



# In All My Dreams

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**Category:** Horror

**Description:** Georgia Harris was eight years old when her mother tried to kill her.

For twenty years she's been haunted by one question...Why?

Why would a mother want to erase her only child from this world?

It's been nearly a decade since Georgia walked the haunted halls of her childhood home—vowing to hold onto the one promise she made herself.

A promise to never return.

Until her father falls ill, and Crane Manor comes calling—and she can't refuse the summons.

Not when there's a chance to see him again. Ian Foster, the boy who stole her heart and destroyed it.

But Georgia has secrets of her own, and she'll stop at nothing to keep

**Total Pages (Source):** 33

# Page 1

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When I was eight years old, my mother tried to kill me.

For twenty years, I've wondered why.

What did I do wrong?

What caused her to hate me so much to want me, her only child, erased from this world?

What would have happened if she hadn't drunk the poisoned lemonade—of her own making—out of the yellow cup with white daisies printed on it that had always belonged to me?

Not a day has gone by that I haven't watched my dull gray-blue eyes and chestnut-brown hair staring back at me in the mirror as I asked myself these questions.

Her eyes. Her hair.

The only piece of my father that stares back at me is a splash of soft freckles that graces my features. My father always said that they were like the constellations in the sky and that these were our very own versions of the Big Dipper and Little Dipper. That we would always be together, shining brightly side by side.

At least, he used to say that...until the day my mother ruined everything and overturned our entire world with a heartless act of malevolence.

We weren't the same after that. Nothing was ever the same again.

I spent the rest of my childhood surrounded by ghosts. Walking the halls of the Crane Manor, a large manor house my father inherited from his father years before I was born. When it was just him and mother, surrounded in wedded bliss.

Did my birth take that magic away from them?

Did I become nothing more than an afterthought? Is that why my mother thought it would be best for me to just disappear from this world?

These are questions that have haunted my every waking thought, and followed me into every nightmare.

I try my best to remember the happy moments we shared as mother and daughter.

Because I know she loved me; I know it.

She used to read me stories before bedtime. Every night, we would pick a different book, a different genre—because Mom said I needed to be a well-rounded reader if I ever wanted to write novels of my own one day, like her.

My favorites were always the stories that made things go bump in the night. The ones that let your imagination run wild...making you second guess every noise in the house.

Is there a person in the hallway coming to murder me, or is that loud creak of the floorboard just Horton, our orange tabby cat, chasing away another mouse?

Is that a tree branch scraping the outside of the house, or is it a sharp-clawed monster coming to steal me away from my parents in the dead of night?

You know, the stories that make you feel like there were eyes on you while you were

tucked in tightly into the pink-tufted bedspread, waiting with bated breath for something sinister to grab you by your uncovered feet to drag you under the bed.

Those were always my favorite. Not because I loved the dark and scary things, but because most nights, Mom would let me sneak into bed with her. She would hold me close all night long, keeping me safe in the embrace of her arms. Waking up and inhaling the scent of that White Diamonds perfume she always wore while being snuggled in tightly between her and Dad—those were the best nights.

My favorite nights.

Until it was all ripped away from me—from us. Leaving a hole of nothingness and darkness where my heart was supposed to be.

Instead of being wrapped in my mother's arms, I was being wrapped in the yellow wool throw blanket that belonged on the back of the couch. The same one we laid down in the yard under the weeping willow tree to have our family picnic on.

One moment I was sitting across from my parents, having an impromptu picnic breakfast with them because Dad had called off work and insisted on joining us for the day.

A real family breakfast, he called it.

Not the rush of workboots and waffles being tossed back and forth as they popped out of the toaster oven.

The next thing I knew, I was being rushed back into Crane Manor, my childhood home, by a policeman that I didn't know, while being chased by the screams of my father.

“No, no, no, Caroline. Why—how could you do this to her? To us!” my father yelled in agony over and over while clinging to the limp body of my mother.

I think part of me knew that it would be the last time I laid eyes on my mother. Each small detail of her etched into that integral part of the brain that holds onto all our dearest memories. I couldn’t tear my gaze away from her as the police officer rushed me into the house, embraced in the yellow blanket and smothered by the smell of the cigar smoke that clung tightly to his uniform.

I remember the way her hand lay lifeless next to the overturned lemonade pitcher, the way her pale skin looked ghostly against the wispy branches of the willow tree that hung low to the ground. The white nightgown she always wore made her look like a princess stuck under a spell, waiting for the handsome prince to come wake her up. The way her dark hair fanned around her like a mermaid drying off in the sun after a long day at sea.

I wanted to remember her like that, looking like one of the characters in the fairytales she read to me as she stroked my hair and placed swift kisses on my cheeks when I started falling asleep.

That was the version of her I loved most.

The version of us I loved most.

The one I wanted to visit in all my dreams, since I wouldn’t have her in any real tangible way any longer.

Instead, she decided to bring one of the scary stories to life—by standing at the end of my bed in that same white lacy nightgown. The white foam still spilling out of her mouth while the blood dripped out of her nose as she stood there, night after night.

Reaching for me.

Watching me.

Haunting me.

Waiting for me to join her.

I knew the minute I turned eighteen that I needed to run from that place. I needed to escape while I still had some fraction of sanity left.

Once I left, I vowed I would never go back there. A vow that rooted into my soul and bones. A vow that nearly destroyed me, knowing I would likely never lay eyes on my father again.

Not that he gave me many reasons to want to.

The hardest part, the part that felt like I was physically ripping my body in two, was I would never see the boy who grew up alongside me, Ian Foster.

The only thing that tied my heart to Crane Manor was Ian. I knew leaving meant abandoning half of myself here—rotting underneath the crown molding and pretending like paint and plaster could fix it all.

Leaving Crane Manor meant I would never skip rocks on the lake with Ian. I'd never see him flashing me that crooked smile that was just a bit too big for his face, or brushing the tears away after a terrible nightmare of my mother. The kind where I would wake up screaming and bury myself into the safety of Ian's arms—who used to sneak up the trellis and into my window every night from the night I turned nine.

I left in the middle of the night, right after I turned eighteen, with my acceptance

letter into UCLA in my hand and two duffle bags slung over my shoulder. That's how I wanted it to be. A Band-Aid being ripped off, leaving only the tattered shards of my heart behind and a note for Ian on my bedside table. A note telling him to come find me when he was ready to let go of the ghosts of Crane Manor. I was okay with leaving that note and not saying a real goodbye...because I knew one day he'd be ready to leave our cursed past behind us and build a future together. A future where we could finally lay our dead to rest, and leave them there.

I promised myself I would never return to that haunted place. The place that only brought pain and misery while being trapped inside of its dark halls filled with the ghosts of my past. I believed that promise with every breath.

Or at least I thought I did, until I got that dreaded phone call from the manor's housekeeper, Mrs. Foster. I stupidly kept the same cell phone number and this morbid hope that Ian or my father might use it one day.

This wasn't the call I was expecting, one I truly wished I could've ignored.

My father was sick, and I was needed back at Crane Manor.

I was needed back home.

It was time to face the demons of my past.

## Page 2

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1

Georgia

Now

“ A uden, honey! You need to hurry up, or I’m getting in the Jeep and leaving without you!” I yell for what feels like the hundredth time. Stress and uneasiness have filled my veins ever since I got the call from Mrs. Foster over two weeks ago that my father was sick.

Thank goodness this unwanted trip lined up perfectly with Auden’s spring break. I can’t imagine they’d fail anyone in kindergarten, but it’s a chance I was glad I didn’t have to take.

I would never actually leave her here in California, but I wish so much that she didn’t have to go with me. I wish I had made at least one trustworthy friend in the last five years. But the only friends and family I have are the ones I’ve been trying to hide her from.

Nobody of importance knows my daughter exists, but they will soon enough.

The thought makes me nauseated and dizzy enough to make me reach out and grab the countertop for balance, placing my forehead onto the cool marble.

Deep breath in, Georgie girl.



Mom used to say that to me and rub my back with a featherlike touch when I was upset about something. And even though I try not to think of her often, whenever I'm stressed, I hear her whispering it in my ear and feel the phantom touch on my back.

She's the one ghost I've never been able to escape.

"I'm coming, Mama! Don't leave without me!" Auden shouts back from the small hallway. I straighten myself up and smile brightly as she appears in the doorway. I can't help the small chuckle that escapes my lips when I see her dragging her bright pink suitcase behind her and trying to shoulder Horton's cat carrier while he yowls in protest.

"Oh, Horton, hush! We are going to visit Mama's giant house, and you'll have lots of mice to go chase around like you used to when you lived there as a tiny baby kitty," Auden tells him excitedly.

I don't have the heart to tell her this Horton is not the same cat as the Horton I grew up with. My Horton passed away of old age when I was seventeen. The day I moved into my first apartment in Los Angeles, I walked down to the local shelter and found this sweet orange tabby cat that needed a home, and I knew I needed him. Naming him Horton might have been a bit morbid, but every time I saw him trotting his way through the tiny apartment, I couldn't help but feel like this Horton was my Horton reincarnated.

Five-year-olds have a skewed concept of time, so I've just let her believe both Hortons are one and the same. I think she likes the idea of having something from my childhood around since I've refused to tell her anything real. My daughter doesn't need to know the dark secrets of my past. She doesn't need to be haunted by them the way I've been since the day my mother tried to kill me.

"Okay, let's load these into the car and get on the road! Our plane is going to fly

away without us if we don't get a move on," I tell Auden while I grab both her suitcase and Horton and place a gentle kiss on her forehead, earning me an impressive eye roll from my sweet, but sassy, child.

My bag is already loaded. I packed light because I have no intention of being in that place for longer than a week. I told Mrs. Foster exactly that, and I could feel her disappointment through the strained silence over the phone.

If I had it my way, Auden wouldn't even know that Crane Manor existed. But the curious side of my daughter went snooping under my bed a few months ago and found my box. The only box I've kept from my life before. One that contains photos that Ian, Irene, and I took all around Crane Manor when Mrs. Foster got us all cameras one Christmas. Old cards from my parents from birthdays long past. My diary I kept as a child, before . I left the diary from after sitting between my mattress and box spring back at Crane Manor. I didn't need written proof of what happened at night once all the lights were out...

Those images of Mother still haunt me to this day.

"Mama," Auden says quietly as I help her into the Jeep and into her booster seat. "What if they don't like me?"

I look into those beautiful hazel eyes of hers, the ones that look so much like her father's. I told him once his eyes were like my own personal galaxy, and as long as I could stare into them whenever I wanted, I could survive anything.

Auden is now that galaxy. The one my entire soul is tied to, orbiting around her every breath, and gravitating toward her every move.

I hold her little face in my hands and kiss both of her cheeks, admiring the splash of freckles she inherited from me. "Honey, the moment they meet you, they will

absolutely adore you. I promise you that with my whole heart, okay?"

She smiles that smile that she reserves for me, the one that's full of trust and love that only a child could muster up. "Okay, Mama. I believe you. Can we go now? I'm ready to pick out my airplane snacks!"

"Are you more excited to go on an airplane for the first time or raid the snack shop?" I ask with a knowing smile as I get behind the wheel of the Jeep and start the ignition.

I look into the rearview mirror and watch her contemplate my question, her face in deep thinking mode as she taps her fingers against her chin.

"Why can't it be both?"

I laugh loudly as I pull out of the apartment complex. "You got me there, kid. We can be equally excited for both."

"I'm most excited to meet my grandpa, though," she says quietly to Horton, who is in his carrier next to her seat.

My heart constricts, and I gnaw at my bottom lip the entire drive to the airport.

Going home, facing him, seeing my father again...it all seemed like the worst idea in the world. A haunted past I escaped and one I would never expose my daughter to.

I was okay with keeping Auden a secret, even if that meant I would never see the two men I loved most in my life ever again. I was safer without them, happier even.

I still believe it with every breath.

## Page 3

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2

Georgia

Now

The flight from Los Angeles to Dallas is roughly three hours. Auden stared out the window for about a half hour before she fell asleep on me. Now, we are in the rental car doing the final two-hour trek of this journey. Auden is asleep again in the back seat. She must have stayed up all night due to excitement.

At least on the flight, I was able to catch up on work and even get ahead of schedule so that I wasn't trying to work and keep Auden in sight at all times while we are at the manor.

Being a journalist in the hustle and bustle life of LA pays the bills, but the dream is still to write full time as a fiction author. So far, my manuscript has sat untouched for years, while the celebrity spotted articles and whatever else gets thrown my way get written and submitted five times a day.

It's a far cry from where I want to be, but it's enough for now. Plus, being able to work from home has had its many benefits. I'm able to walk Auden to and from school, which is conveniently down the road from our apartment. I have time to run whatever errands I have for the day and still make it home in time to get a few articles submitted and make sure Auden has a healthy dinner and a bedtime story every night. As far as being a single mom goes, I feel damn lucky to have the life we have.

I'm terrified it's all about to implode the moment my past meets my present in just a couple short hours. I keep looking back at Auden in the rearview mirror, worry and uneasiness still plaguing my every breath. Every mile marker we pass adds another knot of anxiety in my gut.

I don't miss home, but I've missed Texas. The drive is full of bluebonnets and blooming wildflowers of every color. Bright green trees looking their best in the peak of spring, with farms and livestock on both sides of the road. Traffic is nonexistent here once we get out of Dallas. Nothing like the stop-and-go traffic in California.

The air is cleaner here, despite the blast of humidity that makes my face flush and Auden's dark hair frizz much like my own. I rolled my window down the moment we hit the backroads toward home .

A home I despise, and with it, a father I no longer recognize.

As I drive, I can't stop my mind from wandering, coming up with insane confrontations I know will never happen.

I hate that I have this slight swell of hope in my chest that Ian is there. While on the rational side, I hope Ian is long gone; it would save me a few lies already ready to roll off my tongue.

But knowing him, he's probably still living at Crane Manor and working on the oil rigs alongside his father, those dreams of becoming a doctor shoved aside.

Will he recognize his own daughter?

A hateful, angry part of me doesn't want to tell him Auden is his. She inherited most of my looks. Her hair is dark like mine, and his , and she has my pointed nose and mouth, but those hazel eyes definitely aren't mine.

Is it wrong for me to lie? Tell him that I slept with someone after he broke my heart and left me? It's not like he came around again in the last five years. Maybe I've moved on and found someone new.

Someone who also held constellations in his eyes. Someone that loved every broken and damaged part of me the way Ian did, because he was just as fractured as I was on the inside.

We were supposed to have a life together. A future I thought we had for a small moment when he did come find me in California six years ago. Only to wake up alone after he promised me forever between tantalizing caresses and heated kisses. He took my heart when he decided to tear the rug out from under me by leaving in the middle of the night with nothing but a note on my bedside table.

A note that said he made a mistake, and this was his goodbye to me. That what we felt could never last because Crane Manor would always have a hold on him, and he wanted me to escape it and never look back.

I told myself for years I was okay with never going back home again, especially after he broke what was left of my already ruined heart. I felt that promise etch itself even deeper into my skin the minute I saw those two pink lines show up on that pregnancy test just a few weeks after Ian left me for good.

Every day, I wonder what life we could have had, though. Would he have been excited or scared shitless like I was? Would he have gone running back to Crane Manor, or would the news of being a father have finally freed him of that wicked place?

If I would have called him when I found out, would he be here with me now? Raising our daughter together, or would I be exactly where I am now, with two broken hearts to care for instead of just my own?

Auden thinks her dad was a soldier and that he was killed helping people. She had never really asked or brought him up, so the lie was effortless on my part when she asked about her father last year. Sometimes, I chastise myself for telling her he was dead, but I didn't want her growing up feeling like she was unwanted and unloved by him. I never planned on reaching out to Ian and telling him about her, so why break her heart more by letting her believe her father abandoned us by choice?

Abandoned me by choice—I never told him that she existed.

I've done everything in my power to make up for the fact that she only has me, and I think I'm doing an okay job. She won't start hating me until those preteen hormones kick in, so for now, I'm soaking up every moment of this version of her.

I feel my resolve strengthening as I pull into the wrought-iron gates of Crane Manor, listening to the gravel crunch under the tires. I swear the concrete lion statues on the pillars stare directly into my soul as I slowly drive past them, just like they did when I left this prison a decade ago.

I pull the car off to the side of the gravel path that leads to the house. I'm not ready to come face first with the ghosts that still live there. I thought I was strong enough to do this, but clearly I was wrong. My vision blurs as the tears threaten to break the dam I've built around my heart for the last ten years.

I don't want to be here.

I don't want my daughter to be here.

Deep breath in, Georgie girl.

I hear my mother's voice as the breeze hits my face, caressing my damp cheeks. I may never know why my mother did what she did. Why she let the demon's voice

ring louder than her daughter's, but I know in my heart that she loved me, fiercely.

The same way I love Auden.

I let the stress I've been carrying on my shoulders slowly seep out as I grip the steering wheel tighter. I put the car back in drive and pull back onto the path that leads home.

I'll keep Auden close to me this entire week. Where I go, she goes. That way nobody will corner her and ask questions she can't answer. I look back and watch as her lips part slightly while she sleeps, much like the way they did after a long nursing session in the middle of those endless nights with her as a newborn.

She's mine.

I won't give anyone a reason to lay claim to her. They don't get to take her from me the way Crane Manor has taken everyone I loved. They don't get to know the amazing little person she is. Ian most definitely doesn't need to know a single thing about her other than she's mine.

I'll keep her safe . . . protected.

I'll say my final goodbyes to my father and then leave as swiftly as I did the last time.

This time, I'll stay gone forever.



## Page 4

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3

Georgia

Now

“Hey, sweetheart, it’s time to wake up,” I tell Auden as I brush her dark hair away from her face. “We’re here.”

It takes a moment for her to come to. She stretches and yawns loudly before she opens those beautiful eyes of hers and stares right into my own. “Mama, did you say we are here?”

“Yes, sweet girl. We’re here. This is where I grew up,” I answer as I help her out of the car.

I turn with her, and we both stare up at Crane Manor. Home.

It’s a large plantation-style home. I’m not sure why my grandfather decided to call it a manor house. I don’t think it’s large enough to be considered into that category of real estate, but what do I know. Kids I went to school with, teachers, small shop owners in the town—to them and everyone else, it’s always been the manor house.

I suppose Crane Plantation doesn’t quite roll off the tongue the way Crane Manor does.

White wooden panels make up the entirety of the front, with long brown pillars to

support the balcony on the second story. When I was younger, the shutters were painted bright yellow, one of my mother's ideas. Now, they're painted black to match the roof tiles.

Seems fitting that the bright and happy colors are now completely erased—almost like my mother's death leached all the joy out of this house, not just my heart.

The front looks mostly the same; new patio furniture and plants adorn the wraparound porch. The main entrance door is still a deep burgundy red; that much hasn't changed.

"Wow, this place is a mansion!" Auden exclaims in awe. "I can't believe this used to be your house. I bet you got lost all the time trying to find the cookies at night!" She giggles and grabs my hand with her own, giving it a tight squeeze and tugging on it excitedly. "Can we go inside?"

"We sure can. Just let me get Horton out of the car first, okay?" I release her hand and watch as she runs toward the front steps of the house, my heart running right alongside her. Movement in one of the windows from the second story catches my eye.

My breath seizes in my throat when I see her .

No, no, no.

White nightgown still covered in dirt. Her face still hauntingly beautiful, even with the blood dripping out of her nose. She's pointing down at my daughter, her eyes wide with fright as she releases a silent scream.

I look toward Auden and notice the steps are wet, probably from Mrs. Foster watering the front garden.

“Wait, Auden! Be careful! The steps are—” I watch in mute horror as she slips on the first step and slams her forehead onto one higher up.

“ Auden! ” I scream hoarsely, running as fast as I can toward her.

She’s not moving.

The deep red door is thrown open as I’m mere feet away from her. “Don’t touch her! Don’t touch her! Georgia, don’t touch her! ”

I stop dead in my tracks when I hear my name.

That voice .

The tunnel vision I was stuck in evaporates as I come face to face with Ian. I open my mouth several times, but my brain can’t catch up while my heart is threatening to pound right through my sternum.

“Where did she hit?” Ian asks stoically, bending down and checking her pulse carefully. “Georgia, what did she hit?” he asks again, more urgently this time.

I gaze down at his hand, gripped around her small wrist, and then up at him. “Get away from her!” I yell, still hoarse but loudly, my voice finally returning, along with fear for my daughter, and anger at him. I quickly close the remaining distance between myself and Auden, kneeling protectively near her without touching her. Some rational part of me knows I shouldn’t touch her. She could have hurt her spine, and moving her could cause fatal consequences.

But all I want to do is scoop her up and run from this place as fast as I can. Run away from him.

I frantically look up into the second story.

She's gone .

She's always gone when I need her most.

“Hey, Georgie. Eyes on me,” Ian says in that same calming voice he used to use when I was in the throes of another night terror. Years later, the soothing sound of his voice still has the same effect on me.

The same nickname that only he and my mother ever called me.

Deep breath in, Georgie girl.

“She—she was running up the steps and tripped and hit her head,” I stutter out. “I think—I think she hit her forehead.”

“How long ago?”

“Not even ten seconds before you opened the door,” I answer, my eyes glued to my daughter's unmoving form.

Ian steps away, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “Hey. Foster here. I need an ambulance at Crane. Unconscious minor. Hit her head on the porch steps,” he says into the phone curtly. “About two minutes now, unresponsive. Pulse is strong and steady. Okay, see you in five.” He hangs up and puts his phone back in his pocket before walking over to Auden. “What's her name?” he asks me, his eyes never leaving her.

“Auden,” I croak out. “Her name is Auden.”

“Pretty name for a pretty girl,” he says as he checks her pulse again. “She looks just like you when you were her age.”

“She’s my whole world,” I tell him, wiping the trail of tears that are streaking down my cheeks. “Is she going to be okay?” I ask him as I sit on the step next to her. “Please tell me she’s going to be okay...”

Ian looks at me this time, his gaze unwavering as he holds my own. “I promise, Georgia. I won’t let this place take another person from you. We’ll make sure she’s okay.” His eyes still have the power to flay me wide open, making it impossible to look away. He chews on his bottom lip nervously, then clears his throat. Another one of his quirks I had forgotten about. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. I saw her fall while I was looking out the window, and instinct took over. I can’t tell you how many parents make injuries so much worse because they rush to aid the child, whether it’s picking them up to comfort them or moving them to get them into a car so they can take them to a hospital. It’s a natural reaction, but it can be dangerous.”

Before I can respond, the telltale noises of the ambulance pierce the quiet sky. Auden moves slightly next to me, moaning softly as she tries to sit up.

“Mama?”

“I’m here, honey. I’m right here.”

“It hurts,” she mumbles as the ambulance stops next to my car.

“I know, I know, baby. These nice doctors are going to make everything feel better. Just hold still for a moment longer,” I tell her, lying down on the wet step next to her so she can see me. “Eyes on me, Auden.” The phrase escapes from my mouth before I’m able to stop them. It’s something I’ve always said to her to calm her down during any moment of discomfort.

Someone places their hand on my shoulder softly. “Georgia, we need you to move so the medics can get her braced and onto the gurney,” Ian says gently, helping me up as I stand on wobbly legs. His arms tighten around me when my knees buckle, keeping me from falling like Auden.

I watch the paramedics wrap the t-spine brace carefully around her neck, then flip her tiny body and move her gently onto the gurney. My eyes scan her the moment I can see her fully, then widen when I see the gash at her hairline. It’s not pouring blood, but it’s bleeding. It looks like it might need stitches.

They quickly load her into the back of the van. The medic says something that makes her smile, and my heart nearly cracks in two. She’s being so calm. So brave. Auden is so much stronger than I was at her age. I follow her into the back and grab her hand, rubbing my thumb across her small knuckles as Ian steps in and sits next to me. I give him a strained smile before I turn my eyes back to Auden.

“How you feeling, little lady?” he asks her as soon as the doors are closed.

“My head hurts real bad,” she answers him. Her eyes move from mine to his, and I feel him stiffen slightly beside me.

I pretend not to notice.

There are lots of kids with golden hazel eyes.

If I don’t react to his reaction, maybe he’ll realize it’s just a coincidence. I feel his eyes locked on me, but I refuse to look away from Auden.

He clears his throat loudly. I continue to ignore him. “You took quite the fall. Your head might hurt for a little bit, but we’re going to make sure you’re as good as new by the time we get done with you,” he finally says.

I urge my body to stay still. Give him no reaction.

“What are they going to do to me?” Auden’s lower lip trembles. I know she’s terrified of the doctor because the last time she went, she had to get her shots for school. I clutch her hand tighter with my own.

“Well, first, they’ll get you checked into a room and clean up the small cut on your head. Don’t worry, it doesn’t look deep, so we should just be able to glue it. No needles allowed near that face. Then they’ll take you to get a head scan, just to make sure everything is okay in that big brain of yours. Afterward, you’ll get to go home with your mom, and hopefully, they’ll prescribe lots of rest and ice cream.” Ian’s voice is calm but playful as he talks to her. The last time I heard him speak this way to someone, it was when we were about the same age as Auden.

And he was talking to Irene . . . his twin sister.

My best friend.

And she’s dead because of me.

Please, please, please. I silently beg whoever will listen.

Don’t let history repeat itself.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

4

Georgia

Five Years Old

“ Tag, you’re it, Georgia!” Irene screams loudly from behind me after slamming her flat palm onto my shoulder.

I turn, glaring at her before Ian comes running out from behind the willow fronds. I hate being it. I don’t run as fast as Irene, and I can’t hide as well as Ian does.

“I don’t want to play this game anymore,” I pout, crossing my hands over my blue overalls for dramatic effect. “I hate this stupid game!”

“Georgia Lynn Harris!” my mother calls from her seat near the lake, her finger beckoning me to her.

“Oh, you’re in trouble now, Georgie,” Irene snickers.

I roll my eyes at her and reluctantly follow my mother’s summons, dragging my white sneakers through the dirt as I get closer to the edge of the lake. “Yes, Mama?” My eyes refuse to meet hers, and I stare defeatedly down at my shoes.

“Come here, my littlest love,” she says calmly and pats her thigh at the same time. I go and sit on her lap, and she wraps her arms around me tightly, enveloping us both in the smell of her perfume. “You know what I’m about to say, don’t you?” she asks



with a smile.

I twirl my fingers around the locket she wears around her neck. “Yes, Mama,” I mutter quietly.

“So tell me what you did?”

I huff out a breath. “I got mad because Irene tagged me too hard and hurt me.”

“And?”

“And I was mean and didn’t need to yell at her?”

My mother laughs loudly, pushing her dark hair out of her face. Then, she dips her chin and places it on my shoulder. “Only five years old, and you’re already the smartest person I know.” She laughs. “Yes, you were rude, Georgia. But also, you chose the game today. You can’t get mad when you lose and say you hate it, okay?”

“Irene always tags me instead of Ian,” I pout. “It’s not fair. Ian’s never it!”

“Georgia.” My mother’s voice is suddenly stern again. “Ian was it three times already, Irene was it twice, and now it’s your turn. That means you need to stop whining about it, and play the game fairly. Or you go to your room and play alone for the rest of the day. You pick.”

I look over at Ian and Irene who are still trying to tag each other through the long hanging fronds of the willow tree. Both of them laughing and having fun. They are always having fun together.

“Mama, can I have a brother or sister one day?” I look up at my mother, and there’s a flash of pain across her face before she smiles brightly at me again.

“Maybe one day, little love. But right now, I want to give all my love to you and not share it. All my love belongs to you, my sweet girl.”

I stand and give her a kiss on her cheek, tasting the salt from the tear that was left there. “I love you, Mama. I’m going to go tag Irene back so hard!”

Her laughter follows me as I hunt down Irene, running into Ian instead.

“Here, Georgie, tag me!” Ian throws his arm out for me to tag, and I tap him gently. “What if we both go tag Irene?” he suggests, holding his hand out toward me.

“Don’t tell Irene, but I think I like you the best,” I whisper into his ear before I grab his hand, and we both laugh loudly as we go searching for his sister.

When we find her, she’s sitting on the side of the house crying and holding her leg.

Ian rushes to his sister’s side. “What happened, Ree?” His voice is full of panic as we watch Irene move her hand.

Her knee is covered in blood.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no! Ree, are you okay? I’ll go get help!” Ian shouts, running back the way we came.

“I was hiding from you guys, and I fell and hurt my knee on the stupid rocks!” Irene yells.

“Don’t say stupid,” I tell her, bending down to her level and getting a closer look at her knee. “It’s not that bad. My mom can clean it up and put a Band-Aid on it real fast.”

“Can you hold my hand until they come back? Please, Georgie?”

I sit down next to her and hold her hand tightly. “It’s going to be okay, Ree.”

Ian comes running back a few minutes later, his hand full of supplies that he drops at our feet. He pulls out a wet wipe and pats Irene’s knee gently, smiling at her. “I can fix this. I’ll fix this, Ree. Just hold on a few more seconds, and you’ll be good as new!”

We both watch as he finishes wiping the blood off of her knee, then holds up a handful of colorful Band-Aids.

“Georgia, what color should we give our patient?” Ian asks.

I bring my hand to my chin, thinking hard. “Maybe yellow so it matches Irene’s overalls?”

“I vote yes!” Irene yells excitedly. “Can you guys put bandages on your knees, too, so we can all match?”

The three of us look at each other and smile as we choose Band-Aids for ourselves.

“You guys are my best friends,” Ian says happily. “Promise we won’t ever leave each other? When we get older, we can all work together somewhere and live here at Crane?”

Irene and I both shake our heads yes.

“Pinky promise?” Ian asks, holding both his hands out to us.

The three of us wrap our pinkies together, squeezing tightly. “Promise,” we say in

unison.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

5

Georgia

Now

It's nearly 8:00 p.m. by the time Auden is discharged from the hospital. The front desk was kind enough to call a cab for us, so I'm waiting with her in the small, sterile-smelling entrance of the tiny hospital. I hold her close to me and caress her back softly as she plays on my phone.

Her scans came back normal, and Ian kept his promise of no needles. I haven't seen him in hours. He disappeared quickly after the ambulance dropped us off at the emergency entrance of the hospital.

I shouldn't want to see him.

But watching him jump to action the moment Auden was injured reminded me so much of the Ian I knew all those years ago—the one who always rushed in to fix me when I felt so broken.

I'm still reeling over everything that's happened since Auden fell. I haven't had a moment to breathe, let alone worry about Ian in the hours we've been here. I'm incredibly thankful she's okay.

Now that I'm able to process everything that's happened, I can't help but feel angry—and grateful—that he came storming back into my life like he had never left

and helped us during the chaos of today. The ER doctor laughed about the dramatics of it all, but he said it's always better to be safe and overreact than sorry for underreacting when it comes to head injuries and children.

Still, Ian shouldn't have this effect on me. This tug-of-war with my heart and head needs to stop. It's been six years. Whatever help he gave today doesn't negate the fact that he left me six years ago and never made an effort to come back.

I don't want him. I can't.

But I don't know if there will ever be a moment in this lifetime that I'm not entirely in love with him. And I know I'll never be loved again the way I was loved by him. The boy who saved my life in so many ways, while never letting his own light go out. We both endured so much loss in our young years. We both lost Irene, then only two years later, I lost my mother—and the version of my father I loved most. Ian was my best friend, my closest confidant. The one who I leaned on heavily on the hardest days. He was my rock in every way that mattered.

Seeing him again after six years, knowing that we share this beautiful, vibrant, amazing little girl...my head and my heart can't seem to get back on the same page.

A black car pulls up to the front and honks twice.

"Come on, Auden. Our ride is here," I tell her, helping her get to her feet and grabbing the small prescription bag the doctor left with us. Just some pain medicine to help relieve the headache she's guaranteed to have tomorrow.

"Are we finally going to the big mansion house?" she asks sleepily.

I chuckle softly as we make our way to the car. "Yes, we are finally going to the mansion. And you, my dear, need to watch your step this time!"

“I will take the stairs very, very slowly this time. I miss Horton too much when I’m away from him,” she mumbles.

My eyes go wide as I process her words. I open the back of the car and help her into the seat before I fit myself in right next to her.

I forgot about the damn cat.

“Don’t worry, G. I got the cat safe and sound into the house.”

The sound of Ian’s voice makes my head snap up. “What are you doing here?” I ask incredulously, my tone slightly angry. My heart starts doing that thing it does when I’m anywhere within five feet of this man, beating furiously against my chest bone. Clawing and biting its way out of my sternum, as if it’s trying to return itself to him.

“I figured you’d need a ride back home, and Maggie at the front desk called and told me you were ready to be picked. I think you might have forgotten that cabs don’t run here, and good luck getting an Uber in this tiny town,” he answers as he puts the car into drive and pulls away from the hospital. “Plus, I wanted to check on my new patient,” he says with a smile.

How do I know he’s smiling? Because I know this man better than I know myself, and I can hear the smile in his voice. It wasn’t always a romantic type of love with him; that came much later. First, he was my best friend, and we knew each other better than we knew ourselves.

“How are you feeling, Auden?” His voice is full of amusement as I catch his eyes in the rearview mirror. My body flushes all over.

“My head hurts a little bit, but I’m mostly hungry,” she tells him over the music coming from the game she’s playing on my phone. “The food at that place literally

sucked. So much.”

Ian and I both laugh, and we catch each other's gazes in the mirror again. That invisible string that anchors me to him pulls taut against my heart.

“What’s your favorite food?” Ian asks her as he turns left into town, instead of turning right toward the manor house. “There isn’t much open this late, but your mom and I used to love the pizza at Lucene’s.”

“Who’s Lucene?” Auden asks as she looks up from her game and out the window. Her face illuminates with all the street signs, making her eyes sparkle more than usual. Her freckles glow different colors from the old-school neon signs hanging in almost every shop we pass.

“I actually don’t know who Lucene is, but he makes good pizza. I promise.” Ian winks at her in the mirror as he pulls into the small parking lot behind Lucene’s Pizzeria. The parking lot is still paved with gravel, making the tires crunch loudly over them.

Ian gets out quickly and comes to my side of the car, opening the door for us. He offers me his hand, but I pointedly refuse it as I turn and help Auden out.

“One of these days, you’re going to have to forgive me,” he whispers in my ear as we head inside.

“Forgive you for what?” I snap back over the table once we are seated. The booths are still bright red, and the table is slightly sticky, as they always were when we were kids.

“For making the worst mistake of my life by leaving you.”



Our eyes meet across the table, the silence between us screaming louder than words.

“Mama, can I have some money so I can play one of the games?” Auden asks, her eyes lit up with hope as she points to the arcade games that are still nestled in the corner.

“Here, take this and go get some quarters,” Ian places a five-dollar bill on the table and starts to slide it our way, stopping halfway when he sees the expression on my face. “If that’s okay with your mom?”

I take a deep breath and force a smile onto my face. “Of course that’s okay. It’s perfectly okay after the crazy day we’ve had. You were so, so brave at the hospital today, and I’m so proud of you.” I place a kiss on her forehead and reach out to grab the bill from Ian. Our fingers brush, electricity pulsing up my arm and straight into my soul. I wonder if he feels it, too, as I pull away quickly. “Go win Horton something fluffy,” I tell her, earning a megawatt smile in return as she walks carefully toward the games.

“She’s a tough kid,” Ian says fondly. “Just like her mom, or maybe like her dad?”

I take another deep breath before turning back toward him. His eyes are on Auden as she plays the claw machine behind me. He’s changed over the last six years. His eyes still hold my galaxy in them, but they seem sad, distant in a way they weren’t before. His dark hair is longer than it was, curling slightly at the nape of his neck, grazing the top of his ears. He’s grown up.

This isn’t the same boy who stole my heart all those years ago.

This version of him is foreign to me, even if my heart still beats like it knows exactly who he is.

There's a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips when he looks back at me, like he's waiting for me to say something.

"What?" I ask nervously, tucking a stray piece of hair behind my ear and glancing back at Auden. She's still at the claw machine with a look of fierce determination on her face.

"Is her dad the brave one, or did she get everything from you?" he asks again.

"He's not in the picture," I answered quickly. He flashes me a look of confusion, so I continue with the lie. Or at least the closest truth I can come up with. "It was a one-night stand. He never wanted anything to do with me, or her."

"He's a fucking idiot, Georgia."

This time I laugh loudly. I can't help myself as the stress of the day and turn of events that led me here hits. Sitting in this sticky booth with the man I'm in love with, listening to him call himself an idiot, without knowing he's talking about himself.

Because I'm too selfish of a person to forgive him and give Auden the father she deserves.

All because he left me to go live with our ghosts instead of staying with me and healing together. Leaving this town was the best decision I ever made, and I'll be damned if I let Ian's charm and gorgeous smile make me think twice.

"Look, Ian. I appreciate everything you've done for us today. I honestly don't know what I would have done if you didn't come running out of the manor when you did." I brush my hand over my face, breathing deeply as my heart shatters again with the next lie I must tell him. "But I have no interest in being here longer than I have to. I'm here to check on my father and to leave as quickly as I came. I'm not here to

rekindle anything. You left me. You made that choice for us both. It's been six years, and I still haven't forgiven you for ripping my heart out and burying it with our dead. I just want to do what I came here for so I can leave and never look back. Okay?"

He leans back and brushes his hand through his hair, making it even more unruly and himself more attractive. "Yeah, okay. I get it. But can I just say one thing?" I nod at him, secretly hoping he never stops talking because the sound of his voice feels like home. "I'll never forgive myself for leaving you the way I did. There's no excuse, and any type of excuse I give will just sound like bullshit. But I never stopped loving you, Georgia. There hasn't been a single day that's gone by that I didn't want to pick up the phone and call you. Hear your voice, your laugh. Hell, I even fantasized about showing up at your doorstep, wishing you could scream and yell at me for being a piece of shit person. Anything to hear your voice again."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I loved you too much to drag you back into this," he says with a strained smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Drag me back into what? You didn't make my father ill, did you?" He shakes his head. "I didn't think so. This trip back has nothing to do with you, so it's not like you 'dragged' me back into anything."

He sighs loudly, drumming his fingers against the table. "Do you still have nightmares? Remember the ones you used to get, after your mother died?"

