

Praise for **BAD THINGS HAPPEN *HERE***

'Fuses elements of mystery and romance as Luca's beautifully told coming-of-age story unfolds against a dark backdrop of death.

There is not a word wasted in this sad and harrowing tale.'

– *Kirkus*, starred review

'An atmospheric and multi-layered mystery that surprises until the haunting end.'

– Klara Thomas, author of *The Cheerleaders* and *The Weekend*

'A heart-racing stay on Parris Island! Couldn't put down *Bad Things Happen Here* as, along with Luca, I had to know who did it. I loved all the twists and turns as Luca gets closer to the truth.'

– Tracy Darnton, author of *The Truth About Lies*

'Deliciously dark and haunting, *Bad Things Happen Here* is an expertly woven knot of mystery, romance, betrayal and death. Barrow's storytelling will have you untangling theories until the very end. Pack your bags, prepare to enjoy your trip - but stay ready.'

– Ciannon Smart, author of *Witches Steeped in Gold*

'A beautiful, racy, and haunting story of standing out and following your gut when the world around you is falling apart.'

– Ashley Woodfolk, author of *Nothing Burns As Bright As You*

'Compelling and compulsive. Barrow expertly crafts a dark tale of sun-drenched dread that lays bare both the long-reaching impact of trauma and loss as well as the ways in which tragedy can so easily be disguised as destiny.'

– Stephanie Kuchn, author of *Charm and Strange*

This work contains themes of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and physical and sexual violence.

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'The Knife'

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For me

Beautiful how
it all pours out,
after dark,
after light.

—Maggie Rogers, "The Knife"

1

Parris, the island where it seems girls go to die.

And like always, Luca is the only one to remember Polly on her birthday.

Luca drives with the windows down, air twisting her curls around her face. Maybe that isn't true. Maybe people do go to Polly's grave, put down flowers that will sit and rot among the headstones. Perhaps they stop to clean off the photograph Polly's mom chose, the one with her hair slicked back in a ballet bun and red-painted lips hiding her braces.

Luca wouldn't know, because she never goes there. That's not where Polly is, to her. It's just a box in the ground and a stone in a place far too somber for a girl like the one Polly was.

It's still early enough that the island is quiet as she drives across it. Not that it's ever busy, really, but the roads are almost completely empty, every light green as she heads toward the bridge.

It rises up into the blue sky, the only way out of this place. Luca doesn't drive across, though, but pulls to the side and turns the engine off. She gets out of the car, the stems of the

orange carnations she brought with her pressed between her palms. Then Luca steps down, beside the bridge, onto the uneven rocky ground where nobody's really supposed to go.

But we did, she thinks.

Her and Polly, climbing down these rocks, so they could reach the water below. That's why she comes here. Or that's mostly why.

Below her the ocean swirls, a calmness to the waves that's unusual for this spot, and Luca throws out the carnations one by one, the bright blooms drifting down and down and down until they meet the water. "There you go, P," she says. "Happy birthday."

Three years she's done this. She brings the flowers, she sits for a while; she starts to tell Polly something that's happening and then stops, because what could she ever say that would mean anything now? *School is shitty. Our favorite breakfast place closed. I realized I was in love with Jada right after you died and I told her about the curse and then she stopped speaking to me.* What does any of that matter to Polly now? What does any of it matter when Luca is alive and she's dead?

She was scared, the first time, to come back. To return to this place where the curse had surfaced. But then she had realized that really, this might be the safest place for her to go. After all, the curse never strikes the same place twice.

So she came, the first year, and the next, and now. And Luca will come back in a year and do it all again, like the ritual can change anything. But it means something to her, to do it. It means something that there's somebody to remember

Polly who really *knew* her. After all, Polly's parents left the island soon after she died. Jada hasn't talked to Luca in almost three years, acts like she and Luca and Polly were never even friends. And everybody else, well, they didn't *know* her, and they don't talk about her. She's sure they have their reasons. Thinking about her is unnerving; they don't like to look death in the face so close. Something like that.

Luca closes her eyes and remembers that last year, that last birthday. Fourteen years old. Polly is fourteen and Luca is seventeen now, will be eighteen in two short months. There was always that distance between them, Luca being born in the long days of summer and Polly coming so much later, arriving in the world during the spring bloom.

She waits there for as long as she can bear. Maybe it's an hour, maybe it's a minute. But when she's done, Luca opens her eyes and looks down at the water again. She kisses her fingers and then holds them out to the air, her only goodbye to the girl she's let down the most.

"I love you," she says, words she never said when Polly was alive. "I'll see you next year."

And she leaves. She's always leaving Polly behind, further and further with each day.

2

When Luca wakes on Friday and pushes back the covers, there is a line across her legs, turning her light brown skin golden. A beam of sun pushing through the crack in the curtains.

She closes her eyes against it. Sometimes she is so sick of the sun that she could climb up into the sky and rip it down with her bare hands.

She gets out of bed and goes to the balcony, stepping out into the early morning quiet. Down below, the backyard is a carefully controlled explosion of flowers, surrounding the wide deck and curling past the pool, edging their way along the green, green lawn. At the end of the garden is the beach, and then the ocean, glittering bright under the sun, as it always does.

Luca turns her gaze left, to the edge of the property next door. The house where Polly used to live. The house that has been sitting empty since her parents left, as if people thought it was haunted.

But then this spring it sold, sign outside, and now new people will live there, new people will sleep in Polly's bedroom

and walk her steps down to the beach and it's really over, Luca thinks. It's done: no more Polly. This is the last place that felt like she was still alive, the house suspended in time, a living, breathing space seeming to say, *I will stay for as long as it takes. I will be here until the truth is known.*

But no more.

Luca sighs and steps back into her room. She gets dressed, sort of: high-waisted vintage-style bikini (she does not subscribe to such outdated rules like “fat girls should wear one-pieces,” fuck that) and a sheer black robe, and twists her long curls into a knot on top of her head.

