

CHAPTER THIRTY

Without warning, thick tears welled from my eyes and I spun around, throwing my arms around him. He hugged me back, a real hug. Like the fierce kind when someone actually wants to hug their daughter. I hadn't felt it for so long and I held on. The next moment, I shoved away, hitting my hip on the outside of the trunk.

His head tilted to the side as he glanced over my shoulder. "Who is that?" he asked in his normal tone of voice.

I cleared my throat and answered unwaveringly. "I told you. I brought you a gift."

He took two steps back and studied me with narrowing eyes. A black jacket that covered his arms, and pants that overlapped black boots. A random car rolled over the bridge, its wheels thumping against manmade grooves as it passed, echoing beneath. "This isn't how this works," he finally said. Not denying that he was the Creekside Killer. Not asking me if I was okay.

An evil smile splayed across his face, turning into someone I didn't recognize. My heartbeat thumped in my ears.

I turned sideways as he nearly pushed me aside and reached a rubbery gloved hand in the trunk. He sat Angela up, her back humped over, propping her head against the top of the trunk. Her hair was tangled in one big mess, strands clinging across her cheek and nose.

He hummed to himself, singing a tune of something that I remember him singing when I was younger, a song that I remember him and mom singing in the kitchen when everyone was happy. But I didn't know the name—I'd always thought he made the tune up himself. There weren't any words.

"Dad?" I asked.

He kept looking at Angela, stroking her face, pulling the strands off her face piece by piece. And he hummed.

“Dad?” I asked again, taking a step closer, averting my eyes. Not wanting to watch. This wasn’t what it was supposed to be like. What did I think would happen?

He hummed more of that stupid little tune, and I slowly stepped closer.

I stood directly next to him, but he didn’t respond to my presence. I gradually raised my hand and poked his arm. The instant I touched the sleeve of his jacket, a gloved covered hand whirled around, knocking me in the jaw with the back of his hand. I stumbled backward, grabbing my chin.

“This isn’t right, she’s not right.” He paused, completely disregarding punching me in the face. His own daughter. I’d never seen him lay a hand on anyone. He’d had a temper beneath the surface, I saw it that night at the table when I questioned the necklace. But now, it was like he was two different people. Not my dad. He, this stranger of a dad, was the Creekside Killer.

For the first time, I was frightened of him. “I hate you,” I seethed with all the anger from all the years he dismissed me, dismissed my brother like he was nothing.

My words cut through the air, and he turned around, letting Angela’s body smack back into the trunk. Facing me, the whites of his eyes widened.

“It’s all your fault!” I yelled, balling my hands into fists beside me. We were alone beneath the bridge, no need to be worried about someone overhearing. A faint sulfur scent coated my nostrils, becoming stronger. “You’re the reason Bram is dead!”

Taking a step back, he stared at me and scratched his forehead.

All the rage I had held back surfaced, facing the culprit of all my pain, the pain that made me into the terrible person I’d become. “If you had never sent Bram away, allowed him to come

home, he would've been home for mom's birthday that night. Not two hours away from where he died—alone—without his family. And you don't take any responsibility for it!" I threw my hands in the air, unafraid. "If it was up to you, Bram would've never existed." I swallowed. "Wait a minute, it *was* up to you. You erased him from our home by removing every picture, every shred of evidence that he was your son, my brother." Giant tears rolled down my cheeks, tasting sulfur-like. "And then when I couldn't handle his death, you forced me to take medicine. Because *you* couldn't handle it. News flash dad, I needed *you*. I needed you to see me. *He* needed you to see *him*. That's all we ever wanted." My eyes lowered to the trunk and down to my blood-stained sweatshirt. "But I guess you're not capable of that. The problem was never with me. It was *you*."

Magnolia flickered in the creek, standing knee deep in the trickling water. She gazed up at me, and for the first time, she wasn't covered in filthy, wet clothes. And her eyes weren't swollen, her face was whole. Her body was whole. Beside her stood her father. I'd never seen him before.

Bitterness crawled up my throat, and I leaned over, retching half-digested marshmallows next to my feet. Rubbery fingers gripped my neck and squeezed.

My father loomed over me with the face of a killer, and I relaxed my hands, not wanting to fight anymore. I was done fighting. I was done living.

