



TWO

This is not where I want to be.

She had landed in a garden on her feet. The first thing she saw was red. Wet, vibrant red, like blood splashed over dark leaves. They were roses, the most beautiful she had ever seen.

Then the smell hit her; so soft and realistic it was as if she was holding a flower to her nose. It made her stomach turn. Everything was crystalline, sparkling, and serene. Spinning slowly around, she thought, *this is too real*.

Even on the grass, she could feel the liquid from the dew on her toes. She could feel cool wind whispering past her cheek. A pit formed in her stomach as she heard the distant cry of a bird, followed by a mangled sound she didn't recognize. Like a wolf, a howl. And the goose bumps on her arms, they were very real.

She slapped her own cheeks, hard. They stung but she hit harder. It was different this time. Never before had it been like this. Never this real. Her mouth felt like cotton, so dry and empty. The garden was so beautiful, but it was also terrifying. This place: she had never seen it before, not even in real life. Her chest tightened, her pulse quickened. A white mist seemed to escape her lips. She could not tell whether it was her breath or just the movement of the air. It dissolved as it floated away,

sparkling as it caught the fiery reflection of the lamps hanging from the trees, which hung low like weeping willows, creating a spider web of leaves that contrasted against the purple sky.

Move. She had to move. The familiar feeling of panic rushed over her still, even though the air had grown silent. How was she thinking these things? How did she know this was a dream?

It was another one. Another waking nightmare.

The grass padded under her bare feet as she made her way across the clearing, searching for a way out even though she knew deep down that she had no choice. Rose bushes surrounded her path, and plants that she did not recognize snaked around stones set in the dirt; graves, or something like them. Strange etchings were engraved on their surfaces. Slowly, she bent close to read them, but they blurred before her eyes. It was a language she did not understand, runes of an ancient civilization. She backed away, hurrying down the path again.

“Please, no,” she gasped, knowing that all her dreams ended with the same rush, the turning of her stomach, the incredible falling feeling. “Please, make it stop.” It was an endless circle; no matter which way she went, the garden all looked the same. The garden, and the stone, the writing merging together, creating shapes. She stumbled back the way she’d come, her world spinning.

Then came the statues.

Charlotte stiffened, struck through with shock. There were four pedestals, each with a marble woman placed upon it, stone women so beautiful that all she could do was stare in awe. Vines tangled around their feet, blossoming with flowers, and their hands were raised to the night sky, folded over as though in prayer. They bent and flowed as if caught in a dance. Intimate. It was intimate, as if she shouldn’t be there.

Charlotte saw her breath floating away again, this time like a fog. It floated towards the women’s faces, the tall one in the front disappearing behind it. It left her cold.

Stepping forward, she saw the path continuing around the women, but she did not want to go near them. Something changed in the air. Quickly, softly, chimes drifted in and out in the distance. Beautiful music...but it was a warning. Charlotte knew that now, with the instinct that often came from dreaming. She wasn’t wanted here.

She closed her eyes, wanting to wake. *This is too real*, she thought, *take me back. I didn't want this. I'm not into this.* And when she opened her eyes, the women were gone...as if they had never been there at all.

Charlotte drew in a quick breath. The pretty lanterns began to cast harsh light, awakening her senses, her caution. The dream turned on her; she could feel the familiar twisting of her stomach and thumping of her heart before the inevitable end, the climax. The grass beneath her feet tensed and hardened, like she was walking on broken glass. Vines began to sliver from the empty pedestals and reach for her like snakes. Panicked, she ran.

She lost her way in the trees, stumbling through the darkness off of the path, praying *please don't lead me back there, please.* Up ahead she saw a bright light and leaped towards it, hoping to find a way out, to wake up, to fall and be free. Tree branches slapped her face, leaving a slight stinging sensation. Charlotte actually felt the fear coursing through her veins, as if something was behind her, chasing her, nipping at her ankles. Like a chorus, the howling started again.

Then there was nothing but blackness.



Waking was never easy. She kept her eyes open, too afraid to snap them closed.

Her room was dark; no light of the moon shone through the window. All she saw was the dark but it was a welcome sight. Charlotte drowned in her post-nightmare buzz, drenched in sweat. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to calm her heartbeat. There were goose bumps all up and down her arms, which had red indents criss-crossed upon them, as she had fallen asleep in her uniform.

For the love of God, I hope I didn't wake up Claire.

She thought she heard movement across the room. Perhaps her roommate had gotten up. Charlotte tensed, her ears still ringing. As expected, the light flicked on and a girl appeared at the edge of the bed, but the image still startled her. Charlotte let out a whimper and held the blanket up over her eyes.

“Charlotte! What the hell!?” Claire chucked a pillow at Charlotte’s face, her whisper spat with just as much force as a yell. “I thought we’d gotten over this three a.m. wakeup thing.”

Charlotte’s face rose with an intense heat, and guilty tears sprung to her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said, choked, still flushed with fear. “I’m sorry Claire. I just... I’m okay. You can go back to bed.”

Expecting Claire to get up and stomp back to her side of the room, Charlotte rolled over, trying to hide her panicked face. But the girl on the end of her bed didn’t move; rather, she sat down, shifted, and crossed her legs. Charlotte tried to control her breathing, wondering what Claire would say.

