

## Prologue

Eden crawled into the living room, the rough carpet burning her chubby knees and hands. As boots slapped the hall floor, she went still, holding her breath.

Had he heard her?

The footsteps stopped. She leaned back around the doorway and peeked down the dark hall. There was no sign of him. Not yet. But he'd come for her. He always did.

She crept a little farther, resisting the urge to leap to her feet and run. He'd hear her if she ran.

Once she was past the big chair, she stopped and looked around. The long table in front of the sofa had a cupboard. She opened the door, wincing at the click. The space was big enough to squeeze into, but it was full of books and magazines.

She glanced back at the big chair. It was too far from the wall. If she hid behind it, he'd see her as soon as he came around the corner. But the sofa? Yes! She flattened onto her stomach. Then she wriggled backward until her legs were all the way under and—

Her bum hit the frame and stopped her. She tried again, squirming madly, but she couldn't get under. Maybe if she went in headfirst. She tugged herself forward and—

She was stuck. She wiggled as hard as she could, the carpet burning her knees, but she couldn't get loose, and she was sure any moment now he'd—

She popped out. She took a second to catch her breath. Then she turned around to go in headfirst and—

Her head wouldn't fit under, either.

What about *behind* the sofa? If she could move it out a little, she could get in there. She grabbed the leg with both hands and pulled. It wobbled but didn't move.

The footsteps started again, slow and steady. Coming her way? She swallowed and tried to listen, but her heart was pounding so hard she could barely hear.

She skittered from between the table and sofa and glanced at the hall leading to the bedrooms. Lots of hiding places back there. Better hiding places. If she could—

“Eden?”

She dove for the sofa and pushed it forward just enough so she could squish in behind. She tried to look back to make sure her feet were hidden, but she couldn’t tell. She wiggled in a little farther, and then she pressed her hands to her mouth. If she made any noise—any at all—he’d find her. She lay on the carpet, trying not to sniff the old cat pee as she made herself as small as possible.

Footsteps thudded into the room. And stopped. When Eden squeezed her eyes shut, she could hear the slight rasp of his breathing. She pictured him there, brushing his shaggy blond hair from his eyes as he scanned the empty room.

“Eden?” he called.

His boots swished on the carpet as he took a few more steps. He sucked in a breath. “She’s gone. Oh my God, Pammie, our baby’s gone!”

Eden pressed her fist into her mouth to stifle a laugh. Mommy’s soft sigh wafted from the kitchen as she told Daddy—again—not to use language like that in front of their daughter.

“But she’s disappeared!” he said. “Call the police! Call the fire department! Call the clown brigade!”

“Speaking of clowns . . .” her mother teased.

Eden’s body shook with silent giggles.

“Our baby is gone! All that’s left is this shoe.” He dropped to his knees by the sofa. “Wait, there’s a foot in it.”

Eden twisted around, pulling her leg in.

“Oh, no! Now she’s completely disapp—”

Eden backed out of her hiding place and launched herself into Daddy’s arms. He scooped her up and twirled her around. She closed her eyes as the air whipped past, smelling of Daddy’s spicy aftershave. Much better than the cat pee from the old owners, but when she was spinning, the smell made her tummy spin, too. She didn’t tell him to stop, though. She’d never tell him to stop.

Daddy tossed her onto the sofa. The bright red pillows scattered as she landed. He picked up one and tucked it under her. Then he bent on one knee.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but I have to leave. I’ve got a big day ahead of me, helping a special girl celebrate her half birthday.”

“Me!” Eden bounced on the cushions, singing, “Me! Me! Me!”

“Really? Are you sure?”

More shouting. More bouncing.

Today she turned two and a half. Last night, she’d barely slept, just curled up under the covers and stared at the mural Mommy had painted on the ceiling, a carousel of horses and swans and lions. Usually, if she couldn’t sleep, she pictured herself on the black horse with the white mane, and she’d go around and around until she drifted off. That hadn’t worked for a long time last night.

Then, when Mommy came to wake her up, Eden heard an owl hooting outside her window, and her tummy had started to hurt. She didn’t like the owl—not in the daytime. It sounded scary,

and it made her worry that Mommy and Daddy would forget it was her half birthday. But that had been silly. They'd never forget.

"Is it time?" she said, still bouncing. "Is it time?"

"It is. We have a big surprise planned. Do you know what it is?"

"No, she does not," Mommy said as she walked in. "That's the concept of a surprise, Todd."

Daddy leaned down to Eden's ear and whispered, "Pony ride!"

Eden shrieked. Her mother rolled her eyes and pretended to be mad, but she couldn't stop smiling.

"Let's get your hair brushed," Mommy said as Eden jumped into her arms. "We'll want to take lots of pictures when you get your big surprise."

"Pony ride!" Daddy said.

"I think we should put *him* on a pony," Mommy whispered in Eden's ear.

When Mommy finished brushing her hair, Daddy grabbed Eden again and swung her up onto his shoulders. "I think I'd *make* a good pony."

He snorted and pawed the ground. Mommy laughed and slapped him on the bum.

Then the door crashed in.

It happened so fast that nobody moved. Not Mommy. Not Daddy. Eden heard the crunch of breaking wood, and she saw the door fly right off its hinges, and she thought was it was a storm like in the movie with the girl and her dog. Only it wasn't a storm. It was monsters.

Huge monsters, all in black, with helmets on their heads and masks over their faces. They swarmed through the broken door. They shouted and yelled and waved black things in their hands.

Eden screamed then, and Daddy stumbled back and Eden started to slip off his shoulders. Mommy caught her before she fell.

One of the monsters shouted. Eden couldn't understand him. Mommy and Daddy did, though. They stopped moving. Then Daddy backed up, arms going wide, shielding Mommy and Eden. Two monsters grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him to the floor.

Eden screamed again. Screamed as loud as she could, her mouth open so wide that her eyes squished shut and she couldn't see. When Mommy's arms wrapped around her, she could feel Mommy's heart pounding. Heard her panting. Smelled something bad and sour that was not like Mommy's smell at all.

"It's okay," Mommy whispered. "Don't look, baby. Just don't look."

Then Mommy shrieked and everything spun. Eden's eyes flew open. One of the monsters had Mommy. Another yanked Eden away. Mommy grabbed for Eden, her nails raking Eden's arm as she tried to get her back. Eden fought just as hard to get to her, kicking and screaming and clawing.

