

SOMEONE IS ALWAYS WATCHING

KELLEY ARMSTRONG



PROLOGUE

THEN

Do you want to do something bad?

That was how it began. Seven words that started a friendship forged in anger and hurt and the dark joy of vengeance. It would become more, so much more, but it started there, fittingly.

I'd been at a company picnic with my parents and their colleagues. Running around with "the crew"—my friends whose parents also worked at the lab.

The company always hired a couple of high-schoolers to watch over us. Today, they sat on a picnic table while we amused ourselves. When we realized they were deep in a private conversation, we snuck closer to eavesdrop. Under Tucker's direction, we crept from tree to tree like guerrilla soldiers until we overheard them talking—about us.

"Tucker's cool," the girl was saying.

"He's a brat," the guy said.

“But he’s *interesting*. Not like Blythe.” The girl rolled her eyes. “Can you imagine being ten years old and already that boring? Always does as she’s told. Never causes any trouble. It’s like she had surgery to remove her personality.”

The guy laughed, and I froze. My gaze darted from tree to tree as I prayed no one else had heard. But they had. They all had.

I bolted. Ran as fast as I could, deep into the park, and huddled at the foot of a giant elm, shaking with an emotion I’d never felt. An emotion I couldn’t name. Humiliation.

I didn’t cry. I just shook, in rage and fury. When I heard footsteps, I jumped up.

“It’s just me,” Tucker said, appearing from around some bushes.

He lowered himself to the ground and sat there, watching me and saying nothing. Tucker was one of our crew, but I mostly hung out with his sister, Tanya. As the babysitters said, Tucker was trouble. My head told me to stay away from him. In my gut, though, I envied him. Nobody ever called Tucker Martel boring.

“Do you want to do something bad?” he asked.

My head jerked up, my eyes meeting his.

Yes.

The answer leaped to my lips, and I clamped my jaw shut as my brain shouted warnings.

Nothing bad. Never do anything bad, Blythe. Ever.

People presume I have strict parents. Those people have never met my mom and dad. Whatever small voice whimpers and panics at the thought of misbehaving, it’s mine and mine alone. Yet underneath it quivers a part of my soul that hungers for a taste of darkness.

A taste of darkness. That was Tucker Martel personified.

When I didn’t answer, he rose, lips curving into a shadow of his

usual exuberant grin. That smile was shy and uncertain—words I would never have applied to Tucker.

“Let me show you,” he said.

We made our way to the parking lot, where he waved at a little blue car.

“That’s the babysitter’s car,” he said. “The one with the hole in the window.”

I squinted at it. “I don’t see a hole.”

“Not yet.” He grinned and picked up a rock. When he held it out, I stared.

“You want me to . . . ,” I began.

“Only if you want to.” He glanced at the car. “I can do it if you’d like.”

I shook my head.

He glanced over. “If you get caught, I’ll say it was me.”

“That isn’t right,” I said.

“No one would believe it was you anyway. Blythe Warren would never throw a rock through a window.”

“Because she’s boring.”

“Nah, because she doesn’t want to get in trouble. That’s normal. I’m just weird.”

“Weird is interesting. Weird is cool.”

“I don’t do it to be cool.” He squinted at the car, his freckles bunching. “She was mean to you. She shouldn’t get away with that.”

Did saying something cruel deserve a broken window? All I knew is that I really wanted to do it.

I took the rock, hefted it, and pitched it as hard as I could. The window shattered spectacularly, and I stood there, bouncing on my toes, grinning.

Then the car alarm screeched. I froze, horror flooding me, but Tucker grabbed my arm and we ran. We ran, and we kept running until we collapsed in the grass, snorting with laughter.

It was the start of a beautiful friendship.

Do you want to do something bad?

Yes. Yes, I do.

ONE

NOW

Eight-thirty in the morning, and I can already declare it a shitty day. I overslept, skipped breakfast, and forgot my travel mug and granola bar on the counter. I also forgot to take my migraine meds. Hence the headache that threatens to split my skull.

I have regular painkillers in my locker, so I beeline there. I know I have a bottle of ibuprofen, and it should be easy to find in a locker like mine. I swear, every time I open it a passing student snorts in derision. Typical Blythe Warren. So uptight that even her locker looks as if it belongs in an advertisement for storage organizers.

It wasn't like this last year. Oh, it was never the trash heap that my little sister calls a locker, but I'd had no problem shoving in books and tidying later. The incident last spring taught me I need to do better. Hold tighter. Stay in control.

Do you want to do something bad?

Absolutely not.

No, that's a lie. I still want to. But I've learned my lesson.

