

PROLOGUE

"BE GOOD."

"Uh-huh." Chloe Park angled her head to look at the house's top-floor windows. Two were yellow-lit, edged in pale curtain. That would be Piper's bedroom. She could picture it already. Trophies and craft supplies, inspirational posters rendered in sugary neon.

"Chloe."

Her mother said it forcefully enough that Chloe looked. The older woman's hands gripped the wheel, manicured nails and a wedding band so delicate it looked like gold thread.

"Be good," she repeated. "Please."

"Okay, Mommy." Chloe shouldered her overnight bag and left the car.

Piper Sebranek had brown eyes, shiny brown horse hair that fell to the middle of her back, and a reputation for supreme niceness. Chloe got the sense Piper had been the queen of her junior high, but look at her now. Just another freshman nobody.

She and Chloe weren't friends, obviously, but their mothers worked together at a law firm in the city. Two days

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ago Piper dropped a birthday party invitation on Chloe's desk in American Lit, all the details written in swoopy calligraphy on lilac card stock.

Chloe had skimmed it, then said, "You couldn't have just *told* me this?"

Piper smiled with her glossy lips only, fingers fraying the end of her ponytail. "My mom made me invite you."

So. Maybe not that nice. Chloe smiled back. "Can't wait."

By 8 p.m. she was regretting her decision. She would've pretended to pass out early, but Piper's weird private school friend Diahann had announced she'd be drawing a mustache on the first person who fell asleep. A *mustache*. These dorks.

Diahann brought a Tarot deck, Anjali three cigarettes in a ziplock bag, two of them snapped and leaking. Ashley got really wild and pulled out a whole hard lemonade. Everyone but Chloe took turns sipping it, after which Diahann stripped to her bra and lay on the floor, whisper-screaming, "I can feel it!"

Diahann fell asleep first. Piper covered her with a fleece blanket and put on *Booksmart*, then dumped the contents of a fat cosmetics bag onto the green-and-blue rag rug. Good stuff, Chloe noted. Sephora brands.

"Makeup!" Ashley clapped her hands like the makeup had put on a little show. She approached Chloe with a brush in one outheld hand. "You have the *shiniest hair*," she began.

This happened a lot. People saw Chloe's size and prettiness and age, a year younger than anyone else in their grade, and thought, pet.

"Fuck off," she said.

After that, they left her alone.

When the movie was over the other girls hugged each other, then took turns going to the bathroom with their toiletry bags and their neat little piles of folded pajamas. The lamp went off and Chloe faced the wall. Bursts of giggly whispering broke out with decreasing frequency until finally the room was quiet. For a while after that she lay unmoving in the glow of Piper's night-light, tracking the shallow breath of the sleepers.

Chloe rolled over. She watched Piper's face, making sure she really was out. After a minute it started to feel like Piper knew she was being watched. Enjoyed it, even. Like any moment she'd open her eyes and wink. What a creep.

Chloe sat up. Hands braced on the floor, she slid both legs from her sleeping bag, then crab-walked to the rag rug. From the makeup still lying in a glitzy pile she selected a pot of blackberry gloss, a NARS eyeliner, and a ribbed tube of Charlotte Tilbury lipstick, pushing them into the bottom of her bag.

The other girls slept on. Their breathing was soft, their closed eyelids untroubled, their small dreams stocked, no doubt, with cute boyfriends. Chloe rose to her feet.

A unicorn mug full of pens sat on the desk between the windows. She selected a black permanent marker and crouched beside Diahann. In two thick lines she inked a mustache above the girl's upper lip, curling twice at its ends like a cartoon villain's.

The other three were squished together on the bed. Chloe considered their faces, but Diahann's mustache had scratched the itch. She moved on to their phones.

Piper's and Anjali's had passcodes. Ashley's had face recognition. Chloe leaned across the bed, held the phone

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over the girl's slack face, and nudged her shoulder. Then again, harder. Ashley's eyes shuttered open. She breathed in through her nose, blinked twice, and rolled onto her side, still asleep.

