

Chapter One

I couldn't breathe.

Sweat beaded over my forehead. I had to blink it out of my eyes so I could dodge the trees and foliage at my feet as I ran. Shadows danced around the trees in my peripherals—taunting me. I had to keep my eyes forward. I couldn't let them distract me and give him a chance to catch up.

The whispers were only getting louder. Pressing at the inside of my skull and threatening to break free. The hundreds of voices commanded me to stop, to turn around, to let him have me.

I shook my head and pushed my legs to go faster.

He was getting closer. I could feel his cold presence against my back. His eyes locked on me.

I burst from the trees, kicking up white sand as I dug my heels into the beach. My eyes went wide at the crescent line of crashing waves that blocked my escape. I choked back a hysterical sob. My knees trembled.

No. I can't stop. I have to keep going.

The black smoke had already begun to leak from the forest at my back. It reached for my ankles as it spilled onto the sand. I ignored my body's protests and broke into another sprint towards the water. Every step was agony as the sand pulled at my bare feet. But I had to keep going. I had to get away.

I had to get away.

The water sloshed around my feet as I ran into the tide. I would swim away if I had to. I would face the sea before I faced *him*.

I didn't get very far before a splitting pain shot up the back of my neck. I dropped to my knees and gripped my head as the waves crashed around my waist. The whispers intensified. *Stop. Turn around. Behind you.*

I spun and my blood ran cold.

The smoky silhouette had emerged from the midnight woods and was standing on the beach. Darkness radiated from his outline—pooling at his feet in inky plumes. He watched me in silence. Waiting for my next move.

I pushed myself to stand, but my body went rigid with icy fear under his gaze. I slammed my hands into the water.

“What do you want?” I screamed at him—my words barely audible over the downing symphony of whispers.

No response. He remained still. I clenched my hands around the sand at my knees in frustration. *You can't just sit here Olivia!*

I gathered all of my remaining strength and forced myself to stand. As soon as I found my footing, the shadowed man stepped forward. I gasped and staggered backward in response. The ocean lapped at my knees. My soaked white dress clung to my thighs and a shiver tore through my body.

He continued forward. The whispers grew louder as he closed the distance.

“Get away from me!” I screamed over the chaos in my head.

The shadow paused at the shore before taking another slow, deliberate step into the dark water. The urge to keep screaming ripped at my throat. But I was paralyzed. The water seemed unbothered by his presence as he slithered towards me at an unnatural speed.

He stopped only a few steps away.

I held my breath, afraid even the slightest sound would set him off. Cause him to grab me and push me under the black surface of the water. The sound of my heart filled my ears, only adding to the cacophony of whispers. *Stop. Don't run. STOP.*

He reached one arm in my direction. The darkness pulsated as smoky tendrils broke from his silhouetted form—coiling around his arm before reaching for me. Surrounding me. I gasped at their icy touch as they wrapped their way around my body and snaked up to my throat.

A scream finally tore from my lips, echoing in the silence around me.

I struggled and fought with everything I had, but no matter how much I protested, the tendrils wrapped tighter. The air itself was closing in around me. Suffocating me. I gasped and clawed at the smoke—tears escaping down my cheeks.

I wasn't getting out of here. It was over. I was going to die—

“Wake up.” Two words cut through the whispers like a sharp blade. The smallest flutter of warmth ignited in my heart—velvety and warm. Light traced through my veins starting from my neck and shot its way down into the rest of my body. A tingling sensation followed in its path. Once it reached my feet, the warmth burst from me with such force that it sent out a blinding pulse of light.

The dark tendrils recoiled in response—writhing and coiling as if they’d been burned. The awful cacophony in my head finally went silent. I could hear the waves crashing against the shore. The breeze rustling gently through the trees. I staggered backward, keeping my eyes on the shadow. He whipped his head from side to side as the air began to ripple around us.

Then it shattered.

I started to feel the pull of my sleeping body. The soft rise and fall of my chest. The fabric of the sheets caressing my skin. The more I focused on my sleeping self, the more I could reach her.

