



SNEAK PEEK

CHAPTERS 1-3

WHITE RABBIT

CALEB ROEHRIG

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

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There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.

—ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE



THE PHONE GOES DEAD IN MY EAR. THE SUDDEN SILENCE ON THE line is so total, so ominous, that a cold surge of adrenaline brings goose bumps to my flesh in spite of the thick and sticky heat that lingers in the night air. “Hello?” I say stupidly, hearing the raw agitation in my own voice. “Are you still there?” A quick and pointless glance at the display assures me that the answer is, indeed, *no*.

“What’s going on?” The boy standing behind me asks, his ancient Chucks scraping against the rough pavement of the street. Sebastian’s “lucky” shoes are so worn out, they’re literally falling apart, his dark socks peeking through frayed holes in the graying canvas. I used to think it was cute. “Who was it?”

I wave him irritably into silence as I dial my cell, calling the number back. It rings repeatedly on the other end, but no one picks up. “Come on,” I urge out loud. “Answer your damn phone!”

“Rufus, who was it?” Sebastian repeats as I give up in frustration, jamming my cell back into my pocket and turning to face him. His wide, dark eyes are filled with obvious concern, and it

makes me angry. He has no right to be worried about me—not now, not after everything he’s done—but I’m suddenly too confused and anxious to summon up the righteous fury I’d been feeling just a few minutes earlier.

“It was April,” I report stiffly, feeling a twinge of self-directed anger as I indulge his solicitude. *Why am I answering him?* My life is none of his business. Not anymore.

“Your sister?” He wrinkles his nose in genuine bewilderment, eyebrows scrunching together. It’s a familiar sight, and another thing about him I used to think was cute—back before he broke my heart.

“She’s the only April I know.”

“Why was she calling you?” He isn’t asking for a summary of our conversation. What has him so perplexed is the simple fact that my sister has called me *at all*—and I’m just as baffled as he is.

April is only ten months younger than me, fifteen to my sixteen, but we barely know each other. I’m her brother only in the most technical sense, and we’re hardly even what you might call friends; *friendship* is something our controlling and self-important father, Peter Covington II, would never tolerate between us. And while I do not personally give two flying shits what that hypocritical dickbag will or will not tolerate, neither do I especially want anything to do with *any* of the Covingtons.

But April has a way of worming into your heart, no matter how many obstacles you set before her. She’s outgoing, fun-loving, and bold, and so far has never met a rule that doesn’t have an April Covington-shaped loophole. There’s a sweetness to her that even her cold-blooded parents have failed to stamp out—and you can bet they’ve given it their best shot. Peter and his wife, Isabel, *have* succeeded in passing along some of their more dismal

qualities, though; and to that end, likable though she may be, April can also be calculating, manipulative, and spoiled. Her company often comes at a price, and I'm pretty sure my account with her has just been called up.

"She's in trouble," I hear myself saying to Sebastian, the words sounding surreally technical, my brain already spinning faster and faster as I try to figure out what I'm going to do next. "She—she needs my help."

"April needs *your* help." He tries the words on for size, but they make no more sense to him than they do to me. And yet, not two minutes earlier, it was exactly what she said.

"Hello?" My voice was testy, my patience threadbare when I answered her call. I was already regretting it—already wishing I'd just continued with the angry speech I'd been about to give Sebastian—even as the greeting left my mouth.

A strange, shuffling silence came back, a susurrant nothingness on the line that was slowly replaced by shallow, labored breathing. Then, just as I was starting to think it was a prank: "Rufus?"

Her voice was quavering, distant, my name sliding around in her mouth like a sliver of ice, and in that instant, I forgot my anger. "Yeah, it's me. What's . . . what is it?"

"Rufus," she repeated fretfully. There was more breathing—stiff and unnatural—and then her distant voice again. "I need . . . I need help, Rufus."

"What are you talking about? What's going on?"

"I'm at . . . Fox's c-cottage," she said next, the words jerky and disjointed, as if they had taken colossal effort to put together. "Fox's parents' cottage. You have to help me. Please."

"What's happened?" I demanded, still too innately suspicious

about anything to do with the Covingtons to take my half sister's plea at face value. "Tell me what—"

"You're the only one I can trust!" She blurted in a kind of high-pitched whimper. "You have to come, Rufus. You have to! Please promise me . . . promise me." Garbled words followed, a string of nonsense, like English spoken backward, and then, "I don't know what to do. I'm so scared. I think I—HELP ME!"

And the line went dead.

I recount this for Sebastian in broad strokes, not really wanting to share, but too upset not to. We're standing in front of his car, amber streetlights casting his stupidly gorgeous face in sepia tones, and the heavy, still air that settles around us is redolent of gunpowder. A block away, my best friend, Lucy Kim, is hosting her Fourth of July rager; it's our pathetic attempt at living up to all those iconic Hollywood teen movies, where no parents and lots of beer is the only formula necessary to create one perfect, life-changing night for a handful of feisty, lovable underdogs—but so far we've only succeeded in creating buckets of puke and a few scorch marks on the back of a couch, which Lucy's going to have a hell of a time explaining to Mr. and Mrs. Kim when they return from Boston on the sixth.

"What are you gonna do?" Sebastian asks worriedly. He moves closer, like he's going to touch me, and I step back. He registers the rebuff and stops, but his eyes stay on mine, his gaze soulful enough to stir a feeling to life inside me that I long ago drove to its grave with a stake through the heart.

"I don't know," I mutter, glancing up toward Lucy's place to avoid his gaze. I can hear shouts, music, and laughter, fireworks

still cracking and booming intermittently from somewhere along the lake. It's nearly ten . . . Would anyone at the party even be sober? "I don't— Maybe I should call Peter."

"Your *dad*?" This statement confuses him even more than April's request for my help. "Is that a good idea?"

"No," I admit, feeling my face color. "But what else can I do? I don't have a car, all my friends are shit-faced, and I don't even know where April is! 'Fox's parents' cottage,' I mean, where the fuck is that? It could be anywhere!"

"South Hero Island," Sebastian responds promptly, because of *course* he knows. "I've been there a couple times. It's only like thirty minutes from here—I'll drive."

"No, thanks," I say in a cold voice, summoning up as much dignity as I can, even though it's obvious that I'm just cutting off my nose to spite my face—a tacit and embarrassing confession that I'm still hurting. That I still care.

"How're you gonna get there, then?"

"I'll figure something out."

"Yeah?" he challenges, a small spark of irritation at last flickering to life beneath his perennially cool facade. "You gonna walk out to the island? Knock on every cottage door you see until you find her?" He takes a step back and gestures to his Jeep, four feet away. "My car's right here, and I know exactly where we're going. You want to yell at me, I can tell, so do it on the way and kill two birds with one stone."

He concludes his proposition with a rakish grin—the smirky, vulpine look that melts underwear across all four grades at Ethan Allen High—and I will the ice to thicken over my heart against its fearsome power. Even so, with an anxious glance at my phone's

display, I can see that time is already slipping past; I don't actually know what kind of help April needs, how serious a situation she's in, and I can't be sure I have the time it'll take to go back to Lucy's and search the party for somebody still clearheaded enough to take me on a half-hour excursion to the middle of Lake Champlain.

Plus, despite my antipathy toward Sebastian Williams, having him along might end up being a good thing. April's crowd is his crowd, too, and if this *does* turn out to be some kind of trap, his presence might fuck up their plans a little. Maybe.

