Killer Genes

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KILLER GENES

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

December 2023
ABSTRACT

The novel Killer Genes explores the concealed world of contract killers through the lens of protagonist Alana, a college student. When Alana discovers dark secrets about her estranged mother and beloved father—namely, that they are both entrenched in the underground profession of contract killing—her worldview fractures.

After the suspicious death of Alana’s ex Jaiden, Alana suspects her own father may have been involved. This launches an exploration filled with moral quandaries as Alana tries to reconcile her love for her father with the possibility of his guilt. When Alana’s long-lost mother resurfaces and warns of a rival agency targeting both her and Alana’s father, the complex layers of secrets and lies begin to unravel.

Alana finds herself questioning notions of trust, family loyalty, and her own moral compass as she becomes ensnared in this world. The novel delves into the psyche of contract killers and the allure that draws people into this darkness. It probes the lengths one might go to in the name of protecting family and paints a portrait of moral gray areas.

This thesis analyzes the novel's key themes around relationships/dysfunctional family, coming of age, deception, humor and suspense.
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"Did he send you the eggplant emoji?" Blaire's voice rises above the refrigerator's hum. She tugs at the oversized blue and green tie-dye hoodie she's wearing, its frayed drawstrings swaying as she speaks.

Rolling my eyes, I scoff and slide my wireless speaker to the side before perching myself on the kitchen island. "It's a date, not a casual hookup."

"That's what dates are for, right? You introduce yourself, exchange smiles, sip on drinks you don't like, and then they show you their wang," she gyrates her hips.

Laughing, I brush my unruly bangs aside, tucking them behind my ear. “I don’t think this guy is like that. He's, like, older or whatever.” Please be different. I can't handle another dating disaster.

"When's he coming, anyway?" She takes a loud slurp of her VIP, the sound of saliva returning to the cup almost audible. Gross

“Drank all the lemonade?” I vault off the counter and fling open the fridge.” To my dismay, I find the container with a meager amount left, hardly worth ten cents. I raise my hands for emphasis. “These are the things that make me wish I could go back to freshman year," I say, brandishing my right hand to illustrate the passage of time. "And never laugh with you about Professor Hendrick's excessively creased shirt." I close the fridge door.

"It's like he used an entire can of starch on the front, and then bought another one for the back," she says, shaking her head in disbelief.

We both burst into laughter, but then, the room plunges into a hushed silence.
My mind starts racing with concerns. Going on a date with an older man is uncharted territory, and I can't help but wonder if we'll have enough in common. What if I can't relate to his life experiences or understand his references? What if he thinks I'm too immature?

My words tumble out, "I... I'm nervous."

"You'll be fine, Lana," she says. "First dates are all about conversation, remember? And you're good at that. Just think back to that time when you had to give that presentation for speech class. You were so nervous that you were shaking the desk. But once you got up there, everyone was blown away. You started sounding like Maya Angelou, Still I Rise."

Blaire drains the last drops of her drink and tosses the empty cup into the sink. "You got this."

"I couldn't breathe. I thought I was going to pass out. I swear I couldn't tell if the lights were flickering or if I was just blinking too much." I snort, and we both head upstairs to my room, the fourth step creaking under the pressure of our feet.

When anxiety hits me like a freight train, Blaire's always there to ride it out with me.

As I move, a whiff of something strikes my nose, and I can't tell if it's the scent of the house or my nerves seeping out of my armpits. I don't even know why I'm so nervous. I mean, I've been on dates before, although they were all with guys who considered a frat house tour or a car backseat a date. The car belonged to his mom; she dubbed me "Harlot from Charlottesville." I'd never gone that far with anyone, so her assumption was off.

Would my mom have yelled at me if she had stayed? Maybe for not putting away my toys at seven, playing in her makeup drawer at eleven, or sneaking out of the house at sixteen. I'll never know.
Blaire flops onto my mattress, a small bounce unsettling her for a moment before she steadies. "What do older guys even talk about?"

"Maybe traffic, the weather, how traffic affects the weather. I don't know." I rummage through my closet for something between "sexy" and "slutty," questioning whether such a middle ground exists. The metallic clatter of hangers fills the room.

"Gabriel," she emphasizes the L, morphing it into Gabri-yol. "How did you meet him, anyway?"


"They sound like bad brakes."

I stand by the closet doorway, a small bookshelf nearby holding a trove of dog-eared novels, as I look at her. "The dress, Blaire."

"Do you want the black one from my room? You have to wear the black one. It's wang certified."

"And that's why I'm sticking with the green one. No more Vimeo rappers," I say, dangling a pair of shoes in front of her face. "Are these good?"

"Wasn't Jaiden on SoundCloud?"

"Tomato, potato, enchilada. Are these good?" I drop the shoes in her lap.

"Perfect. So, Skylar. Panic at the Disco."

"Yeah, you didn't want to come, so I brought Skylar."

“Nike swoosh eyebrows.”

“That’s the one.”
"You sure our seats are all the way back here?" I grumble, trying to scrape the chewing gum off the bottom of my shoes. You'd think they would clean up beforehand.

"The ticket says S15. I can't even see the seat numbers. Like..." Skylar starts, twirling strands of her ponytail. I cut in.

"What if we sit closer to the stage? We could see better."

"Isn't that, like, illegal?" Skylar asks, fidgeting with a blue scrunchie as she tightens her band shirt. Blaire would be one step ahead of me if she was here. I take a tip from her grift handbook.

"That's if someone catches us, right?" My heart pounds and I force down my anxiety with a hard swallow. It's tough going against the grain when each step out of my comfort zone fans the flames of fear.

"What if someone is supposed to sit there?" She bites her lower lip, her eyes scanning the empty seats.

"They aren't there, so maybe they got sick or something. I don't know," I suggest, tracing the delicate silver dagger necklace my dad had given me with my fingertips, gesturing towards the second row closest to the stage.

"If we sit that close, they might even pull us up to sing with the lead," I say, my hands trembling at the thought.

"But what if they aren't sick?" Skylar raises a valid concern.

In my mind, I envision standing on stage, facing the crowd, which I know is a breeding ground for sweaty palms and nail biting. But sharing the stage with Panic at the Disco would be amazing. Instead of voicing my excitement to Skylar, I murmur, "the drummer might spot you," stretching the "you" like Blaire would.
"Oh my gosh, you're so right." Skylar's eyes light up, and without another word, she dashes down the steps towards the second row.

#

The lead singer’s intense performance sends beads of sweat streaming down his body, and we’re so close that I just felt a drop a second ago. Skylar's powerful vocals fill the air, and my lungs ache from belting out every lyric of "Don't Threaten Me with a Good Time."

Amid the electrifying rhythm of a guitar, someone taps me on the shoulder. I bounce up and down, in sync with the music, as I turn to face the interruption.

"What's up?" I shout. Turning, I'm greeted by a man, his defined abs pressing against the fabric of his partially unbuttoned striped gray shirt. My gaze lingers before meeting his greenish-brown eyes. I'm at a loss for words. Wow, he's hot.

"Excuse me," he says, attempting to divert my attention.

"What did you say?" I ask, straining to be heard. He appears older than me, as if he celebrated his thirtieth birthday just yesterday.

"You're in my seat," he says, with lines of annoyance etched across his face. Despite his irritation, there's a rugged attractiveness in his scruffed jawline.

I wonder if he always looks this annoyed or if it's just me.

"What?" I squint, struggling to hear his words.

“I paid for that spot," He leans in, breath warm against my neck.

The song ends, granting a temporary reprieve from the situation. The guy sighs and brandishes his ticket. "I was trying to tell you that you took my seat."

Great, just great. Skylar said this would happen. But it's too late now, I'm not moving.

"I didn't take anything; you weren't here," I say, holding firm.
He scowls and steps closer, expecting me to back down. But I stand my ground, despite his attempted intimidation. I feel no fear. Well, that’s a half-truth at best.

Crossing my arms, I challenge him, "Aren't there sayings about finders not having to give up their seats?"

"This ticket says otherwise," he says, displaying the crumpled slip of paper in his hand.

Why is he so hot? Maybe it was fate for me to steal his seat.

"Who shows up in the middle of a show?" I say, my voice shaky at first. Get it together, Alana. Woman up.

"I paid good money for this ticket, killed for it, and I won't let some entitled Brendon fan dictate when I should or shouldn't arrive at a concert."

"So, you murdered someone for the ticket?" I ask.

"If you don't move, you might be next. Then I won't have any worries."

I stifle a cough, rallying courage as I narrow my eyes in a bid to pierce his stubbled facade. Skylar intervenes, sensing the tension.

"Do I need to call security? Is he bothering you?" she asks, elevating her voice a notch too high, attracting the attention of nearby concert-goers.

"He might kill the security," I mutter under my breath, as I adjust my bangs with a confident flick, making sure they are in place.

For some inexplicable reason, he and I can't help but burst into laughter as the band resumes for song two, diverting Skylar's focus.

"You owe me," he says, his voice more subdued.

"I don't even know you," I say, a smug smirk forming on my face.
"So, did you tell your Dad about Gabriel?" Blaire asks, snickering.

"If I did, he would've hired a bodyguard," I smirk. Such a helicopter parent.

It’s funny, but it's true. My Dad would do anything to protect me. He's had to be both mother and father. According to him, my mom never wanted kids. I believe him—raising an anxious child like me alone is no small feat. He didn’t choose this willingly.

"So, what time is Gabe coming?" Blaire asks.

"Maybe I should start accepting roommate applications," I say, smiling at Blaire.

"Around 7ish." I hope Blaire likes him. She means everything to me, and anyone I date must pass the Blaire test.

"Well, get dressed. Chop-chop," she says, clapping her hands together.

#

The doorbell rings, jolting me from my pre-date preparations. I scramble to clasp my heel's strap and pop in my right earring, but Blaire rushes ahead, peeking through the blinds, curiosity lighting her face.

"He must hit the gym or bench groceries or something," she says, eyes fixed on him.

I roll my eyes, chuckling. "Groceries aren't that heavy, Blaire," I say, checking my reflection in the full-length mirror to ensure my ruched cami dress fits just right. Admiring my heels, I appreciate the added height.

"Tell my arms that. Those 5lb bags of sugar are killer," she says, crossing her arms with a mock grimace.

Shaking my head, I open the door with a welcoming smile. "Hi, come in. Just give me a moment to grab my purse from the kitchen, and I'll be ready. This is Blaire, by the way."

"I'll be watching the clock," she warns. "Don't bring her home before ten."
Gabriel winks, a playful smirk on his lips. "If by that, you mean show her a good time, I've got you covered."

Blaire cocks her head, studying Gabriel for a moment before turning to me with a grin. "I like him. He's a keeper," she says, a knowing twinkle in her contact-green eyes.

Blaire's lackluster guarding, the realization that my purse was hanging from my arm all along, and the absurd luck of nobody noticing hits me all at once.

"Can we get through the date first, please?" I say.

Gabriel's voice pulls me back. "Are you ready?" he asks, and I pause to take in his look. His dark hair frames his face. He's wearing slightly torn black jeans, Chelsea boots, a fitted black tee, and a blazer straight out of an assassin movie. I half-expect him to whip out a suppressed Ruger from the flap of his coat.

"I'll be back later," I say to Blaire, giving her a quick hug before we step out the door.

"Hopefully not," she says.

#

We stroll through the refreshing Virginia air, and I wish for hotter days to mask my stress-induced sweat under the guise of the scorching sun. I repeat my internal mantra, reminding myself that it's just a date—nothing to be concerned about. As we approach a vine-draped building nestled off the main street, Gabriel reaches for my hand, and his touch strangely makes me feel secure. We’re off to a great start. I can’t believe I’m going on a real date.

"Gabriel," he says to the man in slacks scrutinizing his clipboard outside the building.

"You made reservations?" I whisper, nerves fluttering. Is he trying to impress me? If so, it's working.
My eyes light up as we are ushered into the restaurant. Fairy lights adorn the space divided into two sections—a balcony and the main floor. Exposed brick adds warmth, while the impeccably dressed waitstaff exude elegance. We reach our table, and Gabriel releases my hand. I had forgotten our fingers were intertwined. He pulls out my chair—chivalry isn’t dead. I’m drawn to a scar just below his ear, a subtle mark against his light topaz complexion. Should I ask him about it? No, not yet.

"I'm glad you accepted my invitation," he says.

"You said I owed you," I giggle. "Did I have a choice?"

"Everyone has choices; it's the consequences we can't always control."

That was kind of deep. What should I say next?

"Blaire is convinced that you weight lift groceries?"

Stupid. Why did I say that? I could have said anything.

He chuckles. "On the weekends, specifically zucchinis."

Vibe check passed.

The waiter interrupts our conversation. "Have you both made a decision on what you'd like to enjoy this afternoon?"

I peruse the menu on the table.

"The lady will have the Chicken Marsala Risotto with Roasted Asparagus, and I'll have the Double Smoked Salmon with Horseradish Cream, accompanied by a side of brown rice," Gabriel says.

I exchange glances with him, then turn to the waiter, unsure whether to feel alarmed or appreciative. After all, he's the experienced one here. Dating older men was bound to bring about new dynamics.
In an attempt to divert my attention from the magnitude of Gabriel's financial investment to this date, I ask, "So, what do you do for a living?"

His phone buzzes in his pocket, yet he pays it no mind. "I'm involved in corporate hotel consulting, actually."

I have no idea what that is. Let’s play it safe.

"Ever thought of using an acronym?" I say with a playful grin. His laughter melds with mine before I continue, "What kind of work does that entail?"

"A lot of project management and advising investors or newcomers to the industry. And you? What do you do?" His phone rings; he silences it. "Apologies for that."

"I study English at the University of Virginia. Considered a part-time job, but my dad disapproves, wants me to focus on education. Honestly, he's overprotective." Annoyingly so.

"The world can be treacherous," he smirks. "One day, you might stumble off the curb and fall into a bike lane."

"So, that's what you always aspired to be, a corporate hotel consultant?"

His reply is cut short by our dinner's arrival. The tantalizing aroma of chicken envelops me as the waiter serves our meals, fills our glasses, and wishes us a delectable time.

"You first," Gabriel prompts, unwrapping my silverware from a white handkerchief and handing me a fork. I spear a morsel of meat, letting it soak in the flavorful juices before savoring it. The taste lingers as I chew, I nod, expressing my delight for the dish.

"It's the Marsala wine sauce," Gabriel says.

As I bite into the asparagus, thoughts of my mother flood my mind. Would she have prepared a dish like this, roasting the asparagus to perfection or dropping a stalk and invoking the five-second rule? Would she have approved of Gabriel?
"I always wondered what it would be like to be a contract killer," he says.

I pause, chewing.

"You asked if I always wanted to be a consultant."

"Oh, yeah. Well, Gabriel—" I hesitate, trying to recall if he mentioned his last name.

"It's Alexander," he says with a grin, toying with a silver ring.

"Welcome to your interview, Gabriel Alexander," I say with a smile. I glance behind me and point towards a person in my peripheral view. "See that man over there? He did something bad. Put too much soy sauce in his wife's rice, or maybe he never pays his parking tickets. Oh wait, I remember now. He hit his child, and now his wife, irritated by her soy sauce-soaked rice and the financial burden of paying his parking tickets, wants him dead." I chuckle, piecing together the words and the story.

As I look across the table at Gabriel, I notice his eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"I mean, it was just a joke," I say, blushing with embarrassment. "You don't have to answer that, sorry. First dates, right?" Shit. Shit. Shit. What am I? A psycho.

"Seventeen seconds," Gabriel smirks at me.

"Seventeen seconds for what?" I ask, feeling idiotic.

"I would wait seventeen seconds before following that man to the bathroom. He's been downing those free waters all night; he'll go," Gabriel says.

I turn to see a glass of water filled to the first groove at the bottom, with a squished lemon half-submerged in it.

"Within that time, Asher, as we'll call him, would have made his way to the bathroom."

I nod, understanding Gabriel's plan. I lean in, hands under my chin. His ability to think on his feet is impressive.
"With this syringe in my pocket," Gabriel taps his right pocket tenderly, "holding a fluid that will provoke a heart attack, I will walk into the bathroom. It will be adorned with incandescent lighting, warm yellows bouncing off the walls. And there, in a stall, Asher will be with his pants wrapped around his ankles, his belt just inches away from clattering on the floor."

"Okay, okay," I interject, intrigued. "Tell me more."

I wonder what it says about me that I'm enjoying this conversation.

Gabriel continues, "The restroom door will close behind me, and I'll lock it, securing each metal mechanism in place to keep anyone from the outside from entering. I'll barge into Asher's stall and attempt to stick him with the syringe," he pats his leg again, and I can't help but laugh.

"How big is this syringe, anyway?" I ask.

Gabriel demonstrates the length using the neck of my glass.

Wow, it's comforting to find someone whose weirdness aligns with mine.

"And that's why I don't do doctors. But continue."

He chuckles, shaking his head, and takes a sip of wine. "Okay, where was I?"

"The syringe, bathroom stall."

"Yeah, so I'll try to puncture him with the needle, but Asher is a fighter. He'll want to have a bit of fun. He'll try to hit me, missing by several inches, but managing to knock the syringe out of my hand, sending it skidding across the floor towards the sinks. Fed up with his games, I'll grab Asher by the roots of his hair and smash him against one side of the stall, then the other. He'll manage to utter a few words, 'Why are you doing this?' and I'll say, 'Your wife, the one sitting at the burgundy-colored booth beside you, the one whose child you slapped, the one whose rice you soaked with too much soy sauce.'"

I interrupt him, giggling. "Don't forget the parking tickets."
Jeez, this is intense.

"The one who paid off all your parking tickets," Gabriel smirks. "Asher will try to fight back once more, but I'll be ready to move on, ready for it to be finished. With my hands still gripping his hair, I'll smash his head into the wall of the stall and then into the toilet, using him as a human plunger. The water will splash all over the printed mosaic tiles, the greens in the pattern glistening as if polished."

"He's going to drown in toilet water?" I cringe at the thought. "Isn't that kind of gross?"

"I don't think a contract killer would care," Gabriel says.

Fair. He’s got a point there.

"But wouldn't they find his body sprawled on the floor or his head in the toilet?" I shudder at the image.

"I would pick him up, comb his wet hair back with my hands, sit him upright on the toilet, pants still around his ankles. His head would fall to one side of the stall, nothing to hold it up. Then I would close the stall door, giving him the illusion of privacy," Gabriel says.

"You better wash your hands."

"Will do," he assures me with a grin.

The waiter suspends our conversation, asking if there's anything more he can get us. I look at Gabriel, unsure if he'll answer for me again, but this time he nods in my direction. I decline dessert, feeling a bit unsettled. The waiter leaves the check, saying, "Whenever you're ready."

"Well, Gabriel Alexander, our team will get in touch with you if we deem you a good fit for the position," I say, biting my bottom lip. "Thanks for interviewing with us today."
We both laugh, knowing we've surpassed the awkwardness of first dates. We didn't talk about the weather or traffic, and it feels like I've known Gabriel for much longer than I have. I can't decide if this is the weirdest or the best first date I've ever had. We continue smiling at each other for a while, and then Gabriel breaks the silence.

"Speaking of restrooms, I have to go," he grins, getting up from the table.

"Be safe in there," I say, watching him walk away. I glance over my shoulder at the couple behind me. Asher is gone, but his wife remains, sipping on the last of her drink. I can't help but wonder if Gabriel will follow through with his plan. I stare at their table a little too long, and Asher's wife catches me looking. I avert my eyes, reminding myself that it was a playful game I started. Gabriel just needs to use the bathroom. I try to suppress my anxiety as I pick at the now cold asparagus and wait for him to return.

A few moments later, Asher's wife checks her phone, gets up from the booth, and leaves. Gabriel emerges from the hallway leading to the bathroom, fixing the top button of his shirt.

"Asher put up a fight in there," he says with a mischievous smile, and a wink.

I roll my eyes at him. "You're too much."

Did Gabriel go through with it? I mean, it was all just a joke, right? But what if he's more twisted than I thought?

"Ready to go?" he asks, offering me his long black blazer.

"Running from the cops, huh?" I slip my arms through the jacket.

He shakes his head. "I would never leave evidence behind."

"Why did Asher's wife leave without him?" I ask.

"Wife?" Gabriel looks confused as he folds his jacket around me. "Not sure, but I'm sure everything's fine. Wait here while I settle the bill."
I glance back at the booth and then at Gabriel. "I'm sure everything is fine," I reassure myself, hoping that our playful conversation didn't turn into reality. Curse my anxiety.

#

On the ride home, flashes of Asher's face haunt my thoughts. I can't shake the image of his lifeless body slumped in the stall. How could Gabriel devise a detailed plan like that? Maybe he would have made a remarkable contract killer. I wrestle with the creeping unease, reminding myself—it was just a game, nothing more. Remember, you started the conversation about murdering Asher. It's just a coincidence that he came up with a detailed plan. He was just being creative and witty. You need to chill out and be normal.

"I had a great time tonight," I say, checking my reflection in the car's visor mirror for any sign of nervous flush. All good.

"You mentioned your protective dad at dinner. Is your mom the same? Should I brace myself?" he asks, a playful glint in his eyes.

I lean closer, stretching the seatbelt.

"Are you trying to meet my parents?" I ask, with a dramatic gasp.

"Tonight was great. I might delay meeting your parents, but another night like this will make me curious about how they created someone as amazing as you," he says, blushing.

His smile breaks through, warming my heart. His phone trills, and he glances at it, one hand steady on the wheel. The strip's vibrant lights envelop the car, resembling shimmering stars in a moonlit sky.

"Mind if I take this?" he asks.

"No, go ahead."
He answers the phone while I gaze out the window, crafting tales for the pedestrians. Was the lady in high heels a sharpshooter, her poodle a secret agent sniffing out hidden drugs? My mind raced, as if reality echoed the whimsy of my thoughts about Asher.

"5762 Marx," he says into the phone.

Then my thoughts shift to Charlottesville and how nothing thrilling ever happens here. No drug crimes, no missing persons or pet posters lining bulletin boards. Potholes don't cause flats. Like Gabriel said, the biggest worry here is stumbling into a bike lane en route to Starbucks.

"I was just thinking about that favor you asked me to handle," Gabriel says over the phone. "It's all sorted now, no worries."

It's not that I want something bad to happen; I want the possibility to exist. The idea of meeting a real contract killer would spike my anxiety, but the mere notion is thrilling. For now, movies will fill that void. I glance at Gabriel, who seems absorbed in listening.

"No complications recorded," he concludes his call. "Sorry about that."

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Just a work thing."

"Consulting can be quite demanding," I say, my voice brimming with sarcasm.

"Tell me about it. So, your mom?" he continues the conversation.

I appreciate his interest in me; most guys just prefer talking about themselves.

"Oh, she's not around."

"Not from Charlottesville?" he asks, glancing at me before refocusing on the road.

"I have no idea where she lives." And honestly, don't care.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to—" he starts to apologize.
"It's fine. My dad fills both parental roles," I giggle.

"Is your dad in town?" he smirks.

"He's an hour away in Staunton. It's closer to his job, so he avoids commuting. It's as far as he's willing to go. You know, safety first. What about your parents?"

"My dad passed away years ago. I got into consulting because of him. Mom rarely leaves the house now, so I visit Earlysville biweekly to bring her groceries," he says.

We pull into my driveway.

"How old are you?" I ask, a pit forming in my stomach. Age is more than just a number.

"How old do you think I am?" he asks, tilting his head.

"I hate guessing. I always get it wrong," I say.

He stops the engine, unbuckles, and takes hold of my hands.

"Come on, guess," he says.

"Twenty-seven? Thirty? Twenty-eight?" I say. Please don't be over thirty.

"Alana," he nudges my arm.

"Thirty? Twenty-nine?" I settle on my guesses. I like him, but how would I explain that to my dad?

"Final answers?" he asks, arching an eyebrow.

"Yes," I say, giving his hands a gentle squeeze.

"I'm twenty-seven."

Relief washes over me. That's a number I can work with.

"Well, I was close," I shrug.

Gabriel smiles, releases my hands, and steps out of the car. He opens my door, and we walk to the porch, pausing before the entrance.
"So, when's our next date?" he asks, his thumb grazing the back of my hand.

Anytime.

"When are you free?" I ask, shivering in the cool breeze.

"Monday."

Scratch that, I forgot my weekdays are booked.

"I have class." I wince.

"Next weekend, I’m having a small get-together. Bring Blaire?" he asks.

Oh my gosh. He’s inviting me to his house.

"Sounds like a plan."

His gaze holds mine, unspoken words dancing between the spark in his eyes and the anticipation in mine. My heart doesn't skip a beat—it pirouettes. He kisses me.

"Goodnight," he whispers.

I can't believe we kissed.

"Goodnight," I say.

#
Chapter 2

"Alana," Blaire bounds onto my bed.

"You're on my leg," I say, wincing at the pressure.

"You act like I weigh a ton or something."

"Heavy like an elephant's foot."

Blaire rolls her eyes, shifts her weight, giving me relief. I adjust, sending her a playful glare.

"Does your dad know you’re a liar?" she asks, raising an eyebrow.

I bury myself under the covers, groaning in response. "What is it?"


"What time did you get home last night?"

"I have no idea."

"So, how was the date?" she says, her eyes widening.

I spring up, nearly toppling her over. "Oh my gosh, yes, the date." Time to give her the play-by-play.

"Drench me in the tea," she says.

I gesture as if opening stage curtains."Picture lights everywhere."

"Like that girl's room on Instagram?"

“Even better, trust me. But let me backtrack. He made a reservation, Blaire. A reservation."

Blaire raises her eyebrows and smirks. "Do you know what that means?"

"What? That he's considerate?"

He has set the bar high.
"Noooo, that he's rich."

I giggle, kicking Blaire off the bed for real this time. Crawling out from beneath the covers, I make my way to the bathroom, feeling the clinginess of my tennis shorts. Why do I always wake up feeling so sticky? I need to start sleeping with a fan. Blaire trails behind me.

"You know you're being dirty, right?" she says, squeezing past me and reaching the sink first.

"We had the most amazing dinner and talked about our jobs."

"You don't have one."

"Exactly. And then, you have to hear this."

"What do you think I've been doing all this time?" Blaire leans against the counter. I giggle, joining her at the sink. "We crafted this scenario where he was a contract killer who had to eliminate a target right there in the restaurant."

"He killed someone," she says, her voice bouncing off the bathroom walls, creating a faint echo.

"No, we were just pretending."

At least, I hope so. What if he's hiding some deep dark secret?

"What if he's actually a killer, and you were the one pretending?"

"That's impossible."

Is it though? Am I just overthinking this whole thing?

A grin tugs at the corners of Blaire's lips. "How did he respond to the storyline?"

"Deadly specific."

"I rest my case," she says, smirking.
I nudge Blaire aside, turn on the faucet, splash water on her face, then mine. "He even ordered for me, being all nice. Killers aren't nice."

There's no way he could be a killer, it's absurd of me to even consider it.

"Last week, we watched 'The Mechanic Resurrection.' Jason Statham was nice."

Dang it, she has a point.

"Ahh, maybe you're right. So, what should I do?" I pivot, patting my face dry with a towel.

Blaire, sporting a chic bob with stunning blonde balayage, fingers through her hair. "Did you enjoy the date?"

"Duh, I had an amazing time."

"Then do nothing."

"What? How can I find out if he's a killer if I do nothing?"

"Well, when will you see —?"

My phone rings.

"One sec, it's my dad," I say, snatching it from the counter and switching to speaker.

"Hey, Dad, I'm here with Blaire."

"Hey, honey. How's it going, Blaire? I'm free today, thought I'd head your way. Would love to see you and discuss adding your name to the house."

Wow, my name on the house? Dad trusts me with this.

"Really?" Blaire says. "Now you're going to be as rich as Gabriel."

I fling a small container of dental floss at Blaire, it patters on the floor. "The house is already mine; it changes nothing."

"That's not true. It's now an asset. By the way, who's Gabriel?" my dad asks.
"He's just a guy for now. Nothing too serious."

Please, dad, don't start the third-degree questioning.

"I'm sure I should get to meet him."

"Eventually."

I should take my time to get to know Gabriel better before involving my dad in our relationship. Plus, Gabriel has to pass the “not a killer” test.

"Alright, keep me posted. Can I drop by?"

"I'll be here."

"I love you more and more each day," my dad says.

"More and more each day," I say, ending the call, eyeing Blaire. "You're overdoing it this morning. You know how he feels about guys."

"Yeah, he's probably already hired someone to investigate Gabriel, his family, and church attendance, even though you guys aren't super religious."

"By day’s end, my dad will know how many times he flossed this year, and he doesn't even have his last name. Oh, and Gabriel invited us to an event next weekend."

"Perfect. It could be at his house. We can snoop around and look for clues. They say you can tell a lot about a person by their medicine cabinet habits."

"What does his Ibuprofen have to do with anything?"

"If it's organized by height or alphabetically, he's a killer. If it's just randomly thrown in there, like it should be, then he's normal."

I squint my eyes, lost in thought for a moment. "That sounds insane, but count me in."

