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Hello, Olive

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HELLO, OLIVE

Bec Braly

A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION FROM THE AUTHOR

From a young age, I enjoyed creative writing. From silly stories about magical creatures read aloud at recess in Mr. Chris McCloskey's third grade class, to fanfiction passed among friends in middle school, to angsty poetry as a high school loner, my journey as a writer has had many phases. The phase I am in with this novella, despite being the most difficult, is perhaps my favorite.

I have received incredible help through Ouachita Baptist University and the Carl Goodson Honors Program. Professors like Dr. Benjamin Utter, Dr. Amy Sonheim, and Dr. Byron Eubanks have advised and guided me through the creation of this novella. Professors like Dr. Barbara Pemberton and Dr. Ray Franklin encouraged me greatly as I brainstormed and planned out the story. My dear sister and friend, Bailey Inman, has also been a huge inspiration and encouragement to me, especially toward the end of my writing process. Thank you, Bailey, for reminding me, "You can't really learn what's good without learning what's bad." There is no proper way to truly express to these people how grateful I am for their mentorship, leadership, and support in this adventure.

My personal writing process developed greatly through the creation of this story. *Hello, Olive* is a result of the support of professors, friends, and family combined with the inspiration that came from my own wild emotions and vivid dreams.

Ultimately, I thank my God, the Master Creator of all things, Whose image He has placed within me allows me to create works of art for His glory.

CHAPTER 1

Jay

Raindrops splashed onto my face as they fell from the edge of my hood. I reached up to wipe my eyes. Mia always loved the rain. I wished she were here with me. But she would be soon, I remembered. I smiled to myself at the thought. Mia was the love of my life. She just didn't know it yet.

I hurried across a street and into my favorite coffee shop, shaking the rain off my coat as I entered. It was my favorite coffee shop because it was Mia's favorite. At least, it used to be. I hadn't seen her there in a week. She seemed frustrated with me for being there, but I told her that the coffee shop isn't all hers after our breakup. It's not like we had a custody battle for it or anything.

I ordered, then sat in my favorite spot, a comfortable oversized chair in the corner of the shop. From this seat, I could see every person who came in the door. I also had a nice view through the rain-streaked window of Mia's apartment building across the street. I sighed. If she only knew how much she meant to me, she would never have left me. She'd be sitting across from me right now, her hands clasped around a hot cinnamon latte, her combat boots perched up on the windowsill, and her laugh sending waves of warmth through the entire coffeehouse.

The barista brought me my coffee, and I breathed in the rich scent while letting the mug warm my hands. Checking my watch, I realized it was the time Mia usually left for work. I watched the door of her building for several minutes, but never saw her come out. Maybe she was sick. I finished my coffee, ordered a cinnamon latte to-go, and went back out into the rain.

I entered her building and pushed her buzzer in the lobby. There was no answer. I decided to try her neighbor, Eddie. Eddie was a nice older gentleman who knew who I was. He'd let me up to check on Mia. Just as I thought, Eddie let me up when I told him Mia wasn't well and was probably asleep.

I took the elevator to her floor, and looked around the hall. Eddie had stepped out. I waved to him. "Hey, Mr. Eddie! Thanks for buzzing me in."

"Of course, Jay. Is Mia alright? I haven't seen her for the last few days," he said, concern evident in his gravelly voice.

“She’s just got that bug that’s going around. I’m sure it has to do with all this rain and cold weather.”

“Well you tell her to let me know if she needs anything. I still have my wife’s old potato soup recipe around here somewhere. I don’t make it half as good as she did, but I’ll be happy to give it a go for that Mia.” Eddie grinned, and his eyes disappeared behind his bristly white eyebrows.

“I’ll sure ask her. Sounds like an offer too good to pass up. Thanks, Mr. Eddie!” I started down the hall to Mia’s apartment, and knocked. I waited, but she didn’t answer. I knocked a little harder, and the door swung open with the force of my fist. *I didn’t knock that hard*, I thought. I stepped in cautiously.

“Mia?” I called out. I didn’t want to freak her out. An ex-boyfriend breaking into her apartment would definitely warrant a frying pan to the face. She didn’t reply. I walked in further. “Mia, your door was open. Are you here? It’s Jay.”

As I entered the kitchen, I noticed a broken mug on the floor. Old coffee had become sticky on the tile. Normally she would have cleaned this up right away. Mia was a bit of a neat freak. Mia’s phone was on the counter by her kitchen window. Stepping carefully around the mug and old coffee, I reached for the phone. The battery was dead. Like the broken mug, it had probably been sitting there for a while.

I set the latte I brought for Mia on the counter, and I hopped over the broken mug again to go into the living room. It was a wreck. The coffee table was overturned. Throw pillows were on the floor. One of her bookshelves had fallen over, sending a pile of books atop a broken relic from her trip to Italy.

I felt a chill, and realized the window was open. Upon further investigation, I realized it was actually partially broken. There was blood smeared across the windowsill. Definitely not fresh blood. The window led to a fire escape that went down into the alley behind the building. The way the building was angled, the section of the alley outside Mia’s window was completely blocked from the view of the street. I remembered Mia telling me that alley gave her the creeps. She always kept her windows locked, and never used the fire escape. I moved closer to the window and peered down into the alley. One of Mia’s house shoes was on the fire escape, stained with more blood.

In shock, I stumbled over the coffee table and sank into the couch. I knew I probably shouldn't be touching anything. I was probably contaminating the evidence or something. What could have happened here? I hadn't even looked in Mia's bedroom. I was too afraid of what I might find. What if her body was in there, and her killer escaped through the window? I took a deep breath, got my bearings, and went into her room. Looking at her bedroom alone, I would never know that the living room and kitchen were such a wreck. This was more like Mia. Everything was organized. Her minimalist decorations were perfectly arranged as she liked them. Even the pen beside her journal was at a perfect right angle with the edge of her desk. I was relieved that I did not find a dead body.

A sense of purpose came over me, and I decided to make it my mission to find Mia. I took a breath and processed what happened. The love of my life had been violently abducted. I had to find her. I had to help her escape. If she was hurt, I had to make sure she got the care she needed. I wanted to be the person who was there for her. I wanted to be the first person she saw when she was rescued from whoever did this to her. I would call the police of course. I'd let them make a report and conduct their own little investigation, but I knew they had other cases. Mia wouldn't be their top priority. She'd be one of many victims for the police to deal with. But she would be my only focus. My life's goal from this moment, I decided, was to save Mia.

CHAPTER 2

Mia

The strong smell of cinnamon warmed my chest as I breathed deeply over my mug. Looking through the window in my kitchen, I had a nice view of the park outside my favorite coffee shop. A couple sat on a bench while their border collie sniffed around at their feet. A homeless man sat under a tree, bundled in a ratty blanket, doing what he could to protect himself from the Chicago winter wind. A few kids played tag while their parents read books or chatted among themselves. I always enjoyed people watching. When I was young, my dad used to take me out for ice cream. We chose people who walked past and created our own ideas of what their life stories might be. One was a Russian spy on a mission to kill the president. One was an orphan with secret superpowers. One was a prince pretending to be a homeless man so he could feel what it was like to be normal.

I smiled and sipped my coffee, remembering the fun I used to have with my dad. After his death over a year ago, I had trouble dwelling on the happy memories instead of wishing he was still with me. I counted this morning of people watching a pleasant success, and imagined he was here, people watching with me.

I turned away from the window and looked across my apartment. I had only been living here for a year, and I wished my dad could have seen it. He would have called it “marvelously Mia.” Anything he thought reflected my personality, he would deem marvelously Mia. I grinned at the thought. I was happy to finally be reaching a point of being capable of thinking about him without being sad.

A knock at the door startled me out of my thoughts. I frowned. I wasn’t expecting anyone, and was looking forward to a nice Saturday alone with my coffee and movies. I looked through the peephole and saw my uncle. I recognized him because of the same tortoiseshell glasses he’d had since I was a kid. I took a step back. I hadn’t seen him in years. He was my mom’s brother, and her family wasn’t very close. I couldn’t even remember his name. James? Gerald? Jeremy? I wasn’t sure. Why was he even here?

I opened the door hesitantly. “Marvelously Mia!” he said with a gentle grin. I chuckled, but was stunned that he would say the same phrase my dad always said. He never really liked my dad. No one in my mom’s family did.

“Hi,” I said, unsure of how to begin a conversation with an estranged family member who showed up at my door uninvited.

“Mia, may I come in? It’s been quite a long time.”

“Sure.” I stepped aside and he walked in. The way he was dressed reminded me of a movie I once saw where a magical old grandfather showed up to send a group of children on a quest. He smelled like old books and eucalyptus, which somehow made me trust him more. As I watched him move across the room, memories of him quickly filled my mind. His name was Gene Richards. He was a surgeon, probably retired now. I remembered my mom speaking of him as her “filthy rich brother,” most of the time in a joking manner, but sometimes out of spite for the way he used to talk down to my dad.

“I’m sure you must be wondering why I’m here.” He leaned against my kitchen island and smiled. He was only in his early- to mid-fifties, but the deep lines around his eyes made him appear much older.

I nodded.

“I’m sure you remember my daughters, Ruth and Olive.”

“Sure,” I said. When he said their names, images of their faces came flooding back. “Uncle Gene, I’m so sorry for your loss.” Ruth and Olive, sweet girls just a few years younger than me, had both died in a car accident after being hit by a drunk driver. The accident was probably six months ago. I remembered being shocked when my mom told me about it, but we hadn’t gone to the funeral. My mom was still bitter toward her family for the way they used to treat my dad. I didn’t think she would ever forgive them.

“Yes,” Uncle Gene said. “I wanted to ask you to come with me to my home. Your cousins Lonna and Emilia are there. Their mother sent them to care for my home after...” he trailed off.

“Uncle Gene, I appreciate the invitation. However, I have a job here. I have to stay. I’m competing for a promotion this month. I’m sorry, I can’t help.” I genuinely felt bad for him, but I also knew I had to remain loyal to my mom. If I went to stay with the brother she hated, she would be hurt.

He frowned. “Are you sure you can’t come? I’ll pay you. I’ll pay you more than what your new promotion would pay.”

I paused, momentarily tempted. I knew Gene was wealthy, and would likely pay me very well. “No, I really love my job. I’m passionate about it. I don’t want to leave, even if more money is involved.”

He stood up straighter and stepped toward me. “Mia, I want to ask you one more time,” his voice sounded more stern, almost threatening. I was surprised. “Will you come work for me and be with your cousins? We are your family. You must feel some sense of loyalty to us.”

Now I was upset. “Uncle Gene, I didn’t want to be rude. But quite frankly, I do not want to go with you. You and your family treated my father with disrespect all the way up until his death last year. You know how much my dad meant to me and to my mom. You always made it abundantly clear that you disapproved of him. You constantly criticized him. I will not work for someone who could not treat my dad with kindness.”

Gene lunged forward and grabbed my arms. I dropped my mug, sending broken glass and coffee across the tile floor. My eyes widened, and I gasped as he put his face close to mine. “I tried asking. I gave you three chances. Now you have disrespected me.”

I tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip. Clinging to my arms, he pushed me back into the living room. I went limp, trying to free myself. One of his hands slipped, and I grabbed his ankle with my free hand. I pulled hard, and he lost his balance. I freed my other arm, and pushed him down. I lunged for the door, and caught the doorknob with the tip of my fingers. The door came open just a hair, but Gene caught my wrist, slinging me back toward the couch. My back slammed against the back of the couch, and I gasped as my spine popped. The air was knocked out of me, and I hunched over and strained for a breath. He grabbed me around my waist, pinning my arms against my stomach and throwing me over his shoulder. He started walking toward the window. His strength in his advanced age startled me. I tried to yell, but hadn’t fully caught my breath. I jerked and kicked, and finally fell backwards into the bookcase. Several books fell down, and I heard the crash of glass. I quickly scrambled up to my feet, threw the coffee table over on its side, desperately trying to block his path to me as much as possible. The bookshelf I had just fallen into shifted and fell over. I heard more books topple onto the floor and the wooden bookshelves cracking as they hit the leg of the overturned coffee table.

“You’re not getting out of this, Mia. You’re only making a mess,” Gene stepped over the shelves and stood on the bottom of the table.

I backed up and grabbed the first thing I could reach for, which ended up being a glass cup full of pens and highlighters. I threw it at him, and he dodged it. He laughed so hard he hunched over. He grabbed a couple of throw pillows from the couch and mockingly threw them toward me one at a time, letting them fall at my feet.

My phone rang in the kitchen, and I ran towards it. As I reached for the phone, it slipped and fell to the floor. I dropped to my knees, grabbed the phone, and answered. Before I could speak, Gene had a sharp silver object held to my throat. “Let them know I’m here, and you’re dead,” he said, “Act like everything is normal.”

“Hello?” I said into the phone, trying to keep my voice from quivering.

“Hi there, Mia, it’s Eddie. I heard a crash from your side of the hall and wanted to check on you and make sure you’re alright.” My sweet old neighbor from down the hall. I squeezed my eyes closed.

“Yes, Mr. Eddie, everything is okay. I just... bumped into something and made a little mess. It’s nothing bad though. I’m alright! Thank you for checking in!” I tried to sound convincing enough that Gene wouldn’t slice my throat with what I thought was a scalpel.

“Well alright. I’m glad you’re okay. Let me know if you’re up for playing dominoes later, I’m making some southern style chicken and dumplings. You might like it.”

“I’m sure I’d love that. I’ll let you know. Thanks again, Mr. Eddie.”

I hung up before Eddie could hear my voice break with fear. Gene stepped away from me and put the scalpel in his pocket. “Very nice. Now stand up. Put the phone on the counter, and make this easy for me.” I stood slowly, setting the phone back down where he could see it. Gene turned away from me and walked toward the living room again. I grinned a little at his stupidity. He really thought I would just follow him out after all this.

I lunged at him, hoping to catch him off guard and injure him in some way. Instead, he caught me and spun me around. He threw me over the fallen bookshelves, sending my shoulder into the window. I yelped as a piece of broken glass pierced my skin. I fell to the floor in front of the window and quickly pulled the small shard of glass out of my shoulder. I desperately slashed the glass toward Gene, but he caught my wrist and twisted my arm back, forcing me to drop the

glass. With his other hand, he pushed his fingers into my shoulder, and I screamed. He muffled it by shoving the back of my hand into my face.

He leaned in close, and the smell of eucalyptus was strong again. “You're coming with me. You don't get a choice. Stop fighting, or the next person to walk into this apartment will find your dead body.”

I turned my head and pushed my hand away from my mouth, and he pinned it against the wall. “You don't know me very well, Uncle Gene,” I said. “I don't stop fighting.”

He chuckled. “That's too bad. You've already lost.” He shifted upward so his knee was in my wounded shoulder, and he reached into his pocket with his other hand. He shoved a rag against my face, and the strong smell of chemicals made me forget the eucalyptus. As soon as I realized the cloth was soaked in chloroform, my vision started going dark. I gave one last kick as hard as I could at his leg before everything went black.

CHAPTER 3

Mia

A headache and the jostling of a car speeding down a gravel road woke me out of my chemically induced stupor. I groaned and tried to reach up to touch my head, but my hands were bound behind my back. My shoulder ached, and I realized I was probably still bleeding. I was in the trunk of a car. It must have been Gene's. *Why would Gene abduct me?* I thought. *All I did was refuse to work for him, and now, what, he's going to force me to?* I shook my head, trying to clear the residual fog from the chloroform. I needed an escape plan.

The car went over a bump, slamming my injured shoulder into the side of the trunk. I tried not to scream. I didn't want Gene to pull over and send me back to sleep with the chloroform. I squinted in the dark, trying to get my eyes to adjust. I could see the faint red glow of the taillights, and I remembered hearing that you can kick them out and try to get someone's attention. I started to maneuver my body so my feet were near the lights. As I did this, I became aware that my feet were also bound tightly at my ankles. Pain seared through my shoulder and back as I shifted positions, but I tried to work up the strength to kick.

Suddenly, my stomach dropped. *Emilia and Lonna. Gene said they were working for him. Do they know he's dangerous? What if he actually abducted them too?* I needed to find out. My escape plan would have to come after making it into Gene's house. If Emilia and Lonna were really there, I had to help them. They were closer to my age than Gene's daughters, and I remembered the few times we saw each other as kids. They were always fun, and I missed them when my mom distanced us from her family for my dad's sake. I hadn't seen them since then, but now that I thought they might be in danger, I had to do everything in my power to help them. It would be easier to escape with two other women on my side. Gene proved he was stronger than he looked, but I doubted he could fight off three angry women at once.

I decided the best plan would be to wait. I would find Emilia and Lonna, and make an escape plan with them. They likely knew Gene's house better than I did, and may already have ideas for how to break out. I breathed deeply, calming myself with this plan. Everything would be alright. Emilia, Lonna, and I would have a better chance of making it out together.

But what if Gene was lying? What if Emilia and Lonna aren't even there? Or what if he's hurt them? Anxious thoughts swam around in my already cloudy mind. *But what if Emilia and Lonna are there? If they are, they're in danger. I don't think escaping now would help anything. Especially since I have no idea where I am, and Gene would likely catch me in the process of my escape. That could make things even worse if he hurts me again.* Sticking with the plan to wait until I arrived at Gene's house, if that was even where he was taking me, was probably my best option. If they weren't there, at least I would know they were safe.

The road started to smooth out, and I wondered how much longer I would be stuck in this trunk. I remembered my mom mentioning that Uncle Gene had a lot of land and a large house in rural Illinois. He probably had no neighbors for miles. I was almost positive that was where we were going. The location would definitely make escaping more of a challenge. I sighed, wishing I had my phone to call for help. That would certainly make this much easier. My phone was still on my kitchen counter next to the window where Gene made me set it after Eddie called. I mentally kicked myself for not sneaking it into my pocket when Gene turned his back. My mom would probably call me in the next couple of days. She would be worried when I didn't pick up, but she probably wouldn't push it. She would assume I was busy or needed some space.

I wondered who would be the first to realize I was missing. When I didn't show up at work, my boss would be irritated. She would definitely not be giving me that promotion. I had just started this job as an intern to a designer for a magazine a few months before. I was up for the promotion to a full-time position because I was ambitious, and my boss could see potential in me. She had been mentoring me since the first assignment I turned in. She loved it, calling it "extraordinary." The other interns were challenged by my work rather than being jealous of our boss's praise of it, which I really appreciated about this work environment. It was rare to have coworkers who were not out for blood in competing for a promotion. Maybe some of my coworkers would be concerned when I didn't show up to work, but I wasn't close to any of them. If they did become concerned, they would probably not know what to do about it and settle on doing nothing. Maybe they would think I moved away without telling anyone, which, though strange, would probably not be seen as out of character for me. My coworkers saw me as wild and adventurous. I was never afraid to take a risk by speaking out about my ideas for the betterment of the magazine's image, while the other interns were usually more timid.