Feeling shakier than I care to show, beginning to grow truly worried about my sister in spite of all my misgivings, I give a curt nod and start wordlessly for the passenger-side door. Sebastian's smile broadens as he blips his locks open, but I pretend not to notice, busying myself with an explanatory text to Lucy. I've been out of the house for less than ten minutes, but she's already written me a (very drunk) message inquiring after my absence: *WHERE ARE YOU, RUFUS HOLT?? IT IS TIME FOR TEQUILA SHOTS AND I NEED MY BESTIE!!!*

Three years earlier, when I was suffering the slings and arrows of a really shitty coming-out process, Lucy Kim was the first friend to rally to my side, communicating her allegiance via a series of effusive texts. First: *JUST FOUND OUT MY BFF IS GAY OMFG SUPERCOOL WOW LET'S GO BUY SHOES!* Followed by: *jkjkjk u know I love you to death Rufus and I am in your corner 110% no matter what mwah xoxo.* And: *I will fight a bitch for you if I have to just say the word.* Then, finally: *Srsly tho I really do need new shoes so how about it?*

Lucy is high-energy, high-maintenance, and often just plain high, but I love her to death. As I clamber into Sebastian's Jeep, I

use my thumbs to hammer out, *Had to leave. Something's up with April!?! Call you tomorrow bae.* I'll get at least seventy more messages from her before the night is over.

The streets of Burlington sweep by in a leafy, starlit blur as we speed north toward Winooski and Malletts Bay, heading eventually for the narrow causeway that connects the shore to the chain of islands in the middle of the serpentine lake separating Vermont and New York. Sebastian was absolutely correct—I really *did* want to yell at him—but I'm too preoccupied with April's summons to shift my mental gears back to the recriminations I've been stockpiling for the guy who so readily volunteered to be my chauffeur. The guy who, not so long ago, was also my first boyfriend.

Dating Sebastian Williams was both the best and worst thing that ever happened to me. In a lot of ways, being with him made me feel as if maybe I'd never really been alive at *all* before. I was like a violin—an object that hasn't much purpose until someone touches it, fills it with resonance, draws things from it that it can never produce on its own. Sebastian had been the one to draw music from me, and it's why the end was so bad; before him, I'd never actually realized how painful the silence was.

But the hardest part of our breakup was also the hardest part of our entire relationship: having to keep it all a secret from everyone we know.

I cast a glance in his direction as we loop through a traffic circle, light gliding across his face in a way that I've tried to capture in photographs a million times without success. He's so good-looking it still takes my breath away, even when I'm wishing I'd never known him. With dark skin, flirty eyes, and a cocky smile, he's too handsome for his own damn good—and that's

before you consider his long-legged, slim-hipped, and perfectly toned body.

Fuck.

It's only been six weeks since he suddenly, and without explanation, stopped answering my texts; five weeks since he officially stomped my heart out like a spent cigarette in the most painful way imaginable; and only one week since I stopped entertaining pointless fantasies that, one day, he would take me back again—or at least give me the chance to tell him to his face exactly what I think of him. Imagine my surprise, then, when he turned up out of the blue at Lucy's house, saying that he needed to speak to me, that it couldn't wait. But we'd barely gotten into the subject before my phone began ringing in my pocket, April calling with her baffling emergency, and now here we are, sitting mere feet apart in an uncomfortable silence as the night gets weirder and weirder around us.

Whatever's on his mind, I know it has to be something big—big enough for him to figure out where Lucy lives, anyway, since he always made an emphatic point of avoiding my friends throughout the four months we dated. Even so, I'm determined to have my say first, to unburden myself of all the poisonous, caustic feelings that have eaten their way down into my marrow over the course of six long weeks. I've rehearsed this scene so many times in my head that delivering my righteous rebukes should be simple . . . only, seven days of training myself not to think about it at all—out of some asinine, self-helpy notion that all the negative emotions were hurting me—has caused my crystal-clear accusations and arguments to become hopelessly tangled together. Answering April's call had partly been a simple play for time to sort my thoughts.

"It's gonna be an hour to get out there and back," Sebastian

remarks conversationally, his voice jarring in the silence. “You can’t ignore me the whole time.”

“Challenge accepted,” I return icily, instantly indebted by my own perverse stubbornness to suppress the vengeful words a little longer. It’s so stupid; I *really* want to tell him off, but if it’s what he wants, too, then I’ll be damned if I give him the satisfaction. I once grudged my way out of tickets to see Death Cab in concert because they were a peace offering from my friend Brent—with whom I was in the midst of a Blood Feud—and I didn’t want him to feel better about whatever it was that he’d done to piss me off.

I can’t fathom what Sebastian has to say to me after all this time, though—what could possibly have compelled him to track me down so late on a night when he should, by all rights, be at a party with all his cool friends—and I admit that I’m more than a little intrigued. Even if I don’t want to be. And neither can I begin to fathom the reason why April called *me* of all people, said *I’m* the only one she can trust. None of it makes sense; the whole evening has turned so bizarre so quickly that I actually squeeze my thigh until it hurts, just to remind myself that I’m really awake.

“This isn’t some kind of a trick, is it?” I finally ask, my voice rusty as Sebastian steers the Jeep onto the two-lane causeway. The sky is freckled with stars, and the lake is a sheet of rippling black metal spreading out to either side of us.

“What do you mean?” He wrinkles his nose again.

“I *mean*, I’m not being lured into some kind of ambush, am I?”

“April wouldn’t do that to you,” Sebastian answers assuredly.

“Yes she would. She has.”

When I was in the fifth grade, before I knew enough to truly distrust the Covingtons, April approached me outside of school one

day following the final bell. I had just unlocked my bike when she appeared at the end of the long metal rack, looking tense but excited.

“Rufus, I need to talk to you!” She hissed urgently, glancing about with her large, robin’s-egg eyes. We weren’t supposed to speak to each other, and I assumed she was nervous we’d be seen. “It’s really important. It’s . . . it’s about my dad and your mom?”

“Um, okay,” I said, only a little suspiciously. She was acting oddly, the words not sounding entirely natural, but I didn’t know what to make of it. “What about them?”

“Not here—in private!” She started backing away. “Meet me behind the gym, okay? I don’t want anyone else to find out.”

“April, what—” I started, but she was already running across the playground, heading for the large brick extension that housed our elementary school’s gymnasium. After a short inventory of my doubts, I secured my bike again and trotted after her.

Rounding the corner, I walked straight into a trap. April stood against the wall, her blue eyes wide and solemn, and she watched with silent fascination as our older brother, Hayden, and two of his friends spent the next four minutes beating me into a quivering, bloody pulp at her feet.

“You guys were little kids back then,” Sebastian says, familiar with the story, dismissing the experience as if it were no big deal—as if it weren’t just one small part of a very big hell from which I have literally no escape.

“Some people don’t change,” I reply rigidly. How can I explain to him, for all her winsomeness, how dangerous April really is? How she was raised in such a bubble that she’s simultaneously

helpless and ruthless, immured from the consequences of her actions by a family that refuses to see her actions in the first place?

"It would be kind of a shitty trap. I mean, she knows you don't have a car, so how could she be sure you'd—"

He stops short as he finally catches up to the rest of my insinuation, and his voice takes on a thorny quality that is immeasurably more pleasing than his attempts at friendliness. "You think maybe I'm in on it." I respond to the charge with silence, and he states gruffly, "I wouldn't do something like that, Rufe. Not to you. You know I wouldn't."

"I don't know *what* you'd do," I shoot back, and six weeks of hurt and doubt and raw anger break the surface like an underwater explosion, venom scorching my throat and pricking my eyelids. Embarrassed, I turn my face to the window.

We leave the causeway and head inland on Route 2, rolling past the apple orchards and farmhouses of South Hero Island, the *crack-boom* of fireworks still intermittently punctuating the night. Presently, Sebastian turns off the main road and onto a narrow lane, heading toward the western shore through a corridor of lushly overgrown trees. The darkness is total, isolating, and the island suddenly feels terribly remote. My hands drift to my seat belt, worrying the fabric with rhythmic motions as the road turns from pavement to hard-packed dirt beneath the Jeep's tires. *Where the hell are we going?*

Eventually, the tree line breaks before us, Sebastian's headlights stabbing out into the moonlit void of Lake Champlain, and he turns north again to parallel the water. We pass a few cottages—mostly vacation rentals—before we finally reach our destination and the Jeep begins to slow.

