

1

I *hate* mornings.

I wasn't always that way. I used to be the first one up in the house, downstairs and cooking breakfast before my parents were dressed for work or my younger brother Chase dragged himself up from his room in the basement, eyes still bleary from sleep. When he reached the kitchen, his greeting was always the same, "What are you burning this morning, Kyndal?" I'd look up briefly from the skillet, raise my eyebrow at him, then return to what I was doing. Now all mornings do is remind me how much my life has gone to hell.

I lay in bed staring at the unfamiliar ceiling above me. I've lived with my Aunt Alessandra for two weeks now, and every time I wake up I still expect to see my old room and every morning I am hit with how much I miss it. The purple walls, the back wall of my closet where my friends signed their names and wrote me messages, the mirror on my dresser covered with so many photos; I could barely even see my reflection. I even miss the orange stain on the carpet where I accidentally knocked over my nail polish when I was 13 and was too scared to tell

my mom about it. By the time she saw it, the stain had already set in. Everything about that room held a memory, told a story from my life. Now that room is gone. I look around this room and see nothing of that vibrancy. Just four beige walls and a wooden floor. No story, no life.

It's hard to imagine my dad living here. According to Alessandra, this is the house she and my dad, Mark, grew up in. When my dad was eighteen, he met my mom. She was a few years older, coming through town with some friends on a camping trip. According to my parents, it was love at first sight. My dad was sitting in a local cafe when my mom, Sofia, walked in and stole his heart. After that, they were inseparable. When my mom left, Dad followed, leaving behind his parents and a ten-year-old Alessandra. He never came back. Not long after, I arrived. Now, I'm living with a woman I don't know, all because she is the only family I have left.

I pushed back the covers and swung my legs off the side of the bed, stretching as I sat up. I knew that if I didn't make an appearance soon, Alessandra would be knocking on my door. I slowly wandered out of the room (I can't think of it as *my* room) and down the stairs into the kitchen. I found my aunt sitting at the kitchen table, dressed for the day in her

heavy hiking boots, khaki shorts, and guide shirt. Her short, dark hair was still wet from her morning shower. She was drinking coffee and reading what looked like the weather report. In the short time I've lived here, I've come to recognize this as her routine.

Although her back was to me, she knew I was there. This house is so full of creaking boards, there's no such thing as a quiet entrance.

"Good morning," she said. Her smile was warm and her brown eyes were dark but gentle. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you." I didn't mention waking up in tears. I had dreamt about my parents being alive, and I was so convinced it was real. She didn't need to know that.

"Glad to hear it. Look, I have an ATV tour this morning through Allegheny Park, but if you're ready in 30 minutes, I can give you a ride to school before I head to work."

I winced. "Ah, *no offense*, but I'm already going to be enough of a freak show to everyone there by being the new girl. I don't need to be the new girl who has to get a ride to school from her aunt. I'm

seventeen, not seven.”

“Well, *no offense*, but I know how much you don’t want to go to this school, and I don’t trust that you’ll actually go. So, I’m taking you.” With that, she turned back around, bringing the discussion to an abrupt end.

I turned on my heel and headed back up the stairs. I sighed. Time to get ready for my first day of school. Starting school with only nine weeks left until summer seemed like a waste of time, but Alessandra assured me it would be good for me; allow me to, “get involved in the community and make some friends.” *Just kill me now.*

I took a quick shower and stood wrapped in a towel in front of my closet. My options of what to wear were limited. Almost all of my wardrobe was designed to be worn in the near constant heat of Texas, not the cool air of a Pennsylvania April. I settled for a deep red sweater (my best color), skinny jeans, and nearly knee-high black boots. I got this outfit when I went to a cabin in Colorado on spring break last year with my family. I smiled slightly at the memory.

I had dragged Chase shopping with me, forcing him to give me his opinion on all the outfits I tried on. Chase hated shopping. His own fashion sense was

limited to shorts, graphic tees, and sandals. He always looked like he was headed out to surf, even though we lived nowhere near the beach. The last shop we entered that day had the best pair of boots I had ever seen. The second I put them on, I knew I wanted them. They fit perfectly. Unfortunately, their price would have meant no gas for the next two weeks. So I took them off, waved goodbye, and left. Chase and I returned to the cabin, and I swear, that night—I dreamt about those boots. I woke up the next morning to a note on the table by the bed:

Happy early birthday. These made you look like you could kick some ass... You better wear them ALL THE TIME!