The shadow still loomed in front of me. Watching. Waiting. His inky tendrils no longer dared to go near me. Even so, he lifted his arm once more. I shut my eyes just as the dream collapsed and swallowed me whole.

Finally setting me free.



I stared blankly at my ceiling fan. I breathed in the familiarity of my room—trying to calm the wild beating of my heart. *A dream. It was just a dream.* Dried streaks of tears left my cheeks stiff and crusty. The fear still lingered in my body. The icy chill of the smoke still caressed my skin. But I was safe now—

The sound of my cell phone vibrating on my nightstand made me yelp. I sat up and sighed in relief. My alarm. Clutching my chest, I reached to shut it off.

The dawn had only begun to pour light through the window—casting an eerie shadow over everything. I searched the darkness. A shiver racked my body as I imagined the shadowed man watching me from the dark corners of my room.

Though I knew I was being completely ridiculous, my heart pounded relentlessly and my mind began to spin. I could feel the anxiety creeping up on me. Flashing imagines of blank, staring eyes and blue-tinged lips filled my mind—replacing the memory of the nightmare as they so often did. I ripped my phone from the charger and did what I always had when those memories reared their ugly heads:

I dialed his number.

I held it up to my ear and listened to it ring—knowing very well no one would answer. *“If you’re looking for Scott you just missed him. Leave a message.”*

The line beeped. Tears stung my eyes at the sound of his voice, but I blinked them away—letting out a ragged breath before dialing again.

“If you’re looking for Scott you just missed him. Leave a message.” I dialed it again and again, letting the voicemail soothe the storm within me.

Eventually, I took in one last breath and left my message. *“Hey, it’s me... I just... well, I guess it doesn’t matter, does it?”* I swung my legs over the bed and let out a bitter laugh. *“I still haven’t forgiven you. But... I’ll be okay for now.”*

Hanging up, I let my feet hit the floor and headed for the warmth of my shower. I stood there for a long time, letting the warm water wash over me—combating the chill of the nightmare and soothing the ache I felt in my chest.

I steeled myself as I did every morning and grudgingly left my shower. When I opened the bathroom door, I was immediately greeted by the familiar giddiness of my dormmate—and best friend—Rachel. I jumped backward, frantically grabbing at my towel so it stayed where it was supposed to.

“Good morning,” she chirped. Rachel studied my surprised expression and laughed, *“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. Though the look on your face is priceless.”* She gave me a quick once-over, *“And lucky me to catch you still in your towel.”* She winked and laughed again, bringing her hand to her mouth. Her long blonde hair hung around her like a golden veil and her bright, warm smile melted my anxiety instantly.

I breathed a sigh of relief and let out a laugh as I headed for my closet. “Stop harassing me, you pervert... did you need something? Or are you only here to scare me half to death?”

“You know, Liv, if you weren’t so fun to mess with I wouldn’t harass you.” She laughed. “Well, not as much anyway. Oh! Right. So, I met someone last week...” she paused as if to get some sort of reaction out of me. A girly squeal of joy? Or maybe a string of questions to get the dirty details? I blinked at her and waited.

“Ugh,” she exclaimed with an exasperated eye roll. “You’re impossible. After a whole year of being roommates, how are you *not* better at gossip? Have I taught you nothing?”

I laughed again as I got changed. “Gossip is *very* un-lady-like, Rache. My mother would be so disappointed in us.” I chastised in a mocking tone, but she still waited expectantly. I slipped on my Aldridge uniform as she waited patiently for me to finish buttoning my shirt and tightening my black and gold tie.

With no sign of her continuing, I rolled my eyes and gave her what she wanted. “Oh my *god*, Rache! Give me *all* the details.” I delivered with a great valley girl impression—if I do say so myself.

She shook her head solemnly. With a raise of one perfect blonde brow said, “It needs work, but I’ll take it. Next time, hold the sarcasm.”

“Right, of course.” I laughed and let my tone return to normal. “Boy or girl?”