One of the monsters said Mommy and Daddy's names, then started saying other names, a whole bunch of them. Mommy stopped fighting then. So did Daddy, who was pinned to the floor under two monsters.

"Wh-what?" Mommy said, her voice so squeaky it hurt Eden's ears. "Those poor couples in the papers?" She glanced at Daddy. "What's going on?"

"I-I don't know." He looked at Eden. "It's okay, sweetheart. I know this is scary, but it's just a mistake. A bad, bad mistake."

A woman appeared then. A normal woman, dressed in a jacket and a skirt, like the kind Grandma Jean wore to work. Only it didn't matter if she was smiling and talking in a nice voice. Not when she took Eden away from Mommy and Daddy.

Eden struggled and kicked and howled.

“Enough of that, now,” the woman said. “You’re going to hurt yourself—”

Eden bit her. Chomped down on the lady’s arm as hard as she could, tasting something bad and hot filling her mouth. The woman shrieked and let go, and Eden tumbled to the floor, then ran toward Mommy and Daddy as the monsters hauled them away.

Mommy twisted around and reached out. Eden threw herself at her, but a monster grabbed her dress and held her back as another dragged Mommy out the door.

## Chapter One

I waited in the shelter drop-in center for my next appointment. The murmur of children's voices wafted in from the play area. Low murmurs, hesitant, fractured. Guilty giggles, cut short, as if the children weren't sure they had anything to giggle about.

The faint smell of bleach from the toys, washed nightly, was almost overpowered by the sickly sweet smell of lilies. Vases on every table. A hundred dollars' worth of flowers. Money better spent on shampoo and baby wipes. But the donor meant well. They always did.

People say that volunteer work is rewarding in ways no paid job can match. I wouldn't know about the paid part. Barely a year out of college, I've never held a paying position. I know what I get out of volunteering, though, and it isn't the usual sanctimonious thrill of helping the less fortunate. It's the mirror they provide, reflecting me in ways that aren't always comfortable.

My 2:15 appointment was Cathy, who apologized for being late even as I assured her she wasn't. She'd slid into the room with her head down, prodding her two-year-old ahead of her.

"Hey, Joey," I said. "Are those new boots? Spider-Man, huh? Very cool."

A furtive glance my way. A quick nod. I like kids. Can't say they feel the same about me. I think they can sense I was an only child, only grandchild, too, growing up in a world of adults.

Cathy headed for a rickety wooden chair, but I patted the spot beside me on the sofa. She perched on the edge of the worn red vinyl. Not the prettiest piece of furniture, but it was bright and cheery and washable. Did the clients look at all the vinyl and wood and plastic, and imagine us after hours, bleaching down everything in sight, cleaning off the contagion of their desperate lives?

"Did you leave Amy in the playroom?" I asked.

Cathy stiffened. "Yes. The lady said it was okay—"

“I was just asking. They’re doing crafts at two thirty and I know she loves crafts.”

She relaxed and nodded. She had two children under the age of four. Another on the way. And she was three months younger than me. Not that she looked it. If I saw her on the street, I’d have added ten years. She certainly had that extra decade of life experience. Kicked out of the house at sixteen. Married by eighteen and divorced by twenty-one. A dozen jobs on her résumé, often more than one at a time.

Nothing could be further removed from my own experience. I live with my mother in a house bigger than the entire shelter. I have a master’s degree from Yale. I work as a volunteer, and I don’t even need to do that. Do I appreciate it? No. On good days, it chafes, like a dress with a scratchy tag. On bad ones, I feel like a bobcat caught in a trap, ready to gnaw my foot off to escape. Then I look at someone like Cathy, and a wave of guilt and shame stifles the restlessness.

“Thank you for seeing me, Miss Jones,” she said.

“Olivia, please. And I’m here whenever you need me. You know that.”

Cathy nodded and wound a lock of hair around her finger. Hair dyed blond almost a year ago, dark roots now to her ears; she’d refused to color it again because the dye job had been *his* idea. The guy who’d left her with those blond ends, a missing tooth, and another baby in her belly.

“So, Melanie has been helping you look for a job,” I said. “How’s that going?”

“Fine.”

Her gaze stayed fixed on my chin. It always did, unless she got worked up enough, like when she’d declared unbidden that she wasn’t fixing her hair. Brief shows of defiance. Achingly brief. Frustratingly brief.



There was more in that lowered gaze than deference, though. I could sense it. Feel it, thrumming through the air between us.

“Did—?” I began.

Joey raced past wearing a tattered backpack in the shape of an owl. It reminded me of the one that hooted outside my window that morning. A bad omen. If you believed in omens.

“Joey!” Cathy said. “Stop running and sit down.” Then, to me, “Sorry, Miss Jones.”

“No, he’s fine. I was just admiring his backpack.” I tore my gaze away. “Did the bakery ever give you that reference?”

She shook her head. I cursed under my breath. Cathy’s last job had been at a bakery. Owned by the cousin of the man who’d left her pregnant. Her old boss now couldn’t seem to recall how good an employee she’d been and thus sadly could not give a reference.

I had the name of the bakery in my wallet. More than once, I’d been tempted to help the woman remember Cathy. I had a few ideas for how to accomplish that. It’s a satisfying image to contemplate, and it would be so much more feasible if I wasn’t Olivia Taylor-Jones, daughter of Lena Taylor, renowned Chicago philanthropist, and Arthur Jones, owner of the iconic Mills & Jones department store. But I am, and as such, I have other avenues of attack, equally effective, if somewhat lacking in drama.

“Let’s leave that for now. I’m sure she’ll change her mind.” *Very sure.* “We’ll grab a coffee and have a look through job postings.”

After Cathy left, I flipped through the stack of job printouts. I told myself I was making sure I hadn’t missed a suitable one for Cathy, but I was really looking for myself. Pointless, of course. In so many ways.

My mother had always expected me to follow her example. Marry well and devote myself to volunteerism and philanthropy. Leave paid work for those who need it. Dad had been more amenable to the idea that a young woman in my position could have a career beyond organizing fund-raisers. My mother came from money—she was the daughter of minor nobility, raised in English society. Dad had been brought up in the business world, where you were expected to work until you couldn't. Or until you had a fatal heart attack at the age of sixty-one, leaving behind a daughter who, ten months later, couldn't look at your picture without missing you so desperately it hurt.

