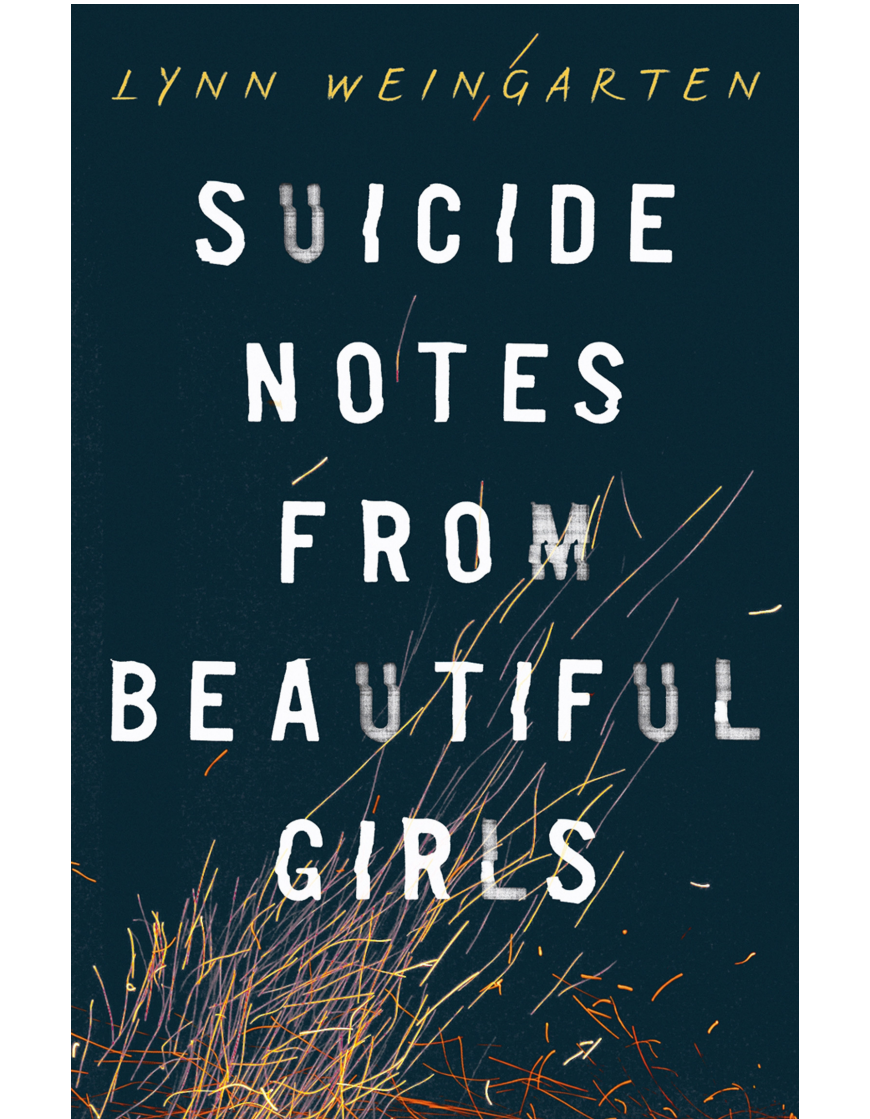


LYNN WEINGARTEN

SUICIDE  
NOTES  
FROM  
BEAUTIFUL  
GIRLS



# Lynn Weingarten

## Suicide Notes from Beautiful Girls

### Аннотация

The New York Times bestseller from the author of *Wherever Nina Lies* and *The Secret Sisterhood of Heartbreakers*. When June met Delia, she was a lifeline. Their intense friendship gave her a sense of belonging, of security, that she'd never had before. She felt braver, smarter, funnier, more attractive when Delia was around. But then something went wrong, and Delia and June haven't spoken for a year when an announcement is made at their school that Delia is dead. June barely has time to mourn before Delia's ex-boyfriend convinces her that Delia didn't kill herself but was in fact murdered, and June is fast swept into a tangle of lies and deceit – and a conspiracy she can barely conceive of, never mind believe. Stylish, sexy and atmospheric, with so many twists it will leave you breathless. Fans of Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* will love this. Lynn Weingarten is a writer and editor of books. *Suicide Notes from Beautiful Girls* will be her fourth young adult novel published in the USA, and her UK debut. She lives in Brooklyn, New York where she likes reading, eating snacks, playing with fluffy animals, and plotting ways for made up people to brutally murder each other.

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About the Author

CHAPTER 1

*I'd forgotten what it was like to be that alone.*

For the ten days of winter break, I drove. I made my way past the crumbling houses in my neighborhood, the mansions a few miles away, out toward the hills and then back again through stretches of cold, flat land. Up and down the Schuylkill River and up and down the Delaware, I cranked the radio and sang loud. I needed to hear a live human voice, and I was my own best hope.

But now break is over. I'm walking up toward school from the far lot, and I'm happy because I'm here, because it's done. I

know you're supposed to like vacation, but it was lonely, that's the thing, like I was floating off into space, tethered to nothing.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I fish it out, a text from Ryan who I haven't seen yet because he only got home last night: by the way got something in vermont I want to give you. Then a second later another one: not herpes.

I write back: good because it would be really awkward if we got each other the same present.

I click send with one frozen finger. Warm puffs of air escape through my smile.

I walk into homeroom, and Krista looks up like she's been waiting for me.

"Oh my God, June," she says. Her eyes are half open, and she's wearing a pair of red plastic glasses instead of her usual contacts. "Is it possible, *medically*, that I'm still hungover from Tuesday? That was two entire days ago!" She takes her big orange purse off the chair next to her so I can sit.

"Given everything, yeah, that seems likely," I say. She grins as though I mean this as a compliment.

The only thing I did over break, other than drive, was go to a party at Krista's boyfriend's house, which is a little weird since we're not close friends or anything. But we talk in homeroom sometimes, and neither of us has a lot of other options is I guess the truth of it. When I got the text about her boyfriend's party, I'd been alone for so many days that I just said yes.

Her boyfriend, Rader, lives thirty-five minutes away, right at

the edge of Philly, in a run-down apartment that he shares with friends. He's older, and his friends are too, some of them in their twenties. The party was mostly guys and the air was hazy with a few kinds of smoke. When I walked in, Krista was already trashed and going upstairs to Rader's bedroom. I felt all these guys turn and give me the up-down. And I suddenly understood why I'd been invited – not for her, but for them. I spent the whole night leaning against the wall not really talking to anyone, watching the party like a movie.

“Rader asked me to get your number for Buzzy,” she says. She rubs her eyes.

I have no idea who Buzzy is. Maybe he's the tall guy who kept coming out of the bathroom sniffing and wiping his nose, or the guy with *A S S S* tattooed on his knuckles, or the one in the velvet shirt who kept asking if I wanted to touch it (I didn't) and who tried to put a shot of tequila in the fish tank (I stopped him).

“I have a boyfriend,” I say.

“Wait, you *do*? Who?”

“Ryan Fiske.”

Krista raises her eyebrows like maybe I'm joking.

“Seriously,” I say.

She tips her head. “No shit.”

I shrug. I'm not surprised that she's surprised. We've been a couple for over a year, but mostly no one knows about us. I guess we don't exactly seem like people who would be together.

“I wouldn't have thought you'd be dating someone so . . .

*normal.*” Krista means this as an insult, to him.

“Well, you don’t know him,” I say. But the truth is, he *is* normal. And it is comforting, somehow.

Ryan is one of those people who slides effortlessly into whatever social group he wants without even thinking about it. He is comfortable everywhere, and tall and handsome in the sort of way where even if he isn’t your type, you can probably appreciate the bones in his face and the fact that they’re all exactly where they’re supposed to be to make a face pleasing.

He’s a little bit of everything, I guess is what it is. And I’m not sure what I am. I don’t think most people give me much thought at all, which is fine by me.

“I hope he’s at least secretly into something freaky,” Krista says. And then she winks and lets out a pained little moan. “My eyes are not ready for winking yet.”

A second later the announcements begin. “Good morning, North Orchard students and faculty. Can I please have everyone’s attention?” It’s Vice Principal Graham. There’s something strange in his tone. I sit up and listen. “It is with deep sorrow and a heavy heart that I must deliver some very sad news. A member of the North Orchard High community passed away over break.” He pauses to clear his throat. And in that moment, I stop breathing. I think everyone does. In that moment it could be any of us. “Junior Delia Cole passed away yesterday. Ms. Dearborn and Mr. Finley and the rest of the counseling staff will be available for anyone who needs to talk, and my door is always

open as well. Our thoughts and prayers go out to Ms. Cole's friends and family during this difficult time."

The loudspeaker clicks off. And then there is silence, and the ding of the bell. The school day has officially begun.

My head detaches from my body. It rises right up into the air and floats toward the door, and so I follow it.

"He didn't say how," someone whispers. "What could have happened?" They sound confused, as though her death was so unlikely.

But I can so easily imagine a million ways Delia might have died. Maybe she climbed up onto the old closed-off bridge that stretches over the reservoir and went out onto the rotted part beyond the DO NOT PASS sign. Or she was up on someone's roof looking up at a big bright moon and teetered onto the delicate edge, even as they begged her not to. Maybe she walked across the road with her eyes closed, playing a game of chicken like she used to, her final moment the howl of a horn, a rush of adrenaline, and sudden blinding light.