On our left, a gravel drive snakes through a copse of aspens and pines, leading to a craftsman-style cabin with peaked gables that form an upper half-story. Massive bushes cluster beneath a wraparound porch, and a detached carport shelters a black Range Rover. A Playboy bunny decal on the imposing vehicle's tailgate flares under Sebastian's headlights and, recognizing it, I shift in my seat. The SUV belongs to April's superdouche boyfriend, Fox Whitney.

Fox is seventeen, a senior-to-be at Ethan Allen, and an absolute prolapsed rectum of a human being. He's also the youngest of three boys, sons of a corporate attorney and a dermatologist, and is therefore nearly as spoiled as my sister. I blink in confusion at his car, even more ill at ease than before we pulled up; if Fox is here, why does April need me? And, come to that, why *me* and not the brother she's allowed to associate with—or one of her many popular friends?

"This is it," Sebastian says a little uncertainly as he shoves open the door of the Jeep and jumps out. I follow suit, a welcome wagon of mosquitoes instantly gathering around me, and I almost regret my choice to wear a tank top to Lucy's party. I say "almost" for two simple reasons: 1) my arms and legs are already stuccoed with bites, so what can a few more hurt? and 2) I've been working out *a lot* over the past six weeks, determined to be hot as fuck the next time I crossed paths with Sebastian, and my arms actually look pretty good.

My ex-boyfriend leads the way to a set of wooden steps that ascend to the porch, and I try to ignore how good *his* arms look—how the muscles in his calves flex before my eyes, how the scent of his dumb cologne still makes me dizzy in a treacherous way after all this time—and concentrate on what I might be walking

into. Lights burn in the cottage, every window ablaze, and I can hear music pumping from inside.

Sebastian knocks at the front door and peers through the beveled glass insets, and I feel like telling him not to waste his time; I've been calling and texting April repeatedly on the trip over and haven't gotten any response. If she's in there, she's not going to answer. Reaching past him, I try the knob, and the door swings open.

"April?" I call out apprehensively. A pinewood foyer extends into a family room decorated in a style an obscenely wealthy person might call "rustic"—the kind of down-home, country charm that requires raw silk slipcovers and *objets d'art* imported from Provence—but it hasn't been treated well; the furniture is out of alignment, red Solo cups and abandoned bottles are everywhere, and fragments of broken glass and ceramic litter the floor like bloodthirsty confetti. My sister is nowhere in sight.

Cautiously, I step over the threshold, my concern mounting. Still, I'm hyperaware of Sebastian's presence immediately behind me, and I wonder—not for the first time—how he intends to explain what he's doing here. There's still a chance this is a ruse, that he's tricked me into another ambush to prove something to his asshole friends—who, for all I know, have somehow sussed out the truth of our relationship. Maybe he's about to pass some kind of ruthless social test at my expense. "April, it's Rufus. Are you here?"

A highly polished staircase rises on my right, climbing to what I suspect is a loft-style bedroom or study, and I cock an ear toward the upper story. The soft noise I then hear, however—a cross between a sigh and a whisper—comes not from above, but from somewhere else on the ground floor.

As I move forward out of the foyer, a dining nook appears to the left off the family room—and then, just to *its* left, the kitchen. This is where I find April at last, when I round the corner, clearing the central island so I can look down at the floor.

My sister is slumped against the cupboards beneath the sink, her head bowed forward, her skin as white as candle wax against her purple bikini; and Fox lies sprawled across the tiles beside her, half-curved into the fetal position, his face nightmarishly slack.

Both of them are drenched in blood, and the fingers of April's right hand are loosely wrapped around the hilt of a massive butcher knife.

2

"*APRIL!*" I GRIP HER BY THE SHOULDERS, HER FLESH FRIGHTENINGLY cold and sticky to the touch, and drag her forward, straightening her up. The knife slips from her right hand as my knee jostles a discarded cell phone resting by her left, and her head lolls and swings on her neck, heavy as a sandbag. Frantically, I give her a hard shake. "*April!*"

"Holy fuck, dude." Sebastian's eyes are huge with panic as he prowls Fox's body, searching for a pulse. "*Holy fuck, Rufus, I think he's dead!*"

Willing myself not to lose it, I press my fingers against April's carotid, holding my breath. When I feel the faint and erratic undulation of blood moving beneath her pallid skin, I emit a primitive noise of relief and squeeze my eyes shut tight. "*She's alive.*"

"What the fuck happened here, man?" Sebastian asks me, deathly serious. His face is stricken as he backs away from Fox's corpse, the Whitneys' favorite son stretched across the slate floor tiles, his T-shirt so saturated with blood that its true color is impossible to determine. "*What the fuck happened?*"

He jolts to his feet and stumbles a little, eyes still getting wider. His anxiety is so sincere that, I finally realize, if this *is* some twisted prank, he is certainly not in on it. I search my sister's body, looking for wounds or some other sign that she's been hurt, but I can't find anything. The blood doesn't seem to be hers.

"April, wake up," I command sharply, sweeping her auburn hair out of her face and tilting her chin to the light. She mumbles something unintelligible, and I pry one of her eyes open. Her pupil is a tiny dot in a pool of aquamarine, her gaze glassy and unfocused as it drifts up into her skull. "She's on something."

"*Shit*, man!" Sebastian paces agitatedly, but he can't stop staring down at Fox's body. "We have to call someone."

"Not yet," I tell him firmly, giving April another hard shake. With a guilty feeling, I swat her lightly across the face. She gives a sharp snort and her eyelids lift unevenly. "April! April, can you hear me?"

"... Rufus?" Her voice is a breathy whisper.

"Yeah, it's me."

Fat tears roll down her cheeks as I watch, and then, to my complete surprise, she tosses her arms around me in a flaccid, desperate embrace. Her forehead thuds against my shoulder, and she begins weakly to sob. I let it go on for just a moment before I straighten her back up again, flustered. "April, what happened?"

"I-I don't..." She starts to look toward Fox's body, but I take hold of her chin again and force her to face me. I can't afford to lose her concentration now.

"Focus on me, April. Tell me what happened."

She licks her lips, her eyes clouding for a moment before she seems to will them clear again, but her voice is a faded, broken

whisper as she moans, “I don’t remember. I don’t . . . there was . . . all that blood . . .”

With Sebastian’s help, I haul her to her feet, and the two of us start walking her through the dining room and living room, hip-hop music blasting from speakers I can’t see. She’s like a newborn colt, her legs rubbery and untrustworthy, and her chin keeps dropping to her chest. I ask her what she’s taken, but her answers are unintelligible, and I feel the quick heat of impatience snapping under my skin. I try to quell it, recalling my therapist’s advice: *Take a deep breath and step back*. Over April’s head, I ask Sebastian, “Do they have a shower? Maybe it’ll wake her up.”

“There’s a bedroom through there,” he answers after a beat, his face alarmingly gray, and gestures to a door set in a small vestibule beside the stone-fronted fireplace. “It’s got a bathroom. I don’t think there’s a tub, but—”

“Let’s get her in there.”

The Whitneys’ master suite is cozy in size and luxurious in appointment—Egyptian cotton sheets, a hand-carved headboard, priceless antique armoires—but an open doorway leads to a surprisingly spare bathroom with a shower stall.

I shove April into Sebastian’s arms while I kick my shoes aside, strip off my tank top, and crank the cold water to full blast. Then I pull my blood-soaked, half-dead half-sister under the hard spray with me, holding her upright while she squirms and mumbles, pink water sluicing off her and swirling ominously down the drain. Her bare skin becomes slippery as the drying blood loosens up, and I have to hold her tighter. Eventually, her struggling grows more forceful, her protests more lucid, and I slap the water off at last.

