

UNCOVER



*What she went looking for,
isn't what she found...*

AMANDA LINEHAN

UNCOVER

By Amanda Linehan

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Christine, Jim, and Karen -
Thanks for all your help. I really appreciated it.

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CHAPTER 1

Marissa turned on the water and stuck her hand in to test its temperature. When it was hot, she took her clothes off and dropped them in a pile on the floor behind her, feeling the morning chill hit her exposed skin. She pulled the curtain back and just as she was about to step into the tub she caught her reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Her image suddenly reminded her of the dream she had woken up from not ten minutes prior, but which she had forgotten until this moment. She stopped for a minute, running her fingers through her hair, and let her eyes run over the rest of her body. She held onto her image for a moment, wanting to make sure it wouldn't go away, and then finished stepping into the shower.

The hot water hit her body and slid down its length, erasing the chill she had felt a moment earlier. She felt good.

Today was the first day of her last year of high school. Her parents had told her that she didn't have to go, if she didn't want to. But she did want to. Or rather, she didn't know what else to do. And her friends would be there, so that would be better than sitting around the house alone.

As the last suds of soap went down the drain, Marissa shut the water off and immediately regretted it, as she felt the cold press up against her body again. Grabbing a towel, she flung it around herself and dried off. The hot water had steamed up the bathroom mirror and, this time, when she looked into it, she could see only a vague outline of herself.

She opened the bathroom door and entered her bedroom. As she walked towards her closet, she heard the familiar noise of claw on carpet. The impatient scratching of a cat who could not use door knobs to gain entry to the places he wanted to go. She smiled and walked to her bedroom door, opening it to reveal the slender body of a black and white cat. He sauntered in and Marissa closed the door behind him.

"Hi, Mooney," Marissa said as she bent down towards the small cat, allowing him to rub his forehead on her legs and stroking him on his head. He usually came calling shortly after she was up in the morning.

After their greeting, Mooney strode around her bedroom becoming reacquainted with the place after having been away for eight hours or so. He jumped up to her windowsill and seeing that the blinds were still drawn, tried to squeeze in behind them.

Marissa raised the blinds, and the sun streamed in through the window. She watched Mooney sit up in attention and follow something raptly with his eyes. His tail bounced around behind him, alternately hitting one side of the windowsill and then the other.

She began walking towards her closet again, but was stopped when she heard her phone beep. She picked it up and read the message.

"Up yet?"

It was Jay. She typed a response back, letting her know that she was up and getting ready for school. She actually didn't have much time left before she absolutely had to leave, but that had never worried her before.

Marissa and Jay, along with their friend Olivia, had spent most of the summer sitting by Marissa's pool. Surrounded by the dense trees that formed the perimeter of the property, they had felt protected in their own private world, of which they were both subject and ruler. Some days they had been joined by others, but most days it was just the three of them, bending the clock to their own will, ignoring the hands that pointed towards the demise of the kingdom.

The largest interruption had been Olivia's internship, which she had been thrilled to receive. Luckily, the hours were flexible. She didn't need to be in the office every day, and she was able to work on projects from home. She would often rise before the sun on days that she didn't have to go into the office, and work several hours before joining Marissa and Jay by the pool. When she left Marissa's house in the evening, she would go home and work several more. They loved her at the internship, and she loved that she could still hang out by the pool. She did both exquisitely well.

Jay had the occasional basketball game or practice for the club team she played with during the spring and summer. At 5'7", she was the best guard on the girls basketball team at school, though her slender body didn't look the part. What she lacked in strength, however, she made up for in speed. She was the fastest player on the team, bar none. By the pool, she mostly lounged in one of the reclining patio chairs and read celebrity gossip magazines. Sometimes she would jump into the water to cool off, but would quickly get out again and go back to the magazines, shouting out interesting tidbits here and there to Marissa and Olivia.

Marissa, on the other hand, loved the water. She did her share of lounging too, but it was in the water where she felt at home. Even in the winter, she swam indoors at the gym her family belonged to. This wasn't quite as enjoyable as swimming in her sunny backyard with best friends in tow, but it worked well enough when the weather got too cold. She had been asked several times to join the swim team at school, but each time she had declined. She wasn't interested in the practices and competitions. She felt free in the water, and she wanted to keep it that way.

The girls had been friends since they were very young, and regarded one another with a familiarity they could have accorded to their own selves, but that seemed equally appropriate directed towards the others. The days passed quickly, yet meandered on at their own pace, until they were stopped suddenly by the approaching school year.

Marissa finished getting ready for school while Mooney moved about the room, darting underneath her bed, jumping up on her dresser, exploring the bathroom. Marissa checked her bag to see that she had everything. She looked at her reflection in the mirror once more and gave Mooney a parting pat on the head. She was looking forward to seeing Jay today even though she had just seen her a couple of days ago. Olivia, however, wouldn't be at school today.

Marissa had attended her funeral the previous Friday.

CHAPTER 2

Marissa jumped out of her car after pulling into the parking lot at school. She had to park in the far lot at the bottom of the big hill because she had gotten there so late. School started at 8:00 a.m. and it was now 7:56. She knew exactly what time she had to be there in order to make it to class on time. She had a minute to spare. Her first class this morning was Calculus, which was good because Mr. Fischer taught that class, and he often didn't take attendance until the announcements were over, which gave her a few more minutes. She had been in his first period class last year. Olivia had been in that class too.

She jogged up to school towards the side entrance, and wished that she could slow down. Today felt so normal, she had forgotten for a while that it had only been three days since Olivia's funeral, and most of the people here, she had last seen there. In fact, it had been one week exactly since Olivia had died. She briefly wondered what the scene was like inside and hoped that not too many people would try to talk to her.

Marissa pulled open the door fearing the worst, and instead was surprised to find everything completely normal. There actually weren't that many people in the hallways at the moment, as there was just a minute or two to spare before the bell. Those she did see talked animatedly, hurrying to class, grabbing one last thing from a locker. It felt exactly like the first day of school should have, except for the fact that she knew Olivia wasn't there and why.

Sitting down in her classroom a minute or so later, she had just missed the bell, but as she predicted, attendance hadn't been taken yet.

"Marissa, you've made it just in time. Bravo," said Mr. Fischer. He was a relatively new teacher in his late twenties, which made him seem both young and old to Marissa.

"I wanted to get off on a good foot this morning, seeing as this is the first day of school." She smiled.

Mr. Fischer moved in close so the other students in the class, who were still absorbed in their own conversations, couldn't hear what he said to her.

"I'm really sorry to hear about Olivia. If you need to leave class at any time for any reason feel free to go. Although it would probably be prudent for me to write you a pass first."

Despite his compassion, Marissa felt annoyed by his comment, but couldn't place her finger on why. She made a waving motion with her hand.

"I'll be fine. And anyways, I'm sure the lecture will be riveting today. Wouldn't want to miss any notes."

He pulled away from her and almost smiled at her attempt at a joke, but just said, "Okay."

After taking attendance, Mr. Fischer began his lecture and Marissa started to tune out, despite her best efforts to take notes. She was fairly confident that she would be able to figure out tonight's homework even if her notes were a little thin. She could always look at her textbook. Her mind began to wander as she sipped the coffee she had brought with her from home.

The viewing had been held the previous Wednesday, two days before the funeral. Marissa went by herself. Jay had asked her if she wanted to go together, but Marissa declined, coming up with some excuse that she couldn't remember now. She was nervous about seeing Olivia's family, especially Olivia's sister, Jordan, who was a couple years younger than Olivia. Otherwise, she felt okay. Sad, but not intensely sad. She didn't even consider not going. It was an obligation she needed to fulfill.

She hadn't spoken to any of the family except for Jordan, who had called to tell her the news. That had been Monday. She was worried about what she would say to them, how she would react to their feelings of grief. It had been on her mind all day.

Marissa arrived at the funeral home and walked into the large room with many people milling about. Before she had a chance to recognize anyone she knew or worry more about talking to Olivia's family, she saw the casket. Oddly enough, she had totally forgotten about that part. She stopped where she was, near the entrance of the room, and looked at the open casket across from where she was. She could just make out the outline of her friend, but couldn't see the stillness on her face.

Her stomach twisted into knots and her breathing became shallow. She felt that she should walk forward, be respectful, and visit the body, but she couldn't make her legs go. Just as she thought she had forced her legs to move forward, she found herself turning back around and walking out the door before anyone she knew could see her. She felt like a coward.

The funeral was held on Friday morning, and considering that she had walked out of the viewing before even speaking to anyone, Marissa decided she needed to be on her best behavior. Oddly enough, no one had asked her about her non-appearance at the viewing. There were a lot of people from school at the church. It even felt crowded. She guessed this is what happened when young people died. She had been to funerals before, but only for people who were already elderly. This was different.

Sitting in the church, Marissa had the sensation of being at an important event. With so many kids from school there, it felt like they were all waiting to see a popular movie or performer. Some place to see and be seen. The idea struck her as inappropriate, but she couldn't help it. The last time she had been surrounded by so many people her age she had been at a concert. For some reason this didn't feel that different.

Jay sat next to her in the pew. Marissa's parents were a few rows behind them. As she looked around the church, she spotted Peter, Olivia's boyfriend. He sat very still, wearing a nice suit, but no discernible expression on his face. He held a handkerchief, but he had no tears. On the opposite side of the church from Peter sat Aaron. Marissa, Jay and Olivia had been friends with Aaron since childhood, and he had been Olivia's boyfriend until the previous January. Olivia had started dating Peter just a few months after, and Marissa had gotten the impression that Aaron was stung by that, even though she knew the breakup had been amicable. His face was wet, and he held a tissue up to his nose every now and then. He looked a bit embarrassed to be showing so much emotion.

Olivia's family sat in one of the front pews. Her father stood with his hands folded together in front of him, as still as a statue. He looked directly at the priest with unwavering attention, as if taking his eyes away would somehow make things worse. He also held a handkerchief, but unlike Peter, he dabbed at his face every once in a while. Olivia's mother stood on the right side of her father, almost a head shorter than him. Marissa watched her blow her nose, and then cast her eyes downward. Her shoulders hunched forward uncharacteristically. Marissa had always been struck by the way she carried herself, erect but never hurried. Just like Olivia.

To Olivia's father's left stood Jordan, Olivia's only sibling. She was just a little shorter than her mother, and with her small frame, often seemed younger than she really was. Until you spoke to her. She was one of the smartest people Marissa knew. Not in the way that Olivia had been smart. Jordan didn't have the perfect grade point average Olivia had, but had an understanding of people and the world that always struck Marissa as insightful. Anything she did intellectually seemed to come effortlessly, and she had a way with people that not even Olivia had possessed.

Though Jordan's appearance was somewhat plain, people around her noticed her presence immediately.

Jordan appeared to Marissa to be quite calm. She stood in the same way as her father, but more emotion showed on her face. She looked tired, worn out, as if this had been a particularly challenging math problem to face and she wasn't done solving it yet. She brought her hand up to her eye and wiped away a tear.

At this, a lump rose in Marissa's throat and she felt her own eyes get wet. A tear broke free and slid down her face, which she also wiped away with her hand. She was glad for this tear however. She had yet to cry today, and was worried about what people might think of that. She had wanted to cry, felt that it was necessary and appropriate, she just couldn't. Next to her, Jay was barely holding it together. Her face was red and wet, despite her many tissues, and her makeup had started to run just a little. Not enough to make her look crazy, but enough that people knew that she was upset. Marissa envied her.

When Marissa got home that afternoon, she went straight to bed and fell asleep within minutes. Her bed felt so good. Private, quiet, and warm. She could just curl up and drift off, which is exactly what she wanted to do. Except for a couple of hours of wakefulness to get something to eat and have a modicum of conversation with her parents, she basically slept through until the morning. When she woke, she felt better, the morning sun held back by her blinds, entering her room through the space between the slats. But soon the light faded and she felt the same she had felt all week. Like feeling nothing, if nothing was something. She moved about her house that day doing lots of little things, but not really doing anything.

"Marissa?"

"Yeah?" she said automatically, even though she had no idea what Mr. Fischer was asking her.

"What's the next step for #4?" he repeated.

She didn't even know why she looked up to see the problem. She had no idea what the answer was. Finally, she just gave up.

"Uh, I don't know." She smiled.

Her teacher couldn't help but smile back. "Does anyone else know what the next step is?" Mr. Fisher turned back around to the board to continue his lecture.

She probably should have felt a little more embarrassed than she actually did. But, she knew that she would have all the material down by the time they were quizzed next week. And frankly, Mr. Fischer was probably just checking up on her since she knew it was obvious she was zoning out. She felt annoyed again. She had set her pen down by this point, and didn't even bother trying to pay attention this time.

Olivia had died in a car accident. Last Monday afternoon, she had been in the car driving home from somewhere, and was struck by another vehicle as she tried to navigate through an intersection. No one was sure where she had been. Both of her parents were at work and Jordan had woken up late and Olivia had already gone. There were a lot of country roads in the area where they lived. Two lane roads that snaked their way up and down hills through wooded areas. Generally, the speed limit was thirty-five miles an hour, which meant most people were doing at least fifty. Hitting deer was fairly common. Accidents generally were not. Olivia was actually a very good driver, even though she had just gotten her license in the last year. But the intersection where the accident occurred was tricky.

The road that she was on was narrow and curvy. For most of the way, thick trees bordered it on each side, and it ended at a road that was a little larger and a little faster. On this road, the

speed limit actually was fifty. It wasn't traveled heavily, so usually, drivers could stick their vehicle out far enough to get a good glimpse of who was coming in either direction. The road to the right was pretty straight and a person could see a car coming from far enough off to feel comfortable pulling out. But the road to the left curved around to the right shortly after the intersection, and with the trees and the small auto shop that sat on that curve, it was hard to tell who was coming around it and how fast. Drivers had to pull out quickly in case another car was coming around the bend.

There were two witnesses to the accident. One was a driver who had pulled up behind Olivia while she was waiting to make the left turn. A man in his forties, he was the only person in his vehicle. He told police that he saw her pull up to the intersection and wait for a minute. Then he watched her pull the car out a little farther, so that she was sticking out into the road.

The man then said that a couple of seconds later an SUV hit the driver's side of her car, spinning it off to the right. The SUV stopped for an instant, and then to the man's surprise, drove away. With trees on both sides of the road, he couldn't see the SUV coming until it made contact with her car. He knew the SUV was black, and he was pretty sure a man was driving.

The other witness was an employee at the auto shop in his early twenties. He said that he had looked out the window of the shop just a few seconds before Olivia's car had been hit. He could see her car at the intersection and it reminded him of something that he had to do in the shop. Just as he started thinking about it, he saw the black SUV collide with her car. He said he didn't realize at first that the SUV had driven away, because he ran outside right after seeing the accident. But when he got there, it was gone.

Olivia had died immediately upon impact. Her little car was smashed. She had been by herself, and on the floor of the passenger seat the police had found three things. A half-full plastic water bottle, a granola bar wrapper, and an admissions brochure from Olivia's first choice college, a prestigious university several states to the north.

This is the story Jordan told Marissa when she called her the afternoon of the accident.

It had been a really nice day outside. It had cooled off just a bit, so that it was hot, but not sticky or uncomfortable as it had been that summer. It reminded her that fall was coming, her favorite season, and also that school was starting in just a few days. Marissa felt relaxed and energetic as she sat on the patio, while the sun warmed her exposed skin that was still a little wet. Jay wasn't hanging out today, she had some things she needed to get done, and Olivia had messaged her the night before and said she couldn't make it either. Marissa assumed she had to go into the office. It was just Marissa and Mooney, who sat with her out on the patio, every now and then coming to attention when he heard an interesting sound. Otherwise he lazed about, only periodically opening his eyes.

Marissa's phone rang and for just a second she felt annoyed at the interruption. She was about to blow it off, but noticed the name on the front of the phone. Olivia's younger sister didn't call her often, and she was curious as to what was up. She answered the call.

As Jordan spoke to her, Marissa didn't react right away. She listened as Jordan told her the news with surprising objectivity. She hung up the phone after a minute or so and began dialing right away. Jordan had asked her to share the news with Jay. As she listened to the phone ringing, she wondered what would have happened if she had never picked up the phone. But it was too late.

She had trouble recalling the conversation with Jay now, but she remembered feeling uncomfortable with Jay's emotional reaction. She wasn't sure why. It was strange to be delivering news that she had yet to process. Almost like it hadn't happened yet, but somehow she knew

about it. Hanging up the phone, Marissa sat for a while out on the patio, looking out into the trees.

She finally stood up from her chair and walked over to the sliding glass door. She felt strange, like she had never been here before, even though she was in her own house. Both of her parents were home that day, which was odd. She opened the door and looked at them sitting together in the living room. She burst into tears.

She told her parents what had happened, and as she relayed the story they comforted her with words and embraces, which made her feel marginally better. She looked at them then, at the tragic expressions on their faces, and she knew that she hadn't even told them the worst part of the story yet.

It was unclear whether Olivia's death was an accident or a suicide.

CHAPTER 3

The next couple of weeks went by without incident and, surprisingly for Marissa, mostly everything felt normal. There were a few tears shed, more questions asked about the accident, and counselors stationed in the library who would talk with anyone who felt the need. But otherwise, school was as it always was, and, as always, Aaron had his wheels spinning.

It was the Monday of the third week of school and second period had just ended. Before heading to the cafeteria, Marissa stopped by the gym to get Jay, who was a teacher's aide for the gym teacher who also happened to be her basketball coach. Jay was just walking out. She hadn't bothered to change out of her T-shirt and shorts, but she did manage to exchange some sneakers for flip flops. Marissa could never quite figure out what Jay did during second period, but maybe that was the point. Jay strode towards her, her hair in a ponytail.

"Hey, Bluejay," Marissa said, which was actually Jay's first name. Marissa used this sparingly, and Jay tolerated it sparingly. Jay gave her a look that said Marissa had used up her quota for the week, but otherwise didn't seem too annoyed.

Apparently, as her father often told the girls, Jay's mother had insisted on giving her that name, and she wasn't to be convinced otherwise. Though unusual, Marissa had always rather liked it. For some reason, it seemed to fit. Jay's mom had died before the girls were friends, so Marissa never knew her. But her imagination had constructed an image of Jay's mom based solely on stories that Jay's dad had told them and her unusual name-giving abilities. She imagined that Jay kept a similar image in her own mind.

They found their friends in the cafeteria and sat down with them at their table, chatting about nothing in particular. Marissa picked at the food she had brought, leaving almost half of it uneaten. She had felt hungry when she sat down, but had gotten full quickly. She lost track of the conversation, absorbed in her own thoughts, and now that she was finished with her food she started looking around the room watching what other people were doing. She caught Aaron's eye at a table across the room. She waved and smiled and watched as he got up from his seat still talking to one of his friends. He swung his head to the side to get his hair out of his eyes and began walking towards Marissa.

"Hey, guys," Aaron said.

The table of girls said hello to Aaron in unison and went back to talking amongst themselves. Aaron squished himself between Jay and Marissa on the bench connected to the table.

"What's going on?" Marissa asked, smiling at the way he had sat himself down.

"Nothing really," said Aaron as he ran his hand through his hair.

"How are your classes?" She had only spoken to him once or twice since school started.

"Fine, I guess. But, hey, what are you guys doing on Saturday?" He looked around at Jay also when he said this but she was still absorbed in conversation.

"I suspect doing something with you by the way you're asking," Marissa said.

"That's right." He grinned. "I'm having people over on Saturday. Want to come?"

"Sure. Your parents are out of town?" She posed this as a question, but didn't really need to ask.

"Yeah, they're on vacation, but I can't remember where. They've actually already left. Been gone since Friday afternoon, but they won't be back until this Sunday."

"Doesn't give you much time to clean up the mess."

"No, but it's never stopped me before." His grin returned. "Probably will start around 9-ish, but you guys," he motioned towards Jay, "can come over whenever."

"Okay, we'll see you Saturday."

"Hope you see me before then. It's only Monday, you know. Oh, and feel free to stay over if you want. On Saturday."

Marissa had been to Aaron's parties before. She knew that bodies would litter the floors and the couches come morning, before everyone got themselves together and went home.

He stood up and they made eye contact. Marissa was surprised to see his usually lively eyes dulled just a bit. Before he walked away again, he said, "And make sure that Jay knows. I don't think she heard a word I said."

Saturday came quickly. Jay came by Marissa's house first so they could walk together over to Aaron's. Aaron and Marissa lived on the same street, but not particularly close together. The street was a dead-end, one lane road with no dividing line in it. There were about ten houses off of it. From the road, all you could see on either side were trees, and the beginning of each driveway with a mailbox next to it. Each house was on a fairly large piece of land, but much of it was covered by trees. This gave the occupants a sense of privacy, exclusivity even, although their neighbors were fairly close by.

Aaron lived on the other side of the street from Marissa and up three houses. His was the last house before the dead end. The girls set off from Marissa's house and made their way over to Aaron's. As they climbed his driveway, they could see that they were definitely not the first to arrive. Five or six cars already lined the driveway.

It was almost nine o'clock now, and the sun had already set. They could hear the noise from the party as they got closer to the house. They decided to just walk around the back rather than go in through the front door. Marissa guessed that this is where most people would be anyways. She was right.

About twenty kids were hanging around on Aaron's patio. As the girls stepped into view, their friends called out to them. The arrival of new guests sparked new energy as the group got temporarily louder and began to mill around. People talked and joked with one another while holding red plastic cups. The sounds of summer still emitted from the trees surrounding them. Insects and animals seemingly invisible during the day made themselves known with chirps, buzzes and squeals. Someone had lit a fire in the fire pit that had grown to a decent size and several people were hanging around its perimeter. Marissa looked up and saw the moon. It was a little more than half full.

