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CHAPTER 1

Once could be excused as a mistake. Anyone can mess up once; Morgana accepts that. But twice? Hell, no. Twice isn't a mistake. Twice is a decision. Twice is a choice. Twice is asking for trouble.

She throws her phone on the bed. Outside, a car horn blasts through the early-morning silence and she knows that if she doesn't hurry up, Art will leave without her. And there is absolutely no way that she's prepared to walk to school today. Not in this heat. Not when she's got a problem to take care of. She's let this slide long enough – Ro needs dealing with, and fast.

Slicking on some lipgloss, she gives herself an admiring glance in the mirror. A hint of blush on her cheeks to add some contour and ensure that her face doesn't look too





pale. Dramatic eyeliner and sweeping dark lashes that have become her trademark look. Her hair hangs just below her chin, the dark black offering a striking contrast to the two white stripes that fall on either side of her face. Morgana knows a couple of facts about her “Mallen streak” – the first is that it comes from the Latin word *malignus*, which means wicked or damned, doomed from birth. The second is that it is hereditary. In fact, the streak is one of only three things that her mother left her, which she feels is pleasingly fitting.

The horn sounds again, more urgent this time, and, with a last glance to check that her make-up is perfect, Morgana grabs her phone and bag and leaves the room, ignoring the wet towels lying on the bedroom floor and the crumpled mess of her bed sheets. Mabel or Mavis, or whatever her name is, will sort all that when she finishes cleaning the kitchen, which, as Morgana had a desire for pancakes this morning, might take her a hot minute.

She makes her way downstairs, letting her hand glide along the thick oak banister that sweeps round the wide curve of the impressive staircase. The entrance foyer is bathed in sunlight, streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling wall of glass that their father repeatedly tells her and Art is one of the main features of Pendragon Hall, along with the heated pool inside the room that he refers to as the *orangery* and which Morgana insistently calls the conservatory just to piss him off. The house is incredible, she knows that really – but it’s only that. A house. Not a home. Pendragon Hall has all the soul of a hotel and Morgana treats it with





the same level of disdain, slamming the heavy front door behind her now with unnecessary force and registering the crashing sound of something falling off the wall with vague satisfaction. With any luck it will be yet another photograph of Art – she’s up to three now. Her father will threaten to take the cost of repairing the frame out of her generous allowance, but he won’t do it. Not when money is the only thing he actually does give her.

“OK, OK, I’m coming,” she mutters, opening the passenger door and folding herself inside, while simultaneously lowering her sunglasses on to her face. It’s bright, despite the early hour. “What’s the big rush?”

In the driver’s seat, Art starts the car. He attempts to, anyway. The Jaguar has seen better days and even though their father has told him repeatedly that it belongs on the scrapheap and that he’ll replace it, Art is weirdly attached to the old thing that once belonged to his mother. The engine turns over in protest at being asked to wake up and Morgana is about to join in with a complaint of her own when it judders into life.

Art pumps a jubilant fist in the air and mutters a quiet, “*Well done, Iggy,*” before heading down the perfectly gravelled drive and between the ornate stone pillars that stand sentry on either side of the entrance gate. The raven, who Morgana has spotted sitting in the tree outside her window for the last two days, is perched on top of one of the pillars, staring beadily at them as they pass through. She shivers, despite the warmth in the air, remembering





the stories she's been told about the birds who are said to be the foretellers of doom.

It's a ten-minute drive, but Morgana only needs two to deal with her problem. Opening her phone, she looks again at the offending message that Ro posted online late last night during what was quite clearly a sleepover at her house. It's a photo of their group, *her* group, posing for the camera while trying to act natural, as if they've been caught unawares and always look this good, which is farcical when everyone knows that they'll have rejected at least sixteen versions of the same photo before agreeing on this one. There should be five girls in the picture, but someone is missing and Morgana has had just about as much as she can take of Ro's pathetic power games.

"Can you believe this?" She waves her phone in front of Art and he flicks his eyes towards it before batting her hand away.

"What is it? And don't distract me when I'm driving with something that's non-urgent."

Morgana suppresses a sigh. It's a whole year until she can get her driving licence and the thought of having to be chauffeured everywhere by Art is infuriating. She doesn't understand why everyone is obsessed with her brother. She can grudgingly admit that he's not a troll to look at (although most people don't have the misfortune of seeing him when he's just woken up, before he's styled his hair into its blond surfer flop) but his chilled-out, sloth-like approach to everything in his life is at extreme odds with her love of action.





She also can't wait until she can arrive at school in something other than a clapped-out old Jaguar. Their father has promised her any car of her choosing *within reason* for her seventeenth birthday and she's already eyeing up a sweet hot-pink Mercedes G wagon that she intends to convince him has the best safety ratings for his little princess.

