



JESSIE HUMPHRIES

Killing
**RUBY
ROSE**

THE RUBY ROSE SERIES



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RUBY
ROSE



JESSIE HUMPHRIES





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*To Nanny, who would have loved this
the most.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Truths and roses have thorns about
them.*

—Henry David Thoreau

CHAPTER 1

I hid in the shadows, scanning the dark parking lot to assess the threat level. So far I'd identified three potential informants I'd have to evade when making a break for it. I didn't need my 4.0 GPA to know that being seen leaving the city library at 9:00 on a Friday night wouldn't win me any points on the SPA (Social Point Average), on which I was definitely flunking. Avoiding detection was key.

Maintaining position under the library's dark awning, I took a quick

breath of briny ocean air to gain my bearings. The parking lot's sickly yellow lights flickered behind the suffocating fog, making it hard to tell whether the rain was misting down from above or wafting in sideways from the shore. In any case, the blacktop lay slick, full of potholes, and speckled with math-club kids who would have just loved to report a sighting of Reclusive Ruby Rose.

With a practiced stealth, I dashed through the night. Even in my new Prada peep-toe pumps—aka my Penelopes—I had speed. I moved light-footed through the blind spots, like I was navigating one of my dad's SWAT obstacle courses, until I found cover in the driver's seat of

Big Black, my overly tinted SUV and current best friend. I gripped the steering wheel. “Ready to do this?” I asked Black, ignoring my therapist’s voice in my head telling me to stop personifying *the things* in my life and start concentrating on the *people*. She didn’t understand. *Things* couldn’t break my heart.

Big Black’s tires spun out, fighting for traction against the wet asphalt. No more denominators, dusty textbooks, or depressing thoughts. Instead, my mind changed gears to the last subject of study for the night. A study I’d so far kept strictly to myself. One that required night-vision binoculars, a police scanner, and my .38 Smith & Wesson

handgun—all carefully hidden beneath the false bottom of the driver's console.

Rebel energy flowed through my veins as I allowed myself to imagine tonight being the night I caught my mark—Mr. Charlie LeMarq—in the act. I had thirty minutes until he got off work and headed to his favorite dive. A creature of habit, he hadn't deviated from his Friday-night routine for five weeks. And neither had I, as I'd waited for the evidence that would finally put the violent predator away for good.

I hit the Pacific Coast Highway with momentum, grateful for a break in the rain. With the windows cracked and the stereo up, the whipping wind and heavy beat refreshed my senses. Something

about the brewing storm beyond the ocean's black-and-blue horizon spoke to me. It was a foreboding that simultaneously quickened my heart rate and eased the ever-present heartache.

I enjoyed the moment—until my phone vibrated against said heart like a minidefibrillator shocking me back to reality. The sad reality of a *seminormal* seventeen-year-old girl and not the sleek sleuth I pretended to be. (Only *semi* because *totally* normal girls don't wear four-inch Prada heels to the library, or stalk criminals, or wear four-inch Prada heels while stalking criminals.)

Pulling my cell out of my cleavage, I found the screen lit up with my best friend's face—my real-life, living-and-

breathing best friend, Alana. Though breathing as a determining factor in a best friend seemed slightly overrated.

I had a choice to make. The red “Decline” button versus the green “Answer” button. Red: Avoid the call now, and keep declining all night because Alana Kailua (aka the only un-laid-back Hawaiian in SoCal) would never stop. Green: Put up my dukes to defend myself and be forced into lies. So, basically—lose-lose.

“Hello, caller, you’re on the air,” I spoke into my Denali’s Bluetooth speaker system. I was nothing if not a law-abiding citizen who’d taken “The Pledge to Put It Down,” the promise to “put down” handheld phones while

driving. District Attorney Jane Rose (aka my absentee mother) had come up with that catchy slogan for her latest campaign.

“Girl, where are you?” Alana banshee-shrieked, forcing me to make an unsafe jerk of the wheel to turn down the volume.

“I’m driving home,” I said, fully aware she wouldn’t believe me. She knew I hated going home to an empty house.

“It’s nine p.m. On a Fri—day!” she groaned. Our high school’s fight song played so fervently in the background that victory could be the only cause. Other than the abuse of energy drinks. “I know you’re not going home, so just get

your antisocial A-S-S over here right now. There's gonna be a killer after-party, and you're coming!"

Sparring match commenced. Lately, every conversation with Alana felt like a brawl at the dojo. Like, even though I'd put away my black belt months ago, I couldn't stop fighting.

"I'm tired, Alana." *Lateral defense move.*

Checking my rearview mirror, I caught Huntington Beach High School's stadium lights fading away. Year-ago me would have been there at the game with Alana—giggling, cavorting, and playing along. *That* girl (with the 4.0 SPA) had long since faded from view. "I'll catch you tomorrow. We'll go to the beach or

something.” *Submissive bow out.*

“Ruby, I know you miss your dad, but your self-imposed solitary confinement isn’t helping. *He* wouldn’t want this.” *Provoking palm-heel strike to the heart.*

“Please don’t pretend to know what he’d want.” *Double-handed hooking block, protecting the weak spot.*

“It’s been over six months since he died,” Alana said with worn-out delicacy. “It’s time to snap out of zombie mode.”

“I didn’t lose a puppy, Alana,” I said. *I lost the most important person in my life,* I didn’t say, as I tried to suppress the billowing emptiness I felt inside. “I need more time.”

“Yeah, so you say.” *Elbow to the mouth.*

“I don’t know *what* you want me to say.” *Bleeding.*

“Say you’ll take off your loner trench coat and come have some fun. It will be good for you.”

“Not tonight, OK?” I begged, feeling the familiar anchor of guilt tugging at me, heavier every time I blew her off. “I promise we’ll go to the beach or the mall tomorrow. Whatever you want.”

“You know, Ruby, I should start calling you Rubik’s Cube, because no matter how hard I try, I can never figure out what I’m supposed to do with you,” Alana said. “And it’s such a shame, because despite the fact that you’ve gone

from being the slightly intimidating Brainiac Barbie to the totally antisocial Hermit Barbie—there are still several dudes I know who'd be willing to offer their shoulders to cry on...or their laps to sit on...or their lips to—”

“Alana!” I interrupted. “I’m sorry, but my life doesn’t revolve around boys and parties like yours does, OK?”

Her long pause meant I’d pissed her off (more than I wanted to), and I drove past the street where I’d wanted to turn. My blood boiled as I realized my stupid mistake. I *rarely* made mistakes. And I *never* lost sparring matches, physical or verbal. I had the karate and debate trophies to prove it.

“Well, I promised I wouldn’t say

anything, but if I can't lure you out of your hole by myself...I have no choice." Alana must've moved into the girls' bathroom for privacy, because most of the background noise had vanished. "Your boy has something planned tonight." *Side stance, luring wave to come closer.*

"What are you talking about?" *Careful approach.* "I don't have a boy."

"Liam Slater, *Rubik's Cube*. Don't play stupid with me. I know better. I gave him your number last week, and I'm pretty sure he's going to text you tonight. And in case you feel like blowing him off, too, just know...he's going to ask you to Homecoming." *Roundhouse kick to the temple.*

Click.

She hung up on me.

I pulled Big Black into an empty beach parking lot along Bonfire Row, my ears still ringing from both the imagined blows and the real news.

Could I believe it? Mr. Elusive, Mr. Preseason Favorite for Most Beautiful Eyes of the Senior Class, Mr. Too Cool for School was going to ask me, Miss Too School for Cool, to be his Senior Homecoming date?

Surely not. Alana had to be messing with me. Liam and I had barely spoken about anything other than equations or our Advanced Calculus teacher's "sexy comb-over." I didn't even have Liam's cell number. Sure, I'd been crushing on

the guy for almost two years. And yes, the boy had impeccable taste in shoes. But since my dad died, I hadn't been in the mood for flirting. Or anything else that required the pretense of happiness.

Plus, I thought he was going to ask Taylor Jennings, the cheerleader not-so-secretly voted Nicest Rack. She'd been hanging her aforementioned lady parts all over him a lot lately. It wasn't enough that she was my sole competitor for the valedictorian race—she also had to compete with me for everything else, including the only boy I not-so-secretly liked.

I hoped he was smart enough to withstand her and her considerable assets. He seemed smart. He was on last

year's honor roll. But, then again, he'd probably paid for his grades with touchdowns and devilish grins. Not that I hadn't benefited from the way his smile could light up the room. These days, the thought of Liam's eyes on mine was sometimes the only thing that brought me back to school at all.

My phone vibrated again, but this time it was a text from an unknown number:

Hey Ruby :) It's Liam. Could you meet me at 366 Water Street as soon as you can? There's something I want to ask you.

He was texting me already?

Flourishes of goose bumps scuttled up my arms. Part of me felt ecstatic, thinking about the possibility of more than his eyes being on me tonight. Maybe his hands, maybe his lips—

But then little red flags began flying across my over-analytical brain. Actually, they were more like red flares lighting up the night sky in my mind.

Red flare: The mere thought of Homecoming! I'd have preferred for Liam to just ask me out to dinner without the rented tuxes, slutty sequin dresses, and group-sex parties. I didn't *believe* in high school dances. Beyond all the forced awkwardness of pinning corsages and posing for cheesy pictures—and never mind all those pesky statistics

about higher rates of drunk driving and sexual assault—the whole idea of high school dances gave me anxiety.

Then again, how long had I been dreaming about spending any amount of time with Liam Slater? He could've asked me to go swimming with the sharks, and I'd have considered it.

Red flare: Water Street. Such a strange location. The old shipping harbor was hardly romantic. I hadn't pegged Liam as one of those guys who asked girls out in an overly dramatic way. Just today in English class my eyes had almost rolled right out of my head when Alana told me about a boy asking out a girl by having her name and the word "Homecoming" written in the sky.

Gag.

But there was no way Liam would stoop to that level. He was the complete opposite of gaggy.

Red flare: “As soon as you can.” The team should still be in the locker room celebrating, showering, and patting each other in inappropriate ways that only athletes are allowed to do. Had Liam already left for Water Street? I hoped he’d at least managed a quick shower, because I never pictured sweat as part of my fantasy make-out sequence with him. Though even that wouldn’t be a deal breaker, considering it might mix with the drizzling rain running down our bodies, and we could have one of those epic kisses straight out of *The*

Notebook...

Red flare: I already had plans—tailing Charlie LeMarq, one of the most prolific child abductors and murderers in my dad's profiles. My own kind of “killer after-party.”

Sure, I knew that stalking criminals was a bizarre after-school activity for a seventeen-year-old girl. But ever since SWAT Sergeant Jack Rose (aka my fallen father) was killed “in the line of duty,” I'd needed an outlet. A way to honor his memory. A challenge to focus all my efforts on. And yoga wasn't doing the trick.

Since the Department wasn't talking, or releasing any information on the “continuing investigation” into his death

that seemed more like a “discontinued investigation,” I had to do *something* to overcome the gnawing need for justice that never came. Obsessing over catching a predator my dad had hoped to put away had become that *something*. It wouldn't bring Dad back from the dead, but it had brought *me* back from wanting to die. I could no longer afford to be the helpless little girl who cried herself to sleep every night. I had to find a reason to live.

And Sergeant Jack Rose hadn't made me a weapons specialist and combat expert for nothing. For as long as I could remember, he'd trained me to be able to defend myself and protect others. Between sparring lessons and shooting

practice, a spooky sound track had played in my head as he went on and on about what a dangerous world we lived in.

Nowhere was safe.

He and my mother had enemies because of their high-profile positions.

I should prepare myself for the day I'd be tested.

Somewhere around age fourteen, I turned off the broken record. The only threat I'd ever faced in my sheltered life was the threat of being suspended from school for fighting. So much for being prepared to defend myself when it was the very thing that got me into trouble! Which was the exact argument Mom always used with Dad after she got home

from arbitration meetings with my principals.

But he'd stuck to his guns, or "our" guns, as they actually were, and never stopped training me.

Sometimes I chalked it up to his undiagnosed post-traumatic stress from his time as a Marine, or the violence he saw every day in law enforcement, or simply that I took the place of the son he never had. Whatever the reason, he kept on with my training—and I took to it.

Like a fish to water.

Opening the false bottom of my console, I looked down at the shimmering weapon—aka Smith, my .38 Special Revolver with built-in laser sight that I'd gotten for my Sweet

Sixteenth. Gleaming underneath Smith was the accompanying laminated concealed-weapons license that Dad had personally signed for me two weeks before his death. As I ran my finger over his signature, I couldn't help wondering (for the umpteenth time) what he'd think of seeing his little girl and her gun now. Surely, he'd never envisioned his young scholar turning into a vigilante stalker.

Yeah, well, I never saw him being ripped from my life without any answers, either. So, whatever.

I grabbed the manila file labeled "LeMarq" and flipped through the pictures, timelines, and notes, focusing on my target instead of my sorrow. I knew almost everything about the sicko

by now.

He liked prepubescent girls. He liked violating them, choking them, and leaving zero forensic evidence behind. Some of his cohorts called him Cherry Charlie, not only because of the string of cherry tattoos he sported on his left forearm, but also because of what each cherry represented: the theft of a young girl's innocence—and, inevitably, her life.

I'd never been able to zoom in close enough to be sure, but I'd counted at least a dozen cherries on his arm. A crop that should have earned him at least a dozen life sentences.

My dad died before he could catch LeMarq, but shortly after, another

detective nabbed the creep. My mom was the lead prosecutor. I stared at the newspaper clippings in my hands now, remembering the injustice. His expensive attorney (provided by a rich relative), a procedural technicality (provided by an inept member of my mother's prosecution team), and a hung jury (provided by the great State of California) sent him walking. It was only a matter of time before he killed again, and neither my mom nor the police were likely to stop him. They only had another 113,000 or so registered sex offenders to worry about.

I slammed shut the file, disgusted with his ugly mug, his stupid baby-blue pedophile van with Louisiana plates he

still hadn't registered (not even a misdemeanor crime), and the infuriating lack of evidence against him. I knew he'd be skipping jurisdictions again before long. If I didn't catch him soon, he could keep getting away with murder forever—and those little girls would never see him coming.

I shoved the file back into the console and looked out at the beach parking lot. The five-foot replica of Bill Brandon's toothy grin stared back at me. Brandon was my mom's increasingly nasty mud-throwing opponent in the upcoming District Attorney race. His campaign poster was plastered on the side of a parked advertising truck: "A Vote for Me Is a Vote for Change."

“What’dya think, Bill?” I asked. “Should Unruly Ruby change? Should I take a night off from my rogue ways to be wooed by one of the hottest guys in school?”

He just smiled with that charming set of veneers only money could buy.

I looked at the dashboard clock. I still had thirty minutes before LeMarq would get to the bar. Once there, he never left his drinking hole in less than an hour. I had a window of opportunity. I could go play Regular Ruby for a minute, find out if this whole Homecoming thing was happening, and get back to LeMarq before he left the bar. If there was any chance Liam really wanted to ask me, I had to find out.

I blew out a deep breath and plugged the Water Street address into my GPS system. With a stomach full of butterflies that felt more like fully equipped hornets, I let my GPS's Mary Poppins voice guide me toward the terrifying unknown. That's right—I felt more comfortable trailing a known murderer than being asked out on a date.

At least with LeMarq, I had a secure vehicle, a weapon, and a cell phone to use in case I needed to call for help. But if anything went wrong with Liam, I had nothing.

No protection. No backup. I'd be totally vulnerable.

The closer I got to the little destination star on my GPS screen, the

more I questioned my decision. Every song that came up on my shuffle seemed to have strange overtones or dark undercurrents—"A White Demon Love Song" by The Killers, "I Will Follow You Into the Dark" by Death Cab for Cutie, and even my man MJ had to pipe in with "Thriller." I finally turned it off.

As I drove farther downtown and into the dark heart of the shipping harbor, I wondered how Liam was going to pull this off. Rose petals and candles hardly seemed dreamy among empty beer cans and broken meth needles. I imagined a trail of Hershey's Kisses leading me through a camp of homeless people until I found a balloon with a note inside reading, "I'd pop if you'd go to

Homecoming with me!” Or something equally idiotic.

I really hoped Liam wasn't *that* guy. I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt—maybe he had something totally non-lame planned. Yet, looking around this neighborhood, all I had were doubts—and an increasingly bad feeling.

“You have reached your destination,” said the eerily pleasant Mary Poppins voice.

“If you could see where I am, Mary, you wouldn't be so chipper,” I responded in my best British accent, realizing I'd rather sit in the car and have conversations with billboards and GPS systems than real people. My therapist would be so disappointed.

I brought Big Black to a stop outside an industrial-sized warehouse. Building 366's entrance was barely visible through the low-lying harbor fog. Only a few sickly yellow patches of light glowed over the large roll-up garage doors, all of which were closed.

Growing anxiety and a waft of fish-flavored air prompted me to raise the windows. I pushed aside all my instincts to bolt by convincing myself that leaving Liam hanging would not be socially acceptable. Or nice. Which lately wasn't a very strong argument for me, but this was Liam Slater.

So where was he? What if this was some kind of mean joke?

Easing off the brake, I let Big Black

roll around to the side of the building. I flipped on the windshield wipers for a quick clean—and rubbed my eyes to do the same.

That's when I saw it.

Beside an open door was the familiar old blue van I'd been following for months.

And it wasn't Liam's.

CHAPTER 2

It took a few stretched-out seconds for me to process the fact that the text wasn't from Liam at all.

My stomach plummeted as I realized who owned that van: Charlie LeMarq. I fumbled to double-check the locks, pressing the lock a few extra times to be sure. My heart thumped in my ears. And my mind reached out for some invisible chain of logic.

Had LeMarq discovered I'd been trailing him? Had he brought me here to teach me a lesson? But how could he

have known? And how would he know to fake a text from Liam?

I grabbed my night-vision binos and zoomed in on the threat. Written across the back window's condensation was the dripping question: "You think you can stop me?"

Then a bone-chilling scream from inside the building stabbed me like a dagger—a young girl's desperate call for help. He had a child in that warehouse.

Simultaneous flashes of heat and penetrating coldness warped my senses, debilitating my instincts to move, while images of horrifying scenarios consumed me.

I fought the escalating pins and pricks

of panic. I had to act.

I reached into the false bottom of my console again and traded the heavy binos for the lightweight steel of Smith. Curling my fingers around the revolver's grip, I dialed with my other hand.

Almost immediately, I heard, "911, what's your emergency?"

"Send all available units to 366 Water Street. There's been a child abduction...and if help doesn't arrive soon...a probable homicide." I tried to sound in control.

"OK, 366 Water Street." Pause...typing..."Help is on the way. Please tell me your name."

"Ruby Rose. Daughter to District Attorney Jane Rose and the former

SWAT Sergeant Jack Rose—”

“Sweetie,” she cut me off. “Did you say Jack R—?”

“I have to go,” I said, pressing “End.” She didn’t need to call me sweetie. Right now I was anything but *Sweet* Ruby, and I wasn’t going to wait for the sirens to tip off Mr. LeMarq so he could slit the girl’s throat and escape. I knew his MO: no survivors, no witnesses. Just lifeless little girls with no forensic traces of his filth. I had to get in there. Whoever just screamed had no chance if I didn’t at least try.

I exited Big Black and raised Smith securely in front of me with both hands, just like Dad had taught me. My hands trembled, like they knew this wasn’t

pretend—this wasn't a simulation. I stared at the van and the dark brick building looming behind it, wondering if I was capable of stopping a dangerous man like LeMarq. Especially without my father.

I could almost hear Dad whispering over my shoulder. Telling me to slow my breathing, raise my awareness of every sound and movement surrounding me, and slowly put one foot in front of the other.

You can do this, Rue. You have to.

I did as he said and crept past LeMarq's decrepit van, cursing when I inadvertently stepped in a puddle of muck and felt the nasty water enter Penelope's peep toe.

Another scream escaped out the cracked warehouse door ahead of me. A weaker, more defeated cry. And something swept through me—an inner surge of strength, a shot of adrenaline, a wave of determination. Whatever poetic crap it was, I used it to fight the fear. I wouldn't let her die.

I entered the building and found cover behind the metal skeleton of what used to be a large piece of machinery. Dad wouldn't have fit, but I did easily. He always said my small size was one of my biggest assets.

At the far end of the sprawling space full of old machinery left to rust and rot like robot corpses, the shadow of the grotesque monster stood dark against the

wall. The only light in the warehouse emanated from his corner. As I rounded the perimeter, I hushed my Penelopes by moving on the balls of my feet. I tried to hear what he was saying, but he was too far away. Steadying my breath, I checked my watch—it had been approximately ninety seconds since the 911 call. I had another ninety seconds, maybe, before the sirens would be heard. Somehow I had to get close enough to trap LeMarq. I moved through the shadows and around the haphazard machines until I was close enough to his voice to stop and find a vantage point.

I crouched behind a large, dead, steel apparatus. Its wires and electrical board had been ripped out like a medieval

disembowelment. I raised my head up enough to catch LeMarq's wicked eyes flicker in the unnatural blue light of a camping lantern he'd set up on a makeshift table. The sight of him caused shots of fear to rip through me. I clenched Smith tighter.

And then I saw the girl. Sitting on the ground, her back against the wall on my right. Tied at the wrists and ankles. I was no more than thirty feet away from her, yet I was miles away from knowing how to save her with LeMarq standing between us.

My heart missed more than one beat when I focused on her face.

She looked—exactly like me! Well, me when I was about ten. We could have

been twins. That had to be a coincidence...didn't it? *There's no such thing as a coincidence, Rue*, I heard Dad remind me.

“Just wanted to say thanks for the *delivery*,” the monster said. But he wasn't talking to the girl. He was on his cell phone. Who was he talking to? “Just beautiful.” He stared at her on the floor, admiring his catch.

I looked again—her long blonde hair parted in the middle, her pale-gray eyes, her petite frame. Mini-Ruby was trembling with terror.

“OK, ten-four, brother.” He shut the phone and moved toward her.

The girl's eyes were full of fear as she shuddered under his gaze. Reaching

into his back pocket, he pulled out a shining blade. She screamed again and tried to push herself further against the cement wall, as if it might give way and save her.

No, only I could save her now. But there was no way for me to position myself between them. As soon as I announced my presence, he'd be able to grab her and use her as a shield. And he'd kill her. What other option did I have, though? He reached out toward her and—

“Stay where you are or I'll shoot,” I called as I cut out of the shadows to confront him.

He grabbed the girl.

“Who the hell are you?” he yelled in

my direction with an expression I didn't quite understand.

I paused, wondering what drug he was on. *He'd brought me* here! I must've looked different with a gun in my hand. Or maybe he didn't expect me to get here so soon.

"I'm the person who's finally going to stop you from killing one more innocent girl," I said calmly. "Now, let her go!"

I raised Smith to a higher sharpshooting position, and turned on the laser sight, aiming the little red light directly at his overgrown unibrow.

He laughed. "You! You think you're gonna stop me?" He slid the blade under the girl's neck. Her eyes exploded with terror, and my soul exploded with rage.

I took two balanced steps forward, fighting my growing anxiety. It was clear he didn't take me seriously—after all, I wasn't much older than the girl he had in his arms. But he was wrong not to. “That's right, LeMarq. I'm going to stop you.” I glared at him to make sure he knew I meant it.

“How'd you know my name?” He took two crooked steps backward, dragging the girl with him.

“Don't play games. You know who I am, just as well as I know who you are. You texted me. You wrote the message on your van!”

His face scrunched up like he was trying to manually restart his useless brain.

“Girl, I don’t have a clue who the hell you are or what message you think is on my van, but if you want her to live, you’ll drop your piece. Now!” He barked like a chained pit bull with more balls than brains.

Was he telling the truth? The surprise in his eyes seemed so genuine. And he didn’t seem to have laid any traps. I studied his face for any tells, noting every strained gesture. If he *really* didn’t know who I was, then someone else had brought me here. Suddenly, everything felt wrong.

I reanalyzed the situation: The police should arrive any second. He would hear them and drag her out as a shield—then kill her and run. I had no doubt

that's how it would go down. This was the time. Dad's voice was loud and clear.

Take the shot, Rue. Find the largest target area and pull the trigger. Save the girl.

LeMarq's legs were well shielded despite the girl's small frame. His left bicep was exposed but wrapped around the girl's chest. The winged demon on his shoulder was practically calling out to be exorcised. But my bullet would pass through the girl's shoulder after his, and dangerously close to her heart.

My only shot was his forehead—the one exposed area that would mean a sure kill. As much as I despised him and wanted him punished, I didn't want to

kill him. His life wasn't mine to take. I silently begged him to just leave the girl and run. Yes, there was the risk of leaving evidence behind, sending him to prison for sure this time. But the bigger risk was me pulling the trigger and sending his brains somewhere far worse than prison.

A wicked wind swirled across the space, and dust flew into my eyes. I was about to lower my weapon to shield myself from the grit, but the sound of sirens blared in the distance, pulling me out of my hesitation. It did the same for LeMarq. He pressed the knife into her skin. Blood sprayed. I pulled the trigger.

The deafening gunshot rang out.

Time stopped.

The world changed into a black-and-white movie with a river of red flowing all around me.

A ruby-red river of my own making.

I ran to the girl and carried her a few feet away, applying pressure to her gushing neck, and shielding her from LeMarq's dead body just a few feet away. She'd already been through enough. She didn't need to see that.

We didn't talk. We didn't cry. We searched for meaning in the gauzy haze of shock hanging over us. We waited in each other's eyes, the same gray eyes, communicating without words. She was scared of dying. I was scared I might not have saved her.

I willed her to stay alive.

Soon a swarm of uniforms, white gloves, and disembodied voices cut in and out of my consciousness. Questions were asked, one-sentence answers were given, and the girl was ripped out of my arms and strapped to the stretcher.

And then she was gone.

Even when my mom appeared on the scene, wrapping me in a scratchy police blanket to shield me from the arriving paparazzi and escalating interrogations, the darkness seeped inside.

I was a killer now, and nothing would ever change that. No matter how Dear D. A. Jane Rose played this one, I was guilty.

But of what, I wasn't quite sure.

CHAPTER 3

Alana wasn't much of a bodyguard—or publicist—but, bless her heart, she tried.

“Just keep walking,” she said, her arm unnecessarily wrapped through mine, escorting me out of last period. “When Chanel stink-eye over there gets pregnant by her twenty-four-year-old boyfriend, they’ll have a new scandal to talk about.” Her voice was loud enough for Chanel’s beady little eyes to turn to slits of spite. I wished Alana hadn’t said that—I didn’t need any more enemies.

It had been several weeks since the

shooting, but I'd only been back to school for one. While the stares hadn't dissipated much, at least the camera crews had. Thanks to Mother Jane getting an injunction against the media to leave me alone at school, I'd only seen two paparazzi snipers hiding in trees today.

Despite the fact that no charges were brought against me, the jury was still out in my trial by public opinion.

“After I finish cheer practice and you finish your *shopping*, wanna come over?” Alana asked, putting undue emphasis on our code word for my psychotherapy appointments. She was the only person in the world besides my parents who knew about my long-term

therapy. Therapy that I may or may not have needed before my dad died or the LeMarq shooting, but that I'd definitely needed since. She added, "We can watch a totally non-creepy, non-killing Halloween movie at my house. Maybe *Scooby-Doo* or something?"

"Sure," I said with my current version of a smile, keeping my head down as we crossed into the parking lot. "But do you mind if we do it at my house?"

"Ruby, it's time to get out of the dungeon." She shook her head. "Your tan is paying the price. You know what I always say: Tan makes fat look good!"

I pulled my head up to give her my *seriously?* look. "First, you're such a racist. White girls like me can't get a

brown Hawaiian glow like yours.”

“Hey...” She pretended to be offended, but instead began checking out her carefully maintained bronze forearm.

“Second, you’re a stick.”

“Not after that Tic Tac I just ate,” she said with a wink. When Alana and I first met nearly a decade ago, she still had some of her “baby fat”—as she liked to call it. But even though she was now thinner than me, she was still self-conscious. It probably didn’t help that half of her huge family (in size and number) still called her Baby Fat.

“Third, the breadth of your shallowness never ceases to amaze—”

A whistle that sounded more like a birdcall cut me off. I looked over to a

group of guys hanging out on a classic yellow muscle car with ridiculous pinstripes. The guys reminded me of the *Macaws of the Amazon* series I'd been watching late at night on the Discovery Channel during my recent bouts with insomnia.

Display of brightly colored plumage: check.

Loud sounds to attract the female gender: check.

Posturing and puffing out of chests: check.

Then I saw Liam at the back of the flock. His rainforest-blue eyes caught mine, clouding my defenses. I'd been avoiding this moment.

I wanted to look away, I really did.

But the way he was looking at me didn't speak of preening or puffing. More like worry—or some other emotion I didn't know how to read. He had to know by now *how* I got duped into going down to the docks in the first place—my ridiculous crush on him. Of course he knew. Everyone knew, thanks to a few corrupt cops and morally bankrupt tabloid reporters.

I felt like a fool.

“Call me later, Alana,” I said, already flying toward my hermit's nest, where I could hide my pale feathers stained red at the tips.

“You'd better answer!” she called out after me.

Somewhere along the line I'd gotten the crazy idea that therapists' offices were supposed to be tranquil, with the soothing sounds of bubbling water or something. No such luck.

If I'd had a gun, I would've shot the damn clock for ticking so obnoxiously at me—an impulse that, admittedly, screamed “anger-management issues.” But since my anger was directed toward an inanimate object and not a person, it was totally fine.

Or so I told myself.

Plus, my concealed weapons license had been suspended and Smith taken into evidence. I was harmless.

“How are things at home?” Dr. Teresa asked in her I-know-what-

you're-thinking-better-than-you-do voice.

“Fine,” I said, refusing eye contact. She sat only a few feet away in her oversized love seat, which made her appear intentionally undersized. She wasn't the only one who could analyze others' choices.

“How's your mother handling the press?” she said. It was a nudge—a pleasant, patient push. I knew this tactic well. She was focusing the attention on someone else to make me more comfortable until I opened up naturally.

And if that didn't work, she'd move on to the crowbar-to-a-nail strategy.

“I'm not sure,” I responded, biting at a cuticle that just wouldn't behave. I had

tactics, too.

“Ruby,” she said, lowering her voice into what I liked to call The Tone (a deeper version of her voice that meant it was time to drop the pretenses), “for me to help, you have to give me more than three-word answers.”

I still didn’t want to look at her, but I felt myself soften a little. The Tone had that effect on me. I was pretty sure she was part witch. But in a good way. I liked to think of her as my own personal Mother Teresa. At least when she was in one of those super-intuitive saintly kinds of moods where she seemed to be molding my soul like Play-Doh. In some ways, she was more of a mother to me than my own mom—especially during

campaign season.

For the last eleven years, she'd been here for me whenever I needed her.

Signs of depression or withdrawal?
Call Dr. T.

Night terrors and recurring dreams of being locked behind bars? *Dr. T can fix it.*

Fighting at school? *Get Dr. T on the phone, stat!*

Some years were better than others. In fact, in the last few I'd only been checking in with her every six months or so. But after Dad died, we reinstated our weekly Wednesday sessions at three. And since "the incident" with LeMarq, we'd been meeting every Friday, too.

Dr. T was one of the only people in

the world who truly knew me—and still liked me.

She used to be my mom's therapist, too, but apparently the D. A. didn't need it (or have time for it) anymore. Jane Rose was now holding herself out as a beacon of mental health and stability, warming everyone with her powerful glow.

“Why don't you tell me what *you* would like to talk about today?” Dr. T uncrossed her legs and sat forward in her seat so only a few uncomfortable feet divided us—another one of her tactics to open me up. Next would be the crowbar.

I tucked my feet under my knees and bought myself a few more inches of

personal space on the couch.

We sat in silence for a while. She would be patient—eternally, painfully, patient.

“Why don’t I feel bad that LeMarq’s dead?” I asked, point-blank.

“Because you did the right thing,” she said without hesitation.

“Yeah, but killing is wrong. Morally, ethically, *biblically* wrong.” Not that I’d ever read the Bible, but that sounded right. “And even though I hate the fact I had to do it, I sort of...don’t hate that he’s dead.” I hung my head, knowing these words would be dangerous spoken outside this room.

“You killed to save a life. Defense of others is not only legally acceptable, but

morally, ethically, and *biblically* as well.” Her lips spread into a soft smile. “That’s precisely why no charges have been filed against you. You *know* all this.”

It was true. I *knew* all this because it had been carefully explained to me more times than necessary. And although my mind understood it, my heart and soul didn’t seem to be getting the same message.

Part of me couldn’t help feel a satisfaction in LeMarq being dead and gone. At least he would never kill again. And yet, nothing seemed to cleanse me from the dirtiness of being the one who’d pulled the trigger. I shouldn’t have been forced to kill. I believed in

law and order. I was born and raised with the principles of “innocent until proven guilty,” and “justice is blind.” Seriously, my mom sat me in front of that damn Justice statue every Saturday one summer so she could work while I studied. Turns out, Justice is a scantily clad, blindfolded woman holding a phallic sword and a set of scales—more like a Vegas stripper than an appropriate representation of fairness. And although I’d seen enough to know that our justice system didn’t always live up to its ideals, I still believed it was the only and best solution for handling criminals. Who was I to have single-handedly sentenced someone—even someone like LeMarq—to the death penalty?

“The newspapers don’t see it that way,” I said. “They think the reason no charges have been filed against me is because my mom’s the D. A.” I looked out the window, wondering how many so-called journalists would love to be privy to this conversation. “It’s been nearly two months, and they won’t leave me alone.”

“Don’t pay attention to them,” she said. “I keep telling you, don’t give them the satisfaction.”

“But aren’t they right to question what happened? None of this makes any sense.” I rubbed my temples, trying to put together a puzzle for which I didn’t have all the pieces. “Somebody lured me there. Somebody sent me a text.”

She straightened her back and ran her fingers through her dark hair. She always did that when she felt like she was losing control of the conversation. “Have they been able to trace the number that texted you yet? Or find out who LeMarq was on the phone with when you arrived?”

“They haven’t said anything if they have.”

“I’m sure they will. It’s only a matter of time before they complete their investigation and clear you officially,” she assured me. As if she was in a position to do so. “We all believe you did the right thing.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think Detective Martinez *believes* me.” I bit at that damn

cuticle as though everything else would be OK if I could just fix my poorly executed manicure.

“Why would you think that?” she asked.

“You should have seen how he grilled me when he asked me to come into the precinct for more questioning. About why I had a gun with a laser sight in the first place, why my dad would give me a concealed weapons license, why I took the kill shot, why I would be so gullible as to respond to a text from an unknown number, why I didn’t wait for the police, why I’ve been in therapy for most of my life...”

“Wait. He asked you about therapy?”
Her eyebrows drew together,

highlighting a few wrinkles her organic oils and yoga meditations hadn't managed to erase.

"Yeah, I'm not even sure how he knew. I guess that's why he's Mr. Big-Shot Detective."

"What did you say his name was?" She reached for her pen and pad of paper.

"Detective Martinez. With a capital *M* for Meathead. Why?" I asked.

"Did you know this detective before the incident?" She answered my question with a question. Why do therapists always do that?

"Yeah, he used to be my dad's partner, like twenty years ago. Before Dad switched over to SWAT," I said,

trying to use the lack of personal space to my advantage for once and read the notes on her lap. Detecting the angle, she pulled the notepad up to her chest, removing the distraction. “That’s why it sucks that he’s the lead investigator. He hated my dad. And I think he hates me.”

“Who told you he hated your dad?”

“My mom. She said something about bad blood between them, and I should never talk to him without her present.”

Dr. T looked puzzled. “Though I’m sure you’d do well to follow her legal advice, I’m not so sure he would have any reason to hate *you*. ”

“How about that I killed somebody,” I said. “I’m a Vigilante Teen Assassin. At least that’s what TMZ called me. They

can't get over the accuracy of my shot. They think that because LeMarq humiliated my mom in court, *I* might be the one who set *him* up."

"I told you not to pay attention to that filth—"

"They're very thorough, you know." I cut her off. "They found out my 'abnormally high' IQ results, my 'strange obsession' with combat training under my father's tutelage, my prolonged leave of absence from school after he died, and even my 'isolating behavior' at school since. They even quoted this girl in my class named Taylor, saying, 'She never really did fit in.'"

I shook my head, knowing Taylor's brutally public words were true. Even

when I was little, I knew I wasn't like everyone else. Sure, I had the clothes and the shoes and the general skills to win superficial popularity points. But most girls, like Taylor, didn't go around knee-thrusting bullies in the crotch, even if they deserved it. And it probably didn't help when Dad reprimanded me for said crotch-kicking with a poorly concealed smile on his face.

In the last couple years, I'd managed to get involved in stuff like debate and student government, but I'd never managed to be, well, normal.

"And yesterday," I continued, "I saw this picture on the cover of a magazine—white rose petals dripping with blood, falling over an unidentified headstone—

and above it in block letters: ‘Ruby Rose: Teen Hero Bleeding with Grief Over Her Fallen Father? Or Drenched with Guilt Over Her Dead Victim?’”

Dr. Teresa must have sensed my latent insanity and put the pad and pen down to clear her throat and get my attention back.

“Let’s not focus on that right now.”

“But they’re right!” I shook my head in defiance. “What the hell was I doing there? How did this happen to me?”

I knew exactly how this had happened, though. I’d brought it all on myself. I’d been tracking LeMarq (and a few others like him) for weeks, and *voila*—the consequences had arrived. I knew that what I was doing was

dangerous. I just hadn't quite realized how killing a monster like him would make me *feel*.

"We don't know why this happened..." She trailed off, seemingly looking for the right words. She was always exact in her language, which made for long pauses. "But I'm sure your mother and the police will figure it out."

I felt the bubbling need to purge myself of my sin. I had to tell someone what I'd done. Someone safe.

"I want to tell you something." I made eye contact for the first time today. A risky move, and one I didn't take lightly. "Doctor-patient confidentiality, OK?" I knew the law.

"Of course." She uncrossed her

flared-leg yoga pants and sat forward with anticipation.

“I was sort of stalking Charlie LeMarq,” I semiwhispered, just in case there was a bug in the room.

There it was, the truth I’d been holding on to. The key bit of information I refused to give Detective Martinez so he could crucify me. The secret I’d never even told Mom or Alana.

Except Dr. T’s eyes weren’t lit up anymore. Shouldn’t she be relieved at the breakthrough? I’d finally opened up. Granted, I’d done so with a real doozy, but she had to be used to my personality by now.

“Excuse me? *Stalking?*” She tried to sound calm, but her shock reverberated

between us.

“I was tailing him. Doing surveillance,” I said like it was a reasonable thing to do. “The guy was literally getting away with murder over and over again, and I wanted to catch him doing something so he would finally be put away. I had no intention of killing him. I swear.” I held up my hands like that would convince her.

“So the night you confronted him, you were *not* following him?” she asked, suspicion snaking up between us.

“I was going to, but then I got the text that I thought was from Liam.” I reached for my phone to prove it to her. Thank heavens the forensic team had let me have my phone back; otherwise, even I

could have doubted this all really happened. “See, here’s the text—”

“I believe you.” She waved away the phone. “I just have to think about this. It should have been shared with me a long time ago.”

“I couldn’t,” I argued. “You would’ve convinced me to stop following them.”

“Excuse me? *Them*?” She angled her head at me as if she hadn’t heard right.

“Yeah, I was sort of...following five different guys.” I braced myself as she took her time absorbing my words. “You told me to find an outlet.”

“Ruby,” she said with a shake of her head, clearly indicating to me that my argument wouldn’t work. “And you promise you’re not doing this anymore?”

“Of course not. Please, Dr. T, you can’t tell anyone. It would change everything. It would look like I planned to go there and murder him, and that would establish *mens rea*—the definition of criminal intent.” I imagined the headline “Teen Sociopath Planned Killing All Along.” And then there would be a trial. And sentencing. And those horribly loose-fitting orange jumpsuits with matching rubber shoes that not even Hollywood royalty can pull off—

“Don’t worry,” she said. “You can trust me, you know that.” I believed her.

I waited to feel better now that I’d gotten it off my chest—but I didn’t feel better. I rolled my shoulders and neck to

see if that would help. Maybe medication *was* the answer.

“You have a bright future, and no one can take that away from you.” She looked at me like she wanted to stamp the words across my soul. “No one.”

“What about my mom’s political opponents?” I could play devil’s advocate all day. In fact, I was good at seeing the half-empty side of things. My Ruby Rose-colored glasses were actually quite dark. “Last week, Bill Brandon went on CNN, spouting off about poor gun laws in California. He wants legislators to pass retroactive legislation making it a felony to even own a handgun in California. I’ll be a felon. Good-bye, Stanford.” I waved

adieu to my bright future with the grace of a well-trained beauty queen.

Dr. T got up and stalked toward her desk. “That’s not going to happen. They’re all just sensationalizing the incident for their own benefit. And that schmuck Brandon is crossing the line by involving you in his campaign against your mother. He knows his retroactive comments are ridiculous, but they give him more media traction. That’s all it is. It would never pass.”

“*Schmuck*. Is that a clinical term, doctor?” I asked, smiling for the first time today. I liked it when I wasn’t the only one in the room with unrestrained resentment.

“I’ve used worse.” She reached into

her desk drawer and pulled out a white envelope before returning to her Throne of Discernment. “I was going to wait to give this to you, but it feels like now’s the time.”

“Is that my one Get Out of Jail Free card I’ve been asking my mom for?”

“It’s a letter.” She stroked its smooth face like it was a velveteen rabbit, and placed it next to me. It had no stamp or return address, just my name in bubbly elementary school lettering. “If you feel comfortable, I’d like you to read it aloud.”

I had a good idea of what it was. And I wasn’t sure I did feel comfortable.

I reached for it slowly, like it could jump away. I broke the envelope’s seal

and pulled out a piece of paper. A picture fell into my lap.

It was me. My blonde hair, my pale-gray eyes.

No, it wasn't me. It looked like my fifth-grade picture, but with a bandage on my neck.

It was the girl. The one I'd held at the warehouse. The one who'd clung to me as I tried to save her life. I'd been wondering how she was doing for weeks now.

A row of goose bumps raised across my neck.

"A therapist I know gave me the envelope to deliver to you," said Dr. T. "Can you read the note?"

I took another good look at the picture

before unfolding the accompanying paper.

Dear Ruby,

Thank you for saving my life. No matter what anyone says, you will always be my hero. I'll never forget you.

Love,

Riley Bentley

My eyes found Mother Teresa's—hers had welled up with tears, while mine were profoundly dry from shock.

“Don't you think it's strange that she looks so much like me?” I said, holding up the picture of the girl. *Riley.*

“What?” It was Dr. T's turn to be

surprised. She wiped her eyes to better study the small wallet-sized photo. “Well, yes, she does look a lot like you—but that’s surely just a coincidence.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. My dad always said that they’re just clues.” The emptiness echoed within me as I remembered his words.

“Well, what kind of clue would you suppose the similarity between you is?” she asked, clearly curious enough to indulge me.

I thought about it for a few seconds, though I didn’t really need that long. I had been thinking about it for eight hours a night for over a month now.

“I think whoever lured me there was sending me a message.” There, I said it.

Talk about breakthroughs. Two secrets revealed in one session. This had to be my record. And saying it out loud only clarified it in my mind. Whoever was behind this planted a girl who looked just like me, to make sure I saw the connection. To make sure I protected her. To make sure I pulled the trigger.

That's who LeMarq was talking to on the phone—the one he thanked for the “delivery.” There was a man behind the curtain, pulling the strings. A mastermind. But I couldn't fathom *who* or *why*.

“Maybe one of the other criminals I'd been following discovered me and was trying to get me killed or arrested,” I said, thinking out loud. “Maybe someone

who had a grudge against my mom.”

“Ruby,” Dr. T said, “why don’t we break a bit early today. I don’t want you to go *crazy* overthinking this.”

I looked back to her, expecting a symbolic cookie for my hard work in “opening up.” Instead, she’d said the C-word and started putting papers in her briefcase.

I was about to ask what I’d said wrong when she stood and spoke first. “I’ll see you on Friday.” My mouth dropped open in shock—she’d never ended a session early. And she’d never reacted so brusquely.

Before I could voice my confusion, she promptly turned tail and exited the room.

Leaving me wondering what had just happened.

CHAPTER 4

Art, schmart. I didn't get it. And certainly not much of this stuff created for the Huntington Beach High School Art Fair.

I walked around the muggy, fried-food-scented cafeteria, just like the rest of the sheep, staring and *baahhing* at the individual pieces. I found myself lingering in front of a violent explosion of black, purple, and red paint on white canvas. I think it was supposed to be abstract, but it was probably just some emo kid's attempt to throw something

together for a grade. To me, it looked like one of those inkblot tests psychologists used to determine a person's emotional well-being. Good thing Dr. T didn't use this kind of thing on me.

I pulled my notebook and pen out of my backpack and tried to formulate my thoughts. We were supposed to find two pieces of art that “appealed” to us and then write down why. It was an official assignment, which meant I had to do my best if I wanted to stay on the rails of my valedictorian train track. One that was increasingly steep and treacherous these days.

I took a sharp breath and narrowed my eyes on the textured colors.

The first words that came to mind were *blood spatter*, *grim reaper*, and—

“Seriously, do I have to force feed you normal?” Alana appeared beside me, looping her arm through mine and dragging me away from my morbid tendencies. “Come over and see the painting of La Jolla Cove that I did. It has blue skies and sunshine.”

“Does it have chubby little baby seals in it, too?” I put my pen behind my ear and followed.

“No, seals are too loud and ugly and smelly. But maybe in the distance there’s a certain hot boy in board shorts kissing a certain brown girl in a bikini.” She licked her lips in a way I didn’t need to see.

“Are you ever going to grow out of the boy-crazy phase?” I teased her.

“Don’t be jealous,” she said. “Kissing’s no crime. You should try it again sometime. You know, like therapy. And I know someone who would be happy to help with the treatment.”

“Alana, give it a rest, for, like, a day,” I said, finally pulling away from the WWF armlock she had on me. Plus, who would want to kiss me anyway? My Social Point Average had taken an even deeper nosedive after the shooting.

“Just sayin’.” She continued through the crowd to the center of the room, where I was beginning to suspect a trap. “Anyway, some guys think it’s cool that you know how to use a gun. It’s very

Bond girl.”

I stopped. Suspicion confirmed. “Is that Liam over there, *also* admiring your work?” It was a rhetorical question—Liam was hard to miss. He was like a man among boys, at least in stature. His face was different, though—somehow fresh, innocent, clear. Like all the extra light in the room found its way to him, and to his light-brown, sun-bleached hair hanging over those big, bright eyes.

Regardless of the light, I didn’t like entrapment. I felt my fuse ignite—my highly flammable, dangerously short fuse.

“What? He likes good art.” She stopped to face me with puppy-dog eyes and a guilty conscience. “Rue! He likes

you, all right? He asked me to set this up. He feels like you're unapproachable. Sort of the story of your life!" She reached out to grab me by the shoulders, and I quickly deflected both hands. She knew better. After all, that's how we met. In fourth grade, when she moved to Huntington Beach from Hawaii, I found her in the corner crying while a couple of fifth-grade girls made fun of her tattered shorts and old flip-flops. I couldn't help myself—I had to tell the girls where to go. And when one girl tried to push me into the corner with Alana, I broke the girl's nose. Alana and I had been best friends from then on, and she'd seen my quick reflexes get me in trouble a few times since.

“I’m kind of going through something right now, OK?” I said under my breath so half the student body didn’t witness the public confrontation. *Extra* would just love to interview Big-Mouth Taylor over there, who never stopped staring at the bleeding, withering Ruby Rose, now having a tiff with her best friend. Oh, how Taylor loved competing for the limelight and gaining the upper hand. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was behind the whole LeMarq incident just to ruin me. “I’m begging you, Alana, I just need some space right now.”

“Liam wants to be your friend, Rubik’s Cube. It’s not like he’s asking you to marry him,” she argued, *not* under her breath. I could feel the crowd start to

take notice. Deep down I knew she was only trying to help me. Under different circumstances I wouldn't have minded her matchmaking efforts.

"I don't need any more *friends* right now," I countered. "Not ones that don't understand boundaries, anyway." I clenched my jaw and stormed off.

Alana never stopped. It wasn't that I didn't still feel wildly drawn to Liam. It was that there was no room in my life for distractions.

"If you're not careful, you might not have any friends *left*!" she yelled after me as I disappeared behind a papier-mâché bust of a deformed alien. I almost reached out and punched that stupid warped head for staring at me like *I* was

the weird one.

I wandered aimlessly until I found myself in the least populated corner of the cafeteria and slumped against the wall. The sticky linoleum floor was full of dust bunnies, long-lost Cheetos fragments, and other unsanitary droppings I tried to block out.

I concentrated on my shoes instead—a useful strategy I busted out from time to time. Oh, how I loved the strappy, black-leather Calvin Klein wedge heels hugging my feet. Classics. Always loyal, always kind. These little beauties would never surprise-attack me in the middle of school, would never care more about their careers than my happiness, would never die and abandon me to a life full

of more questions than answers. Wait. *A scuff?*

“Damn it,” I mumbled. I tried to wipe it clean with my thumb and a little spit. But it did no good. I’d have to wait until I got home and found my Kicks Kleaner.

Just great. Here I was, stuck in the proverbial corner of life—and not just because of the ever-sticky linoleum I was sitting on. Now I didn’t even have anywhere to focus my disruptive thoughts. What, exactly, was I supposed to do? Stew in my guilt for snapping at the one person who still wanted me as her best friend? I wished I could distract myself by searching online for a new pair of shoes, but if I was caught on my cell phone I’d have more problems than

I needed today. Cell phones weren't allowed during school hours.

Taking my chances of making eye contact with someone, I looked straight ahead. I still had to find another piece of art that "appealed" to me so I could finish my assignment. But I didn't want to get up.

I hoped I could see something worth looking at from here. Something that wouldn't inspire thoughts of death, betrayal, or scuffed shoes.

About twenty feet away I noticed a black-and-white charcoal drawing. It was a sketch of a young girl with long, straight hair parted down the middle. It was really well done. Perhaps a little too well done for this bush-league art

fair. I stood and wiped stray guck off my red skinny jeans and made a beeline for it.

This had to be some kind of egotistical-Freudian-thought-processing-dysfunction, because as I got nearer, that girl in the sketch started to look a hell of a lot like me. Slightly upturned nose. Dimple in the left cheek. Long neck. What the H?

Who put this here?

In the bottom right corner of the picture, old-fashioned, scrolly letters read:

Love, D. S.

Who was that?

And now that I was up close, there was something very disturbing about this sketch. It wasn't just her face, it was the tattoo on her arm. A winged demon screeching at me, threatening to tear me apart. I'd seen that exact tattoo before on Charlie LeMarq.

Oh no. The world suddenly went fuzzy and dark, like I was seeing things through stained glass. I scanned the room for the nearest escape to fresh air, and instead of finding a clearly marked exit, I found another face that took the last of my breath away. Across the crowd, stood a man with a goatee who looked a lot like Detective Martinez.

A falling sensation rushed over me, and a sickening crack echoed through my

skull.

“Ruby, can you hear me?” A raspy male voice lingered above.

“It’s Ruby Rose!” a girl shrieked through the clamor. “Someone call 911!”

“No! Somebody just get me some water,” Alana ordered.

I opened my eyes to find a three-headed monster looming over me. Then my vision cleared, and I made out Liam, Alana, and some tiny freshman girl, all fussing over me.

