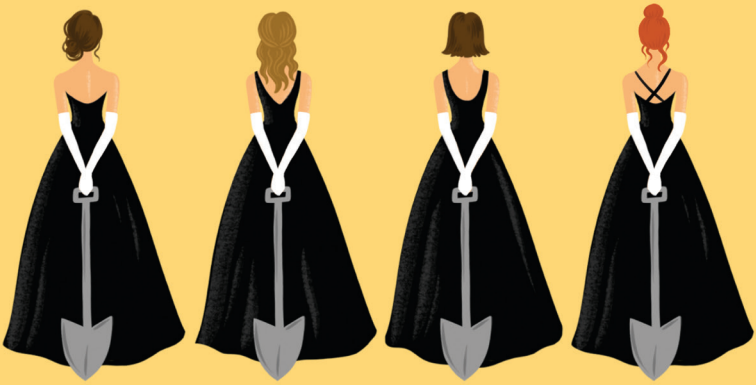
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LABOR DAY, 3:17 A.M.

"Sawyer, are you there?"

"I'm here."

"I can't feel my feet. Or my hands. Or my elbows. Or my face. Or—"

"Sadie-Grace, just give me a second."

"Okay . . . Was that a second?"

"If I'm going to get us out of here, I need to think."

"I'm sorry! I want to stop talking! But I dance when I'm nervous, and right now, I can't dance, because I can't feel my feet. Or my hands. Or my elbows. Or—"

"Everything is going to be fine."

"When I'm nervous and I can't dance, I babble. And, Sawyer? Being buried alive makes me *very* nervous."

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FOURTEEN WEEKS (AND THREE DAYS) EARLIER

CHAPTER 1

"Has anyone seen William Faulkner's life vest?"

There was a point in my life when the question Aunt Olivia had just called down the stairs would have struck me as odd. Now it didn't even merit the slightest raise of my eyebrow. Of course the family's mammoth Bernese mountain dog was named William Faulkner, and of course she had her very own life vest. Hell, it was probably monogrammed.

The mamas of the Debutante set were very big on monogramming.

Really, the only thing surprising about Aunt Olivia's question was the fact that my aunt, who was type A in the extreme, did not already know where William Faulkner's life vest was.

"Remind me again why we're hiding in the pantry?" I asked Lily, who'd dragged me in here five minutes ago and hadn't spoken louder than a whisper since.

"It's Memorial Day weekend," Lily murmured in response. "Mama always gets a bit high-strung when we open the lake house up for the summer." Lily lowered her voice even further for dramatic effect. *"Even her lists have lists."*

I shot Lily a look intended to communicate something about pots and kettles.

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"I have an entirely reasonable number of lists," Lily retorted in a whisper. "And I would have a lot fewer if you showed any inclination whatsoever to get ready for college yourself."

Lily Taft Easterling was just as type A as her mama, and both of them insisted on operating under the assumption that I was going to State with Lily in the fall. Matriculation at that fine institution was, I had been informed, a family tradition.

I couldn't help thinking that my specific branch of the family tree had our own traditions. *Deception, betrayal, no-bake cherry cheesecake* . . .

"Is it me, or did there use to be a lot more food in this pantry?" I asked Lily, to keep her from reading anything into my silence.

"Mama packs for the lake like a survivalist preparing for the end days," Lily said in a hushed voice. She fell silent at the sound of incoming footsteps, which stilled right outside our hiding place.

I held a breath, and a moment later, the pantry door flew inward.

"*Hasta la vista* . . . Lily!" Lily's younger brother, John David, punctuated that statement with a cackle and began pelting us with Nerf darts.

Ducking, I noted that our assailant was dressed in camo, had painted black stripes under his eyes, and was wearing an enormous life vest that I could only assume belonged to the dog.

"I try my level best to avoid fratricide," Lily said pleasantly. *"However."* The *however* was meant to stand on its own as a threat, but I decided to lend a little specificity Lily's way.

"However . . ." I suggested, advancing on John David. "Noogies are more of a gray area?"

I caught John David in a headlock.

"You mess with the bull . . ." John David tried his best to wriggle his way out of my grasp. "You get the horns!"

"And *you* get a noogie!"

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Lily stared at the pair of us like we'd just started mud-wrestling in the middle of Sunday brunch.

"What?" John David said innocently, before trying and failing to bite my armpit.

"You two are bad influences on each other," Lily declared. "I tell you, Sawyer, there are days when I'd swear he was your brother, not mine."