Sometimes she is tired of the sun, but all of the time, she needs it to live.

She makes her way through the house: past the framed photos along the upper walkway, down the soft-carpeted stairs, cutting through the open living room where her sister's diploma hangs above the piano. *Only temporarily*, Whitney says every few weeks. *Once this internship is over, I'm thinking about going to New York. Or Chicago, or Austin—the place changes, but the fact that Whitney is not leaving doesn't.* No one really leaves Parris. Whitney had gone to college, but she came back, just like everybody else did, like Luca is destined to do someday.

Outside she takes off her robe and slips into the pool and stays there, suspended in the water as the sun moves through the sky and time seems so still.

So she doesn't know what time it is when a shadow falls on her as she floats on her back.

"Do you ever get out?" the shadow says.

Luca turns over and swims to the edge, holding on to the side and looking up at her sister. "You look like shit," she says, but she doesn't mean it. She never means it, even when Whitney looks like she does today: clearly hungover, in last night's dress, lipstick still stained on her mouth, her long dark hair pulled up in a sloppy ponytail. Whitney is her big sister and always beautiful because of that.

"Ha." Whitney kicks off her heels so she can sit and slide her feet into the water. "Did Mom ask where I was?"

"I haven't seen her," Luca says. "I can't believe you were out all night. I thought it was a work thing. You hate them."

"It was," Whitney says. A small smile is on her face. "And then it wasn't."

"You could have called me." Luca flicks water up at Whitney. "I would have come out."

"You would have hated it," Whitney says, and tips her head back, squinting at the sun. "The new people are here."

Luca sinks a little, letting the water cover her chin. "What?"

"Saw them as I came in," Whitney says. "So. That's it, I guess."

That's it.

Although it won't be it, Luca knows. Her mom will invite the new people over for drinks, maybe dinner, and she'll make Luca and Whitney be there, because it's *polite* and *nice*, and Luca will have to put on a smile and pretend that she hasn't hated them since she first heard they existed.

"What are they like?"

Whitney shrugs. "I think it's just two of them," she says. "A woman and her daughter, I guess. I saw their stuff, mostly. Nice art." Then she pulls her feet out of the pool. "I'm starving. Are you hungry? Let's go get something to eat. And coffee. I need coffee, desperately."

Luca tries her hardest not to look over at the wall that separates their property from the Sterns'.

Not the Sterns' anymore. Whoever these new people are.

"Yeah," she says, nodding at her sister. "Give me a minute to change. I'll meet you out front."

3

A drop of water trickles down Luca's neck as they wait in line at Darkroom, Whitney's preferred caffeine dealer. It's the usual afternoon crowd: moms with babies in thousand-dollar strollers, kids like her on summer break, a few basic white guys stabbing at laptop keyboards.

The line's going slow. Whitney's talking to her about what she's going to wear when they go out tonight, but Luca's looking up ahead to see who the holdup is, and she rolls her eyes when she sees Isaac Charles at the register, in that beat-up leather jacket he's always wearing no matter the heat and the scuffed boots with undone laces. Likes to lean into the wrong-side-of-the-tracks stereotype, except in Parris, there is no wrong side. Just the wrong kind.

He's getting his card out as slowly as he can and talking intensely at the barista—not *to* her, but *at* her. "Well, maybe you could swing by after you close up," he's saying, running a hand through his short but artfully messy hair. "You know Beth Palermo? Her parties always go all night. You'll have time."

The barista is clearly avoiding his gaze, busying herself

tapping things into the register. "Oh, I don't know," she says. "I have to open tomorrow, too. Super early, you know?"

"So come for an hour." Isaac leans over the counter. "Come on, Grace. Have some fun."

"Hey."

The sharp word comes right next to Luca's ear, and she lets herself smile as Whitney snatches Isaac's attention. "*Super* not it to hit on someone whose job depends on her being nice to you, asshole."

Isaac flushes, narrowing angry eyes. "I wasn't—"

"Yes, you were, Isaac," Whitney says. "And she's clearly not interested, so now that's done, you can fuck off and let her do her job and the rest of us get on with our day. Yes?"

He lingers a moment, as if torn between staying and fighting for the barista's yes, or doing what Whitney says, and then he pushes past them so fast that Luca almost doesn't hear the "Bitch" he throws over his shoulder.

Almost.

The barista visibly relaxes and Luca watches out the door, watches him striding down the street. "He is such a dick."

"That he is," Whitney says, and then it's their turn to order and the barista is saying thank you to Whitney, and Luca turns, gaze moving along the line behind them. And that's when Luca notices her.

The new girl.

Has to be, because Luca knows everybody on this island, if not by name then at least by face, and she would remember a face like this girl's. Would certainly remember an Asian girl,

because Parris is exceedingly white and Luca is a mixed-race Black girl and those are the things you keep track of in a place like this.

She's tall, dark hair cut blunt at her shoulders. Wide eyes and a mouth to match, and as Luca watches, the girl sinks her teeth into her lower lip, staring up at the board.

Some small part of Luca that has lain dormant for years sets alight.

Look away, she thinks. Look away look away look away—

"Luca." Whitney's looking at her, eyebrows raised. "What do you want?"

"Oh. Sorry," Luca says, and then she gives the barista her order and Whitney pays and then says, "I have to pee," and disappears.

Luca moves down to wait at the end of the counter and pulls out her phone so that she has something to look at other than this girl.

She's staring at it when someone says, "I love your nails."

"What?" Luca looks up and the girl is next to her now. Up close Luca can see the deep brown of her eyes and a tiny scar below that bottom lip.

Do not look at that scar. Do not look at this girl like that. She took Polly's house and you are supposed to hate her, right, that's what you decided, isn't it?

"Your nails," the girl says. "I always rip mine off. But yours are perfect."

"Oh," Luca says, and she looks at her fingers, tipped with almond-shaped acrylics, bright red for now. "Thanks."

"I'm Naomi," the girl says. "Fontaine."

Do not play nice with her. What would Polly say?

