

SUDDENLY  
A  
MURDER

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*For Rixie*

# PROLOGUE



The knife burns cold in my trembling hand.

I lock Blaine's door with a soft click so no one can follow me into his bedroom. The others are busy getting dressed for cocktail hour, but it would be unforgivable to take any risks now that I've come this far.

The antique shower plumbing whistles and bangs as loudly as the rusty boiler in Marian Academy's basement. Even so, I hold my breath as I creep toward the bathroom. I hide behind the cracked door and peer through the gap. Blaine is standing in the canary-yellow tub, a sheer shower curtain drawn around him, his head and chest barely visible through the swirling steam. The vintage wool bathing suit he'd worn to the beach is in a heap on the mosaic tile.

Each bathroom in Ashwood Manor has been meticulously preserved, and Blaine's is decorated with golden art deco mirrors.

I look at the gold blade of my knife.

*They match.*

If I were the kind of person who believed in signs, I might think the universe approved of the crime I was about to commit.

But I'm not that kind of person. That person would have spilled their secret to Kassidy weeks ago, hoping the universe

would repay their good deed. I'm more of a don't-fuck-with-my-future-if-you-don't-want-to-meet-my-knife kind of girl. At least I want to be. My shaking hands tell a different story.

Blaine's eyes are closed, his head tipped up to the water as it cascades down with the delicate patter typical of old houses, a quiet contrast to the thumping plumbing in the walls. It's a soothing sound, like spring rain, and I briefly flash back to the day before prom, when Blaine danced in my apartment building's courtyard during a storm while my family and I laughed from the sidewalk.

He looked vulnerable and young then, just as he does now, standing naked and defenseless in the shower. I've been waiting for this moment. Obsessing over the details in my head for days. But as Blaine runs his hands through his ginger hair, slowly pushing a stream of water off his forehead and down his freckled back, a burning guilt spreads through my arms, almost making me drop the knife.

Blaine doesn't deserve this—not really. But neither do I. And I can't sit back and let him destroy my life.

I grip the knife tighter and step through the doorway.



A glass shatters. Someone screams below deck as the *Blood Rose* hits a patch of choppy sea. Kassidy ignores the noise and keeps talking. “Chloe may be super smart or whatever, but even Dean Halliwell nodded off during her valedictorian speech, and he’s the most boring person I’ve ever met.”

Kassidy doesn’t seem to care that Chloe could climb the stairs at any minute and hear us talking about her. I adjust my seasickness wristbands and take a steadying breath. The loungers on Kassidy’s yacht are plush, but I can’t get comfortable. Maybe I’m uneasy because of the rocking waves. Or maybe because I know what’s buried inside the backpack resting at my feet. Either way, I keep hoping to see Sparrow Island on the horizon.

It’s a cool day for June, but the sun shines brightly above the dark water. Seabirds coo and caw overhead, occasionally dipping their bills into the cold sea for fish. Kassidy has pulled her graduation dress above her thighs so her long legs don’t get tan lines. If she were less wealthy, her skin would be ivory from living through winters in Maine. But when you spend your school breaks in places like Seychelles, you end up with a honey glow year-round. I don’t need to travel to look tan—my last name’s Morales.

The telltale pop of a cork reaches our ears.

"They've opened the champagne!" says Kassidy, jumping off her lounge and running to the metal railing. The *Blood Rose* has tiered levels, so from each deck you can see the edge of the next. "Bring me a glass, babe," she calls to Blaine, leaning so far over the railing her head disappears from view. "And one for Izzy too."

I reluctantly slide off my lounge and join Kassidy. Blaine is no longer wearing his cap and gown, or even his shirt. His broad back is bent over a table where he's filling glasses from a magnum bottle of something that probably costs more than I've made at Pegasus Books all semester.

The smile he flashes at Kassidy falters when he sees me. I hurry away from the railing and return to my lounge.

Kassidy pops back up and ties her glossy blond waves into a messy bun. "Anyway," she says obliviously, "I think students should vote for the valedictorian. Otherwise, you end up with drippy geniuses reciting tortured clichés about their hopes and dreams."

I nod, only half listening. *Stupid Blaine*, I think. *He's going to ruin everything if he keeps looking at me with those guilty eyes.*

I respond a few beats too late. "At least you didn't have to watch the other parents treat your mom like a pariah at the reception."

Kassidy rolls her eyes sympathetically. "Like, how dare she give their precious babies tough math grades." She flops onto her lounge and smiles. "My parents couldn't believe she gave me a C in calculus. They thought I'd get the best-friend grade boost."

A stiff breeze lifts my curls into the air. The cool spray of water and the buzzing hum of the engine make me feel a million miles away from my family's apartment in Harker.

I wonder what my mom and sister are doing at home without

me. It's hard to believe only three hours ago we were stuck in a stuffy auditorium listening to Chloe's address: *Though our time at Marian Academy is over, the lessons we've learned here will never fade. As you go into the world and confront its challenges, always remember the school motto: Fortis Fortuna adiuvat!*

Fortune favors the bold.

I think about my backpack again. I felt like a budding sociopath when I packed the knife, wrapping it carefully in a pair of jeans and shoving it to the bottom of my bag. Now I wonder: Will I have the strength to be bold?

Footsteps sound on the stairs. "Your butler has arrived," says a sarcastic voice. I turn to see Fergus balancing three glasses of champagne between his fingers. He's dressed in what he calls Euro chic but his critics at school have deemed Euro geek: snug olive slacks, brown loafers, and a button-down shirt with sleeves rolled up to his pasty elbows. His dirty-blond hair is styled with a swirl, like a 1950s greaser, and his small brown eyes are scrunched with his ever-present smirk.

He nods at Cassidy, who flashes him a tight-lipped smile. Fergus is Blaine's best friend from childhood, and he and Cassidy have been locked in a battle for Blaine's attention for years.

"Blaine's too busy to serve you," says Fergus. "He's begging Ellison for details about next year's Olympic rowing trials."

Kassidy and I each grab a glass. Fergus clinks his against ours. "To never setting foot in that prison full of backstabbing prima donnas again," he says.

"Gus, what are you talking about?" I laugh. "You loved Marian."

"And you're the *top* backstabbing prima donna," adds Cassidy. "Prince of the theater."

Fergus's face turns sour. "I suppose you think Blaine is the king."

"More like a god." Kassidy playfully fans her face as she says it, but I know she's not joking. It was Blaine's performance in *Almost, Maine* that brought them together. When she saw him onstage our freshman year, she fell into his blue-eyed smolder and never returned.

"Gross," says Fergus. "The only reason so many students came to our productions is that Ms. Kepler invited all the Hollywood B-listers her dad works with. And if I *occasionally* dropped hints about gossip to include in the school paper," he says, turning to me, "that doesn't make me a backstabber."