An excited smile broke out across her face. “*His* name is Alex. He’s *gorgeous*. I’ll spare my polite, little Livy the dirty details, but I met him in my scholarship group.”

I cocked my head at her. “What happened with Valerie?”

“Things got... complicated.” She looked away and I got the message. Rachel very rarely stayed with the same person for long. There was always something that came up one way or another. Which was a shame. I was starting to like Valerie.

I cleared my throat. “So, Alex, huh? I thought you weren’t mixing relationships with your scholarship group anymore?”

Rachel was a little different than the other students at our school. Aldridge was little-known to the general public. Being a school for the elite,

only prominent people sent their kids here. But as all schools did, Aldridge had a scholarship program to avoid the PR nightmare that was financial diversity. Rachel was from a middle-class family with no exceptional background or status so she was one of the few here on a scholarship. It was a lot harder for her to get accepted, but with her impeccable grades and leadership skills, she was a hard applicant to say no to.

To give those few students a safe place away from all the stuffy rich kids, they erected a scholarship group so they could find comradery on campus. Rachel attended once a week and it seemed to help her stay grounded.

"Well... he's an exception." A mischievous smile lit her features before she launched into the story of how they became friends and got closer over last year. I started to tune her out as she explained *why* he was the exception. So much for sparing me the dirty details.

I shuffled around my room, gathering all the materials I needed for today's classes. In the process, I knocked my sketchbook right off my desk and papers went everywhere. I cursed as I bet to gather the scattered pages before Rachel could see them.

She didn't seem to notice as she was still chatting away as if nothing happened. I loved her to death, but when she got going, there was no stopping her. I suppose that's how a lot of pre-law students were. I smiled to myself and finished gathering my papers—stuffing them into my shoulder bag along with my textbooks.

"So anyway," she continued, "I was hoping you would say yes and do me this *teeny-tiny* little favor. I know it's *completely* last minute and I'll owe you one, big time. Liv... Livi... *ohmygod*, Olivia!"

I snapped back to the conversation and instantly knew I was in trouble. *What favor?*

Rachel frowned. "You weren't even listening, were you?"

"Y-yes! Of course I was. That sounds great." The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them. Whatever it was, it couldn't be that bad... right? I figured she needed me to leave the apartment for a few hours. I was already planning in my head where I would spend my evening when I caught the look on her face.

She blinked at me. “For real? *Ohmygod* thank you!” She squealed and pulled me into a tight hug, “We’ll leave around nine. I have to run that *errand* I told you about.” Rachel winked and my stomach tightened. “I’ll see you back here to get ready. I know this isn’t exactly your thing, but it’s going to be so much fun. I promise!”

I blinked at her and nodded. What was she talking about? What errand? How could I have missed *that* much?

“I’ll take care of *everything*. Now, get your hot-ass to class. I’ll look in your closet for something sexy for you to wear...” she let her voice trail off in thought. “Well, on second thought, you can borrow something from me.”

And on that note, Rachel turned and left. I stared at her bouncing blonde hair as she disappeared out the door. What on earth was she getting me into? What did I get *myself* into? My stomach churned at the possibilities, but I couldn’t worry about it now.

I had to get to class.



I breathed deeply. Letting the fresh, cool air of the morning fill my lungs. As I walked to my first class, I focused only on the feeling of the crisp, autumn air biting at my cheeks and soft clouds of hot breath escaping my lips.

It was that time of year when it grew colder every day. I still wasn’t used to the cold, northern weather. Though it was pretty at times, I longed for the California warmth. Especially now, walking across campus—fighting the bitter winds to get to my classes.

Aldridge University was a special kind of boarding school, regarded higher than the Ivy League schools due to its secrecy. They tucked it neatly away in the hills of northern Maine several miles from the ports and their quaint little towns. At a glance, it looked like a normal school. Dorms, libraries, vast quads of lounging students. However, upon closer inspection, it’s not quite as inconspicuous.