Luca pushes her hair over her shoulder and gives the girl—Naomi—a tight smile. "Luca Laine Thomas," she says, the way she always does when she says her name, partly because it is her name and partly because she's always loved the way it sounds out loud. And then, because it feels like Naomi has the upper hand and she does not like it, Luca says, "You moved into the Stern house. Right? On the north shore."

Naomi looks surprised. "Yes," she says. "How did you know that?"

"Not many secrets in Parris," Luca says, and then Whitney is back.

"Hey," she says, and notices Naomi. "Hi. Oh! New girl. Right?"

Luca gestures between the two of them. "Whit, this is Naomi. Naomi, my sister, Whitney."

"Naomi," Whitney says, drawing it out in that way she likes to do. "I wondered when we'd meet you. We're neighbors, you know."

"Oh," Naomi says, glancing at Luca. "No. I didn't know."

A different barista sets their drinks down in front of them, and Whitney looks at Luca with a shine in her eyes that Luca knows all too well.

Naomi's phone chimes, and Whitney takes full advantage of the second Naomi takes to look at it, away from them.

She's cute, Whitney mouths.

Don't, Luca mouths back.

But of course she does. “You should come out with us tonight,” Whitney says. “Meet everyone. I mean, you’re gonna meet them all eventually, but it’s better if you’re with us.”

“Tonight?” Naomi looks up and bites her lip again.

Luca looks away.

“Sure,” Naomi says after a moment. “It’s not like I’m doing anything else, so—”

“Perfect.” Whitney grabs their drinks and heads to a table. “Luca, give her your number, okay?”

She’s subtle as a brick through a window, but Naomi is looking at Luca and does not seem horrified. “You sure you want to come?” Luca says, a weak attempt at loyalty, still. “These things can be kind of . . . intense.”

Naomi does not back down. “I like intense,” she says.

Luca sighs. “Okay,” she says. “Give me your phone.”

After she’s tapped her number in, she hands the phone back. “Thanks,” Naomi says.

And Luca gives her another smile, sharper this time. “Don’t thank me yet.”

4

They eat dinner with their parents, a once-a-week event put in place shortly after Polly's death. A coincidence, Luca knows she's supposed to believe, as if her parents haven't always been completely transparent, as if she didn't see it for the *how to deal with your mentally unstable child in the wake of a tragedy* suggestion it really was. But it's okay, doesn't bother her. She knows—has known since she went to her first therapist at eleven—that her parents don't really know how to treat her, because neither of them knows what it's like to have a brain like Luca's. But they try, and isn't that what counts? They pay for good therapy and her medication; they do things like the family dinner and vacations when they would rather be working, because it's the best they can manage. And if her other options are the kind of parents who don't believe in mental illness, or the kind who would cling and monitor her every move, then Luca is glad she has the clueless-but-well-intentioned kind. It gives her a freedom, a space, where she doesn't have to pretend to be the good, sweet girl who just gets a little sad every once in a while.

Luca spins her fork through her pasta as her mother grills Whitney about her internship at the law firm. Besides, these dinners may have started as a response to what happened to Polly, but now they are more just regular dinners, the specter of Polly fading away, like she has from most people's minds.

The thing about Polly's death, her disappearance and reappearance in the shallows, is that it was not unusual. Maybe for another idyllic place it would be, but Parris is not like that. And the strange thing about growing up on this island, having it be part of you and you part of it, is that you forget these events don't happen everywhere, not in the way they happen here. You forget that not everywhere has the stories Parris does—Polly, lungs filled with salt water.

The daughter burned to ash.

The pageant queen left for dead in an alley and the girl on the yacht—all of them, these violent bursts that rip through Parris, leaving razor-edged holes behind.

You forget that not everywhere is cursed.

"We met the new people," Whitney is saying now, bringing Luca back to the moment. "Well. We met the daughter."

"Oh, you did? We should have them over," her mom says, and the lights of the dining room chandelier catch the gold in her blond hair as she turns to Luca's dad. "What do you think, Nick? Drinks? Next week, maybe?"

"Tuesday could be good." Her dad takes out his phone, even though the rule is no phones at the dinner table. "I have a dinner on Monday and the investors' meeting will run late on Wednesday, so yeah, Tuesday or Thursday should work."

"I heard the daughter is about your age, Luca." Her mom takes a piece of bread and rips it in two. "Is she nice?"

God, I hope not, Luca thinks. But she smiles at her mom and says, "I guess."

"We're taking her out tonight." Whitney reaches for the bottle of wine and tops up her glass, the liquid spilling out sunset pink. "Being good neighbors, you know."

Luca raises an eyebrow. "You just want to make sure she knows who's in charge around here," she says, and laughs when Whitney gives her the finger.

"Be civil," her dad says with an exasperated laugh. "Can we not just have one nice dinner?"

"Nicholas," Whitney says, even though she and Luca both know how much it irritates their father when they call him by his first name, like it annoys their mother when they call her Emilia, too. "All we *do* is have nice dinners. There were three different charity auctions last week alone. If I have another server shove another truffled Camembert tartlet in my face, I'm absolutely going to lose it."

Their mom stands, reaching for the bottle. "Just, please," she says, "behave yourself tonight. Okay?"

Under the table Whitney kicks Luca, and Luca puts on a pretty smile for their parents, the reassurance that their girls are the good ones, of course they are. "Don't we always?"

When dinner is done, her parents leave for whatever they're doing tonight, and Luca and Whitney go get ready.

Luca can hear Whitney singing in her shower even from

down the hall, and she loves her sister but she is a truly terrible singer, so she closes the door and turns up her music to drown Whitney out.

She changes her clothes—a black top that slips off each shoulder, a pair of tight black jeans, a gold chain at her throat—and then sits at her dressing table to begin the slow process of painting on a face. Not slow because she wears so much makeup, or is a perfectionist, but because she likes to take her time. It's calming, the routine of it. Filling in her brows, a high arch like Hedy Lamarr, slicking on shiny lacquer for a Josephine Baker mouth.

