

THE
KILLING
JAR

ALSO BY JENNIFER BOSWORTH

Struck

THE
KILLING
JAR

JENNIFER BOSWORTH

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX • NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
175 Fifth Avenue, New York 10010

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Printed in the United States of America by
R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Harrisonburg, Virginia

Designed by [TK]

First edition, 2016

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

macteenbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bosworth, Jennifer, author.

The killing jar / Jennifer Bosworth. — First edition.

pages cm

Summary: When she was ten years old Kenna discovered that she had the ability to drain the life from another human being, and ever since she has been afraid to touch anyone—but when she uses that power to save her mother and twin sister from an attacker, her mother finally reveals the secret origin of her power, and she is forced to choose between the Kalyptra and a human life.

ISBN 978-0-374-34137-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-374-34138-1 (e-book)

1. Paranormal fiction. 2. Mothers and daughters—Juvenile fiction.
3. Twins—Juvenile fiction. 4. Sisters—Juvenile fiction. 5. Secrecy—Juvenile
fiction. 6. Horror tales. [1. Supernatural—Fiction. 2. Mothers and daughters—
Fiction. 3. Twins—Fiction. 4. Sisters—Fiction. 5. Secrets—Fiction.
6. Horror stories. 7. Horror fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.B6532Ki 2016

[Fic]—dc23

2015004146

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*For the women who raised me—Kathleen Knott,
Amy Jespersen, Borgny Erickson, and Gertrude Knott*

THE
KILLING
JAR

*All that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.*

—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1

PROLOGUE

THE KILLING

I TRY NOT TO THINK ABOUT IT. THAT TIME I KILLED A BOY.
But the problem with trying not to think about something is you'll think about it even more.

So that's what I do. I think about it. I dream about it. I obsess.

But I never, ever talk about *him*, the boy whose life I took. I didn't want to kill him. At least . . . I don't think I did. Or maybe that's just what I tell myself so I can live with what I am. What I did. How I did it.

I was ten years old, and so was he.

His name was Jason Dunn, and on the outside he appeared as normal as his name. His family lived next door to mine on the outskirts of town. My bedroom window gave me a direct view of the path to the river. I watched Jason take that path every day after school. He always came back smiling to himself in a way that made me feel cold and queasy, like I'd

eaten something bad. So I followed him, and I found out why he smiled like that.

Jason liked to kill.

Insignificant things mostly. Small murders that would go unnoticed. He chopped up worms into wriggling segments and fried them with a magnifying glass. He pulled the wings from moths, or misted trails of ants with hairspray and set them on fire. Miniature tortures that parents tend to write off as boys being boys. Cruelty as a phase, like puberty.

Jason's preferred method of torment was to put butterflies in his killing jar, the kind entomologists use to kill insects quickly without damaging their specimens. There was a swab of poison in the bottom, a fast-acting toxin. Although Jason had a corkboard where he pinned dead butterflies and moths, beetles and spiders—he brought his collection to school every time we had show-and-tell—he wasn't in it for the scientific observation. He just liked to watch things die.

But then he went too far.

My twin sister Erin is allergic to everything with fur, so our mom wouldn't let her have pets. Still, she secretly adopted a stray orange cat with a missing ear and a scar over one eye that liked to hang around our house, especially after she started leaving food out for it. She named it Clint Eastwood because its squinty eye reminded her of the classic Eastwood glare, and Erin was going through a spaghetti western phase. It turned out the cat was a female, though. She had a litter of kittens in the shed behind our house. Erin and I visited the mother and brought her clean towels and bowls of tuna fish.

We watched her kittens jitter and worm about, figuring out how to use their weak limbs, mewling in tolerant protest as Clint licked them clean. Their mother purred like an engine while her brood fed.

One day the kittens' eyes were sealed tightly shut. The next they were open and black, and fuzz covered their bodies.

But when we came back to see them the next day, the kittens were gone, and so was their mother. Erin was distraught. She begged me to search the woods for her cat and the kittens. She just wanted to know they were all right. Erin couldn't be a part of the search because of her "condition," which was what we called it for lack of a name that ran the gamut of my twin's maladies. Defective heart. Weak bones. Anemia. Asthma. Severe allergies. Autoimmune disorders.

It was better that Erin didn't come with me to search for her pet anyway. Better she never had the image of what I found trapped in her head.

I knew as soon as I found Clint Eastwood's mangled body by the river, surrounded by her drowned litter, that this was Jason's work, but if I needed further proof, I got it when I saw him at school the next day, his hands covered in raw, red scratches. Clint Eastwood put up a fight. Good for her.

I told Erin I couldn't find Clint Eastwood and the kittens, but in truth I buried them in the woods and marked their grave with a pile of river stones. While I dug the grave with my bare hands, I thought about how I was going to make Jason pay for what he'd done.

I could have told my mom what Jason was up to, but I

doubted she would believe me. Jason was an expert at hiding the monster inside him. He was unfailingly polite to adults. He never got into trouble at school. He was quiet but not too quiet. He played sports, but he wasn't too aggressive, never pouted when his team lost. He was everyone's idea of the perfect kid, and I had no evidence to prove otherwise.

If someone was going to teach Jason a lesson, it had to be me. I *wanted* it to be me. Because even though Erin and I didn't have the kind of uncanny twin connection that allowed me to read her mind, I felt it when she was in pain. She was a part of me and Jason had taken from her one of the few things that made her happy.

So I was going to take something from Jason, because I could. Because I had recently come to understand that I wasn't like other people.

"You have a gift that very few people in this world possess," my mom had told me in confidence. "But you must never use it. Promise me you'll never use it, Kenna, because you're too young to control it, and if you start I don't know if you'll be able to stop."

So I promised, but my promise was a lie. If someone tells you that you're special, that you can do something extraordinary, you have to try it at least once.

Three days after I buried Clint Eastwood, I trailed Jason into the woods, observing him, stalking him the way I imagined he stalked his doomed victims. He caught a monarch butterfly in his net and let out a whoop of triumph before inserting it into his killing jar.

“Can I see?” I asked, stepping from the trees and walking slowly toward him, my arms hanging loose and casual at my sides. I didn’t want to seem like a threat. Not until it was too late.

He clutched the jar to his chest, like I might try to take it from him. “Why?” he asked, his eyes empty, not the eyes he showed to adults. These were his real eyes. His vacant crow’s eyes.

I didn’t answer his question. I lowered my gaze to the jar and the butterfly trapped inside, its crisp wings the color of Halloween, velvet black and flame orange. The butterfly beat against the walls of its glass prison until it lost the will to fight and drooped against the bottom like wilted lettuce.

Jason’s empty eyes beamed with excitement then, and fury uncoiled in me like a rising cobra.

He never saw it coming. I grabbed Jason by the wrist and felt something unfurl from my skin, connecting me to him like a shared vein. His mouth opened in a distended O, but he couldn’t scream. I didn’t give him the chance. His life, his essence, a sensation like rising and expanding, like I’d swallowed a sunrise, flooded my body. At the same time, Jason’s color waned from pale to waxy gray. His skin shriveled into a dehydrated shell. The hair fell from his head in hunks. His eyes turned black as underground tunnels and his cheekbones protruded in chalky, white wings.

When he fell, his killing jar hit a rock and glass exploded like brittle fireworks.

I’ve never told anyone about the hurricane of raucous, feral

energy that poured from Jason into me, so heady and rapturous that it almost lifted me off the ground. It told me I could do anything. Run a thousand miles. Swim an ocean. Live forever. Raise the dead. Anything. It was all within my grasp.

It told me I was a god.

I knelt beside the shattered killing jar and cupped the limp butterfly in my palms. I touched its wing with the tip of my finger, and watched as a hair-thin strand of white light emerged and attached briefly to the insect's thorax. The wings stiffened and twitched. A moment later the monarch juddered into the sky and vanished from sight.

Then I ran. Not because I'd killed Jason Dunn, but because it was the only thing I could think to do with the energy boiling through me like rocket fuel. I raced through the woods, across the river where Jason had drowned the kittens, and into the mountains.

When I finally returned home two days later, the euphoria that had filled me after I killed Jason was gone, and I needed it back. I was certain I would die without it, or that I was already dead, because that was what it felt like to lose the light I'd taken from inside Jason. Who knew there could be such light inside someone whose soul—if he had one—was so dark?

I could tell as soon as my mom opened the door that she knew what I had done. And what I *wanted* to do. To take again, and take and take. To drive away the dead hollowness inside and replace it with perfect euphoria.

A fever took hold of my body and pushed acid sweat from

my pores. My stomach seized and cramped and I doubled over, retching up searing bile. My organs ached like they were shutting down. My blood thickened and decelerated to an oily crawl in my veins, and my heartbeat slowed and then revved, slowed and then revved. A sensation like I was covered with biting insects tortured my skin until I scratched it raw.

“You were right,” I told Mom, sweating and holding myself and raking my arms bloody. “You have to take me away and lock me up or I’ll do something terrible.”

Mom said nothing, only nodded and gave me some of Erin’s pills to knock me out, and when I woke up I was in an empty room alone. A room with a locked door and no windows. I wasn’t sure how long she kept me there. Five days? Ten? Thirty? I lost track of time as the fever melted my skin and invisible pincers snapped at my insides. Imaginary army ants chewed on my flesh and my stomach heaved and heaved, even when there was nothing inside it. My throat tore and I coughed blood until I passed out. I tried to forget why I was locked in the room. I tried not to hear my mom crying when she brought me food I couldn’t keep down, telling me she was sorry . . . sorry for what I was.

When she finally let me out, I was string thin and wasted and unwashed, but I was under control.

Mom studied me a long time before responding.

“What you did to that boy . . . you can never do that again.”

“I know,” I told her.

“We can never talk about this,” she said. “Not ever. We have to pretend it never happened.”

“Okay.” I began to cry. Both of us did.

“You have to be normal. Be just like everyone else.”

“I’ll be normal. I will.”