“Are you okay?”

The words were so soft, and so surprising that Charlotte wondered if she had heard them at all.

“I’m...” And then she gritted her teeth, realizing it was a repeat of the one thing she was so tired of saying. “I’m fine.” At that moment she only wanted to fall asleep, to forget this whole episode ever happened.

But Claire didn’t move. She just sat there; Charlotte could feel her breathing.

“I know you’re hurting. With these dreams lately, I mean.”

Charlotte sat up, the blanket falling around her, hair falling loose out of her ponytail. “What are you talking about?”

Claire blinked at her with big, beautiful slanted brown eyes; eyes which Charlotte had never seen looking like this, not with that vague intensity, that glazed-over look, even when Claire was stoned. Her olive skin was moistened, as if she had seen the same things Charlotte had.

“Claire?” Charlotte leaned forward, her brows furrowing. What the hell was going on?

Her roommate bowed her head, as if she was falling asleep.

“Hey,” Charlotte grabbed her, realizing it was possible she was not out of her nightmare yet. “Claire. Claire!”

“Are you okay?” Claire snapped up, eyes widening, asking the same question. A repetitive monotone.

Charlotte slid off the bed, backing up. God, this nightmare wasn’t over; unless Claire was playing some kind of joke on her, something to dredge up the past.

“It’s not funny, whatever you’re doing,” she whispered under her breath, grabbing the back of her desk chair. Her

roommate swayed, her long black hair cascading over slim shoulders.

“What?” Her head was suddenly up, chin jutting out, alert. Charlotte felt a rush of relief and crept closer. Claire shook her head. “I’m sorry, I just...”

Looking straight at Charlotte, she said, “I know you’re not okay. It’s alright. It’ll all be done.” With those words, she daintily slipped off Charlotte’s bed and crawled back into hers, flicking off the light in the process.

Jesus Christ. Charlotte still stood at her chair, her heart thumping wildly. Claire wasn’t making a single sound: even her breathing had fallen silent. It was something straight out of a horror movie. Charlotte expected Claire to sit back up and start reciting demonic verses with glowing eyes. She shut her own, hoping that it had just been a continuation of the same bad dream, that Claire hadn’t really said the only thing that seemed to scare her right now. It was all she could hear in the silence.

It’ll all be done.

Even after sliding into bed, proper pajamas on and the covers pulled up tight, Charlotte could not fall asleep again. Every creak above her, every whistle the wind made, chilled her to her bones. She considered getting up and going for a long walk in the school hallways, but then realized that would only intensify her fear. The covers were warm. She could hide under them and try to forget what had just happened. However, not even the privacy of her own bed or the steady rhythm of her breathing could keep the bad thoughts out.

She thought about the picture she kept taped to the back of her closet door. It was a newspaper clipping of a man; a blurry photo, but the eyes were dark, and they stared a hole into you if you looked too long. He had shot himself fourteen years ago after dropping a young girl off at the steps of a Pennsylvania private school. *Her.* He had left *her.* He was the only connection to her past, now he was dead and buried in the ground. But she kept the picture there as a reminder that she must have come from somewhere, that someone must have loved her, once.

It was something she tried not to think of often. Nonetheless, it all felt so much more important. Maybe he had dreams, too. Maybe they had driven him to death. Charlotte closed her eyes, one tear slipping out and down her cheek. She felt the familiar tightening in her chest, the sweat pooling under her arms.

She laid anxiety-stricken for what felt like forever until her heavy eyelids finally won the battle of sleep.



Her alarm clock screamed bloody murder at her.

It dragged her from a sleep she had only fallen into. She wanted to hit it, and hit it hard. Her hand swung and missed, instead slapping her wooden bedside table with a disastrous *thunk*. Charlotte swore into her pillow, her palm throbbing. Claire was gone. She noticed this and was grateful they wouldn't have to talk.

Her alarm off, she quickly changed and gave no thought about what the hell her hair looked like for the morning, exasperatedly tying it into a back bun. She thought of practice at the end of the day, and hoped her director, Kitch, wouldn't notice the bags under her eyes.

Just keep your head up, she thought. No one can hurt you if you don't want to be hurt. It was a mantra she tried to tell herself each morning. But that day her stomach turned with unease. She thought about the look in Claire's eyes as she had said, 'It'll all be done' and about the grip Perry had forced on her when he had asked about the girl.

It's Tuesday, she thought. Bad things don't happen on Tuesdays.

At breakfast, Andie and Perry were too absorbed in each other to gather any words other than "good morning." They were silent, but only to her, which was fine because Charlotte did not want to disrupt their twin vibes. She did not want to discuss anything with them at the moment, even though she wanted so badly to ask Perry what he had meant yesterday. While she sipped her strong coffee, Claire walked by with Landon but did not sit down. She had only given a short wave. Charlotte tried to smile at her. She was sure it came out like a grimace.

In math, because she couldn't care less about paying attention to the lecture, she looked up "bad things that happened on Tuesdays." The answer was surprisingly grim.

Her head slipped lower on her palm, jarring her, and her phone nearly slipped out of her hand. Okay, so she might as well start pretending she cared about this class.