The phone unlocked. Chloe sat cross-legged on the floor, taking her time looking through Ashley's texts, DMs, photos, boring boring boring, then she stopped.

Two weeks ago Ashley stood in front of a bathroom mirror with one hand on her hip and the other at the level of her eyes, taking a photo of her reflection. Her expression was inward, absorbed. You could tell the photo had been taken for her reference alone. She was naked from the waist up.

Chloe considered it a moment, impassively. Then she texted it to herself, deleted the text from Ashley's phone, and replaced it where it had lain.

Restlessly she surveyed the room. The air that had felt so alive to her minutes ago, so shiny-dark with possibilities, was dead now. It lay like flat seltzer on her tongue.

But the rest of the house remained. A pocket world in which only she was awake.

If the feeling she had, easing into the hallway, were a sound, it'd be a tonic note. If it were a scent, it would be matches and cut lime. Sometimes she tried to imagine a future that would allow her an endless supply of it, but all she could think of was cat burglar. Or Manson girl. The closed double doors of the main bedroom pulsed invitingly at the end of the hall. But there was risky, and there was stupid. Down the stairs she went.

The ground floor was dark. Chloe turned left into the little den beside the stairs, a place of deep chairs, a cold fireplace, and a pretty cabinet full of bottles. Wine, port,

gemstone liquors with Italian-sounding names. The only thing she recognized was a half-full bottle of Cuervo. It'd be funny, she thought, to stash the bottle in Piper's room, some place where her mom would find it before Piper did. The thought hardened into a plan. She tucked it under her arm, stepping noiselessly from the den.

A light had come on in the kitchen.

Chloe paused. Her heart was gently sparking, the way it always did when she got caught, or was about to, or almost did. She didn't notice it, but she was smiling. Tequila bottle hanging from her hand, she walked toward the light.

Then she stopped, thrown by the sight of a girl she didn't know.

The girl stood with her back to the doorway. Her head was bowed over the sink, hands braced against the imitation marble. Piper's older sister, she must be, but Chloe's brain supplied no name. Was she about to vomit? She'd probably just snuck in drunk.

"Hi," Chloe said brightly.

The girl whipped around. Chloe took an involuntary step back. The girl's breathing was audible, her pupils massive. Chloe revised her guess: not drunk. High.

"Chloe," she said. Her voice was odd, her face a little bit familiar.

"Yep." Chloe gave a derisive sniff. There was a smell in the kitchen, plasticky and unnatural. It was coming from the girl. "No offense, but you reek."

Piper's sister nodded without speaking. Eyes fixed on hers, nod, nod, until her bobbing head seemed toylike. Chloe felt a rare stab of unease and crossed her arms over her chest, hugging the bottle of Cuervo. The other girl hadn't even mentioned it. "You're staring at me."

"I'm sorry," the girl said softly.

She *sounded* sorry. Like, genuinely. It crept Chloe right out.

"Thirteen."

"What?" Chloe snapped. She was still standing on the threshold, and forced herself to take a step into the kitchen.

"You're thirteen," Piper's sister repeated. Her eyes ran over Chloe's face. As if, just by looking at her, she could smell the matches, hear the tonic note. "That's a bad age for a girl."

A prickle ran over Chloe's neck. She rolled her eyes to hide it. "Whatever. I'm going upstairs. Maybe you can go find a shower."

"Stop," the girl said.

Chloe did. Why, though? There was something in the way the girl said it. The word a wick of sharp command, her voice burning around it like a flame.

So. Chloe did stop. She did turn and look and feel all her superpowers—cruelty and nerve, a cast-iron stomach—dissolve like cotton candy at the sight of the blackness that massed around and behind the girl's head, not shadows nor hair nor anything else she could put a word to.

"I'm sorry," the stranger said one more time.