I laugh again. "Never change, Gus."

My friends had bloomed like flowers at Marian Academy; I'd been more like an invasive weed. Kassidy cried when we walked out of Marian for the last time, but I felt only relief. Relief that I'd never again have to wave at my mom in the halls, or see the other students smirk at my faded uniform, or stand by Kassidy's side looking like a short, curvy letter S next to her perfect T. Relief and hope that things might be different in college.

"I want in on the toast," says a deep voice from the staircase.

A few seconds later, Ellison finishes the climb from middeck and slams his glass against ours with such enthusiasm I can't believe they don't break.

"Sorry." He laughs. "Guess I don't know my own strength."

Fergus rolls his eyes so hard they look like boiled eggs.

Ellison props himself against the railing, which comes only to the top of his thighs. The stubble usually dotting his dark-brown skin has been shaved for the graduation ceremony.

Every inch of him looks like a future Olympic athlete. I'm half-surprised he didn't row himself to Sparrow Island.

Ellison yells to the deck below. "Blaine, you coming?"

Heavy footsteps bang up the stairs. Blaine barrels into sight, still holding the magnum of champagne. The black T-shirt he's put on over his dark jeans contrasts sharply with the big white sneakers hugging his feet. Blaine's always decked out in the kind of hypercasual look popular among the rich kids who can spend thousands of dollars on the latest kicks.

"Looks like I found the party," he says. He puts down the champagne and connects his phone to a little Bluetooth speaker he pulls out of his back pocket. When he presses *PLAY*, loud rap drowns out the jet-engine sound of the wind. Blaine's giant watch sparkles in the sun as he grabs the champagne again and chugs straight from the bottle.

"Your girlfriend is worshipping your godlike feats of acting," says Fergus, his voice dripping with derision. "Might want to take advantage of her good mood."

Blaine squeezes himself onto Cassidy's lounge and pulls her into his lap with his free hand. "My girl's always in a good mood," he says, earning a laugh from the rest of us, who have all been on the receiving end of one of Cassidy's sulks. She leans against him, and they indulge in the kind of kiss most of us would hide behind closed doors.

"I wondered where you went," says the lilting voice of Marian's valedictorian.

Kassidy and Blaine tense and break apart. Ellison stands a little straighter and runs a smoothing palm over his short brown hair.

Chloe Li mounts the final stair and walks hesitantly over to the group with a still-full glass of champagne. Like Blaine, she's dressed casually: high-waisted jeans, a sporty crop top, and red trainers. She recently chopped her straight black hair to her chin, and some evil stylist cut her bangs too short, like a sadistic child might do to a Bratz doll. It's not a good look.

Kassidy scowls at Chloe, then rolls off Blaine and walks to the other side of the deck. Blaine sets down the champagne bottle and follows her with a barely audible groan. Chloe frowns at them, not used to their fireworks.

Ellison breaks the awkward silence. "Loved the graduation issue of the school paper," he says to me, smiling warmly. "Especially the retrospective you did on old Calloway."

"Kassidy helped me on that one," I say. "Dr. Calloway used to work as a model in New York. She loves Kassidy's fashion column."

"I can't believe she's taught at Marian for fifty years," adds Chloe, clearly relieved to have something to say. "It's weird to think I might never have met any of you if she hadn't pushed the administration to let girls apply."

Ellison holds his glass out to her. "That would be a loss for all of us," he says.

Chloe flushes pink as she clinks his glass. I turn away to hide my grin. Although it's been a while since Ellison set off butterflies in my stomach, I remember how pleasant the sensation is. It's a good thing Nestor couldn't come on the trip; he wouldn't like watching Chloe get swept up in a new flirtation so soon after dumping her.

Fergus, who's been watching Ellison and Chloe with stormy eyes, interrupts their conversation. "Where's Marlowe?" he asks.

"Inside, on one of the couches," says Chloe. "He told me he'd rather finish his book than get slapped by the wind."

"Typical," mutters Fergus. "He probably gets seasick and doesn't want to admit it."

"Or maybe he's not used to being on a yacht this small," jokes Ellison.

Kassidy and Blaine return arm in arm a few minutes later, smiling happily. Whatever she was pissed about, she's over it. That's one of the best things about Kassidy: She doesn't hold a grudge.

Just as I start to debate joining Marlowe, Kassidy squeals and begins to dance on her tiptoes. "There's Sparrow Island!" she says, pointing at a fast-approaching rock covered with wild grasses and thick pine groves. It looks like someone dropped a crescent of forest into the middle of the ocean. "You can't see Ashwood Manor because it's on the other side of the hill."

"I told you I should have sent my Jag over on the ferry," grumbles Blaine. "You packed like ten suitcases. We'll never be able to lug them up that hill."

"Relax," says Kassidy. "We have drivers waiting for us." I can tell she's trying not to look too pleased with herself, which makes me suspicious. She'd told me about the surprise graduation trip to Ashwood Manor only a few days before. And she hadn't said anything about cars.

After what feels like another queasy hour but is really only ten minutes, the yacht pulls into port. Crewmen jump off the boat and use lines to maneuver us close to a long dock surrounded by bright-green ferns. Once we're tied up, they attach a ladder to the side so we can climb off without falling. A crew member tries to shoo away the gulls scavenging

crumbs on the dock, but they scurry around him like he's part of the scenery.

I grab my backpack and strap it on firmly. It's no mystery why the nerves rolling through my stomach won't settle: It's how I always feel when I'm about to talk to Marlowe.

Before I can not-so-secretly rush to meet him as we disembark, Cassidy grabs my arm and holds me back while the others clamber down the stairs to collect their bags. She's bouncing on her feet as if she might dive overboard.

For a minute, I forget about Marlowe. "I've seen this look," I say. "You have another surprise."

She smiles. "You know me too well."

"Please tell me it's not strippers again."

She laughs so loudly the gulls screech with displeasure and launch themselves into the sky. "Not strippers," she assures me. Then her face turns serious. "My surprise involves everyone, but I want you to know that everything I did, I did for the two of us." She drags me toward the staircase. "I can't wait to see your face. This is going to be the best week ever."



## KASSIDY'S HOUSE

Three Days Ago

Kassidy and Izzy sat in their usual spot: the teal leather recliners in the front row of Kassidy's home theater. The room was tucked in the corner of the east wing, so Kassidy's parents couldn't hear the piercing music of the old movies Kassidy and Izzy screened every Wednesday after school.

This evening, Kassidy couldn't sit still. Every few minutes, she jumped up, ball gown trailing behind her, and twirled like a ballerina.

Izzy mindlessly stuffed buttered popcorn into her mouth. No matter how hard she tried to focus, her thoughts were far away from the movie. It wasn't until Kassidy hopped up for the fifth time that Izzy finally noticed her.