"If you calculate the slope, here..." Mr. Mac turned around, his beady eyes examining the class. "Miss Jenkins, head up please. If you'd like to nap, you can do it in the dean's office."

"Hmm? No, sir." Busted. She sat up straighter, trying to ignore the twittering of the students around her. The feeling of getting called out in class was not a good one, even if she couldn't give a shit about calculating slopes, $mx+b$, whatever it was.

"Would you care to recall what I've been discussing with the class, then?" Mr. Mac crossed his arms, and stared at her like she was a deer in headlights. He loved making students squirm. This didn't even surprise her, but she still didn't know the proper answer.

"I, uh—"

"Mr. Mac?" She heard a familiar voice and turned to see a scruffy-looking Perry at the back of the class raising his hand. "I have a question about the y -intercept there."

And by the time Mr. Mac had droned on about why Perry's question was really unnecessary, and why " b " crossed where it did, he seemed to have forgotten about his previous interrogation. Charlotte felt a surge of something that felt like relief mixed with adoration, and hoped she could catch Perry after class. Without his sister, he could break easily. Maybe she could ask him about his strange words yesterday. She hadn't forgotten about his words, but she was preoccupied with the dream and how it had left her shaking.

The coffee hadn't helped her much, and by the time she finished half-listening to Mr. Mac's dronings about stuff they had already learned at least twice before, she was ready to go back to bed even though it was barely 10:00 a.m. The bell rang. She was the first person to stand up, hurriedly arranging her things. In her haste, she knocked her pencil case off her desk.

"Shit." She bent down, heat rising to her cheeks. She just wanted to get out, quickly, and avoid Mr. Mac asking her any questions about her behavior. Surprisingly, when she stood up, she noticed no one else had moved. She was the only one standing, and everyone had turned to her, watching as if they were waiting for her to do something.

Charlotte swallowed, hugging her things to her chest. Realizing she had more than just embarrassed herself, she bowed her head, beginning to leave. The room was silent.

A chair slid back. She looked to see Perry, the only other person to get up, and his eyes were also trained on her. His

mouth was slightly open, as if to say something. Their eyes met, and she felt an involuntary shiver run through her, as if someone had left one of the windows open and the winter wind was caressing her spine. It broke when she looked away and quickly ran from the classroom, feeling all of the eyes on her back. As soon as her foot crossed over the threshold, the students behind her broke into action, gathering their things.

She was lost in the sea of students leaving their classrooms, and was glad to be enveloped by her peers. What had she done to warrant such exposure? She could still feel their eyes on her, like they were secretly laughing. Something, probably PMS, caused tears to prick her eyes and a lump to rise in her throat, which she quickly swallowed down. She felt like she had been back in the tutor's office, struggling with a problem and under the steady, interrogating eyes of her teacher.

"Charlotte, wait up!" Someone grabbed at her arm and she flinched. Gladly it was just Perry, his hair ruffled, sleeves of his uniforms pushed up despite the cold weather.

"Hey," she said, trying to swallow down her anxiety. She could tell it showed on her face.

"I'm fine," she said, an edge in her voice, before his inevitable question. "Rough class."

"Yeah, I don't know what got into them back there," Perry said, shrugging his shoulder. Charlotte could tell by the look on his face that he knew something, something he was keeping from her.

"You look tired." He struggled to keep the conversation going. Charlotte swept aside the irritating comment, dying to pry into his thoughts, but the words didn't come to her. The incident in the classroom had left her out of sorts.

"I had a bad dream," she said softly, remembering the garden all too well.

"Gonna turn it into a painting?" Perry smiled at her. They walked together back in the direction of their dorms.

She laughed dryly. It was interesting he would say that. The thought hadn't even crossed her mind. The last thing she needed was a reminder of what she had seen: something to expose her memory, to have her become so vulnerable in the middle of a crowded art classroom. Even now, the paintings in her portfolio stood out in dark contrast to what the others in the class did: her scenes of dripping shadows, broken thrones, waving fields splattered with blood.

"I'll see you at practice tonight." Perry's voice reached her ears, soft. "And I'm... really sorry about yesterday." Before she could say anything, he gently touched her elbow and walked away. She realized that she was at her own dorm door, her name in dry erase marker staring back at her. Her mouth slightly opened, as if to call after him, but she closed it.

Damn. She had missed her chance. Maybe she could corner him after practice, play up the charm, lean close and whisper in his ear. Charlotte had seen the way he looked at her before; she wasn't immune to it. But Devon had left a sour taste in her mouth. She didn't want to act on her feelings, whatever they were. She wasn't ready, not yet.

Claire wasn't inside. Charlotte quickly got ready for her next class, still cursing the fact that she had lost her roommate's scarf. Claire hadn't mentioned it nor had she mentioned the eerie sleepwalking incident last night. If she didn't remember a thing, that had to be what it was, right? Sleepwalking. It was sane, it was explainable. Charlotte liked to leave it at that.

What Claire had said, though, nagged at her like an incessant bug. It was what everyone was saying; singling her out like the nutcase she was, making her vulnerable.

