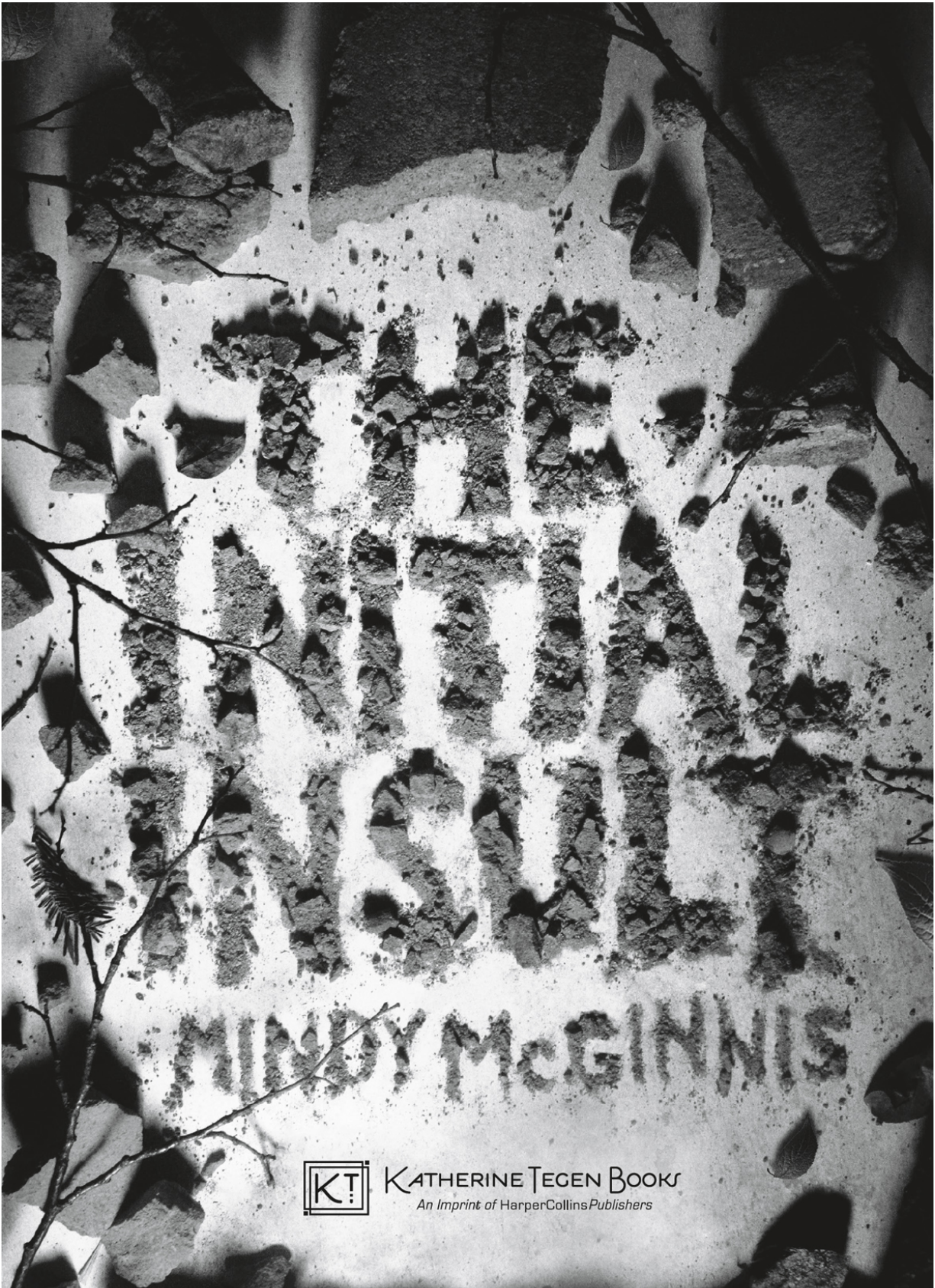


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THE FALL GIRL

MINDY MCGINNIS



KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
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Dedication

*For Amanda.
We've been in the dark together.*

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Chapter 1

Tress

Out here, something can turn to nothing real fast.

The buildings fade out as you drive from town, paved roads turn to gravel, and then to dirt. Cell phone towers start to disappear, electric lines begin to sag, and soon, you're nowhere. Grandpa Cecil says that's a good thing, says the animals like it that way. But the animals he's talking about are in cages, and I don't think they like much about life at all.

Most of them were bred in captivity, but those that weren't—like the panther—they've got a different feel about them. Something in the eyes. Something they lost. They watch me and Cecil, waiting for us to make the mistake that will give it back to them. I'm always aware when I'm near the cages, but Cecil's awareness drifts a little with the drink, and he's got a bad eye on account of it, damaged and filmed-over gray.

The cat got it, and Cecil swears he wants the other.

The sign out by the road reads "Amontillado Animal Attractions," but last week somebody spray-painted "White Trash Zoo" over it. I'm scraping away with the end of a screwdriver, tiny curls of red paint falling around my feet, the tips of the poison ivy vine that climbs the sign post brushing against my arms. I'm not worried; I don't get poison ivy. Cecil says that's on account of my mom, but she's gone, so I can't ask her if she got the rash or not. I push deeper, accidentally digging into the planks and sending a chip flying off into the overgrown ditch, a new scar bright against the old wood.

An autumn sun is burning into my back, giving the last of the summer warmth to my skin as I work. School started two months ago, but it's still hot down in the valley, and the school board spent their whole last meeting debating with parents over the cost of air-conditioning. That and the flu that's burning through Prospero, the next town over. It turned into an argument about taxes and the last levy failing, then the school nurse getting

shouted down by someone with a WebMD printout. My cousin, Ribbit, told us all about it, said pretty soon the parents were fighting with each other, about what was more important—health or air-conditioning.

Me, I don't have parents. Just Grandpa Cecil. That's something of mine that turned to nothing overnight back in fifth grade, my house and my allowance and my toys and clothes all following about a month after. Friends took more time to disappear. But they did.

"Air-conditioning," Cecil huffed when Ribbit stopped by, his rusted-out truck idling in the driveway because he's never been quite at ease with the animals.

"Walk outside," Cecil said. "There's air."

Air-conditioning was for pussies, Cecil went on, and he didn't raise none of them. I didn't argue against that, since the person he did raise is gone now, and what he does for me can't exactly be called parenting. More like just making sure I don't die, and if I do, that it's not because one of the animals killed me. Then his business would be shot.

"Nice sign," Ribbit had said when he put the truck in reverse, ready to head back to the Usher house, down the road. I hadn't noticed it until he pointed it out, our sign being something I looked at every day but never really saw, like Cecil's milky eye rolling in its socket. The spray paint was new enough to still be shiny but old enough to have soaked in. Days, then. For days people down in town had likely been laughing, and me driving right past it in Cecil's old truck, coming home from school to feed the animals their bloody, raw-meat dinners, not seeing it. Not seeing the insult, painted in bright red right at my own doorstep.

Cecil had raised his ball cap and scratched his head, honestly stumped. "Who would go and do a thing like that?"

I know. I know exactly who.

It's got to be someone who doesn't mind driving the switchback over the ridge in the dark, the turns so tight you pray you don't meet someone, because these roads weren't meant for more than one car at a time.

Someone who knew Goldie-Dog, my ancient mutt who I named back before I had much of a vocabulary, and would still follow me to the cages at feeding time, even though I'd be done and headed back to the house by the time she got to the first pen. The gator got Goldie last week, little tufts of gold-white hair floating in her pond as she eyed me, silent in the morning light.

Someone who thinks they're better than us, someone with—I'm sure—things like air-conditioning and a flu shot and a car with a muffler on it because Cecil and I never heard a damn thing, and the dog never made a peep. Maybe because Goldie was as good as dead already, the deadly V trail of the gator dancing on the surface as she made her move.

Someone who wanted to make sure we know what we are and bothered to drive out of town, past the buildings and the cell towers, past the paved roads and up into the hills, coming back down on the other side out here to our little place. Coming out here to lead Goldie to the water and leave their mark on our doorstep. They left something for nothing and came to take a little bit more from us.

I can see it. I can hear it. I can smell it. She's in her shiny blue car, music blaring until they're close to the house, windows open to air out the sickly sweet smell of weed. She probably shushed the others—the new friends she brought along to torment an old one—probably closed her car door real quiet and slipped Goldie-Dog a treat when she came to greet her, still familiar with her scent after all these years. A kind one. A comforting one. A scent she would've trusted, right up until the gator's jaws snapped down on her spine.

I imagine my old friend even did the sign herself, maybe worrying a bit when the spray can was louder than she thought it would be or shaking her hand when her finger got stiff from pushing down. She was smart enough to take the cans with her, and I bet she even threw them in the dumpster behind the gas station on the way back home after dropping off her friends, probably screwing Hugh Broward in the back seat before she went on home.

I've borne it all with patience, the years of small cuts that heal over, my heart a pulpy mass of scars. But it was still beating, at least I could say that, right up until she took Goldie from me. Now it's a dead thing, still in my chest. And if I can't feel the good things anymore, then doing a few bad ones shouldn't hurt a bit.

And they are long overdue.

I dig viciously at the last bit of paint, and my screwdriver slips, flying out from under my fingers and sending my hand into a hard scrape against the wood. The pain is sharp and bright, and a shock pulses to the tips of my fingers. There's a splinter in my palm, running from the top of my wrist up into my fate line, close enough to the surface of the skin that I can see the

grain in the wood, but deep enough that it's going to hurt like a bitch coming out. I grip it with my teeth and pull, the sun baking my back and a trickle of blood snaking down my arm as I do. In his cage, the panther huffs, tail twitching, suddenly bright-eyed. He can smell it.

I spit the splinter into the ditch, where it pings off one of Cecil's beer bottles.

I'm not like Cecil, wondering who would go and do a thing like that.

I know who.

It was Felicity Turnado.



Chapter 2

Felicity

I'm being carried again, but this time at least I know by who.

Hugh's calf tattoo flashes in front of my eyes as he walks, our school mascot—a raven—flicking with every other step. He's got me hauled over his shoulder, my hip to his ear, my long hair almost reaching the grass as he carries me out past Gretchen Astor's barn, into the woods behind. Plenty of hoots and hollers follow us: the guys urging Hugh to get some, the girls adding their own thoughts, none of them out of concern. My friends—at least, that's what we call each other—watching me half-comatose and being carried off into the dark.

Hugh's tat crosses my vision a few more times, and then he settles me gently onto a rock, the one we always use when the party is at Gretchen's. I slip like water through his arms, sagging into him as he settles in beside me, his body as steady and sure as the boulder underneath me. No wonder everybody calls him "Huge," although the girls are always asking me if there's another reason, eager to know.

"You okay?" he asks.

I don't have words, am past that point, but I do manage to nod. From the house comes another yell, someone emptying a beer over somebody else's head, a splash as yet another person is pushed into the pool—a joke that never gets old . . . to them, anyway. They think he's out here pounding me into the ground, taking advantage of the pretty drunk girl, dragging her into the dark. They think he's the danger. The truth is, I'm safer with Hugh Broward than anyone else on earth.

I've always loved to be carried, and begged my father often when I was little. Arms up and open, trusting. Nobody ever tells me no. Not Dad. Not Huge. Not whoever carried me away from Tress Montor's parents so many years ago. I don't know who that was, just that my arms were too weak to

wrap around them, my vision blurry, the blood running down the side of my head hot and sticky in the last of the late-fall heat, drawing mosquitoes.

One buzzes around me now, its call high and whiny. I smack at it, missing completely and hitting myself in the mouth, where there's still a small, silver scar in the corner from my own teeth biting down when . . . when something. No one knows what happened the night the Montors disappeared, not even me—and I was the only one there. Me and whoever carried me.

"Your aim sucks," Huge says, easily swatting the mosquito out of the air.

Everything sucks right now. My motor coordination. My limb control. My life. I start to slide again, slipping down past Hugh's knees to the ground. He grabs my wrist, lowering me gently.

"Close?" he asks, and I nod.

He unbuttons my shorts, easing them down to my ankles, followed by my underwear. Then he walks away, far enough that I can't see his silhouette, hear his steps crunching the dead leaves, or smell the faded scent of his cologne.

The whirling in my head slows, centers, focuses, like a cat that's been circling prey, ready to pounce. It does, and the seizure comes, my hands clenching and unclenching in the dirt on either side of me, my feet grinding into the ground, pressing dirt into the silk underwear tangled around my sandals. Mom always details the seizures to me, after, even though I've told her that I am aware right before I have them, that I can see and feel and hear and taste every damn thing. Better than normal, even.

It's during them that I can't recall. A light turned off. A clipped reel from a film.

There are branches overhead, darkly black against the stars, the dead leaves rustling against my hair. I hear and see and feel everything tremendously right now, the world in high def until the focus fades to a pinprick and I'm going, I'm going, I'm going . . .

I'm gone.

The leaves will be in my hair when Hugh and I come back from the woods, that and the dirt on my back causing snide smiles. I usually come around with a burning taste in my mouth, the memory of my last sounds—guttural, helpless—sending a spike of embarrassment to chase all the misfiring in my brain. Sometimes the worst happens; this was one of those

times. There's warm urine between my legs, harsh and acidic, soaking into the forest floor.

I sit up, easing myself, shakily, onto the rock, pulling my underwear back into place, followed by my shorts. The first time Hugh was too mortified to take them down all the way, but he's learned over the years. He comes when I call, settling beside me. I lean into him.

"You know . . . ," he says slowly, a conversation we've had more than once starting all over again.

"There are medications," I finish for him. "Yes, I know. I take them."

"But they don't mix well with drinking." It's his turn to finish my sentence. "Or with that other shit you do," he adds.

"I do lots of shit," I say. And it's true. I'm a shitty person.

"So maybe cut it out," Hugh says, an edge in his tone he's not used with me before. One that cuts, sharp, like the smell of my urine, only just beginning to fade as a few cold, fat drops of rain start to fall.

"I don't want to," I tell him, taking him by the hand and leading him back toward Gretchen's and the sounds of the party; shrill screeches as the rain starts to fall in earnest and the occasional yap of William Wilson, her seriously stressed-out poodle.

And Felicity Turnado doesn't have to stop, doesn't have to do anything she doesn't want to do. That's the truth. There's a deeper truth, though. The *why* of it. A truth that I keep to myself, bound deep and dark, surfacing out of my mind in the still moments before sleep, crawling up, climbing out, finding light, whispering to me in the night.

Because if I stop drinking and drop the pills, if I take better care of myself and let good people love me and give my own love to those who deserve it, I'll have everything that Tress Montor doesn't. And I don't deserve that.

Because I'm the reason she has nothing.



Chapter 3

Cat

*My cousins come in the night,
Feline paws pattering
in the cool.
Piling onto my back, we give,
each to the other,
Warmth and memories—
both carried in blood.
They settle on me, curl against my belly,
our soft clicks
And rough tongues, filling the night.
They wish for what I have,
Food—roof—clean coat—fresh water.
I want what they are.
Achingly thin. Slip under the fence
A young one rolls, sleep making her reckless.
Slides down my pelt,
Pooling near my mouth.
Another feline's bones in my teeth would be bitter.
So instead I lick, a mat
Separates under my will, like the rabbits who crack open
when they wander too close.
She is young, and warm,
blood close to the skin with sleep.
It doesn't have to be spilled. For me
To smell the memories, best and last.
If I took her she would be
mother / rain
I huff, her pelt billowing under my breath.*

*Deeper is her last meal
still in her blood,
death mixing with her life, quiet as it fades.
warm / poison
A possum passes the cage, coat dripping from the wet grass.
Quiet and cold, blood not talking.
He is not my kin.
Or my meal.
Today the girl, in the sun, blood brought by wood,
a strong scent on the breeze,
Felicity / hate*



Chapter 4

Tress

“The Allan house, really?”

“Yep.” Ribbit nods, his toes flicking in the pond water as bluegills nibble on them. “They’re tearing it down.”

“Huh,” I say, rolling up my jeans and joining him on the tailgate of his truck, backed up to the pond so we can dangle our legs in.

The Usher house looms behind us, built by Ribbit’s ancestor to show the world what he could do. What the world did in return was eat his fortune, and now the rocks he took from the ground are working their way back to it, tumbling down in a stiff wind. When we were kids Ribbit’s dad wouldn’t let us play near the foundation, said a stone could come down on our heads and we’d be done for. And now the old Allan place is going the same way. Something to nothing.

It bothers me, for reasons I can’t say.

“Why, though?” I ask, instinctively pulling back from the first fish that comes in to investigate my feet. “Why tear it down now?”

“Stay still,” Ribbit instructs. “It’s like a free pedicure. People in the city pay money for this.”

“That’s why you spend so much time at the pond?” I ask. “Pedicures?”

“I don’t know *why now*, with the Allan house,” he says, ignoring my jibe. “But it came up at the last township meeting that it’s an ‘attraction for the youth.’”

There’s always got to be an Usher on the township council, same with the school board. Nothing is official until the oldest family in Amontillado weighs in. Right now Lenore—Ribbit’s mother—fills the chair, her maiden name a strong enough pull to count. Nobody had blinked when she gave Ribbit her name, his dad—an easily swayable Troyer—bending to her will. Ribbit likes to go with her to all the meetings, a little Usher apprentice on her heels from the moment he could walk. His devotion to her has never

faded, his presence in local politics now assumed. It makes him feel needed and necessary, which doesn't happen much.

Plus, the adults are the only ones who call him by his real name, Kermit. The kids renamed him Ribbit the first day of kindergarten, and he never argued. He's not a fighter, my cousin. He likes to say he's a lover, but he's a little too skinny and a lot too awkward to be that, either.

He pulls his legs up out of the water, the zigzag scar on the back of his calf still raised and red even though it happened a long time ago. Ribbit and I had been adventuring in some of the old Usher outbuildings, where a kid could find all kinds of great stuff—old bottles, scraps of metal; once, we even tripped over a tombstone out on the back acre, collapsed into the ground and wiped smooth from a century of rain and wind, a long-dead Usher underneath us as we ran, laughing above them.

The Usher property was our playground, until Ribbit and I went over an old fence that wasn't ready for our weight. It gave out underneath him, the rusty barbed wire still sharp, digging in deep and tearing his leg open as he went down. My mom said I couldn't play at my cousin's anymore, said her older sister didn't do a good job keeping the property safe for kids. But Mom was gone not long after that, and Cecil couldn't have cared less if I was safe or not, as long as I came home in time to do the chores.

"Attraction for the youth," I repeat with a snort, thinking of the old Allan house, as dilapidated as the Usher property, if not more. "That's not news, not to anybody. Half our parents partied out there."

"And it's where half of us were conceived," Ribbit adds, for which I give him a shove. He takes my blow easily, swaying with the push and ending back where he was, upright, beside me, our shoulders touching.

The Allan house. We've all spent time there, frightened our feet will punch through rotting floors, or a beam come down on our heads. I've put my hands on the walls, plaster coming loose, even at the lightest touch, and wondered if I might feel something. A deeper call, or a beating heart. Cecil is an Allan, which means I am, too, twice diluted, but still . . . it's there.

My mom would've been an Allan, if Grandma hadn't been the last of the Ushers. She'd refused to marry, saying she'd rather see the Usher blood die than have it walk around in a body that didn't carry the name. Cecil, the youngest of the Allan brothers, had taken her up on the offer, his own ancestral home already a crumbled ruin. When both his brothers died in

Vietnam their name went the same way as the house is about to: something to nothing.

“They talked about the animals again,” Ribbit says.

I sigh, the exhalation going all the way down to my feet and scattering the fish that had gathered there.

“Cecil’s got permits for all of them.”

Ribbit stretches, his long arms curling back behind his red hair, shaggy and in need of a cut. “I don’t think it’s the permits that are the problem. People just don’t like knowing there’s a crocodile nearby.”

“It’s an alligator,” I tell him.

“Whatever. Next time a kid gets bit, you know Cecil’s going down.”

I pull my feet out of the water, toes dripping, one finger in Ribbit’s face. “First of all, he didn’t get bit—he was scratched by the orangutan, and second, he was inside the line.”

I repaint the lines every Sunday, a yellow stripe in the ground to mark what’s safe and what’s not. Some mom wanted a better shot of her kid with Rue, and our waiver is worded the way it is for a reason.

“People are stupid,” I say, putting my feet back in the water, letting the coolness slip up my legs as I sink into the pond, wishing it could touch the heat in my chest.

“People are,” he agrees. “Dill Riley coughed at the township meeting, and everybody about lost their shit.”

“Old Dill or Young Dill?” I ask, even though Young Dill probably has a least thirty years on both of us.

“Old Dill.”

“Flu?” I ask, but Ribbit only shrugs. There’s been a nasty strain running through the county, tearing up guts and leaving people wilted and pale in its wake. They gave out flu shots for free at the clinic last week, urging the very young and very old to get vaccinated. I guess that’s how death works, clipping us off at both ends.

“Doesn’t matter if Dill had it or not,” Ribbit says. “We all treated him like he did. He could’ve swung a dead cat with a long tail and not hit anybody. People got far away, fast.”

“Hmm . . . ,” I say, trying to remember if any of our zoo visitors have been coughing, and wondering if they could pass it to the animals. Last thing we need to be is the Amontillado *Dead* Animal Attractions. I slip farther out into the water to where it grows colder, near the drop-off.

“Hey, don’t . . .” Ribbit scoots closer to the edge of the tailgate, one hand on my shoulder. He hates it when I go in the water.

“I can swim,” I remind him.

“I can’t,” he tells me for the millionth time. “So stop making me nervous.”

“It’s the panther the township should be worried about, not the alligator,” I say, ignoring him as the mud I stirred up settles, the fish coming back in to see what changed in their world.

“They are.”

I sigh again and pull myself back up onto the tailgate, the ends of my jeans wet where I didn’t roll them up far enough. “You have anything good to tell me?”

“There’s gonna be a party,” he offers. “Last one, before the Allan house is torn down.”

“Yeah?” I say, unrolling my pant legs.

“Everybody’ll be there,” Ribbit pushes. “I figured you could, you know, maybe make some money.”

I stop struggling with the wet denim. He’s got a point. Where there’s a party there’s plenty of wants, and I’m able to fill them, taking care of my own needs in return. I’ve been looking out for myself long enough to smell opportunity, but I know the scent of danger, too. If the township council finally gets it into their head to come after Amontillado Animal Attractions, Lenore Usher’s vote won’t be enough to save us, and I can’t say for sure that she’d back us. She and my mom might have had the same last name and shared the same blood, but it takes more than that to make someone family.

Grandma died before I knew her, slow and awful, by all accounts. The slow part she was thankful for, calling a lawyer to her bedside to take the house right out from under Cecil’s feet and give it to Lenore. The awful part I don’t like to think on much. Lenore told me once she died screaming, clutching her belly and refusing to leave her land. Lenore put her mom in the ground the next day, her father out of the house within the week. My mom landed on her feet, marrying a Montor. Cecil landed in the trailer and has been rolling downhill ever since.

I don’t love Cecil’s trailer, but it’s got a roof and four walls. And a mortgage. One that gets paid more by what we grow on the back acre than

the animals that live up front. But at least the animals let us pretend to be respectable.

What bothers me, though, is that I know Ribbit isn't talking about the party because he's worried about my financial situation. He brought it up because he can't go alone. One drink and he'll do anything that's asked of him, strip down, bark like a dog, or funnel a quart of vinegar straight to his gut . . . or somewhere else. I've seen him do all these things, and smile doing them, because it makes people laugh. He doesn't understand that it's not because he's funny but because he's the joke.

I hate when they do that to him.

I hate that he lets them.

But I know why, and I kind of get it. Lenore's had him jumping to her beck and call since he had his feet under him, and the only time she had a smile for Ribbit is when he did as he was asked. If Cecil had trained up our animals half as well as Lenore did her son, I wouldn't have to go to the Allan house tomorrow night just to keep our electricity on.

A minnow comes in close to investigate where my feet have been, the last swirls of mud finally settling. A larger bluegill follows behind, curious. I wonder for a second if the bluegill is the minnow's mom or dad. I've been doing that ever since my own parents disappeared, coupling up smaller animals with larger ones, not wanting even a fish to feel the pain of being an orphan. I can't even claim the title of orphan, not yet. Next month will mark seven years since anyone has seen my mom or dad. Until then, I'm just a ward and Cecil my guardian, because we don't use words like *grandpa* or *granddaughter* to refer to each other. That would imply an emotional connection that isn't there.

But the blood connection is there, one I can't deny because you can see it in the way we both hold our heads high, or square our shoulders when someone walks up to us too quick for comfort. Maybe I learned it from watching him, but I don't think so. I think there's a steel streak in me that comes from Cecil, and I think that same bit of steel is partly what's held up the Allan house for all these years, not the brick and mortar. I've felt it every time I've walked into a party, something calling to me, something saying I belong there.

I know that house, and not just because I've scouted out the best places to do my business dealings at parties. I know that house because it knows me, and we've both been abandoned. There are dark corners inside of it, as

there are in me. And if it's going to be destroyed, I've got someone in mind to go down with it.

I shake off my feet, pull my sandals back on. "Everybody's going?"

Ribbit nods quickly, sensing that I'm about to cave.

"All right," I agree. "I'll come."

The fish flash away as I move, my shadow crossing the water, their world changing again, light to dark, in a moment. Like mine. At least theirs changes back quick, the sun returning to warm them.

My world can't be fixed. But maybe it can be put right.



Chapter 5

Felicity

In Amontillado, calling someone *rich* is an insult. Everybody knows who has money and who doesn't, so you don't need to go around showing it off, especially if you're new blood, like we are. Of course, *new blood* means your family hasn't been around for at least five generations. Time carries more weight than money in Amontillado, something Gretchen Astor enjoys reminding me of every time we pass the stone pillar in the center of town with the founding fathers' names inscribed: *Allan. Astor. Montor. Usher.*

I'd like to think she's not doing it on purpose, that maybe running her fingers over her last name as we walk by is an unconscious movement, something she's learned from watching her parents, who worship at the altar of their surname and expect the rest of us to as well. But everything I know of Gretchen is careful and calculated, and despite my money—and we do have it—this is her silently reminding me that *Turnado* isn't up there and never will be.

That little snub isn't the only thing that bothers me about that pillar, though. The Allans are gone. The Ushers are still here, struggling along, clinging to the power embedded in the history of their last name. It's sad enough, knowing how the Allan and Usher lines of Amontillado ended up. It's the other name—Montor—that gives me goose bumps, and for the opposite reason. Nobody knows what happened to Lee Montor, the last male survivor of his name.

And Tress . . . She turned her back on the town—literally—when she went to live in the hills with her grandfather, and metaphorically by refusing help from everyone who tried to give it. And people did try—I know, because I was one of them—to do what they could for the last Montor. But Tress is Tress, and Mom says that pride always was a Montor trait. That and thinking they're better than everyone else, she had told me once, with a sniff. That's how I know Mom wishes *Turnado* was up on that pillar, too.

But it's not.

New money might spend the same as old, but it still isn't worth as much to the people of Amontillado. So Mom and Dad were careful, putting a deck on the back of the house first, waiting a few years to add the porch on the front. Mom says nobody's better than anybody else, and we don't want people thinking the Turnados got too big for their britches all the sudden. The gas pocket the company hit on our land wasn't exactly a secret—you can't hide a long line of white company trucks. But Dad says every landowner in Amontillado has some money from gas, it's just that nobody needs to know exactly how much.

I don't even know how much, just that they stopped talking about community college a few years back, then told me if I wanted my own car I could pick something out . . . just nothing flashy. They didn't have to clarify. Gretchen Astor's dad had bought himself a BMW when we were in junior high. Somebody spray-painted *ASStor* across the hood two days later. He took the hit and traded it in for a Civic. That car had all the bells and whistles: heated seats, satellite radio, entertainment centers for the kids in the back. Gretchen's mom had worried that it was still too much, but the Civic had passed. Like her dad said—as long as you keep the money out of sight, you're allowed to have it.

Brynn Whitaker is sprawled on my bed, a separator between her toes, her tongue half pushed out between her teeth as she concentrates on painting them. "You're sticking with the clown thing?" she asks.

"Yes," I say.

The package described my Halloween costume as a "sexy clown." Brynn said there was no such thing, but she's going as a taco, so her opinion doesn't weigh very heavily with me.

"I like the bells," I tell her, and I do feel a little validated as I slip the jester's cap on.

It's cute, the purple and pink ends each tipped with a silver bell. They ring when I toss my hair over one shoulder, the curls tickling the bare skin between my shoulder blades. There was not a lot of fabric in that package, for it costing thirty bucks. What there is of it is thin as hell, and it sticks to me like water. I can even see the dimple of my belly button, which is only a few inches above where the skirt fans out into slashes, each of those carrying their own bell.

Brynn glances up from her toes, her skeptical expression falling away. “Fuck. You are a sexy clown.”

“Yep,” I agree. I know I am. People will be looking at me, which is nothing new. But they’ll be able to hear me, too. The bells will signal my entrance and exit, everybody’s eyes and ears full of Felicity Turnado. And maybe I can even feel good about myself, for one fucking second.

“Help me out?” Brynn asks, lifting her taco costume from where it’s propped in the corner. She’s wearing one of my leotards under it—a bright green one from when the dance studio did *Peter Pan*—and when her arms pop out the side and her head comes out the top, she’s the most awkward thing I’ve ever seen. And she’s thrilled.

“Ridiculous,” I tell her as she spins, apparently happy as she floats in bulky foam. “How am I going to get you into the car?”

“I’ll ride in the back,” she says. “Unless you’re too sexy to drive.”

Both our phones go off at the same time, the ringer we set for the school announcement system—“Fuck School,” by the Replacements—filling my bedroom.

“What the hell?” Brynn asks, echoing my thoughts.

It’s a Friday night. Everybody’s big plans are to head to the football game, then out to the Allan house. There’s no reason for the school to be calling.

“Oh my God, you don’t think they know about the party, do you?” Brynn asks, eyes wide above her tulle lettuce.

“Right,” I say, picking up my phone. “And they’re using the all-call system to warn us off. You’re a genius.”

I accept the call, as does Brynn, so Principal Anho’s voice is in stereo when she says: “Due to reports of a sharp increase in the flu within the district, the health department in coordination with the superintendent and myself have decided it is in the best interest of the public’s health to cancel this evening’s football game.”

“Awww . . .” Brynn’s face falls. I can’t imagine her disappointment at not being able to show her taco outfit to the whole town.

“We’ve still got the party,” I remind her. “And now we’ve got it sooner.”

I cut off Anho as she goes on about a possible mandatory curfew if the outbreak worsens, but Brynn leaves her phone on long enough for us to

hear her cough, a wet throaty sound that definitely brought something up with it.

“Ew,” Brynn says, upper lip raised in distaste. She’s holding her phone farther away from herself now, like she’s afraid she can catch something through the speaker.

But I’m still stuck on the last thing Anho had mentioned—the possibility of a curfew. Cops in Amontillado tend to leave us alone. They know we’re drinking, but they don’t make a big deal out of it as long as we stay in the same place long enough to sober up. If the town council institutes a curfew, though, turning a blind eye won’t be something we can count on anymore.

A blind eye. I shudder, thinking of Tress’s grandpa and his dead white eye.

“Gross,” I say, without thinking.

“Yeah,” Brynn agrees, still holding her phone at arm’s length. “I think Anho choked up a lung.”

But I’m not thinking about Anho, or Brynn, or even Tress’s grandpa anymore. I’m thinking about me and what I need in order to feel good. Other people around me, their noise filling up my headspace. Eyes on me, letting me know I’m worth looking at. A drink in my hand and a pill in my fist, making everything fade out, edges fuzzy, nothing sharp anywhere. Not my memories. Not my conscience.

Everything needs to be soft and dull, the world a pillow for me to fall into.

And in order for it to happen, I need to make a phone call.

It used to be we would text, when we were younger. Lots of emojis. Hearts and smiley faces. Poop, of course. She still giggled back then, I remember the sound. Now her voice has a permanent hard edge on it, like the one time she cornered me at school after I texted at three in the morning, telling me *calls only*.

“Texts are evidence,” she said. “And I don’t trust you to be smart enough to send ones that aren’t incriminating. Phone calls can’t prove shit. We could be talking about anything.”

She gave me a once-over then, eyes sweeping the latest outfit that had come in the mail. There’s only one good place to shop around here, and if you go there you’re guaranteed to end up wearing the same thing as three other girls. So Mom got me a Stitch Fix account a couple of years ago. The

third time I asked her to do the checkout process for me she just saved her credit card info on the site and told me to *be responsible*.

I'm not. I just buy everything. Sometimes I don't even open the boxes. Mom has never said anything. We don't check credit card statements anymore.

That day in the hall Tress was wearing a shirt of mine that I'd taken to Goodwill, something I'd never even worn. I could see the two little holes at the neckline where she'd torn the tags out, and it closed my throat a little. If we were still friends, I would've just given her that shirt, maybe loaned it to her after she went through my overflowing closet. She wouldn't have found it picking through outdated shit at Goodwill, a folded twenty in her back pocket, one that probably came from me filling my need.

I glance at Brynn, but she's adjusting her lettuce in the mirror. I quietly pull open my desk drawer, lift my birth control pills to grab a few twenties off the stack of bills underneath. I've got a couple hundred just sitting there. Mom always hands me some cash as I'm going out the door, if I need money for pizza or gas, or if I'm going out with Hugh. Especially if I'm going out with Hugh. The Browards don't have land with a gas pocket on it.

Sometimes Mom hands me money as I'm leaving, and then Dad stops me in the garage and hands me more. I don't tell either of them about the other, which is how I've got a nice stash sitting here, waiting for me to pass it on to someone else.

Someone who will use my money to buy my clothes at the poor store, not knowing. She'd be pissed, I think as I slide the cash into my bra, since sexy clowns don't get pockets.

She'd be so pissed.

Calls only, she'd said that day in the hall. *We could be talking about anything*. Except Tress Montor and I don't talk about just anything. Only illegal stuff. In short, transactional sentences. But it's something, I guess. Something I found to keep her from floating away from me entirely. Something that makes the world a soft place for me and keeps cash flowing into hers.

I can't give Tress anything. She won't accept my clothes, my texts, or my friendship. But I can give her money, folded into a tight square, our skin barely touching as we hand off. The one time I slipped an extra bill in my payment I found it the next morning under my windshield wiper. I know she didn't drive over, because that truck of Cecil's doesn't have a muffler

and the whole neighborhood would've called the cops on her in the middle of the night for breaking the noise ordinance. She probably walked down out of the hills in the black of night to return twenty dollars, rejecting my charity and keeping her conscience clean.

Twenty bucks for a clean conscience. Sounds nice.

I've handed a lot more than that to Tress over the past couple of years. It doesn't help. But I keep trying. I slip past Brynn into my bathroom, my sexy clown reflection staring me down as I dial. She picks up, blunt and monosyllabic.

"Yeah?"

"You coming to the Allan house?" I ask, realizing my mistake when there's no immediate response. A friend would ask her that, someone who was going to meet up with her at the party. I'm not a friend; I'm a customer.

"I need a couple forties," I say quickly. "Maybe some weed?"

Tress's weed is shit, but I'll pass it off to Hugh.

There's a rustling on the other end, like Tress is checking her supply. Then a short answer, quick and concise. "'Kay."

"See you there," I say.

But there's just a click as she hangs up.



Chapter 6

Tress

I need manacles.

Everything else came together pretty quickly and is already tucked into the back of Cecil's truck. The drill and bit, some masonry tools and Quikrete from back when Cecil tried to make a little patio to put the grill on. We found that grill in the ditch, and the concrete he poured has the imprint of the alligator's tail in it, because she got out before it dried. She ate a few of our chickens, and we might have never known the electric on her fence had gone out if not for the racket and the flying feathers. I had to lure her back to her little swamp with a side of beef, then spray her off with the garden hose so the concrete didn't dry in her tail.

And now I'm searching through the lean-to, looking for manacles.

"What a fucking life," I say, then bite my tongue. For all I know my mom and dad don't even have that. I've asked the questions and done the searching, didn't get answers or make any discoveries. Hitting brick walls doesn't feel good physically or metaphorically; I've got scars on my knuckles to prove the first, and memories of being sent on my way by well-meaning adults when I asked hard questions about my parents' disappearance to back up the second. Tonight, I'm going to ask the one person who knows something, the one person that pure human decency has kept me from talking to. I'm done with that. What I've got in mind isn't decent, not by a long shot.

And I need those manacles.

"Cecil!" I call, hoping my voice carries over our acreage. He always says his land is rocky, good-for-nothing shit . . . but there's a lot of it. And it's the truth. Usually we just yell if we need something, hollering until the other answers because if we walked around trying to find each other, we'd spend half the day wandering. Cecil's drinking problem combined with being hard of hearing means that there's an unfair amount of yelling on my

end. Once or twice I've found him passed out in the weeds, and sometimes I think he pretends his hearing is worse than it is, especially when what needs to be done is anything resembling work.

"*Cecil!*" I yell again, in the direction of the back twenty acres. It rolls down to where our summer crop is growing, but there's also a stream, and he could be fishing. It's not Cecil that answers me but the low whine of a Weedwacker. I follow the sound past the enclosures, keeping an eye on the cat while I do—he flicks his tail at me, cool and calm—as I make my way toward the front of the trailer. Cecil is out by the road, whacking weeds down around the mailbox.

Figures. That's the one thing he'll do with consistency—get the mail.

I gesture for him to turn off the Weedwacker, but he finishes what he started first and I've got to duck around the pieces of shredded poison ivy flying through the air. He finally sets the Weedwacker down, and I see that he didn't load it with a string; Cecil put a circular saw blade on the end. It spins as it slows, individual teeth finally showing themselves as it comes to rest.

"Jesus, Cecil," I say. "You'll take your leg off with that."

He nods, agreeing. "Or the cat's, she gets it in her head to come after me again."

"He," I correct. "The panther is a male."

"Acts like a woman," he says, looking over his shoulder at the cages as he spits. "Holds little things against you. Doesn't forget. Bides her time."

I've been hearing this shit long enough that I figure Grandma might've been smiling when she signed her will, despite the cancer eating her alive. I'm willing to bet the *little things* she held against him were probably larger and more general, like him being a dick and the occasional insufferable—yet mercifully concise—diatribes. I will give him that. Cecil doesn't have a lot to say, it's just that all of it is spiteful.

"I need the manacles," I tell him.

"What'd Rue do?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say quickly, jumping to the orangutan's defense. "I just need the manacles."

Cecil's eyes tighten. The network of lines around the blue eye deepen; the muscles around the ruined one remain slack from where the cat's claws went in deep, slashing everything to tatters. "You being weird?"

I've been living with Cecil since the fifth grade, and the closest we ever get to *the talk* is when he asks me if I'm "being weird."

"No, I just need them." I give him a hard stare then, one that I remember Mom using on Dad when she was done with words and had moved on to something more powerful. They didn't fight a lot, but when they did and Mom pulled out that look, I knew it was over. So I studied her, mimicked the set jaw, narrowed eyes, cock of the hips, slightly raised eyebrows. The whole posture says, *Come at me*. But it also says whatever I want it to say, or whatever the person I'm arguing with is scared of.

