



# The Snake in the Grass: The Prequel

**Author:** *Lucy Auburn*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance

**Description:** It begins with the truth, a lie, money and cruelty. Like all things buried in blood-soaked ground, it grows crooked and twisted. These things never turn out well. It ends with a rope, a tree, a snake in the grass... and one girl's promise to the dead: revenge. This book contains trigger content. Please read the author's note on the look inside.

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

## Chapter 1

My brother died biting his tongue, a bruise the shape of four knuckles shadowing his rib cage.

Some things start with a bang, others with a whimper. This story starts with both. It ends in the tall grass of the late summer sun, the air heavy with humidity, tree branches creaking beneath impossible weight. I remember it all, burned into my retinas and echoing in my mind. There was the croak of cicadas starting up in advance of the coming evening. There was blood dripping onto blood-soaked ground, consecrating a place where no bodies should've ever fallen.

All things being equal, there are worse things in the world than the sound of a chair hitting the floor. But not in the house where I grew up. Beneath the rafters Papa Edwin cut and hammered, in the kitchen where Meemaw made pecan pie and sang show tunes, there was one single defining sound that warned of a coming storm. Like the finger of a dark funnel cloud dipping down on the horizon, it made clear that destruction lived above you and was about to come to Earth to tear whole worlds apart.

There ain't no eye in the middle of a tornado. And there was no calm in the midst of the storm my father's fists rained down.

"This is unacceptable." He held the letter in hands that were steady despite the depth of his rage. The chair he pushed over as he surged to his feet was still rocking on the ground behind him from the force of his violent anger. "You were told not to apply to that school. The public high school is more than good enough for you, boy."

It was always “boy” when he was acting up by trying to survive. Never Silas. The kicked dog doesn’t get a name.

“They don’t teach violin at the public high school.” I remember the way my brother’s eyes lit up. The fight didn’t go out of him until the end; it took them to make him whimper instead of snarl. “I’m going to Coleridge. They gave me a full ride scholarship. It’s not like it’ll cost you any money.”

Silence at these words. Mom, looking down like always, because looking up had been trained out of her—or maybe she’d never wanted to fight in the first place. Dad, crumpling the letter in his hand, rage leaking out of him like rusty water from a dripping faucet. I kept my mouth shut and my eyes fixed in front of me, watching it all with my peripheral vision, waiting for the sound of a train hurling down the tracks, a storm’s last warning of its coming fury.

When his fists descended, it was quick but deadly. A smash, a crash, a snarl, a boy no longer small enough to throw getting pushed into the wall. Knuckles to a rib cage, kicks until he went down, one more for good measure. The big man standing back, triumphant and cruel.

Normally Silas curled up on the ground, waiting for it to end, for Dad to slam his bedroom door and retreat. Afterwards Mom would pull off his shirt and tend to what she never stopped from happening. All the while he’d keep a stiff upper lip and a docile look in his eyes. He was well-trained in hiding his anger away.

This time the voice that came out of him didn’t hide anything at all, and it shocked me like the earth trembling beneath my feet.

“Is that it?”

My brother rose up defiantly, sides covered in bruises—but never his face or his arms

or anywhere the people in town couldn't look away from. Daddy always did love to give the good, proper folks of Wayborne plausible deniability.

"I know you've got better than that." Silas sneered at Daddy. "Go on. Break a rib. Bruise a spleen. I'll still outrun you and leave you behind one day." His eyes flicked to me. "And I'm takin' Brenna with me."

Daddy looked at me all cold and distant. I averted my eyes. And deep down inside, in my very core, I trembled.

Not with fear.

But with rage.

In the middle of the summer nights, when the stars were out and the air smelled heavy with coming rain, my brother and I—who shared a birthday and a middle name—used to lay out in the heavy grass staring up into the endless sky. One night, when he laid down groaning on the ground and got up with his middle curled around pain, I wondered aloud why Daddy hit him and not me.

"Is it because you're a boy?" I asked him, poking at the sore spot as if it were a missing tooth. "It's not like he loves me any more than you."

Silas leaned down and cupped the top of my head with a curved, soft palm. "It's because he knows if he hit you, you'd hit him right back twice as hard. You have a fire inside you, Brenna, and you'd burn the whole house down if he ever prodded at it."

That day, the day Silas stood up instead of staying down, the day he told Daddy he was going away to that wretched school, I felt the flames within me crackle. It was like the cold coals of a bonfire getting stoked back to life by a skilled hand, a bit of

fresh tinder, and some warm breath.

Once fed, a fire rarely goes out on its own without leaving a path of destruction in its wake.

The anger within me has the same all-consuming nature.

But Daddy barely looked at me when Silas said my name. He sneered in contempt and turned back to his one and only son, hands loose at his sides but ready, as always, to curl into fists. “You and your sister share nothing but a birth date. You came out wrong the day you were born, and you’ll die just as wrong one day. Try to goad me all you want.” He talked down to Silas like he wasn’t the one who’d smacked him around only seconds before. “We both know you ain’t got what it takes to walk into that fancy school and come out alive.”

For once in his life, Daddy was right.

Just not in the way he thought.

## Chapter 2

I didn’t sleep that night. Couldn’t, with the thunder booming in the distance and the flashes of lightning throwing my room in sharp relief. It reminded me too much of the tornadoes of ‘04, when we came so close to losing everything but made it out without a scratch.

After the season of destruction was over, my father, in the middle of changing the lightbulbs in the kitchen, reached up and ran his finger across the initials carved in one of the wooden beams: E.W.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

“God’s grace brought us through this. Mark my words,” he told us, “my father’s hands blessed this place.”

Those same hands once hit him so hard his left eardrum was permanently damaged, but this was left out of the family legacy.

Though the house came through things just fine, my memories of it as a scared four year old stayed stark in my mind forever after. The storm that night felt like a portent of things to come, a promise that my father’s rage would turn from a dark cloud hanging overhead to death itself touching the ground.

Because I was awake, I saw the light in Silas’s room come on. I heard the quiet, tinny sound of music playing through laptop speakers. Thunder doomed, my pulse quickened anxiously, and I knew there would be no sleep for me that night.

Slipping out of bed, I pulled on my faded gym shorts under the old T-shirt I wore as pajamas. Crossing to Silas’s door, I rapped once and walked inside without waiting for an answer. He barely looked up from the screen in front of him, back curved outward from hunching at his desk. “You didn’t wait for me to say ‘come in’ or anything.”

“Sister’s rights.”

“Those aren’t a thing.”

“They are now.” I padded over to his laptop and leaned past his shoulder, peering at the screen. “Is that an orientation video? Wow, you really are the nerdy one of the

two of us.”

“Shut up.”

He clicked the window away, face burning, but forgot to hit pause. The voice over started playing: “As a student at Coleridge Academy, you’ll enjoy unparalleled access to technology beyond your wildest dreams. Our three computer labs...”

By the time Silas got the video to stop playing, my eyebrows had climbed all the way to my hairline. “Wow. Three computer labs. If you go you’ll die from spending all day and night programming instead of eating, sleeping, or going to the bathroom.”

“I’m going to study the violin,” he reminded me, pointing over to the case sitting on his desk, which was beaten and worn. “Their worst instruments are Knilling, and their best are hand-carved in Italy by master craftsman. The first chair in the New York Symphony Orchestra studied at Coleridge.”

“So you’re quitting programming?” That seemed unlikely to me—Silas spent all his sleepless nights in front of his computer, tapping away in program windows in languages I didn’t understand.

“I’ll still study computer science, I guess.” His fingers drummed against the hard case of his laptop, a hand-me-down from our cousins, whose parents had the temerity to leave Wayborne and make their shaky way to the middle class. “I’ll need a career to fall back on if I don’t make it in music. It takes more than just talent, you know. There’s luck. And... connections.”

I snorted. “Good luck getting those, Stinky.”

Scowling at my old nickname for him, Silas threw an arm around my neck and rubbed his fist in my hair. I yelped, struggling out of his grip and laughing, feeling

like a little kid again.

But as we fell apart, sides heaving with laughter and exertion, a sober thought occurred to me. “If you go to Coleridge...”

“When.” He was insistent, a fiery look in his eyes, chin lifted. “When I go to Coleridge.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him I thought Dad might just break his legs if he tried. “Well, when you go, I’ll be all alone here.”

“No you won’t,” he swiftly corrected me. “You’ll always have Maggie.”

Maggie Reynolds, my best friend—sort of. We’d been the closest of pals in elementary school and middle school, but since starting high school things had changed. I hadn’t even seen her all summer; she was on vacation with her boyfriend, Henry, who floated in from Richmond and swept her off her feet. They were staying at his parents’ beach house in Rhode Island, and our primary communication had faded to my commenting on her social media photos and her “liking” my responses but never bothering to reply.

From the photos, she looked happy: tan, thin, her hair developing bright blonde streaks that I had the feeling were salon-sourced and not natural. Nothing like my pale, curving self or the dark hair that made my sharp face look more severe.

I envied her, but only because she hadn’t taken me along for the ride. I would’ve cut my own fingers off for the chance to leave Wayborne for longer than a sad solitary week at a time. I wanted to see the world, no matter the cost. I wanted a life of adventures.

But I didn’t think Maggie would be going with me on those adventures.



My sadness must've shown on my face, because Silas made that puppy dog expression he always made in times like this, his lips puckering comically, thick dark brows drawn together over shocking blue eyes. "Poor Brenna. You should get some friends before I leave you forever and ever."

I mock punched him in the shoulder, and he made anoofsound like it really hurt. "I miss Jade," I confessed. "I haven't talked to her since..."

"Since you both shoplifted and only she got arrested?" My brother's wry look only deepened the twisted, guilty shame in my stomach. "She's probably still serving her community hours. Maybe you can catch up with her picking up trash on the side of the road."

"Maybe," I echoed. The truth was, Jade deserved better than me. I wanted our old friendship back, but I didn't know where to find it beneath the wreckage of the things I'd done—and the things I hadn't done, which were worse in a lot of ways. "I probably have a better chance of getting into that fancy schmancy academy with you than I have of getting Jade to ever look me in the eyes again."

"Stranger things have happened," he quipped. "I'm sure if you grovel hard enough Jade will forgive you. It's not like you turned her in or something. You're a yellow-bellied coward, not a traitor."