No, she thought, sliding her bag back over her shoulder. *I'm not going to resort to this.* She thought about what the shrink had drilled into her head over and over, years ago: *You are not special. You are not a freak, no matter how often they may make you think you are. Dreams do not define a person.* Things she should be focusing on right now, as her heart thumped wildly in her chest as she entered back into the halls. She felt like every student she passed was still staring at her, like she had something written on her forehead, in block letters, a neon sign. Charlotte wanted to crawl back into bed, pull the covers over her head, and forget that school ever existed.



"Andie, wait up."

She felt him before he even grasped her arm, shaking the cigarette from her mouth.

“Perry, what the hell?” she muttered, hiding it at her side, suddenly worried that attention would be drawn to her illegal, nasty habit. They were around the side of the theatre where they usually met before and after play practice, shielded from the harsh winter wind.

“Sorry,” he said, shuffling his feet. “You should really quit that on school grounds, you know.”

“Yeah. You’ve told me a million times.” She dropped the smoke and put it out with her foot, knowing it would join the graveyard of countless other butts left by the resident smokers on campus. It calmed her mind on a day like today when every sound or movement made her jump; when all she could think about was Charlotte and the way she had looked when Perry had asked about the spectre.

“I’m worried, Andrea.”

She looked at him, trying to study his face. Her brother—her always chipper, friendly, never-bring-me-down brother—now sounded like she felt: like the weight of a thousand sins had been put on their shoulders, like they carried the world.

“What is it?” Andie turned to face him, feeling the snow soak into her shoes, her careless attire for the weather.

“The redhead. She’s...projecting...onto Charlotte. Can’t you feel it?”

She didn’t want to think it meant what she knew it must mean. The look in her brother’s eyes was far too serious to wave this off as some lustful concern on his end.

“Perry, what did you see?”

“In class today, they all stared at her. Everyone. Even Mr. Mac. They watched her as if she was some kind of...”

“Target,” Andie finished, feeling her stomach clench. This couldn’t be happening. They had tried to blend in, to lose the darkness, to avoid conflict with everyone around them.

“I just don’t understand,” Perry continued, clenching his hair, his expression one she rarely saw: one of confusion and anger, his teeth gritted. “We’ve been all over the place, and that girl, she’s never appeared like this!”

“Shhh!” Andie stepped forward, smacking him. “The less we say about *her*, the better. Perry, we’ve got to get a fucking grip on this. What we need to do is figure out a way to stop it before something happens to Charlotte.”

“She’s innocent. She doesn’t deserve this.”

Andie knew that. She also knew that whatever was happening was definitely happening for a reason. It was one of those things she *just knew*. When she looked at Charlotte's drawings, she saw another world...one that definitely did not belong on Earth...one that felt eerily alive. Sometimes she thought about things, things that made her bite her tongue with regret, dark little whispers in the back of her mind: *what if we just let her go...what if we let the specter take her...will that make it all go away?*

"I know," she answered her brother. "However, it seems we've tried so hard to avoid something that inevitably is happening."

He ignored her. He would keep fighting for her, the girl he couldn't keep out of his head, the girl he admired completely. That love: it intensified everything, it raised the stakes, and it put them in danger.

"She's being watched...everything she does. I can just feel it; their gazes on her. How is it possible to do that? How is she doing this?" His voice was strained, rising.

"Shh," she said again, but softer, grabbing his wrists. "Think happy thoughts. Be happy." *Happy like you're supposed to be, not so damn miserable.* That was her job.

"I can't," he said. "She sucks the life out of this place."

It was true. It wasn't just the snow, the cold, the looming deadlines.

She would protect Charlotte, Andie thought, if only to keep her brother the way she loved for him to be—the angel of her life.

"It's all fucked up, Andie," he said. "Something's coming."

And for once, he talked a lot of sense.



That night during rehearsal, Charlotte was still swarmed with thoughts of the dream. Without putting it on paper, without that release, it remained in her head, torturing her, replaying on a loop. If she concentrated, she could still smell those roses, feel their petals on her fingers.

Her director, a high-strung woman by the name of Kitch,

was growing tired of Charlotte's absentmindedness. "Oh, *Viola!*" she squawked, waving her short arms with script in hand. "Pay attention!"

Charlotte apologized, cheeks red, and turned to her co-actor for the scene. Being on a stage was the last thing she needed right now. Even though it was just a scattered group of her cast members in the first few rows, she felt as if an entire audience was watching her, eyes glowing in the dark.

She slowly walked around the stage as *Twelfth Night's* Viola, lost on the beach after a disastrous and fate-shifting ship wreck. Charlotte gazed up into the bright stage light and fell to the ground, leaning back, as directed. Kitch liked everything super dramatic, so it came off extra cheesy with the Shakespearean lines. Charlotte whipped back her head, closing her eyes, reciting her next lines. She felt the heat of the lights intensify on her face, and it made her skin tingle; an odd feeling as they were quite distanced from her. She opened her eyes and squinted, trying to see.

"For saying so, there's gold: mine own escape unfoldeth to my hope," she whispered, gaze drawn to movement on the far right wing instead of the ragged sailor in front of her. Someone had just swished away the curtain, as if receding from peering onto the stage. She continued her lines, speaking into the light. A buzzing began in her ears.