That was Lily's version of teasing, but still, I froze. Lily had no idea—*none*—what she'd just said.

No idea that it was half-true.

John David seized the moment and managed to wriggle out of my grasp. He was taking aim with his weapon when Aunt Olivia rounded the corner.

I'd swear he was your brother. Lily's words echoed in my head, but I forced myself to focus on the present—and the stormy look on Aunt Olivia's face. I stepped in between John David and my aunt and offered her what I hoped passed for a sedate smile.

"Aunt Olivia," I said calmly. "We found William Faulkner's life vest."

John David and I were summarily convicted of "inappropriately timed horseplay" and "wearing on my last nerve, I swear" and sentenced to loading the car. I wasn't about to complain about a much-needed distraction.

Months ago, I'd moved into my maternal grandmother's house after she'd offered me a devil of a deal: if I lived with her and participated in Debutante season, she'd pay for college. I'd agreed, but not because of the half-million-dollar trust now held in my name. I'd willingly become a part of this lavish, glittering world because I'd wanted, desperately, to know which scion of high society had knocked up my mom during *her* Debutante year.

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And the answer to that question? The one Lily didn't know? *Her father. Aunt Olivia's husband, my uncle J.D.*

"Are you feeling okay, Sawyer? You're looking a little peaked, sweetheart." Aunt Olivia was holding a to-do list that appeared to have taken no fewer than eight Post-its to write. I was willing to bet that not a single item on that extensive list said *Find out husband slept with and impregnated my younger sister nineteen and a half years ago.*

Also probably not on her list? *Realize sister got pregnant on purpose as part of some idiotic, godforsaken teenage pregnancy pact.*

"I'm fine," I told Aunt Olivia, mentally adding that to the list of the lies I'd told—in words and by omission—in the past six weeks.

Under normal circumstances, Aunt Olivia probably would have tried to feed me for good measure, but she apparently had weightier things on her mind. "I forgot the backup avocados," she said suddenly. "I could run to the store real quick and—"

"Mama." Lily came to stand in front of Aunt Olivia. The two of them didn't look much alike, but when it came to manners and mannerisms, they could have been twins. "You don't need to go to the store. We'll have plenty of avocados. Everything is going to be fine."

Aunt Olivia gave Lily a look. "Fine is not the standard to which Taft women aspire."

Lily gently plucked the list from her mother's hands. "Everything will be *perfect*."

A third Taft female added her voice to the conversation. "I'm sure that it will." Even wearing her version of casual wear—linen capris—the great Lillian Taft knew how to make an entrance. "Sawyer, honey." My grandmother let her gaze settle on me. "I was hoping you might accompany me on a little errand this morning."

That was an order, not a request. I took inventory of all the rules

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and social niceties I'd flouted in the past twenty-four hours but was unsure what I'd done to merit Lillian wanting to talk to me alone.

"Should we wait for you, Mama?" Aunt Olivia asked, her eyes darting toward the clock.

Lillian dismissed the question with a wave of her hand. "You head on up to the lake, Olivia. Beat the traffic. Sawyer and I will be right on your heels."

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CHAPTER 2

My grandmother's errand took us to the cemetery. She carried with her a small floral arrangement—wildflowers. That caught my attention, because Lillian literally had a florist on speed dial. She also grew her own roses, yet the bouquet in her hands looked like it had been plucked from a field.

Lillian Taft was not, generally speaking, the low-cost DIY type.

She was uncharacteristically quiet as we walked a gravel path down a small hill. Set back from the other gravestones, in the space between two ancient oak trees, there was a small wrought-iron fence. Though the detail work was stunning, the fence was small, barely reaching my waist. The parcel of land inside was maybe twelve feet across and ten deep.

"Your grandfather picked this plot out himself. The man always thought he was immortal, so I can only assume he was planning on burying me here instead of the other way around." My grandmother let her hand rest on the wrought iron, then pushed the gate inward.

I hesitated before following her to stand near the tombstone inside: a small cement cross on a simple base. My eyes took in the dates first, then the name.

EDWARD ALCOTT TAFT

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"If we'd had a son," Lillian said softly, "he would have been named Edward. The *Alcott* was a matter of some debate between your grandfather and myself. Edward never wanted a junior, but there was something about the sound of his full name that I liked."

This wasn't what I'd been expecting when she'd whisked me away for a one-on-one.

