



THE BOOK OF
PR  MISES

TAMMY BIRD

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By
Tammy Bird

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Early Praise for *The Book of Promises*

“Tammy Bird is an up and coming author to watch. She deftly shifts between the intricacies of crime fiction and angst of the young adult genre with ease. She writes from the heart, and I can't wait for what she does next!”

~ Jessie Chandler, Author of the Shay O'Hanlon Caper Series.

Acknowledgement

To my wife and dearest friend, thank you for once again putting up with me as I wrote away many hours we could have spent together, and thank you for reading the first draft and gently guiding me to necessary changes. Your commitment to my dream is unmistakable, and I am thankful every single day that you agreed to walk through this world with me.

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Finally, a shout out to my old neighborhood in Denver, Co. and to my dad whose mismatched living room may very well have a major role to play in this novel.

Dedication

To my Lillie Bug, grandkid extraordinaire. Thank you for brainstorming with me to come up with a title for this book after I fretted over it for months and came up blank. And more importantly, thank you for teaching me every day about strength and diversity and love.

Forward

This book deals with emotionally abusive and physically abusive relationships between teens, between adults, and within families. These relationships are not the fault of the abused person, who often is convinced he or she is not a good person and is in fact at fault due to “shortcomings” noted by the abuser. Often, those who are abused have been convinced that no one else will ever love them, that the relationship they are experiencing is normal, and that they are the one who is always doing something wrong.

This book depicts scenes of involving the deadly sexual technique known as autoerotic asphyxiation: strangling or suffocating themselves to heighten sexual arousal and orgasm. Please see the Afterward section for more information on these topics.

Chapter One

Spencer Price cut between the one-story science and technology buildings and the small cluster of classroom trailers that served the ever-growing student population of Thatcher High. Her destination took longer to reach this way, but less foot traffic used the slender walkway. Spencer liked less traffic in general but especially when she walked to AP Lit. The empty airtime allowed her an opportunity to prepare for the instructor's daily reading quiz. A slow stride past this cluster of newer red-brick buildings that led to the old three-story main building gave her eight-and-a-half minutes of blissful silence.

Four minutes into her journey, she often saw a tall, lanky boy with shaggy brown hair and a singly visible hazel eye who stood against the science building, one foot cocked backward and resting against the old red-brick wall. She looked straight ahead when she passed him. She knew his name but doubted he knew hers. That was fine. She didn't have time for boys. As a senior, her focus was on getting through her final year with scores worthy of scholarships and grants for a good computer science program with a graphics specialization.

Occasionally, the boy would nod, and she would nod back, but they never spoke, not until today.

“Hi.”

The boy's voice was between soft and deep. It convinced her to slow and turn her head just enough to peek over her shoulder. She expected to see someone prettier, shorter, less round, waving in response to his greeting.

There was no one in sight.

Her best friend reminded her on the regular that she could be beautiful. Could be. If she lost twenty pounds. If she let her hair grow. Prettier if the traits of her parents came together in a better combination. Her mom's eyes—faded-green in color—and her perfect curves, perhaps, or her dad's smooth, near-black skin and slender frame. Instead, her body was flat up top and puffy in the middle, and even the neon-green puffer jacket she wore today did little to offset her skin and eyes, the shade of forest wood. Her hair formed a wiry, curled mess that she controlled by keeping it cropped tight against her head.

She was directly in front of him now.

“Me?” Spencer faced the boy, who had his arms crossed loosely against his chest. His head twitched briefly, as if to draw her closer. She bit her lip. She was already late. She pivoted her whole body and moved forward until her shadow engulfed his slender frame. “Hi.”

He flipped the strands of hair from his face.

A shiver ran up the back of Spencer's neck. He was lovely.

“I'm Jordan. Jordan Rohan.” If he noticed the sun's disappearance from the space around him, he didn't let on. “You're Chloe, right?”

Chloe was her given name. Chloe Imani Spencer Price. She had loved Imani, and she was happy with Chloe, even more so as she aged, but not her mom's maiden name, Spencer.

In kindergarten she asked the teacher to call her Imani. The teacher told her it sounded like an animal. The other kids laughed. She didn't like Imani as much after that.

She remained Chloe until fourth grade when Molly Blackstone moved in two houses down from her. When Chloe recited her birth name, Molly demanded she go by Spencer. Molly said Chloe, Imani, and Molly all ended with the same sound, and that would never do if they were going to be best friends.

Spencer willed her left hand away from her right that was digging at a cuticle. “I know your name. We had geometry together.”

A glint of light appeared and disappeared as his head bobbed up and down, his eyebrow ring catching the sun’s rays each time his head moved from the edge of her shadow. “I go by Spencer.”

Another head bob.

Without Molly, she didn’t know what else to say. She wanted to sink into the sidewalk.

Jordan Rohan stood so close she could feel the heat radiating from his skin, and she could not find one decent phrase to utter.

“Okay. Spencer it is.” He leaned forward slightly until the shiny eyebrow ring disappeared under a tuft of hair.

His words smelled like warm pizza sauce. Spencer breathed in the comfortable cafeteria smell.

“I waited here to see you.” Jordan’s voice lost a bit of the soft and gained a bit of cocky.

“Why?” she asked, finding her words again.

She looked over his shoulder at the wall. The bricks crumbled at the edges. Thatcher High was one of the oldest schools in Denver. Even the newer buildings were twenty-plus years. The trailers, scattered on one end of what years ago was a neighboring field, were the newest addition to the campus. Small metal rectangles, they stayed hot in the summer and cold in the winter.

This year’s seniors would be the last to graduate from here. Next year, a shiny new building would be ready seven blocks from where they now stood. Spencer was glad she wouldn’t be transferring.

Muffled female voices pulled her back into the moment. She tried to place them. *Inhale. Exhale.* They were somewhere near the main building, too far away to understand, but close enough to remind her she was going to be late for AP Lit. She should go. *Inhale. Exhale.* She stood still.

“Whaddya mean, ‘Why?’” Jordan’s voice rooted her in their new dance.

“I mean, why.”

Jordan leaned fully back against the wall. “Because I like what I see.”

“I call BS.” Spencer hoped Jordan didn’t hear the quiver in her voice. She wasn’t afraid to talk to him in particular. She was afraid to talk to people in general. “Why now?”

“You’re always with Molly except when you go from there”—he pointed to the middle trailer in the cluster of tan and rust—“to there.” He swiveled his upper body and pointed toward the main building. “Is that good enough?” He swiveled back until he once again nestled in her shadow.

Spencer considered reminding him that he could have talked to her last year when they had class together but decided to drop it for now.

Jordan pulled his foot from the wall and took a full step into her shadow, his body now inches from her own.

She felt a puff of warm air on her nose. She should move sideways. She sent the message to her feet. They refused the request and stayed plastered to the sidewalk. Her heart murmured a soft *thump, thump, thump*. She heard the late bell. Still she stood, Jordan’s breath on her nose. She

felt exposed. What was Jordan's endgame? She heard her twin brother's voice in her head, "Loosen up, sis. Sometimes it's better not to know." But she wasn't her brother. She lived best when she knew.

"I should—"

"No, you shouldn't." Jordan stopped her words and replaced them with his own, his finger against her lips.

She spoke around the long, slender digit. "You don't even know what I was gonna say."

He pushed harder against her lips.

Her head screamed for her to back away from his touch at the same time her body moved into it.

"Yeah, I do. That you should go to class. But you shouldn't. You shouldn't because I've seen you use your peripheral powers when you pass. You want to talk to me, too." He dropped his hand to his side.

"Peripheral powers? Are you serious, Mr. Confident?" She pulled her top lip into her mouth and raked her teeth across the spot he touched.

"I am. It's true, right?"

Spencer shrugged one shoulder. She rubbed her damp palms against her jeans.

And then Jordan's hands were on her shoulders. They were warm through her jacket. The pressure was soft. Not what she expected. It caught her off balance. She realized she thought of his hands before, when she looked at him through her peripheral vision, when she and Molly talked about her kissing a boy. Now his hands moved her effortlessly one hundred and eighty degrees until she felt the wall against her back. The brick was warm in the middle where Jordan had stood and cool around the edges where the warmth of his body didn't spread.

Thump, thump, thump. She had never kissed a boy, but she knew what was next.

Jordan moved his hands down to her waist.

Her body was at war. She wanted to run. She wanted to stay. She didn't know this boy. She didn't care. She swore she wouldn't let the wrong boy kiss her. But what if he was the right boy and she would only know if the kiss proved it?

The sliver of air between them swished away as Jordan's flat stomach pushed into her curves.

She wanted to kiss him, right or wrong.

She tilted her head and leaned into Jordan's tongue. The taste of sun and cafeteria pizza filled her mouth. She wouldn't be going to AP Lit today.

"Jordan Rohan actually kissed you? Like full-tongue kissed you?" Molly's voice raised a full octave when she mentioned Jordan's tongue.

"Yep. And then we stood there being awkward. I don't think he's any better at this than I am."

Molly pounced, cat-like, onto the tall queen-sized bed and wiggled into a cross-legged position. She patted the spot in front of her on the lavender comforter. "Up here. Now. We have waited for this day!"

Spencer climbed atop the tall mattress and mirrored Molly, knee to knee. "Molly. I love you, but you're so dramatic sometimes."

"How can you say that? This is, like, the thing."

“Your thing.” Spencer rested her hands atop Molly’s knees. “It isn’t that big a deal. Seriously. So, he kissed me. We just need to mark it off the list and move on.”

“Um, like, no. What did he say? How long did it last? Tell me everything.”

“You mean while he was trying to take out my tonsils with his tongue, or after?” Spencer smiled at Molly, while her insides wiggled and jiggled with what she could only describe as panic. “Bizarre is a good word. I don’t know. It happened. I pulled away. He didn’t stop me. We talked. He has a free period when I’m in Lit. He’s in one club, but he didn’t say which one. His brother plays football. He doesn’t.” Spencer paused. She tried to remember what else they talked about. She came up empty. “That’s pretty much it.” Spencer didn’t hate the kiss, but she didn’t love it, either. She didn’t have the right words to explain that, so she didn’t.

Molly wasn’t letting Spencer off so easy. “Are you going to kiss him again? Do you like him? Did you give him your number? Did he ask?”

Spencer tried to quit thinking about the taste of pizza. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

Molly stared.

“Yes. Okay? Yes.”

Three fingers of Molly’s right-hand poked Spencer’s chest.

Spencer giggled. She let her upper body fall back onto the pillows. “For you, I’ll kiss him again.” She stretched her legs until one was on each side of Molly.

Molly bounced up and moved onto all fours above Spencer, she said, “How dare you, woman. This is about you, not me.”

“Really?” Spencer pushed her head deeper into the pillows and looked up at Molly.

Molly leaned forward until she could put one hand flat against the lavender comforter on either side of Spencer’s head, directly above each shoulder. She leaned in until their faces were a fraction of an inch apart, their bodies barely touching.

Strands of Molly’s soft, golden hair tickled Spencer’s cheek. Spencer blew it away. It returned.

Molly moved the tips of her hair back and forth across Spencer’s whole face. “What? You don’t like my hair? Huh? Huh?”

“Stop.” Spencer moved her head from side to side. “Stop.” The words came out with a giggle. She wished they could stay right here forever in this playful space. It was reminiscent of the years before high school, before Molly met Lucas.

Spencer reached up and put her hands against Molly’s waist. She pushed gently until the friction ceased between them. Time stood still for the briefest of seconds until she eased Molly’s thin frame back into her own curves.

“Like you would ever push me away,” Molly whispered. She reached for Spencer’s glasses, folded them using her chin, and placed them above their heads. “Now…” She kept her voice low. “Did you kiss back like we practiced? ’Cause I’m not marking it off the list if you didn’t.”

Spencer readjusted her body until she could bring their noses together. “I kissed him like this.” She tilted her head and wrapped her fingers in the strands of hair that previously tickled her cheek. When there was no space between them, she used her tongue to part Molly’s lips. The soft taste of strawberry and graham crackers replaced all traces of Jordan, and she sunk into the familiarity of the only person who mattered.

The kiss deepened.

Spencer slid her hand under Molly’s shirt until it rested against smooth skin. She traced the gentle curve of her back up to her shoulder blade.

Spencer liked familiar.

Molly didn't pull away.

Spencer moved her fingertips to Molly's long neckline. It was Spencer's favorite part of Molly's body. Her own neck was short and buried itself in the extra skin of her shoulders. Probably the reason Molly never touched her there.

She paused with her palm at the midpoint of Molly's neck, right where her fingertips disappeared again into her hair. With her other hand, she found the edge of her best friend's shorts and worked her fingers down until she felt coarse wisps of hair. This was the point where Molly would move into or out of the moment. Spencer waited.

The wait was short-lived.

A quiet moan moved from Molly's mouth to hers, sending a quiver from the place of origin to her toes. She pulled Molly closer, until her tongue and her moan moved deeper into her mouth.

The two moved as one.

Spencer felt the pulse of Molly's satisfaction seconds before Molly pulled away. The tremor pushed her over the edge, as well.

"Thank you," Spencer murmured.

"My pleasure," Molly whispered against Spencer's cheek. "Thinking about you with Jordan is hot."

Spencer tried to hide the disappointment on her face. Molly suddenly felt very heavy against her body. She should have known Molly wasn't thinking about her alone, but she let herself believe—again.

"It was just a kiss." Spencer focused on her breath. *Inhale. Exhale.* The room felt devoid of oxygen.

Molly pushed up on her hands and tickled Spencer's face again with her hair. "Like our kiss?"

Spencer didn't want to lie. "I guess. I mean, he's a guy and you're a girl, so not exactly."

"Duh. Don't be dumb. Was it as long as ours? As soft?"

"I guess. It was weird. It was soft, but different soft." Spencer pulled one arm up to her face and swatted at the blonde hair. "We've kissed a long time. It's hard to compare."

Molly tucked her hair behind her ear and rolled to her side. "I just want to make sure I taught you well. Jordan doesn't need to know you've never done this before."

Spencer decided it was best to shake off the weird twitch in her gut and focus on what she knew Molly wanted to hear. "You know you taught me well. I did you proud. He has no idea I never kissed a boy. So. Do you think my kiss will make him want to call me again?"

"Fuck yes, if it was like our practice kisses. I want to call you again after that." Molly rolled to the edge of the bed and stood. "My legs are shaking. Not sure how geek-boy managed to stand after you laid that on him."

Spencer propped herself on one elbow and admired the way Molly moved, like a lean, golden, alley cat, quick and graceful in her motions, to the other side of the room.

Molly slid the corner of the desk forward and knelt next to it. When she stood again, she held their book.

Even now, Spencer didn't understand why Molly insisted they keep the scrapbook in a secret space the girls found in the floor years ago, but it was Molly's first rule, so Spencer complied. Rules number two and three were they never looked at the book unless they were together, and they never talked about the secret dreams and wishes they kept there.

Molly turned the book over in her hands until the title faced up. *The Book of Promises: Together Forever*. She padded back across the hardwood and sat on the edge of the bed. “We can still be best friends and have boyfriends, you know.”

“I know.” Spencer wiggled her body until it was just inches behind Molly. “But boyfriends weren’t in the plan when you made the first entry.”

“That was a lifetime ago.”

“I know.”

Molly wrote the first entry nine years ago in her best fourth-grade handwriting.

Buy 1393 South Washington Street. Live together forever.

That house stood between the homes of the two best friends. Old Mrs. Brahms lived there, but she wouldn’t live forever. At least that’s what Molly said when they were nine.

In the years since, they added other things. Some of the items they tried but then altered, like, “Pick matching furniture” and “Decorate rooms to match.” Molly loved white and lavender and pink but said Spencer looked stupid in pastel colors, so she marked a line through the first entry and changed the second to say, “Help each other decorate rooms,” which translated to, “Let Molly decorate rooms.” That didn’t bother Spencer. She hated pastels and decorating. Win. Win.

Other items they did as children but didn’t consider in later years.

Do summer reading; use sparklers; pet a snake.

Still others remained from years gone by or were added later.

Swim in an infinity pool in Singapore; toilet paper a house; kiss a boy.

There were hundreds of hopes and dreams covering the pages of their book.

“You think he’s a geek?” Spencer quit thinking about the past and pushed to a full sitting position.

“Lucas says he is.” Molly shrugged one shoulder. “Who cares? You. Kissed. Him.” She picked up her hairbrush and used it as a mic. Her voice was high and full of bliss. “Attention, world. My best friend, Spencer Price, is a woman now.”

“You sound like you did when we were ten and Charlie Banks pulled your ponytail, and you wanted the whole school to know he liked you.” Spencer chuckled.

“Well...” Molly laid the book next to her and stood. “He absolutely, positively, did.” She put her arms high over her head, fingertips touching, and twirled in a fierce, sinuous dance.

Molly’s shoulder-length locks fanned out from her face. “What’s not to like, oh admired one?” Spencer tried to sound annoyed, but they both knew she wasn’t. No one admired Molly more than Spencer. They both knew that, too.

In the last few years, Spencer decided less about the new entries put into the *The Book of Promises* and Molly decided more. Spencer didn’t particularly like Molly’s choices—jump from the roof onto a mattress holding hands; touch a boy’s penis; have a threesome; put threatening messages in balloons and let them go; sneak out and spend the night in the tree house behind the Teen Club—but she never said no to an entry.

Molly returned to the bed and patted the spot next to her.

Spencer slid sideways until their legs touched.

“Let’s see.” Molly opened the journal slowly. “Where’s the page to record the locking of tongues?”

“Just get to the page, drama queen. I need to get home for dinner sometime tonight.” Spencer reached over to turn the pages herself.

Molly pulled the book from under Spencer’s fingertips. “Fine. I’m doing it. I’m doing it.” She laid the book back against her legs and fanned through the pages. “Here.” She pointed to the

line that read, “Kiss a boy before we’re 18.” Next to the sentence, Molly had added two uneven lines. The line with “Molly Janel Blackstone” written next to it already had Molly’s signature and date, July 4, 2017. Last year. It was the same day they crossed off, “Go to a bonfire on the beach.”

Sadness overtook Spencer when she looked at the page. She and Molly fought that day, and it was all her fault. She admitted as much to Molly the next day and tried to explain the peculiar feelings in her gut as she watched Molly and Lucas, heads together, arms intertwined, acting like the rest of the world didn’t exist, acting like she didn’t exist. She ended up spewing more hateful words when Molly called her weird. When Molly told her to leave, she begged for forgiveness. None of it worked. The boy ended up being Molly’s actual boyfriend.

Before Lucas, Molly and Spencer were always together. After Lucas, Molly split her time between the two worlds. Spencer liked pre-Lucas better, but she was used to him now and tried to keep herself busy when she knew Molly and Lucas were together.

“Hey. Where’re you at?” Molly elbowed Spencer in the side. “Sign here and it’s official. Spencer kissed a boy on January 23, 2018, almost three months before turning 18.” Molly pulled the pen from its nesting place inside the book and handed it to Spencer.

Spencer signed her full name. Chloe Imani Spencer Price. That’s another rule. If they don’t do something together, when each one completes the promise, she signs her full name and dates it. All official-like. She handed the pen back to Molly.

Molly nodded. “Nice. You know what’s next.” With the tip of the pen, Molly pointed to the next item on the list and then to the signature, Molly Janel Blackstone. She gave Spencer’s shoulder a nudge with her own. “You know what you need to do.”

Spencer felt the warmth creep into her cheeks.

Molly laughed. “Come on. It’s not like you aren’t ready.” She read the entry out loud. “Have sex with a boy.” The “Have sex” part was written after the girls snuck into Molly’s mom and dad’s room when they weren’t home and watched an R rated movie where a man and woman lay naked in bed. They were twelve. The “with a boy” part was written in the older Molly’s handwriting. She added it after Spencer insisted what they did in Molly’s bedroom when they were alone was sex. Molly called it experimentation. She said all best friends experimented to get ready for sex with a guy.

After arguing back and forth, Molly grabbed the book off her desk and created the addendum. “Not that I’m agreeing what we do is sex. It’s different. But there you go, smart-ass.”

Spencer withdrew for several days after the argument, but Molly kept at her until she gave in and returned to her normal doting self. She still hated how she felt anytime they talked about sex.

“How about second base and touching a penis, first?” Spencer asked. “I’ve got zero interest in signing my full name on that line anytime soon.”

Molly shrugged. “Suit yourself, prude. Personally, if Lucas doesn’t put out, I’m not hangin’ around, but whatever.” She took the pen and added, “Touch a boy’s penis,” to the bottom half of the page and scribbled her name and signature. The date she added was the same date that was next to her first kiss. “Happy?”

Spencer was anything but happy. “Whatever.” She tossed the word into the air. “I’ll never be you.”

Chapter Two

“Spencer. Spencer?” AJ waved his hand in front of Spencer’s face. “Mom’s talking to you, dork.”

Spencer flipped her twin brother off just under the edge of the wooden table and looked across at her mom. “Sorry.”

“Where’s your head tonight?” Virginia motioned to the plate of barely eaten food in front of her daughter. “Everything okay with you and Molly?”

“Everything isn’t about me and Molly.” Spencer’s voice was louder than she meant for it to be. She pushed peas into the mashed potatoes on her plate and scooped them onto her fork. She loved her mom and her brother, but sometimes she wished they didn’t want to talk about everything.

“It’s true, then.” AJ put a bite of chicken and mashed potatoes in his mouth.

“What’s true?”

“What’s going around school.”

“Seriously?” Spencer looked at him, fork in midair. No way anyone could know she kissed Jordan. There was no one near them at the time. But it was the only thing she could think of that made sense. Her stomach tightened.

Virginia looked from one to the other. “Someone want to fill me in on this big announcement?”

AJ swallowed another huge bite of food. “Ask her.”

Spencer took a drink of water to try to dislodge the lump in her throat. First Jordan. Then Molly. Now this. It was too much. “It’s nothing. Honest. AJ thinks he knows everything.”

“Jordan told Lucas. Lucas told his brother. Lucas’s brother is on the JV team. Juniors like to brag about knowing stuff.” AJ shrugged and shoveled more food into his mouth.

She fought the urge to plunge the tines of her fork into AJ’s hand. She kept her eyes locked with his.

“Just drop it, big shot.”

“What’s the problem? No one cares that you kissed some geek.” AJ turned sideways in his chair and stared at his sister. “And I can’t help that I play football and coach the younger guys in practice.”

She balled her fists tighter and tighter under the table until her short nails dug into the skin of her palms. “It’s private. I don’t like to put my life in the spotlight like you, that’s all.” She spat the words into the air like tiny daggers.

“Again. Not my problem, sis. If you don’t want people to talk, crawl back into your ninety-nine-cent themes and up Molly’s ass.”

“Watch your mouth, AJ.” Virginia’s tone left no room for argument.

Spencer made a face in AJ’s direction and bobbed her head from side to side. “Ninety-nine-cent themes.” She mocked his words.

Spencer entered a contest in her junior year that was sponsored by Android for best launcher theme by a rookie designer. Not only had she won, but the company invited her to join

their think-tank team, a team of designers who ranged in age from sixteen to fifty-six who worked to keep the company in business. “Those little widgets and icon packs are why you get to play football, so go ahead, jackass. Turn it back on me.” She didn’t even know why she was so mad at him, but she couldn’t stop her voice from escalating. “And leave Molly out of this. She isn’t my brain.”

The slam of a hand against the wooden tabletop stopped both teens from uttering another word. “What is going on, you two?”

They focused on the other side of the table. At a mere five foot two, Virginia was a force to be reckoned with. After a messy divorce, she went back to school while working full-time and graduated with high honors. Now she worked three twelve-hour days per week as an RN in the hospital’s emergency room.

Through it all, Spencer never felt as if her mom was too tired or preoccupied to spend time with her. Spencer learned to prepare meals, chopping and cleaning food alongside her mom. Most parents let their kids sleep in on the weekend. Not hers. She and AJ heard, “Wake up, sleepyheads!” every day of the week. Spencer pretended to be annoyed, but she loved the way her mom always whistled old Elvis songs and the way they all broke into a fifty’s twist and fits of laughter.

Virginia was the reason they were sitting at the same wooden table where they sat as toddlers, the reason they had a hot meal Sunday through Thursday every week, the reason that AJ had a football scholarship and Spencer had a computer to code the ninety-nine-cent themes that kept her sane.

Neither sibling wanted to hurt her in any way.

“Sorry,” the two said in unison.

“Accepted. Sorry your day kinda sucked. Or not.” Her mom smiled at Spencer. “I’m still not really sure.”

Spencer put her fork on her plate and pushed her chair away from the table. “Can I be excused? I have homework.”

Virginia and AJ exchanged a look.

Virginia nodded. “We can talk later.”

Spencer stood. As she scraped her dinner leftovers into the trash and made her way to her room, she heard bits and pieces of the conversation she left behind.

“What the heck?” Their mom’s voice was full of concern.

AJ’s response was too low to make out entirely. Something about Manny asking him if he was cool with Jordan hooking up with his sister and AJ trying to play it off to get more information.

“So, it really isn’t about Molly?” The rise in intonation when her mom hit midsentence hit Spencer deep in the gut. Red crawled up her chest and into her face.

AJ’s voice stayed low. She picked out a word or two but nothing more.

The conversation would continue long after she shut her bedroom door. It often did. Unlike her, AJ and her mom were extroverts. AJ would chat about whatever he knew. That’s what he did. And their mom would ask the right questions, prod in the right places, to keep the stories going until food crusted on plates and water glasses created pools on the old wooden table.

AJ and Spencer shared a fierce love, but they couldn’t be more opposite in looks or personality.

AJ was the high school’s football star and a straight-A student. His physical appearance mashed traits of their parents in perfect combination. He was compact and lean and perfectly

symmetrical; his eyes, faded green in color like their mother's, contrasted beautifully to the amber-colored skin and soft brown hair that he kept pulled into a puff. Though animated and silly with his friends, he possessed qualities that also made him a kind and humble leader.

Spencer wasn't a leader. Not a follower, either. She was a loner who was content to have one best friend and to belong to a club of fellow coders who understood her passion.

Spencer threw herself across her bed.

Now there was Jordan and her signature on a page of *The Book of Promises* that proved she crossed that magical line, a line she wasn't sure she was ready to cross.

She considered a text message to Molly. Remembered the words, *touch a boy's penis*, scrawled in Molly's handwriting, and decided against it. Of course Molly touched a penis, so why did she feel as if she was sucker-punched in the gut when she thought about it? Molly was probably with Lucas right now. She was rarely around when Spencer needed her anymore. Maybe she needed other friends. Maybe that would help her sort through all of this. Even if Molly was around, she proved today she certainly didn't understand Spencer's confused state, and she never would. She was the female version of AJ—perfect in every way.

Her left butt-cheek buzzed. It was Jordan texting her.

Jordan: Meet me tomorrow?

Spencer: Why? So you can tell the whole football team you kissed me?

Jordan: What're you talking about?

Spencer: Only my embarrassment at dinner when my stupid brother told my mom.

Jordan: That we hung out? Is that a bad thing?

Spencer: That we kissed, idiot.

Jordan: Oh. Sorry.

She stared at the text. Her mind whirled. What would Molly say? She definitely wouldn't have sweaty palms or a butterfly stomach. She started and erased several replies before she settled on an attempt at nonchalant.

Spencer: No biggie, I guess. Everyone will find out anyway.

Jordan: Is that a bad thing?

She looked at the screen. He sounded like a broken record.

Spencer called for Cinnamon.

Cinnamon made a slow exit from under Spencer's bed, stretched and yawned, and looked in the direction of his owner.

"Seriously, Cinn?" She patted the spot next to her as she talked to the lazy feline. "Any day now."

Cinnamon stretched again before leaping onto the bed and settling in next to Spencer.

She and Molly each asked for a kitten for Christmas the year they were ten. They named them Cinnamon and Sugar. Cinnamon was a male orange tabby, and Sugar was his orange-and-white sister. Molly said the kittens were just like them, okay on their own, but way better together.

When the girls were fourteen, Sugar got out of the Blackstone's house. Molly said it was no use, that someone probably already had her, but Spencer and Mrs. Blackstone searched the neighborhood for days, knocking on doors and calling her name. She never came home.

Spencer scratched behind Cinnamon's ears and listened to his purr. Within a minute, her heart rate slowed, and she could breathe again. She didn't know if Jordan was a good thing or a bad thing, but she did know that it all felt too heavy tonight.

"Maybe I'll wake up full of witty comebacks and giddy laughter." She grabbed a pillow and scrunched it into a squishy ball while she talked to her furry companion. "Or not. Probably not." She ran her fingers from Cinnamon's head to his tail. She didn't even have the energy to undress before she turned onto her side and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Three

Spencer awoke to the buzz of metal against wood. The sound pierced her eardrums, incessantly, like an infant crying out to be fed. It took her a minute or more to realize the noise wasn't an infant but her phone.

She tried to clear her vision by focusing on Cinnamon, who seemed content to stay curled against her chest.

“Morning, boy.”

Cinnamon stretched his paw up to her face and tapped.

She blinked several times until her eyes adjusted to being awake. Her thoughts formed in rapid, shattered bits.

The phone.

Jordan.

Text messages.

Socially awkward.

She forced her body to move out of the warm spot where she slept and toward the relentless buzz. Her phone was upside down on the nightstand. “What the...”

She wiggled her toes. Her shoes had been removed. She sat up and attempted to reorient through the foggy half-sleep. Her hand found the edge of her mother's homemade afghan that fell down to her waist as she fumbled for the phone on her nightstand. The annoying rattle turned into a soft buzz against her palm.

Cinnamon purred in response to Spencer's absent-minded scratch behind his ears.

5:25.

Her alarm wouldn't go off until 5:45.

She touched the screen. Molly's blurry words appeared as soon as Spencer rested her thumb against the Home button.

Molly: It happened again.

“Great.” Spencer eyed Cinnamon's position on the afghan and wished she could turn the clock back sixty seconds. She located her glasses on the nightstand and slid them into place on her nose. As the words came more clearly into view, an inky blackness filled her heart. She pushed her head hard against the pillows and swiped through the series of texts. She didn't have to read them to know what they said. Every few months, for years, Molly dreamed the same dream, and only Spencer could calm the demons.

In the past, Spencer wanted to help. But in the past, she also felt part of a team that would be together forever.

Another message popped up while she considered her response.

Molly: I know you're awake.

Spencer: Your mom?

Molly always knew when she was awake. Like a spooky sixth sense. Sometimes Spencer wondered if she could actually see through 1393 South Washington and into her bedroom. Spencer knew it was Molly's mom. She just wasn't awake enough yet to say anything else. She didn't understand why Molly hated her mom. She doted on Molly, who was an only child. There were always fresh-baked bread and sweets in their house, and it was always spotless. Her mom and dad loved each other, and they worked together to make sure Molly's life was a happy one. When they were younger, Spencer even wished they could change places, that she could have the round, joyous mom, and the dad who came home every night for dinner, and Molly could have the perfectly proportioned workaholic mom, and the dad who disappeared when she was eight.

Molly: Yes.

Spencer: Kitchen?

Molly: Yes.

Molly: Bipolar bitch.

Spencer sat up and reached for the pull-chain on the bedside lamp. The space next to her bed flooded with light.

Spencer carried something about Molly's dream with her all the time. A fear. She thought about a reply but didn't type one. She hoped her silence would stop any further discussion.

For a moment, the green and yellow bubbles didn't move. Spencer held her breath. Dots appeared and disappeared. Molly was typing.

Spencer's hand clung to the phone that her mind insisted she throw hard across the room. She tried to breathe but couldn't pull in enough air from the room. The walls and the words on the screen swirled together.

It wasn't just about Molly's hateful words regarding her mom. She already anticipated the next few texts. The dream always held the same elements, just arranged differently.

It was everything since Lucas. No. It went farther back than that. All of high school. The last few years throbbed a cacophony of thoughts in her head. Jordan's kiss. Lucas and the bonfire. *The Book of Promises*. Molly touching a penis. Molly and her mom in Molly's kitchen.

The dream always happened in Molly's kitchen.

Pebbles against Spencer's bedroom window. How many times over the years?

Molly in Spencer's kitchen. That's where Spencer cared for her after the worst episode when Molly came with scraped knuckles and dirty knees. Molly said she woke up in her own backyard, digging in the ground with her bare hands.

After the worst episode, Molly and Spencer waited until daybreak for Spencer to walk Molly home. Mrs. Blackstone was making pancakes with cherry compote. She didn't ask where they had been.

Molly said her mom tried to leave them once in real life, back before they moved to Denver, before Spencer and Molly were best friends. When Molly talked about it, you could feel the hatred coming out of her pores. Spencer could relate to the hatred but not to carrying it forever.

When the girls were eleven, Spencer asked about the time before Denver. Molly told her she didn't want to remember a time without Spencer in her life.

"You want to be my best friend, don't you?" Molly asked.

"Of course I do."

"Then that's that. There is no time before me and you. Got it?"

"Got it."

Spencer called the dream a nightmare. Molly said it can't be a nightmare. Nightmares don't make you feel powerful.

Molly liked power.

This time it was four months between episodes. Four months. That was the longest Molly had ever gone without the dream, and now they would have to reset the clock. Again.

Spencer: You okay?

Molly: We'll talk later. [zippered-mouth emoji]

As if Molly needed to remind Spencer to keep the dream to herself.

Spencer pushed the Home key and laid the phone on her nightstand. The ride to school was going to be an interesting one.

On the seven-minute ride from home to school, Molly talked nonstop about one thing—the dream. There is always an argument. Molly's mom raises her fist to Molly, and Molly fights back. By the time her dad gets from the top of the stairs to the kitchen, Molly is poised over her mom with a knife. Her dad always saves both of them from a horrible outcome. For the most part, it plays out to Spencer like an interpretation of Molly's feelings around her mom almost leaving years ago and her dad keeping them together, except this time, as in several times before, Molly begs her father to let her finish what she started.

When they parked, the one-sided conversation ended. Molly smiled, fixed her lipstick, and fluffed her hair. "Ready?"

Molly was in school mode.

The two made their way toward the main building.

"Looks like you're being summoned," Molly said.

Jordan waved in their direction. He was sitting on one of the huge concrete slabs that bordered the stairs to the main building. If he was upset about the way she ended their short text conversation last night, he hid it well.

"Should I go?"

"Should you?" The edge from the car conversation was back in Molly's voice.

Spencer felt the red heat move from her chest to her cheeks. Right now, she wanted to be wherever Jordan and Molly were not, but that didn't seem to be an option.

She slowed her steps and focused her eyes first on Molly and then on Jordan. His hands pushed flat against the concrete slab. He stood, said something to his court, and positioned his body to move down the stairs.

She looked back at Molly. "I should probably go talk to him."

Molly's smile looked frozen on her face. She slowed her pace.

Spencer's pace slowed in unison, the invisible string held by Molly tying the two girls together. Spencer took a deep breath and willed her warm cheeks to cool before Jordan reached them.

Molly's hand on her shoulder and the nails through the thin fabric of her T-shirt stopped the slow forward movement of both girls.

Spencer cringed. She obviously didn't fully understand the rules of the "kiss a boy" thing. She made a mental note to ask Molly later.

Jordan must have sensed there was more going on between Spencer and Molly than could be seen from one hundred yards out. He still moved in their direction, but his step slowed.

Spencer turned to face Molly. "I thought you were happy I kissed a boy." She kept her tone even and light. She looked only at Molly. "Why are you mad?"

The two stood, faces a fraction of an inch apart. Their backpacks protruded, making them look like turtles deep in conversation, while other students, backpacks slung over their shoulders, jostled one another playfully around them.

"Mad? Why would I be mad to see you so excited to leave me on the morning of a dream? Oh. I don't know. *You tell me.*"

Spencer motioned slightly with her head in the direction of Jordan, who she could now see in her peripheral vision. He would be next to them in less than a minute. When she spoke, she tried to keep her words inside the small circle they created with their bodies. "I wasn't trying to make you upset. You know I would rather keep talking to you. But if you want me to get that other signature, I might need to show interest."

Molly's face softened.

Relief spread through Spencer's body. Not much was more important to Molly than loyalty. Spencer's loyalty to the plan, to the book, outweighed the need for an extra few minutes between the car and the building.

Crisis averted.

Spencer kept her face close and still. Molly had to be the one to release them.

She heard Jordan's footsteps to their right, but she stayed focused on Molly. She knew this was a test of her allegiance. She also knew as soon as Molly claimed victory, the game would be over. Seconds ticked by.

Jordan was next to her. He didn't speak.

"I have to take Lucas home today. We'll meet after." Molly breathed the words onto Spencer's skin.

The whisper rippled across Spencer's earlobe and down her spine. She nodded. "I know."

Molly straightened. When she reached her full height, there was a bright smile on her face. "Hey, Jordan. Sounds like you two need to be alone. I'm out." Molly adjusted the strap on her backpack and turned toward the school. "I need to find the boyfriend, anyway."

Jordan and Spencer watched Molly bounce toward the main building.

"Hey, you." Jordan bumped his shoulder softly into Spencer's. "Sup?"

"Molly had a rough night. Family shit."

"Family shit sucks." Jordan shrugged. "Part of it all, though. Right?"

“Right.” Spencer decided to leave that conversation right there. Besides, how do you tell someone you barely know that your best friend has dreams about hurting her own mother?

“You didn’t text me.”

“I fell asleep.”

“Seriously? That’s what you’re going with?” Jordan’s tone was light and fun.

Spencer smiled despite herself. “That’s what I’m going with.”

“Then I still have a chance. You weren’t blowing me off. Jordan one. Universe zero.”

Spencer laughed. It felt good after the heaviness of the morning. She searched the perimeter for Molly. It only took a moment to spot her and Lucas. The two sandy-haired teens stood out against a backdrop of green in front of the bushes that ran the length of the red-brick building. They looked happy. The bend of Molly’s head told Spencer she was comfortable with the win between them, she didn’t witness the laughter between her and Jordan, and Spencer could proceed with life.

Spencer re-focused on the hazel eye in front of her. “Your eyes are nice,” she said. “You should show both of them.”

Jordan flipped his tuft of hair twice. The second time it came to rest just beyond his ear. “Better?”

Spencer nodded. “Wanna give me a ride home after school?”

“I do indeed. And I want to walk you to class. Which way, milady?”

Spencer pointed toward the main building. “Chem.”

“This way to all things made of mixtures I can’t explain.” Jordan crossed his arm over his stomach and bowed in the direction of the old, red-brick buildings.

Spencer liked him. She didn’t know a single thing about love, but she knew about pain and fear, and Jordan didn’t evoke either of those. “Get up. People are looking at us.”

He stood and pivoted until he was facing the doors. “As they should.” He waved his arm in a circular motion before creating a triangle, elbow out, hand on hip.

Spencer slid her arm through Jordan’s. “Weirdo.”

“That’s me. At your service.”

Spencer: Where are you?

Spencer laid her phone next to the plate of steaming cherry pie and vanilla ice cream. She didn’t expect an answer. If Molly wasn’t home by now, she wasn’t coming anytime soon.

“I’m sure she’ll come bounding in any moment, dear.” Mrs. Blackstone squeezed Spencer’s shoulder and shuffled around to one of the five remaining chairs at the table. “For now, you and I are going to enjoy this pie.”

Spencer smiled at the woman in the bright-pink apron and matching flowered slippers. Spencer loved Molly’s mom. She loved her jet-black hair that never showed a strand of gray, even though she was well into her fifties, and she loved the way she twisted it around itself into a bun on the top of her head and held it in place with whatever was handy, a pencil, a pen, a wooden spoon. She loved the way Mrs. Blackstone’s stomach jiggled when she laughed and the way she always smelled like fresh-baked pie crust, even when she wasn’t baking, and the way she asked Spencer to call her Momma B. “Thank you.”

“Only the best for my girls.” Mrs. Blackstone pushed a strand of stray hair behind her ear before reaching for the back of the chair at the head of the table. She laid her plate down and slid into the seat, scooting the chair back and then forward again to get comfortable.

With each movement, the chair groaned against the weight of its new occupant. The sound made its way up Spencer’s spine and through her arm. Mrs. Blackstone kept her silverware at its tip-top shine, and the movement made the spoon shimmer in Spencer’s hand.

Spencer watched the silver shimmer slide through the white ice cream and into the red cherries below. She swallowed the mixture of hot and cold. “Delicious. Too bad Molly isn’t here to enjoy it right out of the oven.”

Mrs. Blackstone held up a spoon of the red-and-white delight. “Her loss. Cheers to us and to piping-hot cherry pie.”

Spencer lifted her spoon in solidarity. She was pissed that Molly wasn’t here but not surprised. It certainly wasn’t the first time Molly told her to come straight home and then didn’t do the same.

Spencer’s phone lit up as she took the second bite of pie. She tilted it toward herself and touched the text bubble with her thumb.

Molly: Lucas needed help with his little sis. Why?

She stared at the words. No apology. No indication that she even remembered telling Spencer to be available for her this afternoon. Typical Molly.

Spencer turned to Mrs. Blackstone with a fixed smile on her face. “Dang. Looks like she had plans to help Lucas with his little sister this afternoon. I must have forgotten. I’m sorry I barged in on you.”

“You’re never any bother, Spencer. That daughter of mine can be quite a pain in the rear sometimes, can’t she?” Mrs. Blackstone put a large bite of ice cream and pie into her mouth and pointed to Spencer’s plate with her empty spoon. “You just enjoy that pie. Somebody’s got to. Might as well be you and me.”

Spencer turned her phone upside down next to her plate and focused on the pie and the conversation. The two women talked about graduation and Spencer’s plans for college. She wanted to stay close to home, but she also wanted to make sure she found an excellent program for computer engineering. So far, she applied to four schools—one in California, one in Georgia, and two nearer to Denver.

When Spencer slid the last bite of pie into her mouth and laid the fork on the red-streaked plate, she rubbed her stomach and thanked Mrs. Blackstone again. “I better get home. Mom and AJ will expect me to be hungry for dinner.” She crumpled her napkin and laid it on the plate.

Mrs. Blackstone pushed her chair back and took both dishes over to the sink. “Thanks for hanging out with me. Sorry Molly stood us up. Comes with being an only child. At least that’s what her dad says.”

“It’s my fault. I’m forgetful. Molly teases me about it all the time.” Spencer had no idea why she was covering for Molly. She was angry. She wanted to cry. She wanted to hate her. But she didn’t. She didn’t at all. She hurt. Hurt with a pain deep in her gut where nothing but quiet darkness normally lived. “I promised AJ a game of one-on-one before dinner, anyway.” Spencer pushed in her chair across the pale linoleum and walked to the sink.

Mrs. Blackstone was running hot water down the front of the plates.

Spencer watched the red run down the drain as she leaned toward the woman and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Spencer dribbled toward AJ and dodged at the last moment. She focused hard on the net, feet pounding the driveway until she was close enough to jump. Swoosh. The sound of the rubber as it sped through the netting gave her all the feels. She turned to her brother and pumped her arms in the air. “Spencer ties the score. One more for the win.”

“Like hell, sis.” AJ swooped past and headed for the ball. His hand connected with the rubber seconds before it bounced into the fence that ran between their house and their neighbor at 1393 South Washington. He shoved the rubber into the pavement, his feet following its movement back to the center of the concrete court. “Ready?”

Spencer pushed her hands off her knees and stood in front of AJ. Her heart pounded in concert with the sound of the hollow bounces as her brother dribbled the ball again and again into the pavement between them. The January air made the warm wetness under her nose and on her neck feel cool. It was in direct contrast to the heat rolling down her sides from the spaces under her arms as it made its way to the band of her jeans. Even in forty-five-degree weather, after an hour of steady runs and jumps and shoves, she and AJ were both flushed and drenched. She opened her fingers wide in preparation and locked eyes with him. “Oh. That point is mine.”

Playing basketball with AJ remained one of her favorite things to do. Their dad put up the net years ago to encourage family time. It worked for all but him. He left anyway. Truth be told, that was fine with Spencer. The house was calmer without him in it.

AJ tried a fake to the left.

Spencer matched the move and tried to swipe the ball. She missed.

AJ changed position.

Spencer mirrored his movement.

The two moved around the court, the ball transferring from his hands to hers several times as each struggled to get the upper hand.

Basketball was one place Spencer felt her brother’s equal. She wasn’t better than him, but she wasn’t worse, either. The siblings were both muscular, AJ in a societally appropriate hard abs kind of way that made him one of the most popular guys on their high school campus and Spencer in a too tall, disproportioned kind of way that garnered Barbiesque insults from others beginning in elementary school. Intellectually, she knew the societal bullshit was just that, bullshit, but when you had small breasts, muscular arms and legs, and a pudgy belly—all of which were constant talking points by everyone from family to strangers—it played on one’s emotional psyche.

Spencer’s outstretched fingers found the ball. She pulled to the side and pushed down. She was in control again.

“Easy, tiger.” AJ shook out his hand and took one quick step back. With his face red and sweaty from the game, it was hard to tell if he was hurt or just trying to throw her off.

Spencer guessed it was the latter. “Easy, my ass. Come on.” Her brother’s shiny form blurred around the edges. She used her free arm to wipe the sweat from beneath her eyes—careful even as she focused on the net to not dislodge her glasses. The hollow pop against the concrete moved through her body. Her eyes found the net. She lined up the shot, pushed off the pavement,

lifted her arm, and released. She liked the burn in her shoulder from the movement and the feel of the wind that swirled up under her T-shirt and pricked across her sweaty stomach.

Neither sibling announced the end of the game. They simply let the ball bounce and roll to its own resting place as they settled side by side in the grass. The two faced the court, knees bent and arms back with their hands bearing their upper body weight, silent except for the sound of fast shallow breaths interspersed with deep intakes of air. For several moments, both worked to bring their bodies back to a calm resting state.

In spite of their differences and mild, sibling confrontations, AJ was the one person in the world Spencer didn't feel uncomfortable with in silence. The two of them even had a dash of twin telepathy. It didn't matter that he was a boy and she was a girl; they often finished each other's sentences and always felt when one or the other was in pain.

"So, what's up with you?" AJ asked.

"Up?"

Spencer wasn't sure why she was holding back. The two didn't always tell one another everything, but they shared more than most siblings she knew.

"Spencer. C'mon." AJ motioned to the court. "That was mad play. Besides. That shit at dinner last night wasn't you. What has you shook?"

"Just. I don't know. Molly's being weird."

"Spill."

Spencer closed her eyes. She let her head fall back and moved it from side to side. The cracking as she made the circular motion felt good. "She said she wanted to hang out this afternoon. Then she left me to eat fucking cherry pie with her mom."

"She with Lucas?" AJ moved his head slightly toward his sister.

"Yeah. But..."

"But what? That's basically her entire M.O. You know it. What else?"

AJ sat up and wrapped his arms around his knees. Spencer looked from him to the wooden fence that separated them from their neighbor. She thought about her pact with Molly to buy the house when they were old enough—so "nothing ever comes between us again." Those were Molly's words. Spencer just agreed. She agreed because she would die if she didn't see Molly every day for the rest of her life. She agreed because when they were nine and held hands walking to the bus stop, the wetness of her palm mixing with the wetness of Molly's palm made it hard to swallow and harder to think.

Nine years later, she would still do anything for Molly. Over the last few years, though, the connection became more strained. Tension between them continued to grow, and more and more it was over stupid stuff. Like boys. Spencer thought Molly wanted her to kiss Jordan, or a boy, any boy, so why was she acting like the kiss broke some promise between them? Not being as connected would be easier—and harder.

Spencer repositioned herself with her arms wrapped around her knees. How could she explain to AJ that something changed when she kissed Jordan? It wasn't just the way Molly demanded Spencer wait for her today. It was more than that. It was in the way Molly described her dream, like it was real, like she enjoyed recalling the details. It was in the way she blew off Spencer's dream of working in the mobile app industry but bragged about her own YouTube channel like it was going to be her claim to fame. It was in the way she pressed her forehead against Spencer's before walking away from her this morning. It was in the way she brushed off Spencer's text message like it didn't matter. It was just—

"Earth to Spencer. Spencer. Did you hear me?" AJ's elbow poked into Spencer's arm.

“Ouch. Asshole. I heard you.” She took a deep breath. “So, I think I like Jordan.”

Spencer didn’t know she was going to say the words until they left her mouth. She did like Jordan. He didn’t make her stomach tremble when he held her hand or make her weak when he kissed her, but he felt kind and real, and right now she needed both.

“Does Molly know?”

“That’s the thing. We have this book. It’s like promises we make to each other and things we want to do throughout life.” Spencer hesitated. Another rule was to never ever mention the book to anyone, not even family.

“Okay. So?” AJ shifted his weight and looked square at Spencer.

“Weird. Right?”

“You two are weird,” AJ joked. “I’m not judging the level of weirdness.”

“You’re an ass.” Spencer shifted, too, so she could see his face. “But I love you anyway.” She decided to tell AJ enough about the book to be able to garner advice, but not so much that Molly would be mad. Not that she would ever know. Her brother and Molly weren’t exactly best buds.

“So. Let me make sure I understand. You have a book with Molly. One of the big-ticket items is to kiss a boy, which she did last year, and you just did. Now she’s mad because you kissed a boy, yet she dissed you today to be with a boy. Is that about it?”

Spencer stared at the wooden fence. “Yes. That’s about it.”

Chapter Four

By Friday the following week, Molly and Spencer and Jordan had established a pattern. Each day Jordan waited for Spencer in front of the main building. Each day she came with Molly and waited for Molly to release her.

Spencer liked how she felt when Jordan's friends welcomed her into their conversation and how Jordan always waited for her to enter the school first. Being with Jordan was easy in a way very different from with Molly. With Molly it was familiar, but it wasn't easy, at least not anymore. She always had an agenda. With Jordan she experienced nothing other than a relaxed banter.

Like now. She and Jordan stood by Spencer's first-bell class and talked about his little sister, who appeared to Spencer to be Jordan's favorite person in the world. Each day, when the bell started to ring, he laughed and sprinted three doors down to slide into his class just as the loud ring subsided.

On both Wednesdays since they kissed, when Spencer joined her coding club in building C, Jordan met her after fourth period. Each time, their steps fell easily into sync as they walked toward the path between the science building and the trailers. Their repartee was light.

"I told my older sister about you last night." Jordan cupped his hand over his eyes and squinted against the sun as he looked at Spencer.

"What about me?"

"You know. About you. Your smart-ass attitude. Your way with words."

"Funny."

"True. Also, that you wear glasses that make you look sexy and smart at the same time."

"I don't wear them all the time."

"Most of the time. And I like when you do."

"Why?" Spencer asked.

"Why do I like your glasses, or why did I tell her about you? Shit, Spencer. I don't know. I like you. I want to get to know you. I talk to my sister every day. She gives me advice."

"Did she tell you to run?"

Jordan didn't answer. Instead, he slipped his hand into hers.

She didn't pull away.

Neither of them mentioned the kiss they shared when they passed their spot. Spencer assumed it was because Jordan didn't want to pressure her. She ignored the war within her body where she both wanted him to acknowledge the kiss and wanted him to never mention it again.

On Friday morning, after Jordan's friends fell away and the two of them were alone in front of Spencer's locker, Jordan moved from mindless and silly banter to silence. The two were only on day eleven of their friendship, but Spencer already knew this meant one of two things—one, she said something he didn't agree with about herself or, two, he wanted to talk about something that was important to him. She hadn't said anything about herself in the last few minutes, so it must be the latter.

Spencer closed her locker and moved to stand in front of him. She liked the way he always stood with his foot against a surface, all James Dean-like. Today, it was the blue steel lockers that lined the hallway.

“Any chance you want to hang out outside of school?” Jordan’s voice wavered.

Spencer thought it was sweet. No one ever appeared nervous around her. She was Molly’s sidekick, the boyish-looking girl who was the cool kid’s friend. If Molly blew her off, everyone else would, too.

She grinned at Jordan but didn’t answer.

“Well?” Jordan asked.

She would have to ask Molly, but she couldn’t tell Jordan that part. “Maybe. What are you thinking?”

“Netflix at my house maybe? My mom’ll order pizza.”

Spencer moved her tongue around in her mouth against the memory of their pizza sauce kiss.

Before she could answer, Jordan slid his foot down the locker.

She was sure he meant it to be a sign of frustration at her lack of response, but neither of them could stop themselves from snickering at the fart sound the rubber made against the metal. “You’re hopeless,” Jordan said. “We could ask Molly and Lucas to hang out, too, if that makes you more comfortable.”

“No. No. It’s not that. I’m just picky about my pizza.” Spencer knew it sounded stupid. She tried again. “I don’t know if my mom will go for the ‘at your house’ thing.”

Jordan resituated his foot against the locker and flipped the long strands of hair out of his face. “Then you choose. You’re the girl.”

“Seriously? I’m the girl? That’s the best you’ve got?” She put her hand on the locker close to Jordan’s head and shifted her weight in his direction. “I am the girl. But I’m not some nineteen-sixties version of any girl.”

Jordan lifted his eyebrows several times and smiled ever so slightly. “I didn’t say you were, idiot. I just meant that I asked you out as the guy, and you can choose where we go and what we eat as the girl.”

“You said girl again.” She dragged out the word girl. Her face was inches from his. His breath was warm on her cheek. She wondered if he always smelled like sunshine. This morning it was mixed with mint. “Maybe I’m offended.” She tried not to laugh.

“Whatever. Do you want to or not?”

The way he said the words made Spencer wonder if they were still talking about going out. She moved her tongue across her bottom lip and rubbed her lips together. She didn’t know if she should move back away from Jordan or stay put. She chose to stay.

For several seconds they were just there, on the edge of something, their breath mixing together in the tiny space between them. She thought Jordan might be moving forward to kiss her again when the tardy bell yanked them apart.

“Shit.” Spencer rocked slightly from foot to foot.

“You’re telling me.” Jordan reached out and put his hand on Spencer’s hip. His fingers were softly guiding her back into his space. “Ignore it. We’re already late.”

“Can’t,” Spencer said. “Chemistry.”

Jordan laughed. With his free hand, he made a motion between them. “Can. Chemistry.”

“Ha-ha, funny man. Maybe after you take me somewhere that isn’t Thatcher High.” Spencer stepped away from Jordan’s touch.

His hand hung in the air for a moment before he dropped it to his side.

One last look in Jordan’s direction, and Spencer moved down the hallway to class. Behind her, she heard Jordan slide into his classroom. It would have been their second kiss.

She swallowed hard and stepped across the threshold into class. “Sorry, Ms. P. Woman stuff.”

Ms. Paczkowski nodded but didn’t break stride in her review.

Spencer slid in between the wooden seat and matching desk. Her phone inched up in the pocket of her jeans. In her haste to get to class, she neglected to put it in her backpack. Molly would notice. Molly noticed everything. Spencer eased her hand behind her back and pulled her shirt over the phone. She could feel Molly’s eyes on her, her anger palpable. Of all classes to be late, why did it have to be the only one she shared with Molly?

Spencer tried to focus on Ms. P. as she finished her review of the homework and moved to the board to begin today’s lecture.

Molly’s shoe slammed into her own.

Spencer’s stomach lurched. She hated it when Molly was mad. They used to never get mad at one another, but high school changed all of that. Now Spencer had done it again. She should have just agreed to pizza with Jordan. Then she wouldn’t have been late, and her phone would be in her backpack, and Molly wouldn’t be mad.

When Ms. P. turned toward the board, Spencer shifted her body slightly to face her best friend. “What’s that for?” Her lips moved, but she allowed minimal sound to escape.

Molly’s brow was furrowed, and her cheeks were bright pink. She mouthed back, “Woman stuff? That’s next week. W-T-F?”

Spencer shrugged. “Sorry.”

Molly’s full glossy lips formed the words. “Saw you with Jordan.”

Spencer looked back at Ms. P. Her tongue moved to the spot on her own glossless lower lip where Molly loved to bite when they practiced for Spencer’s first boy kiss.

