

# ONE

## *Cassidy*

**M**ix. Mingle. *Try to look like you're having fun,*" Paisley had said before disappearing into the crowded kitchen.

She'd abandoned me in record time, even for her, and I was left standing in a sea of half-drunk people with the vague feeling that I had some totally off-putting and incurable disease, like smallpox. Honestly, people might have preferred that. At least with smallpox they could host a fund-raiser. As far as I knew, there were no bake sales for the chronically sad.

I stuffed my hands into the back pockets of the dark-wash skinny jeans Paisley had insisted I put on instead of the old faded pairs I'd grown accustomed to wearing. It was either concede to the jeans or let my best friend wrestle me into a miniskirt and I most definitely wasn't ready for anything as flashy as a miniskirt. I

—-1  
—0  
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scanned the room, trying to remember whose house this was anyway. Whoever it was, I didn't envy them. There were too many nice things combined with too many people. It was a parental disaster waiting to happen.

I meandered farther inside, making sure not to make eye contact with anyone. These people sure did like plaid. I stepped over a set of tartan throw pillows that had been pitched to the ground to make room for a group of girls to smash in together, one girl's legs thrown over those of her two friends, a casual message to the rest of the room: *We* are best friends. I knew because I used to speak that language fluently. But now I sought out somewhere to hide in plain sight. I found it in the living room, next to a piano, a furniture piece with enough heft to create a more comfortable, less populated perimeter. I picked up an unlit candle sitting on top, brought it to my nose, and sniffed in the scent of wild sea grass. Okay, so I had to turn it over and check the label. I had no idea how wild sea grass smelled. I had a theory about candles, actually. I was convinced that the world's candlemakers only manufactured, like, three different fragrances—fruity, fresh, and baking ingredient—all the other supposed “perfumes” were just marketing disguises designed to make us feel like we were purchasing something worth fifteen bucks.

I glanced over my shoulder. Nearby there was another group of girls huddled together that looked vaguely familiar—maybe sophomores—but none of them looked as if they wanted to discuss my candle conspiracies. That was honestly too bad. I might have been into that conversation.

I gingerly set the jar down on the piano and picked up a gold frame. In the photograph a smiling man and woman wore fedoras

and held frozen drinks with little umbrellas in front of a glimmering pool. They looked so happy it made my joints ache. Paisley would probably scold me for snooping around their belongings. Hell, I would probably scold me. The old me would anyway. I sighed and replaced the frame.

A couple of the younger girls that I'd noticed earlier were casting furtive glances in my direction and whispering to each other. They were pretty, with long hair that grazed past their shoulder blades and necklaces that matched their shoes. I stood there in no-man's-land, letting them whisper and stare. Even with my not-so-invisible cloak of doom and gloom, as captain of the cheerleading squad, I was still popular enough to be intimidating, although now with all the rumors about me—face it, many of them true—I was probably a little scary, too. Hence the whispering. I doubted any of them would have the guts to come right up and talk to me. Good, let them be scared, I figured.

I'd been at the party for twenty minutes and so far I'd managed not to talk to a single person since walking through the door. I felt weirdly proud of this. Like maybe I should keep it that way. An entire party without opening my mouth to speak. Or to make out with boys.

Getting drunk and kissing definitely fell within the realm of old me.

I squeezed past the group of girls and noticed as they fell silent the moment I came close. *Subtle, ladies*, I wanted to say. Only I didn't because I was anti-conversation. Anti-party. Anti-everything.

Instead, I observed. I glided out of the living room, feeling like a ghost of my former self, and into the kitchen. The back doors

opened onto a patio where my classmates were spilling out into the night. I spotted Paisley's blond bob, bowed forward in concentration over a game of flip cup taking place on the breakfast table. Beside her, two girls from our cheerleading squad, the Oilerettes—Ashley and Erica—hailed her on with whoops and squeals.

I jumped at the feeling of a cold hand tugging on my elbow. "I heard a rumor you were here."

I jerked around to see Ava. Startled, my mouth fell open, but no words came out. I just blinked at her. She was a fellow junior on the Oilerettes, who'd made the squad for the first time this semester. Ava had a penchant for adding a personal flair to her clothes. She'd cut the neck opening of a black T-shirt, so that it now hung casually off one shoulder, blending with the shiny strands of her jet-black tresses.

I tightened my lips into something that I hoped resembled a smile.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you." She looked me over. "Geez, it's a party, Cassidy." She playfully grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me as though she could shake free whatever piece had broken in the past few weeks. "You look more like you're at somebody's funeral." Her hands slid from my shoulder and she pinched the bridge of her nose. "Right. Sorry. God, bad choice of words."

In case anyone was wondering, it wasn't kosher to mention the words *death*, *funeral*, *dead*, *dying* or *kill* in front of me. Not after my boyfriend, Adam, accidentally killed Paisley's on-again, off-again romance, Knox, just as I was being crowned Homecoming queen. Or after Adam had likely suffered a similarly gruesome fate at the hands of Hollow Pines's resident serial killer. Of course, all of this occurred once Adam had very publicly cheated on me

with a high school nobody, so perhaps even the word “boyfriend” was generous.

Not that this wouldn't be enough to make anyone's greatest hits album for Worst Year Ever, but those parts of the story that people knew, the ones that made them whisper and look at me funny and apologize for making a stupid offhand comment that even I knew they didn't mean, those parts didn't amount to half of it.

I had a gaping hole in my chest so wide I found it shocking that the whole world couldn't see right through it. And the stone-cold truth was that Adam wasn't the one who put it there.

I caught myself staring off into space. Or rather, I caught my reflection in the dark circles of Ava's eyes, which were busy searching my face for signs of life. *Sorry, no signs here*, I wanted to tell her, only it felt like it'd take an exorbitant amount of effort, so I didn't bother.

I was actually relieved when Ashley bounced away from the game of flip cup to join us. Her cheeks were flushed with an early buzz. I remembered the feeling I got after the first few drinks, when my blood felt warm and gooey in my veins, every muscle in me relaxed and I loved everyone that I met. *Especially* the boys that I met. Those were the days when I didn't see any harm in a little kissing. But I knew now that the warm, gooey feeling was the same one that left girls with gaping holes in their chests.

“The Billys are on their way with wine coolers,” Ashley said, referring to the guys on the football team, William, Billy Ray, and just Billy. I'd kissed William twice and Billy Ray once last year. Paisley had made fun of me for being easy, but in my personal canon of ethics I wasn't easy as long as I kept all contact above the waistline.

Still, I wished I could take it all back now.

Ava leaned closer to Ashley. “Paisley showed me those pictures of that sophomore, by the way. I’m actually mortified for her. First, she was stupid enough to send pictures to William in her underwear and, second, she wears cotton instead of lace.”

With Ava and Ashley occupied, I took my opportunity to leave. I shrugged and pointed over my shoulder in a vague direction that could have meant I was getting a drink or going to the restroom. Ashley gave a quick smile and waved her fingers.

The restroom. Now there was an idea. I could kill at least fifteen minutes in a bathroom. Completely alone. I’d committed to an hour at the party. Enough to make the skinny jeans worthwhile.

I trudged along a carpeted hallway that looked as if it should lead to a bathroom and quickly ran up against the back of the line. Even better. I could probably kill twenty minutes now.

I waited, taking dutiful steps forward every time someone else shut the door behind them. I thought coming to a party would help, but looking back I wasn’t sure what. My mood? My outlook on life? My solitude? The invisible gaping wound festering in my chest? Those felt like lofty goals for a house party.

*It’ll be good for you*, I replayed my friends’ words in my head and sighed. *Give it a chance.*

I was finally the next person in line. No one had tried to talk to me the whole time I’d been standing here. A small part of me was put out by this. The old me would have chatted to people in line. Actually, the old me would have never ventured to the bathroom alone. Paisley and I would have gone into the bathroom arm in arm and taken turns fixing our hair while the other one peed.

The door opened and a skinny boy wearing a starched fishing shirt and holding a red plastic cup exited. I slipped in and closed

the door shut behind me. Someone had left the hand towel off its hook and a bottle of shower gel had been knocked off the edge of the tub, but other than that, the bathroom looked relatively clean for mid-party.

