

# WHAT WE BURIED

KATE A. BOORMAN

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Reality is merely an illusion, albeit  
a rather persistent one.

—Albert Einstein, maybe

SLIPPERY  
AND  
CONDITIONAL

## Radio News FM:

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"Reno PD have been called in to help with a case of arson in Mineral County, as a recent discovery has turned it into a potential criminal investigation. Bones were uncovered in the wreckage of a burnt lakefront property, discovered by a local man during his walk. Police did not confirm whether or not the remains are human; the investigation is ongoing.

In local news, LVPD are asking for the public's help in locating two people who disappeared from the Clark County area Friday—"

# JORY

MY DAD SNAPPED the radio off as we pulled into the parking lot of Princess Liv's Spectacle of Justice, otherwise known as the Clark County courthouse. It wasn't to spare us some sort of upsetting news story on an "already upsetting" day; my dad generally wasn't aware of those kinds of things—you know, other people's realities or emotions? No, he was trying to read the parking instructions to see if he could pay by credit card, and the radio was irritating him.

Not that my reality was affected either way. Some random news story held as much relevance for me as this court date; the only one emotional about today was my mom. And as I stared at the courthouse through the tinted window of my backseat prison, I couldn't remember why I'd agreed to waste my time.

My dad cursed and began rummaging for change in the console, and I peered at the building, which shimmered and danced in my vision like it was threatening to wink out of existence. It was a trick of the light, a common sight in

Nevada—land of infernal sun and dry, cracked earth—but something about the way it wavered made me want to look harder, make sure it was real.

It made me want to do the same to myself.

My chest tightened. Sinking into the leather of my dad's SUV, I squeezed my fist tight and watched two tendons appear on my forearm as the muscles strained. I closed my left hand around my wrist and squeezed harder, feeling my pulse thud, picturing the blood rushing through the vein toward my fingers and back toward my heart.

You know the saying "seeing is believing"? It's a problem, when you think about it. I mean, it's reasonable for people to want proof before they accept something they've been told. I do. I'm a fan of logic and demonstrable facts. But the idea inherent: that you can believe what you see? That's majorly flawed, because people usually have no clue what they're looking at. It's why people think my sister is a lovely, tragic victim. It's why they so often assume I can't tie my own shoes.

"We're here, Jory-boy," my mom announced belatedly, glancing back from the front seat. "It's time." My mom was a classic stater-of-the-obvious. I relaxed my hand without meeting her gaze and said nothing, even though I knew she was hoping for some reassuring response. This was her new thing. The moment my sister had filed her lawsuit, I'd materialized before my mom's eyes.

Now I existed.

My dad's cell went off—his ringtone was the first four bars of "Janie's Got a Gun," which gives you an idea of how irritating he is—and he answered it as he parked, turning away from my mom dismissively.

She was used to that. We all knew that plastic forks and printed paper napkins and whatever other party supplies were distributed by my dad's company, Par-T-Own, didn't sell and ship themselves.

But lately, my dad's phone calls had become louder, more excruciating to witness. His volatility hadn't ever been completely contained to the home front—it bled into customer relations from time to time—but this seemed next level. He was less cocksure, a bit desperate even, and I wasn't going to hang around and listen to him swear or, worse, *wheedle*.

I opened the back door to freedom, and a breath-stealing blast of heat, and stared at the blurry courthouse, forcing it to come into focus.

There. Solid as the asphalt trying to melt the bottom of my Nikes: a nondescript building with no imposing columns or archways. It blended into the surrounding box stores dotting this strip of road like it was trying to appear as if it was for common people. Ironically, it was also situated on the outskirts of Vegas—where the common people's transit didn't run.

Not that I'd take transit. People on the bus are the worst for staring.

I slammed the door of my chrome-rimmed holding cell and headed for the shade without waiting for my mom. As I climbed the front steps, a shadow passed over the entryway—dark fingers trickling along the stucco overhead like cool water.

My pace slowed. It was a cloud passing over the sun—I knew that—but I had the sudden urge to put a hand on the railing and grip the metal tight. Maybe lie down on the steps, feel the concrete.

*Stop it.*



The air felt heavy, like the very rare time rain was imminent.

“Hotter than a snake’s butt in a wagon rut,” my mom observed, catching up to me. She was breathing hard and clutching her oversize purse. The tassels and bits of bling swung, hitting her elbow and her side alternately.

The saying was “snake’s ass,” but my mom never swore. She said it didn’t reflect well on a person’s character. I guess for my mom, words spoke louder than actions.

The entry led into the open-air atrium of the courthouse. In the center, concrete planters surrounded a fountain in the shape of a decidedly nonaquatic lizard, which spouted water from its mouth. Fitting, for Vegas—where nothing was too incongruent or illogical.

“Let’s wait here for your dad. He’ll just be a second.”

I looked at my watch. It was twenty to ten; our court appearance was at ten o’clock. The fact that my dad had taken that call spoke volumes about his opinion of the court date. The fact that my mom didn’t protest when he took it spoke volumes about . . . everything else.

She plunked herself down on the edge of the concrete, like she needed a rest after a hard-won battle, and glanced around. A weird mix of disdain and concern crept over her face. “She sure doesn’t draw the crowds like she used to.” The look morphed into alarm. “I hope to heck she doesn’t wear her hair up.”

The hell?

“She knows her ears stick out too much for that.”

As I digested the complete inanity of that comment, my mom’s first observation registered. She was right: there hadn’t been any media outside the courthouse, and the atrium wasn’t

empty, but it certainly wasn't packed. It didn't seem like throngs of rabid fans had shown up to see this all go down.

Huh. Maybe the case wasn't as big a deal as Liv had hoped. Maybe, after three identical lawsuits pitting ex-beauty pageant kids against their parents, public appetite for this kind of spectacle had waned.

Awkward.

Liv had been texting all week, trying to confirm I'd be here. Her last message was full-blown desperation: *Need to talk. Can I come over?*

I hadn't answered. I had no idea why my presence mattered that much. Maybe she was thinking of the family photo op: the triumphant queen and her big brother, united in justice. There wouldn't be a shred of truth in the image, but who cared? The illusion was what mattered. Liv's entire existence proved that.

