



WHAT WE LEFT BEHIND

SUNSHINE

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PROLOGUE

Garnet. Crimson oozing from the body. It's covered with holes that look like they're inspired by a polka-dot pattern. This image is heebie-jeebies central for anyone with trypophobia.

The liquid is thick, staining the carpet. It smells like blood... exactly the smell I remember.

I bet it would be hard to remove the stain from the carpet. I had to throw mine away. It was my favorite one, and I got it from Hong Kong, from a famous brand called Tai Ping. Honestly, someone else got it, but who cares? It was mine, and it was ruined.

Now, all I care about is how I should get rid of this body without getting blood on my hands. I don't want my hands to be covered in someone else's gross liquid once again. It's not hard to wash off, but the smell on your hands will stay and haunt you, reminding you of what you did.

So, I'd better not get them covered with it again.

CHAPTER ONE

SARAH

The morning was as usual—boring. The same Monday, the same lectures of biology. It's not a perfect beginning I would prefer, but it's not like I can do anything about it.

I reached the university ten minutes before, as always, and they were all late. Again. I decided to take a seat and save seats for them. Before I could enter, someone came and back-hugged me. I didn't even need to look to know who it was. It's obvious—it was Lara, my first friend in this university.

She's an extrovert, and I guess if she wasn't, I don't think I would have been friends with her. It takes a lot for me to talk to a stranger, but thanks to Lara, I was able to enjoy my first year.

"What's up, EJ?" she asked.

She calls me EJ because my full name is Sarah Elizabeth Johnson.

"Nothing much. Just going to explore Mother Nature's secrets in a not-so-interesting lecture."

“It’s okay, I’m joining you. I’ll make it interesting,” she replied while grinning from the right side of her lips, showing her beautiful dimples.

She’s really perfect. I’m glad to be friends with her.

We went inside and took our seats. In no time, May and Phoebe joined us. Phoebe had an angry look on her face, as if she had fought with someone.

I asked, “What’s wrong, Phoebe?”

She didn’t reply and put her head down.

“She had an argument with her roommate,” said May very softly. May lives in the same building as Phoebe, and they usually come and go together.

“I’m just gonna kill that bitch someday,” said Phoebe very angrily, as if she would have done it if murder were forgiven and there were no punishment for it.

And I believe she’s capable of doing it. We all know Phoebe. That’s how Phoebe is. She’s the coldest person you’ll ever meet if you’re her enemy, but she’d do anything for you if you’re on her side. And I know where I should stand.

Always.

But none of us took her seriously. Phoebe had a temper, and she had a way of making even the smallest things sound like a matter of life and death. This was just another one of those moments.

“Well, go ahead, gurl. We’ll help you hide the body,” said Lara with a wink and a big smile. And for a fact, I know Lara would help too.

“Heyy, chill, guys. Have some strawberry milk, Phoebe.”

While saying that, May took it from her bag and gave it to Phoebe and us.

“But what did she do this time?” I asked while sipping my strawberry milk.

“She is just a whore. She used my body wash without asking me and mixed it with her cheap one, hoping I wouldn’t notice,” Phoebe told us in a cold voice.

“It’s okay. Just warn her and maybe she won’t do it again—”

“And if she does, we’ll help you kill her and bury her. Don’t worry. After all, friends are family, and anything for family,” said Lara, cutting my words off.

I smiled and sipped my milk while May nodded in agreement.

Before anything else could happen, the teacher came in. I saw Phoebe typing something with a smirk. Suddenly, a fear washed over me. I hoped whatever thought had just come into my mind would never come true.

CHAPTER TWO

PHOEBE

I hate Mondays. Not because of the lectures or the early mornings. I hate them because everyone suddenly thinks they have the right to ruin my peace.

Especially her. My roommate. I don't even know what annoys me more—the fact that she used my body wash without asking or the fact that she thought I wouldn't notice. I don't share my things. Not with her. Not with anyone.

“Are you still angry?” May asked as we walked out of the lecture hall.

I looked at her. “Do I look angry?”

She gave me a look. “Yes.”

“Then there's your answer.”

She sighed. May always does that when she doesn't know what to say.

Lara walked beside us, laughing about something Sarah had said during the lecture. Sarah was quiet, like always. She usually was. I glanced at her.

EJ. That's what Lara called her. Sarah had this strange way of observing people without making it obvious. Sometimes I wondered what went through her head.

"Phoebe."

I looked back at May. "What?"

"What were you typing during the lecture?"

I smiled. "Nothing."

She narrowed her eyes. "You're lying."

"Maybe."

Lara suddenly leaned between us. "Okay, now I definitely want to know."

"You don't."

"Now I REALLY want to know."

I rolled my eyes. "Curiosity kills the cat." I said with a smirk.

Lara laughed. "See? This is why I love you."

I smiled, but didn't answer. Some things were better kept to myself. Especially this.

I pulled my phone out again and looked at the message I'd typed earlier. For a moment, I wondered if I should send it. Then I did.

My smile grew wider. There. It was done. Whatever happened next wasn't my problem.

CHAPTER THREE

SARAH

By the time I reached home, our group chat had already become chaotic. There were memes, stickers, random messages that made absolutely no sense, and somehow Lara and May had turned it into a full-on sticker war. Most of them were from Lara, with May immediately counter-sticker-attacking her. I don't even know how they have the energy for this.

May: *Why isn't Phoebe saying something?*

Lara: *Because you're not letting her talk.*

May: *It's you who's spamming stickers, not me!*

May tried to defend herself.

Phoebe: *Maybe.*

Finally, Phoebe replied to May.

Lara: *Wow, you're defending May. Nobody is on my side :(*

Me: *Ohh, I'll defend my bebe.*

I replied with a kissing emoji.

Lara: *I have Sarah now. I don't need you guys.*

I giggled while reading it. Sometimes I wondered how we'd even become friends. We were so different from each other, yet somehow it worked.

May: *Heyy guys!! Why not go for a trip? Yk, mountains?? C'mon, we've known each other for like a year and all we've done is go to a café near our university and a bar around the corner. Let's have an adventure, guys!*

I stared at the message for a second. A trip. I'd never actually been on a trip with them before.

Lara: *I am all in.*

Of course she was.

Phobe: *I think I need a break too, so I don't mind.*

Me: *Then let's go to Arnold. I've heard it's pretty affordable and a good place to rest.*

Phoebe: *Ohh yeah, that's a nice place. I've heard of it too.*

May: *Okay then, guys, let's go there this upcoming weekend.*

Lara: *Alright :)*

Me: *K, GN all :)*

I placed my phone on the table and lay down on my bed. My first-ever trip with my friends. I was excited. Or nervous. I don't know which one represented my situation better, but whatever it was, I was definitely looking forward to it.

Maybe I needed a break too. University had been the same routine for so long—lectures, assignments, studying, going home and repeating the same thing the next day. Maybe a few days away from everything would be good.

I closed my eyes for a moment, already imagining the mountains, the cold air and all four of us probably arguing about something

stupid within the first hour. I smiled to myself. This might actually be fun.

My alarm went off at 6:00 a.m. I stared at it for a few seconds, questioning every decision that had led me to this moment before finally getting out of bed. I did some yoga, had a glass of warm water and decided to finish some studying since we were going to be busy this weekend. If I knew I was going to be distracted later, I preferred getting things done beforehand.

After finishing my portion an hour later, I took a warm bath and got ready for university. Before leaving, I texted Lara to ask whether she would be attending today's lecture or not.

She had told me that she had been seeing this guy who worked in some tech field and was much older than her. May and Phoebe didn't know about it yet. I was the only one she'd told so far. She had said she'd tell them soon, and honestly, I preferred them knowing it from her rather than from me. I didn't want to be the one who accidentally ruined whatever she had going on.

And guess what? She was going to see him today. Which meant I'd have to lie to May and Phoebe again. I sighed. It wasn't exactly a big lie. At least that's what I kept telling myself. Still, I didn't like lying to them. Especially when I knew I'd probably have to do it again.

I reached university thirty minutes early. They weren't there. Again. I honestly don't know why I even bothered coming early anymore.

I decided to grab a cup of coffee instead. As I came out, coffee in my hand, something caught my attention. An old man was playing the violin a little distance away.

I stopped. I don't know why. Maybe it was the sound. Maybe it was because I hadn't heard someone play like that in a long time. I stood there quietly and listened. He played beautifully.

He looked like a beginner who had decided to try something new to earn some money. His movements weren't perfect, and there were moments where the notes weren't as smooth as they could have been. But he was trying. And that was what mattered.

I looked down at the two dollars I had in my hand. Without thinking much about it, I put the money into his hat—the same hat I'd gotten while buying my coffee. He looked up and gave me a small smile. I smiled back.

Some things are just meant to be admired for a while because they're temporary. Not everything is meant to stay.

Before I could walk away, I heard someone calling my name.

"Sarah!"

I turned around. It was May, with Phoebe beside her.

"What are you doing? You bought coffee?" May asked.

"Here, for you."

I handed the coffee to May and Phoebe while still looking at the man playing the violin.

"He plays so perfectly," said May.

I couldn't help but smile. "He plays nicely, but not perfectly. The articulation in that fast section needs a crisper spiccato rather than just standard *détaché*."

Both of them looked at me.

"Ohh, you know so much about violin?" Phoebe asked in an astonished tone.

I looked back at the old man. "I used to play."

The words came out before I could stop them. “I wanted to make a career out of it. I wanted to go to a music academy in France.”

For a moment, I forgot that they were standing beside me. I forgot about the university. The trip. Everything. There was just the sound of the violin. And a memory I hadn’t thought about in a while. A sad smile appeared on my face.

“Why didn’t you pursue it?” May asked curiously. I looked at her.

There were so many answers. None of them were ones I wanted to say.

“It’s not necessary for everything to go your way,” I replied.

I started walking away without waiting for them. I could feel their eyes on me, but neither of them followed with another question. They knew. Or maybe they just understood that I didn’t want to talk about it. Either way, I was grateful.

We were going to be late for today’s lecture. And I was going to be late for the first time. I hoped it would be the last time. I didn’t want my past to ruin my future goals.

CHAPTER FOUR

PHOEBE

I watched Sarah walk away. Something about her had changed. A few minutes ago, she had been talking about the violin like she had forgotten where she was. Her face had actually lit up while she was talking about it. And then May asked why she didn't pursue it. Just like that, everything changed. Her smile disappeared. Her voice became quieter. And suddenly she was walking away from us.

I wondered why she was so upset. Maybe it was just an old dream that didn't work out. Maybe there was more to it. I wanted to ask. But I didn't. You can tell when someone doesn't want you digging into something. And Sarah definitely didn't want us digging.