Exiting the bathroom, I flick the switch, and Blaire clings to my shoulders like I’m a shopping cart.
"So, care to accompany me on a snack run?" Her grip on my shoulders loosens, and she twirls like an untrained ballerina, stopping just inches away from colliding with the wall. “We can walk to the store.”

"You're going to break something," I chuckle. "We could just drive." Walking to the store sounds like torture in this Virginia heat.

"Come on. We never walk, and the weather—" she pauses to check her phone, scrolling through the weather app, before lying. "is perfect today."

Slipping past her, I make my way to my room and neaten up my box-quilted comforter, pretending it's made. I consider that some fresh air might do me good after entertaining the wild thought that Gabriel could be a killer. I remind myself of the saying about clear minds—or was it great minds? Same difference. "If you have me out there sweating, Blaire, I swear." I fluff the pillows.

Blaire leans against my door. "Wear something light," she laughs, before exiting and adding, "Meet you downstairs in fifteen."

#

Walking beside Blaire, my feet ache with each step as she kicks loose pebbles along the gravel road. The unrelenting sun beats down, offering little respite except for the occasional shade provided by overgrown oak tree branches in neighboring yards. Despite the heat, the air smells fresh, but any attempt at relaxation is thwarted by the sweat trickling down my sandals. As we pass well-maintained lawns, I think about responsibilities that come with owning a house, like scheduling lawn maintenance every two weeks. Maybe it won't be so bad, considering my dad foots the bill and won't let me get a job.
"Almost there?" I ask, fanning myself in the heat, the makeshift breeze tousling my long, black hair.

"According to the GPS, just one more mile."

"You know, we could have driven," I comment, eyeing the sweat stains on Blaire's shirt. Fatigue sets in, and I wonder if she feels it too but hesitates to say anything since she was the one who suggested walking in the first place.

"It's like a sauna, Lana. Let the heat cleanse you," she raises her hands towards the sun.

"You're going to make me hit you," I laugh, nudging her.

"Hey, look," she points to an in-ground swimming pool beyond a fence adorned with a metal "S," hinting at the family's surname.

Blaire's devil-may-care attitude always lands us in situations. And I know this time won't be any different. She does as she pleases, as if the word "illegal" doesn't exist. Part of me wishes I could be a little like her, but I'm not ready to trade my freedom for an ill-fitting orange jumpsuit.

"No," I say, stopping her before she can even begin.

She stops mid-street, facing the house with the pool, where a sign stands, displaying the words ‘She chose UVA. Cavalier Strong’.

"I haven't even said anything yet," she smiles, and I can already anticipate where this is heading. "But didn't you say you were hot?"

"We can't," I emphasize, "trespass into someone else's backyard. It's closed and locked for a reason," I say.

"I don't see a 'do not enter' sign anywhere. Do you?" she scans the perimeter.
I shake my head. "Oh my gosh, Blaire." I envision the family inside, eyeing us through their blinds. They might be calling the police already. "I don't want to end up on the evening news," I say, looking at Blaire.

"Follow me." She strides through the grass towards the side of the house, where the backyard gate is located.

"Blaire," I whisper-shout. "Blaire."

With Blaire leading the way, I have no choice but to follow in her footsteps.

Approaching the gate, I sweep the neighborhood, ensuring no one is watching us. My eyes dart across the street and over to the neighboring houses, hoping we haven't attracted any unwanted attention.

"We don't even have swimsuits," I say, my heart pounding with excitement and fear. The prospect of getting caught makes me tense, but part of me can't deny the thrill of breaking the rules.

Blaire scales the fence and leaps to the other side. "We don't need them," she says.

I hesitate, eyeing the fence. "How am I supposed to get over?"

"See that lock?" Blaire points. "Grab the fence, put your foot on the lock, and use it to hoist yourself over," she says.

Placing my foot on the metal clasp, clearly designed to keep people out, I recall the stories Blaire shared about how, as a child, her parents encouraged her to explore the outdoors and how she developed a hobby of climbing trees, fences, and even venturing into sewer holes. Above all, she loved going places she shouldn't have. And now, here we are, about to trespass into someone's backyard.
"Technically, it's not breaking and entering if nothing is broken," Blaire says, a devious sparkle in her eye.

Did she just read my mind?

"I know you're overthinking this. Just come on and get over this fence before we get caught," she says.

With Blaire's help, I navigate the fence and descend to the other side.

I pause, envisioning the discomfort of walking through a store with clothes clinging to my skin. "What about the groceries?" I ask. "We can't go shopping in wet clothes."

Blaire shrugs. "We can go tomorrow."

"Seriously, you're something else," I say, freezing as my eyes fixate on the shimmering blue pool surrounded by wicker chaise lounges. The "S" family's backyard resembles something out of a Home and Garden magazine. Turning my attention to the built-in grill, I chuckle at the sight of Blaire pretending to flip burgers with her bare hands. "What are you doing?" I shake my head.

She turns to me, a grin on her face. "Want some?"

As Blaire finishes overcooking her burgers, she wastes no time discarding her shirt, leaving me glancing at the backdoor and windows of the house, grateful for the presence of curtains.

"What if we get caught?" I ask, observing Blaire as she removes her jean shorts.

"We run," she says.

I smile, grateful to have a friend like Blaire.

Feeling awkward about undressing, I settle into one of the lounge chairs.
Blaire plunges into the pool and turns to me, her slender figure gliding through the water. "I'll push you in," she says. "It feels amazing."

"You said the same thing about the weather."

She rolls her eyes. "Don't make me."

Fine," I say, peeling off layer after layer of clothes until my bra and underwear serve as makeshift swimwear. Taking a deep breath, I leap into the water.

Even the pool feels expensive. I submerge myself, allowing my hair to soak up the luxury. Blaire and I challenge each other to a breath-holding competition, and I win twice before she triumphs in the third round. I attempt to teach her how to float, but she beats me in a race to the end of the pool and back. It's always a blast with Blaire. For a moment, our eyes meet, and we burst into laughter for no apparent reason other than the sheer joy of being together.

After about another twenty minutes, I hear a sound and turn to see the back sliding door of the house opening. A woman with brunette hair appears and pulls the curtains aside. Blaire and I scramble out of the pool. I struggle to put on my clothes while she bundles hers together and heads for the fence.

A loud "Hey!" emanates from the house once she spots us. My heart begins to race. I can't help but laugh, acknowledging how ridiculous we must look, partially dressed and dripping wet.

Despite my ankle getting cut, we both manage to climb over the gate. But it all feels worth it.

#
Entering the house, parched, I beeline to the fridge, snatch a juice, and twist off the cap. To make more room for future recipes, I peel off a couple of old sticky notes from the fridge door, including one for strawberry boba tea.

Carrying the cold drink, I head to my room to change out of my sweaty clothes. Today has been a wild ride so far, and the fact that we managed to make it over the gate still shocks me. As I enter my room, the sound of rushing water tells me that Blaire has already claimed the shower. I hope she doesn't use up all the hot water.

Wrapped in a fuzzy robe from behind the door, I plop on the bed, waiting for her to finish.

I'm uneasy about meeting Gabriel's friends. What if they don't like me? I flip through clothing apps searching for the perfect outfit. In frustration, I toss my phone onto the bed but it slides into a crevice by the headboard. Murphy's law strikes again.

Grumbling under my breath, I rise from the bed, pushing the mattress aside. As I reach for the lodged phone, it rings. Stretching over the edge, my fingertips just miss its vibrating surface. I nudge it closer and snatch it up, but in my haste, I hit decline.

How can I be so clumsy?

"They left a voicemail," I mutter, pressing play. "What the heck?"

I dash to the bathroom door, hearing Blaire's shower running. I knock twice, but with no answer, I decide to enter anyway.

"Blaire, listen to this."

She moves the shower curtain, a soapy hand peeking out. "What is it?" she asks.

"I got a voicemail from someone claiming to be my mom," I say.
Blaire rinses off, shuts the water, and wraps a towel around herself. "You're kidding," she says, face full of disbelief.

"Not at all," I say, still stunned by the message.

She secures her towel, her blonde hair dripping. Drying her hands, she grabs my phone to replay the message, echoing it aloud for us both.

"Lana, it's your mom. I know I haven't been around, but I need to tell you something about your father. It's important. Call back. We need to meet," Blaire repeats, her head tilted.

This can't be real. My mom? Contacting me after all this time?

"She doesn't even have the right to call me Lana," I say.

"Does that sound like your mom?" Blaire asks, her eyes searching mine for answers.

Why couldn't she have reached out earlier when I actually needed her support?

"I don't know. I barely remember her, just that she's my mom," I say, gripping a silver dagger pendant at my neck.

"What might she know about your dad?" Blaire asks, her curiosity evident.

"I already know everything. He's my dad and he's always been there for me."

It's hard to imagine having a normal relationship with my mother.

"Are you going to tell your dad that she... I mean, your mom called?" Blaire asks.

"Yea."

"Don't you want to at least know what she has to say?"

"I don't know. No. Maybe," I say.

"She sounded urgent. Maybe this is a chance to connect. I know you've always wondered what it would be like if she was in your life," Blaire says, returning my phone.

"She's a little late to the party, Blaire, don't you think?" I say.
"You should call her. If it's off, tell your dad. Plus, wouldn't it make your heart race to be face-to-face with the infamous, one and only Mom?" Blaire says, wrapping her arms around me. I smile, freeing myself from her embrace. "I need to use the restroom," I say, wanting a moment to think.

As she exits the restroom, she glances back, "Want eggs? I'm in a mid-day breakfast mood."

"Yes, and your famous french toast sticks?" I ask from the toilet.

"That was a given," she says, her voice fading as she walks away.

On the toilet with an ivory mat at my feet, I flush. The sound momentarily drowns the turmoil in my head. My dad's impending arrival, the cryptic voicemail from my estranged mother, and Gabriel's mysterious occupation as a potential hitman—a trifecta of uncertainty. The universe seems to have fast-forwarded my life, and I'm left trying to piece it together.

"You okay?" Blaire says with a soft knock.


Blaire lingers by the door. "Better spray before you come out," she says.

I spray a burst of citrus mist from the air freshener. Closing my eyes, I picture my mother, her face emotionless and unfamiliar. If I choose to deceive my dad, I know a meeting with her is inevitable. But where would we even meet? A lit diner, a cozy coffee shop, or perhaps that park near the US-250 bypass? And what would I even say? Should I start with a casual "hi" or "hey," as if we're just catching up on lost time?
It all feels meaningless, considering she already knows who I am. Maybe I should cut to the chase, laying out the bare facts. "You called me about dad," I practice, moving from the toilet.

I make a silent promise to myself to listen to her words, no matter how much they might sting. I won't allow them to break me. Meeting my mother is a powerful decision—a choice of closure or self-preservation.

Blaire's voice snaps me back to reality. "Food's getting cold," she says.

Turning the faucet, I grip the edge of the crowded sink, amidst half-used shampoo bottles and a nearly empty toothpaste tube.

In an alternate scenario, I consider sharing the phone call with my dad. After all, he's my dad—the one who has loved me unconditionally. He'll be just as surprised as I am, considering he hasn't heard from her either. I'll share the news, and in that moment, an understanding will pass between us. There's no way she could say anything that would make me turn against him.

At heart, distancing from my mother feels safest—to avoid emotional pain and further abandonment. She can remain a distant figure in my life, no more than a meaningless voicemail that might as well have been a prank call. So, playing detective at Gabriel's house might provide the perfect distraction from this family drama.

I finish washing my hands, turning off the faucet, and brace myself for what lies ahead.

#

"Blaire, you've got orange Cheeto dust all over the white couch," I say, throwing my hands up.

The mortal enemy of white upholstery.
“It wasn't me. I put your plate in the microwave,” she says, orange residue still on her fingers.

"Okay, Shaggy. Dad's on his way," I say.

"I can't wait for Mr. Cadwell; he always brings gifts," Blaire says, doing a happy dance.

“I bet you it's doughnuts,” I say, taking a bite out of the cold eggs Blaire left for me.

"How do you know?" she asks.

"I'm Sherlock. I have clues.”

She tilts her head at me, amused.

"I just want doughnuts," I giggle, making my way back to the couch.

"Figured. So, are you going to tell him?" Blaire asks.

I've weighed the pros and cons, but I still can't shake off this feeling of uncertainty.

"Throw me a wet towel."

She launches one across the room at me, the water hitting me before my hands even touch the rag.

"You could have wrung it out," I say.

"I did."

"I might not tell him. Considering your words, meeting her could confirm my suspicions. The toxicity will seep right out of her pores in this heat," I say, wiping the orange off the couch.

"Catch."

Blaire alley hoops the rag into the kitchen sink.

"If you're going to tell him, do it after he passes us the doughnuts."

The doorbell rings, and I rush to the door to open it.

"Hey, Alana," Gabriel greets me.
"Gabriel?" I say, taken aback by his unexpected visit.

Wow, he really went out of his way to come here.

"Hey, I know you said next weekend, but I wanted to stop by and give you these," he says, uncovering his hands from his back and holding out a bouquet of blue roses.

"Oh my gosh, they're so pretty, you did--" I begin.

"I know. I just had a great time, and you deserve them. I hope that doesn't sound douchy, the whole ‘deserve’ thing," he chuckles.

"Hey, Gabriel," Blaire yells from inside, drawing his attention.

He waves at her.

"No, I get it. It's sweet. Thoughtful," I say, making sure Blaire can hear me.

"Well, I don't want to intrude or anything," Gabriel says, leaning forward to give me a quick kiss on the lips. "See you Saturday."

I smile, the door still open, shaking my head. "So freaking sweet."

"Yeah, he's kinda too sweet. I get it now. Definitely not a killer, but we can still double-check when we go," Blaire says.

I've learned my lesson—no rushing into things. But that's another check in a good direction.

I set the flowers on the dining table, their color contrasting the slate stone, and look for a suitable vase. Grabbing a sleek glass pitcher, I half-fill it with water and place the unwrapped flowers, their petals unfolding, inside.

"Seriously, he just shows up out of nowhere, bearing gifts? That's some next-level stuff," Blaire says, lifting one of the stems to her nose, inhaling its intoxicating scent, and then returning it to the pitcher. "Smells fresh out of the ground."
Blaire and I have weathered many storms together. If she sees boyfriend qualities in him, it bolsters my hope for our future. Yet, I'm in no rush to define or formalize our relationship. I need to pace myself.

I nod with a hint of a smile. "Exactly. Your turn next, Blaire. Imagine double dates and group trips if Gabriel and I click. Fingers crossed."

She shrugs, sitting on the couch and grabbing the remote. The TV flickers on. "I prefer peace over dating drama. But I'm in for any vacation plans."

"Fair enough. As long as you're cool hanging out with Gabriel and me," I say, sitting beside her, admiring the flowers.

She raises an eyebrow. "If he understands that he's the third wheel," she says, fluffing a pillow and tucking it under her arm.

I give her a teasing swat. "You're silly." Propping up my feet, I motion to her. "Feet."

"Sure, go ahead," she says, and I place my legs across her lap, finding comfort on the cushions.

Our search for an entertaining show is cut short by a sudden knock.

"That's probably dad," I say, standing and checking the peephole before unlocking the door.

"I love seeing you grow," he says with a warm smile, his salt-and-pepper hair styled in a tousled quiff.

I cover my face, feeling embarrassed. "Dad."

"Hey, Blaire. How's your family?" my dad asks.

"About as good as they can get. Just kidding. Everyone's doing okay," Blaire says.

"That's great. Is this couch new?" my dad asks, looking around.
"Same couch, just cleaned. Rented a shampooper from Costco," I say, motioning him to sit.

“Really? When you were little, renting wasn't enough. You threw up so often, I'd joke to friends about testing paint colors," my dad says, his eyes crinkling.

He always brings up the most cringe-worthy moments from my childhood.

"How've you been? Everything good at work and stuff?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"I can't complain, but corporate accounting has its challenges." He offers a box of chocolates. "Any plans for tonight?" he asks, stretching out his legs.

"Just chilling," Blaire says, stuffing a piece of caramel-coated chocolate into her mouth.

"You're the best, Mr. Cadwell."

"So, considered the house transfer?" my dad asks, his tone signaling its significance.

"I have," I say, although my mind has been distracted. The house is low on my list of priorities. The most pressing matter is whether I should tell him about the phone call. He always comes over in a good mood, and I don’t want to lie to him. I've lied before, but it's been about trivial things like homework or sneaking out of the house. This is different.

"What do you think?" my dad asks, eyes locked on me.

I think I might throw up.

"Are you taking your name off completely?" I ask, buying myself some time while I gather the courage to broach the mother topic.

"I think it's time. You should have it. You deserve it, working hard, stepping stones away from completing your degree. Time for you to own something for yourself."

"Will I have to pay anything?" I ask, trying to mask my bubbling anxiety.
“Not until you finish school, but it’ll just be taxes on the house, home warranty, that's it. And if you ever need help, you know I'm always here,” he says.

I glance at Blaire, and I can tell she's waiting to see if I'm going to tell him. The weight of my secret presses against my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

"Dad, I have to tell you something," I say, my voice trembling.

"What is it, honey?" He leans forward.

I look at Blaire, and she's holding her breath, anticipation written all over her face.

"Earlier today, I got a...," I trail off, unsure of how my dad will react. It's new territory, and I'm stepping into the unknown.

"You okay? What's going on? You fail a class or something? I'm sure you can make it up; you're smart,” he says.

"Some weirdo left a voicemail saying I won a trip. But he kept asking for my social security number. It was nuts." I shake my head, avoiding eye contact.

"You know they have those scams going around. You almost scared me. I thought you were about to say something wild," my dad says, relieved.

"Me too," I say, glancing at Blaire and then back at my dad. "Well, I'm ready for adulthood. Where are these papers you speak of?"

I guess I’ve made my decision. It looks like I'll be meeting my mother after all.

"I need your signature on a few. Just elementary stuff on the ownership transfer," my dad explains, retrieving a folder from his bag and handing me the documents.

Holding the papers, a whirlwind of feelings hit me. Maybe I knew what I was doing all along, chasing the thrill, holding off on telling my dad until the right moment. If I told him now, it would ruin everything. I need to confront my mom first, let her spin her lies, so I can show her
how unimportant she is to me. I don't need her to know how to cook or figure out which boy
likes me. I don't need her to give me pedicures or make me laugh. I can handle things on my
own.

"Sign right here, honey. There are a couple of other ones underneath, and then the house
is all yours," my dad says, unaware of the familial dust storm to come.

#
Chapter 3

Sunlight pierces my window, waking me. I squint at the nightstand—it's 11:15 a.m., and my Dante class is at noon. With less than an hour to get ready, I know I need to wake Blaire up. She's not one to rise unless prodded, except for non-school-related activities like sharing boyfriend stories, indulging in Ben & Jerry's ice cream, or sipping late-night lemonade. Despite her nocturnal habits, her grades never suffer—she's smart.

As I survey my room, something feels different. Maybe it's the result of owning the space now, or perhaps the air has shifted since I replaced the dirty air filters after my dad left. Either way, there's a subtle change that I can't quite put my finger on.

"Blaire," I call out, hoping to avoid the dreaded trip across the hall.

"I'm not awake," she says.

"Then how are you answering me?" My voice cracks, my throat parched.

"Sleep talking. It's a thing."

I climb out of bed, half-wishing I could take my cocoon of covers with me. Mornings are the absolute worst. I shuffle across the hall, feeling the soft, coffee-colored carpet underfoot. Grabbing a pillow from Blaire's gaming chair, I approach her bed, passing her cluttered nightstand with game cases and candy wrappers. Placing the pillow over her head, I apply just enough pressure.

"Ala—" she says, her voice muffled.

"You were sleep talking; I had to wake you up carefully," I say, removing the pillow.

"You know what they say."

"Are you trying to kill me, Ms. Gabriel?" she says, tossing the pillow onto the floor. "You two have more in common than you think."
Gabriel, the infamous killer. Who knew he'd become our inside joke? I can't help but wonder how he'd react if he found out we've been labeling him a hitman.

"We don't know anything yet," I laugh. "Get up. We've already wasted like ten minutes."

"You're the one who insisted on taking the Dante class. I suggested the one on reading and writing Sci-fi/Fantasy starting at three, but no, you wanted to wake up at the crack of dawn," Blaire says.

"It's already past eleven; get up, or we won't have time for breakfast."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm the one cooking it."

"Exactly," I say, making my way back to my room.

"We live fifteen minutes away," she says, but I pretend not to hear her.

I pull a chambray shirt from my closet and lay it on my bed. Slipping into high-waisted denim shorts from a drawer, I then choose white sneakers from my rack. With everything set, I take some paper and mentally prep for my final year of university.

All the hard work, sacrifices, and late-night study sessions have led to this moment.

Just as I'm getting ready, my phone starts playing a snippet of a song- a notification, a text from Gabriel.

"Good morning, and happy first day, Lana. I hope everything goes smoothly."

Oh my gosh, we're on a nickname basis. My cheeks flush as I respond, "So far, so good, Gab. Thanks." Before hitting send, I delete the letters G, A, and B, thinking it's too soon and coincidental to reciprocate the nickname. I'll save it for later.

Another notification pops up, and it's from my mother.

"Blaire, come here."

"I'm finishing breakfast; relax, we won't be late," she says.
"It's not about that; it's about her."

Sure, it's easy for my mother to try and paint a negative picture of my dad, but I know better. I've seen the countless sacrifices he's made, the kindness he's shown, and the love he's poured into my life. Those actions speak louder than any twisted lies she could make up.

"Her, who?" Blaire asks, stepping into my room and shoveling oatmeal into her mouth with a spoon.

"You didn't tell me you were done," I say, taking her bowl and sneaking a few bites. She raises her hands in apology. "What's going on?"

I illuminate my phone screen, bringing it close to her face. "Look."

"I can't see," she laughs, grabbing my phone, honey on her lip's corner. As she reads, I give her oatmeal with apple, then take a few bites for myself.

"She wants to meet you today?"

"In freaking Richmond."

"How far is that?" she asks, already searching for the distance on Google. "It says one hour and six minutes with usual traffic. Do you think traffic will be usual?"

"Who said we're going?" I say, tapping her.

"Uh, we have to go. What happened to showing her who's boss?"

"We have a class to attend. We'll be late if we don't hurry up."

"You weren't rushing when you were texting Gabriel," she says.

"How did you—" I say, a bit of oats flying from my mouth.

"The proof's here," she says, waving my phone. "We'll go after class. Consider it a mini-road trip."

"Why do you think she's waiting to send us the address?" I say.
"I don't know, maybe she's busy."

Or maybe she's having second thoughts about lying to her daughter.

"Sounds sketchy to me," I say.

Blaire reclaims her bowl and picks up a small piece of apple, savoring its sweetness.

#

Our professor's name is Christian Langton. It sounds foreign. I stride into the classroom, not wasting any time at the door like some of my classmates. Natural light floods the room through large windows, highlighting glossy gray floors. Blaire, in ripped black jeans and a vintage band tee, sips from a fountain, then follows me.

"He looks church handsome," Blaire says as her eyes meet the professor.

"More like business owner sexy, you know, like the emoji with the guy holding the gavel."

We both laugh as the professor, with his broad shoulders and commanding presence, moves back and forth in front of the room, his gray tie swaying under his neck. The sleeves of his crisp white shirt reveal a glimpse of a tattoo on his wrist.

"Well, if Gabriel turns out to be a disappointment, you can take a shot at him."

I wave her off.

"I thought you said older guys were the cream of the crop," she says.

"He looks older, older Blaire."

"But that doesn't stop him from being sexy," she says.

Our laughter subsides as a voice interrupts us. "Welcome, my name is Professor Langton," he says, his voice firm with a slight accent that lingers in the room.
"Find a seat anywhere," he says, waving and introducing himself to other entering students.

We climb about eight steps and find a pair of seats in the middle of the aisle, not too close but not too far away either. Blaire drops her backpack on the half-table, and I put mine on the floor. Once it appears that all the students have arrived, the professor begins to speak, moving around the room with his hands in his pockets.

"My name is Professor Langton. I insist you address me in no other way. It is not Langston or Layton or Professor C. It's Professor Langton," he says, exhaling before continuing. "Now, please take out your book, assuming some of you have it, and turn to page thirty-four. Those who don't have a book, observe those who do as a reminder to come prepared."

Blaire glances at me out of the corner of her eye and whispers, "Scratch that, I'm retracting my bid. Lang-Tongue seems a bit too cranky."

"He needs his vitamins," I say under my breath—or so I think.

Unfortunately, speaking too loud drew the attention of everyone within two rows. The room's echo seems to amplify their stares, making me feel put on the spot. I try to ignore it, but Blaire stares back. Still, they don't know what we were talking about. As I look to the front, I lock eyes with the professor in a silent contest. Eventually, I lose the staring match, and Lang-Tongue speaks up.

"The Divine Comedy is an epic poem of immense proportions, narrated by Dante himself in the first-person point of view," he says. "Furthermore, The Divine Comedy serves as an allegory, a work in which characters, objects, and events possess both literal and figurative meanings. For instance, in this poem, Beatrice symbolizes divine love and grace."

My mother symbolizes unworthiness and disgrace.
He continues his lecture on The Divine Comedy, but I'm only physically present in class. My mind is preoccupied with the question of whether I'm crazy for lying to my dad, and the looming uncertainty of visiting my mom, wherever she may be. Blaire takes notes, and the professor concludes his discussion, an hour and thirty minutes have passed, and I'm still without answers. In fact, my questions seem to multiply.

I gather my book and bag, pulling Blaire along as we rush out of the classroom, eager to avoid any further encounters with Lang-Tongue.

"Whoa, you’re pumped for this road trip," Blaire says.

"No, I just didn't want him to stop me for anything," I say, fumbling. "I don't need any trouble on my first day."

Heading towards the car, we stroll down the hall adorned with club posters and event flyers.

"Didn't she say she would send us the address?" Blaire says.

"I haven't received anything yet.”.

"Maybe we just need to give it a little more time,” she says.

As we approach the car, Jaiden, someone I recognize from across the university yard, calls out to me. "How's it going, Alana?"

Among the parked vehicles, my compact car, painted in a striking midnight green shade, stands out.

"Oh my gosh, isn't he that SoundCloud rapper? I thought they didn't go to college.”

I wave at Jaiden while opening the car door. "Get in, Blaire."

"He's running over here," she says. "Maybe he wants you on his next album," she starts making DJ noises with her mouth.
No more second chances for Jaiden. I won't let history repeat itself.

"I'm going to run over your feet," I warn, banging my hand on the steering wheel.

Blaire closes the car door, tucking her feet under her in a criss-cross applesauce position.

"Road trip. Road trip."

I roll my eyes, but deep down, I can't help but feel a twinge of excitement. A part of me longs to see my mother.

#

I drive, eyes on my phone, anticipating the infamous text. The scent of southern food wafts in through our open windows. Beside me, Blaire breaks the silence with speculation.

"Maybe she doubted you'd show and delayed the message," Blaire says, fingers drumming the armrest.

"I told her I was coming," I say, grip tightening on the steering wheel.

Blaire shrugs. "It could have been misinterpreted. You know what we need?"

I glance at her, my hands trembling. "What?"

"Snacks. We have to load up on the goods," Blaire says, rubbing her hands together.

My mind drifts back to a memory from freshman year.

"Remember when I ran out of gas on highway 64?" I ask Blaire, adjusting the rear view mirror. On it hangs a bracelet I brought back from my travels to Greece during a summer study abroad program.

"Yeah, you said everyone was zooming past you so fast that you thought your car was going to tip over."

"I didn't want to walk to the nearest gas station alone, and I honestly didn't know what else to do, so I called my dad," I say.
"Mr. Cadwell always comes in clutch," Blaire says, smiling. "Thinking of calling your dad?"

"I've just never kept him this far out of the loop," I say.

"He might respect you for it," Blaire says, patting my shoulder. "This is grown-up stuff. We're venturing out. He gave you the house because he trusts you to make good decisions."

I pull into a Kroger known for its wonky carts. "Snacks are on me," I say, trying to divert from the mounting tension.

We wander through the aisles, lured by cookies, cakes, chips, and crackers. Blaire picks up a Cosmopolitan, while I go for Vogue and Vanity Fair. Our basket brims with snacks—excessive for an hour's trip—but we head to the checkout. The cashier appears either unhappy with her job or irritated by our presence.

I toss our haul into the backseat, keeping out some Sunchips and Capri Suns. I check my phone for a text. Should I reach out to her? We end up in the parking lot, eating chips and streaming Netflix on my phone propped against the vent magnet.

Then, in the midst of the show, my phone rings, and Blaire's gaze meets mine. My heart drops like a lead balloon.

"We have to answer it," Blaire says.

"I expected a text, not a call," I say, my anxiety rising.

I've grown so distant from my mother that it's like we speak different languages. I mean, I don't even know how to begin to talk to her.

"Well, I can't talk to her. She doesn't even know that I'm coming with you."

Reluctantly, I pick up the phone, summoning my most composed adult voice. "Hello."
"I'm calling about your car's extended warranty," a voice chimes in. Without hesitation, I hang up. How do they even get my number? The eternal battle against telemarketers.