Why the hell had I killed Magnolia? While he squeezed, I tried to think of the answer. Pressure built behind my eyes and inky black spots filled my vision. This hadn't gone exactly as I had planned.

I guess I killed Magnolia because ... well ... nobody was allowed to hurt my family except for me. I was blood. It was my job to report my dad, not hers.

Coughing sounded in the distance. Who coughed? It was coming from the trunk. Angela wasn't dead yet.

Pressure from his grip forced blood to fill my face, hurting my eyes. *I won't die tonight.* I needed to save Angela.

With all my might, I threw my hands straight up over my head. In one swift motion, I forced my elbows down onto his forearms and raised my feet at the same time, pulling my weight to the ground. He fell forward, nearly hitting me as we tumbled backward. I rolled out of his path the second my back slammed into the hard dirt. The breath knocked from my lungs, and I panted.

Without power, I stumbled toward the creek. My feet slipped beneath me. I knew without looking that he was behind me. Would he really kill me? I guess we were passed that now. He wasn't himself. Or maybe he was finally himself, the fake one always being who he'd portrayed himself to be in front of others.

“Sonora, get back here!” he hollered—making his presence known.

My knees hit the cold water rushing. The current was stronger than I expected, but it wasn't deep. Magnolia and her father stood a foot away, and I reached my hand toward her, asking for help. But what could she do? She'd never been able to do anything more than mess with electronics and car batteries. My body seized at the biting iciness seeping into the fibers of my shorts. My soaked socks and shoes weighed my feet as I pushed forward.

I tripped and fell completely into the water. My dad remained on the edge of the bank. His peered down at the water and at his boots. With a flip of his hand, he dismissed me, like I was more trouble than he needed, and marched back to his car. Angela's head rose above the edge of the trunk. Did she know what was happening?

I threw my hands beneath the running water and searched for a thick rock. My dad was halfway back to the car. My fingers felt along the bottom of the creek. Something sharp cut my palm, and I snapped up, holding my hand as it stung.

My dad was nearly at the car. Angela leaned over the edge, tumbled onto the ground, and had a hard time balancing.

I shoved my hands back beneath the surface and felt around. In a mad dash, my fingers finally graced something thick and round. I grabbed it and lifted. The sliminess didn't gross me out as it would have before. It wasn't a rock. It was a water-logged stick as round as my arm. And my arms weren't that big.

I thrashed about, my arms swinging out to the side to keep from falling. My left hand brushed through Magnolia's. A biting pinch spread from my fingertips, shooting up my arm and over my neck then down my other arm. I winced, keeping my knees high as I hastened through the pain.

My feet graced the bank and sloshed with each step, sliding and jamming my toes against the tips of my shoes.

Hair clung to my cheeks, water dripping down my forehead. Blinking the wetness off my lashes, I spied Dad hovering over Angela. She crawled backward on her elbows as if she suddenly realized the magnitude of her situation. I wanted to yell, let her know I was coming but was afraid to give my dad any warning. I kept quiet.

Gripping the stick in my right hand, with a heavy head, I marched forward and then stopped. It wasn't dead quiet out, the creek provided cover. But still. I didn't want to take any chances. Bending down, with one hand, I quickly slipped off my sloshy shoes, grabbing the heel and dropping them quietly to the ground.

My arms trembled as I moved forward.

Every step felt like I was floating, like I wasn't really there. Like this was all one big nightmare.

Halfway to the car, I seized. Could I really kill my own father? What if I missed, and he killed me too? I needed to make this right. I *needed* to save Angela. With thick spit coating my tongue and dripping from my mouth in shivers, I glanced back at Magnolia. Pleading with every ounce of strength, I asked her for help without speaking. My eyes bore into hers, and I hoped she understood.

She wavered in the water, completely perfect except for the shimmery see-through appearance. In an instant, her ghostly form rushed toward me with an unfathomable speed like a bright light flickering at full strength in the darkness. A zapping pinch—much stronger than when my hand graced hers—rippled through me, as if each fiber of my skin ripped from the muscle beneath. Amidst the pain, her essence consumed mine.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

How much could I take in one week? Allowing Rosa to take control of me was a huge mistake, and now I had begged Magnolia for help. Feeling her in my skin felt icky at first, like thick glue replaced the blood in my veins. Gradually, that ickiness faded.

