

"Oh boy, does Miranda ever know how to write a twisty-turny ending (or two, or more)."

—MARILYN STASIO, *New York Times Book Review*

SUCH A QUIET PLACE

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AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE LAST HOUSE GUEST

ALSO BY MEGAN MIRANDA

The Girl from Widow Hills

The Last House Guest

The Perfect Stranger

All the Missing Girls

SUCH A QUIET PLACE

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For my parents

**SATURDAY,
JUNE 29**



HOLLOW'S EDGE COMMUNITY PAGE

Subject: SHE'S BACK!

Posted: 11:47 a.m.

Tate Cora: There's a cab outside the house. Did anyone know she was coming back here?

Preston Seaver: What?? Are you sure it's her?

Tate Cora: I'm watching out my window. It's her. It's definitely her.

Charlotte Brock: DELETE THIS NOW.

CHAPTER 1

THERE WAS NO PARTY the day Ruby Fletcher came home. We had no warning, no time to prepare ourselves.

I didn't hear the slam of the car door, or the key in the lock, or the front door swinging open. It was the footsteps—the familiar pop of the floorboard just outside the kitchen—that registered first. That made me pause at the counter, tighten my grip on the knife.

Thinking: *Not the cat.*

I held my breath, held myself very still, listening closer. A shuffling in the hallway, like something was sliding along the wall. I spun from the kitchen counter, knife still in my hand, blade haphazardly pointed outward—

And there she was, in the entrance of my kitchen: Ruby Fletcher.

She was the one who said, “Surprise!” Who laughed as the knife fell from my grip, a glinting thing between us on the tiled floor, who delighted at my stunned expression. As if we didn't all have cause to be on edge. As if we didn't each fear someone sneaking into our home.

As if she didn't know better.

It took three seconds for me to find the appropriate expression. My hand shaking as I brought it to my chest. “Oh my God,” I said, which bought me some time. Then I bent to pick up the knife, which bought me some more. “Ruby,” I said as I stood.

Her smile stretched wider. “Harper,” she answered, all drawn out. The first thing I noticed were the low-heeled shoes dangling from her hand, like she really had been trying to sneak up on me.

The second thing I noticed was that she seemed to be wearing the same clothes she’d had on yesterday during the news conference—black pants and white sleeveless blouse, without a jacket now, and with the top button undone. Her dark blond hair was styled as it had been on TV but appeared flatter today. And it was shorter since I’d last seen her in person—just to her shoulders. Makeup smudges under her eyes, a glow to her cheeks, ears slightly pink from the heat.

It occurred to me she’d been out for twenty-four hours and hadn’t yet changed clothes.

There was luggage behind her in the hall—what I must’ve heard scraping against the beige walls—a brown leather duffel and a messenger-style briefcase that matched. With the suit, it was easy to imagine she was on her way to work.

“Where’ve you been?” I asked as she set her shoes down. Of all the things I could’ve said. But trying to account for Ruby’s time line was deeply ingrained, a habit that I’d found difficult to break.

She tipped her head back and laughed. “I missed you, too, Harper.” Deflecting, as always. It was almost noon, and she looked like she hadn’t gone to sleep yet. Maybe she’d been with the lawyer. Maybe she’d gone to see her dad. Maybe she’d tried somewhere else—anywhere else—before coming here. Maybe she’d wrung these last twenty-four hours of freedom for all they were worth.

Then she was crossing the room, coming in for a hug, inescapable. Everything happened on a brief delay, as if choreographed.

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Her walk had changed, her steps quiet, more deliberate. Her expression, too—careful, guarded. Something new she'd learned or practiced.

She seemed, suddenly, unlike the Ruby I knew, each proportion just slightly off: thinner, more streamlined; her blue eyes larger and clearer than I recalled; she seemed taller than the last time we were in a room together. Or maybe it was just my memory that had shifted, softening her edges, molding her into something smaller, frailer, incapable of the accusations levied against her.

Maybe it was a trick of the television screen or the pictures in the paper, flattening her into two dimensions, making me forget the true Ruby Fletcher.

Her arms wrapped around me, and all at once, she felt like her again.

She tucked her pointy chin into the space between my neck and shoulder. "I didn't scare you, did I?"

I felt her breath on my neck, the goose bumps rising. I started laughing as I pulled away—a fit of delirium, high and tight, something between elation and fear. *Ruby Fletcher. Here.* As if nothing had changed. As if no time had passed.

She cocked her head to the side as I wiped the tears from under my eyes. "Ruby, if you had called, I would've . . ."

What? Planned a lunch? Gotten her room ready? Told her not to come?

"Next time," she said, grinning. "But that—" She gestured to my face. "That was worth it."

Like this was a game, part of her plan, and my reaction would tell her all she needed to know.

She sat at the kitchen table, and I had no idea where to go from here, where to even begin. She had one foot curled up under the other leg, a single arm hanging over the back of the chair, twisting to face me—not bothering to hide her slow perusal: first my bare

feet with the chipping plum polish, then my fraying jean shorts, then the oversize tank top covering the bathing suit underneath. I felt her gaze linger on my hair—now a lighter brown, woven in a haphazard braid over my shoulder.

“You look exactly the same,” she said with a wide smile.

But I knew that wasn’t true. I’d stopped running in the mornings, lost the lean-muscle definition of my legs; had let my hair grow out from collarbone to mid-back, an inverse of her transformation. I’d spent the last year reassessing everything I’d thought I knew—about others, about myself. Picking apart the trajectory that had brought me here, the conviction I’d always felt in my decisions, and I worried that the uncertainty had somehow manifested itself in my demeanor.