That's when I realize I gave the ibuprofen to Gabrielle, who's been having headaches of her own recently.

I sigh and rub my temples as I look up and down the hall for Gabrielle. We go to a private STEM school, which sounds fancy, but it's just a perk offered by Coeus Medical Technologies, the research lab where my parents work. Coeus Prep is a tiny school, with only a hundred and forty students, most of them the children of CMT employees.

"B-Blythe?" a voice says behind me.

I turn to see a red-haired freshman holding out an extra-large coffee.

"I-it's Blythe, right?"

The poor kid looks like he's delivering a top-secret package, his life on the line if it falls into the wrong hands.

"This is for you." He thrusts out the coffee. "It's from—uh, from . . ."

"Tucker," I say.

The freshman nods, his chin wobbling. "I don't know him. I mean, I do—everyone does, but he just kind of . . ."

"Stopped you in the hall and told you to bring me this?"

"Right."

I roll my eyes. "Well, he owes you one, then. He'll remember that. But you don't need to do what he says."

The kid looks unconvinced. Then he roots around in his pocket and withdraws something hidden tight in his fist.

He looks around furtively. "Also this."

I put out my hand, and he passes me a plastic baggie of pills. I glance at it as the kid frantically waves for me to hide it.

"It's painkillers," I say. "A grab bag of painkillers, because I get migraines."

“Whatever. None of my business.”

“It really is—”

Another wave. “I don’t need to know.”

The kid hurries off, and I lift the cup. On it, where the name should be, it says *Bliss*. That’s Tucker’s nickname for me, bliss being a synonym for blithe. Blythe. Blithe. Bliss. The guy devours books the way I devour data. Not that it helps him much in a STEM school.

I glance at the baggie. Tucker started stashing this mixed bag of painkillers when I began getting migraines. He must have seen me coming into school and could tell that I hadn’t had my coffee and I’d forgotten my meds.

I scan the hallway, knowing I won’t see him. He didn’t do this to win brownie points. He did it because I needed it. I cherish all my friends, but Tucker is something special. For better or worse.

I take out my phone and text him a simple TY, and he responds with a thumbs-up. It’s our first text in two weeks. There’d been a time when we texted hourly. That was before the incident. Before our parents made us swear we’d keep our distance from each other. The alternative was that one of us would be transferred to another school, and I knew by “one of us” they meant Tucker. I’d never do that to him.

The last time I’d texted had been the anniversary of his mother leaving. A quick “thinking of you today,” and his “Dad’s moping, but T & I are fine.”

As I root around in the baggie, a couple of passing kids do a double take. I don’t bother to explain. They could tell Meeks—our VP—and he wouldn’t even order a locker search. Tucker’s gets searched weekly, which is ironic because he’s as straight-edge as they come. The power of illusion and reputation. I down two pills

with a slug of coffee, and I'm tucking the baggie into my locker when Gabrielle walks up to hers beside mine.

"Hey," I say.

She starts spinning her lock. She's moving as if in a trance, purple-black smudges under glassy brown eyes.

"Gabrielle?" I say.

She gives a start, blinking and looking around as her eyes focus. Seeing me, she gives a smile, tired but genuine. She practically falls into my hug, and I squeeze her.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

She steps back and her gaze surveys the hallway. "Have you noticed the cameras?" she whispers.

"What?"

She jerks her chin toward one of the security cameras. Her braids swing with the movement, her gaze barely skimming the camera, as if she doesn't want to be seen looking directly at it.

I frown at the camera. It's nothing new. The school was built fully wired for tech.

"What about them?" I ask.

"They're always—"

The bell clangs. I wait for it to stop and then say, "They're always what?"

She fixes me with that tired smile and shakes her head. "Nothing. I'm just . . . off."

"Headache?"

"Yeah. They're getting worse."

"You need to talk to your parents. In the meantime . . ." I swing the baggie in front of her. "I have drugs."

She laughs softly. "Tuck?" Before I can answer, she notices the

name on my coffee cup. “Silly question.” She puts out her hand. “Hit me up.”

I do, and then I shove the baggie into my locker, and we head to class.

* * *

It’s lunchtime, and I’m heading to the cafeteria when Gabrielle texts.

Gabrielle: Skipping lunch. Sorry! Forgot I had a group assignment.

I slow outside the doors. We usually eat together as a group. That’s easier when Gabrielle’s there. Otherwise, if Andre and Callum have track practice, it could just be Tanya and Tucker, and that’s awkward these days.

