

CHAPTER



“WOULD THE defendant please rise.”

This wasn't an actual question, even though it sounded like one. I'd noticed that the first time we'd all been assembled here, in this way. Instead, it was a command, an order. The “please” was just for show.

My brother stood up. Beside me, my mom tensed, sucking in a breath. Like the way they tell you to inhale before an X-ray so they can see more, get it all. My father stared straight forward, as always, his face impossible to read.

The judge was talking again, but I couldn't seem to listen. Instead, I looked over to the tall windows, the trees blowing back and forth outside. It was early August; school started in three weeks. It felt like I had spent the entire summer in this very room, maybe in this same seat, but I knew that wasn't the case. Time just seemed to stop here. But maybe, for people like Peyton, that was exactly the point.

It was only when my mother gasped, bending forward to grab the bench in front of us, that I realized the sentence had been announced. I looked up at my brother. He'd been

known for his fearlessness all the way back to when we were kids playing in the woods behind our house. But the day those older boys had challenged him to walk across that wide, gaping sinkhole on a skinny branch and he did it, his ears had been bright red. He was scared. Then and now.

There was a bang of the gavel, and we were dismissed. The attorneys turned to my brother, one leaning in close to speak while the other put a hand on his back. People were getting up, filing out, and I could feel their eyes on us as I swallowed hard and focused on my hands in my lap. Beside me, my mother was sobbing.

“Sydney?” Ames said. “You okay?”

I couldn’t answer, so I just nodded.

“Let’s go,” my father said, getting to his feet. He took my mom’s arm, then gestured for me to walk ahead of them, up to where the lawyers and Peyton were.

“I have to go to the ladies’ room,” I said.

My mom, her eyes red, just looked at me. As if this, after all that had happened, was the thing that she simply could not bear.

“It’s okay,” Ames said. “I’ll take her.”

My father nodded, clapping him on the shoulder as we passed. Out in the courthouse lobby, I could see people pushing the doors open, out into the light outside, and I wished more than anything that I was among them.

Ames put his arm around me as we walked. “I’ll wait for you here,” he said when we reached the ladies’ room. “Okay?”

Inside, the light was bright, unforgiving, as I walked to the sinks and looked at myself in the mirror there. My face was pale, my eyes dark, flat, and empty.

A stall door behind me opened and a girl came out. She was about my height, but smaller, slighter. As she stepped up beside me, I saw she had blonde hair, plaited in a messy braid that hung over one shoulder, a few wisps framing her face, and she wore a summer dress, cowboy boots, and a denim jacket. I felt her look at me as I washed my hands once, then twice, before grabbing a towel and turning to the door.

I pushed it open, and there was Ames, directly across the hallway, leaning against the wall with his arms folded over his chest. When he saw me, he stood up taller, taking a step forward. I hesitated, stopping, and the girl, also leaving, bumped into my back.

“Oh! Sorry!” she said.

“No,” I told her, turning around. “It was . . . my fault.”

She looked at me for a second, then past my shoulder, at Ames. I watched her green eyes take him in, this stranger, for a long moment before turning her attention back to me. I had never seen her before. But with a single look at her face, I knew exactly what she was thinking.

You okay?

I was used to being invisible. People rarely saw me, and if they did, they never looked close. I wasn't shiny and charming like my brother, stunning and graceful like my mother, or smart and dynamic like my friends. That's the thing, though. You always think you want to be noticed. Until you are.

The girl was still watching me, waiting for an answer to the question she hadn't even said aloud. And maybe I would have answered it. But then I felt a hand on my elbow. Ames.

"Sydney? You ready?"

I didn't reply to this, either. Somehow we were heading toward the lobby, where my parents were now standing with the lawyers. As we walked, I kept glancing behind me, trying to see that girl, but could not in the shifting crowd of people pressing into the courtroom. Once we were clear of them, though, I looked back one last time and was surprised to find her right where I'd left her. Her eyes were still on me, like she'd never lost sight of me at all.