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Day 0: "The Party"

Eva

"Did you *see* her?" Piper whispers, lifting the same plastic cup of wine she's been holding the past two hours as if it hides her. It's a prop. She's sober. She always is. She's also hopelessly prone to melodrama.

I nod, face carefully blank. Of *course* I saw her. I've seen every single girl that flirts with Nate at these parties.

I'd rather not be a witness to it, but that's one of the downsides to being me: I'm expected to be at every party. Like Piper and the rest of our crowd, I am here because it's who I am and what I do. Nate isn't one of us, hasn't been for a couple years, so he doesn't always attend, but when he does, he inevitably goes upstairs or down a darkened hallway with some girl. I pretend not to care. My act works on everyone but Piper and Grace, who sit on either side of me.

"She's not even that pretty," Piper lies.

Grace says nothing.

The girl is no prettier than us, but she's not *less* attractive either.

Nate is a lot more than good-looking. Tall and lean without being gangly, short dark hair that's cut in an almost military style, and muscles that make it hard not to find an excuse to touch his arms. Even with the fact that he has no social standing, he has to use exactly zero effort to convince girls to wander off into the dark with him.

We used to be friends. He used to be my best friend. Then his parents got divorced, and he became someone I didn't know. I still watch him, but I never speak to him. I haven't since the start of sophomore year. Every time I see him glance my way as he walks past with a girl, I think of the last time I tried to talk to him.

*It's the first party of the year, and my parents are away again. I'm sitting with Grace, a new girl who moved from Philadelphia to tiny little Jessup, North Carolina.*

*"Who's he?" Grace asks.*

*"Nathaniel Bouchet." I look at him, standing in the doorway surveying the room like a hunter. He doesn't look like my Nate anymore. He's always been wiry, but now he looks like he works at it. I swallow, realizing that I'm staring and that he can tell.*

*"Excuse me a minute," I say.*

*Robert and Reid are sitting with us, but I excuse myself to walk over to him. It's been forever since we spoke. He hasn't called or come to see me in weeks. I never catch him at school either. I miss him. Even after he stopped being around the rest of our friends, he was still my friend. I thought that would never change, but now, I think I might be wrong.*

*I've had a couple drinks, and it gives me the courage to ignore his dismissive glance and walk up to him.*

*"Nate," I start.*

*I only want to talk, to go back to the way we were, but he looks right at me, his gaze roaming from my sandals up my jeans and over my blouse and ending on my face. "Not interested."*

*Then he steps around me like we're strangers. He just walks past me like I'm not there, like he doesn't know me, like we haven't been in one another's lives since we were*

*in preschool. I feel like everyone there is staring at us, but if they are, no one mentions it—not to me, at least. My last name protects me from that, and for a change, I'm glad to be a Cooper-Tilling.*

*Nate, on the other hand, has just sealed his pariah reputation. It was bad enough that his parents divorced, and he suddenly seemed to forget that there were clothes in colors other than black. Now, he's rude to me in front of everyone. If he was trying to make the rest of my friends declare him invisible, he just succeeded.*

*On Monday, I find out that he slept with Piper's cousin, Julie, who was visiting. She's three years older than us, a freshman at Duke. After that, it became a thing to talk about which girl he chose for the night when he turned up at parties. After that, I never tried to talk to him—or let him see me watching him—ever again.*

Piper is waiting for her cue, for me to tell her what to think. It's how things are in Jessup. She's one of the elite, but I'm the one *she* follows. My parents are the top of the food pyramid here. It's not a situation I cherish, and I pretend not to notice.

I simply play my part, fulfill their expectations and smile. It's the best plan I have.

I know that Piper is hoping for permission to tear Nate down, but I'm not going there. "She's no different than the last three. He'll leave in the morning with her phone number, but he won't use it."

"What are you two whispering about?" Reid asks as he flops down next to Piper and drapes an arm around her shoulders. They're not dating; he simply has no awareness of personal space.

Piper shrugs him off. "Losers."

"I'll protect you," Reid promises.