"What did she say?" Blaire asks.

"Wrong number."

Before Blaire can probe further, a text message finally arrives.

101 W Franklin St, Richmond, VA 23220.

"Now, we're in business," I say.

I start the car, input the address into the GPS, and hit the road.

"Where do you think we're meeting her?" Blaire asks, examining the directions on my phone.

"Likely a rundown apartment or dodgy hotel. That's the movie cliche for shady meetups," I say.

"Or maybe an abandoned warehouse," Blaire adds.

"With roaches and water stains everywhere."

"The floor so worn, every step feels like you could fall through," Blaire says.

We share a laugh, easing my fear.

"If it's anything like what we're describing, she's going to have to meet me outside."

As we continue driving, halfway through, I suggest we switch seats, wiping the sweat off the steering wheel. Battling negative thoughts is exhausting. I flip through the pages of Vogue, questioning Blaire's opinion on Rihanna's outfits or pondering why Blake Lively wasn't cast in the Gossip Girl reboot. Her answers—Rihanna always kills it, and who is Blake Lively?—serve as great distractions.
I text Gabriel and ask him what he's up to, mentioning our short road trip without divulging the destination just yet. He responds, looking forward to our weekend meet, noting the event chairs he bought are backordered.

I feel a wave of nausea rise within me with each passing minute, knowing that the inevitable is drawing near.

#

The car stops, but I keep my eyes closed. The engine quiets, replaced by birdsong and rustling leaves. Distant footsteps echo on the pavement.

"Umm, I think we're here," Blaire says.

"Here come the creepy spiders," I say, eyes still closed.

"I doubt we'll encounter bugs here," Blaire says.

Curiosity wins, and I open my eyes to a towering tan-gold building. Is this like a sick joke? This is so not what I imagined.

"You sure this is the right place?" I ask.

"The GPS says so, but I have my doubts," Blaire says, shading her eyes from the sun to better view the hotel entrance.

We park in front of the grand hotel, The Jefferson. Through the car windows, I see its lavish interior: columns decorated with concrete leaves and expansive red and gold rugs over marble floors.

"She's loaded," Blaire says, pretending to toss money with a wrist flick.

"And she left me," I say.

Did my mother find raising me so horrible that she left me for a life of luxury?
"We can't be sure. Let's hear her out and maybe grab those pricey mini booze bottles—or knowing this place, full-sized," Blaire says, trying to lift the mood.

I eye the potato chip crumbs on the car floor, relating to them. Abandoned and left behind, just like you guys.

A tap on the window pulls my focus. I roll it down to see a man in red and gold, matching the hotel's theme.

"Welcome to the Jefferson Hotel, valet service," he says.

"No thanks," I say. "We won't stay long."

"My apologies. Guest parking is around the corner," he says, pointing the way.

"Thank you," I say, hands pressed to my chest. This is top-tier service.

"Where do you think all her money comes from?" Blaire says.

I text my mother we've arrived. She says she'll meet us in the lobby. It dawns on me that I don't know what she looks like as we step inside the hotel.

"How will I know which one's her?" I ask Blaire.

"She'll look like you, right?"

"Maybe. Or I might resemble my dad more," I say, scanning the crowded lobby for any familiar face.

"For our sake, I hope not."

The lobby of the hotel is more grandiose than anything I've ever seen. A mosaic skylight stretches overhead, providing a view of the Virginia clouds.

She's lived without me, without my dad. We could've been a wealthy, loving family. Building sandcastles, having cheese-filled picnics, with my favorite Provolone. I would have had two parents, a normal life.
A woman in her forties, with emerald bracelets, approaches us.

"May I help you ladies?" she asks.

"We’re just waiting for someone," Blaire says.

"Feel free to help yourself to the executive lounge. It’s open to all residents and guests," the woman says.

I nod, my eyes scanning the double staircase leading up to the balcony area. I search for a woman who could be my mother, someone with black hair, but it doesn't narrow down the possibilities. What if she has my voice or if our resemblance is so uncanny it's like seeing double?

I spot a lady in a red strappy dress approaching, eyes locked on me with familiarity.

"I think that’s her, Blaire," I whisper, pointing.

The lady beams, giving us a fleeting glance before approaching a man by the entrance. They embrace and twirl, then exit the hotel together.

"So, she wasn’t looking at us."

"I hate when that happens," Blaire grumbles. "Should we find a place to sit?"

"Probably not," I shake my head. "I want her to spot us easily."

Blaire and I position ourselves back to back, scouring the entire expanse of the lobby. The tension in the air is palpable as we both remain on high alert.

Suddenly, a faint whisper carries across the room, calling out my name. I turn to see a woman with sangria-colored locks signaling me from a nearby corridor.

Hold on a sec, could she be my mother? What's the deal with her hiding?

Holding Blaire's hand, I gesture for her to follow as we head into the empty hallway.
"Lana," my mother begins, moving closer with open arms. "You look—" She tilts her head, lifts her eyebrows, and touches her heart.

Oh my gosh, it’s her.

My palms grow clammy and my mouth goes dry. "What did you want to tell me about my dad?" I say, forgetting all formalities.

"Let's talk in my room," she says.

I'm face-to-face with my mother, the woman who abandoned me.

"This is Blaire, my friend. She's with me."

"That's fine," my mother says, her tone soft.

Note to self: Avoid impulsive reactions. Breathe first. Now, she's convinced that she’s given birth to a daughter with a severe deficiency in manners.

She ascends the carpeted staff-only hallway in a black shirt dress with a gold belt and lantern sleeves, her matching heels marking each step.

"How was the trip? Wish I could've made the drive myself. It's not safe," my mother says.

So now you want to see me. Was I the problem? Did she really not like kids, like Dad said? I don't understand.

"How did you recognize me as your daughter? I don’t remember y—," I begin, trailing off.

"Why wouldn’t I know?" she says.

She's asking why she wouldn't know me, but the truth is, she chose not to know me. She wasn't there when I needed her the most.

I bite my tongue, refraining from commenting further.
Pushing open the heavy light-gray marble door, we step into a furnished suite. Metal line artwork graces the walls, adding sophistication, while silky wool carpet cushions my steps. I tread into the opulent room, feeling out of place.

"Help yourself to the bar," my mother says.

Blaire's eyes flicker to me. I dip my chin. She presses her lips together and turns to the parlor.

"I've always watched over you," my mother says, moving to the bedside table. She lifts a framed photo of baby me, clutching it close, lost in its memories.

Now I'm confused. She kept a photo. Why keep it if she didn't want me?

The room's warm light reveals a scar within her eyebrow.

Pointing to the door, I cross my arms. "You left," I say.

"I did, but I didn't," she says.

"What does that mean?" I ask, sinking into a patterned chair near the TV.

Blaire approaches with a glass. "It's white wine," she offers, then whispers, "I'll give you two some space," before stepping away.

The real MVP.

"I've been there, even if you didn't see it," my mother says, extending her hands. I pause before accepting her touch. "You're intelligent, as I hoped. Blaire's been the me I couldn't be. I'm sorry, Lana," she says, voice shaking with what seems like genuine regret.

"Don't call me Lana," I snap, pulling away. Tears stream down my face. "Only those close to me have that right. You're just a distant figure, hardly family," I say, wiping away my tears.

"Why did you bring me here?" I ask.
"You're in danger," she says. The room feels stifling. Her revelation derails my thoughts.

"Danger from what?"

A clink from another room startles me.

"Your dad's mixed up in something perilous," she says.

Is she for real?

"Corporate accounting doesn't sound dangerous," I say, grappling with the image of my dad I've always known.

"He kills people, Alana," she breathes.

The weight of her words crash into me. Is my entire life a facade? She’s mistaken.

The room spins, discordant notes plucking at memories of my father. The glass tremors in my grip. I set it down, and it sloshes, but doesn’t spill.

"No. He can't—Blaire, we're leaving."

"Alana, please, listen," my mother says, reaching out to grasp my arm.

Blaire appears in the doorway. "What happened?" Her brows knit together, and she bites her bottom lip. Her gaze darts between me and the door.

"How can you claim something so grave?" I ask.

If she's gonna throw wild accusations like that, she better have the receipts.

"It's vital you leave the house, and Virginia. Take Blaire if you must, but distance yourself from your father," she says.

"That's nonsensical."

How could I abandon the man who's stood by me?

"There's a group targeting those linked to your father’s agency. He's not your safety net anymore," she says.
"My dad's priority has always been my safety."

"Mr. Cadwell would protect Alana at all costs," Blaire says, stepping between us, shoulders squared.

"He might not have a choice." She says, eyes dark, jaw set. The clock on the wall ticks loud in the silence that follows.

"Why would dad say he works at a firm if he kills people?" I rake my hands through my hair. "I've never seen him hurt anything, not even a bug." I throw my arms out, "You show up out of the blue to call him a killer?" My voice rises, echoing off the vaulted ceiling.

"They'll target him, and you could be collateral," she says.

"You're spinning conspiracies," Blaire says, with a dismissive hand.

My mother, eyes darting between us, inhales. "I hate putting this on you. I wish I could take you with me." She retrieves a suitcase from under the bed. "I leave tonight. Please, consider doing the same."

Her insistence doesn’t square with her not taking me.

"Where are you headed?" I ask.

Tears forming, she says, "I love you," drawing me into an embrace.

Conflicted, I can't find the courage to hug her back.

#
Chapter 4

Blaire stops our swift exit, wringing her hands. "So, what's next?"

I lean against the warm, silk-wool wall, sliding down to the cushioned floor. "I think... I need to talk to my dad."

Blaire sits next to me, her green-contacted eyes searching mine. "What do you think he'll say?"

"I'm scared he'll think I betrayed him."

"Why?" She fiddles with her ripped jeans.

"He's trusted me. Now I've gone behind his back to see my stranger of a mom without telling him." Standing upright, I sway before finding my balance. My breathing comes in gasps as I take hesitant steps down the hall.

"You okay?" Blaire steadies me.


She moves closer. "So, what's our move?"

"I still believe I need to face him. To come clean about everything."

"Don't worry. I got your back," she says.

"You know you're talking to me, right?"

Her eyes twinkle. "You've got this, you're Alana freaking Cadwell."

#

Dizzy, my head buzzing with bees, I stumble into the car, struggling to catch my breath.

Part of me yearns to trust my mother, craving the maternal bond I've missed. But I'm also compelled to defend my father, the man who's been my constant. The idea of him in some dark
underworld contradicts everything I've known. My dad has taught me about honesty, integrity, and responsibility. He's been my guide to adulthood.

But then this little voice in the back of my mind starts whispering annoying what-ifs. What if my father isn't who I think he is? What if he's entangled in a web of secrets and lies? Could he be capable of the things my mother accuses him of?

The questions unsettle our bond. Torn between loyalty and growing suspicion, I hope my mother is wrong. Because if there's any truth to her words, both my father and I are in jeopardy.

"Call your dad, let him know we're on our way," Blaire says.

"On it." I dial his number, leg bouncing. It rings once, twice, then voicemail. "That's odd." I rub my hands over my shorts.

There’s a good chance, he’s fine. I'm being paranoid, right?

Blaire shoots me a worried look.

"I'm going to try him again. He is quick to respond most times, even when he's at work."

I can hear the pounding of my heart in my chest.

"You don't think something has happened to him, do you, Blaire?" I ask.

“Maybe he's busy or in the shower," she says, merging lanes.

What if it's more than that?

"What if those guys managed to track him down?"

"Stop overthinking. He's fine." Blaire knots her fingers together, avoiding my eyes. "You believe her wild story?" Her voice cracks on the last word. Clearing her throat, she lifts her chin.

"I don't know," I say, phone clutched in hand, chewing my lip raw. I redial.

Blaire adjusts her seat, driving with her knees. "Give me that," she says, taking my phone and setting it aside.
She splits her attention between me and the road, then holds my hands. "Breathe with me."

"But the car—"

"Just breathe," she says.

I match her breathing pace, letting her words guide me. "Imagine you're floating, surrounded by sunlight and trees."

I whisper her words back, picturing the setting.

She continues, "Feel the water's current, hear the birds. Everything’s alright."

With each word, I find calmness, opening my eyes.

"Thank you."

Blaire squeezes my hand. "I'm here. Your dad's fine. Let's not jump to conclusions."

I nod, hoping she's right.

Sometimes you accept unchanging circumstances. Yet occasionally, you dare hope for more.

Like at the mother-daughter dance, with your dad's clumsy twirls in your lace-trimmed blue dress, you wished it was your mother dancing with you. You wish you didn't learn womanhood from YouTube, feeling left alone and unguided, relying on solutions like petroleum jelly on a tampon every month. You longed for a family with a loving mother and a caring father, even though you understood it was unattainable.

In these overwhelming moments, I sought solace at Sueno Lake.
There, I could escape the chaos and allow my thoughts to be drowned out. The first time I ventured to the lake, apprehension clung to me like a second skin, keeping me rooted on the bank. Fear of the cold waters and potential drowning restrained me. Yet, something beckoned me forward—a melody that resonated like a siren's lullaby.

With twittering hands, I slipped off my flip-flops, the pebbles beneath them unsteady and unforgiving. I approached the water's edge, its surface shimmering under the warm touch of the sun. In one brave, fluid motion, I submerged myself in the lake's nurturing current, clothes drenched and clinging to my body. Floating, I looked up, the sky mirroring the dreams that seemed distant on land.

We cruise down the road, engine humming. Blaire's hold on the steering wheel eases. Music from the speakers fills our quiet. Sinking into the leather seat, I watch the world pass by. Twenty minutes from my dad's, Blaire finally speaks.

"What do you remember about her anyway?" Blaire asks.

"Just fragments," I say, trying to grasp the fleeting memories. "They're like faded dreams. I question if they're real."

"Care to share?" she asks.

"As I picture her, she's a blur. I can't see her face or eyes, but there's something soft about them. It's like she looks at me and I'm home, you know? It's a comforting feeling. She used to dangle Blue in front of me like a bunch of grapes from a vine. And for a moment, I would imagine taking a bite. I know, crazy."
"Childhood memories are weird. I used to use crayons as lipstick to mimic my mom,” Blaire says.

"You and your mom are so alike."

Blaire makes a face. "Past tense. We're different."

I smirk. "Sure."

"Is Blue the stuffed dog you have in your chair?” Blaire asks.

"Yeah, I think that's why the blur feels so real to me. It's like I've intertwined my memories with that toy. It's just getting harder to distinguish what's real and what's not anymore."

"How old were you when she left?"

"It feels like she is confined to that blur. I don't remember when she came or when she left. It's always just been me and dad, you know?" I say.

My phone rings and I snatch it.

"Is everything okay? Did someone come for you? Why didn't you answer?" My voice pitches.

"Alana, calm down. What's going on? Are you safe?"

"I'm okay," I say.

"I left my phone at work. It was dead when I got it. Saw your missed calls after charging," my dad says.

"I met a woman today. She said she's my mother.” Houses pass by. "We're driving to you. She said things, dad, unsettling things."

"Lizeth talked to you?" There’s an edge to his voice.

"We're almost there. I just passed the big pine tree."

"Drive safe," he says.
Hanging up, relief washes over. "He's alive, Blaire. Just a phone mishap."

Blaire smiles. "I knew it'd be okay."

#

"Come inside. Are you both alright? Why aren't you at school?" Dad pulls us into a protective embrace.

Digging my nails into my palms, I say, "I need to tell you something."

His hands shoot up. "Is someone hurt?" he asks, concern in his almond-shaped eyes.

"We thought you were," Blaire says.

"Why would—" He starts, but our urgency interrupts him.

"I got a voicemail from Mom," I say.

His brow furrows. "She reached out after all these years?" He scratches his head, trying to make sense of it.

"I play the voicemail, needing his verification. "Is this her?"

He listens, then responds, looking as if he swallowed a clove of garlic. "Lizeth's calling you about me?" He paces the living room.

"She mentioned... people wanting to kill you," I say.

I can't believe I'm having this conversation right now.

"Is that right?" His words catch in his throat. "I can't believe Lizeth would pull you into one her fantasies."

He throws pillows one by one, they thud against the sofa.

He seems bothered. Maybe he’s innocent.

“She seemed so sure," I say, seeking clarity.
He sighs, his demeanor softening. "Your mother made choices, dangerous ones, that I've shielded you from."

I bristle, "Don't I have the right to know? I’m an adult."

"You're right. But you know how I feel about keeping you safe," he says.

"What choices did she make?" Blaire asks, sinking into the lazy boy recliner.

"I no longer have ties with your mother, but I don't want you hating her or being scared of who she is," he says.

Dad needs to realize that I'm not a little girl anymore. I can handle things on my own.

"Isn't that a choice I can make for myself?"

"Lana, I—" he begins, but I interject.

"Dad."

He blows air. "Alright." Settling onto the couch, he pats the space beside him. "You might not see her again. Lizeth wouldn’t harm our family. Her absence did enough damage."

I nod, processing the complexities of my mother’s past.

"When I met your mother, she was already mixed up with some killers. I accepted her, even if I disapproved," he says, looking distant.

This is twisted.

Blaire leans forward in the recliner, her eyes wide.

My head spins. "How are you so calm discussing this?"

He redirects, smoothing his shirt, "Lizeth's work impacted her psyche. She started believing things that weren't real. Her talk of me being a target? Look around. Do I seem concerned?"

Did he just dodge my question?
Blaire and I nod in agreement. "No."

"Take her words with a grain of salt," he advises, emphasizing family unity and trust.

My gaze drifts to the newspaper coupon clippings scattered across the worn-out brown console table between us. Among them, a headline catches my attention—apples on sale, marked down by ten percent, and ground beef a steal at four dollars a pound. I shift my focus to the refrigerator, its surface adorned with a collage of cherished memories—photographs capturing moments of me riding bikes, savoring slices of cake, indulging in ice cream. Those pictures, preserved keepsakes to remember.

I survey the entire room, taking in the sight of plants nestled in every corner, flourishing under his attentive care. His bookcase and shelves serve as mini-gardens. He breathes life into every leaf and stem, watering them with love. He shops at Wholefoods and Krogers. He’s not a cold-blooded killer.

My mother is just crazy.

"I believe you," I say, breaking my silence.

"I didn't know that was up for debate," he chuckles, rising up from the couch. "You girls have been through enough. Just relax here for the rest of the day. We can watch television. I have pretzels," he says, attempting to restore a sense of normalcy.

Taking a deep breath, I realize that we're in the clear. Hitmen don't eat pretzels.

#
Chapter 5

Remembering everything that has taken place over this past week sends shivers down my spine, akin to witnessing people drizzling hot sauce over their popcorn. I find myself placing my palm over my chest, seeking confirmation that I'm still breathing. And I am, despite the unsettling words my dad used to describe my mother. According to him, she strangles people for breakfast, or at least that's the vivid image that plays in my head. What if, deep down, I carry some of her murderous genes within me? My research on Google suggests that sociopathy can be hereditary, fueling my worries.

I sprawl across my bed like a starfish, stretching my body in all directions, sinking into the softness of my quilted comforter. Blaire is visiting her family for the day, preparing for Gabriel's gathering tomorrow. She mentioned something about shopping with her mom, searching for a detective’s dress. I suspect it's all part of her elaborate plan to pry into Gabriel’s life by snooping through his cabinets and rummaging through his trash cans. In regards to everything that has happened, I contemplate canceling the outing. But, I want to see Gabriel, especially after being engulfed in a whirlwind of college assignments and prospective assassins throughout the week. Maybe now things can return to normal.

Being related to someone who defies the rules on a daily basis weighs on your conscience. Should I confide in someone about this? Perhaps the authorities? Yet, I possess no tangible evidence of her criminal activities; it would boil down to my word against hers. Why couldn't she have settled for more commonplace illegal activities like selling marijuana or stealing candy bars from Shaun's Gas and Go?

Maybe, I just need to let it go and move on.
My schedule has been monotonous this week, characterized by a cycle of waking up, halfheartedly grooming myself, attending classes, returning home, and repeating the process. Blaire attempted to persuade me to join a Zumba class at the University fitness center, believing that shaking and wiggling would somehow mend my broken family.

I cannot understand why my mother would offer her time to confront and warn me about my father when she herself is the one with a criminal past. Strangely enough, it all kind of makes sense now. I could never imagine a man who struggles to eat ramen with chopsticks as a contract killer; the woman who abandoned her child and vanished is the one who fits the bill.

Maybe I just need to schedule an appointment at Lenae's Wellness and Spa, where a massage could serve as a much-needed release from all this family drama. Time to leave it all in the past.

#

The spa boasts an array of luxurious facial treatments, catering to every desire. For a hefty price, one can indulge in the experience of having organic farm snails glide hyaluronic acid onto their faces, or opt to combat aging by immersing premature lines in a lavish bath of 24K gold. I gleaned these enticing details from a brochure I picked up from a table near the entrance, its base conical and etched with a texture resembling plaster.

As I step into the lobby, the air is filled with the soothing aroma of lavender dryer sheets, as if they were tucked within the cushions of the scattered chairs. Behind the front desk, a staircase-like arrangement of alkaline waters stands tall, flanked by an assortment of deluxe moisturizing products, worth a small fortune.

The receptionist, her sleek bob framing her face, greets me with a warm smile. Sensing my presence, she inquires about my appointment, or if I happen to be a walk-in. Leaning on the
cool surface of the counter, I respond with more information than necessary, explaining my desperate need for a break and how this visit serves as a form of cleansing, despite already being clean.

I express my mild apprehension about being nude and confirm that I indeed have an appointment. Her polite nod suggests she discerns that my spa experiences have been limited to store-bought volcanic ash gel peel-off masks and cucumbers bought at the local market. I needn't have voiced it myself. She confirms that their top priority is to provide comfort and assures me that I can keep my undergarments on throughout the entirety of the services.

After waiting for about five minutes in one of the cozy lobby chairs, the scent of lavender growing stronger with each passing moment, I am guided by a man donning pristine white scrubs into an elongated room adorned with a massage table covered in crisp linen and draped with matching fabric. The man bids me a good day, as if the goodness of the day has already materialized, and closes the door behind him.

Despite the apparent solitude, the room emanates a sense of tranquility, aided by the soft, anonymous music playing in the background—a medicinal embrace. Shedding my clothes, I leave them stacked on a nearby chair, ensuring my bra is tucked beneath the pile—a display of well-mannered decorum ingrained in me from growing up in the same house as my ever-present father.

Tentatively, I climb onto the massage table, deliberating whether to face the door or the opposite side. Opting for the former, I avoid the risk of being startled by someone entering without my knowledge. At least from this angle, I can glimpse the light filtering through the door before it opens. I drape the fabric over me, though my legs quiver. It is difficult to ascertain whether the tremor is due to the gentle breeze now caressing my exposed skin or lingering nerves.
about being unclothed, despite choosing the less conservative option in an attempt to appear more mature.

While contemplating whether to rest my hands at my sides or fold them beneath my head, a woman by the name of Maeve enters the room, clad in monochromatic scrubs. She introduces herself and inquires about any areas of pain or discomfort. Hesitant, I acknowledge my uncertainty regarding any specific pain points. Requesting my consent, she places her warm hands on my back, reminiscent of a stack of dried laundry, and miraculously, my leg ceases its trembling. With purposeful kneading, she seeks to unravel the concealed tension entrenched within each bone's crevice. As she applies pressure, I flinch, prompting her to comment on the extensive knots of stress she uncovers. As her knuckles work along my spine, I feel as though I may become unhinged from the table, yet every time she completes a section, the woven threads of tension seem to unravel, leaving me breathless.

When she finishes, tears well up in my eyes, and I find myself weeping, a release of pent-up emotions I didn't realize I was holding.

#
Chapter 6 - BLAIRE

Blaire's sanctuary, her bedroom at her mom's when she’s not with Alana, is a realm engineered for gaming, snacking, and the begrudging chore of homework.

Red LED lights cast a subtle crimson glow from behind her bed, while legendary video game posters adorn her walls. The pièce de résistance is her triple-monitor gaming station.

Amidst her digital dance lies the snack bar: a haven of indulgence with Red Mini Licorice Twists—her defiant favorite against Alana's disdain, a variety of chips, and a cache of energy drinks and water for gaming marathons.

As the battlefield on her screen rages with the cacophony of virtual warfare, Blaire’s headphone mic descends to her mouth, the gateway to commanding her digital troops.

“Left corner. Left corner,” she says, her eyes glued to the screen.

A teammate's lament through her headphones prompts her to recline in her chair, her screen casting shadows over her frustration.

“What was that?” she says.

*It feels like we're stuck in a losing streak. Alana is dealing with the shocking reality of her mother being a killer, and I can't seem to get a win on my side either. I know the scales are different, but you know. I just wish I could do something.*

The defeated sigh of her teammate carries through the mic. “It’s this crappy gun, Blaire. I can’t do anything with it. Haven't unlocked the good stuff yet.”

Without missing a beat, Blaire flips to her Discord screen, fingers dancing over the keyboard as she enters a string of alphanumerics. “Here. Refresh your page after you enter this,” she says, hitting the send button.
The real world intrudes as her mom swings open the door—a stark contrast in mom jeans, oxfords, and a ribbed white shirt under a fringed red and yellow jacket.

"I didn’t transform into this for nothing, you know. Weren’t we dress hunting for that party?" Her mom says, opening the room’s curtains.

“Last round, promise,” Blaire’s focus is divided between her mom and the screen.

*I need this victory.*

Her mom tilts her head. “Keep me waiting, and I might just board you in here.”

Blaire flashes a mischievous grin. “Sounds tempting,” she eyes her mom before returning to the game. “Kidding.”

The euphoric shout of her teammate resonates through the headphones, “You're a wizard, Blaire. Got access to all the weapons. How the heck did you—”

"Save your awe for later, let’s get this win," she cuts in, plunging back into battle.

#

Blaire steps into the bustling mall, cool air replacing her screens' warm glow. She navigates the crowd, eyes scanning the directory before spotting her favorite boutique. Heading to the entrance, she steps into the trendy space, browsing the racks and toying with fabric.

“The right dress won’t jump out at you,” her mom says.

“You sure about that?” Blaire pokes her shoulder. "Thought Dad said he was coming?" "I invited, he declined. You know he's a homebody.” The fringes of her jacket dance as she moves. "Have a style in mind?"

Blaire’s face adopts a theatrical seriousness. “Something that says, 'I’m here to uncover your secrets’—like a classy spy.”
Her mom raises an eyebrow. “And how do the dollars and cents figure in this spy
fantasy?”

*It's uncanny how my oddball tendencies manage to save me from questioning.*

“Will you cover my six?” Blaire says.

"Let's keep it within a budget that doesn't need a covert op to balance the books," she
winks, as they delve deeper into the dress maze, their laughter blending with the store's upbeat
music.

Leaning closer, her mother dares, “What do you say? Try on every dress here and strut
around until you find the one?”

Blaire laughs at the ridiculous yet thrilling idea. "One in nine odds."

Her mother narrows her eyes, grin widening as she tries to guess the number sealing their
bet—a small, shared ritual.

"One, two, three..." In sync, they utter, "Seven."

Blaire curses softly. With a sigh, she grabs a red flare dress, slipping it on to start the
peculiar fashion parade. Her mother stands guard as Blaire layers herself in patterns.

Each addition triggers outbursts, disturbing the boutique's peace. By the halfway mark,
Blaire resembles a fabric snowman, sweltering in the late summer air.

"Feeling toasty?" her mother says, patting the mound encasing her.

Customers glance their way, some offering knowing smiles and shakes of the head. For
Blaire and her mom, this is living - reveling in each other's company.

Deep down, Blaire can't help but harbor guilt over a relationship she gets to enjoy, a joy
that remains out of Alana's reach.

#
Chapter 7 - ALANA

Several cars trail behind us like we're the leaders of a school parade as we scout for a parking spot. The driveway is paved with flagstone, crowded with luxurious Porsche cars and various models of sleek Teslas. Our car, undoubtedly, stands out like a daisy in a rose garden.

The air is filled with the jingle of keys, the soft thud of car doors, and the hum of lively conversations. We roll down our windows for a better view as we approach an open space. Clearly, Gabriel and I have different interpretations of a "get-together." Despite choosing it for its recommendation and attractive label at my local spirit and wine shop, the bottle of Zinfandel I cradle in my lap suddenly appears small.

Blaire sits beside me, her seatbelt stretched taut across her body as she gazes out at the floor-to-ceiling windows adorning the front of the house. Her body leans against the dashboard, testing the limits of the woven polyester designed to keep her safe. Strangers dressed in an array of honey, emerald, metallic, and floral outfits walk towards the front door, their faces unfamiliar to me.

As we approach the house, the sound of clacking heels echoes on the geometric rock outlining the pathway. Blaire wears a leather tussock-colored dress, her attempt to channel detective vibes. To me, the waist cut-outs give her more of a Grecian goddess look than Sherlock Holmes, but vibes don't lie. In an effort to impress Gabriel, I wear an eyelet dress in a shade called "Sacramento green," as stated on the tag tucked safely in my purse for future return. Lace is a safe choice, timeless and elegant.