“We have to make sure you’re ready,” Molly would tell her.

Spencer didn’t argue. She liked to practice with Molly.

Jordan’s lips were pinker, smaller. Would he bite? She didn’t think so. He seemed softer.

Molly scribbled something on a piece of paper, and the next time Ms. P faced the board she tossed it onto Spencer’s desk.

Spencer opened the paper quietly. “It’s ok you were with him. Just don’t like him making you late for class. Still can’t shake the damn dream. Mom with Aunt May all day. Need you this afternoon.”

The pit in Spencer’s stomach grew with each word she read. She hated this part. After Molly bailed on her the day of the dream, she thought it wasn’t going to happen. She should’ve known better. It always happened after the dream. Molly needed her. They were best friends. Best friends were there for each other. Always. Spencer folded the paper and shoved it into her front pocket. She looked at Molly and nodded.

Chapter Five

The soft, fleshy skin below Molly's jawline sunk inward against the pressure of Spencer's thumb. Spencer pushed harder. Her knees pressed softly against Molly's waist. The pressure was necessary to feel for Molly's rapid breaths. A too-early release and Molly would not be satisfied. Too late, and she could die.

In the beginning, Spencer would often get scared or lose focus, look up to the manga posters hanging above the bed, move her finger a fraction of an inch. Each time, Molly would refuse to talk to her for days. Once, she threatened to leave Spencer forever. That scared Spencer even more than the game.

Last year, in a moment of Spencer's weakness, Molly almost died. Now Spencer remained vigilant, aware of every movement, aware of the whites and the pupils of Molly's eyes, aware of the seconds of silence as Molly's vein throbbed under her fingertips, aware of the exact number of seconds the flow of blood to Molly's brain was nonexistent.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

Spencer counted silently.

Molly rocked.

Spencer was the receiver once. It didn't go well. As soon as the static started in Spencer's ears and the flush began to crawl up from her chest and into her face, she bucked Molly off and onto the floor.

Eleven. Twelve.

Spencer didn't like the idea of being unconscious, not even for a few seconds.

Thirteen.

She researched the practice. She knew Molly's vision would be getting darker, foggier. Molly never made it past eighteen before she climaxed or passed out. Sometimes the latter immediately followed the former. Spencer always hoped for this. It worked if she applied steady pressure to the soft skin of Molly's throat in exactly the correct way.

Fourteen. Fifteen.

Molly was happier when it happened like that. And all Spencer wanted was for Molly to be happy.

Molly's pupils enlarged, and her eyelids closed.

For a fraction of a second, Spencer held a picture of Molly's limp body in her mind's eye. The horror of not knowing the status of life or death was real. She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat and settled on the back of her tongue. Tears threatened. And then it was over.

A flutter of skin against skin between her legs brought the world back into focus. Spencer pulled her hands close to her own body and rubbed her fingertips against the flesh of her palms. She waited.

Molly smiled but kept her eyes closed. "Fucking brilliant."

Spencer let out a breath. She moved one hand down until her palm rested against the slight give of the mattress. She moved her leg to unstraddle Molly's narrow waist.

"No. Not yet." Molly spoke in a soft breathless tone, her eyes now open and pleading. "You're wet. I want to watch you."

Spencer eased her knee back down and relaxed her bottom until it rested against Molly's legs. She told Molly multiple times that she didn't like this game, that she was afraid she would do it wrong, that she would slip, and her thumb would crush Molly's hyoid bone. And that was the truth...part of it anyway. Her brain and her body fought every time. She didn't want to kill her best friend, but when she did it just right, like this time, when Molly called her "brilliant," and asked her to stay, when she felt Molly's moment of euphoria deep inside her skin, well, that she not only liked, she loved. Within seconds, the fear and scrutiny of the game were gone and there was only her and Molly, alone in the universe. A moment later, she was finished, and Molly was wriggling out from under her.

"That's my girl." Molly put her hands on each side of Spencer's fleshy middle and lifted.

Spencer started to protest, to ask for one minute more, but she knew the answer would be no. She swung her leg and plopped her warm body down on the cool sheets. "Fine."

"Don't ruin it." Molly's words drifted up toward the ceiling.

"I'm not. It just felt too good to let it be over." Spencer's hand drifted across the small divide and came to rest atop Molly's. She squeezed her fingers. "Want to look through our book for something to cross off this weekend?"

Molly slid her hand away and rolled to her side. "It's what it is, Spencer. No more."

"I'm not saying it is. I'm just saying sometimes it would be nice to let it be what it is for a few more seconds. That's all."

"I'm hanging out with Lucas this weekend."

Spencer watched her favorite person slip into a pair of tight, gray leggings and a wrinkled, white-and-orange-striped tee. An old-school lava lamp pushed wax up through the purple liquid on the nightstand next to her. Spencer focused on the purple glow on Molly's leg. "No problem. I'll probably do something with Jordan anyway. He just mentioned that it might be fun to all do something together."

"I don't think so. Lucas is weird about who we hang out with. He doesn't know Jordan that well."

Spencer wanted to say that Jordan knew Lucas well enough for Jordan to tell him about their kiss and for his brother to tell AJ. She wanted to tell Molly she felt like that was an excuse to not have to be around her and Lucas at the same time. She wanted to, but she didn't. Instead, she just said, "Like I said. No big deal."

"Why didn't you tell me you were hanging out with Jordan?" Molly asked the question in the same way one would ask about the weather. She smoothed the edges of her shirt where it fell against her hips and glanced at herself in the mirror.

Spencer knew there was nothing nonchalant about the question or about Molly. "He just asked." She pushed against her abdomen with both hands to stop the kaleidoscopic churning in her belly. She knew if she rolled to the right or the left, the colored pieces of glass would burst through the tender layers of soft skin to expose her rippling insides. She held her breath.

"When?" Molly met Spencer's eyes through the reflection in the mirror. Without a break in eye contact, she put both hands under her long blonde hair and pulled the strands from beneath her shirt.

Spencer needed to move, to get dressed. She was too vulnerable in this position to talk about this. But her body refused, and so she stayed, pressed hard into the mattress. She waited for the bright swirling colors to slow. "I was going to tell you. We just talked at school, and you wanted—"

Molly cut her off. “Whatever. I need to get downstairs. Mom will be back anytime.” She leaned in toward the mirror and applied lip gloss and mascara. When she finished, she slid her feet into her flats and walked toward the door.

Tears stung Spencer’s eyes. She blinked several times. “Want me to braid your hair?” Spencer clutched at old pleasures the two used to share. She wanted a few minutes more. If she could just explain to Molly that she was doing what she thought Molly wanted.

“Get up.” Molly’s tone turned terse and demanding. “Now.”

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

Molly opened the door and turned. “I’m not letting you ruin my night. Come on.”

“I am.” Spencer rolled to the edge of the bed and threw her legs over the side. The movement made her dizzy. She paused.

“It’s five fifteen.”

“Okay. I get it.” Spencer stood up. “Seriously. We both know your mom isn’t going to be here in fifteen minutes. She’s with Aunt May. She’ll be here right before your dad, and he’ll ask about dinner, and she’ll tell him it’s breakfast day.”

Molly took two steps toward Spencer. “Go the fuck home.”

Spencer slid her socked feet sideways until she was beside the chair where her clothes were draped across the back. When they were alone, Molly called her the neat boi with the ironed boxers. Molly called her a lot of things when they were alone. Spencer didn’t really iron her boxers. Not that she would mind. She liked the feeling of wrinkle-free clothes. Her mom said her dad used to want his ironed, his sheets, too. She guessed she got that from him. She pulled on her pink-and-white-striped boxers and loose-fitting jeans. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror before she slid her shirt over her head. She liked the way the jeans fell around her hips, thought the dark fabric with the pink and white peeking out over the top described her perfectly. She looked at Molly. “You make no sense, but whatever. I’m out.”

“Cool.” Molly’s face relaxed and her voice again took on the sweetness of the previous hour. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Spencer lifted the lid on her computer and typed in her password. While the screen came to life, she took a huge bite of the ham sandwich she made for dinner. She often ate alone at her computer Friday and Saturday night. That suited her just fine. She preferred alone to unnecessary small talk. After the afternoon she just had with Molly, she wasn’t up for even the mundane exchanges that were common with her family.

Her mom always started a conversation with the same question. “How was your day?”

To which she and her brother always said, “Good. How was your day?”

Spencer thought about her day. She chuckled. Oh, I cut off blood circulation to Molly’s brain and then she sent me home like a discarded peasant.

Now that would be a conversation starter.

Tonight, as on most Friday nights, her mom was on a date and her brother was at practice. That left her to sit in her room, surrounded by books on layout styles, color variables, and the implementation of CSS to create a theme. It was her passion and also a way to make money. Until recently, she was saving so she and Molly could buy 1393 South Washington. Now, she wasn’t so sure. Molly didn’t know Spencer was thousands of dollars to the good toward that entry in *The Book of Promises*. No one did. Not that people didn’t know Spencer made apps and theme packs

for phones; they did. They didn't think it was as valuable a topic as the generic, "How are you?" that everyone held so dear. The only people who gave a rat's ass about her passion were the like-minded geeks in her coding club. They talked code, not much else, and that was also fine with Spencer.

By the time she downed her dinner, Spencer was consumed with the music in her ears and the moustache template files on her screen.

When Cinnamon rubbed against her legs, demanding attention, Spencer jerked. Her movement sent Cinnamon scurrying across the room and under the bed.

"Come on." She patted her leg.

Cinnamon came to the edge of the bed but didn't come out.

"Do you want to come, or not?"

She looked again at the file on her screen while she waited for the cat to make his way across the room. The melancholy girl who sat alone on a background of white reminded her of herself. The girl sat with her knees hugged to her chest, her chin resting on her forearm. She stared at something no one else could see as tiny black hearts floated down around her.

"Really, Cinn? Why so skittish tonight?" She heard agitation in her voice. Took a deep breath. "Sorry boy."

The keyboard attached to the newest theme was giving her fits. The exact spot where a user's finger would touch a letter on the virtual keyboard was slightly off. It made Spencer crazy. She sat up straight in her chair and rolled her head from side to side. She needed to get this right.

She looked at the yellow rubber duck staring at her from its spot under the computer screen. "I know. I know. Explain the code."

She reached for the small bathtub toy. Her teacher gave each student in the coding club an identical duck. "This is a lucky duck," Mrs. Maxwell told them. "Recite one line of your code out loud. Explain to the duck how it works. If it doesn't make sense, perhaps you found your bug. And if you're frustrated, your buddy here is up for a squeeze or toss across the room." The class laughed as the teacher's duck flew across the classroom, but it was true.

"You've flown around this room more than once, haven't you, Lucky Duck?" She gave the yellow plastic animal a squeeze and placed him back in his coveted spot on her desk.

She didn't have it in her to recite code to Lucky tonight. Her thoughts were foggy. Her eyes were tired. She removed her glasses and rubbed her knuckles hard against her eyelids.

Cinnamon was back at her feet. She scooted back from her desk and patted her lap.

She removed her earbuds, laid them next to her glasses, and turned her attention to the orange ball of fluff on her lap. "What's up, boy? Feeling neglected?"

Cinnamon meowed in response and head-butted Spencer's chin.

"Yes. I love you more than Lucky Duck."

Cinnamon's meow turned into a soft purr. He kneaded Spencer's lap with his front paws.

"Oh, to have your life." She scratched Cinnamon's favorite spots. "I bet you wouldn't abandon me for some guy." Spencer wondered where Molly and Lucas were tonight. She thought about texting Jordan. Her stomach clenched. She wasn't good at making friends, not like her mom and AJ and Molly. She remembered the taste of pizza and sunshine and the invitation of a proper date. "I'm surrounded by social butterflies."

She heard a sound outside and paused. She swiveled in her chair until she faced the window. Blue sky had turned to black. She suddenly felt very exposed under the bright light of her room.

“A fish in a fishbowl, mom would say.” She eased Cinnamon onto the floor. “Better close the blinds before mom gets home and wants to discuss safety for an hour.” She stretched her arms above her head and leaned from side to side before standing. She took a step toward the open blinds. Cinnamon followed.

Before she reached the window, Spencer noticed snowflakes moving through orange-and-red flashes of light outside the windowpane. The colors throbbed through the slats in the open blinds. Spencer pulled the string to move the slats up past the middle of the window, slid the window open, and leaned into the frigid air. She counted two police cars and one fire truck.

The center of the commotion was in front of 1393 South Washington, closer to Molly’s house than her own. AJ wasn’t home. That meant it was before midnight. AJ never missed curfew. Missing curfew meant no football. No football wasn’t an option.

Spencer strained to see exactly where there was movement. It didn’t take long for her to see two police officers come out of the house next door. She let out the breath she was holding.

The proximity to her own home should have caused angst. It didn’t. Only one thing mattered. Knowing Molly was safe.

Spencer’s hand went to her back pocket.

In her mind, she would text Molly, they would meet next door, and they would make up and all would be right with the world again.

Her pocket was empty. She glanced back at her desk. Her phone lay to the right of her sandwich plate, where she placed it hours ago.

She watched for a few seconds longer. Fear crept up her spine and tickled the base of her neck. She was ninety-nine percent certain she and Cinnamon were alone. She took the five steps back into the belly of her room, slid her glasses back into place, and returned to the window, phone in hand.

She needed to connect with Molly.

Spencer: Something is going on at OUR house.

Spencer alternated her attention between the movement below and the screen where she typed the message. Minutes ticked by. She picked at the cuticle of her ring finger while she waited.

Another vehicle pulled up in front of 1393 South Washington. She looked at her screen. Nothing from Molly.

After ten minutes of indecisive banter in her own head, Spencer decided to quit observing the tiny forms who were in and out of the house next door and to go outside to get a better look.

Before she left her yard, Spencer spotted Molly exiting a car parked in front of her house.

Spencer stood at the edge of her walkway. Molly staggered a few steps and then balanced herself with one hand against the hood of the car. Spencer looked at her phone. Ten forty-five. The time only registered as important to Spencer because it wasn’t a normal time for Molly to get home on a Friday night. Her mom and dad stopped policing her movements when Molly turned eighteen. She still adhered to her ten o’clock curfew on school nights, but all bets were off on the weekend. Sometimes Spencer would get a text at midnight, and sometimes it was two or three. It always said the same thing. *Home safe. Sweet dreams.*

Spencer hated that she still had more than a month to go before she was eighteen, and she hated that Molly didn't seem to miss their weekends together. When Spencer asked Molly what she did, Molly gave a cursory upturn of her lip and said, "What do you think? I fuck Lucas."

Spencer forced her feet to move once, twice, three times. She never asked Molly again what she did when she was out without her on the weekends.

The two of them made a pact in ninth grade to stay sober so they didn't destroy brain cells. Spencer kept the promise. Molly didn't. Spencer knew this from the bonfire last year and from the few times she heard Molly and her friends talk about the parties Spencer didn't attend. Molly said she barely touched anything other than an occasional beer. Based on what Spencer was witnessing tonight, Molly lied.

Spencer took another step. Stopped. Looked up to her bedroom. Cinnamon stood in the windowsill. The light behind him made him look like a shadow against the screen. She wanted to turn around and pretend she didn't see Molly at all. Instead, she took another step in the direction of the flashing lights.

Molly swayed.

Another figure, not Lucas, exited the driver's side of the car from which Molly just emerged. Neither of them seemed to notice Spencer as she neared 1393 South Washington.

"What the...?" Spencer's voice trailed off as the two came together at the front of the car.

Molly was obviously on something. The man, too. Spencer didn't know him. He looked older. His movements disturbed the softly falling snow as he spoke. He pointed first to the house next door and then to Molly's house. Their faces were concealed by the shadows, but Spencer guessed from their movements the man wanted Molly to go inside and Molly wanted him to shut up. Molly's body language said the man didn't stand a chance. His body language said he was still going to try.

As Spencer passed 1393 South Washington, she peered into the house that always stood between them. The front door was open. The light from the open doorway framed a stretcher. On the stretcher was a body completely covered by a black vinyl bag. The current owner of the house was Mrs. Brahms, a retired music professor who was rarely seen outside her home after the death of her husband when Spencer and Molly were fourteen. Spencer visited the woman with her mom and brother until Molly moved in and she could stay with the Blackstones instead of moping through an hour or more of adult conversation. After Mr. Brahms died, the woman stopped taking visitors, and other than alternating turns mowing her lawn and trimming her hedges, neighbors ceased trying to visit.

Spencer knew the Brahmses had two sons, but neither was around. One was a big shot on a sports team in North Carolina. Spencer caught sight of him courtside more than once when her brother watched a game at home instead of somewhere else on a big screen TV. The man always looked angry. She said as much one day, and her brother said it was because the team was incompetent. Spencer didn't think that was it.

The other son ran a real estate company and traveled constantly, or at least that's what Mrs. Brahms told everyone in the neighborhood. Molly didn't believe her. She said he must be in jail or something, because no one ever saw him, not even on holidays when Mrs. Brahms said he was there.

As far as Spencer knew, after her husband's death, cats were Mrs. Brahms's only company.

Spencer was in the house only one time after she stopped going with her mom. She was twelve. The Brahmses were going on vacation, and Virginia agreed to have AJ and Spencer take turns tending the cats, all ten of them.

When she told Molly about the smell of old people and urine after her first turn in the house, Molly laughed. “She’s so old she farts dust, Spence. What do you expect?”

“It’s gross. I don’t want to go back. I think my mom hates me.”

“Spence. Think about it. This is our chance. When do you go again? Tell AJ we’ll take his turn.”

That wasn’t the reaction Spencer expected. “He’ll want to know why.”

“Fine. When do you go? We’ll wait ’til then,” Molly said. “Then we get to explore our future home without any adults telling us to mind our own business.”

When Molly retrieved *The Book of Promises* from its secured space in the floor and turned to a clean page, Spencer was as excited as Molly.

At the top, Molly wrote, “1393 So. Washington Street – The planning begins,” and underneath she added bulleted items: “Take room measurements; choose colors; pick the furniture we want to keep.” At twelve, neither of them realized none of the furniture would stay when Mrs. Brahms moved.

Two days later, the two of them felt grown up as they moved from room to room and debated on what color they would paint—lavender in the bedroom, Molly’s favorite—and which furniture they would keep and which they would replace. The two giggled and crinkled their noses as they deliberated the smells in each room. In the kitchen, Spencer voted for unwashed dishes and dirty sneakers. Molly said cellar funk. Molly was right. The cellar smelled like the kitchen, just ten times worse.

Tonight, Spencer didn’t smell the cellar funk. She smelled burnt cabbage and mustard and brats. She wondered if Mrs. Brahms was cooking before her body gave out and she ended up in the zippered bag now on a gurney on its way to the long, black sedan parked among the flashing lights.

Spencer paused as the man pushed the gurney across her path. Many of the people from the neighborhood now stood in a small group and consoled one another. Several were in their pajamas. Spencer nodded when old man Coe looked up from the group and acknowledged her, then she resumed her steps toward Molly and the unknown man. There would be plenty of time later to learn what happened to their neighbor. Right now, the man’s hands were on Molly’s shoulders, and she looked like a wet noodle being pulled out of a pot of boiling water.

Spencer moved more quickly in their direction. As she drew closer, she recognized the burgundy Subaru. It was Lucas’s. Her eyes scanned all around and inside the car. No Lucas. The man looked like an older version of Lucas. A brother maybe? She had no idea. Molly didn’t talk about any siblings other than a little sister, and Spencer never asked.

Whoever he was, she didn’t like the way his hands now gripped Molly’s arms or the proximity of his face to hers.

“Get your hands off her.” Spencer’s voice sounded louder than she meant for it to be.

The group that huddled together in front of Mrs. Brahms’s house turned in unison at the sound. Spencer could feel their eyes on her. She glanced in their direction and waved. Old man Coe waved back. She hoped she looked more convincing than she felt.

The man’s hands fell to his sides. He looked at Spencer. They both looked at Molly.

“This is none of your concern,” Molly screeched. The drunken slur in her voice melded her words together, making them hard to understand.

“You’re drunk.”

“Duh, pussy girl.”

Spencer smelled the sour stench of alcohol on her breath and the sweet stench of marijuana on her clothes. It wasn’t the first time. Last month, Spencer confronted Molly about the same flowery smell in her car, a smell she knew from football games and the occasional huddle next to the trailers at school, was marijuana. Molly claimed it was from her friends. Spencer believed her.

Spencer turned her attention to the man. He hadn’t moved since he dropped his hands from Molly’s arms. Spencer thought he looked tired, drained. His eyes were only partially opened, but they weren’t bloodshot like Molly’s, and his skin drooped from his cheekbones. “What’s going on? Why is she like this?”

The man raised his head only a fraction so that he was still not talking to Spencer, but to the pavement in front of her. “Look. I don’t want no trouble. I’m doin’ a favor. That’s it. You want her. I don’t. Here ya go.” He shuffled in a half circle and slid a step sideways until he could reach through the driver’s side of the door. When he returned to his original position, he held out a small pipe. “She’s shitfaced. Took this from her, and I def don’t need it in my car to get me jammed up.”

Spencer looked from the man’s hand to Molly and back to the hand. She felt her arm move out from her body. Everything stood perfectly still except the arm. As it came into full view, Spencer watched as her fingers moved together and her hand cupped slightly. Her palm struck the underside of the man’s hand. The small metal pipe popped upward.

All three heads turned to watch its movement. It bounced several times atop the Subaru, once against the windshield, and again against the hood. Spencer counted the pings as it moved. She could hear the circle of adults behind them, knew they would soon come their direction if she didn’t get things under control. She had to get Molly away from this man, away from the prying eyes of the neighborhood, away from the metal pipe.

“I paid good money for that. Prick.” Molly yelled her words at the man. “You hear me? You...you dickwad.”

“Molly. Come on. You’re making a scene.” Spencer grasped Molly’s hand and took two steps forward.

Molly swayed, but her feet stayed planted firmly next to Lucas’s car. “And this ain’t your fucking car anyway, prick. If he loved me, he’d be here. Where’s my pipe?” Molly spiraled from one thought to another. “You’re supposed to be my friend.” Molly’s attention was now on Spencer. “Goddamnit.”

Spencer let go of Molly’s hand. She dropped to her knees where the pipe hit the ground and ran her fingers across the concrete. The last bounce should have landed the pipe behind the car’s front tire.

A sick, hot feeling erupted in the pit of her stomach. Molly had no right to be mad at her. She took a deep breath. Held it. Her temple throbbed. She pushed the air out of her lungs and moved forward slightly, running her fingers across the rough asphalt. Her fingers found the warm metal. Spencer put the pipe close to her face. The contents smelled sweet. She connected the smell to Molly. She smelled this way often over the last few months. She wondered if this man was responsible for Molly’s new habit.

Pipe in hand, she stood. She shook the object in Molly’s face. “Here’s your precious pipe.” She kept her words steady. “I don’t get it. We made a pact.”

Molly stood motionless. The grin on her face didn’t match the anger in her eyes.

“Molly.” Spencer knew her parents and Molly’s parents would know about all of this tomorrow. She drew some comfort in the knowledge that from where they stood the gawkers wouldn’t be able to make out the pipe or the slur in Molly’s voice.

“We made a pact. We made a pact.” Molly was laughing now, but her body was rigid and still.

Spencer positioned herself behind Molly and put one hand on each hip. “Come on. We’re going inside.”

After a few steps, Spencer looked over her shoulder and said, “Tell Lucas thanks for nothing.”

At the mention of Lucas’s name, Molly flailed her arms to shake loose from Spencer.

Spencer held on tight.

The man started the Subaru. He didn’t say another word before he pulled away.

Spencer guided Molly up over the curb and toward the house. Molly punched at nothing. The swoosh of air was audible. Molly staggered forward. “I hate you, Spencer. I fucking hate you. This is all your fault.”

A few of Molly’s blows landed on Spencer’s hands that still held firmly to Molly’s hips. Spencer hoped everyone in Molly’s house was asleep. The fact that they weren’t next door with the other neighbors indicated they were. “What are you talking about, Molly? Come on. It’s cold out here. Let’s go inside.” She tried to keep her voice steady and soft. “Molly. Look.” She stepped to the side, her arm around Molly’s lower back, one hand still on her hip. With her free hand, she pointed to the group in front of the Brahms’s house. “They’ll tell your folks. Please. Just come on.”

Molly stopped talking. She put her hands to her sides and let Spencer lead her up the narrow concrete path to Molly’s front door.

“Give me the key.”

Molly tried to reach into her own pocket, missed, and almost took both girls down. “Whoops. Sorry Spencer-did. I didn’t mean to be like this.” Molly’s words were a sing-song jumble.

Molly hadn’t used that nickname since middle school. It made what was happening even harder. “I know.” Spencer steadied Molly. She reached into Molly’s pocket and pulled out the key. Neither girl made a sound as they removed their shoes and tip-toed up the stairs and into Molly’s room.

Spencer managed to get Molly out of her clothes and into her favorite sleeping shirt—an over-sized Marshmallow and Jai Wolf T-shirt from a concert they saw two years ago at Red Rocks.

“I don’ wanna go to bed.” Molly’s words slurred together. “Le’s build a snowman.” She swayed in front of Spencer.

“It’s barely snowing, Molly. We can’t build anything.”

“You’re jus’ mad at me, aren’t you? Don’ be mad at me. Hey. Com’on. Don’ be mad at me.”

Spencer eased Molly onto the lavender settee in the corner before situating herself cross-legged on the bed.

Molly struggled to get comfortable on the small piece of furniture.

She looked suddenly out of place with her smeared mascara and red cheeks in the sea of white and lavender. “You sure you don’t want to come up here?”

“I said no. You’re mad a’me. Your mom’s gonna be mad a’me.”

“I left a note on the table.”

“A note? Whaz it say? I’m a take care a poor drunk Molly?”

Spencer heard anger creeping back into Molly’s voice. She debated staying or going home. There was no way to win. She voted to stay. “Why don’t you just lie down?”

“Fuck you.”

“What’s your problem? I’m the one who should be mad.”

“You?”

“Yeah. Me, Molly. You dismissed me today. I came back to help you anyway. Now you’re being an asshole.” Spencer picked at her fingers. This new level of dislike for Molly made her nervous. Molly was her only real friend. She didn’t want to lose that, but she was tired, too. When she spoke again, she tried to keep her tone even and her words measured. “Who was that man? Why were you in a car with someone who’s not Lucas?”

Molly was half-sitting, half-lying, on the settee. Her eyes were barely open. She spat words in Spencer’s direction. “Why da you care?”

“You’re my best friend. I care. Period.”

“Itz none o’ your business. Not who he is. Not why Lucas wasn’t there. Not if I get high.” Molly sat up straight. Her head bobbed, but she maintained the position. “Everyone getz high. If I’m your bezt friend, act like it. What’re you, anyway, twelve?”

Spencer looked at Molly. She wished she was home on her own bed with the bold orange-and-blue-striped blanket pulled up to her chin and Cinnamon curled against her stomach. Here, where the lavender melted off the walls and into the air, she could barely breathe. The room was soft. All of it. The white furniture with rounded corners. The dozens of pillows, white, pink, and lavender, thrown atop the thick, purple comforter. And Molly, with her made-up face, perched on the lavender settee at the edge of the space. Even with black streaks and red cheeks, the world loved her. Spencer loved her. Molly’s parents called Spencer the yin to Molly’s yang.

Spencer kept her voice even. “Let’s get some sleep. We can talk tomorrow.”

Molly mocked Spencer’s words through silent lips.

“Seriously? And I’m the one acting like she’s twelve? You know what? Fuck you. I’m going home. Sleep. Don’t sleep. Whatever.” Spencer scooted to the edge of the bed and stood up.

“Don’t go. Pleazh. I’m sorry.”

“You make no sense, Molly. If you want me to stay, quit being an ass.”

“I will. Come zit with me.”

Spencer continued to stand at the edge of the bed. “Who was the man?”

“Fine. Stay over there, puzzy girl. You’re a spy anyway. That’z what Lucuz says.”

“Oh my god. I was not spying on you. I have never spied on you. Do you seriously hear yourself?” Spencer whispered, but her tone was clear. She took one step in the direction of the lavender chair and then another. “You’re not sober. And I’m trying hard to be a good friend. Mrs. Brahms died tonight. Do you even care? You had to see the coroner’s car, the police. Molly. I’m sad and scared and I just can’t do this right now.”

Molly looked up at Spencer. “You’re right. Okay. Juz’ please don’t be mad. I can’t take it right now. Our house. Our house. Our…”

Molly’s voice was warm and wavy in its drunkenness.

“Stop it, Molly. Just stop.” In that second, as Spencer looked into the eyes of her best friend, she saw her at age nine, with a white-blond cap of hair and red overall shorts, sitting under the old willow tree in Mrs. Brahms’s back yard, her body leaning against the moss-covered wall, her

skinny legs stretched well beyond those of Spencer's own round stubs, talking about this boy and that boy, utterly self-possessed, even then.

There was something disturbing about recalling the warm, willow-tree memory and feeling absolutely cold inside. A tear ran down Spencer's face and settled in the corner of her mouth. Spencer knew the drunk Molly couldn't care less about what happened next door and yet, Molly's words turned her inside out. She fought the urge to sit next to Molly, to wrap her in her arms and hold her close.

Molly stopped as quickly as she started. She uncurled herself and stood. She moved cat-like toward the bed, to where Spencer stood. Before Spencer could react, Molly's tongue gently lapped the droplet from the corner of her lip. "You taz' like salt an' sadness. Please don' be sad." Molly sucked Spencer's bottom lip into her mouth and held it between her teeth.

Spencer eased backward, Molly in tow, until she could balance herself with one hand flat behind her on the footboard of the bed. Her other hand threaded into Molly's hair. The kiss was filled with loss and grief and hurt, and Spencer surged against it. A shiver went down her spine and into her knees, and for a split second it all fell away—the fear, the questions, the doubt.

Molly kissed differently drunk. Like it was their first time. When they pulled apart, Molly looked at Spencer with a smoldering intensity that Spencer had never seen before. It was different in a thousand tiny ways that Spencer couldn't figure out. It was more than the drinking, more than the pot.

Spencer untangled her fingers from Molly's hair. "Not tonight, Molly. You can't make this go away like this. Why are you smoking weed? We have a pact..."

Before Spencer could finish, the darkness returned to Molly's eyes, choking out the want that was there seconds before. Molly stayed less than an inch from Spencer's face, her words low, her tone menacing. The slur was gone. "I'm so sick of your childlike mentality. No one wants to hang out with you. You're a fucking baby. I stick up for you. Do you know that, baby? Do you?"

Spencer's mouth filled with the metallic taste of vomit. Her throat burned. She stayed firm in front of Molly, one hand against the bed and the other at her side. She picked at the skin around her thumb nail with her index finger. The pain helped her keep the tears at bay. "I should go. You should sleep."

Molly didn't let up. She mocked Spencer's words out loud this time. "I should go. You should sleep." Molly inched even closer to Spencer's face. Their noses touched. "I don't need to sleep, baby dyke. I need for people to quit asking me if we're a couple. I need for you to stop looking so queer. I need you to grow the fuck up. Smoke a joint. Loosen up."

"Jordan doesn't think I'm a baby." Spencer spat the words in Molly's face.

Molly shoved Spencer backward.

Spencer lost her balance. Her arm folded at the elbow. Pain shot downward into her hand. She wanted to run. She wanted to stay. She didn't understand what was happening. Molly never called her names, certainly not dyke. It was Molly who suggested last year they get Spencer boxers and men's tanks. The two shopped for clothes all the time. Molly liked sundresses and cute tight-fitting tees. Spencer liked loose jeans that rested around her hips and plain men's tees. Molly said it made them perfect friends.

Her breath came in quick gasps. Her heart pounded. "Why are you acting like this? What happened tonight?"

Molly repositioned herself until her face was about an inch from Spencer's face. "Don't think because old lady Brahms kicked the bucket, I'm going to move into the house with you, either. I'm not moving in with a dyke."

Spencer was drowning in Molly's words. She reminded herself to breathe. "I wasn't even thinking about that right now. Shit, Molly. What's wrong with you?" The truth was, Spencer did think about it. She thought about it when she paused in front of the house earlier. Why couldn't she tell Molly that now? Why did she feel the need to lie? Was it because she wasn't sure if the lavender bedroom was all she didn't want? Maybe she didn't want Molly anymore. Maybe she wanted Jordan. Maybe she didn't want anyone.

Instead of answering, Molly made a one-eighty turn and stumbled ten steps across the room. It took her two tries to successfully move the dresser and retrieve *The Book of Promises*. Molly laid the book that held so many years of childhood plans and dreams on top of the desk, swayed, and then fumbled to get a pen out of a purple holder that rested next to a picture of Lucas.

Spencer's center of gravity shifted. The room stood still. She didn't. Colors swirled between her and Molly. Molly opened the book and pushed pages aside. She knew what Molly was looking for in her still drunken state. Spencer hoped the page would soothe Molly, remind her about their past, about how important their friendship was to each of them.

Molly found the page with "Buy 1393 South Washington Street" scrawled in big blue letters.

Spencer watched.

Molly wobbled slightly.

Spencer waited.

Molly looked at the pen inside her balled-up fist. She looked at Spencer.

Spencer didn't move.

Molly looked back to the words on the page and began to scribble. Red ink rolled out of the tip, back and forth on the page, faster and faster.

Spencer licked her lips, dug at her cuticles, but she remained in place. It was impossible to deny her helplessness. Aside from each other, *The Book of Promises* was the only constant they had. It was their shelter.

Tears slid down Molly's face. She didn't stop. In a matter of seconds, the words of two fourth grade girls who dreamed of never being apart disappeared under her anger. It took several more seconds before the paper ripped under the pressure of Molly's anger.

The sound seemed to awaken both girls from the pen's spell.

Molly's trance-like movements ended.

Spencer hiccupped a single sob.

Molly was bawling now. She turned back to Spencer. "What are you staring at? I hate you. I hate you. This is all your fault."

Spencer found her feet again and crossed the area between her and the one person in the world who made her whole. "Molly. Please talk to me." She took the pen from Molly's trembling hand and laid it across the ripped page. "Come on. You're going to wake your parents." She tried to lead Molly to the bed. "You're scaring me."

Molly flung Spencer's hand away from her arm. Her face contorted into a grotesque sneer. "You don't get it, do you? You ruin everything. You want to know why Jordan kissed you? Do you? I'll tell you why. He kissed you because Lucas paid him to kiss you."

Spencer stared at Molly's face. She caught a whiff of sickly sweetness in the breeze that followed their movement. And then it was startlingly quiet.

The two stood there in the soft lines of the lavender room. Small, paper particles danced in the light that shone between them.

“Did you hear me?” Molly asked. Her voice was now soft like she was sharing a masterfully kept secret. “Lucas. Paid. Him. That’s why I wasn’t with Lucas tonight. That’s why his cousin brought me home. That’s why I got so high. He paid him to kiss you, so we would stop being so close.”

“Lucas is an idiot,” Spencer said. Her voice was lower than Molly’s, barely audible in the otherwise quiet room.

“Don’t, Spencer. Just don’t. I tried to tell him you just hadn’t met the right person. He laughed in my face. Said you had. Me. Are you in love with me like that, Spencer? Are you?”

“What does that kind of love even mean?” Spencer asked. “You’re messed up, Molly. I’m out of here. When you’re sober tomorrow, text me.” Spencer moved toward the bedroom door.

“Spencer?”

Spencer slowed and turned.

“We still need each other. If you say one word about what you do for me, I will hurt you and then leave you. If you tell Jordan you know, I will hurt you and then leave you. Break up with him if you need to, but not right now. Give it time. And do not make it about me. We’re not a couple. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

Spencer understood.

Chapter Six

Spencer lay awake in bed the rest of the night. None of this made sense on the surface, but the subconscious marches to its own beat, and right now hers was afraid of losing her best friend. Right or wrong, at least for now she decided to keep this horrible monster buried deep inside her stomach even if it ate her from the inside out.

Saturday and most of Sunday, Spencer stayed in her room. She told her mom and brother that she picked up a stomach bug at school and she would text them if she needed anything. Between the demise of Mrs. Brahms and her red eyes and desire to stay buried under her comforter, no one questioned the story. The upside to the neighborhood's loss and the lie was she was left alone ninety percent of both days. She slept more than she stirred. When she was awake, she stared at Netflix and avoided the text messages from Jordan. There were nine messages in total. Four came in the early part of the day on Saturday, one early afternoon, three late in the day, and one in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Each segment increased in edginess.

Jordan: Hey. Hanging with some friends at Twine's. Up for old school Foosball?

[microphone emoji] Is this thing on?

Worried about you. [concerned face emoji] What's up?

Foosball isn't a date, you know. [smiley emoji]

Jordan: Heard about your neighbor. So sorry. Were you close?

Jordan: What's up? Thought we were past this. [shoulder shrug male emoji]

Ok. Whatever.

Do you want me to back off? Say something. Anything.

Jordan: You up?

Spencer wanted to answer. She wanted to know if he was being paid to text her. She wanted to scream at him, to make him hurt the way she was hurting. She liked him. Really liked him. Maybe they would never be in love, but they could have been friends. Now there was no one to trust at all. She stared at his last text for a long time. Maybe he really did feel horrible about leading her on. She needed someone to talk to or she was going to explode.

She wanted to tell someone everything that transpired between her and Molly, but she wasn't sure that Jordan was the right person. She thought about AJ but decided that was weirder than Jordan. Not her mom. Virginia would flip out. Plus, you don't talk to your mom about sex with your best friend.

Maybe there was no one to talk to about it, but it still existed. Whatever they called it, the two shared a million seemingly insignificant details about each other, details upon which Spencer's world hung. Maybe Molly didn't create the same world out of the details, but it existed. When they were fifteen and Molly asked Spencer to touch her *there* the first time, it existed. When they were sixteen and Molly asked Spencer to strangle her for the first time, it existed. Tonight, when Molly stood in front of her as someone both familiar and alien, it existed.

And then it dawned on her. She existed for Molly. Everything in her life since she was nine and Molly held her hand for the first time was for Molly.

Even *The Book of Promises* was about Molly. Maybe not in the beginning when they had agreed to buy the house between them, or when they giggled and wrote about putting pop rocks in the pancake mix. Those days were simple, exciting. They were filled with staying awake to sneak down to the kitchen for cookies and chocolate milk when Mrs. Blackstone told them no more and with walking around the house, Molly in her mom's high heels and her in Molly's dad's boots.

Molly changed the summer she went to spend time with her aunt and uncle in Wyoming. Her parents said she needed something to do over the summer that was purposeful. Working on the ranch where Molly's dad was raised, and his brother still lived, was their answer. It was the first time the girls were apart in six years. They were fifteen. Spencer missed her desperately while she was gone. Six agonizing weeks. They could text some, but Molly's parents said she couldn't call; she needed to be present in the vacation. Neither girl understood it, but Molly complied except for twice. Both times were late at night. Both times Molly cried. Molly hated it there. Spencer hated her being there.

While she was gone, when Spencer became too lonely, she went to the Blackstone house and let Mrs. Blackstone feed her sweets fresh from the oven. When they talked, Mrs. Blackstone told Spencer that Mr. Blackstone never wanted to move from Wyoming but thought it was best for Molly. When Spencer asked why they moved, Mrs. Blackstone said it was complicated adult work stuff.

The first night Molly was home, she told Spencer she wanted to kiss.

Spencer didn't get it. "Kiss who?"

"You, dummy. So we know how to do it when we meet a boy. We need to know how, or the boys will be too rough."

"I don't know. I don't wanna kiss a boy."

"Come on. If you love me, you'll do it."

Spencer did love her, even then. Spencer continued to love her even when her requests became more bizarre. She continued to love her when her additions to *The Book of Promises* became potentially life altering. Bungee jump from a bridge; dive from a waterfall; steal a parent's car in the middle of the night; return it at dawn; have a threesome; and she continued to love her when Molly pushed her farther and farther away. It wasn't about being a dyke, as Molly called her. She didn't think about gay or straight. She just loved Molly. No matter who else she loved or kissed or had sex with, there would always be Molly.

Spencer heard her mom call out. She knew she would be up soon to check on her. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose. She didn't need a ton of questions right now. What she needed was to pull herself together. She had one person left to depend on—herself. Two days was enough.

After a quick trip to the bathroom to wash her face, she grabbed her phone and sat at her desk. First on her new agenda, text Jordan.

Spencer: Did you get paid to kiss me?

The room prickled with electricity. She pulled the short ringlets of hair above her ear.

Jordan: Let's meet. Need face-to-face.

Spencer: Answer the question.

Jordan: It isn't that easy.

Spencer: Yeah. It is. Did you get paid or not?

Jordan: Yes. Please. Just hear me out.

Spencer: WTF. Why?

Spencer looked down at her pudgy belly. *Because you're fat. Because no boy will want to kiss you if we don't get you in shape.* The words echoed in her mind. Molly told her that when they were fourteen.

When they were twelve, Molly started to develop round breasts and curved hips. Spencer thought they were beautiful on Molly, but she didn't want them. When Spencer's mom caught her staring at Molly, she told her not to worry, that her straight hips and round thighs would become curvy and shapely with time. Virginia called her a late bloomer. Spencer didn't say anything, but she hoped her mom was wrong. She hated the raised mounds on her chest and wished they were smaller. The growing muscles in her legs from hours of basketball felt good. She didn't even mind the pudgy belly that covered her stomach muscles. Back then, she couldn't understand why Molly and her friends suddenly refused their favorite burger and fries or why Molly insisted they do one hundred sit-ups a day.

At almost eighteen, she understood. Flat chests and round stomachs were ugly. She was ugly.

The ellipsis blinked next to Jordan's name.

Spencer watched.

Jordan: It's too hard to explain in a text. Meet me.

Jordan: Please. [praying hands emoji]

Jordan: I don't want to hurt you.

Spencer: I will be at Twine's in 30.

Spencer thought of all the years she listened to Molly tell her she wasn't quite good enough. She took a breath and stood, determined to confront her demons.

Ten minutes after convincing her mom she was feeling better and needed fresh air, Spencer pushed through the front door of the neighborhood diner. The interior looked like something out of the 1940s, all white and blue and high windows. It smelled like hamburger grease and fresh-

ground coffee beans—a recent addition that Mrs. Twine insisted would draw the millennials. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead.

On school days at four o'clock in the afternoon, the back room with its retro foosball table and pinball machines was packed with local kids. On Sunday, the pings and dings and loud teenage laughter of the back room was replaced with the low banter of couples sipping coffee and surfing on their phones in the front cafe.

Two steps in, Spencer spotted Mr. Twine at the counter that ran the entire length of the long café. He chatted with a little girl and her dad. His eyes sparkled in the same way they sparkled years ago when he opened the doors for the first time. Spencer's family was still whole back then and attended the grand opening together.

Mr. Twine nodded in Spencer's direction.

Spencer smiled and waved.

Mr. Twine was closer to her dad than her mom so, even though the families were friendly before she was born, Spencer never worried that her time there would get back to her mom. Twine's was a safe space, a feel-good place, a place on Old South Pearl Street that never changed beyond the barest of upgrades.

Spencer spotted Jordan in a corner booth. The bright blue of the fake leather was in stark contrast to the rest of the café's surroundings. When Mr. Twine replaced the faded old booths last year, young and old alike were displaced for two long days. She wondered if the complaints were the reason no other changes were made.

Jordan was pressed up against the wall with his body slouched almost completely under the table.

Spencer slid out of her coat and into the booth across from him. Her stomach lurched. She sipped water from a glass already on the table in front of her.

Before either of them said a word, a sing-song voice asked, "Can I get you anything to start?"

Spencer turned her head in the direction of the waitress. Her eyes were level with the woman's name tag. Sarah. Spencer shook her head. "Not for me, Sarah. Thanks."

Sarah looked at Jordan. "How about you, bud? Can't take up a booth and order nothing." She tilted her head in the direction of the counter. There was a large white square sign on the wall. It had two large words in red, "No Loitering."

Jordan ordered fries and an orange soda.

When the woman was out of earshot, Spencer said, "So talk."

Jordan's eyes were red and swollen. Either he was drunk the night before, or he had been crying. Spencer didn't know him well enough to know which, but he didn't once mention alcohol or weed in any of their conversations. Since so many kids at their school threw those words around daily, she assumed he didn't do either on the regular. She never understood the draw, and after Friday night, she didn't think she ever would.

Spencer watched Jordan's body movements as he straightened in the booth—the movement started at his tailbone and rolled up his spine. He moved like water poured.

"Spencer, I—I'm sorry. I... Damn it." Jordan's lip quivered slightly.

Under the table, Spencer pulled at the skin around her fingernail.

"Okay. I did agree to kiss you for money. But I didn't know you. Now I do, or sort of. I want to know you. Like, don't you think we hit it off?" Jordan drew circles with his finger on the Formica tabletop.

“I thought so before I knew you took money to be my friend.” She dug at the skin around her nails more quickly, pulling until the thin piece of skin tugged into the tender layers.

“Is that what we are, Spencer? Friends? ’Cause I thought we had something between us. I guess I was wrong.”

Spencer straightened her back until she was at her full height in the booth. “Don’t you dare try to turn this back on me. Whatever we might have been doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“It does to me.”

“Tough sh—”

Sarah returned with the fries and soda. “Ketchup?”

Jordan nodded.

With the movement of a magician, Sarah pulled the plastic bottle from her apron pocket and flipped it on its head.

Jordan looked to Spencer. “You sure you don’t want something? Anything?” He slid the ketchup across the blue laminated tabletop and put the fries midway between them.

She frowned. “No. Thanks.” She pushed the fries back to Jordan. Why did she agree to meet him? This was insane. It occurred to her this might be the last time the two of them talked, and the thought caused mixed emotions. Maybe she wasn’t as much of a loner as she thought. She watched him squirt a bright red stream across his fries.

Sarah said, “Okay, then. If you change your mind.” She nodded at Spencer. Then she was gone.

Jordan was noticeably uncomfortable in the silence that followed. He popped a fry into his mouth and shifted in his seat. The vinyl squeaked against his work khakis.

Spencer had never seen him in his uniform. The pale-blue polo was far different than the all black he usually wore; it made the gold specks in his hazel eyes more prominent. Spencer found herself admiring the contrast even in her anger.

“I don’t want anything to eat,” Spencer said. She focused on the red pickup truck in the parking lot behind Jordan’s head. “I want to know why. We’re face-to-face. So, talk.”

Spencer tried to still her hands in her lap. Her index finger was throbbing. She sat straight against the back of the booth, determined to keep the burning crash site inside her head contained.

“Okay.” Jordan held a French fry midair, a glob of ketchup sitting on the end. “I’m just gonna be real with you.” Jordan put the fry in his mouth and swallowed. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. He took a deep breath. “I did it to help you. I know you’re queer.”

“You know what?” Spencer’s eyes moved from the truck in the background to Jordan’s face and then to the emblem on his shirt, *Pearl Street Escape, An Immersive Experience*.

“I was pretty sure when we were in class together last year.” He stuffed several more fries into his mouth.

Spencer couldn’t get her eyes to move from the emblem. “Queer? As in I date girls? What the hell, dude?”

“Everyone thought you and Molly were a couple before she got with Lucas. People still talk, even after Lucas.”

Spencer wished she had stayed home. She went back to picking the skin around her nails and stared at the emblem on Jordan’s shirt. “Let me get this straight. You let someone pay you to kiss me because you and some stupid-ass friends think I’m gay? And, you did it to help me?”

“Yes. Kind of anyway.” He looked at the plate of fries. Picked one up. Put it back down. Picked it up again and drug it through the ketchup.

Spencer felt the blood trickle down her finger where the skin finally gave way.

“Say something.” Jordan talked to the plate of fries.

Meeting Jordan didn’t help make sense of any of this. If anything, it made it worse. Not only was she the laughingstock of the small group, she was the laughingstock of the school. Even worse, so was Molly. Sourness and dread inched up her throat. “And what about at my locker? The BS about chemistry? Going out on a real date? I wanted to kiss you again. What a stupid idiot I am.” The last words slid between her lips like a bullet from a gun, hard and fast and with the intent of harm.

Even with hair hanging down the side of Jordan’s face like a worn curtain, the furrowed brow showed the blow struck as intended. “You’re not an idiot,” Jordan said. “I like you. I really do. I liked kissing you. Come on. You have to believe me.”

Jordan’s deep breaths made the emblem on his shirt go out and in. Spencer watched until her breaths matched. Thirteen days. That’s all it was. She could still walk away.

He looked up from the fries. “Here’s the thing, Spencer. I know this is weird. I know—”

“Weird?” Spencer cut him off. Her skin crawled. She moved her eyes away from his emblem and looked directly into his eyes. So many gold flecks. She contracted the muscles in her butt cheeks, pulled more skin from her cuticles, counted her breaths. “Weird is looking for your cat for thirty minutes and finding him in the spot where you were sitting before you started looking. Weird is watching your double-jointed friend wrap her foot around her neck. Talking to me to put money in your pocket isn’t weird. It’s cruel and hurtful. Don’t worry about the fat girl. She doesn’t have feelings.”

“Spencer...”

“Don’t. Just don’t. Does kissing fat girls pay more than working in the escape room?” Warmth crept up Spencer’s neck and into her cheeks. Under the table, she was working on the cuticle of another finger to keep from crying.

“Weird was a bad choice of words. Okay?” Jordan pushed the plate of fries to the edge of the table.

The movement brought forth the waitress and halted any further rebuttal from Spencer. “You two love birds okay over here?” The aproned woman looked directly at Spencer.

Spencer smiled and nodded. “Fine. Thanks.” She was glad her skin tone hid the physical act of blushing.

The woman patted Spencer’s hand and picked up the plate.

Jordan leaned forward, mirroring Spencer’s posture. He didn’t acknowledge the fat comment. “Just let me finish. I have to give you the whole story if you’re going to understand at all.”

The closeness of Jordan’s face to her own across the table added to Spencer’s distress. She changed positions. Her body pushed back against the booth and then slid sideways until her shoulder was against the wall.

“Fine. Finish.”

The warm sun reached through the window to make the dust dance above the table where Jordan planted his elbows. She followed the line of his arm up to his hands. His fingers intertwined, and his thumbs pushed so hard against one another that white crescent moons formed under his nail beds. In thirteen days, she became accustomed to Jordan’s laugh, to his smile, to their easy-going banter. No. They probably wouldn’t have made it as a couple, but they definitely could have been friends.

“I’m part of SPECTRUM, the Gender Sexuality Alliance group at school,” Jordan said. “Ms. P. is the faculty advisor.”

Spencer drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. The talk of being gay was wearing thin. “Look. I go to the same school that you do. I don’t need you to tell me what I already know. I just want to know why you kissed me for money. That’s it. Not all the story-time bullshit.”

“Sorry to bore you,” Jordan said.

Spencer watched him scoot toward the end of the booth. She wondered if he was going to leave. Part of her silently pleaded with him to go, and the other part silently pleaded with him to stay.

Jordan stopped just shy of the edge. “Will you listen? Please?”

Spencer pulled her leg up onto the booth and pivoted so she was again facing Jordan. She shrugged.

“I told you I have twin siblings, Jessie and Jonnie.”

Spencer balled her hands into fists. None of this mattered. “And your mom is obsessed with *J* names. You told me,” Spencer felt her jaw clench. “You all have them. Your sisters are twins. They’re five years older than you, not identical. You get along better with one, the one who’s at a college close by. I don’t remember which, and it really doesn’t fucking matter.” By the end of the rant, Spencer was loud whispering. “Get to the point or I’m out.”

“You know what?” Jordan asked.

“What?”

“This was a bad idea. You figure it out.” Jordan slid out of the booth. “Just one thing. Molly isn’t who you think she is. Just know that.”

“Molly is none of your business.” Spencer’s voice escalated. The patrons in the nearby tables turned to look her way. She focused on Jordan.

When Jordan answered, his voice sounded sadder than it did upset. “You have no idea. Look. I care about you. I know you don’t believe that. What I did was wrong. Stupid, even. But I thought I was doing the right thing. If you want to hear the story, text me.”

Without waiting for Spencer’s reply, Jordan walked out the door.

Molly’s text came through while Spencer walked the four blocks from Twine’s to her house.

Molly: What are you doing?

Spencer: Walking.

Molly: Come to my house.

Spencer wanted to say more but didn’t want too many questions. She wanted to apologize for their fight, to ask Molly to forgive her. It was her fault Molly got angry. It was always her fault. Now *The Book of Promises* was ruined.

Molly isn’t who you think she is. Jordan’s words played on repeat in her head. She looked again at Molly’s words. She wasn’t ready to talk. She put her phone on vibrate and shoved it into her back pocket.

When she got to Arkansas Street, Spencer didn’t turn right toward home. Instead, she walked farther down Pearl. She walked past the row of houses. She passed the duplex where Myrtle

and Tillie lived. Her mom called them old maids. Spencer thought they seemed happier than a lot of married people they knew. She crossed the street and walked past a few more houses before she passed the corner bar. She slowed and looked at the announcement posted in the window. Help wanted. Twenty-one and older.

Spencer crossed to the other side of Pearl Street. She needed time to sort through what she knew, which wasn't much. Lucas paid Jordan to kiss her. He did it so she would leave Molly alone. With Spencer out of the picture, Molly wouldn't be called gay. As a bonus, Spencer wouldn't be called gay, either. But Jordan said he belonged to the SPECTRUM group at school. Why? And why was Jordan so insistent on talking about his siblings? What did his sisters have to do with anything?

Spencer's phone buzzed against her butt cheek several times as she walked. At the 7-Eleven on the corner, she stopped and pulled it out of her pocket. There were two new texts from Molly, one from Jordan, and two from AJ. She chose Molly first.

Molly: Don't ignore me.

Molly: NM. Coming to your house.

The first was time-stamped 6:40 PM. The other was ten minutes later. Jordan's text came in between Molly's first and second.

Jordan: Sorry for everything. [sad face emoji]

AJ's messages held the greatest sense of urgency.

AJ: Where RU? Molly is here. So am I. Ugh.

AJ: Seriously. Come. Home.

AJ was such a drama king. If she wasn't so frustrated and sad, she would have laughed.

AJ didn't particularly like Molly from the first day of fourth grade, but until tenth grade he tolerated her for Spencer's sake. In tenth grade, a mutual friend who lived down the block invited the three of them over to play video games. The girl's parents were out of town overnight. The girl took a partial bottle of rum from her parents' liquor cabinet. AJ and Spencer took one drink apiece. The girl and Molly drank the rest. After Molly threw up, she insisted Spencer walk her home. Spencer didn't want to leave. Her brother saved her by offering to walk Molly himself. Something happened that night that neither AJ nor Molly ever talked about, but now AJ avoided being alone with Molly at all costs.

Spencer: Almost home.

AJ: Hurry up.

Spencer: Tell her to wait in my room.

AJ: Already did.

Spencer: Good. She go?

AJ: Finally.

When Spencer reached her bedroom, Molly was lying on her back across Spencer's bed with her hands under her head. "Bout time."

The smell of strawberry shampoo filled the air. The combination of Molly's relaxed, peaceful smile and the sweet smell in the quiet safety of her bedroom was almost enough to erase Spencer's anger from the last few days. Almost, but not entirely. "Why are you here?"

"I miss you." Molly's voice was soft. She patted the dark-blue-and-orange comforter. "Lie with me."

Spencer needed to do homework. She glanced at the backpack next to her nightstand. It was heavy with books she ignored more than not over the last week.

"I have to be the most important." Molly patted the bed again. "Homework can wait."

"You tore our book," Spencer said. "You scribbled out our very first dream."

"I know." Molly turned her head slightly. She looked up at Spencer. "I'll make it better. Don't be mad at me."

