WHITE LIGHTS

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ALSO BY LAUREN KATE

YOUNG ADULT BOOKS

Fallen

Torment

Passion

Rapture

Unforgiven

Fallen in Love

Teardrop

Waterfall

ADULT BOOKS

By Any Other Name

The Spirit of Love

What's in a Kiss?

The Orphan's Song

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WHITE LIGHTS

LAUREN KATE



New York Boston

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For Laura Rennert

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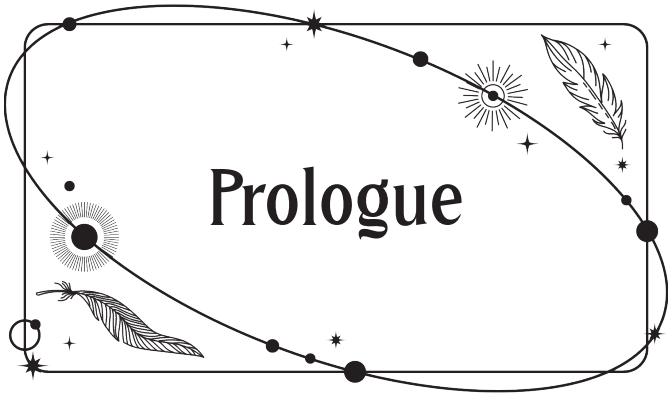
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"Such things, though rare in time, are frequent in eternity."

—Lord Byron, *Cain*

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Prologue

The last thing Rafe needs today is a gorgeous girl pointing a video camera at him. Well, not at *him*, exactly. She's capturing the scene: the crowded pier, sunlight glinting off the ocean, seagulls mimicking angels above Ventura Beach.

Angels mimicking humans, strolling down the pier…

If someone were to write a book about Rafe's weaknesses, this woman might as well be on the cover—and on every other page. And sure, titillation is a dime a dozen in this world, and Rafe is a well-resourced guy…but sparks like her are rare. It almost hurts to look at her, but Rafe can't make himself stop.

She's setting up a shot like it's a matter of life and death. He watches her look through the viewfinder, slide her tripod up and down with slender fingers. He likes her chipped nail polish, which he feels suggests a complex mind. He could lose himself in her dark, wind-tangled hair, worn loose down to her waist. The curves of her shoulders remind him of the Sicilian shoreline. And that stern expression? He'd love to use his mouth to melt it off her pretty face, if only everything were different…

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Alas.

He's late to meet Sam. He feels this internally, without any watch. Even after all these years, meeting his mentor makes Rafe tremble. Sam doesn't like to wait.

Rafe heads up the pier, toward the ragged, beachfront seafood shack Sam chose for their meeting place. When he draws near the woman, Rafe clenches his jaw, smiles with his eyes. What's more natural than posing for a camera?

But right as he's about to pass her, about to place her in the world-class museum of his mind, the woman looks up from her camera. And directly at him.

It stops Rafe in his tracks. A river of warmth winds through him. Damn if it hasn't been a while.

But here it is: chemistry. Sudden. Soul-affirming.

And absolutely impossible.

The woman seems as stunned as Rafe. She looks back into her viewfinder. Where she can't see him, where human-made technology won't pick up any trace of him.

She furrows her brow in disbelief. Rafe's heart begins to pound. By the time she raises her eyes again, he's gone.

"Hey," a voice calls out.

No way she's talking to him. No way she even saw him. Mortals can't see Rafe's kind. For good reason.

No, what he'd taken for eye contact—for chemistry—was only an illusion.

Rafe doesn't let himself look back. He hurries up the rotting plywood stairs and through the swinging saloon doors of the restaurant. He's out of breath when he slides into the wood-paneled booth across from Sam. And then the sight of his old friend sends the bombshell on the pier light-years from Rafe's mind.

"Salutations," Sam says, not looking up from the napkin where he's

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sketching something with a pen. "I was starting to think you had better things to do."

Sam is wearing jeans and a ripped black T-shirt, a gray baseball hat slung low over curly russet hair. He looks the same yet is completely different than Rafe has ever known him to be. Something unseen has shifted.

"What happened to you?" Rafe asks.

"I wanted you to be the first to know," Sam says, holding out his arms. "I'm done."

A fearful abyss opens in Rafe. He speaks carefully. "What do you mean, *done*?"

"You know what I mean," Sam says, resuming his sketch. "I'm free."

Rafe has never known Sam to lie, but what he's saying now is insane. If it's true—it can't be true, but if it is—it changes everything.

"Aren't you going to ask, 'What happens now?'" Sam says.

Rafe looks around the restaurant, at the other diners digging into fish and chips, oblivious to the enormous event unfolding in their midst. A development that will touch every single destiny on earth. What must it be like to be them, so ignorant of the cosmos, how desperately fragile it is?

"All right," Rafe says to Sam, a tremor in his voice. "What happens now?"

"That's someone else's problem. Play your cards right, and it could be yours."

A surge of hunger, of hope, lights through Rafe. Is this the moment he'll look back on? The moment when he was finally given the chance to redeem himself?

"Are you . . . offering it to me?"

The Crimson Pinion. The single red feather Sam bore in his wings for the last six millennia. The totem that elevates an angel to a seraph, enabling him and him alone to preside over death.

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Where is it now? Is Sam about to—

"Rafael." Sam frowns. "You know I can't." The mercy in his voice makes Rafe feel nauseous. "You have to earn it. Hell, the way things are, you may have to *seize* it. With both hands." He looks down at his napkin, the sketch. "Of course, the others will want it, too."

Rafe's fists tighten. "Who else knows?"

"You're the first. I owe you that much at least."

"I don't understand. You're a dead man walking?"

"Don't be so dramatic. I've got my whole life ahead of me."

"But, Samael, *why*?"

Sam settles back against the booth and smiles. "I'll show you."

A waitress approaches. She's thirty-seven and two-thirds if Rafe had to guess, with good bones and tired eyes, chewing faintly scented grape gum. When she faces Sam like he's any other customer, Rafe breaks out in a sweat. She can *see* him.

The motherfucker isn't lying.

"What can I get you, sugar?"

Sugar. She's *talking* to him. To Samael, the Angel of Death.