It's the routine and the memory of being five years old, playing with her mom's powder brush, Emilia applying her own lipstick to Luca's lips so they could match, for the five minutes before she wipes it off again.

The eyeliner takes the longest, the nerve necessary to carve out the clean-cut flick on her eyelids, but Luca is practiced in this and sits back, satisfied, to admire her work when she is done.

When her phone buzzes, she checks it: one new message from Naomi. is it okay if i get a ride with you? i don't drive and also i don't know where the fuck i'm going

Luca laughs and types fast. duh, of course, did u think we were gonna let u go by yourself anyway?

Naomi's response is almost instant. idk maybe ur into new girl hazing. should i come over when i'm ready?

sure. ring the bell, i'll listen for you

Luca sets her phone down, and there is something in the

top corner of her phone that she has looked at a hundred times today but has not registered before now, right now, this very moment.

Today is the nineteenth.

Today is the nineteenth and somehow Luca missed it, even though Polly's birthday falls four days before, even though she always remembers.

Except for this year, when she has forgotten that today marks the day that Polly disappeared.

"Shit," she says, her panic making the word an even uglier sound. "Shit, shit."

She has always thought it cruel, this chain of days. First Polly's birthday, then her vanishing, then her death. A neat row beginning with the best and ending with the worst.

But even so, she has not forgotten before, and this is how it starts, isn't it?

This is how I begin to forget her.

Luca sits forward, her chest tight and her breath coming shallow. *Not now, not now*, she thinks, because this feeling she is all too familiar with. The anxiety that plucks at her nerves and twists deep into her brain and makes her think things she would rather not, the obsession that makes her focus in on those thoughts, again and again and again and again and—

Her eyes fix on the tweezers lying on the dressing table, their sharp little ends, and here it goes, here it starts, *pick them up push them into your palm drive them hard until they pierce the skin until there's blood, and think about it, picture it, keep picturing it, keep picturing it—*

Her bedroom door opens. “You ready?” Whitney says. “Madison called and said—Luca. What’s wrong?”

Luca holds out her hand but she cannot speak yet, and Whitney, because she knows Luca and she knows this, comes into the room and closes the door and kneels on the floor as she takes Luca’s hand.

“Okay,” Whitney says, half a whisper. “Okay, we’re just going to sit here. And it’ll be okay in a minute.”

Luca breathes in cycles: in *two three four*, hold *two three four*, out *two three four five six seven eight*.

She breathes, and counts, and holds her sister’s hand until her heart rate slows and the thought about the tweezers does not scare her. “All right,” she says eventually, finally. “I’m all right.”

When Whitney sees she is really okay, she stands and takes Luca’s chin in her hand. “What happened?”

“It’s May nineteenth,” Luca says. “And I forgot. We all forgot.”

She watches Whitney’s expression shift a hundred times in a split second and then Whitney leans down, puts her forehead against Luca’s. “Shit,” she says.

“Yeah,” Luca says. “Same.”

“This doesn’t mean anything.” Whitney pulls back and looks at her. She has their mother’s eyes, soft hazel, where Luca has the same almost-black ones as their father. “You know it doesn’t mean that you don’t love her, or miss her. It’s only this one day. You remember her all year round. This doesn’t mean anything.”

Luca rubs her thumb over her bottom lip. “I’m going out

tonight,” she says, “with the girl who lives in Polly’s house now. A girl I promised myself I would hate.”

“Why? Because her mom bought their house?” Whitney shakes her head. “You think Polly would care about any of that?”

Luca stays quiet.

Whitney tugs on one of Luca’s curls. “She grew up here,” she says. “Polly was one of us. She knew us, she knew *you*, and she knew exactly how much you loved her. If you think she would be pissed because you didn’t remember that today was *the* day, you’re *wrong*. Okay? So we’re gonna go out now, we’re gonna take that new girl out and show her who we are and know that she is not some kind of replacement, okay? No one could ever replace Polly.”

“I know,” Luca says quietly.

“I know you do.” Whitney pulls Luca to her feet. “So come on. We have places to be.”

And Luca lets Whitney lead, and she thinks, *I am sorry, Polly, I’m sorry*, and then she shuts the door on the moment.

5

It's a party like any other, because this is how it always is, and Luca lets Whitney lead the way, like she always does. She is always following in the wake of her sister.

Tonight there is this new person between them, Naomi following Whitney into Beth's, and Luca thinks that if things were reversed, if she were the new girl walking into the party, then she'd be majorly anxious, but Naomi doesn't seem nervous at all.

She'd been walking up to the house when Luca and Whitney opened the door to leave, and Luca had still been a little shaky, but Naomi had flashed this bright gleaming smile and maybe Luca is easy but she felt better after that.

"Come on," Whitney says over the music as they walk through the open-plan house, a constant flow of people around them. Beth's parties are always packed, the place everyone wants to be, when she lets them. "I'll introduce you to everyone."

"Everyone?" Naomi looks over her shoulder at Luca.

Luca shrugs. "You'll see."

Outside is where the crowd is, and over by the pool there's a fire pit currently surrounded by Everyone: Madison Rivers and Carter Muszynski and Beth Palermo, the kind of names other kids on the island just know, the same way they know Whitney and Luca Laine Thomas. They're Whitney's friends, really, but Luca has known them all her life too, from junior sailing to ballroom classes to getting quietly drunk at fundraisers, and Madison has been best friends with Whit for so long that Luca almost thinks of her as another sister. As the three of them approach Everyone, Luca gets this feeling like she doesn't want to do this, doesn't want to introduce Naomi to them, because they'll love Naomi and then they'll take her in, subsume her, and Luca wants this girl all to herself.

She doesn't stop, though, only keeps following her sister over there. Watches as a pair of skinny white boys in too-carefully shredded jeans approach the fire pit, lean in toward Carter, and say something that makes Beth, sitting in Carter's lap, wrinkle her nose. Carter waves them off, and the boys hang there for a moment, as Beth turns and stares them down. It's not until she bares her teeth that they scatter, slinking off like wounded puppies.