"Your grandfather and I met on Memorial Day weekend. Did I ever tell you that?" In typical fashion, Lillian did not wait for a reply. "I'd snuck into a party where a girl of my provenance most certainly did not belong."

Unwittingly, my mind went to another high-society soiree where one of the attendees had not belonged. His name was Nick. We'd shared one dance—him in a T-shirt and me in a ball gown. Despite my best efforts to the contrary, the ghost of that dance had lingered.

"If anyone else had found me out, there might have been trouble," Lillian mused, continuing her own stroll down memory lane, "but your grandfather had a way about him. . . ."

The nostalgia in her voice allowed me to tuck the dance with Nick back into the corners of my mind and focus on the conversation at hand. Lillian almost never spoke about her early years. I'd gathered that she'd grown up dirt-poor and ambitious as hell, but that was about all I knew.

"You miss him," I said, my eyes on the tombstone and a lump in my throat, because she'd loved him. Because I'd never know the man buried here well enough to love or miss him, too.

"He would have liked you, Sawyer." Lillian Taft did not get misty-eyed. She was not one to allow her voice to quiver. "Oh, he would have pitched a fit when Ellie turned up pregnant, but the man would have gone to hell and back for his little girls. I've no doubt he would have done the same for you, once he came around."

Edward Alcott Taft had died when my mom was twelve and

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Aunt Olivia was closing in on eighteen. I was fairly certain that if he *had* been alive during my mom's Deb year, she probably wouldn't have "turned up" pregnant in the first place. The fact that she had made a pregnancy pact with two of her friends didn't exactly scream "well-adjusted." But the fact that she'd chosen her own brother-in-law to knock her up?

That had *Daddy Issues* written all over it.

"Have you talked to her?" Lillian asked me. "Your mama?"

That put me on high alert. If Lillian had brought me here in hopes of inspiring a little family forgiveness, she was going to be sorely disappointed.

"If by *talk* you mean *steadfastly ignore*, then yes," I said flatly. "Otherwise, no."

My mom had lied to me. She'd let me believe that my father was former-senator, now-convict Sterling Ames. I'd believed the senator's kids were my half-siblings. They—and his wife—believed it still. The senator's son was Lily's boyfriend. Walker and Lily had just gotten back together. I couldn't tell him the truth without telling her.

And if I told Lily who my father was, what my mother and her beloved daddy had done . . . I'd lose her.

"I can't help but notice you've been awfully quiet these past six weeks, sweetheart." Lillian spoke gently, but I recognized a Southern inquisition when I heard one. "Not talking to your mama. Not talking to anyone, really, about things that matter."

I read between the lines of what she was saying. "Are we having this conversation because you want me to come clean to Lily and Aunt Olivia about the baby-daddy situation or because you want my word that I won't?"

Lillian Taft, grande dame of society, philanthropist, guardian of the family fortune and reputation, was not impressed with my

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choice of words. "I would consider it a great favor if you would refrain from using the term *baby daddy*."

"You didn't answer my question," I said.

"It's not mine to answer." Lillian glanced down at her husband's grave. "My time to speak up was years ago. As much as I might regret my choice, I'm not about to take this one away from you now. This is your life, Sawyer. If you want to live it with your head in the sand, I'm not going to stop you."

When it came to the art of making her opinion known while explicitly declining to share an opinion, my grandmother was an artist.

After all these years, she was tired of secrets.

Like I'm not, I thought.

"The only fight Lily and I have ever had was because her daddy's name was on my list of *possible* fathers." I willed that to matter less than it did. "We made up because I 'discovered' my father was someone else and told her as much."

Lily worshipped her dad. Aunt Olivia was a perfectionist; Uncle J.D. was the one who told Lily, again and again, that she didn't have to be perfect to be loved.

"I think you underestimate your cousin," Lillian told me quietly.

I let myself say the words I was constantly trying not to think. "She's not just my cousin."

She was my sister.

"Don't you go feeling guilty," Lillian ordered. "This is your mama's mess, Sawyer. And mine. Lord knows I should have kicked J.D. to the curb years ago, the moment I suspected he would *dare*—" My grandmother cut herself off. After a moment, she bent to lay the wildflower bouquet at the base of the tombstone. When she straightened, she gathered herself up to her full height. "The point, Sawyer

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Ann, is that this mess is not, in any way, shape, or form, yours."

"This mess isn't *mine*," I countered. "It's *me*."