Ryan is waiting for me outside homeroom. We lock eyes and he stands there staring, frozen, like he isn't really sure what to do with his face. And I'm not sure what to do with mine, either, because it doesn't even feel like my face anymore. I start walking toward him and he pulls me against him into a hug. His arms are strong and warm like always, but right now I can barely feel them.

I say, "This is . . ." And I stop because my brain has run out of words, and there's nothing in my head but air.

“. . . completely nuts,” he says. He is shaking his head. And it occurs to me that this is the first time either of us has mentioned Delia, referred to her at all even, in over a year. I thought we would at some point – that it would be so strange when we finally did.

We make our way across campus, and he drops me off at the door of the English building, where my next class is. He leans in and hugs me again. The nylon of his jacket is smooth and cold against my cheek.

When he lets go, he looks down at the ground. “I can’t believe this happened.”

But the thing is, now that it has, it seems like it was always going to. Like somehow all along, Delia was far ahead of us, dead, and we are only just now catching up.

“I don’t know if it’s weird to say this now,” he says, “but I really missed you.”

And I know in a different version of the world than the one we are in, this would send a jolt of pleasure up my spine. So I say, “Me too,” but being apart from him and winter break and everything that happened before this moment seems very far away. I can’t really remember what missing feels like, or any other feelings either.

## CHAPTER 2

*I went to classes.* My brain registered nothing. It mattered even less than it normally did.

It’s right after lunch now. I’m in the bathroom standing at the

sink. There are two girls three sinks away, juniors like me. I don't know them well, but I know their names: Nicole and Laya. Nicole always wears big silver hoop earrings and Laya always wears a ponytail so tight it looks like her face might split. They are passing a stick of eyeliner back and forth.

I'm not really paying attention to them, to anything, until there's a buzzing sound – Laya's phone receiving a text. And then a half second later there's Laya's highpitched voice shrieking, “No fuh-reaking way.”

I look up. Nicole is lining her bottom lid, pulling at her face so you can see the pink around her eye. “What?”

Even though I don't know what Laya is going to say, my heart is psychic and decides to start pounding.

“So you heard how Hanna's older brother is training to be a police officer, right?”

Nicole nods, her head bouncing like it's too heavy for her neck to hold up.

“And you know how they didn't say how she died, right? Well, she said he said that's because” – Laya pauses, getting ready to say something juicy – “it was suicide.”

Through the fog of feeling nothingness, my stomach drops, my heart stops beating. I lean forward, like I've been punched.

Nicole turns to Laya. “Whoa.”

“Yeah. On New Year's Day.”

“Oh my God, that is so sad!” Nicole sounds excited. “How?”

Laya shrugs. “Hanna's brother didn't tell her.”

“I read a thing once that women, girls, whatever, are more likely to use pills, but I don’t know, I could sort of see her, like . . .” Nicole puts her two fingers together and sticks them in her mouth. Then she jerks her head to the side and lets her tongue hang out.

The water is pounding down into the sink and splashing onto my shirt. Maybe I am going to throw up.

“She always seemed sort of off the rails . . .” Laya says.

“Totally. Like one of those famous people who do insane things, except not actually famous.”

“Yeah, like, famous only in her own head, though.”

My sink has filled up. Water drizzles out onto the floor.

I face them now, something inside me sparks and catches fire. “Stop talking about her like that,” I say. I try to keep my voice from shaking. They turn toward me, like they’re only now noticing that I’m here at all. “Just fucking stop it.”

“Um, hi?” Nicole says. “Private conversation. Besides, were you even friends?”

She looks at me, lips pursed slightly.

“Yes, we were,” I say.

“Oh,” says Laya. “Sorry.” And for a moment she almost kind of sounds it. Laya and Nicole exchange a quick look and then head toward the door without another word. They are best friends, which means they don’t always need to speak to understand each other. I watch them go. There’s a squeezing in my chest, and my eyes tighten. The tears are starting to come,

but I grit my teeth and I blink them back.

The thing is, when I said Delia and I were friends, that wasn't really true.

If we were still friends, then when I saw Delia's name flashing on my phone two days ago for the first time in over a year, instead of clicking ignore and not even listening to the message, I would have picked up. I would have picked up and heard Delia's voice, and would have known something was wrong. And then, no matter what Delia said, no matter what Delia was planning, I would have stopped her.

### CHAPTER 3

#### 1 YEAR, 6 MONTHS, 4 DAYS EARLIER

*It was a relief to know she didn't have to explain.* Not about the ache in her chest, the pit in her stomach, where it was coming from, and how much she didn't want to talk about it – Delia would just get it. She always did.

June imagined what Delia was about to say, maybe something along the lines of, “Parents. Fuck 'em,” or “Only boring people have perfect lives.” Delia could make you feel like the things you didn't have were things you didn't want anyway. She changed the whole world like that.

So that's what June was expecting, standing out there in the summer sun, waiting for Delia to fix this.

Delia tipped her head to the side as if she was considering something. She raked her curls behind her ear, hiked up her low-slung cutoff shorts, then reached out and took June's hand. She

squeezed it tight, but still she didn't say anything at all. She just grinned and waggled her eyebrows.

*Then she started to run.*

And because she was holding June's hand so tightly, and June's hand was attached to June's arm, which was attached to June's body, June had no choice but to run with her. She stumbled at first, adrenaline coursing through her veins as she plunged toward the ground, then righted herself. Delia was ahead of her, arm stretched back, racing across the empty field, legs pumping, pulling June right along.

"Wait!" June begged. "Please!" June was in flip-flops. They were flapping against the grass until she accidentally ran right out of one of them. "I lost my shoe!"

But Delia didn't wait or stop.

"Fuck your shoe!" Delia called out.

So what could she do? June kicked off the other one and pumped her legs. When was the last time she ran as fast as she could?

"But where are we GOING?" June shouted.

"WE'RE JUST RUNNING," Delia shouted. Trees zipping by them, they were flying through the air.

The pit in June's stomach dissolved, sweat broke out along her back, her lungs were bursting. But still they ran, giddy and breathless, the pieces of June's life dropping away bit by bit until she was nothing but legs in motion, arms, a heart, a hand, held. A body, stumbling, tripping, almost falling. Except she wouldn't

fall, that's the thing. Delia wouldn't let her.

## CHAPTER 4

*After school I meet Ryan out front and follow him to his house like it's any other day.* That's where we always go, even though no one is ever home at my house after school and someone is almost always home at his, and we're supposed to want to be alone.

Ryan puts his arm around me as we walk inside into the enormous open foyer. Ryan's family is rich. For some reason I didn't even understand that when I first started coming over. I knew that his house was nicer than mine, that it felt much better to be in here in this big beautiful space than it ever did to be at home, but that wasn't saying much. Delia was the one who explained it to me the one time she ever came here. Ryan was out of earshot and she'd leaned over the edge of their giant leather sofa and stared at me in this really intense sort of googly-eyed way that she only did when she was already drunk. "Shit, J," she said. She was holding one of their very soft throws, stroking it like a bunny. "Why didn't you tell me that your *love-ah* was *loaded*?" But things were already kind of weird between us at that point, so I didn't say, "Wait, he *is*?" which is what I was thinking in my head. Instead I shrugged like it was nothing.

Now I'm on the sofa and Ryan has gone into the kitchen area. I can still see him from where I sit.

"Are you sure you don't want anything?" He opens the freezer. "You might feel a little better if you eat something."

I shake my head. I'm underwater.

While Ryan puts things in the microwave, I look down at the phone in my lap, at the tiny icon on the screen – the message from Delia, which I still haven't listened to. Which I can't even bring myself to mention.

The microwave dings and Ryan takes out his plate, carries it to the couch, and sits down beside me. He pulls his laptop onto his lap and opens up the Kaninhus website, which is Swedish for "bunny house." Basically there's a guy in Sweden who has these two rabbits who live in a penned-in area in his backyard, and the guy keeps a webcam on them all day long. Ryan showed me the site when we first started seeing each other. "I really, I mean, I really, *really* like these bunnies," he said, almost like he was embarrassed about it, which was what made it so charming. He told me his friends would think it was super weird if they knew. (His friends have an extraordinarily low bar for what weird is.) The bunnies mostly sniff around and wiggle their noses and eat stuff. We talk about them a lot, as though they are real and have hopes and dreams and complicated interior lives.

"Hi, Adi. Hi, Alva," he says to the rabbits on the screen. He is using a terrible fake Swedish accent, which is another one of our couple things. "How are you today, bunnies?" One of the bunnies is eating from a little dish. The other is asleep.

I guess he's trying to distract me, to keep my mind off things, as though somehow that's possible. Or maybe it's that he doesn't know how to talk to me about her, to have this conversation at all. I sure as hell don't either.

But I'm thinking how it feels wrong to be sitting here staring at these rabbits while Delia is dead.

And I'm thinking how Delia would say, *I'm dead, what the fuck do I care? Watch the fucking bunnies if you want to.* And then she'd curl up the corner of her mouth the way she did when she knew she was being sassy.