I imagine when I give this look to Cecil right now it says, *There are at least fifteen animal rights violations in our backyard and I can make that very clear, very quickly to very many people, if you don't tell me where the manacles are. You don't need to know why I want them.*

He grunts and picks up the Weedwacker, the circular blade spinning lazily. "West shed," is all he says, before jerking it back to life, a cloud of smoke erupting between us, followed by the high whine of the blade slicing through live vines. Poison ivy sprays across my back as I walk away, and I know he did it on purpose.

It's a pansy-ass, passive-aggressive, cheap move. One that he would deny if I turned around and called him out on it. But I don't. Instead, I clench my fists and head toward the shed, passing Rue's cage as I do. She follows along beside me for a second, grabbing the bars and showing me her teeth.

It's a smile. If you don't know orangutans, you can't tell if they want to hug you or kill you. And they can, but this one won't. At least, she won't kill *me*. I stop, reaching through the bars to touch Rue's face, and she cups my hand, pushing it tighter against her cheek.

"Hey, Rue," I say, keeping my voice low and calm. Yesterday I told Ribbit that the town council should be less concerned about the alligator and more about the cat. But the truth is that the scariest thing in here is probably this sweet girl, mostly because you wouldn't see it coming when she decided it was time to snap your neck.

So I'm careful when I reach through the bars, combing out some tangles in her hair. She turns, aware of what I'm doing, showing me a spot she's been working on. I finish the job for her, pulling out a clump of mud and touching the sore skin underneath.

“I’ll get some salve for that,” I tell her, and she grunts at me like she understands.

I tried to teach her sign language once and was starting to see indications of progress, until all she wanted to do was flip me off. Every time I approached the cage she’d give me a huge grin and a double bird. I couldn’t figure out where she learned it until one day I turned around and saw Cecil behind me, giving me the finger and laughing his ass off.

“Fucker,” I say, and Rue nods along with me.

I sign *goodbye* at her, but she turns her back, either refusing to show me that she remembers the sign or irritated that I’m leaving her already.

But I’ve got things to do, which is why I’m not going to give Cecil shit about the poison ivy sticking between my shoulder blades or tell Rue that I don’t have time to talk right now. I’ve got things to do, like find out what happened to my parents seven years ago.

And for that, I need manacles.



Chapter 7

Cat

*The girl moves—sometimes—
as I do. Sleek. Purposeful.
I know the walk.
Something dies tonight.
She moves between us, watching me,
watching her.
The man, flashes silver, smells of machine.
A breeze brings her to me, meat and green things.
Death and life. She carries both.
Green sap, on her skin.
Drying earth blood.
A gust rattles the bones,
inside my cage. A collection of meals
Long eaten. Their memories, faded, gone.
She goes, with chains, heavy thoughts.
The man carries silver-flash-danger,
Closer.
Eyes me.
He'll feed us tonight, bleary and slow-smelling,
throwing old meat.
He makes smoke, fills the air with bees,
light sparks. Small shakes. High hums.
I hunker, teeth out, ears down. Muscles tight under, nothing
to leap at,
only silver-flash-danger, biting bars, metal singing.
He stops, sees me down. Makes noises, low now.
His lips curling,
mine too.*

*He goes, leaving hot metal in the air, curled hind legs beneath me.
The Almost Human in the dusk, hands behind bars,
like butterflies.
Motion again, same. And same. And again.
What Almost Human says, I see—
silver-flash-danger danced wide,
severed the lock-cage-door-shut-trapped.
I flex my feet, claws extended.
And wait for the smell
of old meat.*



Chapter 8

Felicity

I started early.

Brynn didn't say much when I cracked a beer open at my house, but she took her taco costume off so she could drive. Her mouth is tight as we head out to the Allan house, my bells jingling as I nod along with the music. Hugh and David Evans pass us on the way out of town, honking like they've accomplished something when they swerve in front of my car. I raise my beer at them in response, like I agree. Brynn silently reaches out, touches my elbow, pushes my arm down out of sight.

"What?" I say, a little bit shitty. "I'm not driving."

"No," she says. "The only Black girl in town is. We get pulled over, who do you think the shit's going to land on? The pretty white girl, or me?"

I take another slug of beer, knowing she's right. But still, it's not like we're going to get caught. "There's nobody out here," I say. "And besides, your dad is white."

Brynn sighs heavily. "That doesn't outweigh my mom being Black. Might even make it worse."

I'm quiet after that, the beer can slick in my hand. I don't know what to say. Except my brain doesn't get that message to my mouth in time, and I hear myself mutter, "Well, there's nobody out here, anyway."

It's true, which is why the Allan house is such a great spot. It's an old brick house, three stories, surrounded by acres of woods that have crept right up to the house in the years it's been abandoned. Gretchen's mom says nobody has lived here since she can remember, and her grandma says the same. The Allans built this place, had the money to fill it with expensive shit, too. Sometimes I wonder if they roll in their graves every time Cecil Allan comes into town, drunk and depositing a wad of cash at the bank, staring down the teller with one eye and daring her to ask where it came from.

Gretchen's mom told us the Allan name was tainted before him, though. Something about a drunk in the family, embarrassing stories, glory won and lost, slipping between their fingers. She claims they just split one night, owing everybody money and a few people more than that. Cecil's line were the poor relations without the money to even skip town. Which is why he jumped at the chance to marry an Usher, eyeing the house and the land that came with it, even if his family name dropped by the wayside as part of the agreement. She says Cecil may be the last person with the Allan name left in Amontillado, but the Allan boys had fun in their day, so there's still plenty of their blood walking around, claiming to be something else.

Bastards aren't exactly news around here. We all know each other well enough to spot a family trait on a face without the name it belongs to. But like my dad says, when you point at someone, there's three fingers pointing back at you. Regardless, most of the Allans split, leaving behind a few babies without their name and a mansion full of furniture, the people in town picking and choosing what they wanted, less and less leaving the house over the years as it rotted where it stood.

There's not much left now, just the stuff that was too heavy for anyone to move, like a grand piano and a big old grandfather clock that stands at the foot of the staircase. It's freaked me out more than once, when I'm high as hell and come up those stairs to see my own reflection staring back at me in the glass front, lost, confused, a mess. There's more than a little bit of my spit dried on the front of that clock, when I told that girl what I thought of her, not using words.

Brynn pulls into the drive, branches scraping the top of my car as she winds her way back to the house. It's already a rager. Somebody hauled a generator out here, and there are naked light bulbs strung around what's left of the sagging porch, the glow of electricity coming from inside as well.

"Sweet," Brynn says, but I'm not thrilled about it. I've got to meet up with Tress, and that requires darkness. She won't do business anywhere people can see. We could go out to the yard, or the woods, but the lights also mean that couples who rely on the dark corners of the Allan house will probably be going outdoors for their privacy tonight.

Something hits the car. Something big, and we both jump; Brynn lets out a little yelp, hands tightening around the wheel.

"Ladies," Hugh says, face pressed against the windshield as he sprawls across the hood.

I smack the glass where his face is. "Get off my car, shithead."

He smiles but moves, and Brynn puts a hand on her chest.

"Scared me," she says.

I act like it didn't, like my heart isn't racing. My bells jingle as I get out, and Hugh flicks at one of them. It spins around and hits me in the eye.

"Sorry," he says, but it's a half-assed apology; he's beelining for Brynn. He passes me and catches up to her, as she hauls her taco outfit under one arm.

"Tacos! Awesome!" he says, and she gives him a side-eye before she realizes he's serious, and then she starts to show him how she made it. His interest is more on where her leotard gapes at the chest than the properties of foam. I laugh a little to myself, the second beer I'm already chugging starting to flow in my veins. She catches his gaze and chucks him under the chin.

"My face is up here, and you're a monument to testosterone," Brynn says.

And one big-ass monument. When we clear the rise he's backlit by the house, hulking over Brynn, even counting all her taco parts.

"Huge! Wait up!" Dave comes streaking past me, leaving a trail of pot smoke behind him. It's skunky and cheap. He must've got it from Tress.

I help Brynn pull her taco costume over her head, adjusting her lettuce and arranging her hair down the back so that it hangs nicely. I've got to admit, she looks good.

"Sexy taco," I tell her, and she laughs. I forgive her for being such a mom back on the road when she made me hide my beer.

We get past the hangers-on at the porch: underclassmen and people not confident enough to walk right in. A few of the younger football players latch on to Hugh, trying to get him to bitch with them about the canceled game. He talks to them for a second, but it just takes Brynn's hand resting on his arm, urging him on into the house, and he caves. I hand off my empty can to a kid who's leaning against one of the pillars, taking the full one off his hands. He treats it like the compliment it is.

Felicity Turnado just acknowledged his existence.

Once we're inside, I definitely decide I prefer the Allan house without lights. There are holes in the walls, little piles of plaster on the floor and mouse prints running through where it's been ground to a fine dust. There's wallpaper still attached in places, sloughing down and sagging from the

walls, a few studs visible. The nails that stick out of them are pure rust, with square heads, something Dad says is how you know something is *really* old. I head for the stairs, which still have a bit of grandeur about them, like the mom at the pool who still has great legs and knows it.

People are crowded on the staircase, and I've got to pick my way through them. Somebody sneaks a squeeze of my ass, and I give them a little kick for it. Whoever he is, he yells and drops his drink, earning a shove from whoever he splattered. I don't turn around to see who it was. I've got a goal. I need to find Tress, and sooner rather than later, while I've still got a little bit of liquid courage to talk to her. I thread the crowd, slipping past a couple of geek sophomores who are—I think—trying to fix the clock at the head of the staircase.

"Are you serious?" I ask them, and one of them turns to look at me, unfazed by my naked legs so close to his face.

"It's got a pendulum," he explains. "Which means it's a harmonic oscillator. If we clean it up, put the parts in working order, and introduce some kinetic energy, it's completely feasible that we could get it running."

"Neat," I say, which is a nice word that when you say it just right, becomes something else. Years of listening to Mom and Dad have taught me how to wield tone like a weapon.

I brush past the geeks, but they aren't interested, already lost in a pile of cogs on the floor, heads together. I go to the railing on the second floor, scanning the crowd below for Tress's hair, black and shining. I don't see it, and I give a little kick to the railing in frustration, sending a spindle falling into the people below me. Somebody yells, and I give them a little wave.

Because I'm Felicity Turnado, which means I can take a freshman's beer and kick a guy who grabs me and accidentally rain splintered wood on people, but the one thing I can't do is ask anybody if they know where Tress Montor is.

She runs a decent but discreet business, setting up somewhere secluded at a party and dealing until her stash is depleted and her pockets full, declaring the store closed and leaving before anyone offers her a beer, or tries to make small talk past ounces or milligrams.

I scout out rooms on the second floor, toeing a few early hard partiers out of the way, freshmen who hit it too fast on their first—and only—night at the Allan house. I'm considering that I might have to wander up to the third floor when I spot her, or rather, I spot her cousin.

Ribbit Usher is the most awkward thing I've ever seen, and I'm counting Brynn's taco in that. But while Brynn can take the taco off, revealing her hard-as-nails volleyball body underneath, Ribbit can't strip off his freckled skin or take any of the rough angles off his arms and legs. I slam what's left of the beer I lifted, reconsidering my opinion as Ribbit stretches his arms in the air, illustrating something for Tress's benefit.

He's got broad shoulders, and I bet he could fill out with some muscle. Maybe if someone like Hugh pulled him aside and showed him how to bench he could be salvageable. Gretchen and I could lighten his hair, take the red down a touch. But that would never happen, I think, crushing my can. Hugh can't stand Ribbit, something he's tried to explain to me before, when we were out on our own, after one of my seizures.

"That kid's just not right," Hugh had said, even though Ribbit's the same age we are. "Something about him . . . I don't know." Hugh had shrugged, not able to put words to it. "Remember when Gretchen's dog bit him?"

"William Wilson?" I'd asked.

"Huh? No, when it bit Usher."

"William Wilson is the dog, dumbo," I'd said, swatting at his arm.

"Jesus, what a stuck-up name for a dog. Figures. Anyway, that dog has been at parties with people yelling and screaming, getting shoved into pools, and once, somebody spray-painted him yellow, remember that?"

"Yeah, maybe," I'd said, not sure what Hugh had been driving at.

"But the one time—the only time—that dog ever bites anybody, it's Ribbit Usher, and for no reason."

"So?"

"So, dogs know things, Felicity. You've got to listen to their instincts. Dogs and babies."

"Yeah, well." My eyes had wandered to a corner, where Gretchen was pressed up between the wall and a junior. "Give Gretchen another few minutes and maybe you can get the opinion of a baby in about nine months."

Instincts or not, I think Hugh just doesn't understand a boy who doesn't know what *offside* means. Personally, I can't say I mind Ribbit one bit, especially not when he lights up like one of the strung bulbs the second he sees me.

“Felicity!” he calls, waving frantically as I come down the stairs. Tress pulls his arm down, whispering something into his ear, probably telling him not to be such a puppy.

I don’t mind. I like puppies.

“Ribbit,” I say, making my way over to them. “You made it.”

I say that like he isn’t at every party, isn’t always trying to do anything he can to please everyone else. He’ll grab drinks and find lost earrings. He even made a tampon run one time. Last month he spent most of the night in the woods because Gretchen’s dog ran out there in a panic after Hugh tried to crowd-surf and there wasn’t enough crowd for his bulk. The resulting crash had made William Wilson bolt for the door, and while everyone else made a joke out of running through the woods and calling for him, Ribbit had wandered, borrowing phones when his battery died, until he found the dog, wet and muddy, but not exactly grateful. He’d scratched the crap out of Ribbit when he tried to pick him up—more evidence to log into Hugh’s instinct file, I guess.

Although Ribbit did score one successful pickup that night—Gretchen’s thanks had come in the form of more than just words. And good for him; Gretchen hands it out like candy at Halloween and there’s no reason he shouldn’t be in on it with the other trick-or-treaters.

“Like my lights?” Ribbit asks, motioning overhead.

“You did this?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He nods, a blush spreading. “I thought everyone might like it. Last night, and all.”

I think everyone does, but I’m not quite able to fake enthusiasm, and Ribbit’s face falls.

“You don’t like it?”

“I . . .” How do I explain the way the exposed studs make me feel? The little mouse prints and the faded, falling wallpaper? “I guess it just makes me sad,” I say. “This used to be a really nice place, once.”

Tress nods in agreement, surprising me. “Something to nothing,” she says.

Then I remember that Ribbit himself lives in a place just as crumbly as this one—stone, not brick—but still. And he actually *lives* there, whereas we only hit this place every few weeks.

“But it’s cool,” I say quickly, putting my hand on his arm. Somebody bumps into me, and I’m pushed forward, fully into him, my chest and belly

flat against his.

“Whoops,” he says, grabbing both my elbows, and I’m suddenly, weirdly, flustered.

“Sorry,” we both say at the same time, then laugh at each other.

“I got some beer on you,” I say, brushing at the front of his shirt where the foam landed.

“Oh, it’s . . . fine . . .” Ribbit’s voice trails off, strangled when I touch him.

“You didn’t wear a costume,” I say, flicking the beer off my fingers.

Ribbit looks down at his T-shirt and jeans, almost apologetically. “No, I . . . it took longer than I thought to get all the lights strung. I was going to go back and change. I still can? I mean . . .”

He’s offering to leave the party and change his clothes because I sounded slightly disappointed. That’s Ribbit Usher for you. Kinda cute. Very pathetic.

“You look perfect,” he blusters on.

“Yep,” Tress agrees. “Perfect.”

But the way she says it isn’t a compliment. It comes out the same way I said *neat* to the sophomores with the clock. She’d been tacitly ignoring whatever weird flirtation was going on between me and her cousin, but now I’ve got her attention.

“You look . . .” I don’t know what she looks like, or if it’s even supposed to be a costume. She’s got on all black, and her hoodie is pulled up loosely around her face, shadowing her eyes.

“Like death,” Ribbit says. “I mean, I don’t know if it’s on purpose or not, but Tress looks like death.”

Tress sighs then, eyes going back to the crowd. “You need anything?” she asks quietly.

“Yeah,” I say, dropping my voice, too.

“Okay.” She swigs from a red Solo cup, still not looking at me. “Through the kitchen, there’s a door down to the cellar. Five minutes. I’ll meet you.”

I nod, then look back at Ribbit. He smiles immediately, like he’s a character in a video game that is programmed for one thing only. “Get me a drink?” I ask.

I only have to ask once.



Chapter 9

Tress

Ribbit comes back with two beers and hands one off to Felicity, who takes it with a smile and then disappears—obviously not the reaction he was hoping for.

“What did you expect?” I ask him, as he stares into his own cup. “You really thought she was going to hang out with you?”

He shrugs and takes a swig, seeming to forget that he’s not going to drink tonight . . . and that it’s my job to keep him from doing it.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Maybe? It’s not impossible, right? I mean, she was totally talking to me for a second there.”

“Yep, one second.” I scan the crowd again, looking to see if anyone noticed Felicity slipping out to the kitchen. I’m checking for Hugh, especially. He keeps an eye on her most of the time, and I need him distracted.

Beside me, Ribbit tilts his beer back all the way, drowning his sorrows. There’s a small gathering at the front door, a lot of cleavage and sequins clustered around Gretchen as her voice rises, a high panicked noise above the general party talk.

“He should be right there, I mean right there,” she’s saying, tears ruining her Cleopatra makeup. “I told him to stay in the car because of last time, and William Wilson *always* stays. He would stay if he was on fire. But I left my window down, and I . . .”

Ribbit is on his way over to help as soon as he sees the tears, and I shake my head. Not so much at him being a total pushover, but because a missing dog—again—is not quite the distraction I’m looking for. I need more.

Suddenly, midsentence, Gretchen pukes.

Everyone around her spreads outward, along with the spatters of Gretchen’s dinner. Except for, of course, Ribbit, who only crosses the

distance between them more quickly and immediately begins cleaning up Gretchen.

“Lightweight.” David Evans is half laughing, half trying to control his own gag reflex when he says it. Next to him, Hugh is shaking his head.

“Gretchen wasn’t drinking,” he says. And that’s when David loses his own battle, pushing Hugh aside as he dashes for the door. He’s not quick enough, and everyone tries to make a path as David comes charging, puke spraying through his fingers.

And *that* is a distraction.

Everyone in the kitchen is spilling out, curious about the yelling. I go against the traffic, forcing my way through with elbows until I find Felicity, pink and purple and jingly and gorgeous, waiting for me by the door to the cellar.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“Gretchen just puked. And David,” I add, opening the door and motioning for her to go ahead of me.

“Are they okay?” she asks, but she’s not worried enough to go check for herself, or actually offer any assistance. It’s more important that she get high. She pauses for a second, hands in front of her as she feels for the banister. “Tress? I can’t see.”

“Sorry,” I tell her, flicking my phone on. We go forward by its pale light, Felicity carefully picking her way. I wait for her to get a few steps below me, then turn, and flick the hook-and-eye lock on the basement door. It’s shiny against everything else. Bright and new. Because I put it there an hour ago.

“Tress?” she calls again, her voice higher and a little panicked since I turned my back and took the light with me.

“Sorry,” I say again, and follow behind her, holding the light above her head so she can see.

It’s dank in the basement, two hundred years of mildew gathering together like a blanket in the air. Tress coughs, and it almost turns into a gag as she gets to the bottom of the steps, the bells on her little slippers jangling merrily as she wanders out onto the dirt floor.

“Tress?” she says again, her voice small and lost, trusting, like it had been when we were kids. “I don’t feel so good.”

She’s got her arms crossed in front of her, goose bumps rising even though I can see bright spots on her cheeks. She hasn’t seen what’s behind

her yet; the hole in the wall and the pile of bricks beside it, the chair facing it, or the pail of mortar.

Felicity hasn't seen any of that because she's looking right at me, eyes wide. "Did you say Gretchen puked? Was she . . . like from drinking, or was she sick?"

I shrug.

"Because there were some people upstairs, just kind of lying there. I thought it was a little early for them to be passed out but . . . oh my God, Tress. What if everyone has the flu?"

Then more importantly, she adds, "What if *I*'ve got the flu?"

"It won't be what kills you," I tell her.

Then I hit her with a brick.



Chapter 10

Felicity

I wait for the boy's voice.

It's always there, after. A nice low, soothing thread that I follow up to consciousness. He'll talk about his grandma, who he lives with, and how he does this with her, waiting patiently for her to come back around after a seizure. I sometimes can't remember his name, and he'll tell me, pinging my memory until I say his name back to him, and he'll help me up, brush my clothes off, and smooth down my hair.

He is a nice boy, that boy . . . Hugh.

Memory is slippery for a few minutes after, and I'll wander, confused inside my own head, not knowing where I am or how I got there, who I am with or if I am safe. But when I hear Hugh's voice I know that I am okay. But this time, something is different. I don't hear Hugh, and there's something wet running down my neck. I move to brush it away, but I can't. My arms won't move. There's a jangling noise, the sound of tiny bells but also something lower, more sinister.

"Hugh?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, and something is very wrong. My head hurts terribly. My hands, too. There is a heavy smell in the air, and I'm slumped forward, hung by my arms, wrists straining against . . . chains.

I open my eyes.

I did not have a seizure.

Hugh is not here.

And I am not safe.



Chapter 11

Tress

“Hey,” I say when Felicity opens her eyes.

I’m glad she came around. Not because I was worried that I hit her too hard, or that there was more blood than I expected; I’ve seen plenty of blood in my life and know that head wounds always look worse than they actually are. The McCaffrey Ranch gives us any cows that die unexpectedly, with the caveat that they come to Amontillado Animal Attractions as they left there—in one piece. I’ve been cutting up dead cows with chain saws since I was thirteen, so, no, blood doesn’t bother me one bit. Especially not Felicity Turnado’s. But I’m glad to see her come around, anyway. I’m glad she’s conscious because I need her talking.

She shifts in her chains, her wrists already chafed as she comes to her feet, dazed and a little woozy. A ribbon of blood winds around her neck from where I hit her with the brick, bright red against the gray pallor of her skin. Felicity does not look good, even for a girl with a concussion who is chained to a wall.

“Tress?” she asks, but that note of trust is gone. Now she’s scared. As she should be.

Felicity rattles her chains again. Her first instinct is to tug at them, but I anchored the manacles into the stone foundation of the Allan house. She’s not getting out of those unless I let her out.

“What the fuck?” Fear turns into anger quickly, her eyes bright under her jester’s cap, which was knocked sideways when I wrestled her body into the badly lit corner. There’s a naked light bulb above me now. While she was out I ran a wire along the beams up the stairs, connecting to Ribbit’s electrical contribution to the party. A little illumination for our long night.

I haven’t answered her yet, and Felicity moves to the next logical emotion—panic. I planned on this, turning the volume up on the music in

the kitchen before I followed Felicity down the stairs. She'll scream herself hoarse long before the party winds down.

She yells for Hugh first, which I expected. Then Brynn and Gretchen and David. At least two of them are actively vomiting on themselves, and Felicity knows that. This is true panic; complete loss of logical function. She pulls on her chains, gouging her own wrists in the process, small drops of blood splattering onto the floor at her feet. She's kicking, too, lunging at me as she screams. One of her jester slippers flies off and hits a ceiling beam, fluttering back down, light and useless as the bell chimes.

It takes a few minutes for her to burn down, but when she does Felicity Turnado is a goddamn mess. Tears have streaked her makeup and she's worked herself into a sweat, her flimsy costume sticking to her skin and showing every goose bump that ripples to the surface once she's done throwing her fit. She's kicked up a fair amount of coal dust, too, blackening both of her legs up to the knee.

"Done?" I ask.

"Tress," she rasps at me, cap now hanging down over one eye. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Let me tell you," I say, pulling my chair up. It's an old one, something I salvaged from a third-floor bedroom. It's decorative, small and spindly, a chair for a lady to sit on in front of her mirror while doing her makeup. That mirror was broken when I found it, the drawers of the vanity swollen with rot and sticking forever shut.

"I'm going to make you talk to me," I say.

"You don't have to chain me up to get me to talk to you," Felicity shouts, voice breaking on *talk*.

"But I do if I want you to be *honest*."

She settles in her chains, eyes bright and boring into mine. "What do you want?"

"I want to know what happened the night my parents disappeared."



Chapter 12

Felicity

It's the worst thing she could say to me.

If she wanted money, I could make sure she got it. Needed a car to drive out of her shitty life, I'd buy her one. But I can't give her what I don't have.

"I don't—" She holds her hand up, and I obediently fall silent.

"Let me tell you what's going on here before you finish that sentence." She gets out of the chair and comes closer to me, hands on either side of the crevice I'm chained inside of.

"You're in a coal chute. Those manacles are anchored into limestone with masonry screws. I've learned a lot about containment in my life, and trust me, you're not getting out."

"This is insane," I spit at her, not sparing my words. "Hugh will be looking for me."

"Hugh is currently distracted," she says, and she sounds so confident that I feel a ripple of unease, something different from the panic that hit earlier. Before I was an animal, reacting with venom. Now I'm a human . . . a scared one who hears a voice inside her head say, *This is really happening*. Then, underneath that, the little voice that whispers in my ear at night . . . *You deserve it*.

Fuck that, is usually how I respond to the voice before falling asleep. And I do the same now. I'm Felicity Turnado, and I can't just disappear from a party without anybody noticing.

"My friends will know I'm gone," I say. "Remember what those are? Friends?"

That last bit is shitty, but so is hitting someone with a brick. Tress only shakes her head, not bothered in the least.

"You really need to know the consequences before you talk." I go still, my voice a dead thing in my throat, gaze following Tress as she walks back to the chair, the bulb above her head making her eyes dark pools.

“I want to know what happened that night,” she says again. “But I’ve got a lot of other things to say to you, too. So we’re going to take our time, and we’re going to talk everything out.”

I nod enthusiastically. This is something I’ve actually wanted to do forever.

“But,” Tress says, holding one finger in the air. “If I don’t like what you say . . .”

She walks over to a pile of bricks, one that looks like it’s been sitting there since the beginning of time, left over from what they didn’t use on the house. Tress picks one up, comes closer to my little nook. My pulse jumps, tight and hot where the metal bites into my wrist.

“If I don’t like what you say . . .” She fades off, shrugging her chin over her shoulder. Behind her there’s a smooth brick wall, the face uninterrupted, each brick notched into the next in a tightly constructed pattern. One section is slightly brighter than the rest, out of place.

“There were two coal chutes,” Tress says. “I practiced.”



Chapter 13

Tress

Felicity totally loses her shit.

I can't blame her, but I also don't have to watch it. I go back upstairs, partially to double-check that the noise level of her freak-out isn't penetrating to the partiers. Her screeches are fading when I'm halfway up the stairs, drowned out by the music in the kitchen. I can still pick out a few words—ones that I doubt her mother knows she uses—when I put my ear to the wooden door, trying to ascertain if there's anyone in there before I open it. I can't hear any movement, so I flick the hook off and take the plunge.

A couple of juniors are going at each other in the corner, but they're really into what they're doing and their eyes are closed. I let the door click shut, then edge past them, out into the main room. More people have shown up, and the staircase is packed, the geeks who are working on the clock giving everyone orders about tiptoeing around the pieces and parts they've got laid out everywhere.

"Hello! There's a system at work here!" One of the boys shouts at a football player who trounces right past him. But the jock isn't interested; he's got one hand on his stomach, the other covering his mouth, his skin a sickly green.

Huh . . . Maybe Felicity wasn't totally wrong about the flu.

I pause for a second, anxious to know if her screams are coming up through the floorboards. They're not. All I can hear is the low hum of party talk, and crying from somewhere outside, high-pitched and desperate. Curious, I follow the sound out onto the porch, where Hugh, David, and Brynn have shifted the underclassmen out onto the lawn and are gathered around Gretchen in a protective circle.

"He probably had to take a piss," David says, his skin still sallow, one hand on Gretchen's shoulder. She shakes her head.

“William Wilson wouldn’t get out of the car unless I told him he could,” she hiccups, wiping her face with the edge of David’s shirt. “He’s a very good boy.”

She gets to her feet, swaying a little, her own color not good. “William!” she calls out into the dark. “William Wilson Astor, you get back here right now!”

“Wow, whipping out the full name, huh?” Brynn says.

Hugh pats Gretchen’s hair, carefully avoiding a splatter of puke from earlier. “I’m sure he’ll come back.”

“What if he doesn’t,” Gretchen wails. “What if it’s like last time? He got so scared and nobody knew where he was, and the only person who actually *helped* me was”—she hiccups again—“Ribbit.”

Hugh’s jaw tenses, and my cousin appears out of the darkness, the light on his phone flicking off. I go to his side, grabbing his arm as he’s about to step up onto the porch.

“You might want to split,” I tell him.

“Huh, why?” His breath has beer on it, his eyes bleary. It only takes one, with Ribbit.

“Because Hugh doesn’t exactly like you, and—”

“Hey!” As if I’d conjured him, Hugh elbows his way through the crowd on the porch, his fist tight around the neck of Ribbit’s T-shirt before he can even get his hands up in surrender.

“You sick little shit,” he seethes into Ribbit’s face. “You hide that little dog away so you can save the day again, get a little off Gretchen?”

“Whoa, hey.” I put my hand on Hugh’s arm, but it’s like metal.

“I know he’s your cousin, Tress, but this is between us,” he says to me. So I hit him.

Hitting Hugh Broward with my bare hand is like pitting a mosquito against a car going eighty miles an hour. Nothing happens except I get hurt. I cradle my hand to my chest, and Hugh’s eyes bounce off Ribbit for one second to meet mine, then settle back on his prey. We know each other well enough to be aware he’s not going to let go of my cousin, and I’m not going to stand down and let Ribbit get hurt.

“He didn’t do anything,” I say. “Leave him alone.”

“You don’t know shit,” Hugh says. “I’ve told you before; he’s a squirrely little bastard.”

“I’m not . . . ,” Ribbit argues, his voice shaky. “I’m a good guy.”

“Dude.” David comes over, puts his hand on Hugh’s shoulder. “I don’t think it was him. He’s been with us the whole time.”

“Of course he has,” Huge says, giving Ribbit a little shake. “Parasite.”

“No, man,” David goes on, his skin still green, wobbly on his feet. “He didn’t do anything to the dog.”

“That’s your area, right?” I snipe at David, thinking of Goldie’s hair floating on the surface of the gator pond, the wet paint on our sign, someone putting a name to us that isn’t Allan or Usher. Just white trash.

David blinks slowly, his gaze dull. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Forget it,” I say, as I watch Hugh’s grip loosen on Ribbit’s shirt. I’m settling that score with someone else, down in the basement. “Let him go, Hugh.”

Hugh gives me a long look, a fire behind his eyes I’ve never seen there before. I’ve known Hugh awhile, but it’s always been the teddy bear side of him I see. I’ve never had to stand my ground against him, because until tonight, Hugh and I have always been on the same page. Now I’m seeing something new, something I’d always heard was there but never witnessed. And if there’s something in Hugh Broward I’ve never seen, maybe there’s something in my cousin, too. But Ribbit is just hanging from his fist like a piece of meat, actually smiling, showing all his teeth and inviting Huge to knock them down his throat.

“Your dude-bro vouched for him,” I say, and Hugh lowers Ribbit until his feet are on the ground. “Happy?”

“No, I’m pretty fucking far from happy. I don’t trust you, douchebag.” He pushes Ribbit in the chest with one finger, and my cousin almost goes off the edge of the porch. “You’re sticking with me for the rest of the night, got it? I’m keeping an eye on you so that you can’t *miraculously* find the dog.”

Ribbit nods, understanding. Pitifully, he seems almost happy. He gets to make time with Hugh now, even if he is a prisoner.

I need to get back downstairs.

That’s when my phone rings.



Chapter 14

Cat

*Something small, made smaller
inside my mouth.
A new best / last.
Gretchen / shadow*



Chapter 15

Felicity

I'm shaking.

I don't know if it's anger, or if it's because I'm cold, or because I'm sick. I ranted at Tress's retreating back as she went up the stairs, and now I'm exhausted. My throat feels like it's in bloody tatters. My whole body is quivering, nerves on high alert . . . or maybe it's because I've got a fever, and my body is trying to shed heat.

Everything is wrong, and I've got small trails of blood running down both arms. The stream from my head seems to have stopped, but there's a drying red trickle going down into my cleavage. I hear the basement door, and my head jerks up, the ridiculous jester cap swinging to the side, hanging by a hair pin.

"Hugh?" I call, my voice raspy and useless.

"Calm down . . . listen . . . *listen* . . ." It's Tress, and she's on the phone, clearly irritated. She comes back to her chair, and it creaks under her weight.

"It was definitely locked," she says, crossing her legs. "No, I did not let the panther loose just to fuck with you."

A long stream of profanity to match the one I'd been screaming at her earlier comes out of the phone, and she holds it away from her ear. "Cecil . . .," she sighs. "And did it kill you?"

Another extended answer comes—an angry one—but Tress only shakes her head. "What do you want me to do? Wander around calling, *Here, kitty, kitty?*"

Apparently her grandpa doesn't have a better suggestion, because Tress hangs up on him, another incensed response cut off with the swipe of her thumb. Tress blows her hair out of her eyes and glances up at me.

"Panther's loose," she says by way of explanation. Like it's not incredibly alarming. Like she's not saying it to someone she's chained to a

wall and threatened to bury alive. My heart kicks up a beat just thinking about it.

Tress is still in her chair, her eyebrows drawn together, looking at her phone. She's distracted, not thinking about me, or her parents. Maybe I can keep it that way.

"What do you even do when a panther is loose?" I ask. "That seems . . . hard."

It's a really stupid thing to say, but Tress nods in agreement.

"Yeah, well, we can hope he comes home, where there's shelter and food but . . ." She glances at me, and we're having a conversation. A totally fucked-up one, but we're talking.

"Cecil hasn't exactly been nice to that cat," she says. "If it comes home, it won't be for anything good."

"Uh-huh," I say, encouraging her. "So what do you do?"

She shrugs. "Not much you can do. Hope it doesn't kill anybody, first off. And pray nobody spots it. People find out it got loose, and we're done."

"Right . . .," I say, trying to think of how I can spin this, turn the topic away from Cecil Allan losing his income and a wild animal killing people. But there's really no way for me to keep this conversation positive.

"So yeah." Tress stands, stuffing her phone into her jeans pocket. "Hope and pray, that's pretty much it. Not much we *can* do, so I'm not going to worry about it."

She picks out a brick, turning it in her hands. My pulse thrums; my belly turns to liquid.

"Tress . . ." I shake, my bells jingling. "Could you . . ." I'm wild, searching for something to say. Anything. "Could you get this hat out of my face?"

It's ridiculous. And it works.

"Sure." She comes over, gently disentangling pins from my hair. Her face is inches from mine, and I could headbutt her or bite her, but it wouldn't buy me anything. She'd just be pissed, and I'd still be chained to a wall. I need to take a different route, try instead to remind her that we used to be friends. That once, we really loved each other.

"There you go," she says, putting my cap back into place, pinning it neatly. The bobby pins slide across my scalp, tickling and bringing back a hundred memories of Tress braiding my hair or combing it out, me showing

her how to put on mascara, and the one time we got into her mom's dye and ruined their new bathroom tiling.

I've got tears in my eyes as she steps back, and Tress is upset, too, her brows drawn tightly together, her mouth a thin line as she inspects a few of my loose hairs that stuck to her fingers.

"Shit," she says. "I forgot to put salve on Rue."

"Rue?" I ask. "Who's Rue?"

"Doesn't matter." Tress shakes the strands loose, then turns her back to me. She's shaking. Not as much as I am, but it's there, a small tremor running under her skin.

"Tress," I whisper. "I don't know what happened to your parents."

She sighs, shoulders falling . . . and reaches for a brick.

"You're going to want to be more careful about what you say, Felicity."

I take a kick at her as she picks up the first brick, but she only backs out of the way, my second slipper flying off and over her shoulder.

"Quit," she says, as calmly as she informed me about the loose panther.

"Or what?" I snap at her, all hints of a whisper gone from my voice. "You'll hold me against my will? Brick me up in a wall because you're a fucking insane person?"

"I can always knock you out again," she tells me. "You'll wake up in total darkness."

Tress lets that sit a second, then continues. "At least if you're awake you've got a chance in hell of talking me out of this."

I'm quiet while she lays the first brick but can't help it when she reaches for another. "Two?" I ask, dropping my voice low, using the tone that I used on Ribbit earlier, when he literally ran to get me a beer. But Tress is not her cousin, and she sees right through my shit.

"That's for kicking at the first one," she says.

I'm dying to take a shot at Tress while she kneels in front of me. I could do some damage, too; maybe knock some of her teeth out, or at least break her nose. But I won't, and she knows it. I won't because I need to keep her happy. She lays an entire first row; four bricks across, like she's testing me. I don't say anything, as instructed.

"All right," she finally says, rocking back on her heels and dropping the spade into the mortar bucket. "We need to talk about freshman year."

Upstairs, a clock chimes.



Chapter 16

Tress

Freshman Year

Shit. That's what I wake up to—actual shit.

There's a raccoon at the foot of my bed, pawing through the clothes I had carefully laid out to wear to school today. I yelp when I see it, and it reactively shits, erasing any chance I had of maybe spot-cleaning its grubby little pawprints from the shirt I'd managed to snag from Goodwill, tags still on.

"Cecil!" I yell as the raccoon scurries out of my room, down the hallway, and out the trailer door . . . which is standing open.

"Huh?" Cecil stirs from his spot on the couch, bumping the rickety coffee table and sending a cascade of beer bottles onto the floor, not all of them empty. A flood of beer follows the raccoon toward the door, because this place isn't exactly level.

"You left the front door open," I tell him, to which he gives a laugh, waves his hand at it, and goes back to sleep, rolling over to show me his back. You work with animals long enough, you learn body language thoroughly. I'm dismissed.

I rifle through my laundry basket, hoping there's something salvageable I can wear. But we haven't had the cash for the laundromat this week, which is why I'd lifted a few things from Goodwill. It wasn't the first time, and I never feel great about it, but Cecil says the Goodwill is a nonprofit anyway so I shouldn't worry too much about it.

Truth is, I can't. I've got bigger concerns.

Like I literally have nothing to wear to school. I've been washing bras and underwear in the sink and hanging them out to dry, but that's the only clean stuff I've got. Everything else is . . . a touch south of smelly. I find a

pair of jeans that have Rue's hair all over them but otherwise look okay. I shake them out, sending orangutan hair across my room.

I can hear the bus coming up the ridge, gears grinding as it makes the climb. In their pens, Zee and Dee, our resident zebra and ostrich, sniff the wind, finding the diesel fumes. I grab the least-rumpled T-shirt I can find and dash into Cecil's room, snagging an old bowling jersey from the back of his closet. I slip it on and douse myself with body spray so that I don't smell too much like mildew. I just catch the bus, find a seat by myself in the back, and jam my earbuds in. My hair is in a dirty ponytail because the well went dry last night, but combined with this weird-ass bowling jersey and my wrinkled shirt I might be able to pull off some kind of grunge vibe. Make this look like it's all on purpose.