"I need caffeine." My mom fished around in her purse and extracted a twenty-dollar bill. She waved it at me, gesturing with her other hand at the coffee bar in the corner of the atrium. "It's gonna be a long morning, Jory-Jore." The layer of makeup she'd caked onto her eye-bags was shiny in the heat. "And it sure would help my nerves."

Because caffeine is a proven relaxant.

"Not sure I can get in that courtroom without a little help." She punctuated this with a dramatic sigh. "Not sure I can get in there at all, actually."

I studied her. She did look unsteady, like that moment last week when she'd had a panic attack at the grocery store. I took the bill from her outstretched hand. "What do you want?"

She dug in her purse again, found a fan, snapped it open, and started to flap. Her free hand fluttered up to fiddle with her necklace. “A Frappuccino—Grande.”

Of course. I crumpled the twenty in my fist. Of course it had to be a Frappuccino.

“Get yourself something, too!” she called as I turned away.

The atrium was shaded by a variety of umbrellas and awnings that did nothing to combat the heat; I could feel my collared tee sticking to my back and hoped the checked pattern actually was sweat camouflage like the label promised. Maybe a cold drink wasn’t a bad idea. It wasn’t in my Sixty-Day Shred regime, but: one, I hated buying bottled water, and two, I had worked out twice yesterday, so didn’t it all balance out? I worked out because I didn’t want to feel weak on top of everything else, and I used the regime because it was good to have a schedule, but I didn’t portion out my meals or worry how my clothes were “accentuating my progress.”

I wasn’t screwed up like my sister.

Before me, a table and umbrella wavered in and out of focus.

I paused and stared, willing it to stop. An unpleasant splintering feeling was working its way through me, bringing an equally unpleasant thought: I was looking at an imitation of the actual table with umbrella. The wavering I saw was the veil between this copy and the real thing, and the veil was drawing back . . .

Dry eyes: that’s what it was.

I pulled a small bottle of artificial tears from the front pocket of my jeans. The relief was instant but, as always, the blurriness took a while to subside. It was hard to decide what was worse for clinically dry eyes: the heat or the air-con. In summer, I was screwed either way.

That's probably what had happened as we parked; my eyes had been drier than I thought, and the heat did its mirage thing. No need to get all metaphysical. I mean, I was into that kind of thing: my film club was always discussing illusion, the line between real and the hyperreal, and, honestly, I considered myself a bit of an expert on it all, considering everything. But today was going to be surreal enough without me questioning my grasp on reality.

I put the artificial tears back in my pocket and joined the line at the coffee bar.

The girl at the register looked a couple of years older than me. She was cute: dark auburn dreadlocks, huge eyes, and a cheek piercing. I turned slightly to the right so she was looking at my best side.

As I waited for the line to move, a shadow passed over the courtyard again. The air was denser still, and the smell in the air . . . it was definitely going to storm. Bizarre. I glanced up to look for the clouds, but like some hapless moth to a light bulb, my gaze was drawn instead to three girls cutting across this corner of the atrium.

My sister, Liv, and her entourage.

They walked with textbook posture, confidence radiating off them like nuclear waves, and they were all done up in faux defiance of perfection: designer tops, teased hair that was supposed to look careless. But the most obvious crack in their rebellious facade was how their flat dress shoes slapped the tile together; they were pacing one another in perfect unison.

You can take the girl out of the pageant—hey, you can convince her those pageants caused her “irreparable and lasting harm” worthy of a million-dollar lawsuit—but you’ll never fully take the pageant out of the girl.

I glanced back toward the fountain. My dad had arrived; he stood with one dress shoe on the edge of the fountain, leaning forward, hand to his ear. He was still on his call. My mom was facing away from us.

They hadn't seen her, and Liv had probably deliberately avoided them. She'd been staying with her friend Asia, the blond—or was the red-haired one Asia?—ever since the hearing date was set more than nine months ago, so she hadn't had to endure my mom's histrionics. I mean, sure, she had endured them for years—so did everyone who tuned in to the reality TV show *Darling Divas*—but Mom's more recent antics? The spontaneous crying and binge eating and impulse buying? My sister hadn't had to deal with any of that, even though her court case was ground zero for Mom's psychosis.

Liv saw me and raised her hand in greeting. She didn't smile—she knew better than that—but I saw her confident expression falter when I didn't return the gesture. She wasn't going to come over here, was she? To “talk”?

“What can I get you?”

I turned back to the counter, caught off guard and forgetting my sideways trick, which gave the hot barista a clear look at my face. There was the usual moment of *pause* followed by an obviously forced *this is totally normal* smile.

To her credit, she didn't look around to see if I had an aide, if I should've been standing in a coffee line on my own. And that smile dimpled in the side of her cheek where the silver stud was, pretty much killing me. I forgot all about Liv.

“One Venti iced tea,” I said slowly, “and one Grande Frappuccino.”

There was a silence. Her eyes flicked to her screen. Back to me. “An iced tea? Venti?” she asked.

I nodded.

"And . . ." She cocked her head forward, gesturing to her ear with a raised finger like the reason she didn't know what I wanted was because she hadn't heard me. "Was that a mochaccino?"

I thought about changing the order, picking something easier to say—I mean, "Frappuccino" has got to be the stupidest goddamn word for a drink in the first place—but a spike of irritation killed that idea. Lately, going out of my way to make sure other people didn't feel uncomfortable was getting old.

"A Frappuccino." I was trying not to care about her reaction, but she was concentrating really hard on my mouth, and I could feel my face getting hot.

Her eyes lit up. "A Frappuccino!" She said it like she'd figured out the cure for cancer, which should've grated on me, except that dimple . . . Okay, she was so hot her glee was kind of adorable.

I nodded. "Grande."

She paused for one more second, then tapped the screen. The cash register drawer popped open.

"I like your ink." She looked at my outstretched arm as she took my twenty.

A tattoo of a two-toned, oblong *ouroboros*—a snake eating its own tail—stretched along the inside of my forearm. It symbolizes infinity, life from death, creation from destruction. The universe in balance.

Sort of.