I realized thinking about work when I was tied up in the trunk of a car was probably not normal. It was definitely indicative of where my priorities were, and probably the reason I still did not have any close friends in Chicago. The car slowed, and my muscles tensed. I slid a little as the car stopped. I gritted my teeth and squeezed my eyes closed as the wound in my shoulder reopened with the shift. I was lying on my side, so a slow, warm stream of blood trickled down my chest. The sleeve of my shirt was already soaked. The cut was deeper than I'd realized. The car door slammed, and a few seconds later the trunk swung open. It was dark, meaning the car ride must have been much longer than I thought. Gene lived pretty far away from the city, but I didn't realize we had travelled all day.

I tried to look groggier than I actually was as Gene reached in and lifted me out of the trunk. I groaned in pain, arching my severely bruised back. I hoped that if I pretended to be unaware or too weak to fight, he would let his guard down, giving me an opening to learn some information that would help me form an escape plan. Looking around, I saw Gene's massive house. *No wonder he needs people to take care of it for him*, I thought. *It probably takes ten minutes to walk from one end to the other*. Floodlights lit the front of the house with an eerie glow.

We reached the door, and Gene kicked it repeatedly, as if knocking with his foot. He waited. He shifted me in his arms, and I could tell he was tired. He kicked the door again, and this time he yelled. "Ruth! We're here! Open the door!"

Ruth? Gene's dead daughter Ruth? A few moments passed, and then the door swung open. "I'm sorry, Dad." The voice was weak and raspy. I couldn't believe it. Ruth was alive. Gene carried me inside and started down a long corridor.

He paused. "Ruth, grab her feet. Help me carry her."

Gene awkwardly transferred to carrying me under my arms while Ruth held my ankles. Now that I was facing her in the light, I could see her better. Her hair was dark and stringy, and strands of it were hanging in front of her face. She was pale and thin, almost ghostly. Her hands were cold on my ankles. She wore a pink and white robe with a neat bow tied around her waist. The robe was too big for her, causing the sleeves to bunch up at her wrists. She looked only at Gene.

They turned down a flight of stairs, and Ruth stumbled a little. "Careful," Gene said, "Turn your head a little so you know where to step." I found it odd that Gene was instructing

Ruth how to walk backwards down the stairs while carrying a prisoner. It all felt wrong and strange.

At the bottom of the stairs, Gene and Ruth set me down on a table. Gene flicked a lightswitch, and my eyes stung from the harsh white that filled the room. It looked like a doctor's office. White cabinets lined the walls, and blue cloth-lined silver trays of surgical supplies were neatly arranged around the room. My eyes widened when I saw the sharp scalpels and other tools. I shuddered at the thought of what he might do to me. *What if I'm here for some kind of sick experiment?* I wondered.

Gene looked at me and smiled almost gently. "Everything is going to be alright, darling. Just wait. We'll make everything better."

Ruth had left the room for a few moments, and when she returned she was wearing scrubs. Like the pink robe, the scrubs were too big for her. Gene put on a white coat that was hanging on a hook on the wall by the door. My heart rate quickened, and I squirmed against my restraints. I didn't know what he was about to do, but I knew it couldn't be good.

"Don't resist. We're going to fix your shoulder. Well, actually, Ruth is going to fix your shoulder. I've been training her to be my assistant," Gene said, "I'm quite proud of how far she has come."

Ruth looked at Gene, eyes wide. She looked afraid. Gene pushed a tray to Ruth's side of the table. He cut my hands free with a scalpel. I relaxed my arms and instinctively reached to unbind my feet. "No," Gene said sternly, "Leave your feet." I laid back on the table. "Go ahead, Ruthie. You know what to do."

Ruth reached for a syringe with shaking hands. I looked away as she peeled my shirt back from the cut on my shoulder. She cleaned the area around the cut with something cold. I winced as she injected a numbing agent next to the wound. I tried to slow my breathing, praying that Ruth actually knew how to do this. I felt pressure on my shoulder, but it didn't hurt like I thought it might. She continued to suture the cut, and I squeezed my eyes closed. I chewed on my lip as I felt the repeated pull and push in my numbed skin.

"That part is crooked, Ruth. Redo it," Gene said. I felt more pressure than before. I felt like a test dummy for medical school students. Frustration filled my gut. All I wanted was to rip the sutures from Ruth's hands and try to fight, but I resisted that urge.

After a few more redos, Ruth finally finished the sutures in a manner acceptable to Gene. “Well done, Ruth,” Gene said, “You’re getting there.”

Gene washed his hands, then put on a pair of gloves. Something about the way he snapped the latex on his wrists sent a chill of fear down my spine. “Let’s take a look at your back. You took a couple of pretty big falls earlier. Now sit up, we won’t bite. Let us take a peek. I want to make sure there are no fractures.”

I sat up, still unsure of when to take my action of rebellion. To be smart, I would have to wait and make a plan. I was just so anxious to get out of there. I wanted to get back to my cozy apartment and my coffee.

Gene lifted my shirt, and pressed around the bruises on my back. I winced. “Hm. I believe you may have fractured a rib or two. Everything appears to still be in place, however. You should heal just fine.”

I sighed, and pulled my shirt back down.

“Thank you for being so cooperative,” Gene said. My back was still to him, so I rolled my eyes. “Now, this next part might be a bit hard for you.” He walked around the table and looked me in the eyes. He touched my hair, and I pulled away. He frowned. “Your hair is much too light. It’s too long as well. Ruth, get the dye and the scissors.”

I heard Ruth’s feet shuffling quickly to the cabinet. *He wants to change my hair? That’s fine.* That wouldn’t be nearly as bad as all the ideas running through my head of possible ways he could torture me with the plethora of surgical instruments around the room.

Ruth returned and helped Gene dye, wash, and cut my hair. I didn’t have a mirror to look into, so I had no idea what it looked like. Gene seemed satisfied. I felt strange. I had never colored my hair before, and I usually kept the length past my shoulders. Now, my hair was cropped at my chin. I didn’t even feel it on my shoulders.

Ruth set a stack of clothes on the table next to me.

“Get changed,” Gene said, cutting the ropes that bound my feet. “You’ll be new.”

His words struck me as odd, but he left the room to give me privacy. Ruth stayed behind on Gene’s instruction to watch me. The clothes were a bit small on me. The pants and long sleeves of the sweater were too short.

“Ruth,” I whispered. “Will you come here?”

She stepped forward timidly. I studied her face. She wouldn't make eye contact. Her skin was so pale I thought I could almost see through her. Gently, I cupped her face in both my hands.

"Are you afraid?" I asked.

She hesitated, then nodded.

"Of your dad?"

Her eyes shifted to the door.

"I'm going to get you out of here. We're going to get out of here together."

She finally looked at my eyes. Her eyes were a stunning pale green. "No. We can't... Olive."

"Olive? Is she here too?"

Before Ruth could answer, the door opened. Ruth jumped back from me. Gene entered the room. When he looked at me, he smiled, and his eyes filled with tears.

"Olive," he said. "You're home."

CHAPTER 4

Jay

After taking photos of Mia's apartment and calling the police, I decided to look in the alley outside Mia's apartment. I left the window alone, knowing if my prints were on it, the police might just try to pin all of this on me. As I turned down the alley, I was grateful the rain had stopped for now.

I went over the facts in my mind. Mia's door was open a little bit when I got there. Not all the way, but just enough that knocking pushed it open. *So she didn't shut it all the way. She let someone in?* I shook my head. Mia was smart. She would never have let someone into her apartment unless she knew them. I wondered if anyone she knew would do something like this. Maybe one of her coworkers was jealous of her success. I made a mental note to interview them later.

Her phone was on the counter. Before I called the police, I went into Mia's room and charged the phone so I could see the recent activity. I remembered Mia's passcode from when we were still together. The last thing on her phone was an incoming call from Mr. Eddie that only lasted a minute or two. If the police asked me about it later, I would play dumb and tell them I thought maybe she was fine and her phone would give me some idea of where she was.

The police wanted to question me when they arrived at the apartment, but I made up an excuse to need to leave quickly. Hopefully it would take them a little bit of time to investigate the apartment before they decided to check out the fire escape and the alley.

As I stepped into the part of the alley that was blocked from view of the street, I got a chill. No wonder Mia hated it here. The fire escape was rusty at the bottom, and the ground was speckled with puddles of dirty water and trash. Something smelled like a dead animal. I walked through the alley, avoiding puddles and searching for a clue. I didn't see any blood or footprints on the fire escape, and realized I should have checked for more blood right outside the window of the apartment near where Mia's slipper had fallen. The rain probably washed most of the evidence away, and the spot outside the window might have been protected from it by the next floor's fire escape.

I looked around for security cameras, but saw none. I frowned. *No clues here. Next, I'll have to talk to her coworkers.* I put my hood up and hurried out of the alley before any of the police officers wandering around could catch a glimpse of me.

My car was parked outside the coffee shop, and I was tempted to get another cup before going to Mia's office. I realized I should have just kept the cup I brought for Mia. I was so shocked about her disappearance that I didn't even think about it. I got in my car and shot a text to my boss, letting him know I'd be cashing in all the sick days I'd been saving up. Finding Mia was going to require my full attention. As I drove to Mia's office, I thought about how she would react when I found her. Smiling, I imagined her throwing herself into my arms and clinging to me. She would be so grateful that I rescued her. I would be her hero. She would never leave me again.

The thought of Mia leaving me caused my smile to quickly disappear. Mia broke up with me a few months ago, and I had been trying to win her back ever since. She had a distorted view of who I was. She had no idea how much I loved her, how perfect I was for her, or how beautiful our future would be together. She thought I was selfish and controlling, but I only wanted to protect her. Obviously, she needed protecting. She got herself kidnapped without me there.

A few minutes later, I made my way into Mia's office building. I spotted her coworkers right away. I had met them when I brought Mia flowers and picked her up for lunch. *I was so good to her, I thought. Her coworkers will remember that and give me the information I need to find her.*

"Jay?" Phoebe, Mia's fellow intern, approached me. "Why are you here? Where has Mia been? Is she okay?"

"Whoa, Phoebe, one question at a time please," I said, turning on my charm. "I found out this morning that Mia was abducted from her apartment. From the looks of it, it might have happened around a week ago. I need to talk to everyone here who knows her. I have to find out all the information I can so I can help her."

Phoebe's eyes widened, then narrowed. "Isn't that the job of the police? Not the ex-boyfriend?"

I sighed. "I wouldn't say ex-boyfriend. I'd say I'm an extremely concerned man who loves her and wants to bring her back to safety."

Phoebe looked like she was wrestling between being irritated with me and concerned for Mia. “Okay, you can ask around if you want. I wouldn’t expect to get much information here, though. Mia is really great at her job, but she keeps her personal life to herself. She wasn’t close friends with anyone here, as far as I know.”

“I’d still prefer to ask around, thanks,” I said. “Do you know what day it was when she first didn’t show up to work?”

She frowned. “I think it was Monday. She was here last Friday, and that was the last time I saw her.”

“So unless someone here saw her during the weekend, no one has seen Mia in at least a week,” I said.

Phoebe rolled her eyes. “Congratulations, detective, you can count days.”

Another of Mia’s coworkers approached us, and I welcomed the opportunity to speak with someone other than Phoebe.

“Jay, right?” the young man pointed at me as he stuck a pen behind his ear.

“Yeah, remind me of your name?”

“It’s Lewis. Is, uh, Mia coming back to work?” he asked.

“That’s actually why I’m here. I’m pretty sure no one has seen her in a week. I went by her apartment today and-” I decided to hold back too many details of what I had seen. I never knew when I might catch someone who knew too much that I hadn’t yet revealed. “It looked like she hadn’t been there in a while. I’m worried about her.”

“Well, obviously,” Phoebe interjected, turning toward Lewis. “He told me Mia was abducted.”

“I *think* Mia may have been abducted. I’m still trying to gather more information that might help me find her,” I said.

Lewis looked confused. “I, uh, haven’t seen Mia since work on Friday. Mia doesn’t exactly, uh, make a habit of hanging out with coworkers on the weekends. I hope you- uh, I hope the police find her though. I hope she’s alright.”

I sighed. Lewis was about as helpful as Phoebe. I also couldn’t tell if his stammering was a speech impediment or a manifestation of guilt. I made a mental note to social media stalk Lewis later, but decided that for the most part I wouldn’t get any useful information here. “Can

you show me where your boss is? I'd like to speak with him. He might know more about Mia's absence. Maybe Mia sent him an email or something."

"You assume the boss is a man. No wonder you and Mia didn't work out," Phoebe said. The statement confused me, but Phoebe hurried on. "She won't know any more than we do. She didn't know Mia was going to miss work on Monday. She was furious, and gave me and Lewis extra work to do to make up for Mia not being there. Not to mention, since Mia has been gone, she's been in a horrible mood. You really don't want to talk to her, trust me."

"Fine," I said. I didn't really want to deal with another irritated woman at the moment. "I may come back another time to talk to her."

"I wouldn't recommend it," Phoebe said.

"Thanks for the help, Phoebe."

"Right."

I left the office feeling significantly less confident about my odds of finding Mia. I wished I had contact with Mia's mom, but I never met her. I asked Mia about her a few times, but she always changed the subject. It frustrated me that Mia kept so much of her life from me. She never let me in, even though I wanted to know her deeply. I always wished she would realize she could trust me. Mia did not understand that I was likely the only man who would ever put up with the walls she built around her private life. She seemed to think that somehow she would find someone else who would never ask any questions too personal, and that would be love. Keeping each other at arm's length until happily ever after. I could never be satisfied with that, and I was determined to break down her walls. To get her to trust me. Perhaps once she opened up to me like I had to her, she would be opened up to love in a way she had never experienced it before.

My phone vibrated, startling me out of my thoughts.

"This is Jay," I answered.

"Jay Foster, this is Missing Persons Detective Lawrence with Chicago P.D.'s Special Investigations Unit. I want you to come in and help us out by providing us with any information you might have regarding the disappearance of Mia Bailey. Can you come to the station now?"

"Sure, I'm on my way. Anything I can do to help."

"Thank you, Mr. Foster. We'll see you shortly."

I sighed and began driving in the direction of the police department. The detective working this case would certainly see me as the prime suspect. I was the “ex-boyfriend.” And I was the one who called in that Mia was missing. The detective would probably think I abducted Mia, killed her, hid her body, and then called it in as an abduction to try to cover my own tracks. I knew the truth, of course, but they might not believe me. Especially since I know so little of her personal life. They might think she is nothing to me but a victim. I decided the best way to handle the interrogation was to show them how concerned I was about Mia’s safety. I would emphasize how badly I wanted her to be alright, and how much I loved her.

At the station, Detective Lawrence guided me into a room alone. It was just like the interrogation rooms I had seen on TV, which made me nervous.

“Have a seat, Mr. Foster.”

“Call me Jay,” I said, trying to get her to trust me. I sat across the table from where she stood. She held a notepad in her hand. I tilted my head slightly and smiled at her, hoping I looked charming and innocent.

“What was the nature of your relationship with Mia Bailey?” she asked, her face stern.

“We dated for a few months. It was not very serious, though I wanted it to be. She pushed me away. She’s a very private person,” I said. I wanted to be as forthcoming as I could, letting the detective know I truly loved Mia.

“How long ago did the relationship end?” she asked.

I leaned forward in my seat. “About four months ago, I guess. I still love her though, Detective Lawrence. I really want her to be okay. Have you made any progress in looking for her?”

“I’d like to keep asking you more questions before answering that, if you don’t mind.”

I sat back, feeling a bit defeated. “Alright.”

“How often have you had contact with Mia since your relationship ended?”

“I tried to talk to her as often as I could without being over-the-top. I wanted her back from the moment she ended things. I have been trying to talk to her and win her back ever since. I went to her favorite coffee shop a few times so I knew I’d be able to talk with her. I bought her coffee every once in a while, and we’d talk. Catch up a bit. But she stopped showing up, and I got worried.”

“Is that why you went to her apartment?”

“Yes. I thought maybe she was sick. I brought her a coffee, and when I got there, the door was cracked open. Not enough to see through it. It looked closed, but it came open when I knocked,” I explained.

“Right...” the detective pressed her lips together and scribbled something on her notepad. “What did you see when you entered the apartment?”

“I saw the broken mug and old spilled coffee. I started shouting Mia’s name, and went into the living room. That’s when I saw the broken window, the blood, the fallen bookshelves... I was terrified that I’d find her body in the bedroom. But when I went in there, it was just like she’d been in there a few minutes before.”

“And what did you do?”

“Well, I was shocked. I didn’t know what to do. I sat on the couch and took it all in...” I decided to leave out the part about looking through her phone. That wasn’t a big deal anyway, the police certainly looked through it themselves. “Then I calmed down, came to my senses, and called 9-1-1.”

“And when the police got there, you hurried away, yes?”

“Well, yes. I... had an appointment.”

“Where?”

I panicked. “Well, it wasn’t exactly a scheduled appointment... I went to Mia’s workplace to talk to her coworkers. I wanted to find out if any of them knew anything about where Mia might be.”

“Didn’t you think I would do that?”

“Sure, but I knew it would take time. I wanted to get answers quickly, and I knew you would be at the apartment for a while.”

She put her hands on the table and leaned toward me. “Let me give you some advice, Mr. Foster. When you are the first one to discover a crime scene, and you leave the scene without giving any information to the police, it doesn’t look good. So maybe don’t do that next time, huh? Maybe stick around and help Mia by giving any information you have to the people whose job it is to find her.”

I blinked. “Detective, I was just trying to help.”

“Well, you did it wrong.” She sat in the seat across from me. “Let me ask you something else.”

“Sure.”

“How much of your DNA are we going to find in Mia’s apartment? Are we going to find any of your blood, fingerprints, hair?”

“My fingerprints might be on the counter, I think I leaned against it while I was looking around... the door too, probably. Like I said, I sat on the couch, so I don't know if you'd find anything there.” I scratched my head, pretending to be more clueless than I really was. Maybe if she thought I was stupid, she would think no one as stupid as I am could successfully abduct a woman. Then I would be further down the suspect list. That is, if the list was longer than just my name.

“Can you tell me why your fingerprints were on Mia’s phone?”

“Oh, yeah, I saw the phone in the kitchen before I saw the mess in the living room, so I picked it up to see if I could tell if she'd used it recently. It was dead.”

“The battery was dead. So you charged it?”