Spencer's gut churned with her own sorrow and the penitence in Molly's voice.

Molly's M.O.

AJ's voice chastised her.

Molly isn't who you think she is.

Jordan's voice added to the cacophony in her head.

Her heart thrummed hard in her chest. She gulped air, trying to fill the thing inside her that left her feeling so empty, so untethered. Molly's face was soft below her. Her lips curled slightly in a half smile, half pout. The look slowed Spencer's breathing and returned her oxygen levels to normal. She wanted the old Molly.

Molly's voice murmured words Spencer wanted to hear. "I don't know what got into me. Everything was so bizarre. I found out Lucas paid Jordan. Mrs. Brahms was dead. I felt like I had to choose between you and Lucas." Molly raked her top lip with her bottom teeth. "You know I love you. I didn't mean the dyke stuff."

Spencer crawled next to Molly and lay on her back. The beige swirls of plaster above the bed and the warmth radiating between their bodies gave her a sense of calm.

Molly grabbed a pillow. She gently lifted Spencer's head and placed the pillow between it and the bed. She propped herself up on her elbow. Her nose almost touched Spencer's nose. "Forgive me?"

It physically hurt for Spencer to imagine a life without Molly. Yet something tugged at her just below the surface, like sobs trapped in her chest, shuddery spasms struggling to escape. Somehow, around the edges, she knew they would never be the same again.

"Well?" Molly let her fingers dance on Spencer's hand. "Don't be such a worrier. We're different, Spencer. I accept your seriousness. You have to accept my need to explore."

Spencer sighed. She knew she was going to forgive Molly, and Molly knew she was going to be forgiven. She moved into the tickle of Molly's fingertips and the warmth of Molly's skin next to hers. For all their differences, they were very much the same. "Yes. I forgive you."

Spencer turned her hand under Molly's fingers until she was able to intertwine their fingers. Both girls held on tight.

Chapter Seven

Spencer was never a social butterfly. She focused on her education and, even if she wasn't as serious or smart as AJ, was determined to become one of the greatest coders of all time. The weeks of Jordan, as she now called them, were a blip in that trajectory. Other than them, and time with Molly, Spencer was always able to curb any impulse that might place her in an uncomfortable situation.

It was exactly twelve days from the weeks of Jordan when Spencer received the text.

Jordan: I'm here if you need me.

Until the text, Spencer knew she missed him, but fear of what that meant kept her from dwelling on it. After the text, she debated with herself every day. So far, the internal debate had raged for nineteen days. Every time, it ended with her looking at the text but not answering.

Each morning, Molly left Spencer as soon as she saw Lucas, and Spencer walked alone past Jordan and his followers, all of whom shifted slightly as she passed. Each morning, not answering became harder. She filled the empty space with the few students who talked to her. None of them held any importance in her life beyond being a part of it since kindergarten or sharing a love of coding.

The coding club was her one, consistently happy place on campus. Twice a week she walked from her final bell in the science building to the trailer where Mrs. Maxwell ran the club. She started it as a girls' coding club when Spencer was a junior. The idea was to get more girls involved in coding. She called the club "GPS" (Girls Programming for Success). It became a hit with a lot of girls and with a lot of guys. When they voted to let guys join, Mrs. Maxwell thought they should change the name, but no one really seemed to care, so they never did.

Spencer hadn't missed a meeting in the two years since the club started. She loved the two hours spent talking code more than any other part of her day. It was one reason she rarely missed school and always passed her classes with a B or better. Those were Mrs. Maxwell's stipulations.

"Anyone who wants to spend their life writing and researching code must be dedicated beyond measure," Mrs. Maxwell told them during the first meeting of each semester. "I will not tolerate laziness. Missed classes and poor grades are signs of laziness."

She also refused to let anyone who wasn't interested in coding into the classroom when meetings were in session. "Distractions are poison to the mind," she said. "Focus is your future."

Some of the students tried Mrs. Maxwell and her rules. Not Spencer. Spencer bought into her sayings. All of them. She went from an average student with few friends and with no real ambition to a student with few friends and a clear goal. She would learn to code, write phenomenal programs, and buy the house that stood between her and the only human being who really mattered.

Today was Wednesday. About a month and a half ago, she kissed a boy for the first time; a month and a half ago her world turned upside down. The days were getting longer and warmer and chatter at school focused more and more on the prom and the end of the school year.

Spencer looked around the small trailer. The walls were the same beige as the ceiling in her room, but it was hard to tell in places where fingerprints and scuff marks overtook the original color and made them gray. Mrs. Maxwell's desk was at one end of the rectangular space. Mrs. Maxwell wasn't. She moved constantly around the room, pointing to a spot in a line of code, shaking and nodding her head to indicate whether the young coders were on track, smiling and giving words of encouragement.

Today, everyone was quiet as they tried to figure out how to incorporate a way to showcase student-created programs within a new app they were developing.

These juniors and seniors were her people. They were her kind of odd and most had an inability to fit equal to her own. Conversation happened, but no one needed to talk to feel included. Silence was as valued as sound, sometimes more so.

Members of the club occasionally had a get together outside of the club meetings, but it was rare. More times than not, their contact was through a chat relay service they developed last year as their club project.

Molly found the elusive connections boring and strange. When Spencer was most excited about a breakthrough in app development, Molly was most glassy-eyed. Eventually, Spencer quit talking about it at all. That arrangement seemed to make Molly happy.

There were five girls and four guys in this semester's group. Mrs. Maxwell allowed a maximum of ten. This year that cap wasn't an issue.

One of the girls in the room broke the intense silence. "Oh, snap."

Spencer and seven other bodies moved to crowd around the girl with the faded jeans and frayed T-shirt. Deja was a sprite of a girl with brown skin and pink ringlets of hair that danced on her shoulders as she talked. Spencer didn't know her well, but she was in awe of her skill and always enjoyed working with her.

"Watch," Deja said. She manipulated the keys on her keyboard until the lines of code morphed into a webpage with six brightly colored squares.

Spencer scooted closer and leaned toward the screen. She watched Deja's lightning-fast fingers. The girl was made for computer screens. It was obvious in the way her fingers danced across the keys and in the way she chewed her lip with joyful intensity.

Deja scrolled the page. She reached a picture of mock students holding a tablet that touted big, variously colored circles. She clicked the orange one. Their project came to life. Within seconds the whole group was laughing and patting Deja on the back.

"That's exactly what we wanted," Spencer said. She looked from Deja to Mrs. Maxwell. "Isn't it?"

"Yes, Spencer. It certainly is." Mrs. Maxwell met the eyes of each of the students. "Your audience is elementary school kids. I'd say you've got that. And you certainly met the idea of making programming more visual and accessible."

Spencer looked back at the smiling Deja. Her happiness filled the room.

Most of the bugs had been worked out in the last few weeks, but the projects within projects concept stumped them. Until today.

Mrs. Maxwell drifted away from the group. Spencer knew from the past semesters that Mrs. Maxwell believed in the student-led communication to success concept. The group would be allowed to talk about what they were seeing until they asked for help. It was one of the things

Spencer liked most about the gray-haired programmer turned high school teacher. She wanted you to realize your own abilities, and she was quick to give credit even if she was the one who led you to the right conclusion.

After several minutes, one of the other students asked if they could put the coding from the project up on the big screen.

“Deja,” Mrs. Maxwell said, “can you walk us through?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Deja’s smile filled her whole face.

Spencer watched as the lines of code came to life on the huge projector screen. She listened to Deja talk through where the error was spotted and how she worked the code to fix it.

Spencer was surprised at her sudden draw to Deja’s beauty. There was something magical about the way the contours of her skin showed through the threadbare T-shirt and the way it mixed with the animated language of programming.

The group planned to showcase the project in April at a competition sponsored by a computer science and product development school out of Silicon Valley. It was a big deal. The winning school would have the opportunity to fly to San Francisco, all expenses paid, and to have their work promoted to a three-thousand-person audience. They would each receive a drone; a high-resolution camera, which Spencer wasn’t interested in but knew her brother would love and coaching from the school’s founders and instructors during their summer academy. An academy that would be fully funded for the first-place project. This was the real prize.

There was only one problem.

The date of the competition coincided with Spencer’s birthday. For the last nine years, the day consisted only of family, school when it fell on a weekday, and Molly.

Spencer looked around the room. She liked these people a lot, but they weren’t her family. If Molly asked her not to go, she knew she wouldn’t go. She had to find a way to make Molly see the importance of the competition to their future.

Chapter Eight

The next morning, for the first time since the weeks of Jordan, Spencer woke up giddy with excitement. That giddiness fueled her bravery, and she decided today would be the day she told Molly about the coding club's breakthrough and their real chance of winning the programming competition.

Holding onto her backpack, Spencer slid into the front seat of Molly's car. She knew Molly wasn't going to like her being at a conference on her eighteenth birthday, but she needed to be there. She plopped the bag between her feet and reached for her seatbelt.

Settled, she looked at Molly. "Good morn—"

Tears streamed down Molly's face.

"What happened? Are you okay?" Spencer reached over to touch Molly's cheek. It was bright red. A welt in the shape of four fingers was coming up fast.

Molly shoved Spencer's hand away. "Just shut the door. I'm fine." Molly put the car in reverse and backed out of the carport.

Spencer sat silently. She saw no other physical signs of abuse.

Molly's dad hit her once before. Molly told her it was her mom's fault. "Bitch is always sticking her nose in my business." Spencer probed for more, but Molly told her it was nothing to worry about.

Molly tilted her head slightly and glanced Spencer's way. Her hands were at ten and two on the steering wheel that she gripped so tightly her knuckles were white and her hands trembled. "What?" Molly screamed. "Don't look at me like that!"

Spencer flinched. "Like what? Are you going to tell me what happened? Was it your dad?"

Molly shrugged. "What do you think? Whatever. *He* was just doing what *she* made him do."

Spencer squeezed the armrest on the door. The speedometer was edging toward forty. The speed limit in the neighborhood was twenty-five. "Slow down. You definitely don't want a ticket on top of everything else."

"Everything else? What does that mean? There is no everything else. There's only my bitch mother who doesn't deserve to walk this fucking planet."

When Molly was in this mood, there was no right thing to say. But Spencer worried about her and wanted to help. When she spoke, she kept her voice low and even. "We should tell someone. You can stay with me tonight. Until we can sort things out." She fidgeted with the handle of her backpack with her free hand. Trees zoomed past them too quickly on the narrow two-lane street.

"Of course, that's your answer," Molly replied. "Come stay with me, Molly. Let's tell someone, Molly. You're such a fucking pussy."

Molly slowed slightly before she turned the corner. The ten blocks and three turns from Molly's house to school felt like a hundred this morning.

Spencer looked at the speedometer again. She wanted to tell Molly that eleven miles over the speed limit was considered reckless driving, but she was more afraid of Molly than she was the speed, so she kept that to herself.

At the next turn, Molly made a menacing sound, a growl and a laugh mixed low in her throat. "I'm not gonna kill us. Chill."

"I didn't say—"

"And I'm not gonna stay with you or anyone else. I handle my own problems. The teeth marks in my mom's arm will remind her of that for weeks."

"You bit your mom?" The world spun too fast. Spencer squeezed the armrest of the door, trying to steady herself. "You bit her on the arm?"

"She was bleeding and crying." Molly's voice was deescalating. The speedometer edged down into a more reasonable range. "It made me happy. Satisfied." Molly's breathing became visibly steadier.

Spencer's grip on the door relaxed. As much as she wanted to ask what happened to create such a scene, she wanted to keep the car and Molly at a steady place. "What do you want me to do? Just tell me."

Molly made the final turn into the parking lot. Her knuckles were no longer white. She pulled into a parking spot, shut the car off, and smiled at Spencer. "Anything?"

"Yes."

"Help me kill her."

Spencer sat motionless in her seat.

Molly reapplied her lipstick and fluffed her hair.

Spencer waited for Molly to laugh, to say she was kidding.

Molly said nothing.

The morning was a blur. Spencer moved through classes, nodded to people she knew, took notes, and ate lunch. All the while, Molly's words pounded in her head. *Help me kill her*. Spencer thought about Molly's dream. It always ended with Molly hurting her mom but never killing her. It was a harmless way for Molly to get her stress out. That's what Molly said, anyway. She was certainly not serious about this. Spencer would meet her this afternoon and help her get this out of her system, too. It would be fine.

In Chemistry, Spencer refused to look Molly's way. She didn't want her to read the fear in her face. She was still trying to rationalize the morning in her mind, but something was different. Spencer knew it. She just didn't know what. It scared her more than the texts and conversations about the dream. This was about a real slap and a real threat of harm.

For fifty minutes, Spencer could feel Molly's eyes boring into her cheekbone, willing her to turn. When the bell rang, Spencer waited. She hoped Molly would leave without her.

Molly stood. She bent down until her lips were against Spencer's ear. "You *will* have to talk to me sooner or later. I suggest sooner." Molly straightened to her full height, adjusted the strap of her backpack across her shoulder, and smiled a perfect smile. "I'll wait for you after school."

Spencer put her hands against the edge of her desk and pushed to a standing position. Before she let go of the desk, she paused to ensure her legs would support her weight. Two students from the back of the class swept past her and almost knocked her off balance. She looked down the row behind her. She was now the only one left. She let go of the desk and started for the door.

"Spencer, stay a minute, please." Ms. P. sat on the edge of her desk.

"Yes, Ms. P.?"

“Are you okay? Thought you might need someone to talk to.”

It dawned on Spencer that Ms. P. might think she gave Molly the welt on her face. She wasn't sure what to say, so she just said yes.

“I'm not trying to pry, Spencer. High school is hard. That's all. Everyone needs someone to talk to whom they know they can trust.” Ms. P. slipped off the edge of the table and stood in front of Spencer. She didn't ask anything else. She didn't push Spencer to leave or to stay. She just stood quietly and waited.

She wanted to talk to Ms. P. Other than Mrs. Maxwell, Spencer thought she was the coolest teacher at Thatcher High. Maybe she wasn't asking about Spencer because of Molly. Maybe she really did want to know how Spencer was doing. Besides, Jordan trusted her, and even though they weren't talking now, she knew he didn't trust easily.

Maybe she could trust her, too. She needed to trust someone.

“Ms. P?”

“Yes, Spencer.”

“How does someone know if they're gay or bi?” She didn't even know she wanted to know until that moment. But she did want to. It felt good to ask, even if the lump in her throat grew every millisecond her teacher didn't respond.

“It takes time to explore who we are,” Ms. P. said.

Spencer picked at her cuticles. She wanted to know how much time. Was three years long enough to know?

“Some people always know.” Ms. P. looked toward the door. It was time for the next wave of students.

“But not everyone, right?”

“Right. Others don't know until they're much older adults.”

Spencer wished Ms. P. would ask more questions, but she knew she would never pry. The room was suddenly too warm. It was now or never. “Do you think I'm gay?”

“I think that's a question you have to answer for yourself,” Ms. P. said. “If you're questioning, why don't you come to a meeting? There are students from across the spectrum. You'd be welcomed.”

Students were settling into their seats. Spencer nodded. “Maybe. I mean, I'll think about it. I don't know. Thanks, Ms. P.” It was too noisy, too warm. Spencer needed to get out of the room. She shifted her bag. “I need to get to class. Thanks again.” She turned to leave.

“Spencer?”

Spencer looked over her shoulder.

“If you're not ready, maybe visit the library. Do some research. And I have office hours after fourth period. Stop by anytime.”

Chapter Nine

“Why can’t you just do the virtual library like normal people?” AJ asked. He handed Spencer a plate and picked up another one.

“Because I like the ambiance.” Spencer tried to keep her tone light-hearted. When Ms. P. suggested the library, Spencer felt an immediate pull. She went often anyway, so it wouldn’t raise any suspicion with Molly or her family. She slid the plate into a slot in the dishwasher and waited for her brother to hand her the next one. “What difference does it make, anyway? You said you didn’t have practice.”

They had only one car, shared by the two of them and their mom. Virginia’s work came first, AJ’s practice second. Spencer didn’t mind. Most places she went, she walked or went with Molly. What she did mind was being questioned on the rare instance when she wanted a turn. She bent and arranged the plates to make room for a cutting board. “I like the library. It’s quiet.”

“It’s quiet here.” AJ handed her the last plate and shut the faucet off with his elbow.

“It’s never quiet where you are.”

“Whatever.”

AJ thought the library was a huge waste of time. You have this thing called the Internet, he always chided her, and full access to the high school’s virtual library anytime, day or night. Spencer doubted he had stepped foot in the building since their dad left. Obviously, he didn’t possess the same connection to the past that Spencer did. For her, the huge wooden doors opened into an alternate universe, a universe where her quirkiness was one puzzle piece in a wonderfully diverse mosaic.

Spencer loved the historical significance of the building, loved that it was on the historical landmark registry and was named after a leader in the Women’s Suffrage movement. Her family had shared it when they were still a family of four. Every time she walked up South Pearl and turned right onto South Logan a giddiness from childhood crept into her stomach and up into her throat. Her family took the path every Saturday. Her dad would hold her hand and swing it back and forth harder and harder until they fell into fits of giggles. Within seconds, all four of them were laughing, hands locked, skipping down the street toward the English Tudor-style building built of tapestry brick. When the twisted chimneys and heavy wooden doors came into view, Spencer and her dad recited “The Pied Piper” poem together. They always finished the last stanza as they crossed the grass court and began the short ascent to the little English porch.

Her dad taught them the words to the poem when they were four.

*Hamlin Town’s in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
A pleasanter spot you’ve never spied...*

AJ’s voice cut off the poem in her head. “Put the plate in the dishwasher.”
Spencer slid the plate into the rack and rewound the poem:

*Hamlin Town's in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;*

She loved the feel of the words on her tongue. Even now, it took her immediately to the open space, heavy oak beams, and leaded-glass windows.

A pleasanter spot you've never spied...

Her dad sucked in a lot of ways, but she knew he loved them back then. Family is odd. At least hers was. Spencer often wondered if he stayed away because he couldn't bear to not be involved. She said as much to AJ once. He told her she was an idiot.

Regardless, she loved to read, and she knew it was her dad who instilled that love in at least one of his children before he bailed. For that, she was grateful.

Spencer squirted liquid into the dispenser and closed the door. "I'm going even if I have to walk."

"Then walk, crabby ass." AJ tossed his dish towel onto the counter. "I have a date with Ivy. Besides, the library's only five blocks."

"Fine, asshole." She glanced toward the opening between kitchen and dining room. When she heard no words of admonishment for her mouth, she stuck her finger in the air.

Thirty minutes later, Spencer pushed open the heavy wooden doors that led to the enchanted fairytale cottage of her youth. Straight ahead, above the scarred and nicked checkout desk was the mural of King Arthur receiving Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake. She heard her dad's voice, *This is from the Art Deco period, Chloe. As a boy, I dreamed of meeting the faery woman who gave the magical blade to the king.*

Spencer wondered if her dad thought his new wife was a faery woman.

Other times, I was Sir Bedivere, throwing the sword back into the lake, and saving the king from his mortal wounds.

Spencer, too, dreamed of being Sir Bedivere, another thing she and her dad had in common.

She turned right to take in the great fireplace at the end of the children's room. She always paused here. At four, she sat like a fairytale princess atop one of the chimney seats, her brother atop a matching seat on the other side. In front of them, their parents, cross-legged on the ornate rug with its swirls of gold and red, took turns doing the voices of the characters in the day's story. When she couldn't sit still any longer, she stood and twirled.

Some Saturdays, her dad told the story of the six-by-eight mural that came to life above the fireplace as she danced. It showed the Pied Piper of Hamlin followed by a swarm of little white children.

When Spencer was eight, she asked her dad why no one in the picture looked like her or her brother.

Her dad said, "Because they look like your mom."

That made sense to Spencer, but she didn't think it did to her mom. She watched her parents exchange a look. Her mom's forehead wrinkled like it did when she fussed at her or AJ, and a deep

sadness crossed through her dad's eyes in response. Both looks passed in a second and Spencer never thought of them again—until tonight.

The only other time Spencer remembered her mom looking mad and her dad looking sad was the day a group of teenagers taunted the family as they walked to the library. Spencer was six. They used words like “nigger lover” and “mixed breed.”

Her dad held her hand too tightly that day.

Spencer tried to pull away.

He held more tightly.

Spencer looked at her mom. She held AJ's hand. Her knuckles were white. The crinkles were in her forehead.

Her dad shook his head.

Her mom pursed her lips.

Neither one said a word to the boys.

That day was the first time Spencer saw a glimpse of her father as less than a hero and herself as less than beautiful. When the boys circled them on their bikes, yelling and laughing, Spencer didn't understand why, but she felt dirty, ugly, and alone.

She didn't feel safe until the heavy wooden doors closed behind them and the burnt chocolate smell of books engulfed her.

Spencer wondered today if her dad taught them the words to the Pied Piper poem to drown out the ugly words of the world, to remind them that the library held the answers against hate.

A pleasanter spot you've never spied.

Spencer turned away from the fireplace and her memories and found an empty table in a far corner near the nonfiction books. She tossed her backpack on one of four wooden chairs and started her search for books that would answer her questions.

Spencer pulled *I Could Not Speak My Heart: Education and Social Justice for Gay and Lesbian Youth* from between two other titles. As she read the back cover, she remembered Jordan's kiss. It tasted like pizza sauce. His tongue was soft and large in her mouth. She remembered the light-headed feeling she got when he put his hand against her cheek and tilted her face to meet perfectly with his. It was nice; very nice. She wanted to kiss him again after he asked her to hangout. She would have kissed him again. She didn't long for his kiss, but she would have kissed him.

GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Youth

What If?; Queers in History

The Full Spectrum

Queer: The Ultimate LGBT Guide for Teens

The Letter Q: Queer Writers' Notes to their Younger Selves.

One by one, Spencer pulled titles.

As she did, she compared Jordan's kiss to Molly's. It was less sweet but softer. Both Jordan and Molly had plump lips. Jordan's were dry, Molly's slippery from lipstick and gloss.

Molly said what she and Spencer did wasn't really kissing each other, because they thought about boys when they did it, except Spencer didn't. She thought about Molly. When Molly kissed her, Spencer felt like she was being swept into a slippery strawberry whirlwind, a tunnel from which she never wanted to return.

When she accumulated as many books as she could carry, Spencer made her way back to the table. She pulled a book from her stack, opened it, and glided the pad of her index finger across row after row of words. She stopped when she came to a passage that she didn't completely understand. It defined a lesbian as one woman attracted to another and talked about a sameness of two people and a sexual connection between those who are cisgender.

She thought about coding class and the fuzzy feeling in her stomach when she watched Deja present her breakthrough on their group project. She wondered if Deja's lips were as soft as Jordan's or as slippery as Molly's.

Spencer read the passage again. She knew what it was to be a lesbian. There were plenty of students on campus who identified as such. It was the second sentence that was the problem. She flipped to the index of the book and found the term "Cisgender."

Spencer saw the term "Cis" in posts online, and she heard it in bits and pieces of conversation around campus, but her friends, Molly's friends, never used it. She turned to the first page where the word was mentioned. She spent a few minutes reading about gender identity and sexes assigned at birth.

She remembered Jordan using the term "Cis privilege" early on in their relationship. He was talking to a friend on the steps of the main building. They shut up when she joined the group. She didn't remember it until tonight. Now she wondered how he knew the term well enough to be using it in casual conversation.

Spencer read more about some of the most ambiguous terms; heteroflexible, homoflexible, queer, questioning, transgender, transmasculine, genderqueer, genderfluid, pansexual, polyamorous, omnisexual, ambisexual. Words she knew little to nothing about seemed never-ending, and the books she was skimming for answers just created more questions.

Molly called her a dyke. Maybe she was. But how could she be if Molly wasn't? And why did she miss Jordan? She would have kissed him again. She would have been his girlfriend.

The more she read, the more Spencer questioned her own identity. Her stomach ached. She identified with a story of a woman who at the age of six realized she wanted to be the person wearing a tux to her own wedding. Spencer wasn't six; she was nine. It happened weeks after Molly moved in two houses down. It became her recurring daydream. Molly in a beautiful white dress and Spencer in a black tux with a cummerbund and bow tie in Molly's favorite shade of lavender. They were on the dance floor. Spencer's hands rested on Molly's waist. They were both smiling. As Spencer grew older, she added another piece to the daydream. After the wedding, she carried Molly across the threshold of 1393 South Washington.

Spencer never told Molly about the daydream. She wasn't sure why. She just intuitively knew she shouldn't.

As she continued to read about sexual identity, more memories returned. One passage in particular told about placing a pink or blue blanket around an infant to determine the future of the child.

When she and AJ were little, their dad tossed AJ higher into the air. He bought AJ cars and her dolls, even though she hated them and begged for marbles instead. She stole AJ's navy overalls one year and left her own pink ones in their place. Her mom laughed. Her dad didn't.

After her dad left and Molly moved in two houses down, Molly's voice replaced her father's. Molly said what they did was what every girl with a best friend did. She said they both would meet a boy someday and fall in love, that the boys would move in to 1393 South Washington, and that they would all live happily ever after. Spencer believed what Molly told her was true. Always. Even after Molly met Lucas and Spencer was alone. Until last month, anyway.

Spencer grew panicky as she read more about attachments to best friends as a sign many teens listed as first clues to their sexuality. She admitted to herself the many jealous thoughts she had toward Lucas and her lack of desire for being with anyone other than Molly. Now there was Jordan. And Deja, even though she hadn't thought of her in any particular way until tonight.

The words on the pages squeezed her ribcage tighter and tighter as she breathed them in, until the air around her was dry and brittle and silent. She sat up, moved her glasses to the top of her head, and rubbed her eyes. She had been reading for two-and-a-half hours. The library would close in thirty minutes.

Spencer had more questions than answers, but one thing was clear. Spencer Price was not straight. The words she ingested tonight confirmed what she felt for a long time, longer than she admitted to herself. She was somewhere on a very complex spectrum.

She didn't know what she wanted from Jordan, if there was anything to want. She missed him. She wanted to talk to him. She also hated him and felt sick to her stomach every time she thought about him taking money in exchange for kissing her to prove Molly wasn't gay.

Oh, Molly. She loved the softness of her tiny folds of skin and the smell of her strawberry lip balm. She started and ended every day with a text from Molly. The thought of losing that at either end of her day made her shiver.

She felt her cheeks warm. She wanted to hate Molly, too. Nothing about her made Spencer's heart feel safe, but everything about her made Spencer feel alive. She wasn't ready to turn away from that. She wasn't certain she ever would be.

She stacked the books on the end of the table and pushed her chair back. Over the gentle scuff of wooden legs against carpet, she heard Jordan.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" Jordan was beside her before the question mark settled on the sentence.

She spun to face the sound of his voice. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I know you hate me," he said. "I'm not here to bother you."

Spencer and Jordan both looked toward the pile of books. When she stacked them, Spencer put them neatly by size, titles all facing the same direction.

The warmth that dissipated only a few moments before crept back up her chest and into her cheeks. "Then what are you doing here?" she asked again. She felt her world continue to crumble. First, Molly refused to stay with her because of Lucas and Ms. P. was likely somewhere wondering if it was her who hit Molly. Now, the one person who she thought liked her, who really didn't like her, was standing in front of her and a stack of books with titles like, *Delusions of Gender* and *Beyond the Binary*.

"I'm in the library because I have a report due and Ms. Daniels insists that we 'research the old-fashioned way' for at least one book." Jordan made air quotes around Ms. Daniel's words. "And I'm here at this table, even though I knew you would probably tell me to leave, because I want to be your friend."

Jordan moved from foot to foot.

For a few seconds, Spencer didn't answer. Jordan looked lost without a wall or locker to press against the sole of his foot.

"Friend?" Spencer pushed back the tears that threatened to spring forth, found her cuticles, and dug in with her nails. "Is that what they're calling it now?"

"Spencer. If you would—"

"Would what? Listen to more lies? Forgive you for pretending to like me? What?" Spencer lobbed zinger after zinger.

She wasn't sure what she wanted Jordan to do in return. She needed someone. Maybe he really did want to be her friend. She didn't want to be hurt anymore.

"Okay. Well. Later then." Jordan put his head down and moved around to the far side of the table.

"Wait." Spencer reached out and touched his shoulder. She wondered if he could feel her hand tremble. "I want to hear. That is, if you're willing to tell me the truth."

"Why I kissed you? The whole story? Will you actually listen?" Jordan sounded like he was trying to be tough, but the squeak in his voice and the glint in his eye begged Spencer's approval.

"No promises. Maybe." She smiled slightly.

The two walked out of the library and settled side by side on the concrete steps.

"You know," Jordan said, "Molly texted me after we left the diner. I think she was watching us."

Spencer looked around. They were alone between two large concrete barriers that held the rails for the stairs. Other than an occasional car, quiet filled the air. She breathed deeply until the warm night air expanded her lungs. She thought this must be what it was like to be tucked inside a cocoon, knowing you eventually had to come out but not wanting to leave. She wondered if her dad felt this way inside the library the day the teenagers surrounded his family. The quiet of his aura as she sat on his lap in front of the Pied Piper, his arms wrapped tightly around her little girl body, made her feel safe. And then he left; he left the library, and he left their life, leaving her vulnerable to the world. Maybe if that day hadn't happened, maybe they would still be safe. But it did. And he left. And now she was here. She wouldn't hide. She needed to face whatever this was and figure out what it all meant for her future.

"Watching us? Why would she do that?" Spencer asked the question as if she didn't already know the answer.

"To find out what we talked about. Duh. She's manipulative."

"She isn't..." Spencer stopped. She was going to listen.

Jordan nodded. "I get it. She's your best friend. But seriously. You know something's up."

"So? You told her?" Spencer pushed her hands between her thighs to stop herself from picking at the already sore cuticles.

"I told her you asked why I took money for kissing you. Then I told her you didn't really want the answer, and I left."

"And? She said?" Sweat ran down the small of Spencer's back.

Jordan looked straight ahead.

Spencer wondered if he thought the darkness and the walls offered cocoon protection.

"She said I needed to leave you alone. That you were the kind of person who didn't easily get over something like that. That she would talk to you for me after you calmed down." Jordan glanced sideways and back into the night. "I'm guessing that didn't happen."

"No." Spencer's fingernail found a cuticle. She eased her legs apart to get a better angle.

Before Spencer could add to her denial, light from the library poured into their space, and two patrons exited. Their banter about whether some author was worthy of being a part of Oprah's book club bounced off the courtyard walls, shattering the quiet.

A twitch in Spencer's shoulder echoed the click of the heavy wooden door as it closed, and the darkness returned.

Spencer kept her eyes on the shoes of the woman as she and a man descended the stairs next to her.

When the couple was out of sight, Jordan asked, “So, why did you change your mind? Why now?”

Spencer’s response, barely above a murmur, rang in her own ears, “I need to know. I thought you were my friend, that I mattered to you. I just need to understand all the pieces.”

“I can only give you my pieces.”

“Molly’s getting strange. Your pieces are at least some of the cause of that.”

Jordan closed his eyes, took a deep breath. “The cause of your whacko friend wanting her boyfriend to pay me to kiss you and then wanting me to back off but to not tell said boyfriend is my fault?”

“Yes. And she didn’t even know he paid you.” Spencer thought about the night Molly scribbled in *The Book of Promises*.

“Actually, she did.”

Spencer ignored the comment. “You didn’t have to take the money. You could have said no. Molly’s a good person. She just... I don’t know. Just tell me the whole story. I’ll figure out the rest.”

Jordan shrugged. “What have I got to lose? Here goes.” He shifted his body until it angled toward Spencer. “Jessie and Jonnie are my siblings, fraternal twins. I told you that. What I didn’t say is Jonnie came out to us as gay when he was nineteen. I was fourteen. No big deal. There was a small ripple through our house, but nothing big. Mostly my dad wondering what he did wrong and my mom worrying about losing her son to AIDS. We worked through it as a family.” The more he told, the faster he talked. “Fast forward. Two-ish years ago. We moved from Indiana to Colorado. New school. No friends. And bam. Jonnie comes out as transgender.” Jordan stopped and looked at Spencer. His breath came in gulps.

Spencer knew he was fighting tears. His leg trembled slightly against hers. Spencer couldn’t imagine the depth of mixed feelings the family must have experienced. “It’s okay. I want to hear more about her.” While she waited, she tried to remember how Jordan referred to his siblings when they were getting to know each other. He didn’t mention them much in the short amount of time they talked except to say all the names started with J and he was the second youngest of four.

She pressed her leg a little tighter to his.

She still might not understand after tonight, but she was finished being angry. Her gut told her it was unnecessary and counterproductive. “Hey. Take your time.”

Jordan smiled and pushed back against Spencer’s leg. “Jonnie chose to just remove the ‘H’ from her name to make it easier on the family to talk about her by name without disclosing her transition, but that didn’t really help. My family was in an uproar. Dad told her to, in his words, ‘Get out of our damn house and never darken the doorstep again.’ My mom cried every day. Jessie freaked out, said he didn’t have a twin, said Jonnie was dead. He actually tells people this. Even now.”

Spencer watched Jordan’s Adam’s apple bob up and down in the dark. His pain was palpable. She allowed herself a moment to enjoy the knowledge that he hurt, too. She was more comfortable and relaxed with him than she was with any other person she knew, even Molly. But he deceived her and, although she was finished being mad, forgiving him would depend on the rest of his story.

“That’s pretty fucked up,” Spencer said. She reached over and took Jordan’s hand and put it on her knee. She squeezed gently.

Jordan's cheeks pushed up slightly. "Thank you, Spencer. For this." He held their hands up and used one finger to point between them. "I know things aren't good between us. I deserve that. But know that right now this is the closest I have felt to anyone since I moved here."

"I know." Spencer took their hands and gently hit her knee twice. "And I need a friend right now more than I need to be mad at you."

"I was so mad at Jonnie for messing up our family. I blamed her for everything. She made my grades drop. She made Jessie mad all the time. She made my mom cry and my dad drink. She killed my other brother and left us with some freak. Everything." He paused. "Know what else?"

"What?" Spencer asked.

"I missed her. I missed her so much."

More bobbing apple.

Spencer waited.

"Enter Ms. P. She saw something was wrong. Because of her, I found the group. Because of her, I've been able to meet so many people who identify as trans and queer and bi and everything. She saved my life, Spencer."

"Ms. P. always knows."

"Yeah. I know it's corny as fuck, but I guess I was trying to do that for you. I mean, not taking the money. That was messed up. There's more about that. But agreeing to kiss you because Lucas wanted you off his girlfriend and Molly wanted people to stop talking seemed to be a way to help you. If you liked kissing me and we liked each other, that worked, and if you didn't like kissing me and we talked about it, I could be there to help you with that, too. You know, to tell you about the club and Ms. P. And to introduce you around."

"Jordan. That's messed up." Spencer let go of his hand and stood up. She moved down the three steps and onto the sidewalk. Every fiber of her being told her to run away from Jordan, from Molly, from all of it. She put one foot forward. Hesitated. Stopped.

The vibes coming from Jordan were too strong.

She turned. "You're right about one thing, or maybe partially right. I'm not straight. I don't know what I am. I'm screwed up. That's what I am."

Jordan was silent. He didn't move. Not even a nod.

Spencer looked to the trees outside the library wall. Even this close, she could barely see them through the pitch-black darkness. Jordan's pleading eyes and the soft light of the courtyard's post lamp called her back to the third stair. She sat back down.

"Thank you," Jordan said.

"Quit."

"Quit what?" His voice was sincere.

"Saying thank you." Spencer was tired, a tiredness that began, she suddenly realized, when Molly went away for the summer and came back a different version of herself, a version that felt heavier every day. Spencer carried the heaviness even when she didn't want to, because she knew that if she tried to put it down it would crush her—and Molly. The thought of Molly trying to carry the weight made it hard for Spencer to breathe.

"I don't want to talk about me. Okay? Not yet."

"Okay," Jordan said. "Whenever you're ready."

Spencer didn't know if she would ever be ready. Maybe it was enough to know there were others who felt afraid of who they were at their core. The books she opened tonight held stories of sweetness and of pain from kids who were out and proud and kids who never would be. She wasn't sure where she fit, or if she did at all.

Spencer scratched her thumb nail against her raw cuticle. She needed to get home, but she was too far to turn back now. She needed to hear the rest of this version of the story.

She pulled her phone from her back pocket. "Gonna let my mom know I'm running late."

"Good plan. My folks won't miss me."

Spencer typed a few words and shoved the phone back into her pocket. "Sorry."

"No need. My choice for refusing to stay away from Jonnie," Jordan said. He shrugged and returned to his story.

Spencer looked out at the orange glow of the closest streetlamp and listened to Jordan's voice.

"Lucas is in my Lit class. The one that brought me here tonight. We ended up in a group for the final project. Four of us meet after school almost every day to figure out how to make a skit about Bierce's 'Owl Creek Bridge.' Anyway..." Jordan took a breath and looked at Spencer.

Spencer didn't move. She could see Jordan's silhouette from her peripheral vision. His shoulders were hunched forward, his elbows resting against his thighs. From this angle, his shoulders seemed broader than they did in the daylight. She admired his outline against the brick. Her heart insisted he could be a true friend. She was almost convinced. Almost. "Go on," she said, still staring into the orange glow.

"When we started, we were all trying to figure out times. He said his girlfriend usually hung out with her best friend for at least an hour every day after school, so that was the best time. Charlton, one of the other guys, said it must be nice to have a girl. You know just talking. Figuring things out. Lucas basically said he wished you two weren't so close. Later, he told us he and Molly fought a lot about it because Molly was too chicken to tell her friend to leave her alone, even though that was what she wanted."

"Wait. What Molly wanted?" Her heart beat irregularly. *Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. I will not puke. I will not puke.*

"Yeah. That's what he said. We laughed it off, but a few days later Lucas asked me if I wanted to make a hundred bucks. Said it would be easy money. I told him there was no such thing. Kinda pissed me off. People like him and Molly who have money to burn and nice cars to drive. You know?"

Spencer did know. Molly's dad was a top real estate broker in the area. Her mom didn't have to work. Molly got a laptop for her fifteenth birthday, a car for her sixteenth. Sometimes it made her angry, because her own mom worked so hard just to make sure the one car they shared was always running and full of gas.

Jordan stared straight ahead. His voice sounded far away. "I work hard to maintain good grades while I work fifteen hours a week. I don't mind. My folks aren't rich. There's four of us kids. I pull my own weight. A hundred bucks is about a week's pay. I told him to hit me with the details."

If this was true, if Lucas and Molly conspired to put Jordan and Spencer together, it was a low that Spencer didn't think Molly would ever reach. Frustration built in her throat. She wanted to shout, to have a tantrum and beat her hands on the ground like a toddler. She opened her mouth and the words spilled out. "And when he said it was to kiss me, you thought it would be okay to mess with the homely girl, the weirdo who follows the popular girl around?" She pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth to keep from saying anything else.

"Not even," Jordan said. "You're not homely or weird. At least that isn't how I see you. Androgynous would be how I would describe you. And honestly? That's sexy as fuck. And

Molly's a jerk. Seriously. That's the part I don't get. You're so much better than her. Why do you let her use you like she does?"

Spencer focused on the crack in the sidewalk at the bottom of the stairs. "She doesn't use me. We've been best friends since fourth grade. I like being around her. We laugh and talk." The words that were true a month ago now tasted stale in her mouth.

"Spencer." Jordan moved his whole body closer to her. "Lucas had a note from Molly that day." He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and opened it. He took out a small, folded, piece of paper and handed it to Spencer. With his other hand he tapped the flashlight on his phone and pointed it toward Spencer's hand.

She unfolded the paper and held it so she could see the words in the light.

This is an IOU for \$100.00.

To collect you must do the following three things:

1. Kiss Spencer Price.
2. Let everyone at school see the two of you together.
3. Convince her you mean it.

Payment will be made in two installments. Half after the kiss is proven. Half one week after the initial kiss—provided the other two stipulations have been met.

It was signed by Lucas and Molly.

"Lucas must have made her write it." Spencer shoved the paper back at Jordan.

"Made her? Didn't you tell me Molly doesn't let anyone make her do anything?"

Jordan was right. Molly was always in control. Molly *was* control. Spencer swallowed the scream that rested just below her voice box.

"I collected the first fifty," Jordan said. He took the paper from Spencer's hand.

Spencer felt her muscles giving in to gravity. Her hand dropped to her lap. She wanted to go to sleep forever. Nothing was worse than the thought of losing Molly. She thought about the tiny fingers on the fourth-grade hand, laced with her own. "But why did she tell me that Lucas paid you? Why did she tell me he was jealous?"

"Technically, Lucas did hand me the money. I think Molly wanted us to fight. I think she felt like we were getting too close. She didn't mean for us to get close. That wasn't the plan."

"No. This doesn't make sense."

"You're in love with her, right?" Jordan asked. He didn't wait for an answer. "Never mind. You don't have to answer that." He put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

"Honestly..." Spencer whispered, "I don't know."

Spencer lay on her bed in the dark stroking Cinnamon's soft fur. As a small child, she was afraid of what lurked in the darkness. She wished every night for the sun. The universe gave her Molly. When she told Molly about her fear, her best friend brought out *The Book of Promises* and wrote in her neatest penmanship, "Turn our beds so we face each other at night."

The next day after school, the two of them worked for hours to get their rooms rearranged. When they finished, Molly said, "When you go to sleep at night, face me, and I'll face you. You'll never be alone again."

Fear of what lurked in the dark had returned. This time it was in the form of a human—Lucas.

This all centered around Lucas.

“Lucas is evil, Cinnamon. He’s trying to take Molly away.”

She thought about the note Jordan handed her at the library. She asked for it before they parted, but he insisted it go back into his wallet.

She wondered if Jordan was telling the truth when he said he didn’t take the second fifty dollars. She hoped he was.

“How did we get here?” Spencer focused on the purring, orange form curled atop her chest. “I have no idea who to trust.”

Cinnamon touched Spencer’s chin with his paw.

“I know I can trust you.” She smiled at the cat. “Know what I told him? Stupid me. I told him I might be in love with Molly.” She let out a puff of air. How could she be in love with someone who wanted to hurt her, someone who made it clear what she loved was being loved? Molly loved being loved by Spencer, by Lucas, by her friends and teachers and followers on YouTube. She loved being loved, but Spencer was no longer sure she loved anyone in return.

If you didn’t love Molly, you were useless to her. But Spencer did love her. She never did anything to make Molly think otherwise. Until Jordan. She wished she could go back to the pathway where Jordan stood waiting. She would walk past him without looking his way, without acknowledging his hazel eye and smooth voice. Then Molly would still be her best friend and Spencer would serve a purpose.

Spencer stared into the darkness. Tears ran down both cheeks, each soft droplet bleeding into the pillow as it fell from her eyes. Outside, everything still looked the same. She still looked the same. But internally, not a single thing remained as it was this morning.

“What will I say to her tomorrow?” Spencer asked the ball of fur. Cinnamon’s purr was deafening. “How do I go back to being Jordan’s friend at school? Jordan thinks we should be fake boyfriend and girlfriend. How does that sound? Says it will keep the heat off us while we figure this out. And we can go to the meetings he told me about.”

Cinnamon purred.

“They call their group SPECTRUM.” Spencer rubbed Cinnamon one more time before she slid him carefully off of her chest and onto the comforter. As she did, it occurred to her that Jordan didn’t mention why he went to the meetings. She assumed because they helped decipher his relationship with Jonnie, but maybe it was more. She was so wrapped up in her own head that she didn’t ask.

Spencer didn’t commit to the fake boyfriend/girlfriend idea, but she didn’t discount it either. It would give her a cover for being away from Molly more, not that she seemed to need a cover. Molly went radio silent today after school. Spencer assumed she was with Lucas, but she didn’t know for sure. She texted her before she went to the library but got nothing in return.

The welt on Molly’s face was bright red in her memory, as was Molly’s pleasure with causing her mom pain by biting down on her arm. She still wished Molly hadn’t stayed at home, but part of her was glad she didn’t have to hear any more about the altercation. Molly didn’t come over because of Lucas and also because Spencer asked her to. Anything that wasn’t Molly’s idea wasn’t a valid idea.

That’s Molly’s M.O. She slid her arms under Cinnamon and moved him to a spot on the bed where he would be against her side. And my M.O. is to worry. She looked toward the window. “Sweet dreams, Molly.”

Chapter Ten

The welt on Molly's face was all but gone. Spencer guessed it was in large part due to the expertly applied makeup. Spencer slid the seatbelt around her waist and snapped it in place.

"Hey," Molly said.

"Sleep well?" Spencer tried to sound happy.

Molly didn't answer.

Spencer swallowed the lump in her throat. "Is that a no?"

Molly put the car in gear. "What did you do last night? And don't lie to me."

"Why would I lie to you? That's stupid. I went to the library. You said you weren't coming over. I needed to do some research. My brother was being a butthead. I went to the library for some peace and quiet."

"And did you get a piece?" Molly backed out of the carport without looking in the rearview mirror.

Spencer looked in the side mirror, as if that would help Molly stop if a car was coming down the alley. "Okay. That's just weird, Molly. What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about."

Molly was right. Spencer did know what she was talking about. What she didn't know was how Molly knew that Jordan was at the library last night.

The old stone building sat on the corner with tall matching stone walls on each side. The street side wouldn't provide any direct line of sight to the library steps. The park side, where Spencer played as a child, was filled with tall trees and large patches of grass. Right against the library was the playground. Spencer guessed there were lots of places to lurk.

"Jordan," Molly said.

The name sounded ugly coming from Molly's mouth.

Spencer closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the seat. "You know what, Molly? I'm tired of trying to please you and getting nothing in return."

Even with her eyes closed, Spencer could feel Molly's anger creeping across the seat between them. For the first time since holding Molly's hand in fourth grade, Spencer didn't care. "Yeah. Jordan was there. He was working on some literature thing. We talked. I forgave him for taking money from Lucas. I might as well. I mean, we got along regardless of how it started."

It was Spencer's turn to lie. After all, turnabout is fair play. Spencer still hadn't decided what she was going to do about Jordan's part in all of this, or if she could forgive him for deceiving her, but her gut told her that he was as much at the mercy of Molly and Lucas as she was. She just wasn't quite sure how.

"Nothing in return? I give you nothing in return?" Molly asked.

Spencer opened her eyes, but she didn't look at Molly. "Of course, that's what you would take away from what I said."

Molly yanked the steering wheel to the right and slammed on the brakes.

"Not now, Molly. Please." Part of Spencer wished she hadn't said anything. The other part found the word games enjoyable, like picking her cuticle until it bled. You know you should stop, but you keep grinding away.

“I’m the reason anyone even talks to you. I have been since elementary school. You ungrateful bitch.” Molly slammed her fist into the steering wheel. “And now you think because some pansy-ass little boy feels you up you can make it on your own? He doesn’t want you. I’m the only person who wants you.”

Spencer continued to stare straight ahead.

“Don’t. Fucking. Ignore. Me.”

Spencer tried to steady her breathing. Speaking without thinking would be harmful for both of them, especially Spencer. She knew the darkness was in Molly’s eyes. She felt it without looking.

Spencer put Jordan before Molly.

Spencer knew what that meant.

The love she felt for Molly was sitting right in the middle of her, right in the gut. Molly knew her better than anyone in the world. From the moment they met, they knew each other intuitively, in their bones, in their blood.

She missed that old Molly. She was funny. She laughed from the bottom of her throat, a laugh that warmed Spencer inside and out. That Molly could get anything from Spencer. But that Molly was gone.

“I’m not ignoring you.” A steady voice and a note of appreciation was imperative. “I’m just not sure what to say. You’re my best friend. Not Jordan. He’s just a guy to hang around when you’re with Lucas. I don’t want people to think we’re gay.” She kept her voice steady, used reasoning she hoped Molly would buy. “Come on. We need to go to school. You know I didn’t mean it like that. I’m not ungrateful. I shouldn’t say you give me nothing.”

“You think?” Molly still didn’t put the car back in drive, but she didn’t retaliate further, either.

“Stupid choice of words.”

The two sat in silence for several seconds.

Finally, Molly spoke. “So, what are you going to do? Are you going to actually date him?” Her voice quivered just enough for Spencer to recognize the vibration in the words. It was always the same. I assert my voice. You explode. I feel bad. You insert feelings. I give in. Not this time. Not really. She looked at Molly. “What should I do? Help me decide. It’s me and you. Nothing between us, right?”

Molly nodded slowly. The lines in her face relaxed.

Spencer took advantage of the moment. “I was thinking I go out with him some. That way Lucas eases up on you. I don’t mind doing that for you. You’re my best friend.”

Those were obviously the right words in the right order. Molly’s face registered complete happiness. “Just enough to convince Lucas.”

“I know.”

“We have to be careful about being together so much at consistent times. Work out a new schedule.”

Spencer bowed her head slightly and nodded. “Okay.” It was decided. Spencer and Jordan would be fake boyfriend and girlfriend.

Molly put the car in gear and pulled back onto the roadway.

Chapter Eleven

Jordan picked up the walkie-talkie and pushed the button. “Are you ready for your first clue?”

The skinny woman with dreads looked at the others in the room.

Jordan and Spencer looked at each other and giggled. Jordan let go of the button. “Shh.” He put his finger to his lips.

Spencer leaned back against the counter and watched Jordan as he waited for the group’s decision. They were about two steps apart between the counter in the escape room lobby that held the cash register and the counter that held the cameras and equipment. She fell in love with the escape room in the short time she and Jordan dated and missed it while the two of them were apart.

Before they left school for the weekend, Jordan and Spencer agreed *Pearl Street Escape* was the perfect place to work out more particulars of their new fictitious relationship. Molly wouldn’t be caught in such a place, so she wouldn’t come in even if she knew Spencer was here. The place was within walking distance from Spencer’s house, so she didn’t have to ask permission to use the car or get a ride. And it was next door to Twine’s. If the escape rooms became too crowded, or when it was time for a group to come out of a room, she could quietly slip out and go next door until she got the all clear from Jordan.

This was the third time she joined him in as many days, and whether or not the romantic relationship was real, the developing friendship certainly was.

“We’re ready for a clue,” the younger version of the skinny woman yelled from the other side of the room. “Clock’s ticking.”

Jordan smiled at Spencer and pushed the button on the black box in his hand. “You found Admiral Nelson’s wonky eye. Try working backward with laser precision.”

Even before the clue was complete, the family started touching the picture of the admiral, running their fingers along the edge, trying to find a button or lever.

Jordan sat the walkie-talkie on the counter and looked at Spencer. “Pretty soon you’ll know all the clues.”

“What are you saying? I’m spending too much time with you?”

“Ha. Never. I like having something to do in between clues.” Jordan kicked gently at Spencer’s foot. “Besides, you’re my fake girlfriend. We’re supposed to be together.”

“If you ever quit, I’m applying for your job. I’m just trying to get a head start for my interview.” Spencer felt light inside, almost happy.

Over the last few days, as time permitted, Jordan told her bits and pieces of what transpired between him and Lucas and Molly, and he said there was more to tell. She believed him. Today was the day. They had all afternoon. So far, he wasn’t defensive. He made eye contact. He answered all her questions without confrontation.

Jordan glanced between the room on the screen and Spencer. “Why would I ever quit? Well, at least before I become a famous astrophysicist like Kip Thorne and ride the gravitational waves right on out of here.” He waved his hands around the small space. “Besides, no one bothers me, and the people who come in here want to get away from the BS out there.” He pointed out the front window. “Win. Win.”

She couldn't argue. The BS of "out there" seemed much farther away from in here. She rested the small of her back against the counter where the coveted Pearl Street Escape T-shirts were stacked by size. Two shirts hung above the counter as an example of the front and back. Spencer wanted one, but Jordan played strictly by the rules, and the rules said the shirts were only for those who conquered the puzzle. Jordan wasn't allowed to play, and she didn't like anyone else enough to invite them into a locked room for an hour.

Spencer and Jordan noticed the movement on the screen at the same time. They said in unison, "Looks like they figured it out."

Spencer giggled as she watched the tiny people moving on the screen. They found a way to line up a series of mirrors to project a laser beam into the wonky eye of the admiral in the portrait and were now using the key found behind the portrait to unlock a drawer. They didn't know it, but they were exactly halfway to freedom from the locked room.

Jordan moved closer to Spencer. "That's what it's about." He pointed back at the screen of smiling faces. "At least for me. Happy people. Communication. Laughter."

She nodded. "Too bad life isn't an escape puzzle."

His sigh was audible. "I screwed up with us, I know. But I'm glad we're here."

"Me, too." She was. As hard as it was for her to accept what was happening, she felt much more relaxed away from Molly, and she liked being with Jordan and his friends at school. "Doesn't mean I forgive you."

"I shouldn't have let them bully me. I was afraid. How stupid is that? I was afraid of a girl I barely knew and her boyfriend who I didn't even really like."

"Afraid? Why afraid? I mean, I get the money thing. Well, I don't get it, but I get it. A hundred bucks is a lot. But afraid? That seems kind of excessive."

Jordan checked his players one more time. They were happily fitting together clues. "This is the 'more' I told you I had to tell. I didn't want you to think I was using my sister to get you to feel sorry for me."

"Jonnie? You already told me—"

"No. Jessie and Jonnie we talked about. They're away at college. My little sister. The one I talk about all the time. Jasmine. My folks call her their change-of-life miracle." Jordan paused to look at the screen. He shifted from foot to foot before placing his foot back against the wall.

"What I haven't told you is she's in a wheelchair. CP."

"CP?"

"Cerebral Palsy. Her brain doesn't communicate with her legs. Eight years old and never walked. Anyway, she's amazing. One of her favorite things to do is to go to the skating rink. My dad takes her. The owners let her go out on the rink in her chair. One evening after we started the project for lit class, and before I agreed to the kiss, I went with them to the rink. Jasmine begged me to go, to meet her friends." Jordan laughed. "It's hard to say no to her. She's persistent and adorable. I'll introduce you to her someday."

Static buzzed as the walkie-talkie came to life. "Last clue, please."

Jordan studied the room to make sure he hadn't missed anything in the few seconds he was focused on Spencer. "It's odd that the four wire panels don't seem to fit together as is. Try bending them." Again, the room exploded in movement and words.

Jordan watched the family in the room. He was making sure they followed his lead before he took his eyes off them. Spencer appreciated his dedication to the game. "How do you remember all the clues?"

Jordan tapped a finger to his head. "I'm pretty smart like that." He smiled. "And we have index cards we can read from if we don't remember. People get stuck in similar places, so it isn't too hard."

"I would get stuck a million times. I'm not good at clues."

"You're better than you think. I guarantee. Besides, the escape rooms are built for groups, not individuals."

When the family was well on their way to solving another puzzle, Spencer redirected the conversation to the two of them. "I would like to meet her. Your sister, that is."

"You will." He reached behind Spencer and pulled out a size small shirt. "If they finish, they get one free shirt. My money is on them getting it for the daughter." Jordan straightened. He flattened the shirt out on the counter next to where Spencer stood.

"So, what about your little sister?" Spencer asked.

His fingers worked to smooth the material. "They threatened her, Spencer." His words were soft against her ears. "When I said no to their request to kiss you for money, your best friend and her boyfriend threatened to hurt an eight-year-old little girl."

Spencer pushed her glasses up on her nose. "Threatened a kid? Come on. Molly's selfish, but no way she would hurt a kid."

Jordan moved back to his side of the small space. "Wake up, Spence. Charlton was at the skating rink the day I was there with Jasmine. Evidently, he's on the speed-skating team. All I can figure is he told Lucas about Jasmine."

"Charlton? Like the guy from your lit group?"

"Yeah. Probably nothing, right? He doesn't seem like that kind of guy. But he might have said something to Lucas without realizing it gave him and Molly what they needed."