I turned and pushed the button on the lock. It didn't stick. I tried again, only to find that the door didn't lock at all. *Great.* I blew hair from my eyes. Well, at least there was a line. People had seen me walk in, so I should have a modicum of privacy.

Moving away from the door, I decided to kill time by snooping through the owners' belongings. I still had no idea whose home we were destroying. I slid open the first row of drawers beneath the countertop. Blue goo oozed from a toothpaste bottle onto a dirty hand mirror. This bathroom must belong to a boy.

I found an electric razor resting in the second drawer and eyed it with interest. I turned it over, testing the weight in my palm. I'd never used one before. I eyed my long brown hair. The old me would never have left the house without styling it into loose curls to frame my face. Now, it was plastered on either side of my head. I leaned toward the mirror and swept a handful of hair away from my ear to see where I'd begin shaving. If I did begin shaving, that was. Which I wouldn't because that was crazy. Wasn't it?

My fingers felt twitchy, trigger-happy.

I hadn't been completely honest. Yes, there was the old me, the one with the wavy curls and miniskirts, the toned abs and the long list of dotting boys. But then there was the old-old me. That version was a chubby girl who was good at math. That version had been invisible. Nobody even knew her name.

I switched on the electric razor and felt it vibrate in my hand.

When my family moved from Phoenix, I'd done some quick

mental math and concluded that life in a small Texas town like Hollow Pines would be a whole lot easier as the girl with abs and miniskirts. But now, I wasn't so sure. My calculations may have been off.

My heart pounded as I brought the razor closer to my scalp. I could go back to that girl. If that was what I wanted, all it would take was a few swipes of the razor and then Cassidy Hyde, Homecoming queen, would be gone. I licked my lips, my mind buzzing with concentration, when out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a gleam of silver in the open drawer.

I lowered the razor and took out a pair of scissors. These were better. *Baby steps*, I told myself. I pulled one of the front pieces of hair out in front of my nose, opened the blades, and held them at eye level.

My hands shook when suddenly the door burst open. Startled, I snapped the handles together and heard the short snip of the blades.

"Someone's in here," I yelled. A lock of my hair drifted down like a feather to lay lifeless on the countertop. My throat squeezed tight. I hadn't meant to speak.

Anger roiled inside me as I whirled to see Liam Buckley pressing his back to the door.

His lips spread into a crooked grin. "Hey, Cass."

"Hey, yourself," I said. There was no holding back the words now that Liam and I were sharing a twenty-five square foot space. "You weren't even next in line."

He lifted his eyebrows. Liam dwarfed me at well over six feet tall. He had eyes as green as emeralds, tan skin, and brown hair streaked with natural shades of golden blond so beautiful you'd swear he paid for them at the salon. "Sorry, had to piss like a



racehorse,” he said, pushing up the cuffs of his sleeves. His rumpled shirt was half untucked, giving him the casually privileged air of a prep school kid. “You mind?”

Before I could answer, he crossed the room, unfastening his belt as he did so.

My mouth fell open and my cheeks went blisteringly hot. Just before I heard the sound of his urine hitting the toilet bowl, I managed to spin back around and aim my eyes anywhere but the mirror.

“What is *wrong* with you?” I said.

His steady stream didn’t falter. “Bunch of freshmen and sophomores in the line so I jumped it.” Liam was a year older than me, a senior starter on the Hollow Pines basketball team. “Plus I needed some place private.”

This entire scenario was officially mortifying. The only problem was that the person for whom it should be mortifying was *him*.

I listened to the zip of his fly and then the toilet flushed. I glanced up into the mirror. At least he’d remembered to put the seat down. Liam was grinning at me as he approached the sink. I instinctively scooted over to make room. Last year I would have died from joy to be stuck in a room with Liam Buckley.

He turned the faucet and stuck his hands underneath the running water. So, not a total barbarian.

“What are you doing in here anyway?” His gaze flitted to the scissors and the lock of hair. “Joining witness protection, Cass?”

I blinked. “What are you doing calling me ‘Cass’? You hardly even know me.” I recognized the voice of the girl with the gaping wound in her chest, the one that didn’t care to be sharing a room with Liam Buckley but instead would prefer to be left alone.

The left corner of his mouth curved up, puckering the skin

below his eye to reveal a small scar that had been hidden there. “Easy,” he said, shutting off the faucet and shaking his hands dry. Drops of water speckled the mirror.

I chewed the inside of my cheek.

He turned away from the sink and rested the back of his jeans against the countertop. So, what, he was just going to *stay* now? He shoved a hand into his pocket. I watched him, reluctantly curious, out of the corner of my eye. He fished out a small, ziplock bag with a dozen or so pale yellow pills inside.

“I don’t normally do this,” he said, popping open the top of the bag. “But you look like you could use it.” He turned his chin over his shoulder and nodded at the abandoned scissors and the lock of my hair. “Before you commit a crime against fashion or whatever.”

“I’m not—” I began to protest.

“Seriously.” His green eyes bore into me. “You need to stop. You have really nice hair.”

My mouth snapped shut. Part of me wanted to laugh at how ridiculous this all was.

“Hold out your hand,” he ordered and, for some reason, I obeyed. He placed a single pill in my palm.

“What is it?” I couldn’t even feel the weight of it in my hand.

He selected another one for himself and closed the ziplock bag. “This,” he said, pinching the round pill between thumb and forefinger. “Is Sunshine. I don’t tell just everyone I have this stuff, you know.” His smile was easy, his shoulders relaxed, like he’s showing me a rare quarter from his collection.

“What’s it do?” The minuscule button of a pill looked too tiny to do much of anything.

“It makes you feel like. . . sunshine. Like it’s the middle of the

summer and you're having the best day ever. Like everything is golden."

I'd been to my share of parties and I was no stranger to alcohol, but I'd never so much as smoked a joint. I turned the pill over and stared at the identical back. I felt drawn in by the cheery yellow color of it. I thought of myself and of the gaping hole in my chest and wondered what I could possibly have to lose.

Just then, someone pounded the door. "Open up," a girl yelled. "There are people waiting."

"One second," Liam yelled. "That's our cue." He held up his pill as if we were clinking glasses. "Cheers." He set the dose of Sunshine onto his tongue, cocked back his head, and swallowed.

Without another thought, I did the same. My mouth was dry and the pill stuck to my throat on its way down, but I managed and, once it was gone, I stuck out my tongue to show that I'd really taken it.

He squeezed my shoulder. "That's my girl." And even though only minutes ago, I'd scolded him for calling me "Cass," this time, I made no smart remark. "Now, shall we go enjoy our night?" he asked.

I stared at the scissors and the dead hair and nodded, still skeptical that the word *enjoy* could apply to me. But my solitude had ended the moment Liam had barged in, so what else was there to do? The pounding on the door had picked back up. Liam casually opened it to greet a red-faced girl preparing to knock her fist against the wood again. "It's all yours." He winked.

The color drained from her face when she saw that it was Liam. "Sorry," she mumbled before ducking between us into the bathroom.

Paisley was waiting third in line, next to Ava. She stood up

straighter when she noticed me. “Um, *hello?*” Paisley snagged my elbow as I was following Liam back down the hallway. “I guess somebody’s feeling more like themselves.” She eyed me from head to toe. “You’re hooking up with *Buckley?*” She shared a look with Ava that I couldn’t read.

I tensed. “No, it’s not like that—”

Paisley smirked, bringing the rim of a wine cooler to her lips. “Right. It never is, Cassidy. Just remember, being easy keeps them breezy, know what I mean?” I did know, but then again, I wasn’t looking for a boyfriend. Every boy in Hollow Pines could blow away in the wind for all I cared. “At least get to your fourth drink before you let him under your shirt, ’kay?” She patted me on the head.

Ava rolled her eyes and pushed Paisley gently with her shoulder. “Oh, shut up, Paize. Let her enjoy her night. This is the twenty-first century. Go get yours, girl.” She offered me a thumbs-up.

