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Farrar Straus Giroux · New York

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For my blackbird

the
SECRETS
we
KEEP

PROLOGUE

I don't remember her room being so cold. Even snuggled into her sweater the chill seeps in, settling into my bones like a whisper from beyond. That's where I will sleep tonight . . . in Maddy's bed, surrounded by her scent. Mom wants to change the sheets, but I won't let her. The hints of vanilla and lavender mingled with Alex's dark cologne brings a little piece of my sister back to me each night.

The only thing I have left of my old life is a few sketches and a poor replica of the friendship bracelet Josh gave me. It took me days to re-create, to weave the strings into the right pattern. It's not perfect, but it goes with me everywhere, a pathetic reminder of who I once was and what Josh still means to me. The real bracelet is gone, cut off and tossed aside just like my life.

I want to make peace with my choice, but Maddy's

secret haunts me. The dark pieces of her life are hidden in the back of her closet for no one but me to see. She's not who I thought she was, but that doesn't matter. Maddy was my sister, my twin sister, and I'll do anything for her, including losing myself.

1

My phone vibrated on my nightstand, jarring me from the sketchbook I had open on my lap. I'd re-created the same drawing five times in the past week, and yet it still wasn't good enough. Problem was, if I didn't figure it out by midnight tomorrow, I'd be out of time.

Assuming it was Josh again, I let it go to voice mail, more concerned with perfecting the sketch than bickering with him over something his neighbor and sometime-girlfriend, Kim, had said. I wasn't interested in dissecting why she was offended that Josh chose to let me drive him to school every day, even though she lived less than a hundred yards from him and he had a car of his own. That was his problem, not mine. And if he couldn't figure that one out on his own, then he was an idiot.

I tossed my charcoal pencil down in favor of graphite. Perhaps it was the reflection of light in my picture that

was off. After a few strokes, I realized it wasn't—all I'd done was take a relatively decent drawing and make it worse.

The phone rang again, the same irritating song breaking my concentration. Swearing, I caught it before it buzzed off my nightstand and tossed it onto the bed next to me. Josh knew I was finishing up my portfolio tonight. I wanted it in early to ensure I was on track for early admission and not slotted into the general-admission pool for the Rhode Island School of Design. His call could wait; he'd understand.

The phone kept ringing, only stopping long enough to chime with an incoming text. Shaking my head, I turned to check the time. The bright numbers on my alarm clock bothered my bleary eyes. After several long, hard blinks and a few more muttered curses, the numbers came into focus. Two twenty-three in the effin morning. What could be so important that Josh had to call me at two-thirty in the morning?

I rubbed my eyes and answered, not bothering to check the caller ID. "What do you want now, Josh?"

"Ella? It's me."

It took a second for me to place the voice. It sounded off, throaty, and quieter than usual. I stared at the phone. My mind registered that it was my sister talking, but I still searched my darkened room for her. I don't know why; we hadn't shared a room since we were ten.

She was in bed when I came upstairs earlier that night. She was grounded. Dad had come home early from work on Tuesday and caught her and Alex in her bedroom. She

worked him down from three weeks without a phone to one night of grounding, but that left her stuck at home on a Saturday night with nothing but me and her collection of DVDs to keep her company. So what was she doing on the other end of my phone?

Flicking on the bedroom light, I stared across the hallway to her room. As always, her door was closed, and I had to get up, trudge those seven steps to her door, and push it open. The room was quiet, her rumpled bed empty. The window behind it was open a crack, probably so she could sneak back in.

“Maddy? Where are you?”

“Alex’s,” she said, her voice muffled by what I could’ve sworn were tears.

“What’s the matter?”

I was more curious than anything. Maddy didn’t cry. Ever. She said it was a sign of weakness and that it made your makeup run. The weakness part I got; the popular crowd she’d immersed herself in would use anything they could against one another.

The makeup part . . . yeah, that I didn’t get.

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter. I just need a ride home, Ella.”

“Where’s your car?”

My guess was that she’d lost her keys or, better yet, was too drunk at one of Alex’s parties to drive. I’d pick her up—there was no question about that, but I wanted to prod her for a reason first.

“It’s at home. Jenna picked me up.”

“It’s two-thirty in the morning, Maddy,” I said, already putting on my shoes. “Can’t you get Jenna or Alex or somebody else to drive you home?”

“No, Alex can’t and Jenna won’t.”

I shrugged, not caring that Maddy couldn’t see me. I didn’t get why Maddy hung out with Jenna, what she could possibly see in her best friend.

“Come on, Ella. If Mom and Dad find out I snuck out, I’m screwed.”

I snorted at that one. Screwed? My twin sister was never screwed. She always seemed to skate by, knew exactly what to say to get herself out of everything. She’d be extra-sweet to our mother, pout for our father, and for Alex . . . well, from what I could gather, she had an entirely different arsenal for getting her way with him.

I could count my friends on one finger, but she could fill the entire cafeteria with laughter. I’d wake up at six in the morning so I could be early for school, and she’d roll in five minutes past the first bell, moaning about some flat tire to get herself out of detention. I’d collapse on my bed exhausted from studying till midnight, and she’d sneak out and go to a party with her boyfriend.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something to tell them.” And they’d buy it. No matter who she was talking to or what lie she was selling, they always bought it.

Maddy managed to make the honor roll, but that was mostly my doing. I’d study for days, then cave when she’d

beg me to *pretend* I was her and take a test she'd completely forgotten about. I never complained; it's not like she took any advanced courses, so it required no effort on my part.

I was getting so good at playing her that her friends couldn't tell us apart. I kept my hair long and stopped adding pink streaks to the underside to look more like her. I'd mastered her voice as well, knew exactly how to raise and lower the pitch to match her sarcasm.

