

YOU
WON'T
KNOW
I'M
GONE

KRISTEN ORLANDO

Swoon READS

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A SWOON READS BOOK
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To Samantha:

Little one, you've stolen my heart. I love you so.

ONE

MY EYES FLIP OPEN AND MEET THE BLACK. THERE'S not a trace of pale light in this windowless room. The first two seconds are bliss. With my first conscious breath, I forget. But the next breath comes, tighter this time; that feeling of dread, a dark cloud, a shade deeper than this room, coils its way around my lungs. And I remember where I am. Why I'm here. What I've done.

I was a sound sleeper as a child. Mom said I wet my bed until the age of five, not because I didn't know how to use the bathroom, but because I slept so hard, even that urgent pulse in my bladder couldn't stir me awake. I haven't had a restful night of sleep since I was eight. Not since my parents sat me down over a scalding plate of chicken pot pie and told me what they really did for a living. Those long, dense stretches of shadowy sleep vaporized like the steam off my plate. Even as a kid, I think I was waiting for something bad to happen. I'd startle awake in the middle of the night, listening. Waiting. Watching. My fingers would search for the knife behind my headboard, and only until I felt its cool blade on my skin could I

fall back asleep. The pluck and buzz of its steel was my screwed-up lullaby.

For the last six months, there's been no getting me back to sleep. Sam has tried with her tiny blue pills. I let them knock me out night after night because without them I'd never sleep. But once I'm awake, I'm up. There's no lulling me back into the misty gray of drug-induced rest.

I can hear Sam breathing somewhere in the darkness. I shift my weight, searching for her clock, and the military-style bunk bed creaks beneath me. The bright red digital numbers read 4:00 on the dot. It's the first time I've woken up on such a clean number. Last night it was 3:24. The night before: 4:51. The night before that: 5:42. I've been making mental notes of those times, memorizing the numbers, like they're going to mean something or decode some important secret. I know they won't. But locking in those numbers, tracking the time my body jolts me awake, feels like the only thing I've had control of since the fall.

My body slowly rises, my muscles rigid as I try not to make a sound. If Sam wakes up, she'll tell me I need more sleep before the Tribunal. She'll place another blue pill into my palm and stand over me while I choke it down. My feet leave the warm cocoon of blankets and find the icy, concrete floor. Goose bumps rise on my skin as my toes search for my slippers. My hands feel for the sweatshirt at the bottom of the bed, on loan from one of the Black Angel operatives. When the watchers transported me from the safe house yesterday, it was an unseasonably warm April day. Eighty degrees by noon. But several stories belowground, I've lost all sense of warmth. Of time, too.

I carefully pull on the door, cracking it just enough to slip my body through without letting too much hallway light spill into our cavernous, nearly empty dorm. The dorm is where all the female Black Angel trainees sleep when they're stationed at CORE. But their year in the Black Angel Qualifiers is nearly up and most have either been cut or are stationed all over the world, fighting for those last spots in the Black Angel Training Academy.

The sight of the empty hallway forces a cold and steady breath through my pursed lips. When I'm at CORE, all I get are questions in the form of words or looks. The concerned queries may be even worse than the debriefing questions from senior leaders, judgment and anger wrapped like barbed wire around every word. Those, I can handle. The "how are you" I cannot. It's not even what they say or how they say it. It's the expectant body language that makes the tide of bile rise in my stomach. Head lowered and cocked to one side. Watery eyes. Lips creased into a sympathetic frown. A hand that carefully reaches for my shoulder. Most of the time I pull away. But if I'm feeling compassionate, I let them touch me. I remind myself they've lost her too.

My fingers brush alongside the cinder block walls in the tunnel beneath Langley. Thousands of the world's best spies track terrorists or intercept threats against the United States several stories above my head, having no idea this tunnel, these Black Angel situation rooms and training facilities even exist.

Six months ago, I never thought I'd see the inside of CORE. I was ready to turn my back on the Black Angels, escape into the warmth of a normal life. But now I'm back in the shadows, desperate to reclaim my place here. The people who once applied the most

pressure to get me into the training academy are the ones pushing me out. It's been a long fall off the precarious pedestal they forced me upon. And I don't even know if I've hit bottom yet.

"What are you doing up?" a voice says from behind me. I turn around to see Sam mid-yawn, her hands fumbling through her sleep-matted blond hair.

"Can't sleep," I answer quietly. Sam walks toward me in plaid pajama bottoms and an oversized Georgetown sweatshirt.

"You really need your rest," Sam answers, looking toward the digital clock stationed at the end of the hallway. "You've got a long day ahead of you. I could give you half a—"

"No," I answer and shake my head slowly. "I'm fine. No more pills tonight."

Sam's eyes scan my face, her eyebrows raised, not believing me. The crescent gray moons that cradle my dark eyes give away my exhaustion. I lower my eyelids and dig my teeth into my sore, inflamed lips. I've been picking them again, an anxious tic my mother broke me of years ago. It's like my nerves know she's not here to gently grab my hand, pull it to my side. Without her, I've been pulling at long strips of dry skin until my lips are either completely smooth or red with metallic blood. Each tear is a risk with conflicting outcomes. There is no in between.

"Well, I guess we're both up for the day," Sam says, taking a seat on the steel bench outside one of the situation rooms. "Breakfast doesn't start for two hours. So come sit with me."

She pats the space next to her. I don't answer. Just stare at the cement floor, my legs pulling me toward her. I grasp the cold, smooth surface and lower myself down. The hallway's fluorescent lights'

incessant buzzing burrows into my ear canals, sending a shiver down my body. I pull the collar of my borrowed sweatshirt toward my face and get a whiff of something floral. I breathe it in again, trying to decode the scent of a stranger. Lavender? Or maybe jasmine?

I wait for Sam to speak. She waits for me to do the same. My eyes stare forward at the white cinder block. I count the number of paint globs that hug the curve of each stone. One, two, three, four.

"They're going to tear me apart, aren't they?" I finally ask. In my peripheral vision, I can see Sam's face turn toward mine, but my eyes stare straight ahead, fixed on those tiny white globs.

Sam breathes in a heavy sigh. "I can't lie to you, Reagan. I can't tell you about the questions they asked me either. But my testimony yesterday was . . ."

"Brutal," I answer and suck in a painful breath. She doesn't need to answer. I know it was. I saw it all over her face when she hugged me hello in the dorm after I arrived. She smiled, her voice brimming with forced cheerfulness. But fear lingered in her two pools of blue and no matter how many times her eyes fluttered, she couldn't blink her worry for me away. "It's okay. I already know what will happen. I know they're going to question every single move I made. Pick apart every little choice until they can prove I got her killed."

"Don't say that, Reagan," Sam says and grabs for my wrist. "You did everything you could. You were willing to trade your life for hers. You have to fight to stay here or you're as good as gone. They want you out. You couldn't save her, but you can still save yourself."

"I know," I reply as an icy breath filters through my raw lips. Jagged pieces hit me all at once. That flash of light. That waterfall of blood. Mom's eyes, pleading and afraid. I put my free hand to my

face and furiously shake my head, trying to erase the memory before I hear the echo of my own screams.

“But maybe they’re right,” I continue as the memory breaks apart. “Maybe if I had done one thing differently she’d still be alive. Maybe if I hadn’t gotten in a fight with her, they’d have pulled me out of New Albany earlier and Torres would never have found them. Or maybe if I hadn’t gone to Colombia at all or stayed on the truck or . . .”

“Stop,” Sam says, her warm hands tightening around my freezing skin. “If you hadn’t made those choices, they’d *both* be dead.”

