

Chapter Three

“Hey, baby,” Mamma says. “On your way home?”
I gesture a thumb over my shoulder, as if she can see me. “Um, I was gonna go to Slim’s.”

“Okay.”

I pause. She sounds unsteady. It makes me feel unsteady.

“Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, baby. Fine, fine. Everything’s . . . everything is going to be just fine.” She says it too loudly. “Baby, I’ve, um. I’ve got my hands full just now. You have fun at Josiah’s.”

She ends the call and all I can do is pull the warm phone away from my face and stare as it reverts back to my home screen a second before going dim again.

Something like butterflies sit in my stomach. Butterflies but worse. Butterflies on meth or something.

I fixate on two things before turning back to Slim.

1. She said to have fun at *Josiah’s*. I know it’s not a big deal. Slim’s mom used to mix up our entire friend group for years,

and none of us look anything like each other. But Mamma, she's different. She's involved. If I say I'm headed to Slim's, she knows all the details before I do.

I wonder idly if she really did have a hundred things on her mind. Enough things she just couldn't take on one more—even if it is my whereabouts.

2. She said everything is *going to be* just fine. As in—it's not right now, but it will be. She sounded desperate. Like an addict telling himself he could totally have “just one.”

It felt like a lie.

Slim steps closer to me, grabs my wrist. “Hey. Everything cool?”

I nod slowly even though it's a blatant lie. I don't know why I lie. “She wants me home right now. She needs to talk to me about something or tell me something, or, I don't know. But I think I really have to go.”

Slim squeezes my wrist where she's got it gripped. It grounds me a little bit. It's why she's my best friend. She always knows the right move to make. “Did you do something? Think she knows we ditched Rawlerson's class again?”

I shake my head. “No, I just. I have to go.”

“Yeah, it's fine. I can catch a ride with someone else,” Slim says. “Go, go.”

My stomach fills with this *hurry up* feeling, urgency sitting in the tops of my thighs and right up under the bridge of my nose. I both want to get home and don't. It's weird and uncomfortable in the same way as clothes that fit wrong.

Slim says some other stuff about texting her after I know

what I did, and I think I agree to do that, but I'm so preoccupied with having what I'm pretty sure is an anxiety attack that I can't be certain.

I don't even know how I get home. But I'm heading up the steps to this too-big-for-our-family-of-four McMansion and my Jeep is cooling down in our circular driveway.

Once I'm inside, I don't hear any voices. It's not totally abnormal, but typically at least Tammy is singing in the kitchen where she always just *has to* fold the laundry.

I drop my keys in the crystal dish on the table like I have every other night this week. That's normal.

I realize I forgot my gym bag and my football pads in my car. That's not.

I don't know where my phone is. Nor is that.

Once, I read in *Teen Vogue* that in the event of an anxiety attack you should play a game with yourself called "Threes." You find, focus on, and name three things you can feel, taste, or smell, or see, or hear.

I do that now as I walk upstairs.

And honestly, it helps.

Smell. The cinnamon Glade plug-ins that Tammy loves. The remnants of detergent in my shirt that my sweat didn't do away with. Mamma's too-heavy perfume in the air, indicating she's recently been down this hallway.

Hear. The ticking of the foyer's grandfather clock. The neighbor's dog barking at nothing, as usual. The washing machine running its fast cycle.

It helps so much that I'm nearly breathing right by the time

I make it up all the stairs and walk on sure feet into Mamma's room, where I can hear someone wrestling with papers.

Taste. The calm. The clarity. The feeling that I am probably overreacting.

No one's inside the room as I walk in. The bed's made and Mamma's purse is on top of it along with her keys and some brown postal wrapping paper.

It's got our address on it in big blocky letters.

It's got my name on it too; only, whoever's written that portion took their time. Curved the "T" into its "A" and "S-I-A" with care.

It's the sound of someone sniffing that draws me into Mamma's walk-in closet.

I pause just inside the doorway as she rifles through a dingy shoebox.

It's the hard consonant that falls out of her mouth as she swears that shocks me into movement.

"Are you okay, Mamma?"

Everything—and I mean *everything*—falls in that moment. Mamma, the high shelf she's reaching up to, the box she's trying to shove onto it.

We both yell, "Oh, God!" But it's Mamma that springs into action.

"Tasia!"

I can't move.

"You're home."

The box. The papers have spilled everywhere.

Mamma's talking almost as fast as her hands are reaching

for the box's spilled contents. "I thought you were going . . . somewhere."

Photos, clippings from the local newspaper with my name on them, a copy of my birth certificate?

"To Josiah's or Slim's or . . . where? Where did you say?"

I lean down and grab the crumpled photo of me as a kid out of her hands.

I can tell it was taken from afar and then zoomed in on. The most immediate details are clearest, and me? I am the hazy outline of a child that wants to blur into the background.

I look happy, though. That much is clear. Unaware. Carefree. Gap-toothed—probably because I'd had, like, three of my bottom teeth extracted—and mid-run at the local playground. I was six, maybe seven years old?