She looked around but didn't see Aaron. Finding an exit from her conversation with two guys, she pulled back the sliding glass door to the house and entered. There were a couple of people in the kitchen mixing things from different bottles into their cups and tasting them. The last concoction elicited a groan. She said hello to a couple of girls she knew from school, who had just arrived and were making their way through the house, before she found Aaron and a few other guys in the living room playing a video game. He saw her immediately, paused the game and got up to greet her to the dismay of the other players.

"Hold on," he called over his shoulder, "I'll only be a minute."

"We made it," Marissa said, leaning herself against the doorway to the living room. "Just wanted to let you know we were here."

"That walk up the street is treacherous." Aaron smiled.

"Maybe not the street, but your driveway is pretty steep." She smiled back. "Are you ever coming outside? Or are you going to sit in your living room all night?"

"We're almost done. I'll be out in a bit," Aaron said.

The front door opened at that moment and a group of four guys walked in. She barely recognized them. She thought they might be sophomores. Aaron walked towards them, his hand extended to greet them.

Marissa turned to walk back outside. The party had fleshed out considerably even since Marissa arrived fifteen minutes ago. Several more people hung around the kitchen now, and outside on the patio it had gotten considerably louder. She thought she heard the sound of shattering ceramics. She glanced back at Aaron to see if he had heard, but he was still engrossed in his game. Aaron's family probably wouldn't miss whatever it was anyways. She pulled back the sliding door and stepped onto the patio.

"Marissa?"

It was Jordan. Marissa was shocked that she had come. Although she supposed that the alternative was sitting at home by herself, which probably wasn't a very good option either. Jordan stood on the patio with a group of her friends who stood tightly together, looking around at who was there, smiling and making big hand gestures as they talked.

Her stomach dropped a little. She was still feeling guilty about leaving the viewing, and, for some reason she felt like Jordan was going to call her out on it. She had spoken to Jordan just a few times since the funeral, and had only seen her once or twice in school. She figured she had been taking some time off, which would be reasonable, and which meant Marissa wouldn't have to see her much.

"Hey!" Marissa called out, putting a smile on her face and waving. She made eye contact with the rest of the girls Jordan was with, who looked familiar but whom she didn't know.

"I'm glad you're here. I thought you would be," Jordan said.

"Wouldn't miss it. I didn't think I'd see you though."

Jordan looked away from her for a moment and put her hands into the pocket of her hoodie. "People have been saying variations of that to me all night. But what am I supposed to do? Sit at home? This is distracting, and fun ... and it feels normal."

Marissa nodded back in understanding and began to feel a little chilly herself.

They were interrupted suddenly by an overly enthusiastic voice. "Hey, why don't you guys have any drinks?" Ben, a good friend of Aaron's, called out to them loudly even though he was standing just feet away. He had two full plastic cups in his hand, and began handing one to Jordan and one to Marissa, sloshing some liquid over the sides in the process.

"No thanks," said Jordan, looking like she expected a protest, but he was already focused on Marissa.

Marissa took the cup she was offered and sipped from it. "Are you the butler?" she asked smiling. Ben put one arm around her, mumbled something she couldn't understand, gulped the drink he had offered to Jordan, then stumbled away.

"I guess he's been here a while," Marissa said and laughed. "So, how have you been?" They began walking away from the other girls, off the patio and into the yard towards the trees.

"Fine, I guess." Jordan paused here, debating what to say next. "There's still no word on whether the car crash was an accident or not."

Marissa had been afraid the conversation would proceed in this direction. She didn't really know what to say to this, so she just said the first thing she could think of.

"I know the one witness said it looked like an accident to him, but the other one said it looked like she pulled her car out into the road on purpose. Nothing's changed since then?"

"No. The young guy who was working at the auto shop said it looked pretty straightforward to him. That Olivia just made a mistake and didn't turn in time. But the guy who pulled up behind her swears that she purposefully pulled her car out into the road in front of that SUV. He said that no one would pull out that far unless it was on purpose."

"I can't believe two witnesses to the same event are saying totally different things."

"Yeah, apparently it happens all the time though. Also, they haven't been able to catch the guy who hit her. If they could, that might give us a few more puzzle pieces to work with."

"What a dirtbag," Marissa said.

"I know. I can't believe someone could just drive away from an accident like that."

"Me neither. Although you would think a hit and run would be more likely with an accident. An admission of guilt, so to speak. If Olivia really did pull her car out in front of him, and there was nothing he could do, you would think that he would have stopped."

"Maybe, but maybe not." Jordan paused again, "You know that they found those college admissions brochures in Olivia's car after the accident?"

"Yeah?" Marissa waited for Jordan to continue, not sure where she was going with this.

"Well ... there's some speculation that maybe Olivia ... was unhappy because she was under so much pressure. You know, like to get into a really selective college, and to have a perfect grade point average, and phenomenal SAT scores. You know, all that stuff."

Marissa considered this, but it didn't feel right to her.

"But Olivia was a shameless overachiever. She loved the pressure. I never knew her to be any other way. I mean, I know she didn't have the SAT scores she wanted, but I don't think ..." Marissa looked up, finally seeing the uncertainty on Jordan's face. "Why, what do you think?"

Jordan's mouth began to move, but there was no sound at first. Finally, Marissa heard her voice.

"Yeah ... I'm, I'm sure you're right. I know she was like that, I just ... So, you think it was an accident?"

Suddenly, Marissa wasn't so sure. She came up with the best non-answer she could think of.

"I'm sure the police will eventually figure it out."

"But what do you think? Like, without knowing any of the details, what do you feel happened?"

Five minutes ago Marissa could have answered this question with certainty. Now, she gave Jordan the answer she knew she wanted to hear.

"I'm sure it was an accident."

Jordan made direct eye contact with her then, and Marissa knew that Jordan didn't quite believe her. But she let it go anyway.

"Thanks."

They walked a few paces in silence until Marissa had a thought.

"By the way, do you have any idea where Olivia might have been that morning?"

Jordan started to answer, but it suddenly got louder over by the side of the house where Marissa and Jay had first entered the backyard. Marissa looked over out of curiosity and saw Peter and a couple of his friends. He made his way through the party giving handshakes and hugs as necessary, a wide smile plastered on his face, his very short haircut and heavily muscled arms making him look like the quintessential athlete. He had spotted her and Jordan and started to make his way over to them. Marissa thought for a second about going back inside to look for

Aaron, or to do anything really, but it was too late. Peter stood between her and Jordan, an arm around each of them. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Aaron open the screen door and step out onto the patio. He stopped for a second, glancing in her direction before starting towards a group of girls on the far left side of the yard. He loudly flung himself into their group causing more than a few high-pitched laughs.

"How are my favorite girls?" Peter asked, still connected to both Marissa and Jordan.

"We'll ask them for you, but we're good," Marissa replied while catching Jordan's eye and chuckling.

Peter removed his arms from the girls as if offended. "Fine. I'll just spread myself around elsewhere." He winked at them as he moved along.

"I'm sure you will," Marissa said so he couldn't hear. Jordan smiled.

She happened to glance back at the side of the house once more and saw three guys walk in whom she didn't recognize. They wore hats with the state university's logo on them and she assumed they were probably students there. They looked familiar, but were definitely not in high school. They didn't go to her school anyway. Marissa watched them making their way through the throng of kids, looking for someone they knew, she guessed. One of the guys, who was leading the way, happened to bump into Peter, which caused him to spill some of his drink down the front of his shirt. Though no words were exchanged, Peter turned and gave the guy a dirty look, who then returned the favor before continuing to lead his friends through the crowd. Marissa wondered who they knew here.

"Do you talk to Peter a lot?" Marissa turned to ask Jordan.

"Yeah."

"I have to admit, he's always gotten on my nerves."

"I understand. He's not a bad guy, he just wants everyone to know how great he is."

This made Marissa chuckle. Aaron walked over at that moment.

"You finally made it outside," she said.

"Yeah," he said a little distracted. Marissa followed his eyes over to where Peter was talking with the same group of girls Aaron had just been with. He turned back to her momentarily and said, "Having fun?"

"Of course," she said smiling. Jordan had walked away, having found someone else to talk to.

"Hey, who are those guys over there?" Marissa asked looking in the direction of the guys with the hats she had just seen walk in.

"Who?" He looked in the direction she showed him. "Oh! Don't you remember? They were seniors when we were freshmen. Friends of my brother actually. Stay here, I'll be right back, I promise." Aaron walked towards them.

Marissa had no intention of standing around by herself and she knew Aaron would find her again. She spotted Jay lounging in a patio chair talking with some other people, and started to walk over when she heard a crash behind her. She turned around to see Ben lying on the patio with the screen door underneath him looking like he wasn't sure how he got there. She couldn't help but laugh as he apologized to Aaron, who had just run over. She heard Aaron say, "Seriously?" before it was drowned out by the laughter of the rest of Aaron's guests.

"What happened?" Jay asked as Marissa sat down in the chair next to her.

"Ben just walked through the screen door."

"He needs to go to bed."

The night wore on. Red cups littered the yard and the patio tables, the volume got louder, and the air got chillier. Nothing else major was broken.

The party had doubled in size since Marissa arrived, which, even for Aaron, was a lot. Marissa was getting cold and, frankly, a little bored, and decided to go back into the house. The kitchen had gotten more crowded and the floor a lot stickier. There were no video games being played but the living room was filled with kids. She didn't see anyone she knew and decided to take a little unguided tour of Aaron's house. She felt guilty walking up the stairs, like she was snooping around, but she was just curious.

Aaron's house was big. Bigger than hers. There were quite a few doors that lined the hallway. Two of them were closed. One of them was Aaron's room. She realized she hadn't seen him in a while. The first room she looked into was his parents' bedroom. She stood in the doorway admiring. It reminded her of a spa.

The next room was an office. Probably for Aaron's father. She stepped in briefly looking at books, knick knacks, and the few pictures that were displayed. Aaron's dad always reminded her of a surfer for some reason, even though he was a successful businessman. She picked up a book from the shelf, and flipped through for a few seconds before continuing.

She entered the next room. It was a den.

This room was comfortable. There was a large TV, though from the looks of it, an older model than the one in the living room. More video games. A somewhat worn leather couch, and more bookshelves. Marissa read occasionally, but not avidly. She perused the bookshelves as she had in the office and picked up *East of Eden* off the shelf. The paperback cover was worn, with creases from being read so often, and the pages were earmarked in many places. She sunk back into the leather couch with the book still in her hand. A window was to her left. The breeze rolled through the room, and she relaxed her head against the back of the couch.

"Snooping?"

She was startled for a second, then turned her head to see Aaron standing in the doorway, chuckling at her surprise. She wondered how long he had been standing there.

"Sorry. I got cold."

"No apologies necessary." He sat on the other end of the couch from her and looked at the book in her hand. "Steinbeck fan? That's one of my favorites."

"I like the movie. But, I've never read the book. Actually, I never knew you were much of a reader."

"Yeah, these are all mine." He gestured towards the full bookshelves. "That's how I've stayed so smart without having to do any work in school." He grinned.

"Thanks for having everyone over tonight. I think we needed it."

"Sure. Life goes on, right?"

"Yeah, I guess it does."

His eyes caught hers for a moment and she realized that he had green in the middle of his brown eyes. Hazel, just like hers.

Shouting outside caught their attention at the same time. This was not spirited banter; this was the shouting of a brewing argument. As they looked out the window, they could see Peter facing the three college guys. Aaron jumped up and ran from the room. Marissa could hear him making his way down the stairs. She decided to follow.

When she reached the screen door (that Aaron had put back into place), the confrontation was unchanged, except now Aaron also faced Peter. Peter's tall, athletic build made Aaron's medium sized frame seem even smaller.

"You have a problem with my guests?" she heard Aaron saying. It was quiet around them now.

"These has-beens have had a problem with me all night. We were just having a discussion, that's all." Marissa looked over to the college guys, one of whom was swaying on his feet.

"I don't think anyone invited you in the first place." At this, the atmosphere tensed.

"That's cool. This is lame anyways." Just as Peter had turned around to leave, the college friend who had been having trouble staying on his feet, flung his plastic cup, still half full of liquid, square at Peter's back. Though he barely felt the flimsy cup hit him, his humiliation spread like the wet mark on the back of his shirt. Peter charged at the guy, pushing Aaron to the ground in the process, and grabbed him by the collar, before the other guys could push Peter back. With his friends grabbing both of his arms, Peter took a deep breath, freed his arms and adjusted his shirt, before calling out to Aaron, who was still on the ground with the chair he had fallen into, "Thanks for having me over." His buddies laughed as they walked around the side of the house and disappeared. The cup-flinger stumbled a few paces, turned around and vomited.

Aaron jumped up, red in the face, and exclaimed that he was okay to anyone who asked. When someone pointed out to him the scrape on the back of his forearm that was bleeding, he looked surprised and said that he hadn't felt it. Shaking his hair back into place, and uprighting the fallen furniture, he walked back into the house right past Marissa, who was still by the door, and didn't look at her. He disappeared up the stairs.

Jay walked in right behind him and stood next to Marissa.

"Guess the party's over," she said.

The next day, late in the afternoon, Marissa and Jay sat outside on Marissa's patio. It was a hot day and they had been swimming earlier. Even though it was late September, it seemed summer had no intentions of going away.

They had woken up that morning in Aaron's basement and after weaving their way through a maze of bodies still sleeping on the floor, had made their way down the long driveway and back up to Marissa's where they had been ever since.

"Hey, remember that time when Ben walked through Aaron's screen door?" Jay said. Both girls laughed.

Still chuckling, Marissa said, "Yeah, that was fun. I'm still tired though."

"You're tired anytime you don't get your full twelve hours," Jay said and then continued. "Are you surprised he had people over last night, so soon after?" She didn't have to say after what.

"I asked him the same thing last night, but you know Aaron. And anyways, I guess there's no use in just sitting around twiddling our thumbs."

"Life goes on."

"That's what Aaron said too."

Jay paused before she spoke next. "How do you think Jordan feels?"

"I asked her last night, and she seems okay." For some reason, Marissa left out the part about Jordan asking her whether she thought the crash was an accident.

"Yeah, but you'd never get it out of her if she felt terrible."

"That's true." Marissa looked out into the trees.

Jay leaned back against the lounge chair she was in and put her arms over her head. She exhaled deeply before saying, "How have you been feeling?"

But Marissa never got the chance to answer the question. Her phone indicated she had received a message. For some reason, she felt butterflies in her stomach. She looked at the phone and saw the name, then flipped it open and read the message inside.

"Find me tomorrow. I have an idea." It was Jordan.

CHAPTER 4

Marissa didn't have to find Jordan the next day. Jordan found her.

After classes were over that day she stood at her locker with Jay. They were both going to Marissa's house that afternoon, and Marissa needed to grab something quickly. Just as they were about to leave, Jordan jogged up to them.

"Hey guys, don't go yet," she said to them a little out of breath.

"What is it?" Jay said.

"I want to talk to you both, but not here."

"Is this about your secret plan?" Jay said. She couldn't help but laugh.

Jordan ignored Jay's laughter at her expense. "I'll tell you guys about it in the car. Can you give me a ride home?"

Once in the car, Marissa driving, Jay up front and Jordan in the back, Jordan got right to the point.

"Alright," she took a deep breath, "I need to find Olivia's journal, and I need you guys to help me. Peter and Aaron too."

"You certainly don't need all of us to do that," Jay said. "I'm sure if you go through her room long enough you're bound to find it."

"That's the thing though, it's not in her room, or even in the house. I've thoroughly checked. It's definitely not there."

"Okay. Why do you need it?" Jay asked.

Jordan paused here. Marissa glanced in the rear view mirror and saw Jordan's face form the expression it did when she was trying to gather her thoughts. Marissa thought she already knew what Jordan was going to say.

"I want to find out for sure whether or not my sister killed herself."

Her words reverberated around the car in the loudest silence Marissa had ever heard. For a moment, the car was completely quiet. Each girl sat with her own thoughts, not wanting to speak them aloud. Jordan finally continued with her plea.

"If I can find her journal, I think I have a good chance of finding out the truth. I need to know what happened," and then she added quickly, "and I think it's only right that it be known. Don't you guys want to know the truth?"

No, not really. Marissa thought it before she could stop herself, as her mind flashed back to her conversation with Jordan not two days prior. She didn't like this idea, not at all. She figured if the police couldn't figure it out then they probably couldn't either, and she had no interest in playing detective. If there was no clear evidence either way, maybe they were better off not knowing.

"Guys?" Jordan said.

Finally, Marissa couldn't avoid speaking any longer. "Don't you think we should just let the police handle this? I mean, if they can't figure it out what makes you think that we can?"

"Because we'll have her thoughts."

Marissa thought that was a strange way of saying what Jordan meant to say.

"The evidence is inconclusive," Jordan continued, "the eyewitnesses don't agree with each other. What we need is to talk to Olivia herself. Since we can't do that, we'll go for the next best thing."

Marissa didn't want to do it. She didn't want to go digging through Olivia's things trying to find a scrap of a thought or a feeling that she once had. She preferred to let this all die down. For

everything to return to normal. She didn't want to search for what Jordan was asking her to search for. She didn't want to look.

Jay spoke first. "Jordan, I'll go with you."

Marissa was annoyed. Now she would have to go too.

"Really?" Jordan asked.

"Yeah, really."

"Marissa?"

Everything inside of her screamed "no," but she couldn't say it.

"Yeah, I'll go too."

"Great! I knew I could convince you guys!"

"No problem," Jay said, "but if the journal isn't in your house, where do you think it is?"

Marissa suddenly didn't want to hear where Jordan thought the journal was.

"Well," Jordan started, "you know the state park off of route 29? A lot of people go hiking and camping there."

"Yeah?" Jay said.

"That's where I think it is."

"In the park? I don't understand."

"Olivia used to go there regularly, just to be alone, I think. She took me with her once, last summer. There was this particular spot she liked to go to that overlooked the river. She mentioned to me that she would write there, and just leave the journal hidden so no one could find it."

"I didn't know she did that," Marissa said, surprised that she didn't know this piece of information about her friend. "How long had she been doing that?"

"About a year, I think."

Marissa remembered that Jordan had been cut off at the party when Marissa had asked her where she thought Olivia had been the morning of the accident.

"So this is where you think Olivia was the morning of the accident?"

Jay turned and looked at Marissa with a confused expression, not having been privy to Marissa and Jordan's earlier conversation.

"Yeah, it was the first place I thought of."

"So you had an idea of where she was that morning? I thought no one knew," Jay asked.

"No one does know. Except for me."

"You didn't tell anybody?" Marissa asked.

"No. I didn't know for sure. And ... it didn't seem right to mention it without being certain."

"Jordan!" Marissa and Jay called out at the same time.

"Listen, I wasn't even sure she was still going to this place. It was just the first thing that popped into my mind when I heard about the accident."

Marissa felt anger bubble to the surface as she realized Jordan had been keeping this to herself. She was glad it was Jay who spoke next.

"So, you want to go to this spot and look for the journal there?" Jay asked.

"Exactly. And now you see why I want all four of you to go."

"I didn't realize that we would have to go on an expedition to do this," Jay said, reconsidering her previous commitment.

"It's really not a big deal, I figure we can all go up after school. It'll only take us twenty minutes to get there. With five of us searching, it shouldn't take us long to cover all the ground."

This spot isn't that big. And, I'm sure it's there. It has to be." Marissa sensed that Jordan spoke this last sentence more to herself than to Jay.

"Alright, I guess you're right. Do you know how to get back to this spot?"

"Yeah, I've been there before."

"I'll let you lead the way, then."

Marissa now felt even more uncomfortable than before. Despite Jordan's confidence, she thought there was a slim chance the journal was even there, much less that they would find it if it was. And, she really didn't like the idea of going all the way out to the state park to do this. Although she enjoyed her backyard, she really couldn't say that she was an outdoors kind of girl. But they were committed now.

They finally reached Jordan's street and pulled into the driveway at her house. Marissa put the car in park but no one moved.

"What about Peter and Aaron?" Marissa asked.

"Don't worry about Peter. I'll take care of him. Aaron, on the other hand," she was talking more to herself now than to the other girls, "he might be harder to convince." They both knew she was referencing what had happened at his house the other night. She looked out the window for a moment, biting one of her nails and then put a hand on Marissa's arm, leaning up from the backseat.

"Marissa, will you talk to Aaron about this? I think he would listen to you."

Marissa was displeased by this assignment. Considering her own lack of enthusiasm she wasn't sure she was the best person to be recruiting others.

"Yeah, sure, I'll ask him."

"I'll go with you," Jay said.

"No," Jordan said, "just Marissa. I think that will work better." Jay just shrugged, and then asked, "Why does Peter need to come? Won't four of us be enough?"

Jordan considered and then answered, "One, I think it would be helpful to have another guy come along. Second, he is—was," she corrected herself, "Olivia's boyfriend, it would only be fair."

"Oh, right," Jay said unenthusiastically.

"Thanks guys. I'll let you know what's up after I talk to Peter. Marissa, keep me updated on Aaron."

"Yes, ma'am," Marissa said as she watched Jordan pull the door handle to let herself out of the car. She smiled at Marissa as she shut the door behind her, and Marissa caught her eyes before she turned away. She could see the spark in Jordan's brown eyes, and was drawn into them.

