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When We Fall: A Young Adult Novel

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ABSTRACT

The creative thesis I have worked on over the past three years is a full-length Young Adult novel entitled *When We Fall*. It follows two former childhood friends, their complicated relationship, and what happens when one of them feels compelled to run away from their problems. The characters in my story, Alison and Connor, are experiencing the same challenges with self-worth and identity that many young adults face. In my work with this powerful platform, I feel compelled to craft stories that will engage readers in conversations about their choices, values, and identities just as my favorite Young Adult authors have done for me.

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and your story gives me hope that someone like me can make a positive difference in the world even though people still throw rocks at things that shine.

Introduction

Reading and Writing Young Adult Fiction

The Young Adult fiction genre is about connecting with readers who are in the most vulnerable time of their lives, guiding them through some of the issues they may be encountering for the first time and reassuring them that they are not alone, no matter how often it can feel like that. Young Adult fiction also serves as the foundation for my undergraduate research and professional goals. Over the past three years, I have been writing *When We Fall: A Young Adult Novel* as my Schreyer Honors Thesis. I wrote the first chapter as part of an honors option in the spring of my first year under the supervision of Dr. Jeanne Marie Rose, Associate Professor of English. In fall 2019, I completed another honors option with Dr. Rose that included research on writing productivity. Through reading memoirs on the craft, such as Stephen King's *On Writing* and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, I learned the importance of writing as much as possible while avoiding the urge to obsess over the quality of the first draft. In previous attempts to write full-length novels like *When We Fall*, I was always able to write beginnings but could never reach the middles or ends. The advice from King and Lamott impacted the way I approach my writing in general and, more specifically, the way I developed this novel.

Young adults, like the characters in my novel, experience significant isolation, which can set them adrift from their futures. Engaging readers in conversations about issues like coming from a broken family, sexual assault, and the lack of justice for many victims enables these readers to stand up for and educate themselves. My hope is that *When We Fall* will spark meaningful interactions around these topics. The story follows Alison's struggles with her high

(and sometimes overly idealistic) expectations and depicts her attempts to navigate interpersonal relationships and set healthy relationship boundaries; it also speaks to the process of coming of age and learning to rise above unfavorable circumstances. Alison's former friend, Connor, who wants to avoid hurting others the way his father hurt his family, stubbornly believes that the only way to avoid this fate is to run away. Connor thinks he can only change in a place where no one has witnessed his past mistakes.

The novel asks readers to decide if they believe we, as people, are capable of the type of change Connor wants to make. Readers witness characters grappling with a range of challenges. For instance, Connor's younger sister, Lily, must come to terms with her sexual assault and decide how to best move on and achieve a sense of justice. Readers, in turn, are asked to evaluate similar questions about their own experiences. I know both reading and writing novels to be instrumental in processing the tragedies in the world around us. There is so much violence that seems impossible to understand. Writing is the best way I know to even begin to comprehend catastrophic events or attempt to overcome personal challenges. I, like many writers, can see pieces of myself in each character I create. In this work, I confront struggles I've had that are very similar to Alison's in learning her limitations and gaining more of a sense of self-respect. Additionally, my characters also reflect pieces of my friends. I've known numerous individuals who have had to endure some form of sexual harassment or violence, and Young Adult fiction's ability to raise awareness of these issues is crucial. While my book can't eradicate these injustices, bringing about discussion and conversation is not only a priority for me, but a means of advocating for a world free of fear and violence for younger people.

Prologue

October 27

Alison Young watched the person she once knew best fade into the night before she let out a breath. It appeared in front of her as a small white puff, and she crossed her arms against her chest with a shiver.

“It’s time to go,” Devan said from behind her. Despite knowing that they were quite alone in the little patch of woods behind the bus stop, Alison couldn’t help but feel wrong about speaking above a whisper. She remained still, continuing to stare at the space where she lost sight of his figure. Devan sighed impatiently. “People will start to notice that we left, Alison.”

“I can’t go back,” Alison replied.

“Okay, we don’t have to go back. We just can’t stay here.”

Alison nodded once, turning away from the bus stop. “Let’s go then.”

They made their way back to the car in silence that wasn’t broken until Alison sat in the passenger seat. As the headlights began illuminating the path, she took a moment to close her eyes to make sure she could still recall every detail of the past two and a half weeks. Her memory had always been uncanny, but she didn’t trust it to stay that way. Especially not with this. “Dev, do you have a pen and a napkin somewhere?”

Devan quickly produced a pen and an old receipt from the diner and handed it to her. Alison glanced at the diner logo, grinning humorlessly at the irony of it. “Thanks,” she said and began to write as much as she could fit into the space, from start to finish.

Chapter 1

October 5 - 7

“Alison, I need your help.” Those were the first words out of Connor Weston’s mouth when Alison picked up the phone that night. Not “*Hi*” or “*How are you doing since I stopped talking to you in the ninth grade?*” but a plea for help.

Alison felt a flash of irritation quickly replaced by concern at the tone of his voice. He sounded frantic – panicked, even – which was unusual for him. “With what?” she asked, her curiosity getting the best of her.

“It’s hard to explain,” he said after a moment of silence. “Please come to my house.”

Alison’s eyes narrowed. “Aren’t there at least two dozen people in your house? Why do I need to come help you?” She had heard the whisperings of his party during school today, so she was confused as to why this call was even happening.

“Ali, *please*.”

She sighed with just a hint of bitterness. “Fine.”

Alison traded her fuzzy socks for boots and a raincoat and grabbed her car keys from their place on the desk. Normally, she’d have to worry about sneaking out like this because of her parents, but both had decided to pick up extra shifts tonight. It was incredibly easy for her to glide down the stairs, walk through the living and dining rooms to the front door, and get into the car parked in her small driveway.

The rain got stronger as she drove the familiar streets of Grandview. Connor had moved to the other side of town right around the time they had started drifting apart, but it was still

fairly close. Grandview wasn't a big place. Streetlights and stop signs and the comfort of houses that rarely changed passed by as she turned the corner to the dwelling wedged between East Elm and Oleander. Before he lived here, Connor had lived in the house next to hers. They used to spend every day in their backyards together. They made up fantastical stories featuring magical kingdoms and spontaneous adventure and quests to save the world they had built along with the princess—typically played by his little sister. Most importantly, they held the keys to the castle in their hands. Alison didn't know exactly when that changed, but she remembered how it felt to watch Connor abandon her to hang out with the kids that had more to offer. His whole personality shifted as they grew from silly nine-year-olds to awkward thirteen-year-olds and so forth, making it impossible for her to reach him. The harder she tried to be a part of his life, the more he resisted.

Over the years, Connor occasionally reached out to Alison if he needed help with something. Usually schoolwork, usually disguised as an attempt to catch up. Every time he reached out, the bitterness within her grew until she couldn't handle it. She remembered the night she became sure her friendship with Connor was doomed, never to return to its former glory. It was a Friday night, similar to this one, but later in the year, the beginning of November. She had to work the concession stand at the football game against Ridgeview, and he was there with the friends who had replaced her. She saw them under the large oak tree next to the concession stand, drinking and vaping, both of which could get them kicked out if the officers patrolling the games noticed. There could be other consequences in store for them with the school as well. She knew the risk was minimal in their case; a lot of the students at Grandview participated in such things, but she didn't want to see Connor get into unnecessary trouble. If the school found out, so would his mother, and that fact alone should've been enough to stop him in

his tracks. Lily had mentioned how Connor essentially picked up their mother's broken pieces in the first few months after Mr. Weston was gone, so how could he do something that might hurt her all over again? How could he bear to disappoint her after all that?

For all these reasons, Alison abandoned her post at the concession stand to warn them of all the possible repercussions. She could hear the words echo in her mind over the sound of the raindrops hitting the roof of her house. "*Can you just stop being such an uptight bitch all the time?*" were the words he snapped at her. One of his friends blew a cloud of the sickeningly sweet smoke directly into her face and added, "*Yeah, honestly. Have you ever tried chilling the fuck out?*" She recalled how difficult it had been to keep her eyes glued to his without showing any hint of how humiliated and hurt she was as they all laughed at her expense.

Swallowing the pain she felt, she asked the woman in the ticket booth to send the police officers over and gave him the coldest glare she could muster. She wasn't going to stand with them to make sure they didn't run away from the police, but she was never going to let anyone – Connor or otherwise – treat her like this again. If their friendship hadn't been over before, it was over now.

After that cold November night, she poured her energy into things that mattered more than Connor Weston. She stopped listening to his half-hearted excuses and made new friends. She saw him disappearing under the bleachers before and after school, sometimes reemerging with lipstick stains and other times with wads of cash poking out of his pocket. She caught glimpses of him driving away from school in the opposite direction from home, heading toward the side of town her father always warned her to stay away from. She convinced herself she didn't care about him anymore and reminded herself to not take responsibility for his actions. It wasn't her job to take care of him. That had been working perfectly for the past three years. So

she had not been invited to Connor's party, though Lily had told her about it, and she wouldn't have made an appearance even if she had. Alison was perfectly content to spend her night cozied up in her bedroom with her favorite coffee face mask, fuzzy socks, and a *Gilmore Girls* marathon. Her phone began to ring during her marathon, flashing the name "Connor Weston" across the screen.

Now, parked in front of Connor's house, she could see light shining through every window. She heard music as soon as she got out of the car. There were people spilling out everywhere, definitely more than the two dozen she had imagined. Most of her hated that she was here, becoming a part of whatever trouble Connor had gotten himself into. Alison started to walk across the lawn to reach the porch, wondering what was so urgent and why he called her specifically. They hadn't talked since the football game during their freshman year.

"Alison! Over here!" Connor's voice sounded behind her. She whipped her head around, eyes landing on him standing by his car.

"Connor, your mom is going to ki—" Alison began to say as she made her way toward him, but stopped when she saw a head of long red curls lying in the backseat. "What the hell?"

She knew even before she saw the rest of the girl's face that it was Lily. As she got closer, Alison noticed the bruises blooming across Lily's pale arms. Alison's stomach turned. She flashed back once again to the magical kingdoms of her childhood, this time focusing in on Lily playing the role of the princess with her sparkling tiara and pealing laughter. Alison could see Lily's seven-year-old self chucking that tiara off her head from one of the low tree branches she used to climb up to, pretending it was her very own Rapunzel's tower. The image dancing just behind Alison's eyes was far different than the passed-out Lily in front of her. All Alison could think was "*Oh no.*"

Connor's voice was hollow as he spoke. "I left for a few minutes to take a walk and when I came back, I found her exactly like this."

"How could you even throw a party like this with her here? Connor, you're her brother. You're supposed to *protect* her."

"She wasn't supposed to be here. She said she was going to spend the night at Corinne's, but then she was here. I don't know why she was here," he gulped.

Alison hadn't seen him cry since they were kids. Once, after talking about their school day and doing their homework (which she always insisted upon), Connor had climbed down her treehouse ladder with Alison following closely behind, and he traveled the short distance to the creek. The woods behind her house stretched on for what seemed like forever and they both loved getting lost in them. First, they'd found the treehouse, and Alison's dad made them wait until he had a good look and fixed it before he let them explore the inside. A few months of hanging out in the treehouse later, they found a small clearing with a creek running across the entrance, guarding it like some kind of moat. Right next to the creek, there was a fairly tall tree with a crude looking swing attached to one of the lower branches. Alison worried about the safety of the swing, but Connor dismissed her and took a seat on the wooden plank. He swayed back and forth lightly, testing it. It didn't take long for him to gain the confidence to stand on top of the swing. Once he'd gained some momentum, Alison watched as he leapt off and prayed he'd tumble to the ground on the opposite side of the creek. They could've just waded across the water, but Connor was always one for dramatic flair. He ended up falling into the water with a huge splash, and Alison gasped when he yelled something her parents would've grounded her for. She ran over to him, and her eyes widened when she saw tears welling up in his. He ended up with a sprained ankle, and they decided they'd never use the swing again.

Alison came back to the present, refocusing her attention on Lily. “What happened to her?” she demanded.

Connor bit his lip. Then the words all tumbled out without him taking so much as a breath, “I don’t know! I went to get some air for a few minutes and when I got back, I found her passed out in my bedroom. She was breathing, but she was kind of cold? I couldn’t wake her up. I didn’t know she was still home—”

“We need to take her to the hospital,” Alison cut him off, her thoughts going a mile a minute. She tried to remember the little medical knowledge she’d gained over the years from her mother, a nurse. Had Lily drunk too much? Did she overdose? Or was it something else?

“What if I get in trouble?”

She couldn’t believe that *this* was the question on his mind. It made Alison want to scream. Did he seriously not care about anyone more than he cared about himself? Not even his sister? She had always thought it was somehow her fault that they’d drifted apart. She wasn’t enough, she said the wrong thing, or she refused to do drugs with him. But maybe it wasn’t her fault at all. Maybe he was truly this narcissistic and awful.

“9-1-1 should have been your *first* call. You shouldn’t have even called me. The fact that she isn’t awake right now is *most definitely not good*. Do you want your sister to wake up?”

Alison stared at him, crystal blue eyes hard and unyielding.

“Of course I want her to wake up, Alison,” he said, glaring at her. “What the fuck? How could you even ask me that?”

“Then act like it. Let’s get her to the emergency room. We can’t wait for an ambulance,” Alison said. Connor opened the door on the driver’s side. “Hold it,” Alison commanded.

“What now?”

“Are you drunk or high right now? Like at all?”

Connor grimaced. “Maybe a little,” he admitted.

Alison sighed, “I’ll drive. Give me the keys.”

He placed them in her hand and went to the other side of the car. She almost rolled her eyes thinking about how he’d really called her just to be his designated driver, but it felt inappropriate with Lily unconscious in the backseat. Alison held back tears as she put the proper key in the ignition and drove away from the party, headlights burning bright in the night, and Connor’s crying the only sound for miles.

Her mind was racing almost as fast as Connor’s car through the winding roads, trying to get Lily to the hospital. What if she was worse off than she looked? What if she ended up needing surgery and there was some kind of complication and the doctors couldn’t save her? Would Connor lose his sister? Would Alison lose one of her closest friends? It was way too soon to be this worried. She tried to convince herself she was just being dramatic. But *what if?* And then Alison wondered about Connor. What was he feeling right now? Was he only concerned about covering his own ass or was he concerned about Lily too? “*Alison!*” Connor screamed. She gasped as she saw the deer running directly in front of the car. Despite knowing better than to swerve, Alison found herself doing exactly that. Her efforts were wasted as the deer ran directly into the side of the car. After pulling off to the side of the road, Connor and Alison stared at each other with wide eyes.

“Is Lily okay?” Alison asked with her heartbeat still pounding rapidly and ringing in her ears. They both looked toward the backseat and were momentarily confused – the backseat appeared to be empty. “Oh no,” Alison said, horrified as she looked back, finding Lily’s head

wedged to the side of the car that the deer had hit. “Connor, I think she’s bleeding from her head...”

“We need to get to the hospital. *Now. Alison, go now!*” Connor seemed close to hyperventilating.

“Connor, I don’t think we should keep driving,” Alison said, trying to push through the shock coursing through her body. She knew she needed to stay focused, but all she could think was that this wouldn’t have happened if they had just called 9-1-1 from the start. Why did she think driving to the hospital was a good idea? Stupid, irresponsible... *There wasn’t time. And at least you didn’t let Connor drive.* Alison tried to rationalize her actions, but the guilt wouldn’t stop. Before Connor responded, she spoke again. “Give me your phone.”

He handed it to her, and she dialed 9-1-1. “Connor, you have to get her to the hospital without me. If my mom or any of her coworkers see me, there’s no way you’ll be able to keep this off your mom’s radar.”

She handed the phone back to him, but he didn’t look so good. “I’ll meet you there. I’ll go back to your house, get everyone out, and drive to the hospital. We’ll tell my mom that you called me while you were in the waiting room if she finds out.” This plan earned a nod. “Okay, great. See you soon.”

Alison got out of the car as she heard Connor start talking to the 9-1-1 operator. *Okay. Breathe. Help is coming for Lily.* These were the words Alison kept thinking, breaking into a run. She ignored the panic rising up inside her chest, thankful for the lull in the rainstorm and that they hadn’t gotten too far from Connor’s house. It came into view much more quickly than she expected, and she stopped when she found herself standing on the front porch. After catching her breath, she walked in.

The party was still in full swing, as if Connor was still there and everything was fine. Alison headed to the kitchen, grabbing two pans and banging them together. Everyone stopped and stared. “Party’s over!” Alison yelled, “The cops are coming. Go home before they get here!” The mention of the authorities got their attention. She went out to the back porch, again banging pans and telling everyone to leave. The house emptied mercifully fast, and Alison scanned the living room and kitchen counter. She rummaged around in the kitchen drawers until she found the trash bags, and then she started the process of cleaning up. Alison didn’t think she’d ever seen so many empty beer cans or water bottle bongs in her entire life. She picked each one up between two fingers, wrinkling her nose as she filled each trash bag. Connor would need to do more when he eventually came home, but she did most of the heavy lifting. As per usual. Alison huffed as she dragged multiple trash bags outside to the trash cans lined up against the side of the house. She turned off most of the lights, leaving one on in the living room before going back to her car.

She took a moment to pause when she was finally in her own driver’s seat. Anxiety she’d been keeping at bay overwhelmed her too much now to start driving. The rain started to pick up again, thrumming against the roof resolutely, and she turned on the radio to let a song by Alabama Shakes play quietly in the background. She couldn’t deal with the silence. A roll of thunder sounded as she dialed Andrew’s number.

Andrew... She felt a small smile involuntarily flit across her face. She let go of her fear just for a moment to remember how the night everything with Connor went south was also the night she’d met Andrew.

When Alison got back into the concession stand, all the anger and sadness and resentment she felt towards Connor rose to the forefront of her mind. Violently sobbing behind

the beverage refrigerator wasn't ideal, but it was better than him and his friends seeing the emotional chord they'd struck. "Is everything okay back there?" A voice sounded from the front window. Alison gasped, quickly wiping the tears off her cheeks and rubbing her sniffly nose on the corner of her shirt sleeve.

She was absolutely positive that she still looked like a mess as she faced a boy she'd never seen before at the counter. Her stomach leaped with mini somersaults as she took him in. He was cute in a shy sort of way, the way when you know they can't see how cute they are. His light brown hair fell to the side of his face in a perfect wave, and his eyes twinkled dark blue. Alison raised an eyebrow at the American Football t-shirt he was wearing under his flannel. "American Football?" she asked, unable to help herself.

"Yeah, have you heard of their first album titled *American Football*? Not to be confused with their second album from 2014 called *American Football*, of course," he said it so seriously that she couldn't help but laugh a little.

"I'm afraid I haven't. Can I help you with something?"

"Oh, a cheeseburger, please. And a Dr. Pepper. Keep the change."

She put the money in the cashbox and prepared his order. "Thank you...?" she purposely let her voice trail off into a question.

"Andrew. I go to Ridgeview."

"Thank you, Andrew." She tilted her head to him.

"Not to be weird or anything but... Are you going to be okay?"

Alison rolled her eyes. "What gave me away?"

"I can see the snot on your sleeve," he replied lightheartedly, causing her cheeks to turn pink.

“Goodbye, Andrew. Please go before I embarrass myself more.”

“All the more reason to stay,” he joked, and Alison playfully groaned. “Find me if you need a shoulder to cry on.”

Weeks passed before Alison managed to find Andrew from Ridgeview again, but when she did, she asked him on a date and the rest was history. They’d been together ever since, and he knew her inside and out.

He didn’t pick up the first time, and she frowned as she heard the voicemail. She hung up before the beep and got ready to dial again. As her thumb hovered over the call button, it started vibrating with his name and contact photo flashing across her screen. She smiled as she answered. “Sorry... I was... sleeping... Are you okay?”

His voice was still full of sleep, and she felt deeply grateful he’d woken up and called back. “Andrew,” she breathed, “thank God.”

There was a brief silence, making her think maybe she’d felt grateful too quickly, and then, “Why are you calling this late? What’s wrong? Where are you?”

“I’m in the car. Parked outside Connor’s house. He called me for help. He... He threw a party and it got out of control. He wanted me to come break it up. And I hit a deer and—” Alison paused. She couldn’t tell Andrew about Lily. She didn’t even have enough information about what had happened to give any details. “It doesn’t matter now. I just really needed to hear your voice.”

“Connor... A deer? Ali, I’m confused. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Wait. He called you, and you *actually went*? Ali, please.” It seemed like he was fully awake now.

Alison didn't know how to make him understand. She didn't even fully understand. "I just – we were best friends once and there's always going to be a part of me that cares what happens to him."

"I'm here for you, Alison. But I do think you should get out of there."

"I can't just leave him alone," Alison countered, and added, "but I will try to get home soon."

"Good. Hey, Ali?"

"What?"

"Can I please go back to sleep?" Andrew asked. Alison hoped he wasn't too annoyed with her for calling.

"Right. Yes, you can sleep. I'm sorry," Alison replied.

"You're an amazing friend. I love you," he said. His words had their desired effect. The tears so close to spilling over, the existential crisis looming over her, seemed almost nonexistent now. Obviously, Connor and his sister were still on her mind, but it no longer felt like she was drowning.

"Thank you. I love you, too." She reached up to touch the side of her face as she closed her eyes and took another deep breath.

"Drive safe, please. I'll see you tomorrow?" There was something Alison loved about being on the phone with Andrew. For one thing, no one ever did phone calls anymore. For another, it reminded her of this quote from *The Fault in Our Stars* that she couldn't exactly remember. Something about how being on the phone was like being in an invisible third space that could only happen on the phone. She liked it, and every time Andrew and she sat on the phone like this – silent except for one another's breathing – she thought about it.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she repeated and hung up.

Feeling ever so slightly calmer, Alison drove to the hospital, taking a different route even though she knew the deer didn’t necessarily live on the road she took the first time. She parked near the emergency room and texted Connor that she was in the parking lot. She waited for fifteen, then twenty minutes, but he didn’t text her back. Alison grappled with her choices – go into the emergency room and risk being seen by someone who knew her mother or leave him here without a ride home or any update on the situation at hand – before deciding on the only thing that made sense to her. There wasn’t a single bone in her body capable of just leaving him here alone. More than that, she’d seen the way Lily had looked in the backseat of Connor’s car when she’d first gotten to the house. It was possible she’d done it to herself, but that didn’t really match the personality of the girl Alison had come to know over the years. If it was someone else’s fault... There were too many people at the party to even begin narrowing down a list of potential suspects, but maybe, depending on how much he knew, Connor could help.

Alison snuck in the door with her hood up, trying to avoid eye contact with every nurse she passed. “Connor,” she hissed when she found him slumped in a waiting room chair with his head in his hands. “I’ve been waiting for you. What’s going on?” She felt her eyebrows knitting together and her forehead creasing.

“They took Lily into surgery. They said something about too much pressure on her brain... they didn’t think it was from the deer... I didn’t fully understand, but... You should leave,” Connor said in a clipped tone. Sucking in some air between his teeth, he continued, “I’m sorry I involved you in this. It was stupid of me.”

“You can’t just push me away now. I’m part of this,” Alison insisted.

“I don’t need your help. I wasn’t thinking. And do you really want to be a part of this? Just a few minutes ago, I lied when a nurse asked for my mom’s phone number. If you stick around, the lies aren’t going to stop,” he warned.

“Connor.”

“Alison.”

They stared each other down with so much intensity that Alison could feel herself getting tired. She attempted to keep her gaze hard and unyielding. He did the same. This was very similar to how things had been when they were kids, except they were infinitely more stubborn than they ever could have managed back then. Time had not made them softer, that was for sure. Her confidence wavered for a moment as she caught sight of a nurse over Connor’s shoulder. He glanced back too and realized she must’ve been one of her mom’s friends. And he was right.

“Something wrong, Ali?” Connor taunted her with a smirk on his face which didn’t feel right given the circumstances.

She only scowled back at him.

“I think you’d better get going before your mom finds out you aren’t in bed.”

Rage filled her entire body. How could he be like this even now, after she’d just helped him clear out an illegal party responsible for sending his sister to the hospital? After she’d almost hit a deer and killed all three of them? She couldn’t imagine just freezing someone out after that. “I *hate* you,” she said, fuming, “I can’t believe you called me in the middle of the night and I actually got *out of bed, dressed, and came running for you*. You know what? Fuck you, Connor.”

She didn’t wait for him to come up with some sarcastic reply. Instead, she stalked out of the hospital waiting room, disappearing back into the storm.

The rest of the weekend passed by in slow motion. Despite the intense anger she'd felt in the hospital waiting room, Alison had called Connor multiple times but was met with radio silence. She tried to avoid thinking about him and Lily as much as possible. She asked her mom about how her extra shift had gone at work, listening for any indication that she might know what was going on with Lily. Alison strained her ears to eavesdrop on every conversation between her parents and any phone calls her mother got. She asked her dad if there had been any calls into the police station while he was there overnight. When he asked her why she was suddenly so interested, she shrugged her shoulders and claimed she was just trying to make conversation.