The switch in conversation gives me whiplash.

I look back at Auden, a cold brush of dread seeping into my spine. My hands twist in knots on the table in front of me. "Yes," I whisper. "I remember them. Why?"

How could I forget? The image of my mother standing at the end of my bed in her white nightgown. Blood dripping out of her nose and foam oozing from her mouth—identical to the last time I saw her. Even if I had managed to forget about them, seeing her in the window earlier today would have brought back every forgotten, sleepless, horrifying night.

Ian reaches across the table, places his hand on mine, and squeezes gently, dragging my attention from my daughter to him. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up. I just wondered if leaving Crane made them stop. If you had finally escaped her.”

My hands clutch Ian’s harder, like a lifeline only he can provide as I drown in the memories of my childhood nightmares.

“They stopped the day I walked out of those gates years ago.”

Deep breath in, Georgie girl.

Nobody else has ever seen her.

Nobody ever truly believed me when I told them my mother was still walking the halls of Crane Manor, haunting me night after night until I finally left. I thought I was done seeing her, until she showed herself to me the moment I stepped out of the car today. Back on Crane soil.

“Mommy, look what I won for Horton!” Auden comes running back over to the table with a stuffed blue bunny. The smile on her face distracts from the goose-egg-sized bump on her forehead.

I clear my throat and shake Ian’s hand off before she sees it. “He’s going to love that, Auden.” I beam at her brightly, pretending that my every breath isn’t trembling with fear as I pull her into my lap.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

6

Georgia

Now

I an parks the car at the back of the house and shuts it off, enveloping the small space in complete silence as we both look up at Crane Manor.

“I forgot how dark this place gets at night,” I say quietly, looking back to see if Auden is still asleep. She fell asleep on the short drive here, and I already dread carrying her up the stairs and to my childhood bedroom.

“I’m sure your dad is still up if you want to go say hello.” Ian’s voice is a low murmur between us.

Well, call me daughter of the year because I completely forgot about him in the hours between arriving here and now.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and turn toward Ian. “When Mrs. Foster called, she didn’t tell me exactly what was wrong with him. She just said he was sick and that I needed to come home as soon as possible. Do you know what’s going on with him?”

Ian lets out a small chuckle, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel softly. Another one of those habits I had forgotten about. Seeing those fingers dancing the way they used to dance across my skin...they remind me of when we were us .

“My mother still has quite a flair for dramatics, if you can’t tell. Your dad fell ill a few weeks ago. We’re still waiting on test results, but as of now, we aren’t sure what’s caused his decline.”

“Decline? What do you mean?”

He shifts his body so he’s leaning against the car door, looking right at me. “Mom found him unconscious at the bottom of the stairs. He says he got hit with a case of vertigo and lost his balance. Of course, we rushed him to the hospital and ran all the tests. Nothing major has stood out, but his heart rate has been abnormal. Fever, chills, abdominal pain, overall weakness throughout his body. He’s been having trouble keeping food and liquids down, but over the last few days, his strength has slowly started to return. Yesterday he was able to pull himself up in bed and feed himself a bowl of oatmeal. I think part of it might be that he knew you were coming home,” he says with a small smile.

“You seem to know a lot about his overall well-being.”

Ian laughs quietly again. That crooked smile of his still makes me want to flash my own at him. “Well, I’d hope I know all about everything going on with him.”

I cock an eyebrow at him. “And what makes you so important in all this?”

His jaw flexes as he brushes his unruly hair out of his eyes. “I’m the doctor in charge of his care,” he answers.

Tears fill my eyes, threatening to spill out as I bring both of my hands to my face, covering my mouth in surprise.

Ian shifts forward, the leather seat creaking in protest. Concern flashes over his face as he turns the overhead light on above us. “What’s wrong? What did I say,

Georgia?” His hands reach toward me, but they stop midair, blocked by that invisible barrier I’ve created between the two of us.

I shake my head, trying to clear all these emotions that have hit so fiercely and suddenly. “Nothing.” I clear my throat and wipe away the stray tear that’s slipped down my cheek. “Nothing. I’m just so proud of you. You did it, Ian. You became a doctor like you always dreamed of. After everything that this world has taken from us, you still found a way to make something of yourself. I—I’m just so proud of you.”

He shifts in the seat again, leaning closer to me. “I couldn’t have done it without the image of mini-you kicking my ass any time I wanted to quit.” He looks back at Auden, studying her sleeping features. I swear I can see him pulling at the threads that tie all my lies together. “You and Irene, I mean. The ghosts of you both kept me going. Auden looks like you, but she reminds me of Irene. Don’t you think? That curious spunk of hers and that fearless heart.”

Before I can respond, Auden stirs and sits up in the back seat. “Can we go inside now? I miss Horton,” she says as she yawns loudly, then promptly lies back down. This child has always been able to fall asleep anywhere.

“Come on, I’ll help you carry her upstairs.” Ian opens his door and steps into the night. I follow suit moments later. “If that’s okay?” he asks hesitantly as I meet him on the other side of the car. “I know where we stand, but I’m here for you. And for her, too, whatever you both need. You’re still my best friend, after all.”

The wink he gives me shouldn't make my heart do somersaults in my chest.

I open the door to the back seat with a nod of approval. I don’t stop him when he reaches in after a moment to pick up Auden.

He carries her effortlessly, navigating the barely lit house, the dark halls casting shadows in every direction. While he carries her, I catch myself looking toward all the windows, my pace slowing, waiting to catch a glimpse of her again. The winding staircase swallows them both up like an endless maw as I hurry to catch up to them.

Nothing is waiting for me in the shadows, at least not at this moment, and I breathe a sigh of relief once we reach the bedroom.

Everything about this room feels familiar in a way I wasn't expecting it to. The bedroom is illuminated by the nearly full moon shining brightly through the balcony doors and the small light next to the bed. Mrs. Foster must have cleaned in here because the room doesn't smell as though it's been closed for years. The white, wrought-iron bed frame stands out in the darkness, the pink duvet from my childhood still in pristine condition. It still smells fresh and clean as I turn down the covers for Ian so he can put Auden down.

I carefully remove her shoes and tuck her in tightly, kissing her good night and whispering that I love her. I nearly jump out of my skin when Horton hops onto the bed and cuddles right next to her. "Glad you made yourself at home, pest." I chuckle as I pet his head softly.

Turning to leave, I catch a glimpse of something in the corner. Or is it someone? I quickly turn back toward the bed and turn on the night-light sitting on the nightstand. Stars of all colors appear on the ceiling above me, lighting the room up and chasing all the monsters away, the way it did when I was little. Scanning the room, there is nothing but my old dollhouse and various furniture waiting in the shadows. I brush Auden's dark hair back from her face, giving her one more kiss before I meet Ian in the hallway.

I leave the door cracked slightly so I can hear her from the guest room across the hall. Ian leans against the doorframe, his hands hidden away in his pockets as he looks



down at the floor. His head shoots up, and our eyes meet, that electric tether between us making my heart feel as though I'm being shocked by an exposed wire.

"You didn't have to wait for me. I know how to find the guest room just fine." My voice cracks at him like a whip that I instantly regret.

I'm still not sure how to talk to him. On one hand, I'm angry at him for our past; on the other, I've missed him more than I've ever missed anything in this world. He's like a phantom limb that I didn't realize was missing until I saw him again.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound so snappy. Thank you for helping me with Auden tonight."

He steps away from the wall, straightening himself before he meets me in the middle of the narrow hall. Auden's door is cracked open behind me, the night-light casting rays of color over Ian. My father's room is at the end of the hall, the door closed firmly in place as I gaze over at it. The only other light in the room besides the flashes from the night-light comes from the electric sconces that are lit through the house. When I was a kid, they held candles, but my father must have updated them over the last few years. I don't miss the way the candles used to flicker throughout the manor at night, casting their eerie glow as my eyes darted from corner to corner, just waiting for something to reach out and take me into the darkness forever.

"Actually," Ian says, his voice low between us. "You're not staying in the guest room. My mom made up that room for you." He points at the door next to Auden's.

"My mom's office?" My voice cracks as I wrap my arms tight around me. "You guys want me to sleep in there?"

I take a step away from the door in question. Her office was the one place I was never allowed to go. She would shut herself in there for hours, days, even. Writing, reading,

doing whatever it was that she did when she needed a break from being a wife and mother. It was the forbidden fruit of my childhood. Always within reach, just one door away, and yet I wasn't allowed to go in there. The first time I did...her ghost appeared to scare me away and hasn't stopped haunting me since. That was the first night I asked Ian to sleep in my room with me, the beginning of our sordid history.

"I can't go back in there, Ian." My heart starts pounding rapidly in my chest, the panic seizing my body, a phantom fist squeezing all the air out of my lungs as my eyes close involuntarily. I haven't had an anxiety attack in years, nearly six years to be exact. The last one I had was when I stared down at that positive test weeks after Ian left.

"Shit, of course you can't. I'm sorry, I didn't even think of that." He steps closer to me.

My eyes fly open when I feel his hand brush against my cheek. Our eyes lock on each other while my rapid breathing hangs heavily between us.

"Shh, deep breath." Ian's hands touch my shoulders gently. "Breathe, Georgie, breathe."

His presence chips slowly away at the terror as I force my lungs to work again. Instead of pushing him away like my brain is urging me to, I wrap my arms around him, crushing myself into his chest. I inhale deeply, letting the familiarity of our embrace ground me.

I don't know how long we stand there, minutes—hours, perhaps. Wrapped together like the last six years never happened.

The grandfather clock in the dining room beneath us strikes midnight, the chime echoing loudly through the house.

Ian pulls away first. The warmth of him dissipates quickly, and the chill of the manor creeps back into my bones. “Come on, you can take the guest room, and I’ll sleep in there.” He gestures toward my mother’s office. We both eye the forbidden door. I can’t tell if it’s that invisible string between us, or the mutual fear of her office, but neither of us make a move toward our rooms.

“I’ll just go sleep with Auden; you take your room,” I finally say.

“You and her are both going to fit on that twin-size bed?”

“The two of us used to manage just fine if I remember correctly,” I joke back without thinking.

Both of us shift awkwardly. I look up at him, and all sense leaves my body before my brain can catch back up. The meaning in his gaze is fighting against my own as we both remember how things used to be between us. How easy it was to be together, as friends, as two broken humans in love. As each other's safety net in this dark, evil world.

Ian blows out a deep breath before he finally tears his eyes away from the door. “Will you punch me in the face if I suggest a cease-fire?” he asks with a playful tone.

“I didn’t realize we were at war,” I say, cocking my eyebrow up at him. “But what would this cease-fire entail?”

His hand reaches out, hovering in the empty space between us. “Trust me?” he asks softly, hope shining brightly from his eyes.

I don’t think twice before placing my hand in his before he leads us both into the guest room, leaving the door cracked open behind us.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

7

Georgia

Now

When I open my eyes the next morning, the first thing I notice is that the door to the guest room is shut. The second thing I notice is that the couch across from the bed is vacant. Ian slept there last night, insisting that I take the bed.

The bed that smelled like him, that sandalwood and citrus mix that's always clung to his skin. I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy wrapping myself in his blankets, wishing that they were his arms around me instead. But every time I woke in the middle of the night, he was there. Sleeping soundly on the couch. His hair wild and messy, splayed across his pillow, his lips parted slightly as he breathed silently.

The room feels like a hollow shell without him, much like my own heart has every second of every day that he's been out of my life. I don't trust him not to hurt me again, but I also don't know how to not trust him. He's always kept me safe in this place, like he did last night. Even from across the room, I felt safer with him here with me.

Everything about him still sets fire to my soul, even if I know this truce can't last between us. I won't change my mind about leaving here for good, and how can I ask him to leave after he's made a life for himself here?

Whatever this is between us . . . it won't end well.

I tug the navy blue duvet off of myself and notice there's a note sitting on the small circular table next to the bed. My heart ceases to beat as my fingers brush against the folded cardstock paper.

Not again. He can't have left again.

I open the letter with shaky hands . . .

G,

Auden woke up and said Horton wanted blueberry pancakes. You looked too perfect to wake. Meet us downstairs when you're ready.

Love always,

Ian

And Auden, and Horton

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding and chuckle to myself. Auden obviously helped write this note since it's her handwriting that signed her and Horton's name. I place the note back on the table and half-ass make the bed before heading into the small bathroom to get ready for the day.

Goals for today include fetching a hot cup of much-needed coffee, finding Auden, saying hello to my father, and figuring out what exactly he needs so I can get Auden, Horton, and myself out of this place as soon as I can.

"G eorgia, my dear!" Mrs. Foster greets me loudly as I walk into the kitchen. "You've grown so much! Look at how beautiful you are, a spitting image of your mother in that dress." She sets the knife down that she was using to chop a pile of

vegetables, her heels clicking loudly as she crosses the checked tiled floor. She wipes her hands on her white apron before embracing me in a hug.

I look down at myself. My yellow maxi-dress and sandals do sort of remind me of my mother, I guess. “Good morning, Mrs. Foster. You’re too sweet. It’s so nice to see you again.” I pull out of her grip and see that she has tears in her green eyes, accompanied by that same crooked smile Ian has. Her thick brown hair is pulled up into a bun, gray streaks pulled taut against her head. She’s only about an inch shorter than I am now, but she’s around thirty pounds heavier than me. Her motherly hug is much needed after such a tremendously stressful journey to get back here.

“Oh no, I don’t want to hear any of that ‘Mrs. Foster’ nonsense. You’re a grown woman now, Georgia, with a daughter of your own if the rumors are true! You call me Lydia from now on,” she chastises me playfully. “Do you want sugar with your coffee? Ian said you might prefer that strange coconut creamer he picked up from the store the other day,” she continues as she moseys around the large kitchen, digging through cabinets and drawers to get everything she needs to make a new pot.

I sit on one of the tufted gray barstools, trying to settle the knots in my stomach that have formed. Ian remembered that I like the coconut creamer, and my heart is trying to do traitorous things to my brain with that knowledge.

“Your father is up and moving around on his own today,” she muses as the coffee percolates loudly, echoing off the white tiled walls and marble countertops. “Have you seen him yet?”

“No, not yet. I was hoping to armor up with coffee before I went to fetch Auden. She’s very excited to meet him,” I tell her as I admire how much this kitchen hasn’t changed. Mother loved everything bright and airy. The whole house is decorated with accents of white, navy blue, and yellow. Every room is tactfully decorated, with sheer curtains to let the natural light shine through. The kitchen is no different. The sink has

a large bay window that overlooks the lake. I can see the willow tree branches swaying with the breeze.

The same willow tree my mother took her last breath under. When she failed at murdering me.

The same lake my best friend died in. When she drowned because of me.

These scenes should scare me away, but the morbid part of me wants nothing more than to go visit their gravesites to pay my respects.

Mrs. Foster hands me a coffee mug with black and white polka dots decorated on it. I take it graciously and pour myself some of the coconut creamer, watching as the black coffee and creamer swirl together in harmony before taking my first sip. Something tastes off, and I swallow hastily before Mrs. Foster can see the disgust on my face. “Thank you for the coffee, Mrs—Lydia.” Her name feels weird on my tongue, almost distasteful like the coffee I just forced down. I subtly turn the creamer carton in circles until I find the expiration date; it’s definitely not expired. I remind myself to clean out the coffee pot tonight with vinegar to get whatever is in there tainting it.

I might actually die without a real cup of coffee all week long.

She smiles at me before going back to chopping vegetables. I’m sure they’ll go into whatever she was cooking before I interrupted her space. “You’re welcome, dear. But you may not want to thank me just yet...” she says with a pregnant pause.

“Why’s that?” I ask nervously.

She sighs loudly, wringing her hands in her apron again. “Ian and Auden went outside to sit under the willow tree...where your father is. I’m afraid they might have

met already.”

I force myself to stay still, like nothing about this is upsetting or shocking at all. “Oh, that’s okay. I had a feeling Auden would hunt him down the moment she woke up. I’ll just head down there now and say good morning to the lot of them,” I tell her as I fake another sip of coffee and head out the side door. “See you later, Lydia. It’s so nice seeing you again after so many years. Thanks again for the coffee.” I wave bye to her with a forced smile before I close the door behind me.

I dump the ruined coffee into the hydrangeas that line the entirety of the manor and leave the mug sitting on the window sill so I’ll remember to grab it on my way back in. Sucking in a deep breath, I force myself to walk toward the willow tree to face my father for the first time in a decade.

I wonder what version of him I’ll get today. The version of him who loved being a father before my mother tried to kill me. Or will I be greeted by the version that looked at me with disdain, silently wishing it had been me instead?

He’s never openly hated me. He’s never treated me with anything but politeness. He could’ve easily turned into one of those fathers who turned to drinking as a way to dull the spells of grief. But he didn’t do any of that. He got up, said good morning to me, went to work at the oil rigs, and came home and kissed me good night. Every single night. Rinse and repeat.

He was there in body, but he was absent in heart. And I think that destroyed me just as much as my mother’s death did.

“ Mommy! You’re awake!” Auden comes running out from behind the branches of the willow tree and nearly tackles me to the ground with the force of her hug. “I missed you so much. You slept and slept for so long, and I missed you,” she says in earnest.



There's nothing better than knowing your child loves you so much that she misses you when you sleep.

I hug her back, lifting her up, and we both laugh when we both go in for a kiss. "I missed you, too, kid. How were your blueberry pancakes?"

"Those were for Horton, and he didn't even touch them," she says as she rolls her eyes dramatically. "Ian made me eggs and bacon and made them look like a happy face just like you do at home."

As she says this, Ian comes strolling out from behind the willow tree with his hands in his pockets. He's wearing khakis with a sage green sweater that fits him perfectly, showing off those usually hidden arms and shoulders nicely.

Not that I'm looking.

"So you know all about the happy face breakfasts?" I ask him over Auden's shoulder.

"Your mini-me made sure I was very well informed as I was in the middle of making Horton his pancakes," he says with a smile.

"Don't tell Mommy, but your bacon was better," Auden turns and whispers to him, very loudly.

"Hey! My bacon is perfectly crispy!" I protest.

Auden squirms out of my arms and goes and stands next to Ian, grabbing his hand like they are long-lost best friends.

Or like father and daughter.

They both gaze up at me, and it hits me how much she looks like him, like Irene. I've been in denial over that fact since the moment I laid eyes on her after twenty-eight hours of labor.

She looks so much like him. They have the same eyes, the exact same shade of hazel, with gold flecks sprinkled in.

My two galaxies colliding, waiting to explode together as they orbit around me and all my lies.

“Georgia, is that you?”

I turn toward my father's voice, and the sight of him nearly brings me to my knees. He looks awful. His skin is sickly pale and pulled taut against his bones. His auburn hair is almost completely gray now and is thinning more and more. The freckles we share are still there, but they contrast horrifically against the white-yellow pallor of his skin. The red-and-blue flannel hanging loosely around his thin frame...so unlike the burly mountain of a man I knew all those years ago. It's as if this house is sucking his very life force out bit by bit.

He limps over slowly, using a cane to lean on. It shakes furiously in his grasp.

Tears well in my eyes as he stops a few feet from me, his breathing ragged and coming out in gasping pants.

“Hi, Daddy,” I finally croak out, closing the gap between us and hugging him gently. “I missed you.”

He hugs me back hard, surprising me with the strength still left in his frail body. “I missed you too, Bug.”

The tears come out in full force when I hear the nickname. He hasn't called me that since before my mom died. I hug him harder, tampering down the past ten years of resentment and hatred I've had stored in my heart.

"Why don't we all go sit inside and catch up?" Ian says from behind us.

I release my dad and nod to Ian, who is still holding Auden's hand. "Why don't you help my dad inside? We'll be there in a moment," I tell him, holding my hand out to Auden. She happily takes it, and we watch as Ian and my dad slowly make their way back toward the house.

"Mama, why do you hate him?" Auden asks once they're out of earshot. "He seems very nice."

I kneel down to her height, looking into those golden-flecked eyes of hers with concern. "Hate who?"

"Papa."

I smile at her and shake my head. "I don't hate him, hun. He's my dad. I love him a lot. Who told you that?"

"She did," Auden says quietly, pulling her hand out of my grasp, pointing up at the house. "She told me she wished you didn't hate him so much."

I follow her hand and gasp when I see her standing there. Looking down at us from her office. The blood dripping freely from her nose...pointing toward the lake with a silent scream on her lips.

"Come on, Miss Auden. You can help me prepare snacks for everyone!" Mrs. Foster yells loudly from the open kitchen door. Auden laughs as I watch her run toward the

house.

When I look back up, my mother's ghost is nowhere to be found.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

8

Georgia

Now

The rest of the morning passes in a blur. Shortly after Mrs. Foster and Auden presented us with an entire platter of finger foods and tea, my father had another one of his dizzy spells, and Ian escorted him back to bed to get some rest.

He filled me in on the comings and goings of work—not much changes in the oil industry. The only major change is that Mr. Foster is now filling in for my father while he's out. Mrs. Foster made sure to make a big hoot about the fact that her husband was now the interim boss. A big step up from the manor's handyman/part-time oil rig employee.

Ian made himself scarce after he helped my father back to bed. I'm sure he's busy doing all those fancy doctor things he has to do now. I still can't believe he finished school, after all that talk of quitting all those years.

After everyone went their separate ways, I decided to take Auden for a tour of the house, taking care to look in all the corners and dark spots before Auden followed me into each room. The manor has six rooms: my father's room, my childhood bedroom, the guest room, my mother's office, my father's study, and a rather large library. There are also the normal, everyday rooms like the kitchen, the living room, dining room, and a handful of bathrooms scattered throughout both stories of the house.

We avoided my mother's office and my father's study, naturally, spending most of the day in my childhood bedroom while Auden played with my old toys and I read a thriller book I grabbed from the family library. By dinner time, Auden was more than ready for bed after spending most of the day chasing Horton from room to room as I worked on not looking for my mother's ghost around every bend.

Maybe I'm slowly going insane being here.

Maybe it's just this house, conjuring up these memories of the day she died.

Maybe Auden is just feeding off of my fear.

As I'm tucking Auden into bed, I decide to ask her. "Who told you I hated Papa?" I ask nonchalantly as she gets herself nice and buried into the pink blankets.

She pops her head up and gives me a funny look, her eyebrows notched together in concentration. "I don't know who she is," she says after a moment of thinking.

"Are you sure that this happened? Not make-believe?"

She shakes her head quickly. "I don't think it did? Maybe it was a bad dream," she answers with a loud yawn. "Mama, who is Irene?"

My heart stops the moment my dead best friend's name leaves my daughter's mouth. "Who—who told you that name, hun?"

"I saw it carved into the willow tree next to your name and Ian's. He didn't want to tell me," she answers.

My heart starts beating again. She doesn't know.

“She was a friend we played with when we were your age. Nothing more. Get some sleep, and when I find Horton, I’ll send his butt right in for cuddles, okay?”

“I love you, Mama. No bad dreams for us tonight, promise?” Her eyes grow heavy as she drifts off to sleep.

“I love you, too. I will do my best to keep the bad dreams away,” I promise her, knowing that it’s a lie the moment it passes my lips. I have no power over the ghosts here.

I turn the night-light on and blow her a kiss as I silently leave the room, taking care to leave the door cracked open again. When I look back one last time, I see Horton jump onto the bed and cuddle up next to her. Some things never change.

A small gasp of surprise escapes my lips when I almost run face-first into Ian. “What are you doing creeping around out here?” I ask him as I clutch my hand to my chest, urging the heart attack I almost had to stay at bay.

He chuckles under his breath, rubbing one hand over his face as he watches me look like a fool while his other hand holds a dark blue book. “I was getting the other room set up so I can sleep there,” he answers.

“Oh,” is all I’m able to squeak out. Why do I feel slightly betrayed that he’d want to sleep on an actual bed than sleep on the small couch at the end of his bed? “Well, did you get it all finished?”

“Nearly, I just need to grab my stuff from your room.”

“You mean your room. Come on. I’ll help.”

He follows me into the guest room. There’s a different sort of tension between us as

he closes the door behind him. I stand in the middle of the room, not knowing what to touch or how I can help. The room looks mostly put together, minus the shitty bed-making I did this morning. My eyes are drawn to the dresser sitting under the window. On it are books, a stethoscope, and men's cologne. On the other side sits my purse and various items I threw up there last night.

This room looks like a room shared by a couple.

I expect him to start packing his things up, but instead, Ian walks in the room and sits at the end of the bed. He starts drumming his fingers against the small book he's holding, looking down at it like it's a bomb waiting to be detonated. Closing the distance between us, I sit next to him, our thighs almost touching.

"What's that?" I ask him. It's not a book I've seen before in the library.

He starts to hand it to me, then pulls the book away from my outstretched fingers just as quickly. "Okay, don't get mad," he pleads, avoiding eye contact with me as I stare at him. "I found it in your mom's desk while I was working at it earlier today."

"Okay . . . ?"

He shifts his body so he's facing me, his knee brushing against my thigh. This time his eyes meet mine, and I can see the stress he's hiding behind them. "It's your mom's diary."

"What?" I snatch the small blue book out of his hand and flip to the first page. My heart constricts with emotion when I see her handwriting on the first page, and the second, and the rest as I flip through it. Each entry starts with "Dear Georgia."

I look down at the diary. Part of me wants Ian to leave so I can read every single word my mom thought was important enough to write down. Another part of me



wants to throw it into the lake and wipe my hands of it forever. Who knows what kind of things she's written in this?

"Did you read it?" I look up at him.

"I only read it long enough to realize that it belonged to your mom."

"I need to ask you something, and I need you to tell me the truth," I say after a minute of silence passes between us.

Ian straightens up, crossing his arms over his chest as he nods for me to continue.

"Why didn't you want to tell Auden about Irene?" My voice comes out in a whisper. Finally speaking her name out loud with him feels like some sort of taboo subject after all the years we spent trying to keep her buried.

He lets out a breath, and his eyes widen in surprise. "Why would I want to, Georgia? I wouldn't share that type of pain with a five-year-old, let alone with your daughter," he hisses through his teeth, anger ringing clear in his voice as his eyes narrow at me. "Why the hell would you ask me that?"

I jump to my feet, tossing the diary onto the bed. "Because she asked me about her today, and she said you didn't want to tell her. You can't just keep ignoring that she existed, Ian," I snap.

He reluctantly gets to his feet and walks toward the door to leave, his shoulders straining against his sweater. Much like he did when we would argue as teenagers. Ian doesn't like confronting his feelings and opts to walk away before he says anything he'll regret. Whereas I'm hot-blooded and let my emotions get the best of me when I'm upset like this.

“Wait.” I take a step to stop him, placing my hand on his arm as his back is turned to me. “Please. That wasn’t fair, and I’m sorry. Auden asking about her brought up all sorts of feelings for me. I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have thrown that at you.”

I feel his muscles tense under my touch before he reaches up and puts his hand over mine. Our fingers naturally intertwine as he turns to face me. His body inches toward mine slowly as our hands clasp each other tightly. That gravitational pull must affect him, too.

I’m dangerously close to letting go of what my brain keeps screaming at me.

Don’t let your heart take over, Georgia.

I lean in toward him, my body choosing not to listen to my heart or my brain this time, then he pulls away.

“Come on. Let’s go get a drink before we do anything you might regret in the morning.” He flashes a smile filled with regret down at me as his hand leaves mine.

I’m left standing in the middle of the room like an idiot as he stalks toward the door. I follow him on autopilot. I feel as though a glass of ice-cold water has been tossed in my face, sobering up the love-struck hormones of my youth.

I wouldn’t have regretted him.

Two bottles of wine later and I’m feeling incredibly relaxed. The edges of the world are muted to a nice haze as I stare at Ian. We’re sitting on the small yellow loveseat in the library; our bodies have a mind of their own as our limbs find ways to touch one another. He moves one way, my legs casually move with him.

This is dangerous territory for both of us, but if this is the last week I have with him,

why shouldn't I enjoy it? Will I regret letting him back in? I've never regretted being with him. Even after he ripped my heart out, I still couldn't bring myself to regret him.

He gave me the greatest gift of my life: Auden. Even if he'll never know that she's his gift, too.

"Tell me something, G. Is there anyone special back home? I know you said Auden's father isn't in the picture, but I can't help but wonder if there's anyone else." Ian's eyes are slightly glassy, his cheeks flushed red by the alcohol. His lips part as he takes another drink of his wine, and I can't force myself to look away as his throat bobs when he swallows. "You're drooling a little bit," he says into his glass as he smirks over at me.

I blink and tear my eyes from him, wiping at my lips just in case he's not fucking with me. It's been a while since I let myself indulge in more than a small glass of wine at dinner. I don't like to drink when I know it's just me and Auden at home. If anything were to happen to her, I wouldn't be able to trust my instincts, so I just don't drink often.

"I'm kidding. Your face is perfect. But I'm still waiting for that answer."

I roll my eyes at him and take another long swig of my wine. I know you're supposed to sip wine like a lady or whatever, but I'm more of a chugger, especially when I'm sharing a tiny seat with the love of my life. And I'm not supposed to want to touch him. Right?

"Do you have anyone special here in town? Maybe a fancy nurse? Or another doctor?" I counter, avoiding his question while I mull over what to tell him.

Ian sits up and grabs the wine bottle from the table, pouring half in his glass, and the

rest of the bottle into mine.

“No.” He laughs and takes another sip of wine. “No fancy nurse or doctor in the cards for me. I don’t see myself settling down and falling in love and all that normal shit. Nobody wants a mess of a person like me, G.”

The wine is making me brave, or possibly sabotaging me, because I can’t seem to stop the words from coming out of my mouth. “You had me,” I blurted out, nearly spilling my wine all over both of us. “I loved every broken piece of you, the way you loved every shattered part of me.” I feel my face flush red as I take another gulp of my wine. I’m avoiding looking at him because I can feel the heat of his gaze on me.

“Is there anyone else?” he asks again. The husky tone of his voice pulls my eyes toward him, my stomach tightening under his heated gaze.

“No, there hasn’t been anyone but you,” I answer finally.

“Besides Auden’s father, right?”

“Yeah, besides him. No one since. Been a little busy raising a child on my own.” I tip the end of my glass and swallow the rest of my wine. He reaches out, takes my empty glass from me, and places both glasses on the table in front of us.

“Thank fuck,” he says, grabbing my face and pulling my lips toward his.

The heady scent of wine and sandalwood attacks my senses as I lose myself to him. Our lips fight to get closer as if this kiss can keep us from ever being parted again. His hands move from my face as his lips pull away from mine, kissing his way across my jaw, my throat, before making their way up to the shell of my ear, nipping it playfully.

“I missed you. Every second of every day, I missed you,” he whispers in my ear, making me moan against him, my body pressing closer to his until I’m straddling his lap. “I missed your smile, your laugh, your body. But mostly, I missed your friendship. I missed us. I’m so glad you’ve finally come back.”

His words turn my heated blood to ice, my brain finally overthrowing the feelings in my heart. I pull myself away from him as his hands start to tug on my shirt. “Wait,” I say breathlessly.

He stops immediately, and it takes me a moment to catch my breath and focus my eyes on him. His hair is a mess. I didn’t even realize my hands must have been thrust in it. His lips are red and swollen; I’m sure mine look the same. His breath is coming out in hard pants, matching my own.

I focus my eyes back on his. “You said earlier that you didn’t want to do anything that I would regret in the morning.”

His hands settle on my hips while he chews on his bottom lip. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

“And you won’t regret this? Correct me if I’m wrong, but the first and only time we had sex, you up and left me hours later with nothing but a note saying you made a mistake and couldn’t be with me.”

And you left me a baby.

But I don’t say that out loud. Even in my drunken state, I know that secret is mine, and mine alone.

“The only thing I regret is having to leave you the way I did.”

A loud, unladylike laugh escapes my chest as I push away from him. “You didn’t have to leave me, you chose to leave me. You say you missed our friendship the most? Well, nothing was stopping you from picking up the damn phone and just being my friend , Ian. I didn’t come here to fall back into your bed. I didn’t come back here for you. If it was up to me, I’d have let this place rot away before I ever came back.” I get unsteadily to my feet. “When you figure out why you really threw us away, then maybe we can talk. Until then, stay away from me, and stay away from my daughter.”

The last thing I see before I leave the room is Ian sitting there. His hands still reaching out toward my phantom hips. Instead, all I can picture is those same hands holding both of our bleeding hearts.

9

Georgia

Now

My heart is racing as I rush up the winding staircase to my room.

I can't believe I almost let myself fall for him again. I need one of those metal wire brushes to scrub Ian Foster from my heart once and for all.

What did I think was going to happen? We'd fall into bed together again and live happily ever after in this cursed house? Absolutely not.

This is what happens when I indulge. My instincts fail me at every turn, and I make stupid decisions that shouldn't involve wanting Ian.

I make it to the hallway on wobbly legs, surprising myself by not tripping or falling once on my haste up. The colorful lights from Auden's room glow brighter tonight since Ian turned off half the sconces on our way down to the library. I peek my head into her room, gazing across the room for ghosts before my eyes settle on her sleeping body. I can't help but notice the similarities she shares with Ian as she sleeps. Her dark hair in disarray around her pillow. Her lips parted slightly as she silently breathes.

She looks the most like him in this state.

I hear footsteps coming up the stairs, so I rush to the guest room across the hall and close the door quietly behind me. A moment later, there's a soft knock.

"Georgia, can we talk?" Ian's voice pleads from the other side of the door. I lean against it and silently cry.

My heart is angry at me for not giving in to it and enjoying the small moment of happiness I had with him for the last few hours.

My brain is high-fiving me for having the strength to walk away.

My soul feels hollow, an empty black hole trying to swallow the rest of me up with it.

There's another soft knock, vibrating the door that separates us. "I'm sorry, for tonight, for everything," Ian says, his voice sounding more defeated than I've ever heard it since Irene's death. "I'll be across the hall if you need anything. Good night, Georgie."

I press my ear against the door, listening for the telltale sign that he's shut away in the office, locked in the forbidden room. Too bad I can't figure out how to forbid my heart from wanting him.

I open my door, leaving it cracked for Auden, and I finally force myself into bed. Turning off the lights and wrapping myself with blankets that still smell like him, I drift into a hazy, regretful, fitful sleep.

I wake with a jolt when the bedroom door slams shut. I try to lift my head so I can see if Auden came in, but my body doesn't respond. I'm stuck frozen solid on my back, the navy duvet pooled around my torso and my arms crossed against my chest.

I feel like a corpse, buried alive in the coffin of my own making.



It's been over ten years since I had a sleep paralysis episode like this. Ian used to wake up next to me and talk me through it, but I don't have him here to aid me tonight.

Taking shallow, quick breaths, I urge my body to move, to do something, anything but stay motionless. Everything is heavy and working against me while my brain is wide awake. It's like being trapped in quicksand, only my face isn't submerged yet.

A strangled noise pulls my attention away from the turmoil of my unresponsive body, and I let out a silent scream while pleading with my body to move.

To get up.

To run.

Because she's standing there, closer than I've seen her in years.

Reaching toward me with skeletal-like hands, the flesh off-colored and pulling away from her bones.

Her hair falling from her scalp in clumps onto her lacy white nightgown.

The nightgown that's smeared with dirt.

Blood drips freely down her nose, leaving bloody red blotches on her chest, staining the nightgown even more.

I can't move as I watch in horror as she takes a step closer to me, the white foam from the seizure she had as she died hitting the navy duvet at my feet.

Her arms reach for me, and her lips open wide as she continues to step closer until

she's standing right next to me. I can do nothing but watch in silence as she leans over me, bringing the rotting flesh on her face right next to mine.

"Don't trust . . . don't trust . . . protect . . ." she moans, her voice a garbled growl through the white foam as she drips blood onto the pillow.

"Don't trust . . . don't trust . . . protect . . ."

She pulls away from me, bringing her fleshy hand to my hair, caressing me, gently, before she disappears through the closed door.

As soon as she disappears from sight, my body convulses as all the feeling comes back. I sit up quickly, turning the bedside light on. Rubbing my hands over my face, then my hair, checking to see if her blood is stained on my pillow.

Nothing.

It was only a dream, Georgia. Just a dream. A stupid, hateful, terrifying dream.

Just a dream, I tell myself over and over again as I work on calming down enough to go back to sleep.

It almost works until I hear Auden scream from her bedroom across the hall. I throw myself out of bed and rush to the door, slamming myself against it as I try to open it.

It's locked.

Why is it locked ?

I frantically pull on the doorknob as I hear Auden's screams from the other room. The door won't budge, and it's one of those old doors that only lock with a key...but it can

be locked from either side with that key...

“ Ian! ” I scream, pounding my hand against the door as hard as I can. “IAN! HELP!”

Please wake up, please wake up. I pound on the door over and over, screaming his name until Auden’s screaming is cut off.

I stop screaming and slamming my hand against the door and press my ear against the wood, trying to hear what’s happening on the other side. I can’t hear her. I can’t hear anything but the sound of my own frantic breathing.

The door handle rattles loudly, and seconds later, I hear the distinct turn of the key. I grab the handle and throw the door open. Confusion floods my veins when I see that the hall is empty.

I run to Auden’s room, stopping short when I see her fast asleep in bed with Horton curled up at her feet.

What the fuck is going on?

“Georgia! What on earth are you doing out here at this hour? It's nearly three in the morning.”

I look over at my father's silhouette standing at the top of the stairs, his cane nowhere in sight.

“I—I’m not sure,” I answer, my voice shaking with nerves and confusion. I look back at Auden’s peacefully sleeping form and then at my father again.

My father steps closer, placing his hand on my shoulder. “Are you having those nightmares again? Are you sleepwalking again?”

Was it just a nightmare? It felt so real. Auden's screams sounded so real.

Am I asleep? I pinch my arm, hard, and hiss through my teeth.

Nope, definitely not sleeping.

"I'm awake, Dad. I just thought I heard Auden screaming," I tell him, my brows knit in concentration as I recall everything that just happened. "But I think maybe it was just a dream. I had a few glasses of wine earlier. Maybe it's just that."

"I sure didn't hear any screaming," he muses. "You used to get those a lot when you were younger. Sometimes you'd sleepwalk and scare the hell out of your mother," Dad says with a laugh. "She was so scared you'd end up walking right into the lake one day and never come out."