She paid me fifty bucks to take an oral Spanish exam for her last week, one she "completely forgot I had." I scored her a solid 82. No point in getting her an A. She took my spot in Physics that day, pretending to be me so I wouldn't get a detention for skipping class. We had a pop quiz. She took it for me, scoring me a miserable 47. Now I was looking at doing extra-credit work for the rest of the term to even manage a B.

I got back at her though. Still pretending to be Maddy, I went and found Jenna, and told her I wasn't feeling well and was staying home that night. Then I called Mom to tell her the same thing. Maddy was beyond pissed; she'd unintentionally got herself a Friday night at home in bed with Mom hovering and me gloating. As for Jenna . . . I'd never heard that girl scream so loud in my life, something about a family dinner to celebrate her birthday that Maddy had promised she'd be at. Oh well, not my problem.

"Ella, please," Maddy begged, pulling me from that memory. "I'll make it up to you. I swear. Whatever you want."

“You always say that, Maddy.”

“I know, but I mean it this time. Please.”

I had a memory full of promises just like that one. Difference was, I kept my promises. Maddy’s were nothing more than hollow assurances aimed at getting people to do what she wanted.

We were so different. Maddy was skirts and heels and flatirons, where I was jeans and T-shirts and ponytails. She was Friday-night parties and homecoming dances. I was B-rated horror movies on the couch with microwave popcorn. From her perfect hair to her perfect friends, right down to her perfectly pedicured toes, Maddy was my opposite.

“Ella? Ella!” Maddy shouted into the phone.

The muffled crying I’d heard earlier was gone, her rapid breathing and rising pitch lending an edge of panic to her voice. I don’t know why she’d freak; it’s not like I’d ever say no. She was my sister, my twin sister at that, and I would always help her.

“Fine. Whatever,” I said, and grabbed a sweatshirt from the end of my bed. “I’ll be there in fifteen.”

I quickly flipped through my drawings, picked the best of four sketches of the exact same subject, and carefully tore it out. Surprisingly, it was the first one I’d done. I scanned it in, adding it to the ones I’d already uploaded, and hit the Submit button. It was only October 18. The application wasn’t due for another two weeks, but, like I said, I wanted it in early. Plus, if Maddy expected me to

drop everything to come get her, then the least she could do was wait the ten extra minutes it'd take me to e-mail my art school application.

My dog, Bailey, hopped down off my bed the minute I stood up, intent on following me around. He beat me to my bedroom door, then waited as if he needed my permission. Knowing him, he'd bark the second I left the house, letting me know he was not happy staying behind. I didn't mind him being angry. He was a dog, he'd get over it in less than a second. What I didn't want was Bailey to wake my parents up. It was bad enough I had to go bail Maddy out. I didn't feel like dealing with Mom and Dad's questions, too.

I grabbed a treat from the box I kept on my nightstand and hid it beneath the covers on my bed. Bailey did as I expected; he jumped up and started nosing through my comforter. I'd hidden it deep enough that it would take Bailey a while to find, hopefully long enough for me to get out of the house unnoticed.

I poked my head into my parents' room before heading downstairs. They were asleep, the TV still casting a pale blue light. I thought about turning it off but figured the sudden lack of noise might wake them up. My eye caught the array of pictures covering Mom's dresser. The flickering glow from the TV gave a hint of what they were, but I didn't need to see the photos to describe each one. They'd been there for as long as I could remember.

The big one in the middle was a family portrait taken

three Christmases ago. We were gathered around a fake fireplace in some photographer's studio. The scowl on my face was the source of a huge argument that day. Next to that was a picture of Maddy and me on our sixteenth birthday. She looked stunning, and was staring off into the distance, probably at Alex. I was standing there praying for Mom to hurry up and take the damn thing so I could go back to my room. The other three pictures were of Maddy. Maddy after her field hockey team won divisionals her sophomore year. Maddy and Alex at junior prom last year. Maddy with the keys to her "new" car.

It was the same in real life. At my father's office Christmas party, she was the one he introduced first. When we went to church, she got to sit between them. When a relative or an old friend asked my mom about the twins, it was Maddy's accomplishments Mom launched into first. Me they were still trying to figure out.

I was the smart, quiet one who preferred the inside of a book to parties. Quirky and reserved, that's how they described me to their friends. Quirky and reserved.

I quietly closed the door and made my way downstairs. It was pitch-black outside, the moon hidden behind a thick bank of clouds. It had rained earlier and, from the looks of it, was going to again.

I grabbed my coat and hat from the hall closet and headed outside. Luckily, the neighbors had left their porch lights on, or I would've walked smack into the trash cans at the end of our driveway. As it was, I'd already stumbled

twice—once over Bailey’s half-chewed rope toy and again, steps later, over a sprinkler head. That last one landed me on my butt, cursing and trying to brush the dampness from my jeans.

When I finally made it to my car, I realized Maddy’s car was in the way. She’d parked straight across our driveway, blocking everybody in.

“Seriously, Maddy?” I said as I kicked her tire. It’d be fine if she was the first to leave in the morning, but she never was. Maddy was always the last one out the door, putting her makeup on in the rearview mirror while she raced to school. It was me who rearranged the cars each morning so Dad could get to work and I could get to school.

I winced at my throbbing toe and made my way back to the house. Moving the cars around wasn’t an option. If turning off the TV had the potential to wake my parents up, then shuffling cars in the driveway would certainly have them stumbling down the stairs wondering where I was going.

I hung my keys on the hook next to the door. There were five hooks there, each clearly labeled with a name. Mine, Dad’s, Mom’s, Maddy’s, even one designated for the lawn tractor keys, but Maddy’s weren’t there. Of course they wouldn’t be there. Knowing her, she’d probably thrown them on the counter when she came in, figuring one of us would find them and hang them up.