I was starting to get annoyed, but I tried not to show it. “Yeah, I charged it to see if anything on it would tell me anything about where Mia might be.”

“You know how to unlock her phone?”

“She hasn’t changed the passcode since we dated.”

“And did you find anything on the phone that you thought might be helpful?”

“No.”

“Did you look through the phone before or after calling 9-1-1?”

I paused. “Why? Does that matter?”

“I asked the question, didn’t I?”

“Before.”

She sighed. “Do you realize that you tampered with a crime scene and possibly compromised evidence? I’m gonna be honest, this doesn’t look good for you, Mr. Foster. You have put yourself in a position where it looks pretty clear that you were trying to hide something on Mia’s phone from authorities.”

“I didn’t delete anything,” I said, getting more obviously annoyed.

“We’ll see. I’ll be right back.”

“Wait, should I get a lawyer?”

“You’re not under arrest. Yet. If you’re guilty, you may need one.”

I decided I didn't like Detective Lawrence. I wished someone else was on Mia's case. I thought about getting a lawyer, but maybe that would only make me look more guilty than I already did. I decided to just give the police all the honest information I had. They couldn't make something that wasn't true into a whole big thing, right? They didn't have any reason to arrest me. I didn't do anything wrong.

Unless looking through Mia's phone was somehow illegal. Then I could be in some trouble.

CHAPTER 5

Mia

“Olive. You’re Home.”

The words reverberated through my head, and I stood paralyzed in shock. *Olive. Gene just called me Olive.* My head was spinning.

Gene took me by the arm and led me out of the room. I tried to process what was happening as he helped me up the stairs and down a long hallway. We approached a set of double doors at the end of the hallway, and Ruth scurried ahead to open the doors for us. It was a bedroom. The bedspread and the curtains were a pale shade of blue. The windows were tall, but no light came in through them. A soft grey rug covered the center of the floor. There was a vanity with a small stool in the corner. The vanity had no mirror, only a wooden board where a mirror may have been before. An elaborate wardrobe and a fancy dresser were against the walls. Framed photographs lined the walls on either side of the bed.

“Here you are, Olive. Back in your room. Get some rest now. I have plans for you and your sister tomorrow. I’ll get you up when it’s time to get ready.” Gene led me to the bed, and I sat on the edge. He smiled down at me, then bent over and kissed my forehead. I was still too confused to react. Gene and Ruth left the room, and I heard a lock click on the doors before the sound of their footsteps retreating.

I was exhausted, and all I wanted was to sink into the plush mattress and perfectly fluffed pillows. But I needed to look around. The room was cold, and my fingers tingled. I slowly walked along the walls of the room, looking closely for anything that might give me new information. The wallpaper was white with silver brushstrokes. I ran my fingers along the wall as I circled the room. I pulled back the curtains to reveal boarded up windows. No wonder no light would come through. I pressed my hand to the wood and pushed. It didn’t budge. I knocked gently, trying to figure out how thick it was. It sounded solid, like there may have been more than one layer of wooden boards between me and outside.

Taking a closer look at the vanity, I saw the same kind of wooden boards in place of the mirror. A hairbrush, a jewelry box, and a few hair ribbons were neatly placed across the table. I looked in the drawers of the dresser. They were filled with girls’ clothes. They must have

belonged to Olive. I opened the doors to the wardrobe to reveal more clothes. Some of these looked nicer, dresses and skirts. Some of the clothes were not as nice, but they appeared cozier, like they were meant for winter.

Moving back toward the bed, I looked more closely at the photos that lined the walls. One photo was of Olive, her dark, cropped hair blowing in front of her eyes. She was laughing and holding a handful of wildflowers. I almost smiled. She looked so joyful. Another photo showed Olive and Ruth leaning against each other and smiling brightly. They appeared to be on vacation at a beach. Sand salted their legs up to their knees, and they wore big, stylish sunglasses. Ruth looked different then, healthier and happier. The Ruth I saw was weak and terrified. I frowned. I had to help Ruth find that strong, confident girl in herself again.

I moved on to another of the photos. In this one, Ruth and Olive gave serious looks to the camera, posing with pursed lips and manicured nails touching their faces. I frowned. *Ruth's eyes...* Earlier when Ruth and I were alone, I noticed how green they were. In this photo, her eyes were unmistakably chocolate colored. *Was she wearing colored contacts?* I wondered. As I looked closer, I started to notice other differences. In the photo, Ruth's nose was slightly longer than I thought it was earlier. I shook my head, deciding I probably didn't get a good enough look at Ruth earlier. Ruth was quite clearly very different now than she used to be.

I looked around at the other photos. Several of them appeared to have been from the same photoshoot. Ruth and Olive were dressed up and posing, laughing and enjoying the fun time together. I grinned a little. I had always wondered what it would be like to have a sister. I imagined if I'd had one, we might have had a photoshoot something like this one.

After looking around a bit more, I realized I wasn't making much progress. I needed an escape, but I knew I wouldn't be able to find one as long as I was this exhausted. I needed to rest and build up my strength before making a solid plan. I was a little afraid to sleep, but I felt pretty confident that Gene would leave me alone until the next day.

I pulled back the covers and climbed into the giant bed. I let myself relax into the warmth. I thought again about Ruth, how fragile and submissive she was to Gene. He had broken her. I wanted terribly to help her find herself again. I wanted to help her escape this mad prison and rediscover the free-spirited girl in the photos with her sister. With that intention in the center of my mind, I allowed myself to rest, determined to awake strong and confident enough to make an escape plan.

CHAPTER 6

Mia

“Olive!”

I groaned and stretched out under the covers. For a brief moment, I thought I was back in my apartment. I was perfectly cozy, and wondered why someone was shouting about olives. I winced as my stretching irritated the stitches in my shoulder, snapping me into the harsh remembrance of my circumstances.

“Olive, it’s time to get up. Ruth is making breakfast, and she needs you to help her.” Gene flicked on the lights, and I squinted. I sat up and rubbed my eyes, trying to clear my head now that I had gotten some rest.

“There are some clothes in the wardrobe for you. I’ll take you to the bathroom before you go help Ruth. I’ll be outside waiting for you.” He stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Part of me wanted to rebel. I wanted to push the door open, run past him, and find my way out of this house. But of course, he knew the house better than I did, and the doors were likely locked to prevent me or Ruth from leaving.

I groaned quietly as I slid out of the bed. The cold floor was unwelcoming to my bare feet. I pulled the first sweater and pair of pants I could find out of the wardrobe, and quickly got dressed. I found some thick socks in the dresser and slid them over my feet. I ran my fingers through my hair, and was startled by how short it was. I had forgotten about the haircut Gene and Ruth had given me. My hair was also much darker than it used to be. I probably looked like a different person, I realized. Maybe even a bit like Olive.

I pushed the door open. Gene smiled at me, and offered me his arm. I walked out of the bedroom and started down the hall without him.

“Olive.” His voice was stern and strong. It surprised me, and I stopped walking. He approached me, his brown leather shoes sending rhythmic echoing sounds through the hall. “Let me lead you.” He held out his arm again, and I took it reluctantly. He led me down the hall and stopped in front of a door. He opened it, and I walked into the biggest bathroom I had ever seen in someone’s home. The floors were gleaming white marble, and the walls had the same shiny wallpaper as the bedroom. The huge clawfoot tub was the true eye-catcher in the room. Under

different circumstances, I would have been thrilled to stay in a home with a luxurious tub like this one. There was no mirror above the sink, which felt awkward and made the room feel smaller.

“Be quick,” Gene said. “You’ll have time for a bath later. Just freshen up. The cabinet below the sink will have all you need, of course.” He closed the door behind me.

In the cabinet, I found a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and a hairbrush. A few other toiletry items like towels and washcloths were neatly arranged on the shelves of the cabinet. I touched one of the washcloths, and noticed it had Olive’s initials stitched into the fabric with light blue thread.

It felt strange to go through a familiar morning routine in an unfamiliar place with no mirror and a captor standing on the other side of the door. It was a relief to brush my teeth and wash my face. As I brushed my hair, the sweater I was wearing irritated my shoulder. I pulled my sweater down over my shoulder and tried to see the stitches. I could mostly see the wound, and it didn’t look great. *At least I might get a pretty cool scar out of this...*

I dreaded going back into the hall with Gene, but I knew if I took much longer he might get angry. I opened the door, and Gene was uncomfortably close to the threshold. He took the smallest step back to allow me space to exit.

I squeezed past him, trying to avoid looking at him. He smelled exactly as he did when he first walked into my apartment, and I wondered what would have happened if I never opened the door to let him in. He grabbed my arm firmly and began to lead me quickly down the hall again.

“Your sister probably really needs your help with breakfast by now. Let’s hurry.”

I tried to form a mental map of the mansion as he hurried me into the kitchen.

The sound of sizzling bacon and the scrape of a spatula stirring eggs in a pan filled the room in an almost eerie way; the house was so large and immaculate that sounds seemed out of place, as if interrupting a reverent silence that was to be kept at all times in this house. Ruth didn’t look up when we walked in. She dutifully kept scrambling eggs with her lips pressed together.

“Go on, Olive. You can make the coffee. I know that’s your favorite,” Gene said. He put a hand on my back to lead me in the right direction, and I flinched. “Relax, Olive. You need some caffeine. Doesn’t she, Ruth?”

Ruth nodded.

I hurried over to the coffee pot and started brewing, hoping Gene wouldn't hover over my shoulder. I tried to copy Ruth's methodical mannerisms as I did what Gene said.

Gene sat at the bar in front of the stove where Ruth cooked. "My two girls. My two daughters making breakfast for me again. It's like the clock turned backward," he said, smiling.

A toaster dinged, and I jumped, startled at the sudden harsh noise.

"Ah, my favorite part. Ruthie's famous bagels."

Ruth prepared the bagels from the toaster like she had done it countless times before, and I thought this must be a daily routine instead of just for special occasions.

"How do you take your coffee, Uncle Gene?" I asked. Immediately after saying it, I bit my tongue and mentally kicked myself. I was probably expected to call him, "Dad," as uncomfortable as that was.

Gene's face hardened. "Olive," he said sternly, "You are slipping back into your old ways." His face flushed red and he raised his voice. "You know you have changed. You are not who you used to be. That is clear. I expect you to behave like yourself. Be respectful. Be obedient. Be compliant. Be loyal. Do you understand?" The question sounded threatening.

"Yes." I agreed. I still refused to call him "Dad." No one could take that title. I decided to avoid directly addressing Gene.

"I prefer my coffee black," Gene said.

I poured a cup and set it on the counter in front of him.

Ruth arranged the eggs, bagels, and small cups of fruit on plates for the three of us.

"Let's move to the table, shall we? It's a beautiful day today, and the sun shining through the windows is warm." Gene carried his plate and his coffee mug to a small round table in a sunny nook of the kitchen. Three chairs were arranged around the table as if the spot were meant just for Gene and his daughters. I briefly felt bad for Gene, knowing how desperately he must want this breakfast with his girls to be real. That sympathy quickly passed when I lifted my plate and again felt the sharp pain in my shoulder. I sat facing Gene, and Ruth sat between us. I looked carefully at the windows around the table. They were locked, but I wondered if I could break them. Outside, all I could see was green. There was a distance of about fifty yards between this side of the house and an iron fence with barbed wire wrapped around the top. The barbed wire didn't look like it belonged there. It was awkwardly and unevenly strung along the fence. On the other side of the fence was a tall, thick hedge. Above the hedge, I could see treetops in the

distance. I wondered if the hedge wasn't adequate for the prison Gene made of his home, so he had the fence built and later decided to add the barbed wire himself.

"Olive, aren't you going to eat?"

I pulled my gaze away from the windows and looked at my plate. I didn't feel like eating, but knew I needed the energy. I took a small bite of eggs and avoided looking at Gene.

Ruth reached for her coffee, and it slipped from her fingers. The coffee spilled on the table and splashed onto her lap. I winced, knowing it must burn. She quickly stood up, pushing her chair back from the table. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'll clean up."

"It's alright, Ruth. You go get changed. Olive will clean this up for you. Won't you, Olive?"

Without a word, I crossed the kitchen to find a rag. I dampened the rag before wiping down the table, Ruth's chair, and the floor.

"Olive, you've been quiet this morning. How are you feeling?" Gene asked. "Are you and your sister in another argument?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I haven't talked with Ruth."

"Well, I think you two need some good sister bonding time, don't you?"

I thought for a moment. It would be good to talk to Ruth alone and learn more about this house and how to get out. "Sure. I think that would be nice."

Gene smiled brightly. "Wonderful! It's settled then. I have to go out for groceries, but the two of you can spend some time together in the parlor. You girls can gab about the latest gossip and all that."

I still didn't know how to read Gene. Despite his slightly misogynist tone, he seemed so happy and kind now while just moments ago he was seething at me for not calling him "Dad."

"The parlor?" Ruth was standing at the entrance to the kitchen in a clean dress. Her face was whiter than usual, and her eyes looked too big for her head. "C-could we go to my bedroom instead, Dad?"

"Nonsense, Ruthie. There's nothing wrong with the parlor. It's a perfectly comfortable room. Maybe you two can dust the furniture while you're in there."

I wondered why Ruth appeared to be afraid of the parlor.

"Let's finish breakfast, and then I'll walk you two over there," Gene said, taking a bite of his bagel.

I quickly cleared my plate, eager to spend time alone with Ruth. Ruth moved her food around on her plate with her fork. She looked like she might be sick.

“Not much of an appetite this morning, Ruth?” Gene asked.

Ruth shook her head.

Gene stacked our plates and carried them to the sink. He turned back to us. “Let’s go then, girls.”

We stood and followed him across the house to the parlor. The more of the massive house I saw, the more I became sure I would never know my way around. There seemed to be endless new wings of the house to discover.

“In you go,” Gene said, stepping aside for the two of us to walk through a set of elaborate double doors. The room looked straight out of a film about European royalty. Antique furniture, floral wallpaper, a grand piano, a genuine fur rug, and a wood-burning fireplace... I wasn’t surprised, but I was certainly impressed.

“You two enjoy your time together. When I get back, we’ll have lunch.” Gene closed the doors, and I heard a few locks click. I waited until the sound of his footsteps faded, then I turned to Ruth.

“Are you afraid of this room because he locks you in it?” I asked.

Ruth stiffly looked around the room, and her eyes fixated on one spot near the wall beside the couch. “No.”

I waited, thinking she might tell me more. When she stayed silent, I decided to press for more information. “Did something happen here?”

She nodded.

“What was it?”

“My sister...”

“Olive?”

She shook her head.

“What do you mean, Ruth?”

She stood still and silent.

“Ruth, what happened?” I tried to sound gentle. “You can trust me.”

“Lonna.”

“Lonna? Our cousin?”

“Lonna, my sister.”

I stepped closer to Ruth, and then it hit me. She wasn't Ruth. “Emilia?”

She looked at me, tears pooling in her big eyes. “Lonna died here.”

I gently touched her arm. “You're not Ruth. You're Emilia. I'm sorry I didn't see it before...”

Emilia sniffed and wiped her nose with her sleeve, looking smaller and more fragile by the second.

“Why don't we sit down?” I asked, moving toward the couch.

I paused, letting her compose herself a little. “We can talk about Lonna if you want, but we don't have to.”

“He told us we would work for him. Be his housekeepers, his caretakers. He promised to pay well. Our- our mom trusted him, and felt bad for him after the accident.” She paused and squeezed her eyes shut when she talked about her mom.

I reached for her hand. She looked grateful to have someone to comfort her.

“He made me and Lonna be Ruth and Olive. Lonna didn't want to. She wouldn't call him ‘Dad.’ She was always looking for ways to leave. Then one day, we were all in the parlor. Lonna got angry at Gene, because he hit me after I accidentally broke a glass. She tried to pick up the broken glass and cut him with it, but he caught her arm and threw her into the mirror.”

I looked at the spot Emilia had been looking at before. “Was the mirror over there?”

She nodded. “The mirror broke, and she kept trying to use the glass to cut Gene. She screamed for me to run, but I was too scared,” her voice broke. “I-I just watched while he... he killed her.” She put her face in her hands and sobbed. “He killed her, and I didn't help her. I was too afraid. I let my sister die. It's all my fault!”

I wrapped my arms around Emilia and let her sob for a few moments. I pressed my lips together, wondering how to come up with the words to comfort her. Certainly, no one had ever been through anything like what Emilia was going through now. How could I help? “Emilia, it's not your fault...” I hesitated, racking my brain for the right words to say. I spoke again, slowly, “For all you know, if you had helped he might have killed you too... I know you miss Lonna. I'm so sorry. But please don't blame yourself.”

She cried harder and weak wails gurgled from her throat.

Her sobs slowed, and I handed her a box of tissues that was on an end table. She took a few and calmed herself down.

“Emilia... how long ago did all of this happen?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I’m not positive. I lost track of time. I was a wreck after she died, and Gene left me alone for at least two weeks. He brought me food and water, but didn’t let me out of my room. He let me out a few days ago, and then he came home with you.”

“How long were you here before... before it happened?”

“We got here in August.”

It was February.

“Have you gotten to talk to your mom?” I asked.

“Yes, but he holds the phone and tells me what to say. I haven’t gotten to talk to her since Lonna died. He just talks to her himself and tells her Lonna and I are busy working... It was always strange when I talked to her. It was like for just a minute, I was Emilia again, and even Gene had to recognize that. He always got mean and hot-tempered whenever I was Emilia and not Ruth.”

As she mentioned Gene’s temper, I panicked for a moment, wondering if Gene had hidden cameras or microphones that he could use to monitor our conversation. Surely a conversation like this would infuriate him. I glanced around the room, looking for any evidence of cameras. I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Is Gene able to watch us? Or hear our conversations when he’s not here?”

“Lonna thought of that. We tested it a few times by saying risky things about escape plans to see if he’d act differently. There was never any reason for us to believe he has any cameras or microphones. Lonna even looked for them several times and never found any.” She paused again, wiping tears from her face. I relaxed a little.

“I know this is hard, Emilia. Thank you for trusting me.”

“Do you remember when we were little? At family reunions, Lonna would always whisper to me, ‘Mia is different from the other cousins, but in a good way.’ It always made me smile. We both looked up to you.”

I smiled sadly. “I remember seeing you two running around with your matching outfits.”

She nodded and sighed.

“Emilia... I know this might be sensitive to talk about, but I need to ask... do you know if Lonna had any solid plans for how to escape this place?”

Emilia shook her head. “She tried everything she could think of. She tried to get me to escape with her, but I was always too scared of Gene.”

“Maybe if we make a list of everything she tried, we can work together to come up with different ways to escape. It’ll be easier if we’re not just repeating the things Lonna already tried.”