Marissa and Jay watched Jordan open the front door of her house and step inside before Marissa pulled the car back out of the driveway. Marissa turned to Jay.

"What have you gotten us into?" Marissa asked.

"Me? You agreed to go too."

"I had to after you said you would go. This is crazy."

"It won't be that bad."

Marissa just looked at her.

The girls pulled up to Marissa's house and left the car in the driveway. Her parents weren't home yet.

"Let's go out back. Want something to drink?" Marissa said.

"Yeah, I'll come with you to the kitchen."

The girls got themselves situated on the patio. Marissa pulled her hair back and secured it with an elastic band, then took off the hoodie she had been wearing to reveal a T-shirt. The late afternoon sun felt good on her arms and neck.

"So, what do you really think about all this?" Marissa asked. Jay opened her bottle of water and took a sip.

"Look, she's upset about her sister, and she wants to do something to make herself feel better. It's the least we can do to go with her. Honestly, I don't think we're going to find anything. I mean, the idea is a little half-baked, right? Even if we do find the journal, what is she expecting? An entry that reads, 'I plan to kill myself today' or 'I don't plan to kill myself today.' I'm not sure what she expects to find, but she's got it in her head that this will give her closure. In the end, it was easier just to agree to go along. We'll go up there, look around a little while, and then come home. We'll probably be back before dinner."

"What if we actually do find something?"

"Then we do. At least we'll have something new to tell the police, maybe make her parents feel better. And Jordan will feel like she's served some purpose."

Marissa took a couple of sips of water as she decided whether or not to ask the question she wanted to ask.

"What do you think actually happened?"

They had not explicitly discussed this before. Jay looked off into the trees for a moment, watching the leaves rustle in the wind. A squirrel jumped from one tree to another.

"Honestly, I feel like it was just an accident. I guess it's just intuition, but there's nothing that makes me believe that Olivia killed herself. I think she just miscalculated when she made that turn."

Marissa thought about this for a moment, and then remembered that Jay hadn't been with her when she talked to Jordan the night of the party.

"Jordan told me there's speculation that Olivia might have wanted to kill herself because she was under too much pressure," Marissa said. Jay dismissed this idea with a wave of her hand.

"We all know that Olivia was Type A to a fault. That still doesn't mean she was suicidal," Jay paused here and looked directly at Marissa. "What do you think?"

Marissa fiddled with her bottle of water, pulling at the label which had peeled off in one corner. She twisted off the cap, but as she pulled it off she lost her grip on it and it fell to the ground beneath them. She bent down to pick it up and when she sat up again, she met Jay's eyes and said, "Yeah, I think you're right." Jay nodded at her and finished off her water. Marissa wondered if Jay actually believed her.

Marissa started up the long driveway and felt as if she had just been here, even though it was Wednesday afternoon. She certainly didn't mind stopping by Aaron's house, but she still felt uneasy about this adventure they were all about to undertake, and that she had to be the one to recruit Aaron. Frankly, she thought Jordan would have done a fair job on her own. But she had said she would do it, so here she was.

She rang the doorbell and stood on the front step waiting. She glanced around and thought it was funny how different this place looked in the daylight. Her thoughts were broken by the sound of the lock turning.

"Hey! What are you doing here?"

"Just felt like taking a walk up the street," she smiled.

"I figured you were somebody trying to sell me something." For a moment, she thought that Jordan had already spoken to him, and then realized he was just making a joke. She laughed quickly.

"No, just wanted to visit. I left my vacuum cleaner models at home."

He smiled and then motioned for her to enter. He held the storm door open as she passed through.

"Nice and clean," Marissa said as she entered the foyer.

"It took a little while, but you know I came through."

"I didn't have any doubt."

She followed him into the kitchen and sat down on one of the stools at the center island. She leaned forward over the counter and watched as Aaron opened the right side of the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of soda. He motioned to ask her if she also wanted one, but she declined. He remained standing by the refrigerator on the opposite side of the island, leaning back against the counter.

"So, why did you really stop by?" Aaron asked, twisting the cap off of the bottle.

"I told you. Just to visit." Marissa couldn't help but smile.

"We've lived on the same street for almost ten years. I can't remember one time that you ever just dropped by."

Marissa tried to think of something clever to say, but nothing came to her. Finally, she just settled on the truth.

"Okay, you're right. I'm here on assignment."

Aaron tossed his bottle cap at her so that it gently hit her in the arm and pretended to look disappointed. He took a long sip of the brown bubbly liquid inside. Marissa grabbed the cap before it fell to the floor and began playing with it on the counter top.

"So what's your assignment?" he asked.

"I'm supposed to ask you if you'll help look for something."

"Who put you up to this?" He cocked his head to the side and crossed his arms in front of his chest like he was suspicious of her, but she could still see the grin peeking out from his face. Marissa saw the scrape he had gotten when Peter had knocked him over the other night. He caught the direction of her eye and immediately uncrossed his arms and put them back down by his sides.

"Jordan."

"Go on."

Marissa tried not to look as unenthusiastic as she was. "She wants you, me, Jay ..." she paused, knowing that this last name would get some kind of reaction, "... and Peter," Aaron continued standing in the same position, his facial expression unchanged, but the smile that kept peeking out from his face had left his eyes and mouth, "to help her find Olivia's journal."

Aaron's face changed at this as if to ask why Jordan would want this. Marissa continued.

"You know that there's some question as to whether Olivia's death was a suicide," she said this last word slowly as if it didn't quite want to leave her mouth. She saw Aaron's face flinch a little, but he nodded in response.

"Jordan's hoping if she can find Olivia's journal, she may find out something that would indicate whether or not that car accident was actually an accident."

Aaron crossed his arms again and looked out the sliding glass door towards his back yard. It was a sunny day with no clouds, and like most of the weather they had recently had, still felt like summer.

Marissa knew what he was about to ask, "I don't understand. Isn't the journal in her house? Why does she need all of us to help her look for it?"

Marissa turned the cap on its side and spun it like a top so that it moved of its own volition without her control.

"No. The journal is not in her house. Jordan thinks its in the state park off of Route 29."

"That's ridiculous."

Marissa grabbed the cap so that it stopped spinning and, this time, threw it back at Aaron, who caught it just as it was about to hit his chest.

"I know." Marissa got up from the stool she had been sitting on and stood behind it leaning on the back rest. "Look, I'm not thrilled with this idea myself, but she has reason to believe that it's there, and she badly wants to find it."

"Aren't the police looking into this?"

"I asked her the same thing." Marissa walked around the island until she was on the same side that Aaron was on and leaned back against the counter so that there was just a few feet of space between them.

"I know this is kind of crazy, but it shouldn't take long. We probably won't find anything anyways."

He looked at her and then ran his hand through his hair and laughed.

"I give up. Yeah, I'll go."

"Good. Jordan will be thrilled." Marissa beamed up at him, and Aaron looked off to the right still smiling.

"Hey," he looked back at her again like he had just thought of this, "why didn't she come by and ask me herself?"

"I don't know. She seemed to think I'd be more convincing. Although I can't think of a person more persuasive than Jordan."

Aaron chuckled softly to himself and pulled his hand through his hair again.

"Well, I guess she was right. It worked didn't it?"

"Guess so."

Aaron threw the bottle cap one more time at Marissa. This time she caught it.

Later that night, Marissa laid on her bed with Mooney stretched out next to her. She stroked the short fur on his slim body and felt his purr vibrate against her. The breeze from the bedroom window made the curtains move and the warm air touched her skin and made her feel sleepy.

Just as she was about to get ready for bed, her phone rang on the nightstand next to her. She grabbed it and saw Jordan's name on the front. She was glad she would be able to tell her that Aaron was in. That would save her a lot of trouble.

"Hello," Marissa said.

"Have you talked to Aaron yet?" Jordan asked, not bothering with any formalities. Marissa was glad to be getting right to the point. She didn't feel like being on the phone long.

"Yep. He's in," Marissa said, glad to be the bearer of good news.

"Excellent," Jordan said, and then continued. "See, I knew you'd be the best person for the job."

"Well, whatever, it's done now and we got the result we wanted." Marissa wasn't sure that there was any "we" in any of this, but still she waited to hear what Jordan had to say next.

"Peter is also in," Jordan said. "I knew that one would be easy."

"I thought that Peter would have been the hardest one to convince."

"No, I just told him that if we found anything new to tell the police he could be the one to bring it forward. You know Peter wouldn't pass up a chance to be the hero. To have his name in lights, so to speak. I barely had to say anything to him."

"Interesting, but I guess that makes sense."

"Yeah, everyone has their buttons. You just have to know which ones to push and when."

Marissa was struck by this in a way that she didn't immediately understand. She felt butterflies flutter through her stomach.

"So, when are we doing this?" Marissa asked.

"This Friday, after school. We'll all meet at the park at, say, 4:00 p.m.?"

"Fine with me. That will give us a few hours of light left in the day. Should be plenty of time."

"That's what I was thinking. Will you let Aaron and Jay know?"

"Sure."

"Okay, great," Jordan paused a moment here. "Marissa?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks again."

"No problem."

Marissa heard the line go blank as Jordan hung up.

CHAPTER 5

Marissa drove along the two lane road bordered by thick trees on either side. She had lowered the front windows so the breeze circulated through the car, but didn't turn her hair into a mess. The car stereo was silent. She listened to the sound of the wind and the roar of the engine, as the car hugged the curves on the road, ascending slightly as Marissa neared her destination.

She crossed the small bridge that carried her car over the river, and looked out to her right towards the water for just a second before turning her eyes back to the road. She looked in her rearview mirror and saw the bridge behind her now. She knew she was getting close to the place where she was supposed to meet Jordan.

Finally, she spotted the correct entrance and pulled her car into the graveled lot. She could already see Jordan and Peter waiting by Peter's SUV. Peter leaned back against the front bumper, his legs crossed at his ankles, his arms crossed against his chest. He still had his sunglasses on, even though the sunlight was tempered by the trees on all sides of them. He gestured to Jordan, who was leaning over the hood of his car on the passenger side, and Marissa saw her nod in a thoughtful way.

It was 4:09 on Friday afternoon. She figured she would be the last one, but it seemed as if Jay and Aaron had yet to arrive. Jay should be right behind her, as they had left school just a few minutes apart. She assumed Aaron was on his way, but she hadn't talked with him since she went to his house Wednesday after school. It was possible he had decided to bail, but she didn't think so.

Marissa parked her car and went to grab her phone out of her bag, but then thought better of it. She didn't want to carry a lot of stuff with her, and this would probably be quick anyway. She left the phone in the bag, made sure she had her keys and hopped out of the car. As she did, she saw Jay pull into the parking lot.

Jordan and Peter spotted her right away as she started walking towards them. Jordan waved at her, while Peter just stood still. Without being able to see his eyes, she couldn't tell if he was smiling or not.

"I see Jay just pulled in. Where's Aaron?" Jordan said.

"I don't know, but he should be here soon."

"You told him where we were meeting? And he knows how to get here, right?"

"Yes," Marissa said, starting to laugh, "relax."

Peter pulled his sunglasses off. "So, what's the plan anyways? Where's this place we're looking for?"

"I wanted to wait until we were all here to go into detail, but basically we take the trail," Jordan pointed in its direction, "for about twenty minutes, until we get to the bottom of a big hill. I'll recognize it when I see it. Then we hang a right, off the trail, for another ten or fifteen minutes until we come to a clearing that sits above the river. You can hear the water as you get closer and there are some landmarks so we should make it fine. I figure Olivia's journal can't be outside of a relatively small area once we're there. With the five of us searching, this shouldn't take long."

"Wasn't it kind of dangerous for Olivia to be coming out here by herself? I didn't realize this was so far off the trail," Marissa said. She didn't want to admit it to Jordan, but she was feeling a little uneasy.

Jordan shrugged. "Well, in the end, she died while driving a car, which is something we all do everyday. Dangerous is relative."

Marissa couldn't argue with that. Just then, Jay walked up to them, keys and phone in hand. Marissa was beginning to wonder where Aaron was. She looked towards the road once more, and just as she did, she saw his car turn into the lot.

"Aaron's here. He just pulled in," Marissa said.

"Good. Then we can get started." Jordan said.

Peter put his sunglasses back on.

After Aaron had caught up with the group, and Jordan explained to everyone where they were going, they set off. It was a warm day. Marissa wore short sleeves and was comfortable, even in the shade of the surrounding trees. She stuffed her car keys in the back pocket of her jeans, and allowed her arms to swing by her sides in rhythm to her gait. She liked the feeling of freedom it gave her not to carry a lot of stuff.

It had been a long time since she had been in the woods, and it reminded her of playing in the trees around her house when she was young. She felt renewed by the green that surrounded her. The trees were still full. It was too early for the leaves to begin changing color yet. Shrubs and vines filled in between the thick tree trunks and the occasional large boulder sticking out from the ground. The ground was covered in a tangle of dead leaves and broken branches, and even on the trail Marissa had to watch her footing for the errant rock or tree limb that had fallen to the ground. It was cooler here and the air smelled better.

Peter and Jay walked up front, their athletic bodies comfortable with the obstacles of the trail. Marissa enjoyed watching them as they maneuvered easily, almost dance-like, down the slightly sloping trail, their frames graceful, lithe and fluid. Jordan was beside Marissa. Her small body made Marissa think of a bird hopping along the ground. Not quite flying, but not quite walking either. They both had to hurry a bit to keep up. Aaron walked a couple paces behind the two girls, hands in the pocket of his hoodie. Marissa thought it was odd that he was wearing it considering the warm weather. He had been pleasant when he arrived, but hadn't said much since.

The five of them walked along the trail, making light conversation. Everything was peaceful. The late afternoon sunlight filtered in through small spaces between the trees and the sounds of the forest played in their ears like a soundtrack. They quickly reached the place where they were to leave the trail.

"Okay, this is it," Jordan announced to the group as they approached the landmark she recognized. Before them, the trail began to incline steeply and Marissa was glad they would not be climbing it. To the right of where they stood was a tree that had clearly been the victim of some force of nature. There were no leaves on it and it stood only about eight feet tall, the top of the trunk jagged and broken. Marissa imagined that the top portion had fallen across the trail at one point and had to be cleared away. One single branch grew out from the tree, also broken in half. Its damaged arm pointed outwards into the forest, like an old signpost that may or may not be giving the right direction. Marissa didn't know whether the branch was guiding her or compelling her to leave the trail, exiling her from its boundaries. She was strangely comforted by the guidance of this old, broken tree.

Jordan reached out and put her small hand on the darkened bark and looked upwards towards the branch. Her gaze then turned out from it, following its reach into the woods.

"This is the direction we walk in," she said.

"How will we know if we're walking in the right direction?" asked Peter, who went to stand beside Jordan and looked out in the same direction she did.

"I told you earlier. There are a few landmarks that guide the way. And, we should be able to hear the water from the river after a while, which will let us know we're getting close."

"You remember all the landmarks?" Peter asked.

"Yes," Jordan said, looking directly at Peter, clearly annoyed.

"Just checking," Peter said.

The rest of the group stood around for a moment waiting to see if their conversation was over. When no one said anything, Jordan started walking, Peter right behind her.

"Alright, let's go," Jordan said.

Marissa stepped off the trail and heard the crunch of her foot meeting the pool of leaves and twigs underfoot. She didn't like that she couldn't see down to the forest floor, as she wondered what might lie underneath the ground cover. She took her first steps gingerly, hoping not to step on a resting snake or otherwise put her foot down in something she didn't want to be in.

The five of them traipsed between the trees, becoming more attentive to what now lay before them. The noises of the forest that had played lightly in their heads while on the trail were now replaced by the whoosh and crunch of ten feet making their way over uncleared ground. Marissa was surprised at how noisy they were.

Marissa found it difficult to tell if they were moving in a straight line or not, but Jordan seemed comfortable navigating the way. Everything was starting to look alike to her. The trees, the shrubs, the rocks, even the sunlight streaming in between the cracks in the trees. For all she knew they could be walking around in circles. She was glad Jordan knew what she was doing.

After walking for several minutes they came upon a large boulder jutting from the ground that gave Marissa the impression of a ship sailing on choppy waters. Jordan ran her hand along its rough surface as she walked by it.

"This is the first one," she said, indicating it was one of the landmarks she was looking for. Marissa thought it looked like all of the rocks that seemed to grow from the ground in this place and wondered how Jordan recognized it. Nonetheless, a certain calm passed over her as they passed this first landmark. It made her feel like she knew where she was going.

A few minutes later they passed the second landmark, which was a creek that ran perpendicular to their direction. The tinkling sound of the water running its course lifted Marissa's spirits and she had the urge to kneel by it and touch it. But instead she stepped over it easily, like the rest of the group, so that she wouldn't have to catch up.

One by one they passed the landmarks that Jordan knew. After the creek was a slim tree that had been split down the middle so that either side hung open, dangling towards the forest floor. After that was another tree. This one twisted its body towards the top of the forest, making its own unique way towards the sunlight. And finally, a large tree that was bent in the middle, giving the appearance of someone bowing towards an unknown deity or force. The bend occurred right in the middle of its thick trunk, so that it grew horizontal for a distance, its leaves and branches forming a kind of canopy over the forest floor.

As the group passed the bent tree, Marissa could finally hear the sound of rushing water. Her energy grew and her curiosity compelled her forward. That, and the fact that they were all still following Jordan.

Marissa hadn't realized that they had been going uphill since they left the trail, except for the fact that her breathing was heavier now. The slope of the ground was slight, so it hadn't appeared that they were moving higher. Up ahead, they could already see where the trees began to clear, and the sound of the water was louder than ever.

The group slowed as they arrived at their destination. They soon reached the edge of the trees and walked out into a grassy area that led to a steep drop off, below which was the river. Marissa now knew why Olivia had liked to come here and why it was off the trail. Clearly, this was a place where park management didn't want people to go. There was no fence or barrier along the cliff, leaving it open for anyone to fall, or jump, off. And the area was isolated by trees on the other three sides. It wasn't a big area, maybe a quarter of an athletic field, though not shaped as neatly. It was half an oval, but rougher around the edges in the way that nature, not man, creates. There was nothing here but grass, trees, air, and sky.

Peter stepped forward almost to the edge. The wind whipped his T-shirt back against his body so that the fabric clung tightly to his muscular frame.

"There are a few guys from school who come out here to go cliff jumping. I don't know if it's this spot exactly, but this seems like the type of place."

"I don't know. We're really high up here. Seems like we'd be too high even for those crazy enough who would want to jump," Jay said.

"Yeah, I think we're too high for that. We must be forty feet up," Jordan said.

"Well, whatever, I wasn't planning on jumping anyways," Peter said, then asked the question they were all thinking. "How did Olivia find this place?"

"Where else? The Internet. Apparently a hiker had described how to get here on some website. Other people have obviously been here despite the fact that it's not on the trail," Jordan said as she nudged an empty soda can with her toe.

"No wonder she liked it here," Aaron said as he also walked towards the edge. He did so slowly taking in the view, turning his head from right to left as he looked up and down the river.

Marissa walked over and stood beside him, her hair blowing wildly in the wind. She grabbed the elastic around her wrist and secured her hair at the back of her head. She looked over at Aaron and watched his hair moving this way and that by the wind. She thought it made him look happy for some reason.

Marissa looked out from where she was to the opposite cliff on the other side of the river. All she could see on the other side was the forest, a dark mass that didn't seem to contain any individual trees. She wondered if where they stood looked the same from the other side. The sky was a light blue with a few wispy clouds and it seemed to stretch on forever in either direction. She liked feeling this close to it. The river below was foamy white with small rapids and the sound reverberated in her ears pleasantly. She felt like the air moved in and out of her lungs easier up here, and her body felt light. No thoughts entered her mind as she observed her natural surroundings.

"Alright guys," Jordan said, gesturing to them to come closer to her, "now we search."

"Where?" Peter asked as he approached the group.

Before Jordan could answer, Aaron chimed in. "Where else?" he gestured to the space around them, "We didn't just walk all this way for nothing."

"I understand that," Peter said, "but this place isn't that small. Do you have any idea where it might be? Anywhere specific?" He waited for Jordan to answer.

"I'm not sure exactly, but it shouldn't be that far outside of the grassy area."

Aaron went to speak, but Peter spoke first.

"Why don't we each take a portion of this area? So we're not searching over ground that's already been covered."

"I'll cover that area there," Aaron said before Peter could start talking again. "Jay, why don't you take over there. Marissa can take the area next to you, and Jordan in that area—"

"And I'll take from there to there," Peter finished by gesturing to what would be his space.

Now that they had their assignments, they all turned away and walked towards the area they were to search. But, before they had even taken a second step, Jay turned back around.

"Wait. What does it look like?" she asked

"It's black with a hardcover, and is probably about this big." Jordan gestured with her hands to indicate a book several inches in width and length.

"So, we're looking for a dark-colored object that's only a few inches big, somewhere," Jay gestured all around her, "out here."

"Uh huh," Jordan was already walking away.

Jay came up on Marissa's side as they both walked to their adjacent areas.

"I told you we're not going to find this thing," Jay said, taking a look back over her shoulder.

"Let's just give it a try," Marissa said as she split off from Jay and went into the area she was assigned to.

They spent over an hour looking for the small book. Turning over rocks, going through the dead leaves and trying to think of places that would be a good hiding spot. Every once in a while, Jordan would stop searching and walk over to each of the others asking them about what they had found and where they had looked. Then she would look with them, going over places they had already searched, like someone who insisted on cleaning up the spots you missed even though you had just cleaned them.