And Chloe remembered. Piper was an only child.

Away, away. Over a mile of winter-cracked blacktop and freeze-dried lawn to a car parked crookedly on a pastoral suburban road. Benjamin Tate sat in the driver's seat.

He was crying. Not crying as a grown-up cries, though he was past forty, but like a child, loud and snotty and unchecked. Faint heat spilled from the vents and the car's windows were covered with a censoring steam. Its interior

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smelled like clear liquor and stomach acid and a cologne so popular, once upon a time, that just one whiff of it could induce instant flashbacks in an entire generation. The song he'd put on repeat ended and began again.

Benjamin pressed his forehead into the wheel's slick hide. "What am I supposed to *do*?" he asked the air.

The car was a green Kia Soul, its paint job rendered inoffensive by moonlight. To its right, a row of sleeping two-stories. To its left, a gray expanse of fields, pocked here and there by soccer nets. Benjamin had grown up in this place. Everywhere he looked he could see ghosts of his younger, better self. Here came one now, sloping across the field in baggy Umbros like a slacker godling.

"Oh, Jesus," he said. "Help me."

He was speaking, again, to no one. But this time, someone answered.

"Stop."

The word was heavy with disgust. The man sucked in a gasp that lodged in his chest like a swallowed cough drop. With it came an odor that overwhelmed even the Drakkar slathered over his wrists. It was the house-fire scent of things that should not have been burned.

There was a girl in his backseat. Her face was in shadow but he could see right away that she wasn't *his* girl.

"What are you doing in my car?" With every tick of his shitty old heart embarrassment was replacing fear. Embarrassment and fury and a different kind of anxiety: What did she see? What did she know? He was drunk enough that he didn't stop to wonder how she'd gotten past a locked car door.

As fucked as he was, things could easily get worse. So he breathed in deeply and made his voice low. His *voice*,

that gritty golden thing he used to believe would carry him free, up and out of this mediocre town. At least he could still use it to convince.

"I hope I didn't scare you," he said, though he'd been the one near to screaming. "Are—are you supposed to tell me something? Did she send you out here to give me a message?"

The word *she* cracked in the middle. It added another layer to his shame, and shame kindled anger. "Well? *Talk.*"

The girl leaned forward until just her mouth was caught in a beam of streetlight. The smile it illuminated filled him with an instant, atavistic terror. The kind that hid in your backbrain, only showing itself when you were on the brink of something irreversible.

Get out of the car.

The thought was electrifying and immobilizing in equal measure. He got as far as moving his hand toward the door.

"Stop."

And he did, mesmerized by the horrible something happening to the girl in the backseat. The darkness thickening around her, the sense of barely concealed *wrong* just behind. Like she might tilt to the side and reveal a black hole where the seat should be.

"I'm sorry."

She didn't sound it, though.

Up now. North over gridded roads, half a mile as the crow flies. To a cemetery.

Alastair and Hecate walked among the stones, tending to their ghosts. Since junior high they'd come here to lay wildflowers and cigarette ash on the graves of their favorites. Every week, it used to be, but not so often lately. Alastair

greeted his old, cold friends silently in his mind. Leonora Van Cope. Lucas Tree. Mary Penney: Sweet Violet, Gone Too Soon.

Hecate wore a ground-sweeping coat of embroidered black, Alastair the collared shirt required to sell phone plans at the mall. Hecate rolled her eyes when she saw him in his work clothes. Must be nice, he thought, to have all your shit taken care of by Daddy.

Alastair had been in love with her for so long, so unreservedly and without expectation of return, that it was disorienting now to find that love was gone. Not fading from overuse, not cracking under pressure, but *gone*. Like someone punched a drain hole in the place where love had lived and let it run out.

Everything was dimmer on the other side of love.

"I talked to my new roommate yesterday," Hecate was saying. "Her friends all sound amazing. We're gonna be, like, this total artists' house."

