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HOURS SINCE SHARA WHEELER LEFT: 12
DAYS UNTIL GRADUATION: 42

Chloe Green is going to put her fist through a window.

Usually when she has a thought like that, it means she's *spiritually* on the brink. But right now, squared up to the back door of the Wheeler house, she's actually physically ready to do it.

Her phone flashes the time: 11:27 a.m. Thirty-three minutes until the end of the late service at Willowgrove Christian Church, where the Wheelers are spending their morning pretending to be nice, normal folks whose nice, normal daughter didn't stage a disappearing act at prom twelve hours ago.

It has to be an act, is the thing. Obviously, Shara Wheeler is fine. Shara Wheeler is not missing. Shara Wheeler is doing what she does: a doe-eyed performance of blank innocence that makes everyone think she must be so deep and complex and enchanting when really, she's the most boring bore in this entire unbearably boring town.

Chloe is going to prove it. Because she's the only one smart enough to see it.

She wanted to *enjoy* her prom night after an entire year chasing early admission deadlines and her spot at the top of the

class of '22. It took weeks to thrift the perfect dress (black chiffon and lace, like a sexy vampire assassin), and it was supposed to be a perfect prom. Not *the* perfect prom—no dates, no corsages—but *her* perfect prom. Just her friends in fancy outfits piling into Benjy's car, screaming Lil Yachty in a room with a chandelier, and collapsing into a Waffle House booth at one in the morning.

But thirty minutes before the prom court was announced, she saw her: Shara, rosy lips and a waterfall of almond-pink tulle, brushing past refreshments on her way to the door. Chloe had been watching her all night, waiting for a chance to get her alone.

Except when she got to the door, Shara was gone, and when student council president Brooklyn Bennett got up on stage to crown Shara as prom queen, she was still gone. Nobody saw her leave, and nobody's seen her since, but her white Jeep is missing from the Wheelers' driveway.

So here Chloe is, the morning after, makeup smudged around her eyes and hair crunchy with hairspray, ready to break into Shara's house.

She finds the spare key inside a conspicuously smooth rock with Joshua 24:15 engraved on it. *As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

The whole drive to the country club, she imagined the look on Shara's face when she saw Chloe at her door. The big, shocked green eyes, the theatrical gasp, the dawning realization that her little stunt for attention isn't going to work out the way she planned because Chloe is a hot genius who can't be fooled. The sheer satisfaction was going to power Chloe through finals and probably like, the first two years of college.

But when she sticks her head through the open door and scans the Wheelers' enormous kitchen, Shara's nowhere.

So, she does what anyone else in her position would do. She shuts the door behind her and does a sweep of the first floor.

Shara's not here.

Okay. That's fine. But she's definitely *somewhere*. Probably upstairs, in her room.

In the upstairs hallway, a half-open door reveals a bathroom that must be Shara's. Beige-and-pink wallpaper, porcelain countertop lined with rosewater skincare products and a bottle of her signature nail polish (Essie, Ballet Slippers). Chloe hovers at the doorway; this isn't her objective, but there's a flower-patterned silk scrunchie next to the sink that she's never seen before, no matter how many AP classes she's spent glaring at the back of Shara's head. Shara exclusively wears her shiny blond hair down. That's like, her thing. She must put it up to wash her face at night.

Irrelevant.

Chloe pauses at the next door. It's slightly ajar and marked with a hand-painted pink S.

It'd be a lie—a huge, Willowgrove-Christian-Academy-football-budget-sized lie—to say she's never envisioned what sort of perfection incubator Shara Wheeler climbs inside when she goes home every day. A tank of goo to preserve her dewy complexion? A professional hairstylist on retainer? Where does Shara go when she's not having picturesque Starbucks dates with her quarterback boyfriend or spinning out suspiciously good comparative lit essays? Who is she when, for once, nobody is looking?

Only one way to find out.

She kicks the door open, and—

The room is empty.

Shara's room is, of course, a nice, normal room. Suspiciously

plain, even. Bed, dresser, nightstand, vanity, bookshelf-slash-desk combo, eggshell lamp with a silver chain. There's a dried homecoming corsage on the windowsill and a tube of Burt's Bees lip balm in a seashell dish on the dresser, alongside a bottle of lilac body spray and a pile of bookmarked paperbacks for school. The walls are a simple biege, with framed photos of her family and her boyfriend and her flock of identical pointy-elbowed, flowy-haired friends with perfect Glossier faces.