"Did you pop a pill or something?" asked Izzy as Kassidy almost fell over from spinning so fast. *The Secret of the Ruby Dagger* played on in the background. "You're not allowed to be bored during our favorite movie."

Kassidy stopped whirling. "I have two words for you, Izzy."

Izzy waited, distracted by Marla Nevercross, the silent-screen siren famous for her wide-eyed pout and her obsession with cheetahs. Izzy and Kassidy were at the part of the movie where she catches her husband seducing Cara Ashwood in the rose garden. "Well?" asked Izzy. "What are they?"

"I want you to guess," said Kassidy, tucking her hair behind her ears.

"You want me to guess two words out of the whole English language?"

"It's about your graduation surprise."

Izzy groaned. "Please tell me it's not something that will get us arrested. Or killed."

"Get a grip," said Kassidy. "When have I ever planned anything dangerous?"

"How about two years ago when we built a canoe by watching YouTube videos and nearly capsized in the river?" said Izzy. "Or last summer, when we stole your dad's motorcycles and rode them up to that folk festival in Canada?"

Kassidy laughed. "The people at those biker bars were super nice."

"I can't believe they didn't check our IDs."

"And you spent all that time making them in Photoshop." Kassidy paused. "This plan is different. It's . . . sophisticated."

"Sophisticated how?"

"It involves an island."

Izzy's mind scrolled through the possibilities. "Let me guess," she said. "Diving with sharks? Hang gliding off bluffs into the ocean?" She swept a piece of popcorn off the recliner. "Maybe we should skip the hard part and go straight to drowning ourselves."

Kassidy sighed louder than the music in the movie. "I'll give you a hint if you promise to keep an open mind."

"Fine," said Izzy. "But I will *not* be doing anything that involves sharks."

"You won't regret this," called Kassidy as she darted out of the theater. Izzy could hear the tread of her bare feet on the creaking staircase that led to the staff kitchen.

Izzy slid off the leather recliner and paced around the home theater while Marla Nevercross slapped her screen husband across the face. The room was dark and cool, and Izzy shivered in the delicate flapper dress she'd borrowed from Mrs. Logan's warehouse-sized closet.

Ever since Kassidy's mom had discovered, midspeech at the Marian Academy holiday ball, that one of her priceless Vionnet dresses had butter stains on the hem, she'd banned Kassidy and Izzy from wearing any of her vintage pieces. Kassidy grudgingly wore replicas in the months that followed, but she insisted that their last after-school screening deserved the best her mom's closet had to offer.

Kassidy shuffled back into the room balancing two tumblers clinking with ice. Her wavy hair fell into her face, giving her the tousled, bohemian look dozens of girls at school had tried to copy without success. She handed Izzy one of the drinks.

"Here's your clue," she said. "They're virgin. I know your mom would freak if you came home toasted on a school night."

Izzy took a sip, then another. She was used to drinking the fancy alcohol the Logans stocked in their cabinets. When Kassidy's parents went out of town, her parties never involved kegs or red Solo cups; she was strictly an upscale-drinks-in-a-real-glass kind of girl.

"Any guesses?" asked Kassidy.

Izzy wasn't in the mood for guessing games. She should have lied and told Kassidy she was too sick to come over. If Kassidy

knew the secret Izzy was keeping from her, she wouldn't have wanted her there anyway.

"I give up," said Izzy.

Kassidy frowned. "You clearly woke up on the wrong side of the bed, so I'll give you another hint. Well, not a hint. More like a gift."

Izzy rubbed her temples. "A cocktail with real alcohol?"

Kassidy laughed. "No, but it is something sweet. I invited Marlowe to Ashwood Manor."

For the first time all evening, Kassidy had Izzy's full attention. "Marlowe?" asked Izzy. "Wait . . . *That* Ashwood Manor?" She pointed to the screen, where Marla Nevercross stood sobbing over her husband's body, which was sprawled across a flagstone terrace on the grounds of Theodore Ashwood's estate.

"I wasn't planning to tell you yet, but you know I can't stand moping."

"I thought you said the museum doesn't open until fall," said Izzy.

Kassidy smiled. "My parents have donated enough money to the restoration to ask for a special favor."

Izzy clapped her hands to her face. "We get to be the first ones to tour the house?"

"Not tour. Stay. For a week."

"A *week* at Ashwood Manor," repeated Izzy in a daze. Then she remembered the other part of Kassidy's surprise. "With Marlowe? I told you I was over him."

"And I'm your best friend, so I knew you were lying."

She was right. Izzy had tried so hard to ignore her crush on Marlowe. But it hadn't worked. Every time she saw him, it felt

like the world narrowed until they were in a bubble universe no one else could enter.

"He has a girlfriend," said Izzy.

Kassidy rolled her eyes. "He told you that months ago," she said. "Plus, she lives in Rome. No way they last."

"You don't even like Marlowe," said Izzy. "Won't a week with just the three of us be awkward?"

"God, yes," said Kassidy with a shiver. "Which is why I also invited Blaine, Chloe, Fergus, and Ellison. I asked Nestor, but his parents are whisking him away to Monaco after graduation to see his grandparents. The owner agreed to rent the house exclusively, so it'll just be the seven of us and some staff. Your mom said she can take care of Caye while you're gone."

Excitement broke through Izzy's malaise. A whole week on the island where her favorite movie of all time was filmed. And not only that. A whole week unsupervised with Marlowe.

So far, her relationship with Marlowe didn't add up to much. Nods in the hallways at Marian. A few awkward conversations at Pegasus Books. But that hadn't stopped her from daydreaming about eating lunch with him in the courtyard or kissing him in the stockroom.

That last fantasy played on repeat during duller work shifts.

"What does a cocktail have to do with Ashwood Manor?" asked Izzy, remembering the clue.

Kassidy's shrug was casual when she answered. Too casual. "Theodore Ashwood built the house in the 1920s, and that's when French 75s were popular." Izzy opened her mouth to press her for whatever she still wasn't saying, but Kassidy cut her off. "Shush, we'll miss the last scene."

They watched the silent actors mime their final, tearful goodbye. As the shock of Cassidy's surprise wore off, a tiny glimmer of hope sparkled in Izzy's thoughts: Blaine was coming to Ashwood Manor too.

In an estate that big and on an island that remote, it wouldn't be hard to find a way to isolate him from the others. It might finally be the perfect opportunity. She would just have to be ready.

After the movie ended, Izzy followed Cassidy back to her bedroom, where they changed into normal clothes. "I can't believe you're bailing on Paris," said Izzy, flopping onto a bubblegum-pink pouf. Spending time in Cassidy's room was like being trapped in a child's dollhouse. Pastels and lacy ruffles and cutesy stuffed animals reached into every corner. "Ashwood Manor is amazing, but it's not the Louvre."