“No, don’t call 911—I’m fine. I just need some water, like Alana said.” I sat up and reached for the water bottle in front of me. As I drank, I felt the blood rush to my cheeks. Liam’s arms were

firmly wrapped around my shoulders—with at least a hundred inquiring eyes watching, and dozens of smartphones taking pictures.

So much for the “no cell phone rule” only I was dumb enough to follow.

Among the first of my unclear thoughts was: *The tabloids are going to think it's an early Christmas*. A close second: *This is impossible—Ruby Rose doesn't faint*. Lagging behind: *Is Martinez really here at the art fair? Couldn't be, because he'd be here now among the crowd*. Trailed by: *I hope I don't have leftover cafeteria Cheetos in my hair*. And finally: *I gotta get out of here*.

I got up and broke out of the literal

and metaphorical grip Liam had on me. The sea of students parted as I made my way toward the exit—everyone moved except for Taylor. She just stood there gloating in all her non-fainting, anti-Ruby glory. With her arms crossed and dark hair pulled into a tight ponytail to accentuate her cat-like eyes, she said, “You OK, sweetie?”

“Excuse me,” I said, as my shoulder checked hers, knocking her off balance. Maybe one day I’d get the opportunity to teach her how I really felt about her constantly calling me sweetie. But not today. I speed walked out the double doors, and then sprinted through the parking lot, begging the ocean breeze to cool down my red-hot cheeks and

spinning brain as I ran. I was pissed. And light-headed. And losing control. I didn't even care if I got in trouble for leaving school early.

Shaking from anger and embarrassment, I climbed into Big Black and hugged his steering wheel. I immediately turned up the volume of my favorite "explicit language" rap song. I needed Big Black, I needed to be alone, I needed—a fat chocolate shake with whipped cream ASAP, and I needed to get out of this parking lot before Alana or Liam came running after me.

As I peeled out, images of the girl in the sketch kept floating to the top of my consciousness, no matter how hard I tried to push them back down. I had to

find out who she was, and who'd put the sketch of her there. It was meant for me, I was sure. Well, not totally sure. I should have checked with Alana and asked if she saw it, too, just to make sure I wasn't having a psychotic split or mental breakdown. After all, I thought I'd seen someone who looked a lot like Martinez in that same moment, and he wasn't there. Plus, I'd never fainted before. Not like that, anyway. I passed out once during a karate match, but that was a one-off, and the only time I'd ever allowed a roundhouse to land on my body.

Fainting in the cafeteria was different: I'd had a visceral reaction to seeing that demon tattoo. It was the same tattoo

LeMarq had on his arm. The exact same fangs and webbed wings. The exact same look of evil in its eyes.

Whoever lured me and LeMarq to the warehouse had also delivered that sketch to my school with the *Love, D. S.* signature. He was toying with me, communicating with me. There was no way that drawing was a coincidence. The girl looked just like me, just like Riley Bentley. These were clues. Whoever this crazy-ass D. S. was, he was speaking to me in a language I didn't understand.

When I was almost at the Dairy Queen (which I personally kept in business), my phone vibrated in The Cleave. I looked down at the screen to

see who the culprit was. A picture of D. A. Jane Rose's new campaign poster winked back at me. Glamour Shots had nothing on this baby.

I had some headshots quite similar to this one, from back in the days when my mother had ceaselessly prodded me to compete in beauty pageants. Lame. Some things never changed, and not just because Mom's plastic surgeon kept it that way. She put a higher priority on appearance than anything else. Instead of the popularity contests, all I'd wanted was to compete in karate—something I was actually good at. If it hadn't been for my dad's training in negotiation and his willingness to take her bullets for me, I'd still be her beauty queen hostage.

I declined her call. The wall between us had grown to around shoulder height even before Dad died, and now it was well over eye level. I couldn't even see her anymore without a decent pair of four-inch Kate Spade platform heels.

Ten seconds later she called again.

She must have heard about what happened at school. There was no point in not answering. She'd track me down eventually, and I'd pay the price.

"Hey, Mom."

"What's going on? Where are you? I just got a call—"

"Mom, calm down." As a seasoned prosecutor, she should've been trained not to pose several compound questions at once. Very objectionable in a court of

law. “I’m fine. I promise.”

“Alana called. She told me you fainted and ran out of school?”

Objection: Leading question.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ve been eating my five major food groups. I just need some protein and some rest.” I lied with a frightening ease.

“I don’t believe you,” she said flatly. “Alana said you were upset.”

Objection: Hearsay.

“No, I’m not upset. Just embarrassed. I need to grab some take-out and lie down for a while.”

“You’ve been acting very *strangely* lately.”

Objection: Facts not in evidence. She barely sees me, how would she

know?

“I’m very worried about you, honey.”

Objection: Badgering the witness. I’ve told her a million times to stop calling me honey.

“Jane! I said I’m fine.” Two could play the name game—she hated when I didn’t call her Mom. “I’ll see you tonight. That is, if you get home before midnight.” Switching the focus to her always won the argument.

“No, I’ll be home in fifteen minutes. We need to talk. You’d better be home then, too.” She hung up.

As I pressed “End,” I wondered what wrong button of hers I’d pressed. She never wanted to talk. She was never home before nine or ten. And she never

hung up on *me*.

Great.

CHAPTER 5

I practically inhaled my chocolate shake—and it soothed every hot corner of my soul. Albeit temporarily.

I flung my backpack off my shoulder and collapsed onto my bed. I felt sick. Sick from the chocolate overdose, sick from my fight with Alana, sick with images of that sketch, sick with light-headedness from fainting, and sick with dread of the impending interrogation by my mother.

What was I going to tell her? The truth? Ha. She would feel obligated as

an officer of the court to inform the appropriate authorities of all my *missteps*. Plus, my full and not-yet-entirely-disclosed side of the story was insane:

So, Mom, I didn't mention it before, but I had more of a hand in the killing of LeMarq than you thought, due to my OCD hobby of following killers in my spare time. And, oh yeah, there might be a chance that one of the other killers I was following is connected to the dude who lured me to that warehouse on Water Street. Oh, and now he's sending me messages through the school

art show. But don't worry, it's all good. Let's just pretend none of it happened.

Uh, no.

I crammed a pillow over my face so I could scream. But mid-scream, I realized *that* was about to turn into a throw-up, and I stopped.

The rumble of the garage door below let me know I had to get a grip on myself. I ran into the bathroom and washed my face with cold water, scrubbing off all my eye makeup in preparation for the inquisition. I would be stone faced. I would be savvy. Mom might have known how to intimidate criminals and suspects. But I knew how

to box her out.

“Rue-girl,” she hollered from downstairs. “I’m home.”

“I’ll be right there.”

I stared myself down in the mirror and whispered, “You can do this.”

I met my mom in the kitchen, where she still had her sunglasses on like she was some kind of hungover rock star. Even her stylish little A-line bob was askew. It looked darker than usual, so black that it maybe even had a hint of blue. She’d been going progressively darker since last year’s polling data showed her darker hair produced a better Latino vote. If she thought I was a disappointment in my choice of guns over dolls, I felt the same way about her

choice to embrace her Mexican heritage because it was convenient for political points. I'd never even met one member of her family. Her mother died when she was in law school, before I was born, and despite the fact that her father was still alive and unwell somewhere in San Diego, she hadn't spoken to him since he walked out on them when she was eight. I knew she had extended family spread across Southern California, but I stopped asking about them years ago when I learned my questions put her in a dark mood.

She was pouring herself a glass of wine. Liquid courage. Not fair—I didn't get any.

“Mom, it's only two o'clock.” I

grabbed an apple off the counter—Granny Smith was my only ally here. “Should *I* be worried about *you*?” I had to stay on the offensive.

“Ruby,” she said, putting down the bottle. “Let’s not do that.”

“Do what?” I asked innocently, sitting down on a barstool across from her.

“Let’s not shift attention to me, when this is about you.” She finally took off her Gucci sunglasses, revealing puffiness around the eyes I wasn’t expecting. She bit at her Restylane-injected lips—an old nervous habit, and one Dr. Syringe-Happy in Beverly Hills had warned her to break.

“Obviously not,” I said, trying not to gawk at the hot mess before me. I’d

never seen her looking like this—not even when Dad died. I knew she probably cried then, but it was behind her perpetually closed doors and perfectly coiffed facade. “What, did Bill Brandon call you a bad name in the *Los Angeles Times* today?”

She turned her back to me and rubbed her eyes with a clean dishrag next to the sink. This was highly unusual. I’d caught her in a real weak spot. Maybe I could actually win this one.

“No, this isn’t about Bill Brandon.” She faced me with renewed strength in her bloodshot, mascara-smudged eyes. “This is about you. Only you.”

Oh, snap.

I told myself to think happy thoughts. I

scratched at the thin wax coating on Granny Smith and imagined landing a sweet high kick. Buying a new pair of Steve Madden cowgirl boots. Kissing Liam Slater while we lay on the beach. Wait, where did that come from?

“Please stay with me,” she said with a note of uncharacteristic hysteria in her voice. “I really need you to *not* do that thing where you close yourself off and think of other things and direct your attention onto inanimate objects.”

I set down Granny Smith—like she’d ratted me out. “Wow, so you’re a psychic now?” I asked. Since when had she paid attention to me long enough to figure out my war tactics?

“I may not be perfect, but I’m not

stupid.” She rounded the counter and stood opposite me. “I know we’ve been distant...and I haven’t really been *here* for you...”

Not this conversation. I was so not in the mood for one of our strained heart-to-hearts.

“This past year has been difficult to say the least. Losing your father, fighting for my campaign, this whole LeMarq debacle. It’s fair to say, I’ve really been thrown for a loop.”

Excusez-moi? Did she just say that me shooting a man in the head had thrown *her* for a loop?

“I want you to know I love you very much.” In my peripheral vision I saw her fiddling with her wedding ring, like her

words weren't only meant for me.

I looked up. I hadn't heard her say the word "love" in so long. Something inside me felt soothed by that one simple sentence, reminding me of a better time when it felt true.

"I know I haven't been spending enough time with you and that I've been relying too much on Dr. Teresa for updates, which is completely unacceptable." She pinched her eyes shut. "But that's not the way it's going to work anymore." She opened her eyes and focused on me with a scary intensity. "And I need to start by telling you something important. Something I should have told you a long time ago—but never found the right time."

She paused and put her lips in position to say something, but nothing came out. This was becoming too painful to endure.

“I need you to know that everything I’ve done is to protect you, provide for you, and help you. And I will never stop trying to do that.” With her hand over her heart, she nodded at me to make sure I understood. I didn’t.

“What are you talking about, Mom?”

“Regardless of what has happened, or what will happen, I want you to remember that, OK?” A full-blown heat rash had developed on her neck. She started rubbing at it without taking her eyes off me. Her agitation did nothing to comfort me.

“Just tell me what you’re talking about. Am I in trouble with the police? Are you going to have to press charges against me?” I gulped, not sure I wanted the answer.

“No, Ruby, that’s not it. No charges will be brought. I don’t want you worrying about that.” She rounded the counter and brushed some of the hair off my brow. That simple touch felt like stars springing to life inside of me after years of living in darkness.

“It’s about your dad.” She hesitated, pulling away before I was ready. “I know I never showed much appreciation for the way the two of you spent so much time together, shooting and fighting and whatnot.”

“That’s a bit of an understatement,” I said, wondering where she was going with this. “All you ever did was punish him, and me, for it.”

“I know,” she said with a grimace. “And I’m sorry.”

Jane Rose said the S-word? And not in a sarcastic way?

“Turns out, he was right.” Tears emerged in her eyes. “He was a good man, and he would have wanted me to tell you—”

A loud chime reverberated through the house.

“Are you expecting someone?” she asked, reaching up to smooth her hair.

“No.” I shook my head, thrown off by (a) Mom’s most sincere moment in

years; (b) what Dad “would have wanted” my mom to tell me; and (c) the sound of the doorbell. Normally, people had to press the call button and get buzzed in to get past the entry gates. My parents couldn’t be too careful with all the criminals they’d put away.

She grabbed the kitchen towel again and attempted to wipe away every sign of emotion before she took off toward the door, putting the Guccis back over her eyes.

As I absorbed the whiplash of emotions she’d just put me through and listened to the abrasively familiar click-clack of her heels on the tile as she walked away, I wondered who’d dared to trespass. Who was pulling my mom

away just when she was finally opening up to me?

Before I had time to prioritize the feelings of annoyance at being interrupted and anger at Mom leaving me hanging again, I heard her gasp.

“What the hell!” She sounded scared. My mother was never scared.

I froze, allowing my mind to conjure all the fatal possibilities.

Just as I managed to gather myself to search the kitchen for some kind of weapon, the air pressure in the house changed, opening the front door with a gust.

I was out of time.

Clutching the steak knife I'd grabbed and listening for any indication that Mom

was in danger and I needed to act. Why would she have opened the door if she was scared? Maybe she wasn't the one who'd opened the door at all.

“Hello, Jane.” A deep Spanish-flavored voice boomed through our grand entryway. I knew that voice.

“Detective Martinez, is there some reason you didn't call my office?” my mother said in her trademark passive-aggressive tone.

My fingers uncurled from my weapon as I realized I no longer needed one—and that brandishing a blade wouldn't win me any points with the man investigating me as a murderer. I dropped the knife and cringed when it clattered into the stainless steel sink.

“I apologize,” Martinez muttered, sounding entirely unapologetic. “But I did call your office. Several times, in fact.”

“So you show up unannounced at my home?” my mother seethed. “This is hardly appropriate, Detective.” She may have been irritated at his unexpected drop-in, but *I* was terrified. Even though he wasn’t the first dangerous person who’d come to my mind when my mom gasped, he was dangerous nonetheless. Perhaps he’d found evidence to contradict my sworn statement. Maybe he was here to catch me in my lie—that I’d never heard of Charlie LeMarq before the night I killed him—and take me in with hands cuffed behind my back.

Or maybe he really was at the art show, and he knew a lot more about the investigation than he'd been letting on.

“Have I interrupted something?” Martinez asked.

“No,” she said, as if she'd completely forgotten that we were just in the middle of a rare moment of her opening up to me about my father. I tried not to let her lie sting.

“Good, because we need to talk.”

“About what?”

“About the investigation, of course,” he said, inviting himself in. “Is Ruby around?”

I tiptoed across the acoustic tile and peeked around the corner.

“Yes, but I would prefer it if we

talked privately,” she said, trying to corral him into her office. Instead, he walked around the foyer as if looking for something. He stopped in front of the framed family portrait, his face scrunching up in a weird way as he stared at my father’s image. His goatee, his thick gold chain necklace, and unnecessary black leather jacket made him seem more like an actor playing a part on *Law & Order: LA* than a real cop. He was more good-looking than I remembered—and probably less good-looking than he remembered. Arrogant ass.

“Detective, please, my bureau if you would,” she ordered, more aggressive than passive at this point, gesturing with

her hands for him to move away from the picture and behind the closed doors of her *bureau*. Like using the French word made her office fancier, or more official.

He reluctantly followed her command, muttering something in Spanglish that I didn't understand. I knew she was only trying to protect me—my rights, my emotional stability. But I didn't like being kept in the dark. And I didn't think I could wait one second to hear what update he had on the investigation.

“Hi, Detective Martinez.” I popped out right before the office door shut. His head swung around at my voice, and I saw a hint of excitement on his face before he narrowed his eyes into a stern-

cop look.

“Hey, Ruby,” he said. “Your mother and I were about to have a chat. But you’re welcome to join us if you’d like.”

I glanced at my mom. Her jawbone was about to break. “No, Detective, I already told you I would prefer if we speak alone.”

“She’s a big girl. She can decide for herself.” He wasn’t intimidated by my mom or her D. A. attitude. Huh—that was rare.

“Yeah, Mom,” I said, walking past them into the *bureau*. “Don’t you think I deserve to know what’s going on?”

She followed me and whispered in my ear, “Listen to me. Don’t speak, even if he asks you direct questions. Let me

answer for you. Do you understand?"

"Mom, he's here to tell me what's going on, not to interrogate me," I whispered back, not believing my own words.

"Don't be so naive, Rue."

She sat me next to her on the couch, and motioned for Martinez to sit across from us in an armchair.

"So tell us, Detective, what news do you have to report?" she asked, firmly in command again. "What has the quick-as-snails Homicide Unit discovered?"

He gave her a look of disgust before focusing on me. "Well, it looks like your story has been corroborated by the forensics," he said, leaning forward, elbows braced over knees, practically

oozing testosterone. If he was trying to establish some kind of male dominance here—good luck. “We dumped LeMarq’s cell phone and found several texts and calls from an untraceable disposable cell. We know now that an unknown suspect promising a ‘blonde delivery’ lured LeMarq there. We assume it was this same unknown suspect who texted Ruby that night.”

I exhaled a little.

“This theory is also substantiated by the fact that LeMarq did not transport the young girl in his van. There were no hairs or fibers found in his vehicle, which leads us to believe that the unknown suspect, who lured both LeMarq and Ruby to the warehouse, also

kidnapped the victim and used her as some sort of bait for both of them.”

I felt my mom tense up. “Excuse me, Detective—*bait?*”

“That’s right...bait.” Martinez continued staring me down, not even bothering to look at my mom. “Why do you think someone would want to lure you there?”

“Detective, she is not going to answer that.” Mom slung a hand over my lap like we were in a car and she’d slammed on the brakes.

He knew I was hiding something. He wasn’t as dumb as his muscles made him look.

“Detective,” my mother said, “I want to know *who sent that text*. I need that

man caught.”

The heat from her laser glare must have gotten to him, because he finally took off his stupid leather jacket. As he draped it over his leg, I noticed a tattoo on his right forearm. It looked like the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor Marine Corps symbol. Dad had that same exact tattoo, in the same exact place. I knew they’d been partners sometime before I was born, but matching tattoos? Maybe it was a common Marine thing—

“I’m working on that, Jane,” he said, finally directing his focus to her. There was a venomous quality to his voice now. And he looked at her in a way that felt—inappropriate. Like he knew her better than I thought, and this wasn’t the

first time they were having a fight.

“Are you *working on it* with the same intensity as the department is *working on* finding my husband’s killer?” she said in a raptor-like pitch. It startled me. Something strange was happening to my mom. “Sergeant Mathews tells me that Jack’s case has gone nowhere. It’s unacceptable—”

“Jane, relax.” He cut her off and stood with his hand up to her, as if he was blocking out her deathly atomic waves. “You know the department is committed to finding out what happened to Jack.”

She rose to face him. She wasn’t going to let him have the upper hand in anything, and certainly not in elevation

—not with those heels.

I was wondering if he was going to bring up anything about the art show (since I wasn't going to)—or if I was legitimately delusional and waiting in vain—when my phone vibrated in my back pocket. My mom was standing in front of me, blocking me from Martinez's view, so I risked taking a quick look.

A photo text stared back at me. A girl tied up, gagged, and bleeding from a head wound. This one looked incredibly like me, too. At least, under the gag it seemed like it—blonde hair, pale-gray eyes. The message read:

11800 Ninth Street. This time, no

police.

I blacked out the screen. I couldn't stand to look at it.

Maybe, hopefully, probably, it was a fake. Since the official story about the LeMarq debacle was leaked to the media, I'd received dozens of threatening texts purporting to lead me to more setups. Each time, I told my mom and she'd report it to the forensic-analysis team assigned to my ongoing case. Nothing ever came from any of them. According to my mom, the texts were sent by a series of punk kids from school, a dirty paparazzo, and an insane person who had nothing better to do with his time.

We'd finally changed my cell phone number. It had been three weeks since I'd received anything. Only Alana, Alana's big mouth, and my mom knew my number.

As Detective Muscle Head argued with my mom, I considered the odds of this message being real. None of the other messages had included photos, certainly not with a girl who looked so similar to me—and just like Riley Bentley. As far as I knew, no one had picked up on that detail yet.

I'd never been warned not to involve the police, either. Something about this message felt different.

“Is something wrong?” Mom's voice stopped my runaway train of thought.

“Honey, are you OK?”

I looked up. She'd called me honey again. I ground my teeth, thinking about how to respond. The text said no police, and yet, a detective was standing right here in front of me. Despite the warning, there was no way I could heed it. If the message was real, that girl needed help.

“No.” I shook my head. “No, I’m not OK.” I turned on my screen so they could see the image. “And neither is this girl.”

Mom grabbed the cell out of my hand like it was a bomb only she could defuse.

“Did this just come through now, Ruby?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Detective...” My mom turned back to Martinez, as though putting the picture closer to his face would help him react quicker. “This needs to stop. Get your forensic team to look into it immediately. If it’s authentic, do something about it for once. I’m not sure how well my office, or your department, can handle another *incident*.” She motioned for him to leave.

At first he didn’t budge. He stood there, waiting, like a black chess piece eyeing his next move toward the white queen. Then his glare shifted to me. His eyes burned through me in a way that panicked me more than the photo did. Did he blame me for this?

“I’ll have forensics trace the call

immediately. Forward it to me, Jane—you know my number—so we can analyze the picture, too,” he said, clenching his jacket in his fists.

My mom started sending him the text and picture. Did she have his phone number memorized? And didn't he need to take my phone with him? Or did he already have my phone tapped?

“But, Ruby,” he said, moving in my direction and holding out a white card. “Take this. In case you need to talk about anything.”

I looked away from him, trying to remember the research I'd done on what gestures marked deception or guilt. I was pretty sure I was doing all of them: rapid eye movement, hands near mouth,

shifting in seat. I felt like the words “guilty stalker” were stamped across my forehead.

As I hesitated, my mom stepped in and took the card instead. “You should go now.”

He stared her down for a good five eternities before leaving without another word, a potent trail of spicy aftershave following in his wake.

My mom threw my phone on the couch next to me and started rubbing her temples. She was definitely hiding something from me. I’d picked up a subtext in her fiery conversation with Detective Martinez. I was so busy keeping my secrets hidden that I’d almost missed hers.

“Mom, what’s your deal with him?”

“Let’s finish this conversation later. I need to make some phone calls.” She made a dignified dash for her desk, like there was a VIC (only not a victim—more like a Very Important Conversation) that couldn’t wait. “Go rest. I’ll get some dinner delivered and we can talk then.”

“OK, but what was that thing you were going to tell me before he got here?”

She finally looked up, and I watched the blood drain from her face.

“If it’s about my case, I think I deserve to know what it is.”

“You’re right,” she said, closing her eyes in defeat. “You do deserve to

know.”

Instead of coming to sit next to me, she took her place behind her desk.

“I don’t know how to say this, so I’m just going to get it out,” she said. “Before you came into our lives, I...had an affair. With Detective Martinez. It was the greatest mistake of my life, and not a day goes by that I don’t regret it.”

My stomach dropped along with my jaw. Why did it feel like she just admitted to cheating on *me*?

“And you’re telling me this *now* because...?”

“Because, Ruby, it matters!” she snapped. “Things ended very badly between us. And now that he’s the lead investigator on your case...let’s just say

he could make things very difficult for us.”

I stared at the floor, not knowing what to say or think. All I could think about was my poor, loyal, dead dad.

“Believe me, I never wanted to burden you with this,” she said, anger and guilt constricting her voice. “Damn it, I just needed you to know that you can’t trust Martinez. Anything he says or does is dangerous.”

She got up and crossed the great divide between us.

“Ruby, words can’t express how sorry I am for my mistakes,” she said, sitting next to me and pulling my chin up to face her. “But it was a long time ago and I need you to know I’m doing

everything I can to make it right, OK?”

“OK,” I parroted back, and turned away. Just when I thought she was making efforts to tear down the wall between us, it had grown even taller. Who was this woman? Was she ever the mom I thought she was? Had I deluded myself into believing we were ever a happy family?

“Why?” I asked feebly, too shocked and hurt to muster the emotion of anger quite yet.

“Why *what*?” She playacted that she was confused by my question, as if I had posed an irrelevant math problem.

“Why’d you cheat on Dad?”

She put her head in her hands. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Maybe even after all this time she still didn't understand it herself.

It took a few minutes for her to gather herself, and I let her. My usual MO was to react impulsively, aggressively. But right now, I felt stunned.

“Go lie down for a while.” Not a request. “I’ll get some dinner and I promise, we’ll talk some more. But for now, I need to make sure this text you received is handled.”

“Fine.” I grabbed my phone and left her office. I didn’t want to be near her anymore.

As soon as I got to my room, I threw down my phone and crammed the pillow over my face, no longer wanting to hear my mother’s cold voice in my head, or

hold the girl's image in my hand, or taste
the tears running down my cheeks.

CHAPTER 6

My phone's vibration from my bedside table woke me up. Disoriented, I grabbed for it and cracked an eyelid to check the time. Five a.m. *What the...?*

I rolled over and rubbed my lids to try to un-paste the contacts from my eyeballs. I never fell asleep with them in—and this inability to blink without burning pain was why.

My phone vibrated again. I rubbed hard enough that one eye was usable. I had ten text messages! Three from Alana, each one increasingly more

agitated by my radio silence, and the rest from two different unknown numbers. The first unknown number read:

Hey, it's Liam. Hope u dont mind Alana gave me your #. Just wanted to make sure ur ok. & I wanted to tell u something. Call me.

I didn't mind. Actually, I couldn't stop the rising feeling of totally not minding. If a girl could shoot and kill someone, then pass out on the cafeteria floor like a lunatic, and this guy still wanted to talk to her, he couldn't be so bad. His abs didn't hurt his case, either.

The phone vibrated a third time.

I scrolled down to the rest of the

texts, all from the same number. There were six of them, and I opened the first:

Check the Channel 3 news. You didn't listen, and you didn't save her.

The second and third and fourth—all said the same thing.

My heart palpitated. I switched on the news. Across the bottom, the scroll read:

Unnamed Teen Girl Found Dead Near Ninth Street.

All the warm and gooey feelings I'd had thinking of Liam and his ocean-blue

eyes evaporated. A girl was dead. And it was my fault.

Something hardened in my chest. Like a cocoon had wrapped itself around my heart. And the darkness I'd worked so hard to dispel after losing Dad filled my mind. Guilt, sadness, anger, and despair all swarmed inside.

A normal person would cry at a time like this. Go running to Momma, to my dad's "trusted" friends at SWAT, and plead for mercy and help. But I was never normal, and definitely not in the mood for pleading. I was in the mood to find out who was doing this to me. And why.

I replied to the message:

Who are you?

Ten seconds later, the message came back undelivered.

I chucked off my comforter and slid to my knees beside my bed. No, not to pray. To reach underneath my box spring. I felt for the handles of my locked chest, pulled it out, and lined up the numbers of the combination until it clicked open. I hadn't opened the chest in weeks, foolishly trying to forget that it existed.

I rummaged through the case files I'd copied off my mom's desk until I found my notebook. I preferred paper notes just in case—I knew from my mom's trials that *nothing* digital *ever*

disappears. And I wasn't going to be one of those defendants dumb enough to Google "how to catch a killer." No, I could easily burn these notes if I had to. And I always used my dad's computer for hacking into official criminal databases and evidence logs. I even had his access codes to get into higher-level police files. They were all neatly written on a laminated card he kept "safe" in his safe. Stupid bureaucracy hadn't even managed to shut down his accounts yet.

Thumbing through pages of comments, charts, and surveillance logs, I ran my finger over the name of each predator I'd been secretly following. All five of them—aka my Filthy Five. LeMarq was the first one I'd set my sights on.

The wind howled outside my window, and the branches of the orange tree scratched at the glass. I checked to make sure no one was there. Of course not—the creepy scraping noise was just part of a normal SoCal morning storm, not someone messing with my mind. Definitely not the spirit of the girl I should have saved.

The condensation from the night's rain on the windowpane distorted the world outside. And the images on the television next to the window distorted my world inside.

Television crews lined the Ninth Street crime scene. For some morbid reason, they kept replaying the coroner wheeling out the black body bag. I had

never hated my high-def flat screen so much. At the moment, I didn't exactly want to "feel like I was there."

The police hadn't released the girl's identity yet, so the news team resorted to zooming in on the moment when the wind picked up and an unzipped portion of the body bag rose, revealing a blonde head. As the reporter went wild with excited speculation on who the victim might be, I couldn't help but wonder why they had to look like me, and what this guy was trying to tell me.

I felt like going on TV myself and warning every blonde-haired, gray-eyed girl in California to stay inside until I figured this out. But surely Detective Martinez or one of his chest-beating

cohorts would see a pattern, and the public would be alerted to the profile of the victims. Or maybe the zombie media would figure it out on their own.

I could only hope the police didn't disclose my involvement. If they found out, the press's cycle of harassment would start all over again. A slimy paparazzo named Sammy tirelessly followed me around after Dad's death—he liked to call me the number-one victim of that senseless murder. More like I was the number-one victim of Sammy's invasion of privacy and national-exploitation tour.

I heard Mom stirring downstairs. Most likely making herself a pot of coffee, working on her usual three hours

of sleep a night. I couldn't afford her barging in, and I certainly didn't want to talk to her about another death. I had to get out of here and find a safe place to gather my thoughts—alone.

The Pier.

I grabbed what I needed, and restashed all the evidence against me. After stuffing my notebook in my backpack and kicking my pirate's chest back under the bed, I headed to my bathroom to brush my hair and teeth.

I tried not to pay too much attention to that sickly looking girl in the mirror. Instead, I tried to look past her, to the open window, where I knew my spot under the Pier and its fresh after-rain breeze waited to wash away the dark

lines and puffy skin around my eyes. But just the thought of puffy eyes made me think of my mom (not because we look anything alike, because we don't) and her admission of guilt in her office yesterday.

As I began to make progress on the rat's nest I sometimes called hair, I also wondered why she hadn't come up to see me last night. She said she would get dinner and we'd "talk some more." Typical Jane Rose. All promises—no follow-through.

Maybe, so she would start to care more about me than her career, I should start campaigning for Bill Brandon and leaking information to his campaign muckety-mucks on her inability to keep

promises. The days of family breakfasts in bed and picnics at the beach had ceased well before we lost Dad. Right about the same time that she formally declared her ambition to run for District Attorney the first time, she unofficially stopped being a wife and mother.

I slammed down my brush a little harder than I intended to and frowned at the state I was in. Hardly my finest hour in the looks department. Even after a little mascara and blush, I still didn't want to see the girl in the mirror. Not even my mom's old pageant tricks of making myself "look better in order to feel better" were working. I needed a few moments with my oldest and dearest friend: Gladys—aka my shoe closet.

I rounded the corner of my bathroom and opened the door to the other “wing” of my bedroom. Clicking the light switch on, I watched the heavenly fluorescent light shine luminously on her walls. Happy to see me, too, Gladys and all her Pips stood at attention for my entry—except for my tan Dolce & Gabbana Catwoman boots, which had to be neatly hung to avoid damage or creases. I had to take care of my Sleeping Beauties.

“Gladys, I need help.” My words echoed into the space. Sometimes it really paid to be an only child. This room had been meant for my sister or brother, but when they never happened, Dad knocked down a wall to give me a playroom. I was never really into toys—

just shoes. I know. Weird. Dr. T told my mom I would likely grow out of it. No such luck. Dad thought it was funny. Mom thought it was expensive—but better than guns. And how could she blame me? She's the one who'd taught me everything I knew about high-fashion footwear. Shoes were "our" thing. Or at least they used to be.

"I'm going to the beach—and then to sucky school—but I need to be able to move," I said as if Gladys might talk back.

I walked around the shelves Dad had handcrafted just for me and the Pips, until I found them. My Juicy Couture Platino Metallic Gladiator Sandals named Hermes. I plucked them off the

shelf and took them back to my room to get dressed, throwing on some yellow leggings, a Roxy hoodie, and my Spy sunglasses. I knew there was no sun, but like my shoes, they provided emotional support.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder and took a deep breath. A Courage Breath for the day—I didn't ignore everything Dr. T taught me.

Now I just had to sneak out without Hawkeye Jane catching me. I slithered down the stairs, into the garage, and into Big Black. For the quickest escape, I hit the garage-door opener at the same time as the ignition. It was already 6:00 a.m., and I only had eighty minutes before school started.

After sitting in the dry sand under the Pier for fifteen minutes, no effective thinking had taken place. Instead, I watched the light shift over the pink-and-purple horizon. Surfers lined up for their turns on the larger than usual sets rolling in. I hadn't surfed since Dad had died. It was *our* thing. And I missed it.

We'd sit out past the break waiting for the waves, and he'd tell me stories about combat as a Marine. About how hard it was to come back from the atrocities he'd witnessed as a soldier abroad. About the dangers still looming at home. About the line between right and wrong.

He'd called this beach his shoreline.

He wanted to believe that—whatever he did—he'd always make it home, back to what was *sure*. His sure things included his integrity, his country, his freedom. His very own shoreline.

He was a broken record about me finding my own shoreline, about preparing myself for the moments in life when I'd be tested. There were times when his training and instruction felt like he was dragging me out into the deep waters of what my mom not-so-affectionately called his Post-Traumatic Stress Paranoia. Both in his time as a Marine and a police officer, he witnessed violence that most people can't even stand to watch on TV. So her words had merit, especially in the year

leading up to his death. But now—his warnings and preparations didn't seem so crazy. In fact, it seemed like he might have known something (or *someone*) was coming.

Which made me wonder where my shoreline was anymore.

I grabbed my notebook and began OCD-organizing what was on my mind.

*Problem 1: A girl is dead because
I didn't respect the warning. I
let her die.*

*Dilemma 2: Whoever lured me to
LeMarq is still toying with me.
Trying to torment me. Or kill
me.*

Predicament 3: I lied to the police

about following LeMarq, and somehow Detective Martinez knows it. If he finds proof of my strange stalking habits, he'll argue that the LeMarq shooting was not, in fact, "legally justified." He'll claim that I had malice aforethought, intent, and motive—and that it was murder in the first degree.

Disaster 4: My mom cheated on my dad—with the one man in a position to take me down!

Mess 5: Mom's campaign opponent, Bill Brandon, is on a witch hunt to destroy the whole Rose family, and he doesn't mind using me to do it.

Catastrophe 6: I am a killer.

“Ruby!” A voice jerked my nose out of my notebook. “Hey, Ruby.”

I looked up to find a half-naked Liam Slater jogging toward me through the sand with a surfboard under his arm.

This had to be some kind of psychotic delusion. Like my subconscious desires had fought to the surface. Or maybe I’d watched one too many episodes of vampire shows with shirtless immortals.

“I was hoping I’d see you here today,” Liam said, a little out of breath. His unzipped wet suit hung dangerously low on his waist, exposing the muscular V-line in his hips that most girls would pay good money to see. His shaggy hair

dripped salt water over his bronzed and chiseled eight-pack. Suddenly, I had a new problem—

Crisis 7: Acting like a total idiot in front of Liam Slater.

“I never heard back from you,” he said as he sat down next to me. “Are you OK?”

“You hoped to see me? What made you think I’d be here?” I asked, semiviolently shutting my notebook like it contained national secrets.

“I’ve seen you out here before,” he clarified. “My boys and I hit this spot before school occasionally for a session, and I’ve seen you here a few times *deep*

in thought. I just never got the guts to actually come over and talk before.”

“Really?”

“Really *what?*” he asked with a half smile.

“Really, you surf here? Really, you’ve seen me here? Really, you didn’t have the guts to talk to *me?*” I was shocked by all three implications. Sure, I could be shortsighted and socially unplugged sometimes, but I couldn’t have missed *him*.

He laughed, and I couldn’t help but notice his perfectly straight white teeth against his sun-kissed face.

“I know we’ve goofed around in class, and said ‘hey’ in the halls and stuff, but you’re sort of intimidating,” he

said. I could have sworn the sun came out just to do that shiny, sparkly thing off his teeth.

“I don’t think *intimidating* is the right word,” I said. “Maybe *unrelatable*...my therapist says I’m unrelatable.” Why was I telling him I had a therapist?

“Oh...kay, unrelatable, unreachable, unattainable, sure.” He looked over at me with raised eyebrows and a suppressed laugh. Seriously, dudes shouldn’t have such long eyelashes. “You hit your head pretty hard yesterday. I hope you’re OK.”

“Did I?” I asked. I honestly didn’t remember. Physical pain hardly ever bothered me. I’d gotten good at ignoring bumps and bruises.

“Right here,” he said, reaching up to stroke my hair where my head had hit the floor. Now that he was touching it, that spot felt tender. But in this moment, I thanked the injury for giving me a rare moment of physical contact. Mom hadn’t hugged me in years, and Dad’s physical expressions of love (since I’d become a teen) consisted of sparring matches and pats on the head. In general, I’d always been pretty successful at keeping people within carefully controlled parameters. Even Alana had to hammer past my aversion to touch—what Dr. T said was part of my *autophobia*, or fear of abandonment. Which of course got ten times worse when my father was murdered.

But this uninvited touch from Liam? I didn't hate it.

"It doesn't hurt," I said, eyes down, blood pressure up.

"That's good." It took him a few strung-out beats before he lowered his hand. "Listen, I wanted to tell you something."

"OK, shoot," I said awkwardly. Not my best choice of words.

"Well, I don't want to come across as a creepy stalker kind of guy." He played with the damp sand in his hands. "But yesterday at the art fair...I noticed this guy. Well, a man. He was watching you."

"What?" I sat up taller. "What kind of man? A teacher?"

“No, I don’t think he was a teacher. I would’ve seen him around school before. He was definitely out of place. He was watching you in an intense sort of way, and it was weird. I didn’t like it.”

Had he seen Martinez, too? Maybe I wasn’t going crazy.

“What did he look like?” I asked, heart racing in a new way now.

“He was wearing a dark suit. No tie or anything, but a sort of athletic build, good-looking—like an older George Clooney kind of look.” He grabbed a piece of kelp and crushed a bulb between his fingers.

“Was he Latino?” I asked.

“No, he was definitely a white dude.

Sort of light, graying hair and stubble. Anyway, do you know someone like that?"

"No, I don't." If he wasn't talking about Martinez, then I had no idea who he was talking about (and I was officially crazy). None of my Filthy Five fit that description, unless one of them had hired a stylist and hit the gym like crazy for a few weeks. My fingers ached to open the notebook in my lap and write it all down.

"Then you passed out and he disappeared," Liam said. "Do you think this guy has anything to do with the text you got that night?"

His question caught me off guard. No one, not even Alana, had dared ask me

about that night. Even though most of the details had been leaked to the media—including the fact that I thought the text was from Liam—I'd successfully given off the don't-talk-to-me-about-it vibe. Even without strict orders from Jane Rose, Esquire, I knew it wasn't wise to discuss the investigation with anyone.

"You know, the night you..." Liam paused, and I prayed he wouldn't say *shot that dude*. "...saved that girl? You think it might be him?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I have no idea."

"I *was* going to ask you to Homecoming—just so you know." He crushed another bulb. "I bought the flowers and everything. And I was on

my way over to your house when Alana called me to tell me about—”

“Uh-huh.” I didn’t need to hear the end of that sentence. I knew what had happened next. I went into seclusion, and he’d gone to Homecoming with Taylor instead.

“I would’ve done the same thing.” He turned to face me. “I would have pulled the trigger on that Charlie LeDouche, too. You did the right thing. No matter what anyone says, especially that Bill Brandon dude. I think you were brave.”

I squirmed a little. He was sneaking past too many of my carefully constructed boundaries with his charm and sincerity. This is what I admired about Liam from afar—his ability to

make people feel better about themselves.

“Obviously, I don’t know *exactly* what happened,” he continued. “Only what I’ve seen on the news or read in the papers, but it seems to me you were put between a rock and a hard place, and you ended up saving a little girl. That’s totally amazing.”

I felt for the picture of the girl hidden in The Cleave. Next to my other important stuff—cell phone, lip gloss—she was there.

Then I did something totally unexpected. I pulled her out to show Liam.

“She sent me this,” I said, holding up the small picture.

His first reaction was shock—possibly at me reaching into my bra. Then his look changed as he wiped his hands on his wet suit and took the picture.

“Wow, this is her?” he asked.

“She sent me a letter, too, thanking me, telling me I’m her hero.” I looked out at the ocean and the frothy waves crashing in. “But I haven’t contacted her. The thing is, I don’t feel like a hero. I mean, I don’t regret killing him, because he deserved to die. He’ll never hurt anyone again,” I said, trying to stop the swell of truth gushing out of me, but unable to because it felt so good. “But it never should have happened. I never should have been put in that position. He

should already have been behind bars. That little girl never should have needed saving—”

“She looks like you,” he said.

My attention jerked back to him. He saw the similarities, too. Liam Slater was smart, observant, and protective. And he seemed to really want to help me.

“I know!” I said. “No one else noticed that.”

“Well, they didn’t release her name or picture,” he countered.

“I mean the police. My mom. My therapist. People who saw her. None of them noticed.”

“I don’t know how they could have missed it.” He stared sadly at the

picture, running his finger over the bandage on the girl's neck where LeMarq had tried to kill her.

After a moment Liam reached up to his left ear and pulled his shaggy hair back over it. Through the wet strands I saw what he was trying to hide—a serious scar, pink and fleshy on the top part of his ear. I was surprised that, after all this time shamelessly staring at him, I'd never noticed it before. It must be why he always wore his hair long. I found myself desperately curious to know who'd done that to him and why.

The closer I looked now, the more I saw. His ear didn't bear his only scar. There were scores of little circles up and down the sides of his body. Like he

had the chicken pox or—someone had used him as an ashtray. I teetered on the edge of asking, but I didn't dare. He was allowed to have his secrets, too.

He caught me examining him, and instead of being angry or ashamed, a look of little-boy sadness fell over him. He stared out at the sea with those eyes that changed a different shade of blue for every occasion. They were now a stormy slate, just like the clouded horizon.

Suddenly, I felt more truth bubbling inside me, and the urge to word-vomit everything. To share why I passed out in the cafeteria, the tattoo in the art, the *Love, D. S.* signature, the fact that I was stalking LeMarq, the photo of a

frightened girl someone texted me last night, and the text blaming me for her death this morning. Another girl who looked like me. Liam already had more clues than the police did. He'd seen the guy who might be Mr. D. S. He could help me.

Or—he could hate me, despise me, and see me for who I really was. He could go to the cops, or worse, the media. Regardless of the way he was looking at me now, things would change. The truth would disgust him, repulse him.

The tide turned inside me, and my shell closed just like the oysters out in the ocean. I couldn't let these little pearls of truth escape. Ever.

“I gotta go,” I said, grabbing the picture from his hand. As I shifted to get up, I felt his hand on my arm.

“What’s wrong? What’d I say?” he asked. His touch and the worry in his voice almost cracked the shell back open.

“Nothing.” I pulled away. “School starts in twenty minutes. I don’t want to make you late.” I speed walked through the clumpy sand, away from the emotional riptide that almost pulled me under.

“Ruby!” he called after me. “I’m sorry...” But the wind whipped away the last part of his apology.

As I climbed into Big Black, I resolved not to let Liam Slater get that

close to me again. He could never hurt me if I never let him.

CHAPTER 7

I walked through the halls of Huntington Beach High wondering what it would be like to be that girl over there by the lockers—clearly in love with the boy next to her, and completely oblivious to every other concern in the world. Or that cheer chick in the courtyard, the one at the center of a gaggle of equally happy-go-lucky girls, laughing and listening to her glittery pink iPod. Or even that Goth boy by the water fountain, totally high as a kite. At least he *looked* happy.

I wondered what I looked like.

The bell rang, and I hurried to my Calc class at the end of the hall with my head down. Relieved not to be stopped, I slid into my seat at the back of the room and busied myself with my OCD preparations. Organizing my desk with the proper arrangement of my sharp mechanical pencil at my right, sleek calculator at my left, textbook center-right, notebook center-left, and bottle of water upper-right. A crack of the knuckles, and I was in the zone. A place where the only problems I had were mathematical.

When Mr. Holsum began to speak, I couldn't help but notice that Liam's desk was still empty. I told myself not to care. That it most likely had nothing to do with

me. That he simply couldn't resist the storming ocean swells, and he was ditching so he could stay out with his boys. Surfers around here often did that. Even teachers were known to call in sick on big surf days.

So him missing class had nothing to do with me or my antisocial behavior.

Except, somehow I knew that wasn't true. He was genuinely worried about the guy behind all of this. And maybe even concerned about me. I could only hope he'd keep everything to himself. I didn't want him to get involved with the messiness of my life. He didn't deserve the whispers in the halls, the name-calling and speculation by the press, and he certainly didn't deserve to be tangled

up in a police investigation.

“Psst, Ruby,” Taylor whispered from her seat next to me. “Check this out.” She hit me with a rolled-up newspaper.

I took it from her unwillingly, if only to stop her from bludgeoning me with it, and leveled my eyes on her. I unrolled the paper and clenched my jaw in preparation for the real blow. The headline read “Ruby Rose: Withering from the Roots.”

Below the column header was a picture of me passed out on the cafeteria floor. And there was Liam with his bronzed triceps, holding me like a baby. I went from annoyed to humiliated to infuriated in a matter of seconds. My life was no longer my own, and now I was a

joke, too. Taylor and her cheer cohort were snickering like a couple of playground bullies. And I never cared much for bullies.

Something snapped.

“You think this is funny?” I yelled at the suddenly snicker-less browbeaters.

“You think it’s OK to make fun of me right in front of my face?” I stood now, and the screech from my desk chair might as well have been a whistle telling everyone to look my way. I didn’t normally pick fights, but I knew how to win them.

“Ruby, is something the matter?” Mr. Holsum asked. He wouldn’t get here soon enough to stop me from heel-kicking Taylor’s front teeth out with my

lovely Hermes sandals.

“We weren’t making fun of you,” Taylor said, so pathetically scared, so implausibly sincere. “I promise.”

“Oh yeah,” I said with a sneer I didn’t particularly like in myself. “What were you laughing at, then?”

“It’s Liam Slater we were *smiling* about,” her nameless friend piped up, scooting her chair away just in case I decided to strike. “He’s obviously so smitten with you. It’s just interesting is all.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

“He’s the only guy who’s ever turned Taylor down,” said Nameless Girl through her trembling, lip-glossed mouth

as Taylor shot her a look of disgust. “We thought he was gay or something.”

I looked at the newspaper scrunched in my fist. I didn’t see “smitten.” I didn’t see “interesting.” I saw privacy being deleted from my list of rights.

“Please, girls, that’s enough.” Mr. Holsum’s voice sounded thin, just like his floppy comb-over. “Please, take your seats.”

I looked at the declawed kittens in front of me and felt like a fool. They were petrified of me. Everyone was staring. They were all waiting for my next dramatic move.

“Never mind,” I said, straightening my posture, then sitting back down. Even if Taylor was trying to humiliate or test

me, it didn't matter. It wouldn't be the first or last time, and, as usual, I couldn't do anything about it. Other than ignore her.

I forced myself into a mindless coma for the next few hours. On autopilot, I planned to just get through the day and keep my head down until I could get my hands on some of the seriously strong Belgian chocolate stashed in the pantry at home. I focused on medicating myself with caffeine and getting to Dr. T's office.

Until I remembered how she'd closed up on me last time, presumably for sharing too much information. Maybe I'd finally done it and destroyed my sanctuary—just like I'd destroyed

everything else.

“I hear you almost got into a fight today,” Dr. T said calmly.

“Word travels fast.” I stared out my favorite square window at the surf whitewashing the sand. Relieved as I was that my sanctuary appeared to be intact, I didn’t feel like going so far as making eye contact. “Or is it that psychic thing again, and you *felt* the incident?”

“Your principal called me,” she said, pulling her chair closer. “*And* your mom.”

“All eyes on the withering Rose, eh?”

She released a small puff of air. “I’m a little worried. You’re exhibiting an abnormal amount of *acting out* right

now,” Dr. T said carefully, with an *abnormal* amount of pausing. “Which is not altogether surprising considering the trauma you’ve experienced, but is nonetheless concerning.”

Ugh. I hated when she went all intellectual on me.

“Nothing happened. It was a misunderstanding, not acting out,” I argued, like maybe saying it out loud would make it true.

“You mean you didn’t take some kind of karate stance in front of two girls today?”

“Karate stance?” I asked. Had I done that?

“Listen,” she said with The Tone. Against my will, I relaxed. “I know you

already know this, but violence is never the answer.”

I finally looked her in the eye for the first time today. “I know that. Do you think I’m out of control or something?”

“I think you always have a choice,” she said. “We always have a choice.”

I didn’t understand where she was going with this. “Are you saying I had a choice in shooting LeMarq? That I shouldn’t have done it? That I was out of control and made the wrong choice—”

“No, no, no,” she hushed me. “In that situation you made the right choice. I’ve told you over and over again that what you did was justified. I’m talking about other choices, those that will certainly come in the future.”

It felt like she was alluding to something important. She had an uncanny ability to know things she shouldn't.

“What did my mom tell you?” I asked.

“That you received another message, and that you made the right choice again,” she assured me. “You were right to report the text. You were right to trust the police.”

“See, that's where I don't agree,” I argued. “It couldn't have been right, because the girl is dead. Because of me.” I knew I shouldn't have trusted ex-lover Martinez. Not only was he vindictive, but completely incompetent. He hadn't even bothered to call and tell me who the girl was. I had to find it out through my own (less than totally legal)

lunchtime research at the library. I held my head in my hands, unable to support it anymore.

Her name was Sarah Jennings. Fifteen years old. Wasn't even reported missing, because her single mom was working a twenty-four-hour shift as a nurse last night. Only a freshman in high school, she'd never wear a prom dress, a graduation robe, a wedding gown. The terror she must have felt, the pain her mother must feel, the darkness of it all threatened to consume me as I allowed myself to—

“Ruby.” Dr. T’s voice felt awkwardly near. “Come back.”

She wasn't just near. She was sitting next to me on the couch with one arm

around me. “God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose,” she said quietly.

“Huh?” I’d lost my bearings. Dr. T had never put her arm around me before. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s Emerson,” she said, pulling away to shine her headlight eyes on me. “God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please—you can never have both.”

I wasn’t drinking her Very Cherry Kool-Aid. And I definitely wasn’t getting the message she was trying to send. Like the physical contact had created a spam filter and her message was just going to the junk file.

Normally, I liked to think of myself as

a highly intelligent person, and not just because of the test scores. I wasn't one of those book-smart-only kids who could barely interact socially or drive without pissing off the entire State of California. Most of the time I could read people, situations, scenarios—and act accordingly. In fact, after I founded the Constitution Society, some people started calling me the “young Jane Rose,” saying things like, “Maybe you'll be the District Attorney one day, just like your mom.” Or, “I bet you make your mom so proud.” Of course that was all before Dad died and I resigned from...everything.

Still, I should have been smart enough to decipher whatever Dr. T was really

trying to say to me. But no. Her arm around me clouded my ability to think straight.

Perhaps sensing my rising discomfort level, she moved back to her chair, giving me some breathing room.

“Rue, tell me what you’re thinking,” she said.

Yeah, right.

“You know I have always tried to be professional with you. You are my client, and you deserve to be treated with every level of respect and dedicated care. But”—she paused, and I felt a blow coming—“I care about you very much.”

That statement should have felt welcome, comforting. Instead, it felt

loaded.

Dr. T didn't have any children of her own. My mom had told me about her series of miscarriages and subsequent divorce. I supposed it was completely natural for her to care about me, especially since I felt the same way about her. But, for some reason, it felt heavy for her to finally voice it. "I know what I'm about to say now may be hard for you to hear, but I am going to say it anyway because it's the *truth*."

I took a deep Courage Breath, just like she'd taught me.

"It's time for you to let your mom in. You need each other now like never before."

Dr. T was right—that kind of advice

was hard for me to hear. Wasn't it Jane's job, as the mother, to let *me* in? Not the other way around?

"You say that like it's an easy thing to do," I argued.

"I didn't say it would be easy. In fact I know just how hard it will be. But it's time." Dr. T checked her watch as if she was beginning to check out.