I cocked my head, studying my pair of friends. In the time we’d stood talking, my cheeks had grown warm. Liam was disappearing down the hall. I thought vaguely that I’d like to catch up with him. Paisley snapped her fingers in front of my nose bringing me back. I knew I should be annoyed with her, but instead, I felt my mouth stretching into a grin.

“Thanks, Paisley,” I said. “You . . . look really pretty tonight, you know that?” And I was surprised at how sincere I sounded. It was true, though. A faint glow seemed to radiate from her blond hair. Her skin had a fairylike shimmer emanating from it. I squeezed her hand, feeling a rush of tenderness for my friend. “Isn’t this night great?” I said.

Ava’s expression was a confused mix between a grin and a frown. “Yeah,” she said. “I mean, I guess so.”

There was a swelling in my chest, like a rising balloon, and it seemed to be plugging up the gaping hole that had been there moments earlier. “Okay, well, I’m going to go catch up with Liam. I’ll see you guys there? Come dance with us!” I didn’t know how I knew that Liam and I would be dancing. But it felt logical. I waved and trotted down the hall in the direction Liam had gone.

I smiled as I passed kids that I only sort of recognized from school. They smiled back. The interaction felt good. It felt right. My veins hummed with a molten warmth so pleasant that I felt as though I’d just returned from a weeklong spa trip.

I returned to the living room where less than an hour ago I’d sulked in the corner. There I spotted the back of Liam’s head, peeking out over the crowded space. I threaded my way through the throng of people, politely excusing myself as we bumped elbows or hips. From the kitchen a nineties boy band song blared through the speakers. The beat matched the thumping in my chest. I remembered this song from car rides with my mom when I was younger. It was one of my favorites.

I tapped Liam on the shoulder. He was chatting with one of the sophomore girls that had been sneaking glances at me with her friends earlier in the night. When Liam looked down to see me standing there, his face seemed to break open with delight.

“Hey, you,” he said.

I matched his smile watt for watt. “Wanna dance?” I asked. “I love this song.”

He cocked his head to listen and then began bobbing along to the melody. He offered me his hand and twirled me in place. Laughter gurgled up from deep inside me, spilling out into the room. I couldn’t believe how long it’d been since I laughed.

Liam and I threw our bodies into the music. Others joined us and before long, a circle had formed to watch the pair of us. I didn't take myself too seriously when I danced and neither did Liam. I brought out all my dad's dorky dance moves—the lawn mower, the running man, even the sprinkler. Tears sparkled in my eyes from all of the merriment. I'd forgotten how much I loved dancing, not for cheerleading, but for the fun of it.

Liam leaned close to my ear. His breath tickled and he smelled like coconut shampoo. "You're the most fun girl at this party."

And I believed him. Because all of a sudden it was as if the clouds had lifted and there I still was, shining again.

## TWO

### Marcy

**A**n eerie green glow was cast by a neon sign in the shape of a pair of boots that hung over a slick, pinewood bar. The club was dimly lit with places to disappear into the shadows for those who wanted to. Those who were like me.

I'd been here before. I knew that in the academic sense. Only this time felt different. I rested my elbows on the counter and pretended to wait for a bartender while I searched the faces gathered there for one that I recognized. No luck.

I turned my back to the bar and scanned the crowd. *Come out, come out, wherever you are*, I thought darkly.

The small town of Dearborn, which neighbored Hollow Pines, only had a few hot spots to serve all of the college's campus. This was by far the most popular.

Five faces had been seared into my memory. When I recognized none of them at the bar, I slinked into the mass of clubgoers. My mind flashed through the lineup of them. Nameless. Heartless. They could only hide for so long.

I reached my hand into the light jacket I was wearing. A wash of comfort blanketed me as my finger traced the blunt side of the knife stashed inside the pocket.

Strobe lights flashed across the dance floor. I studied the face of every boy that I saw. Laughing. Smiling. Drinking from frothy cups. In the cutting lights, they all looked like they had fangs. I stroked the hidden blade, biding my time. *Soon*, I told it. *Soon*.

And in a soft voice, I began to sing:

*“Hide and seek, hide and seek,*

*In the dark, they all will shriek,*

*Seek and hide, seek and hide,*

*Count the nights until they’ve died.”*



# THREE

## *Cassidy*

**W**hen I was a kid, I had a name for that place between sleeping and wakefulness. I called it Sleep Space. As in *outer* space. That little pocket of time when I was so relaxed in bed that I was practically weightless, a black hole between two different universes, left dreaming in no-man's-land.

Sunlight trickled through the blinds in my room, warming my face. I buried my head deeper into the pillow and clung to Sleep Space as though I could stop the pull of gravity.

The door of my bedroom creaked open. Through it, the scent of bacon wafted, causing my stomach to growl. When was the last time I'd eaten? I wondered as I finally lost my hold on Sleep Space. My last meal had to have been dinner. Did I remember to eat dinner? I couldn't recall. I took a deep breath in and my mouth watered.

“Cassidy?” My little sister’s tentative voice came from the doorway.

When I propped myself up on my elbows, I had to remind myself, she wasn’t so little anymore. Honor was already one semester into her freshman year at Hollow Pines, tall for her age with cheeks splashed with freckles and hair two shades lighter than my own that fell to the crooks of her elbows. She’d been named after my grandmother, who passed away a few months before Honor was born and ever since, the name had been a constant source of anxiety for her.

“Morning,” I said.

“Mom told me to tell you that she made breakfast,” she said, taking a step onto my carpet. “I told her you probably wouldn’t come down, but she made me tell you anyway.”

“Okay . . . well, what’d she make?” I moved a pillow behind my back and propped myself upright.

Honor looked at me like I was pulling a prank on her. “Mom’s making chocolate chip pancakes and Dad’s cooking bacon. Why?”

I licked my lips. My stomach growled loudly enough for both of us to hear. A smile tugged at Honor’s lips.

“You had me at chocolate. I’m coming down.” I wrestled my legs free from the covers.

“Uh, Cass?”

“Yeah?” My bare feet hovered a few inches off the pink floral rug laid across the hardwood floor.

“Did you go to a party last night?”

“Yeah . . .” I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the vanity across from my bed. “Oh.” I was wearing the same dark skinny jeans from last night and a fitted black shirt. Mascara and

lipstick were smeared on the side of my face so that I resembled the Joker. I covered my mouth with my right hand and stifled a giggle. “I guess I need to clean up first, huh?”

Honor’s face brightened. “I’ll stall Mom?”

“Don’t let any of the chocolate chips get eaten without me.”

She grinned and scampered off. I heard the sound of her footsteps fading down the stairs. My chest squeezed as I remembered that this was the first conversation in weeks that involved me responding with more than one word.

Wiping the last threads of sleep from my eyes, I made my way into the bathroom and twisted the nozzle on the showerhead. Steam filled the room, fogging up the mirror, and I quickly stripped off my clothes, which reeked of smoke and alcohol, and jumped under the downpour.

I’d never fallen asleep in my clothes from the night before. Why hadn’t I changed when I’d gotten home? I closed my eyes and let the water cascade over my head. Actually, I had no recollection of getting home, period. I ran my fingers through my soaked mane, racking my brain for the last thing that I could remember. My fingers reached the ends of the front strands of hair on the right side too quickly. I felt around the chopped-off edge like I was touching the end of a missing limb and suddenly the sound of a scissor snip replayed in my mind. Liam barging into the bathroom, the tiny, yellow pill, and then . . . Sunshine.

Yes, the last thing I remembered was a warmth spreading through my hands, feet, and limbs as I danced gleefully around the party with Liam.

Here in the shower, I noticed that I was smiling at the memory. Well, I noticed that and that the water was beginning to get cold.

I didn't feel hungover. I had no headaches or stomachaches or grogginess. As I stepped out of the shower, I realized that I felt better than I had in weeks.

I ran a towel over my skin, but when I got to my left hand, I observed a dark smudge on the back. I held it up to the light to study, but I couldn't make out what it was other than an inky smear. That was odd. I put the back of my hand underneath the sink faucet and rubbed at the blotch with my thumb until it disappeared.

