



Lake Hollow Curses

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Category: Romance

Description: Secrets give way to Fears about Curses...

Lake Hollow's mysteries are about to be solved,
Hidden dangers lurk as Remi and the men she's given her heart to
close in on the answers

What gives life, takes life...

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Chapter One

Remington James

Paralyzed with fear as I crumple to the floor, I can't control my crying. Gulping, to get air in my lungs, my vision turns blurry with tears.

I read the warning Carlotta Marlow gave Wilder in her letter. I read it. How did I let myself believe that it had no validity? That she didn't know what she was saying.

I whisper to myself, "There are lots of 'C' names in Lake Hollow, loads... it's not..." Carlotta's name started with a 'C', Ceily, Carter Kelley, Father Chris Lowe, Cammie at the post office, Carrie who works at the lodge.

But Charlie and Cal are the only ones with connections that make sense. They were the ones suspected by Carlotta... men I've given my heart and soul to.

The little things that made me pause previously come at me like a wave. Charlie's inconsistent statements about Lakeside Park, Cal's anger and refusal to talk about the drownings.

The names of the victims are a drumbeat in my mind. Mia. Mark. Tera. Jeremy. Susanna. Sara. Katie.

Sara Truitt? Katie Gibson?

That would mean one of them killed their own sister. This realization is so vile that

my stomach does somersaults.

I'm shaking so much I slip trying to stand, I give up. Curling into a tight ball and muffling sobs against my knees, I immediately decide to keep this to myself. Plans start to take shape as I try to grasp what this means. One may be guilty... fuck, is. Is guilty of terrifying things, but the other one isn't. I can't tell Keenan, Wilder, or Grady about finding the missing pages. Forefront in my mind is protecting the one that has been fooled like the rest of us. I need to talk to Detective Hemminger. I need to tell her about Katie's diary.

It all comes crashing down on me like an avalanche.

Mom and Aunt Bo, the move from Florida, Uncle Skip's chilly behavior, Lake Hollow's tragic past... my guys... the betrayals, the bullying endured by Wilder, the suspicion, and now...

Now, I'm starting to doubt myself for the first time in my life. To doubt my own judgment. I've fallen in love with all of them.

How could I be blind to a monster? A killer.

The lights turn off and come back on in the bathroom over and over. I'd be amused that Winifred is trying to communicate with me again if my life wasn't falling apart. Wini-wait... I suck in a stuttered breath. Wait. Katie's diary was only found in the bathroom because the lights made us call an electrician, then the window issues caused me to discover the missing pages.

Could my ghoulish friend Winifred be Katie Gibson? Is that possible?

I've never been much of a believer in spirits, hauntings and whatnot. Relia had a box of crystals, believed all types of otherworldly things, but to me, if I couldn't taste,

touch, hear or see it... it didn't exist. Kind of like my mom half the time.

Keeping my voice hushed, I whisper, "Katie? Is that you?"

I don't know what I expect. Some grand reveal? The lights freaking out, for her to answer me, or even creepy writing on the mirror. I've seen too many horror movies. I get nothing in return.

With my head leaning on the door, I hear a soft knock, followed by, "Remi, are you alright? We put the fire out, the smoke was getting out of hand. Rem?" Charlie knocks again, lightly.

My hand presses against my mouth, the sound of his voice wracks my body with pain. My bird understander, my compassionate sounding board, my heart cradler. It can't be him. Please, God, it can't be.

A low churning noise starts, I'm getting that choked feeling back... damnit, not now. Not on top of everything else. That dark unsettling spirit, not the least bit like Winifred... or is it Katie? is creeping in.

I hear Cal ask, "Are we sure she even came inside?"

"Uh, yeah? Do you feel that?" Grady asks. It's not just me feeling it. The atmosphere has shifted so dramatically in the cabin, my stomach quakes, my body shakes.

There is movement outside the door, their voices sound distant to me. My vision is blackening... "You heard me... get the door open. Get her out of there." Wilder's voice is stern, but there is panic in it.

Then just like last time, the feeling passes after a couple of minutes.

Hauling myself off the floor, using the doorknob to steady me, I take a deep breath.

There are too many mysteries, there is too much unknown to lose faith in either Cal or Charlie. We belong together. My rebellious heart refuses to let go. Until I can no longer deny it... until something tangible is placed at my feet, I'm on their side.

I choose to believe in them.

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All four of my boyfriends rush at me when the door opens.

“Christ, James, did you feel that energy?” Wilder asks in my ear with a quick hug.

“I was afraid you passed out with all that smoke inhalation,” Cal says smoothing a hand down my back.

Charlie edges in closer. “Are you okay? Your eyes are red... were you crying?”

With my hand in his, Grady adds, “We didn’t need to burn the damn trunk. Are you regretting it?”

Am I okay, do I regret anything? Only time will tell.

Right now, my mind can’t stop going over the details. “You’re all being dramatic. I’m better than okay. The costumes are gone, I’m letting go of the past.” Taking a big breath and wiping my hair from my face, I add, “It’s been a long couple of days.” I don’t regret the trunk, but I’m regretting finding those pages. I can’t unsee it. I pick at the words on the page not obliterated by water damage. ‘I told him I saw him with Sara, he pushed her down into the lake. I saw her hands come up then she disappeared.’

‘He looked right at me when he turned from the lake.’

Then Charlie, whose lap I was sitting on not even an hour ago, while I tried to force feed him my terribly burnt smores, my Charlie says, “There’s more going on here.”

Wrapping his arms around me from behind, he whispers, “Please tell us what’s wrong.”

Blinking tears away, I laugh abruptly, pulling away from all of them. “Last person out of this cabin is doomed to eating that gloppy casserole Ceily made... with tuna, peas, and I swear raisins in it.” I stick my tongue out in disgust.

Falling all over each other and me, they try pushing through the door en masse while chattering away, Wilder turns to grin at me, but he pauses. I’ve come to a halt, feet from the door. I never noticed that initials were etched into the wood door frame inches from the floor.

I move to the door, squatting to look at what’s etched there... WPL... I’ve seen those initials before...

“James?” He looks around the room. “Let’s get out of here. I’m getting a bad vibe. It feels oppressive, something’s not right... let’s get the hell out of here.”

I want to run from the whole mess.

But there is no outrunning my problems now.

I’m ready to admit that it’s no coincidence I’ve come across Katie’s diary, there’s been forces pushing me towards it. I steel my heart for my mission ahead. Katie Gibson witnessed a murder, Carlotta Marlow was onto the suspect, Wilder’s visions are increasing... it’s time to get pushier.

Restless spirits aside, the victim’s families deserve to know the truth. The residents of Lake Hollow need to know that the drownings were no accident.

Chapter Two

Charlie Gibson

There was hesitation when Cal asked Remi to leave with us last night.

Something changed after she'd been in the cabin, and if Wilder hadn't been standing across from me at the bonfire, I would have sworn that he'd been whispering in her ear. She'd mentioned his visions are getting worse. I refrained from asking him anything about them, because I don't trust him. I'd been willing to try, based on Remi's urging, but I can't anymore. Wilder is getting to be a problem. His motives are murky. As far as I'm concerned, they always have been.

Coming to a halt before the patio doors, I hear Natalie say, "Ew, I don't think I'm going to eat gummy bears anymore."

Mitchell's response is muffled, as he walks back towards her, and I lose sight of him.

"Because it's a product of turkey, it says so on the package and I hate poultry."

As the village idiots examine the candy wrapper, I step outside. "It's made in Turkey, not madeofturkey." It's unfair to lump Mitchell in with Natalie James and her fluff headed comments, but they've been attached at the hip. I haven't had a chance to talk to him since our meeting with Detective Hemminger.

"Are you going fishing with me this afternoon or not?" I could care less about what activity we do, but ever since Natalie took a hook in her arm from a cast by Mitch, she's squeamish about fishing. It gives me an opportunity for some time alone with him. He's been avoiding me.

Guilt over what he told the detective? Why else would Hemminger ask about Katie's whereabouts the night Sara passed away?

Natalie looks between us, twisting, slightly in place. Mitch drops her hand, tucking both of his under his armpits. Sighing, he says, “Can we fish off the dock?”

An alarm sounds in my mind. He’s being weird about the lake again. “Sure. We don’t have to fish, I’m up for a run to Beau’s. We need to discuss the paperwork dad had drawn up.”

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In private. Natalie won't understand half of it, but she isn't discreet. All the things I've learned just this morning because she doesn't think before sharing, are Skip is researching acquiring land by the Country Club, the Marlows put a spotlight up in their yard facing the Funpark, Wilder made a comment about not wanting to use his motorcycle because of the unpredictable nature of his seizures, and... this one still has me twisted... Remington re-enrolled in art school in Florida. Classes start in less than a month.

“Uh... well, I mean... yeah, yeah we can just fish off the dock,” he says with hesitation. After a quick kiss goodbye to Natalie, he follows me to the boathouse for his tackle and a couple of rods.

Growing up, dad, Mitch, and I would fish off the dock early Sunday mornings... until the morning Katie was missing. The only one taking the activity seriously was dad. We used the time to get him to talk about Lake Hollow. All the ways it's changed through the years. It's the most impassioned we'd ever see him. His love of his hometown is impressive, while he's never been that effusive over his love of his children. He'd regale us with stories of him and Daniel running wild, playing in the water.

Until...

But dad would avoid the talk of losing Daniel. If an outsider would've heard the stories, they'd assume Daniel was still with us. Maybe he is.

“Why are my rods always getting moved? Someone dug through all my fishing gear, the line in my tackle box is all tangled up,” Mitchell gripes, hauling his cumbersome

four drawer black tackle box off a shelf. “No one should even be coming in here.” He goes to set the box down on the cement pad that runs the perimeter of the boat house, but it tips, spilling its contents all over. Artificial lures, bobbers, weights, his fillet knife, and keys spill out.

I pick up the set of keys, raising an eyebrow. I ask him, “What are these for?”

The sloshing of the water from the front of the boathouse, the loon calls, and a distant motor almost cover up Mitchell’s reply. He grabs the keys from me, shoving them in his pocket, he repeats himself, “Don’t worry about it.”

I haven’t been in the boathouse since the Fourth of July when I snagged the keys for the pontoon. In fact, I don’t keep any of my belongings out here. Besides it being dark and dank, it’s not convenient. My water skis, wakeboard, most of my fishing equipment are in the basement storage room of the house. Eliminating the need to move any of it when colder weather sets in and the boats are lifted out of the water. “I’m not. But... you seem to be?”

Over and over since I returned to Lake Hollow, I’m reminded that my younger brother isn’t the same person he was when I left. Whether it’s been the proximity to all the rumors, or he knows things he’s keeping to himself... Mitchell is acting nervous as hell.

I need to get to the bottom of it.

There’s not a cloud in the sky, as we take up each side of the cedar decked dock. Our view is clear of the country club to the left of us, the Funpark across the lake, and in the distance to the right of us and beyond the bridge, The Bends. The slimy worm I grab from the Styrofoam container we keep in the boathouse fridge dangles from the hook, while I balance the seven-foot rod with the open-faced reel in between my knees. “You need a bobber and sinker on your line,” I remind Mitchell, whose head

seems somewhere else altogether.

He nods lightly at me, while cutting the line to put a weight on it. “Dad’s really selling the house... for real this time?” His voice is saddened and hushed.

Finally. Why hold onto it, if my parents avoid being here? “That appears to be the case.”

Standing here with Mitchell, the weight pulling us to this place, to Lake Hollow feels tethered to me. A feeling of revulsion creeps up my spine. How could a place so beautiful, so serene seeming hold such treacherous secrets? The gentle waves of the water are a taunting presence. A reminder that nothing is as it seems.

“I’m still not moving. Lala left her house to me, after I get all her things packed up and distributed how she wanted, that’s where I plan to stay.” His voice cracks, wiping a tear from his cheek he continues, “I half expected the Marlows to fight everything.”

“Right. Well, her brother anyway,” I respond to him. Grady could care less about his aunt’s possessions. In some ways he seems almost emotionless about her being gone. But Grady has always been guarded around me. Fair enough, we’ve never been all that friendly until recently. Until Remington James came into our lives. “Gary Marlow would fight you just because you’re a Gibson. Are you sure he knows?”

Snagging a good-sized Perch, Mitchell starts to reel in, distracted he says, “He was served paperwork. I don’t know...” I set my rod down, grab his pliers to work the hook out of the fish’s mouth, as he continues, “What does dad need from me?”

I do the mediating between Mitch and dad. Years of disappointment dad has fostered over Mitchell’s shortcomings... his sensitivity, his mediocre grades, lack of ambition, his neediness... they’ve culminated in dad leaning on me. He expects me to be the messenger, by default that’s what Mitch wants me to do in return to dad. It’s

exhausting and pointless. “He wanted me to tell you that you can keep anything you want from the house out on the airstrip property, but it has to be moved by the end of the summer.”

A deadline. On so many fronts.

“Fine. Tell him I don’t want or need anything other than my clothes and... and I want the family picture that hangs over the fireplace.”

Interesting choice, but even though I wanted it, too, I nod at him, my smile tight. “That’s it? What about the runabout?” The boat he has always favored. “Or your camping stuff, dad’s hunting mounts, or his nature prints? No furniture, appliances, tools... None of that?”

He shrugs. “I don’t need it. I’m good.”

Trying to assess his facial expression, I feel the slight nudge of acknowledgment. He may know more than I ever realized about dad. About the past. He wants to cut ties as quietly as possible. So do I.

“Alright.” I toss my line back into the water. “Say the word and I’ll help you get things over to your new place.”

Beaus on the water is always busy on Tuesdays during the summer, not only are the wings cheap, but happy hour specials bring in a young and boisterous crowd off the lake. The docks are full of boats, the outdoor music loud, and the tables are full. Carter waves both Cal and I towards him. “You fuckers took long enough to get here. I had to hold off several people from grabbing these chairs.” DBD, or Dave as he should be referred to now that we’re all adults, holds up a pitcher of beer over his head, while waving enthusiastically.

I had to talk Cal into being here. He's been especially crabby since Remi has been quiet. Avoiding him at work, not answering texts again, and not being around when he stops at her cabin. I told him to relax, he's only going to push her away, if he gets clingy.

Cal Truitt as clingy... never thought I'd see the day.

Once we're all seated at the sticky laminated round table filled with markings, drawings, and a gummy film, Carter says, "Hemminger reached out and wanted to talk to me. About weird shit, too." Dave sets the pitcher on the table along with the stack of cups. "Told him that he needs to talk to Wilder Lee again."

Cal rolls his eyes grabbing a cup to pour himself a drink. "You mean her? Hemminger is a woman. Can we have a night free of drowning talk?"

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I suppress the urge to ask him why he wants to shut this down.

“Uh-uh, nope. Detective Mike? He’s the balding dude with the big mole on his cheek? That guy we talked to after Sara drowned.”

Oh. Now I remember... the original detective was a bulldog of a guy. He was newer to town; unlike his wife he didn’t know anyone involved. “I’ll bite... what weird shit did he ask you about?” I take the cup offered to me by Dave.

“One fucking night.” Cal shakes his head. “Just one night where the past isn’t discussed is all I’m asking for.” It’s all he’ll ever say. As his friend, I want to back off. As someone that wants the right person held accountable, I can’t.

The cover band is doing a montage of Beach Boys songs, a miss when it comes to their clientele. Most of us are under thirty. Now, if Grady or his band graced us with their presence it would be an actual party. But he’s hiding out in his cabin to avoid being spotted. The local news station outed him for remaining in the area after The Splash.

Carter continues, “He asked me about the replica telescope that the Funpark used to have near the bumper boat pond, then he was talking about Mia’s missing necklace, and he asked me about Lakeside Park, too. Can’t remember what that was all about.”

Huh. Paying more attention to the conversation, I ask him, “What do you mean he asked about the telescope my parents took down? Why?”

Cal squints at me, taking a drink of his beer. Dave snorts and says, “I still have a scar

on my leg where I hit that thing when we were chasing each other around at night. That stupid Goddamn thing.”

“Maybe if you weren’t such a fucking clutz.” Carter slaps the back of Dave’s head. He turns back towards me. “No clue. I think he should look into Wilder’s ‘visions’.” Carter uses his fingers to make quotes when he says visions.

As Carter and Dave bicker back and forth over the quality of the beer, I watch Cal. He’s avoiding my eye contact. I kick at the leg of his stool. “She’ll call.”

Only I’m not sure that this is all about our girlfriend. The more the past is discussed, the more he pulls away from me. Mitch isn’t the only person lately that I’ve realized has changed. Cal isn’t the easy-going or agreeable best friend I remember.

Looking past me at the handful of older customers who are dancing on the grassy area near the stage, he makes a crack, “This is like watching toddlers at a Wiggles concert, except it’s drunk rich boomers.”

“Cal?” I’m not a fan of his deflection. “It’s going to be okay. She’s just having a rough time with her uncle. She’s going to call.”

He takes another swallow of his drink. Hanging his head, he sighs and says, “I hope you’re right, because I’m not even sure what to do with myself. I don’t know what I did wrong.”

He trusted Wilder. If I’m guessing right, I think he’s trying to turn her against us.

Chapter Three

Remington James

Well, this is a lot to take in at eight in the morning. Rubbing my eyes, I look over the mess before me, spread all over the living room area of the cabin. Droolius sits panting on the couch, with the insides of the throw pillows along with the shredded fabric strewn all over the place, only one intact inside his mouth. “What did you do? Oh my God.” Groaning, I start to pick up the tufts of cotton.

Laughter comes from the screen door at the front of the cabin. “I’m not sure, but it looks like your dog caught whoever was responsible in the act and saved one of the pillows. Honestly, he’s a hero.” Wilder leans against the doorframe, holding out a cup of coffee.

It’s impossible to stay irritated with my furball, all it takes is one doggy smile with his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth and I fold in spectacular fashion. “I guess if he can’t escape from the cabin, he’ll just destroy the contents.” I plunk down on the couch next to him where he’s excitedly wagging his tail at the sight of Wilder. Which I would do too, if I had one.

“Hmmm... well as Droolius’ attorney at paw, I claim that the pillows attacked first. Totally self-defense. He should be completely exonerated of these horrific claims,” Wilder states sitting on the other side of him, hugging him to his side.

No one in this world should look that good in just a pair of well-worn gray sweatpants. When he passed me, the smell of his cologne caused all my systems to go haywire. Now, I just want to find a place to drag him for me to maul his body. Horny much? Get a damn grip, Remi. He doesn’t pay visits often, there must be a reason other than saying hi or being adorable. “To what do I owe this morning cup of coffee?”

“Truitt called me to check on you. He’s worried you’re avoiding him. Are you?” Nuzzling into Droolius’ side, he sets his coffee cup on the low-lying coffee table.

My mind won't let go of Katie's words. I want to forget about it. Scrub it from my brain, but instead it's consuming all my time. I keep telling myself that I just need a little breathing room, and I'll sort it out. What though? How does someone sort a mystery of this magnitude out? "What did you tell him?" Wilder still has no idea what I found or how I've backed away from Cal and Charlie.

"There, there, it'll be alright?" he quips before rolling his eyes and adding, "I agreed to talk to you. And... I may or may not have made fun of him. He used to be the most unbothered human, back when I knew him, but it appears that you've gotten to him. Nice work."

Keep it short... keep it innocuous. "Things are fine. I'm... grand."

He smirks at me. "You're a terrible liar."

Uncle Skip clomps his way into the room. "Now what? Every day there's a dilemma. What happened here?" He's aghast looking at the mess I had abandoned in favor of staring at Wilder. Droolius cocks his head looking at Skip who, might I add, looks like he slept in the winds of a hurricane.

"What's up with this..." I point at his patchy facial hair, wayward clothing, and dark circles. "You look vaguely homeless." Our issues just keep piling up between us, with no resolution. We seem to have a pact to carry on without any real talk. Healing. Maybe ignoring it all is the best we can do, because I won't apologize for being hurt. I won't apologize for expecting him to care about me as his niece.

He nods Wilder's way. "You were right about the computer glitch." Rubbing a hand through the hair already sticking up on the side of his head, he continues, "Thank you for the tip. I'm not the least bit technologically inclined. Hopefully, we'll catch the vandalism culprit now."

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Confused I look between them. “What are you talking about?” Jumping down, Droolius runs to the front door with a little yip when he hears a knock on it. “What was wrong with the security system?”

“Spyware. Either the system was compromised with spyware when it was downloaded, or someone knew what they were doing and put a bug in it. It appeared to work, and maybe it had been, but the footage was going somewhere other than the online account your uncle has.” I forget sometimes that Wilder is a numbers guy, who likes to dabble in computer things. “It should be fine now. You should limit access to the account though. Who can get into it now?”

“It’s just the employees, the maintenance guy Carlotta contracted, Charlie, and Mitchell.” That means both Cal and Charlie could be behind the vandalism. The growing unease inside me is threatening to invoke a full-blown panic. Wilder said it could’ve been on the computer already. Just one more check mark next to suspicious.

Opening the door for Keenan, I put a hand over my mouth as he shoves a tabloid magazine into my other hand. The front-page features none other than Grady Marlow in a badly photoshopped picture from the boat on the Fourth of July, making it look like he was having a romantic get away with Charlie and Cal. “Oh, they’ll love this.” I can’t help giggling. Since he came out publicly... in not so many words, media rumors are all over the place.

Wilder grabs the magazine to look at it. “Who believes this garbage?”

Following us into the cabin, griping about how unfair it is that Grady is so close, but he chooses to keep to himself, Keenan stops short at the sight of the living space

filled with pillow stuffing, Droolius, sitting proudly in the middle of the mess. “Wow. Was this Winifred?”

Really? “Keenan, I know he looks innocent, but this wasn’t our invisible friend.” Crossing my arms, I address my little imp, “Somebody got bored last night.”

“Nooo... he just found it that way. Look at him. He’d never.” Wilder winks at us. “Never.”

While I grab a banana from the left-over stock for Ceily’s baking expedition, Keenan smacks his head. “Mee-maw could not find her glasses after the Fourth of July. She baked the damn things into one of the loaves of banana bread the two of you made.”

That isn’t a surprise. She’s baked other artifacts from her kitchen into things when she gets busy talking about something. A potholder in a chicken pot pie, a serving spoon in a baked spaghetti.

Wilder starts to laugh. “I found a pair of her cheaters swimming in the chili she made me once.”

Talk of Ceily reminds me that I promised I’d help her this afternoon. “Are you coming with, to the boys and girls club event? She had promised Carlotta to help, now that she’s...” Gone. She’s gone now, but the words get caught in my throat. Admitting it out loud, even more than before, feels harsh. I now believe that Carlotta Marlow met the same fate as Katie. Father Lowe has put together a dunk tank, carnival games, and a basketball scrimmage between the kids and their parents. It was an event that Carlotta sponsored with her property management company annually.

“Who me?” Keenan points at his chest with his eyes wide. “No, thank you. It’s a church sanctioned event. If the Catholic church has things to say about the way I live my life, I will pass. That’s all you and mee-maw. I did come by to walk with you

though, there's something I want to discuss."

"That took a dark turn." I'm not familiar with what the Catholic church believes, but I have some questions I want to ask Father Lowe.

With the help of Wilder and Keenan we manage to rid the living room of all the fuzzy pillow filling and fabric. Then the little massacre artist makes his departure with my neighbor. Hell, Wilder is more than that, even if we're not acting on it since the country club. My imagination goes there every night. He's become one of my most trusted confidants. The nagging feeling that I should tell him about finding the missing pages is stifled only by the fact once I've told someone. Anyone. I have to accept it. I just can't do that.

Determined to walk to St. James earlier than the event starts, I drag Keenan out the door while Uncle Skip is still bitching about Nat oversleeping. "Why do I get the feeling that what you're about to drop on me isn't going to make my head any less scrambled?"

He pulls my hand into his, tracing over the birds I drew in detail. "Shhh... let me admire this masterpiece. Then once we're clear of this place..." He looks over his shoulder as we cut through the trees to a side street that leads up the hill to St. James church. "Okay, so listen up. I overheard Mee-maw on the phone with one of the detectives. He asked her about the necklace, and about Lakeside Park."

"He? I thought Hemminger was investigating the Ross drowning?"

Trudging up the side of the hill, I kick at a pebble concentrating on the road in front of me while Keenan answers, "According to mee-maw, her husband investigated all the drownings the first time around. Carlotta met with him a couple of times, and he was going to talk with his wife. She grew up here and originally stayed out of it because she knows the Gibsons."

It seems like everyone in Lake Hollow ‘knows’ the Gibson family. “Okay. But Ceily said she wasn’t sure where the necklace came from or how it ended up in Hidden Treasures, right?” We’re a couple blocks from the church and I can already hear the noise of the kids, piped in carnival music, and the muffled sound of a voice giving announcements on a loudspeaker. “But what’s up with Lakeside Park?”

“Hmm, girly pop, that is what I want to know. If Susanna Ross drowned in front of the Bends, why are the police interested in Lakeside Park?” The only thing I can be sure of anymore is that I have no idea what’s going on. Not with the direction the detectives are heading, not with the creepy things that have been happening, the threatening vandalism, not even with my warring heart over Cal and Charlie.

I’m lost. Drowning? I hate to make the analogy, but I’m in over my head. Growing up I was forced to become good at sussing out people with shady motives. Mom’s boyfriend, whose hand lingered a little too long on my lower back or leg, or the landlord that would key in and rifle through mom’s jewelry. As far back as I remember, I could pick up on the signs. But now I’m forced to admit that if Cal or Charlie have been playing me, I’ve been completely unaware.

We find Ceily engaged in a lively conversation with Father Lowe over Grady Marlow and the salacious ‘rumors’. That’s Keenan’s cue to cut out after a murmured ‘hello there’. My bestie is gone in a flash. I’m interested in the fact that Father Lowe doesn’t make disparaging comments about Grady.

“I’d welcome a conversation with him. I’ve known Grady since he was eight.” Father Lowe pivots to greet me. “Ah, the more hands the merrier.” He claps his hands together. I can’t help but notice as he shows me to the dunk tank where I’ll be facilitating people trying to hit the target and send him into the water, that everyone wants some of his time or attention.

We have half an hour before the carnival is under way, feeling pressed for answers, I

start my inquiry, “Father Lowe, can I ask you something. Uh, as a priest?”

His congenial smile widens. “You can call me Father Chris, and yes, ask me anything you’d like.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?” I carefully set the roll of tickets down next to the large bucket of tennis balls. “I mean... do you think they exist?” I grimace slightly at the frog with a middle finger up, that I had drawn on the side of my hand. Should’ve considered the audience I’d have today. I discreetly spit on my hand and rub at it, smearing it enough to cover.

He sits back against the tank, folding his arms, “The Catholic Church urges extreme prudence before ascribing any phenomena to a supernatural force, warning that being too quick to attribute divine origin to explainable occurrences can damage faith and warp belief. However, this is one of the few times where the popular secular perception of something lines up with the accepted position of Catholic theologians and experts. The Catholic Church has no official doctrine regarding “ghosts,” so Catholics are free to have different opinions on the questions, so long as their opinion is in line with Catholic doctrine on the body, soul, and what happens when we die. It is a matter of doctrine that when we die, our soul separates from our body and arrives in Hell, Heaven, or Purgatory. What is unclear is what God permits for souls, as far as appearing to the living, once a soul is in one of these three places. Sorry, that’s a lot... sometimes I get going.” He shakes his head. “Personally speaking, I do believe in spirits here on earth. I see it as a sign from God that more exists for our souls beyond our human forms. Belief in all that is visible and invisible is a tenet of our faith, and in the end, spirits are part of our holy tradition.”

I wasn’t expecting that. I’d figured he’d call it crazy talk, admonish me for such silly ideas, and I could play off everything that I’ve experienced at The Bends since being in Lake Hollow. I find myself almost speechless. My mouth opens and closes a couple of times before I say, “I think our cabin is haunted.” No. I know it is. Even

when I told myself that I didn't believe in ghosts or spirits, I couldn't explain any of it away.

He raises an eyebrow. "Would you like me to visit and do a blessing? It's been my experience that some souls linger because they feel a pull here. Tragic unnatural deaths can cause something like that. According to Catholic experts in this area, the way to distinguish between a soul that desires prayers and a demonic spirit, is that souls do not do things that are scary or destructive. While their presence may fill an area with a sense of sadness, they do not illicit fear, although seeing a soul may cause a very natural reaction of fright. Any activity a soul is causing will cease once prayers or Masses are offered for them."

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Sounds about right. I bite my lip before saying, “I’m not Catholic though. I’m not even sure that I believe in ‘God’.” Which seems stupid to say now that I’ve asked his opinion on ghosts. I must believe in some way. A tendril of fear slips through me over what he differentiates between a spirit at unrest and a demonic presence. I’ve experienced both sensations in the cabin, and so has Wilder.

Scary or destructive. That second feeling that has caused me to feel like I’m being smothered, felt threatened. Is there more to all the curses talk in Lake Hollow or am I losing my ever-loving mind?

We continue to set the dunk tank up, as Father Chris says, “Doubt is a normal part of human existence and nothing which we need to be afraid of or run away from, rather it is an opportunity to explore what it means. It’s often children who are more open to religion, than adults who are naturally more skeptical of all things.”

Maybe I should continue to grill him over his mention of a demonic spirit, but I’m terrified of what else he’ll say. There were two very distinctly different energies in the cabin. One, I strongly believe could be Katie Gibson, and the other I have no idea. Plus, sometimes I can’t help my mouth, “You do know that saying kids are impressionable sounds like cult programming, right?”

Father Lowe chuckles. “Any belief system can be compared to a cult, I imagine. What I would encourage any young person to do is study. I can recommend great works by some famous skeptics and theologians alike. Ultimately the relationship you choose to have with the Lord is a personal one.”

It’s easy to forget that Father Lowe is a priest. Dressed in a pair of khaki shorts, a

polo, and wearing a backwards baseball cap, he looks interchangeable with any of the dads arriving with their kids. He tosses me the tape for our sign. “How do you like Lake Hollow so far? Aside from the spooky cabin?”

“It has its charms.” Like the four men who call this their hometown. “And characters.” Like my new friends with loud personalities. Leaving for art school will be difficult, the decision made spontaneously, now feels short sighted. But I will comeback. My heart will be here in Minnesota and on the road with Romantic Ruin. If our separate lives don’t tear us apart.

Slipping his sneakers and socks off, Father Chris says in a saddened tone, “Yeah... it has its characters. Like Carlotta Marlow. You know her nephew Grady, right?”

“I do. Lala seemed to know everyone here.” The excitement of the kids pulling their parents along and pointing to different booths grabs my attention briefly. The bitterness I used to feel over missing this with my mom has softened and been replaced by wonder. There’s still a possibility I could do this for a child someday and be the grown up I had needed. I think of another question I wanted to ask, “Father Chris, uh... do you, do you know why Carlotta Marlow may have thought that the drownings that happened here weren’t accidental?”

A dark cloud passes over his features, stopping him mid climb into the tank to sit on the bench. “As a matter of fact, this is the second time in the last couple of days I’ve been asked that. I was visited by an investigator yesterday about Lala.” He puts his foot back down, shaking his head. “I told the gentleman that I have an obligation to those I’ve counseled, but I couldn’t identify the specific person regardless.”

Maybe it’s the loud clamor of kids, the bells and whistles, or my growing dread but he’s not making sense to me. He told them something or not? “I don’t follow.”

He leans his side against the tank filled with water. “Carlotta had come to me as a

friend not a priest. She shared some information with me. I told her something that I shouldn't have. Years ago, I'd had a class of twelve-year-olds submit questions about life anonymously to me the year before the suspicious drownings. One of the questions... well, I should've stepped in and found out who asked it." He shakes his head, sighing. "Maybe I could've headed off what happened. But I thought at the time it was a bad joke. We're a community centered around the lake. It was... shocking that someone would ask it. Carlotta didn't think it was joke."

Don't ask him. Just shut up, Remi. "Who was in that class? Can you tell me?" I have the sinking feeling I don't even need to bother asking. This could be the reason for the suspect list.

A line starts to form for the dunk tank, Father Lowe quickly climbs in while saying grimly, "I told the police, but I'm sorry Remington, I can't share that with you. Telling Lala was unwise."

Chapter Four

Cal Truitt

Even when I want to cry I can't. My brain does a hard reset. There hasn't been a time in years when I felt this... raw? This exposed. I've invested my entire heart in Remington, but she's separating herself from me.

Hell, I even reached out to Wilder for some answers. I regretted it immediately when he started teasing me. All I want is a chance to find out what I did or didn't do. I never could've prepared myself for feeling this twisted up.

Taking a second walk through the mini putt course before James' Flicks n' Fun opens, my eyes catch on a picture flipped upside down and wedged under a windmill obstacle. Once I've pulled it out, flipping it over I realize it's one of the drowning

photos that was missed in cleanup weeks ago. Absent-mindedly I shove it in my pocket.

I had hoped Remi was working today, but she's been crossed off the master schedule. Was it because of me? I'm so distracted I don't hear Skip walk in. "We're a little short-handed today, could you run the bumper boats on your own?"

"Where's Remi?"

More employees continue to file in the door, while Skip looks at a text notification before answering me, "Oh, good. Looks like we'll have someone coming in to replace her today after all." Then he's on his way to his office without answering my question. Typical.

My mind is on Remi and not on what I'm doing. When Kami and her over-glossed lips make her way towards me after an hour, I'm ready to leave. "Fuck my life," I say under my breath. "Here, can you take tickets. Over there." I point to several feet away from me at the start of the dock. There's little to no need to interact with me. I was feeling rotten enough without having to listen to her digs today.