Andrew came to check on her the day after the party, just like he said he would. He asked if she wanted to talk about it, but she deflected to other topics immediately. Alison didn't want to give him more details. It would only worry him unnecessarily, especially since Connor had once again severed any hope of friendship between them. She let Andrew believe she was okay and that everything with Connor had just been a passing nightmare. They drove into the city and treated themselves to dinner and record shopping. Alison picked out an album by Amy Winehouse, and Andrew chose a Blue October album at her suggestion. When they got back to Alison's house, they played through the Blue October album so she could point out all her favorite lyrics during Andrew's first listen. They opened the windows, allowing the autumn air to wash over them along with the music. Sitting there with him, she started to believe she really was okay instead of just pretending she was. Life could go on without Connor as it had for the past three years. At least, that's what she tried to tell herself.

Chapter 2

October 8 - 9

The halls of Grandview High seemed emptier without him on Monday morning. Connor Weston was only one person, but without him there, Alison could feel the intangible difference. The tears in his eyes in the front seat of his car haunted her, intruding when she wasn't occupied with something else. The only thing keeping her grounded and sane was Eleanor sitting next to her during homeroom filling the silence with the details of how her weekend went.

Alison focused first on Eleanor's slender fingers covered in a sheer nude polish just a shade lighter than her skin before transitioning to her long-sleeved cream blouse with its covered buttons at the cuffs and high collar. Her friend always opted for a more business casual look despite only being seventeen years old. As she spoke, her curls bounced each time she moved, and the Taylor-Swift-1989-era red color of her lipstick contrasted nicely with her white teeth. She was talking about her mom and dad – more specifically how her mom was always attempting to micromanage every aspect of her life while her dad desperately tried to tame her worst instincts. This weekend, her mother had completely freaked out over her technology usage even though most of her homework assignments needed to be done on a computer. Mrs. Zhang insisted Eleanor was spending too much time staring at screens, that she should go on a walk or pick up a book instead. Eleanor was always going to be in a never-ending battle with her mother, and sometimes she just needed someone else to listen, which Alison was always happy to do.

“So, what did you do this weekend?” Eleanor asked, and Alison froze. What was she supposed to say? *Oh, nothing much. Connor called and asked for my help because something*

terrible happened to his sister at his party, and he apparently didn't think to call the police. Also, I hit a deer driving her to the emergency room. No big deal, obviously.

“On Friday night, I had to take Connor’s younger sister to the hospital...I tried to call to make sure they were both okay, she and Connor, you know. But he didn’t answer. And I also went out to eat with Andrew and we got some new vinyl together,” Alison said slowly.

“Wait, wait, wait. Back up to the part about Connor’s sister and the *hospital*?” Eleanor replied, her eyes wider than Alison had ever seen them.

“I don’t fully know what happened and I don’t want to spread any wrong information...” Alison hedged.

“Didn’t Connor have a party Friday night? Did his sister get alcohol poisoning or something?”

“Or something,” Alison echoed quietly. It was eating away at her – not having any idea what had happened to Lily. Lily had always been like a little sister to her, and they’d stayed close even after Alison and Connor’s friendship fell apart. She recalled numerous Netflix marathons and Lily making them pumpkin spice lattes as practice for when she was old enough to get a part-time job at Sugar Acres Cafe (the best place to get coffee in town). Alison wasn’t just worried about Lily because Connor had asked for her help. She was worried because Lily was her little sister too, in a lot of ways. She hated Connor for keeping her at arm’s length, completely out of the loop. The bell signaling the end of homeroom rang, effectively ending Eleanor and Alison’s conversation.

“See you at lunch,” Eleanor promised with concern written all over her face.

The first four periods of the school day went by in a blur. Alison sat quietly through her English class as they discussed the first act of *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. Alison could already sense a general theme of Torvald viewing his wife, Nora, as a doll he could manipulate to his liking. She wasn't a full person to him, merely a helpless, dependent damsel who would always do whatever he asked of her. She resented that she could relate to poor Nora. In French, they were working on writing a short personal essay completely *en français*, something none of them had ever done. Alison found herself to be quite good at it. She wrote and read fairly well, but speaking was a completely different story. There was supposed to be a presentation later in the year, which she had been dreading since Mlle. Olsen first told them about the assignment. It was still a long ways off though, so she pushed it from her mind as much as possible. After French, she had calculus – by far her least favorite class – and after, she would go to Intro to Ceramics. She loved the class, but what she loved more was the art room. There were a couple art rooms but all the AP Studio Art kids and the students taking ceramics were in the biggest one. It was in the center of the school, and it was one of the few rooms you could easily look into because the door was framed by large windows. The floor inside was wood, similar to the floors in the gymnasium, there were six long tables placed to the left side of the room, and the right side of the room was dedicated to supplies and big drawers to store unfinished work. There were streaks of paint everywhere, and it had this specific art-supply smell. She adored it even though she wasn't the most artistically talented. Sometimes she wished she could spend all her time in the art room instead of always having to manage the next SGA thing or check things off her very full to-do list. It was one of the few places she could let go of her worries and have a few moments of peace.

When her ceramics class was over, she agonized over lunch with Eleanor. Would she want to continue the conversation from homeroom? Would she have forgotten? She counted each step to the cafeteria and scanned the tables for her best friend. At the table, they pulled out their packed lunches and put all their food between them. Alison took one of Eleanor's apple slices, and Eleanor grabbed a handful of Alison's white cheddar popcorn. Alison had been worried for nothing – Eleanor didn't bring up Connor or Lily again and they talked about their morning classes. Eleanor warned Alison of a quiz in AP Psych, and Alison nodded, saying she'd thought there might be. They were currently learning about the different reinforcement schedules, and she figured Mr. Palmer would want to make sure they understood the differences between each one. Just as they were moving on to a different topic, Alison's phone lit up the table with a text from none other than Connor. She opened it, quickly reading what it said.

Ali we need to talk.

She was once again reminded of Ibsen's Nora and Torvald. "What's wrong, Ali?" Eleanor asked in a voice full of caution. Alison got the sense that she already knew who the text was from and had a general idea of what might be wrong.

"So... Like I said this morning, I don't want to spread any false rumors. But after I went out of my way to drive to Connor's, pick him and his sister up, got in a car accident because of a damn deer in the road, he banished me from the hospital waiting room. I didn't go in at first because I didn't want my mom or anyone to see me, but I needed to know he was okay. And that Lily would be okay. And instead of letting me stay, he told me to go away. He hasn't picked up the phone since, but *now* he wants to talk..." Alison ranted.

Eleanor frowned and nodded. “You should turn on your read receipts so he knows you saw it,” she advised.

“Isn’t that a little immature?” Alison asked.

“He deserves it. He shouldn’t expect you to just be there whenever it’s convenient for him,” Eleanor replied with a shrug. Alison weighed her words carefully in her mind. Before she could come to a decision, Eleanor added, “Whatever you decide to do, *do not answer it.*”

Despite Eleanor not knowing the full scope of the situation or how important talking to Connor could be, Alison listened to her best and closest friend. She was tired of feeling used. She had enough animosity in her heart to be petulant.

Read receipts: *On*. Answer: *None*.

Throughout the rest of the day, she saw Connor. Not actually Connor, but the ghost of Connor. In the halls, in the cafeteria during her study hall, on the drive home. Maybe it was the guilt of deliberately avoiding his text. She knew she’d said she was done with him. Alison couldn’t help herself – she worried about him. For as long as she could remember, it had been that way. He gave her everything and nothing all at once. In her bedroom, she trailed her fingers across her comforter with thoughts of how he used to sprawl across it and talk to her while her parents made dinner. On many occasions, he’d start to open up about something only to shut down when her interest was fully piqued. He could get her to tell him anything, do anything, just by making her feel like she meant something. Like she was special. It was a doomed kind of thing; he could take it away at any moment, but that didn’t stop her from falling into it every time. She wanted to stop. She was beginning to wonder when enough was enough.

The ride home was uneventful. Once home, Alison found herself alternating between doodling and staring at the wall more than working on her homework. She was too worried about

Lily to focus on mundane math problems. Instead of forcing herself to complete the assignment like she normally would, she decided to see if her mom or dad needed any help with dinner. She could smell the start of something cooking down in the kitchen. She wasn't sure which one of them was cooking – they always alternated based on when they were working or how tired they were when they got home – so she looked around the kitchen curiously as she walked down the stairs. Her mom stood at the counter next to the stove, chopping up kale. What Alison had smelled from upstairs was a mixture of sweet Italian sausage and onion sautéing in a pan. “Do you need help with anything, Mom?”

“I'm almost finished with everything for the soup. I'm going to start making asparagus as soon as all this is in the pot, but if you want to cut that baguette and do the garlic bread...”

“Say no more,” Alison said playfully, grabbing a sheet pan, a cutting board, and their bread knife. Once there were enough slices to fill the pan, she mixed butter, garlic, and parsley in a dish and spread it on each slice. She sprinkled Parmesan cheese on top and put it in the oven. While she was at the stove, she stirred the pot of simmering soup, holding her breath for a second as she felt her mom brush behind her to the refrigerator.

Her mom prepared the asparagus to be put in the oven, taking a cursory glance at Alison. “What's going on? Usually, you're too busy with homework to help with dinner.”

Alison shrugged her shoulders in an attempt to make light of it all. “I couldn't concentrate so I thought I'd try something else for a little while.”

Her mom frowned and placed her hand on Alison's forehead. “Well, you're not running a fever... Who are you and what have you done with my daughter?”

Alison shook her head, amused. “I'm fine, really.”

Her mom raised an eyebrow, creating a facial expression that clearly said *I don't believe you, but I'm not going to push it right now*, and Alison appreciated it.

She started to get utensils to set the table. "Is Dad home tonight?"

"He won't be home until a bit later. You don't have to set a place for him."

"Just you and me then," Alison said, grabbing just two instead of three of everything.

Alison was sure her mom would notice that something was off, but she wanted to maintain a sense of normalcy. Her mom would be even more concerned if she took her food upstairs. Plus, she just couldn't stand the thought of going back upstairs and being alone with her thoughts. She knew she would have to eventually, but she wanted to prolong it for as long as possible. Alison worried if she was left to think about Lily and Connor, she'd call Connor to check on how things were going. She wanted to know how Lily's surgery went, if her doctors thought it went well and if she was awake yet. Had he spoken to her? Did he know what exactly happened at the party? Would Lily remember, considering there had been so much pressure on her brain when they took her into surgery? Calling was exactly what Eleanor had advised against, and Alison knew she was right. But Lily was important to Alison. She wanted to know if her friend was okay. It was unfortunate that her friend's brother was kind of the worst. And now, Connor was ruining her relationship with Lily, too.

They sat together at the table, Alison and her mother, across from each other with their soup, asparagus, and garlic bread. The food was good, but the way her mother was scrutinizing her felt like she was a part of an interrogation. Alison knew that she knew something was wrong, but she didn't know what to tell her. Not the truth, for sure. They were about halfway done with their meal before her mother finally spoke.

“I was hoping it wouldn’t come to me nagging you, but Alison, please just tell me what’s wrong.”

Alison brushed a piece of her dark brown hair behind her ear and bit her lip as she tried to come up with a response to appease her mom. “I don’t know…” she hedged. “I guess I’m just really worried about the Homecoming dance. I have a meeting with Dr. Kastner tomorrow about it; I think she wants to tell me that having it at the planetarium won’t be possible.”

“Would it really be so bad if it weren’t at the planetarium?” her mom inquired, taking another spoonful of soup.

“The theme is *Starry Night*. So, the short answer is yes, it would suck if I couldn’t have the dance at the planetarium,” Alison stated dryly. All of this was true, Alison *did* have a meeting with Dr. Kastner, and she was almost 100% sure the principal was going to try to tell her it wasn’t in the budget to have the dance at the planetarium. However, she wasn’t worried in the least. She’d been preparing for this argument since Dr. Kastner had emailed her about scheduling a meeting, and she was confident she could win. “If it weren’t my senior year, I wouldn’t care so much. I just really want to do something cool for the class.”

Her mom seemed to believe her. “I’m sure you’ll be able to convince Dr. Kastner,” she said, smiling softly.

“Thanks, Mom,” Alison replied.

After they finished eating, Alison offered to do the dishes, but her mom told her not to worry about it. She said Alison should focus on her homework. So once again, Alison found herself sitting at her desk, staring at the calculus problems. She worked through each problem painfully. By the time she was done with the assignments for the night, she was exhausted enough to go to sleep.

Morning came more quickly than Alison would have liked. She got ready, putting on a burgundy fitted sweater and skinny jeans with her favorite pair of suede ankle boots. She pulled her dark brown hair back into a ponytail and completed the look with a sheer, shimmery eyeshadow with mascara. The rest of her morning routine consisted of eating something quick – today, a banana – and brewing a cup of coffee before rushing out the door to her car.

Entering the school, she made a beeline for Dr. Kastner’s office. For a second, she thought she caught a glimpse of Connor leaning against the lockers, but she didn’t have time to confirm if it was him. She walked into the principal’s office, and there she was, sitting behind her desk. Waiting for Alison. Her brown hair was thin and straight and went to her shoulders, and her eyes were always distant, never kind. In all the time Alison had known the principal, she wasn’t sure if she’d ever been met with a true smile. Dr. Kastner’s blazer was gray, on top of a deep blue button-down shirt. She wore a chunky silver necklace and matching earrings that Alison tried not to grimace at. “Good morning, Alison,” Dr. Kastner greeted her lifelessly, “please sit.”

“Good morning, Dr. Kastner. You wanted to talk about the Homecoming dance?” Alison prompted.

Dr. Kastner nodded. “Right to the point, I see. I’m not sure we can have the Homecoming dance at the planetarium. I know this is disappointing, but it’s just not feasible with our budget this year.”

“Please, Dr. Kastner, the Homecoming dance *needs* to be at the planetarium,” Alison replied with her hands folded in her lap.

“I don’t see why—” Dr. Kastner didn’t get a chance to finish.

“The theme is *Starry Night*.”

“I’m sorry, Alison, there’s simply no room for the planetarium in the budget.”

Alison winced, thinking about how there’d been room for the new turf field and baseball uniforms last year.

Dr. Kastner pressed her lips together tightly, before sighing, “I’ll see what we can do. You might need to do a fundraiser or two for the decorations if you want the school to cover the cost of renting out the planetarium.”

“Glad we could work something out,” Alison responded. It was amazing to her that she’d been able to handle this so well when she had handled everything with Lily so poorly over the weekend. She pushed the thought from her mind. “Have a nice day.”

She flung the office door open and began her signature confident stride down the hallway when she felt someone grab her elbow. They dragged her into the nearest empty room, which happened to be one of the music practice rooms. Chairs were strewn about, sheet music meant to be tucked away in a folder was laying on the floor. Everything looked dim, and it took Alison a moment to gain her focus. When she did, she looked up at Connor irritably. “What the hell?” She snapped at him.

Connor threw a swift glance to the windows in the back of the room before commenting, “Seems like a good day for Tess, right?”

Alison stared at him, dumbfounded. His eyes bored into hers for a moment before she saw frustration bloom across his face. It seemed he was upset that she hadn’t immediately figured out his riddle. “Connor, why can’t you just—” she began to say, but he abruptly left the classroom. She stood there for a moment, considering his words, turning them over in her mind. Suddenly, it clicked. Tess as in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. She guessed he wanted her to go to the

library. The halls were empty now – first period had just started – which made it easy to sneak in. She went to the fiction section and then to *H* for Thomas Hardy. Alison had half-expected him to be there waiting for her, but he wasn't. She pulled *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* off the shelf and opened the front cover, finding the note he'd left for her.

She unfolded it and almost tore it to shreds right then and there. Red-hot anger boiled in the pit of her stomach and pulsed through her veins. Nevertheless, fifty-five minutes later she made her entrance into the diner. The note had instructed her to meet him there in an hour, so he still had a few minutes to show up. Making her way across the checkered floor, she took a seat in the booth in the farthest corner. Jodie, her favorite waitress, brought her a strawberry milkshake. Alison took a sip from the red and white paper straw gratefully. "Aren't you supposed to be in school right about now, chickadee?" Jodie asked her in a disapproving tone.

"This is important, Jodie," Alison promised and gave her a look that read plainly: *You aren't seeing me right now.*

Jodie's studied Alison for a minute. "Since this isn't a normal occurrence, I'll keep this between us."

"Thanks, Jo."

"Don't make this a habit," she warned.

As she walked away, the bell on the door rang. Alison's eyes flashed up, immediately locking with the only stare that could make her feel so many emotions at once. He sauntered over to her booth without breaking eye contact. Once he was seated across from her, he swiped his finger across the fluffy whipped cream atop the milkshake before licking it. "Skipping school, Alison?" he asked as if he hadn't known Alison would be right here waiting for him.

He stuck his hand out with the intention of taking another lick of whipped cream, but Alison caught his wrist in her hand. “Don’t play dumb. What do you want from me, Connor?”

When he frowned instead of answering her, Alison couldn’t take it anymore. She slid the milkshake across the table and spit out at him through her teeth. “It’s on the house.”

She had every intention of walking out of this diner and never speaking to Connor Weston again. She was up and walking away when... “Alison, wait. I’m sorry,” he caught her hand at the last second. “I walked all the way here. I can’t pull this one off without you.”

His brown eyes were deep and vulnerable, and for a second, she saw the scared Connor she’d seen on the drive to the hospital. Her best friend, Connor. “You have *five minutes* to convince me to not leave right now. If you can’t, never try to call me again. I mean it this time.”

“Well, Alison,” he bit his lip and nodded slightly, glancing out the window. The way the grey daylight hit him in that moment allowed her to see just how exhausted he looked. His shoulders hunched in, causing him to look small. “You saw Lily. I’m in deep shit. And I need your help.”

He spoke with newfound urgency, apologizing for the years of asking for favors and never giving anything in return. He said he knew he didn’t deserve her help – that he was bold to even ask – but just one last time...

Grandview, the diner, Jodie, even the booth melted away as Connor talked to her. “What I’m about to tell you, Ali... You can’t tell anyone. Promise?”

He paused, waiting for her response. Without missing a beat, Alison replied, “I promise.”

She knew there was no turning back now.

Chapter 3

October 10

Alison thrived in the fall, and so did Grandview. With lowering temperatures and falling leaves in shades of crimson and gold, the promise of hot apple cider under Friday night lights hung in the air. Mouths watered at the thought of Miss Dotty's famous cinnamon pie at the annual fall festival, ideas for the perfect Halloween costume budded in the minds of elementary school children and high school teenagers alike, and plans to go apple picking skyrocketed.

On Main Street, she and Eleanor walked toward Sugar Acres Cafe, the only place worth going for a pumpkin spice latte. It was their fall ritual to sit at one of the small wooden tables scattered throughout the petite coffee shop until the sun began to set over Lake Valmont. They usually worked on homework in compatible silence or talked about anything going on in their lives. Alison's life updates consisted of family, Andrew, or whatever event she was planning at the time, while Eleanor preferred discussing various college options and anything happening in the political world. Today, however, the conversation centered around Connor, and Alison couldn't help but think he'd love knowing that he was the center of her attention once again. It felt like he wanted her consumed by him at all times. She could go weeks and months without so much as thinking of him, and just as she thought she was free, he'd swoop right back.

Eleanor nibbled on a chocolate chip muffin as Alison confided in her as much as she could without telling her the full story. She'd made a promise to keep it a secret, after all. "He wants you to help him *run away*? Are you both *insane*?" Alison hushed Eleanor quickly and

glanced at the cafe counter, looking for Mr. or Mrs. Ruffner, the owners. Eleanor's eyes darted over to the counter, too, before she whispered, "What could he *possibly* need to run away from?"

Alison snorted. "Life in general, his responsibilities, the damage he's caused everyone he's ever interacted with."

As she was saying each of these statements with sarcasm dripping from her voice, she was flashing back to the conversation they'd had at the diner just over twenty-four hours ago.

"The reason I had the party... I was mad at my mom. And my dad. They're trying to get back together," Connor glared bitterly at the table. "They decided to leave for the weekend to go to the city and I decided to throw the party. I wanted them to come home to a mess. I thought it was the least they deserved for turning my life upside down so many times.

I've never really told anyone how bad it was when my dad left my mom for the first time. She completely shut down. She'd have these nightmares where she'd wake up screaming in the middle of the night and I was always there to make sure she was okay. I took care of my sister, waking her up in the mornings to get ready for school and making sure we ate every night. Obviously, Lily is only three years younger than me so it wasn't like she couldn't take care of herself. But she shouldn't have had to take care of herself. I grew up so she didn't have to. I did this for weeks, Ali. Not just days. Weeks. After seeing my mom like that, I never thought she'd let my dad back into our lives.

"Over the past few months, I noticed my mom acting differently. She was happier. I thought she had started to see someone – and she had. But that someone was my dad. I was so pissed when I saw him sitting at our kitchen table again. At the party, there was a lot of alcohol and drugs. I wasn't as intoxicated as I could've been, but it was enough. I left the party to get

some fresh air and when I came back, I found her in my bedroom passed out,” he dragged in a breath, “she wasn’t supposed to be there.”

Alison reached her hand across the table and rested it on top of his clenched fist. She was surprised when he didn’t pull away. “We’ll figure this out, Con.”

“I think – I think I need to go away. At least for a while. I want to be a better person, but I feel like I can’t do it unless I get out of this god forsaken town. I want to be better for Lily, for my mom... For you. But I need to go and clear my head. And I can’t get in any more trouble for throwing that party.”

Eleanor chose not to reply to Alison’s comment, instead taking a moment to look out at the lake. The sun cast its shining light on the tips of the gentle rippling waves. Three small boats rested on the shoreline beneath the protective shadow of the willow tree. “Alison,” Eleanor finally spoke. “I know you won’t listen to me, but I don’t think you should help him. Whatever he’s done, whatever secret you’re keeping for him, it’s not worth it. He’s not worth it. It’s time to let him go. For good.”

Alison knew Eleanor might be right. Again. Connor *hadn’t* been a good friend to her. He’d barely even been a friend for the whole second half of her life, period. “El, I—” she started to say when her phone vibrated in her pocket. “Sorry, I have to take this.”

Andrew’s name and the picture of them hugging in Christmas Village flashed across her screen. “Hi Andrew,” Alison said, holding the phone up to her ear.

“I’m going to take a wild guess and say you’re still with Eleanor. But I wanted to let you know that I’m at your house,” Andrew said.

“Okay, I’ll be there soon. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Alison shoved her phone back into her coat pocket, and began to fix her wool scarf. Grabbing her latte, she fixed her gaze on Eleanor. “Connor needs me. I know you’re trying to protect me or whatever, but I’ll be fine. Can you please just try to be supportive?”

Eleanor frowned. “Ali, I do support you. I just think—”

“I have to go. Andrew’s waiting for me at my house.”

Alison pushed open the glass cafe door and allowed herself a small smile as she felt the crisp autumn air nipping at her cheeks. A few minutes later, she was in her car and driving the familiar streets home. She sped by houses, watching the pointed rooftops disappear behind her and transform into evergreen as she got closer to her house. The trees ended in a scattered line behind it, allowing her family a small backyard. She parked her car in the driveway and climbed the steps, crossing her porch and letting the screen door slam behind her. The kitchen was warm, lights all on, so she knew one of her parents was nearby. “Hello? Is that apple pie I smell?” Alison called, looking around for any sign of where her parents might be. Her mother emerged from the basement, laundry basket in hand.

“Apple dumplings. You were close,” she said as a way of greeting with a smile. “I went to the store after work to get vanilla ice cream too. Tell Andrew he can stay for dinner if he’d like.”

“I will. Where is he?”

“I believe he’s in your bedroom waiting for you.”

Alison immediately took the stairs up to the second story of the house, made a left at the top of the landing, and entered the room she’d had for her whole life. She always felt a little bit of excitement when she came in to see Andrew lying on her cherry blossom comforter surrounded by jade green walls and the yellow glow of her desk lamp. She’d spent her whole

childhood and the first half of her young adult life within these four bedroom walls daydreaming about finding her person. She wanted someone who would be there for her like her father was there for her mother. With Andrew, it felt like she had.

“Hey,” Andrew said, smiling.

“It’s really good to see you,” Alison smiled back and kissed him once before sitting down across from him.

“Bad day?” he asked.

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, Alison knew the happy little bubble they were in would be popped – burst – ruined the moment she told him about what Connor had asked. She didn’t want to lie to Andrew though. The trust he placed in her was too important to lose. Looking at anything that wasn’t Andrew, Alison counted to ten in her head. When she reached ten, she breathed out and sat up to put some distance between them. “I talked to Connor today...”

The reaction was instantaneous. Andrew’s smiling, happy face was suddenly frowning, serious. Guarded. “Long story short, he wants me to help him run away.”

“Ali, look at me.” She hadn’t even realized she was looking away again. “Don’t help him. Don’t talk to him anymore. Don’t see him.”

Since Andrew was her person, the one she trusted most out of anyone in this world, the one she always confided in, the one that knew her almost as well as she knew herself, he *knew* what he was telling her to do was basically impossible. He knew she was going to fight him on it.

“You know I can’t do that,” she reminded him.

“He’s—Connor is bad for you. I know he was your best friend; I know you would go over a cliff for him. But Ali,” Andrew grabbed her shoulders, “he knows that too. He knows you have a weird weakness for him, and he knows you can’t resist saving him. *He’s manipulating you.*”

“Okay, Eleanor,” Alison muttered.

“Eleanor and I both care about you more than Connor ever could. Do me a favor and listen to us for once.”