Mom and I never talked about my dangerous secret again, or about my confinement, or about Jason Dunn. Sometimes it feels like we haven’t really spoken since the day she let me out of the locked room. We move our mouths and sounds come out, but we never actually say anything.

Aside from my mom, no one knows the truth about me, and I hope they never will. What happened with Jason can’t happen again. I won’t let it, though every time I touch another person, I feel the life contained within them like a bottle waiting to be uncorked. So I never touch people if I can avoid it, just like I never tell anyone what really happened to Jason Dunn. I keep distance between me and everyone else because the temptation is too much. Often I wake in a desperate, greedy fever, remembering how taking Jason’s life felt like drinking sunlight and eternity, and I want more. So much more.

I want life. Not my own, but theirs. Every life but my own.

But I try not to think about that, either, because thinking leads to wanting and wanting always, inevitably, leads to taking.

GRAY GIRL

SOMETIMES YOU FORGET YOU'RE ALIVE UNTIL YOU'RE scared to death. As I took in the massing herd of festival attendees, I felt more alive than I had in years. Alive and sick, my stomach churning like a cyclone. I should have skipped dinner, and probably lunch, and breakfast, too, because I was likely about to lose them all in front of hundreds of people.

"Nervous?" Blake asked, eyeing me from the driver's seat. The endless line of cars we'd been trapped behind began to move, and a parking attendant wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt waved us forward.

"Nope," I said, my voice trembling. "Not a bit."

"Seriously?"

He looked so hopeful I hated to disappoint him. "You know how people always say they have butterflies in their

stomach when they're nervous? I have ostriches. A stampeding army of ostriches. I envy the people who have butterflies. They don't know how lucky they are."

"A.," he said, "you have nothing to be nervous about because you're going to kick ass. B. I'm stealing your ostriches. Think of it: an army of savage, alien ostriches living on a squishy pink planet that resembles the lining of a stomach."

"Sounds homey," I said. In a week, Blake would have drawn a whole new comic inspired by my anxiety and posted it to his blog. "You better at least dedicate the story to me."

"To my reluctant muse, Kenna, and her stomach full of ostriches." Blake grinned at me, but seeing my expression his amusement curdled to a sheepish cringe. "Are you really freaking out?"

"You said this was a small festival," I reminded him. "I was not prepared for this." I gestured toward the stage, and the sea of festivalgoers.

"Well . . . I've never been to a music festival. I didn't have anything to compare it to."

A female parking attendant wearing tube socks and cut-off Daisy Duke shorts directed Blake toward a space that looked barely big enough to accommodate a motorcycle. By some miracle, he managed to wedge his rattling 4Runner into the space, and the short-shorts-wearing attendant gave him a double thumbs-up and a dizzy grin. Blake smiled back at her, and a pang of jealousy gonged in my chest.

He's not your boyfriend, I reminded myself. He can check out whomever he wants.

Still, I couldn't help glaring at Short Shorts through the passenger window. She sneered at me and turned away, but not before I read the words printed on her tie-dyed festival shirt:

Folk Yeah! Fest 2016

Folk You!

Folk Me!

Folk Everybody!

"Either way, it's too late to back out now," Blake said. "Someone's already blocked us in."

The parking was tandem, and we were jammed in front and back. There would be no leaving until the festival was over. Until my song was over.

My heart began to pound so hard I could feel it in my kneecaps. "Can we sit here a little longer?" I asked.

"We need to get you signed in."

"Please? One minute. That's all I need." That was not all I needed, but it was all I was going to get.

The engine idled. An old-fashioned string band called Long Way Home played through the speakers. I'd introduced Blake to them as part of his musical reprogramming. When I'd first met Blake at the beginning of our junior year—after his family moved into the house next door that used to belong to the Dunns—his iPod playlist had been in a sad state, filled with such no-brainer, Top 40 hit makers as Miley Cyrus, John Mayer, Maroon 5, and, God help me, Ke\$ha.

"Ah, you're a music snob," he'd deduced after I told him

every twelve-year-old girl in America called and said she wanted her taste in music back.

Blake had good-naturedly shrugged off my teasing. “So I’m not a music person.”

“That’s because you’re listening to the wrong music.”

“Then teach me, Wise One,” he’d challenged, and I accepted. Three months later, Blake was not only listening to Tom Waits and Father John Misty and a few dozen other respectable musicians, but I’d started giving him guitar lessons. I suspected he still listened to his Top 40 staples when I wasn’t around, but even a music snob like me couldn’t turn my nose up at a song solely because it was popular. I just tended to like things old school, before voice modulation software and glorified karaoke competitions that churned out universally acceptable talent.

But then two weeks ago Blake threw down a gauntlet of his own—a gauntlet that came in the form of a flyer announcing a music festival called Folk Yeah! Fest. And one of the features of the festival was a competition for emerging artists. Participants would play one original song in front of the Folk Yeah! audience. The audience members would vote, and the winner would have her song professionally produced and included on the Folk Yeah! compilation album.

Blake had signed me up without telling me, claiming it was better to ask forgiveness than permission. I tried to decline, but it was too late. Blake had told Erin about the competition and she demanded I go through with it.

“It’s my dying wish,” she proclaimed, making me wince. I would never get used to Erin’s cavalier attitude toward the likely chance of her own premature death.

“You play that dying-wish card once a week,” I said, but Erin propped her garden hose arms on her bony hips and narrowed her eyes at me behind her thick glasses.

“If you don’t play at this festival, I’ll never forgive you,” she amended.

I sighed and said yes, as if I’d ever had a choice. It was impossible to say no to Erin when I didn’t know how much longer she’d be around.

“Your minute is up,” Blake said and killed the engine. Long Way Home’s hectic but harmonious guitar/banjo duet went silent, and the muffled strains of live music coming from the stage replaced it. My heart started beating in kick-drum bursts. The passages between my throat and lungs narrowed, signaling an oncoming asthma attack. I fished in my bag and found my emergency inhaler.

“Are you okay?” Blake’s eyes widened in alarm. I tried never to use my inhaler in front of him or anyone else. It made people nervous, I’d observed, and I already had a tendency to make people nervous.

“Yeah. Fine.” I sprayed my lungs with an acrid fog of medicine, and the tension in my chest eased.

Blake stuffed his keys into his jacket pocket, but made no move to open the car door. “Kenna, if you really want to withdraw—”

“No. I promised Erin.”

But my promise wasn't the only reason I needed to finish what I—or technically, Blake—had started. I was about to start my last year of high school, and I had no desire to follow graduation with any of the things that sounded responsible, going to college and majoring in something practical in the hopes of someday getting a normal job and securing a normal life as if I was some normal girl.

Normal lives were for normal people, and I was not one of them.

I reached for the door handle. “Let's go. The longer I sit here, the more likely I am to chicken out.”

We went around to the back of the 4Runner and Blake popped the trunk. I reached for my guitar in its scuffed, black hard case, covered in scraps of my favorite lyrics scrawled with silver pen. Blake beat me to the handle and picked up the guitar. “I'll carry it for you.”

“Oh. Um. Thanks.” I would rather have carried it myself. My guitar was like an extension of me, a Horcrux containing a piece of my soul. It was a gift from my mom, given to me shortly after the Jason Dunn incident. After I stopped touching other people or letting them touch me. She didn't encourage me to change my new rule. Instead, she brought me something I *could* touch without worrying whether I would hurt it. She taught me my first few cowboy chords, and then I was off to the races, teaching myself to play using video tutorials and songbooks I ordered online.

But I let Blake be the chivalrous guy he wanted to be and

carry my guitar because it made him happy. He was always doing stuff like that. Opening doors for me. Offering to let me try whatever he was eating. Laughing at my jokes even when they weren't funny. I wanted to tell him to stop trying so hard to win me over. I was already won. He had me from the moment he'd knocked on our door to introduce himself and offered oatmeal raisin cookies he'd made himself. I hated raisins, but apparently I was a sucker for "boy next door" types like Blake, who looked like a shy, English prep school student with his pale, freckled skin and his thick, brown hair parted on the side. He was the kind of guy who belonged in a school uniform with a striped tie and a blazer, whose cheeks turned bright pink in the wind. His innate sweetness was, to a lost ship like me, a beacon in a black night.

But I couldn't admit that to Blake, because if I did he would want us to change our relationship status from "just friends" to "something more complicated," and that was where things got tricky. It wouldn't work, and I'd end up losing my best friend. Unacceptable. Besides, what guy wanted a girlfriend who wouldn't let him touch her?

We headed for the wide-open field, where a stage jutted from the landscape, and were ingested in the flow of people heading in the same direction. The festival had been going since noon. Blake and I could have arrived earlier and seen some of my favorite indie folk bands play, but I'd needed the extra hours to rehearse my song. I'd probably practiced too long. The tips of my fingers were sore, and my throat felt raw as a scraped knee.

The crowd pressed in around us, and I felt my back stiffen. I tried to make myself smaller so I could avoid touching anyone around me, but it didn't work. Some stoned guy wearing a slouchy beanie cap stepped on the back of my heel. A college-age girl taking a selfie elbowed me in the arm. Suddenly Blake's shoulder was pressed right up against mine, the back of his hand against my hand.

I felt the life under his skin, warm and bright and ebullient.

I jerked away, my heart rattling like machine-gun fire.

"Sorry." Blake looked startled. "I'd give you space if there was any."

"Don't worry about it," I said, trying to sound casual even though I was the one who'd drilled it into Blake's mind that he *should* worry about it. I'd never figured out the right explanation to give Blake about my "no touching" rule. If there was anyone I did want to touch it was him, especially when he looked the way he did tonight, trying so hard to fit in that he'd made himself even more conspicuous: clean-cut, East Coast preppy masquerading as a scuzzy hipster. Still, he blended better than I did. With my blond hair bleached and tinted the color of a gloomy sky, wearing my signature shades-of-gray ensemble, I looked like a watered-down goth, Girl with the Dragon Tattoo—Light. The rest of the festival attendees were a sprawling patchwork of color and texture. Flower prints and neon and plaid. Leather and lace and suede fringe. Denim and dreads. Hair dyed lavender, cotton-candy pink and blue, mermaid green, sunset shades of orange

and magenta. People dressed as decades, ranging from the Gatsby era to the stonewashed eighties.