“Yeah, but maybe if I had let Laz go after her or shot Torres when I had the chance . . .”

“Reagan, no,” Sam says, her gentle voice giving way to the beginnings of exasperation. “You can’t do this to yourself. You can’t or you’ll go insane.”

“Then I guess I’m insane,” I say, my voice monotone. My breath becomes slower, shallower. Soon, the only sound I hear is the *tick, tick, tick* of Mom’s favorite watch, which I’ve kept permanently on my wrist since Colombia; a present from her parents after medical school that she always kept in her go-bag.

Sam’s fingers slowly slide off my wrist. She leans her back against the cold, cinder block walls and we settle into a heavy silence.

“I can’t believe I’m even here,” I say softly, searching up and down the deserted hallway.

“In this position or in this building?” she asks.

“Both, I guess. After all my training. After all the bullshit they’ve pumped into my head, trying to make me believe I’m special or something. The training camps and pep talks and money they’ve invested. I can’t . . .”

A toxic mix of anger and sadness bubbles up my throat, stealing my voice. I face Sam; her kind eyes urge me to continue.

“I can’t believe how fast they’ve turned on me. You should have seen the look on their faces when I said I still wanted into the academy. You’d have thought I told them I put my own gun to my mother’s head.”

After days of debriefing post-Colombia, Thomas Crane, my parents’ main contact at CORE, and the other senior leaders were ready to hand me my new life, confined to a single manila envelope. New name, new passport, new driver’s license, new cover story. Reagan Olson. Seventeen-year-old high school senior with a dead mother and government official father. They had secured a spot for me in a foreign boarding school. Said they’d get me into the University of Oxford or the Sorbonne, far out of the reach of Torres. Provide me with my own security detail. I told them that wouldn’t be necessary. That I’d be attending the training academy with the new recruits this summer. With that, every eyebrow in the room rose in unison. Their mouths unhinged. I don’t know if they were surprised I still wanted to be a Black Angel after everything that had happened or if they were just stunned by my nerve. I can only imagine what they’re saying about me behind closed doors. The girl who breaks every rule, defies orders, gets her mother killed, and still thinks she belongs. Ballsy move, chick.

Thomas had put his hands in his pockets, his eyes fixed on the ground. Seconds ticked by. Perhaps he was waiting for me to say I was joking. How could I imagine I’d still be allowed in? After what I just did?

“That decision is no longer yours to make, Reagan,” Thomas

finally said. “You have lost your automatic bid into the training academy. You’ll have to plead your case before the Black Angel Tribunal and see if they’ll even allow you into the Black Angel Qualifiers. If they let you in, you’ll have to try out like everyone else.”

And that was that. Only two spots in the training academy are offered to Black Angel children right out of high school, and the female spot that had been promised to me now belonged to someone else. And there was nothing I could do or say to get it back.

After my debriefing, I was shipped off to a farmhouse in rural Virginia. With Torres off the grid and promising revenge, I’ve spent the last several months cut off from the world, surrounded by security cameras and guards but no real people. Just online high school courses and Netflix to occupy the endless hours alone. Dad and Sam made the two-hour trip to check on me when they could. But my body still ached with loneliness for my mother, for my friends. Luke was whisked off the plane after we landed from South America and transported who knows where. I haven’t been allowed to talk to him or Harper or Malika. We are ghosts to one another. Half memories and unanswered questions. It’s hard to even think about them. But I’d do it all over again; I’d alienate myself from the world for twice the time for the chance to become a Black Angel. Because it’s the only way I will find him. And kill him.

My fate now lies in the hands of five senior leaders. Five votes determine if I’ll ever be able to snuff out the rage that flickers at my core. It’s a slow-burning ember now, but its smoke has begun to fill my body, choke my lungs. This fire will soon engulf me and won’t stop until I put a gun to the head of Santino Torres and watch his crimson blood pool from his brain.

TWO

WHAT IS HE SAYING IN THERE?

My nerves are on fire, heating my body in the chilly underground bunker. The heels of my black, unpolished boots clack against the acid-stained concrete floors, echoing down the East Hall, which is lined with a dozen high-tech situation rooms, several boardrooms, one large lecture hall, and the Tribunal chamber.

I slow my cadence as I walk past the heavy chamber doors. But I hear nothing. Not even muffled debate. It's completely soundproof. Dad has been in there for hours. Over forty minutes longer than they had expected. I glance down at Mom's watch ticking steadily on my wrist. My testimony was supposed to have begun at eleven o'clock. It's nearly noon. What is taking so long? What is he saying about me?

Sweat gathers beneath my armpits and rises to the curve of my neck, and even though it's freezing down here, I wish it was ten degrees cooler. I run my fingers along the front of my carelessly

pressed black button-down shirt, silently scolding myself for not taking more time to iron it this morning like Sam insisted.

“So, what are you in for?” a voice says behind me. I turn around to see a boy about my age leaning against the cinder block wall. Well over six feet tall, with dark skin and teddy-bear brown eyes, he’s dressed in a crisp, white button-down shirt, navy slacks, and a matching jacket. He catches me eyeing his outfit and smiles. “My mother told me I needed to wear a tie if I wanted to be taken seriously, but I just can’t stand those things. Feels like being slowly choked to death.”

The skin of my neck sings with a sense memory, panic quickening my pulse. I close my eyes and try to stop it. But it comes anyway. Heavy hands on my neck. The hot spray of spit on my skin. Metallic, bitter blood in my mouth. I see his face, the silvery specks outlining his body and beyond that, black. Death. I bring a hand to my forehead, shielding the terror that must be written on my face, and shake my brain until the memory from Colombia breaks apart.

When I open my eyes, the boy’s smile has fallen into a crooked line. I force the corners of my mouth to rise into an I’m-okay-and-not-going-mad smile.

“Yeah, I can see that,” I answer, the words louder than I meant them to be. The sound of my own voice catches me off guard because I’m not used to hearing it. At the safe house, I could go days without speaking a single word.

“I’m Cam Conley,” he says, walking toward me. “Fellow in-trouble trainee. And you are?”

“I’m Reagan . . . Hillis,” I say, my voice hesitant, realizing it’s the first time I’ve ever introduced myself using my real name.

“Oh, so you’re Reagan Hillis,” Cam says, his eyes widening. He offers me his hand, which I quickly shake. His skin is warm.

“You know who I am?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“Of course,” he answers, pushing his smudged black-rimmed glasses farther up the bridge of his nose. “Everyone knows who you are.”

“And why do I feel like that’s a bad thing?”

“It’s not,” Cam replies and shakes his head. “If you’re a trainee, you know who the elites are. You’re one of the elites. For those of us lower on the totem pole, present company included, we’ve been compared to you our whole lives.”

“By who?” I reply.

“Our parents, leaders at CORE,” Cam answers, shrugging his shoulders. “They dangle your names and accolades out in front of us to try and make us better.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. There’s a whole Black Angel hierarchy, but I guess if you’re at the top, you don’t really need to know that.”

“Oh,” I reply, my stomach pulling into an unsettling series of knots, my mind suddenly less preoccupied by the Tribunal.

Wonderful. Everyone hates a teacher’s pet.

“So,” Cam says, leaning casually against the wall again, as if we’re just stopping to chat in between classes at school. “What did you do to get in trouble?”

“How do you know I’m in trouble?” I answer and look over at the chamber doors, willing them to swing open so I’ll have an excuse to cut this conversation short.