“Who’s to say you weren’t on that list?” Piper says, but she doesn’t mean anything by it. Reid is one of us.

“Yeung.” Reid glances at Grace and nods at her, then turns to me. “Eva.”

“I have a first name!” Grace snaps.

Before they start bickering Piper quickly redirects the conversation. “Did you guys want to go to Durham for the Bulls game? Daddy has a bunch of tickets that he said we could use.”

I tune them out. It’s far too easy to do, really. The conversation, the people, the whole party is like most every other Friday for the past couple years. Sometimes I want to ask them if they’re happy, if they enjoy their lives or if they feel like they’re just playing roles like me.

Grace tolerates Jessup, but this is only a pit stop for her. Reid is hard to decipher; he never gives a straight answer. On the other hand, my boyfriend, Robert, seems to like being one of the town darlings. He has an entourage everywhere he goes—and likes it. I don’t. They’re my friends though, so I smile at them before I top off my glass of lukewarm wine from a bottle that has my grandfather’s last name on the label.

Politely, I carry the bottle over to Robert where he still stands with Grayson and Jamie. Robert absently kisses the top of my head and holds his cup out toward me. The other boys are drinking beer, but Robert always drinks wine from the Cooper Winery when I’m with him.

I don’t glance toward the doorway that leads to the bedrooms. I don’t think about Nate kissing some girl who isn’t me. No, not at all. Not even a little.

After I fill Robert's cup, I wait. I'm not clingy; I don't interrupt. I simply wait until the boys notice and walk away. Once they're gone, Robert looks at me carefully, studying my face for a moment before asking, "Is everything okay?"

"I'm bored."

He laughs. "All of our friends *and* a bunch of people from school are here, and you're bored?"

"Piper only wants to gossip. Reid is . . . *Reid*. Grace is pouting or maybe arguing with Reid by now. You"—I poke him in the chest—"were over here, so yes, I'm bored."

He grins, sips his wine, and waits. I can't deny that he's one of the best-looking boys I've ever seen. He's certainly one of the best-looking in Jessup. Basketball, baseball, and tennis keep him in perfect shape, and he has the bluest eyes of anyone I know. It's not his fault that I wish they were chocolate brown instead.

"Can we leave? Maybe drive out to—"

"You know better than that," he interrupts quietly. "Everyone would want to come with us as soon as we said we were heading out."

Everyone, of course, means only our closest friends, but they're the same people I've spent the past few hours with—really, the past seventeen years with if I want to get technical. They're my friends, and I love them. Sometimes, though, I want to be just a girl with her boyfriend, not a girl, her boyfriend, and their dozen closest friends.

"Fine." I blush a little before suggesting, "We could go to one of the bedrooms . . ."

"With all of our friends out here?" Robert looks at me like I suggested we have sex on the coffee table.

"Just to fool around," I clarify.

He leans in and kisses me briefly, lips closed, and then he wraps an arm around my waist. “Come on.”

For a moment I think he’s agreed with me, but then I realize that he’s headed back to the sofa. He murmurs in my ear, “We can do that at your house any day. Tomorrow, I’ll meet you at Java the Hut, and then we’ll go to your house for a dessert.”

I nod. There’s no way to say that it isn’t really physical contact I want.

I want to feel swept away. I want to not sit here listening to gossip while Nate has sex in another room. I want to be wanted—and distracted. Instead, I sit next to Robert, our hands twined together, and resume the same routine.

“You totally missed it,” Piper gushes. “You will never believe what Davey Jackson just did!”

Nothing ever changes, not here, not for me.

Day 1: “The Act”

Judge

I sit and wait in my stolen car. The engine is still; the lights are off. I can’t even listen to music. I don’t want anyone to see or hear me.

I thought Eva understood me. Last night, she proved me wrong. She looked straight through me like I wasn’t there and spent half the night paying attention to him, one of the countless people who will never ever deserve her. He’s not right for her. *I* am.

When I see Eva walking away from the mostly empty parking lot and heading down the deserted street, I wish I had another option. I’ve been waiting for her to see the real

me for so long, doing the things she asked of me so she would know I was the one for her.