With most of the blood washed away, it’s even more apparent that she’s physically unharmed, her slight, pale frame streaky and

textured with goose bumps but otherwise pristine. I sit her down on the lid of the toilet, and she stares at the white tiles of the floor, shivering and blank. Breathing hard from the exertion of holding her up, I ask, “Are you feeling better?”

A long second passes where she just gazes up at me, and then she gives a faint nod. “Yeah.”

“Where are your clothes?”

She raises her arm like it weighs two hundred pounds, and points vaguely into the master bedroom. “In there. Is . . . is Fox—”

“Get yourself cleaned up, put your clothes back on, and then I’m gonna need you to tell us what happened tonight, okay?” I try to deliver it like a statement, mimicking the way my mom “asks” me to do chores—*I need you to mow the lawn, okay?*—but my voice is shaking. I clamp down hard against the fear. I cannot lose control. *Take a step back.* “Can you do that for me?”

April nods again, and mumbles, “Yes.”

As I herd Sebastian back into the chaos of the living room, shutting the bedroom door behind us, I hear the shower turn on again. My ex-boyfriend gives me an incredulous look, his soft, kissable lips scrunching up like a cat’s anus. “You’re letting her take a freaking shower, man? She’s covered in evidence!”

“This whole *place* is covered in evidence,” I fire back, waving my hand around the connected rooms. We’ve tracked Fox’s blood across the pinewood floors, and streaks of it cling to Sebastian’s arms and face. I’m standing there, trying to compartmentalize, fighting to think, when I notice his eyes bob up and down the length of my torso and I finally remember that I’m still shirtless. Even in the midst of all the shock and disorder, I feel a wave of wildly inappropriate satisfaction as my ex-boyfriend gets a look

at how toned my chest and abs have become in the weeks since he dumped me.

I had this whole plan to turn into a crazy-hot sex god over the summer, to build muscle like an underwear model and then have Lucy take some “candid” photos of me that I could post on Facebook and Instagram and anywhere else Sebastian might see them and realize how awesome I was doing without him—so he could see the newer, hotter Rufus Holt and eat his heart out. My biology proved unequal to the fantasy, however; my upper body hardened a bit, but after putting on exactly two extra pounds of muscle, my narrow-shouldered physique seems to have just plain given up. No matter what I try, I appear to be stuck permanently on lanky. Still, I look way abs-ier than I did the last time Sebastian saw me without a shirt on, and I guess that’s all that matters.

“We have to call the police,” he insists next.

I shake my head. “Not yet.”

“What the fuck do you mean, *not yet*?” Sebastian demands, his voice climbing into the realm of hysteria. “Why not? Fox is fucking *dead*, Rufus!”

“Not until we hear what April has to say! We need to know . . .” *We need to know what we’ve walked into.* “We need to know what happened first.”

Something’s not right. On the surface, it sure as hell looks like April killed her boyfriend with a big old knife . . . but why? And why did she call *me* for help? At the risk of sounding selfish, this is the real reason I don’t want to involve the police just yet. Instead of her doting parents or her close friends or even our take-charge asshole of a brother, she’s involved *me* in this thing, and I want to know exactly where I stand before I start getting all reporty with

the cops. My recent history with the law is dodgy, anyway, and I can't exactly afford any misunderstandings.

"Just wait until she's told us, okay? Just *wait*." I try to sound authoritative again as I turn and start for the front door, my brain speeding while I struggle to close off any avenue of thought that doesn't lead directly forward.

"Where are you going?" Sebastian asks, indignant.

"I just want to have a look around outside. I think— Let's just know as much about what's going on here as we can, okay? Before we call anybody?"

Sebastian is silent for a moment, his lips still pursed tightly. He looks more than a little freaked, but he gives me a short nod. "Okay. Okay."

The second the door closes behind me, I sprint to the porch rail, barely covering the three steps before I start to heave. Nothing comes up but an unearthly retching sound, my stomach convulsing, drool running over my bottom lip as I struggle to breathe and fight my nausea into submission. The air outside is still heavy and warm, but it's not until I start sucking in great mouthfuls of it that I realize how good it smells. For all its rarified trappings, the lake house reeks inside with the metallic stench of blood.

I will my stomach to settle, my head to clear. When I'm finally breathing evenly again, I step back and begin a methodical circuit of the house, eyes sweeping left to right as I look for something I can't even begin to anticipate. Nothing special catches my eye, though—just more Solo cups and cigarette butts—and I soon reach the end point of the porch. A set of steps descends to the yard on my right, while on my left, a patio door affords me a full, Technicolor view of the kitchen and Fox's body—still swimming in a lap pool of his own congealing blood.

With a shudder I quickly reverse course, tugging my phone out of my shorts. It's damp from the shower but seems to have avoided the worst of the spray, and it still works. I'm definitely not ready to talk to the cops, but I haven't totally lost my mind, either; I know an adult needs to be involved in this slasher-movie nightmare. But it has to be one that I trust.

My mom answers on the fourth ring, her voice groggy and thick. I can picture her lying on top of her bed, a paperback splayed across her chest, fumbling for her glasses on the nightstand. "Hey, kiddo, what's up?"

"H-hey, Mom, I—" My voice chokes off, the reality of what I have to say slamming into me like a crosstown bus. *April might have murdered her boyfriend.*

"What is it? What's wrong?" She's immediately alert, her hair-trigger panic tripped by my hesitation. "Did you and Lucy have a fight? Do you need a ride?"

"No, it's nothing like that," I assure her in a quiet hurry, feeling my way through my own words. "It's . . . actually, it's, um . . . April?"

"*That girl.*" Mom's tone becomes as hard and sharp as a broken tooth. "What did she do this time? Did she crash your party tonight? Listen, if she said . . . if she said something about my calling Peter—"

"No, Mom, it wasn't—" I stop short, her words hitting their target. "Wait, what do you mean, 'calling Peter'? Did you talk to him?" She stays silent, and I feel the back of my neck prickle. "Mom?"

"I *might* have phoned your sperm donor today," she admits at last in an aggrieved huff. "It was a moment of weakness, and I'm not proud of it."

"Why?" I ask, surprised to find that it's actually still possible for my night to get worse. With one possible exception—me—nothing

good has ever resulted from any kind of contact between Peter Covington and Genevieve Holt.

Sixteen years ago, my mother was a bright-eyed, twenty-five-year-old interior designer and art consultant, new to the city of Burlington, Vermont, and the proud owner of a small firm bearing her name. She'd done three years of art school, dropping out when an internship with a major decorator in New York turned into a full-time job she couldn't refuse, and then eventually followed her heart to New England. Thanks to a modest inheritance from my grandparents—a, by all accounts, quirky and lovable couple who ran a country store in a small Maine village, taught their kids to pursue their dreams, and unfortunately died before I could ever meet them—she was able to rent an office, hang out her shingle, and take on private clients.

It wasn't always easy. Work came in when the economy was up, and vanished when it went down, leaving her scrambling to cover the bills; and so, when a law firm by the name of Pembroke, Landau, and Wells offered her a massive chunk of cash to help them choose a few impressively priceless works of art for their offices, she was overjoyed to accept. When she met their junior partner, a Harvard legacy by the name of Peter Covington II, she was quickly swept off her feet. He was tall and handsome, with blond hair and gray eyes, and he was utterly charmed by the bohemian and unpredictable free spirit that was the young Genevieve. They were a total mismatch, his white-collar starchiness at complete odds with her offbeat *joie de vivre*, but—in my mom's mind, at least—the sparks their differences generated were what fueled their romance.