Cassidy stared out her picture windows at the sun setting behind the hills. She was the kind of beautiful that made art students want to paint her, and in the dying light she looked like a Thayer angel. "This might be the last time we're all together," she said. "Everything's going to change when we go to college."

"You and I will always be best friends, Kass."

Cassidy shot Izzy a crooked smile. "I know. But Blaine will be a thousand miles away. And everyone keeps telling me long-distance relationships are doomed to—"

Screaming interrupted Cassidy's train of thought, and stomping rattled the fan. Izzy looked at the ceiling in alarm. "Since when do your parents yell at each other?"

"It's nothing," said Cassidy. "Just drama at my dad's work."

She hurried away from the windows. "I'll ask Miguel to get the Bentley."

KASSIDY'S DRIVER DROPPED Izzy off at her apartment building on the outskirts of town. It was a three-story brick complex with uneven sidewalks and burglar bars over the windows. Izzy's mom sat at a round table in their cramped kitchen, grading exams.

"¿Tienes tarea?" she asked.

Izzy shook her head and responded in English. "There are two days of class left. You're the only teacher still assigning seniors work."

"There are no breaks in the real world."

Izzy grabbed an orange soda from the fridge. "My friends will never have to face the real world."

Her mom blew out air like a bull. "Money doesn't protect you from everything," she said, splashing red X's across the papers.

Her mom had taught at Marian Academy since Izzy's freshman year of high school. She heard the whispers about how she was hired only because she was Latina, but criticisms rolled off her like water off wax paper. Izzy sometimes thought the other teachers envied her mom's youth. She'd fallen pregnant with Izzy in high school and hadn't gotten her degree until after Caye was born. Izzy stared at her long curly hair and smooth skin and wondered if she'd be as pretty at that age. Then her thoughts turned dark: Beauty wasn't always a blessing.

"Isadora, are you listening?"

When the room came into focus around Izzy, she realized her mom had called her name multiple times. "Caye's waiting for you. You should say good night so she can go to sleep."

Izzy swigged her final sip of soda and headed down the narrow hallway to her sister's bedroom, scooting around the wheelchair collapsed against the wall.

Caye lay in bed wearing patterned pajamas that were much too young for her and clutching an old stuffed cat. "You're home!" she shrieked.

Izzy quickly hushed her.

"Sorry," said Caye with wide eyes. "I forgot not to make noise."

"It's fine," soothed Izzy. "We just don't want the neighbors to complain again."

Caye smooshed a bent finger against her mouth. "You weren't here," she whispered.

"I was at Kassidy's," said Izzy. She could tell Caye wasn't sure who she was talking about, even though she'd met Kassidy a hundred times over the past four years. "Do you need anything before I turn off the light?"

"Mommy helped me shower."

"That's good, Caye. Anything else?"

"She brushed my teeth."

"Sounds like you're all set, then."

Caye held out a clenched hand. "Sing the moon song."

Izzy always felt stupid singing aloud, but "Querida Luna" was Caye's favorite song, and disappointing Caye was like kicking a puppy. She sang the verses her dad had taught them, all the way to the end. When she finished, Caye's eyes were closed, and her lips were parted over her teeth. A bolt of protective fury shot through Izzy's temples. She wanted to wrap her arms around Caye like someone taking the impact of a grenade, but she tamed the urge and went to the living room.

Izzy's mom appeared from the hallway. She'd changed into

a sleep tank and shorts and was carrying a glass of water. "Did you have a good time at Cassidy's?" There was a knowing arch in her voice that hinted at what she was really asking.

"Kass told me about the trip to Ashwood Manor," said Izzy. "Thanks for letting me go."

A faint flush spread across her mom's high cheekbones. She and Izzy hadn't spoken much in the past month. Caye and school and work kept them so busy they could go entire days without exchanging more than a few functional words.

"You're welcome," she said. "I don't want you to worry about me and Caye. It'll be good practice for when you leave for college."

Her mom went to bed, and Izzy transitioned the living room from day to night. Caye needed at least ten hours of uninterrupted sleep, and the apartment had only two bedrooms, so Izzy slept on the pullout couch. She yanked the thin mattress from under the cushions and piled pillows on top. Then she closed the privacy curtain that divided the living room and kitchen and lay down.

Her scholarship to Brown University included a private room. The intensity of the ache for her own space was almost scary. Every night, she imagined herself in a real bed, gazing out a window that overlooked something green, where garbage trucks didn't wake her up at the break of dawn.

Some people counted sheep; Izzy counted days until fall semester started.

Then she thought of Caye, and bitterness rose in her throat. Izzy had worked her ass off to go Ivy League, but unless she acted soon, there would be no private room, no courtyard view, and no college. She'd be stuck in her family's apartment forever.

The week at Ashwood Manor was the solution—if she had enough daring to pull it off. As she lay in the living room listening to screams from the parking lot and sinking through the pillows onto the metal bars under her mattress, she decided that to get away from this life, she would dare anything.



Marlowe is already down the ladder when Kassidy and I leave the yacht. A small ferry station dwarfed by birch trees sits at the end of the dock. I can just make out Marlowe's head of dark curls entering the sliding glass doors. Chloe and Ellison stand about halfway up the dock, looking at something through a pair of binoculars. Blaine is nowhere to be seen.

Beyond the ferry station, a narrow road snakes up the hill to a craggy peak. Sheer bluffs fall into waves that crash over rocks poking out of the water like clutches of black dinosaur eggs.

"People think Sparrow Island looks like a giant's tooth," says Kassidy.

I try to picture a giant with his mouth open under the ocean. "If giants' teeth were covered with bushy trees and wildflowers, maybe."

Suddenly, someone behind me yanks my backpack hard, then releases it.

"Boomerang!" shouts a familiar voice.

The rebound of my overstuffed backpack tilts me forward, and I fall onto the dock with a shrill scream.

"That wasn't funny, Blaine!" yells Kassidy, helping me up. "Sorry, Izzy. He's being a jerk because his dad was too busy scouting basketball players in Europe to attend graduation."

Blaine scowls, his cheeks turning almost as red as his hair. "Like I care about that. I was just messing around."

"I'm fine," I say, checking my hands for splinters. "Let's catch up with the others." I hurry ahead of Kassidy and Blaine, but I'm close enough to hear her arguing with him in a hissing whisper. He's been acting out in small ways since our fight, which is one reason I've been avoiding him. If Kassidy has noticed, she hasn't said anything.

When I'm nearly at the ferry station, Kassidy runs up and loops my arm through hers. "Ready?" she says, an excited smile on her face.

"Why is there a ferry station for a single house?" I ask.

"Theodore Ashwood insisted the ferry bring him groceries and mail from the mainland every day," says Kassidy. "When he died, his niece moved in and used the money from the Ashwood Manor Trust to maintain the station. My mom says it's a good thing she did—when the museum opens, they'll have to run several boats a day from Bar Harbor."