I listened to every secret message she gave me. She was like a goddess in my mind.

Maybe that's where I went wrong. The Lord ordered that "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." In my heart, I raised Eva up like a false idol. That was a mistake. Now I have to atone, not just for my sake, but for the safety of my future children. The good book says "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children." I have to protect the children I'll one day have.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I say the words quietly as I wait in the dark and quiet.

I picture her even after I can't see her anymore. She could've called Grace to pick her up tonight. She didn't. It would have been a sign if she had. I watch the signs. Eva Tilling—princess of Jessup, North Carolina—is alone. I made sure she would be, but I hoped we would be saved from this.

I turn the key, and the engine wakes. I turn on the stereo and shift out of park. My eyes burn, and my hands tighten on the steering wheel as I drive into the dark where she waits. I flick the high beams on and turn the music up so loud that she can probably hear it now. I feel like I can hear the gravel crunch under the tires as I swerve onto the shoulder, but I can't, not over the music. I searched for the perfect song, "Lift Me Up," to tell her all the things I can't say. I hope she is listening. I know the Lord is.

I feel like my heart is beating in tune with the thundering drums, and I slam the gas pedal down before I can hesitate. I feel the thump, and through my tears, I see her hit the hood of the car and slide off.

I don't slow down. I can't. I can't even look in the rearview mirror. I did it, but it hurt. God, it *hurt* to sacrifice the one person I thought was meant to be mine. My Eva is bleeding along the side of the road. This was the only choice left to me.

I had to kill her.

Day 3: "The Vision"

Eva

My mind is fuzzy. I hear unfamiliar noises, and I don't know why. My eyelids weigh too much, and I can't make them open to see where that awful beeping is. I think about sitting up, but if I can't move my eyelids, I surely can't move my whole body. I try anyhow. Someone grabs my arm, speaks softly in words I can't make out, but it doesn't matter.

All that really matters suddenly is that I'm falling.

I know I'm already on my back but somehow I still fall.

*I fall into someone. I know it's not my skin I'm wearing even though it somehow is mine for the moment. The woman I am inside is waiting for her grandson, Ethan. He should have been here by now. My chest hurts. I have—no, she has—had this twinge all day, and even though it's probably nothing, it scares me.*

*Somewhere in my mind, I remind myself that this is not me, that I am Eva Elizabeth Tilling. I am only seventeen, and I have no children or grandchildren.*

*I try to pull myself out of her skin, but I'm stuck here. My heart hurts. It feels like the beats are going too fast, like I've been drinking nothing but caffeine for days, and*



*somehow it keeps going faster and faster. My hands tighten on the arms of the chair. I need to get up, to call someone, to do something. Ethan isn't here, and I can't drive, and I think my heart is going to pound out of my chest.*

*I hear footsteps. He comes into the room. I look up, but I don't recognize the boy standing there.*

*His hands are on me, helping me not to fall so fast to the ground. I try to say something, but my heart stops racing. I feel it stop.*

“Eva?” Grace’s voice interrupts my death, pulling me back into my own skin with a snap, making me try to squirm away from the nurse who holds my wrist in her hand.

I feel her hand like it’s burning me. I try to look to see if the skin is red, but I still can’t focus my eyes.

“You’re awake,” the nurse says, before releasing my wrist to write something on the folded-up paper in her hand.

“Heart attack.” I’m shaking all over and cold like I’ve just been wrapped in icy sheets. Every part of me, other than my wrist, feels frigid.

“No, sweetie. You’re fine.”

“Heart attack,” I manage to say, even as I notice that my heart isn’t aching now. *Just a dream.* It was a dream. I’m not a mother, much less a grandmother. I don’t know anyone named Ethan either. I can’t remember what he looked like. I only remember the voice, the fear in it, and the way his hands felt strong while he helped slow my fall. I can see the whole thing playing over in my mind, can catalogue everything but his face.