Emilia shook her head. “I can’t. Especially not after what happened. We just have to wait for someone to find us. I’m sure my mom is already getting concerned since I haven’t talked to her in a few weeks.”

“We have to try, Emilia. We can’t just wait around for someone to rescue us.”

“You sound like Lonna,” she said. “You’re going to end up like her, too. Unless you give up and just be Olive.”

“I can’t be Olive. I’m not Olive.”

“You have to be. You have to pretend, or he’ll kill you.”

I leaned back on the couch and thought for a moment. “We’ll just take some time, okay? I’ll pretend to be Olive when Gene is around. But I want to make plans, and I want you to plan with me. We won’t do anything until we’re sure our plan is solid. And if you are worried about parts of the plan, we’ll keep reworking it until you feel good about it. How does that sound?”

Emilia bit her lip. “I guess it doesn’t hurt to plan it out.”

I smiled. “Great! We need to start now. We don’t know how much time we’ll have together without Gene. Tell me about what Lonna tried.”

CHAPTER 7

Jay

A few days after being questioned by the stone-faced lady detective, I sat in my apartment where I had begun a vision board. On TV, people usually pin photos and maps and yarn to the wall when they were trying to solve a mystery, so I thought I'd give it a shot.

A map of Chicago with a bright blue pin on Mia's apartment was in the center of the wall. The scene of the crime, Mia's last known location, and the place with the most physical evidence of what happened to her. My favorite photo of Mia was pinned directly above it. Mia was trying to be serious when I took that photo, but she had a slight smirk. She was trying not to laugh at something stupid I'd said. Sighing, I wondered if I'd ever see her make that face again.

A yellow pin on the map marked Mia's office. Connected to the yellow pin by a few old shoelaces, I pinned photos I found online of a few of her coworkers. Phoebe, Lewis, and her boss Noreen. Their social media accounts held no incriminating evidence, though Lewis's page was sparse. He only posted pictures of nature scenes and inspirational quotes. I had to search through posts he'd been tagged in to find a photo of him for the wall. I wondered how someone who worked for a popular magazine could have a social media page that looked like it belonged to someone in their sixties. I still thought he was suspicious.

It wasn't likely that Noreen or Phoebe were actually involved, but I still wanted to question Noreen. I also suspected that Phoebe might know more than she was letting on when I spoke with her. Maybe there was tension in the office, or some kind of competition that Mia was a part of. Phoebe probably knew all the office gossip, and could tell me if anyone seemed resentful toward Mia. If I got to speak with her again, I'd be sure to ask about it.

I also looked through Mia's old Facebook page and found a couple of ex-boyfriends from her college days. They were weird. One of them was Lukas, a theatre major whose pants were too tight. The other was Danny. He didn't have much information on his profile, but he looked like he built robots and did other people's computer science homework on the weekends. Both were scrawny, shorter than six feet, and had big glasses. College Mia had a type. I was glad that her taste in men improved after she got her degree. I printed pictures of them and taped them to the other side of the wall because I ran out of pins.

Staring at the wall gave me both a sense of accomplishment and helplessness. The mess on the wall made it look like I had made progress, but the truth was that I still didn't know any more than I did the day I went to Mia's apartment.

Looking at the photo of Mia, I realized it might be a good idea to put up posters around the city. I sighed when I realized no one in busy Chicago would stop to look at them. I'd probably get told it was a waste of paper, and I should just make a social media post instead.

I sat up straight. A social media post. Maybe starting a page to spread awareness of Mia's disappearance would help. If I created a page, people could reach out if they had seen anything or had any idea of what might have happened. I smiled and pulled out my laptop, feeling like I finally had a chance at making some progress on this investigation.

I created a Facebook page titled "Help Save Mia." I used my favorite photo of her as the cover, and made a post with the information I knew about how long she'd been missing. The direct messages would be open for anyone with information about Mia's disappearance. I shared the page from my personal profile, and then created posts on my other social media sites to share with anyone who didn't use Facebook. Within minutes, several people shared the post on Facebook, writing things like, "Help find this poor woman!" and "So sad. You never know when something like this might happen to you or someone you love. Be careful out there."

Mia would probably pretend to hate all this attention. She always acted like she hated being in the spotlight, but the truth was that she was the main character of everyone else's stories; she always had the interest and attention of others. Eyes were naturally drawn to her because of her artistic style and her natural beauty. She was magnetic, I always told her. I secretly thought she liked to be the person everyone looked at when she walked into a room, but she used to tell me she didn't like when people looked at her for too long. She'd always stare back at the people who stared at her, especially the guys. Most of the time, she intimidated people. They rarely approached her because she seemed so confident, so perfectly alright just the way she was. Even if her hair was a mess or she had a stain on her jeans, she was always sure of herself.

The first time I saw her, I was that guy staring at the untouchable, unapproachable Mia. I thought speaking to her might be intrusive and distract her from whatever extremely important, too-cool-for-commoners task she had in front of her. She was stunning. The busy city around her was chaos, but she was both serene and bold. I followed her through the windy city and made

mental notes of where I might run into her again. For weeks, I went to the right places and observed her from a distance. It was probably a little creepy, but I didn't see it that way. In my mind, I was creating the perfect atmosphere for her to fall for me.

And it worked. Briefly. I asked her out. She said yes. We dated for a few months. Then she changed. It seemed to me that she got bored and wanted something new. I was frustrated and heartbroken. I wanted her back, of course, but I had to do it the right way. Just like the first time, I had to wait for the perfect opportunity to win her back. I was trying to take that opportunity the day I found out Mia was missing.

I smiled as I thought about how saving Mia would create the completely perfect conditions for her to take me back. She would realize she needed me as much as I needed her. When she saw my vision board and my social media posts, she would finally understand how hard I was willing to work to care for her.

My thoughts were interrupted by a chime on my laptop. Someone had sent a message to the Facebook page I created. My mouth dropped open when I saw the name "Angela Bailey." Mia's mom.

"Who are you, and why are you posting about my daughter?"

"Mrs. Bailey," I wrote back, "My name is Jay Foster. I dated Mia for a few months. I thought the police would have called you by now... I'll have to talk to the detective about her sloppy work. I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, but Mia is missing. She was abducted from her apartment a week or two ago. The police are doing everything they can to find her, and I assure you that I am also working hard to find out what happened." My heart was heavy as I hit send. I imagined Mrs. Bailey's cries as she learned about her missing daughter. She would probably cry all night, especially since she was alone after the passing of her husband. How could the detective not have called Mia's mother? That made no sense. The first thing she should have done was call Mia's next of kin. I sighed and shook my head, again wishing that a better detective was on Mia's case.

After a few minutes, she wrote back. "Detective Lawrence contacted me a few days ago. She told me not to put anything on social media just yet, because it could alert her abductor that the police are searching. Did the detective tell you something different? Mia never mentioned you."

That was a surprise. Maybe before I left the station, the detective mentioned something about the internet, but I was busy thinking about what I needed to do next to find Mia. Mia never telling her mom about me stung a little, but I decided to move past that.

I wrote back. "I just thought I would get the word out. I'm not sure how much time the police are actually putting into this investigation. This is Chicago, after all. They have a lot on their plate. Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you. I would love to help you in any way I can."

A few minutes later, I got a call from the detective.

"Do you realize that you're getting involved where you don't belong, Mr. Foster?" Detective Lawrence asked.

"I was just trying to help. I hadn't heard of you making any progress, so I-"

"That's because it's none of your concern. You're not family. You're Mia's ex-boyfriend, and Mrs. Bailey has never even heard of you. And quite frankly, you've upset Mrs. Bailey. You need to back off."

"Have you found anything else though? Are you getting closer to-"

"Goodbye, Mr. Foster."

I blinked. The detective actually hung up on me. I couldn't believe it. She had no idea how much I cared about Mia. I was probably doing more work to find Mia than she was! I slammed my phone down on the coffee table and paced around the room. If the police weren't going to take this seriously, I was going to have to work even harder to find Mia. I wouldn't be getting any helpful information from the detective, so I needed to do it myself. Waiting for a message to come in on the Facebook page I'd created felt like doing nothing, but I wasn't sure what else to do. I could go back to Mia's office, but Phoebe would probably get in my way, and I wanted to wait a while longer before going back there.

Rubbing my face with both hands, I flopped back down on the couch and put my feet up. This whole situation felt hopeless, but I couldn't give up on Mia. She was still out there. At least I hoped she was. She could have been killed. Her body could be floating somewhere in the river, soon to wash up as an unwelcome surprise for someone on a morning jog. She could be lying dead in someone's basement. She could have been taken away to a foreign country and sold into slavery, then died of some disease. My stomach turned at the thought.

I lay down on the couch and stared at Mia's photo on my wall. I couldn't imagine a world without her. I couldn't imagine a world without us together. I just had to find her.

CHAPTER 8

Mia

Emilia and I spent the rest of our time alone discussing the different ways Lonna had tried to escape this house. I still didn't have a complete understanding of the layout, but Emilia was trying to help me learn. It would have been easier if we weren't locked in the parlor and could actually walk around the house together, but Emilia arranged little figurines from the bookshelves on the floor to represent different rooms and corridors. A marble dog represented the kitchen, and a little swordsman represented my bedroom. Other figurines were arranged all around. We didn't have enough to map out every room in the house, so we started using books. Emilia admitted she didn't have the layout of the house fully memorized yet either, but she did the best she could.

"This house is ridiculous," I said, "Trying to remember which halls lead where is going to be impossible if he keeps us locked up all the time."

"Well..." Emilia said, "He has let me wander around alone before. I think he grew to trust me, and didn't expect me to try to escape. Especially after Lonna's death."

"Oh, that's right. You weren't locked up when he first brought me here," I said. "He called you in and you helped him carry me."

Emilia looked at the floor. "I've kind of learned that it's safer to just do what he says."

I reached for her hand. "Keep doing that for now. I think it's better if he trusts you." I could tell she felt embarrassed.

"You probably think I'm a coward," she said, nervously running her hand through her hair.

"I don't. I think it takes strength and bravery to be able to comply with what Gene says in order to keep yourself safe until you've gathered enough information to form an escape plan."

"But I haven't been trying to plan an escape," she said. "I want to leave, of course. I just don't think I'll ever be able to."

"Well, now you've got me. We're going to do this together. We won't rush it. We'll take our time and learn everything we need to know to get out of here without getting hurt. I'll make sure you don't get hurt, okay? I'll protect you."

Emilia nodded and squeezed my hand. I could tell she was still apprehensive about even making plans.

“Let’s get all this put back on the shelves,” I said. “Gene will probably be back soon.”

We gathered up the books and figurines. Emilia knew exactly where they belonged, which was a relief since I had already forgotten. After we finished putting everything in its place, Emilia and I sat back down on the couch. Emilia was stiff and seemed anxious.

“Are you afraid of him?” I asked.

“Obviously. Why wouldn’t I be?” she replied.

I shrugged. “I don’t see a point in being too afraid to escape. And I don’t mean that to offend you, Emilia. It’s just that either we live here and pretend to be Ruth and Olive until Gene dies, we escape, or we die trying to escape. Personally, I would hate to wait out Gene’s life pretending to be someone I’m not. I have a life of my own to live. I have a job to get back to. I have a mom I miss and haven’t talked to in too long. If I’m sitting here afraid of Gene, I know it’s going to hold me back from escaping and getting back to my life.” I paused. “Don’t you have reasons to go back home?”

Emilia shrugged, and her face darkened. “All I can think about is having to tell my parents that Lonna is gone.” She sniffled, and I handed her another tissue. “I’m afraid they’ll blame me. I know nothing will be the same. Sometimes I wonder if it’s even worth hoping they’ll find me.”

My heart ached for Emilia. I pulled her in for a hug, and she cried into my shirt. I wiped away my own tears before they fell into her hair. I didn’t know what to say. Emilia clearly felt hopeless, and all I wanted was to give her something to hold on to. She needed something to be excited about. A reason to leave this place and get back to her own life. She needed a reason to stop being Ruth and just be Emilia again.

The lock on the double doors clicked, and Emilia sat up straight, quickly wiping her tears away with the tissue. Gene entered the room with a huge smile on his face.

“My girls! How has your time been?”

“It’s been great,” I said. “We loved getting to spend time with just the two of us. We need to do it more often.” I squeezed Emilia’s hand, hoping to comfort her.

“Fantastic!” Gene said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s have lunch. I brought home something special.”

We followed Gene out of the parlor and back across the house toward the kitchen. As we walked, I made note of the different rooms we passed, trying to remember our little map on the parlor floor. We walked into the dining room, which I hadn't seen yet. Gene had arranged boxes of Chinese food on the table. My mouth watered at the smell of lo mein and shrimp.

"I thought this would be a fun treat. I know how you two love Chinese food," Gene said, sitting at the head of the table.

"This looks great. Thank you," I said, trying to work toward gaining his trust.

He grinned. "Of course, Olive."

Emilia and I sat at the table and began eating with Gene. I ate quickly, happy to have food that I really enjoyed. I remembered eating Chinese takeout while pouring over my class notes in college. Chinese food was what I always called my brain food; I ate it nearly every time I had to study for a big exam or write an important paper. I also used eating Chinese as motivation to study for classes I didn't enjoy. I smiled as I remembered my old roommate wrinkling her nose every time I brought home takeout. She didn't like the smell of Chinese food, which I thought was ridiculous. I always told her I would get her used to it, and she'd learn to love it. She never did.

Eating Chinese food in Gene's dining room felt like getting a taste of the familiar while surrounded by uncertainty. Emilia moved her food around with her fork, not seeming very interested in it. I worried that Gene would get upset with her if she didn't eat.

"Are you feeling okay, Ruth?" Gene asked, noticing her behavior just as I did.

"I'm just not feeling very hungry, I guess," Emilia said.

"Well, if you want, we can save yours for later. You can eat it when you're ready."

Emilia nodded.

I was surprised that Gene was being so gracious toward her, but I was also grateful. Emilia certainly didn't need any added anxiety.

Emilia took her food to the kitchen, and I hoped Gene and I would finish our meal in silence.

"So, Olive," Gene said, letting down my hope for a quiet meal, "Ruth seems upset. While I was gone, did you two talk about something that upset her?"

I shook my head. "We had a nice time, actually. I'm not sure what's going on with her now. If you want, I could ask her about it if we get more time alone."

“Sure,” Gene said, “That would probably be good. You girls understand each other so well. I’m jealous of that fact.”

“Maybe this afternoon, Ruth and I can paint each other’s nails and get to talking,” I suggested, trying to play into his idea of sisterly connection.

“Well, that sounds alright. I was planning to get an afternoon nap in, anyway. That run to the store about wore your ol’ dad out.”

“Get all the rest you need. We wouldn’t want you getting sick from not taking good enough care of yourself,” I said.

He chuckled. “My sweet Olive, always concerned for the health and comfort of everyone else but herself. You should let me take another look at that shoulder of yours. I know that little accident you had banged you up pretty good. I should check to see if it’s healing well.”

I nodded and forced a smile. “Sounds good. You can look at it after your nap.”

He grinned and began to clear the table. I decided to help, since he seemed to like it when we took care of him or showed concern for him. When we entered the kitchen, Emilia was rifling through the drawers frantically.

“Ruth, is something wrong?” Gene asked.

She jumped and quickly shut the drawers. “I-I just thought I lost my hair pin. I thought maybe it fell out when I was making breakfast. I’ll have to check my room.”

Gene didn’t seem bothered, and continued to put away leftovers and throw away trash. I made a mental note to ask Emilia about this later. I doubted she was actually looking for a hair pin in the kitchen.

Gene walked us back to the hall where Olive’s bedroom was, but stopped at a different door. He opened it, revealing Ruth’s room. Emilia and I entered.

“You two are lucky to have so much time together today. I’ll be napping. I also may do a little reading later this afternoon. That old library is getting dusty,” Gene said. He locked the door behind him as he left.

I frowned. “If we have to go to the bathroom, how do we get out?”

Emilia shrugged. “Just have to hold it. He doesn’t fully trust you yet.”

“Great. Oh, by the way, I told Gene we’d paint each other’s nails. Not sure if you’re into that kind of thing, but I figured he’d think of it as something we’d bond over,” I said.

Emilia actually smiled. It was the first time I saw a hint of happiness from her. “I think there’s some nail polish in one of my vanity drawers.” She crossed the room and rifled through a few drawers of makeup before pulling out a bag of nail polish.

“There are at least a dozen different shades of pink, Mia,” Emilia said, sitting on the floor and dumping out the contents of the bag. “Would you prefer bubble gum pink, cotton candy pink, or Barbie girl pink?”

I laughed and sat across from her, thinking this might actually be what having a sister felt like. “I take it there’s probably no black nail polish in there. That’s my preferred shade of pink.”

Emilia laughed loudly, throwing her head back. I was stunned at how beautiful she was when she was this happy. She didn’t look as pale or weak. Instead, her cheeks were flushed with color and her smile was contagious. She picked through the nail polishes. “I think this one would suit you,” she said, holding up a dark shade of purple.

I nodded. “I like it. I think you should do this one.” I showed her a light blue one.

“I like that a lot,” Emilia said, “You first, though.” She shook the bottle of purple polish and held out her hand to take mine. She started painting my nails, and I was surprised at how good she was at it.

“You’ve definitely done this before,” I said.

“You haven’t?”

“No, I usually either paint my own nails or get them done.”

“I guess growing up with a sister, I got pretty good at this.”

We were both silent for a few moments, thinking about Lonna.

“What were you really looking for in the kitchen earlier, Emilia?” I asked.

She hesitated. “A knife. I was hoping to hide one in my pocket so we could use it to defend ourselves if we tried to escape but got caught.”

My eyes widened. “Emilia, that was a great idea. Also really risky. I’m impressed.”

She shrugged. “I already know he hid all the sharp things before Lonna and I got here. The broken mirror that Lonna tried to fight with made him get rid of all the mirrors and breakables, too. I was just hoping he missed something.”

“I take it you didn’t find anything?”

“Nothing good. I think a frying pan might be good for something, but I can’t fit one in my pocket.”

I laughed. “With as small as they make women’s pockets, we can hardly fit our keys in them.”

She smiled, continuing to paint my nails with impressive precision. She bit her lip. “I’m still pretty nervous, but the more I think about it, the more I think that maybe if we work together, this really could work.”

I nodded. “And about what you said earlier, about talking to your parents about Lonna... I want you to know that I’ll be there for you when you talk to them, and every step of the way afterward. If you want to come stay with me in Chicago for a while, just to allow yourself some time to process, I’d love to have you.”

Her eyes widened. “Really? You’d do that for me?”

“Of course,” I said. “Not only are we family, but now we have shared trauma.”