The sparks worked their magic for approximately two weeks before my mom discovered that Peter Covington was in fact

married, that he had a toddler at home—a little boy named Hayden—and that most of the things he'd said to her in private were a pack of lies. She ended things immediately, with a fiery speech that she has a tendency to recount verbatim whenever she's had a little too much white wine, and then spent a few months debating whether or not to rat the man out to his wife. When she learned that she was pregnant, it was merely the icing on the cake.

I was born into the midst of an ugly war that continues to this day, erupting in periodic skirmishes as Peter Covington tries to ruin my mother's career and life, and she sues him repeatedly for slander and back child support. Peter's wife, Isabel, amazingly has stuck by him through the whole lengthy ordeal; supposedly, April was born to save their marriage, but I suspect a prenup is the real reason their matrimonial bonds have never been torn asunder.

Peter wouldn't have anything to do with me; in sixteen years, I've never received so much as a birthday card from him. When I was a kid, he fascinated me—my wealthy and elusive father, who lived in a beautiful home and drove a fancy car—but I only made the mistake of calling him Dad once, when I was five years old and he came by our house to deliver some personal message to my mom; his reaction, which was swift, furious, and terrifying, permanently cured me of my misplaced affection. In an emergency, my mother would have turned to the *Cloverfield* monster for help before asking for a favor from Peter Covington—and if she'd called him now, it could only mean one thing.

"How broke are we?" I ask flatly, when her silence becomes unbearable. My thoughts fragment inside my skull. Fox's corpse is practically looming over my shoulder, but the poverty my mom and I struggle against is a black hole with its own inescapable gravity; I can't avoid it, so I might as well dive in instead and give

myself a little more time to think about how I'll bring up the *dead body* I've just discovered.

She takes a hesitant breath. "It's not for you to worry about, kiddo."

"Mom."

"I've got it under control, Rufus."

The lie is so threadbare it's impossible to let it pass unchallenged. "You said you'd rather take a bath with a lawn mower than ask that ass-butt for money again! You'd never have called him unless it was really serious." More silence follows, and I bite the inside of my cheek as the bottom drops out of my stomach. *How much worse is this night going to get?* "How bad is it?"

"Ruf—"

"Please, Mom, just . . . tell me." I've made my way to the rear of the cottage now, and I lean tiredly over another porch rail, crickets underscoring the deceptively tranquil view of dark water spreading toward the far shore. The moon glares brightly down at the Whitneys' cottage like the spotlight from a police helicopter, and I duck my head. "Whatever it is, my imagination'll only make it worse."

"We owe the bank about eight grand," my mother confesses miserably, "and, okay, it's kind of . . . urgent." It's only the fourth of the month, and she's already panicked enough to appeal to my father; that means this is an old debt, a compounded one, and she's starting to get desperate. "I can scrape together about a quarter of it if I can get your uncle Connor to pay back the money I loaned him last Christmas. But . . ."

She trails off, my stomach heaves again, and just like that I feel the phantom grip of Fox's cooling fingers at the base of my neck. I called my mom about a *murder* and now we're talking about the chance that we might lose our house? The ground seems

to tilt sharply under my feet, pressure grips at my chest, and I struggle for air.

My mom's all I've got; my whole life, it's just been the two of us, holding hands to ride out the storm; and too often, the storm has been *me*. Somewhere inside me lurks a volatile Mr. Hyde, an alter ego driven by an engine of combustible anger I've only recently found any success in mastering. Swept up in the inner hurricane of my rage, I've screamed and ranted, broken dishes and bones, terrorized my teachers—and provided my father with ammunition in his agenda against us. How many phone calls has she gotten from school officials over the years because I lost control and broke the glass on a trophy case or attacked someone in class?

And she's stood by me through all of it. I owe her so much. I owe her everything. How much more can she take? My mouth clicks dryly, my free hand tightening on the wooden rail. "I've been working all year, Mom. I can help—"

"No. Absolutely not, no way!" She's so vehement I can practically hear her hand karate-chopping the air. "I will *not* let you spend your money on this, Rufus Holt. Do you hear me? These are my mistakes, not yours, and if—if—"

She stops altogether, and I can picture her again: glasses in her lap, fingers pressed hard against her lips, mouth trembling as she tries not to cry. The lake smears in front of me, black and gray and blue all running together, and I blink hard. None of this is fair. "It affects me, too, Mom. It's my house, too."

"I'll take care of it. If I have to sell my organs on the black market, I will handle it. Okay?" She puts some steel in her tone. "Your shithead sperm donor owes us so much by now I would own this fucking place outright if he'd pay up."

"Don't hold your breath," I mumble weakly.

“I’m sorry, kiddo. All that . . . let’s strike it from the record and start over. What did April do this time?”

Reflexively, I turn around and peer back into the cottage through the broad French doors of the family room. The fixtures of the kitchen gleam menacingly at the front of the house, and Sebastian stands near the fireplace, watching me with brightly nervous eyes and radiating an inarticulate terror of being alone inside with a corpse. I know I should tell her what we’ve found . . . but how can I? She’s already in a lousy place; the first thing she’d do would be call the police—or, worse, Peter—and there would go any chance for me to take control of my involvement in the situation.

I’m not exactly one of the Bad Kids, but my history of anger-related behavioral issues are well documented, and cops don’t really seem to care much about your GPA when they already remember you from the time you lost your shit in the eighth grade and knocked a bully’s tooth out with the back of a chair. Especially when your own father prosecuted the bully’s subsequent lawsuit against the school district and publicly called you a “dangerous animal.” Thanks to a good therapist and the right medication, my moods have stabilized a lot since then, but the president of the school board is just waiting for the proper excuse to expel me—and having been suspended once this year already, my situation is precarious.

I haven’t thought things out, I realize; once my mom learns what’s happened, there will be no taking it back. I need to know more. I just need a little more time.

“It’s nothing,” I mumble at last. “Don’t worry about it.”

As I disconnect, though, it is with the distinct sensation that—somehow, in some way—the Covingtons have just ruined my life yet again.

3

“WHO WERE YOU TALKING TO?” SEBASTIAN DEMANDS THE SECOND I let myself back in through the doors of the family room, stepping carefully around the glass fragments that litter the glossy floorboards. The music is off now, and so is the sound of water rushing through the pipes in the bathroom. April is done with her shower. “I thought you said we shouldn’t call the cops!”

“Five minutes ago, you wanted to call the cops,” I point out, startled by his about-face. From my new perspective, in the middle of the family room, the disarranged furniture looks like evidence of a struggle; the chairs have been knocked rather than pushed aside, and the glass inset of the coffee table is feathered with cracks.

“Five minutes ago, I hadn’t had a chance to look around yet,” Sebastian counters with quiet urgency. He comes closer, his soft, dark eyes gazing steadily back into mine, and a painfully happy memory zings through me like an electric shock. “Rufus, who were you talking to?”

“My mom, all right?”

“*You told your mom?*” Aghast, he stares at me, his face turning gray again in an instant.

“No, I didn’t. It was just . . . forget it, it doesn’t matter. What did you mean about having a chance to look around? What did you find?”

Wordlessly, he leads me away from the scattered furniture and into the dining nook. There are paintings on the wall of sailboats and harbors, a sideboard with bric-a-brac and iron candlesticks, and a blocky wooden table holding up a bounty of all sorts of things kids our age are not supposed to be into. There are jugs of cheap wine, an open case of cheaper beer, and about a half-dozen bottles of liquor that are nearly empty; an ashtray bristles like a porcupine with cigarette butts; and a broad hand mirror shows unmistakable traces of white powder, a tightly-rolled dollar bill resting alongside it.

Mr. Hyde is already fighting to surface within me, some hot, dark emotion clawing at my chest like heartburn, when Sebastian directs my attention to the small white pills that lay scattered everywhere across the floor like rice at a wedding; there are so many of them, strewn about so haphazardly that they’re impossible to count. With shaking fingers, I turn one over, revealing the telltale stamp pressed into the top side of the tablet: the outline of a rabbit.