I wanted to ask her if she knew what the symbol was, if she knew what book it was from, and there was a crazy moment where I imagined she answered yes to both, and then she asked why it was oblong and not a perfect circle, and I told her the

reason, and she thought that was cool. And then she asked me out, which wasn't weird because she assumed I was eighteen on account of the tattoo.

"Where'd you get it done?" She gave me my change, grabbed a cup from below the counter, and started scribbling on it.

"Revolt."

She cocked her ear forward again and grabbed a second cup.

"Revolt Tattoo."

She marked the cup and set both aside, sucking in her bottom lip like she was thinking hard. "Oh! *Revolt!*" she said. I take cute back; she was gorgeous. Her eyes were a light brown and her skin was lightly freckled, like she'd been dusted in whatever they put on the top of the whipped cream—

"Sorry," she said. "I'm sorry." For not understanding me, she meant.

Spell: broken.

I stuffed the change into my pocket and moved along the counter toward a different barista—a guy with dyed blond tips who had picked up the cups with my order on them. The hot girl greeted the next person in line.

"Your name?" the guy with the terrible frosted hair asked, cup in hand, Sharpie at the ready. "She forgot to ask."

Forgot, or didn't want the hassle.

"Jory." I didn't look back at the barista. I hoped she stayed distracted.

He squinted. "George?"

"Jory."

He pursed his lips, like he was deciding whether or not this was even worth his time. A hot feeling crept into my throat. He scribbled on the cups in turn and set them aside.

I moved along to wait at the far end, forcing myself to count down from ten, like our family doctor insisted. My parents hadn't taken her advice to find me a shrink, so she'd tried to help me herself.

*"Outwardly expressing anger is new for you," Dr. Levy had said. "It's important we find techniques to help you do that in an acceptable way."*

Technique number one: count down from ten.

I wasn't exactly sure if she knew what she was talking about, but I'd figured it was worth a try. I didn't want to end up flying off the handle and doing something I regretted.

Technique number two: while counting down from ten, unpack the situation that made you feel angry.

Okay, the interaction with the girl at the register hadn't gone the way I'd wanted. That wasn't anything new. I was also used to people apologizing for not understanding me. So . . .

My train of thought paused as I scanned the atrium.

Liv had disappeared.

"Rory!"

I counted again before stepping up to the counter and taking the drinks: a Venti iced tea and a Grande Frappuccino. For Rory.

I guess my parents couldn't have known when I was born that I'd always have trouble pronouncing my own name—that a *J*, for someone with paralyzed sixth and seventh craniofacial nerves, was a bitch of a consonant to negotiate, second only to plosives—consonants like *P* and *B* and *T*. The one surgery helped my left side a bit but came nowhere close to fixing my pronunciation. If I'd done the series of surgeries, like the doctors had suggested, my own damn name wouldn't have been such a



challenge. There was even a chance I could've smiled—or something close. But then, my parents would've needed to see it as an investment. You know, like a Child Glitz Pageant?

Like that.

I walked back toward the wrinkled silk pantsuit that was my mother. My dad was still on his call.

"I understand that!" he snapped into the phone. "And I said I'd sort it out. I need time. You need to give me that—" He pushed off the fountain with a dress shoe that needed a serious shining—the round buckle was dusty, another sign that he was unraveling by the minute—and strode out of earshot.

I looked at my watch again; it was now ten to ten.

"We'd better get in there," my mom said, dropping her necklace back against her throat and reaching for the drink. She made no move to get my dad's attention. "Judas Priest, but I'm all aflutter."

*Aflutter* was a hilarious understatement; she knew what was coming. Liv's lawyer had won three straight cases in a row the past three years: all beauty pageant kids who'd participated in the *Darling Divas* reality TV show. And none of those girls had the footage Liv had.

Even my parents' lawyer had advised us all to prepare for Liv winning. He meant emotionally, I think. As in: prepare yourselves for Liv's legal emancipation and the estrangement that would follow, because after this circus was over and all that was left were crumpled popcorn boxes, we were going to be sad little clowns indeed, without our main event—our Liv.

Well, at the end of summer I was moving away from all this and restarting my life at Boston University, so, yeah, I'd prepared. I looked down at the hand that gripped my iced tea. Blood pumped oxygen through my veins, along my wrist, into

my palm, my fingers, and back. A continual loop. Never-ending. I was a walking *ouroboros*.

It was the courthouse, with its ironically cheap stucco, that was temporary; it was what it stood for that was ephemeral.

About a year ago, Liv told me that she had learned from her new friends (“pageant survivors,” she called them) that it isn’t selfish to want retribution; that if you’ve been wronged, bringing light to the issue by punishing the perpetrators helps those who’ve been similarly wronged.

I didn’t tell her we would first need to agree on a definition of “wronged” before I’d concede that she was enacting a public service. There was no point in having that conversation; Liv would never understand that justice was slippery and conditional, that it only existed for certain people in certain circumstances.

She didn’t realize that she was, still, firmly center stage in an inane and self-absorbed fiasco. All that was missing was the mile-high tiara.

## LIV

THE HALLWAY OUTSIDE the courtroom was long and airy; it echoed with the clip of business heels and a low murmur of voices. All that space made me nervous—I am way more comfortable in crowds.

“Where is everyone?” I scanned the pencil skirts and tailored suits, chewing my upper lip. We’d breezed into the courthouse no problem, but I’d told myself that was because the media was probably inside. Now we were right outside the courtroom and I still hadn’t seen a single reporter. I hoped Asia hadn’t noticed.

“They’re coming,” Cherish replied, looking at her phone. Asia peered over her shoulder. “But Brooke texted she’ll be a little late.” Cherish glanced up at me. “Or did you mean *everyone* everyone?”

A hot flush washed over me. I waved a hand like I didn’t care. “I meant *us*.”

Cherish flipped her long auburn hair. It had natural shine,

the kind I had to use a special product to create. “Kaylie will be here any minute.”

“How soon?” I said it more to keep Cherish off the topic of all the people who hadn’t showed.

“Soon. Like five minutes.”

With effort, I clamped my teeth together, tasting Brindled Glass, the matte lipstick I’d reapplied. My mom had tried to break me of my lip-chewing habit for years—she even had my pageant coach coat my upper lip in some kind of gloss that tasted like garbage. It would work for an hour or so, but the gloss would eventually sweat off during routine practice, and by the afternoon I’d be back to chewing my lip raw.