“This is the last time, Maddy. I swear to God, this is the

last time I do anything for you,” I muttered to myself as I fished around our kitchen counters in the dark. She couldn’t make bailing her out easy. Nope, Maddy had to make everything as difficult as possible.

I finally found her keys wedged behind the radio. I picked them up, swearing to tear her a new one for being so selfish, then headed back out into the damp night air. If everything went as it should, I’d be home and in bed in less than a half hour with another of Maddy’s promises to make it up to me stashed away in my brain.

2

It was drizzling by the time I reached Alex's house. Except for a few scattered cars parked between the trees, you'd never have known there was a party going on. I guess that was a perk of being *really* rich—a long driveway and lots of land to buffer sound.

I remembered the day Maddy met Alex Furey. We were freshmen, and it was our third day of school. I thought going to a new school with my sister would make everything easier, figured I'd have at least one person to sit with at the lunch table. I didn't take into account that we had no classes together, that Maddy was a lot more outgoing than me, or that we had very little in common. I assumed we'd stick together, and I'd have a built-in safety net.

Maddy let me crowd her those first few days, smiling and encouraging me to go off on my own and make some

new friends. I tried: sitting next to people who I didn't recognize in my classes and saying hi to the few kids who looked my way. But when none of them said hi back, I ignored them and minded my own business.

That first Wednesday, I went to find Maddy in the cafeteria, excited about the drawing I'd done in open studio. The lunchroom was as loud as always, the smell a cross between burned pizza and nasty gym socks. Looking forward to a half hour of peace, I grabbed a tray and bought something I deemed safe enough to eat—a hot dog—and headed in to find her. But she wasn't sitting in the corner of the cafeteria like she had been on Monday and Tuesday. That table was empty—eight vacant chairs surrounding an equally deserted table. I searched the other tables, automatically focusing on those kids sitting alone. No Maddy. It wasn't until I scanned the center of the room, my eyes skating across the six tables that had been jammed together, that I saw her. She wasn't sitting in a chair. She was perched on top of the table, her arms draped around some kid's neck. And she was laughing.

I stood there watching her, debating whether to go over and sit down next to her or to seek out one of the empty tables that littered the corners. Luckily, I didn't have to make the decision. Maddy made it for me.

She extricated herself from the boy's hold and hopped down off the table. I couldn't hear her over the noise, but I gathered from the flick of her wrists that she was telling him she'd be back in a minute.

“Hey,” she said as she stopped in front of me. “I waited for you outside the cafeteria, but—”

“Yeah, sorry, I had a question about a geometry problem,” I said, cutting off her lie. She’d never waited for me outside before. Not once during junior high and not once since we started here.

“Who are they?” I asked, looking past her to the group of people now staring at us.

“Alex Furey,” she said, smiling in his direction. Here was a smile I hadn’t seen before—head cocked and perky.

“Okay,” I said, taking a step toward the table. I didn’t care who we sat with so long as I didn’t have to sit alone.

Maddy stopped me, her perfectly pink nails encircling my wrist. I stared down at them, wondering when she’d had time to paint her nails and when she’d started wearing pink. And were those tiny white flowers painted in the middle?

We’d come to school looking nearly identical, so much so that our homeroom teacher did a double take. We were wearing the same jeans, the same hair twisted into a bun, the same boring beige tank tops when we left the house, but somehow she had changed and redone everything from her shoes to her makeup in the last three hours.

“Alex has a cousin your age. He thinks—”

“You mean *our* age,” I interrupted.

She shrugged that off and steered me toward a table in the back of the cafeteria. “I think you’ll like him. From what Alex says, you two have a lot in common.”

Which translated to: he was smart, quiet, and too quirky for his own family to acknowledge. Apparently, so was I.

“He’s starting an anime club,” she continued, fingering the notebook I had tucked under my tray. It was covered with manga drawings I’d been working on during History class. Some of them were good; most of them were doodles. I had the one I wanted to show her on top. I’d ripped it out of my notebook, thinking I’d give it to her at lunch.

Maddy took the tray from my hands, not once looking at the drawing underneath. “Come on. I’ll introduce you.”

She was a good five steps ahead of me before my feet started moving. I tucked the drawing into my notebook and followed her over. The two kids sitting there looked up when she dropped my tray onto the table. I recognized both of them from Honors English but had no clue who they actually were. They were two guys with longish hair and Mountain Dew T-shirts eating their food and minding their own business until my sister interrupted them.

I swung my head from them to Maddy. Her food, if she had any, her books, and her phone were at the other table.

“It’s Ella, right?” I turned toward one of the boys at the table and nodded, wondering how he knew my name. “I’m Josh.”

“Yup, her name’s Ella,” Maddy offered up when I remained silent. “She’s into that Japanese-cartoon stuff you guys like.”

Maddy nudged me closer, and I stumbled into the corner of the table. “Right, Ella?”

I nodded, still confused, still mute. Until five minutes ago, she was into my “Japanese-cartoon stuff,” too. Last I checked, she had an entire bulletin board dedicated to my drawings. Now she was talking about it like it was some noxious side effect of having an identical twin sister. I followed her gaze to the other table and watched as her entire personality changed instantly in front of my eyes. She shook her head, tossing her hair as she smothered a giggle. Alex winked, and I swore she blushed.

“You’re good, right?” Maddy asked over her shoulder as she danced away. I didn’t bother to answer. I was too busy trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

“You gonna sit?” Josh asked.

“What?”

“I said are you going to sit?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

I pulled out a chair a safe three seats away from him and sat down. I didn’t speak, just focused on my food, confused and hurt that I’d been dumped—literally dumped—by my own sister.

Three years later I was still sitting at that same table with Josh, but now my sister’s exclusion didn’t bother me.