Every party, same thing. People who still think of Carter as the island's best and brightest dealer, a reputation he's never going to shake.

But then they are there at the fire themselves, and Everyone looks up and lights up when they see the sisters there. "Finally!" Beth says. "What took you so long?"

"What up, losers." Whitney falls into her natural place next

to Madison. “This is Naomi. She just moved in next door to us. Naomi, this is”—she points—“Madison, Beth, and Carter.”

Luca sits on the only empty couch and gives Naomi a nod, so she sits next to Luca. “Be nice to her,” Luca says. “By which I mean absolutely do not be yourselves.”

Madison laughs, and in the firelight she glows: her perfectly white teeth, her golden hair, the diamond on her left ring finger. “Aren’t we always nice?” she says, an amused lilt to her words that says she knows exactly how not-nice they can be, when they choose to. “Anyway—hi, Naomi! Please ignore these two wicked witches!”

Naomi pushes her dark hair behind one ear, a small smile on her face. “I’ll try,” she says.

Luca notices the semi-lost look on Naomi’s face and leans over to speak into her ear. “Okay,” she says, “so, we’ve known Madison forever, and she’s engaged to a guy she met in college, but he’s not here, he’s never here. I mean, she says he likes us but I don’t buy it. And then we have Carter, kind of an asshole but mostly not, and mostly not to us. Likes to think he’s a *reformed* asshole anyway, especially now he’s not dealing anymore. Beth’s the best, an angel—except for when she and Carter are in an off phase, which is almost every other week. I think they might be on right now, but who can even keep up?” She pulls back and arches one eyebrow. “Does that help? Or did I make it worse?”

Naomi lets out a small laugh. “I got it,” she says. “I think, at least.”

“Speaking of witches,” Carter’s saying loudly, drawing

Luca's attention back to him, "better be careful tonight. It's a full moon."

"Oh, please," Beth says. "Can you not?"

"Not what?" Carter says. "I'm just saying we all need to watch out. The curse hasn't struck in a while, and we all know what the full moon means."

Luca feels her cheeks warming, and the way Whitney glances over at her. The curse, right. Always a funny topic to bring up on nights like this, around the fire, sloppy-drunk storytelling, like it's nothing more than that.

They all believe it's nothing more than that, Luca thinks.

"Come on," Whitney says loudly. "We're not telling stupid stories tonight."

"I'm just *saying*," Carter repeats. "Witches burn, right? Just like that girl Isla Hollinghurst burned up in that house fire."

"*Stop*," Whitney snaps. "We are *not* talking about the curse."

Carter's eyes narrow. "Fine. Fuck a curse," he says. "Why don't we talk about the real reason she didn't make it out?" He grins, and there's a cruelty to it. "Why don't we talk about how it was her brother who set the fire and left her in there to die?"

There's a second of silence, like they all can't believe Carter actually said it—Luca can't *believe* Carter said it, that quiet, ugly rumor about Justin Hollinghurst, how he'd hated his younger half sister and her claim to his inheritance enough that he locked her bedroom door from the outside before setting the house on fire

But that was all it was, an ugly rumor. An explanation the

people of Parris whispered to each other, Luca knew, because the very idea of the curse made them so uncomfortable.

Still, Beth makes a noise of disgust at her boyfriend's words. "Let go," she says, jerking out of Carter's grasp, and he does, so quickly that Beth slips all the way from his lap to the ground, slamming into the tile.

"Jesus!" Madison says at the same time Beth says, "Fuck, that *hurt!*"

Carter puts his hand out to help Beth up, but he's laughing at the same time and Beth ignores him, stands up all by herself. "You are such an asshole," she says, shoving him. "You know what? Find somewhere else to sleep tonight."

Beth stalks away and Madison sighs. "Do you have to be this way, Carter? Do you try, or does being a dick come naturally?"

Now Carter makes a face. "It was a joke! Come on, no one really believes—"

"Oh, it comes naturally," Whitney says without looking in Carter's direction, and she gets to her feet. "I guess I'll go after her then, shall I?"

She doesn't wait for an answer, just walks off after Beth.

Luca looks at Naomi. "And that's our cue."

Luca gets up and grabs Naomi's arm, pulling her away from the fire pit and through the expansive yard toward the bar area. When they're halfway there, she realizes what she's done and burns a little, self-conscious, and drops Naomi's arm. "You want a drink?" she says over her shoulder, hoping Naomi can't see the flush in her cheeks.

"Jack and Coke," Naomi says. "So. That's everyone, then."

Luca winces as they join the line. "Sorry," she says.

"It's fine, they're your friends. No judgment."

Luca considers this. *Are they her friends?* Madison is the one she's closest to, by virtue of her being Whitney's forever best friend, Luca always trailing them around the Riverses' estate when they were kids. Beth is cool, but the kind of *cool* that means she lets Luca borrow her shoes more than that they keep each other's secrets. And Carter? He's always been there, the one who rolled them their first joints, the one they taught the reality of periods and bras and feminism to. She does love them, but truly, they are Whitney's friends first. Luca had always had Polly, and Jada.

Then Polly died, taking all her understanding of Luca with her, and Jada turned her back when Luca became too much for her. So now her sister is the only one she really has left, the one person who knows the unvarnished, unsweetened version of her.

But that feels like a lot to say to Naomi, something she doesn't need to hear, so instead Luca nods. "This is Parris," she says, like that's an explanation. "You get twisted up with people before you can even talk and then it's sixteen years later and you realize you can't imagine a world without their annoying asses in it."

Naomi looks somewhere past Luca. "I had a friend like that," she says, and then her mouth drops open, like she's surprised she said it.

"You're not friends anymore?" Luca grabs two cups: one

for Naomi's Jack and Coke, and one for her own vodka and lime—she doesn't drink much usually. Too much booze is not a good mix with her antidepressants, but one or two is enough to get her nicely tipsy.