Spencer stared at the little people on the screen. Three members of the group were huddled in one corner reading a laminated set of clues. The other two were walking around touching items that would serve no purpose in the hunt. She felt like one of the wanderers, trying to find her way out of a situation that she didn't understand at all. "Are you sure? What would they gain? I mean, they would never follow through with a threat like that. Right?"

"Lucas gives me the creeps, and I'm just gonna say it. So does Molly."

The lines in Jordan's forehead and around his mouth portrayed the distress Spencer knew he felt. She felt it, too, more every day.

"What I do know is Lucas asked me how much I love my baby sister. He said it would be a shame to see her hurt over my decision, that I better think hard about my final answer. He knew she went to the skate center, that she rolled around alone on the rink." Fear and anger cracked his voice as he neared the end of the last sentence.

Spencer's gut tingled. She knew he was telling the truth. Lucas was behind the threat and Molly was involved. Her Molly. It was like the nightmares she helped Molly rationalize, except it was Spencer's nightmare, and Molly was doing the opposite of helping. "I'm sorry you're in the middle of this."

Jordan nodded. "Me, too. Not because of me. I can handle myself. But if they hurt Jazz, I will—"

The speaker crackled to life again. The family was gathering at the door. The mom was jumping up and down. In her excitement, she pushed the button in and out on the walkie-talkie.

"I can't talk about this anymore right now. I know how hard it is for you to wrap your head around all of this. Trust me, it's hard for me. I ask myself constantly what I could have done differently, how I could have not kissed you and kept my family safe."

“Thank you for telling me. I know the stakes. No one will ever know.” Spencer rested a hand on Jordan’s shoulder. “Me and you. That’s it.”

Jordan nodded. He didn’t turn his eyes back from the screen. His voice was quieter when he responded. “You know what I wouldn’t do differently?”

Spencer’s eyes slid across her hand and onto the screen. She watched the girl with the dreads squeal and clap her hands as a young man clicked the final number into place on a combination lock. Inside was the key to unlock the door and set the team free. “What?”

“Get to know you better.”

Spencer could see the edge of the upturned corner of his mouth from where she stood. She was happy about that, too. If she was going to get to the bottom of Molly’s sinister actions, she couldn’t think of a better person to do it with. Weird or not, she trusted this guy. “I feel the same.”

The tiny figures on the screen were punching in letters on the door’s key code.

“That’s it, then.” Jordan remained still.

Spencer lifted her hand off Jordan’s shoulder and moved around the counter. “If only escape was that easy.”

Chapter Twelve

The classroom was alive with laughter and words when Spencer and Jordan walked in and found seats at one of the tables. Spencer took inventory while they waited for others to join. There were currently eight kids in the room, four girls and two boys, not counting her and Jordan. She noticed September, a talkative redhead who sat behind her in U.S. History last year. She was talking to a boy Spencer didn't recognize. September noticed Spencer and dipped her head once in acknowledgment. Spencer smiled. She never pictured September, with her long hair, stylish frames, and designer jeans, as someone who would be in this club.

Spencer didn't recognize anyone else at the table. She checked the time on her phone and looked at Jordan. "Do we just all sit here and talk?"

"Naw. Ms. P. usually gives everyone a few minutes to get here."

As if on cue, Ms. P. looked up from the stack of paper on her desk and spoke to the group. "Looks like we have a couple of new faces today. How about you all introduce yourselves before you move on to the agenda."

A girl to the right of September nodded. "On it, Ms. P. I'll start."

"Thanks, Elena. I'm here if you need me."

Elena gave a sloppy salute in the direction of the desk then turned her attention to the other students at the table. Her bright-red lips turned up slightly at the edges.

Spencer didn't wear lipstick. Molly didn't like it. Well, she liked it on herself but never on Spencer, which suited Spencer just fine. She hated the feeling of waxy silly-putty lips. The red was perfect for Elena, with her tawny skin, all black ensemble, and tiny dark spikes that grew on a third of her head.

Molly would hate the cut.

Spencer loved it.

"Obviously, I'm Elena." Elena emitted a welcoming vibe as she moved her head slightly to take in each person at the table.

In the moment it took Elena to say her name, Spencer realized she wasn't the person she would have been had Molly not carefully crafted her over the last nine years. That realization both saddened and angered her.

"Queer. Pronouns she/her," Elena said. "I'm the group pres. Any of you who are new, hit me up. Happy to help get you acclimated."

Elena bowed and waved her hand to her left. Two-thirds of her hair brushed the tabletop. She wore her cockiness like an ironic T-shirt. It fit her. "Leo. You're up." Her head tilted slightly toward the person to her left, and Spencer noticed a multitude of silver studs that pierced her ear from lobe to tip. She was honestly almost too adorable.

Spencer moved her eyes from the pres with the dark globe eyes and tawny skin to the bigger-than-life teen in a tight-fitting T-shirt with "Straight outta the closet" stamped across a rainbow flag on the front.

"Hey, guys. Leo." Leo made a motion with his hand toward himself. "Total gay. He/him." He smiled at Spencer. "Hi, new person. Love the watch. Want it. Need it. We'll chat."

“Hi,” Spencer said. She instantly liked the outspoken boy with the pale, freckled skin and sunburned nose. She wanted to say more, but her brain was rebelling against her. She felt antsy and strange—like she should remember something or know something that was just out of reach.

“And talkative. I like you, new person.”

Jordan was next to Leo. He started to introduce himself, but before he could even finish stating his name, the door opened.

Elena smiled at the newcomer. No, beamed was a better word. Elena’s whole face beamed at the newcomer. “Better late than never, chica.”

Spencer noted the stark contrast between Elena’s white smile and the golden skin. Elena super-liked whoever just entered.

The new person spoke. “French. In the farthest trailer, of course. But I’m here now. Let the party begin.”

Deja. Spencer’s heartbeat quickened. Deja would recognize her in about two seconds. She folded her hands into her lap and sought out her cuticles.

Deja was directly behind her. Spencer listened as Deja and Elena exchanged small talk.

Spencer felt different and exposed, like an ogre in a room full of pretty humans. She inhaled deeply. Apple orchard and spring water. The scent pleased her senses, all of them. Idiot. You shouldn’t have come. Molly’s going to be so pissed.

And then Deja was pulling out the chair next to Spencer, and her dress, the color of a Granny Smith apple, was brushing Spencer’s arm, and Spencer was trying not to think about the apple-orchard smell that matched the dress and tickled her nose and made her happy inside.

“Hi, coding buddy.” Deja slid into a seat next to Spencer. “I wondered if I would ever see you here.”

“Hey. It’s my first time. Jordan invited me. I’m just here—”

Deja held up a hand. “Yeah. I know. You’re with him.” Deja leaned forward and pointed a thumb in Jordan’s general direction.

Spencer noted a hint of disbelief in Deja’s voice. Her insides rattled like they always did before she said something stupid. But she didn’t want this girl, who was obnoxiously cute in a way that was very different than the cute of Elena or the pretty of Molly, to think she was only here because her boyfriend was an ally and now she was, too. “You’re not as smart as you think you are.”

Deja smiled and raised her shoulder just enough for the Granny Smith apple-green dress to ripple along her side.

Spencer wanted to stop the meeting. She wanted to ask Deja if she chose the dress to match her shampoo or soap or whatever it was that made her smell like a warm apple orchard. She wanted to be alone with this girl who seemed very different here than she did in coding club where they were all just people intent on solving a problem. Her heart raced in her chest. She stayed as still as she could so the apple-orchard dress would continue to brush her arm.

Deja thought she was straight. She obviously either hadn’t heard or hadn’t believed the rumors about Spencer and Molly. Spencer tried to find relief in that, but all she felt was doomed.

Deja spoke to the table. “Sorry I’m late. French is always more important than anything else in a teenager’s life. Just ask Monsieur Colon.”

Everyone laughed.

Spencer glanced sideways at the super brainy waif with the hip, pink-tipped haircut and the bright-colored dress. She wished she would have said something witty or smart, but the

moment was gone, and Spencer sounded as dumb as she felt sitting in the room with all these confident people who knew who they were and what they wanted.

This was a dumb idea.

Introductions resumed at the table. Jordan talked over Spencer's thoughts. She didn't pay much attention until he said, "Ace. Pronouns he/him."

That was a term Spencer read, but she couldn't remember what it meant. Jordan told her about his sister being trans, about the problems that caused in his family, but he never identified in any of their discussions as anything but straight. She thought back over their conversations. Why hadn't she paid more attention to the descriptive language? She was so focused on how other high schoolers came out as bi or gay that she skipped over the other pieces entirely.

Spencer glanced in Jordan's direction and watched him twirl a spinner ring on his middle finger, right hand. It was mesmerizing. This was not the time to ask for clarification. She already felt out of place. She adjusted her glasses and nodded with everyone else.

"And this is my friend, Spencer," Jordan said.

Elena made eye contact with Spencer. "Hey there, Spencer. Are you comfortable introducing yourself? It's all good if not. This crew can be a bit overwhelming at first."

"Sure. Yeah. Can you call me Chloe?" Spencer asked. She surprised even herself with the request.

"Chloe is a way cooler name than Spencer," Leo said. "Why'd you go with Spencer, anyway?"

Elena nudged Leo's elbow. "You talk too much. She'll never come back if you keep it up."

"Whatevs. Just sayin' you're fab. That's all." Leo stuck his tongue out at Elena and smiled at Spencer. "You have a pronoun preference?"

Spencer gave a tiny shrug. "Um. I don't know. Does that sound dumb?" She stopped talking.

Before Deja joined them, she considered saying that she might be a lesbian. Now that sounded stupid. She didn't think about pronouns at all. She should have. This whole thing was hard. She dug deeper into her cuticle until she felt warm liquid ooze onto her nail bed. She pushed her nail against her jeans to stop the bleeding and willed with all her might for someone else to speak.

It was probably good Deja was there. What if she said she was a lesbian, or maybe was a lesbian? How would that look? She was here with Jordan, and they were a couple, even if they weren't. She couldn't go back on their plan. Besides, Molly made it clear Spencer wasn't to let anyone know a single thing they did together. Nothing was because they were in love or anything. It was training for Spencer and a way to get Molly over the nightmares.

Molly needed her to keep a secret. Jordan needed her to keep a secret.

"We've all been there," Elena said. "You can question and grow into a new label, or no label. No one here knew everything when they started. Everyone has a coming out story."

Leo made another face at Elena. "Speak for yourself, girl. I came outta my momma's womb this sparkly."

September said, "Tell it, boy. You're magnificent beyond belief."

Leo snapped.

Everyone laughed, including Spencer. She liked it here. It felt like...

She tried to define it for herself.

Like when her dad used to wrap her in all her favorite blankets, one after the other, in just the right order, and then snuggle her tight as they watched reruns of the original Scooby-Doo

cartoons. He called her his little burrito. She could still hear his laugh, the one that her mom said rumbled up from his toes. After he left, she begged him to come home and wrap her into a burrito. He never did, and she hadn't felt that safe since. Maybe this wasn't a dumb idea after all. Or maybe it was.

Jordan poked her elbow with his. "You wanna go by Chloe?"

"I feel more like a Chloe," Spencer answered. She kept her voice low, so it didn't interfere with the others who were now sharing thoughts on coming out. "I want to be someone different here, someone who, you know, knows who they are and shit."

Jordan bobbed his head one time. "Do you know who you are? You did say maybe. And you were identifying as straight when I kissed you."

"Maybe." Spencer made a face at Jordan. "Okay. Fuck you. No. Not yet. I want to come back here. I know that."

Another thing she didn't know she was going to say until she did. Her thoughts were a swirly mess. She wanted things to be different. But they weren't different. She was a girl at the center of a tornado of people who continued to pull her in and spit her out repeatedly.

"And why didn't you tell me you were ace?"

The laughter and side conversations about coming out began to subside.

"I'll explain later," Jordan said.

It was her turn to nod.

Deja tapped the tabletop with her fingers. "My turn. My turn."

The room returned to quiet.

"Deja. Lesbian geek extraordinaire. She/her pronouns, please. And, for the record, Leo isn't the only one who embraced the gay from—well, like, forever."

Envy crept into Spencer. Why did everyone seem to know who they were except her? Before she met Molly, she was just a kid being a kid. She didn't have a crush on anyone, not even a teacher. Then there was Molly, and she just wanted to be her best friend. She didn't need anyone else. Except Molly wrote "Kiss a boy" in *The Book of Promises*, and then she did, and Spencer did, too. And now she was sitting between Jordan and Deja, and her mind couldn't reconcile the combination of pizza and apple orchards, couldn't reconcile how pizza and apple orchards could survive when smothered with strawberry lip-balm.

The rest of the introductions whizzed past Spencer in a stream of white noise. *Lesbian. Geek. Extraordinaire.*

Forty-five minutes later, Ms. P. announced the end of the meeting and asked Elena to set the agenda for the next. As a group, they were participating in the Denver Chalk Art Festival, so the particulars would continue to be the core of their discussion.

Ms. P. added a few housekeeping notes, then everyone stood.

Spencer was about to bolt when she felt the cool touch of small fingertips on the bare skin of her arm. She knew before she turned it was Deja.

Jordan moved away as she finished the pivot that put her face-to-face with the self-proclaimed lesbian geek extraordinaire.

Deja was three or four inches shorter than Spencer and probably half her weight. She wasn't thin, exactly, just kind of trim and tight all around. She looked like she smelled—bright and sweet with a little bite.

“I love your hair,” Spencer said.

Deja’s head was tilted slightly to look up at Spencer, and the short, dark waves with bright-pink tips bounced gently against the lime-green strap across her shoulder.

“I like yours, too.”

“Right. Because hair so short you can barely tell it exists is so in.” Spencer’s hand went to her tightly cropped hair.

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. You’re cute. I’ve wanted to talk to you for a while.”

Ugly words threatened to creep out of Spencer’s mouth, words like ogre and giant and fat that she threw around herself before anyone else could do it first. Deja seemed genuinely interested, and it actually made Spencer feel kind of cute. She kept her mouth closed.

“We should hang out,” Deja said. “That is, if your boyfriend’s cool with that.”

Spencer looked at Jordan, who chatted with Leo just a few inches away while he waited for Spencer. He was obviously amused at the current exchange.

Spencer tried to give him a *please help me* look.

Jordan smiled at Spencer and Deja and said, “No worries here. The more the merrier.”

Spencer wanted to stomp on his foot. Instead, she gave him a sideways stink-eye before looking back to Deja. “Sure. Sounds fun.”

“How about tomorrow, after school? We could walk to Twine’s and have a milkshake.”

“Tomorrow?”

“You know, Tuesday, the second day of the week? You do drink milkshakes, yea?”

Spencer fumbled with the edge of her T-shirt. “I do. It’s just...”

Deja stepped closer. “Up to you. Whenever. Give me your phone.”

Spencer slipped her phone out of her back pocket and swiped it open. She hesitated. If Molly saw Deja’s number, she would have to explain. Her brain didn’t know exactly why, but it knew that was a bad idea. Trying to explain anything she felt over the last hour and a half would lead to trouble. She felt it in her stomach, like a buzzing cell phone against her nightstand. Everyone in Molly’s circle thought she was so fun and laid back and bubbly, but Spencer knew her behind closed doors, and she was actually the most confusing and demanding person in the universe.

“You Snap?” Spencer asked. At least Snapchat disappeared after being read.

Deja shook her head. “Not into social media. Too risky.”

What was risky was texting back and forth, but Spencer didn’t say that. She just opened her contact page and watched Deja’s tiny thumbs dance across her phone screen. She would have to remember to delete texts when they occurred—if they occurred.

Deja smiled when she handed the phone back to Spencer. Their hands touched.

Spencer jerked her hand away too quickly, then instantly regretted the move. She shoved the phone into her back pocket and put her hands against her sides. Her body throbbed.

“Thanks,” Deja said, apparently unaware of the effect she was having on Spencer. “I’ll text you.”

“Tonight?” Spencer asked.

Deja’s face was close to Spencer’s, so close that Spencer felt the breath of each word. “Yes. Tonight.”

“The more the merrier?” Spencer slapped Jordan across the back as soon as she knew they were out of earshot of everyone else.

Jordan laughed. “What was I supposed to say? I’m not your boyfriend. How about, ‘I have no say in this since dating is our cover to stay safe from the popular kids who threatened my kid sister?’ That would have gone over well.”

Spencer opened the door to Jordan’s car and slid into the passenger seat. Jordan wasn’t wrong. While she waited for him to settle into the driver seat, she decided to drop the subject of Deja.

Deja. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply until her hands stopped quivering and her breathing returned to a slow in-and-out rhythm. When she opened them again, Jordan was looking at her.

“What does all this mean for you, Jordan? I mean, I know it’s fucked up for both of us, but don’t you like anybody? Don’t you want to go to the prom with someone you really like?”

“I like you.”

“I know. But. We’re never going to hook up, not like that.”

“Let me ask you something. Do you feel like you can talk to me about anything now? Like we were supposed to end up talking even if it started out stupid?”

Spencer wriggled in her seat. She fixated on Jordan’s knuckles, white against the black steering wheel. How quickly her world had shifted. He was now the only person she could talk to about anything.

“I do. I just don’t want you to miss out on things.”

“By things, do you mean sex? Because you heard me say I’m ace.”

Spencer was quiet. She kept her eyes on the white knuckles and black steering wheel.

“You don’t know what that means. Shit. Sorry. Ace is a term that means asexual. I don’t have sexual tendencies. At least I never have.”

“But you said you were attracted to me. You’ve dated girls. You told me that.”

Jordan started the car, put all four windows down, and killed the engine. He turned toward Spencer and laid his leg, bent at the knee, up on the seat. “No. I’m romantically drawn to people. I’m attracted to you, just not sexually. That’s why this works.”

“Still…” Spencer didn’t want to screw this up. She tried to remember what she read. Why was she the only person in the world who didn’t know about this stuff? She remembered reading an article about teens and pansexuality. This wasn’t what Jordan identified as, but she couldn’t completely remember that either. “Question?”

“Shoot.”

“So, if you’re ace, you never want sex. Is that the opposite of pansexual?”

Jordan looked like he was trying not to laugh.

“Never mind.”

“No. There are lots of ways to be ace. I’m just talking about me personally. For me, I’m sex-indifferent. I can participate in it if my partner wants it. It isn’t about discomfort. I just don’t feel it like others seem to feel it. You know?”

“No.” She smiled at him. “Honestly? I have no idea how others feel it.”

Jordan put his finger under Spencer’s chin and guided her face up until they made eye contact. “You don’t have to know everything. Like Elena said, everyone gets in tune with their body and mind at a different rate.”

Spencer’s body relaxed a little.

Jordan dropped his hand back to his lap. “As for those who identify as pansexual, the idea is you don’t identify as gay or straight, and your own gender identity has no bearing on attraction. It doesn’t mean they’re sexually or romantically attracted to everyone. It just means they use their power of self to subvert gender binaries and create more space for people of multiple genders and sexes.”

“Wow. You sound like a social studies teacher.”

They both laughed.

Jordan uncoiled his leg and rearranged himself against the seat.

Spencer bit her lip. She looked around the parking lot. Their car was the only one left. “Are you working tonight?”

“I always keep meeting days open. Just in case someone needs to hang out and decompress.”

“You’re a good guy.” Spencer meant it. This guy with the shaggy brown hair and soft-spoken demeanor was one of the kindest people she had ever met.

Jordan grinned. “I know. So. About the Deja thing. Do you like her?”

“I don’t know. I—we...” Spencer was trying to make a complete sentence, but her brain was once again uncooperative. This seemed to be a new trend. She swept her arms in a wide circle inside the car. “I have this—you. Us. Besides, I think she has something with Elena.”

“Elena? What makes you think Deja’s into Elena? Didn’t she sit by you? Huh?” Jordan punched her leg.

Spencer didn’t answer. She didn’t feel like guessing games.

“Lighten up, Spence. Or should I call you Chloe?”

“Spencer’s fine. I don’t know why I said that.”

“Don’t we have enough on our plates right now without getting all uptight about labels and who might like who?”

“You’re right. It’s just...”

The smell of fresh water and apples knocked her senses for a loop. And then there was the phone number. The flirting about text messages. She may not be able to follow through on her feelings, but she wanted to know if there would have been a chance. “I don’t know. Something about the way they looked at each other.”

“Elena would like them to be, but no. Deja isn’t into her. At least she never indicated as much.”

“Shit,” Spencer said. “All I could say when she touched my arm was, ‘I love your hair.’ Who starts a conversation with that?”

“You, apparently,” Jordan said.

The laughter in his voice made Spencer feel even worse. She sucked at all of this. “So, can I ask you a question?”

“About Elena and Deja?”

“No. About all of the different labels. One of the girls said she’s bi. I know people who identify as bi. That’s not it. I just guess I don’t get it.”

Jordan pushed the button to start the car. “Teacher voice engaged.”

“Shut up, dork. Just help me understand and not look stupid in front of people.”

“Am I not a person?”

Spencer watched his profile. She liked his smile and the little round orb it made in his cheek.

“Okay. Mr. Rohan is ready to begin his lecture on bisexuality. Fasten your seatbelt. This will be a moving lecture.” Jordan laughed at his own pun.

“Cute, Mr. Rohan.”

“Tatiana is her name. For her, it means she’s attracted to men and women. Bisexuality isn’t binary, though. She could just as easily be attracted to people who identify as transgender, or to some other mix of gender identities. To identify as bi means to be attracted to more than one, but not all.” The car’s turn signal filled the empty pause in their conversation, as Jordan turned right onto the main road.

Spencer thought about that. She thought about Jordan’s kiss. It was nice, but she critiqued it more than she reveled in it. This was the opposite of what happened when she kissed Molly. She wondered if Molly felt about her kisses the way she felt about Jordan’s. The thought brought a wave of sadness.

“Got it.” She met Jordan’s gaze. “How long did it take you?”

“To understand all of this?”

She nodded.

“I still don’t have it all. I’m just committed to listening and respecting. That’s it.”

“Maybe I can meet Jonnie someday?”

Jordan caught several strands of his hair that the wind kept blowing into his face and tucked them behind his ear. “That would be cool. I’m planning a drive up this weekend. It’s in Boulder, so like an hour. Jonnie’s hoping I’ll join her next year. She wants to keep an eye on me, I think. Plus, I’m pretty much the one family member who she can count on to always have her back.”

“Is that one of the places you applied?”

“Duh. Yeah. It has one of the best ranked astrophysics programs in the country.”

“Want company?”

“This weekend or in the astrophysics program in the fall?”

“You sure you don’t want to skip school and live off your comedic skills?”

“Hm. Tempting. But, no.” Jordan winked at her.

“Did you just wink at me?” Spencer burst out laughing. “You’re like the oldest young person I ever met.”

“I resemble that remark. So, you coming or not?”

“Definitely.” Spencer wondered if they would be fake boyfriend and girlfriend in Boulder.

“Wanna grab a burger to seal the deal? We can stop at Twine’s.”

“Can’t. I have a deadline on an app.”

Jordan retucked his hair.

Now Spencer needed to figure out how to tell Molly. She inhaled deeply until the burn from the hot outside air melted into the burn on her insides.

The rest of the ride home was filled with small talk about the colleges Jordan’s twin siblings attended. Each would soon graduate with a bachelor’s degree: Jessie in sports management from a school on the other side of the United States, and Jonnie in professional, technical, and business writing from the college in Boulder.

A few doors from her house, Spencer said, “Molly can’t know about this. None of it. Not us going to the meeting, not the labels, not Jonnie.”

Jordan was quiet as he pulled into the alley behind Spencer’s carport.

Spencer saw the tiny orb in his cheek deepen. When he turned toward her, she saw a sad smile, one that didn’t reach his eyes. She immediately felt guilty for what she said.

“Sorry. Molly’s just sensitive. You know.”

“I don’t really know, and I can’t promise. I don’t advertise. I also don’t miss an opportunity to get people to think about gender and to challenge their cissexism.”

Spencer looked down at her lap. “I don’t want you to, but if she starts feeling like all you’re doing is getting me involved with this…”

“I won’t volunteer anything. I promise. Spencer, look. I’m as upset about all of this as you are. Remember, they threatened my family. If we need to not go to the meetings, we won’t. If we need to go out with them, we will. You just tell me what you need. I’ve got you.”

“Thanks. It will all work out. I promised to be at her house tomorrow while Lucas is working on your lit project. I’ll see how she’s acting.” She wished she could roll up into a tiny armadillo ball and hide. Everything felt too big. And she absolutely didn’t believe anything was going to work out.

“Okay. We’re meeting to practice at his house. It’s due next week. Ms. Daniels doesn’t want to deal with it after the prom.” Jordan paused. “I guess we need to talk about the prom. Right? Isn’t that what couples do?”

Spencer asked Molly to their senior prom in freshman year after seeing a news report about two girls going to the prom together and being crowned king and queen. Molly laughed at her. Spencer decided then that she wouldn’t go at all. Her reserve hadn’t wavered. “Maybe later.” She undid her seatbelt and sighed. She was wearied, too depleted to think about prom or sexuality, or being alone with Molly.

Jordan kept the car idling. “Sorry. Shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No worries. I know we need to talk about it. Tomorrow. K?” She swung her legs out of the car and threw her backpack over her shoulder. She glanced toward 1393 South Washington. The brick-style ranch with the square front porch taunted her. For years, she imagined sitting on the swing enjoying the colors and smells of a garden overflowing with flowers in full bloom. Molly tried to teach her the names of flowers each spring when they sat in her front yard and looked toward their future home. False Indigo was the only name she still remembered from those days. Mrs. Brahms planted them the year they were eleven. The name struck her as funny, and she rolled in a fit of laughter down the slight slope of green that ran from the edge of the yard to the sidewalk. When she regained her composure, she told Molly that she would love whatever she planted, and she would study every day to learn the names of all of her favorite ones. Spencer turned from the memory and waved to Jordan.

“Later, Spencer. Text me.” Jordan’s car clicked into drive. He pulled back into the street. Chloe. Why didn’t I tell him, “Yes. I want to be called Chloe”?

Chapter Thirteen

After dinner and kitchen duty, Spencer excused herself to her room. She had been thinking about a new theme. At her desk, she played with various shapes until she found a combination she liked—two girls, on their stomachs, one with short tight curls, all curves and soft lines, and one, skin a shade lighter than her own, with a cute wave cut and delicate features. She made their limbs overlap and added a soft shade of pink to the cheeks of the smaller woman. She added a tree to the background. She worked like she was in a trance. She had never made a theme with two women. When she finished, she felt like she pinned her heart to the screen.

Spencer was registering her latest theme to the theme store when her phone buzzed against the desktop. She smiled when she looked at the text.

Deja: Hi, Chloe.

She leaned her chair back on two legs and held the phone in front of her. She called her Chloe. Somehow it made her feel different, better.

Spencer: Hi.

Spencer wanted to sound nonchalant and cool, but hi sounded lame. She tried again.

Spencer: Been thinking about you.

Delete.

Spencer: Do your lips taste like Granny Smith apples?

Delete. Delete.

Deja: A girl of many words, I see. [tears of laughter emoji; dark glasses emoji]

Spencer was glad she was alone in her room. She could feel the warm glow in her cheeks.

Spencer: Right?

Deja: Sorry I was so bold today. [Milkshake emoji]. Friends?

Spencer: Friends.

Spencer: Just finished an app.

She lifted her phone and took a picture of her screen, deleted it, adjusted her angle, and snapped again. When she was satisfied with the quality, she hit Send.

The app text was just the right text to spark conversation. In seconds, the two were rapid firing text messages back and forth about resolution, color choice, changing background colors under the text-messaging table, and how to make the graphic pop. Spencer drank in Deja's words like an energy drink. The more jazzed they made her, the more she typed. When her mom knocked on her door, she almost fell backward. She looked at the clock on her computer. 10:30.

Spencer: Gotta go. Mom's knocking.

Spencer put all four chair legs on the ground and turned her phone upside down on her desk.

"Didn't mean to startle you," Virginia said. "That Molly?" She stepped fully into Spencer's room and sat on the edge of her bed.

"No. Deja. She's in my coding class. We were talking about a project." She wasn't lying. They were talking about coding. She rubbed her hands on her jeans. Spencer could tell she wanted to say something.

"You and Molly having problems? You know you can talk to me." Virginia hesitated. "Is she upset about Jordan?"

"What? No. Why are you asking me that?" Spencer's heart flickered. Her breath stuttered in her lungs. She sat still in her chair. She hated not being completely honest with her mom, but she didn't know where to begin to explain. She didn't know why the question bothered her so much, but it did. A burning, shivering fear traveled through her spine and down her arms.

Virginia was quiet for a long time and then said, "Spencer, come sit." She patted a navy-blue stripe on the comforter.

Spencer did as asked. She still didn't have words to describe how disgusting she felt inside for what was happening on the outside, so she didn't know what a conversation would accomplish, but it felt good to have her mom close. The two women developed a relationship more like a friendship than a mother/daughter hierarchy in the last few years, and especially since Molly turned eighteen and left Spencer home more nights and weekends.

Virginia gave her a squeeze. "You can tell me anything. You're my heart. I won't be angry at you."

Spencer heard the words. She wanted to believe them, but it seemed everyone was disappointed in her for something these days or would be soon. She thought about the texts with

Deja. They felt good and right, but they weren't honest. They left out the part about not really being Jordan's girlfriend, about being in love with Molly, about not being a virgin, not really anyway, not if you count what Molly asked her to do, what she had done for years, what she couldn't talk about to anyone without risking Molly getting mad at her and hurting someone she cared about.

She laid her head against her mom's shoulder. "It's just graduation, I think. It's so close. There are so many projects, and Molly says she isn't going to college. She knows I want to. She knows I've applied to several schools. She still says we should get jobs and stay here for at least a year. She's my best friend, but I can't do that. Is that awful?" Spencer hoped she heard the truth in that and didn't push for the rest.

Her mom said, "It isn't awful at all. You have a gift, Spencer. You shouldn't let anyone dictate how you develop it."

"I'm trying not to." That was one hundred percent truth.

Spencer's mom leaned her head against her daughter's, providing support to hold her up. Spencer felt safe. She wished she could stay here until she could figure everything out in her head. "Mom?"

"Mmm hmm?"

Spencer pulled back and looked at her face. She was going to ask her if she thought she was gay, but she chickened out. "Jordan wants me to go to Clarian College with him this weekend to visit his sister. I kinda wanted to check it out anyway. I promise no drinking or..." She paused.

"Or sex?"

"Yeah. Or sex." Spencer watched her mom's expression. If she was bothered by the thought, she didn't show it.

"Spencer, you and your brother will be eighteen in a few weeks. I know teenagers have sex. Remember, I was the one who had the talk with you both."

Spencer thought her smile looked fake, but she was glad she tried. She smiled back. She wondered if her mom thought her smile looked fake, too. She felt the pressure of tears behind her face, but she didn't want to cry anymore. Instead, she stood and walked back to her desk to shut down her computer. Her mom stood, hugged her from behind, and kissed the top of her shoulder. "You'll be okay," she said. "You're going to be okay."

Chapter Fourteen

It felt like forever between Jordan's invitation and the weekend. Spencer spent her time convincing Molly that she was going to miss her terribly, creating a playlist for the drive, packing and unpacking and packing again. In between, there were texts to Deja, lots of texts, more texts than Spencer wrote to anyone on a daily, maybe ever. The day before the trip was no different.

Spencer: What does a person wear to fit in on campus? [big-eyed, open-mouth emoji]

Deja: I don't know, how about a smile and dark-rimmed glasses?

Deja: It would work for me. [heart-for-eyes emoji]

Spencer laughed out loud. Their text messages bordered on flirting. Or maybe they did more than border. Spencer wasn't sure. Whatever it was, Spencer liked it way more than she should.

Spencer: You're easy.

Deja: Maybe. Or maybe you just auto-complete me.

Spencer: Lame. [Laughing with tears emoji]

Spencer told Jordan about the texts on the way to Clarian Friday evening.

"You two are nerd-cute perfection," Jordan said after Spencer read the text that referenced computers.

"If only." Spencer heard the disappointment in her voice. "Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Stop." Jordan held up his hand and pushed the button to mute the music blasting into the small car's interior. "We're friends. No more, no less. Good friends. Better every day. I want you to be happy. We're doing all of this so we can be happy. Fuck, Spence. The only positive about all of this is our friendship."

Spencer leaned over and kissed Jordan's cheek. "You might just be the best friend I've ever had." Spencer felt a pang of guilt at the words. Molly was her best friend when they were nine and ten, and even when they were thirteen. But high school changed things.

"Might be?" Jordan goaded.

She sat back upright in her seat and adjusted the seatbelt. "For real."

Jordan glanced her way and back to the road. "You mean it, don't you?"

"I do. I mean, I still feel weird about the kiss and the IOU and not knowing why Molly would be a part of that." Spencer fiddled with the fabric of the seatbelt. Something was off with

Molly. Spencer felt it in her gut. She couldn't prove it, but she knew whatever was happening would crest very soon.

"You can trust me. I know you don't totally believe that. I get it. But it's true." Jordan turned his blinker on and slid in behind an eighteen-wheeler. "This is all imperfect as hell. You have a hardcore crush on Deja, and that puts all of us at risk. But I still support it, because you should be happy."

"What about you? What about Jasmine and your family?" If Spencer was linked with Deja, the entire playing field changed, and not just for Jordan and her. "What about Deja?" She couldn't gamble with the lives of others. "I appreciate what you're trying to do, but everything needs to stay status quo until we figure out how to get out of this mess."

"Fair enough. You flirt at a distance. We'll show the world our undying love."

"Jordan."

"What do you want me to say, Spence?" His voice was as tight as his grip on the steering wheel. "I don't know how to fix it."

Spencer thought he sounded like he was close to tears.

"I just want this to stop." She found her cuticle, started picking to keep from crying. "I just want to be happy for the weekend. Can we do that?"

Jordan nodded.

This trip couldn't have come at a better time. Instead of being upset, Molly almost pushed her out the door. Lucas would turn nineteen tomorrow. Molly was totally focused on the party she and their circle of friends would have at a parent-free home. Spencer wasn't invited. She was seventeen. Molly used that as the reason. Spencer knew the real reason was Lucas and the fact that the two of them threatened harm against her and Jordan.

Molly used to plan Spencer's party every year. Their parents thought it was cute when they were young and the two of them would spend hours bent over lists and ideas. As the years progressed, no one asked what Spencer wanted. They waited for Molly to tell them.

This year Molly talked more about Lucas' birthday than her own, which she and Spencer talked about exactly twice. Nothing was solidified either time.

"Does it bother you that we weren't even invited to Lucas's birthday party?" Spencer asked.

"Why would it? It isn't like Lucas is my friend. Besides, seems stupid to invite someone you're blackmailing."

"That's just it, Jordan. It seems like they would want to invite us. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, and all that. I don't know. Just seems weird."

"Like them paying me weird? Or threatening you weird? Or how about threatening Jasmine weird? Is it that weird?"

Spencer knew he was right. She tried to think about other things as they drove the last few miles.

The GPS app broke her thought. "Your destination is on the right."

Jordan reached forward and touched the screen. "Got it, Garmie."

"She's pushy, like you," Spencer said, trying to lighten the mood.

Jordan turned into a large parking garage. "Somebody has to be." He smiled and reached out for Spencer's hand. "Truce?"

"Truce." She squeezed his hand. Spencer was happy to be here with Jordan. She liked that he talked to his phone's GPS. She liked that he didn't try to impress her. She liked that he was her friend.

“It’s gonna be a good weekend,” Jordan said.

“Agreed. And this place is huge.”

“Yep,” Jordan said. “Still can’t believe you’ve lived your whole life in Denver and never been to Boulder.”

“It’s flat.” Spencer made a straight-line gesture with her free hand. “Why would a mountain girl want to come to a plateau?” She popped her seatbelt open and retrieved her hand from Jordan’s. “But college life might make it worth being here.”

Ten minutes later, the two were sitting side by side on a multi-stained couch in a dorm room littered with bright-colored potato chip packages and long-abandoned empty glasses, some still holding various amounts of flat beer.

When they arrived, Jonnie swept them up in a three-person bear hug and deposited them where they now sat. “Give me five, little brother. I need to finish whipping up a pitcher of margaritas for my fans.” Jonnie’s laughter trailed behind her as she moved from the couch to the tiny kitchenette.

The music verged on too loud for conversation.

Jordan looked horrified.

Around the room, people strained their voices just slightly to be heard. Spencer wondered if Jordan wanted to mute it like he did in the car, and would he, if given half a chance? If the music level and beer were any indication, it was going to be a fun-filled weekend with an unsteady Jordan and his fun-loving sister.

A boy with a tall, starched mohawk bounded through the door. He had a glass balanced on his forehead.

Spencer’s laughter rang out over the music.

Jordan’s head whipped in her direction. “Seriously?”

She tried to stifle another laugh, as the students around mohawk dude reached out to guide him around a table, their own feet, and a shoe sticking precariously out from under the bed. “Come on. That’s hilarious.”

“I had no idea my sister’s friends were like this.”

Jordan’s Adam’s apple strained against his neck. Spencer felt his stress. “Jordan, if you’re worried about me, don’t be. This is college. It’s Friday night. No one looks completely drunk. They’re just blowing off steam.”

“It’s six o’clock.”

Spencer looked around the room. There were seven people in the small dorm space, another two in the kitchen. No one was stumbling. No one was yelling. A few were drinking beer from cups like the empties scattered around on flat surfaces. From the kitchenette, Jonnie’s voice rang out, “It’s margarita time, my lovelies.”

The small crowd let out a resounding whoop.

Spencer poked Jordan with her elbow.

Jonnie laid a tray on the coffee table in front of the pair. “Margarita?”

“No, thanks,” Spencer answered.

“Me neither.” Jordan smiled at Jonnie. “We kinda promised Spence’s mom.”

“Fair enough, little brother.” Jonnie ruffled Jordan’s hair.

Jordan blushed. He pushed his sister’s hand away.

Spencer could tell he didn’t really mind. His face looked more relaxed after the gesture. The connection between the two was apparent.

The throb of activity in the room took Spencer's eyes off the brother/sister duo. She breathed more easily now. With every beat of the music, every peal of laughter, she felt the pressure of home fade. The pace of the room felt good. She leaned back against the couch, propped her feet up on the coffee table, and settled into her new skin.

Spencer woke to the smell of bacon. Her cheeks hurt from laughing long into the night. She stretched and recalled the evening. Her favorite part was ordering pizza and listening to the comfortable banter of the nine people who turned out to welcome her and Jordan to the campus. At some point, Jordan told them he and Spencer weren't a couple. It was like a final weight lifted from the weekend. The disclosure brought forth frank discussion about those in the room.

Mike, AKA mohawk dude, turned out to be the only person in the group who self-identified as heterosexual. He called it cishet. "I'm in love with Jonnie. I'm a man. Jonnie's a woman. I have straight privilege, not because I have sex in a particular way, but because I'm attracted to the opposite gender."

Cishet was a term Spencer read about in the library. It was noted as being a term transgender people used to refer to people who were considered their oppressors. What she read didn't match what she heard Mike say. Others in their group must have felt the same, because they bantered among themselves for a half hour or so about a better label and why.

The majority of those in the conversation believed Mike was bisexual and hetero-romantic, including Jordan. "Here's how I see it," he said. "Having sex in a particular way has to do with biological sex and not gender. You said before Jonnie you enjoyed sex with people who have a vagina. Right?"

"Right," Mike said.

"And you enjoy having sex with Jonnie who, unless she's done something I'm unaware of, has no vagina."

Mike nodded.

Everyone in the group grew quiet as Jordan spoke.

Spencer didn't understand all of it, but she was super proud of Jordan. He obviously loved his sister tremendously and did a lot of research to understand her world.

"Okay." Jordan continued. "Gender aside, you're bisexual." He paused for a minute while everyone absorbed that. "Now we move to gender and romance. You're a man in love with a woman. Hence, hetero-romantic." Jordan turned his hands palms up and shrugged. "Tada."

Spencer thought about the rest of the conversation as she got to her feet to follow the wonderful smells coming out of the kitchen. She loved it here and decided if there was any way at all to make Clarian University her home in the upcoming year, she would.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in." Jonnie put an arm around Spencer and gave a squeeze. "You hungry, girlfriend?"

"Starving. Bacon smells heavenly. Where's Jordan?"

"He and Mike went to get orange juice. They'll be back in a few." Jonnie turned the bacon slices with a fork. "Grab the eggs outta the fridge."

"How many?" Spencer shivered when the cold of the ice box met the warmth of her skin. Jonnie kept the dorm room super toasty, almost too much so for Spencer. Her own house was kept on seventy year-round to conserve energy. "Brrrrr."

Jonnie laughed. "I like my food cold and room warm." She handed Spencer a big, red, measuring bowl with a handle. "Crack 'em in here. All twelve. My Mike can put away some eggs. I think he might be part fox." She laughed again, from down in her belly.

Spencer was more relaxed puttering around the kitchen with Jonnie than she ever remembered being outside her own home. "Thanks for having me."

"Wouldn't have it any other way, kiddo. My baby brother is tickled with you. He's tickled. I'm tickled." She reached over and tickled Spencer's side.

"Not a great idea," Spencer said. "Guess what I haven't done this morning?"

"Pee on my floor and I will kick your sexy ass." Jonnie took the bowl of eggs and started rummaging through a drawer full of utensils.

Spencer saluted Jonnie, turned on her heel, and headed for the bathroom. "I'll be back."

Jonnie laughed. "Your Terminator voice needs work, girl."

Back in the kitchen a few minutes later, Spencer observed Jonnie as she worked. Jonnie was taller than Spencer by about an inch. This alone made Spencer like the woman. It was rare to not be the tallest woman in the room, and the opportunity made the weekend even better. Jonnie's breasts were perfectly shaped, and her waist and hips were perfectly proportioned. She had the same hazel eyes and shaggy brown hair as Jordan, and the contrast of her hair against her skin—well, it was exactly what Spencer dreamed of having on the night after a group of teenagers circled her family on the way to the library, what she dreamed of after Molly said she looked like a tree with no leaves because she was the same color from top to bottom.

Jonnie caught her eye. "What?"

"Nothing. You and Jordan look so much alike. That's all."

"All us kids do. Probably because my folks look more like siblings than partners." Jonnie took the last of the bacon out of the skillet and picked up the red measuring cup.

"I wish I looked as good as you. You're so...I don't know...feminine."

Jonnie stopped, her hand midair. One drop of yellow escaped the pour spout of the measuring cup.

Spencer watched it fall into the hot grease and then looked to Jonnie. For a moment, they stared at each other, and Spencer couldn't remember what she should be doing, or why this woman was looking at her so intently.

"Sorry. I didn't mean anything," Spencer managed to say as she moved backward until her body rested against the small island between the kitchenette and living area.

Jonnie turned the stove-top off and sat the eggs on the counter. "You can ask me questions and make observations. I'm not put off by either. I just wonder why you think that. You're beautiful, my lovely." Jonnie put one hand on each side of Spencer's face. "Look at me. You're beautiful. Say it."

"Beautiful?" Jonnie's hands were uncomfortably warm against her cheeks. "Can I be good-looking or cute, instead?"

"You don't get to joke. Being okay in your own skin is not a joke. It has taken me years to feel beautiful. That's the key. If you feel it. If you believe it. You can be it."

"I don't give a shit about being beautiful. Seriously."

Jonnie held her stance. "Fair enough. How about handsome? Or intense? I think intense." Jonnie nodded. "Girl, you can't deny intense."

Spencer nodded between the older woman's palms. "I guess. I mean, yeah. I'm intense, and handsome is cool. I just. I don't know. Molly says my hips and ass don't fit the rest of me."

And my skin is a weird color. And these”—Spencer stepped back and pointed to her breasts—“are so small that my stomach sticks out farther than they do.”

“Do you want them to be bigger?”

“My boobs?”

“Yeah. Your boobs.”

Spencer watched Jonnie’s breasts as she shook her head between her hands. They swayed slightly with the movement. Spencer had zero desire to know what that felt like. She didn’t even want what she had. She thought about Molly and the exercises she asked Spencer to do, exercises that were meant to increase bust size. Molly didn’t believe her, but she did them still, even though they didn’t work.

Jonnie’s hand dropped from Spencer’s face and landed solidly on Spencer’s leg, right under her butt cheek. “Besides, there is nothing flabby or weird about these legs, girl. Mmm. Mmm.”

“Basketball.” Spencer didn’t move. She wondered how Deja’s hand would feel resting just below her ass.

“You play in school?” Jonnie put her other hand on the other leg. “If you don’t, you should.”

“Nope. No interest in group sports. That’s my brother. He’s beast. I hold my own with him on our home court, though. Used to play with my dad, but he couldn’t keep up and bailed.”

Jonnie dropped her hands and turned back to the stove. “Men can be assholes. Makes me thankful for Mike.” She turned the knob.

Spencer watched the coil turn from black to red. “Agreed. What can I do to help?” She pushed off the counter.

“Take your handsome, intense ass over there and set the table.” Jonnie lifted the large measuring cup and poured the yellow mixture into the skillet.

Spencer smiled. “Your wish is my command, beautiful one.”

Jonnie slapped her ass as she walked away. “My brother has good taste.”

“We’re not—”

“Don’t matter, lovely. He digs you.”

Before Spencer could respond, the front door opened and Jordan called out, “Hi honey, we’re ho-ome.”

“In here, my sweets,” Jonnie sang out in return. “Just put the eggs on.”

A few minutes later, the four of them sat around the tiny kitchen table and enjoyed the breakfast feast. Jonnie was right, Mike ate over half of the eggs and a huge pile of pancakes. In between bites, he joked with the others and touched Jonnie’s hand.

Spencer wanted what Jonnie and Mike had. The banter between them was light and easy, and they were constantly connected either physically or through a glance or long look. You could feel the deep love.

It was hard to leave Clarian on Sunday afternoon. As much as she thought she would hate the land surrounding the campus, she didn’t.

It wasn’t as flat as she anticipated. In fact, when Jonnie took her to the top of a hill overlooking a large lake with water gently hitting a grassy meadow at its edge, Spencer was impressed. It wasn’t her mountain range, but it wasn’t level ground, either. The campus itself was 269 acres full of picturesque natural features and elegant architecture. At the center of the campus

was an impressive red-brick structure adorned with an eye-catching clock tower. The campus nestled at the bottom of the Rocky Mountain foothills, so even though they weren't in the mountains themselves, outstanding views of the mountain range's peaks could be seen for miles around.

Perhaps even more than the campus itself, Spencer loved the people, all of whom were incredibly smart and lived lives so incredibly different from one another. The few students she met over the weekend made her feel completely welcomed as a part of the college community, Jonnie especially.

By the time Spencer and Jordan threw their bags into his car, the two women were fast friends.

"Text me when you're home safe," Jonnie said through the open window of the driver's side.

"We will," Jordan and Spencer replied in unison.

Spencer leaned toward the driver's side of the car. "Don't forget. You promised to let me know about the next open."

Jordan started to speak. His sister put her finger on his lips. "Ain't none of your business, little brother."

Jonnie kissed her brother on the cheek and blew a kiss to Spencer. "You know I will, lovely. I'm all about you and me and cold beer come fall."

Chapter Fifteen

Jonnie kept her promise. Before Spencer got home from school the next day, Jonnie texted the information about an upcoming open house.

Jonnie: Save the date! [String of heart eye emojis]

Spencer: I'm so there. I miss you guys.

Jonnie: It won't be long. Kick ass on your exams.

Spencer: Yesssssssssss. The end is near.

As the days turned into weeks, Spencer and Jonnie became better friends. Spencer found she could talk to Jonnie about anything. When Molly still didn't have plans for Spencer's birthday, and Spencer was feeling especially low, it was Jonnie that she texted to talk it through.

And now, just days before Spencer's birthday, as she sat with her back against the brick wall where all of this started, she texted Jonnie about a new version of an old problem.

Molly's dream was back.

Spencer: You there?

Spencer: Need big sister advice. [mind blown emoji]

Jonnie: Women in Religion. Done in ten.

Jonnie minored in women's studies to make herself a well-rounded person. Spencer didn't even know women's studies was a thing a couple of weeks ago, but now she was considering the minor herself. Computer engineering was still her plan. She checked Clarian's program. It compared to others she applied to earlier in the year, and it wasn't quite as competitive. Provided she didn't blow finals, her GPA, coding club hours, and current job should secure her a spot. A minor in women's studies would help her when she applied for master's programs that would allow her to work with marginalized youth and young adults like those in the SPECTRUM club at school. Her new goal was to help them learn coding as a way to achieve their dreams.

The club was part of why Spencer was reaching out to Jonnie today. There was a meeting after school to finalize the Arts Festival details. Spencer wanted to be there, but she couldn't be both there and with Molly as she chased away her demons.

Spencer was torn between her new friends and her best friend.

The choice should be easy. She should want to be with Molly. It bothered her that she didn't.

She was being an awful friend. Except, maybe she wasn't, not if Jordan was right. And the IOU showed he was right. Still, Molly loved her. She knew that. Lucas tried to pull them apart.

She didn't know this, but she hoped it with her whole being. The alternative was more than she could handle. Still, she wanted to be with Deja and Jordan in the SPECTRUM meeting more than she ever wanted to be in Molly's bed with her fingers pushed into the soft skin of her throat.

When Jonnie texted her back fifteen minutes later, Spencer was no clearer on what she should do than she was when she slid down the warm brick wall and wrapped her arms around her own legs.

Jonnie: Hola chica. Que pasa?

Before Spencer could tap Jonnie's text message, a text came in from Molly.

Molly: Where are you?

It was their lunch bell. Molly ate with Lucas. Spencer thought she could easily get away. She should have known Molly would notice. Molly noticed everything.

Spencer: Had to see Mrs. Maxwell. Didn't want to interrupt you and Lucas. 'Sup?

Molly: You didn't answer me about today. Meet at my car?

Spencer: What if I study after school and then come over?

Spencer: Need to stay with Mrs. Maxwell. Just for an hour.

Spencer: That way, you can see Lucas and I'm not in the way.

Spencer knew the Lucas thing could go either way. It depended on Molly's mood. She waited, afraid to return to Jonnie's text until she was sure Molly was satisfied. She watched Molly's bubbles ebb and flow on the screen.

Molly: What if you bring your ass to my car after school and we ride home together? It's my turn. Got it?

Spencer: I'll see you this afternoon.

Molly: You're the best.

Spencer clicked over to Jonnie's text.

Spencer: FML.

Jonnie: Uh O.

Spencer: NM. Just Molly drama.

Jonnie: Spill.

Spencer: Haven't told her about SPECTRUM. Meeting today conflicts with what she wants. [string of rainbow flag emojis]

Jonnie: So will love win? [Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple heart emojis]

Spencer: Nope. Agreed to meet at Molly's car. No biggie. SPECTRUM next week.

Jonnie: That it?

Spencer: Biggest thing, anyway.

Jonnie: Deja gonna be there? [heart eyes emoji]

Spencer: At the meeting? Yeah. [heart emoji; red circle with a line through it]

Jonnie: Serious, girl. How's that going?

The coding club was working overtime getting ready for the upcoming competition. That put her and Deja in the same room together a lot. Every time Spencer was near her it was harder to pretend being near her didn't affect her. It did. A lot.

Spencer's heart raced so fast the last time they were in the modular unit that when Deja leaned over Spencer's chair to point out what Spencer was missing in a line of code, Spencer was sure Deja could feel the thumping through Spencer's back and into Deja's breast where the two body parts met.

Spencer: It's not. I can't get her involved in my stupid life.

Jonnie: Your life isn't stupid. Convoluted. Confusing. Not stupid.

Spencer: Your brother thinks it's stupid.

Jordan wanted Spencer to talk to him the way she talked to Jonnie. She told him he wasn't a girl and there were just some things he didn't understand. He was still being weird after that conversation.

Jonnie: My brother will deal. [Woman shrugging shoulders emoji]

Spencer put her head on her knees. She was tired. Her senior year should be fun. Instead, she dealt every day with a best friend who moved between love and hate over and over again, sometimes in one day. She was juggling a pretend boyfriend who had no desire for sex but confessed a weird jealousy for her relationship with his sister and a girl she couldn't stop thinking about who she thought liked her, too. People were threatening those she cared about. What else could go wrong?

Spencer raised her head when her phone dinged three times in rapid succession.

Jonnie: Here's the thing. You can't fix any of this. Not today, anyway.

Jonnie: All you can do is make one decision at a time.

Jonnie: What do you want?

Spencer shifted her weight against the wall and pushed her feet out from her body until her legs were flat against the ground. The heat felt good through her jeans. She drew a deep breath and held it. She wanted Jonnie to help her, to tell her what to do. She wished she was back at Clarian. It was easy there. She didn't have to choose. She could just be.

Spencer: I wish it was July. I wish I was accepted to Clarian.

Jonnie: Spencer. What do you want?

Spencer: I don't know. I want to know what to do about all of this.

Jonnie: What do you WANT?

Spencer squeezed the phone with all her might. It took everything inside to not throw it across the walkway. Her chest tightened and her jaw hurt. Why was Jonnie being like this?

Spencer: I WANT it to stop.

Jonnie: And yet you have no magical powers.

Spencer: I WANT to go back to the way things were at the beginning of the school year.

Spencer: I WANT my life back.

Jonnie: One step at a time.

Jonnie: What do you want?

Jonnie: One thing.

Spencer yelled at the screen. "Stop. Just stop. I can't do this." She swung her elbows back against the wall, repeatedly, until each was numb. Still the words pounded in her ears. What. Do. You. Want? She slid the phone into her pocket without answering.

Spencer managed to avoid Molly, Deja, and Jordan for the rest of the day.

By the time she reached Molly's car that afternoon, she convinced herself years of friendship could not be thrown aside for people she just met.

"Do you want to go get a soda before we go to the house?" Spencer asked, sliding into the passenger seat. "I forgot my water this morning. I'm dying over here." She cocked her head to the side and rolled her tongue out of her mouth.

Her attempt at humor was rewarded with a one-word answer.

"Can't."

Molly waved to a trio of girls getting into a car next to them and called out, "See you tonight, bitches."

Spencer cringed. It was almost two-thirty. She figured she would be at Molly's disposal for no more than three hours before being discarded for whatever party the cool people were attending tonight.

Molly turned over the ignition. She glanced at Spencer. "There's a barbecue at Natalie's house," she said, as if that should tell Spencer all she needed to know about the exchange.

"Is that why you can't get a soda? It isn't like it would take long. Twine's is five minutes from here. We could talk there." Spencer was agitated but still tried to keep her voice light. "You agreed we needed to talk."

"Not today, Spencer."

"Then when? You haven't mentioned my birthday in weeks. It's almost here."

"I know when your birthday is. Do I look stupid?"

Spencer buckled her seat belt as Molly steered the car to the street. She didn't answer.

"I don't want to talk at Twine's. I want to go to my house. There are too many people at Twine's. Besides, I told you I had the dream again." Molly's face went from all smiles to pain in the blink of an eye.

Spencer wondered if it always had and she was just too caught up to notice. "Maybe it's time to tell someone."

"No. I told you. You're my best friend. You know I can't take it alone."

Molly's face registered sadness.

Spencer decided it was best to not push the issue right now. "I get it. Your house it is." She smiled at Molly. "I don't want to disappoint you."

"That's my girl." Molly's smile returned as quickly as it left.

When they walked in the front door of Molly's house, her mom called out a cheery hello and came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a white, flowered apron. "There's my girls. Hey, you two. How was your day?"

Molly's smile was gone again, this time replaced with a straight white line. "Fine. We're going upstairs to study. Don't bother us."

Spencer looked at the purple streaks on Mrs. Blackstone's white apron and smiled. "It smells wonderful in here."

"It smells wonderful in here," Molly mocked. "What? You want to stay down here and bake a pie?"