I definitely get a whiff of Rue when I walk into the school, so I go to the bathroom and try to dab hand sanitizer in a few different places. There's a bunch of upperclassmen in there I don't know, so I just get a handful from the dispenser and duck into a stall. There's some whispering, a muttered "What the hell?," followed by giggles.

Great. I wander into the atrium, hoping to spot somebody—anybody—I can stand with . . . or at least, near. I scan the crowd but don't see any friendly faces—Gretchen Astor actually looks at me and starts laughing. The only thing she doesn't do is point. Except, I'm sure she does, once I walk away. I stick my chin out and try to find a corner, preferably somewhere dark, before the bell rings.

There's another whisper behind me as I pass, then a snort. I turn around, headed back to the bathroom to see if I'm bleeding through my jeans or something. I mean, I know I'm not making the cover of *Vogue* anytime soon, but I didn't think my clothes were *that* bad.

"Hey," a guy's voice calls out. I don't think it's for me. It can't be for me. I speed up.

"Hey!" he yells again, and there's a tap on my shoulder. I turn around, and there's a football player smiling at me. "Your shirt is ballin'."

I search his face, scrutinizing it for any sign that he's fucking with me. Weirdly, I don't see any.

"Thanks," I say cautiously.

"No, I mean, like, it's *ballin'*."

"Right, thanks," I say again, backing away.

I duck back into the bathroom, against the crowd that's headed into the halls. There are shouts as people reconnect after the summer break, a lot of hugging. But I'm in the bathroom, inspecting my underwear. Most girls just ask their friends to check their asses when they get up to dump their lunch tray. Me, I don't have friends like that.

I'm not bleeding, so I don't really know what the giggling was about. I'm taking off my pants to check the butt anyway, when the loudspeaker comes on, cutting through the chatter of the halls, right into the bathroom.

"Tress Montor, please report to the guidance office."

"Seriously?" I ask my pants.

There's already a line there, people wanting schedule changes or complaining about not having a study hall. Mrs. Febrezio spots me and takes my elbow, ushering me past them and into her office.

"Tress," she says. "It's seven fifty on the first day of school, and I've already had complaints from teachers about your shirt."

"My . . . what?"

I must look baffled, because she drops the strict look. "Your shirt," she repeats, searching my face.

"I . . ."

"Tress." Her face softens a little a more. "Do you even know what's on the back?"

I take off Cecil's bowling jersey, and flip it around.

It's got two bowling balls and one pin embroidered on it, arranged so that it looks like a cock and balls. Above that, where a last name should be, it just reads DICK.

"Ballin'," I whisper to myself.

"Excuse me?" Febrezio's sympathy disappears.

"Sorry, I . . ." I'm trying not to laugh. I bite the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste metal. "No, I didn't know. Swear."

She nods, but I can tell I lost points by being amused.

"I've got some shirts from lost and found you can choose from," she says. "Unless you want to just wear . . ." Her voice fades off, taking in the tee I had on under the jersey. It's a rumpled mess, but she's had too much training to say so.

"I'm fine," I say, stuffing Cecil's jersey into my bookbag. "Sorry about the . . ." I almost say *cock and balls* but stop myself. I've been living with Cecil so long my filter isn't always in place.

“Have a good day, Tress,” Febrezio calls behind me, but I’m already slipping past the row of kids who want study hall, don’t want study hall, or just want to align their schedules more closely with their friends’.

I’m cruising through the halls, scanning lockers for my number when someone grabs my elbow. “Dude, what happened to your shirt?”

It’s the football player again, all smiles and teeth, and I think of Rue. She’s either going to hug you or kill you. I give him the benefit of the doubt, something I don’t do often.

“I’ve been castrated,” I say, shrugging.

He laughs, and a few people turn to look. I’m struggling to find words, to think of what to say next. I almost unzip my backpack and offer him the jersey, since he likes it so much, but then he clamps a hand onto my shoulder, and I reassess. It would never fit him. This guy is huge.

“Huge,” I say, the word filling the gap between us. “Hugh Broward.”

“Yeah,” he says. “See you around, Tress Montor.”

I nod like he didn’t just give me a gift, then turn to my locker. The staff put signs on all the freshman lockers, little welcome banners with our names. My eyes slide to the one next to mine, curious, and my heart goes up into my throat just as I hear a gasp behind me.

I turn to see Felicity Turnado, clean and beautiful and perfect. I still feel good about making Hugh Broward laugh; I can still feel the weight of his hand on my shoulder. So there’s a lightness in my chest that lifts a little more when I see her, a buoyancy that rises to my face and pulls the corners of my mouth up.

I’m smiling at Felicity Turnado when she turns her back on me and walks away.



Chapter 17

Felicity

Freshman Year

I don't have anything to wear.

Correction—I have too many choices. I'm staring at my closet, wondering how best to usher in high school, overwhelmed by the fact that I have an unnatural amount of clothing. It's the first day of freshman year, and while being Felicity Turnado mattered in junior high, it doesn't mean shit to the upperclassmen. What I wear today will announce to everyone where I see myself fitting in, so I've got to make it count. I'm not an athlete, and it's not like I own a ton of sweatpants and hoodies anyway, so that look is easily shot down. I'm smart, but not sure how much I want to push that. I've been playing down the cute smart girl thing since I ditched my glasses for LASIK in seventh grade.

I'm in the choir and was tapped to sing the national anthem at junior high graduation, but I'm not sure the arts crowd is quite where I click. I've got the boho clothes for it, and if I wear my hair down and loose I can rock the free-spirit hippie thing. But there's a lot of confidence required for that, and the little part I landed in the junior high musical last year got me a backstage pass. Even behind the curtain the stage kids were always on, being funny, dramatic, or just all out *themselves*—like they had nothing to be ashamed of. Maybe they don't. That's probably why I never felt comfortable.

I didn't mind the attention, though . . . not at all.

With that thought, I grab a pair of ripped jean shorts and a cute little tank. Enough to show off what I've got while still playing it safe with dress code. The labels are from brands that will set me apart but not *above*. That's important. Really important, in Amontillado.

I look in the mirror, adjusting a fold there, applying a little more mascara here. Dabbing my lipstick off when I realize the color is too much, too confident. I've got to attract boys but not alienate girls. Especially as a freshman. I want upperclassmen to notice me, but I can't be pegged as fresh meat by the boys, or as a threat by the girls. It's a fine line, a delicate balance, and I can't make a misstep.

I'm still the girl who was with the Montors when they disappeared, the one who doesn't know what happened—or won't say. I'm a mystery to most, a pity case to some, and complicit to a few holdouts. Amontillado still hasn't decided what I am, five years later.

I straighten my shoulders and put on the smile I've been practicing in the mirror.

I've got to show them that I'm Felicity Turnado, and I am just fine.

Mom drops me off at school without making too much of a fuss. She hasn't let me ride the bus since second grade, when I had my first seizure moments after walking in the door at home. She's convinced I'm going to seize during the ride, with no one noticing until they open the doors in front of our house and I don't get up. She's a worst-case scenario type of person. I can't say I blame her there, though, given that the Montors—and their car—disappeared into thin air, leaving me wet, gasping, and forgetful on the riverbank. I don't have the best track record with moving vehicles.

"Bye, Mom," I call over my shoulder as I leave, ducking out from under her arm as she reaches for me.

I sail into the atrium like I don't care, like I'm not noticing every single person who notices me, not weighing the glances and determining where I land on their judgment scale. There are a few junior girls giving my tanned legs the stink-eye, but Brynn spots me and comes over, gives me a hug. Their attitude changes immediately, which tells me they must be athletes. Brynn's been burning a hole in volleyball records since sixth grade; if she accepts me, they will, too.

"You look good," she tells me, and I pay the compliment back, meaning it. She's got dark skin and knows how to set it off . . . not that she needs to. Everything looks good on that build.

"What's your first period?" she asks, taking me by the hand and leading me over to where the juniors are gathered.

"Um . . ." I glance at my phone. "English."

“Cool,” Brynn says. “Me too. Walk together?”

“Yes.” I jump at her offer. Brynn introduces me to the other girls, and they warm up immediately when she tells them that I kept book for the eighth-grade volleyball team.

“We need a new book,” one of the girls says, obviously eyeing me. “You know the sport?”

“I don’t play, but I know it,” I tell her.

In and out, the closest I’ll ever get to being an athlete, myself. Brynn has played in school and travel leagues her whole life, and if you wanted to spend any time with her, you ended up watching a few games. Maybe a few hundred. I tend to run from projectiles—or just cover my face and scream—but that doesn’t mean I’m not into sports. I showed enough interest that the coach invited me to come to some scrimmages and taught me how to keep book. She said having a parent keep book was just inviting an unwanted coach to the bench. I’m practically a pro now; my book is tight. No smudges, no pencil strikes that are unsure, substitutions recorded like clockwork. You could look at my record of a game and relive it, accurately, play for play.

In junior high tournaments last year I noticed that Prospero was serving out of rotation. I’d glanced around, hoping an adult would say something, but both our coaches were consulting with the players, and they hadn’t spotted it. I checked my book again, stunned that something so obvious could slide. But my book didn’t lie, and I cleared my throat.

I didn’t miss the sneer on the Prospero coach’s face when I handed my book over to the officials, expecting a child’s unsure notes, a vague perception of reality. Instead, they’d consulted, nodding, and we ended up getting a point out of the mess. When the table official handed the book back to me, he said, “Good work, kid,” and gave me a high five.

It felt good, like something I’d done had actually mattered. But I can’t be too enthusiastic, or these juniors will automatically peg me as a social climber.

“You should come to a practice, introduce yourself to coach before scrimmages start,” one of them says. She’s tall, broad, probably a middle hitter.

“Cool.” I nod. “I mean, I’d do it. If you need me.”

“She’s the best,” Brynn says. “Felicity’s mind is like a steel trap.” She snaps her hands together to illustrate, and I jump.

“Nice,” another girl says, and I give her the smile I tried on at home.

She smiles back. Good. My smile works on upperclassmen.

There’s a little more bounce in my step as I search for my locker. I’m scanning numbers, looking for mine as mini reunions occur every five steps. I’ve gotten about twenty hugs and twice as many once-overs from guys by the time I find it.

Right next to Tress Montor.

Shit. *Shit shit shit.*

The panic grabs me, instantaneous and crushing. My pulse quickens, my breath stops in my chest, and my brain goes to slush. I don’t even have language anymore, just the need to run. It’s been like this since that night; I can’t even look at Tress without having an all-out anxiety attack. Guilt rushes in, filling my whole body like it’s a helium tank and I’m a balloon . . . one that’s about to burst.

Black spots fill my vision, and I know I have to breathe, so I inhale, gulping like a drowning person. A little bit of control comes back, enough that words can be strung together again. It’s not a relief. They come in a tidal wave, like always, an attack on myself inside my own mind.

You’re the reason they left the house in the middle of the night.

You’re the one who can’t remember what happened.

You’re the last person to see Tress’s parents alive.

It’s your fault.

I’m going to lose it. Break open right here in the middle of the hallway, leaving a puddle of insecurities and guilt for everyone to slip in.

Tress turns and sees me.

She hasn’t mastered her face the way I have, hasn’t learned that emotions shouldn’t be shown. We were so close for so long that this still happens sometimes—we’ll catch each other’s eye unexpectedly, and she’ll light up, just a little bit. Tress Montor is still happy to see me.

I can’t take it. I spin on my heel and walk away.

I tell them in the office that I need a locker reassignment. The secretary gives my little jean shorts a glance and tells me that locker placements aren’t negotiable. I tell her there’s a used condom in mine, and that I’m going to call my dad—who is on the school board—if they don’t change it. Right now.

That gets her moving. She points me to a chair and goes to the inner office door, says something muffled to Mrs. Anho, the principal. I text

Hugh, thumbs flashing, giving him my locker number and combo and asking him if he can put a used condom in it.

He doesn't even ask why, just sends me a thumbs-up. He's been protecting me from mean girls, older boys, and the occasional creepy adult ever since a senior snapped my bikini top at the pool in seventh grade. Hugh "accidentally" did a cannonball right on top of his head, which resulted in the squad being called and Hugh getting kicked out of the pool for the rest of the summer.

But Hugh can't fix everything. He can't save me from the past, or what I did. The secretary gives my shorts another glance, and I nervously tug on the hems. When I'm sitting down, they are way shorter than I thought. Great. I told myself what I wore today was going to announce to everyone who Felicity Turnado is. Apparently, she's a little tramp who needs a boy to bail her out when she has panic attacks.

I lean forward, putting my head in my hands, letting my hair fall in sheets on either side of me, shutting out the world.

Shutting out Tress Montor.



Chapter 18

Felicity

“No, it wasn’t like that,” I say as Tress balances a brick in her palm. She looks at me over the edge, dubious.

“Wasn’t like what?” she repeats. “Wasn’t like you had your locker moved so that you didn’t have to be near me?”

“No, Tress . . .”

I clear my throat, thinking hard. It’s difficult when it feels like my head is spinning one direction, my gut another.

“It’s so hard,” I tell her. “I . . .”

Words are slipping, sliding away from me as my focus fades, my vision going in and out. I can’t weigh everything carefully, can’t evaluate each syllable and second like I usually would. As Tress wanted: I’m stuck with being honest.

“I can’t even look at you,” I say, and that flicker of interest that was in her face goes still and hard.

“This wall gets high enough, pretty soon you won’t have to,” she says.

She lays a brick, the wet smell of the mortar rising into my nose.

“No, wait,” I say. “I didn’t mean—”

Tress reaches for another, and I’m utterly quiet.

But she lays it anyway.



Chapter 19

Tress

Felicity is not catching on quickly.

She needs a minute after I put down the second row of bricks, so I go upstairs, listening again at the door for noises in the kitchen. There aren't any, and when I open it even the couple from the corner is gone. The music is still on, the single speaker belting out a tune for no one and nothing. The running hum of the party is gone, too. I'm tense, listening, poised like I've seen the cat do when he doesn't like something he hears.

Or doesn't hear.

Then it comes, a wall of sound—laughter, actually—rolling from the entrance hall. I relax, square my shoulders, flick some wet mortar off my hands, and pull my hood back up before following the sound. The party isn't over; it's just relocated. Hugh is holding court at the top of the staircase, admirers fanned out across the steps below him as he holds a phone up to capture . . . Ribbit?

"What the fuck?" I whisper to myself, slipping behind a group of freshmen who weren't lucky enough to score a spot on the steps. They've got their phones out, too, and Ribbit is neatly squared in their sights.

"Now," Hugh says loudly, positioning his chair—a ridiculously overstuffed thing someone must have pulled from in front of the fireplace—so that he's at an angle to Ribbit, whose chair is smaller. He sways in it, the legs wobbling with his attempts to sit straight.

"Let's get a volunteer from the audience," Hugh says.

"What's going on?" I ask, tugging on a girl's elbow.

She half shrugs, eyes red-rimmed and fever spots on her cheeks. "Dunno. They're doing, like, a talk show kind of thing, I guess? This guy, I swear, it doesn't even matter what you ask him, he answers it. It's *hilarious*."

Oh, shit. I've seen this before. Get one drink in Ribbit and he'll do anything for you. Get two and he'll answer anything you ask him with total, absolute, 100 percent honesty. No filter. No holds barred.

"A volunteer?" Hugh says again, and a girl stands, her arms pinwheeling wildly around her when she almost loses her balance on the stairs. It's Maddie Anho, the principal's daughter. Hugh gets up and comes down to her, reaching out for her fingertips and leading her the rest of the way like they're on the Oscars or something.

Maddie faces Ribbit at the top of the stairs, her body outlined by the massive clock. The pendulum is swinging, flashing on either side of her as it does, playing peekaboo with the crowd. Those guys must have managed to fix it. It chimes quietly, an abbreviated song for the quarter hour. I rise on tiptoes, squinting to get a good look.

"Well, they kind of fixed it," I say to myself.

"Go ahead, ask him anything," Hugh encourages Maddie.

"Huh?" the girl next to me asks, her jaws chewing away on a wad of gum. Underneath the peppermint, I can smell the faint stench of puke.

"The clock," I tell her, my eyes following the smaller hand as it slides upward from the large, embossed number three. "It's running backward." It goes on like that for a full minute, then seems to change its mind and run forward again.

"Scale of one to five, how hot am I?" Maddie asks Ribbit, posing with her hands on her hips for optimum illustration of her curves and the princess costume she's wearing.

More phones come out.

Ribbit doesn't seem impressed. He holds his hand out flat, then wiggles it. Maddie's face falls, and everyone bursts out laughing. I relax a little; at least it's directed at her and not him.

"I mean, I'd bang you," Ribbit says quickly. "But you're not really my type. Your mom, however . . . I would *totally* do your mom."

Everyone dies. Almost literally. A kid sitting next to my feet is laughing so hard that he chokes, a spurt of vomit coming out one side of his mouth as he collapses, still giggling as he passes out, warm and heavy against my shins.

"Oh my God." The girl next to me turns to her friend. "Did you get that? He just said he wants to bang the principal."

The other freshman nods, her focus still tight on her phone, her arm high above the crowd as she zooms in on Ribbit's face. She pulls up Instagram and starts a new story, using hashtags #HonestUsher and #TrueLoser. I'm about to stop her, my hand frozen in midair, when Ribbit adds:

“I'd bang the history teacher, too.”

The noise rises again, loud with fresh laughter. Everyone is here. Everyone is invested. No one is looking for Felicity Turnado.

I turn, and go back down to the basement.



Chapter 20

Cat

*The smell of sick, strong,
humans made weak.
I circle after I eat, small hairs on my tongue.
A cousin comes, prowling. I show her my teeth,
spots of blood.
She cleans my whiskers, pushes under my chin, searching
for warmth.
Heat from the house, bricks on my back.
She curls, between my paws, a small hum rising.
Her contentment flows, touching my own.
She pulls a story from me, our blood speaking.
Another time. Another place.
Before the bars and the man. Before the old meat
and the Almost Human.
I tell her of baking sun, faraway plains.
She shows me a blade, the stub of her tail.
I rest, my skull sheltering her body.
Humans, we say.
And together, shudder.*



Chapter 21

Felicity

Twenty-two rows. That's the number I came up with when Tress walked away from me. Twenty-two rows, four bricks in each row, eighty-eight bricks until I'm not Felicity Turnado anymore but just a part of the foundation of the Allan house. A house that's about to be torn down. I shiver, my bells creating a joyful soundtrack for my fear.

I hear the cellar door, but I don't bother crying out. I know it's Tress. I can tell by her footsteps, a tread I memorized as a child from all the overnights at our houses—before I began having seizures. Tress was always the brave one, the one who would sneak downstairs for snacks in the middle of the night, come back up to my room with Skittles and Twizzlers swiped from the cupboard, our mouths multicolored and sticky as the night wore on and we talked and talked and talked.

Words came easily then. We'd chat about parents and pets, whatever show we were watching. We'd reenact the latest memes and take pictures of each other, laughing as Tress tried to do the splits, one foot balanced on my bed, the other on my dresser.

"When did it change?"

I say it aloud, and Tress glances up from her phone, where she's thumbing through Instagram.

"Seriously? You're asking me?"

"No . . ." I shake my head, searching for the words. "I mean, I know—okay? I know when it changed. I'm not . . . I'm not stupid."

I'm defending myself with the last statement a little bit. Enough so that she knows I'm not going to just be a piece of meat hanging here but not enough to piss her off.

"I know you're not," Tress says. "You never were."

I remember leaning over a math book, working out a problem while Tress looked on, brow furrowed in concentration.

“You told me not to pretend I was,” I say quietly. “Remember that?”

“Yep.” She nods. “Story problems.”

“Story problems,” I agree, rolling my eyes, and we both laugh.

It’s a sound I know well, and have missed. My higher giggle mixing with her low tones, the music of my childhood, now accentuated by the rattle of chains.

Tress shakes her head. “I don’t care how many apples Lucy bought at the store and how many people she needs to feed with them, and how much money she has and how much they cost, and how much change she’ll get. The stories were always so stupid, you know?”

She sits on the chair, and I hear her phone buzz in her back pocket.

The average brick is two inches tall. Felicity is five foot five. How many bricks will it take for her former best friend to seal her into a wall?

I shake my head, dispelling the thought. I already know the answer, anyway. “You said I shouldn’t pretend to be stupid, because I never wanted to raise my hand in class.”

“You didn’t want the boys to think you were *too smart*,” Tress says, making air quotes around the last words.

“You said I can be smart and pretty,” I go on. “I can be both.”

“You are both,” Tress says.

“Right,” I agree. “So . . . if I’m not stupid, Tress, why would I stand here and insist that I don’t know what happened that night, if I really did? Why would I let this continue if I could stop it just by being honest?”

Tress is nodding along with me, like she knew I would say this, and a pit of fear opens in my stomach, my heart falling into it. I thought I was being clever, reconnecting with her and leading her through a logical chain that would undo the ones she’s got me in. But instead she’s just agreeing, like I’m following a script she already had laid out. Like she knew exactly what I was doing.

Tress stands up, selects a brick. “You wouldn’t tell me, because you’re not scared enough yet,” she says, reaching for the mortar pail. “You wouldn’t tell me because fear is a powerful motivator. But you know what’s stronger?”

She comes closer, toes touching the bricks she’s already laid, face close to mine. “Shame,” she says.

And she’s got me there. She’s got me dead to rights.



Chapter 22

Tress

Felicity's face falls, and her knees go out, her wrists alone supporting her as she sags. Her head drops, the jester cap sliding to the front again, but I saw her expression when I hit her with *shame*, and it told me everything I need to know. She went from pretty to ugly with just one word, the spark behind her eyes when we laughed suddenly stomped out. I know what defeat looks like. I know shame, thoroughly and completely.

Felicity Turnado knows something. And I'm going to find out what.

But I need her full attention in order to do that, and right now it looks like she needs to stew for a minute. My phone goes off in my pocket—again—and I pull it out for a glance. Cecil is actually attempting to text for the first time in his life, since I'm not answering any of his calls.

Cat 🐱 dance. Kill some odyssey were ✓

I stare at it for a second, completely lost. I end up having to retype everything into my phone and take some suggestions from autocorrect to try to translate it. What I finally work out is: “Cat dangerous. Kills somebody and we're done.”

“No shit,” I say to my phone. What Cecil didn't do is send any suggestions about how a person is supposed to go about capturing a panther and leading it docilely back to its cage in the middle of the night. I know there's a dart gun back at home, but stalking a cat is a dangerous business that becomes impossible when it's a black cat in utter darkness.

Nope. Cecil will have to wait. Or sober up and do it himself—there's a thought.

My phone vibrates in my hand, drawing my attention to a string of tweets and Instagram posts featuring the hashtags I'd set on notifications—#HonestUsher and #TrueLoser. There are hundreds of alerts, and they're

picking up steam. People I know are using it, but it's being retweeted and reposted at an alarming rate, strangers getting in on the game. Someone even has a livestream going on Facebook . . . and it has over three hundred viewers at the moment.

I hop on to see Ribbit leaning dangerously to one side of his chair; the only thing apparently balancing him is a beer in the other hand. Somebody is keeping him refreshed, making sure the show doesn't end before they're done watching.

"Next question," Hugh says, and the camera goes over to him, large and kingly in his stuffed chair.

"What are you doing?" I ask the screen. Hugh's a good guy; we've got a friendship that's rooted in my cock-and-balls shirt from freshman year. I know that if I send him a text right now and ask him to stop, he will.

But I don't.

"This one is from . . ." Hugh glances at his phone, seems confused, then starts again. "This person wants to know if you've ever shit your pants."

The camera swings back to Ribbit, who seems to be thinking very hard. "Yes," he says, his face dead serious. "You know the pizza they sell at the pool?"

The whole crowd groans, and the camera pans them, some people nodding enthusiastically, wanting to know the rest, others covering their mouths in horror.

"It runs right through you," Ribbit says, enjoying the reaction. "You know . . . *runs*?"

The camera swings back to Hugh for a reaction, but his eyes are on his phone as he scrolls through it.

"I tried to make it to the bathroom," Ribbit goes on, turning to the crowd. "But even though I was *running* . . ." He leans into the pun, enjoying the shocked reactions. He pauses for effect. "I didn't quite make it. I'm pretty sure I left a little something in the pool."

Everybody goes nuts, some people overjoyed, others disgusted. Brynn Whitaker goes up to Hugh, clearly unhappy. She grabs his arm, whispers something in his ear. Ribbit spots her and points with his beer hand, froth splashing over the front-row viewers.

"You were there," he says, speech slurring. "You had on a pink bikini."

The crowd whoops, and Brynn gets a few catcalls, the concerned look on her face quickly switching over to anger.

“Your boob popped out,” Ribbit continues. “I held on to that image for months. Like, really *held on to it*,” he says, and mimes jerking off.

The Facebook stream goes nuts along with the crowd upstairs. Hearts and laughing faces and thumbs-ups are flying across my screen when I switch over to text. My fingers hover for a minute, debating. The hashtags are gaining momentum and the livestream has a thousand people now. Me texting Hugh isn’t going to stop this. Brynn shakes off Hugh’s hand when he tries to grab her, and she storms off. I watch her exit the screen accompanied by the hard strikes of her footsteps above my head as she stomps away.

Bells jingle, and I glance up. Felicity has raised her head, fresh tears streaking down her face. “Tress,” she says, my name barely a whisper. “I don’t know anything. You’ve got to believe me.”

“Yeah.” I shove my phone into my back pocket and stand up, the chair creaking under me. “See, the thing is . . . I don’t.”

Another roll of laughter comes from upstairs, loud enough to reach us in our solitude.

“What’s going on?” Felicity asks, eyes going to the floor above us.

“Ribbit got drunk,” I tell her. “He’s answering anything anybody asks him, and it’s going viral.”

Felicity shakes her head. “They’ll eat him alive.”

I shrug. “They’re your friends.”

“It’s your cousin,” she snaps back. “Aren’t you going to do something?”

“I am doing something,” I tell her, and I pick up a brick.

She goes quiet and watchful, eyes following me.

“Eighty-eight bricks,” Felicity says, the fever spots in her cheeks brighter now. “Eighty-eight bricks and Lucy should just buy all the apples; that way everyone can have as many as they want.”

“Or maybe,” I say, weighing the brick in my hand before I lay the third row. “Maybe she has to steal them, because she’s fucking poor.”

There’s a lull upstairs, and I hear the clock, running backward to chime the hour.



Chapter 23

Felicity

Sixth Grade

My phone lights up with a text, and my heart goes up into my throat when I see the name. I play it cool as I go downstairs, stepping over the pile of shoes Mom set aside to go to the yard sale fundraiser to benefit the PTO. She became the president right after I started having seizures, and now she's at the school all the time. Mom always manages to find something to do in my classroom, one eye on me. Last week David Evans told me my mom was hot, and I stomped on his foot. I got in trouble and had to apologize to him in front of the class.

"Do we hit boys?" Mom asked in the car on the way home, the school buses I'm not allowed to ride anymore blocking traffic.

"No," I muttered, and she nodded, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror.

"What do we do when a boy says something nice to us?"

"Say thank you." I repeated the lesson she's been drilling into me since I started to get boobs, but David didn't say something nice to me. He said it about my mom. And his face didn't look nice when he said it.

"Mooooom," I call out, scanning the empty first floor from the open staircase.

I spot both Mom and Dad hanging out on the new deck. Even with the sliding door shut, I know they're fighting. I can tell because Mom keeps her face blank, neither accepting or denying anything Dad says. He's told her before—one time when they forgot to shut the door—that it makes him *fucking insane*. I'm not supposed to know he says that word, or that the word even exists. I know a lot of things I'm not supposed to, mostly

because Mom and Dad get angry with each other, and when they're angry they're loud, too.

But Mom keeps making the face Dad hates. She's good at it. I've started practicing it in the mirror. Apparently making boys *fucking insane* is something that works; Mom always gets what she wants.

If I can catch them at a bad moment my own news might slip past, as they both try really, really hard to act like everything is okay. That's something that we're *all* good at. I flip back the lock and am about to jerk open the door, when I stop in my tracks, catching the last few words out of Dad's mouth.

"—goddamn birthday party! There's no reason why they can't spend the night!"

"Really? *Really?*" Mom asks, dragging out the second one, like maybe Dad made a mistake by saying what he did. By the look on his face, he might be thinking the same thing. "Because we all know what happened last time our daughter had a sleepover."

Yeah, we do. Us and the whole town. In my hand, my phone buzzes again. My fingers are sweaty, smearing the name on the screen: *Tress Montor*.

The last time our daughter had a sleepover. I touch my fingers to the side of my lip, where the scar still lingers, even though Mom has told me twice there's a doctor who can make it like it never happened.

I already feel like a lot of things never happened, like the big chunk of time I can't remember from that night at Tress's. But I remember what came before, super well. Mom and Dad had been fighting out on the back deck, just like this. Outside, where they thought I couldn't hear. But I am small and quiet, and I'd sat halfway up the steps, listening.

"If she wants to go to the Montors' there's no reason why not," Dad said.

"No reason?" Mom shot back, her voice angrier than his, and louder. "It only has to happen once, Brandon, just once. One seizure and everybody knows that the Turnados have something in their blood, and who will marry her then?"

I squirmed on the stairs then, thinking about the fact that my dad had a real name, more than the idea of getting married.

"*Married?*" Dad's voice rose to match Mom's then, cracking. "Jesus Christ, she's in sixth grade, April! And this isn't the seventeenth century."

“No,” Mom said. “But it’s Amontillado. You didn’t grow up here. You don’t know. People still talk about the Evans boy marrying that Troyer girl out of the kindness of his heart, knowing full well insanity runs in their family.”

“You sure it’s not the only one?” Dad bellowed, and then there was a smacking sound that made me jump, the hem of my nightgown fluttering with the movement. Mom had come around the corner, shaking her hand, freezing when she spotted me on the steps.

“What did you hear?” she asked, but all I could do was shake my head.

Like I did when I came home from school to find her on the floor, a froth around her lips. Like I did when I caught her taking my seizure medication, her mouth a tight line around the pill. Like I did when she told me, for the thousandth time, “Never let anyone know there is something wrong with you.”

I have become very good at pretending there is nothing wrong. So good that now, as I slide open the screen door, I put on the face I’ve been practicing. Mom’s face. Blankness, waiting for the other person’s reaction.

“Tress RSVP’d,” I say. “She’ll be here tomorrow for the party.”

“Okay,” Mom says in her fake, cheery voice, the one she practices as much I do the face. The door is almost latched again when Mom stops it with her foot. “Wait. Who?”

“Tress,” I say, keeping my voice light and airy, like hers. You can get away with a lot if you keep a polite tone. I’ve learned that from watching Mom. She bartered down the salesman at the car lot last week to a price that had actually made Dad hug her. We drove off the lot together, Mom looking in the rearview mirror at the salesman with a smile.

“He has no idea what hit him,” she said, then told me to set the air however I wanted it because we had dual climate control now. And heated seats. The clothes I was wearing still smell like a new car, leather and plastic and steel, shiny and bright. Clean. New. A lot of my stuff is new these days.

“Tress,” I repeat. “Remember her?”

Mom’s blank face folds a bit, into a scowl, and I know I messed up. I messed up because I sounded like Dad. And—like Mom said that night before I ran to Tress’s house—nobody likes a smart-ass.

But I hear Jackson Troyer really likes yours.

That's what Dad had said, right before there was another sound that wasn't a slap but something harder, something I didn't want to know more about, so I ran. Went down the road and across the bridge and out into the night, like Tress and I used to sing—

Over the river and through the woods to my best friend's house I go . . .

"Yes," Mom says calmly now, eyeing me. "Of course I remember Tress. I didn't realize that you'd invited her. I'm just wondering if it's a good idea for you to see her. Won't that be . . ."

"Difficult?" I fill in for her, using the word my therapist applies to just about everything.

Is it difficult for you to move past that night?

Do you have difficulties remembering because of the trauma?

How difficult is it to manage your panic attacks recently?

Would you say that your relationship with Tress is difficult now?

No. I'd say it's gone, over, done with. And that's not okay with me. I don't know what happened to the Montors that night, but I know that my mom wants to pretend that it was nothing. That nothing happened and Tress never existed. But she did, and she still does, and she's my friend, and I want her at my birthday party. Even if my mom doesn't.

I stick my chin out. That's Dad's move and I know Mom doesn't like it, but we're past the part where we pretend to be polite.

"Yes, *difficult* is a good word," Mom says, reaching to take my hand. I let her have it, but I don't squeeze back. I just let my hand lie in hers, because *difficult* is not a good word.

"It won't be," I say. "Tress is my friend. Why shouldn't she be at my party?"

It's a dumb question. I know why. Because I was with her parents in their car the night they disappeared, and I haven't hung out with Tress since then, even though it's been months. Mom and Dad said we couldn't really talk to each other because there was an open investigation, and we were both witnesses. Everybody wanted to make sure our stories were kept straight, that we didn't end up "muddying the waters" by conferring with each other.

But, like the investigator who talked to Mom explained, I'm a witness, but only *kind of*. Technically I was there when something happened to the Montors, but whatever it was, I seized right before it happened. I was there . . . but not there. I was in the car, and then I was on the bank by the

river, my nightgown covered in mud and pee, crying because someone carried me there but then they left. I was alone, and I was cold, and I was scared.

But I wasn't a witness. I had hoped that meant I could talk to Tress, but really it just meant that I go to therapy more often. And that the officer who I told about the seizures gets a big box of doughnuts delivered to his desk every Monday morning.

"Honey." Mom is being careful with me now, using the voice that she uses when I'm coming up from a seizure, when she thinks I'm having trouble understanding English. I don't. Not then, and not now.

"I just thought it might be uncomfortable for you, to be reminded of . . . everything."

I pull my hand back, out of hers. "I can't be reminded of something I can't remember."

"Okay." The blank face is back on. I'm starting to understand why it makes Dad *fucking insane*. "But what about the other girls? Won't it be awkward for them?"

"No," I say, even though I know it probably will. Mom knows it, too, and she can hear it in my voice.

"Well." Mom reaches out, rubs my arm since I won't give her my hand back. "It's your birthday party, Felicity. If you want Tress to come, then she comes. I just want it to be fun. It's a party. *Everyone* should be able to have fun."

She slides past me through the door, clicking it shut behind her and leaving me on the deck with Dad. He shakes his head, raises his beer to me in a salute, and downs the rest of it. Just like the car salesman . . . sometimes we don't know what just hit us.

"So then Jackie said that she heard David Evans was going out with a seventh grader, and I said there's no way that's true." Gretchen scratches her head as she sucks on her Popsicle, the red color sticking to the edges of her lips. Somehow she manages to get it all just on her lips, dying them a permanent bloodred. The rest of us have it smeared around our mouths. Like kids.

We are kids, I remind myself. But like my therapist says, sometimes kids don't get to stay kids for very long.

Brynn bites into her Popsicle, the sight making me wince. My teeth are super sensitive, and I always have to roll anything cold around in my mouth, warming it up before I take the leap of actually biting down. Brynn goes in like the Popsicle is her enemy, chomping off half of it with one bite.

She catches me looking at her and rolls her eyes. We're going to have to hear about David Evans and who he may or may not be going out with until someone interrupts Gretchen. Maddie is too invested in painting her toenails to be much help. Her Popsicle is about to drip onto my new bedspread, but I don't care.

I am waiting on something much more important to happen.

"Felicity!" Mom's voice sings out. "Your guest is here!"

Everyone else, Mom announced as *your friend*.

Gretchen breaks off, and all the girls look at me with questions on their faces. This is the group. Our group, the one that formed at the beginning of this school year with pinkie promises and matching hoodies and a group-text conversation that has been going on for months. We're all here. No one is missing.

Then Tress is in the doorway, a sleeping bag tucked under her arm, unlaced boots flopping on her feet. She's got a smudge of dirt in the hollow under her neck, a fading bruise across her upper arm. There's a scab covering most of one knee, a chunk of dead skin that almost falls off when I give her the biggest hug ever.

"I'm glad you're here," I say in her ear, quiet, just for us.

"Hey," she says back. She's stiff in my arms, but the stiffness eases out when I don't relent in my squeezing. Tress melts a little, just like a Popsicle, once I've warmed it up a bit.

"Oops," Maddie says from behind us. "I think I made a mess."

"You can't *think* you made a mess," Brynn says. "You either did or you didn't."

"I made a mess, then," Maddie says agreeably.

"I've got it," Brynn says, hopping up. She slips past us, reaching out one hand to awkwardly clap Tress on the shoulder. "Hey, Tress," she says casually.

"Hey," Tress says back, stiffening again.

Still on the floor, Gretchen's eyes narrow at Tress's sleeping bag, still tucked under her arm. "Is this a sleepover? The invitation didn't say it was a sleepover."

Under my arm, Tress goes still as stone.

"I need somewhere to stay," Tress says, at the same time that I say, "Of course it's a sleepover!"

It's definitely not a sleepover. Mom wouldn't even consider it, in case I had a seizure. In case Maddie and Gretchen and Brynn see me pee my pants and twitch and roll on the floor like an insane person. A person who has something wrong with them. A person who no one will want to marry, because then their kids might have it, too.

Gretchen eyes me, sucking hard on her Popsicle. "If she's staying over, then I'm staying over," she finally says.

"Well, yeah!" I say, because like Mom said, we want to make sure *everybody* is having a good time. I'll be sure to bring that up when I break the news to her.

"Kay," Gretchen says, reaching up to scratch her head again. "I'll text my dad."

Brynn comes back with wet paper towels and wipes down Maddie's arm—which is dripping with red Popsicle water.

"Hey, we're staying the night now," she tells Brynn, who shakes her head.

"Can't," Brynn says. "I've got volleyball camp in the morning."

"Oh," Maddie says quietly, and I know she's thinking the same thing I am. Without Brynn here to rein her in, Gretchen will go after Tress any chance she gets. And Maddie—I know—will follow the leader.

That just leaves me. I tighten my arm around Tress, pulling her against my side.

"I'm glad you're here," I say again.



Chapter 24

Tress

Sixth Grade

I stomp down hard on the shovel, accidentally cracking carrots as I do. But Zee won't care. Zebras aren't all that picky about their food. Not like how Gretchen Astor always asks the cafeteria lady to cut the crust off her sandwiches. The first time Cecil showed me how to dig carrots for the animals I asked if he was going to wash them first. He'd thumped me on the head with the bunch, dirt raining down on my hair.

"Probably do you a little good to eat some dirt, too," he said.

In the paddock, Zee brays at me. He saw me come into the garden with the shovel, and he's no dummy. It's snack time. Goldie-Dog leaves my heels, trots over to Zee's paddock, and slips between the slats, craning her neck so they can touch noses.

Goldie's rear end is a mess of mats, mud, and probably some poop, too. Cecil won't let her in the house, so my dog has had to settle for finding a spot in the barn. She made friends with Zee real quick, but Dee—the ostrich—didn't like Goldie at all. Cecil wasn't too happy about that; Zee and Dee came as a pair, and they share the same paddock. Having Goldie zip in and out was causing "hostilities," according to Cecil, and if I wanted to keep my dog, she'd better learn her place.

Two months ago, I still had the nerve to plant my feet and stick my chin out. I'd told Cecil that I'd run away before I let him take my dog to the pound.

"Who said anything about the pound?" Cecil said, and pointed at the shotgun propped in the corner.