"What?"

"You said you had a friend like that," Luca says. "Had."

Naomi is silent for a minute, and Luca can feel the space between them filling and then cracking. "Anya," Naomi says finally. "She died."

Luca's hand jerks and the whiskey she's pouring spills over her hand. "Shit," she says, shaking it off and then wiping her hands on her jeans.

Did she hear that, or is she fantasizing these things now? Because she remembers, a second ago, Naomi saying her friend died. And perhaps it's some broken wishful thinking on her part, that this new girl, this beautiful girl, this girl who lives next door, is also in the Dead Best Friend club, but maybe—

"Sorry," Luca says, shaking her head like it'll make things clearer. "Did you say she died?"

And Naomi nods, once. "It was a long time ago," she says.

And Luca wants to say, *No, I get it, I understand because that happened to me too, and I don't know anyone else who knows what this feels like—except for the other girl who was our best friend too, and she won't look at me anymore.*

Luca wants to drop the drinks and pull Naomi into whatever quiet space she can find and talk only about their girls, Polly and Anya.

But then a hand is snatching the cup of whiskey out of Luca's grasp and it's her sister, and she's downing it and throwing her arm around Naomi's neck. "Are you having a good time?" she says, not waiting for Naomi to answer. "Come, dance with me and Beth. Luca's a good dancer. Show her what a good dancer you are, baby sister."

Naomi is dragged away and Luca watches them go and the moment fractures and dissipates. *No, stop, go back*, she wants to say now. *Tell me everything*.

But she can't make time spin backward, and now Naomi is dancing with Whitney, an unselfconscious winding of her hips to the dancehall playlist.

Luca knows what Whitney's doing, but what she said is true—Luca is a good dancer. And she's always wanted to dance with a girl like Naomi.

So she goes.

They dance and drink and play quarters on Beth's parents' antique coffee table, and Luca loses track of Whitney somewhere around eleven, but she finds Madison instead, almost as good, and they smoke French cigarettes watching some girl show-off diving into the pool, and then she loses track of Madison, too, and Luca's only had a couple drinks—okay, maybe three—okay, maybe four—but Naomi is keeping up with her and for once Luca is not left on her own the way she usually is once Whitney disappears.

When they both have to pee, they go upstairs, because Luca knows every bathroom in Beth's house and Beth doesn't

mind if she creeps around where no one is supposed to go, except when they are up there it seems like no one is following the rules tonight, because there are people making out up against the wall and one girl sitting on the floor smoking a joint.

But Luca tries the bathroom door and it's open, and she points at Naomi. "You first."

She leans by the door, waiting, and she's about to pull out her phone to text Whitney, tell her to meet by the pool in five minutes, when the girl with the joint speaks.

"Hey," she says. "Luca?"

Luca focuses on her and it's Tiff Lancaster, who drives a '66 Mustang that Luca covets, and Luca likes her fine, so she says, "Yeah, Tiff?"

Tiff climbs to her feet—Luca always forgets how tall she is, staring down at Luca from a great height—and leans opposite Luca. "May nineteenth," she says.

Luca shifts. "What?"

"It's May nineteenth," Tiff says, and offers Luca the joint. "The anniversary, right? Polly Stern. That girl who drowned. She was your friend, right?"

Luca blinks and she's in the police station three years ago, sitting on a cold metal chair and staring at the picture of a smiling Polly on the table and trying not to flinch at every word Detective Charles says. She blinks again and she's down in the depths of the station, a place where she is not supposed to be, but the officer who she convinced to lead her down there doesn't seem to know that. She's looking through

the glass at Polly's body, Polly's dead body on a slab, the skin on her face gray and bloated, her eyes milky and ripe to burst, and she can only imagine what the part of her covered by a sheet looks like, can only imagine the rotting smell of her.

Then she's back in this moment, the one where it's as if Tiff knew she forgot, because in all the banal conversations she and this girl have had at parties and benefits and school events, Tiff has never uttered Polly's name. Not once.

But tonight.

The bathroom door opens and Naomi comes out and her face seems brighter than before. Luca can't figure it out, but then she understands it's just Naomi's lipstick, the fresh slick of red she must have applied while she was in there. "Hey," she says, looking between Luca and Tiff and then at the joint in Tiff's hand, still hovering there. "Okay?"

Luca pushes off the wall. "Wait for me," she says, her words too fast so they become almost nothing, *wayferme*, and she turns her back on Tiff-fucking-Lancaster and locks herself in the bathroom.

She snaps the light off, darkness covering all.

The buzz from the vodka is gone, and now that she feels entirely sober again she cannot stop thinking about Polly, Polly, Polly and she is taken over, consumed suddenly by the notion that something terrible is about to happen to her.

The curse, the curse. A thing that nobody else believes in, at least not past sixth grade, when the stories stop being scary and start being the shit that Carter pulled tonight. Stupid

games, a way to give your girlfriend a good scare while you sit safe in the confines of your happy world.

But Luca believes it. She believes it, she can feel it, so much that it almost shocks her that she is the only one. That no one else feels the creeping grasp of something bigger than them, hears the hum running deep beneath the island. What else could explain everything that has happened here, that will continue to happen? It is just like every horror movie she has seen, every fairy tale told to her before bed as a small girl: there's a balance, an equilibrium that must be maintained. You can't outrun it, can't outsmart it. It takes what it requires, desires.

In the moonlight coming through the two tall windows, Luca moves close to the countertop. Without thinking too much about it, she presses her wrists against the sharp edge, watching herself in the mirror as she leans her weight forward and feels the pressure building against the skin and ligaments and veins there. She releases a long, slow breath between barely parted lips and then lifts her hands away, eyeing the indentations in her skin.

No permanent damage.

She raises her eyes and looks back at her mirror self. "Nothing bad is going to happen tonight," she says, her breath clouding the glass. "Stop it."

When she comes out of the bathroom, Tiff is gone but Naomi's there, waiting, like Luca asked her to.