Alison jumped off the bed and whirled back around to face Andrew. “Andrew, he says he’s in deep sh—trouble,” she waved her arms around, “*real* trouble this time.”

“Trouble, huh? So, what did he tell you? What is this ‘real sh—trouble’?”

Alison pressed her lips into a firm line. “I swore I wouldn’t tell anyone.”

Andrew threw his head back and groaned, “What he told you probably isn’t even the *truth.*”

“Why would he beg me to help him run away if he didn’t actually need to run away?” she demanded. “What would be the point of that?”

Andrew opened his mouth to answer, but before any sound could make its way out, Alison’s mom poked her head in the doorway. “The apple dumplings are ready, so start making your way down to the table.”

Alison’s mom left as quickly as she came, and Alison and Andrew remained frozen in place. “You don’t have to stay for dinner if you don’t want to,” Alison broke the silence first in a frosty tone.

“Do you want me to stay?”

“Only if you don’t say anything about this to my parents.”

They stared at each other in silence for another thirty seconds. During the first ten seconds, Alison felt the anger swelling inside her. In the second ten seconds, she felt it starting to dwindle. She hated being angry with Andrew and very much just wanted to hug him and forget about Connor for the rest of the night. Oh, she could hold onto the anger if she wanted to. She'd done it with Connor multiple times in the recent years, but with Andrew, it was different. She hated fighting with him.

In the last ten seconds, she spoke again, "Andrew, I need my person right now. Can you just be my person and be mad at me later?" He opened his arms and she fell into them gratefully. Breathing in his scent, feeling his warmth, listening to his heartbeat... She could sit here forever. "Thank you," she mumbled.

"We should go downstairs before your mom comes back up," Andrew said, loosening his hold on Alison after a few moments.

Together, Alison and Andrew walked down the stairs and took their places at the table. The cinnamon sugar aroma filled the entire room, and Alison thought she might start drooling. "Has my mom ever made apple dumplings when you were here before?" Alison asked Andrew, combing through her own memories and coming up with nothing.

"No, I always miss them somehow," Andrew replied and then added, "They smell amazing, Mrs. Young."

Alison's mom smiled as she placed the pan of apple dumplings in the center of the table with a wide serving spoon. "You know there's no need for formality. You two have been dating for a while now. It's just Sara." After grabbing the ice cream from the freezer, she looked at one of the empty seats at the table. "I forgot to call Adam in. I'll be right back."

She headed for the garage. Alison's father was a detective for the police department, but he'd always had a knack for carpentry. When he wasn't busy with a case or on call, he could usually be found in his workshop. He'd made Alison's bed frame, her desk, her bookcases, just like he'd fixed the treehouse that Alison and Connor stumbled upon in the woods. It had been a long time since Alison had been to the treehouse. She wondered if everything was the way they'd left it before their friendship fell apart. Part of her hoped it was.

When everyone was finally seated at the table, they dug into the apple dumplings. Typically, full sit-down dinners like this didn't happen in Alison's house. She was usually busy with a school thing or with Andrew or Eleanor, her dad often had to work long hours, and her mom was a nurse at the hospital, so she also worked long hours, chaotic shifts. Alison didn't know how her parents had managed to do all the things they did and still be able to make time for each other or time for her. However, she was always grateful they had. She'd seen difficult family situations through her friends' lives – Connor being one of them. She hated that two people could be in love one day and out of love the next. Alison didn't understand it, and she never wanted it to happen to her.

Luckily, she could watch her parents and how good they were with each other. She could see real love wasn't always easy, but she could also see it was still something worth fighting for. She snuck a glance at her parents holding hands on top of the table, and then snuck a glance at Andrew. Even though they were in the middle of an argument, she was still glad to have him here. He looked over to her, and she wondered if he knew just how much he mattered to her. She wanted to find new ways to show him every day.

"Alison, how was your day?" Her father asked, effectively pulling her out of her sentimental train of thought.

“It was fine. Dr. Kastner tried to tell me there wasn’t enough money in the budget to have the Homecoming dance at the planetarium, but I handled it. Oh, and pumpkin spice is back at Sugar Acres,” she answered, trying to keep it light, desperately hoping they couldn’t see that something else was going on.

“Having the dance at the planetarium was a great idea. I’m glad it’s working out,” her mom said, smiling at her. Alison smiled back.

“I don’t know how you keep drinking those pumpkin spice lattes, though. They’re disgusting,” her dad chimed in.

“You clearly just don’t have taste,” Alison retorted.

As her dad laughed, Andrew spoke up. “Didn’t you say you talked to Connor today? Wasn’t he your neighbor when you were younger? Sara, Adam? Did you know Connor or his parents?”

Alison clenched her teeth and stared daggers at Andrew, but he was barely paying attention to her.

“Connor Weston? It’s been a long time since we heard that name in our house. What did he want, Ali? How’s his mom doing?” Alison’s mom asked.

“It wasn’t a big deal. He was asking me about the assignments he missed. He missed school for a couple days, but it seems like he’s back now. Probably a stomach bug or something. We didn’t talk about his mom at all.” Alison tried to sound casual about all of it, but her heart was racing. Why would Andrew do this to her? Why couldn’t he just stay out of it?

“Maybe I should have them over for dinner. It must be difficult to have your husband up and leave like Michael did. Those poor kids. Have you talked to Lily lately? Did she make the Grandview swim team?”

Alison wished her mom would just drop the subject already.

“I haven’t talked to her since early last week, but yes, she did make the swim team.”

“Remind me to call their mother tomorrow, would you?”

“Yes, I’ll remind you. Can someone pass me the ice cream?” Alison asked and took it from her dad’s hands gratefully.

She gave herself two more scoops and pretended everything was fine.

“If you two are done, Alison and I could clean up out here,” Andrew offered.

Alison’s parents shared a look before her mom said, “Normally, I’d tell you that’s too kind and unnecessary, but I’ve been dying for some relaxation all day.”

“We’ve got it covered, Mom. Go rest,” Alison urged. As they were leaving, she stood up and started gathering the dishes. She went through the motions, turning the faucet on, rinsing everything, handing it off to Andrew to put in the dish washer.

“Ali,” he whispered.

“No. You don’t get to ‘Ali’ me. I asked you not to say anything, but you tried to bring it up anyway. What’s wrong with you?” Alison stopped rinsing and glared at him.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think—”

“It’s not your *job* to protect me or decide what’s best for me. The only reason I told you at *all* was because I trusted you to keep it between us. I knew we’d fight, but I didn’t want to keep secrets. And now I’m regretting that decision.”

He reached his hand out, as if he wanted to touch her shoulder or caress her face, but let it fall. Then, quicker than Alison could process, he swiped some of the soapy water from the sink and flicked it at her. “Hey!” Alison yelled, flicking some of the soapy water back at him. They

went back and forth, getting suds everywhere and laughing. “We should stop before we get too carried away and start breaking plates,” Alison said, out of breath.

Andrew pulled her close and touched their foreheads together. “I’m sorry, Alison. I was only trying to help. I know I can’t make decisions for you, and I normally would never try to tell you what to do, but I’m worried.”

Alison placed her hand on the side of his neck and rested it on his shoulder. “I understand,” she said, “please just try to trust me. I’ll be fine; I can do this.”

He heaved a heavy sigh, “Promise me you’ll stay safe and keep away from Connor’s friends. If there’s even the slightest concern things will go sideways, promise me you’ll keep yourself safe.”

She grabbed hold of his hand and gave it a small squeeze. “I will,” she vowed.

Alison was still angry about the stunt he’d pulled during dinner, but she could understand why he did it. She knew all he was trying to do was make sure she didn’t get burned by Connor. She was also aware that Eleanor was trying to do the same. She could be mad at them all she wanted, and she knew she’d probably have to lie to them about the plan as it developed, but she knew they were coming from a place of love. How did she manage to find two people who cared for her so much? How was it possible for her life to be so impossibly put together aside from Connor? She felt a deep sense of dread as she realized everything she cherished about her life was probably about to be uprooted by Connor Weston in a few weeks. Alison hoped against all odds that Lily would have a quick recovery and Connor would stay and everything could just be okay. As she held Andrew’s hand, she tried to take a snapshot of this moment. She tried to hold the memory of them laughing while splashing dishwater at each other. In the moment, she decided to think only about Andrew. She’d loved him for years now, and she willed herself to

believe their love was as strong as her parents'. She willed herself to believe it could survive anything.

Chapter 4

October 11 - 13

It wasn't until nearly the end of the next school day that Alison realized she didn't have the street smarts to help Connor on her own. She had tried to come up with a solid plan in each and every one of her classes, but she always came up a little short.

Now, it was the last period of the day, and she was leading a meeting with the members of the Homecoming committee. Alison divided them into two groups based on their strengths and interests – some were more interested in the annual tailgate, parade, and ceremony while others were more interested in the dance – before slumping down into her seat at the head of the table. With a sigh, she resigned herself to going through the plan she'd created so far. The beginning, she thought, was decent enough, but she couldn't for the life of her get past the first few steps.

Step One: Change Connor's appearance.

Step Two: Leave when most of the town is preoccupied with something else.

Step Three: Create a new, fake identity.

These all seemed somewhat obvious to her, but the plan felt incomplete. It lacked nuance. How would he get to wherever he wanted to go? What if people started looking for him? What if he wanted to come back some day? How many of these questions were even her responsibility? She could only plan for so many things. Alison decided to let it go for the time being. Connor could wait until she got home. She was missing all her favorite parts of planning an event. "What

do we have so far?” She asked, inserting herself into the group that was covering the dance. They were crowded around Devan’s tablet.

Devan held up the tablet to face Alison. “We were thinking something like this for the posters and tickets. Do you want me to change anything?” Alison took in the quick sketch they’d made on the tablet. The background was a deep midnight blue with a darker vignette around the edges. There were yellow and gold swirls for stars, reminiscent of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, a nod to the theme. Initially, she had imagined gold text as well, but she could see now that the silver the group had chosen for the script font was much better.

“No, I love what you’ve done with it. Send that to me so I can give it to Miss Brennan in the Publications Office. She’ll be able to use your sketch for the actual poster and ticket design,” Alison said as she gave the drawing one final glance. She smiled as she realized her vision was coming to life. She was struck with a feeling of gratitude to be working with a group that knew exactly what she was picturing in her mind.

“Sure thing,” Devan said. After a few taps, Alison felt her phone vibrate with an email notification. Suddenly, Alison recalled a story she heard about Devan during their junior year.

A few months into the school year, Devan showed up at Grandview High, introduced as the new kid who went by they/them/theirs and dressed like a long-lost Winchester sibling out of *Supernatural*. Alison recalled giving Devan the initial tour of the school with Morgan, the vice president who was always trying to one-up her (but *that* was a whole other story), and admiring them as they navigated all the stares they were getting from students in the hallway. Were those students staring because Devan was new? Or because they were the first nonbinary person many of the students had ever encountered?

After a few weeks, the staring mostly stopped. Until a new rumor started floating around. Whispers traveled through Grandview High about Devan running away from their family after coming out last year. Some people were saying Devan participated in a traveling circus while others were dismissing the story as nothing more than an exaggeration, but the story ended with Devan coming back and their parents enrolling them at Grandview High for a fresh start. If any of that was true, Alison had never confirmed it because prying felt wrong, Devan might be the one person who could help her help Connor.

“Hey Devan? Can I talk to you about something after the bell rings?” she asked before thinking it all the way through. Devan looked confused but nodded once. The two of them continued discussing decorations and snack table possibilities with the rest of the group until Alison decided she should check on the other group. She walked to the other side of the table, seeing their plans to contact some of the local businesses in town for the tailgate and an ordered list of clubs for the parade. Alison knew not every club would want to make a float or walk, but she appreciated the tentative lineup they’d created. The parade always ran the same route from the town hall square down Main Street to the front of the high school where the tailgate would be waiting. They would announce Homecoming King and Queen before letting everyone disperse to enjoy festivities. The group had already made a backup plan for everything to be held in the gym if it was raining. Alison hoped for clear skies.

Once the bell rang, signaling the end of another long day, Alison and Devan waited for the room to clear. “What’s up, Alison?” Devan was back to their perplexed facial expression from earlier.

“I’m... Not sure how to ask this,” Alison paused. “I heard a rumor that you ran away from home last summer before our junior year. Is that true?”

Devan gave her a lopsided smile revealing a cute little gap between their two front teeth. They pushed one of the shorter stands of light brown hair behind their ear before answering, “It’s true. I obviously ended up coming back, but yeah. I did run away from home. Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering... How did you, um, do that?” Alison kind of hated the way this conversation was sounding. It sounded like *she* was the one who wanted to run away, which sounded ridiculous. If there was one person no one would ever expect to run away, it would be her. While it was true that no one could ever anticipate what was going on in someone else’s life, Alison’s family was as good as it seemed.

“You’re not really asking for you, are you?”

“No,” Alison admitted and continued, “it’s for a friend. He might be in trouble.”

Devan’s brow furrowed. “We should leave and talk about this somewhere else.”

Alison knew they were right, so the two of them gathered their belongings and drove back to Alison’s house. She checked to make sure no one was home before leading Devan to the porch swing. She idly wondered if a conversation as serious as the one she was about to have had ever occurred on this swing. She thought not.

Devan waited for her to speak, and she let several minutes pass by before she began. “It’s Connor.”

Alison told Devan all the details she knew for sure, feeling lighter and lighter as it rushed out. She hadn’t realized what a toll this secret was having, how heavy it was making her. Devan was an excellent listener – never interrupting with more than a slight widening or narrowing of their eyes.

Only after she finished did Devan speak. “I can help, but are you sure you want to go through with this?” they paused, contemplating their next words carefully. “I mean, for starters, I

think leaving your sister behind to process this trauma alone is a dick move. And second, I don't even know exactly *how* much legal trouble he could really get into."

Alison nodded. "I'm not sure either. I agree with what you're saying, but I'm hoping I'll be able to convince him to come back eventually."

"And what if you can't?"

"I can't be sure until we get to that point, but I don't want him to just leave all this mess behind permanently because what if he keeps creating messes he can't clean up? Eventually it will all come catching up to him."

Devan pursed their lips. "I guess if you're going to be doing this regardless of what I say... I'll help you out."

Alison smiled. Just as she was about to say thank you, she saw an unfamiliar car park in front of her house. It took her a few seconds to realize it was Connor, driving a car she'd never seen before. "Does he know you were going to tell me?" Devan asked.

Their voice sounded far away. Alison felt anxiety rise within her stomach – she was almost 100% sure Connor was not going to be happy about this. As he continued to walk up to her porch, she tried to play the conversation out in her mind as many times and in as many different ways as possible.

"Hey," he said once he got close enough. His always-wary eyes flickered over to Devan and back to Alison.

"Hi," Alison meant to say more but instead her body locked in its tension, and she inadvertently decided to prolong the inevitable.

"I didn't know you two were friends."

“Well, you haven’t exactly been around for the past three years, so,” Alison could see Connor bite the inside of his cheek. He’d always done that when he got mad and didn’t want to make things worse.

“Were you talking about anything interesting?”

It was amusing to Alison that he was trying to avoid an argument when she was about to cause one with whatever she chose to say next. “I told them about your... situation. They said they’d help with the planning since they have some experience with running away.”

The inner-cheek bite was back. “I thought I told you that you couldn’t tell anyone. Alison, you promised.”

“I know,” her first instinct was to apologize, but telling Devan had been necessary. She wouldn’t apologize for trying to help him in the best way she could.

They stared at each other, not blinking, no longer aware of their surroundings. Devan could’ve left, and they wouldn’t have noticed in this state. Connor’s eyes were like melted milk chocolate except the emotion in them was anything but sweet.

Finally, Connor spoke. “Forget about helping me. I’ll do this on my own, just like everything else. I’ve gotten along just fine without you, and I don’t know why I thought I could trust you now.”

“Connor, stop. You know deep down telling Devan was the only way we’d have a chance to get away with what you want to do.”

“No, Alison. It wasn’t. Just because *you’re* naive enough to trust anyone with everything doesn’t mean I am.”

“You’re *such* an asshole.” Alison could feel the tears coming and she wanted him gone before they could roll down her cheeks. “If you think you don’t need my help, fine. Get away from me and my house and have fun trying to do this by yourself. I’m so over it.”

They stared at each other for another minute, anger filling the space between them, before Connor stalked off the porch and back to the car.

Devan rested a hand on Alison’s shoulder, and she crumbled. Alison couldn’t handle the weight of the things going on alone. She couldn’t help Connor by herself, and she couldn’t shoulder the weight of the secret by herself. She had already needed to keep the two people she was closest to at arm’s length because of how disapproving their reactions had been. Telling Devan had been necessary in more ways than one. She could recognize maybe she’d gone about telling them the wrong way, though. That she could’ve told Connor about her idea first. *I’m so stupid*, she thought to herself after thinking about how she should have just texted him. Alison couldn’t stop crying no matter how hard she tried. It came in waves – there would be a break in the tears where Alison thought she’d collected herself, but then she would stumble across a new thought, something she hadn’t considered yet, and the tears would start all over. She wanted to be able to stop, recognizing how ridiculous she must look from an outside perspective, and that made her all the more upset. But with herself rather than Connor.

Devan stayed for a while, but as it got closer to the time they were supposed to get to work, they asked if there was anyone they could call. “Eleanor,” Alison whispered into their shoulder. Eleanor appeared shortly after, enraged beyond belief and ready to commit an act of arson or murder at a moment’s notice. When she saw Alison curled up on the porch swing under a blanket Devan had grabbed from her living room, Eleanor’s face was fierce and sharp in her concern. “*Please* let me kill him. I know I can get away it.” She wrapped Alison up in her arms.

Her hugs were so tight that it felt as if she were holding all the broken pieces together. Even if she couldn't completely put you back together, she could make you feel like you were whole for at least a few minutes.

Alison had stopped crying at some point between Devan leaving and Eleanor arriving, but she knew the mascara running down her cheeks was what caused Eleanor's distress. "No murder, El." She closed her eyes for a moment as Eleanor continued to hold her.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Fine. Let me know if you change your mind. And if you want to talk about what happened."

"There's not much to talk about. I told Devan about how Connor wants to run away because I knew they could help me create a better plan, but now he's pissed at me for telling someone. So, he doesn't want my help anymore," Alison said, rubbing her eyes and opening them back up.

"That doesn't explain why you're crying, babe."

"Connor told me I was naive and too trusting." As she said it out loud, it didn't seem like the worst thing. It was the *way* he'd said it. It was the way he always made her feel stupid and small. Eleanor didn't immediately say Connor was wrong and that he always would be because she didn't need to. Alison could sense it all in the hug.

They sat together on the porch swing until they saw Alison's father's car. They relocated to the kitchen where Alison got each of them a bowl of ice cream. She was getting the spoons when her dad came into the house. "Hi Dad," she greeted as she took the seat next to Eleanor at the table.

“Hi girls,” he replied, hanging his coat.

“Hi Mr. Young,” Eleanor chirped as if everything was normal.

He didn’t stay to talk to them today, choosing instead to meander into the living room to watch whatever he could find on TV. Eleanor’s phone buzzed on the table. She glanced at it and whispered, “It’s my dad. Do you need me to stay?”

Alison shook her head. “Thank you, but no. I’ll be fine. I could use some time alone. Today took a lot out of me.”

Eleanor gave Alison one more bone-crushing hug and left as quickly as she’d come. Alison cleaned up their ice cream bowls and went to her room. She ignored her homework completely for once, not even bothering to promise herself that she’d do it later. She simply climbed into her bed, under the covers, and lay there silently. Alison let her body have the one thing it had been begging for since Connor stormed off her porch. She drifted into a dreamless sleep.

A few days later, the day of Grandview’s Fall Festival, Alison felt genuine excitement for the first time since before the night of Connor’s party. She picked her outfit carefully, changing it twice, and did her makeup with shimmery gold eyeshadow and black winged eyeliner. Her hair flowed in soft waves just past her shoulders. Her phone started to ring, and she smiled at her reflection as she answered it. “You almost ready?” Andrew asked.

“Yes,” Alison replied, “are you excited?”

“More than you know.”

Alison’s smile widened. “Me too.”

Within the hour, Alison met Andrew at the edge of Lake Valmont. He was waiting for her with a full picnic spread out on a blanket. Sandwiches, cheese, strawberries, grapes, miniature apple and pumpkin pies, apple cider – she couldn't believe he'd done all of this for her. "What's all this for?" she asked, holding a hand up to keep the sun out of her eyes.

"It's our anniversary," he patted the ground next to him. Alison sat down beside him and took a sip of the apple cider he handed to her.

"Our anniversary isn't for a few months."

"No, I meant it's been two years since we met at the football game," Andrew clarified, and Alison felt her heart swell three times its usual size. She thought about how he was making her feel better because of something Connor had done back then and now he was patching her up again, right in that moment. She flung her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

"Happy anniversary," she whispered, still clinging to him. He stroked her hair. "Let's eat some of this food."

Every last bit of the picnic was savored. Andrew packed up the blanket and the basket so they could wander around the park and Main Street where all the festivities were happening. It felt wonderful to be there with Andrew, arms intertwined and walking through the crowd. The tables, stands, and storefronts were all decorated in autumn shades, and she could smell so much apple and cinnamon that she thought she'd died and gone to heaven. They participated in pumpkin painting and purchased lanterns to set afloat in the sky once the sun set. The lanterns were a new addition; Alison guessed someone on the planning committee had loved *Tangled* just a little too much, but she was grateful to whomever it was. She couldn't wait to see all the lights flickering in the night sky.

At some point in Alison and Andrew's wandering, Eleanor and Devan found them. They convinced Alison it was fully necessary to do the line dancing in front of City Hall. The three of them giggled and tripped over their own two feet as they learned the steps. Andrew stood back and watched with a small, amused smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He hated dancing, but Alison could barely take watching him miss out on all the fun. She broke from the line dance to pull Andrew back in with her.

"Ali, I don't know any of the steps!" he shouted over the music.

"Neither do we! We can all figure it out together!" she yelled back. He stayed firmly rooted in place as she held his hands in hers. She could see him torn between wanting to make her happy and the anxiety he'd been fighting all day. "Andrew, I promise it'll be okay," Alison implored.

"Only for a little bit," he surrendered. Her smile was radiant as they returned to the dance floor. Eleanor and Devan cheered and clapped for him. They danced for two songs and then Alison told her friends they were going to take a break. He had said *only for a little bit*, and Alison wanted to make sure she honored that.

The crowd had thinned ever so slightly, allowing more calmness and quiet to the evening air. With the sun mostly set, their surroundings appeared dimmer with a deep periwinkle haze. Golden twinkle lights shone above them, contrasting with the blue hues of dusk. It occurred to Alison that Andrew hadn't brought up Connor once today. She hadn't told him the full story about what happened Thursday afternoon, and although she wanted to ask him about it now, she suspected this was another gift for her. He was being careful to not bring up anything that might upset her or cause a fight. "Andrew?" She broke the compatible silence they'd been walking in.

"Hmm?"

“Thank you for giving me a perfect day.”

He threw her a crooked smile and a sideways glance. “The pleasure was all mine.”

“We should probably head to the lake. It’s almost time for the lanterns.”

As the lanterns floated up and up and into the night sky, Alison imagined she was letting go of Connor. Of their past friendship. Of whatever hold he had over her. All of it, she released into the blackness. She let go of the overwhelming need to come to his rescue, the anxiety over how Lily was doing, everything but the joy and peace she was feeling in this moment. Alison looked over at Andrew and found him staring at her, bathed in the lantern’s warm yellows and oranges. She held onto that warmth between them all the way home despite the coolness of the October night. It spread from the top of her head to the tips of her fingers and toes as Andrew gave her a long goodnight kiss on her porch.

She was practically humming while she took the step one at a time, wanting to savor the night for as long as possible. The warmth spreading throughout her body turned ice cold when she opened the door of her bedroom and saw Connor waiting on the edge of her bed for her.

Alison gasped. “How did you *get* here? Did you walk?”

“I borrowed someone’s car. But that’s beside the point. I came to tell you I’m sorry I reacted badly. Lily hasn’t woken up yet. The doctors said not waking up right away is normal, but I can’t stop thinking it’s not. Please say you’re still willing to help me,” Connor spoke as she scowled at him.

Alison pressed her fingers to her forehead, trying her best not to scream or cry out of frustration. She closed her eyes slowly and refused to open them for a long moment. When she did, she took a deep breath and swallowed hard at the sight of Connor still in her bedroom, still

expecting her to help him. Alison had been hoping he'd disappear in the time it took her to blink.

“Connor. Get out of my room and out of my house *right now*,” she said through gritted teeth. Not only was she angry at his audacity but also because he'd stolen this perfect day from her. He needed to leave so she could salvage what was left of her fairytale.

“Ali—”

“No. We can talk about this tomorrow. Or the next day. Or maybe never. But right now, you need to leave.”

“Promise you'll meet me at the treehouse tomorrow. Then I'll go.” Connor folded his hands together and jutted out his lower lip.

“Whatever, fine. I'll meet you at the stupid treehouse.”

