

SOUTH SPRINGS

by

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THESIS CERTIFICATION

Faith Danielle Brehm defended this thesis on 16 March 2021. The members of the thesis committee were:

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ABSTRACT

SOUTH SPRINGS

Faith Brehm

When South Springs resident Allison Cooper is found dead at the local dam, it sparks a frenzy in the usually quiet small town as residents speculate on what exactly happened to her the last night of her life. A murder? Accident? Suicide. No one seems to know and the police are out of their depth.

South Springs follows the lives of those closest to Allison in the months following her death. As they struggle to come to terms with her loss, they find themselves under the increased scrutiny and fascination of the rest of the town. Each manages their grief through different facets as they attempt to reestablish their lives without her.

SOUTH SPRINGS WOMAN FOUND DEAD

Sunday, September 24, 2013

The body of 21-year-old South Springs resident, Allison Cooper was found in the river below the South Springs dam early Saturday morning. Cooper's body was discovered by two local fishermen, Paul Anderson and Tony Edwards, who pulled Cooper from the reservoir, calling the police when she was unresponsive. Reports show that Cooper was last seen leaving her job at the South Springs Happy Joe's at 9 p.m. on Friday night. A cause of death has not yet been determined. Any information should be reported directly to the South Springs police department.

ONE

Glancing at her phone again, Aliyah let out an irritated breath when it blinked back at her with no new messages. She could see that her constant fidgeting was starting to wear on her friends around the table, but none of them said anything to her; between looking at her phone and trying to refocus on the textbook in front of her, she'd catch their eyes watching her before darting back to their own work.

Aliyah scrubbed a hand over her face before shoving her head back down into the textbook. She still had forty statistics problems due for class tomorrow, but she just couldn't seem to make herself focus on them; she could hardly strike up any motivation despite what she knew the missed assignment would do to her near-perfect academic record. Her teeth dug into her lower lip, just enough to hurt and give her a jolt into the present, end of her pencil tapping endlessly on the pages of her book with a dull thunk.

"Look, Aliyah." Kiara's voice was soft, sympathetic, but Aliyah's head still shot up at the sound of her name. Kiara sat across from her, and Aliyah couldn't help but notice with a bit of guilt that everyone else had gotten up and left. She hadn't even heard them go. "We're all kinda worried. You've been weird all weekend." Kiara swallowed, and Aliyah could tell she was carefully thinking through her words. "I've never seen you leave homework for the day before," she noted, pointed one long, manicured finger at work sitting innocently on the desk between them.

Aliyah appreciated Kiara's attempts to tiptoe around the situation to spare her feelings, but she also knew it would be better to just get to the point rather than talk around the issue. "Allison and I got into a fight," she admitted quietly, shutting her textbook and laying her head down on it.

“Oh, hon, I’m sorry.” Aliyah couldn’t see Kiara from her new angle, but she could hear the sincerity in her voice.

“She won’t respond to any of my messages.”

“Maybe she just lost her phone,” Kiara suggested. “Did she go to that party you were worried about her going to?”

“Probably,” Aliyah lamented. She stretched her arm out to nudge her phone over to Kiara who typed in the passcode and navigated her way to Aliyah’s texts with Allison. “We argued about her going but it was over a call. I told her I didn’t want her to, and she called me a prude. Not my fault that she drinks too much.” Aliyah could hear the touch of bitterness in her voice.

“Did you tell her that she drinks too much?” Kiara asked, absently. “These texts don’t seem too bad.”

Aliyah bit her lip before answering, “I might have called her an alcoholic.”

“Ooo, ouch.”

Aliyah let out a loud groan. “Not my fault that it’s true.”

“Doesn’t mean you should say it to her face, sweetie. Or, in-person. Over the phone? Whatever. You know what I mean.”

Kiara slid Aliyah’s phone back over to her, the screen lit up in front of her eyes. Aliyah raised her head to see Jake Park’s contact information. “This is the guy, right? The one that she’s friends with back where you grew up?”

“Yeah,” Aliyah answered softly. Jake had always been more Allison’s friend than hers, but he was a good enough guy. A bit rough around the edges, Jake had picked fights with just about anyone he could to take out his anger about his fractured home-life. Aliyah could respect

that, at least. Growing up in one of the only minority families in town had been hell. Being in the closet had only made it worse.

At least she knew that her family loved and supported her at the end of the day. Jake might have blended into the demographic, but he couldn't claim to that.

"You should call him," Kiara said, tapping her nail on the screen of Aliyah's phone. "Tell him what's going on. Maybe he can get Allison to give you a call back."

It was good advice.

Aliyah felt like she couldn't breathe. Her vision had narrowed down to her bedroom window, watching the people walking around on the quad outside. It was like watching ants, an absent fascination without any strong feelings of connection. It didn't feel real. Nothing seemed real until a loud snap sounded that made her entire body jerk toward the noise.

Her phone had landed on the white linoleum next to her bed. Her legs were crumpled up under her on the sharply clean bedspread. The sound of her phone making contact with the floor made everything come crashing back over her, reminding her that she wasn't detached from the world. Her legs ached from the position, and her chest burned from a lack of air.

She couldn't breathe.

Aliyah let out a gasp, chest heaving under the labor of trying to do something it was made to do. One of her hands pulled at her braids, right at the root, the tingling pain of the action a contrast to the pain in her chest, the ache in her legs.

Allison was dead.

Allison was dead.

Throat contracting around nothing, Aliyah fumbled for her phone, pressing it back against her ear to hear Jake muttering sharp and worried platitudes of concern through the receiver. “Breathe,” he hissed when he heard her labored breaths through the phone. “For fucks’ sake, just breathe, Aliyah.”

“Can’t,” she gasped.

Was this what having a panic attack felt like? She’d never had one, but she’d worked Allison through enough of her own. A small part of her brain registered the similarity between Allison rasping breaths during a panic attack with her own in that very moment. She’d gotten pretty good over the years at working Allison through her attacks, even through the phone. She tried to cast her mind back over what she’d talked Allison through.

Distantly, she could hear Jake counting, muttering encouragement between sets. Aliyah rubbed a hand over her eyes, dislodging her glasses and practically ripping them off and tossing them away from her to get them out of the way. Despite any active thought of her own, she found herself taking in breaths with Jake’s counting until she no longer felt like she would pass out from lack of oxygen. Not that it made her feel any more put together; she still felt like she’d shake apart at the seams any time now. Apparently she hadn’t been the only one that had helped Allison through an attack.