"Okay?" Naomi says again, and she's looking at Luca like she knows the answer is no, and it's unnerving.

All Luca wants to do is slip into one of the several bedrooms farther down the hall and sleep.

But Naomi.

“Come on,” she says. “We should get out of here before it becomes a total mess.”

She leads, and Naomi follows.

6

They walk home slow, mostly because Naomi can't seem to manage a straight line, and Luca tries to keep thoughts of Polly out of her head by maintaining a nonstop stream of words in Naomi's direction, *Madison's wedding is soon and I don't know why she has to get married right now but I guess they're in love or whatever, and her boyfriend, wait sorry her fiancé, Peter, he's kind of boring but whatever, I still think she should get a prenup even though he's a Van Wyle and she says they don't need one, they don't care about each other's money, but better she's marrying him than someone from Parris, like remember that guy at the coffee shop today who was being an ass, Isaac Charles, yeah she dated him in high school, well she says a few hookups does not count as a relationship but he was totally obsessed with her, and if she was marrying him she'd need a prenup for sure, but enough about them, I guess Carter and Beth just broke up again tonight, for the billionth time, I mean Carter can be such an ass sometimes I don't know why he can't just be normal—*

When she finally takes a breath they're home, and Luca

feels her headache beginning. This is why she doesn't drink too much, she reminds herself. Stupid.

"Is this what it's always like?"

Luca looks at Naomi as they stop, standing in the middle of the wide street somewhere between each of their homes. "Yes," she says. This is Parris: late nights and the ocean during the sunlit days and walking home, two girls on their own, as if nothing bad could ever happen to them, even though at any second the curse could find and take them.

But Naomi doesn't know about the curse and Luca is not about to tell her. Telling her means talking about Polly, who used to live where Naomi sleeps now, and she can't, she can't, not tonight.

Naomi's watching her in that unnerving way again. It makes Luca's skin itch, pins and needles pushing up from her veins to the surface.

"Okay," Naomi says, and then she is hugging Luca.

It takes Luca a moment to register Naomi's arms around her, Naomi's body pressed against hers, and her breath stops.

Naomi is warm, her skin against Luca's clammy, and it has been obvious all night—all day, since Luca first saw Naomi in the coffee shop—but now Luca feels it must be noticeable on her own skin. Naomi must feel it where their bodies touch, how Luca's dormant desire has woken up and named Naomi as its target.

I want you I want you I want you, her blood pulses.

Then Naomi releases her and gives this small smile. "See

you later,” she says, and then, when she is halfway to her house, she spins and calls out, “Oh. Thanks for tonight.”

Luca says nothing, only raises her hand, and then she turns before Naomi can see it in her eyes.

As if she doesn’t already know.

She takes quiet, careful steps through the house, because even though it seems impossible in a place this big, her parents always seem to hear her returning.

In the kitchen she gets a glass of water, and drinks the entire thing standing in front of the sink in long, thirsty gulps. She is about to fill the glass again when she hears the unmistakable sound of the front door closing, and noise in the hall.

So she sets the glass down and steps out into the darkened hall. “Isn’t it past your curfew?”

Her dad looks up from where he’s trying to unlace his shiny oxfords, brown eyes crinkling as he laughs quietly. “Shit. You caught me.”

“I thought you and Mom were being boring grown-ups tonight,” Luca says, hoping she sounds as sober as she now feels.

“It was a last-minute work thing,” he says. “I had to play poker with the CFO of the company we’re about to buy.”

“Poker? On a *Friday*?” Luca widens her eyes. “Are me and Whit gonna have to talk to you both about your partying? It’s really getting out of hand.”

Nick finally gets his shoes off and comes over to Luca,

giving her shoulder a playful push. “Careful,” he says. “I still hold the key to your credit cards.”

Luca smiles. “I’m kidding,” she says. “God, you really are boring.”

Nick shakes his head. “Call me boring one more time, and I might decide *not* to ignore that you smell like you’ve smoked an entire pack.”

Luca’s cheeks warm. Her parents don’t really care that she drinks, because everybody on the island does, and half the time it’s happening at an event and they’re the ones handing her the glass. But smoking is another story. “On that note,” she says, “I’m going to bed.”

“Don’t wake your mother,” Nick says, and Luca holds a finger to her lips before she turns and climbs the stairs.

She pushes Whitney’s door open as she passes, but the bed is empty and the bathroom dark.

In her own room Luca wipes off her makeup in her bathroom and changes, crawls into bed, and then calls her sister. It goes to voice mail, and even though she knows Whitney never listens to them—because neither does she, nobody listens to voice mail anymore—she speaks when the robot voice tells her to. “As always, you vanished off the face of the earth,” Luca says, rolling onto her side. “You are the worst sister. But it’s fine, whatever. Naomi’s cool. I think maybe she could be my friend. I don’t know.” She can still feel the warmth of Naomi on her. “But please don’t do what you did tonight and try to, like, flirt on my behalf, okay? I mean it, Whit. Do it again and I’ll kill you, I promise.”

She laughs a little. "Find me when you get home tomorrow. Let's go buy shoes and get ice cream and I'll let you tell me about whoever it is that you ended up kissing tonight. Bye, Whit," she says, and she hangs up and falls asleep not a minute later.

7

It's late when Luca gets up the next morning, and so she's surprised to find her mother in the kitchen all dressed up like she's going to work. "Is it not Saturday?" she says, opening the cabinet to find some Tylenol for her headache (fine, hangover). "What are you doing?"

"I have a client coming in from out of town," her mom says from her place at the kitchen island, like they don't think of anywhere that isn't Parris as out-of-town. "This is the only day they could meet. What time did you and your sister get home?"

Luca goes to the refrigerator next, takes out the orange juice, and pours a glass. "Late," she says. "Well, I did. We got separated."

"Luca," her mom says, and it's that exasperated tone she loves to use on her younger daughter.

"What?" Luca says. "You know she's at Madison's, like always."