In half of a heartbeat, Magnolia's thoughts of mercy penetrated mine, all her strength, all her newfound peace powered me like a 9-volt battery. The last half of the same heartbeat, she floated out. That's all the time she needed. Her ghostly form appeared drained, withered, vaguer than ever before.

A burn lingered beneath my skin, and with a strength I had lacked, I dashed forward. My feet covered with wet stocks didn't falter my swiftness.

Angela didn't appear to notice me until the abrupt moment I reached my father from behind. I swung the stick backward. Without giving him a second to react, I swung forward with all my strength, knocking him in the head. Shouting at me, he reached for his wound. He stumbled away from the car and turned around. His head waned to the side.

Angela raised her hand in defense at my presence. Blocking her face, I reached down and grabbed her wrist to help her stand. My dad wobbled further to the side, like he was confused, like he couldn't believe what I had done.

My heart raced. All I could think of was we needed to get out of there. Get away from him before he regained his strength. Surely one blow to the head wouldn't stop his determination, stop his rage.

“Magnolia, I need your help!” She remained in the water with her father, and in an instant, they both disappeared. A glow enveloped them as they whisked upward toward the dark sky.

I licked my lips, the sulfur taste still there. And the smell, I could smell sulfur like it was toddling in front of my nose.

“We need to get in the car,” I yelled at Angela's whose face filled with horror.

She shook her head. “Don't you understand?” She shook her head more. She was losing it. This was all too much for her. Her phone was on the ground next to her, as if she tried to make a call but didn't have the chance. Or did she? Had she called the police?

I grabbed her phone and threw my hands around her and yanked up, trying to help her to stand. With one swift pull, her bent knees straightened, and she stood. I released my grip. Her arms fell limp at her sides. I stuffed the phone in my pocket.

Out the corner of my eye, I jumped at the sight of my dad approaching. He looked angry. His head jerked as if he was possessed. He began laughing, which was terrifying. “Sonora, I'm going to give you one last chance. Step aside.” Spit flew from his rabid mouth as he spoke with a poisonous grin.

A hand wrapped around mine, and without taking my eyes completely off my dad, I stole a glance at Angela. She stood next to me and squeezed my hand with an unbending force. Her breathing palpated her chest, panic was consuming her.

I swallowed the bitter, eggish odor that lingered.

“Dad,” I said with a wavering voice. “I love you. And I know you love me. You can’t kill us. Just let me take Angela and leave. She won’t say anything.” I knew this line of logic probably wouldn’t work. It never did in the movies. Who in their right mind would stay quiet about being abducted and nearly murdered by the Creekside Killer? With a slight tug on Angela’s hand, one I hoped he hadn’t noticed, I began moving back toward the driver side of my car. “Even if she does tell the police. There’s no evidence. I won’t back up her story. I’ll say someone else did this. If you leave now, you can go home. I bet mom is still asleep, she won’t even know you left.”

Mentioning my mom softened his eyes—a bit. But then he peered down at our feet, which were moving. We were merely at the edge of the trunk, not fully to the side yet. I halted.

“Dad!” I shouted. Hoping someone might hear me or that might yelling would knock him back to normal “dad” behavior. I hadn’t seen a car pass over the bridge since we arrived, so flagging someone down was out of the question.

“Last chance.” His words cut to the alarming center of my soul, if I had one still. I imagined my soul was long gone with what I’d done.

The sulfur smell increased. I shook my head at the stench. Angela too.

A second later, I fell to my knees at the sight. Angela’s hand was still looped through mine, not letting go. A ghostly Lachlan loomed between me and my dad. His body whole, wearing the same thing he’d worn at the concert. But he wasn’t *really* there. I knew what he was but didn’t want to admit it. If I did, that meant he was truly gone. That I’d killed him too. That whatever the hospital did, hadn’t pulled him through. But how? He’d texted me earlier. He had been alive. His transparent head whipped side to side as if he were confused. How long did it take for someone to realize they were dead?

My dad rushed forward, I didn't see him at first. I was focused on Lachlan. Angela screamed, and we ran. This time, she pulled me along. But something was different about Lachlan. I couldn't put my finger on it. I didn't have time to think.

We sprinted and nearly reached the treeline when I realized nobody chased us. I yanked my hand from hers and turned around. My father was at the foot of the car, motionless, grabbing his chest, and writhing on the ground. Lachlan hovered next to him. Was he doing this? But how?