"Did you look here?" she asked Marissa after she had walked over, putting her hands over and under a set of large roots that had protruded from the ground.

"Yeah, I did."

Jordan didn't answer, but still continued to examine the area.

"I can't believe we haven't found it yet," Jordan said, hands on her hips as she surveyed the ground below her. Marissa didn't say anything. She didn't know what to say.

Just then, Aaron yelled out.

"Hey! I found something."

Marissa was relieved. They could all stop searching now and go home. She was tired of this adventure, and frankly, she had exhausted all the places she could look.

They all jogged over to where Aaron was to see the journal he had found. But he wasn't holding a small black book. In his hand was a knife, the kind that people take with them while hiking or camping. The short blade folded over into its silver handle, making it easy and safe to carry around. It was dirty, but the blade itself looked fine. Aaron opened and closed it a few times and was clearly pleased with his find. Marissa thought it looked like nice equipment. Someone probably had been disappointed to lose that.

"Cool, huh?" he said as he held it up for everyone to see, this time with the blade out.

"Did you find the journal?" Jordan asked, uninterested in Aaron's discovery.

"No, I found this knife."

"Then why did you call us all over here?" Jordan asked, her voice rising slightly. Marissa was surprised to hear tones of irritation in her voice where there was usually tranquility.

"Sorry, I just got excited." Aaron closed the blade and let the knife fall into his pocket.

"Has anyone found anything?" Jordan looked around at the group. No one said anything.

"Then let's keep looking."

"Jordan, we don't have much time. The sun will set soon, and after that we'll have to make our way back because the light will be running out," Jay said.

Jordan stood for a minute not looking at anyone in the group, but looking out through the trees. She took in a breath and let it out.

"Okay, let's keep looking until then." Jordan walked back to her area with less speed than she had before. Her eyes were downcast and Marissa didn't think it was because she was intently searching. Marissa realized Jordan was beginning to give up, to resign herself to the fact that they wouldn't find Olivia's journal. That Olivia's final thoughts would never be known. Not by Jordan, not by anyone.

Marissa suddenly felt sad for Jordan's loss. She hadn't thought about it like this before. Jordan, out of everyone involved, was the one holding it together. But now, when she looked at her she saw someone small and young, not quite able to withstand this blow, like a shed in a tornado. For the first time, she could see Jordan's weakness. Not because of some character flaw, but simply because she was just like the rest of them. Jordan didn't really know what to make of this and her limited life experience didn't leave her with many options for figuring it out. She never seemed vulnerable like that before. Marissa had always thought she had it all figured out.

She watched Jordan crouch towards the ground, running her hand through a pile of leaves, but without much energy. Marissa walked to the area she had already searched and made a few half-hearted attempts to look around, but she now knew for certain what she had known since the beginning. The journal wasn't in her area or anyone's. It was never here in the first place.

Not long after, the daylight began to noticeably dim. They were clearly facing east as there was no sunset to watch, but still they all stood, or sat, for a few moments and watched the light disappear around them while looking out over the chasm between the two sides of the river. Marissa listened to the sound of the moving water and felt that it travelled through her own body, making her feel energetic and peaceful at the same time.

No one wanted to say the thing that they knew must be said. Until Jordan said it.

"I guess that's that. Let's go home."

CHAPTER 6

There was nothing left for them to do but start heading back. Jordan was the first to begin walking back into the trees. Her shoulders slumped a little as she walked this time, and her pace wasn't as quick. But before she could get too far Peter stepped in and told her that he could navigate them back. Jordan didn't argue and told Peter once again what landmarks he should look for. He took the lead while Jordan hung back this time. She looked tired.

Marissa watched the exchange between the two of them and instead of the usual annoyance she would feel when Peter did anything to make himself stand out, she suspected that he had actually done something kind. Either way, she felt confident that they would be led back to the trail safely. She hadn't bothered to remember the landmarks herself.

Dusk was still a little ways off, and she figured the daylight would hold out for them until they made it back to the trail. Marissa noticed the noise of the water fading, and was just a little sad. She thought to herself that she would have to come back here sometime. It was peaceful. She wondered why Olivia had never asked her to come along.

The lush green of the forest had faded in the dying light. The blossoming darkness had begun to conceal it, until it looked dark itself. The noises were different too. She wasn't sure how, but they had changed and she felt as if she walked through a different landscape than the one they had taken to get here. The distinction between the trees, shrubs, vines, rocks, and the tangled growth had begun to blur so that you couldn't tell the outline of anything, just that it was one big mass getting darker and darker. She should have felt relieved as they made their way closer to the exit, but instead a feeling of dread grew inside of her. They had left the sky and the wind and the water behind them, and it seemed that they had found themselves in a gray underworld, where the freshness of the breeze was replaced by the musty decay of plants and animals, and the freedom of the sky was replaced with the constraint of the solid earth around her. She was starting to feel just a bit chilly too.

No one was talking on the way back to the trail. Partly out of respect for Jordan's feelings and partly because they just wanted to go as quickly as possible. It took only a few minutes to reach the first landmark, the tree that was bent over in the middle. Marissa was glad for the quick pace as it meant the walk back to the car wouldn't take as long as their walk to the cliff. She didn't pay much attention to the environment around her, just her feet on the dead leaves below her.

Up ahead, Peter stopped for a moment and looked around. Marissa assumed he had found the next landmark. Shortly after, he moved on again and the others followed him. Two landmarks down, she thought. They would probably be back at the trail in less than fifteen minutes.

"Hey, Jordan," Peter called out, "you said the second landmark was the split tree, right?"

"What?" Jordan looked up for the first time since setting out.

"The split tree. Second marker, right?"

"Yeah." Her gaze went back down to her feet, then she looked up quickly. "Wait. You haven't seen it yet?"

"No."

"It shouldn't be far then. It's got to be right in front of us."

Jordan looked alert now as she walked just a little ways behind Peter. Her gaze no longer trailed the ground. She turned her head to look around her periodically.

Marissa was now alert to the trail, keeping her eyes peeled for any sign of the split tree. She no longer felt like just following. She couldn't be sure, because she hadn't really paid that much attention when they came out here, but she felt like there had only been three or four minutes walking distance between landmarks on the way here. They had passed the bent tree probably five or six minutes ago, and although that wasn't that far off from her estimate, she began to feel uneasy. It wasn't quite the feeling of butterflies in her stomach, but maybe of a few gnats.

They continued on. Peter still looked purposeful, his eyes looking straight ahead and his gait wide and smooth. Jordan's small frame moved quickly over the landscape, her eyesight darting through the trees. Marissa read the anxiety in her eyes, and those few gnats became butterflies in an instant. She glanced over at both Jay and Aaron, who also had their eyes on the woods in front of them. The light had faded considerably. They could still see fine, but soon they wouldn't be able to. They had overestimated how much daylight they had left.

Jordan stopped suddenly, which made the rest of them stop too. Peter had to turn around to see what had happened. Jordan put a hand up to her mouth before she spoke to the group.

"I made a mistake," she said, before pausing to think. "The second landmark isn't the split tree, it's the twisted tree." She looked up at Peter as if she expected him to be mad at her. Like a child waiting for a parent's reaction when she knows she has done something wrong.

They all stood around Jordan with their hands on their hips catching their breath. All eyes were on Peter.

For a moment it looked like he was about to get angry, and then the frustration fell from his face and he addressed Jordan.

"That's okay. We'll just have to back track a little ways to find it."

"Why don't we just keep going in the direction we're going? Even if we're off from the landmarks, we should hit the trail eventually," Aaron said.

"Not necessarily," Peter said, turning to look at Aaron. It was the first time they had directly addressed each other the whole evening.

"Sure we will. We walked straight down the trail until we turned off of it to the right. If we keep walking this direction we have to eventually see it. We've already come all this way and it's getting dark. I don't want to go back now." Marissa could see Jay nodding her head in agreement.

Jordan stood not saying anything, suddenly no longer the leader of the group. Marissa said nothing and watched the others.

Peter didn't seem to believe that they would inevitably make it to the trail if they kept walking this way, but apparently didn't have any better ideas.

"Jordan, do you think we'll reach the trail if we keep going?" Peter asked. Marissa caught the offended look on Aaron's face.

For once, Jordan didn't look like the authority, she looked like a kid. She stalled a moment, looking outwards in the direction they were facing.

"Yeah, most likely," she said.

Marissa heard the certainty go out of her voice. She didn't want to argue, but Jordan didn't sound so sure about where they were headed. It was probably best for them to go back and find that last landmark, even though that would put them even farther behind in the dark. She debated saying something to the group, but before she could get the words out Peter began walking.

"Alright, let's keep going then," Peter resumed his lead.

"Sorry guys," Jordan said, falling behind Peter again.

"Don't worry about it," Aaron said. "The trail has to be up ahead. We'll be fine." He flashed her his characteristic grin and the corners of Jordan's mouth turned up just a little.

Marissa's feet didn't immediately start moving again. She felt resistance, as if she was pushing herself against an invisible current. The others were all ahead of her now. She willed herself forward so she could catch up.

She stayed back this time, watching the others, not really knowing where it was they were going. She wanted to call out to Peter or to Jordan, but each time she looked at them and their confident strides she talked herself out of it.

Marissa walked backwards through her mind, trying to remember the way they got out here to see if this felt right to her. They definitely turned right off the trail, but then after that she didn't know. They could have walked in a straight line or in a circle and she wouldn't have known the difference. She had simply followed Jordan out here; she had no sense of the direction they had taken. At this point, she had no choice but to follow.

They walked on for another ten minutes or so, trampling over the same ground that had brought them to their destination, but this time it was different. This time it was dark.

The daylight slowly seeped from the forest, like someone sucking the last bit of soda through a straw. As their visibility decreased, their movements were still quick, but jerkier, not quite being able to see the branch that lay across their path or the rock that grabbed their sneakers as they moved over it. Marissa had never been in the woods at night before. At once she was surprised at how dark it was and how much she could still see. As her eyes adjusted, she thought she knew what Mooney must feel like as he prowled the house at night, walking through unlit rooms, his body becoming a part of the dark itself.

Soon enough, the light completely disappeared. It was night.

Peter whirled around. "We should have been there by now." His eyes scanned the woods around them. Everyone stopped, not knowing what to say. "This is too far. We've been walking now almost as long as the total time it took us to get to the river. We've got to change directions."

"Why are we stopping?" Aaron asked, gesturing impatiently. "It's dark and we have to get to the trail."

"This clearly isn't the way to the trail," Peter said, his voice rising. "We would have found it by now."

"Of course it's the way. What other way is there? We've walked straight out from the river. That's how we came out here. It's how we'll get back too," Aaron said.

"Then where is it? Where's the trail? You don't know what you're talking about."

Aaron started to move quickly towards Peter, but was stopped by Jay.

"Wait, let's just stop," Jay said. "We all have phones, don't we?"

"I left mine in the car," Aaron, Jordan and Marissa called out at the same time.

"I have mine," Peter called out, pulling it out of his pocket and holding it up to his face.

"Good thing a couple of us are responsible," Jay said as she pulled out hers.

"Never mind." It was Peter. "My battery's dead."

"My signal is low," Jay said, "but I'll try to call my dad."

"No offense, but what's your dad going to do?" Aaron asked. Marissa noticed an edge of irritation in his voice that wasn't usually there.

"He can call the police, maybe park management or something. I don't know. I don't know how they find lost people."

"We're not lost," Jordan and Aaron called out at the same time.

"We may not be lost, but we certainly don't know where we are. We can't be that far off the trail. If we can get someone out here, they can probably find us," Jay said.

"I still think if we keep walking a little ways we have to find it," Aaron said.

"Will you just shut up?" Peter said.

"Will both of you shut up?" Jay said as she placed the call to her dad. They all held their breath while she waited for him to pick up.

"Dad? Dad, it's me. Hey, I need—. Dammit, I lost him."

She called again, waited for him to pick up, and as soon as he did they were disconnected. Jay tried a couple more times with no luck.

"I've got no bars," she said, indicating the signal strength. Peter began pacing.

"So, we have no working phones, we don't know where we are, it's dark and the trail is nowhere to be found," Peter said, as he put his hands on his hips and turned to face the direction they had come from. When Marissa looked that way, all she could see were dark shapes. Even Peter himself was bathed in shadow, making the outline of his body look blurry.

Both Aaron and Peter spoke at the same time.

"We keep going forward."

"We've got to go back."

They looked at each other before they began to argue.

"Straight ahead is taking us nowhere. We should have turned back the minute we realized we missed the landmark," Peter began.

"So why didn't you?"

"Because you told us to keep going!" Peter gestured widely with his arms, his form still imposing even as it was overcome by the shadows.

"It was a suggestion, not an order. And anyways, we have to eventually hit something if we keep going this direction—the road, the trail, something. This is the direction we came from, it has to lead us back this way." Aaron got closer to Peter as he spoke.

"You keep saying that and you're wrong. We would have made it back already. I don't know where this way leads," Peter pointed, "but it's not the way that we want to go."

Marissa felt a chill on her arms and crossed them over her body. She watched Peter and Aaron square off and wished that someone would make a decision. Personally, she wanted to go back.

"We don't have many choices. I'm going back to find the last landmark with the girls. You can come with us, or keep going your way," Peter said.

"They haven't agreed to go with you," Aaron said. He looked at the three of them.

Peter turned to look at them also.

"I think it's better if we find the last landmark. At least then we'll have a familiar reference," Jordan said.

"I agree," Jay added.

Aaron looked at Marissa then and she knew he wanted her to come with him, not because he thought he was going in the right direction, but just to prove a point.

"I want to go back," she said.

Marissa could see the disappointment on Aaron's face even in the very dim light. She almost reconsidered, but hated the idea of walking farther into the unknown. At least backwards, they knew where they were going.

Peter looked at Aaron and shrugged, then turned around and began walking in the direction they had come from. Jordan and Jay followed. Marissa hesitated before walking again, wishing

that Aaron would come up beside her so she could make amends. But he stood still for a bit, looking behind him and then back up at the group as they walked away. He did not look at her. Marissa finally turned around and followed the others. She knew Aaron was behind her because she could hear his footsteps crunching the dead leaves.

The gray underworld of twenty minutes ago was now completely black. The only light came from the moon, which filled in the space between the trees just as the sunlight had earlier that day. But unlike the sun, which had illuminated their landscape, the moonlight served only to gently bathe each living thing so you could see its outline, but didn't really know where it began and where it ended. Shadows hung around everything, as if they were always there, simply made invisible by the sunlight during the day. Marissa felt that this was the way the forest was intended, the way that it actually was. They just hadn't been able to see it earlier.

The darkness had become another living organism, something that breathed and pulsed just like all other bits of life here. Marissa felt its eyes on her and imagined that it could see her as she passed through it. It penetrated all the way down to the cells of her body, filtering through their membranes, and filling them with its presence. She felt heavy, like she was dragging something along with her through the leaves, but this something was also familiar, something she had always known.

She watched the blurry outlines of her friends before her and felt comfort in their presence. Their pace was much slower now, as visibility had been severely lowered. But the noise they made seemed much louder to her. The crunch she would have heard earlier in the day now sounded like they were crashing through their environment. It was harsh to her ears, as if they were disturbing a peace that would have been there had they not been. But Marissa held onto it, glad for the noise and distraction. She had no idea how Peter was navigating and she wasn't going to ask.

She hadn't told either of her parents where she was going this afternoon. She had thought she would be back quickly. They probably weren't worried yet, but they would be soon when they tried to call her phone and there was no answer. Marissa rubbed her arms as the chill she felt earlier had turned into cold.

The group trudged along in silence, backtracking the way that they had come.

Marissa's mind wandered to what would happen if they couldn't find their way back tonight. She assumed that eventually someone would find them or they would come across hikers or campers. The park was relatively large for the area, but it wasn't huge. Maybe someone was already being sent to rescue them. She wondered if any of the others had told someone where they were going.

She looked up ahead and could see Peter and Jordan conferring with each other as they walked, their fingers pointing in different directions.

She knew it then. Knew it before any one of them said it out loud.

They weren't going to find the landmark.

The thought came to Marissa swiftly, out of nowhere. Maybe out of the darkness itself. She kept following Peter and Jordan, but the hope that they would find something familiar to put them back on their path was gone from her mind. Marissa had accepted the inevitable. In time, the others would too.

They had been walking now for another fifteen minutes or so and had not come across the landmark they were looking for. Every once in a while she could see Jay look at her phone to check the signal strength. Apparently, it still wasn't strong enough.

Marissa thought to herself as she walked, trying to keep her mind off of the increasing cold. After they missed the landmark, they had no reference for where they were, so each move they made was aimless. It had felt safer to keep going forward, but that had only led them farther away from anything they would recognize as familiar. Even now as they turned back towards the mark they had missed, they couldn't be sure they had picked the right direction. If they came across the landmark it would be pure luck, not navigational skills, for they had nothing from which to navigate.

Peter stopped suddenly, and so did the rest of the group. She saw Peter pick up a stick, or maybe it was a rock, and chuck it into the trees ahead of him. His anger disturbed her for a second, but then she realized he felt the same way that she did. She saw him sit down with his back against a thick trunked tree, his knees up and his muscular arms resting on top of them. He leaned his head back. She approached Peter, Jordan and Jay. She assumed Aaron was still behind her.

No one said anything for what seemed like way too long. Marissa broke the silence.

"We're lost."

Some distance away an owl hooted and Marissa felt the full strength of the cold descend upon her bare skin.

CHAPTER 7

"Marissa, are you cold?"

It was Peter who spoke. He was in the same spot where he had originally sat down, leaning back against a tree. The other members of the group had sat down near him, creating something of a campsite, if only they had any equipment with them.

She looked up at him and nodded. She didn't want to complain about her personal comfort given their circumstances, but she really was getting uncomfortable. Peter had on short sleeves too, so she wasn't sure what he was going to offer her. At the moment, however, she wouldn't have hesitated to cuddle up with him.

Before Peter could respond, Aaron spoke.

"Here, take this." He pulled his sweatshirt off and tossed it at her. He hadn't even looked at her since she had said she'd rather return to the landmark, so she was a little surprised that he was now offering her his source of warmth. She met his eyes and thanked him. His eyes smiled back at her in return.

She pulled the sweatshirt on and immediately felt better. She put the hood on too. It smelled just like him.

It had been several minutes since they stopped and except for the conversation about the sweatshirt, no one had said anything. The only sounds were of the forest. Insects buzzing and chirping, leaves rustled by the wind, nocturnal creatures going about their business. They could see one another, but just barely.

"So what are we going to do?" Marissa asked.

She looked around at the others, and at first they stared blankly back at her. Then Peter spoke.

"You all can do whatever you want, but I'm staying here. Someone will eventually find us. This place just isn't that big."

"Did anybody tell anyone where we were going?" Jay asked.

Marissa couldn't exactly tell, but it seemed like the others shook their heads in response. Either way, no one spoke, so she guessed that the answer was "no."

"So how will someone find us if no one knows where we are?" Jay continued.

"I don't know." Peter sounded exasperated, though Marissa couldn't make out his facial expression. "But I do know that we don't know the direction to walk. We've already proved that. So I'm going to sit here until someone finds us or until we can begin walking again, which won't happen until it's morning."

"So we're just going to sit here?" It was Jay again. Peter exploded.

"Yes! Do you have a better plan?"

Marissa thought she saw Jay shrink back for just a second, and then the tone in her voice became aggressive.

"You were the one who was leading us."

"I didn't hear anyone else offering to go first. Including you." Peter had lowered his voice, but the ice in it chilled Marissa more than the cold air.

Marissa saw Jay sit back again, no longer ready for battle. Apparently, she had no answer to Peter's last statement.

For a couple of moments they sat as before, silently listening to the night sounds. It seemed to Marissa that the matter was settled. They would stay right here until the morning. That was probably the best plan at this point, she thought to herself. She wondered what time it was. It

seemed like it was really late, but it was probably no later than eight o'clock. It was going to be a long time before they saw the sun rise.

"Guys, I'm sorry." Jordan's voice sounded small and frail as if it finally matched her physical body. Marissa realized then that so much of Jordan's persuasiveness was in her voice. There was something about it that made you obey, even if you didn't know what you were obedient to. It called you like a chime on a clock, luring you to the next hour. You couldn't ignore it, nor resist it, and the hours passed whether you wanted them to or not. When she had heard the notes of uncertainty in her voice earlier that evening, it was as if the low, peaceful chime had become a shrill bell, one that jarred you awake instead of lulling you to follow. Now, you could barely hear the chimes.

"It's not your fault. We all got lost together," Aaron said. He sat directly across from Jordan. Marissa recognized the genuine kindness in his voice, and was glad he was there.

"Speak for yourself." Peter stood up from his seat as he said this, still spitting icicles. "You were the one who told us to keep going forward after we missed the landmark."

"And you were the one who did it." Aaron remained seated.

Peter stopped suddenly and looked like he was about to say something, but as far as Marissa could tell he just glared at Aaron and then began pacing.

"Jay," it was Marissa who spoke, "you got through to your dad earlier on the phone. Does anyone know if our location could be traced through that?"

"I honestly don't know," Jay said, "but let's hope they can. Sooner or later one of our parents is going to realize that we haven't come home yet and they can't reach us. At least my dad will have heard my voice at some point."

"My parents will probably try your phone when they can't reach me, and then they'll try your dad," Marissa said.

"And my dad will do the same," Jay said. "He may have already tried after I called and we got disconnected."