“White rabbits, man,” Sebastian notes the obvious. “A shitload of them.”

Rage sweeps over me so fast that lights actually flash in my eyes. My brain feels like it’s spinning, exploding, and melting all at the same time, and I become dizzy from the heat building in my face and neck. *What the fuck has April gotten me into?*

Migrating from the New York club scene, “white rabbit” is a designer drug known to cause euphoria, heightened sensory perception, and hallucinations. The pills have also been linked, notoriously, to acts of extreme violence—like, trying-to-exfoliate-your-neighbor-with-a-belt-sander extreme—and parents everywhere are terrified of them. We had two assemblies about drug abuse at Ethan Allen this past spring alone, after white rabbits turned up in a couple of arrests on campus at the university. Get caught smoking a joint or taking some of your best friend’s Adderall and you’ll be in trouble; get caught with white rabbits and you’re *fucked*. They’ve replaced bath salts as the latest version of History’s Most Dangerous Substance Ever, and local authorities come down like a guillotine on anyone caught buying, selling, or using them.

Rumors make the rounds at Ethan Allen all the time about the various losers and burnouts using hard drugs, blotting out dismal visions of their uncertain futures with a chemical assist; and the bored, rich kids are notorious for spending their unwieldy allowances on recreational substances, counting on their trust funds and connected parents to protect them in the event of “legal complications.” But what Sebastian and I stare at now is an order of a different magnitude.

Lucy and I swore a blood oath to each other, once upon a time, that we would never ever so much as *touch* white rabbits. For one thing, my brain chemistry is unpredictable enough as it is without adding hallucinogenic nightmares to the mix, and for another, I absolutely cannot afford the trouble that getting caught with white rabbits would bring me. My mom and I have no money and no prestige. My life would be ruined.

And April has invited me to a murder scene decorated with enough of them to fill a fucking beanbag chair.

“Hey—hey, Rufus? I need you to breathe, man, okay? Slow breaths. Like me, right? Do what I’m doing.” Sebastian’s voice penetrates the fog of my rage, his eyes level with mine again, his right hand locked with my own. “Take a step back, right? Say it.”

“Take . . . a step back,” I repeat, forcing myself to focus—on his face, on his touch. I struggle to control my breathing, and he moves my free hand to his chest, holding it there. He’s done this for me before when my anger has taken over, talking me down from the ledge when I was perilously close to losing it, and the routine is heartbreakingly familiar. It felt so huge, so significant, to share such an awful part of myself with him—to be so unbalanced, and to know that I could trust him to be my counterweight.

He’s looking at me, looking into me, and his eyes are warm, dark pools full of our shared history—windows into a past that’s still too painful to touch.

The first time I really met Sebastian “Bash” Williams, it was at a meeting for the Front Line, our school’s sorry excuse for a newspaper. Everybody knew who he was, of course; Bash was too good-looking and his dad too important for him to fly under anyone’s radar for long. But he and I didn’t become personally acquainted until September of our sophomore year.

I’d been working on the paper ever since I’d started at Ethan Allen, writing occasional editorials, but mostly serving as a photographer. Bash joined the staff as a sports columnist—a position for which our supervisor, Mr. Cohen, felt he was eminently qualified, based solely on the fact that 1) he played lacrosse, and 2) the guy’s father was the athletic director at the university. It didn’t make a lot of sense to me, but everyone on the Front Line was so impressed by

Bash's lacrosse stats—and his looks—that they didn't really care. For some even less explicable reason, Mr. Cohen assigned me to act as Bash's personal photographer, shooting the pictures that would accompany his articles.

It was not an easy partnership in the beginning. Bash's popularity elevated him well above my own meager social standing, putting him into the orbit of Ethan Allen's student royalty. He hung out with guys like Fox Whitney and Race Atwood—and, thusly, my brother, Hayden, as well. Natural enemies, Sebastian and I were antagonistic from the moment we were introduced, boring holes into each other with iron glares.

Over the course of the next two months, however, things slowly changed. Our mutual hostility proved too difficult to maintain when we were forced to sit together in the same car for hours a couple times a week, driving back and forth to different away games. I started to realize that he actually was a pretty good sports writer after all, and the atmosphere between us gradually shifted from open animosity to resentful cooperation to a grudging but necessary pact of silent non-aggression. Finally, at a football game in Brattleboro the week before Thanksgiving, Bash Williams actually spoke to me in a genuinely friendly way for the first time ever.

I was rummaging through my bag, digging for a camera lens that had gotten lost in the other useless crap that I kept in there, and I had hauled a bunch of items out in order to make the search easier. Right on top of the disordered pile I was creating beside me sat a battered and dog-eared copy of Love—the fourth volume from the most badass manga series of all time.

“Dude,” Bash blurted unexpectedly, a spark of something unfamiliar glimmering in his eyes. “Are you seriously reading Death Note?”

“Uh . . . yeah?” Aware that this might be a trap, I kept my answer guarded. But Bash surprised me.

“That story is the shit!” He couldn’t keep his excitement under control. “I don’t want to give anything away or whatever, but by the time you finish that? You’re gonna have lost your mind. What part are you up to?”

“Actually? I’m kind of rereading it. For the third time,” I admitted, eyeing him with a curious level of newfound respect. I didn’t think popular kids were into anything except the Top 40, other popular kids, and ganging up on nerds. “You like manga?”

“I mean, sorta.” He shrugged sheepishly. “My girlfriend’s little brother, Javier? He’s, like, nuts about anime and stuff. All last summer he was bugging me to read Death Note.” Bash was in a very high-profile on-again-off-again relationship with Lia Santos—the kind of obnoxiously torrid love affair that involved tons of handsy PDA in school hallways, followed by tons of screaming arguments also in school hallways, a breakup, a make-up, lather, rinse, repeat. Paying attention to them was exhausting. “I finally agreed, just to get him to lay off, and . . . man, once I started it, I stayed up for thirty-six hours straight and finished the whole series. I mean, I think I literally know what it feels like to come down off a meth binge now.”

“I know what you mean,” I said with a short laugh. “The first time I read it was back in the seventh grade, and I didn’t sleep for about a week, because I was convinced that maybe it was really possible to kill somebody just by writing it in a notebook.”

He grinned. “You did?”

“It’s really embarrassing.” I felt my face turning red, but I smiled anyway, because he didn’t seem to be mocking me.

"I get it. I, uh . . . I actually maybe kinda slept with the light on for a few days after I finished?" he confessed, rubbing the back of his head. "And that was last August."

"It's freaky as hell," I agreed.

"It's awesome as hell," he returned, seriously. "Have you read Blue Exorcist? It's wild—it's all about the son of Satan learning to fight demons so he can bring down his dad. The action sequences are rad as hell."

"I've heard of it."

"You should check it out," Bash said, his eyes not quite meeting mine. "I'm, like, obsessed, and . . . and I'm sick of not having anybody to talk to about it."

For a second, I wasn't sure how to react. This sudden and unexpected olive branch was difficult to process and harder to trust, given our history; but at last, I said, "I will. It sounds really cool."

He looked at me then, and smiled; and there was a quality to it that was shy and sincere and searching, and I felt something warm flip over in my chest.

And, just like that, I realized the horrible truth: I had a crush on Bash Williams.

As soon as the spinning in my brain begins to slow, the throbbing fire in my chest to subside, I break my contact with Sebastian and step away. No matter how much I trusted him in the past, I can't anymore—and maybe never should have.

"You okay?" He asks gently, and the compassion in his voice is almost more than I can bear.