Compared to the rest of the festivalgoers I was as drab as smog. But I didn't really care. Gray was how I felt, so I wore my spirit color openly. It was the one true aspect of myself I showed to the world.

Except I didn't feel gray around Blake. That was the best and worst thing about him. I was used to gray. I wasn't prepared to deal with the rest of the spectrum he brought out in me.

Blake did the talking at the sign-in table, where a man and woman who looked like they'd time traveled to the festival from the dust bowl era—the man wearing a porkpie hat and suspenders, the woman in an unflattering, vintage sack dress with a Peter Pan collar and buttons down the front—handed me a document to sign and a square of paper with the number 7 printed on it.

"Kenna Marsden, you are lucky number seven, our last performer for the competition. I was worried you weren't going to show up." She beamed at me. "I loved your entry song. Is that the one you'll be singing?"

I nodded, feeling dazed as I stared at the number in my hand. "There were only seven entries?"

"Oh, no, we had hundreds, but we winnowed it down to our favorites."

She gave me more instructions, but I felt like I was listening through a wall. Luckily, Blake was attentive enough for both of us.

“Good luck!” the sign-in girl called as we headed toward the stage.

“See?” Blake said. “Hundreds of entries and you were one of seven chosen! That has to make you feel good.”

It was impossible to explain to Blake why I rarely felt “good” about anything. Blake’s family bought the house that had formerly belonged to the Dunns, but as far as I knew he was ignorant of the tragic fate of the Dunn family. After losing their only child, Jason’s parents got divorced, his dad lost his job, and shortly after that lost his mind. He was remanded to a psychiatric hospital in Portland, where, rumor had it, he raved about how his son’s soul had been sucked out of his body by a demon girl. That would be me, the one who’d been with Jason when he died. Who had run from the scene and vanished into the mountains. Fortunately, Mr. Dunn was the only person who had jumped to the right conclusion.

Blake stepped in front of me, forcing me to stop. His expression was adorably stern, like a little boy pretending to be a drill sergeant. “Come on, Kenna. You spend all this time making me listen to other people’s music, when your stuff is just as good, and you hoard it away like it’s some shameful secret. No matter what else happens tonight, just be proud of yourself for two seconds.”

I gritted my teeth to keep the truth contained. I would never be like him. Blake drew his quirky, deranged comics and posted them on his blog without a second thought. The

comments people left ranged from fanatical praise to troll scum vitriol, but when I asked him if the belligerent comments bothered him, he just shrugged. “It’s not personal.”

But the songs I wrote, the lyrics, the mournful, funereal, guilt-drenched melodies . . . those told the truth I guarded so carefully. The truth I could never admit, or I might see the answering candor in the eyes of someone I cared about.

Condemnation. Disgust. Revulsion.

He doesn’t understand, I thought, because he doesn’t know his best friend is a murderer. He doesn’t realize that if you do something bad enough, it follows you for the rest of your life.

I didn’t get a chance to answer his question. We were interrupted by Erin’s voice shouting my name.

“Kenna! There you are!”

I turned, and saw my bespectacled twin waving, our mom at her elbow. I gasped as Erin darted into the crowd, weaving past a gauntlet of hipsters and hippies.

I sped to Erin’s side and snarled at the few jolly festival-goers who didn’t get out of her way quickly enough.

“Are you okay?” I asked, looking her over as though she’d been in a car accident. Anyone who didn’t know Erin was my twin would never have believed we were even the same age, much less two halves of the same egg. Erin was so small and scrawny she could have passed for a malnourished, little-girl version of Keith Richards. There was no official name for the condition that forbade Erin from thriving in the body with which she’d been born. Whatever it was, it kept my mom and

me in a constant state of alarm. Erin's bones were so brittle she could trip on a crack in the sidewalk and fracture her ankle, and her blood so thin she was liable to pass out if she had to stand too long. She had a bad heart along with asthmatic tendencies, but where my asthma seemed to manifest only during moments of stress, hers was exacerbated by pollution, exercise, dust, and a hundred other things I could list from memory.

"When do you go on?" Erin asked, pushing up her comically thick glasses, which had slid to the tip of her nose. "Are you freaking out? I'm freaking out! Did you know Lorde was only seventeen when she won a Grammy? That could be you!"

"If I ever win a Grammy, it will be because of you," I told her.

Erin was the only person I never turned away when I was working on a song. I let her sit in the basement and listen to me play as long as she wanted. She may have had a broken body, but her mind was sharp and analytical. If my entry for Folk Yeah! had impressed anyone, it was partly thanks to Erin's critical ear.

Our mom wrestled her way through the crowd to reach us. She must have come straight from her bakery, Knead. Flour powdered her jeans and her shoulder-length, blond hair, which she always cut at home with a pair of scissors that needed sharpening. I had a vague childhood memory—my first memory—of my mom's hair long as a horse's tail, of sitting on her lap and wrapping myself in it like hiding inside a

curtain. I would have thought I was imagining this version of my mom, but for the huge, intricate tattoo of a moth on her back, stretching across both her shoulders like a shawl. Whoever Mom had been before she had Erin and me, she must have been a lot more interesting than she was now. There was also the matter of our father—or lack thereof—and how Mom told us she didn't know his name. But Erin and I had done the math, and we knew our mom had been only eighteen when she gave birth to us. Much of her passion for life must have been lost to the stress of having one daughter who'd been knocking on death's door since she was born, and another who had *sent* someone through that door.

Mom took Erin's chin in her hand and tipped her head up to face her. "I told you to stay right next to me," she said as though she were speaking to a five-year-old who'd wandered away in the grocery store.

Erin rolled her eyes, but redness crept into her pale cheeks. She was used to our mom treating her like a baby in front of me, but in front of Blake it was another story.

"Give her a break, Mom," I said.

"A break is what she'll get if she falls or gets knocked down out here."

"Can you guys please not talk about me like I'm not here?" Erin said, her voice small and barely audible over the buzz of the crowd.

Mom and I shared an anxious glance, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing: if Erin's doctors were to be believed, Erin *wouldn't* be here much longer.

My twin was dying, and she had been all her life, ever since she was born blue and cold and with a hole in her heart. Our mom, too, had nearly died during childbirth right along with her, and afterward, she told us in a rare moment of openness, she went through a period of postpartum depression so vicious that she'd considered suicide. She probably would have gone through with it if it weren't for the fact that we would have become orphans without her. But Mom's postpartum depression had never really ended, and I thought I might have inherited my own depression issues from her. Then again, we both had plenty of practical reasons to be depressed, the first of which was the constant threat of losing the person we loved most.

When she was a baby, Erin's doctors said she probably wouldn't make it to her fifth birthday, but she had. Then they told us she wouldn't make it to her tenth birthday, but she had. Then they said she wouldn't make it to fifteen, and here she was, seventeen and still alive. But the thing I didn't tell Mom—that I hardly dared admit to myself—was that I had begun to sense a change in Erin. I couldn't explain it, but when I was near her, I felt her diminishing fast, the life hissing out of her like she'd sprung a leak.

But Erin didn't live like she was dying. She hadn't attended school since an accident on the playground in fifth grade, but Mom had homeschooled her and Erin had already gotten her GED and was taking online college courses. One would think she'd prefer to spend her time enjoying herself, but her nightstand and desk were stacked with books that made my

brain hurt just to look at them. Historical biographies, Victorian novels, anything by Carl Sagan, Stephen Hawking, or Neil Degrasse Tyson. I was in awe of her. If I'd been the one in her situation, I probably would have spent the majority of my time locked in my room crying and cursing God or whoever for dealing me such a crappy hand.

Most of the time I tried not to think about Erin's condition, but with the stress of my first live performance bearing down on me and Erin and Blake looking at me with such hopeful expectations, it was all too much. Tears burned the backs of my eyes, and my mind whirled like a top about to spin off a table.

"I can't do this," I muttered, but no one heard me because I couldn't get enough air into my lungs to make myself heard. How was I supposed to sing when I couldn't breathe?

Then someone in a Folk Yeah! T-shirt was calling out my number, beckoning me toward the side entrance to the stage. Blake pushed my guitar case into my hands and whispered, "You're going to be great." Erin clapped and squealed with excitement.

My mom shocked me by reaching out and brushing a lock of gray hair back behind my ear. I couldn't remember the last time my mom had touched me, and I sucked in a breath as I felt the promise of energy restrained beneath her skin. My immediate impulse was to reach for it, to pull that energy into me, but I set my teeth and refused to comply. Mom withdrew her hand quickly.

“Go on,” she said, her smile sad and anxious and twitching a little at the corners. “Show them what you can do.”

I swallowed a fist-sized lump in my throat and nodded.

It happened fast and achingly slow at the same time. A festival liaison briefed me, then a sound technician miked my acoustic guitar, and before I knew it I was walking up a short flight of steps and onto a stage, looking out at hundreds of faces.

I searched for Blake and my family, but didn’t see them. My eyes stopped on a middle-aged man with gray at his temples. He looked out of place with his brown hunting jacket and his dead, black stare. He reminded me of someone, but I couldn’t decide who. And was it my imagination, the hatred and rage he projected toward me from those cold eyes of his?

My heartbeat thundered. I began to tremble and panic and reached automatically for my emergency inhaler, thinking, *One person in the audience already hates me, and I’m supposed to sing?* But my bag was gone, and I had a vague memory of handing it to the festival liaison to hold until I was finished. Could I subtly hint for her to bring it to me? Leave the stage for a second to retrieve it?

I tore my gaze from the man in the hunting jacket and my eyes finally landed on Blake, right in the front row, just off to the side so I hadn’t been able to spot him right away. He stood with my mom and Erin. Erin was smiling so wide her jaw would probably be sore tomorrow. She had never in her life

been allowed to attend an event like this, and she probably never would again.