C.

Confused, I looked around the room until I eventually found a box at the foot of the bed. I opened it up to find the same boots from the day before. How and when Chase went back for them, I didn't know. I put them on immediately, not caring that I was still in my pajamas, and headed to the kitchen to start making breakfast. Ten minutes into making scrambled eggs, Chase walked into the kitchen, smiling at me from the other side of the breakfast bar as he walked toward the kitchen table

to sit down. “What are you burning this morning?” he asked. Rather than answer, I grabbed an empty glass, filled it with OJ and walked around the breakfast bar to hand him the drink. Hearing the noise of my steps on the wooden floor, Chase turned to look at me and burst out laughing as he saw me in my boots, zipped tightly over my Superman pajama bottoms. I joined him in his laughter, kissing him on the cheek as I handed him his OJ saying, “Well, you did say to wear them ‘all the time’.”

I jolted away from the bittersweet memory. I wiped the tears from my cheeks and shook my whole body quickly, tried to shake off the feelings that always came when I thought about my family. It’s been seventeen days since they were stolen from me.

“No time for all that now,” I whispered to the mirror. I hastily brushed my long brunette hair, then ran my fingers through it just enough to give it that “tousled, but not ratty” look. I figured it could dry on the way. I added very light makeup to my face, just enough to accent my green eyes. I’ve never been conceited, but I have to admit—I look good. The combination of my dark hair and naturally tan skin brings out the jade in my eyes. The sweater hit me just right, accenting my curves in all the right places, not too tight, but enough for people to know

what I'm working with. I like the added height the boots give to my 5'9" frame. To an outsider, I bet I would look as if nothing was wrong, but as I looked closely, I could see the light shadows under my eyes, the haunting look of grief in the gaze that stares back at me. Sighing, I turned to brush my teeth and headed back downstairs.

As I hit the bottom step, Alessandra turned to me from the kitchen sink where she was rinsing out her coffee cup. "Ready?" she asked.

"Can't wait," I deadpanned.

Twenty minutes later, we pulled up out front of East Forest High School. Class didn't officially start for another 25 minutes, so many students were sitting on benches and in the grass, enjoying the cool weather until they were forced to go in. Alessandra thought it would be best for me to get there early so I could find my first class ahead of time. Breathing out deeply, I looked over, smiled at my aunt, and mumbled a "Thanks for the ride." I opened the door. Just as I was about to exit, Alessandra gently grabbed my arm.

"Kyndal."

I turned and looked at her. "Yes?" I raised my eyebrows. I only pretended to care what she had to

say.

She hesitated, looked down, then met my eyes. “Never mind, just have a good day. I’ll see you out here after school.”

I gave her a small nod and headed toward the building.

I tried my best to ignore the stares I got as I walked inside. At a school with a student population of 200, the new girl does not go unnoticed. Once in the building, I walked toward the office to return the registration papers Alessandra and I had filled out. As soon as I opened the office door, I was greeted by the secretary; an older woman whose name I don’t know. She looked up from her desk, smiling at me from behind her glasses and tacky red lipstick. “Good morning, Kyndal! Are you excited for your first day?”

Thrilled.

I responded quietly. “Good morning,” I ignored her question. “Here are the signed registration papers.”

“Oh, thank you dear. Give me just a moment and I will print out your class schedule.”