“*Thank heck for lip liner and airbrush gloss,*” my mom used to say, “*or you’d be a horror show.*” She said it often enough that the cameras caught it, then they played it on about seven different episodes. It was a “frankenbite”: a clip taken out of context and spliced together with other footage to create a particular scene. A typical clip went like this:

Hairdresser, doing my hair: “*Wow, Livy. Your hair is holding curl so well today.*”

My mom’s voice: “*Thank heck . . .*”

Close-up of eight-year-old me, looking in the mirror.

My mom’s voice: “*Or you’d be a horror show.*”

I guess when they used it like that, they were trying to show how unkind my mom could be. Later, they used the frankenbite in combination with my tantrums. Like at the Little Vixens Pageant in Tallahassee when I was nine and I’d thrown my Rich Wear Queen crown in the garbage because I hadn’t won Ultimate Grand Supreme. For that, they’d dub the whole quote over footage of me acting poorly. It was supposed to be so ironic it was funny, right? Clearly no amount of lip gloss could help me.

I watched those episodes the most of any of the footage, because it was like watching a stranger who looked like me. I didn't have memory of the really bad tantrums, where I'd flail and scream and rip at my cupcake dress. My therapist told me it is possible for a person to be so emotionally distressed that they basically black out and that this happened most often to children.

I guess that's what happened to me. Once, I raked a camera-man's face and drew blood. That episode had the most hits on YouTube—along with comments that advocated instating capital punishment for spoiled children.

I scanned the hallways for Kaylie. Media or no, I wanted all my girls here to share in my victory—*our* victory. We'd worked so hard on this, I couldn't imagine winning without them. That was kind of funny, considering I used to think I hated them. Considering I had said as much on national TV.

I'd said a lot of things on national TV.

But that didn't matter now. I was finally in control of the things I said, of my image, and I could write a new story for myself. I just hoped people were paying attention . . .

"Hey, don't be nervous." Cherish was frowning at me.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Asia said. "Cherish threw up before she went into her final hearing."

"Seriously?"

Cherish made a face. "That wasn't nerves!"

"No? Residual bulimia?" Asia smiled wickedly at Cherish, who laughed. But when Asia's eyes met mine, I saw the unspoken question, the concern.

Part of me loved that she cared, but it bothered me that she obviously wasn't sure if I was over all that. I shook my head.

I hadn't thrown anything up in more than a year; I was strong, like her.

*Strong. Brave. Fierce.*

"I saw your brother on the way in," Cherish said.

"Yeah."

"Is he still not talking to you?"

"Jory doesn't talk much," I said lightly. "So how would I know?"

"What's that called again?" Cherish asked. "I know you told me a few times, but I can never remember."

"Moebius syndrome."

"And it's . . . like paralysis, right? God. I can't imagine. Because he's all there, right? Like, he understands?"

I nodded, picking at the pinkie nail on my left hand before I realized what I was doing. I tucked it into my fist. "Scholarship to BU in the fall. Majoring in . . . rocks? Something science-y."

"Wow. Are they all like that?"

*They.* "People who have Moebius? No. Like, some have . . . what's that called—autism? But he doesn't." A fluttery feeling was starting in my stomach.

"He's not very friendly. Though I guess why would you be? It must be so hard."

I made an *uh-huh* sound, hoping she'd drop it. I didn't like to talk about Jory much, and Cherish had a way of asking things that could be irritating. I didn't black out anymore, but my therapist had identified some "problematic thoughts" I'd have when I was upset. We'd worked on ways to redirect my thinking when I felt that darkness creeping in.

And there it was, hovering at the edge of my mind like a black cloud.

"It's hard on everyone," Asia said firmly. Her statement didn't bother me, because she knew the whole story. She knew Jory and I had never been close, even though he was only eighteen months older than me, and that since I'd filed against my parents it had gotten so much worse. He hadn't spoken to me in months, and I was pretty sure it wasn't out of loyalty to my parents; it wasn't like they were besties.

Probably he thought I had nothing to complain about. And yes, the lawsuit had put us back in the public eye, and he is a private person, so he could've been annoyed about that. I'd tried hard to keep him out of it, though; I'd done interviews and appearances on the condition that he was left alone.

But Jory had always been a prickly pear. Even as a kid he was hard to get along with.

I was going to change that. He didn't know it yet, but we *both* needed this. And when the judge read out her ruling, he'd see.

"Does he work out?"

"Cherish!" Asia chastised.

"What? I'm just asking!"

I took a sip of air and mentally pushed at the dark shadow. "I guess?"

"You can tell," Cherish continued, raising her eyebrows in appreciation. She wrinkled her nose. "Like, it's kind of tragic that—"

"Where's Sandra?" I looked around. "She said she'd meet me at a quarter to."

"She's here." Asia waved to someone behind me.

I turned. Sandra, my lawyer and Asia's former lawyer, was striding toward us, dressed to kill in a seersucker skirt and jacket and patent maroon heels. I suddenly wished I'd chosen my maxi dress and heeled sandals. They were the first things

I'd picked out, but then Asia had said she thought we should look teenager-y.

I risked a look back at Cherish, inwardly cringing that I had cut her off. But it had been that or letting myself slap her insensitive—

*Stop it.*

I took another small sip of air and shoved down the person I used to be—the person my parents had made me. I needed to show people, the judge, that it had been the pageant world that caused my blackouts. Sandra had found me a therapist to make sure I could deal with my anger and not do anything that might compromise our win.

*Redirect. Focus on something good.*

Okay: Cherish didn't look annoyed with me.

"Good morning, Lavinia. Hi, girls." Sandra always used my full name. I didn't mind so much; she had a way of saying it that made it sound kind of fancy. The way my mom said it, it always sounded trashy. A spicy perfume settled in the air. The courtroom was a "scent-free zone"—it even said so on the door—but Sandra wasn't the type to let anyone tell her how to present herself. She was so fierce.

She touched my arm. "How's my warrior?" She didn't look the least bit upset that there wasn't a crowd of media and onlookers.

*If you can't make it, fake it.* I pulled my stomach toward my backbone and squared my shoulders like I'd learned in Pro-Am modeling. It had been good for something, at least. "Ready," I answered.