It used to be that Alastair would plot to be alone with her. Logging every minute, every glance, every accidental-or-not brush of skin on skin. Now he dreaded it. Every time they met it grew clearer: that she was shallow. That she thought of him very little. That she was *just like everyone else*.

And where did that leave him? Alone. Even more utterly than he'd thought.

On top of everything else, Hecate was *boring*. Since her early acceptance to RISD, it was all she talked about. Each fresh revelation punched another little wound into his skin.

"Hey. Hello?"

He looked up. Hecate was pouting against a time-eaten headstone. "You're not *listening* to me." She pushed her lips into a lazy kiss, no sound.

She'd noticed, lately, the loss of his unrequited love. It bothered her just enough that she'd started to flirt a little, crumbs of attention he once would've fallen on like a starving man. Now he looked at her kissy face with cold fascination.

"You have to come visit me in Providence," she said unconvincingly. "Just wait till, like, October, so I know all the good places to take you."

"I'll need my money for rent," he said stonily. "Here. Remember?"

She fidgeted her handmade dress into place, checking the pretty swell of her breasts above it. She really was talented. The road at her feet was paved in sunny brick.

"Well. If you pay for your flight, I'll pay for half your food." She laughed. "It's so funny, my roommate actually gave herself a fake name, too, back in junior high. She thought it was so cute we used to call ourselves Alastair and Hecate."

She spoke the names in a mocking upper-crust accent. Horror clamped around his spine like a calloused hand. "You told her our True Names?"

"Oh—come on." She was still smiling, but she knew enough to look ashamed. "We haven't called them our *true names* since . . . Kurt, that was a kid thing. We're almost eighteen."

Alastair stood abruptly, wishing he was wearing something more dramatic than work clothes beneath his open coat.

"Fuck you, *Madison*," he hissed, and stalked off into the dark.

She called after him, but only once. Even dazzled with rage, he wove among the stones without stumbling. He

knew the graveyard like he knew the piece of shit house where he'd grown up, in all its nicotine-stained, decorative-chicken-bedecked glory. Fuck his mom and her chintzy chicken collection. Fuck Hecate—Madison—and her perfect new life in Providence. Fuck—

He tripped. He banged his knee on a stone that shouldn't have been there and went ass over teakettle in the dark. When he stood, eyes damp and knee throbbing, he wasn't sure where he was.

Not that he was *lost*. The stars were out in force, the moon a bobbing silver boat, but every familiar thing they illuminated seemed strange. Not Alastair's haven but the realm of an indifferent dead.

He spun in place, anger souring into fear. Madison was back there somewhere, unseeable in the dark. Lost to me, he thought grimly, dramatically. She's lost to me. Then he looked ahead, orienting himself by the Eyeless Angel. It was perched atop the old Petranek mausoleum, stone wings extended.

Alastair squared his shoulders and struck out toward it. He would rest in the Angel's shadow, see if Madison even bothered to follow. Maybe he would play the old game, reaching up to grip the Angel's stone fingers with his own. But he stopped before he reached it, shoes sliding a little on a damp stone marker.

Someone was already sitting on the mausoleum steps. A girl, hair around her face, bare palms flat against the stone. Her posture told him she was very cold. Alastair's skin lit up with a pleasurable anxiety. She looked like an urban legend.

"Hi," he said.

The girl turned just a little, face hidden behind her hair.

He thought she might have been crying. He'd been crying some, too. Softly he approached. A sour chemical scent flavored the air around her; distantly he pictured closet backs and bug spray. "Are you okay?"

There was a catch in her throat. Sadness. Or laughter. "I've had a long night."

"Me, too." Alastair hesitated, then slipped his long coat off his shoulders and held it out. "You look cold."

The girl made a tight sound. "That's nice. Thank you." But she didn't reach for the coat.

It wasn't until he saw the quick white gems on her hair that he realized it was snowing. Fat flakes from a clear sky. And maybe it was that ordinary miracle, or just the unfamiliar act of chivalry, offering his coat to a stranger in the middle of the night, but something shifted in him.