So Goldie had to learn her place, which meant I had to teach Dee that she wasn't a threat. I guess that's how I learned my place, too, out there

with the animals. Just a week in the paddock and Zee was nudging my back, checking my pockets for treats. And while Dee and I weren't exactly friends, the ostrich stopped flapping her wings at me and making herself big every time I climbed the fence. She'd only charged me the once, when my back was turned.

That's how I learned not to turn my back. On anything.

Cecil kept the pens cleaner than the house, on account of the ASPCA people doing unannounced drop-ins. It didn't take long for me to figure out the animals were better company anyway; I'd learned not to turn my back on Cecil, either.

And how to haul manure and clean hooves. How to brush a coat and trim a mane. How much to feed each animal and where to catch the biggest fish out of the creek for the alligator. I shudder, remembering the flash of silver scales as a tail disappeared down her throat. I lean against Zee to absorb some of her warmth. She grunts deep in her throat and crunches on her carrots, the orange ends disappearing into her mouth, the green tops following behind.

Dee spots us and comes over, her bulk shifting from side to side. She stretches her neck out and pecks me, like a reminder that she's here, and hungry, too.

"You're ugly," I tell her.

It's hard to like an ostrich.

You can't like or dislike an alligator; you just have to be careful around it. She keeps to herself in her little pond, and we turn off the electric fence to pop in and check that it's decently stocked with fish . . . but only after being sure she's well-fed with a few big ones from the stream first.

"Can't trust her," Cecil told me gruffly, the first time we walked into the alligator's pen. It seems to be the basic rule around here.

But mostly Rue, Cecil warned me. It took me the longest to warm up to the orangutan. He called her the *o-rang-o-tangy* and said she'd tear my face off if I gave her the chance. I wasn't allowed to go in her pen—a large, fenced-in open-air area with a single tree growing in it for her to swing in. There was a closed-in building attached, where she could go if it rained, or when the vet came for medical attention. But for the most part Rue stayed in her tree, eyes following me when I moved around the paddocks and cages.

I hadn't liked it. Hadn't liked the way she was almost human . . . but not quite. How sometimes she walked along beside me when I came near the cage. I'd felt stalked, hunted, until the one day she stretched an arm through the fencing and handed me something. I'd reached out automatically, palm up.

And Rue had put a piece of shit in my hand.

"What?" I'd looked down at it, shocked, then back up to see Rue giving me . . . well, giving me a shit-eating grin.

"You asshole!" I'd said—a word that Cecil dropped a lot around the cages—and done the only thing that seemed like the right reaction. I threw it at her.

She'd been thrilled, ducking her head and jumping into the tree to grab an apple from the stash she kept up there, throwing it at me the second I turned my back. It sailed through the square holes of the fence and I understood; we were playing a game.

I'd gathered a few things, some apples from the orchard, a tennis ball I usually tossed with Goldie, and a balled-up sock from the box of mismatches. Rue and I spent most of the afternoon throwing things at each other, which I guess is how you make friends with an orangutan.

She's watching me now from her tree; I can see her eyeing me through the leaves. She'll probably wait until I'm in throwing distance and peg me from afar. She's gotten pretty good at judging what will fit through the fence holes and what won't, and her aim is improving.

"All right, Zee," I tell the zebra, giving her a last rub on the neck. "You're good."

Goldie slips through the paddock slats as I climb over, her dirty haunches bouncing as she runs in front of me. I really need to trim her up, give her a bath. Not that long ago she had monthly appointments with the groomer and would come home with a bow on top of her head, Mom and Dad telling her she was a good girl, a pretty girl. Dad would roll around on the ground with Goldie, then grab my leg and pull me into the pile, telling me I was a good girl, too, while I shrieked and reached for Mom, who would pretend I was invisible.

"What is that?" she'd say, cocking her head. "I think I hear my daughter . . . but I can't see her. Weird."

I squash the thought as soon as I have it, painful because it came true. Mom can't see me now, neither can Dad, and I bet they can't hear me,

either. Felicity Turnado showed up at my house in her nightgown, crying, asking if she could spend the night, and after that everything changed. Goldie isn't an indoor dog anymore, and she isn't a clean dog anymore. Cecil doesn't tell me that I'm a good girl, either, no matter how clean the pens are or how hard I work. That's just the way it is.

The tennis ball hits me square in the forehead, and Goldie grabs it on the third bounce, running off with her head in the air. I rub the spot.

"Nice, Rue," I tell her. I hold my hands up, empty. Goldie ran off with my only ammo. "You win." She gives me a chirp and comes down, graceful and effortless, swinging easily through the power of her own strength. She drops in front of me, cocking her head when my phone goes off in my back pocket. There's a question on her face—what is this new thing?

I'm as surprised as she is. Right after Mom and Dad disappeared there had been a lot of messages, kids from school asking if I was all right (I wasn't) and if there was anything they could do (they couldn't). But the messages had dwindled as time passed, and my new situation became old. I wasn't news anymore. I was just poor now. I couldn't do the movies or the mall without that awkward moment when someone else's mom handed me a folded twenty, or spend the night without being encouraged to take a shower *and scrub real good* before bedtime.

I stopped taking the twenties, started refusing to scrub real good, and the pity invitations didn't come anymore. The only person I hadn't heard from in months was the person I wanted to talk to the most: Felicity. So when I pull the phone out of my back pocket and see that I've got a text from her, and that she wants me to come to her birthday party, I say the first thing that comes to mind, some more words that Cecil taught me.

"Holy shit."

In her cage, Rue grins at me.

I am not glad I came to the party.

Cecil was not happy when I told him I wasn't doing chores tonight, because it means he can't get blackout drunk for another extra hour. I didn't even think about asking him to drive me into town, and I would've walked the whole way if Ribbit's mom hadn't spotted me hiking down the road with my backpack and sleeping bag. I'd grabbed the bag after Cecil yelled at me that a girl who doesn't pull her weight doesn't need a bed to sleep in at night. I've been locked out for less, and slept in the stable more than once

when Cecil was in a mood. If I can stay at Felicity's, at least I won't smell like an ostrich in the morning.

Aunt Lenore gave me a ride to Felicity's house, a little line in between her eyebrows. She told me to have a good time when I got out of the car, Cecil's old boots slapping against the Turnados' paved walkway. Cecil took most of my stuff to Goodwill when I moved in with him, said he didn't have the kind of room that Mom and Dad did and that I didn't need most of that stuff anyway. What I needed was to learn not to be spoiled.

I guess one of the things that spoiled me was having my own shoes, because Cecil traded all of them to some guy at the bar who forgot to get his kid a birthday present in exchange for a bottle of whiskey. So now I have on his old boots, the dried mud and probably more than a little animal shit tracking all over Felicity's bedroom carpet. Which, I notice, is new.

April—Felicity's mom—was weird with me, one hand on my shoulder as she guided me to Felicity's room, like I didn't know the way. Then Gretchen had mentioned invitations. I didn't get one of those. I got a text last night, last minute.

I'm standing here, wearing an old man's shoes, holding a sleeping bag I'm not supposed to have, staring down a bunch of girls I don't really like. And despite the weight of Felicity's arm across my shoulders, something is being made very clear to me.

I don't belong here.



Chapter 25

Felicity

Sixth Grade

We're friends again.

It happened slowly, starting with the fact that no one had brought any sleeping bags—breaking the news to Mom that this was now a sleepover had *not* been awesome—and so we ended up making a pile of blankets on the floor of my room. We're cuddled in, a bag of Doritos passing between us, wiping cheesy fingers on whatever we can find.

Mom had carried Tress's boots outside with a wrinkled nose, and I had given her a pair of my pajamas. She's almost like us, now, with the right clothes on and that scab on her knee covered. Almost. There's still something about her eyes, and how she's being too careful, watching Gretchen like she's waiting for her to attack.

Which she hasn't done . . . so far.

Brynn's mom picked her up about an hour ago and me, Gretchen, Maddie, and Tress had torn through a package of cookies and a case of soda that Dad had slipped into my room, with a wink and a thumbs-up. I'm guessing Mom is lying on the couch downstairs, her mouth a thin, flat line as she crosses her fingers and prays I don't have a seizure in front of everyone. Either that or worrying about the soda rotting my teeth out of my head. She always says my smile is my best feature. I guess if I didn't have seizures maybe that would be my best feature instead.

It might rot my teeth, but the sugar is helping us all get along. We've got the giggles, and Tress has even loosened up a little bit.

"Hey," she says, bumping me with her elbow. "Do your impression of Mr. Stephens."

"Oh . . .," I say, my stomach bottoming out a little bit.

“Do her what?” Gretchen asks.

“She can do Mr. Stephens,” Tress says. “She’s, like, really good at impressions.”

It’s true, I am. But it’s not something I do for just anybody. Last time Mom caught me mimicking our mailman, Dad in a laughing fit on the couch, she told me it wasn’t nice to make fun of people.

“I’m not making fun,” I insisted. “I’m just—”

“Pretending to be a sixty-year-old man?” Mom asked, raising an eyebrow. “That’s weird, Felicity.”

Maybe it is weird, I don’t know. I’d kept my impressions just for Tress since then, but now Maddie and Gretchen are looking at me expectantly.

“All right,” I say, standing up. A cascade of cookie crumbs rolls off my front as I get into position, throwing my shoulders back and making myself big, barrel-chested like Mr. Stephens, our science teacher.

“Volcanoes,” I say, dropping my voice really low and rounding out my vowels. “Are truly a miracle of geology.”

Maddie erupts in a fit of giggles, and Tress claps. Gretchen just looks at me, wide-eyed.

“That was . . . bizarre,” she finally says.

Weird, my mom’s voice echoes in the back of my head, and I falter on my feet, wondering how Gretchen would react if I dropped to the floor right now, foaming at the mouth. *Bizarre* would just be the beginning.

“Do another one, do another one,” Maddie says. “Do Captain Choir!”

I roll into an impression of Mrs. Adams, our music teacher, smacking the undersides of my arms to make my skin wobble, which totally is making fun of someone. But even Gretchen is laughing now, so I keep going.

“Oh, do Ms. Frampton!” Gretchen says.

That one’s harder. Ms. Frampton is a complete airhead of a substitute that we get sometimes. She’s really young and nice and just seems to want everyone to be happy. Last time we had her she brought homemade cookies, and then lost control of the classroom when Jessica Stanhope had an allergic reaction to the nuts in them. We haven’t seen Ms. Frampton since then.

I screw my eyes shut, trying to remember her. Trying to recall the set of her face, small repeated movements, the lilt of her voice. All the things that make a person unique.

“Hello, class,” I singsong as I breeze through the doorway, pretending like I’ve just arrived. “How are we today? I’ve got cookies for everyone . . . except Jessica.”

“Like Jessica needs any more cookies,” Gretchen says, holding her hands out from her waist. Maddie erupts into giggles, but Tress is frozen in place, her face a tight mask.

I don’t know what happened. It’s not like she’s friends with Jessica or anything, and my impression wasn’t that bad. I hit the high notes of Ms. Frampton’s voice, the cadence of her speech with a little downturn at the end. No . . . wait. That’s not right. I wasn’t doing Ms. Frampton at all; I fell back on mimicking a voice that I’ve heard a million times.

I was doing Annabelle Montor.

And by the look on Tress’s face, I nailed it.



Chapter 26

Tress

Sixth Grade

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

It’s true, but not because I have to pee. I’m going to puke. I’m going to lose Coke and Doritos and Oreos all over these girls who have parents. I push past Felicity, and she reaches for me, her fingers glancing over my arm. It’s just like my mom said when I rolled around on the ground with Dad and Goldie . . . *I can hear you, but I can’t see you.* I might never see my mom again for as long as I live, but I just heard her voice. And it came out of Felicity Turnado’s mouth.

“Don’t touch me,” I growl, ducking out from under her reach.

I can’t be near her right now. I slam the bathroom door so hard it bounces off the frame, and I know that April might be coming to investigate—loud noises at the Turnado household aren’t a thing—but then I’m over the toilet and losing everything, and I couldn’t care less what April thinks about slamming doors.

I flush it all down and roll over onto my back for a second while I get myself under control. I don’t think Felicity meant to do that, don’t think she had any intention of bringing the image of my mother back to me, full force, right when I was beginning to think I might be the kind of girl who still went to birthday parties. Who still laughed with other girls. Who might even still have friends.

The leg of Felicity’s pajama bottoms is bunched up above my knee, the sliding dive I made to get to the toilet in time giving me a fresh burn right across the kneecap. There will be a scab to match the other leg in a couple days. A tear slips out, and I reach above me, roll out some toilet paper to dab my eyes and the sweat from my forehead. I’ve got to get cleaned up,

get myself under control—*get my shit together*, Cecil would say. I give my nose a good blow and then open the cupboard to throw the wad of paper away. April has all the trash cans in the house tucked away in corners, behind doors, out of sight. I toss the tissue, miss, and have to dig around to find it, knocking over a box of tampons in the process.

Felicity must have started, I realize . . . then think about the fact that I didn't know. I didn't know because she didn't tell me. And she didn't tell me because—

“Because we're not friends anymore,” I say aloud.

We're not. I knew that. I knew it when I got a text from her and had to double-check that she actually meant to invite me to her party, that she didn't accidentally text the wrong person. I knew it when April carried my boots outside. I knew it when Felicity hugged me—so tight, too tight—with a desperation to deny what she already knew, too.

We're not friends anymore.

And, while that may be true, something else is as well. There's a box of tampons in this house, and there aren't any where I live now. When I asked Cecil to add them to the shopping list he told me it'd be a cold day in hell before someone caught him in that aisle, and that I should just *hold it* until I got to school.

“It doesn't work that way,” I'd told him, but he said he'd gotten this far in life without learning women's business, and that was just fine. Which for him, I suppose it was.

Me, I need tampons.

And here are some, right in front of me.

I grab the box and stuff it down the front of Felicity's pajamas. If I get back into the bedroom and get under the pile of blankets I can slip it out of my pants and into my backpack once everybody else is asleep. I straighten up, close the cupboard and give my reflection one last check before turning toward the door, where a shadow slides away.

Gretchen's quick, but I'm faster. You don't live around wild animals for months without developing reflexes. I grab her wrist as she tries to spin away from me.

“Let me go,” she says, pulling away. But I've got her in a good grip; I can feel the tiny bones of her wrist grinding together as I clamp down.

“Guys?”

Felicity and Maddie are standing in the bedroom doorway, confused. I let go of Gretchen's wrist and she holds it against her chest.

"What's going on?" Felicity asks, eyes moving between the two of us.

"Tress stole your tampons," Gretchen says, shooting me a nasty look as she rubs her wrist.

"Did not!" I say, lying reflexively. Everyone looks at the obvious outline of a box in the waistline of my pajamas. Felicity's pajamas. Felicity's tampons.

"Hey! Let's . . . let's watch a movie!" Felicity says brightly, voice high and fake, like her mom's. "You can pick, Gretchen. Doesn't that one cute guy you like have something new out? Or like a special on HBO? There's that new horror show, I heard it's super scary!"

She's trying, but it's not enough. We're going to pretend that everything is fine, that I belong here, that we can all just watch a movie together and go back to having a sleepover at a birthday party after one girl puked her guts out and then stole someone else's tampons. The girl who can't buy her own. The girl who doesn't belong.

I duck back into the bathroom and toss the box under the sink, not caring that I knock over a dozen bottles in the process. They're all lined up, matching sets of shampoo and conditioner in bright colors. I push over the last two for good measure, go back to the bedroom and curl up under some of the blankets without a word, my back to the others, snuggled into a nest of my own making.

I can't be here, but I can't go home, either.

I don't have one of those anymore.

I lie still, listening to the others drop off, one by one. Maddie goes first, her little comments about the movie falling away into light snores. Gretchen sticks it out longer, but eventually she asks Felicity if she can sleep in the bed because sleeping on the floor is just not comfortable enough. Felicity tells her that yes, of course she can, and soon Gretchen is out, too, her breathing deep and regular.

I hear Felicity get up, tiptoeing around the others. I hear the bathroom door swing open, the higher creak of the cupboard door following that, and the sound of her straightening her shampoo bottles. She comes back to the bedroom, steps over me lightly, unzips my backpack, and puts the tampons inside.

I lay there, stiff and sweating, until there's a glimmer of light outside. I sneak out and walk home, stopping to throw the tampons into the river. The box comes open as it falls, and they float downstream, refusing to sink, bobbing brightly against the dark brown of the water. They're packaged in different colors, the foil flashing pink and neon green, the sun reflecting off them as they go with the current, for everyone to see.

Something that doesn't belong.

Tossed away.

Trash.

Just like me.



Chapter 27

Felicity

“I was trying to help you,” I say, bristling. “You needed tampons; I gave them to you. I was trying to be your friend!”

Tress is shaking her head. Slowly. Calmly. But I wouldn’t say patiently. No, I wouldn’t call it that.

“My friend?” she asks, crossing her arms. “Giving me things doesn’t make you my friend, Felicity. It’s . . .” Her face contorts, and I know she’s trying to find a way to say what she wants to say without using the word *charity*.

She clears her throat, trying again. “It doesn’t make you my friend. Giving me stuff makes me . . . less than.”

Tress Montor < Felicity Turnado

“I never looked at it like that,” I say.

“No.” Tress comes to her feet, mortar trowel in hand. “Of course you didn’t. You were just thinking of yourself, how it made *you* feel to give me stuff. And how did it make you feel, Felicity?” she asks, stepping closer.

I grind my teeth, shredding the new layer of enamel that was recently applied in an attempt to undo years of damage . . . years of me doing exactly this—grinding my teeth and thinking about Tress Montor.

Because yeah, it did make me feel better to give her things—clothes, pairs of shoes when there was a BOGO, books that my ever-hopeful librarian aunt bought me for Christmas that I was never going to read. Over the years it went way beyond tampons, every box that I dropped on her doorstep late at night lightening the load on my heart.

They came back sometimes—but not always.

“Don’t act all insulted,” I say, though I am keeping an eye on the trowel. “You didn’t return everything. So don’t stand there all high and mighty and act like you’re above a handout.”

“No,” Tress says. “Only what I could balance on my bike, or carry, once I outgrew my bike. The rest ended up in the river.”

“That’s . . .” I imagine designer-label clothes, tags still on, hardcover bestsellers floating down the river along with bottles of body spray. “That’s ridiculous, Tress. Jesus, swallow your pride.”

“*Pride?*” Her grip on the trowel tightens, knuckles going white. “You actually think I have some of that?”

Tears pool in her eyes, and she turns away from me, shoulders hunched, back tense with an urge to strike out at something. When she speaks, her voice is an empty echo, bouncing back to me off the stone walls.

“When you gave me things, it made you feel better—and that’s all you thought about, how it made you feel. You never thought maybe it made me feel even worse. I wasn’t your friend, Felicity. I was your pity project.”

“What was I supposed to do?” I ask, anger pushing the words past my enamel-capped teeth. “How was I supposed to make everything better?”

She turns back to me, eyes wet.

“You were supposed to tell the truth.”

The truth . . . a slippery element stuck somewhere between what I witnessed but wasn’t there for, something I saw but can’t remember. “Tress.” I lick my lips, gloss coming off on my tongue.

It’s gone, along with my makeup, which has mixed with tears and blood and has dried on my cleavage. All my armor is melting away, but my tits are still high, almost to my chin because of the push-up bra I’m wearing under my costume. I came to this party prepared . . . but not for this. Not for Tress Montor.

I remember what I looked like before I left, the last glance at the mirror that showed me Felicity Turnado—bold, confident, sexy. A girl who takes beers from boys and they’re thankful for it, because maybe our fingers brushed. A girl who other girls mimic, dress like, act like, follow around. I’ve cut more than one of them with my tongue, knocked them down a few pegs when they climbed too close, putting them back where they belong. Beneath me.

Fuck Tress Montor, and fuck her pride.

I toss my head and straighten my shoulders. “Those jeans you’re wearing are mine,” I say. “Seven for All Mankind, boot cut, size 6. The pullover you had on at school Monday was mine, too, Collina Strada, crew

neck, medium. So don't stand there and talk to me about not taking my charity. You are, even if you don't know it."

I said something similar to a girl from Prospero at the football game last week. She wanted to knock me back by telling me she screwed Hugh. It's more than likely the truth, but I covered the drop in my gut by saying it was my shirt he ripped off her, and that's probably what turned him on in the first place, that she was almost me . . . but not quite. She ran away from me crying, the sequins on the Parker Isaac top that used to hang in my closet flashing as she went.

But Tress doesn't even blink. She comes closer, leaning in to give me a hard look. I'm the first one to flinch. Content, she pulls back.

"These may be your jeans," she says. "But it's also your blood on them. So don't get too cocky."

I can't argue with that. I want to, I want to kick and scream and call her names. But when she motions at me to be silent, I stop talking. Because while I might have made my point, Tress follows it up by making one of her own. Not with words, but brick and mortar. She lays the fourth row, calmly, steadily, with no outward sign that I upset her at all.

That's the fourth of twenty-two rows, I think. Fourth of twenty-two. It sounds kind of like football, but we're not playing a game down here. I've got eighteen rows left to convince Tress not to bury me alive. Eighteen rows to convince her that I deserve to live. Problem is, I don't know if I can. Another problem is, I'm not entirely sure that I do.

"Okay," she says, pushing her hair out of her face. "Now we need to talk about junior year."



Chapter 28

Tress

Junior Year

I'm staring at a college application, wondering if *wrestling alligators* is something I should put under special skills or not. There certainly is a trick to it, and I've got it down . . . plus some nasty scars on my legs to show for it. There's a general rustle behind me in the library. Brynn and Gretchen are whispering about something; David Evans comes in and informs the librarian his summer reading report is due tomorrow so she should give him the shortest thing on the required reading list. She hands him T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* with a small smile.

"Good luck," she says, keeping her face professional. But inside, I'm sure she's laughing like Rue did the one time Cecil tripped and fell into her septic drainage.

I turn back to my computer screen, angling it so that nobody can see what I'm doing. I don't need everybody talking about the fact that Tress Montor was looking at colleges, trying to translate the language on the FAFSA website. I can't just walk up to a college admissions office and tell them I've got both Allan and Usher blood in me but no money. That might matter in Amontillado, but once I leave here, I'm just a poor kid with a crappy résumé, all my money in dirty, wadded bills that I slip off the pile before handing it over to Cecil, who is sometimes sober enough to double-check the count, sometimes not.

"Jesus Christ," I say, leaning back in my chair and looking at the tuition prices. Even the cheaper ones feel astronomical. It doesn't help that I have no idea what to claim for our income. Whenever I ask Cecil about it all he does is shake his head, or say, "Not good and not getting any better."

"What's up?"

Hugh flops into the seat next to me, his knees scraping against mine. They're darkly tanned from the summer, and even hairier than Rue's. I quickly minimize my window but not before he catches the movement.

"Looking at porn?" he asks too loudly.

"No," I harsh whisper at him. "And we're in a library."

"Huh." He looks around him like he's surprised. "Weird."

"For you," I agree. "Why are you even here?"

Then I see Brynn looking at him over a book, glancing down quickly when he notices her.

"Ohhhhh," I say. Hugh blushes a little bit, and I smack his leg. "You could try talking to her, not just following her around, creep."

He moves in closer to me, lowering his voice as well. "Okay, so I tried that, but here's the thing—she's like . . . nice."

"Oh, that's new and different for you, huh?"

"No, I mean . . ." He glances around, drops his voice to a whisper. "So, like, everybody thinks I'm with Felicity, you know?"

"If by *with* you mean hooking up at parties, then yes, people think that."

"Right!" Hugh says, apparently thrilled I understand. "But it's not like that."

I'm pulled in despite myself, still hungry after all these years for any inside information about my former best friend. "Not like that how?"

"We're not, like, a thing. We're not together. It's . . ." He leans back in his chair, and sighs. "It's complicated."

"Genitals make life hard," I say, and it's his turn to smack me.

"Seriously?" he asks. "Genitals?"

"That's what they're called."

"Whatever." Hugh shakes his head. "Point is—Brynn's a nice girl, and she's friends with Felicity."

"And if she thinks Felicity is into you, she's not going to cross her friend," I finish for him. "So just tell Brynn that you're not doing genital stuff with Felicity."

"It's not that simple," he says, suddenly choosing his words more carefully. "Felicity needs me for . . . things."

I'm quiet, searching his face. I know Hugh pretty well—well enough to know that he doesn't do drugs. And I know my market well enough to know that he's not selling, either, because I haven't seen my sales go down

—I don't have a competitor. So Felicity doesn't need him for the same thing she needs me for.

"Whatever it is," I tell him. "She's using you."

"It's not like that, Tress," Hugh says. "Felicity's got problems you know nothing about."

"Right," I agree, turning away from him. "Not like mine; the whole town knows my issues."

Hugh lets it slide; there's nothing he can say to that. David has joined Brynn and Gretchen at their table, brow furrowed in intense concentration as he tries to plow through *The Waste Land*.

"Whoa, dude, you've got to beef up this résumé."

I turn back to my computer to see that Hugh's looking at my application. "Dick," I say. "That's private."

"No, for real," he says, reaching out for the keyboard. "Check this out."

I grudgingly push the keyboard toward him, and he starts typing away with a surprisingly fast hunt-and-peck method.

"So you don't want to outright lie," he says. "Because they might follow up. I'm guessing you don't have any job references?"

I nod, silently thanking him. Hugh knows that I can't name the Amontillado Animal Attractions as my employer, much less put Cecil down as a reference. Our Facebook page itself would bar me from most campuses in twenty seconds, not to mention probably bring the ASPCA down on our heads. And I can imagine Cecil fielding a phone call from an admissions office, telling them he didn't raise no pussy that needs air-conditioning—or a higher education.

Self-starter, highly motivated, and adaptable to changing situations, Hugh types.

"Nice," I say grudgingly. It's certainly all true, especially being adaptable. Last week I had to relocate my entire store when somebody let the cops know there were drug deals going down in the old barn out on 26. I think learning the patterns of a grumpy ostrich's mood swings counts as adaptable, too.

"But the extracurriculars need some fluffing." Hugh eyes the screen, resting his chin on his hand. "I know you don't play any sports—"

"You mean, you know I can't afford to play any sports," I correct him, but he just waves his hand. Amontillado went to pay-to-play a few years ago, taking with it any chance I had of stepping foot onto a court or field.

Not that it mattered. Even if I had the cash, I don't have a car, and there's no way Cecil would drive my ass back and forth to practices.

"Sports look good on paper," Hugh says. "But that's not the only thing people put on their résumés."

"Right, but all of them require some sort of actual participation," I tell him, ticking off the clubs on my fingers. "Student council, FFA, even book club. All those kids are constantly doing shit I can't."

Basically, anything that requires time and a pair of wheels.

"What about class officer?" Hugh asks. "It's kind of a bullshit title. You don't really do much of anything—What?" He breaks off when he sees me rolling my eyes.

"You really think there's a chance in hell? Class officers are pure popularity contests, and you know it."

"President and VP, maybe," he admits.

"And nobody is going to let me handle money," I tell him. "No way I get treasurer."

"So run for secretary."

My mouth is already open for a comeback, but none comes out. I end up settling for, "Yeah right."

"Why not? Now you're just being a pain in the ass, and you know it," Hugh says. "Last year they couldn't even get anybody to put their name up for it at the class meeting."

This is true, but the *they* in question were Gretchen and Brynn—already elected president and VP—and half the reason nobody wanted to fill the other roles was because they didn't want to put up with Gretchen's shit. Finally some flunkies had raised their hands and automatically got the positions simply because nobody else offered themselves up as tribute.

I glance over at their table. Brynn I can take; she actually seems kind of cool. Gretchen I can *take*; as in, take her out at the knees if she starts anything with me. And it would be good to have something on my extracurriculars, since I can't claim my job without self-incrimination.

"All right," I say to Hugh. "I'll give it a shot."

"Nice," he says. "Now, let me show you what the internet is actually for."



Chapter 29

Felicity

Junior Year

“So then David said there was some freshman at two-a-days who passed out, and when they lifted his legs to get the blood to run to his head he wasn’t wearing his jock strap and his balls popped out of his shorts . . . or should I say *ball*?”

“He only had one?” Brynn asks.

“One,” Gretchen says, holding a finger in the air, in case we don’t get it.

“I’m surprised he had any, the way he hits,” Hugh says, and Brynn winces.

I look down at my lunch, shaking my head. Hugh can never see that she’s not impressed when he says shitty things. Gretchen sure is, though. She stops eating to run both her hands over the expanse of his chest.

“Everything bounces off this brick wall,” she says, practically purring.

Brynn becomes completely entranced by her pizza at that point, and I have to stop myself from clarifying that the only thing that hasn’t bounced off Hugh’s chest is Gretchen. He won’t have anything to do with her, despite her multiple attempts.

I’m stirring my soup—something called “cheesy hamburger” that consists of gelatinous cheese and hunks of meat—when the freshman in question walks by, his face turning a bright red when Hugh shouts, “Uno!”

Hugh jumps up and gives him a high five, which the kid returns half-heartedly, balancing his lunch tray in the other hand and trying not to tip over when Hugh hits him harder than strictly necessary.

“Did you have to do that?” Brynn asks when Hugh comes back to our table.

“What?” Hugh says. “He loved it.”

Brynn gathers up her stuff and walks away, leaving a stricken Hugh behind.

“What’d I do?” he asks, looking at me for clarification.

I could tell him. Explain that Brynn has an ex-boyfriend she could never quite please, how even the affection he showed her always had an edge on it, or a taunt, just like what Hugh did when he called that poor kid Uno. Or . . . I could just shrug, because David is coming over to join us, and he always brings out the worst in Hugh, and I don’t think my voice will carry over his.

“What’s up with you?” Gretchen asks, giving me an elbow right when my spoon is halfway to my mouth. Cheesy hamburger sprays across my lap, the grease soaking in, the cheese leaving a residue.

“Sorry,” she says, handing me a napkin.

“Nothing’s up with me,” I tell her, dabbing at the mess.

“Really? ’Cause those are the first words you’ve said all lunch.”

They might actually be the first words I’ve said all day, but Gretchen doesn’t need to know that. I didn’t have a good night. Something was trying to break through, old memories rising like they’d been filled with helium, fighting their way to the surface. I can feel them, sometimes—floating dread. My therapist says it would be best if I let them into the light, deal with whatever it is trying to come out.

But I can’t. So instead I popped an Oxy and had dreams with red lights and water, the feeling of floating not being limited to the drugs in my bloodstream. I was being carried, not smoothly and efficiently the way Hugh does, the raven tattoo flashing in and out of my vision, but sloppily, awkwardly, my rescuer—or attacker?—running through the woods, branches slashing my legs, long and exposed under my nightgown.

Gretchen snaps her fingers in front of my face, rousing me. I jump, knocking my soup bowl, this time the mess slopping onto the table—not anyone’s clothes.

“Jesus—get with the program, Turnado,” David says.

“Fuck off,” Hugh snaps at him, and the mood at our table is most definitely altered—because of me. I’m not being the bright, smiling blonde today. Not being the person they know.

“Sorry,” I say. “Didn’t sleep much last night.”

“That’s my boy,” David says, slapping Hugh on the back.

Brynn is gone, so Hugh lets it hang, like maybe we were having insane sex for hours and that's why I'm not at the top of my game today. When really it's the opposite; I slept too much. I'm slow and foggy, the Oxy still doing its job even when I'm done needing it to.

Brynn has moved over to the table with the volleyball team, and Hugh wanders in their direction, knowing one of them will call for him to join them. A sophomore does, and he plops down next to her. Brynn looks away when he tugs at the girl's fishtail braid.

He's hopeless. Always on for the boys, always *onto* the girls. Except for the few of us he recognizes as human beings. The ones he'd have to actually form a relationship with, not just fuck and toss. He'll come to our rescue every time, a white knight who rides away before he has to take more responsibility than just saving you. Or maybe I've just been seriously friend-zoned and am bitter.

"We need to talk about prom."

I assume Gretchen directed that to David, getting a top-tier date locked in early. But a few seconds later she's snapping her fingers in front of my face again.

"Hello? Prom?"

"Yeah, prom," I say, desperate to make myself agreeable.

"Right," she says, watching me closely. "Junior class officers are in charge of it, and I'm not letting ours come off like last year's."

I have to agree with her. Last year they tried to do a *Little Mermaid*-themed dance and rented out an aquarium. Which would've been cool, but nobody bothered to clarify with the aquarium staff that it was for a prom, not just a class trip, so a bunch of decked-out teens ended up sitting through lessons about endangered species and forced to participate in a scavenger hunt identifying types of fish. Although, I did have two proposals of marriage and there was at least one fist fight over me, so not a total loss.

"Obviously me and Brynn have got prez and vice in the bag, but we can't have those diseases from last year."

"Meg and Lisa?" I ask. "I thought they were fine."

"No, I mean like *actual diseases*, Turnado. Don't you remember?"

I do remember. Meg Cofflero and Lisa Johnson had done a fundraiser for multiple sclerosis, asking that we all pay whatever we felt was appropriate for our prom tickets, while anything over the price of admission was donated to medical research. Mom and Dad had donated a ridiculous

amount, asking that they be put down as anonymous. There were a lot of those on the program at dinner, a trifold that had the five- through fifty-dollar donors listed, the word *anonymous* becoming more prevalent as the numbers got higher.

"We are not having prom at the hospital," Gretchen says, putting down her fork with a clang.

"Who said we were?" I shoot back.

"Felicity," she says patiently, "that's what will happen. Trust me. Everybody was so happy with Meg and Lisa and all their community-minded *thoughtfulness*." She puts the last in air quotes.

"Did you know Meg's sister has MS?" she goes on. "That's the whole reason they did it. It's not like they're actually raising money for sick people. I bet everything went right into her family's checking account."

I seriously doubt that, but I don't have the energy to fight with Gretchen. Besides, even if it did all go to pay the Coffleros' medical bills, I don't even care.

"MS sucks," I say, turning over a spoonful of now cold and lumpy soup.

"Uh, so does prom in a cancer ward."

"Way not cool," David chimes in, a bite of mac and cheese falling out of his mouth.

"I already talked to Maddie Anho, and she said she'd run for treasurer, so you'll be secretary," Gretchen says, like it's all decided.

"Wait? What?" I ask.

"Sec-re-tary," Gretchen says, breaking down the syllables for me. "Even if Meg or Lisa try to run, you know they won't win against you."

"Oh my God," David says. "You're cockblocking class elections."

I flip my spoon over again, watching fat and cheese roll off it in an oily stream. I don't want to be secretary. I don't want to plan prom. And I don't want to be sitting here with David and Gretchen. I don't want to think anymore.

I want to go home. I want to go to bed.

"Meeting's at one, auditorium." Gretchen pats my arm. "It's mandatory."

Class meetings are mandatory for the whole school; I know that.

But I don't think that's what Gretchen means.

Everyone files into the auditorium, eyes sliding across each other as we assess after the summer break. We've been in school a week, but there are still some surprises: the cute girl who suddenly became hot; the hot guy who doesn't have the same shine to him anymore; the pasty person who apparently went outside for the first time and looks better for it.

I feel eyes on me, too—a lot. I know my exterior looks amazing. No one needs to know about the rest.

Mrs. Febrezio is our class adviser, and when she goes up to the podium everybody gets quiet more quickly than they would for anyone else. She writes more reference letters for colleges than anyone in the district, and nobody wants to burn bridges.

"All right." She clears her throat. "You all know the drill. I'll open nominations for the offices, and we'll vote by show of hands. President?"

She surveys the crowd, and Maddie stands up. "I nominate Gretchen Astor."

"I second," Brynn pipes up. Nobody even attempts to run against her, and the inevitable wave of hands go into the air, sealing the deal.

"Vice?" Febrezio calls, but Gretchen is on her feet before she's finished with even that one syllable.

"I nominate Brynn Whitaker."

"Second," Hugh yells, loudly enough that there are giggles. The pattern repeats itself, with no one wanting to face off against the volleyball star . . . or maybe they just don't want to be the person who challenges the only Black girl and look like an asshole. Or . . . wait. Brynn would win anyway. Am I being racist? While my Oxy-riddled brain tries to puzzle that out, Brynn wins and we move on to treasurer.

"I nominate Maddie Anho," Brynn says, but Lisa Johnson is right behind her, and nominates Meg Cofflero. Beside me, Gretchen tenses. Meg then nominates Lisa, and it becomes clear that they are trying to split the vote just enough that Maddie won't slide into the spot so easily. People are looking up from their phones now, aware that the room just got tense.

Febrezio calls for a vote, and it's actually close. Maddie wins, but it's not the landslide Gretchen was looking for. Beside me, she's texting furiously, promising people free prom tickets and open-campus lunch for upperclassmen if they vote for her candidate for secretary.

"Secretary?" Febrezio calls, and Gretchen jumps up. I reach out to grab her arm at the last second and manage to snag her, pulling her back down.

“Ouch! The fuck?” she says to me, too angry to notice the people around us covering their smiles.

Lisa stands and nominates Meg.

“I don’t want to,” I tell Gretchen.

“What do you mean you don’t want to?” she repeats back to me, like I spoke another language or something.

Meg stands and nominates Lisa.

“I . . . just don’t want to,” I say, my tongue heavy in my mouth, my brain too slow to process words as the Oxy keeps its promise.

Gretchen’s eyes narrow at me, and suddenly Hugh is standing, taking everyone by surprise when he says, “I nominate Tress Montor.”

It gets super quiet then, and all eyes go to Tress. She’s sitting by herself in the back, her gaze bouncing off everyone else’s. She won’t hang her head, but she doesn’t know what to do with all that attention, either.

“What the fuck is he doing?” Gretchen asks me, like I’m supposed to know. “Great. Now we’re going to have a safari-themed prom, and that crocodile is going to eat somebody.”

“It’s an alligator,” I say, but Gretchen slips my grasp and jumps up right before Febrezio closes the nominations.

“I nominate Felicity Turnado,” she shouts, and some of the tension leaves the room. Everybody knows what Gretchen wants now. They know who they’re supposed to vote for.

I win.

Of course I do.

I always win.



Chapter 30

Tress

“I needed that,” I tell her, tapping the edge of the mortar knife against the pail.

“I didn’t want it,” Felicity says.

“That’s not the point.”

I get up as another wave of laughter comes from above us, a few shocked gasps for punctuation. Dear Lord, what did Ribbit say this time?

“I didn’t want it,” Felicity says again, more force behind her words. “Gretchen—”

“But you *got* it,” I say, cutting her off. “Something I would have had to fight for, barely had the guts to *want* . . . and you just walk into it.”

We’re quiet, watching each other for a minute; the silence stretches upstairs, and I fight the urge to check my phone, follow the hashtags, see what Hugh has Ribbit doing now.

Felicity takes a deep breath, and I notice that her skin is a chalky gray under her makeup, the smeared foundation and bright fever spots the only color to her face.

“Would it have mattered?” she says quietly.

“What?” I refocus, back on her eyes, sharp and glittery.

“You wanted honesty, right? That’s the whole goal? So, let’s be honest, *Tress*,” she practically hisses, coming alive.