I’m ready to slip off to the library when someone waves from a table. He’s a dark-haired guy, so good-looking that his glasses seem like a Clark Kent disguise. I smile and hurry into the cafeteria. Callum Kilpatrick’s parents joined CMT last year. I like Callum. Well, I suppose that’s a given, considering we went on our first date Friday.

For months, Callum had made it clear that he’d like to get to know me better, but I don’t date, for all kinds of complicated reasons. Recently, I’d begun to wonder whether “reasons” really meant “excuses,” and “complicated” really meant “Tucker.” So when Callum started talking about a new movie we both hoped to see, I suggested we go together.

Callum's sitting across from Andre Washington, his fellow track-team star. Callum is the team captain, mostly because Andre didn't want it. Andre is our class president, mostly because Callum didn't want that. If our school had a homecoming king, they'd be the main contenders.

On the opposite side of the table sit Tucker and Tanya. People always mistake them for twins because—being less than a year apart—they're in the same grade. They share the same sandy blond hair and dark blue eyes, but otherwise there's little resemblance.

Tucker has the kind of build that sets football coaches drooling. I get people suggesting I should lose a few pounds—*you're so pretty, you could be a model*. With Tucker, they suggest he gain weight, specifically muscle—*you've got the build for it; you could be a quarterback*. I don't need to lose weight; I'm a size ten. Tucker doesn't need to put on muscle; he's tall and rangy, in that loose-limbed surfer-boy way.

I suspect my "you could be a model" compliments are mostly just encouragement for me to lose weight. In Tanya's case, they come complete with model-agency scout cards. She's freaking gorgeous, tall and slender with a face no actual sixteen-year-old should have. Gabrielle and I joke that Tanya must sacrifice small animals for that perfect skin.

The only thing that would keep Tanya from a modeling career—well, beyond the fact that she'd *rather* sacrifice small animals—is her expression. People call it resting bitch face. With Tanya, it's full-on active bitch face. Yet even as she turns her glare my way, I can't suppress a jolt of grief. Apparently, in stepping away from Tucker, I also lost his sister's friendship. Still not quite sure how that works, but with Tanya, one doesn't question.

"Hello, all," I say as I walk over. "Happy Friday."

I slide into a chair as they return the greeting. Well, the guys do. Tanya attacks her burger like it's still alive.

"Has anyone seen Gabi this morning?" I ask, as nonchalantly as I can.

"I did," Andre says. "Passed her in the hall between first and second period. She seemed lost in thought. Everything okay?"

I make a face. "I think so. I'm just fussing."

"Is she coming to lunch?" Callum asks.

"No, she has a group assignment." I take my sandwich box from my backpack. "I hear Adrian's parents finally agreed to let him have his annual Halloween—"

"I need to talk to my sister," says a voice behind me.

"Hey, Syd," Callum says.

"Hey, Colin."

Callum rolls his eyes. He thinks she's teasing, and a month ago, he'd have been right, but there's an edge to my sister's voice, as if she's saying, "Remind me who you are again?"

I excuse myself and follow Sydney into the hall. Once the cafeteria doors close behind us, she says, "He had his *hand* on your *chair*, Blythe."

I widen my eyes. "Oh my God. *No*. Completely unacceptable. If Callum wants to put his hand somewhere, it clearly belongs on my thigh. Or draped over my shoulders, fingertips brushing my boob."

"Just wait. That part is coming. Closely followed by waking up to a Mrs. Kilpatrick tattoo."

I shake my head. "Resting his fingers on my cafeteria chair. It's the first step headfirst down a slippery slope to marital servitude. One might think you have something against the guy. Which is weird, because I'm sure you've told me how nice he is."

“He’s nice as a friend. As a boyfriend?” She shudders. “He’s the female you. High-school Barbie and Ken. So damned perfect, he’s boring.”

Tension slams through me. I roll my shoulders to shake it off.

Sydney continues, “You need someone who complements you. Someone like . . .”

I follow her gaze through the cafeteria window. It rests squarely on Tucker.

“Don’t start that again,” I say, as I wave her away from the window.

“Why not? You’re being stupid. Tucker is—”

“I don’t think Callum is boring,” I say breezily as we walk. “Did you know he plays D&D online with his old friends? Tabletop version. Every Tuesday night.”

“Yeah. Hey, look at us playing this retro nerd game. Aren’t we *ironic*?” She makes a gagging noise.

I shake my head. She’s wrong. There *is* a secret geek in Callum, one that shares my love of comics and anime, but Sydney’s at that age where once she judges someone, they stay judged, despite any evidence to the contrary.

“He’s also a great kisser,” I say. “Like *amazingly* great.”

That makes her cheeks pink, which is adorable.

“Such a good kisser,” I say.