Her phone vibrates on the counter and Luca expects it to be Whitney—she seems to know when Luca's talking about her, always—but the screen says *Beth*.

never drinking again
breakfast tacos on me?

bring Whit and also a list of new boyfriend options bc
i think i dumped mine last night

Luca smiles as she types: come on, u and carter didn't
make up already?

he wishes. god knows whose bed he slept in last night
but it sure as shit wasn't mine. and it can stay that way
. at least until next week

Luca's laughing when her phone buzzes again, but this
time the name on the screen isn't Beth, but Naomi.

Naomi.

Last night flickers back at her: the drinking, the dancing,
Naomi's soft arms around her. Her mom's talking at her, but
Luca is reading Naomi's message: sooo this is awkward bc i
don't like know how to make friends?? but did you maybe
wanna hang out today or something?

Emilia is still talking, but Luca cuts her off. "Yeah, great,
sure," she says, landing a kiss on her mom's cheek on her way
out of the kitchen. "See you later, Mom."

*Sorry, Beth, but there are more important things than break-
fast tacos.* She replies to Naomi: be ready in twenty.

8

Luca takes Naomi from one end of the island to the other, in and out of the lanes she's known all her life, past the gallery housing abstract art, around the redbrick building that is their high school.

It's not until they are watching the boats rock in the harbor that Luca realizes she has taken Naomi to only places where bad things have happened. Here, where the yacht carrying the remains of a girl named Laney Hart came in, twelve years ago. The alley behind the school, where Evelyn Mortimer, Miss Parris 1973, was found assaulted and abandoned with the crown still on her head. And the gallery, a sleek, mostly glass building that sits on the site of the former Hollinghurst mansion, the house that burned to the ground, taking Isla Hollinghurst with it, when Luca was only eight years old.

There are more, of course, going back farther and farther, but those are the ones that Luca thinks about most. Those are the ones she has brought Naomi to. *A curse tour*, she thinks. See, this is what happens: it guiding her, pulling her where it wants her to be.

Or maybe it was just me, she thinks again, because there is a lot humming inside her that she isn't sure how to approach.

So later still she drives them back to the northernmost point of the island, where there are no homes, only a winding road that climbs up and up and deposits you in a stretch of pale gravel. Luca parks and leads Naomi through long grass and tall trees until the trees fall back and everything falls back and they are on top of the island. Look to the right, and the ocean is its usual serene self under the setting sun. Look to the left, and there's Parris proper, laid out beneath them and covered in lights.

"Wow," Naomi says, taking a step to the edge where one side of the ground beneath them drops off, and then dancing back. "Whoa."

"Are you scared of heights?"

"No. When you've spent your entire life as a gymnast, you stop being afraid of most things, but especially heights."

"A *gymnast*? Wow, bury the lede much?" Luca says. "Are you good?"

"I was." Naomi glances back at her, like *move on*. "What about you? Afraid of heights?"

Luca moves closer to Naomi, nearer to the edge, and sits among the delicate wildflowers. "No," she says. "I'm more afraid of the things my brain says when it wants to *make* me afraid."

Naomi sits next to her. "What do you mean?"

Her question is more curious than needling, and Luca smiles into the dusk. "I have this thing," she says. "I don't

know, I just think things without meaning to. They come and they won't leave even though I want them to. Sometimes they're the most pointless things, a song on a loop no matter how much I want it to stop. And then sometimes it's like—" She pauses. Does she want Naomi to know that sometimes when she's driving, she becomes fixated on the idea of ramming her car into the driver next to her? Or that she has constant waking nightmares of killing her mother, terrible accidents that she is responsible for? "Sometimes it's 'look at this look at how high up you are if you jumped from here you'd most definitely die how would that look,' and then I keep thinking about that until the next thing comes along."

The air is quiet around them and Luca thinks, *You've done it now, you told her all about your crazy too soon and now she hates you.* Exactly what happened with Jada, when Luca told her just how real the curse was. She remembers, often, how Jada looked at her like she was disgusted, how she walked away without a backward glance.

But when she looks up and their eyes meet, Naomi gives her a slow smile. "It's okay," she says. "I get it."

She says it like it's nothing, which means everything. Something inside Luca unfurls. "Queen of intrusive thoughts," Luca says. "That's me." She tips her head to the side. "So tell me the rest."

"Rest of what?"

"You know, your 'life story' or whatever. I need to know the dirt, so I can let everyone know all about you," Luca says, and for a second Naomi looks worried, like she thinks Luca's

serious, but when Luca laughs, Naomi relaxes and laughs too. "Let's see, what do I have already . . . gymnast. Not afraid of heights. Can't keep a manicure in good condition . . ."

"What else do you wanna know?" Naomi shrugs. "My parents are divorced. My dad is in Chicago now. He has a new wife. I guess he'll have new kids soon."

Luca raises an eyebrow, watching Naomi's tone. "Stepmom? We don't like her?"

"Stepmom is fine," Naomi says. "Daddy's the problem."

"And where you moved from?"

"Oh, very repressed, very rich, very white," Naomi says with a smile. "So you know, this place feels just like home."

Luca rolls her eyes. "Oh yes, Parris, so wonderfully diverse and welcoming," she says. "What about your mom?"

"She's the good one," Naomi says. "Collects art. Does charity shit. Doesn't hold me to impossible standards I'll never get close to meeting, so. There's that."

They sit in silence for a while then, a silence that is both comfortable and not, the only kind Luca knows how to sit in. She is thinking of what to ask Naomi next when Naomi says, "This might be weird, but I heard something last night. About a girl. Who went missing or . . . something." She looks at Luca. "You know about that?"

Well, here we go.

Luca buys a little time getting a thin gray sweater out of her bag and pulling it on, wrapping her hands up in the ends of the sleeves. She can feel Naomi waiting and really, Luca has just been waiting, too, for this inevitable moment.

“Yeah,” she says on an exhale, and she stares out at the lights of Parris. “Polly. She disappeared, while she was waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

Luca looks over at Naomi. “Me.”