As the steam evaporated, I stared at my reflection. Bright eyes stared back at me. For the first time in a long time, I had the urge to comb my hair, put on eyeliner, and wear real clothes. I couldn't remember the end of the party or how I'd gotten home last night, but . . . so what? After I took the Sunshine, maybe I'd had too much to drink. Maybe I'd actually partied like I used to and had one of those miraculous mornings without a hangover. Clearly, I was fine. In fact, I was better than fine. I was happier than I'd been since before I'd met Adam, since before Knox died, since before that night in Dearborn.

*Dearborn.*

I abandoned my reflection in search of a pair of yoga pants and a soft fleece jacket. Real clothes and makeup would have to wait until after I got my appetite under control. I never wanted to think about Dearborn again. Except somehow it'd been all I could think about for weeks. I'd thought about it so much that it had chewed the gaping hole through my chest.

Dressed, I tugged a comb through my damp hair. Only last night and even this morning, it was like the gaping hole had vanished. It was like I'd never gotten drunk at that stupid bar or stumbled away from my friends or gone off with that stupid group of college guys.

It was like I was still me.

Like they'd never hurt me.

I froze, waiting for the memory to gnaw a fresh crater where my heart should be, but none opened up. I could breathe. In and out, in and out. I felt genuinely *good*. Maybe my friends had been right after all. A night out was exactly what I'd needed. Kids my age. Fun. *High school*.

There was no reason to worry. Everything was fine. People had little blackouts all the time after a party. I nearly giggled at the memory of Billy Ray, who once took off his shirt at a party, drew a smiley face on his ample stomach, using his belly button as the mouth, and went around using it like a ventriloquist dummy. When we brought it up at school, he had absolutely no recollection of his routine.

See? I was better than fine.

I returned my comb to the drawer, enjoying the scent of eucalyptus shampoo and the comfort of lotion on my skin, and then, without sparing another thought for Dearborn, headed downstairs to the kitchen.

Mom was using a spatula to wrestle a pancake from the griddle. She dropped the perfectly browned circle of batter onto a plate. Dad peered into the microwave while a plate of bacon spun around and around. He didn't know how to use the stove.

Honor was the first to look up. "Don't worry. I didn't let Mom use any blueberries in yours," she said. She sat on one of the wooden chairs at the kitchen table, knees tucked into her chest, and pajama bottoms that covered her toes.

"Thank goodness," I said with exaggerated relief. The tile was cool on my feet as I wandered over to the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of orange juice.

“Somebody’s up and at ’em this morning.” Dad stood up from the microwave. I couldn’t count the number of times my mom had told him not to watch the food while it spun inside or else he’d get cancer from the radiation, but when it came to food, my dad was a little kid, always sneaking treats and never able to wait patiently for the next meal, which explained the endearing cushion of fat that protruded past the waistband of his weekend sweats.

“I guess so,” I said, trying to sound casual, as though I’d never stopped attending our Saturday morning breakfasts in favor of sulking in my room.

Mom turned her back from the griddle. She had a dollop of batter stuck in her bangs. “You look . . . healthy,” she said.

*Healthy.* That was nice, I supposed. But what had I been looking like normally, the Crypt Keeper? A few months ago, I probably would have immediately assumed she meant “fat.” After pouring a glass of orange juice, I returned the carton to its spot in the fridge.

“Oh, Cassidy, can you grab the strawberries in there? We need something semi-nutritious.”

“Since when?” The microwave beeped and my dad grabbed the plate of bacon, yelping when it was too hot to handle. “*Youch!*” He pressed his fingers to his mouth.

“Careful.” I laughed and, not that I was keeping score, but that was at least the second time in twenty-four hours. I slid the strawberries over to my mom.

“That’s strange. One of my knives is missing,” Mom said, studying the wooden block that held her kitchen set. “Are you using it, Darren?”

Dad shook his head. I plopped down on a chair next to Honor and pulled my phone from my pocket. Five unread text messages.

The first three were from Paisley.

**Where are you? I can't find you anywhere and this party is past its expiration date.** The message was sent at midnight. I scanned to her second text.

**Hello? You're my ride home. Did you ditch me for Liam???**

I chewed on my nail. Had I really abandoned Paisley? That did sound a little like me. Shit.

**Ava's giving me a ride home. Next time you want to take a drive down easy street, you could at least let me know . . . Text me so I know you got home ok tho, promise?**

A mixture of emotions swept through me. I'd always thought Paisley's jokes—that I was easy—were harmless until recently when I realized they could hurt my credibility. It felt too late and too convenient to try to tell people now that, sure, I liked to get drunk and kiss boys, but . . . that was it. Besides, maybe Paisley was a little bit right about me. I wasn't sure anymore.

The next text was from Ava.

**Ignore Paize. She's drunk. Both glad to see you having fun. Ta-ta!**

I smiled at that. See? I was right. I *had* had a good time. I still was having a good time.

Just then Honor reached for my phone and tried to snatch it away. "What's so important, anyway?" she whined. Years of being a big sister had trained me to be quicker than she was. I latched onto her wrist before she could swipe my cell away.

"Give it back!" I pried her fingers free from the screen. She had such delicate little bird bones that it was a relief, at least so far, that she didn't want to be a cheerleader like me. The poor girl would break.

She released her grip with a huff and sat back in her chair.

I closed my eyes for a moment and sighed. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry. One more thing and I’ll put it away. Deal?”

She nodded.

The last message was from an unsaved number. I clicked on the message and knew immediately whom it was from:

**That was fun. Where’d you run off to last night? Txt me if you want more. This # is my cell.**

It had to be Liam. And I could only hope by more he was referring to Sunshine. After all, if *he* didn’t know where I ran off to either, then that must mean I didn’t “take a drive down easy street,” as Paisley had so poetically put it, which meant I probably just got tired and decided it was time to head home. That was a relief. Sunshine was looking better and better. A smile tugged at the corners of my lips.

I pressed my thumbs into the keypad and typed out, *Later today?* And hit “send.”

“I know that look.” Mom set a heaping stack of pancakes topped with strawberries on the table between Honor and me.

“What look?” I said, setting the phone facedown.

“The *there’s a boy I like and I can’t stop texting him* look.” She gave me a look that I was familiar with, too. The *I’m your mother and I know things* look. I scrunched up my nose and stuck my tongue out.

Dad joined us at the table and helped himself to the first pancake. “A *boy?*” he said with mock surprise. My dad wasn’t one of those barbaric guys that acted as though his daughters should be locked in castles until they were thirty or else he’d pull out his shotgun. In fact, my parents shared an obviously pleased glance at the mention of a boy and me in the same sentence.



I flitted my eyes to the ceiling like I was annoyed when actually it felt nice to have my parents faux-worried about a boy as opposed to real worried about my constant bad mood. Dad slid the pancakes over to me and I forked the biggest one onto my plate and doused it with warm syrup. “It’s not really like—” I stuffed the first bite into my mouth. The taste of the warm, sugar-laden flapjack exploded on my tongue and I nearly moaned. Usually I allowed myself only one cheat day a week and lately I’d been surviving on power bars and Gatorade more often than not. The effect of the flour and sweet and glorious carbohydrates was sinfully delicious and nearly short-circuited my brain.

I started to tell my parents that Liam wasn’t a boy that I liked and, what was more, there weren’t any boys on my radar period, but I stopped short. Maybe it was the digesting pancakes sending a wave of endorphins into my brain or maybe it was just the way our whole family was gathered around the breakfast table like nothing had changed in the last few months. Whatever it was, I made a decision. I may not have liked a boy exactly, but I did like something, so instead, I asked in the midst of shoveling in my next bite, “Do you guys mind if I meet up with him later?”