I grew uncomfortable under her gaze, wondering what she might be looking for, what she might be thinking. At the realization that we were alone here.

“Are you hungry?” I asked. I gestured to the food on the counter—the cheese and crackers, the strawberries in a bowl, the watermelon I’d been in the process of cutting—willing my hand not to shake.

She stretched, extending her thin arms over her head, lacing her fingers together: that sickening crack of her knuckles with one final reach. “Not really. Did I interrupt your plans?” she asked, looking over the snacks.

I shifted on my feet. “I saw you yesterday,” I said, because I had learned from Ruby that responding to a direct question was always optional. “I watched the news conference.” We all had. We’d known it was coming, that she was going to be released, could feel the shared indignation brewing, that after everything—the trial, the testimonies, the evidence—it was all about to be undone.

We’d been waiting for it. Hungry for information, sharing links and refreshing the neighborhood message board. Javier Cora

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had put the details up, without context, and I'd seen the comments coming through in quick succession:

Channel 3. Now.

Watching . . .

Jesus Christ.

How is this LEGAL?

We knew better by now than to say too much on the message board, but we had all seen it. Ruby Fletcher, wearing the same thing she'd worn the day she was taken in, a banner across the bottom of the screen as she stood in the center of a crowd of microphones: PRESUMED INNOCENT. Simple yet effective, if maybe not entirely true. The trial had been tainted, the investigation deemed unfair, the verdict thrown out. Whether Ruby was innocent was a different matter entirely.

"Yesterday," she said breathlessly, euphorically, face turned up toward the ceiling, "was *wild*."

She'd seemed so poised, so stoic, on television. A suppressed version of the Ruby I knew. But as she'd spoken, I had leaned toward the television from my spot on the couch. Even from afar, she could bend the gravity of a room her way.

On the broadcast, I'd heard a reporter call out to her: *How are you feeling, Ruby?* And her eyes had crinkled in that charming way she had of holding back a smile, as she looked straight at the camera, straight at me, for a beat before responding: *I'm just looking forward to getting on with my life. To putting this all behind me.*

And yet, twenty-four hours later, she had come straight back here—to the scene of the crime for which she'd been incarcerated—to face it.

THE FIRST THING RUBY wanted was a beer. It wasn't yet noon, but Ruby never worried about such mundane things as public

perception or social approval. Didn't try to make an excuse, like the rest of us here might—*summer hours; rounding up*—craving acceptance or someone else to join in our small rebellions.

She stood in front of the fridge, letting the cold air wash over her, and said, "Oh, man, this feels so good," like it was something she had missed. She closed her eyes as she tipped back the bottle of beer, her throat exposed and moving. Then her gaze drifted over to the knife on the counter, to the cubes of watermelon. She picked one up and popped it in her mouth, chewing with exaggerated slowness, savoring it. A faintly sweet scent carried through the room, and I imagined the taste in my own mouth as she licked her lips.

I wondered if this would go on indefinitely: every item, every experience, something unexpected and taken for granted. *Wild*.

My phone buzzed from where I'd left it beside the sink. Neither of us made a move to look at it.

"How long, do you think, before everyone knows?" she asked, one side of her mouth quirked up as she leaned against the counter. As if she could sense the texts coming through.

Not long. Not here. As soon as someone saw her, it would be on the message board—if it wasn't already. When you purchased a home in the Hollow's Edge neighborhood, you automatically became a member of the Hollow's Edge Owners' Association—an official, self-run group with an elected board that decided on our budget, collected our dues, made and enforced the rules.

From there, you were also invited to join a private message board, not officially regulated, initially set up with the best of intentions. It became a different beast after the deaths of Brandon and Fiona Truett.

"Do you want them to know?" I asked. *What are you doing here? How long are you staying?*

"Well, I guess they're bound to notice eventually." She crossed one foot behind the other. "Is everyone still here?"

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I cleared my throat. “Plus or minus a few.” The renters had all gotten out when they could, but the rest of us couldn’t sell without taking a major loss right now. The Truett house was still empty next door, and Ruby Fletcher, longtime resident of Hollow’s Edge, had been convicted of the killings. It was a double hit. Maybe we could’ve recovered from one or the other, but not the combination.

Tate and Javier Cora, my neighbors to the left, were looking to move, but they were two doors down from the crime scene and had been advised by their realtor to wait it out. But there were others who had slowly disappeared. A fiancé who had left. A husband who was rarely seen.

Breaking the case had broken a lot of other things in the process.

Instead, I said: “The Wellmans had their baby. A boy.”

Ruby smiled. “Guess he’s not such a baby anymore.”

I pressed my lips together in an approximation of a smile, unable to figure out the right thing to say, the right tone. “And Tate’s pregnant.”

Ruby froze, beer bottle halfway to her mouth. “She must be unbearable,” she said, one eyebrow raised.

She was, but I wasn’t about to tell Ruby that. I was always trying to decrease animosity, smooth over tension—a role I’d long inhabited in my own family. But these were safer conversations than what we could’ve been discussing, so I ran with it. “And Charlotte’s oldest just graduated, so we’ll be losing one more by the end of the summer.” I was filling the silence, my words coming too fast, practically tripping over one another.

“Can we vote someone else out instead?” she asked, and I laughed, imagining the many names Ruby might propose, wondering which was at the top of her list. Chase Colby, most likely.