“Anyone who is standing outside the Tribunal chamber is in

trouble,” Cam says, tilting his chin toward the imposing double doors. “Me? I don’t know ten different ways to break a man’s neck like you probably do, but I can hack into pretty much any system in the world. I got curious about some files. Swiped my dad’s computer, broke into some highly confidential databases one too many times, got caught. And here I am.”

“Are you at risk of not making the Black Angel Qualifiers too?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Cam answers, nodding. After a moment, his eyes brighten with recognition. “Wait. Are you?”

My head slowly bobs up and down as my teeth dig into my sore bottom lip.

“Holy . . . wow,” Cam replies, placing his hands on top of his head. “Reagan Hillis out of the academy and maybe out of Qualifiers. That’s hard to believe. So seriously, what did you do?”

A knot of inconsolable sorrow, burrowed beneath my sternum, breaks free and rises up my throat. I expect my mind to float back to that night, but it flips through its mental scrapbook instead, stopping on a page of Mom.

I see her, a shadowy lump on my bed as she tapped, tapped, tapped my favorite doll’s arm on my stomach, begging in her silly, high-pitched Mimi voice for breakfast or cartoons. Our special morning ritual when I was particularly grumpy. When I wouldn’t move, she’d up her game, cry out, “Mommy, wake up, I’ve got to go to the bathroom. Mommy, I’ve really got to go! Mom . . . hurry!” When I still wouldn’t stir, she’d plop Mimi’s bottom down on my nightgown, make a fake pee sound, and say, “Too late. Sorry, Mom.”

It never failed to make me giggle. The thought of it now makes me want to smile. And cry. And scream.

Stop, stop, stop. I slam my mental memory box shut and my face goes numb. *Stupid, stupid, girl,* my mind scolds. My hands cling to the cool surface of the cinder block wall as my entire body inflames. Every inch of me knows. *She's gone, she's gone, she's gone;* my skin pulses with the truth. But my mind refuses to listen. Those words whisper past its edges, never settling, never staying. They can't. Especially not now. I welcome the armor around my brain. I swallow the key to my memory box. Because if I don't, I'll wade into the black until it reaches my knees, my torso, my neck. I've refused to be pulled in by the undertow of grief because I know I'll dive in search of the bottom. I'll want to touch its deepest parts, an ocean under an ocean, and never, ever come back.

"Reagan?" Cam says, his voice soft. I turn my face back toward him and his eyes shift from curious to concern. "I'm sorry. I thought maybe you did something careless like me. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I did something careless too," I reply, the words ragged as they leave my tongue. "And it cost me a lot."

Cam opens his mouth, but before the words can tumble out, the chamber door opens and I can hear my father's angry voice echoing inside. Goose bumps prick and prick and prick. The heat of my blood, the chill of my skin crash and tangle. If my body was a storm front, I'd be a tornado.

He turns and his brown eyes meet mine. The dark, purple bruises that covered his face after Colombia are gone, but the deep

cut on his cheek, sewn together in a crisscross of black stitches our first day here, has left a thick, pink scar.

My furious heart still throbs when I see the evidence of his Torres-induced beatings. The corners of my mouth rise with love and concern. I wait for my father to return even the smallest of smiles. He doesn't. His eyes don't warm, his mouth stays frozen in a perfectly straight line, unmoved by my presence.

Those first couple of weeks, I collected about three dozen words between us. A few partial sentences. A couple "I'm sorrys." One mumbled "We'll be okay." He was a mess. He barely spoke to anyone in the safe house in Ecuador. Those first forty-eight hours after Mom died, he sat in the corner, his back against the wall, head in his hands. Cried. Then stared. He left me to be comforted by Luke and Sam and Laz.

These last few months, I've only seen him a handful of times. Too broken to go back on Rescue/Take-down missions without Mom, he's become a senior director at CORE, overseeing special ops missions in the field, traveling God knows where for weeks at a time. When he comes back to DC, he'll show up at the farmhouse unannounced to check on me. He brings me treats I devoured as a kid like Hostess Zingers and Swedish Fish. Sometimes he'll leave magazines on my bed that are a few years too old or a few years too young for me. He asks how I'm doing without really asking because he doesn't want to hear the real answer. And he refuses to talk about Mom.

I thought his coldness, his distance, was because he was shattered. Torn apart without his wife. But looking at his face through the chamber doors, he doesn't look lost or hurt or sad. He looks livid.

At me.

THREE

MY THROAT IS DRY. I TRY TO SWALLOW BUT ALMOST choke, the pain knife-sharp. Saliva won't come quickly enough. I could reach across my table for the pitcher of cold water, its condensation clinging to the curve of the glass. But my hands stay at my sides. I'm afraid they'll pick up on my nerves. Pull at my exposed threads. Unravel me.

The white wooden chair I'm seated in is not meant to hold a body longer than five minutes. I've been inside the Tribunal chamber for half that time and already my tailbone and spine are radiating. The five Tribunal members seated at the long white table in front of me, elevated two imposing steps up, have much softer seats. Modern and sleek, but cushioned and comfortable with high backs and padded armrests. I look around the stark white room and realize I'm the only one in a wooden chair. I wonder if that's part of their strategy. Make her as uncomfortable as possible so she'll give up. Ask to go home. Wherever the hell home is.

"Miss Hillis, as one of the elites, we know you had an invitation

to skip Qualifiers and join the training academy right out of high school, but in light of your conduct this past fall, the Tribunal and several senior leaders are questioning whether you are a right fit for the Black Angels after all,” says a man with muddy brown eyes and a full head of jet-black hair. His face is chiseled, dimensions perfect, like they were carved out of stone. Stony Face leans forward in his chair, the jacket of his crisp dark suit flapping open. Beneath his tailored shirt is the body of a twenty-five-year-old, but the deep lines around his mouth and the sporadic sparks of gray in his hair give him away. He’s in his late forties. Maybe even early fifties. His imposing stature reads Rescue/Take-down team. A seasoned Black Angel. All of them are vets. I’d expect nothing less from something called a “Tribunal.”

Two men in suits flank his left, two women to his right. The women are in dresses, one black, one gray, each with matching blazers. The brunette with large gray eyes, one shade lighter than her dress, has a colorful scarf draped around her neck. As my eyes scan the small, cinder-block-enclosed space, I realize that cerulean-blue scarf is the only hue in this room that’s not some shade of black, white, or gray.

“There are very serious allegations against you, Miss Hillis,” says the woman with the scarf. “Allegations of deceit, of blind insubordination. During our days of testimony, several people said your conduct jeopardized the entire mission—”

“Yes, but if I hadn’t been involved—” I begin to speak, to the surprise of the entire Tribunal. A quick rise of Blue Scarf’s hand tells me I’m only hurting myself, confirming the damning testimony. Defiant. Rebellious. Rule breaker.

"You will have your turn to plead your case, Miss Hillis," she continues, her voice rising with annoyance. "Now, under normal circumstances, if these allegations were made against a trainee, much less someone who is not even in the program yet, they'd be grounds for immediate dismissal. But you . . . you are Reagan Hillis. I'd be lying if I said that we haven't been watching your progress for years. You've shown immense promise. But talent without respect for authority is fruitless. You've gravely disappointed this Tribunal and all Black Angel agents. We expected much more from you."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, more to myself than to them. Irritation flashes in her icy eyes and silences me again. I lower my head, press my raw lips together, and that hollow cave inside me begins to throb. The moment Torres put a bullet through my mother's skull, it's like I was cut open, a vital organ ripped from my body. My flesh carelessly stitched back together with rusted staples. Now that empty space involuntarily screams with pain. I suck in a full breath, trying to fill the ache with new air, but it whistles through.