“Your pulse is fine,” the nurse says as she puts medicine into the tube that hangs from an IV bag beside the bed. “Your heart is fine, Eva.”

“I don’t want to die. So cold.” I feel like I’m drifting again, and I’m scared, so I grab the nurse’s hand. “Freezing.”

“I’ll get a warm blanket,” she promises.

I’m cold, and I hurt all over. I close my eyes. I’m not sure how long I float in that nebulous state between awake and dreaming. When I hear the sound of footsteps, squeaky soles on the tile floor, I wonder if the pain or the footsteps woke me.

I look over at the white-clad woman. She moves a tube that hangs on the side of my bed and stretches to me. It’s obviously an IV line, but I don’t know why it’s there—or why I’m here.

I feel the cold start to crawl up my arm as the medicine travels through my vein from my wrist upward. It’s a disturbing feeling, one I’d like to stop, but by the time I force my lips open to ask the nurse about it, I’m alone in my room. My mind is encased in an ever-increasing fog, and I’m pretty sure the fog is because of that tube in my arm.

I’m not sure if moments or minutes pass before I ask, “Where am I?”

If someone answers, I don’t hear it. Sleep or drugs make the fog and weight stronger, and I’m out again. When I wake the next two times, I try again to ask questions, but if anyone answers—or hears me—I’m not aware of it. All I know is that I hurt, and then I’m drifting away. Maybe that’s why I dreamed of dying: I hurt from my legs to my head. Vaguely, I realize that between the hurt, the IV, and the nurse, I’m obviously in a hospital. I’m just not sure *why*.

In one of my moments of lucidity, I realize that I can’t move my arms or right leg, but I’m not sure if it’s from the medicine pumping into my arm or if there’s another reason.

“I’m right here,” Grace says from somewhere nearby. I can’t see her, but I’d know her voice anywhere.

“Grace?” With far too much effort, I try to focus on the shape in the chair that is apparently my usually hyper friend.

“Rest. You’re safe, sweetie. We’re here,” Mrs. Yeung says, and I realize that Grace’s mother is somewhere beside her. “You just came out of surgery.”

Grace hurries over to stand beside the bed. “You’re going to be okay, though, and I’m here with you.”

“Don’t leave me, Gracie.”

“I won’t,” she promises, and I am relieved. There’s no one in this world I trust more than Grace Yeung.

“Everything is okay now,” Grace says. She reaches out one hand as if she’s going to brush it over my face, but she doesn’t actually touch me. It’s only the shadow of her hand that lands on me.

“You’re going to be okay,” Mrs. Yeung repeats.

I glance at her and then look back at Grace. She nods in agreement, and then I’m out again.

This time my dreams are a strange mix that may be a series of wakeful moments waking and unconsciousness. If not, I’m dreaming about nurses and Grace sliding a chair near the bed with a horrible screeching noise—which seems a bit unlikely.

“Why am I here?” I ask, possibly again, possibly for the first time. I don’t remember if I’ve asked, but it’s the most reasonable question after “where am I?”

As promised, Grace is still here. Mrs. Yeung isn't with her now, but that doesn't matter. The chair is beside the bed, and her voice is quiet as she answers, "They had to bring you to Durham. You're in Mercy Hospital. You were unconscious; 'head trauma,' they said, but you woke up late last night. This morning, you had surgery on your leg for a broken femur."

I nod.

"They had to delay the surgery a day, but they operated today. It went well," Grace says. "You're in a new room now. You were in ICU."

"Hazy."

"You're still coming out of the anesthesia. Plus, they gave you sedatives," she explains.

Time passes, and eventually, my head feels clearer. I swallow, trying to speak with a tongue that feels too thick and a mouth that feels too dry, before repeating, "*Why* am I here?"

Grace doesn't answer for a moment, so I watch her face for answers. People are more transparent than they think. Even with whatever medicines pump through the IV tubes, I have enough clarity of mind to see the worry and the anger in Grace's face. Whatever happened to land me in this bed set my best friend into a mix of emotions that she's trying to hide.