I fully expected Lillian to take issue with that statement, but instead, she raised an eyebrow. "You are rather perpetually dishevelled." She produced a hair clip seemingly out of nowhere and "suggested" that I make use of it. "You have such a *pretty* face," she added. "Lord knows why you're so intent on hiding it under those bangs."

She said *bangs* like a curse word. Before she could lament the fact that I'd had her hairdresser chop off a great deal of my hair, I preempted the complaint. "I needed a change."

I'd needed *something*. I'd spent years wondering who my father was. Now I was living under the same roof with the man, and neither one of us had acknowledged that fact. It would have been easier if I'd thought he was ignorant, but he knew I was his daughter. My mom had said as much, and on that, I was certain she was telling the truth.

The whole situation was a mess. My entire life, my mom had never once made me feel like a mistake, but somehow, discovering that she'd conceived me on purpose made me feel like one.

If my mom hadn't still been grieving her father's death . . .

If she hadn't felt like a stranger in her own family and desperately wanted someone or something to call her own . . .

If her "friend" Greer hadn't seen that vulnerability and sold her on a ridiculous, happy vision of becoming a teen mom . . .

Then I wouldn't exist.

"Sawyer." Lillian said my name gently. "Bangs are for blondes and toddlers, and you, my dear, are neither."

If she wanted to pretend that my hair was the real issue between us—and in this family—I was okay with that. For now.

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"If you brought me here to check up on me," I told her, "I'm fine." I averted my gaze, and it landed on my grandfather's tombstone. "I'm a liar, but I'm fine."

I couldn't forgive my mom for deceiving me, but every day, I got up and let Aunt Olivia and Lily and John David go about life like normal. It was hard not to feel like the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree.

"Your mama was a daddy's girl, Sawyer." Lillian looked back at the tombstone. "Your aunt, too. Growing up the way they did, they never had to be fighters. But you? You've got a healthy dose of me in you, and where I come from, a person has to fight to survive."

That was the second time she'd referenced her origins. "Why did you bring me here?" I asked, unable to shake the feeling that nothing about this conversation—including the location—was an accident.

Lillian was quiet for a stretch, long enough that I wasn't sure she was going to reply. "You asked me weeks ago if I could find out what happened to your mama's friend Ana."

The breath stilled in my chest. *Ana, Ellie, and Greer,* I thought, forcing myself to keep breathing. *Three teenage girls, one pact.* Greer had lost her baby, and that meant that Ana's—if she'd had it—was the only other person on this planet with an origin story the exact same flavor of screwed-up as mine.

Her kid would be my age now, almost exactly.

"What did you find out?" I asked Lillian, my mouth dry.

"Ana was a quiet little thing. My recollection of her was fuzzy. She was new in town. I'd heard of her people but didn't know them. From what I've pieced together, she and her family picked up and moved back home around the time I found out about your mama's delicate condition."

By that time, I thought. *Ana was pregnant, too.*

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"Where were they from?" I asked. "Where did they move back to?"

There was a long pause as my grandmother made an intense study of me. "Why do you want to find this woman?"

Lillian knew that Uncle J.D. was my father, but as far as I'd been able to tell, she had no knowledge of the pact. There was no real reason for me to keep it from her, but it wasn't the easiest thing in the world to come right out and say.

"Sawyer?" my grandmother prompted.

"Ana was pregnant, too," I said, clipping the words. "They planned it that way. I don't know if she had the baby, but if she did . . ."

Lillian weathered the blow I'd just dealt her. "If she had the baby, then what?"

I tried to find words, but they all seemed shallow and insufficient. How could I adequately explain that the same reason I'd wanted to find out who my father was, the same reason I'd longed to meet the family my mom despised, the reason I'd stayed here even after I'd discovered the truth—that was exactly why I wanted to know what happened to Ana's baby, too.

People who'd always had a family to count on and a place to belong couldn't truly understand the draw of that little whisper that said *There's someone like you.*

Someone who wouldn't hold my origins against me.

"I just want to know," I told Lillian, my voice low.

There was another silence, more measured than her last. Then she reached into her purse and handed me a newspaper, folded open to the business section.

I scanned the headlines but had no idea what I was supposed to be looking for.

"The article about the attempted corporate takeover," Lillian

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told me. "You'll notice that one of the companies is an international telecommunications conglomerate whose CEO is a man named Victor Gutierrez. The other company is owned by Davis Ames."

Davis was the Ames family patriarch, grandfather to Walker and Campbell, father to the man I'd once thought was *my* father—the man who really *was* the father of Ana's baby.