Former Angel of Death.

Rafe's oldest friend, his mentor, has gone mortal. Has actually, honestly, given it all up. Rafe can't believe it.

Sam gives Rafe a *watch this* look, then cocks his head toward the waitress.

"Heaven must be running out of angels if you're down here."

"Oh God," the waitress groans. "Nobody wanted that."

Sam straightens his spine with an earnestness that horrifies Rafe. "Let me try again—"

"Please, no," the waitress says, treating Sam like any random nobody hitting on her. "You want coffee or what?"

"Coffee," Sam says, delighted. "My friend will have one, too."

The waitress glances across the booth, in Rafe's direction, but not

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at Rafe. And the blankness he feels under her unfocused gaze makes him think of the woman on the pier. The way it seemed like she saw him. How that had felt inside.

He pushes her out of his mind to focus on Sam, this news, and its shattering implications. Rafe must use this advantage. He must take control. He can't fuck it up this time.

Seize it, Sam said. Sam who looks so content now having just made a fool of himself with a waitress. If it were anyone else, Rafe wouldn't be curious, but this is Sam.

"Help me understand," Rafe says. "You . . . retired so you could hit on waitresses?"

Sam shakes his head. "Good old Rafe. No one else can make the transcendently profound sound so infinitesimally small."

"It's just, there's no shortage of sex in—"

"It's not about sex."

Rafe blinks.

"Love, asshole. I want *love*."

Rafe scoffs. "No one gives up what you had for love."

Sam sketches, says nothing.

"Right. Where do you intend to find this . . . love?"

"Could be this librarian I just met," Sam says. "I walked in for a book of Byron's plays. I walked out with Adah. Astonishing. The unspeakable softness."

"Yet you're hitting on the waitress?"

"All mortal women carry a spark of the divine in them. Once you've experienced it, it becomes addictive."

"It sounds to me like all you've done is replace one object of devotion with another," Rafe says, hearing the blasphemy in his own words.

"And I'm telling you," Sam says, smiling, fearless, "it's an upgrade."

"How long has it been?" Rafe manages to say.

"Three nights. Already everything has changed. You should hear

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the sound of Adah's laughter, Rafe. Like a nightingale. We stay up all night talking, make love at sunrise in her backyard under the lemon tree. She's giving me surfing lessons! I'm starting to think maybe one day I can see myself as a dad—"

"You've been gone *three nights*? That's four hundred and fifty thousand souls—"

"I can do the math. I just don't have to anymore."

"Why didn't I sense it? Why didn't I know?"

"You know now. I'm telling you."

"Three nights. And no one's noticed?" Rafe whispers. It's unfathomable. Suddenly impatient, he grabs the napkin from under Sam's pen. "What are you drawing?"

"Her." Sam points out the window at the woman with the camera.

Rafe feels a wild pulse of jealousy. He studies her likeness on the napkin, the careless lines his mentor has just made. He never knew Sam could draw, but he's captured something essential about her that makes Rafe want to steal the napkin, to stare at it for centuries.

"Why are you sketching her?"

"For future reference," Sam says. "She's talented. Seems like she could use a mentor. And maybe it's time you thought about paying it forward? To a young filmmaker who could use a leg up?"

Rafe grips the edge of the table. Moments ago, he'd convinced himself the woman with the camera was mere eye candy. Now her proximity, her existence feels threatening.

Had she really seen him out there on the pier? No.

"You know what I want," Rafe says. "I have wanted it for a long time. You're telling me suddenly it's within reach. The last thing I need is games."

The corner of Sam's mouth tips up. "There are the things we say we want, and the things we think we want. And then there are the things we really want," he says. "If you want this, Rafe, you need a protégé."

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"I work with you."

"*Worked* with me," Sam says. "Now it's graduation day. Time for the pupil to become the iris."

"No," Rafe says. "I'll work alone."

"We *can* learn from them, you know," Sam says, taking back the napkin to continue his sketch. "You've been aboveground too long. Away from the soul of things."

"And you're the expert? Three nights with a librarian and you've figured it all out?"

"I've heard it said," Sam says, staring past Rafe, "that when you die, your whole life flashes before your eyes. I want my flash to be a good one. Something beautiful, you know?"

"Tell me what to do," Rafe says.

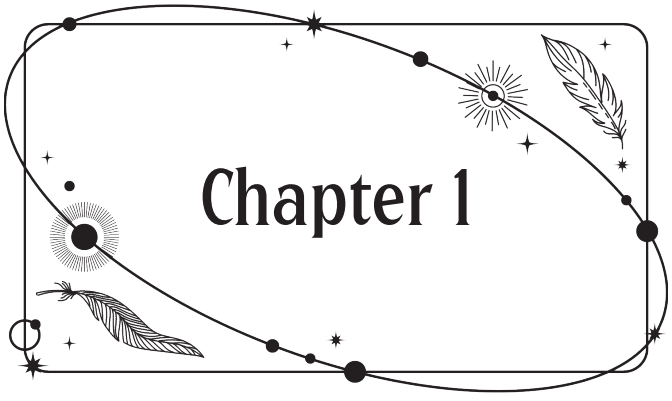
Sam levels a familiar gaze, imbued with old and absolute power. "Keep my secret as long as you can. In the meantime, look for advantages." He nods at the woman on the pier. "That could be one."

"She is *not* an advantage."

Sam lifts a shoulder casually. "When the teacher is ready, the student will come. I think that's how the saying goes."

"Here's your coffee, cutie," the waitress says, setting down a steaming cup in front of Sam. "And one for your friend. Hope he shows up before it gets cold."

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Chapter 1

Hold a gun to desdemona Rae's head and tell her to name her worst enemy? She'd say the deep fryer at her Uncle Bob's Dairy Barn on the outskirts of Death Valley, California.

Dez is scared of little, but the deep fryer holds a special place of loathing in her heart. It scarred her, twenty years ago, before anyone else had yet had the honor. The first pain she remembers, four years old, is trying to help stop her mother, pregnant then with Dez's younger brother, from dropping the sizzling pan on her way out to the dumpster.

Dez keeps her left wrist covered now. Doesn't trust the deep fryer any further than she can throw it. Saves cleaning it for last when she's working the night shift at the Dairy Barn.