Spencer thought it would be nice to eat the pie that was obviously already baking. She breathed in the sweet warm blueberries. "No. I don't want to bake a pie." She and Mrs. Blackstone exchanged a quick glance. "Let's get this studying started."

Molly pulled her shirt over her head as soon as the door clicked shut.

Spencer watched the tiny clips break free on Molly's bra under Molly's long fingers. There were no butterflies, no trembling hands or goose-bumped skin this time. It was as if she was watching a stranger. She stood close to the door. It wasn't too late to leave.

Molly looked over her shoulder. "Come on, Spence. I need you." She slid her shorts down her tanned legs and kicked them toward the dresser. "It's me and you against the world, right?"

Spencer nodded. She couldn't let her down.

Molly was rougher than usual, uttering words of hate and bitterness until her air was cut off and she couldn't speak at all.

Spencer waited for the gasp of air that told her Molly was okay. Then, she got up and reached for her clothes.

"What the hell, Spence? I didn't tell you to get up."

“You’re finished, and I’m not in the mood to get kicked out in ten minutes. I’m saving you the trouble.”

“That isn’t how it works.”

Spencer ignored her and continued dressing. “Molly. What’s going on? You’ve never talked about your mom during. That was weird.”

Molly stood up. “I told you the dream was stronger. I guess I needed to get it out of my head. Whatever. It’s over.” Molly straightened the comforter on her bed and rearranged the pillows, so everything looked exactly as it did when they got home.

Spencer stood in the middle of the room with her jeans in her hand and watched. The deep-purple throw pillows were the same color as the streaks on Mrs. Blackstone’s apron.

When Molly finished, she came over to where Spencer stood. “You’re right. You should get out of here. It’s getting late.”

Spencer pulled her jeans on and slipped her feet into her sneakers. She didn’t want to be here anymore than Molly wanted her. Another first. “We didn’t talk about my birthday.”

Molly leaned over and flipped her hair forward. She reached for the brush on the dresser and missed.

Spencer picked it up and put it in her hand. “Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.” Molly flipped her hair back in place and turned to Spencer. “You chose to be at the conference on your birthday, not me. Of course, if you want to do something after school tomorrow...”

“You know I have to stay after with the team to practice the presentation. That isn’t fair.” Spencer’s voice was thick with emotion. A sour taste made its way into her mouth.

Molly shrugged. “You better go.”

“Molly—”

“Molly. Molly. Molly. You sound like my mother.”

Spencer wet her lips and opened her mouth to speak. Her chin trembled. Her stomach roiled. She looked at Molly one more time, submitted to defeat, and headed for the stairs, unopened backpack in hand.

By the time she stood in front of 1393 South Washington, Spencer knew what she wanted. She pulled her phone from her pocket and found the text from Jonnie.

The tears were coming too fast and hard to see the letters on the tiny keyboard, so she hit the Call button instead.

“I want to find out the truth,” Spencer said as soon as Jonnie answered. “I want to live my own life without fear of what Molly thinks or what Lucas might do.”

“Then let’s figure out what we need to do to make that happen.” Jonnie’s voice was soft and even. “Where are you? Are you safe?”

Spencer looked at the windows of Mrs. Brahms’s home. It was early evening. The sun was out.

The curtains should be drawn.

For a moment, Spencer wondered why Mrs. Brahms left them open.

She looked for Mrs. Brahms on her front porch. The rocker was empty. Mrs. Brahms was dead.

The “For Sale” sign creaked softly as it swayed back and forth in the light breeze, announcing the death over and over again in time with Spencer’s thoughts.

Was she okay? Spencer felt the dark emptiness of the house as she contemplated her answer. No. She would never be okay again.

She felt sad way down in the pit of her stomach where concern for Jonnie and Jordan's little sister lived, where something that resembled love and also stress churned when she thought about Deja.

She wasn't okay. But unsafe? She didn't feel unsafe.

"I just left Molly's." She hiccupped on Molly's name.

"You're crying. Did she hurt you?"

Spencer could tell Jonnie was trying to stay calm and calm Spencer at the same time. Her kindness felt like a punch. "No. She—" Sobs racked Spencer's body. She bent forward, her hands on her knees, and breathed deeply in and out, in and out.

Jonnie was quiet except for her own deep breaths. In and out. In and out. When Spencer put the phone back to her ear, the two were breathing in unison. In and out. In and out. She tried again to tell Jonnie what happened. When she finally got it all out, both were quiet for several seconds.

Jonnie spoke first. Her voice now a mere whisper. "Spencer. Listen to me. This is not normal behavior. And this is not love. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"It's just—"

"It's just? isn't gonna cut it, girl. Does anyone else know about this?"

"No. I'm not allowed to tell anyone."

"Not allowed to—" It was Jonnie's turn to go mute while she thought.

"You know what I mean." Spencer's soft words barely filled the silence. "She has horrible nightmares. They scare her so much. She doesn't like to talk too much about them, because they always have her mom in them. They fight a lot. Molly only wants sex after a fight and a dream."

"What she asks you to do is not sex. You know that, girl Say you know that."

Spencer didn't, and she couldn't say she did. "Sometimes she does things to her mom in her dream and feels guilty, even though it isn't real." She told Jonnie about the time Molly showed up at her house with bloodied knees and dirty fingernails. "Her dad hit her last month. She wouldn't tell me why except it involved her mom and that she bit her. Only things like that make her need it."

"Spencer, stop." Jonnie's tone was stern but soft. "What does any of this have to do with her need for you to choke her? Seriously, girl. She bit her mom. Just think about that. I'm talkin' crazy train, here."

"You don't get it. No one gets it. That's why she needs me. She doesn't have anyone else to help her fight the dream." Spencer's words, still scarcely more than a whisper, came fast and jagged. She was no longer crying. She just stood, halfway between houses, and shook.

"She needs professional help. You're two days shy of eighteen. You're smart as shit, but what you aren't is professional help."

"Maybe I should go back."

"You said she told you to leave. She always makes you leave after."

"She did, but sometimes—"

"No. You will go to your house," Jonnie said. "Call me when you're in a safe space to talk about this more. I don't like you being in the open where she can sneak up on you talking to me."

Spencer did as she was told. After dinner, Jonnie talked to Spencer until long into the evening. When they said good night, Spencer's load felt a little lighter. She just needed to make it to graduation.

By the next day, the darkness was only a thin veil between Spencer and the world. Maybe this was what being an adult was all about. She thought about the look on Mrs. Blackstone's face yesterday and wondered if she wore a veil as well.

Molly did what Molly always does. She texted Spencer like everything was fine.

Molly: Pick you up in five.

Like nothing happened. Spencer shook her head and grabbed her backpack. Neither said a word about the previous afternoon.

Chapter Sixteen

The night before her birthday, Spencer fell asleep alternating among texts with Jordan and Jonnie and Deja. Her thumbs were tired, but her heart was full. Molly may not care about her eighteenth birthday, but her new circle of friends cared very much. Jordan even tried to get the day off so he could go with the coding club to the competition, but it didn't work out. It would be just her and Deja, which was fine with Spencer. She was looking forward to focusing on the team.

The next morning, her nose woke up before the rest of her was ready. She was dreaming of Clarian, and people of all shapes and sizes, of all genders, sitting cross-legged in a circle in Jonnie's dorm room. She was in the middle of the circle, laughing. Jonnie was reminding her that she was important and worthy of her own dreams.

She stretched. There may not be a surprise party or special escapade designed for her by Molly, but her nose told her family tradition would still be there.

Cinnamon yawned next to her. His cat breath mixed with the smell of her mom's chocolate chip pancakes and warm maple syrup. "Eww. Get away," she said, giving the cat a playful push and a quick scratch before she headed for the shower.

Today was all about pancakes for breakfast and enchiladas for dinner. Every year, for as long as either twin could remember and regardless of their monetary standing or what else the day held, their mom made sure their favorites were served on their special day. For the magical eighteen, she offered to change things up in any way they wished, but neither wanted the day to be any different. Spencer and AJ may not have much in common other than sharing April 21 as their born day, but on this they agreed. Pancakes weren't pancakes without chocolate chips, and a birthday wasn't a birthday until the last enchilada was consumed. After dinner, she and AJ would each get one gift. It would be something they had mentioned wanting some time throughout the year, usually something forgotten long before their birthday rolled around.

The ritual was the one thing Molly didn't own in Spencer's life. Any party or additional gathering was left to the girls to decide, but not this.

Molly tried to change the ritual. She thought Spencer's mom should let them have a big party and should ask each twin what they wanted specifically, but Spencer's mom put her foot down. Birthdays were for celebrating life and personalities, not for getting lost in a sea of people and being given something you already knew you were getting. Spencer told Molly she was disappointed, but secretly, she was glad her mom put her foot down.

Spencer dried quickly and slipped into black jeans and an orange, school-embossed polo. She eyed her neon-orange Chucks. That's what she wanted to wear, but the decision of the team was to wear black. She grabbed her glasses from the nightstand and pulled black high tops from the closet. She looked at the ensemble in the mirror. It was going to be a good day, whether she saw Molly or not.

She snapped a selfie and sent it to Deja.

Spencer: Who's ready to kick some coding ass? [girl with hand raised emoji]

She hit Send and followed her nose to the sweet smell of batter and chocolate. No matter where she went in the world, there would always be AJ and her mom, always listening and always making note of what she needed.

By the time Spencer made her way to the kitchen, her brother was wiping syrup off his plate with a huge forkful of chocolate chip pancakes.

“Happy born day, sis,” AJ said around a mouth full of pancakes. “Aren’t you off to impress a bunch of geek judges with your ‘teach the children all the geeky things’ app?” He made quote marks in the air as he chided her for her choice of hobby.

“Yes.” Spencer swatted at his hands as his sentence faded away. “And happy born day, jock. Aren’t your adoring fans waiting for you on the field?”

“You know they are,” AJ said. He folded both arms at the elbow and flexed his muscles. “They gotta get somma this.”

Spencer shook her head and laughed. All three of the Prices were early risers, even on the weekends, so sitting in the kitchen at five in the morning on a Saturday didn’t faze them. It was one of the reasons she and Molly never spent the night at one another’s house. Even as children, Molly was cranky early in the morning. Very cranky.

Spencer checked her phone again before laying it on the table and taking the plate of steaming wonderfulness from her mom.

“You don’t need her to be happy, you know,” AJ said.

Virginia gave him the mom look, and he shrugged. “Just sayin’.”

“It’s okay, Mom. I know. And guess what?” Spencer stabbed a pile of pancake pieces. “I’m happy. And we’re going to crush this competition, with or without Molly’s support.” She guided the dripping golden morsels into her mouth.

“Still no plans for your big day after the competition?” their mom asked before returning to the stove to retrieve the last of the pancakes.

“Nope. Molly said she didn’t want to squeeze in between Jordan and the competition, and Jordan has to work.”

AJ said something inaudible around his last mouthful of pancake.

“Huh?” Spencer and their mom asked in unison and laughed.

“All I said was Princess Molly needs to get a grip. Why do you have to wait around while she’s with Lucas, but she never wants to work around your plans?”

“Who knows. She might still show up and surprise me.”

AJ was kind enough to drop the conversation. They both knew it wasn’t going to happen.

Spencer concentrated on her plate. She was disappointed. She had asked Molly to go with her to the competition. “It would be a great present,” she had said.

All Molly said was, “Snooze fest. Not interested.”

AJ leaned toward his sister’s plate, his fork poised to attack the remaining pancake pieces.

“Don’t even think about it.” She held her fork in her fist and made a stabbing motion in the air.

Their mom reached the table with a plate for herself and an extra pancake for AJ. “Here, mister. Leave your sister’s breakfast alone.”

“Serve her right if I ate ’em. She’s the one who took so long coming down.”

Their mom chuckled. “First born, first down.” She soaked up syrup from her plate and put a bite in her mouth. “What time does the competition start, love?”

Spencer wished she had her mom's metabolism, but the first born took that, too. "Eight. The bus leaves at six forty-five."

"Wish I could be there. I know you'll do great."

AJ chimed in. "What about me? Im'ma do great, too." He made his voice whiny. His shoulder bumped Spencer's arm. "You like her better."

The three of them teased and ate. The banter soothed Spencer's nerves.

By the time AJ parked their car in the school's parking lot, Spencer had checked Snapchat and Facebook a dozen times, each time reading aloud another birthday message. The few she had were all basically the same, including the one from Molly that posted just as they arrived at the school.

Molly: Happy Birthday, BF. Hope you win today.

At least Molly remembered she was in a competition. She turned her phone dark and returned it to her pocket.

"What's up? No love notes from Molly?" AJ cut the engine and undid his seatbelt.

"Fuck you, asshole."

AJ shrugged. "I don't know why you two don't kiss and make up."

"Because we aren't fighting. She doesn't do early mornings. The end."

AJ always made jokes about her and Molly. It never bothered her before, but today it did. This competition was important. She needed to focus. "Just drop it. Okay?"

"Fine, sis. I was just kidding. I'm on your side. Remember?"

Spencer stuck her tongue out at him and headed across the parking lot to board the waiting bus.

She climbed the steps of the short activity bus and looked around for an empty seat. She made her way to the back and chose a seat in a row of two. Both seats were empty.

She eyed the door as one person after another climbed onto the bus. None of them were Deja.

Mrs. Maxwell asked the team to ride together if they could, but she didn't make it mandatory. Spencer tried to remember if Deja said whether or not she would be on the bus.

Her mind went to thoughts of an accident. Would Lucas hurt Deja if he found out she and Spencer were texting? Spencer pulled off a piece of fingernail with her teeth—realized she was biting her nails—stopped.

When the bus left the parking lot of Thatcher High, the seat next to Spencer was still empty. Spencer got out her phone and pulled up her text messages. Nothing new. She scrolled through Snapchat and Instagram and then briefly through Facebook. There were more messages from connections she never met and from family in Steamboat Springs that they rarely saw, but nothing from Deja.

She clasped her hands in her lap and focused out the window. The trees and billboards blurred outside the bus's window and lulled Spencer into a daydream state.

She and her team were accepting their first-place trophy. The audience was clapping. She felt a tickle on her fingertips, and then Deja's slender digits sliding between her own. As the announcer called out their names, Deja was squeezing her hand.

Spencer jerked herself awake when her phone buzzed between her hand and leg. The bus was five minutes out from the conference hall.

```
Deja: //Code starts Here
int age;
if(today.equals(21st April)) {
System.out.println("Happy Birthday to You!");
age++;
}
//code ends here.
```

A slow smile crossed Spencer's lip. She pressed her hands to her stomach, willing the fluttering to stop. Deja was okay, and she remembered her birthday.

The competition itself went by in a blur. There were competitors everywhere. Spencer's team huddled together around Mrs. Maxwell, who gave them additional pointers on articulation and poise. Spencer watched the other teams closely. She thought her own team's project was better than most, but there were several presentations that she couldn't deny were first-place material.

First place would mean an opportunity to learn from some of the best programmers in the United States. It would also mean a summer break in California. Spencer wanted the prize so badly she could taste it.

After everyone presented, the judges deliberated for what was only minutes but seemed like hours. Spencer held her breath when they came back into the room.

"Third place goes to the McKinley High Coders," the oldest judge said into the microphone.

Spencer let out a small amount of air. They weren't third. That was good. Very good. She leaned into Deja.

Deja leaned back.

The judge read from the paper in his hand, "Second place goes to the Thatcher High Coding Club, Denver."

Spencer stood completely still while the words and the applause reverberated through her. She fought the tears that threatened just below the surface and tried to smile at her teammates, all of whom were jumping around and high fiving Mrs. Maxwell. Spencer's legs felt like lead. She thought about what she saved throughout the year, money that would compensate for what a full scholarship didn't, but not enough to fully fund a summer in Silicon Valley. Without the first-place, all-expenses-paid program, they might as well have won nothing at all.

After the first-place winner was announced and the crowd started to thin, Deja took Spencer's hand and pulled her away from the others who were shutting down equipment and chattering about whether or not they should have taken the first-place slot. The electricity in the air and the conversations about programming and creating and winning and losing only served to make the ache in Spencer's stomach more pronounced.

She pulled her hand out of Deja's, but not before they were well away from the others. "I know. I know. I'm being a sore loser." She wasn't in the mood to get a lecture from Deja, who looked none too happy about Spencer's attitude.

Spencer didn't care.

She wanted to go home, put her headphones on, and throw her thoughts into a new theme, especially now that she needed to double her savings in a few months to be able to go to the program in Silicon Valley. Doubling her savings wasn't impossible. The last theme she floated by her team, "Love in an Apple Orchard," was already a top seller for Android devices.

Watching Deja in action today gave her an idea for something else. "Just A Girl and A Computer." She loved the title. At least she did before they lost. Now she wasn't so sure. Coming in second in a programming competition sucked. It double sucked because it was her birthday and triple sucked because no one at the competition knew she crossed the magical threshold into adulthood at precisely the moment the second-place winner was announced.

"Want to go for a ride?" Deja stood next to Spencer on the fringe of the large conference room. She said nothing about Spencer throwing her hand away or about Spencer's mood.

"Where? Who's going?" Spencer was not up for a celebration or for listening to the team talk about the thousand-dollar scholarships and Xboxes they won moments before.

Deja spoke again, this time looking straight at Spencer. "You and me."

"Where?"

"Quit asking so many questions."

"Fine."

"Is that a yes?"

Spencer shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

Deja slid her computer into her backpack and said her goodbyes to the others on their team. Spencer did the same and followed her out of the conference room, up the escalator, and through the hotel's burnt-orange-and-tan lobby. The colors matched her mood—dingy. She would probably suck at theme building right now anyway.

A few minutes shy of noon, the two girls moved together through the double doors and into the natural light.

White clouds hung in a bed of turquoise as the sun's rays melted through. Spencer cupped her hand over her eyes. "Ugh."

Deja was still ignoring her attempts at glumsville. She pointed to the old silver Civic at the far end of the blacktop. "That's mine. Come on." She reached for Spencer's hand and drug her across the blacktop.

Spencer stopped just short of the car's dented bumper. She looked around the parking lot. A small part of her expected to see Molly pop up from an adjoining parking spot.

"You okay?" Deja stopped and turned to Spencer. "We don't have to go anywhere. Seriously. I won't be mad."

"No. No. It's not that. Sorry. Losing just sucks. That's all. Let's get out of here."

Spencer eased her hand out of Deja's and crawled into the passenger seat of the Civic. Her nose involuntarily crinkled. She tried to hide the action by pushing her glasses further up on her nose. "Okay if I crack the window?"

Deja revved the engine and pushed the button to roll down all four windows. "Smells horrendous, I know. My mom is dating some creep who insists that if he blows the smoke out a crack in the window it won't smell up the car."

"It's not that bad."

Actually, it was horrible. Lately, Molly had the same smell, just fresh, like she walked past a smoker in the neighborhood. Spencer wondered if she was smoking. Spencer's mom never let her go anywhere there would be second-hand smoke. As a nurse, it was one of her things. Spencer tried to push her mom out of her head and the smell out of her nose.

Deja drove south down Broadway, away from the conference center. They went past businesses, but not the kind either girl was likely to frequent. A seamstress, a tax office, a bar. At Alameda Avenue, Deja turned west.

Spencer stretched her legs and crossed them at the ankles. She rubbed her palms along the front of her jeans. "Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"You'll see."

"I'm not big on surprises. Just sayin'."

Deja seemed to think that over for a moment. She took her eyes off the road for a brief second to look at Spencer's face. She bit her lip. "I can't tell if you're serious."

"I am, actually," Spencer said. "I've never been good at not knowing. My brother loves surprises. Drives my mom crazy."

"What? That he loves them or that you don't?"

"Both." Spencer chuckled. "Mostly having twins who can't agree on anything. He's older by two minutes. And he's a guy. A football-playing guy. He thinks it's important to remind me that he's in charge, usually by jumping out from behind something when I think I'm alone."

"Makes me happy to be an only child," Deja said.

"I don't know. He helped me get through my dad leaving. And my mom works weird hours, so it's okay to have someone around."

Deja pushed one shoulder up. "I like being alone. I hate it when my mom brings people into our house."

Spencer thought she saw an actual shudder go through Deja. "So, where are we going?"

"We're going to Ship Rock."

Spencer felt her cheeks push up a millisecond before her face broke out in a huge grin. To hell with both of their families' drama. Deja was taking her to one of her favorite places.

Deja looked back and forth quickly between the road and her passenger. "It's Saturday. The sun is out. That's reason enough to head for the hills, yes?" She grinned, obviously happy with herself.

"Yes." Spencer drew out the word. "It totally is." She relaxed against the warm fake leather. According to a text a few minutes prior, Molly just started her shopping extravaganza with some of the people she and Lucas hung with. She didn't mention the competition, and Spencer didn't bother telling her they came in second. The less Molly wanted to text today, the better. "It totally is."

"I know ending up in second place was shittier because of the day." Deja gave a crooked smile.

Spencer loved the dimple that formed at the bottom of Deja's cheek when she gave that grin. "It is what it is. Is that why you asked me to come?"

"It's a warm spring day, and I just wanted to hang out with you on a flat rock. I think you're pretty rad, in case my texts didn't hint enough. So there." Deja breathed deeply into her nose and out of her mouth. She was full-face smiling, now.

Deja wasn't the only one. The smile on Spencer's face was stretched so far from side to side that her cheeks ached. When she texted Deja last week, she mentioned skipping school to lay on a flat, heated rock when she needed to be away from the world. She never thought Deja would

remember. She remembered. And she planned an afternoon for the two of them in the very area Spencer mentioned had the best flat rocks.

Spencer reveled in the fact that Deja thought about what Spencer loved and acted on that information. It occurred to her that, in nine years, Molly never once suggested they go to the mountains to be alone. She forced thoughts of Molly out of her head and focused on Deja. “Thanks.”

“You do still like flat rocks, yes?” Deja’s voice held a teasing lilt.

Spencer had a keen sense of her own heartbeat. “More than you know.”

The rest of the drive was spent in easy conversation that explored their differences and connections. Unlike Spencer, who had never been outside of Colorado except to visit family in Indiana a time or two, Deja had lived all over.

“Part of the deal when your dad’s in the service,” she said. “Before he left, we were scheduled to move again, from Missouri to North Carolina. But then my parents decided he was going to go alone.”

“My dad bailed when we were eight,” Spencer said. “He showed up for us until he remarried. Then they had kids and we ceased to exist.”

“Sucks. No other kids for my old man, but he was never one for being around anyway. We were only in Missouri for about six months.”

“I’ve been right here since birth.” Spencer shrugged. “It’s good to be in familiar territory. I can’t imagine moving that much. And my room. God. I couldn’t leave my room.”

“Yeah. You get used to it, I guess. My mom’s sister and brother and their families all live in Denver. My mom was born in Golden. So, when things fell apart, we packed what we could fit in a moving truck and here we are. I like being here, now. I won’t lie.”

There was that smile again. Spencer wondered what it would be like to kiss her, and then she got mad at herself for thinking it. On the bus ride to the competition, she worried that even a few texts back and forth put Deja in danger. Now she was watching dimples and contemplating a kiss. “You and your mom get along?”

“I guess, yeah,” Deja said. “I mean, we don’t really fight or anything like you hear ’bout in some families. She does get too clingy sometimes. Why?”

“No reason. Just when you were talking about the smoke in your car, it sounded like maybe there was some animosity.”

“Nah. I’m not keen on the boyfriend, but I get it. My mom is picking the opposite of my dad. Who can blame her for that? New dude is nice enough, just a jerk about smoking wherever he wants.”

Spencer nodded and leaned forward in her seat. The smell of the red dirt as the car tires churned up dust brought her senses back into harmony. She closed her eyes and took a long slow breath. “I love it here.”

They were quiet as the car climbed the final few yards to the amphitheater.

Deja pulled into one of the large parking areas nestled between two mammoth red rocks. Ship Rock was just to the south of the Red Rocks Amphitheatre. Spencer’s dad used to take the family to Red Rocks Park when she and AJ were small. On the other side of the theatre, Creation Rock was equally as majestic but not as fun. After all, what can ever be as fun as a rock larger than Niagara Falls that’s shaped like a ship?

The waft of the warm heat rolling off the red stones smelled like clay. For Spencer, that was the smell of carefree childhood.

“You hungry?” Deja was already out of the car and moving toward the red stones.

Spencer followed suit. “Starving. Ship Rock Grill is good.” She pointed toward the Amphitheatre. “Deck has ridiculous views.”

The two headed up the dirt hill toward the building constructed around two massive boulders. Spencer talked between puffs of air. “I saw my first concert here in 2010. Vampire Weekend. With. My. Mom.” She left off the part about Molly being with them.

“Really? You like Vampire Weekend?”

“Um, yeah. You don’t?”

“I do, but a lot of people say they’re the whitest of the white privileged Ivy-Leaguers who made it by stealing from foreign musicians.”

“That’s stupid and obviously said by people who don’t know their heritages or background. Anyway, I love them.”

“Ditto. Sucks Rostam isn’t with them anymore.” Deja poked her elbow into Spencer’s arm.

Spencer poked back. She was impressed that Deja wasn’t the least bit out of breath, nor was she the least bit put off by Spencer’s statement. Most people who were not from Colorado struggled with the altitude. And most teenagers struggle with admitting they went to concerts with their parents, even if it was when they were eleven.

“You should have heard them here,” Spencer said. “This place has perfect acoustics.”

“I can see that, for sure.” Deja paused midstride, pivoted on one foot, and came to rest next to Spencer. “Selfie?”

Ship Rock was directly behind them. Deja played with the angle, stretching her arm way out in front of them, trying to get as much of the rock as possible. It wasn’t working. Her arms were too short.

Both girls were giggling when Spencer took the phone from Deja and extended her arm. The two moved their heads closer together until their cheeks touched. Spencer tapped the screen with her thumb several times as the two of them smiled, stuck out their tongues, and laughed.

“Let me see.” Deja put her hand over Spencer’s and pulled the phone toward her. Spencer’s hands were so much bigger than Deja’s. Spencer’s hands were long with round, short appendages, where Deja’s were small with slender, perfectly formed fingers.

Her tiny hand guided Spencer’s. The warmth of Deja’s palm felt good. Spencer thought about turning her hand inward and wrapping her fingers around Deja’s. And then she was nine again, Molly’s palm against hers as they walked toward school together, two young girls unaware there was anything wrong with the feeling of love and contentment that came with the warmth and dampness of two sets of fingers intertwined.

Damn it.

She left her palm against the back of the phone.

Deja didn’t pull away. Instead, she moved closer to Spencer’s side as the two looked at the shots.

“We’re marvelous, darling,” Deja said in her best, seductive, Fernando Lamas voice.

“You look marvelous. Me? I look ridiculous.” Spencer swiped back to the picture of the two of them, eyes squinty, tongues pointy, cheeks puffy. “How can you still look good with your tongue sticking out like that?” She turned her head to face Deja. “You’re pretty adorable, you know.”

“You’re pretty damn adorable yourself.” Deja squeezed Spencer’s hand and tilted the screen even closer to eye level. She swiped forward to one of them laughing. “See that? That’s some beautiful shit, right there.”

Spencer started to say something about her bulbous body being out of place next to the soft petite lines of Deja's body, but the look on Deja's face stopped her. She could tell that she meant what she said about the two of them being beautiful together. A feeling unlike anything Spencer experienced before nestled into her and beat alongside her heart.

She moved her free hand upward until her fingers rested on Deja's cheek. With the barest of pressure, she turned Deja to her.

Spencer leaned in and down, watching Deja's eyes until it got awkward, watching for signs of fear. Deja met her halfway, lips dizzyingly warm.

Deja's fingers curled around the fabric of Spencer's T-shirt near the middle of her back. She opened her mouth slightly. Spencer's tongue found Deja's and circled it. They were both breathing fast. Spencer felt puffs of air from Deja's nose on her cheek. The position of their bodies was awkward, and Spencer was super aware that they weren't alone on the rocks. After only a few seconds, she pulled away. "Sorry. I—"

Deja shifted her body to be directly in front of Spencer. She touched Spencer's lips with her finger to silence her. "Shhh. Don't ruin it."

Spencer bobbed her head once. She felt Deja's hand cup the back of her neck. The grip was tender but firm. And then their foreheads were pressed together. Unlike when Molly did this to her, when Deja did it, it made her feel safe, wanted, warm.

Two hours ago, life sucked. Now, it seemed the most perfect place of all.

"I don't know what happened in your past, but here..." Deja's thumb moved from the side of Spencer's neck to her cheek. "Here you never have to be sorry for obeying your gut. Got it?"

Spencer's nod moved both of their heads and their foreheads bumped. The two erupted into a fit of laughter. She liked this side of Deja. Not too serious like when she was in coding club or too grandiose like in the SPECTRUM club, but thoughtful and playful.

Spencer jumped onto a large flat rock. Her shoulders pulled up in a shrug. "My gut says feed me, and so I must obey!"

Deja reached for her hand and pulled her down, still laughing. "Screw you, smart-ass. Come on. I'll race you to the food."

"You're on." Spencer pulled her hand from Deja's and jumped from the far side of the rock. It gave her a two feet head start.

"Cheater!" Deja's voice was right behind her.

When Spencer reached the flat walkway that led into the restaurant, she stopped. She leaned forward and put her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath. She was embarrassed at how happy she was to be with this tiny, witty girl.

Deja came up behind Spencer and grabbed her playfully around the waist. "You win. This time."

They walked side by side into the café and settled into a booth next to a huge painting of a dinosaur with multiple bony plates on its back. The silver plaque underneath the painting told the girls it was a Stegosaurus, a genus of Thyreophoran dinosaur, from the Late Jurassic period. Deja seemed mesmerized by the photo and by the others scattered around the eatery.

Spencer was mesmerized by the childlike wonder in Deja's eyes. It reminded her of the looks on the faces of the ten- to twelve-year-old campers, including herself, when she and Molly attended summer camp here seven years ago. She didn't want the week to end back then, just like she didn't want the day to end today. She didn't want to drive back into reality where she couldn't relax into the joy of moments spent with someone who wanted nothing from her but time. It might just be her favorite birthday ever.

After they ordered burgers and fries and the waitress returned with their drinks, Spencer pointed back to the painting and asked, “Can we maybe drive over to Dinosaur Ridge after?” She hoped she wasn’t overstepping. She wanted to show Deja where she camped, to have her experience the feeling of the fragility and smallness of human life that she felt when she put her own tiny foot into the allosaurus tracks left millions of years ago by thirty-nine- or forty-foot-long lizards that ate stegosaurus for dinner.

She knew it was the right question when the small smile that was plastered to Deja’s face suddenly made the corners of her eyes crinkle and her dimples deepen.

Deja leaned forward, her chest resting against the edge of the table. “I’ve never seen a real dinosaur footprint.” After she smiled at the words, she sat up straight in the booth and wiggled slightly back and forth. Her excitement was palpable. “Let’s. Yes. Please.”

Spencer wanted to look at her forever. What she was feeling was different than anything she felt before—freeing, not constricting, like she was being invited to bring her real self to the table.

Spencer pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and played with the skin with her tongue.

After the first summer camp at Dinosaur Ridge, Spencer wanted to go back the next year. Molly said no. She thought they were too old, that the camp was for little kids. Spencer agreed. She didn’t want Molly to think she was a little kid. Molly never visited the ridge again, and Spencer only visited it when her mom made her because they had company who wanted to come or secretly when she came up alone to sunbathe on a hot red rock.

Now this person sitting across from her, this person who was the same age as she was, this person who called her Chloe because she wanted her to, was excited to be here, excited to be here with her, and she had yet to put her foot into a dinosaur footprint.

“Seriously? Never?” Spencer pointed to the stegosaurus. “That guy was first discovered here. I guess that’s why his picture’s on the wall.”

The waitress returned with their burgers. When she was satisfied the girls had what they needed, she moved away to tend to other guests, and Spencer continued to tell Deja about the dinosaur on the wall.

Deja swallowed a huge bite of hamburger and washed it down with a long draw of soda. “I guess it’s all old news to you, huh?”

For a moment, Spencer was afraid she said too much. She wanted to share what she learned over the years, not make Deja feel like she shouldn’t want to be here. She almost apologized, but she noticed Deja’s smile didn’t fade at all. Spencer relaxed back into the story. “It never gets old, really.” She popped a fry into her mouth. “I’ve always loved everything about this area, including these guys.” She moved her head to indicate she was talking about the dinosaur.

Deja reached across the table and squeezed Spencer’s hand. “Show me your world, Chloe. I want it. All of it.”

Spencer felt a tinge of shame as she looked at the sincerity in Deja’s eyes. There was so much she couldn’t share. She thought about Jordan. Deja must question why she kissed her when her boyfriend was at work back in the city. And what about Molly? The two of them had talked very little about Molly when they texted. She felt the need to tell Deja everything. The feeling was fleeting, though. Spencer needed to think only about the way she felt right now. The rest was too hard.

Soon, they were walking the trails around Dinosaur Ridge.

“Hey, Chloe. Why can’t you hear a pterodactyl using the bathroom?” Deja pointed to the sign indicating that a pterodactyl took its last steps on what was now this sloping land.

“I don’t know. Because they’re dead?”

“No. Because the ‘P’ is silent.”

“You’re stupid,” Spencer said, but the words were barely audible she was giggling so hard.

It wasn’t until Spencer was waving to Deja as she pulled away from the curb in front of Spencer’s house that she realized two things. For the second time in a month, her cheeks hurt from laughing and, today, her phone hadn’t been out of her pocket since Dinosaur Ridge. The first thought made her stomach tingle in a good way, the second made it tingle in reverse.

Molly didn’t like her to go that long without texting.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and checked her messages. None from Molly since two o’clock when Spencer decided to text about the team placing second and Molly responded with a few words about how she should have just not gone so she wouldn’t have been disappointed.

The reverse tingles grew more intense.

She looked toward Molly’s house and up to her second-story window. There didn’t seem to be any movement.

Her nerves stabilized a bit as she went inside and was greeted by the smell of cheese enchiladas.

“Happy eighteen, sis!” AJ’s voice traveled from the kitchen. “In here.”

Spencer made her way through the living and dining areas and the arched doorway. “It smells amazing!”

Virginia turned from the stove. “How about you wash your hands and help your brother set the table. Enchiladas in ten.”

Over the next hour and a half, Spencer didn’t think about anything except her little family and the love she felt when she was with them. When the presents were opened and the kitchen cleaned, Spencer asked to be excused to go hook up her new ultra-wide screen monitor, but not before she tried to express her gratitude to her mom. “This is too much. I love it, but—”

“But nothing. AJ pointed it out to me in the store one day, said his geeky sister was drooling over it.”

It was expensive, something she planned on buying herself one day, not something she expected her mom to buy. “AJ has a big mouth.” She shoved her shoulder into him. “Thank you, Mom. Seriously. I cannot think of a single thing I would rather have.”

The second monitor looked great on her desk.

She snapped a picture and sent it to Deja and then to Jordan. She thought for a second and then sent it to Jonnie, too.

Spencer: I might have the best mom ever.

[Computer monitor emoji. Heart emoji. Birthday cake emoji]

Jordan: Looks like something you would love, dork. [Cry laughing emoji]

Spencer: And proud of it. [string of cry laughing emojis]

Jordan: Good day?

Spencer wasn't sure how much to say. She and Deja didn't talk about Jordan or about what they would and wouldn't share. As if on cue, Deja popped in.

Deja: My what big monitors you have.

Spencer: The better to see you with, my dear. [eyeballs emoji]

Spencer turned back to Jordan's question.

Spencer: Excellent day. Even if we came in second. Deja and I hung out after.

Jordan: Get it, girl. [Whistle emoji]

Spencer: You sound just like your sister. [Cry laughing emoji]

Jordan: Apple [tree emoji] You know.

Spencer: Are you okay with this?

Jordan: It complicates things. I'm good, though.

Jordan: We've got this.

Spencer: Except I will have to tell Deja about us.

Spencer: Our arrangement.

Jordan: Yeah. I guess. Not yet. Let's talk.

Spencer: Agreed.

Jordan: [smiley face emoji]

Spencer: I'm beat. Gonna get some [Zzz emoji]

Deja added two new messages before Spencer texted again.

Deja: Can't wait to see you again. [dinosaur emoji. Monitor emoji. Hamburger emoji]

Deja: Sorry. Too much?

Spencer thought about all the things she wanted to say, all the things she couldn't say, all the complications and roadblocks.

Spencer: No. Not too much. I was texting Jordan and Jonnie, too.

Deja: Ah. Okay. So, not too much?

Spencer: Nope.

Deja: Did you tell Jordan?

Spencer stared at the screen. She didn't expect that question tonight. She started a response. Erased it. Started again. Erased. Deja would see her bouncing dots and know she was typing. Shit.

Spencer: Didn't want to say anything in text. Plus, not sure what's up.

Deja: With us? With this? You know what's up.

Deja: But it's cool.

Deja: Whatever you need.

Spencer: Let's talk tomorrow.

Deja: [Thumbs up emoji]. Sweet dreams, Chloe.

Chapter Seventeen

The night was filled with dreams. Dinosaur prints were overlaid with Deja's soft facial features. When Spencer tried to touch Deja's dimple with her finger, the face melted into the red clay and rebirthed as Molly. Then the prints evaporated, and Molly stood in front of her screaming about love and hate and abandonment. Spencer begged Molly to understand, but Molly screamed louder, repeating, "You left me alone to fight the dream. This is all your fault. All your fault. Your fault."

The repetitive screams woke her. Her body trembled. Cinnamon meowed and curled close. "It's okay, buddy. It was just a dream." She stroked his fur. It was damp from tears she didn't realize she shed. "Sorry, little dude." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand before reaching for her glasses and settling them on her nose. If the first few minutes were any indication, it was going to be a long day.

She stretched her arm across Cinnamon one more time and grabbed her phone.

Eight twenty. That was late for her, even on the weekend.

Two missed messages. Both came through around three in the morning.

Deja: I think you could be an integral part of my project life cycle.

Spencer laughed out loud.

Cinnamon leaped up and looked at his owner like she was crazy.

Spencer laughed louder. "Right, Cinnamon? I'm totally losing my mind." She moved to the next text message.

Deja: You must be tired because you've been streaming through my RSS feed all night.

As she read, the dream and the first few minutes of her morning disappeared, and thoughts of Deja filled her senses.

"Oh, Cinnamon, this one is not gonna go quietly into the dark night."

She looked at the texts again. No one ever got her like this. She wanted Deja to know they were good without committing to anything that would get either or both of them in trouble. She scratched Cinnamon's ear. "What would you write, boy?"

Cinnamon stretched his legs far in front of his body and yawned.

"Thanks. You're a big help."

She stopped scratching the feline. "Screw it. I deserve a few minutes of freedom and happiness."

She took a deep breath.

Spencer: Are you an applet?

Spencer: Cause you make me feel all GUI inside.

She chuckled at her own ability to flirt using the programming language both girls adored. She clicked away from Deja and to four missed messages from Molly. None of them made her laugh.

Molly: Up? Sorry I didn't plan a blow-out 18.

Molly: I've got a surprise.

Molly: Hey, come on. Where are you? Come over.

Her whole being wanted to pretend the only thing in the world was a stream of nerdy coding messages between two nerdy coders. She also wished she could take back the last message she sent to Deja. She knew better than to invite the woman into her world, but it was too late. She read the last message.

Molly: I need you. Don't do this. I want to make it up to you.

Maybe none of this was tied to Molly. Maybe Lucas was the mastermind. Maybe he was behind everything. She checked for a response from Deja. Nothing. She was probably still sleeping. She wished she wasn't.

"Cinn, this is a mess, dude." She picked the orange tabby up and held him close to her chest. His fur tickled her chin. She snuggled her face deeper into his fur. "Why do I have to care?"

She felt the purr rumbling deep inside Cinnamon's chest.

"I love you, too, Cinn. I wish human love was this easy."

Spencer sat like that for several minutes.

Cinnamon didn't move to get away. He dangled from Spencer's hand until she eased him into her lap.

She loved Molly. She couldn't deny it, not even to herself. But the love was different now. When she put it up against what she felt with Deja, it seemed flat.

Spencer considered her options. She was still tired from the two-mile trek around Dinosaur Ridge followed by an evening celebration with her mom and AJ. A milkshake and laughter with Deja sounded like the perfect Sunday, but she was eighteen now, an adult, and adults didn't make excuses or evade their responsibilities. Molly was her best friend, and until they sorted all of this out, she needed to remember that. She would go to Molly's, and the two of them would spend the day together.

She eased Cinnamon into the crease of her arm and refocused on the phone.

She read Molly's words again and typed her response.

Spencer: Give me an hour.

Spencer: Birthday celebration with mom and AJ kept me up late.

Molly: See you in < forty. [smiley emoji]

Spencer tossed the phone to the end of the bed, disengaged from her pet, and made her way to the bathroom.

She dressed carefully and with Molly in mind. If they were going to be able to get through this, Spencer knew it was going to take both being calm and making sure Molly knew she was still the most important person in Spencer's life. She chose a vintage-inspired Led Zeppelin cut-off tank over a purple sports bra and loose denim jeans that sat low enough on her hips to show off a turquoise Tomboy-X band. She eyed the row of sneakers in her closet for the right match for today's outfit. She settled on neon-green high tops. Molly was right, neon colors did compliment the deep brown of her skin.

Twenty minutes after checking her look in the mirror, Spencer was knocking on Molly's front door. She was afraid Molly would read her mind and the world would implode. It didn't. Instead, Molly told her how nice she looked and bounded up the stairs with Spencer close behind.

Spencer fell out of formation once inside the room and dropped onto the settee closest to the door. Something felt off, but whatever it was stayed just outside Spencer's grasp. She let her eyes travel the room. The far wall of windows looked out at 1393 South Washington. When she was younger, Spencer fell asleep to thoughts of herself and Molly, each looking out their respective windows toward 1393. Back then, she envisioned a power to cloak the house between 1391 and 1395 with an invisibility blanket, making everything between them disappear. She told Molly's mom one day, who thought it was the best super power she could imagine.

Wait. Molly's mom.

That's what was wrong.

"Molly, where's your mom?"

Molly shrugged. "Her room, I guess. Who cares?"

Spencer gazed at Molly, who perched against the white desk with the scalloped edges. Molly looked like a young princess. Stuffed animals overflowed the hutch, adding to the sweetness of the scene. Spencer herself added fifteen or twenty to the collection of fluff over the years of their friendship. Most of the rest were from Molly's mom and dad.

There were exactly three from Lucas. A large pink bear won at last year's fair; a lavender bear with a white tummy and a soda with two straws embroidered in the middle; and a purple stuffed tabby cat with a tag that said her name was Molly. Spencer hated that one the most.

"Shouldn't she be in the kitchen?" Mrs. Blackstone was always in the kitchen on Sunday. She started baking and prepping as soon as Mr. Blackstone left for his downtown office and stayed there until dinner was served. At a little before ten, there should be sweet smells wafting through the house.

"Why the sudden interest in where my mom is? Did you forget she doesn't belong to you?"

It was an old argument. Molly hated her mom, but she didn't want to share her with anyone else. "I'm not saying she belongs to me. I just didn't see her. I usually do. That's it. Can we not fight? It's my birthday weekend."

“Whatever. I’m not fighting, just saying. I’m sure you’ll see her on your way out. Do you want to talk about what I did for you, or what?” Molly’s face contorted into a scowl unbecoming a princess.

“I just...never mind. It doesn’t matter.” Spencer reminded herself that she was here to make things better, not worse. The small, deep-purple couch where she sat held two, fuzzy, white throw pillows, one at each end. She scooted sideways until her hip tucked up against one. Her limbs were twitchy and restless. “So, what’s the surprise?” Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat.

Molly opened the desk drawer. “Wait and see.”

Spencer didn’t have to see Molly’s eyes to understand the excitement in her voice. She relaxed against the fluff of white and waited.

Molly looked over her shoulder, her hand resting on whatever was in the drawer. She smiled. “We’re going to be okay, Spence. You’re my girl. I promise.”

“I know. We always are.” For the briefest of moments, the world was right again.

Except it wasn’t. Spencer tried to push the burn of Deja’s lips, the stroke of her tongue, the graze of her fingertips, to the back of her mind.

This was the plan. Searching for answers was the plan. Maybe, just maybe, if Spencer tried hard enough, things could go back to the way they used to be when it was just her and Molly against the world.

Jordan’s words snuck in to remind her that Molly signed the IOU for one hundred dollars. Molly said she wanted to be rid of Spencer. Molly and Lucas.

She tried to focus on Molly. She was leaning forward, back straight. Her pale-pink tights hugged her thighs, making the muscles in her thin legs more pronounced. Spencer loved her legs, her ass, her back. She swallowed.

As if she could read Spencer’s mind, Molly said, “Should I stay here like this?” She flexed up onto her toes and back down. “Or do you want to see the surprise?”

For a moment Molly’s teasing erased the pain, and the past months melted away.

“Can I have a minute to decide? Or three?” Spencer asked.

Molly tilted her head sideways and looked farther over her shoulder. Her eyes glinted like a young child who just learned she was getting a puppy for Christmas.

She tilted her head back and swung her hair in the pretty girl way. Spencer wanted to get up and go to her. She wanted to disappear into her smells and sounds, the strawberries and graham cracker smells that always made her forget the world. The air in the room was warm. Being here with Molly, Spencer couldn’t help but feel the tug of old feelings, the same feelings she knew Lucas had for Molly.

Lucas. Just the thought of his name and Spencer was back in the world where Molly was the center of attention because she was beautiful, and Spencer was clinging for dear life for the few crumbs that were thrown her way.

Focus. This is about today, about one relationship. “What’s the surprise?” Spencer asked. She sat forward slightly to get a better view of what Molly was pulling from the drawer.

It was *The Book of Promises*.

Molly turned. Her face beamed. Her lip quivered.

Spencer would follow that quiver anywhere.

“Wait ’til you see,” Molly said. She moved with purpose across the wood floor until she was directly in front of Molly. She offered the book like a medal of honor to be cherished.

Part of Spencer wanted to reach out and accept the offer as an acknowledgment that everything was alright. The other part of her refused.

She offered Molly a tiny smile.

Molly knelt between Spencer's legs and balanced the book on Spencer's lap. "Look. Look what I did for you."

Spencer pushed a strand of hair from Molly's cheek and tucked it behind her ear. "Our book?"

"Our book. You and me, Spence. Always. Remember?"

Spencer did remember. She felt like a real girlfriend when Molly talked to her in her soft old-Molly voice. She wanted to wind her fingers in Molly's hair, to trace a strand of blonde from the crown of Molly's head to its tip. She hated herself for wanting it, for wanting the world to stop in this minute. "Molly. We need to talk about all of this." She tucked her hands under her thighs to keep them from following her desire. Spencer had never been anyone's girlfriend, certainly not Molly's. Molly made that very clear.

Molly opened the book to the first page. She looked up at Spencer as if to say, "Do you like it?" She didn't acknowledge Spencer's request to talk.

The book felt heavy. Spencer wanted to slip out from under its weight. She didn't like it. In fact, it made her feel antsy and strange—like something was wrong, but she couldn't remember what. She blinked slowly, letting her eyelids block out the page while she fought against the tiny pinprick in the back of her mind. Even with her eyes closed, everything was drifting.

Spencer opened her eyes and looked down at the open book. The page that withstood the pressure of a red marker was gone. In its place was a new page, a page created to renew the dream of two innocent nine-year-old girls. Molly did a good job recreating the wavy curves of a fourth grader. *Buy 1393 South Washington St.*

"Why, Moll? Why? We can't keep doing this." Spencer pushed the book forward until it met the resistance of Molly's chest. Everything was heavy—the book, Lucas, Jordan, Deja, all of it. She swallowed the lump that edged up her throat. Her head spun. She turned away from Molly, pretending to adjust the white fuzzy pillow.

"Doing what, Spence? Are you okay?" Molly's voice was that of a sad, compassionate, nine-year-old child. "Look at it. I fixed it."

Spencer knew she meant it. Molly was like a child who still believed there was a way to turn back the hands of time.

"You're shivering, Spence. Stop. What's wrong?"

"I'm fine," Spencer said. "Just, you can't fix it like this, Molly. No matter how much you want to. Not this time."

Molly pushed hard against the book, held it tight against the soft folds of Spencer's stomach.

Spencer's breath steadied. The pain of the sharp edges shattered the boundaries of their world. For a moment, everything looked different. Completely flat. Colorless. She looked around the room. It was like looking at a photograph faded from years of too much sunlight. The vibrancy of their past was no more. The secrets of their relationship seeped out, and they could never be hidden again. She wanted to forgive Molly. She did. But fear rumbled in her stomach, gnawing words of forgiveness until they were mere puffs of air incapable of making their way to the surface.

She repeated what she knew was true. "You can't fix it, Molly. We can't fix it." She pressed her palm against Molly's cheek to lessen the blow, to let her know she still cared. The words lingered between them, sinking deep into their skin. "You've changed. We've changed."

Molly shook free from Spencer's palm. She shoved the book deeper into the folds of flesh and then released it. Again. And again.

Nine-year-old Molly was gone.

Spencer's stomach clenched, loosened, clenched, and loosened to the rhythm of the pain. She didn't say anything. She didn't move.

"I changed?" Molly screamed the question as she dug into her best friend's flesh. Her entire being simmered red. "You fucking changed." The eyes that now looked up at Spencer were seething orbs of hate. "You're just like AJ. You lead me on and then tell me it's all in my head. Well, screw you both."

Spencer waited until Molly's thrusts slowed and then stopped. She steadied her voice before she spoke. "I don't know what happened that night with you and AJ, but there's one thing I do know. I've never led you anywhere, Molly. You didn't even call to wish me a happy birthday, or ask me how the competition went. Why? What did I do that was so horrible that you're treating me this way?"

"You want shit I can't give you. You want me to love you—like that. You know your asshole brother told me he couldn't think about me like that because of you. Because of fucking you. What the actual fuck, Spencer? You ruin everything. I can't have people thinking I'm gay." Molly looked down at the book, but she didn't resume the attack.

Anxiety that had been churning in her stomach crawled up Spencer's throat. She wanted to float out of her skin and away to anywhere that wasn't here. "But you ask for it. It isn't like..."

"Isn't like what?" Molly was a different person. Her words spewed from her mouth. She stood and stared down at Spencer. "What you do for me is a service. Nothing more. You're supposed to be my best friend. It's about pushing out the demons, so I can live in this ugly world." Her pure, articulate fury filled the room, making the air humid, hard to breathe.

"Ugly? Molly, I don't understand. You have a good life. We have a good life. What if we were gay? Would that be horrible?"

Molly reached down and yanked Spencer's head backward by her hair. "Don't you ever ask me again. Do you hear me? Never. My life isn't good. You know where my mom is, Spencer? Hiding in her room like a little mouse. She thinks she can control me. She can't. Neither can you."

Spencer held Molly's gaze. Her insides pounded in fear. Molly had been bad before, but not like this. "Okay. You're right. There are things that aren't perfect. I won't mention any of this again." She closed the book softly and held it out to Molly. "My gift is perfect. Thank you for redoing the page." She hoped Molly would take it. She needed to get herself into a standing position. She was too vulnerable trapped against the purple and white of Molly's room.

Molly shoved the book out of Spencer's hands. It slammed to the floor and echoed, like time was bouncing off itself. It came to rest under the edge of Molly's bed, barely visible beyond the purple folds of ruffles.

Spencer swallowed around the fear in her throat. If she stayed calm, Molly might deescalate. At least that's what the past indicated.

She focused on controlling her own breaths. In through her nose. Out through her mouth. She stayed attentive to Molly and the tone of her words. "Come on, Molly. I didn't mean anything bad. I know that you're with Lucas. I'm with Jordan. I just don't care if people talk, I guess. That's all." She needed to get the rage in Molly's eyes to subside. She had done it before. "I'm here because I missed you. You know that. I'm pleased with my gift. You always know just what to give me."

Molly kicked Spencer's shoe hard. "You're here because Lucas and Jordan are working on some stupid project. Not because of me. You don't care about me anymore. Lucas says you've moved on. Did you move on, Spencer?" She kicked again. Harder this time.

Spencer didn't flinch.

Sadness seeped through the anger in Molly's eyes.

Spencer took advantage of the show of weakness. "You texted, and I came, Molly. I will always come." Spencer sat forward until she could reach Molly's cheek with her fingertips. "I'm here because I love you. I love you—not in that way, but like I always have. You and me. Nothing between us, right?" Her hand trembled against Molly's soft skin.

"You're shaking." Molly's voice changed again.

Spencer let out a breath. The cycle seemed to be almost over. The anger was gone. Only sadness remained.

Molly lowered herself until she was again kneeling between Spencer's legs. She put her hand over Spencer's. "I don't want you to be afraid. I just get so crazy when you aren't here. You're the only one who can stop the thoughts. Sometimes I dream I'm devouring you, consuming you so we really are never apart."

Their eyes locked and held in an unwavering stare that left Spencer feeling naked before her. She told Molly she loved her, and Molly had ignored it. Again. How was it possible to feel desperate for an acknowledgment of love and desperate to get away from the person who would never love you? "Are you having the dream again?"

Molly nodded. "And you weren't here."

"I'm here now. It's okay. It's okay." Spencer eased her hand from Molly's cheek and into her hair. She raked her fingers through Molly's blond strands and watched them fall back into place. One strand stuck to a single line of wetness on Molly's cheek. It reminded Spencer of so many times before when the two of them argued, so many times when Molly cycled through happiness, anger, sadness, sorrow. She tried to remember if there was ever more than a solitary tear. Even as children, she couldn't remember a single time.

Molly touched Spencer's lips and ran her fingers down to her chin, putting a finger on each side and squeezing. She held Spencer's face close to her own. "Don't leave me."

"I won't." Spencer braced for what came next. Molly would lock her bedroom door, lead her to the bed. She would undress and instruct Spencer to do the same, or not, or somewhere in between.

"Make it go away. Make me go away." Molly let go of her chin and reached for Spencer's hand.

"Wait." Spencer let her hand rest in Molly's, but she stayed firmly seated.

"Come on, Spence. My mom is going to want us—"

Spencer cut through Molly's words. "I don't want to be a service, Molly."

Molly let go of Spencer's hand and thrust her body forward until Spencer was pressed tightly against the back of the soft, purple cushions.

When Molly kissed her, it was like she was trying to inhale her, to suck out her soul. Spencer was no longer in her own body. She let the pressure of the kiss, the pressure of desire and anger, absorb her. She wanted Molly to tell her that she loved her. Just once. If Molly admitted it, Spencer could fight for it.

What you do for me is a service.

To Spencer, nothing was more genuine than her love for Molly. Now she knew what was happening wasn't love. It hurt. It made her shake. Friendship or more, it should not feel like this. Yet even in her fury and knowledge, she felt helpless against it.

A service. Nothing more.

Molly's words ping-ponged through her head. Every time the words reverberated, she cringed. The pressure of Molly's lips didn't feel soft or gentle or kind. Her fingers were digging into the flesh on Spencer's shoulder blades like a warning. It felt like the dance of hunter and prey—adrenaline-filled but scary and full of wrath. Spencer pulled her head back as far as the couch would allow and turned it away from Molly. She was breathless and weak. She was something else, too. Determined to put an end to the cycle.

"No," she said. She turned her head back toward Molly until their eyes met and held. "I don't want to do this anymore." The anger was crawling back into Molly's eyes. Spencer didn't give in. "I don't like it, Molly. I don't like watching the breath go out of you and not knowing if it's coming back."

Molly was on her feet before the last sentence was complete. She looked down at Spencer. "Don't like it? Don't even fucking try. You like anything that lets you touch me. You're a pervert. Not me."

Spencer swallowed. She pushed herself to a forward-sitting position. "Having sex while I strangle you isn't fun for me. Just because you turn me on doesn't mean I like that part of what we do."