As she walked away, I turned and looked out the window toward the front of the school. The number

of students hanging around had grown. As I scanned the area, two guys caught my attention. I don't know what it was, but something about them kept me from looking away. Maybe it was the fact that they had slightly separated themselves from the rest of the students, or that they were complete opposites. They stood facing each other, their profiles to me. The boy with dark skin and a shaved head moved around excitedly. His well-defined muscles flexed every time he moved his arms. The other was leaning against the school's brick wall. He was clearly the taller of the two, even though the first was far from short. He wasn't as obviously muscular and bulky, but his posture implied that he was well-built. His stance was relaxed, but his eyes would scan the area regularly. He missed nothing. His brown hair gave off a slight blonde tint in the morning sunlight. His mouth was raised slightly in a smirk as he listened to whatever story his friend was so enthusiastically telling him. I stood there frozen, staring at these two strangers. The brunette boy turned his head as if he heard his name called and looked through the window directly at me. I was so taken aback by the intensity of his blue eyes, I gasped. I looked away instinctively, but when I returned my gaze, the boy was still staring. His eyes were squinted, sizing me up. I wasn't surprised. Small town like this, there can't be a lot that

happens. As the new girl, I doubted that this was the last time I'd be stared at, but it was still annoying.

I'm not a damn circus act.

“Here you are dear.” The secretary had returned. The sound of her voice startled me away from the odd staring contest. I turned back toward her, grabbed my schedule, told her thanks, and left the office without glancing over my shoulder to see if the strange boy was still looking my way.



The first half of the day went by uneventfully. Only one of my first three teachers, Mr. Fulmer, my Trigonometry teacher, forced me to stand up and introduce myself.

Hi, I'm Kyndal Davenport. I just moved here from Dayton, Texas.

I immediately decided that it was my least favorite class (as if I needed another reason to hate math.) Nobody attempted to talk to me, which I found surprising. I always thought small town people were supposed to be nosy.

By the time lunch rolled around, I was starving.

Apparently there is an open lunch policy as I saw several students leaving school to eat elsewhere. I don't know where they went; it's not like this place has many options. I walked quietly to the cafeteria, grabbed a lunch tray of food, and headed outside to eat. I found a quiet, secluded table to sit at near the edge of the forest that flanks the school. Just as I was about to take a bite into my cheeseburger, I was interrupted by a blonde-headed girl plopping herself down unceremoniously next to me. She looked at me, smiling wide.

“Hi,” she said. She bounced up and down on the bench, shaking the table. Her bubbly personality was bursting out of her.

“Hi,” I responded warily.

“I'm Lydia Warner. You're Kyndal Davenport right? Sorry to just act like I know you when I really don't, but I was in the class where Mr. Fulmer forced you to introduce yourself. What a douchey move. Things like that are the reason no one really likes him, well that and sometimes he smells like cheese.”

I just stared at her, wide eyed, overwhelmed by the flood of information that was spilling out of her.

“So, you're from Texas, huh? It's weird that you

don't have a drawl. What brought you here? I bet you think the weather here is really cold. Is your first day going well? Are people being nice to you?"

"Which question would you like me to answer first?"

"Sorry, I'm overwhelming you. Let me start over. Hi, my name is Lydia Warner, and you are?"

"Kyndal Davenport."

"Nice to meet you."

"You too, I think."

"I'm sorry, but I ramble when I'm nervous or excited and I really wanted to meet you because I thought you might need a friend, but now I can't seem to stop talking and you probably don't even want me to sit with you and..."

"It's fine." My interruption was stiff. She breathed out deeply, looking as if a huge weight was lifted off of her shoulders. I gave her a reluctant smirk and took a second to really get a good look at her. Lydia is a petite little thing. Her face is dainty, framed by her shoulder length blonde hair and glasses. While her build seems to be average, her wardrobe is anything but. She sat next to me wearing bright pink skinny jeans with a grey

screen-pressed shirt reading *Your Mom Goes to College* paired with black ankle boots. Both wrists were covered in bangles of various colors. She looked more like she belonged in a big city, not Marienville, Pennsylvania. I looked back up at her face to see her looking at me expectantly. I realized she asked me a question. “What?”

“I said, how are you liking East Forest High so far?”

“Honestly? It’s pretty unremarkable. There were more people in my junior class in Texas than there is in this entire school.”

“Yeah, it’s a pretty small town, I know. Imagine being born and raised here. I’ve known the same people my entire life. I’m pretty sure I could give you the full name, birthdate, and social security number of everyone at this school.”

She went on to give me complete details on the few students who were in our eyesight. She was explaining to me how a boy named Dylan tried to pull a prank on a teacher last year and accidentally ended up glued to his own chair, when we were interrupted by a football hitting our table. It landed a few feet away from us.