"How's your screenplay going, Adi?" Ryan says.

Normally I'd join in, ask Alva about her slam poetry or something (because we pretend they're both frustrated writers on a writing retreat in Sweden). Instead, I'm bursting with everything that I'm not saying about Delia.

I can't hold it in anymore. My mouth opens up and the words tumble out. "I heard it wasn't an accident."

Ryan turns slowly, the smile gone from his face. "Wait, like, are you saying she . . .?"

I nod. "Did it herself."

"Jesus. How?"

I don't know. "But . . . there's something else." My heart is racing. I need to get this out. "She called me two days ago." I hate hearing myself say this. I hate so much that it's true. "But I just let it ring. She left me a voicemail. I didn't listen to it at the time because I . . ." I stop. I didn't because I couldn't. Because I had worked so hard to try and put her out of my mind.

"What did she say?" he asks.

"I still haven't played it yet."

Ryan exhales slowly. "Maybe you don't need to. Maybe it will

only make things worse.”

“But how can things be worse than they already are?”

He just shakes his head, looks down, then leans back and holds out his arms in this way that I love, when I’m capable of feeling anything. Which right now I’m not.

I lean against him anyway, and he squeezes me tight. We stay that way, until the front door opens a few minutes later and Ryan’s mother and sister Marissa come in. We spring apart. I stand up.

“Junie, sweetheart!” Ryan’s mother. “We missed you over Christmas.” She puts her keys and her fancy purse down on the counter.

His sister waves to me as she walks up the stairs.

“Marissa told me what happened at your school today,” Ryan’s mom says. She frowns. “Such a terrible shame, a tragic waste. Did either of you know the girl?”

I don’t want Ryan’s mother to make a fuss, the way I know she will if she finds out the full truth. “I kinda used to, a while ago,” I say. “Not anymore.”

“Oh, honey, that’s still awful. I’m so sorry.”

She reaches over and gives me a hug. I know if she holds on too long, I will break apart entirely, because all of a sudden it turns out I am just barely holding myself together. I have to get out of here.

I pull away awkwardly. “I need to use the bathroom.” I feel Ryan watching me go.

Once I'm safely inside, I turn on the faucet and slide down to the floor, my back against the door.

I cannot wait any longer. I fish my phone out of my pocket and dial voicemail. I hold my breath.

First the automated recording. "Message received Tuesday, December thirty-first, three fifty-nine p.m." And then Delia. "Hey, J, it's me, your old pal." Her voice sounds at once completely familiar and like I've never heard it before in my life. "Give me a call, okay?" She pauses. "There's something I need to tell you."

That's it. That's all there is.

Suddenly, I feel the edge of the door pressing into my back. Someone is trying to come in.

"One second," I call out. My voice cracks.

I slip my phone back into my pocket, pull myself shakily to my feet. I splash water on my face and pat it dry with one of their soft towels.

I'd assumed there would be something in her voice to make this all make sense, but all that's here is Delia sounding exactly the way she always did. She doesn't sound like a girl who is getting ready to die.

Except . . . she was. It was the day before; she must have known. Did she call to tell me? Did she call so I could stop her?

I open the door. Marissa is standing there in the hallway, smiling at her phone. "Sorry," she says without looking up. "I thought you were with Ry. He's in his room."

I walk down to the end of the hallway. He's waiting for me on his bed, his blue plaid comforter bunched up behind him.

"Did you listen?" he asks.

I nod. "She said there was something she needed to tell me. But that was it. She always did like to keep people in suspense. Guess I will be forever now." I try to choke out a laugh. Delia would have liked that joke. But the laugh gets mangled on its way out and comes out like a cough and a sob. I won't let the tears come. I can't.

"I don't understand," I whisper.

Ryan shakes his head, he clenches his jaw. "It's beyond understanding." And he looks like he is going to cry too.

"Junie?" Ryan's voice jolts me out of my trance. It's later. We haven't been sleeping, just lying in bed, holding on to each other. The sun has gone down and the room is dark.

Now he holds something out in front of him. "Your present."

It's a tiny snow globe, a perfect winter ski scene behind glass. When I look closer, I realize the person on the slope is a rabbit.

"It's Alva," he says. "Or Adi." He smiles. "When they went on vacation."

I try to smile back, but my mouth won't work right. "Thank you," I say. "It's perfect." And I think about the rabbit wallet I have for him back home, how I ordered it custom from an Etsy shop and was so excited when it came. How I spent a long time wondering whether buying him a present referring to our private joke was somehow too *much*, too *serious*. And I thought for a

long time about whether to get one rabbit or two.

I remember the girl who only had that to worry about. It all seems like a million years ago now.

We make our way back downstairs. The kitchen is warm and bright and smells like sweet cooking onions. There's music coming out of the sleek speaker on the counter behind the sink – happy instrumental stuff with lots of percussion. Marissa sits at the kitchen table with her laptop open. Ryan and Marissa's older brother, Mac, is there now too, standing at the kitchen island. There's a tangle of peppers and onions sizzling in front of him in a pan.

Mac is nineteen and is different than the rest of his family. They all fit so easily into this world of happy family dinners, easy smiles. Even Ryan does, though on some level I think he probably wishes he didn't. It's a really good world to visit, but I've always only felt like a visitor. Sometimes it seems like maybe Mac kinda feels that way too. He graduated high school last year, and then went to Europe with his band. He came back a couple months ago and is starting a company with his friends, something to do with technology and filmmaking that's supposed to be a secret. He lives in an apartment in downtown Philly with a few other guys, but he comes here sometimes for dinners and things. I always get the sense that he has some kind of secret life, maybe part of the world I used to belong to before I met Ryan. When my whole life was wrapped up with Delia.

“Mom's at some exercise thing and Dad's working late,” Mac

says. “Here’s food if you guys want it.” He hands us each a plate piled with grilled shrimp and peppers and onions. He puts a platter of tortillas in the center of the coffee table and surrounds them with sour cream and homemade guacamole. Mac is a good cook, but the idea of eating seems absurd to me.

But not as absurd as the idea that Delia could be dead, which makes no sense at all.

I sit with my plate in my lap, barely moving.

Delia devoured life in greedy, gulping bites. She never had it easy – there was hard stuff with her family, and hard stuff maybe wired into her brain. But no matter how bad things got, she would never have chosen to leave the world when there was still the chance that things could change, and things could *always* change. There’s *always* hope. And the Delia I knew knew that.

*So what the hell happened?*

No one talks much at dinner. Ryan takes the onions off my plate and gives me the guacamole off his. I eat one bite. When the three of them are done eating, Ryan takes our dishes to the kitchen to load the dishwasher, and Marissa goes upstairs to her room. Then it’s just me and Mac. He comes over to the couch where I sit and leans in, voice low. “They’re having something for her tonight,” he says. “Her friends from Bryson, I mean.”

I stare at Mac. I wonder if he is purposely not saying this in front of Ryan. I wonder, maybe, if somehow Ryan told him what happened all that time ago.

“Where?” I ask.

Mac shakes his head. “Sorry, I wish I could tell you. I only heard that they were meeting at her favorite place. And I don’t know what that is.”

But I just nod and almost smile, because the thing is, I do.

## CHAPTER 5

2 YEARS, 5 MONTHS, 24 DAYS EARLIER

*By the time Delia and June got to the reservoir, the boys were already there.*

Delia linked her arm through June’s. “Don’t be nervous,” she whispered. “It’s not too late to change your mind.” She was using this gentle, sweet tone she only ever used with June and her cat.

But June shook her head. “I want to get this over with.” It was the summer after eighth grade, and June had decided it was time.

Delia snorted a laugh. “Well, that’s one way to think about it.”

They kept walking down toward the water, and June could hear the others now – laughter, the clink of bottles, and music coming out of someone’s phone. According to Delia, they were out there almost every night during the summer. They all went to Bryson, which was the school Delia would have gone to if she hadn’t convinced her mother to tell the school district that they still lived in their old house even after they’d moved in with Delia’s stepfather.

“Guys at Bryson are generally hotter,” Delia had told her once. “More skateboarding than soccer player, which is why it’s better not to go to school with them. Then you don’t have to see them in the morning and look at the oozy zits they popped when they got

out of the shower, or smell their coffee farts, and have no choice but to find them disgusting forever.”

And so when June mentioned not wanting to start high school still not having kissed anyone, Delia made a joke about kissing *her*, then laughed and said, “Well, you’ll just make out with one of the Bryson boys, then.” Like it was no big deal and already settled. Delia, of course, had kissed lots of people. Eleven, according to her list.

They made their way toward the tiny flickering campfire and stopped. Delia reached over one of the guys’ shoulders and snatched the bottle of beer from his hand. Then she backed up and sat on a rock. Delia stayed far from the fire. She always did. Fire was the only thing on earth she was scared of.

“Hey, D,” the guy said without turning. He had longish floppy hair and a black-and-white striped T-shirt.

“Hello, boys,” Delia said. “This is June.” She turned to June and handed her the beer. “June, I can’t remember any of their names. It doesn’t really matter, though.” Delia grinned at June. She was doing her Delia Thing, which guys always seemed to love. June held the beer tightly to keep her hands from shaking. She pretended to take a sip and looked at them more closely.