Someone was talking to her. Charlotte couldn't hear them clearly. Her eyes were focused on the moving curtain, swinging back and forth, back and forth.

"Charlotte," George said, but he wasn't George, he was something else: a grotesque figure with black eyes, a gaping mouth, red hair growing from his skull.

Charlotte blinked, crawling backwards, but her hands were slipping on the shiny stage, her palms stinging.

"Viola....*Charlotte!*"

Those bright lights faded in and out, grew huge in her vision, and then she saw blackness.

The next thing she knew, George, now looking like his proper self, was pulling her up by her arms, with a frightened look on his face. She barely felt his fingers. Bright blue fingernails waved in front of her eyes. Charlotte looked up at Kitch and the surrounding crew, her ears ringing. They were all staring at her with concerned faces, but faces nonetheless—normal, human faces.

Kitch mouthed something, her lips moving a million miles an hour. Charlotte tried to understand. She placed her hands around her ears, trying to make the ringing stop.

"...passed out," she heard George say. "You passed out."

The lights clicked off and Charlotte's face immediately cooled. The stage was dark and everyone looked around. "Hey!" Kitch yelled. "Who's back there?"

Her heart began to thump wildly, the image of people surrounding her, peering at her was not one she needed at the moment. She struggled up with George's help, head turning. She was the only one who noticed the girl slipping out the side door.

Kitch told her to take a few minutes off, to sit in the audience and watch a couple of scenes where her character wasn't needed. Her director was obviously frazzled, short hair beginning to rise around her face, sweat beading at her temples. Charlotte felt bad for saying no, that she had to get some air, but her suspicions were aroused. Charlotte slid out the same side door, where the girl, *that girl*, had disappeared moments before.

She had obviously meant for Charlotte to see her.

The air was cold. Charlotte rubbed her arms, which were only covered by a thin long-sleeved tee. Her coat was inside. The snow was no longer falling although there was just a slight breeze that whispered through the tall pines that surrounded campus. The edge of the theatre's yard was surrounded by a rocky face with jutting points, ice dripping from them in frozen sheets. A single path led along the side of the theatre to meet up with the main walkway leading to the central courtyard. Charlotte looked down, and saw tiny footsteps leading off the path. She followed them with her eyes. There was one set winding its way up the side of the cliff.

The wind blew her hair over her eyes. Her skin prickled, and she looked around. There was no one in sight, but if she concentrated, she could hear a faint whistling.

"Hello?" she whispered into the wind.

The footsteps ended halfway up the cliff along a piece of rock that jutted out, covered in ice. They stopped, as if the owner had just disappeared into thin air. Charlotte knew, unconditionally, that she had just seen the redheaded girl slip from the theatre. But the outcrop was void of any person, just layers of ice, no clues as to where she had gone.

She felt faint, a little disoriented from her experience in the

theatre. She had never passed out like that on stage. A shiver tore through her. George's face had been wrong, grotesque, something out of her nightmares. In a blink of an eye, it had been gone, but she could not un-see what her mind had been toying with. She closed her eyes, hoping Kitch wasn't going to freak out, hoping that it was a one-time thing, and that she hadn't really seen the redheaded girl just slip from the theatre, where she had obviously been spying.

"Creepy, isn't it?" said a voice from behind her.

Charlotte jumped, startled from her reverie, and turned to see Perry behind her. His eyes were amused, but his voice was gentle. "Kitch sent me looking for you. Are you okay?"

She felt a twinge of annoyance, even though she knew his intentions were pure. "You know, a lot of people keep asking me that," she said, her eyes still trained on the footsteps.

He ignored her comment. "This place sketches me out," he answered, moving closer. "Why are you out here alone?"

She ignored the question. "Why do you say that?"

"Just heard some stories. Y'know, student urban legends." He shoved his hands in his pockets, obviously cold. Charlotte could smell the faint odor of cigarette smoke on him. "About kids attempting suicide off these cliffs and stuff."

And stuff. She felt a chill run through her that had nothing to do with the cold. "Real nice," she mused. She had never heard such stories. "I thought your sister was supposed to be the gloomy one."

Charlotte was joking, but she saw Perry's mouth turn down grimly. He ignored the comment, instead saying, "Kitch is about to flip her shit. You are one of the leads, you know."

She sighed. "Yeah. I'm really embarrassed about what happened in there." But she wasn't embarrassed. She was afraid. It was as if she had walked into a nightmare while she was awake. Her mind kept replaying George's gaping mouth.

He studied her carefully, as if he wanted to ask her what was wrong but he knew she would snap at him if he did. "Don't worry about it. We're all under a little stress sometimes. Drink some tea, go to bed early," he said as he held the door for her. "Doctor's orders."

She found herself smiling despite what she was feeling, his presence lifting a bit of the tension. "Perry, I want to ask you something." They crowded just inside the door, in the dark corner of the theatre, the rest of the cast milling around on stage.

She needed to take her chance about what he had said yesterday at Tango, while they were alone.

Strangely, he reached out a hand to her cheek. “Don’t worry about it,” he answered, as if he had read her mind.

She frowned at him, not thinking he understood. “No, I really need to know about what you said...”