"Miss Hillis, the testimony against you has been quite mixed," Blue Scarf says, her hands neatly folded with self-satisfied authority on her table. "We've had to ask a series of tough questions to all of those involved in the mission, including your father. Some say you defied every order given to you and behaved recklessly. Some have defended you and said you were able to see things others couldn't. That if it hadn't been for your actions, others would have died in that field in Colombia. You've had several months to think about your actions. Do you still believe we should consider you for the Black Angel Qualifiers?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't," I reply, my voice controlled,

strong. “I had a long-standing invitation into the academy. This is where I belong.”

“Do you understand why that invitation has been revoked?” Blue Scarf asks, pushing a pair of tortoiseshell glasses farther up her nose.

My teeth chew at the inside of my lip as I scold myself for not coming up with a stronger strategy before walking into the chamber.

“Yes and no,” I finally answer. “I went against Black Angel Directives. I knew it then and I know it now. But I broke those rules to save lives. My intention was not to be combative. After what I saw with the blown mission in Kentucky, my instincts just took over. I thought my parents would die without me there to fight for them. So, I did what I thought needed to be done to bring them home alive. My thought process didn’t go any further than that.”

“See, that’s part of your problem,” Blue Scarf interjects, her bony finger cutting back and forth through the air, pointing at me. “You don’t consider beyond the ‘right now.’ From the testimony I’ve heard this week, it seems you only think about yourself.”

Selfish girl, my mind whispers. Those words and their synonyms have been used to describe me so many times over the last several months that I have to wonder if they’re true. First by my mother back in New Albany. Then on the mission. During my debriefings. Now the Tribunal. Maybe I *am* selfish. For wanting a different life. For fighting so viciously with my parents. For breaking every rule to save them. After the kidnapping, the muscles in my body, primed from years of practice, just took over. I didn’t think. Didn’t analyze

or try to stop myself. Not once. But was it all instincts? Out of love? Or selfishness? To loosen the heavy chains of guilt that would paralyze me if I never got to say I was sorry?

Blue Scarf and the other woman share a glance, pulling me back from my daze.

“I don’t really see it that way,” I reply and push away the toxic thoughts gnawing at my resolve. “I was thinking about the potential victims in this mission: my parents. I knew my actions could put my status at this agency at risk. But I also knew that I had the skills and the strategic mind to be out there. I knew they needed me. So I went.”

“You think very highly of yourself, don’t you?” Blue Scarf says, her gray eyes narrowing. “You’ve been treated for years like you’re God’s gift so I guess it’s only natural.”

Sweat pricks once again at the glands underneath my arms, my black shirt clinging tighter to my moist skin. I dig my fingers into my hip bones to stop from exploding. I know that’s what she wants. Give them one more reason to throw me out of the Black Angels for good.

“I certainly do not,” I reply, trying to keep my voice calm. “I’m not going to lie. I was told growing up that I was born to do this. But I also worked tirelessly to learn every skill. I am a product of the two best trainers in the world. But I still have a lot to learn. I’ve always felt that way. I’m not God’s gift. I’d rather be in the Qualifiers than have that automatic invitation into the academy, if you must know. I want to prove that I deserve to be here.”

Blue Scarf looks down at the papers in front of her, scanning

through debriefings, testimony notes, her own scribbles. She strikes me as the type of woman who doodles. I can picture her on the phone or in a meeting, clouds and stick figures filling the margins of her notebooks.

“Your combative behavior really started the Saturday your parents got home from their hostage rescue mission in Colombia,” she says, looking up at me. “According to your father’s testimony, you left the house without the guard and gun they demanded you have, got drunk, stayed out until four in the morning. Came home and got into a screaming fight with them. That doesn’t sound like Black Angel material to me. That sounds like the lashing out of a temper-tantrum-prone child.”

“Is there a question in there?” I ask, my mouth speaking before my brain can stop it.

“Miss Hillis,” Stony Face interjects before Blue Scarf can speak, assault missiles ready to fire behind her sullen lips. He gently touches her arm, a signal to stand down. “We need to understand your mind-set leading up to the mission. We feel that your actions that night were out of character. I think we just want to know why there was a shift?”

My mind circles around that night. Little pieces flicker. The foul taste of Mad Dog. My panic over leaving. My mother’s angry eyes. Their disappointment. My disgust.

“I was tired of being kept in the dark. I was sick of my life not being my own. I was done being perfect, because what did I have to show for it? A go-bag full of half memories and places I can never return to. Of friends who don’t really know me. I was just pissed off.”

The anger. It was always there, silently waiting. I never showed it. I had muzzled it, even when it was pounding at my door. The bitterness ate away at me, like a slow-burning acid. So that night, when the anger knocked for what felt like the thousandth time, I opened the door. I welcomed it in.

“I was foolish. I was defiant,” I continue. “I got drunk for the first and last time in my life. I said terrible, terrible things. And I’ll have to live with that now.”

The back of my skull radiates pain, like being struck from behind by a two-by-four, as I think about some of the last words I said to my mother, so thick with hate. Her eyes, polished emeralds, slick with tears. Her voice whispering guilt and regret. And me, refusing her apology.

“Is that why you want to be a Black Angel now?” Blue Scarf asks, her voice softer, manipulatively leading. “That fight was about you not wanting to do this. So do you want to earn back a spot in the academy to pay your penance?”

“Of course not,” I reply quickly, even though I wonder if there are several grains, maybe bushelfuls, of truth in her words. “That mission opened my eyes. It made me realize this is the life I’m meant to lead. I had my doubts. I had anger because it never felt like my choice. But now it is, and I see things so clearly. I don’t want to do this to right wrongs or for my mother. I want to be a part of this agency for the thousands of people I know I could help or save. The world will never stop being a dark and horrible place. But maybe I can help provide that sliver of light. Of good.”

The words slip out of my mouth with such ease, I cannot separate the truth from the pretender; the calculating liar they’ve trained

me to be. I've been able to talk my way into and out of any situation for years. So how much of what I say is real? And how much is just to get to Torres?

For the next two hours, they grill me about my actions in the Ohio safe house, in Colombia. And I tell the truth. I defied my superiors. I manipulated my way across the border. I let my emotions carry me out of that truck and across that field.

"Why did you put down your gun in the storage room?" Blue Scarf asks, her eyes heavy, as if she's having difficulty computing what I've done.

The energy it takes for me to not think about Torres's cold, damp basement could power CORE's entire compound. If I didn't tether my mind, those moments would play on repeat forever. But with each question, the shattered pieces rise, sliding back into place.

"They were so close together, I couldn't get a clean shot on him," I reply and clear my stinging throat. "There was no way he was going to let her go. But I thought perhaps he'd be willing to trade. He wanted me. He came for me first. His revenge killing. He wanted to see them suffer so I gave him what he wanted. I put down my gun and offered myself up in exchange for her life."

My mother, with all her bravery and talent and kindness, could do so much more in the world than I ever could. She should have lived. I should have died. The world is a much scarier place without her here to protect it. Protect me.

"But he killed her anyway," Blue Scarf says, as if I didn't know.

"Yes. He did."

My nose wrinkles, filling with a rancid sense memory. I take in another breath, but there it is again, gunpowder and wet metal.

Blood. The scent will hit me out of nowhere. Making coffee. Brushing my teeth. The smell even wakes me, from one nightmare and into another. It's like those molecules burrowed themselves deep into my nasal passage that night.

I can't stand this pain in my throat any longer. I reach across the table, trying to steady my hand as it pours a glass of water. I wonder if Blue Scarf can see my controlled tremble. I bring the liquid to my lips, open my throat, and down it in one gulp.