As the frozen stars touched down and melted to nothing he saw, with swift and perfect comprehension, that he would have a life after Madison. After high school, after his mother counting down the days until he was no longer hers to deal with. The fog would clear, the black hallway end. Somewhere, a place of light lay in wait. He was suddenly sure of it, and so full of relief he could've lain down over the stones and wept.

But. Something was happening. A dark mass, gathering behind the girl. The stone of the mausoleum dissolved in it, curling in on itself like paper eaten black by flame. He squinted and shifted a step to one side, trying to see it more clearly.

It was coming from the girl.

He stepped back. And again. Thinking, Madison, stay. Stay far away.

The girl said, "Stop."

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Just the word made him feel heavy. "What . . . what is this?"

She tipped her head to see him, clearing the hair from her face. "I'm sorry."

The bright future he held in his mind slipped free like a tumbling coin, gone. "Wait." His hand out, warding this new destiny away. "Wait. I know you. I know who you are."

Now, on her face, a smile. "No. You don't."

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CHAPTER ONE

HER TEXT CAME JUST BEFORE midnight.

I love you

Only that. I'd read it and my eyes went wide in the dark. I replied in an anxious flurry.

Hi

I love you too

Okay I just tried to call. Lmk youre ok

Becca??

I'm coming over

I'd had to go on foot. In January, at night. As I walked my mood flipped from fear to fury and back again. The text was weird, but on the other hand it was classic Becca: dropping a line in the water. Waiting to see if I'd bite.

Now I stood, a little dizzy, at the bottom of her snow-dusted driveway, watching her unlit house. How long had I been standing here? Time felt slippery, the night endless. My body ached with cold and the lateness of the hour.

I shook it off and headed up the drive. Around the side of the house, over the screechy gate. The last time my best friend and I had spoken was three months ago. Now I moved to her bedroom window and tapped our particular

tap. The one that said, *Wake up, come outside. It's not a serial killer, it's me.*

The light stayed off. The curtain didn't twitch. Becca slept like a frigate bird, half her brain awake at all times. If she was in there she was ignoring me on purpose.

I slapped my palm against the glass and stalked over the lawn, shoes crispering through a rind of new snow. I climbed the steps to the little deck Becca's dad built around the aboveground swimming pool and sat in the less grimy lawn chair. The pool beside it was dank as a cauldron. Last year Becca and her stepmom didn't cover it until Thanksgiving. This year they hadn't bothered at all.

There was a smell coming from somewhere. It was noxious, scraping my throat. I looked askance at the surface of the water, then typed out a text.

I'm on the deck. Get out here it's freezing

A light blinked on below me. I looked, then reached through the chair's gaping slats to pluck Becca's phone from the boards. Its screen was lit with the text I'd just sent. Behind it, a stack of my other texts, unread.

I looked up at the silent house, neck prickling. Then down again, at the deck. There was a stained green mug beside the place the phone had lain, half-full. Something made me pick it up and sniff its contents.

Then I laughed a little, rolling my eyes. Coffee, spiked heavily with citric vodka. Now the text out of nowhere made sense: Becca had always been a sentimental drunk. Also a drunk with a tiny bladder. Probably she'd swayed inside to use the bathroom.

I watched the dark glass of the back door, waiting for her to walk out of it. I was nervous but I was ready. On the boards near my feet was a smear of ashy black. I smudged

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it to nothing with my heel. I ran my fingertips over my palm—raw and stinging, scratched on my dash through the night. After a while I lay back to look at the stars.

I was lying in the quiet rift between the two halves of my life: before and after. Fear was lapping at my edges, dark as ink. But now that I was still I could feel how tired I was. Exhaustion swooped over me like a long-winged animal.