"You take tickets. I'll help people on the boats." She crosses her arms over her chest.

"Do you know what you're supposed to do? You've never worked over here." I'm sending every fuck you I can to Skip in my head. He's not so oblivious he doesn't get that Kami and I aren't exactly friends.

"How hard could it be? I'm sure I can figure it out." Without argument, since she was looking for one, I shrug and move to the ticket-taking area of the dock. I ignore her anguish, when she isn't able to figure out anything. Confronted by the cold hard reality that I'm not coming to her rescue ever again, she finally gets things halfway under control.

Time creeps along as the sun beats down on me, I try to act entertaining to the waiting line of people. But it falls flat. My heart just isn't in it. My mind keeps circling back over and over to Charlie telling Carter about Remi going to art school. How does he get told that, but she keeps it from me? I want her to pursue her dreams, explore anything she desires, but I want to be in her life for it.

"You ask him. Shhh. No ask him." My attention snags on the women right behind me.

I turn to face them, asking if I can help them with something, my tone flat. Startled they both look at me wide eyed, making me wish I had followed my instinct and left work earlier. My crabbiness is seeping over into everything. Trying to be more inviting, I add, "If you have any questions I can try to answer them."

Both women appear middle aged, the one that chooses to speak on their behalf reminds me of my mom. "Are you Cal Truitt?" It's not as if I'm famous like Grady, my family isn't as well-known as Charlie's. I also don't have the infamy of a police investigation like Wilder. Why in the world would she know who I am?

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“Uhh... yeah?” Tucking my hands in my pockets, I reassess them. They don’t look familiar. When I interned, I never met any of the parents, my baseball kids only have a handful of parents that are regulars. I’m at a loss.

Kami is watching the whole exchange which chafes at me. Repositioning between her and the ladies with my back turned to my ex, I ask, “Do I know you?”

She nervously moves her watch wristband, glancing at her friend before continuing, “I’m Mary Ross. My daughter Susanna... do you remember Susanna Ross?”

The name is an instant shot to my heart. Not because of the girl whose face I can barely remember, no details stand out, but because she died the same summer as my sister. They both drowned in Lake Hollow weeks apart. “I-I... yes, yes I remember her.” I don’t want to stand here and lie to her mother, but from experience I know how hurtful it is when your lost loved one isn’t remembered. Her daughter didn’t make an impression on me years ago, beyond what I was being told by my friends. Did I even meet her?

Moving us out of the way of the rest of the line, Mary says, “I’d heard you were working here. The gal that owns the secondhand store told me I might find you here.” Bold. But before I get irritated, I listen to her as she continues, “I wanted to ask you about something. If that’s okay?”

Under the hot July sun, my mind still reeling over Remi’s absence, a queasy feeling sets in. I encourage Mary to ask it. She takes a deep breath. “The last conversation I had with Susanna the night she... when the medical examiner placed her time of death... that night.” Her friend soothes her by rubbing her arm. “She was at Lakeside

Park to meet you.”

What?! The fuck she was.

“Excuse me? Could you repeat that?” My eyes narrow as she says it again. Heart galloping at a breakneck speed. Why would she think that? “I don’t know why you were told that. I not only didn’t meet up with your daughter, I never made plans to.”

She expected me to say that. No surprise on her face, she clasps her friend’s hand. “I was going to say, she thought she was meeting you. I was on the phone with her and heard her say, ‘Why are you here, where’s Cal?’ Do you know... do you have any idea who would have lured my daughter to the park?”

Lured? Why would anyone do that?

If the police knew about this, why haven’t they asked me this question? Unless they aren’t buying it. “Ms. Ross, I have no idea. Truly none. This is the first time I’m hearing any of this. I never spent any time with your daughter.” I wince slightly at the blunt statement I’m making to her, but she doesn’t catch it. Wrapping her arms around herself, her eyes fill with tears while she whispers to her friend.

She turns slightly to look up at me. “Cal, do you know where I could find Grady Marlow, Wilder Lee, or Charlie and Mitchell Gibson?” Oh, fucking hell. She’s on a one-woman mission to solve her daughter’s death. I can appreciate her intentions, but I’m not giving their locations to her. Did Carlotta embark on this with her? There have been whispers here and there that Lala was asking about Susanna, Sara, and Katie.

All I can do is shake my head.

What the hell makes her think any of them, could tell her? Wilder was gone when

Susanna was here that summer. Wait... he was gone. Something I'd forgotten about before. He started that summer out in California with his mom visiting family. Sara was livid that she was left behind. She was insufferably moody until he came back. He never met Susanna Ross.

If all the drownings weren't coincidental... if... oh my fucking God. It never was Wilder. I'm still staring at my shaking hands when I realize Mary and her friend have walked away.

Suddenly, I want to talk to Wilder. I want to know more about these visions he's been having. Unlike Charlie, I don't think it's a sign of guilt, he may have answers we all need. "Christ, Sara, I've really fucked this all up," I say softly to myself. "Bet you've been watching this all go down angry as hell."

Chapter Five

Remington James

"Mmmm two snacks that taste great together," I mumble to myself. Moved carefully aside by Wilder and Grady as they help Ceily move heavy shelves over to make room, She has them nailing ladders on the wall for a quilt display. I can't tear my eyes away from them.

Keenan snickers next to me, rolling his eyes, he says in a teasing tone, "Permission to stare a while longer?"

How do they keep their hands off each other? I feel the chemistry any time I'm in their vicinity, it may be wishful thinking but the three of us together sizzle and pop chemistry wise. Keenan presses his finger into my cheek. "You're doing that moony-eyed gaping again, sweetheart."

Can he blame me? I think not. “Ceily where did the hats go?” Her impressive display that I helped mount from upside down umbrellas is nowhere to be seen.

Shuffling from behind the checkout counter, she stands with her hands on her hips. “Hmph. It was nice while it lasted, but the stuffy mayor’s wife stopped in again about that heirloom necklace, and it was a windy day. One of the umbrellas bopped her on the ole noggin’.”

I shouldn’t giggle, but picturing it and her permanently pinched face, I can’t hold it in. “Do you mean the necklace that Wilder disposed of in the lake?” That gets his attention, he turns making a face. “It belonged to her family originally, right?”

“Mmm, lawd yes. She caterwauled on and on. She could start an argument in an empty house that one. I told her what I did last time she came in, that I was never sold that item, don’t even remember it in stock here.” If she’s showing back up about it, that could mean that the detective knows about it, too. I hope so anyway.

Running my hand over the beautiful ivory bird locket necklace that Wilder gifted me as an apology, I smile to myself. A reminder that I’m healing, even if it’s out of spite. Inside the locket, I put a folded note he left me one morning. Patron saint of all hopeless life forms, there’s a broken mess next door that thinks you were heaven sent.

Grady holds the ladder up over his head, while Keenan and Wilder use step stools to reach it, pounding nails into the ladder rails. “Is that the one that you had at the drive-in?” he asks. “The one that is supposedly cursed?” He may be joking, but Wilder’s sharp look cuts his hilarity. “Remind me why we think that?”

“I don’t... Wilder, this is on you.” Damn. Watching his arms while he nails the ladder, makes me wish he was nailing something else altogether. I’m a goner. “Like most of the rumors around here, it’s about the drownings.”

He recounts the details about the girls that had the necklace drowning near The Bends, the necklace disappearing to reappear again... over and over. The more I think about it, the more unlikely it all sounds. It's still sitting on the weed choked bottom of Lake Hollow since Wilder's last deposit. A piece of me expects to see it laying in the cabin somewhere each day.

Hopping up to sit on the counter, I fold my legs, the Sharpie drawn picture of a bug-eyed frog holding a heart spanning my calf, makes Keenan stick his tongue out at me before grinning. Like a treasure map he keeps pointing out my drawings as if I hadn't done them. "Do we think someone dropped it off in your shop, Ceily? To get rid of it or something?"

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She finishes straightening the tea set on the shelf near her, looking at me thoughtfully with eyes framed in eyeliner not quite on the lash line. “I suppose that’s one explanation, or it was inside something else that was sold to me.” She shrugs as she pats my sunburnt knee. “Kind of reminds me of the whole loon pin fiasco.”

This is new. “What was that?”

She goes on to tell us that she had purchased a box of costume jewelry from an estate sale a few towns away ten years ago. One of the pins discovered in the lot Carlotta found out was worth thousands of dollars, but Ceily insisted she only pay what it was marked as, which was twenty-five dollars. For reasons that Ceily doesn’t know, a few weeks later Bonnie Gibson stopped in asking about the pin. Then one day in church she noticed that Bonnie was wearing it. She asked Carlotta if she’d given it to her, and it made Carlotta flustered not answering the question. She proceeded to ask Ceily a dozen questions about Bonnie’s visit to her shop.

“Anyway, saw it on Bonnie at Lala’s funeral. It made her angry when I pointed it out. It kind of upset me if I’m being honest that she bit my head off about it.”

“Meemaw, is that why you didn’t feel well?” Keenan asks her, trying to pay attention while gawking at Grady.

She nods. “One of the reasons.”

Chapter Six

Wilder Lee

Asleepless night and the growing heat of the morning almost make me want to take a dip in the lake. Not that I'm going to. My visions certainly curtailed that desire long ago. Any movement is taking great effort right now.

Rolling over, I can't help groaning. Every muscle is still sore from the episode I had after my shower last night. It hit aggressively, causing me to fall and bang my shoulder against the towel rack.

Laying near the pebble stone path of Lakeside Park, my stomach rolling, I can't help heaving.

In the distance I can hear someone calling 'Mia? Mia? Miaaa?'

Straining to sit up, to answer the voice... to see who is calling. I feel gripped. My limbs weighed down. My voice strangled in my throat.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I try to focus on breathing, but it gets thready. The sensation of sinking, water filling my nostrils. I'm choking.

My throat feels strangled.

A female voice is softly chanting, "Stop him, stop him..."

Pushed... I'm being pushed down. A male voice... "Remember... cleanse... remember... cleanse..."

I'm still choking as I start to come to.

Now, this morning, I'm bruised, tired, sore, and no closer to understanding what any of it means.

Just the universe testing me.

I've kept this to myself, until I can explain any of it to Remington, but I've started to jot things down. Connections. All the drownings are connected, I feel it. Three summers, seven deaths... they are all related.

Pulling myself up to grab the notebook I've written in, I look it over:

Mark Tullery, 16, Lived next door to Grady, walked with me to school-possible crush on my mom, coached Cal's Little League team, no known link to the Gibsons.

Mia Kelley, 18, Grady took a music class with her, family friend of the Gibsons, no real link to me.

Tera Hersch, 14, Stayed at The Bends, followed around Cal and Charlie, ran a 5k race with Grady, friendly with Katie.

Jeremy Eiler, 18, worked at Gibson Funpark, friends with Grant Marlow, didn't know him

Susanna Ross, 15, stayed at The Bends, crush on Cal and maybe Grady? Never knew her.

Sara Truitt, 16, my girlfriend, Cal's sister, Grady's best friend, Charlie -no real issues.

Katie Gibson, 12, Charlie's sister, friends with Grady and I, Cal -no real issues.

Then it ended.

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But that overriding sense of doom makes me think it'll start again. Soon.

No matter how many times or ways I go over it all, there is no reason or connection that I can see between the victims other than how they died. Nothing that points to Cal or Charlie. If Carlotta found something damning, I can't imagine what it was.

My visions haven't lied to me yet.

The messages don't make sense until it's too late sometimes, but they haven't led me wrong. What is the link?

Whistling to Droolius, as he runs along the shoreline, I glance back at Remi's cabin. Guess he found a way out again. "Hey pal, needed to stretch your legs, huh?" I scratch his side, while squatting next to him. "Where is your cute as hell owner at? Hmm? Should we go track her down? Are we going to find her in the rockstar's cabin? That's my guess."

He follows me without needing to entice him with the stick I picked up. Since Grady's privacy was compromised by the local media and talk from indiscreet locals, he made a few moves to ensure he's not bothered at The Bends. He paid a pizza delivery guy with similar hair to switch vehicles and draw attention to his house on the southside of the lake, while he drives the guy's Prius in peace.

Droolius bounds ahead of me towards the door of Grady's cabin, the sound of his guitar can be heard along with Remi's soft laugh. Letting myself in, since both do the same at my cabin, I lean back against the doorframe. Remi is in her underwear, topless, Grady is in his boxer briefs. I'm suddenly overdressed in my

shorts and tank top. “Am I interrupting?” Not that I care.

Remi bounces up with a little squeal of delight. “Perfect. Get over here. Listen to this song. It took him all of fifteen minutes to write. It’s Romantic Ruin’s next hit. Come over here.” She grabs my hand to pull me over to the couch. Instead of playing, Grady puts his guitar down, with hesitant smile on his face.

I’ve done my best to steer clear of intimate interactions with both of them. Not because I don’t want them. Fuck, this close to them both is making me crawl out of my skin with want. But my seizures, Lala’s death, the past rearing its ugly head... it’s been like a dark veil over me. Do I pull them close to me, when the future is so unsteady seeming? It would be selfish. It would kill me if I can’t keep them in my life.

“Did you have another seizure?” Grady asks quietly noting the purplish mad looking mark seen under my tank top.

Shrugging, I pick his guitar up, cradling it against my chest, I strum a few notes. “What was the chord progression that Katie loved to use in her songs? She called it the cute boy bop?” My faint smile falls off my face as I remember the time spent with her excited to show us a new song. She loved to explain her ideas with her eyes shimmering. I play with my eyes closed, a hand coming to rest on my leg. When I open them, Remi is watching me intently, her thumb caressing the inside of my thigh.

“You’re really good. I mean... freaking good.” She blinks at me in surprise. “I had no idea.”

I don’t play much anymore. Over the years it became too fraught with heartache. Memories of Katie, Sara, Grady... loss, betrayal, bitterness.

“He’s better than I am,” Grady says reclining back. “He won’t admit it, but he is. He

doesn't write music, but he sure as hell plays better than I do."

Stopping mid stroke, I put the guitar back down. I know what he's doing. My hand rests over Remi's. "How was the charity event?" It's taking some restraint not to look over at Grady lounged back on the couch. His lengthening dick outlined within his maroon underwear.

"Where to do I start?" She moves behind me, wrapping her arms around my neck. Her breasts pressed against my back. Christ, we have lift off. "Father Lowe is traumatized from meeting me, I'm sure. First, I asked him a bunch of questions, then I couldn't figure out the mechanism of the dunk tank, and kept accidentally plunging him in the water, fed him Ceily's cookies because I mixed up the plates, stepped on his bare foot, gave him an inadvertent peep show changing out of my wet shirt... oh, oh, and this one tops it all, my phone had our Pillowbiters playlist on it, I hadn't swiped out and I was opening my phone to look at my calendar and FMRN blared out."

Wiping tears from my eyes from laughing, I grab ahold of her forearm. "You definitely left an impression."

My cellphone rings, with the horse's ass I programmed for Cal's number. "Now what do you need?" Should I answer his call that way? Probably not, but we've transitioned from getting along into the more mercurial waters of friendly. So much could go wrong with that.

"Hi to you, too. Are you with Remi?" Not this again. What's with his sudden desperation to know what she's up to all the time?

"If I am?"

Remington mouths 'who's that?' but I get up and walk to the kitchen area.

“She hasn’t called or texted me back. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine, but you don’t sound like you are. You’re coming off strongly pathetic, with a side of obsessive.” I can’t resist needling him a bit. “What’s going on?”

He gives me a dissertation on the spiral he’s been on. I hear him talk more than I have the entire time I’ve known him. Maybe I should be alarmed he’s dumping it all on me, but instead there’s a part of me feeling downright triumphant that I’m the one he’s confiding in. Not fuckface Gibson for once.

“Wait... what? She came and found you at work to ask you that?” Mary Ross confronting him had to blow his mind. If she showed up on my door, I’d probably pledge to help her find out what happened come hell or high water. My soft spot has always been women my mom’s age or older. “Did Detective Hemminger meet with you?”

Both Grady and Remi are watching me, as Cal goes on, “Do you mean recently?”

Nothing gets by him. I roll my eyes. “Uh huh.”

I let him go on for far too long about the state of his life before making an excuse to get off the phone. Turning to Remi, I ask her, “Okay, truth time. Why are you ignoring Truitt?”

She squirms around, scratches her ankle, her face scrunching. “I’m not hiding anything.”

Oddly specific.

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Grady looks at her, tapping his knee his voice sarcastic, “So... what are you nothiding then?”

In true Remi form, she bites her lower lip, sways my way ditching her underwear as her steps bring her inches from me. “It’s hot in here, dontcha think? You need to lose some clothing.” Maybe she’s able to sidetrack Grady, Charlie, or Cal this way, but she needs to learn that I’ve got more self-control than all three of them put together.

“Nice try. Now that I know you’re keeping secrets, I’m more interested in that.” Backing away from her to lean on the kitchen counter, I almost miss the disappointed look pass over her face. “Just tell me, you’ll feel better.” Her anxiety over Cal asking about her was palpable. The thing is, Remington James may be even more stubborn than me, I don’t hold out much hope that she’ll give in.

“Right.” She looks over her shoulder at Grady who has sat forward watching where things go between us. “It has to be eighty degrees in here...” She tugs lightly at the leg of my shorts. “You’ll feel better...,” she says in a sing-song voice. “We’ll make you feel so much better.”

Grady can’t stay away, joining us in the kitchen, he grabs Remi’s shirt handing it to her. “There’s a boat a few feet from the shore, they have a clear view into the cabin through the picture window.”

She takes the shirt, tying the front up. “I thought I’d heard a boat motor. Hardly anyone fishes near The Bends. That’s weird, right? The guy that cuts the grass around here said the fishing is the best on the north end near the bend in the channel.” The rumors keep the locals from this area of the lake, a lot of the tourists keep near the

south end where they stay, but the darker, weedy waters near The Bends are home to the trophy fish.

“Occasionally, someone comes along, like that guy we saw pull up that big thirty-inch Northern Pike.”

She hums to herself, eyes closed while she leans back into Grady’s chest. Her voice is relaxed and hushed sounding, “It’s so peaceful around here, I like the fact we don’t have to listen to motors all the time.” He kisses her shoulder, making eye contact with me.

Every cell of my body wants to reach out for them, but I’ll take my control where I can exercise it. When he moves around her, grazing his side across the front of me, my dick strains inside my shorts. The fucker is trying to provoke me. I’m not playing into this. “Yeah, not a lot of people fishing in row boats.” My laugh is halfhearted.

Row boats. Why is it that making my mind grasp for something... something I should remember.

Not a boat with a motor... a rowboat.

Fuck me. Goddamnit, why didn’t I remember this when Hemminger asked about Susanna Ross?

Looks like I need to reach out to the detective. The boat that was seen in front of The Bends was a rowboat from what I’d been told. At the time it didn’t even dawn on me how strange that was, I hadn’t been here when it happened. Whoever told me about it, said specifically that it was a rowboat. The thing about a rowboat is that you wouldn’t accidentally strike someone in the water and do much damage. In a boat with a motor of any kind you certainly can. If a rowboat was seen here, no struggle in the water was heard... a sensation grabs hold tightly. I know I’m on the right track because that

dread and creeping darkness seeps in.

Could she have been killed elsewhere and dumped here... could the others have been? By someone using a rowboat to deposit them in front of The Bends.

Chapter Seven

Remington James

The urge to chase after Wilder, is only beat by the fact Grady's hands know just where to touch me. "He's only acting like he has a secret now, because of me... right?" If I could guarantee that they wouldn't go after Cal or Charlie, I'd tell them. Would I blame them for their increased suspicion? Not at all. The distance I've put between us is making me analyze everything. Possibly finding fault with little things that mean nothing. Charlie is being his understanding self, thinking my problems with Uncle Skip have me upset. Cal is acting slightly frantic. Which one is being disingenuous? In my very soul I want to believe neither of them are.

Pulling Grady behind me, the mugginess of the cabin is causing sweat to bead on my upper lip, a swipe of my tongue over the salty spritz is taken by him as teasing. So be it. "Go for a swim with me?" Not once have I seen him go near the lake, much like Cal and Charlie he seems to pretend like it doesn't exist. Wilder has no problem being on his dock, or for that matter, tossing things that don't belong to him into the lake.

He slows behind me bringing us to a stop. "Ehh, Rem..."

These superstitious hang-ups have to be overcome. What does he think will happen to him taking a dip in the lake in broad daylight with me by his side? "I'll protect you."

His smile cocks to the side. "Protect me, huh?"

Without warning he scoops me up taking long strides towards the dock in front of his cabin. Not slowing as he picks up speed until we sail off the end of the dock into the sun glistening ripples of the lake. The cool water feels refreshing as we're submerged. His strong arms tug me back towards the surface, where coughing, we drag the hair out of our faces.

On tippy toes, I hold my head above the water, a laugh bubbling out of me. "I think we scared the person fishing away." The boat moves further north past a cluster of rocks sticking out of a weedy section of lake, moving out of sight the putter of his motor grows distant.

Grady's smile lights my insides up. "If that didn't do it, this would've." Encircling my waist, he pulls me tight, lavishing a kiss on me that steals my breath away.

Moving a couple feet closer to the shore where I can stand flat footed, Grady still holding me tight, we're submerged to midchest level. He goes in for another kiss, his breath labored. "There is absolutely no one else that could've compelled me to get in this lake again." I run my hand down his jaw, staring into his brilliant blue eyes. My thumb toying with his lower lip, I lean in to gently kiss it.

"I dare you to make love to me right here... right now. In the big, bad, scary lake." We're essentially out in the open, but the cabins that are currently rented are quiet. He's been stringing me along since I came to his cabin. We'd make out until I was writhing, then he'd get occupied writing his music. I'm taking this chance; I need this release.

I need my songbird.

I slide a hand into his underwear, instead of stopping me, he does the same, cupping my ass. The action causes me to grind against him. Fevered words pass between us that melt into mere noises. Wrapping my legs around his waist, my pussy rubs the

length of him. “Mmmm, I need to feel you inside me. Don’t keep making me wait.” We don’t have protection, but I don’t want to go get any. Could be a bad call, but I’m too worked up.

Our kisses don’t break, as I tug down his underwear freeing his dick. Working him inside me, gasping against his mouth, our movements small and jerky. “Oh... oh, that’s it... that’s it...,” my voice is higher pitched as I cling to him.

He whispers in my ear, “Remi, I’m drowning in you. Completely drowning.”

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Maybe he doesn't realize it yet, but I already drowned in his depths weeks ago. Wherever life takes me beyond this summer, whatever I spend my days doing-he will be a part of it.

Under the midday sun, standing in the dark waters of Lake Hollow, I realize the extent my heart has dived fully into the burgeoning love I have for Grady Marlow, trusting that I'm safe there.

Carlotta Marlow's little blue bungalow sits on a corner in the northside of Lake Hollow. Blocks from St. James Cathedral, perched at the top of the hill overlooking the lake. Her flower beds and gardens appear well cared for like the home is currently being lived in. I can't help but admire the lawnsculptures of birds done in a mosaic of shimmery tiles gracing the bed of her hydrangeas.

Looking over at Grady, who has stopped short of her ornate wood door, I inquire again, "Are you okay?" I've asked him variations of that all the way here in the Prius, whose steering wheel pulls to the left. Like it's not enough his borrowed car rattles like it'll blow, now it's got a mind of its own. I tried to convince him to walk, but between the heat and the boxes he's grabbing, my argument didn't stand up.

The news that Carlotta left her home to Mitchell Gibson stunned me. Then I reminded myself that she suspected Grady of horrible things. Maybe her choices would've been different, had she known the truth. "I haven't been here in years." He sighs looking over the yard once more, before pulling the set of spare keys he had from his shorts pocket. "Last time I was here, I'd helped her plant those." He nods his head at the line of white lilac bushes next to the cobblestone driveway.

We make our way into the warm space, her little touches everywhere. Nothing opulent in the cozy rooms, but all of it tasteful. Splashes of deep color mixed in with cherry-stained wood, her framed photographs of Lake Hollow, and carvings of animals. “He said the boxes are on the back porch.” Mitchell spent several minutes trying to spit out the reason he called Grady before he had gotten to the point. Carlotta had boxes with his name on them.

The hallway walls are adorned with pictures that I scan over on the walk to the backside of the house. My eyes catch sight of one taken at the Funpark. In it, Carlotta looks younger, surrounded by a group of boys’ and girls’ middle school aged. I recognize Cal and Charlie immediately; their smiles haven’t changed. They’re standing on the dock that surrounds the bumper boat pond next to a telescope that looks just like the one in the gazebo at Lakeside Park.

“This telescope isn’t there anymore.” I tap the picture. “I wonder when it was removed and why?”

The brass plate base and big bolts remain on the dock. I had thought it was a utility cover, often griping to myself when I’ve stubbed a toe on it, or others have tripped over it. It’s a hazard really, making the absence of the telescope even more bizarre.

Grady leans in to look at the photo. “I never spent time there, I wouldn’t know,” he says, sadness saturating his tone.

The way his dad’s grudges colored his adolescence makes my heart break for him. It put a wedge between his beloved aunt and him, it kept him from his classmates, and from enjoying the activities other kids his age were involved in.

Two cardboard boxes are sitting on a white shag rug near the doorway. A weathered black hard leather guitar case leans against them. Grady crouches next to it, his hand on the case, with his head bent. His voice is strangled by tears when he says, “I used

to lie to myself all the time. Tell myself that I would've loved music regardless of her influence on me. That her getting close to Mitch and Charlie didn't sting." His eyes are red, cheeks wet when he looks at me. "She made me who I am. Everything I am. But she preferred them."

Chapter Eight

Grady Marlow

Against my better judgment, I drove to Cal's rental townhome, still not sure what his intentions were inviting me over. The clunker I swapped my yellow Pontiac Firebird Trans Am for to keep any nosy media people away, sits idling outside his place. Pulling my cellphone out, I scroll to his message again. It simply says, Stop by if you have time 533 Dunbar Dr, thx. My guess is that he wants to pry about Remi.

I pass Sara's last message and video. After years of opening, it daily, I realize I haven't watched it for a couple of weeks. Clicking on the video after making peace with Wilder, changes the context. The angry look on his face while hugging Sara doesn't seem directed at her, or even me, but at Cal who is standing on shore pointing at something with irritation on his face. For years I'd built a narrative in my head surrounding the toxic relationship between Sara and Wilder, but honestly, she and Cal fought just as much.

"I'd undo it all. I'd go after you, if I could do it all over again, Sara. There will never come a day I'm not sorry about that. It's time to let this go," I say to her, to myself, and the powers that be. "I need to get rid of this video now." Before I can stop myself like I have so many times over the years, I delete it.

There's finality in it. Admission to myself that holding grudges against Wilder, torturing myself watching it... none of it fixes anything. She's gone. We lost her six years ago.

It doesn't take Cal long to open the door after I press the tinny sounding doorbell. "Hey, man." He gives me a one-armed bro hug, with a slap to my back. "Did you walk all the way here? Where's the hotrod? Did Remi finally convince you that none of us are meant to have our bodies jostled around in machines?" He smirks to himself at the mention of her.

It only took him five seconds to do it. Here I thought I was getting obsessive about her, seems I'm not alone there.

I tell him the arrangement I made over the vehicle swap, while we settle in his living room. Then he's up to grab a couple bottles of beer from his empty looking fridge. Tossing me one, he asks, "We're friends, right?"

Are we? I hesitate because even if we'd been friendly years ago, we've never moved in the same circles. But Remington has changed all of that. Now, we have her in common, not just the tragedy of the past. Shrugging, I clear my throat and respond, "Yeah, I guess?"

That sounded noncommittal of me, but he continues anyway, "Did Remi tell you she's going back to Florida for art school soon?"

"It's a good move. You've seen how talented she is." He half turns to lean against the counter gazing out the patio door while I continue, "It's not forever, she'll come back." I need reassurance myself that the end of the summer doesn't endus.

He closes his eyes and sighs. "She hasn't said a word to me about it. She hasn't really said anything to me since the night we burned her mom's trunk."

"Oh? How did you hear about it then?" She is avoiding him. She'll share about it if she wants to, no prodding will bring it about like Wilder had tried. Not that I'm going to tell him she's doing that. "Ahhh... her cousin the world class yapper probably."

“No. Charlie mentioned it.”

She’d tell him, but withhold it from Cal?

“Mmm, could it be that she hasn’t had a chance yet? She’s been busy at Hidden Treasures and volunteering with Ceily.” I play it off, because I don’t have the heart to admit I’ve seen her every day. “What does Charlie say?”

“What I want to hear, like he always does.” Finishing his second bottle of beer, he grabs a bottle of Jack Daniels off the fridge along with shot glasses. “Want one?”

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This little drop in at Cal's place is fast becoming a party for two. "Just one shot."

Two hours later we're both feeling no pain. I've listened to his opinion of Skip James and the relationship he has with Remi, heard everything there is about the Lake Regional High school baseball team, and played a halfhearted game of quarters. My motor skills are lessening all the time. Laughing at the public access channel he'd stopped on looking for a baseball game, I almost miss the couch when I go to topple on it. "What the actual fuck is this?" I slur at him. My vision swims as I try to focus on a nun hula hooping in the courtyard of the St. James Cathedral.

Cal flops down next to me on his old couch, out of nowhere asking, "Do you think I'm emotionally repressed?" Is he serious right now?

"Doyou?" I wobble standing to grab the stale chips Cal dug out of a cupboard. "Why?"

"I don't know. I don't like sharing things. Our family motto is 'keep it to yourself' and that's been the unspoken motto forever, because we keep it to ourselves." He chuckles after a hiccup.

He picks up the television remote pausing the screen as he points. "Is that... Remi?"

I wouldn't consider myself drunk enough to be seeing things, but sure enough on the frozen screen is our Remington James, standing next to a dunk tank, inside the tank sits Father Chris Lowe from St. James. "They took video of the charity event? Damn, man, look at her, she's such a knockout." Her animated little faces talking to the kids, the twirling of her Sharpie marker hanging on her bird locket chain, the little

drawings littering her skin. The whole package inside and out makes me thank my lucky stars every day.

Cal's dreamy-eyed gaze at the visual of her is certainly duplicated on my face. He rewinds until the camera is focused on the booth she is volunteering at. Like lovesick idiots we replay her segment a few times. "Let's call her," Cal says with another slight hiccup.

Normally, I'd love to call Remi, if she answers. Her cellphone is usually misplaced somewhere. But we've both over imbibed. I've already accepted that I'm passing out here. "How about we don't drunk dial our girlfriend?"

"Our..." Cal laughs to himself. "Doesn't it feel

strange thinking of her that way? Are we boyfriends then? Because no offense, I don't think of you like that."

I should've anticipated dealing with this question, eventually. Cal is a good-looking guy, but I'm not attracted to him. Never have been. "We're friends, remember? I'm not into you, man." Thankfully, that whole conversation is dropped as he channel surfs, looking for some sport to have on in the background.

He lands on an 'expose' of Romantic Ruin, or more correctly focused on yours truly. The glib sounding reporter stands in front of blown up photo of me on stage at The Splash. "Marlow hasn't been seen since the music festival in Minnesota, insiders say he's laying low while rumors circulate about his sexuality-" Our band's latest release has managed to stay strong in the top five songs for that last three weeks on the Billboard music charts, but sure... let's talk about my personal life. My bottom teeth hurt from clenching my jaw and my left ear is ringing just watching this. The guilt over my shit eclipsing the band itself is always on my mind.

Making a disgusted noise, Cal flips the channel. “Stupid fuckers. How is that news? Not to mention that no one even acknowledges the loss you had in your family. Fuckers.” This could be the moment that I decide Cal may actually be my friend. A real friend.

An hour later, when I find Cal in the middle of his kitchen doing the standing nod off, I call it. The party wraps up with me steering him to his bed. Depositing the wastepaper basket next to it, I put a hand out to the wall to help guide me to the couch, tempted to try calling Remi. However, just hearing her voice is a weak replacement over holding her.

I may be feeling sick tomorrow, but it was worth it. It’s been years since I last spent any real time with Cal. That time lapse had me forgetting how much fun he actually is. I laugh at the memory earlier in the evening when he did a little heel kick, while speaking in an Irish brogue, or when he attempted a jumping toe touch but nailed the wall like a live action cartoon. Silly. Aspects of his personality that seem dimmed around Charlie.

Chapter Nine

Remington James

Borrowing one of Ceily’s vintage bicycles to get to the Sheriff’s office had seemed like a solid plan. I don’t know if Hemminger will find the information I have helpful, or if she can tell me anything, but I’m determined to try. That was before the day turned balmy, hovering around ninety degrees, before I forgot about bugs, and before I miscalculated the distance or time it would take. My desire to do this is flagging. I could’ve gotten a ride, but then I would need to explain why I’m going there.

I roll to a stop on the bike path with the Sheriff’s office in sight to swat mosquitos off my ankle. “Christ on a cross what the foook,” I whisper furiously in a Scottish

accent. The swarm of bugs hovering around me is an irritating cloud. Pulling my ponytail tighter, adjusting the white babydoll top and jean shorts I'm wearing, and kicking at the rusted chain guard that has been rubbing against the pedal, I'm almost ready to proceed. Until it dawns on me that I still have to bike all the way back into Lake Hollow. Good freaking gravy, so much for thinking this was a good idea.