But he was already walking away, the back of his curly head turned, waving his hand in a goodbye gesture. Charlotte stood, watching him, fuming. They knew—the both of them. They were keeping something from her and they were watching her struggle with it. She swallowed her frustration down. Not that they were particularly close, but they were the closest friends she had at Sinclair right now; people she thought she could trust.

Kitch spotted her and called her over, shrilly, coffee in hand.

So the rehearsal continued. Charlotte still couldn’t help glancing towards the side door, wondering if the girl would come back. But she didn’t, and the show went on. She found herself performing every line and cue perfectly, much to Kitch’s satisfaction. She left the theatre feeling very strange.



“Pass the salt?” Claire asked, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin, her words practically mumbled into incoherence. She had decided to join them for a late dinner, a rare occurrence, but she had barely said two words.

Charlotte tossed the salt-shaker to her roommate, who fumbled with it before it landed in her lap, releasing sparkly little cubes onto her pants. “Shit!”

Andie smirked.

Charlotte apologized, watching Claire brush the salt off her legs. Why was she here? Landon wasn’t anywhere in the room either. She and Andie sat together on one side, enjoying their dinner in the usual comfortable silence as if their tiff yesterday hadn’t happened. Now that Claire was here, she couldn’t ask Andie about what she and Perry were conspiring. And she still felt like a million people were watching her out of the corner of their eyes.

As she tried to concentrate on dinner, she heard a deep voice say “Hey, pretty lady.” Charlotte knew who it was before the hand even touched her neck, cold fingers causing tingles to run up and down her body. She felt a black hole form in the pit of her stomach, absolute horror at the fact that he would do this to her here.

She turned around, her face stone cold. “What are you doing?”

“Just being nice.” Her ex smiled and crossed his arms. “I thought we were still friends.”

We aren't, she thought. *When I dumped you, you said you hated me.*

But she smiled at him in return. She did not need this drama, on top of all things. “Of course. Good evening. Bye.” And then she turned around, picking up her fork.

For a few horrifying seconds she thought Devon would cause a scene, just stand there until she was forced to confront him. However, as she heard him huff and walk away, her shoulders released their tension. Andie and Claire, who had remained silent through the exchange, both gave her looks with raised eyebrows. Charlotte lost her appetite.

“What is with that?” Andie asked, finishing her meal. “I heard he...” she looked at Claire, an iron edge to her voice, “well, you know. Moved on.”

“For the fucking better,” Charlotte said, fighting the swirling in her stomach, her annoyance turning to fury. “I’ve got to get out of here. Walk?” She turned to Andie, hoping to get her alone.

“I’ve got to get a book from the library. Wanna join?”

A fantastic opportunity. Claire got up, saying she had to go meet Landon although her eyes followed Charlotte as she and Andie left the room. Claire still hadn’t mentioned anything to reveal her memory of the sleep-talking the night before, and Charlotte was almost grateful for it.

Charlotte always liked to have an excuse to venture into Sinclair’s library, which was massive. The late evening sun slanted through the tall windows, making the mahogany wood furnishings glow. There were several students at work in the computer lab on the far left, but the two girls ventured further into the stacks. The books lined the walls, sitting on shelves that went on forever, sofas and lamps dotting their path. Charlotte loved this place. It was the first spot she really ever felt at home in when she was brought into Sinclair. She saw over to the right

the little nook by the window where she used to sit and pretend to read as a child when really she was observing the student life.

Andie suddenly cut off down to the left, scanning the book spines with a quizzical glare. Charlotte carried on, running her fingers over the shelves, fingering the labeled gold plates, letting her mind wander.

“What are you looking for?” she called, her voice carrying across the aisle.

“A book for English. We’re doing an independent study,” Andie answered quietly, her voice muffled by the many volumes that separated them.

“Oh, cool.” Charlotte stepped back out onto the main path, the communal area now far behind them. Back here it was darker, quieter.

She swung around the bookshelves, trying to keep her nails from inadvertently digging into the dark wood as her thoughts kept directing back to Devon. Why today, of all the days, did he feel he had to bring up the past? The last few nights still haunted her, which was probably obvious to everybody from the bags under her eyes. He was a prick: that was the answer. She thought she had cut him loose long ago.

She could hear Andrea whistling somewhere a few rows down. She passed the *D* section and strolled down it, noticing it had grown very quiet in the library, the usual student chatter almost muted. The farther back she walked, the more silenced it became. Dahl, Darwin, De Sade, Dickens. She walked by the various titles, some familiar to her, some quite not. One title stuck out to her. *Great Expectations*; something she had done for her own novel study. While not her favorite book, it was worth the read.

Charlotte stuck out her hand and ran it along the spine, which was cracked from many uses. She remembered writing her name on the back card with red pen because it was all she could find at the time, scrambling through her bag. She flipped to the back now, pulling out the name card with the blotchy and uneven writing of multiple other students. She saw her name there, in red, the “i” in “Jenkins” un-dotted, the letters flowing together in her half-cursive way. And it was circled three times, also in red.

Not that it was particularly unsettling, but Charlotte couldn’t help but feel a cold prickle at the back of her neck and her stomach drop. She didn’t remember doing that. It could have

been any other student thinking they were playing a funny joke. But the circles: they looked an awful lot like the rings of a target. And her name was the bull's-eye.