3

I parked as close to Alex's house as I could, which was still fifteen cars away. I could hear the music now, the faint thump of the bass echoing through the windows. Out of habit, I locked the car. Not that anybody would think to steal it. My sister's ten-year-old Honda was nothing special compared to the shiny new toys parked around it. That, and nobody messed with anything that belonged to Alex Furey. And my sister most definitely belonged to him.

I followed the music up the walkway. The front porch was littered with plastic cups and empty pizza boxes, the occasional soda can tossed in between. I made my way up the stairs, careful not to look at the two kids making out on the railing, and opened the door to the house.

I don't know what hit me first, the music or the smell, but both sent me in search of clean air. Three steps and

the stench of perfume, pot, and sweat finally cleared. The pounding in my head . . . well, that dulled to a tolerable level. I hadn't been to a party like this since I was a freshman and Mom paid Maddy to take me out with her. Something about me needing to make friends. Since then, I'd spent plenty of time running pick-up duty but had done my best to avoid *ever* having to enter into this social scene again.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

His voice echoed over the drumming in my head, and I looked up to see Josh coming out the front door. I thought about asking him the same question—he wasn't exactly top man on his cousin's list—then I remembered his parents were away, Alex's with them. A family vacation that didn't include kids.

Surprisingly, both sets of parents thought it wiser if Josh and Alex stayed together while they were gone. My guess was that that had nothing to do with Josh's parents and everything to do with Alex's father wanting to make sure his son didn't trash his house while they were gone. Josh would stay to make his parents happy, but there was no way he'd run babysitting duty for his uncle.

"Looking for Maddy," I said. "She called and said she needed a ride home."

"Stay for a while and hang out with me. I brought some movies from home. We can watch them upstairs."

He'd been bugging me for weeks to spend more time with him, but I'd been obsessed with my art school

application and passing AP Physics. Plus, he had Kim now, and she was more than willing to occupy every second of his time.

“Can’t,” I said. “I’m beat and we have a Physics test on Monday. Kinda hoping for something better than a B on this one.” More accurately I needed an A to make up for the F Maddy scored me last week.

Josh shrugged, the slight bit of hope I’d seen in his eyes fading away. “Sent my application in this morning. You finish yours?”

“Yup. I submitted it before I left. Now we wait.”

Josh laughed. We had planned this since the middle of freshman year. We’d submit our applications on the same day, to the same schools, then start obsessing about it four weeks out. When the e-mails finally came, we’d meet up and compare them. We’d go together or not at all. If one of us didn’t get in, then, as far as we were concerned, neither of us did.

“Yeah, now we wait.” He held the door open for me, and we walked in. It took a minute, but once I got used to the smell, it wasn’t so bad. The house wasn’t overly crowded, but that didn’t make it any easier to get around. Nobody got out of our way, and we had to weave around people, furniture, and the occasional nasty glare to make our way through the living room.

“No Kim?” I asked, smirking. She’d been clingy lately, complaining that he spent too much time with me and not

enough with her. I didn't see the problem; neither did Josh, but then again I wasn't the one dating a sophomore.

"Nope, seniors only, according to Alex," he said, and I gathered from his tone that Kim's absence wasn't bothering him. He'd spent the entire day with her while I was holed up in my room finishing the sketches for my RISD application. Knowing him, he was probably looking forward to some time without her.

I made my way through the house, irked when I saw some kid point in my direction and scowl. I could look and act exactly like my sister if I wanted to, had done it for years. But here, when I was being myself, I was a nothing.

"She was in the kitchen last time I saw her," Josh said as he pointed to the far side of the house. "But that was a while ago."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Why didn't you offer to bring her home?"

"She never asked," he said, and I heard the inference in his voice. He would gladly have given Maddy a ride home . . . had she asked.

I couldn't help but look around as we made our way through the house. My sister had been dating Alex since freshman year, and I'd never once set foot in here. I'd picked her up at the end of the driveway plenty of times, had made it as far as the front door to ring the bell. But not once, before tonight, had I been invited in.

I scanned the room, wondering what made this kid so special. If it was there, I didn't see it. His house may have been bigger than ours, but the furniture looked no more expensive. The iPod docking station on the table looked to be a few years old. Mine was better.

I spotted the shadow of a girl curled up on the couch. She looked vaguely familiar, like someone I would've recognized instantly had the lights in the room not been so dim.

She sniffled and ran her sleeve across her nose. I followed her gaze to the far wall, wondering what had her so entranced. The wall was blank except for the giant flat screen mounted halfway up, and that was off.

"She okay?" I asked Josh.

"Who? Molly?" he asked. "I guess so. I talked to her earlier, asked her if she wanted a ride home or something. She said she was fine and wanted to be left alone."

I thought about confirming that for myself. As soon as I found Maddy, I was leaving anyway. I could drop her off. I made a mental note to check and see if she was still there before I left, then headed into the next room.

The kitchen was at the far end of the house and doubled as beer central. There was a keg on the floor, tucked into a brown trash barrel that I presumed was filled with ice. Two coolers stood by the sliding door and what was left of several pizzas littered the counter. There were people everywhere—jammed into the small corner between the refrigerator and the pantry, sitting on the counters, leaning

against walls. They'd dragged the dining room chairs in so that they could fit twelve people around the table that housed a bunch of plastic cups and what looked like a Ping-Pong ball.

I scanned the room twice looking for Maddy, listening for the sound of her voice. Placing my hands on Josh's shoulders, I hoisted myself up so I could see, and still no sign of my sister.

"She's not here," I said as I glanced at my watch. So much for my back-in-bed-in-less-than-a-half-hour plan.

Josh looked around the room himself before moving toward a kid by the door. "You seen Maddy Lawton around?"