"Anyway..." I said, trying to change the direction of the conversation. "Where's Lara?"

Sarah turned around. "She's not coming today. She had something to do."

I nodded. Something about the way she said it made me feel like there was more to the story. But I didn't question her. If she wanted

to tell me, she would. Besides, Lara was probably doing something stupid again.

Before I could say anything else, May suddenly smiled. "I'm sooo excited for the trip!"

I laughed. "You've been talking about it since yesterday."

"Because I'm excited!"

"We haven't even left yet."

"I know!"

She looked way too happy about it. I couldn't blame her, though. We'd been friends for almost a year, and somehow the furthest we'd ever gone together was a café near the university and a bar around the corner. A trip was definitely overdue.

Sarah smiled. "We'll have to go shopping before we leave."

"Oh, definitely," I said. "We need clothes, snacks, and probably a million other things Lara will convince us to buy."

"Hey, don't blame everything on Lara," May said.

"I wasn't."

"You were."

I laughed. For a moment, everything felt normal. Just the four of us talking about a stupid little trip.

Until I noticed May's expression change. It was quick. Her smile dropped for barely a second before she looked down.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"May."

She sighed. "You guys don't have to spend too much."

Sarah looked at her. "We weren't planning to."

"I know, but..." She hesitated. "I just don't want you guys spending unnecessarily because of me."

I looked at Sarah. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. I knew why she'd chosen Arnold. It wasn't just because it was a nice place. It was affordable. Especially for May.

May was an orphan. She'd been taking care of herself for years without parents to depend on, without someone automatically paying for things or asking whether she needed anything. She hated being treated differently because of it. And honestly, I understood why.

"May," I said, "We're going because we want to. Don't make it weird."

She looked at me for a moment before smiling.

"Okay."

"Good."

"And I'm still not letting you guys spend too much."

I laughed. "There she is."

She laughed too. The awkwardness disappeared. At least for the moment.

CHAPTER FIVE

SARAH

We were sitting in a restaurant, planning out our trip, when Lara finally joined us. She looked unusually happy. Actually, *very* happy. I narrowed my eyes at her as she walked towards our table, trying to figure out what was going on. I bet something good had happened with that dude she had been hanging out with lately. She had been acting a little suspicious whenever I mentioned his name, and now, seeing that ridiculous smile on her face, I was almost certain I was right.

She pulled out a chair and dropped herself into it like she hadn't kept us waiting at all. "Hey, guys. Planning without me?"

"Yeah. Anyways, your plan sucks," May replied, hitting her in a teasing tone.

Lara stared at her for a second before rolling her eyes. "Wow. I just got here."

"And you've already managed to contribute nothing," May said, completely serious.

I couldn't help but laugh. Whenever I looked at those two, they reminded me of a typical sibling pair. They were always arguing over the smallest things, teasing each other and somehow managing to annoy one another every five minutes. The funny thing was that they didn't even look alike.

If I had to compare them to anyone, though, I'd say May looked a lot like Phoebe. Their features were not very different, and there was something about the way they looked at people, especially when they were annoyed, that made them seem strangely similar. If someone told me they were sisters, I honestly wouldn't question it.

Phoebe, meanwhile, sat quietly, occasionally glancing at the plans spread across the table. We had been talking about this trip for days, but somehow it still didn't feel completely real.

A few minutes later, Lara clapped her hands together. "Okay, then, guys. Let's just enjoy ourselves and forget that tomorrow exists."

"That's your solution to everything," Phoebe muttered.

"Exactly."

I smiled. For once, I didn't want to think about tomorrow either. No school. No assignments. No tests. Just the four of us. Maybe this was exactly what we needed.

Finally, the day came. I had been waiting for it all week.

Phoebe drove us there in her parents' car. It was a white BMW, and although I wasn't really into cars, even I could tell it was definitely an expensive one. I sat in the back with May while Lara sat beside Phoebe, talking almost the entire way.

The journey itself was surprisingly peaceful. For the first few minutes, everyone was excited and talking over each other. Then the conversations slowly became random. Lara started pointing out things outside the window, May kept making comments about practically

everything she saw, and Phoebe mostly focused on driving while occasionally joining in.

I spent most of the time looking out of the window. The buildings slowly disappeared behind us. Then the busy roads became quieter. And eventually, there were more trees than houses. The further we went, the more different everything looked. It felt like we were leaving our usual lives behind with every kilometer.

When we finally reached the place, we decided to stay at a bungalow that Lara had recommended. Well... Technically, it had been recommended to her by her boyfriend, James. But Phoebe and May didn't know that yet. I wasn't sure why Lara hadn't mentioned it. Maybe she simply hadn't found the right moment. Or maybe she was deliberately keeping it to herself. Either way, I decided not to say anything.

The bungalow was beautiful. It was a white house sitting right in the middle of the woods, surrounded by tall trees and greenery. It wasn't some huge, fancy mansion like the kind you see in movies. It was actually quite simple. And somehow, that made it better. It looked comfortable. The kind of place where you could spend the entire day doing absolutely nothing and still have a good time.

There was a small porch at the front with wooden steps leading up to the entrance. The windows were wide enough to let in plenty of sunlight, and from certain angles, all you could see beyond them were trees.

The air itself felt different. Cooler. Cleaner. Quieter. For once, there were no horns, no crowded streets and no constant noise in the background. Just the sound of the wind moving through the trees.

As soon as we stepped inside, we were greeted by the woman in charge of the bungalow. She was an older woman, probably in her forties or fifties, with a soft smile and a warm, welcoming presence.

“My name is Adeline Grey,” she introduced herself. “But please, call me Addy.”

There was something comforting about her immediately, and her gentle welcome made the unfamiliar place feel even more like home.

Lara immediately started exploring as if she owned the place. “Guys! Come look at this!”

“We literally just got here,” May called after her.

“And?”

I laughed and followed them inside.

The bungalow was just as cozy on the inside as it was from the outside. There were wooden floors, comfortable-looking furniture and warm little lamps that made the place feel almost like a home rather than a holiday house. I could already imagine us sitting around at night, talking about everything and nothing.

Apparently, there was also a lake about five miles away. We could go fishing there, according to Lara, and there were apparently several beautiful places around the area that we could explore. She was basically a human Google. The more I heard about it, the more excited I became.

I walked towards one of the windows and looked outside. The trees stretched further than I could see, their leaves moving slightly with the wind.

I didn’t know why, but something about this place made me feel like this trip was going to be different. Maybe it was just the excitement of being away from home with my friends. Maybe it was the peacefulness. Or maybe I was simply overthinking it.

Either way, I smiled to myself. This was going to be so much fun.
And I was definitely not going to forget this trip.

CHAPTER SIX

The next morning started much earlier than I expected. I woke up to the sound of someone knocking repeatedly on the bedroom door.

“Sarah! Wake up!”

I groaned and pulled the blanket over my head. “Go away, Lara.”

“We’re wasting the day!”

“It’s eight in the morning.”

“Exactly! The day is already halfway gone.”

I heard May laugh from somewhere outside the room. “She has been trying to wake you up for fifteen minutes.”

“Traitors,” I muttered.

Eventually, I had no choice but to get up. By the time I reached the living room, everyone was already dressed and ready to leave. Phoebe was standing near the window, looking outside, while May was checking something on her phone. Lara, of course, was the only person who seemed to have enough energy to run a marathon at eight in the morning.

“So,” she said, turning towards me, “Are you finally alive?”

“Barely.”

“Good enough.”

I rolled my eyes.

We had breakfast quickly before deciding what we wanted to do first. There was no strict plan. And honestly, that was probably the best part. We didn’t have to worry about schedules or where we were supposed to be at a particular time. We could just walk around and see where the day took us.

We started by exploring the area around the bungalow. The woods looked completely different in the morning. Sunlight slipped through the branches above us, creating little patches of light on the ground. The air was cool, and every now and then, we could hear birds somewhere in the distance. Lara kept walking ahead of us, stopping every few minutes to point something out.

“Look at this!”

“Lara, that’s a tree,” May said.

“I know it’s a tree.”

“Then why are you calling us?”

“Because it’s a *nice* tree.”

I laughed. “How exactly do you decide whether a tree is nice?”

“I just do.”

“That makes absolutely no sense.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

Phoebe shook her head, but I could see the smallest smile on her face.

We spent most of the morning like that. Talking. Laughing. Taking pictures. Getting lost and then pretending we had known exactly where we were going the entire time.

At one point, May nearly slipped on a patch of wet ground, and Lara laughed so hard that she almost fell herself.

"Don't you dare laugh!" May yelled.

"You should've seen your face!"

"I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"Right now, I do."

I watched them argue and smiled. There was something strangely comforting about moments like these. Nothing important was happening. And maybe that was exactly why I liked it. For once, none of us had to think about school, grades, parents or whatever waited for us when we went home. We were just four friends spending time together.

Later, we made our way towards the lake. It was even prettier than I had imagined. The water stretched quietly between the trees, reflecting the sky above it. The entire place was so peaceful that even Lara managed to stay quiet for a few minutes.

We tried fishing, although I wouldn't exactly call it successful. May caught nothing. I caught nothing. Phoebe caught nothing. Lara somehow managed to catch a tiny fish and acted as if she'd just won a championship.

"I told you I'm good at this."

"You caught one fish," Phoebe said.

"One is better than zero."

"Barely."

Lara proudly held up her fishing rod. "I'd like everyone to remember who the best fisherman here is."

"Definitely not you," May replied.

We stayed there for hours. Eventually, the sun began to move lower in the sky, and the bright afternoon slowly turned into a softer evening. We decided it was probably time to head back.

The walk back was quieter than the walk there. Everyone was tired. My feet hurt, my hair was a complete mess from the wind, and I was pretty sure I had taken approximately a hundred pictures that I would probably never look at again. But I was happy. The sky had started changing colors above the trees, and the fading sunlight made everything around us look almost unreal.

We were walking along the road leading back towards the bungalow when Lara suddenly started talking about dinner.

"I think we should order pizza."

"We had pizza yesterday," May reminded her.

"So?"

"So maybe we should eat something else."

"Pizza is always an option."

"You have the diet of a five-year-old."

"And I'm proud of it."

I smiled, listening to them argue as I walked a few steps behind.

By the time we reached the bungalow, everyone looked exhausted. Lara, however, suddenly seemed to find a new burst of energy.

"My phone is dead," she announced.

"That sounds tragic," May said.

"It *is* tragic."

Before any of us could say anything else, Lara rushed towards her room. I shook my head. Honestly, I could understand her. How could a person possibly survive without a cellphone for more than five minutes?