"Your parents really should be here to tell you this," Grace starts. Her lips press together in a judgmental way that's very familiar when my parents are mentioned. She's far more judgmental about my parents than I am. I *like* the independence I have because of their travel and work schedule.

I glance at the giant vase of flowers in the room and know that it's from them. There are other smaller arrangements, but the big one is orchids, my favorite flower. It's huge and overflowing. "They sent those."

"These were waiting when we got to your new room," Grace says, but she scowls again. Orchids don't make up for their absence in her book, but I'm sure they have a reason for being away. They always do. Most of the reasons boil down to them forgetting that I'm not actually an adult yet—not that I'm complaining.

"Why did I need surgery?"

"There was an accident," Grace says, her expression going from angry to gentle in a blink.

I grab her hand and tug.

She straightens her arm so our clasped hands rest on the edge of the hospital bed. She looks almost as tired as I feel. She squeezes my hand and stares at me. Her eyes are red and puffy, and I can tell she's been crying a lot and sleeping a little. "I'm glad you're okay," she whispers. "I was so scared. You must've been terrified."

"I don't think I . . . I don't remember anything," I tell her. My voice wavers a little, but I'm not as upset as I probably should be. I feel sort of like I'm in a haze, which raises another question. "What am I on?"

"An antiseizure drug, a muscle relaxer, and . . . I'm not sure what else." Grace glances at the bag of medicine. "Sugar water or something for hydration. Plus sedatives and stuff from the surgery."

"Where's your mom?" I ask. I'd heard Mrs. Yeung earlier, but I don't see her.

When my parents travel, she's my unofficial mom. Truthfully, she fills that function even when they're home, but when they're away, she has a signed power of attorney form for emergencies. My parents trust her completely—and for good reason. Mrs. Yeung has all the traits that “good Christians” in the South are supposed to have, including a few that my parents lack. She's a stay-at-home mom who gave up a career to move to our little backwater town in North Carolina with her husband when he got a chance at his dream job.

“She had to leave,” Grace says. “We've been here a lot, and Jimmy had to miss a game already. She wanted to stay till you woke, but—”

“She was here when I needed her,” I interrupt. “She's awesome.”

Grace scoffs. “Yeah, you say that because you don't live with her. The other day . . .”

I know that Grace is still talking, but I can't focus on what she's saying. Things don't add up. I remember leaving the coffee shop. Robert was to meet me, but he didn't show. We didn't argue at the party the night before. He was distant, but we didn't fight or anything. We never really fight. We're friends who've known each other since the cradle and decided to date last year, but honestly, we still mostly feel like friends who sometimes have sex. Fighting isn't an issue for us, so when he didn't show for our date and didn't answer when I called—*or* when I texted him—I was confused.

Both my parents and Grandfather Cooper were out of town. Grandfather Tilling was home, but he goes to bed early, so I didn't want to bother him, and I felt stupid calling Grace to come pick me up when it was only a couple miles to walk. Really, it would've taken longer for Grace to get there than it would for me to walk it.

“I was on my way home. I remember that. Robert forgot me or something.” I look at Grace, as if her face holds the secrets I can’t find inside my memories. Sometimes with Grace it kind of does. She’s very readable. She squeezes my fingers, and I notice that I’m still holding on to Grace’s hand.

“You got hit by a car when you were walking, sweetie.”

“Hit? Like someone ran over me?” I try to remember, but I have nothing. It’s a bright blur there when I try to think about it.

“Yes.” She starts to tear up and adds quickly, “But you’ll be okay. You hit your head; they call it a traumatic brain injury. That’s why you can’t remember things, and you have a broken leg, some bruised ribs, and . . . lots of black and blue.”

But Grace looks down and won’t meet my eyes, and I know there’s more.

My mouth feels like the desert looks, and I have to swallow before I can prompt, “And? Am I . . .” I look down at my feet and quickly wiggle my toes. Then I glance at my stomach and arms. There’s a bandage on my right forearm, as well as scrapes and cuts on my hands. The cuts aren’t as bad on my left arm, but my right biceps is liberally decorated with slashes and dots. My left arm is scratched and cut, but nothing severe. Looking at my skin isn’t going to tell me if there’s something really wrong under it though. “Did I lose an organ or . . .”