"What's your code?" I asked Angela in a speedy tone, tugging the phone from my pocket. I wasn't sure how long Lachlan could hold my dad, and we'd already put too much distance between us and my car. "We need to call for help." It was our only shot.

She snatched it from my hands. With trembling fingers she typed the code, taking three tries to unlock it. Her wide eyes looked over at mine. "Now what?"

Her question was absurd, she still wasn't thinking straight.

I took the phone and dialed 911.

When the operator answered, I couldn't speak at first. What was I supposed to say? I hadn't thought that far. "Um. Um."

Angela snatched the phone from my ear.

"We need the police! Please! He's going to kill us!"

Peering down at the car, Lachlan had vanished, and my dad slowly regained his strength, pushing off the ground with his hands. Angela asked me where we were, but her words muted in the distant. She said something into the phone, I couldn't hear her.

My dad took a step, and he scanned the area, turning around toward the river. I grabbed Angela's shoulder in fright and pressed my finger to my lips, shushing her. Had he not spotted

us? Her phone was bright. I jerked it from her ear and tossed it facedown on the ground, hoping he hadn't noticed.

We froze. With as muddy as we were, blending into the darkness wasn't hard.

Inch by inch, we lowered closer to the ground.

"Sonora!" my dad yelled.

Angela dropped her face into the mud, as if she were too afraid to look.

"Sonora!" my dad hollered again, his back arching with each yell. His voice sounded different from ever before, no longer my dad's. He completely encompassed the Creekside Killer, transforming into someone I didn't recognize. He still looked the same. But everything about him was totally different.

"When I get up, you run," I whispered to Angela.

Her face flipped from the mud. "What?" she asked sharply.

I repeated myself. "You have to. This is my fault."

"No. No. No. You can't leave me!"

Her panicked voice caught the eye of my dad as I saw his head snap in our direction.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I shoved myself off the ground and glanced down at her. “Run! Or you’re going to die!”

With those words, she jumped up and before I’d even taken a step, she dashed into the treeline. I bit my lip and headed for my dad.

He moved toward me in a wobbling manner. I suspected he was still in pain from being hit over the head and tortured by a ghost, but he remained upright, walking. A predator looking for its prey and mad that he hadn’t gotten what he wanted.

As I darted around him, he glanced in the distance, looking for Angela in the shadows. “Where is she?” he growled.

“How many girls have you killed, Dad?” I needed his attention to stay on me.

He spun around as I whipped open my car door and climbed inside. As soon as I locked the doors, he darted for the handle, trying to open it. My keys were in the passenger seat, next to my blood smeared phone. I reached for them just as my window shattered. Flecks of glass flew, hitting my face, and a hand reached inside. I shoved the keys into the ignition and started the car. The engine roared as I pressed the gas, but it didn’t move. I’d forgotten to shove the gear into *drive*.

The moment I did, my car leaped forward and my dad grasped my hair. I reached up with both hands, letting go of the wheel, and locked my fingers around his arm as the car rushed

toward the creek. I pressed down on the pedal and the car picked up speed, the wheels losing grip on the muddy ground.

He tried pulling away, but I held on tight as his legs dragged.

The second the wheels reached the creek, the car darted into the current, and water rushed through the door.

The creek wasn't deep and as the cab filled, my dad began laughing again.

Suddenly, his eyes widened. His legs were stuck beneath the front wheel, and he stopped laughing.

I rolled the passenger window down and turned off the car, flinging my keys into the water. I scooted into the passenger seat and climbed out the window.

In the distance, red and blue lights flashed, coming toward the bridge.

"Sonora, help me!" he yelled as I gripped the side of the car. The current trapped me against the side, and I pulled myself forward little by little. By the time I reached the trunk, it was completely filled with water, weighing the car down even more.

"You killed all of them, Dad!"

"It wasn't—wasn't—just me," he stuttered. My ears pricked up. He'd confirmed the thing I had wondered before, that there was more than one killer.

The cop lights stalled on top of the bridge as a bright gleam shined down from a flashlight. The car began moving with the current, dragging deeper and deeper.

"Sonora!" Dad yelled, farther away. His voice sounded gurgled. "Sono-ra!"

And then the yelling stopped.