There were four: one shirtless with wiry muscles, two in black T-shirts who looked tough and cool, and the one whose beer she had. She watched as he raked his hair away from his face. He had a tattoo on the back of his wrist where a watch would be, a figure eight maybe, but she couldn’t say for sure. He caught her

staring at him, and by the light of the fire she thought she could see the tiniest hint of a smile.

“Tell us honestly, June,” Shirtless said. “Is Delia paying you to hang out with her?”

“No,” June said. “I’m her imaginary friend.”

June hadn’t known what she was going to say until the words popped right out. When she was around Delia, she was a better, more clever version of herself. Like she really was someone Delia had made up.

All the boys laughed. And for a second June felt bad; maybe it wasn’t nice of her to join in with the boys’ teasing. But Delia laughed too, and slung her arm over June’s shoulder, proud.

“Then how come we can see you?” said Shirtless.

“She must have a very powerful imagination,” Striped Shirt said. “A dirty one.” He was staring directly at June then. She felt herself blush, and she was glad it was dark. She liked the way his voice sounded, sexy but playful, like he was saying that but also making a joke about someone who would say that, all at the same time.

June glanced at Delia, who was looking back and forth between them. Delia gave June a tiny nod. *Him*. A minute later when the boys asked them to sit down, Delia arranged it so that June and Striped Shirt were sitting next to each other. And then a minute after that Delia walked toward the water. “Hey,” she shouted. “Come with me if you’re not a pussy.” They all watched as she stripped down to her bra and underwear, climbed up to

the top of the tall rocks, and threw herself off into the reservoir.

“We better go down there and see if she died,” Shirtless said. Even though they could already hear her splashing and whooping below. Shirtless and the two in black stood up.

“Next time you take a drink from your sink,” Shirtless said, “remember: My balls have been in your water.” He leaped off the edge, and the others followed.

And then it was June and Striped Shirt all alone, just the way Delia had planned it. He leaned over, put his elbows on his knees. She could see the tattoo on his wrist again. It was covered in plastic wrap. He reached out to rub it, like he wanted her to notice.

“I only got it a few days ago,” he said. “So it itches.”

“Does it mean something?”

“Yes,” he said. And she couldn’t tell if she was supposed to ask more questions or not. So she picked up a skinny stick and poked the end of it into the flame.

She wished very much that Delia were still there next to her instead of far away in the water. June’s heart was pounding. She felt small and scared. She closed her eyes, pictured Delia nodding. *Him.*

June took a deep breath, then turned toward Striped Shirt. In one swift motion she grabbed the neck of his shirt and pulled him in toward her until their lips were touching.

For one horrifying second he just sat there, lips slack. His mouth was cold and tasted like beer, and she thought about the

fish at the bottom of the reservoir that sometimes nibbled at their toes when they went swimming, and how this was what kissing one of them might feel like. But a half second later he started kissing her back, and a second after that he pushed his tongue against her lips. She opened her mouth and let it in.

*This is my first kiss, she thought. I am having my very first kiss now.*

But it didn't feel sophisticated or cool or even good. It was odd and a little gross, really. And suddenly, June was struck with something: For the rest of her life, no matter how many kisses she had, no matter who those kisses were with or what they meant, this was the one that came before all of them, out in the dark with a guy whose name she didn't even know. He would always be her first.

Striped Shirt reached up and put his hand on her boob. His hand felt small, in a creepy way, kind of like a child's. She thought maybe she wanted him to stop, wanted to undo this. But she wasn't sure how.

A moment later Delia and the boys were back, climbing up the rocks, dripping and shivering. June and Striped Shirt pulled apart.

Shirtless said, "Whoa, hey now," and started backing away when he saw them.

But Delia just stood there, wringing out her hair. June felt like she might cry.

"Come over here, D," is what one of the guys said. "I think

our boy and your imaginary friend could use some privacy.”

“How was the water?” June asked. She tried to make her question sound casual, but what she was hoping beyond anything was that Delia would somehow figure out all that June wasn’t saying. And fix it.

Delia raised her pinky up to her mouth and ran it back and forth across her bottom lip. She was staring straight at June.

June scratched her ear. Their code.

A second later Delia glanced down at her phone, then said loudly in a voice only June would know was fake, “Oh shit. We have to go home now. Sorry Junester, my mom just realized we’re not at home. She’s totally going to kill me.”

June scrambled to her feet.

“That sucks,” said Shirtless.

“Parents, man,” said one of the others.

“So I’ll see you back here sometime?” Striped Shirt asked June. And June nodded, not meaning it, not even looking at him.

Silently they walked away. Delia held June’s hand the whole way home. She never brought it up again.

## CHAPTER 6

*When I get home, the apartment is dark, but I can hear the TV blaring through my mother’s bedroom door. It’s after nine and she’s not at work tonight, which means she’s drunk, and what is there really to say about that. I’ve long since gotten used to things being the way they are; in general I just try not to think about it. But as I climb up the narrow stairs, for one weak second I let*

myself imagine what it would be like if I could knock on her door and tell her what happened. I imagine her wrapping me up like Ryan's mom did. I imagine her telling me everything is going to be okay. I feel a wave of something then, longing, maybe. I shake it away. My mother wouldn't do it. And even if she did, I wouldn't believe her.

I go into my room, kneel down, and start pulling things from my drawers. In this moment I am calm again, a strange, faraway kind of calm, like I'm not really here at all.

Ryan tried to convince me to stay the night. "My parents won't mind," he said. "Considering everything . . ." His voice was soft and sweet, and even though I could hardly feel anything, I knew that if all of this hadn't happened, it would have made me happy that he wanted me to. And a part of me wished so much that I could say yes, that I could curl up on his family's couch where everything is safe and warm and good. When his dad got home he'd make bad puns and turn on the news. He'd kiss Ryan's mother on the lips and Ryan would jokingly roll his eyes. Then Marissa would make popcorn with tons of this butter spray she loves, and we'd all sit together. I'd let their normalness swirl around me and envelop me. And I'd pretend like none of this had happened.

"I should go home," I told Ryan, "to be alone for a while, I think." And he seemed to understand, or at least he thought he did. He walked me out to my car and stood there watching as I drove away. *Alone*. I felt bad for lying to him. But what choice

did I have?

Now, here in my room, I get undressed. I pull out a pair of thick black wool tights. I put the tights on and my jeans back over them. I slip on my dark gray leather boots and lace them up. I am trying so hard not to think about anything, not to think about where I am going and why.

I rifle through my drawers until I find what I'm looking for. The sweater – so soft, dark green with delicate gold threads. This was Delia's. I haven't worn it in a very long time. She gave it to me back when things were still good with us. "It makes me look diseased," Delia had said, throwing it at me. "Please save me." Delia was always so generous and acted like it was nothing. Acted like you were doing her a favor accepting whatever she gave you.

It is the nicest sweater I own, by far. I put it on, my jacket over it, and a black scarf as big as a blanket, because it's January and I know it will be cold down by the water.

I park in the little alcove at the side of the road and get out. It's been years since I've been here, but I know the route by heart. There's a car right in front of the hole in the fence around the reservoir, and I shake my head. You're supposed to park far away. This is trespassing. No one is supposed to know that anyone is out here.

I squeeze through the hole and walk down the narrow dirt path. My stomach turns over and over. I hear quiet murmurs, and as I get closer the murmurs turn to words.

"You can't start a fire, man. It's too cold."

“Fuck off. I was a Boy Scout. I have skills.”

“Oh yeah?” A few people laugh. “They give out patches for rolling a jay?”

I can see them now, a small group huddled in a circle around the bonfire spot. Someone is bent down, flicking a lighter over a pile of twigs. They smolder weakly, thin ribbons of smoke curl up.

My eyes start to adjust, and by the light of the big bright moon I can make out thick coats, army jackets, hats, gloves. Their breath white in the icy air.

I walk up behind them, my heart beating fast. I don't belong here, here among her friends. “Hey,” I say. A couple of people half turn.

I work my way into the circle between a tall wiry guy and a tall girl with short dark hair and lips so red I can see them in the moonlight.

Someone takes out a bottle of vodka, the cheap kind that comes in a big plastic jug. “To Delia,” one of the guys says. “A girl who could really fucking drink.”

“To Delia,” the others say back. And then there's a splashing sound as someone tips the bottle over the ground. And I feel a deep wave of sadness – this is it, this is her goodbye, a few people standing out on a cold January night, pouring shit booze onto frozen earth. They pass the bottle, taking long gulps. Who were they to her? How well did they know her? How much do they care?

When the bottle gets to me, I hold it far from my face so I won't have to smell it. I don't know how to begin, but I know it might be my only chance for answers. So I just blurt it out.

"Was she in some kind of trouble?" My voice sounds strange and hollow.

A guy turns toward me. "What are you talking about?"

"Was Delia in trouble?" I say.

"Who even are you?"

"I'm June," I say. "A friend." And I feel like a liar.

There is a silence.

"Delia wasn't *in* trouble," the guy says. "She *was* trouble." He sounds pleased with himself, like he thinks this is a very clever line. I hate him, whoever he is.

Someone lets out a laugh. I keep going. "But something must have been really wrong," I say. "For her to . . ."