My twin met my eyes, reading the distress on my face, and mouthed one word.

Breathe.

I did.

Everything after that was a blur.

WHEN THE MUSIC'S OVER

I RESTED MY FOREHEAD AGAINST THE CHILLY GLASS OF THE passenger-side window and watched the road slide by beneath Blake's 4Runner, a fast-moving conveyor belt carrying us home.

But I didn't want to go home, because then this night would be over.

"Can we keep driving?" I asked. To my bass-numbed ears, my voice sounded like it came from the bottom of a lake. My mom and Erin had left the festival shortly after I played, but Blake and I had stayed to hear the rest of the bands. For hours we'd lost ourselves in music and voices, in black night and white stars. I forgot to care if I won the contest. I'd played and that was all that really mattered. Erin was the happiest I'd seen her in years, and my mom had hugged me. Actually *hugged* me. It was a brief embrace, over almost the instant it

began—before I could even acknowledge the hunger that raised its voice at contact with another person—but it was enough to tell me that something had changed between us tonight. Maybe the apprehension she'd held toward me since Jason Dunn's death was finally starting to fade.

And then there was Blake, who kept staring at me when he thought I wasn't aware, smiling like he was reliving a happy memory, who'd told me a hundred times already how great I'd been, how the audience had loved me, how they'd gone still and silent the moment I started playing and hadn't seemed to breathe until I was finished.

Blake, who made me feel good about myself, made me feel like I deserved to feel good.

He stretched his fingers on the steering wheel, like a race-car driver about to jam the pedal to the floor. "Any particular destination in mind?"

"No destination. Let's just keep moving forward." I leaned back in my seat and let my head loll toward Blake. The glow of the dashboard gauges created a rim light that traced his profile. "This is probably going to sound dramatic, but everything seems different now."

"Maybe it is." His smile faded and he looked at me for a moment, nodding seriously.

Heat crept into my cheeks and gathered in my stomach. My will to resist Blake was weakening, and I wasn't sure I cared anymore.

Ahead, I saw the turnoff to the long drive that cut through

several hundred yards of forest before reaching my house. An unfamiliar brown Bronco was parked on the side of the road next to our mailbox.

“Whose truck is this?” Blake asked, slowing into a turn and then pulling up next to the SUV.

Both of us peered into the cab, but saw no one inside.

I shrugged. “Maybe the driver broke down and didn’t have a cell phone to call a tow truck.”

“Who doesn’t have a cell phone?” Blake asked. He’d moved to the midsize Oregon town of Rushing from a pristine Connecticut suburb, where I imagined no one ever abandoned a broken-down SUV next to his mailbox, or if they did it would be promptly hauled away.

Blake accelerated slowly and continued down the gravel driveway to my house.

“What happened to driving all night?” I asked, trying not to sound disappointed.

Blake glanced over at me. “You were serious about that?”

“Nah,” I lied, and forced a laugh. “You know me. Spontaneity is my mortal enemy. Pull over here, okay? I don’t want my mom to hear your car and wake up.” I was supposed to be home by midnight. It was almost two.

Frowning, Blake slowed and steered onto the shoulder, under a canopy of trees. He was probably counting the number of points he’d lose with my mom for keeping me out past curfew, respectable young man that he was.

“Relax,” I told him. “I’ll sneak in through the basement

window so she won't hear the front door. I have a whole system."

"You do this often?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, I probably shouldn't tell you this because my order has a code and everything, but I'm a vampire slayer, which involves a lot of late-night outings."

I was relieved when he chuckled and let the subject drop. I didn't want to tell him what I really did at night when I couldn't sleep. Didn't want to admit how often I snuck out and went to the place where I'd buried Clint Eastwood and her kittens. I brought my guitar, sat with my back against a nearby tree, and I played to the pile of smooth stones and sang so softly I was almost silent. I did it because sometimes it was too much temptation to be in a house at night with two helpless, sleeping people—two people who could provide the same thing Jason Dunn had provided, a way to be free from myself for a little while.

So I played music instead, because it was the only thing that kept me grounded. Kept me under control.

"You went away," Blake said.

I blinked and focused on him, realizing I'd been staring out the window in silence for a long moment. "Yeah, I guess I did."

He smiled in that shy way he had, that made me feel like I was the bold one. "I'm going to remember tonight for the rest of my life," he said, and then laughed and lowered his eyes. "Now *that* sounds dramatic."

“Then I guess I like dramatic.” I found myself leaning toward Blake across the console. I heard the knocking of my own heartbeat. Or maybe it was Blake’s I was hearing. Or both, beating perfectly in sync.

He looked at me, his eyes the color of newly minted pennies. The cedar and honey smell of his cologne in my lungs made me feel off-kilter, half-dreaming, like I’d inhaled some kind of intoxicating hallucinogen.

Blake began to lean toward me, too, but I froze as the rational voice in my head spoke up, reminding me about my rule, which was for his own good as much as mine. Blake was the best friend I’d ever had, and taking things to the next level meant I would risk losing him. But could I really exist in this state of limbo with him forever, both of us wanting more and me always saying no? Wouldn’t that end the friendship just as surely?

“I better go.” I took a deep breath and opened the car door.

The grumble of the engine died. I glanced back at Blake.

“I’ll walk you,” he said.

“You don’t have to,” I told him, but I didn’t mean it. Part of not wanting the night to end was not wanting to say good-night to Blake, even though he technically lived next door to me. In our neck of the woods, which mostly consisted of actual woods, “next door” meant our houses were separated by a couple hundred yards of forest. Not that I minded living so many miles from town proper. Surrounded by trees, with a river running through our backyard and the mountains

looming, I felt isolated from civilization, and I figured I was better off that way. Easier to stay away from people when you lived like a witch in the woods.

“There’s no way I’m going to let you wander off in the dark, especially with that mystery truck parked by your mailbox,” Blake said.

“Then who’s going to walk you back to your car?”

He thumped his fist against his chest. “I am man. I walk the world alone without fear.”

I turned my face away so Blake wouldn’t see me smile. Blake was almost as skinny as I was, despite his addiction to any and all kinds of cookies. His favorite joke was to buy a box of cookies and then check the ingredient list and say, “Hmm. Interesting. These cookies contain one hundred percent of my daily requirement for cookies.” When he found out my mom owned a bakery, I thought he might do a backflip.

“What about my guitar?” I asked, gesturing toward the trunk.

“I’ll bring it to you tomorrow,” he said. “Good excuse for me to show up at your house unannounced.”

I hesitated. I hadn’t spent a night without my guitar since my mom gave it to me. But if I trusted anyone with it, it was Blake.

“When have you ever needed an excuse before?” I asked, batting my eyelashes at him.

He feigned shock. “Careful or I’ll revoke your oatmeal raisin surprise cookie privileges.”

“You never told me what the surprise was.”

“The raisins,” he said, as though this should have been obvious.

“You refer to them as oatmeal *raisin* cookies. That kind of ruins the surprise.”

“The surprise is that most people hate raisins in oatmeal cookies, but in these you actually like them.”

“You’re so weird.”

“But you like weird.”

“That’s right. I do.”

I smiled.

He smiled.

I swallowed.

He cleared his throat. “Well, I guess that’s enough witty banter for now.”

We both laughed, breaking the tension, and started up the road, our shoes crunching on the gravel. Mom had been meaning to get the drive paved for as long as we’d lived in our house, just like she’d always meant to finish the basement, but she’d never quite gotten around to either task. Erin’s medical bills exceeded what her insurance covered, so there was rarely much extra money lying around at the end of every month. Not that any of the treatments or medications or studies had helped Erin, nor had they answered any of the questions we had about her condition, but Mom couldn’t sit back and do nothing.

A breeze moved through the trees and caught my hair, lifting it and chilling the skin of my neck. The moon overhead

appeared to have been sliced cleanly in half. The cool air was sharp with the scent of pine trees, a smell that reminded most people of Christmas, but not me. I'd heard a person's sense of smell was closely linked with memory, and the tang of pine trees often sent me back to my time lost in the forest after killing Jason, bombarding me with fractured snippets of recollection. Of charging through trees, my blood surging with rapturous, sparkling, effervescent energy; the forest bending and warping around me, trunks twisting and bowing over me, and the sunlight pouring down through the cracks like a waterfall of liquid light. Of night, when the stars began to fall like snow and the moon was close enough to touch like a reflection in a pond. Even now I woke from surreal, kaleidoscopic dreams that felt like dreams within dreams, memories of what it had felt like to be lost in the woods and lost to myself, and I wanted it again, so badly I could hardly draw breath and had to take a dozen hits on my asthma inhaler to make my lungs open up for plain old air.

For two days I had lived that intoxicating dream while search parties scoured the woods, looking for me. They had even tried to search Eclipse, the bohemian commune situated in an isolated valley nestled on the other side of the Cross Pine Mountains. The people at Eclipse lived in seclusion, only driving into town when they had to buy supplies they couldn't grow or make themselves. The search party had nearly come to blows with the Eclipse people, who'd refused to let them in. But before a warrant could be acquired, I had woken from

my dream and returned home to the terrible reality of what I had done.

I lied to everyone but my mom, told them I'd seen Jason drop dead, and I'd been so scared I ran away. Ran and ran until I was lost.

And everyone believed me, with the exception of Thomas Dunn, Jason's dad. He told anyone who would listen that I was a demon who had drained the life right out of his son. He ranted and raved about the evil child next door until they locked him up. I wondered sometimes if it would help Mr. Dunn to know that his precious Jason wasn't the golden boy he remembered. That he was as much a monster as I was.