"I'm fine." I look past him to the kitchen, where Fox's head is just visible behind the island, a dark mass in a spoiling pool of

scarlet-black blood. Weirdly enough, it helps me get a hold of myself, like a sudden cold-water bath. “I’m all right.” Stiffly, but not without real gratitude, I mutter, “Thanks.”

“Did you find anything outside?”

“Not really. No bloody footprints or whatever, and pretty much every room in the cottage has a door that opens onto the porch. This place is at the ass-end of nowhere, though. No one came in off the street and did this. Either it was April, or . . .”

Only I don’t have an *or*. At the moment, there’s no better explanation. It’s pretty obvious that April and Fox weren’t alone in the house all night; in addition to the massive supply of drugs and alcohol on the dining table, grocery bags heaped atop the kitchen island disgorge a sick-making bounty of junk food. Brightly colored packages of chips and candy have been ripped open, many of them half-empty, and crumbs litter the counter. There were people here—but who and when and how many, we won’t know until April comes out of the bedroom.

I turn to say something and catch Sebastian flicking his eyes away. “What?”

“Huh?” He glances back, trying and failing to effect an innocently blank expression—his who-me? face. He used it all the time when we were together, and he was terrible at it.

“You were looking at me. What?”

“Nothing, it’s just . . .” Sebastian shrugs, and his eyes do that down-up thing over my torso again. “Have you been working out or something?”

My face heats up again, this time with embarrassment, and I cross my arms self-consciously over my bare chest. I wanted him to notice, of course; this is basically the moment I’ve been imagining, repeatedly, for the past six weeks: Sebastian seeing the

hot new Rufus Holt, wishing he could have me back and hating himself for letting me go. Only the situation is all wrong, Fox's grisly death crowding the moment, and my ex-boyfriend's puzzled eyes seem to track the changes to my body with only clinical interest.

And, just like that, I feel humiliated all over again. Even standing in the middle of an *actual crime scene* I can't escape how much I've let him get inside my head. How much I want Sebastian Williams to still want me, and how much it hurts that he doesn't.

To my utter relief, the door to the master suite pops open at just that moment, and April sidles meekly into the room. She's wearing jean shorts and a loose-fitting shirt, her auburn hair falling to her shoulders in damp, tousled ropes. Her face is still drawn and colorless, but her eyes look way more alert.

"How are you feeling?" I ask neutrally, moving toward her through the wreckage of the family room.

She stares, her expression flat. "Better, I guess. Um . . . thanks." Her gaze drifts toward the kitchen and fixes in place, like a missile system locking onto target. There's no way she can see Fox from the little vestibule, but the presence of his body commands attention nevertheless. "Is, um . . . is he still . . . ?"

"You want to go into the bedroom to talk?"

April gives a minute and almost frightened nod, and then the three of us retreat through the door, shutting it again for good measure. My little sister sinks down on the edge of the bed, letting her hair fall into her face, while I straddle a shabby-chic chair placed in front of a shabby-chic vanity. Sebastian stays close, breathing more easily now that a physical barrier stands between Fox and him.

"What happened tonight, April?" I prompt.

She snuffles, picking at the dark polish on the nails of her right hand, and says, to my left kneecap, "I'm not sure. I mean, I don't really remember."

"Try to think," I suggest through my teeth, already thin on patience, just like that. "You called me for help, right? I can't help if you don't tell me anything."

"But I don't *know* anything, Rufus." Her voice shakes, her big blue eyes meeting mine, filled with tears. "We were having a party, and I got tired so I came in here to lie down, and then . . . when I woke up, I was in the kitchen, and . . . and Fox, he, he . . ."

She starts to cry, dropping her head forward as her shoulders quake and loud, mucousy snorts sound from behind the curtain of her hair. April wipes her face with her hands over and over, until Sebastian leans past me to swipe some tissues and hand them to her. She accepts them wordlessly and, after a few moments, lifts her chin again.

I'm not sure what it says about me as a person, but I spend a good, long moment studying her expression for possible evidence of bullshit before I speak again. "What were you on when we got here?"

"Nothing," she declares, impossibly.

My jaw goes tight. "Don't lie."

"I'm not!"

"April, when we found you in the kitchen, you were so fucked up, you couldn't even walk," I remind her, heat slowly turning my brain into a tropical greenhouse. "There's an avalanche of coke and pills in the dining room that you could slide down with a toboggan, and you want us to believe you were sober?"

"*I didn't take anything!*" She practically screeches it this time, and I almost think she's telling me the truth. "I never use that

stuff! Fox . . . I mean, okay, he got me try some things once or twice—but I *hated* the way they made me feel!”

“Even white rabbits?”

“Especially that shit.” She shudders. “I took some once and I thought plants were growing under my skin. I almost cut my arm open trying to let them out.”

Sebastian and I exchange a perplexed glance, and I turn back to my sister. She looks me in the eye, her expression level and grim. If she’s lying, she’s gotten a lot better at it than the last time we faced off—but if she’s telling the truth, it makes no sense. “Look, just . . . let’s start from the beginning. Who was here tonight, and what happened?”

April takes a breath. “We were having a Fourth of July party, you know? Fox’s parents went to New York, so he knew the cottage would be empty, and he told everybody to come over.”

“And by everybody you mean Race and Peyton?” I venture, naming Fox’s and April’s respective best friends—who also happen to be a couple.

She nods. “And Arlo Rossi, and . . . some other people.”

Her eyes dart to Sebastian when she says this, but just as quickly drop back to my kneecap. I’m intrigued, but decide not to press her on it. At least, not yet. “Okay, so Peyton and Race and Arlo came out here, and you guys had a party, and then what?”

“And then I don’t know,” she says helplessly, her voice small and shaky again. “Honestly, Rufus, I didn’t take anything—all I had was a couple drinks, but maybe they were stronger than I thought, because, like . . . there’s just this big *blank*! Last thing I remember, everybody was over here, and then . . . then I wake up in the kitchen, and Fox is on the floor next to me and, and . . .” She trails off, hiccupping, and slaps a hand to her mouth. For a moment,

I'm afraid she's about to barf, but then she asks, "Is he really dead?"

I shift in the stupid little chair. "Yeah, April, he is."

She shakes her head in disbelief, auburn tresses swinging, and squeezes her eyes shut. A couple of tears roll silently down her colorless cheeks. "I didn't kill him. You have to believe me."

With some difficulty, I ignore her grasp for my heartstrings, determined to stay clearheaded—to not let my creeping sentimentality for April Covington get in the way of my judgment. I'm rattled enough as it is, with pink shadows of Fox's blood still dappling my wet shorts, and I can't afford to be softhearted right now. I try to remember all my reasons not to trust her, but our past keeps intruding on my perception.

In the eighth grade, when the stage-whispered rumors of my sexuality were publicly confirmed, April stunned me by being the second person—after Lucy—to voice her support. The day I learned that my secret and I were both officially *out* was horrific, and after the final bell rang, I fled our school for the privacy of a wooded rise behind the soccer field. All I wanted was to finally get a chance to cry without an audience of jeering, scornful thirteen-year-olds, but my half-sister somehow managed to track me down.

"I don't care," she blurted in a quiet rush the second I noticed her, copper sunlight gilding her face as she looked up at me. "I don't care that you're gay, I mean. It doesn't make any difference to me. I don't think there's anything wrong with it, and I think Cody and Eric are shitheads for making fun of you and stuff."

"Thanks," I answered awkwardly, befuddled by her sympathy and lacking for anything more meaningful to say. Cody Barnes was

one of Hayden's many acolytes, willing to hurt me in any number of trivial ways if it would catch his hero's attention, but Eric Shetland had—until that very morning—been one of my closest friends. I was so stung by his betrayal that no one's actions seemed to make sense to me anymore.