“Thanks, Ali,” he said and disappeared out the door behind her. She listened for the bottom stair to creak, but he must have skipped over it. She counted another ten seconds before sinking to the floor. Exhausted, she thought, *there's no way in hell I'm going to that tree house tomorrow.*

Chapter 5

October 14 - 15

The sun streamed through Alison's window the next morning, bright and unrelenting. She rolled over to face the other side of the bed in the hope that she could fall back asleep. Before she could, she remembered her plans to study and do homework with Eleanor. With a groan, Alison pulled herself into an upright position and checked her phone. A couple news headlines that she opted to ignore for the time being, some Twitter notifications, but nothing from Eleanor. She typed out a quick text: *when do u want to go to the library?*

She knew better than to expect an immediate response. It wasn't even 9 A.M. Eleanor wouldn't be up for another hour, at least. Alison wondered if Connor was already at the treehouse. She couldn't imagine him waking up so early to meet her. God, she wished the sun didn't have to be so bright. Alison moved from the bed to her desk where her back would be facing the window instead. Sitting with her legs folded underneath her, she consulted her weekly planner to see which assignments needed to be completed for the next morning.

She saw twenty calculus problems from a page in her textbook (disappointing but unsurprising) and a reading for AP Psych. She had hoped to review her French essay to ensure everything was conjugated properly. Alison felt confident she could finish all those assignments today with Eleanor and their cups of coffee surrounded by shelves filled to the brim with books of all shapes and sizes.

While she waited for word from Eleanor, she made herself her favorite breakfast – French toast – and cracked open a book to read while she ate. The rest of the house was silent

and empty, as it usually was in the morning on weekends. When she was a kid, she remembered being woken up early by her mother to get dressed and pack a bag for her Aunt Carol's house. Alison loved going to Aunt Carol's. She'd play with her older cousins in the backyard and there was an old desk in the corner of the dining room where Alison used to sit and color or write for hours. The desk got so full that she and Aunt Carol needed to go through it a couple of times throughout her childhood.

Of course, there were days where she went to another relative's house or sometimes even Connor's, but Aunt Carol's had always been her favorite. She remembered how sad she was when she got old enough to stay home by herself. And sadder still when her Aunt Carol passed away two years ago. But it was nice to have the house to herself sometimes. She liked the silence and the independence. For some reason, it felt like she was more herself on days like this one more than at any other time. It wasn't that she acted any differently, but she supposed she didn't feel a need to perform for anyone. No matter how well you know someone, Alison thought, it always feels like you can't be fully yourself unless you're alone.

Her phone pinged on the table next to her. It was Eleanor: *sorry i have to cancel, not feeling well and my mom is insisting i stay in bed for the entire day.*

Alison replied: *it's okay, feel better soon <3*

Setting the phone down on the table and staring blankly into the space in front of her, Alison tried to decide what she wanted to do. She could go to the library alone, but that felt wrong. And lonely. She could try to find someone else to study with, but that felt like a waste of time. Instead, she settled on staying home, brewing her own pot of coffee, and doing her homework at the kitchen table. There was more room to spread out at the table than there was at her desk.

She worked steadily on each assignment with intent focus. That didn't stop her from getting half of the calculus problems wrong the first time around, but she persevered. With two of her three assignments done, Alison decided to take a break. She filled her water bottle and set out toward the woods at the back of her yard. Somewhere in the midst of doing her homework, she got the nagging feeling that Connor was waiting for her like he had said he would be. As angry as she was, she could also see the situation from his perspective – he wanted as few people to know as possible, and Alison had told someone within a matter of days without so much as giving him a head's up. It made her seem untrustworthy, even if he knew she wasn't. And it wasn't like she'd never said something she didn't really mean in the heat of the moment. Connor came to her for help when he couldn't trust anyone else, and Alison couldn't ignore that. Or ignore him. Despite her feelings from the night before, she headed to the treehouse.

She considered turning back around and going home a few times, but something nameless and indescribable inside her wouldn't allow it. So, she continued to walk down the picturesque autumn path, breathing in the chilled air and listening fondly to the leaves crunching beneath her feet.

The treehouse slowly came into view. Alison looked up at it with the same wonder and curiosity she'd had as a child. She scanned the surrounding area, looking for Connor. Had she really come all this way, put her pride aside, for him to not show up? A frown spread across her face. A branch snapped from somewhere behind her. She whirled around, searching frantically for the source. Connor Weston stood leaning against a tree, surveying Alison with a glint in his eyes. She wasn't sure what the glint held – surprise, satisfaction, maybe? – but now that she was here, he would find a way to convince her to stay.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come,” Connor said in a low voice. The sunlight danced across him in a way that accentuated the circles under his eyes, only deeper since their conversation in the diner, and his normally coiffed hair was now disheveled. Alison was also almost positive he hadn’t changed clothes since she’d seen him in her bedroom the night before.

“I wasn’t sure I’d come either,” she admitted.

“Well,” he paused. “I’m glad you did.”

“Are you *sure* running away is the best thing to do? Can’t you st—”

“Stay?” Connor cut her off. “No, I can’t. It’s complicated, but I’m sure you’re aware that according to most of the people in this town, I’ve become somewhat of a delinquent. This party would be the last straw for me.”

“Part of growing up is standing firm and facing the mistakes you’ve made instead of running away,” Alison pointed out.

His jaw was set. “You’re not wrong. I just want to go somewhere where I can start over. Where I might actually have a chance at being a better person. I don’t think that can happen here. Also, Lily... I don’t know if she’ll ever be able to forgive me. When she... *If* she wakes up...” Connor lowered his gaze to the ground, kicking a small rock with the tip of his foot. “Isn’t it better to leave? Isn’t she better off without me around? Aren’t *you*?”

Alison opened her mouth and closed it again. She wanted to tell him that wasn’t true, that people weren’t *better off* without him, but she wasn’t sure. Her life had certainly been easier when they were still ignoring each other; however, from what she knew, Connor was a good older brother to Lily.

“So... Running away is supposed to be a selfless act?”

He pursed his lips, most likely thinking he had never been described as selfless in his entire life. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Will you ever come back?” Alison asked. The voice inside her head screamed *why do you care so much?* The truth was, she didn’t know. Was it because she didn’t want Lily to feel abandoned by both her father and now, her brother? Alison was an only child, but she loved Lily like an older sister. Or was it because she cared about Connor and knew if he left, she’d never hear from him again?

“I don’t know. A clean break might be better.” Connor shrugged. Alison’s heart sank.

“What if Lily wants you to come back?”

Connor looked down at his feet again, considering. “I might come back if it’s what she wanted,” he relented, looking back up at Alison with a smirk. “You can say you’ll miss me, Ali. I promise I won’t tell.”

She scoffed at him. For the moment, she thought, it was best to help him as she promised she would. Alison wasn’t giving up though – if there was any chance she could convince him to stay, she would.

“I need to talk to Devan some more, but we agreed changing your appearance and creating a fake identity would be necessary. They also thought my idea of leaving while most of the town is otherwise preoccupied was smart. I was thinking maybe... the night of the Homecoming dance.”

“That’s in two weeks.”

“Yes,” Alison confirmed. “I think that will be just enough time to get everything in order.”

“Okay,” Connor said, nodding.

“Okay,” Alison repeated. She wasn’t sure what was supposed to come next. Was that the conclusion of the conversation? Did he want to talk about the plan more? She stared at him and his less-than-ideal appearance. “Connor... Don’t take this the wrong way, but when was the last time you showered? Or slept? Or ate a meal from something other than a vending machine?”

His mouth lifted at the corners ever so slightly before fading back into a neutral expression. “It’s been a little bit,” he admitted.

“Do you want to come back to my house? I could make us something to eat,” Alison offered.

“I think I’m just gonna go home. But thanks.”

She didn’t completely believe him, but she didn’t push it. Connor started to walk away. “Connor?” Alison called after him and he turned back to face her. “Meet Devan and me here on Tuesday after school.”

“Got it,” he said before turning back around and leaving her alone by the treehouse.

On Monday morning, Alison went to school and did everything the same way she always did. She breezed through her morning classes, was reminded by Eleanor that they were supposed to hang up Homecoming posters after school (she had convinced her mother to let her out of bed today even though she didn’t feel quite at 100% yet), and talked briefly with Devan about meeting with Connor.

After the final bell rang, Alison made her way to her locker to put her textbooks away and grab the posters from Mrs. Brady’s office, who had been in charge of the SGA for a long time. Alison’s mother remembered her being there when *she* was in school too. Her ears perked

up at the sound of Lily's name coming from somewhere to her right. Alison moved slower, pretending to be arranging the things in her locker so she could hear the rest of the conversation.

"Have you heard from her lately? She was supposed to come to my house for a sleepover, but she never showed up."

"Weird... I haven't heard from her. And she hasn't been to school in a little while now. She sits a few rows away from me in Algebra II, but her seat is empty every day."

"I hope she's okay."

Alison hoped she was okay, too. The girls talking about Lily started a new conversation and continued on their way to the buses. She was alone at her locker once more, feeling a growing concern for Lily. The night of the party, Connor had never told Alison exactly what had happened to Lily. She had her suspicions, but none of them were confirmed.

She closed her locker and left to go find Eleanor, who was waiting for Alison on the bench by the main office. Eleanor sprang off the bench and fell into step beside Alison. She handed her half the stack of posters.

"So... I heard two girls talking about Connor's sister just now," Alison said as they hung the posters every few feet down the hall. There was no real need to keep her voice as quiet as she was – hardly anyone was still in the school. She just didn't feel right saying it any louder.

Eleanor shot a wary glance at her after taping up another poster. "What did they say?"

"That Lily hasn't been to school since the night of Connor's party."

"So, she's still in the hospital?" Eleanor surmised.

"Yeah. Something about this doesn't seem right to me," Alison said, "my mom hasn't brought up Lily or Connor or their parents at all, but she spends so much time in that hospital. I find it hard to believe she hasn't caught wind of the situation at all."

Eleanor nodded. “It does seem kind of weird. What happened to Lily, anyway? Did Connor tell you?”

“No. But I didn’t ask directly or anything. I could try to ask the next time I see him.”

“If he knows more than what he told you, what makes you think he’ll tell you now?”

“That’s a fair point,” Alison allowed, “all I really know is she was unconscious when I got there. That could’ve been any number of things. I think I’m going to try to ask anyway.”

“I’m sure being more confrontational won’t cause any problems at all,” Eleanor said sarcastically. Alison bit down on her lower lip in response.

They put the posters up in silence for a few extra long minutes. “I forgot to tell you what Valerie did during our last mock trial meeting...” Eleanor broke the silence, launching into a story about how Valerie was making an attempt to overthrow Eleanor as team captain. At the end of the story, she concluded, “All I’m saying is I spent the entirety of high school making our team as strong as it is, and she’s been here for less than five seconds. I’ll be damned if she ruins all my hard work.”

“I’m sure it’ll all be fine, El,” Alison said in her best comforting voice, “the rest of the mock trial team absolutely adores you. Or is afraid of you. Valerie won’t be able to convince them to turn against you.”

They talked a little more about the situation with Valerie – Eleanor spiraling over what she could have possibly done to offend Valerie and Alison trying to calm her down – before moving on to their college plans (Alison torn between wanting to get into the best photojournalism program possible while also not wanting to potentially do long-distance with Andrew and Eleanor narrowing down her list of dream schools to Yale, Wellesley, and UPenn). Finally getting through the last of the posters, Eleanor and Alison decided on a date for dress

shopping before saying goodbye at the school entrance. Eleanor was riding her bike home today, and Alison was taking her car, as usual.

Alison took a detour on the way home, choosing to drive slowly past the hospital with the knowledge that Lily was still somewhere behind the doors. She wanted to go in, to find Lily, to figure out what was going on for herself because she didn't fully trust Connor to tell her. Instead, she ignored the desperate need for answers and reluctantly turned back to her house.

Chapter 6

October 16 - 17

It was the first time Alison had been in the treehouse in years. She knew it was the same place; it had the same musty smell, the same rays of sunlight hitting the same spot on the wall they always had. Yet somehow, it seemed completely different. It felt smaller than it had when she and Connor were kids. And it was clear *someone* (Connor) had decided to stay here at some point in the years after they had stopped coming together. There were an absurd number of blankets piled on top of each other as well as two pillows shoved in the right corner. Right next to the makeshift bed were bottles of Coca Cola, cans of Monster Energy, and bags of chips. Alison suspected if she searched hard enough, she'd be able to find a stash of weed somewhere. Maybe even something worse. *Don't think about it*, she thought to herself.

“You used to hang out here by yourselves?” Devan asked, raising an eyebrow.

Alison nodded, turning to face them. “My parents have always been... Extremely trusting. I think it's because I've never really given them a reason not to be that way.” *Until now*, Alison's thoughts interjected. “They have their moments of overprotectiveness, but they're few and far between.”

“Did anything ever happen between you and Connor?” They raised their voice suggestively at the end.

“No!” Alison replied a little too fast, a blush spreading furiously across her cheeks.

Devan smiled. “Was he your first kiss?”

“Okay, yeah, maybe,” she admitted, “I’m pretty sure it meant more to me than it did to him.”

“I think that’s a pretty fair assessment.”

Alison allowed herself to think about the kiss for the first time since it happened in middle school. The day it happened, Alison and Connor came to the treehouse before dinner to work on pre-algebra homework together. Connor wasn’t the best student, but he was always a genius when it came to math. And she needed the help. Desperately. She recalled the way he patiently helped her through each type of problem until she could manage to do them all by herself and the way the earth smelled like rain from the storm the night before. If it hadn’t been for the kiss that would come later, Alison didn’t think she’d remember these details with so much clarity. After they finished the worksheet, they sat across from each other and played cards, talking about random things until they landed on the topic of crushes and first kisses. Connor was crushing on this other girl while Alison was busy crushing on him. He said he wanted to practice. He was sure the girl he liked already had her first kiss, and he didn’t want to be awful at it. So, there they were, sitting across from each other over a messy deck of cards, eyes wide.

“Can I kiss you, Ali?” he had asked in a soft voice.

“Yes,” Alison had replied, even though she knew he didn’t like her that way. Even though she knew it would mean something different to him than it would to her. When their lips met, Alison thought maybe *this* kiss could change his mind. The butterflies in her stomach were rapid and fierce, and she thought, *there’s no way he doesn’t feel this too.*

Alison’s eyelids popped back open as he pulled away, hoping to see the butterflies in her stomach reflected somewhere in his expression. She didn’t find them. The wave of

disappointment that rolled over her was excruciating. She and Connor never kissed again, and they never talked about it after that day either. Alison didn't know if he'd ever gotten to kiss the girl he liked. She also didn't know if he'd ever even considered the possibility of her having feelings for him, but she did know she thought about their kiss for a long time after it had happened. Shortly after was when Connor started to distance himself, when he made his new friends and treated her like some kind of pariah. So, in turn, Alison forced herself to stop romanticizing that kiss and tried to move on with her life.

She walked around the perimeter of the treehouse in an attempt to avoid talking about the kiss or how naive she'd been to think he'd fall in love with her and they'd live happily ever after, especially in eighth grade. There was a little shelf with books and DVDs right near the treehouse entrance, and Alison laughed at the sight of the portable DVD player. She pulled it off the shelf and showed it to Devan. "We brought this up here because we wanted to watch movies together. My parents got it for me the one year we went to Greenwood Adventureland."

Devan laughed too. "It's so bulky," they observed. "I can't believe we went from that to our iPhones? That's so wild?"

"Hey, what's all the laugh—" Connor stopped short as he got into the treehouse and saw Devan and Alison standing there, losing their minds over an old portable DVD player. He pointed at it. "It looks like an oversized Gameboy."

The three of them continued laughing for a minute before settling into a weird kind of silence. Alison didn't know how to transition from making fun of the silly little portable DVD player to planning a quick getaway for someone who may or may not have participated in various illegal activities in the past few years.

“I hate to ruin the fun,” Devan started, “but we really need to get the plan in place if we want to do this the night of the Homecoming dance.”

“Okay, so we’ve all discussed changing appearance and getting a fake ID. I was thinking last night that you should get a burner phone,” Alison said, shifting gears.

Devan nods. “Burner phones are a good idea. You’ll both need one if you want to keep in touch. I would also suggest leaving a trail just in case your parents decide to look for you. Make lots of stops and take out small sums of money along the way. When I ran away, I used a dating app to find people who would let me crash at their place. If you’re worried about being found out from social media, you could hang out in coffee shops or diners and sweet talk someone into letting you stay with them.”

Connor and Alison shared a glance and silently decided not to ask for further details. Devan continued, “Another option is like... Camping? I don’t know how outdoors-y you are.”

“I’m not really, but maybe I could do a bit of both?”

“You can take some of my family’s camping gear. It’s in the attic. We stayed up at the campgrounds like, one time. My dad absolutely hated it,” Alison offered.

“I just thought of one thing,” Devan said. Connor and Alison both looked at them. “You should go to the dance for a little. So people see you there.”

“If he goes to the dance, when will we change his appearance?”

“There’s a motel at the bus stop on the edge of town. There never seems to be many people there,” Devan suggested.

“So... Step One... Get Connor a fake ID,” Alison began.

“I already have one so I can just ask the person I got it from to make me a new one. Hopefully he’ll be able to make my hair and eyes a different color in the photo,” Connor chimed in.

Alison bit her tongue to avoid making any snide comments. She thought, *it’s one thing to need one in a situation like this but to already have one?*

“Step Two...” Alison said, shaking off the judgmental thoughts. “Two burner phones and a small sum of money to get the trail started.”

Devan looked at the calendar on their phone. “I’ll grab the burner phones when I go to work tomorrow. You’ll have to set it up yourself, but I can get it. Easy.”

“Step Three: Gather the bare necessities in a backpack or small-ish suitcase. Step Four: Maybe leave a note for your mom? Maybe she won’t look for you if you ask her not to. Just a thought. Step Five: Go to the Homecoming dance. Step Six: Leave early, dye your hair, and put contacts in at the motel. Step Seven: Get on the bus, don’t turn back. Step Eight: Leave a trail, take out money at a couple places, use your burner phone to keep in touch with me. Does that sound about right?”

“I think it sounds like a solid plan,” Devan approved.

“Okay. I guess that’s it then,” Connor agreed.

Alison looked at him for a moment, feeling incredibly strange all of a sudden. If she had told twelve- or thirteen-year-old her that in a few years, she’d be helping her best friend run away from home, she would’ve never believed it. She would’ve asked why the plan wasn’t to convince him to stay. All of this happening in the place where they spent most of their time as kids? The place where they’d had their first kiss together? When did they grow up? And how did they grow into this? Alison blinked, disoriented.

Connor's phone started to buzz in his pocket, and he took it out, looking confused. His confusion transformed into alarm in a matter of seconds. "Mom?" he answered the phone.

"Connor Anthony Weston, why am I just finding out about your sister being in the hospital? Where are you? How did this happen? You better have a damn good explanation, or I swear—"

Connor tilted his head up to the ceiling of the treehouse as his mother yelled at him. Alison couldn't quite catch all of it, but it seemed like she was not happy her daughter had needed emergency surgery and she hadn't been informed. And as if that wasn't bad enough, Ziegler's Towing had also called about her son's car.

"Mom... I'm—" he started, but she didn't let him finish. "I'll be home soon. I'm sorry." She gave a short reply before he hung up the phone. He looked at Devan and Alison with a look of pure dread plastered on his face.

All he said was, "I have to go home."

"Do you want me to drive you?" Alison asked.

"No, it's fine. I'll talk to you later," Connor replied with a false sense of calmness.

He climbed down the ladder and disappeared from sight. Devan and Alison didn't stay much longer, agreeing to talk again tomorrow after Devan was done with work. On the way home, Alison thought more about she and Connor growing up into people very different than expected. She'd always imagined a life similar to her mom's. She met Alison's dad when they were young, and they started dating in high school and that was it. She got pregnant shortly before they were scheduled to graduate. That was the only difference Alison imagined for herself – she wouldn't get pregnant before going to college. Her mom still managed to go to school and become a nurse, but Alison could tell she was supposed to come later in their life plan. If her

mom hadn't gotten pregnant when she did, Alison thought she would've wanted to travel more. See the world.

And Alison had always wanted to do the same, which was part of the allure of photojournalism. When she was a kid, she'd hoped Connor could come with her wherever she went. She imagined them going to every country together and seeing the sights in between her assignments and eventually coming back to Grandview to settle down. Start a family. She had no idea Connor would turn into a boy she wouldn't even recognize until it started to happen.

The house came into view, light glowing in the windows like a Thomas Kinkade painting. Alison opened the door and smiled at the sound of her parents in the living room, laughing in unison over something on the television. As the door shut behind her, Alison's mom came out to the kitchen with two empty mugs. "We weren't sure when you'd get back or if you would have dinner with Devan, so we got you roast pork lo mein from Dragon Palace. It's in the fridge."

Alison watched her mom walk past in her favorite Fleetwood Mac shirt and plaid pajama pants to refill the mugs with chocolate milk, her nearly black hair that was the same as Alison's pulled back into a loose bun. "Thanks, Mom," Alison replied with a smile as she shuffled back to the couch to pass Alison's dad his mug and curl up next to him. The quietness, the peace... It was all Alison ever wanted for herself back then, and it was still what she wanted now. But instead of imagining it with Connor, she imagined it with Andrew. And honestly, the fantasy felt a hundred times better with Andrew sitting next to her than it ever had with Connor. Connor, even when they were kids, was never the type of person she could have a simplistic relationship with. He fought her at every turn, disagreed with her just for the sake of watching her get mad, picked at her weakest spots to prove he could. Never a source of comfort. Alison wondered if this was

what he meant when he said he wanted to start over and become someone new. Did he want this type of life? The type of life where you come home to your person and fall into them and tell them all about your day while watching a random sitcom on TV? Alison couldn't imagine him in a role like that.

After heating up half of the lo mein and saving the rest, Alison stole a last glimpse at her parents before going up to her room for the night.

“Just try it, I promise you'll love it,” Alison coaxed the vanilla sweet cream cold brew into Connor's hands as they sat by the window in Sugar Acres Cafe. Normally, she ordered nothing but pumpkin spice in the fall, but she hadn't been in the mood when she entered the cafe.

“Ali, I don't like—” Connor protested, but Alison shook her head fervently.

“I don't believe for a second that anyone could deny the deliciousness of a vanilla sweet cream cold brew.”

He rolled his eyes in response, but took a hilariously dainty sip from the cup. His eyes widened, and Alison smiled, smug. “Now take this five and go get yourself the same thing,” she directed while holding out the money. She sat at the table looking out at the sunlight on the lake as she often did on days like this, waiting for Connor to come back with his own coffee and for Devan to walk through the door freshly done with work. A few minutes later, Connor was back to sitting across from Alison with his cold brew in hand. “So... What happened with your mom last night?”

Alison knew as soon as she said it that the light and almost playful energy before the two of them would dissipate, but she took her chances. “You heard her. She was upset,” he said, vagueness on purpose just to irritate her.

“Yes. And?”

“And nothing. I told her Lily and I got in a car accident while she and dear old Dad were away and I took her to the hospital immediately after. I apologized for not calling, said I was pissed at her about Dad, and that I was also terrified to tell her that Lily got hurt on my watch. Very basic, minimal detail. Obviously, left out the part about leaving the wrong phone number at the nurse’s station...” Connor took another look sip of cold brew accompanied by avoiding eye contact.

“We never really talked about what exactly happened...” Alison gave him a look.

He glared back before turning his stare out the window. All Alison could think was that Lake Valmont had done nothing to deserve the look of death he was giving it. “I think you probably already have a pretty good idea of what happened without me needing to spell it out for you.” Connor’s jaw was tense. Alison’s eyebrows knit together.

“Did someone...” Alison’s voice faltered as she imagined the worst. She couldn’t help but think back to how Connor had placed the note in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* of all the books in the school library. “Did someone assault Lily?” Alison whispered.

The little golden bell chimed from its spot above the door, and Devan came in. They wore a Matisse t-shirt under a black zip-up hoodie with cuffed jeans and Converse sneakers. For some reason, Alison had been expecting a shirt with Walmart logo, but she guessed they’d decided to go home and change before meeting her and Connor. When Alison looked back at Connor, she could tell he didn’t want to talk about it anymore now that Devan was here. He hadn’t really wanted to talk about it in the first place. Even though he hadn’t gotten a chance to respond, Alison felt as though she had all the confirmation she needed from the look on his face.

Devan came over to the table after being served – hot maple latte – and placed the Walmart bag with the two burner phones presumably inside on the table.

The three of them set up the phones as fast as possible to attract minimal attention. Alison ordered three warmed-up blueberry muffins, and they took their stuff down to the lake. Devan found as many flat, round rocks as they could to skip across the surface of Lake Valmont while Connor and Alison sat and watched. Alison wanted to make sure she was home earlier than the day before. She had an essay that needed to be written by the end of the week. And she didn't tell either of them this, but she just really wanted to call Andrew.

“Hey beautiful,” Andrew’s voice came through as Alison flopped down on her mattress.

She smiled and said, “It’s nice to hear your voice. How’ve you been?”

“You know. School, work. Repeat. You’ve been busy.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” Alison grimaced. “Are you free on Saturday?”

Andrew paused, most likely thinking about his work schedule. “I think I can manage that.”

“Good. We’re going to do something really fun. And all my attention will be on you,” Alison promised, feeling better just from having plans set.

Alison and Andrew talked about what happened at school and for him, what happened at work after school. Neither of their days were very exciting, but Alison was still so happy to be listening to him talk. She wished she could stay on the phone forever.