Until now, I'd pretty much relied on her to be a sounding board and nonjudgmental third party when I needed to vent about various neuroses. But now that I'd killed someone, indirectly caused an innocent death, and trapped myself in my own lies and illegal obsessions, I really needed her.

"We're going to end our session a

few minutes early again today,” she said. “We’ll make up the time at another appointment.” She stood to escort me to the door. But she hadn’t even given me the chance to tell her about my mom’s affair. “I want you to give what I said a great deal of thought. Truth or repose—you can’t have both.”

I honestly had no idea what she was talking about. But maybe with some distance I’d figure it out.

“See you next week,” she said with a sympathetic nod. “Have a safe weekend.”

“You, too,” I said.

And she shut the door in my face.

CHAPTER 8

Equation of the night: Muggy air (smelling of equal parts beer and sweat) + hip-hop (blaring from the Napoleon-complex speakers) ÷ the throng of horny teenagers (rubbing up against each other like animals in heat) = sensory overload.

“I can’t believe you brought me here!” I yelled into Alana’s ear. “Can you get a ride home? I don’t feel comfortable—”

“Oh, shut up and relax,” she yelled back, fist-pumping to the music. “This is just what you need—mindless social

interaction. No one is worried about you and what you've done or haven't done. They're too busy having *fun*!"

She was wrong. This wasn't *just what I needed*. I didn't *need* to be manipulated into coming to some stupid high school party when she promised we could talk. What I needed was to figure out who was messing with me. And fast, before anyone else got hurt or Martinez discovered that I'd been stalking LeMarq long before I put a bullet between his eyes.

As soon as I could, I was going home, locking myself in my room, and poring over my notes on the Filthy Five. There had to be a connection between them and my whole life falling apart.

I watched as Alana slipped into the pulsating heart of the dance floor. Her wavy black hair bopped to the beat, and her skinny little Daisy Dukes—wearing legs jumped up and down with the crowd. I couldn't help wondering why she still put up with me after all these years. Me, the epitome of Buzzkill. She remained ever loyal, even when I failed to reciprocate. I imagined Dr. T would probably say that as opposites, we needed each other to balance out our weaknesses and strengths. She kept me normal, and I kept her in excellent *couture*. Except lately, I worried I was more of an anchor, pulling Alana down into the depths with me.

As she got sucked further into the

riptide of flesh, I found a wall to lean on, my anxiety growing. I shouldn't be here, hanging out, doing nothing. But I didn't want to feel the consuming guilt and anger threatening to break me, either. Maybe Alana was right: I needed a good distraction.

I scanned the massive room, observing other people's issues for once instead of concentrating on my own. It appeared that Declawed Taylor and unnamed friend were lushing their way to happiness. Jell-O shots and tube tops were all they needed. A pack of football players surrounded them as they slurped themselves into oblivion.

As my eyes roamed the room, I found so many examples of kids with major

problems: Brianna Hartley, who'd spent last spring in rehab; Miles Brown, who'd gotten two girls pregnant in the same year; Ted Cohen, who'd once eaten a handful of worms on a dare...

But even after some therapeutic people watching, or as Alana liked to call it, "people judging," I still felt like a wolf in sheep's clothes. Well, a wolf in four-inch Jimmy Choo wedge heels. Yeah, these kids were crazy, but I was almost 99 percent sure that none of them were violent-crazy. Like me.

I caught eyes with a guy named Jace I dated freshman year—if *dating* meant kissing a lot and then being constantly harassed about "moving to the next level in our physical relationship." He was a

charming guy, but his smooth talking got old. And when I told him I thought we should go back to being friends—the kind without benefits—he took it hard. If *hard* meant spreading rumors about what a boring prude I was.

While I was still looking in his direction, he shaped his hand into a gun and took aim at me. I couldn't believe it. He'd been a jerk-jar before, but this was crossing the line. I had half a mind to cross the room and break his little gun-shaped hand (and equally little boy parts) but the thought of the story getting leaked to *Access Hollywood* kept my back against the wall. When he cocked his hand and made a blasting gesture, I finally looked away. What a piece of—

“Don’t pay attention to Jace.” Liam’s familiar voice caught me off guard. And his warm breath against my ear almost made my Jimmy Choos give way. “He only acts like an ass because he’s never gotten over you.”

I turned my head to find him leaning on the wall next to me, the disco ball sprinkling light on his face like diamond reflections.

When the freak did he get here?

“Oh, hey,” I said, taking a firmer stance against those eyelashes. “Right. Jace. Ass. Totally.” What was that? California Cavegirl–speak?

“It’s hot in here. Wanna come out on the balcony with me?” This time his lips brushed the side of my neck as he leaned

in. How could he still want to talk to me after I stared down his scars and then lamely left him at the beach?

I looked around for something to hold on to. A lifeline to keep me from jumping off this cliff. Where was Alana when I needed her?

I found nothing and no one. I looked down instead, trying to steel my resolve. Except his classic white Nike Air Force 1s might have just turned me on even more. This boy, his lashes, and his shoes were going to break me.

“Sure,” I said.

He took my hand and weaved me through the bouncing bodies, up the stairs, through a master bedroom, and onto a balcony overlooking the shore

with a spiral staircase leading down to the beach.

“Should we be up here? I don’t even know who lives here,” I said, out of breath. I wasn’t trying to do that seductive-bunny voice girls like Taylor use to unhinge guys. Honestly. Hiking the massive staircase after months of no physical training and the close proximity of Liam’s lips to my ear had sincerely winded me.

“Don’t worry,” he assured me, letting go of my hand and plopping down on a love seat facing the railing. “This house is just a party pad. You know Chase?”

“I think so. Is he on the football team with you?” I asked, even though I knew exactly who Chase was. Alana used to

have a thing for Chase like I still had a thing for Liam. At one point, she'd even had the joint wedding all planned out.

"Yeah. Well, this is his uncle's third or fourth house. He's some billionaire from Texas or something."

"It's amazing," I said, still standing in the doorway where he left me.

"Yeah, I know—sick, right?"

"Totally. Sick." *I* felt sick. I had no idea what to do with my hands. Pockets, no. Behind the back, no.

"Come sit down," he said, sounding sort of winded himself. Which made no sense since he was in peak physical condition.

"OK." I rounded the seat and sat down next to him, wondering why I was

being so weak. I had firmly resolved not to allow him to get close to me again. And here I was, obeying his every command.

“So, what’s up with you leaving me high and dry the other day on the beach?” he asked with a slight hitch in his voice. Almost like he was just as tense as I was.

“There’s this thing called school. And you aren’t supposed to be late to it.”

“Whatever. We had plenty of time.” He leaned toward me.

It was a bright night, and the moon provided an unfortunate spotlight on my awkwardness—and a better view of that scar on his ear.

“Have you thought about what I told

you?” he said. “About that guy watching you? Have you told the police?”

“No, I mean yes, well...” I stopped to gather myself. “Yes, I thought about what you said, but I haven’t told the police.”

“Have you told your mom?”

“No.”

“Why not? Don’t you think it’s sort of pertinent?” He put his hand on my knee. I jerked away, far jumpier than necessary.

Of course I thought it was pertinent. But football players shouldn’t use such big words. Or pretend to be seriously interested in me. And certainly not touch me like that, or look at me like this—with tenderness and intimacy.

“What’s going on? Why wouldn’t you help them protect you?”

“You don’t understand. There’s more to it.”

“Tell me, then. Help me understand.”
He turned his body to face me.

I stared at his lips. Were they telling the truth? Or were they like chocolate—promising happiness, providing a few moments of heaven, then ultimately betraying me, going behind my back and putting junk in the trunk?

It didn’t seem like a fair choice. Chocolate had total power over me—there was no denying my addiction to the dark, creamy crack. Those few moments of bliss were always enough for me to disregard the consequences. So, even if Liam was only chocolate, I wanted to taste a piece.

Just imagining the moment our lips would touch made me light-headed. There was no denying how strongly I'd wanted this. An energy buzz overtook all my logic, all my pain. Overwhelmed by it, I gave in.

I softened.

Briny air swirled across the veranda, mixing with Liam's musky cologne. The scent swept over me, and I closed my eyes to breathe it in. But then something inside me turned over. It smelled like the same cologne my dad used to wear.

A deep pit formed in my stomach as I remembered him walking out the garage door for the last time. I didn't know then he would be ambushed and blown to pieces. I didn't know then that I would

never see him again.

“I gotta go.” I opened my eyes and started to get up. But Liam stopped me, reaching for my wrist. Instinctively, I rotated my hand clockwise and thrust it down with the full weight of my body to break his grip.

“Jeez!” He jumped up and grabbed at his wrist in pain. “What the—?”

“Don’t grab at me then if you don’t want to get hurt!” I moved behind the couch, to put some space, and furniture, between us.

“I wasn’t *grabbing* at you,” he said with a grimace. “I was just trying to stop you from running away from me *again*.”

“First of all, you did *grab* me, and second...” I didn’t really have a second.

“Look, I’m way too messed up for you to bother with.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to *grab*,” he said, moving toward me slowly, like I was a bomb in need of dismantling. “And just so you know, it’s OK to be a little messed up.”

“I don’t know what you want from me.” I backed up. “Or why you’re acting so *interested* in me all of a sudden. Is it the fame thing? Do you want to see yourself in the newspaper next to Bleeding Ruby Rose again? Or did one of your football buddies bet you that you couldn’t get laid by the most *dangerous* girl in school?”

Not likely. My virginity wasn’t exactly a secret. One of those trashy

magazines had even broadcast it in an article called “Ruby Rose: The Virgin Vigilante.”

He stopped and looked at me with the mug of a kicked puppy. “Wow.”

“Wow, what?” They were simple questions.

“I had no idea that’s what you thought of me,” he said, lowering his head to stare at the red marks developing on his wrist.

“Well, I told you,” I said, a little less abrasively. “I don’t know what to think. Things are complicated for me, and I don’t know what your intentions are.”

“My intentions?” he asked, as if he didn’t readily know the answer. “I just wanted to help. That guy—he used me,

too, you know.”

“What? What do you mean he *used* you?”

“He pretended to be me when he sent you that text, remember? My name was in the police report. That Detective Martinez guy came to my house and interviewed me. And when it went public, reporters tried to talk to me. My friends never leave me alone about it. So, yeah, I feel a little *involved*, OK?”

“OK,” I said, taken aback. I felt horrible that my stupid life had already affected him, and like the biggest B-word for giving him such a hard time. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know—”

“Plus, I know what it’s like to be misunderstood.” He paused and did that

self-conscious ear-touching thing. Again, I wondered what could have possibly happened to him. “It’s a lonely place to be, and I can see how talented you are at pushing people away. Or maybe I should say karate chopping people away.” A sliver of a smile formed in the crease of his eyes.

Oh, no. I was softening under his charm again. “But you’re still not answering my question, Liam. *Why* do you want to help me? Are you upset that you’re involved?”

He rubbed his forehead. “C’mon, isn’t it obvious?”

“If it were obvious, I wouldn’t need to ask.”

“I like you, all right?” He was red in

the face and clearly frazzled. “I’ve liked you for a long time, but you haven’t given me the time of day.”

It couldn’t be that simple. He couldn’t have wanted to help me simply because he “liked” me. I “liked” watching lobsters play in their tank at the restaurant, and I still “liked” to eat them. I didn’t trust that word. For two years, I practically went all googly-eyed at him every time he looked at me. Now he was saying he “liked” me?

“I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean, but I’ve always given you the time of day.”

“Let me be clear, then, so you know what I mean,” he said, stepping forward again, a glutton for punishment. “I’ve

been wanting to ask you out for a while, but when your dad died I figured you needed some time. Then, just when I got the courage to ask you to Homecoming, well, the bottom of your world dropped out again.”

He knew that my dad had died. And he'd cared enough to give me time. I softened even more.

“So what about Taylor?” I asked, wondering why my brain had brought her up at a time like this. It was like my logical brain had a firewall and was trying to override the invading emotions.

“Taylor?” he asked back. His eyebrows creased together in confusion.

“You know, the girl you actually *did* take to Homecoming. The girl who's

always hanging all over you. The girl nobody turns down.” *Shut up!*

He reached out to take my hand, apparently unafraid of what other sudden movements I might make. And, inexplicably, I let him take it.

“I’m not going to say anything bad about Taylor,” he said, moving his head even closer to mine. “But I’m not going to say anything good about her, either.”

Wow. I couldn’t help but be impressed with his maturity and refusal to trash-talk.

“But you on the other hand,” he said, looking me in the eyes. “I think *you’re* amazing. And brave. And totally different.”

Firewall disabled, I let him pull me

into his arms.

I let him put his body against mine.

I let my eyes close, appreciating the heat between our bodies. His heart beating against my ear drowned out all my wild, neurotic thoughts. I was giving in to him again. *I* was the glutton for punishment.

Until I felt a pinch on my neck. Like a bee sting, it burned. But surely there were no effin' bees at the beach this time of night. I tried to pull away, but by the time I reached to get the bee's stinger out of my skin, I realized I was dealing with something else entirely.

A syringe.

And I was losing consciousness.

CHAPTER 9

I heard the voices before I could identify where they were coming from. Swirling human forms floated around my mind. And pain. I felt that rising with my consciousness. In my head, mostly, but also on my wrists. They were bound behind my back.

I ordered my eyes to open, but they were as heavy as theater curtains. I needed pulleys or something.

When my eyelids eventually creaked open, I almost wished they hadn't.

I lay on the cold floor of a large metal

cage, like one used for lions at the circus. I had awoken in my very worst nightmare. I hated bars. Like, I really, deathly feared them. Dr. T said it was a “seminormal/common phobia,” and not to give it too much importance, but that was easy to say when she wasn’t the one with the recurring dreams of bars slowly closing in on her until she was crushed to death.

The men behind the echoing voices were nowhere in sight. Hyperventilation and claustrophobia drained me of my wits. I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing. I couldn’t lose my cool now. I had to fight. I had to look past the bars and pretend like they weren’t there in order to gather my

survival instincts. The inanimate cage couldn't beat me when the very animate men beyond them were far more likely to do so.

Forcing open my eyes, I saw a spacious warehouse filled with boxes and old machinery, not unlike the one at the harbor where I'd put a hole in Charlie LeMarq's head. And I wasn't alone. There were two equally drugged and bound bodies just outside the cage, except they were tied at the ankles as well as the wrists. I wondered why they weren't in here with me—and why they weren't stirring.

I looked closer at them through the dim light. It was Alana and Liam. The last time I'd seen Alana, her dark hair

was bouncing to the beat of the music. Now it was as limp as a doll's. And Liam's beautiful lips, the ones I'd come so close to kissing, were now gagged and covered in bloody cloth.

My chest tightened with a crushing force. I hated myself for getting them involved. If only I'd done a better job of pushing everyone away, they wouldn't be here.

"I'm not going to tell you again!" a deep voice echoed across the warehouse. "It's time, so make the call!"

"Come on, jefe, this ain't right," another man replied in a much younger and more hesitant voice, with an accent that made me think of the East LA gang crews. So not *bueno*.

I couldn't see them, and they couldn't see me behind the row of crates piled haphazardly toward the ceiling.

“What *ain't* right is you acting like a little bitch. Now get your phone out and make the call.”

“Bro, calm down and think about it. All we're supposed to do is babysit these drugged kids for a while and then take the money and run? Rick, it's a setup.”

Rick. I knew a Rick. Rick “The Stick”—one of my Filthy Five. But I'd never heard him speak, so how could I be sure if this voice belonged to him?

“You're wasting time,” Rick said.

“You've done deals with this guy before?” the younger guy asked,

sounding more skittish.

“Yeah, two nights ago, OK? It didn’t go as planned, and I had to get rid of a girl. Let’s just say he owes me tonight.”

Two nights ago? Get rid of a girl?
Could he have been talking about the girl on Ninth Street from the text I got?

“Didn’t go as planned? Shit, man, you ain’t exactly making me feel better.”

“Look, I’ve done plenty of deals, and this one won’t be any different,” Rick said. “So just make the damn call and let’s get this over with!”

“Why don’t *you* make the call?”

“Because, you idiot, I don’t have the number. The broker gave it to you.”

The broker? What product—?

Oh, crap. We were the product. *I* was

the freaking product.

“Here. Take the number that dude gave you. I’ll go wait where the cops can’t bust through that door in five seconds!” The younger guy was rattled.

“Look, you split, and you *lose* your split. You understand? That’s twenty grand. And the *broker* is not *some dude*. He’s big-time, working with Mr. G. You get in with G, and you don’t get to mess around. So just shut up already!”

There was a pause and some shuffling.

“Can’t I at least sample the product? Five minutes alone with the blonde?” My stomach turned, and my muscles tensed in revolt. Young or not, stupid or smart, this guy was dangerous. “If we get

busted, at least it won't all be for nada
—”

“How many times do I have to tell you? The broker said she's a virgin, and they pay triple for virgins. You're not touching her or her skinny little friend, no matter what. I need this score, all right?”

There was no longer any doubt in my mind—this was, in fact, Rick “The Stick.” Number two on my list of the Filthy Five. The details I'd written in his file quickly came to mind. Formerly: Rick Rossi, champion featherweight boxer from South LA. Currently: notorious drug dealer and unmerciful murderer of anyone who got in his way. He earned his cute little nickname by

screwing over one of his big-time drug partners, “sticking” him with the evidence that sent the guy to prison, and walking away with a sweetheart deal from none other than Dear Mother Jane Rose.

Before Dad’s death, his team had responded to a tip on one of Rick’s big deals going down. They recovered 500 kilos of cocaine, but not The Stick himself. He’d gotten away again. Since the bust he’d been lying low, staying away from the cartel guys. That must’ve been what he was talking about when he said he needed this score. He needed the money.

If I didn’t do something quickly, they were either going to make the call and

sell us, or they were going to talk each other out of it and get rid of us themselves. I cursed the man behind this torment. Who was this “broker” who’d convinced another one of my Filthy Five to participate in the systematic torture of Ruby Rose? Why didn’t he just kill me himself? And why did he have to involve Alana and Liam? Sure, Alana was fragile enough to sell, but there was no market for six-foot-four tight ends who could knock out The Stick with one punch.

As they continued to argue about whether or not to get rid of us, I rocked back and forth until I could wiggle my hands under my legs and bring them in front of me. I was relieved to find my

bonds were only plastic tie straps—and I had sharp teeth.

But minutes passed and I'd made no progress on the thick ties. My now swollen and bloody gums weren't helping, either. I was running out of time. If they hadn't heard me by now, it wouldn't be much longer.

I looked around for something sharp—a broken bottle, a piece of scrap metal, anything. But after too many minutes of blinking to try to focus past the bars, all I could find to saw the plastic were the sharp, rusty hinges on the cage itself. I swallowed the feeling that the bars were moving toward me as I crawled toward them, and I began sawing. I barely breathed as I used all

my strength to grind through the plastic as silently as possible.

As soon as the ties snapped off, I felt around for a way to open the cage. In the top corner was a latch kept shut by a bicycle lock. A bicycle lock? Come on, no proper criminal uses a coiled three-digit-code bicycle lock! If it were a normal lock, I could have picked it with my earring like Dad taught me. But the only way to get this thing off was to know the code. And I didn't know it.

Wait. *Three* digits.

Suddenly, I had an idea. Mr. D. S. didn't seem to do anything without purpose or meaning. I doubted Rick had put me in this cage himself. It wasn't his MO. He was a vicious criminal who

didn't mind beating people to death with his little bare fists, but as far as my research went, child trafficking wasn't in his repertoire. Plus, why cage me and not my friends? These bars felt very much meant for me.

The three numbers had to be significant. I mentally ran through all the numbers in my life—birthday, phone number, address—rotating the lock as fast as I could to any three-digit combination related to them. But nothing worked.

My heart thumped three times, as if willing my brain to figure this out for the sake of all the body parts. I let go of the lock and let my head fall against the bars.

I thought back to the text with the photo of the girl on Ninth Street. Any numbers? No. The sketch at the art fair? No. The text from Fake Liam luring me to the warehouse?

That message filtered into the forefront of my sore head: *366 Water Street.*

I squinted through the bars and put in the numbers 3-6-6. The lock clicked open, and I broke free.

“They’re on their way,” confirmed Rick’s personal assistant in crime.

The call had been made. Whoever was coming to take us would be here soon. And I couldn’t carry out both Alana and Liam on my back. Even if I could wake them up without making

much noise, I had no idea how to get their ankle and wrist ties off in time.

I had to find a weapon, or see if my captors had one and use it against them. Maybe the men had a knife, and I could get back here in time to cut Alana and Liam free.

I crawled through piles of strewn trash, careful not to look too closely at it—and also careful not to cause any noise. Whether it was the drugs or the stress of the cage, time wasn't making sense to me. It took forever to get to the boxes separating me from the men. I peered over the clumsy piles, cautious not to knock them over like dominoes. Now I could finally see the enemy. Rick could have also been called The Stick

because he'd been beaten by an ugly one. Or because he was as skinny as one. He and his coconspirator, who was far chubbier and softer than I was expecting, sat at a flimsy card table, anxiously staring at the door. Like either a dump truck full of money was about to back up through the cargo entry door—or a SWAT crew. There appeared to be only one revolver between them, and it sat untouched on the table. If either of them was packing another weapon, I couldn't see it.

That shiny gun was my target. I had to get it somehow. I imagined Dad walking me through it all—just like he had with LeMarq. Just like he always would, dead or alive.

Create a diversion. One of them will take the gun and check to see what it is. Take him out by surprise from behind. Grab the weapon and disable him with two bullets to the chest. You already know he will kill you, so don't let him have the chance. The second man will either flee or attack. If he flees, pursue. He could double back and ambush you before you're able to find a way to call for help, and you can't leave your friends in harm's way. If he attacks, you know what to do.

I took a deep breath. I could do this. There was no time to waver or second-guess. I had to save my friends.

I found an empty beer can nearby and chucked it toward the cage. It hit with a

loud *clang*! Instantly, the men's chairs screeched backward on the cement floor. I hid behind the stack of crates again so when one man walked past me to check on the noise, I could spring.

"Go check it out," Rick ordered. I remembered his strange aversion to guns, and most likely the only reason he even had a tagalong with him was to pack it. Or to blame everything on later if he got caught.

"It's probably that stupid white boy waking up. I'd be happy to knock him out again," Tagalong said as he made his way to my hiding spot.

I lunged, simultaneously kicking him in the groin and twisting his weapon from his grip. I'd done it dozens of times

in training sessions but never in real life. He howled in pain. This couldn't have been his first swift kick to the balls, but he sure acted like it as he rolled around on the floor with his hands between his legs.

“Rick, it's the blonde!” he moaned. “She's got my piece.”

“Shut up or I'll shoot,” I warned. I had no idea where Rick was. I hadn't heard him move.

“I knew this was a trap.” He groaned. “Just shoot me and get it over with. I can't go back to prison. I won't go back. I'll kill you and both your friends before I go back.” Real tears came spurting out of his pathetic eyes, and for a second, I almost pitied him. His baby face and

purple LA Lakers hat turned sideways made him seem only a few years older than me. The guy should have been in college or working at the mall, not messing around with gangs and a guy like Rick. Dad's voice cut into my hesitation.

Protect yourself, Rue. Make sure the weapon is cocked, and take the disabling shots. You know he will do it to you, or worse, without a moment's hesitation if you let him.

As I made sure the gun was cocked, I noticed how familiar it felt. This was no street gun. This was a sophisticated piece. A gun I'd used before.

I heard the terrible cracking noise against my spine before I felt the pain.

My knees buckled and I fell to the ground, face first. Either Rick had slammed me with a wooden two-by-four, which had splintered in half, or he'd used a steel beam and the cracking noise was my vertebrae shattering. But how had he gotten behind me?

I checked my senses to make sure I still had the gun. Its cold steel was still wrapped in my white-knuckled clutch. I looked over my shoulder. Rick's gaunt, pockmarked face loomed above me. And I knew he was hell-bent on making sure it was the last face I ever saw.

"Stop!" I screamed. I rolled over on my back, crunched up, locked my arms out in front, and raised the gun between my legs. "I'll shoot!"

He raised another two-by-four above his head, ready to destroy me.

I had no choice. He was going to kill me.

I aimed for the largest target area and pulled the trigger. The gun sounded like a bomb exploding in the vast space. His chest ripped open and his body lost momentum. As though in slow motion, he dropped to his knees and the life drained out of his eyes. He would never fight again.

The smoke from my gun rose, just as the dust particles under his body mushroomed from his fall, swirling with the sudden draft of wind.

I gagged on the taste of bile in my throat and grimaced as the tinny smell of

blood and gunpowder choked the air out of my lungs.

I fell back, disgusted and disoriented.

Until I remembered the baby-faced gangster—who'd said he'd kill us all before he went back to prison.

I looked up and he was already running past fallen boxes and debris—toward Alana. He was going to play his last card and use her to bargain for his freedom.

I pushed myself up with renewed strength and chased after him, ignoring the splintering pain attacking my spine. I leapt over Rick's body and willed my drugged body to run faster than the pudgy threat. He couldn't fight me while I had a gun, but he could stomp on Alana's head

or whip out a knife and stab her a few times before I got off a shot. I already knew he was going down swinging—or stabbing.

“Just wait, I don’t want to kill you!” I yelled after him. I don’t think he heard me, or believed me, because he ran faster. In my mind, I begged him to stop, to act rationally, to give me his phone so I could call for help, and to try his chances again at the failed justice system that allowed him to be on the street in the first place. Or just make a play for the exit.

“I won’t shoot you if you leave!” I screamed while gasping for breath. “Please don’t do anything stupid!”

My fears were confirmed the moment

I saw him pull something metallic from his boot and go for Liam's lifeless body.

I stopped running to take aim—for the shoulder this time. I couldn't shoot a man in his back, and I didn't want to kill him.

Then I heard my dad again: *You don't have a sight on this pistol. You're too far away, and it's too dark. If you miss, he'll kill Liam. You have to do it.*

The truth seemed to sting my eyes. I pinched them shut for a millisecond to clear my vision and regain my resolve. Then I corrected my aim, took the shot between his broad shoulder blades, and held my breath for impact.

In midstrike, he dropped the dagger, dropped to the ground, and dropped off

the face of the world forever.

A full minute must have passed before I allowed myself to exhale, because dizzy didn't begin to explain the fainting sensation welling up inside me. I looked down to the weapon in my hand. Its custom-polished stainless nickel-plate finish shined up at me, and I noticed for the first time that it was a Glock 30, .45-caliber handgun. The kind Dad had carried as his off-duty weapon. The one he carried with him during SWAT operations as a backup. I turned over the heel to check for an engraving. There it was—his initials: J. R.

I dropped the gun like it was a hot coal. If this was my dad's gun, it must've been taken off of his body by whoever

killed him. I didn't even know it was missing. This couldn't actually be Dad's. No, it couldn't be.

He spoke to me urgently this time: *Rue. It's not over. They called someone. Pick up that gun. Never drop your weapon.*

"Nice work," a foreign male voice whispered in my ear, as arms clutched me from behind. "You just saved me a load of money."

My heart sank as I realized my mistake. Maybe my fatal mistake.

I couldn't see the new threat's face, but I could see Liam's and he was finally conscious. I wondered how long he had been awake and if he'd seen me kill the monster lying dead over his legs.

By the wild look in his eyes, I was sure he had.

“No!” he screamed through his gag, trying to fight the bonds and get the dead body off him.

“Oh, I see,” the scratchy voice breathed into my ear. “We have a boyfriend. Must’ve gotten in the way. I don’t really deal in the boy market, but I’m sure we’ll make do.”

Instinct took over again, and I thrust my elbow into his ribs, twisted so his grip loosened, and—with every ounce of force I had left—slammed both hands down onto his wrists to break free. Now that I was facing him, I could go for the “sweet spots.” I faked a kick to sweet spot number one—the groin—and got

him in sweet spot number two—the eyes. I clawed at his face with my fingernails, and he screamed, “*Kuradi lits! Kuradi lits!*” Which sounded like he was saying, “Karate tits!” or “Karate lips!”—but probably meant something very different in his language, and nothing friendly, for sure.

With his hands now guarding sweet spot two, I promptly went for number one, releasing the kick of all kicks to the only place that matters. It connected with a crunch, and a guttural groan.

Followed by a protracted slide and click.

I didn’t make that sound. A cold circle of metal pressed against my temple.

“Try something and I shoot,” a different voice beside me warned.

“Ruby, don’t move,” Liam called out, panic in his voice. Somehow he’d loosened the gag enough to speak. “Don’t fight.”

Before I’d be able to swing around and make a play for the gun, my life would be over.

I dropped my throbbing head and listened for the answer. Where was my dad’s voice now?

Gone. Just like my life in a few moments.

A backhanded knuckle-slap to my face cut me out of my ridiculous search for the voices in my head.

“Insolent brat,” the first man spewed

through his forest of facial hair. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a handgun—relieving the other man of gun-pointing duty—and stroked the side of my face with the barrel. “Your spirit will be broken soon enough.”

“No,” I said, coiling my springs. “I won’t let you. I’d rather die than be handed off to one of your disgusting buyers.” I tasted another round of fresh blood in my mouth and looked for the gun I’d so stupidly dropped. It was my one and only chance to survive.

“Please,” Liam pled from the floor. “Ransom us. You don’t have to sell anyone. My dad is filthy rich. He’ll pay you whatever you want. I swear. You’ll get far more that way.” I didn’t know

Liam's dad was rich. He had to be lying. But it didn't matter—this was good. Liam was distracting them. Maybe I could find that gun in the dark and—

Thump. The violent sound caused me to turn. The second guy, with his stupid '80s mullet, was standing over Liam, kicking him in the side. With his hands tied behind his back, Liam couldn't defend himself. He was coughing and grimacing for air. The Mullet was going to break Liam's ribs or puncture a lung.

“Don't touch him!” I screamed. “Stop that—”

“Or what?” the first man breathed in my face. His oniony breath alone was nearly enough to kill me. “You'll use *this* against us?” He held my own

father's gun to my head.

I didn't know which I was more pissed about: making the stupid mistake of dropping that gun or getting my innocent friends involved. Maybe if I had gone to save that girl on Ninth Street, this whole night wouldn't have happened. Maybe involving Alana and Liam was Mr. D. S.'s way of punishing me for my disobedience. Either way, I blamed myself. And who said dying would be so bad anyway? At least I'd be with my dad again.

As The Mullet made his way back over to me, I knew I had to act soon. I couldn't wait until they tied me up again. I had to die fighting *now*.

I took one last look at Liam suffering

on the ground and Alana still in her unconscious ignorance, and I said good-bye in my mind. I could only hope my friends would put up a fight, too, if they could. Then I turned all my energy back on the first guy—the leader. I could disarm him, use him as a shield, and maybe get off a couple of shots before The Mullet could react. It was a long shot, but I had to do it if there was even the smallest chance it would save my friends.

I slouched my shoulders and heaved a huge sigh of defeat. Part of me meant it, and part of me faked it to lure the men to let down their guard. It worked—a smile formed through the dirty-nasty beard of the first man, and he relaxed just enough

for me to make my move.

As I was about to spring, a small green dot appeared on his face. As though Tinker Bell herself had flown in to distract me, the light flickered before it steadied itself on his forehead. Before my brain registered what it was, the dot turned a burgundy-red and the man's body flew backward. He'd been shot in the head, just like LeMarq.

I spun, expecting The Mullet to blow me away, but before he could even raise his gun, he had two rounds firmly lodged in his chest.

For a moment I froze, not comprehending what had happened. Then adrenaline and relief coursed through me like an injected drug. Until it

occurred to me that whoever just shot these guys might go for me next.

I looked down at the pool of blood near my feet and saw Dad's gun. As I reached for it, a strong arm wrapped itself around my body while a hand pressed a damp cloth over my nose and mouth. The harder I fought against the crushing strength, the faster I lost my own. The scent on the fabric stung my senses and made my eyes water.

My world quickly spun out from under me. Swirling. Darkness. Pain. The last thing I saw was Liam, still on the ground, soundlessly calling out my name.

CHAPTER 10

Either my face was dangerously close to a shallow pool of water or I was drooling. Or both. Gross.

I finally opened my eyes, and wiped my face with my sleeve. Wasn't heaven supposed to be all white and sparkly? I looked around for those pearly gates, some fat little cherubs, or some other heavenly clichés.

I sat up to make sure I wasn't in hell. This habit of waking up confused and bruised was getting old.

It didn't look like hell, though my

back still hurt pretty hellishly. At least there was no fire, no brimstone. Not that I would even recognize brimstone if I saw it.

I was on top of an ocean cliff, lying in the middle of an isolated rugged bluff. The powerful surf crashed below me. The waters were angry, but that didn't mean anything. Maybe this was some kind of symbolic in-between.

A foghorn from a boat in the distance bellowed a deep belching sound. But in the weak light of dawn, I couldn't even see a vessel.

“Ruby!” a female voice called out.
“Ruby, I’m over here.”

I spun around—Alana!

She was lying on the ground behind

me, twenty feet away. Still bound. And Liam was next to her, unconscious again.

I scrambled to my unsure feet and made my way up the slight incline and over the jagged sandstone rock to my poor, traumatized, lucky-to-be-alive, unlucky-to-know-me friends.

“Alana, I’m coming,” I said, stumbling and falling on my already sore wrist. How did we get here? “I’m just a little dizzy...”

“It’s OK, take your time,” she said with a shaky voice. I could tell she’d been crying but was trying to be brave. “I don’t want you falling off the cliff and leaving me and Sleeping Beauty over here for the vultures to peck on.”

I finally made it to Alana and fell to

her side. “I’m so sorry—this is all my fault.”

“Would you just shut up and get something to cut off these ties?” She blew some wet strands of hair out of her eyes.

“Of course, I’ll find something.” I scanned the cliff top for a rock shard, a seashell...“Holy mother of...” I whispered.

On a small ledge twenty feet away sat a pair of heavy-duty stainless steel cutters. But that’s not what stopped me short. It was the gun—my dad’s nickel-plated Glock—sitting next to them.

“What is it?” Alana propped up her head to look.

I hesitated for too long, wondering

why someone would want me to keep the murder weapon.

“Ruby! What is it?” Alana yelled at me.

“Some scissors. There are just some scissors over there.”

“I’ve been lying here an hour, screaming at you and Liam to wake up, and there’s an effin’ pair of scissors over there?”

I ran over to the ledge and grabbed the shears. Making sure Alana was looking the other direction, I quickly tucked the gun into the back of my pants before I went to cut her free. As she rubbed at her raw skin, I crawled the few feet over to Liam to check his pulse before I cut his ties. His heart rate was

scary slow, but he was alive.

“Liam, can you hear me?” I rolled him over so his head was in my lap. I brushed his shaggy hair off his eyes, willing them to open. “Please wake up.” His face was clean and fresh, no more bloodied lip. Like someone had dunked his head in the ocean, or carefully wiped away any evidence of the beating.

“Is he all right?” Alana asked, now standing on wobbly legs.

“I think so.”

“Who did this to us? Where are we? And where’s my damn phone?” She started patting herself down like if she concentrated hard enough, her cell might miraculously appear in one of her skimpy pockets.

“Sit down, Alana,” I ordered. “You’re going to fall and break something.”

“Did we get roofied? Is this some kind of sick practical joke?” she asked, refusing to obey. Her skinny little flamingo legs looked like they’d give out any second.

“No, this isn’t a joke. Just sit for a minute.”

“Why’d you say this is all your fault? What did you do to get us punked like this?” She began pacing, making me want to yank her to the ground for her own good. “If it’s the football players who did this, I am going to *kill* them—”

“I told you, nobody’s punking us.” I cut her off, not comfortable with her

talking about killing anyone. “It’s not the football players.” I turned my attention back to Liam.

There was no way to explain to Alana what had happened. She’d obviously seen nothing and never woke up to witness the carnage. She thought we just got dumped on the cliff. She hadn’t even seen the blood on my shoes yet. I looked down, expecting to see my poor Hermes stained red with evidence of another crime scene, but instead it looked like I was wearing a brand-new pair of two-hundred-dollar designer sandals on my feet. And my hoodie, which no doubt once showed signs of blood spatter and gunshot residue, was clean. My brain couldn’t process the amount of detail

this guy had taken care of—

“Man, my mom and dad are going to be pissed,” Alana said. Like her parents being angry was the biggest thing to fear at this point. She was so clueless. “How the crap are we getting home? I don’t even know where we are.”

Liam twitched in my arms. “Liam, wake up,” I said, willing him to come back to me. “C’mon, wake up.”

I thought of Dr. T’s Emerson quote—truth and repose. Liam couldn’t have both. None of us could. The truth was that a killer was holding him. And when he woke up, when his repose ended, that’s what he would see when he looked at me—the truth. I was a killer.

I did what I had to do to save my

friends and survive, but one death had been hard enough to take. Now there were four more. As I held Liam, I couldn't get my hands to stop shaking or my breathing to steady. I began rocking, trying to calm myself and dispel all the memories. Damn, I needed some Swiss chocolate right now.

Liam grimaced and his body tensed up. He was coming back.

"I'm right here," I said, touching his face. Intense relief rose in me. A profound sense of gratitude as I held him, knowing he was OK. I never meant to let myself feel this strongly about him—about anyone.

He finally opened his eyes, and they found mine.

They were a bloodshot blue this time. Not much sparkle at the moment.

“Are we alive?” he asked with the rasp of a whiskey-drinking smoker.

“I don’t know how, but yeah,” I said.

He blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes like he was trying to unsee something. “Where’s Alana?”

“I’m right here,” she said, snarling. He turned to see her standing with her arms crossed, clearly not as over the moon as I was to see him awake. “If your buddies think this is some hilarious prank, they’re wrong!”

“Prank?” he asked, not to her, but to me. I knew what he was really asking, *She doesn’t know?*

“Alana thinks we were roofied and

dropped off here by your jock-head friends as a joke,” I said with bulging eyes. *Don't tell her that I'm a raging sociopathic teen serial killer!*

“Oh.” Liam let out a huge huff of breath. “*Ohhhh*,” he said again, but this time with a scowl as he held his sides. Then I remembered those kicks to his unprotected ribs.

“Do we need to get you to the hospital?” I asked.

“Hospital?” Alana’s voice raised an octave. “What kind of friends are these guys? Is this some kind of hazing crap?”

“No, no hospital,” Liam said, slowing his breathing.

He turned his back to Alana long enough for me to mouth to him, “I don’t

know what to tell her.” My instincts warned me not to divulge anything she didn’t need to know. Her loyalty to me could only go so far. Plus, I didn’t want to scar her any worse than necessary. Maybe, for her own sake, the less she knew, the better. Like he could read my mind, Liam nodded.

“No, this is a football injury,” he lied. “I must have been lying on it wrong. It’s a bruise from last week’s game.”

I wasn’t sure why he was playing along. I couldn’t understand this guy. Always protecting me. I didn’t even need to explain, and he was going along with my insanity.

“Well, can you walk?” Alana asked. “We need to find a way out of here.

Maybe I can get home before my parents get up and decide to ground me for the rest of my life.”

“Yeah, I can walk.” He clenched his jaw and stood up with a swift grace. “I finished a game once with a dislocated shoulder. This is nothing.”

“I’d be impressed if I hadn’t just been drugged, kidnapped, and left to die on a cliff by your team of varsity a-holes,” Alana said as she stalked away from the cliff’s edge, presumably looking for a way to get out of here.

As soon as she turned her back, I whispered to Liam, “Thanks for lying.”

“She really didn’t see anything?” he whispered back, with a shaken look like *he* hadn’t missed a thing.

“I guess not,” I said softly, watching Alana. “Unless she’s blocking it out because it’s too awful.” My shoulders bowed, remembering all over again what I had done.

“It was the same guy, Ruby,” Liam whispered, taking my hand. Goose bumps raised all the way up my arm. “The one I saw watching you at the art fair. *He* drugged you with whatever was on that cloth at the warehouse. But he was dressed differently, like a special ops guy or something. Like Jason Bourne. Dressed in all black. I wasn’t sure at first because he wore some kind of helmet, but right before he drugged me I saw his face.”

I wobbled a little, as though a

California tremor had just shaken below me. He steadied me as best he could and said:

“He looked me right in the eyes. He didn’t say anything, but it was weird. He wasn’t...” Liam paused and his eyes glassed over like maybe he wasn’t really awake.

“He wasn’t what?” I snapped my fingers in front of his face.

“He wasn’t evil looking,” Liam said with a question mark all over his expression. “His eyes were...I don’t know...not intent on killing me. Not intent on killing you. It was weird.”

I couldn’t comprehend this. The motives of this Mr. D. S. evaded me time and time again.

“I think we should go to the police—” Liam said before I interrupted with my knee-jerk reaction to hearing “police.”

“NO.”

“Ruby, hear me out,” he said.

“No. I don’t know what *I* am going to do,” I said, pulling away my hand. Not because I didn’t desperately want his help, but because I felt guilty. I never should have involved him in this. He had a future. People who loved him and would be devastated if he was locked up for the rest of his life for two counts of conspiracy to commit murder, two counts of obstruction of justice, and who knows how many counts of seriously poor judgment for fraternizing with the known criminal Ruby Rose.

“Don’t pull that on me,” he said, taking my hand again, and this time tilting my chin up so I was forced to look him in the eyes. Those resilient eyes now turning a clear pale blue—almost the color of the horizon behind him. “We’re in this together.”

“No, *we’re* not,” I said, not pulling away, just clarifying. “*You* didn’t do anything. *You* didn’t pull the trigger. *You* didn’t help me get away. *You* are not responsible for anything. This is my problem, not yours.”

“I’d have pulled the trigger if I’d had the chance!” His voice raised above a whisper.

“Shhh,” I quieted him. “Yeah, well, you didn’t have to.”

For a long minute, he stared at me. I'd tried to warn him. I'd tried to keep him away. Sheesh, I'd practically broken his wrist telling him to keep his distance.

"No one should have to go through this alone," he said, not backing down. "Whoever is doing this to you, to *us*, isn't going to stop. He's playing some sick, twisted, bullshit game with you, and you need my help." Suddenly, against my will, I was in his arms again. And I wasn't at all comfortable there at the moment. Last time I'd been there, I was drugged, caged like an animal, forced to kill two men, and dumped on a cliff.

I wanted to pull away. But I didn't.

"Sorry to interrupt your little

moment,” Alana called down from above, “but you might want to see this.”

My guts fell like I’d just hit an unexpected drop on a roller coaster. What was it—a dead body? Evidence of what I’d done? My heart beat unnaturally fast as I scaled the cliff’s steep face.

I almost burst when I saw him.

“Big Black!” My knight in shining armor. My SUV.

“At least those a-holes left us a ride,” Alana said. “Now get in and drive me home before life as I know it is over.”

“How in the...” Liam said behind me.

“I don’t know,” I responded, only to him. “Whoever this guy is, I guess he doesn’t want me dead.”

“Just traumatized for life.” He feigned

a smile. “C’mon, let’s get out of here.” He tried to lead me over to the passenger side door.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I’m driving.”

The drive home was sore and silent. After briefly discussing the last thing we each remembered at the party, which was basically nothing—except for Alana being told that I needed her upstairs—we let Mary Poppins guide us back to familiar territory. Turned out, we were only twenty miles down the coast, and it was going to take us about a half hour to get home. But the dread that filled the car was palpable. Dread that bodies would be found, parents would go

ballistic, and lives would be ruined—any minute.

I figured no one wanted to speculate about what happened to us. No one wanted to discuss the looks on our parents' faces when we walked in and got the whole *I'm relieved you're alive, but now I'm going to kill you* speech.

I kept looking over to Alana in the passenger seat with her raw wrists, wondering what she really knew. Maybe some part of her subconscious had absorbed the gunshots, the sprays of blood, the smell of death. Maybe she was choosing repose over the truth—only postponing the twisted memories or dreams of me slaughtering two men. At least I had a good referral for a

psychotherapist.

In the meantime, I had to find a way to convince her not to accuse the football players. That would just cause a chain reaction of problems I didn't need right now.

Even if they never found the bodies or other physical evidence (because of Mr. D. S.'s meticulous planning), Detective Martinez and my mom's campaign opponent, Bill Brandon, would tag-team up like a pair of brute wrestlers to take my mom and me down if they heard about this.

The butterfly effect would be disastrous. Not that killing three men was even remotely close to the ripple of a butterfly's wing. But whatever.

As I turned into Alana's neighborhood, Liam leaned over the center console and put his hand on Alana's arm. She quickly pulled away.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to..." Liam stuttered. "I just have an idea. Let's tell our parents that we had a bonfire at Newport, someone stole our phones, and we were stranded at the beach. Let's not tell them about being tied up, or about the cove. They'll freak."

"Why?" She turned to face him in the backseat. "You don't want to get your buddies in trouble?"

"If this was one of the football guys, I *promise* I will find out," he assured her. "I just don't think they would be capable..." He trailed off.

“Oh, really? And who would be *capable*?”

“Alana,” I cut in, “you can’t go around accusing people.”

“Whose side are you on, Ruby?” she snapped.

“Nobody’s. I mean—yours?” I didn’t understand the question. Liam and I exchanged a worried glance in the rearview mirror.

“I don’t know what you guys are trying to hide, but I am 100 percent not cool with being drugged, kidnapped, and dumped by *anyone*.” Alana rubbed at her wrists like all of a sudden they scorched with pain. “All I know is that if you pull around this corner, and there are police outside my house because my

parents called me in missing, I'm not telling any bogus lies."

I drew a last breath before rounding the corner to discover our fate. Alana's parents weren't normally the kind to worry, but I knew I had little chance of keeping up the ruse if they suspected anything. I kept looking through my sunroof for any circling helicopters, or other signs of the whole LA cavalry out looking for our dead bodies after discovering the remains of four men at the warehouse.

Time skidded into slow motion as we turned onto Alana's street. The sun was up. Sprinklers cast rainbows over manicured grass, newspapers dotted the drives, and a yawning cat stared at us as

we came into view—but there were no sirens. No black-and-white vehicles. No frantic mothers in Hawaiian muumuus on the drive. Nothing out of the ordinary.

We all exhaled. “Thank God,” Alana said, dropping her head like she was really praying.

I looked in the rearview mirror. Liam’s expression said *Now! Convince her now!*

“Look, Alana.” I slowed my approach to her curb. “Will you just do one thing for me?”

She lowered her eyebrows. I opened my mouth, not even sure what I was going to ask her—but a beeping electronic device interrupted me.

Our eyes bulged as we recognized my

text-message alert. I thought I'd lost my cell phone! The sound came from somewhere right between us.

I flung open the center console to find all three of our cell phones neatly placed next to each other. We each grabbed for our own, desperate to discover the fallout.

I had only one unread text message, from another stupid unknown number.

Check your mom's text log. All is well.

I scrambled to the history of text messages between my mom and me.

At 11:36 last night a text from my

phone read: *Staying at Alana's tonight.*
See you tomorrow.

At 11:38 Mom replied: *OK. Be safe.*

At 11:40 my phone replied: *OK.*

I looked up at Alana in disbelief.

“My mom thinks I stayed at your house last night,” she said, looking at her own messages. “Someone texted her and told her so. Someone pretending to be me.”

I watched her eyes and saw comprehension dawning. Like maybe she finally understood this had nothing to do with the football players, and everything to do with someone far more sinister.

“Let me see that,” I said, taking the phone from her. It was true. Someone

sent her the same text to check her mom's log. We were in the clear. All *was* well. At least in regards to not being busted yet. I knew it was only a small victory. Soon there would be a long list of other consequences such as the bodies being found, Liam turning on me, a very public trial, the inevitable destruction of my mother's life and career, and ultimately getting shanked in prison by a gang of "big girls" who didn't like my attitude. And to think that just a few months ago I was only worried I wouldn't make it to Stanford because of poor attendance.

"Same for me," Liam said from the backseat. "My mom thinks I'm at my buddy Chase's house."

A long and uncomfortable pause took over the car. I didn't know what to say or even what to think. I only knew that if Alana remembered something and wasn't saying anything to my face—it could be a problem. I could tell she didn't want to be in the car with me for one more second.

“I'll call you later,” she said, not even bothering to meet my eyes before flipping the lock and practically sprinting into her house.

I wondered if I'd ever have a best friend again.

Not that it would matter if I didn't find out who had done this to us, and soon.

CHAPTER 11

As I slunk down in my tub, I wondered why I'd never thought to combine two of my favorite escapes before—a steaming bath and hot chocolate. If there was ever a time I needed them, it was now. I doubted prison would offer a massaging jet bath or carry this particular brand of imported French *chocolat chaud à la noisette*.

Not that I had done anything wrong—The Stick's murder was legally justified—but I wasn't naive enough to hope that everyone would see it as cut-and-dried.

Not with my mom's enemies. And not with the psycho still out there attempting to destroy me.

Now that I found myself alone, it all started to sink in. I was on a collision course with disaster. No matter what I did, life as I knew it was over. Either I would be caught, exposed, and ruined, or I would have to live with the knowledge that I had betrayed everyone and everything I'd ever held dear by keeping my secrets and "obstructing justice."

Or, of course, there was always the third option: death.

No, not suicide. I'm not that girl. I'm talking a slow, tortuous death by Mr. D. S.-hole. By now, I knew this guy was in

control. He was smart and capable enough of taking my life any moment he wanted. Shoot, he could very well come drown me in this bath right this second. Except that was obviously not what he wanted. So what did he want?

A wave of fatigue weighed me down. I needed to drag myself into bed before I accidentally drowned. Must've been the killer combo of the hot bath and having been drugged twice within the last twelve hours.

I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around myself, not even bothering to get dressed before I slid under my covers and turned on the TV to check the news. I had to know if they'd found the warehouse and the bodies yet. I flipped

through the channels until I found Bill Brandon and his shiny white campaign teeth. That smile alone was enough to win over several thousand “cosmetic” voters who knew nothing of the candidates or issues, who admitted to voting based on good looks. “Cheap votes” my mom called them. In the last election she was the one collecting them against an old man with a bright-red bulbous nose. In Brandon she’d met her match—with his chiseled jaw and salt-and-pepper hair, he oozed masculine smolder.

“You see, Megan, there are just too many questions, and not enough answers,” Brandon charmingly explained to the attractive news anchor,

like he was at a bar and she was the lucky girl he'd take home tonight. "District Attorney Jane Rose is a rogue pirate captain on a sinking ship. There is not enough transparency. There is not enough justice. Too many violent offenders still roam the streets while she dines in the private chambers of her lobbyist supporters. Orange County needs a new captain. One who will right the ship. I have the experience as a former police officer—and the proven determination as a successful victims' rights attorney—to make it happen."

What a joke! Captain Jane Rose the Rogue Pirate versus Bill "Peter Pan" Brandon the Scallywag Hero. This guy couldn't be any more ridiculous.

“So tell us, Bill”—the reporter, and her implants, faced him—“where do you get your passion? Does this have anything to do with your family history?”

Talk about lobbing a softball question.

“Yes, I’m glad you asked.” The Scallywag folded his hands and turned somber. “I get my passion from my daughter, Whitney. She’s why I’m here. She was fourteen years old when she was taken from her bed in the dead of night by a multiple offender. As the police captain in our small community, I thought I was protecting her. I thought something like that could never happen to me. We didn’t find her body until a year later. That’s when I changed my

thinking. I wasn't doing enough."

The smirk fell off my face. I felt stupid for not having known about his daughter. Had I only been selectively listening to information about him, and vilifying him because of my mom? There was more to this guy than I'd realized.