Allison.

“Did she-?” Aliyah hiccuped out, “did I-?”

“There’s nothing you coulda done,” Jake’s voice came through, quiet. He’d always been a quiet guy, but Aliyah almost found herself having to strain to hear him. “I was -” he stopped.

“There’s nothing that could have changed anything,” he finally settled on.

“But if I’d been there maybe she wouldn’t have. Maybe she wouldn’t have done it.”

Jake's voice took a turn from the weary uncertainty he'd had toward steel. "Someone killed her," he said, no room for doubt in his voice. "She didn't do this to herself, 'Liyah, I promise you."

Someone *killed* her? Aliyah swallowed trying to ignore the burning in her throat. Was murder better or worse than Allison -? She couldn't even finish her own thought, cutting it off. She didn't question Jake's statement. If he said someone had murdered her, she didn't doubt his judgement. "Do they know who?"

Jake let out a long breath, audible through the phone. Aliyah could hear the wet sound in it, like Jake had been crying or barely holding it back. She wiped her own face to find her eyes dry. The tightness in her throat, the agitation, she felt, unable to stop her fingers from twisting into her once-neat bedsheets; she knew the only reason she hadn't started crying yet was because she hadn't quite processed what was happening. Shock. Agitation, chest pain, numbness. Check, check, check.

"No," he answered. "The police are launching an investigation or whatever, but, well. It *is* just South Springs police." Aliyah couldn't even remember if South Springs had ever even seen a murder before. Certainly not one that anyone on the current police force had ever worked on. "They pulled me in yesterday," Jake admitted quietly, irritated. "I get it. But fuck. They wouldn't even let me *help*."

"They don't think you did it do they?" Aliyah asked, her voice finally pitching into something outside a monotone.

"No. Just routine. They pulled in her family too, just to talk. Make sure she didn't step into the dam herself. *She didn't*," Jake reiterated sharply.

“The dam?” Aliyah asked, heart pounding. “She died at that party, didn’t she? That stupid one we fought about. *Fuck.*” All of a sudden it was like the walls were closing in around her again. Would Allison have gone if they hadn’t fought? If Aliyah hadn’t told her she drank too much and needed to cut back? Would Allison have felt less like she needed to prove something if Aliyah had just kept her mouth shut?

God, she would have been drunk. Did that make it easier for her attacker to get to her?

“Liyah,” she couldn’t help but tune into the sharpness of Jake’s voice. “None of this is your fault. Allison would have gone to that party regardless of whatever happened between the two of you. If either of us is at fault, it’s me. I was *there*. I didn’t even notice when she left. I should have,” he paused, “I should have looked out for her better.” Aliyah couldn’t answer. She didn’t blame Jake, but she couldn’t find the words to reassure him either, not with her own head and heart swimming with guilt. “I’m going to figure out who did this,” he promised. “I’ll make sure to fix it as much as I can.”

Aliyah believed he would try.

Aliyah adjusted her hat with a breath out, trying to steady the shaking in her hands. It had been exactly three days since she’d heard the news, and she still hadn’t cried once. Even now she could feel the burning behind her eyes and the sting in her sinuses, but nothing came. Jake wiped a hand down his own face, fingers rubbing along his chin where he’d shaved that morning.

“Thanks for the ride,” she told him, not sure what else to say.

“Yeah, don’t,” he stopped, lowering his hand and fidgeting with his sleeves. He finally settled on shoving his hands into his pockets. “Don’t thank me,” he continued. They stood in silence for a few minutes, Aliyah’s feet beginning to ache in her heels. They were black, close-

toed and shiny. She'd bought them for graduation the year before and hadn't worn them since, packed away in a box in the closet at her parents' house. "You, uh, you look good," Jake told her, breaking the quiet. "I didn't say it yesterday, at the airport, but, uh, yeah. College must be good for you."

"This is so awkward," Aliyah couldn't help but breathe out. Even standing next to her, Jake felt miles away.

Leaned back against his rusted pickup, Jake stared forward across the open field, toward the group of people huddled around Allison's soon-to-be gravesite. "Kinda the glue that stuck us together, right? This *is* awkward."

"I don't want it to be."

"Yeah, me neither. She was super in love with you, you know," Jake told her, and Aliyah couldn't help but let out a wet bark of a laugh. She found it startled out of her, an awkward sound of surprise. Would she ever genuinely laugh again? She couldn't imagine it. Everything just seemed so serious now.

"She loved you too. Called you her only brother."

"I know," he replied quietly. After a heartbeat, he nudged her, tipping his head toward the side. "Look alive," he said, "family incoming."

Off to the left, the Cooper's SUV pulled off to the side of the cemetery's gravel roadway, tires flattening the grass. They were only a few feet away, and Jake and Aliyah watched them as they all stepped out of the vehicle, Claire and Kathy in matching black dresses while Kevin looked out of place in his stiff suit. Jake gave them a small wave that seemed to be a cue for them to come over to where the two of them were waiting.

"You wanna tell them?" Jake muttered under his breath.

Aliyah had to resist elbowing him or giving him a scolding look. “Definitely not. Even if I did, this is hardly the place. If Allison didn’t want, well-” she stopped herself as the Cooper’s neared, giving them a tight smile.

“Oh, Jake, it’s good to see you,” Kathy said in a rush. Aliyah could tell she’d been crying, redness around her eyes that her makeup wasn’t doing a good job covering up. She could see the same expression in both Kevin and Claire’s faces and her heart lurched for them. Why couldn’t she seem to be able to cry?

Kathy wrapped Jake into a hug that he returned. “It’s good to see you too, Mrs. Cooper.” After a minute, they parted and Kathy gave Aliyah a quick hug in turn. It felt more like a courtesy greeting than anything else. Despite how close she’d been with Allison, Aliyah had always felt like an afterthought to her family, never quite accepted, even as a friend.

“We should,” Kevin started, clearing his throat and gesturing toward the congregation of people, “before the ceremony starts.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Kathy agreed. Hand finding Jake’s, she gave him a squeeze. “We’re waiting to get Allison’s things in order,” she told him, “if there’s anything you need from her apartment, either of you, we’ll see about getting it to you. It may be a few weeks before,” she took a deep breath, “before we’re ready to settle everything, but we’ll get it to you if you let us know.”