She heads to the closet and grabs the mop, wheeling the bucket toward the center of the restaurant. Dez doesn't mind closing time at her awful job. Sucks at it, obviously, but kind of likes the quiet hours when the doors are locked and she's alone. She's come to look forward to the meditative swish of the ancient mop against linoleum.

Uncle Bob texts Dez videos of his orthopedic shoes making these

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horrible *scriiiiitch scriiiiitch* sounds anytime he opens the Dairy Barn and discovers a sticky spot from the night before, which is always.

She mops badly, restocks the freezer chaotically, according to her mood, and when it comes to the postapocalyptic hellscape that is the bathroom at this family-run dining institution, Dez closes her eyes, squirts some cleaner in the toilet's direction, flushes with her foot, and hopes for the best.

She knows she's the worst employee the Dairy Barn has ever had. If you were in a generous mood, you could say Dez sucks so badly because her mind is always elsewhere, because she's destined for other things. Not necessarily greatness, though she'd take it. Just…more than this. A ticket out of this dust devil of a town.

And even if destiny is a farce, as Dez sometimes fears it might be, even if Dez might be going absolutely nowhere fast, Uncle Bob can't fire her or Dez's mom will kick his ass.

Her paycheck is an insult, but she needs it. After tonight's shift, Dez will have enough cash on her debit card to pay the hundred-dollar fee for her grad school application to the American Film Institute in L.A. Dez loves movies, wants to devote her life to making them because in film, there's never a wasted moment. Not in a good film, anyway. Everything means something. Together, all the frames, shots, close-ups and fade-outs, every music choice and line of dialogue adds up to something larger than their parts.

In real life, Dez can rarely understand why one thing happens as opposed to another. In her films, she gets to decide. She gets to pay off the metaphoric promise of an opening image with the final shot. And she doesn't need a happy ending. Tragedy seems to follow her, and that suits her fine. What she does need is an ending of significance, of resonance and power. And since she can't count on that in life, she makes it in her films.

She dumps a stack of brown plastic trays in the sink to spray down.

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She thinks of her latest short film, shot two weeks ago on the pier in Ventura. The one she's submitting with her film school application. *Glimpse* lives on the hard drive of her Chromebook on the couch where she works in her mother's garage. She thinks of it traveling through the internet's labyrinth, to a faculty committee in Los Angeles. Filmed on a magical day when Dez and her friend Silas pooled their gas money, drove four and a half hours to the beach, then blocked, cast, and shot the whole sequence in the fading rays of a summer sunset—it's good, and Dez knows it. The kind of thing you watch with your breath held.

She thinks, for the thousandth time, of Asher. The random local Ventura guy they cast to star opposite Dez in the film. By the end of that day—hell, from the very first moment—Asher felt anything but random. Dez hasn't spoken to him since, but she's spent trillions of hours studying his features, his mannerisms, and his inexpressible Asherness while she edited her film.

Since that day, she's been too focused on finishing *Glimpse*, on getting in this application, to think about texting Asher. Or to wonder what it means that he hasn't texted her.

She knows what she would say if she could take the time to text him. And tonight, after she clicks Submit on the application, who knows…

Hey. That thing we made? I finished it.

Something happened that day between Asher and Dez, something bright and true and lovely. It started in the parking lot, when Silas thwacked Dez's arm to draw her attention to the beachfront skate park. To the spinning shirtless creature seeming to levitate above the half-pipe. Dez stared. Then warmed inside with a glow of intuition.

That one.

After a series of impossible aerodynamics, the skater reentered the earth's atmosphere, and Dez beelined.

"I'm making a film," she said, eyeing the light sheen of sweat along

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his collarbone, the way his fine golden hair half obscured his eyes. How small she looked in the reflection of his silver mirrored sunglasses compared to the towering man in front of her. "You're perfect, and I want you in it."

"There are pickup artists," he said, taking in Dez's freckles, flip-flops, fingerless gloves, her short black baby doll dress and dark hair so long it skimmed the hem of her skirt. "And then there are legends."

"Is that a yes?"

He brushed his hair out of his face, and she saw his eyes were a very light hazel, reminding Dez of the sweet, sun-warmed dates that grew on the young palm outside her kitchen window. Dez ate them by the fistful, could never get enough.

His front teeth grazed his bottom lip as he thought. "I don't like living with regret."

"Is *that* a yes?" Dez asked. She was smiling through her impatience.

"Not gonna be that guy who looks back on his life and says, 'Why'd I let that strange, adorable, very forward woman get away?'"

"We don't know what the hell we're doing," Silas chimed in next to Dez. "Just saying."

"Shut up, Silas," Dez said. "Yes, we do."

"I bet you know enough," the skater said. He smiled, at Silas, at Dez. No teeth, just smooth, very pale, pink lips. It felt familiar, that smile . . . not like they'd known each other before, but like they would know each other after. Like Dez was editing this moment from the future, marking it: Cue the music, this is where it all began.

They shook hands on the terms of his casting commitment. One day of work, no monetary compensation, but beers at the end, if the bars were still open, and credit in the name of Asher Ibrahim.

Asher Ibrahim. He was twenty-seven, three years older than Dez, and a native of Ventura. He'd been skating at that park since he could

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walk. She loved the way his name sounded like he came from the other side of the world, or like somewhere even farther, somewhere Dez wasn't yet able to imagine.

Working with Asher, filming him that afternoon, was the best experience of Dez's life. It was a taste of what she wanted out of whatever the future held.

"Al," a familiar voice calls, muffled through the glass door of the Dairy Barn.

Dez looks up from the sink toward the sound. She knows who it is before she sees him. Her brother. No one calls her that anymore but Moses. Her childhood nickname is short for *Albatross*, because when Dez was younger, she'd take off into the desert behind their house for such long stretches of time that their mom would say she feared Dez had flown away, across the desert and over the Pacific Ocean.

Mo taps on the window. Grins.

"Fuck off," she calls. "We're closed."

Dez always brings home food for Moses and her mom after work. She has tonight's to-go sack sitting in a warmer. Onion rings for her mom, and the ignominious side salad in a separate sack on the counter. Her mother is the only Dairy Barn customer ever to enjoy the menu item Uncle Bob has the nerve to call a salad.