— — —

LIAM TOLD ME to meet him at the corner of Grimwood and Havelock Drive. At dusk, I pulled up to a ramshackle park with a public basketball court. If this was a date, I’d insist he at least take me to dinner and a movie, but since it wasn’t, the park would do. A pair of headlights shined onto the court. Liam waved at me from the free-throw line. “Can you leave your lights on?” he asked when I started to get out of the car. I glanced at his Mustang. “The

lighting sucks out here,” he explained. When I looked around, I saw that he was right. There was only a single lamppost for the whole park and it was several yards away from the basketball court.

I nodded and left the car running and my headlights blazing. Outside, the sun had slipped below the tree line leaving behind it only a sliver of molten orange to dye the sky’s hem a soft, cotton candy pink. Everywhere else evening muddied the edges of things.

The concrete court was painted mostly green, but a rusty red color peeked through in places where sneakers had rubbed holes into it. Liam bounced a basketball in front of his toes twice and then shot it at the hoop. The ball bounced off the tilted rim. I caught it midair and ran my hand over its bumpy, leather skin. It smelled like gym class.

“How’d you get my number anyway?” I asked, twirling the orange basketball between two fingers.

He wiped his forehead off on the sleeve of his T-shirt. “Sports directory.” He grinned and tapped his pointer finger to his temple. “Smart, huh?”

“Oh, right.” I’d forgotten about the directory, which gave the names and contact information of all Hollow Pines athletes. It helped to coordinate pep rallies, signs of support, and general attendance at events. Why hadn’t I thought of that?

“Don’t worry. I’m not, like, a stalker or anything.”

I rolled my eyes and bounced him the ball. “I didn’t think you were. You’re Liam Buckley.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He dribbled the ball to the hoop and this time shot a layup. It swooshed through the ragged net. He caught it on the other side and tossed it to me.

I hadn’t played basketball since I was a kid, but my dad always

told me that I'd stolen all the athletic genes in the family. Maybe that was true, since it looked like Honor was destined to be more of a drama geek. I dribbled the ball out to the three-point line. "Only that I hardly think you need to be stalking girls. They seem to flock quite willingly."

He stood underneath the net, waiting. "Yeah, well, you're Cassidy Hyde," he said with a shrug.

I scoffed. "So?"

"So, everyone knows who you are, too."

"I guess." I positioned the ball between my palms, bent my knees, and used my right hand to guide the ball as I hurled it toward the hoop. It bounced off the backboard and I squeezed my fist tight instinctively. "Darn," I muttered under my breath while Liam chased after the stray ball.

"Looks like someone's competitive." He returned with his easy lope. "So, are you glad I didn't let you chop off all your hair?"

I stared down at the ground. "I wasn't planning to chop it *all* off," I said, even though I wasn't sure what I'd been intending to do. The darkness that I'd felt in that moment was impossible to touch from where I currently stood. Still, I knew it was hovering nearby waiting to consume me and that was exactly why I was here. With Liam.

Liam's eyebrows shot up. A half smile playing at his lips. He bounced the basketball through his legs, switching up his stride, left and right. "Okay . . .," he said. "But you have to admit, it helped."

I took a deep breath. The park was deserted except for the two of us. "Yes, but . . . I have questions." As though to prove that the old Cassidy was clawing to return to life, I had come armed with all my best type A questions for Liam.

He stopped bouncing the ball. “I’m an open book. Come on.” He set the ball down and walked off the court to a swing set nearby.

I chose the swing next to his and let my feet lift from the ground, grateful now that I had his full attention. “Right . . . well, first, did, um, did anything happen between us?”

Based on his text message, I was pretty sure the answer was no, and I was abundantly glad that he couldn’t see the color spike in my cheeks when I asked. Nothing said “easy” like a girl who couldn’t remember whether she’d been easy or not.

His chuckle was soft and low in the dark. “Like did we hook up? No. Nothing like that. Just danced. But now you’re making me wish that maybe I’d made a move.”

“No!” I snapped back too fast. The silence that followed was awkward. I listened to the creak of the swings’ chains. “I mean, sorry, but I’m glad we didn’t. I didn’t think so, but I . . . was just testing. You know, for any side effects of . . . well . . .”

“Of Sunshine?” He completed the thought for me.

“Exactly.” I looked over. Liam’s back formed a C curve as he hunched in the swing’s seat, too small for his lanky frame.

“I . . . wasn’t sure how I got home last night. Has that happened to you when you’ve used it?”

He shook his head. “No. Nothing like that. And I’ve already taken it, like, a dozen times. Healthy as an ox.” He thumped his chest.

I furrowed my brow. I guessed that was a relief. “So, are there any side effects I *should* know about? I ran a search on it, but I couldn’t find anything.”

He pushed off the ground and tucked his knees to float through the arc. “It’s new. Designer. Totally the shit. My older brother got

it at his college. Just that warm, gooey feeling, like everything is happy and perfect and fun. You know what I'm talking about." He reached over and nudged me.

I knew exactly what he was talking about. "Is it . . . addictive?"

"Christ, Hyde. You think I'd give you heroin or something? Haven't you ever taken a party drug before?"

I let the soles of my shoes drag along the dirt below. "No. Is that strange?"

"Oh, sorry, I just figured you had or whatever. I mean, I guess I've always heard you were a bit of a wild child."

*Wild child. Easy.* What had I done to earn these descriptions? "You shouldn't believe everything you hear," I said flatly.

He shrugged. I wondered what it would take to get a rise out of Liam Buckley. He seemed so annoyingly self-assured and relaxed.

"Look, I'm an athlete, too, but as long as you don't go overboard, you should be fine."

I pressed my lips together. Right. Everything in moderation. At least until the old Cassidy was back and here to stay. I'd been miserable for long enough. What I needed was a jump start. That was all.

"So, what'll it be? I'm not just selling to anyone, you know. Only people I know will be cool and not a bunch of shitheads. Shitheads are how people get caught."

"How much?" I asked, standing up to dig out the cash I'd picked up at the ATM.

"That depends on how many you want."

"I don't know. Two or three, I guess."

"All right." He smiled easily. "For you, forty bucks."

My palms were sweaty. I decided not to ask whether "for me"

meant the pills were more expensive or less. I handed him the money and he handed me back a small ziplock bag with three yellow pills inside. My heart beat like a jumping bean.

*Sunshine.*

A few minutes passed before I was back inside my car, fishing out a pill, and placing the tiny droplet on the tip of my tongue. Now all I had to do was wait.

## FOUR

### Marcy

One hour, thirty-three minutes, and fifteen seconds.

It had been that long since I'd first seen the boys walk into the club and it'd been just over an hour since I'd left to wait outside for them. Five faces: The short one who I knew as the watcher, the one who'd hid behind his video camera that night like the distance made him any less guilty. The surfer with the longish hair and laid-back attitude, the boy who'd told me to relax, *chill out*. The sexy jock with his backward baseball cap and silver tongue, he'd pulled me in like a mosquito to a bug-zapper. The thin-lipped skull face with a cigarette hanging from his mouth, a mouth I knew was armed with cowardly taunts and cheers and encouragement to go too far. And, of course, the mean one. Vampire-toothed, crocodile-skin boots, eyes that could eat your heart out raw. Circus

Master, I called him. I had nicknames for each and I checked them off mentally before returning the phone to my pocket. I traced the entry stamp on the back of my hand, a splotchy inkblot in the shape of a pair of cowboy boots.

“You know you can go back inside.” The bouncer sat on a stool opposite the glass doors. “If you’re waiting on somebody or something. You’re welcome to go take a look.”

I nodded without looking over. “Kay.” But I made no motion to leave.

Instead, I propped one foot up on the brick wall behind me and folded my arms across my chest. It was getting late.

The door swung open. I held my breath. Two girls spilled out into the night, giggling and swaying arm in arm. I relaxed against the wall again. No sooner than I had, though, than a shot of laughter burst into the dark sky like a gunshot. The laugh sounded to me like a living echo of a memory.

I wrenched my shoulders from the wall and glanced sidelong at the fivesome and immediately I stiffened. There was an extra person. Six total. And that sixth person was a girl.

She wasn’t supposed to be there. I watched as Circus Master looped his arm around her shoulder and leaned in close to talk to her. I felt my mouth curve into a snarl.