We laughed together, and she got a little teary eyed. “I haven’t felt like this in a really long time, Mia. I actually feel like there’s hope for me.”

I smiled. “There is. Of course there is.”

CHAPTER 9

Jay

The wind blew harshly against my face, and my nose burned from the cold. I quickly ducked into the clothing store one of Mia's college ex-boyfriends worked at. I wanted to see if he was there so I could ask him some questions. I wandered around, pretending to be looking at some sweaters.

"Need any help?"

I turned and saw the familiar, bespectacled face of the guy I'd been searching for online, Lukas. His burgundy cardigan was buttoned over a light grey button up, and he wore tight black pants and fancy shoes. He adjusted his beanie as he approached me.

"Hey, uh, are you Lukas, by any chance?" I asked.

He grinned. "Are you a fan? You must have seen me in *Newsies* last month. Want a photo?"

"No, uh, that's actually not why I know you. You know Mia Bailey, right?"

His smile faded and his face turned dark, immediately setting off bells in my mind. "Yeah. Why?"

"Have you seen her recently?"

"No." His answer was a little too quick.

"When did you last speak to her?"

"What's with the interrogation, man? Who even are you?"

"I'm Jay. I dated Mia not long ago. I'm asking if you've seen her because..." I hesitated, wondering if it would be a bad idea to let him know I knew she was missing. "I've been trying to get in touch with her, and I can't reach her. I thought I'd reach out to people who know her to see if everything is okay."

Lukas shrugged. "I haven't seen her since just after college. Why don't you talk to Angela?"

"Angela? Oh, Mrs. Bailey. Well, I did talk to her. She hasn't heard from Mia in a while either."

He frowned. “Well, I hope she’s alright. I can’t help you though. Unless you’re looking for a new fit.” He held up a shirt from a rack, and I shook my head.

“No, sorry. I just wanted to ask. Thanks, Lukas.”

“Yeah. Hope things turn out alright,” he said.

I left the store feeling suspicious of Lukas. I decided to sit at the restaurant across the street and wait for him to get off work.

A few hours passed, then I saw Lukas lock up the front of the store. It was dark now, so I hurried outside to follow him from a distance. I stayed across the street and several strides behind him. He walked a few blocks before stopping at a bar. Neon lights shone from the windows, projecting a red glow onto his clothes. I thought it made him look even more evil. *Maybe this really is the guy*, I thought. I leaned against the wall across the street from the bar, trying to appear inconspicuous. I scrolled through Lukas’s social media profiles on my phone while I waited. I knew it could be a while before he left the bar, but I decided it was worth it.

I shivered and pulled my coat tighter around my body, looking around for a place to wait indoors. Unfortunately, the only places where I’d still be able to see Lukas leave the bar were already closed for the evening. Over the next hour or so, little clusters of women and a few lone men entered the bar, the women laughing together and the men looking glum from long days of work. I couldn’t see what was happening inside the bar, but I imagined bachelorette parties and men eyeing women to choose which one they’d take home that night. I was never really a fan of spending time in bars. Everyone was either overly excited or drowning their depression.

A while later, I saw a young woman stumble out of the bar, giggling hysterically. Lukas followed her out, his hand on her back. My shoulders tensed, and I turned away from the streetlights, hoping Lukas wouldn’t notice me. The woman walked like a newborn deer, but Lukas didn’t appear to be as drunk as she was. They walked away from the bar, and I followed, staying on the other side of the street.

“I think I need a lil’ nappy nap,” the woman said, still stumbling around and laughing hysterically.

“My place is close to here,” Lukas said.

This does not sound good, I thought.

“Nah, my place isn’t far and my roommate wants me to be home tonight. She’s such a buzzkill,” she said, her words drawn out and exaggerated. “Buzzkill, buzzkill.”

“Forget the buzzkill, then, gorgeous,” Lukas said, holding the woman by her wrist, “My place is just cozy enough for you to take a nap.”

This guy. He’s definitely got bad intentions.

The woman sluggishly pulled her arm away from Lukas. “Just walk me home, pretty boy,” she said. “The buzzkill awaits.”

“I’m starting to think you might be the real buzzkill,” he said.

She let out an exaggerated gasp. “No way, I’m never a buzzkill. I just have a buzzkill to go home to.”

Lukas sighed. “You’re not making my life very easy right now, you know.”

The woman walked ahead of him, swinging her arms and humming a tune. She seemed oblivious to the fact that Lukas was threatening her. He followed her with his hands shoved in his pockets, his posture like that of a child who wasn’t getting his way. He stopped in front of some stairs that led to what must have been the building where he lived.

“Mandy,” he said.

The woman turned around and looked at him through dazed eyes.

“Come here, I think you dropped something while you were twirling.”

She approached him, and he pulled her in for a tight embrace. He kissed her on the mouth, and she resisted without success. He tried to pull her up the stairs into the building, but she wasn’t so drunk that she didn’t know how to yell, “No.”

She shouted and pulled away from him, her speech still slurred. I ran across the street and pushed Lukas off of her.

“Hey, man! Leave us alone! We’re just in a little argument!” Lukas said. He got up and moved toward me with his chest puffed out.

“I saw what you were doing, and she obviously wants you to leave her alone.”

He squinted. “You’re Mia’s ex. From earlier. Were you following me?”

I was fuming at this point. I moved inches from his face. “Is this what you did to Mia, too? Did you force her into your apartment? Is she still in there?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, dude! You’re crazy. Leave me and Mandy alone.”

I turned around and saw Mandy sitting on the sidewalk, her hair matted against her cheek. “Do you want me to walk you home, Mandy?” I asked.

She nodded. I helped her up, and turned back to Lukas. “You better believe you’ll be seeing me again,” I said.

“Come near me again, and I’m calling the cops!” Lukas shouted as I led Mandy away.

“Are you okay?” I asked, guiding Mandy as she clung to my arm.

She nodded. “Some guys are just jerks. I’m glad you’re not. Thanks for being a hero.”

I couldn’t help but smile a little. “Hey, I know tonight has been hard on you, but can I ask you something?”

“If you’re about to ask me to go to your place-”

“No, no, no. I just wanted to ask something about Lukas.”

“Oh, I don’t know him. We just met at the bar.”

“I just wanted to know if he seemed... I don’t know, like he could hurt someone?”

“Well obviously,” she said. “He probably would have hurt me if you hadn’t stopped him.”

I paused. “I’m worried he may have hurt the woman I love.”

Mandy stopped walking, and her eyes got big. “Does she go to that bar?”

“I don’t really think that’s her scene. Lukas dated her back in college, and she now she’s disappeared. I think it’s possible he did something to her.”

“Like, killed her? Or kidnapped her?” I could tell Mandy was getting scared.

“Mandy, don’t worry. He’s not going to hurt you. I just want to find out what happened.”

She nodded, and we continued walking.

“How far is your place?” I asked.

“A few more blocks.”

“Good thing you were within walking distance of that bar, huh?” I said, trying to lighten the mood so she wasn’t so tense.

“Yeah. It’s not my favorite bar, but when I know I won’t have a ride home, it works.”

“Did I hear you say you have a roommate? Couldn’t she give you a ride?”

“She’s too busy with her face glued to her books. She’s always doing homework. I can’t get her to take a break for even one night of fun.” Mandy sighed, and shrugged lethargically. “I just have to show her how much better life is when you let loose a little.”

Life didn’t look so great for Mandy right now, and I doubted her roommate would be dying to go bar hopping after Mandy told her about what happened with Lukas between vomiting sessions.

We walked the rest of the way in silence. Mandy thanked me again before staggering safely into her building. I figured it was time to head home for the night, but I decided I would definitely be looking into Lukas again the next day.

CHAPTER 10

Mia

Gene was making me feel more uneasy than usual.

He prodded my wounded shoulder with one hand and rubbed my back with the other, and I could feel his breath on my neck. I felt a little sick.

“Does this hurt?” he asked, lifting my arm up so the wound moved a little.

“Yeah. When I move it, it usually does.”

He grunted. “It’s a little red, and a bit hot to the touch. I’m worried it might be infected. I’m going to have to clean it. It’ll hurt you more than it hurts me.” He chuckled, clearly proud of his little joke. It made me feel queasy.

What made me even queasier was this horrible room. This room he brought me to when he made Emilia give me stitches. It smelled like a really old doctor’s office. The lighting was harsh and irritated my eyes. To say the table where I sat was uncomfortable would be an understatement. All I wanted was to leave.

He pressed a cloth on the top of a bottle and turned it over to wet the cloth. I shuddered as I thought back to when he used a similar cloth to knock me out with chloroform. Though it was only yesterday, it felt like ages ago. He pressed the cloth against my shoulder, and I had to hold myself back from yelling. Every muscle in my body tensed as my shoulder was filled with fiery razor blades of pain.

“I know it hurts, Olive. I’m sorry.”

It took every ounce of self control I had in me to keep from screaming at him that he was insane, he did this to me, my name was Mia, and I wanted to go home.

“I know. I’ll distract you from the pain.” He said. He continued to clean my wound. “Do you remember when you were little, and your sister would sing to you when you were angry?”

I shook my head. “Tell me more about that,” I said, desperate for something to think about that didn’t involve the searing pain in my shoulder.

“You were never an easy child to raise,” he continued. “If anyone told you what to do, you would do the opposite.”

I grinned a little. I liked Olive. “Sounds like me,” I said.

“Oh, no. You’re much different now. Better. More obedient. Anyway, when you were young, you used to go into fits of anger when you got in trouble for anything. You wanted things your own way, and that wasn’t how it was supposed to be. So when your mother or I would correct you, you would get outrageously angry. Little Ruthie would hold your hand and sing to you, even if you were still screaming and pulling away from her. She would keep reaching out to you with loving hands, singing peaceful melodies. Eventually, she always calmed you down. You would fall asleep on the floor, and she would keep humming while she stroked your hair. It was beautiful. It always made me so proud to have a daughter like Ruth.”

I felt bad for Olive, but was glad she had a good sister by her side. They even died together. I wondered what it was like to have someone you’re that close to forever. Someone who knows and loves every bit of you, even the ugly parts. Tears filled my eyes as I thought about my dad. He was that person for me. Even when I got mad at him or pushed him away, he still loved me. But he was gone. My heart ached from missing him.

“Are you proud of me?” I asked, wondering if he really had a favorite daughter as it seemed from what he said so far.

He hesitated. “I am now. Now that you’re different. You’re still learning, but I sense that you’re more willing now than you used to be.”

I thought of Lonna. He must have been partially alluding to her escape attempts. Of course, since he had revealed a bit of the real Olive’s nature, I was sure part of it was about her rebelliousness. I chewed my bottom lip as Gene began to tape gauze bandages over the disinfected cut.

“This should feel better. I’ll keep checking on it to make sure it’s healing properly and that the infection goes away and doesn’t spread,” Gene said. He walked around the table and came close to me. His dark eyes peering into mine made me feel cold. “I want you to remember that you’re better now. You’re a good daughter. You’re not rebellious or angry anymore. You’re obedient. Compliant. A hard worker. You are the daughter I always knew you could be.”

I nodded. My head was swirling with thoughts about Olive. She was never who Gene wanted her to be. Ruth was the perfect daughter to him, but clearly that was never enough. He wanted two perfect daughters. Now that both of his real daughters were gone, he was trying to replace them, first with Lonna and Emilia, and now with me and Emilia. But instead of replacing them exactly as they were, he wanted me to be a better version of Olive. He wanted Emilia and

me to be the perfect pair of obedient daughters he never had. My stomach turned at the thought. Clearly, Gene was sick. I wondered if Emilia's mom had any idea of his condition from her phone conversations with him. Maybe if she caught on, she would decide she wanted Emilia to come home. That would have to lead to something.

I tried to take deep breaths as Gene helped me off the table and led me back down the creepy hallway toward the stairs. I noticed a door I hadn't seen before. It had several locks.

"What's in there?" I asked, gesturing toward the door.

"Nothing you should be concerned about, darling. Just some of my valuables," Gene said.

Once upstairs, he led me back to Olive's room. "You deserve a good night of rest after all that. I know you're in pain. Take this," he handed me a small pill. "There's already a cup of water in your room waiting for you. I had Ruth take it in there. This will help with the pain and help you get some rest."

I nodded, took the pill from him, and went into the bedroom. The loud clicks and thumps from the door locking bounced off the walls of the large room. I sat on the bed and hid the pill in my pillowcase. I didn't want to take it. I wanted a clear head, and didn't know how the pill would make me feel. I drank the whole cup of water quickly, then paced around the room.

My mind raced with thoughts of Olive. She must have been miserable here. She must have wanted freedom from the controlling father with unrealistic expectations of her. Maybe she secretly resented Ruth for being the perfect daughter he wanted Olive to be. I wanted to talk to Emilia. She might know more about what Olive and Ruth were really like. I didn't want to wait until morning to try to get some alone time with her. I wanted to talk to her now.

I looked at the door, and sighed with frustration when I saw there was no way to try to pick the lock from the inside. The window seemed hopeless too, since it was firmly boarded up. If I had the right tools, I could easily remove the boards. Too bad Gene probably confiscated any tools Olive may have kept around.

Ignoring the lingering pain in my shoulder, I rummaged through Olive's things. She didn't have a lot of clothes. I suspected Gene threw out the things he didn't like and replaced them with what his ideal daughter would wear. Most of the clothing was girly. Pastel colors, fluffy sweaters, and neutral skirts filled the drawers. Based on what I knew of her personality and what I had seen in the photos on the walls, few of the items looked like anything Olive would actually wear. I imagined Olive was free-spirited and individualistic. She and I would have

probably gotten along well, I imagined. It made me sad that I had never taken the time to get to know my cousins in our adulthood. All I knew of them were vague memories of all of us as children playing at family gatherings.

Some of the drawers were empty. To my surprise, the bottom drawer was filled with books. I gasped, and felt my heart rate quicken. *Books*. I almost cried. I sat on the floor, pulled a book out of the drawer, and flipped through it. I breathed in the comforting and familiar scent of old pages bound together and imprinted with stories of other worlds. Though every part of me wanted to escape reality and spend the entire night reading, I knew I needed to keep looking around. I sighed and reminded myself that these books weren't going anywhere. And neither would I if Emilia and I never found anything to help us get out.

Since I was already on the floor, I decided to take a look under the bed. There was nothing there. I got up and felt under the mattress. The tips of my fingers touched something, and I reached in as far as I could to grasp it. I pulled out what looked like a journal, but upon opening it I realized it was a small photo album. Inside were photos of Olive and a young man I hadn't seen before. He had dark, curly hair and a crooked smile. On the inside of the cover, the words "Levi & Olive" were written. Little hearts were scribbled around the names. Olive had probably had to hide her relationship with Levi from Gene, which would explain why the photos were hidden under the mattress. I flipped through the photos and saw Levi and Olive with huge smiles plastered on their faces. Some photos were of the two of them hiking or picnicking by a lake. Others were slightly blurry pictures of them laughing together. One photo was of Levi grinning while driving on a highway. The next was of Olive's bare feet propped up on the dashboard of what I assumed was Levi's car. The next page had a note on a napkin tucked into the photo slot.

"O,

Run away with me.

- L."

I imagined how Olive must have dreamed of getting out of this house and away from Gene. My heart ached for her. She must have felt just as trapped as I did. Anything she did to try to be independent probably incited anger in Gene. I imagined Olive sneaking in late at night after spending time with Levi, and Gene's outrage toward her rebellion. She probably felt torn about leaving with Levi, since Ruth clearly meant so much to her. Unless Olive planned to take Ruth with her...

What if Olive and Ruth were running away together when the accident that killed them happened? My eyes widened at the thought. I doubted a father as controlling as Gene clearly was would just let his daughters drive off together by themselves. Maybe they had stolen his car. Maybe the photos on the wall were taken by their mother before the divorce, and that's the only reason they appeared happy. Maybe after their mother left, they were trapped here with a broken-hearted, control-freak father who wouldn't let them out of his sight.

I wasn't completely sure I was right, but it felt like that scenario fit the gaps in what I knew of the story. Now I was itching even more to talk to Emilia about all of this.

The lock on the door clicked, and I jumped up from my spot on the floor. I quickly shoved the photo album back under the mattress and closed the drawer of books with my foot. *I thought Gene was supposed to let me rest for the night!*

The door slowly creaked open. Emilia tiptoed in, her finger pressed to her lips. My jaw dropped, and I quietly crossed the room to her. She closed the door behind her as noiselessly as she could. She ran across the room and flopped onto the bed. She grabbed a pillow and muffled a quiet scream into it. Flopping the pillow down on her lap, she whispered, "I can't believe I did this." Her eyes were wide and her face was pink. She was high on adrenaline.

"Emilia, how did you do this?" I whisper-yelled at her.

"He always locks up the keys to outside in a safe with buttons that beep too loud to get into. But he uses the keys to our bedrooms more often, so he keeps them on a hook beside his bedroom door. Tonight, he didn't lock my room, because I told him I'd really like to take a long bath. I waited until he was asleep, reached in his bedroom door, and grabbed the bedroom keys. And now I'm here. And I'm freaking out."

I jumped up and down as quietly as I could, excitement pulsing through my veins. I threw myself on the bed and hugged Emilia. "I'm so proud of you. You were so brave!" I squeezed her tight, and she giggled like a giddy little girl.

"I tried to imagine what you would do. I thought maybe if I thought of you and Lonna the whole time, I could be as strong as you two," she said. My heart melted at her sweet words.

I sat up quickly. "You're not going to believe what I just found," I said. I rolled off the bed and reached under the mattress, pulling out the photo album. I tossed it to Emilia and watched her eyes get even bigger as she flipped through the photos.

“Olive had a boyfriend!” she said. She looked up at me. “What if he’s been looking for her? Maybe he’ll find us!”

I hadn’t thought of that. I sat next to her and smiled as I watched hope flood her heart. She looked completely different from the hollow, pale, broken girl I saw when Gene first brought me here.

“I’m thinking maybe there’s more to Ruth and Olive’s story than we realized,” I said. I showed her the note I found in the album. I explained to her my thoughts about Olive and Ruth running away to meet Levi, and my suspicion that they stole Gene’s car and wrecked it as they were escaping.

“Wow,” Emilia said, processing the new information. “That’s so tragic. I wonder if Levi knows Olive is dead, or if he thinks she stood him up. Since Gene probably never knew about Levi, he couldn’t have told him about the accident.”

“Levi probably thinks that Olive decided to stay here,” I said. “Or maybe he thinks Gene caught her while she was trying to run away. But it’s also possible that he heard about the accident from someone else, like one of Olive’s friends.”

We sat in silence for a few moments, thinking of all the possibilities.