“That’s kind of you, thank you,” Jake told her, squeezing her hand in turn. She gave them both a strained smile before letting Kevin lead her off toward the gravesite a few yards away. “That sucked,” he said when they were out of earshot. Aliyah only hummed in reply. “I know you just said that you don’t want to tell them, but they’re gonna see the pictures of the two of you together. At her apartment.”

“Maybe that’s the best way for them to find out then. Or you can just sneak in and clear them out before anyone else goes in. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Pretty sure you have a key. You could do it too.”

“I can’t,” and even Aliyah could hear the crack in her voice. “I can’t go there and be around her things when she’s, when, when she’s not around. Did you know,” she continued quickly, unwilling to let Jake cut in, “that I asked to take a break when I went to college? I thought it wasn’t fair to her, that I’d be at college, and she was stuck here, and what if she got bored of waiting?”

“No, uh, she didn’t tell me that.”

“She was pissed. I mean, just absolutely furious with me. We didn’t, for the record, take a break, that is. She said it made no sense, that she’d never get tired of waiting, and would wait for me to come back and be all smart. Even offered to fly up every weekend as if she had the money for it. I was so glad we didn’t when I got to college. I woulda been so lost without her support, and now, now she’d just gone, and I have to somehow figure out how to go back there and deal with that, because I can’t do it here.”

“I get it, ‘Liyah, I do.”

“I haven’t cried since you called me,” Aliyah pushed on. She could feel the hysteria bubbling in her chest just like on Monday when she’d made that stupid phone call to Jake. What if she had never called? Would anyone have remembered to tell her? “Which is so stupid. Why can’t I cry? I *loved her*, but I can’t even *cry*.” Except that ended up being a complete lie, even as she said it, she could feel the wetness on her cheeks, the burn of her mascara getting into her eyes.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Jake said, stepping in front of her and blocking the view of the congregation, not that it mattered much, everything had gone blurry around the edges already. “You did love her, and she loved you, and-” he stopped, grabbing her hands to ground her, “fuck, man, I don’t know what to say, because this whole situation is shit.”

“It really is,” she huffed, pulling her hands away from his so they could wrap each other in a hug, breathing in the autumn air and trying to stifle sobs. Ten yards away the priest started up his sermon. They didn’t move any closer, content, for the moment, to hang onto the little bit of Allison they had left.

TWO

“I don’t know why we’re doing this,” Kevin grumbled, but he let Kathy adjust his tie regardless. Her hair was blow dried and pinned up; he couldn’t even remember the last time that she’d done up her hair all nice, well, other than. Well, other than the funeral the week before.

“It’s church,” Kathy said, voice just a bit sharp but also clearly not looking to start an argument. “Claire, are you about ready?” she shouted to their daughter down the hall. Claire didn’t answer, but Kevin hadn’t exactly expected her to. She probably wanted to go even less than he did. “Everyone goes to church,” Kathy continued as if she’d never even interrupted the conversation.

“We’ve never gone to church,” he couldn’t help but shoot back. He *knew* why Kathy wanted to go. Over the last week or so she’d gotten quite buddy-buddy with Father Dan at the church. He’d officiated the funeral, and been helping Kathy “work through her grief,” as she’d told Kevin the night after the funeral when they’d laid together in the darkness, both unable to sleep. The day after, Kathy had been gone for the whole day leaving him and Claire alone to figure out what to do with themselves.

At first he’d been angry with her for leaving them alone like that, but a few more days out and Kevin was glad that she had someone else to listen to her grieve. His own chest felt broken open, splintered and jagged around the edges, and when he thought too hard it became difficult to breathe. He couldn’t deal with her grief too. Kevin pulled at his sleeves because it felt like the thing to do while Kathy doused herself in a bottle of the sharp-scented perfume she’d worn since they were in high school.

“And I don’t know why. I used to go as a kid and the girls went to CCD all those years. Maybe if we’d gone more often-” Kevin didn’t stop her except to feel his frown deepen, but

Kathy didn't finish her thought on her own. "Father Dan says it'll be good for us to go and for Claire to be there."

Instead of answering, Kevin just let out a grunt. The only time that Kevin ever went to church was for funerals and weddings. He thought that he could probably count the amount of time on his hands if he tried. The thought made him want to vomit, but he wasn't about to tell Kathy that.

"Claire!" she called again.

This time their daughter snapped back a quick, "What, Mom?" from down the hall.

"Are you about ready?" She glanced down at the watch on her wrist. "We need to be out the door in five if we want to make it in time to get a good seat!" She walked out of the bedroom, her outfit, while not the black dress she had worn the week before, was still similar enough that it gave Kevin a sharp sense of déjà vu.

He swallowed down the feeling, unwilling to let it become anything more serious that would lead to that awful sharp prickling behind his eyes. Digging the heels of his palms into his temples, he gave himself a moment to just breathe. The scent of Kathy's perfume filled up the room, giving Kevin something to focus on beside the heated feeling under the collar and tightness in his chest.

Kathy had left the room, and Kevin was glad.

He gave himself a few moments to gather his breath, to let himself feel each of his limbs, grounded to the floor at his feet, up through the sturdiness of his legs, the way his chest rose and fell when he breathed, the way his uneven nails caught on the lace doily on top of their dresser. Just like the psychiatrist woman from the police department had told him. Kevin hated the fact that the exercise actually made him feel better.

Shaking out the tension in his shoulders, Kevin followed after his wife into the kitchen where she was already gathering up car keys to head out into the garage. Claire wore a pretty navy dress that Kevin couldn't remember seeing before; he couldn't help but note that his youngest daughter looked just as thrilled to be going to church as he was. He gave her a gentle comradery nudge that made her lips twitch up just a bit before he followed her out the door after her mother.

"Everyone's staring," Claire hissed when they entered into the atrium of the church. It looked just the same as it had last week, all red brick walls on the outside and neutrally painted walls on the inside. The stained glass windows gave the whole interior a cheery sort of feel that made Kevin want to grumble. He wasn't feeling particularly cheery.

Kathy pushed Claire forward from where she'd dug her heels into the carpet of the atrium. "No one's staring, just go," Kathy said back at her, voice low but still sharp. Glancing around at the couple handfuls of people gathered around in the atrium before the service started, Kevin had to admit that his daughter was right; people *were* staring.

If the church-goers were trying to be subtle, they were doing a terrible job. Their conversations had been hushed anyway, but now it felt like they were whispering to each other behind their hands, shooting furtive glances at the family that had just entered. Kevin clenched his fists together to avoid shoving them into his pockets.