Blake was unusually quiet as we walked. Normally he never shut up. Blake was a chatterer, the kind of person who always broke an awkward silence, even if it was with the most random statement that popped into his head. *Did you know mosquitoes are completely unnecessary to the ecological balance of nature? Did you know that about seven babies are born every second? Did you know the lead guitar player for Queen has a PhD in astrophysics?*

I glanced over at him as we walked, wondering how much he'd heard about Jason Dunn's death. He had to know something. People still talked about it. How could they not? Rushing had a population of only twenty thousand people. Jason's death was the most interesting thing that had ever happened here.

We reached the place where the woods met my front lawn, and I turned to Blake, feeling as though I were standing under a spotlight. His brows were drawn together and tilted in an

expression of worried concentration. There were things I wanted to say, but they scattered like a pile of fall leaves kicked by a sharp wind, and all that was left was what I wanted to do.

Before I could stop myself, I stepped toward Blake, putting my mouth so near to his that I was breathing him in. We weren't touching, weren't kissing. We paused in "before," balanced on a tightrope between what we were and what we would become if either of us moved.

"Kenna . . ." he said, sounding excited, and worried. Whatever concerns he had, I didn't give him a chance to speak them, because then my own concerns would rear their ugly heads.

I brushed my lips against his, feeling the energy buzzing beneath his skin, but I was careful not to want it. Not to open myself to it. After a brief moment of hesitation, his mouth sighed open and overlapped mine. He tasted like brown sugar and cinnamon.

His kiss was just like him: considerate, gentlemanly, sweet. It frustrated the hell out of me. After so much time spent keeping him—keeping all guys, all *people*—at a safe distance, I was finally ready to let one of them in. I wanted more than a polite kiss.

I made my lips softer but kissed him harder. He responded, arms wrapping me, fingers burrowing into my hair. A sublime sense of vertigo, a magnetic gravity overcame me. I was falling and standing at the same time. Our kiss became less considerate, more impatient and eager, and there it was: the ferocity under the sweetness. The rogue under the clean-cut

boy next door. Blake's teeth nipped at my bottom lip. His tongue skimmed mine. A low groan purred in his throat. My temperature rose until it felt like a fever, a delicious sickness, the kind that could wipe out an entire population. My fingertips, calloused and always slightly numb from infinite hours spent playing guitar, dug into his back. But I was careful. I kept a grip on the old, greedy need that lived inside me.

Distantly I heard a noise like a cry, but I ignored it. Kept kissing him. Desperate now. Starved for this. Starved for him as much as I'd been starved for the light I'd taken from Jason Dunn.

The cry came again, and Blake pulled back so suddenly he left me reeling, swaying on my feet.

"What was that?" he said.

I heard it again, though I still wasn't sure what *it* was. My skin prickled in primal warning. It sounded like someone, a person, crying out in despair or pain. But there were birds that made that sort of sound—birds and other creatures, like mountain lions with their furious shrieks. This close to the forest, plenty of animals confused our property with theirs, some of them more dangerous than others.

"Let's get you inside," Blake said decisively.

Blake walked me to the basement window, which was on the opposite end of the house from my mom's bedroom. Reading the disappointment on my face, he cupped my cheek with one hand in a gesture I'd only seen men use in movies. My skin thrilled and yearned for more. I felt the glowing life inside him, but what I craved at that moment was him. Just

Blake. His mouth and his arms and his touch and his warmth. I didn't want to take anything from inside of him. I only wanted to stay next to him, to bask in the closeness of him.

"Nothing changes," he said.

"Or everything does," I pointed out.

"For someone who wears as much gray as you do, you have a tendency to only think in black and white."

I started to deny this, but his lips shut me up and his soft, summer-warm mouth made me forget all about the cry until it came again.

"Good night," he whispered. "Get your ass inside where it's safe."

"My ass would be safer with you. Just come in with me and sneak out when it's light."

He considered this for a moment before shaking his head. "I'm out past curfew, too, remember? And I can't exactly call my parents at two in the morning and tell them I'm spending the night at your house. They're cool, but not that cool."

He kissed me one more time, and started jogging back in the direction from which we'd come.

Feeling unmoored, I slid the basement window open and lowered myself inside, then stood there a moment in the dark, leaning against the cold wall. The unfinished basement consisted of concrete floors and framed-in rooms, but only one had drywall and doors.

My stomach was giddy, lodged somewhere between my lungs.

Me and Blake. Blake and me. It was amazing how life could change on a dime if you made a choice. If you let yourself have what you wanted.

The cry came again. It clawed through my thoughts, reeled me back to reality.

It was louder now. Much louder.

It was coming from inside the house.

SO MUCH BLOOD

FOR AN INSTANT I STOOD PARALYZED. THAT SOUND HAD not come from a bird, or any other animal. It came from somewhere in the basement. But all the bedrooms were on the first floor. Why would my mom or Erin be in the basement at this time of night?

A more important question: Why would either of them make that sound? That desperate, wordless plea of suffering. Someone in terrible pain.

Someone who needed help.

I heard something else then, and it made my heart beat so hard I thought it might crack my ribs. Heavy footfalls from above. Clomping. Stomping. Neither my mom nor Erin could make that much noise walking around if they tried. That meant there was someone else in the house. Someone big. Someone who wasn't supposed to be here.

The mystery truck parked at the end of the drive.

Cell phone.

Police.

My brain merged these three elements and a plan was born. Call the freaking cops. Don't wait to find out if it's all a misunderstanding. Do it now.

I forced my joints to bend and reached into my bag, fumbling for my phone. My fingers found my inhaler and moved on. My lungs were tight, my airways cinching closed, but this was no time for an asthma attack.

Upstairs someone stomped around the kitchen, making no effort to be quiet. What did that mean? Oh God, what did that mean? My mom . . . Erin . . . one of them had made the sound. The cry.

A sob welled in my throat, and I smothered it with one hand while the other, shaking uncontrollably, dialed 9-1-1.

Keep it together, I commanded myself as I waited for the ringing to begin. *Stay calm, make sense, be coherent for the operator.*

My eyes were hot and tight with the pressure of tears, and every sound made my nerves snap.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?" a woman's voice answered. She sounded brusque. Alert.

I opened my mouth and heard a thin wheeze of a response, "There's someone in my house. I think he—" *Say it.* "I think he might have done something to my family. I think he . . . hurt them."

Saying the words aloud made me shake even harder, but

the operator was all business. “I’m going to send officers out to you right away, miss. Tell me your address.”

For a moment my mind went blank. What was my address?
What the hell was my address!

The answer landed in my head and I blurted it out, too loud. I went still. Listened. No movement upstairs.

A creak from above. A cupboard door opening. He was looking through our kitchen cupboards.

“Miss?” the operator was saying. “Miss, officers are en route. Are you in a safe place?”

“He—he doesn’t know I’m here,” I said.

“Okay, that’s good. Stay where you are.”

The cry came again, and this time I pinpointed its origin: the north end of the basement, where the only semifinished room was located. Mom used the room for storage. It was the only one with walls and a door.

The cry came again, weaker now, and more desperate at the same time. I recognized the voice.

Erin.

I couldn’t wait for the cops. I had to get to her.

“Miss?” the operator said. “Miss, what’s happening now?”

More sounds from above. Wooden chair legs scraping across tile. He was sitting down at the kitchen table, making himself comfortable. What was he eating? Mom had made lasagna yesterday. There were plenty of leftovers. He had probably helped himself.

Rage churned inside me. It battled with my terror until the

two joined and filled me with a chaos of emotions that made it impossible to think straight.

“Miss? Are you there? What’s happening?”

“I have to go,” I said, and hung up. I silenced the cell in case the operator tried to call back, and shoved it into my pocket. Then I was moving.

There was no light. I walked softly, but every step I took nearly gave me a heart attack. I was sweating ice water and shivering, and I couldn’t see a thing. I bolted silently across the remaining distance, but slipped and fell when I was almost there. I touched the ground and felt sticky wetness.

Please don’t be blood, I thought. Please don’t be blood.

Then my fingers found something else. I picked up the fragile object. A quick exploration with my fingers told me what it was: a pair of eyeglasses, the lenses shattered.

Bile rose in my throat. I wiped my hands on my jeans and pushed to my feet.

The sounds from upstairs had stopped, but I imagined I could hear the man chewing. In my head the sound was as loud as his stomping footsteps, the gooey, wet smacking and gnashing of teeth.

I stole the rest of the way to the north end of the basement. The door to the storage room was closed and there was light coming from beneath. I leaned with my ear close to the crack, straining to hear through the wood.

A girl’s shuddering whimper penetrated the barrier.

I opened the door.

The bare bulb glaring above cast a mean, relentless light

over everything. Over the lake of blood that swamped the concrete floor. My mom was propped against the wall like a forgotten doll on a shelf, her head lolling forward, her white nightgown drenched red with blood. I couldn't tell if she was breathing.

“K-Kenna.”

The voice was barely a voice. It was a wheeze. A thready gasp.

Erin lay crumpled in the corner of the room. I skirted around the blood and dropped painfully to my knees beside her.

Suffocated sobs tore at my throat. Erin's face was a disfigured purple landscape, one of her eyes a swollen mound sealed with a crust of blood. Her pajamas, too, were soaked in blood. My hands hovered over her, wanting to help, unsure what to do, or if there was anything I could do. She needed medical attention, and fast. She was so small, so delicate, it was a miracle she was still alive. How long until the police came? How long did my sister have? Minutes? Seconds?

Erin opened her mouth and tried to speak again. Blood gurgled in her throat.

“Shhh. Don't talk,” I said, my chest so tight I could barely produce the words. “Help is coming. I called the police.”

But we lived so far from town. It took Blake and me twenty minutes to drive to school every morning. How much time had passed since I'd called 911? Five minutes? Three? I should call again, tell them to send an ambulance. I reached for my phone.

Erin's eye rolled toward me. "Get . . . out," she managed. "He wants . . . he wants . . . you."

The man upstairs started moving again, and this time his footsteps were tromping down the stairs.

Erin's one eye went wide and she started breathing fast. But her lungs couldn't handle the air, and she started choking until blood speckled her lips.

He was coming. There was no way for me to get back to my hiding place, to get anywhere, before he blocked me in.