“Emilia, have you seen what’s in that locked room downstairs? The one by the room where Gene had you stitch my shoulder?” I asked.

She winced at the memory. “Sorry I did such a horrible job on that, by the way. Medicine may have been an interest for Ruth, but blood makes me queasy. But, no, I haven’t seen what’s in there. I have noticed that Gene goes down there at least once a day, and he always takes a little bag with him. I think maybe he goes in there to tidy up or to practice surgery on dummies or something.”

“Why do you think he keeps it locked up?”

She shrugged. “We already know Gene is a weird guy. Maybe he has something creepy or dangerous in there. Maybe he’s doing an experiment.”

“What if we go down there?” I suggested. “Maybe there’s something in there we could use to escape.”

Emilia shook her head. “No. Definitely not.”

“Come on, you’re telling me the girl who stole Gene’s keys to the bedrooms is scared of the basement?”

“Yep. That’s exactly what I’m telling you. Not happening, Mia.”

“Okay. Not tonight, then. How about another night?”

She shook her head again, but seemed to consider it. “We’ll have to have a really solid plan together if I’m going to do that. And I already used the long bath excuse to get out of being locked up, so I’m out of ideas there.”

“And he doesn’t trust me enough yet to leave my room unlocked,” I said. “Emilia, I really want to do this tonight.”

Emilia pressed her lips together and thought for several seconds. “What if I stay at the top of the stairs and make sure Gene doesn’t wake up?”

I smiled. “There she is. There’s brave Emilia.”

CHAPTER 11

Jay

This is progress, I thought, pacing around my apartment. I was becoming more and more confident that Lukas was the guy, but I still wanted to track down Danny to rule him out as a suspect. He was more difficult to find, but after a lot of social media stalking and Google searching, I learned he worked at a pizza restaurant a couple of hours away from the city. That job didn't seem to fit what I knew of his personality, and I wondered what had gone wrong to land him there.

Grabbing my keys and my coat, I hurried out the door with the directions to the restaurant already pulled up on my phone. On the drive there, I thought about Lukas and what he might have done to Mia. I imagined him showing up at her apartment, begging her to take him back. She must have refused, making him angry. He probably forced his way into her apartment and dragged her out the window to the fire escape. From there, he probably couldn't have taken her straight back to his apartment unless it was already after dark. His apartment was in a relatively busy area during daytime hours. At night, however, he probably could have gotten her inside just as easily as he would have with the girl from the bar if I hadn't been there to stop it. He probably drugged her to get her inside without making too much noise. I hated the thought of Mia helplessly wrestling against ropes that tied her to a chair in his apartment. The image in my mind fueled my anger toward Lukas.

A siren blared behind me, and I looked in my mirror to see blue lights flashing. I hit the steering wheel. I was barely out of the city, and now I was being delayed. I pulled over and waited impatiently as the police officer approached my window.

"Sir, are you aware of how fast you were going?" he asked.

"No, sir. I've had a rough couple of weeks," I replied. "The woman I love got abducted, and there doesn't seem to be any progress being made in the investigation of her disappearance."

"And that justifies going twenty miles per hour over the speed limit?"

I had no idea I was going that fast. "No, sir. I'll pay closer attention."

"What's your lady's name?" he asked.

"Mia Bailey," I replied.

He scribbled something on his notepad. “Let me have your license. I’ll be right back.”

I handed it over, and he went back to his car. I leaned my head back on the headrest and sighed. This cop was wasting my time. I was *tired* of cops wasting my time. The detective wasted my time by asking me questions that aren’t helping anything. She wasted my time again when she called me about Mia’s mom and nagged me for making a post to try to help Mia. Now this officer was wasting my time by delaying me from ruling out another suspect. This was more proof toward my suspicion that the authorities couldn’t find Mia because they didn’t care about her. I was working day and night to find her because I loved her. The police had no attachment to her. They probably didn’t care if they found her alive or dead.

The officer approached my window again. “I’m writing you a ticket. But I want you to know I talked to the detective on Miss Bailey’s case. She’s working hard to find her.”

I scoffed.

“What, you don’t think she is?” he asked.

“I find it hard to believe. She hasn’t given me any updates about the investigation, and she keeps acting like it’s not a priority.”

The officer scratched his chin. “Well, I assure you, she’s working hard to find Miss Bailey.”

“You already said that. But I haven’t seen any proof of it.”

He kept scribbling, then handed me the slip of paper and had me sign something. “You should try to get some rest, Mr. Foster. Losing your mind and speeding down highways isn’t going to help Miss Bailey come home.”

“Yes sir,” I responded, hoping he’d let me go quickly.

He nodded. “Be careful out there. Snowstorm is coming in tonight.”

I gave him a nod, then rolled my eyes as he walked away. I grew up in Illinois. My first time learning to drive was right after a blizzard when I was fifteen. I knew how to drive in the snow.

An hour and a half later, I pulled into the parking lot of the pizza restaurant. Sure enough, Danny was inside working the register.

“Welcome in, man,” he said dryly as I entered. The place was empty, so I was the only customer. I saw that as a good thing, since I would probably be asking Danny some pretty uncomfortable questions. “What can I get ya?”

“I’ll just have a bottled water. I’m actually here to ask you something. You’re Danny, right?”

“You wanted to ask me if I’m Danny?” he asked. He pointed at his nametag. A green smiley face sticker was next to his name.

“I know your ex-girlfriend Mia. I wanted to know if you’d heard from her recently,” I said.

He shrugged. “Man, I haven’t seen Mia in years. Why you askin’ me?”

“I’m worried that she’s in trouble,” I said. “She’s been missing for a few weeks now.”

“Man, I wish I could help. Hope she’s alright.”

I didn’t think I had anything to worry about with this guy. He didn’t look like he cared to put effort into brushing his hair, much less into abducting a woman.

I paid for my water and left the restaurant feeling more confident about Lukas as the guy. I needed a good plan. I could try to catch him in something shady again, and then I could threaten him with telling the cops if he didn’t let Mia go. Or I could wait until he was gone to work and go up to his apartment door to see if I heard Mia inside. If I heard her, surely that’d be a good enough reason to kick his door down without getting arrested for it. Saving Mia would have to cancel out breaking and entering charges.

I sat on the edge of the driver’s seat of my car, leaning close to the steering wheel. Driving too fast was a habit of mine when I was stressed out. Even though I had already been pulled over once today, I couldn’t help myself. I sped down the interstate back toward Chicago, where I would hopefully find and rescue Mia.

Despite my speeding, the drive felt like it took ages. The entire time I thought about how Mia might react when I saved her from Lukas. All I wanted was to bring her back to safety and tell her how much I still loved her. The thought of winning her back was the only thing that kept me going in this wild search for her. This whole investigation wouldn’t even be happening if I didn’t want her back so badly. I wondered if the police would even know she was missing if I hadn’t gone to her apartment with a coffee to tell her I still loved her. It wasn’t likely that anyone else would have cared that she was missing. Her mom may have worried, but she probably would have assumed Mia was just busy. It would have been quite a while before Mrs. Bailey decided something was wrong and that she needed to be worried.

I thought again of what Detective Lawrence said about my posts upsetting Mrs. Bailey. Every time I thought of it, I fumed. Why would Mrs. Bailey have any reason to be upset that someone was actually working to bring her daughter back to safety? I decided that if I turned out to be wrong about Lukas, I'd look more into Mrs. Bailey. Perhaps she had something to do with this. Why else would she be mad that I was trying to find Mia?

My eyes widened at the thought. Mia could have been kidnapped by someone in her own family. Maybe her mom was involved, and that seemed most likely from where I stood, but I hadn't even thought to look into her extended family members. She never mentioned them. I knew her dad died, but she didn't talk about him much either.

I wondered if her mom was strong enough to physically overpower Mia. And what reason might Mrs. Bailey have for kidnapping Mia? Maybe she was afraid of losing Mia. Or angry that Mia had moved to the city, too far away for her mom to make frequent visits. Maybe she had a psychotic break or something and took it out on Mia. She was really playing it up with the police, though. From what I could tell, she had them wrapped around her finger. They would never suspect her. It was quite genius, honestly. I was almost impressed.

At this point, I was still almost positive Lukas did it, but now I had a solid back up plan if he didn't.

Approaching Lukas's building, I put my hood up and took a deep breath. *I'm coming for you, Mia.* I hurried into the building as someone else was leaving, looking around for any sign of Lukas. I suddenly realized I didn't know which apartment was his. I was getting ahead of myself. *Okay, no big deal. I'll just walk through the whole building and see if anything looks suspicious. If not, I'll wait for Lukas to get home from work. That should be pretty soon anyway.*

The stairs of the apartment building creaked loudly. There was no way I could avoid being heard in here if I had to follow Lukas up the stairs. Maybe if I kept my head down and played it cool, he wouldn't realize it was me. I walked casually through the hallway of the second floor of the building, listening closely for anything unusual.

The sound of laughter came from one apartment. One door I walked past was quaking with the rhythmic vibrations of a loud electronic dance song. The distant sound of a dramatic lovers' quarrel blared from a television in another room. My nose wrinkled at the smell of someone's dinner burning. Continuing to the next floor, I thought I heard a woman shout. I froze

and held my breath, listening for the voice to speak again. I crept down the hall as silently as I could.

“Leave me alone!” the woman shouted again. My heart skipped. It sounded like Mia.

I guessed which door the woman was behind, and I knocked.

The door swung open quickly and a red-haired woman with wild eyes met me there. She looked disappointed. “You’re not the sitter,” she said.

“Uh, no, sorry. I think I have the wrong apartment,” I replied.

She started to close the door.

“Oh, wait, excuse me,” I interrupted, “Have you seen this woman around here?” I showed her the photo of Mia that I posted on Facebook.

She squinted, popping a bubble in her chewing gum with her back teeth. “Can’t say. She looks like every other girl around here.”

I tried not to be offended on Mia’s behalf. “Okay, well, thanks anyway.”

As the woman closed the door, I heard someone approaching me in the hall.

“What are you doing back here?” It was Lukas.

I sighed. My cover was blown.

“I told you not to come back here again. Am I gonna have to get a restraining order?”

“Look, man, I just want to know if Mia is here.”

“I already told you she’s not. So leave. Now.” He moved closer to me and stuck out his chin.

“Prove to me that Mia isn’t in your place, and you’ll never see me again.”

He stiffened. “Prove it to you? I don’t owe you anything. Just get out of here.”

“You’re making yourself sound more guilty, you know.”

“Maybe Mia doesn’t want you to find her. Did you ever think about that?”

I blinked, startled.

“Maybe she ran off because she wasn’t into you anymore. She stopped going to all her usual places because she knew you’d look for her there. She’s covering her tracks to keep you from bothering to hunt her down. She’s disappeared pretty well, right?” His face was turning red.

“Her apartment was broken into. Things were broken. There was blood.”

“Probably a setup,” Lukas said, matter-of-fact. “I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just saying, she’s done it before.”

“Disappeared? Left a crime scene behind?”

“Not the crime scene part, but she’s disappeared before, yeah.”

“Would you explain, please?” I asked, trying to sound sympathetic. He seemed like he was actually telling the truth.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Back in college, right after she dumped me, I was trying to talk to her about it. I wanted closure, or at least a reason why she ended things, even if it was a stupid reason. She ignored all my calls, stopped going to her favorite study spot, and moved somewhere off campus. I couldn’t find her anywhere, and it was because she didn’t want me to find her. That’s what’s going on with you, right? You wanted to talk to her, win her back, something like that. And she’s disappeared. I’m telling you, you’re wasting your time searching.”

“But she hasn’t even contacted her mom. She’s stopped going to her job, a job she really loves. Why would she want to disappear from everyone and everything that matters to her?” I asked.

“She always used to talk about running away and starting over. She would dream about moving somewhere and building a whole new life from scratch. When we were still dating, she used to say maybe we would run away like that together. Change our names, get new haircuts, move to another country. I really wouldn’t be surprised if she decided to do it alone. That’s just the kind of girl Mia has always been.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s it. I don’t think she’d stage a whole fake crime scene and disappear out of nowhere. I especially don’t believe that she’d want to cut contact with her mom.”

“Seriously? You think she and her mom were close? How many times did Mia tell you a happy story involving her mom.”

I shrugged. “She didn’t really tell me any stories about her mom.”

“She used to complain about her mom to me all the time. If there’s anyone I think she’d want to get away from, it’s that overbearing mom of hers.” He shrugged. “I know we got off on the wrong foot, man. But I feel for you. I know what it’s like to be left in the wake of Mia’s disappearance.” He patted my shoulder. “If you need to talk about it...” he paused, and for a moment I thought he was about to offer friendship, “get a therapist.” He pressed his lips together,

nodded once, then walked away, leaving me standing dumbstruck in the hallway of the smelly apartment building.

CHAPTER 12

Mia

Emilia and I crept down the hall as quietly as we could. I held my breath as we passed Gene's door and hurried to the top of the stairs. Emilia squeezed my hand, and I gave her a reassuring nod. I tiptoed down the stairs, keeping my hands on the walls. It was so dark, I wasn't sure I'd be able to find the door. I reached the bottom of the stairs and ran my hand along the wall, feeling my way through the hallway. My hand hit the doorframe, and I stopped. I moved both hands across the door, and could feel the locks.

I pressed my ear to the door, and tried to steady my breath. I heard a small clinking sound on the other side of the door. Reaching up toward one of the locks, I slid it over. I knew I wouldn't be able to open all the locks without a key, but I thought maybe I could memorize where they were in case we ever got a hold of the keys and snuck back down here in the dark. There was a chain lock just below the sliding lock, and I undid it as well.

"Can't break me."

I jumped back from the door and pressed myself against the opposite wall. The words had been faint and muffled, and I wasn't even completely sure I heard them. My sleep-deprived, adrenaline-influenced mind was probably playing tricks on me. I shook my head and moved back toward the door, feeling again for any more locks I could try.

"You can't break me."

The words were raspy and louder now. It was a woman.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"RUTH!" the woman screamed.

I bolted up the stairs. I grabbed Emilia, and we ran as quietly as possible back to our bedrooms. The woman's raspy wails continued to echo through the hallway. Emilia dropped the bedroom keys outside of Gene's room before she turned down the hall into her own room. I shut the door of Olive's room and hoped it appeared to be locked. I dove under the covers and tried to pretend to be asleep. I could hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears, and my hands were trembling. I clutched my mouth with one hand and tried not to breathe too loudly.

Even though this room was pretty far from the top of the stairs, I could still hear faint cries of the woman in the basement. I had no doubt Gene heard her too. His room was closer to the stairs.

Who is he keeping down there?! I thought. My mind swirled with panic and confusion.

Several minutes passed, and I heard footsteps approaching my door. I slowed my breathing and pretended to be asleep. The lock clicked, and I heard the door creak open. I stayed completely still. A minute or so later, the door closed again, and I heard the lock click and thud. I stayed frozen in place, afraid to move. I hoped Emilia was okay.

After a few minutes, I got up and walked toward the door, trying to hear Gene or Emilia or the woman from the basement. I heard nothing. I hoped Gene had gone back to bed and that Emilia was safe in her room. I paced back and forth across the room, trying to calm myself down. I didn't want to think about all the possibilities of what Gene would do to us when he found out what we did. I didn't want to think about the woman in the locked room. I didn't want to think about poor Emilia and how terrified she must be. She would probably never again want to take a risk toward planning an escape.

I kept pacing and taking deep breaths, trying to clear my mind while also staying alert to any sounds that might come from Emilia's room. I was still worried Gene would try to punish her if he found out she took his keys. Since she dropped them outside his room, maybe he would think he dropped them himself or knocked them off their hook. *What will he think about the screams of the woman downstairs? Will he think they were random, or will he know she screamed because I was down there? Who is the woman? Why did she scream Ruth's name?*

I sat on the floor and put my head in my hands. *She screamed "Ruth." Maybe she thought I was Ruth? That would mean she knows Ruth. Olive and Ruth's mother left the family a few years ago... What if Gene kidnapped her and is keeping her down there? He definitely has reason to be angry with her for leaving. Maybe he even blames their daughters' deaths on her. What if he's keeping her down there to torture her? Punishing her for leaving the family? Keeping her from ever leaving him again? Maybe she thought I sounded like Ruth, and that's why she screamed her name.*

My mind was reeling. Every time I started to slow down my thoughts, another idea or fear would invade and speed my spiraling mind back up again. I laid down flat on the floor. I remembered my dad taught me special breathing exercises when I was little. I used to get

stressed a lot. School work or friends would overwhelm me easily, but he would always calm me down. We would lie on the floor together with our shoulders touching, and he would say, “Focus on your breathing. Deep breaths in and out. Feel your toes relax. Then your legs.”

I could almost hear his voice now.

“Let your tummy and your back relax.”

Tears streamed down the sides of my face and into my ears.

“Feel your fingers and arms relax.”

I miss you, Dad.

“Your shoulders hold a lot of stress. Let that tension go. Relax your shoulders. Keep breathing.”

My breathing was tight with emotion, but gradually slowing as I imagined my dad’s comforting words.

“Let your neck and face relax. Loosen your jaw. Feel the stress being pulled out of the top of your head, leaving you feeling light. You can float away on a cloud, you’re so relaxed and weightless.”

I used to giggle as he rolled over and grabbed me, throwing me up in the air.

“See, Mia? You’re floating! Nothing can hold you down!”

The familiar smell of toast, eggs, and coffee filled the kitchen. I had lost count of exactly how many breakfasts Emilia and I had made for Gene, but it had definitely been more than a week since we discovered the woman downstairs. Gene never said anything about it. He’d gotten up the next morning and acted like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. I was relieved that he didn’t seem to suspect anything, but I was also desperate to find out more about her.

Emilia and I hadn’t gotten any time alone since that night, which frustrated me. Emilia avoided eye contact with me, and continued being the dutiful daughter Gene wanted. The events of that night had scared her into silence. Gene kept us both busy with work around the house. I didn’t mind that too much. I saw it as an opportunity to better learn my way around the mansion,

memorizing every hallway and every room, taking note of which doors stayed locked and which were always open. I mostly worked on cleaning the upper two floors of the house, while Emilia cleaned the main floor. I wondered if Gene had Emilia clean the basement as well. Part of me hoped so, because maybe she could learn more about the woman. The other part of me knew she would be terrified out of her mind to go back down there after what happened. She probably wouldn't be able to hide that fear from Gene, and he would quickly piece together that she was not only aware of his secret, but was also involved in the wild screams of the woman that night.

I'd been looking for any excuse to ask Gene for time alone with Emilia. He always assigned us jobs for the day before I got the chance to ask. This particular morning, Gene was running late to breakfast. Emilia and I couldn't talk now, because Gene could walk in at any moment, but I knew I'd have the chance to talk to him when he came in.