The dorms we lived in were more like apartments. Two bedrooms on opposite sides, each with its own bathroom. Two students shared a full-

sized kitchen and laundry room. Even still I caught whispers of complaints from the other students. Most weren't used to having to share.

The libraries were as opulent and refined as they came. Grand staircases that were hand-carved and stretched to impossible heights. Rows and rows of pristine, well-kept books. And a high-end computer room—though the majority of students rarely needed it.

The quads were plush with soft grass and stalls typically line the edges selling beverages and food. Not as many in the colder months, but they did have one or two that sold hot tea and coffee.

If anyone knew about the legal team we had stacked behind these walls... they'd know something was up. Not that they'd be able to say anything about it. Any unwanted attention or the discovery of our identities is under a thick blanket of legal protection. We were barely allowed to tell *each other* who our parents were. Non-disclosure agreements and all that.

Students still did it, but it was frowned upon.

They're all, well... spoiled brats. Though their financial status was hidden underneath the mandatory Aldridge uniform—black and gold sweaters, blazers, skirts, and slacks—their attitudes said it all. The thought of being one of them always made my skin itch. I'd happily give up my status and all the baggage that came with it.

At the end of the day, Aldridge was a fancy place where important people could ship their kids to keep them out of the media, out of trouble, or out of their hair.

At least that's why *I* was here.

After turning sixteen, I finished my homeschooling requirements and was sent here by my parents. I was a little young to be in college—the youngest to ever be admitted, in fact—but my parents insisted the board of directors let me in. They presented it as an emergency with everything going on back in LA after the... incident.

I paused in my trek across campus when I felt my cell phone buzz inside my jacket pocket. My brow knitted as I read the text.

Olivia, your father, and I haven't heard from you in a while. There is something we wish to discuss. Please respond promptly.

A pickle of agitation spread across my skin. I could feel her indifference from hundreds of miles away. I hated how it still twisted cold knives beneath my skin. I promptly shook it off and texted her back.

Yes ma-am.

I walked and watched for her response. When it buzzed in my heart clenched.

Excellent. Your father will be calling you when he finds the time. Try not to waste it when he does.

Bile rose inside me but I swallowed it.

Yes ma-am.

Checking the time, I stuffed my phone back inside my pocket. I was going to be late. So much for a relaxing morning.

I stewed about my mother's text on the way to my favorite class of the week. Introduction to Cognitive Psychology with Professor Reid. And not only because the professor wasn't horrible to look at—the reason most girls took this class—but because I found it captivating.

Maybe it had something to do with being painfully awkward my entire life and wanting to relate more to my peers. Or maybe it was because there were still so many things about this world I didn't understand... so many things about *people* and their actions I didn't understand.

But no matter how much I wanted to be engrossed by the inner workings of the mind, or by the way the professor chewed on his pens, I couldn't. Something about sitting in a dark lecture hall took me back to last night. I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

"Miss Stanley?"

My head shot up. Eyes darting around to find the voice that called my name, but as I looked around the room, I noticed more than a few people had their eyes on me... including my annoyed professor.

"Miss Stanley, I asked you a question." He spoke again. He adjusted his dark-rimmed glasses and waited patiently for my response. I swallowed hard, trying to remember what he's asked me.

He was younger than most of the professors. And newer having shown up before the fall semester started. No one knew much about him which continued to make him a hot topic for gossip around campus. Especially with the girls. His honey blonde hair was tousled in the devil-

may-care fashion, accenting his dark eyes. The intensity of his look often took my breath away.

Now, being one of those inopportune times.

"Oh! Um y-yes. My apologies. Could you please repeat the question?" Looking around the room I could feel my face growing warmer. So many people were staring at me. I sank back in my chair—away from their scrutiny.

Professor Reid sighed and repeated, "What is one of the most influential memory theories?"

"Um, r-right," I sat there in a moment of silence formulating the answer. "Memory Decay. Peterson and Peterson, 1958, suggested memories can only last so long before they're forgotten completely."