Where's the Glossier Gang now? Nursing their prom hangovers, Chloe guesses. Clearly, none of them are here looking for clues. That's the thing about popular kids: They don't have the type of bond forged in the fire of being weird and queer in small-to-medium-town Alabama. If Chloe tried to ghost like this, there'd be a militia of Shakespeare gays kicking down every door in False Beach.

Why isn't Shara here?

Chloe clenches her fists, steps inside, and starts with the desk.

If there's no Shara to interrogate, maybe her room has some answers. She peers through the contents of the desk and shelves, looking for Shara's *Gone Girl* calendar with days of the week marked by "gather supplies" and "frame Chloe for my murder." All she finds are college brochures and a box of pink stationery monogrammed with Shara's initials—thank-you cards for the imminent flood of graduation checks from rich family. No incriminating diary pages crammed in the wastepaper basket, just the cardboard packaging for some lip gloss.

Jewelry box: nothing notable. Closet: clothes, a carefully organized shoe rack, prom and homecoming dresses zipped inside tidy garment bags. (Who uses *garment bags*?) Underwear drawer: half-empty, enough modest petal-soft things gone for

a week or two. Bed: over the tucked-in ivory quilt, a neatly folded Harvard T-shirt. God forbid anyone forget that Shara got into her first-choice school, with offers from basically every other Ivy in the country.

Chloe releases a hiss through her teeth. This is just a bunch of perfectly normal stuff, suggesting the perfectly normal life of a perfectly normal girl.

She doubles back to the vanity, opening the drawer. Tubes of lip gloss line up neatly in almost identical shades of neutral pink, most half-used, labels rubbing off. At the end of the row, one is brand-new, so full and shiny it could have only been used once, if ever. She recognizes its packaging from the wastepaper basket.

When she twists the cap off, the scent hits her just as hard as it did the first time she smelled it: vanilla and mint.

The window opens.

Chloe swears, drops to the carpet, and crawls under the desk.

A pair of black Vans appears on the windowsill, bringing with them the skinny frame of a boy in distressed jeans and a flannel. He pauses—she can't see his face, but his body twists like he's checking that the coast is clear—and then drops down into the room.

Dark curly hair with caramel highlights, light brown skin, long and straight nose, a jawline both square and delicate like fishbone.

Rory Heron. Willowgrove's answer to every brooding bad boy from every late '90s teen drama. The most eligible bachelor amongst the stoners-skaters-and-slackers rung of the social ladder. She's never had a class with him, but she's heard he doesn't attend them much, anyway.

She watches as his eyes track the same path she did—the

dresser, the bed, the pictures on the wall. After noticing he's kicked the corsage off the sill and onto the floor, he picks it up with gentle fingers and examines the dried buds before returning it to its place. Chloe's eyes narrow. What is Rory Heron doing here, in Shara's bedroom, fondling her corsages?

Then he turns to the desk, sees her, and screams.

Chloe lunges to her feet and slaps her hand over his mouth.

"Shut *up*," Chloe hisses. Up close, his eyes are hazel-y brown and wide open in alarm. "The neighbors could hear you."

"I *am* the neighbors," he says when she releases him.

Chloe stares at him, trying to reconcile Rory's whole persona with the extreme uptightness of the False Beach Country Club. "You live here?"

Rory glares. "What, I don't look like I could afford to live here?"

"You seem like you'd rather die than live here," Chloe says.

"Believe me, it's not by choice," Rory says, still scowling, but in a different flavor now. "You're—Chloe, right? Chloe Green? What are you doing under Shara's desk?"

"What are *you* doing climbing through Shara's window?"

"You first."

"I—I, uh," Chloe stammers. Rory's entrance startled some of the fire out of her, and now she's not sure how to explain herself. Her face starts to heat; she wills it to stop. "I heard she ran away last night."

"I heard the same thing," Rory says. He talks with the same kind of studied disaffection that he carries himself with, shoulders slumped and impartial. "Did you—do you know where she is?"

"No, I just—I wanted to see if she was really gone."

"So you broke into her house," Rory says flatly.

"I used a key!"

"Yeah, that's still breaking and entering."

"Only if I commit a crime."

"Okay, trespassing."

"What do you call climbing through her window, then?"

Rory pauses, glancing down at the toes of his Vans. "That's different. She told me she was leaving her window unlocked."

"Not an invitation, dude."

"Jesus Christ, I told you, I'm her *neighbor*. People like, ask their neighbors to check on their stuff while they're gone all the time. It's a thing."

"And that's what you're doing?"

"I wanted to make sure she was okay."

Chloe pulls a skeptical face. "I've literally never seen you speak to her in my life."

"You don't even know her, do you?" Rory counters. "What are *you* doing here? Why do you care if she's gone?"