Sure enough, he walked into the kitchen and grabbed his coffee. "Sorry I'm later than usual this morning, girls. I had something to take care of."

"Could Emilia and I spend some time together today?" I asked quickly, before he could spout off the day's to-do list.

He pursed his lips in thought for a few moments. "I do have some work to do outside today. We got snow last night, and I was going to shovel the driveway."

I couldn't imagine him doing all that by himself. From what I remembered of him bringing me here, the driveway was really long. I wondered if he would hire someone to assist him. Someone we could signal to for help.

"I suppose the two of you could stay in the house together, but if you see anything that needs cleaning, I expect you'll do it while you're not busy."

I nodded. Emilia stayed quiet and still, stirring her coffee.

We finished breakfast, and Gene got bundled up to go work outside. He didn't lock us in any particular room, leaving us free to wander around the house and look for things that needed to be done. As soon as he was outside with the door locked behind him, I turned to Emilia.

"We need to talk," I whispered.

"I don't know if I can, Mia. I've hardly slept since that night."

"I know it was scary, but we have to do something. He's keeping a woman downstairs. I think it could be his ex-wife."

Emilia shook her head. "It isn't. He hates her and wants nothing to do with her."

“What if he has her down there so he can torture her?”

She shook her head again. “I doubt it, Mia. I don’t know who it is down there, but I don’t think it’s her.”

“We should go back down there while he’s outside,” I suggested. “There’s no way he could hear her from out there. We could try to keep her calm and ask her to tell us who she is.”

“Mia, are you crazy? After what happened last time, you still want to go back down there?”

“What if we can help her? What if we can get her out and escape out the back while Gene is busy outside?”

“He would notice, Mia. And the back doors are locked just as tightly as the front ones. He took his house keys outside with him. Even if we could get the woman out of the room downstairs, we have no way out.”

“Maybe his keys for the room downstairs are somewhere in his room. Maybe he doesn’t keep them on the same ring with the outside keys. Or maybe he has spares for the house doors on the key ring he has the basement key on! We can’t know unless we look. If we get her out, she might know a better way for us to escape. She’s probably been here longer than either of us, Emilia.” I knew it was all a stretch, but I was desperate for any way to get out of there.

“I don’t feel good about this. I feel sick when I even think about it.” She started to walk away toward the kitchen.

“Where are you going?”

“To do the dishes from breakfast.”

“Emilia, we don’t know when another opportunity like this could present itself. Gene is outside, and we’re not locked in the parlor.”

She kept walking. I followed.

“Come on, Emilia. I know you want to get out of here just as much, if not more than I do.”

“Mia, you have no idea,” she snapped. She spun around, and I saw pain in her eyes. “You have no idea what this place has done to me. You don’t know what I’ve been through over these last several months. You hear that? *Months*, Mia. I haven’t spoken to anyone outside this house unless it was a scripted phone call with Gene standing inches from my face. You don’t know how badly I want to get out of here, but *we can’t*. It’s impossible. The harder we try, the more danger

we're putting ourselves in."

"But if we don't try, then we're stuck here forever! I know that's not what you want."

"Of course it isn't! But at least for now, I would rather be stuck here alive than dead." As soon as she said the words, she started to crumble. "Lonna tried to get out of here, and she's dead!" She began to sob.

"Emilia," I reached for her.

"No," she said, pushing me away and sniffing back her sobs. "I want to be alone. Please let me do the dishes by myself."

My heart ached. I wanted so badly to help her. "Okay. Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

She nodded, and continued walking to the kitchen. I sighed as she walked away wiping her tears and stifling more sobs. I bit my lip. I knew she would hate me for this, but I needed to find out who the woman downstairs was.

I made my way to Gene's room. The door was open, and I looked around. The keys to the bedrooms were hung on the hook where Emilia said they would be. I searched the drawers, careful to put everything back exactly where I found it, but I didn't find any keys. I found his safe in his closet. Like Emilia said, there was a keypad on the front. I wondered what the code could be. I didn't want to risk making random guesses. I didn't know if the safe was set up to notify Gene when too many incorrect guesses were made. I pressed my lips together. I needed to go downstairs. I wouldn't be able to let the woman out, but maybe I could get her to talk to me.

I turned on the light and slowly made my way down the stairs. I shivered as I remembered the last few times I'd been down here. The healing wound in my shoulder itched, reminding me again of the horrors of Gene's operation room. The smell of the basement had become familiar, but it didn't make it any less eerie.

I gently tapped on the door with all the locks. "Hello," I said quietly.

Silence.

"Hello, are you there?" I asked, a little louder this time.

A quiet groan.

"Can you hear me?"

"Ruth?" The voice was quiet and weak.

My breath hitched. "No, I'm not Ruth. I'm Mia. Who are you?"

“Olive...” She coughed a few times. She seemed groggy, and I wondered if I’d woken her up.

I paused. “No, I’m not Olive either. Like I said, I’m Mia.”

Silence.

“How long have you been here?”

“Forever.”

“I want to help you get out.”

More silence.

“Are you Ruth and Olive’s mom?” I asked.

Shuffling noises came from the other side of the door, and I thought I heard the sound of chains dragging the ground.

“Ruth. I want Ruth.”

“Ruth... Ruth died.”

“I know. I miss Ruth.”

“What about Olive?” I asked.

She coughed again. She sounded like she hadn’t had anything to drink in a long time.

Finally, she answered. “I *am* Olive.”

CHAPTER 13

Jay

With Lukas's surprising news about Mia's previous disappearance, I thought it best to lay low and process this information for a while. I had removed Lukas and Danny from my vision board. Tossing their photos in the trash was satisfying. Lukas was clearly not a great guy, and Danny was just strange. A photo of Mia's mom was now in their place on the wall. Surely if Mia had run away on purpose, there would have been some kind of paper trail left behind. Plane tickets, credit card charges... something. I still wasn't completely convinced that Mia had run away, so I circled back to my family theory. Mrs. Bailey, formerly Angela Richards, was my new prime suspect.

Mrs. Bailey definitely had a motive. She lost her husband, then her daughter moved to the big city, too far away to visit regularly. Grief and loneliness were enough to drive anyone to do something crazy, even if it meant a mother had to physically force her own daughter to live with her. The way I saw it, Mrs. Bailey had the clearest motive of any of the other suspects I had thought of. I could understand better than anyone why Lukas or Danny would want Mia back, but I could never see one of them actually succeeding in forcing her to comply with his wishes after hurting her.

After spending some time looking through Mrs. Bailey's social media, I decided to look into some of her family members. I vaguely remembered Mia mentioning something about being estranged from her mom's side of the family, and I wanted to rule out anyone who might have some reason to want to hurt Mia based on hard feelings from their family's complicated past.

From what I was able to find online, it looked like Mrs. Bailey had two siblings, a brother and a sister. Her sister, Sue Ellen Hill, seemed like a sweet woman. She had a picture perfect family. Her husband was tall and handsome, and her two daughters, Emilia and Lonna, were never pictured without a genuine smile. Sue Ellen's most recent posts featured pictures of her daughters as little girls, captioned with sweet sentiments about how proud her daughters have made her over the years. As I dug a little further, I learned that Emilia and Lonna were living with and working for Dr. Gene Richards, Sue Ellen's and Mrs. Bailey's brother.

Gene didn't have any social media profiles, but I was able to tell from Sue Ellen's excessively detailed posts that Gene was a retired surgeon who lost his daughters in an accident involving a drunk driver. Sue Ellen had shared several posts about speaking out against drunk driving. It was obvious that she and Gene were close, and she supported him through the tragedy.

I found it odd that Emilia's and Lonna's previously active social media profiles had not been in use since around the time they went to work for Gene. Maybe they just didn't have great internet there. Sue Ellen mentioned in her post that Gene lived in rural Illinois, so that would explain it. Still, a part of me wondered if Gene forbade them from accessing social media while they were working for him.

Putting that thought aside, I refocused on Mrs. Bailey. *Should I call her?* I wondered. That might catch her off guard. It could allow me to hear Mia in the background or something. I paused, considering my options. There were no more notifications on the post I had created about Mia, so I decided calling Mrs. Bailey was probably my only next option. She was a realtor, so I got her number from her business card, which was displayed on her social media profiles.

"Hello?" she answered quickly after the first ring.

"Hi, Mrs. Bailey, this is Jay Foster."

"Jay," she said. "Is Mia there?"

I blinked. "No. But I have been trying to find her. I was hoping you knew something more."

"I don't. And I wish you would leave all of this to the police. Your meddling could get in their way."

"Mrs. Bailey, I only want to help. I love Mia. I want to see her safe as much as you do. The police don't care about Mia the way we do. If we look on our own, we're more likely to find her. We can dedicate more time to saving her. Is there any information you can give me that could help me in looking for her?"

Mrs. Bailey paused. I could hear her nervous breathing through the phone. "No, Jay. I appreciate your care for my daughter, but again, I need to ask you to stop looking. It's only going to harm the detective's investigation."

She must have been hiding something. She didn't want me involved because she was worried that I was on to her.

“Listen, Mrs. Bailey, I hear your concerns, but I just can’t give up on Mia. I promised myself the day I found her apartment in a mess that I would be the one to save her.”

“Did you ever think that maybe that’s not your job?” Mrs. Bailey asked.

How could she say something like that? She had no idea all the work I’d put in. She didn’t know how much I loved Mia. I knew Mia better than anyone else in the world. I fumed with anger.

“I love Mia. No one else could dedicate this much time to looking for her. No one else could have made as much progress as I have in trying to find her.” I took a breath, and anger filled my lungs. “How could you try to stop someone from finding your daughter? Don’t you want her to be found? Or are you involved somehow in her disappearance?”

A tense silence rang out for several moments. “Jay Foster, I don’t know who you are, or if my daughter even knows you. I want you to stay away from my daughter. Stop looking for her. Never contact Mia or me ever again.” She hung up.

Her words only confirmed my suspicions. She had to be involved in Mia’s disappearance. *I bet Mia is there right now, tied up near Mrs. Bailey, crying and wishing I would save her. The last thing Mia would want right now is for me to listen to her mom.*

I grabbed my keys and checked that business card again for an address. Nothing was going to stop me from finding Mia.

CHAPTER 14

Mia

Olive. *The woman in the basement is Olive?*

“Olive, I thought you were dead.”

“No. Ruth died in an accident.” Her voice was weak and shaky.

“Were you in the accident too?” I asked

“Yes.” She sounded so young as she said the word. Like a little girl who was afraid that telling the truth would lead to something awful.

“Are you hurt, Olive? Has your dad been hurting you?”

“Sometimes.”

My heart ached, and I pressed both my hands against the door, wishing I could embrace Olive and make her feel safe.

“How long have you been here?”

“Since after the accident.”

“How did Gene make everyone think you were dead?”

“He told me he bribed the coroner. Closed caskets at the ceremony. One was Ruth...” she hesitated.

“Was there someone else in the other casket?”

Silence.

“Olive?”

“My mom.” She began to sob quietly and weakly. She sounded so fragile, like just one sob could shatter her chest. “He k- h-he killed her.” Her cries grew louder.

My heart broke, but I had to quiet her. I didn’t want Gene to come inside and hear her. “Shh, Olive. I’m so sorry. I want to get you out. Do you know the code to Gene’s safe?”

She sniffled, and sounded like she was pulling herself together. She must have been stronger than I thought. “It might be Ruth’s birthday.” She told me the numbers, and I tried to burn them into my mind.

“I’ll try that. Thank you, Olive.”

“Please don’t go yet.”

I couldn’t imagine how lonely Olive was down here. “I have to go try the code to get the key while Gene is still outside. If he catches me down here, I’ll never be able to get you out.”

“Okay,” she said after a few moments. “Please be careful.”

I smiled a little at her gentleness. “I will.” I tried to sound reassuring.

I hurried up the stairs and peeked around the corner before silently running to Gene’s room. I wanted to tell Emilia, but I knew she would just get more scared after hearing that Gene killed his ex-wife.

I went into Gene’s room and quickly tried the code Olive told me.

My breath hitched as the door clicked open.

“It worked.” I whispered. *How did that work?! This is actually happening.*

I grabbed the keys from the safe. Four keys hung from the thick silver ring. At least one of these had to work downstairs, and surely one of the others could get us outside. I hurried to the kitchen, knowing that since I had the keys, I had no choice but to bring Emilia in on the plan. She had to know so we could all escape together.

I pushed open the kitchen door and saw Emilia drying dishes. “Emilia!”

She turned around. Her face was red, puffy, and streaked with tears.

I held up the keys. “Stop crying. It’s time to leave.”

Her mouth dropped open, and she almost dropped the pan she was drying. She set it carefully on the counter before running to me. “*How?*” she asked.

“I’ll explain later, we need to hurry.”

I grabbed her hand and ran back toward the stairs. Just as we reached the top of the stairs, I heard the front door close. Emilia and I both froze. I shoved the keys in my pocket and pulled Emilia back toward the kitchen. I pretended to be laughing at a joke she told as we picked up where she left off on drying the dishes.

“Sounds like you two are enjoying yourselves,” Gene said. “I just came in for a quick glass of water.”

“Here, let me get that for you!” I said. “We have been having a nice time. It’s so nice to spend time with my sister.” I smiled at Emilia, who was flushed and pretending to be focused on drying a coffee mug. I filled a glass with water and handed it to Gene, trying to keep my demeanor calm and bright.

“Thank you, Olive.” He took a sip. “I’m glad you two are having such a nice time. I’ll go back outside in a minute. I wouldn’t want to barge in on your girl talk.” He gave me a wink, sending chills of disease down my spine.

How could a man that had murdered at least two women, bribed a coroner, and was holding his own daughter captive in his basement manage to appear so kind and fatherly? His smile and the little gleam in his eye were so genuine. The way his brow furrowed with concern when either Emilia or I showed any sign of discomfort or pain reminded me of a sweet grandfather’s fondness for his child’s little ones. Despite what I had been through during my time under his control, something in me still hoped he could get help. When he got caught, as I was certain he would, I hoped he could get therapy and begin to heal from the trauma and heartache he had experienced. Since I lost my dad, I understood what it felt like to lose someone. The trauma and grief could be overwhelming. It was the trauma of losing Ruth, I was certain, that broke him. I wondered if he could ever be restored to the man he was before Ruth’s death.

Emilia and I continued drying dishes in silence while Gene sipped his water. Emilia’s hands were shaking, and I hoped Gene wouldn’t notice. I also prayed he wouldn’t notice the bulge of the keys in my pocket.

To my great relief, Gene finished his water and went back outside without noticing anything that could have ruined the plan. As soon as we heard the distant sound of the front door locking, Emilia and I set down the dishes we were drying and gave each other a knowing look.

“We have to do this now,” I said.

“I’m scared. What if he catches us?”

“I’m not going to lie to you. He might. But we have to try. This might be the only opportunity we get for a really long time. And we’re so close. Let’s just try.”

Emilia nodded.

In the basement, I pulled the keys out of my pocket and tried one at a time.

“Mia?” Olive called out from the other side of the door.

“Yes, it’s me, Olive. I’m trying to get you out.”

Emilia gasped when I said Olive’s name.

I heard Olive move closer to the door. “I’m chained to the wall.”

“Hopefully we have the key for that.” I continued trying all the keys on the different locks. It was working.

“There isn’t a key for it. Dad got rid of it a long time ago.”

My heart sank.

“Hang on,” Emilia said. “Keep unlocking the door. I’ll be right back.”

Emilia hurried down the hall into the room where Gene kept his medical supplies. I finally got all the locks undone and flung the door open. The moment I did, the smell of stale bread and rusted metal rushed out of the room. Trying not to gag, I took a step in.

Olive was chained to the wall by a cuff on her ankle, like she said. Her clothes were worn and dirty. Her hair was matted against her head, and oily strands stuck to her neck and shoulders. She was even more pale than Emilia was the day Gene first brought me here. She looked like a ghost. Her eyes were dark, and her lips were cracked.

“You won’t be able to get me unchained,” she said. Her eyes were wide with anticipation. This was the first time she had seen anyone other than Gene in months. She wrung her tiny hands together nervously. She was bouncing up and down, almost jumping, making the chains at her feet clink against the concrete floor. I almost smiled at the sight of this physically broken woman full of so much hope and excitement.

Emilia came into the room with a few sharp tools from Gene’s collection.

“How did you get those?” I asked. “Doesn’t he keep them locked up?”

“I broke the door of the cabinet,” she said.

My eyes widened. “I’m impressed.”

She handed me a scalpel, and we found the weakest point of the chain. We started grinding the scalpel, along with some other sharp medical tools I couldn’t identify, against the chain, trying to cut it apart. The sound was excruciating, but we could tell it was working, but not as well as intended. The chain was old and thin enough that the strong, shiny tools chipped away at it slowly. The chain was disgusting, and not only because the room was full of filth. It looked like Gene hadn’t tried very hard to find a strong chain, but perhaps just found an old one in his garage.

“This is taking too long,” Emilia said. “We need to try something else.”

“What do you suggest?” I asked.

“We need something to pound it with. Like a hammer. That would break it.”

I turned to Olive. “We’ll be right back. We have to find something better.”

She nodded and clasped her hands together again.

Emilia and I hurried back to Gene's makeshift operating room and started searching.

"Mia," Emilia said in a serious tone.

I turned to see her looking into a glass cabinet that was hidden behind the cabinet door she'd broken. Inside the glass cabinet was an old bone saw.

"Well, that's terrifying. I don't even want to think about if he's used that before," I said, shivering.

"It'll work though. We need to get it out. Help me break the door," Emilia said. We grabbed the heaviest thing we could find, a step stool, and held it together. We counted to three, then swung the bottom of it as hard as we could against the glass. It cracked, and we tried again. It shattered, and we hurried to get the bone saw out.

Moments later, we were wincing at the sound of the saw grinding against the chain. We had to cut through both sides of the weakest chain link to free Olive. Olive was clinging against the wall, her head hunched down to her chest and her eyes squeezed shut. Finally, we heard the snap and clink that signaled the end of the excruciating shrieks of metal on metal. The chain had broken. Olive slowly raised her head, eyes wide, seeming afraid to look. She was finally free.

"We have to hurry." I thought it best to bring the saw in case we needed a weapon of defense. I held it carefully against my chest with one hand, and took Olive's hand with the other. My whole body pulsing with adrenaline, I swiftly led Olive and Emilia up the stairs.

"Where do we go now?" Emilia asked when we reached the top, her voice panicked.

"Kitchen. Back door." I kept my voice low, praying to God that Gene hadn't come back inside while we were downstairs.