We were just about to sit down and rest when Addy appeared from the hallway.

“There you girls are,” she said.

May looked up. “Everything okay?”

Addy smiled. “Yes. You have a visitor.”

We all stared at her.

“A visitor?” May questioned.

Addy nodded.

I frowned. A visitor? Who would possibly come all the way out here to see us?

Before any of us could form another thought, the front door opened. Footsteps echoed through the quiet room. Then a guy walked in.

I looked at him. Something about his face immediately felt familiar. I had seen him somewhere before. I was sure of it. But where?

I stared at him, trying desperately to place the memory. Nothing.

Wait a minute—

My eyes widened.

What the hell?!

I knew that face. What was he doing here?

CHAPTER SEVEN

James. Lara's older boyfriend. I remembered Lara showing me his photo once or twice, but seeing him standing right in front of us was completely different.

But what was he doing here? Wasn't this supposed to be *our* trip? Did Lara invite him? I bet Phoebe and May weren't going to be happy about this. Especially since he had just shown up in the middle of nowhere, apparently ready to become a part of our trip.

Our trip.

Before I could introduce myself or even say anything, Lara came rushing down the stairs with an awkward little laugh. The moment she saw James, her expression changed. She walked straight towards him and hugged him. Then she turned towards us.

"This is my boyfriend, James."

There was a brief silence. Not a long one. Just long enough for me to notice it.

Phoebe glanced at May. May glanced back. Neither of them said anything.

Lara noticed. "He was having a vacation too," she quickly explained. "And when he asked me this morning... I couldn't turn him down. He really won't disturb us. He's pretty cool, guys."

She said the last part a little too quickly. Like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to convince us.

May forced a small smile. "Oh. That's... nice."

Her tone didn't exactly match her words. Phoebe leaned against the wall, her arms crossed. "It's okay. You can show him around."

She sounded completely calm. Almost too calm.

Lara's smile faded slightly. "You're not mad, are you?"

Phoebe looked at her. "No."

Just one word. Then she turned around and walked towards her room.

May stayed behind for another second. She looked at Lara, then at James. "Yeah. It's fine."

But it clearly wasn't. She gave Lara a small smile before following Phoebe.

The moment they disappeared down the hallway, Lara's shoulders dropped. She stared at the floor. "I think they're mad."

"They're not mad," I said.

Lara looked at me. "They're definitely mad."

I couldn't exactly argue with that. May wasn't the type to make a scene over something like this. If she is upset, she'd probably just keep it to herself. But Phoebe... maybe Phoebe really isn't mad? Just disappointed? Or maybe she is... and she's gonna explode later.

Which, somehow, was worse.

"You should've told them before bringing him here," I said carefully.

"I know." She sighed. "I just... I didn't want to say no to him."

I nodded. That sounded like Lara. She hated disappointing people. Even when saying no would have made things easier for everyone.

I gave her a small pat on the back. "It's okay. They'll understand."

She gave me a weak smile. And honestly, it was weird seeing Lara like that. Lara without a smile was like food without salt. Seriously.

I looked towards James. He had been standing quietly through the entire conversation, almost as if he didn't want to get involved. He stepped forward and stretched out his hand.

"I'm James. Lara's boyfriend. Nice to meet you."

I shook his hand. "Sarah."

He smiled. At first glance, there was absolutely nothing threatening about him. He had an innocent-looking face, the kind that made you think he couldn't possibly cause trouble. He seemed polite, calm and completely harmless.

But then I looked into his eyes. His blue eyes met mine for a moment. And something felt... off. I couldn't explain it. There was nothing obviously wrong with him. Nothing I could point at and say, *that's it*. It was just a feeling. The way his eyes seemed to hold my gaze for a second longer than they should have. The way I suddenly felt like he was looking straight through me.

I quickly looked away.

Maybe I was overthinking it. Maybe I was just annoyed about him suddenly joining our trip.

Still...

Something about this guy didn't sit right with me. I didn't know what it was yet. But I knew one thing. I probably shouldn't get too close to James.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I went to my room and shut the door behind me. I sat on the edge of the bed, staring at my phone. For some reason, I couldn't stop thinking about James. Maybe I was being ridiculous. I barely knew the guy.

I was about to put my phone down when suddenly—

Ding.

A notification. Phoebe.

I opened the message.

Phoebe: *Sarah*

Me: *Yeah?*

A few seconds passed.

Phoebe: *You knew this?*

I frowned.

Me: *Knew what?*

Phoebe: *About her boyfriend.*

Me: *About James? Yeah. Lara showed me his photo once or twice.*

The typing bubble appeared.

Phoebe: *But you knew he was coming?*

Me: *No. I knew about her boyfriend. Him coming here? No.*

There was a paused.

Phoebe: *Hmm.*

I stared at the screen.

Me: *What?*

Phoebe: *I don't know. I just think it's weird.*

Me: *Him coming here?*

Phoebe: *Yeah.*

I thought about it.

Me: *Same.*

Another message appeared.

Phoebe: *Did Lara ever tell you anything about him?*

Me: *Not really. Just that he's her boyfriend.*

There was another pause.

Phoebe: *Exactly.*

I frowned.

Me: *What does that mean?*

Phoebe: *Nothing.*

I rolled my eyes. Typical Phoebe.

Me: *Phoebe...*

The typing bubble appeared again.

Phoebe: *I just don't trust him.*

I stopped. My mind immediately went back to his blue eyes. That strange feeling I'd had when we'd shaken hands.

Me: *Honestly? I don't know if I trust him either.*

For a few seconds, there was no reply. Then—

Phoebe: *Good. So, it's not just me.*

I stared at the message. Maybe I wasn't imagining it after all.

Me: *Don't tell Lara we're talking about this.*

Phoebe: *I won't.*

Another notification popped up.

Lara: *Guys, dinner in 10 mins!!*

I smiled at the message hoping everything will be back to normal.

Me: *See you downstairs.*

Phoebe: *Yeah.*

I put my phone away and got up. Whatever strange feeling James gave me, I decided to leave it alone for now. After all, maybe there really was nothing wrong with him. Maybe we were just being overly suspicious.

I headed downstairs. Everyone was already sitting around the dining table when I walked in.

Lara looked up. "There you are!"

"I was literally gone for ten minutes."

"Exactly. Ten minutes too long."

I laughed and took the empty seat beside May. Dinner was already served, and for a while, nobody mentioned anything about James. We just ate. Lara talked about what we should do the next day, May complained about how tired she was, and Phoebe mostly listened.

James stayed quiet. He didn't seem uncomfortable. If anything, he looked like he was trying his best not to get in the way. I occasionally caught myself looking at him. Every time I did, he seemed completely normal. Polite. Calm. Almost... harmless.

Maybe I really had judged him too quickly.

Then James suddenly put his fork down. "Hey, guys."

Everyone looked at him.

"I know I kind of showed up unexpectedly."

Lara immediately looked at him. "James, you don't have to—"

“No, it’s okay.” He gave her a small smile. “I probably should’ve asked all of you before coming here.”

Nobody said anything.

James glanced around the table. “I know this was supposed to be your trip. All four of you planned it together, and I kind of just... showed up.”

May looked down at her plate. Phoebe didn’t react.

James took a breath. “I’ve just been going through a rough time lately.” His voice was quieter now. “I haven’t really been in a good place, and I didn’t know who to talk to.” He looked at Lara. “When I spoke to her this morning, I just... wanted to see her.”

Lara’s expression softened.

“I needed her.”

For a moment, nobody said anything. Lara reached across the table and held his hand.

I felt a little guilty. Maybe we’d all judged him too quickly. He hadn’t come here because he wanted to ruin our trip. Maybe he really had just needed someone.

James looked back at us. “I know I should’ve asked first, and I’m sorry. I don’t want to ruin your trip.”

“You’re not ruining it,” Lara said quickly.

James smiled at her. “I’ll stay out of your way. You guys can do whatever you planned. I’ll just be around.”

“You don’t have to stay out of the way,” May finally said. Her voice sounded softer than earlier.

James looked at her. “Thanks.”

Phoebe finally spoke. “It’s fine.” Her voice was calm.

I glanced at her. She didn’t look at James. She just continued eating.

I looked back at him. He seemed genuinely sorry. And suddenly, I wasn't sure what to think anymore. Maybe Phoebe and I were wrong. Maybe there really wasn't anything strange about him. Maybe the feeling I'd had earlier was just because he'd suddenly appeared in the middle of our trip. Lara seemed happy again, and that was probably what mattered to her.

The conversation slowly returned to normal. We started talking about tomorrow again, arguing over whether we should go to the lake or explore somewhere else.

For the first time since James arrived, I relaxed. Maybe this trip could still be normal. Maybe I really was overthinking everything.

But somewhere in the back of my mind, that strange feeling remained. And I couldn't completely shake it.

CHAPTER NINE

After we were done eating, we all went back to the living room. Nobody seemed ready to go to bed yet. We were sitting around, talking about random things when May suddenly sat up.

“Let’s play truth or dare.”

Lara immediately looked at her. “Seriously?”

“Why not?”

“I haven’t played that in forever,” I said.

“Exactly. That’s why we should.”

Phoebe shrugged. “Fine.”

James smiled slightly. “I’m in.”

May grabbed an empty bottle from the table and placed it in the middle of us. “Okay, then. No backing out.”

“Who said I was backing out?” Lara said.

“I’m just making sure.”

We all moved a little closer as May gave the bottle its first spin. It went around and around while we watched it, waiting to see where it would stop. Eventually, it slowed down. And landed on James.

May grinned. "James. Truth or dare?"

"Truth."

Phoebe looked at him. There was a small smirk on her face. "Why did you really come here?"

Lara immediately looked at her. "Phoebe, no, you—"

"I was removed from my job yesterday," James said.

The room went quiet. His expression had changed. The easy smile was gone, replaced by something darker.

"I was framed."

He said it slowly, his eyes dropping towards his hands, which were joined together in his lap. Nobody spoke for a second. Lara looked at him, and for the first time that evening, she looked genuinely worried. Phoebe, however, simply nodded.

"Okay." Her voice was calm. "Next."

I glanced at Lara. She looked disappointed by the question, but she didn't seem shocked by the answer either. Almost as if she already knew. Or maybe she'd heard something about it before. I wasn't sure.

May spun the bottle again. It went around the circle before slowing down. This time, it landed on Phoebe.

Before any of us could even ask, Phoebe leaned back and smiled. "Truth."

I raised an eyebrow. "Okay." I thought for a moment. Then I smiled. "What's the horrible thing or prank you've done to someone? Because we all know about your... habits."