The station's amenities are basic: restrooms, ticket counter, a few scratched-up benches that look like old church pews. A single bored security guard sits behind the counter reading a battered paperback. He must be expecting us, because he barely glances up before returning to his book. The sliding glass doors on the opposite end of the station open with an oily squeal as we approach. When I see what's parked outside, I stop dead.

In front of us are two open-air Rolls-Royce Silver Ghosts—exact replicas of the cars from *The Secret of the Ruby Dagger*.

"No freaking way!" I shout. I sprint to the nearest car, not caring how stupid I look in front of Marlowe, who is already in the back seat of the other one.

I graze my fingers along the curved fenders, hop onto the running boards, and caress the leather seats. "How did you get them to the island?" I ask Kassidy.

Her dimples pop as she dances in excited circles. "The ferry!" She bends down to examine one of the hood ornaments. "Finding the cars was the hard part. They're not very common anymore."

I gasp. "They're originals?"

Kassidy laughs. "Actual butts from the 1920s sat in these seats."

"Is this your surprise?"

"The beginning of it," says Kassidy mysteriously. She glances at her phone. "We should go. I want to get to Ashwood Manor before sunset." She piles into the car with Blaine, Fergus, and Ellison. "Looks like we're out of room here," she tells me with a wink. "You'll have to join Marlowe."

I roll my eyes and follow Chloe to the other car, where Marlowe sits reading a thick cloth-bound book. He nods at us, then buries his head back in its pages.

Chloe examines Marlowe's volume as we drive away from the ferry station. "*Anna Karenina*," she says, reading the gilded title. "Any good?"

Marlowe raises his head again, black curls blowing in the breeze as our driver accelerates up a winding road dotted with bluebells. The sun highlights the smattering of freckles under his eyes. His skin is almost as dark as mine—courtesy of his Greek mother—and it's remarkably smooth, like a pebble washed clean by the ocean.

"It's romantic but sad," he replies. He turns to me. "I believe there was a film adaptation in the 1930s."

I'm so taken aback both by his knowledge of the movie's existence and by his speaking to me that I stumble over my words. "With Greta Garbo. It's one of Kassidy's favorites."

"Do you and Kassidy watch a lot of old movies?" asks Chloe.

"Tons," I reply. "Kassidy loves the glamour of the Jazz Age. She wants to be a costume designer."

Chloe sighs. "I read her fashion column in the school newspaper every week, but I still can't put a good outfit together."

There's an uncomfortable silence while I try to think of something to say. None of us had hung out with Chloe before Nestor invited her to prom, so I know only three things about her: She's been top of our class since freshman year, she plays lacrosse, and her mom is a big-shot executive at some Chinese investment firm.

"Did you have a good time at prom?" I finally ask.

Chloe's eyes get wide, like I've just asked to read her diary. Her hand spasms, and she drops her purse on the floor of the car, spilling lipstick, a wallet, and a little red vial. The bouncing car sends the bottle rolling until it hits one of my sneakers. I pick it up and look for the brand name, but there's no label or even a spray nozzle. Just a black screw cap.

Chloe snatches it out of my hand and scoops the other dropped items back into her bag, then sits up straight, cheeks flushed with exertion. "Prom was so much fun," she says. "I'm a terrible dancer, but I loved it anyway."

My journalist's nose for gossip prickles at her reaction to my question. But before I can press her, we take a bend in the road and Ashwood Manor comes into sight.

"Oh, wow," mutters Chloe, and even Marlowe looks up from his book with interest.

The estate is perched near the top of the hill overlooking the ocean. Waves batter the cliffs below, white foam dashing itself against the rocks before being flung into the swirl of the sea. The gray stone of the house is salt-washed, like it was once underwater. Terraces full of roses and rocky trails run down the hill to the ocean, and so many wildflowers surround the property it gives the impression of a colorful blur, like a Monet painting. A dense pine forest rises in the distance beyond the house, dark and imposing.

It's like someone has lowered a Technicolor filter over my eyes. I could never have guessed from the black-and-white scenes in *The Secret of the Ruby Dagger* just how bright and alive the gardens would be or how many shades of gray the sun would illuminate in the stone. And yet there's something cold and reserved about the house itself, as if it had absorbed the notorious reclusiveness of its original owner.

"I can see why they turned this into a museum," says Chloe. "It's gorgeous."

"Wait until you see the inside," says Marlowe. "It's like walking into a time capsule."

"How have you been inside?" I ask. Theodore Ashwood permitted the film crew to shoot only the facade and grounds, so I've never even seen a picture of the interior.

Marlowe flushes, like he's revealed something he wasn't supposed to. "My mom's on the museum board with Mrs. Logan. The owner gave us a private tour a few weeks ago. Didn't Cassidy tell you?"

I shake my head. "I guess she wanted to surprise me," I say, trying not to sound jealous. Typical Cassidy. Keeping secrets to spare my feelings.

The cars pull into the gravel drive in front of Ashwood Manor. A line of staff dressed in old servants' uniforms stands outside. All of them look a lot like my parents, and I'm reminded with startling clarity that I don't belong here. My friends spend their summers visiting beautiful places around the world while I've rarely traveled more than ten miles from my apartment.

My family has gone on vacation only once. My mom drove me and Caye to a busy beach town near Boston when I was fourteen, but my sister got sick and we had to leave early. With the cost and difficulty of accommodating Caye's wheelchair, we never tried again.

I watch the drivers hand our luggage to the footmen, who struggle to lift the heavy cases up the steps. The excitement that followed me from Harker to Sparrow Island is replaced by dread. I can't let that be my life. I can't do what my mom and dad did when I was little. Soaking their hands in ice after long days at work, arguing about what bills could be delayed longest, fighting with hospitals about Caye's care.

One of the footmen tries to grab my backpack, but I shake my head and jerk the straps so tight I know I'll have marks on my shoulders. Thinking about Caye has reminded me what's at stake. No one can see the knife. I'll get only one shot. I have to make sure I don't miss.



Marlowe is right. Stepping into Ashwood Manor is like walking into a perfectly preserved time capsule.

Chloe's mouth drops open as she follows me and Kassidy into the foyer. "This place doesn't even seem real," she says.

Blaine laughs. "My mom would hate this décor," he says, looking at the furniture and curios with the practiced eye of someone whose mom designs houses for a living. "It's the opposite of minimalist."

Unlike its weather-beaten facade, the interior of Ashwood Manor is warm and welcoming. A magnificent staircase winds from the entry hall up to a second level. Rich oil paintings hang on the walls, while panes of stained glass filter the dying sunlight into shards of color across the oak floors. Carved sideboards overflowing with fresh lavender diffuse a sweet, delicate perfume through the hall.