Just then there was a sound from behind her, like the shuffling of feet. Charlotte whipped around, the book falling from her trembling fingers, a moment of weakness. It made a loud clang, and she realized it echoed because there was utter silence in the library. There was no one behind her.

"Andie!" she called, knowing it was probably her friend. "Found that book yet?"

No answer, just more muffled movements.

Charlotte frowned and put the book back, her heart beginning to beat faster. The same feeling came upon her, like it had the night before as Claire had stared her straight in the face and told her "*It'll all be done.*"

After returning the book, she walked closer to the main aisle, hoping to look down and see the normal student activity she had passed by upon entering the library: students acting normally instead of what she saw in the back of her mind...something that scared her.

"Hey there."

She stopped, turned, and froze. *Of course.* The last person she wanted to see.

Devon's smile was still crooked, but not in a friendly way. It was slimy. He oozed that cockiness which had only just multiplied after she had dumped him, reaching douchebag levels. He leaned on the shelf at the opposite end of her aisle, the muscles in his arms bulging as his arms folded.

"What the hell do you want?" she said dryly, making it clear that she didn't want to play this game anymore.

But Devon didn't take the hint. He moved a little bit closer, his familiar smell wafting over her, a mix of cologne and the swimming pool. She realized that she didn't recognize the look in his eyes, and that scared her. He was usually so easy to read.

"Oh, come on. Don't be like that. I know you were happy to see me earlier."

Ugh. No wonder she had dumped him. He still couldn't take the hint.

"Oh really?" She folded her arms herself, not going to let him get to her nerves. "Pray tell, what makes you think that?"

Shockingly, he reached out a hand to touch a strand of her

hair, to run his fingers along it, twisting it like he used to. He knew she used to love his touch. An angry rant was tearing its way up her throat, a flush rising with it.

Around them, the library remained silent. Charlotte couldn't even hear Andie's movements. All she could hear was the strong thumping of her heart, *ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum*.

"How long has it been?" The cockiness in his voice somehow intensified, oozing, like he knew she hadn't seen anyone after him, that she wasn't taking her clothes off for anyone else, that her skin was unblemished by marks like the ones he had made.

That thought made her snap. She smacked his hand away, snarling, and turned, not wanting to even give him the grace of a goodbye. But she did not expect him to retaliate. His fingers were cold around her neck, and surprisingly strong. It tore the life out of her. Too shocked to yell, he dragged her back to him, their bodies pressed together.

"Don't act like you don't know," he growled in her ear, all familiar tones in his voice gone, replaced by an animal she didn't know. His fingernails threatened to draw blood.

She clawed at his hands, and one of them slipped to cover her mouth as she tried to yell out. Where was Andie? What did he plan to do to her? Lifting a foot, she slammed her boot down on his. He gave out a strangled grunt, and she pushed back with her hands, managing to slip away.

"Devon, what the fuck!" Her hands massaged where he had touched her, and her breath caught as she saw his face.

Black eyes: they stared at her, unblinking in a face she no longer recognized. It was Devon's body, undeniably, but those eyes...

"Oh." She grabbed one of the shelves, stepping backwards, her heart racing. "Andie!" she called, running into the main aisle. "Andie!"

She heard footsteps running from somewhere, but she felt they were all around her. All she could see was Devon's black eyes and his hands like claws reaching for. She stumbled; kept stumbling. Why was no one coming for her? Why was the silence so deafening, the students all gone? He chased her...or at least she thought he did. One moment he was there, and then she could no longer feel his breath on her neck. She stopped, quaking, in the *R* aisle.

She stopped, but the footsteps continued. Charlotte whirled to see Andie, white-faced in front of her, glasses askew.

“Charlotte!” Andie grabbed her cheeks, her palms hot. “Are you alright?”

Her stomach felt like it had been punched, the life drained out of her. But relief wound its way into her words: “I’m fine, Andie, I’m fine. God, Devon just—”

But Andie was already pulling her down the hall, hands on her wrists. On her face was set determination. Charlotte didn’t know what to say. Her ex had just abused her in a public place. She had seen those eyes, eyes that had appeared on George earlier that day. She swallowed down tears. Was it a dream? A waking nightmare like Claire’s ominous words the night before? She could hear the clicking of the shrink’s pen, repetitive, drilling into her skull, a fractured memory.

Devon was gone. There was no one leering at her from the aisles which seemingly stretched into blackness. But there was light ahead in the common area. Where were the students? Why was it so...

Andie pulled her through a room of statues. At least, that’s what Charlotte’s mind registered it as: a sea of unmoving, blank stares. The students who had previously been chattering, moving, animated, now all remained motionless like birds, perched in waiting, eyes reflecting in the overhead lights, all staring in one direction. She could barely hear her own breath. They were all looking at her and Andie.

Andie began to run, her shoes making the only sounds in the room, *clack clack clack*. And Charlotte followed, too afraid to let her hand slip from Andie’s, afraid that if she fell her beating heart would explode, her body left for them to devour. They were demons, surely; something dug from her deepest fears, watching her as she ran. Even the librarian, with her horned-rimmed glasses...her head was moving robotically to follow the two as they ran from the room.