It felt like no time had passed. Ruby was always like this:

disarming; unpredictable. *A hypnotic personality*, the prosecutor had declared. As if we were all the victims and therefore blameless in our allegiance.

It was something I repeated to myself often, to absolve myself.

But then I realized why she was asking about everyone, about who was here and who would remain: Ruby was planning to stay.

IN TRUTH, I HADN'T given much thought to where Ruby would go after her release. It hadn't occurred to me that *here* would even be on her mind, with everything that had happened. We hadn't spoken since that day in the courtroom after I testified, and that could barely count—she'd just mouthed the words *Thank you* as I passed.

I'd pretended I hadn't noticed.

If I'd had to make a guess, it might have been that she'd go to see her dad in Florida. Or hole up in some hotel suite funded by the legal team who had gotten her released, working the case angles with her lawyer. I would've thought she'd be more likely to disappear entirely—seizing her chance, reemerging in some far-away place as someone new. A person with no history.

I checked the clock over the fridge, saw it creeping past noon, drummed my fingers on the countertop.

"Expecting company?" she asked. She was looking at the spread on the counter again.

I shook my head. "I was going to bring this to the pool."

"Great idea," she said. "I missed the pool."

My stomach plummeted. How many things had she missed—the cool blast of the refrigerator, the pool, me. Would she keep listing them off, twisting the knife?

"Be right back," she said, heading toward the hall bathroom at the base of the stairs.

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I washed the knife as soon as she was out of the room—it was too much, laying out there on the surface, taunting us both, unspoken. Then I picked up my phone quickly, scrolling through the messages piling up.

From Tate: *Why didn't you tell us she was coming back here??*

From Charlotte: *Call me.*

So they already knew.

But I ignored them, instead firing off a quick message to Mac, fingers trembling with leftover adrenaline: *Do not come over.*

I had no idea how long she intended to stay. Ruby's bags were sitting just outside the entrance of the kitchen. Maybe I could get a sense of things without asking directly. I listened for water running in the bathroom, but the house was eerily silent. Just the cat, Koda, hopping off a piece of furniture somewhere upstairs, and the muffled call of a cicada from the trees out back, growing louder.

I slowly unzipped the larger piece of luggage, peering inside. It was empty.

"Harper?"

I yanked my hand back quickly, the side of my finger catching on the zipper. Ruby's voice had come from the top of the staircase, but only her shadow was visible from where I stood. I didn't know what she could see from this angle.

As I backed away from her bags, she came into view, moving slowly down the stairs, hand sliding down the railing. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

Her voice had subtly changed, the way people had pointed out during the investigation—what some called hypnotic but what others called cunning or angry. It was all loaded together on a razor's edge. Either way, it made you pay attention. Made you tune in acutely to whatever Ruby was going to tell you.

"About what?" I asked, feeling my heartbeat inside my chest. There were so many things I could tell her:

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Everyone still thinks you're guilty.

I don't know why you're here.

I slept with your ex.

"My things. Where are my *things*, Harper."

"Oh," I said. I hadn't had time to explain. Hadn't thought it would be an issue. Hadn't thought she'd expected any differently. "I talked to your dad. After."

She paused at the bottom step, raised a single exacting eyebrow. "And?"

I cleared my throat. "He told me to donate them." It wasn't that I was unsympathetic, it was just, twenty years was a long time. She acted like she'd been gone a week, not fourteen months.

Ruby closed her eyes briefly, took a slow breath in. I wondered if she had learned this during her time behind bars. It was not at all how Ruby Fletcher used to handle disappointment.

"Did Mac come by for anything?"

God, I didn't know what she was asking. Everything she said was laced with something else.

"I can take you to the store. For anything you need," I said. I could buy her new clothes, new toiletries. I could offer to put her up in a hotel, hand her some cash, wish her well. Wish I'd never see her again.

But she flicked her fingers at the air between us. "Later." She bent and picked up her bag—her empty bag—and returned up the steps.

It occurred to me that I might be witnessing a crime against my property. That she was going to rob me, and I was going to be complicit in it, as it was so easy to grow complicit to the desires of Ruby Fletcher.

WE DIDN'T ALWAYS LIVE together. The situation was unspoken but understood, I thought, to be both brief and temporary.

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After Aidan moved out of my place, after Ruby's dad retired and sold their house, it was a momentary necessity—a period of time when we both needed a pause, needed to grasp our bearings, figure things out. Decide what we wanted next.

But she didn't leave, and I didn't ask her to. It seemed that what we both wanted was for her to stay. We had developed an allegiance of convenience, if only for someone to feed the cat.

I'd grown accustomed to the solitude since she'd been gone. I'd grown to value my independence and my privacy, on my own for the first time since college. Knowing that everything here belonged to me.

When she came downstairs wearing my clothes—the maroon tie of a bathing suit top visible under my black tank dress—I didn't have much of a position to argue from, after getting rid of her things. She was taller, and now slimmer, than I, but our clothes were the same general size.

Koda followed her down, weaving between her feet, the traitor. She had been Aidan's cat first, was firmly antisocial, and seemed to spurn attention from all humans except Ruby.

Ruby gathered her hair into a short ponytail, one of my elastics on her wrist. "Do you have an extra pair of sunglasses?" she asked.

I blinked at her. This was like watching a car crash in slow motion. "What are you doing?" I asked.