Phoebe's smirk widened. "I sent a nude photo of a friend to *her* friend, well, you get it what do I mean by *friend*."

Everyone went silent.

I blinked. May stared at her. "Why would you even do that?"

Phoebe shrugged. "Ahem. I don't know." She looked completely unbothered. "She interfered too much, and she shouldn't have seen or said those things so I had to take care of her."

May still looked confused.

I stared at Phoebe. "Hmm." I leaned back. "Did you regret it?"

"Hmm..." Phoebe pretended to think about it. "Nope. I don't think so." She grinned. "I think she deserved it. Plus, I didn't even know her. She was just a classmate, so yeah... who cares?"

May looked at her like she couldn't decide whether to laugh or be horrified. Lara, however, was more curious.

"What stuff, though?"

Phoebe opened her mouth. Then stopped. "Hey, wait a minute." She pointed at the bottle. "Wasn't this supposed to be one question?"

I laughed. "Technically..."

"Exactly." She reached for the bottle. "I'll give you the full story next time."

She spun it again.

I looked over at James. He was staring at Phoebe with an expression I couldn't quite understand. He looked genuinely amazed. Maybe even shocked. Or... Impressed?

No. I seriously doubted he was impressed. Still, something about the way he was looking at her made me wonder what he was thinking.

The bottle continued spinning across the table. Round and round. And as everyone waited for it to stop, I couldn't help smiling. Something told me we were going to learn a lot more about each other tonight. And judging by the things we'd already heard... I had a feeling it was going to be a very long night.

CHAPTER TEN

Eventually, we ended the game. It had gone on much longer than I expected, and by the time we finally decided to call it a night, everyone was already tired.

“Okay, I’m done,” May said, stretching her arms. “If we play another round, I’m going to fall asleep right here.”

“Same,” Lara said, getting up.

We all said our goodnights and went to our respective rooms.

I changed into my pajamas and got into bed, hoping I’d fall asleep quickly. But for some reason, my mind kept going back to everything that had happened that night. James. His job. The fact that he’d been framed. Phoebe’s strange answer. There was definitely something odd about this group. I just couldn’t figure out what it was.

Eventually, though, tiredness won. I fell asleep.

I don’t know how long I had been sleeping when I suddenly woke up. My room was completely dark. I blinked a few times, trying to figure out what had woken me. Then I realized. I was thirsty.

I groaned quietly and sat up. I checked the time on my phone. 4:07 a.m. Seriously? I rubbed my eyes. *Who even wakes up at four in the morning for water?*

I quietly got out of bed and opened my door. The bungalow was completely silent. Everyone was asleep. At least, I assumed they were.

I walked towards the kitchen, trying not to make too much noise. As I reached the hallway, I noticed someone coming from the direction of May's room.

I stopped.

It was Phoebe.

She looked slightly surprised to see me.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

Phoebe looked at me. "I went to talk to May."

I frowned. "At four in the morning?"

She shrugged. "I needed to talk to her about something."

I stared at her for a moment. There was something about the answer that didn't sit right with me. But I was too tired to question it.

"Okay..."

Phoebe simply nodded and walked past me. I watched her disappear down the hallway. *What could she possibly have needed to talk about at four in the morning?*

I stood there for another second before shaking my head. Maybe it was something personal. It wasn't really my business.

I went into the kitchen, poured myself a glass of water and drank it quickly. Then I headed back towards my room.

That's when I felt it.

I stopped walking.

A strange feeling crawled over me. Like... Someone was watching me.

I slowly looked around. The hallway was empty. Nothing. Just darkness and silence.

I swallowed. "Okay, Sarah. You're tired," I whispered to myself.

I tried to laugh it off. But the feeling didn't disappear. My skin prickled. I suddenly felt very aware of how quiet the bungalow was. Every little sound seemed louder than it should have been. A faint creak somewhere. The wind outside. The sound of my own footsteps.

I looked towards the dark end of the hallway again. Nothing. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling.

I hurried back to my room and closed the door behind me. I leaned against it for a moment, breathing slowly. *What the hell was that?*

I climbed back into bed and pulled the blanket over myself. But sleep was gone. Completely.

I stared into the darkness, listening to every little sound around me. And no matter how many times I told myself that I was imagining it... I couldn't stop wondering if someone was really watching me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, that strange feeling from the hallway came back. Someone watching me. I kept telling myself it was nothing. Maybe I had been half-asleep. Maybe the darkness had made everything feel worse than it actually was. But every time I started to doze off, something would pull me awake again.

Eventually, I gave up trying. I don't even remember when I finally managed to fall asleep. It couldn't have been for long.

"Sarah?"

I opened my eyes slowly.

"Sarah, wake up."

I blinked, still half-asleep. It was Addy, standing near the door.

"Oh..." I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "Morning."

"Good morning, dear. I tried waking you earlier."

I looked at the time. I had slept much later than I usually did.

"Sorry. I didn't sleep well."

Addy gave me a small smile. "That's alright. Go freshen up. Everyone's downstairs."

I nodded.

As I got ready, something suddenly occurred to me. Nobody had come to wake me up. Usually, Lara would have already been banging on my door, complaining that I was wasting the morning. But today... Nothing.

I assumed Lara was probably busy with James. But May? And Phoebe? Phoebe wasn't exactly the type to wake anyone up either, but May usually would've said something.

I frowned. Maybe they were just tired. I didn't think much about it. At least, I tried not to.

After getting ready, I went downstairs. The first thing I noticed was how quiet it was. May was sitting at the dining table, nibbling at her food without really eating. Phoebe was sitting nearby. Lara and James were there too. Nobody seemed to be talking much.

I looked around. "Did something happen?"

Phoebe looked at me. "No."

Her answer came a little too quickly. I noticed that she looked tense. Not scared. Just... tense.

I wanted to ask what was wrong, but something told me not to push it. So I didn't. Instead, I walked over to the table.

"Addy, could you make me some juice, please?"

"Of course."

I sat down. I didn't really feel like eating anything heavy anyway.

Lara looked at me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. I just don't feel like eating anything heavy."

May looked at me. For a second, our eyes met. Then she looked away.

I frowned. Something was wrong with her. I just didn't know what. She wasn't acting like herself. She looked... Nervous? No. Maybe scared. But scared of what?

I looked at her again. May noticed. Our eyes met for barely a second before she quickly looked away. Again.

Okay. Something was definitely wrong. But what?

I decided not to ask. Not yet. I didn't want to make her uncomfortable. Instead, I tried to lighten the mood.

"So," I said, looking around the table, "Why don't we go fishing again?"

Lara immediately looked interested. "Yes!"

"We could also swim in the lake," I added.

James looked up. "Are we actually allowed to swim there?"

I gave him a look. "Yeah, of course."

He smiled. "Okay. Just checking."

May suddenly spoke. "I don't want to go."

Everyone looked at her. She put her food down. "I'm not feeling good."

Lara immediately frowned. "Are you okay? Do you have a fever?"

"No, I'm fine."

May forced a small smile. "Don't ruin your trip because of me. I just want to sleep. You guys go."

I shook my head. "No, it's okay. We'll cancel. We can take you to a hos—"

"Sarah, please."

Her voice stopped me. She looked at me. "I'm okay. I'll be okay. Please go and enjoy. I'll just sleep."

I hesitated. There was something in her expression that made me want to stay. But she was looking at me like she really wanted me to leave.

I sighed. "Okay."

I wasn't completely convinced. But I didn't want to force her.

We all started getting ready to leave. As I reached the door, I turned back. "Are you really okay?"

May smiled. "Yep. I'm fine."

I still didn't believe her.

Phoebe looked at May for a brief second. "If there's any problem, call or text us, okay?"

May looked at her. Just for a second. There was something in that look. Something I couldn't understand. Then May nodded. "Okay."

I followed the others outside. As we walked towards the car, I glanced back at the bungalow. May was still standing near the doorway. Watching us leave.

I couldn't explain why, but I suddenly felt uneasy. Maybe something was going on between her and Phoebe. Or maybe I was just imagining things. It was probably nothing.

Yeah. Everything was probably fine. At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

We eventually reached the lake. The view was just as beautiful as it had been the day before. The water shimmered beneath the sunlight, and the trees surrounding it moved gently with the breeze.

Lara immediately started talking about getting into the water. James laughed and followed her towards the lake. Phoebe stayed nearby, quietly watching them.

Normally, I would've been excited too. But I couldn't focus. My mind kept going back to May. The way she'd looked at me. The way

she'd avoided my eyes. The way Phoebe had looked at her. And the fact that she'd suddenly decided to stay behind.

I stared at the lake. *Was May really okay?* I didn't know. But something told me she wasn't. And I couldn't shake that feeling...

CHAPTER TWELVE

We had been at the lake for a while when I noticed Phoebe standing a little away from everyone, talking on her phone. She seemed distracted. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but she kept looking around while she spoke, almost as if she was waiting for something.

When she finally ended the call, she walked back towards us.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Phoebe looked at me. "Oh, no, nothing. Addy's going out to get some groceries and a few other things. She's going to give me the keys, so I'll just go grab them real quick."

"Oh."

She nodded and walked away.

I didn't think much of it. At first.

But then ten minutes passed. Then twenty.

I looked around. "Where is Phoebe?"

Lara shrugged. "She'll be back."

"She's been gone for quite a while."

“Maybe Addy had more things to get.”

I looked towards the road again. Something about it was making me slightly uncomfortable.

“Should I go check on her?”

Lara looked at me. Before she could answer, James spoke.

“We can all go.”

I looked at him. “It’s okay. I can just—”

“No,” Lara interrupted. “We’ll come with you.”

I nodded. Honestly, I didn’t mind. But a small part of me also wondered if I really wanted to go. Lara and James had been together almost the entire morning. Not that I blamed them. They were dating, after all. But sometimes I felt like I was just... there. Whenever they started talking, I’d either walk a little ahead or slow down behind them. I didn’t want to interrupt them. And I definitely didn’t want to be the annoying third wheel.

So maybe going to look for Phoebe was actually a good excuse to escape for a while.

Before we could go anywhere, though, I saw Phoebe coming towards us.

“There she is,” Lara said.

Phoebe reached us and casually joined the group as if she hadn’t been gone for nearly half an hour.

“What took you so long?” Lara asked.

“Nothing. I just had to wait.”

She didn’t explain any further. I glanced at her but didn’t ask.

Eventually, we continued on. The rest of the day passed quietly.

About an hour later, we stopped at a beautiful spot to rest. There were trees all around us, and beyond them was a view of the

mountains stretching into the distance. The breeze was cool, and for a moment, everything felt peaceful.