The kid looked at us, then opened the cooler. He dug around in the slush before pulling out a hard lemonade. His eyes met mine and he smirked, no doubt too drunk to figure out that I was not my sister. I remembered him from Maddy's Spanish class. Keith something or other. He sat next to her and had asked if "she" wouldn't mind sharing the answers to the oral exam *I'd* taken. I batted my eyes, and in my best Maddy voice said, "Absolutely, darling. Anything for you," then wrote the wrong answers down and slid them toward the edge of my desk. He winked and quickly memorized them, never once questioning who I was. Idiot.

Josh caught Keith's look and clarified. "This is Ella," he said. "We're trying to find Maddy."

"Ha! Well, that explains why she looks like crap," Keith said as he walked away, not offering to help.

I glanced down at myself, thought maybe I was wearing mismatched shoes or had a big pizza stain on my sweat-shirt. I had on an old pair of jeans, a plain gray hoodie, and an equally dull jacket and nothing was grossly wrong with any of them. Sneakers matched, too, so maybe it was my hair. I'd quickly tossed it into a ponytail before I left, then tucked it up under my hat. Perhaps I should have actually brushed it.

Josh caught my hand as I went to smooth my hair. "You look fine. He's just being a jerk."

Not wanting Josh to know how much the drunk kid's comments hurt, I tried for a smile. I doubted I had pulled it off.

"I wasn't lying, you look fine," Josh said again. "You always do."

I shook my head and watched as Keith stopped a few feet away and bent down to whisper something into a girl's ear. She turned around, her gaze raking over me. Crap, Jenna.

She walked over, a beer in one hand and the drunk kid's hand locked in the other. The disgusted scowl she reserved for me was firmly in place. "What are you doing here?" Jenna asked. "I strongly doubt *you* are on the guest list."

"Where's Maddy?" I asked, ignoring her comment.

"She's gonna flip when she finds out you're here. God, it is bad enough she has to deal with you at school, but here . . ." She shook her head and trailed off, unable to find the exact words to describe her hatred of me.

“Whatever. Where’s Maddy?”

I followed Jenna’s eyes to the ceiling and groaned. It would be exactly like my sister to call me in a tizzy, then suck down two more beers and forget about everything. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Jenna giggled, her hand playing with the blond hair at the back of the drunk kid’s neck. She was amazing, could go from mean girl to flirt at a staggeringly impressive speed. Yeah . . . me, I didn’t find it amusing.

“You want to check upstairs?” Josh asked, motioning toward the stairs.

“Uh . . . no,” I said, remembering the one time I walked into Maddy’s room unannounced to retrieve the calculator she’d “borrowed” from me. Mom was out at book club and Dad still wasn’t home from work, otherwise I doubt Alex would’ve even set foot in Maddy’s room. Dad made sure both Alex and Maddy knew the rule—no boys upstairs if my parents weren’t home and even when they were, the door had to stay open. Wide open. That night the door was closed, and I got more of a view of Alex than I ever wanted.

“Let’s look outside. If she’s not there, I’ll check upstairs,” Josh said.

I nodded my thanks and followed Josh onto the deck. What the house lacked on the inside, it made up for out here. It was quiet, the huge lawn sloping down toward the lake. I could see a shape I thought was a dock, but without a light, I couldn’t be sure.

But what I could see clearly were two Adirondack chairs off to the side of the deck stairs. And if my eyes were right, someone was sitting in one of them.

“Maddy?” I said as I approached. She was huddled into herself, curled up in a ball, her shoes dangling from her hands.

“Maddy?” I repeated, shaking her gently. I’d never seen her like this—quiet and distant—and it was beginning to freak me out. “What’s wrong?”

She looked up, and the fear that had struck me when I first saw her had nothing on the pain that lanced my heart now. The tears I’d heard on the phone were still there, streaming down her face as she struggled to compose herself. From the looks of it, she’d been sobbing long and hard, hidden away back here.

I shot Josh a glance, hoping he could fill me in. He’d been here the whole time, was sleeping under the same roof as Alex. He had to have some idea as to what was going on.

Josh shrugged, hunched down in front of my sister, and stared into her eyes. He waited a second for Maddy to silently acknowledge him before asking, “Where’s Alex?”

“Inside.” She hiccuped.

“Do you want me to get him?”

“No,” she said, and stood up.

She was soaking wet and shaking, her lips nearly blue. From the dampness of the grass and the puddle next to

the deck, I gathered it had rained here, too. And by the looks of it, Maddy had been sitting outside, alone, when it happened.

I doubted she was drunk. She got up without any help and didn't seem to have a problem following my questions. She didn't stumble or cover her mouth and swallow down beer-tinged bile threatening to come up. I knew what drunk Maddy looked like, and this wasn't it.

My guess was that the glaze covering her eyes was from her tears and nothing more. "What's going on?" I asked.

She stared at me for a long minute, then shook her head. "Nothing. Can we go?"

I had a thousand questions for her, but I knew she wouldn't answer any of them. I thought about searching each room of the house until I found Alex and asking *him* what was going on. Somehow I didn't think that would help. If Maddy didn't want me to know, then she wouldn't tell me. I'd hear about it on Monday at school, then get a completely different version of the story the following day. By the end of the week, I'd have fifteen versions of "What Happened to Maddy Lawton?" to sift through. But before I listened to any of them, I wanted the real story from her.

I let it slide for now, more interested in getting her shivering body into the warm car than anything else. Tomorrow . . . tomorrow I'd start asking the questions.

4

I didn't bother to take us through the house. I figured my sister was out here by herself for a reason—a reason that probably involved her friends *not* seeing her like this.

“You want me to follow you home?” Josh asked.

I shook my head. His car was blocked in five deep, and if I didn't get home soon, my father, and not my silently miserable sister, would be my biggest problem.

“Call me when you get home,” Josh said, and pointed toward the house. A few people had found their way out onto the front lawn and were busy setting off car alarms. “I'll be up for a while.”