In answer, she opened the drawer of the entryway table—the same place we'd always kept the keys—the same place Ruby had also kept the Truett's key, when she walked their dog. For a brief second's pause, I thought she was looking for it, but then she grabbed the electronic pool badge that granted us entrance through the black iron gates. "Going to the pool. Aren't you?"

"Ruby," I said in warning.

Lips pressed together, she waited for me to continue.

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea right now,” I said. She had to know it. Of course she knew it.

She turned her face away, but not before I caught what I thought was the glimmer of a smile. “I’m ripping off the Band-Aid,” she explained as she opened the front door. But that wasn’t quite right. Prison had softened her metaphors. She was flirting with an inferno. She was dousing a gaping wound in vinegar.

She walked out barefoot, front door left ajar—an offering that I had no intention of taking. Not in broad daylight. Not on this street. Not in this neighborhood.

It was bad enough she was *here*, in my *house*.

But I stepped out onto the front porch, watching her walk past the front of the Truett house without a glance toward the empty porch, the darkened windows. No hesitation or change in her stride as she passed the house she’d once allegedly let herself inside in the middle of the night, let the dog out, started the old Honda in the garage, and left the interior door to the house ajar, so that Brandon and Fiona Truett died silently of carbon monoxide poisoning in the night.

My house was situated at the center of the court, six homes around the half-moon edge, a wide-open circle of pavement with a grassy knoll in the middle, with a scattering of trees that blocked the view of the lake in the summer but not the winter.

The pool was on the main neighborhood road, bordered by the woods and overlooking the lake, and from a certain vantage point, with a generous frame of mind, it could pass for an infinity pool.

As Ruby strode by each house, I imagined the security cameras catching her. Watching her. Recording her in jolts of time that could be pieced together later to track her every movement. The Brock house, whose video feed had picked up a noise that night. The house on the corner, belonging to the Seaver brothers, whose

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doorbell camera had caught the hooded figure striding past, and who had plenty to share about Ruby Fletcher besides.

Ruby was out of sight now, probably passing the Wellman house, whose camera had identified Ruby sprinting into the woods, toward the lake.

I was listening hard to the silence when I sensed movement from the corner of my eye.

Tate was standing at the entrance of her garage next door, half in, half out, arms crossed over her abdomen. Our separate houses were only a few yards from being townhomes with shared walls. We were practically side by side. I felt her staring at the side of my face.

“I didn’t know she was coming,” I said.

“How long is she staying?” Tate asked.

I thought of the empty bag in my house. “Not sure yet.”

Officially, Tate and Javier Cora hadn’t seen or heard anything that night—they’d gotten home from a friend’s party after midnight, and there was nothing on their camera. Unofficially, they weren’t surprised. Now I could sense her teeth grinding together, but I wasn’t sure whether it was from anger or fear.

Tate was maybe five feet tall, and small-framed at that. I’d learned it wasn’t her true first name only during the investigation. It was her maiden name, but she and Javier had met in college, where she played lacrosse, and everyone had called her Tate then. So did he. She still wore her thick blond hair in a high ponytail with a wraparound athletic headband, like she might be called onto the field at any moment. I could picture it well. She could summon an intensity that compensated for her size.

Everyone knew Tate and Javier as the gregarious couple of the neighborhood. They hosted weekend barbecues and helped plan the neighborhood social events.

“Do something,” Tate said, making her eyes wide. Pregnancy

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had turned her less gregarious, more demanding. But we'd all hardened over the last year and a half. We'd each become, in turn, more skeptical, wary, impenetrable.

I nodded noncommittally.

We both stared in the direction Ruby had gone. "Chase is going to lose his shit when he sees her," she said before retreating inside.

Though Tate was prone to overreaction, this was not one of those times.

If Chase saw her there—

If no one had warned him first—

I grabbed my things in a rush, taking off after Ruby.

CHAPTER 2

IT'S FAIR TO SAY that no one here had loved Brandon and Fiona Truett.

On the surface, everything was fine. We smiled, we waved. But we didn't really socialize with them.

Brandon was the head of admissions at the College of Lake Hollow, where many of us worked, and he believed vigorously in a separation between work and relationships. He was standoffish, and judgmental of the rest of us who did not adhere to his personal code of conduct, and kind of an asshole. Fiona was standoffish by proxy, judgmental by proxy, an asshole by proxy.

We liked them more in hindsight. In sympathy.

Their house had been unoccupied since the day they were found. It belonged to the bank now, but no one was offering, and so it sat—empty, haunting. A constant reminder.

In the months after, the yard had run wild and overgrown until we coordinated a schedule to keep up appearances, like we did after Charlotte Brock's accident and knee surgery. We did not have altruistic intentions; we were not such good people. But we cared enough about our own status not to let the property go to hell, bringing us all down with it. We were all dependent on one another here.

The neighborhood of Hollow's Edge hugged a finger of Lake Hollow, a semicircle of fifty closely packed homes oriented toward the water, half-moon courts set off from two main roads. The development had been completed about five years earlier, and many of the homes were occupied by their original owners. They were similarly designed and modestly priced; there weren't large industries in the area to commute for. Most of us in Lake Hollow worked for the college, or Lake Hollow Prep, or the public education system.

We were highly educated, though not highly compensated. But we had this: the view, the convenience of a suburb, and the ambience of our own private stretch of nature—you could hear it coming alive at night, down by the water. And the summer: Administrative positions required year-round employment, but the rest had the expanse of mid-June to mid-August for themselves. Two-plus months of unstructured, unaccountable hours. Though I technically had a year-round position at the college, the days turned flexible in the summer, the hours more like a suggestion than a requirement.