“Holy crapballs!” Lydia shouted. “Watch where

you're throwing that thing!" I got up to throw the football back to its owner. But as I reached down for the ball, my fingers touched another hand. As soon as we made contact, heat shot up my arm followed by a cool breeze. The feeling was exquisite. It reminded me of going into an air conditioned house after a hot day in the sun. Pure relief. All too quickly, the hand pulled away. I looked up and found myself face-to-face with the same guy from earlier in the day. Again, I was completely struck by his piercing blue eyes. He held my gaze, the same bewildered look on his face as me. Up close, I noticed just how attractive he was. His skin was tanned and unmarred. His lips were thin, slanted in a smirk. He opened his mouth to talk, but was interrupted.

"Roman! Hurry up man, throw the ball." He kept eye contact, ignoring his friends. Did he feel the same thing as me when our hands touched? "Rome! Come on, man!" He cocked his head to the side quickly as if to apologize and turned to rejoin his friends.

Rubbing my arm, I sat back down next to Lydia. The feeling had faded too soon. "Who is *that*?"

"Roman Sands," she replied automatically. "Sexy, huh? Almost every girl is completely obsessed with

him but he doesn't give any of them the time of day. That was the closest I have ever seen him come to flirting."

Really? A guy that hot doesn't give girls the time of day? I found that hard to believe. *Wonder if he's gay.*

"Nope," Lydia said.

"No, what?" I asked. "I didn't say anything."

"I know what you're thinking though. And no, he's not gay. Kellee Copeland asked him that exact question last year at a party after one too many jello shots."

I blushed a deep crimson. Lydia knew exactly what I was thinking. *But why do I care?*

Just then the bell rang. Back to class.

"So what do you have next?" Lydia asked as we walked toward the building.

"Umm," I fumbled in my book bag for my class schedule. "chemistry, lit, and then gym."

"Well, crap! Maybe catch you after school?"

“Uh, yeah, sure,” I replied. I was still rubbing my arm. The cool tingle lingered there.

“Cool. See ya later, Tex!”

I waved goodbye, but my response was late and I don't think she saw it. I shuffled back to the building, the odd encounter with Roman already forgotten. Maybe this school won't be so bad. Seems like I already made one friend and the day is only half over.

I should have known better.

2

Walking into Mr. Sykes' chemistry class, the first thing I noticed was Roman sitting at the back table. He was looking down, sketching something in his

notebook. I turned away from him and introduced myself to the teacher. He directed me to an open stool at a lab table in the middle of the room on the opposite side from Roman. The stool next to me was empty, so I sat down and took the time before the bell to look around the room. The classroom looked like the standard American science room. High, black topped lab tables, two stools resting at each. Three of the walls were covered in a variety of posters. The fourth wall, the one to my left, was lined with windows that looked out into Allegheny National Forest.

Maples are common in Allegheny. Their green leaves contrasted with the charcoal bark of the black cherry trees. I wanted to get lost in them. The warning bell rang and I snapped out of my daydream. I looked toward the door to see three girls walk in, talking to each other in hushed tones. Almost simultaneously they stopped in their tracks, glaring directly at me. *I knew this day couldn't continue to go well.*

The trio sauntered over. Two of them sat in front of me: the tall, pretty girl with long, caramel hair, and a cheaper knockoff version of her. The third, a tan girl with dark hair and eyes, took her seat next to me. I kept my head down and popped my knuckles under the table, a nervous habit of mine when I'm

stressed out.

The final bell rang and Mr. Sykes started class. He was trying to describe the lab we would be doing that day, but the three girls blatantly ignored him. The cheap twins in front turned around and whispered quietly to the one next to me. Although I couldn't hear everything they said, I caught words like *Texas, dead, her fault*. Their eyes darted my way as quickly as they talked, but whenever I looked over, they averted their gaze.

“GIRLS!” Mr. Sykes hollered toward our tables. The two in front of me rolled their eyes before slowly turning to face the teacher.

“Yes, Mr. Sykes?” It was the caramel haired one who I have determined is their leader. Her voice was sickeningly sweet.

“If what you are saying to each other is so much more important than what I am teaching, do you care to share with the rest of us?”