The girl was young. Maybe younger than I was. She had an uncared-for look, like a stray cat, wide-eyed and with a narrow build. Clearly, she was just as lost, too.

As the boys turned left out of the club, I hiked the black hood I was wearing over my ears and followed. Over the fabric, I clutched the outline of the knife hiding underneath. Squeezed the hilt twice for comfort. It was there and it could wait, too, I reminded myself.



Only I wasn't sure how long.

At the corner, I expected the girl to veer off. *Go*, I willed her mentally. *Leave*. But she didn't.

I trailed a block behind. Watched the moments as they happened like snapshots. The two boys in the back—the one with the cigarettes, Lucky Strike, and the sexy piece of bait for the group, Jock Strap—jostled each other. The cigarette fell out of Lucky Strike's mouth and he left it fuming on the sidewalk. When I passed the spot, the sweet vapor from the wafting tip made me woozy. I crushed it with the sole of my boot.

Up ahead, California, who, like Short One, wore a shirt that read *Beta Psi*, crept up and pinched the girl's ass. She squealed and whipped around and I saw the fleeting look on her face change from anger to annoyance to a fake smile, like she'd been in on the joke all along.

The joke was theirs, though.

Short One jogged in front of where Circus Master still had his arm looped possessively around the girl's shoulder. Short One pulled out a handheld camcorder. "Smile for the camera." At least that was what I thought he said. He walked backward, and panned the group. I edged sideways, out of the frame's background.

From this angle, the girl's face was hidden from me, but I could see as she raised a tentative hand to wave. Her shoulders pinched up to hide her neck. The boy got close. Zoomed into her face and let out another huge clap of laughter.

We passed one of the blue towers with dead siren tops scattered near campus. Big buttons begging to be pressed in the event of an emergency. But emergencies rarely happened in convenient areas.

I should know.

I'd lost track of where we were walking. I quickly collected my bearings. We'd turned off the main road onto a dark side street. They entered a parking lot, nearly empty but for an old Chrysler with a FOR SALE sign tacked in the window. I hung back in the shadows of an old apartment building.

Observing. Studying. Biding my time.

*Leave, girl.* I needed her to go. No witnesses. No mess. Right now, she was in the way. I felt some of my anger peel off and gravitate over to her. She must have seen where she was by now. But she was still playing the role of good little girl. Pleasing. Compliant. She mustn't be rude.

Jock Strap found a littered bottle, picked it up over his head, and smashed it on the ground. Short One hid behind his blinking red light. Then with no other toys to play with, nothing else breakable, they turned to the girl. My hands curled into fists at my sides.

It began as a shove. The girl stumbled forward like a marionette doll into the arms of Circus Master. I could feel his sneer, breath hot on my face, even from a safe distance away. Another echo of a memory. I forced myself to watch.

Another shove. This time back to Jock Strap. Around she went. Push. A kiss on the cheek. Shove. Another pat to her ass. Rage clawed at my stomach.

Circus Master gave an order. Gestured with his hands. And then the girl was lowering herself to her knees amid the broken bottle and the shimmering moonlit asphalt. The sound of her whimpering cries reached me. Rage boiled my blood until it thickened and hardened in my veins.

I forced the rage down into the pit of my belly where it'd be forced to stew with the other acids there until the next evening.

There would be no revenge tonight, I had to concede. The huntress inside me seethed, pulling at the reins to be let loose.

But the problem of the girl remained.

I observed her another moment before turning my back on her. It was official: Tonight had been a total waste.

As I disappeared around the corner, I could still hear cruel laughter. I could picture the humiliation spilling out in hot tears all over her face as clearly as if it was a portrait painted on a canvas in front of me.

It took me thirty seconds to reach the blue tower, to slam my hand on the button, for the sirens to swirl and to flash blue and white light on the pavement. They were thirty seconds the girl would never have back.

My breath shortened as I ran back to the apartment building adjacent to the parking lot. The boys had lifted their heads, listening. I pressed myself to the side of the old brick and cupped my hands around my mouth. "Hey," I said in as loud and as deep of a voice as I could muster. "You. Over there. I've called the police." The boys searched in my direction. I stepped partway out of the shadows, using the hood to mask my hair and face.

The sirens cut through the air. The police really would be there. Soon.

The red light on the camcorder blinked off. "Come on," I heard Short One say.

As he left, Circus Master took one glance back at the girl still on her knees. He ruffled her hair before spinning to follow his friends.

She fell on all fours, palms biting into the asphalt. Sobs dampened the air. My shoes crunched toward her. "Here." I grabbed her

under the elbow and beneath her armpit and used my weight to pull her upright.

The girl squinted at me. Tears streaked her cheeks. She shook violently, lower lip trembling. Dark, sweaty bangs stuck to her forehead.

I let go of her arm. She nearly toppled over, but caught herself and still managed to stand there blinking at me like I was an alien who'd descended down from a UFO.

"My name's Lena," she offered it up like a gift. Her legs quaked and I steadied her.

"Marcy," I said gruffly, wearily, wishing there weren't any more girls like Lena but recognizing myself in her all the same. I held on to her until I was sure she could stand on her own. "Make sure you don't need my help again," I said, and there was nothing altruistic about my tone. It was a warning.

"But, w-w-wait, don't I—?" she said. "That's not your—" Her fingers slid down the sleeve of my sweatshirt as I pulled out of reach.

I didn't wait. I couldn't. I tugged the drawstrings tighter at the nape of my hood, turned, and walked swiftly away.

# FIVE

## *Cassidy*

**H**onor jabbed me in the ribs and I blinked awake. “Watch it. You’re about to start drooling,” she said. Her feet were crossed at the ankles, nude flats tucked underneath the pew. Next to Honor, my mom followed along with the sermon in the Bible she shared with my dad.

“Is it almost over?” I whispered.

She nodded and turned her face back to the front. I wiped the corners of my mouth, just in case my sister had been right about the drool. This was hardly the first time I’d fallen asleep during one of Pastor Long’s sermons, but today, I’d managed to sleep through my alarm, plus I was still groggy from missing my coffee. I’d only barely managed to throw on a wrap dress and pin my hair into a passable bun before loading into my dad’s Tahoe. It wasn’t

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like me to sleep through my alarm. Come to think of it, I wasn't sure I could recall setting it at all.

I yawned and shifted my weight on the pew's thin cushion. My family had been coming to Hollow Pines Presbyterian ever since we moved here. I'd always loved the purple and green stained glass and the way the windows refracted the light into geometric patterns that shifted on the red carpet of the church's stage. Everyone that was anyone went to church in Hollow Pines. It didn't matter if you drank yourself silly the night before or if you'd spent the entire six days prior getting to third base in the back of your boyfriend's pickup. On Sunday morning, your rear end was in the sanctuary.

I scanned the congregation for familiar faces. Even though I was sleepy, the effects of the Sunshine still hadn't worn off. Either that or I was truly getting over the last few months of my life. I knew because it hadn't annoyed me when Dad put his blinker on a hundred yards too early or when Mom sang the hymns too loud. And I was dying to discuss hair choices for Friday night's basketball game with Paisley. Hair choices! I couldn't remember the last time I'd cared about something as inconsequential as hair choices.

I caught sight of Paisley, her head dutifully bowed, which meant she must have been sneaking texts on her phone since no one else was praying. In the church's right wing, Ava sat with her mom. Every so often, she'd trace the sign of the cross over her shoulders and breastbone. Her family was Catholic, but since there were no Catholic churches in Hollow Pines, the Presbyterian church had to do.

In unison, the congregation rose and began to sing a song about peace and forgiveness. Honor balanced her hymnal on the pew

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back in front of us. She slid it over so that I could read from it, too. A black stamp on my left hand caught my eye. Quietly, I lowered my hands off the rail and knitted my fingers together, hoping that Honor hadn't already seen.

I'd seen, though.

My throat tied itself in knots. The stamp was a picture of two spurred boots and I recognized it instantly. A cold sweat cropped up among the tiny hairs on the back of my neck. I'd had that stamp on my hand before—once—the night I went to Dearborn. When I went to Ten Gallon Cowboy.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The images flooded in, rushing through me like a tidal wave. The music. The sticky floors. The boys laughing. Without even trying I could feel again how the night had morphed into something ugly, first slowly and then all at once.