The open door welcomes a steady stream of people entering and exiting, turning the gathering into a bustling event. Before I can fully take in the surroundings, Gabriel spots me. I desperately hope he didn't witness my misstep, almost tripping on a small stone before the door.
"Green is definitely your color," he exclaims as we embrace, the smoky vetiver scent of his cologne enveloping me.

Okay, act natural. Compliment his house.

"Your house is absolutely beautiful," I say, my hands clasping my cheeks in utter amazement.

"It's a lot, I know," he laughs, giving a playful shrug.

Well, at least he's being honest.

"No, I mean, yes, but still, it's truly something," I say.

Blaire, interjects, twirling a strand of her perfectly curled, blonde hair for tonight, and asks, "So, what do you do again?"

Gabriel chuckles. "I work in project management. Can I get anything for you two? Something to drink?"

"You manage something," Blaire says playfully.

I extend the bottle of Zinfandel towards him. "For you. I'm sure you have an abundance of wine by now."

"And yet, yours is better simply because it's from you," he replies warmly.

I smile.

Is it getting warm in here, or is it just me blushing like crazy?

"I'm glad you both could make it," he says, looking me directly in the eyes. He then playfully bows with prayer hands to Blaire, his black suspenders resting against his chest.

He moves further into the foyer. "I'll grab you both some drinks. Feel free to explore. My house is yours," he adds.

Blaire and I enter the living room, where the ceiling appears to ascend towards heaven.
I bet the mortgage here costs 10x more than my tuition.

Round cocktail tables, adorned with pens, clean stationary, and wine glasses, are artfully placed throughout the room, surrounded by elegantly dressed men and women. I overhear snippets of conversation mentioning charity and affordable housing. Someone taps my shoulder, and I turn around to see Jaiden, the Soundcloud rapper.

"Hey," I ask, raising my eyebrows and tilting my head slightly to the side, "what brings you here?"

"Alana," he replies urgently, fidgeting with the baseball cap on his head, "I need to tell you something."

"You know Gabriel?" I inquire, my voice cracking.

"I'm in charge of the music tonight," he explains. "I'm a DJ, and—"

It finally registers in my ears that music has been playing all this time. Surprisingly, he's actually talented. It seems being a DJ doesn't require playing one's own music.

I look around, interrupting him. "Where's your setup?"

"Can I speak to you in private?" Jaiden asks,ducking as if expecting something to be thrown at him.

"She's not interested, Jaiden. She's dating the host," Blaire interjects, crossing her arms.

Jaiden grabs me, accidentally pinching my skin, and pulls me beneath the staircase. "It's about your dad. I tried to tell you sooner, but you drove off."

His hands appear shiny, possibly sweaty, I can't quite tell. "How do you even know him?" I ask.

"I don't even know if I should be saying this." He paces beside me, sweat beads forming on his chin. "I saw your dad kill someone, Alana. I'm not sure if he saw me, but—"
His words paralyze me. My head buzzes with a swarm of bees, and the room spins momentarily before settling into focus.

"Please, listen," Jaiden pleads, gripping both my arms. They tingle, feeling almost numb to the touch.

Desperate to avoid this possibility altogether, to salvage some semblance of a normal family, even if it exists solely in my mind, I pull away. "I think you must be mistaken," I say.

Blaire steps forward in support, hooking her arm through mine. "Sorry, Jaiden, we have other matters to attend to," she says.

Jaiden releases me, and I feel a slight sense of relief. "Fine," he mutters, wiping his palms on his pants. "But remember, I warned you."

"What did he say? You know we can't trust everything that comes out of his mouth," Blaire whispers in my ear, her words a reminder of caution. "Remember when he lied about his aunt's death, had you in tears, and then she walked in halfway through the movie we were watching? I thought the house was haunted until she actually touched me," she jogs my memory.

Blaire's words ring true, and I cling to them, grasping the last fragile fragments of hope and faith within me.

"So you know," she says, hands out in front of her, palms upward, "take everything he says like the butt end of bread. Ignore it for a week," she pauses, mimicking setting something aside, "then throw it away."

As I adjust the sleeves on my dress, I scour over the party and nod in agreement.

"Yeah, you're right," I say.

"Alright, here's the deal," Blaire says, nodding toward the staircase, "we're at Gabriel's party. Remember, we're on a mission."
I gaze up at the floating pathway, feeling a tinge of unease about snooping through Gabriel's things. However, I see it as a distraction from my own troubled family and an opportunity to dive into something different. Blaire and I are probably exaggerating the significance of his interview answers from our first date, but crossing his name off the list of potential hitmen can't hurt–better safe than sorry, right? After all, he did say this was my house too.

We creep up the stairs, feeling as though all eyes are on us, but a glance around reveals that no one is paying attention. I swear, if I end up on the security camera footage, I'm going to regret this forever. I straighten up and walk normally, nudging Blaire to do the same. At the top of the stairs, there's an abstract painting with bold blue strokes, reminiscent of Sueno Lake. Blaire darts into a nearby room, while I trace my finger along the image. This has to be a sign that Gabriel might be the one. The hallways are painted in modern shades of white. Glancing behind me to ensure no one is ascending the stairs, I notice Gabriel's office on the left.

I settle into his leather chair, leaning back as if smoking a cigar. What am I even searching for? I open the top desk drawer, finding mints that melt in the mouth, a lint roller, acetaminophen, a loose phone charger block, a bowtie, a Swiss army knife, and an array of pens. Curiosity piques, and I open the knife, gliding my finger gently along the blade. I wonder if just owning a knife makes you feel safer, even if you don't know how to use it. I examine the other tools, a collection of straight and squiggly metal instruments, their purposes a mystery to me. Carefully, I return them to their original positions.

"Lana," I hear Blaire whisper from the hallway.

"Why are we whispering?" I ask, making my way out of the office.

"We need to be discreet," she replies, walking over to me. "Did you find anything?"
"What are you wearing?" I chuckle.

"One of his jackets," she laughs. "It's so oversized that it reaches my knees."

"How is that helping us find anything?" I laugh. "Make sure to put it back."

"I will. I think Gabriel's room is at the end of the hall. If he's hiding anything, it's likely there."

Muffled voices from downstairs resonate up the stairs, quickening our pace. If someone catches us, I’ll just pretend I’m looking for the bathroom.

As we enter his room, my eyes immediately catch a bottle of cologne resting on his dresser, its scent wafting through the air. There's something about a good-smelling man that makes my heart flutter. Beside the cologne, a square-shaped mirror reflects our eager expressions as we step further into the room.

Intrigued, I open the second drawer, revealing a glass window displaying rows of watches meticulously organized by their metal colors. It's clear that Gabriel has an eye for detail. A glass of water sits serenely atop his nightstand by the bed, as if waiting for its owner to return.

Despite the inviting ambiance, we can't resist the thrill of a potential secret. With no real reason to suspect anything, we let our baseless curiosity take over. We embark on a quest to uncover hidden compartments or mysterious clues. Drawers are opened, clothes are rifled through, and books are flipped through with care.

Minutes pass like hours, but our efforts lead to no results. No secret letters, no concealed treasures, nothing that would reveal any hidden aspect of Gabriel's life. It leaves us feeling both relieved and slightly disappointed.
We give the room a final once-over, even inspecting the closet which is completely lined wall to wall with clothes. Just as I'm about to turn off the closet light, a shadow catches my eye within the light fixture above the center island. Jackpot.

"I think I found something, Blaire," I say, slipping off my heels and climbing up to get a better look. I carefully reach down into the light fixture, making sure not to burn myself on the bulb.

"What is it?" Blaire asks.

With a triumphant grin, I reveal a shiny silver key. The metal feels hot in my hand. Sure, I'm confident that Gabriel is innocent, but there's nothing wrong with a little detective work just for fun.

Blaire's gaze locks onto the key, curiosity dancing in her eyes.

What do you think it opens?" she asks.

My mind races with possibilities as I twirl the key between my fingers. What could this key unlock? A hidden compartment in the room that we missed, perhaps? Or maybe a door to a secret passageway, like the ones in the mystery novels I love to read?

Without hesitation, we delve back into the closet, searching with a slower and more deliberate pace. Amidst the clothes strewn around, Blaire spots a suspicious-looking pile on the floor near the back end of the closet. The mound seems slightly out of place, and with renewed fervor, we dig through the clothes. As we remove the last layer, our breath catches in our throats – there it is, a large trunk, about the size of a person, concealed beneath the disguise of Gabriel's clothes.

My heart pounds as I reach for the trunk, but before I can even touch it, Blaire's hand grips my arm. "Wait, are we really ready for whatever secrets this might reveal?" she asks.
I pause, contemplating her words. She's right; we might be delving into something that's better left undiscovered. But the allure of the unknown is too enticing to resist. "We've come this far, Blaire," I say, determined. "Let's just see what's inside. We can handle whatever it is."

With a shared nod of agreement, we carefully unlock the trunk with the silver key. The lid creaks open, and a musty smell wafts into the room.

We rummage through the contents of the chest, my heart pounding with curiosity and nerves. Folded report cards, a discolored handkerchief, a prom pamphlet, and a faded photograph of Gabriel with a man who appears to be his father fill the space. Before I can react further to my findings, Gabriel's voice startles me, and I hastily close the trunk, turning to face him with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Uh..." I say, struggling to find the right words.

"I've been searching everywhere for you guys," he says, holding two glass flutes filled with a straw-yellow liquid. "Had to play the host, engage in some conversations. But seriously, what are you doing in my closet?"

"We were just..." Blaire starts but trails off, seemingly at a loss for words as well.

"We were trying to find out if you..." I begin, then falter. Standing up, I quickly brush the creases out of my dress. "I was curious if corporate hotel consulting is your only job?" I finally manage to ask, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Why didn't you just ask me?" Gabriel asks, narrowing his greenish-brown eyes.

"Because I wanted to know if you were also a contract killer," I confess, feeling fully embarrassed. The words spill out, and I can't believe I’ve just said that out loud.

He chuckles, and I feel the heat rising under my arms.
Leaning back against his closet island, he scans the room and asks, "Find anything interesting?"


He smirks. "Considering our history thus far, this weirdly fits right in character for us. But why would you even think—"

I cut him off, hastily explaining how our conversation at dinner took a dark turn, how I shared it with Blaire, and how we both got carried away in the moment. I apologize profusely for invading his privacy.

Gabriel listens patiently, his expression softening as he understands the situation. "It's alright," he says finally, setting the glasses aside. "I can see how that conversation could have led you down this path."

I let out a sigh of relief.

"So, what you're saying is my get-together is boring?" he says, flashing a mischievous smile.

I giggle. "It's a party, Gabriel. But I—"

Gabriel gives me a reassuring smile. "No harm done. But next time you have questions about me, just ask. I promise I won't be offended."

I nod, feeling grateful for his understanding. From this moment on, I vow to communicate openly instead of jumping to wild conclusions. Our potential relationship means too much to risk over silly assumptions.

Blaire stands up from the floor, wiping her forehead. "Sorry too. The whole thing was kind of my fault. I mean, I started it."
He smirks, motioning us towards the door. "Let's get back," he says.

I look around at the mess on the closet floor. "We'll clean up everything," I say, scrunching my face. "Again, I'm sorry."

He takes hold of my hand, and Blaire follows suit. "Forget about it," he says, leading me out of the closet. "I'll deal with it later."

As we exit Gabriel's room and step into the hallway, the volume of voices increases. It sounds like someone screams, and I can't help but tense up. Gabriel's grip on my hand tightens as we hurry down the stairs, with Blaire trailing behind, still wearing his jacket.

"What's happening out there?" I ask, as we make our way through the crowd.

The wide glass door leading to Gabriel's backyard is swarmed with people, spilling out into the night. Determined, we forge ahead, pushing through the dense crowd, our urgency intensifying with each step. Someone accidentally spills their drink on my sleeve, leaving it damp. Taking in the scene, I notice tear-streaked faces and chaotic conversations blending into a cacophony. Finally reaching the front, a sharp gasp escapes my lips as I witness a lifeless body floating face down in the pool.

"What happened?" Blaire catches up to us, standing beside me. "Oh my God, isn't that Jaiden, the Soundcloud rapper?"

#
Chapter 8

Blaire and I are sitting on our living room floor, the wood paneling leaving painful indentations on our butts, but we dare not move, still shaken by the events of last night. All the lights in the house are on, and I can't help but worry about the skyrocketing electricity bill. But the darkness feels scarier, and I need to stay alert and aware.

As we left Gabriel’s house last night, with flashing lights and people screaming, and officials bombarding us with questions, I realized how little we knew. Instead of paying attention, I was too busy scouring Gabriel's home for clues.

I turn to Blaire, who is absently picking at the stitches under the bottom of the couch.

“Hey, you’re going to ruin that,” I say, my hair pulled into a messy ponytail at the top of my head, oily curls tumbling over the sides.

She looks up, her eyes more sunken than usual, probably from the lack of sleep, the faint imprints of pillow lines still visible on her rose-beige skin.

“The average person can hold their breath for ninety seconds,” she says.

“Do you think we shouldn’t have gone through Gabriel’s things?” I ask, scooting closer to Blaire. Her reply is important to me, as I can't help but second-guess what we did.

“We were just trying to protect ourselves,” she replies, her voice uncertain, as if trying to reassure herself as well.

“How come nobody else saw what happened at the party?” I continue, slouching against her shoulder, attempting to relieve some of the pressure from the hard floor. Blaire stretches out her legs and accidentally bumps her knee on the coffee table.

“Ouch,” she winces before settling back into her position. “Well, we were upstairs, and so was Gabriel.”
“And everyone else?” I ask, searching for answers.

“Too drunk, maybe?” She shrugs.

"What do you think Gabriel was up to before he came upstairs?” I say, the question burning inside me. I glance down at my chipped nail polish, the once neat Sacramento green, now a mess of oblong geometric shapes.

"Probably hosting, duh. Did you see how many people were packed into that house?" Blaire exclaims, her eyes widening at the thought, but then narrowing as she realizes the implication of my question. "Wait, you're not suggesting he—"

“How could I not? We went there looking for evidence—”

“And we found nothing,” she says, her posture straightening, concern etched on her face.

“No weapons, no hidden passageways, nothing suspicious. The only odd thing was that weird trunk with the photos. Don’t tell me you're afraid of baby photos,” she teases.

I laugh and playfully push her. “You're right. Besides, if Gabriel had something to hide, he wouldn't have invited so many people over.”

“Exactly,” Blaire agrees, trying to get up off the floor and extending her arm to help me up. Her navy blue and orange University of Virginia bands brush against my wrist.

I lean back against the chiffon-colored wall near the kitchen, shifting my weight.

“I've never seen a dead body before. I mean, I've never seen death,” I say.

Blaire hesitates before responding. “It's stuck in my head too,” she concurs softly.

“Who do you think did it?” I ask, pressing my nails into my side, my mouth suddenly dry.

#
Chapter 9 - BLAIRE

After Gabriel's party made headlines, Blaire retreated home, against her wishes. She sought solace in virtual battles, immersing herself in intense tournaments that tested her dexterity. She crafted code to enhance her gameplay, expanding the in-game universe with levels beyond the original design. It was her refuge, a universe she could control.

Every pixelated victory edged her closer to her dream—she aimed to craft narratives for video game companies, where fantasy and reality were separated.

Her room, usually bathed in comforting crimson, now lay lit by harsh overhead lights that banished shadows, erasing traces of Jaiden. Her dad's cautious knocks on her door, accompanied by his tentative voice every half hour, were constant reminders of the situation.

Her mom masked her concern under a guise of normalcy, fetching trivial items for Blaire throughout the day. She'd enter with fresh fruit or new batteries for her controller.

Blaire struggled with the sinister aura enveloping Alana's family, especially Mr. Cadwell. The once gentle, welcoming man now harbored a dark secret. Could he be a killer? And Alana... were her secrets too grim to unveil? As code compiled and characters on screen sprang to action, she yearned for a keystroke to debug the real world, to rewrite the narrative, reviving Jaiden, vindicating Mr. Cadwell, and calming her.

#

Blaire hits record, starting her weekly live stream. The viewer count and tips rise with every second as comments flood the chat.

"Alright guys, remember that for every fifty dollar tip I receive, I'll share a new trick," she says.
She slides into her usual rhythm, sharing gaming advice and debating with her audience about character efficacy and questionable updates.

"Thank you, Bladerunner48 for your donation," she says, eyes darting to the buzzing Discord channel on her second monitor.

“Hey. I saw you on the news,” a comment flashes on her stream chat.

Blaire's face tightens, but she chooses to ignore the message, focusing on conquering the boss enemy instead. Another chime draws her attention - a new message on Discord. Unlike the others, this one doesn’t have a username attached. She clicks it open.

Hello Blaire,

We've been following your digital footprint and are impressed by your exceptional coding skills…

As she reads through, her breathing shallows and her fingers twitch over the mouse. The message extends a mysterious invitation, a link.

Driven by curiosity, she clicks. The Discord message vanishes.

Panic gnaws at her, the sudden fear of potential viruses curdling her stomach. But then, a black dialog box emerges on her screen with white text that greets her by name.

"Hi, Blaire," it pauses, awaiting her response.

Blaire toggles back to her game, asking her audience, "Who’s sending weird messages to my Discord?"

She anticipates an answer, but the chat buzzes on, unfazed. Deciding to err on the side of caution, she bids her viewers a hasty goodbye and ends her stream. Now almost menacing, she refocuses on the black box.

Her fingers hover over the keyboard before she types a cautious, “Hey.”
The text resumes, unraveling more about this so-called organization. "We're an agency that specializes in unconventional problem-solving," it says. Reading the word "agency" triggers thoughts of the shady dealings of Alana’s family.

Their vague, alluring promise of unimaginable resources fuels her curiosity, while sensible caution gnaws at her resolve. She rolls her chair over to her third monitor, running a quick diagnostic check to ensure her system’s security hasn’t been compromised. All clear.

“So, it’s not a virus,” she says to herself, her eyes shifting back to the ongoing message in the black box.

Could this be her bridge to understanding the dark, complex world Alana’s family has hinted at? Is this her chance to uncover truths about Alana’s dad or even her mom?

But before she can delve any deeper, the box vanishes, leaving her with nothing but a blank screen and unanswered questions.

#
Chapter 10 - ALANA

I lie in bed, pulling my blanket over my head, trying my best to block out the raucous laughter and thumping music coming from a nearby dorm party. The soft glow of the moon seeps through my half-open curtains, casting a faint light across my cluttered room. Tissue boxes are strewn about, a lingering reminder of my sadness, and last night's dinner plate, with cold mashed potatoes still stuck to it, sits forgotten on my desk. Among the disarray, Gabriel's clothes lay neatly folded in my corner chair.

It's been a week since everything happened, and Saturday has rolled around once more, casting a somber ambiance on the room. The thought of being alone is unbearable, especially after Blaire sought solace with her family following the incident. I'm grateful that I've invited Gabriel over to keep me company. Why does life have to be so unpredictable and unfair?

Sleep continues to elude me, just like every night. I keep shifting and tossing, my eyes heavy with exhaustion. A faint scent of citrus and vanilla permeates the room, a calming oil gifted by Blaire. Jaiden keeps haunting me like a ghost, his voice echoing throughout my space, replaying our last conversation. He tried to warn me, and now I can't shake this persistent feeling that my dad may have had some involvement in his death. What secrets are you hiding that I don't know about?

I let out a frustrated sigh, tossing my pillow to the floor in a futile attempt to shake off the whirlwind of emotions engulfing me. Underneath my bed covers, Gabriel stirs and reaches for the lamp on the nightstand, casting a soft halo of light to spill into the dimly lit room, illuminating the dusty blue walls.

"Hey," he whispers, his voice barely audible over the distant sounds of the party. “You alright?”
"I need to get out of this house," I say, my voice carrying a touch of restlessness.

He leans back against my headboard, a knowing smile on his face. “It’s 2 am. Where do you want to go?” he chuckles.

“Anywhere, but here. I’ve had enough of being cooped up in my feelings,” I say, my eyes wandering around the room.

"When do you have clearance to go back to school?" he asks, genuinely concerned, his gaze shifting from me to the black chestnut stained desk, where my school books lay untouched.

“Monday. Got the week off, because of—.” I run my hands over my face.

“I know,” he says softly. “Being back at school might help you feel normal again. You know, going to classes, focusing on homework, and getting good grades.”

Inhaling deeply, my emotions run high. “I think it’s my fault,” I say, my eyes welling up with tears. Maybe if I had listened to Jaiden, things would be different.

"What’s your fault?" he says, gently turning his body towards me.

“I spoke to Jaiden before he died,” I confess.

“Come here.” Gabriel pulls me into his lap, wrapping his arms around me.

The softness of his touch and the safety of his arms contrast the lingering pain in the room, a haven within a storm.

“You didn’t put him into that pool. Some sicko did,” he says.

I never thought I'd have to consider my own father as a suspect.

“I could have prevented it?” I say, my chest feeling tight with guilt.

Gabriel holds me tighter, pressing a soft kiss on the side of my neck, his breath mingling with the calming oil. "Even if you knew or saw who did it," he says tenderly. “That doesn’t mean you could have stopped it. You could have gotten yourself hurt.” He places another gentle kiss
on the other side of my neck, his actions a soothing rhythm amidst the chaos of my mind. “And that’s the last thing I would have wanted.”

“But Jaiden told me—”

Gabriel interrupts me gently, lifting me up and placing me on my feet.

“What are we doing?” I ask.

“If I’m not mistaken, you said you wanted to get out of this house of misery,” he says, trying to lift my spirits with a playful smirk, his eyes meeting mine.

“Where are we going?” I say, standing there in my cotton night tee, my fingers playing with the hem of my pajama shorts.

“Put on some shoes,” he says, with a smile.

#

Under the starry night sky, a soft glow emanates from the windows of a few houses, indicating that a handful of night owls are still awake. The gentle croaking of a tree frog echoes through the neighborhood, harmonizing with the soothing chirping of crickets. Gradually, the thumping of music from distant parties subsides.

As I sit in Gabriel's car, parked outside my house, the engine purrs softly in the darkness, like a contented cat. Dim street lights cast gentle rays through the windshield, creating a dance of subtle patterns on the dashboard.

"Why do you have goggles in the trunk of your car?" I say, as he hops into the front seat of his flawlessly clean Audi and hands me a pair.

He grins mischievously, his dark hair slightly tousled from the wind. "I do this a lot when I need to blow off some steam," he says, closing the car door behind him, causing his work lanyard on the rearview mirror to sway gently.
"Do what?" I ask, curious.

"Stop trying to guess, you'll see," he replies with a chuckle.

As we drive through the winding streets, the scent of freshly cut grass wafts through our windows. I can't help but glance at the backseat, impressed by how neat and clean it is, except for his briefcase lying on the leather.

"Isn't it considered kidnapping if I don't know where we're going?" I ask, teasing.

He shakes his head playfully. "No more criminal talk. We have to get you out of that headspace."

"You're right," I say, feeling a sense of comfort.

"When I was younger, my mom used to play a game with me before bedtime," he begins, and I listen attentively.

We pass by a small park.

"She would sit on the edge of my bed, her hair pinned up with one of those claw clips, and say, 'Tell me something I don't know.' The first time she asked, I thought she had caught me doing something I shouldn't," he reminisces.

I giggle, and the tension eases even more. "Like what?"

"Stuff like eating lunch meat straight out of the package when she wasn't looking or hiding my broken toys inside my sneakers."

I laugh harder, and the sound echoes through the car. "Didn't you think she would eventually find them in your shoes?"

"I don't know what I was thinking," he says, smiling at me before making a turn. "But she really asked me that every night so that we could stay close. So that she knew what was going on in my life, and I could connect with her, you know?"
I smile back, touched by the sweetness of the memory. The car winds its way down a road that steadily narrows, the lights of civilization fading into the distance. Trees rise on either side, their branches creating a canopy above us. This is starting to feel like a horror movie.

"I think that's the sweetest thing I've ever heard," I say.

I take a moment to absorb my surroundings before turning to face Gabriel. "Uhh," I say, locking eyes with him.

"Trust me," he assures me. Taking one hand off the steering wheel and gently rubbing my thigh, he says, "Tell me something I don't know, Lana."

I blush, feeling my heart race a little. "I don't know what to say."

"It could be anything," he encourages, giving me an affectionate smile. "Hit me with the first thing that comes to your mind. No wrong answers," he says with a laugh.

"Umm, sometimes when I'm alone and Blaire isn't in the house, I talk to myself," I confess, feeling a bit vulnerable.

Is he going to think I'm a complete weirdo now?

"What kind of conversations do you have with yourself?" he smirks, clearly enjoying the little revelation.

Well, I can't take it back now. The cat's definitely out of the bag.

"Just random chats about whatever I'm doing at the moment. Like, 'don't waste the tea,' or sometimes I talk aloud about my life choices, like 'am I making the right decisions? Is this what I really want to do with my life?' Stuff like that, and sometimes it's just random noises."

"Beeps, and bops, and that sort," he says, mimicking the sounds, and I can't help but laugh. "So do you?" he asks, his tone softening.

"Do I what?" I ask, a little puzzled.
"Feel like you're making the right choices?" he clarifies. "What do you want to do after graduation?"

"Sometimes…I think I want to work at a fashion magazine, you know? Combine two things I like," I say.

"That sounds like a plan. Why aren't you sure sometimes?" he probes gently.

"Sometimes I have, like, these intrusive thoughts telling me I'm not good enough," I say, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders by sharing this with him.

"Well, you need to tell them to shut up because you're going to be fine. I know it," he says reassuringly. "You have this light, this energy that just radiates off of you, and I know if I can see it, other people can too."

His words warm my heart, and I feel a blush creeping up my cheeks again.

It's like he's genuinely interested in getting to know the real me, not just the surface stuff—what a breath of fresh air.

"Tell me something I don't know," I say, wanting to divert the attention a bit.

"I have a weird obsession with eating pickles," he says, pulling onto a gravel road. "It's something about the sour, salty flavor."

I chuckle. "No judgment over here," I say.

He stops the car, and there's a moment of silence before he continues, "Oh, also after our date, I couldn't stop thinking about you. You're different from anyone else I've dated in the past. You're funny, but not in a trending way, and it's never forced. I just had a good time, and I can definitely see this going somewhere."

"That was two things, not one," I tease with a smirk. "You lose the game."
With that, I lean in, moving his face towards mine, my hand on his stubbly chin, as I kiss him. "Me too," I whisper before taking off my seatbelt.

As I glance out of the front windshield, all I see are trees, their branches swaying gently in the wind.

"Just wait, you'll see," he says, a glimmer of excitement in his eyes.

Still in our pajamas, we cautiously step out of the car onto the gravel path. I can hear the small pebbles crunching under my feet as I follow Gabriel through a dense grove of trees. He carries a portable light he grabbed from the trunk, and his goggles hang around his neck.

Feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness, I reach for his hand, while my own goggles are perched atop my head. He gently intertwines his fingers with mine, giving me a reassuring smile.

As we venture further, the trees give way to an open space, forming a wide circle. Here lies a collection of steel drums, each topped with broken pieces of ceramic, surrounded by scattered lamps, plates, vases, and other discarded furniture. Gabriel places the light on the ground, flooding the area with brightness, revealing the array of items in clearer view.

He points to something off to the left and says, "Hey, grab that?" I walk over to where the gravel transitions into grass and pick up a bat. "So this is what you do when you have a hard day at work?" I ask with a hint of amusement.

"It helps a lot," he replies, clearing the top of one of the barrels and placing a mug on it. "Ready?" he asks, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"What do I do?" I ask.

"Goggles down, and then go for it," he explains.
I pull the string to adjust the goggles tightly against my face, and the light reflects off the hard plastic. "If you say so," I say, holding the bat up and taking a step closer to the target. With a swift swing, the mug shatters into pieces, and a satisfying feeling surges through me. "That feels great."

"I told you. Okay, let's go bigger," he says, moving a discarded lamp onto the barrel.

"Where do you get all of this stuff?" I ask, curious about his collection.

"Goodwill shops, or I pick up things left to die on the curb," he says, revealing the origins of his eclectic assortment.

"Wow. That's wild," I remark, impressed by his resourcefulness.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Thank you," I say, gratitude filling my voice as I position the bat with determination, ready to swing with all my might.

#
Chapter 11 - BLAIRE

The next morning, Blaire wrestles awake after a restless night. She splashes cold water on her face and stares at her reflection in the mirror, questioning her sanity.

*Should I confide in Alana about this?*

She dresses in a hoodie and jeans, slings her backpack over her shoulder, and with a deep breath turns on her computer. The room comes alive with the humming of the machine. She checks for anonymous messages that might have arrived overnight. But there’s nothing.

*Maybe there’s nothing worth mentioning?*

#

Blaire thumbs through Discord messages from loyal followers, inquiring about the abrupt end to her stream last night. Their concern is genuine. She concocts a benign excuse about technical difficulties as she meanders along the familiar path to the campus theater. The quaint building hosts her "Art of English Adaptations" class every Friday. On other mornings, she sometimes slips into the empty room just to enjoy the quiet space.