I wanted to mock punch him again for the insult, but I couldn't because it was true. So instead I flicked him in the forehead and suggested, "Late night binge watching until we both fall asleep on the floor?"

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

“Carpet face it is,” he agreed, using our phrase for what you look like when you wake up after pressing your cheek to the thick fibers for hours.

That night, we watched movies on his little laptop screen until our eyes went dry and our necks ached. We fell asleep stretched out on the ground, blankets covering us, his soft snores the last thing I really heard.

Neither one of us talked about the fight or the fury that followed. We didn’t acknowledge the bruises on his sides or the weariness in his eyes. And of course, we didn’t mention the fact that we both knew once Silas left Wayborne for Coleridge Academy, he was never looking back.

Talking about the hard things wasn’t something we did very often. We swallowed them down instead.

Maybe if we had talked, Silas would still be alive.

I wonder now if he swallowed so much rage and pain that he had no choice but to be weighed down by it, until it dragged him six feet under the earth.

## Chapter 3

I watched him go with a knot of worry in my heart and nausea growing in my stomach. He hung out of the passenger side of his best friend Wally’s beat-up truck, dark hair shining in the late morning sun, waving back at me with a reassuring smile on his face.

“It’s just a week away,” he’d pointed out that morning, when I woke up curled on the floor at the foot of his bed, carpet face firmly imprinted on my left cheek. “Just an orientation so we’re ready for classes in the fall. I’ll be back before you know it. No reason to worry, Brenna.”

But worry was my constant companion from the moment he told Daddy he’d be going to Coleridge, come Hell or high water. I obsessively stalked the academy’s Facebook page, looking for signs that there were any kids like Silas anywhere inside its storied halls. The page was filled with catalog-quality images, diverse as a Benetton ad—and no doubt at least a little faked. Somehow I found it unconvincing that every student group on campus consisted of a girl in a hijab, an East Asian boy, two bland white kids, and one black student with dreads, braids, or a natural afro.

They were all too happy, too used to having the camera trained on them, white-toothed and relaxed on the campus lawn. Similarly, the language on the Facebook page was peppered with faux friendly language and memes meant to appeal to Generation Z. The school even had its own Snapchat filters and PR-created hashtags.

I searched and searched for any sign of scandal but found none. Where were the posts apologizing for a controversial event, or a Dean’s letter responding to a protest? You couldn’t spit far enough to escape an on-campus brouhaha these days, and yet Coleridge seemed to be above the fray, full of rich kids yet diverse, situated a short commute south of New York City but somehow reflecting none of its cultural touchstones.

Unlike the white-toothed kids depicted on its cover image or the polite comments littering every post, I wasn’t buying a single whitewashed second of it. Even my public school had a day of walkouts, an election-related protest, and public statements following the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. If Wayborne High School was big enough to feel those sort of reverberations, then much-bigger Coleridge Academy had to feel them too.

Whatever the school administration was ignoring, it was big enough that they dared not acknowledge its existence.

So though I waved goodbye to Silas and pasted a smile on my face like nothing was wrong, in my heart I only knew worry.

My brother knew what it felt like to fold in the middle under an onslaught of fists, but he had no idea what games the rich play when they're bored of getting everything they want.

He was a gazelle walking into the lion's den, and he'd left me, his only other pride member, behind.

\* \* \*

The call came in the dead of night, breaking through my cell phone's sleep rules and waking me in the middle of a dream. My fingers fumbled across my nightstand for the phone, and I pressed my thumb down on the web of cracks across the finicky touch screen.

"Hello?" My voice came out warped with sleep; bleary-eyed, I stared at the red numbers of my digital clock. 2:13 AM. The caller wasn't a number saved in my phone, but somehow I knew. "Silas?"

"Yeah." He sounded frightened, but not in an immediate way, as if he'd just run panting from a tiger and was calling me from the top of a tree, staring down at its claws and teeth. "I'm calling you from the school's landline. My cell's broke. It kinda fell in a toilet bowl."

"I keep telling you not to put it in your back pocket when you're going to the bathroom."

“It wasn’t my fault,” he responded, sounding indignant. “That’s not why I called, though. There’s... something else.”

Silence on the other end of the line. I waited for him to finish the sentence, mind too full of sleep to figure out what to say to draw him out. Sitting there in my bed, hair mussed from sleep, I enjoyed just hearing him breathing for the first time in days.

“It’s bad here, Brenna.” He sounded choked, like he was talking around a pit lodged in his throat. “I didn’t... I knew it would be tough, but not likethis.”

I didn’t say “I told you so,” to my credit, because it wouldn’t have helped. Instead I asked, “What happened?”

More silence from him. Silas had never been the most talkative brother, but when it was just the two of us I could always depend on him to at least respond to my questions. The worry lodged in my middle bloomed into fear.

If I’d had a car, a license, and a lick of good sense, I would’ve driven up north to get him right then and there. I can see it now in my mind, with the clarity of hindsight and broken-heartedness: the sun rising over the horizon’s edge, the sound of wind flowing past rolled-down car windows, and his kicked-puppy face as I pull up in front of the academy’s ostentatious gates. He would say something like, “I tried my best,” or “you didn’t have to come all this way.” I would tell him to get in already and throw his luggage in the back.

But I didn’t have a car, a license, or enough good sense to know what to do in that moment. All I knew was that something was wrong, it was too big for me to fix on my own, and neither one of our shitty, no-good parents would be able to help even if Silas wanted their help.

Finally, after a long handful of seconds, Silas spoke. “It’s nothing you need to worry

about. I'll... I'll handle it myself. I'm sure by the time the school year starts it'll all die down."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

Alarm set the steady rhythm of my heart off-kilter. “Settle down?”

“Go back to sleep,” he said. “Sorry for waking you.”

The line went dead before I could respond.

I slept, somehow. I slept despite the worry in my heart. I told myself I would see him again in a few days, and he would tell me all about it. In my mind it was so easy to imagine what those other students would do to him: make fun of his clothes, call him poor, imitate his accent, and single him out as an outsider.

Now I realize that I lacked imagination.

What they did to him wasn’t the run-of-the-mill bullying that a new kid gets when they transfer schools.

It was something else, something that lurked in the dark and struck before you sensed it. They bit down hard and left a poison inside him that spread through his veins fast as blood. By the time they were done with him, they didn’t even have to lift a finger to finish the job; the events they set in motion did all the hard work for them.

Let it never be said that rich people don’t know how to delegate.

After that phone call, I punched the number of the landline he’d called from more than once, trying to get someone to track him down. But though I got a friendly menu response, and more than one friendly receptionist, no one seemed to be able to find him for me when they went looking.

So I just had to sit at home and wait, whittling down the hours.

The day before Silas came back, I went to Jade's house.

## Chapter 4

Jade lives in the part of Wayborne that floods when the river is fat and full. Her house has been rebuilt from the foundation up three times; by the third incarnation, it had stilts and a ten-step staircase leading up to the front porch.

If you're the kind of person who doesn't look too close, you'd probably assume that Jade and her family lived in a lower elevation part of Wayborne. You'd fault the flooding of her house on the land itself, andtsk-tskevery time they refused to evacuate or rebuilt instead of moving.

But what you don't know is that Wayborne, built straddling a river, has a not-so-well-kept secret. The north side of town is where the white folks lived back when segregation was legal, and the south side of town was where the black folks wereallowedto live. Bisecting the two sides of town is a lazy river that swells every few years or so, its fat, full belly squeezing water out onto the land.

The north side has levees to prevent flooding.

The south side doesn't.

So while my father's father built his house north of the levees, Jade's grandparents had no choice but to go south to find a plot of land to settle on. And if the color of their skin made their options narrow, well, they refused to let the inevitable storms rip their roots up from the soft ground.

Each year that the floods came, they sat in their house and watched the water rise.



When it left, taking things they loved and people they knew with it, they turned their backs to the rising sun and rebuilt that which was stolen from them. They set down roots in land that had been theirs for generations. Suggest to them that they'd be better off moving, and you'd get a look that would scald your very skin from head to toe.

The south side of Wayborne had its hazards, sure, but it had its beauties too. It was where their children were born; it was the land they played and grew on. It was here, south of the river's screaming destruction, that they made the best of it and leaned on each other for help.

Each flood they built better. Each flood they lost neighbors to the waters, the destruction, or the cold aftermath. Some moved up north; others moved down south. But the Smiths never left. They'd been put in Wayborne, Virginia generations long past, and they refused to give ground. It would take God Almighty himself to remove that family from the blue-painted, clapboard-sided house with its dark brown shutters.

Jade's mom Grace used to say, "I was born in Wayborne and I'll die in Wayborne, no matter what may knock on my door. I've got more blood in this soil than circulates through my body, and I won't walk away from a single drop. This land is as much mine as anyone's."

Staring up at the house's third rebirth the day before Silas returned, I tried to summon some kind of courage. Unlike every other time I stood at the foot of those steps, this time I was coming with my metaphorical hat in my hand to beg for forgiveness. And I didn't know if I'd even be let through the front door.

But I was lonely, desperate, and all out of pride. I'd do anything to get back in Jade's good graces. Even grovel, probably.

Standing at the bottom of those steps, though, I couldn't quite make myself go up

them. Maybe because I knew the instant I did I would have to face what I'd done.

So it was a relief when the front door opened, Jade standing at the threshold of the house, her hair a gentle halo pushed back from her forehead by a thick headband. She looked at me the way you look at a stray cat when it drags its dirty, wounded body to your front porch after weeks away, begging for a morsel of food and a pat on the head.

"Long time no see," she said, sounding neither angry nor happy to see me. "You picked a hell of a time to darken this door again."

"Darken this door?" I raised an eyebrow at her choice of words. "You've been reading too much lit fic again. You only speak in metaphors when you spend all day buried in a book."

"What else do you expect me to do?" The way she put her hand on her hip and looked down on me, Jade made it clear she was judging me and found me wanting. "If I even so much as step out of this house I have to worry my dumbass juvenile probation officer will drop by for a surprise visit to make sure I'm not breaking the law. So yeah, Brenna, I've been sitting in my room reading my mom's old paperback books all day. There's not a whole lot else I can do."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

Lamely, I offered, "Sorry."

"Oh." She crossed her arms over her chest. "The great Brenna Wilder is sorry she ran away when the security guard came. Well, I guess if you've said the word we're all good now. Come on into my house and let's pretend like it never happened."