There were other, more exclusive subdivisions on the opposite side of the lake, closer to the college: larger homes, more established communities, with lake access and boat docks. Our neighborhood didn't officially have direct access, though there was a cleared path through the wooded area across from the Wellmans' home, a gently sloping path where people dragged kayaks and canoes. A strip of plywood atop the rougher section, to ease anything over the roots without damage.

There weren't many young children here yet, the neighborhood self-selecting based on its facilities. The lack of playground. The pool with no lifeguard. The proximity to the lake. All hidden dangers that parents could see. We were mostly young professionals, upwardly mobile, still establishing ourselves.

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Aidan and I had fit right in. We'd been welcomed into the fold as soon as we'd unloaded our things, fresh out of the large academic setting of Boston University, where we'd first met, enamored with the possibilities of the life we would build for ourselves here. We'd both grown up near the water—me, a mile from a stretch of cape where I'd learned to fish and sail and keep time by the tides; him, on the Gulf Coast of Florida, where he'd developed an affinity for biology and boating. We'd felt a pull here, a faint familiarity, like there was something in it that recognized us, too.

Five years later, I could name every family on the street as I walked to the pool, as I followed Ruby.

I thought about stopping at Mac's house on the corner to make sure he'd gotten my message, but it remained dark, the blinds tilted shut. In fact, the stretch of road behind me and in front of me remained still, unnaturally silent, only the cicadas starting up again in the trees, calling out to one another. I was used to hearing my neighbors.

Our backyards collided, high white fences in a grid, granting the illusion of privacy. We couldn't see one another, but we could hear everything, though we pretended we couldn't. Everyone was reduced to a caricature of themselves on the other side of the fence, winnowed down to their most defining features. Sometimes you could see colors moving through the thin slats, the movement of a person, when you thought you were alone.

On a typical weekend morning around this time, most people were up, working on house projects or reading in their backyards. Others would ride their bikes around the lake into downtown, or go for a walk before the heat really kicked in.

But on this particular Saturday, the neighborhood appeared quiet. *Sleepy* is what the news reports once called us, as if we were collectively lazy, oblivious to the danger among us.

In truth, summers here were always dangerous. In their luxury. In their sleepiness. With their lack of structure and sudden influx of time. Time to notice the things we were too busy for during the rest of the year. Time to fixate. Time to make a change.

Anything taken to an extreme was dangerous. Here, in the summer, there was nowhere to hide—not from others and not from yourself.

On the surface, Hollow's Edge could still give the illusion of a quiet little neighborhood, but that was a lie. Even if it had been true at one time, the reality was a very different thing now. One thing I could say for sure: We had all awakened.

THE POOL WAS NOT crowded, for which I was grateful. Ruby had already claimed a blue lounge chair, setting herself up by the pool steps. But she had my key, and I couldn't get in without calling her attention.

Chase, thankfully, wasn't here. Neither was Mac.

There was a man in the far corner, a dark hat pulled low over sunglasses, chair angled directly toward the sun, tanned arms resting beside his pale torso. Preston Seaver. Mac's younger brother. I wasn't surprised; he could usually be found at the pool on the weekend, probably on a mission to even out his tan. Preston worked in security at the college during the week and always seemed to know what was happening, in and out of work—and he was usually all too willing to share.

Preston Seaver, who had told the police how one time, when Ruby and Mac were fighting, someone had broken into their home and smashed some dishes, establishing a pattern. Preston, who now held me at arm's length, like I was not to be trusted.

But it was a mutual distrust, and I wasn't sure which of ours was the strongest. The way he'd turned on Ruby so fast. *I warned*

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my brother, he'd told them. As if he had always sensed some menace lurking in her, threatening to emerge.

Sometimes, when he looked at me, I wondered if he saw in me something untoward. Something worth warning his brother about, too.

Now he remained perfectly still, but I couldn't tell whether he'd noticed Ruby or was sleeping. They had never gotten along, not even before. Preston believed Ruby was full of herself; Ruby believed Preston was irrelevant, an unfortunate extension of Mac's existence. Even before, they could circle each other without interacting. It was a skill, but it worked only by joint agreement, some sort of pact they had entered into together.

Margo Wellman had noticed Ruby, though. She had the baby in the pool, and every few seconds she sneaked a glance—but she didn't change her own plans. She was pulling the baby—a toddler now—in a yellow float, in lazy circles.

I stood at the gated entrance, not wanting to call Ruby's name—not wanting to declare an allegiance, disrupt the balance—when she approached the edge of the pool, crouching down. “Is this your little one?” she asked Margo.

Margo didn't move any closer, but she didn't retreat, either. She was just out of reach of Ruby, and she pulled the float subconsciously closer. “Yes, this is Nicholas.” Nicholas had the same curly red hair as his mother, fine and wispy but undeniably hers. Margo had her hair tied up in a bun on top of her head to keep dry, though tendrils had come loose and clung to her neck, water-logged.

“Hi, Nicholas,” Ruby said, waving. She smiled when Nicholas waved back, all chubby arms and baby-faced delight. “Congrats, Margo, he's precious.”

“Thank you,” Margo answered.

Nothing about Ruby being out or here. No apologies or

condolences or congratulations. Their entire interaction was exquisitely, painfully civil. Nothing about the fact that it was Margo's camera, with its wide-angled view of the lake and the path cutting into the woods, that had caught Ruby running down through the trees that night—making us wonder if she might've been disposing of some evidence in the lake or the surrounding woods, though nothing was ever found.