By the time I angrily shove the clunky wreck of rust into the bike rack at the Sheriff's office, I'm crabby. The cinderblock, no nonsense building feels like a refrigerator after the heat and exertion of the ride. I wipe my sweaty face against an arm, leaning against the wall waiting for the detective. The desk clerk behind the bullet proof glass said she was on a phone call as she eyed me over, like I'm here to bump someone off.

"Ms. James?" Detective Julia Hemminger approaches from the hallway, extending a bottle of water so cold that condensation drips off. Bless her law-abiding damn heart.

Accepting the drink with thanks, I follow her into an office stuffed full of her things. The walls are covered and the desk is piled up high with paperwork. "I'm surprised by the visit. Is everything okay?"

That's a rather broad term. Okay? I'm fairly sure I'm being haunted, one or more of my boyfriends are lying to me, my uncle detests me, and I just donated a pint of blood to the ferocious mosquitos that plagued me on my way here. Oh, and I just realized my cellphone isn't on me. Goll damn it.

"I take it by that lack of a response that it's not. What can I help you with?" She adjusts her chair, folding her hands on the desk in front of her. That worn and stained turquoise and pink striped journal is the only way Katie Gibson has to communicate with us now. Letting it go is for the best, but I'm nervous it won't get the detectives any closer to holding the culprit accountable. Poised to listen intently, she meets my eyes. But finding the words is proving difficult. What if I cause the police to go after an innocent person? What if this conversation is the downfall of someone I love?

Pulling out Katie's diary with the missing pages slipped inside of it, I put it on the desk in front of the detective. Her eyes widen as she looks down at it. "What do we have here?"

Detective Hemminger reminds me of my high school art teacher, the same warm voice, understanding eyes, and a demeanor that screams of competency. I want to tell her every last thing. About Carlotta's letter, the tidbits I've picked up from various people over the past few weeks, but I know better. She's trained and paid to be an information gatherer. I tell her about finding the diary, but nothing else.

It's enough of a confirmation that the drownings were not accidental, at least two of them weren't. I watch her page through, stopping and scanning the words. When she reaches the final entries, she sucks a breath in, her eyes getting even bigger. "You've looked at this?" she asks me in an even tone.

"Mmhm. I have. Can I ask you something?" She pulls her glasses off, to rub at the side of her nose. "You can."

"Do... do you have a suspect?" My heart lurches in my chest. Not really wanting the answer, but knowing I need it. "For the drownings?"

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She frowns before putting her glasses back on. “There is a person of interest. I’m limited in what I can say about the Ross murder case, because it’s an open investigation. That includes who the suspect is. It’s all circumstantial right now, there isn’t enough to make an arrest. We don’t want to risk alerting this person that we’re trying to find evidence.” She puts her hand on the top of Katie Gibson’s diary continuing, “What you found changes some things.”

In other words, she can’t tell me. I placed the diary in her hands, but there isn’t anything to allay the fears mounting inside me over Cal and Charlie. “But you only mentioned Susanna Ross’ case, what about Sara and Katie, now?” Wilder has asserted that they are all linked, but there is no telling what the authorities believe or can prove.

“Thank you for coming in with the diary. I understand that you could’ve done something else with it, but it was wise to bring it to me. Does anyone else know about it?” Deftly ignoring my question, she marches on.

Uh, uh. I’m done giving her anything, because she’s not able to share a thing with me. I see you and raise you... a zipped lip. Shaking my head at her, I drop my eyes from her face.

She moves the diary into a manilla envelope, writing on it, she puts it in a locked cabinet against her wall. “You remind me of my daughter. If she was in the same situation as you, I’d want someone looking out for her. You have an interesting group of new friends in Lake Hollow.” That’s rather funny when I consider my own mother. She’d gleefully abandon me with no thoughts of my safety. Oh, that’s right she actually did.

The detective sits back down, her face serious as she says, “Please be careful. While I can’t tell you who our person of interest is, I will say they are in Lake Hollow currently. You may find yourself spending time with them, and there is no telling what this person is capable of or what they think of you. I’d advise you to avoid private time spent alone with anyone beyond your family for now.” Her sad smile morphs into a weary sigh. “If I’m scaring you, that might be for the best. It’s much easier to stay alert if you’re at least a bit afraid. Please take my card, if you hear or see anything that connects to the drownings, I’d like you to call me.” She hands me her business card which I tuck into my pocket.

Afraid? I’m not scared right now, I’m getting angry.

Whoever killed Sara, likely took Katie’s life, too. Wilder’s visions draw a connection between all seven drownings. The person that did it not only got away with it but let Wilder flounder under suspicion. This person has to be responsible for Carlotta’s demise. A body count of eight, and maybe there’s more. Maybe I’m a target. But afraid? Not as much as I want to destroy them. In this moment, I’m even more convinced this isn’t one of my boyfriends.

Hemminger walks me out. “Any big plans today? Whatever you do, there’s a record high temp coming this afternoon. Try to stay hydrated and out of the sun.” Spoken like a true mom. It reminds me how much I once craved that kind of guidance.

“Charlie Gibson and I are going out for ice cream.” I throw his name out there as a test. Call it a degree of self-preservation, I want to see her reaction to my mention of him.

She smiles kindly at me. “Fitting activity based on the weather.” I let out the pent-up breath I had after announcing my plans. “Remember my warning, okay? For the time being, while my partners and I start looking into the other drownings, re-interview a few people, it’s really best not to talk about any of this with anyone.”

One last reassurance needed, I say, “I understand. I can keep this to myself. I should get going though, I’m meeting up with Cal.” I’m not. In fact, I need to get back to him after avoiding telling him about art school. I just say it to see her reaction over my mention of him.

My insides freeze when she bites her lip, an unsaid fear in her eyes. “Cal... Cal Truitt?”

“Yeah, he’s my boyfriend. We’re meeting up.” Do it, Remi. Just throw another little piece of curiosity at her... “He wanted us to meet up at Lakeside Park before I get ice cream with Charlie.” Wilder’s visions have something to do with the park, not just the lake.

She opens her mouth up, eyes tense.

Then she folds her arms over her chest. “Remi, I can’t stress this enough. Please be careful.”

I want to throw up, walking out of the county sheriff’s office. Not over the long bike ride back to Lake Hollow, but over the possibility that Cal isn’t who I think he is.

My horrendous trek back to The Bends comes to an end with me almost falling off the bike outside the cabin door. Sweat running down my back and neck. A sticky film from the bugs, dust, and cottonwood fluff coupled with my wild hair make a shower imperative.

“I give up. You were being chased so you stole a bike from a junkyard to flee? No, no... let me guess, Skip is looking at buying a bike shop, so he had you start transporting them one by one back here. This is the hundredth bike.” Wilder puts his hand out to help me up. Of course he had to come outside to witness me like this. He’s all freshly cleaned looking, standing shirtless in a pair of black athletic shorts,

causing me to almost pant for reasons other than the heat. I'm grossed out for him, when he plants a smooch on my forehead.

"Eww... don't kiss me, I'm all mucky yucky. I'm covered in the countryside." Playfully pushing him away, I stretch my legs out. All that walking, and still, all it takes is a few miles on a bicycle to make them cramp. To be fair, it wasn't a well-functioning one with one wheel bent, the chain guard catching the pedal, and the seat a glorious, cracked ass pincher. "I need to clean up."

He trails me into our cabin, where Droolius looks up from Skip's tennis shoe he was intently chewing on to greet us with an excited yip and tail wag. My little menace. I give an affectionate rub to his head. "Skiperoo is going to love that."

Telling him what I'd been up to, Wilder isn't thrilled that I rode a bike all the way to the Sheriff's office to hand over Katie's diary. He tells me that he would've taken me. Yeah, on the back of his sleek black and red road rash inducer. No, thank you. I'll take the soreness, and bug bites versus scraping over the pavement. "You're missing the point here... did you hear me?" I strip out of the damp clothes, Wilder leaning in the doorway.

"Huh... the... huh?" His eyes soften, his whole face transforms watching me. That glimmer of lust, the quirk of his lips. Maybe I can get a hand? Since our fun the night of Grady's party he's been stopping anything beyond a touch or kiss. "You'll have to forgive me. I can't hear right now with you naked in front of me. I can't think." He steps into the small bathroom, closer to me, his hand running down my sweaty side. "I can barely catch my breath."

I cup his hardening length through his shorts. "I'm not opposed to assistance in the shower." So help me, if he puts me off again, I may scream.

But we don't make it in the shower before I've removed his shorts and underwear. "I

surrender, James.” Wilder rasps below my ear, where his tongue just licked a path up my neck. “You’re a terrible tease, you know that? As a side note-”

I interrupt him with a huff, “Me?! I’m not the tease here. You’re the worst.”

“I think you meant best. I’m the very, very.” He nips my ear lightly, his voice giving me goosebumps. “Very best.”

That look in his eyes further unravels me. “Hey, stop weaponizing your eyes at me like that.” Holding the back of his head and keeping him close to mine, I whisper, “If you stop this now, I will go absolutely savage on you.”

His cocky smirk firmly on his face, he pulls me tighter. “Back to the side note... you drove the temp up a good ten degrees when you took your clothes off. I had to let you strip me just to get comfortable. “I win. He caresses my back, while his tongue in my mouth makes my body so needy for him that I catch myself shimmying as close as I can to him. With as much of my bare skin touching his as possible, my right hand wrapped around his sizeable dick, my strokes are getting jerky.

My frantic kisses, paired with the moans he makes are getting me worked up to the degree that my limbs aren’t cooperating with me. He scrambles my brain this close. His tongue is a key that turns off all thoughts.

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Being careful flies out the cabin window. No condom? Right now, I can't have a problem with that.

His engorged dick is weighty in my hand as I guide him into my throbbing pussy. "Oh, James...", is his seductive moan against my forehead as he thrusts deeper into me, is like a further aphrodisiac.

Wilder Lee has moves that have me riding a wave of euphoria as I'm clawing at his back. I think I stop breathing for a few seconds. His dick is making sure that I'll remember this, days from now, feel that blissful ache left behind.

My fervent moans of, "Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop...", against his mouth are rewarded by his seductive look paired with that cheeky smirk of his. I can't pull him tight enough to me.

From against the sink, against the wall, me wrapped around him tightly. Each time I'm spiraling, he pulls back drawing out the ecstasy. Until I use all my might to grab his ass cheeks to pull him tighter against me. "I want you to cum," I say raggedly into his ear. Does he ever. Seeing him running out of me, down my leg, does something to me. That feral part of me purrs, luxuriating in causing him to blow.

My mouth seeks his again, as his dick is pressed between us growing rock hard again. "More... oh my God, please." Using his cum, I stroke down his veiny cock. I'm not done with him yet... I never will be.

"Mmm... I'm not arguing with you about that." His fingers dance across the curve of one of my breasts as his other hand plays with my clit causing me to suck a breath in.

His every move, every breath draws me more deeply into him.

Our bodies, slick with sweat, are intertwined. His voice is spellbinding, “I’m not going to last, if you keep grinding on me like that.” But I can’t help myself. He pulls back, sitting me on the edge of the sink. He dives back in for a kiss that makes my heart skitter about in my chest. “Fuck... I can’t stop.” He grabs me, pulling me back onto his rigid dick.

I’m sure anyone at The Bends can hear us when we climax, because the sound I make has Droolius running to the bathroom, and Wilder’s growl has me holding him tightly, my legs locked around him. My body wracked by unsteady breaths, as I quiver. He kisses the corner of my mouth, his voice shredded, “You’re fucking intoxicating.”

Cascading water with suds from the fragrant peony shampoo pool at my feet. Wilder squirts more shampoo on his hand to massage my head with as I resist the urge to lean back against his chest. “Relaxed?” he asks as I find myself lulled into a daze. For the first time in days, I let go of all the thoughts troubling me. I had been solidly in the present moment. Just realizing that, put an end to it.

Wilder misinterprets my sigh. “No, you’re not?”

I focus my attention on the reddened bug bite above my knee, while I try to explain, “My mind is busy trying to sort things out. It took a break, but we’re right back at it.”

He puts an arm around my waist to pull me flush to him. “You won’t accomplish anything if you get wrapped up in maddening matters. It’ll just drive you crazy... crazier.” He laughs, while squeezing me with the arm holding me tightly.

We switch positions so he can rinse off from washing my body and hair. Turning to grab the bottle of soap, I catch him look up out of the corner of my eye. He crashes

against the wall of the shower, I move quickly to lower him, shutting the shower off.

Swearing to myself, because I can't stop his momentum, his body strikes the floor of the tub/shower combo, his head glancing off the side with a dull thunk. My eyes fill with tears. I couldn't even manage to keep him from injuring himself. All his concern over having a seizure in front of me is further complicated by my argument not holding up at all. A lot of good having me here was. A strained groan comes from him as his body shakes.

I slide under his upper body, holding his head in my lap. Wiping tears from my eyes, I say as soothingly as possible, "I'm here. You're going to be alright. It's okay. I'm here. I'm here baby. I'm here." My hand smooths through his hair. His body relaxes after a couple of minutes, but before I can think of what to do next, it starts again. Wilder starts to sound like he's choking, making me reposition, terrified that it's because of how he's lying.

Under his breath he's saying something. It takes

leaning in close to his mouth to decipher what it is. "Remember, cry... remember, cleanse... stop, stop, stop." Then his teeth clench, the tremor becomes stronger. I need to call for help, but I'm afraid to leave him in the tub or move at all.

The debate on what I should do ends, when his body relaxes after a couple more minutes, his eyes blink open a couple of times, a hand going to the side of his head. "Jesus Christ." He moans, struggling to sit up.

"You shoul-"

"I'm going to be sick," he cuts me off, as he moves fast to turn his head over the side of the tub to vomit.

I don't want him to see that I'm crying. Keeping my hand rubbing his back, I turn my head away. He had tried to tell me they were coming on with no warning, and more often, but this makes my worry over him topple all reason. He shouldn't be driving his motorcycle, or for that matter staying alone. What if I wasn't here? He could've been knocked out or worse.

"You hit your head," I mumble through tears.

Chapter Ten

Charlie Gibson

She's late. We were going to meet at three, but fifteen minutes have passed. If she would've allowed me to pick her up, I wouldn't have the unsettling feeling that something happened to her. She's usually a stickler for being on time.

Grabbing my phone out to call her, I hear the ding of the bell over the door, looking up, I see Remi breeze in the door with her damp hair clipped up, wearing a muted yellow t-shirt dress, a brightly colored pink fringe purse hanging across her body. Her smile is barely a lift to her lips. Something's happened. Again. This time I hope she'll actually confide in me. "We didn't need to do this if there's something going on." I give her a quick kiss to her temple.

I suggested we meet up, because I want to give her the opportunity to tell me about Art school and not bombard her with my questions about it.

She shakes her head. "Wilder had a seizure. Not that he'll go to the doctor or anything."

Convenient. Was that after he found out she was meeting me at Talley's? I'm trying. I'm really trying to think better of him, but then another situation pops up making me

doubt him again. “Ah.” She winces at my response. I add, “Did you tell him he should get checked out?”

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“A lot of good it did. I’m sorry I’m late.”

We order our creative combos that are fast becoming a tradition when we come here, mine root beer and pink lemonade, hers coffee and cotton candy. As we make our way to a booth in the corner, I lightly touch her lower back, an impulse to hug her is thwarted by her distracted mood. “Maybe we all need to ban together and convince him to see a doctor. It’s not normal. His incidents.” I stop myself from adding that they may have no answers, because they’re all a farce.

She closes her eyes, making a pleased sigh with a spoonful of her ice cream in her mouth. Licking her lip, she pulls her purse to her lap. “I got you something. It’s dumb, but...”

There isn’t a thing she could give me that I would discount that way.

She sets a rubber duck sitting on an innertube wearing a sunhat on the table between us. “I found it at Hidden Treasures, it made me think of you. It reminds me of the story I heard about Katie and her rubber ducks on opening day at the funpark.” This time her smile is full wattage as she winks at me. “I wrote a note on the bottom.”

I stare at the duck and back at her.

Words pile up as I sit here stunned at her thoughtfulness. She thinks about my sister. With tears in my eyes, I pick the duck up to look at the bottom. ‘She lives on beyond your memory inside your heart.’ How does she do that? Even more proof that Remington James is irreplaceable.

“Rem, this is.” I clear my throat. “This is the most heartfelt thing I’ve ever been given. Thank you.” My grandmother used to always say that you should never give someone a gift early in a relationship, because they’d fall in love with your hand and not your heart. It was ingrained in me. But I’ve always done it. There wasn’t much of a worry with the frogs that she would be like that. I’d give her anything, and even if the duck is simple, the meaning is on par—our hearts are linked.

I’m reaching for her hand, when she goes back into her purse to pull out something else. This time it’s a rubber frog with sunglasses connected to a keychain with a key on it. “This isn’t the way I planned to tell you. I had imagined all of us together. I want to start by saying that the way I feel about you hasn’t changed, and this isn’t a forever goodbye.”

Here it comes. I dangle the key up in front of me. “About art school?” No reason to be coy about it. She must know that Natalie can’t help herself.

Her eyes widen as she nods. “You heard already? From who?” Not from her, which made me wonder if she was nervous to tell me.

“Nat let it slip. What’s with the key?”

Biting her lip while playing with her spoon, she says softly, “The keys for my new student apartment. They arrived yesterday. I was hoping you’d come see me? I’ll be back over breaks, but I don’t want to wait that long.” She swallows before continuing, her voice laden with emotion, “Charlie, I can’t lose what we have. If my leaving for art school is a deal breaker, if y-”

“Stop.” I shake my head and grab her hand. “Just stop. You’re not losing me. In a couple weeks I head to Wyoming for my dad, then I’ll figure it out from there. Florida is nice in the fall, right... or is that hurricane season? I don’t care.” I chuckle as her smile spreads wider. “I’ll be around so much you’ll get sick of me. Promise.”

I want to ask about Cal, Wilder, and Grady, but it's enough right now, knowing that she wants me in her future.

Chapter Eleven

Remington James

Relief over Charlie's response floods me. He's always been steady and even keel, there was no reason to think he'd drop me, but a long history of not mattering still affects me from time to time. Seeing his reaction to the gift, eases any doubt I had over his possible guilt. That paired with Detective Hemminger's response to my meeting him today.

"Can I ask you something?" It still crosses my mind too much and I need to put it to rest. "When Cal showed me Lakeside Park and the gazebo, he said that all of you grew up playing there. You, too. But on the Fourth of July didn't you say you get sick from the vortex anomaly?" Carefully watching for his reaction, I try to keep my tone nonchalant.

"Cal said... why would..." Charlie's brow wrinkles in confusion. "I'm not sure why he would include me in that. Maybe you misunderstood him?"

Did I? I remember him talking about Charlie, don't I? Now, I can't be sure. My heart screams at me to stop this inquest, but I keep going. I've always been a curious person who questions things, but the stakes here are the highest they've ever been. I want to know as much as I can. "Do you remember any of the other drowning victims? I'm sorry for bringing this up. It's just, thinking about Katie..."

I grab the fabric of my knee length dress, pressing down to keep my legs from jiggling with my fraying nerves. Charlie doesn't look phased by the question in the least. "Of course. It's hard to forget."

“Do you think they’re all connected, or do you know of any connections between them?” I put the last spoonful of the mixed ice cream in my mouth. I’ve heard what Wilder could remember, now I’d like Charlie’s perspective.

Charlie leans back, folding his arms over his chest. “I’ve always said that it’s too coincidental that they’ve all been at a specific spot near The Bends.” He frowns before going on, “I didn’t know the two tourists very well, but the rest all grew up here. As for connections, I don’t know what they could be.”

“So, you think it’s possible?”

He nods before saying, “I’d say it’s hard to believe otherwise.”

Satisfied that Wilder, Grady, and Charlie are all concurring that there must be a thread connecting the drownings, I tell myself if Cal would open up he might too. His reluctance to talk about the past isn’t enough to point a finger his way. I used to deflect the shit out of discussing Relia, the landlord of the womb I came out of.

Charlie throws our empty ice cream cups away, returning to the table he asks, “What’s Skip been up to? It’s been a few days since he called me in a panic.”

“Just freaking out over a bug in the security cameras, but Wilder got to the bottom of it. Then he started to come up with schemes to get Gary Marlow to sell him some land.” I shake my head with a laugh. “Still delusional.”

“Say what? He had camera issues?” Charlie rubs his cheek. “What did Wilder do exactly?”

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I shrug. “He had to remove spyware and reroute the video storage. I don’t understand any of it, but Skip was losing his mind over it. Now hopefully we’ll find out who is responsible for the vandalism.” My attention is pulled to the door when a group of teenagers enter laughing and joking with one another.

“Huh. Spyware?” Charlie asks while he tucks the gifts I gave him in his shorts pocket. “That’s interesting.” His tone is light, but his furrowed brow and the way he is staring at the table give me the impression he’s processing something. Focusing his beautiful sky-blue eyes at me, he warns, “Please be careful. I said it before, but if you can avoid it... don’t be alone with him. With Wilder. There are some things not adding up here.”

“I’ve been hearing a lot of that lately. Be careful I mean.” There is a long history between Charlie and Wilder of contention. It’s not really for me to mend things between them. He’ll see that he was wrong, eventually. “One of my favorite things about you is that you’re protective of the people you care about. You don’t need to save me from Wilder.”

Before we leave, I pull the old Altoids tin I keep in my purse out, taking out two of the googly eyes inside to place on the mayor’s wife’s face displayed on her real estate flyer hanging next to the door. “You are adorable, Rem. I love that you keep those in your bag,” Charlie whispers.

He talks me into letting him walk me back to the cabin, telling me that it’s for his peace of mind. It’s hard to put up much of a fuss when spending time with Charlie makes me feel like everything will be alright with the world.

There are days I wonder if all the chairs pull up to my table. Freaking faily on the daily lately. I forgot Father Lowe was stopping to bless the cabin this afternoon. He's waiting with Ceily when I return with Charlie, alongside a miserable looking Wilder, who has a bruise forming on the side of his face. Awkward is a safe word to describe the atmosphere. Both my guys eye one another up like apex predators, the cheery Father Chris comments several times about my 'unconventional' pets while Ceily tries to push her cookies on us.

"Oh, no, no I just had ice cream, I'll pass." She's hard to say no to, but I've made the mistake of accepting her fingernail clipping, asphalt treats before. That may not be the ingredients, but it's got to be close. "I'm happy to get started. Last night was rough. Winifred was restless." I can't call her Katie around Charlie.

"What happened?" Wilder asks me perplexed.

Fair enough, because I neglected to share. It's become commonplace to have strange things going bump in the night around here. "Scratching or scraping sounds, but I don't know where it was, Droolius was whining and pacing near the door, the Hops were all squeaking... it was a whole ordeal." Once Skip gets word back about the rental home on the southside of Lake Hollow, he's sure to hightail us out of here.

I've grown attached to the cabin though. To being near Wilder and Grady. I'm even sad that Father Lowe may be able to help Katie's spirit leave. But she deserves rest, she was able to get her diary where it needs to be.

Charlie checks in on my froggie friends. "Is this one, okay?" He points to Sir Hops A Lot who likes to try squeezing through tight spaces, but gets stuck, usually at weird looking angles. It's his thing.

"Mmm... spatially challenged." I bloop him through the bark covered tunnel before wandering over to Ceily and Father Chris deep in discussion about blessings versus

exorcisms. I'm having nightmares tonight, no doubt.

"...back a few years ago. Don't you remember?" Ceily leans more heavily on her cane. "Half the town council was livid."

Dare I ask? "What happened?"

"Father Connelly performed a ceremony at Lakeside Park to bless the lake, but it was presented as a casting out of all evil spirits that dwell within the lake. There was controversy over that implication." She waves her hand while rolling her eyes. "Pure lunacy. Half the town wanted to ban anyone from swimming in the lake because they felt the Lakeside Park energy doohickey was proof of a demon portal, and the sane half just wanted everyone to shut up already."

With Charlie on one side of me, Wilder on the other, we watch Father Lowe walk into each small room of the cabin repeating his prayers. "Lord, send down your mercy and your blessing upon us here and upon this house. May your angel of mercy watch over it and keep all who live here safe from anything that is evil. May he guide us into the fulfillment of your holy will, teaching us to observe what Christ has taught us."

He breaks out a fancy looking jar, a worn bible, and recites another prayer. Ending it with, "In the name of Jesus." He then sprinkles water from the jar around the cabin.

It's not lost on me that Wilder is being more overt in his affection with Charlie here. He keeps a hand on my waist, or arm. Likewise, Charlie has been doing the same. I can't say the attention sucks, but they are definitely trying to send a message to each other. Wilder laughs, lightly, under his breath.

"Now what?" I poke him in the side.

“Just watching a bit of theater.” He gives me a half smile.

“I think we might actually agree on something.” Charlie leans in to say, “But if it makes you feel better then who cares if it’s just some parlor tricks.”

It’s worth a shot. Most of what he says could be mumbo jumbo, but on the off chance that it works to free the spirit I believe is here, then chant away.

A chill rolls through me, a nervous laugh escapes. How is this real? I can’t be as flippant about this as Charlie, or skeptical as Wilder. I know a spirit has been here... Katie or someone else. There may be a second less friendly one, too. Father Chris’ normally jovial talking becomes serious fervor as he does the prayer again.

Ceily comes to stand by me when Charlie moves behind me placing his hands on my shoulders. She grabs my arm. “The Lord will hear him.” I think the whole group of cabins at The Bends hears him, but I don’t know about the big guy.

Chapter Twelve

Cal Truitt

“Is the life hack in the room with us?” I ask Skip while scratching my neck. Each day drives home the point that this man is living with his head in the clouds.

I’m in a chronic state of bewilderment around him. “That’s going to make it more difficult, not easier.” He’s met with me three times today about an ‘innovation’ for mini putt ball retrieval. He’s making me itch.

Glancing out the window at the back of his office, I keep hoping to spot Remi. She teamed up with Keenan on the mini putt course today, leaving me to deal with both Kami and Nat on bumper boats. Neither of them is interested in being helpful, the

mess created by Skip's impromptu meetings hasn't helped. "I wouldn't ask that last maintenance person you hired and then fired. He was an inbred tennis ball of a human being. That's how you almost got electrocuted, remember?"

He taps his pen against his lips, his eyes closed, "Oh, yeah. Do you think Charlie could figure it out?"

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Each passing day this summer is making me feel like I'm living in the longest and most chaotic comedy skit ever. When I'm not trying to figure out what my life has become, working here throws baffling things my way. No one should try what he's proposing, but I bet if Skip contacts Charlie, he'll accept that conclusion from him. Just not me. I shrug in response.

My walk back to the bumper boat fiasco gets sidetracked when I see Remi struggling to get a child's shoe off one of the course obstacles it was thrown on. I reach around her to pluck it off. "If Skip summons me to his office one more time, I may have to demonstrate why his plan won't work. Then I'm going to need a padded cell somewhere."

She bumps into my side with her rear playfully, "Tell him that I'm on the way. That'll shut him down. We had 'words' this morning about me leaving in a couple of weeks. He doesn't understand why I can't find a school near here. But when I explain why to him, it's not good enough." When she told me the news, apologizing that she'd been hesitant to share, I told myself not to react. Not to show her how hurt I've been.

But I have obligations to return to also.

Hugging her tight to me, I say softly, "It's all going to work out." It has to, because life without her sounds deeply deplorable. It's nothing I'm looking forward to.

Her friend, Keenan, walks our way idly swinging one of the mini putt clubs. "She's got more faith in that top than I have in most of humanity." He directs the golf club at a red-faced mom trying to reason with her out of control toddler whose shoe we've rescued. "It's impressive." Her thin, barely there crop top is fighting to make it

against the flotation devices she had surgically attached to her chest.

The pop music that is piped into the Funpark cuts out with an announcement on the speaker, “Cal to base, Cal to base, please.” For the fourth time.

Remi puts her hand against my chest, straightening up taller, she says firmly, “Oh no. Uh uh. I’ll take care of his bullshit. Besides you need to head back over to the bumper boats, they haven’t been running for over fifteen minutes and the line is winding back all the way to the office.” She leans in to give me a kiss on my cheek. “Try not to drown your co-workers.” She immediately slaps a hand over her mouth, her cheeks reddening. “Oh my God, I didn’t mean... what I meant was... Oh for fuck’s sake. Can we just forget I said something so insensitive an-”

I cut her off with a kiss, as I slap Keenan on the back because he starts to choke on his gum next to me.

“It’s okay. You didn’t mean anything by it,” I say through a chuckle. She’s still making comments under her breath because of her bad word choice.

She looks over her shoulder mouthing sorry once more, before heading inside the office. She’ll say sorry a dozen more times for the faux pas before she drops it. “Do me a favor, please?” I ask Keenan who is making faces of disgust at the toddler’s mom.

“Oh, this should be good. Go ahead,” he says sarcastically.

“Switch places with me. Please? I’ll owe you a huge favor.” There is no way I want to deal with Nat or Kami for the rest of the day. Nat can’t stay focused, she’s always wandering off, and Kami is either trying to flirt or fight with me during every forced interaction.

“Hmph. I don’t think we can be friends anymore. Memories will suffice. Goodbye, old friend,” he says mockingly, kicking his leg up behind him, giving a little wave. “Bye, bye. Be gone.”

I can’t help laughing at him.

Ten minutes later after bargaining with him he finally agrees to switch to the bumper boats; he gets thirty dollars, a yes or no on whether Remi has used any of his gifts... she may not be happy about that admission, and two of his drive-in shifts.

The bumper boat line and unhappy customers have spilled into the mini putt line by the time that Keenan turns to leave. Minutes later, Remi comes back from the ticket office, frustrated. “The hypothetical fixed it. You and Charlie should be safe from his antics for now. Where’s Keenan, what happened?”

“He is off to the bumper boats. Wasn’t that nice of him?” I wink at her,

She pulls a rubber frog on a keychain from her pocket with a key on it. “I forgot to give this to you earlier. It’s for my apartment at school. I want you to use it. Use it a lot. I mean all the time.” She isn’t leaving for twelve days. It’ll go by fast, but I wonder why she’s giving this to me now. She must be as nervous as I am that she’s moving back to Florida. Even if it’s temporary, if she needs us, we won’t be close by.

“You’ll come back to see us, too?”

There’s a pang of discomfort in my chest. A need to make sure she knows that I don’t want this to be a summer fling. She’s jump started my heart. A jolt that’s given me purpose again. The amount of times my mind wanders to thoughts of her daily would be embarrassing to admit out loud. Hell, I’ve never felt so compelled to share the most mundane occurrences with someone. Not even Charlie, who I’d normally tell.

“You won’t be able to keep me away.” When she grabs my hand to lead me back to the start of the course, I notice she has crafted all of our names: Wilder, Charlie, Grady, and I out of googly eyed frogs up one arm. The way my heart feels like it’ll swell out of my chest can’t be healthy. Damn, the way I feel wrapped up in her still stuns me.

Chapter Thirteen

Remington James

The sheer delight I feel over having all the guys together at the cabin is making me downright giddy. I felt bad asking Charlie and Cal to meet us here, knowing their reluctance to hang out at The Bends, but it would not have happened otherwise. “This is one of those things we call ‘leave it alone’s’ not sure if you heard about ‘em or not...” I can’t help but wrap my arms around his waist. Wilder thinks he needs to have a talk with Uncle Skip about the way he treats me. The others all agree that ‘Captain Crazy’ uses me. But what they don’t understand is that it’s not going to change. He was saddled with his twelve-year-old niece at the worst time of his life. I should just be grateful he didn’t abandon me like Relia had.

Cal grills the steaks while he and Grady discuss baseball. Specifically, Cal accepting a new offer to train with a minor league team in Florida a mere fifty miles from my school. Yes, please. Although, I don’t want to be pushy about it. Charlie and Wilder have been sticking near me. It’s sweet, but I keep tripping over them.

Each time I look them over, I have the impulse to slap my cheeks. Not one, but all four. With their shirts off, sporting athletic shorts and the delicious muscles that wind me up. I’m talking v cuts that my tongue wants to run down, strong arms that I want to run my hands over, and... ooo, just the thought of other appendages makes me light up bright red. How in the hell? Maybe it’s the way the universe is giving me reparations for the first part of my life. I never want to take them for granted for a

single solitary second.

“Leave it alone? You mean like he does when it comes to asking everyone you know to help him?” Wilder adds. He’s not wrong.

“Ugghh... he has a valuable lesson to learn about demands and leverage. Like if he needs people more than they need him, he isn’t in a position to make demands. Most people learn that around five years old. Yet, he does it all the time.” He must have Charlie on speed dial, since Wilder helped with his security camera problems he’s knocking at his door more, Cal has to listen to him constantly at work, and Grady hasn’t been exempt, his wheedling him to make an appearance in the parade for James’ Flicks n’ Fun still rankles me.

“Speaking of... what was wrong with his security program?” Charlie crosses his arms while staring Wilder down. “Remi said there was a problem. What did you do to fix it?” His tone isn’t what makes me bristle, it’s the way he’s looking at Wilder like he suspects him of something.

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“I fixed it by initiating a recursive quantum reboot, by cascading the binary interface through a parallel distributed server node.” He punctuates his statement with a cocky half smile Charlie’s way.

“Wha-” I start to ask him.

Charlie scoffs, “Are you being serious?”

“No. There was spyware, so I removed it. Know anything about that, Gibson... the spyware? Weren’t you the one that picked the security equipment up for him?”