"Well, obviously," another guy says. "People who are fine don't generally off themselves."

"It's not like she would have said what it was though."

"If you knew her at all, you'd know that." Someone reaches out and takes the bottle from my hands. "Delia didn't tell anyone personal stuff about her life."

*But she did*, I want to shout. *She always told me.*

"Listen," another voice says. This one is female, kinder than the others, slightly southern sounding. Only before she can say any more, a bright light is slicing through the trees, lighting up our faces one by one. Two car doors slam and the beams from

two flashlights shine out into the night.

“Shit,” someone says. “Cops.”

“Tigtuff ?” one of the guys asks.

*Tigtuff ?*

There’s another voice then, gravelly and low. “Not on me, thank fuck.”

And all at once there’s frantic motion, everyone running in every direction. Adrenaline zips through my veins, but I force myself to stand right there. Here’s something I know that none of them seem to, that Delia never understood either: If you run, they will chase you; if you stay and fight, you might lose. Sometimes, when there’s danger, the answer is to curl into yourself and wait. I take tiny silent steps down toward the reservoir. I climb up over the big rock and crouch down.

It’s so peaceful there, the commotion behind me, the moon reflecting off the water, shimmering silver.

I turn toward the road. The cop car’s doors are open now, the light pours out from within. I see the silhouette of an officer holding a bottle up in the air. Someone was stupid enough to bring it up with them.

I stay where I am for a long time, as names are taken and tickets handed out. One person is led into the back of the police car, and everyone else is either driven or drives themselves away.

And then I am alone again. And I am afraid. And this time I don’t even know why. I start back up toward the road. My toe snags a root and I lurch forward, but I catch myself just in time.

My heart is hammering, and I'm not sure if it's the near fall or something else. I keep going, quietly, carefully. I can hear my breath and the wind and the beating of my heart.

Then, footsteps.

Someone else is out here. A square of blue light sweeps by.

I want to turn and run, but I know if I do, this person will hear me. I force myself to breathe. Whoever it is they must be here for the memorial, same as I am. But still, I reach into my pocket and wrap my fist around my keys so the sharp end sticks out between my knuckles. The light goes by again. It stops on me.

"Hello?" a voice calls out. It's low and male. The footsteps are getting nearer. "Please," the voice says. "Wait."

He's close. He holds his phone up to his face so he glows. Big jaw, thin mouth, short nose. I realize I know who he is.

I saw him with Delia a few months ago, out in the parking lot at school. I remember watching them, curious about her and this guy who wasn't her type. He was a wrestler, not tall, but wide and sturdy looking, like a bulldog. Wholesome, somehow, too. Delia had jumped up on him from behind, wrapped her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. And he ran around the parking lot, fast like she didn't weigh anything at all.

"I'm Jeremiah," he says. "I recognize you."

"We go to school together," I say, because sometimes when I meet people from North Orchard outside of school, I have to tell them this.

Jeremiah shakes his head. "Not from there. From a picture

she kept in her room. You both have these hats on. She talked about you. You're June."

I know exactly what photograph he means, because I have a copy too. Mine is in the back of my closet, and I haven't looked at in a very long time.

"I'm sorry, you're too late. For the memorial I mean," I say. "People were here before." I try to slow my still pounding heart. "Other ones. But the police came."

"I know. I was watching."

"You didn't come down."

"I wasn't here to drink with those people." He pauses. "I came looking for answers."

There is something in his voice then; it hits me in the center of my chest. "Me too," I say. "I'm trying to find out why she did it. Why she . . ."

The wind whistles. I pull my coat tighter.

"She didn't kill herself, June." Jeremiah leans forward. "Delia was murdered."

A pulse of white-hot energy rushes through me. I stare at his face, half lit under that big yellow moon. "What are you even talking about?"

"She hung around with a lot of messed up people. She wasn't afraid of anyone or anything. Even when she maybe should have been. She wouldn't have killed herself, and if it looks like she did . . ." He pauses. "Then it's because someone made it look that way."

I reach out for something to grab onto. There's nothing but air.

"So we have to figure out who did this to her," he finishes.

"Because no one else is going to."

I say, "If someone . . . I mean . . . We need to go to the police."

"I already went. And they wouldn't listen. They pretended to humor me, then gave me some pamphlets on grief and sent me on my way." Jeremiah leans forward again. "We have to figure this out ourselves."

His words are sinking in.

"You're the only other person who cares enough to ask the right questions."

I can barely breathe.

"She wouldn't have done this to herself, what they're saying she did," he says.

"But what *are* they saying?"

Jeremiah is quiet for a long time. "Come with me," he says finally. "There's something I need to show you."

## CHAPTER 7

*I follow Jeremiah back to the road. What the hell am I doing?*

*I feel like I'm in a dream. I think, This guy is crazy with grief.*

*I shouldn't be following him.*

We get in our cars.

We make our way on narrow twisty roads. Up Beacon, down McKenna, onto leafy Red Bridge. It seems like we're heading to Delia's house, but instead of pulling up in front, Jeremiah makes a sharp right and pulls into the cul-de-sac that connects to the

woods behind it. He parks. I pull in behind him.

For a moment I sit there in the silent dark, the only light the yellow circle from someone's front porch. I press my hand to my chest. I haven't been anywhere near Delia's house in over a year, but I used to come here nearly every day. This was more my home than my actual house was.

I open the door and step out. Jeremiah is waiting for me. I will the memories to stay away. I can't handle them now.

"It's down through the woods," he says quietly.

He holds up his phone again, flips on the blue light. He steps up onto the grass between houses and disappears among the trees. I follow.

We're surrounded by darkness. The leaves crunch beneath our feet. I breathe heavy. In, out, in. *And that's when I smell it:* this strange scent I cannot understand. It's weak at first, but as we reach the edge of the trees, it hits me like a punch in the face. There's burnt wood and leaves, scorched rubber, melted plastic, gasoline. I pull my scarf up over my mouth and nose. But it doesn't matter – the stench is so strong.

"What the hell is that?" I say.

We are standing at the edge of Delia's backyard now. Jeremiah points his phone toward the remains of a structure out in the grass. I can't tell what it is.

"How they say she did it," he says.

"How she . . ." I stop. Then I remember: This is where Delia's stepfather's shed is supposed to be. *He uses it to drink and jerk*

off, Delia had said. And what I'm looking at now is what's left of it – half of a wall, a metal frame, and a pile of burnt things.

Jeremiah turns toward me. “*This* is how they're saying Delia killed herself. That she burned herself to death in there.”

I breathe in. I can taste it. My legs start to shake.

“There was firewood inside. She doused it in lighter fluid, herself too, and lit it up. *Whoosh*. So they say.”

I can feel the heat crawling up from my stomach. Images flash. *Delia trapped, fire all around. She's scared, screaming.*

And it's real now. I can't breathe. Delia, who was so tough, who would say anything, do anything, go anywhere, wasn't brave about everything. Memories come – Delia shrinking away from a tiny bonfire on the night she first confessed it. Delia flipping out because a guy was playing around with a lighter too close to her. I remember the look in her eye when she told me about her nightmares of nothing but flames. *If I have one while you're here*, she had said, squeezing my hands tight, *you must promise, promise you will come and wake me up.*

Delia was scared of just one thing. This was it.

“There's no way she did this,” I say. And I know in that moment that what I'm saying is true.

Jeremiah nods. He turns toward me, out there in the dark.

“So now you understand,” he says, “why I need your help.”

We're up by my car now, Jeremiah and I. And I'm this close to losing it entirely.

“We can go back to the police,” I say. “Maybe we can tell

them . . .” I am desperate, grasping for anything.

“They’ve already seen this place. There’s no point in going to them until we can tell them something they don’t already know.”

“I haven’t . . . I hadn’t spent time with her in so long, I don’t know anything about . . . Where would we even start?”

Jeremiah turns away. “I might have an idea.” He raises his gloved hand and puts his finger on the window. “I did something a few weeks ago that I’m not very proud of.” He traces a circle in the condensation on the glass. “She got a lot of phone calls when we were together, but she didn’t always pick them up. I guess maybe I was a little jealous. She wasn’t always the easiest person to have as a girlfriend, you know.” The words are tumbling out of his mouth, faster now. “Usually she’d bring her phone with her when she went to the bathroom, but this one time a couple weeks ago she forgot, I guess. The phone was ringing, it had been ringing all afternoon. So I don’t know, I didn’t even really mean to, but then . . . I answered it. It was a guy, and he said, ‘There’s no point in trying to avoid me, I know your friends, I know where you hang out. I’ll find you.’ He was all crazy mad sounding. I asked who he was, what he wanted, but he hung up. I checked, and the name on the phone was Tigger. When Delia came back from the bathroom, I didn’t say anything. I knew if I did she’d get pissed at me for snooping and I didn’t want her to be mad at me. I’m such an idiot. I should have said something. I should have . . .” Jeremiah pauses then. He rubs the circle off the glass with his fist and looks up. “If we need somewhere to start, I think he’s it.”

I am silent. But all of a sudden, I realize something:

*Tigger. Tig.*

My breath catches in my throat.

*Tigtuff ?*

*Not on me, thank fuck.*

The pieces are clattering together, bits of memory arranging themselves into a shape.