"The man who brutally tortured and killed my Whitney was still walking the streets. He wasn't convicted. His attorney persuaded the jury that my department had tampered with evidence because they wanted justice for me. Honestly, Megan, every day I considered finding him and..." He paused, lowering his gaze. When he looked back up at the camera, his eyes were alive with fire—instead of the tears I expected to see. He

continued: “I considered finding him and killing him. Showing him the same respect he’d shown my daughter.” He blinked and regained some of his composure, but I had lost some of mine.

“Of course, I came to my senses. I couldn’t do that to my wife and two other children. Instead, I went to law school and helped create the program we now call Whitney Watch, which is a series of protocols that communities and police departments use to find missing children, prevent travesties, and obtain justice against offenders. I am resolved to get these multiple offenders off the street. No plea deals, no sloppy prosecutions, only justice. For our children, for our communities, for

Whitney.”

I couldn't believe it—this bully seemed sincere. He'd lost his daughter. He wanted revenge. He was just like me.

Before, I thought seeing him elected would be a bad thing, mostly because it meant my mom would be fired. Now, I wasn't so sure. Except that maybe I was one of those “multiple offenders” he vowed to put away.

I turned off the TV—everything was going hazy. Not just my eyesight from overwhelming fatigue, but my shoreline. That line Dad had tried so hard to show me—the divide between right and wrong—wasn't so clear anymore.

The shaggy green carpet tickled my

cheek. I rolled around on the floor, giggling like crazy. Someone was tickling me, chasing me in circles. I laughed and fell, laughed and fell. I couldn't get away—I wasn't really trying. I looked up to the oversized smile above me and squinted through the belly laughs. I couldn't talk. I didn't have the words yet, but she did. "I'm going to get the little monster." Her long blonde hair was pulled into a high bun, so I could see her bright-blue eyes perfectly. I stared at soft, pink lips stretched out in a wide grin, making the dimple in her left cheek even deeper. She looked like the girl in the sketch at the art fair. It felt like I knew her.

Wait, was she me? She was my age.

She looked exactly like me, except for the eyes. Like Baby Ruby was playing with Teenage Ruby, or the version of me that didn't include shades of gray and darkness—

All of a sudden the room went black, like the lights of the world had just turned off. I couldn't find her. I crawled around blindly, searching for her touch. Instead, I felt bars in every direction. Everywhere I turned the bars locked me in. The ground was sharp and hard.

“Ruby.” My mom's cold voice entered my dream. If I didn't know this was a nightmare before, I knew it now. “I need to talk to you.”

The darkness started slipping away to a fog, deep and heavy.

“Honey, wake up.” Her impatient voice doused me like ice water, the silly pet name as annoying as always.

And yet, part of me was still glad to see her. There was always a seed of hope inside me that she’d surprise me, maybe whisk me off to Paris for fall shoes and chocolate crepes, like she did lifetimes ago. Pre-D. A. Jane used to be quite spontaneous. Post-D. A. Jane, not so much.

“I have to go,” she said. Of course, she woke me up just to say good-bye. I never got used to her MO: offering me something I wanted, just to say I couldn’t have it. *Here, Ruby, put these cookies*

in the cookie jar. And don't you dare eat them, they're for decoration. And shouldn't you be cutting back on the sweets? That metabolism of yours won't last forever.

“It's fine,” I said. Though it wasn't.

“You must've had one hell of a night,” she said, eyebrows raised. Maybe it was all a dream. I let myself hope for only a second before I looked down to my wrists and saw the bruising.

“Yeah, you know Alana and me.” I pulled up my towel and the covers to make sure none of me was exposed. “Party to the break of dawn.” I faked a smile, but it probably looked more like a grimace.

“I know it's Sunday, but I have to go

to the office for a little while, OK?” she said. Even though that “OK” with the inflection at the end indicated a question, which normally required a response, I knew better. She didn’t need my permission. And even if I said no, what was she going to do—listen? Ha! Would she stay home and make me breakfast in bed like Dad used to do? The only recipe she knew was burned toast. Would she curl up and have a quiet Sunday in, watching episodes of *Law & Order* and talking about life? Come on, she was the star of her own real-life crime show.

And now with the whole affair thing hanging in the air between us, I wasn’t sure I even wanted her around. I thought

about what Dr. T had said—letting my mom in, us needing each other now more than ever.

“Call Alana,” she suggested. “Do something fun today. I heard they’re having a sale at Nordstrom.”

“OK, fine. See you later, then.” I wanted to grab my cell phone off the nightstand and check for messages, but I couldn’t because of my bruised wrists.

“Don’t be like that, Rue.” She reached over to shift my hair out of my face, and I let her. Like a puppy starved for attention, I even leaned into her touch, hoping it would last longer. This was it—my opportunity to let her in. She was trying. I would try, too. My heart ached for Dad. And she had hurt me with

her mistakes and selfishness. But I still needed her help. And for a second, I thought maybe I could tell her everything and she'd understand. Maybe it would all be OK. Maybe she'd believe me if I said, *Yes, I was stalking LeMarq, but no, I never meant to kill him. And I was also following this other dude, Rick "The Stick," someone I also killed last night. And, oh yeah, I killed his friend, too—*

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She pulled her hand away from my cheek.

"Like what?"

She blew out an exasperated breath and pinched her eyes shut. "Like you don't understand the stress I'm under or

what's at stake for me."

I rolled my eyes. So typical—always thinking of Jane.

"I have a lot of important people relying on me, and I can't let them down now," she continued. "The governor wants to see me, and..." That's when I stopped listening. I was tired of wishing she'd consider me one of those *important people*.

"It's fine," I said quietly. I wasn't trying to guilt-trip her. I just knew I couldn't win this one. White flag raised.

"*I promise* I'll be back in time for dinner. We'll talk," she said, starting to get up. There was that teasing word again—"talk." I wouldn't hold my breath. "What do you want me to bring

home? Chinese? Italian? A nice prime rib?"

"I don't care," I said, watching her speed walk out of the room. "It's your world," I muttered to myself, knowing she couldn't hear me. It was more likely she'd forget to call, and I would end up making myself mac and cheese.

"I'll surprise you, then," she hollered from the staircase. She must've been taking two at a time, even in heels. And I thought I'd inherited my agility from Dad.

After the garage door shut, I wondered if it would've been a blessing to her if I'd died last night. She wouldn't have to bother anymore with any of this mothering mumbo jumbo. She wouldn't

have to come home *ever*. My death would probably give her a boost in the polls, and best of all, she wouldn't have to share the five million dollars of life insurance money my dad had left for me in trust.

So why did I still want her love and attention? If only Dad were here. He knew exactly how to buffer the tension between Mom and me. He'd make me some of his famous French toast with extra powdered sugar on top. He'd throw the wet suits and boards in the back of his truck and drive me down to our surf spot. He'd take me to the SWAT obstacle course and gun range to sweat and shoot my worries away.

I remembered now what it had felt

like to hold my dad's gun for the first time when I was twelve. It was exciting—exhilarating, even. But last night that gun had felt so dangerous and wrong. The minute I got back home, I'd put it back in his safe where it belonged.

Which begged the question: How did Dad's gun even get there last night? Had someone stolen it from the crime scene? Taken it off his dead body for profit? Sold it to a pawnshop where Mr. D. S. had then tracked it down? My brain overflowed with ridiculous theories. Dad's entire SWAT team was with him the night he died. At least that's what I'd gathered from the few details I'd heard. So how could anyone have been able to take the gun—unless that someone

belonged to SWAT? Could one of them have betrayed him? If it was possible for Martinez—his former partner—to betray him so deeply, then a wider SWAT betrayal was just as believable. Perhaps that's why his partner, Mathews, hadn't dared show his face around here since.

Crack. A sharp noise on the window made me jump. I looked over to see if it had shattered, but it was intact. Hugging the towel to my body, I got out of bed to make sure it was locked. Then I saw him—Liam.

He grinned up at me like I'd offered him an early birthday present: me, wearing virtually nothing. I jumped back, both relieved that he wasn't an ax murderer and totally pissed at him for

scaring me and invading my privacy.

I ran to my closet to grab a robe, and in the space of a few feet my mind changed. I wasn't that mad. Maybe a little surprised, maybe a bit flattered, and maybe a bit curious about what it would be like to be in the same room as him wearing only a towel.

Two robes hung in my closet: a thick, purple frumpy thing I used at Christmas and the Victoria's Secret robe I used in the privacy of my own room. I couldn't very well go down there looking like Barney the dinosaur.

I wrapped the hot-pink robe around me and headed downstairs to talk to him like a civilized human being.

“Oy, you,” I yelled out the front door.

“There’s this thing called a doorbell.”

He came running around the hedge. “I was going for the whole Romeo-and-Juliet thing.” He shoved his hands in his jeans and flashed that sparkly smile. Why did he look so happy to see me?

When was I ever going to understand this dude? Aside from Mr. D. S., he was the only person in the whole world who knew exactly what I was: a killer. And yet he wanted to play Shakespeare with me.

“You do know that Romeo and Juliet both ended up dead,” I said, trying to sound unaffected by his charm, while inside I couldn’t help feeling flattered—or maybe twitterpated. The black Hurley V-neck shirt he wore clung to his chest,

revealing the muscular curves I'd daydreamed about ever since that shirtless morning at the beach. "And also, Romeo didn't chuck rocks and nearly break Juliet's window."

"Uh, yeah, sorry about that." He scratched his neck and wrinkled his nose. "Turns out throwing a rock twenty feet in the air *delicately* is sort of hard."

He stood on the welcome mat, looking like he felt totally unwelcome. Avoiding his eyes, I stared down at his feet. Under his impressively clean throwback Jordans, the mat read: "Life Is a Bed of Roses." Dad had given it to Mom a few years back. I used to think it was absurd. But after he died I started seeing it differently. Sure, we had our

share of thorns, but we all loved each other.

“Have you heard from Alana?” Liam broke our uncomfortable pause.

“Not yet,” I replied, unhappy to be reminded that my *best* friend had finally realized I was the *worst*. “Have you heard anything on the news about”—I paused for a second, ashamed to say what had happened out loud—“you know, the warehouse?”

“Nope.”

I squinted at the sun, waiting for him to tuck tail and bolt.

“Well, aren’t you going to invite me in?” Liam asked.

I looked down at my robe, feeling a little underdressed. It hadn’t occurred to

me that he'd want to come in. "Well, are you or aren't you?" he asked again, moving closer.

"I guess, but..." I didn't know how to finish that sentence. *If you promise not to turn me in to the cops...or seduce me.*

"Nice robe," he said as he pushed through the door and gusted in. I tightened the sash again. "We really ought to talk. You know, about that *math* problem," he said louder.

"My mom's not here," I said, relieving him of his need to speak in code. "We're alone."

His smile was wider than I'd ever seen it. Like twelve hours ago he hadn't been abducted and almost sold to an

international drug lord who liked boys. This kid had the short-term memory of a goldfish.

“Good.” He reached for my hand and pulled me to his chest, and I let him reel me in like *I* was the goldfish. “I forgot to thank you for saving my life,” he said.

Er, wrong. I hadn’t saved his life. I put it in danger just by knowing him—and caring about him—but I didn’t say that. All I could think about were his eyelashes and his lips.

“You’re welcome?” It came out more like a question.

“Look, I know this may sound weird or psychotic or something, but what you did last night was...freaking amazing.” His eyes were lit up in a way that made

no sense to me.

“What are you even talking about?” I asked.

“Ruby, those were bad guys. I mean really bad guys. They were going to kill us. Or worse.” He grimaced. Finally, a look that made sense. “You not only saved us, but probably tons of other people they’d have messed with, too. I only wish I’d been the one to pull the trigger.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa. I shook my head in complete disagreement and backed away.

“Liam, it’s never OK to kill,” I said flatly. He didn’t get how it felt—hearing the crunch of bullet through bone. Seeing the spurt of blood. Living with the awful

knowledge that I'd killed them. Not the cops, not my dad—but me. I had good reason to do it, sure, but that didn't make it “OK.”

“Of course it is.” He looked around like one of my mom's nude Greek sculptures would side with him and tell me how ridiculous I was being. “You don't really believe that.”

“I believe in the justice system. I believe in the law. And I believe in the enforcement of it by those with authority to administer it,” I said.

“And the law says a killing is *justified* in self-defense or in the defense of others. It's called excusable homicide,” he said confidently. When I looked impressed, he added, “I Googled

it.”

I blew out an exasperated breath. Here I was standing half-naked in my foyer, arguing legal semantics with Liam Slater. I had so many problems that I couldn't even count them anymore. But first things first, I needed to put some clothes on.

“Come up to my room in five minutes, OK?” I said and turned to go up the stairs. “It's the second door on the left.”

“OK.” He smiled from perfect ear to scarred ear. I hoped he wasn't thinking what it looked like he was thinking. Or, maybe I hoped he was.

CHAPTER 12

I walked (completely clothed) to my window and opened it to make sure I could hear Mom's car if she came home. Not because I was going to be sharing a sex session with Liam, but because I was going to share something far more sinister: my research on two criminals, who just happened to have died by my hands.

“I like your room,” Liam said from the edge of my bed. I detected an unusual amount of nervousness in his voice. “Very...uh...beachy.”

“Bitchy?” I asked, teasing him for the stammer, and I joined him on the bed.

He grinned and shook his head. “It’s like being at the beach. All the seashells and starfish and all.”

“I’m just kidding,” I assured him, grateful he hadn’t seen my shoe closet. That one would be hard to explain, even to him. “I just wouldn’t be surprised if that’s what you really thought of me. Or worse.”

“You should do that more often,” he said, with suddenly soft eyes.

“What, misinterpret your words?”

“No, smile.” He held my gaze. “It looks good on you.”

My smile faded. Something about him pointing it out made it scamper away.

Plus, I wasn't entitled to smile. I still had blood on my hands. Did *that* look good on me?

Except, Liam's expression made it clear that discussing my guilt wasn't exactly what he had in mind at the moment.

I had to change the subject. The tension radiating from him practically screamed "Let's Do It" like a flashing neon sign. I could even almost hear Marvin Gaye singing "Let's Get It On." And I could 100 percent for sure feel the energy sparking between his body and mine.

I'd opened the door wearing my hooker robe, invited him to my room, sat him on my bed, and *smiled*. Of course he

could get the wrong idea. I think I was getting the wrong idea myself. On cue, images of him with his shirt off on the beach formed in my mind. His wet suit hanging low on his hips, his tan skin, his soft lips...

I felt like a hot teapot about to whistle from the steam inside me. Just as I was about to get up, he said, "I'm not trying to get into your pants, Ruby."

Huh? What about the neon sign—and Marvin Gaye? I'm pretty sure that my face turned Ruby Red.

"Er, that's not what I meant," he said, squirming again. "It's not that I don't want to. I mean, I totally do. Like you wouldn't believe—but that's not why I'm here." He rubbed his forehead like

massaging it would help him articulate.
“That came out weird.”

“Liam, it’s OK,” I said, wondering what my personal neon sign was saying right now. “Let me show you something.”

I stood and offered my hand to help him up. He looked up at me like he couldn’t believe it. I was actually reaching out to him. I could hardly believe it, either.

He took it and something like an electrical shock zipped through me, head to toe. His clear eyes set me on fire; his scent burned me up. I forgot for a second what I was doing.

Oh yeah, the chest. I needed him to move so I could reach under the bed to

grab it. I let go of his hand and fell to my knees beside him. With a grunt and a tug, the treasure came gliding out. I'd never shared this with anyone else. I couldn't believe I was doing it now.

I paused, wondering if I could trust Liam with this. He might not understand. But I needed help. A fresh set of eyes. I was too close. I couldn't see the forest *or* the trees anymore.

"What is that thing?" he asked, looking a bit worried.

"It's just some evidence I've been gathering," I said, trying to sound casual. "I've looked over this stuff several times in the last few days, but maybe you can help me find something significant." I fumbled with the code and popped the

lock. Which made me remember the whole cage situation from last night. My body tensed up at the thought of the bars and the stupid three-digit bike lock.

“It’s 366,” I mumbled.

“What’s wrong?” Liam dropped to his knees beside me.

“Just remembering a detail.”

I told him how I was the only one put in a cage, glossing over how afraid I am of bars—not wanting to relive it. How I escaped, the combination number, and how they matched the address from the first shooting. About how there had been other cryptic clues or messages. Like the demon tattoo on that girl in the sketch at the art fair. Like the *D. S.* signature. Like the fact that the girl in the sketch looked

a lot like me, just like the little girl Riley Bentley—the one I saved at the warehouse—and just like the one I didn't save on Ninth Street. Like making me use my dad's gun and then returning it to me afterward. Whoever was doing this to me was doing it for a reason.

“So, let me get this straight,” Liam said, staring at the unopened chest. “This guy is sending you messages? Leaving you clues?”

“It feels like it. Like he's giving me pieces of some strange, twisted puzzle, and I'm supposed to put them together somehow.”

“But why? To show you who he is? To exact revenge on your mom or dad? To lead you on a wild goose chase until

he strangles you in some Satan-worshipping ceremony?”

“Jeez, Liam.” I glared at him. “Way to make a girl feel better.”

“Oh, sorry.” He frowned and shook his head. “That was an insensitive joke and absolutely *not* going to happen. I was just thinking out loud.”

“Whatever,” I said, now focusing on the chest, wondering again if I should actually share this darkness with another human being. I could just see him on the witness stand. The prosecutor would ask him, “Then what did the defendant do?” He’d reply, “We were alone in her bedroom when she showed me her chest—her chest of horrors.” *Dun dun dun!*

“Well, are you going to show me

what's in this thing or not?" Liam asked.

"Yeah, of course." I flung open the top and pulled out a few of the most recent notebooks. "OK, before you start judging me, I just want you to know my therapist told me I needed an *outlet*. I was, like, comatose for two months after my dad was murdered. And one of the only things that got my mind off of his death was focusing on these guys." I laid out five files. "I call them the Filthy Five. Child abusers, murderers, and drug traffickers that either my dad couldn't catch or my mom put back on the street. I've been following them. Now two of them are dead." I stopped myself. I wasn't explaining it right. Maybe, if I just let him look at the records and

connect the dots himself, he'd see something I missed.

He started thumbing through the thick green files and notebooks. And he stopped when he apparently couldn't read any more about what these men had done. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand as if he'd just eaten a hot pepper.

"Wow," Liam said quietly. "You did all this research yourself?"

"Like I said, I needed an outlet." I waited for him to look at me again, but he wouldn't. I could see the wheels turning in his head. He was figuring out that if I was following them, that would give me a motive—which meant maybe I was really trying to kill them after all.

And maybe I wasn't telling him the whole story. Which is what my mom, Detective Martinez, and any other rational person would think.

“Look, I know these guys are guilty,” I continued. “The evidence is all there. But for one reason or another it couldn't be used in a court of law, or wasn't strong enough for a life sentence. I had to get new evidence in order to convict these guys for good. So I started tailing them.” I knew I was rambling, and it sounded borderline psychotic, but I couldn't hold it back. “Anyway, whoever is behind this knows about my Five. LeMarq was number one and Rick is number two.” I pointed to Rick's file. “You never saw him, but he was there

last night. I killed him right before I killed the guy who fell on top of you. Oh my hell...I just admitted to killing two men last night.”

“Shhh, Ruby, shhh,” he said, holding me close. “It’s OK.” Was that him shaking or me?

“I never meant to do it, I swear,” I said, covering my face with my hands and fighting surging tears. “I never wanted to kill anyone—”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Liam cut me off. “You don’t have to work so hard to explain it to me. I’ve seen and heard enough to know that someone is manipulating you. We just need to figure out who and why.”

A rogue tear escaped, and I wiped it

away before it could reach my cheek. I couldn't let myself go to that place ever again. There was a time after Dad died when I let myself be crippled and debilitated by constant waterworks. I couldn't go anywhere or do anything without embarrassing myself. It had been at least three months since my last ugly cry. To survive I needed to see clearly, without the blurring pain.

As much as I needed and wanted Liam's touch, I pulled away to steel myself against the weakness threatening to destroy me. My walls were there for a reason: protection.

"Hey," Liam said, brushing my hair out of my eyes. "Why don't we get something to eat, check the news to see

if there's a report on any, uh, crime scenes, and we can go through this in a little while."

I was hesitant to leave my research without showing Liam the three remaining criminals. There had to be another clue that would help me understand why all this was happening, or maybe prepare me for the next time around. Because by now, I knew there'd be a next time.

"C'mon, when was the last time you ate anything?" Liam asked, frowning and lifting himself off the floor. I could tell he was trying to hide the pain in his side from last night. "I had a bowl of Captain Crunch a few hours ago when I woke up, but I need some real food."

“Yeah, *real* food,” I said, rubbing away any stray traces of emotion. “My mom doesn’t do a lot of grocery shopping these days. I doubt there’s anything here.”

He offered me his hand and I let him pull me up.

“That’s cool,” he said, giving me that devilish grin. “I could really go for some In-N-Out Burger right now. A Double-Double, extra salt on the fries, and a big ol’ whammer jammer chocolate shake. How about you?”

For the first time in a long while, Liam Slater made me laugh. I could only smile and nod in agreement.

“That was easy,” Liam said, leading me toward the door. “You never do what

I say.”

“You had me at chocolate shake.” I smiled. “And whammer jammer.” I smiled even wider. But as I hit the top of the stairs I remembered I’d left all my “dirty laundry” spread out all over the floor. “Wait, let me just put away the chest. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I put most of the files and notebooks back, and shoved the box under my bed. Admittedly, it wasn’t the most original place to hide my deepest, darkest secrets. I stuffed the remaining three of five monster files in my backpack. They were heavy, but as I slung the bag over my shoulders, I couldn’t help but feel lighter. I finally had someone to confide in. Someone who I could finally be

myself around. He knew everything now—he was the only one. Not my mom, not Dr. T, not Alana.

My heart sank remembering the way Alana looked at me when she got out of Big Black early this morning. She wanted nothing to do with me anymore. I'd be lying if I said I didn't see it coming. Though she'd always made an effort to understand—and even sometimes participate in—my dad's training, she never loved it. In fact, in the year leading up to Dad's death, she was pretty much over it. Especially when it got in the way of parties, boys, shopping, and beach time. Which it always did.

I checked my cell phone to see if she'd called or texted, but her silence

was deafening. I so badly wanted to tell her again that I was sorry for dragging her into all of this. Talk to her about how Liam made me laugh. She would practically drool over the phone if I told her about Liam's neon sign. How ironic that the only time I'd managed to push Alana away was also the one time I finally had something to say.

Suddenly, I heard men's voices coming from downstairs. Liam was talking to someone, but I hadn't heard the doorbell. I held tight to my phone in case I needed to call 911. I thought about getting one of Dad's shotguns, but first I peeked over the railing to see if I could catch where the voices were coming from and whose they were.

Liam stood near the open front door, arms crossed. I could see the outline of a man in black clothes standing opposite him.

This time, 911 wouldn't do me any good.

CHAPTER 13

I let the weight of my backpack pull my shoulders down. I was really getting tired of this whole showing-up-at-my-house-unannounced thing. A voice in my head whispered, *Police harassment*. Another whispered, *Abuse of power*. Yet another whispered, *Stop whispering*. *Unless you're building an insanity defense*.

And then a voice screamed, *Hide the files!*

I hurried back into the bedroom and flung my backpack under the bed,

considering whether to call my mom for backup. But I couldn't just leave Liam down there all by himself with Detective Muscle-Head Martinez. I trusted Liam, but I didn't exactly want his trust to be tested.

I hustled downstairs to join them.

“Detective Martinez, what are you doing here?” I asked, not even pretending to be pleasant. I was angry, and I wasn't going to hide it.

“I came by to check on you,” he said, not doing me the same favor of making it clear how he really felt. He casually turned away from Liam and squared himself to face me coming down the grand staircase. His gaudy gold chain flashed in the light of the chandelier.

“Check on me?” I asked. “Why would you need to *check* on me?”

He gave me a knowing look, but what he *knew* I couldn't guess. Maybe he knew I'd killed again. Maybe he knew that as we spoke, the CSI unit was meticulously analyzing the evidence off of four bodies that would put me away for good. Or maybe he just knew I was hiding something.

My foyer had turned into an interrogation room, and I was willingly waiving my right to counsel.

“Let's just say I was worried about you,” he said, gesturing in Liam's direction, as if playing the noble father-figure card.

Step 1: Gain trust.

“Home alone, are we?” Martinez asked.

Step 2: Open with an easy question.

“Yeah, and I’m pretty sure my mom would have your badge if she knew you were here questioning me without her presence or consent.”

“Whoa, there’s no interrogation here.” He held up his hands. “I only wanted to make sure you’re *fine* and that everything is on the up-and-up.”

Step 3: Reveal suspicion.

“Well, now that you know I am *fine* and things are looking *up*, you can go.”

He studied me, his eyes trailing up and down my body as if looking for physical evidence. He moved closer. “I know what you’re doing, Ruby.”

Step 4: Make an accusation to invoke admission of guilt.

My facade of confidence faltered for a second. But if he really knew what I was doing, he should just arrest me already.

Liam finally stepped between us. “I think you’d better leave now.” He didn’t take my hand or put his arm around me, but his closeness steadied me.

Martinez’s dark eyes left mine and narrowed on Liam. “Young man, you’d better be careful who you talk to like that.”

Step 5: Use physical intimidation.

Liam was bigger than Martinez, but his eyes still dropped as the detective moved even closer, erasing the space

buffer between us.

“Do you still have the number I gave you?” Martinez asked, maybe ten inches from my face.

Step 6: ???

“No.” I pulled back my head. “My mom has it. You saw her take it.”

“Here it is again, then,” he said as he slid it into my hand and held it there a moment. “You just might need it one of these days. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” I replied, totally not understanding, but hoping my compliance would make him let go, even though I knew he was waiting until I made eye contact. Damn, I didn’t want to. But I wanted him gone. So I looked him dead in the eyes.

He blinked in acceptance of my token offering of surrender, and finally let go. He took one last look at Liam. “Remember what I told you.”

As soon as he crossed the threshold, I slammed the door. We waited for a few minutes, listening for the sound of his car starting in the distance and then pulling away. I wondered how he even got past our gate.

“What the hell was that?” I asked myself, trying to wipe away the feeling of his hand on the back of my shorts. “When I tell my mom about this, she is going to freak.”

Liam was strangely quiet. “What’s up with you?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing,” I said. “It kind of looks like *something*. What’d he say to you before I came down?”

“That guy, he just...” He avoided my eyes, and grabbed the door handle. “Never mind. C’mon, I think we both need a fat milkshake after that kind of police terrorization.”

“Fine, just let me go get my backpack.” I turned to go, but I could tell Liam was shaken. Detective Martinez must have gotten to him before I came down. And I couldn’t help but wonder if sharing my research with Liam had been a big mistake.

Over the consumption of salt, fat, sugar, and near-illegal amounts of complex

carbs, I continued to tell Liam the reasons why I couldn't go to the police about everything that had happened. Most of them had to do with Detective Martinez. My mom said he was dangerous and not to trust him. Their affair ended badly. Of course, I was still waiting for that "talk" with her for more details on their past. But this much I knew: I didn't like Martinez. If he could betray my father so deeply, then he could betray me if I confided in him about my Filthy Five.

Liam agreed we couldn't trust him but tried to convince me maybe there was another friend from Dad's SWAT team who would help. But I didn't want to talk about my dad, or his department. I

couldn't go there. Not yet. They'd let me down and failed Dad by letting him die. All without giving me any kind of reasonable explanation.

Even Mathews, Dad's so-called best friend and right-hand man, had ignored me since that terrible night. The dude (Dad's replacement, by the way) had never even come to see me. And he used to be like a second father to me. In fact, he was the one who'd given me Smith for my Sweet Sixteenth. He said the laser sight would help me stop shooting like a girl. He used to love to tease me. Now, apparently, he loved to pretend like I didn't exist.

I had no friends in SWAT.

Liam never really told me what

Martinez had said to him before I came down. He only alluded to Martinez warning him to “be careful” with me. I didn’t press him because I had a feeling about what Martinez was really trying to do: use Liam against me. And yet Liam was inexplicably still here, despite the risks of being associated with me, enjoying a greasy picnic on the beach. Intermittently smiling and touching me, with a gentleness I’d never experienced.

“Did your parents say anything to you this morning?” I asked.

“My mom just asked why I came home so early. I told her I’d had a hard time sleeping and wanted to be in my own bed. She was cool.”

“What did your dad say?”

“I haven’t seen my dad in years,” he said quietly. “But since he was a drunk, I’m sure he wouldn’t have noticed or cared anyway.”

“Oh.” I paused, not meaning to bring up a hard subject. So he had lied about his “rich dad” ransoming us. “My dad drank a lot, too. But he noticed everything. Even when he was tanked, he could hear the scurrying of a cockroach. If he’d been here, I wouldn’t have had a chance of sneaking in like I did this morning.” I couldn’t believe I was talking about Dad again. I hadn’t been able to do this with anyone yet. At least, not without breaking down, cracking up, or shutting off. Maybe because I was trying to comfort Liam, it was OK.

“My dad was a mean drinker,” Liam clarified.

“My dad could be mean,” I countered. “He and my mom used to argue like a couple of rock stars in a hotel. Headphones came in handy on nights like those.” In hindsight, now that I knew about the affair, maybe it explained why he was so angry with her for so many years.

“Yeah, well, I wish arguing was all my dad used to do.” Liam pulled his hair over his ear again, and I longed to reach and out and touch him, reassure him. His dad must have given him that scar.

“I’m sorry,” I said, panicking a little. I wasn’t used to having real conversations about real things. I had

trained myself to never talk about anything meaningful. Maybe Liam was right and I was completely unapproachable. “I never meant to bring up painful stuff—”

“It’s OK, Ruby.” He took my hand and soothed me. I must’ve had that about-to-self-destruct look on my face. “Before the sun goes down, let’s have a look at those files in your backpack.”

I looked up to the horizon. The sky was lit up like a melting bag of Skittles. Pinks and purples blended with yellows and oranges. We didn’t have much time left before the light went.

I let go of Liam’s hand and rummaged through my bag. “There are three guys left on my list,” I said, laying the files

out on the blanket in front of me, like we were just two teens about to do some homework. “I’m pretty sure Mr. D. S. knows about my Filthy Five list—or he at least knows I was following these guys and is trying to set me up to kill them all.”

“Yeah, it seems that way.” Liam nodded. “But why?”

I thought about it for a second. A theory was taking shape, but it had some serious holes.

“I think it has something to do with my mom.”

“Uh-huh.” He egged me on.

“No one has ever told me anything about what happened to my dad. Not even his best friend, Sergeant Mathews.

I have no idea if it was a drug bust gone wrong, a robbery, a hostage situation, a terrorist attack...nothing. I only know that he was ambushed on Grissom Island, up the coast in Long Beach. That's it." I stared up the shoreline. Even though it was a little more than fifteen miles away, the lights of the busy harbor twinkled in the distance. "What if someone is trying to hurt my mom? Someone she put away or double-crossed or whatever. Step one: Kill husband. Step two: Send only child to jail. Step three: Destroy her career."

Liam didn't respond right away, and I could tell he wasn't convinced. He cocked his head like he was considering the theory. "But why not just kill her?"

That's a lot of work—and a lot of killing—for *her* to remain alive in the end. Plus, I thought you said you looked through your mom's cases and no one fits the profile of this guy."

"That's true," I said, throwing a cold fry to a seagull.

"What if this guy is just some crazy psycho who gets off watching you kill? Like that Jigsaw guy from *Saw*. He believes these guys deserve to die, too, and he thinks this is some game. Maybe he has a connection to one of these guys and that's what drew him to you. "

Or maybe Liam watched too many movies.

He flipped through the third file. It was Father Michael McMullin's. Seven

suspected child molestations, two suspected child abductions, and five dropped charges. And that was only in the State of California. He'd been a priest in Michigan and Florida before that. District Attorney Jane Rose's press release blamed the failure to convict on the witnesses refusing to testify.

I took the fifth file on Stanley "The Violent" Violet—a sadistic video game genius, porn addict, and lover of small women with even smaller self-esteem. His "alleged" crimes consisted of binding, torturing, and killing innocent college-aged women.

My dad had dropped Violet with a through-and-through shot to the shoulder seven years ago during a standoff-

hostage situation in a mall parking lot. Violet had gotten sloppy and tried to force a freshman coed into his Lamborghini. A search warrant produced four thoroughly bleached trophy keepsakes (small trinkets of nondescript jewelry that couldn't be linked to any missing person) from presumably four other victims who were never positively identified. His computer game success bought him a media-mongering hotshot attorney who convinced a jury that Violet was "legally insane and incapable of knowing right from wrong" because he thought he was in a video game. He got five years in a mental facility, then the bare minimum in parole supervision in the two years

since he'd been out.

I glanced through the photos. I didn't have one of those two-foot lenses, so the pictures I'd taken were pretty low quality—mostly shots of Violet going in and out of bars, strip clubs, gas stations, and the odd videogame store. I don't think either Liam or I knew exactly what we were looking for, but it was better than doing nothing.

I opened the fourth file. Roger Vay—the worst of the worst. He'd literally gotten away with murder at least a dozen times. He was by far the smartest, slimiest, and scariest offender on my list. He studied his victims. He chose the isolated loners, the irresponsible partiers, and the professionals who

worked long hours. By the time anyone noticed they were gone, so was any evidence connecting him to the crime.

The only reason we knew he was such an accomplished killer was his signature—a unique antique key he would later mail to the closest person in the victim's life. Each victim had his or her own handmade key. The thought of Vay crept me out to the core. And how evil to mess with the family's minds, making them think that if they could just find the locked door to where their loved one was being held, maybe they could save them.

After years of fumbling around, the police finally figured out the glaring piece of “key” evidence and linked the

cases—all twelve of them, spread out over twenty years. They started calling him the Key Killer.

Finally, someone got the idea to run a search on locksmiths in the criminal database, and they found the only one with an old rape arrest. They closed in on Roger Vay, gathered some damning forensic evidence tying him to the mailed keys, and put him on trial. During Prosecutor Jane's presentation of evidence, another woman went missing and a copycat killer sent another key. It was enough to create reasonable doubt, and the real Key Killer was set free. The justice system at its finest.

I stared down at the pictures in the file. Remarkably, Vay looked clean-cut,

owned his own small business, and even had a wife and two kids. He also hardly went anywhere, so there were far fewer pictures of him to study.

“Hey, check that out.” Liam pointed to one of the photos I’d put down. It was of Stanley Violet outside his gas station talking to someone in a vehicle. “See that black cargo van? It’s the same one from this picture.” He grabbed the photo I was holding and slid it next to his.

I gasped, my heart thumping in my ears. Could this be true? “Oh. My. Mother.”

“It’s the same vehicle, right? And part of the license plate shows.”

“Liam, I can’t believe this,” I said, leaning in to him to see the photos better.

“I totally missed that. But is that a *D* or an 8?” I pointed at the plate.

“Are you blind? First of all, a *D* looks nothing like an 8. And anyway, it’s neither—it’s a *zero*.” He was clearly enjoying his breakthrough.

I squinted at the image, scrunching up my nose as though that would make the image suddenly clear. “It’s definitely a *D*.”

“Whatever you say,” he said, imitating my expression. Mother Jane would be dismayed to know that a boy had caught me looking so unattractive. I didn’t care. This was huge.

“Come on,” I said, shoving the files into my bag. “Let’s get back to my place before my mom gets home. I want to get

on my dad's computer and check the plates.”

CHAPTER 14

I didn't go into my dad's office very often. Only to do some research on the "official ongoing investigation" into his death, and some digging on the Filthy Five. Otherwise, it had been virtually untouched since he died—his gun case securely locked, the minifridge stocked with Corona Lights, and his dearly beloved semper fi flag hung on the wall. If I didn't know better, it felt like he might be coming home any minute to skedaddle me out of his man cave.

This time, as I prepared to do

research with Liam, I noticed a large coin on the mouse pad. I picked it up to move it aside and realized what it was—my dad's Challenge Coin. What was it doing here? He'd always had it on him, and it wasn't here the last time I'd come in. Had he accidentally dropped it under the desk before he died, and the cleaning lady found it recently and put it somewhere we'd see it?

“What's that?” Liam said, as I turned it over in my hand.

“A coin that everyone in my dad's SWAT unit had,” I said, trying to remember its significance. “It says ‘Loyalty. Courage. Commitment.’ Though, I'm pretty sure they just used it for bar games. When someone taps it,

it's supposed to alert everyone to a challenge. The last person in the unit to pull out their coin and start tapping has to buy everyone drinks." I shook my head. "Like they need any more drinking in SWAT." I put the coin in my pocket anyway. It instantly made me feel closer to Dad.

I wiggled the computer mouse, and the last program used popped up. The large screen lit up with a photo from my sixth birthday party—my dad and me smiling at each other over a massive plate of sizzling fajitas and fruity drinks with umbrellas. My heart sputtered at the sight. I didn't remember looking at these photos the last time I was in here. My mom must've used the computer, which

surprised me since I was under the impression that she hadn't stepped foot in here since his death. Maybe she missed him a lot more than she let on.

I closed the files and closed off my heart. No time for weakness now. Instead, I opened the license plate database, silently thanking Liam for not asking me any questions about the picture.

I typed in the letters and numbers I could see in the photo, filling in all the other fields I could—commercial van, black, standard California plates. Two-thousand-plus hits registered.

“Stupid overcrowded California,” I mumbled, typing in a few variations. Three-thousand-plus hits came up each

time.

“Dead end,” I said and flopped back in my dad’s oversized desk chair. A hint of musk from the leather and his cologne wafted up, and I pinched my eyes, pretending to feel frustrated, but really feeling like sobbing. If only my dad were here. He would know what to do. He would get his team to track down every lead and protect me.

“Ruby, are you all right?” Liam touched my leg and made me jump.

“I’m fine,” I said, feeling stupid.

“You just looked...” He paused, searching for the right word.

“I’m sorry,” I interrupted. “I’m good. I’m just not used to having someone around like this. Alana’s usually here to

create mindless diversions for me, but not...this.” I gestured at whatever invisible *thing* hovered between us.

“Well, get used to it,” he said gently, momentarily holding my cheek.

Flustered, I looked back to the blurry photo and studied it again.

“I wish I had one of those huge lenses so these effin’ letters would actually be decipherable. One of those slimy paparazzi guys named Sammy had one that could probably take pictures of life on Mars. He’s the guy who put most of those pictures of me in the tabloids. He was around here a lot when my dad first died, always saying these creepy personal things about me, baiting me to look at his stupid camera. After LeMarq,

he was one of those sniper paparazzi hiding in the bushes at school. He's a real tool."

Liam sat up higher and laughed like I'd finally hit the punch line of a hilarious joke. "It's not that funny," I assured him.

"No, it's not that. I'm not laughing *at* you, even though it is pretty ridiculous," he said with a stupid grin I almost felt like wiping off him. "You just found the answer to the problem."

I stared at him. "I didn't know we were doing math tutoring. Which problem?"

"Let's go find this guy Sammy, and he'll have the photos we're looking for. If he was watching your every move

with his privacy-invading camera, *and* the guy behind all of this was watching you, too, chances are there are more images out there. Maybe more than a license plate.”

I sat there speechless, suddenly understanding. Not only would Sammy have photos, but insider information on the “Investigation” of LeMarq, and maybe even my dad’s, too. Somehow these guys always knew more than they should. Like how many times I frequented the 31 Flavors on Main Street for Double Dutch chocolate scoops when I was “depressed.”

Sure, there was a risk Sammy would take advantage of the fact I was doing my own investigations and asking my

own questions. But that was a risk I had to take.

“Liam,” I said, “you’re a freaking genius.”

“Rue! I’m home,” my mom yelled just outside the door.

“Oh, snap, it’s Mom,” I muttered. Like a cat landing on all fours, I stood up, clicked off the monitor, and shut the drawer with my dad’s passwords.

As my brain raced through how all this would look to her, I decided to play the awkward card. “Liam, she’ll know I’m hiding something by being in here. Just pretend we were making out, OK? That’ll really throw her off.”

He stared at me for a few moments. “Really?” he whispered, eyes bright.

“Won’t she be totally pissed at me?”

“Who cares if she’s pissed at *you*?” I didn’t understand why he would even care how my absentee mother felt about him.

“Well, she could put me away for good. Everyone knows how tough Prosecutor Jane Rose is.”

“For kissing?”

“For perjury,” he said with a devilish grin. “You can’t ask me to lie, can you?”

He moved in closer and put his arm around me, cradling my neck. He looked down at me with an intensity I almost couldn’t handle, waiting for my permission. What was I going to do—say no?

Suddenly, he wasn’t asking anymore.

The moment our lips touched, my eyes fluttered shut in a rush of sensation. His hands, his body, and his mouth were slowly, tenderly, exquisitely consuming me. His warm breath and lips reminded me of melting campfire chocolate—soft and full, smooth and sweet, but dangerously hot. A tingling heat rose in my body. I'd been kissed before, but never like this.

I squeezed the back of his shirt into my fists and pulled him even closer. He didn't seem to mind as he brought both hands to my face, then to my shoulders, then to my hips. I didn't even know what to do with my hands anymore. I didn't mean to touch his abs, but there they were under my fingertips. Waves of

adrenaline and desire surged in me with each kiss and touch.

I finally took a breath and realized how desperate I was for oxygen. He rested his forehead on mine, and we breathed the same air. I couldn't open my eyes yet—I was too dizzy.

“Wow, Ruby Rose, no wonder they say you're lethal,” Liam whispered.

I playfully slugged him in the chest. “Hey, easy with the name-calling.”

“Sorry,” he said, kissing my cheek, then my neck, then moving back up to my lips. “At least we won't be lying.”

I heard my mom just outside the door murmuring intermittent curses. She must've been going upstairs, because her voice trailed off around the third F-

bomb. She definitely didn't know we were in here.

"I think she might have a case against me for assault," I said, looking at his wrinkled shirt and swollen lips. "You look like you just got mauled by a bear."

So much for restraint. As in every other aspect of my life, I was losing my self-control.

Liam smoothed out his clothes and tried to straighten up, but he couldn't erase the giddiness written all over his face. Which was good, because that was exactly what I needed my mom to see. I clutched my backpack and mentally prepared myself for the confrontation.

"C'mon." I grabbed his hand and led him out of the room. Once we hit the

stairs, I yelled, “Mom, I’m down here.”

A few seconds later, she popped her head out of my room. And one second after that, her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

“Rue, what...who...how...” she stammered. Poor D. A. Jane was at a loss for words. She was a mess, and she knew it. Shirt untucked, a few strands of unruly hair askew. As she descended the stairs, she straightened herself up as much as she could.

“This is my friend Liam. We were just studying for a Calculus test,” I said.

“I wasn’t expecting company,” she said with a salty tone directed at me. “Though it’s lovely to meet your *friend*.” Liam smiled back, not knowing what to

say. The look on Mom's face was bizarre at best. Was she pulling a cougar move on the first boy I ever let into my house?

Mission Awkward: Accomplished.

I watched as she accumulated the evidence against us. Messy hair, pink lips, guilty faces. I couldn't tell if she was mad or jealous. Or maybe she was just flat-out flabbergasted.

"We were just leaving, actually," I said. "Study group."

"It's almost eight o'clock on a school night!" she argued. "And I got dinner—fresh halibut from Duke's."

"Well, we have a big test tomorrow, and I already ate." I rebutted each point, just like she'd taught me. "I promise to

be home by ten.”

I turned to go. I wasn’t exactly asking for permission.

Liam followed me to the door but stopped midway to do the proper thing. “It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Rose.”

“It was nice to meet you, too, Liam,” she replied, looking him up and down again. Even in her disheveled state, she was beautiful and she knew it.

I wanted to slap her right then. For how many reasons, I wasn’t sure.

CHAPTER 15

Groggy didn't cover it. And third-period History wasn't helping.

To keep my head from collapsing on my desk, I supported my chin in my hands and propped open my eyes. Even then, the dim lights and gentle hum of the projector were luring me to sleep.

The long day and the late night with Liam had left me drained. Finding Sammy proved far more challenging than just calling *Star Magazine* and being connected to the desk of Sam Carmichael, who was credited with the

“Hollywood Belles in Bikinis” pictures this week. We left a few messages and wrote a few e-mails before being forced into patiently waiting for a reply.

The endless early morning hours had left me exhausted—tossing and turning in bed with memories of blood and gunshots. And the warm room and Mrs. Monotone Voice weren’t helping.

The only thing that kept me going was a steady intake of a very caffeinated soda in my thermos, and the invigorating memory of Liam’s lips on mine.

Finally, the lunch bell rang and I hurried to meet Alana at her locker, just as I’d done every other school day for the last five years. As I approached, I noticed she wore long sleeves—despite

the warm day. She was hiding the bruising from the ties.

“Hey, Alana,” I said in my best lighthearted, glad-you’re-alive tone, as I slid up to the locker next to her. She jumped at the sound of my voice.

“Hey,” she said without looking in my direction. Instead, she kept her focus on switching the books from her backpack to her locker.

“Why haven’t you returned my calls? I’ve been really worried—”

“Please, Ruby.”

“Please, Ruby, what?” I asked.

“I gave you space when you needed it—now it’s time to return the favor.” Surely she was speaking to her textbooks, not to me.

“Uh...no, if you recall, you *never* gave me the space I wanted. And I understand why. You were only being a good friend.” I put my hand on her shoulder.

She jerked away and turned to face me. “I was wrong. I should’ve listened to you. I should’ve understood. Now I’m asking you—”

“To what? Abandon you when you need me the most?”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Ruby. I really *don’t* need you.” She shut her locker with force. The crash of metal against metal was jarring.

“I get why you’d feel that way right now. But you have to understand that I never meant for you to get hurt.”

“Look, I don’t know what happened or why. I just know I don’t want any part of it. Can you understand *that*?” She hurriedly zipped up her backpack.

“I do. But...you’re my best friend.” I looked down, searching for the words to convince her to forgive and forget. But mostly to forget.

“Consider this my best-friend breakup speech then,” she said, slinging her backpack over her shoulder. I almost laughed. She’d threatened to “break up” with me many times over the years.

“Alana, you’re being silly,” I said, reaching out to her again.

She pulled away and took a few steps backward, shaking her head. “You know, all these years I thought the guns

and the training were just more of your weird...*quirks*. Just a strange way to spite your overbearing mom, or a bizarre way to bond with your *dysfunctional* dad.”

Hey! I thought she loved my dad. He’d taught her to shoot, too!

“Alana, don’t...” I didn’t need to finish that sentence. She knew my dad was out of bounds.

“But now I’m not sure what to think anymore. I’ve always given you the benefit of the doubt. Even when you killed that LeMarq dude and your mom took care of it. But the problem is”—she paused, with a look of sadness that turned to blame—“I know you too well, Ruby Rose. You’ve always been the one

looking for the fight.”

I ground my teeth in a flash of anger. OK, I got it—she was pissed. I almost got her killed and then tried to pretend nothing had happened. But attacking my family? Not cool. What was next? Burning my favorite pair of UGGs?

At the same time, though, she was right about one thing. Alana had known me too well, and for a long time. Of course, she didn't know the details—that I was stalking LeMarq and The Stick—but she knew I was more involved than I was letting on.

I closed my eyes, calling on my problem-solving skills to give me the words I needed to persuade her to freaking relax.

“You’re overreacting, Alana,” I said, opening my eyes to find her walking away. “Would you just wait? We need to talk about this.”

“I’m sorry, Rue,” she said, clearly not sorry at all. “But I’m sure Liam would just love to ‘talk.’ You two can share your secrets.”

“What? Liam?” I looked behind me. Liam was at his locker, trying to pretend he wasn’t listening. He gave me a sheepish smile, and I smiled back weakly.

When I turned back to Alana, she was already disappearing around the corner.

“She’ll come around.” Liam’s gentle voice softened the blow. “As soon as we figure all this out, she’ll understand.”

“There’s that *we* again,” I said, backing up against the locker, still shaken from Alana’s cutting words. “You sure you don’t want out yet? A good night’s sleep didn’t give you more sense?”

He put his hand on the locker next to me and leaned in. “Not after the way you kissed me last night,” he whispered.

The heat blossomed in my cheeks. Surely he wasn’t considering kissing me right here in the hall? That would be highly inappropriate and at the same time freaking amazing.

“Any news on that schmucky Sammy dude?” he asked.

“Ha, no.” I smiled. “He hasn’t returned any of my e-mails or phone

messages. You?”

“Nah, but he’ll call. Don’t worry.” Liam gently touched my face. I really hoped no one was watching me melt right now. “Come on, let’s get something to eat.”

Every day Liam and I ate lunch at school (enduring Alana’s spectrum of looks from disdain to disappointment), and every night we patrolled the Hollywood hotspots looking for Sammy and his missile-sized camera. But the schmuck was good at what he did. He was a ghost—just like Mr. D. S., the even bigger schmuck behind all this madness. And I was the haunted.

I didn’t like being on the defensive all

the time. I had to find a way to regain control of my life. Except I couldn't figure out how.

Until nearly two weeks later on Halloween, when the ghost finally called.

CHAPTER 16

The Pier was crowded for a Friday afternoon in late October. Unseasonably warm weather and the Halloween spirit buzzed in the air.

As I people watched, ghouls and phantoms roamed the beach. Some dude wearing nothing but skate shoes, board shorts, and a Captain Jack Sparrow wig played Bob Marley tunes on his guitar below me. Another kid, wearing one of those white masks from the movie *Scream*, casually rode his beach cruiser down the boardwalk. The souvenir shop

in the middle of the Pier even had a huge grim reaper—shaped kite flapping around in the breeze.

The real ghost—schmucky Sammy—could be anywhere, watching me, taking aim to shoot me from afar. He had a camera lens for all occasions. Sammy had said to come alone, so I made sure I scheduled our little rendezvous for when Liam had a football game an hour away and would be gone all afternoon and night.

Liam and I had been together every other possible minute of the day for two weeks. I tried to act like it wasn't necessary, but he stuck by my side—which may or may not have had something to do with all the kissing. It

seemed like whenever we had the chance, we'd lose ourselves in each other: at the beach, in my room, at the back of the library.

Shaking the images from my mind, I looked down on the beach for distraction. And what do you know—Jell-O-Shot Taylor and her still nameless sidekick lay tanning in their matching hot-pink string bikinis. I felt a larger than usual amount of spite rise up within me. Not only had Taylor most likely taken the upper hand in the valedictorian race, but she was embracing the seemingly carefree life that I'd never have again. She had a friend to hang out with, time to lie in the sun, and a future full of normalcy. If

ending up incredibly successful and somewhat famous on the *Real Housewives of Orange County* is “normal.” Better than ending up on *Cops*, though.

Taylor said something, and her friend’s high-pitched laugh floated on the breeze all the way over to slap me in the face. Alana and I used to be like that—happy, silly, naive. I had no idea what she thought happened that night, or what she’d remembered since, but as far as I knew, she hadn’t told a soul about being drugged, bound, and left for dead on a cliff.

I’d tried to call her. I texted her about twenty-five thousand times, with gentle questions like, “What’s up?” or “Wanna

hang?” or “Need chocolate?” I told myself she just needed more time. She’d been mad at me before and had gotten over it. After all, we were besties. It said so on the chain necklaces we got in junior high.

“Well, well, well, if it’s not the infamous Ruby Rose.” A thick and greasy voice sludged down my ear. Was he talking with his mouth full of food?

I turned to find an equally repulsive visual. Oily face, shiny bald head, and the unshaven jowls of a chipmunk about to hibernate. He took the last bite of the burrito in his hand and threw the yellow wrapper toward the garbage can about ten feet away. He missed.

I looked down at him in disgust—I

mean I literally looked down at him because he was so short.