“Stop. Please.”

“Let me give you a little sisterly advice. When it comes to kissing, you want someone who knows what they’re doing, but isn’t *too* polished. The right amount of pressure, the right amount of enthusiasm, the right amount of tongue—”

“Stop.”

“The tongue is the most important part. You want—”

“Callum’s a great kisser. Got it. I wonder what Tucker would be like.” She glances at me. “Well, that shut you up.”

“I presume you wanted to speak to me about something other than my taste in boys?”

“It’s Gabi. I bumped into her between classes. She was talking to herself. Or that’s what she said, but she seemed to be talking to the wall. Something about being watched?” She shrugs. “It was weird. I promised not to tell you, but then I thought about it and realized I should.”

“Thank you.” I throw my arm around her shoulders. She allows it for 1.5 seconds before shrugging out of my embrace.

“I won’t tell her,” I say. “But thank you. I mean that.”

A *whatever* shrug as her gaze slides away.

We turn another corner, heading back to the cafeteria.

“Oh, look,” she mutters. “Here comes Callum, making sure you didn’t get lost.”

I make kissing noises at her.

She rolls her eyes but smiles, too. “He’s a nice guy, Blythe, but you don’t need nice. You have enough for two people.”

“I will take that as a compliment, even if it’s not meant to be. Go have lunch, Syd. I’ll see you at home.”

* * *

Callum hadn’t been coming to find me. He was popping out to use the restroom. I don’t tell him about Gabrielle. I don’t tell anyone. One, I’d hate for Gabrielle to find out Sydney didn’t keep her secret. Two, I’m afraid I’m overreacting, as always.

I only tell the others that I'm a bit worried about her, and to please let me know if they bump into her and anything seems wrong. They will. We have each other's backs. Always.

That doesn't stop me from fretting. Gabrielle and I have last class together, and I hang around the door, wanting to speak to her beforehand. I'm still there when Ms. Lee says, "Blythe? Are you joining us?"

Biology lab starts without Gabrielle. I tell myself that's fine. She's gone home early because of her headache.

It's twenty minutes into class when Gabrielle walks in. No, she *storms* in, and that is so unlike her that every head pops up.

She marches through the door and stops short. Her gaze fixes on the security camera.

"Why is that there?" she demands, cutting off Ms. Lee mid-sentence.

Ms. Lee turns from the smart board, her eyes widening when she sees who's speaking like that. "Gabrielle?"

"Why is that there?" Gabrielle says. "Why is it *watching* us?"

Had it been anyone else, Ms. Lee would have told her to sit. But the teacher only gapes.

"The security system?" Ms. Lee's gaze lifts to the camera. "That isn't new, Gabrielle. It's there for everyone's safety."

"It's watching us. It's *always* watching."

People shift, as if they're witnessing an awkward private moment.

I glance around for friends. There's only Devon, who doesn't count. He used to, but after moving away for a year, he returned a very different guy, one who wanted nothing to do with his old "crew." Not even Gabrielle, who'd been his best friend. He's watching her, though. Watching and frowning.

"Are you all right, Gabrielle?" Ms. Lee asks carefully.

“No,” Gabrielle says at the front. “I am not all right. I am fuck-
ing *sick* of being watched.”

I blink at the profanity. Gabrielle grabs Ms. Lee’s chair and strides toward the camera. The teacher swings in front of her and takes hold of the chair.

“I’m not sure what you think you’re doing, Miss Harris—”

“I don’t want to be watched. Is that not fucking clear?”

Ms. Lee stiffens. “You have a privacy concern. That’s understandable, but interrupting class is not the correct expression of it. Nor is cursing. Take a seat, Gabrielle.”

“Not with that thing watching me.”

“All right, then. Maybe you’d prefer the chairs in the VP’s office. Blythe? Would you please lead the experiment?”

I hesitate. I want to say I’ll take Gabrielle, but she’s already marching toward the door. I nod and take my notes to the front.

TWO

When Ms. Lee returns, I ask about Gabrielle. She assures me everything is fine. She suspects Gabrielle has read an inflammatory article on CCTV concerns. Which isn't like Gabrielle at all.

I don't know what to do, and an inner voice whispers that I'm being presumptuous to think I should do anything. This is bizarre behavior for Gabrielle, but our teachers are always on the watch for that. We joke that they treat us like hormone-bombs, always one breakup or bad grade from detonation.

After class, Devon catches up to me.

"What's going on?" he says, which may be his first words to me all term.

"I have no idea, but I'm going to find out."

He hesitates and then says, "Let me know, okay?"