When I look up, Blue Scarf is leaning back in her chair. Her arms are crossed, examining me.

"I am sorry, you know," she says and my body freezes. She registers the shock on my face, the right side of her mouth rising with a sympathy I had yet to see. "We have to ask you tough questions here, Reagan. But I'm sorry for what you've had to go through."

"Thank you, ma'am," I reply, my voice even scratchier than before. Her gray eyes hold mine, a sudden sadness passing between us. And I wonder how well she knew my mother. If they were friends. If they talked about me. If she knew my chubby five-year-old face from the crinkled photo my mother always carried with her.

Blue Scarf leans forward, breaking our connection, snapping back into her role of senior leader. She looks down at her notes and then back up at me. "Do you consider your actions reckless?"

My lips purse and push to one side as I think about my answer. I knew this would be a question they would ask me. You'd think I'd have a clear idea about what I want to say. I don't. So I try the truth again.

"Well, I only wanted to do good," I answer. "I know my actions might look out of control or reckless. But I thought I was doing the

right thing. I didn't care if I died that night. I only cared about them living. So if I was reckless, then I am sorry. I just wanted to save my father. Save my mother. And I failed."

The last words ripple as they hit the air. My aching throat burns with unwelcomed tears. My fingers search for the double heart pendant on my wrist, Mom's bracelet hidden beneath my shirt. *I will not cry. I will not cry.*

Blue Scarf's face has changed again. Her eyes flick up at me, sorrowful. She takes off her glasses, pinching the bridge of her nose. She asks her question with a tentative voice. "One last thing. Do you think your actions contributed to the death of Agent Hillis?"

"What?" my thin voice squeezes out before her question steals the rest of my breath. A shiver stabs at my skin and I struggle for new air. It enters my lungs in panicked gulps and I'm back in Torres's basement. I see his manic eyes. The way her body fell, almost in slow motion, onto the dirty mattress. I feel her blood on my hands, sticky and still warm.

Did you kill her? Did you kill her? Did you kill her?

"I'm sorry," she finally says, looking down at the table and breaking our stare. "It's a question we've had to ask every person that has testified."

"And have people actually said I did? Have they said my actions got my mother killed?"

"The truth?" Blue Scarf asks, her eyebrows rising like two question marks over her glasses. I nod. "Some said absolutely not. But a few others believe had it not been for your conduct, your mother would still be alive today."

My lips release a quivering breath. My throat convulses,

choking down tears. The grays and blacks and whites in this room swirl until I can't distinguish one contrasting color from the next. That question follows my every waking moment. But it's the first time someone said out loud what my heart already knew.

"Can I ask one thing?" My thin voice rattles, trying to swallow back the sobs threatening at the base of my throat. "What did my father say? Did he say yes? Did he say I got my mother killed?"

Blue Scarf turns toward Stony Face, pressing her slender lips together until they all but disappear. The look my father gave me in the hallway is the only answer I should need. But their loaded silence puts a period at the end of that painful declaration.

Finally, Blue Scarf turns back to face me. "You know we cannot reveal the answers to top secret testimony, Miss Hillis," she answers, cocking her head to one side. "I'm sorry, but I still need an answer. Do you think your actions contributed to the death of your mother?"

Your mother. Not Agent Hillis. Not Elizabeth. Perhaps Blue Scarf meant the term to be less harsh. But the question pierces, the word *mother* thrusting the knife deeper. And that hollow spot begins to shriek. I scan their faces. Ten anxious eyes stare back at me, awaiting my answer.

"I ask myself that question pretty much once every sixty seconds." I bite my lip, push my hand into the flesh of my stomach, trying to redirect the agony so I can get through this. "And still, I can't give you a straight answer. Maybe. Maybe if I hadn't gone after her alone, we could have freed her. Maybe if I'd done just one thing differently, she'd be alive. Even after this investigation, after you make your decision, I'll still be asking myself that question. Perhaps not every sixty seconds, but at least every day."

I pause, trying to imagine a life where that question doesn't slip into my thoughts every minute, every hour. I wonder if that will ever happen. Or if I'm just kidding myself.

"I do know one thing," I continue, my hands digging deeper into my stomach, fingering organs and stealing my breath. "If I hadn't run into that field, if I hadn't disobeyed orders and gone down to Colombia, she'd still be dead. And my father would be dead too. I ran toward the gunfire when everyone else was ready to run away. And it wasn't just because those were my parents tied up in that barn. It's because I was taught you don't leave people behind. I jumped out of that truck, I ran into that house, even though I knew I could die. So if that doesn't make me Black Angel material, I don't really know what you're looking for. A perfect person who makes no mistakes but also takes no risks? Who cares more about Directives and procedures than the lives of their targets? If those are the type of people you want in this agency, then you're right. Maybe I don't belong here after all."

Blue Scarf holds my eyes for a few silent seconds, then nods dismissively. My signal to leave.

"We'll have a decision for you later today," she says as I stand up. "Good day, Miss Hillis."

As I walk toward the door, all I can see is my father's face, standing in this exact spot after his own damaging testimony. I should have seen his betrayal then. I may be his daughter. But I killed his wife. Didn't I?

Before I can reach the door, the quiver starts at my breath, then my lips, spreading until every part of me is pulsing and shaking. I want Luke. I want Sam. But most of all, I want my mother.

Don't do this here. Don't do this here.

My body carries me out the door to the hallway. I get about ten steps before my shaking legs give out and I collapse onto the steel bench outside the chamber.

How could he? How could he?

Pain radiates through every part of me. My hands ball into tight fists and curl into my heaving stomach. And for the first time in months, I feel the crushing weight of my mother's death. With one more breath, that hollow spot inside me rattles, then explodes, its black poison spreading, its tormenting burn searing me from the inside out, until all I want is to follow her into the darkness.

"Reagan," a voice says, my hands suddenly enveloped into a pair of warm palms. I look up and Cam is seated at my side, my own face reflected back in his concerned eyes. And what he must see cannot be good. "Are you okay? What can I do? Who should I call?"

"No one," I reply quickly, shaking out my head and sucking down the emotions I so foolishly let out of their little box. I sniff back the tears that scratch against my throat and stand up quickly, pulling my hands from his grasp. "There's no one to call."

No one. I have no one.

As I turn down the hall, I can feel my chance of making the Qualifiers slipping away, and with it, Torres's heartbeat grows stronger in my ear. I can see his face. Laughing, drinking, killing. Living, as my mother's body grays with decay. I close my eyes, take in an unsteady breath, and embrace that black cloud of dread, that whisper of certain doom.

FOUR

STEAM RISES FROM MY COFFEE CUP, LICKING MY FACE. I lean closer, trying to feel its heat, but my nerves have shut down. My entire body, numb. Feeling nothing is the only way I can survive.

I stare into the black and blow, rippling the liquid, before adding my milk. The white hits the dark center, exploding into a delicate, creamy cloud. CORE doesn't have my beloved Splendas. Just sugar. I drop in three cubes. They enter the scalding drink with a trio of plops.

A hand touches my right shoulder and I immediately tense. I've been waiting for a member of the Tribunal to come and get me for hours. Summon me to the chamber to hear their final decision.

"Why so jumpy?" a rich, honeyed voice asks. I turn around. Laz.

"I thought you were Thomas or one of the senior leaders," I reply and my tense shoulders fall. Laz has such a calming presence. On the mission in Colombia, he was the only one who believed I belonged there. The only one who put my worried and racing mind at ease.

"I was hoping I'd see you before I left," he says, his eyes smiling even though his lips do not.