“Thanks for coming,” I said, swallowing some pride.

“I brought what you asked for,” he said, swallowing down the food and opening his jacket to expose a flat manila envelope tucked into his pants. What did he think this was, some kind of drug deal? The thought of touching that envelope made me want to take a shower in hand sanitizer.

“Can I see them?” I wished he’d just hand them to me.

“Let’s discuss the terms of this deal first.”

“What’s to discuss? You said you’d help me.”

“For a price.” He stared at me like I was an idiot. “You didn’t think this was free, did you?”

“Fine, how much dirty money do you want?” I stared back like *he* was clearly the idiot.

“I’m not talking money.” He looked at all the girls in bikinis and licked his lips.

“If you think I’m gonna...” I trailed off, incapable of even forming words so vile.

“Relax, that’s not what I meant.” He patted his camera. “I meant some exclusives. I get some pictures of you doing *interesting* things, and you get pictures of a black van doing *uninteresting* things. By the way, do you

think this black van has something to do with you blowing LeMarq's brains out?"

"What do you mean *interesting*?" I said through clenched teeth.

"You know—you in a bikini doing Tai Chi, you scantily clad in the arms of your hot new boyfriend," he said through a smile so big the pigeons were likely to crap on it. Then he dropped the smile. "Or a tip the next time a shooting goes down."

I hadn't given this snake enough credit. He saw a pattern and knew it would happen again. Maybe he knew it already had.

I nodded reluctantly. "We can work something out," I said, careful not to agree to anything specific.

He handed me the sweaty envelope, and I quickly took it.

“I knew your dad, you know.” He took off his sunglasses and cleaned them with his dirty shirt. “Long time ago. He was a good guy.”

“How would *you* know *him*?” I asked, seriously confused by how this lowlife could know a legend like my dad.

“He helped me out on a research paper I did in grad school. This was a few years back, before he became Sergeant, before I...got into this.” He put his glasses back over his squinting eyes, like he was suddenly ashamed of himself. “I used to be a real journalist.”

“That’s hard to believe,” I muttered.

“So why’d you join the dark side?”

“Money,” he said flatly. “Grad school ain’t cheap.”

And apparently, it’s ineffective at teaching proper grammar. “What did my dad help you with?” I asked.

“Rooting out some *interesting* cops,” he said with raised eyebrows, like I was supposed to know what that meant.

“OK,” I said, raising my eyebrows in return.

“He made a few enemies back then, but I wasn’t one of them. He scratched my back and I scratched his.” He made another incomprehensible facial gesture. He thought we were speaking in some kind of code and I knew the subtext. But I didn’t.

“They won’t tell me anything,” I burst out, knowing I was changing the subject. “They say my dad died in an ambush, blown up by explosives. But they have no idea who or why. Do you have any more back-scratching buddies left in SWAT?”

He dropped all the wise-guy pretenses. “Sure I do.”

“Anybody say anything about what happened?”

“Sure, sure,” he said. “I still got some buddies in SWAT who talk. Loyal guys. Guys still torn up about it. Yeah, word is someone was causing him problems. A high-ranking special operative—someone with a vendetta. There was a report, an official complaint your dad

filed just weeks before..." He stopped to make the sound of a bomb exploding and illustrated it with his fat little hands. "They didn't tell you this stuff? Not even Mathews, your dad's replacement? I thought the two of you were close."

"A report?" I said in half disbelief, half rage. "No one ever mentioned a report! Certainly not Mathews. What did it say?" Could the "special operative" be Mr. D. S.?

"I'm not sure. I never saw it. This is just what I heard from Mathews, off the record. I'm not supposed to..." Uneasy, he started to look around. Like he felt someone watching us. "Look, that's really all I know."

"Can you find out? Could you ask

Mathews again?" I knew I sounded desperate, but I didn't care.

"That's all I got," he said, nonchalantly running his tongue around the inside of his mouth as if he was checking for lucky leftovers. I had to force myself not to gag.

"I don't want to talk to you any more than you want to talk to me, but please, if you find out anything else, will you let me know?"

Either I'd said something that amused him or he found some beef jerky stuck in an incisor, because his goofy grin made him look far too satisfied.

"I'll tell you one thing, sweetheart," he said, backing away. "Talk to Detective Martinez. He knows more than

you think he does. Waaaaaayyy more.”

Sweetheart? Martinez? This loser knew just how to piss me off.

“Why him?” I started to follow the trail of slime, but he held up his hands like *I’ll touch you with these greasy things if I have to*.

“Remember that corrupt-cop thing your dad and I were working on all those years ago?”

“You can’t mean Martinez? If that was true, he wouldn’t have been promoted to Detective.”

“Let’s just say that Martinez was good at getting in and out of more than just your mom’s panties.” He dropped his chins and grinned. A quick palm thrust would wipe that smug look off his

face. “Not long after your dad found out about the affair, he turned Martinez in to Internal Affairs for some ‘misplaced drug evidence.’ Nothing stuck of course. Jack made the move to SWAT, and Martinez made his way up the ladder all the same. That’s the thing about corruption, it’s hard to know how deep it goes. But make no mistake, Martinez’s hands weren’t clean.”

“But my dad couldn’t prove it?” It was more a statement than a question.

“The thing is, Jack and Martinez were both damn good at their jobs. In some ways, they were a lot alike. Both highly trained, ambitious Marine brothers until the end of time and all that jazz. They were tight. But the *way* they did things

couldn't have been more different. While Jack was all *letter of the law*, Martinez was all *spirit of the law*. Martinez bent the rules, did things his own way, and Jack didn't like it. Jack thought he could change Martinez. That as his partner, it was his duty or some shit...pardon my French. But obviously, that didn't happen.

“While Jack made his way up to Sergeant fairly quickly, Martinez built a reputation as a dirty cop. About a year ago, your pops *allegedly* began suspecting Martinez of suspicious dealings with a few drug rings.” Sammy paused to make a full-circle motion with his chubby hands, then said, “So, when I heard Martinez's name came up in the

personal complaint Jack filed the month before his death, I couldn't help but wonder—”

“Wait,” I said. “My dad filed a report against Martinez one month before he died?” I couldn't believe the vast amount of information I didn't know. It kept falling on top of me like an avalanche.

“No, the report wasn't filed against Martinez. Remember, I said the complaint was against someone else—someone from both of their pasts. Somebody I don't know about, unfortunately. But Martinez was a *witness* to threats against Jack. Apparently it would've taken a lot more than a nearly wrecked marriage and an

almost-destroyed career to break the Marine bond they shared. Water under the bridge.” Sammy stared with skeptical eyes at the water slamming against the Pier’s beams.

I shook my head in astonishment. Was he insinuating that Martinez didn’t hate my dad anymore? That they made up, and he was actually helping my dad, trying to protect him from someone—maybe the same someone who’d been setting me up? Could I believe this dirty little slop of a man? Had I misinterpreted Martinez’s concern all this time? Was he trying to protect me against the same man who murdered my father?

“Look, kid...” Sammy paused and

glanced around nervously. “I gotta go, but don’t forget to call. Remember, I scratch your back, you scratch mine.”

The only thing I wanted to scratch was my skin in case some of his head lice had jumped onto my body.

But he really did know my dad—and in a way I never had.

I was supposed to go see Dr. T at 3:00. First, she pushed the appointment back, which I thought was lucky since that was the time Sammy had wanted to meet. But while I was on my way over to her office, she canceled altogether, saying she wasn’t feeling well. That had happened like two times ever. Snow at the beach was more common. I

wondered if I'd told her too much. If she was distancing herself from me because of what she knew I'd done.

I would've considered it another stroke of luck that the house was empty when I got back, but who was I kidding? My mother was never home.

I pulled the pictures out of the envelope and thought about burning it in the trash can to make sure all Sammy's slime was gone. But that would raise flags I didn't need, so I put it in the kitchen trash compactor and washed my hands four times. Just to be sure.

He had four pictures of the van. Clear, digitally enhanced photos. I pulled open my dad's database again and plugged in the plate number.

One name popped up: D. Silver. I almost couldn't believe my eyes. D. S. now had a last name *and* an address: 4081 Royal Hill Bay, Newport Beach, California—only twenty minutes from here.

Now I wished Liam wasn't away at his game. I shouldn't go—no, I couldn't go—to Newport without him. And yet it would be virtually impossible for me to sit here alone and twiddle my thumbs all night. Surely doing a simple drive-by would be a safe enough activity in my Mary Poppins–equipped Big Black. We could just go check out the address.

I closed out my dad's computer and headed over to his gun safe, putting in the pathetically simple code—911. The

safe door creaked open, and I stared at the racks of weapons like a kid at a candy store. Since my handgun, Smith, had gone into the LeMarq evidence logs, never to be returned, I wanted something similar. Hanging on its hook was my dad's nickel-plated Glock, but I could barely stand to look at it, let alone touch it. Maybe I shouldn't be taking a gun at all.

I'd been somewhat successful at blocking out most of what happened that night at the warehouse. Liam and I had an unspoken agreement not to talk about it. But now, as I stared at the Glock, I couldn't help feeling the darkness of those deaths creep over me again. Why had Silver returned my dad's gun to me?

The only reasonable choice seemed like my mom's Ruger pocket revolver. It was tiny enough to seem like middle ground between a real gun and nothing at all. The only reason we even had it was because my mom once told my dad she wanted a gun small enough to fit in her small Coach purse, and he bought it for her anniversary present. She got so mad that he'd dared offer it in the place of a "real anniversary gift" that she never picked it up. I couldn't tell if it had ever been used. I knew my dad wouldn't have been caught dead with a little thing like this.

And I hoped I wouldn't be, either.

I slid it into my jeans pocket, next to the Challenge Coin I now carried with

me at all times. As I was about to close the safe, the hilt of a knife caught my eye. It was one of those Rambo-type blades, with a leather holder that strapped on to the leg under clothing. I pulled up my jeans, tied it above my boot for good measure, and heaved a big sigh of relief.

I finally had a lead.

CHAPTER 17

I could barely make out the faded address sign on the decaying post at the entrance of the marina. “Bayside Buccaneer Yacht Club” had seen better times. Half of the old-fashioned street lamps were burned out, and half cast a faint Halloween-orange glow that did nothing to illuminate their surroundings. The place was littered with garbage, and the bitter reek of fish seeping through my rolled-up windows made it feel more like a deserted shipyard than a yacht club.

Aside from a few old beater cars lining the street, several abandoned-looking RVs in the parking lot, and a small office near the docks, no other evidence of life existed. This place was totally isolated. Even half of the boat slips were empty.

Could Silver live on one of these eyesores? It seemed unlikely considering his profile. Yet, as I sat safely inside Big Black watching a lonely plastic bag blow down the planked walkway toward the water—which I told myself *didn't* look like a ghost floating in the darkness—it started to make sense. This might be an ideal place for a criminal to hide. Nobody around except for the rotting fish.

The lights in the small office down the walkway flickered, catching my eye, and I toyed with the idea of jogging down there just to verify that D. Silver really did have a registered slip. But it was dark. And Halloween night. And logic told me to wait for Liam.

Except, logic also told me that I was fully capable of walking a hundred yards to ask one stupid question. Especially with the heat I was packing in my pocket. I grabbed my phone and quickly typed a message to Liam, telling him where I was and what I was doing, just in case. But as soon as I pressed "Send," the message came back undelivered with a huge exclamation point indicating no service. Just perfect.

I turned off the engine and reached down to make sure the knife was secure under my boot-cut jeans. Reminding myself of all my dad's training, I turned up all my senses as I walked across the parking lot and onto the creaking wooden causeway. I could do this.

The wicked wind picked up as I drew nearer to the office, and a tattered flag on a pole whipped and snapped at me. I knocked on the glass door of the small shack. Across the room, I saw the top of the guard's unmoving sun-spotted head behind his chair.

I could tell he was watching TV, not only because of the flickering blue light dancing across the ceiling, but because the volume was vibrating the

floorboards beneath me. He was watching the USC versus UCLA football game—it was late in the fourth quarter, all tied up.

I let myself in.

“Excuse me, sir,” I called over the front counter. The guy obviously had no peripheral vision left, because he didn’t budge except to scratch himself in some wish-I-hadn’t-seen-them places.

“Excuse me.” I raised my voice even louder. He took a sip of a dark liquid I was sure wasn’t Coke and adjusted his legs on the chair opposite him. Good gracious, was I going to have to give the guy a coronary just to get his attention?

I walked past the desk and rounded him so he could catch me in his

peripheral vision. Instantly, his eyes bulged open, his legs and his drink went flying, and the old man overturned his folding chair and landed flat on his back.

“What the...!” he screamed. “Who the P-P-Pete are you?” he stuttered from the floor.

“I knocked,” I said while helping him up. “I’m really sorry—I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

“What you d-d-doin’ here, girlie? Making me miss my damn game!” he barked. “We ain’t doin’ no trick-or-treatin’ round here!”

“I’m not here to trick-or-treat. If I could just get some information, I’ll be out of your hair.” Oops, he only had like five hairs left.

“Fine,” he groaned, holding his back as he went over to the desk, motioning for me to evacuate his personal space. “What you want?”

“Could you please tell me where Mr. D. Silver’s boat is docked?” I asked politely.

He blew out a stale-smelling breath and started poking at the computer keyboard with one finger. “What’s the first name, girlie?”

“I don’t know. Everyone calls him D. Silver,” I said casually, not wanting to raise any red flags. Legally, he shouldn’t be offering any information, but something told me this guy wasn’t exactly a stickler for the rules.

“If it will get you out of here

sooner..." he muttered, pushing up his sagging bifocals and leaning in to the monitor. "B-16. That's down the left side here—"

"Really?" I asked, craning my neck to sneak a glance at the monitor. "Do you know him?"

"Know who?" The old man tilted the screen away from me. So it was OK to tell me the info but not to let me see it?

"D. Silver," I said pointing at the screen. "Have you seen him around? Do you know what he looks like?"

"What's this about?" He took off his skinny reading glasses hanging for dear life off the end of his nose and gave me a see-here-young-lady look. I could tell he was gearing up to run me off when a

staticky voice came to life from the ground. An ancient walkie-talkie.

“So B-16 is empty, then?” I asked as I backed out of the office, glancing out the window in the direction of the slip.

“I didn’t say that.” He bent over to pick up the walkie-talkie off the floor. “But ain’t nobody out there tonight, rest assured.”

“Thanks,” I said, almost out the door already. “Sorry about the fright.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he mumbled as I left.

I turned left and made my way down to the B dock. I was operating on instinct now, not fear and certainly not logic. The guard said no one was out here tonight, so if I went and had a peek

around the boat, it might pay off. And if he was wrong and I found any signs of life—lights, noise, or movement on the boat—I'd leave and come back later with backup. Lots of backup.

The wind was getting stronger, pushing me backward, but I was almost to the B dock when I heard a shriek.

A man's.

My feet—and my heart—stopped.

“Help, help...I'm drowning...please help!” The voice and the splashing water weren't far away, but I couldn't see where in the darkness.

I pulled the gun from my pocket and made sure it was cocked and ready.

Damn it. This wasn't good. I shouldn't have ever gotten out of Big

Black. Or more to the point, I shouldn't have ever gotten *in* Big Black tonight. This was a setup. But how? How could he have known I'd come tonight? Was he watching Sammy?

"I can't...stay up...please!" The voice cut through my thoughts.

I grabbed my cell out of The Cleave. I had a choice to make:

A. Call 911 and go back to the security office, hoping the drunk and feeble old man could move fast enough to help me save whoever was out there;

B. Call 911, go back to Big Black and leave, knowing the police would trace my number and I'd have to explain myself;

C. Call 911 and go save the man

myself; or

D. Don't call 911 at all, because I just remembered I have no effin' service! I held up my phone to the night, willing the phone gods to send me some little bars of mobile coverage. Curse words I'd never used before came flowing out of my mouth.

What choice did I have at this point but to get out of there, and fast—before it was too late? But if this was Silver's work, I already knew he wasn't afraid of putting innocent lives at risk. And what if the person in the water was someone I knew?

I took off toward the cries. Sprinting down the narrow, uneven dock, I nearly fell over some loose ropes. The poor

lighting and slipshod care of the dock were dangerous.

In the moonless night, I couldn't get my bearings. I couldn't see anything in the water, and the sounds were echoing off the boats in every direction.

Until the light.

Like a spotlight centered just for me, a bright beam shone directly on the side of the old rickety houseboat at Slip B-16.

Its name, *Ruby Belle*, was painted on the side of the boat.

Time seemed to stand still. Information overload started falling into designated Tetris-like slots: The boat was named after me. It was docked at Silver's slip. And someone was in the

water next to it, calling out for help.

He'd done it again. He wanted to toy with me. And I'd been stupid, impatient, and impetuous enough to walk right into his trap.

"Help," the voice called again. Whose voice was it? Whose life would I have to save, and whose would I have to take?

I jumped onto the boat—a motorboat with a small cabin—and raised my gun to prevent a surprise attack. The deck floor was wet and slippery as I found the bait in the waters beyond the front hull—the human bait meant for me. My eyes adjusted to find another familiar face, another monster fighting for his life.

Father Michael McMullin. Number

three on my Filthy Five list, of course. Without his thick-rimmed 1970s glasses, I almost didn't recognize the pedophile priest my mom had prosecuted and failed to convict. Still wearing the white collar of God. But now, tied up in the silver chains of Mr. D. Silver. The thin chains tightly wrapped around his neck didn't look heavy enough to drown him, but the ties binding his wrists together weren't helping.

“Help!” he cried. “I can't swim.”

Considering what he'd done to all those children, he deserved to drown. The chain around his neck couldn't have been more appropriate—several of his victims had been tied up with rosary beads.

As I watched this grown man (who'd never learned the basic skill of treading water but had most definitely mastered the skill of ruining lives) struggle for air, I couldn't help but marvel at how Silver had outdone himself. If I didn't save Father Michael, technically it would be me who killed him. I wouldn't have pulled a trigger, but he would be dead at the bottom of the ocean just the same.

But I wasn't a killer like Silver—or like Father Michael.

“Help!” he called again, more desperate now.

I scanned the deck for a flotation device, rummaged through the sparse galley, and even scoured the two other boats docked nearby. Everything had

been removed, as though pirates had pillaged the place. Of course I knew there was only one pirate behind this sick trap.

I hurried back to *Ruby Belle*'s bow and found the only thing that might save Father Michael—a short mariner's rope with hooks at each end. I threw one end out into the water for him to grab, but it wasn't close enough to him to see in the dark night. Not that he was even looking for it. He was probably so blind without his glasses that I'd have to hit him over the head with it.

I reeled the rope back in and yelled, "I'm throwing you a rope. Grab it!"

He was too out of his mind, flailing about for air.

My choices became abundantly clear. Let him die—saving countless souls, and the justice system hundreds of thousands of dollars. Or attach the rope to the boat, jump in to attach the other end to his body, and pull both of us back into the boat—risking not only my life, but others' lives in the future.

I put the gun and my cell phone down along with my boots and jacket, hooked the rope to a rod at the tip of the stern, and jumped in. The cold Pacific water shocked my system like an abrasive alarm screaming, "This is a mistake!" My clothes suctioned to me, strangling me like a thousand sheets of icy blankets. Each stroke I took felt like a bad dream where my muscles wouldn't

respond to my brain's commands.

As soon as I got to him, I hooked the rope onto the chains around his neck (knowing it wouldn't feel awesome to be strangled as I dragged him) and tried to pull us back in, but his flailing legs made it impossible to even move in the right direction.

I swam around to face him, hoping that when he got a good look at me—even without his bifocals on—he'd calm down. But instead, his eyes bulged and he started screaming. "No, no! Not you."

"Relax, I'm trying...to...save you!" I screamed, choking on seawater. What the hell was he so scared of? A skinny little teenager trying to save his life? Had Silver warned him that I would hurt

him? “I’m going to cut you loose...so you can grab the rope.”

But he couldn’t hear me. He was too busy repeating Hail Marys between gasps for air. I took a huge breath and dipped under the water, away from his splashing blows, to try to get at the knife strapped to my leg. With frozen fingers, suffocating clothes, and collapsing lungs, I almost thought I wasn’t going to be able to do it.

Just as I thought I was doomed, I let go of the rope, gave my pant leg a tug with both hands, and slipped the blade out of its sheath. Air had never tasted so good.

Clenching the knife in one hand and taking the plastic tie binding his wrists

in the other, I sliced and his hands were free—with or without cutting some of his skin. I neither knew nor cared.

But as soon as he realized I'd freed him, he didn't try to swim. He grabbed my head and tried to use my body to stay above water. The moron didn't understand that he was connected to the boat now, and all he needed to do was grab hold of the new line and pull himself in.

I gasped for air and tried to tell him, but he was past listening, past feeling, past reason. I tried to fight the sting of the ice water burning my lungs with the adrenaline kicking in to save me. I was drowning, I couldn't break free of him, and I couldn't fight—he was too strong,

and my reflexes were too weak from the numbing cold. Time and again my head went under the pitch-black water, disorienting me, freezing me, threatening to choke me. I knew I only had one choice left.

I gripped my knife and gave him a warning stab in his arm—only meaning to hurt him enough to get free of his grasp. Instead of the cut weakening him, it enraged him even more. He was like a shark incensed at the smell of blood—thrashing and clawing at me with more force than I could handle. He grabbed me by the neck and tried to choke the remaining air out of me. My mind went fuzzy.

I fought back—for precious oxygen,

for life—but instead, I inhaled two mouthfuls of foul salt water mixed with blood. I was going to die, right here, at the hands of Father Michael.

No. I would not be another one of this man's victims. My dad didn't train me to survive only to have this pathetic sadist drown me.

I renewed my grip on the knife and slashed once as hard as I could, until I felt the blade slide through tissue and hit bone. He went limp.

Oh, crap. Where had I stabbed him that made him give up so fast? I'd only wanted to make him let go of me. But in my choking, frozen, and blinded state, I hadn't had the senses for precision.

I released the weapon, too weak to

even pull it out, and swam as far away from him as I could. It wasn't until my fingers felt the slippery wooden ladder that I even turned back. But by then, he was already underwater.

Chances were he was dead, but I had to at least keep trying to save him. My soul couldn't take any more deaths.

I scaled the ladder, shaking in the night wind. I charged to the stern and grabbed the rope, pulling with everything I had left. I heaved until my arms felt like they would come right out of their sockets, with no progress. He was too heavy. Maybe even stuck on something below. If he hadn't been killed by the knife wound, he had to be dead now after several minutes

underwater.

I let go of the rope, falling to the floor of the boat, and sunk my head between my knees.

How much more of this could I take? I tried to breathe, but my lungs were burning and I could only gasp in agony. My hands shook with the bitter cold.

What was I supposed to do now? Call the cops and tell them I'd killed yet another man? Watch them pull the priest's body up with my knife sticking out of his chest? My stomach clenched in disgust.

Try to explain (again) that it really wasn't my fault? How would I even justify my presence here—or his?

The whole truth would need to come

out, only to be twisted and used against me. Used to destroy me, my mother, my dad's good name. My heart stung with rage.

I let out a wild cry, banging my fists on the boat's wet floor and letting the tears fall.

I hated myself, I hated Silver, and I hated what he'd made me.

He was Dr. Frankenstein, and I was his monster—forever tainted by the shedding of so much blood.

My tears mixed with the salt water still dripping from my sodden hair. I shook with anger—in near hypothermia, and in horror. Alana was right. I was always the one looking for the fight. I'd chosen to follow these men that I'd

killed. I'd chosen to put myself in a place I shouldn't be, carrying weapons I shouldn't have.

Yes, part of me had wanted the priest dead, but not at my own hands. Yes, he had deserved to die by injection or old age in his lonely prison cell, but not by stabbing. Yes, he would never hurt another soul again, but what about me? I still had a soul. Perhaps a dark one—but it was a soul nonetheless.

I had to pull myself together and report this one. The four bodies at the warehouse were different. I had no idea where the damn warehouse even was. I would have looked like a lunatic.

But *this* body was right in front of me, dangling at the end of a hook like chum

in the water. Silver may have made me into an executioner, but I wouldn't let him take away my integrity. I wouldn't leave Father Michael's body here for a poor old fisherman to find.

Plus, I still believed in the justice system, and believed that I would receive a fair trial. Despite the mess of everything, I could rely on a jury of my peers. Well, maybe. As long as my mom employed a high-powered defense team (using up all my dad's life insurance money meant for my college education); as long as I portrayed myself as sympathetic (which I had no idea how to do); as long as no juror had a secret hatred for any member of my family (not likely, since the polls showed that at

least 25 percent of Orange County strongly disapproved of my mother's tenure as D. A.); and as long as the press stopped calling me a Teen Vigilante (they'd probably come up with something worse).

OK, so maybe I didn't believe the justice system always worked. But I still needed to call 911. I forced my boots back on and pulled my jacket over me for warmth.

As I stood, a new light caught my eye—there was a car up on the street. No, a van.

A black van—pulling into a parking spot. It stopped in mid-turn as the beams of light landed on me like I was the star performer in his sick show. I couldn't

see him, but he could most certainly see me.

I grabbed my gun and phone and sprinted up the rickety dock to the street. When the van's tires squealed and it roared away, I changed course to get back to Big Black.

My nerves and icy fingers had me shaking so badly that I could barely get Big Black's door open. Silver was getting away. Finally, I was in and I screeched out onto the street. I knew the general direction he was going: south. If I could get close enough, I could shoot out his tires and stop him.

I pushed the engine down the empty street until it opened up into a busier area. I barely blinked, waiting and

watching for something to show me where the van had gone. Suddenly, about two stoplights away, I saw a black vehicle turn left and disappear behind a building. I blew through two yellow lights and turned in after it down a narrow street, which became a claustrophobically thin alley with nowhere to hide. It seemed like I was on the butt-end of a strip mall, where workers came to throw out the trash and sit on milk crates to smoke. Except no one was around—and probably hadn't been for a while.

Big Black's headlights finally lit up the gate at the end of the alley. The sign on it said: "Dead End."

He must have somehow gotten through

this gate and relocked it. I flashed Big Black's brights on the sliding gate. Either I was delirious or that heavyweight padlock was still swinging.

I thought about doubling back and finding out where the end of the alleyway led, but that was ridiculous. Silver was long gone. A thousand steps ahead of me—a million miles away. He'd outsmarted me again and lured me away from the crime scene. I could just see myself on the witness stand trying to convince everyone that I wasn't the stupidest girl in the world. Not that my defense team would ever let me testify.

I had to go back to the marina and use the Security Guard of the Year's phone to call it all in.

“S-s-say what?” the guard stammered as he slammed down his remote control. What was he so irritated about? His stupid, inconsequential, non-life-threatening football game was over.

“I said, can I please use your phone? There’s been a terrible accident.” I looked a mess—soaked and matted hair, smudged eye makeup I couldn’t wipe off, still-sopping clothes, and my poor, innocent, formerly light-brown Diesel ankle boots crusted with salt water and debris.

“What kind of accident?” he asked, grabbing his walkie-talkie.

“A man drowned out there,” I said, trying to sound calm. “I tried to save

him, but he was tied up. I need to call the police right away. Please, where's your phone?"

"Hold on there a minute," he said with his hand up, suddenly alarmed. "What man? Where?"

"We don't have time for this." I didn't want to explain anything to this guy. He was drunk, and my words could be twisted. "Can we just call the police?"

"Look here, young lady," he said. "There ain't no phone around here. This here radio's all I got. Budget cuts. So you'd better tell me the location so I can report it."

"Fine," I said. "B-16."

He started jabbering into his walkie-talkie, waving me to follow him to the

dock and describing me to whoever was on the other end as a juvenile delinquent and possible meth head. Through the static noise and unintelligible war codes they were using, I presumed the police had been notified. The guard was surprisingly sprightly and nimble through the darkness, and we were back to the *Ruby Belle* in no time. Maybe he would have been able to help me save Father Michael after all.

“Where?” he demanded.

“Right there,” I said, pointing to the rope leading over the stern of the boat.

He climbed aboard, and I followed him up to the edge of no return. We stood there looking down into the dark water. In just a few moments, he would

pull on the rope and make the most ghastly discovery of his life. Inch by inch, he pulled at the dead weight. The rope made a sickening grinding noise against the metal of the boat. Either this guy was shockingly strong or Father Michael had already lost most of his blood and limbs to the bottom feeders.

Finally, the end of the rope came into sight. My knees buckled, and my lungs locked up.

Where was the body?

CHAPTER 18

I stared at the rope, incapable of forming a logical thought. All that was left of Father Michael was his shirt.

“Better call off the fuzz, Jimmy. We got a false alarm here,” the crotchety old guard complained into the radio, staring at me with what looked like a mixture of sympathy and disgust. “Just a dumb Halloween prank.”

A prank? That’s what he thought this was?

“Somebody put an old shirt in the water.” He held the shirt in the air to

demonstrate what a stupid blonde I was.
“Girlie, you need some new friends.”

My legs felt like overcooked spaghetti noodles. My brain was telling me to sprint out of this haunted harbor, but I couldn't make my feet move. I felt trapped, watched, manipulated. So much for standardized testing and its assessment of my “elite” intelligence—I was an elite idiot to have come here without Liam. His presence might have prevented this. Or at a minimum, he'd be here holding me now.

“Are you OK?” the guard asked.

“Of course,” I lied.

“You're trembling. Are you cold or somethin'?”

“Yeah, cold,” I said.

“Well, c’mon back to the hut with me and I’ll fetch you a blanket.”

“No, I’m fine,” I said, because I still couldn’t move. But I suddenly noticed the stink of bleach.

Somehow, Silver had managed to come back and destroy all the evidence that Father Michael had ever been here. But that was impossible. How would Silver have had enough time?

“What did you say you were doing out here?” the guard asked, staring at me.

“I didn’t say,” I responded flatly. And I walked away.

As I drove, I kept shoving all the harbor images out of my mind. I tried to think about Liam instead.

The closer I got to home, the heavier my guilt became. I should've called 911 and reported what I'd done. Yet, how could I do that with no body? Not even a shred of evidence that anything at all had occurred? Only a discarded wet shirt. Just like with the warehouse killings, I had nothing to back up my story.

I had to get home, to get warm. Maybe then my brain would start working. My ice block of a foot lay heavy on the gas.

I peeled onto my street, anxious to escape the darkness of the worst Halloween night of my life. Luckily, my neighborhood was too snooty to participate in trick-or-treating, so I didn't have to worry about running over any little witches or wizards. But Big

Black—and my heart—skidded to a halt when I neared my house and a dark shadow materialized next to a parked vehicle outside the gate, exactly where the paparazzi usually lined up. Except, the car wasn't Sammy's old Pinto.

No, it was Liam Slater's red canvas-topped Jeep.

I jumped out of Big Black without even bothering to shut the door behind me. Running to Liam, I buried my face in his chest and let his arms encase me. I breathed him in and instantly felt safer.

After a second, he pulled away from me—probably because he'd realized my hair and clothes were wet, not to mention I smelled like blood and fish guts. With his hands on my arms, he

scanned my disheveled state with eyes as dark as the night.

“Oh, Ruby,” he said. “What did you do?”

I told Liam the whole sordid story, and he just sat there in my bucket seat, staring down the radio dials like they'd done something horrible to him. Or maybe it was the heater vents. Oops, he was probably sweating in the hot car. I was still cold from being in the dirtiest part of the Pacific Ocean. I turned down the heater, and my seat warmer up. Damn, I wanted out of this car and into a hot shower, but Liam deserved to know what had happened.

I wondered when Liam was going to

yell at me. Ask questions. Storm off to the police station. Or any other rational response.

“Liam, I’m really sorry I didn’t wait for you. I was impatient and cocky, and maybe in the back of my mind I felt like you didn’t deserve to be dragged any further into this mess.” I slammed my head back onto the headrest. “I win the contest for Most Screwed-Up Girl and Idiot of the Year.”

I flinched as his fist connected with the dash. Out of all the reactions I could’ve foreseen, that wasn’t one of them.

I gripped my armrest, unsure of what he might do next. I’d never seen this side of him. He was furious.

“Yeah, Ruby, maybe I’m a little pissed that you went to see Sammy without me. And maybe I think you’re absolutely crazy for hunting down this guy alone. But what I’m the most upset about is the danger this dick, Silver, is putting you in. You could have died!” he raised his voice like I wouldn’t get the message at a normal volume.

“Relax, Liam.” I slid my hand halfway over the console between us. “I didn’t die. I’m right here.”

He saw my gesture (which was no little thing for me) and was quiet for a few moments. Taking a deep breath, he grabbed my hand and squeezed it in both of his. “Ruby, this guy is smart and patient. He knew you would go to the

boat dock. He had it all planned out. He made it so that either you had to watch the priest die or risk yourself to save him. He obviously told the priest that you were dangerous to ensure the priest would fight back and you'd have to kill him in self-defense. Then he lured you away so he—or his accomplice—could go back and take the body and leave the priest's shirt, knowing you'd call the cops. He's not trying to get you caught. It's almost like he's trying to protect you." As he said it, some of the puzzle pieces started shuffling around in my mind, but they weren't fitting neatly into place.

I pulled my hands away and slumped back in my seat, massaging my sore

head. "If that's true, then he has split personalities or something. First, he puts me in these dangerous situations, forcing me to kill, and then he defends me and cleans up to make sure I could never be prosecuted. The dude gave me back my dad's engraved handgun! Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, but no matter what, it's like he's ten steps ahead of us." Liam paused and pursed his lips. "I know you don't like it, but I think it's time to go to the police, Ruby. Maybe Sammy was right and Detective Martinez would back us up if he knew what was going on with your dad."

"No." I stared at him. "No, no, and no."

“Things are getting out of control—”

“Things have long been out of control, Liam. I have killed, or been responsible for...” I stopped to count with my fingers. “Seven deaths now. Seven!”

“That’s not true,” he argued.

“LeMarq, the girl I didn’t save, The Stick and his friend, the two other gangsters...or whoever they were...and now Father Michael. How would I ever be able to explain that?”

He blew out a breath, and clenched his hair in his fists.

“You aren’t responsible for any of those deaths. *He* is,” Liam said. Who was he trying to persuade? Himself?

“*He* didn’t make me carry that knife. *He* didn’t force me to pull any triggers,”

I said, playing prosecutor. “*I* put myself in those positions. *I* am the one with motive, intent, and—worst of all—very little remorse for the *victims*.”

“Ruby, *he* put you in impossible situations. And in every single case, you did the right thing. Every one of them deserved to die, except for the girl. But now the right thing is to tell the authorities. Maybe the FBI or CIA can help.” He reached for me again, but I didn’t want his touch. I put up my signature warning hand.

“Yeah, so they can *help* destroy my family and escort the both of us to prison for the rest of our lives,” I said, my voice rising an octave. “No matter who we go to, it all trickles back down to the

detective assigned to my case—Martinez. And if Sammy was wrong about Martinez, he'll take you down with me. Because, as you recall, you were present for some of this.”

“Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it all my life. Believe me, I can handle whatever the police throw at me,” he said with a weird smirk.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. I glanced over at his disfigured ear.

“Never mind. I didn’t mean that literally,” he said, shaking his head—a move I now knew he did to make sure his hair covered his scar. “I just meant that we have no choice but to trust the

system—”

“What happened to you?” I cut him off. He knew my secrets. It was time for me to know some of his.

He glared at me with *how dare you* eyes, but I held his gaze like we were having a blinking contest. “Liam, c’mon, you know I won’t say a word—”

“I have a record, OK? A juvenile record, that is. It’s sealed, and supposed to be expunged or erased, or whatever, when I turn eighteen next year. But it exists. And somehow Martinez knows about it. That’s what he was talking to me about that night he came to your door. He warned me to stay out of this, and away from you, or else he’d make sure my record got longer.”

“What?” I lost the blinking contest.
“Back up. What did you do?”

“It was a long time ago, Ruby. I’ve never told anyone about it.”

“Are you freaking kidding me? Whatever you did can’t compare to what you’ve witnessed me do,” I said, irritated that he was holding back when things were so lopsided in the bad-deeds department.

“I nearly killed my father,” he said point-blank, staring at his hands as if they might still have blood on them.

“Because he did that to you?” Not only did I ask the question we’d been avoiding for weeks, but I actually reached over and touched his ear. At first he flinched away, but then he hung

his head and let me move his hair aside to run my fingertips along the disfigured skin. I could feel him cringing as I prodded his head to the side to allow the blue light of my console to shine on the scarring. My heart ached for Liam's embarrassment, and it burned for the father that had done this to him.

“Well, yeah, I reacted to defend myself from him, but really to protect my mom and brothers.” Before he looked away, I saw that his eyes were now full of sorrow and rage. “He used to abuse her right in front of us, our whole lives. He'd come home wasted, knock her around, call her every name in the book, accuse her of things—and if my brothers or I got in the way, we got it, too.”

“You have brothers?” I asked, wondering how I didn’t know this.

“Christian is twelve, and Tug is only eight.”

“Tug? That’s his name?”

“Well, his real name is Tomas, but my mom always says ‘If you’re not careful, he’ll tug your heart right out,’ ” Liam said, smiling painfully and looking out into the night. “Not to mention your arms if you don’t take him surfing when he wants.”

“Good to know,” I said, hoping I’d get the chance to meet them someday.

“Anyway, one night, when I was thirteen, I just couldn’t take it anymore. He came home from work late, drunk and out of his mind. He was angry

about...everything. He went after my mom. Slapping her, pushing her, accusing her of having affairs when everyone knew—well, I knew because I was the oldest—that he was the one sleeping around. He threw Christian across the room for getting in the way and was about to go after Tug for crying when I snapped. He got me in the ear with a broken beer bottle, but I...” He closed his eyes as if talking about it made him relive it.

I put my hands on his cheeks and made him look at me. It was my turn to comfort him. “It’s OK—if there’s anybody in this world who’d understand, it’s me.”

“I would have done anything to

protect my mom and brothers, even if it meant killing him.” Liam swallowed hard, like he regretted letting his dad live. I finally understood why he liked me—I was just as damaged as he was, if not more.

He was big and strong and gorgeous, but broken. Cracked inside—just like me. We both put on our best show, but underneath we couldn’t stop the suffering for those we’d lost and what we’d done.

“Where is he?” I asked, wondering if I needed to go kick his ass right this second.

“He still lives up in NorCal. I haven’t seen him since the trial.”

“Trial? He pressed charges on you?”

I gasped and placed my hands over his balled-up fists.

“Yeah, and they stuck. They said I should’ve spoken up about the abuse—*if* it really happened.” He squeezed my hand. “They didn’t believe me after the fact.”

“What? Didn’t your mom and brothers testify to back you up? Surely they had bruises or other physical evidence to corroborate your side of the story.”

“Things got complicated, Ruby.” He shook his head and pulled his hands away from mine. “My dad was smart. He rarely left evidence of his abuse. Even that night, I was the only one hurt. Christian had carpet burns and my mom had red marks, but as usual, the real

damage was on the inside.” Liam cracked his window and took a breath of fresh air. “Plus, my dad has a lot of money and he hired an attorney to file a petition to terminate *her* parental rights, arguing that my mom had poisoned me against him. That she actually brainwashed me into trying to kill him for the money. My brothers were little, and I couldn’t bear to see them being put through all that. And, we didn’t have any money to fight him. He agreed to drop the petition and let her have custody of us if I copped to the assault charge. So I did. He kept his good name along with his multimillion-dollar business, and I took the blame.”

I grimaced at the reality of the

situation.

I had been taught—ingrained with the belief, really—that the justice system worked. That the police investigate the crimes, the D. A.’s office prosecutes them, and the Constitution protects it all. Sure, there were glitches, but overall it was the best system in the world. And I preached this at my high school Constitution Society meetings. True, I only founded the stupid club to pad my resume, but I still believed it.

Until now.

Now, I didn’t know what to believe if abusers like Liam’s father and murderers like Father Michael could get away with so many premeditated crimes, with *malice aforethought* and *intent to do*

harm. Liam had none of that, I had none of that, but we could go down in flames.

“If I’d reported the abuse earlier, documented it, documented some evidence against my father before it all blew up? Maybe he’d be the one with the record and not me.”

“You were just a kid, Liam,” I argued. “How could *you* have documented evidence against him? That makes no sense.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense, Ruby,” he said, shaking his head. “After the fact, it was our word against his. And his word meant a whole lot more than ours. He was a well-respected businessman who donated regularly to the campaigns of anyone who mattered

in the City of Santa Cruz. The police couldn't help me even *if* they believed me."

"I get it, Liam. I know how much it matters to have connections. I've obviously been on the receiving side of that crooked line lately, and I have the same problem you did! I don't have any evidence. Silver has made damn sure of that," I said, burned out. Tired of being cold, sick of thinking, and weary of being me.

"I know," Liam said softly. "I know."

We sat in silence for a few minutes, staring into the dark night. There were no easy answers, and we had almost no one to trust.

"I just need some time." I interrupted

the silence. “I promise, I’ll think about it.”

“In the meantime, is it OK if I come up?” he asked.

“Up where? To my room?” I said, surprised.

“I don’t want to leave you alone,” he said. “Your mom isn’t home yet.”

I looked at the clock. 11:02. “Yeah, I’m not surprised. She’s probably having ‘campaign drinks’ downtown.”

“So...yes?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

“Uh, I guess,” I said, sure about wanting him near, but unsure about what a yes actually meant. “You might want to park your Jeep around the corner, though, so Jane doesn’t immediately call

in the cavalry.”

“Cool, because there’s something I want to show you,” he said with a wicked gleam in his eye that my virgin brain couldn’t interpret. Suddenly he was moving his whole body in my direction, and all the frozen blood in my body turned hot. Until I realized he was just leaning over to press the gate-opener button clipped to my sun visor. “I’ll meet you inside,” he said, his lips so close that his breath mingled with mine. “Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER 19

When I finally emerged from the shower, my skin burned bright red. I wiped some of the steam off the mirror and stared at my pitiful reflection, counting up the reasons why I resembled a Hot Tamales candy.

It could've been the scalding water I'd used to warm the icy marrow in my bones.

Or the vigorous scrubbing with my loofah to remove the evidence of ever having touched Father Michael.

Or the anger I felt toward Silver for

turning me into something I hated.

Or the intermittent impure thoughts I had about Liam alone in my room.

I cracked the window to let the ocean breeze turn me back to a normal color before I got dressed and went out.

I opened the door to find only a bedside lamp was turned on. I'd forgotten for a second that I told Liam not to turn on any more lights in case my mom came home. This way she'd think I'd fallen asleep already.

As I let my eyes adjust to the low light, I discovered Liam totally relaxed (and fully clothed) on my bed. Disappointment (that he had no physical expectations) and relief (that he had no physical expectations) duked it out for

control of my emotions. Then a third reaction won out—surprise—when I saw what he had in his hand. A photo. Of a man. With a well-groomed beard that could only be...

“Is that a picture of Silver?” I asked, racing to the bed to snatch it from Liam’s fingers. “How in the—”

“You’re not the only one with high SAT scores,” he said, pulling the picture out of my reach.

“Really? I thought you got on the honor roll by batting your girl lashes at teachers,” I teased back, grabbing the picture.

“Hey, I don’t have girl lashes!” He pretended to be offended. “And I’ll have you know, I study very hard to get my

grades. Not all of us are naturally brilliant like you.”

“Whatever.” I smiled without looking back at him, staring at the photo.

It wasn't great. In fact, it was terrible. But it was something. Silver looked just like Liam described. Handsome, in that “look at my sexily groomed beard” kind of way. Well built. Well dressed. No more than forty years old, if that. What would a guy like this want with me? He looked too normal. This had to be the man that I'd seen across the crowded cafeteria as I was about to faint, and through my blurred vision I made a facial hair miscalculation, projecting my fear of Martinez onto someone else.

“Seriously, how did you get this?” I

asked, not taking my eyes off the picture.

“You know Mrs. Peabody in the front office?” he asked. I nodded. “This morning, when I was supposed to be in second period, I took her some donuts. When she went to the break room to get her coffee, I took a peek at the security footage. It’s all digital, so I typed in the date, zoomed in on the clearest image, and printed this sucker out. It was easy.”

I finally looked up at him. Genius. Why hadn’t I thought of that? And why did I keep underestimating, distrusting, and generally misjudging him? I could have reached over and kissed him in gratitude, but instead I said, “This is amazing. Thank you.”

Our eyes lingered on each other’s,

until I had to look away, blushing. His neon sign was back on, and mine had blinking red lights. And in this situation the red lights didn't mean STOP.

I wondered if he felt the same. If he could forget all the awfulness of the evening. After all, we didn't need to go all the way. We could just—

“So now that we have proof of what he looks like, it should be enough for the police to ID him, right?”

OK. Not what I was expecting.

“What's wrong?” he asked. “Isn't this good news? This could help clear you. It shows that the guy is following you. He's somewhere he's not supposed to be.” He reached toward me, not to touch me or comfort me but to take back the

picture. “If we show this to the police, they have that face-identification technology—”

“I told you, Liam,” I said, standing up. “I can’t go to the police with this. Not yet. Just having a picture of some dude doesn’t prove anything. How do we connect him to any of the abductions or killings? How do I prove he made me do anything?”

“Hang on,” he said. “Just a few minutes ago, you were ready to plant one on me for getting this picture.”

“I think it’s time for you to go.” I crossed my arms, ready to close the doors on the vault. I knew I was being ridiculous, but exhaustion, shame, and confusion were drowning me just like

Father M—

“Look, I’m not going to do anything you don’t want me to do. I promise.” He held up his hands and moved toward me slowly, like he knew what I was capable of. “I’m just trying to help you.”

I bit my lip, unsure of whether I should believe him. I couldn’t even trust myself. Just moments ago I was ready to kiss him, and now I could just as easily knee him in the jewels if he said the wrong thing.

I dropped my head and ran my fingers through my damp hair. “I’m sorry. I just don’t know how to feel anymore. I don’t know who to trust or where to turn. I should probably just run away to Mexico where no one can find me, and then I

wouldn't have to kill anymore or go to prison."

"OK, let's go," he said, smiling and moving in closer again. "Let's just get some sleep before we make a run for the border, all right? You've had a busy day."

It was true. It had been one freakishly long day, and I didn't want to spend any more energy or emotion recounting it. I was ready to collapse.

"Come and lie down." He took me by the waist and guided me back to the bed. Part of me wanted to steel myself against his charm, but there was no denying the larger part of me wanted to give in to him. I wanted to believe him that he wouldn't do anything to hurt me. He

wouldn't do anything stupid behind my back, like talk to the police. Whether I was willing to admit it or not, the vault had been unlocked. I'd let him in completely somewhere along the way.

I was falling—*out* of control, *into* bed, and *for* Liam Slater. Falling hard.

I slid under the covers and felt him slide in right behind me. Within moments I was drifting. Not just into sleep, but closer to another human being than I'd ever been before. He pulled me tight to his chest, and I melted into him. Every part of him entwined with every part of me, like I didn't know where he started and I ended. My head rested on his arm, and our breathing slowed to match one another's. I'd never experienced

anything like it. His hot breath near my ear sent prickles up my neck.

I lay there, waiting to feel his lips against my skin, or his free hand on my thigh. I wanted it. But apparently not as much as my body and mind wanted sleep.

The last thing I remember was his arm reaching over me to turn the lamp off, and the feel of his body against mine. I didn't even care if my mom came home to find him in my bed. What was she going to do? Kill me? She could get in line.

In the morning, Liam was gone, but his scent wasn't. I breathed in my pillow, the smell of his cologne and shampoo

reminding me of his warm skin and soft hair. I longed to feel him again, to be held by him. So much for my aversion to touch.

I wondered when he'd left. It was Saturday, so he probably had early-morning practice or something. I hadn't even asked if he'd won his game last night. It didn't seem like it mattered at the time, but now my omission just felt rude.

My stomach rumbled. It had been nearly a day since I'd eaten anything. I rolled out of bed and went to the kitchen. The smell of coffee not only alerted me to my mom's presence but also spiked my awareness of a possible confrontation with her. I almost went

back up to my room to search for a granola bar in my backpack when I heard her voice.

“Is that you, Rue-girl?”

I gulped and shuffled into the bright light of the kitchen. I felt like I needed sunglasses just to enter this side of the house. Maybe I had some kind of hangover from last night’s horror.

“Hey, sunshine,” she said.

“Hey, Mom.” I went straight to the fridge without looking at her. As I searched for the quickest and easiest nourishment, I watched her out of the corner of my eye. She put down the paper and watched my every move. Why was she just staring at me without her normal assault of judgment or cross-

questioning? She knew something.

“Good night’s sleep?” she asked.

“Uh-huh,” I said, grabbing the orange juice.

“Not too tired this morning?” she prodded.

“Nope.” I filled up a glass and sipped the juice while studying the fruit bowl for something I could grab and get out of there with. But damn it, the bananas were too ripe and the oranges looked a day or two past edible.

I turned to the cabinet to snatch some bread instead while Mom continued staring. Had she seen Liam in my room—or had she seen him sneak out this morning? Did she know something about what I’d done last night?

“Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” she pushed.

We were exceeding our spoken word limit for the day. I didn’t have time to toast this bread. Butter and jam would have to be enough.

“Not that I can think of,” I said, throwing a fake smile in her general direction.

She took off her reading glasses, sat back in her chair, and crossed her legs. One of her signature D. A. moves that meant, *OK, I’m getting serious now*. I bet it worked great on unwitting criminals ready to plead out, but it wasn’t working on me. At least, I was *trying* not to let it work on me. It would be a lot easier *trying* from my room. I

started to go, but then she said, “Ruby, why do you lie to me?”

I skidded to a halt. I didn’t even know which lie to cover for.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, turning and accidentally making eye contact.

“How long has this been going on?” she said.

What? Stalking people, killing murderers, or having sleepovers with a boy? “Could you define what you mean by ‘this,’ counselor?”

“It’s not a game,” she said, standing up and making her chair scrape against the tile floor. “You could be jeopardizing your future.”

I needed a few more specifics.

Everything I did lately was jeopardizing my future. “Seriously, Mom, just tell me what you’re talking about.”

“Well, we’ve never had this conversation, and it is probably overdue...” She put her arm around my waist and led me back to the table.

Two horrible “overdue conversations” sprang to mind: Either she’d found out about the deaths piling up around me or she actually wanted to have *The Conversation*. Yeah, like at seventeen I didn’t already know about the birds and the bees.

I honestly couldn’t decide which discussion would be worse.

I sat down at the table with my bread and butter as my only defense against her

attack, jamming in mouthfuls of food so she couldn't expect me to speak first. She sat down across from me.

"I don't know exactly how to say this," she said, "but I hope you at least used protection."

As much as I suddenly longed for her to be talking about the gun and the knife, I knew she meant something else. And I wished she did know about Father Michael. Then she wouldn't feel the need to torture me with this awful subject.

"The last thing you need right now is to bring a child into the situation," she said, now talking more to herself than to me. "Believe me, a mistake like that would be devastating, not just for you—

but everyone involved.”

I stared at her, trying to read where this was coming from. Something in her eyes made it seem like she wasn't talking about me anymore. Like she was alluding to someone else. Maybe even herself. But that didn't make any sense. She was in her thirties when I was born. Right about the same time she admitted to her affair with—

“Please don't tell me that Martinez is my real father.” I closed my eyes, unable to look her in the face.

“Ruby! Of course not. No, that's not it at all.” She paused, speechless.

I reopened my eyes to make sure she was telling the truth.

“I'm talking about *you*,” she said,

straightening her posture to regain control.

“What about me?”

She hesitated. So un-Jane Rose. She was rattled, flustered. I’d never seen her thrown, so completely off her game.