There was scorn dripping from every word, so acerbic it made me wince. But I couldn't back off, couldn't turn around and walk away. I had to buckle down and face the storm. Whatever she had to give to me, I deserved it, and so much worse.

"I know you're mad." This seemed self-evident, but it bore observing out loud. "I didn't know what to do about it. I thought... I thought even talking about it would just..."

"Explode in your face?" The snort that left her nose was disdainful. "I guess you're not exactly used to disagreements repairing things. Your family isn't really experienced in conflict resolution."

Unlike most of my friends, Jade knew everything. She'd been there during the late nights when I curled around myself and cried; hers was the house I ran too, back when I was still in the habit of running. There was no sugar-coating Silas's bruises or the dark circles under my eyes. Jade knew all of it, every dirty secret the Wilder family held close to their chest, and my father hated her for it.

"Maybe you can teach me."

"Maybe I can," she acquiesced. "And maybe I could stand to hear you apologize a

few more times.”

“I’m sorry, so sorry, really very sorry.” Biting my lip, I stared up at her and asked, “Can I come in?”

In response, she stepped into the cool shadows of the air-conditioned house and left the door yawning wide behind her.

It was an invitation, not just into her house but back into her heart. I approached it with the reverence it deserved, taking the stairs one at a time and staring hopefully into the depths of the reborn house, certain that I’d find salvation within those four walls.

“Do you want lemonade?” Jade called from the kitchen, trusting me to waltz in and close the door behind me. “The trees out back are dripping with lemons, and Mom won’t stop juicing them. We have enough to whet the thirst of a whole football team.”

“I’ll have a glass.” I followed her into the kitchen, which was wallpapered with a feminine floral pattern that I knew was bought in the past decade but still looked like it came out of a 1970s Home & Garden magazine. “Is your mom around?”

“She has a shift down at the diner.” Jade eyed me as she poured two tall glasses of lemonade from a pitcher fresh from the fridge. “You picked a perfect moment to come over. I’m sure if she were home she’d box your ears.”

I winced at the thought. “She’s that mad?”

Jade made an indelicate noise that was half-snort, half-laugh. “I’ve spent the last three weeks picking up trash on the side of the road in full view of all the PTA parents and half the rest of the city. Of course she’s mad. She thinks you should be

standing right there beside me.” She slid one of the glasses in my direction. “And you would be, if you weren’t the world’s greatest coward.”

I swallowed a too-big mouthful of the sour-sweet lemonade. “I resemble that remark. And a whole lot of others beside it. But I am sorry, Jade. I didn’t think that it would become a whole big thing.”

“Yeah, well, you live on the other side of the levees,” she pointed out. Unsaid beneath her sentence was: You’re a white girl, and I’m a black girl. “The rules are different for you. If they’d caught us together, I bet we both would’ve had ten hours max. Instead I got a hundred all by myself. It’ll be a miracle if I finish them before school starts up.”

I winced, swallowing the instinct to apologize again. I knew it wouldn’t help. “You’re right, I’m sure.” The glass sweated against my hand. “Is there anything I can do? Other than perform hara-kiri.”

“I have a sword,” Jade said menacingly. “I’m sure you could disembowel yourself if you found sufficient motivation. Yukio Mishima committed seppuku, after all, and he almost won a Nobel Prize. You haven’t achieved nearly so much.”

“There’s that lit fic talk again.” I stared at her with wide, mournful eyes. “Next thing you know, you’ll be saying ‘ain’t’ ain’t a word, and correcting all our grammar. What’s next—Yale? Harvard? NYU?”

Jade laughed, the sound a balm to my injured soul. “If I go to an ivy league school I’ll never see you again.” Tapping her chin, she added mischievously, “Though maybe Silas and I will get into one together. And of the Wilder twins, he’s the one most likely to give me a happily ever after.”

I glowered at her. “That’s like, a step away from incest.”

“Is it?” She widened her eyes, all faux innocence. “Because my melanin check tells me you and I don’t have a drop of blood in common.” Jade stretched her arm across the kitchen counter and pushed it against mine, her brown skin a contrast to my deathly pale. “Pretty sure Silas and I can get down and dirty without our kids getting hemophilia.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Gross and grosser.”

We laughed together, and drank lemonade together. After a long, happy moment, I sobered up and asked her, “Do you forgive me? Can you forgive me? I never thought you’d get arrested.”

“I know.” She studied my face. “But, Brenna, you have to understand that the rules are different for you and me. What gets you a reprimand gets me hours of community service. We live on opposite sides of the river for a reason, and those reasons didn’t die with our grandparents.” Motioning towards her arm, she added, “Melanin.”

I nodded my head in acceptance, the bitter truth settling inside me the way adulthood tends to. It felt like growing up, and I didn’t like it at all, even though I knew I had to—just like Jade. “Next time I’ll stand right beside you when the hopped-up power-tripping security guard gets his cuffs out, and they’ll have to deal with the both of us together.”

Jade snorted. “Thanks, but I’d rather there never be a next time. No more stealing lip liner and ponytail holders for me. We’re not that far from being eighteen and graduating from high school. One way or another we’ve got to face adulthood together.”

I didn’t like the way that sounded, as true as it was. So I busied myself with drinking Jade’s mom’s lemonade, and then I dragged her to the living room and made her binge watch the latest streaming show with me, our mouths opening wide with

incredulous laughter.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

For a moment the Smith household was something next to heaven, a place where I rested my head and my heart alike. I knew a kind of peace: the repair of a friendship broken, forgiveness born of grace, and a place that felt like home. I let my guard down and dared to believe that everything would be alright.

There's always calm before the storm breaks. It's the only way you know the destruction is coming.

### Chapter 5

He didn't come home when he was supposed to.

Standing on the side of the road, cell phone in my hand, I frowned in the direction of the setting sun. Wally left to pick him up that morning with plenty of time to spare; they were supposed to switch turns driving on the way back with a rest in the middle. It was a long drive, but not that long. They were supposed to make it by sunset.

I called Wally's number twice, but he didn't pick up. Either he was using his phone so much that the battery died, and he didn't bother to bring a charger—typical Wally behavior—or something was very wrong.

My anxious mind immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was the latter, insistently telling me terrible stories of my brother's head going through a car windshield, or Wally getting them lost on the side of the road and murdered by escaped convicts.

To fight the catastrophe-related anxiety in my mind, I grabbed the old fixed gear bike



from the garage and rode it around our cluster of houses beneath the darkening sky and time-activated street lamps. Its gear ran smoothly, pedals well-oiled by my brother's careful hand. Even the little pink ribbon tied to the handlebars was bright, shiny, and brand-new looking.

At one point my mom came out, stood on the front porch, and called to me. "Brenna! Want any chicken pot pie? I'm about to put it in the fridge for later."

I stopped and stared at her, the tips of my worn tennis shoes touching the ground. "Silas isn't home yet."

"He can reheat it for dinner. That's the sort of thing he'll have to get used to doing once he's transferred to that new school." The light in the middle of the lazy ceiling fan cast a warm orange glow across her face. "Don't stay out here too late. Your father will want you to come to bed in time for nightly prayers."

I nodded, not daring to speak out loud. Daddy insisted we were in bed at ten sharp every night so we could get on our knees and pray—a tradition he taught us when we were barely young enough to know the words to a single psalm. He almost never checked to make sure we were doing it anymore, but on those rare nights he came up the stairs at ten, we were either by our beds murmuring saintly words or would find ourselves yanked to our knees until reverence came pouring out.

I'd missed Silas that whole week as I knelt by my bed and spit out a penance half-remembered and never genuine in feeling. Normally we'd do our prayers—or his profanity-laden version of them—with our bedroom doors open, facing each other. For a while in middle school he spent every night inserting jokes into his prayers, insistently trying to get me to giggle, until Dad came home one night, went up the stairs, and put a stop to that.

By the time he declared he was heading to Coleridge, our prayers were more of a soft

conversation filled with bits of truth.

“Lord Jesus, don’t let me fail this next test. I think if I do I might never get to go to college like my brother.”

“Grant me the patience to tutor my sister in math so I don’t have to support her financially for the rest of my life.”

“Forgive me for walking out on Jade when she needed me the most.”

“Don’t let my family fall apart while I’m gone. And... I hope this new school is worth it. I hope going there takes me out of this godforsaken shithole. No offense or anything, Big Man.”

“I hope tomorrow Dad is in a good mood.”

“I hope tomorrow Mom doesn’t have those sad eyes of hers.”

After we said our amens we let it all go and moved on like it never happened. He didn’t mention the fading bruises; I didn’t mention the extra makeup classes I was going to have to take in the fall. Prayer was how we talked about the hard things without ever really talking at all.

I didn’t really believe any of it had some sort of power. If God was looking down at us, I figured it was with indifference at best and scorn at worst. We were little more than ants whittling our short lives away.

But as the sky grew darker, my stomach grumbled, and the bicycle lost its appeal, I found myself praying for real. In quiet, silent bursts of plaintive words, I prayed that Silas was okay and that he would come home soon.

A dark little corner of my heart wanted to pray that he hated his week at Coleridge so much that he'd change his mind about going all the way up to Connecticut for school.

I refused to put those envious prayers into words, though. It was selfish to try to drag him down with me. So I acknowledged the best of myself in murmured words to a god I wasn't sure existed, and looked towards the dim street, waiting for familiar headlights to come barreling towards the house.

I waited.

And I waited.

A stupid, panicked part of me started to really believe that the worst had befallen Silas, and he wasn't going to come home at all. The fears that'd seemed so exaggerated hours before suddenly became plausible as the summer air cooled and the mosquitoes swarmed in the air, biting to the tune of cicada song. I tried to imagine my life without him and failed, my mind bumping up against the possibility with panic.

It was one thing to imagine losing him for a week, a few months, or two years. To lose him for a lifetime made every thought in my mind unravel around me.

Finally, just when I was about to give up and go inside, or ride my bike all the way to the police station to insist they dosomething, I saw those yellow-orange headlights and the front bumper of an old pickup truck chugging down the road. Dropping my bike carelessly in the grass, I ran up to the passenger side door as the truck slowed to a shuddering stop.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

“Silas!” He looked beaten down, worn by the long drive and coated in rest stop dust, but as he climbed out onto the ground he gave me a thin smile. I threw my arms around him, heedless of the duffel bag he held in front of him, hugging it as well. “I thought for a second there you and Wally got lost or something. Or maybe decided it wasn’t worth coming home at all.”