He'll buy it; she knows he will. Gordon Merrick's love language is throwing obscene amounts of money at his offspring, in the hope that they'll leave him in peace to focus on what really matters in life – building his business empire and making more money. Besides, as the big man in Avalon, he has connections everywhere and there's no way he'll have to pay the full price. Everyone is always desperate to curry favour with the man who can make gold out of stone.

"It *is* urgent, actually." She stares at the screen, narrowing her eyes before zooming in closer on the photograph. "Ro has posted yet another picture with hashtag *sistersforlife*. Without *me*. She invited the others over last night and then posted about it. I mean, it's got to be deliberate at this point. I've noticed it for a while, her trying to weasel her way into everyone's good books – and now this."

They're all there, pouting out at her in high definition.

Iris, the tiny typical English Rose with blue eyes and long blonde hair, looking like butter wouldn't melt, gazing adoringly at the girl beside her.

Maz, poker-straight long brown hair, expertly applied lipstick, gorgeous high cheekbones that she got





from her Chinese mother and matching pearl earrings and necklace that she got from her American father and which would look ridiculous on anyone else, smiling just a bit too hard.

Lettie, posing as if she's on the photo-shoot of her dreams, her long black box braids cascading like a waterfall around her face and her perfect smile highlighting the bronze glow of her cheeks against her dark skin.

And Ro, honey-blond afro hair piled up in a high messy bun. Foolish, reckless Ro, standing in the middle of the group and staring into the camera lens. Right into Morgana's eyes, taunting her, challenging her.

"How dare she?" she mutters.

"Yeah, sounds terrible," drawls Art, finally shifting into fourth gear. "Imagine posting a picture of your friends online. Although that 'sisters' hashtag is a bit cringe."

The "Sisters" name *is* lame; Morgana should never have let them choose it. She flicks her hair out of her face and shoots Art a glare. "I don't think you quite understand. This is a power move. Ro invited the rest of the girls over without me and she wants me to know. Along with the rest of the world."

Art shrugs and indicates to turn right. "So what?"

Morgana scowls at him. "So, *I* get to decide who's invited and who's not, and I'm not about to be overthrown by *her*." She turns her attention back to her phone and starts to tap at the screen. "But no worries – she's an inconvenience, that's all."





“Overthrown?” He shakes his head. “You’re not the queen of Avalon, Morgana.”

Morgana rolls her eyes and pulls down the sun visor to check her lipgloss. Such an ignorant statement does not deserve a response.

“What’s the plan then?” Art pulls the car to a halt at the crossing, waiting for the wave of lower-school kids to meander across the road, clearly in no rush to get to school.

Morgana slams the sun visor shut, finishes typing and presses *send*, before flashing him a grin.

“I don’t plan,” she tells him. “I act. And if Ro is still one of the *Sisters* by the end of today, I will be extremely surprised.”

Art drums his fingers on Iggy’s steering wheel, finally looking across at her.

“You do know that getting what you want by attacking someone else isn’t good vibes, don’t you?”

Morgana snorts. “As if you care. And you can spare me your motivational surf quotes, Art. I’m not one of the pick-me girls who think you’re Avalon’s answer to the Dalai Lama.”

“Whatever.” Art swings the car into a student parking space and kills the engine. “I’m heading to the beach after school so you’ll have to walk home. We can order takeaway when I’m back – unless you want to eat whatever godawful casserole Mabel has left for us?”

Morgana shudders and opens the door. “As if.” Their father left on a business trip a few days ago and the next few weeks of the housekeeper’s casserole looms before them like a culinary wasteland.





She swings her long legs out of the car, enjoying the stretch in her calf muscles as her toes make contact with the ground. She needs to find the others and take a temperature check of how her revelatory text message has been received. She's as gutted as the rest of them, she really is, and she feels so, so bad about telling them what Ro has been doing behind their backs. She wouldn't have said a word – she prizes loyalty above all else, *obviously* – but the sight of Ro getting up close and personal with Jayce when they all know that Lettie is desperately in love with him was too much. It's all *so* messy and awful and she feels super stressed about it.

“Morgana?” Art leans across the front seat to get her attention. “Just remember what Dad always says. If you ask for what you want—”

“Then you'd better be prepared to get it,” finishes Morgana. A brief, rare smile passes between them and then it's gone. She rearranges her face to convey tragic, conflicted, worried friend and then walks towards the Year Eleven entrance. She's got this. Nobody shapeshifts better than Morgana Merrick and only a fool would think twice about going up against her.

Today, that fool is Ro. Tomorrow it will be someone else. It's not pleasant, throwing your friend under the bus, but Morgana has no choice. If that's the price for being the most popular, loved, feared, admired girl at Avalon Academy, then she's willing to make them pay.

Whatever the cost.