"My parents won't." It was Peter. Marissa noticed that his voice was now softer. "They won't think anything of it. It will be morning before they think anything's wrong."

"Mine too," said Aaron.

"My parents are already worried," said Jordan. "I mean, I don't even drive. Where could I be?"

"Will they try one of us?" Jay asked.

"Not at first. Eventually," Jordan said, "I mean, if they hadn't heard from Olivia, they would have tried you guys, but I don't know that they'll think of that for me."

At the mention of Olivia, Marissa remembered the reason they came out here in the first place. She realized how worried Jordan's parents must be. They just lost a daughter a month ago, and now they can't find the other one. Marissa felt guilty about upsetting them.

She looked out into the dark trees. The noise of insects and small animals moving about was soothing in the same way that the noise of the TV might be soothing to someone trying to fall asleep. It let her know that everything was fine. She felt insulated by the dark, protected in a way. Even though her eyes couldn't tell her exactly what was out there, she felt that it couldn't get to her either. She felt perfectly fine relying on her ears and intuition to alert her of danger, and so far, it was all clear.

Aaron sat to her left about ten feet away. He was the farthest away from the other group members. Marissa glanced at him, but wasn't sure that he noticed. A moment later she heard footsteps in the leaves and then felt another warm body sit down close to her on the same rock.

"You should have told me it was you. I thought you might be a tiger," Marissa said.

"It is hard to see, isn't it? I've never been in the woods at night. Might be kind of cool if we weren't totally lost." Marissa could definitely see his smile this time.

"Thanks for your sweatshirt. I was freezing."

"No problem."

Neither of them could think of anything to say after this, and the chill seemed to feed the silence between them.

"Looks like Peter never got us back to the last landmark after all." Aaron's voice was rough. There was no trace of the kindness with which he had spoken to Jordan earlier. Marissa didn't quite know what to say to this. So she just said, "Yeah."

"I still think we should have kept moving forward," Aaron said.

"We didn't know where we were going. We had no idea what we would find in that direction," Marissa said, her voice a little sharper than she had intended.

"We sure didn't find anything in this direction."

"No, but at least this way we were looking for something specific, something we could actually find." Her patience was waning fast.

"All I'm saying is this way didn't work."

"No, it didn't. But I still think we made the right decision." Marissa realized after she had said it what this implied, but at the moment she didn't care.

"So Peter has better ideas than me?"

She wished that he would get up and leave the rock they were sitting on. She was tired of arguing and didn't have the energy to soften her words.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't need to." Aaron got up and left her sitting alone. The cold air replaced the spot where he had been, and she wished he hadn't gone. Aaron walked back over to the place he had been sitting previously and closed his eyes.

"If you have something to say about me, say it to me, not to her." It was Peter, who clearly had been listening. He had sat back down against the same tree, and was now looking directly at Aaron. Jay and Jordan were now looking at Aaron too.

Aaron, who's irritation was still fresh after his conversation with Marissa, must have been feeling bold. He stood up and turned towards Peter, taking the opportunity to tower over him while Peter sat on the ground.

"I said that you clearly didn't know where you were going, because now we are even more lost than before." His voice was loud and clear. Peter stood up.

"At least my idea was better than just 'keep walking.' And, anyways, the girls wanted to go with me, didn't they?"

"You brought us nowhere," Aaron said. "It doesn't matter if a whole army was following you. You were wrong."

Peter paused for just a moment and even in the dark Marissa could see a smirk appear on his face.

"And I guess you were wrong about your girlfriend. She apparently liked me better," he said, referencing Olivia. "And it looks like your new one likes me better too."

Aaron didn't hesitate. He rushed at Peter, tackling him to the ground. Marissa winced as Peter's head barely missed a rock. Before Peter could get up and while Aaron still had momentum, Aaron hit him in the face, which caused blood to come out of his nose. Aaron hit Peter a couple more times before Peter got his bearings and threw Aaron backwards. Peter didn't

waste time. He grabbed Aaron's shirt and pulled him up from the ground before he hit him. Aaron was propelled backwards, blood now appearing on his face.

Jay and Jordan jumped up from their seats as the boys started to fight. Both were yelling at them to stop, but kept a comfortable distance from the fracas. Startled, Marissa also jumped up, but stayed in the spot where she had been sitting and didn't say a word. She had the vague inclination to try and stop them, but ultimately decided she was staying out of it. She was surprised at the brutality with which they fought. They were both dirty and bloody.

Peter hit Aaron a few more times with Aaron managing to stay on his feet. Aaron, who now probably had a black eye as well as a bloodied mouth, lunged at Peter, throwing him to the ground one more time. He kicked him in the stomach and Peter curled up to brace himself. Aaron was about to kick him again, when he just stopped. He bent over, put his hands on his knees, and spit out the blood that was in his mouth before he walked away. Peter lay on the ground a moment longer, breathing hard and wiping the blood off his face with his hand. He got up slowly, with one hand still over his stomach and sat back down against the same tree he had been leaning against all night.

Sitting back down, Marissa didn't say anything to either of them, thinking they both deserved what they got. She felt an inclination to see if Aaron was alright, but decided against it, figuring that he probably didn't want to talk to her anyway. Jordan walked over to both of them to see if they needed help, but both boys waived her off, and sat in their respective places, bloody, sweaty and catching their breath. It was quiet again.

Jay and Jordan walked over to Marissa after it was clear that neither boy wanted their help. They sat down around her and began talking in whispered tones.

"I was sure that Aaron was going to die tonight," Jay said, looking from Aaron to Peter.

"Well, he looks awful, but I think he'll live," Marissa said.

"Peter doesn't look that great himself, frankly," Jordan added.

"I know. Aaron held his own better than I thought he would," Jay said.

"He seemed angry to begin with. What had you guys been talking about before that?" Jordan asked.

"He was upset I decided I decided to follow Peter back to the landmark, rather than go with him," Marissa said.

Jay shrugged. "There was no way I was going to keep going forward," she said, "no matter how much I like Aaron. We weren't going to find anything in that direction."

"That's what I thought too, but apparently he got angry about it," Marissa said.

"I'm still glad they're both with us though. Makes me feel safer," Jordan said.

"Neither of them have had any brilliant ideas tonight though. They probably got us more lost than we would have been on our own," Jay said.

Marissa wasn't sure if she was still annoyed by the conversation she had with Aaron, or if she was just plain irritated at their situation, but she suddenly felt aggressive.

"I haven't heard you offer any suggestions."

Jay stopped for a moment, caught off guard, and then fought back.

"That's because between those two I couldn't get a word in edgewise."

"I'm just saying, don't complain about where we've ended up when you didn't help to get us here."

"What was I supposed to do? Frankly, we never should have come out here in the first place."

"You were the first one to volunteer!"

They were not speaking so quietly now. Out of the corner of her eye, Marissa noticed Jordan's head lower momentarily. Even in her anger, she knew that this wasn't all Jordan's fault, and felt just a little guilty for making her feel bad.

"I haven't heard any great suggestions out of you either," Jay said, some of the fight going out of her voice.

"I also haven't been complaining the whole time."

Marissa thought she heard a mumbled "whatever" as Jay got up and walked away. But despite the end of the argument, Marissa still felt angry. Jordan started to speak, but Marissa cut her off.

"Jordan, I'm just going to try to sleep right now."

Jordan looked hurt, and appeared to want to say something else, but she got up and left Marissa alone.

Still in Aaron's sweatshirt, she lay down on the ground and put her head on the rock she had been sitting on. She closed her eyes. Jay was right, she hadn't said anything when she thought they were walking off in the wrong direction. She wished that she had. She had assumed that everyone else knew better than she did. But they had been just as clueless as she.

Marissa realized that every chance they had of finding their way out was missed. Nobody knew where they were. They had no working cell phones. The landmarks were not written down anywhere, they were going from Jordan's memory. And when they should have turned back, they kept going forward. This had been a night of total stupidity. And she felt the stupidest of them all. She wished again that she had voiced her discomfort with going forward. If they had gone back they probably could have found their way again easily. And she would be at home, rather than curled up on a rock.

They hadn't questioned Jordan once during this whole time. Not when she told them her idea, not when they searched for the journal, not while she navigated them through the woods. It hadn't felt necessary. She had seemed so sure of where she was going, what she was doing. And Marissa had been content to follow. And now, they had no idea where they were, Aaron and Peter were bloody, and she had just alienated herself from everyone except Peter.

And, they had nothing to show for it. They had not found the journal.

Marissa must have fallen asleep because when she opened her eyes next, the light looked different and the moon had shifted in the sky. She sat up just a little and looked at her companions. All asleep. She looked around and listened. Not for anything specific, just to take in her environment. She vaguely wondered why she had woken up, and then thought to herself that it must just be the physical discomfort of lying on the ground. She pulled Aaron's sweatshirt around her tighter, pulling her arms out of the sleeves and resting them in the main part of the sweatshirt. She instantly felt a bit warmer.

Just as she was about to close her eyes again, she looked out into the dark and caught two glowing orbs, seemingly suspended in midair. She sat up suddenly and they were gone. But she would have recognized those orbs anywhere. Those were what Mooney's eyes looked like in the dark. Sometimes at night, when she walked through the house, she would see him in a darkened room and his eyes would glow back at her. In those moments, it was easy to forget that he was her little furry pal. She could imagine that maybe he had become something different. The eyes of the darkness itself, looking through her.

She looked around again for the pair of eyes, but didn't see them. The leaves rustled loudly and, at the moment, there was no wind. She became aware of her heart beating and felt her body energized. She stayed very still.

"Guys?" No one moved.

"Guys?" She said it again louder, this time getting Peter to stir. He looked at her, squinting his eyes. "What?"

"I think there's something out there."

CHAPTER 8

"Where?" Peter sat up, wide awake.

"Over there," Marissa pointed in the direction she had seen the suspended orbs.

She saw Peter look in that direction, still sitting, straining his eyes in order to see anything that might be out there. He must not have seen anything, because he stood up and walked a little closer to the place where Marissa had pointed.

"What did you see exactly?" Peter asked.

"Two eyes," Marissa said.

Peter turned around quickly as if that hadn't been the answer he was expecting.

"How big?"

"Like a cat's eyes. They were glowing."

He looked around another moment, then became satisfied that nothing was there.

"Whatever it was, it's not there now," he said, and went to sit back down by his tree.

"What's going on?" It was Jordan, she had woken up.

"Nothing," Peter said. "Marissa thought she saw something out in the woods."

"What did you see?" Jordan asked.

"Eyes."

"Eyes?"

"Yeah, like a cat's eyes. Over there. Then I heard the leaves rustling."

"Loudly? Or like the wind had moved them?" Peter asked.

Marissa hesitated. "I'm not sure, exactly. I don't think it was the wind. It sounded like something running through them."

"I think I see them." Jordan pointed across from her, to the right of where Aaron was still sleeping.

"Where?" Peter jumped up to get closer. As he did so, the noise of leaves and brush being disturbed got louder.

"Was that you?" Jordan asked Peter, referencing the noise.

"I don't know," he said.

"Stay still," Jordan said, and Peter stood like a statue.

The three teenagers listened intently as they heard the leaves rustle once more, seemingly in one place and then in another, like surround sound.

"What are you guys doing?" Jay had woken up.

"Shhhhh," all three of them said at once, their ears straining for the smallest sound.

There were no other sounds at the moment save for the buzzing and chirping of insects. Marissa felt the wind against her face, then heard the leaves blowing around her.

Peter sat back down and for the moment the panic had passed. Aaron had now also woken up, and they filled him and Jay in on what Marissa had seen.

"It was probably nothing," Peter said.

They all sat still and silent, with the logic of a child who pulls the blankets up over his head to protect himself from the monster in the closet.

"Wait," it was Jay. "There they are." She had jumped up to get a closer look, but before she could get too far Peter jumped ahead of her.

"Where? I don't see them." He looked around frantically, searching for the eyes that he could not see. "Are you sure you saw them?"

"I think so. They were just like Marissa described."

The wind picked up again and they heard the leaves rustle. Marissa imagined those two little eyes, making their way through the brush, hiding where they could, ready to pop back out at any moment. Circling them. Seeing them better than they could see it.

Marissa jumped as she heard a flapping sound, like cloth being beat against a hard surface. She looked up and to her right, but couldn't see anything.

"What was that?" Jay asked, temporarily distracted from the eyes and the leaves.

"Sounded like birds or something," Peter said.

"No, not birds, not at this time of night," Jordan said. "Bats, maybe?"

No one replied. Marissa felt a shiver of disgust go up her spine as she thought of the winged creatures. Sometimes while sitting out on her patio at dusk she saw bats flying back and forth between the trees. It wasn't the same as watching birds fly back and forth though, the bats were different. Dirtier, uglier, nastier. She shuddered again, and wondered what else was creeping around here. Marissa swore she felt the sensation of little legs walking themselves all over her body, and every now and then used her hand to brush away some invisible creature which she knew must be there, but which wasn't.

Suddenly, the leaves rustled again, and this time, Marissa didn't feel the wind on her face.

The noise stopped quickly. The group was frozen, not wanting to move a muscle. Fear had taped their mouths shut, cutting off their voices by force, and bound their bodies with the rope of sheer terror.

"It must have gone," said Peter. He didn't sit back down right away.

Marissa saw him begin rummaging around, feeling for something. Finally, he picked up what she thought was a small branch that had fallen off a nearby tree. He held it by his side knowing he might have to use it, but otherwise was completely still.

It was silent once again. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, Marissa heard a new sound.

It sounded like something cracking.

Marissa sat as still as she could while she listened to the creaking and straining, until finally, there was a definitive snap and something heavy hit the forest floor with a thud.

They didn't know what it was. And they didn't wait to find out.

Marissa felt her body propelled off the cold ground and flung forward into the darkness. She knew that the others had taken off too, simply because of the cacophony around her. She couldn't see much, but the noise was deafening.

She couldn't really run through the forest at this time of night, but moved as fast as the obstacles in her path would allow, occasionally tripping over something or almost running head first into a tree. Slender branches from trees and bushes scratched at her skin and caught on her clothes, slowing her down even more. They would have been completely harmless during the day, but in the darkness they held her back.

The world around her became a dark blur consisting of things that were gray, black and blacker. She didn't know what she was running towards and didn't really care. She just knew that she needed to get away and get away fast.

Finally, Marissa felt her body get tired and her breathing increase until it was uncomfortable and realized that she was slowing down. She didn't want to slow down. She didn't want to face what she had left behind if it caught up to her. Although she didn't even know what she had left behind. It was just a sound really. Something she couldn't see. Something without a body or a tangible form. Still, she didn't want to know what it was.

Marissa reached her limit. She stopped suddenly, bending over and putting her hands on her knees. She thought to herself that Peter and Jay had probably been able to run much farther, and she envied them for that.

As her body began to recover she realized what they had done. They were separated. And she was alone.

She could hear sounds. What might be the others running away too, but she didn't know. She couldn't trust her senses. She couldn't see anything to begin with, and now she didn't understand the sounds she was hearing. Couldn't attribute them to anything. She thought she heard a yell, whether it was a cry for help or just the excited outcry of running into one of the other group members, she didn't know. Marissa hoped that one of them would find her, so she wouldn't have to go back out and look for them.

She listened again, and could still hear the sound of leaves and shrubs being disturbed and possibly voices, but maybe it was something else. She wanted to yell out, but was scared that whatever was out there might hear her and find her before the others did. She desperately wanted someone to know where she was, but didn't want to draw any attention to herself.

Finally, she sat down where she was and began to cry. The tears felt so warm sliding down her face.

She sat there for a moment curled around her bent knees and didn't think a thought. Just sat, alone in the dark, waiting to be rescued. Or if not rescued, to disintegrate on the spot so she could become a part of the forest itself. At least then she wouldn't be lost. At least then she wouldn't be by herself.

She turned her gaze upwards and searched for the moon. She didn't have to look far; it was right above her. It was almost full, but not quite, like someone had sliced a part of it away. It glowed steadily, reflecting the light of the now hidden sun, and directed it downwards towards the forest floor. Towards where she was sitting. She was grateful.

Strangely, her fear began to melt, like an ice cream cone on a hot day. But instead of trying to lick up the melted ice cream from around the rim of the cone, she just let it drip to the ground. Just let it drip.

When she looked back down again, she heard the same sounds, saw the same nothingness, but didn't fight them.

There could be something out there, certainly. But probably not, probably it was just her and the trees, and the wind and the bats and the leaves. If it was daylight she would know that, and even though she would still be uncomfortable not knowing where she was, she would know what was around her. It was no different now, those things were still there, only she couldn't see them, she just had to know that they were there. That nothing had really changed.

She wiped the tears away from her face with the sleeve of Aaron's sweatshirt and reminded herself that she would need to wash this before she gave it back to him.

Then she heard the noise again. The same rustling that they heard before. Only this sounded like something bigger. Its footsteps heavier on the ground, dragging a little differently through the leaves.

She didn't immediately know what to do, just sat there listening. Then, summoning her courage, she looked around her for something to protect herself with and her hand landed on a large rock. She picked it up, feeling its jagged edges and liked how heavy it felt in her hands. It was cool to the touch.

Curiosity mingled with fear, and she stood awaiting her fate, wondering what was coming at her through the dark. She braced herself for whatever it might be.

It was closer now, much closer. She could just see the outline of this creature. It appeared to be upright.

"Marissa?"

She dropped the rock and walked directly towards the creature that had been walking towards her.

It was Aaron.

Without saying a word, she put her arms around his torso, pulling her body into contact with his. His arms went over hers and wrapped around her back, embracing her tightly. She felt his chest move air in and out of his lungs, and for the first time in hours she felt warm.

As they released each other, she stepped back so she could see his face.

"Where are the others?"

"I don't know. I was with them at first, but when I realized you weren't with us, I went looking for you."

"Are they together?"

"I think so. You took off the fastest when we heard that noise. The rest of us were closer together."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"I didn't. I just went in the direction that I thought I heard you go. I didn't realize that I was so close to you, but then I heard you crying."

Marissa paused here. She wasn't sure if Aaron noticed her hesitation.

"Wow. Thanks."

"You're welcome. I didn't want you to be alone."

"If you hadn't found me, you'd have been alone too."

"True. I didn't really think about that."

They heard an owl hoot, and stood for minute listening to the noise reverberate through the forest.

"Well, what do we do now?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Maybe we should just stay here."

"We could, but there's only two of us now. We might not be very protected. I feel like we should keep going."

Marissa looked at him then, but he probably couldn't see her expression very well.

"I know. I know," he said, acknowledging his earlier attempts to keep the group walking. "If you really think it's a bad idea we can stay right here, but something tells me that we should keep walking."

Marissa felt intuitively that he was right, even though her brain told her this was probably the more dangerous option.

"Okay, let's keep going," she said. She swore she could see him smile broadly, even in the dark.

"So here's what I was thinking. We walked up a hill to get to the river originally, right?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"The ground slopes up over there," he pointed. "I wonder if that would take us towards the river."

Marissa looked in the direction he pointed and paused a moment. She hadn't thought of this and was impressed that he had picked up on it.

"I think it's worth a try. Let's do it."

"Good. And on the brightside, we can't get any more lost than we already are." She thought she saw him smile again.

"You better be careful, those may be your famous last words."

"You mean when they do the TV show about us?"

"Yeah. Let's hope we're around to watch it."

They had been walking for about ten minutes when Marissa began to wonder what time it was. She didn't wear a watch herself and she wondered if Aaron had one on. She hadn't noticed previously.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Almost one." Apparently, he did have a watch on.

"Wow. I didn't realize it was that late."

Ever since it had gotten dark, time seemed to move at its own pace, or maybe not at all. She couldn't tell. In fact, until they saw daylight again, time didn't mean much to them. 12:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m. or 4:30 a.m. were no different from each other. It was still dark and they still didn't know where they were.

"Tired?" Aaron asked, making eye contact. They walked side by side as much as they could.

"God, no. I'm wide awake." They both laughed at this.

"Yeah, me too."

Suddenly, Marissa remembered that the last time the two of them had spoken, they had argued. It had slipped her mind with all of the previous excitement. Now that she remembered, she felt tense.

She glanced at Aaron and even in the dark could see his eye had swelled and bruised where Peter had hit him. It made him look different, but not unattractive. Something that she had always been able to see had left his face, although she wouldn't have been able to describe it in words. He looked older, maybe.

"Nice black eye, by the way." She smiled as she said this.

Aaron laughed a little. "Yeah, thanks," he said as he brought the tips of his fingers to his swollen eye. "Guess it looks pretty bad, huh?"

"Peter didn't look so great either."

He looked like he was about to say something but held himself back instead. He walked straight ahead, still focused on the path ahead of them. Finally he spoke.

"Sorry about earlier. Back when we were sitting down." He looked straight ahead.

"That's okay. I was stressed, I figured you were too."

Though there wasn't exactly a pause in their conversation, Marissa sensed a gap. Something that needed to be hurdled. Aaron jumped.

"Do you wish you were with Peter and the other girls right now?" He looked at her this time, if only for a moment. She looked back at him directly, even if he couldn't exactly see her eyes.

"No. I'm glad I'm with you."

At this, the air between them cleared and the tension she had felt subsided. They walked along a little way, almost leisurely, as if they were taking a Sunday stroll and not lost in the forest in the middle of the night.

"So here we are, lost in the woods," Aaron said.

"Yes, indeed we are," Marissa said.

"What did you think when we realized we didn't know where we were?"