Lara and James sat together, talking about something that I couldn't hear. I smiled to myself. They looked happy. I just wished I didn't feel like I was constantly standing in the middle of their little world.

I sat down a little away from them and pulled out my phone.

That was when I noticed a message. May.

I opened it.

She had sent it about twenty minutes ago.

I'm going back to the city. I'm not feeling well. Don't worry about me. You guys enjoy.

I stared at the screen. My stomach dropped.

"Lara."

She looked at me. "What?"

I showed her the message. Her expression changed immediately. "What?"

"May's going back to the city."

"She left?"

"I think so."

Lara sat up straighter. "She didn't say anything?"

"No."

I looked towards Phoebe. She was sitting nearby. I showed her the message too.

Phoebe read it. Then she simply said, "It's okay. She said she's fine. She probably just wants to go back."

I stared at her. "How can you be so calm?"

Phoebe looked at me. "Because she said she's fine."

"But she wasn't feeling well this morning."

"I know."

She didn't seem worried. Not nearly as worried as Lara and I were. I couldn't understand it. May had barely eaten that morning. She'd looked nervous, avoided eye contact and refused to come with us. And now she had suddenly gone back to the city. Something didn't feel right.

"I'll call her."

I stood up.

"Sarah—"

But I was already walking towards the bungalow.

I called May. The phone rang. Once. Twice. Three times. Please pick up.

Finally, she texted me.

May: *Hey.*

Me: *Where are you?*

There was a small pause.

May: *I'm a little busy right now.*

Me: *Are you okay?*

May: *Yeah. I'm okay. I just can't talk right now. I'll call you back later.*

Me: *But why did you leave?*

May: *I just wasn't feeling well.*

Me: *Do you want me to come back?*

May: *No, Sarah. I'm fine. You guys enjoy. It's only two days more anyway.*

I sighed. "Okay."

Me: *I'll talk to you later.*

I stood there for a few seconds, staring at my phone. At least she had answered. That made me feel a little relieved. But something still didn't feel right. How could she just leave like that?

I slowed down when I noticed Lara and Phoebe walking towards me.

I stopped. "Sorry."

Lara frowned. "For what?"

"For being rude earlier. I was just worried about May."

Her expression softened. "I understand. But remember, she's our friend too."

"I know."

"She texted me too. She said she's okay."

I nodded. Then I looked at Phoebe. She was quiet for a moment before speaking.

"She called me. She said she's fine."

I looked at her. "She called you?"

Phoebe nodded. "Yeah."

For a second, I didn't say anything. May had texted me. She had texted Lara. But she had called Phoebe. I wondered why. Maybe she just wanted to talk to Phoebe. Maybe there was a reason she hadn't texted her.

I looked at Phoebe for another second. She didn't seem bothered. I decided not to think about it. Maybe I was just being paranoid.

"Okay," I said quietly.

Lara gave me a small smile. "Come on. Let's go."

I nodded and followed them.

As we started walking again, Lara immediately went back to talking to James. I smiled slightly. For some reason, I didn't feel like being around them anymore. I walked a little behind.

The scenery was beautiful, the weather was perfect, and everyone else seemed completely fine. But I couldn't relax. My mind kept going back to May. The way she'd looked that morning. The way she'd avoided my eyes. The sudden message. And now the fact that she'd gone back to the city without telling us in person.

I looked down at my phone again. Maybe I really was overthinking everything. Maybe May genuinely wasn't feeling well. Maybe she just wanted to go home.

I put my phone away. I wanted to believe that. But somehow... I still couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We came back a little late. Honestly, we were kind of lost. James had confidently claimed that he knew a really good spot that nobody else knew about. Turns out...

He was lost too.

"How much longer?" Lara asked for what felt like the tenth time.

"Not much," James replied confidently.

I looked at him. "You said that twenty minutes ago."

"I know where I'm going."

Phoebe raised an eyebrow. "Then why have we passed that same tree three times?"

James looked around. "I... don't remember seeing that tree before."

I sighed. Of course.

Somehow, after walking around for what felt like forever, we finally managed to find our way back. The moment we reached the spot, everyone looked exhausted. I just wanted to sit down and do absolutely nothing.

We barely had time to relax, though. The sky had already started getting darker.

I looked at the sky. "Guys, I think we should go back. It's getting dark, and this place isn't exactly safe once it's completely dark."

Lara looked towards the sky. "Yeah, you're right."

James nodded. "Okay, let's go."

So we started making our way back.

Honestly, getting back was just as much of a hassle. The road was uneven, and after all that walking, my legs were already hurting. Every few minutes, I'd step awkwardly over a rock or stumble slightly. And somehow, every time I looked at James, my legs hurt even more. I don't know why. Maybe it was just because I was annoyed with him. I guess I couldn't do anything about it.

By the time we finally reached the bungalow, I was exhausted. I stepped inside and immediately felt a strange emptiness. Maybe it was because May wasn't there. I couldn't ignore the feeling anymore. May wasn't with us anymore on this trip. I should call her and check on her again.

I reached for my phone. The battery was dead. Of course. I would've called her earlier, but with all the walking and everything else, I hadn't noticed how low it had gotten.

"Great."

I needed to charge it first. I went upstairs to my room, plugged my phone in and started freshening up.

Before going downstairs, something suddenly crossed my mind. May's room.

I don't know why I hadn't thought of checking it earlier. I walked over and opened the door. Everything looked almost exactly the same. Her clothes were not there. Her jewellery was not there. Everything

else was just... untouched. Well, obviously. She had only left that morning.

But then I noticed her charger. It was still plugged in. And there were some snacks sitting on the table. I stared at them. May loved those snacks. She would've never left them behind if she had decided to go home.

Then I noticed something else. Her favorite plushie. The little one she always kept around. It had been given to her by one of the caretakers at her orphanage, and she was weirdly attached to it. She took it almost everywhere.

I looked at it for a few seconds. There was no way May would leave this behind. She wouldn't. Unless... Maybe her hands had been full. Maybe she had simply forgotten it. Yeah. That had to be it.

I picked it up. "I'll take this for her."

I carried it downstairs with me. Lara and Phoebe were already there. I walked over to them.

"Guys."

They looked at me.

"Look what I found in May's room."

I held up the plushie.

Lara smiled. "Her favourite?"

"Yeah."

I looked at Phoebe. "She left her charger, snacks and this too."

Phoebe shrugged. "Maybe she forgot?"

"Yeah," Lara agreed. "It's possible."

I wasn't completely convinced. "But she never leaves this."

Lara smiled at me. "We'll take it for her. It's okay, Sarah." I looked at her. She gave me a teasing smile. "You're overthinking a lot." Then she added calmly, "This isn't a thriller or mystery novel."

I stared at her for a second before giving her a teasing look. “Yeah, I know.”

We all sat down for dinner. I tried to focus on the food in front of me. I really did. But the thought wouldn’t leave my head. Why was I overthinking so much? Wasn’t I here to relax? This was supposed to be a fun trip. I shouldn’t be sitting here analyzing every little thing May had left behind. Maybe she really had forgotten her plushie. Maybe she really was fine.

I picked up my spoon and took another bite. It was only one more day. Two more nights. Everything would be fine. Hopefully.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We all finished dinner and stayed in the hall for a while. Nobody seemed in a hurry to go to bed. It had barely been five or ten minutes when I finally decided to go upstairs. I was tired. Actually, I was exhausted. Between all the walking, getting lost and everything else that had happened today, I just wanted to lie down for a while.

I stood up from the sofa.

Lara looked at me. "Where are you going?"

"My room."

"Already?" She looked almost offended. "Come on, let's have some fun. We can play something or do something."

I smiled a little. "Not in the mood."

Lara looked at my face for a moment. She seemed to understand. "Okay." She nodded and didn't push me any further.

Phoebe glanced at me too. "It's okay. Let her rest. Today has been a lot." Then she gave James a look. A very obvious look.

James immediately looked embarrassed.

I looked between the two of them. I wasn't sure what exactly had happened between them, but Phoebe clearly wasn't going to let James forget how much trouble he'd put us through today.

And honestly... I couldn't help it. A small giggle escaped me.

Phoebe looked at me. "Ahh, finally. The little devil laughed."

I laughed again. "Yeah, whatever."

Lara smiled. "See? You're already feeling better."

"Good night, guys."

"Good night," Lara replied.

I waved at them and headed upstairs. For the first time all day, I was actually looking forward to being alone.

I entered my room and closed the door behind me. The bungalow was much quieter upstairs. I changed, got into bed and pulled the blanket over myself.

My mind wandered back to everything that had happened. May. Her message. The strange feeling I'd had all day. Her empty room. The plushie sitting on my table now.

I tried to push all of it out of my head. I was here to relax. Tomorrow would be our last full day. I needed to stop thinking about everything.

Eventually, I closed my eyes. I don't know when I fell asleep. But I couldn't have been asleep for very long.

Crack.

My eyes suddenly opened.

I froze.

For a few seconds, I didn't move. What was that?

I listened carefully. Nothing. The room was dark and quiet. Maybe I'd imagined it.

I slowly sat up. Then I heard something again. A faint sound from downstairs. My heart started beating faster.

I looked around my room. I hadn't even checked the time. Honestly, I was too scared to.

I got out of bed as quietly as I could. I walked towards the door and slowly opened it. The hallway was dark. I stood there for a moment, trying to see anything. Nothing.

"Hello?"

My voice came out quieter than I expected.

No answer.

I swallowed. I didn't know why, but I suddenly felt like I shouldn't go downstairs. But then I heard another noise. I looked towards the staircase. Someone was down there.

I needed something. Anything. My eyes landed on the table beside me. A steel bottle. That was literally the only thing within reach. I grabbed it. I knew it wasn't exactly going to protect me from anything, but at that moment, having something in my hand made me feel a little less helpless.

I slowly stepped into the hallway. One step. Then another. I made my way towards the stairs. My heart was pounding so loudly that I was almost convinced whoever was downstairs could hear it.

I started walking down. Slowly. Carefully.

I reached the last few steps.

And then I saw it.

Blood.

I froze.

"What the...?"

My eyes widened. For a second, I couldn't understand what I was looking at.

...I saw Phoebe. She was standing there with a broken vase in her hand.

And on the floor...

Lara was lying there. She looked almost unconscious. Bleeding.

My entire body went cold. The bottle nearly slipped from my hand.

“Fuck.”

I stared at them, unable to move. “What happened here?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LARA

I woke up in the middle of the night. I didn't even know what time it was. I just knew one thing. I was hungry. Of course. Midnight cravings were the worst.