I always thought I'd work for Dad someday. Take over the family business eventually. It didn't matter if the store bored me to tears. I'd be working with him and that would make him so happy. Except now he was gone, and I couldn't bear to step through the store's front doors.

For now, I intended to go back to school in the fall and get my doctorate in Victorian lit. No idea what I'd use that for in the real world, but it would give me time to figure out what I wanted.

I hadn't told my mother my plans. No use stressing her out when her dream was about to come true—her only child married, and married well. As for my fiancé, James . . . I hadn't told him, either. First I was checking out my options for local schools. Once that was set—and before the wedding—I'd tell him. He'd be fine with it. He didn't expect me to sit home and keep house for him. Not unless I wanted to. I most certainly did not want to.

When I finished tidying up, I stepped outside the front doors, and the city hit me. The screech of tires and growl of engines. The stink of exhaust and the tang of roast pork. The flash of colors—bright shirts, neon signs, blinding blue sky.

Our family doctor used to blame my hypersensitivity on my upbringing, raised in a quiet house in the suburbs. But years of city exposure didn't seem to help. I'd walk onto a busy street and every sight, sound, and smell assaulted me, my brain whirring as if trying to make sense of it all. I'd learned to adjust—it was part of my life. Usually it passed in a moment, as it did now. I took a deep breath and headed to the gym.

*The photographer stepped back into the shadowy doorway as the young woman approached. Once she was abreast of him, he lifted his camera and held down the shutter button, silently snapping photos.*

*Amazing how much she looked like her mother.*

## Chapter Two

“You’re lucky I love you,” I whispered as I leaned over. “Or I would be so out of here.”

James’s lips brushed my ear. “I’d be right behind you.”

He smiled, a blazing grin that had every woman at the table swooning. CEO of Chicago’s fastest growing tech firm, and son of a former senator, James Morgan isn’t gorgeous, but that grin had landed him a spot on the city’s most eligible bachelors list for three years running. Sadly, he wouldn’t be eligible next year. Well, sadly for everyone else.

“Another hour,” he whispered. “Then Penny has instructions to phone me with an urgent message.”

Good. As charity dinners went, this one ranked about average, which meant somewhere between uncomfortable and excruciating. The cause was excellent—New Orleans reconstruction. The food was just as good—Creole by someone who obviously knew how to cook it, which meant it was heavy on the spices and not nearly as appreciated by the older crowd. Most of it got left on the plates, which had me looking around the sea of tables, mentally calculating how far that wasted food would go in some Chicago neighborhoods. But they’d paid handsomely for it, eaten or not, and that was the point.

James’s father had been asked to give a speech tonight. James was doing it in his stead. That happened a lot lately, as his father aged, to the point where the organizers would be surprised—and probably disappointed—if James Senior showed up instead.

So James was a guest of honor, which meant everyone at this table wanted to make his acquaintance, and he couldn’t spend the meal chatting to his fiancée. While he conversed with everyone in turn, I entertained the others. Every few minutes, his hand would brush my leg,

sometimes a flirtatious tickle but usually just a pat or squeeze, a reminder that he appreciated me being there.

Finally dessert was served: Doberge cake, a New Orleans specialty, a half dozen layers of chocolate cake with lemon and chocolate pudding between them. The meal was coming to an end, and conversation was hitting the stage of desperation.

“So how did you two meet?” asked the woman on my left.

“Their families know each other.” A man across the table answered before we could. “Mills & Jones department stores. James Mills Morgan and Olivia Taylor-Jones.” He sat back, looking smug, as if he’d just uncovered a secret—and somewhat shady—connection.

“Our grandfathers founded the company,” James said. “Mine sold our shares to Liv’s dad before I was born, but our families still get together a few times a year. Liv was always there. Usually getting into trouble.”

A round of obliging laughter.

The woman on my left patted my arm. “I bet you had a secret crush on him.”

“Er, no,” James said. “She was seventeen before she remembered my name.”

“Only because you look like your cousin,” I said.

“Who’s a half foot shorter than me and fifty pounds heavier.” James turned to the others. “Let’s just say Liv’s complete lack of interest kept my ego in check.”

“You were older,” I said. Then hurried to add, “Out of my league.”

“Nice save, darling. Truth is, by the time she was old enough to notice me, I’d gone from a gawky teenager to a boring businessman. Liv prefers fighter pilots.”

I sputtered a laugh. “He was a computer tech in the air force.”

“Close enough. The point is, she was not easily wooed. I’ve launched hostile takeovers that were easier.”

James spoke after dinner, making an impassioned plea for donations. I would say it was a lovely speech, but that would be arrogant, considering I wrote it. I could point out that a master’s degree in Victorian literature hardly qualifies me to write speeches about contemporary disasters, but I never did. If James was going to be my husband, I was going to be more than a bauble on his arm.

I hadn’t planned to marry so young. I’m not sure if I planned to marry at all. My parents had a great relationship but, well, it lacked what is to me an essential component of a partnership. Namely the partnership. Dad ran the business, Mum did her charity work. Never the twain shall meet. James has let me into the business side of his life from the start, and I appreciate that. So if he asks me to write him a speech, I do.

I will say, then, only that the speech was successful. Checkbooks opened. As they did, James made his way through the crowd, with me at his side. Then, so deftly that even I hardly noticed, we ended up in the back hall.

“I think the party is that way,” I said.

“Which is why we’re going this way. You looked like you needed a break.” He swung me into an alcove. “And I wanted to thank you for the speech. Perfect, as always.”

He pressed me back against the wall, lips coming to mine in the kind of deep, hungry kiss that had, a year ago, made me decide James Morgan was a lot more interesting than he looked.

When I finally needed oxygen, I pulled back and whispered in his ear, “If you want to thank me properly, I noticed the east wing was cordoned off.”

He chuckled. “Dare I ask how you noticed that when we came in the *west* doors?”

“I wander.”

The chuckle deepened, and he lowered his hands to my rear, pulling me against him as he kissed my neck.

“But it should probably wait,” I said. “You are a guest of honor, and it would be most improper—”

“I like improper.”

He let me down and we zipped down the hall toward the east wing.

I leaned against the wall, skirt hiked up my hips, legs still wrapped around him.

“I definitely need to write you more speeches,” I said.

A rough laugh. “I definitely need to find more occasions for you to write me speeches.”