"Why are you showing me this?" I asked.

Lillian sighed. "Your mama's friend Ana? Her full name was Ana Sofía Gutierrez."

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CHAPTER 3

A man who shared Ana's last name—*her father? brother? a more distant relation?*—had made a move against the Ames family's corporation.

Two hours of highway and back-road driving later, I was still mulling that over. As Lillian's Porsche SUV wound its way past a guard gate, a golf course, volleyball and tennis courts, and a pool, I couldn't help thinking that Davis Ames had once told me he'd *handled* the situation with the girl his son had impregnated. There was no telling exactly what that meant, but I had to wonder if business was just business for this Victor Gutierrez—or if it was personal.

Is this about Ana somehow? Revenge? For what, exactly? And why now?

"Here we are," Lillian declared, pulling into a circle drive. "Home, sweet lake home."

I had to compartmentalize. I couldn't be thinking about Ana or the pact or any of this around Lily and Aunt Olivia, not if I wanted to keep pretending that I was fine, and *we* were fine, and there was nothing for them to worry about or know. So instead, I focused on the sights at hand. When I'd heard the rest of the family refer to the "lake house," I'd pictured a cabin. Something small and rustic.

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I really should have known better.

"This is your lake house." I fell back on stating the obvious as I stared up at an enormous stone residence. I stepped out of Lillian's Cayenne, and the front door to the home flew open.

"Sawyer." Lily was smiling. Not her polite, default smile, not her pained "you can't hurt me" smile—an honest-to-God, cheek-to-cheek grin. "You won't *believe*—"

Our grandmother stepped out of the car, and Lily cut herself off midsentence. "I hope traffic wasn't too horrible, Mim." That sounded more like the Lily I knew, but her dark brown eyes were still dancing. She waited a beat, then turned to me. "Come on. I'll show you our room."

Somehow, I doubted the energy I could hear buzzing in her voice was a reflection of her excitement at the idea of the two of us sharing a bedroom.

"What's going on?" I asked as we made our way to the front door and into the foyer.

Lily shushed me. Deciding that I didn't want to know what had gotten into her badly enough to be shushed twice, I focused on the house instead. The staircase winding its way upstairs I'd expected. The stairs going down I had not.

"Three stories?" I asked Lily. "Or is the basement just a basement?"

"It's just a basement." Lily paused. "With one bedroom. And a game room." She paused again, slightly embarrassed, because properly bred young ladies were always slightly embarrassed by the size of their vacation homes and the overall privilege to which they'd been born. "And a media room. A pool table. Ping-Pong . . ."

Deciding she'd said enough, Lily took to the stairs—the ones going up, not down. I followed, and together, we arrived at a small landing. Compared to the scale of the house, the second story was

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cozy: one bedroom with two twin beds, a bathroom, a closet. Aside from what I suspected was antique furniture, the room looked like it belonged in the cabin I'd imagined.

"I know it's a little small," Lily said softly, "but I've always loved it up here."

I walked over to the window and stared out at the lake below. "Who doesn't love a turret room?"

From this vantage point, it was obvious that the house had been built into the side of a hill. There was a steep drop-off, then the land sloped gently toward the rocky shore. The view of the water was breathtaking.

"Well?" Lily demanded.

"Well, what?" I asked, unable to tear my eyes away from the whitecapped waves as they broke and rolled slowly toward what appeared to be a private dock. Our cove was as big as I'd expected the entire lake to be, and from where I stood, I could see past the cove's entrance to the main body of Regal Lake.

The name didn't seem as ridiculous as it had on the drive up.

"Well . . ." Lily prompted primly. "Ask me again."

"Ask you what?" I played dumb. She'd shushed me. This was the price of shushing.

"Ask me what's going on." Lily came to stand beside me in the window and held up a long, flat box—too big for jewelry, but too narrow for almost anything else. "Ask me," she instructed, "what this is."

I took the box from her outstretched hand. It was matte black, with a card stuck to the middle. The card was made of a thick off-white paper—the kind I associated with wedding invitations—and a single word had been embossed on it in raised black cursive.

Lily's name.

I went to remove the top from the box, but Lily stopped me.

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"Don't open mine." She nodded toward one of the beds. "Open yours."

A second box—this one bearing my name—sat near the pillow. I crossed the room, picked it up, and opened it. Nestled inside, I found a single elbow-length white glove. Pinned to the glove, there was another note, this one written on thinner paper in blood-red ink.