My blood runs cold as I look up at my father. Does he know? My mother promised she wouldn't tell anyone...about that day.

The day I killed my best friend.

Dad claps me once on the back. "Well, kid, I'm going to bed. I get restless at night these days. It's the only time my body doesn't feel like it's failing me. You know?" I shake my head at him, not really listening to anything he's saying as I stare vacantly at my daughter. My brain replays the events of that night like a highlight reel. My mother's face hovering above mine...over and over again.

"Get some sleep, Dad. I love you," I say distractedly as I watch him disappear down the hall and close his door behind him, leaving me alone with my ghosts yet again.

I look over at Auden one last time before deciding that everything must have been another bad dream before forcing my legs to take me back to the guest room. I hear a

door open behind me, and I turn, thinking it's just my father again. Instead, Ian's messy bedhead appears from behind the office door.

He looks like he just woke up from a deep sleep. His eyes struggle to focus, lines from his pillow indented into his cheek. "Georgia," he says with a yawn. "What are you doing out here?"

"Did you hear any screaming?" I ask him.

"Screaming, no? Who was screaming?" He straightens, his body coming to life like the bodyguard he tries to be for me. Like he's always tried to be, but he can't always save me from myself, or the terrifying things my head conjures up.

I shake my head. "No one. It's nothing. Just a bad dream."

Ian steps out from behind the doorframe and into the hall, walking toward me with a look of concern. My mouth dries out, and all thoughts of ghosts evaporate as my eyes sweep over his body.

This is most definitely not the boy I knew all those years ago. I knew he was fit, but I didn't know he was this fit. His flannel pants sit low on his hips, that dusting of hair trailing from his stomach to beneath those same flannel pants teasing me. Naturally, his shirt went missing at some point, his bare, muscular chest and abs on full display for me as he steps closer.

What is it with this stupid hallway?

I take a step backward as he gets closer. The closer he gets, the less of his body I can see. He stops in the middle of the hall before changing his mind and heading into his room. As I turn to do the same, he comes out with a blanket and pillow in his arms.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my eyebrows knitting together. I’m secretly hoping he’s doing what I think he’s doing. Even if I want to hate him, he’s still my safe haven in this evil house.

“Keeping guard,” he answers back before he pushes past me with his arms full of blankets and disappears into my room behind me. “Come on; let’s go back to bed,” he says, and I twirl to see him making his spot on the couch.

My heart is doing backflips in my chest as I watch him get situated. His muscles flexing as he lies down, putting his arms behind his head. Flashing that crooked smile at me like everything that happened tonight between us was just a fever dream of my own making.

I look at the empty bed and see my mom’s diary sitting on the pillow. I don’t remember moving it, but I must have during my nightmare.

Do I want to sleep with my mother’s ghost? Or should I choose the lesser of two evils and beg Ian to keep me safe in his arms...just for tonight? Will he even let me after I yelled at him to stay away from me?

I walk to the bed hesitantly, grabbing the diary and holding it to my chest, then over to the couch he’s lying on. Our eyes meet, and his gaze feels like an exposed wire touching my skin as his eyes travel up and down my body. I’m not wearing anything special, just a purple sleep tank and matching shorts, but he makes me feel like I’m wearing nothing.

Exposing me from the inside out like only he can.

I open my mouth to ask if I can sleep with him, just for tonight. Before I say anything, he shifts his body against the couch, leaving a space made just for me. He nods his head toward the spot, and that shy smile from our childhood tugs at his lips

as I move closer.

He doesn't wrap his arms around me like I want him to, but his presence next to me is enough to make me feel safe again. I press my back against his chest as he moves one of his arms under the pillow we are sharing, lying his other arm across my hip and down my thigh.

"Will you read this with me?" I ask him quietly, holding my mother's diary up between us. I don't think I have the strength to read it on my own, and I'm still not sure I want to know what she wrote. But it feels like a weakness to ignore it.

Ian takes the diary from me carefully, shifting his arm from underneath my pillow and opening the book in front of us. "Of course, why don't I read it to you while you try to sleep. Like we used to?"

"I'd love that," I whisper, snuggling closer while his voice reads my mother's most coveted thoughts.

10

Ian

Now

I open the diary gently, the old pages warped and frayed on the edges as Georgia leans closer to me. Never in a million years did I think I'd be sitting here, reading another story to her while she calms herself enough to fall asleep after a horrible nightmare. I thought I ruined every chance of this the moment I left her all those years ago.

The biggest mistake of my life, but one I needed to make for her.

"Did you forget how to read after all those medical journals broke your brain?" Georgia teases. How I've missed this woman and her smart-ass mouth.

"Pretty sure they would have fired me by now. Nothing screams Dr. Lawsuit like forgetting how to read the correct dosage to give a patient," I joke back.

I pull the diary closer and turn to the first page.

Dear Georgia,

I know this is my diary, so I pray that you never see it. But if you do, this is proof of just how much I truly love and cherish you. More than my whole life, my darling girl. Today I sat at the willow tree and watched you play with the twins. You and Irene



were princesses who had been stolen by an angry dragon, holding you prisoners in the giant tower. Ian was the brave knight that came to your rescue, his sword a giant wooden branch he pulled from under the tree. Barely four years old, and the three of you have more imagination than anyone could muster up. The laughter from all of you always fills me with so much joy. You asked me this morning why you didn't have a sibling...And I lied and told you it was because you were so special that I didn't want to share any of my love for you with another child. But that isn't true. Your father and I tried for years after you were born, and I suffered so many losses. As I write this, I am currently going through another one. I think that's why I decided to finally start writing this diary that you and your father gifted me for Christmas last year. This is my reminder that it's okay to be sad, to feel the ugly, angry feelings I feel, while also being full of so much gratitude for you. It's okay to feel both sadness and hope. And I think I'm writing this to you because it's all the things I wish I could tell you. My littlest best friend. I wish I could give you all the siblings in the world. I wish more than anything that my body wasn't a traitorous monster, like the dragon in your game. Instead of stealing the princesses, my dragon steals all my hope for the future.

Except you, never you, my darling girl.

You are my sunlight in a world full of such darkness.

Never, ever forget that, my littlest love.

Love always,

Mom

"I knew she loved me," Georgia mumbles out, her voice heavy with sleep as she lays her head against my shoulder. I've missed the way she falls asleep in my arms. All the worry and grief in her life fade away as her features smooth out.

“Of course she loved you. There isn’t a single thing about you that isn’t completely fucking loveable,” I whisper to her. She mutters something in her sleep that I can’t hear, but I’m sure it’s something sassy and aimed toward me.

Reading about us as kids makes Irene’s absence hit hard. I miss my twin every day. But my parents have made sure that her name doesn’t get brought up. Ever. It’s too painful for them, even after all these years. So I’ve trained myself to keep her ghost at bay. Never thinking of her, never saying her name out loud.

Until Georgia and her daughter came crashing back into my life.

There’s something about Auden that reminds me so much of Irene. When I first laid eyes on her in the ambulance, my heart just about gave out. It happened again while I was making her breakfast this morning. I turned and almost dropped the fucking plate because she looked just like my sister, perched on the edge of the barstool. I couldn’t stop myself from asking Georgia if Auden reminded her of Irene.

It’s like letting her name pass through my lips has awakened her.

Auden has such a fun, carefree spirit. It’s hard for me not to love her the way I love her mother. I just wish life had worked out differently for us, but I made that bed, and now I get to lie in it.

Even if lying in this particular “bed” isn’t so bad right now, I know when this week is over, my heart is going to be crushed all over again. This time I won’t just lose Georgia; I’ll lose Auden, too. Spending the morning with her and learning more about her, I selfishly wish that she was mine. But if I hadn’t left Georgia when I did, she wouldn’t have Auden. I can’t regret my choices too much when she gained so much from my sacrifice.

The smart thing to do would be to stay as far away from both of them as possible,

self-preservation and all that.

But I've never been good at making smart decisions.

Placing the diary on the back of the couch, I wrap my arm around Georgia, my fingers drumming lightly against her skin as we both fall asleep.

Before I fully succumb to the darkness, my subconscious notes that it looks like something spilled down the front of the bed mattress.

Something that looks strangely like blood.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

11

Georgia

Now

S ometime in the night, I must have turned because I wake in a cocoon of warmth as I'm pressed against Ian's chest with his arms wrapped tightly around me.

Looking up at him, I can't stop the memories of all the nights we spent just like this. Only, instead of a small couch, we huddled together on the twin mattress in my childhood bedroom. Him, holding me to his chest, protecting me from my night terrors. Me, pressing my ear against his chest gently so I could listen to his heartbeat without waking him.

Whatever fight we had last night, it doesn't change anything. We fight, I scream and curse at him, he walks away. We still end up here, gripping onto each other to keep the horrors at bay. Every damn time.

I fell in love with him with my entire soul when I was thirteen, and I haven't been able to escape that fate since. Here we are, nearly thirty years old now, and still intertwined together. Woven together forever because of Auden. It's hard not to blurt out that she's his daughter when he reminds me so much of that boy I loved so many years ago. Especially after a night like last night, falling asleep to the sound of his voice as he read my mother's words to me. After hearing about all her losses...maybe I should just rip this Band-Aid off and tell him that Auden is his daughter.

I know how my best friend would react, but I don't know how this new Ian would.

And that's what makes me hesitate any time the words creep over my lips, begging to be released into the world.

"I can feel your eyes on me," Ian says with a low rumble, his voice still fogged with sleep. I roll my eyes at him, even though his eyes are still closed. "Quit your sass, or I'll move and kick you off the couch, G."

A stupid giggle passes my lips at the thought. He wouldn't dare.

"Yes, I would," he responds to my unspoken thoughts. "In case you forgot, I knew you quite well before we decided to turn our innocent friendship sleepovers into something more."

I reach out and pinch his bare chest, making him yelp as his eyes fly open.

"Fucking, rude, Georgie," he says with a sleepy laugh.

"Did I hear you say you had a sleepover and you didn't invite us?"

Ian and I both jump apart like teenagers caught breaking curfew when we hear Auden's voice. I end up on the floor, all caught up in the comforter, as Ian tries to yank it away from me to cover himself.

"Auden! Hi!" I yelp from the floor, trying desperately to untangle myself. My head is inches away from the bed, and when I look up, I see streaks of blood on the white sheets. The image of my mother's dead corpse comes to mind as I reach forward with a shaky hand to touch it. It's still slightly damp from hours before.

It wasn't a dream.

Auden drops Horton onto the bed, then stands over me with her hand on her hips, looking extra annoyed with me. “Mom, you have some explaining to do. Don’t you?”

Ian’s laughter is loud and completely unabashed when I look up at him, begging him for help with my eyes. “Don’t look at me. She’s your daughter!”

If only you knew.

I look back over at Auden, and she crosses her arm over her chest, just like I do when I’m disappointed in her about something. My own fit of laughter bubbles out of my chest at the sight of her. My little five-year-old going on fifteen.

“So you had a sleepover without me?” Auden asks again.

I get to my feet, pulling her down onto the couch with me, squeezing her right between Ian and myself. “We didn’t mean to have a sleepover without you. I promise we won’t do it again, okay?” I glance over at Ian, and he’s still trying to hold his laughter in.

“It’s not fair that you forgot about me,” Auden says, her lower lip starting to tremble.

I pull her into my lap, stroking her hair and her back, soothing her until she hugs me back. “Shh, that’s okay. It’s okay,” I whisper into her hair. “How about you and me have a sleepover tonight? Maybe if we’re together, we won’t have bad dreams anymore.”

She nods her head enthusiastically against my chest. “Can Ian come, too?”

My eyes meet his, and he looks pained as he watches us. He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it again and shakes his head at me.

“Actually, Ian has big doctor things he has to do tonight. But Horton can sleep with us instead. How about that?” My heart breaks as the lie passes over my lips.

Ian finally stands, stretching all those new muscles of his before he starts walking toward the door.

“Ian?” Auden turns, watching him walk out.

“Yes, Auden?” He pauses at the doorframe, leaning against it, waiting for her to continue.

“Will you come to the sleepover with us if I start screaming again? Last night nobody came.”

My mouth drops open as my eyes flicker back and forth between Ian’s surprised face and Auden.

“Why don’t we all get dressed, and then we can get breakfast and eat down by the lake?” Ian finally says.

Auden jumps out of my lap and runs toward him, wrapping her arms around him. “That sounds like the best plan ever! I’ll wear my prettiest dress!” She releases him and runs to her door across the hall, slamming it loudly behind her.

“I’ll start on breakfast. You get dressed and meet me in the kitchen when you’re ready,” Ian says quickly before disappearing into the hall. He pops his head back in a second later. “We need to talk later...about all this.” I nod my head at him, and he leaves again. This time, I hear the office door shut behind him.

My eyes linger on the empty doorway before turning toward the blood splatters on the bed.

What if none of it was a dream?

I get to my feet, shaking off the uneasiness I feel when my eyes catch on the blue diary sitting on the back of the couch. My mother's words echoing through me, leaving me feeling so incredibly loved, while also feeling so heartbroken for her and my father. I had no idea they were suffering so much. It also leaves me with more questions.

Why would she try to kill me if she loved me so much?

I grab her diary, taking it into the small bathroom with me as I get ready for the day. Maybe Ian can read another entry while we have breakfast and it'll provide more answers.

A uden comes into my room shortly after I get out of the shower asking if I'll braid her hair before we meet Ian for breakfast. She looks absolutely adorable in her lilac purple dress. Every time she moves, the sequins sewn in catch the light, making her look like a fairy princess.

I wonder if this is how my mother looked at me when I was her age, with nothing but love in her eyes.

As I brush through her dark locks, I see her eyeing the diary that's still sitting on the vanity.

"You said you were screaming last night?" I ask her, slowly brushing through her long dark hair.

She bites her lip. "I thought I was, but I think maybe it was just a bad dream like the other night," she replies, watching the brush weave in and out her hair as I go.



“What did you dream about the night before?” I start braiding one side of her hair, pulling a purple hair tie out of the drawer before I finish.

“I don’t remember. I was scared, so I looked out of the door, and I saw the other open door. I went in and saw you asleep. Ian was awake on the couch and playing on his phone. He told me to keep quiet as we snuck out and let you sleep,” she tells me. “Then Ian made blueberry pancakes for Horton and asked me a bunch of questions.” She’s tugging on the hem of her purple dress, twisting it around her fingers over and over again.

I chew on my lip, contemplating what to ask next. “What kind of questions did he ask you?”

She shrugs, looking up at me through the mirror's reflection as I braid the other side. “Just silly questions. Like how old I was. If I knew my dad.” She shrugs, looking down at her hands again. “And he asked if you had a boyfriend.” She giggles at the last one.

I laugh with her as I wrap the hair tie around the second braid. “And what did you tell him?” I cock an eyebrow at her with a smile. She doesn’t need to know that my heart is racing over the enormity of his innocent questions.

“I told him my birthday was October 2, 2019, and that my dad was a soldier who died protecting his friends. And then I told him you’ve never had a boyfriend before,” she tells me, looking at her braids in the mirror with a smile. “My hair is perfect. Thank you, Mommy. Now I’m really hungry, so we should go see what Ian made for breakfast!” She jumps off the stool, slamming the bedroom door behind her.

I need to talk to Ian. I’m not sure he’s ever going to forgive me for not telling him about Auden, but it’s clear that he suspects the truth about her.

I shouldn't have come back here.

Mrs. Foster made it sound like my father was on his deathbed, which is why I dropped our whole life to come here. From what I've seen, he's recovering slowly, but he's recovering.

So why did she insist I come back?

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

12

Georgia

Now

A uden is sitting on one of the barstools in the kitchen, eating a plate of french toast and strawberries, when I finally make my way downstairs. Ian and Mrs. Foster are nowhere to be found. But there is an extra covered plate next to Auden.

“Where’d everyone go?” I ask her, setting my mom’s diary down on the countertop before pulling an empty stool out and taking a seat next to her.

She slides the extra plate over to me, taking another huge bite of her french toast. “Ian said Papa needed help. I don’t know where the other lady went,” she says with her mouth full.

I tsk under my breath. “Auden, her name is Mrs. Foster, not ‘the other lady,’” I correct before taking a bite of my own breakfast. “Also, it’s rude to talk with your mouth full,” I mumble through my own full mouth of food, looking sideways at her with a smile.

“Bit of a pot-kettle situation we have here,” Ian muses, greeting me with a smile and a wink for Auden. His dark hair is damp after his morning shower. His white button-up shirt fits snugly against his chest, and he has the sleeves rolled so his forearms are on full display. Dark jeans sit low on his hips as I marvel at him. “That whole ‘like mother, like daughter’ thing makes total sense now,” he jokes, grabbing one of the

empty stools and dragging it behind him to the other side of the bar.

I can't take my eyes off of him as he reaches over, grabbing the fork I must have abandoned on my plate sometime between him walking through the door and me checking out his perfectly sculpted ass when he grabbed the stool. He spears a piece of my toast, making sure to get a strawberry as well, before bringing my fork to his mouth.

Auden giggles loudly when he makes a loud noise of approval from across the two of us. "Hey, that's supposed to be my mom's, remember? You also forgot to get her coffee." Her sass has no bounds, but Ian seems to enjoy it because he laughs loudly. One of those big belly laughs that make your sides hurt.

He's still laughing when he stands to pour us both a cup of coffee, making sure to add the coconut creamer into both mugs before sliding my cup across the counter to me.

"Thank you," Auden says politely to Ian. "Mama is kind of cranky without her morning coffee."

Ian laughs into his cup. "Don't I know it," he jokes, blowing into his cup before risking a sip. His face contorts in disgust as he spits the coffee back into the mug. "Yeah, that's a big no. G, don't drink that. I think the creamer's gone bad or something." He reaches over and takes my cup from the countertop, dumping both of them in the sink.

"I actually meant to clean the pot out yesterday, but the night got away from me..." My words fail me as I look over at Ian. I bring a hand to my face, touching my lips gently, remembering the feeling of his mouth on mine last night.

Then I remember the way I yelled at him, then hours later fell asleep in the safety of his arms.

“Mommy, I’m all done.” Auden’s voice punctures the awkward silence that I cast into the kitchen. “Can I go play with your old dolls until we are ready to go to the lake?”

“Of course, sweetie. I’ll come get you when it’s time.”

Ian and I both watch her skip out of the kitchen, listening to her steps stomping loudly on the stairs.

He’s leaning against the countertop next to me, his hands crossed over his chest as he watches me clean the few dishes in the sink.

“Do you know where your mom keeps the vinegar?” I ask him, pulling the coffee maker toward me and emptying the reservoir. “I need to run a few cycles through here to get that disgusting taste out so I can enjoy one damn cup of coffee in this place.” I slam the appliance down on the counter, the lack of caffeine and sleep finally hitting me.

Ian starts looking through the cabinets, checking behind all the boxes of food and in the pantry. “I don’t think we have any, but I’ll grab some while I’m out today.”

I groan in frustration, and Ian shoots an amused look at me. “I know I’m being a brat, but this is day three of no coffee, and I feel like I’m going to fall apart if I don’t get something with caffeine in my body immediately.”

“Do you think Auden will be okay up there if we disappear for ten minutes?”

“Depends...what do you have in mind?” I ask, my insides turning to liquid as he looks at me with that heated gaze from under those dark lashes.

“Get your minds out of the gutter.” Mrs. Foster comes into the kitchen in a bright

green maxi dress. Her white apron is wrapped snugly around her hips, and she tsks repeatedly under her breath at us. “What’s the matter with the coffee pot?”

Ian greets his mother with a quick kiss on the cheek. “Good morning, Mom.” I don’t miss the way she shrugs his touch off or the defeat in his shoulders because of it. He rubs a nervous hand through his hair, pointedly avoiding my gaze. “As for the coffee pot, something in the coffee tastes off. We were about to go grab a cup from the house and then take Auden to the lake to play for a bit,” Ian tells Mrs. Foster as she busies herself with putting the coffeemaker back in place.

Mrs. Foster freezes, dropping the coffee pot on the counter, causing it to shatter everywhere.

“Mom?” Ian rushes to her side, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

She shakes her head harshly, tugging her shoulder out of his grip. “Don’t take that little girl to the lake, Ian,” she whispers. “Please don’t take her there.” Her shoulders slump, and she starts crying silently in front of us.

Of course. The lake would trigger her. Her daughter died in that lake, and there’s no timeline for grief.

“Mrs—Lydia, I’m so sorry. Of course we won’t go there. I don’t know what we were thinking. Why don’t you head home and relax? Ian and I can clean this mess up.” I grip her shoulders gently, tugging her into a hug as she cries harder into my chest.

“I can’t watch another little girl die in that lake, Georgia. I can’t. I miss her so much, every day,” she cries. “Auden reminds me so much of her. Of my Ire—” She gasps. “The day she stepped into this kitchen and I laid eyes on her, I thought for a moment my sweet girl was back.”

My eyes meet Ian's over his mother's shoulder. I can see the heartbreak on his face, making my own heart crack for what I took from this family.

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be the one comforting this woman.

Especially because I'm the one that took everything from her.

Tears well in my eyes as I stare at Ian. There is so much he doesn't know, so much he will hate me for when he finds out.

"Come on, Mom. Let me walk you home," Ian says gently, taking her from my arms and steering her toward the back door. "We'll talk later, Georgie. Okay?"

I nod my head at him, giving him a sad smile in return.

Before I go fetch Auden, I should clean this mess up. I grab the broom from the closet and sweep up the glass shards from the coffee pot. I guess I'll take Auden into town and grab a new coffee maker sometime this afternoon.

As I wipe off the counters, I can't help but wonder what Mrs. Foster would think of me if she knew I was the one responsible for her little girl's death.

The thought leaves me in chills, and all I want to do is hold my own little girl. Hold her close and never let her go.

My footsteps echo loudly through the empty house as I run up the wooden stairs as quickly as I can. "Auden!" I shout for her. She appears at the top of the stairs, Horton content and calm in her arms as she pets his head. I pull them both into a hug, holding them close as Horton yowls in protest between us.

"I love you, Auden. So much. Never forget that, okay?" I tell her, my mother's words

from her diary echoing in my head.

“I love you, Mama. With my whole body,” she responds. I pull back and give her a questioning look. “My body is bigger than my heart, and I love you that much.” She giggles, releasing the angry Horton finally. “Can we go to the lake later? I want to keep playing,” she says as she’s already heading back into her room.

“How about we go into town for milkshakes instead?” I can’t bear to let her near the lake after everything that happened with Mrs. Foster. I’m sort of surprised that Ian even suggested it in the first place. “Just stay and play until I come get you, okay?”

“Okay, Mommy. Love you!” she yells, then closes her door with a loud click.

I drop my body onto the first step. Tears of frustration and stress build behind my eyes, making my face prickle while I take deep breaths, trying to calm my stupid racing heart. Even though Irene’s death was ruled an accident by the cops when her body was found floating in the lake—nobody knows that it was because of me.

Before the dam in my heart completely breaks open and I let the magnitude of my past actions overwhelm me, I hear glass breaking from down the hall, followed by a loud thump.

“Dad?” I whisper under my breath. I jump up and run down the hall toward his bedroom.

I knock softly and place my ear against the door. I don’t hear anything, so I knock again, a little louder this time. “Dad, are you in there?”

I hear a loud crash from inside the bedroom, and I throw open the door.

The gasp that leaves my lips sounds inhuman, and my heart stops in my chest at what



I see.

My father's body is lying at a bent angle in the middle of the bedroom floor, a broken teacup sitting next to his outstretched hand. And my mother's ghost is standing over him.

"Daddy?" My voice shakes as I look from one parent to the other. I risk a step forward, and as my foot hits the soft padding of the cream carpet, the door slams shut behind me. I turn in horror as I stare at the closed door, grabbing the handle and pulling with all my strength, but the door won't budge.

I take a shaky breath before forcing my body to turn back toward my parents. A blood-curdling scream leaves my mouth when I come face to face with my mother. Her face is mere inches from mine as she stares at me with her bloodshot eyes.

She opens her mouth, revealing those yellow-stained teeth and more white foam. "Don't trust...don't trust...protect," she moans out as she points toward the bedroom door.

My body shakes uncontrollably as I continue to be stuck in her throes. I open my mouth, then shut it again. My teeth slam together furiously as I try to force myself to say something. Anything.

"Don't trust . . . don't trust . . . protect . . ." she moans again.

My tongue feels heavy against the roof of my mouth. "Don't trust who?" I finally manage to blurt out. My mother continues to stare at me, her head cocked sideways as if she's thinking. "Don't trust who, Mom? Is any of this real?" I yell out, nearly biting my tongue off due to my teeth still shaking ferociously.

She looks down at my father's unconscious body. "Don't trust . . . don't trust . . .

protect . . .”

I glance over my shoulder when I hear a loud knock from behind me, and when I look back, she’s gone.

My knees buckle, and I fall to the floor painfully.

“Mr. Harris?” Ian’s voice echoes from the other side of the door. “Lincoln?” Ian knocks again.

Dad.

“Dad!” I scream, crawling over to him as Ian throws open the door.

“Oh shit,” Ian says before dropping to the floor next to us and grabbing my father’s wrist, checking his pulse. He looks straight at me as he mutters numbers to himself. “What happened?” he asks as he pulls a small flashlight out of his pocket, using it to check my father’s eye response.

I fall back, slamming my tailbone into the carpet while wrapping my arms around my knees. “It was her. It was her. It was her.”

The world melts away. Ian is talking, but there’s no sound. My eyes are fixed on my father as I rock back and forth.

Warm hands cup my face. “Eyes on me, Georgie. Breathe, baby. Just breathe.”

I watch him as he takes a deep breath and exhales it a moment later. I close my eyes and copy him, breathing in and out until I’m back in control of my body. When I open my eyes, his hazel-colored galaxies are the only thing I see.

A lifeline in the riptide of terror.

“That’s it. Deep breath,” he repeats and places his forehead against mine, his hands still cupping my face gently. I reach up and put my hands over his, our fingers intertwining. “You’re okay. I’m here.”

I’m safe. He’s here. I’m safe.

“My dad, Ian!” I gasp, ripping my hands out of his. I rush past him and kneel next to my father. I reach out to touch him, then stop, chastising myself. I don’t know how to comfort my own father.

“The ambulance is on the way. He’s going to be okay.” Ian’s voice is gentle and reassuring as he kneels beside me. I focus on the steady rise and fall of my dad’s chest; watching him breathe calms something in me.

I can’t lose him, too.

This house isn’t allowed to take another person I love.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

13

Georgia

Now

I an and I are sitting in a private waiting room at the hospital, both of us nursing cups of shitty hospital coffee as we wait to hear about my dad. Ian could have gone back with the rest of the doctors, but he chose to stay here with me.

I might have fallen in love with him a bit more, just for that kindness alone.

Mrs. Foster offered to stay with Auden, keeping her at their house in the back until we got home. I didn't want to drag her to the hospital for us, especially if we get bad news about my father. Auden just learned she has a grandfather. It would be too cruel to take him from her before she has the chance to get to know him.

That thought stops my heart.

Do I want Auden to have a chance to know him? Three days ago I was firmly rooted in my stance on leaving here as soon as possible, not letting her near my family here. Not wanting to taint her life with the ghosts of my past.

But is she not already making herself at home at Crane Manor? Intertwining herself into Ian's life. Mrs. Foster's life. My father's life...

What if I don't want to take her away from them now?

What if I don't want to leave?

Can the lies of my past destroy our chance at a real life here?

Would I give up everything I've worked for in California so that Auden might have a real family? A father who wants to be around us, even?

I wonder if my father would have tried harder to stay in my life if he had known he had a granddaughter. Or would the yearly birthday card he sent me have just turned into two instead?

These questions are on repeat in my head as I stare at the clock on the ceiling. It ticks loudly in the silence surrounding us. Each minute that passes feels like a minute closer to my world imploding.

There's a soft knock on the door. Ian jumps up, rushing to open it. I haven't really paid attention to him in the chaos of everything, but now I can't rip my eyes away from his pale, tired- looking face as the doctor walks in and closes the door firmly behind him.

"Ms. Harris?" The doctor walks over to me, blocking Ian from sight, and holds out his hand. I reach out and shake it. "I'm Dr. Marshall. I'm in charge of your father's care while he's here. Why don't we have a seat?" He gestures toward the chairs we just vacated.

"Is he going to be okay?" I ask, refusing to sit back down.

Dr. Marshall looks over at Ian.

"Stop looking at him, and tell me what's wrong with my father!" My voice cracks, warm tears slipping down my cheeks. Ian crosses the small room and puts his hand

on my lower back. Professional, casual even. But it's enough to muster up some strength as I wait for Dr. Marshall to tell us everything.

"Ms. Harris, Dr. Foster. It looks as though your father suffered a heart attack. His heart rate has fluctuated greatly in just the last hour he's been here, and his breathing is labored. We'd like to keep him here overnight for more monitoring," he explains to us. "Dr. Foster, you said he's been recently ill? Can you tell me more about that?"

Ian's whole demeanor changes as he tells Dr. Marshall about my father's fall and his bouts of dizziness and lack of strength. He goes into full doctor mode, telling Dr. Marshall about my dad's course of treatment, his vitals over the last week, food he ate, liquids he drank. Ian's brain has the capacity to hold so much knowledge.

Very much like his daughter's.

"But he's going to recover?" Ian asks Dr. Marshall, who nods a firm yes at him. "A full recovery? Or will he have deficits or long-term side effects?"

"We can't say for certain, but based on your statement, it sounds like you got to him very quickly, so we don't expect there to be any long negative effects. Obviously, he will be at high risk for a repeat heart attack, but once his primary care physician works out his dosage of medications, we expect positive results."

"How long does he need to stay here?" I ask the doctor. "I can run home and grab him extra clothes and the essentials."

"I would like to keep him for at least three nights to monitor him. You're able to go see him now if you'd like though, Ms. Harris."

"I'll swing back around and check on him later this evening after we grab his things. Thanks, Dr. Marshall," Ian responds, shaking the doctor's hand before he bids us

farewell with a quick wave and exits the room, leaving Ian and me alone once again.

“Can you call your mom and check on Auden while I go see my father?”

“Of course,” Ian says kindly, opening the door for me. “Let me show you where his room is at. I’ll meet you back in the lobby when you’re ready.”

I follow him through the maze of white walls that smell like disinfectant as we pass rooms with other patients. Some are sleeping, some look like they are in agonizing pain. None of them are my father’s room, until Ian stops in front of a partially open door at the end of the sterile hallway. He reaches out and squeezes my hand before opening the door for me, letting me pass in silence.

My father looks like a man who just suffered a heart attack, tiptoeing the edge of death. Multiple wires attached to monitors are weaving in and out of his green hospital gown. There’s an IV drip set up behind him, clear liquid in the tube dripping slowly before disappearing into veins. His skin is shallow-looking and ghostly pale.

Almost like he’s getting ready to join my mother in the afterlife.

The white walls are decorated with various photos of outdoor scenes, acting like photos of cute bunnies will distract from the fact that you’re in a hospital. The television mounted to the wall flashes brightly in the corner as Dad clicks the channel button on repeat until he finally settles on baseball. I walk across the small room and pull the hideous orange chair over to his bedside.

It takes Dad a moment to realize that I’m even here. His meds clearly make him groggy as his eyes struggle to focus on me. “Hey there, kid.” His voice is garbled, like his tongue is too big for his mouth.

I reach out, putting my hand gently over his. “Hey, Daddy. How are you feeling?”

His eyes close slowly, then open again. “I’ve had better days. But I’m okay now that you’re here.” He coughs loudly into his free hand. “I didn’t think you’d come. I know I haven’t been the best father to you, especially after Caroline left us.”

I grip his hand harder. “Oh, Dad, of course I’m here. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be right now,” I say truthfully. “I’m sorry it took you getting sick for me to brave coming back here. But I’m happy to be home. Happy to be here with you.”

“You’ve always been brave, Bug. Just like your mother. She loved you so much.”

I reach over to the bedside table and grab a tissue from the box sitting there, dabbing gently at my eyes. An angry laugh escapes as I roll my eyes. “Clearly not enough.” I laugh out loud. “She did try to kill me after all.”

Dad coughs again, his whole body shaking the bed with the force of each exhale. He shakes his head while he struggles to catch his breath. “No,” he gasps. “No, she didn’t, Georgia. I’ve never believed she was capable of it. She loved you more than life itself. I just haven’t been able to put the pieces together yet.” Another body-racking cough wrestles its way through his frail body.

The door behind me is thrown open. I turn expecting to see nurses rushing in like they do in the movies when the main character is coughing their lungs up like my father is. Instead, I’m greeted by Ian’s father, Gabe Foster, who’s wearing a fancy tan suit, much like the ones my dad wears to work. He’s taking this whole interim boss thing a little too seriously.

“Link! I heard you found your way back into this joint!” Mr. Foster boasts loudly like he isn’t in the middle of the ICU with other sick patients across the hall. He crosses the room and steps right up to the foot of the bed, his eyes landing directly on me. “And is this my little Georgia peach? My, have you grown! No wonder my boy is still waiting for you outside. Still got him wrapped around that dainty finger of yours,



I see.” He winks at me, flashing me a cocky, knowing smile. It leaves me feeling like I just bathed in dirty dishwater.

I get to my feet, reaching out to shake his hand when he throws his arms around me and pulls me close to him. He smells of sweat and something sickly sweet. I pull away politely, giving him a small smile while secretly wondering how Ian came out so humble compared to this man.

Mr. Foster has always been a boisterous man. His voice is always a touch louder than everyone else's in the room. His smile just a little too wide, too insincere. I always wondered how a meek and gentle woman like Mrs. Foster could fall for a man like him. But if life has taught me anything, you never know what people are truly hiding. Maybe she just hides her demons a little bit better than her husband does.

“Hey, Dad. I’m going to head back to the house and check on Auden. I’ll grab some things of yours from home and come back later tonight, okay?”

My dad smiles at me, nodding his head before turning his attention back to Mr. Foster.

“Hey, Georgia,” Mr. Foster says as I reach the door to leave. “I met that girl of yours. Cute kid.” His gaze bores a hole into my soul, something wicked gleaming behind his green eyes. “Looks like a carbon copy of my sweet Irene. Don’t you think so?”

“Yeah, a little—a little bit,” I stutter. My father’s eyes land on me, looking more confused than ever. “I’ll stop by later. Love you, Dad,” I say in a rush. “Bye, Mr. Foster.”

During my emotional crisis, debating whether I want to keep Auden here so she can get to know her grandfather...I forgot that she has two of them.

If I tell Ian about who Auden truly is to him, I'm inviting his parents into her life as more than just acquaintances.

My stomach curdles with dread at the thought.

"You look like you had a fun run-in with my dad," Ian says jokingly as I hop into his car. I'm sure my cheeks are red from being flustered, and my hair probably looks like a rat's nest after the forced hug from Mr. Foster. I shoot him a death glare in response, tugging the seatbelt over my body as I let out a groan of frustration. "That bad, hey?"

I blow a stray strand of hair out of my eyes. "No, it wasn't that bad. I just forgot how creepy he is in a suit," I answer back, a smirk settling on my lips.

Ian puts the car into drive, laughing loudly at my comment, navigating his way out of this hospital parking lot. Déjà vu hits me hard as we drive back toward Crane Manor.

"Ahh, always the creepster in the suit. But really, I hope he didn't say anything too out-of-pocket to you. We both know how he can be." Ian flashes a horrified look my way, making me laugh. After a day filled with stress and unknowns, laughing with him makes me feel like everything will be okay.

"He said he met Auden."

"Oh," Ian says, his face giving nothing away as he focuses on the road. "And what did he say about her?"

I gnaw at my lower lip, watching the fields of wildflowers pass us by in a colorful rush. I feel like I have this timebomb inside of me, just waiting to explode all over Ian. It's only a matter of time before I slip up and all my lies unravel around us.

“He said she looks like your sister.” I sigh. I hate bringing her up with him because I know how her death destroyed him. Destroyed both of us, in different ways. My soul is stained forever, while his soul is missing its other half.

Ian’s fingers drum loudly against the steering wheel as we pull up to a red light. I wonder what secrets he has burrowing in that brilliant brain of his, waiting to explode all over me, too.

“Want to go grab a cup of coffee before we head home? We can grab Auden a kids’ meal for dinner if she’d like that?” Ian suggests, looking over at me with a hopeful smile. Not the reaction I was expecting after bringing Irene up, but I’m happy to switch the subject.

I look at the clock on the dashboard; it’s already 6:00 p.m. The hospital nurse reminded me that visiting hours end at 9:00 p.m. and that nobody under twelve was allowed in the ICU. That gives us just enough time to grab food, pack a bag for Dad, get Auden to sleep, and still have time to make it back to the hospital. “Yeah, that sounds great. I’d like to put Auden to bed before going back to check on Dad. And I need to wash the smell of your dad’s hug off of me, so maybe hit that gas peddle a little harder, Foster.”

Ian flashes me one of those smiles that I swear was made just for me, the one that Auden most definitely got from him, then turns toward town.

Leaving me with another bout of déjà vu as both worry and hope eat at my insides.

14

Georgia

Now

Fueled by real coffee, not shitty hospital coffee, Auden and I walk hand in hand toward my parents' room after stopping to get her pajamas on. She always looks so precious in her floral sleep set. Like a little grown-up in a tiny body.

She was more than happy to help me pack a bag for my dad. Mrs. Foster helped her make a get-well card while they hung out today, easing my feelings of uneasiness toward her a bit. I'm scared she'll realize Auden is Ian's daughter the more she gets to know her. Auden is so much like Irene, it's just a matter of time before Mrs. Foster strings my lies together and figures it out.

When Auden showed us the card at dinner, my heart nearly cracked in two. She drew a willow tree on the front with pretty purple flowers she said she saw at the Fosters' house. The flowers form a heart around the tree, and she wrote "get well soon Papa" over the top in blue crayon. On the inside, there are four hand-drawn people and one orange tabby cat. The four people are holding hands with giant smiles on their faces.

Me, Auden, Ian, and my father, standing in front of Crane Manor.

Under it, she wrote, "I love my family so much."