“I know about you and that *boy*.” Those words practically spurted from her mouth, oozing with disdain. “I asked him to leave this morning. I didn’t wake you because I wanted to know if you would be honest enough to just tell me the truth. And apparently, the answer is no.”

“Really?” I asked, cocking my head. “This is so interesting coming from someone who lies for a living.” I set down my bread. I no longer needed it to

defend myself. “You lie to the press, lie to the Court, lie to your only child—and you’re accusing *me* of lying!”

“Young lady—”

“You promise the world to everyone,” I said. “Promise the community to be tough on violent offenders and then cut them deals or allow enough incompetent mistakes to let them off.” I ripped that one straight from Bill Brandon’s talking points. I knew I should stop, but the words kept bubbling up.

“You promise your family that you’ll be there for us, and you aren’t.” Just mentioning the “us” brought flames to my heart. There was no “us” anymore. Just her and me in our glorious isolation. At

least she couldn't cheat on Dad *again*. But I didn't dare mention that. "So please remind me, *Jane*, where I was supposed to *learn* honesty."

"This discussion is not about me, Ruby, and I will not let you attack me to protect yourself. Don't think I've forgotten this is how you work. Dr. Teresa has told you over and over that this is not an appropriate way to communicate." She smoothed out her hair and narrowed her eyes. "*I* am the mother. *You* are the daughter, and you will treat me with respect. And you will tell me whether or not you are sleeping with *that* boy under my roof."

"OK, you want the truth? You want respect?" I said, narrowing my eyes

right back. “No, I am not sleeping with *that* boy. We’ve never had sex. *I’ve* never had sex. He slept in my bed last night, but nothing happened. We didn’t even kiss once.” Part of me wished I had slept with him, just to throw it in her face. “And since you brought her up, Dr. Teresa is more of a *mother* to me than you’ve been in a long time. At least she accepts me and tries to understand me. She never bails on me.” Well, except for yesterday, but that was unheard of.

Mom deflated like I didn’t expect. I’d hurt her. She sat still, shoulders slumped, a few tears suddenly running down her cheeks. Was she a wounded lamb or incensed tiger? I had no idea. I wanted to take back the words, even if

they were partially true.

In the lingering, threatening silence, I braced myself for her response.

Even after she quietly got up and left the room, I held tight to the table for a while—just in case.

CHAPTER 20

For weeks I held on, waiting for my mom to lash out at me, punish me, forbid me to see Liam. Take away my credit card and shoe allowance. Surely, she'd come up with some retribution for my insubordination. But nothing happened.

I wondered if I'd really hurt her. My grandmother—my mom's mom—died before I was born, but I knew she'd worked more than one job to help put my mom through college and then law school after my no-good grandfather left. My dad had explained to me that one of

my mom's biggest regrets in life was not having her mother there when she walked onstage to receive her law degree. Which was why she pushed me so hard. It was her way of honoring her mother and rising above the hardship she'd endured as a girl.

For days after our fight, she left early and came home late, which I liked to think wasn't *only* because of me—Bill Brandon's attack ads were picking up steam on every TV, radio, and Internet channel.

I went to school and to bed without seeing her. I reviewed the assassination of JFK (and Charlie LeMarq), the carnage of World War II (and Rick "The Stick" and his cohorts), and the

dissection of frogs (and Father Michael). Everything reminded me of those horrible moments. Not even Liam's kissing skills, or several pounds of my mom's best imported chocolates, could make me forget. As if committing "legally justified murder" wasn't already hard enough on my soul, it was also taking its toll on my thighs.

And to add insult to injury, I had absolutely no new evidence to lead me to the answers I needed.

Liam and I checked the California databases for any additional information on D. Silver, but there were over a thousand results. Even after we refined the search criteria to an adult male, there were over a hundred. Early one Saturday

morning, before Liam's football practice, we went back to Bayside Buccaneer Yacht Club. While Liam used his old scuba gear to search the shallow bottom of the boat dock for Father Michael's body, I scoured the boat for clues. Big surprise—nothing.

We went back down the coast—to the cliff we'd woken up on—to search for answers, but that was a bust, too. We had no idea where to start to find the warehouse we'd been taken to the night of the beach party. Liam even asked a bunch of kids if they'd seen anyone suspicious that night, but since it was a high school party full of all kinds of shady behavior, that didn't produce anything helpful, either. One of his

friends, pleasantly nicknamed Johnson (and not because it was his last name), thought he “might” have seen Liam being carried down the back staircase over the shoulder of “some dude,” but he said he didn’t think twice about it because he thought Liam was probably wasted, too, and anyway he was a “little high,” and in the middle of making out with a Swedish exchange student named “Molly or Marin or something.”

It was like none of it had ever happened. Except that it had. Liam knew it, I knew it, Silver knew it, and Alana maybe knew it—she at least knew *something*, because she still wasn’t talking to me.

Thanksgiving and the holidays were

upon us, but no one would have known it at Casa de Rose. Not like last year when Dad and I got out the decorative fall wreaths and the miniature stuffed pilgrim set and spent days baking chocolate-chip-pumpkin cookies.

This year, there was only the scent of silence.

That is, until a bouquet of colorful autumn flowers arrived at my door, smelling maybe a little of marijuana. The delivery guy was clearly stoned even though it was only 7:00 a.m.

“Are you Ruby Rose?” asked the weed guy. I noticed that his eyelids were barely doing their job.

“That’s me,” I responded, ascertaining that his threat level was a

mellow-yellow. I knew Silver likely had inside men helping him, but this dude couldn't be one of them. Just in case, though, I had a bedazzled butterfly blade Dad had once given me for Christmas hidden in The Cleave.

When he'd buzzed in from the video gate, I asked him to leave the flowers by the call box. He said he was given specific instructions not to do so. Out of curiosity and sheer desperation for any clues, I let him come to the door. But not without properly arming myself.

"Rad." He bobbed his head. "I've seen your picture on TV. You're way hotter in real life, though."

Gross. Even though he wasn't completely destitute in the looks

department, slacker skater dudes in their twenties weren't my type. Especially not ones who may or may not be working with psycho manipulator of the year D. Silver.

“Are you going to give me the flowers or not?” I asked, holding out my arms. “I have to get to school.”

“Oh yeah, totally.” He looked down like he'd forgotten he even had anything in his hands. As he gave them to me, he said, “You know, if you ever get sick of the guy who sent these, I'm single.”

“Good to know.” I threw him a you-may-leave-now smile and shut the door before I got high simply from being near his clothes.

I practically sprinted to the kitchen to

read the card sitting on top of the scarlet, white, and ginger blooms. Inspecting the envelope for any initial clues, I gingerly opened the seal.

*Roses are Ruby red
Autumn lilies are orange and
white
Let's do something normal for
once
Will you go to the Sadie Hawkins
dance with me tonight?*

Oh—kay. Sure, in the back of my mind I'd considered the possibility that Liam had sent the bouquet. It probably made more sense than D. Silver, who was more likely to send me a cryptic

piece of art or a creepy message.

So why couldn't I decide if I was relieved or disappointed? Excited or terrified? Appreciative or angry?

Despite my growing catalog of concerns, Liam was relentless about the dance. Even after I explained my aversion to underage binge drinking, awkward group dates, and cheesy picture stances, he still insisted that we go. All day at school, he went out of his way to make me smile, laugh, and forget. My answer went from a firm no, to a definite maybe, and then after his speech about being normal and going on our first real date, my answer turned into a hesitant yes.

After all that he'd done for me, it was

about time that I did something for him.

I caught a glimpse of my androgynous ensemble in the reflection of his shiny Jeep door as it slammed shut in his driveway. “Sadie Hawkins, eh!” I said contemptuously.

“Come on, they’re just T-shirts,” Liam said, batting eyes the same color as our matching baby-blue Billabong Ts.

“At least we didn’t have to go all matchy-matchy in footwear,” I said, concentrating on my more flattering shoes. Sure, Liam could pull off the vintage checkerboard Vans, but I needed something with a little more lift.

“Well, I thought about getting matching shoes, but I can’t rock the heels like you,” Liam joked.

“Ha-ha.” I couldn’t restrain my smile. “These aren’t heels by the way, these are my stripey blue-and-white wedge-pump Toms with a bow.”

“And I thought *I* had a shoe problem,” he said, grinning. I was already starting to feel more normal. “Come on, I promise this will only take five minutes. My family really wants to meet you and take a few pictures.”

“Right.” I shook my head in disbelief as we walked to the front door. Why Liam’s mom and brothers wanted to meet the Vigilante Teen Killer was beyond me. Maybe they wanted to pat me down for weapons, or warn me to stay away from Liam when his back was turned.

“And just so you know, it was my bro Christian who helped me write that poem for you. He’s the family romantic. Tug, on the other hand...” He blew out a breath. “Let’s just say you need good reflexes. Watch out for flying objects.” He winked and took my hand to escort me into his small house.

“Hey, guys,” Liam said warmly to the two boys sitting in front of the TV. “I want you to meet Ruby.”

At first, all I saw were eyes. Two big, bright brown eyes and two big, beautiful green eyes—looking up at me with the same excitement.

The older boy stood up and came over to shake my hand.

“Hi, Ruby. My name’s Christian.” He

was thin, with short dark hair and glasses. He looked nothing like Liam. Actually, he was sort of the opposite of Liam in every way.

“Well, hello, Christian,” I said, shocked at his polite and formal manner. Either he’d been prepped for this or he was the most charming twelve-year-old I’d ever met. “It’s nice to meet you.”

He smiled and returned to the carpet. Tug teasingly punched him and made a googly face. Tug had the same dark hair but was thick as a tank.

“Tug, be nice,” Liam warned, though he was obviously amused. “Don’t expect Tug to shake your hand, Ruby. He’s got cooties.”

“Hey,” Tug said. A shoe went flying

past Liam's head, barely missing his scarred ear.

"I see what you meant about reflexes," I said to Liam.

"Yeah, we'd better get going before someone gets hurt." Liam smiled. "*Mamacita! Estás lista?*" he called into the back rooms. I hadn't realized he spoke fluent Spanish.

A woman with luxuriously dark hair and eyelashes that went on for days came gliding into the room. I could see where Liam got his lashes and olive skin, but other than that I was confused. Liam had much lighter hair and blue eyes. And I thought *I* looked nothing like my mom.

"Oh, Ruby," she said, her dark eyes

just as vibrant as the boys', but softer at the same time. She took my hand in both of hers, then swiftly pulled me in for a kiss on each cheek. "I've heard so much about you."

Oh, snap. Hearing things about me couldn't be good.

She pulled away to look me in the eyes. "Thank you for taking a minute to come by so I could take some pictures. Liam doesn't go to many dances. I have to seize my opportunities."

It was only now that I noticed she had an accent. And that kissy thing wasn't very American, either.

"Of course," I said, finding myself naturally drawn to her. Either she didn't know who I was and what I'd done—or

she truly didn't care.

“OK, *vamos*. I have to get to my shift, and you have to get to the dance.” She motioned for me to follow her out the back door. “My name's Claudia, by the way—or Ma, as the boys like to scream at me.” She swiveled her head around to smile.

Liam guided me through the house with his hand placed at the small of my back. True to his word, he made the whole thing painless. We took a few quick shots in the backyard flower garden, made pleasant small talk, and were out before his mom could ask any tricky questions.

When we got back into Liam's Jeep, his family came outside to wave good-

bye. A pang of envy struck me as I absorbed the way they beamed at Liam. They were a family—perhaps a damaged, struggling family on some levels, but they were together.

A wave of fear came rushing in right after. What if they lost him because of me? How would they ever fill the hole that Liam would leave? It made me sick to think my selfish desire for his help could destroy their world.

“Was my family that bad?” Liam asked after a few minutes of silence.

“What? No.” I shook the sour look off my face and attempted to smile. “It’s not that. They’re all lovely. Your mother is so beautiful. Where’s she from, by the way?”

“Costa Rica. My dad was a big wave chaser.” He grimaced a little at the mention of his father.

“What shift does she have to get to?” I asked, trying to get away from the dad subject.

He frowned. “She’s sort of a...bartender. Works nights. It’s not like she’s the most powerful attorney in the county or anything, but she makes unbelievable tamales most Sundays.”

I’d trade the powerful-attorney thing any day for a mom who would look at me the way Liam’s mom looked at him. With obvious love—like he was the most wonderful thing in the world.

“What is it, then?” Liam said. “Did Tug put something slimy in your pocket

when I wasn't looking? He does that—”

“No, Tug is hilarious, and Christian is a little heartthrob. Really,” I assured him. “Your family is great.”

“Then why’d you just go all *brooding brow* on me?” he asked, not paying nearly enough attention to the road.

I rubbed my forehead. “Look, I’d never forgive myself if anything ever happened to you because of me. Your family needs you.”

“Well, *I* need *you*, Ruby,” he said flatly. “You make me crazy, and constantly worried, but...I need you.”

“Yeah, you need me like you need a hole in the head,” I said, realizing immediately what a distasteful joke that was. I wasn’t sure I’d ever been told that

I was needed before. “Sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

He wrinkled his nose for a second, then reached out and touched my hand. “Let’s make a deal, OK? Let’s play pretend.”

“Like pretend we have supernatural powers and can actually defeat the evil villain?” I shook my head. As if.

“Even better, let’s pretend we’re normal seventeen-year-olds, and we’re going to a high school dance. Curfew is two hours later than normal, and nothing else matters tonight. You’re just a girl—an insanely sexy, kick-ass girl, obviously. And I’m just a guy—a totally hot yet sensitive guy, of course.” He smiled. “And we’re going to rock this

Sadie Hawkins dance tonight! That kind of deal.”

I laughed. “OK, deal.”

“Sweet.” He turned up the stereo and started moving to the music. I laughed even harder. “I promise, tonight will be epic!”

As we pulled into the school parking lot filled with matching teen couples, I shooed away the creepy-crawly thoughts of Silver showing up to ruin my night. Just as I started imagining some terrible incident involving blood and punch bowls, Liam opened my door and reached for my hand.

As if he could sense my nervousness, he leaned in and kissed me, forcing the worries away. I tensed up at first, then

gradually relaxed, my mind going blank as his fingertips threaded through my hair. Tasting him, breathing him, feeling him, wanting him, were the only ping-ponging thoughts I could find in the corners of my mind right now. Nothing and no one else mattered.

A tingling sensation of desire formed deep within me. I wanted to pull him back inside the Jeep and go someplace else where we could be alone.

He pulled away sooner than I wanted.

“If I have to do that every time I catch you brooding,” he said breathlessly, “I will.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a *promise*.” He pressed his lips together in a way that made me want to

kiss him again. Then, taking my hand, he led me through the parking lot and into the gym full of handmade posters, dangling streamers, and so many strobe lights a girl could have seizures.

The first person I saw as we walked through the balloon archway was Alana. She saw me, too, but instead of brightening with a flash of excitement like the one I felt at seeing her, she looked away in a flash of something else. Anger? Hurt? Fear?

I wanted to run and talk to her, find out who her date was. Maybe slap her on the butt and say “good game” in a husky voice to make her laugh. That’s what we did and who we were before. I wanted that back. Maybe Liam was

wrong, and I couldn't be normal ever again.

“Why are you tempting me?” The sensation of Liam's breath on my ear made my knees come dangerously close to wobbling. “A promise is a promise, and I am a man of my word. Shall we dance?”

“Uh, don't you want to go see some of your buddies?” I looked over to his Amazon-birds entourage in brightly colored shirts—and did a double take. Four guys. Four girls. Four sets of T-shirts in solid colors. His best friend, Chase, and his girlfriend, Meg, in purple. His other friend Jett, with his date, in yellow. And the fourth couple, in red, Jace the Ass Face with none other

than One-Up Taylor.

“Is this a group date?” I asked Liam, horrified.

They were all looking at us now, some of them waving us over.

“Not exactly,” he said, holding his finger up to his friends, asking for a minute. “Traditionally, in high school, teenagers attend dances as a group. But...” He paused, looking at me. “*We* can do whatever you want.”

I tried not to feel trapped. “Did you not hear my objection to the awkward group-date thing?” I asked, just a little too snarkily. “Liam, Jace *and* Taylor both hate me!”

“Whoa.” He let go of my hand so he could cup my face. “I had no idea they

were even coming. It's not like they asked my permission," he said, snarking right back. "But honestly, tonight we don't have to do anything you don't want to do. We can keep our distance."

"It's not like I want to be the jerk girlfriend, but..." I didn't know what to say without sounding *exactly* like a jerk.

"Hang on, did you just call yourself my girlfriend?"

Oh, double snap. Liam's eyes crinkled with amusement.

"I didn't mean to infer—"

"Wait." He put one finger over my lips, looking like a retriever who'd just heard one of those silent dog whistles.

"This is my song. Come on!"

As we slow danced to the cheesy

remix of an '80s love song, he drew me in tight and I laid my head on his chest. How many times had I dreamed of being this close to him? All I knew was that it was better than I'd dared to imagine. It was the way his hips moved against mine. The way his lips brushed my neck as he sang the ridiculous chorus lyrics. The way he assured me with every movement that he wasn't letting go.

He knew me for exactly what I was, and he was still here.

I was disarmed, in every way.

In order to avoid spontaneous combustion, I had to distract myself, so I peered around the dark gym watching the lights trickling over the crowd.

Suddenly, a movement caught my eye

—the outline of a man with broad shoulders in the dark corner of the gym.

“Oh no,” I whispered. “Not here. Not tonight.”

I stopped dancing—and breathing.

“What’s wrong?” Liam asked.

The figure couldn’t have been more than thirty feet away, but in the darkness my eyes strained to see him clearly. A jock couple in atrocious lime-colored TapouT UFC shirts moved directly into my line of sight. I wanted to tap them out.

“Follow me.” I untangled myself from Liam and pulled him through the crowd.

If it was Silver, what was he going to do? How would we stop him?

As we weaved around the dancing

couples, my vision finally adjusted to the dim light. And there he was, plain as day —Mr. Holsum, our Calculus teacher, with his unmistakable floppy comb-over, pouring himself a drink.

I felt like a moron. Not to mention paranoid. “I thought I saw...” I trailed off, feeling suddenly shaky.

“Ruby,” Liam shushed me with his voice and touch. “You don’t need to explain. I get it.”

I looked into his understanding eyes.

“Maybe we should just go,” I said. “I suck at normal.”

“What, before my song is over?” His eyebrows pinched together in dismay. “I don’t think so.”

Just as he drew me back in close, the

song ended and I pulled away, thinking I'd ruined the moment and probably the night. But then the DJ announced another slow track.

I exhaled. "I'll try not to run away this time."

Liam held on to me for the next three songs. In fact, he barely let go of me for the next three hours as we danced, whispered, and touched.

But the fear never left me. The fear that one of the dark shadows I kept seeing out of the corner of my eye would materialize—and Silver would come back.

In fact, I knew he would.

CHAPTER 21

I'd really outdone myself this time. Not only were Alana and my mom still giving me the cold shoulder, but Dr. T was, too. She'd been distracted and distant in our appointments. I wondered if the fight with my mom was the cause. I didn't doubt Jane was vindictive enough to have done something to compromise my relationship with Dr. T because of my comment about my twice-a-week therapist being a better mom. Maybe she'd told her that it was unprofessional to get so emotionally close to a patient,

or something like that. Maybe she was hoping I'd feel like I couldn't lean on Dr. T after all, and would break off the relationship altogether.

My suspicions spiked even higher when I got a text from Jane:

*Meet me at Dr. Teresa's office
after school today. 4:00 sharp.*

She had never (as in *ever*) come with me to an appointment before. Something must have changed. I worried about what she could possibly want to say to me that she couldn't just say alone. Maybe she was going to tell us that she wasn't going to let us keep having our appointments or something.

It felt like an ambush, and I didn't like it.

The tension between my mom and me was at an all-time high. I felt like I was still sitting at the breakfast table, holding on to the edge with white knuckles, waiting for her wrath. Like I had been sitting at that table my whole life.

When she finally showed up in Dr. T's waiting room, she was late, of course. Gucci purse in one hand and a Venti Starbucks in the other, she came storming in like a celebrity.

"Hello, Ruby," she said with the aloof formality of a stranger.

"Hello, Mother," I responded with the sass of a neglected teen.

"Is Dr. Teresa not here yet?" she

asked as she sat down next to me and started digging through her purse.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I knocked a minute ago and no one answered.”

“Is she usually late?”

“No, not really,” I said, thinking back. Actually, I couldn’t remember the last time she’d been late.

“Well, I don’t have time for this,” my mother said, standing and power walking over to the door to knock again.

Shocker: Jane Rose didn’t have time for *this*.

“What’s going on, Mom?” I asked. “Why are you even here?”

“Dr. Teresa?” she called through the door, ignoring me. “It’s Ruby and Jane. Are you in there? Please open the door.”

I rolled my eyes. If she were in there, she would open up. What if she was with a client and didn't want to be disturbed yet?

"Mom, are you even going to answer me?"

Apparently not. She pressed her ear against the door, listening for a sign of life, I assumed. "She should get a receptionist, for crying out loud."

"Mom?"

"What, Ruby?" she answered harshly, looking at me like I was a petulant two-year-old.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm here because we need to talk."

How many times was she going to give me that "we need to talk" crap?

“Then talk,” I challenged. “Why do you need Dr. Teresa present to talk to me?”

She rattled the door handle. “I just do.”

I was about to admonish her for being so evasive (something she loved to do to me) when the door swung open. It was unlocked and no one was inside, that much I could see.

I stood, surprised that her door was unlocked if she wasn't there.

“This is highly unusual,” my mom said disapprovingly.

“Which part?” I answered, walking past her into Dr. T's room. “The District Attorney breaking and entering or someone standing you up?”

“All I did was check the door. It swung open on its own,” she said defensively.

I’d never been in Dr. T’s office without her being there. Curious, I wandered around the space. I’d always wanted to know more about Dr. T: her family situation, her failed marriage, her miscarriages, her history. Despite how hard she worked on me to open up, she never really returned the favor. All I knew about her came from my mother.

“What are you doing?” my mom asked, sounding suddenly uncomfortable.

“Nothing,” I said, looking through some papers on Dr. T’s desk. “Just checking to see if she left us a note or something.”

“If she left a note, it would have been on the door,” she argued. “Or she’d have sent me an e-mail.”

True. This was so unlike her. Then again, after ten years of intermittent therapy, I wasn’t confident I really knew what she was “like” anyway. I continued to search her desk for a family picture or keepsake that held some trace of who she really was. Instead, it was scattered with self-help books, medical journals, candles, and an assortment of coffee mugs.

“Come on, let’s wait outside and I’ll call her to see where she is,” Mom said, digging through her bag for her cell.

I was about to leave the room when I looked at Dr. T’s chair. My breath

caught, and time jerked to a halt—like the moment I shot LeMarq, like the moment the blade went into Father Michael's chest.

A large, old-fashioned brass key sat in Dr. T's place.

I felt sick as I reached to pick it up. The panic rising in my chest threatened to consume me as I realized the key could only mean one thing—he'd taken her. The Key Killer, the fourth man on my list.

Attached to the rusty key was a red string and a small note. I pinched it up with my fingertips like it was a poisonous spider. The note read:

Find me.

The handwriting was Dr. T's—I'd seen it so many times before. Another one of the Key Killer's signature moves—forcing the victims to leave one last plea for help to their family.

My vision went starry. Air wasn't making it to my lungs.

Not Dr. T. Not the only person in the world who knew me best and loved me anyway.

I couldn't comprehend what kind of an evil person would crush minds and souls like this. How would I find her? None of his victims had ever been found. Not one of them. Twelve keys. Twelve missing persons behind twelve locked doors.

This had gone too far, become too personal. If the Key Killer or Silver were here right now, I would tear them to shreds. I looked back at the note, but it was turned the wrong way now—and there was a message on the other side, written in someone else’s hand:

*If you want the Doctor to live, **do not** involve Jane.*

“She’s not answering.” My mom’s voice sliced through my spinning frenzy. Why couldn’t I involve her? “I’ll leave a message.”

As she waited to leave a voicemail on a phone that would probably never be found, my mind raced.

Wait, Dr. T's phone wasn't off. It rang before it went to voicemail. That meant it could be tracked. If I called the phone, the nearby towers would ping her location—and we might find her before he turned it off and demolished it. I had to act fast.

If there was ever a time I needed my mom, it was now. She had the resources to track the phone, and she cared about Dr. T, too. Surely, she'd pull out all the stops to find her. But a flashback of the blonde girl on Ninth Street stung my mind. Silver didn't bluff. I couldn't risk Dr. T's life by involving Jane. I'd have to find another way.

Suddenly, I knew where I needed to go. To the only person I trusted.

As my mom left Dr. T a voicemail, I escaped. Even when she yelled after me to come back, I kept running to Big Black.

“Slow down,” Liam said, grabbing me by the wrists after I told him about the key. “Ruby, everything is going to be OK.”

“No, it’s not,” I argued. “You don’t understand. This can’t happen to her. Not Dr. T.”

Looking over his shoulder at half the football team and most of the cheer squad staring at us, he pulled me deeper under the bleachers for privacy. Even though Alana’s back was firmly facing me, I wondered if it hurt her that I’d

come running to Liam and not her.

“Ruby, just breathe for a second.” Liam still wore his pads with his helmet pulled back on his head. He looked so normal, so All-American. And here I was, drawing him into my dark world, trying to fight a serial killer.

“So, what do you want to do?” he asked quietly

“I need someone with access to cell phone tower information,” I said, knowing it was a ridiculous game plan. A Hail Mary.

“Well, who would have that kind of access?”

“A detective, I guess.” I thought out loud. “Someone who could get a quick warrant.”

“Well, how many detectives do you know who could help with that?” he asked, as if he already knew the answer.

I knew it, too, and the answer was “one”: Detective “I’m Gonna Take You Down” Martinez. I put my face in my hands. I couldn’t believe it had finally come to this. But if it meant Dr. T might live, I would willingly place myself at the mercy of a man I wasn’t sure I could trust.

“It looks to me like you don’t have a choice,” he said, pulling my hands away from my face and nudging my chin so I’d look up at him. “Do you still have his card?”

“I think so,” I said, fumbling through my backpack. “Yeah, here it is.”

“Good. Let me just tell Coach I gotta go. I’ll be right back, OK?”

I wanted to stop him. Tell him I could do this on my own. Tell him I’d go to Detective Martinez first and then call him. But the truth was, I needed him. Or maybe I just *wanted* him so badly that it felt like *need* at this point.

Maybe if Liam had been with me when Father Michael died, I wouldn’t have fled the scene and lost the body. Maybe it would have prevented the whole thing. And maybe if Liam came with me now it would throw off some part of Silver’s plan, and we could get the upper hand.

I gripped the rusty key until it left marks in my skin. I would never let go of

it until I found her. How many other loved ones had the same thought about their key before the police took it away as evidence? The thought made a bad taste come to my mouth, as if the key was firmly lodged in my throat.

“I just have to go change,” Liam said, suddenly in front of me again. “I’ll meet you at your car, and we’ll call Martinez together, OK?”

“Sure,” I responded, feeling nearly defeated already. I was about to cross over the point of no return—go to the cops, hand myself over to the Detective my mom had told me to stay away from, the man who’d betrayed my father—without any certainty we would ever find Dr. T. I panicked at the thought of

where she might be. If she was scared or confused—or even alive.

“Hey,” he said, doubling back and reaching out to squeeze my hand. “It’ll be all right. We’ll find her. Remember, this guy keeps drawing you in. He wants you to save her, and he wants you to kill her abductor.”

Of course. I wasn’t thinking logically. I’d forgotten Silver’s game. This wasn’t the Key Killer acting alone, in which case Dr. T would never be found. This was Silver pulling the strings, and Dr. T was just bait. Not only would I find her, but I would have to kill another human being to save her.

I pulled away from Liam. I would kill again if it meant Dr. T would live. I

didn't like it. I didn't want it. But I would do it if I had to.

CHAPTER 22

Liam leaned against the hood of Detective Martinez's unmarked police car while I paced next to it. Martinez sat in his driver's seat with his door open, silently staring at his computer screen. He held his cell phone like a hand grenade.

If anyone from school saw us right now, they'd think that Liam and I had just been pulled over by an undercover cop. But asking Martinez to meet us outside Starbucks on Main Street was the first plan that crossed my mind. The

location was public (which made me feel better), close to the precinct (yet far enough away that I couldn't be thrown inside a detention cell), and near the Pacific Coast Highway (for a quick getaway to Dr. T). Too bad it was also busy. I could tell that a few people inside the café had recognized me. I turned my back to them and stopped pacing next to Liam.

“The warrant was issued at least forty-five minutes ago,” Martinez grumbled. “Damn it, this shouldn't take so long.”

Liam and I looked at each other, wordlessly communicating our confusion at his being mad at anyone but us.

Minutes felt like hours while we

waited for a shred of hope. It made little sense that Martinez wasn't pounding me for answers, grilling me on the details. He'd simply taken my word for it that the Key Killer had pounced again and, without blinking, he'd requested the warrant to access the cell phone information. I'd even shown him the key with the messages attached. All he did he was sit there steaming, texting up a storm.

I was about to ask Martinez if there was anything else I could be doing, when the two-way radio in his car rumbled to life with a staticky voice. The only words I caught from a few feet away were "last known ping," "Pasadena," and "Rose Bowl Stadium."

“Ten-four,” Martinez said, staring into the distance. He typed another text into his phone.

“What are you doing? Is everything OK?” I asked. Was there something I’d missed over the radio?

Sweat beads ran down his cheeks despite the cool dusk air. He ignored me and continued texting. I didn’t like it. As I was about to grab the car door, Liam blocked me with his arm, but I shoved him away.

“Detective, what’s going on?” I asked, standing directly next to the open car door. “If you don’t tell me, I’m going alone. I heard Rose Bowl Stadium. I’ll just go—”

“I warned them,” he said sharply.

“None of this should’ve happened. None of it!”

“Who? Warned who?”

When Martinez wouldn’t answer, I spun to Liam. “Screw this. Let’s go. I don’t have to wait for a police escort.”

“Wait,” Martinez said, getting out of his car. “Ruby, you’re not going anywhere without me. Do you hear me, young lady?”

I ground my teeth. Young lady was better than sweetie or honey, but not by much.

“Well, I’m not going to sit around here listening to you spout off to yourself about who knows what!” I raised my voice. “Dr. Teresa could be dying right this second.”

“Get in the car,” he ordered. “You, too, Mr. Slater. Now.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. Sirens could only decrease travel time.

As we drove, I wondered when he was going to call for backup. Instead, he drove north with a locked jaw and lead foot, occasionally shaking his head at me in the rearview mirror. Liam squeezed my hand as we slid around the backseat like bobble-head dolls.

I wanted to know how long it was going to take to get there and what we were going to do when we got there. But it was almost like we had an unspoken agreement not to ask questions.

“What do you think it means?” Liam whispered in my ear.

“Think *what* means?” I asked back. Was he talking about Martinez’s bizarre silence, the new choice of bait, or something else?

“C’mon, the *Rose Bowl*? You didn’t catch that twisted so-called coincidence?” His hot breath against my skin caused a physiological reaction completely contradictory to my rational one. I was turned on and turned off in one fell swoop—an inconsistency that unfortunately defined my life. Valedictorian contender—or death-penalty candidate? Founder of the Constitution Society—or vigilante lawbreaker? Protector and defender—or vengeful killer?

Whether or not the location was

chosen to match my name, the truth was that when we reached the Rose Bowl, the chances of my committing murder again were high. This time, it would probably happen right in front of the detective who'd personally petition for my capital punishment. Why *not* do it at the Rose Bowl? The press would eat this up.

Instead of answering Liam, I stared out the window at the blurred lights. The billboards and neon signs off the freeway grew distorted and fuzzy as unwelcome tears welled up in my eyes. I hated what Silver had made me do, what I had to do now. And I worried this was it for me—that it would be my last night of freedom. The last time I would be

able to hold Liam Slater's hand, touch his face, or...kiss his lips.

Without thinking it through, I leaned over and kissed him. He recoiled at first, most likely surprised at the timing, location, and the company—Martinez was less than two feet away with a fairly good view. But I didn't let Liam go. The kiss meant more than a possible good-bye. It was a thank-you, an apology, and a desperate hope for the best. When I pulled away, I saw the understanding in his eyes. "It might be the last time I get to do that," I said.

"Don't say that." He put his arm around me so that my head fell on his chest. "Everything is going to be OK."

I wanted to believe him as I savored

the taste of his lips.

Now, I would be lucky if they let me have a choice between a firing squad and lethal injection. Though in California, they'd probably kill my soul with never-ending bureaucratic appeals, amicus briefs, and rubber knock-off Crocs sandals long before they killed my body. At least the Orange County prison had HBO, a luxury I used to think was preposterous.

I clutched at the key still piercing my hand. There was no hope left for me, but maybe some remained for Dr. T. This was all worth it for her. I would not let her die.

Suddenly, we weren't on the freeway anymore. Instead, we were in some kind

of residential neighborhood. Old houses, apartment buildings, and winding streets.

I couldn't help myself anymore. "Detective, where are you going?"

Martinez didn't respond; he only clutched the steering wheel tighter. What was going on with him? What wasn't he telling me?

"Is this how you get to the Rose Bowl?" I sat forward and put my arms over the back of the passenger headrest. "When are you going to call for more units?"

"Damn it, Ruby!" he roared. "Just sit back and shut up. Trust me when I say that more units won't help in a situation like this. Or don't you remember the last time SWAT let you down?" He took a

hard turn into an apartment complex.

I sat back, not expecting the aggressive snap or the painful truth. He was right—SWAT had let me down in the worst way possible the day they let my dad die.

He parked against the back wall of the bare parking lot and threw the car into park with too much force. An awful cranking noise escaped from the hood of the car. He flipped open his phone and started that texting crap again.

“Detective,” I began, trying to sound respectful. “Please, tell me what’s going on.”

“You’ve got history here, Ruby Rose,” he said, turning around to face me. “He’s brought you back to the

beginning.”

That was it—Detective Martinez knew who Silver was. “The beginning of what?” I asked. “Just tell me why we’re here. I thought we were supposed to be going to the Rose Bowl.”

“The stadium is right behind that hill,” he said, pointing behind the abandoned-looking apartment building. I could just see the bright lights of the stadium in the night sky.

“But we’re not going there,” he went on. “He’s brought you back to apartment 4E.”

I tried to make sense of the apartment number, but 4E meant nothing to me. I racked my brain and scanned the building for something familiar to jog my

memory. And there it was, the address sign: College Village South Apartments —366 University Parkway. This was the third time Silver had used those three numbers in his sick game. He'd meant to lure me here all along, and Martinez knew it.

“Why here? What is this place?” I demanded.

When he didn't answer, I leaned over to see his face. His mouth moved like he wanted to say something, but nothing was coming out. Why was it so hard for anyone to tell me anything?

“We don't have time for this,” I said, exasperated. Resolving not to wait for answers and to go find them myself, I reached for the door handle. But

Martinez grabbed my shoulder with a death grip.

“*We* aren’t going anywhere. *I* am going in, alone.” He squeezed my shoulder tighter, with emphasis. “You two are staying here until I say otherwise. Do you understand?”

“No,” I said, pulling away from him. “Dr. T is in there because of me. What if I’m the only one who can save her?”

He gave me a condescending smirk. “You’re seventeen. Believe me, you’re not the only one who can save her.” He turned and got out of the car. “Just stay put,” he said, glaring at us both.

He shut his door, raised his weapon in front of him just like my dad would’ve done, and disappeared under a dark

archway of the building.

“I’m not sitting here,” I said to Liam. “I’m the one with the key.” I pulled it out of my pocket.

“Ruby, I’m begging you,” Liam said. “Just wait.”

He stared with concern at the spot where Detective Martinez had disappeared, but I knew Martinez was fully capable of defending himself. At least he had a weapon, which was something we didn’t have. I searched the squad car for a stowed shotgun or a hidden knife, but I found nada. My only weapon now was the key.

After minutes that seemed more like wasted hours, I caved. I wasn’t going to be a spectator anymore. As I was about

to leap out of the car, the boom of a cannon sounded and fireworks exploded behind the hill. The home team must've scored. For a moment, the beauty of the scene blindsided me, and I couldn't help but watch the streaming colors fall from the sky. I grabbed the door handle. "Liam, you can stay here if you want, but I have to go in."

When he didn't move or respond, I waved a hand in front of his face to get his attention. He grabbed my hand and pinned it down, continuing to stare at where Martinez had disappeared.

"Are you listening to me?" I said, losing patience.

"Ruby, just wait," he said in a hushed tone. "I thought I saw something."

“What?” I strained to see what he was talking about. “Where?”

“I don’t know.” He huffed and finally pulled his tense body away from the window to rub his eyes. “Maybe it was nothing.”

“Liam, what did you see?”

“I thought I saw a flicker of light in the apartment up there,” he said, pointing to the second story. “I thought I heard something, too.”

I looked up to where he was pointing but didn’t see anything. “Are you sure it wasn’t the fireworks?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I’m going to go check it out,” I said, but he stopped me again.

“Wait, Ruby, it’s a trap. You know

that!” The intensity of Liam’s eyes in the darkness was more effective than his python-like grip. “Just because Martinez didn’t want to call for backup doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t—”

“No, I think Martinez was right. If we call it in, anyone from dispatch to SWAT could handle it wrong and Dr. T could die. Maybe Martinez knows what he’s doing. He seems to know a lot more about Silver than we do.” I shook my head in disbelief that I was actually siding with Martinez. “Look, Silver has a plan, and at this point I don’t think killing me is part of it, so I’m going in there. And you are *not* going to stop me.”

I got out of the car, and Liam climbed

out after me. The building's entrance seemed more like a deserted mine than college housing. And given how close we were to the stadium, it felt odd for the area to be so forsaken.

A bluster of dust nearly knocked me into Liam as I moved toward the dark corridor's opening. All the exterior lights were either burned out or busted in. If anyone still lived in these apartments, I felt sorry for them.

Martinez must've somehow known exactly where 4E was, and he'd gone this way, so we followed the path until it opened up into a courtyard with a gated pool. The water looked like the greenish-brown algae color of swamps meant for gator huntin'—not bikinis and

Pi Beta Phi keg parties. It even smelled like a rotting cesspool. Anything could be at the bottom of that water.

Signs were posted all around the gate, and I crossed the dying grass to read one. The place had been condemned. Scheduled to be torn down and rebuilt in a few months. Which meant it was abandoned, and we were alone.

“Great. No witnesses.” Liam’s words echoed my fears. “I don’t feel good about this.”

When had either one of us ever felt good about any of this?

Suddenly, a desperate groan came from the shadows behind us. We spun around to face a dark entryway at the back of a staircase, then we sprinted

toward the sound.

It was Martinez—lying facedown, looking broken and barely alive. Blood poured out of his shirt. He'd been shot.

"I knew I heard something," Liam berated himself. "I'm calling 911."

I wasn't going to stop him. Though I doubted the cops or an ambulance would get here in time.

"Ruby," Martinez moaned so low I could barely hear him. I fell to my knees beside him as Liam made the call. The smell of blood mixed with the faint scent of smoke made me dizzy and nauseated. I didn't know Martinez smoked. I hadn't smelled it on him in the car.

"I'm here, Detective, right here," I said, holding his bloodied hand. "We're

calling the paramedics. You'll be all right." I hoped it was true.

"Liam, help me turn him over."

As we carefully rolled Martinez over, I felt a bulletproof vest under his linen shirt. In the dark corridor I couldn't see where the bullet wounds were.

"I'm going to take your vest off, Detective—"

"No, Ruby, don't..." He spoke laboriously, like every syllable pained him. "I tried...to prevent it...to make them—make *her*—tell you...the truth."

He was losing consciousness.

"I told your mother not to do it. I told her to come clean. But how could...we have...known it would...come to this?" His body tensed up with a sudden

shaking fit to match the tremors inside me. What had my mother done to bring this on us all?

As I tried to find the source of the bleeding, the metallic scent of blood and the scent of smoke grew even stronger. My eyes watered, my nose stung, and the glands in the back of my throat tickled—that feeling right before a vicious upchucking attack. A section of his flesh had been ripped open on his forearm, right where his Marine tattoo used to be. The same tattoo my dad had.

I watched Martinez struggle for breath, and some intangible part of me ripped as well. As much as I had hated him, I now felt stirrings of compassion and regret. I didn't want him to die.

“Hold on,” I pleaded. “Help is on the way.”

I looked up at Liam, now leaning over Martinez’s body, and our eyes met. Through the darkness, I could see the fear in his expression. Did this remind him of the night his dad had cut open his head with a beer bottle?

I wanted to reach out and calm him, but my hands were bloodied, and I started coughing. Then it hit me. I looked around—black smoke was blowing our way.

Fire.

“I’m going up to 4E—you stay with him,” I said to Liam.

“No, you can’t...” Liam trailed off as Martinez gasped in pain. “Ruby, the

police will be here soon, just wait.”

“If she’s in there, it will be too late,” I said, letting go of Martinez.

Clutching the key in my bloody hand, I bolted to find Dr. T.

From the center of the courtyard I scanned the six surrounding two-story buildings for the right apartment. It wasn’t hard to find—flames behind the windows, not to mention the billowing smoke emerging out the open door, was a pretty good indication of which apartment would be 4E.

I scaled the staircase and covered my nose with the sleeve of my hoodie as the thickening smoke nearly knocked me out of my resolve.

Once through the door, I tried to

orient myself among the flames. At the far end of the room, a large metal cage contained what looked like two lifeless bodies. The surging nausea rose again, but this time it had nothing to do with the smoke.

I urged my feet forward. I had no time to close my eyes and try to overcome my stupid psychotic fear of bars. I had to get to the bodies before the flames did, or we'd all die. Black smoke surrounded me. Dancing on the ceiling. Climbing up the walls. Suffocating everything—including a photo of a girl on the wall.

The same girl from the sketch at the art fair. What?

No, I couldn't think about that now. Another coughing fit hit me. I fell to the

ground, aching for oxygen, desperate for clear thought.

Then I saw Dr. T. She was one of the bodies in the cage, blindfolded and duct taped. I crawled to the cage and searched for the lock that matched my key, but I couldn't find it. Tears in my eyes made it even harder to see—a pure physical reaction to the smoke.

Finally, I found a clunky metal lock and slipped the old key in. It clicked and turned, and the barred door swung open. I forced myself inside—reminding myself that I'd beaten the cage before and could do it again. I pulled Dr. T's limp body over and saw something written on the duct tape covering her mouth: "SECRETS." What the hell was

that supposed to mean? I checked her pulse—it was slow but steady.

I didn't want to, but I reached for the other body, too. Eyes stinging and lungs closing up, I pulled on his shirt. It was definitely number four—Roger Vay, the Key Killer, with the same gray tape, same message: “SECRETS.”

There was no way I could get them both out before the flames consumed us. Silver was making me choose. Making me condemn one to death.

I grabbed Dr. T's arms and wrapped them around my neck as I crawled out onto the green shaggy carpet. Once outside the cage, I dragged her by the shoulders with every ounce of strength I had left, trying to locate the door. The

smoke was too dense, the flames too high, my legs too weak. As I searched for the way out, a flame seared through my cloth Toms. Of all my precious shoes, these had to be the most flammable.

The flapping flames framed the exit. Desperate for oxygen, I had no more time to think. I called on my last shreds of adrenaline and strength to pick up Dr. T and sling her over my shoulder. My knees almost buckled, but I steadied myself for the five seconds I needed to burst through the doorframe. I collapsed as soon as I sensed fresh air.

We were outside the apartment at least.

“Liam!” I screamed, coughing up a

lung. “Help!” My head felt like it wasn’t my own. I was disoriented and barely alive—I felt like I was choking to death. If I just lay my head down here, maybe it would feel better. Maybe Liam would come and we’d be OK.

A blanket of cool air swept over my body as I drifted in and out of consciousness. In a distant corner of my mind I was no longer in danger. I was weightless and free. I thought I was in the ocean, lying flat on my longboard. With the sun on my back, I let my arms dangle in the water. I heard my dad’s voice in the distance, gently calling my name. The current was taking me toward him...

A jarring pain stabbed through my

chest, and a coughing fit brought me back to reality.

The last thing I felt was being carried away in the arms of a strong man.

The last thing I saw was the reflection of flames in the man's eyes through the clear plastic shield of his black tactical helmet. Familiar eyes with an unfamiliar intensity.

The last thing I heard was my own voice screaming, "Wait, Dr. T!"

CHAPTER 23

Everything glowed too white. Too sterile.

I couldn't keep my eyes open with all these fluorescent bulbs trying to blind me. I could barely breathe with whatever was strapped to my face. I couldn't move with my arms bound.

Wait. I was tied up? Where was I?

I forced open my eyes to look down at the body that surely wasn't mine, even though it was attached to my very dizzy, throbbing head. An atrocious gown covered my torso, and sandpapery white

sheets covered my legs. I didn't even want to think what kind of nasty wool socks covered my feet. I felt them scratching my heels, and that was enough to piss me off.

I jerked at the leather straps at my wrists and ankles, blinking wildly from light overexposure. My damn pupils stung like invisible fairies were taking archery practice on my eyeballs—

I had to be on drugs to be thinking like this.

The plastic mask covering my mouth felt sweaty and claustrophobic. I wanted it off. Now.

Was this some kind of torture room? Where was Liam? And Dr. T?

I closed my eyes and fought my

restraints. I don't think I meant to scream, but it sure sounded like my voice echoing off the white walls and beeping machines.

“Relax, honey, relax!” A voice caught me off guard—a sharp, authoritative voice, accompanied by soft, heavy hands. I stopped fighting long enough to find out who was brave enough to call me honey when I was in such a foul mood.

All I saw were huge boobs. Not the usual perky Hollywood implants, but enormous mounds of flesh.

“It'll be better if you relax,” the sharp voice warned.

I slammed my head back against the pillow. Whoever this lady was, she

meant business. She'd probably been hired to carry out the torture. I wouldn't make it easy for her.

Step 1: Get free.

Step 2: Land a serious knee kick to her head. Striking her anywhere in her core would be like trying to punch Play-Doh. Hell, those breasts were as good as a bulletproof vest.

Step 3: Find clothes.

Step 4: Run!

Of course, this brilliant plan only had a chance if I could steady my breathing and get free. I didn't need the beeping monitor to tell me my heart rate was dangerously high.

"I don't want to have to increase your dose," she said as she fussed with my

straps, my mask, my sheets. “But you’re testing my patience.”

“Please, just tell me where I am and what is going on,” I said. But given the combo of not having spoken in who knows how long and the thick plastic mask covering my mouth, I doubted she understood. I lifted my thirty-pound bowling-ball head to plead with my eyes.

“I’m going to untie these wrist straps now,” she said with less attitude and more tenderness than I expected. “You’re going to be all right. Now that you’re awake, no more thrashing around, OK?” She moved in and started working on the ties. I prepared myself for the moment when I’d be free, heel kick her

in the jaw, and escape this strange, sterile dungeon. I'd find Dr. T and carry her on my back if I had to—

“Oh, thank God.” A familiar voice came from outside the door. “She’s awake? Can I see her?”

My mom! Did Silver get her, too?

The door swung open and she was there, hurrying toward me.

A short, wrinkly man in a white coat materialized behind her, carrying no weapons as far as I could tell.

Beyond them, a tall figure moving in the doorway caught my eye—Sergeant Mathews. His square jaw was set tight, yet his dark eyes were soft. My drugged brain couldn’t make sense of how and why he was here.

Cool air tickled my wrists, telling me I was free. I wanted to rip the plastic mask off my face and bolt out of this white hell, but my mom's fingers wrapped themselves around the place where the straps had just come off. Not free enough.

“Oh, Rue,” my mom said as she sat beside me and pulled down my mask. She looked unusually haggard and stressed. “I was so worried.”

“Mom, what’s going on?” I still wasn’t sure if I needed to protect the both of us.

“You gave us a scare there,” the wrinkly man said as he wobbled closer and nodded to excuse the woman I now understood was my nurse. “It’s been

nearly two days since you came in here kicking and screaming.”

That made no sense. I didn't remember that. Why didn't I remember anything? Maybe that was why I was strapped down.

I searched my consciousness for a crack in the dam that held back my memories of when and how I got here.

“You suffered extreme smoke inhalation. We had to give you oxygen and keep you sedated so you could rest,” Dr. Wrinkles said, patting my foot through the sheets.

Smoke. Yes, I remembered the smoke. So much smoke.

Crack.

“Luckily, you only have minor burns

on your leg from the fire,” the doctor continued.

Fire, sure—where there’s smoke, there’s fire.

Crack, crack.

“Give her a few more days, and your little heroine will be good as new,” he said to my mom.

Heroine? Who did I save?

Crack, crack, crack.

The dam broke, and Dr. Teresa was behind it.

“Where is she?” I sat up tall in bed. “Dr. Teresa? Is she OK?”

“She’s fine,” my mom said, putting her thin hand on my knee. “She’s in a room down the hall.”

I exhaled in relief and went into a

coughing fit.

“I have to go see her,” I said, starting to get up. “I need to talk to her.”

My mom’s grip tightened. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

I jerked away to climb toward the opposite side of the bed, but then I felt a sharp, pointy tug at my forearm. I looked down to find that a scary-looking IV connected me to the medical equipment lining the headboard. The thought of ripping it out made me dizzy and nauseated.

I held my head in my hands for a moment to fight the desire to dry heave. Another attack of the black lung made me double over the bed with a very unladylike hacking noise. Someone slid

the plastic mask back over my face, and I concentrated on the cool, wet air replacing the painful darkness inside me.

I had no choice. I let my mom force me back in bed.

When my breathing steadied, I opened my eyes to find my mom standing at the foot of my bed. She had tears in her eyes. Not little ones or fake ones meant for TV, but real streaming tears.

“What is it, Mom?” I asked, pulling the mask away slightly.

“I need to tell you something,” she said, looking at me so hard it felt like she was looking through me.

My heart felt as weak as my lungs. What did she *need* to tell me now?

“OK,” I said, bracing myself.

Another tear spilled out, and she paused as if forming the words in her mouth pained her. “Detective Martinez is dead.”

Deep down I’d already known, but it did nothing to soften the blow.

I remembered talking to him, feeling his warm blood on my hands as I tried to stop the flow. I looked down at my hands, wondering if they were still stained.

I closed my burning eyes.

“Rue, there’s more,” she said, prompting me to reopen my eyes for another hit. I didn’t know if I could take it.

“The police found Liam with Martinez’s blood all over him.” She

paused. “They’ve arrested him for murder.”

CHAPTER 24

It took another three days before they released me from the hospital. This time it wasn't the IV or the coughing bouts confining me to bed—it was an armed officer standing at my door. My mom said the guard was there for my own protection, but it felt more like he was there for my own imprisonment.

Those three days seemed endless. I went over everything in my head again and again, trying to figure out what I could have done differently to keep Martinez from dying and Liam from

going to prison. Where had I gone wrong? I needed to talk to my mother about my involvement in it all, but there was always someone else within hearing distance—a nurse, a doctor, a guard...

After telling me about Liam's arrest, Mom had explained the investigators' theory that he had set fire to the apartment complex to destroy evidence. That even though Liam's motive for the murder was still unclear, his involvement was indisputable. And until he started cooperating with the investigation, he would continue to be the sole suspect. The more she explained, the more guilt wrapped around me—the reason he wasn't "cooperating" was to protect me.

According to Jane, Liam was claiming ignorance. She rolled her eyes in exasperation and ran her hands through her hair when she recapped his side of the story in press conference bullet-point detail: “Martinez had been shot by an unknown third party, you and Liam went to his aid—hence the blood—you smelled smoke and went after Dr. Teresa, he’d tried to go after you, and someone knocked him out from behind. The next thing he knew a fireman was waking him up in the street outside the apartments.”