“And leave you all alone? Never.” His voice was rough, but his arms were strong, and he smelled the same familiar grass-and-rain scent as always. “We had a little... delay getting out of Coleridge. But we got here.”

Wally got out of the car, strangely silent, his dirty blond hair pushed back from his head. As I stepped out of Silas’s embrace his eyes flicked back and forth between us again and again. He seemed uncomfortable for some reason, based on the way he kept fidgeting.

I stared at Silas. “What was that phone call about? You never called back.”

“It was nothing. I shouldn’t have worried you in the first place.”

He paced to the bed of Wally’s truck and pulled his travel suitcase out of the back, not looking at me. I frowned at Wally, hoping he’d tell me what was going on, but he was staring at the dirty toes of his tennis shoes like they fascinated him.

“Long trip?” I asked, trying to pry something out of him.

“It was pretty much the same in both directions.”

“What was the campus like? Did you get to see it?”

Wally’s eyes wandered away from his shoes and towards the horizon. “For a bit.”

“I saw on the website that there’s a wolf enclosure on campus.” Silas was watching me oddly as he pulled out the handle of his suitcase and tilted it forward onto its wheels. “Well?” I looked back and forth between them, frowning. “What were the wolves like? Did you see them? There are four, according to ColeridgeAcademy.com.”

“The enclosure is big.” I watched my brother hike his duffel bag strap further up his shoulder and studiously not-look at Wally, who was also not-looking at him. “The wolves were barely visible while we were there. And the dorm building they put me in was on the other side of campus.”

“Oh.” I deflated. Talking about the wolves was the only neutral topic I came up with, and it hadn’t dissipated any of the tension in the air. “I just thought it was cool. I mean, wild animals on a school campus? Wayborne High’s mascot is a bird.”

Wally piped up just to correct me. “A peregrine falcon.”

“Yeah, whatever.” I cleared my throat. “See you next weekend, Wally? At Mom’s Fourth of July picnic.”

He looked over at Silas and opened his mouth like he was going to say something, then paused. “Yeah, sure. See you in a week, Brenna.”

Climbing back into his truck, Wally coaxed the old engine to life and released the clutch, giving it enough gas to send it rolling down the road. I watched the pickup’s dusty silhouette disappear into the darkness between street lamps, then turned and eyed my brother, searching for a sign of what happened.

Some part of me thought it might be written on his body, like every bruise Daddy ever gave him, or the defiant look that lit up his eyes when he declared he was going to Coleridge. What I didn't know then—what I do know now—is that the worst wounds are on the inside, where you can't see them.

“Let's go inside,” Silas said, ignoring my scrutiny in favor of galloping up the front steps two at a time, his beaten-up suitcase banging behind him. “I'm hungry. Got any leftovers for me?”

I followed him, my own stomach grumbling, the mystery of the missing week temporarily forgotten. We sat across the kitchen table that evening, eating reheated chicken pot pie. Mom came in to kiss Silas on the head and murmur mom-like words at him; Dad stayed ensconced in the master bedroom, the tinny sounds of sports talk filtering in through the crack beneath the door, thoroughly ignoring his one and only son.

For a moment, there was something not quite like peace in the house.

Call it a ceasefire: a retreat from engagement on the battlefield.

Like most cessations from war, it was doomed from the start.

## Chapter 6

That evening, Silas closed his door when he said his prayers—or didn't say them, for all I knew—and it felt like he was shutting me out of his life as well.

He hadn't talked about Coleridge over dinner, except to make vaguely positive assurances to Mom that he had a good time and made friends. When I tried to probe him on details, he acted like it had all happened so long ago that he could barely remember.

It all seemed fishy. Silas was never one to talk, but I knew this was supposed to be different. He was going to a new school in a different state, traveling all the way from our little town in Virginia to Great Falls, Connecticut, just a train ticket away from New York City. Even if the school was stuffy and the kids were impossibly rich, there had to be things to talk about.

If nothing else I thought he'd at least discuss the violin.

But he was closed-mouth and distant-eyed. The only thing of substance he told Mom was that he broke his cell phone; eyeing Dad's closed door, she told him she'd take him to get a new one on Monday. Implied beneath her words was that we wouldn't tell Daddy. They'd go shopping while he was at work and buy the new phone in the cash Mom collected every grocery trip, withdrawing cash back from the debit card to avoid too many questions about what she was buying and why she needed it.

I always thought she was a coward, but she protected us in her little ways. There was the money she slipped us every birthday, the trips to the store each Christmas, and Thanksgiving at Aunt Cheryl's house, where we got extra toys and the brief pleasure of seeing her smile. She did what she could bear to do, and nothing more.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

She's all I have left now.

Mom didn't pry too far into Silas's troubled eyes or ask questions about what happened to his cell phone. She took what he said at face value and demanded no more of him, just as she expected us to demand no more of her than what she could give. But I wasn't satisfied. I always had to poke at bruises and pick at scabs, and this was no different.

Silas shut his door.

So I got up in the middle of the night, when the house was still and I was sure Daddy was in bed, to slip across the hallway and turn the doorknob. It was unlocked; we didn't get the benefit of fully privacy in our rooms, which included locks on the doors. Heart beating too fast, I slipped into his bedroom in the darkness, some part of me afraid of what I would find.

My instincts told me, even then, that something was wrong.

I've never believed twins had a special connection; Silas and I were born on the same day, grew in the same ways, but we weren't psychic or magic. I didn't feel it when he got hurt, and he didn't know when I was afraid. But that summer night when he came home with the light gone from his eyes and his joy dimmed, I knew something was wrong, not because I was his twin but just because I loved him.

"Brenna." He sat up in bed, looking at me, his hair mussed in the light pouring in from the hallway. "Can't sleep?"



I shook my head, words sticking in my throat. Questions like, How are you? What's wrong? What really happened this week? Are you going to leave us? There were petulant demands in there too, ones I stomped down, like Please don't leave me here with them.

What I said out loud was, "I missed you."

"I missed you too." He cleared his throat and flipped back the quilt on the other side of his bed. "C'mon, sit down. We can plan what we'll make for the Fourth of July picnic. It's right around the corner."

Perching on the side of the bed, I studied him. There was no darkness in his eyes, no tremor in his voice, so I relaxed. I told myself that it was all going to be okay.

We can lie sometimes, in the deepest corners of our heart, so thoroughly that we buy our own deceit. I bought mine hook, line, and sinker.

"I was thinking we could do cowboy cookies like year before last. That's if Mom doesn't hog the oven all day cooking like she did last year. Jade wants us to make pecan pie, though."

"So you talked to Jade?" He raised his eyebrows, which were standing up in five different directions from sleeping face down on the pillow. "I knew you two couldn't stay apart for long."

"Well, I promised I'd do some hours of my own to make up for the community service hours she's doing. That was as much for Grace as anything. She has me cleaning out the oven and squeezing lemons from the lemon tree out back. I swear I got enough juice in my eye to half blind me, and my hands are all dried out from the steel wool sponges." I held them out so he could see. "That was just today, mind you. It'll get worse I'm sure. But if it means she'll forgive me..."

He smiled, and squeezed my hand. “Grace Smith isn’t the type of woman to make you jump through hoops just for the sake of watching you do it. If she’s got you doing chores up at their house, it’s for a reason.”

“True. And Jade got a hundred community hours, so the least I can do is pick up the slack around the house while she’s out picking up trash on the side of the road. It’s half my fault she’s out there.”

My brother snorted at this. “Less than half, I’d say. Jade has been stretching the limits of the rules since she came out into the world. I still remember that time she tried to convince me to jump off Height’s Cliff into the river below when it wasn’t even deep enough to touch the banks. I swear she wanted to see if my head split open just so she would know if it was safe.”

“Just watch,” I told him, “you’re gonna marry that girl one day.”

It was a joke, but one I’d made many times in our lives. In a small place like Wayborne, most people either married someone they’d known all their lives or got the fuck out of town. It always seemed like my brother and Jade would do one or the other—or both.

Normally he laughed when I said it. But this time Silas’s expression shuttered closed, and he pulled his hand away from mine. “Jade is too good for me.”

I blinked at him. “Well, that’s probably what she’d say, but only as a joke. You two are both going places.”

His mouth thinned, eyes hardening, and for a moment he looked so much like Daddy that my heart did a somersault. “Jade Smith would be better off if she stayed away from this family for the rest of her life.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?” The voice that came from his mouth was one I barely recognized. He’d never been angry with me like this before; irritated, sure, and frustrated, but anger was something Silas avoided. It made him seem too much like the man who left darkness indelibly imprinted on his skin. “If Jade hadn’t gone out with you that day, she wouldn’t be doing community service right now. And if I hadn’t... if she got close to me...” He shook his head, eyes wild. “This family isn’t right. No one good should come near us.”

In that moment, I didn’t hear his pain, didn’t sense the words he refused to say. All I heard was him saying, rightly, that my best friend deserved better than me. It cut me to the quick and made me feel small—so I turned away from him, slid off the edge of his bed and shut myself off from looking any closer into his words.

“If that’s how you feel, maybe it’s best you’re leaving us and going up to Connecticut.” I fiddled with the hem of the old shirt I’d worn to bed, backing slowly towards the door. “I wouldn’t want to poison a future Coleridge grad like you. After all, I’m nothing but Virginia trash, and you’re going places. So I better go sleep in my room before my stink rubs off on your cuff links.”

His voice followed me out into the hallway. “Brenna, wait...”

I ignored him, nursing my hurt and licking my wounds. Flicking off the hall light, I returned to my own bed and curled up in the middle of it, cold despite the summer air and the handmade quilt covering me.

It wasn’t until later that I realized how close he’d come to telling me the truth of things.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

By then it was too late for the both of us.

### Chapter 7

#### The 4th of July

No one has ever been as happy as my mother is making dozens of people fat and full at the same time.

As the Fourth of July picnic wore on in Freedom Park, she tossed her head back and laughed, a wine margarita in one hand, the tongs to the barbecue in the other. All around her neighbors from both sides of the river joined her with their own potluck additions, from the casserole no one would touch to the oven-baked macaroni and cheese that would disappear without a trace. My mother was the middle of it all, the fourth woman in her family to hold the Wayborne tradition, and the first to really revel in it.