Reid nodded with approval. "Very good—"

"Actually," someone spoke up a few seats in front of me, "it was 1959. And, personally, I think it's less about decay and more about the retroactive interference of new information."

I straightened in my seat, my attention immediately shifting to the thick, messy brown hair of a boy who had his hand raised causally in the air. He turned in his seat and flashed me a smirk. Was he... making *fun* of me? What was his deal? His arrogant gaze shifted back to the professor.

I bristled and my cheeks flushed. A part of me wanted to refute what he was saying, which was strange. I wasn't normally one for confrontation, but something about his condescending tone lit a fire inside me.

"Interesting theory, Mr. Westbrook," Reid said, clearly amused. "Though I don't remember asking you for one." Giggles rolled through the room.

Ignoring the professor, I lifted my chin at *Mr. Westbrook*. "So, you're saying memories don't fade on their own? You don't just forget things over long periods of time?"

He spun back around. "What I'm *saying* is other information overrides those memories and makes them harder to remember. Time has nothing to do with it. How can there be memories you remember for your entire lifetime and others that decay? Wouldn't they *all* go away?" He shook

his head. “New information overrides the unimportant information. It’s about what’s important to you. Not about time.”

“So you’re going to negate the studies done by psychologists? By professionals?” Why was he still arguing with me? And having so much fun with it for that matter.

He flashed me a haughty grin, though his eyes were jaded. Cold even. “What are theories aside from simple options made by old men? They know as much as we do now, if not less.” And on that closing statement, he tsked at me and turned back in his seat.

“What are you talking about—”

“Alright, *students*. As much as I love a colorful debate, I have a class to teach. Mr. Westbrook, Miss Stanley, please feel free to continue after class.”

Reid waited patiently for the whispers from the rest of the class to die down before resuming his lecture. My glare was set to the back of that unruly brown head.

Class went on for the rest of the hour, thankfully without any more questions from the professor, or meaningless arguments from belligerent *classmates*. However, that confrontation did seem to snap me back to reality—leaving any shadowy figures or icy smoke to the recesses of my mind.

As the day went on, I found it easier and easier to let the dream dissolve into a distant memory. Soon I’d forgotten it all together and was more worried about what Rachel had planned for tonight. I thought about it more as I walked back to our dorm. It had something to do with Rachel and the guy she likes... and I had to dress up.

Eyes wide, I stopped—nearly dropping the key I’d fished from my bag.

Oh no, no, no! It *was* obvious. And I was a massive idiot. I knew what it was, and I was becoming increasingly upset with myself that I’d said yes to it.

The girls’ dorm building grew closer as I walked along the quad. I sighed in dismay. *No turning back now, Liv.*



Staring at my front door, I tried to think of any reason I could use to get out of this. I could fake being sick... tell her I had uncontrollable diarrhea... that would definitely ruin a double date. *A double date!* I groaned aloud in the hallway. And a blind one at that. I was in full panic mode. I hadn't been on a real date in... oh god... when had I *ever* gone on a real date?

Think, Olivia. Think. I rubbed my forehead and squeezed my eyes closed. If only I were a better liar. She'd see right through me if I used any of those excuses. I took a deep breath and gently opened the door, taking off my shoes to hold them in my hand so as not to tip Rachel off that I was home. Trying to buy time.

I looked at the other end of the living room. Her door was closed, but I could hear the muffled sound of music playing through her Bluetooth speaker. I tiptoed past her door, through the kitchen, and stopped at my bedroom door on the other side of the apartment.

My hand hovered over the knob as I hesitated. Why was I being such a baby about this? It's not like I could bale on my friend. Especially not after I lied about listening to her and agreed to it. That would be rude.

But... what do I have to do on a date? What should I say? How should I even *act*? Not to mention standing next to someone as amazing as Rachel made me pale in comparison. What if my total lack of allure ruins the night for everyone?

As I opened my door, a voice shattered the silence behind me.

"Good you're back!" Rachel called happily, "Jeez, Liv, I was getting worried we wouldn't have enough time to get you ready. You didn't forget, did you?"