Stepping into the shade, it's early, the corridors are quiet. She sinks into one of the plush seats in the empty auditorium to finish the rest of her breakfast burrito, a morning staple prepared by her parents.

*Why does this feel like I'm breaking some unspoken rule? It's a nothing burger at the end of the day, but we always share everything.*

Blaire taps Alana's name on her phone's recent calls list, a smile spreading across her face as she anticipates talking to her best friend. But before it dials, her phone glitches, emitting a bizarre whirring sound. Startled, she drops her tortilla and the phone.

"What the heck?" she says, glancing around.
As the odd noise dwindles, she picks at it from the ground, fearing it might explode at any minute. With a quick grasp, she snatches it up and is met with a black, dead screen.

"Shit, I broke it," she whispers.

Well, it was singing its swan song before I dropped it, so maybe it was already dead.

Her heart sinks. As grief edges in, white letters flicker to life on the screen. It's a message from the agency again. Now they want a face-to-face meeting following her verbal expression of interest.

This is dangerous. The phrase loops around her mind like a haunting echo. What do I do?

Blaire begins to sift through her choices. She could decline, confide in Alana about this cryptic invitation, and continue with her life. Or she could say yes—even though it screams of recklessness. It isn't as if caution had ever been her companion. Embarking on a daring path to infiltrate the agency could yield invaluable information, freeing Alana from her suffocating stress.

She'd be venturing into the lion's den, aligning with the agency orchestrating the chaos. Yet, she could sift through the lies, debunk the rumors, and at the end of it all, if things got too hot, she could retreat. No contracts had been inked; it was just a meeting.

She takes a shaky, shallow breath, squeezes her eyes shut, and whispers, "Yes."
Chapter 12 - ALANA

I scan my university card at the front desk, and as the light turns green on the scanner, a friendly library assistant greets me with a warm smile. The entrance to the library is grand, with glass doors leading to a vast space filled with row after row of books, carefully stacked and organized on sturdy, polished wooden shelves. The air is scented with the unmistakable aroma of almonds and old paper.

Inside, the library is abuzz with life. Large round tables, scattered throughout the middle of the room, create cozy reading nooks where students gather to study, chat, or enjoy a snack while immersing themselves in their chosen books. A beautiful balcony, accessible by a flight of wooden stairs, overlooks the library floor and houses even more literary treasures, including a well-curated film and video section.

As I walk further in, I notice students engrossed in various activities. Some lean over the balcony, peering down at the hustle and bustle below, while others roam the aisles, exploring the vast collection for inspiration or information. Some students are deep into their studies, poring over textbooks and notes, preparing for exams or working diligently on assignments.

I make my way to the online library catalog, determined to find the perfect books for my research paper on experimental prose. David Foster Wallace, a recommended author from my Embracing the Avant-garde in Fictional Narratives class, and Kathy Acker, discovered during a fruitful Google search, will be my starting points. To my delight, both authors' works are available in the library, and I feel a sense of relief knowing I have a solid foundation.

As I begin typing, my mind drifts to a recent tragedy—the loss of Jaiden. With a heavy heart, I try to focus on my research, but lingering thoughts make it challenging to concentrate. Falling into the distraction, I impulsively type "the art of murder" into the catalog search bar. A
list of books appears. "Cracking the Code of Killers" - wait, is that nonfiction or fiction? Feeling unsure and unsatisfied, I quickly switch the search field to research papers, hoping for more suitable results.

When I explore the keyword "killer parents", articles of infanticide pop up, I feel uneasy and quickly abandon the search. Well, that’s not what I’m looking for. I know my dad would never hurt me, but what if he's a completely different person and capable of the unimaginable when it comes to others? I take a deep breath, trying to shake off the unsettling thoughts, and decide to restart my search.

Gazing around the library, I ensure no one is watching as I type in "How to identify a killer." But the moment the results appear, I realize it's too much for me to handle. My heart pounding, I hurriedly log out of the catalog session, feeling a mix of fear and relief.

Redirecting my focus, I wander towards the section housing Kathy Acker's novel, "Great Expectations." I locate the book I need, tracing my finger along the spine before pulling it out gently. With the book in hand, I head to the self-checkout machine near the entrance, eager to escape the haunting topics weighing on my mind.

#

I spend the entire afternoon trying to distract myself—balancing between binge-watching Netflix, immersing myself in the captivating world of a book borrowed from the library, and exchanging reassuring texts with my dad to let him know how I'm coping after everything that happened. Face-to-face conversations are something I prefer to avoid with him, at least for now; I need time to sort out my thoughts and emotions.

As I putter around the kitchen, my phone lights up with a message from Gabriel. He's letting me know he'll be over soon, just five minutes away. A flurry of nervous jitters swirl in my
chest. Today is the day I decide to open up to him about everything that's been on my mind. Gabriel is my rock, an incredible listener, and has been a pillar of support through all of my struggles. I hope he'll understand, even if some of what I share might sound unbelievable.

I check the timer on the cookies I'm baking, trying to find a sweet and subtle way to ease into the upcoming conversation. There are twenty-seven seconds left on the clock, so I quickly slip on my oven mitts—a thoughtful gift from my dad when I first moved—to avoid burning myself. Wearing them now feels oddly weird.

Finally, the cookies are ready, and I carefully take them out of the oven, placing them on the stove to cool as I turn off the heat. The room fills with a deliciously sweet aroma. While preparing for Gabriel's arrival, I hear a soft, gentle knock at the door. My heart skips a beat, and I take a deep breath before heading over to open it.

He greets me with a warm kiss, leaving his suitcase by the entrance and taking off his shoes. "How was work?" I ask, trying to keep things light for the moment.

"Pretty good, actually. No problems. Everything went smoothly," he replies with a smile.

"That's great. I made us some cookies," I say excitedly, offering him my latest baking experiment.

"Oatmeal Raisin, Chocolate Chip?" he playfully guesses.

"Trying a Pinterest recipe. Chocolate Peanut Butter Swirl," I giggle. "You'll be my taste tester."

"Okay, bring it on," he says, accepting the challenge.

"Just be careful; they're still hot. I just pulled them out," I warn.

"I've never been afraid of a little heat," he teases.

"I can't with you," I ask with a playful eye-roll.
As I pull up the bar stools by the kitchen island, I gather my courage and say, "I need to talk to you about something."

"What's up?" Gabriel asks, loosening his tie and unbuttoning the first three buttons of his shirt.

"Remember the other day when I mentioned your party and Jaiden?" I begin, my nerves getting the best of me. We both take a seat.

"Mhmm," he says, looking curious.

"I believe my dad drowned Jaiden," the words escape my lips with my next breath, my voice barely above a whisper. Gabriel’s expression is calm but concerned.

"What makes you think that?" he asks, turning slightly to face me, his hands resting on the countertop.

"He tried to warn me about my dad, but I didn't take it seriously," I say, fidgeting with the hem of my shirt, trying to keep my composure.

"Do you think your dad could really do something like that? Hurt someone?" he probes.

"I don't know if believing or not believing changes the truth," I say, trying to steady my emotions. My heart pounds in my chest, making it hard to breathe.

"What do you want to do? Should we go to the cops with this information?" he offers, his support unwavering. "You know my house is still a crime scene. Sharing what you know about your conversation with Jaiden might be crucial to the case. Whatever you need, I'm here for you." His gentle hand rests on my shoulder.
I can't sit still any longer, so I stand up and start pacing, trying to ease the knot in my stomach. "I think I need proof," I finally say. The cool tile floor feels slightly reassuring beneath my feet.

"Proof? How are we going to find that?" Gabriel asks, his fingers tapping on the counter as he stands up beside me.

I walk from the open kitchen into the dining room and back, a sense of unease growing within me. "It's my dad—the man who has raised me my entire life. Something feels off about all of this. I need to know if it's just a weird coincidence or something more," I explain, my fingers tracing the edges of the dining table.

"So, what's the plan? Should we follow him?" I ask, my gaze locking with his.

If someone told me last year that I'd be doing this, I would've never believed it.

Worry lines crease his forehead, and we both return to the bar stools, sitting side by side once more. "Is that safe, Lana? I mean, if he's capable of doing what you fear..."

"I need to know," I say, my hand subconsciously scratching my arm. "I need to be sure."

"What if he didn't kill Jaiden at the party but has done it before?" Gabriel asks.

I shake my head, trying to compartmentalize the overwhelming thoughts. "I can't deal with that right now. Let's focus on one thing at a time." My fingers grip the edge of the countertop, seeking some stability.

"Alright, I get it. If you feel this is necessary, I won't let you go through it alone. But we need a solid plan," he says, placing a supportive hand on my back.

"Okay," I say, feeling slightly relieved that he's by my side. "Should we tail his car tomorrow after he leaves for work?"

"He could spot us if we get too close. We need to be careful," Gabriel warns.
"So, what's the alternative?" I ask, taking a deep breath.

"Together, we'll figure it out. I haven't really tracked anyone before," he says, his gaze never leaving mine.

I remember rummaging through Gabriel's stuff earlier and blush. "I promise I'm not a snooper. I don't do this normally," I say, feeling a bit embarrassed.

He smirks, a playful glint in his eyes. "It's alright. We all have our moments." He leans against the kitchen island, thinking.

He brings up the idea of using my phone's tracking feature. "Do you have Find My Phone?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, retrieving my phone from the kitchen counter where I left it.

"We can place it in the backseat cushions of his car and track him from a safe distance," he says. He makes a gesture with his hands as if carefully tucking the phone away in a hidden spot.

"What if the car doors are locked when we get there?" I ask.

"We'll have to find another way. Maybe attach the phone to the outside of the car. Do you have duct tape?" he inquires, scanning the kitchen for supplies.

I can't help but giggle. "Blaire bought plenty of rolls last year for a Halloween costume."

Gabriel raises an eyebrow, intrigued. "What was her costume?"

"She initially planned to make a mini dress out of it, but then she decided to go as a 'slutty schoolgirl,' her words, not mine. She said she already had the skirt, so..." I trail off, feeling the atmosphere lighten a bit.

He chuckles. "Alright then. Let's use the duct tape to attach your phone to the bottom of his car, and we can track him from your laptop."
"Sounds like a plan," I say, feeling grateful for his support. Pragmatic and practical, hmm. Should we tell Blaire?" I ask. "Do you want to involve her?" he asks, his eyebrows raising in a knowing expression. "I don't want to put anyone else in danger," I confess, my fingers playing with the edge of the bar stool. "Then let's keep it between us for now. Once we've planted the phone and we're back home safe, we can tell her," he says, reassuringly placing a hand on my arm. "Agreed," I say.

#
Chapter 13 - BLAIRE

As Blaire navigates the twisted alleyways between towering warehouse buildings, her footsteps echo. Her decision to meet with the agency alone tests her. She wishes Alana were here, but her friend would never agree to something this risky. It is up to her to unveil the truth for both of them. Clutching the taser from her bedroom drawer, she walks faster as daylight fades. The lie about a school event has been enough to assuage her mom, at least for now.

Reaching the designated building, her nerves turn electric. She reminds herself of the code word—Doberman. Strange, but necessary, she presumes. Her phone's flashlight struggles to pierce the heavy shadows as she approaches an ominous gray door. A small slot, closed, is the only feature on its cold, steel face. With a shaky breath, she knocks. Silence. Her heart races as she knocks again, harder.

“Code,” a deep voice says, eyes peeking through the lifted opening.

“D-Doberman,” she says, pushing closer to the slot.

It snaps shut. The pause that follows is monstrous. Then, the door creaks open, her legs turn jelly as she steps inside, into the belly of the unknown. However, what awaits her is not at all what she envisions. A boy, around seventeen, stands there in basketball shorts and a hoodie, a casual grin on his face, and a game controller in hand.

“Welcome to the agency,” he says.

As he guides her in, Blaire's jaw drops. The room thrums with a powerful, tangible energy. Massive screens light the room, groups of ages huddle around, immersed in game play. At the back, rows of monitors line up, each stationed by a focused coder with headsets on.

The boy chuckles, "Feel free to look around. If you fancy joining any game, I've got your first buy-in," he winks.
"You guys hacked my phone," she whispers, wringing her wrists.

“Oh, that? Yeah, Tracie over there did the magic,” he gestures to a blue-haired girl engrossed in code. “Cool, huh?”

Oddly enough, "cool" is the exact word Blaire would use to describe this place. The shock that was weighing down her legs lightens, making way for a peculiar sense of belonging. Her solo venture to meet the “agency” had been a leap off the deep end, yet here she is, amidst a buzzing enclave of tech aficionados.

She had set out to infiltrate the agency, thinking she could glean information to help Alana understand her parents. Though she would disapprove of her affiliating with the same shady organization that had disrupted their lives, she reasoned the ends would justify her risky means. If she came back with answers, Alana couldn’t be mad. Now, empty-handed and uneasy about her errand, she knew she couldn't tell Alana what she had done. The thought of confessing the truth tied her stomach in knots. She just couldn't do it.

She would carry this burden, taking the lesson as her own. The truth that mattered was preserving the faith between two friends.

Before she can get lost further in her thoughts, a girl with a pixie cut and an arm full of silicone bands approaches her, handing over a controller. “You got next game, Blaire?”

Blaire blinks, startled. “How do you know my—” she starts, but her words trail off as her fingers graze over the cool plastic of the controller.

The girl grins, “We all know who you are. You’re a legend.” Her chin tilts. “Buy-in's a thousand.”

“I don’t—”

The guy in the hoodie chimes in. “You joining the agency?”
Blaire looks around the room, the walls covered in vibrant, spray-painted murals. Despite the surreal setup, she feels a rush of adrenaline that has nothing to do with fear.

“Y-Yes. I’m joining the agency,” she says, her voice steadying with each word.

His smile is reassuring as he nudges his head towards the gaming crowd. “Then I got you covered.”

#
Chapter 14 - ALANA

Gabriel parks the car about the size of three standard school buses away from my dad's place on the opposite side of the street. The clouds lazily drape over the saffron-spiced sky, painting the neighborhood with a warm, golden hue. Unbuckling his seatbelt, he flashes me a reassuring grin before I follow suit and adjust myself, feeling the soft leather of the car seat beneath my fingers. My dad's car is parked in the cobbled stone driveway, its windows left partially down.

"So, I just wait here?" I say, my hand comfortably resting on Gabriel's forearm, my fingers tracing the faint patterns of his skin.

Resting in the cupholder, I spot Gabriel’s business card adorned with a "Ziva" logo, elegantly designed on sturdy paper.

He reaches out for the duct tape, "We don't need you getting caught, do we?" He wears a mischievous grin as he playfully nudges my shoulder.

I giggle, trying to shake off the nerves bubbling inside of me. "And what about you? What if you get caught?"

"I won't," he says confidently, and there's something in his tone that makes me believe him, something that makes me feel safe.

With a soft click, Gabriel unlocks the car. The plastic stem pops up as he pulls the door handle, giving way to the outside. His boots crunch against the gravel road, a sound that grates on my ears but grounds me in the moment. My heart plummets to my feet, and I'm afraid that if I move, it might shatter, so I remain still, just watching. He steps out of the car, glancing back at me with an assuring nod, but his lips stay pressed together as if he's holding back words he
doesn't want to say. The door closes with a soft thud, and I can hear the distant sounds of kids playing.

He checks both ways before crossing the street, silver duct tape in hand, my phone snug in his back pocket. My eyes follow him closely, and I wonder if he can sense my gaze on him, if he knows how much I admire his bravery. He's got some serious guts, I have to admit.

I scan for any sign that my dad is awake. There's no rustle of the blinds, no shadows flitting inside the house. I watch Gabriel pull my phone out of his back pocket and swiftly lower himself to the ground, his body rolling beneath the car like a mechanic's creeper trolley board. It's as if I'm right there with him, my T-shirt dusted with dirt, hearing the soft ripping of the tape as Gabriel secures our means of finding out the truth.

He takes his time, making sure the tape holds my phone in place, ensuring it won't come crashing down when my dad decides to leave the house. After a few minutes, he's back up on his feet, and my eyes dart around, searching for any hint that we've been caught. Gabriel doesn't sprint back to the car, probably trying not to raise any suspicions, but instead crosses the street with a casual stride and returns to the door.

"How'd everything go?" I ask as he gets back into the car.

I can't believe we actually pulled that off.

"For a moment, I thought the tape wouldn't stick. But I managed it. Wasn't too long, was it?" he says, tossing the tape in the back, settling back into his seat, and fastening his seatbelt. He runs a hand through his hair, a few strands falling out of place.

How does he manage to be so effortlessly attractive?

I exhale a sigh of relief. "What do we do now?"
He leans over, opening the glove compartment. "I've got some granola bars. You want one?" He shoots me a look that sends a shiver down my spine, causing me to instinctively bite my lip.

"I don't think I can eat right now," I say, my mind spinning.

"Same here," he says, closing the compartment. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I ask.

"You're dealing with all of this," The crinkles around his eyes deepen. "No matter what happens, I'll be right here," he says.

"I know," I say.

"Even if it turns out to be true, and you don't want to do anything about it. If you just want to live with the truth, I'll still have your back."

I reach over the armrest and the seat, hugging him tightly, my head resting against his chest, feeling the comforting beat of his heart. "I know," I whisper.

#
Chapter 15

An hour before my dad starts getting ready for work, we find ourselves with some time to spare. He's been at the same job for years, gradually climbing the ranks as anyone should in a long-term corporate position. I know he's an accountant, responsible for a lot in the company, evidenced by the heavy sighs he gives me when we talk after his work hours.

His co-worker Jane seems to be a chatterbox, sharing more gossip than financial advice. Then there's Louis, always striving for a promotion to manager, but hindered by John, the director, who perceives his confidence as arrogance. As for me, I've never set foot inside that building; I couldn't even conjure up an accurate description if my life depended on it.

Back at my place, I find Blaire sitting on the couch. She rushed over after my call, finally escaping the clutches of her parents' watchful eyes. Gabriel stands by the kitchen island while I take a seat next to Blaire, ready to explain our plans and everything we've done. At first, she's understandably upset—not the mad you get when you clumsily break something that means a lot to you, like your favorite mug, or the mad you get when an ex writes a status on social media that's indirect but obviously referring to your relationship, but the deep, gut-wrenching mad you get when you're afraid to lose someone you love.

However, with time, her anger subsides, and she's on board, though she wishes I had confided in her earlier before making my decision to leave.

My laptop sits open on the coffee table in front of us, and we anxiously wait for the blue dot on the screen to move. The stark and unforgiving glow of the laptop illuminates our faces. To pass the time, we play Uno, each card placed on the glass table with a purpose, trying to distract ourselves from the present.
In my younger days, whenever a storm rolled in and the wind howled with such force, it would plunge the house into darkness. But those were the moments when my dad and I would spring into action, grabbing candles to create light. Together, we'd huddle around, embracing the moment, playing cards or diving into board games. "Let's hush our worries," my dad would say, "and let the world work its magic."

Blaire shuffles the cards repeatedly until she gets it right. Like a folding fan, I absentmindedly fiddle with my cards, getting up only to sit back down, circling the room until I end up in the same spot. The cards become slightly damp and start to bend from the sweat on my hands. My gaze drifts to the computer screen repeatedly, almost staring without blinking, until the map becomes a blur. Gabriel fidgets with his nails from his place at the kitchen island.

"Did the dot just move?" Blaire says, and we drop our cards, the colorful faces scattering across our laps and the floor as we inch closer to the screen.

"I don't know. It's hard to tell," I say, my eyes fixed on the map, hoping for even the tiniest hint of progression.

"It's definitely moving," Blaire says as the blue circle finally begins to migrate across the laptop screen.

"Oh, crap," I exclaim. Reality check: this just got serious

Gabriel comes over to the couch, sitting next to us, absentmindedly picking at a nonexistent piece of lint on his sleeve.

"It's happening," I say, my hands trembling slightly as I run them through my hair.

"Should we leave now?"
Without exchanging a word, we all rise from the couch. I grab the laptop, and we head out once more, an unsettling feeling looming over us as we embark on this journey, unaware of what the truth holds—whether it's something good or bad.

#

I make a conscious decision to ask Gabriel if I can drive. It's my way of reclaiming some control over my life, even if control can sometimes feel as slippery as the sweat on this steering wheel. Blaire sits in the passenger seat, guiding me from my laptop. My dad stopped to get gas and then wandered around a coffee shop, giving us enough time to catch up while keeping a safe distance, a couple of blocks away. With Gabriel wedged between our two backrests, we slide our seats up to give him more legroom.

As we drive, I find myself lost in thought, staring at the tops of trees, trying to imagine what it would feel like to kill someone. I picture my dad confronting a barista at the coffee shop and taking her life. The image haunts me. I hear my heart thumping in my ears, tires crumbling concrete, the gravel breaking and splitting. Breathe, Alana. Breathe.

"I think he’s on the move again," Gabriel's voice breaks through my thoughts, and it takes me a moment to register what he said.

"Are you okay, Alana?" Blaire asks, reaching over to adjust the temperature controls in the car.

Just silently praying that my dad isn’t a killer.

"Not really," I say, gripping the steering wheel tighter, following the blue dot.

After about ten minutes, I stop the car at Ridgeview park, finding the playground empty. We line up next to a bush and get out, being careful not to draw attention. A few adults are
walking around—a man in a pink floral two-piece set, and a woman juggling her phone, a baby bottle, and a diaper bag in her hands. A loose dog dashes around in sloppy figure eights.

"There he is," Blaire points out my dad, and I realize this will be Gabriel's first time meeting him. Meeting, well, more like encountering a wild animal at the zoo.

The concrete walking trail, winding through the grass like a maze, stretches out before us. As we approach, I can't help but notice how different my dad looks today. Dressed in athletic running clothes, a stark contrast to his usual attire, he jogs up the course with a determination I have never seen before. The black cap on his head seems to dance with each step, as if the wind might snatch it away at any moment.

Gabriel, sensing my uncertainty, gently grabs my hand, his touch grounding me in reality. We continue walking, the softness of the playground absorbing the pressure of our steps, leaving temporary imprints on its spongy surface. Staying a couple of feet away from the pathway, we seek refuge behind colorful plastic spirals and maneuver stealthily under galvanized steel bridges, careful not to be exposed and out in the open.

We find a vantage point to watch my dad, and as we look closely, he seems to vanish into a tree-covered path.

I really hope he's simply taking a well-deserved day off, making use of accrued vacation time.

"Do we think going deeper into the woods is a good idea?" Gabriel asks cautiously.

"It's just my dad," I say, hesitating for a moment before making a decision. "Let's get closer, but be careful."

We navigate our way through the dense vegetation, trying to stay quiet. As we move closer, we catch a glimpse of him sitting on a nearby bench, deeply engrossed in conversation.
with a man boasting curly brown hair. Settling behind a screen of leaves, we strain our ears to eavesdrop on their conversation, but nature renders it nearly impossible to hear anything.

"He missed work to sit in the park," Blaire whispers.

"Maybe it's a colleague, a client he's meeting," Gabriel speculates. "I often meet people in places where they feel comfortable to create a safe space."

"I don't know," I say, watching them closely. "Can anyone read lips?"

Unfortunately, we can't make out their words, but they seem to be having a casual conversation. My dad extends his left hand, shaking on something with the man, and then continues walking along the path.

It doesn't make sense for him to use his left hand; he's right-handed after all.

"Nothing happened," Blaire says.

"What do you want to do, Alana?" Gabriel asks, his voice tinged with concern.

"I need to speak to him, find out what they talked about," I say, determined. I walk towards the bench where the man is still seated, basking in the sunlight. Here goes nothing.

"Alana," Gabriel and Blaire chime in unison, worry etched on their faces.

"Hey," I call out to the guy before taking a seat on the bench. "You were just talking to someone here, weren't you?" The sun beats down, making the air feel heavy around us. "Excuse me," I try again, my nerves making my voice come out a bit muffled. I hope he can hear me this time. "I don't mean to bother you, but I was wondering if I could ask you something."

No response. Maybe he cranked up the volume on his headphones, which I now notice are tucked into his ears. Determined to get his attention, I gently tap his shoulder. Suddenly, he slumps over like a rag doll, his body collapsing horizontally onto the bench. His head hangs off the side, and his eyes stare lifelessly into the distance.
Panic sets in as I jump up, and stumble backward, tripping on the gravel and injuring my hands. Tears blur my vision, and I feel Gabriel and Blaire trying to help me up, but I feel numb and can't catch my breath.

"I ca—" I gasp, struggling to speak, my throat feeling constricted.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I'm overwhelmed by fear and confusion. The reality of what just happened is too much to bear, and I feel myself slipping—

#

Crouching down, I tug hard on the worn-out laces of my shoe, probably tighter than I should. But I crave a pain, something tangible, something I can control. The weight of yesterday’s haunting memory presses on my chest, making it difficult to breathe. Every time I blink, I see his vacant eyes, the very life sucked out of them. Over and over, I wonder about his family. Does he have a daughter who misses him?

Gritting my teeth, I push myself to run. The college's well-worn path extends like a line of salt around the campus. As I race on, my hair fans out, occasionally brushing against my sweat-slicked face. The humid air is heavy with the aroma of citrus and the sharp bite of smoke. I pass by familiar sights — students lounging on makeshift picnic blankets, a girl giggling atop her boyfriend’s shoulders, the ever-present recycling bins dotting the green.

I keep pushing, faster, harder, until my lungs scream for air, and my legs ache with fatigue. My vision blurs, and my knees buckle. Suddenly, the world tilts sideways as I crash into the cool grass.

“Ms. Cadwell?” A voice with a distinct British lilt slices through my daze. "Are you okay?"
Barely managing to gasp, my hands fly to my throat, trying to clear a path for the air that refuses to come. My eyes are awash with tears that sting.

A hand touches my shoulder. "Can I help you? Should I get someone?"

After a moment, warmth surrounds me. It’s comforting and oddly familiar, reminding me of my father’s embrace. But as the haze lifts, a familiar face comes into focus — Professor Langton, his dark hair neatly swept back. More prominent than before, the intricate tattoo of a dark crow spreads its majestic wings across his wrist. My cheeks burn with embarrassment.

“Did you trip?” he asks, his gaze sweeping the area.

Please ground, just swallow me up.

Gathering my voice, I say, “Not exactly, just… overwhelmed.”

He nods understandingly. “Remember, you can always come to me during office hours, and the school has counselors too.”

If I tell anyone, they’ll call the police, and my dad could end up in jail.

“Thank you,” I say, students passing by in a blend of colors and voices.

His gaze lingers, the concern evident. "Missed you in class. Everything okay at home?"

"Just the usual," I mumble, looking past him, not really wanting to divulge more.

I need to find a way to balance everything going on in my life and still focus on school.

He gives me a kind look. "Let me know if you need anything. Keep me in the loop."

“I will,” I say, managing a weak smile.

Once he's gone, I pull out my phone, frantically checking news apps and social media. But there’s no mention of the lifeless body I'm sure I saw yesterday. My fingers hover over my dad’s contact. Should I ask him about the man in the park? I can't. Not now. I start to head back
home, trying to focus on my upcoming class. I can't afford any more distractions. I have to graduate.

#

In my room, I'm slouched in my chair, a worn gray blanket draped over it. My eyes dart from my vanity mirror to the clock on my nightstand and then back to the book that's proven so hard to concentrate on. I grip the pages, thumb marking my place, while I struggle to understand what's going on with Savannah, the main character of the novel. All these years, I thought I knew my dad. How could I have been so blind, living in a bubble, not seeing the signs?

A motorcycle roars in the distance, interrupting my thoughts. The scent of my candle, which burns with a buttercream fragrance, reminds me of easier days. I take a deep breath, trying to lose myself in the comforting scent.

Reaching out, I grab a chip from the open bag on my desk, and as I bite into it, I wince. A sharp edge of the chip slices the inside of my cheek.

I took sides against my mother, thinking she was just being paranoid. But she wasn't lying. There has to be more to the story, though. Maybe he's trapped, forced into this life.

I remember one time after catching a glimpse of a possum, split and lifeless on the street. Dad had tried to reassure me, spinning tales about how it might've just been discarded clothes or even just a possum taking a nap. He always tried to protect my innocence, always tried to shield me from pain.

How can I get my dad to stop doing what he does? If he continues down this path, he could end up dead or in prison. He's my father. I owe it to him, to us, to try and save him.
Shaking my head, I set the book down, my assignment still incomplete. The cool surface of the vanity feels soothing against my cheek. An idea forms, a spark in the depths of my anxiety. He prioritizes my safety. So, maybe he wouldn’t take any risks if I'm with him.

I'll have to deal with the consequences of late assignments later; my dad needs me now. I pick up my phone and send him a quick text. "How about an early dinner tonight?"

#

The rhythmic sizzle from the grill fills the room, accompanied by the hum of conversations from neighboring tables. Ryu, the Hibachi chef wearing a striking black and red coat, swiftly sets down obsidian sauce trays next to our drinks. The tall crimson hat on his head is reminiscent of the range hood looming before him.