“I have to go tackle this essay, but I can’t wait to see you this weekend,” she said, trying to sound enthusiastic rather than sad.

“I have some homework, too. Remember to take breaks and go to bed before midnight.”

“I make no promises,” Alison said just before ending the call.

The rest of the night was uneventful. Alison completed the first draft of her essay without any real issues before going downstairs to make herself something for dinner. After eating, she cleaned up the dishes and went back to work. She chipped away at her homework until her eyelids felt too heavy to keep open. Alison yawned as she got into bed, allowing all the muscles in her body to relax as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 7

October 18

“Why didn’t you tell me about Connor’s parents and his sister?” Alison’s mom asked as Alison tried to make herself breakfast before school. She poured waffle batter into the iron, closed it, and turned to face her mom.

Alison shrugged her shoulders. “I thought you’d heard about Lily by now, honestly.”

“And his parents?”

“Connor was and is really upset about his dad being back. I didn’t think it was my place to talk to anyone about it.”

Her mom pursed her lips with a hand on her hip. “I invited them over for dinner tonight.”

“*What?*” This felt bad. Very bad. Like the worst migraine you’ve ever had.

“When I called Amy, she sounded so stressed. I thought dinner with us could help. Good, home cooked meal... A chance to think about something else for a little while...”

Alison groaned, “Mom, her daughter is *in the hospital*. I don’t think you’re stuffed salmon is going to make her forget that.”

“Well, it beats sitting in the hospital cafeteria until it closes wondering if your daughter is going to recover from her traumatic brain injury,” she shot back.

“Okay, fine. Maybe you’re right,” Alison allowed, still thinking about all the ways this could end in disaster. It wasn’t that she thought something explosive might happen, but she could imagine how awkward it might feel. And how much Connor wouldn’t want to be sitting at the same table as his parents, plus Alison’s, plus Alison too.

“Do you know what happened to Lily? Amy wasn’t sure about all the details when we talked.”

Alison tried not to tense up. “Connor told me they got into a car accident. I think they were trying to avoid hitting a deer.”

Her mom handed her a cup of coffee. “You should check on your waffle before it burns to a crisp.”

“Shoot,” Alison said, looking at her waffle, almost too dark to be edible.

“The only thing that’s gonna save *that* is ice cream,” Alison’s dad teased as he came into the kitchen. He opened the fridge for milk and swiftly grabbed the Honey Nut Cheerios, a bowl, and a spoon.

“Ice cream for breakfast?” Alison asked, skeptical.

“Why not? Plus, this is an emergency,” her dad replied.

They had vanilla and black raspberry in the freezer, and Alison took a scoop of each rather than trying to decide between the two. She drizzled chocolate syrup on top in a zigzag and sat at the table with both of her parents.

“What time are the Westons coming?” her dad asked, looking at her mom.

“I told them to be here around six. So, try not to stay at the station too late tonight, please,” she said, taking a sip of her coffee. Alison took a sip of hers, too.

“I’ll be home, promise.”

Alison took a few more bites of waffle and ice cream before noticing the time on the stove. She’d woken up earlier than usual, but she’d be late if she didn’t leave in the next few minutes. “I have to go. I’ll see you later.”

“Have a good day, honey,” her mom called after her as she scooped up her backpack and headed directly for the door.

“You too, love you, bye!”

Alison found herself speeding almost the whole way to the school, getting into a parking space with minutes to spare. She stared out the windshield at the sun poking out from behind some clouds. She wondered if Connor’s mom had told him about tonight.

She didn’t have much time to dwell on it, seeing that she only had one more minute to get to homeroom. She knew Ms. Croll wouldn’t mind since she was rarely ever late, but she hated the feeling of rushing nonetheless.

As Alison sat at her desk in homeroom, she pulled out her phone to text Connor.

Alison: *did your mom tell you that you’re having dinner at my house tonight?*

Connor: *What are you talking about*

Alison: *my mom invited your family over for dinner when she heard lily was in the hospital*

Connor: *Ugh. I don’t want to deal with my parents tonight
Or yours (no offense)*

Alison: *none taken
but hey
maybe it’ll be fun :)*

Alison smiled, knowing that he would be rolling his eyes when he read her message, wherever he was.

Connor: *Ha-ha
I seriously doubt it*

Alison: *yeah, but at least she's making stuffed salmon. so you'll be having a good dinner for once*

Connor: *Mmm... stuffed salmon*

That almost makes up for how much the rest of this sucks

The bell signaling the end of homeroom rang, and Alison put her phone back in her pocket before heading off to her first class.

Her day went by pretty quickly. Time slowed during her least favorite classes, as it almost always did, but the rest was as fast-paced as she could hope for. Eleanor and Alison made a list of potential shops for Homecoming dresses they wanted to visit during lunch and discussed all the places in the city where they could have dinner. Neither of them went into the city often, so they always tried to make a day out of it whenever they had the excuse to go. Alison told her about dinner with Connor and his parents when Eleanor asked what was weighing on her. Eleanor's face had warped in concern at the mention of Connor's name. After that, Alison begged to talk about anything else.

When she made her way out to the parking lot, Alison was surprised to see Connor leaning against her car. He looked better than he had the last time she saw him in the sense that she could tell he'd had at least one shower and his clothes were freshly washed – no wrinkles in sight. “Finally,” he said, standing up straight. “I was starting to think you got lost in there.”

Alison tilted her head at him. “What are you doing here?”

“I go to school here too, you know.”

“I meant at my car. Where's the one you were driving the other day?”

“I had to return it. Plus, I felt like walking today,” he said as if it were a perfectly simple and reasonable explanation. Connor loved driving. But Alison let it go.

She nodded slowly. “Well, get in. Your house or mine?”

“Your house...” he said, then added, “We should stop to get more vanilla cold brews first though.”

Alison laughed and got in the driver seat. Per Connor’s request, they stopped at Sugar Acres Cafe for coffee and drove back to Alison’s house. “Hey Mom,” Alison called as she walked in the front door with Connor trailing closely behind.

“In the living room!” she called in response. Connor and Alison walked through the kitchen to the living room. Her mom was sitting in the rocking chair by the window with a book in her hands. If Alison knew her as well as she thought she did, it was probably Stephen King.

“Connor came home with me. We’re gonna do some homework before dinner in my room,” Alison informed her, still standing in the entryway.

“Okay, I’ll call you when it’s ready. And Connor, make sure your mom knows you’re here already. I don’t want her to worry.”

“Already texted her, Mrs. Young,” Connor said.

Alison and Connor went upstairs to her room, and Connor immediately sprawled across her bed like he used to when they were younger and still best friends. Alison had always imagined their friendship continuing and moments exactly like what was happening right now when they were kids – a scrapbook of memories of the two of them in her room where nothing changed except them getting older. There had been some changes over the years like her bed going from a twin to a queen and getting two more bookshelves than she’d needed back then. But for the most part, it was the same as it was the last time Connor had spent a substantial amount of time in the room. He took notice. “I thought maybe the walls would be a different color, at least.”

Alison sat in her desk chair and faced him. “I still like the green,” she replied.

He got up from the bed and looked at the bookshelves. He smiled at the long row of 39 *Clues* books. “Remember when you tried to hoard every copy of *Into the Gauntlet* because you didn’t want me to read it?”

“That’s not how it happened,” Alison grumbled.

“That’s exactly what happened.”

“No, you wanted to read the last book when you should’ve been reading like, the fourth one. I kept *Into the Gauntlet* away from you because you were trying to read the books out of order!”

“I remember it differently,” Connor said, but they both knew Alison was right.

“I’m sure you do,” Alison said, voice laced with sarcasm. She turned her attention to her desk, retrieving her textbooks and homework from her backpack.

“So, do you want to tell me about your life for the past few years?” Connor was back on the bed. She threw a glance at him, thinking of all the sarcastic things she could say in response. *Maybe you’d know if you’d stayed around.*

Instead, she answered seriously, keeping her voice as light as possible. “My life has been pretty much the same. I learned how to drive, I get good grades, I’m hoping to go to school for photojournalism...”

“You don’t want to be a wedding planner anymore?” Connor interrupted.

“No, Jennifer Lopez was great, but I think photojournalism is more my thing. I decided on that while we were still friends, but I guess I never told you.”

“What about your boyfriend? I’ve seen you two around.”

Alison hesitated. She didn't want to talk about Andrew with Connor. "I met him the night of the Homecoming game. The one where..." she trailed off, not wanting to remind him or relive it for the second time in the past few weeks.

Understanding flashed across Connor's face. "Yeah, I know the one. You've been dating for that long?"

"It took a few months to find him after the game. All I knew was his first name and that he went to Ridgeview. But when I did, I asked him out and we've been together since then."

"You never asked me out," Connor said it so fast, and it looked like he was regretting it already.

"I—" Alison started but stopped. She looked down at her feet. "You wouldn't have said yes," she said simply. It was a fact. When they were younger, she thought they'd have a chance, but there was always something stopping her from taking the leap. She didn't know what it was before, but she knew now it was her self-preservation kicking in. There'd always been a chance that Andrew wouldn't say yes, but something about him felt different. From the moment they'd met, Andrew had made Alison feel safe. He made her laugh, he stopped her from crying, (which Connor had caused), he gave her butterflies and made her feel calm all at once.

Now, Connor was the one looking down at his feet. "I'm sorry, Ali."

Alison bit her lip and went back to her homework, not wanting to talk at all anymore. They sat in the room in silence until Alison's phone started to vibrate on the desk next to her. "Hello?" She answered, not paying much attention to the caller ID.

"Hey, you busy?" Andrew's voice surprised her.

"Not super busy, no. I'm doing homework and Connor's here."

"Connor?" Alison could hear the jealousy creeping into his voice.

“My mom invited his family over for dinner, so he came home from school with me.”

“Ah,” he replied, sounding a little less upset.

“Was there any particular reason for calling?” Alison asked, writing down an answer to one of the problems on her worksheet.

“I got done with work early and I was going to ask if you wanted to come over for dinner and hang out, but I guess you can’t.”

“Ugh. I’m sorry, that sounds like it would be so perfect.”

“It’s alright. We’re still good for Saturday, right?” he checked.

“Yes. Saturday. I can’t wait,” she confirmed, spinning side to side in her chair.

“I’ll see you then and I’ll let you get back to your work.”

“See you then,” Alison echoed before adding, “Hey Andrew?”

“Yes, Alison?” he replied with the same tone.

“I love you,” she said, smiling wide at how true it felt.

She could hear the smile mirrored in his voice as he answered, “I love you, too.”

Alison hung up and went back to work, ignoring Connor’s stare. With every passing minute, it seemed like Connor’s staring was burning a hole into the back of her head. If he wanted to say something, why wouldn’t he just say it already? She was about to crack from the intensity when her mom called them down for dinner.

Connor’s mom was the first thing Alison saw when she got into the kitchen. She sat at the table with her long brown hair flowing past her shoulders and her olive green cable knit sweater complementing her fair skin. The second thing that came to her attention was Connor’s dad. It was strange to see him sitting at the table next to Mrs. Weston. Alison had met him before, but he was rarely around when he was supposed to be. Then he left, leaving Connor, Lily, and their

mother to wonder why they weren't good enough to stick around for. His hair was lighter than Mrs. Weston's, highlighted with some red when the kitchen lights hit it right. His whole appearance seemed a little scruffy. Alison tried to remember if he'd always looked like that. She plastered a smile on her face as she said, "Hi, so glad you could make it."

Alison thought she heard Connor sigh quietly behind her as she sat down across from his mom. He pulled out the chair next to Alison, across from his father. Alison's dad was sitting at one end of the table while her mom fluttered around to make sure everything was set and easy to reach. Eventually, she sat down at the opposite end from Alison's dad, and dinner began. Alison let her parents do most of the talking, only speaking up when asked a direct question by anyone at the table. The stuffed salmon was delicious, but it wasn't delicious to the point of distracting Alison from all the tension radiating off of Connor. Her mom had paired the salmon with linguine and brussels sprouts, and it seemed like everyone, at least, was enjoying the food. She could tell her mom wasn't pleased to see Mr. Weston, but she smiled and tried to make conversation with him anyway. Alison admired her kindness. It was something she tried to emulate, but often struggled to achieve.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but I was wondering if there was any update on Lily?" Alison's mom tried to ask gently, but it was like all the air had been sucked out of the room. Alison was pretty sure she was holding her breath looking back and forth between her mom and Connor's.

Mrs. Weston glowered at Connor with tight lips. Out of the corner of Alison's eye, she saw him sinking further down in his seat. Alison had spent a lot of time being mad at Connor for so many different things, but in this moment, she felt bad for him. She remembered how he had looked when they first took Lily to the hospital and knew without a doubt that he'd been

terrified. He didn't want anything bad to happen to Lily. His mom was blaming him so much more than he deserved. It made Alison feel even worse to know he was blaming himself just as much.

"No, there hasn't been any real update since the surgery. They said they got the bleeding under control, but her brain activity still hasn't changed. The doctors are hopeful she'll wake up soon. They said sometimes, these things take time, but it's really just a waiting game at this point," Mrs. Weston replied.

"I've been reading and talking to her every day. The nurse told me it could help," Connor spoke for the first time since Alison's father had asked him how school was going earlier.

"We might not be in this mess if it weren't for you," his mom snapped, stabbing a brussels sprout with her fork.

"Yeah, Mom. It's all my fault. You leaving your children alone for the whole weekend just so you could have some kind of romantic getaway with the man who left you and his family totally wasn't a factor in any of this," Connor fumed.

"You're old enough to take care of yourself, Connor. Don't try to pin this all on me."

"Oh, screw you," Connor said. Alison pressed her lips together to avoid saying anything. *It's not my place, it's not my place*, she chanted over and over in her head.

"Don't talk to your mother that way," Connor's father said sternly, and all the tension that had been building throughout the night broke loose.

"You have no right to tell me how to treat anyone." Connor pushed his chair back and stormed out the front door. Everyone else sat at the table, completely frozen.

Before Alison or her parents could make an attempt to smooth things over or transition to a lighter topic, Mrs. Weston's phone rang. She answered, grateful for the distraction.

“We should go,” Connor’s mom said in a low tone once she ended the call.

Alison’s mother frowned. “Amy, I’m so—”

“Don’t worry about it, Sara. That was the hospital calling to let us know Lily woke up. I need to go see her.”

Alison’s mom didn’t have a chance to get in another word; the Westons had gathered what little they’d brought with them and left.

After another minute had passed, Alison looked at her mom. “Do you mind if I go look for Connor? I want to make sure he’s okay and tell him Lily’s awake.”

“Go. Tell him he’s welcome to our guest room if he doesn’t want to go home tonight,” she said, staring intently at the tablecloth.

Alison looked over to her dad to make sure her mom would be alright. He nodded. “It’s okay. I’ll help your mother clean up.”

With her denim jacket and shoes on, she went to the only place she could think to start looking for him. The woods were different at night, more menacing in the shadows and darkness. Their treehouse was slightly harder to find, but Alison managed after a few wrong turns. She climbed up the ladder and poked her head through the entrance. Connor was sitting on the makeshift bed with his head tilted toward the ceiling. Without saying a word, Alison walked over and sat next to him, pretending she didn’t see the tears rolling down his cheeks. She held out her hand, and he took it, leaning his head on her shoulder.

She didn’t know how long they’d been sitting next to each other in the dark. Eventually, she said, “Don’t go home. Stay with us tonight.” She waited for him to tell her to leave, to tell her he was fine and that she was reading too much into things, to push her away the way he always did.

Instead, he sniffled and just barely managed to say, “*thank you.*”

Chapter 8

October 19

“Dinner with the Westons sounds like a treat,” Eleanor said sarcastically from the dressing room beside Alison’s.

“Yeah, totally,” Alison agreed while she shimmied a dress over her shoulders.

“And he spent the night?” Eleanor asked.

“In the guest room. I was just as surprised as you.” Alison gently smoothed out the skirt before looking in the mirror. The dress she had on was pretty – dusty rose and airy with some floral lace details – but it was on the shorter side and the v-shaped neckline plunged much deeper than anything she’d ever worn. She debated adding that Lily had woken up. It felt strange to omit it from the conversation, and Eleanor would be happy to hear it, but she also didn’t have any more details. Lily was awake, but what did Lily remember from the night of the party? Did she remember anything? Had she spoken yet? Alison thought maybe it would be best to wait until she had more information to share. And to let this day be about the Homecoming dresses.

“Are you ready?” Eleanor’s question made it even easier to push the night before further into the back of her mind. There would be time to talk about Lily later.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Alison replied as she came out of the dressing room. Eleanor came out seconds later in a pale Cinderella blue strapless dress. The sweetheart neckline was much more modest than what Alison was wearing. “So, what do you think?”

“I think you look hot.” Eleanor had always been matter-of-fact and straight-to-the-point. It was one of the reasons she and Alison got along so well. Still, Alison blushed at the compliment.

“Thanks, I feel a little uncomfortable though.”

Eleanor nodded. “It’s a good dress if you want some shock value, but you’ve never been the type to want that.”

“That color goes so well with your skin tone. Do you think you’ll get it?” Alison asked.

“I don’t think so. Yours is too bold and mine isn’t bold enough.”

“We can both do better,” Alison said with a laugh.

The next dresses weren’t right either. Eleanor had convinced Alison to try on a long dress, but she’d always felt like those were more appropriate for the prom than Homecoming. And Eleanor’s next dress was her favorite color (emerald green), but still not unique enough to make her feel like she was making a statement. “If I can see Felicia from AP Bio wearing it then it’s not individualistic enough,” she had explained, and Alison could see her point. Even though no one would remember in a few years, there seemed to be a lot of pressure not to wear the same dress as anyone else.

Alison took out the list of dress shops from her coat pocket and crossed off the one they were currently in. “Let’s try this thrift store. Most of the stuff in there is usually very lightly worn or still has the original tags,” Alison suggested, pointing to the next store on the list. “If we find something, it’s less likely that anyone else will have it.”

“*Love* the way you think,” Eleanor said, already halfway out the door.

According to their map, the thrift store was a couple blocks away. As Alison and Eleanor walked to *Twice As Nice*, they felt the start of a weak drizzle. In a matter of minutes, it picked up to a steady rain, and Alison pulled a small umbrella out of her purse for her and Eleanor to use.

The inside of the shop was welcoming with its warm yellow light and cozy decor. The wooden floors were covered with a couple mismatched area rugs, and Alison could just make out the vintage armchairs placed outside the dressing rooms in the back corner. The racks of clothes were organized by color first, size second, with rows of shoes lined up underneath. There was a long table in the center of the room with accessories – necklaces, bracelets, earrings, things to place in hair. Alison couldn't wait to dive in. "Hi girls, can I help you with anything?" A woman whom Alison assumed to be the owner walked toward them from her spot behind the register. She was wearing her own vintage tee tucked into jeans underneath a cardigan, black hair pulled back with a velvety scrunchie.

"Yes, actually," Eleanor said. "We're looking for one-of-a-kind Homecoming dresses." She flashed the owner a smile.

"You've come to the right place. We just got some new dresses in that you might like."

Alison and Eleanor followed her to a collection of dresses near the back of the store. Eleanor's eyes widened as she pulled out an emerald green dress, much more interesting than the one from the previous store. Alison scanned the options, opting for a rose patterned midi dress. "Oh, *Ali*, you have to try on this one!" Eleanor exclaimed, holding up a dark fuchsia dress. It was sleeker than the dress in Alison's hands – between the floral pattern and the ruffles, it was definitely girlish – and felt like more of a modern choice. The lace on the back was the only form of embellishment.

"You don't think it's too boring?" Alison asked, unsure.

“*No*. It’s perfect for you. The style will show off your curves and your legs and the color will look great too. I’ve always thought you looked best in jewel tones.”

If Eleanor felt this excited about the dress, Alison knew she couldn’t *not* try it on. It turned out that there was only one dressing room, so they went in together and tried on their respective dresses facing in opposite directions. “Are you ready?” Alison asked once her dress was in place.

“Yes,” Eleanor replied. On the count of three, they spun around to face each other, letting out happy squeals when they saw how the dresses looked. Eleanor was stunning. The dress ended just above her knees, flowing loosely at the bottom as the golden rhinestones sparkled with every movement of the fabric. It had a higher neckline than most of dresses they’d seen, and yet it didn’t feel more conservative because of it. The top had the same beading pattern as the bottom, curling out from the neckline in a slight V-shape, accompanied by capped sleeves. It seemed to be the statement piece she’d been looking for all day.

“El, I will give you my right kidney if you promise to buy that dress.”

Eleanor laughed in response. “I’ll give you mine if you promise to get that one.”

Alison stole a glance at the mirror behind her. Eleanor had been right about the color complementing Alison’s skin tone. She thought there was a nice contrast between the dress and her eyes. It clung to her waistline and her hips in a flattering way and ended around the mid-thigh area. Slightly shorter than Eleanor’s, but not so much shorter that Alison’s dad would give her a disapproving look when she left the house. The thin straps came up at a slight angle, meeting in the center on the back of the dress where the zipper was. If Alison turned around, she was sure she’d see how lovely the lace looked against her exposed back. “Should we try on any other dresses before we decide?”

Eleanor shook her head. “When you know, you know. These dresses are perfect and if we tried on any other dresses, we’d just be comparing them to these.”

“Let’s see if they have any shoes and jewelry to go with them.”

They changed back into their regular clothes, feeling much less glamorous in them than they’d felt before they’d found the dream Homecoming dresses. The owner of the shop, who introduced herself as Cecilia, showed Eleanor a pair of point-toe heels with a thin strap around the ankle that matched the color of her dress perfectly. Cecilia and Eleanor scoured the shop for something to go with Alison’s dress and came up with a pair of shiny gold open-toe heels, also with a thin strap around the ankle as well as a slightly thicker strap that would be above her toes. “You should wear gold eyeshadow and jewelry to match the shoes,” Eleanor advised as Alison held the shoes in her hands.

Right before they paid for their Homecoming outfits, Eleanor found a pair of gold hoops with dangling emerald teardrops that she thought would complete the look if she wore her hair up. With that last addition, Alison and Eleanor checked out and promised to return soon.

“Dinner?” Alison inquired when they got back to her car.

“Oh yes, please. I’m starving. Do you want to try the Italian place we talked about at lunch the other day?”

“Sounds alright to me.”

“I should text my parents to tell them we’re going to dinner,” Eleanor said, more to herself than to Alison. Alison put the restaurant’s address into Google Maps and brought up the directions while Eleanor typed out a message, probably to her dad. He’d tell her mom so she wouldn’t have to answer about a hundred more questions before they could consider leaving the parking space. A few minutes later, Eleanor announced, “We’re all set.”

The Italian restaurant proved difficult to find, even with Google Maps' assistance. When they did find it, they were fortunately able to be seated right away and ordered a few appetizers to share. Now that there wasn't anything distracting her, Alison started to have more thoughts about Lily being awake and Connor staying the night and how she hadn't considered how she was going to tell Andrew. Or if she should tell Andrew. *Don't be ridiculous*, she thought to herself. *Of course you should tell Andrew*. But if she told him, he wouldn't be focused on how it made her a good friend. He would be focused on his jealousy. And there was no reason for him to be jealous. Nothing had happened, and Alison hadn't wanted anything to happen. She was just doing what she thought was the right thing – Connor probably would've spent the night in the treehouse if she hadn't brought him home. Plus, it hadn't even been her idea. Her parents offered him the guest room. *Maybe that's what you should tell Andrew. That it was your mom's idea*. Even though that would be the truth, Alison didn't know if it would make a difference to Andrew.

Alison let out an audible sigh, and Eleanor gave her a questioning glance. "What's on your mind?" she asked.

Alison paused before answering, "I wanted to wait until I knew more to tell you, but another reason Connor spent the night is because we found out his sister is awake. We were going to try to see her, but my mom thought that might not be a good idea considering what happened at dinner. And I just realized I don't know what to tell Andrew. I don't want to *not* tell him, but I don't want to fight about Connor anymore."

"I understand where you're coming from, but I get why Andrew's upset. You spent a long time letting Connor walk all over you and now you're pretty much doing that again. His

jealousy makes sense,” Eleanor said, “and I think it will only get worse if you keep this from him.”

“I know you’re right, but I don’t know if I have it in me to have the fight we’re almost inevitably going to have. I kind of just want to have a nice day with him. We haven’t seen each other in a little while...” Alison trailed off when she saw the waiter coming to take their dinner orders.

Once he left, Eleanor looked seriously at Alison. “Please tell me you’re going to tell Andrew,” she implored.

“Do I have to tell him right away? Or can it wait like a little bit?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t wait *too* long,” Eleanor emphasized.

“Fine. Okay. I’ll tell him. I just have to figure out how and when. Can we please talk about something else now?”

They spent the rest of dinner on lighter topics. Andrew, and Connor, and Lily being awake were all still looming in her mind, threatening to come back at any moment. The lighting in the restaurant was dim, the walls were a sunset golden yellow, and the floors were a dark hardwood. Frank Sinatra played at a soft, unobtrusive volume in the background. The food was delicious. Alison had ordered spaghetti carbonara and was not disappointed. It was much better than the recipe she and her family had made many months prior. Eleanor seemed pleased with her tortellini dish, too.