I rushed to the door, closed it, and locked it. I spun around, searching for something to prop against the door. I went for a chest of drawers painted butter yellow, which had been mine when I was a kid. As I shoved it in front of the door it made a shrieking sound across the concrete.

The footsteps halted for one deafeningly silent moment, then thundered as he ran.

I got the chest of drawers in front of the door just as the man twisted the knob. When it refused to turn, he pounded the door.

I backed away, my heart thrashing. My vision darkened around the edges with every rapid thud. I retreated to where Erin lay and huddled beside her. Every time the man struck the door, my whole body jolted and my teeth ground together like I'd received an electric shock.

"He won't get in. The cops will be here soon. Don't worry. Don't worry." I wasn't sure if I was talking to Erin or to my-

self. I checked her face to see if she was even conscious and a moan escaped my throat.

Erin was limp. Lifeless.

A memory burned behind my eyes . . . a butterfly gone slack, sagging to the bottom of a glass jar.

My moan became a wail. A banshee shriek of grief. I pulled Erin into my arms and crushed her against me.

My sister. My broken twin self. My best friend.

Gone.

The pounding ceased, and then something worse followed.

The man on the other side of the door began to laugh.

LIGHTS OUT

MY WAIL AND THE MAN'S LAUGHTER COLLIDED, MAKING a horrible, discordant sound. I clamped my mouth shut, but my chest strained, filling up with unvoiced anguish. Something was sure to pop. To tear apart inside me. A lung. A heart.

The man finally stopped laughing. "It's about time you came home, Kenna. I thought you might keep me waiting all night."

I rocked my sister's body, holding her so tight I would have hurt her if she were alive. I tried to speak. I wanted to scream that the police were on their way, that he better get out while he could. But I opened my mouth and all that came out was a silent, hissing scream. My chest was on fire. My body, my skin and bones, tingled like a limb coming back to life.

"Are you wondering why?" the man said. "Why your house? Your family? I came for *you*, Kenna." His voice low-

ered, so I had to strain to hear him. "I've been watching you for a while now. I wanted to know who you were, to understand why . . . why you would kill an innocent little boy."

My breath stopped in my throat. I remembered the man in the crowd who'd stood there glaring at me with such hatred. There was only one person in the world who had a reason to look at me like that.

Thomas Dunn.

"My son. My perfect little boy." He pounded his fist against the door and a strangled sob wrenched from his throat. "You stole him from me!"

A scream loosed from my throat. "Get out of my house!"

A sizzling burn swept across my skin. I felt as though I were coming apart, like filaments of me were peeling away, threads of flesh reaching out from my body and waving in the air, the tips ending in raw, tender nerves.

"Open the door, Kenna. It's time you paid for what you took."

I shivered so hard my teeth made a sound in my head like helicopter blades cutting the air. I moaned and buried my face in my sister's hair. There was blood in it, already starting to coagulate, turning her thin strands into stiff, tacky dreadlocks.

It was my fault. All of this was my fault.

The image of the dying butterfly flashed behind my eyes again. The shattering glass of its prison. Jason Dunn's empty eyes sinking into their sockets. His face turning gray. His skin shrinking against his skull.

The butterfly's wings tensing, batting, lifting it into the sky.
"Open the door, you murderer!"

He struck the door and a crack formed. I didn't know how much time had passed since the 911 operator told me the police were on their way, but I didn't think they were going to make it in time.

I gathered Erin in my arms and lifted her. She was so light she seemed to float into the air, resting weightlessly in the crooks of my elbows. The sound of the door splintering was far away now. Numbness filled my ears like cotton. My fingertips burned as though I'd been handling hot coals. My entire body felt like one prickling nerve ending, those strings of me that had unraveled continuing to quiver and dance above my skin. I felt like an electric sea creature. Lightning made flesh.

I laid Erin's body down over Mom's outstretched legs, and then I burrowed in against them, dipping myself into their cooling blood. I didn't feel revolted. The only thing I felt was all-consuming grief and the tingling extension of my skin. The room seemed brighter than it ought to be. The bare bulb overhead radiated an intense, white light, almost too dazzling to look at. It grew brighter and brighter and then began to flicker for a moment, and right before it popped, I thought once more of the butterfly careening drunkenly into the sky.

The lightbulb exploded, and shards of thin glass rained down from the ceiling. Everything shook.

But the room did not go dark.

The blinding white light remained, but a hundred new

hues had joined it. Swirling mists of green, blue, lavender; sparks of yellow and flickers of red and orange in the air, like ghosts made of fire. A storm of light and color, bubbling and blossoming and fogging around me.

I saw them now. The strands of light stretched from my body, an expanding network of colored electricity, reaching through the door, the walls. A mushrooming matrix of luminous, hair-thin ribbons. Everything was quaking, and I was so hot and so cold, and my eyes ached from the light and vibrant color that condensed and billowed toward me like a gathering storm, a violent aurora borealis trapped in this tiny room. I tangled my arms with my mom's and Erin's limbs so I was touching them, no longer afraid to hurt them. Those veins of light extending off me seemed to pierce my family's skin and connect us, creating one organism.

Then something new. A vacuuming sensation at the tips of the strands, like they'd all become miniscule whirlpools, and I was filling up inside. Elation fluttered my heart. Joy. Madness. A ferocious euphoria, and it was so wrong, so wrong to feel this way right now. But I couldn't help it. Whatever was happening was beyond my control.

My emotions flashed from rage to hunger. From buzzing excitement to terror. From yearning to passion to feverish arousal to a predatory desire to hunt, kill, and taste blood in my mouth. To poison. To bite. The urges kept coming, shifting faster. The impulse to cower. To protect. To run. To fly.

It was too much . . . too much . . . I was drowning in impulse and color and light. So much light!

Then the room began to darken little by little, light and color washing from the air like night overtaking a sunset. I was so overwhelmed, so mesmerized by what was happening that I didn't realize the pounding on the door had stopped.

The mayhem inside me reached critical mass, and I felt like I would explode if I didn't release it. The vacuuming sensation reversed and all that joy and exultation and wildness rushed through the strands connecting me to my mom and Erin, strained by colored tubes as thin and strong as spider silk until every mad, euphoric sensation was gone.

I cried out as the colored strands vanished from sight. I'd lost the light again and I was empty. The light and color were gone. The maelstrom in my head and heart were gone. I felt as though I'd gone blind and deaf.

Then something stirred against my hand. The stirring became a spastic flutter of flesh.

In the dark, I screamed.

I struggled to my feet, caught in legs and limbs. I forgot about the blood. My feet skidded out from under me and for a moment I was midair, tilting upside down.

Then my skull hit the concrete floor, and the darkness got darker.

Before I blacked out, I saw a figure lurching through the darkness. Thomas Dunn was inside the room then.

So he would be the last thing I saw.

I supposed that was what I deserved.

IMPOSSIBLE

“WAKE UP. KENNA. WAKE UP!” A WOMAN’S FAMILIAR voice.

“Is she okay? Mom, is she okay?” This time the voice came from a girl.

“I don’t know. She’s breathing. I think she might have hit her head. Kenna? Kenna?”

My lids peeled open over my eyes and pain boomed in my skull, a sledgehammer blow that made firecrackers explode in my vision. Darkness and sparks . . . darkness and sparks. But this pain was nothing compared to the hollowness inside me, a vacant feeling like some vital organ had been removed.

“Mom? Erin?” I said in a tearful moan. Had I followed them into death? I’d never subscribed to any particular belief about the afterlife, but this was not my kind of heaven,

not this dark place. I was cold and empty and wet, as though I was still in the basement, soaked in—

In blood.

I sat up fast, blinking out the shadows and the skull-splitting pyrotechnics. The pain in my head blossomed, but my vision began to clear and my eyes to adjust. A narrow bar of moonlight shone under the door, enough light for me to recognize I was in the storage room, and there were two people in the room with me. Two people who were kneeling on either side of me in their own blood, and neither of them was Thomas Dunn.

My mom and Erin.

Alive.

Impossible.

My memory reversed, and I saw the moments before I blacked out. A figure staggering through the darkness. The phantom lights that came from everywhere and nowhere, filling me to bursting and then vacuumed out of me, cracking me open as they left. The bulb overhead bursting, showering slivers of glass. Thomas Dunn hammering at the door, and then . . . silence. He'd stopped trying to get in, perhaps startled by the light in the room, if that had even been real.

Was he still out there, lying in wait to finish what he'd started? What *Id* started when I took his son's life.

My eyes, adjusting to the darkness now, scoured my family. Despite my aversion to physical contact, I reached out with a trembling hand and touched my mom. She was warm. I

sensed the force of her vitality like static electricity, and her eyes . . . her eyes were black, pupils expanded to the size of pennies. Why, I didn't know. But who cared? My mom was alive, and so was Erin. That was all that mattered.

I pulled Erin into a hug, tears burning my eyes, and released her just as quickly. Something about her was different. She *felt* different.

I held her back and studied her face. Both of her eyes were open and black, the same as my mom's, even though when I'd first seen her in the basement, one of her eyes had been a mound of swelling, the lid sealed shut with blood.

"How?" I asked.

Mom shook her head, touched the slash marks in her nightgown, as though she were remembering how she got them, who gave them to her. Her head turned toward the splintered door and her upper lip curled to show her teeth. "Where is he?"

"I—I don't know," I said. The door was barely a door anymore. If Thomas Dunn had wanted in, he would have been in.

Mom rose unsteadily to her feet, her movements disjointed, like those of a newly birthed foal trying to stand for the first time, gawky on unfamiliar legs. She crept in a herky-jerky style toward the door. She peered through the ragged hole he'd made, and then shoved aside the chest of drawers.

"Mom," I said sharply, but she turned the knob and

wrenched the door open, revealing an unmoving figure lying facedown on the floor outside. I saw that Thomas Dunn had a handgun tucked into the back of his pants.