My jeans and T-shirt feel shabby, like I'm an anachronism the house might purge at any second.

The stout footmen lug our bags upstairs while we roam the first floor. At the back of the house, Kassidy and I find a drawing room with a baby grand piano and stiff velvet couches surrounding a roaring fire. The room is formal but comfortable—the kind of place guests might play card games and drink fizzy whiskeys.

Tall French windows framed by fluttering indigo curtains stand wide open. Kassidy and I step through them onto the flagstone terrace.

The patio overlooks an explosion of wildflowers carpeting the hill. At the end of a long, dusty path bordered by rose gardens, a sheer cliff drops straight into the water. Except for the distant sound of waves and the buzzing of nearby bees, it's silent.

"I can't believe we're actually here," I whisper, not wanting to break the calm. "Marla Nevercross drank cocktails on this terrace." I point to the cliff. "That's where Cara Ashwood threw the ruby dagger after killing her sister's husband."

Kassidy smiles and squeezes my hand. I consider mentioning her private tour but decide against it. I know Kassidy. The tour didn't matter to her, but this moment does.

"I think it's time for the final surprise," she says.

I follow Kassidy back to the foyer, where the others are waiting. She takes a deep breath, and my heart flutters with anticipation.

"I know you want to see your rooms and unpack," says Kassidy. "But first, I need to tell you why we're here."

"Because it's a badass house on a private island?" says Ellison, like no other explanation is required.

Kassidy smiles. "It's more than that. We're standing in a piece of film history."

"Here we go," mutters Fergus.

Kassidy waves an arm around at the antiques and art. "Theodore Ashwood built this house in 1926 with the money he made selling alcohol during Prohibition," she says. "He used to host wild parties here—"

"Like mine," says Blaine with a wicked smile.

Kassidy scrunches up her nose. "His make yours look like children's birthday parties." Blaine's face grows dark, but the rest of us laugh. "Theodore's teenage daughter, Cara, who he called Sparrow, desperately wanted to be a movie star, so Theodore told Fabrizio Ricci that he could shoot his next film at Ashwood Manor if he cast Cara in one of the lead roles. So Ricci did." Kassidy's expression grows soft. "And she was perfect. So perfect the other lead fell in love with her and convinced Cara to run away from Sparrow Island and her father."

Kassidy pauses for effect, but everyone except Marlowe and me is scrolling on their phones, barely paying attention. So I chime in. "Is that when Theodore became a recluse?" I ask.

Kassidy shakes her head. "After she ran away, Cara's life became as tragic as a Ricci film. She started drinking, left the actor for the manager of a speakeasy, and died alone in a seedy Boston motel." Kassidy sighs. "When he lost his Sparrow to the same thing that made him rich, Theodore Ashwood shut himself up in Ashwood Manor and never set foot on the mainland again. Everything you'll see in the house this week—the couches you sit on, the plates you eat off, the showers you bathe in—those are his last, lonely memories."

There's a moment of silence.

"Way to kill the mood," says Blaine.

Kassidy grins. "I know how to bring it back to life. I have a surprise for all of you."

Something about Kassidy's voice makes people look up from their phones in alarm. There's a sudden tension in the hall, like electricity is zipping between our bodies.

"This isn't just a week at Ashwood Manor," she says, her voice shaking a little. "It's a theme party. A completely immersive

1920s experience. We're going to dress and act and eat like we're at one of Theodore Ashwood's house parties. Tennis, cocktail hours, fancy dinners, card games, dancing—every detail will be as close as we can get to living at Ashwood Manor like the original inhabitants."

I gasp and cover my mouth. A cascade of film images flashes in front of my eyes. Gowns and striped stockings and parasols and glasses of champagne. Stolen kisses under staircases and walks in the garden.

Kassidy smiles at me, and I remember her words on the yacht: *Everything I did, I did for the two of us.*

I look around to see how the others are taking her announcement. Marlowe, who I glance at first, doesn't react at all. Blaine groans and holds his head in his hands. Fergus plays it cool, but it's obvious he's thrilled; if it involves costumes and acting, he's always game. Chloe seems a little apprehensive but smiles all the same. And Ellison just looks amused.

"If we want it to be realistic, I'll need to bunk with the staff," he says. "Pretty sure Black dudes weren't playing a lot of tennis at fancy estates back in the day."

Kassidy flushes bright red. She always tries so hard to think of flaws in her plans. I watch her wonder if she's made a giant error.

"I'm kidding, Kass," Ellison says with a laugh. "But how are we going to dress like it's the 1920s? I don't know about the rest of you, but I mostly packed basketball shorts and T-shirts."

Kassidy recovers her composure with relief. "Each of you will find period outfits cut to your size in the armoires upstairs. Mr. Jimenez, the butler, will send all your regular clothes and cell phones back to the mainland with the drivers so nobody is tempted to cheat on the theme."

Almost everyone gasps in unison.

"Our phones?" asks Chloe.

"You can't be serious," says Ellison.

Fergus stops scrolling to stare at Kassidy in disbelief.

Even Marlowe shifts uncomfortably.

"No way I'm giving up my phone," says Blaine.

"Then no way will you be included in the week," says Kassidy with a shrug. "The yacht returns to the mainland in an hour. Anyone who doesn't want to play by the rules can go home. No hard feelings."

Angry red patches appear on Blaine's cheeks. The others don't look happy either. But no one makes any motion to leave.

"All of your parents know about the surprise," continues Kassidy. "They have the landline number in case they need to reach you. But only use the phone if absolutely necessary, because technically Theodore Ashwood didn't own one."

The butler steps out of the shadows, startling everybody. He holds out a leather satchel. Kassidy turns off her phone and drops it into the case. The others type frantically, no doubt telling friends and social media feeds why they won't be online for a week. I compose a quick note to my mom:

Cell phones being returned to the mainland.  
Tell Caye I ♥ her and will see her soon.

When I place my phone next to Kassidy's, a weight I didn't know was there melts off my shoulders. For the first time ever, I'll be out of my mom's reach.

Kassidy smiles once everyone puts their phones in the bag. "You can give Mr. Jimenez the clothes you brought after you've changed into your evening wear." She points at Blaine. "All your

clothes, including that watch. TAG Heuer timepieces looked completely different in the 1920s."

Blaine's eyes widen. "You think I'm going to send my seven-thousand-dollar watch back to the mainland with strangers?"

Kassidy scoffs. "No one's going to steal your stupid watch. If I make an exception for you, everybody will want to keep things, and then it won't seem real." She turns to face the rest of us. "You'll find daily schedules and copies of an etiquette book in your rooms if you want to improve your performance."

"Screw that," mutters Blaine, looking mutinous.

Kassidy ignores him. "There are two hours until we meet back downstairs for cocktails. The etiquette books have pictures of how to put on your suits and dresses and how to do your hair. If you need any help, you can ring for the maids, who have been prepared for the week."