Alison and Eleanor left the restaurant feeling almost uncomfortably full with their takeout containers in hand, looking both ways quickly before crossing the street to the car. In the thirty minutes it took to get from the city to Eleanor’s house, Alison once again wrestled with how to tell Andrew about Connor. The fact that she was planning to help Connor yet again, the fact that

he'd spent the night, even if he was just in the guest room... And even if it was for a valid reason like Lily waking up and the argument he'd had with his parents... In her mind, Alison could already see the fight fueled by jealousy and concern for her well-being. What would be the point in going through all that turmoil when Homecoming (and therefore, Connor's departure) was so soon? Wouldn't it be better if Alison just kept it all to herself? *You have nothing to hide, so don't act like you do*, Alison tried to convince herself avoiding the issue wouldn't make it go away and it wouldn't get easier over time. She worked on convincing herself that it was the right choice, that she and Andrew could handle the argument and maybe it wouldn't have to be so bad. *You can handle this and so much more*, she thought over and over for the rest of the way home.

Chapter 9

October 20

The next morning, Alison got ready with extra care since it had been a little while since her last date with Andrew. She chose a dark blue shirt she knew he'd loved in the past and a skater skirt with a row of buttons down the front. For dress-up occasions, Alison usually opted to leave her hair down since she wore it in a ponytail so often, but she felt like it was more of a braid day. She started at the crown of her head and twisted her hair repeatedly until she got to the end. Her phone pinged to alert her of Andrew's most recent text – he was outside waiting for her – and she completed the look with simple winged eyeliner. She didn't want to keep him waiting, but she felt frozen to her seat in front of the mirror with a sudden wave of guilt. "You should just tell him," Alison told her reflection. *You know if you tell him, you'll ruin what could be a really good day. Isn't it better to have a really good day?*

Alison shook her head and went outside to see Andrew sitting in the front seat of his car with his right hand on the steering wheel as he analyzed his reflection in the rearview mirror. His other hand brushed a bit of hair back into its proper place. When he looked away from his reflection to meet Alison's gaze, she smiled. She loved watching him take in her outfits and makeup on days like this one and was happy to see he'd also picked something he knew she'd love. The crimson sweater made his eyes bright. She noticed it also made the nip in his cheeks from the cold even cuter. The rest of his outfit was still a mystery, but it was nice enough to know he'd chosen at least his shirt with her opinion fresh in his mind.

"How are you?" He asked as she slid into the passenger seat.

“I’m alright, a bit stressed about Homecoming but that’s normal,” Alison replied, trying not to think about how none of this was normal. She wasn’t lying to him, but she wasn’t telling the truth either. The guilt continued to gnaw at the edge of her empty stomach.

“I know you want everything to be perfect, but have you ever considered taking care of yourself?” Andrew said, only half-joking.

“I’ll be fine,” Alison reassured him. “Eleanor and I found the perfect dresses. I wish you could come to Homecoming with me and see mine,” She added.

“You’re the class president. You could always bend the rules for me,” Andrew once again half-joked. He knew she couldn’t. “Anyway, where do you want to go today?”

Alison bit her lip in thought for a moment. “Roller skating?”

“You know I don’t really love roller skating,” Andrew said as an answer.

“Only because you don’t know how,” Alison countered. “Let me teach you, *please*.”

Andrew sighed. “Fine, but I get to pick where we eat later.”

“Fine,” Alison agreed.

Her favorite roller-skating rink sat at the edge of Grandview and Ridgeview. When she would go with her parents as a child, everything was still the same as when they went as teens. Everything was painted in the same three shades of neon green, blue, and purple. The snack bar tables had the retro boomerang pattern, and the walls had the worst wood paneling. The carpet on the area outside the rink was torn up in various places, and a lot of the lockers didn’t shut right. Over the years, they repainted and went with a couple different color schemes, but things didn’t really change until they had a kitchen fire. For a while, it seemed like they weren’t going to be able to repair it and re-open. It was a miracle when they did. And when it did, it became one of the nicest places to hang out. The new rink had an impressive checkerboard pattern, and all the

new rental skates were white with pink or purple wheels. They updated everything from those rental skates to the snack bar menu and added on an area to have parties in the back. Alison loved that everything had changed so drastically, but it still felt like home when she walked through the doors.

They paid admission, laced up their rental skates, and made their way out to the floor. It was a Saturday morning, so it wasn't very busy. Mostly parents and very small children. Eventually, they'd get to the part of the morning when the DJ would play a couple skating games with them, and that's when Alison and Andrew would dip out to sit in the snack bar together. For now, it was time to teach Andrew how to properly roller skate.

Alison stood in front of him, backwards with his hands in hers. Skating backwards had never been her favorite way to skate, but it would be worth it if he could get it right and feel good about it. "The motion you wanna make with your foot is kind of the same as how we used our Razor scooters as kids," Alison told him.

"And then what?" Andrew asked.

She shrugged in response. "You just kind of keep going. Once you master that, I'll teach you how to do the scissor thing."

"Is that what you're doing right now?"

"Yes, but you'll be doing it facing forward. Backward skating is kind of hard."

Alison and Andrew made a few circles around the edge of the rink, slow and steady, the top 20 pop songs fading into the background. Andrew focused on not falling or losing his balance while Alison tried her best to assist. "Okay," Alison said with a slight pause. "I think you're getting the hang of it. Do you want to try without me holding your hands?"

“Sure,” Andrew said, looking anything but. She gave him an encouraging smile as she let go of his hands. They skated, side by side, and after a few rounds it felt like flying.

Alison showed him how to do the scissor technique for a little while as well as the more efficient way to turn she’d learned simply from watching her dad before they decided to take a break. “Snack bar?” Andrew suggested, and Alison nodded, heading for the nearest exit off the floor.

Hollie gave them a large bucket of fries with cups of cheese on the side and two sodas. They sat in the back corner booth with their food. There would still be dinner later that Andrew would choose, but that wouldn’t be for hours yet.

“Tell me about how school’s been for you. We’ve only been talking about me and Homecoming lately,” Alison said, popping a fry into her mouth.

He shrugged before he spoke. “It’s not nearly as busy for me as it’s been for you. I’ve been working on a video project with Patrick and Sam for a few weeks. It’d be done if they’d just schedule a time to hang out and shoot the video, but they’re barely trying. I’m probably going to have to do all the work so we get a grade.”

Alison nodded. “Group projects can burn in hell.”

He laughed. “Yeah. My other classes are going fine, I guess. I’m struggling with my lit essay, and I think I might’ve done bad on my physics test yesterday.”

“I suck at physics, but I could help with the essay if you want,” Alison offered.

Andrew shook his head. “You’re busy and it’s due soon. I’ll get it done on my own.”

Alison asked him to tell her more about Patrick and Sam, his two best friends. Andrew told her about how he thought Patrick might be keeping a secret from them. He’d been acting weird lately, and Sam was starting to hang out with a different group of people. Andrew and

Patrick weren't invited. Andrew said he didn't really mind because the other people Sam liked to hang out with were kind of bad news – he gave Alison a pointed look as if to say “*See? I can stay out of trouble. You should try it too,*” and Alison smiled and shook her head – but he did wish that Sam would put in more effort to hang out with him and Patrick. Alison wondered aloud if they'd stay friends after they graduated or if Sam would fully disappear into the realm of “*somebody that I used to know.*”

In her head, Alison catalogued all her friends into people she'd keep talking to and people who would also disappear into that we-were-friends-once-but-now-we-avoid-eye-contact-in-the-store type of thing. The latter wasn't as long as she was expecting it to be, but time would tell. She wondered where Connor fit into those categories. She hoped that she'd figure out a way to say no to him after the plan was all over and that he'd never have this kind of effect on her or her relationships again. Andrew and Alison finished their cheese fries and sodas and went back out to the rink.

Alison spun the two of them around under the disco ball while the music played so loud that they could barely hear their laughter. Little kids skated around them just like Alison used to do when she was their age. By the time they finished, Andrew was skating very well, and she hoped it meant he wouldn't be as opposed to coming back in the future.

They changed back into their normal shoes, gave the skates back, and Andrew held the door open as Alison walked into the parking lot. He caught up, falling into step next to her as they made their way back to his car. He started driving without telling Alison where he was going, so she tried to think of places in the same direction they were headed. Rather than stopping at any of the usual places Andrew liked to go, they stopped outside a small restaurant by his house that Alison had never been to before. Not with him or anyone else. The sign was

worn down, meaning it had to have been here for much longer than the time she and Andrew had been together, but she couldn't remember noticing it on any of her many drives to his house.

Inside, it was quiet. Other than one other person sitting in the back corner, Alison and Andrew had the place to themselves. The floors were carpeted, and the walls were covered in wood paneling, which Alison usually hated but it matched the rest of the decor quite nicely, making it feel like they were in a cabin in the mountains. They sat across from each other and looked closely looking at the menu. There weren't too many options, but each one sounded better than the last. "What are you getting?" Alison asked, looking up at him.

"I think I'm going to get the All-American Burger. You?"

Alison looked back down at the menu to reread the burger's description. It seemed pretty much the same as most burgers, but on a brioche bun and bacon. "I think I'll get that too."

"Did you see they have strawberry milkshakes?" Andrew asked with the knowledge that they were one of Alison's favorite things.

"Yes, I didn't know if I wanted to order one because I wasn't sure what I was going to eat yet... But a burger with fries and a strawberry milkshake sounds perfect." Alison knew she was eating way too many french fries, but she couldn't be bothered to care.

When the waitress came back, Andrew ordered the strawberry milkshake and the two burgers and she wrote all of it down in waitress shorthand, nodding as she finished. "That'll be out soon," she promised.

The milkshake came out first, and Alison sipped on it, humming at how good it tasted. "You never told me how dinner with Connor's family went," Andrew said once the straw was no longer between Alison's lips.

"It was tense. Connor's dad was there, and he hasn't forgiven him."

“That’s it?”

“There was a bit of a fight and Connor left the house while we were all still sitting at the table,” Alison hedged. *This is exactly why you should’ve told him earlier*, the voice inside her head chastised.

“Did he get home alright?” Andrew asked.

Alison felt like she suddenly knew how the deer had felt the night she’d tried to drive Lily to the hospital. “Well... Actually... He didn’t go home.” Andrew cocked his head to the side as a way of asking Alison what she meant by that. She fidgeted in her seat before saying, “He stayed at my house for the night.”

He *what?*?”

“In the guest room. You know, the one down the hall. Dinner went terribly, like I said, and after he left, his mom got a call that Lily was awake, and I knew Connor would want to know and my mom said we probably shouldn’t try to visit because of how mad Connor’s mom had been and how crappy his dad is and it was actually my mom who offered the guest room... I promise it wasn’t my idea. He really wasn’t doing well, Andrew... I wanted to make sure he was okay...” Alison thought being buried alive might be preferable to having this conversation.

“Were you even going to tell me?” Andrew demanded.

“I wanted – I wanted to avoid something like this,” Alison explained as her stomach twisted itself into knots.

“Are you keeping any other secrets from me?” The way Andrew said it made it more than a question – it was an accusation.

“Well, the plan to help him run away is back on,” Alison said in a small voice.

“I can’t believe this.” Alison winced at Andrew’s tone. She braced herself for more words, but they didn’t come. Andrew was staring past her shoulder in complete silence, the anger waving off of him in thick tendrils.

“Andrew, I’m—” Alison began to say, but he cut her off with a glare. *Sorry*, she thought.

They sat in silence for so long that Alison lost track of the amount of time. The waitress brought the burgers, looking curiously between them, and left without another word. Alison picked at her food.

Andrew paid for the meal, refusing to take any of Alison’s money when she offered, and then also refused to talk the whole way back to her house. He pulled up out front, cut the engine, and looked over at her.

“I’m sorry,” Alison blurted out.

“We went through almost the whole day without you telling me a thing. You just acted like everything was totally fine.”

“I just wanted us to have a good day. I didn’t want Connor to ruin it.”

“Alison, Connor didn’t ruin anything. You did by not telling me. If you had told me right away, this wouldn’t be happening right now.”

Alison thought about arguing that he would’ve still been angry if she’d told him the second she got in the car, but she refrained. “I’m sorry,” she repeated, hating how empty the word sounded. It didn’t convey the remorse she felt. People overused the word “sorry” all the time to the point where it meant nothing and now, she was here, using it too, wanting it to mean something but knowing that it didn’t.

“I know,” he replied. Not *it’s okay* or *I forgive you*. Alison looked down at her hands in her lap.

“How do I make this right?” she asked. For once, the guilt did not cause tears to spring to her eyes or cause her voice to tremble.

“You can’t. I just need time.”

Alison frowned. “Okay,” she conceded. She leaned across the center console to give him a quick kiss. “Thank you for today.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied.

“I love you,” Alison said, hoping that while saying sorry didn’t mean much, the words *I love you* would still mean something.

“I love you, too,” he answered with sadness and anger still clear in his voice. Alison pressed her lips together, debating whether or not she should stay in the car with him.

Without any sense of comfort or how much time Andrew would need, she opened the passenger side door and left. She stood on the porch until she couldn’t see the lights from his car and then she let a tear escape from the corner of her eye.

Chapter 10

October 21 - 23

The hospital was eerily quiet when Alison walked down the halls early Sunday morning. Visiting hours hadn't started, but when she'd thought about the possibility of running into Mrs. or Mr. Weston, she felt the anxiety levels rise all over her body. So, she came early and hoped the nurse her mom had always been close to, Ivy, would let her go in.

Ivy was reluctant but agreed – “I’ll try anything to get that girl talking at this point. Just don’t tell anyone I let you in before visiting hours,” she cautioned.

Lily was already awake, lying in bed with one of those bed trays that would normally have food on it. Instead of breakfast, Lily had a deck of cards, and Alison tried not to stare at the bandages wrapped around her head. “She’s been playing a lot of solitaire,” Ivy explained. “I’ll be right outside. Let me know if you need anything.”

Alison sat down in the chair next to Lily’s bed.

“Hi, Lily,” she said. Lily didn’t answer. “I know you’ve been through a lot. Do you want to talk?”

Still nothing.

Alison didn’t want to be too pushy, so she decided on just one more thing. “I know you’re not ready yet. That’s totally okay. I hope you’ll feel better soon.” Lily looked at Alison, but Alison wasn’t sure what emotion was in her eyes. “If you want to talk, you can tell Ivy. She’ll know how to reach me since you don’t have your phone.”

Alison walked towards the door. With her hand on the handle, she turned back. “I’m really glad you’re awake, Lil,” she said and left.

The rest of the day seemed to take forever. Alison tried to focus on her work, but it was only getting harder to do. She longed for the days when nothing particularly interesting was happening in her life. She yearned for simplicity, for her daily routine – going to school, doing her school assignments, running SGA meetings, grabbing coffee and thrifting with Eleanor, seeing Andrew as often as their schedules allowed, coming home and going on photography walks – it was so peaceful, and she had never wanted it any other way. But somehow, she was barely even thinking about it anymore. She was all tied up in whatever was going on with Connor and praying to everyone from Jesus to Zeus for Lily to be okay. It felt like nothing else mattered.

The next day, Alison was very aware that Andrew hadn’t called or texted since the fight. It had only been two days, so in the grand scheme of things, it hadn’t been a very long time. In Alison and Andrew’s world, though, two days was an eternity. Andrew didn’t live in Grandview; Alison didn’t have an excuse to see him in the halls at school. No lunches, no classes, no sightings on the walk from the school to her car. This never really bothered her, but it did now.

So much so that even though she knew he hadn’t had anywhere near enough time or space yet, she decided – during dinner while her dad passed the bowl of mashed potatoes across the table to her mom – that she was going to go to Andrew. She was going to drive to his house, and she was going to make him talk to her. On the way there, she thought about all the things she hadn’t been able to say to him on Saturday night. All the things she hadn’t fully processed at that point.

Alison understood why he was so upset with her for not telling him; she'd known it was a mistake to keep it from him even as she was doing just that, but she thought that this reaction was a little drastic. To not call or text at all? To be this mad when *nothing had even happened* between her and Connor?

Andrew's street came into view. The house was small and white with red shutters and a matching door, and yellow light glowed bright through the two front windows. Alison parked the car and strode up to the front door. Before she had a chance to knock, his golden retriever named Lucinda (from *The Spiderwick Chronicles*), or Lucy for short, started barking. "Luc, what is it?" His voice was muffled by the door, but it was clearly Andrew. Alison was grateful because she wouldn't have known exactly what to say to his mother if she'd been the one to answer. He opened the door in sweatpants and a t-shirt, his hair sticking up in places where it usually laid flat. Surprise flickered across his features as he saw Alison.

"I'm sorry for just showing up like this, but you haven't been answering my texts." Now that she was here, Alison felt like she'd made the wrong decision. There wasn't a single part of his expression that made her think he might be happy to see her.

"That's kind of the whole concept of *needing time and space*."

"Andrew, I know it was wrong not to tell you right away, but I *did* tell you. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Can we not do this here?" he whined, crossing his arms across his chest.

"Sure, yeah, of course," Alison answered. "Where do you want to do this?"

"Come in, but be quiet. My mom and sisters are asleep."

The house was as welcoming on the inside as it looked from the outside. His mom collected little trinkets from every place she'd ever gotten to visit, and they were sporadically

placed on the shelves where they kept DVDs, on the coffee table, on the windowsills, anywhere there was a little bit of extra space, and it was always the perfect temperature. Instead of sitting on the couch in the living room, Andrew led Alison out into the kitchen and they sat next to each other at the breakfast nook – a small counter right in front of the back window where his mom decided to put two stools.

“I don’t want to fight with you, Ali,” he said, looking down at the counter instead of at Alison.

“I don’t want to fight either,” she replied.

“If we talk right now, I’m going to say things I don’t really mean and I’m not going to be able to take them back. Don’t make me.”

“I don’t understand why this has to be such a huge thing,” Alison said, frustrated. “I know you don’t like Connor and that you think he’s the spawn of Satan or something, but I promise I know what I’m doing here.”

“Ali, every time he comes into your life, it’s like you somehow become isolated from everything else. Is he worth that? Is he even worth saving? This seems pretty self-inflicted.” Andrew finally looked at Alison and his gaze was even more piercing than she expected.

“*Everyone* is worth saving, even from themselves,” Alison argued.

“Even though he’s not a good person or a good friend? Even if saving him causes you to lose everything else? I’m genuinely asking.”

Alison looked down for a moment before looking back at him. There were not many things she was sure of, but she was sure of what she was about to say next. “Everyone is worth saving. No matter what they’ve done in the past, no matter how many times they’ve done something wrong on purpose or by mistake, I think they deserve another chance. The world can

be a cruel place, there are a lot of people that don't give second or third chances, and sometimes – not all the time – but sometimes, that's all a person needs. Another chance.”

Something changed in Andrew's facial expression. Alison wondered if it was defeat. “I hope you're right about him.”

“But you don't think I am.”

“No. Not really.” He shook his head.

“Where does this leave us?” Alison asked, reaching to take one of his hands. He didn't let her.

“I want to think you're right about everyone being worth saving, but I can't do this. I can't be with you while you're trying to save him. It's too much.”

Alison felt hollow as she processed what Andrew was telling her. “If this... If this is because you're jealous of Connor, you don't have to be. I love *you*. From the moment I saw you at the football game, I knew. I want to be with you.”

“You can't see the way you look when you talk about him, but I can. There's something there even if you don't want to admit it. Maybe...” Andrew started to say, but then he stopped.

“Maybe what?” Alison demanded, pushing back tears.

“Maybe once he's gone, we can go back to normal. But for right now, I can't be here for you.”

“We're supposed to be there for each other through everything. That's how love is supposed to work,” Alison said barely above a whisper.

“I'm sorry, Ali.”

She looked up at the ceiling to keep herself from breaking down. “I guess I'll go now,” she said and stood up, walking out of the kitchen and out the front door. She got halfway to her

car when she heard his voice behind her. It was like every rom com she'd ever seen yet sadder somehow.

"Wait." Alison turned around to find him already in front of her. He pulled her in by her waist and kissed her for what felt like a long time. She still wasn't ready when it ended. He wiped one of her tears away with his thumb and stared at her intensely. "I still love you."

She gave him a weak smile. "Then I hope I'll see you soon."

She went home. She walked up the stairs. She crawled into bed. She turned off the lights.

When Alison woke up the next morning, it felt impossible to get out of bed. Her head pounded and she glared at the wall across from her. She heard a knock at her door and could tell just from the way it sounded that it was her mom. She poked her head through the doorway. "I'm all for playing hooky every once in a while, but I think you're supposed to be sneaky about it."

Alison groaned, "I'm not playing hooky."

"You're usually downstairs at this point. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Didn't sleep well."

"Sorry, kiddo. I'll make a whole coffee pot just for you."

"I'll be down in a minute," Alison replied, rolling over to the edge of the bed. She hadn't worn a hoodie to school since middle school, but that was changing today. She put the heather grey zip-up hoodie (borrowed from Andrew and never returned) over the lilac-colored t-shirt she'd worn to sleep. She slipped out of her pajama pants and into a pair of skinny jeans and threw on her Vans. She brushed through her hair quickly, just enough to get any knots out, and bounded down the stairs with her backpack slung over her shoulder.

Her mom and dad scrutinized her as she made her entrance. Alison's mom handed her a to-go cup without saying a word, but her dad paused. "Should we be concerned?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Is it a crime to dress down for school?" Alison huffed.

Her mom snorted. "It is for you."

Alison pursed her lips. "Well, I *am* running late. So. Yeah."

Her dad looked like he wanted to say something else, but he mercifully went back to reading the news on his phone. Alison walked out the door without picking up anything to eat and drove to school in record time. There were more people than usual in front of her locker when she got to the main hallway, and she was confused until she got close enough to see Connor accompanied by Eleanor and Devan.

Eleanor noticed Alison first, looking elated at first and then with the same expression Alison's parents had worn in the kitchen as she registered the outfit.

"Your hair's down," Connor said in a way that made it sound like an accusation.

"Okay!" Alison snapped and then sighed heavily. "No one say another word about my appearance and don't ask me how I'm doing. I don't want to talk about it." Each of them nodded, appearing to be mildly afraid. "Now, why are you all in front of my locker?"

"I always wait here," Eleanor defended herself.

"We just—" Connor started and then fixed his eyes on something past Alison. She looked over her shoulder and saw his best friend, Tristan, walking toward them. She glanced back at Connor. His teeth were smashed together, and he had a look in his eyes that she'd never seen.

Once Tristan was close enough, he spoke, "Hey man, it's been a minute. Where've you been?"

Connor's facial expression got impossibly more scary. "How can you ask me that right now?"

Tristan blinked, seeming perplexed by Connor's hostile attitude. "What? I haven't even seen you since—"

"Since the party at my house, yeah. Remember? Where you *raped my little sister*?"

Alison's, Devan's, and Eleanor's mouths all dropped at the same time.

"Whoa. Dude. I would never rape anyone, especially not your sister. What's wrong with you?"

"*What's wrong with me?*" Connor exploded. Before Alison could comprehend what was happening, Connor had Tristan pinned up against the lockers with his hands firmly around his neck.

"Connor! Stop!" Alison yelled, but knew it was useless. Connor wasn't really there, he couldn't hear her. She could barely hear her.

Devan and Eleanor worked together to pry Connor off Tristan while Alison stood, frozen in horror. Her hand flew up to her forehead. She closed her eyes and reopened them slowly in an attempt to make sense of everything.

Up until this point, Alison had thought Connor wasn't sure what had happened to Lily or who might have been responsible. She thought at least that part was as much a mystery to him as it was to her. If he knew it was Tristan, she thought, why didn't Connor want to go to the police? Why would he let Tristan get away with it? Did Tristan have something he was holding over Connor's head? What could possibly be horrible enough that Connor would let someone get away with something so heinous?

“What’s going on here?” A teacher Alison had never had before came out of the classroom across the hall to see what all the commotion was about.

Alison looked from the teacher to Connor, still fuming and held back by Devan and Eleanor, and Tristan looking pale as a ghost up against the row of lockers. “We’ve got it under control, I promise,” Alison said, desperately trying to avoid any more attention.

“I’m sorry Alison, but I think I should take Connor and Tristan to the principal’s office.” The teacher gave Connor and Tristan a pointed look that said *follow me*.

Fantastic, Alison thought. *Connor getting in trouble the week of Homecoming is just fantastic*. She turned to Eleanor and Devan. “What was he going to say before Tristan showed up?”

“He told us his sister still wasn’t talking,” Eleanor revealed, eyeing Alison carefully.

“They’re going to do a psych evaluation later today if she doesn’t speak by then,” Devan added.

“What happens if she doesn’t pass the psych eval?”

“I think she’ll be admitted to the psych ward.”

Alison wasn’t sure what this new development would mean for Connor or the plan. Would he still want to run? Would he want to stay for Lily? Him picking a fight with Tristan at the exact moment when he knew they’d need to talk through all the options was *so* inconvenient.

“About what just happened…” Alison said, still stunned.

“Yeah, that was rough,” Devan said. “I knew Tristan was a prick, but I didn’t think he was like that.”

“No, I just – Connor didn’t tell me that Lily was raped.”

“Seriously?” Eleanor looked like she wanted to do much worse than give Connor detention or suspend him.

“Is it possible that he didn’t know until more recently?” Alison asked, feeling sick. If he’d known this whole time and chosen to keep it from her while still asking her to help him run... Was this why Lily wasn’t talking?