"Great. Now, remember that you won't have to say anything. You'll just need to sit there while the judge delivers her decision."



I nodded.

"I can send it out when it comes in, right? The verdict?" Cherish gestured to her bright-blue phone.

"If that's all right with Lavinia." Sandra looked at me.

"Totally," I said quickly. "People will want to know. Won't they?"

"Everyone is so proud of you already," Asia cut in. "But this moment of your absolute self-actualization will be the icing on the cake."

I smiled, hoping I didn't look unsure. Asia sometimes spoke in a way I didn't understand, but she never made me feel stupid for it. Still, I was pretty sure she hadn't really answered my question.

"And afterward we're going to do something symbolic of your new freedom," she continued.

"Like putting all of Liv's pageant crowns in a pile in the parking lot and driving over them?" Cherish suggested.

Asia snorted. "Nothing that juvenile," she said. "I mean like taking our picture in front of the Eiffel Tower—a placeholder until we visit the real thing."

A flush rose up my neck into my cheeks. Driving over my pageant crowns was pretty much exactly what I'd planned to do. I hadn't told Asia; I was going to pretend it was a spontaneous thought. She liked spontaneous people.

But she was right: the idea was childish.

*"Horror show."*

"All right." Sandra moved past us and opened the door to the courtroom. "You girls can sit in the first row behind our table. Lavinia, after you."

Asia squeezed my arm and gave me a reassuring smile. "You'll be great."

A thrill rushed through me at her touch. "Thanks," I said, and then, feeling bold: "And thanks for the other day."

She tilted her head. "For what?"

"Worrying about me."

Asia frowned. "What do you mean?"

I paused, my cheeks growing warm. "Oh! I thought . . ." She'd texted me a bunch, wondering where I was, how I was. I'd just assumed . . . a dizzying sweep of humiliation hit me.

*"Thank heck for lip liner and airbrush gloss."*

"Sorry," I said. "Forget it." I was dying inside, but I drew myself up to my fiercest and entered the courtroom.

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"Where are they?" Asia's whisper was unreasonably loud in the silence.

I glanced over my shoulder at my friend's anxious face. She was wedged between Kaylie and Brooke. Cherish sat on the bench at the far end. They were all taking turns glancing back at the doors.

I scanned the room. There were a handful of people: a few women who must've been from my mom's homemade jewelry group, my mom's sister, whom I'd only met twice when I was little, some men I didn't recognize, and a few people with notepads who looked like press. Definitely not a high-profile-case kind of crowd.

Beside me, Sandra shook her head slightly. I turned back around.

The judge, a large woman with bright-red lipstick, checked her watch. The clock on the wall behind her read twenty past ten. My parents were way late. And it was flipping freezing in the courtroom.

I shivered, pulled my arms close to my sides, and glanced over at my parents' lawyer, a skinny middle-aged man with thinning hair. He looked confused, like he also hadn't expected them to be late.

Where the flip were they? Were they doing this on purpose? I'd seen Jory in the atrium. There was no way he'd take the bus, so he would've had to catch a ride with them. No. They were here. My mom was taking her sweet time climbing those steps.

It was a little power play. Fine. She could enjoy it while it lasted. Because once the verdict came down, her ability to manipulate me, or anything related to my life, ever again, was over.

Behind me, Cherish sighed loudly.

Sandra checked her phone. The clock hand ticked over another minute.

Silence.

And then the door was flung open with a thud so sudden, my heart stuttered. Everyone turned.

A security guard strode in. He ignored us all and made his way past Sandra and me to the judge's bench.

No one was following him.

The judge bent to listen to the man's low murmurings. She asked him something I couldn't hear, and as he answered, she took off her glasses and rubbed at her eyes. She held her glasses in both hands, scanning the courtroom. Her gaze stopped on me.

"Lavinia Brewer?" she said.

I leapt to stand, but Sandra put a hand on my arm, keeping me in place.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry to inform you that we'll have to delay."

Now Sandra was out of her chair. "On what grounds?"

The judge swung her gaze to Sandra, unhurried. "On the grounds that we currently don't know where Mrs. and Mr. Brewer are."

"I'm sorry?" Sandra didn't sound sorry.

"Mrs. and Mr. Brewer are nowhere to be found. I'd like them present for my ruling. So we'll delay until we locate them."

"Nowhere to be found," Sandra repeated.

My parents' lawyer was also standing, looking bewildered.

"That's correct."

"They're in the atrium!" I blurted out.

The judge shook her head. "Not anymore. Security has scoured this building inside and out. Their vehicle is in the parking lot, but there's no sign of them."

"I just saw my brother." My voice was doing that whiny thing I hated. "Where could they have gone?"

"Your brother didn't go anywhere; he's still on the premises." The judge repositioned her glasses. "He's the one who reported their disappearance."

## JORY

I DON'T KNOW from previous experience, but I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that being questioned by overzealous authority figures on an ordinary day is like dealing with wet sand in your underwear. Being questioned by said figures when you have my syndrome, on the most messed-up day ever? Gritty nether regions would be a welcome reprieve.

I'd been speaking with two of the courthouse security guards for ten minutes, and I'd counted down from ten a dozen times. They were asking me questions really slowly, like I was from another planet, and they kept looking at each other when they didn't understand my answers.

At least focusing on that was helping me keep it together.

"So you went and got your mom a . . ." The dark-haired guard paused, like he was waiting for me to fill in the blank, and squinted, his already too-small eyes shrinking further. He had a strange quirk to the side of his mouth. Most people

tend to tune out extraneous information when they're under duress. Not me: I've always focused in on details when I'm uncomfortable.

"Coffee."

He exchanged a look with his companion. "And then you and your parents started across this atrium toward those steps."

I nodded. "Yeah."

"You didn't leave to go anywhere? Even for a minute?"

"No."

"You were directly in front of them—leading the way?"

I'd told them this three times already.

"Yeah."

"And then?"

"Then," I said, mimicking his greeting-a-being-from-outer-space tone, "when I got to the stairs and turned around, they were gone." I held the guard's gaze. He hadn't caught on to the fact that I was mocking him. He was too busy playing detective, trying to figure out if I was telling the truth by looking at me. This was an upshot to having Moebius: there was no way he could tell that I was lying.