Shortly after Ian saw the card, he made an excuse to go back to his parents' house to

check on his mom. He walked out the back door, those broad shoulders sagged with defeat.

When it's the three of us, it feels like we are the family we should be. I can see it in his eyes; he adores Auden. But he's also cautious around her. Like he's too scared to let her in.

You should just tell him.

"Mama, did you know Ian had a twin sister? Her name was Irene, like the name in the tree," Auden says once we enter my parents' room.

I stop and look down at her, her hand still clutched tightly in mine. "Yes, I did know that. How do you know about Irene?"

"Mrs. Foster showed me a lot of photos of when Ian was little like me." She toes the beige carpet, swaying back and forth nervously.

I stoop to her level, grabbing both of her little hands, turning her toward me. "Honey, what's wrong?"

Her lower lip trembles. "Mama, I did something bad." Her freckles shine brightly on her skin as she looks down at her feet.

"You can tell me, whatever it is. We can fix it," I say softly, squeezing her hands reassuringly.

She lets go of my hands, reaching into the chest pocket of her pajamas, and pulls out a folded piece of paper, handing it to me without looking at me. I take it, unfolding it carefully.

It's a photo of Ian, Irene, and myself in front of the willow tree. The three of us holding hands, smiling wide at the camera. Ian is in the middle, always sandwiched by Irene and I. Tears prickle behind my eyes as I gaze down at the three of us.

How could the smiles on these three kids have broken so much just a few weeks after this was taken?

"Mrs. Foster says I look like her." Auden points to Irene. Irene's dark hair is in pigtails, hanging over her sunflower-yellow overalls in the photo. Her and Ian both wore matching smiles and squinty eyes as the sun blinded the three of us.

I wipe a tear away, sniffing loudly as I look up into my daughter's eyes. Their eyes. "You do look like her, don't you?" I smile at her. A sad smile that I hope she can't decipher.

"I think I look more like you. And I have freckles that match Papa's." She smiles, pointing at her face and then mine. "You do, too."

"Papa calls our freckles his own little constellations. We all have matching ones because we all belong together. At least, that's what he used to tell me when I was little like you."

Auden smiles at that, touching her own freckles, lost in thought.

"You said you did something bad?"

"I stole the picture for you. I'm sorry, Mama," she tells me, playing with the hem of her pajamas. "I thought you might be happier if you had a photo of your friends."

Oh, Auden . The sweetest child, with a mess like me for a mother. I guess it's not so far-fetched that Ian ended up being so normal even though his father is less than.

“This is very sweet of you to give to me. Thank you, hun. But next time, you should just ask Mrs. Foster. Stealing is never okay. I am happy to have this, though.” I wrap her into my arms, hugging her tightly. “Now, let’s pack this bag for Papa so he can get better soon and come back home.” I place a chaste kiss against her forehead, taking care not to touch the goose-egg bump she’s still sporting.

I pull out a bag from the oak wardrobe, quickly grabbing a few shirts and pants before placing them on the canopy bed in the middle of the room. Auden starts opening drawers at random, looking quickly before closing them and moving on. I cross the room and grab a few of my father’s clothes from the dresser under the window. When I look out, I see Ian standing at the edge of the lake, hands in the pockets of his dark jeans, looking more pensive than I think I’ve ever seen him. A far cry from the smiling boy in the photo.

“If Papa gets better, does that mean we have to leave?” Auden interrupts my thoughts, forcing me to leave Ian alone with his own ghosts once more.

I place the clothes I gathered from the dresser into the bag on the bed. “Come here, Auden.” We walk together to the white rocking chair in the corner of the room. I sit, pulling her onto my lap and wrapping my arms around her tightly.

My mother used to read me all sorts of stories in this chair. My father’s words earlier replay in my head. Does he really think my mother wasn’t the one responsible for trying to kill me? If he’s right...well, everything I feel about her will look differently. Including memories I have of her in this chair, telling stories every night and holding me close. Her White Diamonds perfume surrounding us in a warm hug.

I can almost smell it as I hold Auden.

I never thought I’d have the chance to make those same memories in this chair with my daughter.

“Do you want to go back to California?”

She rubs her fingers across my hands, contemplating my question. “I think I like it here better,” she admits.

I ruffle her hair playfully. “So, you’re telling me you’d be okay with leaving our apartment and your school just to live in this big haunted house?”

She giggles, snuggling into my chest. “It’s not haunted, Mama. The ghost here is a nice ghost.”

My breath catches in my throat.

“What do you mean there’s a nice ghost?” I ask her.

Auden pulls away from my chest, looking right in my eyes. “She’s a nice ghost. She comes to help me at night when the bad one tries to scare me.”

Deep breath in, Georgie girl.

My next words tremble out of my lips. “Auden, what does this nice ghost look like?”

Auden jumps off my lap, skipping across the room to one of the drawers she riffled through earlier. She pulls out something and brings it back to me, handing it to me with a smile. “This is the nice ghost.” She points down at the photo, my eyes following her finger with dread.

I have to hold back a scream when my mother’s face gazes back at me. “This is the ghost that visits you? Does she look like she does in this photo?” I ask with bated breath. I don’t know if I can stay here if she’s seeing the version of my mother’s ghost that haunts me.



Auden shakes her head. “Yes, she’s very pretty, like you.” She beams at the photo before her face turns serious. “She told me I have to protect you from the bad one.”

“The bad one?”

“Yeah,” she says flippantly, twirling in place like the five-year-old that she is. Like we aren’t in the middle of a life-altering conversation. “The bad one that tried to kill you. Can I put Papa’s card right on top so when he opens the bag he sees it first?”

I nod, unable to speak.

“Yay! I’ll go get it, and then we can pack it all up for him. I bet Horton will try to sneak away in the bag, so make sure you don’t hear any meows when you leave. Okay?” Her eyebrow is cocked, hand on her hip, waiting for my response.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll make sure there’s no meowing. I promise.”

Happy with my answer, she skips out of the room joyfully, like ghosts and haunted houses are nothing to stress about.

Leaving me alone with more questions than I know what to do with. And with more fear of the living people in Crane Manor than I have of the ghosts.

After tucking Auden in for the night and bidding Mrs. Foster farewell, Ian and I head back to the hospital. The drive is short, both of us quiet, stuck in the cyclone of silent thoughts and secrets between us.

At least that’s how I feel. Surrounded by a constant storm of lies and secrets I’m keeping from him.

Auden being his daughter.

My role in his sister's death.

The fact that I'm still in love with him.

That last one might not be as big of a secret after the last few nights we've spent together. His phantom touch still lingers on my body when I remember how we fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms last night.

I've never been able to hide my heart from him. It's pointless for me to try now when I have relied on his strength so much since coming back here.

"Do you want me to go in with you?" Ian asks as he pulls the car into the employee parking lot behind the hospital. "It's okay if you don't. I know you and Lincoln haven't had much alone time since you came home."

Part of me wants to tell him no because I want to hear more about my father's theories about my mother. Another part of me doesn't want to leave Ian's sight because his presence is such a comfort to me, and I feel like I can conquer anything with him by my side.

"Come with me, please?" I finally say, twirling my fingers in the hem of the flannel shirt I changed into before we left.

He places his hand over my anxious fingers, squeezing softly. "Always, Georgie."

I glance down at his hands, and my eyes catch on the leather band under his sleeve. I tug on his sleeve and notice it's the same watch my father wore for years. It was a gift from my grandfather to my father when he married my mother. My mother had a matching locket, and their initials were carved onto the back of both.

"Where did you get this watch?" I ask him, running my fingers over the band and

watch face.

I look up at him as he runs his other hand through his dark curls nervously while gnawing at his lip. “I found it with your mother’s diary in her desk,” he answers.

My eyebrows shoot up. “And you just decided to start wearing it?”

“Jesus, no, Georgie. I’m not a thief,” he stammers. “I gave it to your dad after I gave you the diary. Your dad told me I should keep it.”

I don’t miss the hint of pride in his voice as I run my fingers over the band again. The leather is aged but still in good shape for sitting in a desk drawer for who knows how many years.

“What else did he say when he gave it to you?” I can’t wrap my head around the idea of my father just tossing something so precious to him away.

Ian pulls his hand out of my grasp, looking down at the watch with a small smile on his lips before he finally answers. “He told me that he and Caroline wanted to give this watch to their son one day.” He glances at me nervously, still chewing on his lip before he reaches across me and opens the glove box and pulls out a small green velvet bag. “And he said they had always planned on giving this to you once you were older.” He grabs my hand and turns it so my palm is facing up. I watch him open the bag carefully, turning it upside down before the small golden locket falls into my hand.

I stare down at the oval locket in shock. I thought for sure my mother was buried with it. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever expect to see it again. Turning it over, I see my parents initials still intact, but there’s more than just their initials carved on it. I run my fingers gently over the new engravings: GLH and ACH.

Georgia Lynn Harris and Auden Caroline Harris.

“When did you do this?” I ask him in a strained voice. I’m trying desperately not to cry again. Today has been full of too many tears. “How did you know Auden’s middle name?” I look up, and he smiles my smile at me. The galaxy in his eyes shining brightly tonight, just for me.

“Well, first, I asked Auden what her name was and when her birthday was. Not because I was being creepy or whatever. I honestly wanted to know.” I raise my eyebrow at him. “Now that I said it like that, it sounds creepy. But I can’t help but want to know all about her. She’s your favorite person in this world, and you’re mine so...” His voice trails off, and I know if the lights were on, I’d see that hint of a blush creeping over his cheeks.

“Anyways, not the point. After I showed your father the watch and locket, he told me to keep the watch because I was the closest thing to a son he’ll ever have.” He looks down at the watch again, running his fingers across the band like I was moments ago. “He also asked me to get the locket cleaned up and to give it to you whenever I felt the moment was ‘right.’ His words, I swear.” He holds his hands up in defense as I roll my eyes. “Then I asked him if it was okay if I took it and got your’s and Auden’s initials added to it, and he said he loved the idea of the whole family being together somewhere, even if it was just on the back of this locket. I dropped it off at the jeweler in town yesterday after lunch and picked it up while you were visiting your dad earlier today.”

I pull the locket to my chest, holding it close. “Thank you, Ian. Really. It’s perfect.”

“There’s more,” he says nervously, holding his hand out for the locket.

I don’t want to part with it now that I have it in my possession, but Ian’s eager and nervous puppy dog eyes make it hard to resist.

Handing him the locket, he leans on the center console. I lean closer to him so I can watch him open the small clasp on the side with a delicate touch. He opens the oval locket, revealing a photo inside, his thumb covering the empty side of the locket.

The photograph is an old, worn photo of my mother and I sitting in the rocking chair in the corner of my parents' room. I'm sitting on her lap as she reads a story to me. I move in closer to get a better look. I must have been about Auden's age in this photo.

"Your dad said he put this photo of you two in there for her birthday one year, replacing the one of the two of them," Ian says softly. He shifts his thumb from the other side of the locket, and I hold back a gasp. "I took this of you and Auden the other day while you were in the library. I figured you might like to have one of you and your daughter in there as well."

The photo of Auden and I is obviously newer. We are sitting side by side on one of the couches in the library. I'm reading her a passage from my favorite story as a child, *The Little Mermaid*. Not that I can see the book clearly in this thumb-sized photo, but I remember this moment from the other day. She found my copy of *The Little Mermaid* in my old bedroom and asked me to read it to her.

"Here, turn so I can help you put it on," Ian suggests.

I turn, relishing in the small brushes of his fingers on my neck as he moves my hair aside before he places the necklace around my throat, buckling the clasp quickly before shifting my hair over it.

Reaching up, I lay my hand on the locket now sitting perfectly between my collarbones. "All right, we need to go inside and see Dad before I turn into a giant puddle of tears in your car," I say as I laugh, opening the door at the same time as Ian and stepping into the chilly spring night of Texas.

The cool breeze hits me, making me shudder. Ian's jacket is wrapped around my shoulders moments later. I look at him and smile as he grabs my father's bag from the back seat.

"Ready?" Ian holds out his hand, and I place mine in his without any hesitation. We head into the hospital hand in hand. It's moments like these with him that make me yearn for the kids we used to be, young and in love, when the only secrets we kept between us were the ones we whispered between stolen kisses and tender moments.

Moments like this remind me how easy it would be to stay here, with him.

15

Georgia

Now

To both of our surprise, my father is awake and very alert when we reach the open door of his room. He's yelling at the TV in the corner as his Braves lose. The nurse brushes past us in a huff of frustration before turning back toward Ian and me.

"Dr. Foster, if you can't get your patient to behave, then you won't be leaving until he does," she hisses out, pointing a finger at him and then back at my father.

I laugh under my breath, causing the angry nurse, with a name tag that reads Olivia, to scowl at me. Ian chuckles next to me before Nurse Olivia throws her hands up at both of us, turning on her heel and storming down the hall.

I nearly have a heart attack right along with my dad when I see how animated and lively he is. It's a damn miracle to see after seeing the way he looked on the floor of his bedroom. I make a mental note to keep a closer eye on him once he gets home.

We walk into the room together, holding hands and giggling like love-sick teenagers. "Dad, are you pissing the nurses off again?" I tease.

"I wouldn't piss them off so much if they'd get me something real to eat besides this nasty-ass Jell-O. Who even likes green Jell-O? Do I look like I want to be puking green shit all over everyone like that girl from The Exorcist?" Dad looks at me, then

his eyes land on Ian's hand still gripped in mine, and he winks, making me blush all over again. "About time you two figured your issues out," he jokes.

What he doesn't know is that my heart is more confused than ever. We haven't worked anything out. We are just making it all so much more complicated.

Ian releases my hand, steps forward, and shakes my dad's hand before grabbing the chair from the corner of the room. "You sit and visit with each other before Olivia comes back and kicks us all out. I'll go see what I can scrounge up from the break room for you."

"A man after my own heart, or stomach." Dad beams at Ian as he walks out of the room, then turns his attention fully to me.

"You seem in better spirits this evening," I tease. I can't remember the last time my father made jokes, let alone laugh while being in the same room as me.

He shifts in the bed so he's sitting up. "Something about being out of that house makes me feel more alive," he says somberly. "I'm sure you know that better than anyone, Bug."

My heart starts racing in my chest. Partly due to the fact that my dad wants to actually talk to me, another part due to the fact that he wants to talk to me about my leaving Crane Manor ten years ago.

Before I decided to start applying to colleges outside of Texas, I asked my father if he would be okay with me leaving him. I remember vividly—like it was yesterday—the nonchalant shrug of his shoulders. Almost like he could care less if I left. He certainly didn't ask me to stay.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I shouldn't have left the way I did."



He shakes his head. “No, Georgia. I’m sorry for not being the father you needed after your mother’s death.” He takes a shaky breath, and I reach forward, grabbing his hand tightly. “Her passing destroyed me. Destroyed me down to my very core. I didn’t know how to be your father without her to guide me.”

I blink rapidly, trying to stave off the tears. We’ve never talked like this. About her. Ever.

“Dad, it’s not your fault. We were both broken, trying to pick up the shattered pieces after she did what she did. I don’t blame you. I don’t even blame myself. It’s just what life had in store for us.” I shrug, a sad smile reaching my lips.

“You’ve grown into such a strong, beautiful woman, Bug. Your mother would be so proud of you. Whatever you feel for her, I hope you know that. She loved you. Really, really loved you.” He squeezes my hand gently. “I am so proud of you, too. Auden was a bit of a surprise. But the best surprise you could have given an old, grumpy man like me.”

We both laugh, the strained atmosphere in the room lifting at the mention of my daughter.

“Oh, that reminds me. She made this for you,” I say, standing and reaching into the side pocket of the bag we brought for him. “She loves you, you know. Her Papa,” I tell him, handing him the card she made before taking a seat again.

I watch as he opens it, reading her words silently to himself and smiling a smile I haven’t seen in many, many years.

“She’s quite the artist. I especially love the furry brat she added in.” He points to Horton. “That demon cat keeps sneaking into my room and biting my nose in the middle of the night. But he’s cute, I guess. Can’t forget to shut the door behind me

with that one haunting the halls.”

I roll my eyes, laughing silently. “She loves that stupid cat. He sleeps with her every night.”

His eyes scan the photo again, then they turn serious as they meet mine.

“When do you plan on telling that boy he’s her father?”

My blood stops cold, and my vision goes blurry. I stare at my father, opening and closing my mouth repeatedly as I try to come up with a lie.

But I’m tired of lying.

“How did you know?” I whisper, looking back at the door to make sure Ian hasn’t come back.

Dad lets out an offended snort. “I have eyes, Georgia. The boy puts all the stars in the sky for you. Always has. I also know that six years ago I told him to go find you,” he says matter-of-factly. “He came back even more broken than I was. I knew something horrible happened between the two of you, but I never knew what. Auden filled in some of those holes for me when the two of them came down to the lake the other morning. The moment I laid eyes on her, I knew. She was yours, but she was also his.”

Silent tears slip down my cheeks as my father rips my lies apart.

“Ian didn’t seem to know, though. Maybe he has an idea. But I don’t think so. Whatever lie you told him, he seems to believe. I can see that it’s eating him alive, wishing that he hadn’t messed up. Whatever he did, or you did. I don’t know. I don’t really care to know. I just want you to be happy, and I know that silly boy makes you

shine brighter than all the constellations in the sky.” He squeezes my hand again, patting it with his other.

I wipe my tears away with my free hand. “I don’t know how to tell him. He’s going to hate me, Dad. There’s so much I’m hiding from him. So much I’m hiding from everyone.” I sniffle, taking a deep breath, grabbing my mom’s locket like it can keep me from sinking into the abyss.

“Georgia,” Dad says sternly. “Nothing that happened to Irene was your fault.”

I look up in shock. “What—how do you know about that?”

He gives me a sad smile before looking down at the locket. “Did you find her diary? I left it in her desk, along with that locket and Ian’s watch when Lydia said she was going to make that room up for you.”

“You knew about it?” I gasp. “You want me to read it?” My heart feels like it’s going to explode in my chest from all these new revelations.

“You need to read it, Bug. It has all the answers.”

The door opens behind me, and Ian walks in with a brown paper bag and a smile on his face. His expression falters when he sees the tears in my eyes, but I give him a reassuring smile.

“I managed to snag some bagels, cream cheese, and a cobb salad. I know it’s not the bacon burger you want, Link. But as a doctor, I can’t recommend that to someone who just had a heart attack,” Ian tells us as he brings the rolling desk over to the bed for Dad, placing the bag on top before turning and flashing me another smile.

The door opens again a moment later, and we are all greeted by Nurse Olivia, who is

already sporting a scowl. “Visiting hours are over. You need to leave so my patient can get some sleep.”

My father rolls his eyes dramatically, making Ian and I both chuckle. “You two go. I’ll be home soon. Give that granddaughter of mine a kiss for me. You can even give the demon cat an ear scratch or two.” I stand and lean over to give my dad a kiss on his cheek. “Read the diary, Georgia. It’s important,” he whispers. I nod, and Ian comes over to shake his hand. “Treat them well, son.”

“Always,” Ian responds.

The two men I dreaded coming back to see, shaking hands. This is the life we should have had. Ian, Auden, and I, a real family. My father, a doting grandfather. Lydia, a grandmother to a little girl who reminds us both so much of Irene, I know she would love Auden with her entire heart. Even the thought of Ian’s father being a part of Auden’s life doesn’t terrify me as much.

I an and I walk hand in hand back to the car. He opens the door for me, making me feel silly until I look up at him and everything about him is screaming at me to tell him the truth.

The short drive back to the house is filled with silence, both of us lost in our thoughts again as Ian’s hand is on my lap. His fingers drum lightly against my thigh, sending all sorts of electric pulses throughout my body.

“Let’s go sit under the willow tree for a while,” I tell him as he puts the car into park behind the manor. “If that’s okay?”

His smile threatens to undo me. “That sounds perfect. I’ll go grab the quilt from the couch and some wine and meet you there in a few minutes. I’m pretty sure Mom made some banana bread today. Do you want some?”

“Mrs. Foster’s famous banana bread? Absolutely, yes. I just need to grab a few things from upstairs,” I tell him before following him into the dark kitchen. I’d like to check on Auden, and I need to grab my mother’s diary from my bedroom before Ian and I head to the willow tree.

I sneak through the house as quickly as I can so as not to wake Mrs. Foster, who is asleep on the sofa bed in the living room. I should buy her some flowers tomorrow for watching Auden. I told her that she could take Auden to their house near the back of the property, but she declined that idea quickly and offered to just stay here with her for the night.

As I’m walking up the stairs, I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Someone, or something, is watching me.

I stop midstep, my breathing slowing as my heart races, my mind urging me to run while my body stands frozen.

Deep breath in, Georgie girl.

Forcing my body and my mind to get on the same page, I turn around slowly. To face whatever, or whoever, is going to be standing behind me, waiting to steal me into the shadows for all the sins I’ve committed.

I gasp loudly when I see Ian standing right behind me, only a step away, holding a quilt and a small bag.

“What the fuck, Ian?” I hiss. “You nearly scared me half to death, you asshole!”

He chuckles, making me seriously debate pushing him down the rest of the stairs.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to notice me,” he says with a smug smile.

When we were little, before Irene passed away, we used to play this hide-and-seek game called Black Widow. We would turn all the lights out and essentially play hide and seek in the dark. When it was mine or Irene’s turn to search, Ian would sneak up behind us and follow us through the house until we finally noticed him. Every time the game ended with one of us crying and Ian laughing before the lights were turned on. My father eventually banned the game because he was tired of hearing us scream all night at each other.

I shove him playfully before heading up the stairs to check on Auden. “How long were you standing there?” I ask as we hit the top of the staircase.

“Only a moment. You were already stopped in the middle of the staircase like a weirdo by the time I snuck up on you.”

So it wasn’t Ian that was watching me. My mother, perhaps? Waiting with another warning to protect and not trust someone?

I look over at Ian, worry and unease washing over me as I gaze at him. Then, he flashes that crooked smile of his at me, and those thoughts dissipate in a cloud of smoke between us. Ian is the one person in this house besides Auden that I know wouldn’t betray my trust.

I tip-toe into Auden’s bedroom, leaving Ian in the hall behind me. Auden is curled up on her side, the pink duvet pooled at her feet. One arm is tucked under her pillow, and the other is wrapped around Horton, who is taking his guard-cat duties very seriously tonight as he snoozes right next to her, completely unaware of my presence. I carefully pull the duvet up and cover her little body, placing a soft kiss on her forehead before tip-toeing back into the hallway where Ian waits for me at her door.

“She looks so peaceful when she sleeps,” he muses, a soft smile playing on his lips. “Much unlike her drooling mother who hogs all the blankets,” he teases.

I love this playful side of him. I feel like I haven’t seen enough of it since we’ve been back.

I wonder if he’ll still be this content with my company once I tell him all of my secrets.

“I’ll be right out. I’m just going to grab the diary from my room,” I tell him before rushing across the hall and into the guest bedroom.

The couch is still a mess from our sleepover, and I can’t help but smile as I recall the way we fell asleep together, wrapped into each other's arms.

Safe from the ghosts and secrets of our past.

I quickly grab the blue book from the nightstand and head back out to meet Ian in the hall.

Only, he’s not in the hall anymore.

I start to head toward the stairs when I hear low whispers from Auden’s room.

When I peek my head in, the small lamp on the bedside table is on, and I see Ian sitting on the bed next to Auden, who is very much awake now.

“What if the bad one tries to hurt Mommy again?” Auden asks Ian, her tone worried as she tugs on the duvet.

Ian chuckles and reaches forward and tucks a stray lock of her behind her ear.

“Nobody is going to harm you or your mom, not while I’m here to chase all the bad things away.”

Auden chews on her lip, clearly unsatisfied with Ian’s answer. “But what about Papa? The bad one hurt him already, and you were there,” she argues, causing Ian to shake his head in defeat.

“You’re right. I was there. But the bad one that hurt your Papa is inside his body, already making him sick. Your mom isn’t sick, and if something tries to get her, I’ll fight them off. I promise I won’t let anything bad happen to her, or to you.”

Auden holds out her pinky. “Pinky swear?”

Ian wraps his pinky around hers, and they shake on it. “Pinky swear,” he promises her with a smirk. Her answering smile is enough to light up the entire planet. “Now, go to sleep before your mom catches you awake at this hour. She might not let us go get milkshakes at the fair tomorrow if you don’t go to sleep.”

“I love milkshakes!” Auden yells excitedly. “Oops, I’m not supposed to yell. Mama might catch us.” She giggles before tucking herself back into the pink duvet.

Ian turns the lamp off before leaning over and giving her hair a playful pat. “Good night, Auden.”

“Good night, Ian. Don’t break our promise. Okay?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, kid.”



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

16

Ian

Now

Georgia and I make our way down to the willow tree in silence. She nearly gave me a heart attack when I turned and saw her watching Auden and me. She didn't say anything, but the smile she gave me said enough as she held her hand out for mine.

Auden may not be mine, but she's wrapped herself right next to her mother in that small, unbroken chamber of my heart I reserve for them.

I know I need to come clean and be honest about my true feelings. I've already told Georgia that I fucked up by leaving her all those years ago; she knows that much at least. But she doesn't know that I'd give up just about anything to have her and Auden both in my life.

A week isn't long enough with either of them, and each strike of the clock leaves me feeling hopeless and restless.

Hopeless because I know there's no world where Georgia would opt to leave her life and choose to stay here.

Restless because I know there's no world where I watch her leave without me again, especially now.

“Can you read another journal entry or two?” Georgia asks once we get settled underneath the tree on the quilt I carried out for us.

The willow tree fronds sway in the breeze around us as the lake makes small waves that crash against the dock in the distance. The frogs and grasshoppers sing their midnight song around us.

I pop open the wine cork and pour us both a cup, using coffee mugs instead of wine glasses so they stay upright on the uneven earth underneath us. Handing her a mug, I take the diary from her.

“Here. I’ll turn my phone flashlight on,” Georgia says, and the small clearing under the tree lights up as she places her phone face-side up. “Can you read the words, or should we turn yours on, too?”

I open the diary, squinting slightly as the words come into focus in the muted light. “I can read it,” I reassure her.

We both take a long swig of our wine, and she leans into me, resting her head on my shoulder as I begin to read her mother’s words once more.

Dear Georgia,

Today was a better day. It’s the first time in a long while I didn’t feel like I was failing you as a mother for being so lost in my grief. I know you can tell when I’m sad, and I wish I knew the magic fix to take all the pain away and just be there for you. Yesterday, I yelled at you for trying to come into my study. I regretted it as soon as your beautiful face fell and you left without a word after placing something on my desk. When I saw the photo you drew for me, the one with the three of us having a picnic under the willow tree, I knew I was the worst mother ever. Your father held me all night as I cried myself to sleep, silently vowing to do better for you.

For both of you.

So today, your father and I took you and the twins to the fair in town. I'll never forget the way your face lit up when you saw the colorful lights, the tactfully decorated booths with cotton candy of every flavor, and all the rides you'd only seen in movies until today. The fair only comes to town every couple of years, and before now, you and the twins were too little for all of the rides. This year, though, you got to go on all but three of them. I promise to take you back the next time it's in town so we can conquer those last three pesky rides with their height restrictions. Ian, the tall sweetheart that he is, chose to only go on rides that you and Irene could ride too. I'd be lying if I didn't have this secret wish for a much, much older version of you two getting married and having your own babies to take to the fair one day. Irene being the perfect maid of honor and best auntie to your children, of course.

You make him work for that future, my littlest love, if it's meant to be.

I asked you what your favorite part of the fair was, and you told me the Ferris wheel. That was my favorite part, too. You said that you loved that we went together, holding hands the entire ride up and down. When we stopped at the highest peak of the ride, your whole face lit up with wonder and awe as we gazed into the stars. I hope you never lose that. The ability to love everything the way it was meant to be by our creator. The stars, the trees, the flowers.

You find such beauty in the world, Georgie girl. Never lose that. Always choose love, happiness, forgiveness. Life is too short to be stuck living in the ugliness of it all.

Choose love, always.

And remember that I love you, most of all.

Love always,

Mom

I place the book on my lap, leaving it open to where I stopped reading. “Do you want me to keep reading?”

Georgia stirs, pulling her head off of my shoulder, sniffing quietly next to me. “I just can’t wrap my head around any of it, Ian.” Her shoulders slump as she starts to cry silently beside me. “How could that be the same woman who tried to kill me?” She looks up at me, her gray-blue eyes filled to the brim with tears.

I place my hand gently against her cheek, wiping away the few tears that have managed to escape. “Your mom loved you, Georgia. So much. We may never know why she did what she did, but I do know that she loved you.”

She leans into me, and I wrap my arms around her as she cries into my chest, stroking her back in gentle motions, wishing more than anything that I had the answers to all the questions that haunt her.

“My dad doesn’t think she did it,” Georgia mumbles into my chest.

“What do you mean?”

She pulls out of my arms, bringing both her hands to her face and angrily wiping away her tears. “He doesn’t think she tried to kill me.”

I open my mouth in surprise, then close it again. It would change everything for Georgia, and Lincoln, if there was some type of proof that Caroline wasn’t responsible for her own demise and destruction of her own family.

“Who would have done it then?” I ask her.

She lets out a defeated laugh. “I have no fucking idea. Up until today, I never gave it much thought. Her death was a cut-and-dry suicide case. Poisoned by her own hand, with the cup that should have been mine. I never gave her the benefit of the doubt. I just believed what everyone told me. Until today, I never thought twice about it being a murder.”

“Murder?”

She shrugs. “Yeah, if someone else tried to poison me, it’d be a murder, right? Or someone wanted my mother dead. Either way, murder. Or she was stuck in the throes of depression and didn’t realize what she was doing? I don’t know, Ian. My stomach is twisted up in knots, and I don’t know what to believe or who to trust anymore. Now Auden is talking about ghosts and bad things. I shouldn’t have come back.”

I look up into the swaying fronds of the willow tree. Before we came out here, I had every intention of telling Georgia how I felt about her, about us, about Auden.

But she has so much on her plate already. I can’t add my shit to that.

I sigh, grabbing my cup of wine and finishing it in three gulps before picking the diary back up. “Let’s keep reading then and see if this diary has any answers. Shall we?”

Georgia nods as she continues to wipe at her tears. I open my arm for her, and she leans on me with no hesitation. Just like when we were kids, huddled together. Too young to understand why we lost Irene and Caroline the tragic and horrific way we did.

Dear Georgie girl,

Last night you had one of your sleepwalking spells again. Lydia woke me up in the

dead of night screaming like a banshee from across the way. When your father and I looked out the window, you were standing at the end of the dock wearing your baby-blue nightgown and holding your stuffed bear, staring into the lake. Or at least, I assumed you were. The shadows of the night made it hard to see. We both went running down the stairs, racing to get to you before you took that last step into the dark waters below. By the time we made it to you, Lydia was already there, tugging you away from the ledge, but you wouldn't budge. It was like you were superglued to the spot. A forklift wouldn't have been able to move you. I remember your father reminding us not to touch you. You aren't supposed to touch a person who is stuck in a dream like you were. But how could I not reach for you? Protect you? You're my entire universe. Of course I had to get you away from the gaping monster that the lake looked like. But even I couldn't coax you into moving. You looked right through me. It wasn't until Ian came running out of his house, screaming that he could help you. Your father and I stood back next to Lydia and watched Ian whisper something into your ear, and like magic, you returned to us again. Your eyes landed on mine, huge and afraid, and you ran right into the comfort of my arms, sobbing. Five years old and you experienced so much fear in your tiny body. If I could hold you close to me forever and keep you safe from the monsters and dangers of the world, I would, my sweet girl. I would hold you and never let you go. Ian held one of your hands all the way back to the house while I clung tightly to the other. Your protectors, keeping you safe from the monsters of the world. If only I knew how to keep you safe from your own self and the scary things that haunt you in your dreams, driving you to put yourself in dangerous and terrifying predicaments. Until I learn, I will do everything in my power to keep you safe from your nightmares. I love you, my Georgie girl. To the moon and back.

Love always,

Mom

I feel Georgia stiffen beside me. Her head lies on my shoulder as I close the diary and

place it on the quilt beside me.

“What’s wrong, G?” I ask, tugging on her chin to get a good look at her in the muted light that surrounds us. She has tears in her eyes but a smile on her lips.

“Nothing,” she says, and I quirk an eyebrow at her. She sighs, pulling herself out of the comfort of my arms. “It’s just, even as kids you were always saving me from myself. I don’t remember having those sleepwalking spells, but my father said something about them recently, and obviously, they happened more frequently than I thought. I just don’t remember them. I only remember the nightmares I got after my mother died,” she says with another shrug. “And you were always there to save me from those, too. You’re always saving me from the things that go bump in the night, Ian.” She smiles a shy smile at me, her gray-blue eyes shining brightly as we gaze at each other in the small space of the world we’ve carved out for ourselves.

I run my hands through my hair, gnawing on my lip the way I do when I’m nervous and deep in thought. My body is begging me to kiss her again, to taste her lips and feel every inch of her. My brain, though, my brain can’t quite catch up with that. Especially when I’m stuck with this massive lie of omission weighing heavily on my chest.

“You say you don’t remember the sleepwalking and nightmares?” I ask, avoiding eye contact with her as I drum my fingers across the mug as I lift it to my lips. “At all?”

Georgia shakes her head. “I don’t. I only remember her ghost. That’s an image I don’t think I’ll ever be able to burn out of my head.”

“Do you see her now? Now that you’re back at the manor, I mean? Have you seen her?”

The look of fear in her eyes permeates my soul as she nods.

Yes.

Georgia lifts her drink to her lips, letting the rim of the mug rest against her bottom lip as she stares at the fronds surrounding us. “I’ve seen her every day since I’ve been back. Several times. I think I’m losing my mind,” she admits softly before finally draining her cup.

It’s my fault. She only comes back to haunt you when I’m around.

But I can’t admit that. The cowardly person I am would rather play her knight in shining armor than be the one that causes her all this misery.

I convinced Georgia that going into her mother’s office was a good idea, that it would make her feel closer to her, even after death. Just like sneaking into Irene’s untouched bedroom had always brought me some sort of solace. Being around her stuff made it feel like she was still there with me after she died.

The first time Georgia saw her was the same day I snuck into her mother’s office with her. Georgia left screaming, and her mother has tortured her from that day on. Coming during the night and leaving Georgia in hysterics and tears as I held her through the aftermath, night after night.

I thought she had finally released her grip on Georgia the day she finally escaped this graveyard when she left for college all those years ago. The nightmares stopped then.

Until I was selfish and thought I could finally be with Georgia, the way we always promised each other. When I followed her to California six years ago, not knowing that I was dragging her mother’s ghost right along with me.

How do I tell the woman I love that I’m the reason she’s being haunted by her dead mother’s ghost?



## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

17

Georgia

Nine Years Old

I stare at the willow tree from the comfort of my bedroom, hating the sight of it just as much as I hate the stupid lake that lies beyond it.

My mom's been dead for six months.

My best friend has been dead for three years.

The lake and willow tree are both reminders of the two worst days of my life.

Two gravestones, with no names carved into them. Instead, those names are carved into my heart. Ripping it to pieces with each reminder that they are both gone.

I miss them both every day, so much.

But I miss them more today. Because today is my birthday. The first birthday without a hug and kiss from my mother. The first birthday without being smothered in her favorite perfume.

Another birthday where I age one more year, and my best friend stays stuck at five.

There's a soft knock at my door.

“Come in,” I try to shout, my voice clouded by sadness as Mrs. Foster enters the room.

“Happy birthday, sweet girl,” she says sadly. A fake smile tugs on her lips as she comes closer and wraps me in a hug.

“Thanks,” I say lifelessly.

Mrs. Foster tuts under her breath and pulls me away from her so she can see my face. “Oh, hunny, I know today must be so hard for you. But your mother wouldn’t want you to spend the day sad like this. She was my best friend, and I know she’d hate to see you this sad on your birthday. Your birthday was her favorite day of the year, you know?”

I roll my eyes, refusing to respond. My mother didn’t even want me to have this birthday.

“Well, when you’re ready, I made your favorite cake, and I even made some banana bread muffins for breakfast,” Mrs. Foster says, smiling at me with that sad smile of hers. The one that matches Ian’s nowadays.

“Thank you, Mrs. Foster. Did my dad leave already for work?”

Mrs. Foster gives me a look full of pity. The same looks that everyone gives me now that my mother is dead. “He had to go into work early this morning and handle some things. I’m sorry, Georgia.”

I feel like someone is trying to yank my heart right through my skin.

He never came in and wished me a happy birthday.

He's always made me happy face pancakes for my birthday.

I miss him so much, and he's not even dead.

"Chin up, Georgie. It's your birthday!" Ian pushes past his mom and hands me a yellow sunflower. "Happy Birthday." He smiles, making my own smile sneak out.

"You two behave. I'll be downstairs if you need me," Mrs. Foster tells us with another sad smile on her lips. Probably realizing there are supposed to be three of us, but now there are only two.

I sit on the end of my bed. Ian follows me and sits next to me as we stare out the big window in my bedroom that overlooks the lake.

"I miss her," I whisper.

Ian puts his arm around me. "I bet she misses you, too."

"I wish my dad was here. He always makes me happy face pancakes for my birthday," I say, looking down at the yellow petals of the sunflower.

"I can't make pancakes, but I know what might make you feel better. Come on!" Ian jumps off the bed and holds his hand out. I grab it and follow him into the hallway.

Ian looks around nervously before pulling me with him farther into the hall until we are standing in front of my mother's office. The room I was never allowed to enter. "When I'm sad and miss Irene, I like to just go sit in her room and think about her. Maybe you can do that here in your mom's office," he says quietly before opening the door.

We both walk into the office, my heart pounding hard as I take in the room.

It's nothing but a small office. On one wall, there is a giant window that faces toward the side of the house. On another wall, her desk sits. Untouched. Full of papers and notes that she probably thought she'd get to eventually. The third wall has an orange couch that turns into a bed. I remember my mom sleeping in here a few times when she was mad at my dad. She doesn't know that I knew about this, and I guess now she never will.

I walk over to her desk and sit on the navy blue chair. It still smells like her. The whole room still smells like her perfume.