I forced my eyelids back open and pulled myself free from the memory. I would never go back. That was the promise I'd made to myself. Never, ever, ever and as far as I knew, I hadn't. Or at least that was what I would have thought if I didn't have the evidence stamped across my hand. My heart beat fast.

Pastor Long raised his hands and held his palms out to us. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all," he said. "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

"Amen," I chanted. Then the organ blared and everyone was reaching behind them to pick up their belongings. I grabbed my purse and tapped Honor on the shoulder. "I'm running to the restroom before the line gets too long, okay? Tell Mom and Dad that I'll meet y'all in the atrium."

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I darted out of the pew and up the aisle toward the double doors, panic slimy in my mouth and throat. “Peace be with you,” an elderly usher in a khaki suit called to me as I hustled away.

“And peace be with you,” I responded breathlessly.

The women’s restroom was located at the end of the corridor. I hurried inside. Tiny green tiles covered the floor and walls. I squeezed out a dollop of pink soap, stuck my hand underneath the faucet, and began scrubbing it with my fingernails. I relaxed as the ink dissolved from my skin and I was left with reddening scratches instead. In a few short seconds, I would have never suspected it was there in the first place.

Ladies of the church began trickling in. Still shaken, I slipped into a stall at the end and closed the door. *Breathe*, I ordered my lungs. *Calm down and breathe*.

The stamp meant nothing. The night after Ten Gallon Cowboy, I’d woken to full body aches that stretched from the top notch of my spine down to the backs of my knees. Today, on the other hand, I felt fine. I had to keep reminding myself of that. I felt fine. For the first time in a long time.

I reached for my cell and texted Liam. **I thought you said there were no side effects?**

I waited as flashing dots appeared on-screen. Followed by his message. **There aren’t.**

I dug my teeth into my lip, unsure how much I wanted to tell him. **Who else has tried it?**

The answer was immediate. **Confidentiality. Part of the job requirement.**

I rolled my eyes. It wasn’t like Liam was a doctor or a lawyer. Still, it was nice to know my secret was safe. **But there are others?**

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Of course :)

I tapped my foot on the ground anxiously. **And no one has had . . . My thumbs hovered . . . memory loss?**

**Nada. U ok?**

**Fine.** I typed a quick reply and switched my screen to dark. Without pulling up my dress, I sat down on the toilet. It was just me. Lots had happened to me in the last few weeks. And besides, nothing bad had happened. Maybe it was even a good thing. Maybe I'd confronted my fear and just, I didn't know, blocked it out or something. Like with PTSD. Was that my issue? What sorts of trauma could lead to a brain switch like post-traumatic stress disorder? I'd heard stories of soldiers getting it from war, of children having cases of PTSD when parents were killed, but what about what happened to me?

I still couldn't say the word. I couldn't even think it.

Was I . . . *traumatized*?

I turned the word over in my mind and thought of the near-catatonic shell of myself that I'd peered at in the mirror, the one who'd been ready to shave off an entire head of perfectly luscious hair. Then I paired that version against who I was before Dearborn: popular, in control, straight As, flirtatious, professional-level best friend. When I put it like that then, yeah, I supposed the word *traumatized* did seem to fit. Was I stressed, too?

Well, it certainly wasn't like me to forget to set an alarm. If I had the trauma and the stress and it was post the "Incident," was it possible that I'd been full-on disordered without even realizing it?

I wiped my hands down my shins. This felt like a positive step. A sign that the old me was just around the corner. Identify a problem. Solve it. That was what the old Cassidy would do and

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medical problems required medicine. At least until I recovered. And, since my problem wasn't exactly one I could talk to a doctor about without a dozen questions and a call to my parents—I could already hear Paisley's singsong voice chiding me about my strolls down easy street—then I would have to self-treat. My breath was coming more steadily now.

Just as much as I felt the old, better version of myself hovering tantalizingly close, I also felt the sad, nasty version haunting me like a ghost. If I wasn't careful, it would suck me under. I needed to preserve cheerleader, straight A Cassidy stat.

There was one thing that had made me feel the best I'd felt in weeks. If I was the problem, then perhaps it could be the solution. I opened my purse and fished for the small clear bag that contained another couple drops of Sunshine. Maybe if I took a half now and saved half for later that would get me back to the feeling I had the night of the party. And yesterday and—

I pinched a tablet between two fingers, positioned it between my two front teeth, and bit the pill in half. A chalky texture coated my tongue. I quickly swallowed the half-portion down, wishing I could get to a water fountain to wash the taste away.

Sealing the bag, I returned it to my purse. The reaction was slower this time. At first nothing happened. I listened to the flush of toilets and waited. Then, gradually, a warmth built underneath the beds of my fingernails. It spread to my knuckles and up to my elbows until at last, the glow seeped into my chest and filled the cavity there with a pleasant heat, soft and wonderful, like a mug of hot cocoa on the coldest day of the year.

I slid open the lock and stepped out of the stall. Catching sight of my reflection in the mirror, I noticed that my skin had an

attractive rosy tint to it. A faint smile pulled at the corners of my lips. No one would know that I'd thrown my hair up and my outfit together in five minutes flat. No way. I looked fantastic.

A silver-haired woman trundled past me in her floppy Sunday hat and scooted her way into the stall I'd occupied. I waved as she passed.

That was it. I'd been overreacting. About all of it. It was so like me. Type A. Closet perfectionist. Every ounce of worry, which had felt so pressing only moments before, floated off to an unreachable distance.

"There you are." Paisley strode over to the sink and washed her hands. "I thought we were going to go see a movie last night. Do you not return texts anymore?"

She wore a floral dress with a Peter Pan collar, perfectly tailored to fit her minute stature.

*Movie . . . movie . . .* It sounded vaguely familiar. Paisley fussed with a few stray blond strands, flattening them into her sleek shoulder-length bob.

I couldn't recall what movie we'd wanted to see or receiving any texts from Paisley, but this time, when confronted with the gap in my memory, the panic wasn't there. It felt almost funny, as though Paisley and I were in on a joke. "Sorry," I said cheerily. "Must have given my secretary the night off."

Paisley huffed as we wandered together back into the atrium. Organ music still trickled in from the sanctuary. Pastor Long stood at the main doors, shaking hands with families as they hurried out to catch their eleven o'clock brunch reservations.

I could tell Paisley wasn't actually mad. That was the thing about the two of us, we could never stay mad at each other. Especially

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because our popularity multiplied when we came in a pair. We both knew it. Blond and brunette. Pick your flavor. Or your poison.

“Okay,” she continued. “So then what had you so occupied that you needed to subject me to another night of watching the Billys play Xbox in William’s basement?” She idly strolled over to a nearby snack table and took a store-packaged cherry Danish from the tray.

“Liam,” I replied without thinking. It was the first thing that popped into my head. That was what I remembered from last night. Liam. I was certain of it.

Paisley stopped before she could take a bite. “Liam?” She lowered the pastry. “So much for that long-winded speech you gave about swearing off boys. How long did that last? One month? Two, tops. That has to be some kind of record for you, Cass.”

I remembered the speech in question. It was only days after Paisley, Ava, Ashley, Erica, and I had visited Dearborn for our big girls’ night out. We were at our usual table in the cafeteria and Ava had asked who I thought would invite me to prom this year. When I’d insisted I wasn’t going and that, even more shockingly, I was giving up boys all together—like they were carbs or something—my friends had been ready to declare my depression clinical.

Maybe they’d been right.

“It’s not like that,” I said, trying not to stare at the jam-filled Danish.

When Paisley took a bite, some of the frosting flaked off and I fought the urge to lunge after it. I’d already gorged myself on pancakes this weekend, so church pastries weren’t on the agenda. Not when I’d decided that I wasn’t ready to return to chubby mathlete obscurity quite yet after all. Not when I’d just reminded myself of

all I had to lose. Not when Sunshine had reminded me, that was. Girls did not claw their way to the top for nothing. That was important for me to remember.