Why does she care? Because she and Shara have both spent every day of their high school careers dedicated to the singular goal of graduating valedictorian, and the only thing Chloe has ever wanted as much as that title is the satisfaction of knowing Shara Wheeler can't have it. Because Shara Wheeler has everything else.

Because if Shara's really gone, that's a forfeit, and Chloe Green does not win by default.

Because two days ago, Shara found her alone in the B Building elevator before fifth hour, pulled her in by the elbow, and kissed her until she forgot an entire semester of French. And Chloe still doesn't know why.

"Why do *you* care?" she snaps back at Rory.

"Because I—I get her, okay? Her stupid-ass friends don't, but I do."

“Oh, you *get her*.” Chloe rolls her eyes. “So that makes you qualified to lead the search party.”

“No—”

“Then what does?”

There’s another pause. Rory shifts his weight from one foot to the other. And then he looks down at the desk, raises his dark brows, and says, “That.”

When Chloe follows his gaze, she finds an envelope sitting innocuously in a pink letter organizer. Shara’s cursive spells out Rory’s name on the front.

Rory’s name?

Rory’s arms are longer, but Chloe reacts faster. She snatches the envelope up and opens it with one finger, taking out a piece of that pink monogrammed stationery, and reads Shara’s flawless cursive out loud.

Rory,

Thanks for the kiss. If you thought I never noticed you, you’re wrong.

XOXO

Shara

P.S. peach100304

P.P.S. Tell Smith to check the drafts. Chloe should have the rest.

“You *kissed* her?” Chloe demands.

Rory looks ready to dodge a punch, which he might want to save for when Shara’s actual boyfriend finds out. “*She* kissed *me*!”

The anger comes screaming back, and Chloe grinds out, “When?”

“Last night. Before prom.”

“Where?”

“On . . . the mouth?”

“*Geographically*, Heron.”

“Oh. On my roof.”

Shara kissed Rory. And now Rory is standing here, in her room, defending her to Chloe, because he—oh God.

She’s the girl next door, and he’s in love with her. That’s what this is. How absolutely, annoyingly predictable.

“Well, don’t get too excited,” Chloe says. “She kissed me too.”

Rory stares. “You’re fucking with me.”

“I’m really not,” Chloe tells him. “At school, on Friday.”

He squeezes his eyes shut, starts to run a hand through his curls, then stops himself before he can mess up the way he arranged them.

“Okay, so, this”—he gestures between the two of them and the room at large—“makes more sense.”

A miserably awkward silence settles like a cloud of jock B.O. in the school gym on a pep rally Friday. Chloe bares her teeth to speak—

The front door opens downstairs.

“Hell,” Chloe says. She checks the clock on the nightstand: 12:13 p.m. Rory made her lose track of time.

“You’re gonna have to take the ladder,” Rory says, already on the move.

“Shara fucking Wheeler,” Chloe mutters, and she launches herself out the window so violently, she almost misses the first rung.

On the ground, Rory puts the ladder on one slight shoulder and clumsily tries to move it back to the fence. He really is just a very nice face on top of a broomstick, physically speaking. She gets why so many junior and sophomore girls are obsessed with his hot-surly-guy-with-the-guitar-in-the-school-parking-

lot vibe, but it's sad to watch him lift something.

"Here," she says, reaching for the other side. He grunts unhappily but doesn't complain.

They climb into his backyard, which is as pristine and lush as the rest of the country club. Back in California, Chloe had never been inside a country club with a subdivision in it, sprawling acreage with a manned gate like a golf course bouncer. She had to pretend she was someone's nanny to get in.

"Okay, screw it," Chloe says, wiping at her leftover eyeliner. The back of her hand comes away black. "What does the peach thing mean? From the note?"

"I have no idea," Rory says.

"Then we'll tell Smith everything tomorrow at school and see if *he* knows."

Rory makes a face. He looks ridiculous, standing inside a gated community pretending to be some kind of dirtbag indie softboy.

"We?" he says. "You want to *tell Smith* you kissed his girlfriend?"

"Don't you want to know what she's doing? Where she is?"

"Why don't we just wait until she comes back and ask her?"

"What makes you so sure she's coming back anytime soon?" Chloe demands. "What if she has some kind of—some kind of secret second life in another town, or some sugar daddy she's holed up with, or something? What if she doesn't come back before we all leave for college? What if she ghosts everyone forever? What if you spend the rest of your life wondering why, in the name of God, Shara Wheeler kissed you?"

Rory, whose eyes have been narrowing more and more the longer she talks, tucks in one corner of his mouth and says, "She really got you fucked up, huh?"