She's a slip of a woman, my mother; turn her sideways and she's barely there. But with her thin golden blonde hair catching the sunlight and a smile as wide as the horizon, she looked alive that afternoon, and she rubbed her happiness off on other. Even my grump of a father dared to have a conversation or two with the neighbors that didn't end in a blowup—though he soon retreated to a fold-out chair in the shade, a beer in one hand and a plate heavy with ribs in the other, his body language making it clear that he wasn't to be disturbed.

“So.” Jade joined me in the picnic line as we went through a second time, her flag-printed tank top and shorts making her stand out as absurdly as she wanted. “He still

brooding?”

I followed the crude flick of her fingers towards my brother Silas, who somehow managed to make the sun's rays shrink from him. “I don't get it,” I told her. “He won't talk to me. He barely leaves his room.”

“He's a teenage boy,” she pointed out. “Maybe he's done with the whole glued-at-the-hip with his sister thing.”

“Maybe.” The thought hurt, so I didn't entertain it for long. “I know something happened while he was at that orientation thing, but he won't talk about it. He just pretends like everything is normal.”

“Did it ever occur to you to let it go?” I cut my eyes at her, and she snorted. “Guess not. Here—take another serving of cornbread. Mom will force feed it to me for weeks if it doesn't get polished off.”

She piled a huge slice of the stuff on my plate, weighing it down even further. I eyed the tray of cornbread in front of us and shook my head. “No way is all of that going to be gone by the end of the day. You'll be eating it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner all month.”

Jade groaned. “Maybe I can convince Mom I'm going keto.”

“Good luck.” Grace Smith served enough carbs with her meals to make a long distance runner cry. “You'd be better off feeding it to the dogs in front of her.”

We moved down the long table towards the dessert end, and got a slice of no bake cookie crunch cake each, balancing the little desserts on smaller, second plates that sat on the edge of our big plates. Then we wove our way through the crowd towards the long table where our seats still were, and settled in to make room in our stomachs

for seconds.

At some point in the middle of eating, I looked up to see where Silas was and couldn't find him. Heart thundering absurdly—that was those instincts kicking up again—I looked around for him in a wide-eyed panic until I spotted him standing in the shade of an old pecan tree, talking to Wally.

“What’s wrong?” Jade followed my gaze. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Oh—it’s just Silas. You’ve got to stop worrying about him. He’s going to Connecticut, not Mordor.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then tell me.”

I opened my mouth to try, but nothing came out except a frustrated breath of air. I didn't know what was wrong, not really. As far as I could tell, my brother's life since returning from Coleridge's orientation week had been non-eventful. Dad had mostly kept to himself, entering that passive aggressive, silent treatment period of his moods, and Mom was the bright and cheery self she always got to be when she was entertaining like this. There was nothing for Silas to really be mad about—at least, not that I could see.

He was getting what he wanted: to leave Wayborne forever. So why was it, as he watched Wally walk away from him, something frightened flicked across his face? Why did Wally look like he had something in his stomach that wasn't settling right, as if he'd eating all of Ms. Rathbone's casserole and was suffering the consequences?

I got my answer soon enough, and it came from the opposite end of the table, where the First Baptist girls were sitting. Silas walked up towards the empty seat at the end near them. Church girls through and through, they were eating the lowest calorie

menu items—and not sneaking the wine margaritas at all.

They looked at Silas like he was diseased. “Be careful.” One of them shot a look towards my brother, flipping straight blonde hair over her shoulder. “You never know what that Wilder boy will do. You should cover your cup with your hand, Abigail. He might put something in your drink.”

Her words were loud enough to carry, and she meant for them to be. A hush came over our end of the table; Silas, stiffening, picked up his plate and looked down the row of chairs for another place to sit. Our eyes briefly met, and his jaw clenched.

He looked like he wanted to be anywhere but there.

Something in me rose up, something wild and angry that could not be contained or controlled. I stared the girl who’d spoken down. “Shut up Bridget. You’re one to talk. We all know what you do behind the bleachers during gym class. No one needs to drug you.”

Jade’s hand clenched on my upper arm. “Brenna... people are watching.”

“I don’t care,” I muttered back at her. “She doesn’t get to talk to my brother that way.”

But the gaggle of church girls wasn’t done. “We all know what he did to that girl up in Connecticut.” Abigail looked at me with wide, doe eyes. “Or don’t you know, Brenna? Didn’t anyone tell you?”

I didn’t understand what they were talking about. I wish I never learned.

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

Silas threw his plate down and glared at the church girls. “Shut the fuck up and mind your own goddamned business.”

There were gasps up and down the picnic table. He’d gone too far now, cursed too openly and sacrilegiously. All eyes were on him with disapproval.

Even Mom’s eyes. “Silas Taylor Wilder. There are children here.”

One of the church girls grabbed the cross necklace brushing her clavicle and started murmuring a prayer beneath her breath, no doubt for attention as much as anything.

But all I could do was stare at Silas. “What are they talking about?”

Bridget made a faux sad face. “Someone should tell her. I guess I’ll bite the bullet.” Silas was looking at me with wide grey eyes, shaking his head back and forth, frozen like he was in some kind of nightmare that he just couldn’t stop. The church girl said, “Some poor girl up in Connecticut who’s too good for hick trash turned your brother down, but he didn’t take no for an answer. Now he’s got his very own hashtag. Every high schooler in the country is talking about it... except, I guess, you.” She batted her eyes in faux sympathy as my whole world ground to a halt. “I’ll pray for you. Silas should pray too—for forgiveness. That poor girl.”

Everything inside me was cold all over. I didn’t know if it was anger or shock; I couldn’t tell what I was feeling at all. All I knew was that there was a look on my brother’s face that I’d never seen before.

It was the same expression I saw on our father just before his hands turned into fists.



All my life I'd thought that face was rage. The twist of his lips, the narrowing of his eyes, the way his thick brows drew down; I saw it and knew what was coming next.

And maybe it was anger, in part. But it was also hurt; I knew that once I saw it on my brother's face, the face I'd been studying every day of my life. Beneath the anger and hurt, though, was a shameful humiliation, the kind of guilt that refuses to come to the surface and be dealt with.

Horried, I asked Silas, "Is it true?"

He looked at me. And just like I knew his face, he knew mine; he saw on my expression that there was a part of me that believed what they said about him.

Hurt, anger, guilt, all of it turned to betrayal as he glanced back and forth between me and the church girls. Then, with a contemptuous sneer that chilled me to my bones, he reached out and knocked Abigail and Bridget's cups of lemonade over. They shrieked as their thighs were drenched, ice cubes slipping off the edge of the table to bounce off their skin.

"Fuck you," Silas declared, his useless anger turning his hands into fists that clenched and released over and over again. He backed away from the table, wild-eyed as the adults grabbed their kids and looked to my mother to get her son in order. "Fuck all of you."

Then he turned and ran, out towards the hills, the deep grass and untamed ground between pollen-coated oak trees. We watched him go; a murmur rose in the crowd, which had been temporarily lulled to complacency from sheer shock.

I heard a deep voice behind me, and realized that my father had woken from his nap. "You see, Gretchen?" He grabbed my mom's arm, to comfort her or to hold her back; I couldn't tell. "That boy came out wrong the day he was born. It's for the best that he

leaves us. Good riddance, I say.”

I looked back, over my shoulder, and saw tears in her eyes. But when my mom met my gaze, I saw in an instant that she wasn’t going to say a single thing to correct him.

She wasn’t going to go after Silas, either.

So I did.

“Brenna!” Jade snatched my sleeve as I got up, pulling me back towards the long table. I looked at her, frozen in a moment in time. “Be careful. There’s a storm coming.”

Glancing up, I saw the wall of clouds, an inexorable dark force on the horizon. Then I looked back at my best friend, whose face reflected my own fear and confusion. “I’ll be back before a single drop falls.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” I lied.

I banged my knees on the bench as I threw my legs over it. Running towards the trees, I drowned out the sound of the church girls praying condescendingly, my father shouting my name, the good old families of Wayborne muttering about “those Wilders” in voices loud enough to be heard.

All I could think of was that look in his eyes, the curl in his fists, and how I’d betrayed him.

I should’ve said, “I know you’d never do anything like that. Ignore those stupid girls.”

Or, “Explain to me what happened. Tell me the truth—that can’t be it.”

Instead I doubted him. Me, his twin, the first person to know him and love him, to hold him close and watch him go far away. He told Daddy he would take me far from Wayborne when he left, and I know that he meant it. To Silas, I was the sun that rose in the sky each morning and burned his shadow away. We were two pieces that fit together, in the way of things that are made whole and carved into mirrored halves.

I am nothing without him now.

But I ran towards him, as the stars chase each other around in the sky, wheeling forever, spinning on their axis. Minutes passed before I felt the first rain drop make its way down through the thick oak branches to splatter on my sun-warmed skin. More followed it; the sky darkened suddenly, and the leaves above my head fell as the wind trembled through the woods.

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

The hair on my back stood up, skin prickling, as the first boom of thunder crashed through the hills and a bright blue streak of lightning coursed to the ground.

I lost his trail; for a moment, confused, I stood in the woods, calves splashed with mud, searching for him in the darkening shadows of the trees. Then I found him, not with my eyes but with my heart and my mind. I turned towards the only direction he could've gone.

A few steps forward through the darkness; shivers ran down my back as the sky grew dark and thick with trouble. Then I saw him, leaning up against the wide trunk of an oak tree, hands on his knees, thick dark hair plastered across his face. His sides heaved. He looked miserable.

As I got close, he glanced up, eyes rimmed red. I stared at him and felt like I was seeing a stranger for the first time.

For a moment, silence.

Then I dared to ask for answers I didn't want to get. "What were they talking about back there?" Reaching out, I grabbed his sleeve, tugging at him like a child—only we weren't children anymore. "I know something happened at Coleridge, but you keep lying about it. Tell me, Silas. Tell me what's going on."

He yanked out of my grip, standing up straight, mouth a thin line. Lightning struck. I looked up at him—I'd been looking up at him for years at that point—and saw, again, our father.

I gasped. Took a step back. Shivered, from the rain or the cold or—something else, some other kind of fear, the kind I don't want to admit to myself.