My lip trembles, and I start crying.

"Oh, Georgie. You're not supposed to cry on your birthday," Ian says sadly. "I shouldn't have brought you in here. I thought it would help like Irene's room helps me sometimes."

I sniffle loudly. "It does help. It just makes me miss her more."

"Well, when you miss her a lot, just come sit in here, and it could help you feel better."

I smile at him, wiping at the tears that are on my cheeks. "Thanks, Ian. Maybe I'll do that."

Later that night, I beg Mrs. Foster to let Ian have a sleepover with me.

"He could sleep in the guest room!" I protest when she mutters something about boys and girls not sleeping together. "Please? It's my birthday, and my dad forgot about it." I pout, hoping that the small tremble of my lip will convince her. "Irene used to have a sleepover for every birthday."

Mrs. Foster's eyes close, and she pinches her nose like she's in pain before she lets out a long breath. "Okay, but just this once! And Ian, you will sleep in the guest room, or you can both sleep on the couches in the living room. Separate couches! Deal?" she asks.

Ian and I flash smiles at each other. "Deal!"

We spend the rest of the night in the living room watching scary movies and eating way too much cake and banana muffins.

My father enters the living room stiffly. "Bedtime, both of you," he says gruffly before turning and heading back into the kitchen. We hear the back door slam shut loudly.

I look over at Ian, who is busy cleaning up the small mess we made. "He forgot my birthday. How could he forget my birthday?"

"Maybe he has something big and wants to surprise you later?" Ian suggests.

I shake my head in defeat as we both walk up the stairs. "He doesn't love me the way he loved me when Mom was alive," I say sadly. "I think I'm going to go hang out in her office for a little while before I go to bed. Thanks for spending my birthday with me, Ian."

"I'll see you in the morning, Georgie," Ian says, then he shuts the guest bedroom door behind him, leaving me alone in the hall.

My heart feels heavy in my chest as I stop in front of my mother's office. I reach out and open the door slowly and gasp loudly when I see my mother standing there. She's staring out the window, her white dress torn at the hem and stained.

“Mama?” I whisper, my breathing coming out in excited pants. “Mom, is that really you?” I step closer, needing to touch her.

I reach out and touch her shoulder, but my hand goes right through her. I let out a blood-curdling scream when she finally turns to face me.

This can’t be her. This can’t be my mother. This is a monster disguised as her.

Her hair is a tangled mess—vines and branches weave into and out of her dark locks. Her eyes are a milky white, looking at nothing yet seeing right through me at the same time. Her nose is dripping blood, her mouth oozing out the same white foam that choked the life out of her six months ago.

No. No. No.

This can’t be my mother.

She reaches out toward me again, and I let out another scream before turning and running right into Ian in the hallway. I turn and slam the door shut behind me, making the sconces on the wall shake and the flames dance.

“Don’t ever go in there again, Ian! Don’t ever open that door!” I turn and sob into his chest.

“What’s in there?” he asks, his voice shaking just as much as my own.

“Death!” I yell at him, taking deep breaths, trying to calm myself down. “I saw my mother’s ghost. But she looks scary now, like she did when she was dying. I swear it was her. She’s in there.” I shudder, shaking my head to clear the memory. “Promise you won’t ever go in there.”

He rubs my back as I clutch his. “Yeah, I promise, Georgie. I promise.”

We both eye the door skeptically before finally heading back toward my bedroom. My heart is still racing, and I can’t shake the image of my mother’s ghost out of my thoughts. I’ll never sleep again.

“Want me to stay with you until you fall asleep?” Ian asks. “I used to keep guard when Irene had bad dreams, too. Sometimes.” His voice is sad as he looks down at our feet, toeing the plush carpet.

“What if your mom finds out?”

“Well, if she finds out, she’ll ground me. And then I’ll just have to sneak out and keep guard at night,” he says as he smirks at me. “I promise I’ll keep you safe.”

I believe him with my entire heart.

18

Georgia

Now

“Come on. Let’s get some sleep. I’m sure Auden will be up bright and early with that promise of the fair whispering in her ear all night.” I grin at Ian before getting to my feet.

We collect everything in a comfortable silence. My mother always used to have this saying when we would spend time together in silence.

Love needs no words.

The saying has stuck with me ever since the first moment I heard her say it. And since her death, I’ve tried to find beauty in the silence of life. Whether it’s brushing Auden’s hair as she reads a story to herself or spending time with Ian in the car without speaking to each other. I’ve relished in the love that surrounds the silence because of my mother.

I don’t understand how someone who supposedly loved me so much could try to kill me.

Yes, you do, Georgie girl. You know why. Because you’re a monster yourself, and your mother knew it and couldn’t live with that secret one moment longer.



“Here, you forgot to eat this,” Ian says as he hands me a hefty piece of banana bread. My mouth is already watering, and I haven’t even taken a bite yet. “What do you think Auden’s favorite part of the fair will be?” Ian asks as we make our way back toward the house.

I gaze up, looking in every window for my mother’s ghost. I have a strong feeling I’ll see her in my dreams tonight, and I hope it’s the version I miss most and not the one that haunts me in my nightmares. A curtain in the upstairs bedroom stirs. I catch the movement at the corner of my eye, and when I look over, I see Auden staring down at Ian and me. Her mouth is twisted in a silent scream, and she’s pointing at the lake...

My mother’s ghost is standing behind her with her twisted, rotting flesh of a hand sitting on Auden’s shoulder. Her nose drips blood while her mouth is twisted in her own silent scream.

“No!” I gasp, dropping the quilt and running into the house as quickly as I can.

“Georgia!” Ian shouts from behind me, his voice echoing throughout the empty halls of the manor as I race toward our daughter. “Georgia, wait! What’s wrong?”

I hit the top of the stairs and throw myself into Auden’s door. My eyes sweep across every inch of the room before they hit hers. She’s standing at the window, silent tears streaming down her face as she stares at me. My mother’s ghost is nowhere to be seen.

“Auden! I’m here. Oh, baby, I’m right here!” I wrap her into a hug and pull her over to the bed with me, cradling her in my arms as she sobs into my chest.

“What happened?” Ian yells as he finally makes it into the room. His eyes are wide with fright before they land on mine.

Some type of emotion crosses his face before he sighs with relief.

“The bad one wanted to get Mommy again,” Auden cries out to him. “It was going to take her away from me. But the nice ghost saved you. She saved you, Mommy.”

I clutch at her tiny body, holding her closer to me as she cries harder.

Ian crosses the room quickly, kneeling in front of us. He places his hand gently on Auden’s back, rubbing soft circles like he’s always done for me. “Shh, I promise I won’t let anything happen to your mom, or you. You’re safe with us, Auden. You’re safe.”

Auden stops crying and looks up at me. Her hazel eyes shine with unshed tears while her lip trembles. “Can I sleep with you, Mama? I don’t want the bad one to get you.”

I bring my hand to her cheek, wiping her tears away. “Of course, baby. Of course.”

Ian holds his arms out for her. “Come on, little one. I’ll tuck you and your mom in.” She jumps into his arms with no hesitation, and my eyes follow them as they walk out of the room.

I walk over to the window and stare down at the lake, wrapping my arms tighter around me when I feel a phantom breeze stir by. The hairs on my neck stand up, and I feel a soft caress on my shoulder. Looking over, I see the same rotting hand that was on my daughter’s shoulder just minutes ago. My breath hitches in my throat, heart pounding harder than ever, as if it’s trying to burst right through my chest so it can hide from the ghost of my mother.

“Mom,” I whisper, refusing to turn and face the monster of my nightmares. “Please tell me what’s going on. Please.”

“Don’t trust . . . don’t trust . . . protect . . .” Her voice is a strangled whisper on the breeze.

“Protect who?”

I turn on my heel, slamming my hand to my heart as I turn and face Ian, who is standing behind me.

Not my mother.

“Did—did you hear that?” I gasp out. “Did you see her?”

His brows knit in confusion. “See who? I only heard you say something about ‘protect something,’ but I couldn’t make out what you were whispering.”

I put my hand on the shoulder where my mother’s hand was. I look around my childhood bedroom thoroughly while the hair on my neck is still standing, all before my eyes land back on Ian. His features are distorted from the lack of light, casting shadows over his face as he looks at me with nothing but concern in his eyes.

“You really didn’t see her?”

Ian looks around the room and shakes his head. “You’re the only one in here, Georgia.”

Fuck, maybe I am going crazy.

I look around my childhood bedroom one last time before following Ian across the hall, lost in thought.

What does my mother mean by protect ?

Who is she talking about?

Is any of this even real?

But that doesn't explain Auden's outbursts.

Something sinister is happening in this house, something that began a long time ago.

"Want me to keep watch, like old times? I'll take the couch." Ian interrupts my thoughts with a soft smile, his voice pulling me away from my unanswered questions.

I look at Auden, curled up and fast asleep on my side of the bed, almost as if nothing happened moments ago.

"No, I'll take the middle. You can take the other side. The bed is big enough for all of us," I say as I drag him toward the bed.

I pass out the moment my head hits the pillow.

I wake to the sound of Auden screaming, my body jolting upright and crashing right into Ian's bare chest as I search the bed with my hands, looking for my daughter in the heap of tangled sheets and blankets.

"Where is she?" I yell, my voice groggy with sleep while I throw the blankets off of myself in search of Auden. "Where is she?" I scream again as her wail of terror hits the empty room for the second time.

The light above me flickers to life, showering myself and Ian in light. Auden isn't in the room. I can see light peeking out from underneath the bathroom door, and I stumble to the door, grabbing the handle and throwing it open.

Auden is standing with her back to me, staring at herself in the mirror in silence. Tears glisten on her red-tinted cheeks.

“Auden,” I say, rushing to her side. “Auden, what’s wrong?” I place my hands on her shoulders, staring at her through the reflection in the mirror. When I touch her, she doesn’t flinch or acknowledge my presence at all. Her eyes are locked on something I can’t see, her body eerily still.

“Georgia,” Ian whispers from behind me. “Is it possible that she’s sleepwalking?”

I meet his gaze in the mirror before flicking my eyes back to my daughter.

“Auden, honey, are you awake?” I ask softly. My hand stops midair as I go to touch her cheek.

You’re not supposed to touch a person who is stuck in a dream.

She doesn’t answer. Instead, we watch as she opens her mouth again and lets out another shrill scream. It ends as quickly as it began, and then she’s back to staring into whatever nightmare she’s stuck in.

“Ian, I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to help her!” My voice cracks. My heart is pounding fiercely in my chest as he comes up behind me and grabs my shoulders in comfort. “How do we help her?” I turn and look up into his eyes. He looks just as lost as I feel.

There’s a loud pounding on the bedroom door, making Ian and I jump in surprise.

“Georgia? Is everything okay in there?” Mrs. Foster’s voice is muffled through the door. Ian shoots me a look of panic before he rushes back into the bedroom to grab his shirt.

“Auden, sweetheart. Please wake up, baby. Please wake up,” I whisper. My words have no effect as she stands completely still in front of the mirror.

I hear the bedroom door open. “Hey, Mom. Auden is stuck in a nightmare,” Ian tells Mrs. Foster.

Mrs. Foster clicks her tongue. “What are you doing in here, Ian? You’re supposed to be in the room across the hall.” Her voice is quiet, but the disapproval rings clear, sending a slight shiver down my spine.

I step out of the bathroom. “I’m so sorry she woke you,” I whisper to Mrs. Foster. “She’s having a nightmare, I think. Ian came over to see what was wrong just a minute before you did,” I lie.

Mrs. Foster crosses into the room and peers into the bathroom at Auden. “You used to sleepwalk all the time like this. Just give her a few moments, and I’m sure she’ll snap out of it.”

“Do you remember how you used to wake me up? She’s never done this before, and I’m scared to make it worse.”

Mrs. Foster gives me a soft smile as she walks over and places her hand on mine, squeezing gently. “Oh, honey, this isn’t something to work yourself up about. Most of the time sleepwalking happens when you’re in a new place or there’s more stressors in your life than normal. I think we can all agree that fits this situation,” she says with a gruff laugh. “Just make sure you lock this door, both doors if you can. Sleepwalkers can hurt themselves, so we don’t want her to be able to get to the staircase when she’s in this state.”

“What can we do to wake her up?” Ian asks.

Mrs. Foster releases my hand and walks past me, then into the bathroom toward Auden. Ian and I both watch as she places her hand on Auden's shoulders and rubs her back lightly. "Auden, honey. We are going to walk you back to bed. Okay?" Her voice is soft and soothing as she gently turns Auden around.

Auden still doesn't respond verbally, but she takes slow steps with Mrs. Foster's guidance, and within moments, Auden is tucked right back into her, her eyes falling shut shortly after.

Mrs. Foster turns and smiles at us. "See, it's as simple as that. Gentle touches and a soothing voice. You never want to make loud noises or try to jostle her awake when she's in this state. She can easily injure herself by panicking and running. Always make sure the area is clear of tripping hazards and that the doors are blocked or stay locked. I'm sure she'll grow out of it, or it'll stop once you're both back home again. She most likely won't even remember this when she wakes up tomorrow. You never remembered any of your nightmares when you had your sleep spells like this, Georgia," she tells us. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to head back home and try to get some sleep in a proper bed. Good night, Georgia. Ian, be a dear and walk me home." Her command is polite but firm, and Ian gives me a wide-eyed look, which makes me giggle, before following his mother out.

"Thank you, Lydia," I call out before they head down the stairs together.

It's clear that Ian's mom still hasn't warmed up to the idea of me and her son together. She was never openly rude or hostile about us being together when we were teenagers, but she was never accepting of it either.

I wonder what she'll think if she finds out that Auden is her granddaughter. Will she be ecstatic like my father was, welcoming my child into his heart with open arms? Or will she see Auden as the complication, just another reason why Ian is stuck in my life still, all these years later?

19

Georgia

Now

The fair is one of my favorite places in the world. I've only been twice, but both times are full of happy memories.

The aromas of fried treats and popcorn. The bright lights flashing in a hundred different directions from all the rides. I even love the smell of the petting farm, which might seem odd.

But everything combined reminds me of a happier time.

A time when my mother and my best friend were alive, laughing and screaming happily right along with me.

A time where the boy I loved, loved me back.

I look up at the giant Ferris wheel, remembering the time I spent with my mother in one of those silly little carts. Dangling on the edge of the world like nothing bad could ever happen to us. Her diary proved that she loved that moment just as much as I did.

Gazing over at the carousel, I remember the moment Ian first kissed me. I was sitting on the cat, and he was on the polar bear when our eyes met, and our laughter halted in



place as we leaned closer to each other until our lips finally touched.

Nothing bad is allowed to happen at the fair.

Auden, Ian, and I can almost pretend like we are a happy little family while we are here. No ghosts, no secrets. Just us. There's no room for anything but joy to exist here today. After the last few stressful days at the manor, we all deserve a few hours of fun.

"What do you ladies want to do first?" Ian asks as we enter the fairgrounds. He holds tightly onto one of Auden's hands while I hold the other. He looks so very un-doctor-like in his deep gray shirt and black jeans, looking handsome as ever. The backpack strapped to his chest makes him look like he's getting ready for some tactical mission. His Braves hat tames his dark locks while his sunglasses cover up those galaxies I love so much.

"Hmm," Auden hums, looking in every direction possible as she struggles to make a decision. Her pinstripe shorts and pink glittery tank top clash horribly with her bright yellow sunglasses. Somehow she pulls it off, because five-year-olds can wear whatever they choose without looking ridiculous. Instead, she looks absurdly adorable.

"What if we do the carousel first? The line looks short right now, and we all know it'll be wrapped around the entire ride by lunch-time," Ian suggests, pointing to his left where the red and white-topped carousel awaits.

"Can I be the dolphin? Please, Mommy?" She tugs on my arm and jumps up and down, her pigtail braids whipping her in the face with each descent.

"Only if your mom can be the penguin and I can be the..." Ian strains to look at what animal sits on the other side of the dolphin. "Duck," he says in horror. "I guess I'll

ride the duck.”

I look over at him and fight a smile. He’s always had this weird thing about ducks. I guess one chased him when he was younger, but I’m still convinced he was chased by a goose that lives on the property. Who gets chased by a duck?

“I’ll take the duck, Ian. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure it doesn’t run after you,” I tease him as we get into line.

He leans against the railing across from me while Auden stretches both her arms out to touch both poles, nearly putting herself into the splits.

“My knight in shining...overalls,” Ian muses, taking his sunglasses off and tucking them into his collar. The way he’s looking me up and down makes me feel hot and cold at the same time. I wonder if he is also thinking about the first kiss we shared while on this same ride.

I’m in lavender overalls that I’ve cut to turn into shorts because the humidity and heat of Texas are already intense this far into spring. My black tank top fits snugly against me and matches the black ball cap that my hair is tucked into, my ponytail swaying back and forth in the breeze.

“Mommy, look! It’s our turn now!” Auden yells as she runs toward her coveted blue dolphin. Ian helps her up and wraps the safety belt around her before taking his place on the penguin. I hop onto the duck and flash Ian an evil smirk over the top of Auden’s head, making him shake his head with laughter.

This is nice. The three of us, doing something as mundane and normal as going to the fair as a family. Ian is so great with Auden. He’s slipped into our daily life with such ease, and Auden absolutely adores him.

Too bad it'll all change the moment my lies unravel.

The carousel bell rings loudly over the speakers, signaling the start of the ride. Auden grips onto the pole tightly, her face a mixture of excitement and fear.

"It doesn't go that fast, hun. I promise it'll be fun."

Her smile lights up the world once she realizes that the ride isn't going to be scary. Her grip loosens, and she laughs loudly as her dolphin starts moving up and down underneath her. "Ian! Look at me! I'm bigger than you and Mommy!" she yells when her dolphin rises higher than ours.

My eyes meet Ian's, and my heart nearly stops when I see that he's also looking at Auden. His smile serene and content, like this is something he'd be happy doing for the rest of his life. This man is making it too easy to fall back in love with him. Especially when he looks at our daughter with so much adoration in his eyes.

The ride ends all too soon, and Ian helps Auden off of her dolphin. She blows the dolphin a kiss and promises that she'll be back to visit him later. Ian and I both let out small chuckles as we followed her toward the exit.

"Let's go on the Ferris wheel next!" Auden excitedly yells, pointing at the large blue ride in the distance. She grabs Ian's hand and skips ahead of us, pulling him right along with her.

"I'll meet you over there! I'm going to grab a couple of waters!" I yell after them. Ian flashes me a thumbs-up before they disappear into the crowd.

I make my way over to one of the concession stands, ordering three waters and two bags of cotton candy, one blue and one pink. I also grab a churro from myself because you can't go to the fair without grabbing something deliciously unhealthy,

and the churros were my dad's favorite snack when he took me as a kid.

As I make my way toward the Ferris wheel, I decide it's probably not a bad idea to call my father and check on him since we most likely won't make it to the hospital tonight.

The call connects instantly.

"Hiya, Bug." His gruff voice sounds pleasantly surprised.

"Hi, Dad. Guess what I'm eating right now?" I ask, my mouth full of churro like the heathen I am.

"Well, I can hear the telltale signs of the fair, so if it's not a churro, you're grounded for life." His laugh is loud over the phone, making me smile while wanting to cry at the same time.

This is the dad I've missed the most over the last two decades. The one that makes silly jokes and big belly laughs because the joy he feels can't be contained. I don't know what changed, but something flipped a switch in my father, and I hope nobody ever flips the switch back. This is the grandfather that Auden has already fallen in love with, and the father that might convince me to stay at Crane.

Ian isn't the only reason to stay anymore.

"You still chewing, or did you hang up because you've realized you're grounded?"

I laugh loudly into the phone. "No, I'm still here. And yes, it's a churro, and it's as delicious as I remember it being when you brought me here for the first time."

"That was a good day. You and your mother both wore matching neon-orange T-

shirts so I wouldn't lose you," he muses, clearly fond of this memory.

"I don't remember the orange shirts, but I remember the Ferris wheel with her. It was magical. Ian and I are actually about to take Auden on the Ferris wheel. I just wanted to call you and see how you're feeling today," I say while looking for Ian and Auden. I don't see them in the line.

"I'm feeling much better. I'd be a hell of a lot better if you talked that boy of yours into convincing these angry doctors to feed me a bacon cheeseburger."

I sigh loudly into the speaker. "Dad, he's not my boy. I don't know what he is."

"I take it you haven't told him about Auden, then? Because, Georgia, you know the moment you do, it'll change everything."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I whisper. "It could change everything for the better, or it could ruin Auden's future if he wants nothing to do with us after I spill the beans."

Dad's gruff laugh rings loudly through the phone. "That boy ain't going anywhere without you girls."

I smile to myself, praying that what my father is saying ends up being true.

"Mommy!" I hear Auden's voice screaming from above me, and when I look up, I see her and Ian sitting together on the Ferris wheel as it slowly starts going up. They are both waving and smiling huge smiles at me.

"Dad, I gotta go. Auden and Ian are on the ride, and I want to take a photo of them. I'll send it to you."

"You three have fun. I love you, Bug. Talk to you later. Thanks for checking up on

me.”

“Love you, Dad. I’ll come see you tomorrow,” I promise him before hanging up.

I turn the camera app on and point it toward Auden and Ian, taking several snapshots before turning it to video mode and hitting record.

I don’t want to miss this moment of them together, and I know it’ll be one Auden will cherish forever.

Once their turn on the ride is up, Auden comes running toward me, her pigtails hopping up and down with each bound.

“Mama! That was the coolest ride ever! Ian pointed out all the buildings, and once we got to the tippy-top, he showed me where home was! I could see it all the way from over here! It was so awesome,” Auden tells me in a rush, barely taking a breath.

Home , she called it.

Maybe Crane Manor could be our home.

“Sorry we didn’t wait for you. This girl of yours lacks patience, much like someone else I know,” Ian teases with a sly smirk. “Did you eat a churro without me?”

“I might have. Why?”

Ian laughs and licks his thumb before bringing it to my face. “You have some sugar right here,” he says, wiping it away gently.

It causes every butterfly in my stomach to take flight while my skin feels like it’s on fire where he touched me.

“I, uh—thanks. I got these for you two,” I say nervously as I hand over the pink and blue cotton candy. Auden digs into the pink bag immediately. “The pink is obviously for Auden. But the blue is for you. Naturally.”

The first kiss we shared was a mix of sticky lips and tasted of blue cotton candy and churros, and I’d be lying to myself if I wasn’t thinking of replicating that same kiss at this exact moment. I know I put the brakes on whatever this started to be when we got a little too drunk in the library. But I can’t breathe when he’s in the same room as me, let alone listen to my brain’s reasoning. Especially when my heart is pleading, begging even, to lean in to kiss him again.

Ian takes the bag of cotton candy from me, our fingers brushing slightly. Fire burns in my lungs as I remember those same fingers cupped around my face just the other night, kissing me thoroughly.

Somehow, we still ended up wrapped in each other's arms by the end of the night.

“Oh, speaking of food,” Ian says excitedly as he reaches into the backpack he’s wearing. “I brought these for you.” He hands me a bag of Hot Cheetos, a Chesire cat grin on his face.

I take them and roll my eyes at him. “I can’t believe you still remember how much I love these.” I grin up at him.

“I remember everything that you love, Georgia.” His voice hits me like a soft caress against my already heated senses, and I feel the blush creep up my neck and into my cheeks.

“Are you blushing for me, Georgie?” Ian smirks.

“Eww, no. It's just the heat.”

He leans in, his lips a hair's breadth from my ear, and whispers, "Friends, right?"

I clear my throat and glance over at Auden, who is still devouring her cotton candy. Her hands and face are covered in a pink sticky mess. It's hard to just want to be friends when the three of us fit together like a natural, real family. Especially here. All around us, there are happy little families. Riding the rides together, eating at tables, laughing. All of them seem so happy.

I look up at Ian, and my reflection stares back at me through the lens of his sunglasses. If I look a little closer, I wonder if I can see the lies written all over my face. Instead, I flash a smile at Ian before stepping closer to him.

"Friends, yes," I whisper into his ear, inhaling the sandalwood and citrus scent that seems to always surround him. "But maybe, something more, too?"

I place my hand on his chest. His ragged breathing matches my own as his heart races in tune with mine. I step back, putting some distance between us, before he grabs my hand that still lingers on his chest. Giving Auden another glance, I make sure that she's completely occupied with her snack before I look back up at Ian. My hand is clutched in his, my palm sitting flush against his heart as he leans in and brushes his lips against mine softly. Just a peck, really. But it's enough to set my skin ablaze all over again.

Ian pulls away all too soon, his mouth moving from my lips to my ear again. "Something more, I think," he whispers before finally stepping away from me and smiling down at me like I've captured the sun just for him.

"What ride should we all go on next?" Auden's voice jars me like a jug of ice-cold water being poured over my head. "I vote for the haunted house!"

Ian chuckles next to me. "Why don't we go get cleaned off first? Then we can



definitely go into the haunted house. Maybe it'll scare your mom like it did the first time we went in it."

Auden looks down at her pink-stained hands and then back at us. "When did you come here without me?"

"I'll tell you on the walk to the bathroom," Ian tells her as he holds out his arm like a fancy prince from a Disney movie.

She wraps her arm through his, and I follow behind them toward the bathrooms near the back of the fairgrounds.

"I'm waiting for the story," Auden sasses. One day, she's going to get in trouble for that attitude, but at five years old, it's just a little cute. Plus, Ian could use some sass in his life once in a while.

"Okay, so, when your mom and I were teenagers, I asked her on a date and brought her here," he tells her. "We went to the haunted house, and I was hoping she'd get scared enough to finally hold my hand," Ian continues with a wink thrown back at me over his shoulders.

I roll my eyes, but I'm secretly loving hearing his side of this story. I vividly remember Ian screaming like a banshee and me having to basically carry his ass through the rest of the haunted house.

"We were in this room that had this really scary clown." Ian stops and looks down at Auden. "If there's one thing you need to know about me, it's that I don't mess around with clowns. Especially the scary ones. Your mom made me watch It with her, like, five hundred times, and Pennywise still scares the crap out of me."

Auden giggles and turns to look at me. "I guess we can't ever go to the circus with

Ian, Mom.”

“I will absolutely be forcing Ian to a circus one day,” I tease. “That is a promise.”

“Ian, do you know where California is?” Auden asks. “Because they always have a really big circus where we live, and maybe one day you can come visit us after we have to go back.”

Ian looks over his shoulder at me, a wistful sort of smile playing on his lips.

“Wait, what happened in the clown room?” Auden asks as we step up to the bathrooms.

“How about you go wash your hands, really, really, well. And then I’ll finish telling you. Deal?” Ian holds out his pinky, then pulls it back when he sees her pink hands. “How about we shake on that deal once your hands aren’t pink anymore?”

Auden rolls her eyes at him with a playful smile. “Deal! I’ll be right back! You guys better not go to the haunted house without me!”

“I would never!” I shout in mock horror, holding my hands to my chest like she’s wounded me for just suggesting it.

“Love you, Mama.”

“Love you, too, kiddo.”

Ian and I watch as Auden runs into the bathroom.

“I—” I start.

“Don’t leave,” Ian says at the same time, ripping his sunglasses off of his face, tucking them into his T-shirt.

“What?” I stare at him, into those hazel eyes that have always felt like home. So many conflicting thoughts rush through me.

He steps closer and grabs both of my hands in his, pulling them to his chest. “Please don’t go back. Stay here. Stay with me. Both of you.”

I take a deep breath. “Ian, there are so many things I need to say. Need to tell you. You may not want me to stay once I tell you everything. You might hate me afterward.”

“There’s nothing you can say to make me hate you. Nothing, Georgia.” His hands squeeze mine harder. “I want all of this. You, me, Auden. A family—our family. There’s nothing you can tell me that’ll make me feel differently. I’ve loved you for my entire life, and I’ll love you for the rest of it.”

“You guys went into the haunted house without me!” Auden shouts. Ian breaks my gaze, and we turn toward her. Her arms are crossed, and her eyebrows are knitted together in anger.

Ian shakes his head at her. “No, we’ve been right here the whole time. I swear it.”

She walks closer and points at our hands, which are still clutched together and resting on Ian’s chest. “Then why are you holding hands again?”

I yank my hands away from Ian’s, and hurt flashes over his features before he hides it with a smile for Auden.

“Your mom had a splinter, and I was helping her get it out,” he lies effortlessly.

“Let’s go to the haunted house!” He reaches out, and Auden takes his hand.

They walk away from me before I’m able to process everything that just happened.

Before I can tell Ian my secrets and tell him that I love him, too.

That I’ve never stopped loving every single thing about him.

I’m not sure my heart knows how to unlove him.

20

Georgia

Now

The haunted house is just as I remember it. The arched entrance is made up of fake cobblestone with long, thin spiderweb-like tassels that you have to walk through to enter. Sinister music plays loudly through the speakers above the entryway, while fake screams of terror echo throughout the maze, bouncing on the walls in a horrifying fashion.

Well, it's terrifying to younger children and adult men who hate clowns.

"Are you sure you want to go in there, Auden? It's okay if you change your mind," I ask her as I watch her eyes widen in fear as she looks into the flashing entrance of the maze. Strobe lights and a fog machine accompany the eerie music, making it look even more ominous from the outside.

Auden sandwiched herself between Ian and I as soon as we walked up to the line, grabbing both of our hands tightly in her own.

"I really want to go in, but I'm sort of scared," Auden says.

"What if I carry you through the maze, and when you get too scared, you can cover your eyes?" Ian suggests.

“Can I wear your sunglasses to hide from the bad things?”

Ian chuckles and pulls his sunglasses off, handing them to her. “You absolutely can. Now up you go,” he says as he bends down to one knee, holding his arms out for her to jump into. “You going to be okay back there all on your own, G? I know how much this maze scares you,” he teases me with a smirk.

I roll my eyes at him and shove him toward the entrance playfully.

“Mommy is the bravest person I know,” Auden says fiercely before we are called up for our turn. I follow close behind them, my hand clutched in Auden’s as it hangs across Ian’s shoulder.

The music is even louder from the inside. Thumping bass makes the floor and walls feel like they are pulsating with the music. Like they are their own living, breathing thing waiting to jump out at us and scare the wits out of anyone who dares enter.

There’s just enough room on the path for me to walk next to Ian. I’m still able to hold Auden’s hand, though my arm is basically wrapped around Ian’s back entirely. I look over, and Auden already has her head buried in Ian’s chest. I’m sure his sunglasses are now bent out of shape.

The first room is barely lit, the faux candles hanging sporadically over our heads as we finally make it past the strobe light. When my eyes finally adjust, I see that we are in a fake jail cell, and the prison warden is a giant animatronic skeleton. He must have some sort of motion sensor hiding in the floor because the moment Ian steps closer to the archway leading to the next room, the skeleton’s head whips toward us, his mouth opening and letting out a hideous cackle.

Ian looks over at me and rolls his eyes before we head into the narrow hallway that connects the next room to this one. I have to follow behind him due to the lack of

space. I vaguely remember this hallway from when we were teenagers. There's something about this room that I didn't like, but I can't quite remember what it was...

"AHHH!" I let out a startled scream as something brushes against my ankle. Now I remember this damn room. I jump again when something touches me on the other ankle. Ian jumps, too.

"Mommy, are you okay?" Auden's voice is surprisingly loud over the ugly cackling from the skeleton behind us.

"Yes, hunny. I'm okay. I just scared myself for a minute there." I laugh, trying to ease her own fears. What kind of mother lets her five-year-old go into a stupid haunted house like this anyway? I'm an idiot, and I know for certain Auden will be curled up in bed with me tonight.

Ian rushes ahead of me, trying to get Auden through the maze as quickly as he can. It's exactly what I would do if I was holding her, too. I follow as closely as I can. My hand hangs limply in Auden's in the space between us when, all of a sudden, Ian stops dead in his tracks, and I run right into him. "Ian!" I hiss under my breath.

The room we are in now is the size of a small bedroom with red light bulbs placed overhead. I let go of Auden's hand so I can squeeze around Ian, who is frozen in place. I glance around the room and can't help the laugh that escapes me.

There are three large, grotesque-looking clowns in the room. One is dressed in an all-white jumpsuit with fake blood splattered all over the front of it and guts draped around him. He's standing right in front of the archway that leads to the next room. The other two are in similar outfits, pacing back and forth on opposite walls.

"Are they not fake?" Ian asks, his voice filled with panic. "Like last time? The last ones didn't move, did they? I don't remember them moving." His eyes are wide and

darting back and forth between the three clowns.

“Not so fearless anymore, are you?” I tease him as I wrap my arm through his, tugging him forward as I step farther into the room. “Come on; they can’t touch us. Let’s just hurry through.”

Ian’s feet are frozen in place until I pull harder on him, jarring him out of whatever living nightmare he’s conjured up in his head. I step in front of the clown that’s blocking the door.

“Excuse me, can we please go through?” I ask sweetly while he just stares down at me, unmoving, unblinking.

Auden whimpers, and Ian’s arm tenses underneath mine. I look over and see that the other two clowns are now standing right behind us, boxing us in and blocking us from both exits.

“Oh, come on!” I shout dramatically. “We have a kid, and clearly, you’ve scared this one enough for one day.” I give a pointed nod toward Ian, and I swear, the clown in front of us smirks down at me. “Just let us go through. Please?”

The two clowns behind us laugh through their masks, and the one blocking the next room crosses his arms over his chest.

“You can go if you can get this one to give me a high five,” the head clown in charge says. His voice full of mirth as he nods toward Ian.

The clown and I share a knowing smile. I should be focusing on getting Auden the hell out of here, but I don’t mind torturing Ian a bit. I shouldn’t be enjoying this as much as I am, but I am absolutely living for this after Ian gave me so much shit about being scared.



Ian looks over at me, his eyes wide with betrayal as he processes what the clown has just said. “Georgia, don’t make me do this,” he pleads, glancing back to the clown.

“Ian, you can’t really be that scared? Can you?”

His audible gulp shuts me right up, and I take pity on the man.

“What if I just give you a double high five instead?” I ask the clown.

He shakes his head. “If he doesn’t want to pay the toll, then you’ll have to pay it.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “What payment do you require?” I can’t believe I’m bartering with a damn clown to get out of a stupid haunted house maze.

“A kiss. Just one. Right here,” he says and brings his gloved finger to his cheek and taps twice. The prior smile we shared turns sinister. I’m starting to see why Ian fears these things.

“Fine,” I grunt out. I lean forward to kiss his cheek, and I catch movement in my peripheral.

“Ouch! Dang girl! You didn’t have to punch my lights out!” the clown shouts and grabs his shoulder.

I look over and see Auden’s small hand bundled into a tight fist.

“Stop being a bully, and let us pass!” she says fiercely.

The clown looks down at me while still nursing his shoulder and moves aside, letting us pass without another word. We all walk through the door, and as soon as we set foot into the next room, the door slams loudly behind us, making us all jump. This

room is brightly lit and full of fun house mirrors.

Ahh, the mirror maze. These mirrors probably still have imprints of my forehead from slamming into them so many times while trying to find my way out the first time I came here.

“Hell of a punch, Auden. Hell of a punch.” Ian’s voice is full of pride and astonishment. “But, and I’m sure your mom will agree, we don’t need to hit people to get what we want. Right, Mom?” Ian glances over at me, a smile playing on his lips as he tries to sound serious.

“Right. Auden, thank you for saving us. But no more hitting people. Deal?” I raise my eyebrows at her, and she gives me a thumbs-up before she snuggles closer to Ian. “I really didn’t want to kiss that gross clown,” I say with a mock shudder.

“I would have high-fived the thing before I let you get your lips anywhere near him,” Ian says, very unconvincingly.

“I only want Mommy to kiss you,” Auden whispers, rather loudly, into Ian’s ear before she giggles. I catch his gaze in the mirror in front of us, and we both smile shyly at each other.

“Let’s just get through this room, and then the exit should be on the other side,” I tell them, moving ahead.

I keep one hand on the mirrors, letting it guide me through the maze, hopefully without slamming my face into any of the other mirrors.

It isn’t long before I realize Auden and Ian aren’t behind me anymore. I catch their reflection in one of the mirrors and turn toward them, promptly slamming my body into a mirror.

“Son of a bitch,” I whisper, rubbing the knee that took the brunt of the collision.

“Mommy? Where’d you go?” I hear Auden’s voice, but when I turn in a full circle, she’s nowhere to be seen.

“Just get to the end, and I’ll meet you guys there!” I shout.

This room isn’t huge, but the way they set these mirrors up makes the maze look never-ending. I hear something that sounds like a plastic wrapper.

“Is someone eating something?” I ask loudly. The music is thankfully low in this room, probably for this exact reason.

“Auden and I found the end!” Ian’s voice sounds like it’s coming from the opposite side of the room. “She got hungry, and I forgot that I brought some snacks from home. Banana bread okay for her to eat?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Auden shouts excitedly.

I chuckle as I continue to reach out in front of me. My hand meets both air and mirrors on every other turn. I reach another turn, and when I make it around the corner, my heart stops in my chest.

“Mom?” I whisper as I stare at the mirror ahead of me.

Her back is turned, her dark hair in damp ringlets down her back. I step closer, and my breath catches in my throat. She is staring at herself in the mirror. The blood drips slowly down her nose, past her lips, and onto her white dress. Her right arm lifts, and she points toward another set of mirrors. Her mouth opens and closes as she whispers something.

I step closer, straining to hear her.

All of a sudden, she turns, facing me dead-on, her face inches from mine.

“Don’t trust . . . don’t trust . . . protect . . .”

Her voice is a strangled whisper, just like the last time she repeated these same words to me. I break her soulless gaze and risk a look around us. Her reflection and mine echo throughout all the mirrors that surround us.

She’s everywhere, and she’s nowhere at the same time.

“Georgia? Are you okay?” Ian’s voice sounds closer than it was moments ago.

I turn back toward my mother, and her mouth opens wide, wider than I’ve ever seen it. Her teeth are rotting from the inside out, her tongue black as coal.

This can’t be real. This can’t be real. This can’t be real.

The scream that comes out of her twisted, horrifying mouth matches my own as she reaches out and grabs my wrist, squeezing it painfully.