I lay there for a few seconds, staring at the ceiling, trying to convince myself to go back to sleep. It didn't work. My stomach growled.

"Fine," I whispered to myself.

I got out of bed and quietly opened the door. Everyone else seemed to be asleep. The bungalow was completely silent.

I walked downstairs, already thinking about what snack I was going to steal from the kitchen. Maybe some biscuits. Or those chips I'd been saving.

As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I stopped. I could hear voices. I looked towards the hall. James and Phoebe were there. They were talking quietly. And they looked serious. Really serious.

I frowned. Why were they awake? And why were they talking alone?

I stayed where I was. Okay... This didn't count as eavesdropping. I was just... Listening. That's different. Right?

I moved a little closer so I could hear them properly.

Phoebe's voice was low. "Are you sure she's not going to tell Lara?"

My heart skipped. I frowned. Who were they talking about?

James answered. "Yeah. I'm sure."

There was a pause. Then Phoebe said, "I've taken care of May."

I froze. My hand immediately went over my mouth. *Taken care of May?* What did that mean? What was I not supposed to know? Why were they talking about May like that?

My mind started racing. Maybe I'd misunderstood. Maybe there was some explanation. There had to be.

I stood there, completely confused, trying to make sense of what I'd just heard.

Then I saw Phoebe move closer to James.

Before I could even process what was happening...

She kissed him.

I froze.

"What the fuck?"

The words barely came out. My eyes stung. Unwanted tears filled my eyes before I could stop them.

Was I seriously standing here watching this? Was this some kind of horrible dream? Because if it was... Please wake me up. Now.

I couldn't process what I was seeing. James. My boyfriend. And Phoebe. My close friend. Together. My chest tightened.

You're telling me my boyfriend cheated on me with my close friend? I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't. But I had seen it with my own eyes.

I stepped out from where I was standing. Both of them turned towards me.

James's face changed immediately. "Lara—"

I walked straight towards him. I slapped him across the face.

"You asshole!"

He stumbled slightly, completely caught off guard. "Lara, wait—"

I turned towards Phoebe. She was just looking at me. No guilt. No panic. Nothing. How could she look so calm?

"How could you?"

Phoebe opened her mouth. "I can explain—"

"I don't want to listen to you." My voice shook. "You're a bitch."

Phoebe went silent.

James tried to say something again. "Lara, please, just let me—"

"No!"

I didn't want to hear another word. I turned around and walked upstairs as quickly as I could.

My tears finally started falling. I hated them. I hated myself for crying. I hated James. And I hated Phoebe even more. How could she do this to me? She was supposed to be my friend. One of my closest friends.

I reached my room and slammed the door shut. I immediately started pulling my bag out. I was leaving. I didn't care if it was the middle of the night. I didn't care where I went. I just wanted to get away from them.

I started throwing my clothes into my bag, barely even folding them. My hands were shaking.

This trip... This stupid trip... It was officially the worst trip of my life.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LARA

I came downstairs with my bag in my hand. I didn't care what time it was anymore. I just wanted to leave.

I pulled out my phone and started looking for a cab. Nothing. Of course. I refreshed the app again. Still nothing.

"Lara."

I ignored her.

"Lara, there's no cab available right now. Please, just listen to me."

Phoebe.

I didn't even want to look at her. I shrugged her away when she came closer.

"Don't."

"Lara, just let me explain."

"Explain what?" I finally turned towards her. "You're telling me you didn't kiss my boyfriend?"

Phoebe went quiet.

"You're telling me you did nothing?"

She opened her mouth.

I laughed bitterly. "What a joke."

"Lara—"

"Move aside. I want to leave."

I tried to walk past her. Phoebe grabbed both my hands.

"Please. Just let me explain once."

I pulled against her grip. "No."

"Lara, listen to me."

"I don't want to hear it!"

I looked around desperately. There was a glass sitting nearby. Without thinking, I grabbed it and threw it aside. It hit the floor and shattered.

Phoebe flinched.

I was shaking with anger. "You know what, Phoebe?"

She looked at me.

"You're a selfish bitch who only cares about herself."

"Lara, that's not—"

"I don't even know why I'm friends with you anymore." My voice cracked. "You're a psycho who deserves to be locked up in a mental hospital. No wonder everyone hates you—"

I didn't get to finish.

A sudden sharp pain hit my head.

I froze. For a second, I couldn't understand what had happened. My hand instinctively went to my head. When I pulled it back, I saw blood on my fingers. I stared at it. My heart dropped.

I looked up. Phoebe was standing in front of me. There was a broken vase in her hand.

My vision started becoming blurry.

"Phoebe..."

I tried to step backwards, but my legs felt weak. What was happening?

I could hear something. Footsteps. Someone was coming. For a moment, I thought it might be James. *Please don't let it be him.* But then I realized who it was.

Sarah.

Oh God. Sarah. She couldn't see me like this.

I tried to speak. I needed to tell her. I needed to tell her what had happened. But the words wouldn't come.

My vision became darker. The last thing I remember was hearing footsteps getting closer.

Then everything went black.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SARAH

I ran straight towards Lara.

“What did you do, Phoebe? Why did you do that?”

My voice was shaking. I looked at Lara lying on the floor, and suddenly everything felt unreal.

“Oh God... my phone.”

I quickly rushed back towards my room to get it. I grabbed my phone and immediately tried calling for help.

Nothing.

I looked at the screen. No signal.

“Damn it!”

I tried again. Still nothing. Of course.

I ran back downstairs. Phoebe was still standing there. I didn’t even look at her properly. I crouched beside Lara and carefully tried to lift her.

“Come on, Lara.”

I put my arm around her and tried to help her up.

Phoebe took a step towards me. I immediately looked at her.

“Stay away.”

She stopped.

“I’m taking her to the hospital.”

I tried to get Lara into my arms properly, but she felt completely unresponsive. I looked at her face.

“Lara?”

Nothing.

My heart started pounding.

Phoebe’s voice came from behind me. “I think she’s not breathing, Sarah.” Her voice sounded nervous.

I froze. I looked at Lara again. Then back at Phoebe.

“What?”

“I think she’s dead.”

“What do you mean, dead?” My voice broke. “No.” I shook my head. “No, no, no. This can’t be.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Lara couldn’t be dead. Not Lara. She was just talking to me yesterday. She was laughing. She was annoying me. She was complaining about James. She was supposed to be fine.

I looked at Phoebe. “Get away.”

She didn’t move.

“Phoebe, get away from her!”

I turned back towards Lara. “What should I do?” My breathing became uneven. “What should I do?”

I looked around the room desperately. There had to be something I could do. Anything.

Then suddenly, I remembered. Addy. She had a car. It wasn’t anything fancy or fast. Just an old second-hand car she’d told me about

once. I remembered asking her about it. She'd said it was a gift from her sister.

My eyes immediately went towards the key stand near the entrance. And there they were. The keys.

I didn't stop to think. I didn't ask Addy. I didn't even think about whether I was allowed to take them. I just grabbed them.

"Sorry, Addy," I whispered. I looked back at Lara. "But I need this now."

I tightened my grip around the keys and ran towards the door.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The drive to the hospital felt endless. I don't even know how long it took. An hour? Two? Maybe more. At that point, I had completely lost track of time. All I could think about was Lara. I kept looking at her, hoping she would move, hoping she would open her eyes.

"Please, Lara," I whispered. "Just hold on."

My hands were shaking so badly that I could barely keep them still. I just wanted to reach the hospital. I just wanted someone to save her.

Finally, after what felt like hours, we reached the hospital. Everything after that happened so quickly. Doctors rushed Lara inside. I stood there helplessly as they took her away from me.

"She's my friend," I said, almost desperately. "Please... please save her."

They told me to wait outside. So I waited.

The operation started. And then I waited some more. Minutes turned into hours. I sat outside the emergency room, staring at the same spot on the floor. I didn't know what to do with myself. I

thought about going back to the bungalow. But I couldn't leave Lara. Not after everything that had happened.

Eventually, the doctors came out. I immediately stood up.

"How is she?"

The doctor looked at me. "She made it through the operation. She's stable, but she'll need to stay in the ICU for observation."

I let out a breath I didn't even realized I had been holding. "She's okay?"

"She's okay."

My eyes filled with tears. "Thank you."

For the first time since I'd seen her lying on that floor, I felt like I could breathe again. Lara was alive. That was all that mattered.

She stayed in the ICU for a while. I barely left the hospital. I slept sitting in a chair whenever I could, ate whatever I could find and kept checking on her.

A few hours later, I was finally allowed to see her. When I walked into the room, Lara slowly opened her eyes.

"Sarah?"

I smiled through my tears. "Hey."

She looked confused for a moment. Then she remembered. Her eyes widened.

"Where am I?"

"The hospital."

She looked around. "What happened?"

I pulled a chair closer to her bed. "You don't remember?"

She was quiet for a moment. Then everything seemed to come rushing back. Her expression changed.

"Phoebe."

I nodded. "What happened?"

Lara looked at me, and slowly, between shaky breaths, she told me everything. What she'd heard. What she'd seen. What had happened between her and Phoebe. And what happened downstairs.

I listened without interrupting. By the time she finished, I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"What a bitch," I whispered. Then I shook my head. "And James... what an asshole."

Lara looked away. Tears filled her eyes again. "I trusted them."

"I know."

"I really trusted them, Sarah."

I reached for her hand. "I know."

Neither of us said anything for a while. It had been a whole day. And neither Phoebe nor James had come to the hospital. Not once. That alone made my stomach twist.

Then, suddenly, the door opened. Two police officers walked in.

I looked at them. "Is everything okay?"

One of them nodded politely. "We need to ask you both a few questions."

Lara looked nervous. "About what?"

"James."

I frowned. "What about him?"

"He's missing."

My heart dropped. "What?"

"His parents have been trying to reach him, but he hasn't answered any of their calls."

I looked at Lara. She looked just as confused.

We told the officers everything we knew. About the bungalow. About Phoebe. About what Lara had overheard. About the argument. About the incident downstairs.

The officers listened carefully. Then one of them said something that made everything even more confusing.

“There’s something else you should know. James was already involved in a fraud case.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“He had money that he was supposed to return, and there were questions surrounding where it had gone.”

Lara looked stunned. “I didn’t know any of this.”

“We understand.” The officer paused. “And there’s another thing.”

I already knew I wasn’t going to like what came next.

“Phoebe and May are missing too.”

I looked at Lara. Neither of us spoke.

May is not there. Phoebe was gone. James was gone. And suddenly, the whole trip felt like something completely different.