“Sorry Ali, but my guess is that he’s known the whole time.” Devan frowned as they spoke.

“Do... Do we just go through our school day like normal?” It felt odd for Alison to feel so uncertain. She didn’t often ask the questions. She was the one who answered them most of the time.

Devan shrugged. “I don’t think there’s anything else we can do right now.”

Alison nodded in agreement. “Let’s meet after school. The diner?”

“See you there,” Devan said and headed off to homeroom. Eleanor and Alison did the same.

Throughout the day, Alison could barely keep her thoughts focused on one thing at a time. She thought about Lily being stuck in the hospital and worried about how she was doing. She thought about Connor and Tristan and the violence at the lockers. If Tristan had really done what Connor said, Alison couldn’t even fathom how Lily might be doing mentally. For a split second, she thought about Connor leaving the note in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and was deeply troubled at the parallel she hadn’t been able to see before. What if there were more parallels between Lily and Tess? She didn’t let her mind go further than that. Intermixed were thoughts of Andrew and the look on his face when he saw Alison at his door and how it compared to the way he normally looked at her. She replayed all the words from talking at the breakfast nook. She

imagined a scenario where he said they'd work through the problem instead of working around it. She tried to replay the parts where he hinted that he would still be there when all of the Connor stuff was over, the parts that would reassure her that he still loved her and that they weren't broken beyond repair, but instead she continued to replay all the hurt. She replayed it until she couldn't take it anymore. Until she was sitting in one of the diner's many glittering red booths with Devan and Connor.

Alison, Connor, and Devan leaned their heads in close to the middle of the table as they spoke in low voices about Connor's sister and Tristan, his week-long punishment of going to detention after school, and his continued preference for running away. Alison argued that he should stay for his sister, she'd need him now more than ever, and Devan echoed her sentiments. He refused to hear any of it. His mind had been made up from the second he'd asked for Alison's help.

"At least promise that you'll come back when things cool down a bit. Don't abandon her. She's been let down enough," Alison implored.

Connor's gaze darkened as she hinted at their father leaving them. "I'm nothing like him, Ali."

"Then prove it," she said, not backing down as easily as she once would have.

He gritted his teeth and didn't respond. After he finished his food, he made up an excuse to leave. Devan and Alison continued to sit in the booth.

"We could still tell, you know," Devan said, breaking their silence.

"We could, but we still don't know the whole truth. And we don't know what Lily remembers. Or what she wants," Alison countered.

“Who wouldn’t want justice?” they asked, and Alison stared out the window. She would want justice if she was in Lily’s position. At least, she thought she would. It was hard to say since for her, it was hypothetical. For Lily, it was her life. Having empathy or sympathy wouldn’t, couldn’t, be enough.

“Some people can’t come to terms with what happened to them right away.”

Alison could tell that Devan was thinking hard about Lily in the hospital because she was, too. She sensed that they wished they could’ve convinced Connor to back out of the plan, but she could also sense that they were still invested in whatever would happen next, no matter which way it went.

Chapter 11

October 24

The leaves still left on the trees rustled in the breeze, casting shimmering shadows on the walls of the motel room and the map Devan, Connor, and Alison had hung up. There were thumbtacks scattered across the area outside of Grandview, up the coast, connected by dark green yarn. With such short notice, Alison hadn't had time to go get red. When she pulled it out of her bag along with the map and the thumbtacks, Connor rolled his eyes – *“Isn't this a little much?”* *“Absolutely not. It's just enough, completely reasonable.”* *“Uh huh, right.”* – and Devan hushed them both.

“Do you think there are enough stops?” Alison asked as she stared at it, sitting with her legs crisscrossed beneath her.

“Yeah, it looks like a solid false trail to me,” Devan affirmed.

“It's really coming together,” Alison said softly.

She tried to imagine Connor getting on the bus, going to all the stops, sleeping on park benches, but all it did was cause a knot to form in her stomach. Alison tried to envision what the coming months would be like for Lily. There had always been a part of her that didn't want Connor to go, to run away from his life, but now that Lily was *awake*? The running away felt even more wrong. But Alison doubted he'd ever listen to her. What could she do other than make sure he had the best chance of getting his second start since she couldn't talk him into staying?

“Ali, I was wondering...” Connor said hesitantly, trailing off as she looked over at him. She raised her eyebrows. “For what it's worth, do you want to go to Homecoming together?”

“Connor Weston asking a girl to the dance? Well, I never!” Alison exclaimed.

“Stop teasing,” he muttered, and she swore she saw a blush color his cheeks.

“Yes, I will accompany you to your last Grandview dance.” She smiled. Even though Andrew could’ve never gone to the Homecoming dance with her because he went to Ridgeview, Alison thought of him now anyway. They were apart, but it felt wrong to go with anyone else. Originally, she’d planned on going stag with Eleanor. “What time is it?”

“It’s almost midnight,” Devan answered, and Alison felt a twinge of panic.

“I need to get home. My parents are going to be upset with me for not telling them that I’d be out this late.”

Grabbing her coat and mini backpack, Alison headed towards the motel door. With her hand on the doorknob, she turned to look at the map on the wall with their yarn and thumbtacks – should they take it down? Before Alison could ask out loud, Devan answered, “We can leave it. I talked the guy into letting us use the room for the whole week.”

Alison wondered what that meant exactly – talked the guy into it – but she didn’t ask. She just nodded and ran out to her car. She drove faster than she usually would, watching as the time changed on her dashboard from 11:59 to 12:00. Her mother’s reproachful look was no way to start a new day. The kitchen light was on when she got home. Her mother must’ve decided to wait up, to ask where Alison had been and why she didn’t call.

Sure enough, there she sat at the kitchen table. Navy blue pajama set and black hair piled up in a bun with just a few light gray hairs sticking out. Her facial expression was an exact match for what Alison had imagined. Her lips were turned downward, her eyes disappointed and wide. Alison took the seat across from her mother before saying anything. “I know it’s late. I’m sorry.”

Admitting that she'd messed up always worked best in the long run. They'd always been the type of parents who were willing to listen to her if she thought they were being unfair or unreasonable. If Alison needed to stay out late, all she really needed to do was call and let them know in advance. She would've done that this time if Devan, Connor, and she hadn't been so caught up in planning out Connor's next steps after leaving Grandview.

"You're not usually like this, Ali. Staying out past curfew on a school night without letting your father or me know? This might be the first time it's happened," her mother said. Despite the disappointment clear on her face, she didn't sound angry. The only thing Alison could pick up on was concern. It made her feel worse for all the lies lately. Even if it was just her choosing to not tell her mother things – they were lies of omission and bad ones at that.

"I know..." Alison paused, hanging her head. "I was with Connor. He's been having a tough time with his parents getting back together, as you already know, and his sister being in the hospital. He wishes he could've done more to protect her."

Her mom pursed her lips and nodded. "Is that all that's been going on with you?" She asked in a dubious tone. Like she wasn't sure if she *should* ask. Alison had always told her about the big things, the important things. She didn't want to talk about what was going on with Andrew; talking about it would make it more real.

"Andrew's... jealous. He said he needed some space. A break." Alison's lip trembled, and she raised her eyes to the ceiling. She'd cried enough over this.

"I'm sorry, honey. I think you're doing the right thing, being there for Connor. I know it probably feels hard right now, but Andrew will come around. You two have something great." She gave Alison a smile, and Alison had to smile back. She thought if her mom thought Andrew

would come around, if she saw that they had something great, it must be true. She would know; she had something great with Alison's dad.

"Thank you, Mom. That makes me feel better," Alison said. It sounded fake, but she really did mean it.

"You're welcome... You should get to bed. You have school in a few hours."

Alison went up to her room, changed into pajamas, and crawled under the covers. Reaching across her bed, she turned off her lamp. Sleep refused to come, and she stared at the ceiling as she put extra effort into breathing steadily and deeply. She wasn't sure when the purposeful deep breaths started working, but when they did, she found herself sweeping the cobblestone floor of a modest cottage. Through one of the windows, Alison caught the last glimmer of sunset. Her new dress was rough against her skin and ended just above her bare feet, no shoes or socks. She set the broom with its unruly straw bristles against the kitchen counter and decided to step into the front yard, which turned out to be surrounded by trees. Honeysuckle climbed up the facade of the cottage. As Alison continued to look up, the clouds were darkening. There was a rumbling of thunder in the distance, and then, she heard a scream. She whirled around to find the source but couldn't see anyone or anything. Alison took a few careful steps into the trees, surveying the area.

As she continued further into the trees, she lost sight of the cottage and the pathway that led back to it. To her left, she started to hear the sound of a girl weeping. When Alison found her, she was crouched on the moss-covered ground in a simple white dress offset by her fiery red hair. "Lily?" Alison asked, tentatively. "Are you alright?"

Once she was close enough, Alison could see that Lily was cradling something close to her chest. A bundle of blankets. “They w-w-wouldn’t le-let me bury him in the ch-church cemetery,” Lily whimpered.

“Who?” Alison asked, but as she said, she already knew. Lily turned to face Alison, revealing a baby just a few months old. Alison didn’t ask why she wasn’t allowed to bury him in the church cemetery or who the father was. She knew this story far too well. She thought back to the day Connor dragged her into the music practice room. *Tess for Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. Alison’s eyebrows knitted together as she stared into Lily’s tearful hazel eyes.

“Lily, where’s Connor?” Alison asked, looking all around again to make sure she hadn’t missed the sight of him leaning up against one of the trees. He was nowhere.

“H-he left m-me here all alone,” she sobbed in response. Alison held her and the baby in its bundle of blankets in a tight embrace.

“It’s gonna be okay, Lily. We’ll find him. I promise.” Alison’s voice caught. She heard herself continue to say “*it’s going to be okay, you’re going to be okay*” repeatedly, the sound growing fainter and fainter until her eyes flashed open.

“What the hell,” Alison said, rubbing her eyes and picking up her phone to look at the time. It was much earlier than she needed to be awake, but she didn’t want to take the chance of having another *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* themed dream. She wasn’t sure she could handle a dream where Lily was getting executed by hanging, which was surely waiting for her if she tried to get another hour’s worth of sleep.

So instead, Alison crossed the room to her dresser, picked out an outfit, and headed to the bathroom for a shower. She turned her brain off for the duration, allowing the hot water and the smell of her honey and vanilla-scented body wash to consume her. Once she got out, she focused

on getting dressed and doing her makeup. She pulled her hair back into a tight ponytail, thinking about the reaction she'd gotten when she chose not to. Even after the shower and spending more time on her makeup than usual, she still had too much time.

She sat her backpack on one of the dining room chairs while she scrambled two eggs for a breakfast sandwich. Her dad was the first one to come into the kitchen, pouring himself a cup of coffee before realizing that he should've needed to brew the first pot himself. He stared at Alison. "You're up early. Not that I mind. Someone else making the coffee is nice for a change."

"I had a bad dream, couldn't get back to sleep," Alison explained, trying to sound casual.

She couldn't get the image of Lily holding the baby out of her head. Or the way her voice had broken when she told Alison that Connor had left her. Maybe it wasn't too late to talk him into staying. Maybe if Alison could just visit Lily in the hospital, try to talk to her, to see where her head was at... She shook her head in an attempt to clear it. Alison was going too fast, and she hadn't even eaten yet or talked to Eleanor or Devan to ask what their thoughts were on the dream. *Don't make any decisions right this second*, Alison ordered herself to a halt. Once the eggs were done, she put them between two slices of toast with ham, cheese, and spinach. Alison and her dad sat in companionable silence until she couldn't sit at the table anymore. She grabbed her stuff and went to leave through the back door.

"Isn't it a bit early to leave for school?" her dad asked.

"I want to see if I can visit Lily before school," Alison answered, truthfully.

"Your mom said she hadn't talked yet when she left the hospital yesterday," he warned.

Don't expect too much.

"Today's a new day," Alison shrugged her shoulders. "It can't hurt to try."

She headed straight to the hospital. It was early again – visiting hours wouldn't start until she was already at school – and she was counting on Ivy to let it slide for a second time.

Lily looked different when Alison entered the room this time. The bandages on her head were gone, and she seemed stronger. Not as afraid, not as confused. “Hey,” Alison said in a quiet voice with her hands in her coat pockets. “How are you feeling?”

Alison wasn't fully expecting an answer, so it surprised her even more when Lily groaned, “That's all anyone keeps asking me.” Alison's shock turned into a quick happiness. The two smiled at each other with their mouths open wide.

“Everyone has been so worried about you. We don't know what else to ask,” Alison defended herself.

“I'm feeling better...” Lily said but didn't continue even though Alison sensed that she had more to say.

“But?” Alison raised an eyebrow.

“But I still don't completely remember what happened. I think I have enough pieces to get the main idea, but there are blank spots,” Lily admits.

“Connor... He said something in the hall yesterday...” Alison started, unsure of whether she should continue.

Lily cast her gaze down to her hands. “What did he say?”

Alison hesitated before answering, “He said something happened with Tristan?”

“Tristan,” Lily whispered. Her eyes looked far away, somewhere in the past. “I remember Connor and Tristan fighting a few days before the party. Tristan came over, but I guess Connor wasn't expecting him. I was too focused on the news that Mom and Dad were seeing each other again. But Connor and Tristan seemed tense...” Lily squinted. “I took a drink from someone, and

then there are flashes. But I can't see who gave me the drink. Or... who was... who was on top of me... The nurses told me that there weren't any secretions, so... I guess whoever it was used a condom," Lily shuddered.

Alison felt relieved at that – knowing that the 19th-century version she'd conjured in her head wasn't going to become reality. "You don't have to figure out any more right now. I'm here for you every step of the way." Alison placed her hand on top of Lily's. "The only problem is that Connor wants to leave. Soon. I don't know if you want that or not, but if you don't, you should say something if you can."

"Thank you, Alison," Lily murmured.

"I have to get to school, but I promise I'll see you again soon." Alison left, feeling more hopeful than she'd felt when she went in.

Chapter 12

October 26 - 27

There were less than twenty-four hours before Connor would get on the bus and leave Grandview behind. Likely for good. Even though Alison had tried again and again to talk him into staying or at least coming back after a while, he was still intent on leaving. Alison didn't know where the idea came from that everyone he'd ever known would be better off without him. She wondered if the constant isolation was exhausting for him. To think that he had to create and maintain this distance from everyone to avoid hurting them. Maybe it wasn't exhausting – maybe he liked it that way, but to Alison, it seemed incredibly lonely.

The sun was setting behind the trees as Alison and Devan made sure that every float in the Homecoming parade was ready and accounted for. The parade route started at the town hall, went all the way down Main Street, took a right at the diner, and ended in front of the high school. Once they got there, they would have a ceremony to announce the Homecoming King and Queen, and then everyone could enjoy the rest of the tailgate until it was time to walk across the street to the football stadium. Devan gave Alison a quick shoulder squeeze before they climbed onto the SGA float. Alison was grateful for them. It was nice to have another person here who knew what was going on inside her head right now. Everyone else just saw the Alison Young they'd always seen. The girl who was always on top of it all and never seemed to tire of it. The girl who carried herself with grace and positivity, the girl who always had an answer to the question being asked of her. And as much as Alison loved being that girl, there was so much

more going on in her head right now. But no one knew except Devan, Connor, and Eleanor. And Andrew, but he'd decided to leave, which she couldn't blame him for.

Alison, Devan, and the SGA float were at the start of the parade, so as soon as they started to move, everyone else followed suit. Alison felt lighter as she started throwing out candy to little kids sitting on the curbs while the marching band played the most beloved stand tunes in the background. It was her last Homecoming parade as a member of the SGA, as a student at Grandview High, and it was all going by too fast. Before she knew it, they were in front of the school. Alison went up to the small stage set up outside to announce the Homecoming King and Queen. She gave a short speech that she'd prepared about Homecoming traditions and asked for the Homecoming court to join her on stage. Once they were standing on either side of her, she ripped open the envelope containing the results of the school-wide vote.

"Molly Fletcher and Justin Turner! Congratulations!" Alison exclaimed into the microphone.

After they were crowned, Alison no longer had any responsibilities as SGA and class president. She blended into the crowd, getting a cheese dream and playing bean bag toss. Eventually, she found Connor. They walked over to the stadium together for their last Homecoming game. A sudden wave of anxiety rumbled through Alison's body. With images in her head from their last Homecoming game, all she could hope for was that this time would go better.

Even almost four years later, the energy of a home football game was simply unmatched. Alison loved the cold nipping at her nose and cheeks, the hot apple cider served alongside a bucket of cheese fries, and screaming the words to "Mr. Touchdown" every time Grandview scored. She'd miss it a lot when they finally graduated. Obviously, she could always come back

as an alum, but high school football seemed like something that lost its appeal after no longer knowing anyone on the team.

“How does it feel knowing that this is your last Grandview High football game?” Alison asked, giving Connor a glance.

He shrugged his shoulders. “None of this has felt real, you know? When something’s in the planning stages, it feels like it might never happen.”

“This is unfortunately very much going to happen,” Alison sighed.

Connor didn’t respond for a while, choosing instead to focus on the game. They were in the last minute and the score was tight. But for right now, Grandview was winning.

The time sped away on the clock, working its way down to zero. Being in the stands, at a game very similar to the game from four years ago, against Ridgeview no less, made Alison miss Andrew. She wrapped her arms more tightly across her chest.

Grandview won, everyone stood up to cheer, but Alison stayed frozen in her seat. When Connor noticed, he sat back down and looked at her. “Why do you look so devastated? We won!”

Alison choked on a laugh. “I know... I just really miss Andrew.”

This was somewhat uncharted territory for Connor and her. Throughout the entire thing, she had tried to keep him at arm’s length for the sake of her own sanity. She didn’t want him to leave, but she couldn’t imagine how much more difficult it would be to let him go if they started to be anything close to friends again. And there were things he didn’t need to know, things that Alison felt unwilling to share. Unconsciously, she’d decided that Andrew was one of those things. She wanted to keep him far away from Connor’s reach.

“You two broke up because of me, didn’t you?”

“We’re taking a break,” Alison corrected him, hoping that it sounded less stupid to him than it continued to sound to her. Connor rolled his eyes.

“So, he’s jealous because you’re not giving him all your attention and you’ll get back together after I’m gone then?”

“That’s... It’s not that simple,” Alison said. He looked too amused, and she glowered at him. “This isn’t funny.”

Connor smoothed out his face. “You’re right. It’s really sad how threatened your long-term boyfriend is by me.”

“Shut *up!*” Alison snapped. “Yeah, what Andrew’s doing kind of sucks, but it makes sense. I can’t say that I wouldn’t feel similar if our roles were reversed.”

“Ali, the difference between you and everyone else I’ve ever met is that you don’t give up on people no matter what the circumstances are. So maybe you’d feel jealous, but you’re not the type of person to quit. You would stay. Even when things are hard, you always stay. Even when you try to quit, it doesn’t stick. You’re a good person. Very selfless,” Connor said. His words hit Alison hard. It had never occurred to her that she might be more selfless than most people. But once the word was hanging in the air between them, it was impossible to ignore how true it was. She couldn’t help but be pleased that some people might view her this way. She was also aware that it could be a weakness. That even though she was selfless, she still ended up hurting the people she loved. And she’d hurt herself on occasion too by putting everyone’s needs above her own. She still didn’t know how to switch it off.

“If you think so highly of me, why did we stop being friends?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Connor sounded genuinely shocked.

“No???”

“I feel like I’ve definitely said this before, but you’re way too good for me.”

“It’s starting to seem like all of us just have really low senses of self-worth,” Alison muttered.

“Maybe,” Connor agreed.

The diner was packed with people from the Homecoming game and the energy was electric. They were all (for the most part) riding the high of winning the game against Ridgeview. The waitresses flowed up and down every aisle of booths, zigzagged through the tables, served food and drinks nonstop. It seemed like a miracle that they didn’t mess up any of the orders. At first, everything was so normal that Alison wished they could’ve done this after every game. Not just she and Connor, but Eleanor and Devan, too. She felt like she’d missed out on the whole having-a-friend-group thing that so many other people had had during the past few years. After they ate their burgers, french fries, and milkshakes, they migrated to a booth with more of their classmates. Alison got lost in the stories, the gossip, the retelling of the game from different perspectives, but Connor’s eyes started shifting from the tabletop to the door. He never maintained eye contact with anyone at the table for very long. Alison gave him a questioning look, but he ignored it.

He excused himself – more than once – to go outside. The first time, Alison saw him talking to another boy that she couldn’t remember if she’d seen in passing before or not. They had a discreet exchange, after confirming that no one (besides Alison) was noticing them. Connor moved out of her line of sight and didn’t come back for another fifteen-ish minutes. When he came back, Alison asked if he wanted to leave, and he shrugged his shoulders. “I’m alright if you want to stay longer,” he said casually enough. She called her mom to tell her that

Grandview had won the game and she'd be home late – she didn't want a repeat of the last time she'd stayed out late.

Eventually, shortly after another one of Connor's breaks, he caught Alison starting to yawn and decided they should leave before she was too tired to drive them back home. Alison dropped off Connor, thinking about how he couldn't even bear to be in his house earlier and contemplated whether that had changed or if he just didn't want to inconvenience her parents. She worried about his frequent trips outside, wondering what he was doing and if he really planned on changing once he disappeared from Grandview. Her own drive home was quiet, just Alison straining her eyes down the road on the lookout for anything that might leap out in front of her. No one was waiting up for her tonight, but the soft light on the microwave had been left on so she could see when she walked through the door.

The next morning, Alison woke up early to prepare the planetarium for the dance with the rest of the Homecoming committee. Everyone checked in with her for tasks as they came in.

“Julia, can you go check with George on the fog machine and where they're going to set it up? I was thinking it would be back there...” Alison gestured to the other end of the room but didn't get any more specific because she caught a glimpse of light brown hair and glittering blue eyes.

Luckily, Julia got the idea and headed off to find George.

“Andrew?” Alison asked, in complete disbelief.

“Hi Alison,” he replied with a smile.

Alison was speechless. All she could do was keep staring at him.

“I know that we're not... we're kind of weird right now, but I wanted to see what your perfect starry night dance looks like before tonight. I know you've been thinking about it for a

while and everything,” Andrew said, seeming a little uncertain, like he couldn’t decide if coming was the right choice. It was the right choice in Alison’s book; she was happy to see him.

“Well, what do you think?” Alison invited him to look around more.

“I can already tell it’s going to be stunning,” Andrew assured her.

“Thank you...” Alison’s voice faltered. She wanted to tell him she missed him, but she resisted. “Is that all you wanted?” she asked instead.

Andrew looked from her, down to his feet, and then back up. “For now, I suppose.”

Alison was still glad that he came, but she felt unsatisfied. It didn’t feel right not to hug him. It didn’t feel right that they weren’t completely at peace with each other the way it almost always used to be.

“I guess you should leave before someone realizes you’re not a Grandview SGA member,” Alison said, trying to make a joke.

He nodded in agreement. “I’ll see you around, Ali.”

“Goodbye, Andrew,” Alison went back to her checklist.

Andrew turned to leave, paused, and turned back. “In case you were wondering—”

“Yes?” Alison looked back up sharply.

“I still love you.” His words sent a shot of warmth throughout Alison’s body.

“I still love you, too.”

They stared at each other for another few seconds, and then he left for real. Alison went back to work, feeling just a little lighter.

Decorating took longer than Alison expected, but it ended up looking fantastic. She could feel the excitement growing inside her, just anticipating what it would look like when the ceiling

was showing all the constellations and all the tiny fake candles were flickering against the blue streamers, balloons, and the silver stars hanging around the room.

Chapter 13

October 27

Alison sat in front of her mirror, taking in everything that was making her look come together. Her dark brown hair came down past her shoulders in curls, and her light eyes were accentuated by the gold eyeshadow and black eyeliner. She loved the way the material of her dress, somewhere between magenta and fuchsia, shined in the light. She smoothed her skirt out in her lap, smiling vaguely at how smooth and cool it felt against her fingertips. It was incredibly easy for her to move around in, which she'd be grateful for if she planned on staying and dancing for any real amount of time. Alison pulled the gold heels onto her feet, fastening the adjustable straps around her ankles. They were taller than anything she'd ever walked in, but it came to her easily enough.

A knock on her bedroom door startled her. "Alison, are you almost ready to go?" Connor's voice came through. She opened the door for him and went back to her desk to put a few things in her clutch – her cell phone, the motel room key, and a small piece of tiger's eye that Eleanor gave her (she figured it couldn't hurt to have the power of crystals on her side) – and she felt his stare following her the whole time.

"Okay, I think I'm ready," Alison said, turning to face him. She was stunned for a moment by the sight of him all dressed up. Had she ever seen him in a suit before? She didn't think so.

"Ali..." Connor breathed out, appearing equally stunned.

She held up a finger. “Please, don’t say it.” There was a sudden lump in her throat as she thought about how much this moment would’ve meant to the younger version of herself that wanted to spend all her time in the treehouse with him. Connor, seeing her as more than the girl next door, was all she’d ever dreamed about back then. But the circumstances were all wrong. He was leaving, he didn’t want to come back, and she was in love with someone else. She was disgusted with herself for the residual feelings that were building up inside of her like the tide of a tsunami when she’d promised Andrew that there was nothing to worry about. But she knew that if Connor called her beautiful, if he so much as *looked* at her like he might want to kiss her, the tsunami would overwhelm her.