“Don’t trust . . . don’t trust . . . protect . . .”

I yank out of her grasp and run toward the only space that doesn’t reflect my mother’s ghost back at me. I round the corner as quickly as I can, cradling my injured wrist, and slam right into Ian’s outstretched arms. Another blood-curdling scream escapes my mouth before I realize that it’s him and not my mother’s cold, waiting embrace.

“Ian! She—she was—she was here!” I pant and stutter to get my words out.

He wraps me into his arms, holding me close. “Who's here? What happened?”

“Wait, where is Auden?” I throw myself off of him and look around in panic, only catching the one hundred reflections of Ian and myself.

“Where is she?” I scream, thrusting my hands into my hair as warm tears stream down my cheeks.

“It’s okay, Georgia! Breathe! Auden is safe; she’s okay. I promise,” Ian shouts over my hysterics, grabbing my shoulders and forcing me to face him. “Breathe, Georgia, breathe.” He takes a deep breath in and releases a slow breath out. I copy him until my heart falls back into a normal rhythm.

I take another deep breath. “Where is Auden?” I ask him, calmly this time.

“She’s with Mathayus, the security guard standing outside. When I heard you scream...I knew I couldn’t leave her alone. But if you were hurt...I didn’t want her to see that either, so I ran outside and asked him to stay with her so I could come get you out,” he explains. “She’s okay. Are you okay?”

I look around the mirror maze one last time, finding nothing amiss before I turn back toward him. “Yeah, yeah. I’m okay. I thought I saw something. Maybe you were right about this haunted house scaring the shit out of me.” My voice sounds wary and entirely full of lies.

How do I tell him that my mother’s ghost decided to follow me outside of Crane Manor for the first time ever? Just a half hour ago, he was asking me to stay with him, for the three of us to make this work.

I can’t risk ruining this chance with all my imaginary ghosts.

“Let’s just get out of here,” I tell him.

Ian knows I’m lying. His eyes say it all when his mouth won’t. But instead of calling me out, he reaches out for my hand hesitantly, choosing to let me stew in my lies alone for a little longer.

“That’s two for two,” I joke.

Ian raises a confused eyebrow at me.

“Two for two that you ended up getting me to hold your hand in this stupid haunted house. You should play the lotto or something with those kinds of odds.”

I expect him to laugh or at least smile at my lame attempt at a joke. But he just squeezes my hand harder and gives me a hard stare before leading us both out of the maze. I see the remnants of the plastic wrapper and banana bread smashed into the ground. The site seems like a fitting metaphor for how my soul feels right now.

Smashed and scattered into a million little broken pieces.

21

Georgia

Now

The rest of the day at the fair passes quickly with no ghostly events. I have felt on edge, though, searching for my mother's ghost in every crowd of fairgoers as Ian and I take turns riding the rides with Auden while she not-so-silently reminds Ian that he can hold my hand for as long as he wants.

And he does.

Throughout the rest of the day, he stays happily sandwiched between Auden and I, my hand clutched in one of his, Auden's clutched in his other.

This could be a forever kind of thing—I just need to be brave enough to tell him.

My heart is nearly bursting watching Ian and Auden together. They fit together so effortlessly, almost like they've known each other for their entire lives. The way Ian's eyes light up when she does something, anything really. His whole soul lights up from the inside out, especially when she smiles that big, goofy smile up at him.

The smile she usually reserves for me but inherited from him.

“Why don't we watch the fireworks and then call it a day?” Ian suggests as we watch Auden pet the goats in the small petting zoo portion of the fair. “They should start

here in the next half hour, and it looks like Auden might finally be running out of gas.” We both look over and watch her yawn the biggest yawn ever while she follows closely behind one of the rabbits.

I check the time on my phone and see that it’s nearly 8:00 p.m. “Honestly, if we leave now, we can probably watch the fireworks from the dock at the house. How do you feel about a little wine, and maybe we can read some more of my mother’s diary once Auden is tucked in?”

A soft smile tugs on Ian’s lips before he leans over and places a kiss against my temple. “That sounds great. I’ll go grab Auden.”

“Make sure she washes her hands!” I remind him.

Watching Ian walk with Auden over to the handwashing station, laughing when he splashes her with his wet hands, her smile wide as she stares up at him and splashes him back...it cements something in me.

When he hates me after this, I just hope he remembers how much he adores her.

Because I can’t put this off any longer.

Tonight I have to tell him that he’s her father.

When we arrive back at Crane Manor, the house is brightly lit from the inside. We can see Mrs. Foster moseying around in the kitchen.

“Hey, Auden, why don’t you run and grab a jacket from your room before we go sit at the dock and watch the fireworks,” I tell her as I help her out of the back seat.

Ian glances down at his watch. “The fireworks should start any minute, so hurry up,



ladies!” He flashes me a smile and ruffles Auden hair as she runs by. “Let’s get some snacks before we head down to the lake.” He holds his hand out for me, and grabbing it is almost like a muscle memory now as I slip my fingers between his.

We watch Auden run into the house; she waves hi to Mrs. Foster before disappearing through the doorway toward the staircase.

Ian heads toward the back steps, but I pull him back. “Thank you for today, Ian. I loved every moment of it. It’s been a long time since we’ve had a day like this,” I say. “Auden and I, I mean. A day of just fun and seeing her laugh and light up the world like she does. The hussle of the city doesn’t allow for days like this very often. Most days, we are just rushing from one thing to the next. I loved having this day with the three of us.”

“I told you, Georgie, I’m all in. I want you. I want Auden. I want this, this little family. Today just made me realize how much I screwed up by leaving you in that bed six years ago. I would do anything to rewind the time, change the past and all that. But then you wouldn’t have Auden.” He reaches up and cups my face, running his thumb softly over my cheek. “And I can’t imagine not having her in my life. It’s been less than a week, and that girl has me completely wrapped around her finger, just like her mom always has.”

A warm tear slips down my cheek. I don’t know if I’m crying because today was perfect, minus my mother’s ghost haunting me from afar, or if I’m crying because I know after tonight, he may not look at me the way he is now. Like I’m everything he’s ever wanted, the girl he’s always loved. So instead of responding to him, I press my lips to his, hoping I can convey every feeling, every thought, and every apology that he deserves through our lips.

Ian pulls his lips away and rests his forehead against mine. His breathing is as rapid as my own. “Have you given any thought to what I said earlier?” he asks. “About you

and Auden staying?”

I shake my head against him. “I want to stay, but there are things I need to tell you before we commit to this, to us. Whatever this is,” I whisper. “You may not want me here after I tell you some...things.”

He pulls back and gives me a confused look, his eyebrows pinching together with worry. “I don’t know if there is anything you can say to make me stop wanting you, Georgia. To stop wanting this. But let’s talk tonight after Auden goes to sleep. Deal?”

I give him a weak smile. “Deal,” I tell him. My stomach is twisting in a thousand knots as he smiles my favorite smile down at me. “Let’s go grab some snacks and a blanket before Auden comes down and yells at us for taking our sweet-ass time,” I joke, pulling Ian toward the back door with me.

Mrs. Foster opens the back door for us with a strange smile on her lips, almost as if she’s displeased.

“Hi, Mrs—Lydia,” I correct myself quickly. “How is your night going?” I ask her as I take a seat on one of the barstools before watching Ian disappear into the walk-in pantry.

“Oh, you know, just staying busy keeping this house in order while your father is at the hospital,” Mrs. Foster muses. “It’s been quiet today, a little too quiet with you three gone all day. I don’t know what I’m going to do with all the silence once you and Miss Auden leave to go back home next week.”

I swear I can feel her eyes on me, questioning me from across the island. I fail to meet her gaze, instead looking down at my clenched fists that are resting on the countertop. “Yeah, I uh, I’m not sure when we will be heading back yet. With Dad being in the hospital and everything, I’m not sure if we should go back yet. I’m

debating pulling Auden out of school in California and transferring her to a school here so I can keep a closer eye on Dad.”

Mrs. Foster clicks her tongue, forcing me to look up at her. She’s leaning against the sink with her arms crossed and the oddest look on her face.

“Is everything okay, Mrs. Foster? Are you okay with us staying a bit longer if needed?” I ask gently.

She lets out a loud laugh. “Oh, dear, even if I didn’t want you here, which is not the case, I wouldn’t be the one to make those decisions. Those decisions would fall on Mr. Harris. And we both know how much he would kill to lock you and Auden up here forever,” she says. “Plus, you don’t think I’d ask you to leave after going through the hassle of making sure you came home to see your father. He was nowhere near as ill as he is now, so it would seem silly to want you gone now. Right?” She shoots me a wink and lets out another loud laugh.

Now I know where Ian got his penchant for sly winking.

Speaking of the devil, Ian steps into the kitchen with a bag and the yellow quilt from the couch, both slung over his shoulder.

“What are you ladies laughing about in here?” Ian asks with a smirk as he leans against the counter next to his mother.

“Oh, nothing important. Just that Georgia here is trying to stay forever, did you know?” Mrs. Foster sneaks a peek at Ian, and the smile that was on her face moments ago completely disappears.

Ian lets out a surprised breath. “Yeah, I keep trying to convince her to stay, but she’s tough to tie down.”

Mrs. Foster lets out a snort and claps her hands together. “What are you doing with all that anyways, Ian?” She points at the bag of snacks that he placed on the countertop.

“The fireworks are about to start,” he says and looks down at his watch. “Well, now they’ve probably already started. We’re going to take Auden down to the dock and watch them before she has to go to bed.”

It’s almost as if all of the air gets sucked out of the room when Mrs. Foster lets out a startled, strangled-sounding breath.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to take that little girl to that lake!” She snaps at him before pointing a finger at me. “I didn’t call you back here to start up this nonsense again with my son. You hurt him enough when you pushed him away all those years ago! Do you know how broken he was because of you? You don’t get to waltz in here and take him from me like you did Ire—” She shakes in anger across me, her finger inches from my face with a look of pure hatred in her eyes.

A look I’ve never seen out of her normally kind eyes.

“Mom, Georgia hasn’t done anything wrong. You’re completely out of line talking to her like this,” Ian says sternly, a poor attempt to get his mother to calm down.

“You’re supposed to be here to help your father. Not lusting after my son again! You have a daughter to think about now, Georgia. Do not make the same mistake with yours as you did with mine.” She gives Ian a pointed stare. “And you! You should be focusing on your patients, not playing hooky to hang out with this one. Isn’t Auden proof enough that she’s moved on, Ian?” She looks me up and down with disgust before stomping out of the house and into the dark night, slamming the door hard behind her.

We watch in stunned silence as she disappears from view, heading to their house on the property that sits behind the manor.

“Ian,” I say quietly as he says at the same time, “Georgia, I’m so sorry about her. Don’t listen to anything she says. Irene’s death has turned her colder and colder throughout the years. It’s like she doesn’t know how to exist in my happiness because Ree won’t ever have any for herself.”

Ian steps around the island and cups my face, gently forcing me to look up at him. “Don’t listen to her, Georgia. We know this is real. I don’t care that you moved on after I abandoned you. None of that matters now. The only thing that matters is us. You, me, and Auden. Never forget that.” He leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead before pulling away and looking at me as though he can see directly into the broken, shattered pieces of my soul. “Tonight, I promise to tell you everything, Georgia. No more secrets. Once you know everything, you’ll be able to decide what this is moving forward.”

The look we exchange isn’t filled with the typical type of tension we usually share. This look, this one is full of questions and sorrow for each other, while also being congested with lies and secrets we’ve refused to say out loud.

I take one last look out the window, at the spot where Mrs. Foster disappeared out of sight. I understand the instinct to protect your child, so I’m not upset about her going off on me about hurting Ian. We’ve both left our fair share of scars on each other over the years.

But what I don’t understand is how she knew that it was my fault that Irene died. The only three people who know the truth about that day are myself, Irene, and my mother.

And two of them are dead.

So how does Mrs. Foster know?

Before I can really sit and think on that, Auden comes strolling into the kitchen with Horton snuggled in her arms.

Ian pulls away from me and gives Horton a few head scratches. “Ready to go see the fireworks?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Auden shouts, scaring Horton out of her arms. We all laugh as he struggles to get traction on the tiled floor before he runs out of the room. “I guess Horton doesn’t want to see the fireworks,” Auden says with a shrug. “Oh well, more snacks for us! I already saw some of the fireworks from my bedroom window, so we gotta hurry!”

22

Georgia

Now

Fireworks explode in colorful bursts across the lake as we are all sitting on the yellow quilt and staring out into the sky in awe. The fairgrounds aren't far from the manor, so the fireworks are still loud enough to make Auden jump every time they send a new one into the air.

Auden is sandwiched between Ian and I. Our fingers stay linked together behind Auden's back. Each small caress of his thumb across the back of my hand makes my own body feel like the fireworks are inside of me instead of bursting across the lake.

I haven't been able to escape my own thoughts, ever since Mrs. Foster lectured me and accused me of taking Ian from her the way I took Irene from her.

How did she know about Irene's death being my fault?

I glance over at Ian. His eyes are distant, like he's also stuck in his own head. I wonder what he thinks of Mrs. Foster's accusation. He doesn't know why Irene really died, but after our truths and secrets spill out tonight, he will.

Does he feel closer to his sister's spirit being this close to the lake, the same way I feel closer to my mother when I see the willow tree she died under?

Or does he refuse to acknowledge his loss still, all these years later, because it's too hard for his parents to cope with their daughter's death?

Part of me wants to dive into the lake and join Irene instead of telling him the truth. Another part of me can't wait to get this lifelong secret off of my chest. The moment the real story passes from my lips...our entire life changes.

For better, or for worse.

I wonder which secret he'll be more heartbroken over: the fact that I'm the one who got his twin sister killed or the one where I lied about Auden being his and stole five years of her life from him.

"Hey, Mommy," Auden calls out to me. I didn't realize how lost in my own thoughts I was because her voice feels miles away instead of just inches.

"Yes?" I look down at her. Her face is covered in powdered sugar from the donuts Ian snuck into the snack bag.

"I love you, that's all," she says sweetly, making my heart nearly explode. Ian squeezes my hand twice before I look over at him and see that he's smiling down at Auden.

Smiling down at his daughter.

Everything changes after tonight, and I wonder what will be left to love afterward.

We watch the fireworks in comfortable silence—well, mostly silence. Auden tells us how pretty each color of fireworks is when they explode across the water until the fireworks end.



“All right, Auden. Time for a bath and for bed!” I tell her, clapping my hands on my thighs before I get to my feet. “Ian, I will meet you in the library in about a half hour, okay?”

I’m too nervous to meet his eyes, but I feel them all over me.

“Yeah, sounds good. Good night, Auden.”

Auden rushes him with a giant hug. “Thank you for taking us to the fair today. It was the best day ever,” she says with her face buried into his chest as he wraps her tightly into the hug. She smiles up at him, then takes off running down the dock toward the back door. “Love you, Ian! Good night, don’t let the bed bugs bite!” she shouts before she throws the door open and rushes inside.

“That girl is going to break my heart one day. I just know it,” Ian says, his voice tinged with both joy and sadness.

“Us Harris girls have a knack for doing that, don’t we?” I joke, towing my sandal into the dock as I sway back and forth.

When I look up at Ian, he’s staring into the lake. His hands are tucked into his pockets, and he feels a million miles away.

I place my hand gently on his arm. “I’ll see you in the library, okay?”

His throat bobs as he nods, still staring into the dark abyss that claimed the life of his twin. I place a soft kiss on his cheek before I turn away from him, leaving him with his own ghosts for company.

“Mama, I think I really like Ian,” Auden tells me with a mouthful of toothpaste as she brushes her teeth. “Want to know why?”

“Finish brushing your teeth, and then you can tell me all about it,” I tease her, running the hairbrush through her long, dark locks. She has the prettiest hair, and I’m going to take full advantage of little moments like this before she decides to chop it all off and dye it wild colors. I can’t believe one day, this sweet girl is going to be a teenager.

I braid her hair quickly before she rinses her mouth out and spits into the sink.

“Rinse the sink out, please.” I motion toward the bright pink glob of toothpaste clinging for dear life against the porcelain.

Auden and I both watch as the offending glob slides into the drain after a few handfuls of water. She flashes a big smile at me, showing off her pearly whites before she throws her arms around me. “I loved today so much. I wish we could have days like this every single day,” she says wistfully.

I kiss the top of her head. “Me too, kid. Me too. Now off to bed you go.”

Auden grabs my hand and pulls me to her room across the hall. Horton is already waiting for his nighttime cuddles at the foot of her bed.

“Hello, Mr. Horton,” I say and give him a few pets on his little head. His contented purr vibrates the entire bed.

“He’s my guard-kitty. He’s in charge of keeping me safe from the bad one,” Auden tells me as she gets snuggled in under the pink duvet.

I take a shuddered breath, looking around the room nervously. “Auden, honey. Who is the bad one?”

Her giant hazel eyes meet mine, and I swear, I see the color drain from her face,

making her freckles look so dark on her pale cheeks. “I don’t know,” she says quietly, chewing on her bottom lip just like Ian does when he’s nervous. “The good ghost tells me to stay away from the bad one, but she never tells me who.” Her voice comes out in a hushed whisper. “But Horton and the good ghost will keep me safe. They always keep me safe when you’re gone,” she says with a small smile.

“The good ghost doesn’t scare you?” I know her “good ghost” is my mother’s ghost, thanks to the photo Auden found in my parents’ bedroom, but I only know her as a terrifying apparition. The idea of Auden seeing her makes every atom in my body on edge.

“No! She’s very nice. She just wants us to be safe from the bad one,” Auden says with a loud yawn. “She’s nice, just like Ian.”

I let out a small chuckle. “Ian is very nice, isn’t he?” A warm feeling spreads through my chest at her words.

“Is he your boyfriend?” She wags her eyebrows at me as a giant, wicked smile spreads across her face.

“Oh, Auden. You are too young to even know what that means. But, I guess, maybe he is. We will see,” I say quickly, my stomach twisting in knots because I know tonight is going to change everything.

“I think he should be your boyfriend, and then he can be my dad. I think I would like that very much,” she says, another loud yawn forcing its way out of her small body. Her admission makes me feel like the worst mother in the world. She could have had a dad this entire time, except I’m a selfish, horrible excuse of a person, and I took that from both of them. I send a silent prayer to whoever is listening, begging Ian and Auden both for forgiveness for my selfishness.

I kiss her forehead and place my palm against her cheek. “You are such an old soul in such a tiny body. I love you so much, Auden. Never forget that, okay?”

“I love you most,” Auden says with a smile before she closes her eyes and snuggles deeper into her pillow. “Good night, Mama.”

“Good night, Auden,” I whisper as a strangled sob gets caught in my throat. “Horton, you keep her safe. You hear me, mister?” I grab Horton from the end of the bed and set him next to Auden. She wraps him in a hug immediately and giggles as I walk out.

“Horton, you gotta keep Mommy safe, too,” she tells him in a hushed voice before I turn the light off, leaving them bathed in colorful shapes from the night-light.

God, I love that kid. While the mistakes of my past haunt me endlessly, there isn’t a single thing I’d change because they all led me to her.

Now it’s time I own up to those mistakes, even if every bone in my body is screaming at me to keep all these dark secrets to myself.

I hurry back to my bedroom and grab my mother’s diary from the dresser. There’s something oddly comforting about having this little blue book of hers close to me again. I hug it close to my chest as I take some deeper, steadying breaths.

It’s time to go tell Ian about Auden.

And to finally tell him that I’m the reason his sister is dead.

There’s a soft knock on my bedroom door just as I grab the handle to leave. Before I have a chance to open it, the handle turns slowly under my palm. I pull the door open, expecting to see Auden, or even Ian.

But instead, I'm met with the creepy smile of Mr. Foster.

"Mind if I talk to you, Peaches?" Mr. Foster asks as he steps into my bedroom. He smells of expensive cologne with an underlying smell of sweat mixed in. The combination makes me queasy, which just adds to my unease of him being here.

I step aside, putting a polite amount of distance between us, and wave him into the room with the hand that isn't gripping my mother's diary. I leave the door wide open and make no move to close it once he passes through the doorway. He stands in the middle of the room, hands in the pockets of his suit as he takes in the appearance of the bedroom.

It's messy. The bed is unmade, and there's an array of mine and Auden's clothes thrown around the room haphazardly.

"So, what can I help you with, Mr. Foster?" I ask nervously.

Why is he here? He never comes to this house, and why does he need to speak to me? Especially at this hour?

I can't remember the last time this man willingly spoke to me, outside of the short interaction at the hospital with my father.

He sways back and forth on the heels of his shoes as he stares at me, looking me up and down with those hard, unfeeling eyes of his. I see nothing of Ian in this man.

No kindness. No love. No soul, if I'm being honest.

"I went to visit your father this evening," he says tersely. "I figured you'd want an update on how he's doing since you've been busy doing who knows what all day long."

I clear my throat nervously, a small shiver sneaking up my spine. “I called my father around lunchtime, and he was in good spirits. We took Auden to the fair in town, and I knew I couldn't make it to the hospital before visiting hours ended. Did something happen?”

Mr. Foster takes a step closer to me, forcing me to look up at him. “We? Who might we be? Don't tell me you're still busy stringing my idiot son along, letting him follow you around like the broken puppy dog he pretends to be,” Mr. Foster spits out. Annoyance and disapproval rings clearly in his tone. “And here I thought the lecture I gave him yesterday would steer him clear of you. I was a fool to think you'd relinquish your tainted grip on him that easily.”

I continue to stare at him while my thoughts run rampant. What does this man know? He can't know the truth about Irene's death, can he? I squeeze the diary in my arms a little tighter, begging silently for it to give me all the answers.

Before I can ask Mr. Foster why he seems to suddenly despise me, Ian appears in the doorway. His posture is stiff, his shoulders tense as he stares down his father.

“Father, what brings you here at this hour?” Ian asks, his voice surprisingly steady, though I can see clearly that his fists are balled up tight against him.

Mr. Foster lets out a humorless laugh. “Oh, nothing. I was just giving Peaches here an update on her father,” he says smoothly. “Since clearly, his health has been of no importance to you ever since she got here.”

I raise a confused eyebrow at Ian.

“He didn't tell you?” Mr. Foster asks with a twisted sneer on his face. “My smart, successful doctor of a son is currently avoiding his duties to play housewife with you. The minute Lydia called you, he decided to take a leave of absence to focus solely on

making sure your father got better, not that he's done much of that. Now have you, boy? Link has only gotten worse since you decided to stay here and care for him."

I look back and forth between Ian and his father. I feel like I'm stuck in a riptide of aggression as they stare each other down.

"I'm sure Ian is doing everything he can to make sure my father gets well," I finally say, my tone soft but firm. "As well as the team of doctors he currently has at the hospital with him now."

Mr. Foster takes a step toward Ian, and his shoulders rise in an almost threatening manner. "Be that as it may. Maybe one of them will take his case seriously and actually figure out what's wrong with the man since clearly it's above my son's pay grade when you're around," Mr. Foster says menacingly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get back home to my wife. She came home in such a mood this evening. I wonder why that is?" He raises an eyebrow at his son before tipping his head my way. "Good night, Peaches. Maybe we will get to have that chat tomorrow sometime, if you can manage to escape this one for more than five minutes at a time, that is."

He stares menacingly down at his son until Ian finally moves out of the doorframe. They are roughly the same height, but Mr. Foster is built much thicker and stockier from working on the oil rigs his entire life.

But I've never been scared of Ian or uneasy around him the way I am around his father.

I'm more scared of him shredding my heart all over again like he did all those years ago.

Ian stares after his father until Mr. Foster disappears down the staircase and out of sight before he looks back toward me. A strained smile tugs on his lips as he runs his

hands through his hair in a frustrated manner.

“Are we still on for our library date?” I ask nervously. “I completely understand if you want to call it a night after that whole awkward encounter.” I look down at my feet, toeing the plush carpet while I wait anxiously for his answer.

Ian steps into the room, shutting the door behind him calmly. I look up, expecting that strained smile. Instead, I’m met with my favorite smile.

My smile.

“My dad is many things,” Ian says, his voice low and husky. “But he is nowhere near as important as you.” He reaches up and strokes my cheek softly. “In no world would I let him ruin our quote-unquote date.”

I’m fairly certain it’s my own smile that lights up the room this time.



23

Ian

Now

The smile on Georgia's face nearly ruins me. The vulnerability, the trust, and the obvious joy that beams back at me are enough to chase all the dark shadows that my father's unwanted presence has left behind.

It's just her and I—us.

After that horrible lecture my father gave me yesterday, his insisting that I grill Georgia and ask her why she's really here because there's no way that she's here to just visit her ill father...

The last thing I want is to have his negativity and unapproval surrounding this moment with her. Any moment with her.

“Why don't we just talk in here instead of in the library?” Georgia suggests, her lips pulling into a smile I can't quite make out.

Is she nervous to be alone with me all of a sudden? Did my father say more to her than the few lines I overheard as I checked on Auden one last time across the hall before coming to this room to escort Georgia to the library?

Not that she needs an escort. She's tough as nails and can take down a linebacker

when she's upset enough. She's tackled me to the ground enough times in our childhood for me to know that she doesn't need to be protected from whatever living things lurk in the night.

She's the bravest person I've ever met, until it comes to her .

I've vowed to protect Georgia in any way I could from her mother's spirit ever since the first time she saw her mother's ghost in the office all those years ago. And while I've never seen the ghost of Caroline, I believe Georgia, and I know it's my fault she's still being tormented decades later.

"Oh, come on, get out of your head and sit with me," Georgia says in her sassy take-no-shit way. "I want to read more of my mother's diary."

I watch as she gets herself comfortable on the sofa, tugging the blue blanket from the edge of the messy bed across from her into her lap. The diary in her hands almost disappears in a heap on her lap because the diary and blanket are the same dark shade of blue. She raises an eyebrow at me and pats the open spot next to her on the couch.

"Come on, Ian. I won't bite," she teases, all uneasiness and nervousness that tainted the room moments before dissipating completely as I cross the room and take my spot next to her. She hands the diary to me with a sly smile.

"Yeah, yeah, woman," I mutter. "Don't rush me." I can't help the stupid grin that takes over my face. It's impossible to control it when I'm around her. "Okay," I say, flipping through the pages carefully. "Where did we leave off?"

"There's a ribbon somewhere." Georgia leans over me, and I give her a puzzled look. "You know, like a bookmark? Diaries typically have slim ribbons to mark the spot in the book," she says as she reaches and grabs the bottom of the diary, bringing it closer to her face until she spots said ribbon and opens the diary to the correct entry.

Her perfume smells like lavender and vanilla, all mixed in one.

It's a scent I could drown in.

I nearly choke on my next breath when the thought crosses my mind. I don't take drowning lightly after what happened to Ree.

"You okay?" Georgia asks softly. "You sort of disappeared there."

I let out an amused chuckle. "I forget sometimes that you know me so well."

"About as well as you know me, I suppose," she muses, laying her head against my shoulder. "Now, let's read before we start getting all sappy and ruining it with all our tortured secrets."

This time, my lungs do stop in my chest because I know tonight is more than just us being us. Tonight feels heavier, more important.

My fate will be decided tonight. My life will either go exactly back to the way it has been over the last six years, miserably alone and wishing I wasn't such a coward when I left Georgia in that bed the way I did.

Or it'll be the turning point in this tug-of-war relationship we've had since we were kids, tormented by our losses as grief attempted to swallow us whole while we clung to each other for dear life.

For some odd reason, I'm nervous to read this next passage. The hairs on the back of my neck are standing at full attention, and I look around the room in a nonchalant manner so I don't spook Georgia. I never see anything, no ghosts like she does.

But I swear I can feel them, watching me, judging me, waiting for me in the darkest

corners of the rooms here at Crane.

I shake my head, snapping myself out of my eerie thoughts before I clear my throat and bring Caroline's diary closer to my face so I can read it easier in the muted light.

Dear Georgia,

I have no words. Truly, I am at a loss for them.

I just got done tucking you back into bed. You remembered nothing from the lake. I wish I had that same luxury tonight.

Because tonight, I committed the worst possible sin a mother could ever commit.

I did something horrible, truly monstrous . . .

Before I can read further, Georgia snatches the book out of my hand and grips it tightly to her chest. Her face is void of all color, making the splash of freckles on her cheeks look like splatters of black ink.

"Georgie?" I know my eyes must be a mixture of shock and concern. "What happened?" I place my hand on her knee, squeezing gently, hoping it'll jar her out of whatever inner turmoil she's battling.

She finally meets my eyes. "Ian, there's something I need to tell you. Something I've needed to tell you for years," she whispers, her lower lip trembling with each word. "Something you're going to hate me for." Her voice is a gentle whisper, but the words give me goosebumps.

I turn so we are facing each other. I grab onto her hands, forcing the diary to fall on her lap, and twine my fingers with hers. "Whatever it is, Georgia," I tell her, hoping

that my voice isn't shaking the way my chest is, "we will figure it out. I promise."

She shakes her head as two tears stream down her face.

"I don't know how to even start this conversation, Ian," she gasps out, her chest shaking with each breath.

"Shh, it's okay. Let's just start at the beginning, you know, like a storybook. Like we used to do when we were kids and were too upset for words. Where does this tale take place?" I ask her calmly.

"Here, at Crane Manor."

I take another calming breath, hoping she'll follow along. "Okay, that's good. Now, when does this tale take place?"

She yanks her hands out of mine and covers her face completely as huge, body-racking sobs escape her. I pull her into my arms, holding her close and stroking her back in comforting caresses until she's ready to talk again.

"It happened the night Irene died," she finally says, her whole body tensing in my arms.

Irene?

That is not what I was expecting to come out of her mouth. What about my sister's death could be the cause of Georgia's distress right now?

"Remember how I used to sleepwalk as a child?" Georgia asks. I shake my head yes; she must have felt it because she continues. "The night she died...she was at a sleepover here at Crane."

I pull Georgia away so I can see her face, and when I see the absolute anguish and guilt in her eyes... I know.

“No,” I choke out. “No. Irene was walking home because she never slept well here at the manor, and she fell into the lake and drowned. That’s what happened, Georgia. That has to be what happened. Tell me this is some kind of fucked up joke. Please tell me it’s not true.” My voice cracks. “Please, Georgia.”

“I wish I was lying. I wish it was some nightmare and when I woke up that we’d be whole again, the three of us together like it was meant to be. I wished it was me instead. I’ve wished for that since the moment the lie left my lips.”

“Why did you lie?”

She looks down at her hands, twisting them in the blue blanket in her lap. “Because I don’t remember any of it, Ian. When I woke up, I was in the bathroom with my mother and she was dressing me in a new nightgown. I remember she was crying and kept telling me that none of it was my fault. Then she put me to bed, and when I woke up the next morning...I heard your mother screaming,” Georgia says.

“When I was finally told what had happened, that Irene had drowned, I knew somehow it was my fault.” She wipes at the tears on her face angrily. “Because I also remembered my hair being wet after my mother put me back in bed.”

Realization dawns on me.

No.

“You sleepwalked into the lake?”

“Yes.”

“Irene followed you?”

“Yes.”

“And my little sister drowned trying to save you.”

“Yes,” Georgia cries out. “I told you...it’s all my fault she died. I don’t know exactly what happened, but I assume that I must have swam out of the lake while I was sleeping. I don’t know why Irene didn’t! She was always a better swimmer than me, but you know how dark and scary the lake is at night. Maybe she just got turned around and couldn’t see the shore, or she was still tired from being up in the middle of the night. That’s what I think must have happened.” Her voice trails off as she sniffles loudly, wiping at her eyes again.

Tears prickle behind my own eyes, and I press my palms hard into my face, trying to stave off the onslaught of the river that’s waiting to be unleashed. I haven’t cried since Irene died, but this. Hearing this. Reliving her last moments, at least as closely as anyone can.

Finally knowing why she was in the lake in the middle of the night to begin with...

“But why did you lie, Georgia?” I ask through gritted teeth. It’s the only part that doesn’t make sense to me.

She sucks in a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “Because my mother told me I had to or else I would be taken away from her.” Her voice is void of feeling, and it forces me to remove my hands from my face. “She said the cops would send me to jail for killing my best friend and that I’d never see her, or any of you guys, ever again.”

“You were just a child,” I say, forcing my own voice to become softer. “It was obviously an accident. It had to be. I’ve been around you when you have your sleep

episodes; nobody can get through to you when you're stuck in a dream. But they never made you violent, Georgia." I reach over and squeeze her hands.

My heart feels like it's being shattered in two. I've always wondered why Irene drowned. Like Georgia said, Irene was the strongest swimmer out of all of us. And Georgia had no control over herself when she was trapped in those dreams.

For Georgia to keep this secret all her life...she must have been so lonely and so scared. It doesn't make it right that Caroline forced her to lie, to put that type of pressure on a child. That's unforgivable.

But, if I had a child and this happened to them, I think I might have said anything to make sure they didn't get sent away.

Does knowing that Georgia was the reason Irene was in the lake in the first place change anything?

No, it doesn't. Because after all these years, it was still just an accident. A tragic, horrible accident. But an accident nonetheless.

"My little sister's death wasn't your fault," I tell her gently. "I'm sorry that you've lived all these years thinking that it was."

Georgia looks up at me, so many emotions flashing over her features. "How can you say that it wasn't my fault? I'm the reason she was in the lake! My own mother tried to kill me because she couldn't live with having a murderer for a daughter! I've lived with that guilt my whole life, Ian. I can't just let it go."

"Would you want Auden to blame herself if this happened to her? Would you look at her with anything but love if this accident had happened to her?"



Georgia opens her mouth, then closes it again. Her eyes are glued to mine as she shakes her head back and forth. “No, of course not.” Her voice cracks.

“That’s what I thought,” I tell her, flashing a sad but understanding smile. “It doesn’t change the way I feel about you, Georgia. I know this isn’t easy; hell, none of the secrets we’ve kept from each other have been easy. Your mother was wrong, and I’m so sorry for what she tried to do to you. I hate that you’ve lived with this for so many years. But thank you for finally telling me the truth about Irene’s death. You aren’t alone anymore.” I run my hands through my hair nervously. “But you might not feel the same way about me once I tell you why I really left you with nothing but a goodbye note six years ago,” I admit.

Those brilliant gray eyes of hers look at me with such a heartbreakingly confused expression. “Ian, I just told you one of the darkest parts of myself, the secret that’s haunted me for decades, and your response was that you don’t blame me.” She crawls into my lap, fitting herself perfectly in my arms, and lays her head against my chest. “There’s nothing you can say that could be worse than what I did, the secret I kept. I won’t let whatever you did ruin this or change my mind about us, either. You can tell me anything, Ian.”

And so I tell her.

24

Ian

Six Years Ago

I t's been four years since Georgia walked out of my life, leaving nothing but a note on her bedside table for me. A note telling me that saying goodbye would be too hard and that it was better for her to leave this way.

Leaving me in tatters as she ran away from Crane Manor with my heart in her hands.

Sure, in the note she told me to follow her when I was ready. She even made sure to write that she wouldn't change her cell phone number in case I wanted to get ahold of her one day.

What I wanted was for my parents to relinquish the death grip they've had on me ever since my sister Irene died when we were just five years old.

What I wanted was for me not to be such a fucking coward and tell them that I don't care if they didn't approve of Georgia. I know in my bones that she is the only girl for me, and it's time I win her back.

Which is why, four years later, I am staring up at the five-story apartment building she now lives in.

How do I know where she lives when I haven't talked to her in four years because

I've been too much of a sour jackass to reach out?

Well, I know this because she sent her father a birthday card a couple of months ago, and Mr. Harris gave me the return address when I asked him yesterday if he knew where she was staying. He handed me the empty envelope with nothing but a sly smile and a wink. A much better reaction than my parents gave me.

My mother cried, begging me to stay, because she couldn't lose another child. My father laughed, a hideous grin on his lips as he told me that Georgia would just use and abuse me and that I'd be scurrying home with my tail between my legs in no time.

I scoff under my breath. I can't let my father's words get into my head and ruin this for me. I've been dreaming of this moment for four years, and I won't let him taint this reunion with Georgia.

With shaking hands, I press the buzzer next to G. Harris .

Her voice greets me almost immediately. "Come on up!" she says through the small speaker, causing my heart to beat faster in my chest when I hear her voice. A loud buzz from the main door rings loudly overhead.

Is she expecting anyone? A boyfriend, maybe? Hopefully not, or this trip will be awkward as hell. Not that I would blame her for meeting someone else. She did leave me high and dry with nothing but a note as her goodbye gesture. After everything we've survived together, I thought I knew her better than that. I didn't think she was capable of being so cruel and heartless.

I make my way inside, and the building is nicer than I expected, but I guess most things in Los Angeles look shabbier on the outside. I opt to use the stairs instead of the elevator because I don't think I can sit still long enough for the elevator to go four

floors. I'm nervous as hell to see her. Nervous, and excited.

Probably the most excited I've ever been if the butterflies in my stomach are any indication.

I'm nearly panting by the time I make it to the fourth floor. Taking deep, calming breaths, I shove the duffle bag higher up on my shoulder and scan the numbers until I find Georgia's apartment: 4G.

The door is painted a bright mustard yellow, which might seem out of sorts if all the other doors on the floor weren't painted in varying hues of yellow and teal to match the hideous geometric carpeting that lines the hall floors. Large framed photos of Andy Warhol's pop art collection hang between each apartment door. Georgia's door has that funky banana on one side and some sort of soup can on the other.

I sincerely hope the inside of the apartments are spared from whoever decorated this monstrosity.

Not that I hate the banana; I might enjoy it in my own house one day. I chuckle to myself when I imagine Georgia coming home every day and being greeted by a giant banana.

It's absolutely ridiculous.

Okay, okay. Time to rip this Band-Aid of my own doing off. I take another deep, steadying breath as I reach up with a shaking fist and knock on the mustard-yellow door.

My breath gets caught in my throat when she finally opens the door and I see her for the first time in four years.

Four long, long years.

“Ian?” Georgia’s voice greets me, an obvious tremble in her voice as we take each other in. “Is that really you?”

The smile that spreads across her face stuns me into speechlessness.