“No! You still have all your organs; you’re not paralyzed. You’ll be fine,” Grace hurriedly assures me. “They put a plate in your leg, but that’s not going to mean much other than physical therapy. You hit your head pretty hard, and we were scared about that. You were out for a day, but you’re *awake* now and seem okay so . . . that’s good too.”

She's still avoiding saying something though. I know her too well for her to succeed at it. For someone so eager to dive into confrontation with most people, she treats me like I'm in need of sheltering. I take a deep breath and ask, "*And?* Just tell me."

"There was a lot of glass. That's all. You got some cuts, like on your arm. The big injuries were your leg and your head . . . your brain, really, but it seems like they'll be fine." She holds my gaze as if staring at me will keep me from reading whatever secrets she wants to hide. I know she'll tell me; she always tells me even when she doesn't *want* to do so. Earlier this year, when Amy blabbed to everyone at school that I had slept with Robert, Grace tried to protect me. She shielded me from the things people were saying, but even then, she gave in after a couple of days and spilled. I don't want to wait this time.

"Gracie . . . what *aren't* you saying?"

She sighs and hedges, "You're going to have some scars on your face. It's not really that b—"

"Mirror."

"Sweetie, maybe not yet."

"Mirror," I repeat, louder this time.

"Eva, let's just wait until you're feeling better, and it's heal—"

"*Please.*"

I watch Grace dig through her bag and pull out the little silver compact that her grandmother gave her for her sixteenth birthday. For a moment, Grace holds it in her hand, squeezing it so tightly that her knuckles look like the skin has grown thinner there.



She holds it out to me, and I don't let myself hesitate. I'm not vain, not really. I'm not the most beautiful girl in the world, but I've always been pretty enough to not be jealous or insecure. I have dark blue eyes, a smallish nose, lips that look pouty, and cheekbones that are defined without looking razor-sharp. I'm not opposed to wearing makeup, but I've always been happy that I don't necessarily need it.

I gaze at the reflection in the glass. The girl I see now *needs* makeup badly. Red lines crisscross my face. Dark blue stitches highlight some of them. As much as I want to, I can't look away from the tiny reflection of myself, and I'm glad that Grace's mirror is so small.

I reach up to touch the black-and-blue marks and cuts on my throat, but before I can, Grace grabs my hand. "No touching. The nurses said you shouldn't irritate the wounds. We had to keep your wrists restrained at first."

Even as she tells me that I was tied to my bed, which is disturbing on some basic level, I can't look away from my reflection. I dart my tongue out to touch the cut on my lip and promptly wince. I don't hurt like I should, and I know that it's because of the medicine coursing through my body. One particularly long cut runs from just under my eye to the side of my cheek where it curls under my ear and vanishes into my hair. That one has been stitched. Vaguely it registers that the ones deep enough to need stitches are the ones that'll scar the most. Some of the others are only shallow cuts like the ones on my arm, so I think they'll fade.

The tiny cuts vanish under the top of my shirt, and I look at my arms again. I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt when I walked home. Maybe that protected them a little, or maybe it was just how I hit the ground or how the car hit me. All I know for sure is that

it's my face that took the worst of the impact. I glance back at the mirror, hoping for a moment that it isn't as bad as I first thought. It is though. No amount of healing is going to make these all vanish.

The day of the accident was the last day I was pretty.

I close my eyes, and Grace takes the mirror from my hand. She doesn't tell me that everything is okay or that it's not as bad as it looks. She might try to hide things from me when she thinks it's for my own good, but she doesn't ever lie to me.

Day 5: "The Visit"

Judge

When the car hit Eva, the thump of her body was louder than I expected. It reminded me more of hitting a deer than a possum. I'm not sure why I was surprised. Girls aren't the same size as possums, but I suspect I thought more of her nature than her size. The initial thump of her body was followed by a thud as she fell against the car hood. I've dreamed about it twice since I hit her, since I thought I'd killed her.