Yeah, he'd be up for the rest of the night working cleanup duty while Alex passed out on the couch.

I got in the driver's seat and looked over at my sister. She was slumped down into her seat, staring straight ahead.

Her hair was damp, stringy, and hanging limply around her shoulders, and what little makeup she had on was now smudged.

“Your mascara is messed up,” I said as I handed her a tissue from my pocket. It was damp from the rain, but that didn’t matter; it’d work better that way.

She tossed the tissue aside and opened up her glove compartment, pulling out a small package of baby wipes. In three swipes, she had her face clean, every trace of her made-up face gone. Like this, natural, with no pretenses and no image to maintain, she looked a lot more like me.

A shiver racked her body and she drew her knees up to her chest, resting her head on them. Her eyes caught mine and she smiled, the faint tilt of the lips the closest thing to a thank-you I would get. My eyes shifted to her feet. They were bare. She was holding her flats when I found her. She’d probably dropped them to the ground when she stood up. I toyed with going back to get them, grabbing a coat of Alex’s for her while I was at it, but I didn’t want to waste any more time.

I took off my coat and tugged my sweatshirt up over my head, then gave it to her along with my coat and hat. I was quite sure I was going to freeze my butt off until the heat kicked in. But she was pale and she was shivering. I didn’t know what else to do.

Maddy took my sweatshirt and slid her arms into the sleeves, then put my coat on over it. She wrapped it farther

around herself, sinking deeper into the fabric and herself in the process. She didn't complain about her hair when I tucked it into my hat, nor did I get a thank-you when I gave her my socks and shoes. She merely shoved her feet into them and went back to staring out the passenger-side window.

Not long ago, she would've said thank you, and probably wouldn't have taken the only dry clothes I had in the first place. But a lot can change in a few years. *She'd* changed a lot in a few years.

I cranked up the heat and searched the rest of her car for a blanket, an extra sweater, an old pair of jeans . . . anything I could find to still her tremors. I found a tube of lip gloss, an empty Pop-Tarts box, and three days' worth of homework that hadn't been turned in. Funny, it was Spanish homework. Now I knew why she had needed me to take that test.

"We'll be home in a few minutes," I said as I tried to maneuver the car off the lawn and onto the driveway. It was harder than I thought with bare feet—my toes kept slipping off the pedal. "I'll cover for you tomorrow with Mom and Dad and tell everybody at school on Monday that you aren't feeling well if you want to stay home for a couple of days and avoid everybody."

"Can't," she mumbled. "People will start talking if I don't show, make up some rumor about me and Alex fighting."

Judging by the stares of the few people we'd passed

in the front yard, my guess was they already were. “They started talking before you left, Maddy. Trust me.”

“No they didn’t. They wouldn’t do that. Alex wouldn’t let them.”

I groaned, amazed at the lie she was selling herself. “You honestly believe that? The rumors started the second I got there, the instant they realized that you called *me* to come get you rather than ask Alex to drive you home.”

I didn’t bother to tell her about Jenna or her dig at me. Maddy would take her side. She always did, blamed Jenna’s miserable attitude on the fact that she had a hard time at home. As if her parents’ financial problems and their crazy need to hide them were somehow a free pass for Jenna to be mean. But no amount of lipstick could cover up her ugly personality.

She shrugged. “You don’t get it, Ella. You never will. They don’t care about you showing up. They don’t care about you at all. They’re more interested in lying—making up stories that will ruin their friends’ lives while making themselves more popular.”

She was absolutely right. Since we started high school, I’d watched her dance around these people, play their games, and worry about what everybody thought while I cleaned up her messes. I didn’t get any of it. Not from the first time she sat down at Alex’s lunch table to last month when she came home so trashed from a party at the beach that I had to spend three hours with her in the bathroom holding her hair back while she puked. Once she passed

out, I had the honor of lying to my parents, telling them the leftover Chinese food Maddy had inhaled when she got home was probably bad. That wasn't the first time I'd covered for Maddy, and it sure wouldn't be the last.

The first hailstones hit the hood of the car like a steel drum hammering through my head. I turned the wipers on, but one was broken, a quarter of the rubber hanging off the blade. It did little to get rid of the water, rather smoothed it into a giant smear across the glass. Craning my head to see through the one clear spot, I pulled out onto the road.

The familiar chime of an incoming text had me glancing Maddy's way. She whipped her phone out and started typing, pausing only long enough to angle the heat vents toward herself.

"Damage control going well over there?"

"What?" she asked, not bothering to look up from her phone.

"I asked if you had everything figured out over there. If you and Jenna got your stories straight."

"What does Jenna have to do with anything?"

Jenna had everything to do with it. As far as I was concerned, she was the one who'd taken my sister away from me, introduced her to that crowd of popular people, and kept her there. If it wasn't for Jenna, I'd still have my sister . . . my best friend. The one who used to camp out with me every Fourth of July in the backyard. The one who always gave me the bottom part of her ice cream cone for my baby

doll Sarah. The one who took away the book *Your Body and You* that Mom had given me in the sixth grade and gave me her own, unadulterated version of the truth. Jenna had taken *that* Maddy away from me without asking, and I wanted her back.

“Jenna has everything to do with it,” I yelled. “Everything!”

Apparently I’d hit a nerve because for the first time since we got in the car she put her phone down and looked at me. “You have no idea what Jenna’s life is like. None whatsoever.”

Maybe not, but I didn’t care either way. “Doesn’t matter,” I said as I turned my eyes back to the road. “No matter how you slice it, she is still a mean, selfish cow.”

I didn’t need to look at my sister to tell she was getting annoyed. I could feel it, the air around us so thick with tension it was suffocating. “What’s your problem, Ella?”