"It isn't sex." The last word contorted Molly's face.

"Molly, it's sex. We have sex. We've had sex for three years."

Molly's face was crimson. Her body electric. Spencer could feel it. She knew their friendship would never be the same. She wasn't thinking about Jordan, or Deja, or even about the well-being of Jasmine or of herself. She wanted to hear Molly confess that with or without choking, what they had was sex.

No part of Molly moved as the red increased in her face and eyes. She stared down at Spencer. Her breath was shallow.

Spencer knew she said too much. Her heart raced.

Molly went statue still and hissed, "You're only alive because I've chosen not to kill you."

The words rippled through Spencer. A solid tingle of terror sat in her belly. She slid to her feet and filled the space between the couch and Molly.

Molly edged one step back.

It was just enough room. Spencer's hand moved through the air. The world slowed. Spencer's palm connected with Molly's cheek, and Spencer shivered as the contact reverberated through her body. Molly's expression changed as she lost her balance, tried to recover, and grabbed for the edge of the chair behind her. She landed on the floor next to the purple dust ruffle that swayed from the breeze of the fall.

"You're wrong," Spencer said. She stood above the woman she loved and hated. "I'm alive because I choose to be alive. I'm finished, Molly. Finished with your demands, with your hot-and-cold attitude, with saving you and losing me."

Molly rubbed her cheek and smiled up at Spencer. "Stupid little girl. Stupid, stupid little girl."

Spencer didn't say another word before she left Molly's house. She was glad Molly didn't get up and try to follow her. She wasn't sure she could have remained strong in her conviction to leave and not look back.

Now, after twenty minutes under the hottest water she could stand, she shivered beneath her navy-and-orange comforter. Her body shook so badly that Cinnamon forfeited her favorite spot on Spencer's belly and retreated to the foot of the bed where he now lay curled in a tight ball against Spencer's foot.

Nothing made sense anymore. She lost Molly. Jordan was the closest thing she had to a real friend, but she still held a tinge of doubt about his honesty. Jonnie wanted her to step up and step into her own skin, whatever the fuck that meant. And Deja would eventually find out she was a fraud.

She poked Cinnamon with her toe. "Come here, boy." She patted her belly. "You're my constant, mister man."

Cinnamon yawned and stretched before making his way up Spencer's leg and onto her stomach.

Spencer rubbed his soft fur while he kneaded her flesh. "I don't know what I would do without you, boy."

Cinnamon purred and settled back into a ball.

The heat from his closeness and the vibration from his motor reminded Spencer she was home, safe from all of the change and confusion that surrounded her every time she ventured out into the world.

She slid one arm from under the covers and grabbed her phone. She pointed the lens at Cinnamon. She took several shots, looked at them, called Cinnamon's name, and took a few more. The repetitiveness of the picture taking calmed her even more.

As Spencer's breathing returned to normal and the shaking subsided, she thought about what she should do next. Staying in bed and hiding wouldn't work for long. Besides, why should she hide? Molly deserved what she got.

She thought about Deja's offer for a milkshake at Twine's, but her feelings were a little too raw for that.

Maybe a walk to the escape room. She could tell Jordan what happened. He needed to know, and she did trust him ninety-nine percent. Besides, slapping Molly and running out of her house could adversely affect him, as well.

Spencer: Hey.

Spencer: Working? [smiley emoji with dollar sign eyes]

She knew Jordan was working. She watched the bubbles appear.

Jordan: Why? You miss me?

Spencer pictured Jordan at work. She knew he would look first at his phone and then at the screen of tiny people in the escape rooms. She enjoyed the movements and laughter that came from the walkie-talkie when Jordan gave a new clue.

She wanted to be there.

Spencer: Maybe. You didn't even ask how I felt being eighteen.

[Tongue out emoji]

Jordan: Figured you were too busy for your make-believe boyfriend.

There was no emoji at the end of Jordan's text. She rubbed Cinnamon, who was now purring quietly in a ball on her chest.

Spencer: What is that supposed to mean?

More bubbles appeared, disappeared, and appeared again. Jordan was obviously being careful with his response.

Jordan: Nothing. Sorry. Just two rooms going. [crazy face emoji]

Spencer: Gotcha. Just checking in.

Jordan didn't react right away. Maybe he was truly busy.

She tried Jonnie while she waited. It was Sunday. She might still be sleeping off margaritas and weed. If so, Spencer didn't know what she would do. Probably walk to the Escape Room and take her chances with Jordan.

Spencer: Hey you. Awake out there? [Sunshine emoji. Rainbow emoji.]

Bubbles immediately appeared. Spencer waited. She thought about texting Deja and then about how compartmentalized her worlds were right now. She was happy when words appeared on the screen.

Jonnie: Headache from hell. Quit sending sunbeams. Lol

Spencer smiled, sent a whole row of sunbeams, and told Jonnie to climb out of her cave and join the real world.

The two bantered back and forth for several minutes. It was almost as soothing as the constant purr from her chest. Then Jonnie asked about her brother.

Jonnie: What's up with the fake-boyfriend saga?

Spencer thought about the past few days.

Spencer: Honestly, I have no fucking idea. [Sad face emoji. Angry face emoji]

Spencer: It's weird now that I'm talking to Deja.

She could hear Jonnie's big, loud voice as she read her reply.

Jonnie: Girl. Don't you let him control your emotions.

Jonnie: I [heart emoji] him, but he can sure be stupid.

Spencer: Why not?

Spencer: Let him, that is.

Spencer: Maybe someone besides me should control them right now. [Crazy face emoji]

Spencer: And I love him, too.

Spencer: I'm losing my fucking mind.

Jonnie: It's a vulnerable time for both of you.

Jonnie: Grrrrrrl, I remember high school.

Jonnie: It sucked.

Jonnie: Hormones rage.

Jonnie: Bottom line. He [heart emoji]s you. You [heart emoji] her.

Spencer: Still.

Jonnie: Seriously, girlfriend. Cut yourself some slack. It isn't your fault he likes you.

Spencer didn't want to talk about Jordan anymore. They would figure this out. In the end, they both knew they were always going to be friends.

Spencer: I just slapped Molly.

It took so long for Jonnie to respond, Spencer wondered if she fell asleep or wandered off in search of something for her headache.

She clicked back to Jordan's name. Still no response.

The quiet of Spencer's room seeped into her pores and amplified the pain of the day that grew in the pit of her stomach until she could hold it no longer. She threw the phone across the room. It hit dead center of the *Life is Better When You Code* poster that hung above her desk.

Cinnamon jumped.

Spencer pulled her pillow from under her head, put it over her face, and screamed as loud as she could. It felt good.

The buzzing of her phone brought her out from under the pillow. She looked at Cinnamon. "Fetch."

The cat gave a half purr, half meow, response.

"I should've asked for a dog." Spencer scratched the cat's head and retrieved the phone herself.

She stood in the middle of her room and turned the phone over in her hand. Other than a small dent in the corner of the rugged case, all was well. She read Jonnie's response

Jonnie: Good. For. You. Sometimes you gotta go badass on a girl.

She couldn't help but grin at Jonnie's words. The woman did know how to make her feel better.

Spencer: Thank you for being you.

Jonnie: [Hearts circling smiley face emoji. Thumbs up emoji.]

Jonnie: Can't be anyone else, even if the world tries to make me.

[Cry laughing emoji.]

Spencer: I'm glad.

Jonnie: Hey Spence?

Spencer: Yeah?

Jonnie: You can't be either.

Spencer: [kiss face emoji]

When her phone buzzed again, Spencer was feeling stronger and more herself.

Jordan: Come on over if you want. My sis is here.

Spencer eyed her face in the mirror. Her hair was flat in one spot, and her face was splotchy from tears and rage. It was probably not the best time to meet another one of Jordan's siblings.

Spencer: That's okay. Nothing important. Hang with your sis.

Jordan: Are you sure?

Spencer: Yep.

She tossed the phone on the bed. She needed to work, anyway. Ten minutes later, she was lost in the details of her latest theme design while the words of Vampire Weekend's "Oxford Comma" screamed in her ears.

Chapter Eighteen

Spencer stood in the spot where she and Jordan kissed. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Could it really be only three months? She pushed tight against the warm bricks of the wall, her knee bent, her foot flat against the wall. It was quiet here. She squinted into the sun. The glare made it hard to see where she stood from either end of the corridor.

She pictured students in the main building as they lived out some utopian existence, musing over philosophy or astronomy, while she stood here alone trying to breathe.

It was the second half of the day, the time when she and Deja passed in the hallway on their way to fourth bell. She couldn't go into the building until she knew Deja would be safely tucked away in class. For that to happen, she needed to stay here until the late bell sounded. She bounced her fists off of the bricks on either side of her large frame, gently at first, and then with more force until the roughness bore into her skin.

She didn't answer any of Deja's texts today, not that there were many. Deja never pushed. Spencer took a deep breath and leaned her head against the brick. The pounding of her fists slowed. She wanted Deja. She wanted to ask her to prom, to walk proudly around the homecoming football game hand in hand, to kiss her at midnight under the stars.

"What a mess," she whispered into the dry heat of the day. "How do I fix this?"

Jordan was in the main building. He treated her the same as every other day, just like she knew he would. He walked her to class, kissed her briefly on the lips, and pulled her onto his lap in the cafeteria. To the outside world, they were in love. To Spencer, he was a good guy and a good friend. What did Deja think? Spencer guessed she thought Spencer was confused. They still hadn't talked much about it. She made a mental note to talk to her later, scratched the note out, and then rewrote it. She was going to have to come clean with her if there was any chance at all that their relationship was to move forward. Gawd, she wanted the relationship to move forward.

Molly was in the building she leaned against, in a college biology course taught by a local community college instructor. It was her favorite class. Spencer hated biology. When they cut a pig fetus to learn how organs fit together in high school biology last year, Spencer stayed home sick. Molly talked about it for days. "Did you know the internal anatomy of a pig closely resembles that of a human?"

Spencer cringed thinking about it and again when she thought about Molly's reaction. She was giddy, excited even.

Spencer shivered. She put one foot down and placed the other against the brick wall.

She hadn't planned on hitting Molly. She hated that she did, mostly because she loved her, even now, and never wanted to cause harm, but also because it gave Molly ammunition for retaliation.

She wondered if she left a mark like Molly's dad left when he hit her. She thought about the hand mark she probably made on Molly's cheek, the emotions Molly exhibited between their houses and school, how Molly turned off the pain as soon as she was nearing her loyal subjects at school. How did Molly explain the bruise to her parents, her friends? Did she throw Spencer under the bus or cover it up? Molly didn't pick her up this morning, not that she thought she would, and

she wasn't in Ms. P.'s class, which was the only class they had together, so Spencer had no idea where they stood or what Molly was saying about her.

Yesterday, Spencer put everyone's life in jeopardy with the slap all because she wanted Molly to confess her love or tell her their friendship was important, more important than Lucas. Now she felt stupid.

When she felt stupid in the past for kid things like forgetting to zip her pants or throwing up on the back of Trever Scott's head when they were in line at the library, Spencer talked to Molly. If Molly wasn't there, she went to Mrs. Blackstone, who fed her pie or cookies until all was right again, or to AJ, who pounded a ball against the driveway with her until the continuous sound of rubber against concrete drowned out everything else.

None of these was an option today.

Both Molly's mother and AJ were too close to the situation, and Molly was the situation.

She still couldn't figure out why Mrs. Blackstone wasn't in the kitchen when Spencer got there, why she didn't meet her at the door with her sing-song welcome. Molly's explanation didn't make sense. The only time Mrs. Blackstone wasn't in the kitchen was when she was in the garden. Spencer couldn't remember one single time in all the years she visited the Blackstone home where Molly's mom wasn't visible and happy.

Talking to Deja was out of the question. In fact, staying far away from her was key to keeping her safe. She had no idea what was happening around them.

Right now, Spencer knew Deja would be wondering why she wasn't in the hallway. Maybe she would text. Maybe she would think Spencer was blowing her off. Spencer looked at her phone. The last text was received from Deja at ten o'clock this morning.

Deja: Loved the rainbow theme, btw. [line of rainbow emojis]

Spencer's thumb trailed across the emojis. It was the theme she posted last night, which meant Deja followed her account. She wondered if she was one of the forty-seven people who already downloaded the \$1.99 theme.

She wanted Deja to be one of the forty-seven.

She wanted to tell Deja everything, to be her girlfriend, her real girlfriend where love was sweet and didn't demand one-sided sacrifice.

She wanted to keep Deja safe.

Safe. That was most important.

Spencer put her foot on the ground and bounced on and off her toes a few times.

The late bell rang.

She continued to bounce in place. If she looked at Deja right now, she would tell her everything she realized as she walked out of Molly's house yesterday.

She loved Molly. She did. But it was an unhealthy love, one that didn't make her tingle or giggle or dream—not anymore.

Right this very minute, all Spencer felt when she thought about herself and Molly was hate. It boiled just under the outer layer of her skin. She clawed at her arm until lines appeared from elbow to wrist.

She wanted to pull the school building apart brick by brick until her fingers bled.

She shook out her arms at her side. Her skin continued to crawl with the boiling excess energy.

She placed her hands flat against the warm bricks and bent her elbows. Down. Up. Down. Up. Over and over again she lowered her chest and face until she could kiss the wall and then pushed up hard until her shoulders burned. She talked to herself as she pressed. "I need help. I can't do this." Down. Up. "I can't breathe. Jasmine. Jordan. Deja. Molly. No one's going to love me. No one's going to help me." Down. Up. Down.

She rested her cheek against the wall. The heat absorbed her tears.

Jordan found her in this position when he walked by thirty minutes later. "Spencer?"

Spencer hoped the sun's strong rays would hold her firmly against the heated wall forever. "You said we could do this. You said we would figure it out."

"We can," he said. "What happened? Please talk to me."

"I slapped her."

The rush of air from Jordan's lips turned into a low whistle when it hit the atmosphere. "Shit."

"Right?" New lines of liquid traced the dried tear paths down Spencer's cheeks.

Jordan positioned himself next to Spencer, careful to be close but not touching. He leaned his head sideways against the wall so he could look at her. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Not here." Her cheek stayed secure against the bricks. Her eyes moved to take in their surroundings.

Jordan nodded. "We only have a few weeks left. Then college. We're almost there."

"Molly won't stop, Jordan." Her words came in tiny gasps. "She's sick." She raised her head, turned, and leaned her back against the wall.

Jordan did the same.

It was the first time she said those words out loud. She knew it for several years, since the first time Molly had the dream, since the first time she asked her to choke her until she passed out, since she came back from Wyoming.

"Can you breathe more slowly?" Jordan reached down and took Spencer's hand. "Does Deja know? Is that why you're here and not there?"

Jordan's hand was warm, safe. He was her friend. She couldn't imagine going through this alone. "I can't tell her anything. I can't. I can't risk it."

The two of them stood side by side, together against the brick wall that started it all. Spencer wondered how things would be different if they hadn't kissed. Molly would have found someone else who would have kissed her for a price. She now had no doubt. She glanced over to Jordan. "Hey."

"Yeah?" His voice was low.

"I'm glad it was you." She smiled a tired but genuine smile. She was glad.

"Me, too."

They returned to silence for several minutes.

Jordan cleared his throat. "I'm sick of her fucking with us. Let's tell someone. I think Jonnie's right."

"We can't. Your sister. We can't take a chance. Things are so jacked up." Spencer pushed away from the wall and let her body fall back into it. Once. Twice. Three times.

"Stop. Just stop." Jordan squeezed her hand. "My sister said something to me yesterday when I was keeping an eye on her at work."

"Jasmine?" Spencer slowed her body and held it against the brick.

Jordan nodded. “It stuck with me all night. She asked me if it felt weird to stand on my feet. We started talking about different ways to move through life. You know, normal brother-sister talk.” He chuckled.

“You’re dumb.” Spencer shook her head. She knew he was trying to lighten the mood before the deep talk. It worked. The boiling beneath her skin subsided as she focused on his words.

“Anyway. She depends on others for everything. My mom helps her dress, moves her from her back to her stomach, puts her in a lift and puts her in her chair, and everything else. Right now, they’re working on this transfer board thing. It’s this thin board where she scoots from her bed to the chair. She shakes when she does it, and sometimes she cries.” Jordan paused.

Spencer felt his love for Jasmine in his words.

Jordan said, “I told her how proud I am of her for being so brave. In her eight years of infinite wisdom, she eyeballed me and said, ‘Not brave. Just I have to do what’s important for me to succeed. It’s stupid to cling to what makes you feel safe.’”

“You think we’re being stupid?”

“Maybe.”

“Molly asked me to help her kill her mom.” Spencer swallowed. Jasmine was right. They couldn’t continue to cling to what they thought made them safe. She decided to put all her trust in this person next to her. She needed someone, and Jordan was that person. “I think she was joking.”

When Jordan responded, his words were calculated. “She’s manipulating you—manipulating us. I’m serious. We have to stop letting her do this.”

A group of students turned the corner of the building and headed in their direction. Jordan moved to face Spencer. He reached down and slid his other hand into hers. The group walked faster. It was an unwritten code to give maximum space to couples just trying to have a moment. Jordan turned his head slightly and nodded. Several in the group returned the nod. One couple raised their clasped hands in solidarity and smiled.

When the group was out of earshot Jordan said, “This changes things. You realize that. Right?” He kept holding her hands in his.

Spencer nodded. With each up-and-down movement, she felt surer. She was ready to tell him everything about Molly’s bruised face and the choking and *The Book of Promises* and the kiss with Deja on the mountain. Together they would figure it out and come up with a strategy. Together they would get through this and be happy again.

And then Molly came around the corner where the group that passed them moments before disappeared.

“Robin said she saw you guys over here. Said Spencer looked upset.” Molly was smiling with her face, but Spencer recognized the fuming eyes immediately.

“We’re good,” Jordan said. He shrugged his shoulders forward slightly.

Spencer nodded. “I was just upset about losing the app competition to Enloe on Saturday. We should’ve won. Jordan was talking me down.”

It was Jordan’s turn to nod. “Told her second place was amazing. You know, even if they don’t get to go to San Francisco and tour the infamous nerdy Google. Plus, you can’t change the injudicious decision of the judges.”

“And we don’t get product coaching. And we don’t get the promotion of our app or discounts to the summer academy,” Spencer added.

Molly looked from one to the other with the glazed-over look she always got when Spencer started talking about app development. “Okay. If you’re sure.” She looked directly at Spencer. “I can stay.”

“No. I’m good.” Spencer’s skin was vibrating. Molly’s eyes told her it wasn’t okay, that she knew Spencer was lying. She wished she hadn’t pulled Jordan further in. Everything was her fault.

Molly blew a kiss in Spencer’s direction. “I’m off to find Lucas, then. I’ll talk to you later.” The emphasis was on you and later.

Spencer got the message loud and clear.

Chapter Nineteen

After missing another SPECTRUM meeting to be with Molly, Spencer was even more determined to find a way to separate herself from the escalating weirdness that was their relationship and to help her new friends to remain safe. She spent the week in status quo mode. She talked to Deja in coding club or when they passed in the hall, but she kept the conversation light. True to form, Deja seemed to accept the arrangement and, other than a couple of random texts, let Spencer control the narrative.

Since their conversation on Monday, Jordan was extra attentive to her. Today was Friday. The two of them spent the afternoon and evening at Pearl Street Escape. They shared open-faced hot turkey sandwiches and orange soda from Twine's and watched little people on a screen as they laughed and talked their way out of clue-filled rooms. When they locked up for the night, Jordan insisted on driving Spencer to her house. "I would make you walk, but you'd just tell everyone what a horrible boyfriend I am."

"I tell them that anyway."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"Probably because I'm a 'keep you on your toes, anything goes,' kind of girl."

The two bantered back and forth with ease for the few minutes it took to drive the three blocks to her house.

When they arrived, Jordan said, "Get out of my car."

Spencer smiled and blew a kiss in Jordan's general direction. "Talk to you in the morning, weirdo."

The two of them may not be a couple, but they were becoming the best of friends. The thought made her smile. She punched a string of numbers into the pad next to the garage door and headed for the kitchen. She still had several hours before her mom or brother would be home, and she intended to use the time to edit a new theme.

"Cinnamon boy. I'm home." Spencer called. She grabbed a water from the fridge and walked toward the stairs, expecting to hear the tiny patter of paws on the wood seconds before the ball of orange fluff appeared. There was no response. The tight, sickly sweet feeling in her stomach grew with each step she ascended. It was the feeling you get when you know something is going to happen, but you don't know if it's good or bad.

"Cinn? Where are you, boy?" Spencer took the last half of the stairs two at a time. "Cinnamon. Here, kitty kitty."

A barely audible meow reached her ears as she moved through her bedroom door. She smelled the metallic scent of blood. "Cinnamon?" She dropped to all fours and crawled to the edge of the bed. The sound and the smell were closer there. "Oh, Cinnamon. What did she do to you, boy? Come here. Can you come here?" Tears stung her eyes. She managed to slide her arm far enough under the bed to reach her beloved pet. She eased him out from his hiding place. His smooth orange hair was now a matted, sticky red.

Spencer cradled Cinnamon in one arm and tapped out a message to Jordan with the other.

Spencer: Cinnamon is hurt. Need a ride to vet. Can you come back?

Spencer tried to look for more bleeding. When Cinnamon winced, she stopped. Her phone buzzed.

Jordan: Turning around.

She dialed the vet's office and then slid the phone into her pocket and rocked onto her feet. She tried to keep Cinnamon still in her arms as she balanced. "We're gonna get you to the vet, boy. She'll fix you up good as new."

Jordan was already pulling up to the curb when she punched the code next to the garage door and made her way across the driveway.

"Is the vet there at this time of night?" Jordan asked as he moved around the car to let Spencer in with as little harm to Cinnamon as possible.

She nodded. "Twenty-four hours. Please hurry."

The ride to the vet's office was silent except for Cinnamon's whimpers and Spencer's whispers. She knew Jordan wanted to know what happened, but he didn't ask. He just drove.

Dr. Woolf's office was where Cinnamon was dropped off after his mother was hit by a car when Spencer was a child. There had been five kittens. When they were old enough to be adopted out, Dr. Woolf sent her clients an email offering them to good homes. Until their father left and took the family dog with him, the Price family were clients and were still on the list.

Spencer told Molly about the kittens when they were in Molly's kitchen eating peach cobbler. Molly said they needed a brother and sister and they would be named Cinnamon and Sugar. Mrs. Blackstone had nodded and said, "Of course. What sweet names."

Spencer begged her mom that night, and Cinnamon joined the family right before the winter break at school.

She looked at the limp animal in her lap. "Please be okay, Cinn. Please be okay."

When they pulled up to Dr. Woolf's office, Jordan ran around the car and opened the door.

Dr. Woolf was waiting. "Spencer. What happened? How did he get cut like this?" Dr. Woolf stood facing her, each of them on an opposite side of the hard, silver, exam table.

"I don't know, Doc. She. She got out. I didn't mean for it to happen." The lie slid right out of Spencer's mouth.

Dr. Woolf's slow nod and gentle tone told Spencer that the vet believed her. "It isn't your fault. You know that, right?"

Spencer didn't answer. It was her fault. All of this was her fault. She needed to talk to Molly. Molly was in control. Molly would always be in control. When Spencer forgot that, something bad happened. She needed to find out what Molly wanted her to do.

Dr. Woolf continued her exam. After a few minutes, she paused. "Spencer. Look at me. I know what you're thinking. Cinnamon got out just like Sugar did, and now he might die."

Spencer's lip quivered.

Dr. Woolf reached across the table and touched Spencer's hand. "That was not Molly's fault, and this is not your fault. Cats are quick. Sometimes we don't even see them slip past us."

Spencer wiped her face with her hands. "Thanks, Doc."

“I’m going to take him back to exam him thoroughly. Do you want your friend to wait with you?”

“I’ll text him.” Spencer sat on the built-in bench against the wall and pulled out her phone.

When Dr. Woolf returned, she discussed Cinnamon’s x-rays and cuts and abrasions. “I believe he’s going to be fine. I’m going to get him fixed up as good as new. I do need to keep him overnight. Should I call your mother?”

“No, thanks. I’ll tell her when she gets home. He’s okay for sure, right?”

“Yes. He’s okay for sure.” Dr. Woolf patted her hands. “Now go enjoy your evening. You deserve it.”

You deserve it.

These were the words Spencer remembered as she punched the code into the garage door and slipped once again out of sight of Jordan and into the hollow walls of her home.

You deserve it.

She pushed the button near the back door and listened to the garage door slide back into place before she opened the cabinet. She lifted the can of red spray paint and felt the shelf for the spare key. It wasn’t there.

You deserve it.

The soap bubble in her stomach popped into a myriad of prisms colors. Molly warned her. Now she had hurt the one thing that she knew meant more to Spencer than anything else outside of her mom and brother.

Spencer knew Molly kept the key. Four people knew the garage combination and the place where the key was hidden. Spencer, AJ, their mother, and Molly. It had been kept in the same spot since the year Spencer’s dad left to be with his new girlfriend, the year the kids started letting themselves into the house to wait for their mom to get off work. *Never tell a soul the combination or where we hide the key. Understood?* Spencer and AJ both understood. Neither told a single soul.

But Molly was with Spencer every day. Eventually Spencer forgot to cup her hand around her fingers as she poked in the combination. Eventually Molly poked in the numbers and came in when Spencer was home alone. Eventually no one considered Molly a soul from whom to hide information. She was Molly Blackstone, Spencer’s other half, the one person in the world who knew everything about Spencer. And now she wanted to remind Spencer that she belonged to her and always would.

Spencer swallowed bile and put her hand on the door handle. It turned easily. She had to swallow again, hard, before she stepped through and shut the door behind her.

“You’ve gone too far,” Spencer screamed into the air of the room. “I’m done. I’m fucking done.”

Cinnamon’s limp body haunted Spencer’s dreams, and by seven ten the next morning she could stand it no longer. She needed to confront Molly.

Hair uncombed, and in clothes from the day before, Spencer headed down the stairs and toward the front door.

“Spence, is that you?” Her mom asked from the kitchen. “Want coffee?”

Her mom always knew which of the twins was coming down the stairs. When they were younger, they tried to fool her. They even wore each other’s shoes to sound like the other. It never worked. “Can’t. Meeting Molly about graduation.” Another lie.

“Okay. But you’re missing orange cinnamon rolls.”

Cinnamon. She hadn’t told her mom or her brother about Cinnamon. Both were out when she got home and when she went to sleep. “Sounds yummy. But you know Mrs. Blackstone will have something ready. Love you, bye.” She slid out the door and down the street. She would tell them later.

Fury must have presented as sadness on Spencer’s face, because Mrs. Blackstone went from a huge smile when she opened the door to a puckered brow. “Oh, sweet Spencer, are you okay? You look like you saw a ghost.”

Spencer squeezed between the woman’s thickness and the doorframe. “Cinnamon got hurt yesterday. He’s at the vet. I need to see Molly.”

Mrs. Blackstone’s eyes softened, and her big arms circled Spencer’s entire being. Spencer let herself melt into the softness for a brief second.

“Spence. I’m so sorry, hon. He gonna be okay?” Mrs. Blackstone’s voice was as soft as her body. It would be easy to let it comfort the fury inside. “Come to the kitchen. I’ll let Molly know you’re here.”

“She knows.” Spencer pushed against the soft rolls of flesh until she was separated from them entirely. “She in her room?”

“She is, but—”

Spencer didn’t wait to hear the rest. She took the stairs two at a time and didn’t slow down until she pushed the door open into Molly’s room.

Molly stood dead center, her arms at her side, *The Book of Promises* dangling from one hand. She wore an oversized Broncos jersey and a pair of Bronco-orange spandex shorts.

Spencer stopped in the doorway to the lavender-and-purple kingdom. She loved the way that jersey hung off Molly’s shoulder. Molly knew it was her favorite. She told her every time she wore it. Spencer’s eyes lingered on the spot where skin was exposed from shoulder to breast. She wasn’t wearing a bra. “You’re trying to manipulate me.”

“Maybe. Is it working?”

“Fuck you.”

“That can be arranged.” Molly moved in Spencer’s direction. “Shut the door.”

Spencer fought the urge to plow her head into Molly’s flat stomach. She pictured her eyes shut and jaw clenched as her head connected with the smooth jersey fabric. In her mind’s eye, the force picked Molly up and plowed her into the window behind her. Shattered glass sprinkled around them, piercing Molly’s skin and leaving flecks of shimmering light in her hair. Spencer let out a breath. “Why did you hurt him?”

“You know why.” Molly didn’t even try to deny that she hurt Cinnamon. She tossed the book to Spencer. “Look at the newest page. I added to our list.”

Spencer let the book fall at her feet. She didn’t take her eyes off Molly. This time wouldn’t end with only a slap. When Molly hurt Cinnamon, Spencer knew it was to control her, to tell her that she needed to keep her mouth shut and be a good little puppet. “I don’t care about the list. I care about Cinnamon.”

Molly continued her slow move toward Spencer. “I thought you cared about me.” Molly’s tone was even and low.

“I did. I do. But I can’t, Molly. I can’t keep coming back. You can’t keep careening between love and hate and expect me to just be here.”

Molly stood in front of Spencer. Her eyes moved from Spencer's eyes to her clothes and back again. "You look like shit." She bent down and picked up the book. She hugged it with both hands against her flat stomach.

Spencer watched Molly's chest rise and fall under her jersey. More skin was exposed from the swaying of her arms as she walked. "It won't work, Mol." Spencer didn't back away.

Red crept up Molly's neck and onto her face. She was perfectly motionless except for the thumb of her right hand which was tracing slow circles on the cover of the book.

Spencer could feel the warmth of Molly's body, hear the slow drawing of her breath, the hold, the release. When she spoke, her voice was so low Spencer struggled to make out the words.

"You said you didn't want anything to come between us." Molly's spittle floated in the sunshine of the room. "But you're telling him our secrets."

Him was Jordan. "That's where you're going with this?" Spencer asked. "You hurt my cat, the cat we chose together with Sugar, the cat you said you loved."

"You hurt me." Her thumb stopped moving. Her voice was insistent.

"The kiss? Are you talking about the kiss?" Spencer tried to speak calmly.

Disappointment flashed on Molly's face, and then anger.

"You are, aren't you?" Spencer asked. She knew she should walk away. If she stayed quiet, there was a small chance they could end this now.

An animal-like snarl began in Molly's throat, somewhere deep, and clawed its way up her throat. She turned away from Spencer and flung *The Book of Promises* across the room, knocking over a lamp on the side of her bed.

Spencer looked at the beacon shining brightly from its new resting place. The dark shade nestled in the light-purple ripples of the comforter; the yellow glow reached out into the room, beckoning her forward, back into Molly's bed and Molly's life. Not this time. Not ever again. "Molly. How did we get here? When did we reach this level of distrust?"

"When you started lying to me," Molly said. "When you started being a stupid, lying bitch."

Spencer opened her mouth to speak but closed it when Molly grabbed her shoulders and shook them.

There was an instant in which nothing moved, and the air was still. There was no sound of breathing, no clinking of pots and pans from the kitchen.

And then it was over.

Molly moved one step back.

Spencer saw a blur out of the corner of her eye the second before her head snapped to one side. Pain radiated from her jaw. She inhaled in an angry gasp. This time, instead of begging or running, Spencer left Molly where she stood and backed up until she reached the bedroom door. Without once breaking eye contact, she pushed until she heard the soft click. She moved back across the room with slow, purposeful steps.

The two once again stood less than an inch apart. The soft scent of strawberries, a scent that yesterday would have broken her resolve, now only increased her fury.

Molly stood still, except for her eyes, which darted back and forth as if she was playing out different scenarios in her mind.

The two stood this way for several minutes, each willing the other to speak.

Molly bit her lip. Her jaw relaxed, and the corners of her mouth turned up. When she spoke, her voice was soft. "Spence. You're my girl, my best friend. When I saw you with Jordan, when I knew you were going to tell him about our little disagreement, it hurt me. Can't you see that? Can't

you see I need you?" Molly took both of Spencer's hands in hers and pulled her across the last inch of space.

The edge of Spencer's foot found the edge of Molly's. She zigzagged slightly then rebalanced. "I can't be both."

"What does that mean?" Molly's turned up edges faded until her mouth formed a straight line.

Spencer didn't give in. "I can't be your girl and your best friend."

"Come on. You're just mixing words." Molly increased her grip on Spencer's hands.

"Ow. Let go." She pulled one hand and then the other out of Molly's but didn't budge from her place. Her jaw muscles clenched until she felt her teeth might break. "I'm not going to be an object you use to block out pain. I can't. And you need to leave Jordan out of this."

"You didn't."

When Molly put everything back on her once again, Spencer knew there would be no apology for Cinnamon, no acceptance of guilt, no easy way out for any of them.

She was done walking away. She contemplated her next move. Her fingers stung where she bent them back when she pulled away from Molly's grip.

She thought again about the head-butting plan, but her head against Molly's strong stomach didn't seem productive.

Her hand curled into a tight fist. Everything slowed in her mind. She felt her full weight push onto the balls of her feet, and then her fist connected with Molly's nose. Droplets of blood splattered all over the floor.

Molly shook her head and blinked rapidly several times. More blood splattered, causing red dots to appear on both of their shirts.

Molly didn't move from the spot where she stood.

Spencer thought about how hard it was going to be to get the blood out of Molly's jersey. She loved her in that jersey.

Molly's hand moved slowly up to rub the underside of her nose. She looked at the blood. She raised her hand to her mouth and sucked the droplets from her skin. When Spencer cringed at the action, Molly threw back her head and laughed.

Spencer watched her mouth. It was open wide. Blood dripped across her top lip and into the crease between her lower lip and gums.

Molly spit the new blood on the floor. "You'll need to clean that up, pussy." She pointed to the red speckling. "At least you drew a little blood that time." Molly stepped sideways, around Spencer, and walked to the door.

Spencer turned and watched. "Let's make certain my mom doesn't waddle up here and try to stop us." Molly turned the lock. "I let you walk away when you slapped me. Probably should have put an end to this before now." She started to cover the ground she put between them moments before. "You will not walk away again. You will never walk away again."

As Molly moved back toward Spencer, her fists clenched and unclenched.

Spencer tried to think. She wasn't a fighter. She hated being this angry. She just wanted it to stop. She glanced at *The Book of Promises* that now lay against the wall. Maybe if she got Molly's attention on that...

"Look at me, Spencer. That stupid book isn't going to help you now."

Spencer didn't look back at Molly fast enough. Molly was in front of her. She had a fistful of Spencer's stomach in her hand. She twisted the soft flesh as she spoke. "I said look at me."

It was now or never. Spencer balled her fist again and swung. The blow landed in Molly's side.

Molly lessened her grip for a split second.

That was enough time for Spencer to pull away and move toward the door.

Molly grabbed the back of her shirt and flung her with such force that Spencer lost her balance and fell to the floor against the dresser. She was sure the thud would bring Molly's mom up the stairs to see what the two of them were doing. It didn't.

Molly stood over Spencer. Her face was contorted. Spencer had never seen her like this, not even after one of her dreams. Spencer tried to stand, but Molly landed another blow. This one with the toe of her shoe in Spencer's rib. Fresh ripples of pain ran through her body. Fresh ripples of anger followed. She staggered to her feet before Molly could strike again. She regained her balance and slammed Molly into the wall. "I hate you."

Molly laughed hysterically as Spencer buried punch after punch into her gut. "Dyke bitch. You'll never be rid of me. Hit me. Hit me, Spencer." Her words and laughter came in spurts.

Spencer felt every word, every diabolical sound, hot on her face. They mixed with the smell of strawberries, with the smell of blood. Everything swirled together and sat hard in the pit of her stomach. Molly was right about one thing. Spencer was a dyke. She was ready to own the word. But first, she had to tell Molly they were finished. She stopped swinging and pulled her pounding body to a full upright position. "I'm finished, Molly. You need help. I can't give you what you need."

"I need help? You stupid bitch. You have no idea." Molly shoved both hands against Spencer's chest.

Spencer planted her feet. She swayed but stayed standing. "You do." She kept her tone even.

"Oh, homely, awkward Spencer. I tried to help you. I did." Molly matched Spencer's tone but added a layer of sarcasm. "You know nothing that I don't want you to know."

"I'm leaving, Molly. I'm leaving and we're finished. Fuck you."

"I have a sister. A little sister. Did you know that?"

Spencer halted mid-turn. She met Molly's stare. "You don't have a sister. What's wrong with you, Mol?"

"She's in Wyoming. She's a stupid bitch, too. But you wouldn't know, because I didn't tell you. I couldn't tell you. They don't want anyone to know. You're my savior, Spencer. My sweet savior. And now you don't want me, and you'll tell Jordan." Molly laughed deep in her throat, a laugh that held an air of fear rather than humor, before she spewed more words into the room. "You owe everything to me, just like she does. I got our parents away from her. I did that. I didn't want to live on that stinky-ass cow ranch. She did. Now she won't admit it. She won't talk to me. Not even when I went back that summer. Idiot parents with their idiot rules."

"What are you talking about, Molly? You're not making sense. You don't have a sister. I'm not a savior."

Spencer watched Molly's face go from laughing hysterically to somber and dark. "You. You owe me everything."

Spencer wiped spittle from her cheek where Molly's words landed. "What do I owe you, Molly? What?"

Molly touched Spencer's chin. The finger moved slowly down Spencer's neck and back up, where it curled under her chin, her knuckle pushing into the soft skin. The slight pressure kept Spencer as still as a statuette while the two stared at one another.

“You stupid, stupid—” Molly leaned her forehead against Spencer’s. “I tried to kill her.” Her voice turned gentle. The pressure eased on the underside of Spencer’s chin. “That’s why we’re here. They tried to put us together that summer they pulled me and you apart. I told them I didn’t want to leave you. They wouldn’t listen. It’s their fault.”

Spencer wrapped her hand around Molly’s wrist. She guided her hand down to her side. “Kill who, Molly? We need your mom to come up here. I don’t want to have this conversation.”

“My. Sister. Are you fucking dense?” Molly yanked her arm from Spencer’s hand and raised it in a fist toward the side of Spencer’s head.

“Mrs. Blackstone,” Spencer yelled. Her voice trembled. Whatever Molly was talking about, it wasn’t good, and Spencer needed to get out.

Molly rested her fist on Spencer’s cheek. “Don’t test me. She won’t come. She knows better.”

Thoughts of Molly’s dream, Molly crying in the car after her dad hit her, their choking game, the dark promises growing more prominent in their book, swirled in Spencer’s head. Was anything real? “Why did your dad hit you?”

“I told you why. She’s a bitch. She wants me gone.”

The blue in Molly’s eyes darkened. Spencer pushed her back hard against the wall, trying to put some distance between them.

As if she knew what Spencer was doing, Molly edged backward slightly, keeping their eyes locked. “She thinks you aren’t keeping me safe anymore, that I’ll hurt her or him. Or you.” She flicked Spencer’s chin hard with her fingers. Her hands moved to Spencer’s arms. She traced the tip of her fingers up and down. “You have been fun to play with. I’m not sure you’re worth the trouble anymore, though. Are you, Spence?” Molly moved one hand away from Spencer’s arm.

An involuntary shiver overtook Spencer’s body. Then she felt one fast straight punch to her unprotected jaw. Spencer’s head whipped back; her body arched backward. She remembered her toes clearing the ground. For a moment her body hung in the air. When she hit the hardwood floor, she heard a thump, but she couldn’t tell what made the sound. She remembered Molly talking. There was something about Cinnamon joining Sugar, about Sugar being in the yard, and something about the beautiful roses.

And then, darkness.

Spencer floated in the darkness. It was a comfort to be surrounded by solid black nothingness. She wanted to stay but knew she couldn’t. She forced herself to regain consciousness. She thought about the roses in Molly’s yard. Mrs. Blackstone planted them after Sugar died. Molly asked her to, for Sugar. When was that?

She could feel cool fabric against her cheek. It played against the pain in the back of her head that punched through to her eyes. She was on Molly’s bed. Molly sat next to her. Molly’s mom and dad stood just behind their daughter.

Through the fog she thought she saw Sugar. She was meowing from the shelf on the dresser. That couldn’t be. Sugar was dead. She ran away after one of Molly’s episodes.

Spencer’s arms were stones, useless limbs that lay by her sides. She focused on her fingertips until she felt the wiggle, then her wrists, elbows, shoulders.

Molly stroked her numb limbs. “Hi, Spence. That’s it. Just relax.”

A wave of disgust washed over Spencer. She remembered. Sugar ran away the day after Molly came to her house with bloody knees and dirty nails.

“Don’t try to move. You fell. We’re here. You’re okay.”

Molly seemed to be trying to convince her parents she was the hero here, the person who brought her to safety instead of the crazed woman who tried to kill her.

Spencer made eye contact with Mr. Blackstone. He smiled and nodded, like one of two people passing on the street. He appeared unaware of what happened to her.

Next to him, Molly's mom stood with the corner of her apron in her hand. Her thumb and forefinger worked the fabric. She avoided direct eye contact, but her eyes watched each new movement Spencer made. Spencer heard the struggle in her avoidance, in her silence. She remembered the pie they shared just a few weeks ago. Why had Spencer not seen the sadness before? It was clear now.

It was also clear that the Blackstones, husband and wife, knew this side of Molly and remained silent.

Spencer wanted to get out of the house, away from Molly, away from the sickness that came with the knowledge that she didn't know this family at all. She sat up. The world bounced. She fought a return to the darkness. The entire left side of her body burned. She remembered a fist smashing into her jaw, the feeling of weightlessness, and the sound of her body bouncing off the wooden post at the end of Molly's bed. She had been twisted in a fetal position with her left arm folded awkwardly beneath her body. Her jaw muscles clenched. She breathed through the wave of nausea.

"Let me up." She looked directly at Molly.

"You had a nasty fall. You need to rest."

"A nasty fall? Are you serious right now?"

"Spencer—"

"Don't even." Spencer felt a new strength. She took a few more deep breaths. "I said, let me up. Now."

Spencer watched Molly look at her dad and then her mom and then back at her. Her dad spoke first. "Spencer. You need to rest. You took a nasty fall. Do you remember what happened?"

Spencer looked at Molly. Their eyes spoke what neither of them was willing to say in front of Molly's parents. This was far from over.

Spencer swallowed her anger and ungritted her teeth. "Not really." She kept her voice even as she lied. "I remember my head bouncing off the floor. There was a sludgy void around me and then fog."

Mr. Blackstone said, "Molly's mom called me when it happened. I came straight home. Molly said the two of you were dancing around, and then you were on the floor. Right, Betty?" he and Molly turned their gaze toward Molly's mom.

"Yes. Yes, that's right."

Molly stroked Spencer's hair. "I was so worried about you. Dad thinks you must have become dehydrated."

Molly's mom moved to the nightstand and offered Spencer a drink from the bottle of water that sat there. Spencer thought she saw Mrs. Blackstone's hand tremble as she handed the bottle to Spencer.

Spencer focused on the wobbly skin of the woman's arm. She contemplated her next move. She wasn't safe here. She had to get out. She took several sips of water and handed the bottle back to Mrs. Blackstone.

"I'm feeling a lot better. How long was I out? Did you text my mom? She'll be worried."

Mr. Blackstone put his arm around his wife and pulled her next to him. He was built like the jocks that AJ hung out with, the ones who sped through life on short, muscled legs, playing

football, drinking beer. “We decided to give you an hour to rest. Your mom doesn’t need to be worried unnecessarily. She has so much on her plate already. Do you want us to text her now?”

Spencer knew it was a test. She needed to pass. She paused long enough to seem like she was considering the offer. “No. I don’t think so. You’re right. If it’s only an hour, she won’t be worried yet.”

Molly and Mr. Blackstone smiled. Mrs. Blackstone stared into the distance, her side rigid against her husband’s.

“I really do need to get back.” Spencer forced herself to turn her head away from the bedroom door and the family that remained in her path and toward the window where she could see the sun had moved high into the sky. “My mom’ll want to have lunch with us before she heads to work.”

She felt Molly’s weight lift from the edge of the bed. Her heart beat a little faster.

Spencer eased her legs over the side. She let her feet rest on the hardwood floor for a few seconds. Her body was hot. She shuddered. It felt like a hand was pressed against her chest. She fought against the pressure.

Once she got her mental armor in place, she stood, pushed past the wall of Blackstones and staggered—in the careful, swamp-wading gait of a drunk—out the front door. She paused at the edge of the four stairs that led from the porch to the sidewalk. She still didn’t quite trust her body’s ability to carry her forward. She felt a wave of heat roll up her neck, and beads of sweat dripped down her back. Her tongue was heavy and bitter in her mouth. She put one foot down and then the other. One step at a time. At the bottom of the stairs, she bent at the waist and puked on the lawn.

Behind her, likely constrained by her parents, was Molly. As Spencer retched, she heard the one person in the world who said she wanted nothing to come between the two of them scream unintelligible words. Then there was a pause, and then another string of sounds. Spencer couldn’t understand the words, but she felt the rage. She assumed the pauses were her parents reminding her to stay composed. Whatever they were hiding, they were hiding it together.

Spencer straightened, wiped her mouth, and willed her body to move in the direction of home. In front of 1393 South Washington, she felt bile once again threaten her throat. She stopped. With her hands on her knees and her head bent, she gave in to the burning bitterness. Her body shuddered violently. Disjointed thoughts about Molly and Mrs. Brahms and *The Book of Promises* pounded against her temples with each heave. When she finished, every part of her body burned with pain. Her calves, shoulders, back, and gut felt like one giant charley horse. She looked through the windows of 1393 at the dark stillness and then at the brightness of her own home.

She didn’t know much in that moment, but she knew she couldn’t go home.

She dug her phone out of her back pocket and hit the third number down.

“Chloe?” A sleepy voice answered.

Spencer almost hung up, but she didn’t know who else to call. “Hey. Sorry. Were you sleeping?”

“Kinda. It’s okay. Just catching a nap. I’m like the weirdest teenager ever. Up by five, even on the weekends. It’s my mom’s fault. It’s mostly always just us, and she likes to walk before work. With me. Says she listens better in the morning. She doesn’t. Whatever.” Deja chuckled. “Sorry. You called me. I’m rambling. Talk.”

“Can you come get me?”

Deja didn’t even hesitate. “Yeah, where are you?”

“I’ll be at Twine’s. Corner of—”

“I know where it is.” Deja sounded awake, now. “I’ll be there in ten.”

Spencer's phone said one fifteen p.m. She was obviously out more than an hour. More lies.

She made a quick call to her mom to tell her she was going to study with Deja for the afternoon since AJ would be out with his girlfriend and she would be at work. She also told her about Cinnamon. The lie, not the truth. It was hard enough to have her mom believe she somehow let Cinnamon out, which led to him getting into a fight and to stay with Dr. Wolff. Her mom believed her when she said she was half asleep that morning and forgot to tell her, or at least she pretended to believe her.

She started to call Dr. Wolff but there was a message on her phone saying they were keeping Cinnamon until Monday, not to worry, and to call when she got the message. They were keeping Cinnamon sedated after stitching him up. The good news, no internal damage. He would be fine in a week or so.

She slid the phone back in her pocket just as she reached the café.

At exactly one twenty-five, Deja's ancient Honda Civic pulled up to the curb, groaning as it came to a stop. Spencer slipped into the cool interior that smelled of stale cigarette smoke and hair spray.

"Thanks for coming."

"You're welcome. You okay?"

"Not really. Can't be at home right now. Maybe not tonight, either."

"Do you need to crash at my house? My mom's cool. We don't have a spare room or anything, but we have a couch."

Spencer nodded. She didn't want to be anywhere near her house—or Molly.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not yet."

"Roger that."

Spencer texted her mom to let her know she was staying with Deja and her mom wanted to bake cookies or something corny like that. She ended the text with a barfing emoji. Her mom texted back to be nice and use her manners. She strung out a row of laughing emojis interspersed with chocolate chip cookies.

For the remainder of the ride, Spencer stared out the passenger window at the buildings swooshing past. This was her neighborhood. She lived her entire eighteen years right here. They passed Dave's five-and-ten where she bought her first Pop Rocks. Her dad still lived with them then, and the four of them had laughed until her sides hurt as the tiny crystals exploded on their tongues. The movie theatre that now showed risqué movies to the over-eighteen crowd was where she and the other neighborhood kids used to sit in the closed off balcony and watch movies for free, because one of them always had an older sibling working the concession stand or ticket booth. Where did things go so wrong?

"Earth to Chloe."

A quiver moved from Spencer's tailbone to the tip of her head. "I—I'm—I'm sorry. This was a bad idea."

"What? Me picking you up?"

"Yeah."

"You want me to turn around? I'm not down for anyone being where they don't want to be."

Spencer didn't answer right away. She didn't want Deja to turn around. She wanted her to drive forever. It struck her hard that her relationship with Molly was over. She started to shake from the inside out. Gut, bowels, heart. Her ears started to buzz.

Deja pulled over and turned the car off. “Hey. How about you take some deep breaths? Is it Molly?”

On her side of the car, Spencer tried to focus again. She realized for the first time since she left Molly’s house that her face must be messed up. She put her hand against her cheek. It was numb, like someone had given her a shot of Novocain.

“Yeah. It’s swollen. I know your mom didn’t do it, so I just figured—”

“Don’t. I can’t. Not yet.” Everything was jumbled and tangled together.

Deja nodded. “It’s all good. In your own time, or not. It’s up to you.”

By the time Deja pulled into the carport behind her family home, Spencer felt strong enough to talk.

“Thank you for not pushing. Are you sure this is okay?”

Deja gave her a long look. “Yes. It’s more than okay. Look, I know there’s baggage to unpack. I’m new, but people talk.”

“At school?”

“At school. No one can believe you and Jordan are together. Figured you would wait for Molly forever. Blah. Blah. Blah.”

“I’m not—”

It was Deja’s turn to cut Spencer off. She held up her hand. “Stop. I don’t give a flying fuck, Chloe. Like, seriously. Not one fuck about whether you and Jordan are a thing because you want to prove you aren’t in love with Molly or even if you are in love with Molly. I like you. What will be will be. That’s it.”

Spencer didn’t feel like throwing up anymore. “I like you, too. Can we just hang out and not talk about anything important?”

Deja smiled. “Come on. My mom’s excited to meet you.”

The woman standing in front of the olive-green fridge when the girls walked in looked like she just stepped out of the sixties in her funky, tie-dyed sundress and bare feet. Her skin was the same light brown as Deja’s, and her pixie-cut hair had the same pink highlights. She talked into the cool air of the open box. “Potato salad and hamburgers. Good enough?”

“Sure, Ma. I told you no need to fuss.”

Deja’s mom turned around, a big bowl of what Spencer assumed was potato salad in her hand. “No fuss. Gotta eat. Right?”

Spencer counted a dozen strings of beads and crystals around her neck. The woman smelled of green apples with just a hint of marijuana.

“Mom, Chloe. Chloe, my mom, Elsie.”

Elsie perched the potato salad bowl on one hand and put the other one forward. If she wondered about Spencer’s appearance, she didn’t let on. Her smile filled her whole face. “Welcome to our home, Chloe. Dej has told me so much about you.” She returned her bowl to both hands and walked to the counter.

“Mom!”

“What? You have.” Elsie winked at her daughter. “And she’s as cute as you said.”

“Mom!”

Spencer laughed. “You think I’m cute?”

“I think my mom likes to start trouble.” Deja tried to look upset. She failed miserably.

It was obvious to Spencer that the two were not only mother and daughter, but friends. She thought about her own mom and wished she hadn’t lied to her today.

“Okay, you two. Don’t just stand there looking all googly-eyed. These burgers won’t make themselves.”

The next few hours passed quickly as the three women laughed through a really late lunch or super early dinner. Deja and her mom argued why one made sense over the other. The bottom line was the two of them never kept normal banking hours, as Elsie called them, and ate whenever the mood struck. They talked long after the last bite of hamburger was consumed. Deja’s home was much like her own in that respect, and it felt good to be here.

“Want to go to my room?” Deja asked. She pushed Start on the dishwasher and turned to her mom. “You need us to do anything else?”

“Nope. Go on. Scoot.”

Deja grabbed Spencer’s hand and pulled her toward the back of the house.

“I like your mom.”

“I like her, too. Most days anyway. We’re super different, but she gets me.”

“She kinda smelled like marijuana. Is that okay to say?”

Laughter rumbled up through Deja’s throat. “Of course. My mom believes in vibes and light and meditation. And other things that we don’t talk about.”

Spencer giggled.

“My room, madam. Entre, por favor.” Deja swept her arm in a big arc.

Spencer felt like she was walking into a rainbow.

“Your room is, um, colorful.” Spencer moved from the doorway and stood against Deja’s bright-orange desk. It held a laptop, red headphones, a yellow duck just like her own, and a half-empty bottle of root beer. An old wooden chair, painted white with rainbow stripes up each leg, was pushed underneath.

“I’m pretty into the community.” Deja followed Spencer into the room.

“And your mom is okay with that?” There was little room to move between the desk and the side of the bed. Spencer stopped about halfway and stood with her back toward the desk. The bed itself looked like a sea of gay. The comforter was solid navy. Rainbow sheets peeked out at the top where its maker hadn’t thrown the blue quite high enough. Stuffed unicorns held court against rainbow pillows for a multitude of other rainbow-colored stuffed animals.

Deja stopped in front of Spencer and rested her butt against the foot of the bed. “Why wouldn’t she be?”

Spencer shrugged. “I don’t know anyone who’s…” She let her thoughts trail off when she looked at Deja’s face. She felt out of place in the vibrantly colored room.

“Out?”

“Yeah. I guess. Out to parents, anyway. I mean. I’m going to the club meetings, so I know those guys, but I don’t know if they’re out to family or anything.” Spencer looked around the rest of the tiny, square room. An old television stand held a small tv on top. The stand itself was painted red. Over it hung a large corkboard covered with more artwork, most of it in the color of a rainbow. The only other piece of furniture rested against the wall opposite the door where they entered. The one tall dresser placed there was even closer to the bed than the desk where they stood. Above it hung a poster that said, “Equality is a Human Right,” in rainbow colors.

“Your mom and brother would probably be behind you if you told them.” Deja turned toward where Spencer was looking. “I’ve had that since eighth grade. My mom bought it for me after I came out to her.”

“Your mom?” Spencer gazed directly at Deja. “That is so cool.”

“I guess.” Deja pushed off the edge of the bed and took a tiny step forward. “The first steps are the hardest. You’ve taken those. You have to trust in those you love.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

Deja’s question annoyed her. “I’m not ready. Okay? Let’s leave it at that.”

Deja moved until the toes of her sandals touched the toes of Spencer’s tennis shoes. “Hey. Come on. I’m on your side.”

“I know. Sorry. It’s all just new. You know? There’s Jordan. He’s not a girl. And I like him. So…”

“But you like me, too. And come on.” Deja put her hands out and ran them in the air around Spencer. “You’re like a perfect lesbian specimen.”

“Oh yeah. That’s for sure. What’s better than a woman who shows up with a swollen face and blood-speckled clothes. The blood belongs to my cat, by the way, not to me. He got into a bit of a tussle yesterday and, in the perfect lesbian fashion, I still have the clothes on today.”

“See. Like I said. Perfect.”

Spencer gently pushed Deja’s shoulder. “Whatever.” She was glad to be here. She liked this woman. A lot. As scary as it was, she didn’t want to be anywhere else.

“Still don’t want to talk?”

Spencer fidgeted from foot to foot. She realized she hadn’t thought about Molly since before dinner. Deja had that effect on her. In that moment, she decided to tell Deja about Cinnamon. “Do you really want to know? You know. What’s wrong?”

“I do. I’m a big girl. I can handle it.”

Spencer put her hands atop Deja’s shoulders. “Not really big.”