Silas snarled, "You wouldn't understand. You don't understand anything."

"Why?" I cried back in response. "Why wouldn't I understand?"

He was contemptuous. "We're both sixteen, but you're naive. Sheltered. You've never dealt with the real stuff. You avoid it, Brenna. You couldn't even deal with a security guard catching you stealing fucking ponytail holders." Another bolt of lightning, nearer this time; the cool white light of it turned Silas's skin a stark, pale color, his dark hair dripping rivulets of water down his neck. "Face it, Sis, you and I are nothing alike. Just like Mom and Dad."

"No, that's not true." I shook my head, reaching for him, and this time he didn't back away as my hands closed over his arms, as I pulled him closer and tried to look into his eyes even as he avoided my gaze. "We're the same, Silas. We're going to get out of here together. I just need you to tell me what happened so I can understand."

His mouth thinned; his arms flexed beneath my fingers. I felt like I was holding a wild animal, or a bolt of lightning itself. Already he was slipping away.

"Please," I begged, "just tell me. It was... it was a mistake, wasn't it? You didn't mean to."

He flinched. His nostrils flared. And he pulled away from me again—but this time his hands came up, palms spread wide, and he shoved me so hard I went flying back.

Mud slipped beneath my sneakers.

Thunder boomed in my ears.

I went down,hard.The thick oak roots that rose from the soft ground hit my back. Air whooshed out of my lungs in a humph. Ears ringing, I curled up onto one side, briefly aware only of the pain and the sound of the storm.

I think Silas said something to me then.

I wish I remember what. I wish I'd been listening. Maybe if I'd heard him—maybe if I'd ever heard him—I would have known him as he tried to know me.

He reached for me with a pale hand.

And I snarled in anger, rising to my feet and rushing towards him. I was barely aware that my hands were fists until my right connected with his side, knuckles hitting him hard enough that I felt it reverberate back to me.

The shock of the punch connecting woke me from a rage. I pulled back, staring at him in horror, an apology already dropping from my lips. But it was drowned out by the sound of the storm descending on us in full force, thick with fury. I don't think he heard it, but even if he had, he wasn't listening.

All that was left in his grey eyes was nothing. No fury, no rage, no confusion or fear. The lightning dissipated, leaving behind darkness. He turned from me, a silhouette in the dim light overhead, trudging through the mud towards a destination only he could find in the chaos waging war around us.

I stood there for a while, alone and confused, lost in more ways than one. Then I heard the sound of an engine idling, and turned to see Wally sitting in his pickup truck on the side of the road.

That whole time we'd been fifty yards away from salvation, but we hadn't seen it through the darkness.

“Brenna!” He leaned over to prop open the passenger side door, heedless of the rain slanting in. “Get in. It’s about to get worse.”

“Wait a sec.”

I looked around for Silas but didn’t see him.

In that moment I heard my father’s words echoing in my head:good riddance. I thought—he’s a grown man, just like he says. He knows where he’s going. He has his Eagle Scout badge.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

I thought a lot of things. I could make a lot of excuses. But the truth is, I was wet, angry, and afraid; and I didn't think my brother wanted me to find him.

So I turned away from the rain and hopped up into Wally's pickup truck, closing the door behind me and dripping onto the rubber mats at my feet. Hesitantly, I told him, "Silas was out there. I don't know where he went."

"There's no time to go looking." Wally sounded frustrated. "There's an abandoned Ranger station out there. Silas and I used to sneak out and drink beer there. I'm sure that's where he was headed."

"If you say so." Truthfully, I was relieved to have an excuse not to go trudging out into the wilderness after my lost, angry brother. My ears were still ringing from the fall; when I reached up to press my palm against my ear, my hand came back tinted pink with blood. "He'll be okay. He's always been a survivor. Me, not so much."

Wally snorted. "You can say that again. I remember that time our families tried to camp together and you nearly died and got us all killed in just one night. Now c'mon," he flicked on his flood lights, "let's get you on home."

### Chapter 8

I stared out the windows at the rain as Wally flicked on his phone and pulled up a playlist to feed into the speakers. Questions gnawed at me. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?"



“When you picked up Silas.” He was going slow, the wipers turned to max, the road barely visible in front of us. I shivered and rubbed my arms, leaning towards the heater like it could drive out the source of the cold. “I know something happened between you two. He’s not talking, so you’re my best bet to learn to truth.”

Wally’s hands flexed on the steering wheel once, twice. He looked like he was considering whether or not he’d have better luck out in the trees with the lightning.

“Tell me,” I urged him. “I’m his sister. If I can’t help him, who can?”

Based on the way Wally sighed, I knew I’d gotten to him. So I pushed a little harder, dug in a little more. “I just want to make sure everything is okay.”

“Nothing is okay.” He slowed down as the rain picked up in front of us, water sloshing across the road and spraying on either side of his tires. “I can’t tell ya half of what’s going on, Brenna, ‘cause I hardly understand it myself. Everything about this is...” Wally cleared his throat. “It’s different. Silas is different. The way he talks about that school you’d think going there was gonna save him.”

There was a lull in the truck cabin as both Wally and I thought about, but didn’t say, the scars Silas bore deep beneath his skin. I flexed my right hand, knuckles scraped raw, thoughts skittering about. I was afraid to think too long on what I’d done; I couldn’t bear to think of what it felt like to stare at Daddy’s expression on Silas’s face, his rage as he pushed me to the ground.

Minutes passed. The road darkened before us. Bolt of lightning came so close that they seared my vision, and the thunder shook the world around us.

Then, in the distance, I saw it.

A funnel cloud.

“Wally.”

“I see it too.” He sounded calm, centered; he was his father’s son, a salt of the earth type who plants his feet somewhere and stays, come Hell or high water. “We’re not gonna make it to your house, Brenna, so you’ll need to come stay with me and my family. We’ll make it into a tornado party.”

I nodded, throat tight.

And prayed to an undeserving god that my brother was somewhere out there, safe and whole.

As if hearing my thoughts, Wally said, “I’ve got an old radio back at the house. We can try to pick up the channel for the Ranger’s station, see if we can catch your brother. He’s probably halfway through a pack of MREs by now and drinking the last of the beer we stashed there.”

“Probably.” I gave him a wan smile. “God knows he’s survived worse.”

After a few moments, Wally said, “He wasn’t in the dorm he was supposed to be in.”

“What?” I blinked at him.

“When I picked Silas up.” Wally looked straight ahead at the road, I think not because he needed to, but because he didn’t want to look into my face as he told me. “He was supposed to be in some dorm called Hadley Hall, but he wasn’t there. Someone gave me directions and I went looking for him. He was in the girls’ dorms on the east side of campus.” Hesitantly, he added, “He was yelling at some girl. Telling her to delete a video. She kept shaking her head. I think... I think she was crying.”

“Oh.” I felt sick.

Wally continued. “He cut it out as soon as he saw me, before he did I heard him say ‘You’ll ruin everything.’ I didn’t get what it was about, but...” He trailed off. “I uh, I don’t go online much. I heard that’s where most of it is.”

Most of it. I could guess what “it” was, now that I’d heard the church girls. Fighting past my nausea, I thanked him for telling me, and let the rest of the trip to his family’s house pass by in silence.

\* \* \*

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

Wifi on the Johnson farm was spotty, so I struggled to search social media for some sign of what Wally was talking about. I looked up “Silas Wilder” and got nothing of use; there was a Silas Wildes who played basketball in Kentucky and got all the hits.

So I tried “Silas Taylor Wilder”—again, nothing. Finally I searched “Coleridge scandal” and fell down a rabbit hole that led me to a blog called Legacies with the tagline: “How they get in, and what they leave behind. Covering scandals at private schools, prep schools, and boarding schools for almost a decade.”

The blog had been active up until 2017, at which point it went dark. That it’d been going on for so long surprised me; I thought blogs went the way of the dinosaur as soon as the first celebrity joined Twitter. But there were constant, in depth articles with a huge comments section, most of it anonymous.

Entries covered doping athletes, bribes to school officials made by rich parents, underground cults, underage drinking, and of course plenty of sex. The scandals covered both coasts and even a few prep schools in between, as well as the occasional post about a school in London or Sydney.

They were extensive, common, and absolutely breathtaking in that none of the people covered in any of the scandals seemed to get more than a little slap on the wrist and a brief suspension at worst.

It was hard to imagine all of this lying low for so many years, but the blog had gone dark just as accountability culture—and cancel culture—grew its legs. Maybe in a world of Weinsteins and Cosbys, a few handsy teenagers didn’t matter much.

But they did when they were the next leaders of the free world. Scrolling back to 2014 and beyond, I found plenty of people who were even now graduating with degrees and getting handed keys to the family fortunes. Here was a pharmaceutical company CEO whose greed started in a west coast prep school; there, a swindling entrepreneur who'd faked her grades with daddy's money before she was even out of braces.

Seeing all of it, I didn't have to imagine how the blog creator had gone other ways. Years had passed; whoever they were was probably long out of school by now. And nothing had come of any of the investigations or publications of scandals except popcorn-eating commentary by a couple hundred online strangers.

It was interesting stuff, but none of it would tell me what was going on with Silas. Coleridge was a two year academy for juniors and seniors heading off to college; anyone still there in 2017 would be gone by now.

As the storm grew to a deafening siren sound and we took shelter in the basement, I had one more brief moment of wifi on the stairs. So I did the thing I'd been dreading: I searched for my brother's social media handle online.

A few tweets loaded before the signal went out.

I heard what @WildestBoy did at a party... why doesn't the admin care? Oh right, diversity admissions for white trash.

LMAO Dean Simmons wants the poors to look good so he won't kick a rapist like @wildestboy out

"Thorough investigation" my ass... did the administration even watch that video!!??  
It's clearly @wildestboy

My parents send me to Coleridge because it's the best of the best. If it's no better than public school what's the point? Expel @wildestboy. Nut up or shut up, fucking cowards.

I didn't scroll down to try to get the rest to load. Instead I tucked my phone into my pocket and joined the Johnsons, including Wally's little sister Beth and his parents, at the scarred oak table in their basement. Candles were lit, a battery-powered lantern was turned on, and Beth started pulling out board games for us to play while we waited out the storm.