With a cleared throat, Mark Landsky stepped away from the rest of the crowd, reaching out to shake Kevin's hand. Mark had been their mechanic for years, and gave a friendly little smile that fell flat of comfortable. "Kevin. How ya doin'?"

"Mark," his wife, Sheri, hissed back at him.

Mark's cheeks colored around his beard and the tight smile disappeared. "Stupid question," he continued. Kathy had succeeded in getting Claire to move, stopping beside the Landsky's. "Look, we're all glad you could make it. It's good to see you, ya know, out."

Mark reached out to clamp a hand down on Kevin's shoulder; he resisted the urge to shrug it off. He could feel irritation running just under the edge of his skin. It wasn't something he'd ever felt before the last couple of days, but now he'd felt it cropping up more and more although it was usually reserved for the shitty attitude of the South Springs' police department. Mark was a friend, relatively speaking, and only trying to be friendly, welcoming. It didn't make the irritation any less real or burning.

Kevin forced himself not to react.

"Really, just let us know if you need anything," Sheri added hastily. She looked imploringly at Kathy who appeared out of her depth, lost in a way that Kevin hadn't ever seen her. "We're all here if you need anything," Sheri continued, a bit less enthusiastically when none of them answered. The rest of the congregation were no longer being subtle with their staring and nodded in agreement with what the Landsky's were saying. Their faces ranged between pity and sympathy; Kevin's nails dug into the meat of his palms.

"Right," Kevin answered, trying to keep his voice light, thankful. If it fell short of that, no one acknowledged it. "We're going to go have a seat." He set his hand on the small of Kathy's back and gave her a light push to get them moving again, past the atrium and into the church proper where the pews were lined up in neat rows and people didn't stare quite so blatantly.

It didn't stop their voices from floating around into the cavernous space. "What a shame what happened to that girl." "*I* heard she killed herself over some *boy*." "Everyone knows she

had a wild streak.” They heard the rumors whispered around them, their entire lives on display for everyone to see.

They didn’t go to church again after that.

THREE

The sun streaming through the windows gave the illusion of brightness and optimism. It seemed deceptive given the recent events in South Springs, contrasting against what Emily thought should have been a dark and dreary day if she were in a movie. Then again, she'd never worked a murder case before, maybe this was just par for the course.

Dallas, who had worked *scores* of murder investigations before, grumbled about the sun through the receiver of the landline phone in his motel room. Emily had called his room as soon as she'd gotten up, ready to start the day, but if Dallas' agitation through the phone meant anything, *he* certainly wasn't up and ready to start the day. Emily just couldn't help her own energy, a buzzing of anticipation under her skin to be working her first case outside of petty inner-city crime; that was all small time shoplifters and car break-ins. She'd been with the *Des Moines Register* for nearly five years and had been looking for her chance to break through into something new. Something important. If that came in the form of an eight hour car trip to get the inside scoop on a small town murder, she would take it.

Dallas grumbled something about needing coffee through the receiver, so Emily jumped on the opportunity to get out and start looking into the town, offering to pop across the street to pick something up for the two of them from the cafe she'd seen when they'd pulled in the night before. Grabbing her notebook, pen, and a small voice recorder, she crammed them inside her purse along with her phone and keys.

In the light of day, the town almost had an entirely different feel than when they'd driven in at 9 p.m. the night before. Their little motel sat at the end of the main street, occupied by little women's boutique stores and salons. It felt like a town built for women with the exception of the oddly placed hardware and appliance stores stuck right in the middle of the drag. The windows of the hardware store were packed with odds and ends, frosted over with a haze of dust. A worn

sign in the window displayed an advertisement for a bicycle sale that looked about ten years out of date.

In the couple of hours before being given the assignment and needing to pack to leave, Emily had done as much digging into the history of South Springs as she could. Frankly, she hadn't been able to find much. In a town of 1500 people, nothing much happened in South Springs. The county fair popped up overnight in a big field somewhere to the west of town every July and doubled the town's population for a few days. After the fair ended, the entire establishment seemed to disintegrate into the ground to wait for the next year. From what Emily could tell, the fair was the most exciting thing to happen in South Springs.

Well. Until this.

The waitress in the java shop seemed nice enough. The place sat quiet in the early hour of the morning, and it meant that Emily's mocha came out quickly from the kitchen. The only other people inside were a group of older men all sat around a large circular table near the front window. The way the waitress would pop her hip out against the wall each time she stopped to drop something off to talk made Emily think they were probably regulars. The kind of townspeople that had grown up there and never left, that frequented the java shop every day at 6 a.m., even on a Thursday.

"You an artist?" the waitress asked, pulling Emily out of her musing. The waitress flicked a long, manicured finger out toward the notebook that Emily had been doodling in. It was a way she'd found to pass the time, a way to refocus her thoughts. She'd been sketching out the scene by the window, the seven men all seated around the table.

The waitress didn't seem disapproving about her choice in subject. Emily had found that people didn't always like to find themselves being drawn out by some stranger, even if it only

amounted to absent-minded doodles. “Ah, no. I’m a reporter, actually,” she added more cheerily. She thought about sticking her hand out for a shake, but the waitress didn’t seem the type to go for that sort of thing. “From *The Des Moines Register*.”

“*The Register*, huh,” the waitress said with a bit of a frown. Emily wondered if she shouldn’t have said anything. Maybe the town wouldn’t appreciate having someone from the city in poking around their personal business. Not that that would be stopping Emily, but she liked this quaint little java shop already. It would have been unfortunate to alienate herself from the people there. “We don’t sell those here. Got *The Gazette* and *Press-Citizen* though. Sometimes we even get copies of *The Sun* in from Chicago.”

“Oh, that’s,” Emily paused, not really sure what to say. “I could set you up with a subscription if you’d like?”

“No. Nobody ‘round here wants to read *The Register*. It’s all about Des Moines, you know? None of us much cares what’s happening in Des Moines. I suppose you’re here to talk about that Cooper girl, yeah? Only reason I can figure that Des Moines would care about South Springs. Funny that they didn’t care about her when she won that state cross country award, but they care about her now that she’s dead. Makes you wonder what Des Moines really cares about, you know?” The waitress never once took a breath, and despite the bite in her words there was no bite in her voice. In fact, she looked interested in Emily, similar to the fascination people had when viewing an important public figure.

“I, am here about the Cooper murder, yes,” Emily answered, words halting.