We rested there. It was peaceful—the white walls, the distant voices blending into a monotone murmur, the stomach-churning mix of perfume and cologne reduced to the spicy scent of his aftershave. I buried my face against his neck, inhaled, and relaxed.

He kissed my hair. “Speaking of speeches . . .”

I lifted my head. He adjusted his stance, lowering me to the ground.

“I need to ask you something.” He cleared his throat. “This isn’t quite how I planned it. I was going to take you to a fancy dinner and pop the question . . .”

“Uh-huh. While I’m flattered that the sex was so good it caused temporary amnesia, we’re already engaged.”

He smiled. “Yes, I know. This is a proposal of another sort. Equally terrifying in its own way. Neil Leacock came to see me today. My dad’s former campaign manager. He—*they*—the team and its supporters—would like me to consider running.”

A moment passed before I could find my voice. “For junior senator?”

“Yes, but not right away. They want to wait until I’m thirty-five. For now, they’d just like me to start heading in that direction. Grooming me.” He took my face in his hands. “I don’t want to hit you with this after the wedding, Liv. I know you might not want a life of endless speeches and endless dinners.”

A senator’s wife? I swore I could hear the trap snap shut on my leg. I leaned against James, hiding my reaction.

*Just relax. Don’t say anything. You need time to think this through. Play along for now.*

It took a moment, but I found a smile that would fool James. I’d minored in drama in my undergrad years. My instructors always said I was a natural. No big surprise there. Sometimes I felt as if I’d spent my life faking it.

I smiled up at him. “In other words, no more sex in the back hall?”

“Er, no . . . Actually, I was hoping that if I promised *more* sex in the back halls it might make the rest more tolerable.”

I put my arms around his neck. “If you’re willing to make such difficult concessions, then I can probably make some, too.”

“Because it *is* difficult.”

“I know, and I appreciate it.”

He laughed and kissed me.



### Chapter Three

We'd just made it back to the party when my cell phone beeped. My mother hates to text, but if the alternative was having me do something as crass as talk on my phone at a charity event, she'll make an exception.

*I need to speak to you, Olivia. Will you be coming home after the dinner?* Mum never lowers herself to text speak.

"What's up?" James asked.

"Mum needs to talk to me about something."

"Meaning you're not staying at my place."

"Sorry. You know how she gets."

Before my dad died, I'd been planning to move into my own apartment when I came back from college. But then my mother needed me at home. I'd expected that. I hadn't expected the nonstop frantic calls to resolve every curve ball life threw at her. Last week, she'd called me home from James's place at 2 a.m. because she'd "heard something." It turned out to be a raccoon on the back deck. I would have been a lot more sympathetic if the housekeeper hadn't been right downstairs, as she was every night I stayed with James.

We'd already arranged for the housekeeper to move in permanently after I got married. We'd also decided to hire a full-time chauffeur to double as a security guard. I still wasn't sure it would be enough.

"Go on," James said. "I'll call a car to the back. I hear something's going on around front."

"A protest?"

He shook his head. "Just a couple of paparazzi. There must be a media personality here."

He lifted his cell phone then stopped. “Are you okay with going out the back? It’s not the door you came in.”

I shot him a glare.

He grinned. “Sorry. I’m just checking, because I know it’s bad luck—”

“Once,” I said, lifting my finger. “It was one time, and you’re never going to let me forget it, despite the fact we just celebrated our engagement with a bottle of Cristal, and I could barely *find* the door.”

“And the time in Cozumel, when you insisted on turning our pillows around so we wouldn’t have nightmares?”

“Tequila.”

“Alcohol isn’t the cause. It just reveals your adorably superstitious self.”

I don’t know where my superstitions come from. A nanny, I suppose. It really does take alcohol—in copious quantities—for me to mention one. James think it’s adorable. The only thing I can do is to change the subject fast, which I did.

Twenty minutes later, I slipped into the car’s leather backseat, feeling faintly ill. James wanted to run for senator. I should have seen that coming. Soon after we’d started dating, I’d asked whether he had any plans to follow his dad into politics. He’d laughed it off but never really answered, and I hadn’t pursued it. I hadn’t dared. I’d been falling for James Morgan, and I didn’t want to hear anything that might interfere with that.

I could fake a lot of things. A politician’s wife, though? I might be able to pull it off for a month or two. Years? Maybe even a lifetime? Never. I’d grown up in these circles. I knew what

came with the position. What would be expected of me. I could not do that. It was like masquerading as a paramedic and then suddenly being promoted to chief of surgery.

As the town car headed into the suburbs, I called James.

“I’m going back to school,” I said when he answered.

A long pause. “You’re going . . . ?”

“Back to school. For my doctorate. In the fall if I can.”

“Okay.”

That’s all he said. *Okay*. My heart rate slowed.

“Where did this come from?” he asked.

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while. I was going to tell you after I looked into it some more, but now with your news . . .” I took a deep breath. “I wanted to be upfront about my plans, too. I’d really like to go back to school. Get my PhD in English.”

“Okay.”

I leaned back against the seat, eyes closing in relief.

“There’s no reason you can’t, Liv. Like I said, it’ll be a few years before the campaign starts. I won’t need you full time until then.”

My eyes opened. “But I’m going back to school for a job. I want a career.”

“With an English doctorate?”

“*Yes*, with an *English* doctorate,” I snapped.

“Sorry,” he said. “Of course you could do something. Maybe you could write.”

“Write?”

“Mysteries. I know you love mysteries. You could be the next Arnold Conan Doyle.”

I resisted the urge to correct him. *Arthur* Conan Doyle had been the subject of my master's thesis. James hadn't read a novel since college, but when he'd discovered my area of study, he'd read two volumes of the Sherlock Holmes stories, just for me.

"Fiction writing isn't really my thing," I said.

"Don't be modest, Liv. You're a great writer."

I'd meant that I had no interest in it as a career. I wanted to get out and do things, not tell stories about other people doing them. But at least he understood I needed a job. It was a start.

After we hung up, I relaxed into the seat again. I'd been overreacting. Even if he did run for senator, there was nothing to say he'd win. He wouldn't even run for five years anyway. Lots of time for me to persuade him this wasn't the path for us.

I was lost in my thoughts when the driver said, "Is this it, miss?"

I looked out the side window at the familiar gates. Manicured flowering shrubs softened the "keep out" message of the fence. My mother's touch. Dad always said if you're uncomfortable with the message a massive fence sends, then you damned well shouldn't put one up.

"Yes, this is it."