I look back and forth between them trying to gauge how likely it is that fists are about to be thrown. There always seems to be an underlying tension between them even when they are agreeing.

“That would’ve been tricky. Remi picked it up with me, it came fully boxed up, and we delivered it to Skip. Unless I’ve become a magician it wasn’t me.” Charlie keeps his voice light, but I’m still worried that they’re going backwards with this whole discussion.

Droolius splashes about in the lake with a stick in his mouth. I’d love to jump into the water to cool off with him, the heat of the afternoon is stifling. But I’d go in alone. Grady won’t go in again, since I dared him, because Father Lowe coming to my cabin for a blessing spooked him. He remembers the blessing done in the lake years previously and how six more people had drown. Wilder won’t purposely go in and based on the anchor he’s sporting in his pants I’m wondering if he’d sink. Cal and Charlie... I won’t even try. They keep their backs to the lake as much as they can.

Cal mentions that it's a minor miracle that Skip has left us all alone today, while he's at James' Flick n' Fun, when his phone buzzes with a text from him. "Speak of the devil," he grumbles, holding up his phone. "Do I answer him?"

"I think not," I say indignantly. "It's your day off. Besides his latest kick is reconfiguring the bumper boat pond."

"No one can ever accuse your uncle of having a lack of ideas. Not that they're great ones..." Cal says while grabbing my hand to pull me towards the food. A mix of medium rare steak, wiltingsalad, baked potatoes and the latest mystery food from Ceily's kitchen.

I poke at it with my plastic fork. "You just pulled this out of your fridge for funsies, right? Not to be ingested?"

Grady taps at it with his plastic fork. "I'm noping out on that. Maybe it's for Droolius."

Wilder plops the plate onto the ground by the grill, but other than the flies it's left alone. "When do you start the mural downtown?" He runs his hands across my back as he passes me.

Yesterday, Ceily asked me to paint the east wall of Hidden Treasures with a mural depicting life in Lake Hollow. Other than keeping it PG she doesn't care what I choose to put on the wall. That's an honor and at the same time a pressure. "Tomorrow. The weather looks good for the next five days, which should be plenty of time."

"Need any help?" Cal asks licking some butter from his potato off his finger. "I can carry your equipment around, fan you, move the ladder into position, give you back rubs or massages, I mean really anything." He laughs while Wilder rolls his eyes at

him.

“Keenan is about all the help I’ll be able to stand. I could use some ideas. I didn’t grow up here, but all of you did. What needs to be a part of the Lake Hollow homage?” I slip Droolius a hefty portion of my bloody steak, while watching for their reactions.

Muttering under his breath, Wilder says, “Graves and ghosts?” Thankfully, no one but me hears him.

I pinch his leg and mouth, ‘Stop it’ at him when he looks at me in irritation.

“Obviously the lake, but Skip would be upset if you don’t include the Funpark. It’s been a part of the community for over fifty years,” Charlie answers with a smile. “You should add some birds and frogs, too.” He winks at me. Could he be any cuter?

Grady adds, “The Splash brings in a lot of tourism. You should include the music festival in some way. I like everything you draw, I’m sure whatever you do will be fantastic.”

They all toss around ideas while Cal stays silent, chewing his steak. Finally, he says, “Don’t include the lake in your mural.” We’re all hushed as he continues, “Paint what the town makes you feel, keep it abstract. Don’t paint the lake. It’s just a bad reminder of how cursed that fucking thing has made this town.”

The guys go on discussing Skip having an idea or two about what I could paint, but I’m focused on Cal. He turns to his side slightly wiping his eyes. When he looks back my way his face has fallen. His unpredictable reaction gives me pause.

Cursed? Does he know something we don’t?

Blasted Romantic Ruin music envelops me as I spin away from Grady, accidentally knocking into Cal. We've all had a couple of shots. I've made two pitchers of margaritas heavy on tequila. If I'm still dying of heatstroke, I'm too tipsy to notice now. Wilder tosses a chewed up frisbee for Droolius to fetch, Cal and Grady are attempting to dance with me, but I'm more effort than style. Bouncing around the room off the beat of the song, they both give up trying to match what I'm doing. Charlie cleans up our mess.

Squealing at the song that comes on, I proceed to hop around more aggressively in the open space in the living room. Wilder wraps an arm around my waist to hoist me up in the air. "You're going to hurt yourself," he loudly whispers in my ear.

My only response is a light bite to his jaw, my hand caressing across his midsection. His emotional support snake that he has tucked in his shorts makes me lose my train of thought. I'd love to take it out and play with it, but there are three other people here. But could I? Mmmm... I must pause too long with my eyes trained on it, since he tucks a finger under my chin to raise my eyes to his gorgeous face. He leans in again. "That power slide move earlier... fuck that was hot, if we ditch these guys, you can shimmy shake all over me. Deal?"

Oh, freaking help me. That smirk. The impulse to pull him into my bedroom regardless of anyone else is only outweighed by wanting all of them in the room with us.

Cal's fingers entwine with mine as he gets my attention. "I have your gift bag in my truck." His tone is taunting and he has a twinkle in his eyes.

Finally. He's kept the bag, teasing me about it since the night after Grady's party. "Get it. Get it now." I grab him by his forearms. "Do it."

The next few minutes are a flurry while Cal runs to his truck to get my gift bag full of

toys from Keenan. When he returns with it, I'm back to dancing to an upbeat bop that is causing Droolius to yip. Cal takes my hand again, turning to Charlie. "Drop that fucking sponge and come with us." He straightens up in response, tossing it into the sink.

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The corresponding clap and high-pitched shriek from me could not be helped. I think he's talking in terms of everyone... all five of us. Ha. Think again, you horny little beast, I tell myself.

Turning to Wilder who is lounged across a recliner, and Grady who is leaning against the doorway into my bedroom, Cal states, "We get to play with the toys first, this time."

Wilder shoots back, "I'm setting a timer."

"Pfft... dream on." He asks me, "When do Skip and Nat get done tonight? Are they closing up at the Drive-In?"

They debate logistics, while I'm mentally already splayed across my bed begging for them. In reality, I start to dance in place because all the liquids I've consumed for the past couple of hours that are blowing my bladder up. "Be back," I say, kissing Cal's hand before dropping it.

No bathroom mirror should ever be consulted after a day in the sun, and alcohol. My flabbers are gasted. My normally stick straight hair is fuzzy, strands hanging loose from the impromptu knot I tied on my head. I forgot makeup earlier, but a smudge from my marker is on one cheek, a bug bite or impending pimple of doom is flaring to life on my chin. I'm a particularly alarming shade of red from the sun and heat.

"Well, this is a choice," I mutter to myself slapping cool water on my face. The light shuts off and back on twice. "Oh, hi. Didn't take the hint with the prayers, huh? You're about to get a whole lot of eyefuls of things, Win. Or Katie... or Win?"

I'd hoped when the strange cabin shenanigans hadn't happened since Father Lowe's visit that it had worked. Guess not. "Win, babe, if you're trying to communicate with me, I need you to be more direct, okay? I'm not good with hints, obviously."

Making haste while I let my hair down and run a brush through, spritz some perfume over me, and grab a few of the condoms from the stash I have in my tampon box, I'm more than ready for sexy play. Most of the lights are off in the cabin when I leave the bathroom. Cal calls out, "In here."

All of the guys are standing at the door that leads to the lake from the cabin, the purplish dusk turning darker. "Are you leaving?" My astonishment bleeds through. I was only in the bathroom five minutes tops.

I'm led by them with no explanation to Grady's cabin at the end of the row. "I don't g-"

I'm cut off by Grady as he says, "No one wants a surprise interruption."

Our Pillowbiter's playlist starts, while Cal and Charlie each lead me into the bedroom Grady points to that isn't being used by him. A bare bed with just a sheet on it, the comforter and loose sheets still sitting on a corner chair await us. "What do we have in here... let's see, hm?" Cal kicks his sandals off by the door looking into the gift bag that is getting rather rumpled looking from all its travels. Charlie softly closes the door, turning to me and biting his lip as his smile grows wider.

The contents of the bag get dumped onto the bed, "This," Cal picks up vibrating nipple clamps, then tosses a package at Charlie, "that," he examines a strangely shaped vibrator, "could be fun."

He puts his phone on the dresser and the techno beat of Sunshine by Wuki makes me wiggle in place. Charlie moves behind me, swaying while kissing my neck. His hands

lightly rest on my stomach. This man can move. “How can you dance so well?” I murmur in a loved-up haze.

“No idea. Maybe it’s just natural?” he playfully replies. We keep going, he spins me away from him and then into his arms, while Cal strips his shorts and underwear off.

“Clothes. Off,” he says while taking me from Charlie.

My shirt gets tossed, baring my braless chest, and the frogs I drew like a totem pole on my breastbone, hearts traced around my nipples. I hear Cal groan, “Christ, somehow I almost forget what seeing you naked does to me, and then...” He squeezes his dick like he’s hoping to get it to behave.

Charlie and I both pull our shorts and underwear off at the same time. My hands have a mind of their own, when I reach out and stroke each of their dicks at the same time. Flushed, his breath choked off, Charlie holds up the item Cal threw to him. “Do we even need these?”

With chemistry off the charts, we don’t need anything, but I admit Keenan’s presents allow for exploration that I’d never come up with on my own. “What is that? Ooo... uh, yeah, yeah, we don’t need them, but I want them,” I say taking the half opened vibrating anal beads package.

Charlie sits on the side of the bed, pulling me to him. “Where’s your marker?” he asks me while giving me a kiss that makes my legs start to shake. Cal throws it, hitting him in the side of the head. “Thanks for that,” he says snidely to him.

They decide to have me draw a bird or frog wherever I kiss them. My tongue slides up the underside of Charlie’s erect dick, I pop the lid off the marker, using one that’s not permanent. “Even on...” Winking at his surprised face, I add, “kidding, kidding.” I wasn’t, but I draw a frog with kissy lips on his hip instead.

Cal has me lay back on the cool white sheet of the unmade bed to attach the nipple clamps. He straddles my legs. "Tell me if it's too tight." The smooth silicone clamps pinch each of my nipples, putting me on the edge of pain. "Does it hurt?" Cal asks while Charlie lays on his side next to me, his hand cupping the underside of my breast, as he kisses it.

Before I answer, Charlie says, "Loosen it up."

"Mmm... no, it's good. It's just a different sensation. Turn it on." When he does, my toes start to curl immediately, my pussy, already getting wet, feels like it's flooding. This is a new favorite. Damn.

"Instant winner, based on that sound." Charlie chuckles, running his hand down my side. The moan I let loose can't even communicate how turned on I am. Cal reclines next to me on the opposite side of Charlie, both their hands giving me pleasure. The two fingers Charlie's inserted rubbing over the fleshly sensitive spot under my pubic bone move at a steady pace. Cal's thumb softly draws circles over my clit.

"That's right, sweetheart, that's right. Just let loose," Cal's voice sounds throaty.

My pants of breath as they both take turns kissing me, make me feel lightheaded. The writhing of my body increases as that pulsing wave inside rolls over me, slamming me with an orgasm that makes me shout out, "Oh, Oh... fuck yes!"

Charlie quickly and carefully removes the nipple clamps, giving me soft feathery kisses where they'd been attached. One of my hands combs through the hair on the back of his head, holding him there. The ache left behind is almost more delicious than having them on. I press a hand over one, humming.

Rolling condoms on both of the guys, I eye up the anal beads. "Which one of you wants the beads?" I raise an eyebrow, trying not to laugh at the surprised look on

their faces.

“That’s for you... right?” Cal asks.

Mmm, yes one of them taking the beads would be for me. The thought makes me wonder what Wilder and Grady may be up to without me. Charlie pulls my attention back with his kiss to the nape of my neck. “Rem, no more toys, right now.” He takes the now vibrating beads from my hand, tossing them on the floor.

Well, then.

Laying back on the bed, hooking a finger their way, I go up on my elbows to watch them approach me. Two best friends that the more I get to know, are not much alike. Cal is passionate and at times brash, Charlie thoughtful, steady, and sweet. Both complement each other. Back on my side, Cal holds me against him, Charlie is on his side facing me. His hand traces down my cheek. “Do you know how much we love you?” I pull him closer using a hand on his hip. “There is no one else,” he pushes inside me, “ever, that could take your place. Ever.” His thrusts are deep and measured.

Cal holds me tightly, I feel the coconut smelling lube from the gift bag being smeared over the pucker of my asshole, followed by him pressing the tip of dick in and then out a couple of times. “In... I need you in,” I say to him clutching at his thigh that is slung over my leg.

The spiraling from my second orgasm comes right before they both come. Laying sandwiched between them both, it takes five attempts of catching my breath to say, “What’s that sound?” Worried about the strange rattle, thinking maybe Grady’s cabin is now haunted because I’m here.

Charlie looks over his shoulder and then falls back laughing. “The anal beads traveled across the floor to the wall.”

Chapter Fourteen

Wilder Lee

Hot and bothered... Oh, I was bothered alright.

It's been over an hour. Should I just go in there?

As I pace down the short hallway towards the bathroom and back to the living room for the eighth time, Grady looks over at me saying, “Can you cut that out?” Huh, why didn't I think of that? Just forget about what she's doing in there with them. Without me, us. I knock my head lightly against the wall.

I'm still not opposed to entering the room, when Grady puts two glasses on the table, pouring some whiskey in each one. “Get over here.” He kicks one of the chairs back. “I want to hear about that.” He indicates the mark on my face by pointing the bottle at it. The bruise from my last seizure is fading, but I still haven't told him about it.

Tapping my hand on my abs, I walk to the table to sit. “Why? None of it makes any sense to me. The lake, the park, what I'm hearing. Not a damn bit of it.”

He takes a sip of the amber liquid, his mouth screwing up. “What have you heard? A voice?”

“Sometimes it's a female, sometimes a male. I've gone over all of it countless times, it doesn't make any sense. It might not mean a damn thing.” His forearms rest on the table. Fucking hell, he's jacked. When did that happen? Discreetly, I take another swallow of my drink, my eyes running over him.

He brushes the hair out of his face, resting back in his chair. “Then who do you think Katie saw that night?”

This fucking again? We get alcohol in our systems and the past surges forth. “That’s the mystery, right? Not a clue.” I’m reasonably sure I didn’t black out and do something to Sara. Even if for years that was a concern of mine. The scrutiny I received solidified that fear.

If the detective knows anything she isn’t letting on. When I called her about the boat being one without a motor, a rowboat, she was disinterested. Reminding me that Susanna didn’t sustain injuries consistent with a boating accident. Rumors are part of any small town, but where did the information come from to start with that a boat had been seen? Could be bullshit, but if not, then Susanna Ross may have been dumped in the lake near The Bends. Why would that be?

I switch to water anticipating Remi returning to us, while Grady opens the doors to let the night breeze through the cabin. The loon calls, crickets, and lapping water of the lake give me a shot of nostalgia. I’d fall asleep to those sounds at night for years.

Laying down on his couch, I close my eyes. Taking a deep breath of the lake air, I get a whiff of Grady’s cologne that smells like fresh lumber, and lavender. He brushes past to sit in the chair, I grab his hand. Opening my eyes, I see him look down at me. “I knew,” I say in a quiet voice. He never tried to hide the way he would look at me well.

Instead of dropping my hand, he nods, holding it tighter. “I know, jackass.”

Keeping a grip on his hand, I swing my legs off the couch to sit up. His dick at eye level, I swallow hard and my mouth goes dry. We’ve never fooled around without Remi at our sides encouraging it. I let go of his hand to lay back putting my hands behind my head. “What city does your tour start in?” Keep the talk safe.

He sighs, turning to sit in the recliner next to the window. “Phoenix, the first weekend of September. We’ll wrap some things up in the studio when I get back and then the tour starts a couple weeks after that.”

How do I ask him what we are or where this relationship goes once he leaves?

“I just realized a couple of days ago that the October show in Miami is thirty miles from Remi and only two days before her birthday.” His smile is devastating. He bites the tip of his index finger. “I hope she doesn’t pay attention to that; I want to surprise her.”

Knowing Remi, she’s already committed his tour schedule to memory.

“You’re going back to Hancock?” It’s not judgment I’m detecting, but I can’t help but feel how mundane the return to my bookkeeping job is. “There is no end of musicians needed for both studio work and with bands. Hell, we could use you in Romantic Ruin.” That wasn’t my dream, it was his.

I shake my head. “Not for me.” It was a hobby that kept me close to him years ago, not something I saw any future in.

I look over towards the spare bedroom, wondering if they all fell asleep.

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Grady looks out the window at the moon hanging low in the sky, illuminating the lake and bathing it in a glint of sparkle. It's almost magical. His silhouette is handsome as hell. "I never wanted to come back here, and now I'll miss it," he says with longing in his voice.

My heart pulses in my throat watching him. I know what he means. If I could isolate a three-year period, extract it from my brain... my hometown would be my favorite place on earth. Those three years though...

What happened to bring on those years, what changed to stop it?

"Did you think we'd see each other again?" I've wanted to ask him that, but each time I'd stop myself. I'd planned to avoid him until the end of time. Until the twist of fate that put us here.

Leaning forward, he smiles at me. "Yeah, yeah, I did. Because we weren't finished. Not our friendship, not..." His words drop off.

Not what? That's the question I ask myself almost daily.

I'm Remi's boyfriend, with Grady it's less clear what we are.

Glancing away from him, I notice one of his guitars leaning against the side of the other recliner. I reach over to pick it up. "Hey... is this Carlotta's?" She taught dozens of people to play on it. Daniel Gibson had once scratched a heart with their initials in it. She would tell us how mad it made her, with tears in her eyes and a big smile on her face. C.M. and D.G.

I strum a few lines from one of Grady's songs. He sings it softly. Getting up, he comes back with his guitar. "Wish You Were Here by Pink Floyd?" He starts to play and I join him. The ease between us as the familiar chords and notes meld together finds that dark place buried inside me, craving light. He sings a few words of it, "...just two lost souls..." The pitter patter of my heart is undeniable as we play. The song winds down, we're both staring at one another.

One loaded moment is followed by both of us setting the guitars down to lunge at one another. We are on our knees, holding each other's heads as the joining of our mouths takes all my air. "Goddamn it." I press him against the chair, both of us on our knees still, his growing dick against mine. "Damn..."

He pulls back to look at me. "I want you, but not if this doesn't mean the same thing to you."

I huff out, "What's that?" Sitting back on my heels, I place my hands on his thighs.

"You're mine. It means that just as much as Remi is my girlfriend, you're my boyfriend. Or we stop right now. I'm not into flings."

Funny thing to say after what happened at The Splash with Remi in the first place. I want to throw that in his face. I'm still irritated by it.

"Well?" he asks, starting to stand.

I pull him back down. "You're annoying. Of course that's what it means."

The coffee table gets knocked out the way, we're not careful tugging at shorts or underwear. His hand cups my balls, then roams up my dick pressing it down against my stomach. "What do you want me to do?" he asks inches from my face.

My hands grab his ass pulling him flush against me, our mouths are back to teasing and tasting one another. With my hands under his ass, I grind against him, our hardening dicks rubbing against one another. Something unruly breaks loose inside me. The need to make him mine. Cum inside him. I flip him onto the floor underneath me, pushing the recliner further back with my foot.

“I don’t imagine you have lube laying around anywhere?” I ask, laughing lightly.

He spits into his hand, running it over my dick. “This’ll have to do.”

I don’t want to hurt him. “Your mouth, use your mouth.” I groan as I sit back, and he puts those fuckable lips around my dick, taking me back far enough to choke. Pulling back, he tries again.

Running my hand through his wavy hair, I let my legs fall open further, wrapping a hand around his dick to stroke it. He brings me close, but I don’t want to cum inside his mouth. I want his ass.

“No. Stop.” I push him off me, between his saliva and the pre-cum, I’m able to work myself into his ass a couple of inches. The tight pinch is close to uncomfortable. I keep a hand occupied with his balls and dick, keeping balance with the other hand.

His hands brace my waist. He leans up, growling, “Show me what you’ve got.”

Unleashing the unfurling want inside my belly, I push him back, wrapping a hand loosely around his throat. Bucking into him, while stroking his cock. His hands are trying to slam me even harder against him. “Fuck, fuck, fuck...” I look down and watch my dick enter him, his dick is bobbing when I let go to give myself support putting my hands on either side of him. I’m driving into him so fast, I know I’m going to have a rug burn. I’ll take the rug burn while wearing a big fucking smile on my face. I cum, pulling out I pump it onto his stomach, wipe it all over his dick and

mine. I come in for a breathless kiss, nipping at his bottom lip. “I can’t feel my fucking legs.”

He laughs at me, moving me back so he can sit up. His mouth finds one of my nipples, biting it slightly. He moves to the side of it, leaving a hickey in his wake. “Lay down on your side.”

Side by side, he takes both our dicks in his hand and gives a few strokes, before moving my ball sack up, he sticks a finger inside of me. “Ready for me?” he asks in his sexy fucking voice.

I don’t answer before he’s moved one of my legs up, easing himself inside. The pace is less frenetic, slow, deep strokes that rub just right, while I get harder than a rock again. Where the fuck is our girl? The three of us together is what I’m craving. Not that this isn’t driving me over the edge. Adding Remi makes us feel complete.

My weeping dick is pressed between us as Grady leans down against me to fuck his tongue into my mouth. An aching winding up threatens to make me explode. My arms tighten around him, as he breaks the kiss to lean his forehead against my head. “I’m leaving myself inside of you, I’m going to cum so fucking deep inside you.”

“Do it. Fucking do it,” I say through clenched teeth as I try to move him from underneath.

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Her sleepy sweet voice comes to us as she pads into the room naked, “This is exactly what I was hoping to find.” Remi circles us, as Grady continues, but holds a hand out behind him. She takes it, straddling my legs. She leans onto Grady, her hand finding our balls. Rolling them through her hand, she sends Grady off with a grunt. I arch up and yell, “Fuck, oh my fucking God.”

We’re both a sticky mess, Remi doesn’t care as she hops up to grab a towel. Then crawls over me, looking down with a mischievous smile. “It doesn’t look like you need any recovery time?” Not when I see her naked on top of me. Her nipples are reddened, new drawings are displayed on her body, a hickey is on her side. I run my hands over the markings.

“Looks like you had an eventful time.” I bite the inside of my cheek. The beast I let loose, wants to claim Remi just as much as I did Grady. For a heartbeat I think, I want my baby inside of her. Before I tell myself it’s ridiculous to imagine that at our ages.

We follow Grady into his room, where the dive onto his bed puts him in between us. Our mouths tangle. She sits on top of Grady, feeding his dick sheathed in a condom inside her, my mouth is on one of breasts, as she cradles my head to her.

“I might have lube... in my.” He points, breathless, not able to form a sentence. I jump off the bed to find a tube in his shaving kit bag. I lather my dick up. Rejoining them, I stand back stroking myself as Remi rides Grady. She’s so fucking divine. Her pert breasts are bouncing as she grinds herself into him, her mouth open slightly with her tongue rubbing against her top lip.

Not able to stand it any longer, I straddle Grady behind Remi, kissing her shoulder, I feel down with one hand, guiding myself into his ass. He lets out a yelp, “I’m not going to last,” he manages to say.

With my hands on her waist, I help her grind down even harder on him, as I fuck into him. Ecstasy. She repositions so she’s riding him reverse cowgirl, facing me. Kissing, we’re breathing one another in completely. Her shallow breaths mix with mine.

“Unh... oh...” She trembles against me as she orgasms. I spill out of Grady; she runs her hand through it over both our ball sacks.

Collapsing on the bed together, I tuck her into my side. Grady props himself up on his elbow on her other side.

“Please tell me you used the double-sided dildo on those two chuckleheads,” I say to her.

“Ha. Aren’t you funny?”

Drifting into sleep, I realize I’ve got my hands on both of them. This is only the second time sleeping in a bed with them or anyone for that matter. The first time I didn’t really sleep, I laid to the side watching them cuddling. Now, I’m holding them both possessively.

I could get used to this. All of this.

Chapter Fifteen

Remington James

Perma-grin plastered to my face, I finagle my way out of Grady’s bed with the

morning light causing me to squint. Our repeat performance after waking up as the sun was rising knocked both Wilder and Grady out cold. Knowing I need to be at Hidden Treasures before Ceily opens today to help her, and needing to check in on Droolius are the only reasons I'd drag myself away from them. Kissing each of their cheeks, I dodge Wilder's arm as he flips, grabbing ahold of Grady's waist.

I slip back into the spare bedroom to retrieve my clothes from yesterday, expecting to find both Cal and Charlie gone. They're both still asleep. Cal with his limbs spread out, Charlie with a leg over the side of the bed like he was escaping Cal's middle of the night flailing. Taking a moment to appreciate the sight of them, I tuck the loose bed sheet around Charlie, tossing a part of it over Cal's bottom half. I kiss the bird I drew over Cal's heart, then the bird I drew under Charlie's pec. I linger a few seconds longer watching them sleep. Cal's eyes move rapidly under his eyelids as he repositions himself, Charlie's lips curl up in a smile before he sighs.

I'm not sure how I'll say goodbye, even temporarily, to all four of them, when all I want to do is stay in their orbit. Or keep them in mine.

Not wanting to leave Cal and Charlie without an explanation, since Wilder and Grady may still be sleeping when they wake, I find the complementary pad of paper and pen sitting on the counter by the landline phone. Penning a note to each of them, I finish it off with a funny caricature of me. At Hidden Treasures dodging food offerings and acquiring more hats-call later, Love Remi.

I don't want them to miss the notes, so I tuck Charlie's in the pocket of his khaki shorts, and then I move to Cal's black athletic shorts to do the same. My hand snags on something that falls out when I remove it. A crinkled photo that stops me cold when I pick it up. In a panic I shove it back in Cal's pocket before racing from the room. I keep whispering to myself as I take long strides to my cabin, "Don't think about it, don't think about it. There has to be a reason. It's not... it can't be..." What reason would he have? To have a picture of a drowning girl in his pocket?

Everything comes back to me in a sickening wave: his refusal to talk about the past, Carlotta's suspect list, access to the Funpark security and grounds as an employee, he admitted to spending a lot of time growing up at Lakeside Park, he met with Carlotta before we arrived, he was outside her office after it was ransacked and evidence disappeared, Father Lowe's mention of a concerning note from his class, Susanna's crush, his sister being critical of him, Mark coaching him in baseball, Katie's diary, the detective warning me about my new friends. With each step my resolve to keep it together falls apart and I'm bent over crying outside my bedroom. It makes no sense, none. I automatically try to make excuses for it all. The reasons he looks suspicious. But it's futile. I'm in love with a person capable of murder. Wilder thinks I'm in danger, for the first time I believe it. Did he react the way he did over the necklace because it meant I'm next? Does he care even a little bit, or should I accept he lied about everything? Does it matter?

He's the monster we were warned about.

How could my goofball, fun loving, warm Cal be behind all the tragedy here in Lake Hollow? I make it to the bathroom just in time to vomit in the toilet. The retching continues while I sob.

"Remi? Are you sick?" Nat says to me through the bathroom door.

On so many levels. Is it sickness that the love I have for him remains, even though I'm reframing so many interactions. "Mmm, give me a minute," I manage between hurling more stomach bile.

I need to talk to Charlie. How do I tell him that the person that is closer to him than his brother, killed Katie? I have no proof, not really. Just an overwhelming amount of what the detective called circumstantial evidence.

When I finally emerge from the bathroom, I'm shaky, pale, and sweaty, Nat's eyes

widen. “You should lay down.”

I refuse, moving like a zombie through my normal morning routine with Droolius. Wordlessly I accept the cup of coffee from Natalie with the cocoa in it that I like. “Where were you last night? I was worried.” She leans her head onto my arm. “I tried to call you.”

My phone is laying half under my bed.

“Sorry, Nat. I was at Grady’s cabin.” A sudden thought makes my panic fly to the red zone. I grab her arm looking her in the eye. “I can’t really explain this right now, but whatever you do... don’t be alone with Cal at work. Anywhere for that matter. You should try to let Mitchell know that, too.” The tears bubble up again even though I fight them back by blinking forcefully.

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“Cal? Did he do something to you?”

Just tore my heart from my chest.

“Please. Just trust me, okay?”

She sucks her lips in, before replying, “Umm, do you remember when I wanted Mitch to tell you what he’d told me that day on the dock?”

God, I can’t take anymore confirmation. If you exist, could you throw me a lifeline of some sort?

“Uh huh, he told me that I shouldn’t date either Charlie or Cal, because they’re leaving. Was there more to that?” Jeezus, Mitchell. I sink into the dining room chair, a hand pressed against the heart slamming inside in my chest.

She nods slightly, before staring out the window. “After Carlotta died, he was pretty upset.” Natalie can take a lifetime to get to the point when she’s telling a story, but I don’t try to hurry her along. Devastation doesn’t need to come barreling at me quickly. “He said that Carlotta had a talk with him two days before her accident. She told him to be careful around Cal, Grady, and Charlie.”

Taking a stuttered breath, I’m relieved it’s not news to me. Because of the letter, I already knew she had a suspect list.

I simply nod at her. “For now, just steer clear of him. Okay?” I catch myself before I start to cry again. How do I cope with this? Do I confront him in a public place? Do I

tell Wilder, Charlie, and Grady? Or do I keep my mouth shut until I leave? If the police can't arrest him because he covered his tracks that well, what chance do I stand finding solid proof?

My heart is fucking stupid.

When Relia died, I was angry about all the times she'd lied to my face. Over and over. I swore I'd never love someone capable of doing that again. But I have. It's worse this time, I had no choice over the mother I had. I chose Cal. I denied the mounting suspicions and I continued to love him.

Now, I have to use the brain I was given and ignore my treacherous heart. I need to protect the hearts of Charlie, Grady, and Wilder. They deserve it.

Chapter Sixteen

Charlie Gibson

"I was like, hey guy with the hydration pack, two hiking sticks, and a tactical vest; a fucking five-year-old walked that same trail in Crocs carrying a naked Barbie doll. Relax," Cal finishes talking about his morning jog while I go back through the paperwork I'm initialing that dad had emailed me.

Cal hops up to sit on his counter. "If we're having a going away party for Remi, we'll have to put it together fast. It doesn't need to be anything crazy; she was happy just having the four of us with her at the cabin yesterday."

"We can do it at my parent's place. This coming weekend?"

"That's excessive, we're not inviting the whole town. What about the Funpark after hours? Skip would agree to that if you asked. For old times' sake?" Right. When all

was normal with our world. Just a group of rambunctious kids messing around, making memories that we'd look back on questioning the validity of.

"Hey, did you catch what Wilder said yesterday? About the security system at the Funpark?" Skip James gave him access to one of the protections for his business, something meant to also protect Remi. "He said there was spyware installed in it?"

Cal shrugs as he tosses an empty water bottle across the kitchen to the trash. "No. Who cares? Doesn't that happen all the time to computers?"

"I'm having a hard time trusting Wilder. First his 'visions' and now he's putting his nose in the Funpark security." Cal gives me a blank look before narrowing his eyes at me. Sometimes he doesn't seem to care about the right things.

"Look, I don't get your distrust, but I will say that Skip is bonkers. The guy doesn't have a single linear thought."

Waking up without Remi next to us this morning, started my day off poorly. Something as simple as knowing where she is can make the worry over her safety lessen slightly. "What time are we meeting everyone to help Mitch finish clear out Lala's house?" It was surprising to me that Grady said he'd pitch in. Carter, Grady, Mitch, Cal, and I should be able to tackle what's left. We didn't ask Wilder; it was my call to leave him out of the mix.

It's not easy letting go of the past.

"If Mitchell shows up with Natalie and I'm forced to listen to them argue, I'm out," Cal warns as he shoves some baseball equipment into a duffle bag. "Or if Carter does that annoying laugh wheeze of his constantly."

"Is it your time of the month? Why are you so crabby?" He's been moody before,

since we've reconnected this summer, but the closer we inch to Remi leaving for Florida the more volatile his demeanor is getting. The Cal I knew growing up was so laidback, I wondered if he was being genuine at times. Who takes everything in stride without showing cracks in the veneer?

He stops what he's doing, his shoulders dropping as he turns to me saying, "Nah. It's this town... it's getting to me, I'm not eager for Remi to leave and then." He sighs. "My parents left me a message this morning. Detective Hemminger called them yesterday to tell them that Sara's drowning investigation is being reopened due to new evidence."

"What new evidence?"

After all this time, the secrets are being exposed.

It took long enough.

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Cal looks down at his hands clasped in front of him. “Fuck if I know. It’s not like they’re going to offer up that information to anyone.”

Shouldn’t he be relieved that the Sheriff’s office is taking a closer look at what everyone in town can agree was a suspicious death? Why isn’t this a good thing? “I’d like to see Wilder’s face when he hears that.” I didn’t intend my comment to be heard by Cal, but the look he gives me is cold.

“Charlie? Seriously? Based on what Grady’s now saying alone... I don’t think he had a thing to do with Sara’s death. Hell, he wasn’t even around when Susanna Ross was in Lake Hollow. This problem you have with him, whatever it is. Drop it. Please. For Remi’s sake at least.”

I didn’t expect that rousing defense of Wilder from him. It’s been clear the past three years have caused us to grow apart, but maybe I don’t know Cal quite as well as I’d always thought.

“I don’t want to fight with you. Let’s just agree to disagree.” I’m not about to forget dozens of interactions from the past, because Cal thinks I need to. “Is Carter meeting us there? I don’t want to keep him waiting.” More like I’d rather stop the disagreement now, before either of us say things we can’t take back.