“Are you going to cry right now?” Connor asked, confused.

Alison’s eyes had been getting a bit glassy. She blinked the tears away. “No,” she lied. “We should go.”

Everything about the dance was exactly as Alison had envisioned. Round tables covered in white linens staggered throughout the room, surrounding a spacious dance floor... Warm yellow light flickering in battery-powered tealight candles around the room... Various shades of blue gossamer fabric framing the entrance’s archway and creating the backdrop for the photo booth on the opposite wall... But above all else, looking up and seeing the constellations so clearly, a million shining stars seemingly just out of reach, Alison grinned at the way it had all come together. There was something so satisfying about seeing something tangible, something physically real come out of her months of stressed-out planning. She wondered if she would feel a similar satisfaction if she received a postcard from Connor while he was gone. *Probably not*, she thought to herself.

A slow song that she couldn't quite remember the name of played lightly in the background as people started to show up. Rather than waiting for everyone to crowd the dance floor, Connor held a hand out while it was still empty. "Do you want to dance?"

It still seemed strange for him to be treating her like this. Alison had to remind herself that this was just as much his last Homecoming as it was hers – even if he'd never seemed to care about the sentimentality of things coming to an end before this moment. Without speaking, Alison took his hand and led them to the center of the dance floor. They faced each other, and he put a hand on her waist to pull her closer. Alison and Connor danced through the first song. Neither of them let go when the next one started. It was just them in the room – dancing in a slow waltz through a thin layer of fog swirling around the ground at their feet.

"Connor... Don't get mad at me, but don't you want to graduate? Reinvent yourself after that?" It was Alison's last-ditch effort to make him reconsider, and she doubted it would work. But it was the only argument she hadn't tried yet.

He huffed before saying, "I can't wait that long. It needs to be now."

"Why?" Alison demanded.

"Because I'm not like you. I don't have my whole life planned out. I have no idea where I'm going, and everyone is expecting me to figure that out if I stay. I'm sick of all of it. Of people asking me what I want to do with my life, not understanding that a seventeen-year-old shouldn't have to know all the answers. I hate school, I hate how your worth is measured by multiple choice tests and GPAs, I hate that we've barely learned anything to help prepare us for things we might actually do in our day to day lives. Like how to file taxes. Or even how to drive. But I need to know that mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell and memorize all this stuff as if I won't have access to Google." Connor stopped abruptly when he realized he was ranting.

“And listen, even with Lily awake, I’m still in trouble. I need to go, and you’ve helped me get this far. So, let’s just stick with the plan.”

“Is this about what happened with Tristan? You can deal with that,” Alison argued.

“I don’t care about the detention. It’s more than that. It’s—” Connor stopped abruptly. This was how it always was since the time Alison had first agreed to help him. She’d had enough.

“You can’t keep giving me just barely enough to continue wanting to help you. Is what you did so bad? Why can’t you stay? Is whatever it is going to ruin our friendship? I missed being your best friend for so long, and now I get you back and you’re going to leave. And Lily. Don’t even get me started on what your leaving is going to do to Lily,” Alison fumed.

“I don’t want to remember our last dance like this,” Connor said. “I want it to be perfect. For you. So *please*,” he sucked in a breath. “Let’s stop talking about this. Keep dancing with me. You can lean your head against my chest, and I’ll lead.”

“No, Connor. I’m not going to shut up and dance with you. Lily is in the *psych ward* because of what happened at your party. She might be talking again, but considering what you said about Tristan, she has a lot of traumatic stuff to work through and—”

“Alison,” Connor snapped. “Please. I want to make things right before I go. We don’t have time to list all the stupid terrible things I’ve done that are making me run. I’ve messed up a lot and I’ve gotten involved with things that I wish I hadn’t – and maybe I wouldn’t have if my father weren’t a piece of shit. But I’m trying to not be a piece of shit too. I’m trying not to follow in his footsteps. Can we drop it?”

Eleanor ran up to them, out of breath with her phone close to her ear. “Alison, it’s Devan. They said they need to talk to you.”

Alison took the phone from Eleanor's hand. "Hey, is something wrong?"

"I was ready to come to the dance, but I had to do a last-minute work thing. Pizza delivery to the nurses at the hospital. They were talking about Lily when I got here, and I asked if I could see her and yeah. Anyway, she wants to talk to you."

"Pizza delivery?" Alison asked, confused. "I thought you worked at Walmart."

"I do both. I need all the money I can get to leave this place, but that's a different conversation. Can I hand the phone to Lily now?"

"Yes, of course, sorry," Alison replied.

There was a moment of silence before Lily's voice rang in Alison's ear. "Alison?"

"Yes?"

"I thought about what you said when you were here, and I want Connor to stay. Don't let him run," Lily said.

Connor gave Alison a confused look, and she had to make a quick decision. Would Lily's wishes mean anything to him? Would it make him stay when nothing else had worked so far?

"Do you want to talk to him?" Alison asked slowly, not breaking eye contact with Connor.

"I'm willing to try," Lily replied. Alison proceeded to mouth her name to Connor and hand him the phone.

He listened as she told him that she wanted him to stay. Something that looked like guilt or remorse crossed his face. "Lily, I... I don't know. I've fucked up so many times and I think it might be better if I just go."

Alison wondered if Lily's response was the same as hers. If it was, Connor did not appear to be swayed. He stayed quiet for another minute before he said, "I'm sorry, Lily. You know I love you, but I can't."

He ended the phone call and handed the phone back to Eleanor. Alison stared at him disapprovingly. “You said that Tristan raped her. Without you, it will be really hard to prove her story,” she reminded him.

Connor shook his head. “Tristan’s family has enough money and enough connections to help him get away with it. And there isn’t any evidence anyway. *And* he knows more about me than anyone else; we’ve been dealing for a long time together...”

Alison pursed her lips. “So, you’re just going to go down without a fight? What if Lily doesn’t want that?” Alison had to remind herself that she wasn’t sure what Lily wanted yet; she wasn’t even sure if Lily remembered all of what had happened to her. But Connor couldn’t just leave and not be around to find out what his sister wanted.

“It’ll be easier if Lily just finds a way to move past it.”

“We don’t get to decide what’s best for Lily’s healing. She said she wants you to stay; until we know more, you should stay,” Alison argued, trying her best to keep her voice low.

“I need to *leave*. I can’t be the person any of you want me to be here,” Connor wouldn’t budge.

“Well, are you going to come back? You promised you wouldn’t abandon her at the diner.” Somewhere in the argument, Alison had put more space between them. It felt like that space just kept growing. A dark thought arrived in Alison’s head. Did Tristan hurt Lily because of something that Connor did? Was that why he wanted to leave so badly and wouldn’t tell Alison no matter how hard she pushed?

“I didn’t promise anything at the diner,” Connor retorted.

“Connor, you’re—” Alison began to say when Eleanor interjected.

“Children, please. No more fighting. It’s Homecoming!”

Connor scoffed and walked away without saying anything else. “Connor, wait,” Alison said, starting to go after him. But Eleanor stopped her. After he disappeared from sight, Alison turned her attention to Eleanor, finally taking in her Homecoming look. She looked even more beautiful in her dress than Alison remembered. Her curly hair was in an up-do, a braid intricately woven across the top of her head, separating the loose strands in the front from the low bun in the back. Classic winged eyeliner and red lipstick, still present. “You look so beautiful!” Alison exclaimed.

“So do you! I was so right about the gold eyeshadow, wasn’t I?” Eleanor replied with equal excitement.

She stayed for another minute or so before wandering off to find some of her friends. Without Connor there, Alison didn’t really know what to do with herself. She looked around the room, looking for a familiar face but didn’t see anyone she could hang out with. Instead, Alison walked toward the refreshment table, where she found Devan.

It had crossed her mind that she had no idea what Devan would wear to a formal occasion. She had assumed they would wear a suit. What she hadn’t expected was this outfit – high waisted, black button-fly pants with a sleeveless royal blue top and a cape in a lighter shade of blue to match. “Devan?!?!” Alison said, gesturing to the outfit.

“Yeah, I wanted to wear pants but also wanted something fun and flowy...” They said with a hint of shyness.

“It’s amazing. Capes are the coolest,” Alison said. “Also, have you seen Connor anywhere? We were dancing, but we got into an argument about him staying and Eleanor interrupted and then he just stalked off.”

“I was worried he might do something like this.” Devan frowned.

“Something like what?”

“I think he’s going to do the plan without us now that we’ve set it all up. He knows we both want to stop him.”

“Should we go? Try to catch him before he leaves?”

Devan’s eyes held an indecipherable emotion. “I guess we can try, but Ali... If we don’t get to him in time... Our best options are to let him disappear or to go to the police.”

Alison didn’t want to involve the police, considering it would mean telling her father. “Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it,” Alison said, knowing that it would sound weird coming from her.

Devan nodded. Together, they left the planetarium, got into Devan’s car, and drove as quickly as possible to the motel. Alison checked the time. “We planned to get him on the bus at the latest time, right?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean he won’t catch the earlier bus. He doesn’t care about following our plan anymore. He just wants out.”

Alison took a deep breath. *Everything’s going to be fine. We’re going to get to him on time, we’ll talk it out. He’ll stay for Lily in the end*, Alison thought to herself. But even as she thought the words, she didn’t fully believe them. The truth was, for the first time in Alison’s life, she wasn’t sure that everything would be fine.

When they reached the motel room, Connor was nowhere to be found, but it was clear that he’d been there. The hair dye had been used, the colored contacts were gone, and so was the backpack they’d packed together. Alison and Devan left the room, got back in the car, and held onto the hope that they’d catch him at the bus stop at the end of the road. The bus was there already, and Alison saw Connor, his hair a patchy blonde instead of the dark brown it’d always

been, stepping onto the first bus step. Devan slowed, and Alison flung the car door open before they'd even come to a full stop. "*Connor!*" She screamed his name. He looked over and waved as she stood there, frozen.

Alison watched him get onto the bus and disappear among the rest of the passengers. She let out a shaky breath, watching a white cloud form in front of her, suddenly feeling the cold against her skin. She wrapped her arms around herself, just trying to continue to hold herself upright.

"It's time to go," Devan said from somewhere behind Alison. She stared at the empty space without answering. "People will start to notice that we left, Alison."

Even though Alison knew staying on the side of the road for the rest of the night would be a waste of time, she still found herself incapable of moving. She wanted to have a plan before taking another step. As if knowing where to go or what to do next would make things easier. "I can't go back," Alison managed to say.

"Okay, we don't have to go back. We just can't stay here." Devan's voice started to sound impatient.

Alison nodded and turned away from the bus stop. "Let's go then."

They made their way back to the car together in silence that wasn't broken until Alison sat in the passenger seat. As the headlights began illuminating the path, she took a moment to close her eyes to make sure she could still recall every detail of the past two and a half weeks. Her memory has always been uncanny, but she didn't trust it to stay that way. Especially not with this. "Dev, do you have a pen and a napkin somewhere?"

Devan quickly produced a pen and an old receipt from the diner and handed it to her. Alison glanced at the diner logo, grinning humorlessly at the irony of it. “Thanks,” she said and then began to write as much as she could fit into the space, from start to finish.

Chapter 14

October 31 - November 15

It had been four days since Connor Weston left Grandview and his sister behind. Four days since he'd severed the last thread of hope Alison had for him to become the version of himself that she would now admit never existed. In that time, Lily had been discharged from the hospital, and she and Alison had plans to meet. Alison was already waiting for her, swaying lightly on Grandview Playground's old swing set. When Alison spotted Lily's red hair, she pushed herself off the swing and met her with a tight embrace. After a few moments, Alison let go. "How are you doing?" Alison asked.

Lily gave a weak smile before replying, "I'm doing okay. Being home has been hard. There's my parents... And..." She trailed off, breaking eye contact.

Alison nodded. "Have you heard from Connor?"

"No. I'm guessing he hasn't answered the burner phone you gave him either?"

"Unfortunately not," Alison muttered.

"I think we should tell your dad," Lily said.

"Are you sure? Connor could still—"

"He's not going to come back on his own, Alison. You know it and I know it. You don't need to pretend for my sake," Lily interjected.

"Sorry," Alison allowed the guilt to wash over her. Not just for the current conversation but for letting Connor walk away at the dance. She should've known better. "I can talk to my dad when I get home if you want," she offered.

“I should come with you. Tell him my part of the story. The counselor at the hospital said they did an exam when I came in.”

“You’re ready for that?”

“I’m not sure,” Lily admitted. “I don’t want to be afraid anymore. I can’t even walk down the hallway in my house without having a panic attack. Maybe if I tell someone, it’ll get easier.”

“Have you told your parents?” Alison asked.

“No,” Lily said, kicking at some leaves on the ground. “I wanted to tell my mom, but I couldn’t get the words out. I think I was worried she’d make me talk to the police before I was ready.”

“Do you want me to ask my dad if you can talk to one of the female cops?” Alison offered, wanting to make this easier for Lily if she could.

“I think that’d be good.” Lily nodded.

After Lily told her story and Alison came clean, Alison was grounded – *“Probably for eternity but at least until your Thanksgiving break”* was what her parents had said. Days passed without Alison or Lily hearing anything. Everything seemed to return to normal, but Alison couldn’t move on. She’d gone against every person who truly cared about her to help Connor because she believed in him and in second chances and in the end, she’d been wrong. Was she wrong about second chances, or was she only wrong about Connor? She wanted to believe that second chances were still worthwhile, but she didn’t know how long it would take for her to get there.

In the days after, Eleanor and Devan continued to be by her side during school, and Andrew had tried to come to her house to surprise her. Alison’s dad wanted to send him away,

but her mother convinced him to let them have fifteen minutes on the porch swing. He'd wrapped his arm around her as she apologized over and over for what she'd put him through. "We'll be okay," he'd promised. "I'll come see you again as soon as your parents unground you."

After a week, Alison's dad came home with an update. "We have Connor in custody so he can't run again, but we're not sure how long we can hold him," he told Alison as they sat across from each other at the kitchen table.

"Does Lily know?" Alison asked.

"We called their parents, so I'd assume they've either told her or will soon," he answered.

"Did you talk to him?" She couldn't stop herself from wondering if Connor had said anything about her.

"Yes. I thought he could use seeing a familiar face," he said, analyzing Alison's facial expression and adding, "We didn't talk about you or your part in this."

Alison wanted to know if he thought there'd be a trial for Tristan, but she could tell that talking about it at all was a sore subject. She sensed that since she'd never made a habit of lying to her parents before this, they were having a tough time forgiving her. Her dad, especially. So, instead of asking any more questions, she thanked him for telling her and went to her room. She opened her phone to see multiple texts from the group chat she had with Devan, Lily, and Eleanor:

Lily: *my parents just told me that the cops found connor*

Lily: *they said i can see him if i want to, but i'm not sure*

Devan: *totally understandable, i don't think i'd want to see him if i were in your shoes*

Eleanor: *i think you should go in just to kick his ass*

Eleanor: *i'll help if you want :)*

Lily: *lol no, but thanks anyway*

Alison smiled as she typed her own response:

Alison: *idk i'm kind of with eleanor on this*

Lily: *he deserves it but we're not doing that*

Eleanor: *:/// okay fine*

A few minutes passed, and then Eleanor sent another text.

Eleanor: *compromise: let me be your lawyer and i kick his ass *with the law**

Lily, Alison, and Devan laugh-reacted to the message but didn't send anything else.

Another week passed. Alison remained grounded. The investigation into what Tristan had done to Lily was underway. Alison wanted her dad to talk to her about it – or honestly, talk to her about anything – but he avoided her. She hated the feeling of him being this mad at her, but there wasn't much she could do. And she needed to do something that would only worsen his anger. She needed to sneak out. She needed to talk to Connor, just one more time. Lily had told her that the cops released him to go home. He wasn't allowed to leave without someone being with him – everyone was still rightfully concerned that he'd run again – and Alison needed him to tell her why. Why did he have to cause all this hurt? She told her parents that Mrs. Brady was asking her to stay after school for an SGA meeting and asked if she could have permission to not come straight home. They said yes more readily than she expected.

After school, she headed in the direction of the Westons' house. As she walked up the front porch steps, the wind blowing lightly through her hair, she was almost hesitant to knock.

She considered turning back – maybe she didn't really need closure, she thought – but she shook her head and let her resolve solidify. Connor answered the door. When he saw it was her, his eyebrows rose. "Hi, Connor," Alison said. "Can we talk?"

His mouth twitched downward, and he shrugged. "Sure." He came the rest of the way outside, shutting the door behind him. "We can sit over here," Connor said, motioning to a bench that looked out over the front yard.

Alison kept her distance as she sat down next to him. She looked over at him, her face neutral except for her eyes, wide and disappointed. "I wanted to ask you... Why do all of this? And why me?"

Connor's facial expression was also neutral as he replied, "I thought I could change, but now I don't know."

Alison took a deep breath and looked out at the yard. "You had to know that asking me to get involved would hurt me in the end," she said.

"So did you."

"I guess that's true," Alison admitted. "I still wanted to be a good friend to you. But that's just it. We're not friends." She wasn't sure if they ever had been.

"No," Connor paused, then said, "we're not."

"That's really great," Alison's voice was thick.

"Is that all you wanted?" Connor asked.

"Yeah. I'll leave." She had nothing else to say and it seemed like Connor had nothing else to offer. She walked back to her car, imagining a different scenario where Connor called her name and told her to wait and apologized for it all. Alison drove away, without a sorry from Connor, without anything more than what she'd arrived with. She had fought for a one-sided

friendship for too long, allowed herself to be used and lied to over and over, tried to believe that if she fought hard enough, she would be recognized for her loyalty and how much she cared. It mattered more that she was loyal and caring to the people right in front of her rather than a person who didn't see her and never would.

Later that night, Lily told Alison, Eleanor, and Devan that there would be a trial. Everyone was surprised that Tristan hadn't taken a plea deal. Lily wasn't sure that her or Connor's testimony would be strong enough to prove anything beyond a reasonable doubt, but she felt that she had to try. They all promised to be there for her as much as she needed. As the trial got closer, Alison's parents ungrounded her, and Lily came over to see her. Lily's Grandview swim team t-shirt poked out from under her purple and blue flannel, and she kicked off her Converse high tops before jumping onto Alison's bed. "Can we have a *Gilmore Girls* marathon? It's been forever," she asked, and Alison smiled.

After a few hours of watching the first season and two bowls of popcorn, Alison turned her attention to Lily. "Do you want to talk about anything?"

Lily gave Alison a sidelong glance. "You mean do I want to talk about Tristan or the trial? Not really," she said. "As it gets closer, I get more anxious about no one else believing me and hearing him deny any of it."

Alison nods and squeezes Lily's hand for a second. "I really hope everyone will believe you."

Lily bit her lip and looked back at the screen. "I heard you came over to talk to Connor while you were supposed to be grounded. Do you want to talk about that?"

Alison let out a small laugh. "Not really," she echoed Lily's words. "I wanted closure, but now I'm just trying to move on without it."

The day before the trial, Alison left her house to go somewhere other than school for the first time. She crossed her backyard, each step she took surer than the last, and navigated her way through the forest path to the treehouse. She climbed the ladder and once again stood in the center of the room she and Connor had spent so much time in. Alison had no idea what would happen during the trial, she didn't know if Lily would get the justice she deserved, or what would happen to Connor, but this was all the closure that she, personally, needed. A tear rolled down her cheek as she moved the box full of trash bags from its place under her arm into her hands. She went around, cleaning up all the trash that had been left here the last time Connor slept in the treehouse and throwing away everything that held a memory from their childhood. After filling four trash bags, she stared at the newly barren walls, standing in place then walking a small circle to make sure she hadn't missed anything. When she was done assessing her work, she clenched her jaw and climbed back down the ladder. Alison left the treehouse, and the torch she'd been carrying for Connor since they were kids, without a backward glance.

Epilogue

Five Years Later

Alison Young stepped off the train onto the platform with a million thoughts and feelings swirling through her body all at the exact same time. She thought about how different it felt from the last time she stood in this particular train station, already an hour away from the small town she had always loved. Back then, she had been leaving everything and everyone she'd ever known behind in search of something more than the broken pieces of herself that she couldn't seem to pick up and piece back together no matter how hard she tried. She'd needed to go further than the nearest city. She needed a whole new state to call home and reinvent herself in. Now that Alison was closer to home than she'd been in five years, she wondered if the leaves would have already fallen off the trees in Grandview or if there would still be vibrant foliage to greet her when she got there. She recalled all the reasons she decided to leave, contemplating what would be waiting for her when she finished her journey home. Alison winced as she thought about the mess she'd created during her senior year of high school. It had all turned out okay, but Alison still felt the overwhelming desire to get as far away as she could for a few years. She wished she could go back in time and do things differently, but she was more aware than ever that that wasn't how life worked.

How much would five years change a person? Would she be able to recognize the person waiting for her? Would they recognize her? She took stock of every person waiting in the train station – a man with long curls pulled back into a bun holding an acoustic guitar at his side, a woman in a form-fitting dress and matching heels with a coffee cup and magazine, an old couple

holding hands as they walked down the steps together – unable to find who she was looking for. Alison moved in a slow circle, worrying that she'd somehow missed someone behind her or off to her side.

“Looking for someone?”

Alison jumped at the sound and feeling of someone mere centimeters behind her, turning around to face none other than Devan. They looked nearly the same as they had when she'd left with just a few differences. The most noticeable differences were their once dark honey-colored hair, now a deep ocean blue, and their old glasses replaced by contacts. “You scared me!” Alison accused, narrowing her eyes.

Devan laughed. “So... How does it feel to be back?”

Alison pondered their question for a moment, trying to figure out the answer for herself. “I'm not sure yet.”

She thought about the manila envelope in her bag and its thick stack of papers, her manuscript. Alison wouldn't know how she felt about this trip back to Grandview until she saw one person – Lily. They'd lost touch during Lily's senior year. She was working hard and she'd gotten a swimming scholarship to Stanford. They were both ready to leave Grandview behind, and now, for the first time in years, they were both back. When Alison had first started writing in the car that night, she'd never considered that something might come from it. She was just writing it to write – writing it to get it out of her system. But then it was done, and she thought maybe something good could come from it. She realized, though, that this was not just her story. It was also Lily's.

Devan nodded as if they understood everything going through her head at that exact moment. And not for the first time, Alison found herself feeling grateful for Devan's continued

friendship even after the plan fell apart. She hadn't expected anyone to be with her on the other side of it, and she was happy she'd been wrong.

"I have a surprise for you in the car," Devan said, beckoning Alison to follow them out of the train station.

"A surprise?" Alison echoed.

Outside, waiting in front of Devan's car, was Eleanor grinning ear to ear with signature red lips and a beige sheath dress. Alison screamed and ran straight into her arms. Hugs from Eleanor felt exactly like what Alison had been in search of these past five years. She held on tight, letting Eleanor comfort and hold her. Moving to a new city and creating a whole new identity for herself had helped her grow, but it never felt like Alison had been able to collect all her broken pieces until now. Receiving this hug from her best friend, knowing that she would always be her best friend even though they would not always agree on every life decision made.

After Alison, Devan, and Eleanor had a proper reunion – driving back to Grandview from the city, singing songs in the car they'd memorized when they were younger and laughing over all the new and old stories – Alison decided to take a walk on Main Street, taking in another autumn in Grandview on her own before going to her parents' house. As she walked, she thought of what Devan and Eleanor had told her between the references to high school nostalgia. Andrew was in grad school and doing well. Devan had asked if he wanted to be part of the surprise; he'd wanted to but couldn't come home for it. Her heart warmed at the way Andrew still wanted to be there for her. Near the end of their senior year, Alison couldn't do what they'd always planned. She knew that he'd go anywhere with her if she'd asked, but for the first time, she didn't want him to. So, she told him to do something for himself while she did something for herself. Alison hoped they would find their way back to each other always, the way they used to talk about

while they were in her bed watching romantic comedies together (he hated them, but she could occasionally talk him into one). They hadn't managed quite yet, but time would tell. She didn't want to imagine the rest of her life with anybody else.

And then there was Connor. Eleanor mentioned that since she'd come home a few weeks prior, she'd caught glimpses of Connor in town. Devan confirmed that he popped up occasionally, never staying long, always avoiding any and everyone. She'd asked if that included avoiding Lily, but Devan said they weren't sure.

She continued her walk, taking pictures in her mind of everything from the kids playing at the end of Lake Valmont to the last of the fall leaves fluttering off the trees in the breeze, wanting to savor it all before the next time she had to leave. She memorized the sound of the bell ringing on the door of Sugar Acres Cafe as she walked in to get her old seasonal favorite – the Pumpkin Spice Latte. It felt a little silly ordering it now. She'd gotten used to drinking her coffee black, but being back in Grandview meant revisiting as many traditions as she could. As the door closed behind her and she took in the familiar interior of the cafe, time slowed down. At the table in the farthest corner, she saw him sitting by himself. They made eye contact, and the smile faded from her face. He raised his hand to wave, just like he had right before he'd gotten on the bus, and Alison gritted her teeth. She turned around and left Connor Weston behind like a story she'd heard once a long time ago that hadn't quite yet faded from her memory. She wasn't sure that it ever would.

THE END.

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