Mo is an extra-pickles, extra-bacon, no-sauce cheeseburger guy. He eats it standing up in the kitchen after a night of partying. Sometimes, if Dez is still up working on her laptop, and if Moses's movements above her don't sound too wasted, she'll come upstairs from the garage to hang out with him, and they'll talk like they used to. It hasn't happened in a while.

"Hey, let me in," he calls, banging on the door.

"If you're in," she calls back, "you're on toilet duty."

"Fine. I'll scrub that shit."

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She expects him to flip her off, or at the very least, demand a share of her wages. But he doesn't, just waits at the door, shifting his weight like he has to pee. Or like he's worried about something. What did he do this time? Dez's mind is already making a list . . .

"Come on, it's a thousand degrees out here," Mo whines.

"Okay," she says, "keep your pants on." She dries her hands and goes to the storage closet to get the keys.

As kids, Mo was the cute one. Even though their features look almost exactly alike—onyx hair, fair, freckled skin, small straight noses, pale blue eyes—her brother wears it differently. He's five years younger, but his adorability lingered long after it was no longer detectable in Dez. Mo can talk to anyone, knows exactly what to say to make them pay attention to him and enjoy it, whether it's a toddler in a sandbox, or a con man at the racetrack. Everybody likes Mo, whereas most people tolerate Dez. Her mother calls her an enigma. Even Silas says she's an acquired taste.

Which is why it was so remarkable that Asher had come out and said it, right away, the night they met. After they finished shooting, halfway into their second Sierra Nevada, he leaned in while Dez was selecting "Drunken Angel" by Lucinda Williams on the jukebox and whispered:

"I like everything I've seen about you so far, Desdemona Rae. What else you got?"

She can still make herself shiver when she thinks about his breath against her neck.

When Dez and Silas left Ventura at two in the morning, with barely enough time for Silas to drop her off at the Dairy Barn for her opening shift, when Asher didn't text and Dez didn't either, she buried herself in her work. She told herself she wouldn't think about their connection—couldn't afford to think about their connection—until after she'd turned in her AFI application.

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Now, walking to the Dairy Barn's front door, Dez jingles the keys.

Mo grins, and Dez can't help grinning back, because even if they're only going to scrub toilets and stack Styrofoam cups, she'd rather do it with her brother than with anyone else.

"Hey, Mo," she says when she opens the door. "What's the drama?"

Before he even steps inside, Mo flings his arms around Dez and holds her like he's drowning, like she's a life raft. This isn't the first time in recent months he's fallen on her like this, so she knows to use the door to support herself, holding up her enormous younger brother's weight. Mo has eight inches, fifty pounds, and their father's alcoholic tendencies on Dez.

A sob ripples through him, into her. It cuts her heart. Oh, Mo. For all her dreams to get the hell out of Death Valley, she knows that she also belongs here, always. With her brother. With her mother. Even Uncle Bob.

"What happened?" she asks.

"Dez, I'm sorry—"

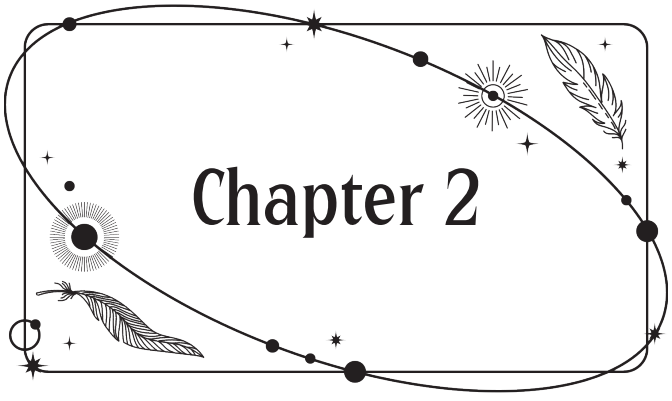
"Hey," she coos against his chest. "It's okay. I'm here."

"I had to."

"You had to what?"

Strange boots flash on the pavement, and before Dez understands what's happening, she and Moses are shoved aside by a man wearing a black hoodie and a black skeleton-print balaclava.

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Chapter 2

Mo!" DEZ SHOUTS, HOLDING HER stoned and swaying brother in the doorway, trying to get him to notice, to act as the masked man leaps over Dez's mop and skids on the wet floor toward the kitchen. The cash register.

But Mo doesn't budge. His arms clasp her waist more tightly, she realizes, holding her still.

I had to, Mo said when she'd unlocked the door.

Her brother has tricked her. Betrayed her. She's being robbed.

"Mo," she says again, softer this time, though her fists begin to wail against his chest. "How could you?"

"Please, Dez." His grip cinches tighter, until it hurts. "This will only take a second."

Hell no. She squirms and kicks and presses her cheek hard against Mo's head. Being high makes him more limber, less sensitive, harder to overcome.

Through her fury, Dez can't help feeling a familiar sorrow, the very specific pain she's felt often recently for Mo.

Her mother, Uncle Bob? They'll be so disappointed.

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"Is this worth it?" she demands, trying to reach his windpipe with her elbow. "For one high?"

"You don't understand," he says, both his hands gripping her shoulders, turning her swiftly so her back is against his chest. He bends at the waist, folding her up against him.

"I understand that you're a giant piece of shit," Dez grunts, feeling immense pressure in her ribs as both of them drop to their knees on the wet floor.

"Just open the till, Dez, please," Mo says.

"No fucking way." She's lost sight of the man in the skull mask. She needs to get to the register to stop him.

"I owe them," Mo says. "I can't pay."

"Yeah, well, neither can I."

As kids, they used to wrestle on the living room rug whenever their mother wasn't home. By the time Mo turned ten to her fifteen, he was bigger than she was, stronger. But Dez always had more drive to win. She used to narrow her eyes and pretend Mo was one of any number of kids at school who'd been cruel to her. Then she could pin him in under ten seconds.

The worst thing about tonight is Dez doesn't have to pretend Mo is anyone but himself to feel the drive to waste him.

She twists underneath him, gaining enough distance to raise her Doc Marten and kick him in the groin.