The entrance seemed miles away but Charlotte ran for it like it was her lifeline. All she could see, or wanted to see, was the bobbing of Andie’s hair, brushing over the back of her navy uniform. She trained her eyes to look nowhere else. They passed through the door, into the main hallway. Charlotte thought, *what should we do, where should we run?*

Like an explosion, the room behind her suddenly came to life. As if a dial had been turned from mute, she could hear the voices as normally as she had before. Andie walked ahead of her, pacing, her hands on her forehead.

“Charlotte, don’t go back in there.”

Charlotte had lingered at the door to check again, to make sure it was real. No one was looking at her now, no one noticed the shaking girls at the entrance, whom they had scared to death.

“It’s fine now, but let’s avoid it.”

Charlotte turned on Andie, gritting her teeth. She had seen it too, hadn’t she? “What were we running from? Where were you when Devon, he...”

Andie moved to Charlotte, swiping away her hair, exposing the softness of her neck. She quickly drew in a breath.

“He did that to you?”

Charlotte moved away, realizing there was a burning sensation on her neck, a mark he had left. “It doesn’t matter.” She would look at it later. “What the fuck was that in there? Did that...” she turned around, surveying the room. The librarian was now at her computer, checking out a student’s books, her fingers moving swiftly across the keyboard. “Did that really happen? You saw it, right?”

Andie’s eyes wavered. Her face was still pale, the strangest hue. It was a look not normally seen on her friend’s face—this one of confusion and fear.

“Really weird, huh?” She tried to break into a smile. Charlotte saw right through it.

“You’re not fooling anyone,” Charlotte said darkly. “When Perry and I were in math class this morning, something similar happened...” she choked on her own words, knowing how ridiculous it must sound. “They all stared.”

Andie should just tell her about whatever it was, their secret: the one Perry clearly knew about, some sort of strange pact they were keeping. She had her friend now. She couldn’t avoid denying that Charlotte was not the only crazy one.

Andie turned, as if looking at something else. There were a thousand words in her gaze. Her lip quivered, slightly. So she had seen it, too; the darkness in the room. Charlotte’s throat began to pulsate.

“I know. But will you promise me not to ask questions?”

“What?” Charlotte stepped closer. What could Andie tell her? What did she and her brother know? There was an aching inside her, a relief that she was not insane, that these dreams did not affect only her. It was a selfish thought. It was a horrifying one.

“Charlotte.” Andie grabbed her shoulder. “It’s not something

I want to get into. Promise me you won't go too far alone. Promise me you'll avoid Devon."

A tingle struck the back of her neck. "Why? Why, Andie? What are you not telling me?" She couldn't say something like that and just let it sit.

Andie shook her head. "I know you're anxious and you want answers." She was struggling; that was obvious. "But I..." She took a breath. "I don't have answers." The words sounded ages older than they should coming from a teenager girl's mouth.

Maybe she could edge the truth out of Perry. He could soften easier. Andie was still the same hardened soul with no give. But she was still shaken. Charlotte could easily see that. They walked back to their rooms together to prepare for their next classes. Charlotte so badly wanted to ask about the red-haired girl, about what had just happened. The mark Devon had left hurt so badly, and she knew that Andie was right. She shouldn't go anywhere alone.

"Claire's in," Charlotte said, going to her door, noticing it had been left open. But she was talking to thin air. Andie had gone, vanished, as if she had already known her roommate was in the room.

"Char? Is that you?"

Claire was lying on her bed, hands crossed and folded on her stomach, staring at the ceiling. Charlotte couldn't tell if she was on a trip or just thinking, perhaps trying to study. She breathed in. The air was sticky and sweet. Her eyes scanned the floor.

Claire turned on her side, bare legs stretched out. She was wearing nothing but a long t-shirt. "Were you at the library that whole time?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. You missed dessert. Chocolate pie."

Charlotte's stomach rumbled. "That sucks." She had a strange feeling that they weren't alone in the room. All she wanted was to crawl into bed and get caught up on some well-deserved sleep, to think about everything that had happened. She ran to grab her pajamas from the closet.

Claire picked at a fingernail. "Do you, by any chance, mind giving us a half hour or so?"

Shit. Charlotte stopped sliding her pajama pants on halfway up her calf and looked at Claire. "You're kidding, right?"

Claire blinked, as if she didn't register the statement. "Well, unless you want to watch."

Ugh. No. She was not taking this. “You know what, guys? Go somewhere else.” Sliding the rest of her clothes on, she hopped into bed. “I’m really done with this day.”

There was a bottle of aloe sitting on her bedside table. She rubbed some on her neck, hoping to God that it didn’t appear as a hickey in the morning. Claire made a sound like she was going to argue, but then she just sighed. Charlotte was shocked by the sudden retreat. Normally she would put up a fight until one of them left in a huff.

But Charlotte, deep down, was glad she didn’t go. Although she didn’t fancy sleeping with Claire in the same room after what had happened the night before—*It’ll all be done*—what had happened in the library was going to keep her up all night if she didn’t have the solace of another girl across the room.

Turning off the light, her head hitting the pillow, she was asleep even before a half-naked Landon slid out from under Claire’s bed and quietly ran from the room.