"Nice place."

Our house was actually modest for the neighborhood. The driver was impressed, though, which meant I had to give him a generous tip in addition to the standard gratuity on James's bill or he'd whine about the "cheap Mills & Jones brat."

As the driver did his paperwork, I walked to the front door. The rich scent of lilacs floated past, and I took a moment to enjoy it, the smell prompting memories of evening garden parties and late-night swims.

I glanced up at the sky. A perfect May evening, warm and clear. Still time for a swim if I could resolve Mum's problem fast enough. I might even get her into the pool if I promised to wear my suit.

I was still digging out my keys when our family lawyer flung open the door and practically dragged me inside, not an easy feat for a man who looks like Ichabod Crane, so pale and gaunt he breaks into a sweat climbing stairs.

"Howard?" I said as I escaped his grip. I sighed. "Let me guess. The board of directors wants Mum's feedback on something, and she's in a tizzy. How many times have we told them not to bother her?"

"It's not that. This is . . . a personal matter, Olivia."

My mother appeared in the study doorway.

"Olivia," she said in her soft British accent. "I hope my message didn't bring you home early."

"No," I lied. "James needed to leave, and I wouldn't stay without him."

Normally she'd have gently praised me for making the socially correct choice, which wasn't always my default. But she only nodded absently. She looked exhausted. I walked over to give her a hug, but she headed for the front door, double-checking the lock.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Come into the sitting room."

As I was following her down the hall, the doorbell rang. I glanced down the hall to see a tall, capped figure silhouetted by the porch light.

"The driver's back," I murmured. "What did I leave in the car this time?"

My mother sighed. "You really need to be more careful."

“I know, I know.”

As I reached for the handle, Howard hurried over.

“Olivia, allow me—”

“Got it.”

I swung open the door to see, not the driver, but a middle-aged man in a fedora. Behind him was a woman with a camera.

“Eden,” the man said. “I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

## Chapter Four

I lifted my hands to shield my face as the camera flashed.

“There’s no Eden here,” I said. “You’ve got the wrong house.”

“No, I don’t.” He lifted a recorder. “Tell me, Miss Larsen, how does it feel to be the long-lost daughter of America’s most notorious—”

Howard slammed the door and shot the bolt.

“What just . . . ?” I began. “Did they say what I thought they said?”

Howard tugged the sidelight curtains shut. Before I could ask my mother if we had a neighbor named Eden, she said, “I need to talk to you, Olivia.”

“Okay,” I said as I let her lead me into the sitting room. “We’ll ignore the crazy folks at the door. What’s up?”

Howard stayed in the doorway. I sat on the love seat and patted the spot beside me, but she was already heading for “her” chair—a very pretty antique so hard it felt like sitting on a rock. She hated the love seat, which didn’t match anything in the room. But it was comfortable. Some of my earliest memories were of being curled up on it with Dad as he read to me.

“What’s up?” I repeated.

“There’s something I need to tell you. Something we probably should have told you years ago.”

“Okay . . .”

She paused a moment, then blurted, “You’re adopted.”

“I’m . . . ?”

She nodded. Didn’t say the word again. Just nodded.

I stared at her. That wasn't possible. I looked just like my parents. Everyone said so. I had my mother's ash-blond hair and green eyes, and my dad's height, wide mouth and strong jaw.

"Did you say I'm . . . adopted?"

I waited for her to stare at me in confusion. Maybe even laugh. Clearly that was not what she'd said.

Instead, she paused for at least five seconds and then nodded.

I thought of the reporter at the door. "So he didn't get the wrong place. Someone found out I'm adopted. They went to the press. You wanted to warn me *before* someone showed up on our doorstep."

She nodded again.

"And now they're saying I'm the daughter of America's most notorious . . . what? Actor? Rock star? Politician? Oh God, please tell me it isn't a politician."

She said nothing. As we sat there in silence, her words finally sank in. Forget whose child I was. I was someone else's. Not hers. Not my dad's.

"I'm sorry," she said at last. "You shouldn't have had to find out about it this way."

"No, I shouldn't."

I looked over at her and the shock cleared, pain seeping in. Hard, angry pain. "You had no intention of telling me I was adopted until you were forced to."

Howard stepped forward. "Olivia, your parents were unable to have children of their own. They decided to give a wonderful, loving home to a child in need."

"I'm not questioning their motives," I said. "It's the part about not telling me for twenty-four years that I'm having trouble with."



“Twenty-one, actually. You—” Howard stopped. His sallow cheeks flushed. Then he cleared his throat, and stepped back. “I’m sorry. This really isn’t my place.”

“No shit,” I muttered.

My mother didn’t tell me to watch my language. Didn’t even flinch.

“So I’m *not* twenty-four?” I said.

“You are,” Mum said. “It’s just that you weren’t an infant when we adopted you. You were a little over two and a half. I wanted a toddler. Everyone wants a baby and there are so many older children who need a home.”

And it was much easier to find an older child who looked like you. Shame plucked at the edges of my anger, telling me I was being unfair.

We sat in silence. I didn’t want silence. I wanted to rage and shout and throw everything within reach.

I wanted Dad. If he was here, I *could* rage and shout and throw things. He’d expect no less. But with Mum’s worried eyes fixed on me, there was no way I could give in to a temper tantrum. Sitting there quietly hurt, though. Physically hurt.

“Okay,” I said finally. “So I’m not your daughter—”

“Of course you are. Don’t be melodramatic, Olivia. I only wanted to keep it a secret because I feared how others would treat you. When you live in a world of privilege, everyone wants to believe you don’t deserve it. I had a younger cousin who was adopted and people always behaved as though she didn’t really belong. I made your father swear that wouldn’t happen to you.”

“All right.” I took a deep, ragged breath that seared my lungs. “So now the word is out, and the press is making a big deal out of it. Must be a slow news day. We’re going to have to counter with a statement. I take it you know who my parents are?”

Silence. I looked at Mum. Then at Howard. Neither would meet my gaze.

“So you do know,” I said. “You just don’t want me knowing, because I might contact them. Well, clearly the press knows so you’re going to have to—”

“That’s not it,” Mum said. “Neither your father nor I had any idea who your biological parents were when we adopted you. I only found out tonight. According to Howard”—she shot a look his way—“your father learned the truth two years ago. He decided to keep it from both of us.”

“He *paid* a great deal to keep it from you,” Howard added.