Dad lifts his water glass, takes a sip, and sets it back. I scrutinize every move he makes, searching for any hint of his secrets. But he just swirls his straw casually.

It's unsettling how he can just sit there like everything's normal when I know it's not.

I shift uncomfortably on my stool. Without warning, Ryu clangs his scraper and fork, drawing the attention of the whole room. With precision, he flips them around his fingers and over his arms. He then sends a stream of oil onto the hot stove and ignites it, causing flames to leap up high. Gasps and claps echo around us.

Dad turns to me, the fire reflecting in his eyes. "So, how's school, Lana? Feeling swamped?"

I wonder if he ever thinks about telling me the truth, or if he's just too deep into his lies.

"Just trying to stay ahead," I deflect, avoiding his gaze.
"And Blaire? Why isn't she here? You two are inseparable," he says, giving his cream-colored shirt—the epitome of dad fashion—a quick tug to smooth out any wrinkles, before looking back up.

Before responding, I pause, really looking at him. There's a scar visible just above his collarbone. "Did you get that from work?"

He glances down, surprised. "This? No, just an accident during my run. Branch snagged me near Ms. Lynns. She really needs to prune those trees."

How long has he been running, and how come I had no idea he ran? Maybe, I could ask open-ended questions to give him the opportunity to share without feeling pressured.

Taking a breath, I tell him, "Blaire had a ton of homework. You know how it is. So how has work been?"

"Thanks for asking. Work has been crazy lately." He chuckles.

Work has been 'crazy'? That's an understatement. I know the blood on his hands.

"Why haven't I visited your office?" I ask, picking my fingers.

I imagined standing by him, guiding him out of the darkness. But facing these lies feels like salt on a wound. Was I naive to think I could handle all of this?

He raises an eyebrow. "You never asked."

"But I want to," I assert, my fingers drumming the counter.

I can't just abandon ship now.

Distracting us, Ryu begins serving our food. The aromas are intoxicating.

"Well?" I press, leaning forward.

He sighs, "Honestly, it's just number crunching. Debts, credits. It's boring."

Maybe it's time to get specific. Dancing around the topic isn't helping.
I chew thoughtfully, then take the plunge. "Ever hurt anyone at work?"

He blinks, then chuckles again. "If you count headaches from staring at spreadsheets, then yes."

So much for that strategy. Back to the drawing board.

I press my lips together, mustering my courage. "How about I shadow you tomorrow? My morning class got canceled."

For a moment, he looks like he might object, but then he just nods. "Alright, Lana. Tomorrow it is."

#

The sun's warm touch dances on my skin as I stand outside our old family car, surrounded by towering buildings made almost entirely of glass. I can see the endless rows of cubicles and tech-filled offices inside. Dad, adjusting his badge on his powder-blue button-down, seems so out of place here, yet so at home.

I quickly text Gabriel, needing the distraction. His house is finally cleared, no evidence, just a heartbreaking conclusion. They ruled Jaiden's death a suicide.

How did they not find any evidence? How can everyone be so blind to what really happened there? They're just sweeping everything under the rug.

A breeze rustles through, and the crisp scent of burning wood fills the air. The realization dawns on me – Dad's taking me into his workplace, a corporate accounting firm. It all feels surreal. At the entrance, there is a fountain whose gentle, rhythmic sounds sharply juxtapose the fast-paced nature of the city.

Leith & Larson, the white letters on the glass door read. I've heard that name so many times from dad.
I never considered the idea that he might not be lying about everything.

"Just a moment," Dad murmurs, making his way to a nearby desk. The woman there, with hair shimmering like gold, is engrossed in paperwork.

My phone buzzes. It's a text from Blaire: "Told the prof you had food poisoning. If she asks, blame bad shellfish."

I stifle a laugh. Classic Blaire.

Skipping class again. I know this will catch up to me eventually.

"Alana," Dad beckons me over, a gentle smile on his face. "Meet Mrs. Olivia."

"Hello," I wave a little awkwardly.

He sighs dramatically, "I talk about you all the time."

The firm has a contemporary vibe: rustic wooden tables paired with modern fixtures, overhead track lights casting rich illumination. As we walk around, dad points out some colleagues. "That's Justin," he nods towards a man engrossed in his laptop.

As we climb a flight of stone stairs, a pang of regret hits me. Why hadn't I visited dad here before? To my surprise, his job here is not a facade, and the people are actually real.

The atmosphere on the top floor is electric. The rhythmic tapping of keys, soft murmurs of discussions, printers whirring away – it's a world unto itself. Dad greets a few colleagues, making casual banter.

Finally, we reach his office. It's spacious, with a desk shaped like a 'U' and minimalistic decor. The palm plant in the corner adds a touch of green, and a kinetic sculpture catches my eye, its pendulum moving at mesmerizing speeds.

Amidst the papers on his desk, dad sets his work bag down, "Want something to eat?" he asks.
"Sure, surprise me."

As he leaves, my curiosity can't be contained. Slipping into his workspace, I'm met with the mundane—pens, papers, and staplers. But there, hidden under the desk, is a small bin that piques my interest. As I lean down to investigate, a sudden sting catches my attention. A small cut. The sight of my own blood quickens my pulse, a stark reminder of the risks of snooping. Yet, undeterred, I rummage through his drawers. Nothing.

Is killing just his side hustle?

A sneeze interrupts my thoughts—the overpowering combination of sterile cleaning products and the fresh scent of the palm plant nearby.

Shaking it off, my gaze lands on his work satchel. I carefully unzip the main compartment. Inside, the contents are just as one might expect: a detailed organizer, a notebook filled with numbers and notes, and a leather wallet. Sifting through the other compartments, the professional nature of his job is further highlighted—meticulously filed financial reports and internal audits. So, this is the life of a corporate accountant.

I circle to the front of the desk and inadvertently lean against it. As I do, a wire mesh pen cup tips over, sending pens scattering across the floor. I bend down to gather them, but I'm distracted by a strange clicking sound. I turn and take a step back, noticing something jutting out of the side of his desk.

A secret compartment? That can't lead to anything positive.

Curious, I squat down to examine the protruding piece of wood. When I pull on it, it doesn't budge. I shift my grip and wiggle the piece, nearly toppling backward. With one last tug, it slides free. The compartment reveals a stapled sheet containing a list of names, each marked with personal details. Disturbingly, some are crossed out in harsh red strokes.
The names highlighted must be those he's already taken out. This list is excessively long. I’m starting to doubt my ability to pull him away from this lifestyle.

Dad's approaching footsteps snap me back to reality. I hurriedly shut the compartment and straighten up, trying to calm my racing pulse.

"Sorry for the wait," Dad says, tossing me a bag of cheesy puffs.

I can't comprehend how someone can be both a good father and a murderer.

We sit in silence for a while, and the weight of what I've discovered keeps pressing on me. Every move of his is now a question. Every word seems to carry a hidden meaning. As the hours drag on, exhaustion wraps around me, but fear keeps me awake. The list, those names.

"Ready to go?" Dad eventually asks, his voice gentle.

"Yeah," I respond, my voice shaky, "Thanks for today."

"You okay?" he asks, concerned.

"I'm just tired," I mumble.

But deep down, I know it's not just fatigue. It's the realization that there's so much about my dad I don't know, and the gnawing fear of what those secrets mean.

#

A sharp pain in my lower abdomen jerks me awake, accompanied by a light wave of nausea. Blinking, my surroundings come into focus. The familiar sensation of my childhood pink comforter envelops me.

I slowly sit up on the couch, clutching my stomach. Groggily, I remember my purse in the kitchen, possibly containing some relief for this pain. With trembling fingers, I search inside, finally feeling the familiar container of acetaminophen. I pop out three pills, swallow them with some stale water from yesterday’s bottle.
A quick glance around reminds me I'm at my dad's place. The room that once belonged to me now screams "gym," with its scent of old ropes and cinnamon. Houseplants drape from shelves, spilling greenery onto the floor. I gather my comforter and set it aside, then slide into a chair at the dining table.

I cannot realistically be with my dad all the time to ensure he doesn't hurt anyone—it's not practical.

I'm shrouded in the ambient sounds of the city waking up – distant car horns, the muffled chatters of pedestrians, and a faint siren. The painting on the wall captivates me; bold strokes of contrasting colors. I used to find it stunning, but today, it feels oppressive. The morning light hitting it makes the reds seem more pronounced, like fresh blood against the canvas.

Footsteps. My heart thumps erratically. I turn to see my dad, dressed in his signature dark plaid pajamas. "How'd you sleep?" he asks with a casualness that irks me.

I spent the night tossing and turning, trying to find the right words to express how I feel.

"It was fine," I mumble, tucking a stray hair strand away.

His shoulders tense up. "You're still planning to come to work with me, right?"

I shake my head, contradicting my words from the night before. "Think I'll go to class."

There's no sound logic in staying here.

"But... wasn't your lecture canceled?" He sounds confused, and more than a little suspicious.

It's true that we've both concealed things, but my lies are innocent. There's a difference.

I hesitate before finally releasing the question that's been eating away at me. "Did you have anything to do with Jaiden's death?"

Regardless of how I word it, there's no perfect way, so I'll ask plainly.
The weight of my question hangs in the air. Our silence is punctuated only by the faint rhythmic click of the fan overhead.

“No,” he says, voice firm, but his eyes betray a flicker of something.

I challenge him, my voice wavering but defiant. “Jaiden saw you. Saw you hurt someone.”

We hold each other's gaze, a silent recognition forming.

“We need to talk,” he finally murmurs.

I stand, matching his intensity. “So you admit it? Why lie?”

He leans forward, earnest. “What Jaiden may have witnessed…it's complicated. Someone might have considered him a risk. But you need to understand—”

“A risk? So, you’re admitting you hurt people who are in your way?” My voice cracks.

He looks pained. “Parents make tough choices for their family, Lana. You’ve been asking questions. I think deep down, you knew.”

I blink rapidly, fighting off tears. “Knowing and hearing are two different things.”

He swallows hard. “I've always tried to provide for you, give you everything you need.”

“This isn’t about things, Dad. It’s about right and wrong,” I assert, anger rising.

His eyes hold mine, pleading. “I didn't kill Jaiden. I've done what I've had to, but not that.”

A memory surfaces. “I saw you, at the park.”

His face drains of color. “I wish you hadn’t.”

His words blur into the background. I can’t listen anymore. My heart heavy, I grab my bag, and as I step out, the door shuts behind me, speaking louder than any words could.

#
The buzz in the student center is almost deafening, and the lights seem way too bright for my taste. As I wait in the Chick-fil-a line, I absentmindedly grab my phone, hoping to look busy. Occasionally, I catch a fleeting reflection of myself in its dark screen. Brushing my hair was a good call. My clothes? Well, they've looked better.

I'm just two people away from ordering when the guy at the front starts to test my patience. "How can you be out of ice cream?" he demands.

The worker, in her signature red uniform, looks drained. "Sorry, sir."

He huffs. "Fine. Ummm, a large waffle fry. Do you have that?"

I resist the urge to roll my eyes so hard they'd fall out of my head.

Just as I think I'm next, someone bumps into me. "Boo."

"Blaire." I grin, relieved. "Hey."

"Whoa, you look... frazzled. Red eyes and everything."

I chuckle. "Hold that thought." I order my food, asking for some extra Polynesian sauce on the side.

Delicious food. The initial phase of my plan to let things go.

Blaire peeks into the bag. "Can I?"

"Go for it." I munch on a sandwich, while Blaire helps herself to some fries. "What? You look like you want to say something."

"It's your eyes. You look like you've been crying or... high?" She teases, wrapping an arm around me.

"Let's not dive into that right now," I say, evading her curious gaze.
We weave through the bustling student center. The scene is typical: someone attempting (and failing) to shoot a paper ball into a trash bin, friends laughing, and the sun streaming in beautifully through the skylight.

Suddenly, Blaire's words pull me back. "You're dropping the whole family drama?"

I sigh. "Yeah. I need to focus on my studies, and... myself. Like, I've got an essay on Virginia Woolf due soon."

I press my chicken sandwich, watching the sauce ooze from the edges of the bun. Catching the runaway droplets with my tongue, I savor the final bite. We converse as we stroll by a grand two-story staircase, its railings threaded with elegant navy blue and orange ribbons.

She laughs. "That's so you. Priorities, right?"

We step outside, soaking in the warmth of the sun. A cheeky squirrel pauses on our path, staring at me with almost knowing eyes. I approach it, but the squirrel quickly dashes away, its bushy tail bouncing behind.

Blaire checks her watch. "I've got to split. Meet you at the fountain later?"

"After my workshop and Spanish class," I confirm.

"Adios, Lana."

I wave, feeling lighter.

I believe in myself. With some compartmentalization, I can do this.

#

I can't help but let my thoughts wander to dad, but I quickly shove them aside. As I stride through the pristine hallways of Bryan Hall, walls plastered with posters of stiff-looking old men and upcoming school events, I rummage through my bag for a distraction. My fingers brush
against a soft fabric scrunchy, and I slide it onto my wrist, snapping it against my skin. Nothing. It's too soft.

Tossing it back in, I dig deeper until I find a rubber band, an ugly beige one I'd probably nabbed from some package. I wrap it around my wrist, snap. It leaves a stinging sensation behind. That's more like it.

A bright yellow poster catches my attention, the bold words declaring, "Make Your Mental Health A Priority." My fingers tug at the strip at the bottom, pulling away a piece with a phone number and a tagline that reads, "The First Step." I play with the strip, folding and unfolding it as the hallway teems with students.

A girl with standout black and silver boot heels clatters by, turning heads. Without thinking, I shred the paper strip into tiny pieces, letting them rain into my purse.

"I like your shoes," I call out, adjusting the strap of my bag.

She throws me a quick smile, "Thanks." The rhythmic tap-tap of her heels echoing in the corridor sounds like gunshots.

With a glance down, I snap the rubber band again, grounding myself.

#

The workshop feels more like a refurbished storage room than a classroom—small, intimate. An unused projector screen takes up most of the space at the front. Lisa Cox, our teacher, perches on her desk in vibrant, patchwork print pants, which remind me of a quilt I once saw at my grandma's house before she passed.

"Come on in," she beckons, her smile infectious.

I hesitate for a moment at the door. Having missed a few classes, the familiar layout feels slightly foreign. Seats are arranged in a circle. I choose the one closest to Lisa, hoping today
might be a new beginning. A stray pencil sits on the gray laminate of the desk. I shift it to the neighboring one, placing my purse safely between my feet.

"All right, everyone," Lisa says as she slides gracefully to the center of the circle, her pants swirling around her like frosting on a twirling cake. The energy is different today—invigorating. For the first time in weeks, I feel just like any other student, attending class and hoping to pass.

"Let's have Dominic start us off, followed by Camille, and then Jonte," she decides.

"Dominic, could you share an excerpt from your piece 'City of Venus'?"

The readings go smoothly. I find myself jotting down thoughts and potential feedback on my phone, fully immersed. My earlier apprehensions melt away. During the discussion, Dominic uses the word "petrichor." I raise my hand, asking for its meaning. It feels good to be engaged.

Then Jonte starts his story. "On the ground, the woman pleads, holding her child close, wrapped in a worn white cloth," he reads.

I strain to listen, but the next lines jar me. The imagery is too vivid, too real.

My hand moves to the rubber band on my wrist, snapping it against my skin for a brief diversion. But the story intensifies. Another snap. And another. The guy next to me shoots me a concerned look.

Without thinking, I snatch my purse and bolt from the room. The hallways blur. I need air. Pushing through the exit, I'm met by a man blocking one side of the doorway. Trying to be polite, I move around him. "Excuse me," I mumble.

He catches my wrist. Panic rises. "Let go!" I shout, scanning the mostly empty campus. In the distance, students cluster near the student center, oblivious to my situation.
The man's grip tightens. I think of my dad, of home. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I'm about to dial when he swipes at me. I stumble, and the last sound I register is the shatter of my phone on the concrete.

#
Chapter 16

I groan, the scratchiness of my voice grating my throat. Everything aches, especially my neck. I try to open my eyes, but fear keeps them shut. With a deep breath, I force them open. But it’s still dark. Seriously?

Shifting, a rough fabric grazes my face. Burlap? Wind hisses around me, making me wonder if I'm outside. My wrists are tied, tight and painful. Panic bubbles up.

What's going on here? Why would someone intentionally target me like this?

Gravity pins me to a hard surface. The scent of wet earth fills my nose. Trying to sit up, something metallic bumps my head. “Ow.”

I force myself to say aloud, "I got this." But do I believe it? Images flash: meeting Blaire at the UVA fountain, wanting a normal life.

Is there a link between this and my dad? Am I now considered a risk? Will I suffer the same fate as Jaiden?

Pushing against the ground, I inch upwards, but something tugs at the burlap obscuring my vision. With a twist of my neck and a desperate pull, I finally free my eyes as the sack falls away. I lose balance, crashing against cold metal, the impact resonating with a shrill clang.

An unsettling shuffle comes from above. Something gritty, like sand, showers over me; I instinctively try to wipe it away, but the binds around my wrists chafe painfully.

What the heck is this? Seriously, what is this? I need to get it off of me.

My skin prickles, as if ants are burrowing into every pore. I stifle a scream, knowing it would only invite more danger. Coughing on my own saliva, water streaming down my cheeks, the eerie quiet is punctuated by the staccato rustling of squirrels darting across tree bark.
As my eyes gradually adjust to the darkness, I come to the startling revelation that I am trapped in a shed. Perched on a splintered wooden shelf before me is a vibrant persimmon-colored vest and matching cap. Nearby, a rusted lamp looms. I need to free my wrists. Gripping a box with my teeth, I open it. Bullets. I look around, but there's no gun in sight. I scan the surroundings: jars of pickled veggies, jerky, batteries, even a case of Mountain Dew. My parched throat screams for a drink, but I move on, taking note of the hunting books and the overwhelming amount of camo gear.

Suddenly, there is a puttering sound. Outside the shed. An animal?

I'm okay. There's no way for it to get inside.

But then something scrapes up the exterior, clawing its way toward the roof. I duck, waiting for a creature to burst through, but it never does.

Footsteps approach, and I quickly collapse where it all began.

"Let me—."

A stumble, a fall. The deep grunt of a man. I edge back, the cold metal of the shelf jarring against my spine.

"Piece of—Ah."

A gunshot pierces the air; a weight settles in my bladder. The metallic jangle of keys, then the door creaks open.

"You want to finish me? Do it then, you piece of—."

Through barely parted eyelids, I see him strike a woman with his weapon's hilt. Her grimace speaks of acute pain. He shrouds her head in burlap, forcing her down with a push. The door crashes shut, and I hear the lock slide into place.

"Hello?" My voice shakes.
She stirs slightly.

I rise slowly, edging towards her body sprawled onto shed's wooden floorboards. "Hello?" My fingers brush against her, tentative. Without warning, she springs to life, disoriented.

"Hey, easy." I say. "I’m here to help."

After a brief moment, her fear subsides, sensing no threat from me. She finally speaks.

"Here." She motions with a tilt of her head towards her belt buckle.

"You want me to... undo your pants?" I ask, confused.

"Just find the hidden latch," she explains. "Get in front of me, use your fingers to feel the buckle. There's a hidden indentation, once you find it, pull it back."

Taking a deep breath, I move in front of her, my fingers skimming the surface of the buckle until I feel an unusual groove. Pulling it back, the buckle comes off in my hand, revealing a sharp edge on its flip side.

"Nice job. Hand it over," she says.

Carefully, I pass the buckle to her tied-up hands. Within moments, she uses the concealed edge to free herself.

She snatches the burlap sack over her head, and my heart stops. "Mom," I say.

"Alana."

#

The air in the dim shed feels sickeningly thick, like being wrapped in a heavy, wet blanket. With my heart pounding in my ears and my thoughts racing, I rake my fingers through my hair. By now, given all the stress I've faced, it wouldn’t surprise me if it was thinning.
I was under the impression that my mother had vanished for good. She was filled with fear because of the rival agencies after dad. I had given up hope on the dream of a normal family, but here she is.

Without overthinking, like a magnet drawn to its opposite, I step forward and hug her.

The world seems to stand still as we share this moment, the musty, damp smell of the shed threatening to drown the serenity. But then we pull apart, and reality crashes back in. Her eyes, sharp and observant, scan the room, taking in the grim reality of our makeshift prison. The dim lighting casts eerie shadows on her face, deepening the lines of worry.

"This isn't good," she murmurs, her gaze meeting mine.

I frown. "I've been trying to find—"

"No," she interrupts, pressing a hand to the wooden table with a thud. "If they’ve captured you too, it means they’re out to get rid of us." Rummaging through her pockets, she dumps their contents onto the table: a lighter, two quarters, and a lint ball.

"We can use the lighter," I suggest, a spark of hope igniting in me.

She shakes her head, strands of her red hair dancing around her face. "We'll burn the whole place down, including ourselves."

"You smoke?" I ask.

"Used to," she asks. "I keep it now out of habit."

Her likes and dislikes are a complete mystery to me; I know nothing about her.

A sudden memory surfaces — the stash of Mountain Dew. Trying to navigate the cluttered floor, I almost trip over a pair of battered boots. Retrieving a can, I crack it open. The lukewarm liquid doesn’t taste great, but it's comforting. Offering one to her, she merely shakes her head, her mind clearly on the escape plan.
I stride over to the shed door and yank at the handle. Peeking through a crack, the glint of a metal padlock mocks me. My stomach sinks. My attention shifts to a red and white cooler in the corner. Opening it, the stench of rotten meat assaults my nostrils. I snap it shut, trying not to gag.

Disgusting. What could the poor deer have done to deserve this?

While I attempt to shake off the nausea, my mother, ever vigilant, points at a backpack swinging overhead. "Check that."

I rummage through it: binoculars, a silent radio, something that looks like a recorder from a grade school music class, hand warmers, and trail mix. All this while, my mother, with her shoes muddied and pants streaked with wet leaves, continues to scan the space.

“Do you know who trapped us?” I finally ask, feeling more desperate with every passing second.

“There are only two options,” she begins slowly, “a rival agency—”

“The one you said was after dad?” I interject, and she nods.

A realization slowly dawns on me, leaving me bewildered. "Why would they target you if, as you said, they're after dad?" I lock eyes with her, seeking answers. "You warned me about the danger of being caught in the crossfire, but it's been years since you've had any contact with dad. Why would you still be in jeopardy?"

She exhales deeply, hesitating. “Because I'm part of your father's agency too.”

Avoiding responsibility, they cast blame on each other to safeguard their respective covers. I assumed it was a choice between one or the other. It never crossed my mind that both of my parents could be killers.
"We need to escape," she whispers, pressing the belt buckle knife into my hand. "Hide this."

With determined steps, she heads to the door, slamming against it with all her might. When it doesn’t give way, she mutters something I can't quite catch.

She gestures for me to join her. "Together, we can do this." She places an arm in front of me, gently nudging me back. "You need a running start," she advises. "More power."

"I'm so ready to be out of here," I say.

"On three," she says.

We charge. In that split second before we collide, I shut my eyes, bracing for impact. The next thing I know, I’m sprawled on the ground, the cool grass clutched in my hand. Trying to piece together the exact moment we broke free is difficult. I'm surrounded by vibrant green trees.

My attention snaps back to the looming shed where a man stands, grip tight on the door handle.

Our freedom didn't come from our efforts. It was thanks to him opening the door.

My heart thumps wildly as I catch my mom's expression.

In a chilling voice, the man yells, "Get them!"

Mom and I whip our heads around, spotting two men advancing on us. My stomach churns, and I lose my lunch.

She kneels beside me, urgency in her eyes. "Remember, you know nothing."

I wipe my mouth and nod shakily.

"Repeat it," she insists.

"I know nothing."

But as the two men grab us, the weight of the knife in my pocket reminds me that I do know one thing: we need a plan, and fast.
Chapter 17 - BLAIRE

Blaire dashes out of Jefferson Hall with a case of dry mouth. Shifting her canvas backpack to the front, she unzips a pocket, pulling out a shiny, peppermint-scented wrapper. As she strolls towards the UVA fountain, she deftly pops the gum into her mouth, crumpling the wrapper and releasing it to the ground. Her gaze drifts towards the horizon, where the Blue Ridge Mountains come into view.

A girl with a perfectly tamed ponytail, rocking a t-shirt with a beaming Earth, hustles toward her. Blaire immediately recognizes the clipboard – someone from an eco-club. Pretending to be engrossed in her phone, she hopes to avoid an interaction.

*Count me out; I have no interest in saving the world.*

"Did you know if we keep cutting down trees, our future's at stake?" The girl's voice pierces Blaire's pretend bubble.

Blaire offers a noncommittal smile, hoping to end the conversation. "We all have to go someday, right?" she quips, a cheeky grin playing on her lips, her wristbands sliding as she gestures.

Not missing a beat, the girl says, "20 percent of our oxygen comes from trees. It's a big deal."

With a mock gasp, Blaire replies, "Who knew?" But the girl's persistence wins, and Blaire begrudgingly scribbles down her email.

#

Waiting by the fountain, Blaire checks her phone for the umpteenth time. Alana's usually punctual, almost obsessively so. The fountain mist dampens Blaire's shirt, and unease begins to claw at her. Two calls and one silly selfie later, still no word from Alana.
Where the heck is she?

On impulse, Blaire heads for Bryan Hall, the age-worn building that was Alana's last known location. Lost in worry, she barely registers the familiar chime of the bell tower in the distance. In her haste, she collides with something. Alana's phone tumbles down a flight of steps, landing with a heart-stopping thud on the pavement. A sick feeling settles in Blaire's stomach as she picks it up and notices missed calls from her and Gabriel.

*I've never known her to leave her phone behind. Something must have happened.*

Bursting into Bryan Hall, she breezes past groups of students, some immersed in conversation, others with their heads buried in textbooks. The hallways, with their familiar scent of old wood and chalk, now seem labyrinthine and imposing. She stumbles into Alana’s classroom, drawing all eyes to her disheveled state.

"Alana? Is she here?" Blaire's voice trembles.

The teacher, concerned, recounts how Alana left class suddenly.

*I have a gut feeling that this is somehow tied to the family drama she kept quiet about earlier.*

Emerging from the room, the crushing weight of not knowing where her best friend is feels unbearable. Fingers shaking slightly, she unlocks Alana's phone, quickly dialing Gabriel. He picks up almost immediately.

"Blaire? I've been on edge, trying to reach Alana all day. Where are you?"

"On campus," Blaire chokes out, her vision blurring.

"Just stay there. I'm on my way." Gabriel's voice is the sturdy anchor she needs.
Gabriel slams on the brakes of his silver Audi, halting abruptly amidst the busy school traffic. Ignoring the blaring horns around them, he flings open the passenger door. Blaire makes a sprint from behind a shiny red jeep and dives into the open seat.

The interior screams luxury: smooth, rock-gray leather seats and a high-tech dashboard adorned with silver accents. With a quick swipe on the center console screen, Gabriel smoothly navigates through the throngs of students.

"I think Alana's gone missing," Blaire murmurs, her voice trembling.

Gabriel darts his eyes between her and the traffic chaos ahead, heightened by a malfunctioning street light. "When did you last see her?"

"We split after class. Should we... I mean, we need the cops, right?"

Eyes focused, hands gripping the wheel, Gabriel nods, "We should report it." His voice strives to stay steady, but Blaire can hear the underlying tension.

Gabriel’s confidence does little to soothe Blaire's racing mind. Flashbacks from the semester flood in: Jaiden floating in Gabriel's pool, a mysterious man at the park. She fears Alana might be next.

\[I\ can\ 't\ lose\ her.\]

#

The police station looms in the distance, a monolithic gray block amidst a bustling city scene, its mundane facade broken only by the parked squad cars reflecting the city's muted sunlight. Officers move around in uniform, their brisk walks and clipped conversations a stark contrast to the cinematic representations Blaire had grown up watching. The weight of Alana's disappearance presses down on her, making her steps heavy. She hesitates for just a heartbeat at
the station entrance. With a deep breath, tasting the tang of city air, she pushes the heavy door open and strides in, Gabriel's reassuring presence right behind her.

Inside, the scene isn't much better, everything is a mistake at white. A variety of faces, each etched with their own stories of concern or distress, line up. Blaire, the urgency making her heartbeat audible in her ears, skirts past the queue to the front desk, earning her a few disgruntled glances and murmurs of annoyance. She slams her hand on the counter, determination flaring.

"My friend Alana is missing."

Across the desk, an officer with weary eyes, her uniform slightly rumpled from hours of service, looks up, both bored and irritated. "There's a line." Her voice is flat, like she's said this a thousand times before.

*Does she seriously think I care? My friend may be in the clutches of merciless killers, so waiting in line feels irrelevant.*

Undeterred, Blaire sets down Alana’s cracked phone, "She disappeared near UVA."

The desk officer's eyes flick over Blaire's shoulder, alighting on Gabriel. The subtle change in her demeanor is unmistakable as her voice softens. "How can I help you, sir?"

Gabriel, his jaw clenched, leans in. "My girlfriend, Alana, is missing. Can we please file a report?"