"You even trained the staff?" whispers Chloe, with something that sounds like awe.

Kassidy nods. "About that. This is not *Downton Abbey*. Don't flirt, interrupt, or otherwise communicate with the staff about things that aren't relevant. If you need another blanket for your bed, that's relevant. If you want to bang the hot footman in the garden, that's not. Got it?"

Ellison pretends he's outraged by the rule, while everyone else half laughs.

Kassidy claps her hands together. "You can head to your bedrooms and get dressed. Izzy, you and I are sharing."

Worn Persian rugs carpet the upstairs hallway, while heavy curtains frame the picture windows. I peek into each room as we pass. They're all furnished differently, but they have the same amenities: ashtrays, stationery, candlesticks dripping with yellow

wax, and ironstone bowls for washing up. My heart swells as I imagine my friends in their period clothes—brushing lint off their tuxes and shaving with straight blades in front of too-small mirrors. I realize it's not only me pretending to be something I'm not this week; for once, we're all pretending.

Our room is twice the size of the others. An enormous canopy bed supported by dark carved posts is pushed against the wall on the left. To the right is a miniature sitting room with a chartreuse chaise longue, a coffee table, and a crackling fire. A narrow closet is tucked next to a cherry armoire that looks like something out of a fairy tale.

Kassidy closes the heavy door and locks it with the brass key that's sitting in the keyhole.

"This is where Marla Nevercross stayed during the six-week film shoot," she says. "Anne Ashwood told me Theodore's room was next door. He used to sneak into Marla's bed after dark."

"Gross," I say. "Wasn't he twice her age?"

Kassidy nods. "He donated tons of money to her cheetah rescue, so maybe that's why she liked him. Anne says the affair ended when Cara ran away. Theodore blamed Marla for keeping Cara's secret romance from him." She walks over to the window, where the sun is setting behind the white pine forest. "Everyone else has their own room, but this is the biggest and it has a dreamy bathroom, so I figured you wouldn't mind sharing. Especially since I'll spend most of my nights with Blaine."

She glances at me shyly. "Are you happy with the surprise?"

I join her at the window and squeeze her hand. "It's perfect," I say. "I didn't realize how much I needed something like this."

Kassidy leans her forehead against the window, fogging up the glass with her breath. "I think Blaine does too," she says.

"He didn't make honor roll this semester, even with all the senior blow-off classes he took."

I stiffen. "Have you asked him why?"

"He says playing Hamlet was exhausting." She draws a heart in the condensation with her finger, then drags a crack down the center. "I don't know. Maybe there's another girl again."

Guilt roils my stomach. "I'm going to have a bath before cocktail hour," I say, walking away from the window before she can press me about Blaine's cheating.

"Don't take too long," she says, erasing the heart with a swipe of her hand. "We're already behind schedule."

The bathroom is glorious. I hang my towel over the brass doorknob and cross the cool hexagonal tile in bare feet. After filling the claw-foot tub with hot water and vanilla bubble bath, I sink into it with a deep sigh. The lone bathtub at my apartment is so shallow that only the lower half of my body is ever covered with water while the upper half freezes, and I can never bathe too long because someone else always needs to come in.

*Who needs cocktail hour?* I think. Better to soak in the tub all evening, watching bubbles pop and pretending I'm a film starlet with a secret lover next door.

Then I remember Marlowe is waiting downstairs in a tux, and I scramble out of the bath, anxious to see him.

Kassidy is already dressed in a bronze evening gown, and she looks so amazing I squeal. "You're a Roaring Twenties goddess!"

She smiles. "Grab whatever you want. I've been ordering clothes and accessories for months."

I riffle through the open trunks. Kassidy's thought of everything: jewelry, headbands, stockings, feathers, and hair-curling supplies. Even the luggage is period-appropriate.

I check out the drape of some long pearls in the mirror. "Does Chloe want to get dressed with us?" I ask. "There's enough here for ten people."

Kassidy purses her lips and pages through a hardcover on vintage hairstyles. "She can ring for a maid if she wants help," she says.

The coldness of her voice isn't lost on me. "I'm surprised you invited Chloe," I say. "None of us really know her."

Anger darkens Kassidy's face. "My dad made me," she says. "His company is doing some business deal with her mom. He wants her to think Chloe and I are friends."

"She was nice enough at prom," I say, wrapping a fur stole around my neck.

Kassidy laughs bitterly. "So nice. Super nice. The nicest ever."

"I thought you liked her."

Kassidy glances at my confused face, and her expression melts back into ease. "I don't like being told who to spend time with—that's all. This week is supposed to be special."

I point to a trunk full of alcohol in the corner. "Aren't you afraid someone will tell your parents?"

She shakes her head. "The staff will be the only real adults on the island all week, and they won't care."

"Where are the dresses?" I ask.

Kassidy skips over to the armoire. "I have one final surprise."

She throws open the doors with a flourish to reveal an entire rack full of stunning gowns. Glass beads and sequins glimmer from silks and chiffons and linens. Colorful day frocks and fancy dinner dresses hang close together, formal bumping against casual in the tight space. I brush my fingers along the delicate fabrics, marveling at their perfection. In complete Kass

fashion, each dress is a restored original. They must have cost a fortune.

My hand stops on a slinky emerald-green dress. "This looks like—"

"It doesn't just look like." Kassidy is beaming, bouncing on her toes. "It's the actual dress worn by Marla Nevercross in *The Secret of the Ruby Dagger*. I bought it from a collector, who won it in one of Marla's charity auctions. She didn't want to give it up," she says, "but everyone has a price."

And Kassidy's family could always pay it.

"It's your graduation gift," she explains.

I yank my fingers away from the dress. "It's too much," I protest. "I can't accept it."

Kassidy grabs my hands. "You've been my best friend since freshman year," she says. "The only one who doesn't care who my father is or how big my house is or that I'm dating one of the most popular guys in school." She smiles at me, but her gray eyes are brimming with tears. "I insist that you have it."

# 5



## MARIAN ACADEMY

Three Months Ago

You want to go to the rowing regatta this weekend?" Blaine asked, looking at Fergus like he'd never seen him before. "Gus, you've said a million times that watching the crew team slap water with sticks sounds as fun as being crushed to death by stage scenery."

"Nestor told me most of the school turns out for the first race of spring," said Fergus.

Blaine snorted. "I didn't realize you believed in the wisdom of the majority."

Fergus and Blaine were waiting for Izzy and Kassidy in the courtyard, which was enclosed like a greenhouse in a peaked-glass dome. Even in the middle of winter, students could eat lunch on the lawn and bask in balmy humidity. The flower beds had been freshly turned by one of the school gardeners, and violets with sunburst centers perfumed the air with a sickly sweetness Fergus had come to associate with the coming of spring.