The Big Bang, 11 p.m., back room.

"Lily," I said calmly, "don't take this the wrong way, but is this an invitation to an orgy?"

"A what?" Lily Taft Easterling did not, as a rule, shriek, but this time, she came close.

"The Big Bang," I replied. "Doesn't exactly sound PG to me."

Lily glared at me. I grinned. Sometimes getting a rise out of her was just too easy. A pang came after a brief delay, and the grin froze on my face.

I could lose this. Lose her.

Putting those emotions on lockdown, I examined the contents of the box more closely. The pin holding the note to the glove was made of silver. Carved into the end, there was a small rose, and wrapped around the rose's stem, there was a snake.

"An orgy," I repeated, forcing a grin and trying to get the moment back. "With serpents."

Lily rolled her eyes. "When you're done repeating that word ad nauseam, I'd be happy to inform you that The Big Bang is a local establishment."

"A brothel?"

"They sell hot wings," Lily said defensively. "And beer. And . . . other beverages."

"So you're saying it's a bar." I'd grown up in a bar—almost literally. My mom and I had lived over The Holler until I was thirteen.

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"Someone wants to meet the two of us in the back room of a bar at eleven p.m.?"

I was skeptical. The world Lily had grown up in—the world I'd reluctantly taken my place in this past year—was a place of charity galas and twin sets and pearls. A bar wasn't exactly the natural habitat of an Easterling *or* a Taft.

"Not just someone," Lily told me, removing the contents of her box and cradling it reverently in one hand. "The White Gloves."

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LABOR DAY, 3:19 A.M.

"Are you *sure* that's how we ended up at the bottom of this hole, Sawyer?"

"Trust me. You were unconscious, but I held on just long enough to see the person responsible."

"Maybe it was an accident?"

"How do you accidentally drug someone, Sadie-Grace?"

"Accidentally . . . on purpose?"

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FOURTEEN WEEKS (AND THREE DAYS) EARLIER

CHAPTER 4

Lily refused to enlighten me as to who or what the White Gloves were until she could be certain that we wouldn't be overheard. At the lake, that apparently meant hitting the water. Within five minutes, the two of us were swimsuit-clad and Jet Ski–bound. We made our way down to the dock.

And Lily's father.

After more than a month of playing this game, seeing J.D. Easterling shouldn't have hit me so hard. I shouldn't have cared that he was in full-on Dad Mode, puttering around the dock and getting way too much pleasure out of power-washing everything in the near vicinity, including and especially the boats.

"How are my favorite girls doing?" he called out. "Making your escape already?"

Don't say a word, I told myself. *Don't think about it. Think about the White Gloves. Think about the snake and rose on that pin. Don't even look at him. Look at the boats.*

There were two of them, one a speedboat and one that Lily would have insisted wasn't a yacht.

"Sawyer's never ridden a Jet Ski." Beside me, Lily was talking.

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"Think we could take out *Thing One* and *Thing Two* before the weekend traffic hits the water?"

I took a step toward the boats, telling myself that it was only natural that I would be curious, natural that I would focus on reading the name on the back of the larger boat, rather than joining the conversation between Lily and her father.

Our father.

"I have noticed, Daughter, that when you preface a statement with 'Sawyer has never . . .' you're usually up to something."

"You say that like it's a bad thing, Daddy."

The back-and-forth between them was so easy, so natural. There was no ignoring that.

"What say you, Niece?" J.D. turned toward me. "Ready to brave the ocean deep?"

This wasn't the ocean, and I wasn't his *niece*.

"I think I can handle it," I said, spotting the Jet Skis on the far side of the dock. I started toward them in hopes of ending this conversation before Lily caught on to the fact that something was off. I'd done a good job of avoiding her dad for the past few weeks. He'd been pulling late nights at work and had made more than one trip up here to check on the boats.

Think about that. Don't think about . . .

"Hate to tell you this, Lilypad, but *Thing One* is out of commission. Can you and Sawyer double up on *Thing Two*?"

"Not a problem," Lily responded.

He pressed a kiss to her temple. "That's my girl."

He didn't seem like the type to sleep with his wife's little sister. The type to sleep with someone our age when he was twenty-three. The type to call me Niece when he knew quite well that I was his daughter.

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Don't think about it. Think about the White Gloves. Don't look at him.

"Earth to Sawyer." Lily was suddenly standing beside me. I hadn't even notice her approach. She held out a purple life vest.