I swallow and keep walking toward the entrance. No one looks at me any more than they do the nurses and techs that fill the halls here at Mercy Hospital. I'm part of the scenery here. I'm nobody important.

Neither is she.

I can't tell anyone though. They wouldn't understand. It's not that I need approval. I don't. I don't need a lot of things. What I *do* need is to see Eva. I've been thinking about it—thinking about *her*—since she fell. I have to know if she's really alive. The article in

the *Jessup Observer* says she is. I carefully clipped it out to save for my book, but after the fourth read, I needed a second copy because the ink was smeared and the edges were crumpled. I was careful with the second copy. Now, though, I hold the original clipping in my hands.

*Eva Tilling, the granddaughter of both Davis Cooper IV (Cooper Winery owner and CEO) and of the esteemed Reverend Tilling, suffered multiple serious injuries after a hit-and-run earlier this week.*

*Miss Tilling, 17, underwent surgery this week and remains at Mercy Hospital in Durham, where she was transported after the incident. She is in critical but stable condition.*

*The victim was walking unaccompanied when she was run down by an as yet unknown vehicle. Authorities believe Tilling was only alone for moments after being struck when another passing vehicle saw her unconscious along the road and called 911.*

*The Jessup sheriff's office is looking for witnesses to the incident. They said evidence has been recovered but declined to discuss specifics.*

*An arrest has not been made at this time.*

*The staff at the Jessup Observer would like to extend our prayers and thoughts to both the Tilling and Cooper families during this difficult time.*

I know the staff writer has to suck up to the Cooper-Tilling family. No matter what *They* do, they're always thought innocent. The paper is only one of the many things *They*

control. I didn't realize it a few years ago, but I see it now: Jessup is owned by Them, the ones who support the crazy rules that govern every interaction in Jessup. I'm not ruled by Them, not now, not ever again. Eva wasn't either, but that changed. She became corrupt. I have seen it, dirt on her flesh where the corruption has begun to take root. She was the shining light, the proof that not everyone believed Their lies. Then she fell. She became just as guilty as the rest of Them, so I had to act before the corruption consumed her. It's like a disease, eating away at all that's good and pure.

I ran over her to save her.

I was willing to let her die in order to save her. I'm like Abraham with Isaac, willing to sacrifice the one I love above all others. Like Abraham, I lowered the knife—or car, in my case—but God spared my beloved one. Now, I am waiting, hoping, *praying* for a reward for my faithfulness.

I'm praying that her acceptance will be my reward.

As I approach the metal detector at the hospital, I wrap my arm around the large arrangement of flowers as I fish out my wallet with my other hand. I don't have an ID in it, but I brought an empty one so as not to draw attention. I drop it and my clipboard into the bin, and then I step through the arch with the flowers. The guard barely looks at me.

I look a little older than I am, and with the scruffy facial hair and hat, the guard probably assumes I'm in my early twenties. He sees the flowers and uniform, and he fills in the rest of the facts to match the image. It's enough for him to shift his attention to the next person. I gather my items and keep moving.

The flowers aren't ostentatious, but they're still large enough to be believable as a gift from the paper. My clothes are nondescript enough—black trousers, navy button-up, and

a navy-and-white ball cap. My shoes are plain black too. Nothing here stands out. Still, I tug the ball cap down a bit farther to shade my face and hold the floral arrangement up and to the side. I stopped in earlier to get a look around the lobby. A camera aims at the door, and another sits in the back far corner of the ceiling behind the reception desk.

A bored woman glances up as I approach the desk.

“Pediatrics,” I say.

“Fourth floor.” She motions toward the elevators.

A second security guard stands nearby, but he’s not here to stop deliveries. Being the intersection of the east–west I-40 and north–south I-85, Durham has long been a high drug-trafficking area. It’s not as bad as it once was, but the hospitals have security due to drug-related crimes. Jessup isn’t like that. It’s safe.