“Bye,” Chloe says, turning on her heel. “I’ll do it myself.”

“Wait,” Rory calls after her.

She stops.

“When tomorrow?”

“First thing,” Chloe says. “Football Physics is first hour.”

“Great.” He unlatches the gate for her. “I’ll get my affairs in order.”

“Why didn’t you ever audition for spring musical? You’re so dramatic.”

“Not my thing.”

They stand there, Chloe’s keys jingling in her hand, Rory looking like he’s going to start writing depressing poetry about Shara any second. Or whatever his deal is. It feels alarmingly like she’s just been assigned to the world’s worst group project, and she can’t imagine the addition of Smith Parker will be an improvement.

“Um.” Chloe clears her throat. “Maybe . . . don’t tell anyone else? About Shara kissing me? I don’t know if I should’ve . . . well, anyway, I don’t think it should be spread all over school unless she tells people herself.”

Rory shakes his head. “I wasn’t gonna tell anyone.”

Satisfied, Chloe lifts her chin and whips around, forcing the gate open. “See you at school tomorrow. You better show up. I know where you live now.”

“Threat received,” Rory says with a sullen salute, and she shuts him behind the gate.

She crosses the front yard of the Heron house and rounds the corner to a copse of trees and an elaborate fountain in the shape of a very ugly dolphin, where she parked her car.

In the driver’s seat, she finally lets her body relax the way it only can when she’s really, truly alone. Her shoulders slump.

Her keys slide out of her hand and onto the floor mat. Her head drops against the steering wheel. The miniature lucky cat on her dashboard waves at her, nonplussed.

She's been kissed and ditched by Shara Wheeler. And she's not even the only one.

But . . . that lip gloss. Vanilla and mint. It's absolutely, 100 percent the lip gloss she was wearing when they kissed. Chloe would never, ever forget that scent.

Which means Shara bought it specifically to kiss Chloe with.

Proof that Shara does, when she's home at night in her powder-blue room, brushing her hair and painting her nails and winding a rubber band three times around a stack of study cards, think about Chloe.

And *that* feels a bit like winning.

FROM THE BURN PILE

Handwritten note from Chloe to Georgia

PLEASE DO NOT REACT AUDIBLY if Madame Clark picks this one up and reads it out loud like she did with Tanner's ranking of girls' butts I will literally kill you

Okay. So.

Shara Wheeler just kissed me. Like literally just now on my way to fifth hour.

AGAIN PLEASE DO NOT REACT you are calm you are a placid lake you are my moms after a pitcher of hemp tea

I was taking the faculty elevator shortcut, and she got on, and then she kissed me, out of NOWHERE.

And I think I kissed her back??? She's hot! I panicked! She may be the bane of my existence, but she also looks like she lives in the hills of Sweden and spends all her time embroidering flowers on linen shirts like an extra in *Midsommar*. She looks like she smells nice and I'm here to report that she does in fact smell nice, like lilacs, except for her lip gloss, which was vanilla and mint. Like, what *else* am I supposed to do when a girl like that is about to kiss me? Anyone would have done the same thing.

ANYWAY. She kissed me, like really kissed me, like KISSED me, and then she was GONE.

What does it mean??? Shara Wheeler is the most tragic heterosexual to ever cram herself into a Brandy Melville crop top. She was obviously just screwing with me. This is mean straight girl behavior. Right???

What do I do????

Lilacs, Geo. LILACS.

2

DAYS SINCE SHARA WHEELER LEFT: 2
DAYS UNTIL GRADUATION: 41

The first thing Chloe saw when her moms' Subaru crossed into False Beach city limits was Shara Wheeler's face.

That's not just what it felt like—although it does seem like Shara Wheeler is everywhere, all the time. It was literally looming forty feet wide over the interstate between a Waffle House and a Winn-Dixie under a swampy gray sky: a pretty blond girl with a pretty smile, holding a stack of textbooks and a protractor.

JESUS LOVES GEOMETRY! the billboard declared, which struck Chloe as a bit of a bold claim. A CHRIST-CENTERED EDUCATION AT WILLOWGROVE CHRISTIAN ACADEMY!

There are a total of five high schools in False Beach, and Willowgrove is the only one with a decent AP program and a theater department with the budget to do *Phantom*. As a fourteen-year-old literary nerd neck-deep in a goth phase, those seemed like the most important things a high school education could offer her. Her mom went to Willowgrove back in the '90s, and she tried to warn her what it was like, but Chloe was insistent. If this was her only option, she could put up with the Jesus stuff.