I glanced at Wally, who was fiddling to the controls on a radio with the volume turned down. Only static came through the speakers. "Any signs of him yet?"

"Not yet." He pursed his lips, fussing with the antennas. "But like I said, I'm sure he's safe in that Ranger station. Probably even safer than we are—it has concrete walls in the underground shelter."

I murmured noises of agreement, but I wasn't so sure. The frantic, animal part of me wanted to run out into the storm, funnel clouds be damned, and find Silas. That side insisted he was scared and alone out in the woods, certain to die without me at his side.

The rational side of me, that grew up with a brother who survived anything, knew that Wally was right. Silas had been headed in exactly that direction before we split up, and he wasn't the type of fool to ignore a funnel cloud on the horizon. He was probably in some concrete basement, tipsy on beer and eating disgusting MREs.

I told myself he was nowhere near the tree.

I didn't want to consider why he might go there.

\* \* \*

The storm cleared suddenly, leaving only its destruction behind to prove that it had ever visited. Wally's dad walked outside and held his phone up to the sky to get a signal and load the news. Grimly, he announced, "It touched down."

"Where?"

"West of here."

A lump formed in my throat. My family's house was west of the Johnson ranch. I looked at Wally, and he headed towards his truck.

"C'mon," he said as he opened the passenger side door for me and stepped aside, "let's go see what's still standing."

As we drove down the road, at first it was a peaceful, familiar sight. Leaf litter scattered the asphalt in front of us; thin branches that had fallen on the road broke beneath Wally's truck tires. The sky was turning from a dark and fierce color to a light grey, then a washed out blue covered by thin white clouds.

I'd seen Wayborne after a storm enough times to know that this was nothing new. There was mud on the ground; the trees looked bare without their extra leaves and branches. In a few places they'd been torn to bits by the descending tornado as it left its wrath behind, but that was nothing less than to be expected. It was like the world around us had been gently tossed then set back down again by a giant hand. There was a good chance that the tornado never even touched down on any residential streets.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

Or so I hoped.

But then we turned the corner, down Mayberry street that led to the little road where our house was, and my heart jumped up into my throat.

There were people on either side of the road, their boots muddy, hair tied back, tired expressions on their faces as they dragged ruined belongings out of their houses and dumped them near the curb. The destruction was inconsistent. One house would be mostly standing, a few shingles missing, water draining from the front porch, while another just next door was a pile of old timber and broken glass. Neighbors with less damage walked to houses that were gone to move broken beams and shattered dreams aside so they could find out what was underneath it all.

Children crying. Mothers sitting near the curb, heedless of the dirty ground beneath them, clutching the few precious things they still had, eyes hollow. Houses turned into little but basements; dogs trotting down the sidewalks, subdued. A group of neighbors heaving up a downed refrigerator to free a cat who'd picked the wrong hiding place.

“Wally.”

“I’m going as fast as I can.” His knuckles were white on the steering wheel. “Can’t exactly mow these people down.”

The crowd in the road dispersed slowly. I wheeled down the passenger side window, stared out at them, feeling feverish and desperate. Spotting someone I knew, I called out, “Millie! Have you seen...?”



She shook her head, red hair dark at the crown from rainwater. “I haven’t been around the corner.” Lips pursed, she looked over her shoulder then back at me. “Maybe you’ll be one of the lucky ones.”

I thought of Daddy standing on a chair, screwing in a light bulb, pressing his fingers to Papa Edwin’s initials on a thick beam of wood holding the ceiling up above our heads. I prayed.

It felt like it took hours to turn the corner and park at the end of the driveway that led to the Wilder house, but it couldn’t have been more than a handful of minutes.

At first I didn’t recognize it.

Because there wasn’t a house there anymore at all.

The driveway led up to the porch, and then beyond that nothing but the remnants of the foundation. There was no big front door, no late ‘80s addition, no clapboard siding or dark grey roof. All of it was gone, not just destroyed but lifted away, from the beams Papa Edwin hammered together to the drywall he hung himself.

All that was left was the front of the porch and the two car garage, which was absurdly still intact. I had to blink at it a few times just to really make sure I was seeing it right.

Wally said something, but I didn’t hear him. As I opened the door and slipped out onto the ground, it occurred to me that the Wilder home was around the corner, nestled in the trees and set back from the road, separate from the rest of the neighborhood.

For all I knew I was the first person to check on them.

For all I knew my parents and my brother had been swept away along with the debris.

I stumbled up the front drive, heart beating a frantic rhythm, eyes searching vainly for a sign of them. And then: the garage door opened. Mom came storming out, her face uncharacteristically angry. Dad's pickup truck backed out of the garage, then rolled to a stop right in front of me.

The driver's side window rolled down. Leaning out, Daddy studied me and Wally, mouth tight. He nodded at me, once, as if he was acknowledging something.

Then he just said, "Move out of the way."

I stumbled to the grass and watched him reverse the truck the rest of the way down the drive, switch gears, and pull out onto the road. He drove so fast that mud churned beneath his tires and sprayed to either side.

Bewildered, I didn't know what to think. It felt like he was driving away completely. Forever. Maybe he was; I still don't know. I haven't thought of him much since that moment. My heart is broken into too many pieces to devote one to his mad mood swings.

As soon as he was gone Mom strode down the driveway, feet bare, hair a reckless tangle. She threw her arms around me and held me tight; I tucked my chin into the soft place where her neck met her shoulder, taking in the smell of the storm's destruction and her knockoff perfume in equal measure.

"I was so worried about you," she murmured. "Thanks for taking care of her for us, Wally."

"Yes ma'am."

Pulling out of the hug, she swept my windblown hair from my eyes and asked, “Where’s Silas?”

I exchanged a frantic look with Wally. “He’s not back yet?”

She frowned. “I thought he was with you.”

“The Ranger station isn’t far away.” I calculated the distance in my head, the time we’d spent driving back from Wally’s house, and decided he should’ve been home long ago. “He has to be there. Doesn’t he?”

In answer, Wally pulled his radio out of the car, face grim. He turned the knob on the volume all the way up. He radioed into the station, then waited for a response.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

None came. He radioed in again.

And again.

And again.

Until I reached out to stop his hand, shaking my head, frantic tears already spilling down my cheeks. “He must not have made it to the station.”

Wally blinked at me. “Where else would he be?”

I knew in that moment exactly where he was.

### Chapter 9

There’s a tree in Wayborne that sits on top of a hill, in a clearing where only the dead speak.

It’s a beautiful old live oak tree with thick branches that reach up to worship the sky and dip down low at their ends. They hang so close to the ground that they would brush against the heads of children who might play in their shade if the tree weren’t a cursed and hallowed place.

The tree is a gorgeous thing. Tangled with moss and as thick as half a dozen men or more, it begs to be photographed and painted, to have picnics held beneath its curved dome and poems written about the first kisses that happen in its shelter.

But it's not just any tree.

It's the Hanging Tree.

When I was a child, Silas and I found the tree and climbed its branches, laughing and screaming, our knees scraped and hands coated in moss. Jade followed us, but being sensible chose to sit in the shade of the tree and read one of her paperback books.

A little while later her mother came up the hill and found us hanging from the tree like wild monkeys.

And she yelled at us so loud we nearly fell from its safety.

I don't remember exactly what she said; I do remember that she told us to get down, to get down right now, right this instant, you wild Wilder kids, get down from that tree or I swear. By the time we made it to the ground she was calmer, but there were tear tracks down her cheeks, and Jade looked lost and alone.

As we stood before her, unsure what we had done, she asked, "Do you know what tree this is?"

I shook my head, but Silas piped up. "It's the Hanging Tree."

"Why do you think they call it that?"

"Because you hang from it," he said, quite boastfully and sure of himself, like all little boys.

"No." Grace got quiet; she looked at us the way you look at a grave. "They call it that because they used to hang people from this tree until they were dead. Then they buried them here, right beneath the ground—if they bothered to bury them at all. Some of

them they let rot, and the wild animals ate them until there was nothing left.”

I remember being disgusted and confused by this. I remember Jade asked what the people had done, why they were hung, if they were bad people. Grace didn’t answer right away. Instead she took us to her house in her sedan, with a stop in the middle to get ice cream bars from a truck, which we weren’t allowed to unwrap until we were safely sitting on her front porch, far from the leather interior of the car she saved up for years to buy.

Finally she told us, in a serious voice, “They were hung because of the color of their skin.”

We never asked again.

We never climbed the tree’s branches again.

But we did go there sometimes, Silas and me; Jade came every once and a while, but she said the place gave her the spooks. For us Wilder kids, it was a strangely peaceful place, one we knew we weren’t alone because the spirits of the dead still haunted it. Unlike the cheery inside of our home with its photos of happy family members on the mantel, the dripping boughs of the old tree knew what had been done beneath their shelter, and it seemed to weep with guilt over it. Even the crooked slant to its trunk was weighed down with memories of the dead. It felt truthful in its wretchedness.

At some point when we were in middle school the city council put a plaque in front of the tree, with the name of all the people who’d been hung there. The plaque calls inhumane capital punishment a “grave injustice,” without mentioning that the mobs who hung the victims were white men whose surnames are our street names, and there are old photos in attics on the north side of town of grinning mobs standing feet from the bodies that they lynched.

I wonder sometimes if I'll ever find a photo like that with my Papa Edwin's face in it. He would be a child, but there are children in some of those photos, sitting on the shoulders of their fathers to get a good look.

At a corpse.

A corpse.

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

They also call it a copse of trees; one letter difference. So little stands between the living and the dead, just like so little stands between our two sides of town. The laws can be changed, but the river never will be, and neither will the tree and its victims.

As Wally pulled up to the side of the gravel road that was the closest a car could get to the tree, he looked over at me. “We can wait for your mom to show up in her car. She shouldn’t be long. Or... or I can go first.”

“No.” I shook my head. “You stay here. Mom will need help getting up the hill. She isn’t... she isn’t strong.”

“Because of her knee injury.”

I didn’t mean in that way, but it fit as well as anything. My mother’s knee, like whatever strength lived inside her, was flimsy; it buckled easily beneath the littlest weight. Instinctively, I knew that she shouldn’t be the first to see what waited at the top of that hill.

A foolish part of me wanted to believe that I’d find him climbing the branches, or sitting under the shade, waiting for me. He would look up and smile, then walk towards me, shading his eyes with one hand. Pointing towards the sky, he’d saylook, the sun is out; it’ll dry up all the rain.