I took it and slipped it on.

"Are you okay?" Lily asked.

I could feel Uncle J.D. looking at the two of us. Watching us.

"Right as rain," I said, turning back to the duo of Jet Skis. "Which one is *Thing Two*?"

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CHAPTER 5

I'd known for a while that Lily had a deep-seated need for perfection. I hadn't realized that she also had a need for speed.

"Boat incoming!" I yelled in her ear, my voice nearly lost to the wind and the sound of the engine revving as Lily angled the Jet Ski into a major wave at forty-five degrees.

"I see it," she yelled back, her blond ponytail whipping in the wind—and at my face. "Hold on!"

My arms were wound around her waist, my fingers clutching the straps on her life vest. She cut across the main channel going full throttle, then hung a left past three massive coves. A small island, boasting a scattering of trees and the remains of a house, came into view. We barreled past it and into a long and narrow cove on the far side. Lily eased off the gas, letting her hands fall from the handlebars as we cruised slowly to a stop near the back of the cove. Compared to the main channel, the water here was like glass. The world was quiet—remarkably so, given how loudly I'd had to yell to be heard a minute earlier.

"Nice place," I told Lily, letting loose of her life jacket and

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shaking out my hands. "I especially like the way I can no longer see my life flashing before my eyes."

As was her style, Lily remained utterly unruffled. "I have no idea what you could possibly be implying."

For pretty much the first time since I'd met her, her hair looked unkempt—windblown and free.

Lily must have noticed the way I was looking at her, because she seemed compelled to offer an explanation. "The lake is my happy place. It always has been. Mama isn't a fan of the heat. Or the water. Or the bugs. But Daddy and John David and I have always loved it up here."

I couldn't afford to let that hurt. "I can see why," I said instead, letting my head fall back and taking in the wide expanse of sky above.

"That's King's Island." Lily gestured to the small blot of land we'd passed on the way in. "No one's lived there for years."

"King's Island," I repeated. "On Regal Lake." You would have thought that this was the Hamptons, not a man-made body of water in a region of the state known for its red dirt and surplus of deer. "Looks to me like this is a place where we won't be overheard."

"I'll tell you everything I know," Lily promised. "Just let me turn around so we can face each other. When I go left, you go right. We should be able to keep our balance if—"

Feeling wicked, I hooked an arm around her waist and leaned hard to the left, taking us both over the side and into the lake. Lily might have swallowed a bit of water. She definitely snorted in a most unladylike manner.

"Sawyer!" She began paddling toward the Jet Ski, which had floated several yards away when we'd gone in.

"What?" I said, feeling more like myself than I had in hours. "The sun is high, and the water feels good. Now talk."

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"There's not that much to tell," Lily warned me. "Until I saw the boxes sitting on our beds, I wasn't one hundred percent certain the White Gloves actually existed."

"A suburban legend?" I quipped. Before Lily could offer a retort, I processed the rest of what she'd said. "Our invitations were inside the house when you arrived?"

"And all of the doors were locked."

Now she'd piqued my interest. "What exactly does the rumor mill say about the White Gloves?"

"That they're a secret society. That they recruit freshmen at State, U-of, and a handful of private colleges in a three-state region. Female-only, *very* exclusive."

In the world Lily had grown up in, *exclusive* meant *wealthy.* It meant old money, power, and status, having the luxury never to talk—or even *think*—about money at all.

"We should go tonight," Lily said. "Right?" She laid her arms on the back edge of the Jet Ski and rested her chin on her wrist. "I know where The Big Bang is. We could tell Mama we're sleeping over with Sadie-Grace. Lord knows Sadie-Grace's daddy won't know the difference."

"Who are you," I deadpanned, "and what have you done with Lily Taft Easterling?"

"I've done everything that's expected of me, Sawyer. My whole life, I've dotted *i*'s and crossed *t*'s. I followed the rules. I was everything I was supposed to be, right up until I started *Secrets*."

Everyone had their own way of coping with trauma. Mine involved a lot of compartmentalizing and a healthy amount of denial. Lily had coped with Walker dumping her last summer by creating a risqué photo blog where she wrote other people's secrets on her skin.

"You miss it," I commented. "*Secrets on My Skin*."

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I waited for her to tell me that I was wrong, but instead, she righted herself in the water. "Walker."