Orderly flew out the window when Mitchell allowed everyone to do their own thing. “How are we supposed to know what goes where? Nothing is marked, Mitch.” I throw my hands up. It’s been an hour, but we’re getting nowhere. Carter’s truck bed is empty as he stands near Grady and Cal joking around. Mitch has a donation truck from the church stopping by soon but that pile only has a rickety rocking chair from

her attic, a sewing machine, and two large nature prints.

“Well, I-I...” He spins in a circle looking at everyone in the front yard of his new home.

“Forget it.” I clap my hands together before whistling for everyone’s attention. “Cal, can you go and bring up everything that Mitch put a red sticker on in the basement that needs to be hauled out? Carter, can you help me with the things in the living room and dining room for now? Mitch, could you and Grady finish marking the things in the bedrooms.”

Carter passes me with a mock salute. “Aye, aye Cap.” He snidely turns to Cal to say, “I forgot what a bossy fuck he can be.” There’s no point calling him out on his comment. I forgot how obnoxious he was. Time made some of us grow up more than others.

I’m pushing aside the heavy solid oak dining room table when Carter asks me, “Cal tell you about the new investigation into Sara’s death? Keep waiting to hear about Mia’s. Hers was one of the first but it’s like they have tunnel vision or something. Can’t tell me they aren’t all related in some way.” His dad is the mayor, you’d think he’d have more pull in that regard, but he’s also a weak human manifestation of a Ford Windstar and his mom has a suffering kink.

“Yeah, there’s new evidence. Wonder what that would be after all this time.”

Carter tips over a stack of patchwork quilts on a dining room chair, while he refolds them, he says, “What about Katie? It’s not like it followed the pattern, but you’ve said she’d never be near the water on her own.”

“Pattern?” What does he mean by that?

“She was the youngest at twelve and the third victim in a summer, when it had been two the other summers.” Carter Kelley doesn’t think before he talks. He never has. Would I be so blunt about Mia or Sara... both ungodly snots? Would I refer to his sister as part of a pattern?

“When I talked to the detective, she was more interested in Susanna Ross’ case.”

Ignoring Carter as he blathers on about different things he discovers as we work, my mind keeps revisiting his implication. Katie's case was different, maybe even less relevant in terms of all the drownings. She could be the most important of all. There hasn’t been another drowning since hers.

Bursts of laughter heard from Grady and Mitch while they work in Lala’s music room, draw my attention. I underestimated Grady, thinking he’d be bitter about Lala wanting Mitchell to have her home. He didn’t need it with the trust he’ll receive at the age of twenty-one, just as I had, he’ll become a millionaire. Romantic Ruin is still topping the charts, maybe money is no concern for him either, but it was his blood relative. There were times I wondered if her closeness with my siblings and I became stand-ins for the children she never had with Daniel. Lucky for her, my parents didn’t mind sharing or in some cases just dumping us on her.

Kind of makes me sound like the bitter one, but I tend to look at it more realistically. My mom tried to keep up appearances because that was important to my dad. My dad attempted to keep the legacy of the Gibson name respected. Lala was there to love us. To give us the time and attention we needed growing up.

Cal climbs the stairs backwards tugging a bulky old dresser by himself. “Where’s Mitchell? Hey, Mitch?!”

Rushing to help him, I recognize the dresser as the one she kept the bottom drawer locked in. We haul it the last couple of steps to the hallway. “Should we break the

lock to see if there is paperwork inside that might be needed?”

Once her office had been ransacked not much remained to give us any hint of what she'd provided the Ross family. Cal leans back against it to catch his breath, while wiping an arm across his forehead. “That’s Mitch’s call, it belongs to him now.”

The response from Mitch is a hesitant shrug.

“Let her lawyer know maybe?” Grady suggests.

We’re all taking a break after St. James’ donation truck leaves, when Grady says to Mitch, “Hey, I was going to ask you where you found that box of medication? Lala wasn’t sick or anything, right?”

Confusion clouds Mitch’s face as he finishes his water. “What medication?”

“Those boxes I picked up that had my name on them had a metal lockbox with a broken lock that had vials of medication with a bag of syringes. She must’ve buried the damn container it was caked in dirt.” He huffs a laugh out. “It was... uh.” He closes his eyes, his lips thin while he’s thinking. “Fuck, don’t remember what it was. Was the container in the box?”

Cal sits up a little straighter, setting his water bottle on the step he’s sitting on. “Was she diabetic? My dad has Type one and used to have insulin that was in vials he had to inject. Now it’s just a pen with a needle.”

Tossing his bottle cap in the air to catch, Carter says flatly, “If it’s insulin it would need to be refrigerated so it’s garbage now.”

Mitch still hasn’t answered him, his brow furrowed, he scratches his arm. “I loaded up the boxes, but I didn’t put anything like that in there.”

Chapter Seventeen

Remington James

My finest pardon is being begged. “Wait a damn minute.” I slap my hand down on the gravel alleyway. “I’ve been working half a day on this already, you’re telling me that I may have to cover it up?” Bright and early, I had all the paint, rollers, brushes, step stool, ladder, tarps, and the scaffolding that the Gibson family connections made happen ready, all set to make a masterpiece. Okay, to at least entertain the passing eyes.

Keenan stands over me with his hands on his hips. “Honey, if she shuts this down, we ride at dawn.” Turns out that Mayor Kelley’s pucker-faced wife, the area’s premiere real estate agent, caught wind of Ceily’s plans for me to paint a mural on the side of the building. Is she expecting a graphic design of penises? A field of penise’s blowing in the wind? A bevy of bared boobies? Why does she feel like I’ll do something terrible? Granted, the last time I saw her at Pop’s a week ago, my tongue was halfway down Cal’s throat, I was holding Charlie’s hand, and I had a frog with his little webbed middle finger up on the side of my hand.

Oh. I guess I can see the concern.

I’d sketched my plan out last night. Scrapping one after another, until Cal’s idea to go abstract stuck. That only made me turn weepy. We haven’t interacted since I found the picture. It’s only been two days, but his texts that I’ve left unanswered nag at me. How do I handle this?

Do I just ask him, “Hey, are you by any chance responsible for eight murders, scare tactics, hauntings, and who knows what else? Would that be you?” Sure. Sounds like

a great way to go about it.

Why don't I go totally scorched earth and announce my suspicions on the loudspeaker at work. Oh... work. There is no way to avoid seeing him, with my current schedule. I start texting all my co-workers that don't normally work the same shifts as us, telling them I need to change my work schedule to paint the mural.

My eyes are puffy, my nose red, and I keep redirecting the conversation when Keenan asks what's wrong. Loving them was going to break me, and I knew that. Carlotta's letter was clear, the detective's warning was clear, and I still held on. I used to think bulls were crazy for chasing red flags, but what did I go and do?

The entire three-story brick eastside wall of the Hidden Treasure's building is completely primed with a white paint after Ceily had city workers spray off the building earlier in the week. Keenan's been giving me moral support. After declaring he'd wield a mighty roller but nearly fell from the ladder when he was twerking to the radio, he became ground support. Covered in specks of paint, dirt, and sweat I almost collapse in the alley, after climbing down the scaffolding.

A tan Cadillac Escalade rolls to a stop on main street before the alley. Mayor Kelley's wife climbs out in a sleeveless white linen and lace two-piece suit, sensible flats, looking stylish from the neck down. Her face has the usual pinched, sour look. "Miss James, hello, do you remember me?" Ugh, how could I forget? Her thinly veiled disgust over Wilder attending Carlotta's funeral sticks with me.

Wiping my grubby hands on my already dirty suspenders is more for show than improvement, yet I do it anyway. "Of course." I don't often forget such a severe looking face accompanied by brittle smiles.

With any attempt at pleasantries out of the way she continues, "When Ceily told the town council what she was going to do, I thought it was a marvelous idea." She

throws her arms wide. It's a challenge to keep myself from rolling my eyes. "We even suggested that there be a contest for the mural idea. There are so many wonderful local artists that could help."

Her comment doesn't hurt one bit, she doesn't know me or what I'm capable of. "A contest? What did Ceily say?"

Keenan mutters behind his hand, "She called her a calamity."

I whisper back, behind my hand, "Oh... that's a good one. I like what she called Skip last week, a wobbly table."

Mrs. Kelley seems oblivious to our side talk as she points to the town square gazebo and other landmarks that could be included. Ultimately, the building belongs to Ceily, they don't have a say. "We think that any reference to the town's tragedies should be avoided." We. She's here on behalf of the town council or has taken it upon herself. People like this are passive aggressive irritants. I try not to gape at her. Did she think I'd paint someone drowning?

"Naturally," I say in a terse tone.

Before she can launch into another discussion about what should be painted or not painted on the brick wall next to her, I unfold the piece of sketch paper tucked into my pocket. I extend it to her, she takes it with her fingertips, like I'm handing her a death threat or an anthrax laced missive. She needs to simmer down.

With a small gasp and her eyes widening, she pulls it in closer. "Did you draw this?"

My seventh attempt to sketch a plan for the wall landed on this. A vibrant purple and pink sunset with a walleye jumping into the air water droplets coming off it, two eagles off to the right, a gazebo surrounded by flower bushes, the old town bridge, a

caricature of Skip leaning on the Flicks n' Fun sign, a drive-in with a line of cars in front of it, a hole of golf with the windmill obstacle, a caricature of Ceily holding a treasure chest, the tower of St. James in the distance, Pop's holding a bag of groceries, Talley with an ice cream cone, The Splash logo with music notes, and, proudly, I've hidden a nod to each of my guys... even Cal. Birds that are flying into the setting sun, hearts for wings.

The vibes of a lake and lakeside town... no lake painted.

She traces her finger over the paper with something resembling a smile on her face. Handing it back to me, she says, "You're a talented young lady. I think the town will be very proud to have that mural displayed."

It's not until she's pulling away with a little wave to Keenan and I that I think about the Kelleys' loss. It's with a heart bogged down in pain and confusion that I pat myself down for the marker I keep on me. Finding it, I cross one of the birds off.

It's time to start making better choices.

Chapter Eighteen

Grady Marlow

Resting my head against my fist, I squirm to readjust in the neon green folding chair I'm being held hostage in. We've been listening to Skip James discuss his plans of expansion for twenty minutes. Not that anyone asked. Pretty sure we were clear about what the visit pertains to. Wilder looks ready to ditch us and this place.

"There were people that thought I should give that a try." I don't think people have thought anything of the sort, but Skip on the few occasions we've interacted hears what he wants when someone talks. Cal and I exchange a smirking look.

Charlie clears his throat before redirecting Skip, “Back to renting the Funpark after hours for Remi’s going away party... would you be willing to do that? I’ll pay whatever.”

The ability to say that must be nice. Quite a flex. Props to him for not making that sound douchey, because it could’ve.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:51 am

With Remi busy painting the mural downtown, we took the opportunity to discuss party plans with her uncle. Doing it all together was unforeseen, since Wilder usually makes excuses not to be involved. He's doing his best to provoke Charlie at every turn which is making Cal, and I play mediator.

“Oh, that's not necessary. We're talking about my niece! Of course you can have it here. I insist. As for paying me any type of compensation, that's just ridiculous. Leave the food to me. Whatever you do please don't let Ceily bring anything she considers edible. Jim is developing some new items for the food truck; it'll be the perfect opportunity to try them out.” And there it is, the angle he can use to make it a business decision. If ‘smarmy’ was a person...

Skip irons out details with Charlie, while the rest of us are disregarded. He clearly wants to impress Charlie. Based on the looks Gibson keeps giving us, he's not going to be swayed from thinking Skip is a clown.

My eyes keep falling on Wilder, I can't help the draw. The more time we've spent together, all the repressed feelings keep working their way out. Unlike the freedom I feel with Remi, I'm feeling insecure around him. Waiting for the rejection to come, I keep resisting the urge to be affectionate with him, to show my feelings beyond sex. He's not giving me a reason to. Hell, I'm more affectionate with Cal, who has become a better friend than I could have imagined. All the time spent with Sara, I managed to know him at just a surface level; that he plays baseball well, that's an understatement, and that he's funny. I didn't expect him to be genuinely nice or considerate.

He nods his head towards the door, using two fingers to mime running. It's tempting.

What I'd like to do is pay a visit to Remi, but going downtown means attention I'm not looking for. Thankfully, dropping in at Flicks n' Fun as it opened, meant I could slip into Skip's office without any issues. Each time the front door of the ticket building opens ringing the bell, I give up more hope that leaving will be as uneventful.

Last night I took a walk with Remi to Pop's Grocery store right before it closed, resulting in being stopped four times, followed by someone in a vehicle, and being told by Wilder, later, that I made the local news and video of us showed up online. We were out for twenty minutes. I've accepted that I need to learn the best way to deal with the interest, but it won't ever be effortless.

When we're finally freed from Skip's office, Cal and Charlie leave to meet up with Mitch to finish up the last of the clean out at Lala's old house. I don't know what to think about the medication that found its way into one of the boxes from the house. There's no reason for Mitch to lie about not putting it there. Finding that dirty metal box with a broken clasp lying on top of sheet music, caused instant frustration. Leave it to Mitchell Gibson to lay something dirty on top of the papers, disregarding how important those papers would be to me.

If he didn't put it there, who did?

Wilder and I leave through a side door out of the office that faces my parent's property. Dad has called me twice, since returning from vacation. He doesn't mention Lala or the fact I'm still in town this long, preferring to tell me he's researching property lines and thinking about investigating Skip James. "No time like the present," I say to myself.

"What?" Wilder asks me, knocking his shoulder against mine, giving me his cocky half smile.

Before I can change my mind, I continue walking past the Prius I'm borrowing towards my parent's home. "Oh, fucking hell," I hear Wilder say behind me. "Your dad hates me. Well, he hates everyone, just hates me more." Little does he know that my dad doesn't dislike him at all. The problems he'd gripe about in Wilder's presence were always about me.

Dad answers the door with his usual grumpy look on his face. "Son." He nods before holding the door open for us. "When did this knocking shit start? This is your home, too." He nods at Wilder as he walks past him. "Been awhile, Wilder." Almost six years, but who's counting.

"Your mother started golfing last month with that group of retired teachers, you know the loud-mouthed ones?" Sure, dad. He likely says these things to their faces which just ups the cringe factor. "That's where she's at."

"Good for her. She's staying active and being social. It'll keep her healthy in retirement, right?" I'd bet she joined them to escape dad's long rants and bitchfests. In the past she would consider the walk she'd take from the house to her lawn chair at the back of our property for a cigarette exercise.

"Hmph, just a reason to drink in the middle of the day."

"You still have this thing?" Wilder asks dad, patting the decrepit gold recliner he sits in. "Wow. Remember that time we relocated it to the garage as a joke and you moved Grady's bed to the garage for a month?"

Christ. I cautiously look at my ornery old man expecting him to be upset, instead he's got a big smile on his face, and a chuckle working its way out. He rarely laughs, so I'm taken off guard. "He never moved it again, that's for damn sure."

Dad and Wilder get started talking about dad's latest project in the yard, while I

watch them. Casually sitting on the arm of dad's recliner, Wilder is animated while describing an old Harley Davidson a co-worker of his purchased. I'm the odd man out. All these years while Wilder doubted dad liked him, I knew they had an ease in communicating that I didn't have with my own father. Yes, I liked classic cars, which dad made his money restoring, but the music interests and my close relationship with Lala put up barriers.

Dad's crackling laugh rings out as he slaps Wilder's leg. "I'll admit, I never expected the two of you to mend fences."

"Me neither," I say quietly. "It's actually because of Lala that we reconnected. She called Wilder asking him to come back to Lake Hollow to meet with her."

My parent's cat Chevy's low whine and the ticking of the Godfather clock in the corner of the den are the only sound for minutes, while dad and I share a look. I can see the emotion he's holding back, a mix of despair, anger, grief. His face reddens as he says, "She was on one helluva mission the last year or so. I'd tell her, your mom would tell her 'Lala leave it the hell alone. Let the authorities take care of it. Stop putting yourself in the middle of it.' But did that stubborn pain in the ass listen to a damn one of us? Ceily, Pops, Talley, Father Chris, even that insufferable Bonnie Gibson, all told her to let it go." He leans forward in his chair. "I know what I heard on the phone that day with her, can't really call it an accident can I? She was not alone at that Funpark."

Wilder looks between us with a sharp look, his eyes narrowing at me. He doesn't even have to say it. I kept this from him, not intentionally. I'd forgotten dad's claims because he spends all his time coming up with worse case scenarios. "Oh, okay... back up. What did you hear?" he asks my dad.

Dad tells him. It's not helpful, because she was found alone, there were no witnesses, no video... nothing to prove what he heard.

“Hey, Dad, did Lala need medication for anything? Did she have a medical condition?” I ask, thinking he may know. Even though things were tense, at times they’d stop talking for a month here and there, they knew or heard things about one another.

“She was as right as rain. Told me after Christmas that she was blessed with Grandma Steiner’s good genes because she felt like a twenty-year-old. That little dig came after I told her about my knee replacement.” They could dish it back and forth. “Is that what they’re saying now that she fell because she had a medical problem?” He scoffs as he stands to open the back patio blinds.

“No.” Dad listens while I recount finding the box of medication, this is the first time Wilder is hearing about it, too.

“What type of meds?” I can tell that Wilder is mad at me. Again. It wasn’t that I was trying to keep secrets or lie by omitting things. I’ve been preoccupied.

“It was Potassium something. I was going to look it up, but I’ve been a little busy getting ready to hit the road for our tour.”

Wilder bites his thumb nail, before crossing his arms across his chest. “You have to be fucking be kidding me. Potassium Chloride by any chance?” He pulls his phone out typing furiously. “Well, does that sound familiar?”

“That might be it. It was vials of it, and syringes.”

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I don't like where this is going...

Wilder levels me with a look of anger as he reads off his phone, "Potassium chloride can be difficult to detect in an autopsy because post-mortem potassium concentrations don't necessarily reflect ante-mortem concentrations. For example, potassium concentrations in hemolyzed blood are much higher than in serum, making it hard to conclude potassium poisoning from post-mortem analysis. Additionally, fatal intravenous potassium injections can cause subtle or no anatomic changes, making it difficult for an autopsy surgeon to determine the cause of death."

Oh, my fucking God. Why was that among my aunt's belongings?

Dad looks like he swallowed his tongue, his eyebrows raised. "Why in the world would she have that?"

Do we ever really know anyone?

"Mitch said he never saw it, that he never put it in my boxes. So, she may not have had that. Someone may have wanted me to think that though..."

"Did you let the detective know about this?" Wilder asks me while shoving his phone back in the pocket of his shorts.

Dad interjects, "Mitchell Gibson? Do you trust any of those Gibsons anymore? Don't make the same mistakes your aunt made. The worst thing that ever happened to her was that family." And we're back to this. Dad always circles back to them as the reason for discord in our family.

The Marlow's vs. The Gibson's round five hundred.

"Uhh... Jesus Christ, dad. This again?"

"Son, you don't understand the history." I've heard that more times than I could ever count. He never really explains what the fuck it means. I'm just supposed to take that as an answer.

"I'm not a kid anymore, that's not good enough. If I don't understand, tell me. What history?"

Wilder and I sit on the sagging old plaid couch in my parents cluttered den, while he tells us more than I wanted to know. Daniel Gibson was not a good kid. Prior to Carlotta getting involved with him, it was widely believed he was unwell, mentally. He'd harmed animals, he'd pushed an employee of his dad's down the stairs, he'd pinned someone between the dock and a bumper boat trying to hurt them. All around bad seed type behavior. The family downplayed or lied about it all. His brother protected him constantly. Made excuses for it all. The day he drowned in front of The Bends he had beaten Lala when he found out she was pregnant. She ended up losing the baby two days after he had drowned. She was investigated, briefly, for pushing him intoxicated into the water causing him to strike his head. Everyone at the party that day told the police he was alone when it happened. After Daniel passed away, the Gibson's denied all his issues. No one spoke a word about Carlotta's abuse at his hands, the pregnancy that ended. Anyone in town that knew the truth kept it to themselves. Carlotta adopted an opinion in time that Daniel had a drinking problem, but he was the love of her life. My dad and mom's attempts to remind her were met with hostility or shunning.

Grabbing Wilder's hand, I squeeze it tightly.

"Do Mitchell and Charlie know the truth?" Wilder asks my dad.

“Do you think that David or Bonnie Gibson would ever admit to their kids or anyone else what Daniel Gibson truly was?” My dad shakes his head sadly.

“What was that?”

“A psychopath.”

Chapter Nineteen

Remington James

Two days of working from sunup to sundown has meant that our progress has been swift. Once I'd painted the black outline of the objects pictured on the mural, Keenan, Pops' grandson, and two of Ceily's friends from quilting started to paint in with the colors needed. The finer details I followed behind doing. Their company is helping distract me from thinking about Cal. Charlie spent an hour on the phone last night trying to get to the root of the problem. He wants to know why I'm not responding to Cal. I couldn't tell him. It would kill him to know what I suspect is true about his best friend.

Instead, I played it off, telling him I'd tried to call back but with the mural I've been busy. Also that nerves about leaving have me distracted. He tried to talk me into meeting up with him at the Drive-In on Saturday night, but I made excuses not to. He'll bring Cal.

Cal Truitt. He's on my mind constantly, each loving moment, each shared laugh, intimate connection driving a deeper pain into my heart. Deep down, I can't accept it. I don't want to.

There's a battle in my mind between what I know of Cal and what I know about the drownings. Carlotta's words in the letter make me feel sick...“Please be careful. The

person responsible is a pathological liar, psychopath...”

I take a breath, backing up in the alley to look up at the mural, which is a couple days from completion. Keenan pulls me close in a one-armed hug. “You fucking clobbered it, doll. It’s gorgeous. Meemaw came out when you were up on the scaffolding. She was moved to tears. I think she mentioned she's making you cookies.”

“Your meemaw is a menace to society.” I swat at my bestie. “It’s good, huh?” Being proud of myself feels indulgent. I choose instead, to appreciate that Ceily gave me the chance to show how much Lake Hollow means to me. This is the first time I’ve felt like I’ve found a true home, with friends and love. Natalie even said, yesterday, that Lake Hollow is better than she thought it would be. Of course, she went on to ask me what makes soup wet, so it may not have been a deep realization.

The widening gap between Uncle Skip and I doesn’t feel like it can be undone. There are resentments on both sides that could be unfixable. I resent feeling like a burden, being kept in the dark, and having to be his ‘rock’. He resents being stuck with me, my opinions, and decisions.

Him missing me when I’m back in Florida, might change our relationship, or solidify the problems.

Once the tarps are in place and all the equipment is stowed in the back of Hidden Treasures, I start off for The Bends. Since coming to Lake Hollow, I’ve walked the route from downtown to the cabin enough to note little changes; a new flyer on a light pole, a tree cut down in a yard, or the gigantic spotlight GaryMarlow erected pointing towards the Funpark. My big inhale of the breeze past the yard full of lilac trees makes the emotions I hid all day pour through me. Tears spill down my cheeks. I need to talk to someone about this, I just don’t know who to confide in. Obvious choices are Keenan, Wilder, or Grady, but once I say it out loud... tell them about finding the pages, about Cal having that picture in his pocket, there is no going back.

The accusation will take on a life of its own.

If I'm wrong, if everyone was wrong, Cal's life will be destroyed. I'd never do that to someone I disliked, much less one that I've come to love.

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I still find holes in all the possible reasons he'd have something to do with the drownings. He was only thirteen when they started, no one has ever mentioned a problem with any of the victims, including his sister. Could Carlotta's suspicion be misplaced? But then what about the freaking picture?

My mind is wrapped up with thoughts of Cal, when I stop short in front of the Marlow's neighbor's home. On one side is the Funpark property and the other is a beige tri-level home, the yard is spotted with rock gardens filled with decorative shrubs. The sign pushed into their yard near the roadway stops me in my tracks. Sponsored by the sheriff's office the heading says, 'Do you have information regarding these investigations?' Below it are six pictures: Mark Tullery, Mia Kelley, Tera Hersch, Jeremy Eiler, Susanna Ross, and Sara Truitt. I step closer, bending to look at the wording below... if you have any information, contact Detective Julia Hemminger followed by a number.

All those cases are reopened.

Except Katie Gibson?

The flush of heat in my face, the tightness in my chest, and the sudden panic all cause me to freeze in front of the Tullery residence. Hemminger doesn't have enough... just circumstantial evidence for an arrest. But the Sheriff's office has a 'person of interest'. The cases are open again. I know something I've tried to deny to myself. What the hell am I doing?

The rest of my walk back to the cabin, I notice the double-sided corrugated plastic yard signs placed by the Sheriff's office in several more places. Even on the

boulevard near the Funpark and the entrance to The Bends. It feels like a desperate last-ditch effort on behalf of the Sheriff's office.

It's several more unneeded reminders of all that I'm keeping to myself.

Hugging my knees to my chest, I sit at the end of the dock watching the sunset. Droolius nudges under my arm. "Oh, buddy... go fetch your stick up, go get it. Go on," I urge him in a high-pitched sing songy voice. The enthusiasm is completely faked for my furry friend.

I turn when I hear someone step onto the dock to see Uncle Skip approaching. "You claim to hate being attacked by the mosquitos, but I find you out here under a cloud of them."

"I'm complicated."

He sits next to me, dipping his feet into the water. "Everything all set for Florida?" We haven't had a talk of any kind for weeks. I suppose he's feeling the pressure to do it because I'm leaving. "On my way home, I checked the mural out. Impressive. I knew it would be, but you've really outdone yourself, Rem." He grabs my hand giving it a bit of a shake. We've never been a family that hugs one another, or, I'm learning, shares emotions in healthy ways.

"Thanks?" The last thing I need or want right now is a forced conversation with Skip. "Before I forget, Wilder is taking Droolius home with him to Hancock, the Hops are going to Keenan and Ceily's, and Squiggles is going with Taj." Leaving my little posse behind is another hurdle, but they'll be safe with their new caretakers. Plus, it won't be forever.

"Imagine my shock when I heard you're flying." He shakes his head with a sigh. "It wasn't long ago you refused to get on a plane..." His words drifts off.

Yeah, wonder why. Now, it's the only option that gives me just a bit more time with my guys. I don't bother to acknowledge his comment. Especially since we've never addressed what happened between Aunt Bo and mom.

"Rem, you know I care about you, don't you?" There's a catch in his voice. My head swivels his way, but he keeps staring at the water. "I had a talk with Wilder. He had a few things he wanted me to... consider. It was mentioned that you think I didn't want you to come live with us."

Oh, for the love of self-expression...

"And you're saying now that you did?"

In an indignant tone he replies, "Of course."

But I remember... "Well, she doesn't have anyone else, I have to take her, right?"

"Oh, Remi. I was terrified of you."

What?! That's rich, I was a twelve-year-old girl. "What did it for you? Was it my Kool aid-stained hair? The alligator I drew up my leg, or I know, must have been the black eye I had from beach driftwood that hit me during a storm. I was pretty scary." I know I sound like a bitch. Right now, I'm tired of listening to his lame excuses. Looking back, I know I acted with a bravado I didn't really have, but he was the damn adult. I felt unwanted before I even left with him.

"You might not remember, but you didn't want to go with me. In fact, you told the CPS worker that I was an unfit carnival clown. That wasn't what worried or scared me. It was the way you'd stare everyone down. Here was this scrawny kid that came across like a battle-scarred adult. I wasn't sure how I could help you."

I didn't know my uncle then, and he didn't know me. The sporadic times through the years that I'd seen him were only memorable because I'd hear about his misadventures: the clown go-carts, chainsaw juggling, themed carwashes, one business idea after another that fell apart.

The silence between us is full of unspoken inadequacies. I never knew how to be vulnerable; he didn't know how to nurture. He finally continues, "I don't talk about my sister. There isn't a good way to explain why..."

"You could try," I say softly. "Did you hate her?"

I don't turn to look at him when I hear a snuffle. "I wish I could. When your mom was a teenager, she ran away... not once but four times. Each time the police returned her, it got worse for her at home. The last time she was leaving... the time that stuck, I begged to go with her. She told me she'd come back for me. She never did. I didn't hear from her for almost two years. But I got it. I really did, our parents saw us as money makers not as people." He wipes his eyes. "I thought I was better than that with you and Natalie, but Wilder has me wondering about that now. Did I pick up bad traits from your grandparents?"

My resolve weakens when I consider the upbringing that my uncle and mom had. The pieces my mom would divulge through the years sounded horrific. Con artist scams they were forced to play a role in, being locked in small rooms with no food and other harsh punishments, when they didn't perform well enough. There was no love, no affection.

"Don't be that hard on yourself. Sometimes, I think... I don't know, I think you've been conditioned to manipulate people, like Relia was." That is the most forward thing I've ever uttered to my uncle. It's the truth behind my feelings towards him that I could never say. I brace myself for his reaction.

“Oh. That hurts.” He puts a hand over his heart, hanging his head. “Your boyfriend said pretty much the same thing... that I manipulate people into doing things. He’s about as opinionated as you are.”

That’s Wilder. Just one of the reasons I’ve fallen for him. “Some of the best people aren’t afraid to voice their opinions even when they know it won’t be popular.”

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“Remi, I care about you. I don’t think of you like my niece, but more like my daughter. You know you’re my rock.” I hate that. Can’t he understand that I never wanted the pressure of being his ‘rock’? This ‘care’ he feels doesn’t translate to me.

I focus on Droolius who is back licking my shoulder, huffing in my ear. There were innumerable times before I was legally considered ‘alone’ that I needed a rock. I could’ve used someone steady, protective, and present. Does he understand the irony?

“I want you to give me a chance to prove it. That you can rely on me, too,” he says after a few minutes spent silent, avoiding making eye contact. “I didn’t even know about the drownings or investigations until Wilder stopped me to chat. You need to be careful, Remington.” Hmm, I keep hearing that, but it’s difficult to do when you don’t know which way to watch for the danger.

I’m going to blame my overwrought emotions for the big sloppy hug I give him, toppling him backwards, “Whoa, yeah, okay. I...” He pats me loosely before laughing as he falls backwards. “Does this mean our talk went well?” I wouldn’t go that far, but it’s leaps and bounds further than we’ve gotten in understanding one another. I love my uncle. He and Nat are family, we share the pain of past betrayals and a legacy of one messed up ancestry.

“Your attempt at having a fatherly talk gets a solid passing grade.” Giving a playful smack to his arm, I add, “A talk with Wilder, huh? Did that happen today?”

Skip rolls his eyes. “It’s a long story, but I know now that he’s got no problem telling it like it is.”

The tears filling my eyes aren't just because I'll miss him... miss everyone, but because I'm not going to be alone again. I know beyond any doubt now.

Chapter Twenty

Cal Truitt

Team confused please gather the fuck here.

With each passing day that Remi doesn't call or text back, that my calls aren't answered, the ache in my chest grows. Grady and Charlie don't have any idea why. Her explanations when they ask make it sound like a coincidence. But it's not.

She has a reason, but she's not saying what it is.

I'm afraid to ask Wilder about it, because I still don't know if he accepts me. Years ago, after Sara died, I said a lot about him not being in prison. That he had gotten away with killing her.

Midway through my shift at James' Flick n' Fun, Kami saunters my way. "Did you and Remi break up?" Is there a kind way for me to ignore her? Who's manning her bridge while she's over here annoying the fuck out of me?

"Hi? If my memory serves me, didn't I tell you that we could talk if work required it, otherwise it would be best not to?"

She frowns at me. "The Cal I know was never such an asshole. Maybe this whole Remi situation and her dating half the town has made you angrier than normal, or maybe I never really knew you, but even when we weren't together you never talked to me like that." She puts her hands on her hips, while she stays standing right in my path.

Blaming Remi for me not talking to her is wild. But she is right that I would bend over backwards to avoid conflict in the past. It was easier to turn the other cheek, bite back the words I wanted to say. But one of the many positive results of my love for Remi is owning what I feel and think. She did that for me.

I just wish I didn't feel like she's suddenly flipped the script on me.

"Did you need something?" I ask because she's looking for a response, and I don't want the drama.

She looks around for anyone that may be listening to us, then turns back speaking quietly, "Did you hear about all the drowning investigations being opened again?" How could I miss it? The Sheriff's office posted signs all over town, my parents were told, I'm meeting later with Detective Hemminger, and Charlie won't let me forget.

"Kami..." She's looking for a reason to speak to me. I know this, but short of picking her up and placing her out of my way I'm stuck. "Did you have a point to make?"

Nat walks out of the ticket office, pausing when she sees me talking to Kami, before I can acknowledge her, she turns, hurrying off to the mini putt course. Great. Natalie James is the main conduit of all the gossip, and Remi is already becoming distant. I didn't need Nat seeing Kami and I talking.

"Do you remember Jeremy?" I don't want to go down memory lane with her, especially not about the past drownings.

Crossing my arms, I respond in agitation, "Barely. Why?"

"My mom called me when she saw all the yard signs because she remembered something weird." Fuuuck. There is no break from it. She goes on, "Carlotta had run into her last summer, and she'd asked her if Jeremy had been in for his school

physical before he had drowned. Super weird question first of all. Like so random.” I just want to sink into the concrete path. Kami’s mom works as a medical records clerk and receptionist at the small family practice clinic in town.

“Yeah, weird. So what?” Not gonna lie, the fact that she’d ask anything about Eiler doesn’t look right.