“Well, I was just saying to Kellee and Jules,” she nods to Mini-Me then to my table partner, “I think it is negligent of the school to allow a dangerous student into our classrooms.”

Dangerous? What the hell? Was she talking about

me? I was the only new kid there.

“That’s enough Paige,” Mr. Sykes warned.

“I’m just saying, if she killed her own family, what would she be willing to do to us?”

Shocked, I shot up, pushing back my stool as I went. “Excuse me?!” I bellowed at the paper-thin girl sitting in front of me. “What the hell is your problem? You don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“I know *all* about what brought you here,” she turned in my direction, a plastic smile stuck to her face. “You’re a killer.”

I placed both hands on the lab table and leaned over it, getting as close as I could to Paige. I looked her square in the face and spoke, my voice steady, “If I was a killer, don’t you think I would be the wrong person to piss off?”

Paige’s eyes showed a brief moment of fear before she turned back toward the front of the room. “Mr. Sykes, didn’t you hear her? She threatened me! Aren’t you going to do anything about it?”

“That’s plenty from you, Ms. Christensen. Ms. Davenport—report to the office immediately. I’ll have someone show you where it is.” I gathered my

bag and headed toward the door. “No need, I remember,” I threw the bag over my shoulder as I walked out of class.

I stomped, my boots echoing off the hallway floors. *How dare she—how DARE she bring up my family?* This girl knew nothing about me or what I had been through. I was ready to leave that school. It hadn’t even been one day and I already hated it. Unable to control my rage, I turned and punched a locker. I dropped to the floor, leaning against the locker that I had dented. I placed my head in my hands. My emotions spilled out in tears. I cried because of what Paige said, because of the reaction she was able to get from me, but mainly because she made me remember.

I couldn’t control the images flooding my mind. *Driving home from my birthday celebration. Me behind the wheel, Mom in the passenger seat, Chase and Dad in the back. It’s late. Our drive home should have taken only 15 minutes, but there was a detour that forced us to take an unfamiliar route. I remember Mom said something funny, I looked at her briefly—just one split second. When my eyes returned to the road, there was something standing out in the middle, I don’t even remember what. I swerved, attempting to miss it. Our car flipped several times, landing upside down. I’m not sure*

how long we hung in that vehicle, trapped upside down by our seatbelts. I must have blacked out for awhile because when I came to, mom was screaming at Chase and dad to wake up. The smell of smoke choked me. Somewhere the car was burning. It was difficult to see or think as the oxygen was stolen from inside the vehicle to feed the growing flames. I strained my eyes, coughing uncontrollably, and looked over at Mom desperately trying to escape her seat. But the belt had latched her. It's harder to breathe now. The last thing I remember before everything went dark was Mom's typically dark eyes glowing a vibrant yellow.

My memory was interrupted by someone placing a hand on my shoulder. I jumped up so quickly I knocked the intruder back. I looked up to see Roman standing there, his eyes a mix of concern and curiosity.

I looked deep into the eyes that had already captivated me twice, but I refused to be humiliated for being caught in a moment of weakness. "What do you want?" I spat.

"Your hand is bleeding," he said, pointing down. Sure enough, my knuckles were stained red.

I responded quickly. "I'm fine." He squinted his

eyes, like he wanted to get a better look at me. I hastily wiped the tears from my cheeks. “Look, I know Sykes sent you to make sure I made it to the office, but I can get there just fine on my own, so run along.” I made a shooing motion at him.

He smiled slightly, almost as if I amused him. He just stood there; quiet, unmoving. I rolled my eyes and turned away from him, continuing my trudge to the office.

Roman called after me. “What Paige said about your family—”

I stopped in my tracks, turned around, and glared back at the dark-haired boy rooted in the middle of the hallway. I pointed my finger at him, “is none of your damn business.” Once again I turned toward the office, at this point welcoming any punishment they will give me just so I can get away.

“No, you don’t understand,” he tried to tell me.

“Leave me alone,” I growled at him and continued on down the hallway. Thankfully, no footsteps followed.