Inside the elevator, I look at the flowers. We talked about the language of flowers in one of our lit classes because of *Hamlet*, so I know that Eva will figure it out. The flowers I picked are yellow roses (for apology and a broken heart), white roses (for silence and purity), red carnations (for passion), and white daisies (for innocence). The daisies were in *Hamlet* too, so I know she’ll see them as a clue. She’ll figure it out.

I’ve already removed the grocery price tag from Harris Teeter, but I check again to be sure there are no other identifying marks that will ruin my disguise. I keep my eyes downcast in case there’s a camera in here, too. By the time I reach the fourth floor, where Eva is, my hands are trembling a little, not noticeably enough that strangers would see, but I feel it. Intentionally, I step on the long piece of my shoelace as I walk, untying it as I approach the desk. I tied and retied it repeatedly to get the length right. I’d practiced as I walked around at home too. Today, I’m doing everything right. Today, I’m not going to

get impatient. It's hard though. I didn't think I'd ever see her again—aside from her funeral. I knew what I'd say *there*. I'd planned it. The words, the pauses, I practiced. I may change it some now that I have more time.

Maybe I won't have to say them at all.

When I saw the article, when I found out she was alive, I knew it was a sign. God doesn't want her to die yet. I understand that now. I was hasty. I have spent the past three days thinking about the right path, praying for clarity and considering my options. He's giving me another chance, giving *her* another chance. Maybe I can make her see, and she can be redeemed. If I save her, she can live, and she'll be so grateful for all that I've done to save her.

I stop at the desk and tell the receptionist, "Delivery for"—I glance at the clipboard as if I don't know her name, as if I could ever forget her name, and read it—"Eva Tilling."

"That girl gets more flowers than the rest of the floor combined!" the woman says as she signs on the clipboard where I silently indicate. The sheet is very convincing. I ordered my own flowers so I could have a good model for mine.

Once she walks away, I glance at my shoe as if I am just now seeing that it's untied. No one seems to be watching, but you never know. I crouch, my posture allowing me to use my hat to hide my face as I watch her carry the flowers to a room. She taps on a door, and I finish tying the shoe as I watch her go inside.

Straightening, I glance around. No one pays much mind to delivery people. So many flowers arrive at the hospital. Why would they look at us?

I force myself not to hurry. We wouldn't be in this situation if I had practiced patience in the first place. Hurrying is dangerous. Slow and steady wins the race,

especially in the South. My grandmother told me that so often that I'm sure she'd take a switch to me if she knew that I'd messed everything up by being impatient.

I glance inside Eva's room as I pass it. It's only a moment, a split second, but she's there. She's awake and speaking softly. If I didn't know better, I'd swear she was an angel. She's not though. She's one of Them. If I can't save her, she'll have to die. She's been spared for now, but I need her to understand. If she doesn't, she'll be a sacrifice at the altar of venality.

Like the rest of them.

My mouth is dry at the thought of how close I am to her now. I could walk straight into her room and visit her, but I'm not ready to talk to her. Still, I needed to see her.

I wonder if she'll notice my name on the card. I listed several names—the editor, a few staff writers, and then I added my own in the middle. *Judge*. It's not the name I was born with but it's my true name, my *soul* name. I'm not really an executioner yet, and without Eva, I'm not a jury. Together, we could be a judge, jury, and executioner.

I'd despaired when I realized that she was one of Them. On the night I tried to kill her, I thought I would be always solitary. Now that she survived, I have hope again.

Outside, I pause to breathe the already thick air. Early summer in North Carolina isn't as humid as the heat of July and August, but the air is heavy already. The sweet taste of wisteria fills my mouth, and I wonder if Eva likes the flowers. They're not as sweet as the pale purple clusters of wisteria clinging to the trees. For her, I brought common flowers—like her, not truly special. That was my mistake before: I raised her up like a false idol. I know better now.

I cross the parking lot to the car I have today and slip on my gloves before I touch the handle. Like my uniform, it's not memorable, a dark blue, four-door sedan. I'll park it beside the one that has Eva's blood on it.