Deja pushed onto her tippy-toes. She was still a half-a-quarter head shorter than Spencer.

Both girls laughed.

“The cheek. That’s Molly. Long story there, and one I’m not sure I’m ready to talk about.”

“Fair enough.”

“My heart is hurt over Cinnamon. That’s my cat. I’ve had him for nine years. He was supposed to be for me and my brother, but he adopted me from day one. He’s never slept a night anywhere but in my bed except when he got fixed.” She studied Deja’s face, trying to judge how much to say.

When Spencer took a breath, Deja offered for them to sit on the bed.

Spencer shook her head. “Just let me get this out.”

Deja nodded. She leaned back against the dresser and put one hand on each of Spencer’s hips.

The warmth of Deja’s hands went through her jeans and deep into her bones. She sighed softly. It would be so easy to let this happen. She laid her hands gently atop Deja’s arms and kept going.

“Jordan dropped me off last night. My brother was out. So was my mom. I always hear Cinnamon as soon as I go inside. He’s like a dog. As soon as he hears me, he runs to the stairs meowing. But he didn’t. I called for him, and he didn’t answer. I found him under my bed, curled in a ball, limp and barely meowing.”

“How did he get there?” Deja asked.

“That’s the thing,” Spencer said. “There are only four people who can get into our house.”

“You, AJ, your mom, and let me guess—Molly.”

“Yeah.”

“But why? Did she maybe find him outside and let him in?” Deja pulled Spencer a little closer.

Spencer felt her lip tremble. It took a few seconds to regain control enough to answer. “Wouldn’t she have texted me?” Spencer answered her own question. “She would have. So would my mom or brother. No one texted me. I confronted her this morning. She didn’t confess, but she didn’t deny. I hit her. She hit me back.” Spencer was crying softly now. She left out the part about knowing Molly not only did it but probably did the same thing, only worse, to Sugar. She also left out the weird babbling about Molly having a sister and waking up to all three Blackstones standing over her in Molly’s bed.

“Oh, Chloe. I’m so sorry.” Deja’s thumbs rubbed circles against her hip bones.

Her body tingled. She moved forward.

Deja led her into her body and slid her arms around her waist.

Spencer didn’t pull away. Deja’s arms felt good. The soft scent of green apple mixed with the smells of the day. Her body softened, and her neck bent until her head rested on Deja’s shoulder. She felt the tip of Deja’s nose press against her neck. The warm air from her nostrils sent shivers down her back. When Deja’s lips pressed to the sensitive skin over Spencer’s pounding pulse, the shiver took over her entire body. No one had ever touched her there, like that, with softness and uncertainty. She felt the lips against her throat curve up in a smile.

“I could stay here forever.” Deja’s words were barely audible against Spencer’s skin.

“Me, too.” Spencer pushed deeper into the soft skin between Deja’s neck and shoulder. “I don’t know what to do about Molly. How could she hurt Cinnamon? Why?” Spencer knew the questions were much deeper than Deja knew. She wasn’t looking for answers. She was looking for comfort.

“Relationships are complicated, Chloe. I’m so sorry this is happening to you. What can I do?”

The in and out movement of Deja’s chest was shallow and then deep, like she was trying to stay in control. Spencer leaned into it. She didn’t answer right away. She couldn’t. The years of unspoken truths held behind her closed lips might slip out and spoil everything. In the silence the fear created, she learned a few things about herself. She learned she wanted this, whatever this was, this tangle of arms and closeness of bodies. Her body and Deja’s body. She learned that what she and Molly once had wasn’t this. She learned the house that stood between her and Molly would never have been theirs, and she learned that—surprise—Molly used *The Book of Promises* to manipulate Spencer into doing whatever fit Molly’s needs at the time.

The rage faded in the silence, too, and Spencer gave in to the softness of the pink-haired waif. “You’re doing it. Holding me. Making me feel safe.” Butterflies took up residence where her stomach used to be. She kissed the tender spot under Deja’s chin and let her head rest fully again on her shoulder.

“Chloe?” Deja’s voice was dense, throaty.

Spencer was barely aware of the hand moving away from her back. “Yeah?” She felt a bit like she was floating. She lifted her face and looked into Deja’s eyes.

“Can I kiss you?” Her hand was no longer on Spencer’s back.

Spencer nodded to avoid trying to answer over the lump in her throat.

Deja kept her head tilted toward Spencer.

Before Spencer could convince herself she was afraid, she leaned down until her lips were against Deja’s, lightly at first, and then with more urgency.

She closed her eyes and leaned into the warmth. There was nothing except Deja's lips, Deja's hand, pulling her head closer, her fingers running slowly through her hair. When Deja's hips bumped against her own, something rose in Spencer she never felt before.

When Deja's lips traveled around the curve of her neck and up to one tender earlobe, the world melted away.

Deja's teeth moved gently back and forth across the virgin skin.

She hoped that by standing completely still the moment would never end. When Deja trailed back to her mouth, it seemed so natural to invite her back in, so simple.

There was no taste of pizza and sunshine, no taste of strawberries and graham crackers. There was only the safety of Deja's warm mouth, the wetness of her tongue against Spencer's own.

It tasted like normal.

Spencer tried desperately to hold on to a solid thought. "Deja." She didn't recognize her own voice. She pulled back and looked at Deja. "This. I've never..." Spencer's voice trailed off.

Deja attempted to fill in the missing words. "Kissed? We kissed at Red Rocks. Liked a girl? I doubt that's true. Had sex? Or sex with another girl? Hmm. I have my theory about this one, too."

"What's your theory?" Spencer latched onto the last words Deja said and used them as an anchor. Things were happening too fast.

"I'm not asking for sex, Chloe. Sorry if you thought—"

"No. It's not. Shit. I don't know. Can we just take a break? I don't want your mom to come busting in." Her words sounded lame, even to herself, but she kept going. "And I need a shower. I smell like blood and a sterile vet's office."

She could feel the disappointment seeping from Deja's skin as she unwrapped herself from Spencer's folds.

"My mom would never come busting in." Deja gave what sounded to Spencer like a forced chuckle. "And for the record, the door is open, so..."

Spencer laughed. It was brief, but it was real. She didn't know what else to say.

"Chloe?" Deja put her fingers under Spencer's chin, like a mother would a child to bring their eyes up to her face, except Deja was the one looking up. "I need you to get this. I like you. A lot. But I don't have to have you. You get to say no or yes. Every time. Do you get that?"

Spencer nodded. She didn't really get it. She heard it. She wanted to believe it. She wanted Deja to believe she got it. But she didn't. No wasn't an option with Molly. When she did say no, people and animals got hurt. It was easier to tell Molly yes. Why didn't she tell Molly yes, this time? It was her fault Cinnamon was in a cage at the vet's office. It was her fault Molly's mom looked so sad. Now it was her fault that Deja liked her. It was too much. She looked at the sweet geek of a girl in front of her who stood perfectly still with her fingers tucked under Spencer's chin. She looked like a live mannequin in a rainbow window.

"I need to shower and sleep."

"Fair enough." Deja slid sideways against the desk, pushed forward, and walked across the room. When she reached the other side, she opened drawers and pulled out items until she had assembled an assortment of both sleeping and waking attire. She tossed the pile across the short distance between her and Spencer. "You're a lot taller, but some of these should work."

"And rounder." Spencer looked through the pile.

"Perfectly so," Deja countered. "Use the bathroom down the hall. Towels are in the closet."

"Thanks." Spencer started to turn but stopped when Deja said her name.

“Chloe.”

“Yeah.”

“This is my favorite softy.” Deja laid the bright-blue square atop the pile of clothes. “I use it when I need to feel safe.”

Spencer pushed the plush blanket up around her chin and headed for the bathroom. After a lengthy shower, she slipped into a T-shirt and shorts. They weren’t the baggy fit she loved, but they were clean and soft and helped Spencer to feel almost human again.

In the living room, Spencer found a sheet draped over the couch and three pillows atop the coffee table. She chose the fluffiest pillow and threw it on the couch, then stacked the remaining clothes choices next to the extra pillows and tucked one side of the softie blanket into the crease at the back of the couch.

Settled in for the night, she thought about the kiss in Deja’s bedroom, the softness of Deja’s teeth against her skin, against her tongue. She ran her own tongue over her lips, trying to ignite the feelings Deja evoked moments before. She replayed the lips and tongues and teeth skipping across her skin. She ran her fingers along the paths of her body that Deja’s fingers might have taken had she not pushed her away. Spencer didn’t know it could feel like that. She hadn’t known girls could feel like that.

Her thoughts drifted and turned into a weird half-awake, half-asleep dream. Everything felt vivid and blurred at the same time.

Molly was there. She chanted, “You belong to me, only me,” repeatedly. Spencer could see her, but she couldn’t reach her. People stood around her. They and the sounds they made were traveling through an echoing tunnel and swirling around Spencer, holding her in place.

She watched as Molly reached out of the frame and pulled Deja back in. Strands of her pink hair stuck up between Molly’s tan fingers. Her legs kicked the air. Her fists swung wildly.

“Look at your little puppy, Spence. Look at her.” Molly’s laughter came to Spencer’s ears through an echoing tunnel. Molly punched Deja in the arm, the stomach, the face. “You’re going to walk away from me for this?” Molly’s bicep pushed upward as she dangled the shorter girl. “She has less muscle on her little body than I have in my finger.” More laughter echoed around them.

Spencer ran in the direction of the two women, but she went nowhere. She tried again. The movement in the dream was transferred to the real world, and Spencer found herself on the floor, the softie blanket wrapped around her body.

The vision felt too real. Deja hanging. Molly laughing.

Spencer would never be free of Molly.

It wasn’t fair. Six months ago, Spencer was content to sit and wait for Molly. Now she wished Molly would never call again.

Except she didn’t really wish that. She remembered Molly’s hand in hers when they were children, the carefree glee they shared. Molly wasn’t gentle like Deja, or kind like Deja. Hell, she never even liked her like Deja. But she was her Molly, the person who chose her above all others.

Deja hanging.

Molly laughing.

She tried to force the vision out of her head with thoughts of the evening with Deja and Elsie. The two of them were hilarious together. She thought about their enjoyment of one another and of her, about the sweet apple scent that they shared, but no picture was strong enough to hold Molly at bay.

She texted Jordan. Maybe the growing ease of their friendship could banish thoughts of Molly.

Spencer: Hey, you.

Jordan replied with a goofy avatar of himself waving wildly.

Spencer stretched. She couldn't decide how much to tell him—not about how she was feeling about Deja or about Cinnamon or about Molly. She stared at the ceiling, her phone resting against her stomach outside the covers. Jordan sent two more texts before Spencer responded.

Jordan: Is Cinnamon home?

Jordan: Are YOU home?

Spencer lifted the phone into the air. She looked at the tan bubble with Jordan's words. She decided to start with Cinnamon.

Spencer: Vet called. Cinnamon is doing great. Thanks to you.

Jordan: All I did was drive. Glad to hear it. Now spill.

Spencer: Spill? [exclamation question mark emoji]

Jordan: Don't even. You didn't text me at eleven o'clock at night about [cat emoji].

He wasn't wrong.

Spencer: Got into it with Molly. She did it.

She erased and retyped.

Spencer: Got into it with Molly. Whole family crazy.

The words stared up at her. She loved the Blackstone family, even Molly's dad, who was absent as much as he was present, and especially Molly's mom, who helped with homework, played a mean game of Monopoly, baked delicious pies, and still had time to make their garden the envy of the neighborhood. Molly's mom looked sad today. Spencer still couldn't figure out why she stood so quietly beside her husband and daughter. Was Molly really that out of control?

Spencer deleted the second sentence and hit Send.

Jordan: Same as before?

Spencer: No. Worse. She knocked me out cold.

Jordan: Are you being for real?

Spencer: Seriously.

Jordan's text bubble filled with three dots. And then disappeared. And then came back. And then disappeared. After several attempts, what came through to Spencer was one word.

Jordan: Fuck.

It was the only word needed for Spencer to feel Jordan's connection to her. He was her best confidant. She had no idea how they would survive this together. What she did know was she would not survive it alone.

Spencer: That's what I said, dude. Fuck.

Spencer: More Monday. Not in text. Meet before first period by the wall.

Jordan: Really? Monday?

Spencer: Maybe tomorrow if I can leave Cinnamon.

Jordan: Better. [Smile emoji] Night.

Spencer turned the phone on its face on the coffee table and, with the mental and physical exertion of the day overtaking her, fell into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter Twenty

Sunday morning, Spencer woke with her head banging, her cheekbone burning, and her throat desert dry. It took her several seconds to realize the incessant buzzing of a hive of bees in her ears was her phone.

Molly: Where are you?

Spencer rubbed her eyes and sat up and looked at the time. Eight o'clock. The house was quiet. On the table next to where her phone had been, her clothes were folded neatly into a pile. On top was a note. "Hope you don't mind. I didn't want the stains to set. Peace, Elsie."

She turned the note over in her left hand. In her right, she toyed with her phone. If she laid the phone back down, Molly wouldn't stop. She would eventually knock on Spencer's door. Her mom would tell her where she was. She thought about Deja upstairs with her rainbows and unicorns and decided her best move was to walk home. She pulled up maps and put in her home address. It would take thirty-six minutes. That wasn't bad.

Spencer grabbed the stack of clothes and headed to the bathroom. In the mirror, she studied the damage from the day before.

Her face was bruised and her eyes bloodshot. She touched the tender spots on her cheek and under her eye. Shit.

In the kitchen, Spencer found a pen on the counter. She used the back side of Elsie's note to thank her for the clean clothes and to thank her and Deja for letting her crash on the couch. She hoped Deja wouldn't question her need to get home to work on a geography project.

Her phone buzzed again.

Molly: I know you're awake. You hate to sleep past seven.

Correction. She didn't usually like to sleep past seven. Today she had, and it felt good, but Molly wouldn't believe that without demanding an explanation. She needed to answer.

Spencer: Running an errand with AJ. Home soon.

Spencer: Why?

She hoped Molly was texting from bed. It was way too soon for her to be awake on a Sunday.

Molly: I'll be waiting. Need to talk.

Molly acted like nothing happened yesterday, like they were fine. They were not, and Spencer couldn't pretend they were.

Spencer: I'm not coming over.

Molly: Yes. You are.

Spencer: Molly. Please.

Molly: My mom needs you.

Spencer: Your mom? WTF?

Molly: I can't stop the dream.

Spencer couldn't breathe. Certainly, Molly wouldn't hurt her mom. Not like that. She folded the blanket and sheet and headed for the door.

It took her just under fifty minutes to get home. She would have been there sooner, but Molly was texting about every three minutes. She slowed down each time just enough to text and walk. Molly sounded deranged. Her texts were about blood and hate and the need to make things right.

Minutes before Spencer reached their street, Molly said it was her mom's fault her dad hated her, and her power needed to end. Spencer paused to exchange a rapid set of texts.

Spencer: Where's your dad?

Molly: Showing houses. At the office. Paperwork. Who cares.

Spencer: Where's your mom?

Molly: Right here.

Spencer: Your room?

Molly: Yes.

Spencer: She okay?

Molly: No.

Molly: Her perfect is collapsing.

Spencer wanted to ask what that meant, but not through a text message. She touched the receiver icon next to Molly's name. The call went directly to voicemail. She went back to the text.

Spencer: Molly. Answer.

Molly: Are you coming?

Spencer: Yes.

Spencer: Should I call 911?

Molly: If you do, I will kill her.

Spencer tried to call again. Voicemail. She thought about the police. An ambulance. Jordan. None of the options made sense. She knew Molly better than anyone. She should have said yes. None of this would be happening if she said yes. She could still fix it.

Spencer: No. I won't see Jordan unless you say.

Spencer: I will help you anytime.

Molly: Oh, Spencer, my stupid little pawn. This is far beyond Jordan and choking games.

Spencer swallowed hard. She could actually feel Molly's anger in her own body.

Spencer: Almost home. Won't call anyone.

Spencer: Promise.

Spencer slid the phone back into her pocket and increased her pace. A half block from home her phone vibrated again. This time, it was Deja.

Deja: Why didn't you wake me? [smiling sun emoji]

Spencer: Why would I?

Deja: Would've taken you home. [house emoji; car emoji; one hundred emoji]

Deja: Or made breakfast. [bacon emoji]

Spencer: Forgot to read for class tomorrow.

Spencer: It's all good.

Deja: You mad? [worried face emoji]

Spencer: No. Not at all.

Spencer added a crazy face emoji and a smile emoji for good measure. It was hard to remember to use emojis for emphasis when Molly hated emojis so much and used them only in the rarest of instances. If there was an emoji in Molly's texts, it was because she was talking in code.

At the edge of Molly's property line, Spencer slowed her pace. Even with the creaking of the For-Sale sign—or maybe in part because of it—1393 South Washington seemed disturbingly quiet without Mrs. Brahms.

Spencer wiped her neck and forehead. It was the end of May, but the sun burned hot against her skin. She typed one last message to Deja to let her know she would reach out when she took a break. She added an emoji of a girl behind a computer to emphasize her need to study.

She watched the screen for several seconds. When she felt relatively certain Deja wasn't going to send additional messages, Spencer swiped the last message off her screen, deleted their text string, and slid the phone into her back pocket.

When her breath came in even intakes and outtakes, she texted Molly.

Spencer: Headed over now.

Spencer: Let me in.

Molly: Door's open.

The response was immediate.

Spencer stood for a moment right inside the front door. The house didn't smell right. Then it came to her. It wasn't what she smelled, but what she didn't. Nothing was baking in the kitchen, nothing simmering on the stove.

She took the stairs two at a time. What she saw when she entered Molly's room stopped her in her tracks. Mrs. Blackstone lay on the floor, eyes open but unmoving.

Spencer knelt beside her. "What happened?"

Mrs. Blackstone blinked but said nothing.

There was a small spot of blood on the floor behind her head.

Spencer looked at Molly. "What did you do?"

"She fell." Molly's voice was flat. She was propped against the pillows on her bed. Her legs were crossed. She was holding a knife.

"Molly?" Her voice shook. "Did you—"

Molly cut her off. "I didn't hurt her. She hit her head. What fun would it be to slice her stupid throat if she can't even get up and run?"

Spencer looked again at Mrs. Blackstone. "Are you okay?"

Mrs. Blackstone moved her chin in a downward motion. She winced.

"It's okay. Don't try to move. I'll fix this." Spencer stood and took several steps in Molly's direction.

Molly waved the knife in a circle in front of herself. "Maybe you should just stay right there, Spence. You thought you could leave me, didn't you? Thought it was a good idea to tell that idiot Jordan all our secrets."

Spencer stopped moving. "I didn't tell him anything, Molly. I swear. I was trying to do what you wanted. You wanted me to be with him so the love of your life would stop accusing you of being with me. I did what you asked. Exactly what you asked."

"I asked you to help me. You told me no. This is your fault."

"I know. I'm so sorry. It won't happen again. I will always help you."

Molly appeared to relax. "You mean it?"

"I do."

"You know I can't keep these thoughts away without you. You know I need you to help me. I almost killed her, Spence. I almost killed my mom."

Spencer began to move forward again. This time Molly didn't stop her. Spencer crawled onto the bed and curled up next to her. "I really am sorry."

"I know. It's okay." Molly's voice was soft, like a small child forgiving a parent for yelling.

"Can we put the knife on the table? It's freaking me out. I want to lay here with you, not think about that."

Molly twirled the knife for a few seconds.

Spencer could tell she was debating her next move. In the end, she seemed to decide neither her mom nor Spencer was a threat to her. She laid the knife on the nightstand and squished into her pillow. She patted her shoulder with one hand. "I missed you."

Spencer laid her head where Molly indicated. She watched the purple glow from the lava lamp as it bounced off the silver blade and into the light of the room. "I know."

She knew Molly meant it when she said she missed her. She always meant it. Until she didn't. "We need to let your mom go downstairs. Maybe she can make us some cookies. Peanut butter, your favorite."

Molly raised her head slightly and looked down at her mom. "I don't know if she can. She's bleeding."

"She can. Can't you, Mrs. Blackstone?" Spencer didn't move her head from Molly's shoulder. She heard Spencer's mom moving next to the bed.

"If Molly wants cookies, I'm happy to make them," Mrs. Blackstone answered. Her voice wobbled. Spencer hoped she was okay to stand. She wanted to get her out of the room so she could talk to Molly without worry of her lashing out at the woman again.

"Do you want them, Mol? I didn't have breakfast. I'm starving."

In a sing-song voice that would be funny if the situation wasn't so dire, Molly said, "Mom? Will you make us cookies? Spencer's hungry."

Spencer swallowed hard. It felt like muskrats were dancing in her gut. Molly sounded like she was nine again.

Mrs. Blackstone eased to a sitting position next to the bed.

Spencer could now see the huge bird egg on the side of her head, and the single line of blood that snaked from its center around her ear and disappeared into her hair.

Spencer studied the poster over Molly's dresser. It was Charlie the purple giraffe from *The Drabblecast*, a podcast about a giraffe with a disturbing and profound view of the world. She stared at the sad eyes and pink dots until Molly's mom made her way to a standing position. When she heard the soft click of the door, she let out a breath. She said a silent prayer that the woman was thinking clearly enough to get on the phone and get help.

"Spencer?" Molly's voice was barely a whisper. It sounded as sad as Charlie's eyes looked.

"Yeah, Mol?"

"I know."

Tears rose up, threatened to spill down Spencer's cheeks and onto Molly's shoulder. She blinked rapidly. She made herself pull back slightly. "Know?"

Spencer felt a soft vibration against her stomach—Molly's phone in her back pocket. She waited for Molly to react.

When she did, the reaction shocked Spencer. Molly's voice rose to a deep growl. "I told him to wait." She reached around and took hold of the vibrating object.

Molly turned slightly away, phone in hand. She still looked like Molly, but she no longer sounded like her, no longer moved through time like her. She watched this strange woman type

words onto the screen with one hand, her body situated to hide the words from anyone other than herself.

Spencer tried to shift without bringing attention to herself. The slight movement allowed her to make out about half of the text. Molly was typing a few words at a time and sending. The back and forth was rapid. Between that and the angle, it was almost impossible to read it. Molly said something about a pet. Her stomach seized. What if they were talking about Cinnamon? She shifted again. The angle was still wrong.

Convince her, Molly was typing. Something. Something. *Meet you*. Something. Something. *Two hours*.

Cinnamon was safe, she told herself. He would be with Dr. Woolf and her team until she picked him up. Did Molly know that, too?

Spencer averted her eyes when Molly turned back and slid the phone into her pocket.

“Where were we?” Molly asked, her voice once again soft and sweet.

Spencer propped herself up on her elbow and made eye contact with Molly. “Was that Lucas?”

“Yep. We have plans later today.” Molly ran her fingers along Spencer’s arm. “Doesn’t leave us a lot of time.”

Spencer nodded. “Do I need to leave? We can talk later.” She tried to keep her voice even, normal. She had no intention of talking to Molly later. She was in survival mode. She needed to get out of this house, to get help for Molly’s mom. To call Jordan.

Molly’s fingers continued to rub up and down Spencer’s bare skin to the rhythm of her words. “Let’s make sure we understand each other, Spence. Then we’ll go down and have cookies. Just like a happy little family. That’s what my mom wants everyone to think. We’re a happy little family.” Molly laughed softly.

“I don’t get any of this, Molly. What’s happening? I just wanted to make you happy.”

“Wanted to?” Molly’s voice was still quiet, but no longer a whisper.

“Want to. You know what I mean.”

“What I know is you and Jordan think I’m stupid. I’m not.” Molly adjusted herself so her face was closer to Spencer’s.

“I know. No one said you were.”

“But you kinda did, Spence.” Molly’s fingers moved from Spencer’s arms to her cheek, where she made slow, spiraling circles. “You’re trying to hide things from me. You can’t, you know. I know he told you about the IOU. Didn’t he?”

Spencer knew it would do no good to lie. “Yes.”

“And you want to know why.”

“Yes. I did. I do. But even so, I like him. He likes me. I don’t understand why you did it now, but it worked out, so whatever.”

“It was Lucas’s idea. I don’t really care what other people think.”

Spencer knew that was a lie, but she stayed quiet.

“He thinks—” Molly paused. “He thinks we’re doing it, like we like each other like that. Said the only way to prove it isn’t true is to see if you would let a guy be your boyfriend.”

“So, you do care what other people think.”

Molly moved her hand on Spencer’s hip. She squeezed and released, squeezed and released.

“I care what he thinks. He isn’t other people.”

Spencer gave a slight head bob to acknowledge the words.

“I still need you.”

“You have never needed me.” Spencer kept her gaze locked on Molly’s face. The glow from the lava lamp gave her blonde hair a wavering, purple warmth. Spencer thought about using her fingers to disrupt the energy she felt as she watched.

“That’s not true.” Molly’s voice took on a new edge. “I need you plenty. Just not the way you wish.” Molly pulled Spencer’s hip forward into her own. With each breath her hand pulled her closer, their bodies touching more deeply with each simultaneous in and out movement.

Tears ran down Spencer’s face. The purple blurred. “You’re hurting me.”

Molly pushed them apart and drew their hips together one last time. “It isn’t me you want to fuck anymore, is it Spence?”

The room was suddenly devoid of air. Spencer couldn’t breathe. “What do you mean?”

Molly released the hip and touched her finger to the middle of a drop that was about to fall from Spencer’s chin. She took it and rubbed it on her own face. “She’s a cute little thing, isn’t she?”

One. In and out. Two. In and out. Spencer’s insides were on fire.

Molly put her finger back on Spencer’s cheek. She pulled a strand of her own hair out of the silent tear and leaned forward until her lips rested against the soft skin of Spencer’s face. “I can cry, too, if you want me to.”

Spencer closed her eyes, tried not to flinch. The touch of Molly’s lips felt hot and filthy against her skin. She thought about all the times the two of them laid in this bed, all the times Molly lied to her. *I can cry if you want me to.*

The pressure of teeth against her skin forced her eyes open. She couldn’t move. Molly was bringing her teeth closer together, causing increased pain. Just when Spencer thought her skin would tear, Molly released her.

“If Lucas finds out you know about the IOU, he will kill them,” Molly hissed against her ear. “Trust me when I say he will. Me, and your silence, are the only things keeping you safe.”

“He won’t find out. I promise. Like I said, we like each other.”

“Just don’t forget who’s number one. When I say come, you come.”

“I will. Nothing between us. You’re my best friend. You and me forever.”

Spencer felt Molly’s skin as it moved up and down against her face.

“Forever,” Molly whispered into Spencer’s ear. “We better never have to have this talk again.”

It was Spencer’s turn to nod.

Molly rolled to her other side, stood, and held out her hand. “You and me forever.” She smiled, her voice slowly returning to the old Molly’s voice. “Now let’s eat cookies. They smell heavenly.”

Spencer worked hard to look calm. “Molly?”

She looked up at the woman she used to trust with her life but didn’t take her hand.

“Yes?” Molly’s voice was once again as sweet as iced tea in the south.

“Why would he hurt Jasmine? She’s a kid. A kid in a wheelchair.”

Molly bit her lower lip. Her head was cocked to the side, her hand still outstretched toward Molly. “Because Jordan loves her more than he loves anyone, even you.” Molly put great emphasis on the word you. She wiggled her fingers, beckoning Spencer forward.

The sweet sing-song voice sent a chill through Spencer’s body. The words Molly spoke were true. Lucas and Molly would hurt Jasmine as easily as they would anyone else who didn’t do exactly what they said.

Spencer took Molly's hand and let her pull her to the edge of the bed. She looked at the knife.

"Leave it," Molly said. "I don't feel safe at night."

"Sure," Spencer answered. "I wasn't going to touch it."

When Spencer was fully standing, Molly took her hand, brought it up to her lips, and gently kissed each knuckle. "Come on. You must be starving."

They followed the scent of warm peanut butter into the kitchen.

Mrs. Blackstone was back to her cheerful self. There was no sign of the dried blood, and no hesitation in her voice when she spoke. "Hey, you two. Cookies just came out."

"Thanks, Mom." Molly dropped Spencer's hand and walked to the fridge. "Who wants milk?"

Spencer watched them move around the kitchen. They talked and moved like nothing happened in Molly's room. She knew from the atmosphere of the room that no call was made for help. Whatever was happening, Mrs. Blackstone wasn't going to call attention to it by contacting anyone.

When Molly put the milk down in front of her, she forced a smile. "Thanks."

"Anything for you, Spence. Right, Mom?"

"Right." Mrs. Blackstone wiped her hands on the flour-splattered apron tied around her waist and rearranged the pencil sticking out of her gray bun. She looked from Spencer to Molly and back again. "It does my heart good to see my two favorite girls together."

An hour later, Spencer sat at her desk in front of a blank computer screen, the taste of warm peanut butter cookies still on her lips. She tried to picture Mrs. Blackstone putting together a recipe while her daughter and her daughter's best friend were upstairs, a knife on the nightstand, her own blood congealed around her ear and down her neck. How did she manage to wash, reapply makeup, and fix her hair, all while waiting for a homemade batch of her daughter's favorite cookies to turn a perfect shade of golden? It was like a scene from *The Stepford Wives*, so much so that Spencer wondered if she took her own knife and stabbed the woman would she go into a loop like a malfunctioning computer.

It didn't matter that by the time the girls ate the warm cookies and drank the ice-cold milk, Molly was completely calm. Spencer still shook.

Even now, staring at a blank screen, her phone buzzing incessantly in her back pocket, she shook inside and out. She needed to call Jordan, to figure out what to do next, but all she could do was sit and stare and shake.

AJ pulled her out of her trance-like state when he bellowed up the stairs. "Sis. Get your ass down here. Time for dinner."

Dinner. She left Molly's just after lunchtime. That meant she hadn't moved, hadn't checked her phone or gone to the bathroom or eaten in hours. She looked down at her hands folded one on top of the other on her desk. She needed to go down and spend time with her family. Perhaps a good meal and mindless banter would help clear her head.

"Coming."

Seated at the table, the three Prices talked about the weekend. AJ's face was flushed, his smile big. He and Ivy were getting serious. Spencer wondered if they were having sex. She thought about the new terms she was learning, experiencing. She was certain AJ was totally straight, sex-

seeking, cis. Her mom, too. She wanted to tell them about Molly, but her desire to keep them safe was greater than the need to tell. She listened to AJ and Virginia talk about the prom, now exactly a month away.

“Ivy’s wearing peach to the prom. She wants me to go with her and her mom to find a matching cummerbund and tie.”

“You don’t want me to take you?” Virginia asked.

“I do, but she said her mom wants to be sure it matches exactly.” AJ shrugged. “I’m just the guy who needs to keep his girl happy.”

“One of those moms, huh?”

The two of them laughed at the inside joke. Virginia would never be one of those moms.

AJ noticed his sister’s lack of laughter at precisely the same moment Virginia did. They said in unison, “He’s in good hands, Spencer.”

She looked from Mom to brother and back again. They thought her mood was about Cinnamon. She nodded. “I know. It’s just...it’s just. Never mind. Can I be excused? I have a big test tomorrow.”

Spencer’s phone buzzed in her pocket.

“You gonna answer that, sis?” AJ asked. “That’s like eight times since we sat down.”

“Not right now. It’s a girl from coding club.”

“The one you stayed with last night?” Virginia asked.

“Yeah. We have this stupid project in another class. I told her I would help her. I’m just not up for it tonight.”

AJ gulped down half a glass of tea.

Spencer watched a drip form and fall from the bottom of the glass as he swallowed again and again. His life was so easy.

He sat the glass in the puddle of water that formed. “Do you want to come with me and Ivy to the mall after school one day next week? You going with Jordan?”

“I guess. He asked me.”

AJ and Virginia started to talk at once.

AJ deferred to their mom. “Go ahead. She won’t listen to me anyway.”

Virginia laid her fork on her plate. “I thought you liked Jordan. Didn’t you want him to ask you?”

Spencer picked at her cuticles under the table. “I don’t want to wear a gown. I want a tux.” The words tumbled out of her mouth.

Before Virginia or AJ could respond, she continued. “Maybe I won’t even go. I don’t know. Jordan wants to go. I don’t want to disappoint him. I just don’t want to wear a dress.”

“Then don’t wear a dress,” Virginia answered. “Is that mandatory?”

“No. It’s just. I don’t know. I just...”

“Just what, sis? You’re acting weird. Wear a dress. Don’t wear a dress. Go with Jordan or Molly or this new chick. Or go alone. Who cares? What is up with you right now?”

“AJ”—their mom’s voice held both concern and admonishment—“how about we watch our tone.” It wasn’t a question.

“Whatever. I’m just saying. Suddenly she’s Miss Popularity. Never home—”

“Like you would know. You’re so far up Ivy’s butt you wouldn’t know if I died and was lying in the middle of my bedroom floor.”

Virginia looked from one twin to the other. She didn’t speak right away. Instead, she stood, moved around the table, and came to a stop behind her two children. She placed one hand on AJ’s

shoulder and one on Spencer's. When she spoke, her voice was low and precise. "Spencer, I don't know what's going on, but your brother, though too abrupt, is right. You have been acting different, spooked almost. Maybe it's turning eighteen. Maybe it's something you're not ready to talk about. But it's there. You need to talk to someone. If not us, maybe Molly."

Spencer cringed at the sound of Molly's name. "I can't talk to her. She hates me. Molly hates me. And I hate her." She pushed her chair back.

AJ's Adam's apple bobbed down and up slowly. She knew he wanted to say more. She also knew he respected her enough not to.

Her mom's hand didn't leave her shoulder, even as she stood. "Mom. Please."

Virginia's hand dropped to her side.

Moments later, Spencer threw herself headfirst into the soft blue comforter and let the weight of the weekend spill out and onto the bed. Nothing would ever be okay again. She wanted to melt into the blanket and disappear. Cinnamon should be snuggled against her side. Her phone should buzz with stupid memes from Molly. That was her world. That was the world she wanted back.

She pulled the phone from her pocket and swiped the screen. Twenty-one unread messages. Molly's name was pinned to the top of the text list. Four new. Spencer read those first. As she did, she heard the old Molly's voice saying the old Molly things.

Wish I could see through 1393.

See you in the morning.

Sleep well.

Thank you for being you and being my best friend.

Spencer tapped Deja's name. Three messages. The first two expressed concern and asked Spencer to at least tell her she was alright, that they were alright. Number three said she wouldn't beg, but she would be there if Spencer needed her.

Spencer didn't know Deja very well, but she knew enough to know that three messages without a response from her, especially one that clearly indicated her feelings, meant that Deja was upset.

Jonnie added five messages to the total. None of hers struck a chord of anxiety like the others. Hers were college memes, a picture of her and Michael sticking their tongues out and showing off what looked like a slender cigar but was certainly a joint, and a couple texts reminding Spencer of what she should look forward to in college.

The remaining texts were from Jordan. He was worried about her. What she told him last night was on his mind. He wanted her to come to the escape room to talk. It was slow, he said. Before she could read the remaining texts, her mom tapped the door frame.

"Spence?" Virginia's voice was soft. "Spence?"

"What?" Spencer's voice was sharper than she meant it to be.

"Can I come in?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice."

"No. No, I don't. I choose this stupid life to go away. How's that for a choice?"

"Chloe Imani Spencer Price. I love you, and I won't stand for such talk. Sit up here and talk to me. Now." Spencer's mom strode into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "Eighteen or not, I'm your mom. I'm the one person in this world who has loved you every second of your life. And no matter what's happening here, I won't stop loving you. Do you hear me?"

Spencer sat up. Her hands found each other and started to pick.

Virginia put her hand atop her daughter's. "Come on. Talk to me."

"I can't. I just can't. I need to go for a walk, clear my head. Please, Mom? I promise. It's okay. I just need to think about some things."

"Fair enough." Her mom stood up. At the door, she turned. "Spencer?"

Spencer looked at her.

"Remember what I said. Anything. My love transcends anything."

"I know. I love you, too."

Chapter Twenty-One

Jordan was bent over the counter, head down, textbook open, when Spencer walked in. When the door chimed, he looked up, flipped his hair out of his eye, and smiled. “I didn’t think you were going to come.”

“I wasn’t.”

“So?”

“So, I needed to get out of the house. My mom and brother are all in my shit.”

“Because they care. You know that.”

“I told them I don’t want to wear a dress to the prom.” Spencer waited for Jordan’s reaction.

“And is your mom cool with that?”

“Are you?”

Jordan shrugged. “Your body, your choice. Why would it matter to me?”

“I like you,” Spencer said. “You might be the coolest guy I’ve ever met.” She leaned on the opposite side of the counter and closed the trigonometry textbook. “Well, except for this.”

“I like you, too.” Jordan slid the textbook into his bag. “And I’m definitely the coolest guy you ever met.”

Neither one of them said anything about the brief text string from the night before. It was another thing she liked about Jordan. Like Deja, he didn’t pry, not even when he was obviously a part of the situation.

“It’s quiet in here.”

“Yeah. The last booked group just left. I don’t anticipate any more activity tonight. Wanna help me reset the Baker Street room?”

The Baker Street room demanded that the players solve a mystery while attempting to dismantle a high-profile gang that has been terrorizing Victorian London.

It was Spencer’s favorite room. She loved the deep-red-and-gold decorations that mimicked the office of the great detective displayed in the Sherlock Holmes Museum in London. She would definitely play if she didn’t already know all the answers.

The monotony of sorting and relocking clues sounded like a perfect way to end a shitty day.

The room held thirty-six clues in approximately 200 square feet. As they worked and talked, Jordan’s easy banter melted away some of the nervousness she carried with her the last few days. She enjoyed Jordan’s effortless movements as he gathered hundreds of little pieces of clues and put them back in their respective places.

She kept the step-by-step list close at hand and read off each one as they moved about the room. When they were almost finished, Spencer stopped.

“The book,” she said. “The book is where all of the clues come together.”

“What are you talking about?” Jordan put the locks on the box in his hand and moved to stand next to Spencer.

She was staring at the paper in her hand.

“Hey, Spence. Earth to Spence.” Jordan waved his hand in front of her face.

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of this before.”

“Think of what? Come on. You have to give me more than that.”

Spencer shook the paper. “Step-by-step. Anything Molly wants to come true goes in the book. Don’t you see? That’s why no one else has the key. That’s why she keeps it locked up. Except she didn’t. It went under the edge of her bed. She was so mad. She didn’t move it.”

“Slow down. Remember, you haven’t filled me in on the last encounter. Let me finish and we’ll go next door.” He put his hand on her elbow and led her to the lobby. “Sit.” He pushed gently on her shoulder.

She sat.

Neither of them said a word until, minutes later, they were seated in the fake, bright-blue booth in the far corner of Twine’s Café.

“She tried to show me something in the book before we fought.” Spencer breathed deeply, letting the fresh ground coffee’s smell seep through her nose as the last of the liquid ran down her throat. Her voice mixed with the buzz of the overhead lights. “I shoved it away. It landed under the bed.”

Jordan didn’t follow. Spencer slowed down, started at the beginning. For the next hour, the two ate French fries and sipped orange soda while she described *The Book of Promises*, how it started, how it evolved over the years, and how she was sure it held the answers she needed to make everything right again. “When we were thirteen, Molly went to Wyoming. That’s where she’s from. Things were different after that, like really different.” Spencer debated on how much she should tell Jordan and decided it was all or nothing at this point. She opted for all. “She wanted to kiss me, really kiss me. I—I liked it. I liked her like that. I didn’t know it yet, but I do now.”

“She didn’t?” Jordan asked.

“She said we were practicing for boys. I think she was. At least I think she thinks she was. There’s more, though. She kept wanting to do different things. First, she would write in the book. Something like, ‘Try electric nail buffer.’” Spencer hesitated. It was harder to talk about this than she thought.

“Electric nail buffer? You aren’t making sense.”

“I know. I know. Look, you can use a lot of things in ways they weren’t intended.”

“Oh. Got it. ’Nough said.”

“Right. So, I would think we were going to do our nails or whatever, then she would tell me that if I loved her, I would help her.”

“Help her?”

Spencer quit pulling at her cuticles, tipped her glass toward her on the table, and pulled the last of the watery orange soda from its resting place on the bottom. Her hand trembled slightly as a shiver made its way through her body. She had come too far to stop now. She told him how those games turned into darker entries in *The Book of Promises*, how Molly’s dream of hurting her mom became more vivid over the years, and how lately Molly was really into her version of the choking game. “I’ve always wondered what happened in Wyoming that summer. I think maybe someone was inappropriate to her, but she won’t talk about it. She’s never said a word, gets mad if I bring it up. Then last week when we fought, she said something weird. She said she has a sister and she tried to kill her.”

“The sister tried to kill Molly?” Jordan asked.

“No. The other way around. But it doesn’t make sense. I’ve known the family for nine years. Not one word about any siblings. I can’t fit that piece into the puzzle.”

“Your face is pale.” Jordan ran his hands over the condensation on his glass and reached across the table. He rubbed the cold liquid on the inside of Spencer’s arms. “Lean forward.” He

ran his hand over his glass again, this time applying the cold liquid to Spencer's cheeks and neck. "Take a breath."

Spencer stopped talking and closed her eyes. The cool of Jordan's hands felt good against her skin. Certainly, Molly didn't really try to kill anyone. But why would she say she did? Why didn't she press Molly more, make her explain?

"I know you don't think she's capable of murder, but she might be."

She opened her eyes. "Murder? I didn't say anything about—"

"What do you think she meant, then?"

She knew it was true. Molly killed Sugar. She tried to kill Cinnamon. And she threatened to kill Spencer, too.

It wasn't Lucas who was the biggest threat in all of this; it was Molly.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It took every ounce of strength Spencer possessed to assume her role as sidekick to Molly on Monday morning. She did it, though, because the fewer waves created, the greater chance she would have of carrying out her plan to get into Molly's room, retrieve *The Book of Promises*, and figure out what Molly and Lucas were planning.

As it was every other time they argued, Molly didn't say a word but, instead, treated Spencer as if nothing happened between them that was out of the ordinary in a loving relationship of best friends.

When Molly told Spencer to ride home with Jordan on Tuesday, Spencer knew it was her opportunity to explore Molly's room uninterrupted. Mrs. Blackstone would assume Molly stood Spencer up again. She would feed her pie and let her roam freely until Molly got home. Except she had no intention of being there when Molly got home.

When Spencer arrived at the Blackstone home, Mrs. Blackstone was working in the front garden. "Hi Spencer, dear. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"It is." Spencer stood directly beside Mrs. Blackstone. "You smell like lilacs." She tried to keep her voice even. "Is she inside?"

Spencer already knew Molly wasn't inside. She doubted she would be, but to be safe, she had Jordan text Lucas to ask him to meet to go over a few last-minute changes to their literature project.

Lucas texted back that he was watching his kid sister and unavailable until later. If Lucas was babysitting, so was Molly. Spencer likely had all afternoon.

"No. Said she was going to Lucas's for a bit to help with his kid sister." She didn't offer Spencer pie.

"Can I go up to her room?"

Mrs. Blackstone rose and walked over to Spencer. Before Spencer could say anything else, Mrs. Blackstone wrapped her in a huge embrace. "Watch yourself, Spencer dear. She isn't to be trusted."

Spencer felt like she was in the *Stranger Things*' Upside Down. First, Mrs. Blackstone didn't offer her pie; now, she was warning her about Molly.

"Please don't tell her I said anything. Her dad either." Mrs. Blackstone's breath was hot on Spencer's ear. "It isn't safe."

Spencer didn't know how to respond.

"I'm going to let go and go back to my garden. Don't say anything about this. We're the same, you and me. We love her. I love her, but I need you to know there are tracking and audio devices."

Mrs. Blackstone loosened her grip and knelt back down in front of her lilacs. "Don't fret the spat with your boyfriend," she said in a voice that was louder than necessary. "You two will make up in no time."

Spencer nodded. She assumed that was the right response to the pretend problem. If there were such devices, she certainly didn't want to call attention to herself.

“Molly should be home for dinner in a bit if you want to wait.” Mrs. Blackstone patted the ground around a newly planted flower. “But you might want to just come back another time.”

Spencer wasn’t leaving, even with this added weirdness. “I’ll wait. I can do some homework in her room.” She turned from the garden and headed inside.

She took the stairs two at a time, hoping with every step that the book was still on the floor where she kicked it. If it was back in the locked space, she would have to somehow convince Molly to take it out and let her see the latest entries. The way their week was going, she didn’t see that as much of an option.

The door to Molly’s room was open. Everything looked just as it was when she left on Sunday, including *The Book of Promises*.

She picked the book up and flipped through the pages. She saw a picture of the giraffe she drew in seventh grade after their class did a research project on Kenya. Spencer had wondered how people knew there were nine subspecies of giraffes in the world. Molly had wondered what giraffes smelled like and if they would bite. It gave both of them a reason to want to stay at Giraffe Manor in Nairobi, Kenya.

She flipped a little farther back and stopped at a list that included, “Jump out of a plane holding hands.” She didn’t want to jump out of a perfectly good plane. Not when Molly wrote that in tenth grade, and not now. She agreed to include it in the book because the promise included holding hands, and Spencer loved holding Molly’s hand.

She flipped farther still. There. A page she hadn’t seen before. The words weren’t in Molly’s neat print. The lines were a print cursive fusion. The wobbly mix unnerved Spencer almost as much as holding the book without Molly present.

She thought about the number one rule. Neither girl took the book out of the locked space without the other being present. Spencer knew Molly broke that promise at least once—when she tore out the 1393 South Washington page from third grade. For Spencer, it wasn’t hard to keep the promise. Molly kept the key on a chain around her neck.

She ran her fingers along the edge of the page while she tried to make out what Molly wrote. There were four items. She worked to decipher the sloppy writing:

1. Make HER disappear.
2. Finish the job in Wyoming.
3. Change our names.
4. Cross country with Lucas and Spencer?

She fought the urge to flee. Her flesh crawled with a shiver that started where her fingertips met the page. What was she reading?

She thought about their last conversation. Molly wanted to show her the book, so she wasn’t the *her* who was mentioned in the first line. She and Lucas texted something about a pet when she and Spencer were lying in bed, but Spencer didn’t know if the pet was female.

Maybe the *her* was in Wyoming. Probably not, or there would not be a reason to also finish a job. Maybe *her* was Molly’s mom. Maybe that’s why Mrs. Blackstone warned her to leave. Maybe she knows something she isn’t willing to talk about.

Spencer wished now she had let Molly talk before they fought on Sunday.

What if the *her* was Jasmine? Shit.

She slid her phone out of her pocket and snapped a picture. Then she thought again about what Molly's mom said. She looked for signs of a recording or audio device. The room vibrated around her. Her arm ached from the weight of the book. Certainly, Molly wouldn't go that far.

She considered the book again, flipped to the previous page. There were more entries that Molly didn't share. It took her seven pages to find something she recognized. Maybe Molly wasn't going to show her the page. It could have been any of these, or none.

Many of the items were crossed out.

~~Smoke marijuana.~~

~~Have sex at school.~~

Seriously, Molly? At school?

The pages told a story of Molly becoming more reckless, less concerned with school and more concerned with harming her mom and her sister. She didn't mention her sister's name or age or whereabouts, but Spencer assumed if this person did exist, she was in Wyoming. The question was, "Why?"

Then there were the pages about Jordan and Jasmine and Spencer. Some items validated what Jordan said.

Get Spencer kissed.

Research Jordan.

Good choice?

What is his weakness?

Other items told Spencer exactly how far Molly would go to keep Lucas and herself in their places as pawns in Molly's game.

Go skating with Lucas.

When is the kid in the chair alone?

Find a place to hold her if Jordan needs to be reminded.

1393.

1393? Tears sprung up in Spencer's eyes and ran down her face. Their house. The only thing between the two little girls every day for nine years.

Spencer snapped more pictures and moved to her contact list. She clicked on Jonnie's name. She stared at the little circular photo of the older woman. She pictured her in the little dorm room in Boulder, unscrewing the top on a bottle of rum in preparation for the indulgences of the evening. Unless there were cameras, unless she was being monitored somehow, Jonnie was still an unknown in all of this. It made sense to send the pictures to someone neutral.

She closed the book and slid it back under the edge of the bed. It didn't tell her everything, but it certainly added to the puzzle.

Her phone buzzed.

Jonnie: What is this, girl?

She stayed in a squatted position next to the bed while she typed.

Spencer: At Molly's. Will explain when I'm safely aw...

Something crashed against Spencer's head. She watched the phone slide out of a hand. She knew somewhere in the pain that it was her own, but she couldn't make the connection. For several seconds, her mind played the words in the final pages of *The Book of Promises* on a loop, and the room went dark.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Spencer woke up bathed in sweat.

It was dark inside the room. From one corner, Lucy Ricardo talked to her husband in a high-pitched voice about the baby she was carrying. Spencer turned toward the sound.

Where were her glasses? She blinked, trying to adjust to the slivers of light that snuck in around the edges of thick curtains, Mrs. Brahms's curtains.

The only other light in the room flickered from the small black-and-white television. Mrs. Brahms said color didn't leave enough to the viewer's imagination.

Spencer wondered how many people knew that Lucille Ball was pregnant when the show originally aired. She knew the actress was the first pregnant woman on television only because she listened to hundreds of hours of clips after the think tank she was part of voted to create a series of themes around old television shows.

As her eyes adjusted and her head cleared, Spencer noted through blurry eyes other items in the room. The carpet, blue and green, was a short shag, and the wood furniture was old with scrapes from the cats that she and Molly fed so many years ago.

She looked down at her beige tank top and black shorts. Her eyes skimmed her legs down to her feet. Beige socks with black stripes. No shoes. She remembered putting them on this morning, but not taking them off. On the little round table to her left, she recognized her glasses. She tried to reach for them. Her arm moved less than an inch before something cut into her skin. Around her, at various points and angles, someone had secured rope.

She was tied against Mrs. Brahms's old blue rocker, the one with the green design that she used to trace with her little-girl fingers while she waited for her mom to end the visit and lead her home. She hated that the furniture didn't match. The couch, against the wall facing the two tall windows, was brown and tan with white lines cutting through it at weird slants, and the second chair was burgundy. Between it and the chair she occupied was the same round table that was there when she first entered the home with her mom. Through its middle was a long, gold pole that led up to a lampshade yellowed by time. She could barely make out her glasses folded neatly against the fake wood.

She struggled to remember more about the moments leading up to her blackout.

She was typing a second text to Jonnie when she heard a noise. She had an excuse prepared for Molly. She practiced it several times so the words would flow if she had to use them. As she turned toward the noise, the rehearsed words tumbled forth. Except it wasn't Molly. The shock of that revelation shook her again as she remembered the spade in Mrs. Blackstone's hand, tasted the dirt that flew from its edge as the shiny object connected with her head.

Soothing words from Mrs. Blackstone swum in around the pain. "I'm sorry, sweet Spencer. It's going to be okay. We're all going to be okay. I'll take care of you. Don't worry about a thing, now."

As the woman spoke, Spencer felt a hand stroke her hair, and then she felt a hand beneath a cloth as it made swiping motions against her cheek.

That's where the memory had ended.

"You're awake!"

The voice came out of nowhere and pierced her eardrums.

Spencer squinted. She didn't need her glasses to know it was Ms. Blackstone coming toward her, but she strained to see her anyway.

"Are you in pain?"

"I'm fine, but why am I here? Seriously. Untie me." She didn't know why she said she was fine. Obviously, she wasn't. She was tied to a chair in a house that wasn't her own with a huge knot on her head where she was whacked with a hard object by the woman who stood in front of her now, a woman who was supposed to care about her.

"I can't. I'm so sorry, Spence. We have to talk."

"Can I have my glasses?"

"Not yet. Sorry about the head. Couldn't let you send that text before we talked. You understand. Right?"

Stupid question, Spencer thought. "Why are we here? In Mrs. Brahms's house? How did I get here? I was at your house? Why—"

"Stop. I'm going to tell you, but just stop."

Spencer pulled against the restraints with all her might. Her arms barely moved. She felt the red creep up her neck and settle in her cheeks. "So, talk."

"I'm hungry. Are you hungry? I'm going to get us something to eat. You're hungry, yes? You must be. It's been two hours since... Well, you know."

The cobwebs started to clear from Spencer's mind. She remembered finding *The Book of Promises* where she kicked it when she and Molly fought. She could see the pages in her head, but the words weren't clear. Something about Wyoming. She needed to remember. Her relationship with Molly put so many people in danger. She stalled for time. "I'm hungry, but my mom and AJ will be expecting me home soon." Spencer tugged on the rope again, more gently this time.

"No one's expecting you. You've texted your mom to tell her you're eating at my house. You also texted Jonnie. Who is that, anyway? We do need to figure that out. I told him you sent that silly text picture by mistake. It was supposed to go to someone else who's helping you with a project in handwriting analysis."

Spencer felt a tinge of hope. She referred to Jonnie as he. And there was no mention of Deja. "My glasses. Please." Spencer nodded toward the table. "If I'm going to wait for you to bring food, I should at least be able to see."

"Fair enough." She slid the glasses from the table and onto Spencer's face. "I knew you would understand. We're going to get everything back the way it used to be."

"You know that's impossible. I know you do." Spencer pulled the skin up on her forehead to move her glasses into place. "Something's wrong. Please tell me. I only want to help."

Mrs. Blackstone nodded and Spencer watched her bun bob front to back, front to back, front to back. The movement spread the smell of lilacs around Spencer's face.

"Why did you let me go up to Molly's room if you were just going to knock me out? What's wrong with you?" Spencer asked.

"Something is wrong," Mrs. Blackstone said, "but it isn't with me. Life was good. You were good for her. Now you've ruined everything."

The smell of lilacs mixed with the smell of coffee as Mrs. Blackstone's breath hit Spencer's face. Bile rose in her throat. She swallowed rapidly several times until the burning subsided.

"Are you listening to me, Spencer? You were the perfect complement to her, until you and that boy messed everything up."

Spencer debated her next words. The Mrs. Blackstone who stood in front of her now was not the same person who baked pies and doted on her family. She wanted to say so much, but in the end, she kept most of it to herself and said, “That boy is Molly’s doing, not mine.”

Mrs. Blackstone stood over Spencer. Before today, the five-foot-two, apron-wearing, gray-haired woman was anything but menacing, but now her presence signified something sinister, something Spencer still didn’t understand.

“I gave Molly a chance to fix this mess.” Mrs. Blackstone’s eyes were glassy, like she was fighting tears. “I left you two alone. As usual, she just made it worse. She needs to be reminded again that she has to keep her mouth shut and play by the rules.”

“What rules?” Spencer wiggled in the chair. “Either tell me what’s happening or untie me and let me go home. I won’t speak to any of you again. Simple.”

“Nothing in Molly’s world is simple.” Mrs. Blackstone flattened the creases in her apron. “I have stew on the stove at home. I’m going to get us a bowl. Then we’re going to come up with a plan. Either you’ll be with us, or you’ll die.”

The pasted-on smile reminded Spencer of the smiles painted on the kewpie dolls Molly used to collect.

Mrs. Blackstone touched Spencer’s cheek. “It’s okay. I know you’re both still young. These grown-up dilemmas are hard to understand.”

With that, Mrs. Blackstone was gone, and Spencer was left alone in the house she once dreamed of occupying with the only person in the world she thought she would ever love.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Before the next commercial interrupted *I Love Lucy*, Mrs. Blackstone was back from her own house with two steaming bowls of stew. After opening the curtain on the kitchen window to allow the sun's rays to reach into the dark room, she sat the bowls on a small, square, card table with a rough gray top. "I'm going to loosen these enough to let you remove one arm. Don't try anything. I've done many things to protect Molly." She pulled a knife from her apron pocket and laid it next to her bowl. "Trust me when I say that I'll stop at nothing to keep her safe. Do you understand?"