He scuttles into himself, off her, making sharp, coughing sounds. Dez fights the urge to look at him. She can't afford to feel sorry right now. Should she grab her brother, drag him out to her car and away from this mess until he sobers up? Call the cops and let them handle the guy in the mask?

No, he'll be long gone by the time they get here. And this is her family's place, her family's livelihood. A fight flares bright in Dez. She's on her feet in a flash and using her hands to vault over the counter.

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Adrenaline pumping, she lands next to the register, next to the guy in the mask.

He's grabbed a heavy-duty grill spatula and is using it like a crowbar on the prehistoric cash register. Dez hasn't balanced the receipts yet, but she'd guess there's close to three hundred dollars in there. Three hundred dollars of her family's money, and this guy isn't getting his hands on it.

She's one for one on dick-kicks tonight, so she decides to go for two. She grips his shoulders from behind—so much narrower than Mo's. A stranger's body. She thinks: frail. She can take him.

Dez narrows her eyes. Readies her foot. And bam. She nails him in the balls. She knows she does.

But he doesn't double over, makes no choking cough like Mo. He lets out a soft, almost sensual moan, and then—where his hoodie has slipped back—he meets her eyes.

Dark eyes, inky, like a squid washed ashore. A glint in them like he's out for something more than money.

Blood?

The man blinks for longer than seems reasonable, and when he opens his eyes again, he punches her in the stomach with a force she didn't see coming. She stumbles backward, into the warmer, still keeping her fucking brother's burger at optimal temperature. The bulb of the heater singes her cheek, and she hisses. The pain is invigorating. Like a boxer emerging from her corner, she charges the junkie.

He's fixed his hoodie so she can't see his eyes anymore. She gets her hands around his neck. He flails to fight her off, but she puts all her strength into squeezing him. Her nails dig into the sinews of his throat.

He jabs at her, elbows to her ribs, her kidney, her breasts. But the pain feels good because she's winning. Any moment now, he'll need

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air. He'll stagger downward, and all she'll have to do is hold on and watch his lights go out.

But the choking takes so long that Dez's arms throb from her fingertips to her triceps. He isn't even trying to wrest her hands from around his neck. Something else, then. New strategy.

He's got the cash register open now. Dez sees the neat rows of green. Remembers the hundred-dollar bill some tourist from Orange County had used to pay for a Diet Coke that afternoon, pissing her off.

His hands are on the money now. And Dez has to stop him. From behind, her hands crawl up his face, up the mask, angry, probing. Until her thumbnails find his eyes. She presses as hard as she can.

In the movie of Dez's life, this moment makes sense, connects to something later in the story, tracing the outlines of a devastating theme. She glances at the security camera on the ceiling, which hasn't worked since Uncle Bob installed it on opening day. No one's filming her right now, so what she's doing only feels feral and psychotic. She can't stop. She presses harder, feeling something in the thug's face give way, followed by a fibrous wetness. She has no idea how this scene is going to end.

On the left side of his face, something loosens.

His . . . eye?

Dez almost throws up, but she bites it back. The masked man yelps like a wounded wolf and then goes still. It's so weird, and it's also all the permission Dez needs. Like the time she reached into the garbage disposal to fish out her mother's one good ring, Dez plunges her fingers into this punk's eye socket and yanks.

She screams. He screams. And then it's in her hand. His eyeball. Staring blankly at her. Black iris on one side, dangling optic nerve on the other.

"Dez, what are you doing?"

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She looks up and sees her brother on all fours, breathing deeply, still recovering from the kick to the groin.

"Stay down, Mo!" she screams, her voice wild and made of rage.

Her focus snaps back to the one-eyed man. He clutches a hand to the bleeding hole she left in his face. With the other hand, he raises a strange antique pistol to Dez's head. The weapon has a circular cartridge atop its long barrel, like a machine gun.

A memory comes to her. Asher in the parking lot of the Ventura dive bar where they stayed until the owner kicked them out. She was sitting in the passenger seat of Silas's car, window rolled down, her arm dangling out. Standing on the curb, Asher took her hand in his, low enough that Silas couldn't see it. He held her gaze as he pulsed his thumb against her palm. She knew it was a message that he couldn't say aloud. She knew what it meant, too, if not precisely, then essentially.

Pulse. Pulsepulse. Pulse.

She nodded at Asher, and their fingers slipped apart as the car began to dive away. And she wanted him then, would have run through fire to take him to bed, and spill their clothes, find out exactly what his skin felt like against hers, but also . . .

What Dez remembers then, now, at gunpoint, is another way that moment had felt: *Enough.*

Even if she never saw him again, what they'd shared that day had been enough for him to mean something to her—and maybe enough for her to mean something to him—for the rest of Dez's life.

If that moment hadn't happened, Dez might feel differently now, on the brink of death. Instead, the thought that comes to her, quite peacefully, is *enough.*

But then she looks down at the eyeball and changes her mind. She's come this fucking far in this hideous fight. That has to be worth something. She's not going to let this one-eyed freak win.

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She moves to the deep fryer. The gunman watches her, follows her movements with his strange gun, but he doesn't shoot. Quickly, she grips the basket like the pro she is, and heaves it up out of its basin. It's only been thirty minutes since she turned it off. The oil will still be north of three hundred degrees.

It's the deadliest thing in this kitchen, and maybe it is her friend, after all.

"Dez?" She hears Moses's voice.

But Dez can't stop what she's doing. She has to protect her brother as much as she has to protect herself. No matter what cold or foolish decisions either of them will ever make, Dez loves Mo, and he loves her back. When it really comes down to it, they're on each other's side.

She spins and flings the full pan of boiling oil at the one-eyed man.

And she hears her brother scream.

The sound is bottomless and never-ending, and when Dez finally works up the courage to look at what she's done, it's exactly as she feared—and so much worse. *Mo.*

Smoke from the oil rises off him, and as it clears, Dez seizes at the sight of his burns. Her body goes completely still as she struggles to absorb the situation.

Moses had leapt in front of the gunman.

Moses had thrown his body between the bullet and Dez.

The bullet that never fired.

Because Dez shot her shot first, pitching a vat of scalding oil onto the kid she loves most in the world.