At the hospital, I’d mostly just listened while biting my tongue. But once we got home, I knew it was time to come clean. In order to plead Liam’s

case, I had to tell Mom the truth. All of it. In the privacy of her office, I dropped every detail, spat out every fact. From me following Charlie LeMarq and the Filthy Five, to Silver's messages and five forced murders, to going to Detective Martinez with the key.

I wasn't sure she entirely believed me without any proof to back up my story. No bodies were ever found at any warehouse, harbor, or apartment complex. Well, except for Martinez's—his burned corpse and gold chain were all that remained in the complex's ashes.

I told her that Silver had to have been the one to knock out Liam. Of course he was. Stupid-ass Silver and his split personalities had done it again. This was

his MO—set us up and then save our skins. But this time, he left evidence that tied Liam to Martinez’s murder. So why didn’t he just kill Liam like he did Martinez? Why ruin Liam’s life when he could take it?

When I brought up Martinez’s cryptic comments about me being brought “back to the beginning” and asked her what Martinez was talking about when he said he’d tried to warn her, she pleaded the fifth. When I showed her the picture of Silver from the art fair, she got that surly look on her face that meant she was going to take a coffee break, or a vodka break, or whatever other kind of break she needed to “think straight.”

I was used to her hiding things from

me, just like she was used to me hiding things from her—but under these circumstances it felt unfair. As I opened up, she closed down. Again and again I asked what she knew, but she was a vault of secrets. And I *never* had the code.

It took nearly all day, several shouting matches, and a few intermittent silent treatments to get out my entire side of the story and answer all her questions. In the end, she hated me for it. I could see it all over her face—the way she grimaced as I shared the darkest details. She didn't realize that I hated myself for it, too.

But I had to trust and believe she would exonerate Liam. This wasn't just about me, or my family, anymore. Liam

could be put away for the rest of his life just because he'd gotten involved with the wrong girl. I couldn't let that happen. His mom and brothers needed him.

Silver was the one who needed to pay for his crimes, not me. And certainly not Liam.

Before I went to bed after our long day of disclosure (and nondisclosure), Mom stone-facedly assured me she'd take care of it. But I didn't know how she *could* do it with the media working against her. Most of the news outlets, from the local paper to CNN, had already judged Liam guilty—sensationalizing the whole thing for their own profit. Despite the fact that the police hadn't released even the most

basic information from the crime scene (like the facts that Dr. T and the Key Killer were there at all), some of the nation's best-known criminal defense attorneys were called in on prime-time television to discuss how bad it looked for not only Liam, but D. A. Jane Rose and her bid for reelection. They argued that the only reason I wasn't in jail with Liam was because of the "abuse of her position."

Everyone knew I had to be involved; they just didn't know how. But with schmucky reporters like Sammy roaming around and opponents like Bill Brandon looking for dirt, it was only a matter of time before more damning discoveries were made.

But I believed in my mom's ability to fix everything—she was powerful, influential, and had an uncanny ability to get what she wanted. I had to trust that she was keeping the police away from me for the right reasons. And yet I couldn't help toying with the idea of storming into my dad's old department to see Mathews, or into Martinez's unit office and demanding that someone release Liam immediately as I revealed the details needed to exonerate him. Surely my sworn testimony would provide immediate proof of his innocence. But every time I thought through that scenario, I saw myself cuffed and escorted to a padded cell where I'd wait until Jane could come

parading in to save me.

If worse came to worst, I was prepared to confess to Martinez's murder myself. I figured the probability of me going to prison for life was already so high that tacking on another murder to my rap sheet hardly mattered.

While Liam had been detained for six days now, the press was lined up and down our street, turning our house into my own personal detention center. Closed curtains, locked doors, and complete isolation. I roamed the house with a frenzied tension that became more unbearable by the second.

The only human contact I'd had all day was when my mom came into my

room this morning. She stood at the foot of my bed and cleared her throat to wake me up.

“Ruby, I shouldn’t have to say this, but I am going to make it abundantly clear. Don’t do anything *stupid* today. Don’t leave this house and don’t talk to anyone. The two guards stationed outside will inform me if you try. Do you understand?”

Barely awake, I nodded.

When I sat up to face her, she was already gone, leaving me in the wake of her Chanel No. 5 perfume. It was like I had taken the role of one of her desperate clients—and she had taken the role of my distant high-powered attorney.

She didn't even say good-bye or reassure me that it would all be OK. Not that I expected her to. But that didn't mean that I'd forgotten the days when she did.

Now, I sat on the stairs and clutched my phone, wondering when my mom would call to give me an update. A shred of info, a scrap of hope. I'd already called her four times with no answer.

I scrolled down my contact list until I saw my backup mom's name—Mother Teresa. I hit "Send" knowing I wasn't supposed to talk to anyone today, but Dr. T probably wouldn't answer anyway. She'd blocked me at every turn. She left the hospital before I was granted

permission to leave my room. And she hadn't answered one of my calls or texts since. Whatever her "SECRETS" were, she was hanging on to them like they were still duct taped inside. She had to know something that would help Liam's case, but she was staying silent. The call went to her voicemail, and I hung up.

I considered writing a letter to Liam, telling him how sorry I was. But what was I going to say? *Sorry I got you framed for the murder of a police officer. I hope your family's hearts aren't broken and that Tug doesn't cry himself to sleep at night. Oh, and I trust the guards aren't beating you too badly.*

He didn't belong in there. He

belonged out here with me. Except, I worried he would finally come to his senses and decide to distance himself from me entirely. I wouldn't blame him, but I would miss him more than I wanted to admit. I ran a finger over my lips, remembering the last time we kissed. The taste of him was gone, but the memory of him would last much longer. Maybe forever.

I scrolled down to the next favorite on my contacts list—Alana. I pressed “Send” knowing she wouldn't answer, either, but just hearing her voice on her outgoing message made me feel connected to her again:

Aloha, you've reached Alana. I'm

*either at the beach, at the mall,
or...at the beach. Leave a message
at the beep.*

Instead of hanging up, I inexplicably started to cry. Right there on her voicemail. My voice cracked as I tried to say, “I miss you.” It cracked again as I sobbed, “I really need you.” And then my heart cracked along with my voice as I begged, “Please call me back.”

I hung up wondering what I’d just done. I’d never been the pathetic, pleading kind of girl. After all that time of pushing Alana away, all I wanted was her friendship back. As I held my head in my hands—ashamed as well as alone—I tried not to admit to myself that all

my “irrational fears of abandonment” had been realized.

I was completely on my own. Just like Liam would be for “twenty-five to life” if my mom didn’t pull a miracle out of her hat.

Out of complete desperation, I went to the family room and turned on the TV, flipping through the local news channels to see if my mom was being interviewed. The last few days I’d been avoiding the news like the plague, imagining all sorts of terrible headlines.

“Ruby the Death Rose—Involved in Yet Another Murder”

“Ruby Rose: Hot Damsel in

Distress or Cold Psychopathic Killer?”

“Incumbent D. A. Jane Rose Drops Twenty Points in the Polls to Bill Brandon—Wayward Child to Blame”

Instead, what I saw made my heart plunge with sorrow. Coverage of Detective Martinez’s funeral service showed huge crowds of uniformed police officers, decorated Marines, and hundreds of civilians dressed in black among the flags and flowers. So much sadness, so much pain. A fresh set of tears came to my eyes, and I wiped them away with both hands like windshield

wipers, remembering my dad's funeral. The sight was so morbidly similar.

With a dark emptiness in my chest, I wondered whether Dad would've been there today. Had he and Martinez really put the past behind them? In any case, *I* should have been there. I should've been standing there next to his family, telling them the truth of what happened.

And then I spotted my mom at the head of the procession, walking through the graveyard with two Latina women. One was older, like grandma old. And the other was young, like my age or a few years younger. She looked vaguely familiar. Some part of me felt like I knew them. Martinez's mom and daughter, perhaps?

They were followed by Sergeant Mathews, who I didn't even realize knew Martinez. But there he was. At six foot six, he looked more like an NBA center than a cop. Then, of course, Bill Brandon and his perfect hair and teeth came strolling in last with his entourage.

I watched it for as long as I could. When the commentators came back on and began smearing Liam, I switched the channel. I couldn't watch anything anymore.

I paced up and down the staircase like a caged animal, trying to figure out how Silver had pulled this off. Even when I'd thought I was being clever with the license plate clue, he'd seen it coming and used it to lure me into

another kill. He punished me for getting Detective Martinez involved with the cell phone tower signals by killing him and framing Liam for it. I wanted to run but had nowhere to go. And even if I had a destination in mind, two guards were stationed outside my house.

My heart was practically beating out of my chest—not only from climbing the stairs over and over again, but also from a growing sense of claustrophobia. I stopped at the top of the stairs and looked out the one window that wasn't blinded by drapes, the half circle of glass above the entryway. All I could see were blue skies, palm trees swaying—and an angel, walking up the driveway. A brown-skinned angel

dressed in Daisy Dukes with a bright yellow flower in her hair.

Alana.

I rushed down the stairs and opened the door before she even had a chance to reach the front steps. She stopped when she saw me and cocked her head sideways with a *Don't jump on me* look.

Too bad.

I ran and threw my arms around her. I couldn't care less that the guards were probably freaking out about my unauthorized exit.

"I'm so sorry, Ruby," she said as she nuzzled into my neck. "I've been the worst friend ever. I just got your message. I totally sucketh—"

"Stop. You don't suck," I assured her.

“You’re here.”

“I heard about Liam and that Detective. I just can’t believe it.”

“I know.” I pulled back to face her. “Don’t believe it, because it’s not true. Come on, let’s get in the house before those paparazzi leeches get any more ammunition. You never know if your butt will make the front page tomorrow.”

“You think so?” she asked, sounding flattered. “It could be the start of my butt-modeling career.”

“Miss Rose,” Buff Security Guy Number 1 said, blocking the entrance. “We don’t have clearance for anyone but you to enter the premises.”

“Yeah, well, she’s coming in whether you like it or not. She’s my best friend.

So go ahead and try to stop us.”

Buff Guy Number 1 gave Buff Guy Number 2 a nervous glance.

“What are you going to do? Fight me?” I led Alana through the two of them and grabbed the front door. “Call Warden Jane if you want. We’ll be inside.”

Slam—that felt good.

As soon as we got to my room, Alana handed me a thick stack of papers.

“Your makeup work,” she said. “Well, most of it. I actually got this two days ago and was going to bring it over yesterday, but I wasn’t sure if you’d want to see me.”

“Oh my gosh, thanks.” I wasn’t allowed to go back to school until this

was all “cleared up.” Not just my lungs, but the allegations piling up around me. But if there was a chance I could still graduate with perfect grades, I’d take it. I plopped it all down on my desk before joining Alana on my bed.

“So,” she said warily, her eyes roaming the room as if looking for body parts.

“Look, Alana, thanks for coming. I know how *complicated* all this is, and there’s probably nothing I can say to explain—”

“Then don’t,” she broke in. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. I only came to make sure you’re OK. I see your picture on the news. I hear your name in the halls. Everyone has a theory

on your involvement with another murder. They're saying the craziest things. Like you put Liam up to killing that cop, that maybe you had something to do with your own dad's death."

Ouch.

"That you're going to go after me next," Alana continued. "And I just couldn't take it anymore. I almost punched Taylor in her big ol'—"

"Oh, I am so sure, Alana," I said. "You and what army? I won't be there to back you up, so don't go getting yourself into any trouble because of me." I couldn't bear to think of putting Alana in any more danger. All I had ever wanted to do was protect her. Even from that first day on the playground when I found

her crying in the corner.

“I’m really worried about you, Rue,” she said, looking me directly in the eyes. “Things just seem to go from bad to worse. When is it going to stop?”

“I don’t know.” My shoulders slumped. “Maybe never. Honestly, I don’t see me coming out of this one unscathed, Alana. There’s too much I can’t explain. And my mom...” I searched for the words to describe the great divide between us. “I don’t know if she’s going to be able to stop me from going to prison for a very long time. Even if she wanted to.”

“What are you talking about?” Alana tipped my chin up to face her. “Who is this person sitting here? And what have

you done with Ruby Rose?”

“It’s not that simple. My mom promised me she’d help exonerate Liam, but then behind my back she seems intent on using him as a scapegoat for Detective Martinez’s murder. I’m getting desperate. I’m almost to the point of confessing myself even though I didn’t do it. I swear, Alana, the man responsible for this is the same guy who made me kill LeMarq and...” I stopped there. I didn’t need to bring up the laundry list of other bad dudes I’d killed.

“Shut up, I know you guys couldn’t have done it,” she said. “Not only do I believe you, Ruby, but I believe *in* you.”

“But it’s not over. He’s going to find

a way to lure me out again. I can't stop him, he's too smart—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa—have you forgotten how freakishly brilliant you are? *You* are smarter than this guy. You are totally capable of beating him. And you don't have to rely on your flaky mom to do it.”

Alana didn't get it. She didn't have all the facts. She was too naive and ignorant of the truth to understand that even if my mom came through on Liam, I couldn't let all those murders (that Alana didn't even know about) get swept under the rug. No amount of her Rah-Rah-Ruby cheerleading would change the fact that I would eventually have to confess to having killed these men, and my story

was too unbelievable for redemption.

“You don’t understand.”

“Stop it, Ruby.” She raised her voice and grabbed my hand. “Stop it with your glass-half-empty bull-crap. All is not lost. Your dad, Mr. Badass Jack Rose, didn’t train you for all those years so you could give up.”

“My dad?” I sat a little straighter at the mention of his name.

“That’s right. Don’t forget what he taught you. I used to think he was psycho—the way he made you his little Barbie Soldier. Turns out, he was psychic or something. He must’ve known this could happen.”

I stared out the window, digesting her totally un-naive, non-ignorant wisdom. I

had underestimated my incredibly loyal best friend, just like I'd underestimated Liam.

“He wouldn't let you give up, and neither will I. So tell me you're going to fight,” Alana demanded.

The strength of my dad's soul surged inside me. Memories of us sitting on our surfboards past the break came crashing back. Days at the shooting range and nights at the dojo. It was true: My dad wanted me to be ready. He prepared me for the time my shoreline would be tested. I'm sure he never imagined it would be quite like this. But he knew someone was a threat to his family. He'd made sure I was strong enough, smart enough, and prepared enough to endure

it.

And in all that time, he never let me hang my head.

So I lifted it. “I promise, I’ll fight.”

And suddenly, I knew exactly how to do it.

CHAPTER 25

Before Alana left, I assured her that if my plan didn't work, I unofficially bequeathed my shoe collection to her. In the meantime, we agreed that it would be best for her to keep her distance. She needed no further convincing of how dangerous it was to be my friend. Maybe one day soon we'd get back to working on our tans together.

But for now, I knew what had to be done: Get to Filthy number five—Mr. Stanley Violet—before Silver did. Or at least before Silver put me in the

impossible position of killing him. I needed to warn him that if he did what Silver said, he would end up like the other four. I needed to make Violet my ally, not my victim. I needed him to help me not kill him.

Ha, I *was* insane. I was about to sneak out of my nice safe home and go looking for a rapist to convince him to help me. *Real smart, Ruby. Best idea ever.*

“Oh shut up,” I said to my inner self, then went upstairs to get ready.

Within fifteen minutes, I had my mom’s minigun holstered under my hoodie, my butterfly blade in The Cleave—and I’d scrawled a note to my mom:

I’m sorry that I did something

“stupid,” but I just couldn’t sit here. I went to see the last man on my list, Stanley Violet. If I don’t come back, you’ll know where to start looking for me.

I left it on my desk, not hers, just in case I got back before her and she didn’t need to know.

I cracked my window and threw the hook of my dad’s Ranger Rappelling Rope around the tree branch nearest me. I’d done this kind of thing before at the SWAT training center, and once on a NorCal camping trip with Dad’s team (including Mathews), I’d done it down the face of a mountain.

The adrenaline kicked in as I gripped

the rope with gloved hands and steadied myself outside of the sill. I shut the window behind me and let myself down little by little, using my feet to slow the descent. I hit the ground softly with the balls of my feet and tugged at the rope from a 45-degree angle to get it to slide off the branch right. But it didn't. The line was stuck on something. I couldn't just leave the rope dangling. Soon one of the guards would make his rounds back here and see it.

I only had one other option since I didn't have time to climb the tree and untie it. I had to throw the rest of the rope back up into the branches and hope the guards didn't look up.

When I heard a man cough, I chucked

the rope like it was a viper and ran. This time I'd thought ahead and was wearing my Dr. Martens combat boots—aka The Doctors.

I tore across the yard and jumped the wall behind my house. No paparazzi hanging out back here. Good thing, because the way I was dressed—black skinny jeans, black boots, black hoodie, my mom's little black gun hiding in my black shoulder holster—didn't speak highly of my intentions. I wasn't going to church, that's for sure.

Dr. Fenton, the anesthesiologist who lived behind us, had a Ducati motorcycle my dad drooled over. He used to tease my mom that one day she'd have to bail him out of jail for stealing it because

“Dr. Brilliant” always left the keys in the ignition. Little did he know it would be me doing the stealing.

I padded around the Fentons’ gazebo and pool waterfall, making sure not to be seen, and I slid into the dark garage. I flipped the switch to find not just one shiny beast, but four—all lined up.

The red Harley Davidson, the blue Kawasaki, the silver BMW, or the black Ducati. After a full minute of needless indecision, I chose the Ducati in memory of my dad (and to match my outfit). I found a shiny-charcoal helmet that fit well enough and tucked my braided ponytail inside.

To avoid the roar of the engine, I walked the bike out until I hit an

overgrown patch of ivy on the side driveway. Then I turned her on and thought about a few dirt-biking trips with my dad to remember how to make her go. Soon, I was peeling out in the direction of Mr. Violet's video game lair twenty miles down the Pacific Coast Highway.

The wind felt cleansing as it whisked past me at 90 miles per hour. For a while, the adrenaline erased everything. The emptiness and regret for a life without my father. The sadness for Martinez and his grieving family. The frustration toward my mom and her silent evasion. The guilt for Liam alone in his eight-by-eight cell. All of it was temporarily replaced with blind speed

and mindless exhilaration. Until I realized that getting pulled over for a simple speeding ticket could set off a disastrous chain of events.

I slowed down and tried to focus, finally exiting the highway and turning onto a private drive right up the cove. Didn't need GPS directions for this one—I'd been here before.

A while ago, I'd followed Mr. Violet back here after a gamer conference he'd attended in San Diego. I'd watched him with binoculars, waiting for the moment he'd pull someone out of the trunk of his Ferrari. But when it never happened, I went home.

This time, I wouldn't be going home until we'd had our little chat. I knew he

would recognize me, and at a minimum be curious why the infamous Ruby Rose was on his doorstep.

Not to sell Girl Scout cookies. Certainly not in this getup.

I slowed down and parked the Ducati in a patch of oleander bushes two houses away, hanging the helmet on the handlebar. Violet's place was too secure to sneak up on him, and I had no time for any drawn-out tactics. Instead, I was going to walk right up and ring the doorbell.

Over the cobblestone drive, through the ivy-clad entryway, and under the portcullis into the courtyard. Two large wreaths hung on the double doors, but instead of red ribbons or holly berries,

the painted black sprigs boasted a silver snake and miniature swords. Where'd he buy this—
HolidayDecorationsForCreeps.com?

I looked down to make sure that if I rang the bell there wasn't some booby trap under my feet that would land me in his dungeon forever.

A video intercom sprang to life before I could touch anything. Violet's shiny face leered down at me from a screen on the pillar.

"Who are you? What do you want?" His voice sliced through the speakers, surrounding me like I was in a cave.

"My name's Ruby Rose. I need to talk to you," I said, checking that my gun was still there. "It's a matter of life and

death.” That was the first time I’d ever used that clichéd phrase, and it was actually true.

He paused, and I heard the tapping of a keyboard. It sounded like he was playing one of his video games. Or maybe he was using face-recognition software to confirm my identity. Or putting in the command for his portcullis to fall and trap me—who has a portcullis anyway? This was Orange County, not Scotland circa 1400 AD.

“Ruby Rose, eh? Whose life and death are we talking about?”

“Yours.” I tried not to blink.

Another pause. He started typing again, and I braced for what he might do. He could send a 911 text and have my

own dad's SWAT team come take me out.

Instead, the remote-controlled double doors swung open. "Then by all means, come in."

As soon as I crossed the threshold, Violet rounded the corner and held out his small hand to formally introduce himself like a perfect gentleman—which I knew he most definitely was not.

His moist fingers wrapped around my hand, and it felt like I was being forced to shake tentacles with a dead octopus. It took everything I had not to throw him and his greasy ponytail into one of his antique swords and make him feel the pain he'd forced on too many innocent girls. I would have if it didn't involve

touching more of his skin.

“Come.” He motioned for me to join him in a strange sitting room full of skulls and serpents. “May I offer you something to drink?”

Yeah, so he could drug me and make me more *compliant*. “I don’t think so.”

All the windows were covered in black curtains, blocking out any late-afternoon light. I had to get this over with—and get out of here as soon as possible.

“Listen, I need your help,” I said, hating the taste of the words on my tongue. “And you need mine.”

“Oh...*kay*,” he said, awkwardly sitting down on a claw-like couch—the back rose up in four sharp talons, so it

seemed like any minute he could be crushed within his own living room. “Help with what, exactly?”

I took a long breath, searching for the best way to answer. “Your life is in danger, and I want to protect you.”

“Right.” He released a stifled laugh that was tinged with nervousness. He was scared of me. And the poorly concealed pistol in his track pants didn’t seem to make him feel any better.

I paused, seeking the line between telling him as little as possible (to prevent him from going to the police with any information), and as much as possible (to prevent Silver from pulling off the fifth kill by my hand).

“Has anyone contacted you lately

about ‘product’ you may be interested in?” I asked.

“Listen, Ruby—may I call you Ruby?”

“That’s fine,” I lied. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

“OK, Ruby, I know who you are.” He pulled at the hem of his thin V-neck to expose scar tissue on his shoulder. “After all, it was your sharpshooting dad who gave me this.”

He stared at me like I owed him an apology.

“You deserved it,” I assured him.

“So is that why you’re here? To give me what I deserve?”

“I told you, I’m here to help you. I swear.”

“Help me like you helped that LeMarq fellow? With a bullet between the eyes?” He placed a pale forefinger to his oily brow, as if I needed a visual.

I clenched my jaw and decided to respond in kind. “OK, Mr. Violet, here’s the truth, plain and simple: Someone has been setting me up to take out *killers*.” I watched his eyes flinch. “I don’t know who’s doing this to me, and I’m not even sure why. But I do know that you’re next.”

I took a few steps toward him to make sure he understood me with perfect clarity. “He is going to try to make me kill you, and I *don’t* want to do that.”

A twisting silence slithered between us while he absorbed the truth. He stared

through me with the eyes of a racked soul.

My head swiveled around just in case someone else was here. I put my hand inside my hoodie to grip my gun.

“Yes, someone has contacted me,” he finally admitted.

“OK, then,” I said, relieved he might actually cooperate. “I have a plan.”

I flung my backpack off my shoulder and reached inside to grab my dad’s vest.

“This is an Ultralight Concealed Goldflex/Kevlar Level IIIA Bulletproof Vest.” I held it out to him. “Wear this day and night. I don’t know when you’ll need it.”

He sat forward on the heel of the

claw-couch and took the offering, inspecting the impossibly thin design.

“Wear it with sweatshirts to maximize the concealment,” I said, channeling my father. “And you need to start thinking about other methods of protection. Hire more security, stay armed, and above all, resist any kind of bait he lays for you.”

“Slow down, sweetheart, slow down —”

“Don’t call me *sweetheart*, and don’t you dare treat this lightly,” I warned him.

“But I don’t understand. You aren’t making any sense.” He held up his hands. “Why would—”

“You don’t have to understand.” I cut

him off again. “Look, I don’t have all the answers. I just know at some point he’ll come for you. And as much as I don’t give a damn about you, the only chance of this working is if you try to protect yourself. Any slight wrench in his plans might be the difference between you living and me killing you. If you value your life, you’ll fight however you can.”

Doubts fought against my hopes as he sunk in reaction to the word “fight.” This small man was no fighter. He was scrawny and despicable. But he was my only chance.

I turned to go. I couldn’t bear to be in his presence one second longer.

Before leaving, I said, “Regardless of what I think of you and the truly evil

things you've done, I don't want to kill you. Please don't make me."

CHAPTER 26

The sound of the garage door cut through my thoughts. Mom was finally home. I shook off the memory of Violet's tentacles touching me, reassuring myself that my scalding shower had washed away all his filth. Man, my loofah was getting a lot of use lately.

I ran downstairs to meet her. I had to know what was going on with Liam.

"Hey, Mom," I said softly, trying not to scare her. It was well after 11:00 p.m., and most of the lights were off.

"Ruby!" She jumped like a skittish

cat. “What are you trying to do, kill me?”

Was that a Freudian slip?

“Why are you home so late?” I asked, going for a gentle approach. “I’ve been waiting to talk to you.”

“Yeah, well it’s going to have to wait,” she said curtly as she scrambled to pick up the files she’d dropped.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked, sensing something in her frantic movements.

She brushed past me and started hiking the stairs.

“Are you just going to ignore me forever?” I called after her. “You know, it was only a week ago that *you* asked *me* to meet at Dr. Teresa’s to talk. Did

you suddenly forget what you had to say?”

“Rue, it’s almost midnight. It’s been a long day, and I’m tired.” She stopped and took off her heels—like that would give her more getaway speed.

“You told me you’d help him,” I said, not even close to giving up. “You promised.”

She turned and looked down at me.

“He’s been in there forever. Why haven’t you gotten him out?”

“It’s more complicated than I realized at first. Do you know how it would look if I pulled strings to get my daughter’s high school *fling* out of jail after he killed a veteran police officer?”

Whoa. I could not have heard that “he

killed” part right.

“He didn’t do it. I told you that. I was there!” I stalked up the stairs after her. “If you’d let me talk to the police, I would tell them that! They have no right to detain him. They have no evidence, no motive. He should have been released by now.”

“Ruby, honestly, just stop. You have no idea what you are talking about. His bail was set too high, and his mom can’t afford it. She’s a bartender,” she said condescendingly. My anger flared and the springs in my muscles tightened up, waiting for the release.

“What bail—what are you talking about?” I asked, staring her down.

“Arraignment was several days ago.

The judge set bail at a million dollars.” She turned to go, but I grabbed her wrist. This was escalating too fast.

“A million dollars? That’s ridiculous. Why didn’t you tell me?” I narrowed my eyes at her, knowing exactly why she hadn’t told me. She saw this fight coming, and that’s why she’d been avoiding me. I wanted to slap myself for believing in her and not finding out about Liam’s situation myself. “Why haven’t you told me anything? I trusted you, and yet you’re the one allowing the charges to be brought!”

She pulled her wrist away. “My hands are tied. I can’t go easy on him because you have a crush on him, Ruby. He had Martinez’s blood on his hands

—”

“So did I. I told you that Martinez had been shot. We *both* had blood on our hands because we were trying to save Martinez’s life. And even so, that’s not enough evidence for an arrest.”

“I’m afraid it is,” she said, her tone hot with impatience. “It may be circumstantial, but combined with other factors, it’s evidence nonetheless. The boy has a record, Ruby. He almost killed someone before.”

“What? He was only protecting his little brothers and mother from his *drunk* dad,” I argued. “And how is that relevant?”

“Protecting yourself would be calling the police, not taking a baseball bat and

putting your own father in a coma for seven days.”

“You don’t know all the facts,” I said, a little thrown by the baseball-bat thing. Liam hadn’t mentioned that detail, and I flinched at the image of him beating his father.

“Neither do you,” she said flatly. “No matter what his father did, he didn’t deserve to be nearly beaten to death. Contrary to what you might currently believe, violence is *not* the answer. The boy is a danger to society.”

“I should’ve known you would pick sides with the abusive parent,” I sputtered. “You *know* Liam didn’t do this.”

“That’s not true. He won’t even talk

to me. He gave his statement to the police and now he is relying on his two-bit public defender,” she said, rubbing her eyes and smudging her makeup even more. “The whole thing...it just doesn’t look good.”

“It doesn’t look good?” I repeated. Of course, I should’ve seen this coming. “*Looks* have always been more important to you than the *truth*, Miss Botox California. Miss Sham Marriage, Miss Closet Alcoholic. I wonder how it would *look* if I decided to go see my paparazzo friend Sammy and gave him an exclusive interview on the *real* life of Jane Rose. Or call up our Bill Brandon and give him—”

“I’m going to bed,” she cut me off,

pinching her eyes shut and blowing out a dramatic breath of exhaustion. She was bluffing, and I was calling.

“Drop the charges, Jane, or I’ll drop a bomb on your campaign you’ll never recover from. Bill Brandon will have a whole new set of names to call you,” I said, knowing I’d just crossed the line. But asking nicely wasn’t working. Liam’s life was on the line. “There is no evidence that can’t be explained away. He’s innocent, and you know it. I won’t let you use him as a scapegoat.”

She glared at me, and I almost lost my nerve, but instead of succumbing to her intimidation, I turned it up. “I will not be ignored by you anymore. I will not be neglected and abused because of your

career. I will not let you scoff at what I have with Liam. It's not a *fling* or a *crush*. He's been there for me in a way you never have." It was all true, but instead of feeling relieved for finally communicating what Liam meant to me, I felt awful for the mean way it came out.

"I don't respond well to threats, young lady," she said. "Not from the criminals off the street, and not from the criminals in my own home."

I flinched, and for a second I thought she did, too. Her words stung worse than a slap to the face. Yes, I'd trailed the men I killed, I'd withheld information from the police, and I'd even "borrowed" a motorcycle from a neighbor without permission. But every

life I took was taken either in self-defense or in the defense of others. None of what I'd done looked good—in fact, much of it looked horrendously stupid in hindsight.

But I thought I'd explained it to her, all very clearly. Yet here she was, calling me a criminal. Mothers aren't supposed to say things like that. They're supposed to love unconditionally, aren't they?

“You would do well to remember that I'm the one who's kept you out of the courtroom. *I've* kept you out of prison.” Her red-wine breath made me back up. “So you don't care for who I am, I get it. Well, guess what, *honey*—I don't much care for who you are.” The look of

disgust on her face was enough for my soul to scurry back into the hole it had come from. “Or not, at least, what you’ve become.”

She turned her back and closed her double doors on me with deliberate force. Then she locked them. She was scared of me. Maybe even repulsed by me. And, until further notice, she was done with me.

I was officially alone in the world. Not that I didn’t already feel it, but now I knew it. I had Alana again, but for now, the less contact I had with her the better.

I bit my lip trying to fight the sting of my tears. In the darkness, I felt the pain, the rejection, and the guilt roll down my cheeks. Maybe if I hadn’t followed my

Filthy Five in the first place, none of this would have happened and she'd still love me.

Never in my whole life had she so deliberately rejected me. Through all my failures to live up to her expectations, through all our differences of opinion, and even through the death of my dad, I had never seen her so cold.

If Silver was trying to demolish me, mission accomplished.

Everything I'd ever valued was gone.

I tried not to imagine my mom's gloating face as they took me away forever. She'd be happy to be rid of me, and my inheritance would only be a bonus. She'd get all five million dollars of life insurance funds held in trust for

me.

Wait, the money! Why hadn't I thought of this before? I wiped salty tears from my cheeks.

Liam needed a million dollars, and I had it. Maybe I could call the estate-planning attorney and get the money wired by noon—Liam could be here by nightfall. The thought of his arms around me and the warmth of his breath on my neck made me lightheaded. Like a balloon expanding with air, I allowed myself to fill up with hope.

Unfortunately, my thin piece of ruby-colored rubber popped when I remembered who the trustee was: Wicked Witch of the West Coast Jane Rose. She controlled my trust fund, and

there was no way I'd be getting my hands on any of it. At least not until I was twenty-one. And even then, it had been explained to me that I would only receive one-third increments—presumably to prevent my spending it all on shoes in one year. Which, to be honest, was a bigger possibility than I cared to admit.

I gave my pillow a pile driver to the gut and threw it across the room. Not knowing what else to do with myself, I grabbed the remote. Part of me wanted to throw it like a Chinese star at the flat screen, but instead I pressed power. My TV had never done anything to me.

The only thing on was *Real Housewives of Orange County*, and—oh

yeah, the late-night reruns of the talking heads speculating on the sanity of Ruby Rose. How would I ever get a fair trial with these bottle blondes spouting off about “mounting evidence yet to be released?” Not that I didn’t like free speech—or getting a few highlights now and then—but please, these girls didn’t know the difference between the day spa and a defamation charge. I doubted either of them would have called me a “disturbed and traumatized child” to my face. But it was cool to say it in front of the entire free world.

I listened to them hypothesize how Liam and I were like a teen version of Bonnie and Clyde. That perhaps the motive behind Martinez’s murder was

Liam protecting me from being investigated. That young love sparked his intent to kill.

Did these women smoke crack before going on air? How much more outrageous could they get?

The tolling of the grandfather clock downstairs brought me back to cold reality. It was 12:15 a.m., and I was no closer to sleeping. No closer to finding any answers that could save me from this nightmare called my life. I turned off the TV and sat there brooding until around 1:00, finally falling asleep in Gladys, my trusty shoe closet and most loyal friend.

CHAPTER 27

I woke up with a start. Gasping for air, I rolled over wondering who'd taken my pillow and why my comforter was tangled around me. It was 4:00 a.m.

“Oh jeez.” I sat up to get my bearings. Light trickled in from my bathroom across the way. “No rest for the wicked.”

Sore didn't cover the way my back felt. Even my mind felt stiff. Dreams of blonde-headed zombies chasing me with pitchforks hadn't been exactly restful. I looked around Gladys's dark walls for

some comfort, but for perhaps the first time in my life, my shoes had none to give. They all just sat there, listless and inanimate. I must have hit rock bottom if I felt alone even among my shoes.

I finally scraped myself off the floor and headed to the kitchen for something to eat. As I hobbled down the stairs, I noticed my mom's doors were open. Maybe she couldn't sleep, either.

I perked up my ears for signs of her presence, but all I heard was the howling wind seeping in from outside. No TV coming from her room, no dishes clinking in the kitchen, no tapping of the keyboard in her office.

I couldn't help myself. I mounted the stairs again and peeked into her room. It

would be so like her to lure me in there just to punish me for it. Maybe *she* was the mastermind after all. Or had employed Silver to make me into the assassin she couldn't be. If she couldn't put those killers away, she would have her psychopath child do it for her.

Now *my* speculation was getting out of control.

"Mom?" I called out. I hadn't been in her room for months. "Are you in here?"

The wind whistled back like it was trying to tell me something. The hair on my arms stood on end.

Her bed was unmade; the light in her walk-in closet was on. *Curious.*

Her briefcase and car keys were on the dresser. *Suspicious.*

I rounded the corner into the hallway leading to her bathroom but was stopped by papers scattered all over the floor. *Straight-up alarming.*

“Mom!” I called out again, this time with a tremor of panic. To be sure, I doubled back into her room to look under the crumpled bedcover, in the closet, and even on her balcony.

I ran downstairs and then back up, checking each room to make sure she wasn’t hiding somewhere.

She wasn’t here.

Silver had gotten her. I was sure of it. Somehow, he’d slipped in past security and taken her. Despite the anger I’d felt toward her last night, all I felt now was sick. I went back to her bed and put my

head in my hands. She was my mom, and I still loved her. I needed her, even if she'd never need me back. She was all I had left.

Blood. Why could I smell it all of a sudden? I sniffed the air like a dog. The metallic scent was definitely coming from the bathroom. I'd followed the coppery smell over the trail of papers and into the excessively large master bathroom suite when the wind got kicked right out of me. My mom's sink was full of bloodstained water and more papers. The drain was actually blocked, holding it all there for me. I pulled out some of the papers and let them drip on the floor.

Red streaks covered the countertop and mirror. Mom must have resisted. I

was horrified by my reflection—it looked like *I* was covered in blood. Like some magic mirror had finally revealed the real me.

Red Ruby Rose, stained in blood.

More papers were strewn across the drawers and shelves, all of them soaked in watery blood. I put them together on the bath mat to figure out what they could be. Knowing Silver, I had to assume they had meaning.

It was a pleading, and the caption read “In the Matter of the Custody of the Minor Child Hailey Bracken.” It was a Notice of Hearing on a Petition to Terminate Parental Rights. I dropped to my knees, desperate for more information. I found pieces of the

Petition with my mom's signature, then another signature on a paper titled "Affidavit of Guardian Ad Litem." She hadn't had physical custody of the child but had closely monitored the girl's care, nutrition, and well-being. That much I got.

Through the scattered and blood-soaked puzzle pieces, a story started to unfold. Fifteen years ago, my mom was appointed temporary Guardian Ad Litem of a baby. The baby's mom was on drugs, the baby had been neglected, and my mom terminated the bio mom's rights. No mention of any dad. All I could find was "Abandonment by biological father, name unknown."

During my mom's Family Court days,

she must have been appointed Guardian Ad Litem for dozens of children. Did this have something to do with Silver? Was he the one who'd abandoned his child? Was my original theory correct, and he was paying my mom back by slowly taking away everything she had? Did he intend to destroy her by destroying me, too?

Suddenly, her phone rang, the high-pitched ringtone frazzling what was left of my nerves. I followed the sound back to the bed and picked up her cell. Unknown number.

“Hello?” My voice cracked.

“Hello, Ruby,” a male voice said. It sent shivers down my spine.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

“Do you remember the last day you saw your father?” he said in a deep Batman-type whisper.

Of course I remembered. I remembered it every day. “Why? What are you planning to do to my mother?”

“Do you remember?” he repeated.

“Yes! OK, I remember.” I tried to remain calm. “Listen, whatever she did to you and your family, she’s sorry.” It wasn’t working. I was losing control. “*We’re* sorry—”

“Then remember last night, because unless you get here fast enough to save your mother, it will be *her* last night.”

I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

“Just so you know, Mr. Violet is also

waiting for you.”

My heart sank. He must’ve taken Violet right after I left. Or maybe Silver had been there when I visited earlier.

“We are both waiting for you,” he said carefully. “I know I don’t need to tell you this, but if you call the police, you might as well call the morgue, because she will already be dead. We’re going to finish this just as it began—on Grissom Island. The place your father tried to bury the truth. More detailed instructions will be sent to your phone. Good-bye, Ruby.”

I held my mom’s phone long after the line went dead.

I had no idea what kind of delusional truth Silver was referring to, but a sharp

reality lodged itself inside of me: This man had killed my father. I was sure of it now. My dad was murdered. Assassinated. By the same man who'd officially destroyed my life.

I'd believed knowing the truth would finally set me free. Instead, it crushed me. And hardened me. I vowed to make Silver pay.

If there was one way I could honor my father, it was to remember what he'd taught me. I couldn't react emotionally. I had to be logical and strategic.

Silver had said he'd know if I called the police, so either he had a scanner or a rat on the inside who would tip him off. In any case, he couldn't expect me to go in there alone. I longed for Liam. He

was smart. He saw things I didn't. I needed him, and my own mom had made sure I couldn't have him.

I checked the call history on Mom's phone. One name stood out among all the others: Mark Mathews—the man who let my dad die and then took his place as SWAT Sergeant. Why was my mom talking to my dad's old best friend at 11:25 p.m.? And again at 11:52? Plus several missed calls through the night?

Was she sleeping with him, just like she had with Martinez? Or could it be they were working together on catching the man behind all this madness? Or both? My mom was a lot of things, but she wasn't stupid. She'd probably known from the night I killed LeMarq

that there was someone manipulating me. That the same man who killed her husband was following me, luring me, torturing me. And she'd never said a word.

She'd betrayed me so deeply for so long. Lied to me, hidden things from me, imprisoned Liam—when none of it was even my fault. It was hers. This madman was tormenting me for *her* crimes. *Her* secrets. She'd destroyed his family, and now he was destroying hers, and mine. And also destroying Liam's to spite me.

Yet, she was my mother, and I wouldn't do to her what she had done to me. I wouldn't abandon her—I had to save her. I stared at the phone in my hand, weighing my options.

Go in alone, like he said.

Call 911 for help.

Trust Mathews—my dad’s best friend, my mom’s ally, the man who used to be like a second father to me but still refused to speak to me. Even after he came to the hospital after the fire.

Maybe all three. I would do whatever it took to bring Silver to justice.

I touched the screen over Mathews’s name and waited for the ring.

“Jane, why haven’t you been answering? I’ve been calling—”

“It’s Ruby.” I stopped him. “She’s gone. He’s taken her.”

He paused, like he needed some extra time to process my voice.

“*Ruby*? What happened? Where are

you?”

“I’m at home—in her room,” I said. “There’s blood, and papers. A man called and said to come to where my father tried to bury the truth. Grissom Island. And if I called the police, she’d be dead.”

I switched hands holding the phone, thinking my hand was sweaty from nerves. But when I looked down at my pants, I realized sweat wasn’t making my hand slippery—it was blood. Her blood.

“Listen, Ruby,” he said calmly, just like my dad used to even when he was stressed. “Don’t move. I’ll send a team to your house to protect you. I’ll take care of this.”

“No, that’s not how it’s going to happen,” I said with surprising authority. “I’m going in. Alone. That’s what he wants. He’s too smart. Too prepared. Anything else and she dies. Wait for my call. Then and only then you can move in.”

“Honey, please don’t—”

“Don’t call me honey!” I snarled into the phone. “I’ve been through too much to be treated like a child. And you know me better than that.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” he said, backtracking. “I just need you to understand who you’re dealing with.”

What? Did he know about Silver, too? Did everyone but me know my mom’s secrets?

“Oh *I understand* who I’m dealing with all right,” I snapped. “I think you and the whole police department are the ones who don’t understand.” I felt a wave of long-building anger rolling in. “It’s been nearly a year since my father was murdered, and you and your SWAT brothers have conveniently forgotten about him and his case. So much for honor, courage, and commitment.” I felt for the Challenge Coin in my pocket. “You let him die, and now you’ve let his memory die by ignoring the justice he deserves. I thought you loved him. I thought you loved me! How could you keep denying me the information I deserve *and*...sleep with my mom?”

Wow, where did that come from?

“Wait right there, Ruby.” Mathews’s tone shut me down. “First of all, I am not sleeping with your mother. That was Detective Martinez’s mistake, not mine. Second, I did love your father. He was the most courageous man I ever knew. *He* taught me honor and commitment. And I love you, too. It was your mother who forbade me—forbade us all—to speak to you. She told us to stay away. That in your emotional state you couldn’t bear it. I respected her wishes to keep you protected from the darkness surrounding their very public lives and your father’s very public death. I see now that it was a mistake, and I’m sorry. As soon as I get the chance, I’ll give you the whole truth. But not now. So please,

just let me take care of this. Do you hear me?”

My mind raced to take it all in: First, Mathews wasn't the traitor I thought he was—and maybe I could even trust him. Second, there was no end to my mom's betrayal. And third, I had to get to Grissom Island before Mathews.

“Don't move in until I call you,” I said before hanging up.

I ran to my bathroom to wash the blood off my hands, and then to Gladys to change into black clothes and shoes. Everything was already laid out—gun, holster, and all—just in case. I didn't bother with the window this time—just ran downstairs, opened the sliding back door, and bolted for the wall. I didn't

even care if the obviously incompetent guards saw me. As soon as I made it to my neighbor's Ducati, it wouldn't matter anymore.

CHAPTER 28

When I was a kid, my third-grade class took a field trip to Grissom Island. I remembered learning three things that day:

1. Grissom Island was one of four man-made islands on the Long Beach coast named after fallen astronauts.

2. The islands were built to hide some of the nation's largest and most productive oil-drilling rigs.

3. From shore, they all looked like something you might see at Disneyland. Grissom Island was definitely eye candy

—encased in an elaborate facade decked with swaying palm trees, huge waterfalls, and castle-like towers...all built to mask the dirty rigs.

I'd once asked my dad if princesses lived on the islands, and he said, smiling, "Only when they're on vacation."

I doubted he was smiling the day he went there and got blown to pieces.

Shaking off the image, I pulled into the harbor parking lot nearest the island. The sleek digital clock on the Ducati's dash read 4:46 a.m. It had only taken me twenty minutes at 100+ miles per hour to get here—even against the wicked wind trying to blow me back. The sun wouldn't show up for another ninety

minutes or so, but the harbor security likely would. I had to move if I didn't want to be seen.

In thirty seconds flat, I parked the bike, removed the helmet, and took cover behind a building marked "Shoreline Yacht Club." I reached into The Cleave for my phone and pulled up the waiting messages.

One from Mathews read:

Don't do this. Call me immediately.

The next from Sammy read:

On my way.

I shook my head, not believing what I'd done. Halfway to Long Beach, I'd stopped and sent him a text.

I'm coming thru on our agreement. If u want the story of ur life, u and ur cameras better get to Grissom Island asap. Tell Sgt Mathews I told u to come. I need this on film.

Even seeing his name on the screen made me want to jump into the harbor and wash myself off. But he was my insurance. Like Liam pointed out all those weeks ago, the police would never believe me if I didn't have any proof. This time I planned to give them footage

they couldn't ignore. It was a long shot —not just because Mathews might not let Sammy and his camera tag along, but because I could bet my life that Silver wouldn't strike a pose for me. But I had to try if it gave me a way to exonerate Liam.

I skipped to the last text, from the unknown number:

Find Boat Slip K-11—Gate K is wedged open. Take the orange kayak to southern rim. Meet us in the large white building at the heart of the island.

Great. I took a long hard look at the obstacle course before me.

The coastline was in darkness. But not Grissom Island. The decorative pink, yellow, and blue lighting lit up the sea. The sound of the crashing waterfalls consumed the area. If I hadn't known better, I could've mistaken this place for Fantasy Island. Too bad I knew exactly what it was—a veneer. A good place to hide secrets. Or even better, a great place to dig them up and bury them again.

A sliver of lightning cut through the sky, momentarily highlighting the entire scene and pointing out how isolated this place really was. It was basically in the middle of the ocean. Not only was getting on the island undetected going to be difficult, but the place was an

underground maze. Even if Silver had taken out the island's private security team and I could make it ashore, I was essentially walking into a dark and potentially explosive trap.

Getting off the island would be another mess. That was assuming any of us would be getting off alive.

Worst of all, a thunderstorm was coming. The shape of the encroaching fog looked like a monster about to swallow this place whole. The thought of traveling over those turbulent waters on a kayak—in the dark—required courage enough.

Someone was going to die on Grissom, I was sure of it.

Maybe my mom.

Maybe Violet—the last man standing on my list.

Maybe me.

Silver had outsmarted me at every turn. The chances of this time being any different were low. I accepted my odds. But I still had a brain. Only half a soul, perhaps, but definitely a fully functioning mind.

And hope. I still had shreds of that, too.

I spotted Gate K—about fifty feet away.

All of a sudden I felt like praying. I didn't even know how—I'd never done it before. But I figured it certainly couldn't hurt.

I muttered some “please helps” into

the phone I clutched, like maybe the cell had God's number on speed dial and like maybe I deserved the help (which I wasn't sure I did). I may not have been raised religious, but I'd heard of the Ten Commandments, and I was pretty sure the whole *Thou shalt not kill* thing was still high on that list. My mom's cell vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and stared at the angrily blinking red light, wondering if Silver had found out I called Sergeant Mathews and was now sending me a picture of my mom's corpse.

I tasted the bile rising inside me.

Pulling myself together, I turned on Mom's phone to see who the message was from. Mathews. It read:

DON'T GO IN. My team is eight min out.

My phone vibrated again. Another message from Mathews:

WE will take him out. I promise Ruby. I want justice for your dad just as much as you do. PLEASE don't go in. Respond.

Maybe he thought bombarding me on both phones would delay me.

But it wouldn't. I had to get inside, and now. I didn't doubt Silver's ability to kill and disappear. Just like with that girl on Ninth Street, if I didn't do

something, my mom would die. How could I live with myself if I stayed out here and did nothing?

I typed:

I'm already in. DO NOT move in until I contact you. I have a plan.

Who did I think I was? Not in my wildest dreams did I ever think I'd be ordering the SWAT Sergeant around. If I just waited a few minutes, they could escort me in. Or we could come up with a plan together. After all, they'd have the schematics of the island. And ten guns had to be better than one.

Except ten guns hadn't been enough to save my dad. I couldn't put my mom's

life in their hands when I knew with certainty what the result would be.

I wouldn't kill her by disobeying Silver's instructions.

I pulled my gun out of the holster inside my black hoodie and tried the gate. Just like he'd said, the heavy door was wedged open by what looked like a shoe. And not just any shoe. One of the \$900 Christian Louboutin "Love Me" 100 mm heels my mom was wearing last night before she took them off to run away from me. This sicko was taunting me again. There was absolutely no need to bring such a perfectly beautiful pair of shoes into this!

I went through the gate and re-wedged the shoe behind me. Slip K-11 was hard

to miss. It was the only slip without a million-dollar yacht. Waiting for me was more like a hundred-dollar piece of crap—a plastic kayak. I bit my lip as I descended the ladder, climbed into the unsteady craft, and began paddling toward the island with quick strokes across my body like my dad taught me.

It took me only a few minutes to navigate out of the dock and enter the open sea toward the southern perimeter of the island where the waves swelled around me. Ignoring the thoughts of what lay beneath and beyond, I concentrated on getting to the shore. The icy water slapping me in the face, the choppy wakes making me sick, and the fear bullying me backward wouldn't stop me.

Finally, I reached land. I shoved the stupid kayak onto the rocks and climbed the boulders to the top. Gun out, eyes up, arms wobbly from the paddling, I sprinted to the only big, white building I could see and hid behind a buzzing electrical box. I scanned the outside of the building until I found what I was looking for—a circular metal plate covering the ground. There was a chance in the darkness and fog that Silver might have lost sight of me (if he was watching) and wouldn't catch me entering from below.

I strained to pull up the plate, then lowered myself into the dark, relying on the feel of each metal rung of the ladder and hoping my eyes would adjust. I

couldn't see how far it was to the bottom, but it felt never-ending. Like this tunnel led to China. Or straight to the fiery depths of hell—where Silver belonged.

For every inch I descended, my heart rate exponentially ascended. I couldn't take much more of this.

Finally, my feet hit the ground and my eyes detected light. I raised my weapon and took careful, balanced steps through the darkness toward a barely lit tunnel. As I moved, all I could hear was the slight squeak of my own footsteps, a rhythmic drip-drop of water, and the buzz of electricity.

I moved through the cold, dank air, listening for any signs of movement

above or below. I prepared myself for attack from any side, analyzing every space I encountered for potential threats and sabotage. A calm focus took over as I moved swiftly through the snaking underground chambers. Maybe my dad had taken these exact steps.

His strength and courage filled me as I stole through the darkness.

One foot in front of the other, Rue, don't hesitate. Trust your instincts.

I clenched my jaw and moved forward. A faint sound came from above. I found a spiral staircase at the farthest west end of the bottom floor and began scaling it. *Arms up, shoulder cocked, weapon high and tight.*

I peered up to the first floor just to

make sure no one was there. Then I continued up, my heart beating faster with every step. The air temperature warmed and the dank smell dissipated the higher I climbed.

Breathe, concentrate, keep your focus on the target.

My arms were tired, and my legs burned from the stairs. I took a moment to compose myself and slow my heart rate before I made the final steps to the point where I could see the room above.

There was a stifled cry. I peered up through the railings to locate the noise, my head shielded by metal rails.