“What?” Jeremiah says. He is staring at me, jaw set, head tipped to the side. “What is it?”

Down by the water they weren’t talking about “tigtuff ” but “*Tig’s stuff.*”

I open my mouth to tell him, I’m stopped by a thought. Can I trust him? This guy who I’ve never spoken to before, who spent tonight hiding out in the dark, watching, who answered Delia’s phone and never told her about it?

“Nothing,” I say. I press my lips together. But what’s Tig’s stuff ? It’s the sort of stuff guys like the ones down by the water might bring out for a night of getting fucked up. It’s the sort of stuff one would very much want to hide from the cops.

And as I understand this, I understand something else: just what that makes Tig . . .

## CHAPTER 8

*Before the sun rose, I was already there, sitting in my car in the parking lot of Bryson High. I haven’t been to sleep. For five hours I drove, thinking about Delia. It was like over Christmas when I was alone, only this time I was kept company by images I couldn’t*

escape. Every time I blinked, there was the shed, charred and crumbling. Every time I took a breath, there was that stench. I turned the radio up loud and forced myself to sing along. Scream along. It's what I had to do to keep the tears from coming.

Now I sit huddled in my coat and scarf, watching as the sky turns from black to gray to clear, cold blue. At 7:20 I get out and walk toward the school, waiting for the students to arrive. If this were a regular day, I'd be nervous knowing I'm about to have to talk to so many people I don't know, to ask them for something. But as it turns out, there are many worse things to be scared of.

Finally, they begin to trickle in – two tall girls in fuzzy boots and pea coats, a small guy with an enormous backpack, three huge dudes in football jackets.

I'm not sure who I'm looking for, exactly, and I could barely see them last night, but Delia's type of person is never that hard to spot.

There's a girl in all black with short dark hair. I walk up to her. "Did you know Delia Cole?" I say.

"Who?" the girl tips her head to the side, confused. She smiles slightly. I ask her again. She shakes her head.

I ask a guy with a skateboard and two girls wrapped together in one very long scarf, a kid with a Mohawk and a dozen more people after that. They all say no, but it doesn't even matter, because someone who knows her is here somewhere and I'm not giving up until I find them.

Three guys are walking toward me now. Two are tall and

lanky, one is shorter and sturdier; they're dressed in black and green and gray. I feel a tingling in my gut.

I make a half circle and come up behind them. They don't notice me. They're talking. I listen.

“. . . appear in court,” says one of them.

“I can't believe you're even here today.”

“My mother bailed me out at two in the morning. Then stood over my bed at six and told me to get up for school.”

“That's rough.”

“Yup.” The first one snorts. “Thanks so much for backing me up.”

“Well you're the one who *brought the vodka up to them*. What did you think they were going to do, make you a martini?”

These are the guys from last night.

I walk faster, fall in with their steps. “Hey.”

They turn toward me. One of them smiles slightly, looks me quickly up and down, the way guys do. I can feel my hair blowing around my face. I've never thought I looked like very much – average height, kind of curvy, eye-shaped eyes, nose-shaped nose, dark blond hair that falls right below my chin.

Delia always insisted I was hotter than I realized. “Everyone else who looks at you sees something you don't,” is what she used to tell me. But she was the type of person who would say that anyway, would actually *think* it anyway, because she loved you. Only maybe these guys are seeing something now – I can tell by the way they're looking at me, smiling slightly. They're glad I'm

there until I say, “You’re Delia’s friends.” And then all of their expressions change.

They start walking a little faster. I keep their pace.

“I saw you last night,” I say.

“Oh,” says the tallest one. He stops then and looks right at me.

“What’s up?”

He has dark hair gathered into a topknot, smooth cheekbones, a strong jaw, and full lips. Up close I get a sour whiff of last night’s alcohol seeping through skin. I remember them down there, drinking, laughing.

“Tigger?” I say, in case he’s one of them.

They’re all silent for a moment. “What’s that?” Topknot asks.

I pause. “I’m looking for Tigger.”

“Bouncing, bouncing, bouncing, bouncing?” Topknot says slowly. “Fun fun funfunfun?”

“Check Pooh’s corner,” says one of the others, grinning. This one is scruffy-faced, with a black wool hat pulled down low. He smiles.

I grit my teeth and force myself to smile back.

“I’m looking for Tigger the person,” I say. “I thought you might know him.”

Scruffy and Topknot glance at each other.

“Nope, don’t think so,” Scruffy says. But he’s lying. His voice is gravelly and low. I recognize it. He’s the one who said Delia was trouble.

I feel my palms begin to sweat. I have an idea. “I need a

hookup,” I say. “Delia was always the one who went to him, for both of us. And I don’t know where else to go now. I need a little . . .” I pause. “Help.”

They stare at me, wary, all of them.

I reach into my pocket. There’s a folded twenty I keep in there for emergencies. I pull it out and thrust it forward. “For your trouble,” I say.

Topknot and Scruffy exchange another look, and I know this was the wrong move. Now they’re even warier. “Sorry, can’t help you,” Scruffy says. “Have a good day.” Scruffy and Topknot turn and keep walking.

But the shorter one, he hesitates. He is broader than the other two, and his face looks softer, younger. Maybe he can hear in my voice how desperate I am. Maybe he really needs the money. He looks back at his friends, who have realized he isn’t with them and have stopped a few feet away. They’re watching him. He reaches out and takes the bill.

“Listen,” he says softly. He dips his hand into his black canvas messenger bag and pulls out a chewed-up pencil and little green notebook. There’s a tiny sticker on the cover, a fluffy chick with a parasol. He opens the notebook and starts to write. “There’s a party tonight at his house. If you need something, you can get it then.” He looks me in the eye. “But you probably shouldn’t mention Delia.”

I force myself to breathe slowly, to try to keep my voice from shaking. “Why’s that?”

“They weren’t always on the best terms.”

“Oh really,” I say. “Delia never mentioned . . .”

The guy shrugs. “I don’t really know the deal. I think she might have stolen something from him, not too long ago? All I’m saying is if you drop her name, he might try to jack up the price. He can be a dick like that.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

“Don’t tell Tig I told you that. Or about the party either, actually.”

“No problem,” I say. And then, “I don’t even know who you are.”

He bites his lip as he hands me the folded-up notebook paper. There on the back of his wrist, where a watch would be, is something I’ve seen before, something I remember from a night with Delia a long time ago – an infinity sign inked in black. I remember when this tattoo was fresh, and I first saw it by a bonfire. I remember how scared I was then, that fear a very different fear than what I’m feeling now. Warmth spreads across my cheeks. When I look up, he is staring.

“No,” Infinity says. He looks me straight in the eye and smiles ever so slightly. Does he remember? “I guess you don’t.”

I unfold the paper. There’s the address – Pinegrove Industrial Park, Building 7. And there’s my folded up twenty.

“It’s in Macktin, down by the water, he says.”

“Thanks,” I say.

Infinity nods. “Good luck.” He turns to walk away, then stops

and turns back. “Be careful. Tig . . . isn’t always the nicest guy.”

“I can handle it,” I say. And I shrug, more confident than I feel.

He gives me a half wave and goes back to his friends. I start the long cold trek back to my car.

What the hell had Delia gotten herself into?

## CHAPTER 9

2 YEARS, 4 MONTHS, 17 DAYS EARLIER

*Delia and June lay on their backs on the grass, fingers intertwined between them, staring up at the big blank sky.*

“Imagine floating off into that,” Delia said. Her voice sounded dreamy and wistful, the way it did when she was fucked up, which she currently was.

“If I ever get the chance to go to space,” Delia went on, “I’m definitely going.”

June laughed. But she closed her eyes. She didn’t even want to look at it.

“I’m serious. I’d go in a second. Everything down here is meaningless . . .”

June wasn’t high like Delia. She was sober as ever. She hated the idea of so much emptiness, above them, around them, everywhere.

“. . . but nothing bad has happened out there yet.” Delia finished. “It’s all brand new.” Delia inhaled deeply like she was sucking in the sky. “And if I go, you’re coming with me.”

Without even meaning to, June inhaled also. She felt Delia’s feelings curling into her body with her breath.

And when June opened her eyes again, she saw only soft velvet soft blackness, endless possibilities. It was beautiful.

## CHAPTER 10

*It's night-time again and I'm alone, driving down the dusty streets in Mackin, where I've never been before.* It's a strange and uninhabited place full of sprawling industrial buildings, mostly deserted.

I pull into a parking lot. The building next to it looks like a prison. The fear I've been trying to squelch starts bubbling up again. I can take care of myself, but I'm not an idiot. Maybe this isn't really the place, and Infinity was messing with me. Maybe I should have asked Ryan to come too. Or even told him where I was going at all.

Except I couldn't. I get out of the car and remind myself that telling him would have just made him worry. Earlier this afternoon I brought up the idea that someone might have done something to Delia. Ryan shook his head, worry lines between his eyes. "The whole thing is really, really sad, but that doesn't mean there's a mystery here," he said. He put his hand on my cheek, so softly, talking to me like I was someone he had to be careful with. He'd never acted like that before, and it made me feel embarrassed. To him I am tough. He likes that. I like it too. "She was a very messed-up girl who did a lot of messed-up things," he went on. "It's why you stopped being friends with her in the first place. You said so yourself."