The pain he's feeling right now—it's a tunneling, rib-roasting agony that Dez knows all too well. She can still call it up in her nightmares from when she was a four-year-old girl. Dez's third-degree burn had taken six months and two skin grafts to "heal." It never really healed. And it had spanned two inches of her wrist.

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Not the entirety of her face and neck.

Moses is on his knees, and the noises coming out of him are inhuman. The skin on his face and neck sizzles. He makes a wet, sputtering sound like he's struggling to breathe. Dez doesn't recognize his face, mottled and angry, a flaming almost purple color, the skin sliding off in places like paper in the rain.

Dez can't move. Can't look away. Can't retch up the bile in her throat. Can't go to him. Can't even reach for her phone in her apron pocket to call for help. She wants to say she's sorry, but the words won't come. She feels everything slipping away into black. She will never, ever forgive herself.

Mo reaches up to the gunman for help. "Am I dying?" he whispers in a ghastly voice.

She watches his eyes drift closed.

Dez wants to go back in time, for it to be one a.m. in their kitchen, Mo wasted but happy, tearing into his bacon cheeseburger, while she snacks on their mom's instant-coffee crystals, and he tells her every stupid and hilarious thing that he and all his friends did that night.

This isn't Mo, gasping for air from a burn-ravaged throat. This disfigured thing cannot be her brother.

"Mo," she finally hears herself say.

The gunman has her brother under his arm and is still pointing the gun at her. He pushes past her, out of the kitchen, taking Mo with him toward the front exit. Her knees are locked. Her keys are still in the door.

"He needs help," Dez says. Her words feel cloaked in needles in her throat.

The man points the gun at Dez's left eye. She still holds his in her hand. She stares into the sickening, oozing hole she's left in his face. She realizes, in all this time, he's never said a word.

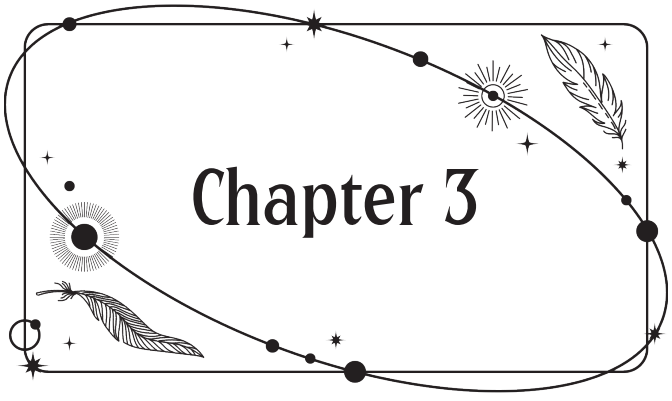
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She looks at Mo, but he's turned away, all his weight against the gunman, his forearms up to shield his face. His feet move clumsily, ankles rolling, like the ground is grease beneath him.

The gunman kicks open the door. It's a hundred degrees outside, and even from here, Dez can feel the blast of heat. The shriek of pain Mo makes upon feeling the outside air is debilitating. Dez feels it all the way into her toes.

Now she can no longer see her brother. Adrenaline kicks in. She charges after them, out of the restaurant, into the heat of the night.

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Chapter 3

Tires screech in the parking lot like horned owls flying out of hell. As Dez's dented Nissan Sentra peels out of the lot, she realizes the gunman's leaving in *her* car, with *her* brother.

Dez runs.

"Stop!" she shouts, chasing the car, running harder, faster than she ever has before. She doesn't feel her body—no burning lungs, no straining muscles. She's only aware of what she's done to her brother. How she needs to make it right.

The night is dusty, hot, soaked in the light of a full moon. The car is gaining ground. Even when she watches it turn onto County Road 89 and Dez lags by something like a quarter mile, it doesn't occur to her she won't catch up. Failure is unthinkable. She's heard stories about people's adrenaline turning them superhuman when their family is on the line.

She sprints to where the street T's, then barrels onto the county road. She runs fifty manic paces before the total stillness, the utter quiet of the road slams into her. She doesn't understand. It's been less than two minutes since she watched her stolen car turn right. There

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are no intersections for miles. But she sees no taillights, no sign of her car.

Nothing but empty road.

She spins around. Nothing behind her either. They're gone. Her brother is gone.

Dez throws her head back and screams until she can't scream anymore. Then she folds, dropping her head between her knees. She is indescribably exhausted. She wishes she could collapse, right here on the road, and sleep for a thousand years.

She thinks of her mother, who's working until ten at the nursing home. Dez needs to call her but feels paralyzed. Mom leaves her phone in her locker, so they'll have to page her, which will make her panic, hurrying down so many long hallways to pick up the front desk phone. And Dez knows her mother will have tried to convince herself that the news won't be as bad as she fears. And then, if Dez can speak at all, she will have to tell her mom what happened, what she did. And in fact, for once, the truth will be so much worse than her mother's anxious mind could have invented. That Dez burned Mo to the edge of death, and now she doesn't even know where he is.

"Are you okay?"

The voice comes from nowhere, like the night itself is asking. When Dez spins to face a man in a black leather jacket, sitting atop a motorcycle, she jumps back in shock.

"Where did you come from?" Dez asks.

"That's a long story," he says.

"There's a car up there." She points. "I need to catch it."

"Somebody do you wrong?" The rider seems to be studying her face, though it's too dark to be sure. "Or did *you* do somebody wrong?"

His cool amusement makes Dez want to bend him in half, then steal his bike, but he's sitting just out of reach, and she doesn't know how to drive a motorcycle.

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"My brother's hurt." Dez's words feel sharp as knives.

The rider tips his head toward the bike's rear seat. "Hop on."

By now her eyes have adjusted to the semidarkness of the motorcycle's headlight. The guy looks a few years older than her, maybe. Still on the slick side of thirty. In the face of what she's going through, what she just did to Mo, in the face of the revolting eyeball in her pocket—Dez finds herself offended by his radiant olive skin, his perfect shave on his model's angular jaw. Those cheekbones. Cobalt-blue eyes only a half shade darker than her own. Dark brown hair the definition of bedhead. Then he smiles, and yeah, of course, he's been to some primo orthodontist.

Fuck this guy.