He looked like he was going to make me go over it a fourth time, but we were interrupted by a flurry of movement swooping down the stairs.

Liv and her entourage arrived like a troop of shellacked Barbie dolls. They'd doubled in numbers, and Liv's lawyer was with them.

Great.

"Where are they, Jory?" Liv demanded, striding over to me.

The security guard held up his arms. "Slow down, little miss."

*"Do not 'little miss' her,"* the lawyer barked, matching pace with Liv. "I am her representative, and my client would like to speak with her brother."

The guard stepped aside, and Liv pulled to a stop, her lawyer at her elbow. Her entourage filed in behind. The blond one looked super pissed, and the other three were too busy staring at me to remember to look like they were backing Liv up.

"Well?" Liv crossed her arms. "What happened?"

I looked at Liv's lawyer. Even in those ridiculous heels, she only came up to my chest. She also had these really tight curls and beady eyes, and she was wearing a diamond necklace that was close to choker length . . . Yeah, the whole thing gave the distinct impression of some sort of lapdog.

*"Jory."*

I looked back at Liv. She uncrossed her arms and waved her hands impatiently.

"I turned around and they were gone," I said.

I'm sure there are things I do when I'm lying. I must have some kind of tell—a gesture, a head bob, something. But only a person who's spent a lot of time with me would recognize it for what it is, and that person was definitely not Liv.

"You know, this is really uncool," the blond one spat out. "After all that Liv's been through? What are you trying to do, break her?"

Liv drew back like she'd been slapped. Her eyes darted away from mine and toward her friend.

"Don't worry, Asia. It would take more than that," Liv's lawyer said.

Liv blinked. Then she straightened her shoulders, like she was resetting—a small gesture, but I saw it. She locked eyes with me again. "Were they even here?" she asked.

"What?"

"Were they here?"

My ability to see far still isn't great, which is part of why I got fixated on things in my immediate proximity, but Liv wasn't similarly nearsighted, was she? She had to have seen my parents in the atrium when she saw me.

"Yeah." My answer sounded tentative, even to me.

"Are you sure?" She stepped toward me, so close I had to put a hand up to warn her to back off. "Are you sure they didn't just send you to make it look like they were coming?"

"Lavinia." The lawyer gently touched her arm. "I don't think this is helping. At this point, we're going to have to file a report and let the police do their job."

The woman's tone was so condescending, I expected Liv's fury to be redirected at her. Instead, she paused. And then it was like a switch had been thrown.

"Okay," she said, stepping back. "Fine. We'll file a report." She turned to the lawyer. "But . . . doesn't some time need to pass—forty-eight hours or something?"

"That's a myth. A person is missing as soon as their family says they are."

"Okay." Liv nodded. "Good." Then, like she remembered something: "What about . . ." She gestured toward me. "You know."

"Right." The lawyer stepped forward. "Jory, the judge asked that you stay with your sister until we locate your parents."

"What? Why?"

"Because your parents have miraculously disappeared the day of the verdict, and she didn't feel it wise to leave you alone."

*Alone.* I looked at the lawyer and Liv. "She thinks I'll disappear, too?"



The lawyer paused, deciphering my words. "Oh. No, that's not the issue. But there will be police action—a search—and in that time, everyone related to the case should be accounted for. It's for your own protection."

Stay with my sister until they could locate my parents. So . . . stay with Liv until the end of time? Because—

*Don't think about it.*

The lawyer looked at Liv's blond friend—the one who hadn't stopped scowling at me. "Asia, Lavinia's been staying with you. Would it be all right if—"

"No." The word was out of my mouth before she could ask Asia the question. There was no way I was staying at Asia's apartment. The sunglasses in her hair looked like she'd hair-sprayed them in; anyone stupid enough to render their sunglasses useless in this weather would probably need help brushing their teeth. "No, thanks."

"Whatever," Asia muttered.

The lawyer sighed. "If you'd rather, Jory, we can arrange to have someone stay at the house with you."

I shook my head. A stranger, babysitting me? This was bullshit.

"Hey." The lawyer's attention was pulled to one of the Barbies. "I hope you're not talking about this on social media?"

The redhead paused, blue phone in hand. "I was just texting my boyfriend."

"Well, make sure he doesn't either. The last thing Lavinia needs right now is a bunch of online speculation." The lawyer's tone was one of admonishment, like she was talking to a six-year-old. "I'll send out a statement."

Red rolled her eyes. "Like anyone is paying attention to this online," she muttered, pocketing her phone.

Liv's cheeks went pink. She cleared her throat. "I'll go home with Jory."

Asia's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"Just until this is over."

I studied my sister. The look on her face was unusual: guilt or embarrassment, or both?

"Maybe there's something there that'll help find my parents."

"The police will handle it," her lawyer said.

"But maybe I can help."

*Need to talk. Can I come over?*

Her text messages. What had she wanted?

"Are you sure?" Asia asked. "I mean, you don't have to."

"I know." She shrugged, like she was trying to look nonchalant. "But I think it's best."

Her lawyer looked back and forth between us. "If you're both sure?"

"I'm sure." Liv fixed me with a stare. There was a spark of desperation there. "Jory?"

My pulse skipped, and there was a palpable throb in my throat. Shutting her down in front of her groupies would be so damn satisfying. After all, she'd wanted a circus, and here she was, center of the ring like a trained lion: on display and clinging desperately to some semblance of dignity.

I pulled my gaze wide. Behind Liv was her little entourage, a couple of security guards milling nearby, and the atrium gaping. She'd wanted a circus, had tried her best to create one, but no one had shown up to see her jump through the hoops.

Damn it. "Fine." I tried to ignore the flash of gratitude in her eyes.

"Do you need to pick up your things from Asia's?" her lawyer asked.

Liv shook her head. "I still have stuff at my parents' house."

"All right. I'll drive you both." Her lawyer looked at her watch. "We'll stop at the station and make the report first."

"What about their car?" Liv asked.

Right. My parents' Armada was still in the lot, which was part of the reason the security guards had questioned me for so long.

"Not our concern."