Mum nodded, and they looked at me expectantly, as if I should be grateful for this, when all I could think was *My dad paid blackmail money to hide something from me. My father. Who’d never coddled me. Never shielded me from the darker side of life. I’d loved him for that. Pay blackmailers?* No, that wasn’t possible. Not from a man who would thunder and lecture me when I argued for leniency dealing with young shoplifters.

“I . . . don’t understand,” I said finally.

Howard answered. “Your father was the victim of a blackmailer who now seems to have realized he could get more money selling his story to the online tabloids.”

More money than he could get from my wealthy family? How big of a story was it?

I swallowed. “Who are my birth parents?”

Howard watched my mother for a moment, silently pleading with her to answer. When she didn't, he cleared his throat. "Pamela and Todd Larsen. The names will likely mean nothing to you—"

"I know who they are." The words came as a whisper, forced out past lungs that seemed to have collapsed, like I'd been hit in the chest with a five iron.

"Did you say . . . ?" Howard began.

"I know who they are. Everyone knows who they are."

Deep breaths. In and out. Don't think. Just breathe.

I shifted my gaze to my mother. She looked away.

*She looked away.*

Oh God. My own mother couldn't bear to look at me.

"So it's . . . ?" I shook my head and turned to Howard. "No, that's who they're *alleging* are my parents. It's a rumor. It has to be proven. I need to submit DNA and compare it to the records of these . . . people."

Howard shook his head. "Do you think your father didn't demand proof when this was first brought to him? The blackmailer provided test results and it wasn't enough. Your father took hair from your brush and had an independent lab test your DNA against the Larsens' DNA samples taken as evidence in their trial. There is no doubt. They are your biological parents."

"It means nothing, Olivia," my mother sniffed. "You are our daughter. Not theirs."

Not Pamela and Todd Larsen's. Not the child of . . . Oh God. My stomach heaved.

"I . . . I need a minute," I said and ran from the room.

## Chapter Five

*The names will likely mean nothing to you.*

Right. No one living in the Midwest hadn't heard of Pamela and Todd Larsen.

Husband and wife. Serial killers.

I was the daughter of two sociopaths.

I stared at my laptop. I knew who the Larsens were, but not a lot about them. I should look it up.

For what?

They were killers. Convicted serial killers. Did I want to torture myself with the details of their crimes? Or was I hoping it wasn't as bad as I'd heard? *Oh, they only killed six people, not eight like I thought. Well, that's not so bad.*

I turned away from the laptop.

A knock at the door. "Olivia?"

When I didn't answer, my mother went away, and I lay there, wondering if she'd actually wanted me to open the door. Or if she'd just come up because it was what a mother was supposed to do.

I thought of how she'd acted downstairs. She'd seemed anxious, and I wanted to say she'd been worried about me, but then I remembered how she evaded me when I'd gone to hug her. I remembered tapping the love seat for her to sit with me . . . and watching her move to the chair.

Damning evidence. Except that we'd never been close. It was my dad who'd curled up on the love seat with me. My dad who'd given me bear hugs and piggyback rides and swirled me off my feet, long after I was too big to be swirled. My mother was kind and she was caring. She was just . . . distant, with everyone. Raised to show her love in other ways.

I went into my bathroom and flipped the sink faucets on to cold, to give myself a jolt, get back on track. As I wet the cloth, I looked up and caught my reflection. I stopped. For the first time in my life, I didn't see that comforting blend of Arthur Jones and Lena Taylor. I saw—

I yanked my gaze away, ripped off my dress, stepped into the shower, and cranked the water up as hot as I could stand it.

When I got out, I avoided the mirror. I left my dress pooled on the bathroom floor and grabbed my jeans and jersey from earlier. I walked into my room to get fresh underwear and socks. Stopped when I reached my dresser.

There was no mirror here. Just reflections of another kind: photos, crowded across the dresser top in mismatched frames. The clutter drove my mother crazy. She was forever straightening them, trying to bring order to the chaos.

My photos. A record of my life. Of what mattered in it. Nana, gone four years now, the only grandparent I'd known, my dad's father long dead. My maternal grandparents' interest in me had never extended beyond the obligatory annual Christmas and birthday gifts. Impersonal gifts for a child they didn't know.

A child they'd *never* known, I realized now. Growing up, I'd been told my parents and I had lived in England until I was three, when my grandfather died and Dad had to return to take over the business. Not true. The Larsens were American. So my parents had adopted me when they moved back here. A convenient way to pretend that I'd been their child all along. Only I hadn't been. My mother's family knew that and they wanted nothing to do with me.

I turned back to the photos. There were more pictures of my parents than anyone else, yet no more than the number they had of me scattered throughout the house. The three of us, our perfect little family.

There were photos of friends, too. Childhood friends. College friends. No best friend—I never felt the need for such a thing, preferring quantity over quality. Did that mean something? An inability to form truly close bonds of friendship?

My gaze slid to the photos on the far right. The most recent, the others inched aside to give way to the new phase of my life.

James.

I hurried to the desk and grabbed my cell phone. I went to hit the speed dial, then stopped.

How would he react?

I shook my head. Was I actually questioning that? This wouldn't be easy, but we'd get through it. First, though, I had to tell him before anyone else did.

I hit the key. The call went straight to voice mail.

I checked the clock. Just past midnight. He'd probably gone to bed. I left a message saying I needed to speak to him. Then I hung up and walked to the window.

A half-moon shone through the star-studded inky black of the clear night sky. I opened the window. The breeze fluttered in, rich with the smell of wood fire from the neighbor's yard, the faint glow of an extinguished bonfire still visible over the hedge.

A beautiful night for a bonfire. A beautiful night for a swim, too, as the moon shimmered across the ripples in our pool. Maybe I could still do that. Maybe I *should*. Slice through the cool water, feel it wash over me, carry everything else away.

I pressed my fingers to the glass. Light flashed from the back of the yard. I blinked and shaded my eyes to peer out. Another flash. Then another. The staccato blinks of a camera shutter. I yanked the curtains so hard the rod popped free. I left it hanging, stalked to my bed, and dropped onto it.

“Olivia?” My mother was at my door again. “There are people outside. More media people.”

I sat up and instinctively glanced toward the mirror, to make sure I looked calm and collected. When I caught my reflection, my stomach clenched so hard I winced.

“Olivia? I know this is a shock, but you need to deal with this.”