“Let’s pretend for one second that you got class secretary—what then? How does this scenario play out, in your mind? One extracurricular and colleges are falling all over you? Maybe you give a good interview and borrow Brynn’s clothes—because you’re besties now, right? And the admissions committee looks at your application and says, wait, everyone! Kick out the valedictorians and varsity athletes—make room for this girl! She’s the junior-class secretary!

“Hoooooooooraaaaaaaaaayyyyyy!” Felicity does a bizarre shimmy inside her chains, costume bells jingling in a frenzy.

“Fuck you,” I say, the words tight and flat, barely inching out past my teeth.

“No, *fuck you*,” Felicity says, swaying from her wrists as her knees give out underneath her. “That is not on me, Tress Montor. High school sucks, and life is unfair, but you’re not pinning the fact that you’re not going to college on me. That one is not my fault.”

My anger is a steel bar inside me, supporting my spine. We were always like this, even when we were little, burning hot and cold. You should worry when Felicity Turnado starts screaming . . . and you should be scared when I stop talking.

Heat can’t sustain itself. A hot day will build into a summer storm, washing out the air and bringing relief. But breaking a cold snap requires an entire shift in the atmosphere, a change in the environment. Felicity is fire and I am ice, and she burns out before I’m halfway through the fifth row of bricks, adding some extra mortar every time she mutters *fuck you* under her breath. I slap the side of her ankle with the trowel when she kicks out at me. It hits right on the bone, and I feel the reverberation down in the handle. Her ankle blackens immediately, a dark bruise spreading as I set another brick.



Chapter 31

Felicity

Fuck you is all I can hear in my head, and it's coming out of my mouth. That is not smart, but I can't stop it. My therapist said a lot about accepting the things I can't change, and one of those is that Tress's parents are gone. She also said I should stop beating myself up for everything—the things I did do, but also things I didn't do. There are a thousand reasons Tress isn't going to college, and she can't hang any of them on me.

So I did what my therapist told me to do. I stood up for myself.

Now I'm so exhausted I can't even do that. Instead, I'm hanging from manacles after screaming obscenities at the person who has me entirely at her disposal and just added three more inches to my rapidly closing tomb.

I need to fire my therapist.

Tress has got the look on her face that I know means trouble. My explosion is over. Maybe forty-five seconds of anger—righteous anger, I will give myself that—is gone now. And for my troubles I've put Tress into a mood that will take me hours to talk her out of . . . if I can stay conscious for that long.

It's become a question.

She didn't exactly give me a love tap with that brick, and the few beers I'd downed with no food aren't doing me any favors, either. Whatever is going on with my gut is not improving, and my arms are beginning to cramp from being over my head for . . . how long? An hour? Three? I raise my head, spots of light exploding in my vision as I search for her among them, my head swimming.

I find her, focus hard on her face, pale and tight under the bare bulb. Her jaw is set and the little muscles along her jawline are flickering. Why am I trying to soften her up? It's useless. Better to take a route she'll respect, at least. Let's get this over with. I spit. The glob, which tastes of blood, lands somewhere near my feet.

“Okay, so let’s just do this,” I say. “What do you want to talk about now? Somebody you had a crush on never noticed you, is that on me? How about that broken arm you had in eighth grade? Totally my fault, right? Obviously, anything that ever went wrong in your life comes back to me so what’s the next topic?”

Tress tosses the trowel into her mortar bucket, drops of liquid concrete flying out around her. “Walking in the rain,” she says.

And it’s not some poetic allusion. I know exactly what she’s talking about.

And it’s not good.

Upstairs, the clock chimes.



Chapter 32

Tress

Seventh Grade

There's a big red *D* on the top of my science test. Next to it, in beautiful, flowing cursive, Mrs. Trevor wrote, *Try harder! You know the answers!*

Except I don't.

Not to the science, and not to a lot bigger questions, either. Specifically, what happened to my mom and dad. It's been three years, and at first I tried to do what Cecil told me to—just forget about it. I learned very quickly that when Cecil tells you to do something, you do it. So when he told me to forget about it, I tried. I tried very hard.

I tried when I was feeding the animals and when I was cleaning out pens. I tried when I was supposed to be listening in class or when I was supposed to be asleep. I tried constantly, but they kept surfacing—faces and voices, thoughts and smells, little reminders that jumped up to grab me when I was baling straw or wading in Ribbit's pond.

I look at Mrs. Trevor's advice and think maybe it's better than Cecil's. Maybe I should try harder to find out what happened, instead of just forgetting about it.

I crumple up the test and toss it in the trash can after the bell rings, walking past the bus riders lining up at the back door, slipping behind Mrs. Anho's back as Maddie rushes up to her with a problem. Something new she can't handle.

Good Lord, what would that girl do if something really bad happened to her?

Curl up and die, that's what.

And maybe that's what my parents did, and maybe not. I just don't know. All I know is that I went from living in a nice house with my family

to living in a trailer with my grandpa and whatever wild animal comes in the door because he doesn't always remember to shut it.

Also, because raccoons are wily bastards. That's what Cecil would say.

A lot of the things Cecil would say have been slipping into my vocabulary the past few years, which has landed me in detention more than once. I saw Felicity Turnado glancing in the window of detention one time, spotting me, and looking away. She has no idea what the inside of that room looks like. Never will, either.

Felicity Turnado doesn't say things like *wily bastard*, because she probably hasn't heard that kind of language in her nice house with her family. In her nice life that my life used to be like, until . . . something happened.

What? I don't know. But maybe I need to try harder.

I haven't been to the public library since my parents disappeared. I'm pretty sure there were some library books at my house that got packed up with all my other stuff. Everything ended up at Goodwill because Cecil said my bedroom was about to get a lot smaller.

The air-conditioning *whooshes* in my face when I walk in, the gust puffing some of my own smell back up into my nose. I'm carrying around the faint scent of zebra with me, having brushed out Zee earlier this morning while I waited on the bus. A bus I didn't get back onto to go home. Instead, I came here, to the library. To try harder.

The librarian glances up, her *Nice to see you* smile slipping when she spots me. It's not nice to see me, it's awkward to see me. That's what the smile tightens into; that's what I see on all the faces of Amontillado now. Pity.

I go right to a bank of computers, but there's a sign-in screen, and I don't have my library card with me, so I go back up to the front desk, to the *Nice to pity you* smile.

"Hi, I don't have my library card with me and I need to use a computer, so can you sign in for me, or something? My name is Tress."

It's a lot. You forget how to talk to people when you're mostly only talking to animals.

"Hello, Tress," the librarian says. "I know you. Do you remember me?"

Of course she knows me. It's Amontillado. And yes, I remember her. Her name is Cindy. She's got some gray hair now and a few wrinkles. Must've gotten married, that's what Cecil would say.

“We can get you a new card,” Cindy says, typing away at her computer.

“I don’t need a new card,” I tell her. “I have a card. I used to come here, before.”

Before something happened.

“Yes.” Cindy taps away, not looking up at me. “But your card would have expired. They expire if they haven’t been used in a year, and I haven’t seen you here since . . .”

Since something happened.

“Well, it’s been more than a year,” Cindy finishes.

I don’t say anything. We stand there in silence until she must find something super interesting on her computer because she says, “There it is!” much too loudly.

Heads turn. They turn and see me and pity me.

“Yes.” Cindy clears her throat. “It looks like your card has expired and . . .” Her eyes are moving over the screen, which I can see reflected in her glasses, some red type standing out. It probably says I have library books that are years overdue. It probably says that I don’t have parents. It probably says, *Be really, really polite to this girl because we all feel sorry for her*. Cindy punches some buttons and the red writing disappears, my lost books and overdue fines and damaged materials washed away in a wave of pity.

There’s a new card in my hand, hard and shiny. I log on to a computer in the corner, one tucked away where no one can see what I’m doing. Where no one can see that I’m googling my parents. The first thing that pops up is a story from the *Amontillado Alerter*.

That’s a dumbass thing to call a paper. That’s what Cecil says.

No clues in missing couple case

Police are asking for the public’s help in their continued search for Lee and Annabelle Montor, who went missing from their home this past Saturday night. Anyone with information regarding their whereabouts is asked to call the hotline printed below. There are no more details to share at this time.

Not on the *Amontillado Alerter* site . . . I can just imagine the editor chewing her lip and deciding what she could print and what she couldn’t. The facts were scarce—my mom and dad left home with Felicity in the car,

and they never came back. Felicity was found in her nightgown by the riverbank, soaking wet, concussed and bleeding. But she was a minor, and I'm sure the Turnados fought like hell to keep her identity out of the limelight. The editor wouldn't have been able to print much without wandering into the realm of pure gossip. But it's a small town and I don't need the newspaper to get details. There are plenty of those on social media. The Amontillado Block Watch page is particularly helpful.

I heard they found the girl down by the river.

She was still at home. Their daughter is the one that called the cops when they didn't come back. Dumbass. Don't spread rumors.

Other girl . . . dumbass.

Page Admin here, reminding everyone to keep it friendly.

He was plenty friendly, if you know what I mean. Came back to bite him in the ass, if you ask me.

Nobody did.

Why the woman? Why kill his wife? You better stop running your mouth before somebody shuts it for you.

Page Admin here, there is no proof the couple in question is dead, and no proof of foul play. Please can we keep to the facts?

What facts? Nobody knows shit. Poof. They gone.

And it's Lee and Annabelle Montor, Jesus. We all know it. Why bother saying "the couple in question?"

Lee and Annabelle AND Jesus? Things are getting rough around here. ROTFL

You're making jokes? People are dead. It's not funny.

WE DON'T KNOW ANYBODY DIED

WE DON'T KNOW THEY DIDN'T

Srsly? Come on, people. They're gone. Their car is gone. Their kid was left at home alone. The other kid was found on the riverbank, assaulted. They're effing dead.

Assaulted?!?! Someone touched that little girl???? Why don't we know about this??? I have kids. I need to know what's going on!!!! I have a RIGHT to know what's going on.

She wasn't assaulted. My cousin is an EMT. She had injuries consistent with being in a mild collision, and some head trauma.

—You shouldn't be repeating what first responders say.

—First responders shouldn't be talking!!!!

Hey you sicko thought she got touched you're the one with head trauma

Page Admin here, I'm locking down this thread to prevent further discussion. This is an ongoing police investigation and nothing being posted here is relevant or helpful.

No, it's not relevant, or helpful. I already knew all these things—and also that Facebook is a shit show. But one phrase does stand out: *This is an ongoing police investigation.*

It still is, three years later. Nobody knows if my parents are alive or dead, and if I follow both options to their logical conclusions, the answer is ugly. Either they abandoned me, or they're dead. My throat closes up. These aren't new thoughts; they're the same ones that have been bubbling up for years, repeating themselves as I lay curled in my bed—or the stable, if Cecil decided I hadn't earned the right to come inside for the night.

But there are other thoughts, too, like the fact that Mom would have known I'd end up living with either Cecil or Aunt Lenore, raised alongside wild animals in cages, or growing up in a house that was falling down.

Or they're dead. Their bodies rotting somewhere, all bone by now, like the ones scattered around the panther's pen. Something to nothing.

I've turned over both options, plenty of times.

I don't know which one I prefer.

I log off the computer, copying down the hotline that was set up for the public to call with information on the Montor disappearance, although I doubt it's still active.

The light is fading by the time I leave the library, clouds rolling in to cover up the sun. Dead leaves skitter across the pavement while I watch a few kids from school unlock their bikes from the rack and take off for home, hoping to beat the rain.

I've got no chance of that. I'm on foot, with a ways to go. This is something I didn't think about when I dodged Mrs. Anho at school. The bus is my ride home. Well, it's my ride back to where I live. Now, I'm stuck walking.

I zip up my coat—an old Carhartt jacket I'd found at a church yard sale, with the price tag of ten dollars on it. I'd showed it to Cecil, telling him it was a steal.

"Steal, damn right," he'd said, and tossed it into the truck without paying for it.

I keep my head down as I walk out of town, the sidewalks stopping once I'm outside the village limits. I'm on the berm then, boots kicking up gravel when it starts to rain. The drops are cold and wet, heavy and starting to pelt me, starting to sting, when the first car goes by.

They slow down, and when I glance up the driver—a man—inspects me, seems to consider stopping, then decides not to. Can't say I blame him. He's watching his own ass. Something I've learned plenty about living at Amontillado Animal Attractions. The next driver, though, is a woman, and she goes so far as to roll her window down until someone leans over the back seat and whispers in her ear. Gretchen Astor.

The car moves on.

I'm soaked to my skin, my hair hanging in dark streams by the time I'm headed uphill. I figure I've got about five miles to go, and only three if I decide to stop at Ribbit's house and get dried off. There's a car coming at me now, headlights on, slicing through the rain. I move over, giving them plenty of room. The last thing I need is to get clipped. This one doesn't even slow down, doesn't even consider it. It hits a pothole right in front of me, sending a wave of cold, gritty water into my teeth.

“Fuck you,” I scream, spinning with it as it passes me, both fingers out in a double bird. “Fuck you all over the place!”

I know that car. I’ve ridden in it. Been in the back seat with my best friend, sharing Skittles and handing a Coke back and forth—but only when it was just her dad with us, because her mom is funny about sugar. *Makes you fat*, she says.

April Turnado is not fat. Far from it. Her too-skinny face had given me a glance as they swept past, her eyes big and round. Felicity was in the passenger seat, her head swiveling to follow me, her mouth moving as she told her mom something. I could see words coming out, her lipstick outlining her bright teeth, but couldn’t hear them. I guess I didn’t need to. I know what she said. *Keep going*.

Three years ago, I was dry and warm and safe, dialing the police when I woke up to an empty house. Felicity woke up wet and cold and confused, lying on a riverbank. Now Felicity is the one who is dry and warm and safe and I’m the one soaking wet, wondering what the hell just happened.

What did happen, Felicity?

Exactly what the hell happened?



Chapter 33

Felicity

Seventh Grade

We're driving home from Dr. Gabriella's, the rain a white sheet outside the windshield.

"So . . ." Mom turns on the defrost, hoping I'll fill in before she has to ask.

I don't.

"How did it go?"

"Fine," I say. This is my go-to answer. School is fine. My friends are fine. My therapist appointment was fine.

"Honey, if you don't think Dr. Gabriella is helping you—"

"She is," I say quickly, realizing my misstep. "I . . . she is."

Mom's eyebrows draw together, but she doesn't push me further. I know I need to go on, share more about what happens during my sessions, but the truth is I talk a hell of a lot more about my mom than I do Tress Montor.

"I . . . Gretchen's dog has an infected toe pad," I say. Because it's something I heard about all day. Big news. World-ending stuff.

"Oh," Mom says. "That's too bad." But she's not really listening. She's squinting at something in the distance, a shape on the side of the road. "Is that someone walking?"

We get closer, the wipers clearing the windshield for a single moment when Tress looks up and makes eye contact with me.

"Holy shit!" I say, and Mom gasps.

"Felicity Turnado! Language!"

"That was Tress, Mom! We've got to turn around and pick her up, give her a ride."

Mom doesn't stop. She doesn't even slow down.

“Mom?”

She glances over at me, her mouth a thin line. “You say Dr. Gabriella is helping you; I believe it. And I’m not undoing any of that by picking up Tress Montor.”

“But . . .” I spin in my seat, watching Tress disappear into the storm. “It’s raining.”

“Yes,” Mom says, speeding the wipers up a notch. “It is.”



Chapter 34

Tress

Seventh Grade

It's Lenore Usher who finally picks me up.

"Tress?" My aunt calls, rolling down the passenger-side window.

I climb in, dripping all over. "Sorry," I say, pulling my wet clothes away from my skin.

"Sorry," I say again when I notice a huge clod of mud I dragged into the car. Lenore has that effect on people; you just start apologizing to her, even if you don't know what you did wrong. Because she makes you feel like you definitely did something.

I glance at her, but she's not looking at me, or the mess I'm making in her car. She's focused on the road, staring over the wheel as we climb into the hills.

"I missed the bus," I say, even though she didn't ask.

"Cecil didn't notice?"

I shake my head. She doesn't call him *Dad* or *your grandpa*. He's just Cecil. Feels about right. "No, ma'am, Cecil didn't notice."

I don't call anybody *ma'am*. Not Mrs. Anho, not my science teacher, not Cindy the pity librarian. But it pops out around Lenore Usher, probably because that's what Ribbit calls her. Not *Mom*. Which, if I really think about it, kind of makes sense. He's been following her around since he could walk, going to council meetings and committee gatherings, where everybody else made damn sure to call her *ma'am*.

It was probably Ribbit's first word.

Mine was *mama*. I know that. It's written in my baby book, the one I hide under my mattress because I don't want Cecil to know that I kept it. He calls sentimental things *senti-shit-all*.

We drive past the Usher house, looming out of the storm, a fresh wound in the side where a rock fell away. Lenore pulls into our driveway, some gravel spinning out from under her tires. She puts the car in park, lets the engine idle. Zee brays his welcome, his upper half sticking out from his barn door. Goldie-Dog runs up to the car, despite the rain, jumping onto the passenger side and leaving a muddy paw smear across the window when she slides off.

“Sorry,” I say to Lenore, but she only nods, and suddenly I’m tired of apologizing to her. I’m tired of pity smiles and being told to try harder. I’m tired of not knowing what the hell happened.

“What happened to my parents?” I ask Lenore.

Goldie jumps again, not understanding why I haven’t gotten out yet, leaving a second smear. I don’t apologize for that one. I sit in my aunt’s car, rain streaming off me.

“What happened to them?” I ask again.

She flexes her jaw, small muscles jumping as she turns to me. Her eyes are bright, little pinpricks of light dancing off the tears that rest there, refusing to fall.

“I’m sorry, Tress,” she says, another apology filling the air. “I’m sorry, but nobody knows.”

I don’t thank her, for the ride, or the condolences. I slam the door when I get out, Goldie on my heels as I tromp to the trailer, shutting the door in her face because Cecil won’t let her in, even though he lets raccoons and possums and once a muskrat, wander on in. I kick off my boots at the door and mud flies, sticking to the wall above the couch, where Cecil lies, unconscious.

Turns out my effort of trying harder has revealed that nobody knows any more than I do. Which is approximately nothing. I flop onto my bed, the stale smell of the bare mattress rising around me as I stare at my palm, where I etched the hotline from the *Amontillado Alerter* to call if I have information about the disappearance of Lee and Annabelle Montor.

I don’t have information. I don’t know shit. But it’s the only thing my afternoon of research dug up, so I dial it, broken-off fingernails tapping against my cell screen. There’s a series of clicks, and then an automated voice informs me that the number I have dialed is no longer in service. I’m instructed to hang up, confirm the number I’m attempting to reach, and try again.

Try harder.

I can't. I'm thirteen years old, and I don't have parents, and I don't know what to ask or who to talk to and maybe they left me or maybe they died but either way I'm alone and listening to a dial tone, when suddenly there's a voice.

"Amontillado Police Department, Officer Riley."

That's it. A succession of two facts—something that was so hard to come by before that I don't know what to do. My throat closes, and all the words reverse, back down into my belly, like a hard little ball.

"Officer Riley," he says again, and I've lived with a drunk long enough to recognize the slight slur on *officer*, the intense concentration that has gone into pronouncing it correctly. Almost correctly. For some reason, it's comforting. I don't know what I would have done if a crisp, clean, succinct voice had answered. Probably hung up in the face of someone who has their shit together. Officer Riley doesn't.

And I get that.

"I was calling the hotline about the Montor disappearance," I say.

"Yeah that gets forwarded here now," he says. I imagine *here* as a tiny office, badly lit, Officer Riley riding out the last few years before retirement behind a desk with a drawer that has a bottle in it.

Riley . . . I do what everyone in Amontillado does—run his last name through a checklist. I've heard it before, and there are plenty of tombstones with that name on it in the cemetery. But they aren't big stones, and they aren't capped off with weeping angels or other signs of wealth or power following the deceased Riley into the afterlife.

The Montors don't have stones at all—we've got a big-ass mausoleum that one of our ancestors built by hand, dragging the stones in from the fields. There is some comfort in knowing that when I die, my body will go to a better place than the one I live in now.

I draw myself up, straightening my shoulders, and inject some pride into my voice.

"I'm calling about the disappearance," I say.

"Yeah, you know something?"

"No," I say. "But I'm Tress Montor, and I want to know what happened to my parents."

There's a moment of silence, followed by a guttural laugh. I imagine Officer Riley's belly giggling behind his desk, and picture the bottle coming

out of the drawer. Sure enough, I hear a soft gurgle in the background, Riley pouring himself some confidence.

"Yeah, you're a Montor all right," he says. "Got some stones, calling in. You're what . . . eleven, twelve?"

"Thirteen," I say tightly.

"Oh, thirteen," he says. "Pardon me. Well, listen, kid—"

"Tress," I say, and I hear him take a drink, the swallow wet in my ear.

"Tress," he repeats, this time without the edge. "All right, Tress Montor. Listen—and I mean it—you listen to me, now. Your mom and dad fell off the grid. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"Like nobody has heard from them?"

"Heard from them or seen them, sure. But it's more than that, kid—sorry, Tress. They made no calls, made no purchases, after that night. The last cell signal from either of their phones came from near that bridge—you know which one I mean?"

Of course I do. It's the one around the corner from our old house, at the bottom of the hill. The one Felicity and I sang about going over the river and through the woods to our best friend's house. It's where the police—maybe even Officer Riley—found Felicity. It's at the edge of town . . . right where something starts turning into nothing.

"Yeah, I know it," I say.

"You know what I'm looking at right now?" Riley asks me.

"Nope," I say.

"My desk calendar. You know what one of those is?" *Those is* comes out in a slurry that I've got to pick apart and translate before I can answer.

"I know what a desk calendar is," I say.

"Well, you kids with your phones these days—" Riley begins, then cuts himself off, like enunciating *these days* wore him out. "I'm looking at tomorrow," he goes on. "I boxed it off in red and drew a big happy face in the middle of it. You know why?"

"No," I say.

"Because it's my retirement day, and if it wasn't, I would've hung up on you the second you said who you was."

Were, I think quietly.

"But you didn't," I remind him, and he sighs.

"No, I didn't." He's quiet for a second, and I think maybe he's got a hard little ball of words in his stomach, too, one that he's been waiting to

unload on someone.

“No trace of your parents has ever been found; we have no leads on this case. And by that I mean forensic, and otherwise. You’re the only person who’s ever called the tip line—you know that?”

Of course I didn’t know that. But I stay quiet, let him cough out the thing he’s been choking on for years.

“Lee and Annabelle Montor are the only missing-persons case we’ve ever had, and it’s locked up tight. Not solved; I mean locked up. Nobody’s talking. You know what it means when nobody’s talking in Amontillado?”

“It means somebody important wants it kept quiet,” I say. It’s an old lesson, one I knew even before I came to live with Cecil. It might not be taught like the alphabet in school, but it’s learned around the dinner table, inferred with down-turned mouths and quick subject changes.

“Uh-huh,” Riley agrees. “And what makes you an important person in Amontillado?”

“Your name,” I tell him.

“Or your money,” he says back.

I let that sit, collecting it with the other words forming the hard ball in my gut.

“And, kid, one more thing—”

“Yeah?”

“What do you see when you turn over a rock?”

“Bugs,” I say automatically, having watched Rue search for a snack more times than I can count.

“Bugs and worms and all kinds of shit—sorry. All kinds of gross stuff you didn’t know was there and maybe didn’t *need* to know,” Riley says. “You turn over this rock, you’re going to see those things. Things that people want left under there, in the dark.”

“I do need to know,” I tell him.

“Then be careful,” he says. “And only believe about half of what you hear.”

“Okay,” I say. “Thank you. Thank you for talking to me.”

“And, kid?”

“Yeah?”

“If half of what you hear doesn’t make your parents sound like great people . . . well, that’s probably the half that’s true.”

I clench the phone in my hand, the hard ball of words turning into something else, hot anger, surging, ready to come up and blister Riley's ear, giving him something to take with him into retirement. But I don't have time to turn the emotion into words before he hangs up.

I think of the Turnado car, splashing past me. I think of Lenore Usher, her lips a thin line when she tells me nobody knows what happened to my parents.

"Somebody knows," I say into my phone, even though no one is listening.

"Felicity Turnado knows."



Chapter 35

Felicity

“I don’t know!” I spit back at her. I’m pissed, but it’s lacking the sharp edges of earlier, and not just because before when I got rowdy I think she might have broken my ankle. No, I’m not kicking and screaming because this time . . . I think she might have me.

That day that we drove past Tress in the rain is something that never stuck well with me, watching my former best friend flipping us off in the rearview mirror, dirty water running down her face. It’s a moment that might have come up in truth or dare, if someone asked me what I’m most ashamed of in my life. Or, at least, in seventh grade. But we stopped playing truth or dare a long time ago, moved on to spin the bottle and strip poker.

I never was very good at cards.

Driving past Tress that day was a shitty thing to do, and I know it, deep down. I told Brynn about it once, when I’d had too much to drink and we were both taking a time-out at one of Gretchen’s parties, just kind of chilling in lawn chairs and staring up at the stars.

“Well,” Brynn had said, brow furrowed and thinking hard. “If it was a dog, would you have stopped and picked it up?”

The truth is that yes, I would have. The truth is, that I would treat a dog better than I treated Tress Montor that day.

But it’s also true that I wasn’t the one driving. I remember my mom flicking on the windshield wipers, Tress’s figure disappearing in the rain. Mom left her there on purpose, leaving a not-so-subtle message in her wake. Did she do the same with the cops? Let them know that if the Montor disappearance was not-so-thoroughly investigated, the Turnados would appreciate that . . . possibly in the form of a donation that made it possible for them to buy a new fleet of police cruisers that year?

Whatever is left in my stomach rolls at the thought, and my mind revolts along with it. If that happened, it wasn't my fault.

"I couldn't just force my mom to pull over, you know," I say, adding a brick to my defense, just as Tress reaches for one of her own. A more solid one to trump my metaphor, because another truth is that I can construct quite the wall of self-righteous, blustering excuses to defend myself, but the one Tress is building is very real, and growing rapidly.

22 rows of bricks / 3 = 7.333

I'm nearly a third of the way toward being dead. I don't like math anymore.

It's like the boa constrictor song we sang as kids, with the snake slowly swallowing us up, except I'm not sliding down a snake's throat. The bricks are rising like the tide, and once they close over my head—

"Tress," I say madly, hoping to distract her as she lays some mortar, sliding the first brick of the sixth row into place. "Have you really thought about this? Like actually, truly, really sat down and thought about this?"

"Yep," she says, tapping the brick into place.

"And you thought about the fact that you could go to jail?"

She's on her knees, fitting the last one with precision, when she leans back and gives me a long, cold stare.

"Have you thought about it? *Actually, truly, really* thought about it? Yeah, I could go to jail, Felicity. But there are spaces between the bars of my cell. Things like light and oxygen can get in. You"—she taps her trowel against the brick—"you won't have that."

"Light," she says, tapping the brick again.

"Oxygen." She adds one last tap. "So have *you* thought about it? *Jail* is another word for *punishment*. I'll take it, because I'll deserve it."

She comes to her feet, leans in. I pull back, my skull grating against stone.

"What do you deserve, Felicity Turnado? And have you been punished?"

"Yes," I tell her, and it's the most honest thing I've said yet. "Yes, I have."

Tress thinks about that for a second, her eyes boring into mine and finding some truth there. "Maybe you have," she half agrees. "But not by me."

That part I can't argue with her about. The problem with Tress is that a lot of what she says also doesn't make me look very good. The other problem is a lot of what she says is true. I shift in my manacles, and my jester cap flops forward again, a shank of my hair, matted with blood, coming with it. I blow at it half-heartedly to get it out of my face, but it's too heavy with gore to move much.

"I've got it," Tress says, once more tucking my hair back, pinning it down. This time the bobby pins scrape across the swelling where she hit me with the brick, and I wince. She holds a shock of my hair for second, one perfect curl that has somehow managed to hold its shape in the damp, and avoid any blood splatter.

She raises her eyes to mine and says, "Let's talk about lice."

Shit.



Chapter 36

Tress

Sixth Grade

Rue is peeling a banana when a truck pulls into our drive. She yells to get my attention, but she doesn't need to; I was trying to pull some of the larger mats out of Goldie's tail, and she bolted out from underneath my hands at the sight of the truck to happily greet it, like maybe whoever is here might be coming to take her away, take her somewhere better.

I do what I've been told—run and get Cecil. Cecil told me early on that he didn't much care what kind of grades I got in school, or if I acted up there, either. His only rules were (1) help him take care of the animals, (2) stay out of his way when I'm not, (3) come get him if anybody shows up at the house, (4) don't come down to the lower acre, and (5) don't be weird, which I figured out meant sex by the way his eyebrows came together when he said it.

I prefer the animals to him, so rules one and two are not a problem. Rule five I'm not worried about, either, for lots of reasons. Rule three I messed up the first couple times because, if I'm being honest, I'm a little bit proud of the animals—especially Zee, once I got her cleaned up nice. The first time a car pulled in, slowing down after spotting the “Amontillado Animal Attractions” sign, I'd run out to greet them, waving like a kid with a lemonade stand.

Cecil had laid into me for that, said he needed to be the first one to see any visitors because he was the one who had to size them up. Amontillado Animal Attractions doesn't have any prices posted—that's because Cecil makes them up on the spot, after evaluating what they're driving and wearing, their last name, how many kids they've got, and—in his words—*the cut of their jib*.

What that actually means is that he charges more to people he doesn't like.

I've seen him let a minivan full of kids with no shoes come in for five bucks and charge fifty to a curious lady on her own, driving a shiny car. I told him after the family left that it was nice of him to let them in for so little, to which he'd told me that nice didn't come into it.

"They only had five bucks, kid," he said, rubbing the top of my head—the only sign of affection he ever allows. "And I wanted it."

I can say a lot about Cecil, but I can't say he never taught me anything.

Today, though, there's something different about the vehicle that pulls in. It's not a minivan with no hubcaps full of screaming kids, and it's not a bored soccer mom with an afternoon on her hands. It's a small truck with a big cage in the back, axles doing their best to keep up with the payload.

I light out for the back acre. There's a point past where I'm not supposed to go. I've been told to just stand and give a yell for Cecil. I've caught a whiff of skunk down there once or twice, so I've always assumed he's got some critters down there that he doesn't want me around. But today the standing and shouting doesn't work, and there's an impatient honk from whoever's behind the wheel of that truck.

So now I've got to decide which rule I break—the one about coming to get him when someone's in the driveway, or the one about not going down to the lower acre? I hear the truck's engine cut out and the man say something. Whatever is in that cage lets out a shriek, getting one in return from the driver. Goldie comes running in my direction, her tail between her legs and pure fear in her eyes. Which makes my decision for me. I'd rather deal with Cecil and skunks than whatever is in the back of that truck.

I jog down the path, Goldie on my heels, keeping the stream on my left, a field full of ragweed higher than my head on the right. Cecil says there's no point tilling the back acre, that the soil is shit and that the ragweed keeps pussies with allergies away. I climb a little fence that goes across the path, getting a decent shock at the top that makes me fall to the ground.

"Shit!" I yell, and Goldie goes nuts on the other side of the fence. She's pacing, panicked, trying to reach me and barking her head off.

"Tress?" Cecil's voice comes from the field, and he rises from the green rows, pruning shears in his hand. "What the hell you doing back here?"

"There's someone up at the house," I tell him, inspecting the burn across my ankle from the electrified wire. I glance up at the fence I fell

from to see yellow clips running across the top wire, attached to an electrical box, a trail camera strung up in the tree beside it.

Nice. I'm sure Cecil got a great shot of my face as I fell.

He grabs me by my upper arm, pulling me to my feet. "I told you—"

"You weren't coming," I say. "And the guy's got a cage and . . ." I think of the shriek I heard, unable to place it. "And there's something in it."

Cecil lets go of my arm. "All right, hang on." He goes over to the electrical box, unplugs the wiring and climbs over the fence. My gaze slides off him and over to the green rows. These are shorter. It's not ragweed, and the skunk smell is stronger down here. Way stronger.

"C'mon, girl," Cecil yells at me. "Get moving."

I scale the fence, following in Cecil's footsteps as we head back to the house, Goldie constantly shoving her nose into my hand, looking for reassurance that I'm okay . . . or maybe that she'll be okay, that I'll protect her.

"What is it?" I ask, breathless. "What's in the truck?"

"Surprise," Cecil says. "Little something some guy needed to get rid of."

More like it wants rid of him, I think as we come up into the yard, and the truck shakes on its wheels as whatever's in the cage makes a lunge at the guy, standing off to the side.

The men shake hands, and Cecil slips him a sandwich bag full of something, then they're backing up to the new enclosure, the one opposite Rue's. She starts yelling at them, and throwing some of her stored fruit. An overripe peach bounces off the passenger-side window, splatting all over.

"Shut her up!" Cecil yells at me, but there's not much I can do. Rue's got a whiff of what's in the cage, and she doesn't like it. She's all the way at the top of her tree, yelling and letting everyone know she's not happy about the new development. In the paddock, Zee and Dee have already fled to the far corner, nuzzling together for comfort.

Cecil pulls the gate to the new enclosure open, and the guy backs the truck up as close as he can, the edge of the cage just inside. He cuts the engine, gets into the back of the truck—bringing a high yowl of complaint from inside the cage. Then he climbs on top of it, reaching through the fence of the enclosure to open the cage's latch.

There's a clang of metal on metal, a dark streak, and then a puff of dirt as the animal—a panther—slides to a halt, changing directions fast when he

sees the man's hand is still inside the cage. The cat lunges, but he pulls back just in time, laughing a little to cover his fear.

"Bastard almost got me," he tells Cecil, sweat rolling off his forehead.

The cat retreats to a corner, growling low in its chest as the truck pulls away. Cecil swings the door shut quickly, snapping a lock down on it. I didn't realize I was backed up all the way against Rue's cage until her arm snakes out. In a second, I'm smashed against the fence, wire cutting into my cheek, Rue's iron grip not letting me pull away. The men don't notice. They're headed toward the house, Cecil cracking open a beer.

Shit, shit, shit. Cecil was right, she's going to tear my face off. Her smell is strong, like body odor and a wet dog, all in one. Goldie is going nuts, barking and yelping. She jumps, biting at Rue's arms, but the orangutan grabs her with one hand and gives her a toss. Goldie yelps and rolls, a spray of dirt rising up behind her. The cat follows the movement, lunging against his own bars to get a swipe in as Goldie skids to a halt, inches away from his claws.

"Rue," I say, swallowing hard. "Please . . ."

One of her hands lets go, but the other is still holding me firmly against the cage. Her free hand flips through my hair, searching, scurrying. She pinches down, pulls her hand back, inspects something between her fingers and pops it in her mouth. I've seen her do this before—Cecil said Goldie's flea medication was too damn expensive and the *o-rang-o-tangy* could clean her up just fine. It had taken a leash and a lot of calm words on my part, but I'd talked Goldie into sitting still while Rue groomed her, taking advantage of the free snacks at the same time.

Just like she's doing to me right now.

"Oh my God," I say, my words as squished as my face, jammed against the fence. "Do I have lice, Rue?"

The only answer I get is the shit-eating grin, as she pops another one into her mouth. Goldie gets her feet back under her and scampers away from the cat's cage, calmer now that she sees that Rue doesn't mean me any harm. She cowers next to me, pushing against my leg as I bend my head, letting Rue inspect me. The orangutan reaches out, gives my dog an apologetic pat as her other hand works through my hair, picking me clean.

I slide down to the ground, resting against the cage, Rue's fingers moving through my hair, mesmerizing. I repeat the action, ruffling Goldie's fur. She tucks her head into my armpit, pushing forward into me for

comfort. I burrow my face into her neck, parting her hair, trying to get down past the smell of the pens and the shit, past the present. Because if I breathe deep enough, I can still pick up the faint traces of shampoo from her last visit to the groomer. And underneath that, if I concentrate, I can smell my mother.



Chapter 37

Felicity

Sixth Grade

“Mom?” I call down the stairs, fingernails digging into my scalp. “Mom? Do we have any dandruff shampoo?”

“What? No,” Mom says hurriedly, as she comes around the corner. “Have you seen my keys?”

“They’re on the table,” I say, pointing toward the groceries she just brought home—everything organic and gluten- and cruelty- and antibiotic-free. Dad says they’re also taste- and fun-free, to which Mom said last night that at least they can eat their dinner without guilt. I can’t. But that’s got nothing to do with what’s on my plate.

“Okay,” Mom says, grabbing her keys. “You ready?”

“Ready?” I ask, still scratching. “For what?”

“You’ve got an appointment with Dr. Gabriella today, remember? I made the appointment after . . . after your birthday party.”

She slips a little, not wanting to say the real reason for scheduling an extra session with my therapist. Her smile is practiced and pasted on, like her lips forgot to slide back over her teeth and now are resting in perma-smile. I know it very well. It’s stuck not just on her face but on every wall of the house, our annual family pictures announcing that yes we are happy—look at our faces. I’ve been practicing a little myself lately, figuring out what it takes to knock Mom’s smile off. I take a swipe now, knowing the one word that always hits home.

“You can just say it, you know,” I tell her, as I follow Mom out to the car. “You can just say we’re going to see Dr. Gabriella because of Tress.”

We all freaked out when we woke up to find Tress gone Sunday morning. Gretchen had sat in my bed, clutching one of my pillows and

trying to look like she wasn't upset. But I knew Gretchen—whether I liked her or not. Her lips, still stained candy red, but now dry and flaking, had been crushed in a straight line, her teeth shut tight against any guilt she might have about what she'd said to Tress the night before.

Maddie had immediately broken into tears, saying now the whole family was missing—which had sent my stomach spiraling. I was in a panic by the time I woke up Mom, a sobbing, hysterical mess. Dad had brought everyone downstairs, asking if anyone had seen her leave or heard anything strange, while Mom made phone calls, what few there were to make.

Lenore—Ribbit's mom—was zero help, and Tress's grandpa wasn't picking up the phone. I tried texting Tress, but she wasn't answering my texts. Or my calls. Or responding to voice mails.

"Okay," Mom said, yanking a sweatshirt on over her pajamas. "I'm driving out there."

Gretchen gasped, her hand clenched tight around the orange juice Dad had poured for her. "You're going to the white trash zoo?"

"Gretchen!" Dad admonished, but she didn't even blush.

"I mean, like, you've had your tetanus shot, right?" she'd asked.

"I'm coming with you," I'd announced. Mom had been too worried to argue, and I'd left Maddie and Gretchen to Dad's pancakes while we drove up the ridge silently, a light rain falling. We pulled into the Amontillado Animal Attractions, and my mom let out a long breath, her rush of relief filling the whole car.

There was Tress, standing out by the animal pens, brushing the zebra.

"Don't—" Mom had begun to say, but I was already out of the car, rushing toward Tress. I'd wrapped my arms around her, squeezing tight.

"I thought you were gone," I'd said.

And Tress, stiff and unresponsive in my arms, simply said, "I am."

"So, your friend"—behind me, Dr. Gabriella turns a page of her notes—"Gretchen."

"Gretchen's not my friend," I say. It just pops out, like how sometimes I accidentally belch and Mom makes me leave the table. But this is worse. These are words I didn't know were in me. There's a pause.

Dr. Gabriella put me on the couch after our second appointment. "You're always looking at me for a reaction," she'd said. "You worry so

much about saying the wrong thing that I can hardly get you to say anything.”