About a week later, the police came back. This time, they had more information. They told us they were investigating James and Phoebe as possible suspects. James had disappeared while already having a fraud case against him. Phoebe had disappeared after what had happened to Lara.

And then they told us something else. Something that broke both of us.

They had found May’s phone at the bungalow and her body buried nearby.

I stared at the officer. “May?”

He nodded. “There were also threatening messages from Phoebe on the phone.”

My stomach dropped. “What kind of messages?”

The officer explained that the messages had raised further suspicion about Phoebe’s involvement with May.

For a few seconds, neither Lara nor I said anything. Then Lara started crying.

“No...”

I felt tears running down my own face. May. Poor May. She had been gone this whole time. And we hadn’t even known.

We cried together for what felt like hours. I couldn’t stop thinking about her. The nervous girl who had come on the trip with us. The girl who had barely eaten that morning. The girl who had told us she wasn’t feeling well. The girl who had texted me that she was going back to the city.

She wasn’t coming back. She never had.

I felt sick. “I can’t believe Phoebe was like that,” I whispered.

Lara buried her face in my shoulder. “I feel so stupid.”

I wrapped my arms around her. “You’re not stupid.”

“I trusted her.”

“So did I.”

We stayed like that, crying for May and everything that had happened. I kept thinking about how little we really knew about the people around us. People we laughed with. People we trusted. People we thought we understood.

I guess... We never really know what people are capable of.

A month passed. Life slowly started moving again. But I didn’t feel the same. The city didn’t feel the same either. Every street seemed to remind me of something. The bungalow. The hospital. May. Phoebe. Everything.

One evening, I finally told Lara something I’d been thinking about for a while.

“I want to go to France.”

She looked at me. “What?”

"I want to pursue music."

She smiled. "You're serious?"

I nodded. "I think... I finally want to listen to May." I looked down at my hands. "She always told me to follow my dreams. And I think I should."

Lara smiled. "Then do it."

I looked at her. "I want a fresh start."

She nodded. "And honestly... this city scares me now."

She didn't argue. Instead, she hugged me. Then go."

A few weeks later, I was sitting at the airport. My bags were beside me. My passport was in my hand. France was waiting for me. I looked around the airport, taking everything in. I couldn't believe I was actually leaving.

Then I heard someone call my name.

"Sarah!"

I turned around. Lara came running towards me. I stood up. She hugged me immediately.

"I can't believe you're leaving!"

I laughed softly. "You're acting like I'm never coming back."

"You guys already left me alone," she said, trying to joke. Then her eyes filled with tears.

"Hey." I held her hands. "I'm not leaving you."

She looked at me.

"You can come to me whenever you want."

She nodded, wiping her tears.

"I just want to start over," I said quietly. "I want to forget all the bad moments." I paused. "But the good ones..." I smiled. "I'm keeping those in my heart, okay?"

Lara nodded. "Okay."

We hugged one more time. Then I picked up my bag. I looked around the airport one last time.

Maybe leaving didn't mean forgetting everything. Maybe it just meant choosing to move forward.

I took a deep breath. Once I left the city, I knew I would be leaving a lot behind. The fear. The memories. The people who had changed everything. But I wasn't going to leave the good parts behind. Those would stay with me.

And as I walked towards the departure gate, I didn't look back.

Not this time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PHOEBE

One month ago

I heard James talking to someone. I stopped outside the room and listened.

“I know, damn it! I’m trying!”

I frowned. What was he talking about? I listened more carefully. Then I heard him mention the money. And that’s when I understood. He was here because he wanted to ask Lara for money and then run away.

What an asshole. I clenched my jaw. Of course. There was something seriously wrong with him. But I knew one thing for sure. If I told Lara, she wouldn’t believe me. She’d probably defend him. I needed proof.

I walked towards James.

He looked at me. “What?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I moved closer to him, pretending I was interested in him. I leaned towards him and tried to reach for his phone. Almost. I nearly had it.

But then—

“What are you doing?”

He suddenly stepped back. Damn it. I failed.

I tried again. I moved closer, making it look like I was about to kiss him. My hand moved towards his phone. But before I could grab it, James kissed me.

I froze. *Asshole.*

I pulled away almost immediately. At least he was loyal to Lara. Or so I thought.

Then I noticed May standing there. She looked completely shocked.

Oh no. She'd seen us.

I immediately pretended like I was trying to scare her. “Don’t worry,” I told her.

May looked frightened. Poor May. I could tell she didn’t understand what was happening.

I looked at James. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of this shit.”

May said she wanted to leave. For some reason, I felt relieved. I’d explain everything to her once we got back. I just needed to figure out what the hell James was hiding.

That night, I waited until everyone had gone upstairs. Then I quietly walked towards James’s room. I started searching. Drawers. Desk. His bag. Nothing.

“Shit.”

I needed something. Anything that could prove what he was planning.

Then I heard footsteps. I quickly turned around. James.

Before he could ask what I was doing, I moved closer and kissed him. He kissed me back. Again. *Seriously?*

I pulled away and looked at him. "Lara isn't talking to me."

He frowned. "Why?"

"Do you think May told her anything?"

He looked nervous for a second. Then he shook his head. "Don't worry."

I stared at him. "I've taken care of May."

He looked at me strangely. "What does that mean?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I kissed him again. I kissed him because I needed him distracted, not because I wanted to. My mind was somewhere else. I needed to find out what he'd done. I needed to—

Oh shit.

Lara. She was standing there. She had seen us.

"What the hell?"

Before I could say anything, she walked straight towards James and slapped him.

"Lara—"

She didn't even look at me. Her eyes were filled with tears.

I tried to explain. "Lara, wait—"

But she walked away. I followed her.

"Lara, please. It's not what you think."

She didn't listen. She wanted to leave. I didn't know what to do. I just wanted her to stop.

Then suddenly—

I hit her.

I froze.

My entire body went cold.

"What did I just do?"

I hadn't meant to. I swear I hadn't. It happened before I could even process it. I stared at Lara. She was hurt. I hit her because she said—

You're a psycho who deserves to be locked up...

My mind went blank. *I'm not a psycho.* I kept repeating it in my head. *I'm not a psycho.* I wasn't. I wasn't. I wasn't. So why had I just done that?

Sarah rushed towards Lara. I stood there, completely frozen.

"I am not a psycho," I whispered. "What the hell did I do?"

Sarah ran upstairs. Probably to get her phone.

James came towards me. I immediately looked at him. "Leave."

"What?"

"Just leave."

He hesitated. "Phoebe—"

"Get your car and get the hell out of here."

He stared at me. "Lara won't want to see you either."

I looked away. Would Lara even want to see me? Probably not. But I had to explain. I had to tell her the truth. I had to—

Sarah came back downstairs. I stepped towards her. "Sarah, let me help—"

"Stay away from her." Her voice was cold.

I stopped. "I'm trying to help."

"Just stay away."

I wanted to explain. I wanted to tell her that I hadn't meant to hurt Lara. That I was trying to protect her. That James wasn't what he seemed. But the words wouldn't come out.

Sarah grabbed something from near the entrance. Then I realized. Addy's car keys. She was taking Lara to the hospital.

I watched them leave. And then the door shut.

I slowly sat down on the floor.

"Oh no."

I covered my face with my hands. "What did I do?"

A few minutes later, I heard footsteps. Addy. She walked into the room and immediately noticed me sitting on the floor.

“Phoebe?”

I looked up.

She came closer. “What happened?”

I opened my mouth. Nothing came out. Then suddenly, I started crying.

“I didn’t mean to...”

Addy looked confused. “Didn’t mean to what?”

“Lara.” My voice broke. “She was bleeding and I... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

Then I felt something. Pain. I looked down. My eyes widened. There was blood on my clothes.

I stared at Addy. “What...?”

My hand went to my stomach. “Addy?”

She was standing completely still.

“What did you do?” My voice shook.

She didn’t answer.

“Addy... why did you do that?”

Her expression had completely changed. The warmth I’d always seen in her face was gone. Then she said something I never expected.

“Do you remember Ella?”

I stared at her. “Ella?”

She stepped closer. “I am her mother.”

My heart stopped. “You’re... Ella’s mother?”

She looked at me with tears in her eyes. “The girl you destroyed.”

I shook my head. “What are you talking about?”

“You sent her pictures to the person who bullied her.”

My face went pale.

"You ruined her confidence."

"I didn't—"

"You don't get to pretend you don't remember."

I couldn't speak.

"She trusted you."

My mind raced. Ella. That name. I remembered. But I had never thought—

"You caused her so much pain," Addy said, her voice trembling. "And you never even looked back."

I shook my head. "I didn't know..."

"Do you feel guilty?"

I stared at her. I didn't know what to say. I had never thought about it that way. I'd told myself it was just a stupid prank. Something I'd done because I'd been angry. I'd never imagined it would follow me like this. My past had finally found me. And somehow... It had found me at the worst possible time.

I looked at Addy. Then at the blood on my hands.

My past is haunting me? I swallowed. *Isn't this a really wrong time for it?*

CHAPTER TWENTY

ADELINE

Years ago

Ella had always been an introvert. She barely had any friends throughout elementary school. She was quiet, kept to herself and preferred spending time at home rather than going out.

So when she suddenly started talking about a girl all the time, I noticed.

One evening, she came home and immediately started telling me about her.

“You know, Mom, she saved me from Jane. She’s so cool.”

I smiled. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah, Mom. I want her to be my best friend.”

I laughed softly. “I’m glad you’ve found someone you like.”

Ella smiled. Then, after a moment, she added, “You know, Mom, I saw her with Justin.”

I looked at her. “Justin?”

“Yeah. I told her he’s not a nice guy. He was kissing another girl the other day.”

“Oh.”

“She got angry and left.”

I reached over and gently touched her shoulder. “It’s okay. Maybe she felt bad about it.”

Ella nodded.

At the time, I didn’t think much of it. I wish I had.

A few weeks later, Ella came home crying. I knew something was wrong the moment I saw her.

“What’s wrong, Ella?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Ella.”

She wiped her tears. “She...” Her voice broke. “Phoebe said she doesn’t want to be friends with me anymore.”

I sat beside her. “What happened?”

“She said I ditched her.” Ella looked completely lost. “I don’t know what I did, Mom. I want to talk to Beth. She’ll know what I should do.”

I pulled her into a hug. “Okay. Calm down. I’ll call Beth.”

Beth was Ella’s sister. She lived with their father, as their parents were divorced, but that had never changed how close the two sisters were. Beth had always been there for Ella. Whenever Ella didn’t know what to do, Beth somehow knew what to say.

So I called her. And slowly, Ella began to calm down.

A few days later, I heard Ella shouting from upstairs.