He was right; I *had*. Maybe I even halfway thought it at the

time. But it wasn't the whole truth.

I didn't press it after that. And really, it's better that I'm alone for the exact reason that I'm wondering if it's smart to be: I'm unintimidating. Not a threat. People tell me things sometimes without really meaning to.

Maybe someone will tonight.

I'm up at the door now. It's propped with a brick. I let myself inside.

There are bare bulbs dangling from the ceiling, leading the way down a long hallway. At the end is a set of stairs, a piece of paper stuck to the railing, on which is written *MAYHEM: THIS A'WAY* over a bright pink arrow pointing up. And so I climb and climb until, legs burning, I'm finally on the top floor. There's another door there. I can feel my pulse in my ears, my temples, my throat.

I open the door and look out into an enormous open loft.

It's eerily beautiful. I've never been anywhere like this.

There are only thirty or so people here, but the place could hold hundreds. Dozens of tiny white lights dangle from the ceiling, and dozens of white pillar candles sit in clusters on the concrete floor. The music is an otherworldly rumbling that rattles the inside of my chest. The air smells like plaster and wax.

In one corner of the loft there's a modern kitchen, all white lacquer and chrome. There are rows of glass bottles piled up on the white kitchen island and a handful of people standing around pouring themselves drinks.

I start to make my way toward them, but I feel a hand clamp down on my shoulder. I turn. There's a man in a suit holding on to me. He has a big round head and a space between his two front teeth.

"What's the password?" he says. His voice is a growl.

*Password?*

"I . . ." I start. I think fast. "My friends are already in here." I point toward two girls walking past. They're a few years older than me, wearing short sheer dresses, high shoes. I'm still in jeans and Delia's sweater. "I think they forgot to . . ."

The guy shakes his head. "No one gets in without a password. I'm going to have to ask you to leave, then."

But I can't leave yet. And the idea of someone trying to get me to go makes me brave. *You're the sweetest little honey pie*, Delia said once, *until someone tells you that you can't do something*.

I clear my throat. "Be careful what you say, now. Tig's expecting me, and if you stop me I doubt he'll . . ."

The guy puts his hands on his hips and sets his jaw. And then, suddenly . . . he bursts out laughing, like this is the funniest joke he's ever heard in his life. "Ah, I'm only messing with you, dolly." He looks me right in the eye. His pupils are enormous. "It's the suit, right? Makes me look like I get to make the rules." He winks and steps aside. "Have a big ol' blast!"

I feel a flood of relief, because I'm in. And then right behind that, ice-cold fear, because I'm *in*. I grit my teeth. It's time to do this.

I make my way forward. I'm the youngest person here. Everyone looks like they're in costume – colored fishnets on their arms, top hats, jewel-toned tuxedos, tiny glittering dresses. Delia would have loved this place. Maybe she did.

I look out at the rest of the room. It's all raw open space. There are three enormous white sculptures off to the side – a ten-foot-tall head, a dancer with no arms, two bodies entwined. At the back of the room is an entire wall of windows, looking out over dark buildings and beyond that a cold white moon that looks carved too.

“For me?” a voice says.

I turn. There are two girls standing next to me: one tall and thin with a huge glittery choker, the other shorter, her eyes lined in green. Choker hands Eyeliner a small white pill. Eyeliner raises her perfectly arched eyebrows.

“Yup,” Choker says. “His very finest.”

They place the pills on the tips of their tongues and swallow them dry.

I stare at them, like I want what they have. “Hey, do you know where I can find Tig?”

Eyeliner gives me a puzzled look, then points toward the back corner of the room. A doorway. “Where else would he be?”

I force myself to inhale slowly, to exhale slowly. I pass a couple swaying against each other. I pass three girls laughing.

This is it.

I look through the doorway now; it leads to another room,

much smaller than the first. In the center of the room is an enormous old-fashioned sleigh bed covered in pillows. And in the center of the bed is a guy sitting cross-legged, head shaved smooth.

*Tig.*

A girl with long bleached-white hair climbs on Tig's lap and presses her lips to his. I step back. He looks up. He pulls away from the kiss.

"Come on in," he says. His voice is high and breathy. He points at me and curls his finger. I walk forward.

Tig's face is thin, lit from below by the small stainedglass lamp on the nightstand. He could be any age at all.

He is on the bed stroking the girl's hair like she's a cat. His shirt is half unbuttoned, revealing a hard, pale chest. "And how may I help you, pretty girl?"

"I was hoping you could hook me up," I say. I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth. Fear rises from my stomach.

Tig tips his head to the side. "What are you looking for?"

"Something . . . fun," I say.

Tig twists his mouth to the side. "I don't know you. Who are you here with?"

"No one."

Tig licks his lips and smiles, but his smile doesn't reach his eyes. "So what the hell are you doing in my house?"

Another wave of fear washes over me. But I hold his gaze.

"I'm here because . . ." *Because I want to know if you killed*

*my friend.* “Because I heard there was a party.”

“Like fuck, you did.” He shakes his head. “Tell me or get out.”

A jolt of electricity shoots up my spine. I think of Infinity and my promise, I think of my dead best friend and how no one can hurt her anymore. I think of the fact that someone did. I clench my fists. “Delia sent me.”

Tig raises one eyebrow ever so slightly. “Ah-ha, a message from the underworld, then.” He whispers to the girl on his lap. She pulls herself up off the bed, smooths her small white skirt, and heads for the door. When the girl is gone, his smile fades. “Save your bullshit,” he says. “What do you want?”

Maybe Delia’s ghost really is here, because Delia wouldn’t have been scared of this guy for a second, and suddenly neither am I.

“I want to know what she stole from you,” I say. But really, I just want to get him talking.

“So she told you about that, did she?” He clenches his jaw.

“She told me a lot of things.”

“Well then you know a hell of a lot more than me.” Something in the room shifts.

“What did she take from you? And what did you do to try to get it back?”

“Well, well,” Tig says. “Are you here to avenge your poor dead friend?” He purses his lips into a frowny little pout. “How sweet.”

Something inside me bursts. I open my mouth, and then it’s like I can’t stop. “I know where you live, and I know what you

do. And if you did something to Delia . . .”

“Are you really threatening me?” His eyes don’t look right. I realize then that he’s on something – lots of things, probably. “That would be an extremely silly thing to do.”

I want to turn and run. I exhale through my nose. “I’m not making a threat,” I say. “I’m stating some facts.”

“Well, then I’ll state some facts too. You shouldn’t be poking other people’s beehives. But you have balls, and I like that in a girl.” He pauses. “So I’ll do you a favor and tell you a little thing about your friend: She was up to some fucked-up stuff that even I wanted no part of, and that is really saying something. But I didn’t *do* anything to her, if that’s what you’re here to find out. She told me she needed it for protection – that was her excuse.”

It? “Who did she need protection from?”

Tig shrugs and his lips spread into a slow smile. “Based on what happened, I’d say herself.”

He pulls himself up off the bed then, tall and sinewy. He opens the drawer of the nightstand, takes out a pill bottle. He walks toward me, falling, catching himself, falling again. He grabs my wrist. His hand is strong and too hot. He forces something into mine, then lets me go.

“What’s this?” Sitting on my palm is a small white pill.

“A goodie bag,” he says. “Because it’s time for you to leave my party.”

He stands there, hands on narrow hips. And I realize there is nothing left I can do. He’s not going to tell me anything else.

My body still buzzing, I walk back out into the main room. Someone is watching me – a girl with short dark hair. For a second I think she looks familiar. She reaches up and waves.

“Go on then,” Tig says. He is standing behind me. “I’m not going to ask you so nicely next time.”

I drop the pill onto the concrete floor as I walk and crush it under the sole of my boots. I feel angry, sharpedged, sick scared. I don’t know what to make of what has just happened. I don’t know what to think or what to believe.

I stop in the doorway and look back at the party one last time. The music is different now. People are dancing with their arms in the air. A girl in a long gold dress is crouched down on the floor where I left the pill, snorting up the dust.

I start down the stairs, taking them two at a time. The crowd climbing up grows thicker the closer I get to the bottom, my eyes are starting to cloud, the faces blending together. Up above, someone cranks the music.

I came here looking for answers, but now I am filled with questions. There’s one thing I do know though: If Delia thought she needed protection, it means this wasn’t a surprise.

It means whatever happened, she saw it coming.

## CHAPTER 11

### 5 YEARS, 3 MONTHS, 8 DAYS EARLIER

*Later, Delia would explain to June that that finding a best friend is like finding a true love: When you meet yours, you just know.* But the third week of sixth grade when the cool new girl,

Delia, invited June for a sleepover, June was a nervous, happy kind of shocked. And she wondered if maybe Delia had made a mistake, thought June was someone else when she invited her. Or maybe it was because Delia hadn't had a chance to make cooler friends yet.

June was painfully, desperately lonely. She spent her weekends by herself, reading and cleaning up after her mother. June liked this new girl with her big turquoise earrings and enormous smile. She liked how this girl didn't seem to give a shit about absolutely anything. So even though June had never had a one-on-one sleepover before and the idea made her very nervous, she said yes.