Her chestnut hair is much shorter than it was the last time I saw her but still complements her heart-shaped face and dark eyes perfectly. She’s wearing a simple white tank top that’s tucked into the tight blue jeans that seem to hug every curve of her. She obviously spends a lot of time outside here in California because her freckles are dulled by her sun-kissed skin.

She’s beautiful.

How could I have stayed away for so long when she smiles at me like I hung the damn moon for her?

“Hi,” I choke out right before she throws herself at me and wraps her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly.

“Oh my God, Ian! I can’t believe you’re here! I never thought you’d come find me,” she says, hugging me tighter to her. “But you finally found me.”

I hug her back, hoping I can transfer every thought and feeling through osmosis. God, I missed her so much. The lavender and vanilla scent that has always seemed to cling to her skin, the way her body fits perfectly with mine, the feeling of her pressed up against me like this...

My eyes widen as I realize that Georgia can probably feel everything right now, and I pull away slowly. She looks up at me with those gorgeous stormy gray eyes of hers

filled with tears. I reach up and wipe them away softly before I lean in and place a gentle kiss against her lips.

Kissing her is like muscle memory; I can't seem to stop myself from doing it.

"I've missed you so much, Georgie."

She scoffs loudly and rolls her eyes, almost as if nothing has changed between us in the last four years. "I've missed you more."

Before I can lean in for another kiss, someone behind me clears their throat loudly.

I turn and see a man around our age staring back at us with an apologetic expression on his face. He's holding a bag of take-out food in his hand.

"Matty!" Georgia says, clearly expecting this man. "I'm so sorry! I was heading down to the lobby to grab the food, but my friend surprised me at the door." She releases me and steps around me to grab the bag from Matty, then reaches into her back pocket and pulls out cash and hands it to him. "Thank you again for bringing it up. Next time, I promise to meet you in the lobby. Please, keep the change, Matty."

Matty smiles at her fondly before looking over at me and eyeing me up and down. "A friend, you say?"

Georgia laughs loudly, the sound echoing down the empty hallway. "Yes, Matty. This is Ian, and he's my dearest, closest friend in the world. No need to fight him off...yet." She turns back and winks at me.

Matty's glacial eyes nearly bore holes into my body before he turns his gaze back to Georgia. The death glare must be reserved for me only because he looks at Georgia like he might be in love with her, too. "All right, Georgia. I'll see you in class. You

two have fun,” he says before finally taking his leave.

“Come on; let’s go eat the best damn eggrolls you’ve ever had in your life.” Georgia grabs my hand and pulls me into her apartment, closing the mustard-yellow door behind us.

I’ve spent countless days, endless hours, with Georgia throughout my life, and never once has it felt more natural than it does tonight. We’ve spent the last few hours eating, laughing, and catching up on everything we’ve missed over the last four years.

We are still us, and I didn’t realize how nervous it made me to think we wouldn’t be the same after being apart for so long.

It’s like the last four years apart never happened, and we’ve just picked right back up where we left off.

We’ve never put a label on us; we’ve never needed to.

She is mine, and I will always be her’s.

We are lying together in her bed, and she’s wrapped in my arms with her head against my chest. We’ve spent our whole lives cuddled up in similar positions, albeit in a much smaller bed, but tonight, there’s a sort of electric buzz in the air between us.

Something feels intimately different this time.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Georgia says quietly. “I know I’ve said it, like, a hundred times today, but I really can’t believe you finally left Crane.”

I stroke her back in lazy waves. “I never thought I’d leave,” I admit. “But I felt like I was missing a piece of me every time I walked into the manor and you weren’t there

to greet me. I missed seeing you swinging your legs on the barstools while you ate something you especially liked.” I kiss the top of her head softly, and when she looks up at me, I feel like everything I’ve been missing in my life is right here in my arms again.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss... home ,” she says warily. “But I don’t miss having to look over my shoulder every time I walked the dark halls alone in that house.”

“Do you still see her?” I ask nonchalantly. I won’t force her to talk about her mother’s ghost if she doesn’t want to.

I’ve never seen Caroline’s ghost myself, but I have always believed Georgia when she told me she was being haunted by her mother. Sometimes I find myself envious. I wish I could see Irene once in a while. But then I remember the way Georgia described her mother’s spirit—the rotting flesh and blood. I’d rather not see my little sister like that.

Georgia smiles at me, a real smile. Not forced at all. A smile I’ve never seen when it comes to her mother.

“I haven’t seen her since I walked through the gates leaving Crane Manor. No more night terrors either, or sleeping spells,” she tells me, relief clear in her voice. “I told you that place was haunted.” She pinches my ribs and makes me jump in surprise. “But I don’t want to talk about Crane, or ghosts. Tonight, I just want to be with you.”

The electricity in the air buzzes louder around us as she stares up at me. I sit up quickly, forcing her to sit up with me.

“Are you saying what I think you might be saying?” I ask. “And before you answer that, you swear nothing is going on between you and your delivery boy?”



She giggles and shakes her head at me. “Matty and I are just friends. I’m not really his type.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “I find that hard to believe. You should be everyone’s type.”

“Matty would prefer someone who looks like you,” she says, raising an eyebrow right back at me. “Now, enough about Matty. Right now, there’s only you and me.”

Her tongue darts out, licking her lower lip as she stares directly into my soul. Her cheeks are flushed, making her look more beautiful than I’ve ever seen her.

“I think we’ve waited long enough. Don’t you think so?” Her voice is low, almost husky sounding.

I reach out and pull her closer to me, kissing her hard as she climbs into my lap.

“We’ve only waited our whole lives for this,” I agree between kisses, making her gasp and melt into my arms completely. “I love you, Georgia. It’s always been you.”

She pulls away, just far enough so we can look each other in the eyes. “It’ll always be you,” she says before placing another kiss on my lips. “I love you, with my whole heart.”

I spend the rest of the night showing her just how much I’ve always loved her. How much I’ll always need her, much like the way I need oxygen to survive. Our movements were clumsy at first, but once we got past the awkward part, it was everything I’d always hoped it would be. It was perfect, because it was with her.

My eyes fly open when I hear a strange noise. I reach over, feeling for Georgia, when my hand hits empty space next to me. I look at the alarm clock that’s across the

room, and it says it's just past 3:00 am. Reaching for the other side of the bed, I pull the metal chain that turns on the small lamp on the bedside table.

Once my eyes finally adjust, I see Georgia standing at the large window in her room. She's wearing a purple nightgown, and she's muttering something under her breath.

I pull my boxers on and cross the room. "Georgia?" I ask softly. "Are you okay?" I place my hand on her shoulder and squeeze gently. I'm not sure if she's stuck in a nightmare or if she's awake. Every time she's had a sleep spell, she's looked completely awake. But I've watched my mother soothe Georgia back to bed several times over the years, and I know I'm not supposed to jar her awake if she is stuck in a nightmare.

"She's back, she's back, she's back," Georgia whispers, her eyes locked on something in the distance as she stares out the window. The city is lit up around us, but when I try to follow her gaze, I see nothing that stands out.

"Georgie, are you in a spell again?" I ask gently, rubbing her shoulders up and down softly from behind her. I can see her reflection through the window. She looks so far away, so I know she's asleep. "Okay, Georgie, let's get you back to bed." I try to steer her toward the bed, the same way I've watched my mother do.

But instead of Georgia moving toward the bed, she turns completely around, forcing me to release my gentle grip on her shoulders.

She opens her mouth and brings her arm up, pointing directly at me as her eyes stay unfocused on something past me. "Your fault. Your fault. Your fault," she says, her voice hollow, almost lifeless.

My heart is pounding in my chest as I look behind me nervously. I fully expect to see Caroline's ghost standing behind me, but I'm surprised to find nothing but Georgia's

belongings and my duffle bag sitting by the bedroom door.

I turn back toward Georgia and gasp loudly when I see that her gray eyes are focused completely on mine now, and she's stuck in a silent scream, while pointing at me. Something about this seems familiar...

No.

It can't be.

"Georgia," I plead, unable to take my eyes off of her. "Georgie, please wake up. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Because now I know why this sight of her looks so familiar...

It's the same way she described her mother's ghost looking any time she came to haunt Georgia. After I told Georgia to go into her mother's office for solace. After I screamed into the lake and begged the heaven's to bring Irene and Caroline back to us.

Georgia told me she hadn't had a night terror or seen her mother's spirit since she left Crane Manor. But what if it's not because of Crane Manor that all these horrible things have happened to her?

What if Georgia is being haunted and tortured with these nightmares because of me ?

I thought leaving Crane meant that we could finally escape the binds that held us there, but I think the only thing Georgia needs to escape...is me.

Her arm drops back to her side, and she shakes her head in confusion, looking around her room in panic before her eyes land back on mine. "Ian?"

I force a smile on my face. “You were sleepwalking. Let’s get you back to bed,” I tell her as I step forward and wrap my arm around her, steering her back toward the bed.

She climbs in and pats the spot next to her. “I’m sorry I woke you. I haven’t had a sleep spell in years. Let’s go back to bed.”

I climb in next to her, unable to force any words out. She wraps herself in my arms and, within minutes, is fast asleep again. I hug her tightly to me, inhaling the scent of her, trying to memorize every single thing about her.

Because I know that the only way to keep her safe, to keep her ghosts at bay...is for me to stay far away from her.

I have to leave and give her no reason to come chasing me.

I have to break her heart completely and make her hate me enough so that she never comes back to Crane Manor.

Sneaking out of her arms, I tip-toe into the small kitchen and grab a piece of paper from the small notepad on the fridge and the tiny pen that’s hanging next to it.

My hands shake uncontrollably as my heart cracks in my chest.

Dear Georgia,

This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come here. We don’t belong together anymore.

Don’t follow me.

Ian

I sneak back into her bedroom and leave the note folded up on the bedside table. I kiss her cheek one last time. "I'm so sorry, Georgie. This is what's best for you. I love you, always," I whisper.

Then I grab my duffle bag from the floor and leave her life for good, without looking back.

25

Georgia

Now

“That’s why you left me?” I gasp out, crawling out of his lap and planting myself on the other side of the small sofa. I glare at him as my heart cracks in my chest.

That’s why he left me? Because of a fucking nightmare? He left me alone in the world, with a child to raise on my own, because of that?

Not that I knew he was leaving me with a broken heart and a baby.

But still, this entire time, I thought he left me because he had finally realized I was unlovable.

My mother clearly didn’t love me enough since she tried to murder me.

My father couldn’t love me after my mother succumbed to her own demise by drinking the poisoned lemonade from the cup that was clearly meant for me.

I thought Ian had finally realized I wasn’t worth his heart, and I believed that wholly for the last six years. It wasn’t until I came back and he still treated me like nothing had changed between us that I thought maybe I was finally worthy enough for him.

But to know I lost him due to something as ridiculous as a nightmare?

“I can’t believe you left me because of that, Ian.” I glare at him, tears welling behind my eyes as I let the betrayal sink into my bones. “Because of a stupid nightmare. A nightmare I don’t even remember having!” I scoff, wiping at my eyes angrily. “Our lives weren’t supposed to look like this. We were supposed to be together,” I cry, my voice cracking in sync with my heart.

Ian reaches out and grabs my hands. I nearly yank them out of his grip, but his eyes look just as broken as I feel. “I didn’t want to leave you, Georgia. You have to believe me. I was terrified that I was the reason your mother’s ghost kept coming back to haunt you. Even now, you’re back in my life, and guess what? She’s fucking back to tormenting you again!” he yells, his voice completely defeated.

“And not only is she messing you with again, but she’s also haunting Auden. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do anymore. I want to be with you more than I’ve ever wanted anything, but how can I live with myself when I know that my selfish desires are the reason you live on edge twenty-four seven? The reason you tip-toe through your own home while checking every dark corner of every room?”

The pain in his voice breaks something in me, and I hurl myself back into his arms. “I would face my mother’s ghost every minute of every single day if it meant that we got to be together. I don’t care about her, or the stupid nightmares. I only care about us. You, me, and—” I almost say “our daughter,” but something stops the words before they can escape.

I take a deep breath, forcing the last secret I have back down. I can’t tell him tonight, not when what we have hangs so precariously in the balance. He forgave me for my part in his sister’s death—how, I have no idea. But he won’t be so forgiving when he finds out I’ve kept an even bigger secret from him.

“All I care about is you, me, and Auden. You two are my family, my whole heart. The rest of this? The rest of this is just extra baggage,” I tell him, pulling myself back

so I can force him to look at me. To show him how serious I am about this. “We’ve carried heavier baggage than this, Ian. We can carry this, and keep Auden safe, together. We can’t let this break us apart again. I won’t let my mother take you from me,” I say vehemently. “And you promised me—the day I came back here—that you wouldn’t let Crane take away another person I loved.”

I grab his face, forcing him to look down at me. I see the tears in his bright eyes reflected back at me and feel the dampness from his tears on his cheeks and wipe them away softly. “And you, Ian. You are someone I love. Fiercely. Madly. Completely. I love you, and I know you love me, too. No matter how twisted it all is. Don’t break your promise by walking away from me now.”

I press my trembling lips to his, the salty taste of his tears igniting a fire in me as he kisses me back with as much love and passion as I feel for him. The last strand of unsureness snaps between us. A startled gasp leaves my lips when he grabs the back of my thighs and lifts me off of the couch, laying me ever so gently on the bed across from us.

I want him. Badly. I tug on the hem of his shirt, and he laughs into our unbroken kiss, causing my lips to curve into a smile. “Nothing like a couple of life-changing secrets to get you in the mood, eh?” he teases me before he pulls away and gazes down at me with so much emotion. “I searched for you in all my dreams. You haunt my every thought. Tempt my every desire. My heart only beats for you,” he says as he kisses my lips, then makes his way across my jaw, my neck, and finally nips at the sensitive spot behind my ear. “And I love you, more than my own life. But you already knew that, didn’t you?”

He continues to tease me as his hands make their way to the buckles on my purple overalls. His movements are confident as he unbuckles them and lets the straps fall away. He lifts my shirt over my head, leaving me in my pink lacy bralette.



“Fuck, Georgia. You’re going to ruin me.” He tugs my bralette down, exposing both of my breasts before he traces them softly with his fingers, causing my nipples to harden underneath them. “You are perfect.”

“And I’m yours,” I gasp as he replaces his fingers with his mouth. The warmth of his lips against my sensitive nipple nearly undoes me as I arch off the bed with a loud moan.

The first time we had sex, we were both so nervous, our movements unsure and awkward as we learned each other’s bodies for the first time. This time, I know exactly what I want, and I’ll be damned if I don’t take it.

I reach for the hem of his shirt again and yank on it hard enough so he ceases the soul-stopping torment on my breasts.

“Impatient little minx,” he says with a heady laugh before pulling his shirt off completely. He looks back down at me, making my insides melt when I see that smile gazing back down at me.

The smile that’s reserved for me.

I grab the waistband of his jeans and tug him back toward me. “I’m allowed to be a little impatient after a long six years,” I say with a smug smile.

Ian puts both hands on the side of my head, caging me between them, refusing to lower his body back onto mine. “You got laid at least one more time after I left.” His voice is strained, almost like he feels the pull between us, begging to continue what we had started. “I’ve only had the pleasure of enjoying my own company since our almost perfect night together all those years ago.”

I feel myself flush. I don’t know if it’s because I feel guilty for lying to him, or if I’m

ashamed that our one night together was only almost perfect to him.

Because that night was everything for me.

“And before you force yourself into a spiral of worry,” Ian says, lowering himself slowly toward me. “I said ‘almost perfect’ because I ruined it by leaving. What we had, that night. It was more than perfect. Any moment with you is my favorite moment ever. I would have waited forever to have you back in my arms before ever looking elsewhere.” He leans down and grazes his lips against mine. “It’s always been you,” he whispers against my lips, his breath hot against mine.

I pull him down on me, kissing him with everything I have as his hands make quick work against the bottom half of my overalls, pulling them off and tossing them onto the couch across from us. I watch with heated eyes as he removes his jeans next, leaving him in nothing but his briefs.

I sit up and reach for him, silently begging him to come closer again before I implode with need for him.

“Do you have condoms?” he asks, his voice low and husky as his eyes light a fire in my veins.

I get to my knees, pulling him toward me by his hips. Our lips barely touch as we play this game of silent torture between us. Close enough to kiss, but refusing to let our lips touch.

“I’m on the pill,” I answer him, letting my lips graze his jaw as he moans softly. “I don’t trust condoms after—” I stop myself short. My eyes widen in horror as I look up at him.

“I would never judge you for moving on after I left you, Georgia,” Ian promises me.

“The past has no room in our futures. Besides, now we have Auden, and she wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t moved on. I could never judge you for that choice when she’s brought so much love into your life,” he says, nipping at my jaw. “Our life.”

I didn’t realize how badly I needed to hear that from him. Even though I know that there’s been no one else, he believes it because that’s what I’ve let him believe. Knowing that he doesn’t hold that fake one-night stand against me...I don’t think I could love this man anymore than I already do. The guilt I feel for lying to him, when he’s being this fucking understanding, makes me dizzy with both self-loathing and unquenchable lust for this man.

Placing my hands around his neck, I pull his lips to mine. He groans before fully unleashing himself. His tongue meets mine in fiery strokes as our lips move desperately against each other frantically.

Last time, we were so gentle with each other. This time, we are like a volcano racing toward an eruption.

Ian pulls my bralette over my head, tugging it off of me in quick motions before he pushes me down onto the bed. He pulls at my jeans until I’m left in nothing but a lacy pink thong. He stands, and his eyes turn molten as he looks me up and down before he pushes his briefs to the floor and steps out of them.

My mouth dries as I gaze at him, my eyes stopping on the hard proof of how much he wants me, too. I spread my legs for him slowly, a full blush spreading over my body at my own forwardness. He throws a smirk at me before he pounces, fisting one hand into my hair as he kisses me again.

He makes me feel brazen and confident in a way I never have before. I grind into him, moaning loudly when he takes his other hand and finally touches me where my need for him pulses the most. Easing one finger slowly in and out of me.

I need more of him.

Reaching down, I take him into my hands, pumping him up and down slowly, matching his own torturously slow tempo.

Ian starts working me harder, faster. I'm so close. But I don't want to finish this way.

I want all of him.

Releasing my grip on him, I grab his hand, forcing him to stop, and I push him back while lifting my hips, flipping us so I'm straddling him. His breathing is as ragged as my own as we stare at each other. A small smirk tugs on my lips as I grab hold of him, lifting myself and guiding him into me as I move slowly, gasping at how full it feels this way.

"Fuck, Georgia," Ian hisses as I really start to move. He grabs hold of my hips and thrusts himself farther and farther into me as we both chase our release.

"I'm so close," I moan, grinding myself into him.

He bounces us up and down with the force of his hips. He reaches up and places his thumb right at my core, caressing it in soft circles until I can't hold on anymore.

I arch my back and scream his name as my release crashes through me again and again. Ian's own release follows as soon as I shout his name.

My body doesn't belong to me anymore; it's his. Fully, completely—his.

Ian pulls me down to him, kissing me soundly as we both struggle to catch our breath. Our sweat-slick bodies collapse into each other's as I untangle myself from him.

“I love you,” Ian says through labored breath.

I reach up and pull his face to mine, stroking his damp hair out of his face. “And I love you.”

Ian laughs loudly, startling me.

“What?” I ask him, laying my head against his chest so I can listen to his heartbeat.

He wraps his arm around me, his hand moving up and down in lazy strokes against my back. “I’m just really glad that your father isn’t home tonight. I can’t imagine the walls are thick enough to drown out our escapades,” he says.

I can hear the sly smile in his voice, which makes me giggle into his chest.

“What?” he asks me this time.

“I’m just glad Auden is a heavy-ass sleeper,” I tell him, looking up and laughing again.

Ian throws his free arm over his face in embarrassment. “I completely forgot she’s in the room across the hall.”

I lean up and kiss his cheek, pulling his arm away from him. “Don’t worry. I’m not winning any Mom of the Year awards either because for a good half hour...I forgot, too.”

“Great parents we are,” Ian jokes.

My heart stops at his words.

Great parents.

I should tell him. I have to tell him she's his daughter. He needs to know.

I open my mouth to finally spill out the last, ugly secret that may be the true ruin of us all, but he catches my lips with his own, moving so quickly I don't have time to protest.

We spend the next hour tangled up together, making up for lost time, as this secret burns a hole in my chest.

I'll tell him tomorrow, I promise myself.

Tomorrow.

26

Ian

Now

Everything is perfect. The smell of vanilla surrounds me, with an underlying scent of lavender, tantalizing my senses into a calm wave of tranquility.

Or at least it would be if that incessant buzzing would stop.

My eyes fly open.

Georgia's sleeping form is nestled in right next to me. I reach over and brush a stray strand of hair out of her face. Her lips are parted as she sleeps peacefully next to me, looking beautiful as ever.

I turn my head toward the buzzing sound again and see my phone on the nightstand on her side. Shifting slowly and carefully, I move myself out of her grip and quietly make my way to the other side of the bed when the buzzing finally stops.

Grabbing my phone, I see that the hospital has called four times. That can only mean one thing. And it's never good.

My blood ices over as I look at Georgia.

Do I wake her? Or do I let her enjoy one last night of peaceful sleep before I have to

tell her that her father may be gone already?

My phone buzzes in my hand again. I race to grab my discarded jeans, thankful we managed to keep our mess of clothes in a somewhat tidy fashion. I place a chaste kiss on her cheek and race out of the room as quietly as possible.

“Hello?” I whisper into the phone, pulling the rest of my clothes on as I stand half-naked in the hallway.

“Dr. Foster?” I recognize the voice immediately, and my heart starts to beat normally again. If Link was dead, they wouldn’t have a nurse calling me nonstop.

“Yes, this is me. What’s wrong, Olivia?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but Mr. Harris has been insistent that you get here as soon as possible,” Nurse Olivia says, an obvious annoyed tone in her voice. “And before you ask why, he won’t tell me.”

I peek into Auden’s room and see that she’s still fast asleep. Horton peers up at me and lets out a silent meow of protest before snuggling back into her side.

“Okay, but nothing is wrong?” I ask Olivia as I make my way down the creaky staircase.

Olivia scoffs. “I mean, he may or may not be my most annoying patient on the floor. But nothing is technically wrong, other than he’s a patient here because he did have a heart attack mere days ago.”

“But he needs me there right now? It’s three in the morning, Olivia.” I sigh into the phone. “Did something happen? Any new visitors?” I ask as I grab my keys from my jacket pocket by the back door. What could have prompted this sudden need for me to



be there?

“He did have a visitor earlier, right after visiting hours ended. They insisted they speak to him and wouldn’t take no for an answer. I assumed you knew about it,” Olivia replies.

I step out into the night, surrounded by the cacophony of wildlife here at Crane. The loud chirps of the crickets, the hoots of the owls hunting for their next meal in the distance, the croaking symphony of the frogs who reside near the lake.

“Who was the visitor?” I ask as I get into my car, letting the phone auto-connect to wireless.

Olivia’s voice cracks inaudibly over the car speakers when she answers.

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

“Urg. Just get here, and you can talk to him yourself,” Olivia practically growls, her patience clearly gone as she hangs up on me.

I look up into the dark windows of the manor before I back the car out. I swear, I see something move in Auden’s window, but when I look again, there’s nothing there.

Ten minutes later, I’m walking into the brightly lit hospital. It may be three in the morning, but a hospital never truly sleeps.

Death and illness have no scheduled timeline.

My footsteps echo loudly as I make my way toward the nurses’ station. I see Olivia scowling at her desk. Her gray-streaked hair is pulled back into the messiest of buns while her heart-printed scrub top is stained with something. Coffee, I think.

“Olivia,” I greet her coolly.

She jumps up from her seat. “Dr. Foster! You’re finally here, good. This way, please.”

“Olivia, I know how to find his room, and it’s been ten minutes. Why don’t you go grab a cup of coffee? I know how swapping to nights makes you even more joyful than usual,” I say with a smirk. Olivia is always a pain, but night shift kicks everyone’s ass.

“Bless you, Dr. Foster. I had a patient earlier come running out of her room and collided with me as soon as I stepped out of the elevator with my cup of coffee,” she says in a rush before she points down at the stain on her scrub top. “And let me tell you, the coffee they serve downstairs is hot as hell. Nothing like that lukewarm gutter water from the vending machine.”

I chuckle at her politely. “Go get yourself some real coffee. I’ll handle Mr. Harris.”

She flashes me a rare smile before she skips around the nurses’ station and takes off down the hall toward the staff room, presumably where the nurses hoard the good coffee.

I turn down the other hall and head toward Mr. Harris’s room.

When I get there, he’s sitting up in bed, and his frazzled eyes meet mine right away.

“Oh, Ian! Thank goodness. Where are the girls? Oh, never mind that. I need you to take me home,” he says in a rush as he tries to get to his feet. “Right now!”

“Whoa, whoa. The girls are at home asleep, and I’m not here to take you home, Link. Now, sit back down, and tell me what’s going on,” I say sternly. Mr. Harris may be

my elder, but he's always been great about listening to my doctorly advice, as he likes to call it.

He sits with a loud huff, the hospital bed creaking loudly under his weight, and that's when I notice the purple flowers sitting on his desk.

"Where did you get those?" I ask him. Something about them seems so familiar, but I can't quite place where I've seen them before.

He looks at the flowers and then back at me. "That's why I need you to take me home! It's not safe for them!" he yells, pointing at the flowers wildly. "When I saw the flowers, and the card. I knew, Ian. I knew! That damn useless nurse was supposed to call you and tell you to bring the girls here! It's not safe for them!"

I sigh, rubbing a tired hand over my even more exhausted face. I didn't get but an hour or so of sleep after Georgia was finally satiated before she fell asleep on me. She's always been one of those lucky people who can hit the pillow and fall asleep within minutes, whereas I need countless hours of counting sheep before I can settle enough to fall into a deep sleep.

"Ian, you don't understand! You need to listen to me!" Mr. Harris shouts again.

I grab the chair from the corner of the room and drag it over to the bed so I can sit. "Okay, what's going on?"

"The girls, Ian. Our girls are in danger. We have to get them out of that house! Look!" Mr. Harris grabs the card that Auden made him and hands it to me.

I study the outside of the card. It's the willow tree at the manor, surrounded by purple flower petals. I look up at the flowers sitting on the desk. They could be the same ones, but it's hard to tell from a child's drawing.

I flip the card open and smile. Auden drew her family standing in front of Crane: Georgia, Auden, Mr. Harris, and me. Horton is hanging out by my feet.

“What am I missing?” I ask Mr. Harris as I continue to stare at the drawing. Nothing seems out of place, and then I see it.

I pull the card closer to my face, and my eyebrows arch toward each other as a surprised breath leaves my lips. “Is that... her ?”

Auden has drawn a person peeking out from one of the windows behind us. Someone wearing some type of white dress. The face is distorted; it looks like Auden may have rubbed the crayon over it to smear it. But it’s definitely a person.

I look up at Mr. Harris, and he’s nodding. “She’s why it’s not safe for them. She came to visit me, and something she said stuck with me, Ian. Lit all the lightbulbs or whatever that stupid saying is when something finally clicks together and makes sense.”

Now I’m confused. He’s seen Caroline’s ghost, too?

“Ian, she’s going to hurt Georgia, or Auden. I don’t know how I know it, I just do. Call it a father’s instinct, but you have to believe me,” Mr. Harris pleads. “Haven’t you felt uneasy about Auden being in that house?”

I lean back in my chair and raise an eyebrow at him. The hair on the back of my neck prickles up my scalp. There’s clearly something I’m missing, something important.

“She hasn’t told you yet,” Mr. Harris whispers, shaking his head in frustration. “Dammit, Georgia.”

“Look, Link,” I grind out. “It’s half past three in the morning. If you have something

to tell me, just spit it out so we can both go back to bed.”

I know I’m being an asshole, but I’m tired and still don’t know why I needed to leave Georgia’s side by rushing here. Everything Link is saying is nonsense.

“Ian, tell me something.” Mr. Harris crosses his arms over his chest. “Has Georgia figured out the real reason for your sister’s death?”

I snap my head up and glare at him.

“Yes, actually. She told me this evening what really happened that night. How you and Caroline decided it was best to lie to everyone, including my parents. Kind of a shit thing to put on your five-year-old daughter. Did you ever stop and think about how much it destroyed Georgia to keep that secret?” I ask, venom coating my tongue as I try my best to tamp down my anger.

What kind of father would willingly go along with doing this to their own child?

“How much it must have killed her to know that she was responsible for her best friend's death? All while knowing that she wasn’t allowed to talk about it? Growing up with the knowledge that her mother couldn’t live with having a murderer for a daughter, resulting in Caroline dying because she tried to kill Georgia over an accident .”

Mr. Harris’s jaw goes slack, his already pale skin draining of whatever color was left.

“No, no, no,” he whispers. “Ian, is that what she believes? That she killed Irene? She thinks that's why Caroline tried to kill her?”

I nod.

“Irene’s death wasn’t Georgia’s fault. It was Caroline’s,” he says solemnly as he struggles to meet my eyes while he twists his hands in the hospital blanket. “And I think...” Mr. Harris takes a deep, body-shuddering breath, almost as if he’s trying to hold his own emotions at bay.

Much like myself.

He finally looks up and meets my confused gaze, my heart pounding hard in my chest while I work on steadying my breathing. I feel like whatever he says next might just break me. And if it doesn't break me, then it most definitely has the chance of breaking Georgia by capsizing everything she’s thought to be true throughout her entire life.

“I think, Ian. That Caroline was murdered because of it.”

I sit up straighter in my chair. “Wh—what do you mean Caroline killed Irene?” I stutter. “Georgia said it was an accident. How can your late wife be responsible for my sister’s death?”

I’m waiting on pins and needles for his response when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I hastily pull it out, seeing Georgia’s name flash across the screen. My hands are shaking uncontrollably after Lincoln’s life-shattering admission, and the call goes to voicemail before I’m able to answer it.

“Hold on, Link. It’s Georgia,” I tell him as I unlock my phone and see several missed calls from her and a pending voice message. I bring the phone to my ear and listen to the message, my eyes widening with fear.

I jump to my feet. “Georgia’s in trouble. I have to go!” I shout at Lincoln as I rush to the door. I don’t wait for his response and throw myself down the sterile hallway.

I don't know what's going on, but Georgia's panicked voicemail replays over and over in my head.

I hope I'm not too late.

27

Caroline

23 Years Ago

I peek in on the girls one last time before I head to bed and confirm they are both fast asleep. Georgia and Horton are passed out on her bed, and Irene is asleep on the adjoined mattress next to her.

When I told Lincoln I wanted to get a trundle bed for Georgia's room last year, I expected to use it for a sibling for her.

Unfortunately, life hasn't quite panned out the way I had hoped. I rub a hand over my flat stomach. I'm supposed to be halfway through a pregnancy, but I lost the baby at ten weeks.

I still haven't managed to figure out how to feel.

One minute, I'm looking at Georgia and reminding myself how blessed I am to have been gifted with such a beautifully kind little girl.

The next minute, I'm angry and heartbroken that my body can't figure out how to give me another one.

Seeing Irene, Ian, and Georgia together all the time both hurts and heals something in me. Georgia would make such a wonderful big sister, but maybe it's time Link and I



stop tempting fate.

Three losses in three years, all before the end of the dreaded first trimester.

The pain is still there after every loss, but it's getting more familiar to cope with. I haven't decided whether that's a good thing or a bad thing yet. Nobody wants this type of grief to become easier with time, but unless you've experienced it, you wouldn't know that this form of grief never truly leaves you. You just make room for it.

"Hello, my dear." Link greets me at our bedroom door with a kiss on the cheek. His appearance catches me off guard. He's wearing black iron-pressed slacks and a cream-colored button-down shirt with a sports jacket slung over his arm. His hair is combed to the side, making him look devilishly handsome.

"Why are you all dressed up?" I ask him, giving him a swift kiss on the cheek before I head into our bathroom so I can change into my pajamas.

Link follows me into the bathroom and adjusts the collar of his shirt. "Gabe and the boys are all getting together for drinks down at Harper's," he says as he pats down a few stray strands of his dark hair.

"You're getting that dressed up to go to a pub?" I cock an eyebrow at him.

Link wraps his arms around me, placing his chin in the crook of my shoulder, our reflections staring back at each other from the massive vanity mirror. The heady scent of his cologne swirls around me as he holds me close.

"I'm the boss, baby." He kisses the side of my head before pulling away. "I have to dress like the boss. You know, keeping those appearances up and all that."

I scoff. “Gabe is your best friend; he doesn’t give a damn if you’re the boss. He just wants to hang out with you and remind everyone that he’s next up for that promotion once Damian heads to Alaska to help manage the rigs there.”

Link’s face twists into something unpleasant, like he just got done sucking on a sour lemon.

“Care, I’m not making Gabe my VP. The guy horses around more than anyone I know. Sure, I can trust him with fixing this skeleton of a house, but I can’t trust him to manage my men when I’m needed elsewhere. The whole company would turn into a beer pong tournament within an hour of him taking charge.”

He sounds remorseful, but there’s an underlying emotion seeping out of him that I can’t quite pin down.

Anger, perhaps? Annoyance. Maybe. Either way, I’ve never heard Link speak about Gabe this way. He’s always been his go-to person in a pinch. I never realized that Link didn’t trust him to do the bigger tasks in his absence.

I can’t imagine the burden of having to keep your best friend at arm's length.

I’m extremely grateful I’ve never felt that way about my own best friend. Lydia has been nothing but supportive and loving since the day we met. Her falling in love with my husband’s best friend felt like fate. Then when we both got pregnant just a few months apart, it was like a childhood fairytale coming to fruition.

Two best friends living next door to each other, married to the loves of our lives while raising our children together. It’s the type of life we had always prayed for, the ultimate dream.

“Why don’t you ask Lydia if she wants to come hang out for the night. You girls can

get wine drunk and watch scary movies while the kids sleep,” Link suggests as I walk out of the bathroom wearing a blue nightgown. He’s sitting on the chair in the corner and pulling his shoes on.

I smile at him and shake my head. “I already have Irene here having a sleepover with Georgia so that Lydia and Ian can have a mother-son date.”

Link looks up at me, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion. “What on earth is a mother-son date?”

I shrug my shoulders. “I’m not sure. Lydia just asked if I could keep Irene here tonight so she and Ian could spend some time together. I think she was taking him to dinner and a movie.”

“Weird sort of date,” Link mumbles. “Who takes their children on a date? It’s not like they can get lucky at the end of the night.”

Irritation seeps into my bones.

“Lincoln Harris, there is absolutely nothing weird about spending time with your child. Maybe you should take Georgia on a date one of these nights instead of heading to the pub every night with your ‘boys,’” I snap back. “Then maybe you’d see the benefits of spending one-on-one time with your only child.”

Maybe this is why we will never be blessed with another child. My husband would rather go drinking than spend any time trying to really get to know his daughter. He’s not a bad father—he adores her and spoils the girl rotten. But he doesn’t know how to calm her down from a night terror. He doesn’t know that she prefers the blueberry waffles over the chocolate chip ones. He doesn’t know that she would rather play in the mud with Ian than play dolls with Irene.

He doesn't really know the child we made together, and it breaks my heart.

But maybe I'm being unfair. Maybe those things are foreign to all fathers. Maybe mothers just pay better attention to the little things like that.

Link stands, and he crosses the room toward the bedroom door. His shoulders are stiff, and I can tell that I've upset him with my outburst.

"Hey," I say, crossing the room and wrapping my arms around him from behind, laying my head against his back. "I'm sorry. That was unfair of me. I think I'm just having one of those days where all this loss feels overwhelming. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

He turns and pulls me into a tight embrace. "It's okay, Care. I know all of this has been so much harder on you than it's ever been on me," he says gently. "But I know one day we will give Georgia a sibling. I just know it."

I look up at him, his green eyes twinkling as he stares down at me.

"And I know we will have lots of fun making that happen. In fact, I know something we can do right this moment to up our chances," he says in a sultry voice, causing my insides to melt as he turns and grips the hem of my nightgown.

I reluctantly pull away from him and playfully slap his chest. "You cad! Go play with your friends," I tell him, my foul mood dissipating as he laughs with me. "I love you."

I stretch and go to kiss his cheek, but he turns his face at the last minute and kisses me hard on the lips.

"I love you. Date night, you, me, and Georgia, tomorrow. Be there or be square."

Link chuckles before kissing me one last time and leaving the room.

God, I love that man, even if he's the biggest fool sometimes.

He pops his head back in before I shut the door behind him. "But you and I, my dear, we have a date tomorrow night, and it involves that pretty lacy nightgown."

My cheeks blush crimson as he winks at me one last time before finally leaving.

I jerk myself awake with a muffled scream into my pillow.

I sit up and see that the clock reads 2:00 a.m.

"Link?" I ask, my throat painfully dry. I reach for his side of the bed, only to be met with a cold and empty space. It's obvious he hasn't come home yet.

Strange. I swear I thought I heard something, but maybe I was stuck in one of those nightmares that Georgia is frequently plagued with.

Or maybe Link is downstairs hunting for food in his drunken state. I roll my eyes. He had better not wake the girls.

I make my way out of bed, grabbing my robe from the chair in the corner and pulling it on before heading into the darkened hallway.

Georgia's door is already open when I peek my head in to check on them, but when my eyes finally adjust to the darkness, I see that both beds are empty. The blankets are both pushed to the end of the beds as Horton is sound asleep on top of Georgia's pink pillow.

I head downstairs, straining to hear them. I bet they are in the kitchen with Link

getting fueled up on sweets before he sends them back to bed.

When I get to the kitchen, I flick the light on, and again, the room is empty.

Where on earth are the girls?

I walk toward the window to see if Link's car is here, but the only car in the driveway is my own.

I stare up at the full moon. It's beautiful tonight as it illuminates the yard. I catch movement in my peripheral.

Movement toward the lake, just past the willow tree.

I stare into the darkness, waiting to see something, anything, when I see something—no—some one splashing in the lake.

I rush out the back door and run as quickly as I can to the lake's edge.

My blood runs cold when I finally see them.