"Yes." When Spencer was able to pull her arm from beneath the rope, she moved her hand to reintroduce circulation to her digits.

"There we are, Spencer. Is that better?"

Spencer looked at Mrs. Blackstone's apron. Smears of blood and dirt, now dried together, decorated the pale yellows and greens of the pattern. "Thanks. Yes."

She wiggled her fingers.

Mrs. Blackstone put a spoon in Spencer's hand. "Eat up. I know it's one of your favorites."

The steam from the bowl tickled Spencer's nose. She wanted to refuse the food, but she was weak from hunger. She knew she was going to need her strength. She raised the first bite to her lips as Mrs. Blackstone began her story.

Molly did indeed have a sister. Her name was Faith. Molly was three when she was born. Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone talked about having one more child after that, but Molly's dislike of the younger child made them question that choice.

"Molly was a needy child, Spencer. She still is. I know you think you can have a boyfriend if she does, but you can't. None of us can have anything unless Molly says we can." Mrs. Blackstone's voice sounded far away, and her eyes were focused somewhere over Spencer's head. "She listens to us on recording devices her dad helped her install. We all have tracking systems on our phones, even you."

"Then why isn't she here? Why doesn't she know that you kidnapped me?" Spencer asked. Her jaw ached when she talked. She wondered if it was damaged from the blow earlier.

"Our phones are in the kitchen at my house. She's too vain to think we would know to do that or to think I would step in to clean up her mess." Mrs. Blackstone chuckled. She actually chuckled. Spencer shook her head and blinked several times. This had to be a dream. She thought about the times Molly reached out to her when they were apart. How many of those connections were because Molly thought she was somewhere or with someone inappropriate?

Mrs. Blackstone's spoon scraped the bottom of her bowl. The noise pulled Spencer back into the mostly one-sided conversation.

"I used a spare key that old Mrs. Brahms gave me years ago, one I buried in the lilacs. Molly loves lilacs. Did you know that? She doesn't like dirty nails. It was a perfect hiding spot. I think I knew it would come to this someday, that I would have to choose you or her, just like I had to choose her or Faith. She's my oldest daughter, my first love, my heart." Mrs. Blackstone stopped talking, as if those last few words explained everything.

True, Molly was demanding of people's time and she wanted to control situations. That was her personality. Spencer knew plenty of people like that. "Molly wouldn't track me. You're crazy." Spencer pulled at the ropes with her free hand. They were looser now but still too well bound for a quick escape.

"If you don't stop squirming, I'll secure your arm again. I can't have you leaving here until I know we're on the same page." Mrs. Blackstone took another bite of her stew without taking her eyes off Spencer. "I know you don't really like Jordan. Molly knows it, too. She said so. She said you're sneaking around with some girl. Are you, Spencer? Are you cheating on my Molly?"

Spencer's breath caught in her throat. Her vision tunneled. "What are you talking about?"

"I read the book, too, you know." Mrs. Blackstone wiped the corners of her mouth with a paper napkin. "You two thought you hid it so well, but a mother always knows. You were looking at the back of the book when I found you. You didn't go through it all, did you? There's so much Molly wrote that she didn't share."

"It's a book of promises—to each other. How could it be a promise if she didn't tell me?"

"Example. Do you remember a promise about giraffes and visiting Kenya? After you left, she wrote an addendum to that one, Spencer. She promised to get a giraffe to bite someone. She even wrote ways to make it happen unnoticed."

"But—"

"No buts. If you think she cares about you, you're as gullible as she said. That's in there, too, by the way. And so is the cheating part, and the things she intends to do when she finds out for sure."

Spencer knew she shouldn't, but the words left her mouth before she could stop them. "Does she know her name?"

Mrs. Blackstone shook her head. "But she will. She said you were at Red Rocks with her, that she was part of your little geek club, that you went there after your presentation last month."

Spencer searched her memory. If Molly really was tracking her, she knew where Deja lived, and she knew Spencer had been there and lied about it. She needed to get out of here. The only way to do that was to make Mrs. Blackstone see the importance of helping her.

"She thinks I don't like Jordan because she paid him to kiss me. She blamed Lucas, but if what you say is true, she's in control. She controls him, too. She wanted him to kiss me so she would look good to Lucas. She wanted me to think a boy liked me so I would ease up on her about us. She wanted you to think she was the one being wronged. Don't you see?" Spencer's words tumbled out of her mouth. All the while, she focused on Mrs. Blackstone's face and posture. Neither changed.

She took two more bites of the stew, attempting to look unfazed by the conversation, and tried again. "She wants to kill you. Did you know that?" Spencer paused. "She dreams about it, comes to my house and wakes me up afterward to talk her out of actually doing it." Spencer matched Mrs. Blackstone's tone and rhythm as she spoke. "She's unraveling. You know she is. We have to help her."

"You don't know anything about helping her. If you did, you wouldn't be messing around with this girl, or with Jordan. If Molly asked him to kiss you, she did it because she needed something from you, something you weren't giving," Mrs. Blackstone said.

"What she needs is me."

"What she needs is whatever makes her feel good at the moment."

"She hates you, you know," Spencer said. "In fact, I've protected you. If you hurt me, she'll hurt you."

“If I hurt you, she’ll find another you. It’s that simple for her. Believe me. I know. Besides, her father won’t let her hurt me. He needs me to monitor things at home.”

“You have no idea.” Spencer’s voice quavered. “I’m not lying. She wants you dead.”

“You’re such a naïve child,” Mrs. Blackstone said in a voice that sounded far away, like someone else was talking and she was just moving her mouth. “Do you think we don’t know about the *dreams* she has?”

Something about the way the woman said the word “dreams” and the look in her eyes and the tilt of her head told Spencer she knew exactly how Molly felt, and she knew Molly would kill her if she could.

“We pay for her cell, Spencer. We have access to her texts.”

“Then why am I here? Why are we here? She needs help.”

“You know what else I hear?” Mrs. Blackstone ignored Spencer’s questions. “I hear her beg you to wrap your fingers around her neck.” Mrs. Blackstone paused to take another bite of stew.

Spencer waited.

“So many times, I wished you would push too hard for too long, that you would slip and end all of this. Don’t you think I want to go back to Wyoming, to my beautiful Faith? I want that more than anything, but Molly took that from me.”

Spencer watched Mrs. Blackstone’s features grow even more composed in the silence following the confession. She felt her left hand pulling at the cuticles on her right. Molly’s parents knew about the choking game and neither ever said one word. What kind of parents let someone choke their child without intervening?

“You’re judging. I see it.” Mrs. Blackstone stared at Spencer as she sipped her water bottle.

“Molly’s our first born. We love her too much, I guess. Faith suffered because of that. She’ll never be whole after what Molly did. We can’t live for Faith, and so we live for Molly. If she was gone, perhaps we could return to that world, but she isn’t, and we can’t. All I can do now is to protect the one thing that I can control—my little family of three.”

Mrs. Blackstone’s last words made the hair stand out on the back of Spencer’s neck.

“You’re like a daughter to me. I couldn’t save Faith, but I can save you, even if that means we don’t ever leave this house.”

Something danced in Spencer’s peripheral vision. A face in the kitchen window. She looked away and looked again. A brown streak disappeared below the windowsill. Another glance revealed nothing but spring’s egg-blue sky. Spencer put her spoon in her bowl and held her breath until she gained control of her palpitating heart.

If Mrs. Blackstone caught on to her sudden change in attention, she didn’t let on. She adjusted her eyes slightly, trying to catch another glimpse, but there was nothing.

“Why did he hit her? Her dad, that is.” Spencer forced herself to look at Mrs. Blackstone and not the window. “She told me her dad hit her, and it was your fault, that she bit you to prove you weren’t in control.”

The realization that Spencer knew about the altercation didn’t seem to faze Mrs. Blackstone. “It was my fault.” Her voice was even and steady. “I told Molly it was time. She flew into a rage, knocked the toaster off the counter, threatened me with a knife. When that didn’t work, she bit me. Not the first time, mind you. Barely broke the skin. I get it. She has to have an outlet. Her dad can’t let it go too far, though. He was forced to slap her to restore order in the household.”

“What did you tell her it was time for?” Spencer watched the woman’s chest move methodically in and out.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Mrs. Blackstone’s look and tone told Spencer she was growing tired of the discussion. Her voice crept to almost a yell. “This, of course.” She made a sweeping gesture with her arms and then pointed to Spencer’s position on the chair. “You!”

Spencer watched drops of stew fall as Mrs. Blackstone swung her hand.

“So, what you’re saying is Molly doesn’t agree with your plan to get me out of her life.” Spencer’s voice became edged. “Why are we here if Molly doesn’t want me gone? Why are we here if you love me like a daughter?”

“Molly doesn’t know what’s best for her.” Mrs. Blackstone’s voice returned to its previous monotone state. “I’m the protector, even when that means moving her across country or getting rid of a pet.”

“I’m not a pet.”

Mrs. Blackstone stood and picked up the knife from beside her bowl. She moved the card table to the side and walked over to Spencer. She put her free hand on Spencer’s cheek. Her palm was cold against the heated flesh. “Some pets have four legs, and some have two, Spencer dear. Do you think for one minute I’m going to allow either to ruin my family?” She paused. “I do love you like my own child.” Her fingers stroked Spencer’s face as a tear ran down her own. “This isn’t easy, Spencer. Not easy at all. If I thought you would come with us and do what Molly needed, I wouldn’t kill you. But you won’t. The last few months prove you won’t.”

Spencer wanted to recoil from the touch. She also wanted to lean into it. The last few months were confusing and scary, and the hand was familiar, loving. She remembered that same touch when Molly didn’t come home, and she sat eating cherry pie in the Blackstone kitchen. She remembered the fingers stroking her cheek when Mrs. Blackstone told her that Sugar was gone.

Spencer thought about Cinnamon curled safely on her bed, about how scared she was when she found him hurt. Then she thought again about Sugar. Did Mrs. Blackstone kill Sugar? If she did, could it have been her, and not Molly, who hurt Cinnamon? Did she mean to kill him? That thought snapped Spencer back into this moment, the moment when the woman she loved as she loved her own mother was threatening her life.

“Bullshit it isn’t easy,” she screamed as she recoiled and spat at the pale hand. “Don’t touch me again. What is wrong with you? Molly will hate you. I hate you. This is our house. Hers and mine. You’ll never be welcomed here.”

Spencer didn’t know if any of what she said was true. Honestly, Molly probably hated her more than she hated her mom. She proved that enough times over the last year. Spencer was a convenience, a toy to be played with when it suited the player.

Mrs. Blackstone wiped the back of her hand on her apron. “We both know my daughter isn’t well. The difference between us is that you still think she can change.”

Spencer risked a quick glance to the kitchen window. Nothing.

“Have you ever heard her tell me she loves me?”

Mrs. Blackstone didn’t wait for an answer.

“You haven’t. I used to rock her and sing to her. I held her when she fell and chose her above all others. I did everything a mom’s supposed to do, and I’ve never heard my daughter say she loves me.”

Spencer contemplated the woman’s words, tried to remember the times Molly said she loved any of them.

“You can’t think of a time, can you? It’s okay. She does love me in her own way.” Mrs. Blackstone ran her fingers down the handle of the knife. “Let me finish my story. You’ll see. I’m saving you. You owe me, Spencer. And it’s time to pay up.”

“By letting you kill me?”

Mrs. Blackstone smiled. “Letting is hardly the correct term, is it?”

“Fuck you.”

“Language.”

Spencer looked down at her lap where one hand remained tied. It was unlikely she could get the rest of the rope undone and fight off Mrs. Blackstone’s knife at the same time, but it was a chance she would have to take if she couldn’t convince the woman to let her go.

Mrs. Blackstone pulled her folding chair to the side of the card table and sat down. She remained quiet while Spencer fumbled at her restraints.

When Spencer looked up, she continued. “I made Molly go back to Wyoming. She didn’t want to. I think that’s why she tried to kill Faith again. She knew I wanted to go home. I was so happy when her dad agreed to send her.”

Mrs. Blackstone’s face softened and her eyes closed.

“I just knew it was time for us to be a real family again. We don’t belong here. We belong on the ranch. We belong with our sweet Faith.”

“What happened?” Spencer kept her speech low. She wanted Mrs. Blackstone to hear stillness in her voice, to be lulled into continuing. It worked.

“Faith healed from her wounds. She wanted me home. I told her to be nice, to convince Molly she wasn’t afraid, that she wouldn’t tell.” Her voice caught.

Mrs. Blackstone’s eyes opened. “She tried. She tried to be nice to Molly. She even called me to say it was working, that we were going to be a family again. Two hours later, she was back in the hospital, barely breathing. My husband’s sister was told to prepare for the worst. She was hit by a car and thrown into the path of another. Neither driver saw what happened, but they both said Molly was watching from the curb. She didn’t even kneel by her sister’s side. Faith lived, but she hasn’t uttered one word or moved one limb in all the years since that day.”

Spencer sat perfectly still. Her mind raced.

“You want to know what happened? She wanted to be with you. She put you above her own sister. You. No one but she and Faith know what really happened that day, but my heart knows. Molly pushed her sister in front of an oncoming car so she would be rushed away and back to you.” She pounded the small card table that held their meal. Stew bounced inside the bowls, but nothing spilled out.

“Our name wasn’t Blackstone in Wyoming. It was Babak. We changed it to save Molly. She was so young. She didn’t know what she was doing, and they were going to take her away. Her dad and I didn’t know if Faith would survive her fall. Back then it was us who heard the doctor say to plan for the worst. We thought our Faith was dead, and Molly was devastated. I should have paid attention to the signs the first time. I should have never left our Faith.” Mrs. Blackstone brought her eyes down until they met Spencer’s.

The bile was back in Spencer’s throat. She wanted to avert her gaze. She didn’t. “Where is she now, Mrs. Blackstone?”

Mrs. Blackstone stood without speaking. She moved the knife from one hand to the other. “She’s all I have, Spencer. She isn’t crazy. We just have to start over. That’s all. We just have to start over.”

Spencer wondered if the knife was the same one Molly used a few days ago in her room. She wiggled her restrained arm slightly as she judged the distance from it to the edge of the table. She moved her feet apart and together, apart and together. The rope cut into her ankles, her calves, and just below her knees. Her free hand and the constant press and release loosened the rope

enough to increase the space between skin and thread, but not enough to quickly remove another limb. The table was approximately six inches to her right and six inches forward. She continued to work her legs slowly back and forth.

“You can’t stop this from happening, Spencer.” Mrs. Blackstone knelt in front of her and put one hand on each knee. She pushed hard against each one until both were still.

Spencer’s stomach swirled like the blue and green of the chair. She took several slow breaths and put her free hand atop the hand in which Mrs. Blackstone squeezed the knife. “I love her as much as you do. You know that. I would do anything for her.”

When she responded, Mrs. Blackstone’s voice was the type of fake that Spencer heard when people who didn’t care for each other met in the grocery store—all sweet, with a hint of underlying impatience. “Then why do you want to tell her secrets?”

“She paid a boy to kiss me, and when I confronted her, she hit me. She lied to me. She tried to kill my cat, for fuck’s sake.”

Mrs. Blackstone moved her hand from under Spencer’s.

Both women watched as Spencer’s hand fell back into her own lap.

Spencer stared into Mrs. Blackstone’s eyes and moved her hand to cover Mrs. Blackstone’s other hand. She gave it a light squeeze. “Please. I know you love her, but you don’t want to do this.” She looked at the shiny knife poised inches from her face.

“You ungrateful child.” Mrs. Blackstone pointed the silver tip at Spencer’s nose. “None of that had to happen. If you did your part, we wouldn’t be here.”

Spencer squeezed Mrs. Blackstone’s hand until she felt her nails push deep into the soft skin.

Mrs. Blackstone glanced down and back up. “You could push your fingernails through my hand, and it wouldn’t hurt as much as being betrayed by you. All you had to do was love her.”

“All? All I had to do was love her?” Spencer stopped squeezing before the anger making its way through her body and into her hand drew blood from her captor. She needed to keep a level head. “That’s all I did for years.”

“Why did you stop?” Mrs. Blackstone asked, her tone softer for a moment.

“Because I loved her and followed her and did whatever she asked, and it didn’t matter.” Spencer made a fist, digging her nails into her own skin. “You sent her to Wyoming. You all kept a secret from the world, from me. Her sickness is on your hands, not mine. I didn’t threaten a disabled little girl to make someone do as I said, she did. She’s the one who didn’t want Lucas to know we had sex, who wanted both of us but only wanted me to know.”

“Because you questioned her. Can’t you see? What you did was wrong.” Mrs. Blackstone’s voice raised on the last word.

Spencer dug her nails deeper. She didn’t recognize this person in front of her with the red cheeks and glossy eyes.

“You started wanting more. You, Spencer. Why didn’t you just kill her instead? Why didn’t you take that pain and channel it through your thumbs against her throat? Now it’s too late. Now people are going to get hurt if I don’t clean up the mess. Don’t you see?”

“I played because I love her. I never want to hurt her. I just want her to go back to being who she was. That’s all. That’s all. That’s all I want.”

Spencer sensed movement again from the kitchen. For the briefest of seconds, she felt hope rise in her chest. Then she felt it—Molly’s presence. It wasn’t someone coming to save her. She felt Molly. She was close. She glanced at the window when she thought Mrs. Blackstone wouldn’t notice. Nothing.

“Molly won’t leave you, so I have to remove you.” Mrs. Blackstone pushed hard again against Spencer’s knees, this time raising herself to a standing position. She smoothed the front of her apron.

The shiny surface of the knife sent a glint of light onto the rope around Spencer’s waist.

“It’s time, Spencer. I need to get home. Mr. Blackstone will be home soon. He likes dinner at precisely six thirty.”

“No. No.” Spencer begged the woman to listen, to give her more information about what Molly did to her sister. “I deserve to know.”

“It was my fault. Faith fell from a tree—”

“She told me she tried to kill her,” Spencer interrupted. “Did you know she told me? That’s not an accident. Please, Mrs. Blackstone. You must know that, too, or you wouldn’t have left.”

“I never would have left my sweet Faith. But she was broken. There were tubes and machines everywhere. Her dad insisted after the police came to tell us that the neighbor saw Molly hovering above Faith as she dangled from a branch. We agreed it was too iffy to stay. We couldn’t lose both daughters. Faith had our extended family. Molly didn’t. His sister wanted us to lock her up. Our whole family wanted us to give up on her.”

“Why send Molly back? Why send her back alone when she was thirteen? You had to know she didn’t want to go. What a selfish move on your part. And now you want to blame me. I didn’t even know you were hiding. How could I know?”

“Don’t try to—”

A crash from the kitchen interrupted Mrs. Blackstone’s raised voice.

Both women froze.

A moment later, Molly’s slender form appeared in the doorway between the kitchen and living area.

“Well, isn’t this convenient?” Molly dusted off the tiny shards of glass from the sliding glass back door and made her way into the living room. A sledgehammer dangled from her right hand. “I should have known you were here when the trackers went still. Are you trying to fix it again, Mom? Are you going to kill her, too?”

Spencer watched Molly’s movements.

Molly’s eyes looked hard and shallow, but when she met Spencer’s gaze, her face softened. “You’re welcome, Spence.”

Spencer looked from Molly to her mom and then to her restraints. “For what, exactly? Last I checked, nothing is happening here I should be thankful for.”

“I just stopped Lucas from hurting your boyfriend’s little sister. He wanted to send a message for Jordan to mind his business and honor his deal.”

“Why are you guys stuck on this?” Spencer asked. “Jordan and I are together. His little sister has zero to do with any of this.” Spencer’s head pounded. She talked around a tongue that was suddenly too big for her mouth. “No one needs to get hurt.”

“Funny. That’s exactly what I told him.” Molly dropped into Spencer’s lap and moved Spencer’s arm around her waist. The sledgehammer thudded against the side of the chair. “And as long as you keep it that way, we can be together.” Molly kissed Spencer square on the mouth and then nuzzled her face into the crook of her neck. “My mom wants us to be together. Don’t you, Mom?” Molly looked over at her mom before sinking back into Spencer’s neck. “You’re her secret weapon, Spence. Problem is, I figured it out and decided it wasn’t gonna play out that way.”

Molly felt so fragile—so thin and slight. It filled Spencer with an overwhelming urge to keep her safe. The truth was, even without the restraints she would have stayed in that moment.

All she ever wanted before the last few months was to feel Molly's easy breaths against her skin, to feel the love from the woman who saved her in fourth grade from the hateful words and deeds of other popular children. The truth was, Spencer was in awe of Molly's calm in the face of danger. Even today, tied to a chair and witnessing a showdown between a mother and daughter whose connection was something to fear, Spencer remained vulnerable to Molly's words of love.

Mrs. Blackstone put her hands atop Molly's shoulders and pulled. "Get up, Molly. Now." Her eyes drifted between the two young women.

Spencer felt Molly's body tense. She didn't move. "Why don't you finish your story, Mom? Let's hear how it ends."

"Shut your mouth, Molly."

Molly stayed on Spencer's lap. "I could untie her, Mom. Could you stop me in time? Should we try?" Molly reached down and started to loosen the rope around Spencer's feet.

Spencer moved her legs back and forth to aid the process. The game didn't last long, though, before the toe of Mrs. Blackstone's garden sneaker connected with Molly's chin.

Molly jerked upright. "What the hell?"

"I told you to get up." Mrs. Blackstone was turning the knife handle over and over in her hand. "If you touch the ropes again, I will kill her."

This time Molly obeyed her mom's order.

"That's better. You know what we have to do."

Molly rubbed the side of her face. She was now standing next to her mom. At least an inch taller than the older version of herself, Molly still seemed small in comparison. "We, Mom? What *we* have to do? She at least deserves to know that I didn't know about Faith being alive, that you told me she was dead, that I killed her, that I would go to prison if anyone ever learned the truth."

"Molly—"

"Fuck you, Mom. I don't need you to clean up my messes anymore, especially if you're going to clean up this one like you did with Faith. I'm not changing my name. Not for you." Molly looked at Spencer. "But if you and Lucas want to work something out, well..."

Mrs. Blackstone put the knife against Molly's cheek and turned her face back until they were once again eye to eye.

"Knife or not, Mother, I'm not moving. I'm not going back to Wyoming, at least not to stay." Molly laughed. "I do have some unfinished business there. Maybe even an unspeaking, unmoving Faith is too much. What do you think, Mother? Should we take care of that annoyance once and for all?"

"Let me remind you, I have the knife now, Molly. I love you more than life, but I won't let you get to Faith again."

"Kill me then. Monsters should die. That's what you told Dad."

Spencer watched the two women. They were face-to-face, Mrs. Blackstone's round belly traversing the minuscule space between. They talked in family shorthand, so Spencer didn't fully understand. What she did understand was both women were sick, and there would be no winner in the battle.

"You weren't old enough to understand, Molly. We needed you to do as we said to keep us all safe." Mrs. Blackstone's knuckles were white against the handle of the knife, as if she was holding on for dear life.

Molly turned her eyes toward Spencer but kept her body square with her mom. "Did she get to the part of story time where she reveals my reward-driven and punishment-resistant personality? My childhood diagnosis of conduct disorder? Did she tell you that you were my

reward for learning a new name and playing my role flawlessly? You know what's the most interesting in all of this? I think I actually cared about you."

Spencer laughed. "Do you even know what love is?"

Molly turned and leaned in close to Spencer's face. She cupped Spencer's cheeks with both hands and brought their lips together until they vibrated with Molly's whispered words, "I didn't say love. I said care." She pressed her fingertips into Spencer's soft skin before releasing her grip.

"If you care about me, how can you hurt me? How can you need me and not give a shit about how I feel?" Spencer asked.

Molly returned to her spot in front of Mrs. Blackstone without answering. She glanced at the knife in her mom's hand and back at her face. "Don't even think about it. You may have that in your hand, but you're far from in control."

The knife caught the sun from the kitchen window and reflected another beam of light, this time across Spencer's face. She moved to avoid it piercing her eyes. When she did, she saw something else move. She watched. Nothing else happened. Like the brief illusion of the face of someone in the window, the movement was there and then gone.

When Spencer returned her attention to the room, Molly was once again in front of her. She touched Spencer's chin with her fingers until Spencer's face was tilted up and their eyes met. "Let's make one thing clear. No one is in control except me. Not in this room, and not in our world. I don't need her or my dad, though I do fancy him a bit more than anyone but you. But, and this is a but you should heed, if I decided to move on, you wouldn't even exist tomorrow. My only point is I have no desire to harm you physically, which means I care."

"Should I be thankful?"

"You tell me. Was it you I dreamed of killing? Was it you whose head I bashed in a million times against the doorknob in my kitchen?"

Molly turned slowly. "You. You I want to harm." Molly stood still for only a moment and then moved like a cat attacking its prey. Before either Spencer or Mrs. Blackstone knew what was happening, Molly twisted Mrs. Blackstone's arm behind her back and the knife fell to the ground.

Spencer couldn't see Molly's face, but she heard the smile in her voice. "That's more like it." Molly kept the arm twisted in place while she reached for the knife. "We're all better off with this in my hand, aren't we, Mother?"

Mrs. Blackstone looked past Molly to Spencer and back to her daughter. "We can fix this, Molly. Don't you see? It's her fault we're here. She wanted to tell Jonnie about your book."

"Jonnie?" Molly dropped her mom's arm and whipped around to Spencer. "Who the fuck is Jonnie?"

Spencer flinched. One of the rules in *The Book of Promises* was to never have a friend the other didn't know about. Spencer broke the rule. She tried to come up with a response that Molly would accept that wouldn't expose Jonnie.

Behind Molly, it was Mrs. Blackstone's turn to smile.

"Someone I met when I went to check out Clarian. Someone irrelevant who knew about the school and program." Spencer intentionally left out pronouns. She hoped Molly would assume Jonnie was a he. It would help protect her from Molly's anger.

Molly took a position where she could continue to hold her mother's arm securely behind her back and see Spencer with a slight tilt of her head. "Why would you talk to him about our promises?"

"I wouldn't," Spencer said. "Why would I?"

"She's lying, Molly," Mrs. Blackstone cut in. "I can show you text messages on her phone."

Molly didn't acknowledge her words. She stayed transfixed on Spencer.

Spencer didn't dare look away even as Molly's eyes bore a hole to her soul. "I came over to look at our book. You asked me to look with you and I pushed you away. I wanted to know what you wanted me to see."

"And did you see?" Molly asked Spencer before turning to Mrs. Blackstone. "Did she see, Mother?"

Spencer answered before Mrs. Blackstone could speak. "I saw your list." She started to mention the additional pages but decided against it. "Who is the she you want to get rid of, Molly? Is it your mom? Your sister? You said you wanted us to run away, so it isn't me. Who is it?"

Mrs. Blackstone moaned and twisted her body away from Molly.

Molly chuckled. "Did that hurt, Mommy dearest?" She turned her full attention to Mrs. Blackstone. "Quit struggling and I won't twist. Keep it up, and I will slit your pansy-assed throat before another moan escapes your lips."

"Molly. Please. I'll help you get rid of her." She pointed to Spencer with her free hand. "I can get us new names. We'll start over."

Molly's full-belly laughter orbited the room and pounded Spencer's eardrums. She looked past Molly and her mom and out the kitchen window. She had no idea of time. The sun was low in the sky, but it was still light. When the sun set completely, the flashing black-and-white light from the *I Love Lucy* marathon would warn a passerby of life in the house. She glanced at the heavy drapes in the room they occupied and back at the kitchen. The broken glass door and small window faced the backyard. No one would be there without reason.

The faces she imagined never appeared again.

Molly and her mom were sparring with words that sounded like growls muted by thick fog.

Spencer continued to loosen her constraints while the two women fought about who was in control, about who knew best for their family.

Spencer easily removed the arm that rested beneath loose ties, but her legs and waist were still securely fastened to the chair.

Any optimism she felt in the first hour was replaced with thoughts of her family, of Cinnamon, and of Jordan, Jonnie, and Deja. She hoped no one she loved found her tied to this chair, dead. Mrs. Blackstone's voice found its way through the fog and into Spencer's head. "The fact remains, we cannot trust her. You do it, or I will."

"I don't need to get rid of her. I own her." Molly was laughing again. She poked Spencer's shoulder with her finger. "You know where Lucas is, Spencer? He's at the skating rink. Did you know there's an open skate today? Three guesses who loves to roll around the rink during an open skate."

"Please, Molly." Spencer fought the urge to manipulate the ropes and charge Molly. The only thing that kept her from attempting it was she knew they both wanted her dead, and she couldn't fight both. She tried to appeal to Molly. "You don't want to hurt a little girl. I know you don't."

"You know exactly nothing that I haven't taught you to know." Molly drug her mom by the twisted arm. When they were in front of Spencer, she forced her mom into the folding chair and released her arm. "Should we have more story time?"

Mrs. Blackstone rubbed her wrist.

"I don't need you anymore, Mother. I'm not eight. I decide who lives and dies. You can no longer determine that."

Spencer remembered Mrs. Blackstone lying on the floor and Molly holding the knife. She wondered what else happened that day, what happened the day Mrs. Blackstone didn't answer the door, what else she didn't know about this family.

"But you need your dad, don't you?" Mrs. Blackstone countered. "If you kill me, he'll abandon you. We've established that, too, haven't we?" Mrs. Blackstone's voice didn't waver. "I'll tell him it wasn't an accident. I'll tell him how you slammed your shoe down on your sister's hands until she let go of the branch. I'll tell him about Sugar and Cinnamon. Is that what you want?"

Sugar? Spencer dug her fingernails into her palms. The thought of Molly hurting Sugar filled her with a fresh surge of trepidation. They were kids when Sugar disappeared—not even teenagers. Her chest rose and fell in shallow gasps. She needed to get hold of herself. What would Jonnie say if she were here right now?

Don't give in to the anxiety. Think about the situation.

She focused on the painful sensation in her palms to keep herself anchored and cast her eyes about the room until they landed on a picture of Mr. and Mrs. Brahms and their oldest son. It was taken courtside against a sea of red and black. Mr. Brahms stood stoically behind his son and his wife, who leaned in against their son, her head resting against his bright red polo. She was the only one who looked happy.

Spencer saw herself in the photo, but it was Molly and her mom who stood stoically behind and beside her. Except tonight she was no longer happy. She knew the other two people in her mind's photo were caught in their own cat-and-mouse game, a game that could cost Spencer her life.

A new movement drew her attention from behind Mrs. Blackstone. This time Deja stood in the kitchen, partially hidden by the refrigerator. Reruns of *I Love Lucy* covered her movements. Spencer's pulse beat in her ears. She blinked. She was still there. She looked away. Back. Still there.

Deja put her finger to her lips.

The room spun around Spencer. She looked at the knife in Molly's hand. The shimmer of light from the blade moved in and out of focus. She needed to keep attention off of Deja. She blinked several times, took a deep breath, and asked, "What is she talking about, Molly? What did you do to Sugar? To your sister? Look at me."

Spencer asked questions as quickly as she could think of them to keep both women focused on her. She didn't know how Deja could help, if she could help, but she was her only hope.

"This is getting tedious. I didn't kill Sugar. My mom did. She said she took her away to protect her, but she didn't. She's crazy. I know it. My dad knows it. Everyone in Wyoming knows it."

"Molly Janel Blackstone." Molly's mom started to rise from her chair.

Molly raised the knife and swung it in her mom's direction. "Bad idea."

Mrs. Blackstone leaned backward just in time to evade the tip of the knife.

Spencer glanced into the kitchen and quickly back to the two women. Deja was no longer there. Perhaps she imagined it again or perhaps she left the way she came, under the cover of an old fifties *I Love Lucy* soundtrack. How many reruns played while they were here? Two since Mrs. Blackstone returned with the food. One before, plus the one that was playing when she woke up.

"You've been listening to her, Spence. She admitted she brought you here to kill you. Bat. Shit. Crazy. You believe me, don't you?"

Mrs. Blackstone let out a deep sigh. “What difference does it make, Molly? You’re not okay. If we don’t get this taken care of, you’ll go away forever. I’ll show them where you buried Sugar in the rose garden. I watched you from the window, you know. I watched you put the shovel away as calm as anyone ever was and walk toward Spencer’s house. I planted the roses not because you were upset over the loss, but because I wanted to remember the exact spot.” Mrs. Blackstone reached up and touched Molly’s cheek. “My dear daughter, I’ll tell them how you came home with blood on your hands after you hurt Cinnamon. And let’s not forget Faith. I wasn’t there when you almost killed her—twice, but I know.”

“You’re right. You weren’t there. You don’t know. You said you believed it was an accident, and then you ran away and made us change everything. I knew you didn’t believe me. Dad knew it, too.”

“I knew it wasn’t an accident. You’re my child. How could I let them take you? I couldn’t lose two daughters in one day.”

“Shut up!” Spencer screamed at Mrs. Blackstone.

Molly nodded. “That’s right, Mom. Shut up.” Her tone never changed.

“You, too.” Spencer looked at Molly. “You’ve been lying to me for months, years even. One day you love me. The next day you hate me. I don’t know who you are. Either of you.” Spencer tugged again against the restraints, this time with both free hands. She didn’t care anymore if Molly saw her. Being still was not helping, and if Deja was in the kitchen, she would need help.

“Spencer,” Molly started to say.

Spencer made the sign for silence with her hand. “Spencer, nothing. I didn’t do anything, yet I’m tied to a chair. If you want to open your mouth, do it to explain this shit to me.”

Molly put the tip of the knife against Spencer’s cheek and pulled it down to her chin. The motion left thin tiny droplets of blood in its wake. She didn’t speak. Instead, she turned to her mom.

Mrs. Blackstone stood.

This time Molly didn’t stop her.

The two were face-to-face in front of Spencer.

Mrs. Blackstone spoke first. “We were happy here before Spencer hooked up with that Jordan boy.”

Molly stared at her mom. “You really believe that shit? You told me I killed my sister, that I was looney tunes, and that I would go to juvenile hall for murder unless we moved away in the middle of the night.” Her voice fluctuated for the first time. “I had nightmares—do have nightmares. I made a friend; you’re trying to kill her. You’re the common denominator. Not me.”

“Give me the knife, Molly.” Mrs. Blackstone took a tiny step forward and leaned in.

The two women now stood close enough for their noses to touch. Spencer pulled more on the ties around her legs. It was easier now. Neither woman seemed to know she was there. She worked quickly. Each knot seemed its own entity, wrapped and rewrapped around the chair and knotted again.

Each time she looked toward the kitchen, Deja was there and then gone, there and then gone. She needed a way to signal to her when the ropes were loose enough to break free. She watched Molly and her mom, glanced to the lamp table next to her chair. She would have to count on Deja to be aware of her movements.

A shadow sprang from the kitchen. Spencer watched as it moved across the room and landed on Mrs. Blackstone’s back.

Instead of trying to figure out who was on her back, Mrs. Blackstone tried to save herself from falling. The floor shot out from under the women, and they crashed into Molly. Deja tightened her grip around Mrs. Blackstone's throat.

Spencer pulled one foot free and then the other as the three women whipped around one another on the ground. The center rope still held her tightly against the green-and-blue swirls. She worked her fingers across the knots.

Deja was standing, now, her foot coming up from the floor and pounding at Mrs. Blackstone's chest.

Molly rolled away from her mom. She still clutched the knife in one hand. When she looked at Spencer, she smiled. "Two birds. One stone. Huh, Spence?" She raised the knife.

"Deja! Behind you!" Spencer's warning came out with more strength than she felt.

Deja rolled to her feet. She spun as Molly sliced at the air to her left. She spun again as it came from the right.

Spencer tugged frantically at the rope.

Deja turned again and again as Molly lashed out.

Mrs. Blackstone staggered to her feet; her hand pressed against the area of her ribs where Deja's foot connected seconds before. "Stab her, Molly. End this."

Molly hesitated. She glanced from her mom to Spencer, as if trying to decide who was most important to her future.

The split second was all Deja needed. She bent low and rammed headfirst into Molly's side.

Molly landed heavily on one knee.

The knife bounced against the floor and came to a stop at the far edge of the table that held the photo of the smiling Mrs. Brahms.

For an instant, the only sound in the room was Lucy Ricardo telling the tired, rundown, listless world that she's their Vitavigavegivat Girl.

Everything moved in slow motion, as the room shifted in Spencer's vision, changing constantly as images superimposed themselves on top of one another. The last knot gave way under her fingers, and she fought to get herself free.

Mrs. Blackstone lunged past Molly and Deja and landed atop the knife.

Molly tumbled forward.

Spencer focused where Molly had one arm clenched to her side. Blood darkened the cloth of her shirt.

"I will kill you." Molly twisted until she could see Deja. "You shouldn't have come. You might have lived." And then Molly was on her feet and her hands were around Deja's neck. She lifted Deja by the throat until her sneakers dangled off the ground.

Spencer's vision swam red, and her head pounded. She stood. One ankle caught in the rope coiled at her feet, and she lost her balance, falling back onto the chair. It took her several seconds to register the blade in Mrs. Blackstone's hand. She was jabbing it into the air as she neared Deja and Molly.

Deja was Spencer's priority. "No, you don't!" she screamed. She dove into a roll and kicked hard against Molly's knee.

Deja fell to the floor, fighting to get air back. For a moment, she looked like she would puke, but she managed to straighten up. Pure rage crossed her face. Her eyes met Spencer's for a moment before they each spun in opposite directions.

Spencer charged Mrs. Blackstone, fists flailing. Mrs. Blackstone was ready. One fast swipe to Spencer's unprotected gut and Spencer felt a burning sensation, lost her balance and landed with a thud against the card table. She felt sweat bead up on her neck and drip down the inside of her arms.

Mrs. Blackstone swiped the knife at Spencer's face. The movement missed its mark. Both women looked to the right just in time to see the sledgehammer pummel Mrs. Blackstone's forearm. The momentum of the blow carried her forward, and her elbow hit Spencer hard at the base of her rib cage. With a garish *whuff*, she felt half her breath abandon her body.

Molly stood still, the sledgehammer once again dangling from her hand. "Let me remind all of you. I decide who lives and dies."

A sudden noise and flash of light startled Spencer. It came from the kitchen. Deja recovered from the surprise first and sprang toward the clatter. "In here! Help us! Please! In here!"

Molly cursed.

Spencer felt a wave of heat and a twist of pain from the slice in her abdomen. She couldn't move. She needed time to focus, and there wasn't time.

"Run," Mrs. Blackstone called out to Molly. "I'll explain everything to them. You'll be okay. Run to your father. Tell him I tried."

But it was too late for anyone to run. Police swarmed the room. Several minutes later, Spencer was in an ambulance, Deja by her side. "Where are they taking her?" Spencer asked.

"To jail, I assume." Deja's voice was laced with sadness and something else. Annoyance perhaps? Spencer wasn't sure. "Her mom tried to refuse treatment for the cut on her side and the crushed hand. Said she wanted to be with Molly. She's crazy. Her arm is smashed."

Spencer nodded. "How did they know to come to Mrs. Brahms's? How did you?"

"I'll tell you all about it. For now, rest. The paramedic says you need to go to the hospital."

"Jordan and Jasmine? Oh my god. Molly said something about Lucas being at the skating rink." Spencer tried to sit up.

Deja put her hand against Spencer's chest. "Stay down, dork. They're fine. Jonnie called Jordan when you sent that cryptic text and then didn't answer. Jordan freaked out when he saw it, told Jonnie everything. She sent him to check on Jasmine and me to check on you." She touched Spencer's face. "I'm just sorry I didn't call the police then. We didn't know. I didn't know. I went to your house. No one was there. I was sitting on your porch waiting for you to get home when I heard glass shatter. I called Jordan. He told me Lucas was at the rink. Said he couldn't leave."

"I thought I saw you look in the window before Molly came."

"Maybe you were feeling me trying to find you."

"Maybe." Spencer smiled. She liked the thought of that.

"After I decided to check out the sound and saw the glass everywhere, I did look in the window. I couldn't tell exactly what was happening, but I saw enough to call the police. I tried to wait for them, but you needed me..."

"Deja?"

"Yeah, Chloe?"

"Kiss me."

Deja gave her a smile that was so genuinely sweet that it sent an unexpected warmth through Spencer's body. It would take time to sort out the day. For now, it was enough that no one lost their life and Deja was here with her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Two weeks later, Spencer returned to school. Her external wounds were healed, and she was working closely with a therapist on the journey to heal internally. Today was part of that healing process. It was her first visit to see Molly, who was transferred from jail to a psychiatric ward after repeated attempts of self harm. Today she would tell Molly goodbye.

When she walked into the room, Molly stared through her, unmoving.

“Hey, Molly. How are you feeling?” As soon as she said it, she wished she hadn’t.

Molly snickered. She continued to stare.

“Sorry. This sucks. I know.” Spencer walked to the edge of the bed. In the week Molly was here, just as in the week she was in jail, she proved to be a danger to herself and others. The designation won her a room devoid of all furniture except for the small hospital bed and one small metal nightstand that was screwed into the floor.

Spencer looked toward the female orderly who stood just inside the door. She was here for everyone’s protection, but it was still unnerving.

“Do you want me to go?” Spencer asked.

“I love you, Spencer.”

“I know.”

“I love Lucas, too.”

“I know.” Spencer’s voice remained even. She couldn’t get Molly’s hateful words about caring versus loving out of her head, but she wouldn’t inject any more pain into the goodbye.

“It isn’t wrong, you know.” Molly took Spencer’s hand and pulled it across the metal rail of her bed.

“Molly. I know.” Spencer turned until she could comfortably take both of Molly’s hands into her own. Molly wasn’t a monster, at least not to Spencer. She looked into the eyes of the woman that was her best childhood friend. There was no trace of the madness of the previous weeks and months. “Who you love isn’t in question, here. You know that, right? I love you. Lucas loves you. But you have to love you, too. Let them help you, Molly. Please.”

“Lucas said he wants to marry me. Me. Molly Janel Blackstone. He doesn’t know me, though, does he?”

Spencer talked to Lucas before she came today. He was a mess. He did love Molly, probably as much as Spencer did. It would take a long time for him to heal. “You’ll have to ask Lucas that. I can’t tell you what he knows and doesn’t.”

Molly looked in the direction of the door. She didn’t acknowledge Spencer’s response to her question. “Where’s my mom?”

Molly asked this question when Spencer called, as well. The doctors said it was short term memory loss caused by trauma. “She’s in jail.”

“Like this one?” Molly lifted their hands and made a sweeping motion. “I hope so. It’s so cozy here.”

Spencer took a deep breath. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen her.” The truth was that Mrs. Blackstone wasn’t in a place like this. She was in the local jail awaiting trial. So was Mr. Blackstone. Spencer avoided the news as much as possible and asked her family and friends to tell

her what she needed to know about the growing list of charges against the Price family, nothing more.

“Why are you here?” The words were more like an accusation than a question.

“You were my best friend. I don’t think it was all a lie, Molly. I want you to feel better. I want to feel better.”

One solitary tear rolled down Molly’s cheek. Spencer didn’t know if it was real or fake. Today, as the two women stood face-to-face in a room surrounded by the smell of antiseptic, as the woman in the white lab coat stood just inside the locked door for Spencer’s protection, as their world changed forever, Spencer chose real. At least it was a start.

Spencer bent forward and kissed Molly’s wet cheek. “I love you, my friend.”

“Like you love Jordan? Oh yeah. You don’t love Jordan. You love Deja. Or is it Jonnie? Do you love Jonnie?” Molly’s voice was definitely accusatory, now.

“Jonnie’s my mentor. She’s going to be there to help me in college.” Spencer wasn’t afraid to talk about her anymore. Molly lost her power when Spencer said goodbye to 1393 South Washington, when she stood alone in the room where she had been tied to the blue-and-green swirls of a chair that represented childhood dreams and lies. “Jordan’s my friend. He wants me to succeed. He wants nothing that I can’t give.”

Molly spat in Spencer’s direction. “Fuck Jordan. Fuck your little fuck buddy, too.”

The attendant relocated to the middle of the room.

Spencer let go of Molly’s hands. She looked at the attendant. “It’s okay. I’m going now.” She moved toward the door.

The attendant stepped backward, keeping her attention on Molly. She turned the handle and pushed the door outward before accompanying Spencer into the brightly lit hallway. “You okay?”

The lights couldn’t contain the total darkness that dripped into Spencer’s soul. It moved silently from Molly’s being and up Spencer’s spine. She thought about the Stephen King novel she read last year, the one that caused her to sleep with the lights on for two weeks. The connection between the two women was deeper and darker than even the master of fear could conjure up in his work. Spencer couldn’t explain that to anyone. She attempted a small smile. “I will be.”

The attendant let go of the door.

Spencer took a step away from her past and toward her future. *Don’t turn around. Don’t turn around. She cannot win again.*

“Spencer?” A one-word question whispered in the dim light behind her.

Spencer pushed her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Her jaw tightened. She continued to move forward without turning or speaking.

“I will get out of here.”

I know.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The next day, Spencer talked to her therapist about her meeting with Molly. They were both pleased with Spencer's ability to walk away without turning around. Spencer knew it was in large part due to the strength she pulled from her new circle of friends, real friends, especially Deja.

She stood with her now outside of the trailer that housed the coding club. They were waiting for the others to arrive for their last meeting of the year. In two weeks, they would be graduates.

While they waited, Spencer showed Deja the app she built of two girls on their stomachs under an apple tree. She felt Deja studying her face. She didn't look up from the app.

"Chloe?"

Spencer swallowed the lump in her throat. She moved her eyes from the app to Deja's face. "Yeah?"

"I'm going to use it forever. Or until you make another one. You're going to make another one, right?"

Spencer felt her cheeks warm. She loved the way Deja said her name, the way she always smelled like fresh rain and Granny Smith apples, the way her dimple crinkled when she smiled.

"Earth to Spencer. Are you in there?"

Spencer smiled. "I'm in here. I want to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"Will you go to the prom with me?"

"I thought you would never ask. I already have a dress, you know."

"You do?"

"Yep."

"Send me a picture later? I'll need to rent a tux. What if I can't find one? What if they don't have any more? The prom is like in two days."

"I don't care if you wear jeans and neon sneakers, dork. I love you just the way you are." Deja took Spencer's hand and led her into the trailer where the others were gathered.

Spencer didn't respond to the words Deja said, but she felt them deep in her heart.

Before Spencer shook her backpack off and pulled a soda from the fridge, her phone dinged. She pulled it from her back pocket.

Deja: ["hip", "hip"] here's my dress.

Spencer laughed. Only Deja would show her excitement through programming humor. The dress was an orange shade with sequins. Spencer took the picture to her mom.

“Did you mean it when you said you love me regardless?” Spencer asked.

Virginia patted the couch next to her and reached for the TV remote. The sun was bright outside the window behind her. The showering sunbeams shone a light on the silver in her blonde hair. Spencer had never noticed that before. She thought about Deja’s mom in front of the open refrigerator, pieces of salt-and-pepper hair dancing around her face. She was thankful for both women in her life. She thought about Mrs. Blackstone, too. She couldn’t imagine the pain she felt at losing not one, but two, children. She didn’t hate her. She couldn’t. She just felt a deep hole of sadness.

“Are you going to stand there daydreaming, or are you going to join me?” Virginia asked. She patted the seat again and smiled.

Spencer sat. She picked at her cuticles and tried to find the right words.

“Is it about Molly? I know how hard this is for you.” Virginia turned so her leg was bent into a triangle and she was facing Spencer. “None of this is your fault. You know that, right? None of us could have known.”

“I should have known,” Spencer said. “I should have known so many times over the last few years. But I didn’t tell anyone about it.”

“She’s getting the help she needs. There’s nothing else for us to do.”

“I know. It isn’t that.”

Virginia reached her arms around Spencer and drew her in for a brief hug. “Unconditional. Remember that.”

Spencer looked down at her hands. “I need help finding a tux.” There. She said it. The words meant she wanted to go to the prom, and she wanted to go in her own skin.

Virginia laughed, and not a gentle laugh either, but a deep in-your-gut belly laugh.

At first, Spencer was hurt, but in seconds she was laughing too. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Still they laughed—at everything and at nothing. As the laughter subsided, Virginia wrapped her arms tight around Spencer and pulled her close. This time, the hug lasted minutes instead of seconds.

Spencer melted into the warm sway of her mom’s love. It felt good to be home. It felt good to have a conversation about who she was and what she wanted.

When Virginia moved Spencer out of the embrace, her eyes were moist, and her smile was huge. “Oh, my sweet girl. This is wonderful news. Who’s the lucky girl?”

“You know?” Spencer asked.

“That you’re more attracted to girls? Of course, I know. I’m your mom. Moms know everything.”

No, not everything, Spencer thought. There were many things she might never tell her mom, or anyone, at least not anytime soon. But her mom knew enough, and for that she was thankful.

Spencer took her phone out of her back pocket and pulled out the picture of Deja twirling in her orange sequined dress. “I need to match this.”

“Is that her?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s gorgeous, Spence. A perfect complement to you.”

“I know, right?” Spencer smiled. Her heart fluttered whenever she looked at the picture. There was nothing she wanted more in this world than to be twirling around the gymnasium with this woman. “Her name is Deja.”

Back in her room, with plans made to go shopping immediately after dinner, Spencer thought about Deja and the prom. This year's prom theme was Nighttime in Greece. There would be a Grecian Goddess statue in the middle of a shimmering pool surrounded by white-blossomed trees and stunning Santorini vases. She pictured the two of them standing in front of a mythical magic palace, waiting to get their picture taken. Jordan would be there, too, and the three of them would dance the night away.

Spencer would miss Thatcher High. The last months were a weird mix of horrible and fantastic, but she had many amazing memories. She was also excited about the future. She received her acceptance letter to Clarian University. The best part was Jonnie and Jordan would be there, too, and Deja would be only an hour away.

Spencer picked up the journal her mom gave her as part of her graduation gift. As she turned it over in her hands, she thought about *The Book of Promises* that now sat unopened in her bottom desk drawer.

The promises between her and Molly wouldn't come with her to Clarion.

She promised Jonnie that yesterday.

She promised herself that now.

She pulled the new book with its empty pages to her chest and beckoned the tears of the past to come.

She bowed her head until her chin rested against the new journal and rocked in rhythm to the crashing waves. The pain washed over again and again like a tsunami against the shore. She didn't try to stop it. She needed to feel every thought, every reality, until the waters receded on their own.

Spencer couldn't change Molly's life. She could only change her own.

She listened to her own breaths. In. Out. In. Out. The tension in her shoulders eased. She moved her head in a circular pattern and lowered the blank book to the desk.

With a black permanent marker, she wrote,

```
public class Main {  
    public static void main(String[] args) {  
        System.out.println("Hello World!");  
    }  
}
```

She thought about Deja standing next to her in her tangerine gown and about the programming jokes they would share in the future. This code was funny, but it definitely wasn't a joke. Deja would understand that. She snapped a picture and hit Send.

Spencer waited as the ellipses came and went in Deja's text bubble.

Deja: Sanity test to make sure your brain is correctly installed?

Deja: AND you know how to use it? [Heart emoji. Stars for eyes smiley emoji.]

Spencer: Exactly.

For the first time in her life, she knew who she wanted to be and how to find herself. Today was day one.

Spencer: That's how us newbies roll. [Heart emoji. Girl behind computer emoji.]

She laid the phone next to her yellow duck and rubbed the soft fur behind Cinnamon's ear. "I think she's a keeper."

Cinnamon curled into a tighter ball in her lap and purred.

Spencer took that as a sign of complete agreement. She turned back to the new journal.

In large bold print, she introduced herself to the page.

My name is Chloe Imani Spencer Price, but you can call me Chloe.

Author's Notes

Abusers are often described as intoxicating. They know how to sweep a partner off of their feet through their spontaneity and intense spirit. While the abused becomes further addicted to the attention, the abuser may lead a secret life, will convince the abused that they're nothing without him or her, and will constantly move between belittling and yelling and holding the abused emotionally captive by swooping in with grandiose gestures. Just as occurs in *The Book of Promises*, abusers will often threaten suicide, blame the abused, and manipulate them through words and actions.

Warning Signs a Person May Need to Seek Help

1. A gut feeling that something isn't right. The abused too often ignores their innate discomfort associated with a partner's mood changes or with their own feelings of not being able to do anything right.
2. Being blamed for the behavior of someone else. This is a manipulative behavior used to make the abused feel guilty and to create fear, anxiety, and shame.
3. Fear, anxiety, and shame are used to pressure the abused to do things they don't want to do. For the abused in this story, it's sex she wasn't comfortable with and a tracking device on her phone that told the abuser her every move, but it could be many other things, as well.
4. Being cut off from family and/or friends. Isolation and a need for the abused to cherish the abuser's love enough to not need anyone else. The abuser uses guilt to control who the abused will and will not talk to.
5. Gaslighting. This is a mind game focused on making the abused feel like they're going insane. Causing someone to question their own feelings, instincts, and sanity gives the abuser a great deal of power. If the abused often hears, "You're too sensitive," "Stop making such a big deal out of this," and "You're crazy," they may be in a gaslighting situation.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline can be reached by phone at 1-800-799-7233 and is available to callers 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Services are provided in more than 170 languages. In addition to answering questions and providing safety planning, advocates are standing by to connect a person to domestic violence resources in their local calling area.

This book also deals with a risky behavior of adolescence known as autoerotic asphyxiation (AEA), which involves reducing oxygen supply to the brain. Related to this is the "choking game." This game is defined as self-strangulation or strangulation by another person to achieve brief euphoria caused by cerebral hypoxia. Unfortunately, it's difficult to truly estimate the number of adolescents engaging in this behavior, as it usually occurs secretly, and teens are not likely to talk about it outside of the space within which it occurs.

Other names attributed to the choking game: Airplaning; black hole; cloud nine; dream game; funky chicken; pass-out game; natural high; space cowboy; rising sun game; space monkey.

Some Warning Signs of AEA and the Choking Game

1. Bruises or marks in the neck region
2. Covering up the neck region in a secretive manner
3. Marks on wrists or ankles suggestive of bondage

It's recommended that parents talk to their children about this dangerous activity and help them to understand the necessity of talking to someone if they hear their friends using any of the names attributed to the choking game.

About the Author

Tammy Bird can usually be found doing one of three things: writing, reading a book, or playing with a grandchild. She does her best writing in the local coffeeshop where she loves to people watch and imagine all of the darkness and light that resides in each person who crosses her path. Writing a novel was a lifelong dream that she thought would never come true.

Never say never, her dad always said. He was right. At 55, Tammy's first psychological thriller, *Sandman*, made her dream a reality.

Book of Promises, a YA psychological suspense, is her second novel. When she isn't writing, Tammy loves creating educational videos, eating ice cream, and hanging out with her wife and family.

If you want to know when Tammy's next book comes out, please visit Amazon's Author Central at <https://amazon.com/author/tammybird> or her website at <https://tammybird.com>. And if you want to follow her, she is on Facebook, Pintrest and Instagram as tammybirdauthor, and on Twitter as Tammy_Bird.

Another Book By Tammy Bird:

Sandman

Katia Billings, EMT with the Emergency Medical Services of Buxton Beach, NC, is one of the first to respond after a hurricane rips through the small island community. As she helps search for survivors, she and her fellow responders discover a secret that will haunt Katia the rest of her life. Lurking beneath the sand dunes is an evil that no one suspected.

A sandy grave not connected to the storm leads investigators to uncover the tomb of a serial killer, literally beneath their feet, hidden for years from the residents of the tight community.

For Katia, it's personal because she knows one of the killer's victims. She enlists help from K-9 search expert Paige, and Katia's on-and-off lover, Zahra, in her determination to find the killer, dubbed Sandman, and stop him from killing again.

What small-town secrets will they unearth in their pursuit of the truth? Will the three women survive the physical, emotional, and psychological attack being waged against their small slice of sand? Or will they become the next victims of Sandman?

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