His concern would make a lot more sense if he hasn't spent the last two months telling his old friends to fuck off when they expressed the least bit of concern about *him*.

"I don't have your new number," I say carefully.

He takes out his phone and texts me. “Now you do,” he says, and walks away.

I message Sydney to say I won’t be on the bus. Then I take up residence in a restroom stall. I wait ten minutes after the bus leaves before peeking out. A nearby window shows an exit jam in the teachers’ parking lot. It’s Friday; no one lingers if they don’t have to.

I do pass a couple of teachers in the hall, but they only wish me a good weekend. If Blythe Warren is at school late, she obviously has a good reason. Which I do.

I need to hear what’s going on with Gabrielle. Fortunately, I know how to do that. Most C-Prep students do. Staff always seem completely unaware of things every freshman knows by Halloween. Like the “dark hall”—a spot where the cameras can’t see you. Or the place inside the study room where, if you stand just right, you can hear office conversation through the vent.

I sneak into the study room. It’s never locked. No one’s going to stop students from studying.

I once mentioned our study room to an online friend, and she thought I meant study hall—a euphemism for detention. Apparently, this room is proof that we do indeed go to a private school. It’s like the perfect coffee-shop study spot, full of comfy armchairs and laptop outlets.

I ease the door shut just as the janitor’s broom swishes around the corner. Then, leaving the lights off, I creep to the listening spot and curl up in the nearest chair.

At first, I hear nothing interesting. Then, as the principal leaves, she asks when Gabrielle’s parents will arrive, and Meeks says they should be here by four thirty. The secretary offers to stay, but Meeks insists he’s fine and wishes her a good weekend.

By 4:10 p.m., the building has been silent for twenty minutes when Gabrielle says, "I'm leaving now."

"Soon, Gabrielle," Meeks says. "Your parents are on their way."

"I am leaving *now*."

The VP's voice takes on his *I'm serious* tone, which no one actually takes seriously. Meeks used to be our principal. He switched to VP last year. On the retirement track, Dad says. Mom jokes that he should have been on it a decade ago. Meeks looks close to seventy, and when he stands, he gives that little grunt old people do, as if it takes effort. As the guy in charge of school discipline, he's a joke. Tucker says getting away with shit is almost discouragingly easy these days.

Still, Meeks makes the effort, and I can picture him straightening as he says, "Gabrielle Harris, I am going to give you the benefit of the doubt and presume something very upsetting has happened in your personal life."

"I am leaving *now*!" The last word booms so loud I leap to my feet.

I have never heard Gabrielle shout. Cry, yes, over a breakup or a singing audition that didn't go her way. I've heard her shriek in a haunted house or a horror movie. I've heard her yelp when she banged her knee or stubbed her toe. But never shout.

Gabrielle is the most even-tempered person I know. Part of that is her medical condition. Getting worked up could be dangerous for her heart. So she doesn't.

"Your parents—" Meeks begins.

"Those people are not my parents."

I blink.

What did she say?

I must have misheard. Gabrielle isn't adopted. At least, I don't think she is.

What if she *is*, and she just found out? I can't imagine her parents keeping that from her, but it could explain why she isn't herself today.

I'm so wrapped in my thoughts that I don't catch the next few exchanges. Then a door slams, and I jump.

"Gabrielle, I need you to sit down."

"Let me out of this room."

"This is not like you. Let me call your parents—"

"They are not my parents! My parents are dead! Dead! Did you think I'd forgotten that? Did you think I'd forgotten the cameras? You're watching. You're always watching. Just waiting for me to do something wrong so you can punish me."

Meeks sputters. "I-I honestly have no idea what you're talking about, Gabrielle. Before today, you've never given us cause for concern, much less *punishment*. I need you to sit down and—"

A bloodcurdling screech has me stumbling over my feet. There's a thump and a cry, but I'm already out of the study room. I skid around the corner, calling, "Mrs. Forrester!" for the janitor, but she's nowhere to be seen.

The hall seems to stretch forever, and I can barely make out muffled sounds from the direction of the office. I run, sliding around corners, my heart thudding even as I wonder whether I'm overreacting.

Meeks hasn't hurt Gabrielle. He wouldn't. Gabrielle must have freaked out, and he's trying to calm her down. That's it.

I stop calling for Mrs. Forrester. If Gabrielle is having some kind of breakdown, she'll be mortified later. The fewer people who witness it, the better.

I reach the office door. It's closed, and I fumble with the knob, my sweat-slick hands refusing to grip, my brain screaming that it's

locked and something is wrong, horribly wrong. Then it swings open.

The main office is empty, the lights dimmed. I stand there, hearing only the pant of my own breathing. Then I realize that the panting isn't mine. It's coming from Meek's office.