But like I said, it isn’t that kind of tree.

As I walked through the thick woods, on a path roughly marked by stones in the ground, I knew.



As I reached the foot of the hill and began climbing up it, my thighs burning, I knew.

And so. I was halfway to the top when I saw. In the distance. Far enough away that I could almost pretend it wasn't.

If I stood there, I thought idly, I could live in the in-between forever, and make denial my peaceful home.

My feet moved anyway.

I climbed, further and further, to the crest of the hill. To the downward slope that the tree set its roots in, sure and steady, unbent and unbroken by the storm's wind—but just a little crooked in one direction.

That close, I saw. I could not deny. I took a deep breath. I looked at his body as it swayed back and forth. I studied the rope and wondered, in a distant manner, where he'd gotten it, how he'd tied it, what he'd done to get far enough off the ground that it snapped his neck.

Waiting for the tears to come, I realized that the inside of my body was a cruelly hollowed thing, dry now after all the expectation on the ride in Wally's truck. Nothing came out of me.

There was nowhere to go but forward. The tree branches, low and full of leaves, brushed against me as I walked. Water was still dripping from their trembling edges. It felt like the tree was crying for me.

In the shadows, I stared at him. I took it in: the bit of blood in one corner of the mouth that used to curve upward just for me, the crooked twist of his neck, the feet that dangled when they used to dance. A wind kicked up, enough to shift the edge of his shirt, and I saw the bruise in the shape of four knuckles, the one I put on his skin

what seemed like a lifetime ago, when the storm was a distant shape on the horizon.

It didn't feel real.

I wanted it to feel real. I wanted it to hurt. I wanted to feel something close to what he'd felt, the brother I'd shared a womb and a life with, who was suddenly as far away from me as two people can get.

So I took a step forward, as if that would break the shroud between what was and what I didn't want to be.

Something moved beneath my foot. Without a whisper of warning or a hiss of alarm, a snake jolted up from the wet grass, twisted its head around, and struck my ankle.

I screamed. The sound was so sudden that it surprised us both; the snake's fangs dug in deep. Feeling wild and out of my mind, I bent down, grabbed its jaw until it came unhinged, and pulled it off me.

It was just a little thing, a rat snake with dark gleaming scales, wet with rainwater, no doubt forced from the banks of the river by the storm—just like I'd been forced from my house. As I yanked it off my ankle and pulled my foot from its back, it twisted around to bite me again, fangs sinking into the meat of my hand where my thumb met my palm. Its teeth were so big they nearly went through to the other side.

The pain sent something through me that tore my heart into pieces. I looked up at Silas's body swinging from the tree and sobbed, falling to the ground on my knees, shaking with grief and anger and the knowledge that I'd done it, I'd left those bruises on his rib cage, I'd seen him last before he died, in anger far from me.

At some point Wally came up the hill, out of breath and wild-eyed, and made the kind of sound that a wild animal makes when it's being skinned alive. He put a hand on

my shoulder and leaned down towards me, collapsing in the middle with pain and grief.

We cut him down together.

I don't remember much of that.

I also don't remember much of what happened afterwards.

But when my mind wanders off track, when I forget for a moment that I live in a world without my brother in it, I reach over and press my fingers into the small red marks on my right hand, at the place where the thumb meets the palm, and I squeeze until the pain is real.

The snake let go, but I won't. I never will.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

They won't see me coming, either.

### Chapter 10

I didn't remember sending the email until I got the reply.

It was the night before his funeral. I was sleeping on the pullout couch in my aunt's living room. Daddy was staying in a hotel; Mom won't talk about why, but I can guess. It doesn't seem to matter, even though once upon a time it would've been all that mattered.

I could feel the fire growing inside me, looking for fuel to burn. And I was afraid the only tinder it'd ever find would be me. Death didn't seem so bad when I knew who was waiting for me on the other side.

So I opened the email and scanned it with uninterested eyes. It didn't matter what the admin running the Legacies blog had to say about what Coleridge did to my brother. I was the last person to see him, after all, and I was sure in that moment that what he did was my fault. I'd replayed our final conversation over and over again in my head, blaming myself. Nothing was worse than the moment I rose from the ground, formed my hand into a fist, and punched him in the side. I was sure it was what tipped him over the edge.

If he'd only had me, I told myself, he wouldn't have had a reason to die.

That's what I thought. Until I read the message.

Brenna,

I have to admit, I've let a hundred emails lie dormant in this account's inbox since the day I stepped away from Legacies. But not this one. This one, I couldn't pass by.

I'm sorry about what happened to your brother. That kind of harassment is not okay, and it should never have happened. Whatever the filthy rich teens of Coleridge Academy think happened that night, none of them know the truth, but all of them have decided what it is, because it fits their preconceived notions of what people with fewer means are like: animals.

I hope your brother Silas is okay.

I had to lean back from my phone at this and wipe the tears from my eyes. Blinking through them, I read the rest of the email.

If you want to find the truth at the center of all the lies, it's going to take some time. That's the bad news. The good news is, mobs like this move on quickly. They'll find their next target for righteous harassment soon. In the meantime, do not engage. I can't stress that enough. People like this have nothing to lose, and you can't predict their next actions. I suggest you stay far away from the internet mob.

But that doesn't mean you can't investigate the truth. If there really is a video, track it down. If you can find the alleged victim, learn what she has to say straight from her own lips. Gather evidence, and give it time. Whenever and however you choose to enlighten the rich masses, make sure you go in prepared. This is not the sort of thing to do half-cocked.

Unfortunately I can't help you. Like the person who ran Legacies before me, I've started a career, a family, and a life of my own. To be honest, I don't have the time, even though I know the blog is something the world needs: accountability for the

young, rich, and soon-to-be powerful.

Maybe you have the time, though. If you do, nothing is a better source for tips than this blog and this email inbox. So I'm handing them over to you. Do with them what you will.

I'm also handing over a tip for you: look into The Elites. They're starting at Coleridge this fall as juniors, but they've been running in the circle of its incoming class for over a decade. The richest of the rich, they're certainly behind what happened to your brother—none of their crowd makes a single move without their say-so. When they tear someone down, they stay down. In their minds forgiveness is something only the richest deserve, and guilt is decided by their hands. Nothing would give me more joy than to see them be held publicly accountable.

There's one more thing I have for you: the attached enrollment packet. It's yours if you want it. You can't run an investigation without a source on the inside, and there's none better than your own two eyes. Not to mention it sounds like your brother shouldn't be heading to Coleridge on his own. So go with him, and slake your thirst for the truth.

Just don't ask how I got it. Needless to say, I gave my share of favors in the time I ran Legacies, and I'm owed plenty in return. Your admission into the academy is the culmination of the last of those favors; after this, I have none left.

Do with it what you will.

Best,

Legacy II

I stared at the email for several long minutes. My reverie was only broken by the

sound of soft footsteps coming down the stairs. Flicking the light at the end of the hall on, my mother entered the living room, her thin wisp of a silhouette backlit as she approached the pullout bed on quiet feet.

“I thought you’d still be awake.” Perching at the edge of the bed, she reached out and smoothed my hair down. “You shouldn’t be reading on such a tiny screen.”

“My computer and tablet both got ruined in the storm,” I pointed out. “This phone is all I’ve got.”

She was quiet for a moment. Then she offered, “Your brother’s laptop was in my car. I’ve still got it. It’s yours if you want it.” Leaning down to kiss my forehead, she cupped my cheek with a thin, warm hand. “He’ll always be with us, you know. He’s watching over us even now.”

Mouth dry, I murmured something agreeable, even though I found it impossible to imagine my brother up in the clouds with angels and harp music. It just seemed too ridiculous to contemplate.

All I knew was that I would get to turn seventeen, but he wouldn’t.

“I think the laptop would be helpful,” I told my mom. “For school, if nothing else.”

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:42 am*

“I’ll get it for you in the morning.”

I didn’t fall asleep that night—last night, the final night that it didn’t feel quite real, before I saw them lower his coffin down into the dark.

Instead I stayed up, thinking and planning.

Whenever I was about to drift off, I pinched the base of my thumb until I felt awake again.

Revenge is all I have left now that they’ve put him in the ground.

\* \* \*

I know who instigated the worst of the harassment that targeted my brother. Four rich boys with no better things to do. They call themselves “The Elites,” as if being born with a silver spoon in each of their mouths wasn’t enough to set them apart. There are whispers about them in hidden corners, places I find on the internet because I have nothing else to fill my life now that he’s gone and everything is different.

Grabbing Silas’s laptop, I flip it open, put in his password—Brenna224—and look at what I haven’t dared to admit to myself existed before now: every filthy thing they said to make him put a rope around his neck and end his life.

In the chat logs, I find their names.

Cole Masterson. Lukas Dupont. Tanner Connally. Blake Lee.



Again, in the emails and comments, the social media messages and viral movement.

Cole Masterson. Lukas Dupont. Tanner Connally. Blake Lee.

Even where they aren't there, the influence is clear. It's written all over the friends who do their dirty work, the sources in the posts that tear him down, the text messages with coy not-quite-death threats hoping he'll jump to his death or die in a fire. The world would be better off without him, they say, and they convinced him it was true. I hate them more with each passing breath.

Cole Masterson. Lukas Dupont. Tanner Connally. Blake Lee.

Around me, life somehow goes on. My cousins squeal as they poke and pinch each other, playing a merry game of tag that nearly knocks over the dinner table. Cheryl scolds them; my mother watches them with pain in her eyes. I know she sees innocence in the little boys playing around her feet, and is remembering my brother as he was as a child.

But I can't remember him that way.

The only way I can see him is how he looked as Wally drove him to Connecticut for a week of orientation at Coleridge: happy, alive, and looking forward to something.

My father's fists couldn't knock the hope out of Silas, but those rich boys did it with their words. They didn't lay a hand on him, because they didn't have to—once they tore him down, they knew he'd end his own life.

How else could they have seen the messages taunting him, encouraging him to commit suicide, and done nothing? When they thought a girl was assaulted they unleashed the hounds of hell, but the instant it became clear the so-called perpetrator was becoming a victim, they were silent. They sat back. They watched. No doubt they enjoyed it. People like them always do.

The Elites killed my brother.

For that I'll make them pay.

11It continues...