When she stood back up, Ruby noticed me at the gate and smiled as she let me in. "Look who decided to come after all."

"Hey," I said. I held up my pool bag. "I have towels and sunscreen. And the food." As if her lack of preparedness was my reason for coming. The scorching summer Virginia sun, which she might've forgotten about.

"I can always count on you," she said.

Margo caught my eye as I passed. I wanted to explain. To tell her I was here to diffuse any sort of situation. To keep my eye on Ruby; to deescalate.

With her free hand, Margo hitched the navy blue strap of her swimsuit farther up one shoulder, then the other, her gaze trailing after us. It seemed like Margo's body kept changing by degrees ever since the baby was born, month after month, in subtle realignments, so that she was constantly fidgeting with a strap, or cinching a waistband, or holding a neckline in place.

Once I settled in a lounge chair beside Ruby, Margo returned her focus to the baby, gently humming. I handed Ruby the sunscreen, passed her the fruit, watched the gated entrance.

It was easy to fall into old habits—the purple insulated cup, hers; the blue one, mine. The chair closer to the umbrella would be for me, for the shade, because I was more likely to burn than she was, though I never noticed until it was too late.

It was so easy to pretend that everything was normal. We've always been great pretenders here.

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When I looked over at Preston, he had his phone propped on his stomach, peering down like he was reading something on his screen. But then I thought, from the angle, that maybe he was taking pictures of us. Recording us. It was not the first time I'd thought he was taking photos of people at the pool.

He tilted his phone slightly, and he pressed his lips together, as if trying not to smile. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and I sat up straighter, staring straight back at him. His expression didn't change, until I wondered whether I was being paranoid. Whether he was watching a video—he had earbuds in, after all—or reading an article, or texting his brother: *Guess who's sitting on the other side of the pool right now . . .*

He grinned, then placed his phone facedown beside him, resting his head back once more.

No one said anything. Margo kept pulling the baby around the pool; Preston remained almost motionless, only his fingers giving him away, tapping out some beat on the side of the lounge chair.

I wished someone would break. Say what they were thinking. None of us were strangers here. We'd all known Ruby since she was just barely on the cusp of adulthood. And last fall, we'd all testified at her trial.

I'd first met Ruby when I was twenty-five, working in the admissions department, and she was a twenty-year-old student staying with her dad in the summer. That was when Aidan and I moved in, and she was a kid bringing her friends to the pool.

People complained, covertly, passive aggressively, on our message board: *What's the policy on guests at the pool? For example, how many underage college kids can be drinking before someone should say something?*

Flirting, even then, with Mac, who was older than I was and wouldn't give her the time of day, just a nod as he passed with a can of beer in his hand.

I'd always had a soft spot for her. She reminded me of the best parts of my brother. The fun and the joy and the excitement that teetered on recklessness—the parts I imagined must still exist in him, if you stripped all the rest away.

After Ruby graduated, she'd gone on to get her master's, working part-time in our department, giving student tours, and I got to know another side of her. We started having lunches together. She talked about her future.

She got a job teaching English at the prep school right after she'd earned her master's, still staying with her dad, to save. That was the same year Aidan finished his postdoc.

That was also when he left me, in a sudden, jarring blindside—so fast and unexpected that the anger first masked the heartbreak, and even now I wasn't sure whether I was more upset about the loss of the relationship or the way it had happened.

He was leaving *for a better opportunity*, he said, *and maybe it's time we stopped pretending this was working*. This could be an opportunity for both of us. And when I argued, tried to understand where this was coming from, he threw his arms out to the sides and said, *My God, Harper, I just have to get out of here*.

Like some switch had been flipped and he was seeing this place with fresh eyes—the four walls limiting him, the neighborhood roads circling back around, and me, always the thing he was coming back to.

As if I were something that required escaping.

There was nothing secret about our breakup—it was a casualty of the summer, and there was nothing better to do than watch the unraveling. There was a moving truck, because he took half the furniture. I demanded the cat in a moment of insanity. Aidan held a going-away party with the guys in the neighborhood—Javier Cora, Mac and Preston Seaver, Chase Colby—and they all pretended this was a normal thing to do. No one mentioned how I

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supported him through his education, and then the second he was done, he left me.

Even my dad was unsympathetic when I told him. He'd never been a fan of Aidan, had tallied his shortcomings on both hands when I told him we were moving here together; said it was in my nature to want to see only the potential in people—like it was some great character flaw.

Aidan and I had bought the house together, in theory. But it was only my name on the mortgage because Aidan had terrible credit and an unappealing debt-to-income ratio (one of the many warnings from my dad), so it was easier to qualify without him.

And then Ruby's father sold their house and moved away. When Ruby asked if I could use a roommate, I was still recovering from Aidan's blindside, still caught off guard at the end of each day by the silence here. The unsettling emptiness that seemed to have its own presence.

I gave her Aidan's office, on the second floor, across the loft from the master suite. She piled her things in her car and drove it the two blocks to my place, and I scooped up her clothes from the backseat, laughing. I was twenty-eight, she was twenty-three, and I wasn't sure which of us was doing the other a favor right then.

Now, at thirty and twenty-five, the gap between us felt smaller.

Eventually, Margo made a production of leaving the pool, saying to no one in particular that it sounded like nap time, as if she needed a polite excuse to make her exit. She swooped her gear into the stroller, the yellow floatie spilling over the seat, and hitched the baby onto her hip.