Georgia and Irene are both in the lake, too far for their toes to reach the lake bottom.

“Georgia!” I yell as I run into the bone-chilling water toward them.

“She won't wake up! She started sleepwalking!” Irene yells as her head bobs up and down in the water, trying her hardest to stay afloat next to Georgia's still form. “She won't wake up!”

No, no, no. I can't lose her. I can't lose my only baby.

“ Georgia! ” Irene screams, her words muffled by the water as she pulls on Georgia’s arm. “WAKE UP!”

I’m only a few feet away when Georgia goes under completely, leaving only a dark ring of floating hair as she sinks lower. Irene starts thrashing wildly as she reaches for anything to keep her body afloat. That’s when I notice that she’s holding onto Georgia’s body, pushing her down farther as she uses my baby as a life raft.

“ No! ” I scream at Irene. “ Get off her! ”

As soon as I reach the girls, I grab Irene’s arm and yank her off of Georgia, pushing her harder than I mean to away from us, deeper into the lake, and grab Georgia’s still form.

I lift my daughter into my arms and kick furiously toward the shoreline. Georgia’s dead weight threatens to drag us both under as I call on all my strength to get us out of this watery prison.

When I finally reach the shore, I lay Georgia down gently and bring my ear to her mouth, listening with my whole soul for any type of noise.

Nothing.

Tears stream down my face as I start CPR on my daughter. Her tiny body jerks violently with every thrust down.

“Come back to me, baby girl, come back!” I yell between movements.

After what feels like forever, her body convulses, and she sits up, spewing water all over both of us between coughing and panting for breath.

“Mama, what happened?” she asks weakly, her small body melting into mine.

I grab her and hold her to my chest, my body shaking from fear and adrenaline as I sob into her hair. “Nothing, baby girl. Nothing. You’re okay. That’s all that matters now. You’re okay, you’re okay.”

“Where did Irene go?” Georgia asks, her voice hoarse from coughing up the lake.

I feel the color drain from my face, and I turn toward the lake behind me, my eyes scanning the surface of the dark water.

That’s when I see her.

Floating face down in the lake.

Her pink frilly nightgown is like a piece of driftwood around her.

“Stay here, Georgia. Don’t move. Just stay right here until I come back,” I tell her, hugging her hard before racing back into the lake.

The lake that might possibly have become a graveyard tonight.

I swim as fast as I can, reaching Irene within moments. I grab her the same way I grabbed Georgia and fight like hell to get us both back to shore.

My energy is fading fast, and I practically throw us both down onto the shore. Irene’s body hits the ground with a loud thump next to mine as I struggle to catch my breath.

“Turn around, Georgia,” I beg her when I see her staring at Irene with wide eyes.

Grabbing Irene’s still body, I listen for breath, the same way I listened for Georgia’s,



and I hear nothing.

I go through countless rounds of CPR. But Irene's body doesn't spring back to life like Georgia's did.

Her body remains motionless, suspended forever in this state. Her hazel eyes staring into the abyss of the night sky, the full moon reflecting through them.

That's when the reality of it finally sinks in. I bring Irene's lifeless body to my own, crying harder than I've ever done before as I rock her and hold her close to my body.

"I'm so sorry, Irene. I'm so sorry," I whisper to her, my tears getting lost in her dark, wet hair.

Georgia whimpers behind me, and I feel as though my heart is flayed open.

Overwhelming panic fights common sense as I realize what I must do.

I can't let Georgia get taken away from me. Everyone will think this is Georgia's fault because of her sleeping spells. Even though she has no control of them, she still walked into the lake, the dominos of cruel fate following in her wake.

I cannot be taken away from my daughter.

So we must lie.

I brush Irene's damp hair away from her face, closing her eyes forever with the palm of my hand, then I walk her back into the lake and leave her there.

Everyone will think she accidentally drowned.

I can't save her now, but I can save myself and my daughter.

If that makes me the worst person—the worst mother—in the universe, then so be it. I'll surrender my soul to Hell before I let my own child grow up without me.

I walk out of the lake, leaving Irene's body floating behind me. I wrap Georgia's shaking body into my arms and walk back into the house with one thought playing in my head over and over again.

I just killed my best friend's daughter . . . to save my own.

28

Georgia

Now

The sound of a door slamming wakes me. I reach over, looking for Ian, but I'm met with nothing but the empty space where his body is supposed to be.

I sit up quickly, pulling the sheet to my bare chest as I search frantically for my phone.

Please don't let there be another "this was a mistake" note waiting for me.

I find my phone on the floor and see that it's past three in the morning. I have no texts from Ian. No missed calls.

Where is he?

I hit his number, hoping he has his phone with him as I search for my clothes. I let out a frustrated groan when the call goes straight to voicemail.

"Where are you, Ian?" I mutter to myself.

I grab a pair of black leggings from the drawer and throw on one of Ian's T-shirts that's hanging in the closet while trying my best to keep the impending heartbreak at bay.

How could he leave me here, forcing me to wake alone after we bared our souls to each other?

I thought we had finally gotten past this.

I thought we were finally moving forward, toward the future we were meant to have together before everything went to shit.

Maybe I'm being too harsh. Maybe he's simply downstairs grabbing a bite to eat. We did spend the last few hours wrapped up together. I'm sure that does something fierce to a person's appetite after burning all those calories off.

Deep breath in, Georgie girl. Don't let your mind run wild with theories before you know what's really going on with Ian.

I step out of the bedroom and decide to go look for him before I let myself fall apart over something that could simply just be a misunderstanding. The colorful lights illuminating from Auden's room are like a beacon calling to me from the dark hall.

I tap Ian's number again, the line ringing loudly in my ear as I peer into her room, but the only one in there is Horton, who is fast asleep on the duvet that's been pushed to the end of the bed.

He lifts his head and looks up at me as I step farther into the room.

"Where's Auden hiding, little buddy?" I ask Horton as if he can hunt her location down and give me directions. He lets out a low meow, then yawns and closes his eyes again.

Ian's phone goes straight to voicemail. I hit redial instead of leaving a message. I debate sending him a text when a chill creeps over my skin, making the small hairs

on the back of my neck stand on edge.

Then I hear it.

That low, tortured moaning sound.

I pull the still-ringing phone away from my ear, listening hard for whatever is hiding in the shadows.

My eyes flick to the window in Auden's room, where the noise seems to be coming from, and I gasp, nearly dropping the phone.

She's back again.

My mother's ghost is standing at the window, her arm outstretched and pointing to something outside.

I step closer, and my body tries to resist with each step as I move toward my mother. I'm only a couple of feet away when I can finally make out the words she's trying to say.

"Don't trust, don't trust, protect."

Seeing my mother's ghost has always terrified me, but some part of me knows that she won't hurt me. Her ghost won't, at least. She may have tried to poison me when she was alive, but her spirit has never harmed me.

I inch closer, my heart pounding harder with each step.

"Mom?" I say her name quietly, barely a whisper.

Her body turns toward me, but her arm remains pointing out the window.

“Protect, protect, protect,” she hisses out before turning her attention back toward some invisible force outside.

Her second arm comes up, pointing in the same direction.

I tear my gaze away from her twisted, heinous features, and my eyes follow down the length of her arm until I, too, am looking out of the window.

It's nearly a full moon tonight, which helps illuminate the property below us. I see the willow tree, its long fronds swaying in the night air. The lake just passed it, its water eerily still. My eyes move to the small dock that juts out over the lake—that's when I see them.

A dark figure is standing at the end of the dock. I can't make out clearly who it is. I can only make out the dark clothing they are wearing. Is it a man? A woman? I can't tell.

But what I can see, what I can make out clearly despite the lack of light, is the pattern of a nightgown.

A nightgown with glow-in-the-dark unicorns printed on it.

The glowing unicorns are like a beacon in the night against the dark fabric of the figure.

Whoever is standing at the end of the dock has my daughter hanging limply in their arms.

“Protect,” my mother hisses next to me again. “Don't trust.”

I tear my eyes away from Auden and the dark figure and stare at my mother's ghost.

"Is this what you keep trying to warn me about? Is someone trying to hurt my daughter?" My voice shakes with each word.

My mother's depthless gaze turns toward me, and her dark eyes look sad, if that's even possible.

"Yes," she whispers. "Protect."

My feet can't fly fast enough as I race out of my childhood bedroom, leaving my mother's ghost and her warnings behind me as I run as fast as my legs can go to save my daughter.

Crane Manor won't take her from me.

I hit Ian's number again as I'm racing down the stairs.

"Come on, come on, Ian, answer your damn phone!" I scream into the phone when it sends me straight to voicemail again.

"Ian! Auden is in trouble! I don't know where you are, but we need your help at the lake! The dock!" I yell into the phone as I slide into the kitchen.

I throw open the back door, and I hit the pavement outside with bare feet, running past the willow tree, the fronds whipping toward me furious, almost as if they are tentacles trying to pull me into their sinister grasp.

The usual sounds of wildlife are strangely absent, like they also know something terrible is in play right now. The only sound I can hear is the sound of my own stuttered breathing.

“AUDEN!” I scream, my voice breaking as I force my lungs to keep breathing. My chest feels like a molten blaze as I struggle for breath.

I reach the wooden dock and stop short, a strangled, surprised gasp escaping my lungs when the dark figure finally turns toward me and reveals their true identity.

“You?” I choke out.

The dark figure flashes me a small, sad smile as they shift Auden’s weight beneath them.

“It’s time for you to pay for what you did, Georgia.”



29

Lydia

20 Years Ago

The front door bursts open behind me. Before I have a moment to muster up any real type of reaction, I see Ian running in with a giant bouquet of flowers.

He rushes up to me with a nervous smile, twirling the flowers in his small hands.

I hate that I'm the reason he's so nervous and unsure about me these days, but it's too hard to see him without her.

Without my sweet Irene.

Next month will be three years since I've seen the two of them together. Smiling, bickering, fighting over the last bar of chocolate.

I'll never see that in double vision again.

My baby girl died because my best friend didn't watch her own daughter close enough. I don't have any real proof. But somehow, somewhere deep inside, I know Irene's drowning was more than an accident.

And I know without a doubt that Caroline and Georgia were somehow involved.

That's why I haven't begged Gabe to quit his job and whisk us away from this house, away from these people.

I can't find proof if I'm not here.

Which is why I brave the sight of that watery cemetery—the lake that swallowed my baby girl's final breath.

Each day, my whole body revolts at the sight of it.

I can't eat, can't sleep, and smiling is still nearly impossible.

It's been three years since Irene died, and still, the world feels too heavy to survive. The only thing that's kept me going is Ian, and even seeing him shatters my heart over and over again.

You're not supposed to have a twinless twin, but that's exactly what Ian is without Irene. Half a soul, half a heart, half a person. Never to be made whole again.

"Mom?" Ian says hesitantly.

I raise an eyebrow at him and battle to plaster some semblance of a smile for him. "What is it?" I respond, sharper than I mean to. Another piece of me slips away at his wince.

He holds out the bouquet of purple flowers, our fingers brushing slightly as he hands them to me. "Daddy and I got these for you. I hope you like them," Ian says nervously, wrapping his arms around his body.

Sometimes I wonder if he's doing it to shield himself from my ire.

Nobody tells you how hard it is to both love—and hate—your own child’s presence. I love that he’s here, but I hate that he’s here because my instinct is to peek around him in search of his sister.

I’m so lost in my own thoughts that I don’t see Gabe walk through the door. I look at him when he clears his throat softly.

He flashes a sad smile at me. He’s always been better at hiding his grief, but I can see how much he is struggling in that sad smile of his. It’s the only smile we know how to give each other these days.

“The guy at the florist said they are called aconite,” Gabe tells me as he squeezes Ian’s shoulders, standing over him like he can protect him with his sheer size.

I look down at the oddly shaped flowers, their hue a beautiful, stunning shade of purple.

“They are beautiful,” I say, truly meaning it. “Thank you, boys.”

Ian smiles brightly at me. He has one of those smiles that spreads across your entire face, so big it nearly touches your eyes.

The same smile his sister will never flash at me again.

Tears sting my eyes as I bring the flowers to my nose to inhale their scent.

“I wouldn’t get them so close to your face,” Gabe suddenly says. I give him a confused look and pull the flowers away from my face. “The florist said aconite is poisonous if ingested. So just don’t go munching on them for a midnight snack,” Gabe finishes, earning a giggle from Ian.

“Can I go give one of the flowers to Georgia?” Ian asks.

His whole soul comes to life at the mention of Georgia.

Anger flares through my nerves.

“She doesn’t deserve pretty things from you, Ian,” I snap, earning myself another wince from him.

Gabe’s eyes narrow as he looks down at me. He squeezes Ian’s shoulders again. “Ready to go, kid?”

“Where are you taking him?” I ask, tossing the bouquet onto the butcher block countertop. A few of the petals detach themselves and fall softly to the tiled floor.

“I’m taking him to work for the day. Caroline has this grand idea for a picnic with Georgia. Link decided he wanted to join in, so he’s leaving me in charge for the day. I asked if my boy could tag along, and he had no qualms with it. Ian just wanted to get you some flowers first,” Gabe answers, his eyes still narrowed and angry at me for snapping at Ian.

“I suppose I need to get over to Crane and help Care with this picnic,” I say, avoiding Gabe’s accusing glare.

Gabe says nothing as he and Ian leave, heading back out the front door and leaving me in my own silent misery for company.

I walk to the window, watching them leave while safely hidden in the shadows of the semi-sheer green curtains. As soon as they get out of the house, Ian lights up again. He grabs Gabe’s outstretched hand with a content smile.

In the short distance past them, I see Caroline. Her white dress billows behind her in the breeze. Georgia appears from behind the willow fronds, her own yellow dress swaying at her ankles as she runs into the safe embrace of Caroline's arms. Caroline hugs her tightly, ruffling her hair before bending down and plucking a hydrangea from the garden bed next to them. She hands it to Georgia, and I watch with jealousy-infused oxygen filling my lungs as Georgia brings the flower to her face, inhaling it with no abandon.

Caroline doesn't deserve a daughter. She doesn't deserve to live in such bliss while I'm losing myself more and more each day to my own misery and grief.

I know it's their fault.

It's time to remind Caroline what real grief looks like so she can know what she's done to me over the last three years.

She is the reason my baby girl is gone.

She is the reason my son is terrified to be in the same room as me.

She is the reason why my husband can't stand to look at me.

I grab the bouquet from the countertop before heading to Crane.

Maybe I'll make Georgia her own special glass of lemonade.

30

Georgia

Now

“Y ou?” I choke out as I stare at Mrs. Foster, my gaze flitting back and forth between her and my daughter. Auden looks too still in her arms.

“Is she—” I choke on my words.

Lydia shakes her head. “No, she’s not dead. Not yet, anyway. But if you try anything, I’ll drop her into the lake. Fitting end, isn’t it? After what you and your mother did to my own little girl.”

My entire body is alight with fear. A soul-consuming fear that I’ve never felt before.

“Auden, baby girl. Mommy is right here.” Tears sting my eyes as I stare at her limp, nearly lifeless form.

Mrs. Foster laughs, a hideously cold laugh. “She can’t hear you. I gave her a snack before bed while you were—indisposed. Just a few melatonin gummies. I won’t let her suffer the way you let my Irene. This is much more humane. She’ll just slip into the water and eventually gasp for her last breath before she joins my own sweet girl.”

Realization and panic flood my veins as I continue to stare at Mrs. Foster.

“It was you. You were the one who tried to poison me,” I say, my voice quiet with shock. “It wasn’t my mother.”

My father was right. My mother wasn’t responsible for her own demise. This person—this fucking monster took her from me.

I spent my whole life thinking my mother hated me, but this entire time, my mother’s ghost has been trying to warn me.

Don’t trust —don’t trust Mrs. Foster.

Protect —Auden.

My mother has been trying to protect me, not torture me.

The revelation is like a punch through my heart. It hits so hard, I nearly fall to my knees as they threaten to buckle underneath me.

But I can’t afford to buckle under the weight, not when my daughter’s life hangs precariously in this monster’s arms.

I shake off the invisible weight of my heart shattering, steeling my nerves for whatever comes next.

“Why are you doing this to us?” I ask, my voice surprisingly calm despite the nonstop hammering of my heart.

Maybe if I keep her talking, it’ll buy us some time.

Time for Ian to get my message and come back from wherever the hell he disappeared to.

I should have told him Auden was his daughter.

I shouldn't have waited.

What if—what if he never gets to hear her call him Dad?

I'm such a fucking idiot.

The worst type of coward.

I send a silent prayer that he makes it here in time, that he hears my message, that he gets to hold his daughter and know that she's ours .

Mrs. Foster scoffs. "You know why I'm doing this, Georgia. Your mother killed my daughter to save you. It's your fault my Irene was taken from me. You may not have been the one to push her under, but it's your fault she was in this lake that night. I can't punish your mother any further than I already have," Mrs. Foster says coolly, but I can see the effort she's making to keep her own emotions in check.

My mouth opens in surprise before I snap it back shut. "You have it all wrong. It was me who sleepwalked into this lake. Irene drowned trying to save me. My mother had nothing to do with it other than covering it up to keep me safe."

Mrs. Foster shakes her head, a maniac smile tugging on her lips as she adjusts under Auden's weight again. She won't be able to hold her much longer; her strength is already waning.

Where are you, Ian?

"I felt so guilty for killing Caroline. It was supposed to be you who drank the lemonade. I wanted her to know what it was like to lose her only daughter. It was



supposed to be you. But when she died, I felt like you had suffered enough. Growing up without a mother, that seemed a fitting enough punishment. But then, I found her little diary. The diary that told the true tale of what happened to my sweet Irene.”

I give her a puzzled look.

“Oh, you haven’t read that far yet? Let me sum it up for you. Your mother pushed Irene into the water to save you. You sleepwalked into this same lake, and my sweet Irene followed you in, trying to save you,” she spits out.

“Irene grew tired, and she started to use your body as a life raft. Your whore of a mother pushed her off and left her to drown in this lake. I didn’t know the full story until after you left Crane when you were off to college. But when I read it, read the truth, I knew you needed to be punished, too. I just wasn’t sure how.”

I take a small, hesitant step closer to Mrs. Foster. “Then kill me, not my daughter. She’s innocent. She’s done nothing wrong. It’s my fault Irene is gone. Take me, please.”

Tears are streaming down Mrs. Foster’s cheeks. I can see the wet trail in the moonlight.

“You don’t have to do this,” I plead. “Take your revenge out on me, not my child.”

Mrs. Foster shifts her weight again. “Oh, no, Georgia dear, this has been my plan from the beginning,” she says. “You see, I kept tabs on you as soon as Ian came running back to Crane with nothing but his duffle bag and broken heart. I couldn’t let you get away with destroying both of my children.”

A fierce, fiery glare erupts from her eyes as she stares me up and down.

“Imagine my surprise when I went to see you just a few months later and saw that you were expecting a child of your own. I had planned to confront you for breaking my son’s heart. My boy would have given you the world, and you spit on his affections. How dare you think he’s not good enough for you? You! Ha! The girl who caused the death of his own sister. I went there to tell you that I knew Irene’s death was your fault and that you needed to stay away from my son.”

I strain to keep my breathing steady, but a glimmer of hope lights up in the form of headlights near the main entrance of Crane. I keep my focus solely on Mrs. Foster. I can’t let her see the car’s headlights bouncing up the gravel road.

Please let it be Ian. Please.

Mrs. Foster starts to turn her head when an audible noise comes from behind her. “You know nothing about what Ian and I have gone through. Nothing!” I scream out, praying to anyone who will listen that she keeps her attention on me.

Mrs. Foster lets out another humorless laugh.

“No, Georgia. You know nothing. You don’t know how easy it was to slowly lure you back here. How patient I’ve been. When I found out that you had a daughter of your own, I couldn’t stop the jealous, hideous thoughts that plagued me. Knowing that you get to be a mother to this sweet girl after you ripped my own from this world...it just wasn’t fair. But I knew that was how you needed to be punished. The same way you and your mother punished me by taking my Irene from me. You see, my revenge has been a long time coming. I needed your daughter to be the same age as my sweet Irene so that when I took her from you, you’d know the same pain you and your mother inflicted on me.”

The car lights have completely disappeared, and I struggle to hear the sound of a door slamming shut. It had to be Ian. Who else would be coming to Crane at this hour?

Unless I imagined the lights? What if nobody is coming to save us?

“Where’s your husband?” I ask Mrs. Foster. “Does he know the twisted and horrendous things you’ve done?”

“Heavens no. The man is utterly useless now that he’s stepped up in your father’s place at the rigs. A nice little reward for him, don’t you think? It wasn’t easy to slowly poison Lincoln. I didn’t want him to die, but I needed an excuse for you to bring Auden here. Gabe is the one that told me about the aconite, after all.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “Aconite?”

“Aconite, wolfsbane, same thing. Those deceptive, pretty purple flowers are deadly when ingested. I didn’t realize how potent the dosage was when I slipped some into your cup of lemonade all those years ago. But I know better now. I learned. Adapted. And I’ve been giving Lincoln small enough doses in his morning coffee to keep him weak. Weak enough to cause alarm, to bring you home.” Lydia says the last part with a sinister smile, making goosebumps trickle up and down my spine.

“You did all of this just to punish me,” I say, my voice hard as I stare her down once more. “But if you kill my daughter, then you’re punishing Ian, too.”

Mrs. Foster howls with laughter. “Oh, dear, he’ll get over you. He should have gotten over you when he found out that you spread your legs for another man mere minutes after you sent him away. I’m not worried about Ian’s thoughts on the matter.”

This time, I’m the one who laughs. An ugly, hoarse laugh.

“Oh, Lydia, how wrong you are,” I say, risking another small step closer to her. “If you kill my daughter, then you’re killing his daughter, too.”

31

Ian

Now

As soon as I get through the gates of Crane, I dim the headlights and park toward the front of the house. I have no idea what's going on other than I'm needed at the lake, specifically the dock. I called Georgia over and over again on the drive back, but she never picked up.

I decide it's best to make a quiet entrance so I can assess the situation. I close the car door quietly and sneak over to the willow tree. I can hide in the fronds and still have an entire view of the lake.

I peer through the gaps in the fronds. All the air in my lungs leaves my chest when I see the scene before me.

My mother is holding Auden, who is limp and asleep. At least I pray she's just sleeping. My mother is standing at the very edge of the dock while Georgia is standing mere feet away, her arms up as she pleads with my mother to not do this.

"Why are you doing this?" Georgia asks, her voice trembling.

Doing what?

I listen with bated breath as my mother tells Georgia that she was the reason Caroline

died, that the poison was meant for Georgia. I hear the confession from my own mother's lips. She tells Georgia how she is responsible for Lincoln's mysterious decline in health.

None of it makes any real sense until she tells Georgia that she's planning to kill Auden to punish Georgia for the death of Irene.

Everything Georgia has suffered through is because of my own mother's hands.

I love my mother, but I cannot let her do this. She's clearly sick, having some sort of psychotic break.

But how can I stop this? How can I get all of us out of this while making sure nobody gets hurt?

I reach into my pocket and dial 911. The operator answers instantly, and I whisper into the phone that we need help at Crane Manor.

They promise to be here in fifteen minutes.

I stand there debating the best course of action.

Do I wait for the cops? Or do I risk angering my mother by showing myself to her? I'm still debating which choice is the better of the two when I hear Georgia laugh. It's not her normal laugh; it's darker, almost sinister.

"If you kill my daughter, then you're killing his daughter, too," Georgia tells my mother.

My heart ceases to beat inside of my chest when Georgia's words fully process.

I feel as though I've been shot. Pierced with an arrow straight through the heart. Every emotion known to man flits through my body. Anger, confusion, elation, until I'm left with nothing but this overwhelming, nearly crippling fear.

Auden is my daughter, and her grandmother is trying to kill her.

"He can make another," I hear my mother say, her voice cold and completely unrecognizable.

"NO!" Georgia's scream of terror rips through the air, followed by the loud, distinct sound of something heavy falling into the water.

I fight my way out of the willow tree, its fronds whipping me in the face from all directions as I try to escape them.

Georgia is kneeling at the edge of the dock, staring into the dark water.

"Georgia!" I yell, running toward her as fast as I can.

"She jumped into the lake. She jumped into the lake with our baby girl, Ian! I can't see anything! I can't find them!" Georgia screams at me, her voice cracking with both fear and frustration as tears stream down her face.

"I won't let my mother take her from us," I spit out as I rush to Georgia's side.

I stop short when someone thrashes in the water closer to me than the dock. Turning on my heels, I rush into the lake, begging my body to go faster as I fight against the fire burning in my lungs.

I couldn't save Irene, but I'll be damned if I lose Auden in this lake, too.

The thrashing stops, and the water goes still.

“Ian! There!” I spin in the water and turn toward Georgia, who is now in the lake herself. Between us, a flash of something glowing emerges.

Auden bursts through the water, gasping for breath. “Mommy!” she screams before she falls into a coughing spell so hard I worry her ribs might break.

I kick my legs and swim toward her, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her close to me. “I’ve got you, I’ve got you,” I tell her as I hold her small, shivering body against mine. “Hold on, baby girl. Hold on.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and holds on tight as I swim us both to shore. Georgia appears before us as I finally hit the point where I can fully stand in the cold, dark water of the lake.

“You saved her.” Georgia sobs before throwing her arms around both Auden and I. She kisses Auden over and over again before turning her attention to me. “You saved my girl.”

I pull her close, wrapping one arm around Georgia while Auden clings tightly to me in my other.

“No,” I say, clutching both my girls in my arms. “We saved our girl.”

Georgia cries harder. “I’m so sorry, Ian. I’m so sorry I kept her from you. This isn’t the way I wanted you to find out. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.”

I pull her closer, kissing her hard instead of responding with words.

I can’t say it’s okay, because it’s not. We will have this discussion another day.

But at this moment, I don't care about the lies and secrets we've let fester between us. All I care about is that they are both safe, here in my arms. The rest we can figure out later.

"Ian?" Auden asks as the three of us stand chest-deep in the dark waters of the lake.

"Yes?" I answer. I'm not sure how much Auden caught of this new revelation.

"Did the bad one go away?" she asks, her voice full of fear, which slices right through my heart.

I should have been there to protect her.

How could my own mother have done all this without me realizing it?

My mother.

"I didn't mean to hurt her," Auden says, interrupting my chain of thought.

Georgia caresses Auden's cheek softly. "Can you tell us what happened when you fell into the water?"

Auden presses her body harder against mine and buries her face in the crook of my neck. "I don't know. I woke up and got scared, so I pushed the bad one down with my feet. I accidentally kicked her really hard when I tried to swim to the top."

Georgia cries silently next to me. I can see the same type of heartbreak I feel about not being there to protect Auden.

"What do you mean by 'the bad one'?" I ask Auden.



“I didn’t know she was the bad one. The bad one always watches me when I sleep and scares me. But tonight, she wasn’t wearing the black hat, and I saw her face. It was Mrs. Foster. I thought she was my friend.” Auden bursts into tears. “I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

I stare down at Georgia. She seems to have realized the same thing because she turns and scans the water behind us. We both see the red and blue flashing lights as they make their way up the windy road to Crane Manor.

“Please take Auden to the shore,” I tell Georgia, passing Auden to her before I turn and wade back out into the depths of the black abyss before me.

I see something floating in the distance, and I swim toward it.

When I find my mother’s body, I already know it’s too late.

She’s gone.

I flip her over so I can be completely sure, but instead of a pulse, my mother’s lifeless eyes reflect back at me.

She left this world the same way Irene did—a tragic accident.

I drag my mother’s body to the shore. Georgia and Auden are already wrapped in a blanket, the red and blue lights flashing over them in tandem.

I rush over to them as soon as I’m done explaining what happened to the cops. Georgia and Auden had apparently already given their stories while I was looking for my mother.

I wrap my arms around both of them, holding them close as I let the aftermath flood

through me. Georgia reaches up and wipes away my tears, giving me a sad smile.

“I love you,” she says.

Auden sniffles loudly between us before I can return the sentiment.

“Ian, are you my dad?”

I look to Georgia, unsure how to answer. She gives me a firm nod as tears spill from her eyes.

I turn my attention back to Auden. “Would you be okay with that?” My heart pounds savagely in my chest as I wait for her answer.

How does this tiny human already hold so much power over me?

I would give my life for her happiness.

Auden smiles at Georgia before making a big show of acting like she’s debating the topic heavily.

She smiles up at me before throwing her arms around my waist. “I think I’m going to love having you as my dad.”

Georgia bursts into tears at the same time as the ones I’ve been holding back escape down my cheeks.

It’s a strange feeling, fitting this much joy and happiness right next to the overwhelming sadness that lies in my heart. Both emotions fight tooth and nail to overthrow the other.

I lost my mother today. Not only did I lose her, but I also lost the person I had always known her to be. I'm not sure which one hurts worse. My mother knew Auden was my daughter, and she chose her own sick, twisted revenge over me.

I know that tidal wave of anger and soul-shattering grief is waiting to pull me under, but it can wait.

Because right now, at this moment, my girls are safe.

My girls.

I clear my throat and pick Auden up. She wraps herself around me, fitting perfectly in the crook of my neck. I look at Georgia, hoping to convey all my emotions through my eyes. The same eyes she's always called her own galaxy. What she doesn't know is that she's always been my entire universe, too.

I've always been hers, and I know now that she's always been mine.

"Let's go home," Auden says, smiling at both her mother and myself.

"Home," Georgia mutters, a small smile peeking through her lips. "Yes, let's go home."

The three of us stare up into the dark windows of Crane Manor, and somehow, I know that it's smiling back at us.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:32 pm*

Georgia - Three Years Later

“How are you feeling there, Georgie?” Ian asks, his voice soft and full of emotion as he rubs his thumb softly across my knuckles as we make the short drive back to Crane Manor.

I can't answer him, so instead, I give him a sad, small smile.

The grief in my heart is too big, and forcing words out means I'll dissolve into another puddle of tears.

We just got done burying my father.

Auden is quiet in the back seat. Her black dress makes her look so pale, almost like the night Lydia tried to take her from us.

It's been a long three years since that horrible, fateful night.

Ian and I spent months traveling back and forth between Crane Manor and my apartment in California as we tried to work through our issues. I wasn't ready to uproot my entire life, especially when Ian and I had so many secrets and lies to navigate through together.

So, he would fly to California and stay with us whenever he was able to take some time off from the hospital.

When he brought up the idea of going to therapy together as a family, I brushed off

the idea quickly. I didn't need someone to psychoanalyze us. I already do enough of that myself, but at the end of the day, Ian talked me into it.

And I'm so glad he did.

Therapy ended up saving us, and it definitely saved Auden.

She had nightmares for months after what happened with Lydia. I can't count the amount of times she woke up screaming in the dead of night, shaking and unable to vocalize what she was feeling.

Ian and I both agreed she needed to speak to someone. Maybe we could help her before any lasting negative damage impacted the rest of her life.

Maybe her ghosts wouldn't haunt her the way mine did if we got her help early on.

We had countless sessions, together as a family and individually, the summer after the lake incident. Most of them ended in tears. But those messy sessions helped us navigate our new family dynamic. I had a hard time letting go of my single-parent role, while Ian had a harder time adjusting to the fact that he was a father to a child he never got to know.

Auden, being as young as she was, loved the idea of having both a mom and a dad. Her sessions were mostly her telling the therapist about the nightmares she had until she finally stopped having them all together.

That was a very happy day in our household.

Auden finished out the school year in California before we finally decided that Crane was where home was.

My father got really sick six months after Auden and I officially moved into Crane.

Multiple hospital visits and invasive tests later, he was diagnosed with lung cancer.

He spent the last couple years in and out of the hospital while also soaking up every moment he could, being such an amazing grandpa to Auden.

Ian's father stepped up as well. It's almost as if he's trying to be the best grandfather, and grandmother, to Auden. He bakes with her nonstop, and I can't count the amount of times Ian and I have woken up to a full breakfast-in-bed spread made by them.

Ian and his father started going to therapy together, and their relationship is stronger than ever now.

Before my father met his end, he asked us for one favor: for us to get married while he could still walk me down the aisle.

I don't think it was the way Ian wanted to propose, but it made it even more special.

We got married under the willow tree just a few weeks ago. We both agreed that we wanted a small, intimate ceremony, and Auden suggested that we get married at the willow tree so that both of her grandmothers and the aunt she looks so much like could watch from Heaven.

I glance back at Auden and smile, the first real smile I've managed to muster up all day.

"Hey," I say. She looks over at me, tears brimming in her eyes. "I love you."

Her lower lip wobbles as she says, "Me too."

Ian looks over at me as he parks the car in front of Crane Manor. "I love both of you, too. In case you forgot about that when you were reminding each other," he tells us, a sly smile tugging on his lips.

“Oh, Dad,” Auden groans as she unbuckles her seat belt. She wraps her arms around the headrest behind him and gives him an awkward hug. “I love you, too,” she coos. “Just in case you forgot.”

“Eight years old and still so sassy.” Ian laughs. “Just like that mother of yours.”

“Hey! Leave me out of this!” I joke, a face-splitting grin sneaking across my lips as I watch the two of them. Who knew I could love two people this much.

“What would Papa want us to do?” Auden suddenly asks.

Ian and I raise our eyebrows at each other in confusion.

“Papa would want us to have an ice cream party while we watch baseball and scary movies,” she says. “Then he would totally want us to have a family sleepover.”

Ian laughs loudly, startling both Auden and myself. “That sounds like something Link would absolutely approve of on a day like today.”

Later that night, Ian and I are in the kitchen cleaning up after our ice cream and pizza party while Auden is sound asleep on the couch in the living room.

“That daughter of yours sure knows how to throw down her pizza,” Ian says as he opens both empty pizza boxes.

“You mean your daughter,” I joke back. “She eats more than both you and Irene used to eat when we had sleepovers. I was always forced to sneak down in the middle of the night to snag a bowl of cereal for myself because I was always left hungry after you two fell into a food coma.”

Ian wraps his arms around me as I’m at the sink cleaning the last of the plates. “I guess I should have known Auden was mine when she devoured her whole plate of

eggs and bacon that first morning after you came back. Especially when she asked for seconds.”

His husky laugh vibrates through my entire body, making me melt against him. He starts nipping playfully at my ear.

“You keep doing that, and we won’t make it to this family-friendly sleepover,” I whisper, shutting the sink off as I turn in his arms so I can face him.

“Is it time to go to bed yet?” Auden yells from the living room, forcing Ian and I to jump apart. We both look at each other and smile sheepishly.

“Raincheck for tomorrow?” he asks as he steps back into my arms and kisses me softly on my lips. Those eyes of his make me feel weak in my knees as I shake my head yes.

“Definitely yes,” I say between kisses.

His lips smile against mine. “Maybe we can discuss giving Auden a sibling?”

My eyes fly open. I stare into his eyes, those galaxies threatening to undo me every time I remember he’s mine.

That this is really my life.

“Are you sure?” I ask hesitantly. “It’s not something we’ve talked about before.”

He shrugs. “I’m not opposed to the idea,” he says. “In fact, I think it’s a great idea. I wasn’t around for the newborn stages for Auden, and I think you’d be insanely sexy with a big ol’ bump.”

He wags his eyebrows at me, breaking whatever tension we taut between us as I



laugh loudly in response. “Please don’t ever refer to me as big, ever again!” I smile and wrap my arms around his neck. “But yes, I’m open to discussing it. It might be nice for her to grow up with a friend in this house—the way I had you and Irene.”

I kiss him on the cheek, just a peck. “Plus, imagine all the fun we’ll have trying?” I smirk at him.

“Jesus, woman,” he groans. “Do you know how difficult it’s going to be not to sneak you out of bed tonight so we can start practicing? It’ll be impossible. Truly. How will I resist you when you flash that smile at me?”

I kiss him on the nose before I pull away from him. “You’ll behave because our daughter will be asleep between us. Now let’s go to sleep.”

The three of us head upstairs and squeeze together in the queen-size bed in the same room that Ian and I have shared since the first day Auden and I came back to Crane Manor over three years ago now.

I’m not ready to inhabit my parents’ room yet. That’ll be something I have to take on eventually, but not tonight.

“I love you, Mom,” Auden says softly as she snuggles up to me. “I love you, too, Dad.”

I lift my head and smile at Ian, just as he does the same thing. We both laugh silently as we stare at each other.

“It’s very cold in here,” Auden says, following it up with an exaggerated shiver.

I sit up to grab the blanket at the end of the bed to drape over her when my breath catches in my throat.

“Dad?” I choke out.

Ian sits up instantly and lets out a strangled gasp. I know without looking at him that he sees them, too.

My parents are standing, hand in hand, at the end of our bed, smiling at us.

My mother’s ghost doesn’t look the way I remember it. She’s beautiful. Just like the last time I saw her before she drank the lemonade that was meant for me.

Her dark hair is in soft curls that cascade down her back. Her white dress isn’t covered in her own blood any longer. It looks just as I remembered it when she was alive. Like a princess in her pretty white dress.

Her eyes are twinkling with unshed tears as she stares down at me before she steps forward and places her hand against my cheek.

I let out a broken sob when I feel her palm against my skin.

“Mama?” I say.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she responds with a smile.

“How—why do you look so different now?”

She brushes my tears away with soft fingers. “You saw me as a monster because you truly believed I was the one who tried to hurt you. You know the truth now, so you don’t see me as a monster any longer.”

I sob loudly against her palm.

“I must go now, sweetheart. But your father and I”—she pulls her hand away and

steps back to stand next to my father's ghost—"wanted to tell you how much we love you and how proud of you we are. You may not see us again, but never forget we are always watching over you."

"Take care of my girls, Ian," my father says, fondness shining clear in his voice. "I love you, Bug."

"I love you, too," I whisper, refusing to break my gaze as I stare back and forth at my parents before they slowly fade away, hand in hand.

Ian reaches over and grabs my hand in his own, squeezing tightly as I turn to him. Tears brim in his eyes as he stares into mine.

"I told you so," Auden says. Ian and I turn our gazes toward her.

I clear my throat and wipe my face with my free hand. "Told us what?"

Auden smiles that sly smile of hers, the same one that's playing on her father's lips. "I told you she was the good ghost."

THE END