I don’t know if it was my irritation with the wipers, that I was now freezing without my coat or shoes while she sucked up the heat, or because I was simply exhausted, nervous about getting into RISD, and stressed about the Physics test I still had to study for, but I snapped.

“My problem? *My problem?* I don’t know, how about the fact that I dropped everything to come and pick you up, yet you won’t tell me why? But the people who wouldn’t leave their beers long enough to drive you home . . . they get the whole story.”

She glanced at me, her mouth opening once to speak

before she shut it and waved me off. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“You’re right, I don’t. You worry so much about what they will think and say, but I’m the one who’s always bailing you out. I’m the one who took your Spanish test last week so that you could pass and not get kicked off the field hockey team for failing a class. I’m the one who’s tired and freezing my butt off over here so Mom and Dad won’t find out that you snuck out. The least you could do is—”

“You want your coat back, here, take it.”

She took off the shoulder portion of her seat belt and tucked it under her arm, then tugged at the sleeves of my jacket. I held my hand up to stop her. I didn’t want the coat; she could sleep in it for all I cared. “It’s not about the coat, Maddy. It’s about me always having to pick up your pieces.”

“I never asked you to—”

“You called me. You. Called. Me. *Me!*”

“Maybe,” she said, and shrugged. “But you didn’t have to come.”

I had to swallow hard to hold back my tears. I’d always done whatever she asked. But no matter what I did or how far I went for her, she’d kept me on the outside, five safe steps away from her and her inner circle.

When we were kids, I knew everything about her. We had one diary until the age of thirteen. One. Each day one of us would write in it, then hand it to the other to read

and write her own entry. The embarrassment I felt on my first day of middle school when I tripped and fell in the cafeteria, my lunch going everywhere. The pain Maddy felt when she found out the boy she liked in seventh grade bet his friends he could get her to make out with him in the janitor's closet. And the fear and excitement that first time we went off to camp the summer before fifth grade, wondering if people would like us, but not really caring because we had each other. Back then we shared everything, including those things that were too embarrassing to say out loud. Now, I was lucky if I got a nod of acknowledgment as I passed her in the hall.

"I'm not doing this anymore, Maddy. You're on your own with school, with Mom and Dad, with everything."

"Wait . . . What? Why?" She anxiously rattled the questions off, not giving me time to answer before continuing. "You can't do that. If they find out, I'm screwed. They'll ground me for weeks. I can't. Alex's birthday is next week, and the Snow Ball is coming up, plus Jenna's having a—you can't. You're my sister, you can't."

"Not my problem."

"Why, Ella? Why are you doing this to me?"

"I'm not doing anything. That's the point, Maddy. I'm not doing anything for you anymore. Like I said, you're on your own. I do all the work and you get—"

"You're jealous. You're doing this because you're jealous."

I didn't bother to respond to that. It was a ridiculous thing for her to say and completely untrue. The last thing

I wanted was to be her, constantly worrying about what I looked like, who I was dating, and watching what I said. She was always on, always pretending to be perfect. Too much work for me.

“Do you know what I’d give to be like you?” she asked. “How much easier it is for that nameless person in the back of the class who doesn’t have to worry about what people think or how they . . .”

I didn’t hear what she said next, I was still trying to process the nameless-person-who-no-one-gave-a-damn-about comment. I mean, I wasn’t an idiot. I knew what people thought of her versus what they thought of me. The countless pictures of her on my parents’ bureau, the massive number of people who seemed to gravitate toward her at school, and the fifty thousand text messages she got each day compared to my ten were evidence enough. Hearing her say it though—my own sister admitting that nobody in school cared much about who I was—somehow made it real.

“That’s who you think I am?” I asked, unable to hide the small quiver in my voice. “That’s what you and everybody else think?”

“What do you care?” she fired back, obviously still angry. “According to you, who cares what people think?”

People . . . yeah. But she wasn’t some random kid at school. She was my sister.

I wanted out of that car, away from her. Forget the rain, I’d walk home. It’d take me over three hours to walk those

ten miles, but I didn't care. Let Maddy scramble to come up with an excuse as to why I wasn't there when Dad got up to walk Bailey and found my room empty. Knowing her, she'd shrug and claim she'd been asleep and had no clue where I was. But I'd fix that. As soon as I walked in that door, as soon as Dad let the first question fly, I'd fix that.

"Picking me up is the least you can do for me," she continued, her voice rising to a deafening pitch. "After everything I've done for you, the people I've—"

"You've never done anything for me!" I fired back. "Since the day you set foot in Cranston High, you haven't done anything for me. It's as if I'm not your sister anymore, as if you are too embarrassed to be seen with me."

"You have no idea what they say about you, Ella," she griped. "How many times I've had to make up excuses for the way you act and dress."

"Oh, I've heard it. Jenna made sure—"

"You think Jenna is the worst of it? You have no clue. You think *you* cover for *me*? You should hear the things *I* have to say to my friends to explain your lack of social skills. *Ella is shy. Ella is quiet. Ella gets nervous around people.*"

She stopped yelling at me long enough to catch her breath, to let her irritation morph into pure anger. "You sit there with your one friend and look at the rest of us like we're idiots. Well, you know what? You're the selfish one, and I'm sick of your crap! I'm sick of you always acting like you're better than me when we both know you're not!"

I slammed on the brakes and yanked the wheel hard to the right. The sooner I was away from her the better. She grabbed the armrest, the sudden jerk of the car taking her off guard. Good. About time. I wanted her off guard.

For a brief second, I felt the tires catch the road, the tremor in the wheel as I forced the car to turn when it didn't want to. The friction eased, and the wheel stopped shaking. The car slid in every direction. I felt a sharp tug on the wheel, and I wrenched it back, trying to make the car go straight. I pressed the brake to the floor, demanding that the car stop, but it kept floating along.