“Mom! Mom!”

I rushed towards her room. “What happened?”

She was smiling. “Phoebe called me!”

I blinked. “Phoebe?”

“She wants to meet me!” Ella looked so happy. “She wants to be friends with me again!”

I smiled. “That’s good.”

“I’m going to meet her now.”

“Okay, okay. Calm down.”

She laughed. I watched her hurry around, getting ready. My baby looked so happy. I just hoped she would stay that way.

It got late. Much later than I expected. I kept checking the clock.

“Where is she?”

I tried calling her. No answer.

Then finally, I heard the front door open.

“Ella?”

She walked inside. Something about the way she was walking immediately worried me.

“Ella?”

She stumbled slightly.

“Are you drunk?”

She didn’t answer.

“Hey, stand properly.”

She held her head. “My head hurts, Mom.”

I rushed towards her. “Okay, wait. I’ll get you some water.”

She barely responded. I helped her to her room and stayed with her until she fell asleep. I thought maybe she had simply had too much to drink. I didn’t know. I had no idea what had actually happened that night.

The next morning, Ella barely spoke. She went to school as usual, but when she came home, she seemed different. Quiet. Distant. I asked her what was wrong several times. She kept saying she was fine.

But she wasn’t.

Later, I found out what had happened at school. Jane had shown Ella a private picture of herself. A picture that should never have been shared. Jane had used it to humiliate her and had threatened her with it. Ella had begged her not to show anyone else.

After that, I noticed Ella slowly withdrawing from everyone. Even from me. I tried to talk to her. She would smile and say she was fine. But I knew my daughter. She wasn't fine.

One night, I noticed Ella's bedroom door was slightly open. I walked towards it.

"Ella?"

No answer.

I pushed the door open. Her room was empty. My heart immediately started racing.

"Ella?"

I grabbed my phone and called her. The phone rang. Then she answered.

"Mom?"

Her voice was strange.

"Where are you?"

There was silence. Then I heard her crying.

"Mom... she destroyed me."

My heart sank. "Who, Ella?"

"Phoebe."

I froze.

"She sent my pictures."

I couldn't speak.

"The pictures from that party. She took them without me knowing and sent them to Jane." Ella's voice broke. "I trusted her."

"Ella, listen to me. It's okay. We'll figure this out."

“No, Mom.”

“Just tell me where you are.”

There was another pause. Then she whispered, “I’m sorry, Mom.”

My heart started pounding. “Ella?”

“It’s too late.”

“No.” I stood up. “Ella, where are you?”

“I love you, Mom.”

My eyes filled with tears. “Ella, please—”

“Tell Beth I love her too.”

Then the call ended.

Beep.

I stared at my phone.

“Ella?”

Nothing.

“Ella?”

I called again. No answer.

“Please...”

My hands started shaking.

“Please tell me it’s not what I’m thinking.”

I ran out of the room. I searched everywhere. I called her name until my voice hurt. But she wasn’t there.

And somewhere deep inside, I already knew something had happened. Something I could never take back. Something no mother should ever have to live through.

And from that night onwards, one thought never left me:

If I had known what Phoebe had done sooner, could I have saved my daughter?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ADELINE

I didn't know what to do anymore. My baby was gone. My whole world had changed overnight, and I didn't know how I was supposed to continue living like everything was normal.

I tried to report what happened at Ella's school. I went there. I spoke to the teachers. I told them everything I knew. But they kept asking me for proof.

Proof. As if losing my daughter wasn't enough.

They told me that Phoebe's parents could sue me if I publicly accused their daughter without evidence. They were more worried about Phoebe's reputation than what had happened to my child.

I walked out of that school feeling completely helpless. I was furious. I wanted justice for Ella. I wanted Phoebe to pay.

And then, I saw her. She was coming to the bungalow with her friends. They were going to be staying in the woods. Away from everyone. Alone.

I couldn't have asked for a better opportunity. I knew what I was going to do.

That afternoon, I quietly entered Phoebe's room. It was dark because the windows were covered. I could barely see anything.

Then I noticed someone standing near the drawers.

Phoebe.

She was searching for something. I didn't give myself time to think. I moved towards her. And then I attacked.

For a moment, everything went silent. I stood there, breathing heavily.

Finally. My baby had received the justice she deserved.

Or at least, that's what I thought.

I looked at her properly. My heart stopped.

Wait. A minute.

She wasn't Phoebe.

I stared at her face.

"No..."

My stomach dropped.

"Who are you?"

It was May.

May. I had killed the wrong person.

"Oh my God."

I stepped backwards. "What have I done?"

Then I heard footsteps outside. Someone was coming. Phoebe.

No. No, no, no. I couldn't let her find May.

I quickly moved May out of sight and hid her away in the room. A few moments later, Phoebe entered. I forced myself to stay calm. I made up an excuse and managed to send her back. She didn't suspect anything.

I stood there for a moment after she left. I would get another chance. I had to. But first, I needed to hide what had happened. I took May downstairs and put her somewhere out of sight.

"I'm sorry, dear." My voice shook. "I know this isn't what you deserved." I closed my eyes. "But... I'm sorry."

Later that night, I woke up because of a noise. I quietly got up and looked outside. I saw James leaving in his car. And there was Phoebe. She was sitting alone. Crying.

I watched her for a moment. Then I saw my opportunity. I picked up the screwdriver and walked towards her. I waited until the moment was right.

Then I attacked.

Phoebe cried out.

I stared at her. All the anger I'd been carrying for years came rushing back.

"Did you feel guilty?"

She looked at me. "What?"

"For what you did to Ella."

Phoebe looked confused. Then, somehow, she still didn't seem to understand.

"You know what?" Her voice was weak, but there was anger in it. "I didn't do anything wrong."

I stared at her. "What?"

"She came to me." Phoebe continued. "She told my parents about the club and the drugs. She snitched on me."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"My cards were taken because of her." She cursed under her breath. "She deserved it."

I stared at her.

That was it. After everything. After my daughter. After all these years. She still didn't feel sorry.

Before she could say anything else, I attacked again. And again. I couldn't stop myself. This girl had caused so much pain and still couldn't see what she'd done. *If she had no remorse, why should I?*

Eventually, I sat there, crying. My hands were shaking. What had I become?

Then I heard something. Footsteps. Someone was approaching.

I froze.

James? No. I couldn't deal with him now. He was tall, and if he saw me...

I looked at Phoebe. I had to hide her. I tried to move.

But before I could even think properly, I heard a voice behind me.

"Mom, do you need any help?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SARAH ELIZA(BETH)

Years ago

When Ella called me, I was very, very angry. At Phoebe.

Or whoever she really was.

I tried to calm Ella down, and luckily, I was still more important to her than Phoebe. Maybe because I was her sister. Her twin sister.

Ella and I are dizygotic twins. We were born together, but almost immediately after we were born, we were separated. I was taken by my father, while Ella stayed with our mother. It sounds strange, but that was just how our lives were.

We didn't grow up together, but every summer, I would go and meet her. I loved my sister. More than anything. She was the one person who always understood me without me having to explain everything.

But then, one year, she suddenly stopped calling me. For a few days. Then a week. I had school going on, so I didn't think too much about it. I thought maybe she had gotten over whatever had been

bothering her. Maybe she was busy with her studies. I thought I'd hear from her eventually.

Then, one random evening, my mother called me. Her voice sounded strange.

"Ella..."

I immediately knew something was wrong.

"Ella... she's not here anymore."

My world just collapsed.

"What?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "No. Tell me I'm dreaming."

But I wasn't. Ella was gone.

My mother and I tried to complain about Phoebe and Jane. We tried everything we could. But it failed. Nobody wanted to listen. Nobody wanted to believe us.

So I made a decision. I joined Ella's university. I abandoned my own dream of going to a music academy.

It wasn't like I didn't try to do it myself during that one year. I did. But somehow, I always failed. Thanks to May and Lara. They were always around her. Always there before I could get close enough.

And then...

The perfect opportunity finally landed right at our doorstep.

Initially, the plan was simple. We were going to kill Lara and frame someone else for it. But then her boyfriend appeared out of nowhere. James. That changed everything. We couldn't use the original plan anymore.

Then we found an opportunity. But Mum messed it up. I couldn't even blame her completely. After all, May and Phoebe looked enough alike that, in the darkness and confusion, it was easy to make a mistake. May didn't deserve any of this.

But luckily, we got another opportunity. This time, there was no James. No May. Lara was unconscious.

I decided to put Lara in the car and help my mother first. I mean... if Lara died, that would be one less witness.

When I put Lara inside the car and went back to help Mum, I saw what she had done. She had attacked Phoebe multiple times. It looked horrible.

For a moment, I just stood there. I couldn't believe how far everything had gone.

I helped Mum put Phoebe into her car. Then Mum drove towards the cemetery. Her friend Bob was there. He handled everything. The car was destroyed, and Phoebe was buried in a grave.

A cemetery. A place for the dead.

I looked at the grave for a moment. *That's where dead people belong, right?* I didn't know what else to think.

In the meantime, I took Lara to the hospital. I had my alibi. Everything had been planned. Everything had been covered. And if anyone figured out that they were dead... well, I doubted they ever would.

At least, that's what I thought.

Until Ella came to me in my dreams.

And suddenly, I realized there was one thing I had completely forgotten. My sister. My twin. The one person this entire story had always been about. Maybe I had spent so much time trying to avenge her... that I'd forgotten to ask myself what she actually wanted.

And that thought scared me more than anything.

Because sometimes, the past doesn't stay buried.

Sometimes... it calls you.

EPILOGUE

I was sitting at a café, enjoying my coffee. My classes started in thirty minutes, and I was early, as always.

It had already been five months since that incident. I was still in contact with Lara, and she was now planning to go hiking with her new boyfriend. She had moved on.

Good for her.

I smiled slightly as I looked at my coffee. Sometimes, though, I still thought about everything that had happened. About Ella. About Mum. About Phoebe.

And sometimes I wondered...

If Phoebe had said she regretted what she had done to Ella... If she had truly been sorry... Would I still have wanted to kill her?

I didn't know. Maybe I never would.

I took another sip of my coffee and looked at the clock. My class started in twenty-eight minutes.

For the first time in months, life felt almost normal.

Almost.

And maybe that was the scariest part of all.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Heyy! If you made it this far, thank you so much for reading my story.

I'm sorry if there are any spelling mistakes, grammar mistakes, or things I might have messed up somewhere. I'm still learning, and I really appreciate you understanding that.

Thank you for supporting my story, my characters, and all the crazy twists along the way. It genuinely means a lot to me.

And if you liked it... thank you for staying till the end. :)