So she put me on the couch, facing the wall, with her sitting behind me. It had felt weird, at first, but once I got used to it, I found out she was right. It was a lot easier to just say what I thought if I wasn’t checking for someone else’s reaction before continuing.

When I admitted as much she told me I should try it in real life sometime.

Now Dr. Gabriella asks, “If Gretchen isn’t your friend why was she at your birthday party?”

I look at my hands, pick at a hangnail there. “I don’t know . . . can you have friends you don’t actually like sometimes?”

“Yes,” she says. “Friendship is complicated. So Gretchen said something that upset Tress?”

“Yeah.” I reach up, scratch my itching scalp. “She said she stole my tamp—”

“I’m sorry, I’m going to have to stop you.” Behind me, Dr. Gabriella gets up, her high heels clicking across the wooden floor of her office. She calls my mom in from the waiting room, and I sit up, worried.

What did I do? Did I say something wrong?

“April,” Dr. Gabriella says. “Did you know that Felicity has lice?”

“Well, I wouldn’t have her in my house again, that’s all I’m saying,” Jill Astor says as she makes a face, primly pinching two fingers together as she slides a nit off a strand of Gretchen’s hair.

We’re having a post-birthday-party party.

Mom had driven home from my appointment with red cheeks, her voice cracking as she yelled at Dad over the phone. “Dr. Gabriella has to fumigate her couch. And I have to call all the other moms. I have to tell them their children got lice at *my daughter’s* birthday party.”

She ordered in food and invited the girls and their moms for what she called a “nit-picking” party. The other moms brought bottles of wine with them, making a joke out of it. Brynn, Gretchen, Maddie, and I had lined up as our moms poured stinky stuff on our heads, told us to keep ourselves busy on our phones, and started drinking.

They’re blaming Tress. And they’re not being quiet about it.

“First she runs off, scaring everyone half to death,” Jill goes on. “And now this!” She waves one gloved hand at the four of us, heads bowed, wet hair hanging in curtains over our faces as we lean forward around the card table Mom had set up.

“Where is Tress?” Brynn’s mom, Angela, asks. On my head, I feel my mom’s hands stiffen.

“You didn’t really expect April to invite her here, did you?” Jill asks, refilling her wineglass.

“How else is the poor girl supposed to get clean?” Angela says, keeping her eyes on the back of Brynn’s head. “Do you really think that old man is going to look after her?”

“Well, he obviously doesn’t,” Jill says. “Gretchen’s head was just *crawling*—”

“Felicity isn’t too bad,” my mom pipes up.

“Neither is Maddie,” adds Kira Anho, who had been quiet until now and has hardly taken a drink. Mom had to push her to take a glass at all, saying that she wasn’t our principal yet.

“Brynn hardly has any,” her mom says.

“Well, Black kids don’t really get lice, though, do they?” Jill says, quaffing the rest of her wine.

“Jill!” my mom says. “Maybe you should lay off the wine.”

Everyone laughs, like they’re supposed to. Everyone except Brynn and Angela. Brynn is next to me, her arm pressed against mine. It’s stiff, all the muscles tightened up, waiting for the moment to pass, or wanting to strike out, slap the laughter out of the air. I don’t know which.

“What?” Gretchen’s mom says. “That’s what I heard. I mean, maybe it’s different since she’s mixed race—”

“Did you hear that the dollar store is closing?” Mrs. Anho pipes up, shutting down Gretchen’s mom.

“No, that’s too bad,” my mom says, happy for the subject change. “I mean, we don’t shop there, of course, but it will be a loss for a lot of families.”

I can’t see Brynn’s face, our hair hanging between us. I can’t see Angela, either, but I can feel a wall of tension behind me, her quiet rage something that my friend has inherited, something she puts on like a coat for a cold day at recess. Except I guess in Amontillado it’s always a cold

day at recess for Brynn and Angela. My thumbs fly across my phone as I text her.

I don't think Tress had lice.

I think it was Gretchen.

Next to me, her phone vibrates. Seconds later, a bubble appears on my screen.

Yep.

And her mom's a bitch.

I stifle a giggle, not wanting anyone to know we're texting, or that Brynn just called Jill Astor a bitch. I look down at my phone, at the texts I sent.

I don't think Tress had lice.

I think it was Gretchen.

I know it's true. Gretchen had been itching the night of my party, not Tress. Mom had burned all the bedding, the little red mess from Maddie's melting Popsicle going up in flames along with Gretchen's lice, still clinging to my pillow—the one she'd used.

I think about Dr. Gabriella, and how she'd turned my back to her, how looking at a painting of trees instead of her face had made it easier to tell the truth. I think about her telling me to try that in real life sometime.

I don't have a painting of trees, but I do have my hair falling around me in a curtain right now, blocking off everyone else so I can't see them. There's a script right in front of me, the words written out so that all I have to do is read them. Say them aloud.

My mom tilts my head a different direction and I minimize my texts.

I don't say the words. I'm learning.

Girls who live in a trailer with their grandfather at an animal zoo have lice.

Girls who have private therapists do not.

Hours later my scalp is pink and tingling, and Mom is putting fresh sheets on my bed. They're brand-new, with the little lines from being folded in the package still pressed firmly into them, even when she snaps them in the air above my mattress. A year ago I would've been under them, yelping as Mom tucked in the corners, made fake cries about the weird lump in the center, and tried to push it back down while I giggled, pressing back.

Now I'm squashed into a corner of the room, holding tight to a brand-new stuffed animal that had taken the place of all my burned ones, and trying to put together the perfect sentence to call my mom a liar.

"Mom . . . I think Gretchen was the one with lice. And I think you know it, too."

She doesn't stop moving, only gives the pillow she's sliding into its new case an unnecessarily hard thumping. "It doesn't really matter, does it? You all ended up with it."

"It matters when you're blaming Tress," I say.

"I'm not blaming Tress," Mom says tightly, stretching out over the bed to smooth the corners. "Jill Astor is."

"But you didn't tell her she was wrong!" I yell, my fingers digging deep into the teddy bear. "You didn't tell her it was Gretchen! And you didn't defend Tress!"

A little voice in my head adds something much worse: *Neither did you.*

"Honey . . .," Mom sighs, resting her head on my pillow. She looks at me, my back flattened into the corner, a death grip on my teddy bear.

"C'mere," she says, wiggling her fingers at me.

I go, sliding under the fresh new sheets and letting Mom's arms come around me in a hug, nice and loose, comforting. It's not like the hug I gave Tress; not a hug that you're worried someone is going to break free of.

"I know things are really difficult for Tress right now," Mom says, her breath in my ear. "But arguing with Jill Astor isn't going to make anything better for her. It would only cause hard feelings and arguments and more problems than we've already got. Do you understand?"

I nod. I do understand. But I wasn't talking about our problems. I was talking about Tress's. Mom presses her face into my hair, her voice warm and soft in my ear.

"I've only got one little girl in the whole world. You're the most important thing to me, and I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

“Nothing happened to me, Mom,” I say, shrinking a little. “I didn’t get hurt.”

“There are different ways of getting hurt,” Mom says. “You’re still here in your bed, warm and safe. But . . .”

She doesn’t finish, at least not immediately. I know she’s being careful with me, trying to find a nice way to tell me I’m not the same girl who ran to Tress Montor’s house that night. She’s right. I’m here, all in one piece. But only on the outside.

On the inside, all my pieces are a jumble. A puzzle that’s been dropped.

“I know, Mom,” I say, rolling over to face her, snuggling my head under her chin. “I know I’m not . . . okay.”

Her grip tightens. Too much.

“You are fine,” she says, her voice rising. “There is nothing wrong with you.”

Mentally, I take notes: *There is nothing wrong with Felicity Turnado. Gretchen Astor did not bring lice to a birthday party.*

“If there’s nothing wrong with me, why do I have to see Dr. Gabriella?”

Mom pushes some of my hair out of my eyes. “Things changed that night, Felicity. For Tress, definitely, but for you, too. You can’t remember what it was, but something horrible happened, and you were there. That’s a hard thing for a kid to deal with. It’s a hard thing for anyone to deal with. There’s nothing wrong with going to therapy, and there’s nothing wrong with you,” she says again, emphatically. “But something happened to you. It’s like . . .” She scans my room, thinking hard.

“It’s like your porcelain doll,” she says, pointing to the dresser. “If she had a tiny crack would you say she was broken?”

“No,” I say.

“And she wouldn’t be.” Mom nods. “But a crack makes her just a little bit weaker, and the next time she falls . . .”

“She’ll break,” I say.

“Right. But you’re not made of porcelain, are you? You can heal. And we’re taking you to see Dr. Gabriella so that the little crack you’ve got can close up, nice and tight.”

“So I’m ready for the next time I fall,” I add.

“Well . . .” Mom stares at the ceiling now, her voice floating up to my rotating fan, her eyes following the shadows there. “I guess so, yeah. But

I'm a mommy, and mommies don't like to think their little girls are ever going to fall, and we do everything we can to stop it."

"So who stops Tress from falling now?" I ask. "What about her cracks? Is she seeing a doctor to make her better, too?"

"I kind of doubt it, honey," Mom says, rolling over to face me. "But she's not my little girl—you are. You're the one I've got to think about, worry about, and protect."

Suddenly, I understand.

"You think being around Tress is going to make me crack more."

She nods. "I think it might."

I fall back on the one argument I've got, the one that should be the strongest, knock down anything else. "But she's my friend."

Mom's mouth goes tight, words she's not saying pulling her lips down.

"What?" I ask.

"Jill said that Tress hurt Gretchen the other night," Mom says, eyes boring into mine. "Is that true?"

I feel heat in my stomach, the need to defend Tress hot and strong. "Gretchen was being nasty."

"But did Tress hurt her?" Mom asks again. I think about the marks on Gretchen's wrist, red and bright, matching her lips. I shrug.

"Felicity, I know that you and Tress were close—"

"We were best friends," I say, then correct myself. "We *are* best friends."

"—but you have to think about the fact that Tress's life is different now. And that means Tress probably will be, too."

I want to tell Mom she's wrong, but I remember how Tress reacted to my hug, like she was expecting to be hit instead. I remember how she watched Gretchen, warily, always on guard.

"Okay," I say, tears pooling in my eyes as I stare upward at the ceiling, begging them not to fall, not to overflow and run down into my ears, where the voice lives, feeding it.

Mom gives me a hug and a kiss good night, turns on the night-light I had to start using again after the—well . . . after. She leaves the door open a few inches, in case I need to sneak into bed with them in the middle of the night—something else I've started doing again.

I let the tears go eventually, sliding down the sides of my cheeks. I tilt my head so they won't go into my ears, creating hot, salty pools on my new

pillowcase.

I think of Tress, how she's a wild animal now.

I think of the creased-new sheets underneath me and the matching bottles of shampoo and conditioner lined up, ready for me to use them to smell good, be pretty, take care.

I think Tress isn't the only one changing.



Chapter 38

Tress

Sixth Grade

The cat is waiting for me when I wake up in the morning. It paces inside the cage, watching me as I wait for the bus. I fed it last night, hauling the head of a steer over my shoulders into the cage, the cat locked inside the enclosed section. The corrugated metal had rippled and rolled as the cat lunged against it, smelling meat, smelling blood. The head was freshly cut, the jagged end of the spinal column poking my shoulder where Cecil had decapitated it, tossing aside different sections for the animals. The blood had run down my arms and legs in rivers, the cat, wild to get at it, howling at the scent. After I was out and Cecil loosed him, the cat sniffed the head, then looked at me through the cage—the other bloody thing.

He'd bitten into the carcass, but kept his eyes on me while he did.

It's the same now, the cat's eyes following my movements as I climb onto the bus, the other kids pressing against the windows, checking out the new addition. Their heads swivel as the bus pulls away, the blue smoke of diesel fumes finally obscuring their vision. I imagine the cat doing the same in his cage, gaze following me until I am out of sight. Whether he views me as the person who brings his food, or actual food, I don't know.

At school I keep my head down, funnel through the other kids to get to my locker, where someone has stuck maxi pads on it. There are three, the wings opened like the frogs we'd dissected in science, skin pinned back to show their vulnerable insides. I blush furiously and tear them off. I try to throw them on the ground but one sticks to my hand, and I have to shake it, hard, the pad flapping like a terrified bird before it falls off. Someone giggles. A phone comes out.

I spin the combination on my locker, not looking up. I'm about to pull it open when a hand slams it shut, large and wide, with hairy knuckles. The janitor nods at me, apologetic. "Sorry, kid, I've got to fumigate it."

"You what?" I ask, trying hard to focus on him and not my classmates, who are staring.

"Fumigate," he repeats, holding up a canister that shows a bug lying on its back, a green cloud over its head, legs folded, eyes the comic book x's of death. I'm still staring at it, confused when he adds, "For lice."

A few more giggles roll through the crowd, gathering steam until they reach the back where people are standing on tiptoe, asking what's going on. I turn, shouldering my way through everyone. A girl yelps when I step on her foot by accident, but when she yells, "Yuck! Cooties!" I decide to grind down, twisting hard. Her cry of annoyance turns into true pain as I break out into the open, right into our principal, Mrs. Prellis.

"Tress," she says. "Why don't you come with me?"

She's smiling, but it's an order, her hand pinched tight on my elbow as we make our way down the hall, the last late arrivals hurrying to get to class before the bell. Mrs. Prellis escorts me into her office, closing the door behind her.

"Have a seat," she says, and her voice is warm, but she's taking note of which chair I sit in, marking it to be wiped down after I leave. "So," she says as she leans forward on her desk, elbows creating a temple that leads up to her bright smile. One that's trying really hard to make me comfortable.

"I don't have lice," I say. And it's true. I don't. Not anymore, thanks to Rue.

"I'm aware that there was a sleepover this weekend and that the invited girls likely were all exposed to head lice." She pauses, but I let the silence continue, not giving her anything. "I was glad to hear you were at the party, Tress."

Nobody else was glad about it, including me. But I don't say that. I just stare her down, waiting. Like the cat. She clears her throat. "I talked to the mothers, and we've established that all the girls—"

"Have mothers," I finish for her.

She stops, stunned. "Excuse me?"

"They all have mothers," I say. "And they made sure their daughters are clean."

“Yes.” Mrs. Prellis nods, but her voice is wary. “So if you would allow the school nurse to—”

“No.”

“I . . .” Mrs. Prellis shakes her head. “I don’t understand. Tress, if you don’t have lice—”

“I don’t.”

“Then you’ll let us determine that, and we can all go about our day—”

“Like normal,” I interrupt again, and this time Mrs. Prellis bites down on her bottom lip, a little blood rising in her cheeks.

“Like normal kids that go home and their normal moms feed them a normal dinner and they sleep in a normal bed,” I go on. “They don’t have lice and TV dinners and a mattress on the floor and wild animals outside.”

“Tress, do you feel safe at home?”

Mrs. Prellis is recentered again, back in the place she knows, where she takes care of kids and looks out for everybody. Especially the ones with the right last names.

“Safe?” I repeat the principal’s question, remembering the streams of still-warm steer blood running down my back, the weight of its massive head balanced on my shoulder, the cat’s screams through the thin sheets of metal. Metal like my locker, the janitor’s hairy hand swinging it shut, the crowd, pushing in, also scenting blood.

“It’s the only place I feel safe,” I tell her.



Chapter 39

Felicity

“I tried,” I say. “I told Mom it wasn’t you who had—”

“Maybe,” Tress interrupts me, deadly cold. “But you didn’t tell Gretchen or Maddie. You didn’t tell them not to stick pads to my locker or let Principal Prellis know it didn’t need to be fumigated. My only good coat was in there. It smelled like bug spray all winter. *I* smelled like it.”

Her voice cuts off, checked by emotion. “You have no idea what that’s like.”

No, I don’t. And the truth is I probably never will. A tear slips out, and Tress flicks it away, angrily. Her phone has been going off nonstop, vibrating ever closer to the edge of the chair, like a lemming ready to take the leap. She snags it at the last second, and as she glances at it her whole body goes rigid, the trowel dropping from her hand, splattering mortar on the hem of her jeans. Her eyes rise to mine, and if we’re not friends anymore, we’re not exactly enemies in this moment, either.

Faces don’t change, and I can still read her like a book. Tress Montor is scared . . . and that terrifies me.

“Tress,” I say, my heart beating pathetically against my rib cage, anxious for release from the rising panic. “What is it?”

She doesn’t speak, only turns the phone to me. I can see the party above us, Hugh facing Ribbit, the clock between them, a sea of faces below, phones held aloft. Above them on the second-floor landing, black padded feet circle, tail flicking.



Chapter 40

Cat

*A strange girl
smells of salt as she walks
darkness eating her sounds
—one sound—over and over,
Deep gasps between.
The cousin bolts, her escape draws attention
and the girl's sound goes light and high
With hope.
A light she makes follows the path
where a tail should be
stubbed out, by human hands.
I yawn-stretch, hackles rising.
Make myself bigger
follow sounds and smells
more promising than her as she
searches for something lost.*



Chapter 41

Tress

“Shit.”

Felicity’s voice is light and breathless when she spots the cat on the livestream. “What do we do?” she asks.

I flick the video away, thinking. The jolt of panic I felt at the sight of the velvety paws has settled into a line of reasoning, each fact easing out the high peaks of adrenaline in my bloodstream.

“The cat isn’t hungry,” I say, “or he already would’ve grabbed someone.”

I pull the video back up, analyzing the few frames where he can be spotted.

“He’s not hunting, either,” I say, thinking aloud. “He’s too loose, just strolling. He’s . . .”

Felicity leans forward, chains jangling as she watches the video with me. “He’s prowling,” she says. It’s a good word for it. He’s moving cautious and slow, investigating while avoiding attention.

“Right,” I tell her. “But he’s curious, and cats don’t just hunt when they’re hungry. They’ll kill for sport.”

I make a decision, grab my backpack from the corner, and slip it over my shoulders.

“What are you doing?” Felicity asks, her voice high and tight again, no longer low and commiserating with mine.

“I’ve got to . . .” What? What have I got to do? Catch a wild animal with my bare hands?

“Don’t you leave me down here, Tress Montor,” Felicity orders, somehow maintaining an edge of authority even though she’s helpless.

“It’s okay. It’ll be okay,” I tell her. “I’ll lock the door.”

It’s a dumbass thing to say, and not only because I put the lock on the *inside* of the door. I don’t know why I’m comforting the person I’m

specifically trying to keep on edge. But I am, and I keep doing it. “I’ll be back,” I call over my shoulder as I walk away, Felicity’s pleas following me.

I emerge into the kitchen to find Brynn crying and mixing water and beer into a Solo cup. I freeze, more alarmed at the sight of her than I would have been if the cat was waiting patiently for me, tail curled around its front paws.

“What the fuck?” Brynn says when she spots me, eyes going to the basement door as it clicks shut behind me. “I mean, what the actual fuck?”

“I—”

I’m trying to formulate an answer when I realize it’s a rhetorical question. Brynn isn’t asking me why I was in the basement. I don’t think she even cares. She cracks another beer and foam sprays onto the bright green leotard she’s wearing. I recognize it from the livestream; she’s the person feeding Ribbit his drinks.

“You’re watering it down,” I say, surveying the mess of empty cans and water bottles strewn across the counter.

“Yeah,” she says, wiping tears off her face. “He’ll die of alcohol poisoning if I don’t. And they’re just . . . they’re just . . . they’re letting it happen.” She starts crying again, full sobs wracking her body as she hangs over the porcelain sink, tears falling against mold that has crept up the sides.

“Not even just letting it happen,” she goes on. “They’re *encouraging* it. Did you see this?”

She pulls out her phone, showing me the comments under the livestream.

Ask him if he’s ever killed someone

Tell him to whip it out

Is he a virgin?

Fake news

Ask him if he’s ever killed someone

That last one from the same poster, insistent.

“Hugh sent me this screen cap from his phone.” She flips through some pics, smiling photos of her and Felicity; a group shot near a bonfire; Gretchen’s dog, posing in a Halloween costume as a skeleton.

“Look,” she says, pulling up a shot of a messages app with over two thousand unread notifications. “Somebody posted Hugh’s account info, and he’s getting questions from all over the world. It’s . . . it’s . . .”

She’s shaking, and I take her phone from her. Not all the comments are enthusiastic.

Somebody stop this

If you’re there please, someone help him. This is wrong.

Does anyone recognize where they are? Somebody needs to get out there.

Everybody chill. This is obviously all staged.

Those kids are not okay! Do you see the ones that are passed out?

They aren’t passed out—look at the puke, look at their skin. They’re sick.

Jesus Christ somebody call the cops

There’s concern but it’s all the same. Somebody—*somebody else*—should do something. Comments are coming fast and hard. I can’t keep up, and Brynn’s phone shakes in my hand when a screenshot pops up, the upper-right-hand corner circled in red with an arrow pointing to four dark paws, leaving the shot.

What the fuck is THAT? Did anybody else see that????

Yawn . . . Staged

I hand Brynn her phone back. “I’ve got to go.”

“Go where?” she snaps. “No, you’ve got to help me.”

“Help you?” I ask, truly flummoxed. She’s currently double-fisting watered-down beers to take to Ribbit. I don’t see how I’m needed. But

Brynn's back in control of herself and giving me orders like I'm a freshman on the volleyball team.

"Everybody's puking their guts out," she says. "We need to get water into them, keep them hydrated. If you see anybody lying down, turn them onto their side so they don't asphyxiate on their own puke. I'll be back," she says, pointing one red cup at me, her eyes narrowed, "and if I find out you went downstairs to sell drugs instead of helping me, I swear to God, I'll call the cops myself and we'll all be fucked."

I'll be way more fucked than anybody else, but Brynn doesn't need to know that. "Okay," I tell her, hands in the air in surrender. "Okay, I'll start . . . watering people."

I wait for her to disappear into the front hall, the kitchen door swinging into place behind her, then take the servants' stairs up the back—the same path the cat must have taken to avoid being seen. I stop, unzip my backpack, and pull out a flashlight. Ribbit didn't run bulbs up the back staircase, and I can't see anything once I'm more than a few steps high. The walls are close and tight here; the servants not rating the open, expansive staircase from the front room.

Sure enough, muddy prints precede me. I wave my light, following as they lead me to a kid wearing a ragged Red Hot Chili Peppers shirt. He's on his back, one shoe loose and dangling. I prop him up, feeling the heat of his skin, and lean him against the wall.

"Mom?" he asks.

I flash my light upward, following the prints, then back at him. There are bright spots on his cheeks, and his eyes are glittery, unfocused. I debate for a second, then remembering Brynn's threat, hoist him over one shoulder. I'm almost to the bottom when he loses his beers. Warm now, his vomit splatters over the back of my legs and into my shoes.

So much for karma.

I prop him in a chair at the table and put a bottle of water in front him, uncapping another one to rinse myself. My shoes and socks are a lost cause, so I take them off and roll up the ends of my jeans before I go after the cat again, now barefoot, like him. I reclaim my bag and flashlight on the stairs, stalling when I reach the top.

Once I walk out there, I'm on camera for the whole world. So far, I've avoided being on-screen and can plausibly deny it if anyone says they saw me at the Allan house tonight. But there are enough phones out there with

enough angles that as soon as I walk out into the light, my presence can be confirmed.

I slide down, back against the wall as I crouch, and check my phone. The livestream is still going, and I can hear Ribbit's voice from my hiding spot, seconds before what I see on-screen as the delay catches up.

"Six inches, I mean that's pretty average, right?"

There's some nervous male laughter, but it's suddenly interrupted by the double front doors swinging open. I hear the bang of one connecting with the wall, followed by the light trickle of plaster falling to the ground from the impact. The person livestreaming swivels to the disturbance and there's Gretchen Astor, her Cleopatra costume torn and wet, her face a dark smear of ruined mascara.

"Guys." She hiccups and holds up a dismembered tail. "Something ate my dog."



Chapter 42

Felicity

Something runs across my foot, and I jump, the involuntary movement sending a spike of pain up my leg. Tress gave my ankle a decent tap right around the twenty-fifth time I said *fuck you*, and I'm paying for it now. Pain is a constant in this new version of my life, one that, technically speaking, only just began but has superseded everything that came before it.

I feel like I've always been here, aching arms overhead, burning circles around my wrists, a starburst of pain in my ankle, a dull thudding in the back of my head, and a constant churn in my stomach. There are other concerns, too, more mundane but no less critical.

I have to pee. Like, bad.

The pressure started building right around the time Tress was laying the second row of bricks, a small tickle, the first indication that yes, I had to pee. Now, my bladder is a bomb and my feet are going to be the target if I don't get out of here. My feet, and whatever just ran across them. I shudder, but the movement doesn't stop when I tell it to, and pretty soon I'm shaking all over.

"Not now," I say, like if I give my body verbal commands rather than just think them, it might actually listen. But this isn't a seizure; I realize that after the initial spasm passes and a new sensation starts . . . a hot jet deep inside my belly, working its way upward.

"Oh, wait . . . no."

I'm saying things to nothing and no one, alone in a dark corner, trapped and desperate as I vomit all over myself. Once I start it's hard to stop, and the tight clench of my stomach muscles is too much for my bladder. It lets go, and in a very short time, I am completely empty.

I hang, useless, a stinking sack of skin. I can feel my heart beating, small, tired, scared, moving timidly, as if asking the question *Should I keep doing this?*

At my feet, my companion stirs, running back and forth in the small space, frightened. It leaves tiny pinpoints of wet spots on my skin as it goes, which cool in seconds. A tail whips across my shins, and I know it's a rat, one that's covered in my own mess and tracking it back and forth across my feet. But I can't feel disgust.

All I feel is complete and utter solidarity.

"You better get out of here," I tell it. "She's not going to back down."

There's a moment, like it's considering my words, and then the rat is gone, shuffling over the knee-high wall Tress has built and disappearing with the flick of a tail.

I thought I was empty; I thought I had nothing left inside me.

But I do. More tears.



Chapter 43

Tress

Gretchen's announcement that something ate her dog is followed by a panic.

Everyone reacts differently, some with screams, a few mutters of disbelief, and more than a little nervous laughter, gasping noises meant to convey hilarity, but really they're saying, *I don't know what to do*.

It's been that way for a while now, the truly amused laughter at Ribbit's admission of wanting to screw the principal devolving into something more primitive, a confused sound that admits the person making it thinks they are supposed to be laughing but doesn't know if something funny is happening or not. Like maybe what used to be funny is now something else. Something darker.

Regardless, the discovery of William Wilson's demise presents the perfect opportunity. Anyone streaming has swiveled to Gretchen, all phones capturing the moment when the queen bee is surrounded by her drones, all of them soothing, touching, hugging, although I do spot a few not-so-hidden smiles. Someone tries to take the dog's tail out of Gretchen's hand, but she resists at the last moment, clutching tight to the vertebrae.

I make my move, following the cat's prints toward a bedroom on the second floor. I glance over the banister. Below me, Hugh still faces off with Ribbit, both bemused now that the attention has moved from them to Gretchen. I back away, toward the wall, but Hugh has caught the movement, and our eyes lock for a second before I duck into the bedroom.

The door clicks shut behind me, and I slide to the ground, flicking on the flashlight.

There, sitting on the bed, tail curled around front paws, the cat waits for me.



Chapter 44

Felicity

My mother was thrilled when I came home from kindergarten and announced that I had a friend.

It had been something of a concern, apparently. Mom and Dad had done everything they could for me up to that point. I'd had playdates with their friends' kids, gone to preschool, taken dance lessons, and spent summer afternoons at the pool. I realize now they were doing their best to get me entrenched with the right people. The right people with the right last names, but I wasn't doing my part. Maddie Anho got mad at me when I won a coloring contest, and she felt she stayed in the lines better than I did and that my "creativity" of color use was really just a mess. I was more interested in picking at my toes during dance class than learning how to stand on them, like Gretchen Astor.

So my social outlook was somewhat sketchy when I got on the bus with my new backpack full of freshly sharpened pencils. I remember Mom waving at me from the front porch, a smile that didn't match the rest of her face stamped securely in place, like if she let it slip I might remain perfectly unaware that everything wasn't, in fact, perfect.

I knew it wasn't.

And so did Tress Montor.

Tress had walked into kindergarten, glanced around, sat down next to me, and pulled a magnifying glass out of her backpack, along with a dead roach, encased in plastic.

"Check this out," she said. "You can see its butthole."

I was entranced.

So were Hugh and David, as well as Brynn and a couple of other girls. I remember Ribbit standing on the edge of the circle that surrounded us, not quite a part, more like a satellite, proudly announcing to anyone who would listen, "That's my cousin. Tress is my cousin."

In all the first-day-of-school splash, clothes still stiff from the hangers they'd been torn from, new sneakers getting their first bits of gravel stuck in the treads, sharp-tipped packs of crayons spilling across freshly cleaned tabletops, Tress Montor had me looking at a cockroach's ass.

When I came home and made my announcement of a new friend, there was the inevitable question to follow, Mom's smile still in the same place—hopeful, but expecting to fall.

“Who is it?”

I was five, but I knew the drill. I took an actual beach towel to the pool—long enough to stretch out on—and so did every one of the girls I was supposed to be hanging out with. Other kids skipped the towel entirely or brought something from home, meant for the shower, usually threadbare or with outright holes. I was five, but I knew that my towel was better and that the better towels and the people attached to them belonged together, our monogrammed initials on them setting us apart from the others.

I knew this because Mom patiently led me away every time I sat with Jessica Stanhope on her towel, a spread of melting Skittles between us. Mom would draw me back to the right group of people with a promise of ten minutes of screen time with the game I'd downloaded to her phone. Mom was careful; Mom was cautious. Mom was not going to let me have a new friend if that new friend didn't fit certain criteria.

And back then, Tress did.

The backpack that she produced the cockroach from was brand-new, and the magnifying glass wasn't some hokey toy for kids. It was heavy, the real deal, and the cockroach was part of an entire set. Tress had a dozen bugs of all kinds sealed in these plastic cubes, clear as glass. I knew because of the bugs that Tress was different from me; I knew by the quality of them that she was the same. So when Mom asked who my new friend was, the smile ready to fall from her face at a moment's notice, I said with confidence, “Tress Montor.”

There was a careful calculation behind Mom's eyes as she considered, the smile stiffly in place as options were weighed. I knew what it was then; now I even know what the formula was.

Lee Montor + Annabelle Usher = Tress Montor.

Montor > Usher [therefore] Tress = [unknown]

In other words, Annabelle Usher married up. Her last name might be worth something, but the Usher bank account certainly wasn't. Lee Montor

was a great guy from a good family who scored a beautiful wife. And they loved each other.

I close my eyes, not having to remember to know that it was true. Tress's parents had loved each other, something that had taken me some time to sort out once I started doing overnights at their place. Her house was a lot like mine in so many ways—modern and clean, with a shiny kitchen and a well-groomed dog. But Tress's house had added touches: Annabelle's garden in the back, where my yard had only a shorn lawn. A piano that wasn't there just to hold family pictures. Lee would play; I hummed the song he would rattle off for us whenever Tress asked, no music required.

"The cold song," I'd say, then an echo, Lee's voice correcting me. "Coldplay."

It took me a while to figure out it wasn't just things that made her house different but the actual family. I bounced into their kitchen one afternoon to refill our water bottles, Tress waiting outside on the trampoline, only to surprise Lee and Annabelle. They had jumped away from each other, guiltily, Annabelle pushing black hair from her eyes.

"Hey, kiddo, what do you need?"

I'd gone back out to the trampoline, ice cubes clinking inside the bottles, and handed one to Tress. "I think your parents were kissing," I said.

"Ugh." She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, they do that a lot. Hey, want to see me flip in midair?"

I watched Tress, her hair fanning out behind her, sweaty and loose as I sucked on my water, wondering what it was like to have parents who kissed.

And it was like that for a long time, right up until it wasn't anymore.

Right up until that night.

I've shied away from it ever since, not wanting to remember, not wanting to know what I saw. But Tress wants to know, and Tress is someone who looks right at the cockroaches.

"Right up their assholes," I agree with myself.

Tress wants to know, and Tress can take it. Remembering is the only way I'm getting out of this. And if Tress Montor wants me to remember, that's what I have to do.



Chapter 45

Cat

*If I am still and quiet
I can see
other lifetimes, slipping past us,
in a place, where they ended.
The girl does not know
there is a boy above her
swinging
from the rafters,
his toes brushing her forehead.
She does not see the woman,
sobbing
at the dresser.
Does not hear the baby
screaming
in the corner.
She sees and hears and feels and knows
only now,
in this place.
And I marvel at the limits
of humans.*



Chapter 46

Tress

The cat sits and stares.

His eyes go from mine, to above me, to the corner, ears turning different directions as he picks up sounds I can't even imagine. But I'd be a fool to think he isn't highly aware of me, every movement, every breath. I rest my back against the closed door, exhaustion getting the better of me.

I have that luxury, the luxury of sitting.

In the basement, Felicity does not.

"Shit," I say to myself, quietly, and gain the cat's full attention again, eyes on my lips, ears pricked forward.

"I don't know what to do," I tell him, and one ear swivels away from me, as if I have said something only worth half his attention.

"I'm holding someone captive in the basement," I tell him, and the ear comes back, cocked. "I hit her in the head with a brick and I chained her to the wall, and I've got her halfway sealed into a tomb, and I probably gave her a concussion, and I think she's got the flu, and I might have fractured her ankle."

It's a lot, when you string it all together like that. A lot of bad things that I did, all of them translatable into a different language, that of legalese and criminal charges. Kidnapping, assault, false imprisonment, menacing. My hands shake, and I rest my head against the door. There's a small thump, and the cat shifts, curious.

"The thing is," I tell him. "There's something that fixes it all. The big gamble."

His eyes latch on to mine, and I read there what is always stamped on his features, a constant feeling, one that moves through his mind, is embedded in his muscles.

"Murder," I say, and the cat yawns.

His tongue lolls out, long and pink, teeth clicking back together sharply. It's a show, put on for me. *I can kill you.*

"I can do it, too, you know," I say, and he cocks his head, almost goading.

"If I have to," I add. "I don't want to. I didn't think . . ."

I didn't think, that's the real admission here. I didn't think Felicity could last this long. Didn't think she would continue to defy me. Didn't think she would insist she doesn't remember.

"What if she doesn't?"

I'm asking questions to the cat, who has ceased listening, eyes roaming the room. My phone vibrates in my hand, and he jumps down from the bed, velvety paws dulling the thud of two hundred pounds of organic killing machine hitting the floorboards. Standing, he's the same height as I am sitting. He faces me, lifts a paw, and begins to bathe.

I risk a glance at my phone. There's a text from Hugh.

Where did you go?

I don't even consider answering him, either honestly or with a lie. Instead, I call.

"Hey." He picks up on the first ring, voice blurred from drink. "You still up there? What are you doing?"

Facing down a panther is the correct response. *Balancing the threat of going to prison for what I've already done versus the idea of outright killing Felicity and getting away with it* is another correct answer. *Realizing that my entire plan of learning about my parents' fate is worthless if Felicity truly doesn't remember* is a correct answer.

"Chilling out," I say. "Needed some space. Too much going on."

"Tell me about it," Hugh says, and I hear Ribbit in the background.

"Who is it? What do they want? Are they calling about me?" Ribbit asks. That last question is desperate, high-pitched, hopeful.

"Let me talk to my cousin," I say, and there's the sound of the phone being handed over. "Ribbit?"

"Tress?" There, always, under my name I still hear the slightest hint of worship. "Tress, are you watching? Did you see? I've got like four thousand new Twitter followers, and a shit ton of friend requests."

“They’re not your friends,” I say. My words are sharp and distinct, biting down on the ends of his blurry, wandering syllables. “Do you hear me? Nothing that’s going on right now is okay.”

“Brynn Whitaker is bringing me beers. That’s more than okay.”

I think of Brynn, crying in the kitchen, empty water bottles and beer cans littering the counter. “Brynn might be the only friend you have right now.”

“I’ll take it,” Ribbit says. “Listen, I gotta go.”

Downstairs I hear shuffling, the crowd moving back into their places.

“People are coming back for round two of Ribbit. Oh, and something, like, ate Gretchen’s dog,” Ribbit says, followed by a hiccup.

“Yeah, I know,” I say. “I’m upstairs sitting across from a loose panther.”

“Cool,” Ribbit says, and I know he isn’t listening. “Maddie got her calmed down, took her outside.” There’s a pause, some muttering. “Look, my man Hugh needs his phone.”

Hugh’s voice comes on, loose and shaky, but not as blurred with drink as Ribbit’s. “Don’t hate me.”

“Give me a reason not to,” I say.

“Look . . .” His voice drops, low and whispering. “The guys are just waiting to kick his ass, and I mean, like, in a brutal way. He said something about David’s mom earlier—I mean, what’s with him and moms, anyway?”

“I have no idea,” I say. “And I don’t hate you because . . . ?”

“Because as long as the show is going, there are cameras on him,” Hugh says.

“And he’s safe,” I finish for him. I think of thousands of people on a livestream, friend requests, new followers, hundreds of unread messages pouring in from around the world. David and the other guys won’t attack him with that many eyeballs on them. An assault conviction would certainly put a dent in their high school football careers, and an assault conviction against an Usher would land their asses in jail, minors or not. You don’t get to spill old blood in Amontillado.

“Okay,” I say reluctantly.

“Hey, do you know where Felicity is?” Hugh asks, his voice back to normal. “I haven’t seen her since . . . I don’t know. I just haven’t seen her.”

“Yeah, I know where she is,” I say.

“Okay, cool. Just checking on her. I look out for her, you know.”

He does. The same way I look out for Ribbit. “Yeah, I get it,” I tell him.

I think of the basement, the naked bulb above my chair, the mortar pail, the pile of bricks, and Felicity, a trail of blood leaking from behind her ear. Tonight, we switched responsibilities, and it is not turning out so well.

I hang up. In the corner of my phone the livestream continues. My messages app is nothing like Hugh's. I have only one notification. One I sent to myself from Brynn's phone. I exhale, my breath foul from a long night, still far from over.

Despite the cat, only inches from me, I hang my head, and I cry.



Chapter 47

Cat

*There is pain in the girl,
but no injury.
I lean forward, sniffing
for the scent of
blood and hurt and skin split and hair torn and teeth broken
and bones splintered and tendons severed and muscles snapping
all the things that can happen.
And the girl lifts her head,
the salt smell of pain in her eyes,
and reaches for me
—like a cousin—
to touch.
But her hand is not a paw
her blood, not like mine.
And I
am not tame.
I smack, to remind.
A touch that would roll a cousin, expose their belly, tell them,
I am alpha.
But the girl is not a cousin
only a human.
And easily opened.*



Chapter 48

Felicity

Annabelle, that's the first thing, easy to remember.

Tress looks like her, so it's not hard to conjure my friend's face, then smooth out some of the sharper edges—the permanent worry line above her nose, the way she holds her body like she's always ready to fight. It didn't use to be that way. Her face used to be open, ready to laugh, her body more likely to erupt into dance than a defensive posture.

Taking away Tress's harder touches gives me Annabelle, tall and dark, graceful. There's a smile, I know that face. She's offering me a Popsicle, pressing the cool wrapper against the scrape on my knee before unwrapping it.