Clinging to one another, we rushed down the hall to the kitchen and slid to a halt in front of the door. I handed Emilia the bone saw and dug into my pocket for the keys. I fumbled to try each one, my hands shaking so violently I almost dropped them. After a few tries, one of the keys worked. The door swung open. Without hesitation, the three of us bolted. We ran so fast, we couldn't hold onto each other anymore. We gulped in the freezing air, feet of snow only slowing us down a little as it numbed our bare feet. I could hear the rattle of the remainder of Olive's chain as she ran along behind me. I glanced back, surprised at how quick she was despite her obvious weakness. I caught a glimpse of a wildness in her eyes as her tiny frame jolted with every step toward freedom.

My heart suddenly dropped. *The fence*. I'd forgotten all about the iron fence lined with messy barbed wire. The snow was piled high, so we only saw the top half of it. We stopped when we reached the fence, and I hurried into action.

"Olive, come here," I instructed. "Emilia and I are going to boost you over. Be careful around the barbed wire." Emilia set the bone saw on the snow and followed my lead. We cupped our hands and lifted Ruth's freezing cold feet. She was light, and we practically threw her in the air. She managed to fall into the powdery snow on the other side of the fence with little more than a tear in her clothes.

"Your turn," I said, holding my hands out toward Emilia.

She hesitated. "I don't know about this, Mia. You said we wouldn't try to escape without a solid plan." Tears were streaming down her face, and she was clutching her chest with panic.

"Emilia, you can do this. We're almost out. We're almost free. Trust me!" I pleaded with her.

She wiped her face quickly and shook her head. "I can't. I can't."

"Emilia, think about what Lonna would do right now. If she was this close to escaping, would she give up? Or would she leap over the fence and run to freedom?"

She locked eyes with me, and I saw her anxiety begin to melt. Her face became determined, and she nodded once. I mustered all my strength and boosted her up. She climbed over the fence and yelped when the barbed wire cut her thigh. When she landed on the other side, she looked at it more closely. "It's not too deep. I'm fine," she assured me. I handed her the bone saw through the fence. She gripped it tightly, as if ready to defend us.

Now it was time for the difficult part. I gripped the iron bars of the fence. They were icy, and the cold stung my fingers. I reached up as high as I could and pulled myself up. I used my bare feet to grip the bars as tightly as I could between my toes as I climbed.

"You can do it, Mia!" Olive said, jumping up and down on the other side of the fence.

Every muscle in my body clenched as I grabbed for the top of the fence. I avoided the barbed wire as much as possible as I pulled myself up. I swung one leg on top of the fence and winced as the wire scratched my ankle. Repositioning my leg, I got enough balance to pull the rest of my body up. Carefully, I maneuvered myself over the fence and flopped down into the snow.

"We did it!" Olive exclaimed.

We continued to run. We didn't make it far, however, before we reached the hedge that lined the outermost perimeter of Gene's yard.

"Follow me," Olive said, "There's a little gap in the hedge over here."

We followed Olive to a very small gap in the hedge. Emilia used the bone saw to cut away branches and widen the gap as much as she could. One at a time, we squeezed through the small gap. Frozen branches scraped against my skin, but I ignored it.

"Let's go, we can't waste time," I said.

So we kept running.

We reached the treeline and ran even harder, dodging branches and bushes. We couldn't stop. We didn't know where we were going, or if we would even find help in the direction we ran, but we had to keep moving further away from Gene.

CHAPTER 15

Mia

We couldn't keep running forever. Already, we were slowing down. My lungs burned, and the only thing I could hear was my own racing heartbeat. We approached a ditch and slid down the snow without hesitating. It might have been fun under different circumstances.

"Wait," Emilia gasped. "I need... to breathe..."

I slid to a stop at the bottom of the ditch. Emilia hunched over to catch her breath, still clutching the bone saw in her frozen fingers. Olive was still wild-eyed and bouncy. She was shivering and her teeth were chattering, but she still rocked back and forth, ready to keep moving forward.

"Where are we even going?" I asked. "Olive, do you know the area?"

Olive nodded her head. "Yeah, I think I remember. I used to come out here to explore as a kid. If we keep going this way, we'll eventually reach a cluster of houses, I think."

"I just hope we don't freeze first." I mentally kicked myself for not thinking to bundle up before making this big escape.

"Gene will notice we're gone," Emilia said. "He knows this area really well. And he'll see our footprints in the snow."

"We have to keep moving then," I said. I climbed out of the other side of the ditch, and Olive and Emilia followed. I could tell Emilia was still struggling, but I was thankful she was pushing through it.

Several minutes later, my lungs screamed at me for rest. I could barely pull my frostbitten foot out of the snow to plunge it back in for another step. Emilia was practically crawling in the snow. Olive still bounced along, but was shaking violently from the cold. All of us were turning blue, and I started to worry that this was a bad idea. Maybe we should have waited until it was warmer before escaping.

"We're almost to the road, I can tell," Olive said, breathless.

"Emilia, are you okay?" I asked.

"Never better," she said through chattering teeth. "Let's just get somewhere warm."

Every step became more difficult, but we linked arms and helped each other along. When one of us fell, we all fell. When one of us got a burst of energy, the others were pulled forward by their determination. When one of us was ready to break, the other two practically carried her.

Somehow we caught sight of a gas station through the trees. It felt like a miracle; like we were approaching an oasis in the desert. We emerged from the woods and weakly slid across the icy parking lot of the tiny gas station situated on a small town road. We pushed the door open, and a chime sounded.

“What can I do for ya?” The woman’s voice came from the back corner of the little room, where the checkout counter was. We gingerly walked around a row of snack foods, and then she saw us. “Oh, you three little things look just awful! What were you doing out there in the cold wearing practically nothing?” She came around the counter and pulled some hoodies from a rack. “I Heart Illinois.” “Chicago Bulls.” “University of Illinois.” She handed the hoodies to us, and we slid them over our heads gratefully. We huddled close together, trying to warm up.

“Can we use your phone?” I asked.

“Of course, sweetheart. You look like you’ve just escaped a kidnapper or something.” She laughed. She glanced at the bone saw in Emilia’s hand, then froze. “You just escaped a kidnapper, didn’t ya?”

“Something like that,” Emilia said. “Just please hurry, I want to go home.”

Something in the woman’s face changed, and she went from caretaker to protector in an instant. “Let me call the police for you. You three just sit tight. You can sit by the space heater behind the desk. I’ll take care of this.” She asked us our names and where we were from before grabbing her cell phone from the counter and walking to the door. I watched closely as she locked it from the inside while she dialed 9-1-1. Relief flooded me as the three of us slumped as close to the little heater as we could get. I squeezed my eyes shut. We were one step closer to being safe again. Emilia would get to start over. Olive would get to live a new life, free from her father. She might even get to reunite with Levi.

“Olive, have you thought about what you might say when you see Levi again?” I asked, trying to start a positive conversation that would get our minds off the pain in our frostbitten extremities.

She snapped her head around toward me. “How do you know Levi?”

“We saw your pictures with him.”

“So you never actually saw him? He wasn’t at the house or anything, right?”

“No, I never saw him in person.”

She relaxed a little. “I’ve been hoping he just ran away to be happy without me. We were supposed to run away together. With Ruthie. We were all going to leave our crazy dad behind and start a new life in Colorado or somewhere. I never thought I might actually have a chance to see him again.” Her face was finally regaining some color, partially from the warmth of the heater, but mostly from the thought of Levi. This was the first time all day I’d seen Olive look like a living person instead of just a walking corpse. I smiled.

“Good for you, Olive, but personally, I won’t be dating anyone for a long time,” Emilia said. “Trauma and relationships do not mix well.”

I spread out my arms and drew my cousins in close to me, feeling like we were bonded forever. “We could always run away to Colorado together,” I said. “I’d like a fresh start.”

The gas station clerk approached us again. “The police are on their way. There’s a detective on the line who wants to talk to Mia.”

I stood up and took the phone. “Hello?”

“Mia Bailey, we’ve been looking for you. I’m Detective Lawrence, Chicago P.D. I’ll be meeting you very soon. Just hang tight. You’re safe now, okay?”

“Thank you,” I said, though I wasn’t sure what I was thanking her for. She had looked for me, but she hadn’t found me.

“Your mom will be so glad to hear that you’re alright. I’ll bring her with me if you want.”

“Yes please,” I said, bursting into tears. I needed a hug from my mom more than anything else.

“Alright. Well, let me give her a call. We’ll see you soon.”

I hung up with Detective Lawrence and turned back to my cousins. “Turns out someone was looking for me all along,” I said.

“Some good they did,” Emilia scoffed. A playful smirk spread across her face.

“I guess we Bailey-Richards-and-Hill women gotta take care of ourselves,” I said.

“We do pretty well together,” Emilia remarked.

“Maybe we should stick together,” Olive said. “I know we kind of only met as kids before today, but I feel like we know each other well.”

Emilia and I gave each other a knowing look. “Shared trauma,” we said in unison.

CHAPTER 16

Jay

Too much time had passed since I'd made any progress on my investigation into Angela Bailey. I'd driven past her house several times, but never had the guts to approach the house. I assumed she must work from home, because for days, every time I drove by, she was there. This time, however, I was determined to catch the house vacant. I'd drive by several times in one day if I had to. I needed the opportunity to get close enough to the house to call out to Mia if she was inside. And I was almost certain she was.

I drove past the house four times, and the fourth time, Angela Bailey's car was gone. Finally. I parked a few houses away on the street and casually walked to the house. I glanced around to make sure none of the neighbors were watching. I walked around the side of the house and peeked in the windows. I couldn't see anything.

"Mia?" I said it in a normal voice, not wanting to get loud enough to draw the attention of the neighbors, but also trying to be loud enough for Mia to hear me inside.

I listened.

Nothing.

"Mia, are you in there?" I asked again.

I walked around the back of the house and onto the back porch. The blinds on the door and windows were drawn shut, so I couldn't see into the house. I called out again, a little louder this time. Still no response. Frustrated, I raked my hands through my hair. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't going to break into the house. I didn't have enough evidence to warrant something that extreme. If I shouted any louder, I'd definitely draw attention from the neighbors.

Feeling defeated, I walked around the other side of the house, called to Mia a few more times, and waited. Still nothing.

Head down, I trudged back to my car. I slammed the door behind me and hit the steering wheel a few times. Mia needed me, and I was useless. I had done so much to find her, but it wasn't working. I was just as useless as the police.

The coffee shop was buzzing with the afternoon rush, creating the perfect background noise to my depressed mood. The smell of cinnamon wafted in my face, almost taunting me. I'd grown to love Mia's favorite coffee as much as I'd grown to love her favorite coffee shop. Slumped over in my chair, I absentmindedly swirled my pinky finger around in the frothy foam that topped my latte.

"Jay?"

I froze. The familiar voice sounded like a ghost to me. *It couldn't be...*

I slowly lifted my gaze, and met her eyes. *Mia*. I was speechless. My mouth hung open as I took her in. She was thinner. Her hair was different. Shorter. Darker. She looked older. Prettier. I didn't even think that was possible.

"I thought that was you. How have you been?" She was perky today, looking like she hadn't been held captive for a several weeks, but maybe just on vacation.

"I- uh, Mia!" I was still incredulous. "You're here! How- I mean, you were missing, and-"

"Yeah, that. We escaped."

"*We?*"

Two young women walked up behind her. "Emilia and Olive, this is my old friend Jay," Mia introduced me. I tried not to take offense at her use of the term "friend." The two women smiled and nodded to me politely.

"Your cousins, right?" I asked.

Mia nodded. "How did you know that?"

"I looked for you, Mia." I stood up and stepped toward her. "I've barely slept even a moment since I found out you were missing. I was the one who discovered your apartment in a mess and called the police. I've investigated and interviewed your coworkers, ex-boyfriends, and family members. I started a social media page to spread awareness and get more information about your disappearance. I tried so hard to find you."

She blinked. "Why?"

"I still love you, Mia."

Mia's cousins glanced at each other with wide eyes, and slowly backed away.

“You... what?” Mia asked, shaking her head.

“I still love you. I thought if I could find you, you would see how much I still care about you, how good we are together.”

“Jay, that wasn’t your place.”

“I- excuse me, what?”

“It wasn’t your job to look for me. You could have been the one who got in the way of the police looking where they needed to look.”

“I thought you’d be grateful,” I started to sweat, and tugged at my collar.

“Grateful? You basically just stalked everyone I know for a while without ever actually helping anything. And, again, that wasn’t your place. We didn’t date for very long. And anyway, we escaped a couple of weeks ago. We’re just trying to get back to normal. I’m not looking to start anything back up again, Jay.” Her confidence overwhelmed me.

“I did so much for you. How do you not see that?”

“Were you really doing it for me? It seems to me like it was all for you, because you wanted to get back together with me. It was nice of you to try to help, Jay, but I wish you had stayed out of it.”

She was ungrateful. She was selfish. She was hateful. She was not the Mia I remembered. Infuriated, I stepped closer to her. She took a step back.

“I sacrificed so much of myself for you. And it turns out that you weren’t even worth it.”

She smiled a little. “Goodbye, Jay.”

CHAPTER 17

Mia

Olive wrinkled her nose at me. “Cinnamon and coffee just doesn’t seem right to me.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Cinnamon is for cookies.”

I shook my head. “It can be for more than just one thing.”

She shrugged.

“I think you’re both weird. Cinnamon is gross.” Emilia kicked her legs in the air as she sat sideways in my new oversized armchair. We’d gotten new furniture for my apartment to replace the things that were damaged when Gene abducted me. Emilia and Olive had moved in with me. It was a bit of a tight fit, but we didn’t mind. We were becoming better friends by the minute. We were especially bonding over the ins and outs of the court case against Gene. We didn’t particularly enjoy rehashing our experiences, but watching Gene’s reactions was even worse. He was so traumatized by Ruth’s death that he was barely able to function. He was also starting to realize what he’d done to Olive, and the guilt overwhelmed him. He hadn’t even begun to process his murder of Lonna and his ex-wife, nor the way he’d treated Emilia and me. The poor man was broken. I did feel bad for him, but I felt less bad when I was cleaning up Emilia’s vomit because she was finally able to mourn Lonna in a real-world setting and kept reliving her sister’s violent murder. I also felt less bad in the middle of the night when I was calming Olive down after her night terrors.

Olive had opened up about her time as a captive in the basement. Her mantra was, “You can’t break me,” the same words she was repeating the first night we discovered her in the basement. Every time Gene came in the room, she repeated the mantra over and over. Gene’s goal was to break Olive of her individuality, her rebelliousness. He wanted a submissive daughter, and Olive wanted independence. He tortured her for months in that basement, thinking that eventually she would learn to behave. Olive was strong. Incredibly strong. She never once gave in to Gene, even under his most brutal forms of torture.

Since Olive shared that with Emilia and me, the three of us had grown close. We trusted each other with everything, even with reliving the most painful parts of our traumatic experiences.

We cried together, laughed together, mourned together, processed together...

I started to think we might always be together. I didn't want to separate from these two. They'd become like sisters to me. The closest friends I'd ever had.

Olive's phone chimed. My mom had bought her one a few days after we'd escaped. Olive was afraid of going anywhere alone, and my mom thought having a phone might help. So far, it hadn't. Olive picked it up and grinned.

"Is that Levi again?" Emilia asked in a singsong voice.

"Yeah. He said he's going to fly in from Colorado next week to see me." Her cheeks were tinted pink as she typed back.

"Where does he plan to stay?" I asked.

"He's got a friend with an apartment on the other side of the city. He'll stay there," Olive replied.

"Are you nervous about seeing him again?" Emilia asked.

"A little. I mean, he thought I was dead all this time. He probably got over me. Now that he knows I'm alive, he might not feel the same. Or he might just confuse himself because he's glad I'm alive, but he might not really feel the same way he used to."

I nodded. "This is a complicated situation. I think you'll handle it well though. You've got Emilia and me to help you out if things get weird."

Her smile broadened. "You're right. I want you two to be with me when I meet up with him." She paused for a moment. "Emilia, how's therapy going for you?"

Emilia shrugged. "It's fine. Not sure this therapist is right for me. I have trouble trusting her."

"Is that the therapist's fault?" I asked.

Emilia groaned. "Probably not."

"Just stick it out. I think she's cool. She's been helpful to me," Olive said.

"Me too. When's our next group session?" I asked.

"Thursday," Emilia answered.

Therapy was the only thing keeping all three of us from falling apart mentally. We'd been through a lot, especially Olive, and therapy was helping us heal. At first, Emilia didn't want to go. It took some convincing, but we got her on board by promising we'd do sessions all together regularly.

Olive stretched out on the floor and dug her fingers into the shag rug. "I might take a cat nap right here on the floor. This rug is like magic."

"I still can't believe it was on sale," I said.

"When do you start back to work, Mia?" Emilia asked.

"Two weeks," I replied, butterflies swirling around in my stomach.

"How do you feel?"

"Nervous. Things will be different. I've missed a lot. And my coworkers are probably going to pry. I'll be the center of attention." I buried my face in the new throw pillow I was hugging against my chest.

"You can handle it. You're the strongest of the three of us," Olive said.

"Gee, thanks, Olive," Emilia joked.

"You know it's true," Olive replied. She rolled over to face me. "You're good at your job. You love your job. Your boss and coworkers all know you're good at your job. If anyone starts to make you uncomfortable, you know you can ask them not to talk about it."

I nodded. "You're right. Thanks, Olive."

"We can bring you lunch on your break on your first day," Emilia suggested.

"And maybe every day after that too," Olive added.

I smiled. "I'd like that. It would give me a good excuse to skip out on lunch with my prying coworkers."

"Has Jay quit calling you?" Emilia asked.

"I blocked him," I said. "I couldn't keep explaining the same things to him over and over."

"You never mentioned him when we were at Gene's," Emilia said.

"Yeah, I didn't even think about him when we were at Gene's. We didn't date for very long. I wasn't interested in continuing the relationship. He'd mentioned wanting to get back together a few times, and even showed up at my favorite coffee shop to 'run into me.' I just avoided him and eventually forgot about him."

“Why did you break up?” Olive asked.

“He was controlling and possessive. Like I said, we didn’t even date for that long. He got jealous over silly things. Just too many red flags to count. I ended it pretty quickly.”

“Sounds like a smart move,” Emilia said. “Weird that he’s still so obsessed with you.”

“Definitely,” Olive agreed.

I stretched my legs out on the couch and yawned. It was getting late, but we always stayed up late talking. Smiling, I realized I was grateful for the loss of sleep. I wanted to soak up all the time I had with Emilia and Olive. My family. If what happened with Gene taught me anything, it was to value the mundane. I’d never know when everything might change.