“She was a good girl,” the waitress continued. Emily tried to shift her notebook to the next page to take notes without being too obvious. The waitress appeared more than happy to chat away, and Emily didn’t want to miss the opportunity to jot down anything important. She

also didn't want to spook the waitress either when she noticed Emily writing, but, well, if she did notice, it didn't stop her talking. "I think she won prom queen when she was in high school. She was a good runner too, everyone thought so, won that state championship like I was saying."

"She was pretty popular around town then? Most people know who she was?"

"Oh," the waitress let out a bit of a laugh, "everybody knows everybody around here, hon. Can't get away from that. She was definitely popular with the boys; she was pretty, like I said. Didn't matter though, she's been dating the oldest Park boy as long as I can remember. They were always together at things. My daughter was a year below them in school, so I'd see the Cooper girl and Park boy together. There was another girl they'd run around with, but I don't know her. My daughter would probably remember."

"I thought everybody knew everybody here."

The waitress frowned. "Some people like to keep to themselves."

"Of course," Emily agreed although she didn't quite understand. The way the waitress' eyes had turned a bit cold told Emily that she shouldn't dig too much more into it. At least not right now. She'd try again on another day maybe, when the waitress had warmed up to her more. "Say, do you have any contact info for the Parks?"

FOUR

Kathy Cooper had been waiting for the knock on her door. She hadn't known when it would come. Hours? Days? But she knew that it would come. She spent so much time at home nowadays that she suspected she'd be there for it. Her manager position at the general store typically kept her busy during the day, but she'd walked in three days after her oldest daughter's funeral to downturned faces and furtive looks.

Everyone wanted to tell her how sorry they were for her loss. She almost hadn't been able to take it, the pity and sympathy, but had pushed through and headed straight for the time card slot. Anything had to be better than the stillness at home, the way her family moved through the house like wraiths, hardly acknowledging one another. No one had gone into Allison's room or apartment yet.

Kevin had gone back to work the day after the funeral. Management there hadn't said a word to *him*. The other day shift manager at the general store met her as she plucked out her time card to stamp from the row of cards. It was right there at the top, in the slot carefully labeled Kathy Cooper, not quite as worn around the edges as the other cards because she'd missed so much time already that month.

"We weren't expecting you," Neil said, words seeming to have been carefully plucked out of the air. "You're not on the schedule. We'll call when we need you. You should go home and spend time with your family." *What is left of it.* Neil didn't say it, but Kathy heard it in his voice anyway.

"Kevin's already went back to work," Kathy answered him bluntly.

"Well, Claire then?"

"She's back in school."

She'd been back in school even before the funeral. It was her first year of high school, a rough year for any kid, only compounded by the fact that she was now the kid with the dead sister. The counselor at the school had thought it would be a good idea for Claire not to miss too much time. "It will help her adjust to have that normalcy in her life, and she wouldn't have to worry about being held back for missing too much," she'd said. It was only the beginning of the year, only September.

Kathy hadn't wanted Claire around while they planned the funeral.

"Well, look. You'll have some time to yourself, to relax. Everyone's always talking about how they don't get enough vacation time." Kathy glared at him. *Vacation time*, as if having a dead daughter was the price she had to pay to get more *vacation time*. "Go home, Kathy."

So Kathy had gone home, and she'd thrown a tantrum in the privacy of her own home, wanting to tear out her hair or apart the photo albums, anything with her daughter's face. She'd settled for dumping out the casseroles and condolence dinners left by the neighbors. She scooped the contents out of their perfect glass pans and into the trash without a feeling of regret, as if a meal would fix anything.

And she thought and she thought and she thought.

"What can I do for you?" Kathy asked, opening the front door after two polite rings on the doorbell. She hadn't been quick to answer, wiping her hands neatly on a discarded rag. She'd turned off the faucet on the kitchen sink; they owned a dishwasher, but washing the dishes by hand gave her something to occupy her time during the day.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Cooper. Mind if I step in?" Dale Williamson pulled off his hat as she answered the door. His uniform, clean pressed, made him look bigger than Kathy knew he was. The outfit acted like an illusion, giving him a sense of authority that he didn't actually have. He,

and the rest of the town, could pretend all they wanted. Kathy knew better, just like the high school kids that drank in the fields outside of town knew better. No one was actually afraid of Sheriff Dale Williamson.

She, of course, did mind him coming in, but she'd been raised to be hospitable, and frankly, she *had* been expecting him. Well, actually, she'd been expecting him to send some underling along. She hadn't expected him to show up in person on her doorstep. Better than expected, indeed. "Can I get you anything to drink? Water? Lemonade?"

"No, but thank you. I won't be long." Dale stood in the doorway, letting the screen shut behind him. He held his hat in his hands, crunching it up between his fingers. A month ago he'd done the same thing, crumpling that same hat between his fingers as he stood in her entryway.

He'd been the one to bring the news of Allison's death, said he'd wanted to do it personally, certainly didn't want rumors to spread to them first. Two fishermen had found her the Saturday morning after it had happened, or so they guessed. She'd been floating in the river, face up, just by the dam, prime fishing spot, especially for retired old men without anything else to do on a Saturday morning. Dale hadn't been sure he'd be able to keep them quiet, that it wouldn't have spread to the whole town by the middle of the afternoon. Murders just didn't happen in South Springs.

Kathy found herself idly thinking at times. Her thoughts almost always went to Allison these days. How had she looked when they'd found her in the river? Would she have looked peaceful and serene, red hair fanned out around her head like those popular Instagram models posed like? There hadn't been any blood, she'd been drowned, grabbed around the arms and tossed into the water. Her wrists had been mottled purple and blue even after those long hours after she'd died when Kathy and Kevin had to go in to positively identify her body, her skin an

unhealthy pale. They'd had a closed casket at the funeral. When Kathy closed her eyes, she could still see those colors dancing in her vision.

Kathy allowed herself a long blink, tilting her head to the side. "Did you find the man that murdered my daughter?" she asked him bluntly. She knew the answer; she knew what he was actually here for. If possible, Dale looked even more uncomfortable now than he did when he'd come to deliver the news. At the time, he'd been nothing but weary, likely up since the wee hours of the morning setting up a crime scene, trying to figure out how to launch a murder investigation, debating on how to tell a family that their daughter was dead.

"We haven't made any arrests," he answered, surprisingly diplomatic.