“Mmm... mom thought it was. Like what did she care about his medical history or whatever? Then she asked if he had hyperkalemia... I think I said that right. Mom told her she didn’t remember, because even though he’s dead she couldn’t tell anyone that. But he was completely healthy. She was asking questions about the condition, too. Like if someone could develop it at a young age.”

My head hurts. I won’t miss the loony toon fringe and all the theories about the past. “Neat story. Anything else?”

She glares at me. “You’re being a dick. I was only saying that mom thought Carlotta was being sketchy. Do you think she had something to do with the drownings? Everyone is always looking for some way they were connected. Who knew everyone in town better than Lala?”

My mouth drops open, my stomach bottoms out.

Lala? Carlotta Marlow?

Her high school boyfriend drowned in the lake right where the other drownings happened, she knew the locals, she may have had contact with Ross or Hersch, but...

“I don’t think so. I really wish people would stop trying to pin it on this person and then that person. It’s like a fucking witch hunt. Why is everyone hellbent on finding a connection?” After all this time, if the Sheriff’s office had anything, there would’ve been an arrest. They are grasping at straws because the Ross family put pressure on them. It’s pointless.

Kami narrows her eyes further at me, pursing her lips. “Like I said, you’re an ass. I just think that maybe Carlotta was responsible, someone found out and then...” She draws a finger across her throat. Has she always been this fucking dramatic?

“If you’re done, can I pass, please? Some of us have work to do.” Grumbling under her breath, she moves.

Pulling my phone out, it takes a few tries to find anything about the medical term she threw out there. I find out that it means a potassium deficiency, a blood level that is below normal in potassium, an important body chemical. The problem can result in fatigue, muscle cramps, and abnormal heart rhythms. Was she thinking he cramped up and drowned?

Whether she was trying to find reasons for the drownings or she had heard something, causing her to ask we’ll never know. I’m tired of the suspicious conjecture. Just fed the fuck up.

Leaving work for the night, I decide to look for Remi downtown. She's been hard at work on the mural, but I just need to see her, talk to her about whatever has caused her to back off. If I said or did something, I need to know. If I'm this tied in knots over missing her after a few days, how am I going to handle weeks at a time?

I park by the town square, jogging across the street to the side of main street where Hidden Treasures is located. Early evening on this side of town is quiet. There are only a handful of people walking on the sidewalk on both sides of the street. I know even before I reach the alley beside Ceily's building that Remi isn't there. I'm starting back to my truck when I see Keenan leaving Talley's with a milkshake.

He spots me, stopping abruptly and putting a hand up in the air. "Have mercy. What brings this southside dweller to this part of town? Trying to hunt down a certain bombshell?" In spite of myself I laugh at him.

"I was hoping she'd be around." I shove my hands into the pockets of my jeans. "It's been hard to get together."

Keenan stops near me. "Sooo... heard you were talking to your ex today. Sounded like it was an intense conversation."

That fucking fast? Christ, Natalie should look into broadcast journalism. "Seriously? She cornered me." Running my hand through my hair, I feel like unleashing a big roar of frustration. It's all building up. Remi leaving, the chatter in town, the past peeking over my shoulder, and now rumors about me talking to Kami.

"Her meds definitely are not at the appropriate therapeutic levels," Keenan jokes leaning against the side of a decorative flowerpot filled with azalea and coppertips. "If it makes you feel any better, Remi didn't seem to care."

No. That doesn't feel better.

I would never play the jealousy game, but she's not communicating and now she didn't react to that? I need to see her.

"She left about five minutes ago, her usual route back to The Bends."

I catch sight of her when I'm walking back to my truck, she's only a couple blocks away. "Rem?!" I call her name as I run in her direction. She bends down to pick up litter, as I come up behind her. "Remi, hey." The look of terror on her face when she turns to see me doesn't fade away as I step closer.

"Honey?"

She ducks her head before looking back up, uncertainty etched across her face. "Remi, what's wrong?"

Chapter Twenty-one

Remington James

We're on the edge of downtown, where there may be witnesses, he's not going to hurt me here. I squeak out, "Oh, hey."

He steps up to me folding me into his arms pressing me close, but I stay rigid, keeping a loose grip to his T-shirt hem. I fight the tears welling up.

When he steps back, he looks stricken. "If I didn't know before, I do now. There's something wrong. What is it?"

Standing here in front of me, it's even harder to believe he did it. Wearing his Flicks n' Fun polo, a pair of jeans, the crinkles next to his eyes, the dimples in his cheeks, those light green eyes. MyCal. But that's just it... the person that did this has gotten

away with it, because they've covered their tracks. They would be unthreatening, charming.

My smile is weak, when I do my best to sound fine. "I haven't been sleeping much, worrying about all the things I need to do before I leave."

His disappointment in my answer only tells me how bad I am at trying to cover up my emotions. "I thought we were past this... you keeping things from me."

Huh. Me, too.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I try to keep it together, but it's difficult as hell when he's right here. "Cal, I'm tired. In a week, I'll be in Florida... it's been a lot." The setting sun feels like a sand timer. I don't want to be in the dark, with Cal, alone.

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So much has changed. He's gone from the first person I felt I could lean on in my life, to the person I need to get away from.

It's ripping my heart out.

"Come back to my place with me? We can finish that trashy show, get wings, and have some fun in the hammock?" His half smile and wink only make me question myself. But how? How is he the monster?

Don't be naive, Rem. Jeezus, get a grip.

"I shouldn't. I need to get sleep." I've never said no to him.

His face falls as he reaches a hand out to me. "Honey, I may be emotionally stunted but there is clearly something going on between us. Please tell me what's going on."

Like a reminder, not that I needed one, a yard sign is stuck in the grass only a foot from us. My gaze locks on the pictures of the victims. Cal notices what has my attention. "They put those everywhere."

"It must be hard to see Sara on those." There isn't a way to take that back, I just blurted it out. "You don't like talking about the past, being reminded must be... must be difficult."

"It won't do any good. The signs, digging up the past."

"Why is that?" I just need to get back to the cabin, dusk is fast becoming pitch black.

The fact I'm not willing to be alone with him under the cover of night anymore is hard to reconcile.

He shrugs, rubbing his thumb over his bottom lip. "It doesn't matter." He tries to get me to take his hand again. "Come with me?"

"I-I-"

Like a savior in a dented silver Prius, Grady pulls up next to us. His timing is impeccable.

"Hop in... both of you. I think we all need to talk."

Any other time I'd balk at getting inside that rattle trap or most vehicles, but the alternative is standing here floundering to come up with a good exit.

Cal agrees to follow in his truck. The look of longing on his face as I pull open the passenger door of Grady's borrowed car makes me feel rotten. Just another degree of despair.

Grady texts Wilder and Charlie to meet us at his cabin. I can't have everything talked about in front of Cal, no one else knows about the pages or about the picture. What the hell do I do? Pacing back and forth in Grady's dimly lit cabin kitchen, Cal keeps trying to catch my eye.

"They should be here in a few minutes." Grady pockets his phone. "It's high time that we discuss everything."

No, no, no. I don't allow myself time to second guess it, I grab Cal's hand and tug him into the bathroom. There is no resistance, but Grady's confusion causes me to call out, "Just give us a minute."

Cal asks, “Are you finally going to tell me?”

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and ask him, as level toned as I can, “Why would you have a picture of a drowning girl in your shorts pocket?”

I open one eye, to see him gaping at me with his mouth wide open. “In my... wait, what the fuck.” He steps back from me. “Oh my God.” He shakes his head at me. “You found that when you put the note in my pocket, didn’t you? I was doing the morning walk through at the Funpark and found it stuck under something, I was going to throw it away, but I forgot to.”

My heart slows as I realize that all I ever needed to do was ask. But there’s still the fear over the letter, over the pages of Katie’s journal. Then his face contorts as he realizes that I was suspecting him of being involved in the drownings. “You... you thought I might be responsible...”

I’m not totally convinced he wasn’t, but his explanation of the picture gives me enough to tip the scales towards innocent. “It didn’t look good, you have to admit that.”

“The only thing I’m guilty of is not staying on top of my laundry or throwing that damn picture away.” His eyes are sad as he slumps back against the wall of the small bathroom. “I thought we were past the point in our relationship where we kept things from each other. Why couldn’t you just ask me about it?”

Something tells me all our relationships are about to be tested when we tell each other what we know or believe. Grady seemed intent on getting it all out in the open, but this could be the worst idea. What if this shows our hands to the killer?

Stop. I need to stop being so freaking paranoid. I know these four. I can trust them.

“I’m sorry. I am, but...” Rubbing his arm, I continue, “My default is to shut down. Trusting anyone other than myself is hard sometimes.”

When we return to the living room area of the cabin, Grady, Wilder, and Charlie are in the middle of a debate. “Dumb as hell. You can’t just do that,” Grady finishes saying.

Turning to us, Wilder says, “Grady thinks we need to share with one another all the information we have about the drownings. I don’t necessarily agree that it’s wise, but.” He gives him an irritated look while his face twists. “The time for secrets is over.”

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I could be having an out of body experience, as my heart zooms along dangerously, my limbs are tingling. I don't want to tell them what I've hidden, it feels important enough... the detective's warning dire enough... that I should continue to keep it to myself.

Grady and Wilder tell us what Gary Marlow said about Daniel Gibson. As they go back and forth relaying the story, I watch Charlie's reaction. He's stunned. At one point jumping up, telling them it's all lies. "No way. It's a lie. Carlotta, my parents... no one, has ever said anything like that. All the stories Lala told about Daniel were loving, fond memories. It's a fucking lie."

"How could not a single person ever comment about Daniel's supposedly bad behavior if it was true?" Cal asks as he sits on the arm of the recliner. "This town gossips about a parking ticket, there is no way a scandal like that gets swept under the rug. I don't want to insult your dad, but I don't believe it, either."

Wilder sighs. "I felt the same way, but while Gary Marlow may be a crabby asshole, he isn't a liar."

Giving us a minute to process the information, Grady stares out at the moonlit lake before turning back to us. "What do we know... what have each of us found out this summer?"

My mind is still grappling with the fact Gary Marlow is saying Daniel was a psychopath. That he had hurt Carlotta, ended her pregnancy.

Grady talks over the guys all debating the merit of the news his dad shared, "Stop.

Hey, hold on. I didn't believe it until I started to think about some things she'd said in the past. She said more than once that people will hide their darkest secrets from the world, which always made me feel like she was speaking personally. I'd asked her once why she'd never had kids, and she said that her first baby was 'taken from her' early in her pregnancy. There... there were signs. Not to mention that the rift between our families makes more sense to me now," he says the last bit to Charlie.

Charlie shakes his head; his face is pale. "It was over land. All of the problems were over a land dispute. My dad got pushy pissing your dad off."

"It started long before that and you know it."

"Technically, it's always been about the appropriation of land, all the way back to our great grandparents. Long before Carlotta or Daniel were born." Charlie sits next to Cal. "I, for one, don't buy it. Your dad is making it up. Maybe he has to justify why he wasn't around for Lala or why he didn't do more when she passed away."

"Can we get back on track here?" Wilder asks as he puts an arm around my waist. "You okay?" he whispers into my ear.

Nope. Okay is the last thing I feel right now. I'm nervous that telling Cal and Charlie about the letter could be a mistake, that letting them know about the diary... we could be tipping one of them off. I've never been more conflicted in my life.

Pulling Carlotta's letter from his pocket, Wilder says, "It all starts with this... Lala left this for me. Both Remi and Grady have seen it." I didn't expect him to give them the letter to look at. The panic in my face when I peer at Wilder isn't eased when he doesn't look too certain of what he's doing either.

I murmur under my breath, "What. Are. You. Doing?"

“If it’s one of them, it’ll push them to do something. If not, then we can try to figure things out together.”

Their reactions are both of shock, tears fill Charlie’s eyes. “Why would she think it was one of us?”

“I don’t understand. I just don’t understand.” Cal’s hand rubs over his cheek. “What the actual fuck?”

I expected them to both act surprised, to feel slighted. There is no trace of a suspicious reaction. “That’s not all...” Here goes nothing. I hate that I never told Charlie this when it happened. That I kept it from him, and he’s going to feel hurt. “When the electrician came to work on the light switch problem in the bathroom of our cabin, they had to cut away a piece of the wall, there was a diary inside it.” Charlie perks up, but I cut him off before he can ask anything. “It belonged to your sister. It was Katie’s.”

He puts his head in his hands. “You found a diary belonging to my sister?” When he looks up at me, I see a gut wrenching hurt, as he says, “You found something like that and never told me, because...” He shakes his head. “I don’t, I don’t understand what’s happening here...”

Cal rests a hand on his back while he says, “What was written in her diary? Where is it?”

It takes all the strength inside me to tell them I handed it over to Detective Hemminger, that I didn’t know what else to do. I had read it, she named who she saw kill Sara, but it was water damaged and unreadable. No one in this cabin looks any better than I feel. The words are absorbed and it’s like that ticking bomb I’ve felt under our feet. It’s blown, leaving in its wake the shattered remnants of distrust, hurt, and disbelief.

“Sara was killed,” Cal’s voice sounds detached.

Even if it’s been suspected by most of the people in Lake Hollow over the years, the confirmation seems like more than he can bear right now. He bends over his knees, his hands fisted in his hair, a loud bellow lets loose from him that makes me jump. “Noooooo!” Grady quickly moves to his side, crushing him against him, while Charlie in a daze grabs his hand. Wilder and I watch on, frozen. The pain is too much to witness, but I can’t leave Cal, and Wilder holds me tight not wanting to leave me.

Time lapses as we grieve as a group.

They know, just as Wilder, Grady, and I, that none of it was accidental. It’s not a whispered rumor anymore, it’s not a paranoid passing thought. It’s all connected, it was all done by someone, and they were pointed at as the culprit.

Everything starts getting tossed around.

“She had evidence, but someone got into her office and took it...,” I offer forth.

“Katie was acting weird after Sara’s death, I should’ve realized...,” Charlie says wiping tears away.

“The meds, that was really strange, tell them about the medication I found...” Grady pokes him.

Pulling his phone out, he tells us about Grady finding a broken open metal lockbox full of Potassium Chloride vials and syringes. It was in things Lala left for Grady that came from Lala’s. Mitchell had packed it up.

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“Are you accusing Mitch of doing this?” Charlie is quick to ask.

“No, no... he said he’d never seen it and I believe him. But who would’ve placed them in there?” he replies, rubbing his jaw. “I don’t know why she’d have them; dad was sure she was in good health.”

Cal pipes up, “Fuck... okay, today Kami felt the need to tell me something.” He kicks at the coffee table, while rubbing at the back of his neck. “Her mom remembered Lala asking questions about a medical condition called...” He pulls his phone out to look at something. “I searched it up... it was hyperkalemia, which is low potassium. She wanted to know if Jeremy Eiler had been diagnosed with it, or if young people could be.”

I don’t like where my mind is going...

“What if... shitballs on fire... okay, what if it’s been Carlotta all along? Before any of you jump down my throat just listen, okay, I’ve watched a lot of true crime shows.” They all look at me with their eyes wide, Grady starts to object, Charlie’s mouth drops open. “She left a letter pointing the attention away from her, she met with a detective that didn’t grow up here and presumably didn’t know her past with Daniel, which Julia Hemminger most certainly would have... she said she knew Lala and your mom, Charlie.” I pace, gnawing at my thumbnail. “Something triggering may have happened and she started to recreate the way Daniel died. She got her hands on potassium chloride, which Wilder found out is not traceable in an autopsy, she injected the victims... who knows where, and dumped the bodies in the lake by The Bends.”

“Except there are major flaws with your theory,” Wilder says next to me. “She got away with it. No one was questioning that they were accidental until she found something that she brought to the Ross family’s attention. Not to mention that she, herself, appears to have been killed by someone.” He shakes his head. “I don’t think so.”

“I agree, it wasn’t my aunt. She knew something that got her killed,” Grady says with confidence.

Charlie shakes his head. “That’s pretty far-fetched. I’m with Wilder and Grady on this.”

Cal chews the inside of his cheek, his face still flushed, tendons on his neck sticking out from all the information dumped on him in the last few minutes. “But... I don’t think you’re that off base. It couldn’t be Carlotta; she was trying to find answers. Did you tell the detective all this? About the meds being found?”

If it’s not Carlotta, not one of the guys... who the fuck could it be? Deep down I can’t let go of the detective’s warning. I start to analyze the way Cal and Charlie are behaving. But they aren’t giving me a hint of something amiss in their reactions. Right now, all the guys seem to be on the same page, working to find answers.

“The night Sara died.” I close my eyes for a few seconds, then blow out a breath. “Sorry to rehash this, but it may be the only way to pick up something missed in the past.” Wilder squeezes my hand in encouragement. He’s had to walk me through this enough to know I won’t back down. “Cal, when did you last see her?”

His voice is thick as he says, “We’d just gotten home from the baseball tournament. She’d had a fight with my parents on the way home, they’d grounded her, taken her car privileges away. She was angry and left to walk... to walk to Wilder’s I guess.”

I knew all that. None of it was anything different from what any of the guys had heard before. I turn to Grady. “You were dropped off at Wilder’s. They were fighting, she left to go home. You followed her?”

Cal sits forward. “No... no, you said that you hadn’t followed her? Right?”

Grady tells them the lies he has since confessed to Detective Hemminger and to Wilder. “When I saw Katie, she was trying to get away from me unseen. I made an assumption.” He looks at Charlie in apology. “I couldn’t wrap my head around it, but if the drowning wasn’t an accident. If it wasn’t Wilder...”

“You thought it was Katie?” Charlie looks sick. He puts a hand over his mouth. “And that’s why you acted strange, not singing at her funeral...”

Nothing new is learned from going through it, but Charlie knows now that Grady had suspected Katie did something to Sara. It’s not easy to hear. None of the revelations tonight have been.

Then the connections between the drownings are thrown out.

“They aren’t though, two of them were tourists,” Cal states, “If we’re going with a pattern, what possible one could there be?”

“I’m not convinced there’s a pattern,” Charlie says.

We spend a half an hour tossing out the things that people have said over the years, from the downright ridiculous, “sacrifices to the lake by satanists,” to “accidental drownings blamed on the water currents pulling people under.” But the only thing we can all agree on is that the Sheriff’s office reopening of all the drownings, except Katie’s, is suspicious.

“They can’t think she did any of this, she would’ve been nine when the drownings started. That’s an insane leap,” Charlie says with conviction. “And then what... she drowned herself?”

Charlie asks Wilder questions about the visions, asking him how he knows that he didn’t black out and do something. It gets heated. Charlie questions the break-in at Carlotta’s office and that only Wilder and I knew about the evidence.

Wilder points out that so did Lala’s killer.

Charlie points out that Wilder had access and even had his hands on the necklace to put it in the cabin to scare me. Instead of throwing it, he could’ve pocketed it.

Wilder rolls his eyes and lets them know I witnessed him tossing it.

Cal gets involved pointing out again that Wilder wasn’t even around when Susanna Ross was here.

Eventually, they drop the bickering back and forth.

By the time we’re all talked out, my fears about Cal and Charlie have eased considerably. The relief that our secrets are out, the lies admitted to, and the suspicions talked through, almost makes the prospect of leaving even worse. We’re feeling more like a unit, like a group of people invested in each other.

Rubbing my eyes and yawning, I lay down on the couch, my head in Charlie’s lap. He runs his hand through my hair, saying softly, “Try to sleep. We’ve been talking for three hours.”

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Grady and Cal bring the mattresses from both beds in the cabin to lay side by side on the floor where the pushed back table had been. We all strip to our underwear. We curl up in the middle of the mattresses, Charlie on one side of me, nestled close, Grady on the other. Cal behind Charlie his legs and arms spread out, Wilder laying behind Grady, a hand on his waist.

I can't sleep. I find myself bumping into the guys as I squirm around endlessly, my mind still spinning over possibilities, my impending departure, and I'm getting turned on being this close to them with minimal clothing on. Even fully clothed, I want to pounce on each of them. Biting the knuckle of my finger, I groan in a stretch that thrusts my breasts out. One of them grazes Charlie's chest.

He gives me a small smile. "Uncomfortable?"

Kissing his cheek as I stay close to whisper, "Could you hold me?"

His tender words as he whispers he loves me, makes me finally lose it. The tension from the last few days, the emotional outpouring tonight, all of it causes me to weep. Silently, tears course down my face, as Charlie holds me tight, telling me it's going to be alright. But how can it be? In my heart I know it's going to hurt like hell, saying goodbye. Grady moves in closer. "Are you crying, Rem?" He kisses my shoulder, tightening his arms around my waist. Wilder reaches over him, rubbing my shoulder.

"Please don't cry, baby," Cal says in a strained voice, his hand smoothing the hair on top of my head.

Waking up in the middle of the night with limbs tucked around and on me, I shift,

stretching out my arms. A little breath of a sigh escapes me. Charlie's eyes fly open at the sound. "Are you alright?" His hand caresses my cheek. Those bright blue eyes that I love search my face like the answer to his question is written on it. To be fair, I have a tendency to doodle.

"Mmm... I'm," I start to respond, but my brain effectively shorts out when Grady groans against me as he repositions. His erection settles against one of my ass cheeks. That horny little beast inside me is waking up. "I'm feeling a little," I bite my lip as I grab Charlie's waist, "frisky."

It turns out none of them were asleep because my admission is heard by everyone. Cal sits up teasingly saying, "We can help with that." He wastes no time standing and putting a hand out to pull me up.

But I don't want to separate from anyone.

Not right now. Tonight made me want to hold on tighter to each of them, to keep us together a little while longer. Because long distance could prove to be too much for them.

I prop myself up with my elbows, giving a little shake of my head.

Wilder speaks up, his voice sleepy sounding, "We have the mattresses out here, where do you think you're taking her, Truitt?"

My heart flutters in my chest as I look them over. "Does that mean you're going to hold out on me? Because we're all in the same room?" The craving I'm feeling only mounts when I think about the dreams I've had of us together. My leaving is pushing me to be bold. The anxiety from the past couple of days has made me need this release.

“Fuck it,” Cal says, dropping to his knees at my feet. Crawling closer in between my legs, he says, “This is all about you, sweetheart.”

They all focus on me. Grady undoes my bra kissing my shoulder, his hand cupping my breast.

Charlie’s lips find mine, he whispers into my mouth in between kisses, “I recognize that look.” The knowing wink of his unravels any hesitation I had to keep going. The hunger for them makes me flush head to toe.

Wilder nudges Grady to sit, giving him room near me. His tongue licks my neck just under my ear, as he says, “We’re going to make sure you’re satisfied, James. What do you want?”

I meet his eyes, turning slightly, while the other three are giving my chest and inner thigh teasing attention. It’s important to me that Grady and Wilder don’t deny or hold back their attraction when we’re intimate. “Touch each other.” I take his hand placing it on Grady’s knee. “I don’t want any of us to stop what we feel like doing.”

Cal hears me, and he raises his head to look at us. “As long as everyone is willing participants, I don’t give a shit what you two do. I’m here for Remi.”

“Same here,” Charlie says after pulling away from my nipple.

Excitement courses through me. No one leaves, we’re all allowing this to happen, after a night fraught with emotional turmoil. “Freaking yes. Smash.” I kiss Charlie gripping his thigh, turning to nip at Wilder’s mouth. “Smash.” Diving at Grady’s luscious lips, I say, roughly against them, “Smash,” then turning to face Cal whose pulling at the waistband of my underwear, I say, “Smash.”

That’s exactly what we do.

Grady races to his bathroom returning with condoms and lube, while Cal and Charlie slip my underwear off, tossing both my bra and underwear on the back of the couch. Wilder puts pillows down onto the mattresses and another comforter. My eyes follow him, his impressive erection confined inside his boxer briefs has me dying to touch him.

My back arches off the mattress when Wilder's mouth, teeth, and tongue start paying attention to my clit. Cal lays next to me, turning my head to kiss me. "When you moan into my mouth like that... holy fuck." I pull at his underwear, freeing his dick.

On the other side of me, Charlie has moved to my other nipple. I tug at the back of his underwear. "Off... take them off."

Throwing my head back, my hands hold the comforter over the mattress. I've lost track of Grady, so I lean back up, to see him rolling a condom on, standing at the edge of the room. "Come here...", I direct him.

Wilder takes his hand pulling him down next to him, giving him a teasing nip at his lips. My greedy pussy needing one of them to fill me, I say in a strained voice, "I need to be fucked... please, ple-" Cal's mouth cuts me off as he flips me on top of him.

"Climb on, sweetheart," he says.

Making out with Charlie, while feeding Cal's dick into me, I can't control my wandering hands. From one hand stroking Charlie's dick, the other stroking Grady's. I have Charlie slide to the side giving me access to Wilder.

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I suck and lick at Wilder's dick.

Wilder growls, "I'm going to come. I need. I ne... oh, fuck." My tongue flattens along the bottom of his dick, as I suck the tip and lap up the pre-cum.

My orgasm as Cal pumps into me, makes me back away from Wilder, Grady reaches around me, placing a firm hand around Wilder's dick, while he removes his condom. When his headdrops to suck Wilder dry, I lose it. I'm turned on too much to hold off the rush of pleasure through me.

Cal is removing his condom, when I encourage Grady to lay perpendicular from me, pulling his bare, thick dick into my mouth, I moan around him. I pop off to direct Wilder to lay with his dick near Grady's head, we're forming a triangle. Grady lifts his hefty cock wrapping a hand around it, sucking one of his balls into his mouth. Wilder gets settled near my clit, his tongue flicking over it, into me and back out.

"Huh, that gives new meaning to triangulating... fuck, okay, do your thing." I can't help the giggle with Grady's dick still in my mouth. Leave it to Cal to watch and give commentary.

I look over at Charlie, who is focused on putting a condom on. He lays behind me kissing my shoulder. His hands roaming over my chest, playing with my nipples.

I come quickly, turning to pull Charlie inside me. We rock together, as I watch Wilder push Grady down on his stomach, rubbing his dick down his asscrack, but instead of lubing up and entering him, he lays against him grinding onto him.

Without penetrating him, he comes on his back. Grady flips over pulling Wilder in to kiss him while stroking himself until he squirts all over both he and Wilder. Cal jacks off watching all of us.

We don't get our fill until I'm covered in little love bites on each breast, the guys have come at least three times, I've sucked on them all, they've all teased me with their tongues, and every one of their names get shouted out by me in release.

Feeling sated after sexy playtime and a deep sleep, I slip out to get back to my cabin. I want to get a full day of work on the mural. I'm hoping to complete it before the rain that is forecasted this weekend. The sun is just starting to peek over the horizon, dew on the grass almost causes me to slip a couple times. I pause to appreciate the still water with a glossy pink tinted surface. Birds chirping make me smile to myself. Birds and frogs. Freedom and survival.

Careful not to let the screen door swing shut, making noise, I guide it closed slowly. When I turn, what I see stops me cold.

Dead in my tracks.

Lying on the coffee table is a familiar necklace.

The antique ivory silhouette locket that Wilder had thrown into Lake Hollow. Stepping closer, I see that it's resting on top of something.

Oh, no, no, no. I press my hands over my mouth shaking. Two pictures are underneath it depicting drownings of young women.

I back away, almost tripping over Droolius who has another picture in his mouth. When I pull it out, I see it's like the other two.

I'd come close to convincing myself that Carlotta either played a part in the drownings or falsely accused the men I care about.

Now... now I don't think I should trust any of them.

While I slept soundlessly last night, after we shared unbridled passions, one of them came here leaving this. To torment me, scare me.

To remind me... now the killer knows everything I know.

My hand shakes while I cry so hard that I'm hiccupping. I put the Kelley family's antique necklace in my new trunk from Ceily. I intend to give it back to them once and for all. Break the curse. Not that I believe for a second it's anything other than a way for the murderer to mark their victims. "Take that you bastard." I give an aggressive middle finger to all corners of the room. "Hope you have a hidden camera somewhere to see this, you demented piece of shit. You're a coward and history will forget you." My voice gets choked.

I can't help having both the heebies and the jeebies.

Charlie's accusations towards Wilder come to mind..."You had access to it. You could've pocketed the necklace instead of throwing it in the lake." Because how the hell does it come back from a deep, dark, weedy lake not once but multiple times? Neat little trick. But not likely.

What if... what if Wilder is guilty? The initials WPL on the note in the locket, on the doorframe. What else could it be? Carlotta could've been wrong, and Susanna was an actual unrelated accident. Giving Wilder a pass from being pinned as guilty. The visions, the connections...

Tick, tick boom.

Another motherfucking blast to my heart and the confidence I'd built in my relationship with him. But it could be any of them, Grady, Charlie, Wilder, or Cal. I'm fucking gullible, thinking that this situation could result in anything but heartbreak and devastation.

We laid it all out last night, and this morning I have more questions than answers.

Nat finds me huddled on my bed bawling when she wakes up. Without a word she climbs onto the bed and holds me. Never once admonishing me for getting myself involved in an impossible relationship. She rests her head against mine. "We're out of dryer tampons."

I'm not asking. I groan with a chuckle. Goll darn it, I'm going to miss my Natalieisms.

Chapter Twenty-two

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Wilder Lee

Say what now?

My chipped coffee mug is almost dropped when mom says, “Didn’t you know that? Maybe you were too young to hear about it. Daniel Gibson was a problem. You should talk to Ceily about it, she might know more. Lala went through the same things you did with the accusations after he drowned. Not that most people talked openly about it, years later, for Carlotta’s sake. Although we moved into town long after he died, it could’ve been more talked about when it happened,” mom states nonchalantly.

“Do you think Charlie and Mitchell knew about it?” What good does guessing do? Gibson acted genuinely shocked, denying that his uncle did the things Gary Marlow claims.

“What little I know of that family, probably not. Revisionist histories and all. There are a lot of people in Lake Hollow that are convinced the Marlows are the bad guys in the whole landdispute, but David and Daniel’s dad screwed them out of a whole lot of their property. It’s a long story. The few times I was forced into social situations with David and Bonnie Gibson they were polite enough, but they have a way of making anyone feel beneath them. Lala was close to that family; I just don’t know how she did it.”

We wrap up our conversation when she starts to pry about my episodes. I don’t like lying to her, but it’s necessary. She’d lose her shit if she knew the frequency and severity of them, since I came back here. “Tell Remi I expect her to call me when she

gets to Florida. Love ya, kid.”

Crossing the room to shut the door that leads to the lake, I see Droolius frolicking in the water near my dock. Shaking my head with a big ass smile spreading across my face, I continue to watch for a few seconds before gathering him up. That dog is going to have a blast at the house I rent in Hancock, it’s on a pond off a quiet cul de sac he can bask in the sun or splash around getting wet. When Remi asked me to give him a home while she’s in Florida, I told her that Droolius already picked me over her. I was only half kidding. That furry fucking ball of sunshine is breaking out of her cabin every damn day.

Not that I blame him. Something is off about the energy in that place.

“Come ‘ere, boy.” I reach past the rocks on the shore to snag his collar. “Let’s go dry you off, get you a treat. I shouldn’t give you a reward for your behavior, but what the hell, right?” In his usual goofy agreeable way, he gets out of the lake easily enough, but then shakes out his wet coat, spraying me.

“Christ. I deserve that. Come on.” No one answers at Remi’s cabin. Latching the door closed that is slightly ajar, I see the bathroom light go on and off a couple times out of the corner of my eye. A chill races through me. I’ve experienced enough to believe there’s more to life than what we can see. Father Christried his prayers; Remi has asked repeatedly, she says in several ways, but something persists. “Well, little dude, I get it.” Animals are supposed to be sensitive to the weather, maybe it holds true for ghosts, too.

I let Droolius hang out at my cabin. Content to munch on one of the treats I purchased for him, while I dry him off.

It’s difficult not to allow my brain to spin out of control over our talk last night. Less of a talk... more of an ambush. Neither Truitt nor Gibson had any idea what Carlotta

was suspecting. If we're meant to believe her... one did and was pretending to have no clue. Staying intune to any impressions or sensations I was having, proved nearly impossible.

My own emotions were out of control. Not only did Gary Marlow tell Grady and I something unfathomable, our whole image of who Carlotta was has shifted. No longer appearing to be the town's aunt, the kind music teacher, steady businesswoman, instead she was a deeply troubled trauma survivor. A possible suspect.

I want to laugh that off. Lala may have hid or buried the trauma she endured at the hands of Daniel Gibson, but it doesn't mean she hurt anyone.

Charlie denies the way Grady's dad portrayed Daniel. I understand if he had only heard the stories we had. Believed her to be alone in life because she couldn't love anyone other than Daniel.

It leaves a bad taste in my mouth. All the secrets that no one can verify. The evidence she put together that went missing after her death.

The same things trouble me. The rowboat seen the night Susanna died, the potassium chloride that appeared out of nowhere in the boxes meant for Grady, Katie leaving behind a diary and pages torn from it in another place all of it proving that Sara's death wasn't accidental, the necklace figures in somehow, the visions don't give any clarity, and Charlie still thinks I'm at fault somehow.

The biggest take away from last night is Remi was hiding things from me just like Grady had. But unlike what Grady did, I wasn't mad. Not hurt or confused by it. Instead, I applaud her for going to the police with it. For protecting what Katie had left behind.