“There you go,” she says. “Edible Band-Aid.”

I laugh in the memory, and I realize Tress isn't the only one who's changed. It comes out light and airy. I'm not checking to make sure I'm *supposed* to be laughing. Not doing a quick assessment of Gretchen's or David's or Hugh's faces to make sure it's okay.

But then Annabelle's face does change, becomes more like the Tress I know today, that line of worry between her eyebrows, the edges of her mouth down-turned. There's a light touch on my forehead, and I lean into it, the fingers cool and deft. At my side, Goldie-Dog whines, her cold nose going into my palm. Something is wrong. She knows. She knows something is not right with me, and soon I'll pee my pants and Annabelle and Tress will know and everyone will know that Felicity Turnado pees her pants sometimes and froths at the mouth and rolls on the floor and no one will ever want to marry me.

“You don't have a fever,” Annabelle says. “Could it be something you ate?”

I shake my head in the memory, but also here in the basement of the Allan house.

“I don’t feel good,” I say, and my eyes flick to Tress, standing at the top of the stairs, a teddy bear clutched against her side, looking down at us with a frown to match her mother’s.

“Okay.” Annabelle runs her hands down my arms, and I shiver, goose bumps popping under my nightgown.

“I want to go home.” My voice cracks as I say it, a pathetic whimper that Annabelle Montor can’t ignore. It was the one place I didn’t want to be, earlier. The place I ran from after I heard the sound—louder than a smack—while my parents were fighting. I ran from home and came to the Montors’, and Annabelle had called my mom, said I was staying here tonight. Said it in a way that my mom couldn’t argue with, and wouldn’t anyway because

Montor > Turnado.

But that tone is gone from Annabelle’s voice now, and I wish she hadn’t used it then. Wish she hadn’t agreed that I could stay. Wish that I hadn’t run in the first place.

“I need to go home,” I say again, insistent.

“Honey, it’s . . .” She glances at her phone. “It’s past midnight.”

I shake my head, real tears coming now. Tears of frustration. I don’t only want to go home, but I *need* to. It started up in Tress’s room, a halo of light around her lamp, a pressure in the back of my head. Her voice got loud and her teeth terribly bright, and I know, without a doubt, that I’m going to seize, and soon. And that means I’ll fall down and roll around, go stiff like a board and maybe even pee myself right in front of Tress.

Girls with monogrammed towels don’t pee themselves.

I gulp a deep breath, bunch my nightgown into my fists, and focus hard on Annabelle. “I want to go home.”

In the basement, my cracked lips barely moving, I say it again. “I want to go home.”



Chapter 49

Tress

My first reaction when the cat smacks me is to feel hurt—not actually pain, just hurt. Rule number one of wild animals: don't forget they're wild animals. I forgot. I sat here and I cried and I told a panther all my problems and then, like an idiot, I tried to pet him, because I made the mistake of thinking that he understood me, that he was my friend.

Apparently I am very bad at picking friends.

Either I try to kill them, or they try to kill me.

Deep wounds take a second to start bleeding. I know this, having suffered more than a few. The cat was only warning me, but it was enough. There are three slashes on my arm, dark and black, like three mouths opening into a part of me not meant to see light. Subcutaneous fat rolls from the edges, a yellow layer peeking out above the deeper pink of skin. Past that there's a glimpse of bone, securely fastened to gray tendon and fleshy muscle, which I see flickering for a moment before the blood flows.

Then everything is just red.



Chapter 50

Cat

*There are lives outside me
present and past that I
can see
when I am still and quiet.
Go beyond that, past
still
and
quiet
To
stone
and
silence
and there are lives, inside.
I have always been cat
but not always this
Sizecolorshapesex.
Once I was smaller, like a cousin,
and died, freezing, with a girl
in our bed, held tightly together for warmth,
though we had only cold left to give
bone pressed to bone.
I remember that girl, her mouth sounds,
different from this girl's.
But in all my lives,
humans cry the same.
She leaves, arm curled to her,
metal / salt / sad / smell stays behind.
The door closes, but it is a light thing.*

And I am dark and heavy.



Chapter 51

Felicity

There's a roar above me, a party I was invited to and haven't quite been able to attend. A swell of laughter spins, loops, goes different directions until it's not laughter anymore, but the sound of wind, a breeze that plays with my nightgown as I stand on the steps of the Montors' house, my hand in Annabelle's, as she stares stupidly at the empty driveway.

"Where's your car?" I ask, scratching the back of one leg with the other foot. We'd roasted marshmallows earlier in the backyard, and the last of the mosquitoes had some bites off me while I devoured my own snack.

Annabelle doesn't answer, only jangles her keys in one hand, eyes roaming up and down the street. It's late. Dark. No one is out. The only light is a rectangle on the lawn, thrown from Tress's room. I walk out into it, look up. Tress stands there, staring down, still holding the teddy bear.

I wave, half-heartedly.

She does not wave back.

She doesn't understand, doesn't know why I'm leaving, can't figure out what she did wrong to drive me away. And I'm sorry and I feel bad but I have to go and I need to go *right now* but we can't go because Annabelle can't find her car and she's not worried about me anymore. Her face does not have the worried-about-children look. It has something else. Something I am very familiar with.

The upset-with-your-father look.

And when the car lights turn onto the street and move closer to the driveway I am so happy to see that it's their car, and Lee is behind the wheel, and now I can go home. But Annabelle is not happy, and Lee is not happy when he sees her.

No one is happy. And Tress turns her lights out, leaving me to stand in the dark.



Chapter 52

Tress

I had a plan. I was going to scare the ever-living shit out of Felicity Turnado and find out what happened the night my parents disappeared, settling a few scores in the process. How I ended up being attacked by a panther and bleeding out while my cousin, Ribbit, became internet famous, I don't know. But that's where I'm at.

I'm holding my arm over my head as I go down the back staircase, but it's not making much of a difference; I'm bleeding so heavily that I actually slip in my own mess on the second step, crashing into the kitchen and knocking the wind out of me. There are black spots in my vision and a metallic taste in my mouth, the sounds of laughter from the staircase are fading in and out, going a little tinny, like when Dad used to insist on trying to find local radio stations when we were on a road trip. I curl up into a ball, willing myself to keep my shit together.

And keeping my shit together starts with keeping my arm together.

I sit up, leaning back against the wall to get a better idea of how bad the wounds are. I kick at a half-full bottle of water, rolling it near enough to me that I can grab it and pour some over my arm. All I get is a quick glance at what I already knew—it's bad—and then the blood is flowing thickly again, dripping down my arm and soaking the front of my pants.

"Okay, Montor," I say to myself. "What's the situation?"

My mom used to say that, whenever I came running to her. No matter what it was, from a bee sting to a broken nose, she always set me down and calmly asked, *What's the situation?* I asked her once why wasn't she like other moms, the ones who said, *What's wrong?*

"Because they assume something is," Mom said, rolling back the hem of my jeans.

"There is," I argued, wiping my nose. "A bee stung me."

“That’s what bees do.” Mom pinched the stinger between her fingernails and pulled it out. “So really, everything is perfectly *right*.”

A cat had mauled me. That’s what cats do. Nothing was wrong. I just had a situation. And situations have solutions.

“I need stitches,” I say, talking myself through it.

But I can’t go get stitches because (1) I’m in no condition to drive, (2) no one else here is, either, (3) I’ll surely be questioned about my wounds, which will lead to the cat’s escape being discovered, followed by the loss of the family business, and, of course, there’s (4) I’ve committed a handful of felonies this evening and will surely be found out if I seek medical attention.

“Okay.” I nod, agreeing with my train of thought. “I can’t get stitches at a hospital. What else can I do?”

Stitching myself up might be an option. I’d closed a few of Cecil’s wounds when he didn’t want animal services getting too interested in us. But I’m not at home. I’m at the Allan house, and the chances of finding a needle and thread are pretty slim, the availability of boiling water or a disinfectant even slimmer. So stitches are out of the question. But I need to close the wounds, and I need to do it fast.

“Okay,” I agree with myself. “But how?”

The room starts to go sideways, so I lean my head back, watching the lights above me fade in and out as my focus shifts, my eyes wandering from the naked glass bulbs to the live wire above them, held in place with staples. I’d helped Ribbit hang the lights this afternoon, following his instructions and grabbing anything he needed out of my backpack.

Pliers. Hammer. Duct tape.

Duct tape.

I scramble, wriggling around to get my pack off with one good arm while trying to keep the other one elevated. I pull back the zipper with my teeth and spot the roll—the edge curled under so that it won’t stick down, like Dad taught me. I grab it and just start wrapping, rolling it around and around my arm, watching the mess of my skin—the open wounds, the dripping blood—covered with length after length of neat, orderly silver tape.

It doesn’t last, of course. Blood starts to seep out of the edges immediately, so I keep rolling, faster now, enough that I can actually smell

the tape starting to get warm, see tiny fibers floating through the air as I spin and spin, patching myself up with the only thing I've got.

I'm sweating when I finish, patting down the end with my nose. My left arm is pure tape from elbow to wrist, and I wound it too tight; I can feel my pulse in my hand. My fingers will be blue sooner rather than later. But I'm not bleeding anymore, and that was my main concern. The situation was that I was going to bleed to death; now I'm not.

"Problem solved," I say, trying to put more confidence in my voice than I actually feel. I toss the empty tape roll in the direction of the sink but miss by a long shot. It hits the wall, leaving behind an indentation in the plaster, and falls down behind an ancient fridge.

It'll be here forever now, after the bulldozers leave and the walls have come down. Once the bricks collapse and the studs bust and the nails fly and the concrete crumbles, that little something that I put here will be a permanent part of the Allan house ruins.

I've got the chance to bury everything I've done wrong, right along with it. Leave Felicity Turnado to die, and move on with my life like nothing ever happened, same as she did to me. But I can't get the sound of her voice out of my head. Not when she screams *fuck you*, or tells me that I'm living off her charity whether I like it or not. Not when her words come out nasty because her mouth is twisted the way her mother's always has been. No, it's how she sounds when she says my name.

She says *Tress Montor* like it's a name that still matters.

She says it like we're still friends.

I told the cat I could do it, could kill someone. And I don't think that's a lie. I just don't know if I can kill Felicity Turnado.

I set my jaw, grab a chair, and pull myself to my feet.



Chapter 53

Felicity

I'm not good at staying still, and Tress knows that. This has not always been true, and Tress knows that, as well.

I roll my head to the side, trying to find a spot on the rock behind me that doesn't grind against my skull. That place doesn't exist.

"Shit," I mutter, letting my head fall forward again. It's like a sunflower that's grown too heavy for its stalk, and my neck screams against the weight.

I can't move, and while I know Tress thinks the steadily growing brick wall in front of me is what's going to make me come clean, the true power in her plan is that she's forcing me to be still. To be quiet.

Tress Montor is forcing me to think about shit.

We camped out in our backyards a lot, lying on our sleeping bags and looking at the stars, Goldie-Dog tucked between us. We talked, pointing out shapes we saw, trying to differentiate stars from satellites, planets from planes. But mostly . . . we were still.

Still and quiet, and together.

I'm not still anymore. I haven't been for a long time. My life is a rush and a whirl, running from one thing to the next, frantically planning the future and making sure—absolutely sure—that I will never be bored. That I will never be alone. That I will never have time to think.

Now, it's all I've got.

I exhale, my breath sick and rotting in this increasingly small space. I can feel my lips, dehydrated and pocked, sticking to my teeth. I bite down, peeling off a strip of thin skin. I roll it around, get some saliva going, and spit, trying to clean my mouth.

My left foot slips in the mess at my feet, and I go down, my arm jerking hard at the wrist, scraping back skin. I cry out, my voice hoarse and lost as my throat swells, choked tight with tears.

“I can’t do this right now,” I say, like it’s a reasonable statement, like maybe we can reschedule my torture for another time. But it’s also true—I can’t do this. I’m going to lose my mind. I can’t be here.

But I don’t have to be, do I?

I went away for a little bit, earlier. Away to Tress’s yard and that night in fifth grade and an empty driveway and Annabelle Montor’s confused face and Lee coming back late, behind the wheel looking . . .

How did he look? I didn’t know then. All I could think of was getting home before I seized, the entire world shrunk down to the electrical currents in my brain and how they might undermine me at any minute.

But I’m older now, and I know some things. I know how men look when they’re caught.

“Uh-oh, Lee,” I say to myself, holding back a giggle. “What were you up to?”

I close my eyes and think of Patrick Vance. I thought I’d loved him. He went to college last year and *on to better things*. That had been his wording, but what he meant was, *There’s a lot of pussy here and yours isn’t*. I could still see his face when I surprised him, knocking on his dorm door only to have him answer it in his boxers, a brunette with sex-bump hair in his bed.

Yep. That face. Patrick’s face. Lee’s face.

The manacle pulls on my wrist, but it’s actually Annabelle’s fingers, tight, gripping, grinding my bones together because she doesn’t know where else to put her anger right now. Lee doesn’t even get the car in park before Annabelle throws open the back door, helping me inside even though I try to squirm away, try to escape the pinch of her hands. She tears open the passenger door, falls into her seat, her mouth a grim line.

“Drive,” she says.

“What’s going on?” Lee asks, voice wary, frightened.

Annabelle’s mouth moves, and I know there are words back there, words she wants to say right now, can hardly keep in. They’re going to roll out like boulders and crush her husband. She glances back, looks at me, considers her options.

“Felicity doesn’t feel good; she needs to go home,” Annabelle says. They’re tight words, harsh, bouncing off her teeth as she bites them clean, not wanting to let more out while I’m here. I shrink into the back seat, balling up my nightgown in my fists as the tension in the car elevates, along with a smell that’s almost overpowering me.

It's like this when I'm about to seize—everything brighter, stronger, harder, faster, louder. It's a cloying scent, heavy like flowers, maybe fruit, right on the verge of rotting. I take a deep gasp, searching for fresher air, a pocket somewhere in this car that the perfume hasn't permeated.

Because that's what it is. Perfume.

Annabelle Montor always smells like grass clippings and earth, woodsmoke and green things growing. Annabelle Montor does not wear perfume.

I know this. She knows this. Lee knows this.

Lee's phone rests in the cupholder. Annabelle reaches for it as we back out of the driveway. He tenses up, every line in his body drawn with a straight edge.

In the back seat, I make myself very small.



Chapter 54

Tress

Ribbit is naked when I glance into the atrium.

I'm surprised it took this long.

The audience is getting more difficult to impress, and Hugh has begun taking the questions and suggestions that he skipped over in the comments before—the ones that he must have decided were too intense at the time. But times have changed, and the livestream is slipping. The views aren't quite up to where they were before Gretchen charged in and broke the momentum with her announcement about something eating her dog.

I spot her on the stairs, collapsed against the banister, red-faced and crying, nursing a beer in one hand, still holding William Wilson's tail in the other. Her friends are around her, but not as many as before. Maddie Anho has slowly been threading her way back toward the top of the stairs—more than likely trying to get into the livestream shot. Brynn is still running Ribbit's beers, but also moving through the crowd, feeling foreheads, propping people up, and handing out more water than alcohol.

Brynn is a good person.

Ribbit stands in front of the grandfather clock, fully naked, swinging his junk in time with the pendulum at the suggestion of a freshman, who finds it so thrilling that he blows beer out his nose. Hugh leads the crowd in a chant, counting off the seconds that Ribbit can keep himself synchronized with the clock. On the livestream, laughing emojis, balloons, thumbs-ups, and fireworks explode across the screen. Viewers are happy.

Hugh locks eyes with me from across the room, and shoots me a thumbs-up, unconsciously echoing his online audience. I scroll through comments, then shoot a text to Hugh.

Just don't let anyone teabag him.



Or shit in his mouth

I know! People are the worst, right?

I minimize my messages app, and pull up the photo from Brynn's phone.

"Yes," I agree. "They are."

Back in the kitchen I kick beer cans and water bottles out of the way. There's a puddle of blood where I collapsed at the foot of the servants' stairs, drying already. My bare feet stick in it as I pad through the mess, making my way to the basement door. It's open about an inch, the pale glow from the single bulb downstairs outlining the edges.

I flip the hook behind me and take each step as an individual challenge. My legs are shaky, and my left hand is going numb. I can't feel the wall underneath my hand, even though I'm leaning against it for support. The dirt floor is cool under my feet when I get to the bottom. It sticks to the coagulated blood and pushes up between my toes, a gritty red-brown mess.

I flop into the chair, exhausted by the walk, my arm cradled against me. I'm hit with the mixed scents of vomit and urine, and glance up to see a chalk-white Felicity hanging in her chains, eyes vacant.

Until they meet mine.



Chapter 55

Tress and Felicity

“What the hell happened to you?”



Chapter 56

Felicity

“I was attacked by a wild animal,” Tress says, and holds up her arm. It’s entirely silver from elbow to wrist, layer after layer of duct tape not quite managing to stop a trickle of blood that drips from her fingers.

“Me too,” I tell her, and rattle my chains.

She laughs. It’s a weak sound, which is nothing I would ever associate with Tress Montor, but I’m glad to even get that out of her. She looks bad. Pale as death, and her eyes are sunken deep into her skull. Her lips are drawn against the pain, and she’s so weak she can hardly keep it together, her arms and legs splayed out to either side of the chair at odd angles. As I’m watching, her eyes go dim and her head slips to the side.

“Hey!” I shout—or at least, raise my voice as much as I can. “Don’t you fucking pass out on me!”

A jolt of panic rushes up my spine. Tress is the only person who knows I’m down here. If she goes out like a light my one connection to the outside world is extinguished, too. I wish that was the only reason I’m freaked out. I wish that I hated her and could relish the idea of watching her drip-dry to death in that chair, knowing that at least she’s going down with me. But that’s not it. That’s not it at all.

The first thing I felt when I saw Tress’s sunken eyes and waxy skin wasn’t joy or satisfaction or victory. All I felt was worry, a deep yank in my gut at the sight of my friend’s blood.

Yeah. My friend.

I still care about Tress Montor.



Chapter 57

Tress

“If you fucking pass out on me, I swear to God, I’ll . . . I’ll . . .”

Felicity Turnado has nothing to threaten me with, and that’s hilarious. I laugh, or at least I try to. My body isn’t responding the way it’s supposed to, and everything is fuzzy: the demarcations between where my body stops and other physical objects start. The passage of time. Morality.

That’s kind of funny, too.

A giggle escapes, high and tinny, not quite right.

“You scared the shit out of me,” Felicity says, and when I look up she’s crying.

“Smells like you mean that literally,” I answer, and her mouth goes tight, like she wants to get mad at me, but half a second later the edges are twitching, and she’s laughing.

“Things have not been going so well down here,” she says, then seems to consider things for a second. “But they’ve definitely been going.”

I splutter, a mix of spit and giggles slipping past my lips. I’d forgotten that Felicity can be funny. Really funny. Maybe she’d forgotten that, too, because she looks half shocked at her own words, even though she’s laughing along.

Or maybe it’s the fact that she’s laughing with *me* that’s so shocking. It shouldn’t be. We used to laugh a lot, get slaphappy like this at three in the morning and completely lose it over the dumbest things. But a lot has changed . . . and I can’t let myself forget that.

The cat really did a number on me.

I don’t know how much of my blood is upstairs in that bedroom, how much is puddled in the kitchen, how much is mixed with dirt and jammed between my toes, and how much is still in my veins. But I think the last answer is the smallest number.

I'm losing my edge, letting our laughter rekindle something that's dead. I need to remember why I'm here, and the best way to remind myself of that is to lay some damn bricks. I stumble to the rubble pile, find one I like. Felicity is still smiling when I begin working on the new row, like she thought everything was going to be okay now. Like it was fixed. Like nothing ever happened.

Something did happen—it happened to my parents. And I don't know what.

I lay one row and look up to see that Felicity has a half smile on her face, like maybe those last four bricks were supposed to be ironic, a final jab before I let her go. I start another row, my blood mixing with the mortar, the light in her eyes falling away as the wall rises. Good. Felicity Turnado needs to know what it's like to lose hope.

I sit back in the chair, a burst of black circles in my vision. The layer of bricks I just added is sloppy as hell, the mortar uneven and pitted with air holes. I did a shit job, and it's something that would earn me a clap upside the head from Cecil if I were at home.

But I'm not at home. I'm in the basement of the Allan house. And if anyone were to hit me on the side of the head right now, I'd probably just go on over and lay in the dirt until . . . until what? Until I die? Until someone finds us down here and I go to jail for the rest of my life? It's that thought—jail—not death, that gets me talking again. I don't want to live like Cecil's animals do, and I've seen the look in Rue's eyes. She'd rather be dead.

But if I'm asking Felicity to be honest, I guess I probably should be, too. What I'm doing here tonight isn't the only thing in my life that could land me in jail, not by a long shot.

"Tress," Felicity asks, her voice weak and shaky. "What are you thinking about?"

"Patrick Vance," I tell her.



Chapter 58

Felicity

Sophomore Year

I am a fucking mess. And I like it.

I stare down into my Solo cup. I have no idea what's in it. I just know that Patrick Vance handed it to me, and I've had a crush on him since seventh grade. He handed me a little white pill to pop along with it, and I didn't even think twice, because right after that he asked for my number. Brynn had given me a sidelong look, and now she's been by my side all night, not letting me out of her sight, even though we both know Gretchen's house like the back of our hands. I mean, we practically live here on the weekends.

"I'm not going to get lost," I say, giving her an elbow. A little too hard, I guess. Her cup slops over the top, and I notice she's only drinking water.

"I'm not worried about you getting lost," she says, flicking her hand dry. "I'm worried about somebody else finding you."

"Ha," I say, because I can't come up with anything better. My mind is slow, catching up to thoughts, picking them up, examining them, then putting them back down, moving on to something else without remembering what it was holding a second before.

It's nice. It's like forgetting.

"Get your head on straight, Turnado," Brynn says. "You're wasted, and everybody knows it. You can't go wandering off on your own. I don't know half these people, and neither do you. Don't be an idiot."

"Like that guy?" I ask, pointing at Ribbit Usher.

Gretchen made the mistake of asking him if she needed to get permission from the school board for the cheerleaders to paint spirit signs in the athletic hallway. He's answering her . . . has been, for about an hour. It's

turned into a lecture on parliamentary process, and Gretchen is politely trying to back out. Politely, because she can't risk losing an Usher vote from the school board. She picks up William Wilson and tucks him under her arm; he's shivering and upset at the crush of people.

"Oh! Is that your dog? I love your dog!" Ribbit says, and shoves his face into William Wilson's. The dog gives a warning growl but not much of one, before lunging at Ribbit.

He's bleeding in a second, blood spouting through his fingers from his torn lip. Gretchen grabs a towel, pressing it to his face while looking for someone to help her out. Brynn and I swivel, turning our backs immediately.

"Yeah, like that guy," Brynn says as they brush past us, Ribbit insisting that everything is fine. He doesn't need stitches. Dogs love him, he doesn't know why that one would . . . His voice fades out as they disappear into the crowd, Gretchen discreetly leading him outside so he won't bleed all over her mom's carpet.

"I will try very hard not to get bit in the face by William Wilson," I promise Brynn.

As for the rest . . . it's hard not to swear I won't be an idiot tonight. I'm wasted. But Brynn's not wrong. Word about Gretchen's party had spread a little too fast and a lot further than intended. The upperclassmen are more than welcome. Gretchen had practically rolled out the red carpet for Patrick Vance when he showed up with his entourage, but I've spotted a few varsity jackets from Prospero—the next town over—too.

So yeah, Brynn's right. We don't know everyone, and the smart move would be staying next to her. But I'm definitely getting a vibe from Patrick that he wouldn't mind being alone with me . . . and I don't have any objections. I also don't have any illusions—I know what he's interested in. I am, too. But I'd also like to ask him what that pill was.

Because I feel pretty damn good.

My eyes follow Patrick through the crowd; he's broken away from a junior girl who had a death grip on his elbow. She's staring after him, about to cry as he heads for the stairs.

"Gotta go to the bathroom," I say to Brynn, shoving my cup into her hand.

She follows my gaze, her face darkening. "Patrick? Are you for real?"

“I gotta go to the bathroom,” I repeat, squeezing my legs together for emphasis. “Seriously. You can time me.”

“Kay” is all Brynn says, setting my cup aside. “But—”

I don’t know what the *but* is because I’m already gone, following the huge raven on the back of Patrick’s jersey. But the stairs are crowded, and apparently plenty of people actually do need to use the bathroom, because there’s a line. It extends down the hall, and some of the rooms that Gretchen usually keeps shut on purpose have been opened.

She’s not going to be happy about that. I stand on my tiptoes, scanning the crowd to see if I can catch a glimpse of Patrick and his Ravens jersey. But there are too many people, too many faces and colors. They’re all a little fuzzy, and I think I might be about to pass out . . . except that’s not right because the sounds aren’t fading, they’re getting louder and—shit. Whatever Patrick gave me is interfering with my anti-seizure meds.

Panic grips me. I don’t want to seize. Not here. Not in front of everyone.

Who will marry you then? Mom’s voice insistent, worried, cuts right through whatever that pill was. I hear her loud and clear, distinct from the rumble of the crowd.

I push through a group of people to find a wall, the banister, anything that will support me. My hands find something solid and clench on to it. It turns out that something is Hugh Broward.

“Ouch, damn.” He turns around and looks down at me. His face changes from annoyance to concern.

“Felicity?” he asks.

But I can’t talk, can’t remember this boy’s name or where I am. His arms go around me, and suddenly he’s thrown me over his shoulder and I’m being carried through the hall, the flash of his calf tattoo the only thing I can see. He’s barreling his way through the crowd, forcing his way to the front of the bathroom line. People argue but fall silent when they turn and see this boy, his size quieting their objections.

The bathroom door opens, and there’s a girl in the mirror, light hair a tousled mess, blue eyes wide and questioning, the pupils tiny black dots in the center.

She’s scared.

She’s scared.

She’s gone.

“You with me?”

It’s a boy’s voice. Quiet. Calm.

“Felicity? You had a seizure.”

Shit. Yes, I did. And that’s . . . that’s Hugh Broward’s voice.

I sit up, and he’s at my side in a second, hands on my shoulders.

“Slow,” he says, and I nod in agreement, my face grimacing when I see the puke down my front.

“Oh God . . .”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Hugh says.

“It’s not okay,” I say, choking back a sob. “I puked all over myself.”

“Here.” He whips off his jersey, pulling it over his head. The white T-shirt underneath is glaringly bright under the bathroom lights, and I close my eyes against it.

“You all right?”

“Yeah,” I say, pushing my palms into my eyelids. Color bursts. Pinwheels spin. “Just . . .”

“Recovering, I get it,” Hugh says, hands me his jersey. “Grandma says the first few minutes after are pretty rough.”

That’s right, I remember now. Hugh lives with his grandmother. His parents got divorced in fifth grade. It was . . . messy—that’s how Mom had put it. Must have been, for both his parents to leave Amontillado behind and him to decide he’d rather live with an old lady who has seizures.

I wet a towel, wipe off the front of my shirt as best I can. There’s an angry banging on the door, three raps in a row, insistent.

“Get off already, Broward,” somebody shouts.

I scrub more furiously, only driving the stain deeper into my shirt and ruining Gretchen’s towel. Dismissing it as futile, I pull Hugh’s jersey on over it, yanking my hair free from the back.

“How’d you know?” I ask, leaning forward to check my teeth. “How’d you know I was going to seize?”

He shrugs, his massive shoulders moving up and down in the T-shirt, like a white cloud. “You just had that look about you, the way Grandma gets. I figured you wouldn’t want to go down in front of everybody.”

“No,” I say, rinsing and spitting. “No, I didn’t.”

The banging comes again, harder.

“You ready to go back into it?” Hugh asks, hand on the doorknob.

I check my reflection, adjust my hair. “Yeah,” I say. “Yeah, I think so.”

He twists the knob, but I stop him.

“Hey, Hugh? Why are you being so nice to me?”

He smiles, his teeth bright as his shirt. “Maybe I’m not *being* nice, Felicity,” he says. “Maybe I actually *am* nice.”

I watch carefully, weighing what I know of him against what I’ve heard. “I thought you were just some big, dumb bruiser.”

He nods, like he’s heard that, too. “Football, beer, and pussy.”

“Yeah,” I say. “So why do you let people think that?”

His hand falls from the doorknob, his eyes boring into mine. “What’s your last name, Felicity?” he asks.

“Turnado,” I say.

“And what’s that mean in Amontillado?”

“Money,” I say automatically. It’s one half of the power equation, the secret everyone knows about you but doesn’t resent as long as you keep it quiet, too.

“And what’s my last name?” he asks.

“Broward,” I answer.

“And what’s that mean?”

“I . . .” I search, all the other answers came easily, but this one eludes me.

“Nothing,” he says. “Not a name that matters, no money behind it. What’s my first name?”

“Hugh,” I say, and he cocks his head at me. “But people call you Huge.”

“Yep, and there might be a football scholarship at OSU with my name on it, if I play my cards right,” he says. “Get the fuck out of here.”

I think of the jewel tones of shampoo and conditioner lined up under my sink, one of them for colored hair. I recently went with the silver look because that’s what Gretchen did and everyone else followed suit.

“So you’re just doing what you’re expected to do,” I say. “Being the thing you’re supposed to be.”

He shrugs. “It’s easier than proving I’m any different.”

I nod, because I get it. He opens the door, and we go back out into it, together. He’s pulled away from me in a second, guys asking for the details about my . . . Oh, that’s nice. Assholes. Brynn’s at my elbow immediately.

“Twenty-three minutes,” she says, her mouth a firm line.

“What?”

“You told me to time you. It took twenty-three minutes for you to take a piss, and”—she spins me around—“apparently swap clothes with—” The humor in her voice falls flat when she sees the name on the back of the jersey I’m wearing.

“Hugh Broward, huh?” She spins me back around, the smile on her face a little forced. “Didn’t know he was on the buffet.”

“He’s not,” I say. “I mean, we were just—”

“Taking each other’s clothes off, yeah,” Brynn says. But her eyes aren’t on mine anymore. She’s scanning the crowd. “Oh God, seriously?”

I follow her gaze to where Ribbit is letting a freshman superglue the cut on his lip. She’s cute, but I know that guy pretty well—it wouldn’t matter if she were a two. He’s had a couple of beers, and she’s in front of him. He wants her to be happy. So he’s letting her superglue his face.

Twenty minutes later the tube has been passed around the room and Ribbit’s eyelids are glued open, constant watering tears running down his face as he smiles at everyone who asks for a selfie. Or at least . . . he tries to smile.

A guy from Prospero glued his lips shut.

I’m at the park. I’m a beautiful girl, and it’s a beautiful fall day, and I’m with a beautiful boy, and beautiful families are walking past us, smiling at the beautiful couple.

All I can think about is how I felt last night—beautiful. Inside and out.

“Oxy,” Patrick had explained over the phone. “You like?”

I do like. And if Patrick is the package it comes with, that’s okay, too. He hadn’t seemed surprised at all when I texted him, even if he was a little taken aback that I insisted we meet today. He’d come over and felt me up within the first ten minutes of us lying on the couch, supposedly watching Netflix. I let him, then asked if he had another pill.

“Not on me,” he’d said, pulling at the crotch of his jeans. “But I can get more.”

“Yes,” I’d said, pressing against him. “You can.”

Because I wouldn’t care if this guy was ugly as sin or skinny as Ribbit Usher or mean as that guy from Prospero who glued Ribbit’s lips shut. That pill made me not think about things, and not thinking about things has been the goal for a very long time.

So we ended up here, after straightening our clothes. Patrick says the park is one of the places where things go down, but that he has to wait. Apparently, his dealer sets up shop on one of the lesser-used trails, one that's a loop, that way the people coming in don't see the people going out. They also send out texts to whoever is buying today, letting them know when it's their turn, further lessening the chances of users knowing who else is using.

"Smart dealer," I say. I'm not exactly proud to be here, myself.

"So . . ." Patrick reaches out, his hand encircling my knee. It's a nice hand, masculine, a scar across the back. But it's not as big as Hugh's, and he doesn't have as light of a touch.

"You and Broward?" Patrick asks.

"Huh?" I look up, blushing, aware that I'd gone into a reverie about one boy while another one had his hand on my leg.

"You and Huge," Patrick repeats. "That a thing? You came out of the bathroom with his jersey on, so I figured, you know . . ."

I think of Hugh, how kind he is, how nobody knows that—and how I doubt he'd be willing to buy Oxy for me. "Not a thing," I say.

"Cool. I wouldn't want to cross him." Patrick's hand tightens on my knee, and his phone goes off. "We're up."

I follow him to the trailhead, swatting at mosquitoes. He takes my hand as we walk and reaches back to steady me when we cross a stream, my sandals slipping off a wet rock. "Those aren't quite trail shoes," he tells me, and I swat at another mosquito.

"You didn't exactly tell me we would be hiking," I shoot back, and his eyebrows come together. Patrick doesn't like girls who talk back. I make a note, filing it away. He's still got ahold of my hand when we come around the corner, and there's Tress Montor. I drop it, backing away like we've crossed paths with a bear.

Funny thing, I reflexively put him in between me and her.

"Tress, what's up? You got my girl covered?" Patrick says, and I close my eyes. Despite all of Brynn's warnings, I did end up acting like a fucking idiot. Maybe not last night, but definitely today. Tress isn't a wild animal about to kill me on the trail, and she's not here by accident, either. Tress is Patrick's dealer.

"Your girl, huh?" she asks, eyes on me. I try to shake my head, try to show her I'd never be with a guy like that. Try to be the Felicity I used to

be.

Instead, I just stand there.

Tress has no use for me; her attention is entirely on Patrick as she produces a baggie of weed, and he opens his wallet for cash. My head is spinning as I watch Tress count it off—twice—before trading him.

This is how Tress makes money.

I didn't know.

I mean, I'd overheard plenty, Mom and Dad wondering aloud how Cecil kept the lights on and the water running up at the zoo, because everyone around here who wants to see it has already gone, and nobody outside of Amontillado comes here. My parents had their own ideas about the Montor income and hadn't had too much compunction about telling me it's an open secret that Cecil grows weed out there. But they never said he was using Tress to sell, and I truly am a huge fucking idiot because it never occurred to me that she was.

Because that kind of thing would never happen in my world.

I step forward. "Tress, I . . ."

Her eyes come to mine, green and hard. Unblinking. "What do you need?"

I need to tell her to stop this. I need to tell her to come with me. I need to tell her to ditch the drugs and I'll ditch Patrick and we'll walk out of the woods together, and everything will be the same again.

But it won't. I may be an idiot, but I'm not completely stupid. It can't be the same again. Her parents are still gone, and I still don't know what happened, and I can't do anything to help her except . . .

I'm digging in my jeans, pulling out a wad of cash that Mom handed me when I went out the door with Patrick.

"Oxy," I say, handing her the whole roll. "Whatever you've got."



Chapter 59

Tress

Sophomore Year

Felicity cleaned me out. I've got customers coming and nothing to give them, but I can't pass up ready cash. Not with Cecil's medical bills piling up.

The cat took his eye about a week ago. He'd been due for worming, and I'd shot the cat in the upper shoulder with the tranq, just like usual. The cat had screamed at me for it, tore the dart out with his teeth and climbed his tree, only to fall out seconds later. I'd winced when he hit the ground, a puff of dirt landing on his glossy coat.

I don't trust that animal, but it doesn't mean I don't respect him.

Cecil had approached him with the wormer vial, cautious, ready to bolt if he needed to. The cat had twitched when he shoved the tube down his throat, gagged when he pushed the depressor. But the job was done, and the cat was still down when Cecil turned his back. And then it had changed.

The cat was up. Not as fast as normal, no, but not exactly slow, either. Maybe I shouldn't have yelled. Maybe it would've been better if the cat just got a swipe across his back, but I did. I yelled Cecil's name, reloading my tranq gun at the same time. Cecil had turned—catching a slash right across the face. Luckily, the cat had been too wonked to calculate his leap correctly, and that's all Cecil got . . . if *lucky* is the word for it.

Now he's laid up in the trailer, a swath of bandages covering half his face. He's drinking against the pain, half-thrilled some days because with that injury our Oxy supply just went through the roof, half-pissed the rest of the time because I won't let him have as much as he wants.

I can't. We need the money.

Insurance doesn't cover wild-animal attacks when you actively make the choice to live with one. So, we're kind of fucked. The one thing Cecil is real serious about is paying bills on time, because the last thing we need is people poking around the property, looking to see what we've got of value.

The answer is—just the one thing.

That one thing is half an acre of marijuana, and that's not exactly something a collection agency is interested in. But the sheriff sure would be.

The Oxy has been a nice sideline, a decent enough trickle coming in through what Cecil calls his *guys*. Cecil has always *got a guy*. It's how we procured Dee and Zee, and of course, the cat. Now the little pickup brings bottles, and the cage in the back has been replaced with a shotgun rack.

But not enough bottles.

Because now I'm the one who's *got a guy*. He's coming down the trail with some buddies, and I've got nothing to sell him because I wasn't planning on Felicity Turnado needing to get high and handing over money to make it happen.

Shit. That's the other thing. I slip off my backpack and tuck the wad of cash inside. These guys aren't going to be happy. Neither will Cecil, if they decide to jump me and take the day's earnings instead of the pills they came for.

If that's all they do to me.

I straighten my shoulders and stick out my chin, ready for the response when my usual customer shows up, two guys I don't know alongside him.

"Tress," he says, giving me an up-nod, and I give it back.

"Bad news," I tell him. "Store's closed, unless you want weed."

"Weed?" He gives half a laugh, looking at his friends, who follow suit. "We're not after weed, you know that."

"I do," I say, keeping it as agreeable as I can. "But I can't sell you what I don't have."

"Well, that's some bullshit," one of his friends says, and I nod, still trying to keep it on the up-and-up.

"I know it," I tell them. "But I got cleaned out. Would you turn somebody away who wants to hand over their cash?"

I hold up my hands, like *What're you gonna do?* It makes me look like I'm with them, that I totally get where they're coming from, and maybe we were all in the same place to begin with—just a bunch of people scrambling

for money. It also lifts my jacket enough to display the butt of the tranq gun jammed into my jeans.

One of his buddies sees it, and his eyes flick off it, nervously.

It looks enough like a real gun to do the trick. And acts enough like one, too, in a pinch. But it can only hold one dart at a time, and there's three of them.

"So you want some weed, or what?" I ask, trying to push them toward a decision. If I don't give them enough time to get angry, they might forget that they are, and settle for something less than what they came for.

"Let's talk a sec, over here," my customer says to his buddies. I nod, like that's perfectly fine, and they go off a few paces, heads together. I tighten my backpack straps, ready to run if I need to, and rest my hand on the butt of the gun.

Their voices rise, low and muttering, but then there's something else, footsteps—heavy ones—and I realize someone is coming down the path, running, by the sounds of it. I usually duck into the trees when this happens, but I don't want to be off-trail if I suddenly have to make a bolt for it. I tuck my jacket back down to cover the gun, and try to look like I'm just enjoying the view, when Hugh Broward comes tearing around the bend.

He's in jogging shorts, a soaked shirt sticking to his torso. He sees me, nods, and keeps going, his gaze gliding over the guys as he passes them. His footsteps die off, and they turn back to me, my customer in front, his friends clearly flanking him.