"I know. I would *hope*," and her voice dripped with condescension, "that we would be the first to hear about it if you did." Kathy cleared her throat and smoothed down her blouse. An itch started just under her skin; she needed to move. She wished that she could go back to the dishes. "That's why I posted the billboard."

Dale coughed, covering it with his hand. "I came to talk to you about the sign."

The sign in question sat just on the edge of town. The large billboard nestled in the Millers' field – soybeans this year – the wooden boards holding it up just a bit old and a tad rotted out but still perfect enough to spread just a little bit of information. Todd Millers' father had had it installed when the farm was still his back in the sixties at the bequest of one of the local gas stations. The last few years it had housed an old advertisement for the county fair that the Millers hadn't been bothered to replace.

Kathy had it replaced with a hotline to call if anyone had information about her daughter's death. She knew she wouldn't be able to drive out that way anytime soon, most of the billboard being a picture of her daughter's face when she was bright and happy and alive. Kathy

had chosen one of her senior photos, a snapshot in between two posed takes where she'd been wearing her track uniform but laughing at something the photographer had said. A still moment of her life accidentally captured on camera. A number at the bottom redirected the caller to a voicemail box that Kathy had set up. Nobody had called yet.

"It's nice, isn't it?" Kathy asked. She busied herself with rearranging a few trinkets on the shelf by her head for lack of anything else to do with her hands. "I knew the police weren't turning up much information, so I thought I'd help out."

"You have to take the sign down, Kathy."

"Mrs. Cooper will be just fine, thank you."

"Mrs. Cooper," Dale conceded when it was clear she wasn't about to continue, "you need to take the sign down. We're holding an active investigation. We can't have anyone interfering with that or spreading misinformation. Any information that does come up needs to come straight to us."

Kathy gave a short shrug, "That's fine. If anyone calls into my hotline, I'll be sure to forward the message on to you if I think it's important."

"Everything is important, Mrs. Cooper."

"Of course it is," she couldn't help but snap. "But since your department doesn't seem to want to get its head out of its ass and figure out what actually happened that night, it looks like I'm going to have to." She took a deep breath, physically feeling her shoulders heave. "Am I breaking any laws?"

"You're interfering-"

"I don't give a rat's ass about *interfering*. Am I breaking any laws?"

"You're not."

“Then I’d kindly ask that you leave my house.”

“Mrs. Cooper-”

“Get out, Dale.”

His mouth twisted up in a pucker, but he didn’t argue with her. “You have a good day, Mrs. Cooper,” he said as he headed out the door. Kathy watched him leave through the screen door, saw the way he put his hat back on and twisted his fingers in agitation. She had the door shut and locked before he’d reached his car.

FIVE

Jake Park wasn't anything like Emily had expected. Everything the waitress had said about Allison "prom queen, cross country star, well liked in the community," as her notes stated, had Emily expecting a football player with carefully groomed features and maybe a farmer's tan. It *was* Iowa. Instead, Jake Park looked like he'd stepped out of a Jack London novel with scraggly, unkept facial hair and combat boots.

Mrs. Park, his mother, had been pleasant enough to point them toward her son on the outskirts of town chopping down timber for a local farmer. Apparently, after high school he'd been jumping around doing odd jobs, landscaping and farm hand mostly. Mrs. Park had been kind but warned Emily and Dale that Jake could be a bit of a handful.

A beat-up Ford truck sat down on the edge of the tree line as Park hauled a branch into the rusted bed. The tree in question stood jagged into the air, no more than six feet tall now, the leaves brown and crumpled as they clung to their branches. The rest of the tree laid out around the truck in varying sizes, some ends snapped off in ragged configurations while others had clean cuts where Jake had stuck a chainsaw to them.

"Mr. Park," Dallas called, giving a brief wave to get the other man's attention, as if he hadn't seen them pull up in their shiny green Honda. Dallas had been lamenting the amount of dust accumulating under the tires from all the gravel roads. "Dallas Weatherall," he continued when they were closer, sticking out his hand for Jake to shake, "*Des Moines Register*."

Jake frowned but didn't say anything right away. He wiped his hands off on the thighs of his jeans and accepted Dallas' handshake. "Just Jake," he finally said, stepping back away from them to start throwing timber back into the bed of his truck. "Not really prepared for guests."

"Oh, that's fine," Dallas replied. "You can keep at your work if you need to. We'd just like to ask you a few questions while you do."

“Not really feeling much like talking either.”

“Jake,” Emily couldn’t help but interject before Dallas could say anything else. She stepped up so that she wasn’t in Dallas’ shadow. “I’m sure you know that we’re here to ask about Allison. I understand that talking about her probably isn’t easy, but we’d like to hear more about her, to help find her killer.” Emily knew it was a lie even as it came out of her mouth, but she couldn’t stop herself from saying it. They were hardly there to help expose a killer – although, it would make for the ultimate story – but to write an expose about the crime.

Neither Dallas nor Jake seemed at all fooled by her grandiose words. Jake let out an unpleasant sound and turned away. “South Springs will take care of her killer; you don’t have to worry about that.”

“So you believe you know who the killer is then?” Dallas asked.

“Not yet, but we will.”

“I’m sure it’s a hard loss on the community; she seemed well liked.”

Jake let out a sharp laugh, bitter and angry. He threw more timber into the truck. “None of them knew her,” he growled. “Those people,” and he scanned his finger over where the town sat just a few miles down the road. “They pretend. They offer condolences and say what a great loss it is, but none of them really gave a damn. None of them knew her.”

“Not like you did, I’m sure,” Emily interjected. “People said that the two of you were in a long-term relationship.” Well, a waitress in the java shop. A person.

That seemed to bring Jake up short, brows drawn together and a bit of wind punched out of his sails. “No,” he answered, voice just as dumbfounded as his posture. “She was practically my sister. Her mom still feeds me Sunday brunch.” He shrugged. “Just goes to show you how blind these people really are.”

Before they'd left, Jake had given them directions to the dam. He'd warned them that reception was likely to be spotty the further out into the woods they drove, but that the signs should lead them where they wanted to go. He hadn't been wrong; it seemed like as soon as they crossed from the nicely marked rural highway onto the gravel leading down into the woods, Emily lost all reception, her phone's little bars blinking at her as it tried to connect.

Good thing she didn't need reception to use the camera.