"You're leaving?" I reply, and reach up to touch his large hand, his long fingers straddling my collarbone and shoulder blade. "But I haven't gotten to see you at all."

"I know," he says with a nod. "Duty calls. Taking one of the agency's jets back down to Colombia. I just wanted to say good-bye. I hope they let you in, Reagan. I fought hard for you. You deserve to be here. Don't let them make you think anything less."

"I don't know, Laz," I say and shake my head. "Maybe they're right. Maybe I was reckless. Maybe I did get my mother killed."

"Niña," Laz answers with a gasp. "No. How can you believe that?"

"My own father said I did," I reply, my tongue growing thick with the heavy truth.

"I don't believe it," Laz says. "You are one of the most fearless people I know. You *are* a Black Angel. And if they don't let you in, they are fools."

The corners of my mouth involuntarily curl. I stand, rise on my tippy toes, and wrap my arms around his thick neck.

"Thank you for fighting for me," I say into his shoulder as his arms tighten around my rib cage.

"You're someone worth fighting for." He pulls out of our hug and pats my cheek. Fatherly. Way more fatherly than my own has been. "I spoke nothing but the truth."

"I hope they let me in so I get to see you again," I say and grab at his wrist. "I don't want this to be good-bye."

"It would be an honor to serve with you," Laz says and slides

his hand into mine. "You're a strong, special girl. You'll be okay. I'll continue to pray for you."

He leans in and presses his warm lips to the apple of my cold cheek, leaving behind a kiss.

"I'll take all the prayers I can get right now," I reply as he pulls away.

"*Dios te escucha,*" Laz says, his index finger pointing up toward the heavens, then back down to his ear. And the déjà vu of that moment knocks me backward. Laz tightens his grip on me as my body momentarily bows.

"You said that to me in Colombia," I reply, regaining my balance. Three Spanish words burned on my brain. He said them just moments before the team jumped from the back of the truck and into the Colombian night. He was whispering, praying. Inviting me to pray with him.

"I know. And it's still true," he answers. He looks me up and down, making sure I'm steady, before letting go of my hand to pick up the black bag at his feet. "It's okay to pray, Reagan. God hears you."

I wanted to believe him then. And I want to believe him now. But I don't. God didn't hear my prayers in Colombia. He didn't save my mother. He didn't take me with her. I doubt he'll hear me now.

Laz walks toward the exit, weaving his way through the tightly packed round Formica tables of the cafeteria. There's only two other agents in the cafeteria, lingering over an early dinner together. They're young, maybe mid-twenties. I've seen the woman before. Once in the hallway and once in the bathroom. She's given me a

polite smile, an awkward nod, but that's been the extent of it. People don't know what to say to me. So they don't say anything at all.

When he reaches the door, Laz turns and looks back at me, his hand raised in a silent good-bye. I take him in. His weathered skin. The slick braid that swings between his shoulder blades. The wrinkles that explode like fireworks around the corners of his dark eyes when he smiles. I file those pieces of him away in case this really is good-bye. I hold up my hand one second too late. His head is already down. He slips through the door and is gone.

I stand, my hand frozen in the air, waving to no one. I'm finally around people and they're leaving me one by one. Laz, soon Sam. She'll be shipped out on a mission before week's end. Life keeps moving while mine feels like it's been permanently stamped with a red and blotchy TBA. Undetermined and undefined.

The uneasy knot pulls tighter in my stomach as I sit back down. I bring my coffee to my lips. It's barely lukewarm. I gulp the tepid liquid, anxious for another hot cup. As I stare back down into the swirls of caramel, I think of Luke, wishing he was sitting next to me. When I'm alone at the farmhouse, sometimes I pretend he's there. I'll hear the creak of the old wood floors and tell myself it's him in the other room. When I can't sleep, I imagine the weight of his arms around my body. And when I'm feeling particularly lonely, I set out an extra coffee cup at breakfast. I pretend I see him out of my peripheral vision eating toast at the kitchen counter while I watch the morning news.

The watchers had rushed Luke off the plane in Virginia with such aggression, my body seized with dread. I jumped out of my seat, trying to follow them, but Laz held my arm, forcing me still.

“Where are you taking him?” I yelled, my eyes filling with fresh tears. But no one answered me. The jet fell silent. Luke looked over his shoulder as he reached the doorway and my heart pounded as I took in his final fragments, memorized his whole. As my eyes traced the long lashes that surrounded his pools of cornflower blue, all I could think about was the golden hour; those fleeting minutes before a summer sunset, when the world is warm and everything the light touches turns to magic. That’s the way Luke always made me feel. And as he was led by the arm out that jet door, they took away my spot of golden sun, my trace of magic. And the world never felt so cold.

I ask, but they won’t tell me where he is or what’s happened to him. His whereabouts are classified. I wonder if he’s still in New Albany with his family or if they’ve all been moved to a safe house, hidden away from Torres and his army of assassins. I wonder if he’s lonely. If he misses me. If he’s safe.

“Reagan.” I hear my name from behind me. I turn to see Thomas standing a few feet away. “They’re ready for you.”

The tiny trace of warmth the thought of Luke brings to my body disappears. I try to jump up, but that agonizing knot in my stomach loops and loops and loops until it’s so large, it crushes my lungs, anchors me down.

“Okay,” I finally reply, my voice thin from lack of oxygen.

Move, Reagan. Move. My nerves fire and my body finally reacts. I stand and follow Thomas. My legs add ten pounds with every step, wobbling my limbs as we walk around the high-security intel center at the heart of the compound and turn down the East Hall. I try to keep up with Thomas’s brisk pace, but my feet feel like they’re

melting into sticky puddles on the concrete. As we get to the steel, soundproofed doors, the thick barrier doesn't even matter. My heart is beating so loudly in my ears, I can't even hear Thomas say, "Go on in." I only know because I can read his lips.

My hand reaches for the icy handle. I pull down and walk inside.

"Good evening, Miss Hillis," Blue Scarf says as soon as I enter the room. Her eyes dart toward my horrible wood chair. "Please take a seat."

The word *please* comes out gravelly. A command rather than an invitation. I quickly pull out the chair and settle in. As she rifles through her papers, my fingers grab at Mom's double heart charm beneath my shirt, my hurried heart beating a staccato prayer. *Please God. Please God. Please God.*

"Miss Hillis, we've had a very long, very heated debate about your conduct. Both before your parents' kidnapping and your questionable actions in Colombia," Blue Scarf begins. "Now, we are not happy with what you've done. Nor will we ever fully understand your actions. But we can sympathize with them. We think . . . well, some of us think . . . that you were acting on the instincts taught to you by your parents and that, with proper training, you could become the agent we had all hoped for. That being said, this Tribunal has accepted you into the Black Angel Qualifiers."

My hands involuntarily rise to my face and cover my smiling mouth; a rush of heat streaks across my chilled cheeks and my cramping shoulders sink with relief. *Oh my God. I'm in.*

"We need you to understand, this was a very close vote. We have reaccepted you but with some very big caveats," Blue Scarf

continues and my hands and smile fall. "Once you enter the Qualifiers in June, you will have to try out just like everyone else. And the senior leaders will be watching your every move."

Great. I bite down on my lip to stop my chest from ballooning with a sigh.

"You'll be admitted into the Qualifiers on probation," Blue Scarf continues, fiddling with the fabric tied in a loose bow around her neck. "Most trainees get two warnings and a term of probation before being kicked out. But not you. *This* is your second chance. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," I reply with a robotic nod, my body already flinching back into old Reagan mode: obedient, respectful—a rule follower, not breaker. If I want to make it through my year in the Qualifiers and gain access to the intel I'll need to hunt down Torres, a life of numbness, of feeling half dead, is the price I'll gladly pay for revenge.