"Why do you *really* want to go to the race?" asked Blaine.

"This is our last semester at Marian," said Fergus. "If I don't go now, I'll never see him—I mean, them."

Blaine rolled his eyes. "*Duh*. You're making a play for someone on crew." He tapped his dimpled chin like he was thinking.

"Let me guess . . . Trey? No, he's too tall for you. Haywood? He's a bit of a blond cherub. At least that's what Cassidy says. But even you couldn't be crushing on someone so obviously uninterested in guys."

Fergus peered into the doorway, willing the girls to appear. They were always late to lunch because newspaper was fourth period and Dr. Calloway apparently thought journalists could live off words alone. It wouldn't take Blaine long to land on the right answer if he kept guessing.

"Peter's a little snake," continued Blaine. "Your success rate may be low, but you don't lack taste." Then his expression changed, and he started laughing. "Have you lost your mind, Gus?" he asked. "Ellison only dates other badass athletes, and you are—at best—a semi-badass member of the drama club's chorus."

Blaine pointed at a reclining male figure tossing a baseball into the air. "Lucas Routh. Gets his school uniforms specially tailored so his biceps don't split the seams." He jerked his thumb toward a tall blond guy who looked like he should be holding a surfboard on a California beach. "Sam Vesper. Models sweaters for L.L.Bean." Blaine turned back to Fergus. "Ellison's dated both of them this year. He clearly has a *type*. And you're not it."

Fergus hated the smug look on Blaine's face, like he knew everything about Ellison just because he'd spent the past six months hanging out with him. "Ellison dated Izzy," Fergus shot back.

Blaine shrugged. "Izzy's hot poor-girl vibe is catnip to guys at Marian," he said. "Plus, she's editor of the newspaper. I wouldn't put it past Ellison to date her for some front-page press."

"Ellison's not like that," said Fergus. He wanted so badly to

tell Blaine about his winter-break fling. But Ellison had sworn him to secrecy, leaving Fergus to imagine those two weeks had taken place in a parallel universe where Ellison couldn't hold an oar and Fergus landed starring roles in school plays. A universe where they made sense.

Kassidy and Izzy arrived with their food. Izzy began munching on the sleeve of saltine crackers she brought from home every day, while Kassidy dug into her salad. Handmade earrings almost as long as her hair hung past her shoulders. They were all forced to wear school uniforms except on Freedom Fridays, but Kassidy was constantly adding unapproved accessories to her wardrobe.

"Why does Fergus look like his dog just died?" asked Kassidy.

Blaine shook his head. "He's chasing after Ellison, and I gave him an honest appraisal of his chances."

Fergus scowled. Blaine's transformation from best friend to jerk had barely been noticeable at first. Some unanswered texts. A few canceled plans. All easily explained by him having more lines to memorize and more rehearsals to attend than Fergus. Then Blaine's mom bought the lake house after the divorce, and Blaine went from popular theater kid to thrower of Marian's best parties. Maybe Fergus should have found new friends when Blaine started treating him like an unwanted stray. But he kept hoping Blaine would get tired of his classmates using him for drugs and alcohol. Now they were about to graduate, and it was too late for Fergus to leave Blaine's orbit. He had nowhere else to go.

"Since Blaine has revealed my secret shame to the world," Fergus said to the girls, "will you come to this weekend's regatta with me?"

Blaine shot Fergus a strange look. "We always go to the races."

Fergus's stomach dropped like he was on a roller coaster. "Since when?"

"Last spring," said Cassidy.

A rush of misery made the back of Fergus's neck flush. His friends—his only friends besides Nestor—had been excluding him from something fun they did together for a whole year.

"We asked you once," said Izzy softly. "You said you'd rather get your wisdom teeth pulled again."

Fergus vaguely remembered that. But it hadn't meant he *never* wanted to go. There was only one reason they wouldn't ask him a second time: They didn't want him there.

Fergus felt a familiar pressure building inside his head. Pressure that could be relieved only by throwing something and watching it shatter into a thousand pieces. He'd have to wait until the bell before he could sneak into the secret closet near the boiler room. The one with stacks of old bathroom tiles that cracked so satisfyingly against the stone wall.

A terrible image suddenly rose to the surface of his mind. For a second, Fergus couldn't speak. His stomach clenched hard, like he might be sick. Instead of tiles, it was Blaine's head he'd launched at the wall. Skull fragments littered the ground like shards of bloody glass.

Fergus forced down his nausea. "Can I go with you this weekend or not?" he asked, keeping his voice calm.

"Course, Gus," said Blaine. A smile played on his lips. "Bring some binoculars if you want a close-up of your boy. And a warm jacket. It gets colder than a nun's nips out there."

"Gross," said Izzy. "You're such a heathen."

"That's what five years of Catholic school will do to you." Blaine grinned at Fergus. "Remember Sister Mary?"

Fergus relaxed a little. The name of their fifth-grade teacher transported him back to the days when he and Blaine were so inseparable. Fergus's parents joked about charging Blaine room and board. "Hairy Mary," said Fergus. "She's burned into my brain forever."

Blaine chuckled and turned to the girls. "There was this nun at Holy Cross with a super-thick mustache. She used to hit our palms with a ruler when we got math questions wrong."

"Which was often, in Blaine's case," said Fergus.

Blaine nodded. "Fergus was tired of seeing me get hit, so one morning he snuck a waxing kit into her desk drawer."

"I hoped she'd be humiliated when she found it," said Fergus.

"She opened the drawer," said Blaine. "Stared at the kit for a minute. Then opened the box and began cutting the cotton strips."

"We thought she'd lost her mind," said Fergus.

"Had she?" asked Izzy.

Blaine shook his head. "I didn't understand fractions, but of course she called on me. Usually, she slid her ruler out of her habit slowly, so we had a chance to dread the pain that was coming. But this time, she picked up a wooden stick from the kit and scooped a giant dollop of wax out of the jar. She spread the wax across my left arm and pressed a cotton strip down hard over it. Then she smiled like I was a bug she was about to crush. It was the creepiest smile I've ever seen." Blaine glanced at his arm. "She reached down and yanked the strip. Ripped the hair straight off."

"She didn't!" squealed Izzy. Cassidy laughed beside her.

“Blaine screamed like a pig being taken for slaughter,” said Fergus. “I started crying. And we both got detention.”

Blaine smiled. “The craziest part is that the next day Hairy Mary showed up sans mustache. She’d waxed it right off.”

Everyone laughed, and for a moment, Fergus remembered what it had felt like before girls started throwing themselves at Blaine after productions and before Blaine posted himself on social media hanging out with Ellison every Saturday night. The red flash appeared back in his head, but Fergus shoved it out. In a few minutes, the bell would ring, and he could finally release the pressure. He smiled at the others while picturing shattered tiles.