And the stars were so clear tonight, so coldly burning.
I fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

I WAS HAVING THIS DREAM. The kind that evaporates as you wake, leaving just the taste of itself behind. The thing about it was, it was really a memory. I'd dreamed it before.

In the dream I couldn't breathe. Water pressed in on me like the walls of a pine-box coffin. Usually in the dream the water was green and warm as spit, but this time it was icy black. I felt my heart slowing, my vision shrinking to a keyhole, a pinhole, gone. Then, her voice. Becca's.

Nora, she whispered. I'm sorry, Nora.

I wanted to reply but I was just so cold. My jaw locked tight and my lungs were dead flowers and I thought, *Don't go away, not again, don't leave me, Becca, don't—*

Something jabbed my side. I woke into a world of white sky, dry air, the plastic slats of the old lawn chaise bending beneath my weight.

Becca's stepmom stood over me, blocking the sun. She'd poked me with two fingers.

"Nora. Nora, wake up."

My elbow slipped through the slats as I struggled to rise. "Sorr—sorry." A thin layer of fallen leaves stuck like cling wrap to my coat. I'd never been so cold in my life.

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"My god." Miranda was swaddled in a thick pink robe that looked like the fluffy stuff you find inside walls. Her face was scared. "How long have you been out here?"

My mouth tasted like a penny jar and my brain felt scrubbed. Like someone had lifted it from its pan and run it over with steel wool. "I was waiting. For Becca."

"You could've frozen to death," she said bluntly. "Come on, come in the house."

"Is Becca awake?"

"Not that I know of. You're waiting inside while I heat up the car."

"Oh." I balled my fists. "No, thank you. I'll walk."

For a second Miranda looked helpless, her pale lashes standing out in the cold sun. "Are you serious?"

"Um." A shiver ran through me. I was regretting the instinct that made me refuse the ride. But Becca and I were still in a fight, probably. I wasn't sure I could afford to be caught making nice with her stepmom.

Before I could decide Miranda gave a small, humorless laugh. "Have it your way. Enjoy the walk."

"Wait." I held up the phone I'd found under the chaise. "Becca left this out here."

She was already picking her way down to the grass. "Leave it."

I watched her disappear into the house. When she was gone I levered myself stiffly upright, all my joints crackling like tinfoil. It was so early the birds were still calling to each other one by one. In the dawn light the pool looked even grosser than it had last night. And there was something under the water.

My heart gave an acid pulse. I leaned over, peering through the scrim of dead leaves. Whatever it was lay in a

hump over the pool's concrete bottom. Blackish, the size of a small animal. Maybe it *was* an animal, a squirrel or an outdoor cat. Miranda and Becca would probably leave it down there to disintegrate.

I dropped hard from the deck onto the frosted grass, trying to wake up my feet. The old trees that circled the yard gave a long rushing sigh. A second later the breeze that ran through them washed over me. It shook loose that weird bad smell from last night. It had soaked into my hair while I slept.

Becca's bedroom curtains were closed. She'd better be asleep in there, not peeking through a crack while I talked to her stepmom, thinking, *Better her than me*. I stomped around the side of the house and down the drive. Everything ached as it came back to life. How the hell had I fallen asleep last night? How had I *stayed* asleep in this cold? I pulled my phone from my pocket to check the time.

Then I cursed, suddenly ten times more awake. It was half past seven on a Sunday morning, and my screen was filled with missed calls from my mother.

I hit play on her first voicemail, left at 6:34 a.m.

"Nora, where are you?" Her voice was just south of frantic. "Call me back as soon as—"

I stabbed the message off and called. She picked up after half a ring and right away I started talking.

"Mom, hey, I'm so sorr—"

"Where are you?" It was my dad. His voice sounded hard and flat. It sounded *afraid*.

"I'm just leaving Becca's. I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was going, I just . . ."

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"Come home," he said tersely. "Now."

"Wait." I curled a hand around my throat. "Did something happen? Dad? *Dad.*"

He'd hung up.