"We need you to move into CORE immediately," she says, looking me up and down the way Sam does during her monthly visits to the safe house, her eyes far more judgmental than Sam's. I've caught flashes of my reflection in passing mirrors but haven't wanted to study myself. I've seen enough to know I don't look good. My skin is gray. My cheeks are gaunt. You could create a birdbath out of my hollowed collarbones. I haven't weighed myself, but I wouldn't be surprised if I've lost at least fifteen pounds. I'm a waify shell of my former self.

"You haven't trained properly in months," Stony Face asserts, his eyes studying me. "We know this has been a difficult time for you with the loss of your mother, but you are in no shape to be a

Black Angel. You've clearly lost muscle mass. You've lost significant strength. If you even want to compete, you better get your butt in gear and fast. Everyone who comes into Qualifiers is in peak condition. And the way you look now, you wouldn't even make it through a day."

He's right. I don't even know if I'd make it through a workout. I've been so consumed with just getting through each day, I haven't thought about actually making it through Qualifiers. The competition will be fierce. And if I don't get in shape, I'll be laughed out the door before lunch.

"Okay. I'll pack my gear and be back here tomorrow. Thank you for this opportunity," I continue with a small, respectful smile. "I will not disappoint you. I promise."

"Here's hoping," Blue Scarf replies flippantly, her body settling into a deep, vexing sigh.

Yes. Here's hoping.

FIVE

TAP. TAP. TAP.

The sound of tree branches scratching at my bedroom window pulls my body away from the neatly folded stacks of T-shirts, yoga pants, and workout bras on my bed. I wander over to the pane of glass that separates me from the swirling wind and impending spring storm. I instinctively pull the open flaps of my zip-up hoodie tighter around my body as lightning brightens the dreary night sky.

One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi.

The thunder rumbles, three seconds and three miles away. Or at least that's what my father taught me when I was little. I always find myself counting the seconds between that crack of light and boom of thrashing clouds.

Lightning flashes in the distance again, illuminating the acres of farmland behind the safe house as rain begins to fall. The temperature has fallen nearly twenty degrees since I left DC after the Tribunal. I guess that's April weather for you.

When I arrived back, I built my last fire in the wood-burning

fireplace. I've never lived in a house with a real fireplace before. I know I'll find it difficult now to return to the hiss of gas and frozen, fake logs. I've grown to love the crack and pop of the wood. The sparks. Even the smell. I'll miss that fireplace most of all when I leave home.

Home, my mind repeats as I pull myself away from the window. I trace the corners of my impeccably decorated room. Mercury glass nightstands bookend my queen-sized bed. A small, gray linen chair with silver studs sits beneath a wide-framed window; a tiny metal table, artfully stacked with books I've never read at its side. It's a beautiful room. A stunning house. But it's constantly cold. Unfailingly impersonal. I've touched everything with care. Like I'm a permanent guest in someone else's home, someone else's life. I've moved around so much, I've never attached the idea of "home" to a residence. But it never felt quite like this before. As I sit down on my bedspread, I look over at the sterling silver picture frame of my mother and me on my nightstand and realize that she was more than a person. She was a place. A feeling. *She* was home.

I tear my eyes away from her wide smile, that hollow spot inside me pounding back to life. I dig my fingers into my jagged hip bones, redirecting the pain. Lightning pulses outside, but before I can count the seconds for the thunder, I hear the front door open downstairs. My body flinches into a standing position, my eyes quickly scan the room, making mental notes of all my weapon hiding places. *Gun beneath the wardrobe. Knife behind the headboard.* Even with two watchers guarding the house 24/7, I can't stop my muscles from tensing with every new sound, never knowing who is on the other side of the disturbance in this constantly silent space.

I hear the sound of keys being thrown in the bowl at the center foyer table, which means it's one of two people: Sam. Or my father.

Shit.

"Sam?" I call out my bedroom door, my fingers crossed behind my back with childlike delusion. As if that could change the fate of who is really in the hallway.

"No, it's me." My father's gruff voice carries up the stairs.

"Double shit," I say under my breath, anxiety piercing my lungs. The delicate lining of my throat swells as I think about his face from earlier today, the anger in his eyes. The furious accusations on his lips inside that chamber. He's about the last person in the world I want to see.

"Will you come downstairs, please?" he calls.

"Just a minute," I yell back and turn toward my transparent reflection against the darkened window. Lightning flashes against the dark sky.

One Mississippi. Two Mississippi.

Thunder rattles the window frame. The storm is getting closer.

As I tiptoe toward the door, I can hear Dad opening and closing plastic bins in the living room. By the time I returned after the Tribunal, the safe house was in the midst of being packed up. I can hear the clanking of glass and porcelain, like he's looking for something.

Just go. Just go, my mind encourages me as I force my body to move.

My legs carry me out of my room, down the creaky, steep staircase and into the cozy foyer. I cross the front hall and poke my head through the threshold that leads into the tastefully decorated living

room. Dad is sitting on the royal blue sofa, still dressed in his CORE leadership attire (a button-down shirt and tie), rummaging through a bin marked “kitchen.” It’s packed with much-too-fancy stemware and flamboyant polka-dotted coffee cups. Mom would have hated this collection of dishes. She’d have declared their splashes of color “tacky.” She’d have them sent back. The ornate crystal wine and champagne glasses too. Mom liked understated. Classic. Timeless.

“What are you looking for?” I ask coolly as I step into the room. A log shifts in the fireplace and a cluster of sparks float toward the chimney.

“Just looking for my college coffee mug,” Dad replies without bothering to turn around. “These things belong to CORE. I don’t want it shipped off to the next safe house.”

I cross the room and delicately lower myself onto a white driftwood wingback chair near the fireplace as Dad pushes aside clumps of beige wrapping paper and colorful mugs. Finally, he pulls out his Air Force Academy mug and holds it up with a self-satisfied smile.

“Got it,” he announces, placing it on the marble coffee table in front of him.

“They certainly don’t waste any time getting everything packed up,” I declare as I peer into an open box marked “holiday,” filled with colorful bulbs. CORE decorated the house for Christmas with fresh greenery, bowls of cinnamon-scented pinecones, and an eight-foot tree artfully decorated with gold ribbons and glittering bulbs. Our family decorations never made it on the branches. I never asked what happened to my favorite ballerina ornament or the sequined Styrofoam cup I made in first grade. I was too afraid of the answer. Even without our family decorations, someone at CORE went to a

lot of trouble to make the safe house feel homey. They even hung stockings on the mantel. But this year, they only hung two. A needless reminder of who was missing. I took them down and threw them in the back of the hall closet, wishing they hadn't hung them at all.

"So, did you come all this way for a thirty-year-old mug?" I ask as Dad busies himself with refastening the bin lids at his feet. He has yet to look at me. Which is nothing new. He probably thinks he earns fatherly points by checking in on me, but most of the time, it's like we're not even in the same room. His body language, bullshit excuse for father-daughter chats (always surface-level topics like school and the weather), and the way he rarely looks at me, let alone touches me, shows me in no uncertain terms "I'd rather be anywhere but here." Sometimes, I wish he'd do us both a favor and just stay away.

"It's a nice mug," Dad replies, finally glancing up at me, his eyes a bit kinder than this morning. "But I didn't drive two hours for a mug. I'm leaving in the morning to head up a Black Angel terrorism task force in Europe."

"Do you know how long you'll be gone this time?"