"O-of course not!" I spun to face her.

Rachel sighed with relief. Her hair was still up in a towel. "Oh good. A part of me was pretty sure you weren't *really* listening to me this morning."

I opened my mouth in protest as she grabbed me by the hand and dragged me across our dorm towards her room. I looked back longingly at my bedroom doorway as she led me away.

As she sat me down in the chair beside her desk, I silently accepted my fate. Rachel left me sitting there as she dug around in her gigantic make-

up bag. She'd even occasionally look up at me with her chocolate brown eyes as if she were intently visualizing her canvas.

It was off to the races as she smeared foundation over my cheeks and forehead. I let my gaze wander around her meticulously organized room. Her binders were all neatly labeled and lined up on her desk. Her bed was made up so neatly that you could bounce a quarter off her comforter.

"Hey! No moving. You'll mess it up."

I straightened but rolled my eyes at her.

Giving my face a break, she stood in front of me—hands on her hips. "This is the important part, so I'll say again: No. Moving. I picked out a bunch of earthy tones that will bring out your beautiful hazel eyes." She winked.

I shrugged. "You're the expert. Bless me with your face magic." We both laughed.

"Alright, my dear, we don't have much time to spare and I still have to show you what you're wearing." A wry smile turned the edges of her pink lips. One I didn't like.

After what felt like an eternity of having all sorts of makeup brushes and pencils pressed to my face—and a sponge-thing I've never seen before—Rachel was finally done. She held up a small round mirror for my approval, not that it mattered, of course. I wasn't going to tell her to start over. But I *was* impressed by the job she'd done.

My eyeliner extended from the edges of my eyes in two, perfectly symmetrical wings. She used dark brown eyeshadow and edged it with black so my eyes looked huge—topping it all off with a thick layer of mascara. She'd effortlessly covered the bags under my eyes from the horrible sleep I'd gotten last night, which was an impressive feat on its own.

"Wow, Rache. I know I said *magic* but... I don't even know who that is." I joked.

"Oh stop," she said, "you're pretty without it, too. Don't forget that. But wait until I curl your hair. I'm thinking sexy beach waves."

She continued as she trotted over to the closet. "I thought we'd go classic tonight. Everyone loves a little black cocktail dress." She held it up for me to see—her smile mischievous.

"Oh no. *No.*" I protested, hands up as if to defend myself from it. "Don't you have something a little... longer?"

She raised her brow. "What? Like nun robes? No. No typical *Liv*-style tonight. You'll be leaving your jeans and hoodies behind." Rachel went back into the closet to pull out a pair of black heels and black sheer pantyhose.

I stared at the dress on the bed. With a deep breath and newfound resolve, I grabbed it and headed into Rachel's bathroom.

It's only for one night.



I hadn't realized how much trouble I was getting myself into until I'd come out of the bathroom for her to zip me up. She'd let out a girly shriek and leaped right off the bed to help me.

She led me over to her cheval mirror. "Don't you look *hot?!*" She squealed again.

I had to admit, the dress *did* look good. The spaghetti straps and sweetheart neckline fit perfectly. It hugged my small curves, not leaving much to the imagination. It was a dress that was hard to overlook. Which was a problem. I tried to swallow my fear.

Taking a deep breath, I proceeded to brush out my long hair that Rachel had turned into waves of shiny auburn. I was instructed to leave it down, which was fine by me. Anything to help obscure my cleavage the dress so audaciously presented.

I gave myself one last look-over. "Rache, are you sure I should wear this?" I looked at Rachel's smiling reflection in the mirror.

"Absolutely. No way can we stay friends if you show up in a hoodie. Social. Suicide."

"Always so dramatic." I tried my best to look annoyed, but a smile tugged at the corners of my lips. I was starting to feel a little excited. Much to my dismay. But that was before I found out the short dress wasn't the worst part of this double date adventure.

"And, last but certainly not least..." Rachel handed me a piece of plastic, and I had to do a double-take when I turned it over in my hands.

“Rache... this isn’t my license.”