*I needed to deal with it? Not even we.*

I took a deep breath and heard my dad’s voice after his heart attack. When he knew he was dying.

*She’s not like us, Livy. She just isn’t. Fair or not, you’re going to need to be strong enough for two. Can you do that?*

“Is Howard still here?” I called.

“Yes.”

“Tell him I’ll be down in a minute. We’ll—”

The crash of breaking glass cut me off.

I threw open my door. A thump from downstairs. I pushed my mother behind me, shielding her.

“Howard?” I yelled.

“They’ve broken in,” my mother whimpered. “Oh my God, they’ve broken in.”

“They’re journalists, Mum, not a lynch mob. No matter how badly they want the story, they won’t break in to get it. Just hold tight.”

I started for the stairs.

She grabbed my arm. “Don’t leave me here.”

“Okay, then stay right behind me—” Damn it, that wouldn’t work, either. While I was sure we hadn’t been invaded by crazed paparazzi, I wasn’t taking my mother downstairs until I knew what was going on.

“Howard?” I called from the top of the steps.

He appeared at the bottom. “They broke a pane in the French doors to the patio.” His face was calm, but his voice quavered. “I think it was an accident. They were jostling to get a picture and a pane broke.”

“Okay, so have you called—?”

A shout from below. So loud and clear that I froze.

“Are they inside?”

“No, no. They’re just shouting for you through the broken pane. They want you to make a statement. In my professional opinion, I don’t think you should speak to them.”

“Good, because I’m not going to. Have you called the police?”

“I don’t want to raise a fuss,” my mother murmured behind me.

“There are people in our backyard, Mum. I’m raising as big a fuss as I can. Call the police now, Howard. We’re going to stay up here until someone comes.”

Howard made the call. I heard him speaking into the phone, then his voice got loud. “When you have someone free? Maybe I’m not making myself clear. Mrs. Lena Taylor—who is a



generous donor to your force's annual fund-raiser—is under siege, with hooligans breaking her windows.”

*Hooligans?* That made it sound like some kid jumped the fence and tossed a rock.

“Wait here,” I said to my mother. “I’ll handle this.”

## Chapter Six

My mother chirped in protest but stayed on the top step as I descended. When I got to the bottom, I saw three faces plastered to the broken patio door, like kids trying to catch a glimpse of an R-rated movie.

A burst of flashes blinded me.

“Ms. Jones?”

“Olivia?”

Shit. Okay, not my brightest move. I retreated out of sight.

“Ms. Jones? Could I ask you a few questions?”

“Olivia? Just a quick statement?”

“Miss Larsen? Hello! Miss Larsen?”

I stiffened.

“Okay,” I muttered. “You want a statement—”

A hand grabbed my arm. I looked back to see Howard.

“Do not engage them, Olivia. That’s what they want.”

“That’s why I’m giving it to them, so they’ll take their damned statement and get the hell off our property. I don’t like them scaring Mum.”

I unwrapped his fingers from my arm and, ignoring the flashes, walked close enough to the broken door so they all could hear me.

I held up one hand to quiet them down. “Fine, you want a statement? I just found out tonight that my biological parents are, allegedly, Pamela and Todd Larsen. I will be investigating this claim. In the meantime, I will ask that everyone respect our privacy and—”

A yelp cut me short. Someone was jostling through the crowd toward the patio doors amid shouts of “Hey!” and “Watch it!”

Then, just as suddenly, the crowd went still. The two older journalists in the front lowered their cameras and pens. One leaned over to whisper to a young woman who looked confused. Her eyes widened and she stepped back to give the newcomer room.

It was an old man. Maybe not that old—seventy or so—but tall and stooped, his rheumy eyes blazing at me.

He stuck a gnarled hand through the broken pane, reaching for the lock.

“Whoa!” I stepped forward. “This is private property, sir. You can’t come in here.”

“I can and I will,” he said. “You may have all these people fooled, but I know who you are.”

I turned to Howard, then heard a cry of, “Sir, you shouldn’t do that” from the crowd.

The old man had flipped the lock. A few journalists continued halfhearted protests, but all of them leaned forward, eyes glittering, cameras raised.

He pushed open the door and marched in.

“Get the police here now!” I said to Howard. Then I turned back to the old man. “You have five seconds to get out.”

The man continued toward me. “I don’t know how you got here, in this fancy house, but—”

“It’s *my home*, and you’ll get out of it now.”

He stopped right in front of me. I blanched, seeing something in his eyes I’d never seen before. Hate. Pure, unadulterated hate.

“You think you got away with it,” he spat. “Think you got yourself a fancy new life. I remember what you did. Every day of my life, I remember.”

Howard said, “He’s clearly disturbed, Olivia. Go back upstairs.”

“Disturbed?” the old man roared. “You’re the crazy one, for harboring this she-bitch—”

He hit me with both hands, knocking me to the floor. I landed on the broken glass and felt it bite into my bare arms. As I scrambled up, he grabbed a shard, gripping it so hard blood welled up through his fingers. He swung it at me. I caught his arm. It wasn’t hard to stop him—he was an old man. When he snarled, I dug my fingers in until he let out a hiss of pain and dropped the glass.

I glowered at him. “If you think I’m my parents’ daughter, then you don’t want to do that. You really don’t.”

Silence. Stunned silence. For a second, I thought, *I’ve done it. They’ll leave now.* Then I saw the shock in the old man’s eyes, and knew in that instant that I’d made a very big mistake. That’s when the cameras started to flash again. I let the old man go.

“Olivia . . .” My mother’s voice from the foot of the stairs.

I wrenched my gaze from the intruders and blinked hard, and when I did, it was like breaking a spell. Suddenly, I was lost in a roar of voices.

“Mr. Gunderson!” someone shouted. “Niles Gunderson!”

“Sir, can we ask about your daughter? About Jan. Does this bring it all back?”

I froze. Gunderson. Jan Gunderson. The Larsens’ last victim.

I turned back to the old man. “I—”

He slapped my face so hard I reeled back.

“I know you, Pamela Larsen,” he snarled as he came after me. “I don’t care what you’re calling yourself these days or what color you dye your hair. I know you.”

My mother screamed. Howard shoved me behind him as he shouted for my mother to get back upstairs.

A stampede of feet clattered across the patio. People were shoving past the journalists—a greasy-haired man with a ragged notebook, a college kid with a video camera. Not real journalists. Just people hoping to sell a picture or a firsthand account. The kind who didn't know that chasing me into my house was against the law. Or the kind who didn't care.