"That's nice," Emily couldn't help but note as they walked toward the deck overlooking the dam. Just on the edge, surrounding the sign warning patrons to be watchful of their step a sort of memorial had been set up. A couple of balloons had been tied around the legs of the sign, floating lazily in the wind. The ground was littered with bouquets of flowers and cards, a couple of pictures. Emily knelt down and picked up one of the picture frames. A group of smiling girls in jerseys stared back at her, arms wrapped around one another. The cross country team; Emily could spot Allison in the front row. The cards boasted sad platitudes: 'thinking about you' and 'calling an angel home'. Emily wondered how many people actually thought those things and how many did it out of a sense of obligation or fanaticism.

Emily almost wanted something of her own to leave, but she didn't have anything. Instead she set the picture back down and took a few of her own pictures of the display.

"Not much of a dam," Dallas said when Emily reached him. He stood on the far end of the observation deck. The grating underfoot gave way to open air under them.

Dallas' hands were braced on the railing, the red paint cracking and peeling to show the steelwork underneath. "It's a roller dam," Emily noted. She'd looked up as much information about South Springs as she could before they arrived; it was the only reason she knew. Dallas

didn't seem surprised, just looking out over the water. The dam itself wasn't impressive, the pictures of roller dams Emily had been able to find were all similarly unimpressive. It looked more like a tiny manmade waterfall than anything. "They're considered pretty dangerous."

"You think she jumped?"

"With the marks around her wrists? Doubt it." Emily had already constructed a picture in her head of what had happened that Friday night. Allison and a shadowed figure out on the dam: a friend or jilted lover, maybe an old high school teammate with a grudge. They'd fight, grabbing Allison around the wrists when she struggled, and hoisting her into the dam, into her death. Emily had read the coroner's report: water in the lungs, could have been from drowning, could also have been because she'd been floating in the river for hours after her death. Body covered in bruises, no clear cause. No signs of assault; no evidence that she had fought back. "How messed up do you have to be to kill a drunk girl and try to hide her body in the river?"

Dallas just shrugged. "You see a lot of weird things in the crime division," he admitted. "Weirdest thing about this one is just that it's a small town. Everybody knows everybody, so no matter who did it, someone's life is going to be ruined because of what happened."

"Of course someone's life is going to be ruined. She was *murdered*. She had a *family*." Emily couldn't help but feel annoyance bubbling under her skin. Dallas made the whole situation sound typical and mundane as if this town hadn't just faced a tragedy. "You saw that guy up there. He's ruined by what happened."

"Hardly seemed ruined. Ruined people don't go out and work and talk to city reporters." Dallas looked at her and seemed utterly unimpressed by what he saw. His complete lack of sympathy for the people of South Springs only made Emily's irritation grow, but she didn't say anything. "It's a tragedy, sure, here, in this moment, but they'll move on." Seeming to sense her

annoyance, Dallas' expression softened. He reached out and patted Emily's shoulder, his grip just on the wrong side of uncomfortable. "Look, you can't let this job get to you. You can't get attached. It'll eat you up inside. Let's go and see if we can get an exclusive with the family."

Emily stood on the edge of the terrace for just a few moments more. She watched Dallas walk back toward their car, but she needed a moment to gather herself before following. Out of the two of them, she was fairly certain the job had only gotten to one of them, had only affected one of them, and she was pretty damn certain that person wasn't her.

SIX

Friday, September 22, 2017

The tips of her tennis shoes dipped into the cold water of the river, Allison lounged back in the sand, arms reclined like beams to keep herself upright. At 11 p.m., the world had taken on a sort of hazy version of reality, the tree line visible against the brightness of the moon, but remaining an indistinct shape, the river a glassy black surface that hardly seemed to move from her vantage point.

The sand had gone cold ages ago, no longer warmed by the surprisingly pleasant September sun; they'd had record highs all week, but the setting of the sun had left the sand pleasantly cold against her heated palms. She could feel the buzz of alcohol keeping her relatively warm even out in the dark. With a sigh, Allison leaned back, letting the sand mix into her hair and wedge under the edges of her clothes.

Lifting and contorting awkwardly, she pulled her phone out of her back pocket, hitting the switch on the side to light up the screen and check the time. It stayed dark, and she remembered, in a quiet moment of clarity, that she'd turned it off hours ago after her fight with Aliyah. Frowning, she squinted up at the sky, deciding that knowing the time mattered far less than turning her phone on to see the missed texts or calls. She and Aliyah almost never fought, not since before Aliyah had gone to college at least. Now everything seemed weird and strained, and it made Allison's chest burn in a way she knew couldn't be attributed to the probably inadvisable amount of alcohol she'd already consumed.

She should have brought another bottle with her.

That didn't make her an alcoholic no matter what Aliyah had said.

It wasn't her fault that Aliyah was too smart and pretty for her own good, and she deserved to have a good time at college without having to wait around for a girlfriend that had

peaked in high school and was too damn scared of the real world to actually go out and see it, and nope, despite all the alcohol, she was not nearly drunk enough for those thoughts. Or perhaps she was just on the edge of drunk enough to really think about it.

Allison sighed and rubbed at her eyes, phone a comforting weight discarded on her stomach.

Covering her eyes with her arm, she forced herself to stop thinking, to just listen to the space around her. To the left, she could hear the sounds of the party she'd come from. She wasn't all that far away, a couple of meters down the trail, but the trees closed around the space, eating up the sound of the music. She couldn't hear any people, just the steady thump of the bass, swallowed up by the sand. To her right, the dam rushed loudly, a steady flow of churning water. The two sounds collided uneasily with Allison caught in between.

"Hey, Alli, what brings you all the way out here?" Uncovering her eyes and tilting her head, she could just make out the shape of Ryan Locklin on the edge of the trees. She recognized him more for his voice than anything.

"Just wanted some space," she answered honestly. Pulling herself up to sitting, she tucked her feet in away from the water and drug her hand through her hair to release some of the sand that had woven its way in. Ryan came closer, an obvious sway in his steps, easily explained by the two bottles of Bud in his hands. He tossed one down into the sand next to her with a flashy grin; she just watched the way the sand attached itself to the condensation on the outside of the bottle like a staticed blanket.

"Brought that for you," he said, seeming to decide that standing proved more difficult than plopping down into the sand perpendicular to her.

Allison grabbed the bottle by the cap, fingers careful over the ragged edges as she swirled a cupholder into the sand. “Yeah, thanks. I’ve probably had enough, honestly.” Which really wasn’t something she’d expected to ever say.