She scoffed. “Obviously. How do you expect us to get into the bar with the one you have? In case you forgot, they don’t let in seventeen-year-olds... or nineteen-year-olds in my case. Look, I got one too.”

Rachel handed me hers and I looked it over. Everything was a match to her regular Maine license except for her birthday and her name... which was now Phoebe Carlisle? I would have laughed if I weren’t so horrified.

I quickly looked back at the one she gave me and arched an eyebrow. “Angela Wheeler?”

Rachel winked and let out a laugh. “Perfect, right?”

“Where did you even *get* these?” I handed her fake ID back to her as she finished getting ready. She slipped it into her wallet before slipping into her stilettos.

“Let’s just say I recently stumbled upon Aldridge’s underground operation. Dean Montgomery and his lackeys make the most convincing fake IDs I’ve ever seen. But I wouldn’t expect anything less from the heir of a major software and printing company. Honestly, I’m surprised no one’s caught on to his identity yet. I guess that’s thanks to our ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy about our identities. Good thing Dean and I have a *special* relationship.”

I looked over at her sheepishly. “I didn’t think we’d be doing anything illegal, Rache.”

She cocked her head at me. “Why are you so surprised? I told you all about it this morning, didn’t I? I nearly died of shock when you agreed with no arguments.”

“Y-yeah, I know. I...” I sighed and shook my head. “I guess I’m... nervous.”

Rachel smiled. “Oh Livy, everyone has one of these. It’s no big deal, okay? I promise no one’s getting in trouble. Legal trouble, anyway.” She winked. “Don’t you trust me?”

I nodded. But internally, I wasn’t sure. I had a feeling she would still go by herself if I refused. So I decided to keep my word, for her sake, at least. I could watch out for her to make sure she kept that promise.

A small feeling of DeJa’Vu pulled at my insides. I unconsciously clenched my phone in my hand—suppressing the urge to dial his number.

I shook my head and tucked it into my clutch. Pulling on the black pantyhose, I strapped on the pair of black pumps and followed Rachel out the door—almost forgetting to grab my leather jacket off the coat hooks. I slipped it over the dress and took one last deep breath before I walked out the door and into one of the worst nights of my life.



I stared out the window of Rachel’s blue Chevy Malibu she’d named ‘Leonardo’. A classic car gifted to her by her grandfather.

I became lost in the soft music and the darkness of the hills and trees we passed by. Soon, we’d be seeing the glowing lights of Cape Ives. A little port town north of Lubec—the only town for miles. Aldridge was fond of the “less trouble happens in the middle of nowhere” strategy. It wasn’t so much less trouble as it was fewer witnesses, in my opinion. Rich college kids always found trouble no matter where they were.

I leaned my forehead up against the cool glass of the window. Closing my eyes, I tried focusing on anything other than this date. When that didn’t work, I pulled out my phone—holding it made me feel better. It was my lifeline whenever my anxiety threatened to swallow me whole.

An unread text from my mother appeared on the lock screen.

Olivia, your father was too busy today. Watch for a call tomorrow.

“A text from your mom?” My head shot up, surprised to hear Rachel’s voice. I fumbled with my phone—trying to hide it from view. Her brow furrowed at my reaction, but she patiently waited for me to respond.

“Just checking in on me,” I said wearily.

Rachel and I were assigned as dormmates last year. We certainly didn’t click right away. The age difference didn’t help, but at the time all I wanted to do was to lock myself in my room. Fortunately, Rachel saw that as a challenge. Her determination to be my friend was the warm flame inside my cold and lonely world without Scott.

But getting close to her meant hiding my past would be nearly impossible. She learned quickly that I had a rocky relationship with my parents. Being someone who grew up nurtured in light and warmth, it was difficult for her to understand my world of frigid indifference.

“What did she say? That’s great that she texted you! It means she’s thinking about you. My mom calls at least once a week.”

The usual pit of jealousy twisted in my stomach whenever she talked about her mother. I laughed it off. “My mother’s not exactly the ‘call when she misses you’ type.” I attempted to change the subject. “So where exactly are you taking me?”