I didn't think I could feel pulled to her any more strongly, but watching her navigate the situation last night clinched it. There is no amount of distance, no crazy ass problem that will drive me away from her. Grady... well, we're working on it. He isn't shying away from me like I expected, and I'm remembering the boy I loved. I'm not totally sold on trusting him. Not yet. It's a bonus that Gary Marlow actually does seem to like me, saying as we were leaving, 'It's about time the two of you worked this out. We've known longer than either of you idiots what was really going on between you.' The urge to play dumb in front of his dad passes quickly when it dawns on me that his parents knew, and it sounds like they aren't upset about it. My talk with Remi's wacky tacky uncle Skip may have gotten through to him, too, cementing my desire to make this work between us.

I'm halfway across the kitchen to fill a bowl of water for Droolius, when a zing of pain in my head stops me. It feels like every muscle in my body cramps up, as I call out in pain, "Fuuu..."

The rolling of my stomach as I struggle to keep my eyes open is the first hint I'm in Lakeside Park,

'Mia?!' the female voice calls out.

'Mia, can you hear me?!'

Nauseated, my head pain is so severe that I'm squinting my eyes in an attempt to open them.

Trying to turn isn't working, my limbs aren't cooperating.

I close my eyes, trying to keep my breathing measured, my entire body is screaming in pain.

Excruciating jolts of agony wrack through me.

I'm begging for relief, just wanting it to end, so that if my heart stops, I'd welcome it, when suddenly I'm under water, batting at hands pushing me under.

My throat feels choked, arms cramping. I can't get a hold of the hands that are pressing down on my head.

A male voice, 'Remember... let go...'

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Then brief respites from the pain, come with grief.

Seeing Remi at the end of her dock, a look of recognition morphing into terror.

The struggle lasts forever. Physically, I feel on the brink of death, mentally the horror of what's happening makes me plead to be put out of my misery.

Jerking awake, I turn to the side and vomit. My head is drenched in sweat. Droolius stands at the threshold into the kitchen whining and whimpering. Fuck. I don't know how long I was out this time, but it felt like hours.

Somehow, I manage to get on all fours to crawl to the kitchen counter. Pulling myself up, it feels like I was run over. The willpower it takes to clean up my puke with a paper towel is astonishing. I move slowly, bending down and back up with my muscles screaming. Finally, tossing the dirtied towels into the trash, I slump down onto the floor against the wall. The clock hanging over the kitchen window shows that half a day has passed.

If this continues it's going to drive me mad.

Chapter Twenty-three

Remington James

"Ohh, I get it." I don't get it.

Ceily pats my arm. "All in the good Lord's time, my dear. In His time." Yeah, I'm

still lost about her whole spiel, but Keenan has said that she seeks God's guidance in everything. Well, aside from cooking and baking evidently.

"Can I ask you something about Carlotta?" I sit on the edge of a step stool, apprehensive about making Ceily sad. The loss of her best friend has slowed her down. Her usually cheerful disposition has dimmed a little in the weeks since it happened.

She shuffles with her cane towards the counter next to me where she leans heavily, nodding at me grimly. "Sure. I can't promise I'll know the answer."

"Did she talk to you about Daniel Gibson?"

I've come to recognize Ceily's different facial expressions. When her mouth thins, her lips quirk to the side I know she's about to say things she finds unpleasant. "Lawdamercy," shemumbles to herself before continuing, "Lala went through a lot of trials when she was a young 'un. More than most."

I drop my head. "Ah."

"Did Charlie or Mitchell tell you about him? That poor family has just been afflicted with bad luck. Specifically, David. Have you met him? Their father?"

The day of Carlotta's funeral, I spent three minutes around Bonnie and only saw Charlie's dad. My feelings about him are tarnished by how detached he seems from his sons and their lives here, while he and his wife jet set around the world. "I haven't."

"He and Lala leaned on each other. They always had." She looks like she's going to say more but stops herself. A shake to her head punctuates it. "It's all over now."

What's over? Her life... or something more?

"That's kind of... weird. Isn't it? To stay so connected to her high school boyfriend's family?"

The bell dings as the postal carrier comes in with a couple packages and mail for Ceily. She brightens as the two start their daily habit of her trying to foist some baked goods on him, he goes into detail about the weather we've got coming. My statement goes unanswered, but it has me thinking.

What kept Lala connected to the Gibson family when Daniel was abusive? Why would Bonnie be okay with Lala and David being close? What made her important to them?

Each layer peeled back in this town, shows another layer underneath. I know a thing or two about deception and the fall out. My grandparents were professional liars, my mom had a funny relationship with the truth, too. But the amount of lies that are piling up around these drownings is overwhelming.

As I'm putting the final touches on the mural this afternoon, I try hard to stay focused. Thoughts of the guys keep making me misty eyed. I'm climbing down from the scaffolding when Ceily rounds the corner with Father Chris. He's looking like the standard middle-aged dad and not a priest. His cargo shorts, university spirit wear, white socks pulled knee high with sneakers. I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"This is remarkable!" he exclaims. "Next summer you should redo the mural we have on the rectory chapel wall. This sums up Lake Hollow so well." Any talk of future plans here gives me a degree of melancholy. I don't have a clear picture of what the next month will look like, much less a year from now.

"What's the current mural of?" Wiping my face with the sleeve of my T-shirt, I

narrowly miss elbowing Keenan in the face as he picks up the tarps we have lying on the ground.

“Over the years it’s faded and gotten marked up, but it was a Revelations themed wall. There is mention in Revelations twenty-two about the water of life, which was correlated with the waters of Lake Hollow. Biblically the word ‘water’ is used for salvation and eternal life, which God offers humankind through faith in his Son.”

Is there something about me today where both Ceily and now Father Chris feel the need to preach to me? I can only imagine the comments Wilder would be offering under his breath right now.

“What’s Revelations?” I shouldn’t have asked it, because that launches the priest into a talk about books or chapters of the bible. Keenan and I share a look of exasperation.

Father Chris takes a break from educating me, while Ceily points out some of the details in the mural I’ve completed. The little wink at me conveys that she could see I was over the discussion.

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Passing traffic slows with some taking pictures on their phones. One woman passing with her dog, a poodle mix, bursts into tears claiming that the mural highlights the town perfectly. “Don’t let my dog bother you,” she says as he jumps on me repeatedly.

“Oh, I insist. I don’t want to make this awkward, but I’m only standing here right now because of the dog.” She laughs at my reply, but I wasn’t joking. The attention we’re garnering for the completed wall isn’t needed. I only sign my initials to the mural after Ceily asks me again.

“The artist needs to be credited.” She hands me a bottle of black spray paint. “Please.”

Father Chris, the dog walker, and Keenan, all cajole me into it. My ‘RJ’ gets sprayed over part of the mini putt course I painted. Somewhat fitting, since I’ve spent a lot of hours at the Funpark this summer.

“Did the priests that painted your mural have to sign their work, too?”

Father Chris smiles warmly. “They didn’t paint it. I can’t even imagine that. No, that mural was done by a group of students decades ago. It was a student club that did it. Now that you ask, I think they did sign with their club’s name. WPL.”

“Huh? What did you just say? What was the name of the club?” I feel the color drain from my face. What are the odds that the letters ‘WPL’ is in the cabin in The Bends, on a note in the locket and it’s not related?

Just one more freaking layer.

“WPL? It stands for Water Provides Life, it was a student club that formed, golly I don’t remember the year. It was a group of students that started it. In fact, Daniel Gibson... you may have heard about him? He headed the whole thing up.”

I don’t take much in about Ceily and Father Chris’ talk after that about the way the church has changed over the years, as I try to figure out... why would the Poe quote be signed with WPL, why is it scratched into the doorframe at the cabin? Less and less seems coincidental.

I’m not sure anything in Lake Hollow is anymore.

Chapter Twenty-four

Grady Marlow

My hand automatically claps over my mouth as I stare up at the east side wall of Hidden Treasure’s building. Standing in the alley with Wilder, Cal, and Charlie, all of us are in awe. Once the pictures we’ve snapped on our phones are taken, I point to the birds. “Look at that, you can see our names around the hearts... if you’re close enough.” Every sweep of my eyes over the wall I see something else. “Holy shit, look at the detail on the Drive-In movie screen.” Our girl is really fucking talented. I knew that, but this shows everyone that ventures through Lake Hollow.

“Those caricatures, they’re perfect,” Cal says taking another picture.

Remi walks up behind us, clearing her throat she says, “I heard there were four lunatics out here. Guess I should’ve known who it was.” She tugs at my shirt playfully. “How did you manage to get here without an entourage?”

Scooping her close with a hand around her waist, I give her a kiss near her ear. “Babe, this is incredible. The sketch you did, doesn’t even compare. I had to see it in person. Who gives a shit if I make the news, because then this will, too.”

She blushes while pushing me back. “Sir, we are in public.”

“That’s the point,” Wilder says teasingly. He puts his arms around her waist from behind her. Cal takes one of her hands, while Charlie backs up further to take a couple more pictures.

“Um, I’m all for gettin’ a little handsy, but let’s not do it for the whole downtown to see. I was called the town doorknob yesterday.” She wiggles away from us, dropping Cal’s hand. “Ya know... everyone takes a turn.”

I groan in irritation. “Are you fucking with us? It’s disgusting that someone said that to you, babe.”

A warning goes off in my mind. We laid it all out for each other in my cabin a couple nights ago. It had to happen, but as a side effect I’ve noticed she’s been putting space between her and us. She doesn’t know who she can trust, and I don’t blame her.

Remi never dwells on the bullshit; she blows it off. She changes the subject with a wave of her hand then adds, “Meh. It was that woman on the corner of Main street and Eighth that said it, anyway. The one that mows her lawn twice a day. Keenan said her uppers don’t mix well with the thermos of Rum she drinks daily. I’m fine.”

“Rem, you’re destined for greatness. I mean it. You did this in what... five days? Unbelievable,” Charlie says, stepping our way. “I bet in the next day or two someone from the city will contact you about doing prints of it, putting it on travel brochures... you name it.” If they do, it’s because Gibson put it in motion.

We're keeping Remi's going away party a surprise. She's not working tomorrow night, the plan is for Natalie to find her at eight, tell her that Skip is having problems at the Funpark and needs help closing up. She's responsible for getting her there, but I'm worried she might be a weak link in the scheme. Natalie James is the ditsiest person I've ever talked to. For some reason, I'm the only one worried.

I'm all for devising a backup plan right now. "Rem, what are you doing tomorrow night?" Cal looks at me in confusion.

She blows a strand of her hair from her face, before scratching nervously on her elbow. Coming up with an excuse to stay away? Damn it. I'm not the only one noticing her reluctance in answering. She says, "Uh, so this might sound weird, but Father Chris mentioned a mural in the rectory at St. James that needs to be repainted. I'm having dinner with Keenan and then I'm going to scope it out."

I know the mural she's referring to. It's existed on the wall into the rectory chapel all my life. The only thing that ever stood out to me is all the red fruit in the picture blended into the water of the river. It gave me nightmares as a kid.

"It needs to be redone, badly. You'll understand when you see it. It's a bit gruesome." I make a face shaking my head.

Wilder turns to me. "I've never been in the rectory. Why's it 'gruesome'?" He mocks my word choice with air quotes, and a laugh.

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Cal shivers and rolls his eyes. “The blood bath in the water?”

The church delivered many gloom and doom messages over the years, coupled with the mural that creeped me out, I have a complicated relationship with my Catholic faith. Their stance on loving the same sex doesn’t help. Charlie pipes up, “I’d forgotten about that mural. Sister Mary Margaret would tell us to shield our eyes when we’d walk through to the courtyard.” He chuckles. “Why didn’t they paint over it, or fix it when it was first done?”

Remi listens to us, biting at her thumb nail. She takes a shaky breath saying, “Charlie, did you know Daniel had started a club in the church and they were the ones that painted the mural?”

His brow furrows. “No. Who told you that?”

“Father Lowe, he was here earlier. He started a club called WPL... or Water Provides Life. Did you know that?” She’s watching him intently. My blood runs cold... because I’ve heard of it.

So has Cal and Wilder. We didn’t know who or where it had started.

Charlie looks at Cal. “Yeah. Let’s not talk about that.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Remington James

“Can we please normalize explaining?”

Do I really intend to make the trek to the rectory on one of my last nights in Lake Hollow before leaving for school? No flipping way. Did I want to bring it up to get their reactions? Oh, hell yes.

Charlie crosses his arms over his chest. “I didn’t know Daniel had anything to do with it, but WPL, I’d almost forgotten about it. There are stories about pranks or-”

He’s interrupted by Grady, “I’d never categorize any of it as pranks or jokes.”

“Let me guess, some more secrets about bad behavior, anyone else seeing a trend here, or is it just me?” I ask these cute but wildly aggravating men of mine. One of which has been playing me like a fool, with me falling right into his trap.

“We were all pretty young when anything relating to WPL stopped happening,” Wilder says waving us away from the sidewalk, a few steps into the alley. “Some fucked up kids decided to sign off on their crimes with it. Smash a street of car windows, scratch the initials into the cars, or throw a couple Molotov cocktails into the fence at the high school football field setting it on fire then burning the initials in the grass outside, uh... fuck, there was a lot.”

“A church group? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” This is defying all explanation. I may not have grown up with a ‘religion’, but I don’t think any church would sanction out and out crime.

Cal and Charlie aren’t talking, but the looks they keep exchanging are speaking volumes. Whatever they’re thinking, is going to remain a secret.

I’m ready to call them on it when Keenan interrupts. He calls out as he approaches, “I need my bestie back, all of you scram.” But the way he comes to stand entirely too

close to Grady, staring at him I'm sure he'd be okay with one of them staying.

As I'm pulled into the door at Hidden Treasures, I watch them go their separate ways. Cal has a heated exchange with Charlie next to his truck. I wish I could hear what's being said. But as Wilder and Grady pull away in the pizza delivery guy's Prius, the traffic is picking up and I'm too far away.

"So, I said oh sure, you've got all that ratty old fringe, by all means make that shit part of your centerpiece." I turn back to Keenan as he finishes talking.

"Sorry... I." I peek back out to see Charlie stepping back as Cal slams his truck door, he shakes his head before peeling away.

"Hmmm, girly, I get it. If I was rolling in all that dick, well, I wouldn't be here for one. Are you going to tell me finally... anything at all? It would be a shelter in place, needing sedation type situation if I was you. Whew." He fans himself, acting like he's fainting.

"You're a riot. Cut it out." I push him towards the back of the store. "I need advice." When I give advice, I always end it with, 'I don't know, though', so if it ruins their life, it isn't technically my fault. Here's hoping my bestie isn't as shit at advice.

I bring him up to date. Including all the things thrown out at Grady's cabin, and the necklace I found again the next morning back in my cabin. "Whoa, okkkkuurrr... girrrl." He pulls at one of his braids while biting his lip. "Yabba Dabba don't... don't be alone with any of them, don't keep that horrifying necklace, don't... oh, shit." His eyes widen. "Uh, I'm going to tell you something. But I didn't tell you, okay?"

More? "Hit me with it," I say with my head in my hands.

"Your boyfriends planned a surprise going away party at the Funpark for you

tomorrow night. Now, normally, I wouldn't blow a surprise, but they only wanted a few people there. What if one of them... the lying bastard, gets you alone? Don't go... or hell I don't know... we start telling everyone and their uncle to come."

They did that for me? My stupid persistent tears push their way up again for the bazillionth time this week. Even the threat of danger doesn't stop me from wanting to go. "No, I'll play along with their plans. But..."

We brainstorm until I come up with a surefire way to buffer myself from an attack. It's a temporary fix, because our relationships won't survive me holding them off. I tell myself it's only until the liar is exposed. But what if that never happens? Not only will I get duped, but it'll also destroy the bonds we all have.

"I think I know what to do."

Uncle Skip is on a conference call with his hypothetical when I knock on his office door. It's an hour until the Funpark closes, the Drive-In is starting to fill. "Can we talk?" I ask as he eagerly nods.

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This conversation will tell me exactly how well our talk the other day went. “Your mural has been done for half a day and I keep getting calls looking for you from the city administrator about licensing for tourism, to do a news article, and,” he smiles wider, “a marketing firm from St. Paul has seen pictures of it and wants to offer you a mentorship.” I let him go on about it and nod as he talks. My mind is elsewhere.

“I need to tell you a few things...” My face crumples as the crying starts yet again.

He gets a panicked look on his face. “Oh no. Nat said you were sick for a couple of mornings. Are you pregnant?”

“What? Fuck no.” I shake my head. I get the assumption. What an absolute mess that would be.

My uncle is no stranger to odd. His parents were con artists, his sister stole his wife away, he has me as a niece, but even after all that he’s shocked into silence over all the things I’ve learned this summer about the drownings, the guys, about this town.

He groans dropping the pen he was chewing onto the desk. “I knew I should have moved onto the bowling alley in St. Anna. I had no idea.”

My lip trembles as I say, “I know about the surprise party tomorrow night. I need it packed full of people; I want you to invite everyone you can. I-I just need to stay surrounded.” I’m locking arms with Keenan and Natalie, so I don’t have to be on the lookout for an attack.

Skip does the unthinkable. He gets out of his chair, coming to kneel next to me.

Wrapping his arms around me, his head muffled against my shoulder, he says, “Anyone hurts you, there might be another unsolved murder in Lake Hollow.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Wilder Lee

I regret trusting the process for Remi’s Going Away party. Not only is Natalie late getting Remi to the Funpark, the whole motherfucking county seems to have been invited by Skip. It’s mind Boggling that he’d do that, when we told him we wanted it to be a small intimate affair, like Grady’s party had been. There are people here I guarantee she doesn’t know. When I see Kami, Cal’s ex with Alana sitting on the dock of the bumper boat pond, I pull Charlie aside. “What’s happening here?”

“I don’t know.” He clenches his jaw looking around. “She’s going to hate this. I hate this.”

Cal and Grady reposition the old rowboats that are filled full of ice that people have been placing the alcohol they’ve brought along with them. “Fucking booze boats? No one has any intention of leaving sober, do they?”

Carter Kelley walks over with a bottle of Everclear and that stupid grin of his. “Shot anyone?” I haven’t had Everclear on its own or in anything ever. It’s illegal in some states, I’ve heard. “Whose boats? These yours, Gibson?”

Charlie shakes his head. “No, Cal are these yours?”

Sneering at Charlie, he rolls his eyes. “Sure. I travel with boats wherever I go. Mitchell had them out on the airstrip.”

There’s a fight brewing between them that seemed to start the other day. I’d pay to

see Cal beat the shit out of Charlie. Well, at least get a good punch in.

Fuck it, maybe a shot of it will soften the growing agitation over our botched plans. “I’ll take a shot I guess.” Carter hands me the bottle. When I take a large swallow, it burns my mouth and throat going down. “That’s fucking deadly.” With my fist clenched, I go back for one more swig, sputtering, “Oh, that’s fucking disinfecting my soul.”

Cal puts his hand out for the bottle, almost spitting it back out. “You’d throw that on a wound during war.”

More sweaty bodies pile in, people bumping against me, making me back up to lean against the mini putt shack. Still no Remi, and the party has been going strong for an hour and a half.

“She’s still available.” Charlie nods towards Alana talking to Carter.

“Not surprised, bro,” Carter says before he cracks open a can of beer. He raps some lines from a song, “I don’t have the hoes, the hoes have me.” He’s even more obnoxious than I remember him being.

“I think we need to go find Remi; Natalie predictably has failed the simple task she had,” Grady says as walks up beside me. “Who the hell are all these people?”

“Don’t know.” Shaking my head, I add, “I tried to talk to Skip a few minutes ago, but he seems to have hopped on the chickenshit express. He’s nowhere to be found now.”

So much for the music that Grady and I were going to play for her, because there’s no chance, she’d even hear it. Someone has loud techno house music playing on the outdoor speakers. The concussive beat and the flashing footlights Skip positioned through the Funpark are giving me rave vibes.

Grady's hand tucks under the waistband of my jeans onto the bare skin of my hip. It's not like anyone is paying attention, but I still stiffen with uncertainty. Are we doing this? I've seen an uncomfortable amount of past classmates, old neighbors, and town gossips. "What are you doing?" I loudly whisper to him.

He slides his hand lower where he caresses my hip. "What does it feel like?"

Honestly? It feels fucking superb.

"I know good and damn well-" My statement is cut off when the side of his hand rubs up against my hardening dick. "Damn... we." I turn slightly allowing him better access. "Need to find Remi." I've been jerked off in a shower display at IKEA, I can't act scandalized by this. It's dark other than the flashing lights, and fairy lights strung about.

I hear Cal yelling our names from the area of the ticket office, so I yank Grady's hand and part of his arm out of my pants. "Later," I rasp out, before grabbing him to pull behind me.

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It takes pushing our way to them when we arrive, he points to Remi dressed in a stunning red barely there top, black pleather shorts, her arm linked with Keenan's. She's sipping a large cup. Her movements are getting sloppy. Her hanging on to her friend and loud laugh make me think she started the party before ever getting here.

Christ. Nothing is going well tonight.

We encircle Remi and Keenan. I start to speak, "Re-"

She lunges at me, her hand covering my mouth. "Shhh, just let it happen." She laughs hysterically as she kicks a leg up behind her. The knee-high black boots have a three-inch heel, she stumbles slightly. "Oh, the lights are staggering to the senses."

Sure. The 'lights' are causing her unsteadiness.

"Sweetheart? Have you been drinking?" Cal asks her, taking her elbow to help her avoid falling. "We were hoping to have some fun tonight, but... slow down, okay?"

"Fun? Sounds like you better get started." She winks at him, linking arms with Keenan again. He seems completely sober. "Anyone else hungry? I could annihilate some food."

Deep in my bones, I don't understand what she's up to. Remington James isn't a party girl, or much of a drinker. She's acting aloof making me suspect she's overanalyzed everything we talked about a couple nights ago.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Remington James

Part one of my plan was to show up late with Nat and Keenan. Part two of said plan, act like I'm in the bag. I'm as sober as it gets. Guards are lowered around drunk people. Someone may slip up and tell me something they wouldn't otherwise. Part three is to make it out of here... well, alive.

None of the guys look thrilled as they follow us to the food truck. Charlie leans into my side. "Remi, are you okay?"

I've had them ask that more times this summer than I've had in my entire life. "Mmm? Oh, sure. Fine, lovely, wonderful. All's good."

He grimaces as he looks at Grady, the two share a look of concern over my state.

Carter Kelley joins us double fisting it with two bottles of beer. "Eesh, bet that one wears homemade deodorant." He tips his head towards a girl wearing a crocheted mini dress, a bandana tied around her bright blue hair. Dick. At the alumni baseball game he made a few off-color comments, too.

Skip is helping Jim at the food truck, the cool reception he gives the guys causes more perplexed looks amongst them. I try to distract them from it. "Hey, Carter, you don't need to make comments about every female you see, hope that helps."

As the night goes on, I notice that none of my guys drink. They seem to prefer staying near me, and aware of what's happening in my vicinity. To Skip's credit, he must've blasted the news of the party to everyone he knew and that they knew. Easily, over two hundred people showed up.

I'm sitting at a picnic table near the food truck, Kami and Alana are at the next one, I hear Kami burst into tears saying, "It's not fair." When she sees that Cal is

approaching the table with my orange craft soda and pretzel she loudly proclaims, “I’m just old news, right? I could beat your ass, you lying sack of shit.”

Ugh, it’s bad enough she resorts to this behavior at work, sober, now that she’s had a couple drinks, she’s being loud about it.

Charlie says, “And this would be why he broke up with her in public, for his own safety.” He leans around me saying to her, “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Drowned, by Romantic Ruin starts to play. I grab Keenan and Grady’s hands leaving my food to dance on the dock. I’m spinning around like a total nutcase, Grady grabs my arm to keep me from falling into the pond. That would finish the night off, taking a dip. Loudly, the lyrics are sung by me, swaying between my starstruck bestie, and the man responsible for the music.

I lean into Grady, kissing his neck. “I need to see you perform this live again. So sexy.” The fevered purr of his voice is felt to my core.

Before he can say anything back, Keenan pulls me away, reminding me quietly, “Girlie, girlie...”

It’s not that I magically forgot my current predicament, it’s the draw I have to them. Even right now as I’m bumping hips with Keenan, acting like I have no cares, Cal is standing over my food with his arms crossed watching me, Wilder is watching, leaning against a bumper boat plug-in pole, Charlie is actively ignoring Carter while staring at me.

I don’t like disappointing them.

It felt necessary.

After two more dances, I drop on the ground near the Mini putt shack. Carter hands me a wine cooler. “Truce, lady.”

To myself I mutter, “Oh, for fricking hell.”

I thank him for the drink I intend to leave unopened. He sits cross legged next to Keenan and me. “I still don’t get your relationship,” he says to me.

“That’s fine. It’s not your average relationship.”

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Keenan blurts out, “Good Lord, she doesn’t need to explain anything to you.”

“Like I mean,” Carter ignores Keenan, “you’re hotter than a three-hundred-dollar car that needs to be started with a screwdriver, but all four guys agreeing to share you?” He shakes his head with a laugh. “Unbelievable.”

Closing my eyes, I lay my head on Keenan’s shoulder. If I neglect to reply, maybe Carter Kelley will get the drift and move on.

“I guess with Grady and Wilder it makes sense because they’re butt buddies, but not with Cal and Charlie.” He just keeps going. I want to slap him, but he might like that.

Keenan sucks in a breath like he’s restraining himself from unleashing on Carter.

“I thought you were friends with Charlie and Cal. Don’t you think it’s disrespectful talking about them like this?” Douche canoe.

He rolls his eyes at me while taking another drink of his beer. “Not exactly. I’ve only ever considered one of them my friend. I had to put up with the other one.”

Mm, yes, drunken confession. Give it to me straight. “Oh? Which one?”

He struggles to get up, looking down at me with a half-smile. “You’ll figure that out soon enough. The one that doesn’t ask people to lie for them.”

Chapter Twenty-eight

Cal Truitt

Imade it through another summer –not completely unscathed but I did.

Grief has me opening windows for some fresh air, while something taps at my heart reminding me that she's still here within me. It'll always find me.

Remi leaves tomorrow. There is something surreal about saying goodbye for now.

Charlie and I will drive her to the airport, then I have to stand there and watch her walk away. She says it's not the end of us, but she hasn't been intimate with us since the night we talked about the past.

She suspected me. Suspects me?

That's not something we'll overcome. I won't have enough proof or the words to convince her I'm not that person. Someone capable of ending anyone's life.

Swearing and banging dishes from the kitchen makes me turn from the baseball game on tv. "Is that a tantrum or do you need help?" Grady's been spending more time hanging out, which feels natural. We may not share all the memories that Charlie and I have, but there are some shared experiences. And there's Sara.

"Do you remember the time she put all the empty sugar packets near the gas tank of my mom's car? She didn't put any sugar in the tank, but mom freaked out and had the car towed to a mechanic. Absolutely diabolical." Sara could exact revenge over the smallest things, in the pettiest ways.

"We'd bring it up once a week or more," he says putting the egg carton back in the fridge. "Remember that shit with your friends? She hated them."

I don't. But I do remember how much Charlie always disliked Wilder. When she started to see him, he would say all the time that she was being reckless. For years I thought he'd been right. That her relationship with Wilder caused her death.

Grady calls from the kitchen, "You don't eat much here, do you? Do you have any seasonings?" I know how to cook well, but I've never bothered to get used to this as a 'home'. Lake Hollow can't ever be considered that anymore.

Last week, I allowed myself a moment of nostalgia, driving past the home I grew up in, that my parents sold the year after I completed high school. The color had changed, the basketball hoop was gone over the garage, and there was a new swing set in the backyard. But it still made me remorseful seeing it.

Handing me the omelet he made me, Grady sits with his plate next to me on the couch. "I thought you hated the Red Sox?"

"It was the only game on."

"Carter got messed up last night." He puts his plate down on the coffee table. "He got into a fight with Charlie, too."

"Oh, yeah? About what?"

"I don't know." It was so loud and chaotic that I don't doubt it. I've argued with Charlie more than ever this summer. The years with sporadic contact made it hard to pick up our friendship where it had left off. We've both grown up. I've stopped being the friend that's willing to go with the flow. He's stopped ...

It hits me in the chest full force.

I know with a certainty that is fucking alarming.

One thing after another.

I look at Grady. “Where is Wilder and Charlie right now?”

Chapter Twenty-nine

Remington James

Ididn’t have to be drunk to sleep lousy last night, all I needed was my resident ghost being a little terror. The lights in the bathroom, the weird scraping, all that and it felt like someone grabbed my legs a couple of times startling me awake. Throwing on a Romantic Ruin shirt I nabbed from Keenan, I leave my bedroom to find Droolius laying on the floor with Squiggles on his back.

The sight of them tickles me to no end. “I am deceased. Do not resuscitate me. Leave me on the floor because I can’t! This is the cutest thing ever!” When I crawl to him, his tail goes crazy, his doggo smile makes me want to grab my marker. I am intent on drawing him on my calf.

I’m heading back into the bedroom to get it, noticing what looks like scratch marks on the wall near the hall closet. I’ve never seen Droolius do that, when I kneel next to it. They looklike five nails dragged across the panel of wood. My stomach flips as I sit back quickly in fear.

Running my hand over the mark, I get the creepy crawlies. I press the panel and around it only to realize this is a secret hiding space. Don’t blame me for the deep dread at what might be inside. The lights led me to the diary, the kitchen window to

the missing pages. Whatever this is, is bound to be shocking. I contemplate finding Wilder or Grady to open it with me, because I'm actually scared.

While I brush my teeth, I keep looking at that spot near the floor by the closet. I change into my outfit for the day, still glancing at it periodically. I even nudge it with my toe, but I can't do it. I just can't.

The lake is inviting looking today, under the clear blue sky. I make my way to the end of the dock, taking a deep breath while stretching my arms out wide. From the moment I stepped into the lake near the Funpark I've felt an affinity with the water. The scandal surrounding the lake has never kept me from it.

Back inside the cabin, I open the trunk pocketing the necklace I'm returning to the Kelleys today. It won't be easy explaining how I have possession of it, but I'm sure they'll be happy to have their family heirloom back where it rightfully belongs.

Sitting on my bed, I draw a picture of Droolius, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. "I'll miss you. I promise that Wilder will be the best dog dad." He paces outside the room.

I've wasted enough time.

The panel moves easily, opening about three inches, I wedge my hand inside to feel around. At first, I feel nothing but dust. I push my hand in more, shoved to the back, my fingertips hit a book. My pulse giddy ups. I hop up to grab something to help move it forward in the cubbyhole. Finding a letter opener, with more groping around I confirm it's just this book.

This happens to be the cabin that people hid journals in. The leather-bound book is filled with different people's handwriting as I shuffle the pages through my fingers. Not ready to read a word.

Putting it on the floor, I notice the cover has initials branded on it. WPL.

No chance I'm reading this without one of the guys. Not after hearing what it was all about. This could be a book full of confessions.

I place the journal on the counter of the kitchen deciding it's a good day to hang out on the dock. With my marker, I sit with my feet dangling in the water. A picture of Squiggles gets drawn on my thigh, while I hum Romantic Ruin songs.

I hear the creak of the dock behind me with footsteps. Immediately I assume it's Wilder. When I look over my shoulder, I'm shocked.

"Well, look at yo-" My voice is swallowed.

Because look at him. Walking towards me, without a bit of fear. Not bothered by the lake or being on the dock.

In fact, something is different.

I scramble to my feet; my marker rolls into the water. I try to smile through the spreading misgivings, it's hard to keep from shaking.

Without any doubt, this man is unrecognizable, not the one I got to know.

I handed him the blueprint to manipulate me.

A panicked scream stays trapped inside my throat, because I can no longer deny that I've been lied to.

MyCharlie never existed.

Chapter Thirty

Charlie Gibson

Water gives life and takes it away.

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The dichotomy is one that intrigues me. Lake Hollow is ingrained in the very marrow of my bones. The iced over winters, the thawing spring. It's a part of who I am.

I grew up hearing about the loss of my uncle Daniel. I'm his namesake... Charles Daniel. He became canonized as a saint in our family all due to losing his life in the lake. Immortalized, made bigger than life in his passing. I heard, when I was twelve, the truth of who Daniel was...

Did it make me curious? Propel me towards my fate?

Or would I have come this way full circle regardless?

I don't question it anymore.

I firmly believe that some people are only here to shake things up. Like me.

To balance life out.

Cal, Wilder, Grady... my Remington. None of them were ever safe from me. Because they all belonged to me, mine to do with as I wished.

The best friend whose actions I studied from an early age and often copied.

The town outcast that I helped shape into the villain.

The enemy's closeted spawn who was always going to choose poorly.

And Remington. The unpredictable girl that lives life unapologetically. Am I able to feel love? Is this love I feel? Sure... as much as I believe someone is a part of me, belongs to me. She showed me facets of life I never considered. She could see what I wanted her to, perfectly. The way she envisioned me was exactly what I wanted to be seen as. The bird understander, the fixer, the protector.

They were all limited by a false sense of morality. They all let emotion carry them away from being logical. Precise. Determined.

Am I cursed?

Or am I the curse?

The first time with Mark Tullery was intentional.

He had to go. Not only did he get compared to Daniel too much, but he was also trying to get my friends to stay away from me. He should've kept his opinion to himself. It was his own fault.

"Charlie thinks we should quit the team because it takes up too much time," Cal told him, shoving the bats into a bag, while Carter stood to the side tossing the baseball up in the air to catch it. He nods in agreement. No one can see me, standing at the side of the dugout.

Mark huffs out a disgusted laugh. "That kid is nothing but trouble. Mark my words, he's going to drag both of you down. Get away from him if you know what's good for you. Seriously."