But also? The longer she looks, the more she begins to wonder. Have they met before? He seems familiar to her in some essential way. She doesn't know him, but she's seen him somewhere.

She stares into his eyes, trying to puzzle it out. For a while, so many bad things were happening so quickly, she couldn't keep up. Now it feels like time has slowed. She can almost swear she's looked into this man's eyes, just like this, before.

But where? When? How? The memory itches the edge of her mind.

The rider holds out a napkin to her. "Dry your eyes. I'll give you a lift."

Dez takes the napkin, wipes her face. His smug calm grates on her. And what's with his jacket? It looks beyond vintage, like it was made before motorcycles were invented. Cast-iron skulls stare out from the jacket's lapels.

She knows the style of this stranger's jacket is a highly useless thing to think about when every second her brother grows farther away. But it won't help if she gets herself murdered on the way to find Mo, and so far, she can't get a beat on this guy.

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On his bike's black shovelhead gas tank, the chrome word *Acheron* glows in the moonlight.

Under normal circumstances, Dez would never consider catching a ride on the back of some stranger's motorcycle. But it seems likely no circumstance will ever be normal again.

"Where have I seen you before?" she asks.

"A dream?"

A police scanner crackles to life on the bike's instrument panel.

"Got an eleven-eighty-three on County Road 89, mile marker forty-two . . . red Nissan Sentra . . . crashed into a ditch."

"That's my brother," Dez says. "Are you a cop?"

She can't immediately tell if this would be good or bad. It would help her get to Mo, but it would also require confronting her recent actions. And the trouble she'll be in.

"Furthest thing from it," the rider says. "Lucky for you, apparently."

Dez scowls. "Then why do you have a police scanner?"

"You know the saying—check in every now and then on your friends. But never take your eyes off your enemies."

Sirens sound in the distance.

They're coming.

"You got yourself in a real mess this time, didn't you, Dez?" the rider asks.

Dez feels her mouth fall open. "How did you know my—"

"Look, I'm headed south. And I'm kind of in a hurry. I'm sure the cops can take you to your brother. Or . . ."

"Or?"

He leans toward her, and she sees a vast reservoir of confidence in his deep blue eyes. "Or I could take you very far away from all of this."

Locked in his gaze, Dez feels a pull. Like she should climb atop this motorcycle and ride wherever this stranger points it. Like it might even be fun.

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It's insane. She breaks their gaze, turning her head in the direction her brother went. The trauma of tonight has rattled her. She needs to go toward Mo, not away with some five-alarm stranger. No matter what consequences she will have to face.

"I'll take my chances," she says, stepping away from the bike and its rider.

"Sorry to hear it," he calls. "I was just getting the feeling we're each other's kind of trouble."

"I doubt that."

"It's in our eyes," he says. He holds her gaze for a moment before he glances skyward. "You and I come from up there."

Before Dez can argue, he kicks the bike to roaring life, then accelerates past the approaching police car at a speed that takes Dez's breath away. She watches the bike vanish like a dream you wake up from and can't quite remember.

And the strangest part is, when the cops pull to a stop in front of her, it's like they never even saw the bike go by.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

As Dez stares at the two policemen suddenly in front of her, she realizes how unprepared she is to tell the cops the story in a way that won't implicate her brother. In a way that won't implicate herself. She needs time to think about how to spin it. Time she doesn't have.

"What are you doing out here alone?" The cop behind the wheel looks at her, suspicious.

She inhales and tries to steady her voice. "There was a robbery at the Dairy Barn. I was working the closing shift. A guy in a black skull mask came in—"

"Did you call nine-one-one?" he asks.

"I— He had a gun. He took my brother. Stole my car—"

"Okay, okay," says the cop in the passenger seat, an older man with softer eyes than his partner. "Slow down. Let's back up."

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"They're in a red Nissan Sentra," Dez insists, and she sees the cops trade glances. "Please. My brother's hurt. He needs to go to the hospital."

"You're saying the man with the gun shot your brother?"

"No," she says. Her breath comes short as she chooses her words. "No. There was a fight. We…I…tried to stop him. And my brother—" She breaks off before she begins to sob.

"We have an ambulance headed for the Sentra," the second policeman says. "If your brother's there, he'll receive medical assistance." He's good-copping her, she knows, but these are words she needs to hear.

"Thank you," Dez says.

"Can you describe the gunman?" the first cop says.

Dez closes her eyes and tries to think. She shudders, remembering their confrontation, her hand around the man's eye. It's still in her apron. She slips a hand into the pocket, as if to cover the glowing radioactive evidence of her guilt. She'll throw it away as soon as she's alone.

"He…he was masked so I—" she stammers. "Maybe five-ten. Medium build. I never saw his face."

"Not even his eyes?"

Dez swallows the bile rising in her throat. "They were black," she makes herself say.

"So more or less any guy off the street?" says the cop behind the wheel. "Your typical forensic sketch?"

"What? No. I'm not making this up."

"What was your brother doing at the restaurant at closing time?"

"He was helping me. So I could get out of there sooner."

"That's nice," the second cop says.

"And about how much cash do you typically close with?" the first cop asks. "Before you split it in two?"

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"It's my uncle's place. I wouldn't do that."

She hasn't lied yet. She hasn't said Mo wouldn't do that. And she hasn't made up the masked man. She's trying to stay calm, but it's been a rough night, and this cop is starting to piss her off.

"Why don't you come with us?" the second cop says.

"I need to find my brother—"

"I don't think you're going to find him by walking down the county road in the dark," the first cop says.

"You're not in trouble," the second cop says. "We're going to go find your brother."

"Maybe some more details will get clearer on the way," his partner adds.

Dez knows these guys are out to get her, but she needs to find her brother. She's spent, scared, out of options. This squad car is her only hope.

She thinks of the man on the motorcycle, wonders where he is by now. He hadn't really said her name . . .

The second cop opens the back door of the police car. "Watch your head," he says as Dez slides in.