What about him? I twisted my torso, allowing my fingertips to skim the surface of the water as I turned in the direction of her gaze. About a hundred yards away, a Jet Ski passed King's Island and began to slow. I had no idea how Lily had recognized its driver from this distance, but I didn't doubt her claim.

Lily Easterling had impeccable instincts about two and only two things: proper etiquette and Walker Ames.

"Did you tell him we were here?" I asked.

"I haven't talked to him all day." Lily avoided my gaze. "But Walker and Campbell are the reason I know this place. Their house is on the point opposite King's Island, just two coves away."

I didn't have the chance to ask Lily if there was a reason she and Walker hadn't talked, before he glided into earshot and cut the engine. He slowed his forward momentum by holding his legs out to the sides, allowing his feet to drag in the water.

"Salutations, ladies." Walker took off his life vest, hung it over the handlebars of his Jet Ski, and dove into the water. He emerged seconds later, right between me and Lily. Moisture beaded on his chest as he shook the water from his hair, splashing us both.

I would never have made a move on Walker, and he only had eyes for Lily regardless, but now that I knew that he *wasn't* my brother, I didn't try quite so hard not to enjoy the view. Then, slowly but surely, my mind turned to thinking about another chest.

Other arms.

Nick had very nice arms.

"As I live and breathe," Walker quipped, drawing me back to the present. "Sawyer Taft and Lily Easterling. What are the chances of meeting the two of you here?"

Better than the chances of my path ever crossing Nick's again. I

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hadn't seen or heard from him since the night of my debutante ball. Not that I'd expected to. Not that I even really *wanted* to.

"Is that your way of saying you were hoping to have this cove to yourself?" Lily asked Walker, her tone prodding.

"Never." Walker had inherited his father's charm, but unlike the former senator, he was not a particularly skilled liar. My gut said that he hadn't known we would be here. He certainly hadn't come looking for us.

"How's your mama?" Lily asked quietly.

There was a beat of silence. "She's just fine."

Walker didn't want to talk about his mama. That made two of us. Charlotte Ames was not a member of the Sawyer fan club. Given that she believed me to be the product of her husband's adultery, I was pretty sure she'd wished me six feet under more than once.

"Is it bad?" Lily asked Walker, her voice muted. He didn't reply, and she pushed off the Jet Ski and glided through the water toward him. I averted my eyes as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Lily Taft Easterling was a properly bred young lady, a Southern miss to her toes. But right now, her hair was windblown and free, and Walker's chest was wet, and I could not have been more of a third wheel if I'd tried.

"Don't mind me," I said loudly. "Certainly don't refrain from PDA on my part. I'll just be over here minding my own business."

"Very considerate of you, little sis."

Walker's new nickname for me hit me hard. When we'd first met, he'd been in the tail end of a downward spiral and seemed to appreciate that I was immune to his charms. I insulted him, and he enjoyed it. That was our dynamic.

This was the first time he'd referred to me as his sister.

I have to tell him. I did everything in my power not to look from

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Walker to Lily. *I have to tell both of them the truth, even if Lily hates me for it.*

But I couldn't make myself do it.

"Don't call me that," I said, and then, realizing that my reaction would probably make him refer to me that way more often, I changed the subject, hard and fast. "I hear the family business is under attack."

"What are you talking about?" Lily said, before turning back to Walker, her arms still wrapped around his neck. "What is she talking about, Walker?"

"It's nothing," Walker told her. "Everything is going to be fine."

"Just like your mama is fine?" Lily asked.

I was starting to regret bringing it up, but I could only compartmentalize so much.

"I don't want to talk about the family business." Walker bent his head forward, allowing his cheek to brush against Lily's, before casting another sidelong glance at me. "That's more Cam's thing these days than mine."

He'd just given me a reason—and an excuse—to get out of here before I said something else I would regret.

"Now that you mention it, Campbell and I are overdue for a little chat." I paddled over to Walker's Jet Ski. The lanyard with the key was still attached to the life vest he'd left on the handlebars. I unclipped the lanyard, attached it to my own vest, and threw his to him.

"Is it me," Walker asked Lily, "or is your delightful cousin stealing my ride?"

"I'm not stealing it," I corrected. "I'm taking it home. Not our lake house—yours. Two coves down, on the point across from King's Island, right?"

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Walker shook his head. “You are a strange girl, Sawyer Taft.”

“I prefer to think of myself as altruistic,” I countered. “This way, you and Lily get some privacy for the latest episode of *Beautiful People in Semi-Functional Relationships*, and I can have a word with your sister.”

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