"Angel," Mamma says.

I'm breathing heavy and I know they say you should definitely not do that when you're in the middle of an anxiety attack, but, like, *who can help it?* Who ever has control over this type of thing? No one, I bet!

"What is all this?"

There's this super-old Polaroid of a smiling Mamma clutched up tight to some white guy, very nearly pressed into a kiss. They're smiling into each other. They're happy. They're everything I'm not right now.

"Let's go downstairs, angel."

My mind works double time, a computer on the verge of overheating, as it puts things together.

"This was in that brown paper?"

“Tasia, hold on, honey.”

“Did someone send this stuff? Poppa and Gram, or . . . ?”

Mamma stands. There’s another paper in her hand. It’s the photocopy of my birth certificate.

It takes me the space of two seconds to note there’s no one listed on the line designated *Paternal*.

I take it from her and hold it up close to my face as if that’ll help me make sense of this. It’s like when you turn down the music on the car radio when you’re lost and trying to follow your map’s driving directions.

My eyes glance up from the paper and find hers.

“What is this?” I step backwards, right onto a newspaper clipping about the time Slim and I tied for thirteenth place in the city’s annual 5K NH Lymphoma run. We were thirteen at the time. They thought it was comedic.

“Tasia—”

“Who sent this stuff, Mom!”

She hugs me tight. So tight I feel like she’s trying to break me instead of hold me together. I wonder how I might solder steel into my spine. It’s working, this break-you-apart hug. Of course it’s working. It’s Mamma. And I am a quickly deteriorating cliff’s edge.

I hear Mamma saying something. It’s like she’s a radio that is losing its signal. She fades in and fades back.

“Angel,” she says. “I don’t know how to tell you . . .”

Fades in and fades back.

“Didn’t know how to tell you . . .”

Fades in. Fades back.

“I’m so sorry—what I’m trying to say is . . .”

Fades in.

“You had a right to know who you are. You *have* a right to know . . .”

Finally, I push her away from me. She’s crying.

“Tell me what this is.”

She nods. She’s caught. Slowly, she bends down to pick up what I originally thought was a shoebox. It is, instead, a memento box. There are flowers, patterns of plants and herbs, covering its top. “I think . . .” she begins. “No.” She’s choked up again, and I just need her to come out with it. Patience has never been my strong suit.

“Mamma!”

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry I lied. To you.”

The fading is back. I catch more bits and pieces. But it’s enough.

“ . . . about who your father is.”

“Daddy wasn’t there . . .”

“ . . . love you so much and—”

“He never knew . . .”

“ . . . been watching you.”

My legs, already Jell-O from the game, give out beneath me.

I shake my head. But something in me is just trying to rearrange all the puzzle pieces it already has. Has probably always had. The puzzle piece that says my skin is lighter than Mamma’s and Trist’s and Daddy’s. That says I don’t share quite as many features with them as I should.

I chalked up my coloring to Mamma's Creole background, my hair to a genetic anomaly I never cared enough to look into. And Mamma and Daddy—they just let me assume it, let me hold it as gospel.

Once when I was nine, I swallowed an ice cube out of a cup of soda my Auntie Sandra gave me. Tristan and I were never allowed to have soda, but Auntie Sandra had given us one to share, so I guzzled it as fast as I could. Until that ice cube. Swallowing it hurt. I panicked in the few seconds it took to half melt and then slide down my throat fully, thinking it would get lodged there or freeze my insides. I didn't know how to call for help. What could anyone else do, except tell me to calm down and that it would melt *eventually*? It would pass. The skin above my upper-lip began to sweat, my underarms started to prickle, and I was a few seconds away from tears when Tristan grabbed my hand and said, "Use the straw next time. It'll melt but it kinda hurts, huh?"

All I could do was nod and swallow repeatedly like a gasping fish out of water. Trist kissed my cheek, took the cup of soda from my hand, and threw it into the nearest garbage can. I think he knew I was done with soda after that.

Fuck *a straw*. All I could think was *good riddance*. I never drank soda again. Neither with nor without ice cubes.

And that's always been my relationship with Tristan. He's been my protector in so many ways, despite being the younger of the two of us by two years.

That ice-cube-in-the-throat feeling kind of reminds me of this feeling.

“But Tristan . . . ?”

Through tears and a sob, Mamma whispers, “Your half brother.”

“Did he send that to me? My . . . this other man? Did he send that box to me?”

She’s quiet a moment before she says, “I don’t know.”

I turn, running back into the room where the brown postal paper with my name and address on it lies.

“There’s no return address,” she says from behind me. “I checked.”

I turn to her. Crumple the paper. Throw it at her.

And I run. I run as fast as my legs will take me down the hall, down the stairs, through the foyer, to the crystal dish with my keys in it and out the door.

In the distance, I think I hear Mamma alternating her sobs with her shouts of my name.

As I drive away, I think I maybe even hear her scream, “I’m sorry!”