Blaire’s patience is running thin, so Gabriel guides her to a waiting area. Moments later, a uniformed officer approaches. Blaire jumps to her feet, anticipation clear in her eyes.

"We're in a dire situation; I can't find my friend Alana anywhere."

The officer, skeptical, asks, "Did she have a reason to vanish?"

*People advise you to go to the police, but when you do, they somehow manage to shift the blame onto you.*
Blaire's incredulity is evident. Gabriel steps in, "She's never late. She didn't meet Blaire after class. We just want to file a report."

Regretfully, the officer explains, "You can file, but we usually wait 48 hours."

"48 hours?" Blaire's voice trembles with anger.

"We need to be sure she didn’t choose to leave," the officer replies.

Gabriel, restraining his anger, nods in acknowledgement. "Thanks for nothing," he mutters, ushering Blaire out.

Once outside, Blaire looks at him, tears brimming. "What now?"

"We'll find Alana on our own."

#

The campus is alive with students mingling between classes, clusters of conversation, and the distant sounds of laughter. Armed with photos of Alana, Blaire and Gabriel weave through the crowd, occasionally showing the flier to passing students. It's a candid shot of Alana at the movies, light from the screen casting a soft glow on her face, slurping a Slurpee with strands of her black hair falling loosely. They'd taken the photo long before their world spiraled into this mystery, back when they thought contract killers were just movie stuff.

A girl with tousled hair and headphones around her neck zooms past on a battle-worn skateboard, music faintly leaking from her earbuds. Gabriel steps forward, hailing her. "Hey, seen her?" he asks, holding out the flier.

She skids to a stop, sending tiny pebbles scattering, flips her board into her hand with practiced ease, and peers at the photo. Her eyes, lined with smudged black eyeliner, search Alana's face briefly. "Nah, sorry," she replies, the edge of her skateboard touching the ground again. As she pushes off, she glances back, "Good luck though," her voice trailing in the wind.
The hum of a nearby notification pulls Gabriel's attention to his phone. He quickly glances at the screen, a brief shadow crossing his features, before he slides it back into his pocket without answering.

"Split up?" Blaire asks. "Cover more ground?"

Gabriel nods, and they part ways.

Blaire zeroes in on Bryan Hall, where she'd found Alana's phone. She hunkers down, feeling the gritty pavement against her palms as she cautiously ventures beneath the bushes lining the staircase. Hidden among the undergrowth, she finds only a solitary cigarette and a forgotten hair tie. As she searches around, she realizes how easily things can go unnoticed. Selective seeing. It's like when you're too engrossed in texting to notice the opening scene of your favorite show.

Blaire sighs, her back against the cool metal of the staircase, and dials Alana's number—craving the soothing sound of her voice. As she slumps down, she suddenly spots a camera fixed to the side of Bryan Hall. "How did I miss that?" she murmurs, then dials Gabriel.

#

"Look." Blaire points, excited, to the weathered camera. "Campus security could have something."

Gabriel nods. "Let's check."

The two hustle to the University center, an impressive glass building that glitters under the sun, reflecting a statue of Poe with a raven on his shoulder.

Gabriel's phone rings again. He silences it without looking. Blaire raises an eyebrow. "You sure you don't need to get that?"

"We need to focus on Alana," he replies.
I can't wrap my head around how weird he is with that phone.

Once in the building, they take the elevator. Blaire taps the button repeatedly, eager to move. When they reach the seventh floor, she halts suddenly. "Wait," she realizes, "they won't just show us the footage."

Gabriel thinks quickly.

Beneath the sterile glow of fluorescent lights, the campus security office feels eerily silent, except for two guys dressed in matching polo shirts and khakis that have seen better days. The room smells faintly of old coffee and stale donuts. One wall is cluttered with a haphazard collection of monitors, some flickering in and out of focus.

Gabriel steps up confidently.

"Hey there. I'm Professor Alexander, and my student Blaire here just told me someone swiped her bag outside Bryan Hall. I chatted with John from your department, and he said we could check out the security footage to see if we could ID the jerk who took it."

_Alright, we're proceeding with this plan. He's really quick on his feet, I must say._

Blaire glances at Gabriel and then the two campus officers. "I've never dealt with something like this before." She tries to summon some tears, but only manages a slightly watery-eyed look. "My mom's special pendant is in that bag. I really need it back."

_I have my fingers crossed that this will work._

The two guys exchange a look. The one with wiry blonde hair, whose eyes seem to have seen too many long nights, speaks up. "John's off today."

"I know," Gabriel replies smoothly. "John and I go way back. He mentioned you guys would be solid and help out."
"Seriously? John said that?" The other officer, younger with a hint of acne scarring says, nudging Blonde Hair. "How exactly do you know John?"

Gabriel remains cool. "We hung out a lot during my wilder days. Story for another time, though. Can you show us the footage? We just want to catch the guy."

Gabriel's abilities make me question whether I should fear or respect him.

The officers nod. "Of course. If John vouches for you, then no problem." The younger one punches in a few codes. "Which building?"

"Bryan Hall," Blaire says.

"The old English building?" Blonde Hair raises an eyebrow.

Blaire nods, "That's the one. Why? Is there a problem?"

The younger officer hesitates, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, "It's just... that building's a relic."

Blaire steps closer, her voice rising, "And? What does that have to do with anything?"

"The cameras there have been busted for ages. They're just for show now."

Blaire huffs, her frustration evident. "Great. So much for a deterrent. My bag's still gone."

"I'm really sorry," Blonde Hair says, his face genuinely apologetic. "You can fill out a report if you like."

Outside the office, as the sun dips lower, Blaire fixes Gabriel with a puzzled look, her shoes tapping lightly on the weathered pavement.. "How'd you know there'd be a John in the mix?"

Gabriel smirks, shrugging casually. "In my experience, there's always a John."
Blaire's heart skips a beat as she realizes the scant progress she and Gabriel have made in their quest to find Alana. Only weeks ago, her biggest stress was running low on snacks or ensuring her family knew she wasn't avoiding them. It wasn’t that she wanted to drift from her family; it's just that Alana's presence was so magnetic, she was her best friend.

Growing up on a steady diet of detective shows, Blaire always believed that finding evidence was as simple as looking closely enough. Now, she feels like a total rookie. Everything points to Alana’s enigmatic father, but confronting him feels like a disaster waiting to happen.

Blaire had reservations about Gabriel at first. But after a thorough, albeit sneaky, investigation of his place revealed only childhood photos, she’s more inclined to trust him. Besides, his commitment to the search seems sincere. And his maturity could be a potential asset.

The two tread silently to Gabriel’s sleek car. The beep of the key fob pierces the silence. Blaire notices the unknown number flashing on Gabriel’s car console for what seems like the hundredth time today. “Ducking calls much?” She smirks, breaking the tension.

Heaving a sigh, Gabriel says, “I have to answer this.”

She gives him a go-ahead nod and subtly strains her ears, trying to grasp fragments of the conversation.

*Whoever's trying to reach him is really desperate.*

Moments later, he hangs up, a storm of emotions playing across his features.

“So?” Blaire prods, her curiosity unabated. “What was that about?”

“We need to make a detour,” he mutters.

Blaire's heart races, wondering if this is the moment her trust in Gabriel fractures.

“Why?”
He doesn’t respond, just starts the car. Though tempted to press on, Blaire decides to wait. After all, actions speak louder than words. She hopes Gabriel's intentions remain true to their mission.

#

As the last golden rays of sunlight bathe the street in a muted glow, Gabriel maneuvers the car to a stop beside an old, graffiti-covered building. Its windows are boarded up. The very aura of the neighborhood pricks Blaire's skin, sending a clear message: danger lurks here. Across the potholed street, an old playground stands like a ghost from childhood memories. The swings creak mournfully in the breeze. Abandoned toys, faded newspapers, and discarded shoes tell silent stories of those who call this place home.

Blaire turns to Gabriel, her eyebrows knotting together in confusion and concern. Every fiber of her being is on edge. “Seriously, Gabriel, what is this place? Are we caught up in some sketchy drug deal or shady underground scheme?” She unbucks her seatbelt, leaning closer to the window, trying to make sense of the dim shadows.

Gabriel's jaw tenses, and the familiar frown lines on his forehead deepen. “Blaire, just stay in the car, okay? It's not a place for...” He trails off, searching for the right words. “Just trust me. You're safer in here.”

She scoffs, looking around. “This car is like a neon sign for trouble.”

His fingers grip the wheel before he starts to unbuckle, phone now in hand. “Just... promise me. Stay put.”

She gives a half-hearted nod, but the moment his footsteps recede, her innate curiosity and determination flare. "Yeah, right," she murmurs, making a quick decision to discreetly follow him.
The thick, putrid smell of the alleyway assaulıts her, a strange mix of rotting garbage and what reminds her of a school cafeteria's botched attempt at a hot dog.

A distant murmur from an upstairs apartment wafts down, accompanied by muffled footsteps. Maybe kids playing or a couple arguing. The sounds make her even more aware of her own vulnerability. She pushes further into the alley, attempting to stay in the shadows.

As she peers from her hiding spot, a gasp nearly escapes her lips. There, amidst the dimming light, stands a figure she recognizes all too well. Why on earth is he here? His immaculate dark shirt, buttoned to the neck, stands in stark contrast to the grimy, unkempt surroundings.

Her heart pounds wildly in her chest as she watches the scene unfold. The exchange is brief: a few words, some furtive glances, and then Gabriel receives a manila envelope.

Why is he meeting with Professor Langton, of all people?

The encounter is short-lived. Just as she's about to move, a stray cat hisses and darts from beneath a car, capturing her attention. She freezes, waiting for it to pass before hurrying back to the vehicle. Blaire's mind races, and she does her best to feign nonchalance as Gabriel approaches, her pulse still reverberating in her ears.

The dim light of the streetlamp outside filters through the car window, casting long shadows on Gabriel’s face. “Thanks for staying,” he says, a hint of relief in his voice.

Her fingers tap nervously on the leather seat. “Of course,” she feigns innocence, her gaze constantly flitting to the folder. “So, what’s in there?”

Gabriel hesitates. “Just... stuff.”

She bites her lip. Frustration pools in her eyes, deepening their shade. "Gabriel, I'm done with the secrets. That’s my professor you just met with. What's going on?"
Guess there's no other choice but to find out on my own.

With a sudden, swift movement, Blaire snatches the folder from Gabriel’s grasp, her wrist adorned with several multi-colored bands. She places a protective arm between them, her nails painted a fierce shade of red. Their eyes lock, and there’s electricity, a challenge.

Gabriel’s breath becomes ragged, his hand shaking slightly as he reaches out. “Let it go, Blaire,” he warns, the urgency in his voice making her pulse quicken.

This is bad. What am I even doing? What am I doing?

A stray strand of blonde falls onto her face as she leans away, defensively. “Don’t even think about it,” she says, her voice shaking but determined. The intensity makes Gabriel hesitate, the greenish-brown of his eyes deepening in conflict.

A deep breath steadies him, and he lunges for the papers. Their scuffle, fiery, intense, results in Blaire's elbow smacking against the glove compartment. Papers fly like white birds, scattering over the car's floor.

Her hands tremble as she picks one up, her eyes widening with shock and confusion. The words “Ian Cadwell” make her heart lurch. “Why is Alana’s dad’s name here?”

As Gabriel's gaze turns distant, she can see him grappling with something. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

He takes a moment, then asks, “The man outside, he's your professor?”

“The one I share with Alana,” she confirms.

Gabriel swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “He’s watching her.”

Blaire's voice, thick with disbelief, reads aloud: “The operation should be carried out discreetly, with no evidence of the executor's involvement.” Tears threaten to spill as realization hits her. “You’re… you're a hitman.”
The weight of the truth pushes down on Blaire, making her head spin. This was Gabriel, the guy who’d always been around, protecting her and Alana. Yet the paper in front of her painted a different story entirely. A chilling thought surfaces: was he now assigned to take out Alana’s dad on her own professor’s orders?

#
Chapter 18 - ALANA

The heavy door creaks open, unveiling a bright, spacious cabin interior. Strategically positioned lanterns cast an ethereal light, making the wooden walls almost glow.

Who would live here, so isolated? I quickly remember.

In this unexpected brightness, I catch sight of my mother. Her sharp features, ones I've inherited yet scarcely seen over the years, look tense. A history of whispered tales and buried secrets reflects in her eyes.

Suddenly, a cold, metallic push shoves me further inside. I whirl around, coming face-to-face with a menacing figure. The cold barrel of his gun reminds me of our reality. Heart pounding, I'm ushered into a smaller room.

I don’t want to die. I just want to go home.

High above, a tiny window teases freedom, contrasting with the rich rug and a bed adorned with a plaid cover and a haunting display of antlers above.

"The boss wants you alive," a gruff voice warns as the door shuts. "That's the only reason you're still breathing."

It's cold comfort, but I'll take it.

Without hesitation, mom starts searching the room. She heads straight for a wooden nightstand, rifling through its drawers. She's on her knees in an instant, scanning the floor beneath the bed.

Sensing my gaze, she looks up. "What?"

"I just... never saw us being here, together," I say, sinking onto the bed. My jeans are smeared with remnants of our harrowing escape, and my shirt clings to me, damp from sweat.
She pushes herself up from the floor, eyes locking onto mine with an unspoken understanding. "You miss your father, don't you?"

"Yeah," I murmur. "I miss both of you. But how do I miss someone I barely know?"

She visibly winces. "Ouch," she mumbles.

Regret surges through me. "Sorry," I say, diverting my gaze.

Sitting beside me, she tries to lighten the mood. "This place reeks of pine car fresheners, right?"

I chuckle, but it’s short-lived. "Why did you leave?"

She glances at the door. Laughter and distant chatter creep in.

"I'm sure you've noticed, but this line of work isn't exactly family-friendly," she starts, her fingers tangling in her vibrant hair. “When I found out I was pregnant, I was torn between whether I could juggle both worlds: changing diapers and... handling assignments.”

Listening to her, memories of home surface.

"The agency saw you as a vulnerability," she adds, her voice laced with sorrow. "Once you're in, there's no simple exit."

I look at her, my voice breaking, "But why choose them over us?"

She leans in, her touch gentle. “I was deep into this life before meeting your dad, even deeper by the time I had you. When I finally told him, he simply asked me what I wanted. Promised he'd be there, no matter what.”

We share a fleeting, understanding smile.

The wind outside roars, and the walls quiver.
"At the agency, you're isolated. I missed you guys. I began making mistakes. They saw and to keep me in line, they brought in your father," she says, her voice distant. "He was manipulated, made to believe I had forsaken him."

As the truth unfolds, it's a lot to digest. Still, it offers a semblance of understanding, a bridge over years of separation.

#

The room door swings open with an abrupt creak, sending a cold chill through me. Standing in the entrance is a tall, imposing man with a shiny bald head, wearing all black. I don't recognize him from before; he's definitely not one of the rough guys who grabbed us.

Without thinking, I scoot back, my fingers digging into the rough, aged fabric of the bedspread as I press myself against the cold, wooden bed's headboard. Beside me, mom rises, ready to confront him.

"Who are you? What do you want?" she challenges, her voice sharp.

She probably faces this kind of stuff every day in her job.

His lips twist into a smirk, revealing teeth too white and straight to be natural. "Thought I'd pay you a visit while your 'door guard' is indisposed." He then flashes something metallic from his pocket — a switchblade, it glints ominously.

Mom takes a defiant step closer, anger clear in her stance and the fire in her eyes. "Leave us alone."

"Relax," he smirks, that grin stretching wider, making him look even more sinister. "I'm just here to chat."

Mom's expression hardens, her jaw clenched. "Get out."

What's my move? Is there anything I can do at all?
With calculated menace, he edges closer. I feel adrenaline flood my system, turning my fear into a jittery alertness. My fingers instinctively curl around the buckle knife in my pocket, the cool metal giving me a small measure of comfort.

In a swift motion, Mom unleashes a powerful kick towards his midsection, sending him stumbling backward, but he recovers almost instantly. "Feisty," he says, licking his lips.

He's trained, that much is clear.

The dance that follows is intense. Mom parries and dodges his lunges, using her environment to her advantage. She shoves a chair into his way, forcing him to divert his path. "Grab that statue." she yells to me.

Without a second thought, I seize the porcelain figure off a nearby shelf, its solid and heavy. As the man momentarily pins Mom to the wall, his back to me, I swing with all my might. The statue connects with a resounding crack, and he goes down, but not out. Groaning, he tries to recover.

How is that even possible?

"We need to move," Mom gasps, pulling me toward the door.

But our hope diminishes when another man appears, blocking our way. Surveying the scene, he sighs, “Should've known Chris couldn't be trusted with this.”

His demeanor seems slightly more sympathetic, a hint of regret shading his eyes, but we're not taking chances. "Stay back," Mom warns, positioning herself protectively in front of me.

His hands raise in a non-threatening gesture. "Just doing my job. No need for further violence."

My grip tightens on the remnants of the statue, ready for whatever comes next.
With the bed needing to be at the window, my mom's genius idea, I stand ready on one side, my fingers gripping the dusty frame. The dust feels like a fine powder, sticking to the sweat on my palms.

"On three," she says, her voice low but steady. "We lift. Quietly. We don’t want them hearing us." Those determined brown eyes drill into mine. This is more than serious.

What if someone comes in while we're doing this? Breathe, Lana. My feet planted, I nod. "Ready." I grip tighter, knuckles turning white.

"One, two, three," she whispers. I push up hard, but the bed doesn't budge.

The list of escape routes and possibilities is diminishing by the second.

"It's too heavy," she grumbles, her frustration echoing mine. "Get that rug."

I blink in confusion. "The rug? Why?"

"To slide it, not lift it," she says. "Like a sled."

Makes sense. We wrestle the rug under the bed, reducing the friction, the coarse texture scratching against my fingertips. Mom explains how it works, and even though I still don't get it completely, I trust her.

"We pull the rug, the bed comes with it," she clarifies, motioning like we're playing tug of war.

After minutes that feel like hours, we finally get the bed under the window. Mom steps onto it, deep in thought.

"Stand on my shoulders," she says, "and check the window latch."

My heart races. "Break it?"

"Only if we have to. Get up here."
Her skill is unmatched. Fearless.

Taking a deep breath, I recall sunnier days, laughing at the local pool, dominating games of chicken on Blaire's shoulders. That confidence bubbles up again. I've done this, in a way.

Mom hunches down, and soon, I'm on her shoulders, reaching for the window latch. Found it. It's hooked. I unhook it, the window creaking open. "Done. What now?"

"Climb out," she says. "Roll when you land. It's safer."

I look down, panic setting in. "How will you...?"

"I'll be fine. Go. Find help. Find your dad," she says.

I want to argue, but her eyes say it all. “Go, Lana.”

For the first time, my mother calling me Lana doesn't bother me.

Taking one last look at her, tears blur my vision. "Remember to roll," she says.

I nod, biting back a choked "goodbye", and take the leap.
Chapter 19 - GABRIEL

Gabriel hesitates, sharing only snippets of his shadowed life with Blaire. A heavy weariness settles on him. Blaire's eyes show hurt, not from the dangerous world he's hinted at, but because of the secrets he's kept from both her and her best friend. Deception might be his survival tool, but the weight of every lie he'd ever told was a stone on his chest.

Finding Alana? Like seeking a needle in a vast, treacherous haystack. But Blaire's hint about her professor being his contact lit a fire in Gabriel. It was clear – the agency had taken her. He was determined, more than ever, to bring her back.

The agency, however, wanted him on a different mission: Alana’s father. A line Gabriel refused to cross. The challenge now was how to protect everyone he cared about without playing into their hands?

Blaire chose Alana’s empty home for solace, wishing for her return, while Gabriel, needing a clear mind, retreated to his own.

#

Gabriel slides his Audi into its usual spot, the driveway designs guiding his car like familiar hands. "They really took her," he mutters.

Before stepping out, he discreetly accesses a hidden compartment near his dashboard, revealing a Beretta 92 pistol. This isn't just protection—it's a promise. If the agency thinks they can play games with him, they're sorely mistaken. Holding the weapon with practiced ease, he exits and locks the car, its beep slicing through the quiet.

The path leading to his front door lights up in an automated sequence, showcasing the meticulous landscaping that surrounds the house: not a leaf out of place, green trees trimmed to
perfection, bushes that seem as if they are manicured daily. Memories of Blaire and Alana's laughter echo in his mind, coaxing a fleeting smile.

His room, a study in organized minimalism, greets him. Everything has its place. A touchpad-operated laundry chute, a testimony to his penchant for tech and order, awaits. Slipping into loungewear, his mind shifts gears, processing the agency’s audacious orders. "They won’t make me their pawn," he whispers, with a determination that sends chills.

The Beretta finds its designated place on his dresser, beside a large square-shaped mirror that now frames his focused visage—hair slightly tousled from the day, eyes burning with intensity.

His sleek black-and-gold kitchen, with its spices and teas arranged in an alphabetical order, offers solace. He opts for a Darjeeling brew, its taste a hint of apricots, peaches, and muscat grapes. As the warmth seeps through him, a spark of an idea takes root.

He knows that defying the agency puts him next on their hit list. Yet, perhaps he can deceive them, making them believe he's obeyed, even when he hasn't. It would demand meticulous planning, but there might be a way to craft a convincing illusion of Mr. Cadwell's death.

Back in his room, as he lies atop perfectly ironed sheets, the lingering scent of fresh linen in the air, thoughts of Alana take center stage. An abandoned warehouse in Free Union seems likely. The night ticks away, and dawn beckons. Resolved, he sets the alarm. Tomorrow is crucial.

#
Suddenly, the shrill beep of the front door alarm pierces the night. Gabriel's eyes spring open. What's going on? He rolls out of bed, the smooth touch of his satin pajamas cool against his skin. Seeing the 4 a.m. glow from his clock, he's sure something's off.

No one should be visiting now.

His hand slides into the nightstand drawer, brushing past a cherished photo of his father, and clutches a remote. A button press, and the house descends into darkness. If there's an intruder, they won't see him coming.

He moves silently, heart pounding but steps light. Another beep — this time, signaling the side door. They're targeting all the entryways. He pushes away fear, replacing it with a focus sharpened by memories.

Nineteen. Drenched in sweat, his karate uniform clinging to him amidst the exhilarating shouts and thuds of the dojo. The agency had watched, seeing not just his skills, but the heavy weight of grief after his father's funeral. They saw potential in him, a young phoenix rising from the ashes.

Ears straining, Gabriel glides downstairs. He reaches the open front door, every muscle tensed, ready. The alarm chirps again — "back door open.” He glances over, confusion flickering. The sliding glass doors remain untouched. Someone's messing with my system. He locks the front door.

Then, a faint noise. A shadow darts, and a masked figure is reaching for a knife on the counter, the moonlight glinting menacingly off its blade.

Gabriel doesn't hesitate. He deflects the knife, but in the struggle, the two crash against counters, knocking spice jars to the floor.

“Who are you?” Gabriel demands, avoiding a slashing motion.
Their dance continues, both of them trading blows and counters. Gabriel can't help but wonder, Is this guy from the agency?

Just as that thought crosses his mind, he uses a swift roundhouse kick, knocking the intruder back. The attacker seems unfazed, lunging again.

"Who sent you?" Gabriel grunts, narrowly dodging a punch.

"It doesn't matter," the man replies, voice full of steely determination.

Amidst the chaos, Gabriel hears, "Where's my daughter?" and the entire fight shifts. Confusion grips Gabriel, causing a momentary lapse in his defenses, and the intruder takes advantage, slamming him into the dining table.

Catching his breath, Gabriel manages to say, "Your daughter? She's not here. There's no one but me."

Livid, the man persists, "Where is she?"

Gabriel, hoping to defuse the situation, slowly approaches the light switch, hands raised in surrender. "Let's turn on the lights. Maybe we've got a misunderstanding here."

With the room awash in light, Gabriel's jaw drops. Before him stands someone he recognizes instantly. "Mr. Cadwell?" The last time he saw this face was on the image from his mission dossier.

Mr. Cadwell narrows his eyes suspiciously. "You know me?"

Keeping his emotions in check, Gabriel says, “Alana's missing. I've been looking everywhere for her.”

A flicker of anger and concern crosses Mr. Cadwell's face. "Alana? How do you know my daughter?"
“We... we were dating,” Gabriel says, awaiting Mr. Cadwell’s reaction. After a pause, recognition crosses Mr. Cadwell’s features. “Gabriel?”

As they try to catch their breath, Gabriel leans against the countertop, struggling with his next confession. "I was contracted to eliminate you. No details. No explanation given."

Mr. Cadwell’s face contorts in shock. "But why? Why target me?"

With a helpless shrug, Gabriel replies, "That's what I've been trying to figure out. But I’d never hurt you. Not if it meant hurting Alana."

Mr. Cadwell's eyes sharpen. “She started digging around. Maybe they thought she was onto them.”

“She thought you were behind something at my party, something involving a guy named Jaiden.” He pauses, puzzled. “Wait, you mentioned ‘they’. Do you work for an agency?”

Mr. Cadwell hesitates. "Not information I’d usually share."

But Gabriel cuts him off, "I'm no stranger to this world."

“5762.” Cadwell reveals, testing the waters.

A look of astonishment spreads across Gabriel’s face. "The same."

With a slow nod, Mr. Cadwell murmurs, "We’ve been set up."

Gabriel's brain races. "How so?"

Anguish laces Mr. Cadwell's voice. "I got word Alana was gone. Thought she was with her friend Blaire. Then someone from inside hinted she might be at this address. I was prepared to do anything to get her back."

As the puzzle pieces click into place for both of them, they speak in unison, realization dawning. "Operation Desert Scorpion."

"We've been axed," Gabriel murmurs. "The agency sees us as threats."
With the weight of their shared secret between them, they understand that to save Alana, they have to challenge the shadowy organization pulling their strings.

#
Chapter 20 - ALANA

The woods surrounding the cabin come alive under the silvery glow of the moonlight. Every snap of a twig makes my heart race, fear gnawing at me that I'll be discovered. I stick to the shadows, reminding myself of all those hide-and-seek games I used to play as a kid. Only this isn't a game, and the stakes are way higher.

My ankle throbs with each step, a souvenir from my unfortunate fall. Lost and unsure, I pick a direction, letting instinct guide me. The forest floor is a maze of vines and fallen branches, but I push through, eyes peeled for another refuge or, even better, a way out of this dense thicket.

An owl's hoot reverberates, its eerie call amplifying my dread. The forest’s shifting shadows play tricks on my mind, morphing benign shapes into imagined dangers. Then, a flashlight beam pierces the darkness. Panic grips me as I dive behind a bush, its coarse leaves grazing my skin. A guard. He's probably on the lookout for escapees—like me.

He appears restless, yawning and fidgeting. Seizing an opportune moment when he's distracted by his radio, I press on, deeper into the forest’s labyrinth of shadows.

My mom's last words to me were clear: find Dad. But how do you find someone when you don’t even have a starting point? The weight of my empty pockets reminds me I'm without my phone. The closest I'd get to any form of help would be to spot someone on a road, but which way was the road?

For a brief moment, the thought crosses my mind. Should I go back and try to save Mom? But then reality kicks in. I can't face a cabin full of those guys alone. If only Blaire were here. No matter the challenge, she always finds a way out.

The grumbling of my stomach interrupts my spiraling thoughts. Right, I haven't eaten since breakfast at school. My body needs fuel if I'm going to make it anywhere. Scanning the
surrounding vegetation, I focus on the bases of trees and sift through the leaf litter. And there it is, a cluster of mushrooms.

Countless hours watching survival shows on TV with Blaire. Yet, I'm drawing a blank on how to discern if a mushroom is safe or deadly. Examining the fungi, I search for any unusual spots or telltale signs of danger.

But everything's so uncertain. Do I risk it?

I toss the mushroom aside, not about to risk my escape from the cabin only to be taken out by poisonous fungi. There's a decent-sized rock close by, and a memory from one of the show’s episodes flickers in my mind. Grabbing the rock, I scrape a mark onto the bark of a nearby tree. This way, if I ever get lost, I can retrace my steps. Plus, if Mom ever gets out or if someone comes searching for me, they'll have a trail to follow. I make a mental note: mark a tree every few steps.

The ache in my ankle intensifies with every step, sapping my energy. The immense expanse of the forest seems to go on forever with no sign of human settlement, evoking a deep unease within me. My feet shuffle and scrape against the underbrush, the weight of my body seeming to grow heavier by the second.

Up ahead, a massive tree looms, its trunk hollowed out in a cavernous cavity. It promises a brief respite. Telling myself it's only a short break, I crawl into the welcoming hollow and let the cool interior cradle my head. Just a few minutes, I promise myself. Just a few.

#
Chapter 21 - GABRIEL

Gabriel, Blaire, and Mr. Cadwell weave their way through the bustling campus of the University of Virginia. Ivy creeps up the walls of old buildings, lending an air of history to the place. Students dash around, backpacks slung over one shoulder, their hurried footsteps and whispered conversations adding to the weight of the moment.