Mom bent to grasp Dunn's wrist and checked his pulse. I braced myself for him to roar to life suddenly, pull out whatever knife he'd used to slay my family the first time around, and do it all over again. Or maybe this time he would use the gun.

There was a brittle, cracking sound, and then Mr. Dunn's arm broke off at the elbow like it was no more than a piece of old, charred wood. Erin screamed and clung to me. I would have screamed, too, but I couldn't find my voice.

Mom dropped Mr. Dunn's arm and it hit the concrete, shattering to dust.

When Erin's scream ended, I heard the sound of tires grinding to a halt on our gravel drive outside the house, followed by the upstairs door crashing open and footsteps pounding across the floor.

The cavalry had arrived, but I wasn't sure the old "better late than never" maxim applied this time. There were going to be questions, and, as had been the case when I ran from Jason Dunn's lifeless body, I didn't have any answers.

Boots thudded down the stairs and flashlight beams cut through the shadows.

"We're over here," Mom called to the cops. She raised her hands so they would see she was harmless, but she couldn't seem to hold them still. That herky-jerky, wind-up-toy jitter continued.

The flashlight beams located her and froze long enough for the responding officers to take in the sight of a crazed-looking woman drenched in blood before one of them barked, “Lie down on the ground!”

“This is my house,” Mom said. “My daughters and I were attacked, but—”

“Down on the ground!” the same cop insisted. Mom did as she was told, lowering herself to her knees and then lying down flat. Erin and I did the same. I ended up next to Thomas Dunn’s body, looking into his face, and I gasped, even though I knew what I would see. Thomas Dunn looked like he’d been dead for a month. Or a year. His skin was lizard gray and leathered, warping around the bones of his face and arms. His eyes, black and wrinkled like prunes, had sunk deep into their sockets. The fingers on his remaining arm were curled into raptor claws. Even as I watched, his hair continued to detach from his scalp and shed onto the floor around him.

He looked just like Jason had when I’d gotten through with him.

The police swarmed us, checking for weapons. When they were assured we were the victims, not the perpetrators, they refocused their attention on the dead man and his kill room.

I explained that I’d made the 911 call and that, despite the blood on my clothes, I was unhurt, and let myself be escorted upstairs. My mom and Erin remained in the basement. The police, assuming they were still injured, chose to restrict their movement. A part of me wanted to stay downstairs with

them, to never let them out of my sight again . . . and at the same time, I wanted to distance myself from them. *Needed* to distance myself.

I was all too aware of a growing hunger inside me, a gnawing sensation, not in my stomach, but everywhere. In every cell. Every pore. In my blood and my brain. This cavernous craving was familiar. I'd felt it seven years ago when I'd emerged from the forest, the state of euphoria I'd lived in for two days having abandoned me, leaving me empty and ravenous.

Whatever I'd done to bring Erin and my mom back from the dead, it had also brought back my hunger.

Two cops guided me to the kitchen and requested I stay there. I spotted the plate Thomas Dunn had used, still sitting on the kitchen table. He had, indeed, helped himself to leftover lasagna. An impressionistic pattern of red sauce and cheese had dried onto the plate. How insane had he become over the years since his son's death that he could massacre a family and then eat comfort food? Maybe cruelty ran in his blood, and he'd passed it down to Jason.

Our kitchen had one of those greenhouse-style windows over the sink, all glass, with two shelves where my mom kept an array of houseplants and potted herbs. As I entered the kitchen, I saw that the plants my mom cared for so meticulously had turned the color of ash, and drooped in their pots. Some had crumbled like ancient paper.

"Did you place the 9-1-1 call?" a female officer asked me, striding into the kitchen. She might have been five two on

her tiptoes, but she looked to be all muscle under her uniform. She had eyes like a boxer, squinted and darting. The kind of eyes that didn't miss a thing.

"I did," I said, still studying the plants.

She examined me, taking in my bloodstained clothes. "Are you hurt?"

"No," I told her, ignoring the throbbing pain in my head. If I said yes, someone would insist on examining me, and I couldn't have anyone touching me right then. I didn't know what I might do.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm fine," I snarled, my tone so vicious it made the officer take a step back.

"I'm sorry. I'm just . . . I need my inhaler," I wheezed, and bolted past the officer, tore open the kitchen junk drawer, and found the inhaler Mom always kept there. Erin and I used the same one. I didn't have a prescription because the doctor Mom took me to claimed I didn't have asthma, that it was all in my head.

I sucked in three inhalations of the bitter medicine and then stood with my hands propped on the counter, my head hanging as my airways relaxed.

I looked up to find the officer studying me with those sharp eyes of hers.

She took a step toward me. "Look, I've seen some weird things in my life, but never anything like what's out there. I have to ask . . . what in God's name happened here tonight?"

I stared at her, confused, and her eyebrows went up.

“You don’t know?” she asked.

I was moving toward the front foyer before she could stop me.

The door stood wide open, allowing the cops and EMTs to come and go. I slipped out onto the front porch and had to grip the wrought-iron railing to hold myself upright as I took in the sight of the land surrounding the house. It was a clear night, the moon high and luminous, allowing me to see enough so I understood immediately what the female officer had meant when she said she’d never seen anything like what was “out there.”

It was dead. The lawn. The bushes that used to stand like sentinels around the house. Mom’s lush, unruly garden. The bullet-shaped evergreen trees. Everything that had been living within a hundred feet of our house appeared to have been scorched.

“Kenna!”

I heard my name shouted from across the barren land. A cop in uniform was busy cordoning off our yard with yellow police tape, but I spotted Blake and his parents on the other side of the perimeter, talking to another officer. Blake waved his arms at me.

I remembered kissing Blake and thinking I wanted to keep going until the sun came up. What if we’d ignored the cry in the night and just kept on kissing? My family would be dead, and Thomas Dunn would still be waiting for me to come home so he could get his revenge.

My feet found their way down the porch steps. The soles of my shoes crunched on the dead grass. It sounded as though I were walking on ice chips. Behind me, the female cop called my name, told me to come back to the house, but I ignored her command.

I began to run through the dead world. It looked like what was left after a nuclear bomb had been dropped, after everything burned and then went cold.

When I reached Blake, he climbed over the police tape, ignoring the cop who kept telling him not to. I threw myself into his arms, and he held me so tight I couldn't breathe.

The female cop caught up to me and insisted I come back inside, that she needed to collect my clothes as evidence. My clothes, covered in blood.

Evidence of what? I wondered. The perpetrator of this particular crime was dead and gone. There was no one to catch.

I ignored her and clung to Blake. Over his shoulder, on the barren side of the yellow tape, I caught sight of a scattering of tawny mounds that looked like piles of dirt in among the blackened trees. Fresh graves. It took me a moment to realize what they really were.

Deer. A herd of dead deer. There had to be twenty of them.

I squeezed my eyes shut and felt the energy contained under Blake's skin. I wanted to reach inside him and take a little, just enough to make my hunger go away.

I released him quickly and stepped back.

“What is it?” he said, his eyes wide with fear as he took in the blood soaking my clothes. “Are you hurt? Is your family . . . are they okay?”

“They’re alive,” I told him. “We’re all . . . we’re okay.”

But that wasn’t true. I, for one, was definitely not okay.

CIRCLE OF DEATH

“IT’S SIMPLY NOT POSSIBLE,” DR. WONG, THE SENIOR emergency care physician, announced to me in his private office at the hospital.

It was six a.m. Four hours that felt like four years had passed since I’d kissed Blake in the woods . . . woods that were now dead, along with every shred of life they’d accommodated. Fallen squirrels and birds littered the ground around the trees, as though they’d made some kind of spontaneous suicide pact. Rabbits, foxes, deer, even a bobcat had been found within the circle of death, their bodies stiff and desiccated. If you looked closely, you could see a powdering of tiny, lifeless insects on every surface, and larger ones—crickets and grasshoppers, spiders and beetles, and thousands upon thousands of moths—mixed in among them.

Outside Dr. Wong’s window, half a dozen news vans

lurked in the parking lot. I didn't plan on leaving the building anytime soon.

"I spoke with the police," Dr. Wong went on. "They estimate there was around ten liters of blood in your basement, which supposedly originated from your mom and sister."

I swallowed hard, but there was a knot in my throat that wouldn't go down, and a low, constant fluttering sound in my ears that was driving me insane. Worse was the empty, cavernous hunger inside me—not in my stomach, but in every fiber of my being. In my teeth. In my eyes. In my fingernails. Worse still was the sensation that I was dying as I sat here, that I was shriveling and shrinking as my body cried out for more . . . more of whatever I'd given to my mom and Erin to save their lives.

"The average adult has between three and five liters of blood in his body." Dr. Wong spread his hands and allowed me to do the math. "Your mom and sister were awake, aware, and walking around when the police arrived. With the amount of blood each of them supposedly lost, that isn't possible."

Supposedly. Dr. Wong liked that word.

My jaw was rigid. I could barely move it to make words. "So how do you explain it?"

"I don't," Dr. Wong said, raising an eyebrow. He was one of those people whose age was impossible to guess. His hair was a solid mass, thick and black, his skin unlined. But he had an adult's BS detector, and he wasn't buying mine. "There is also the matter of the wounds. In essence, there aren't any,

which begs the question: Where did all that blood come from? And there is your family's behavior, their enlarged pupils, and their tremors. We tested them for drugs, chemicals of some kind, but they were clean." He took a breath and let it out. "And finally, there is your sister's condition. Your twin sister, is that right?"

"Yes." A wave of chills swam over me, making my teeth rattle. I had changed clothes before leaving our house—my bloody clothes had been bagged as evidence—but I barely remembered choosing what to wear. I wished I'd brought a sweater, but at the time I'd felt feverish. Now I was freezing, and my skin was starting to crawl. I fought the urge to rake it with my fingernails.

Dr. Wong consulted the chart in front of him. "I remember Erin. I treated her when your mom brought her in a few years ago. She'd fallen and broken several bones."