The door is closed. I remember the sound of it shutting and Gabrielle freaking out—and in that horrible moment, I wonder whether I've made an unforgivable mistake. I look at Meeks and see a kindly if ineffectual man. I presume he'd never pull anything. Never get a teen girl alone in his office and . . .

Swallowing hard, I throw open the door, my fists already balled. And there is Gabrielle, sitting in the corner, her eyes wild and blood . . .

She's covered in blood. Her face, her hands, her shirt.

My heart stops.

I have made the most inexcusable mistake imaginable. I told myself Gabrielle was safe. I didn't keep shouting for Mrs. Forrester. I didn't call 911. I ran as fast as I could, but I was not fast enough, and now Meeks has hurt her. *Really* hurt her.

I take one lunging step. Then I realize I don't see Meeks, and I wheel toward the open door, expecting to see him there, weapon in hand. But the doorway is empty, and the office is silent except for Gabrielle's panting breaths.

I turn back to her. She isn't looking at me. Her gaze is down as she cradles something in her lap. It's the old trophy that always sits on Meeks's desk. A bronze shot-putter on a marble base.

Voices waft through the open door. I can't make them out. Someone's asking questions and as distant footfalls sound, I exhale.

Gabrielle's parents are here.

I take another step toward Gabrielle, and my foot slides. I look down to see blood. It's everywhere. Blood pooled on the floor. Blood splattered over the desk. Blood flecked with little bits of something that looks like . . .

I jerk back, my mind refusing to say what those bits look like. I stumble over something and twist to see Meeks lying on the floor. He's facedown, the back of his head covered in blood. I blink, staggering away, the image seeming to snap in and out of focus until I realize he's not facedown. He's on his back, and I can't . . . I can't even see his face. It's a crater of blood and bone and brain.

A shriek. A banshee shriek from the corner of the room, and I spin to see Gabrielle flying at me, the bloodied trophy raised over her head. A shout sounds in the hall, just as she swings the trophy.

Darkness.

THREE

I'm shivering in the cold drizzle and wishing I were in school. It's Monday, and I should be in history right now, which is my least favorite class, but suddenly Mr. Culp's droning voice seems very appealing, especially if it comes with a warm and dry classroom. Also, ibuprofen. I've taken my migraine meds, but my pounding head insists I need more.

A sense of déjà vu flashes: me rifling through my locker to find ibuprofen. The smell of coffee. A little baggie of pills that made me smile.

Had that been Friday morning? The entire day is a blur. That's what happens when you slip on a wet bathroom floor and knock your head against the sink.

The memory brings fresh pain, and I try not to wince. I'm standing at my vice-principal's grave, listening to his funeral service. I can't make faces and moan about my sore head.

While I was unconscious on the bathroom floor, Mr. Meeks was putting a gun under his chin. Or that's the story. No one's

saying exactly what he did, but it was a closed-casket visitation, so I presume the rumor is true. There are lots of rumors about why, too. Some people whisper he was being pushed into retirement. Others say he couldn't stand being alone after his wife's death. Still others speculate that a recent doctor's appointment may have come with a death sentence.

All I know is that he's dead, and grumbling about my throbbing head and the bitter rain is the height of selfishness. So I straighten fast and the sudden movement makes my head pound and my stomach lurch.

"You okay?" Gabrielle whispers beside me. "I have aspirin."

I motion that I'll take it later, and then I lean in to whisper, "How are *you* doing? Still feeling sick?"

"Yep, and praying your mom's right, and it's not contagious. Dad keeps asking if I went drinking Friday, got myself a hang-over." She rolls her dark eyes.

Gabrielle's mother glances over, and while there's no reproach in her eyes, we still mouth apologies and lapse into silence.

Callum's dad, Dr. Kilpatrick, thinks Gabrielle had a bad reaction to her heart medicine, which is causing her flu-like symptoms. Her headaches have gone away, but she's run-down and woozy, and it doesn't help that our classmates keep shooting her curious looks. Apparently, she had a meltdown in biology class Friday, one that I barely recall after hitting my head. Something about the security cameras?

The reaction to her meds had caused mental confusion. Mom says no one can fault her for that, but this is high school. One outburst about cameras and everyone will start whispering you're some kind of conspiracy nut. I've made sure our friends all know the truth. That will help.

Sydney is on Dad's other side. Andre's across the crowd with his mother. Tucker and Tanya aren't here. From what I've heard, their dad was worried Tucker might make an inappropriate remark. I can be offended on Tucker's behalf, but yes, the guy lacks whatever wiring tells a person that a man's funeral is not the place to joke about having driven him to blow his brains out.