Liv turned and huddled her groupies together. Asia unfolded her arms to give Liv a hug, and she shot me another look of disdain. The rest made soothing noises and took turns touching Liv like she was some rare object that could break.

But Liv wasn't either of those things; she wasn't unique or fragile. So maybe her suggestion of returning to the house wasn't a way to save face. Maybe it was some kind of calculated move I couldn't figure out yet. Or . . .

Or maybe she was right.

Maybe there was something at the house that would set it all straight. Maybe my parents were back there right that second.

Maybe I hadn't seen what I thought I saw.

## LIV

THE GLASS CASE in my parents' living room had been cleaned recently. It was huge, at least twelve feet tall, and full of my pageant crowns.

Not the early ones, obviously. Mom didn't display any of my prelim crowns—the small, local pageants that fed into state. And none of the Queen crowns from early state pageants were displayed either, since those were a “waste of money” according to my mom. Winning Queen of your event meant you had no shot at the good titles and no chance at winning Ultimate Grand Supreme. And since we always entered the required number of categories to qualify for Grand Supreme, pulling—winning—the Queen crown of any event was sort of like the loser crown. Definitely not showcase worthy.

There were more than sixty. Some of the Grand Supreme crowns were eighteen inches tall, and they literally glittered; my mom had set the track lights in the room so that they hit the case just so. In the middle of the second shelf there was a

framed photograph of me as a kid, maybe ten years old. Red swimsuit, hair in pigtails, sand stretching out behind me. The sun had caught a glint of gold at my throat and the sparkle in my eyes as I posed.

So aware of the camera. So aware of my smile.

I'd been doing pageants for a few years by then; I knew how to turn it on.

I kicked off my ballet flats and sank down on the white couch.

When we had arrived twenty minutes ago, Sandra had helped me do a quick look around to make sure my parents weren't there. Of course they weren't; I'd never thought they would be, which was something I told her straightaway, pretending the reason I'd volunteered to come was to help out Jory. She thought, like, maybe he'd be worried or scared or something? And that my being there would make things more comfortable, in the circumstances.

She didn't know Jory—his needing me around had never been a thing.

No. I was here for answers. There was something about all this that felt off, like Jory knew more than he was saying. Plus, the idea of going back to Asia's after everything: the pathetic crowd turnout, the epic fail at getting a verdict . . .

*"Thanks for the other day."* My skin crawled with the memory of Asia's confused frown. How pathetic was it that I'd thought she was *"worrying about me"*?

My therapist would tell me to let it go, to redirect. So how was this for redirection: I'd question Jory myself and figure out where the H my parents were.

I'd asked Sandra to check my room for me. I was sure my mom had made a flipping shrine, readorned it with the

pageant sashes and photos I'd torn down and thrown at her during one of our arguments, and I was afraid that if I'd guessed right, I'd trash the place. That wouldn't look very good to the judge.

Plus, the police had told us to disturb as few things as possible at the house, in case they decided to apply for a search warrant and look for clues or whatever. Sandra told them that, considering my parents had missed their court date, these were "exigent circumstances," which I guess meant the police shouldn't need a warrant. The cops said they needed some time to look into it all and took down Sandra's name as our liaison while they conducted their missing persons search.

So, who knew how long it would be before they were actually looking for my parents? And Jory . . . well, he'd told the police exactly what he'd told Sandra in the car on the way to the station. And he was shaken, for sure. I could tell because ever since we were kids he'd get really fixated on small details when he was upset. Like, he'd zero in on people's faces, kind of zone out, and he was doing that the whole time we were at the police station.

But was he upset because my parents had disappeared or because he'd played a part?

*Judas Priest.*

He was so frustrating and unhelpful with his one-word answers. I wanted to scream at him, but giving in to that impulse was the old me—I didn't do that anymore. I pulled myself off the couch, resisting the urge to check my phone. I'd turned it to mute at the police station after Sandra told me I could post that my court date had been postponed, and it had blown up with tweets and messages. Like, part of me was relieved—people were obviously watching the case—but I couldn't deal

right now. I didn't even have it in me to Snapchat something snarky about that stupid showcase of crowns.

I tracked down Jory in the kitchen. He was standing in the far corner, making toast—a smell that reminded me I hadn't eaten all day. Wrapping up at the courthouse had taken some time, then at the station, there were all these questions—some I couldn't even begin to answer (“What were they wearing?” “What was the last thing they did?”), so Jory had to, which took forever—and then there'd been the drive home.

I opened the fridge, knowing before I looked that it was packed with everything I didn't eat. Sure enough, a full-fat, high-sugar spread greeted me: cans and cans of soda, bricks of cheese, some kind of layered cake, three loaves of bread, two enormous jars of peanut butter, take-out containers . . . I grabbed a yogurt cup. It was that awful, brightly colored stuff, but it was as close as I was going to get to dinner.

I wandered to the island and leaned against it. “Jory?”

He didn't turn around.

I tried my smile-voice trick, forcing a smile before I spoke. Whether or not I felt like smiling, it always made my voice sound happier. “Look. I know you don't want me here, and I know . . . you've been upset about the court case. I . . . I just hope that wouldn't cause you to do something you might regret later.”

No answer.

Smile. “Because what Mom and Dad are doing? It's not right. It's . . .” I racked my brain for the phrase. “An *obstruction* of justice.” *Whew.*

Jory made a sound—a laugh?—and popped his toast.

Smile. Barely. “And I don't want you involved in anything

like that. Because they're going to be charged, you know. When they're found. And you need to go to college in the fall. And you can't do that if you're being charged . . ."

He plunked the toast on a plate and began buttering it.

I gritted my teeth. "Jory, *please*. If you know something, I need to know. I need to know if you were involved."

A pause. "I wasn't."

"Do you swear?"

Jory put the knife down and turned. "Yes."

I peered at him. It was so hard to tell with Jory. Best to keep him talking. "But had Mom been acting strange lately?"

"Um, yeah."

"Really?"

He tilted his head, holding my gaze. It took me a second to realize he was mocking me.

"Jory! You know what I mean!"

He went back to buttering his toast. How much flipping butter did he need?

"I mean was she, like . . . nervous or . . . different?" The knife scraped against the toast. "I just want to know if she—"

He wheeled. "That?" He pointed with the knife to the fridge behind me. "That food? She buys that amount *every other day*." He picked up his plate. "The bar for strange behavior is pretty low."