I winced as I recalled the incident in fifth grade, the last year Erin had attended school. Erin had disobeyed our mom's strict mandate never to use the playground equipment, but she'd gotten tired of sitting on the sidelines with her books, watching the other kids swing and run and have a good time. It was my job to watch her, make sure she never did anything dangerous, and usually I did. But that one day, I turned my back for a few minutes and Erin ended up with multiple fractures in both tibias after dropping only a foot from the monkey bars and landing normally. Erin's bones were not meant to withstand that kind of impact, and she'd spent the next few months in double casts and a wheelchair.

My mom had been furious with me for not taking better care of her.

She needs you, Kenna, my mom had told me while tears of guilt poured down my face. *You're the strong one. You have to protect her.*

I braced myself for bad news as I asked, “What about her condition?”

The doctor spread his hands in a gesture that implied helplessness, but a ghost of a smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “I don’t understand what happened at your house last night, and maybe I never will. But as far as your sister’s afflictions are concerned . . . she no longer seems to have them. She’s perfectly healthy.”

I swallowed and finally the lump in my throat went down. Tears stung the backs of my eyes and my breath hitched in my throat.

I stood, my knees trembling. “Can I see her now?”

My mom and Erin had been relegated to a suite on the third floor, where they would be kept for observation and testing until Dr. Wong had satisfied his curiosity. I exited the elevator and walked quickly to their suite, but froze outside when I heard my mom’s voice. I cracked the door open slightly and peered inside. I caught sight of a broad-shouldered man in a suit, blocking the view of my mom. He held a pad of paper and was writing quickly. I guessed he was a detective.

I stood still and listened, realizing my mom was giving

a statement of what had happened last night. I needed to know what she said so I could repeat it.

“We went to bed later than usual,” Mom said. “We’d been at a music festival near Portland, watching Kenna perform.”

“Kenna is your other daughter?” the detective said. “The one who came home later?”

“That’s right,” my mom said. “She was out with her boyfriend.”

“Name?” the detective asked.

“Blake Callahan.”

“Are they talking about me?”

I whirled to find Blake standing behind me. He looked exhausted and wonderful and worried. I wanted to throw my arms around him and bury my face in his neck. Instead, I took a step back from him and put a finger to my lips to shush him. He nodded, and leaned in to listen.

“So,” Mom continued, “it was after midnight when we went to bed. My guess is Dunn was already in the house waiting for us when we got home. I woke up about an hour later with a gun pressed to my head. He . . . he had Erin. He told me he wouldn’t hurt her if I did what he wanted.” A choked sob followed. Tears sprang to my eyes and I had to press both hands over my mouth to hold back a sob of my own.

“He lied,” my mom said, her voice bitter and cold. “We cooperated with him because he said he wouldn’t hurt us if we did. He marched us down to the storage room in the basement, probably because it was farthest from the front door. He didn’t want Kenna to hear anything if she came home

while he was”—she paused—“while he was in the middle of things.”

“What did he do once he had you down there?” the detective asked.

“He was insane,” Mom said, not really answering the question. “We knew him, you know. He was our neighbor a long time ago, but after his son died he lost his mind. We tried to reason with him, but he wouldn’t listen. He started screaming at us about Kenna, saying she had killed his son, which is ridiculous. Obviously he needed someone to blame.”

I had to hand it to my mom, she was a good liar. I almost believed what she was saying even though I knew it was bullshit.

“And then he . . . attacked you?” the detective asked, sounding cagey, like he wasn’t sure how to broach this subject. “I mean, he must have attacked you. Your blood was all over that room.”

“Yes,” my mom and Erin said at the same time.

“And then?”

A pause, and then Mom said, “We don’t remember.”

“What do you mean, you don’t remember?”

“That’s all we can tell you. Thomas Dunn attacked us. He had a gun, but he didn’t use it, probably didn’t want to alert the neighbors. He used a knife instead, and while he was . . . while he was busy with me, I yelled for Erin to make a run for it. Sh-she—” Her voice cracked, and Erin cut in.

“He caught me before I could get out of the basement,”

she said in a tremulous whisper I could barely make out. “He hit me and broke my glasses and dragged me back to the room. I . . . I don’t remember anything after that.”

“You don’t remember Kenna coming home?”

“No,” Mom said.

“No,” Erin said.

“And you don’t know how Thomas Dunn died?”

“No,” they repeated.

“Or what happened to the land around your house? No theories? Aliens? Astrological event? Divine intervention?”

“No,” my mom said firmly. “We have no idea what happened. We don’t know why we’re still alive. All we can do is be thankful that we are. I’m sorry, there’s nothing more we can tell you, Detective.”

“Then I hope Kenna can fill in a few blanks. Thanks for your time.”

The detective’s footsteps moved toward the door. I motioned Blake into the room next door to my family’s, which was thankfully empty. Blake and I hid behind the curtain, both of us breathing fast, until the footsteps faded.

Then Blake looked at me. “You’re shivering.” He took off his jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders. It smelled like him. Like brown sugar and cinnamon, honey and cedar. I wished I could press my face to his neck and breathe him in, let him put his arms around me. But I didn’t dare let him touch me. The hunger was getting worse, a raw ache. A cavernous emptiness that begged to be filled. Withering

cells crying to be sated. The papery fluttering in my ears continued, louder now, and my skin prickled like I was being jabbed by a thousand acid-laced stingers.

You've been through this before, I told myself. You made it through that time. You can do it again.

But that had been different. I had been locked in a cell alone, not surrounded by people.

"What are you going to tell that detective?" Blake asked. "You can't avoid him forever."

I shook my head. "I don't know," I said, but I understood what Blake was really asking.

What happened to you last night? What did you do? What are you hiding?

"I need to see my family," I said to change the subject. "Alone."

Blake nodded, doing his best to hide his disappointment that I wasn't ready to confide in him. "I'll wait in the hall."

I started to turn away, but Blake caught my hand and pulled me back, holding on tight when I tried to pull away. I gritted my teeth behind closed lips so he wouldn't know the torture it was to be so close to him, so close to what was inside of him.

Life. So much irresistible life.

"You can trust me," he said, holding my gaze. "No matter what you tell me, it stays between us, okay?"

"Okay. I know." I slid my hand from his and breathed again. But even when I'd left him behind, I could still feel the pulsing seduction of life inside him, and I wanted it.

Needed it. In an instant I went from shivering to sweating. My muscles cramped and my stomach roiled with nausea. It was all I could do to keep from doubling over and retching.

I paused at the door to take a few deep breaths, which helped a little. Then I stepped inside.

There were two beds in the suite. The curtains that would normally partition the patients had been pushed back, so the room with its peach-colored wallpaper and benign country art on the walls was wide open.

I looked from my mom to Erin. For several seconds all I could do was stare. Whatever had caused their spasmodic movements had calmed. Both of them shone with health and vitality, their skin porcelain smooth and radiant, which seemed doubly impossible because no one looked that good under fluorescent hospital lighting. My mom's and Erin's hair fell in melted-ice-cream waves over their shoulders. Erin's dishwater-blond hair had always been thin and brittle, but now it was the color of butter, and was so thick and satiny I had to wonder for a moment if she was wearing a wig.

I stood there for a moment, not sure what to do. I couldn't tear my eyes from my twin's, couldn't stop seeing the bruises that had blackened her face a few hours ago, the swollen lump of her eye and the blood soaking her pajamas. My sickly, frail twin who once broke both legs dropping a foot from the monkey bars, who was so tiny, so skeletal that Mom had to buy her clothes from the children's department . . . my sister was transformed as though she'd spent the night in a chrysalis

and had been reborn into a new body. A healthy, strong, perfect body.

“Is it true?” I asked her. “You’re . . . you’re . . .”

She beamed at me, her eyes filling with tears, and nodded. “So much for not living to see my next birthday.”

There was a chair next to Erin’s bed. I dropped into it before my watery knees gave out. Erin had terrible eyesight. When she wasn’t wearing her glasses, she tended to squint like a mole. But her glasses were gone, and her eyes were wide open.

“What do we do now?” I asked the room.

My mom and Erin shared a furtive glance.

“Plead ignorance,” my mom said, keeping her voice low in case anyone was listening outside the door. “No matter what they ask, we don’t remember anything, all right? Kenna, it’s especially important that you remain vague.”

I turned to Erin and saw her clear, bright eyes fill with tears and her chin begin to quiver.

“Do you remember?” I asked softly.

She licked her lips and swallowed. “You brought us back,” she whispered. “I was outside my body, just sort of drifting. Then I felt this tug, like I was a balloon on a string, and you were the one holding the end.” She smiled sadly and wiped her eyes as the tears dripped down her nose. “You saved us. You saved *me*.”

I wanted to tell her no, she was mistaken. I hadn’t saved them. I had damned them. I was the reason Thomas Dunn did what he did.

I was the reason they had died in the first place.

Then the door opened and the detective stepped inside. He was middle-aged, graying, twenty pounds overweight. His tired eyes pinned me down. "There you are," he said. "I'm the detective handling your family's case. I need to take your statement."

"Can we do it here?"

He shook his head. "Just you and me." He gestured impatiently for me to follow. "It won't take long. Come on, let's talk in the cafeteria, get some coffee. Your boyfriend can come, too," he added with a half smile, as though he were trying to be charming.

Reluctantly, I stood and followed him, my fever ramping up a few degrees. I wanted to take off Blake's jacket, but it felt like a layer of armor, a protective shell. I curled my hands inside the sleeves.

Blake waited in the hallway outside the room, pacing restlessly. When I emerged, he stopped pacing and moved to my side. He tried to take my hand, but I folded my arms and stuck my hands in my armpits.

"I'm Detective Speakman, by the way," the detective said. He held his hand out to me. I ignored it.

"What do you want to know?" I asked. "You already have your man and he's dead. What's left to investigate?" What was left that didn't call for an episode of *The X-Files*?

He raised his eyebrows at me, but lowered his hand, gazing at me with a blank expression. "I just need to get all the facts."