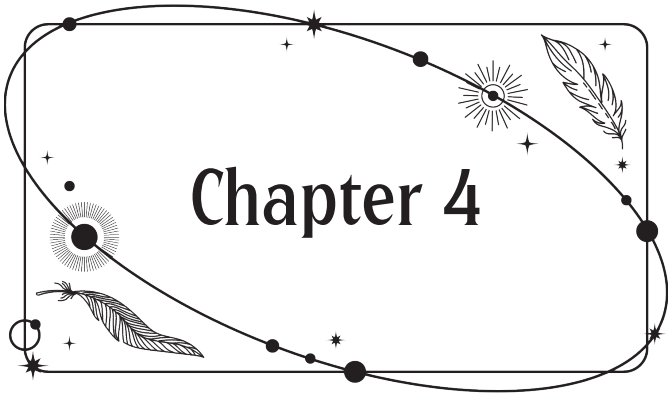
"They went that way," she says, pointing over her shoulder.

The squad car makes a wide, clumsy U-turn before Dez can fasten her seat belt. Her head slams against the window, and when she rubs the tender spot, she realizes she's still holding the napkin the guy on the motorcycle gave her.

In the moonlight coming through the window, she notices something sketched in ink on the napkin's front. Her stomach rises to her throat.

It's a drawing of a woman's face. An unmistakable portrait of Dez.

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Chapter 4

At two in the morning, Dez sits in the hospital waiting room and silently pleads.

Please. Heal. Please.

Around her sit other people's families, wearing bathrobes and inappropriate shoes, ripped from the flow of their lives into panic and confusion just like Dez. A mounted TV from the mid-nineties is chained to the ceiling, tuned to the weather channel, but Dez stares straight ahead, at a large coffee stain shaped like a three-legged centaur on the vinyl wall.

She's had no news of Mo, only the vacant, placating line from the receptionist that the doctors are "doing everything they can." She sits alone, knees knocking with nerves, under a black sludge of guilt.

She hears her mother and her uncle talking in low voices outside the automatic sliding doors. About her. She catches pieces she cannot concern herself with yet.

Lawyer, her uncle's saying. *How expensive?*

Her mother's shaking voice: *The district attorney?*

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Dez's hand goes to the edge of the eyeball in her apron pocket. She's been studying the biowaste bin in the hallway behind the receptionist, looking for a chance to get rid of the eye.

But she knows she'll never get rid of it. Not really. Somehow it will see her for the rest of her life.

She takes out the napkin the stranger on the motorcycle gave her to wipe her eyes. She stares at the drawing, feeling a crater in her gut. The likeness is faithful down to the pattern of her freckles, the curve of her nose, the cowlicked peak of her hairline. It's somehow more accurate than a photograph. The lines capture an essence Dez sees every time she looks in the mirror. They show the hunger and conviction in her eyes, limned with her deepest fear. That she will never reach her dreams, that she isn't even worthy of having them.

Every time Dez gets as far as wondering how the existence of this sketch is possible, the mechanical whir of the waiting room's automatic doors brings her back to her surroundings.

To her brother. To this current crisis, which is bigger than anything she's ever known.

"Dez?"

Her mom stands in the doorway. Dez pockets the napkin and searches for the reassurance she usually finds in her mother's gaze. The problem is she doesn't recognize her mom, her face painted strange by grief and panic. Dez watched the change come over her as they sat in the hospital lobby last night, and Dez whispered her version of the story, only leaving out that while fighting off the man in the mask, Dez had taken out his eye. She'd been too sickened with herself to tell her mom that part.

And one more thing. Instinctively, she left out the interlude with the stranger on the motorcycle, before the cops showed up.

She had told her mother, in other words, what mattered about

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Mo's current situation. And it changed her mother into a new person, someone Dez wasn't acquainted with and wasn't sure liked her very much.

"The police want you to sit for questioning."

Dez nods.

"Uncle Bob doesn't think you should talk to them yet. Without a lawyer."

"Do they think I—"

"They do," her uncle says, coming to stand behind her mom. He stuffs his hands in his jean pockets, worrying the crease between his eyes. His bad news stance, a more serious version of his pose every time Dez makes an expensive mistake at the Dairy Barn. "All the cash is missing from the till. And there's no evidence anyone else was there last night. No fingerprints but yours on the cash register. Or on the driver's side of your car."

"That's impossible," Dez says.

"Maybe when they get the DNA evidence back from the lab…" But her uncle doesn't sound optimistic.

"I'm not making him up." Anger flares in Dez. "There was a man with a mask and a gun. Why else would I—" She closes her eyes. She can't go back to the moment she burned Mo. "How else would my car have crashed into the ditch?"

"They think you were driving," Uncle Bob says quietly. "They think you crashed and ran."

Dez looks at her mother. "Mom?"

"You need a lawyer, Dez," her mother says, looking down at her hands.

Is this the moment Dez reaches into her apron and shows her mom and her uncle the eye? It might be the only evidence supporting her side of the story, the truth. But she hesitates. Her family is already so

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disgusted with her, she can't bring herself to show them what else she did last night.

Out the window, Dez sees the two cops who'd given her a ride to the hospital. They're heading for the automatic doors, for the waiting room. For her.

Dez stands and brushes past her family. She sees a sign for the cafeteria one flight up and hurries for the stairs. She's close to hyperventilating when she bursts into the empty, cavernous room.

The seating area is open, but the buffet and registers are closed and dim. Dez sinks onto a hard, beige chair in a dark corner. She puts her head down on the Formica table. How quickly her entire life has changed. Five hours ago, she'd been mopping the Dairy Barn floor, her biggest concern getting her film school application in before the midnight deadline. Which seems ridiculous now. She'd been considering texting Asher. Way back when ambition and flirtation still existed.

Somehow texting Asher doesn't feel ridiculous. In fact, it feels almost urgent. She could use someone to take her mind off things.

She doesn't have to tell him about Mo, about the alternate reality she slipped into when she threw that pan of oil. She can pretend she did just apply to AFI. She can pretend that even though it's ungodly late, she wanted him to be the first to know. She can pretend to still be the filmmaker Asher had met that day on the beach.

She feels for her phone in her pocket, but just as she's about to take it out, the aroma of weak coffee finds her nose.

Dez looks up to see the motorcycle rider from the county road.

There's a mischievous late-night twinkle in his eye as he sets down two lidded Styrofoam cups of coffee, then dumps an assortment of chips, candy bars, and plastic-wrapped cookies on the table in front of her.

"Where did you—" she starts to say.

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