Paisley followed my eyes, smirked, and took another monster bite. “It’s Liam Buckley,” she mumbled, mouth full. “If it’s not *like* that, you’re doing it wrong. Trust me.”

I chewed on my lip, debating how much to tell her. Would Liam let anyone in on our little secret? Were other people using Sunshine, too, and I never knew? Part of me wanted to tell her. For better or worse—let’s face it, many times it was for worse—Paisley was my best friend. But did that mean she had to know every little thing about me?

She didn’t know about Dearborn or the boys or the aches in my body and in my heart that followed.

Paisley had been my best friend for years, but when I thought about the barbs in her tongue, the ones that could poke me and call me a slut with a laugh and an *oh you know it’s true* smile, I wanted to recoil as though from a hot stove.

The more I thought about it, the more I saw that Sunshine worked like a really great tube of concealer. It matched my skin tone perfectly and nobody, not even Paisley, needed to know that I had a pimple.

“We just met up at the park and played a little basketball.” I shrugged. “No biggie.”

Paisley polished off the rest of the Danish and licked her fingers. She’d never had the same tendency toward chubby stomach rolls that I had. “Okay, so you’re taking it slow. That’s good, I guess. Different for you, though.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re not taking it anywhere.”

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Her eyes widened. “Is he gay?”

“I don’t know, Paize, and I didn’t ask because I don’t care.” By now the Sunshine was flowing through my veins like liquid gold. I gave an easy smile. One that had the old Cassidy written all over it. “Stop being so uptight.” I pinched her cheek like an overzealous great-aunt. Then, in my altered state, a thought seized me. “Hey, do you want to go for a run this afternoon? It’s really beautiful out.” Sun poured through the glass doors. Outside, churchgoers were shucking off their cardigans and enjoying the weather.

“Did an alien abduct you? Or . . . oh, I know, are you doing one of those Gwyneth Paltrow juice fasts because I’ve been debating trying the master cleanse, but wasn’t sure . . .”

I kept my gaze trained outside, staring at the fresh air and the rustling leaves and the flowers, all brushed with a spring glow. “Truth?” I cut her off.

Paisley gave a light, frustrated stomp of her foot. “Truth. Yeah, of course. Always.”

“It was, just, I don’t know, getting kind of exhausting being sad all the time.”

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SWEAT DRENCHED THE neckline of my T-shirt and turned my legs slimy. I kicked my tennis shoes off on the front porch and shoved them next to the family welcome mat. My muscles burned and my calves were already tight. I’d run the mile to Hollow Pines High to meet Paisley where we’d then done two full sets of stadiums steps. Even though I knew I’d be sore in the morning, I relished the surge of endorphins, the feeling of fistfuls of blood pumping through my heart and the way my body felt totally awake

after a good workout. An Eminem song blared through my headphones, reminding me of the times that Paisley and I used to ride around in her car, windows down with nowhere to go, blasting rap songs and nailing every line word for word at the top of our lungs. The memory made me smile. I tugged the buds from my ears and wrapped the wire around my phone as I pushed open the door to my house.

“Mom, I’m home!” I yelled. My socks left cloudy imprints on the hardwood floor as I pounded up the stairs to my room. The door to my bedroom was closed. When I opened it, I let out a soft shriek once I found that it was occupied.

“Honor? God, you scared me.” I blinked several times in quick succession, surprised to see her in my room when she wasn’t supposed to be and even more surprised when I took in what she was doing.

“Cassidy!” She whirled to turn her back away from the full-length mirror. She didn’t realize I could still see the phone clutched in her palm through the reflection.

My little sister was wearing a red thong and a black push-up bra. Both of them were mine. “What are you *doing*?” I lunged for her phone.

She jumped clear of me and held the phone out in her opposite hand to stay clear of my reach. “Nothing. God, don’t overreact. I’m going to wash them and put them right back where I found them, okay?”

Underneath her constellation of freckles, her face flushed pink.

“You think *that’s* what I’m worried about? Whether you return my . . . my *underwear*?” Her knobby knees bowed slightly inward as she tried to shift into a more modest position. I gawked at her

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pointy elbows and sharp collarbone, both of which would have made her appear more at home on a playground than posing in lingerie. “The question is what are you *doing* in them because I’ll tell you what it looks like you’re doing.”

She rolled her eyes and in that moment it looked to me like my little sister had morphed into some kind of otherworldly being. “Please, Cassidy. Like you aren’t going to parties and sneaking out with boys. I found you yesterday morning wearing your clothes from the night before. Remember?”

My mouth fell open. “I—I—*what?* That’s totally different.” And for a second it was like I had double vision. I saw Honor sneaking out to Dearborn. Honor flirting with college boys. Honor ditching her friends for a cute smile and a free drink. Honor being passed around, sneered at, called horrible names, names so poisonous they would burn a hole through her chest. And Honor not getting to choose her first anything because it was taken from her in one stupid moment.

She stood there twirling a few strands of hair around her finger.

“Give me your phone,” I said slowly, stretching out my hand.

She lifted her chin defiantly just as she had when she was five years old and wanted to wear a tutu for a week straight. “No.”

“Give it to me.”

“No!”

“Honor Mary Hyde, give me that phone!” I charged and grabbed her behind the elbow. We tumbled onto my bed.

She flattened her face into the mattress. “Get off me,” she screamed. She tucked the phone underneath her stomach. I straddled her, one knee on either side of her little girl hips.

“Who did you send them to, Honor? This isn’t funny.”



“No one! Gross, Cass, you’re all sweaty.”

I wedged my arm between her and the bed. Cheerleading and two extra years had made me twice as strong as her. I felt for her fingers and pried them off the pastel blue case one by one until she lost her grip on the phone.

“Got it!” I yelled triumphantly. I kept her pinned down while I scrolled through the contents of her phone and found the pictures. Three photographs were saved side by side. One with Honor turned to the side, her back arched, her hair cascading until it reached the small of her back. One straight on, but I could tell she was using the sides of her arms to create the small line of cleavage. And one shot over her shoulder to get a view of her butt. “Oh, disgusting, Honor.” My nose wrinkled and I hit “delete” on each of the photos. “Here’s your dumb phone back.” I tossed it on the mattress next to her head and crawled off of her. “Next time I catch you doing something like that I’m telling Mom.”

She rolled over. Her chest was rising and falling like it was her that had just run stadiums. “Oh, I guess it’s okay when you do this stuff because you’re *Cassidy* Hyde.”

“I don’t do any of that.” I wiped sweat from my forehead. But of course I remembered the boy behind the video recorder in Dearborn, red light blinking in my face, and wondered if she was a little bit right.

“That’s not what I heard.” She scooted off the foot of the bed. From the floor she grabbed a pair of flannel pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt. She pulled the sweatshirt over her head and immediately looked less like a cyborg had taken over my sister’s body. “You must be pleased now that you have Mom and Dad convinced that you’re back to being Miss Perfect.” She tugged on the pants.

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“But it’s not easy being Miss Perfect’s baby sister, okay? You could at least invite me to one of those parties or something. We *are* related, you know, and we *do* go to the same high school.”

My throat tightened. I wasn’t sure I wanted my sister near a party ever. Especially not now.

She waited for a few seconds for me to respond. When I didn’t, her shoulders sagged and she moved for the door.

“You’ll thank me later,” I called after her. But she was already down the hallway and I wasn’t sure if she heard.

I shook my head and slid off the side of the bed. I’d left my purse on my nightstand after church. Honor was right about one thing. The relief I felt seeing my parents faces now that they believed I was back to being the old Cassidy left me feeling a hundred pounds lighter. Better than any Gwyneth Paltrow juice fast. And besides, they didn’t just believe it was true, it *was* true.

I felt strong again, functional, vibrant. The leftover effects of my run still hummed through me like a tuning fork. My sister was just naive. What did she know about the world? Nothing.

I unzipped the top of my purse, fished out the ziplock bag, popped the other half of the tablet into my mouth, then swallowed.