Preston stood next, towel slung over the distinct tan line on his upper arm, and nodded in our general direction as he headed toward the gate. I tipped my chin back, the faintest response, a force of habit. Ruby, committed to the cause, did not acknowledge him.

I checked my phone, but no one else had contacted me. Mac

never responded. To be fair, I wouldn't, either—not if I thought she might notice. I would keep my distance. Keep out of it. Hope this was temporary and we could all go back to our lives tomorrow.

No one else came to the pool, though the hours grew hotter, more stifling.

“How lucky for us,” Ruby said, reaching into the Tupperware bowl of fruit, “to have the pool all to ourselves.”

We passed the time in silence. Sun and drinks and me, always, with my eye toward the entrance.

Ruby dove into the deep end, floated on her back, and I felt myself being drawn into the past. All these things we had done before, as if we could excise the time between. The scent of sunscreen and chlorine and Ruby's steps leaving footprints across the concrete, her hands twisting the ends of her hair, squeezing out the excess water.

She hooked her ankle around the leg of her lounge, pulling it farther away from the encroaching shade, in a sharp kick of nostalgia—so that I could almost taste the extra-sweet sangria Ruby would make, tossing in whatever fruit I happened to have in the fridge at the time, the mixture cloying at the back of my throat. The way my skin would feel on those endless days, absorbing the summer sun, before I showered off back home later, when the sting of the burn slowly revealed itself from the inside out.

And then the neighbors started passing by for a closer look: walking dogs or strolling by, on their phones. One by one, as if it were coordinated. Each one slowing, watching briefly, and then moving on.

These people who, after her arrest, *always had a feeling* about Ruby Fletcher, her perceived crimes expanding in retrospect. Saying, *Money went missing from my wallet at the barbecue; from my living room at that New Year's party; from my pool bag—it was Ruby. I know it.* The paranoia gaining force as people searched for signs, for clues, for how we had missed the danger among us for so long.

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Finally, I saw Chase. He wasn't in uniform, but he was walking as if he were. Confident and full of authority, with his large frame and ramrod-straight posture. Stopping and staring from across the street as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Dark hair buzzed short, wide stance, arms hanging stoic at his sides. He stood there for a long time. If Ruby noticed, she didn't let on.

We used to see Chase as *our* cop. We could count on him to fill us in on the cause of the sirens, or the status of the car break-in investigation, and we called on him at neighborhood meetings, plying him for information with beer at the pool. He lent a sense of security. But he became something different after Brandon and Fiona Truett.

The message board had started the same way—as a source of information: *Who has the number for a good plumber?* or *What was that loud noise in the middle of the night?* and *Did you hear about the prowler in the neighborhood up the road?*

Hollow's Edge was a force, as a group, over the last five years. We caught package thieves. We saw a coyote and warned neighbors to keep their small pets inside at night. We caught Charlotte's husband bringing another woman home when Charlotte was out. We solved mysteries. We solved problems. We crowdsourced data and posted the video feed from our security cameras. We extrapolated results.

But the board, too, had subtly morphed with time. After the deaths of Brandon and Fiona Truett were deemed suspicious, eventually, and with Chase's guidance, we believed we had solved the case of who killed them. We pieced together Ruby's movements, her time line, and the police came by for our evidence, our message board comments morphing into official statements.

We were more careful now. In person and on the message board. Posts were deleted as soon as people stopped responding and sometimes sooner.

Ruby picked up her purple insulated cup and raised it toward the iron gates where Chase stood, in a mock salute. Of course she'd known he was there.

He finally turned back up the road, and I breathed slowly, deeply, as he disappeared from sight.

"Okay, you made your point," I said. "I'm baking here. Let's go."

"All right," she said, stretching. "Anyway, I'm famished for some real food."

I SCANNED THE AREA for Chase as we walked back, worried he was somewhere else: waiting in the woods; waiting in front of my house. I kept an eye out for anyone at all. But no one came outside.

They were watching, though. I could feel it in the shadows behind the windows. In the way everyone remained behind the safety of their walls.

All the things that seemed so appealing when we moved to Hollow's Edge: Its insular nature. Its privacy. That close familiarity. The safety of neighbors who would look out for one another.

All of us were held hostage by it now.

The truth was, after the deaths of Brandon and Fiona Truett, we were trapped here. We were trapped with one another and what we had each said and done.

CHAPTER 3

I CONVINCED RUBY TO LET me order in, to relax with a pizza in the living room, Koda curled up beside her on the other end of my couch as she sat with my laptop open in front of her.

“You sure you don’t mind paying?” she asked as she quickly added an assortment of clothes to the online cart.

“No, of course not.” I’d gotten rid of her things, and now she sat beside me, still smelling faintly of chlorine, hair damp and tangled, in more of my summer clothes. She didn’t have a credit card, or employment, or a bank account.

She selected one-day rush delivery and passed the laptop my way so I could enter the payment information. “I’m good for it,” she said with a wink. I’d never seen her wink before. It was things like this—quirks I didn’t recognize—that I found most unnerving.

She scooted closer, the cushions sinking between us, so that I felt her brush against my shoulder as she watched me finish placing the order. “Hey,” she said. “Let’s see what they’re saying.”

I froze, my heart in my throat. “You want me to Google your name?” I could only imagine what things might come up—links I’d already clicked, articles I’d read, every one of them already consumed by me in private.

“No,” she said, “I mean here. The message board. What they’re saying *here*.”