"I've never quite felt that way before, although it reminded me of the time I thought I had lost my purse. For a few moments, I felt like I had lost my whole life. My phone, my credit cards, cash, ID, my favorite lip gloss. It was like when your stomach seems to drop out of your body, like when you're on a roller coaster. Were you scared?"

Aaron didn't answer right away.

"Yeah." He laughed. Marissa laughed too. Aaron continued.

"But I was thinking ... Are we really lost?"

Marissa was surprised to hear him get philosophical.

"I mean, okay, we don't know where we are, it's dark, and everywhere we look is the same tree practically, but that doesn't mean we're lost, right? It just means we have to find our way again. If we wait a little bit and the sun comes up, which we know it will, things will look different, we may be able to see something that we couldn't before. In fact, for all we know we're ten feet off the trail. It's just that we can't tell. We can't stay lost forever. We're still here somewhere, we just don't know where, but when we figure that out, we'll be found again. Right?"

Marissa chuckled at this, not knowing exactly what to say.

"What? I'm serious," Aaron said, laughing a little himself.

"I know. That's what's funny." She paused before continuing. "It makes sense, though."

As she said this, something bright caught her eye. It flickered between the trees a short distance away, and suddenly she realized it must be fire. Although her eye was drawn to it and her brain told her this was their chance at rescue, she immediately felt that this fire was not telling them to come closer, but telling them to stay away.

"Do you see that?"

They both stopped and Aaron looked in the direction she was looking.

"It looks like fire."

They looked at each other then. Marissa almost said that she thought they shouldn't go towards it, but couldn't get the words out.

"Let's go check it out," Aaron said. Excited, he began jogging through the brush and around trees. Marissa followed.

They could hear voices now. Speaking quietly in low tones. Marissa figured they must be campers. But the thought didn't feel right to her. It was the middle of the night and they were in the middle of the forest. There was no one else around except her and Aaron and these people. And yet, she continued on.

She could now see two male figures, illuminated by the fire light, sitting across from each other around the fire.

"Hey!" Aaron called out. The men must have heard them, because one of them stood up, then looked down at the other to discuss something.

"Hello there?" the man standing called out.

Marissa and Aaron finished walking the rest of the way towards the fire and finally stepped into its light.

Marissa immediately wished they hadn't.

CHAPTER 9

The two men in front of them were not much older than they were. Maybe five or six years. The man who had called out to Aaron was still standing. The clothes he wore were dirty, not in an unkempt way but in the way that made Marissa think he had been outside working. Maybe they were hunters, she thought. Everything he wore looked like it was a little too big for his thin frame. The bottle he held in his left hand contained an amber colored liquid.

His friend still sat on the ground. The baseball hat he wore was tilted back on his head and cocked a little to the side. Underneath its brim, Marissa could see beads of sweat on his forehead that were out of place on this chilly night. Every so often he adjusted his hat, but mostly just stared into the fire.

"Hey there. What are you all doing out here?" The skinny one extended his free hand to Aaron.

"Boy, are we glad we found you guys," Aaron said while accepting the man's hand. "We went off the trail a while back this evening and got lost out here. We've been walking around for hours. Do you guys know how to get back to the trail or the road?"

The skinny man looked at his friend, who still stared off into the fire, before answering Aaron.

"Well, yeah. We can show you the way we came in here, but, to be honest, I don't think I could find it until there's some light. But, you all are welcome to hang out with us here until then, right Travis?"

Travis nodded his head but didn't say anything. Marissa thought he looked sick.

"My name is Jake, by the way." He drank from the bottle he was holding and offered some to Aaron, which Aaron declined.

"My name is Aaron, and this is Marissa." Jake looked at her while extending his hand. She felt his eyes running the length of her body before coming back up to meet her face. He smiled at her, but she didn't find him very friendly. His hand felt clammy against hers.

"Travis, aren't you going to say hello?" Jake asked.

Travis waved hello to both of them, but didn't bother to get up or make eye contact.

"Don't mind Travis, he's just not feeling that well." Marissa noticed that Travis also had a bottle with him, but his was almost empty.

"So what are you guys doing out here?" Aaron asked.

"Oh, well ...," Jake began, looking at Travis. This time Travis looked back at him and held his gaze for a minute before looking back to the fire. "Actually, we're out here hunting. Can't say we did that well today," he smiled then, indicating they hadn't been able to catch anything, "but, you know, it's just for fun anyways."

"Cool," Aaron responded.

"You ever been hunting?" Jake asked him. Aaron replied that he hadn't and the two men began talking.

Marissa didn't really hear the rest of their conversation. Her eyes began wandering around the campsite.

They had built their fire in the middle of a small clearing. Travis sat on a large branch that at some point or another had fallen from one of the trees. Marissa sat the closest to him on the ground with Aaron next to her. Jake sat opposite of Travis and leaned himself up against a tree.

They didn't seem to have much equipment with them, not even a tent. She noticed two backpacks laying close to the fire and a couple more empty bottles and that was it. Her eyes

scanned the rest of the area looking for any hunting equipment or other supplies they may have brought with them when she noticed a black trash bag laying approximately fifteen feet from the fire. Its contents were lumpy, making the black plastic stick out in various places. She wondered if that's where their hunting equipment was. She thought it odd that they didn't have a tent or any food.

The fire they had built warmed the air around them considerably, taking the chill off the night air. It illuminated the area around them so that for the first time in hours, things seemed to have an actual shape, not just a wispy silhouette. The shadows, however, had grown in numbers. They switched and flickered against the trees and the earth, dancing to the rhythm of the fire. A colony of creatures who were at home in the night, living in the nooks and crevices of every tree, every shrub, every rock. Marissa felt outnumbered.

She turned her attention back to the conversation that Aaron and Jake were having, but felt no urge to jump in. She looked over at Travis who also clearly felt no urge to jump in. She was surprised when he finally spoke.

"Hey, Jake," Travis said, "what do you think Dan's doing right now?" He looked up slowly across the fire at his friend, took his hat off and placed it back in the same position again. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open.

The conversation stopped abruptly as the three of them turned to look at Travis. Marissa caught the look in Jake's eye, the content of which Aaron and Marissa were clearly not privy to.

"How would I know what Dan's doing now? He's not here, is he? And don't be rude, our guests don't know who Dan is and you blurting out questions about his whereabouts makes you seem drunker than you really are."

Travis wiped his hand across his brow and looked like he wanted to cry. He didn't look at Jake as he answered him.

"I was just thinking about him, is all. Just wondering what he was doing."

Jake shook his head as he turned his attention back to Aaron. Marissa saw Travis sip the last bit of liquid from his bottle, quiet again for the moment.

"Sorry about that," Jake said. "Our other friend Dan was supposed to come with us today, but he wasn't able to make it. So, what about your story? How did you get out here in the first place?"

Marissa and Aaron looked at each other, silently asking the other who wanted to speak first. Marissa didn't feel like talking. Aaron began telling Jake the story and Marissa sat quietly, sometimes listening and sometimes just thinking her own thoughts. Finally, her attention was brought back to the fire by Jake.

"You've been about as quiet as Travis tonight," he said, speaking to Marissa.

"I sure hope I look better than him though," she said, making a joke but feeling no urge to laugh.

"That you surely do," Jake said, appraising her once more. Marissa pulled her knees in towards her chest and wrapped her arms around them while keeping her eyes on him. He continued.

"Travis is just upset we didn't have a successful day." Marissa glanced over at Travis as Jake said this and watched him adjust his hat again. "He doesn't take disappointment well."

"Are you sure he's okay? He doesn't look that good," Aaron said, while eyeing Travis who made no indication he had heard them talking about him.

"Well, like I said, I'm not sure I could find the way back in the dark and Travis certainly wouldn't be any help. Anyway, he's fine."

Travis looked angry at this, and raised his eyes from the fire to look across at Jake.

"Jake's lying." His speech slurred as he spoke.

"Lying about what?" Jake's tone was aggressive.

Marissa was perfectly still as she watched the exchange between the two men. She moved only her eyes as she looked back and forth between them.

"Dan's here," Travis said. "He's over there." Travis pointed off to his right into the forest, having trouble holding his hand steady. Who he spoke to was unclear, but he had suddenly become a lot more talkative.

"There's nothing over there," Jake said as he leaned his body forward towards the fire while speaking a little louder than was necessary. "Where's Dan, Travis? Show me where." He laughed at this.

"You'll have to excuse him," Jake said to Marissa and Aaron, "he's stupid even when he's not drunk." He laughed again.

Jake stood up and began pacing around the fire. He fumbled around in one of the bags and found a pack of cigarettes, took one out and lit it.

"Those are my cigarettes," Travis said.

Jake ignored him and began smoking.

Marissa happened to look over then at the trash bag and noticed something that she hadn't seen before.

At first she thought it was just a trick of the light that was making the shadows appear to grow and recede, but then she realized that there was a shadow underneath the bag growing steadily. She looked at it for a moment, but couldn't figure out what it was, if it was even anything. Suddenly she realized that what she was looking at was not a shadow created by the firelight, but some kind of liquid pooling underneath the bag.

And just as suddenly, she finally understood why Dan hadn't been able to make it tonight.

She didn't want to move. Jake was still pacing and smoking and Travis was now sitting with his head down resting on his arms that were supported by his bent knees. Aaron was looking down at the ground kicking a pebble around with his shoe when Marissa nudged him. He caught her eye and she looked in the direction of the leaking bag, and mouthed the word "Dan." She hoped he understood what she was saying.

Aaron looked over at the trash bag and immediately a sort of quiet shock came over his face, which no one would have seen unless watching closely. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it, and she knew that he understood what was in that bag. Marissa wasn't sure what they were going to do next, but suddenly Aaron was up on his feet brushing himself off and looking just a bit too casual.

"Hey guys, thanks a lot for letting us hang out a while, but we need to get moving. We're going to try and find the trail so we can get back home. Thanks again." He moved towards Jake and held out his hand. Jake looked back at Aaron for a long moment.

"No," Jake said. "I want to tell you a story first."

"Look, we've really got to go." Aaron reached out his hand towards Marissa to help her up from the ground, but before he was successful in pulling her up, Jake was in front of him with the reason why Aaron and Marissa could not leave.

He held a large knife in his hand, which Marissa would have referred to as a hunting knife, as it certainly wasn't from the kitchen. The serrated blade pressed against Aaron's throat, and though no blood was drawn, Marissa could see the indentation it made in Aaron's skin. Marissa heard Travis start to cry.

"I think you should listen to my story first," Jake said as he pulled the knife back.

Aaron sat back down close to Marissa and put his hands into his pockets. Marissa looked over at the bag again and noticed that the growing pool had begun to run down the shallow incline that lay between the fire and the bag.

Jake threw his cigarette butt into the fire after he was finished and Marissa watched the filter burn as he began his story.

"So, there were three guys who had been buddies a long time. And they decided to put together a little hunting trip." He paused then and squatted to the ground picking up some of the bottles strewn about, looking for one that was not empty. He didn't find one.

"The thing about these guys was that—let's just say they had made a deal with each other. Now I'm not going to go into all the details, but the problem was that one of the guys didn't hold up his end of the bargain, and the other two guys weren't real happy."

Marissa felt Aaron fiddling with something in his pocket, although his facial expression remained perfectly cool. She could no longer hear Travis's sobs and thought he may have passed out, his head still resting on his arms. The stream of liquid had traveled a little farther down the hill, leaving no doubt that this wasn't just an illusion of the dark.

"Well anyways, the other two guys thought they might be able to," he paused here finding the words he wanted to use, "resolve the conflict. So they gathered their things for the hunting trip and went out to the woods. Travis, should I finish the story or do you want to?" Travis didn't even look up. "Okay, I will then." Jake stumbled a little as he walked around the fire, still pacing.

"Where was I?" he mumbled to himself looking off into the woods to find his train of thought again. "Oh, right, so the three guys, they started off on their hunting trip. The day started off pretty well, with everybody having a good time. They weren't able to kill anything, but it didn't really matter."

The stream of liquid had moved farther still down the slope to the point where it would reach Jake's feet soon if he stepped in the right place. She watched Aaron's eyes glance at the trash bag when Jake wasn't looking, but still he had no emotions on his face.

"So, it was getting late in the day, about time to pack up and go home, when the two guys thought it would be a good time to bring up the issue at hand." He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped and looked at Travis. "Travis, I really think you should tell the rest of the story." Travis gazed up at Jake with his eyes barely open. Marissa wasn't sure he could speak a single word much less end the story. He mumbled something at Jake that they didn't understand.

"What?" Jake yelled back. "Travis, I can't hear a word you're saying." Travis mumbled something again and Jake looked disgusted.

"Well, it looks like Travis isn't going to be able to tell us the end of the story. But, you guys are smart kids. I could tell that just looking at you. And I bet you all already know the ending to this story. Oh hell, I'm not going to pretend anymore, the two guys in the story, that was Travis and me. That part you probably figured out. And the other guy, that was Dan, you probably figured that out too since Travis couldn't keep his mouth shut." His voice rose as he said this.

"Dan actually did make it out with us today, but he's just not going to be making it home again. You know what? Travis, since you were so eager to tell Aaron and Marissa where Dan was, why don't you tell them now?"

Travis shook his head, still with his face down. The sobs got a little louder.

"C'mon. You were going to tell them earlier tonight where Dan was, why don't you tell them now? Tell them where Dan is, Travis, go on."

The bloody stream had finally reached the fire and Jake, as he came back around the fire, unknowingly stepped in it, covering the sole of his shoe in red. He stood there looking at Travis, unaware of what he had just done.

"You were so talkative earlier tonight, Travis. Where's Dan?" Travis lifted his red face up from his knees and just pointed at Jake's shoe.

"You're pointing at me, stupid. I'm not Dan." Travis cried some more as he kept pointing. Jake finally looked down at his shoe, and his facial expression looked almost compassionate for a moment as he lifted his foot in front of him to see the bottom of his shoe.

"Yep, that's Dan." His eyes followed the stream back up to the trash bag. "Grown men don't fit very well in trash bags."

Marissa was only horrified a moment before Jake went to step backwards and instead stumbled into the tree he had been leaning against earlier.

Aaron seized the opportunity. He sprang up from the ground, and in his right hand was the silver knife he had found earlier. He lunged at Jake, catching him with the blade near his rib cage and slicing upwards. Marissa heard Jake yell as she jumped from the ground ready to run. Aaron looked behind him towards Marissa to see that she had gotten up and when he was satisfied that she was behind him pushed Jake out of the way so they could run past him.

She was running through the dark again, with enough of Aaron in front of her to see her way through the trees. She hadn't seen where Jake had fallen as they rushed by him but from the sound of the screams behind them she thought he may have fallen into the fire. Even after all they had seen and heard she hoped that Travis had the ability to pull him out, although from what they had seen of him tonight she didn't know if he could.

The darkness whooshed by her, touching her on all sides as she ran. She didn't feel it when her legs began to get tired and her breathing became hard and fast, she just wanted to get away. Every emotion she hadn't felt while sitting around that fire came to her now in one lump, so that she couldn't tell the difference between fear and horror and sadness. She just wanted to get away.

Aaron stopped suddenly in front of her, and bent over to catch his breath. They were stopped just a few seconds before he grabbed her shoulders directing her onwards again, this time with her a little in front of him. Though they had slowed, they did not walk, but jogged steadily through the forest.

They continued moving up the same slope they had been climbing before they met Jake and Travis. The trees thinned a little in this part and as Marissa looked up between them she could see the moon again. The light filled the open spaces, illuminating what earlier in the night would have been hidden. She was glad for it.

Finally, out of breath and out of energy, they both stopped. With her hands on her hips, Marissa gazed at the moon, feeling like they had found something that would guide them out of here. Aaron leaned against a tree, head back and eyes closed. The silver knife was still in his hand.

He looked at the blood that covered the blade, then crouched to the ground to wipe it off on the earth. He folded it shut and put it back into his pocket.

"Are you okay?" he asked Marissa.

"Yeah," she said quickly, nodding. As her breathing returned to normal, she heard a familiar sound. Water.

"Do you hear that?" she asked Aaron. He perked up.

They took off again, this time without the urgency that danger brings but with the speed that occurs when something you want is within your reach. They hadn't realized how close they were.

They stepped out from behind the trees and looked out onto a similar clearing to the one they had searched earlier this evening.

They were higher above the river than before. And the water rushed by quicker in this place.

Aaron walked not quite to the edge where the land dropped off and sat down, knees bent with arms resting on them. Marissa started to walk over to him, but noticed that he had hung his head and had started to cry. She lay down on the ground where she was and left him alone.

She looked up at the sky, and let her feet and arms splay to her sides, feeling the stability of the ground beneath her. She suddenly felt very tired. She closed her eyes, surrendering to her sleepiness and felt perfectly safe laying out in the open, somewhere between the sky and the river and the earth.

Before she drifted off, she heard Aaron get up and walk over to her. He lay down on his back next to her, and although they weren't touching she felt his presence. They both fell asleep under the moon.

CHAPTER 10

Marissa opened her eyes, surprised to find it still dark. This was the night that would never end.

As she stared upwards, it felt as if she were being drawn towards the sky. Or maybe she was already there, a star burning in the night. As she let her sleep wear off, her awareness deepened and she looked at her surroundings.

She propped herself up on her elbows. Aaron still slept beside her, and looked like he wouldn't wake anytime soon. She could hear the river rushing by below them, but couldn't see it because of the drop off. She decided to take a look.

She got up, brushed herself off and walked to the edge of the land. They were high up, higher than before, and just as she felt drawn upwards a few minutes ago, she now felt drawn downwards towards the rushing water. She knew that somewhere the river met the road and it irritated her to feel that this way was blocked to them. The clearest path to their rescue was not accessible. She resigned herself to this fact and sat down on the ground still at the edge.

On the other side all she could see were more trees, thick in their placement so you couldn't see between them. She thought about the old expression then, you can't see the forest for the trees, and thought that the opposite applied to her, you can't see the trees for the forest. She watched the river wind its way through the space it had carved between the land and watched it disappear around a bend. Even though she couldn't see it past that point, she knew that it still existed beyond what her eyes could see, and was comforted by that.

She sat watching for a while, not thinking about much of anything, until she heard footsteps behind her and knew that Aaron had woken up.

"Don't jump," he said, with his familiar grin. Marissa smiled back.

"I guess we made it to the river," she said.

"Yeah, and we're about fifty feet too high," he replied, and both of them laughed.

He sat down beside her on the grass and leaned back on his hands. The breeze swept his hair back off of his face. They didn't speak for a few moments, watching the water rush by, looking over to the other cliff at the trees. Marissa almost asked Aaron what time it was, and then decided she didn't care. She knew it must be getting light soon anyway, the night didn't last forever, and for as long as they had been walking and running and sleeping, it must have been almost over.

"Thanks for getting us out of trouble back there," Marissa said, watching the wind blow his hair back again.

"Of course," he said, "we had to get away. I couldn't think of anything else to do." He didn't look at her as he said this, but out at the other cliff. A minute went by and he spoke again. "Do you think he died?"

She didn't know what to say, so she just said what she felt. "Maybe. Travis would have had to help him, and I don't know that he was able." She looked over at him then but he still stared straight ahead. She looked over to the other side herself, back into the darkness. She moved towards him then, not for his comfort, but for hers. He slid his arm around her as she leaned on him.

His warm body felt good in the breeze, even though it was already a little warmer than it had been in the night. She had no real need for his sweatshirt now, so she pulled herself up for a moment to lift it over her head and off of her body, then resumed her position next to him.

"Thanks," she said handing the shirt back to him. He took it from her and put it to his side.

"No problem."

Their eyes met, and instead of turning their attention right back to the water or to the trees, they kept it on each other. Marissa wasn't aware of getting closer to him until she felt him kissing her and his hand on her thigh. It was warmer now still, and her body responded to the heat fluidly, like water flowing around and between the boundaries of its landscape. She only knew they had pulled away from each other because she could feel the breeze again, cool against her skin where the heat had been.

Their gaze still locked, Aaron went to speak and then hesitated. When he finally spoke, it came out quieter than Marissa would have thought.

"I'm glad you're here with me."

"Me too."

He moved towards her again, creating the same heat. As they pulled away once more, Marissa noticed something that had not been there just a few moments before.

"It's getting light," she said. They both looked at the sky and saw the pale greens and blues that preceded the sun on the horizon.

"I didn't think it would ever end," Aaron said, his eyes fixed on the new light. Marissa nodded and knew exactly what he meant.

She couldn't believe only one night had passed. It felt like it might have been days or weeks since they first realized they had missed the landmark getting back to the trail. Or maybe it had been just a second ago. She felt different, as if she had shed something tonight, like a snake that had squeezed out of his skin, leaving it behind to turn to dust. To become just another part of the landscape, no longer recognizable as part of what he was. Just gone.

Marissa stared at the growing light, not wanting to take her eyes off of it, for fear that it might not get any brighter. They had waited for this all night. Finally, it was dawn.

It had been so dark in the woods all night long, except for the moonlight, which they were lucky to have had. She had never thought before what it must be like in the forest at night, the way the darkness filled in the spaces between the trees and the rocks and the shrubs. She wondered if there had been no moon, would it have been pitch black? No, she thought, there is always some light. As she thought back, she was surprised they had been able to get around as well as they had. But, their eyes had adjusted and after a while, it just seemed normal.

Suddenly, her mind recalled the dream she had had the night before the first day of school. She had forgotten about it. But something in her previous thoughts had triggered her memory and in her mind she saw the image of what she had seen that night.