I don't think I'm going to like what they decided.

"Thing is, we came out here to buy Oxy," he says.

"And I don't have any," I repeat, no longer trying to keep my voice polite, this meeting civil. I know nasty and have been around when plenty of things started heading that way. Like right now.

"Right . . . but you said you did, is the thing," he says.

"And I *did*, but now it is *gone*," I repeat. "So if you—"

"Hey, Tress."

The four of us jump, all of us caught. Except, I'm glad to see Hugh, who apparently turned around and came back. He's standing there taking up the whole path, sweat pouring down his face. His gaze sweeps the three guys, assessing, and coming out in his favor.

"You all right?" he asks me.

"Yep," I say, nodding. "On my way out."

“Me too,” he says. “Walk with me?”

“Sure thing,” I say, giving him a bright smile. The other three back off, and Hugh motions for me to go in front of him, so that it’s his back turned to them, not mine.

“Thanks,” I say, once we’ve put some distance between them and us.

He only grunts in response, and my phone goes off in my pocket. I pull it out to see a text from the customer we left on the path behind us.

Next time, have what I want.

I text back:

**Next time, make your mind up faster and at least ~~you won’t leave~~
empty-handed.**

Because there will be a next time. The guy spends too much money for me to send him elsewhere, even if he is kind of a creep.

“Things like that happen a lot?” Hugh asks.

I shrug. “Girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.”

Which is true, and also reminds me. I shoot a text to Felicity Turnado, taking a stab in the dark that her number might still be the same but wording it carefully in case it’s not.

My number hasn’t changed. Call me if you need anything. Anytime.

I can’t turn away white trash cash, and I can’t turn away Turnado cash, either.

“Well,” Hugh says, picking our conversation back up. “A girl’s gotta do what she’s gotta do, but maybe she doesn’t have to do it alone. Like, for her own safety.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, ducking under a branch. “And what’s your cut?”

“Nothing.” Hugh’s footsteps fall dead behind me, and I turn to see that he’s genuinely shocked. “I just don’t want you getting hurt, is all. If I didn’t run the trails on the weekends, that could’ve gone bad, back there.”

“It could’ve,” I agree, and turn back to the path. We’re quiet until we break out into the light, sunshine falling on my face. “All right,” I say. “I try to keep it to once a month, different spots. I’ll let you know. We’ll meet up and you . . .”

And he protects me, I think. For nothing. For no reason.

“Cool,” he says.

We trade numbers, and I wait for the text that says what he wants in return.

It doesn't come.



Chapter 60

Felicity

Sophomore Year

“Tress and Hugh?” Maddie’s voice is high, unbelieving, soaked in vodka.

“That’s what I heard,” Brynn says, shrugging. “I guess they’ve been, like, hanging out.”

I think of Hugh in Gretchen’s bathroom, yanking his shirt off, helping me clean up. He’s a nice guy. “Good for her,” I say, but I say it into my drink, the words echoing back at me from the sides of a red Solo cup.

And I mean it, kind of. I ignore the little drop in my stomach and the ideas that had taken root that day when I looked at Patrick’s hand and wished it were Hugh’s. It’s the least I can do for Tress. Well, that and funnel her constant cash for pills.

“Whatever,” Gretchen says. “There’s no way Hugh is smashing trash.”

I take another drink. If there’s something in my mouth it’ll stop the words from coming out.

“Hey, speaking of trash,” Brynn says, her eyes going to the corner where I spot Patrick talking to Jessica Stanhope. She’s shed something like fifty pounds in the past year, and apparently guys who wouldn’t look twice at her before are now honing in. But I’m all out of *good for hers*. I make my way toward them in time to see him punch her number into his phone, then give her ass a pinch as she walks away.

“Hey,” I say, coming up beside him.

“Hey,” he says, slipping his arm around my waist, smooth as hell. It’s been here a lot lately—with clothes both on and off.

“What was that about?” I ask, nodding toward Jessica.

“Nothing, just talking,” he says, avoiding my eye.

“Just talking?” I repeat, but he only nods. “Like maybe you’ll talk later, too? Because I saw you get her number.”

His arm is gone from my waist, his eyes not kind anymore. “That a problem?”

“I . . . well . . . ,” I sputter. He was supposed to be caught. Supposed to be guilty.

“Look, maybe I wasn’t totally clear with you about what’s up with us,” he says, leaning down so that his voice is in my ear. “I’m not a one-girl kind of guy.”

“Oh,” I say, my stomach bottoming out. He’s saying it so casually, like it’s not a big deal. Like I have no right to be angry. Maybe I don’t. I mean, I never did ask him if we were dating. I just let him do . . . well, basically whatever he wanted. As long as I got an Oxy first.

“I mean, that’s cool, right?” Patrick says. “You didn’t think that we were . . .”

“Yeah, no, yeah, I mean, duh,” I say, all the words I didn’t have for Gretchen coming out now, tripping over each other, not making sense. “I mean, whatever.”

He nods. “Cool.”

Sure, it’s cool. Everything’s cool. Everything is *awesome*. I walk back over to the girls and find my drink.



Chapter 61

Tress

Sophomore Year

My phone is ringing. At three in the morning. That can't be good.

"Hello?" I'm breathless after scrambling for it, the security light from the animal pens lighting up my room.

"Tress?"

There's a sob, a broken noise. It's Felicity. She's not okay.

"Where are you?" My heart is in my throat, and I'm up, pulling on shorts even though I'm not wearing underwear, throwing a sweatshirt on with no bra, rifling through the mess on the kitchen table for Cecil's keys.

I am coming. I will save you. Everything will be okay.

"He's seeing other girls," she says, her voice dull now.

"What?" I stop, watch an empty beer bottle roll off the table, breaking on the floor.

"Patrick," she says. "I slept with him, and I guess I thought, I don't know . . . I thought maybe he was, like, actually into me, or whatever."

"Where are you?" I ask again.

"What?" She sniffs. "I'm at home."

At home. In her house. On a nice street. With her family.

"Why are you calling me?" I ask, my voice hard as hell this time.

"What? I . . ." She trails off, confused.

"Why are you calling me?" I repeat.

"You said . . . you said your number was the same. You said call if I needed anything. You said call . . . anytime."

"If you need *drugs*, Felicity," I seethe into the phone. "Call me if you need drugs."

"Oh," she says, small and soft.

“Anytime,” I say.
And hang up.



Chapter 62

Tress

“He’s bad news,” I tell Felicity, two years too late.

I should’ve said it on the path, I should’ve said it at the first party I saw him sniffing around her. I should’ve said it. I didn’t. That’s on me. And maybe her pill problem, too.

“You think?” she asks, the words slurred, the laughter that follows unhinged.

“I always thought . . .” My voice isn’t strong, either, the thoughts slippery, the consonants and vowels needed to bring them out into the world something I can’t conjure. “I always thought maybe you and Hugh . . .” I finally manage.

“Really?” Her voice brightens a second, like maybe it’s an interesting topic. “I mean . . . I guess . . . I always thought . . . maybe *you* and Hugh.”



Chapter 63

Felicity

Tress starts laughing, and there's an echoing answer from upstairs, weaker now. I don't know if it's because sounds have been going in and out for me in the past few minutes or if people are dropping off upstairs.

"No." She shakes her head, spinning the trowel in her good hand. The other one is turning purple, the tape she bound her wound with much too tight. "No," she repeats. "Not me and Hugh."

"Why not?" I argue. "I mean, he's cute, and if someone could convince him to drop the alpha act—"

"No," Tress interrupts me. "He can't. When the pack senses a weakness in their leader, they take him down. He knows that. I know that. You know that."

I guess I do, which is why I feel a little gut twinge of joy whenever someone takes a cut at Gretchen, why I've got a couple of embarrassing pics of her on my phone, for whenever the day comes that I'm tired of her telling me what to do. If it comes. Following is easier than leading.

"You're both alphas," I say, understanding. "You and Hugh. It would never work."

She stops spinning the trowel, refocusing her thoughts.

"You finally ditch him?" she asks. "Patrick?"

"Yeah," I tell her, nodding. My head feels like a water balloon, too heavy. It rolls oddly, off to one side. I try to focus on the bricks, try to count them, see how high the rows are. I don't know, anymore. Higher than before, that's all I can say for sure. Math is hard when you've got a concussion and major blood loss plus are still slightly high and maybe a little drunk.

I open my eyes. What were we talking about? Oh yeah, Patrick.

"He went to college and majored in extracurricular activities," I tell Tress.

“Cheaters gonna cheat,” Tress says. Her eyes have gone a little blank, and she’s fixated on the floor, where her blood is starting to pool as it drips from the tips of her fingers.

Cheaters gonna cheat. . . .



Chapter 64

Tress

“Cheaters gonna cheat,” I say. “Liars gonna lie. Haters gonna hate.”

My mind is wandering, leaving the area as my blood leaks out, the point being lost. Lost like my parents. Lost like my dog.

Goldie-Dog.

I pull out my phone and show her the picture.

It’s not the sign that got to me, when I spotted it on Brynn’s phone. Or the smiling faces in front of it. It’s Goldie-Dog. My dog, leaning into Felicity, her tongue lolling out, happy to see someone she knows. Someone she remembers. Someone she loves.



Chapter 65

Felicity

Cheaters gonna cheat. . . .

It's echoing in my head, bouncing off my skull, the hard truth of what I know needing to escape, find a new home inside Tress's mind. I can't focus, can't process what she's holding in front of me . . . a phone . . . a picture . . . I squint, wanting to do something right. Wanting to please Tress.

Shit.

I'd like to say I don't recognize that person, don't know who the girl is posing with Gretchen and David in front of Tress's trailer out in the middle of nowhere, cheeks red from drinking . . . but not as red as the words we'd sprayed on the sign behind us.

WHITE TRASH ZOO

And beside us, Goldie-Dog, my arm looped over her, her tongue out, happy.

There's nothing I can say, no defense for what happened. All I can do is be silent and take whatever punishment Tress feels is acceptable. I don't know how to explain that I was trying to find her again, trying to recapture the Tress I knew. But the Tress I remember is gone. The one I know now is standing before me, staring me down, a wild animal loose from its cage.

The Tress Montor I created.



Chapter 66

Tress

It's clear on Felicity's face—I just took everything from her. Any pretense of being a friend, or even a decent person. That's gone now.

It feels good. It's nice to be the one taking. There's a jolt of adrenaline in my veins, chemicals and fibers of duct tape and whatever is left of my blood all coursing through me, pushing me forward. To the inevitable end.

“Tell me how my dog died,” I say, my parents now a faint echo, a memory from long before. Goldie's still fresh. I don't need to poke that wound to make it bleed.

“Tell me how the last thing from my old life was eaten by an alligator.”

I put the phone in my pocket and reach for the mortar pail.

“Tell me what you did, Felicity.”



Chapter 67

Felicity

Senior Year

Being in the passenger seat of your own car is weird. I don't think I've ever been here before. Where have I been, lately? Where was I tonight? Earlier?

I focus on the dash, the backlit numbers, trying to make sense of them. Two in the morning. It's two in the morning and I am incredibly fucked-up and David probably shouldn't be driving and Gretchen is in the back seat, her face pressed against the window, lipstick smearing on the glass.

"Why are you driving my car?" I ask David.

"Because you probably shouldn't be, babe," he says, his hand wandering over to my knee. I look at it for a second, study the long fingers and the knuckles. I brush it away. I don't like him. His hand isn't Hugh's hand.

"No, I mean, like, why are you driving my car?" I repeat, because he didn't understand that I'm not asking which of us is more fit right now. I'm asking why he can't just let me drive my own goddamn car, like Hugh does, putting the passenger seat far back enough to accommodate his bulk.

I had to adjust it when I got in, pulling it forward and smiling, thinking about the next time Hugh gets in and his knees will be up in the vents, his chin resting on them, and we'll laugh about it, and why isn't he here right now? And where are we going, anyway?

"Where are we going, anyway?" The last thought escapes my mind, leaks out through my mouth. This happens with the Oxy, sometimes. I should be more careful. Who knows what I could say, what might come out of me. Hugh is usually with me and he takes care of me when I'm this bad off, and why isn't he here right now?

“White Trash Zoo,” David says in answer to my question, the one I spoke aloud.

“Fucking A,” Gretchen says from the back seat, her words sloppy and slurred against the window. “Tressy Trash Montor.” She tries again, lifting her head this time. “Trashy Tress Montor.”

Shit. That’s right. Hugh didn’t want to come. Didn’t want to do . . . whatever we’re doing. We’re going to do something to Tress. They are. Or I am. I don’t know.

David cuts the lights, and the moon takes us the rest of the way, past the Usher house, like a huge tombstone in the night, the pond in front reflecting the glare of the moon. It’s so bright, too bright, showing us everything, making me see. I don’t know how we got out here. I don’t want to be here, but I am here, and Gretchen has gained a second wind and is almost perky as she hands me something when we get out of the car.

A sack. A grocery sack. A dollar-store sack. The dollar store—the only place Tress can shop now—and why did we go there? Why would Felicity Turnado be in a dollar store?

“‘Thank you,’” I say, reading the sack aloud, but Gretchen thinks I’m talking to her, and she laughs and reaches into the bag and pulls out a can of spray paint and it’s red and she’s shaking it and it makes a *click click click* because there’s a little ball inside mixing the paint, like there’s one inside my head right now mixing my thoughts and my words are going to come out like the paint, spraying out of my mouth, and I don’t want these people to hear me because I don’t know what I might say.

I don’t know what will come out of me because I don’t know what’s inside me.

There’s a smell, thick and heavy, with a sound, a hiss, and they are doing it, they are doing something bad. Something that will hurt Tress. Tress who was my friend, and these people are not my friends, and I know that but I am here with them now, anyway. And I feel something cold in my hand, and I look down and there is someone I know, an actual friend, looking back at me with a question.

“Goldie-Dog,” I say, dropping to my knees. I wrap my arms around her neck, and she leans into me, and she smells like shit and animals and a dog, but it’s not chemicals and it’s not paint and it’s not bad words. It’s not a bad smell, just a smell, and I want to tell her that but I don’t know how, so I just keep my arms around her and look deep into her eyes and hope she knows,

hope she feels that I love her, right now. I loved her then and I love her now, and there's a flash and someone tells me to look somewhere and I do because I am a follower, and Goldie looks too and there's another flash.

Gretchen is laughing and she falls into David and her lips are red and the sign is red and now his lips will be red, too, and I don't want to watch this so I walk away. Goldie follows me, her nose pressing into my palm, then into my neck because I've fallen down and there is someone looking at me but it's not Gretchen or David. It's a nicer face. I crawl closer and there are hands on me, touching, and it's not a human. It's almost human, but not quite human, and that means it's better because being all human is not always good.

Almost human > Human

Human ≠ Good

And I'm touching it back, and it runs its hands down my arms and touches my hair, and there are bars between us, why are there bars between us? I am the dangerous one who should be inside, should be kept away. Should not be here. Goldie presses against me, and there is warmth from her and warmth from the hands and this is what Tress's life is like now, all animals no humans, and oh my God I want this for myself.

I want to know Tress now, new Tress, this animal life. I want to share it with her and feel her here in this place, and I'm on my feet and I'm going to the next thing, black and white stripes and big eyes that I'm lost in and wiry hair that I run my fingers through and a tap on my back, and there's a bird face and it's ugly and I love it and the wings unfurl and they are beautiful and I show my own arms and we talk like this now. Not words. Not words painted on a sign.

I didn't come here for that; I came here for this. I came to find Tress again and there's a path and maybe that's how I find her because she is also not human anymore she is an animal and she would be here, she would be with them and I will find her again. And I'm following and I'm walking where she has walked and I am running and our feet are the same and we are the same and we are together again and Goldie is tugging on my hand now pulling, because we don't use words now we do this and—

A snap. A flash.

And pain.

Not a flash of David's phone and not a snap of a picture being taken and not pain of words on a sign but real pain on my foot because it is not Tress's

foot and we are not the same and I forgot that and now I am in water and I am drowning.

It's . . . familiar.

Why is that?

These are my thoughts and they are clear and cogent for the first time since forever, and I know that I have forgotten more than Tress. I have forgotten much more, but now there is Goldie and she is with me, and she has her mouth on my arm and she is gentle with not teeth and she is pulling me away from water and toward land but something else has teeth and it is coming and I try to tell her but how we talk now doesn't work anymore and I don't have words either and there is a *crack*.

And there is no more Goldie.



Chapter 68

Tress

“Yeah, that electric fence, it’ll get you,” I hear myself saying, an idiotic response to the story of how my dog died.

“Hurts, right?” I ask, digging into what Felicity just told me, doing the same thing she was, trying to find the scraps of what we still share.

Like being shocked by an electric fence.

Like knowing how something dies.

“I loved that dog,” I say, and it’s another dumb thing to say, but it’s true, and like a lot of true things it’s also incredibly sad.

I’m crying when I lay the next row.



Chapter 69

Felicity

Tress's hands shake a little as she lays the ninth row of bricks, drops of her blood mixing with the mortar. She doesn't speak as she does it, and I don't argue. There's nothing to say. I might have ranted and raved at her about the junior-class secretary thing, but I deserve the bricks she's laying right now.

I try to calculate, measure the distance that's left. But there's an echo in my head still, Tress's words not letting go of me.

Cheaters gonna cheat. . . .

Cheaters gonna cheat and I know how it feels to drown. These thoughts hold hands in my head, forming a chain leading back into the dark parts of my mind, the ones I threw shadows over, in order to forget.

But that's inside of me, and I need to concentrate on what's outside right now. The wall in front of me is past my thighs; the layer Tress is adding will bring it halfway up my body. There's still space between it and the ceiling, but the gap is closing. We're over halfway there. I exhale, the sharp smell of my own breath filtering up to my nose. What the fuck am I going to do?

My mom is an eternal optimist, always looking for the bright side of things, even if they do tend to verge on being incredibly shallow. *When life hands you lemons, put them in your hair for highlights* is one of her favorite sayings. Global warming means better tans. The flu that laid her low at the beginning of the week was doing her a favor by trimming off at least five pounds. Her immediate reaction to the doctor diagnosing my seizures had been to proclaim, "Well, at least it's not something with your face."

What would she have to say about this? I wonder.

You're going to die, but Tress Montor will still be a brunette.

I laugh a little, but it quickly descends into a sob, thinking of my mom. She's not going to be okay, if this ends the way I think it's going to.

"Something funny?" Tress asks. She puts the pail down, and rests on the chair, her skin sallow and sagging after the effort that went into adding the

layer of bricks.

The truth is that nothing is funny, not a damn thing. I've been slipping in and out of consciousness, my mind hopping from the night her parents disappeared to this musty, dank hole I'm going to die in. I don't want to be in either place, and what I've remembered is not going to make Tress any happier. I'm chained to a wall, facing down a girl who wants to entomb me. And I have to tell her something that's going to kill her.

Then she'll kill me.

I guess that's fair.

"No," I say. "Nothing's funny." Upstairs, a roar of laughter contradicts me.

"Tress . . . ," I say, my words dry in my throat. "I need to tell you something."

She hears the weight in my words, looks up. "Yeah?"

"Your dad was cheating on your mom."

Her eyes, still blank, stare at me, and I think maybe I didn't say it. Maybe I've spent so much time not saying the important things that when I finally tried, the words didn't actually come out. Then she's up, one bare foot sliding in the pool of her own blood as she comes at me, pointing the trowel in my face.

"That's a fucking lie! You're a *fucking liar!*" she screams, voice cracking.

I shake my head. "No. No, Tress, I'm not."

I don't have the energy to be scared, or upset, or angry in return. I don't have anything left, and it must show, because she backs off, the outrage in her eyes dying a little as she considers the possibility.

Tress might not have had her parents her whole life, but she also didn't have what I do—the experience of watching a marriage fall apart. She didn't get to see the big fights, the small digs, the knowing glances, the laden words said in conversational tones. Maybe the Montors were careful not to let her see, or maybe she never knew, and she's held on tight to just the good things, canonizing them in her memory.

Well . . . the Montors weren't saints. I can say that, for sure.

Wait . . . I can?

I pause, digging deep, wondering where that came from. "Tress . . . I think—"

"Shut up!" She whirls, throwing the trowel at me. "Shut the fuck up!"

I can't dodge it; can hardly move my head or keep my legs under me. Luckily, Tress is way too emotional to have good aim. The trowel bounces off the wall a foot from my head, ricocheting back at her to hit the lone light bulb. There's a flash of light, a pop, a yelp from Tress.

And then . . . it's utterly black.



Chapter 70

Tress

There's a blue halo in my vision, a burn on my eyes from looking at the bulb when it blew. I can't see anything, but I'm down on my hands and knees, feeling for my phone. I had it in my pocket, but it fell out, clattering to the floor when I jumped as the light exploded.

Shit, shit, shit.

My hand slides through my blood, already growing tacky in the coolness of the basement. I bump against the chair, and it screeches across the stone floor, unnaturally loud in the silence. Utter silence.

"Felicity?" I ask.

She doesn't say anything, and I'm scrambling now. I need that phone. Need the light. Need to . . . Shit, what do I even need to do? Fix everything? Go back in time and undo it all? My fingers brush against the phone and I grab it, relieved when it lights up, despite the crack across the screen. The streaming feed comes on, the viewer number still healthy.

"Can't get enough, can you?" I ask.

And from the darkness, comes my mother's voice, echoing me.

"Can't get enough, can you?"



Chapter 71

Felicity

Fifth Grade / The Night Of

“Can’t get enough, can you?” Annabelle says, her mouth tight as she flips Lee’s phone shut, putting it back in the cup holder.

“Do we have to do this right now?”

Lee turns in the driver’s seat. I know he’s looking back at me, can feel the weight of his gaze. But I’ve got my eyes squeezed tight, have made my body very small. It’s what I do at home—pretend I’m not there.

“No—do *you* have to do *this* right now?” Annabelle says, her voice low and growling. “When your daughter has a friend over?”

“Jesus . . .”

I crack an eyelid. Lee’s hands are tight on the steering wheel. His jaw muscles flicker.

“Just, seriously get a grip. You’re being ridiculous.”

“*I’m* the ridiculous one?” Annabelle asks. She fights like Mom; repeating what Dad said but making it sound stupid.

“Annabelle—”

“Yes.” She cuts him off. “That’s my name. That’s who I am. Annabelle Montor. Your. Wife.”

I don’t know if she’s not bothering to control her volume, or if my seizure is close. Her voice breaks higher, to a level I can’t pretend to ignore. I jam my fingers in my ears, squeeze my eyes tighter. Pinwheels of color explode across black.

“First you were Annabelle Usher,” Lee says. His words are quiet, and dark. Heavy pebbles that I can tell have been thrown before. I feel her rage, radiating to fill the car.

“And I’m supposed to be endlessly grateful?” she asks. “You lifted me up, and I’m supposed to look the other way now?”

“No, that’s not—Shit, I missed her road. You made me miss the turn.”

“Of course, you made a mistake . . . but it’s my fault.”

“Can you just shut up for one goddamn second?” Lee yells for the first time, his patience exhausted.

She falls silent, and I feel the car turn. I slide across the leather back seat, the fabric of my nightgown slick and sweaty. It rolls up, and I grab it, pushing it back down to cover my knees. I think I push down, but I might have pulled up. Directions are wrong, and time is thin, and I left Tress’s house ten years ago and I’m still there. I’m slipping. I’m slipping. I’m . . .

“Lee, remember that bridge is out—”

This time Annabelle cuts herself short, and Lee slams on the brakes. I roll off the seat, land in the footwell, unable to catch myself. Warmth rushes down the side of my head, and blood trickles into my mouth, my lip already swelling where I bit it, too hard. Too much. Too fast. It’s all here now, circling, getting ready to descend.

“Lee?” Now there’s something new in Annabelle’s voice—fear. And something new in the air, too. Lights. Bright lights, bouncing off the seats, into my eyes, into my head.

“Stay in the car,” Lee says, and I hear his door open.

But Annabelle Montor (*Usher*) is not the kind of woman who stays in the car. Her door opens, too.

Words. Flashing. Like the lights.

papers

thief

stole

mine

yours

sister

don’t

please

money

listen

But no one is listening, and I can’t, either, because everything is fading and the door is opening and someone has grabbed me and I smell grass and earth and green things growing and Annabelle UsherMontor and different

now I'm falling and the smell is wet and fish and river and dead leaves and

—

I'm falling.

I'm falling.

I'm gone.



Chapter 72

Cat

*I am very quiet
and very still.
Stone and silence.
The door was closed
once
But has not always been.
It was open when—
the swinging boy hoped someone would stop him.
(no one did.)
the sobbing woman hoped someone would hear her
and come.
(he did / he did not.)
The screaming baby had no thoughts
only need
and Mother did come.
(not everything ends badly.)
It was open then—
so I go there,
through time and space
and doorways.
Loose now.
In the place where humans
make their noises.*



Chapter 73

Tress

“Felicity?” I’m shaking her, reaching over the wall that I’ve built, my panic rising. “Felicity!”

She moans, dangling by her wrists. She’s unconscious, her legs like jelly. I let go of her to grab my backpack, and she falls forward completely, bells jingling, only held up by the manacles. She’s bleeding freely, red channels running down her arms. It’s a dark red in the light of my phone, her skin a horrid, sickly gray.

I drop my backpack on the ground, rifling through it with my good hand for the keys to release her. There’s another roll of duct tape and pliers and a pack of gum—*Where the hell did that come from?* I think wildly. There’s a bottle of Oxy and a baggie of weed and some cherry ChapStick, and I don’t see the key.

“It’s here,” I say, then turn the light back on Felicity. “It’s here, I’ll find it. I’ll get you out.”

Get her out of where I put her. What I did to her.

I dump the contents of my backpack on the floor and hear a metallic *zing* . . . somewhere. I flash my phone around, looking for the glint of light on metal. I spot it and grab, with the wrong hand, pain lighting up my entire arm as I close my fingers around the key. The cat got something deep in there, his claw caught on tendon, or muscle.

I am not okay.

But Felicity is worse, and that’s on me.

I can’t hold the phone and undo the manacles with only one hand. I bite down on my phone, pieces of screen cracking off onto my lips, my tongue, tiny splinters digging into my soft parts, trying to hold the light just right. The first one comes unlocked, and Felicity leans into me, cold and clammy, smelling of blood and vomit.

“Mom?” she asks.

I can't answer, can't correct her with the phone in my mouth, and now half her weight is on me. I turn my head, and the light moves with it, as I work the second lock, tears of frustration running down my face. Some of them follow the curve of my cheek, find their way to my mouth, salt stinging the tiny cuts there.

The second lock lets go, and Felicity falls forward, her head knocking into mine. My phone falls with a clatter at our feet, the light shining upward into my eyes as I lower her to the floor, my arm screaming with pain. I can't hold her, and she falls the rest of the way, slumping into a seated position on the other side of the wall, her head resting against the bricks I laid, one leg folded awkwardly underneath her.

"I can't carry you," I tell her, like that information will suddenly make her stand. "I don't think I can even get you over this wall. Not with my arm like this."

Nothing. No answer. No indication she hears me at all.

I lean over the wall, reach down, try to shake her again, the light from my phone practically blinding me.

"Carry me," Felicity says, her eyelids flickering. "Carry me."

"Felicity! Stay with me," I urge her. "Look at me!"

She opens her eyes, but her focus is not on me. It falls to the necklace that has slipped out of my hoodie, dangling now, flashing in the light.

"Oh . . . there it is," she says.

And she reaches up, closing her hand around half a heart pendant.



Chapter 74

Felicity

Fifth Grade / The Night Of

“Did you know Gretchen named her new puppy William Wilson? What a stupid name,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Like, even her dog is kind of stuck-up.”

Tress laughs, runs her hand down Goldie-Dog’s nose. “You’re not stuck-up, are you Goldie?” she asks, and Goldie farts in return, sending us both into peals of laughter.

“Girls . . .” Annabelle’s voice comes from down the hall. “It’s past midnight. You need to be thinking about sleep.”

“Okay, Mom,” Tress calls back. “We’ll . . . think about it.”

Which sets us off again but makes me feel a little bad. Tress’s mom is cool.

“I don’t want to make your mom mad,” I whisper, my giggles making the whisper as loud as regular talking, which only makes Tress laugh more.

“Oh, wait . . .,” she says, something occurring to her. “Mom gave this to me.” She gets up from the floor, going over to her dresser. She comes back with two necklaces, each of them with half a heart pendant hanging from them. One side reads *Best*. The other reads *Friends*. Tress holds them in front of me, swaying in the light from her bedside table.

“This used to be Mom’s,” she says. “I guess they were a thing once. Kinda cool, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, reaching out. They’re cheap, mostly brass, the chains corroded with age. My mom would die if she saw me wearing this. I’m okay with that. I close my hand around one, then pull back, questioning.

“Are you just showing me these, or . . . ?”

“Yeah, I’m totally just letting you know I have it. Obviously one is for Gretchen,” she says.

“Oh my God,” I say, giving her a shove. She falls backward, laughing.

“Girls!” Annabelle’s voice again, sharper this time.

I take one of the necklaces and put mine on. “So . . . if this was your mom’s, why does she have both pieces?” I ask.

“Huh?” Tress’s hands are behind her neck, struggling with the cheap clasp. I motion for her to turn around, and she does. I move her hair, latch the necklace for her.

“Who had the other part of your mom’s necklace? And”—it feels super rude, but I’m curious—“why did they give it back?”

“I don’t know,” Tress says, shrugging, holding the charm and reading it upside down. “I didn’t ask.”



Chapter 75

Tress

Fifth Grade / The Night Of

“We’re going to wear these forever, right?”



Chapter 76

Felicity

Senior Year

“Felicity? Hon? Do you have your box ready for the PTA rummage sale?”

Shit. No, I don’t. But I need to clean out my closet like nobody’s business. I grab the box Mom left in my room a week ago, open it, and jerk random things off hangers, grabbing shoes from the back of the closet, anything out of season. This rummage sale is going to be a gold mine for somebody.

Gold . . . I probably have some jewelry that can go, too. I crack open the box, laughing when I spot the pair of earrings that Brynn got me last year for Christmas—volleyballs, one that reads *Book*, the other one *Keeper*.

“A keeper, all right,” I say, tucking them into a drawer to hold on to.

The smile fades when I spot a ring Patrick got me, an apology for something he did . . . again. It goes into the PTA box, falling among the piles of clothes without a sound. Something’s jammed in the back, the charm pinched in the hinges, a cheap chain curled, greenish, lying on the bottom of my jewelry box like a snake.

I yank it free, my stomach dropping.

Rummage sale, here I come.

“Can she even afford to shop here?” Gretchen asks, glancing up from her phone.

“What?” I ask, shading my eyes. The sun is beating down on the school parking lot, the tables of clothes, toys, shoes, dishes—all the unwanted objects of Amontillado up for sale, the made-up moms of the PTA playing salesgirls.

“Tress Montor,” Gretchen says, pointing. “She’s like . . . here.”

I follow Gretchen's finger to see Tress hovering over the jewelry table.
Shit.



Chapter 77

Tress

Senior Year

It hangs, dangling in the sun, too dirty to shine. The engraved word caked in neglect.

 Around my neck, its mate, the answer. Under that, a patch of skin, always green now—because I’ve never taken it off.

 The other half of my heart is on sale for a quarter.



Chapter 78

Felicity

Senior Year

“Seriously?” Gretchen’s gum snaps in my ear.

“What?” I ask again, my back to her as I sort through children’s clothes.

“Tress just took something off the jewelry table and walked away.”

“Okay,” I say. I fold clothes, adoring the symmetry in the squares I can make, the order under my hands.

“Do you remember when she stole your tampons? Klepto.”



Chapter 79

Tress

She's got the heart in her hands, pulling down, pulling on my neck, pulling me over the wall.

"Felicity, you need to let me go. I can't lift you by myself. I've got to get Hugh."

"Where's mine?" she asks, her eyes on the necklace. "Where is my heart?"

"Here," I tell her, digging into my hoodie pocket. "It's here. I brought it for you. I thought . . ."

I don't know what I thought. That I would show it to her and she'd be overwhelmed by the grief of what we lost, pushed by her emotions to tell me what happened that night?

I don't know.

But I definitely didn't think I'd be putting it around her neck, clasping the back through a bloodied knot of hair, lifting her chin because she can't raise her own head.

I didn't think I would kill her.

I reach past her legs, past a wet mess of all kinds of things, for my phone, turning the light away, out of my eyes.

"You've got it back now," I tell her. "You've got your half of the necklace."

It rests, lackluster, against her gray skin, next to a runnel of her blood.

Her half, the half that reads *Best*. Because that's the half she wanted. Of course she did. And maybe that's right. Maybe Felicity Turnado is better than Tress Montor, not because of her house or her car or her parents or her clothes. Maybe Felicity Turnado is better than Tress Montor because she never killed anyone.

"I'm going to get Hugh," I tell her. "Hey!" I clap my hands in front of her face, sending a massive jolt of pain up my arm. "Felicity—I'm getting

Hugh. We're going to get you out of here."

"Hugh?" she asks. "Hugh didn't carry me."

"Okay," I tell her, agreeing with whatever she says. "I'm leaving you the phone, okay? I'm leaving you the light."

She doesn't answer, so I go, lost in pitch blackness as soon as I turn my back, slipping in my own blood, finding the staircase by feel, pulling myself along the banister, one-handed, resting halfway up.

Jesus Christ. Neither one of us is going to make it.

I elbow the hook open, fall into the kitchen, sending bottles scattering. The glass rolls across the floor, making hollow music.

"Hugh!" I cry, not caring who finds me. Not caring who helps. Not caring about the questions. I just have to save my friend.



Chapter 80

Felicity

“Hugh didn’t carry me.”

My voice is strained, tired, a worn-out note.

But it’s not wrong.

“Hugh didn’t carry me,” I say again, a little louder.

Something rests against my skin, something metal on my chest, something sticking in place. Something wet. Something smells something . . .



Chapter 81

Tress

I crawl on my elbows through the kitchen, black spots spraying my vision. I cry for Hugh, cry for help. I call for Brynn. I call for Maddie. I even call for Gretchen. No one comes.

I struggle to my feet, pulling myself up with a chair, and lurch to the door.



Chapter 82

Cat

*The smell of the girl
is everywhere.*

Red. Death.

*Spots in the room
with the swinging boy
down these steps, a drop
I lick and taste*

her last / best

*Felicity / FELICITY
a puddle of her, in this room
with chairs*

*Felicity / FELICITY
a smear, by that door.*

A beckoning, below.

Felicity / FELICITY



Chapter 83

Tress

Piles of people. Hands and arms and legs. Slick skin, pale faces. Hot breaths, warm and vacant, fill the air. There is no more laughter. All are silent.

Hugh, in his throne, suddenly small, bleary, barely there, a question not asked yet on his lips. Ribbit, naked, collapsed on the floor, the zigzag scar on the back of his calf bright and angry, fresh like only yesterday. The clock ticks, backward, the only thing moving in the room.

I'm down again, more blood out than in, crawling over people, but they are wrong, too small, hands and faces and feet, and the boy in the concert T-shirt is too young to be here, is only a child, who thought I was his mother in the stairwell; why are we all children again?

On the stairs, the clock stops.



Chapter 84

Felicity

Shadow. Shadow and light. Something in the dark. Something on my chest.
Something is near me. Something is here.



Chapter 85

Cat

*Another girl
different now
almost gone
her blood has spilled
mixed with my girl's
together they are*
Fel—Tress—icity / FEL—TRESS—ICITY



Chapter 86

Felicity

My hair it floats tangles with Annabelle's we float bubbles from her mouth bubbles from Lee's nose eyes flat and dead and fish take a nibble there is a weight on my chest, half of a heart. I am pulled angry words (*no don't can't shouldn't won't LISTEN TO ME!*). Hair dangles swinging with my hair and the heart it tangles I am carried out of the water I am carried onto the bank I am carried I am dripping I am wet I am

carry me take care of me

not the raven flashing tattoo black it is an angry Z red slash of skin not healed stitches like small mouths held tightly shut hands on my face hands wanting me to be okay this boy always wanting to help always wanting to make it better always wanting to make up for the thing that was so wrong Oh Tress oh Tress oh Tress they are dead and I knew but I didn't know that I knew and he KNOWS he KNOWS—not me. Oh Tress you are in danger and you will not stop I know you and you will know and I cannot help you I am going I am going I am going



Chapter 87

Felicity

I am gone.



Chapter 88

Tress

I am helpless, and there is no one to help me. I will do it myself, like always. I grit my teeth, spit, come to my feet. Behind me, a shadow, some movement. I turn in time to see a black tail slip out the front door.

“Run,” I tell it. “Go far.”

Back to the kitchen, I unscrew a light bulb, propping myself against the table for a second to catch my breath, watching as a glimmer of sunlight reaches through the grime on the window.

“I’m coming, Felicity,” I say, making my way to the door.

The steps are hard, my good hand clutching the light bulb, my bad one holding the rail as best it can. I follow the glow of my phone, find the empty socket, screw in the light bulb.

“I’m back,” I tell Felicity.

She doesn’t hear me.

Felicity is dead.



Chapter 89

Tress

There is no movement upstairs as I finish my work, the trowel heavy in my hand, the bricks impossible, but made possible, by dint of my will. I began something, I will finish it. Slowly, I entomb the body of Felicity Turnado.

My best friend.



Chapter 90

Tress

Upstairs again, my bad hand, purple and numb. I pick my way through the people, children no longer, my head clear now. Too clear. I know what I did.

I wake Ribbit, who smiles at me as soon as he opens his eyes. Naked. Trusting. A child. He sees my arm and wants to help, wants to fix it, wants to make everything better. I tell him it is unfixable, and he nods, still drunk, but seeming to understand the finality of *unfixable*.

We move through the yard, past what used to be William Wilson.

We put the Allan house behind us.

A house that will soon be torn to the ground.



Chapter 91

Felicity

I ask for the boy, as always.

“Hugh?”

His name bounces back to me. Echoed. Rejected.

“Hugh?”

There’s no answer but my voice, saying the same thing. Again.

“Hugh?”

I reach for him, because he always reaches, too, and we touch, and then everything is okay. Because touching Hugh is how I know I’m back. But he’s not here.

There’s no one here.

I open my eyes to find him, but they are already open, and I cannot open them more.

There is nothing to see.

But I can feel.

And all I feel . . .

. . . is bricks.



Chapter 92

Cat

*No metal no fence no bars
no girl no man no Almost Human
no old meat, only fresh,
many, many last / bests
and where once there was a house
and a boy swinging
and a woman sobbing
and a baby screaming
and the smell of my girl.
Those things are gone now.
And instead I hear, quietly,
under rock and dirt
The sound of crying.*

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About the Author



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MINDY McGINNIS is the author of several young adult novels, including *Be Not Far from Me*, *Heroine*, *The Female of the Species*, and *A Madness So Discreet*, winner of an Edgar Award. She writes across multiple genres, including postapocalyptic, historical, thriller, contemporary, mystery, and fantasy. While her settings may change, you can always count on her books to deliver grit, truth, and an unflinching look at humanity and the world around us. Mindy lives in Ohio. You can visit her online at www.mindymcginnis.com.

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