Gabrielle and I aren't supposed to be here either. Our parents didn't want us coming. We insisted though, which is why we're flanked by my dad on one side and her mom on the other.

When I turn to look for other friends, Gabrielle leans in and whispers,

"My parents are dead. Dead and gone."

I startle and spin on her. "What?"

"I said my parents want me staying home tomorrow." Her brow furrows. "What did you think I said?"

"I-I don't know."

One corner of her mouth quirks. "You looked like I was suggesting we grab some cute guys and go make out after the service."

I'm about to reply when I notice a man beside the open grave. He looks so much like Meeks that I give a start. It must be his son.

I'm turning away when I notice blood dripping from the man's nose.

I glance at Dad. He offers a reassuring half-smile and mouths, "Everything okay?"

My gaze cuts to Meeks's son. Blood now drips onto his white shirt. Dad only arches his brows in question, and then the minister says something that pulls his attention away.

People move forward to lay white flowers on the casket. The son goes first, and when he steps up to the graveside, I wait for the inevitable gasp. There's blood running freely from his nose,

over his mouth, soaking his shirtfront. I don't know how he doesn't realize it—I can only guess he's on Valium or something for the shock of his father's death.

Meeks's son steps up to the casket and lays one white rose on it. Then he bends over to whisper something.

Blood drips onto the rose.

And no one says anything.

Meeks's son straightens, and as he turns, I see his face.

His nose is caved in, his face a bloody mass of mangled flesh. I let out a cry, staggering back, hands to my mouth. And then, in a blink, he's fine. He glances my way, brows knitting, as my father catches me, Gabrielle giving a soft squeak of alarm.

"Blythe?" Dad says, cradling me.

"I-I . . ." The words jam in my throat.

I'm hallucinating. My concussion must be worse than Mom thought.

Dad's already bustling me out. Sydney comes after us.

"Dad? What's wrong with Blythe?" she whispers when we're away from the graveside.

"I shouldn't have come," I say.

Dad touches the back of my head as he peers into my eyes.

"Sydney, can you get a ride with Mrs. Harris?"

Sydney nods and hovers until Gabrielle and her mom catch up. A murmured exchange, and then Mrs. Harris leads Sydney away and Dad steers me toward the car.

When we reach it, he opens my door. Then he touches my shoulder.

"What happened, Blythe? And don't say 'nothing.' You looked terrified."

"I'm having hallucinations. From the concussion."

Fear passes through his gray eyes. They mirror my own—worry and all, I’m sure. I blink my fear back, but his stays, etching lines around his mouth.

“What did you see?” he asks.

I open my mouth to tell him. Then I stop. Am I going to admit that I saw a man’s face crushed? That I thought my friend said her parents were dead? Those aren’t simple hallucinations. They’re morbid and grotesque, and they’ll have my parents wondering what dark part of my psyche they bubbled up from.

Keep it together. Stay in control. Be good. Always be good, Blythe.

“Spiders,” I blurt. “I thought I saw spiders on the casket.”

Dad exhales and hugs me tight. “Well, that would scare me, too. Let’s go talk to your mom. She’ll get you fixed up.”

* * *

My parents are arguing in their home office. Not arguing with each other. I always joke that if Sydney and I end up old and alone after a string of divorces, it will be totally their fault for setting a ridiculously high standard. Oh, sure, they argue, but they don’t *fight*. They disagree and withdraw to their corners of the house until they’re ready to work it out.

Tonight, they’re fighting with someone on the phone. Mom’s voice sears and scorches, her temper red-hot. Dad’s tone says he’s trying very hard to be patient and losing the battle. He’s talking to the other person as Mom snaps questions, and I swear I can *hear* her pacing.

Sydney is at a friend’s, and I’m supposed to be enjoying a deep and dreamless slumber, courtesy of a mild sedative. For the last two nights, I’ve been plagued by nightmares that evaporated when

I woke gasping and screaming. After the incident at the graveside, Mom prescribed something to help me sleep. And I did sleep, wonderfully, for about four hours before I snapped wide awake, hearing the distant sound of the argument.

I creep into the hall and pause outside my sister's room. Having Sydney gone makes me even more anxious. It's probably a good thing she's not here then. My fifteen-year-old sister is going through what our parents call "a rebellious phase." One of the things she's rebelling against? Her overprotective big sister.

I continue to the top of the stairs, where I crouch to hear my parents better.

"You aren't listening to me," Dad says to whoever is on the phone. "We want to know what happened. Not whatever version you've been feeding us since Friday. We want the damned truth."