My mom was sitting in a chair at the center of the round room. Her hands were bound behind her, and there was

gray tape across her mouth. Two men stood in front of her with their backs to me, speaking in whispers. I recognized the small man as Filthy number five—Stanley Violet. Which meant the other one had to be Silver.

The dimly lit room appeared to be some kind of emergency antechamber with a cylindrical ceiling at least a hundred feet high. All the way up the walls I saw scaffolding and rungs of balconies for the different floors. Each floor was lit by small red lights. But on the main floor before me, there was vast empty space. No rigs, no machinery, no cover—except for the ring of shadows from the second floor scaffolding around the perimeter.

I bobbed my head back down and texted Sergeant Mathews:

She's in the westernmost area of the white building, center of the island. At least 2 levels down. I'm about to move in. Wait for my call.

I put away the phone, eager to finally see the man who had destroyed everything and everyone I ever loved.

The urge for revenge boiled inside of me. Dark, rolling, and spilling over with hatred.

I was so close to saving my mom, getting justice for my dad, and perhaps even proving Liam's innocence. It didn't matter that Sammy wasn't here yet.

If I shot Silver now, I could explain it all. Mathews would back me up, and when Sammy got here, his crime scene photos would, too.

How lucky was I to have found him just standing with his back to me, whispering tactics with Filthy Five *number five* and totally unaware of my location?

I slid the gun out onto the floor to steady myself. I only had one chance. I closed my left eye and focused down the barrel of the revolver toward the target. My finger itched to shoot. Just as I began to put pressure on the heavy trigger, he turned toward my mom and I finally saw Silver's face.

It wasn't him.

Or it didn't look like him.

At least not the "him" in the surveillance picture Liam brought me. This guy was clean-shaven and much older than I expected. The picture Liam showed me of the guy at the art fair had that silver-fox beard thing going on. Sure, he could have shaved, but he couldn't have aged twenty years. Now that I was looking, this guy also had weird posture, like he was seventy years old.

But if this wasn't Silver, where was he? And who was this?

"Hello, Ruby," said a voice from below. I almost pulled the trigger in surprise, but it was aimed in the wrong direction. "Put the weapon back in your

holster.”

Really? Not hand it over or kick it twenty feet away?

The man was only a few steps below me on the spiral staircase, his face hidden. I recognized his voice from the phone call. Silver.

“You may need it in a few minutes,” he continued in that low, gravelly voice.

Of course, he still wanted me to kill. I thought about pretending to put my gun away and then turning it on him for a quick shot, but I wasn’t ready for my first bullet wound. He’d stop me—not kill me. I knew that by now he wanted me alive in order to kill Violet, but he’d defend himself if I forced him to. I couldn’t be impatient or hotheaded if I

wanted to save my mom. I had to let it play out and take the chance when it presented itself.

“Listen, I know you think my mom’s a bad person.” I started to negotiate. “You don’t have to convince me of that fact, but—”

“Shhh,” he hushed me, using his gun to push me up the stairs. “There’s plenty to say, but not just yet.”

CHAPTER 29

I holstered my gun inside my hoodie like he asked and climbed slowly up the metal stairs. Each step I took sounded like the clicking of the tracks on a roller coaster as it climbed its way up to the big drop. The roller coaster came to a pause as I stepped out into clear sight of my mom and the two men. My mom's eyes widened with horror when she saw me, and she began jerking against the plastic ties binding her to the chair. One of her wrists was wrapped in bloodied white gauze.

The two men moved closer to her, as though they were protecting her from me. Like the way two lions would stand over their nice zebra dinner.

Who was the guy standing next to Violet?

I knew Silver was still behind me with a gun, but nothing prepared me for the moment he placed his hand at the small of my back to guide me toward the group. It was as if the roller coaster finally lurched forward from its pause on the precipice, making my stomach drop as the plunge took my breath away.

When I turned to face him, I found—Detective Martinez.

No, it couldn't be. Martinez was dead. Shot. Burned. How could he be

standing here wearing a tactical helmet and the smuggest smile I'd ever seen?

"But I saw you bleeding." I talked myself through the memories. "From under your vest—"

"Blood bags, Ruby."

"But your arm was ripped open where your tattoo used to be." His arm was covered now, but the way he was using it showed no signs of serious damage.

"I had to make sure they found my blood on you or the boy. Plus, I'd been meaning to get it removed anyway." He glowered. "The man I got it with no longer has his, either."

My dad.

"But they found your body in the

fire!”

“They found *a* body, Ruby. Someone in the coroner’s office owed me one.”

“I don’t understand...Liam...why —?”

“You will.” He motioned for me to keep moving toward the two other men and my mom. “We don’t have much time.”

“Time for what?” I asked, obeying his order while fighting for a sense of reality.

“I know you called in a SWAT team,” he said evenly, no longer using the low whisper from the phone call. No wonder I hadn’t recognized his voice. He’d been disguising it.

I turned to see his rage at my

disobedience, but the anger wasn't there. He wasn't surprised by my decision. He'd known I wouldn't blindly follow his directions.

"I expected nothing different," he said, motioning for me to move forward. "But perhaps the good ol' boys in SWAT will remember to watch out for the more *explosive* parts of this building."

Oh no, he'd booby-trapped it. My instincts raged to obliterate this sadistic piece of scum.

I was almost to my mom when he stopped me, and the four of us stood in a misshapen circle around my mom's chair. She looked so helpless, so afraid.

"I believe some introductions are in

order,” he said, moving away from me and standing halfway between me, my mom, a very nervous-looking Violet, and the mystery man. I kept trying to make eye contact with Violet, but he looked terrified.

“As you all know, my name is Detective Martinez, deceased,” he said with a very un-deceased smirk on his face. “To my right is Mr. Viktor Gulav. On the left, Mr. Stanley Violet, the last man standing on Ruby’s little list. Then last, but certainly not least among us, we have District Attorney Jane Rose.” He stepped closer to her and ripped the tape off. A piercing scream echoed off the cement walls around us. I flinched at the terror and rage in her cry.

“Are you done?” he asked squarely.

“What more do you want from me?” she shrieked. “I’ve already given you all of Jack’s life insurance money. You said if I gave it to you you’d—”

“That I’d leave you alone?” He walked several feet away, stopping under the shadow of an overhang. Without the flickering flame inside the open incinerator grate next to him, I wouldn’t have been able to see his evil grin. “Come on, Jane. You know me better than that by now.”

“Then what do you want?” she yelled.

“Let’s start with the truth.”

My mom’s eyes pivoted to me. She obviously knew what he was talking about.

“What truth?” I asked her. “What truth?” I asked him.

He never took his eyes off her, like he was waiting for her to answer first.

“OK, fine, I’ll start with some truth,” he said, unfolding his arms, gun still in hand. “You both already know Mr. Violet here. But you may not remember Mr. Viktor Gulav. Let me refresh your memory. Mr. G here is a skilled thief, arsonist, and international sex-trade and drug dealer.”

I looked over to the small man, expecting him to be offended at this description. Instead, he couldn’t have puffed out his bony old chest any farther.

“His services have been quite helpful in my little endeavor. His connections

and legwork came in handy when it came time to place the various men in position for Ruby to discover. He was released from prison last year. Took a two-year plea deal, copping to three counts of aggravated assault. Does any of this sound familiar, D. A. Rose?”

My mom closed her eyes. Giving out weak plea deals was an everyday occurrence for her.

“Two years,” he repeated. “Does that sound right for someone you know is responsible for thousands of rapes, hundreds of deaths? Yet you put him back on the street like it was nothing. Justifying your failures with sound bites like, ‘Sometimes justice is constrained by the law.’ All while you and King

Jack sat on your thrones, accusing me of corruption.”

Silence.

Meanwhile, Mr. Gulav’s mouth was opening and shutting like a carp’s, like he was searching for the right words to get him out of this situation. Like he was only just now realizing he’d been set up by Martinez. He took his black beanie and put it over his heart. He knew something bad was coming.

“Well, let’s just say that I’m no longer *constrained* by the law—or by my old friend Jack, who relentlessly accused me of working with the likes of Mr. G and had become dangerously close to proving it.” Martinez raised his weapon in the direction of my mom, Violet, and

Gulav.

“No, wait!” Gulav shouted with his hands up. “I thought we had a deal! What about the big payout? What about the shipment?”

“Oh, the shipment will arrive per our agreement,” Martinez said, slowly lacing his hands around the gun, enjoying every second of this production. “You just won’t be there to profit from it. Good-bye and good riddance, Mr. Gulav.”

Two deafening shots blasted, and Gulav went flying backward. Then blood. So much blood. It began gushing out near my mother’s feet.

My mom released another guttural scream. I wished she would stop doing

that. It wouldn't get us out of here alive.

Or, then again, maybe it would. I examined the shadows of the large room and the overhangs of the decks above us. Maybe Sammy was here by now; maybe he'd gotten that murder on camera; maybe SWAT's sharpshooter could take out Martinez from above.

I couldn't see any signs of infiltration yet. On top of that, Martinez had positioned himself under the scaffolding. Even if sharpshooters were up there, they'd have no shot on Martinez. Not only was he protected, but I could vaguely see a door behind him.

Martinez was holding the smoking gun casually at his side. He showed no remorse, no shame. He was entirely

unaffected by the taking of a human life.

In the space of a few seconds, my mind spun away from me. The adrenaline kicked in, and I couldn't feel my own body. I was floating above this horror story, numb from the panic filling the room.

I still believed I had a chance to stop the madness. Not just for me, but also for the people I loved. For my good and loving father, for my selfish and manipulative mother, for Liam, for his family. But somehow Martinez had outsmarted me at every turn.

I'd let them all down. I could see where this situation was going. He was going to give Violet a choice: Kill my mom—or be killed.

Which really meant he was giving me a choice: Kill Violet or let him kill my mom, in which case I'd be responsible for another death. Ruby Rose, the serial killer.

I really hoped Violet was wearing the vest I'd given him. A sympathy pang for him caught me by surprise. He was a despicable human being, but still very human. And he was afraid.

"Don't pretend to feel sorry for this waste of flesh, Ruby." Martinez's voice kicked me in the gut. "Remember who he is, what he's done. What he's capable of doing again."

I remembered. Violet's greatest pleasure was other people's pain.

So why didn't Martinez just shoot

Violet himself if he thought it was right? Why make me do it? Nothing about this made sense to me.

“Now, before it’s Ruby’s turn to pull the trigger, there’s some more truth to be told,” Martinez said, removing a glove from his right hand and an arm guard off his forearm. Without losing focus, he threw both into the fire pit next to him. Was he trying to dispose of any traces of gunshot residue? He wore another glove underneath the first. The extent of this man’s planning blew my mind. “It’s time to come clean, Jane,” he said, turning to my mom.

She raised her head and gave him the scariest look I’d ever seen in my life. Her mascara had run and the demon

glare she gave him made *me* flinch. “Don’t do this,” she said quietly. “For her sake. Don’t.”

“It’s not up to you anymore. Both you and Jack had your chances, and you failed to take them. I warned you it would come to this.” Martinez wasn’t intimidated. His lowered eyes matched her defiant stare. “If you don’t tell her, I will.”

“I’ve been trying to tell her. I was going to, but—”

“What are you talking about?” I yelled. “Mom, what are you not telling me?”

“Ruby, I know I haven’t been the perfect mother,” she said, leaning toward me. “I know I’ve let you down,

but don't let him—”

“Enough!” he roared. “We don't have time for this.” Martinez showed his first signs of losing composure. If he was expecting my mom to cooperate, he was mistaken.

“Mr. Violet, you know what to do,” he said with eyes narrowed on my mom.

Mr. Violet didn't look like he knew what to do at all. He stared back at Martinez with a pleading expression.

“Now.”

Violet scurried to a table behind him and came back to my mom's side with a long knife. “I don't want to do this,” he whimpered, wiping his snotty nose on his sleeve.

“What, it's OK to do it to innocent

young women, but not to the guilty?" Martinez asked. "You know your choices, Violet." Martinez raised his weapon and aimed it right at the shaking predator.

I couldn't stand it.

I started to move toward my mom, but Martinez stopped me with a bullet sparking on the floor six inches from my foot. "Ruby, be patient. You need to hear this."

"Really?" I screamed, finally pulling out my gun. "You want me to be *patient* while you let this freak with no soul murder my mom right in front of me?"

"She's not your *mom*," he responded. "She's a thief, a liar, and a murderer."

"No, Ruby, don't believe him," my

mother called out.

“Mr. Violet!” Martinez called out louder.

Violet placed the knife against my mom’s neck without conviction. A sliver of blood formed and ran down her skin. She screamed again.

“Stop!” I cried over all the madness, shooting ten feet to the left of Violet to scare him away. He cowered aside. “Do *not* hurt her.”

I spoke directly to her. “Mom, just tell me what he’s talking about.”

“I’m your mother, Ruby, I’ll always be your mother. I love you.” She sobbed through the pain. Though her bloody neck wound was unnerving, it wasn’t fatal. Not yet. “I was never any good at

showing it. But I swear, Ruby, you're everything to me. I couldn't bear to burden you—"

"Lies, Jane," Martinez interrupted. "Even faced with your own death you continue to lie."

"I tried to tell her, but I couldn't. I never wanted to hurt her—"

"No, you lie for your own sake," he argued. "You lie to protect yourself. Through Jack's death, your *daughter's* misery, you deny the truth. The truth that you caused the death of Ruby's real mother."

My breath caught.

"No, that's not true!" Mom reared her head.

"The truth that you stole Ruby and

pretended she was your own,” he continued.

“It was all legal,” she said through labored breaths.

Everything was going fuzzy around the edges. *I could see the bloody court papers in my mind.*

“The truth that you never even wanted her, but you thought you could save your failed marriage and repent for the sin of our affair if you adopted the perfect baby girl.”

“That’s a lie!” she seethed.

“The truth that when the baby’s biological father learned he had a daughter and demanded to know his child, you denied him at every turn.”

I was the baby from the petition.

A chill went through me as the “truth” froze me to the spot.

I could barely process the ramifications of his words, let alone the obvious pleasure he had in telling this twisted story.

“He abandoned her—”

“He didn’t know she existed,” he said icily. “I told you he’d come back for her!”

“Her mother was mentally unstable, she couldn’t take care of her,” Jane said. “As the appointed Guardian, I did what I had to do. Nothing more, nothing less. Ruby was in danger. The biological father was gone! It wasn’t my fault that Kelly overdosed.”

My lungs struggled for air. An

invisible fog was suffocating me.

“You pressured her and lied in your reports. You wanted Ruby from day one, and you did what you had to do to get her,” Martinez said.

“Ruby was found alone in a crib when the neighbors called the paramedics! That woman overdosed right in front of her own two-year-old child. What more evidence do you need that she was being neglected? I saved Ruby!”

“Oh, Jane,” he said, “your argument would be so much more convincing if that wasn’t the night you had Kelly Bracken served with the petition to terminate her rights.”

The world started spinning. Their

words kept flowing into my consciousness, but I was being taken back to the crib, to apartment 4E, to the sound of a woman's weak sobs just out of reach, to the feel of the bars, to being trapped and abandoned. The sketch at the fair, the picture on the wall of the burning apartment. It was her—my real mother. I could almost see her face in my mind. Not how it looked in the pictures, but in real life. Her long blonde hair, her soft skin, her smile.

Somewhere deep inside, I'd been holding on to her.

"I gave Ruby a good home," Jane Rose said. "An education, resources, things she never would have had in those seedy University apartments. Things I

never had but fought to earn.”

“That wasn’t your call to make. She belonged with her mother—her *true* mother.”

“No, she belonged with us! Jack and I tried for years to do it the right way. We paid thousands of dollars in fertility treatments for a baby of our own. That woman had a fling for a few months, and oopsie, here was an unwanted pregnancy. Kelly didn’t want a child. She wanted sorority parties, football games, and hot young military men to screw on the side.”

“Do you really want to talk about women who like to screw on the side?” he warned.

“I’m not the only one at fault here!

Kelly contributed to the problem, and though I know postpartum depression must be truly horrendous,” she said with all the sarcasm she could muster, “it didn’t give her an excuse to neglect her own baby. I wasn’t the one who called Child Protective Services on her. It was her neighbors, her friends.”

“Odds are, she would have figured it out without your threats and sabotage. *You* backed her into a corner. *You* are responsible for her death. *You* are responsible for too many crimes to count. Not only in letting criminals walk free because of your incompetence, laziness, and selfish pursuit of political power, but in neglecting, abusing, and turning your back on everyone you’ve

purported to love. You manipulated Kelly, just like you manipulate everyone else in your life. Like you manipulated Jack into marrying you, like you manipulated me into an affair that was going nowhere, like you manipulated the voters into electing you—and last, but certainly not least, like you *attempted* to manipulate Ruby’s biological father to keep him away from her. So tell me, Jane, what did that get you?” His smirk widened as his voice rose. “Besides a dead husband?”

The world spun cobwebs of imaginary fog around me, cocooning me too tightly, constricting me too forcefully. I couldn’t breathe. Was he saying that my father killed Jack—the

man I'd always believed was my dad?

Suddenly, he put his hand to an ear-comm unit as if he was getting an urgent message.

“Speak of the devil,” Martinez said with an evil edge. “It appears that the man of the hour, Commander Damon Silver, has returned to Grissom Island—and he is most eager to finish what he started the day he killed Sergeant Jack Rose.”

D for devil.

D for D. S.

D for Damon Silver.

D for Dad...

CHAPTER 30

I felt him before I saw him.

He entered from the door behind Martinez, also wearing a bulletproof vest. I recognized his groomed salt-and-pepper-stubbed beard from the school surveillance photo. But unlike Martinez, he wasn't wearing a helmet or neck guard, and he didn't seem to be armed.

"Welcome, Commander Silver," Martinez said, his body turned midway between the door and us, his weapon firmly pointed at my heart. "You're a little behind schedule, but at least the

introductions have already been made. All except for the formal father-daughter one, of course.”

Silver said nothing. He just moved slowly to the edge of the scaffolding’s cover where a dash of light spread across his face.

The way he looked at me didn’t speak of anger or insanity. He was calm, steady, and maybe even—sad? His strikingly pale eyes creased around the edges, like he was trying to communicate something without words. He wasn’t the raging lunatic I’d imagined him to be. Instead, his expression and body language spoke of submission and surrender. He even looked a little beat up.

Why did it feel like I knew him? Like his face, his manner, his eyes, were familiar to me. Not just because of that grainy surveillance picture, or because we were biologically connected—but because I'd seen him face-to-face. I couldn't find the exact memories, but I was sure they were there.

"I'm sorry, Ruby," he said quietly. "This isn't how I dreamed of meeting you." A heartbreaking grimace formed on his face. Why was he pretending to be decent? Where was his sadistic grin? If his strategy was to sedate me with his gentle approach—good cop/bad cop style with Martinez—it was working. I didn't know what to make of him.

"Very touching," Martinez mocked.

“But we must be getting down to business. Despite the fact that Jane might *want* to kill herself after witnessing this little family reunion, I doubt she will. Mr. Violet will have to do it for her.” Martinez shifted his weapon in Violet’s direction. “Are you ready to make your choice, Mr. Violet?”

“Wait, no!” I raised my weapon, not knowing in which direction to point. “Don’t do this.” I looked at Martinez with his self-satisfied smirk. “Why? Because my mom chose my dad over you? Because he turned you in to Internal Affairs? Tell me why you’re doing this!” The barrel of my gun settled on him.

“Oh, Ruby, do I really need to spell it out for you?”

“Martinez, no—” Silver started.

“If it weren’t for *you*, Ruby,” he said, “none of this would have *ever* happened. Jack would’ve walked away from the marriage, Jane and I could’ve been happy together, and Damon Silver never would have been involved. There would’ve been no need for all these lies, all these cover-ups, all these deaths!”

My jaw dropped. He blamed *me* for all of this?

“This is not her fault, James!” my mom shouted. It was the first time I’d heard her, or anyone, use his first name. He flinched.

“I warned you about her, Jane!” he shouted back. “That she’d grow up to be just like her father.”

What was that supposed to mean? What did he know about my real father?

“I told you she was damaged goods,” Martinez continued. “That one day she’d snap!”

“But you made her do it,” my mom said, coming to my defense. “You set her up! You entrapped her!”

“Are you serious? I didn’t make her follow those five criminals.” He was incensed that she was standing up for me. “She did that all on her own. I watched her go out several times a week to stalk one of her Filthy Five.” *He followed me?* “I’ve seen the thick criminal profiles she spent weeks and months accumulating.” *He broke into my house and went through my things?*

“Do you think that’s normal behavior for a seventeen-year-old girl, Jane? No, she happily killed all those men. Don’t be deceived by her innocent act. Jack knew exactly what she was, and he did his best with her—to rein her in and teach her about his holier-than-thou ‘shoreline’ crap.” *That’s what the training was about?* “But it didn’t work with me when Jack and I were partners, and it didn’t work with Ruby. As soon as Jack was gone, she became who she was always going to be—a sociopath. I told you that no amount of money or therapy would change that. And you still chose *this* over me!” Martinez was losing his mind, and control of his voice.

“Do me one last favor, Jane. Take a

good look in Ruby's eyes when she pulls the trigger on you...or Violet. You'll see what she really is—the greatest mistake of your life!" He stopped waving his gun around to point it directly at my heart.

"Martinez, remember our agreement," Silver warned—except he held no weapon to back himself up.

"Of course, our agreement. How could I forget?" Martinez dialed it back a notch, suddenly amused by something. "Tell me, Ruby, did you know the blood of an assassin runs through your veins? Did you know your little hobby of taking out bad guys is a shared pastime of dear-old biological dad here?"

Silver pursed his lips as if he thought about defending himself but decided not

to.

“Of course you didn’t,” Martinez continued. “But now that you do, I bet it comes as very little surprise. Sure, Silver’s kills have always been sanctioned by clandestine government agencies, but he certainly knows how to get the job done. Which was shocking and troublesome information to the young Jack and Jane, who so quickly fell in love with you—or fell in love with the *idea* of you saving their marriage. But this information is probably a little less shocking to *you* at this point. Especially since Silver was your accomplice, in terms of cleanup and concealment detail.”

I thought back to what cleanup

Martinez could be referring to.

Target 2—Taking out the two human traffickers at the warehouse to save my friends and me.

Target 3—Cleaning up the boat and removing Father Michael's body from the water so I couldn't go to the police.

Target 4—The fire. A memory came to me, and I almost gasped when I realized that Silver had carried me out. My eyes strained to see his eyes once more. For a moment, I swore I could still see the flames in them.

“Tell us, Silver, have you kept track of how many dozens of lives you've taken in your career in special ops? I mean sure, Jack and I both had our share of forced shootings, but you—”

“This has gone far enough.” Silver cut off Martinez.

“OK, I get it. You won’t accept the trophy for the most accomplished killer of us all. But perhaps the District Attorney will.” Martinez’s eyes roamed all over her. “No, she’s never actually pulled a trigger or set a fire. But as Ruby now knows, all it takes is a choice. And Jane Rose’s choices have led to more deaths than we can even estimate. Make no mistake, Jane Rose will lie and cheat to get what she wants, no matter how many people are destroyed in the process.”

Mom sat in her defendant’s chair in the center of the room, while Martinez stood to prosecute her with the facts.

Violet was the bailiff keeping her in place. Silver was a coconspirator—though I wasn't sure about that. They seemed to be at odds, and yet they shared some kind of agreement.

Which left me to be what?

The judge?

The jury?

The defense?

Or the victim.

“You have a choice, Ruby,” Martinez said, his voice low, watching me. “Either you kill her, or Mr. Violet does. Who deserves to die more? A man who rapes and murders innocent women? Or a woman who destroys the lives of those she purports to love and protect?”

Really? Did he honestly believe I

would shoot my own mother? Even if she wasn't my biological mother?

I would never do that.

He had to know it just as well as I did.

No, he didn't expect me to kill her. I had to remind myself that what he was truly trying to do was get me to kill Violet. Just like one through four. He started with me saving a stranger, then my best friend and boyfriend, then myself, then Dr. T, and now my mom—each time raising the stakes to ensure that I made the kill. He wanted to prove to my mom that I was the coldhearted murderer he thought I was—the psycho he'd predicted I'd be.

I turned back to her. Her tears were

flowing freely.

“You can’t do this,” she said to me. “It’s murder. It’s wrong.”

“Mr. Violet!” Martinez barked. “This is your last chance!”

Violet jumped, looked down at the knife in his hand and then up at me, as if asking for my help. This was it. I had to make my decision.

I raised my gun in the general direction of Violet, aiming somewhere to the right of him, when an echoing noise from above caught my attention.

It started out as a single clank of metal against metal. Then it rose to a chorus of tappings all around the decks of scaffolding. Through my veil of shock and rising panic, I couldn’t work out

what was causing it.

Then it dawned on me—coins. I ran my fingers over the engraved metal of my dad's Challenge Coin in my pocket. His SWAT team had finally moved in. Sergeant Mathews, his unit, and maybe Sammy were up there somewhere with their sights set on me. They were challenging me to do the right thing. And perhaps warning Martinez.

But they didn't know what was going on! Did they think I was really going to kill my mom or Violet? They wouldn't let me. They'd shoot me first—a shot to disable me. Lowering my weapon, I looked over to Damon Silver. He'd retreated further into the shadows, along with Martinez. SWAT would have no

shot on either of them. Hell, SWAT wouldn't even be able to confirm that they were ever here. They'd escape the same way Silver had the night he killed my...other dad.

Wait. Silver killed my dad? I didn't understand. Jack Rose didn't *deserve* to die. I was just starting to get the feeling that maybe Silver cared for me. That he was trying to protect me. Not only from Martinez's setups, but maybe even from Martinez himself. So why would he take away someone I loved?

I turned to him in a flash of anger. "You didn't have to kill him!" I yelled into the shadows where I could see Silver, but anyone above couldn't.

"You don't understand," Silver

replied quietly. "It's complicated."

I pointed my gun at him.
"Uncomplicate it, then!"

"OK, Ruby, OK." He paused as if waiting for Martinez to stop him. But he didn't. "I've wanted to meet you for a long time. I don't expect you to remember this, but when you were three I came for you. I knocked on the door and Jane...your mother...answered with you in her arms." His deep voice cracked.

My head swiveled to Jane to assess if he was telling the truth. She didn't deny it.

"She warned me to stay away and shut the door in my face," Silver continued. "I tried for years to change

her mind—or Jack’s mind. The last thing I wanted was to hurt you or disrupt your life. Especially considering my line of work. So I let it go. But I never let *you* go. I watched you grow up from a distance. There were times when I could’ve reached out to you. So many times. Especially after the LeMarq shooting when I started following you to try to figure out what was going on. Then when I saw that sketch the day of your high school art fair—that’s when I knew that someone was trying to dig up the past.”

Could this be true? Was this why I felt like I knew him already? He’d been so near for so long and I had no idea.

“So you’re claiming that it wasn’t *you*

digging up the past?" I asked, not sure I could believe him. "Why would you have risked coming into my school?"

"I received a letter asking me to come. *Supposedly* from you."

"What?" I asked, utterly confused. "I didn't send you a letter. I didn't even know you existed!"

"I knew it wasn't from you, but I had to go anyway." He paused and rolled his neck as if hesitating in his explanation—or his lies. "Almost a year ago, I received a very similar letter—on the same exact stationery—from Jack Rose, saying that he wanted to talk. When I read the suggestion that we meet here on Grissom, I became suspicious but figured I could handle it. You had just

turned sixteen, and I thought it was finally time for us to meet. But when I got here, it was a trap.”

“So you blew him to pieces?” My furious voice bounced off the walls.

“No, Ruby, I thought Jack set the trap for *me*. That he chose Grissom Island because one of his ex-Marine buddies is head of security here. I figured that when he realized I wasn’t going to fall into his ambush, he called in his SWAT team and told them that I’d set the explosives. I escaped, and I honestly didn’t know what had happened. At the time, I thought he must’ve made a mistake or tried to disengage one of his own traps to protect his men and...something had gone wrong.” Silver sounded miserable.

And he could no longer yell his side of the story over the clamor of the tapping.

I didn't understand this guy.

Why would my dad have messed with something he wasn't experienced with? He didn't work with explosives. Something wasn't adding up. If only he had trusted me enough to tell me what was going on. If only he'd told me the truth.

And then I realized what Mathews was really trying to say with the tapping. It's what Jack himself would have said if he were here—to remember to stand for honor, courage, and commitment. Jack Rose taught me everything I knew. Whatever his flaws were, or whatever mistakes he made, he shouldn't have

died because of this madness. He was only trying to keep his family together. Prevent all this from happening. And he couldn't. Despite how hard he tried to prepare me for it, even his worst fears couldn't have dreamed up this particular nightmare.

“That’s it!” Martinez cut back in. “It’s time to make your choice. You shoot Mr. Violet or your mother. Ten, nine...”

There had to be another choice. If I took a Hail Mary shot at Martinez, he’d stop me—either with a bullet at my mom or me. Plus he had a bulletproof vest on. Same with Silver.

If I took the shot on Violet, SWAT would stop me.

If I chose to do nothing, Violet would

be forced to act, bullets would fly, and Jane could get hurt all the same.

The problem was that all these choices produced the same unacceptable results:

- Both Martinez and Silver would escape—just like Silver did the last time SWAT had the place surrounded. Neither of these guys would ever surrender with their hands in the air. This entire thing had been meticulously planned. I had no confidence that SWAT or Mathews could stop them.
- Liam would go to prison for the rest of his life if Jane decided telling the truth was still a major

inconvenience. I couldn't allow myself to put all my trust in her again. If there was one thing I knew for sure now, it was that the woman could justify anything.

“Eight, seven...”

I stood frozen when the answer came to me. There was only one choice left.

I chose Jack Rose, and what he stood for. He might have made mistakes, but he willingly put his life on the line to protect me.

And he had died trying.

“Six, five...”

I looked back to Violet, who was slowly making his move toward my mom.

“Four, three...”

“Remember what I told you?” I asked Violet in a voice loud enough for him to hear through the noise. “You need to protect yourself. You have to fight.”

He shook his head, not understanding what I meant.

“Ruby, stay where you are,” Silver called out. “Don’t move any closer to him.”

“You’ll have to stop me!” I screamed and ran full speed into Violet’s waiting blade.

Too many things happened at once. I felt a searing pain in my side, my mother screamed, several gunshots tore open Violet’s arm, and I collapsed. I looked down to find Violet’s knife sticking up

from my torso, like one of those Halloween costumes with the rubber knife poking out. I fought for consciousness through the blurring pain and blood loss to make sure everyone was still alive.

Violet was hurt, whimpering in the fetal position, but conscious. He'd be OK. He'd been shot before.

Mom was screaming like she was on fire, but she'd live.

Martinez had either retreated farther into the shadows or was gone. I figured as much. He got the revenge that he came for—our family was destroyed. He didn't necessarily want me or Jane dead, but he wanted us ruined, and most of all, he wanted Jane to regret raising me.

But I was relying on the opposite to be true for Silver. The man who was my real father surely wouldn't turn his back on me now. I scanned the room for movement, for a shadow to tell me he was still here. When I realized that he was gone, the throbbing in my side doubled—like a self-inflicted punishment.

He was supposed to save me. Just as he had at the warehouse and the apartment fire. It was my last hope of forcing him into a weakened position so that SWAT could disarm him. Then they'd take him into custody, force him to account for his involvement in all the crimes, and testify that Martinez wasn't even dead. Maybe he'd even have a way

to lure Martinez back to be held accountable as well. Liam would be released. I would be exonerated for my part in the deaths.

I was so delusional. Silver was long gone.

An explosion went off, but from what direction I had no idea. An alarm sounded soon after. Through the ringing in my ears and the swirling emergency lights all around me, I heard shouting and commotion.

I blinked over and over to fight the pain and fear washing me away. I'd managed to get stabbed in possibly the most excruciating (but safest) location on my core. So long as no one pulled this thing out and the paramedics got

here in time, I'd probably be OK, too. As long as the whole island didn't explode.

But it was all for nothing since the two men behind all of this had fled once again—

Suddenly, someone had me by the shoulders and was pulling me under the protected cover of shadows and scaffolding—it was Silver, using me as a cover, knowing SWAT wouldn't shoot me. Relief fought with misery for control of my emotions.

I had him. Even if it was for the briefest of moments.

He picked me up like a baby and carried me gently to a concealed corner near his escape door. I pinched my eyes

shut in agony as he set me down, partially on the ground, partially on his lap.

I fought to steady my breathing before I dared reopen my eyes and look at him. A wave of shock overcame me when his pale-gray eyes met mine. The *same* pale-gray eyes as mine. He was suffering, too. Neither of us spoke for the seconds that stretched on like hours. And he held me like I once held little Riley Bentley after LeMarq sliced into her. In my delirious pain, my mind took me back to the bloody warehouse when Riley and I were the only two people in the world. Silver stared down at me—just like I'd done with Riley—and he silently willed me to hold on, to be brave, to know

everything would be OK.

I no longer saw a man that I feared. I saw a man who cared about me and wanted me to live.

“You look so much like her.” There were tears in his eyes. At first I thought he meant Riley Bentley, until he said, “Except for the eyes.”

He meant my mother.

In the short distance between our beating hearts, I felt a connection. In another time, under another set of circumstances, I knew things could have been very different for us.

“I’m sorry, Ruby, but I have to go,” he said. “You’re going to be OK. The paramedics will be here any minute, and...” He looked up to see whether any

SWAT units had made it down to this level yet. We both heard the boots coming, and he was already getting up. He could be out that door in seconds, never to be seen again.

I couldn't let him slip away now. "Wait," I whispered. "You can't go."

He had to be held accountable for my father Jack Rose's death. He had to provide testimony on Martinez to let Liam go.

"I'm sorry," he said, now crouching over me. "For Jack, for everything. But you have to understand, those SWAT men will kill me without blinking. Martinez set me up. I now realize that *he's* the explosives guy. The traps lining this place today are the same ones I saw

the day I came here to talk to Jack. Martinez made me believe that Jack had set the traps for me, while making Jack think I set the traps for him. And it had to be Martinez who set up the meeting—not Jack. He wants this to end badly for me so I can't track him down and make him pay."

So Silver didn't kill Jack.

"If that's true," I said, "then I'll protect you. But you can't leave. Not again." Not like when I was a baby, and not like the nights when I killed those men and was left wondering why.

I steadied the gun still clutched in my hand and slid it into his lower abdomen. The same place where I'd been stabbed and where his bulletproof vest ended. I

took a hard look into those eyes that tore me apart. If I had to, I'd hurt him, but this ended now.

"Please, Ruby, you don't understand," he begged. If he really wanted to, he could've overpowered me.

"You're right. I don't understand any of this," I said. "And I certainly don't understand what kind of agreement you had with a psychotic madman like Martinez."

"Ruby," he said calmly. "Our *agreement* was that if I promised to come alone and unarmed today, then he wouldn't kill you. I'd give my life for you. To keep you safe. You have no idea how long I've wanted to be a part of your life. In my mind, you've always

been that little girl at the door. The one I could see, but never hold. And it kills me to be holding you like this. Everything I did was to protect you—from pain, from prosecution, from Martinez. And I'm sorry that I failed."

Could he be telling the truth? He wasn't working *w i t h* Martinez but *against* him? Was he lying?

"Then don't make me shoot you," I whispered through the pain.

And as SWAT rushed in and tore Silver away from me, I screamed at them not to hurt him. But as they violently forced him to the ground with his hands behind his back, I realized—

We'd all lost.

CHAPTER 31

“Are you sure this is OK?” I asked Dr. T as she pulled into her garage.

“Stop asking that,” she said, smiling.

“I’ve never been homeless before.” I took my seatbelt off and grimaced at the pain. The eleven stitches in my left side were still tender, and the Ibuprofen wasn’t helping like I’d hoped. I’d told myself I was only allowed to take the good stuff for a week. When they discharged me, I wanted to be “clean.” I wanted to see the world with fresh eyes. The holiday season had come and gone,

a new year had begun, and I needed a fresh start.

“You are *not* homeless,” Dr. T responded, unclicking her seatbelt. “Just having a little vacation until you and your mom find a way to”—she paused —“figure things out.”

Her gentle eyes told me it was OK if it took a while.

She got out of her sports car and ran around to help me out.

“I’ll get your bags out of the car later,” she said, taking me by the elbow to walk me into her place. “I want you to see the view first.”

“I never knew you lived on the beach, Dr. T. How come you never told me?”

“You never asked,” she said.

She led me up a flight of stairs into the living room of her modest-sized beach house with an anything-but-modest view. The sun was setting on the Pacific Coast. Her large panoramic windows looked like murals hung on the wall. Either there were still drugs in my veins or this was the most beautiful sunset ever. The horizon was lit up with pumpkin oranges, electric pinks, and, of course, ruby reds. Like it was created just for me. Like someone was saying, “Isn’t it good to still be alive?”

“Yes,” I said out loud.

“What?” Dr. T said.

“Nothing,” I said, a little embarrassed that she’d heard me talking to myself. “I’m just glad to be here.”

She put one arm around me, and we watched the seagulls fly past the deck outside. In the distance I could see the surfers lining up near the Pier. I wondered if Liam had been out there since his release. They'd let him go two days after the Grissom Island Showdown, as Sammy called it. Turned out, Sammy got several shots and even a little grainy footage of me getting myself stabbed as SWAT moved in. It had looped endlessly on every news channel for a week. Which was why I had sworn off television forever.

Sammy sent me a nice card at the hospital, thanking me for the tip-off and the millions he'd make on the images. He even promised to cut me in on the

deal, but I didn't want his money. What I really wanted was for him to take it and bribe all the other paparazzi to leave me alone.

Just to get here, we had to sneak out using the hospital's private drive. No one knew about Dr. T, where she lived, or what had happened to her. But there was no going home for me—at least not for a while. Partly because the cameras had permanently camped out there, and also because my mother and I weren't feeling especially close at the moment. She didn't love my unwillingness to come home, and I didn't love the time it had taken to drop all charges against Liam for Detective Martinez's murder. The dude wasn't even dead! Martinez

was probably living off my dad's money on some Caribbean island. But the public didn't know that. Not yet, anyway.

It appeared that the current news cycle's headlining theory for the ever-growing list of murders was "revenge against the high-profile Rose Family." And if it wasn't for my "self-sacrifice," the District Attorney would've been the last and ultimate victim of "Viktor Gulav's rage against justice." The authorities would neither confirm nor deny the media's speculation that I'd killed the notorious criminal in order to save my mother. There was no mention of Silver or Martinez.

Once the CIA moved in and took over

the case, they threatened us all with prosecution if we revealed any facts about the ongoing investigation, including details concerning Martinez's involvement. A cruel twist, considering how badly I wanted the world to know that it was James Martinez who killed my father, put my loved ones in danger, tortured my mother, and destroyed my soul. All in the name of exacting his vengeance—on his old partner who was going to expose his corruption, his ex-lover who'd jilted him, and a child whose very existence had supposedly ruined his chance at happiness.

When the Special Agent assigned to my case came to see me, he curtly told me not to worry, assuring me that he'd

personally see Martinez face justice. I might have been able to overlook his 1960s-style slicked-back hair, outdated male condescension, and habitual use of the term *sweetie*—but only if in the very same breath he hadn't used a line right out of my mom's old playbook: "Sometimes you have to let a smaller fish go in order to catch the bigger fish." I wanted to tell him exactly where to go with his fish analogies.

As long as we cooperated and kept our guppy mouths shut, we could earn our immunity. Which sealed the deal for me. That's when I learned the real truth about Damon Silver. Special Agent Fishy opened up about Commander Silver—Medal of Honor recipient in the

United States Army, Green Beret Special Forces Commander, and inactive operative in an elite Special Operations Group of the CIA. A real hero. “One of our bravest.”

Who still hadn’t come to talk to me, even though he’d been released almost immediately after his arrest.

Whatever. It was complicated—I got that. And somehow I knew I’d see Silver again.

As for Jane, after she was discharged from the hospital, her points in the polls skyrocketed. Her campaign managers knew exactly how to swing it—“Jane Rose the Survivor.” But the media turned on her when their questions continued to go unanswered. Bill

Brandon took advantage of her weakened position and began accusing her of scandal and cover-ups.

There were still several months until Election Day, but Brandon was quickly becoming the favorite. And I was glad. Not just because he'd be tough on violent offenders and make his slain daughter proud, but because I still held on to a shred of hope that maybe I'd get my mom back. That maybe if the fight for her campaign and career were over, she'd start fighting for me.

“Ruby, I need to apologize to you.” Dr. T’s voice pulled me back to the present. Her arm still held me close to her side, her eyes still centered on the bright horizon before us. She swallowed

hard. “I needed some space after the fire. I had nothing to give, and I was scared that if I didn’t distance myself from you, I’d be in more danger. I knew Martinez was trouble from the first moment you brought him up in our post-LeMarq sessions. I just didn’t know it was leading to this—”

“What? You knew about Martinez?” I asked, pulling away.

“Ruby, let me finish. I’m sorry for keeping the truth from you all these years.”

“What truth have you hidden?” I flinched at the pain in my side. It felt like one sentence had just reopened the wound.

“Ruby, please, give me a chance to

explain—”

“So that’s why he wrote the word ‘SECRETS’ over your mouth? Because you were in on it all along?” I backed away from her.

“Don’t do that,” she cautioned, using The Tone. “Don’t spin away. Ruby, I was only trying to protect you.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Why does everyone keep using that excuse? They didn’t tell me squat because they were only trying to *protect* me. Does this gash in my side look like I’ve been protected?”

She closed the gap between us. “I always felt it wasn’t my place to tell you the truth, or at least what little truth I knew. Your parents—Jack and Jane that

is—were my clients before you came into their lives. I was their marital counselor. Your mother had been trying for years to get pregnant, and it was causing problems in the marriage. I knew about the affair. Your dad was hurt, but patient. He coped with alcohol. She coped by throwing herself into her work in the Family Court.”

She stopped to gauge my distress barometer, like she knew I needed to take a breath before hearing more.

“She talked about you a lot in our sessions. She told me how neglected you were by your real mother. Unchanged diapers, left in your crib for hours. But most of all, how special you were despite it all. How you reached out to

her. How you hugged her tight and wouldn't let go."

I'd never stopped reaching out to her. I still didn't want to let go.

"You had her heart, Ruby. Whatever she did to get you, I have no idea. I knew it was suspicious. I knew it was questionable. But I never doubted the way she felt about you. She may not have shown it well with her career taking up so much of her time, but I know she loves you."

I wanted to believe her. The memories of that special bond Jane and I used to share still lingered. The way she held me, the way she sang to me, the way we used to be a family. But after all she had done, part of me just wanted to hate

her.

“I don’t want to talk about her anymore.” I shook my head and wiped my eyes. I couldn’t hear any more of this. Maybe one day I’d forgive her, but not today. “I need some rest. No more truth for now.”

“Ah, so you remember what I told you? God offers to every soul the choice between truth and repose. I tried to warn you.”

It was true. She had tried to warn me. I hugged her, and she tightened in surprise, but I didn’t let go. I wasn’t sure words could convey my gratitude for what she’d gone through for me. But as she softened and squeezed me back, it seemed like she felt it.

“Well, I have just one more bit of truth to tell you before we rest,” she said, pulling away with a mischievous smile.

“I don’t know if I can handle one more bit, Dr. T.” I slumped into a love seat and clenched my teeth at the pain in my side. “I’m exhausted. Can’t you just bring whatever it is to me?” I made those wide kitty-cat eyes.

“Nope.” She gently raised me by my elbow. “Just trust me.”

“Fine, but this had better be good,” I said, following her outside to the deck stairs leading to the roof. “And there’d better not be any dead bodies.”

Looking sad, she shook her head at me.

The salty sea air replaced the tinge of black oil from Grissom Island lingering inside me. The crashing waves drowned out the residue of noise in my mind. It was like Dr. T was using her voodoo powers to heal me.

I reached the top, and she finally let go. Behind the licking flames of the rooftop fire pit, two familiar faces lit up, and my heart skipped a beat.

The boppy curls of my best friend, Alana, and the shaggy locks of the only guy who'd ever broken into my heart, Liam. My eyes fluttered between the two. I couldn't decide who I wanted to run to first—if I could run without my side tearing open.

“It’s cool,” Liam said, sliding his

hand behind Alana's back. As though chivalry wasn't dead, he nudged her forward. "I can wait."

Alana came toward me with her arms outstretched. But now that I was looking, she had a small box in her hands—chocolate.

"Thought you might need some of this," she said grinning. "It's not your fancy European stuff, just some of my mom's chocolate-covered macadamias from her stash."

"It's perfect," I said. And it was.

Both of us took a deep breath, bracing ourselves for the lame girlie cry about being happy it was over. Instead, our eyes seemed to have a whole conversation on their own. She said she

was proud of me. I said I couldn't have done it without her. She said she missed me. I said I missed her more.

“Thanks for coming—you have no idea how much this means to me.” I squeezed her. “You guys are all I’ve got now.” I didn’t even know if I’d ever see Big Black or Gladys and the Pips again. Which I told myself was OK since I had the three of them. *People* not *things*. Dr. T would be so proud.

“That’s not true.” Alana pulled away. “You have millions of supporters.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Rubik’s Cube, the whole nation is on your side. Sure, you have your share of critics, those far-right fanatics and the

hard-left lunatics...but you're kind of the Taylor Swift of justice. At least that's what this week's issue of *Teen People* is calling you. You should see the Santa Claus-sized bag of your fan mail downstairs."

"Fan mail?" That didn't sound right.

"Yeah, I'm thinking about dropping out of school and becoming your publicist or manager or something. So far, every single major news channel has contacted me to get an interview with you. I don't know why they called me, exactly. Maybe because they found out we were besties...but, Ruby, you wouldn't believe how much money they're offering."

I glanced at Liam. He'd crossed his

arms over his chest and was smiling at Alana's energy. I honestly didn't want to hear what the nation thought of me. Or how much money they'd give me to continue keeping the truth from them. I just wanted to go to him.

"Come on, Alana," Dr. T said, suddenly at her side. "Let's go get that bag of fan mail sorted and let Liam and Ruby have a minute, shall we?"

Alana's excitement bubble popped. "Sure, of course," she said, taking in the way Liam and I were looking at each other. "Awkward," she chimed to Dr. T.

"We'll be downstairs when you're ready to come down," Dr. T said, leading the way.

As soon as Alana's head dipped out

of sight, I turned back to Liam, and suddenly he was holding me, pulling me in, like we couldn't get close enough.

I nestled my head in his chest and let his heartbeat tell me what I wanted to know as I breathed in his minty-fresh smell. I hoped I didn't smell like hospitals or death.

"Ruby Rose, I missed you," he whispered in my ear. The goose bumps fired across my neck, with every hair standing at attention under his warm breath.

"I don't even know what to say." I pulled away to look up into his eyes. "I'm so sorry for dragging you into all of this...and for what my mom did to you...and the media—"

“Stop,” he said. “I don’t want to talk about any of that right now. All I want to do is be with you.” He held my face in his hands.

“Does your mom know you’re here? Tug and Christian must hate my guts.”

“She knows I’m here,” he said with a wide smile. “And no, they think you’re amazing. They don’t know the whole story, of course, but they know enough to understand how brave you were.”

“The whole story, huh?” The thought of explaining the whole story made me tired. “Where do I start?” I asked.

“I already know everything,” he replied. “I pried it out of Dr. Teresa. I hope you don’t mind that she broke that doctor-patient confidentiality thing...and

that whole CIA-sworn-to-secrecy thing. She thought I deserved to know that the guy I supposedly killed is the one who did all of this to you.”

“No, of course I don’t mind. I think sacrificing your life to save hers and mine earned you a pass to know what really happened,” I assured him.

He smiled. “Anyway, she told me about your bio mom and bio dad. Man, I didn’t see that coming.”

“Me neither.” Though my split-personality theory made a lot more sense now. Martinez set me up to hurt me, and Damon cleaned up behind us to protect me.

Talking about it drained me all over again. It must’ve shown all over my

face, because Liam grabbed my hand and led me to a lounge chair by the fire.

“Come on, you need to rest,” he said, helping me lie down. He grabbed a blanket, slid in behind me, and covered our bodies chin to toe. The ocean breeze swirled around us, making the fire bend.

The horizon was no longer brilliant shades of primary colors. Instead, it had faded to a navy blue, with wisps of silver outlining the clouds. Again, it felt like someone was creating this piece of art just for me. Here was *my* silver lining: Liam.

As we watched the last traces of light dip into the dark waters, I twisted to face him. The only thing that could have made Liam’s lips any more tempting was

if they were dipped in chocolate.

“Don’t hurt yourself, Ruby, you just got here,” he said, slipping one arm under my head for support and the other one around me. Was it me, or did the flames in the pit just kick their intensity up a notch? The heat between us burned just as strong, as if the anger, sadness, fear, and pain over the last year had culminated in one bonfire of emotion. Maybe the feel of his abs through his shirt had something to do with my rising temperature as well.

I wanted to say something to him. Express how grateful I was for him sticking by me, never turning on me when it might have gotten him out of jail earlier. The words weren’t forming in

my mouth.

Liam moved his face toward mine. Tingly anticipation tiptoed across every inch of my skin. I lingered in the moment, recalling all the times I'd fantasized about these breathless seconds. We were too close, and it was too dark to see his eyes, but I was pretty sure they were closed and waiting. Patiently hanging on for Ruby Rose's petals to bloom.

Whatever light was left in the twilit sky disappeared as I closed my eyes to give in to him. I clutched his shaggy hair and kissed him in a way I didn't know was possible. It felt like every time our lips moved against each other, a chunk of the wall I'd worked my whole life to

build crumbled into the sea.

I grasped the back of his neck with my fingers and pressed my hips against his. My head arched backward when he moved his mouth down my neck and around my ear. Pulling my V-neck shirt off my shoulder slightly, he kissed my exposed skin. Every part of my body tingled—I'd never been touched like this before. I felt like my heart was going to burst out of my chest.

"I think I'm about to tear a stitch," I said breathlessly.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"Maybe, if I could just keep my heart from beating a million times a minute, it wouldn't feel like my side is going to explode."

“Right,” he said apologetically. “I should have thought of that. Sorry—”

“You don’t have to apologize for anything.” I took a few measured breaths. I unlocked my legs from his, and snuggled up to his side. I felt the Challenge Coin in my pocket. “Let’s just lie here for a while. You can stay, right?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, brushing my cheek with his lips.

The moon was directly above us. The few stars brave enough to shine through the smog, cloud cover, and city lights of the Los Angeles coastline twinkled down on us. I glanced at the foaming whitewash on the beach and imagined my dad, Jack Rose, coming in from one

of his twilight surfing sessions by the Pier. I could almost see him in his wet suit and with his longboard securely tucked under his arm.

I closed my eyes to better picture him. He stopped, shook out his wet hair, and smiled down at the little girl running up to his side—the little girl I used to be.

A few tears escaped from my shuttered eyes, and when I opened them again, the image was gone.

Dad had made it to his shoreline.

And he'd never stop guiding me toward mine.

The wind picked up a little, reminding me that Martinez and other dangers still loomed out there. But instead of baring myself to its power, I

dipped under the covers and breathed in Liam's fresh scent until I fell asleep in his arms.

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Jessie Humphries was born and raised in Las Vegas, Nevada. She received a BA from San Diego State University, where she cultivated her love of the beach, then lived in France, where she cultivated her weakness for shoes, and finally earned a law degree from University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where she cultivated her interest in justice. Appropriately, her debut novel, *Killing Ruby Rose*, is a thriller about vigilante justice set in sunny Southern California with a shoe-obsessed protagonist. Jessie currently writes and practices law in Las Vegas, where she lives with her husband and children.