I saw the side of the road, the three-inch concrete curb that separated us from the trees. There was no ear-piercing shriek, no grabbing for the door to brace myself. Nothing but complete and utter silence.

The car teetered when it hit the curb but didn't stop. It spun sideways and continued on its path. I turned and saw the same horrified gaze on Maddy's face that I knew was on mine. Her eyes widened and her lips parted on a silent scream as the trees grew bigger, grew closer.

I heard, saw, and felt it in slow-motion. Branches scraped across the top of the roof, each grinding sound showering the windshield with dead leaves. The car shook, bounced to the left, skimming the trunk of a tree. I watched it happen, saw the bark peeling away, a pale blue streak of paint left in its place.

Maddy's cry shattered my own. Through the windshield, I could see the trees flying by. The car was still moving,

picking up speed as it lurched to the right, balancing on the outer edges of its tires before tumbling over.

The thin tip of a branch snapped and fell on the hood of the car. I had a second of relief before I heard the windshield crack. My eyes fixed on the glass as I saw the crack spread, the circles widening and creeping out until the windshield finally shattered and coated me with shards of glass.

Somehow I had the presence of mind to brace myself, to grasp on to the steering wheel and lock my arms. I looked over at Maddy. She was screaming, her eyes closed and her hands flailing around for something to hold on to. Her hand brushed mine, and I grabbed it, clutching it with every ounce of strength I had.

There was no blinding light when we finally hit the tree, only burning pain followed by darkness. Total, desensitizing darkness.

5

Noise. That's what brought me out of the darkness

I was trapped in. Voices, alarms, the screech of metal, the thud of running feet—all of it combined into one jumbled mess of noise. I fought through the black fog, tried to grab on to each faint sound, hoping it would pull me farther and farther away from the massive weight that seemed to settle upon me.

“No, not yet,” someone yelled, and the hands I could feel at my side vanished. I tried to move, to bring my fingers to my face and physically claw away the wet haze covering my eyes. But nothing would move. Not my arms, not my head, not even my legs. It was as if my entire body was crammed into a metal vise.

“Easy there.” The voice was back, unfamiliar and soothing at the same time. I felt my eyelids being pried open, the searing light burning into first my left eye, then the right.

They fell closed and the light disappeared, the pain lingering behind.

“Can you tell me your name?”

“We have to move.” It was a woman now, her words sharp and curt.

Move? Move where? I wanted to sleep. Sleep? Wait. I couldn't sleep. I needed to go pick up Maddy. She'd called me from Alex's house, something about needing a ride home. Wait. No. I was at Alex's. She was crying out on the back lawn. That's why I was wet. Her tears were falling on me. Nope, that wasn't right. It was the rain.

I shook my head, tried to piece together the flashes of information. None of them made sense. She'd said I was the nameless girl. A nobody. That, I remembered, and a bubble of anger resurfaced—anger laced with pain.

Pain? Wait . . . what? My head hurt. I mean, it freaking killed. Like somebody had taken a pickax to my eyes. And why was I wet? I concentrated on my fingers, got them to obey me enough to brush against each other. They were soaked but warm. Why was the rain warm?

“Stay with me.” There was the man's voice again, but this time it wasn't soothing. It sounded urgent, demanding.

My feet were cold. Shoes. I'd left them at Alex's house. No, Maddy had left *hers* at Alex's house. She had mine. She had my sweatshirt and coat, too; that was why I was so cold. At least I thought she did. I tried to look down, but my head wouldn't move. It was plastered in place.

It hurt to breathe. I pried my eyes open and saw the flashing lights. What had happened to my windshield? Was that a tree branch on my dashboard, and what was with the red paint coating the jagged pieces on the passenger-side window?

“Hurts,” I choked out.

“I know.” I turned toward the man but couldn’t make out his face. It was blurred . . . hazy. “I’m going to give you something for the pain, but first, can you tell me your name?”

My name. My name? God, it hurt to think. I shook my head, the idea of having to formulate one single word was too much to bear. I saw a flash of metal to my right and tried to turn my head. They were cutting something; the sound of the metal blades hitting each other tore through my mind. Maddy’s side of the car was dented in, dirt and leaves ground into the thousands of spider-cracks that laced the window.

I shivered as the frigid night air hit me. The passenger-side door was gone, two gloved hands tossing it aside in a hasty effort to get inside . . . to get to Maddy. Her body was slumped forward, resting at an odd angle against the dashboard. Hurried words, none of which I understood, echoed through the car as they gently eased her back against the seat, her head lolling to one side. Somebody reached for her neck and then her wrist before shaking his head and backing out of the car. If I had the strength to speak, I would’ve yelled at them to leave her be, to let her stay in

the safe confines of the car, not to move her into the dark, wet night.

Maddy? I whispered in my mind. Her eyes were open and she was staring at me. Why didn't she blink? Why didn't she move?

She didn't fight, didn't cry out in pain when they pulled her out of her seat. She laid there boneless in their arms, a spot of wetness rolling off her cheek. I followed the drop of water to the floor and saw one of my shoes lying on the dirty floor mat by my phone. Where was the other?

"Stay with me," the man said. "Can you tell me your name?"

I didn't care about my name. I wanted to know where they were taking Maddy and why she looked so quiet and cold. I heard the man talking to me, demanding that I answer him. I blocked him out, focusing my energy on calling my sister back.

"Maddy," I whispered, hoping she'd hear me. Hoping she'd acknowledge me, say something, anything.

"There you go. Good. Now, do you know where you are?"

I tried to shake my head, but it hurt to move. "No," I managed to whisper.

"That's okay," he said. "We're going to move you now. You're going to be fine."

"Maddy," I repeated as his hands reached out for me. I didn't fight it this time. I didn't struggle to stay there despite his demands. I simply let go.