A longer pause, and Mom snaps, "They're bullshitting us, Rob. You know they are. Something happened . . ." I don't catch the rest.

"That's your story, and you're sticking to it?" Dad says. His voice is calm and measured, but in a tone that always left me squirming, knowing I'd been caught in a lie.

I don't catch the rest. He's speaking lower now, and Mom has gone silent. Only the occasional word breaks through. I ease down two more steps.

The stair creaks.

I wince, and I remember Sydney saying it's easy to sneak down if you know which step creaks. The fact that *she* knows—and I have no idea—says a lot about both my sister and me.

Conversation stops. A whispered exchange and then Mom appears from around the corner.

"Hey, baby. You're up."

"I feel like I mainlined an espresso shot," I say.

She makes a face. “That can happen with sedatives. How about a cup of cocoa?” She waggles her brows. “I’ll throw in a shot of peppermint schnapps.”

“Peppermint *schnapps*? It’s not the nineties anymore, Mom.”

She sighs, deeply and dramatically, reminding me so much of Sydney that I have to smile.

“I’ll take the cocoa,” I say. “But only if it has marshmallows.”

“Seven, right?”

I roll my eyes.

She grins. “Remember that? Your cocoa always had had to have exactly seven mini marshmallows. Not six. Not eight. Not three regular-sized ones, and definitely not the little fruity kind.”

“Yes, please remind me I was a weird kid. That always helps.”

I come down the last few stairs, and she puts her arm around my shoulder, steering me toward the kitchen.

TANYA

Tanya pauses at the bottom of the stairs to listen as Tucker walks into the kitchen.

“Hello, son,” Dad booms.

“Hello, paternal unit,” Tucker says.

Dad’s guffaw sounds like the laugh track on an old sitcom. Tanya resists the urge to run interference. It helps sometimes to just stand back and listen. To remind herself that as sweet as their father is to her, the guy Tucker sees is an asshole.

Dad has always had that counterfeit laugh and booming voice. He’s the lab’s HR manager, but he also manages PR, and the stink of insincerity wafts off him like cheap cologne. But when he speaks to Tucker, there’s a strained tone that smells like fear. Like saying “Nice doggie” to a snarling rottweiler. Which makes no damned sense. Tucker might have his wild side, his dark side, but *he’s* not the one their dad should be afraid of.

Three years ago, when their mom left without a word, Dad kept giving Tucker these looks that pissed Tanya off, though she didn't understand them. Then Mom called, and seeing their dad's relief, Tanya realized he'd been afraid that Tucker had done something to her. Which proved how little he knew his son.

Now their father greets him with that false hearty "Hello, son!" as if reminding himself of their relationship. As Tanya peers around the corner, Dad thrusts a plate of breakfast at Tucker, smiling as if to say "Here, take this food, doggie, and don't eat me, please."

Tucker accepts the plate with an equally fake grin. "Gee whiz, thanks, Dad! Mmm, pancakes. My favorite!"

Dad hesitates, and Tucker says, in his normal voice, "This is great, Dad. Really," and Tanya has to fight a growl. Their dad treats Tucker like shit, and Tucker takes it, as if that's what he deserves, and it makes Tanya want to . . .

She clamps down on the thought. Then she strides into the kitchen.

"Hey, sweetheart," Dad says, his voice warm and laced with something like relief. *Oh, thank God, I'm not alone with Tucker anymore.*

Tanya walks right past him without even a nod of acknowledgment.

"I made pancakes," Dad says.

She snatches one from Tucker's plate and starts eating it. Her brother pantomimes jabbing her with his fork, and their dad inhales sharply.

Tanya takes a fresh pancake from the stovetop and eats it like a cookie. "So, what did you think of that English quiz last week?"

"It's obvious Baker's just making sure we read the books. And when I get perfect, she'll accuse me of cheating. Because I couldn't actually be, you know, *reading*."

Tanya snorts. "She's new. She'll figure it out."

Their dad wanders from the kitchen, reassured his children are having a safe and boring conversation. As soon as he's gone, she leans toward Tucker. "We should pick up Blythe today."

Tucker shakes his head.

Tanya shifts in her chair. "How much longer are you putting up with this shit, Tuck?"

"However long it takes."

"She has a concussion. It's a good excuse to give her a ride in."

Tucker tilts his head. His "thoughtful" gesture. Considering. *Excellent.*

"It's only being considerate," she presses. "No one said you can't pick her up for school if she needs a lift. I'll be with you. So will Syd. It's cool."

"We'd need to get there before the bus does," he says.

"Then we have twenty minutes. Eat up."