As I worked out his last sentence, he turned and bit into his toast, keeping the hand holding the plate up near his face. I turned and fished in the island drawer for a spoon. Jory was messy when he ate, and he was self-conscious about it. I didn't have his chewing issues, but I could sympathize. I hated eating in front of people, too.



Still, did he think I didn't know strange behavior? The months before I filed and moved out, my mom had upped her control game to epic levels: combing through my room, stalking my social media. Overbuying at the grocery store was nothing.

I pulled the tab of my yogurt back and wandered over to the kitchen patio doors, peering out at the pool. It was already dark, and the outdoor lights caused shadows to flicker and dance on the surface of the water.

The pool was maintained like it was used all the time. But we didn't use it and we never had guests; my parents didn't have any friends they'd invite over. They'd always been too busy for that sort of thing, my dad with his business, my mom with my pageants. Being friends with other pageant moms wasn't really her thing.

*"We're here to win, not make friends, Livy."* My mom had said that when you're putting a bunch of money into something, you have to give it one hundred and ten percent—you're cheating yourself if you don't. And . . .

*"No one likes a cheater."* Once, she'd said that exact thing to a nine-year-old contestant, accusing her of deliberately taking too long in hair and makeup and making my own appointment rushed. I hadn't had time to get scales painted on my arms for my Deep-Sea Wear costume, and my mom was furious. On YouTube, that episode was unofficially titled "Sea Monster: Brenda Brewer loses it."

Yeah. She was big on no cheating. Until it came to what she was willing to do to me, I guess. That wave of powerless fury surged up. I was so close to being done with my parents' nonsense forever. And now . . .

*"What are you trying to do, break her?"*

Asia's words from the courthouse echoed through my

head. Did she really see me that way—as someone who could break? Did she think I was that fragile?

*“Horror show.”*

That black shadow swelled in a corner of my mind.

Tomorrow was Saturday: if the police decided they needed a warrant to search the house, they couldn’t get one on the weekend, could they? And by Monday, who knew where my parents would be?

I had to do something. If there was evidence in this house, maybe I could find it. After all, I had so much invested in getting my parents into that courtroom—wasn’t I cheating myself if I didn’t give *a hundred and ten percent*?

I stared out at the pool. It shimmered in the yard lights, shadows writhing along the aquamarine like black snakes. The surface wavered and then flashed, suddenly so shiny it could’ve been reflecting the sun on a cloudless day.

The skin over my collarbone pinged, like something hot had touched me, and I heard a familiar click: a camera shutter.

But my eyes were drawn to the body.

Facedown. Drifting like a clump of garbage. Suit jacket splayed out on the surface of the water, dark hair . . .

The yogurt cup dropped from my hand and hit the kitchen floor with a splatter.

*“What the hell, Liv?”*

My mouth opened, but no sound came out. I raised my hand, clutching the spoon and feeling like I was moving in slow motion, and pointed, pressing my finger to the glass.

Jory crossed over to me and peered out. *“What?”*

Seriously? I looked at him. He was squinting. Right. He was nearsighted.

*“It’s Dad.”* My voice was barely a whisper.

*"What's Dad?"*

I looked back at the pool. The bright, shiny surface was gone, though the shadow snakes were still there, weaving along the bottom.

The far end of the pool was empty.

"But . . ." I unlocked the door and pushed it open, my toes squishing through yogurt as I stepped out. The night air was sticky and the stone tiles were warm under my bare feet. I ventured to the edge of the pool, gesturing with the spoon. "He was here." I turned. Jory was stepping over a gob of pink dairy fat to follow me outside. "He was floating."

"In the pool?"

"Yes." I swallowed. "He was facedown . . . He looked . . . dead."

Jory stopped. He crossed his arms.

"I swear I saw him."

Jory was silent.

"I . . . swear." I looked back at the empty pool. Except . . .

Except there was no way. Dead bodies don't get themselves out of pools and then over an eight-foot-tall concrete wall enclosing the backyard. I shivered despite the heat. Jory was still staring at me. He probably thought I was cracking. Like Asia said I would.

"I'm tired." I shrugged. "My eyes are playing tricks on me." I met Jory's gaze reluctantly, expecting him to say something cutting.

Instead, he tilted his head. "You really didn't see them today?"

It took me a moment to figure out what he meant. "No," I said. He was sticking with his story, obviously.

He was quiet again. He looked over my shoulder at the pool.

I fiddled with the spoon. I was tired. A little spooked. Like, it's not every day your parents disappear. Especially when you're finally about to make them pay for ruining your childhood.

Okay. Maybe I was more upset than I thought. Maybe I'd done the adult version of blacking out.

Jory muttered.

"Pardon?" I looked up at him.

"Wish. Fulfillment." He said it slowly, deliberately.

"What do you mean?"

He gestured at the pool. "What you saw."

I frowned, trying to understand. *Was he saying—"I don't wish Dad drowned!"*

He crossed his arms again.

I didn't—did I?

I stared at the flickering shadows on the pool. No. I was upset, and it had triggered a memory. A scary image I'd seen once or something.

"What did you need to talk about?"

I looked back at Jory. "Pardon?"

He sighed. "Why are you here, Liv?"

I frowned at him. "To help." He stared at me, clearly expecting me to offer a better explanation. Well, he could wait. What I'd wanted to talk about, which was what I was planning to do with my lawsuit winnings, and the reason I was here now were two different things. And before I told him anything, I needed to find my parents.

I stepped around him and headed back to the kitchen. I'd have to clean that yogurt. The housekeeper never came on the weekend. I was sure they still had one; I couldn't imagine Mom cleaning. I couldn't imagine her doing anything, much less drowning my dad—

Wait. Where had that thought come from? Something my mom had said once—not caught on camera. We were near water somewhere. The surface was so shiny . . .

*"Sometimes, I wish to heck he'd drowned."*

I stopped dead and spun around. Jory had his hands shoved in his pockets and his head bowed like he was thinking. "Jory." He looked sideways at me. I took a deep breath and spoke as I exhaled to steady my voice, the way Sandra taught me. "I think I know where they are."