“It’s this little pub called McKendrick’s. It has a back porch with a *gorgeous* view of the ocean. Too bad it’s getting so cold out. I miss summer.” Rachel pouted.

I swallowed. I’d been to parties with drinking before, but never an actual bar. Scott took me to one of his friend’s birthday parties in Beverly Hills once. He never let me out of his sight, of course, but in those brief moments, I felt the thrill of rebellion. It was a welcomed release from always having to be who my parents wanted me to be. A place where you weren’t expected to be polite and cordial. A place where I could be a normal teenager and not one competing for her parents’ approval day in and day out.

I also learned how dangerous rebellion could be. I clutched my phone and closed my eyes.

Rachel took advantage of my long pause, “Sorry, I know the party scene isn’t for you.” Her words were soft and reassuring. “But I really appreciate it. Alex and I were supposed to be going out *alone* tonight, but he has a childhood friend in town and wanted to include him. I understand, of course. But thanks to you no one has to feel like a third wheel.

“Plus,” she continued, “I’ve been *dying* to go out on the town with you! Maybe after we pop your cherry tonight, you’ll indulge me more often?” She paused and repositioned her grip on the steering wheel. “Seriously, though... thank you. I know that sounded bad like I’m using you, but I swear that’s not it. Honest.”

I smiled. “Rache, it’s okay. I don’t mind. I already agreed to this, remember? I knew what I was getting myself into,” I lied.

She let her shoulders relax a little. I turned back to the window again, and without even thinking about it said, “Plus, my cherry was already popped. I’d been to a few parties with Scott before. So it’s not *that* big of a culture shock.”

I was just trying to reassure her, but as soon as I'd said it, I wished I hadn't. Because Rachel's head snapped in my direction with an exasperated look on her face—her attention not on the road where it was supposed to be.

"WHAT!" she shrieked.

"Rachel! Watch the road!"

Rachel turned her eyes back on the road, just in time to avoid drifting into oncoming traffic. But her attention was still fully on me.

"You've been to parties? *You?* Seriously? And I'm just *now* hearing about it?" Rachel seemed genuinely hurt. Like I had betrayed her or something. She put on a dramatic pouty face and said, "I'm finding this out *now* after more than a year of living together?" She scoffed. "Oh, you're busted, missy. You bet your hot ass I'll be draggin' you out with me more often. You have no choice now. I thought you were this major goodie-goodie, but I guess I was wrong about you. You sneaky girl. It's always the quiet ones, as they say."

"What? No. I just... I don't like going out anymore. But you're right, I should've told you the truth. I'm going with you now aren't I?" I laughed nervously, trying to distract her from the slip-up I actually cared about.

"You're damn right! Like I said, you're now my poisoner of social injustice. So, you either pay the fine or pay with your blood."

I snorted. "You play too many video games."

"Whatever. The point still stands. Partying with me, or death. So choose wisely."

I laughed. "Well, I guess if death is my only other option... I choose that."

I figured she would have a witty comeback or a punch to my shoulder, but only silence hung between us. I watched as Rachel's face darkened. I held my breath. Hoping she wouldn't ask about him. Did she know? Could she tell?

"Who's Scott?" she asked carefully. "I mean... is he like an old boyfriend or something? You've never mentioned him before. I knew about that douche bag, Aaron. But not Scott."

I let out a sigh of relief. With all the hush around our identities, it made it possible for *some* things to stay secret. Rachel was my best friend, but it had only been a year... and I wasn't ready to tell her. Not yet.

"Something like that." Before she could ask more questions, I continued, "I don't want to talk about it... especially not tonight. So, can we drop it? Please?"

I knew she didn't believe me. Even still, she said, "Yeah okay... I guess this isn't the best time anyway. We're *supposed* to be having fun. But... what about later? Will you tell me then?" She looked over at me again, worry filling her chocolate eyes.

My expression softened. "Yeah. Thanks, Rache."