"I had a dream. The night before the first day of school." Aaron turned his head to look at her to let her know that he was listening and then turned his eyes back to the dawn.

"I was driving near school, and it was a really nice day outside. Like the first real warm day of the year. And as I was driving I saw this huge thing on the horizon that kind of looked like it was man-made and kind of looked like it had always been there. It sort of looked like a huge rock. I drove towards it and was able to get inside. There were these dark, stone hallways on the inside and there were rats running around. But anyways, it had a top floor and I was able to get up there and there was this huge window that I could see out of for miles around. I could even see school. I stood there for a while looking and as I went to turn around and walk away, this mirror caught my eye."

She stopped here and thought for a second before continuing.

"I walked over to it, even though what I really wanted to do was leave. But, I felt like ...," she paused here, sat up straighter and looked off into the trees, "I felt like I couldn't leave without that mirror. Like this was the doorway out somehow."

"Yeah?" Aaron turned and looked at her again.

"I stood in front of it, but when I looked in it, I couldn't see anything. Just the wall behind me. I couldn't see my reflection. And, I continued to look in it, hoping that my face might finally show up and it didn't. And I was trapped there. Trapped in the dark. After that I woke up."

"Hmm," was Aaron's only response. He turned away again.

It was silent between them. She could see pink in the sky now.

"Maybe you weren't there," Aaron spoke, still looking straight ahead.

"What?"

"Maybe you weren't there, and that's why you couldn't see yourself in the mirror."

She looked at him and he turned and looked at her. She nodded, continuing to think about what he had said, feeling like she remembered something she had once forgotten, yet couldn't figure out what it was. Her thoughts fell away, until the dawn was the only thing in front of her.

"Do you miss her?" She didn't have to say who.

"Yeah, of course," he then quickly added, "I mean, not in a romantic way. Just in the way that someone from your life is now gone. Forever."

"Me too. I wish we had found that journal, for Jordan's sake. She really thought she was going to get some kind of closure here."

"I agree, but I never really believed we would find it."

Marissa hesitated before she asked the question that she really wanted to ask.

"Do you think she killed herself?"

"No," he didn't hesitate. "No way. I'd be shocked to find out that's really what happened. I honestly think it was just an accident."

"That's what Jay said."

"What do you think?"

"I told Jay that I thought the same thing, but, honestly, I don't know."

"But, do you really think she was suicidal?"

"I mean, it didn't seem that way to me, but you never know what's going on inside people's heads. You never know how they really see themselves."

"I still think it was an accident. I wonder what Jordan believes."

"She never actually said. She said that what she wanted was the truth."

"Do you believe that?"

"No."

She made eye contact with him as she replied and he sort of smiled back. They sat there while the colors in the sky became more varied. Going from cool greens and blues to warm pinks and oranges. They couldn't have picked a better spot, although Marissa knew they hadn't really picked it. They just ended up here, really.

They talked a little, but Marissa felt talked out, so mostly it was just quiet between them. She didn't know the last time she had watched the sun rise. If it was up to her, she wouldn't be awake when the sun got up, and mostly she wasn't, so generally she wasn't interested in the sun rise. But this was different. It had been so dark for hours, and she had waited for this moment the whole time. Finally it was here, and they could go home soon.

"How are we gonna get out of here?" Marissa said.

"I was hoping you had a plan."

"I was thinking the same thing about you."

She waited for him to say something in reply, but when it didn't come she didn't press for it. Aaron clearly wasn't worried about it right now. She lay back and felt the breeze massage her skin lightly, feeling strangely like fingers pressing into her body. She was going to sleep all day when she finally got home. She was hungry too, and thirsty. She hadn't felt either of these all night. In fact, she hadn't once thought about food or water.

"Hey, can I see your knife?" she asked Aaron out of the blue. She hadn't been that curious about it before, but something made her think about it.

"Sure." He pulled it out of his pocket and handed it to her, its silver handle gleaming in the new light. It felt heavy in her hand and she liked the sensation. She flipped out the blade and examined it, running her fingers over its side and resting the pad of her forefinger on the blade. Even though Aaron had cleaned it off, there were still little smears of blood and it made her feel strange to be holding this object that had someone's life on it. She didn't want to think about what had happened to Jake. She figured they could tell the police about what had happened and if they were still there, they would be found. She cleaned it off one more time, wiping away the last remnants of Jake's blood. She couldn't see any more spots when she folded the blade back into the handle and handed the knife back to Aaron, who returned it to his pocket.

"Look," he said.

She turned her head towards the horizon and could see a sliver of burning yellow-orange just above the tree tops on the other side. She stood up and walked to the edge of the drop off, standing there in stillness, her arms lowered by her sides.

She wasn't sure she had ever really watched the sun rise. She knew it rose every morning, and had certainly been up early enough to witness it a few times, but she had never given it her attention before. It was there every morning, and yet that didn't take away from its draw. She felt pulled towards it, her mind and her body, so that other concerns and worries fell away. In this moment what was important became clear, even if she couldn't articulate it.

Aaron came and stood beside her and although they weren't touching, she felt the connection between them. The burning sliver had gotten bigger now, and it looked as though an egg yolk had been placed on top of a bed of greens.

Standing there together with Aaron, but both of them in their own space, she watched as the sun rose half way over the trees. It made her think about when she was very young and would draw pictures of the sun on pieces of large paper at the kitchen table. She would draw a yellow circle and color it in, and afterwards add lines of varying lengths protruding from its outer edge and place it in the sky above whatever else she had drawn. As if she had risen the sun herself. As if she had created it.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the last bit of sun rose above the trees. Marissa could only really tell because she could now see a sliver of pinkish sky between the trees and the sun. She knew that this could only mean one thing.

It was time to go home.

CHAPTER 11

“What are we going to do now?”

Marissa was snapped back to reality by Aaron’s question. She didn’t know what they were going to do now.

“I don’t know.” She looked at him, not offering any more words, and he looked back at her with the same expression.

“There’s only one way out of here that I know,” he pointed towards the trees. “I think we’ll have to go back through the woods and follow the river as closely as we can. We should eventually either find the trail, or the road, or the spot we went to yesterday to look for the journal. What do you think?”

“How long is that going to take?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know where we are. I guess it could take all day. I mean, the park isn’t that big, but we really got turned around last night. Your guess is as good as mine.”

Marissa stood, thinking, as she turned her gaze back towards the river. Too bad they were so high up or they could just jump in and be carried towards the road. Marissa didn’t want to enter the forest again. She had already escaped the dark once. She wanted to offer a better solution, but she didn’t know what to do, so she stalled instead.

“Let’s think about this in a little bit. We don’t have to rush off right now. The sun just came up; this is the moment we’ve been waiting for all night.”

“I don’t know. I’m ready to get out of here. Plus, if we have to walk a long ways today, we should probably get started. And, I’m starving.”

Marissa remembered her own hunger and thirst, and figured she didn’t have much time to stall.

“Just another fifteen minutes. It’s really peaceful here.”

Aaron clearly looked like he didn’t want to stay, but was beginning to accept that he would lose this battle.

“Fifteen minutes and then we’ll start walking?”

“Yeah,” she agreed, and thought to herself that if she didn’t want to go back into the forest she better come up with something in the meantime.

She sat back down on the ground and picked at a blade of grass to the side of her. Aaron joined her a moment later.

“What made you want to stay? You’ve been ready to leave all night.”

“I just like it here. How many times during the day do you really pay attention to anything? You do this, you do that, you move on to the next thing. This sunrise is probably the first thing I’ve really looked at in weeks. I just wanted to enjoy it a little bit longer. I felt like we escaped last night when we found this spot, and I don’t want to go back in.”

“But that’s the only way back home,” he said.

She didn’t say anything back to him right away, but looked at him for a moment considering. She looked back out across the river, at the trees on the other side.

“Maybe,” she said. She could see Aaron looking over at her, but she didn’t turn back to look at him.

At that moment, a bird flew across her line of vision, its wings spread wide as it glided on the air. It didn’t make a sound, but it caught Marissa’s attention and held it. If she were a bird, she could just fly over to the other side, or down to the river bed, whichever she wanted. Or, she could bypass that all together, and simply fly straight back to where the car was parked. She

wouldn't need the river at all, and the forest would have no impact on her because she could simply go above it, not needing to tangle herself in its innards.

She cursed her feet and the ground upon which they relied and wished again that she could just take off.

Aaron was right. There was no other way. They would have to go back through the forest. And even though it would be lighter than it was last night, it would still be darker than it was out here. She resigned herself to this thought, and felt sad. They had no choice.

Aaron had gotten up and was pacing around, exploring the area. Marissa walked as close to the ledge as she could get, almost standing with her toes over the edge, and looked.

She felt as if she might fall without any warning. As if being this close to the edge would simply tip her over. Without being able to see the land below her, but feeling its stability, she wondered if this is what it would feel like to fly, free but connected. She almost wished that she would slip. Not to die, but simply to make a leap, because then she would be in that water being carried back towards something that she wanted to return to.

She closed her eyes and listened to the rushing water and the sounds of the birds and felt her balance become a little unsteady. Before she wavered too much she opened them again, but didn't feel relief, just discomfort. She looked down at the river, and stepped back from the ledge putting several feet between herself and the edge.

Aaron was watching her, maybe to leap into action if she fell, but maybe just to watch. She turned and smiled at him, and he smiled back. The fifteen minutes were almost up.

She looked back out at the water once more, as if saying good-bye, and resigned herself to going back into the forest, back into the dark. She forced herself to turn around, and leave behind the open space and the wind. She was not a bird. Her fate was her feet on the forest floor, marching through dead leaves and tangled vines.

"Alright," she called out to Aaron across the clearing. "Ready." She smiled at him, but didn't feel happy. He must have noticed, because he stared at her for a moment as if he was about to ask her what was wrong. She was glad he didn't ask, because she didn't know what she would say, and felt like if she tried to explain it she might cry. She didn't feel like doing that right now. She was too exhausted.

As she walked towards him, she looked beyond him into the trees and fixed her eyes on the shadowy landscape. She forced herself forward, but with each step she felt more resistance, as if two hands reached out from the forest to push her back. Her energy drained from her body like water from a leaky faucet. It flowed out and dissipated, wasted, unused. She imagined it like a pool of water gathering at her feet, which she sloshed through to get towards the edge of the clearing. It reminded her of Dan, and, with that thought, she started to cry.

There were no sobs at first, just tears running down her face that she wiped away with her hands, but as she tried to collect herself, steel herself against the fact that they were going back into the woods, she couldn't hold back any longer.

She crouched down to her knees, hiding her face between her arms and sobbed. She hadn't cried like this in a really long time, not even when Olivia died, not even earlier tonight when she was completely alone. She felt Aaron kneel down beside her, but couldn't pay much attention to him, as she only felt her own emotions pouring down her face, and her body moving along with them. As the tears were released from her eyes, they purified her. Watching one fall to the earth and dissipate, she imagined that the land had absorbed her pain, and would release it to whatever it was that animated all of this.

Eventually, the sobs subsided, the tears stopped coming and she felt still.

She looked up at Aaron, who looked worried and had clearly gotten no responses to his questions about what was wrong. What she said next came out of her mouth, but it was not from her.

“We’re going to jump.”

“We’re going to jump where?” She knew he understood what she meant, but was hoping he was wrong. There was fear on his face, even though he tried to hide it.

“We’re going to jump into the river so we can go home.” She stated it simply, as if she were saying, “The sky is blue.”

“From over there?” he pointed towards the ledge, knowing, of course, that it was the only place to jump. Now he was stalling.

“Yes, from the ledge. We’re going to jump from the ledge into the river.”

“But, we’re really high up,” he said this quietly, like he was talking to himself as much as her, not in a persuasive tone, but in an accepting one.

“The jump is high, but we can make it. It’s doable.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t really. I just think we can.”

“Marissa, let’s go back through the woods. We know we’ll eventually find our way, and, and we don’t know that it’s safe to jump in there, or even if it’s deep enough. And what about what’s underneath the water that we can’t see? We could get torn to shreds. This way we know is safe, let’s go back.”

He pleaded with her, but the battle was already lost. In her emotional outpouring, she had found something that had existed all along, but which she couldn’t see, and courage had flashed through her body. The fear that she felt was there, but it was small. Like a single voice being drowned out by the yells of a crowd. She wanted to jump while she still had that courage.

“I don’t want to go back in there. We know that the river intersects with the road, and it will probably carry us there quickly. I’m ready to go home and I don’t want to walk another day through that. I want to go now.”

She turned around and walked back towards the ledge. The wind blew her hair back off of her face, and she breathed it in, allowing it to feed her spirit.

Aaron ran up behind her.

They both stood now on the spot where Marissa had been earlier. The place where she had closed her eyes. Aaron looked down at the water below them and looked almost sad. But his facial expression quickly changed to a more controlled look, as if he were bracing himself.

“We should at least try to find out how deep it is,” he said while searching the surrounding area for something that could test it. He walked a few feet away from them and picked up a large rock that weighed at least a few pounds. He stood at the edge of the land, and holding the rock in both hands held it over the water. A second later he dropped it and they both watched as it fell through the air and into the water below.

Marissa wasn’t sure what they were actually waiting for it to do. As expected, the water splashed as the rock broke its surface, and after that they could see no more of it. It’s not like the rock was going to float to the surface and tell them that it was alright. She looked at Aaron to check his reaction.

“Is it deep enough?” Marissa asked.

Aaron looked very serious for a moment as if he might be calculating something in his head.

“I don’t know,” he said still looking at the water. He looked at her and they both laughed at the absurdity of what they were trying to do. As if dropping a rock into the water might actually

tell them something about its depths. And if it could, they were not expert enough to understand it.

Aaron stood with his hands on his hips, concentrating on the water below.

“I know there are guys who come out here to jump off the cliffs,” he said, “I just don’t know where.” He pondered his last sentence.

He went to speak, and then hesitated. On the second try he found the words.

“When you jump, keep your legs together and your arms by your sides, as straight as possible.”

Marissa knew this already, but simply nodded.

“I’ll jump first so you know it’s deep enough.”

“But, what if it’s not deep enough?”

“Then you’ll know.”

A shot of anxiety started in her stomach and went upwards through her body as he said that. But still, she felt they would be okay.

Aaron was looking a little paler, and he wore the hard expression on his face like a mask. He took a deep breath and spoke again.

“When you see me come up to the surface, you’ll have to jump soon after because the current will probably carry me down river. We’ll want to stay together as much as possible in the water. Okay?”

“Okay.” Fear was pumping through her again, but her mind was already made up. She wished Aaron would just jump already so she could jump too.

He looked at her and for some reason she hoped he wouldn’t say anything. She got her wish. He positioned himself at the edge of the cliff and closed his eyes, and took a couple deep inhalations. When he opened them again, he looked down once more and then immediately back up.

“Help me count. I’ll jump on three.”

They started counting. “One, two ...” They never made it to three.

Aaron leaped off the edge with a burst of energy, his arms flailing until he could get them by his sides, and his hair blown upwards by the force of the wind.

Marissa saw him make his body into a straight line, and penetrate the water just as the rock had done. It had only been a few seconds since he was last standing next to her. She held her breath as he hit the water, and that same shot of anxiety went through her body again. It seemed much longer that she was waiting for him to surface.

There he was. She saw his dark hair emerge from the water, and a raised arm that she thought was giving her the thumbs up sign. He was treading water, but was being moved away from the spot where he had landed. It was her turn to jump.

She didn’t have much time. She had to do this now.

She stepped to the same spot that Aaron had jumped from, and felt the stability and structure of the earth underneath her feet. A minute ago it had made her feel resentful, and now it made her feel safe. Fear permeated all the cells in her body so she felt like she was buzzing. Her heart rate had risen and her breath was coming in shallow and fast, and yet, she felt alive.

She wanted to take one look back at the forest to see where she had come from, but decided against it, not wanting to change her mind or use up too much time. The wind blew against her face as if pushing her onwards and she knew she had to go now or risk losing the burst of energy that had driven her towards this point.

A bird flew across her line of sight, parallel to the cliff she was standing on. That was the signal. Without another thought, she backed up a few paces in order to gather a little speed and felt her feet leave the land.

As her body fell towards the water, she felt the overwhelming urge to scream, but couldn't open her mouth to do it. Her stomach climbed towards her throat as her body adjusted to the free fall it had found itself in. Terror, fear, joy, and freedom all merged into one as she plummeted towards the river, all at once desperate to enter the water, but at the same time hoping she wouldn't have to. She pulled in her arms and legs and braced herself for the entry.

She hit the water hard, but correctly. She barely noticed the cold as she began swimming to pull herself to the surface. She just wanted to be able to breathe.

Raising her head above the water, she gasped for breath, not because she was almost out of oxygen, but just to know that she had made it. It was a little hard to swim with all her clothes on, but the river was already moving her downstream. She wished that she had thought to at least take her shoes off.

She immediately looked around for Aaron and didn't see him at first, which worried her. But she hadn't looked far enough. She spotted him farther downstream. He had seen her and was trying to swim towards her or at least stay where he was to wait for her, but was having difficulty with the current. Marissa swam to him to catch up.

She reached him and he grabbed her by the arm, gripping her tightly so they wouldn't get separated.

"You all right?" he asked between huge breaths. She nodded back at him between her own heavy breathing.

"Come on," Aaron said as they began swimming, still grasping her arm. The water moved quickly, but Marissa didn't feel afraid. She was relieved to be, if not on solid ground, out of the air.

Her whole body felt electric. The buzzing sensation she had felt while standing on top of the cliff had increased, although now it made her feel pleasant. She still felt energetic, but peace had replaced fear. Relief and joy intermingled among other emotions, and she felt full, but not overwhelmed.

They moved quickly through the water, which they were grateful for. But they really didn't know what was up ahead or around the next bend. Frankly, they really didn't know how far away the road was, or exactly how to get up to it once they were out of the water. Marissa thought that they could figure that out once they got there. That's what they had done all along.

The water was chilly. Cold enough to be uncomfortable, but not enough to be dangerous. After the initial exhilaration had started to wear off, Marissa felt the cold more acutely, but didn't immediately wish to be back on the land. She had spent so much time on land wishing she was in the water that she couldn't stand the thought of wishing for something else again.

Luckily, they weren't swimming into rocks and other debris as they moved downstream. In fact, the ride was quite smooth. Aaron loosened his grip on her arm, and after a while they floated almost leisurely side by side, not saying a word.

Marissa wondered how long it would actually take them to get to the road. Before they had jumped, she had imagined it to be almost immediate, but now realized that they still didn't know how close they were or how long it would take them.

The cliffs on either side had decreased in height, and if they had jumped in from here it would have seemed like a fun game rather than a possibly life-threatening risk. This thought almost made her laugh. They hadn't thought about walking down a ways to see if they could find

a smaller jump. They had been so taken by the moment that throwing themselves off that cliff seemed like the only option.

The river had also started to narrow, and wasn't moving as quickly. She wondered if they had passed the place where they had looked for Olivia's journal and looked up to check it out, but couldn't tell. It didn't really matter anyway.

For the next few minutes each of them watched the water ahead of them intently, waiting to see the first signs of the bridge that crossed the water indicating its intersection with the road.

They were both swimming again, helping the current carry them along. As they came around a bend in the river they finally saw the bridge. They watched a single car pass over it.

They swam hard and fast towards the narrow shoreline that had appeared on their right side. The current made it more difficult, but didn't stop them from making quick progress.

When Marissa reached the land and had pulled herself out of the water, she sat on the ground catching her breath, with Aaron beside her doing the same and felt relieved that their journey was practically over.

Aaron jumped up after a minute, and said, "Let's go," as he began climbing up the bank next to the steel beams of the bridge. Marissa followed him, making her way up the small dusty incline, grabbing hold of the beams for support, and, finally, putting her feet onto asphalt.

She looked back at the water, and then turned her eyes towards the road.

CHAPTER 12

The morning air was cool, and if she hadn't been soaking wet, would have been quite pleasant. Instead, it left Marissa feeling chilly. Not chilled, like the night before when she had borrowed Aaron's sweatshirt, but chilly enough to make her more alert of her senses and wish she had some dry clothes in the car.

The car. She couldn't believe that in less than half an hour she would be back at her car.

Every couple of minutes a car passed, its passengers ignoring the two sopping wet individuals walking along the side of the road. Marissa was glad that no one stopped. She didn't feel like talking, and she didn't feel like discussing what had happened. It felt private. Soon enough, she would have to tell the whole story over and over again, which she wasn't looking forward to.

It seemed like it should be an exciting story to tell, but she felt protective of it. It belonged to her and no one else. And anyway, it wouldn't come out right when she went to put it into words. To verbalize the experience was to kill part of it, slice it off like a piece of roast meat to be eaten. She didn't want others consuming her experience. She wasn't sure she had totally digested it herself.

The leaves had not yet begun to change. They were still green and thick, comfortable in their youth, swaying wherever the breeze took them. A month from now this road would be lined with gold, orange, brown, and red. Regal and poised for the onlooker who wished to capture their brilliance for a moment, knowing that soon the branches would be empty, but remembering that it would all happen again the next year.

Marissa made a note to come back here in a month. She stopped for a moment, thinking, and then reached down to untie the laces in her shoes. She pulled them off, and her socks too, until it was just her bare feet on the asphalt. It felt warm against the soles of her feet. Holding her wet shoes and socks in her right hand she continued walking, receiving an amused look from Aaron, who looked like he wanted to say something, but didn't.

It was then that she saw another car coming.