"Hayden's a shithead, too." April's cheeks flushed with the guilty pleasure of saying it out loud. "He's so mean. All the time. I mean, you're lucky you don't have to live with him." She glanced over her shoulder instinctively, as if afraid saying his name might actually conjure his presence, and then went on in a fervent undertone, "Honestly, Rufus? Sometimes I wish he was dead. Sometimes I wish you were my real brother and Hayden didn't even exist!"

Without warning, April suddenly threw her arms around me—our first actual embrace—and then, while I was still reeling from the unexpected show of affection, she turned and dashed away toward the school.

Willfully blanking the memory, I ask April, "Where was your phone?" The question seems to confuse her, so I back up. "You woke up next to Fox, and then you called me. Where was your phone?"

She makes a bewildered face. "I guess I had it with me. I don't really know."

"You didn't have to go looking for it?"

"I don't think so. I mean, if I had, I wouldn't have still been sitting next to Fox when you got here." She shivers a little.

"So why did you call me?" I finally ask, after tallying up everything she's said. I'm pretty sure I have the reason figured out, though, and am anticipating her answer with a growing sense of prickly unease.

“Don’t you get it?” She fixes me with a haunted look. “All my friends were *here*. The last thing I remember, we were all having a big party; and then all of a sudden, I’m waking up, my boyfriend is *dead*, and I’m here all by myself? They *left* me, Rufus.” With both hands, she drags her hair back from her face, and whispers, “I didn’t do it. I know I didn’t. But that means . . . it means—”

“One of them is the killer,” Sebastian concludes, rubbing his eyes. “Fuck.” I can tell he’s regretting whatever impulse compelled him to seek me out tonight, whatever guilt or curiosity made him so eager to drive me to South Hero Island so he could stumble over the dead body of one of his friends.

“I didn’t do it,” April repeats insistently, searching my face with the piteous desperation of an orphaned beggar. “You know me, Rufus, I could never have done something like this!” The point is, frankly, equivocal, but before I can address it, she’s already moving on to the true purpose of her summons. “You have to get me out of here, okay? I’ve already bagged up my bikini—we can throw it in the lake, and—”

“April—”

“They left me here to take the blame for something I didn’t do!” My half-sister’s pitch begins to rise, her cheeks becoming blotchy. “This isn’t like getting caught drinking with your loser friends, *Rufus*,” she fires at me stingingly, a weapon tailored to fit my dubious record. “I could go to fucking *jail*! Actual fucking *jail*!”

“And if I do what you’re asking me to, *I* could go to fucking jail,” I shoot back, my vision starting to shimmer as my anger soars above and beyond the call of duty. “Even if you throw out your bathing suit—even if we wipe your prints off the knife and every other damn thing in this place—Fox’s parents are *still* going

to find him dead in the kitchen, the cops are *still* going to find a metric shit-ton of drugs in the dining room, and all your friends are *still* going to say that the last time they saw your boyfriend alive, he was *alone in the house with you*.” I guzzle air into my lungs, having ranted all that in a single breath. “Don’t *you* get it, April? You can’t cover this up, and if you try, it’s only going to look worse!”

She goes quiet again, her lips clamping into a narrow line, and we glower at each other for a long moment. I know her better than she thinks; I can see the wheels turning in her lucid, blue eyes. Most of the people in her life are susceptible to her manipulations because they want to please her, but her tears and tantrums won’t work on me. She’s actively calculating my weaknesses, looking for another access point.

“Okay, you’re right,” she finally says. “I guess I wasn’t thinking. But you can’t just call the cops, Rufus. Dad—*our* dad—will kill me. You know he will.”

This is also debatable. Peter’s rages are infamous—and I would know, having both suffered and inherited them—but he and Isabel treat April with the care and handling of a holy relic. The man would lose his shit if his daughter became implicated in a murder, but it’s hard to picture him actually taking it out on her. However, the fact of the matter is that I really have no idea what goes on behind closed doors in the Covington household.

“So what exactly are you suggesting?” I ask warily.

“I know about your mom’s phone call today,” she reveals, having found her access point at last, and I feel a metaphorical trapdoor swing open under my feet. “I know you guys need money, and I’m willing to pay you—”

“I’m not taking money to help you cover up a murder,” I declare

hotly, thrown off-center by how humiliatingly accurate her read on me is.

“Not for that,” she insists, leaning forward, the tendons in her hands standing out in high relief as she grips the coverlet. “You’re smart, Rufus—everybody knows it. Remember when we were in that summer reading group thing, and you solved all those little mysteries or whatever? Maybe you can figure out what happened tonight!”

“April, I was *eleven*,” I splutter, appalled, “and they were just a bunch of dumb riddles with the answers already built in!” The “summer reading group thing” was an activity sponsored by the public library, a way for parents to ditch their kids for a couple hours a day and feel good about it. A condescendingly perky volunteer read us a bunch of two-page mystery stories—tales of theft and people being bonked over the head—where finding the solution was as easy as identifying simple inconsistencies woven into the narrative. A man claims he was getting the mail when his neighbor was robbed, for instance, only this supposedly happened on a Sunday, when there is no mail delivery. It was kid stuff, and I only succeeded where the others failed because the others didn’t try. “This is real life—this is a *real fucking murder*—and I wouldn’t even know where to start! Even if I could figure it out, we’d have to go to the police anyway.”

“I know,” she whispers defenselessly, her chin wobbling. “But just . . . please, Rufus. *Please*. I don’t mean you need to catch whoever did it, but I need help. Really, really bad.” Tears splash down her cheeks, and I suddenly realize how authentic her fear is. “All I want you to do is talk to the people who were at the party and see what they say. Maybe you’ll be able to tell if one of them is lying,

you know? Maybe somebody will, like, give themselves away? And then we can go to the police and tell them what we know. Everything. That's all I'm asking."

I sigh, a headache beginning to beat at my temples like a blacksmith pounding out a horseshoe. "April—"

"I've got two thousand dollars, in cash, and I'll pay you all of it if you help me figure out who really killed Fox." She cuts me off decisively, and my jaw lands in my lap. "Two grand, Rufus—no questions asked—if you agree to go talk to everyone. Just talk. And then, no matter what, we go to the police. Okay?"

I can see in her eyes that going to the police scares her beyond measure; I can also see that she's dead serious about that two grand. I know it would be lunacy to agree—and my permanent record doesn't really have the cushion to absorb a lot of cataclysmically bad life choices—but she's nailed my Achilles' heel on her first try. Even as I tell myself I need to say no, I'm mentally reviewing the reasons to justify saying yes.

My eyes fall to the clock on the Whitneys' bedside table, bright red digits reminding me of our limited time. "When are Fox's parents due back from New York?"

"Not for a few days," April answers, studying my face with quiet intensity.

I nod. No danger there. I won't be interfering with a police investigation because, as yet, there *is* no investigation; I won't be removing or destroying any evidence; and we'll ultimately go to the police and report the crime ourselves anyway. More to the point: *April* will report the crime—and any theoretical damage done by her leaving the crime scene was already done by my dragging her into the shower in order to wake her up, anyway. There's

no way to undo that, but we can still mitigate how guilty it looks by calling the police before they even know there's been a murder in the first place.

But all that is incidental. The only thing that truly matters is that my mom owes the bank eight thousand dollars, and doesn't know where to get it. She has a little less than two thousand at hand; I have a little more than two in my savings—which I'll make her accept, no matter what she says; add April's two and, even though it won't hit the target, it'll still bring us to within a respectable margin. Maybe even close enough to buy a temporary extension on the remainder.

Even if it doesn't pan out that way, though, it's worth the gamble. It's all worth the gamble. Even if I'm ultimately expelled for getting involved in whatever psychotic drama has unfurled at Fox's cottage, it's still better than being homeless—and if we get evicted anyway, my transcript will be the least of my concerns.

Squeezing my eyes shut for just a second, I take a deep breath and then nod at April. "Okay. I'll do it."