Cal and Carter exchange a concerned look, before Cal says, "That sounds kind of mean. Just because he doesn't play baseball?"

“No. Because he’s a manipulative little brat.”

I’d already buried the medication I found in our boathouse fridge. Medication mom had been prescribed after her bout of bulimia that left her potassium deficient. I knew enough that it was untraceable after death. After watching his routine, I determined the best time to attack him was while he was on a run near Lakeside Park. I would take our rowboat in the middle of the night to dump his body near where Daniel had died.

There was a symmetry in it that appealed to me.

The second time was unintentional. Sort of.

I was only going to confront Mia. Tell her that I knew about her and my dad.

But instead of listening to me, she mocked me. Insulted me. “What are you talking about? You’re such a little psycho. You don’t think I’ve noticed the way you watch people? I told Carter that he needs to stay away from you. Wait until I tell your parents about this.” Spinning away from me, towards the parking lot of Lakeside Park, she laughs before looking over her shoulder at me. “Besides I’m not the person your dad is screwing.”

Calmly, I move silently through the dark behind Mia. The syringe in my pocket, my fingers moving over the cap. A jab to her neck. Untraceable... the tiny prick almost impossible to see. I take off her precious necklace, sliding that into the other pocket. “I’ll show you crazy,” I whisper near her ear, “All you had to do was listen, but you couldn’t even do that. This is your fault.”

The second time in the rowboat to dump someone in the lake, she wasn’t dead when she went in. I held her under, giving her a benediction of sorts, “Remember that you are water. Cry. Cleanse. Flow. Let Go.” I gave a final shove as her muscles locked

up.

The third time felt like the universe was giving me a sign, I had dumped Mia's necklace in the trash. Somehow the girl staying at The Bends found it. She was getting on my nerves anyway.

"Why are you being mean to me?" Tera asked following me from the Lodge down to the shore. Her flirting with Cal at the Funpark hadn't worked, now she's trying it with me. She's become annoying. It's her fault for not taking a hint.

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Looking down the shoreline at the area of the last drownings, I decide to invite her for a nighttime swim. “Don’t tell anyone. No one.” She was dumb enough to listen.

I pulled her down using the necklace that time, then took it with me. It was harder without the meds to cause severe pain and respiratory distress with sensations of asphyxiation, panic, and terror.

The fourth time, with Jeremy, that wasn’t a plan, but he found the meds I’d buried in Lakeside Park. His dog dug it up. When I saw the lockbox in his work locker at the Funpark, he caught me taking it.

“Charlie?” He shut the locker room door. “Were you stealing that? Wait... wait.” His wheels slowly turn thinking about where the box had been buried. He’s already accused me of trying to knock him into the bumper boat pond.

He never noticed I’d managed to get one of the vials into my pocket before he caught me. On his evening swim, I stabbed him with the meds, jumping from underneath the old bridge behind him. It happened too fast for him to react.

The fifth time, with Susanna she had the necklace. Just like Tera she was bugging Cal.

“What are you doing here?” She’d been told Cal would meet her at Lakeside Park that night. It was over fast. The only issue was someone spotted the boat that night. But either the detectives discounted it, or they could not confirm it.

Either way, it was over. All she had to do was leave Cal alone, but she didn’t. It was

her own fault.

Sara was the sixth. At first, I hadn't meant to, but then face to face in the dark it came to me. Wilder and his visions wouldn't be a problem for me anymore if she died after their argument.

"Oh great, just what I needed. What are you doing here?" I'd seen the nitwit from the telescope at the Funpark. I slipped away down the shore to where she was stomping her way to the bridge. To walk back home.

I started to respond but decided to attack her before I second guessed myself. She would've screamed otherwise. I choked her with the ugly necklace. I knew which dock had no lights that would illuminate it. Carried her to the end of the dock. Dumping her, she came up gasping. I held her under. 'Remember that you are water. Cry. Cleanse. Flow. Let Go.'

She never should've associated with Wilder. Doing so made it impossible to save her.

Then there was our sweet Katie.

The last thing I wanted was to take her away from the world, but she couldn't be reasoned with.

"Charlie, I have to tell mom and dad. Just tell them it was an accident. You-you didn't mean to hurt her. Right? You didn't mean it."

I shake my head at her. Not in response to her question, but over her betrayal. I'm her big brother, she looks up to me, loves me.

I had the meds back from Jeremy's locker. After giving her a lethal dose of the potassium chloride, she went more quickly. No struggle in the water necessary.

That one messed with me. I'd contemplated letting Mitchell go, but he still believes in me.

His call about Carlotta Marlow talking to him about the investigation she was doing on her own into the drownings, it was clear what needed to happen. It was high time to call her out over the affair she was having with my father, the baby that was never Daniel's but my dad's.

Did they think I never heard the closed-door arguments? The loon pin found of Carlotta's in my parent's bed, the notes between them locked in the drawer at the bottom of her dresser? The way the strain made mom sick... vomitting until she needed to get shots of potassium chloride?

Carlotta Marlow deserved her end, that fall should've killed her. Instead, she held on uselessly for weeks, making Mitchell suffer. I was ready to be done with them both by the time she passed. I was worried for him.

Oh, Katie. Your loss made me never want to send anyone into a watery grave again.

Until Remi.

Chapter Thirty-one

Remington James

"Ch-Charlie?" He's silent standing next to me looking out over the water. He's not acting right. His whole demeanor is cold and off. In my heart, I'm still hoping I'm wrong. That all the arrows pointing towards him were a mistake. But even as he takes my hand to hold, I sense how fucked I am.

"It never had to be this way," he says tenderly. Like the Charlie I thought he was, but

the words are damning.

I tremble as tears start to pour out of my eyes. He tightens his grip slightly on my hand. He looks at me thoughtfully, wiping away the tears on my cheeks. “You could’ve let it drop. But you even managed to find the WPL logbook.” He shakes his head grimacing. “You had so many opportunities to leave it all alone.”

The twisted thing is, he told me about the drownings. He pulled me into this to begin with. I was in trouble the minute I met him. “I don’t understand. Why? Why, Charlie?” My voice is pleading, choked with tears.

I try to pull away, but his firm grip on my hand doesn’t loosen. He wraps his other hand around my waist. I’m a fighter. Everyone says that, but I am. A scrapper that managed to fend for myself in rough neighborhoods without a parent around most of the time. I’ve kneed a junkie that tried to rob me, I’ve run from a group of older boys that were giving me the creeps, and I shot a flare gun at a scary guy that followed me home one night. But in the face of a man I’ve fallen in love with, I can’t scream for help, I can’t kick and fight. I’m dissolving in tears.

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I want him to stop this. To tell me he didn't mean any of it. Because I'm going into shock.

He leans down to kiss my head. "Remi, I never wanted it to end this way." Having felt the necklace in my pocket, he pulls it out. "Just one more sign."

No. No. No. Nooooo!

The necklace wraps around my neck, as he squeezes the wheezy shriek from me amounts to nothing. He deftly lowers me into the lake with one arm around my waist, like he's just helping me into the water. He follows me in. The water level up to his armpits, he stands close, dragging me down in the water by pulling back on the necklace, his face is blank.

He leans near me, I hear his muffled, "Remember you are water. Cry. Cleanse. Flow. Let Go." One of his hands smooths my hair back lovingly, the other tightens the chain of the necklace.

My vision is blackening around the edges when a pounding sound on the dock reaches my ears. I hear splashes in the water around me. I'm freed from Charlie's grip, pulled out of the water into Grady's arms. I look up to see Cal holding Charlie's head under the water.

My voice is scratchy, "Don't... Cal, don't."

Wilder flies into the water. He pulls Cal back, Charlie coughs profusely as his head comes up. Wilder puts an arm around his neck. "I could snap his neck. No one would

know but us.” His voice is fierce.

Clutching to Grady’s forearms, my legs weak, I try to sound sure, “No, Wilder. You’re not a murderer, he is. If you do that, he never has to answer any questions or get punished for what he’s done.”

Cal pulls me into his arms, his chest heaving. “Fuck, are you okay? Are you okay, sweetheart?”

As sirens come closer, I walk out of the lake supported by Cal and Grady. When I look back, Wilder still has Charlie around the neck. A vial of medication has worked free of his pocket and is bobbing in the water next to him. I came close to death. If he hadn’t found the necklace, I would be gone right now.

Chapter Thirty-two

Cal Truitt

“Fuck off and keep fucking off. From now until forever fuck the hell off!” I yell at Gibson as he has handcuffs placed on him. His face is a blank fucking mask as he looks at me.

He’s been my best friend since I was four, he was like a brother. How the fuck was he able to hide what and who he is?

I can’t form more words, thinking about what he’s done. He killed my sister. He tried to take Remi from us. His sister... what kind of Goddamn monster can kill his own little sister? My heart feels like it’ll burst right out of my chest.

Shellshocked, I fight to get my breath.

I don't know what to do with myself. Remi is being examined by paramedics, Wilder is speaking to the detective, and Grady is watching me with distress. "All this time... all this fucking time..." I grab my jaw squeezing.

I should've encouraged Wilder to end it.

To kill the sick fucker, because he's gotten away with this for nine years. Nine long years, while everyone in his life suffered. He'll never pay the price. His family's money will ensure he doesn't rot in prison. Grady walks up to me, pulling me into his chest with one arm. He states gruffly, "That piece of shit tried to frame each one of us along the way."

My hand pulls at the back of my neck, while I start to walk one way, and then redirect the other way. I can't think straight. The axis of the whole world has been knocked off. Like a fucking fool, I did Charlie's bidding for years. Hell, I was only back in Lake Hollow because of him. All the warnings through the years, Mark, Sara, Carter, Dave, even Mitchell. All the times things were bugging me, I let him come up with excuses.

The world according to Charlie. It had always been that way. He convinced me that I was 'lucky' to have him as a best friend. He was generous, loyal, protective... He was not even one of those things. Evil. He's sheer evil.

After Remi is done with the paramedic, she makes eye contact with me. Her reddened eyes fill with tears. A gasping sob escapes her as she rushes into my arms. I hold her like my life depends on it. It might.

I'm the reason he was ever in her life. I encouraged her relationship with him, because I didn't want to lose her to him. How fucked is that?

"Oh, my God, Rem, honey, I'm so fucking sorry. I'm so sorry." I cry into her hair,

holding her tight. She puts her hand out to Grady. I grab onto his soaking wet shirt pulling him into our grasps. The two of us surround her. Wilder finds us all grieving, when he walks back from the dock where he retrieved his cellphone that he dropped before jumping in the lake. He'd left the 911 line open. As we're holding one another with tears in our eyes, he joins the hug, but anger has a strong hold on him.

"I want to him to suffer," he says. "Ineedhim to suffer."

He's not going to.

What made it all click for me, what made all the puzzle pieces fall into place was a memory, combined with the talk about WPL, the fucked way he acted about the row boats, his vendetta against Wilder. That fucker told me the day we were downtown to see the mural that he had no idea what everyone was upset about when it came to the mention of WPL. We were making it something it wasn't.

Father Lowe wrote on the blackboard in the twelve-year old's religion class 'Life Questions'. Charlie has been acting weird. He told me about a secret club, WPL, but he can't tell me yet what the initiation is. I don't want to do it, especially since I have baseball. I look over at Charlie's paper and see what he's written. It says -What if the Lake wants sacrifices? If water gives life, does that mean anyone that dies in water comes back to life-like Daniel Gibson?He puts his finger to his lips and tells me, "Shhh... it's just a joke." I don't like the way his eyes look. I write on my piece of paper;Does God know when bad things are going to happen?I only write that because I don't like the way my best friend is acting. We hand our pages in to the priest, with the others, anonymously.

How did I not see it then? Or remember a year later what he'd written? I never connected it. The guilt I feel is like lead in the pit of my stomach. I could've prevented it all. If I'd gone to an adult, I could've stopped it.

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Instead, I followed his lead in blaming Wilder. I shit talked him by his side.

Sara, if you can hear me now, I'm to blame that Charlie ever knew you. I'm part of the reason you're gone.

This is going to destroy me.

Remi, with her hands on my cheeks, looks me in the face. "This isn't your fault. It's no one's fault but his. Do you hear me?" She may never understand...

All of the deceptions wash over me.

...friends I let go over Charlie's say so.

...the appropriation of my ideas.

...lies upon lies.

...the cunning way he put suspicion on me.

...all the lives he ended. How many did he kill?

"Honey, I'm with Wilder on this. He needs to feel tortured. Oh, my fucking God."

Standing at the side of Lake Hollow, in wet clothing, clinging to Remi... I promise, all his victims... both dead and alive, to help the detectives uncover it all.

“I don’t want this to be real. How is this real, Cal.” She shivers next to me, her pupils blown.

Wilder rests his hand on her shoulder. “We stopped him. It’s over.”

Or it’s now just all beginning as we learn the fucking truth.

Chapter Thirty-three

Wilder Lee

Burned in my psyche are the images from my last episode, along with seeing the struggle in the lake as I ran from my dropped bike. The horror of seeing the vision brought to reality. Again.

Gibson should’ve drowned. But I could never hold another person under the water robbing them of air, stealing life from them.

It turns out I was never the psycho he tried to tell everyone I was. I was just the threat to him being found out. My visions marked me as a liability.

The motherfucking bastard didn’t understand that the visions were never straightforward. It didn’t work that way.

He couldn’t believe me when I said it, because a liar believes everyone else tells lies.

Remington James. She shakes even with our arms wrapped around her, huddling together in disbelief. The sound around us is nothing more than white noise. She looks at me with her watery blue eyes. “You never trusted him.”

No. I couldn’t let go of all the times in the past where pieces of his vile personality

peeked through. The bullying, the lies, the manipulation. I was never convinced a person could change or grow enough to not have been those things anymore. They just get better at hiding it.

Kissing the reddened mark from the thick braided chain of the necklace Charlie had pulled her under with, I'm dumbfounded it found its way out of the lake again. An icy fear prickles down my neck.

It was at the hands of Charlie that people died, but he didn't get the necklace off the bottom of the lake... he didn't manufacture the bad energy in Remi's cabin...

Questions I refuse to ask out loud, to ponder with anyone, start to surface in my mind.

What turns someone into a killer? Two energies exist in the cabin the James' have rented... Katie and Daniel? How much did Daniel's legacy influence Charlie?

It doesn't matter in the least... he's responsible.

As people leave us, we all sit on the couch in my cabin. Droolius is asleep on Remi's feet. We are all emotionally spent to the degree we've all grown quiet, leaning on each other. Remi is curled up in Cal's lap, her head against his chest, Grady is laying back against me, my arms around him.

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We don't move. We don't get up to drink or eat. We drift off at times to sleep restlessly. I'm worried about the dark days ahead. The return to life, not normal life... nothing can be 'normal' again, the moments when we're by ourselves and some memory strikes a blow. The truth laid bare isn't healing. It's going to hurt while we process it all.

I can see in Cal's eyes the deep pain of life altering betrayal. The kind only a trusted and loved friend can deliver.

Carlotta Marlow tried to find the person responsible. She spent the last couple years of her life poking at the past. She was so close to learning what Charlie had done. Until he stopped her. We should've taken her warning more seriously, but who can accept they've grown up with someone capable of cold-blooded murder?

We kept telling ourselves, if there is someone responsible, they would've been caught. Never believing they'd cover their tracks so well, convince everyone in their life so effectively of their harmlessness...

Charlie Gibson played us all. Lake Hollow didn't see the monster in one of their own.

The cabin descends into darkness, but we don't move to turn lights on, only shifting now and then. The hurt whispers of disbelief among us, as we hold onto each other tight. When the screen door is knocked on, and Ceily bustles her way in with bags of food, I finally unfold myself from the couch. "You shouldn't have," I say to her quietly. No, she really shouldn't have, but it's sweet of her to bother.

Keenan comes in behind her, flipping a light in the kitchen on. "This is from Pops..."

all of it.” In other words, highly edible. Remi lets out a brief cry of relief seeing her friends. She gives Keenan a bear hug, saying, “I can’t believe it, I just... Keke, I can’t...”

No one has an appetite for food that is stowed away in the fridge. Ceily prays over us, telling us that Father Chris is on the way. For once, I won’t fight his council. I need something... something to tell me we’ll survive this. That the pain won’t eat us alive. “In the Lord’s name we pray.”

Chapter Thirty-four

Grady Marlow

News travels fast in Lake Hollow. It always has. It makes me physically sick to think of all the bad deeds that were hushed and not talked about. Covered up, like an ugly scar to be hidden from everyone.

My aunt’s words keep running through my head... “Make your story bigger than just yourself, choose courage over comfort, life has a way of working out, and first it hurts then it changes you.”

I’d never seen my father shed a tear until he came to the door of Wilder’s cabin, when Father Chris was leaving. My stoic, tough father fell apart in front of me. I held him up as he cried a lifetime of tears. Over his sister, over the hidden realities, even over me. He tells me if Gibson had hurt me, he would’ve been behind bars for strangling him to death.

Skip and Natalie James hunker down next door after being alerted by the police about what had happened. Her uncle was livid, fooled completely by Charlie’s ‘good guy’, ‘helpful’ behavior. Natalie cried, we barely understood her through the sobs, “Mitchell knew, he knew something was wrong with his brother.”

Before leaving Wilder's cabin for their own, Natalie told us Mitchell had been securing things in a storage unit on his father's airstrip that he wanted the police to see... row boats one with WPL etched into the sides, the love letters in Carlotta's dresser mentioning some of Charlie's behaviors that both David and Lala were concerned were like Daniel's, even a receipt he found for gas in Lake Hollow three days before Charlie said he was back in town.

There are no consolations.

The Gibson I should've been suspicious of wasn't Katie. Her heartbreak over seeing her brother kill Sara, her inability to tell anyone before she shared the same fate... it is tearing me apart. Did she think no one would listen, or was she terrified he'd kill her, like he ended up doing anyway?

Wilder is right, there won't be good answers to all the questions we keep coming up with. Charlie didn't hold onto the lies this long to spill now. He won't answer honestly.

My hand runs down Remi's back as she is curled on Cal's lap. She's been staring at the wall of Wilder's hallway with a shocked look on her face. "Baby, can I get you anything?"

She says softly, her voice tired sounding, "Sorry if I acted crazy earlier... it'll happen again."

No need to explain. I get it. Cal sighs before saying, "Rem, please don't apologize." The agony in his voice, tugs at my heart. "You have us. We're not leaving you... or each other. We're here."

We're here.

The next day passes in a blur of grief, more questioning by the Sheriff's office, the FBI, and a steady stream of people we grew up with. Carter Kelley arrives armed with alcohol and anger, repeatedly telling Cal, "Never liked that pompous fucking asshole. There was always something sneaky about him."

The town is mourning again over the deaths that were murders. Stories are all expounded on... it's all guessing. It's storytelling at its finest. We're informed by Ceily that the St. James' prayer circle is a hive of gossips. "It's not considered tongue wagging if it's a prayer request," she says, rolling her eyes. Word comes to us that Charlie is denying any part in the past drownings or Carlotta's death. His parents believe his every word. We didn't expect anything else.

Natalie keeps in contact with Mitchell Gibson. He's retreated out of town with his parents, staying with them in another state. He asks her not to relay updates about his brother to us, but Natalie is on our side. With the victims of Charlie. Her cousin, Remi, is her only concern.

National news picks up the story, eager to point out that I'm involved in the whole mess. "Management for Romantic Ruin is not announcing a cancellation or delay in their tour plans at this time."

My plans to leave are indefinitely on hold. It would be easier to tear my beating heart from my chest, than leave. My only concern is the people I love. I plan to ensure I do whatever I can to see Charlie get justice, if you call prison enough punishment for countless lives taken justice. That will come when he meets his maker.

Chapter Thirty-six

Remington James

I don't understand how heartbreak gets romanticized, for me it's a kind of death and

I'm being forced to keep living.

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Charlie's face, his words... the version of him that I fell in love with, haunts me. Just as much as Katie did. The effect of his betrayal does terrible things to my mind. I believed every word he had told me. Every kiss, every touch, every word. Even reflecting, I have no 'ah ha' moments when I can see where I'd been blind to his deceit. None.

I want to hate him. I beg myself to let go of any of the love I had for him. Because I loved someone that didn't exist. The pain of not being able to is excruciating.

I remind myself that he tried to kill me. He did the very thing he'd done eight times before. But my stupid brain has succeeded in thinking of him in two ways...myCharlie, and Charlie Gibson, who is being termed 'The Lake Hollow Killer'.

The man who showed me tenderness, protectiveness, and held me when I cried. Versus the man that showed no regard for me, blank faced and strong, pulling me into the lake water with the heirloom necklace, whispering nonsensical words while my life started to slip away. Prophetic... the last words "Let go." I want that badly. I just don't know how.

Droolius licks my face, as I lay on the bed of Uncle Skip's new rental in St. James. My belongings are still packed in the corner, as I decide if I'm leaving. I pushed my flight back a week, but I can't leave Wilder, Cal, and Grady. Not after all the revelations in the last few days.

The rental became available two days after Charlie's arrest. We couldn't pack and leave fast enough. The following day the cabin burned to the ground. Not one other

cabin caught fire.

Ceily's church group blames the devil or demons, I think it was faulty wiring, Wilder thinks arson, and Grady wonders if the strange dark energy was Daniel, that he managed to burn it down.

I'm hoping Katie is at rest finally.

Wilder whistles for Droolius from the next room. "Come here, boy. I've got bacon. Bacooooonnn." He whistles again. He appears in my doorway shirtless, his gray sweatpants low on his waist. Sweat dripping off him from the run he took with Cal. "Ready to go?"

Do I look like it? I groan, flopping to my back. I still have the oversized old baseball T-shirt on, a pair of Grady's boxer briefs, my hair sticking up all over, unbrushed for two days. "Uh huh. I'll go like this."

Grady is leaving us. He needs to get his affairs in order, before he comes back. The Romantic Ruin tour is being pushed back three months. Returning to Minnesota, he'll stay in Hancock with Wilder. Cal is making plans to move there, also. Where they will keep a home ready for me to return from art school. But I don't want that anymore. My initial excitement over it dwindled as the time drew close. The day my entire life shifted; school became a chore I didn't want any longer.

Besides, the mural is opening doors that art school never could've.

Cal comes to stand next to Wilder in the doorway, they've been staying on couches, the spare bed, in my room since we moved in. "We can help you get dressed if you want?" His soft attempt at teasing is met with a weak smile.

"Anyone else feel like they have a brain eating amoeba? No?" I slowly stand, shaking

my limbs out. “Just me?”

They squish me in a hug, while I accept, I’m not going anywhere. A day without them will only make this gaping hole in my heart unlivable.

“You’re sure? You don’t want to think about it longer?” Cal asks, his hand running through my tragic hair.

Oh, but I am. I’m completely done thinking about it.

I’m also officially done pretending that secrets are okay. That they do anything other than perpetuate fear, that they cause us to feel cursed. I was forced to keep Relia’s secrets when I was growing up, I was blindsided by Skip’s secrets about Relia, and the secrets kept by all the men I loved almost destroyed me. Those secrets did prove deadly for eight people.

Not ever again.

Openly and loudly, I’ll live my life. No secrets. No uncertainty.

With purpose. My art has always been about beautiful interpretations of everyday life, seeing symbolism in the animals I’ve always taken comfort in. Wilder tells me that the art I create gives him hope, Grady sees inspiration, and Cal finds a measure of peace. For me, it’s a way to understand what’s happened.

The birds and the frogs. The adapting and surviving like Cal has pointed out to me. I once thought Charlie was my bird understander, but I was wrong.

It’s always been me. I need to reclaim that.

Epilogue

10 Months Later

Cal Truitt

Each day I make an intentional effort to talk about how I'm feeling.

It's hard as fuck.

Pushing the terrible feelings down inside of me, for years has become a coping mechanism.

In the blink of an eye my world became a nightmare. One that I couldn't wake up from. All the times I played into Charlie's manipulations putting people I cared about in danger, all the times I called him 'brother', 'best friend', and 'family' never stop coming to mind. The disgust over it is corrosive.

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I rest my forehead against the steering wheel of my truck, taking deep breaths to steady myself. Coming here took strength I didn't think I could muster. Hell, I spend half my time wishing he was gone, regretting that I didn't push Wilder to kill him. But we have consciences... taking a life would be impossible.

Instead, we're forced to deal with the aftermath of it all. The public scrutiny of Lake Hollow, the analysis of strangers, the emotional turmoil in our relationships, they all can hinder us on a bad day. But, fuck you, Charlie, our relationships with Remi only strengthened. Remington James was your downfall. She was too intelligent, her past prepared her too well, her love is too magnetic to allow you to demolish her spirit.

We don't talk about you.

We don't forgive you.

You're the monster that we fight silently.

Oak Park Heights Correctional Facility is where Charlie will sit behind bars until his last dying breath. No one thought my coming here was a good idea. Mitchell tried to talk me out of it, telling me that his dad's last visit messed him up again for weeks. He's not accepting responsibility. I expected my application to visit him to be denied. There was deep apprehension when I admitted to myself that it would've given me relief to be told no. A reason to stop. To accept that we will never know what happened.

I'll give it one last shot. One more attempt at extracting the truth from him. For Sara, Katie, and Carlotta. For the woman I will spend the rest of my life loving. For

Remington.

Answers may never come. Detective Hemminger had told me when I was interviewed after we almost lost Remi that the investigation shifted from me as the main suspect to Charlie for three reasons: Mary Ross' information about the phone call, Remi's visit with Katie's diary and the mention of meeting me at Lakeside Park making her think she was also being lured by Charlie, and the prescription number for the potassium chloride coming back to Bonnie Gibson. But they were nowhere near close enough to arresting him when he tried to take Remington's life.

She survived. We caught him in the act. There is no way he can deny responsibility for that. Instead, he says nothing about it. Never testifying, never speaking to anyone regarding his charges.

Trying my best not to let my nervousness show, I follow instructions given to me at each stage once I'm in the doors of the prison to the visitation room. When I'm seated, I stare at the door he'll be walking out of. I think of Remi's words on the way out of the house today, "He's going to try getting in your head, don't give him the satisfaction. Don't let him undo all the work you've done."

It's a struggle keeping my face devoid of emotion when he walks in with the guard. He nods at me, a brief upturn of his mouth before adopting a serious look. On the surface he is the same Charlie. The one that I had loved like a part of my family.

We stare each other down for a minute or two.

I'm searching for any sign of remorse or guilt from him. But he could be meeting me for a drink on a Tuesday at Beaus for all the emotion I'm detecting from him. My attempt to appear unruffled lasts seconds. I feel the sneer I have on my face, the flush crawling up my cheeks.

“No one wanted me to come here,” I break the silence between us. “They told me not to bother.”

He replies, “But here you are.”

Mentally, I need to dig deep, to picture my sister, Remi, Wilder, Grady, Carlotta, and Katie. I need to keep reminding myself... this isn't my best friend. I don't know this murderous monster.

“One time.” My teeth clench, I need a deep breath to steady my voice. “If you have a soul at all, if there is any truth to anything you ever said or did when we were growing up or this past summer... you'll tell me what you did to my sister.”

He doesn't drop eye contact with me, he doesn't squirm in his seat, or fidget. He sits statue still. His mouth firmly closed. Like a standoff, I wait to hear anything. A denial, a confession. Even an insult. But he gives me nothing.

I'm pushing my chair back to get up and leave, when he says, “What have you been up to lately?”

Motherfucker, what? He's sitting in a maximum-security prison for murder, he's been given a serial killer fucking name, he's ruined lives... but he asks me that? I'm fucking floored. Now my face is probably a brilliant red, as I ball my fists to rest on my thighs. “Detaching from every memory I have of you. You must be fucking kidding me with your bullshit.”

That gets a little smirk from him as he shakes his head. “There's the Cal I know.”

“Don't do that,” I warn him, leaning forward in the hard plastic seat. “You've been exposed for the lying piece of shit you are. Don't act like you were ever my friend.”

His head dips slightly, he traces the edge of the table. Clearing his throat, he has tears in his eyes when he looks at me. “How is Remi doing?”

No fucking way. He doesn’t get to speak her name or ask anything about her. With anger I respond, “Oh, you remember her? The woman you lied to, garnered sympathy from, manipulated, and tried to kill?”

“I ne-”

Does he forget we stopped him? I interrupt him, “Save it. You have two minutes to tell me what you did, or I leave. When I do, I’m not going to waste one more minute of my fucking time thinking of your sorry ass, I won’t ever say your name again, and I’ll never look at your smug face ever again. My life will continue without you in it, just fine. You’ll sit here rotting away waiting to die. Alone with nothing but the memories of what you did.”

But Charlie is done talking.

I stand to leave without looking back at him.

With my back still turned, I’m standing behind the guard who is opening the door to leave the visitation area when I hear Charlie say, “It wasn’t my fault, Cal.”

The fuck it wasn’t.

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Once I'm back at my truck, I lean against the driver's side door, keys clutched tight in my hand. A guttural cry breaks out. Tears that I fought shedding, break free. Even if it was unlikely he was going to confess or address all the lies, I'd held onto the hope that after everything we've shared, I'd get a reaction other than bland greetings.

I meant every word I said to him. He's dead to me. I'll go on living my life and doing everything I can to forget what he once represented in my life.

I am leaving a lifetime of memories behind me today, because I no longer know who that person ever was.

Wilder Lee

I know that look. "It didn't go well, I take it?"

Remi shakes her head as she slips into my office. "We all tried to talk him out of it." Sighing, I pull her towards me. "Is he on his way home?"

"He is. We were right, and I think he's ready to move on now." The look of defeat on her face is heartbreaking. She had wanted to hear that Gibson was remorseful or gave a shit about what he'd done. The love she had for him didn't disappear automatically when he turned on her. Unfortunately.

If Cal needed to have more proof that Charlie doesn't deserve an audience with any of us, then who were we to stop it? I know Grady tried several times to discourage it. We were all concerned Gibson would fuck with his head.

He'd sure done a number on all of us.

Remi still cries at night when he's been mentioned in a conversation had around her.

Grady cut 'Drowned' from the set lists on their tour.

I still want him to suffer.

Mitchell is finally realizing that his brother was trying to convince everyone in his life that he was a mental mess. Newsflash, he was growing suspicious of his big brother, but he was never clinically depressed or suicidal. He's still a whiny brat, but it's easy to overlook that after everything going on with his family. Turns out his dad, David, grew concerned about Charlie when he was carving WPL into things and writing notes signing it WPL. Like the Poe quote in the locket. Which girl received the note from him and put it there, or did he?

The locket still baffles us all. Was he getting it out of the lake, or... Well, fuck if I know?

I think he did it to draw suspicion towards me, even though I don't have a middle name, WPL could be attributed to me. The dumb fuck knew planting a seed of doubt in people's minds would be enough. Who is going to think a group of kids from a church group, Water Provides Life, were going to do the things they did or decades later a fucked-up kid was going to look up to them.

That his wack job uncle would be some type of hero to him.

We don't even know if any of us have his intentions correct. If there was thought behind it, or it was all arbitrary. Because he's not giving anyone a single answer.

Holding Remi close while she silently cries, my heart is in my throat. "We're going

to get through this. I'm sure it was painful for Cal, but now the repair begins. We're doing this together. I know we're all lugging around a lot of baggage, but you've got partners who are willing to unpack beside you, and we can all be unapologetically human together."

Healing needs to start.

For every one of us.

It helps that my constant worry about seizures has eased. I haven't had a single one since the day Remi was almost drowned. The impressions, the feelings are still there. Last week Ceily paid us a visit, I kept getting a slight pain in my chest. When I gave her a hug goodbye, I envisioned her dropping to the ground outside Pop's. She didn't understand my insistence to be seen by a doctor, but she did that afternoon. She was in danger of a heart attack and had a stent put in.

Sometimes I wonder if what I felt when I had my episodes and the way I physically responded was the feelings the drowning victims had. The seizures began when I was in fourth grade in Lake Hollow, they were about the drownings long before they happened.

The way I felt during the seizures mirrored the effects of potassium chloride poisoning, and drowning. I've never had a seizure away from Lake Hollow. Knowing that no doctor could explain it, and it seems they're gone, with any luck, I'm inclined to think this 'gift' I've had since I was a small child was being used to stop Gibson.

It only took nine times before I was able to.

A fact I confront every damn day.

"Umm... kay, so I have to tell you something," Remi says wiping her cheeks off.

“Before you start to lecture me or get irritated just hear me out. Okay?”

What in the wrong turn is this?

“Let’s hear it.” I brace myself for a Skip story.

“It’s only for a few days... or a couple weeks at the most.” She gives me a forced smile. “Or... yeah, a couple weeks.”

“This has Skip James vibes. Spill it.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:51 am

“Nat hit a racoon with her car.” She plays with my tie, not making eye contact. “The good news is that the racoon is going to be fine... he’s great. Just some damage to one of his legs.”

“Oh, what a relief. I was so worried.” I say sarcastically while rolling my eyes at her. Wrong James, but close.

“Stop it. So... we couldn’t just leave him there to get hit again or to get attacked by another animal.”

“There’s a wild raccoon at our house right now isn’t there?”

She scrunches her nose, sucks her lips in and nods her head. “Just for a little bit. Bandit will be the best boy. We should keep him away from Droolius for a day or two. He was grabbing his tail.”

Outfuckingstanding.

“You can’t help yourself, can you?” I fucking love her. “What about rabies? What about our house... do they chew on things? Legend has it that you can actually resist adopting injured or homeless animals. You know that, right?”

Boredom will never be a problem.