Gabriel is certain Alana anticipated her last year of school to be hassle-free. But it has become everything but that for her.

Their mission is urgent: to locate Professor Langton, who's said to be ensnared in one of his intense lectures. Blaire, possessing invaluable knowledge of the campus, is their guide in this critical endeavor.

“How long do these lectures typically last?” Gabriel asks, every second weighing heavily on his mind. He prayed they'd get to Alana before it was too late.

“Hour and a half, tops.”

Mr. Cadwell's voice is laced with gravitas as he addresses Blaire, “Once we pinpoint Langton's location, you need to distance yourself. The nature of what might transpire... I couldn't, in good conscience, allow you to be caught in the midst of it.”

Blaire's face tightens, determination shining in her eyes. “For the record, I can totally handle it. This is for Alana.”

Gabriel knew Blaire was all in, but for him, it wasn't about trust; it was about safety.

Gabriel nods, respect evident in his demeanor. “Your insights have been indispensable, Blaire. The agency's protocols are... restrictive. They don't facilitate easy liaison. So, thank you, but—”
Mr. Cadwell adds, “Just point us in the right direction, okay? After that, I’d feel better if you went and got a coffee or perhaps there is a place where you can wait, safely away from the fray?”

Gabriel, a shadow of a memory crossing his face, adds, “And this time, no exceptions, alright?”

She takes a deep breath, acquiescing. “Fine. C’mon. We've got about ten minutes before the lecture wraps up.” And with that, she leads the way.

#

Outside Professor Langton’s classroom, Gabriel narrows his eyes through the window in the door. “That’s him,” he murmurs, a hint of disbelief edging his voice. Adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves, he adds, "Who would've thought? An English professor."

It burned Gabriel up knowing that someone he had worked with for years was the one behind Alana's disappearance. If not for the repercussions, the man would be dead. The University wasn’t the place.

Mr. Cadwell’s jaw tightens, face reddening. “Just thinking about him being around Alana…” He trails off, glancing down the corridor. “He’s a complete stranger to me. Our worlds never overlapped.”

Students start to rise from their seats inside. Professor Langton remains at his desk, engrossed in a stack of papers.

“Blaire, times up.” Gabriel nods towards the classroom. Turning to Mr. Cadwell, he asks, “You ready?”

Mr. Cadwell taps a discreet bag on his hip. “Always. We have to find out where they've taken Alana.”
Blaire hesitates, glancing between the two men before heading toward the building exit. Gabriel takes a deep breath. “Remember, we need answers more than anything.”

As students flow out of the room, they grumble about upcoming assignments, group dynamics, and lengthy lectures. One lingering student chats briefly with Professor Langton, then departs.

"Now." Gabriel pushes open the door, with Mr. Cadwell on his heels. After a quick glance around, Gabriel locks and quietly shuts the door, standing strategically so he obscures the window view.

Mr. Cadwell steps closer to the professor, tension filling the air.

"Office hours start after three," the professor murmurs, highlighting something at his desk, unaware of their presence.

“We won’t be here that long.” Mr. Cadwell’s voice is cold. He places his bag on the teacher’s desk.

Professor Langton, not an ounce of fear visible, meets Mr. Cadwell's stare with steely resolve. "I don’t owe you any answers," he says.

Without hesitation, Mr. Cadwell lunges at him, attempting to pin the professor against the whiteboard. However, Langton's reactions are swift and precise. He deflects the move, his own training evident in every gesture.

The two grapple briefly, neither gaining the upper hand, their movements precise and controlled. Gabriel watches intently, ready to intervene if necessary. Every instinct in him pushes him to jump into the fight, to settle the score with the man who has upended his life.

Suddenly, Mr. Cadwell manages to push Professor Langton against the whiteboard, dry erase markers scattering to the floor. "Where is Alana?" he demands, breathless.
Langton smirks, even in his pinned position. "Why should I tell you?"

"We're not playing games," Mr. Cadwell growls, his face inches away from the professor's. "Where. Is. Alana?" Drawing a knife from his belt, Mr. Cadwell places it against the professor’s throat.

Langton smirks, but there's a hint of concern in his eyes. "You wouldn't dare."

Mr. Cadwell's face contorts with rage, and it's clear he's teetering on the edge of control. The blade indents the professor's skin just a tad more.

To Gabriel, the priority was clear: he had to pinpoint Alana's location before the professor’s life came to an end.

Gabriel quickly hangs his jacket on the door, obscuring the window. With that done, he steps in, placing a hand on Mr. Cadwell's shoulder. "Ease up. We need information."

Mr. Cadwell backs away, his chest heaving as he tries to rein in his emotions. The room remains tense, a pressure-cooker moment having just passed. Professor Langton, despite being momentarily at their mercy, keeps an eerily calm demeanor, trying to reclaim some semblance of control.

Seeing an opportunity, Gabriel swiftly reaches into Mr. Cadwell's bag and pulls out a set of sturdy ties. With a quick nod to Mr. Cadwell, the two of them move in coordination to secure Professor Langton. They push him into his teaching chair and bind his wrists and ankles, ensuring he's firmly restrained.

Mr. Cadwell steps back once Langton is secured, trying to catch his breath and gather himself.

Gabriel, on the other hand, crouches down to be at eye level with Langton. "You can make this easier for all of us," he says, his voice firm.
The professor simply smirks, now more confident with some distance between him and the knife. "Your move."

Gabriel's expression hardens, and he leans in, whispering, "Well, this is about to get a lot worse for you."

#

The classroom's fluorescent light casts a harsh, sterile glare, illuminating the cold tile floor. From the corridor, a melancholy tune from a guitar floats in, a poignant reminder of normal school life outside the room. Gabriel, with an edge of urgency, moves to the side of the room, grabbing paper towels and a spray bottle. He hastily scrubs at a sinister red stain, the color jarringly bright against the gray tiles.

He knew that every piece of evidence, every trace, had to go.

Mr. Cadwell, a tall figure with silvery hair, zips up his leather bag. Nearby, Professor Langton is tied to his chair, his formally composed face now a shade of terrified white.

"That wasn’t too difficult, was it?" Gabriel quips, a slight smirk on his face as he stands near Mr. Cadwell, the two of them of comparable height.

Professor Langton laughs bitterly. “You really think you've won? This situation is way over your heads.”

To Gabriel, it seemed almost as if he were joking.

Gabriel, unamused, taps Mr. Cadwell's shoulder and motions towards the bound professor. Turning his attention to the professor, he asks, “Care to elaborate on what we're missing?”

The professor’s dark eyes bore into them, "Thinking you've located Alana and her mom? That's not a win. By the end of this, you might just wish you hadn’t."
Gabriel rolls his eyes. “You don't seem to be in a position to make threats right now.”

The professor struggles against his restraints, a hint of desperation in his voice. "Just end it. If you don’t, he will."

Mr. Cadwell raises an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

Leaning back with a sigh, Gabriel sits on the teacher’s desk. “Look, we're not going to kill you here. So seriously, spill. What’s going on?”

“AB won't be pleased,” the professor murmurs, his gaze distant. “If he learns I’ve revealed their location, he'll end us all. He controls every move we make. Fail him, and it's game over.”

AB? Gabriel wondered. He had always believed his contact was the top link.

Gabriel narrows his eyes. "There's no way we're leaving Alana at the mercy of your goons."

A glimmer of hope appears in Professor Langton's eyes. “How about a compromise?”

Mr. Cadwell scoffs. “Why should we trust you?”

“Haven't you been listening?” Professor Langton snaps back, frustration evident.

Gabriel raises a hand to calm the escalating situation. “Alright, what do you propose?”

The professor takes a deep breath. “Release me, and I'll order my team to back off. But you'll need to fake your deaths. It must happen at the cabin compound.”

Mr. Cadwell exchanges a glance with Gabriel, his skepticism clear. “And how do you propose we pull that off?”

“That’s your puzzle to solve. Once it's done, you vanish. Leave the country,” the professor says.

Gabriel effortlessly steps down from the desk. "Run?"
Never had such a fear gripped Gabriel, making him contemplate the idea of hiding.

Professor Langton’s tone is grave. “If AB learns you’re still breathing after I’ve confirmed your death, it’s curtains for us all.”

“And how can we be sure you'll hold up your end of the bargain?” Gabriel challenges.

The professor, voice trembling slightly, replies, “We're in this mess together now. I'll meet you at the cabin.”

"Alright," Gabriel says, slowly untying the professor, his expression guarded.

#

Beneath the shaded tree, dappled sunlight filters through the leaves, casting gentle patterns onto Gabriel's sedan dashboard. He hunches over the steering wheel, lost in a labyrinth of thoughts. Mr. Cadwell sits next to him, tension evident in his posture. In the backseat, Blaire fidgets, the silence punctuated only by the soft hum of the air conditioning.

Blaire, ever the optimist, breaks the silence. "Okay, so it's not all bad, right? We know where Alana and her mom are now?"

Gabriel thumps the dashboard with frustration. "If we can't pull this off, if we can't convincingly fake our deaths, we're done."

Mr. Cadwell lets out a weary sigh.

Blaire leans forward, her youthful enthusiasm shining through. "Come on, we just need a plan."

Mr. Cadwell’s voice takes on a bitter edge. "It's insane that we're dealing with the same guy who went after my daughter. I had to stop myself from taking him down in that class."

The thought of killing the professor crossed Gabriel's mind, but that would undoubtedly make AB suspicious. His own safety wasn't the issue; he was more concerned about the others.
"How do people even fake someone else's death?" Blaire asks.

"We usually don't," Gabriel replies, the hint of a smirk forming.

Blaire's eyes light up. "What about theater makeup?"

"I doubt children's Halloween paints will impress the top brass," Mr. Cadwell comments.

Blaire quickly pulls out her phone, scrolling through her gallery. She thrusts it toward Gabriel. "Look at these."

Gabriel's eyebrows shoot up as he scrolls through the images. "This is... seriously impressive, Blaire." He hands the phone to Mr. Cadwell, who seems equally impressed.

"I thought you were studying English, Blaire?" Mr. Cadwell inquires.

"I am," Blaire answers with a smirk. "This? It's from my 'Art of English Adaptations' class. We do a lot of stage stuff."

Gabriel, now animated, exclaims, "You're a genius, Blaire. Can you get the makeup supplies? Do you have them at home?"

Blaire hesitates. "Actually, they're in the theater room at school."

Gabriel and Mr. Cadwell exchange wary glances.

"I'll get them," Blaire offers. "It's less suspicious if I go. I'll just say I forgot something."

"Just be careful," Mr. Cadwell warns.

Blaire squares her shoulders and nods. "It's for Alana." With that, she slips out of the car, leaving the two men in her wake.

#
Chapter 22 - ALANA

I brush off a spider scuttling too close to my ear and push myself out of the tree's hollow. Daylight breaks, marking the end of my long, eerie night in the woods. My ankle throbs, feeling stiffer than it did yesterday. I massage it, trying to ease the tension before continuing on.

As I walk through the forest, the golden rays of sunlight through the leaves shift from the yellowish hues of morning to the stark brightness of midday. The sounds of the forest are a constant hum in my ears, but my own heavy breathing and the sporadic rustling of leaves beneath my feet grow louder as fatigue sets in. My throat feels parched, and the weight of the night's events weighs heavily on my mind.

The first hint of the sound of rushing water is almost drowned out by my own footfalls. But as the minutes stretch on, it becomes undeniable. Hope ignites within me. Didn't those survival shows always say that following water could lead to civilization? Without hesitation, I break into a run. Every step sends a jolt of pain up my leg, but the urgency to find safety, to return home, overshadows everything. I need to see my mother again. And my father... after the revelations from my mom, I understand him in ways I never imagined.

The rush of water grows louder, and soon, the forest opens up to reveal a swift stream. Relief floods me, and I drop to my knees, the cool dirt pressing against my skin. I cup my hands, greedily gulping down the crisp water. As each drop trickles down my throat, I'm struck by how I took simple things like this for granted in my old life.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I stand, taking one more deep breath of the fresh air. The music of the stream guides me as I decide to walk alongside it. Before I realize it, I stumble onto a worn path that leads to a road.
On the road, I swipe my hands along the gritty gravel. The distant hum of an engine perks up my ears. A car. I shuffle to the road's edge, stick my thumb out, hoping someone in this vast world might stop for a stranger like me.

The car edges closer, sunlight glinting off its metallic surface. Through the window, a woman with cautious eyes glances my way. Behind her, two young boys, about ten years old, peek with curiosity. My heart races, but as they all size me up, she accelerates, leaving me in a cloud of dust.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I fight back tears. Giving up isn’t an option, not yet. With the majestic Blue Ridge Mountains looming ahead, I keep walking, praying the next car might be the one to stop.

It's scorching in no time, and sweat trails down my forehead. Shielding my eyes with my hand, I try to keep the blazing sun at bay. A lone bird circles above, making me wonder if it sees me as its next meal. Just as I'm about to trudge forward, another roaring whoosh of a car grabs my attention. I freeze. The fleeting sight of it makes me think of Gabriel's car. But he would've stopped, wouldn't he?

As I ponder this, the distant sound of tires crunching on gravel reaches my ears. The car is reversing. Hope swells within me. And sure enough, as it draws closer, familiar faces come into view through the window: Gabriel, Dad, and Blaire. Tears blur my vision. They found me.

Blaire yanks open the backseat door, and I rush in. Pain shoots up my ankle as it twists, but I try to ignore it. Blaire wraps her arms around me, almost too tight, but the comfort is all I need. Dad and Gabriel both lean in, their faces etched with concern.

"Are you okay? Did you get hurt?" Gabriel asks.

I gesture to my ankle. "Sprained it when I jumped from the window."
Dad's arms replace Blaire's as he pulls me into a hug, his voice shaky. "I thought I'd lost you."

Before I can process everything, Gabriel's lips meet mine. The familiar warmth is comforting, but the realization that Dad is watching makes me pull back, my cheeks burning.

"We need to save Mom," I urge. "She's still inside."

Dad nods, determination in his eyes. "We're on it. Just hold on, okay?"

#

Nestled among towering pine trees, the cabin looks serene in the daylight, its wooden panels shimmering under the sun. It's quite different from the ominous silhouette I remember from nights past. To the side, an unfamiliar car with deeply tinted windows stands, sharply contrasting the natural surroundings. And from that car, Professor Langton emerges, oddly clad in black, his attire making him seem even more out of place, almost menacing.

A surge of unease rushes through me. "Why is Professor Langton here?" I ask, gripping the car door handle so tightly I can feel its hot metal imprinting into my skin.

"Oh, I might've missed mentioning that he's Gabriel’s contact," Blaire says.

"Contact? What does that even mean?" I say, my voice betraying my rising anxiety.

Why on earth would Gabriel be associated with our professor?

Blaire shares a quick, significant look with Gabriel before turning to my dad and muttering something under her breath. But it's Gabriel's voice that breaks my spiraling thoughts.

"Alana," he murmurs, voice strained, "Can we talk? Please?" He stretches his hand out, waiting for me to take it.

Everyone seems to know something I don't. Am I the only one in the dark here?
Blaire's gaze lingers, suspicious, but then she moves towards my dad, giving us the space we evidently need.

Gabriel gently guides me towards a secluded spot near the back of his car. The crunch of leaves underfoot seems deafening in the silence between us.

"I always intended to tell you," he begins, hesitation evident in his voice. "Eventually, but with everything that's been going on, now I'm forced to at such an inopportune time."

Wait, is he married? Could he have a child? I might've jumped the gun dating someone older.

I shift, wincing slightly as a sharp pain shoots up my ankle.

"Want to sit down?" Gabriel offers, noting my discomfort.

I shake my head. "No, I need to hear this. What's up?"

Universe, I beg you to stand with me just this once.

He hesitates, then ventures, "Remember our first date?"

"The restaurant reservation?" I say, my mind drifting to the gentle glow of fairy lights and our effortless conversation.

"Yes, that one. But more importantly, do you remember our conversation about... the interview?"

This is going to haunt me forever.

I sigh, massaging my temples where a dull ache is forming. "Gabriel, we talked about this. I felt guilty for snooping around and jumping to conclusions—"

He holds up a hand, imploring. "Lana, please. Let me finish."

Nodding, I wait, a sinking feeling forming in my stomach.

His voice drops to a whisper. "What I said... was true."
My heart skips a beat, and I search his eyes for clarity. "Wait, what are you saying?"

He takes a deep breath, visibly struggling. "Alana, I... there are things I do, things I've done. I've hurt people. It's my... job."

I stagger, sinking to the ground, the weight of the revelation too much. "So, you're a contract killer, in real life? Everyone's been lying to me. I'm surrounded by lies."

Gabriel kneels beside me, his eyes searching mine. "I wanted to find the right moment to tell you." He reaches out to touch my shoulder, but I pull away, hugging my knees close.

"How can there ever be a 'right moment' for that?" I snap.

He swallows hard. "I was afraid... Afraid of losing you."

From afar, Professor Langton's impatient voice cuts through the tension. "Are we moving forward or not?"

"Alana," my dad begins, trying to reach out.

Gabriel's voice is soft, urgent. "I love you, Lana."

My heart says one thing, but my mind another – how can I love a killer? I was born into my family, but this choice is mine to make. How do I handle this?

Brushing off the leaves and gravel from my jeans, I stand up, my head spinning. "We should get this over with," I whisper, taking the lead.

#

Inside, we're ushered into a bleak room with blank walls, and beneath our feet lies a cracked and faded tiled floor. The most unsettling feature is the drain situated right in the center. On one side, there's something resembling a handheld shower head, but a shiver runs down my spine. This room isn't meant for bathing.
We're surrounded by a group of intense-looking men. We have a plan, sure, but the way they eye us, it's like they might change their minds any second. They might decide our presence is more trouble than it's worth.

Among them, Professor Langton stands tall, a silent authority emanating from him. It's obvious they respect — or perhaps fear — him. No one dares to meet his gaze unless spoken to.

My mom's right beside me, her fingers interlaced with mine. A surge of gratitude hits me for having her close again.

But then there's Gabriel. His eyes keep finding mine, and the intensity of his gaze provides a complete contrast to the coldness of the room. After everything we've faced, all I wish I could do is melt into his arms and forget the world. But, what would that say about me? Am I morally flawed?

“So, what’s the big idea?” Professor Langton’s voice slices through the tense silence, his eyes fixed intently on my dad.

Blaire, with her characteristically vibrant energy, unzips her backpack in a swift motion. It spills an array of makeup tools: foundation, concealer, and more, which crash against the tiles, echoing in the room. She begins listing her arsenal with expertise. “Setting spray, wax, liquid latex...” she motions to each. “And the pièce de résistance: fake blood.”

"Blaire, this is amazing," my mom says, her fingers squeezing mine, full of hope.

Professor Langton’s eyebrows threaten to meet his hairline. “Our very fate lies in the hands of a budding special effects artist?” His skepticism is palpable.

“I told you AB wasn’t playing around,” he continues, frustration evident. “The evidence needs to be ironclad. He isn't easily fooled, and has ways to detect digital deceit.”
Finding my voice, I step in. “It’s going to work,” I assert, meeting the critical eyes of the men. “Blaire’s unparalleled in her craft. And this isn't a digital gimmick—it's real-life artistry.”

Professor Langton considers this for a moment. “Time?”

Gabriel interjects, “As long as necessary.” His tone is challenging, daring anyone to counter.

Oh, let this be the solution.

Blaire rolls her eyes, diving back into her supplies. “If everyone stops talking and lets me work, it'll be done before you know it. Mr. Cadwell, ready?”

I watch her hands move in a blur, expertly mixing and applying her materials. It's fascinating to think that she once used these skills primarily for literary theater adaptations.

The room is thick with tension. My dad's fingers tap impatiently against his thigh, and Professor Langton constantly checks his watch. The group of men behind us, their expressions unreadable, only adds to the unease.

Blaire, seemingly immune to the pressure, continues her work. Every now and then, she steps back to admire her craftsmanship, making tweaks here and there. Fake bruises, gashes, and burns appear, making dad look battered and broken. By the end, even I have to squint to remind myself it's all fake.

Finally, she steps back with a satisfied sigh. “Done.”

Langton, ever so grudgingly, nods.

“Who’s next?” Blaire asks.

#

Gabriel sprawls out on one end of the room, looking all kinds of uncomfortable. My parents and I cluster on the opposite end, the chill of the ground seeping through our clothes.
Above us, Blaire stands, eerily illuminated by a few overhead bulbs. She steadily drips fake, but disturbingly realistic, blood onto our clothes, the floor, and the aged walls. The smell of the artificial blood, metallic and sweet, fills the air.

The entire scene, bathed in a haunting light, makes my skin crawl.

If this falls through, our fate is pretty clear. Fingers crossed it works.

"This is seriously creepy," Blaire comments.

A tear forms in my mom's eye, gratitude evident as she says, "Blaire, you have no idea how much this means to us."

"Let's hope so," Professor Langton says, slowly walking around us, assessing the setup. "Everyone else, out. We need space." He fixes his gaze on Blaire. "That includes you. And take your bag. We don't need it cluttering the shot."

Blaire hesitates, her fingers clutching her bag tighter.

Professor Langton catches onto her hesitation. His voice hardens, protective, "If anyone lays a hand on her, they'll regret it." He gestures for her to proceed.

I reach out, squeezing Blaire's hand. "You'll be okay," I murmur, hoping my words sound more confident than I feel.

With one last glance over her shoulder, she sneaks out the door. Langton isn't far behind, and the way he slams the door shut sends my pulse skyrocketing. He quickly pulls out his phone and, after filming a brief message for AB, he starts recording.

#

With the cold biting into us, we cluster together, Professor Langton towering over our small group.
“If there’s even a hint of suspicion, trust me, I’ll know,” Langton warns. “And I won’t hesitate to pull the trigger myself.”

A chill runs down my spine. Gabriel, sensing my unease, wraps an arm around me. This time, I lean into his embrace, grateful for the comfort.

“We won’t let that happen,” my dad says, rising to confront Langton. Their eyes lock in a silent battle of wills.

“How much longer?” My mom's voice is filled with worry as she gently brushes a stray strand of hair from my face.

“We wait,” is all Langton says, his voice as cold as the room.

Time seems to stretch endlessly until, finally, Langton’s phone rings. He answers with a nod, signaling the caller is the one we’re waiting for—AB. They converse for what feels like way too long, and I can't suppress the tremor that takes over me, my teeth chattering from both the cold and anxiety.

Finally, Langton ends the call and faces us, his expression unreadable. “We’re all clear.” He swallows hard. "But I can't stress this enough: disappear, and don’t even think about staying in the states. If you do, he’ll know, and you already know what that means.”

#
Chapter 23 - BLAIRE

Blaire hunches on her bed, nestled amid a heap of throw pillows, each bearing faded images of band logos. Alana's safety-driven departure left a void that the quiet town of Virginia seemed incapable of filling. Though she had made a bunch of gamer friends, nobody could replace her best one. She traces a chip in the paint on her bedroom wall, lost in thought when her phone shivers against her thigh.

With a sigh, she picks it up, smiling at new texts from Alana. They have been her lifeline. “I miss you,” she types, her thumb hovering over the send button before typing out, “I bet the food is amazing there. Send me a pic, so I can pretend I’m eating it too.” A small chuckle escapes her as she sends it, picturing Alana’s animated face. With a muted thud, she falls back onto her bed.

“Blaire,” her dad's voice calls out from the living room.

“Yeah?” she says, stretching out the word.

“Your mom and I are heading out for a bit,” he says.

“Date night,” she chants, reaching for a half-empty bag of chips on her nightstand.

“We won’t be long,” her mother chimes in, her voice closer now. “You sure you’ll be okay?”

“Go. Have fun. Seriously,” Blaire says.

Her mother’s face appears at the door, a soft smile on her lips. “You sure? It’s been quite the change for you. But hey, fantastic news about Alana’s dad’s job, right?”

Blaire nods, forcing a smile. “Yeah, Mom. It's awesome. Go enjoy your date.”
Minutes slip by unnoticed as Blaire dives into reality television. An abrupt rattle at the door startles her. She springs off her bed, her heart fluttering in her chest. “Mom, you’d lose your head if it weren’t screwed on,” she says, smiling as she makes her way to the front door.

But when she swings it open, no one is there.

*Odd, could’ve sworn I heard something.*

She shuts the door and turns around, to feel a rough hand clamp over her mouth. She attempts to scream, thrashing against her assailant, but nothing but a raspy wheeze escapes. Terror rising, she claws at the hand clenched over her mouth, her nails raking flesh. Still, her cries are stifled, muted into muffled whimpers.

“Quiet now,” a man whispers close to her ear.

Another man steps into view; she recognizes him as one of the guys from the cabin room with Professor Langton.

"Have a seat," the man releases her, gesturing to the couch with a cold, calculated smile.

*What does he want? Why is he here? Oh, I can’t die like this.*

Blaire complies, her legs trembling as she lowers. The man she remembers sits across from her, his eyes never leaving. But it’s the man near the door that scares her the most.

He strolls over, sitting down next to her. “Heard about your little magic trick,” he says, his jaw clenching.

“I don’t know what—” Blaire starts but is cut off by his laughter.

“Oh, come on. No need for pretenses,” he says, dismissing her feigned confusion with a wave of his hand. He nods towards his companion, who produces a small, black box from his pocket and hands it over to Blaire. Her hands quiver as she takes it.

*This is bad, really bad. Do I even want to see what’s in there?*
“Open it,” the man says.

Her eyes linger on the box, her fingers trembling as they hover over the silky ribbon. With bated breath, she tugs at the bow, letting it fall away. The lid eases off with a soft shudder. Her pulse drums against her temples, her hands betray her and she loses her grip. The box tumbles, its contents rolling across the carpet, now exposed in the middle of her parents' living room.

“Th-that’s an ear?”

The man leans closer, his breath sharp against her cheek. “A little incentive for you to be cooperative,” he says. "Plus, I really hate liars, and the professor lied to me."

Familiar face rises from his seat across from them. The man before her pulls a handkerchief from his breast pocket, stooping to polish the toes of his dress shoes. "So," he says, glancing up at her as he continues his shining, "where are they?"

#
Chapter 24 - ALANA

The streets of Naples resemble a sepia-filtered snapshot from Instagram. Narrow alleys with clotheslines stretch between ancient, crumbling buildings, the scent of fresh pizza dough wafting from tiny osterias, and the distant hum of Vespas zipping around every corner. And in the backdrop, the Bay of Naples gleams under the midday sun.

This was the dream, after all - a fresh start. No more chaos. No more shadows from the past.

The uneven cobblestones tap a rhythmic tune beneath my now not-so-white sneakers. I adjust the strap of my leather purse, its familiar weight a constant reminder of the life we left behind.

"Turista?" A familiar voice chimes in.

I whirl around, a smile tugging at my lips. It's the old man from the café, my unofficial guide to all things Naples.

"Still?" I laugh. "After all this time?"

Has it been a month already?

His laugh is warm, the timbre of it now familiar. "Some things never change. But Naples, she's got a hold on you now, hasn't she?"

“I think she might have,” I say, spotting my mom at a nearby shop. Naples is beautiful, but it still feels like we’re just visiting.

He taps the table in invitation. "Naples has stories. She's seen so much - joys, sorrows, wars, and peace."
Before I can reply, the chime of a shop door catches my attention. Mom’s approaching, cradling a small box. A brief shadow crosses her face before she forces a smile. “You won’t believe what I found.”

Inside, nestled against velvet, is a pendant in the shape of Mount Vesuvius. "A symbol of our new beginning," she whispers.

I fiddle with the pendant, my throat tightening.

"I'm trying," she says.

It seemed so simple when danger was all around, but now the quiet moments between us are the most challenging. Without a common enemy, can we rebuild?

A rush of memories threatens to overwhelm me, but I push them aside. "It's beautiful, Mom."

She sneaks a glance at her watch. "We should head back. Your father wants us to cook spaghetti tonight—wants the family together at the same table."

They're all here, yet each added to a downpour of hardship. This is harder than I thought.

I nod my head, but then remember, "Gabriel's still in the café."

The old man winks. "Ah, young love."

"There he is," my mom points out.

This was the goal, right? Family here, Gabriel, having the option to finish school. But tending to the scars feels like it’s undoing the happiness.

“You okay?” Mom's voice weaves its way into my thoughts.

“Just...missing Blaire,” I say.

It never occurred to me that leaving meant she wouldn't be with us.

“I get it,” she replies, squeezing my arm gently. “Maybe she can visit soon.”
As Gabriel approaches, a sudden collision jostles him.

The guy doesn't even stop to apologize. He strides a few steps away, pausing beside an ancient fountain where water cascades over timeworn stone. The murmur of the water seems loud..

From his vantage point, the man's piercing gaze locks onto Gabriel. With a deliberate motion, he tosses a coin into the fountain's depths, and without another glance, melts away into the crowd.

Gabriel, his face drained of color, pulls a crumpled note from his pocket. The scribbled message appears to intensify his distress. He reads it multiple times, his shoulders stiffening. Without uttering a word, he thrusts the note back into his pocket, grabs my hand, and says in a hurried hush, "They know me here."

#