“Miss Larsen?”

“Eden! Look over here!”

“Mrs. Taylor?”

The kid with the video camera rushed past me toward my mother. Mum started up the stairs. The kid reached over the railing and caught her sleeve.

The rip of tearing fabric. A gasp. A thump as she tripped, falling down the steps and landing in a heap at the base.

I shoved past two reporters and scooped her up.

“The car!” I yelled to Howard. “Get your car!”

I half dragged, half carried my mother to the garage. Cameras flashed. Voices shouted. Hands grabbed for us. I kept plowing through, oblivious.

When I got into the garage, Howard was already in his Mercedes, engine running. I pushed Mum forward.

“Get in the car!” I yelled.

She didn't hesitate. Didn't even look back.

Howard hit the button to open the garage door. I shouted to wait until I was in, but the door was rising and I could make out the legs of people outside waiting for it to open. Someone shoved a video camera underneath.

My mother's face was stark with terror. There was a bloody print on her shoulder, from my cut hand. I saw her face and I saw that blood, and I realized I couldn't get into Howard's car. If I did, the reporters would never let it out of the garage.

I had to protect my mother. I'd promised Dad.

I waved at Howard. "Go! Get her out of here."

He didn't need any more prompting. I was probably lucky he didn't throw open the door and shove my mother out in his haste to escape.

He put the car into reverse. My mother just sat in the backseat. I told myself she was in shock, but it looked like simple relief. She'd gotten away. As for me . . . ? Well, I could look after myself.

The Mercedes reversed down the driveway, sending the onlookers scattering like bowling pins. No one tried to stop Howard. Their prey was still in the garage, alone and defenseless.

I ran. No choice really. Well, there was. I could grab the pruning shears and attack anyone who came near me. I considered it. Even wondered whether I could get away with a self-defense plea. I might have done it, too, if I hadn't just discovered who I was and realized that slicing someone up really wouldn't be the way to prove I wasn't truly the Larsens' daughter.

I darted inside my dad's workshop and threw the dead bolt. I took a quick look around at the tools. The heavy tools. The sharp tools. The lethal tools.

A longing look. Then a queasy look, before I raced out the back door. A glance around. No one in sight yet. I followed the line of trees across the property and took off.

### The Product of Monsters

The college student huddled behind the tree, listening to the cacophony of voices inside the house. Dear God, had they actually broken in? She rubbed her arms against the night's chill. Her fingers brushed the strap around her neck, and she looked down at the camera, hanging there like an albatross.

It had seemed so simple when he phoned. She hadn't heard from him since school broke for exams. He'd said he'd call, but he hadn't. Then he did.

"Hey," he'd said. "You live in Chicago, right?"

She told herself it wasn't really a question. Of course he remembered where she lived.

She'd said yes, and he'd said, "Good. 'Cause there's this story about to break. I got a heads-up from a buddy of mine. It's leaked on the Internet, but not far, meaning it's still fresh, and it's taking place right there in Chicago. Do you know where Kenilworth is?"

She did. Not that she'd ever been there. People in her neighborhood didn't know those in Kenilworth unless they worked for them.

"Perfect," he'd said. "I need you to snap a couple pictures of a girl who lives there. You can do that, right?"

Of course she could. She was a photographer. That's how they'd met—working for the school paper. While she hadn't liked the idea of sneaking onto private property—especially in Kenilworth—she'd do it for him.

Turned out, trespassing wasn't really an issue, considering she hadn't been the first one there. The others were mainly bloggers and small press, maybe not as concerned about the law as

they should be. She thought they might try to run her off, but they just let her hang out with them at the back door.

That's when she'd found out who the girl was.

"Todd and Pam Larsen's kid," one of the older journalists said, his breath reeking of garlic. "Can you believe that? Everyone figured they'd shipped her off for adoption in Australia, and she ends up here. She grew up as the daughter of that department store family."

She'd nodded as he talked, hoping eventually he'd explain who Todd and Pam Larsen were. The names were familiar, and she was sure if he gave her a clue, she'd figure out why, but he'd just kept bathing her in garlic breath until she faked getting a call and backed off the patio.

She'd looked up the Larsens on her phone. When she found out who they were, she knew why she didn't remember them. Because if she'd heard about them before, she'd wiped it from her memory. Would have bleached it out if she could. Now they were stuck there. Imprinted on her brain. The Larsens and what they'd done.

Oh God, what they'd done.

She'd abandoned her post then. Gone to huddle under a tree in the yard and try to keep dinner in her stomach.

The girl inside. The rich girl. The one everyone was waiting for. She was the child of these killers. The product of monsters.

She supposed she should feel sorry for the girl. Olivia Taylor-Jones was apparently only a couple of years older than her. But she couldn't feel sorry for her. Couldn't feel anything but disgust and horror.

If she just found out she was the child of such monsters, she'd take a header off the Sears Tower. You couldn't go on after that. You just couldn't.



She'd been sitting there, thinking of that, when they broke into the house. Now she listened to the commotion inside. Shouts. Crashes. A car starting.

Olivia was getting away. This would be her last chance for a photo. She didn't want the photo. Didn't want to *look* at the Larsens' daughter. But he expected it.

She moved up alongside the house. The car backed out and zoomed down the drive so fast she barely got her camera raised before it was gone.

She leaned against the garage wall and exhaled. She'd tried. She'd tell him that she tried but—

The side door clicked open.

She froze, then pushed back against the wall, crushing vines.

A young woman stepped out. She shut the door and looked around.

It was her. It had to be her. Blond hair. Piercing eyes. Her face hard as she surveyed the yard. She'd been calling Olivia Taylor-Jones "the girl," but there was nothing girlish about her. Nothing soft. Nothing warm.

The product of monsters. A fiend masquerading as a pretty young woman.

Last chance to snap a photo. A perfect shot. Just take it.

But if the flash went, Olivia—or rather, Eden—would see it. She wasn't far enough away to escape . . .

She pressed herself harder against the wall and waited, barely daring to breathe until Eden broke into a jog and disappeared into the night.

Afterward she stood there, shivering and shuddering against the wall, until her legs could hold her and she staggered forward. Her shoe caught on a broken piece of vine and she stumbled, twisting to see the door Eden had come through. To see what she'd left behind.

A bloody handprint.