Dad shrugs and scans the coffee table's choice of magazines. "Three months? Six months? I'm not really sure. That's why I came out. I wanted to say good-bye. And, well . . . and I guess wish you good luck at Qualifiers."

Dad settles into his spot on the couch, mindlessly thumbing through a month-old copy of *Time* magazine. One I know he's already read. Fury eats away at my center. *How could he? How could he?* My mind repeats today's broken record. My lungs swell, heavy

and tender with thin air. It's hard to breathe near him. It's hard to *be* near him.

"So is this the way we're going to do this?" I finally ask after what feels like hours of sitting across from each other, and worlds apart.

Dad clears his throat and loudly turns the page of his magazine before grumbling, "Is this the way we're going to do what?"

"I don't know, live," I answer quickly, my voice teetering on annoyance.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he answers, his voice almost sleepy, his continued indifference singeing my flesh.

My heart pumps my blood faster and faster, angry and hot. Of course he'd say that. Act confused despite his Mensa genius level IQ. Sit on the couch like everything is fine. That's the Hillis way.

"How can we just sit here and pretend like today never happened?"

"I'm not pretending anything, Reagan," he replies, shaking his head and pulling his magazine closer to his face.

"Bullshit," I declare, and before I can stop myself, I've leapt off the chair and pulled the magazine out of his hands, ripping it at each corner. Dad doesn't move; his eyes stare down, stunned. And as I throw the magazine back on the coffee table, I'm a little stunned myself.

"Jesus Christ, Reagan," Dad finally replies, his hands smoothing the wrinkled pages, handling last month's news with more care than me. "What has gotten into you?"

"Don't play dumb," I reply, anger bubbling up my throat,

altering my voice. "Are we seriously going to sit here and pretend like what you said in the Tribunal today didn't happen?"

"What exactly do you want from me?" Dad asks, closing the magazine, still not looking at me. "It's over. You're in. What more is there to talk about?"

"Oh, I don't know. How about the fact that you almost damned me to a life outside the Black Angels? Or that you didn't defend me when they asked if I got Mom killed?"

"I did defend you," he starts and I cut him off.

"Not according to the Tribunal," I reply. "They told me some people testified that they believed my actions got Mom killed. And when I asked them if one of the people was you, they didn't deny it. And it was written all over their faces. You said yes. How could you say that about me?"

"I didn't say that you got your mother killed." My father's voice rises.

"Then what did you say?"

"I said I didn't know."

"A passive-aggressive, noncommittal answer like that is just as bad as you saying yes. In fact, I'd rather you had just said yes. Then at least I'd know for sure where you stood."

"How can you be so selfish?" Dad's voice soars as he stands up from the couch and begins gathering up his coat. "How dare you fight with me? You know I'm still grieving your mother."

"Well, so am I!" I yell and point to the center of my chest. "This didn't just happen to you, you know."

"Reagan, what is your problem?" Dad is now screaming back at me.

"Are you serious, Dad?" I yell again, my hands shaking and thrown over my head. "Mom is dead and the last person I have left can't even look at me. You can barely stand to be around me. So what was the plan? Get me kicked out of the Black Angels and shipped off to some foreign college where you'll only have to see me once or twice a year? Is that why you betrayed me? To get rid of me?"

"Don't you dare use that tone with me, young lady," he yells, his trembling index finger pointed at me. "I am still your father. And more importantly, now I'm your superior. I'm your boss."

"Fine. That's how I'll think of you from now on," I reply, my voice settling into an indifferent calmness. "Why are you even here? Shouldn't you be at CORE? Boss?"

"I thought my daughter would like to say good-bye to me before I leave for God knows how long," he replies, throwing his jacket over his wrinkled button-down shirt and loose tie. "Look, you want the truth? You want to know what I really said in there?"

"Yes," I answer, my arms crossing over my chest as I settle back down in my chair.

"When they asked me if I thought your actions killed Mom, I didn't know what to say," Dad says, his hands held out in the air. "I know you loved your mother. I know you were only trying to help her. But I don't know because I wasn't there. I didn't see it happen. I gave a nonanswer. Sue me. But when they asked me if you should still be allowed to try out for the Black Angels, you know what I said to them? I said no. Because truthfully, Reagan, I don't know if you're the right fit for the team anymore. I don't know if you belong there. You defied orders. You were combative and reckless and

went against everything we taught you. I didn't betray you by saying you got your mother killed. I would never say that. But I did testify that I no longer believed you deserved the right to call yourself a Black Angel. So if that's betrayal, then I betrayed you. But you're right about one thing. Sometimes, I can't stand to look at you. You remind me of her. And that hurts too much."

My breath catches in my chest as the truth slides from his body, foul and obese with despair. My eyes sting as I tear myself away from his broken face.

I swallow hard at the rigid, thickening lump in my throat; sobs rattle the center of my chest. *I will not cry. I will not cry.*

"It may not even matter," Dad says, pushing aside the boxes at his feet as he clears a path toward the door. "From the looks of you these days, I don't even know if you'll make it past the first round. The Tribunal may be playing politics right now. Letting you in to save face even though they know . . . you'll be cut before the first week is over. So good luck. You just might need it."

Screw you, my mind screams, and it takes every ounce of energy not to shove him out of the room or burst into tears. My lower jaw trembles as he grabs his coffee mug and heads for the door. My teeth sink into my quivering lip as I hear him walk across the foyer, grab his keys, and open the front door. He slams the heavy wood door behind him, its crack echoing throughout the empty house.

One Mississippi. Two Mississippi.

It's only when I hear his key turn and lock me inside that the tears start to fall. They come fast and hot, my lungs gasping for new air that won't come quickly enough. My stomach throbs; my body doubles over and falls to the floor. I want to be as low to the ground

as possible. I fear if I stand up, I'll fall farther and farther toward the center of the earth.

My sweatshirt has opened up and these old wood floors are freezing. I army-crawl closer to the fireplace, my tears turning into loud, full-body sobs. The kind of heaving cries you have as a little kid when you fall and hurt yourself and nothing can make you feel better. My lips and chest convulse. I cannot breathe. And all I want is my mother.

She dies over and over again. Every hour of every day. And I just want this torment to stop, this grief, this life to be over. I feel like I'm walking around, grasping at the fractured pieces of myself that keep falling from my body. I try to put myself back together, but I can't. Nothing seems to fit or wants to stay. So I just keep picking up the slivers, hugging them to my chest, the splinters of my former self glittering in my hands. But my father cannot see them. He doesn't see that I'm falling apart. On the outside, I look whole. And I just want him to see me. I want him to understand how messed up I am. Just care. Just give a shit.

My shaking fingers reach for a gold bulb inside the holiday box. I pluck it from its pile and hold it in my hands, staring at my mutated reflection in the painted glass. And before my overanalytical brain can stop me, I hurl it into the fireplace. It shatters into a million pieces, the glass popping and sputtering in the heat. I pick up a green bulb and throw. Then a red bulb, a purple bulb, a blue bulb, a silver bulb. I throw and throw and throw. They shatter against the painted brick inside the fireplace; the broken pieces ignite and scatter like New Year's Eve confetti. I cry and scream and throw until I cannot reach any more bulbs from my crumpled spot on the ground.

When there are no more bulbs, I look down at my body. Tiny, colorful shards of glass prick at my legs. But I don't feel them. All I feel is the searing ache at the hollow spot inside me, tripling in size.

Lightning flashes outside. I take in a breath with each new count.

*One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi . . . Four . . .
Five.*

The thunder never answers. The storm, swift and fierce, is gone.