I left the office over two hours later. Apparently, the punishment for threatening someone in class is an incredibly boring lecture, a call home, and a week

of after school detention. Alessandra told me we would discuss what happened when I got home. I wondered if she'd care what Paige had said to begin with. The principal sure didn't. I headed toward the gym for my last class of the day. My time in the office had forced me to miss my entire literature class, the one subject I actually liked at my old school. By the time I had made it to gym, the class had already started.

The class was in the middle of a basketball game. On a typical day, I would jump right in. I've been an athlete my whole life. But on that day, I just wanted to go home and pretend like none of it happened. I handed my late pass to my teacher, who luckily gave me the option to join in the game or sit and watch. I opted for the latter. I moved toward the bleachers, had a seat, and waited for that wretched school day to end.

When the bell freed me at 3:00, I was out the gym doors into the fresh air. I saw Alessandra sitting in her car and I shuffled her way, my head down. I looked up briefly when I heard my name called. Lydia was headed toward me, a smile on her face. I kept walking without recognizing her. When I reached the car, I was so eager to get in, I couldn't get the car door open. My fingers struggled to grab the latch. My hand fumbled with the handle. I

growled in frustration. Any punishment Alessandra gave me at that point was preferable to staying there. I removed my hand, stopped, and took a breath before finally getting the thing to open. I plopped in the passenger seat and Alessandra looked over at me. “I think that girl was trying to get your attention.”

“Can we just leave, please?”

“S-Sure.” She hesitated, staring at me for a moment with concern and confusion in her eyes before she started the car and left the parking lot. I was clearly upset, and she could tell. Luckily, she didn’t push it. I stared out the window at the unfamiliar town that is now my home. One grocery store, one gas station, a town library, a hotel, and more churches than there are houses. The town is so small it doesn’t even have a stoplight—something the locals apparently take great pride in for reasons I don’t understand.

Directly on Route 66, Marienville is a stop on the way to somewhere better, not a place someone wants to live. Unlike the town itself, though, the scenery is beautiful. Marienville is almost completely surrounded by Allegheny National Forest. Over 800 square miles of old growth forest, winding creeks and rivers, and breathtaking,

sometimes steep cliffs. The Allegheny is the real life of this town. Tourists come here to ATV, kayak, hike, rock climb, and camp almost year-round. The Allegheny is where my aunt worked. She gave hiking and ATV tours through a local tourist group. She was still wearing her uniform in the car that day: khaki shorts and a shirt that read “Allegheny Explorers.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Alessandra asked quietly.

“I really don’t,” I replied. I kept staring out the window.

We rode the rest of the way home in silence.

When we reached the house, I jumped out of the car and immediately headed toward the front door.

“Where are you going?” Alessandra asked.

“Upstairs. I have homework to do,” I lied. I really just wanted to go upstairs, curl up on the bed, and cry.

“It can wait.” I turned around, expecting her to be standing right behind me. Instead she was reaching into the trunk of her car. “Here,” she said. She threw a pair of outdoor boots at my feet. “Change

into these.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see. Just do it.” I grabbed the boots, sat down on the front porch, and changed my shoes.

“What am I supposed to do with the boots I was wearing?”

“Leave them on the porch.”

“What if someone takes them?”

“Who?” she asked, gesturing around us. She had a point. We lived on a gravel road, and there wasn’t another house for miles. “Braid your hair too.”

“Why?” I asked again.

“I told you; you’ll see. Now follow me.” We headed around the house toward a large detached garage that Alessandra used to keep all of her gear for work. “Can you work a clutch?”

“Yes,” I said warily. *Where is she going with this?* She opened the garage door, revealing a variety of outdoor gear. Carabiners and ropes for rock climbing, kayaks for the river and creeks, and finally, two ATVs.

“Put these on.” She handed me a helmet, goggles,

gloves, and a CamelBak. “You take this one,” she said, patting the seat of the closest four-wheeler. “I’ll take lead. You follow behind. Don’t get too close. In case something happens to me I want you far enough back that you don’t get in trouble, too. We’ll start out on the trail, but where we are going will require hitting some rough terrain. You up for it?” I looked up at her and grinned.