The night of the sleepover Delia's stepfather was working late, so her mother let them order pizza and cans of Coke and eat in Delia's room. "My stepfather's diabetic," Delia said, slurping on the soda. "So the only soda we ever have is *diet*, which is *poison*. My own mother is trying to poison me." Delia didn't sit while they ate; instead she walked around the room pointing things out like a museum tour guide – here was a tiny painting of a winter scene that Delia had found at a thrift store, here was the prescription pill bottle nicked from her mom (Delia kept breath mints in there now), there was a cherry stem that she'd knotted using only her tongue (it was the only time she'd ever successfully done it, so she'd saved the evidence). June had never seen a room like this, one filled with so much interesting stuff. It was like she expected to have friends over to show things to.

Shortly after ten, Delia's stepfather came home and started yelling at her mother behind their closed bedroom door, yelling in a unhinged, out-of-control sort of way. That's when Delia said it was time to sneak out.

She climbed out her window and then dropped down into the grass. June was scared, but she followed. They walked up and down the block a couple of times. They left dandelions in people's mailboxes. They peeked into the window of Delia's cute high-school-aged neighbor. They saw him changing out of his clothes, and he got all the way down to his boxers before he shut the curtains. "Damn it!" Delia said. And then she grinned. "I have an idea." And then – and even at the time, June couldn't really believe it was happening – Delia reached around back and unhooked her bra through her shirt, then pulled her arms into her shirt, wriggled around, and suddenly her bra was off and in her hand right there on the street. June stared at it in the light streaming from the windows of the houses. It was black, with an underwire. A real bra, because Delia had real actual boobs. She convinced June to do the same, and taught her how to get it off without taking her shirt off. June was embarrassed that hers was barely a bra at all, more like a shiny little undershirt. But Delia didn't seem to notice or care. "Now what?" June said. She felt breathless and giggly.

"Now we mark our territory," Delia said. She grabbed June's hand and then snuck around the front of the house, opened up the boy's family's red-barn mailbox, and tossed both bras inside.

“There,” Delia said. “And now we have a secret.”

June nodded, like she understood. But she didn't until Delia went on. “Having secrets together makes you real friends,” she said. “Secrets tie you together.” And June felt suddenly giddy at the idea that Delia would *want* to be tied to her.

Then they snuck back in through Delia's porch. And even though it wasn't cool at all, June told Delia how this was probably the first thing she'd done that she wasn't supposed to. Maybe ever in her life. Delia just smiled. “Guess you haven't been hanging out with me enough,” she said. “We'll have to change that.”

They tiptoed back upstairs, and Delia made a show of locking her bedroom door behind them. Then she leaned over and lowered her voice to a whisper. “My stepfather is an asshole. So I always keep it locked, in case.”

June felt fear prickling her belly. “In case what?”

“In case he tries something.”

“Has he?”

Delia shrugged and shook her head. “But if he ever does . . .” Delia reached into her desk drawer and pulled out a switchblade. She held it up. “I'm ready for him.” June opened her mouth in a little shocked O. Then Delia pressed the silver button on the base and a plastic comb popped out. Before June could feel the full effects of her embarrassment, Delia started laughing. It was round and rolling and joyful, her laugh. It didn't feel like she was laughing at June was the thing, it felt like she was inviting June to join in on the joke.

“You should have seen your face,” Delia said. She shook her head. “You were so shocked, it was amazing.” She put her arm around June. “My stepfather really is a shit, though. My family in general is complete bullshit, actually. What’s yours like?”

“I only have a mom,” June said. “She’s pretty bullshit too.”

And then for some reason – maybe because June liked the sound of Delia’s laugh, or maybe because she couldn’t even remember a time when she’d been honest, really truly honest with anyone, or maybe just because it was late at night and that’s the hardest time to hold things in – June began to talk. She talked about how her mom was out most nights, even when she wasn’t working; how she came home early in the morning, knocking into things and stinking of alcohol. She talked about her father who she’d only met twice. She talked about the time her mom fell and sprained her wrist after tripping over June’s school bag and blamed June, and June felt really guilty, but also didn’t totally know what to think because of what she smelled on her mom’s breath.

June talked and talked, felt the words pouring from her mouth as though she was a faucet and had forgotten how to turn herself off. And when she was finally done, she was struck with a wave of horrible embarrassment. She had ruined her new friendship when it had barely just begun.

“I’m sorry,” June barely managed to mumble. Her cheeks burned with shame and disgust at herself, at how needy and weak she suddenly felt.

But as she looked up, she saw that Delia was staring at her, her head tipped to the side. She didn't look bored or freaked out or like she thought June was a weirdo. She smiled in this way that made her seem very wise. "Crazy that we have such messed-up families, and yet somehow we both turned out so awesome, right?"

June felt something lifting inside of her. *We*. "Right," she said. She forced a laugh and then she meant it.

They brushed their teeth after that and put on pajamas. Delia got them three glasses of water ("I need two, in case I dream about a fire," Delia said), and they lay side-by-side in Delia's enormous queen-size bed. Delia combed June's hair with the switchblade comb – Delia insisted on doing it, because her own curls were too thick and would break the teeth off, and she hadn't yet used it on anyone – and June felt almost drugged with happiness and relief. Now that this girl was her friend, everything might just be okay. She wouldn't be so lonely anymore. She wouldn't be alone. This girl was going to change everything.

## CHAPTER 12

*The pit in my stomach is so enormous, it could swallow up my room, the house, the whole entire world.*

*I abandoned Delia, and now she is dead.*

A gut punch of sadness hits me, so intense I can barely breathe. I open my closet. I reach in toward the back and feel for the picture. I pull it out and sink down onto my bed.

The frame is glittery pink with two enamel teddy bears on top,

holding a heart between them. Delia gave it to me the summer after sixth grade. It was a joke but also not a joke. The photo is of the two of us peeking out from under these ridiculous floppy sun hats that Delia had bought for us. There I am – blond hair, forgettable face – and next to me is Delia, her dark curly hair taking up half the picture, olive skin, big strong nose, fierce chin. Her huge mouth opened in the world’s biggest smile. Delia always insisted she was kind of crazy looking. “Not pretty,” she would say. “Sexy.” But she was half wrong, because when she smiled like that, she was the most beautiful person you had ever seen.

When we stopped being friends, I kept telling myself it was only for now, a temporary thing. One day it would all go back to normal. I was always so sure of that.

Finally, finally the tears begin to fall. We will never have the chance to make up. I will never have the chance to apologize. I will never have the chance to tell her anything ever again. She is really truly gone.

I put the frame on my lap and take the phone out of my pocket. I call voicemail so I can hear her voice, hear the last words she’ll ever say to me.

“Hey, J, it’s me, your old pal . . .”

I had so many chances to fix things between us. So many chances that I didn’t take. Whatever was going on in her life, if I had been there, *I would have kept her safe.*

“Hey, D,” I whisper over her voice. I need to say these words, even though she can’t hear me. “I know we haven’t talked in a

while, and that a bunch of crap happened, but I really miss you.” My chest is so tight, my heart might burst.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” she finishes inside the phone.

The tears are still coming, an impossible amount of them. I keep talking. “And I’m so, so sorry about everything that happened, I should have . . .”

And then I stop, because here is the weirdest thing: The message is over, but somehow it isn’t – there are still sounds coming through my phone. There’s a scuffling, and then Delia again. Only this time, she isn’t talking to my voicemail, but to someone in the background. “I’m going to tell,” Delia says. There is a teasing lilt to her voice, but underneath there’s something darker. “I’m going to tell what you did.”

I press my ear to the speaker. There’s another voice, male, shouting. I can’t make out the words, but I can hear the tone: anger. Fierce and frightening. I hold my breath, and my body fills with ice. And then the message clicks off.

Adrenaline courses through my veins. I’m not crying anymore. What I think I just heard . . . this is not possible. I cannot have heard it.

I start the message again, and again there is Delia’s voice. The scuffling. Delia: *I’m going to tell. I’m going to tell what you did.* And then the voice in the background, that male voice, that anger.

The blood is pounding in my ears. There is no mistake. That person in the background, I know who it is.

It's Ryan.

My hands are shaking, I can barely breathe. I check the time. It's after one a.m. Ryan will be sleeping.

The phone rings four times and goes to voicemail. I hang up and call again. It rings and rings.

Finally, he answers.

"Mmm'lo?" I imagine his face pressed against his pillow, one bare leg kicked out from under the comforter, because that's the way he always sleeps. I imagine him with Delia, yelling the day before she died.

"I need to talk to you." My voice sounds strange, barely like me at all.

"Are you okay? What time is it?" I imagine him sitting up in bed now, scratching his chest. I imagine his slow, sleepy heart starting to pound. "Did something happen?"

*Yes, I think. Something very, very bad.* But what I say is, "Can you meet me?" Because I know I need to do this face to face.

He hesitates for only a fraction of a second. I imagine him thinking how late it is, how early he needs to get up for swim practice. "Of course," he says, like I knew he would. Because a thing I know about Ryan is that he always does what's expected of him. Then again, maybe I'm wrong about that.

"Should I come over?"

"No," I say. "I'll come to you."

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