She didn't think anything of it at first. Just another car passing by, probably full of hikers, campers, or maybe people going fishing, ready to have a fun day in the park. Ready to spend the day outside in the early autumn weather. Warm, but without the heaviness that summer heat always brings with it.

But when she looked at it again, she saw that the car was white with distinct markings on it. On the roof were colored lights.

"It's a police car," Aaron said.

They stopped walking and waited for the car to catch up to where they were. Thirty seconds later the police car was right alongside of them, stopped on the other side of the road. The officer in the driver's seat had barely stopped the car, when the back driver's side door opened and Jordan jumped out.

"Where have you guys been? And why are you all wet?" she said running across the two lane road towards them. She threw herself at Marissa first, embracing her quickly and then did the same with Aaron.

"We decided to take the scenic route," Marissa said. Jordan gave her a playful shove and waited for the real response.

Marissa smiled. "Basically, we walked around until we found the river again. We stayed there for a while and slept. After the sun came up we were going to try and follow the river back

to the trail or the road I guess, but instead we just jumped in.” She made a gesture at this point that this was the reason they were wet.

“You jumped in the river? We were pretty high up at that spot yesterday,” Jordan asked, looking incredulous.

“You should have seen where we were,” Marissa said, and then continued. “What about you guys? Where are Peter and Jay?”

“You’re not going to believe this, but after we were separated, Jay literally ran into the landmark we had been looking for. You remember the twisted tree? We were back at our cars within an hour probably, and then we went to the police.”

“You’re kidding,” Marissa said, glancing at Aaron in the process, unable to hide a smile.

“No, I’m not,” Jordan said, smiling back. “We tried to find you guys after that. We figured you couldn’t be that far away, but we couldn’t find you. After a while we figured it was better to just get out of there and go to the police. So is that all that happened to you guys? You just walked until you came to the river?”

Marissa looked at Aaron again. “Not exactly, but we’ll give you the details when we get back up to the cars.”

The officer walked over at that moment.

“Are you guys all alright? Any injuries?” the officer asked.

“No, we’re fine.” Aaron responded this time. “But we do need to report a murder.”

The officer clearly looked like he hadn’t been expecting that.

“We didn’t commit it,” Aaron said immediately, and the officer’s face relaxed. “We ran into some people in the woods last night.”

“Okay, get in the car and when we get back up to the lot, I’ll take a statement from you.”

Jordan’s mouth hung open a little bit.

Jordan sat up front this time, and Aaron and Marissa got into the back seat. Marissa felt uncomfortable sitting in her wet clothes, the way that they clung to her body, and made her feel suctioned to the vinyl seats. They sped back up to the parking lot.

A few minutes later, Marissa was glad to leave the vinyl behind, and still had her shoes in her hand as she stepped out onto the graveled lot. She thought it might be wise to put them back on her feet, but decided against it. She just walked carefully.

She saw Jay and Peter as they rushed towards the both of them asking the same question Jordan had asked them, “Where have you guys been?”

As if she and Aaron had decided to take a small vacation and wandered off, taking in the sights as they went along. It made her laugh, as absurd as it was, but she also found it annoying and wasn’t quite sure why.

Marissa watched, and was a little surprised, as Peter approached Aaron with his hand out. The two boys half-hugged with their hands still clasped together, and then began discussing what had happened after they had all split up. Marissa thought it was amazing the changes twenty-four hours could bring.

Jay threw her arms around Marissa’s neck and tightly embraced her only to let go a few seconds later. Marissa barely had time to return the embrace.

“Where have you guys been?” Jay asked again. Marissa was already getting tired of hearing that question and they had only been found a total of three minutes. She gave Jay the same abbreviated version of the story she had given Jordan.

“We tried to find you guys right after we were separated. Where were you?”

“I don’t know. I thought I could hear you for a while and I almost yelled out, but then, I don’t know, the voices got fainter. And then Aaron found me, and we had no idea how to find you guys. So we moved on. Jordan told us you were the one who found the landmark again.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right!” Jay said as if she had just remembered. “After we took off running I literally ran right into it. It was that twisted tree. Took me a few seconds to realize it, but when Jordan saw it—she was almost right next to me—she confirmed it. Peter was just ahead of us and we called him back. We tried calling for you guys, but we didn’t want to risk losing the landmark again so we couldn’t really leave the area.”

“I can’t believe it,” Marissa said, shaking her head. Just then she felt two large hands firmly, but affectionately, grasp her shoulders.

“Sounds like you guys are going to have a better story to tell than we are,” Peter said smiling, while coming around to face her.

“Yeah, we definitely one-upped you guys in being lost,” she said, playing along with him. He grabbed her then, pulling her into a tight hug. She felt completely enveloped by his large body as his muscles contracted around her. When he pulled away, he winked at them both and jogged over to where his mom was standing. Marissa watched as he gave her a hug too.

The parking lot was like a crowded aquarium at the pet store. Plenty of fish, but no room to swim around. Word had spread quickly about Aaron and Marissa’s run in with Travis and Jake, and the parking lot buzzed with anxious energy.

The same officer that had picked up her and Aaron in the car waved her over to where he was standing with Aaron and they both began the story of meeting Jake and Travis. The crowd gathered around as Aaron detailed how they had gotten separated from the group and stumbled upon their campsite. When Aaron told the last part about pushing past Jake and hearing his screams as he fell into the fire, the only sounds were a few birds chirping and a car passing by on the road.

The police took off quickly in search of Jake and Travis’s campsite, guided only by the vague directions Marissa and Aaron had been able to give them. Marissa doubted they were still there, but hoped the police would be able to find them and arrest them.

They told the rest of their story to everyone who was left and when they mentioned jumping into the river, one of the park rangers told them that the particular spot they had jumped from was a favorite of the most daring cliff jumpers. He also told them that if they had walked down the river a little ways they would have found a spot about half as high as where they had jumped from. He laughed at this, throwing his head back, while the onlookers chuckled. Marissa and Aaron couldn’t help but crack a smile each.

Her parents and Aaron’s parents were there, as well as Jay’s dad, Peter’s mom and Jordan’s parents. Police cars and service vehicles with colored lights and bright markings were scattered throughout the lot, as well as her car and Aaron’s car, just where they had left them at 4:00 p.m. the previous day.

She couldn’t believe that not even twenty-four hours had passed. Yesterday afternoon seemed like another lifetime ago, and one that she didn’t remember that well. She viewed it in her memory like looking at it through a veil—unclear and far away. She felt as if her whole life had passed in one night, and now she was starting another life this morning. Still her, but new, fresh and yet old at the same time, older than she had ever been.

She saw Aaron talking with his parents, exchanging hugs and trying to wipe away the worried expressions on their faces with smiles and light words. Her own parents were standing next to her, asking her questions that she answered but didn’t pay much attention to and

occasionally squeezing her shoulders or putting their hands on her arms. She told them that she was fine, and even though she understood their worry, she felt violated by the questions they asked her, as if they had entered her body without her consent and held microscopes up to every cell, trying to find something she wished them not to know. It was private, secret even and she only wanted to share as much as she had to.

After the emergency workers were convinced that they were fine with no injuries, Marissa and Aaron were free to go and the crowd began to disperse.

Her parents had gotten back into their car to drive home, and Marissa walked back to hers, reaching into her pocket for the keys. She had the key in the lock, when Jordan walked up behind her.

“Before you go ...” Jordan looked off into the trees, her hands inside of her back pockets. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. It was my idea to come out here, and we didn’t even find what we were looking for.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t force me out here; I came of my own choice. I could have stayed behind if I really wanted to. I got lost on my own,” she paused here and reflected, “I guess I got found on my own too.”

“Yeah, I just ... I just really wanted to know that it had been an accident—or not,” she added quickly. “I guess we might not ever really know.”

Marissa looked at Jordan for a moment, and hesitated before she spoke again.

“I know this isn’t hard evidence, but whatever it counts for, I really think that the car accident was an accident.” She said this without doubt, but with no proof either.

Jordan’s eyes began to fill with tears. She held them there on the brink, not allowing them to go over the edge and slide down her face. Marissa reached over and hugged her, and felt her own eyes fill to capacity. She pulled back, still grasping her arms, and smiled. Jordan smiled back and looked relieved. She turned around and walked towards her parents’ car where they were waiting for her to drive home.

Marissa finished opening the car door and grabbed her phone which she had left in the glove box. Missed calls, text messages, voice mails.

“Hey!” It was Aaron at his own car across the parking lot.

“Yeah?” she yelled back.

“Talk to you later?”

“Yeah,” she replied, glad that he had kept this good-bye short. He grinned at her as he got into his car, and she smiled back.

She was ready for a nap.

Marissa woke up to the feeling of being pricked by little claws on the arm she left outside of her blankets. Mooney had made himself comfortable on the bed and was kneading her arm with his paws, clearly enjoying himself by the sound of his velvet purr. Marissa opened her eyes briefly, patted his head and closed them again.

It must be sometime in the afternoon, she thought, not really wanting to know what time it was. She had come home from the park and gone immediately to bed, as she had only slept those couple of hours after she and Aaron had made it to the river. She lay there with her eyes closed, not wanting to open them for fear of going back to “real life.” The longer she stayed in bed, the longer she could remain in her private world, the door to which opened sometime last night and to which she had not yet walked out of.

She dreaded going downstairs and having to talk to her parents. Although they had heard the same story everyone else had, surely they would have more questions, and possibly lectures about outdoor safety. Then people would start calling. She expected Jay anytime now, and other friends from school who surely were hearing the story as it spread. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't know how to talk about it.

Marissa rolled up onto her side in order to face Mooney, who was still purring, but whose claws had finally settled down. She stroked the top of his head with her whole hand, starting between his eyes where he liked to be rubbed and running her hand back over his ears so they flipped up after her hand had passed. Mooney closed his eyes and reached his head back up to find her hand after it had left him. She gave it back to him every time.

She wasn't sure what to do now. She looked over at her window through the sheer curtains that had been drawn and noticed the late afternoon sunlight, fading but peaceful, beautiful in its slow march to sunset.

Throwing the blankets back and giving Mooney one last pat on the head, she got out of bed and began taking her clothes off, tossing them back onto the bed in a pile. She would put them away later. She walked to the bathroom and began turning on the water for a shower, when she caught her reflection in the mirror.

There she was. Her face. Her hair. Her shoulders. She was all there; no parts of her were missing. And yet, she looked different to herself.

She felt the urge to stand here forever, observing herself in the reflective glass, where she existed safe and secure.

No, she thought. That was ridiculous. What she saw looking back at her was just an illusion. Her two selves silently battled it out for a minute, trying to see who would win. Finally she smiled at herself in the mirror and stepped behind the curtain and into the shower.

As she let the water soak her hair and stream down her back, she felt heat spread throughout her body, and, suddenly thought about the mirror she had seen in her dream. The one in which she couldn't see her reflection.

Maybe Aaron had been right. Maybe she was never there in the first place.

CHAPTER 13

Someone was knocking on her bedroom door. Marissa opened her eyes and turned her head to see the clock next to her bed. 10:03 a.m.

She sat up, running her hand through her hair.

“Yeah?” She figured it was one of her parents.

The door opened and in walked a thin girl with shoulder length hair.

“Hey,” said Jordan, shutting the door behind her, but not before Mooney also slipped in, “your parents told me to come up, said you needed to wake up anyways. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Why are you here so early?” Marissa asked, as she put a hand on Mooney’s head and slid it down the length of his body until the tip of his tail.

Jordan didn’t answer her right away. She wandered through the room, looking at Marissa’s stuff, every once in a while picking up something and examining it.

“I’ve never been in your room before,” Jordan said, still taking in the surroundings. The statement didn’t require a response. Marissa continued petting Mooney and watched Jordan look around.

“I’ve been wide awake since 6:30 this morning. I slept most of the day away yesterday. I figured you would have too.”

“I did,” Marissa said.

“And you’re still sleeping?”

Jordan put down a picture that she had picked up and sat down on Marissa’s bed. Without saying a word, she pulled out a small black book from her bag and laid it down on the bed between her and Marissa.

Marissa didn’t need to ask what it was, but she did anyway.

“What’s that?”

“It’s her journal,” Jordan replied.

Marissa reached for it, then pulled her hand back a bit and met Jordan’s eyes. Jordan nodded and Marissa picked the book up, feeling its hard leather binding.

She flipped to a page in the middle, expecting to see words, but saw only white pages. She flipped backwards towards the front of the book and finally saw an entry dated almost six months prior. She closed the book before reading the words.

“Where did you find it?” Marissa asked.

“My mom had it. She picked it up from Olivia’s room after the car accident. Thought there might be something in it that would help with the investigation.”

She smiled with awareness as she said this, and Marissa chuckled.

“Looks like we went on a wild goose chase,” Jordan said and waited for Marissa to speak.

“Well, we thought we might find something important. We just didn’t know. We didn’t get the result we wanted, but I don’t know that the whole night was a waste.”

The both sat there for a moment, Marissa playing with Mooney and Jordan looking out her bedroom window.

“Alright, I’ll let you get back to sleeping,” Jordan finally said as she picked up the journal and placed it back in her bag.

“Actually, do you want this?” She held out the journal to Marissa.

“No,” Marissa said, shaking her head, “those are her words. Maybe they were never meant to be found in the first place.”

“Will you take it anyway, even if you never read it? I don’t want it.”

Marissa took the book from Jordan's outstretched hands.

"Thanks," Jordan said, and then quickly, "see you in school tomorrow?"

"Yeah," Marissa said. Jordan stepped back out the door and closed it behind her.

Marissa opened the car door and was surprised to feel that the air was so cool. It was not unpleasant. She was comfortable in long sleeves with no jacket, but, unmistakably, it had become autumn overnight.

The grass she walked over was neatly kept, short and uniform, a vibrant shade of green. The breeze blew her hair back as she walked.

The sun shone from the western side of the sky, warming her where the wind had left its mark. There were still a few hours yet before sunset, and Marissa smiled to herself as she realized that this time she would definitely make it back to her car before then.

She passed headstones and grave markers. Some had flowers by them. Others did not. She read the names and dates on the stone markers, which didn't mean much to her other than a brief introduction of a life lived, one that had already passed by, just as she was passing them by now.

The last time she had been in this place was at the funeral. She had not yet seen the marker that she looked at now with the name that she recognized and the date range that seemed too short compared to the others in this place. There was no space reserved for a spouse or significant other. Just this name in this one space. But still it seemed crowded.

Marissa knelt on the grass in front of the marker, and couldn't remember if the body was underneath her or if it was in front of the marker, but then decided it didn't matter. Olivia wasn't actually in this place; it was simply the earthly marker of her life. As she took her eyes away from the stone and looked out across this short forest of lives, she felt something release. Some heaviness that she had been carrying with her was gone.

It's only a piece of stone, she thought to herself, even as she looked at her friend's name and year of birth carved into its surface. It's only a piece of stone. She reached her hand out to touch it, tracing her fingers over the indented letters.

She hadn't brought flowers, but she found herself fumbling with the stone vase that was currently inverted into the marker. Twisting its visible top, she finally pulled it out of the ground and secured it back into place, this time right side up so that it could hold something.

Out of her back pocket she pulled a small black notebook, which she had left unread, and placed it on top of the vase. She stayed on her knees for a moment, closed her eyes and sat in silence. Afterwards, she got to her feet, and making sure that she still had her keys in her hand, turned around and made her way back over the neat grass to her car.

The next morning she got to school at her usual time, almost late, and hurried from her car to the building.

She felt people looking at her as she walked through the hallway, but she hurried on to class, not in the mood to tell stories.

When she got to her classroom, more pairs of eyes set themselves on her, but here she couldn't run past them. She sat herself down and tried to look normal, sipping coffee out of her travel mug.

"I hear you had a little adventure over the weekend. Glad you're back," Mr. Fischer said, and then immediately turned to the lesson. Marissa was glad for his brevity and for the ability to hide behind the calculus lesson. Marissa opened her notebook and took notes, her mind actually staying with the problems written on the board. The bell rang before she knew it.

The day passed quickly and Marissa didn't have to engage in any long storytelling sessions about what had happened to her over the weekend. Maybe the others had already gotten the word out. She was grateful for that.

She was surprised not to see Jordan that day, as they usually ran into each other a few times throughout. She hoped everything was fine.

After school, she sat with Jay out by her pool, this time both of them in hoodies to keep out the wind that blew with some force that afternoon. The sun still shone strongly, but not enough to warm them completely.

They were rehashing the events of a few nights prior, comparing experiences. Marissa had just finished giving Jay the whole story of their visit with Jake and Travis.

"You mean that knife Aaron found while we were looking for the journal?" Jay asked.

"Yeah, I had forgotten he even had it."

"Do you know what the police found?"

"Apparently, when they got to the campsite all they found was the remains of the fire and a few empty bottles. So, I guess they made it out of the woods."

"Wow."

Just then, they heard the sliding glass door open, and once again, a thin girl with shoulder length hair stepped out onto the patio.

"If you're going to keep dropping by like this, I should just give you a key to the house," Marissa said.

"Be careful what you ask for," Jordan said.

"I didn't see you in school today."

"That's because I wasn't there."

Both Marissa and Jay knew a story was coming and fixed their attention on Jordan as she took a seat in an empty chair across from the other girls.

"He turned himself in."

Marissa leaned forward across the table. "Jake and Travis?"

Jordan looked surprised for a moment.

"Actually, yes. But that's not who I'm talking about. I'll tell you about them in a minute.

The guy who hit Olivia turned himself in to the police this morning. The hit and run."

Marissa sat, still leaning forward, and waited for Jordan to continue.

"Yeah, he turned himself in this morning for hit and run. The police called us in right after."

Jordan paused then, but Marissa and Jay didn't say anything.

"He's young, mid-thirties or so. He's got two kids, elementary school age. He went into the police station this morning and said he did it."

Marissa knew what was coming next. Her body was as still as it had been around Jake and Travis's campfire.

"He said that he's pretty sure it was an accident. That he came around the bend too fast and by the time he saw her car it was too late."

Jordan paused and looked up here, but Marissa and Jay didn't ask any questions.

"He said that the car was making a left onto the road, that he saw a young female driver in the driver's seat and that when he saw her car, he couldn't stop in time. He panicked, and drove away."

"I don't know whether this makes me feel better or worse," Jay said.

"So now there are two witnesses saying that it was an accident and one saying it was a suicide. Do the police know what it was?" Marissa asked.

“No, not really,” Jordan said as she settled back into the patio chair. “With this guy coming forward, it seems like it was probably an accident. But we still don’t know for sure. Probably never will.”

The three girls sat there a moment not knowing what to say to each other. Finally, Marissa spoke.

“I guess that’s not exactly what you wanted.”

Jordan simply smiled back.

“Odd to find this out now, two days after our ill-fated journal seeking expedition,” Jay said.

“It’s as good a time as any,” Marissa said.

“Maybe she just made that turn at the wrong time,” Jordan said, with her gaze directed downwards towards the patio. She made a steering motion with her hands, as if she was playing back a scene from her own memory. She looked back up abruptly. “So that’s where I was today. I can’t believe it.”

“What about Travis and Jake?” Marissa asked.

“Oh!” Jordan sat up in her chair. “I found this out today too. You won’t believe it. They turned themselves in.”

Marissa flew forward again, slapping her hands down on the table in front of her.

“You’re kidding!”

“Well, one of them did. Travis, I think.”

Marissa thought back to Travis sweating around the campfire as he tried not to pass out.

“What about Jake?” Marissa asked.

“I don’t have all the details. The police couldn’t tell us much. They just knew I was involved in what happened the other night. I think they arrested him at his home. Apparently he had been badly burned on certain parts of his body.”

Marissa heard his screams in her mind once more as she remembered running past him into the night. She thought about Dan, a man she had never known, and his two friends, and something like compassion welled up from the deepest place in her body despite the terrible crime they had committed. She knew it was likely that their sentence would be severe. Three lives lost.

Nobody said anything more. Marissa looked off into the trees, remembering her night in the dark, and was glad for the sun that now shone down on her.

Marissa’s phone rang that night as she was getting ready for bed. In the midst of changing clothes, she looked at the name on the front and saw that it was Aaron calling. She actually hadn’t seen him since Saturday morning.

She pulled a T-shirt on over her head and answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me. Did you catch up on your sleep?”

She laughed a little. “Yeah, I slept all day Saturday pretty much, and all Saturday night too.” She laughed again. “Were you in school today?”

“Yeah, I was, but, honestly, I was swarmed all day. I must have told our story a dozen times. But, I have to admit, it was kind of fun.”

“Better you than me. I must have had a sign on my forehead that said ‘don’t ask me about what happened over the weekend’ because nobody asked about it, and, to be honest, I was glad. I just figured Peter had gotten to everybody first.”

“Yeah, probably.”

There was a pause, but neither of them tried to fill it immediately.

“So,” this word was very drawn out, “I was thinking. Aside from our sixteen-hour outdoor adventure through the woods, we’ve never like, you know, hung out or anything, and I think we should. I think we should go out on a real, actual date sometime. Do you want to?”

Marissa thought about saying, “You mean that wasn’t a date?” but instead she just said, “Yeah, sure. When?”

“This weekend?”

“Okay, that’s good. What are we doing?”

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

She couldn’t help herself.

“We could always go hiking.”

There was a pause and she heard him chuckle, and knew that he was grinning on the other end of the phone.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Linehan is a fiction writer and the author of the blog, Look Far. She lives in Maryland, likes to be outside and writes with her cat sleeping on the floor beside her desk. Visit her website at: www.amandalinehan.com