Alessandra wasn’t kidding when she said we would hit some rough terrain. Twenty minutes into our ride, she abruptly turned off the trail, winding in and out of trees, over dead stumps, even through a low-running creek. We rode for so long I was beginning to wonder if she actually had a destination in mind, or if she just wanted to go for a ride so I could clear my head and forget about my day. If the latter was the case, it was working. I could already feel myself calming down, forgetting about the terrible things Paige said, or about yelling at Roman in the hallway.

All of a sudden, the forest opened up and I was in the most beautiful place I had ever seen. In front of me was a large, treeless meadow. The grass was wild and knee high, highlighted by beautiful wildflowers that sprinkled the field with yellows, reds, and pinks. Just past the grass was a lake. As we brought our ATVs to a stop, I removed my

helmet and marveled at the water. It was a gorgeous blue and perfectly still—the surface interrupted only by a small island in the middle. The water reflected the sky like a mirror. I walked to the water’s edge and looked down. The water was so clear I could see the bottom even though it was several feet down. Except for the small clearing we were standing in, the lake was completely surrounded by dense forest. It was perfectly silent except for the occasional chirp of a passing bird.

Alessandra stood next to me, looking out over the lake. “What is this place?” I asked her. She must have heard the awe in my voice.

“My favorite place in the whole world, and not on the tourist’s map,” she said with a smile.

“It’s unbelievable.”

“Your father showed it to me, not long after he met your mom. Said it was his safe haven from all the evils in the world. I come here when I need to think, when the world gets to be too much for me.”

“So that’s why you brought me here, to help me calm down?” I was surprised. The gesture, along with the consideration behind it, were unexpected.

“Look, Kyndal. I know I can only begin to understand what you’ve been through in the past few weeks. I lost my brother, someone that I hadn’t seen in 18 years, someone I didn’t really even know. You lost your entire family.” I turned and looked at her, wondering where she was going with this. “Your entire world was turned upside down. Forced to leave the only place you’ve ever known to live with an aunt you’ve never met. I know it’s going to take some time, but I just want you to be happy here and know that I am here for you, whatever you need.” Her smile was kind. It reminded me of my father. I smiled back. I saw her arm twitch, and I knew what she was going to do, but I was too slow to stop her. Next thing I knew, she had me wrapped up in a hug. My body stiffened. I hadn’t had any real contact with anyone since my family died. She released me quickly. Although I don’t mean it, my manners took over. “Thank you, Alessandra.”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you—call me Allie. Please. Only my mom called me Alessandra, and only when I was in trouble,” she said, laughing slightly. I nodded, and we both turned back to look at the lake. The silence was comfortable. I don’t know how long we stood there.

Finally, I turned back to her and spoke quietly: “She

told everyone that I killed my family.”

“The girl from school?” Allie asked gently, turning toward me.

I nodded. “Paige. She said the school shouldn’t have let me in because I was dangerous. Why would she do that? She doesn’t even know anything about me.”

“Some people are just naturally afraid of anything new. Rather than take the time to get to know you, she decided to attack.”

“But how did she even know about the accident?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice was grim.

“I shouldn’t have lost my temper and threatened her the way I did. I just got so angry. I couldn’t believe the things she was saying, and the teacher didn’t even stop her. Tomorrow everyone will know about what happened and think I’m some kind of lunatic.”

Allie’s eyes looked determined. “You are not to blame for your family’s death. Tell me you believe that.” Rather than answer her, I turned back to the lake. *Did I know that?* So much about that night was blurry, but on a few things I was crystal clear. I was the one driving. I was the one who looked away. I was the one who swerved. So why was I the

one who survived?

By the time we returned home, the sun had dipped below the canopy of trees, casting the forest into alternating sections of light and shadows. We parked the ATVs in the garage. I was surprised to feel that even though I was drained from the emotional rollercoaster I had ridden that day, I felt physically rejuvenated by the ride through the forest—almost as if my body was replenished by being a part of nature. Once inside, I helped Allie make dinner. Cooking has always been something that relaxes me.

After we cleared the plates, I headed upstairs for the night. I took a shower, hoping the hot water would wash away the remainder of my worries about returning to school tomorrow.

After the shower, I laid in bed and put on my headphones. I scrolled through my music and chose a band that Chase loved. Heavy metal has never been my thing, but it made me feel close to him, and the screaming and deafening beat kept me from thinking. I laid that way until everything went black.