My fingers tingled. That wasn’t any better. Ruby had never been a member of the Hollow’s Edge community page, since she wasn’t an owner herself. Charlotte was the president of the board and had established an arbitrary set of rules that dictated who could be permitted access to the message board—*homeowner* being the main criteria. She’d decided back then that Ruby was something between an unregistered tenant and a long-term guest.

But I couldn’t deny her now. Not when she was sitting so close, wearing my clothes because she owned nothing of her own. Not when I’d convinced her to stay in—some dark secret I might still be able to contain.

She watched as my fingers flew over the keyboard, typing the URL, my log-in already in place. The page loaded quickly, entries sorted by date. There were no new posts from today. Not a single one.

“It’s not the same anymore,” I told her. “People don’t use it as much.” Then I shut the laptop quickly, before she could scroll down, call me on my bluff.

She let out a sigh as she edged back to her side of the couch. “I’m not sure what I expected,” she said, reaching for another slice of cheese pizza. “Maybe my picture on every security camera on the street.” She smirked, then closed her eyes as she inhaled the scent of greasy pizza. I guessed this was another thing she’d missed. “Did you ever get yours fixed, Harper?”

Once upon a time, I’d had a security camera, too. Angled over the front porch—a deterrent more than anything. But it hadn’t recorded that night. Whatever service Aidan set up had long since expired.

“Never got around to it,” I said. Though the device still sat there, uselessly pointed at empty space. Those cameras, for our

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safety, they could just as easily be turned against you. The petty infractions they exposed; the relationships they ruined. I wasn't sure a camera would ever keep me safe when the person convicted had a key.

After we finished eating, I took our plates to the kitchen and tossed the pizza box in the trash can inside the garage, thinking Ruby would be heading to bed soon. Thinking surely she'd be as tired as I was. The sun and the drinks, and who knew how long it had been since she'd last slept.

"Do you need anything before I go to bed?" I asked, turning off the television, hoping she would take the hint.

She shifted positions on the couch, letting Koda settle onto her lap. "I'm good. I'm just—God, it's so quiet. I'm not used to so much silence."

But it was only inside the walls that was quiet. Outside, the sounds of the night came alive, things encroaching from the woods and the lake. The crickets chirping and the tiny frogs bellowing, a sound I once mistook for something larger, until a frog had plastered itself to the front window—letting out a call so sharp and close, I'd thought it was a cry for help.

During the investigation, we had established an official neighborhood watch. A self-imposed curfew. The remnants of our fear carried over long after. We locked our doors and the patio gates, we pulled the curtains tight, we slept with a can of Mace beside our beds—or more. We listened to the silence. We whispered. We reimagined the noises we'd heard drifting from our neighbors' homes. The music at three a.m. The fight. The bang. We stared at the ceilings, slept odd hours, searched through our old camera footage.

Ruby didn't know, she had come back to someplace different.

"Good night, Harper," she said when I hadn't made a move to leave.

“Good night,” I said. I hated to leave her there, but I did. Didn’t want her to think that I didn’t trust her here, that I was afraid.

My room—the master—faced the front, and hers faced the back, a smaller room with a Jack-and-Jill bathroom connecting to the loft, which looked out over the stairway and entrance. Inside my bedroom, I checked my phone one last time. No one else had reached out. I’d expected more calls, more texts, more questions. But the silence said something, too. The nature of my friendships here, too fragile to withstand Ruby’s return.

The thing we learned last year, or maybe the thing we had always known, was that there were two versions of Hollow’s Edge. There was the one on the surface, where we waved to our neighbor, and passed along recommendations, and held the pool gate, smiling.

And then there was the other, simmering underneath.

I shouldn’t have been surprised. I’d witnessed the same from the inside, growing up. With my brother, Kellen, in and out of rehab since he was sixteen, and the strain of my parents’ relationship, fracturing under the disagreements and the blame. So different from the facade we presented to the outside, glossing over reality with good posture and white lies.

Eventually, I heard Ruby coming up the stairs. I heard her in the shower. I relaxed, rolling over, eyes fixed on the door. And then I saw her shadow just outside my door. I counted to ten, and it didn’t move. I stared at the doorknob, thinking I should’ve locked it. Then wondering which was worse—Ruby coming in or Ruby realizing I was afraid?

Finally, the shadow retreated. But I heard the sound of her steps on the staircase and then the back door creaking open. I bolted upright in bed, imagining all the places she could be going. All the things she could be doing. Staring at the clock on my bedside table to mark the time—being a good witness.

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Maybe there was nothing to worry about here. Maybe I was reading too much into things. Maybe she just wanted fresh air, and who could blame her, really?

But all I could think of was that other night. The one we had to keep revisiting, with the cops, with ourselves—when I'd heard that same creak of the back door and the shower running around two a.m.

It hadn't meant anything to me then. Not even after we'd found them.

No one was afraid at first. Shocked, yes. Upset, of course. But not afraid. Or at least not afraid of anything more than ourselves, what we might've missed. Because when Brandon and Fiona were discovered deceased, we didn't yet know it was a crime—well, nothing further than a domestic crime of murder-suicide (and we could make a case for it going either way). A crime that was self-contained.

But slowly, in the days that followed, the scene shifted.

The carbon monoxide detector—the same model in every home—was no longer in its place, or in the house at all.

The police started coming door-to-door, asking where we were that night, what we'd heard, what we'd noticed. And finally, we understood: Someone else had been in that house with Brandon and Fiona Truett.

Someone who had killed them.