Ryan seemed to agree, laughing. “Girl, you can put away more than anyone else back there.” He stuck his thumb out behind him to indicate the party. He shifted closer, until his knees lined up beside her leg with a gentle nudge. Allison just watched him, focus somewhat hazy, and for the first time that night she wondered if she was more drunk than she’d thought. Maybe Aliyah had a point about all the drinking she’d been doing. “Glad you ditched Park,” Ryan continued, gaining confidence when she didn’t move away from him, “follows you like a fucking lapdog.”

“I like Jake,” she answered. Instead of looking at Ryan, she squinted back behind him. Was Jake still at the party? Probably. He’d been her ride there, and he was too much of a good guy to leave without her. She’d definitely seen him throw back a few beers in the last couple of hours. Hmmm, maybe neither of them should be driving. Aliyah could have driven; she’d never been a big drinker.

Allison rubbed her chest at the ache that burned there. She’d forgotten entirely about Ryan until he spoke again. “He’s a pushover, gonna be stuck here doing dead-end jobs forever, y’know? But my old man’s gonna retire in a few years, and I’ll be running his construction business. Could build you any house you wanted.” He leaned forward, free hand reaching out to touch her hair or shoulder or neck, she wasn’t sure, but she ducked out of reach before he could get to her.

The quick movement left her head spinning but not enough that she couldn’t get her feet under her. Her socks squished a bit grossly in her tennis shoes, wet from where the river water

had seeped in earlier. It left her toes feeling numb and uncoordinated. “I’m getting out of this dumb town,” she told him.

Ryan stood up to meet her, following her as she made determinedly for the dam. She wasn’t sure why that’s where she wanted to be, but she knew she needed to be there, or maybe just away, to have Ryan’s voice drowned out by the rushing of the water; she’d left the party to be alone after all.

“Hey, hey!” he said, progressively louder, beers discarded in the sand behind them. “You wanna get out, that’s cool. Any idea where you would go?” Allison just gave him a noncommittal shrug in response, huffing out a breath as she hopped across uneven rocks toward her destination.

Blinding spotlights illuminated the viewing deck up above, but the dam itself remained shadowed, crystal black water churning. The two of them climbed the coastline, where the long prairie grass, turning brown with the season, met the water splattered slate grey stones from the river. When they reached the top shelf of the dam, Allison looked out over the water, hands on her hips, feeling a bit damp from the spray. The air felt different there, charged and unpleasant.

“Allison, look, damn,” Ryan started again, words disjointed and voice slightly raised to be heard over the water. Allison didn’t look. “I was thinking that we could go out. Nowhere fancy, y’know, just somewhere. Grab a beer or something.”

“How many times have you asked me out for a beer, Ryan?” she couldn’t help but ask. She didn’t know the exact number, but she was fairly certain she wouldn’t be able to count each on her hand. She shifted her weight to her other hip, feeling the way the ground swayed under her with the movement. When Ryan didn’t answer right away, she continued, “Don’t know why you keep asking when you know I’m not gonna say yes.” Normally, a bubble of irritation would

have been itching under her skin at Ryan's question; she'd never been one to hold her temper in check. Now, with the alcohol and river and chill September wind, she just wanted to laugh, the gurgle of noise caught in her throat.

"Just figured it's a matter of time," Ryan muttered back. Petulance colored his tone, but Allison chose to ignore it, not at all surprised. "Gotta get bored of Park eventually, y'know."

Allison let herself laugh at that one, throwing her hands into the air in exasperation. "Fuck this town," she settled on, unsure of how to properly articulate all the things she was feeling, the tension in her bones that she carried with her each day, the clenched feeling in her chest of the secret she carried with her. Allison felt so very tired of carrying that secret around with her everywhere.

She was tired; despite feeling the heaviness in her limbs from the alcohol, she stumbled her way closer to the dam, sneakers sliding against the wet stones, but keeping her balance, arms stretched out to her sides to distribute the weight.

Spinning back around, back to the dam, she found Ryan much closer than he had been when she'd been walking out. Clearly he'd followed her, and she hadn't heard him over the rushing of the water. She looked up at disheveled hair and dark eyes as he came closer, surprisingly quick. With a sickening feeling rolling in her stomach, she realized that he wasn't nearly as drunk as she was, swaying as she balanced on the rocks.

He pressed up against her, feeling more like a solid wall encroaching on her space than an actual human being. She was used to Aliyah's soft limbs and knew that Ryan would not be so easily pushed aside. Allison pulled back, but Ryan caught her wrists in a tight grip. Her feet slipped against the rocks, limbs jerking out from Ryan's grip when he pulled her face in to kiss

her. Her ears were ringing with the rush of adrenaline and disgust, eyes narrowed into where Ryan stumbled back away from her, hand rubbing over his jaw.

The world came back to her in waves, the pulse of the dam behind her, the cold damp feeling of the water sprinkling against her skin. The radiating pain in her knuckles and wrist where she'd put her hand into Ryan's jaw. "Bitch," she heard Ryan mutter over the sound of the water.

The word made Allison laugh, a touch hysterical, stomach still churning, with revulsion or fear, she wasn't sure. "I'm a *lesbian*, Ryan," she spat, fingers pushing her hair back away from her face, unable to keep still. "You never had a chance in *hell*."

"You fucking dyke," Ryan growled. Ryan had stumbled back when he'd been hit, but he recovered the lost distance, approaching her with an intent and confidence that had her stumbling back. She wouldn't let herself stop to be grabbed and pulled in again.

"I thought I was the prettiest girl at the party," Allison sang at him, voice bitter.

"You can be hot and still be a dyke."

"You're such a fucking tool, Ryan." Allison picked up her pace, stumbling over the rocks that she couldn't see as she made her way backwards. "I'm a lesbian!" she reiterated, feeling every ounce of the alcohol she'd consumed, and a little bit drunk on the high that she'd finally *said it* to someone, anyone, even Ryan fucking Locklin. Laughing, she threw her head back, vision filled with the stars peeking out in the sky and feeling lighter than she had in years.

Drunk on adrenaline, she almost didn't notice when a rock gave out from under her, water rushing around her ankles and sudden pain in her wrist where it caught on the concrete of the dam before the water swept her feet out from under her and then flooded over her head.

SEVEN

Claire sat on the edge of the dam's overlook, watching the water fall over the edge in an endless stream. She'd slotted herself between the red bars, legs hanging over to dangle below her. Occasionally they brushed against particularly long tree branches or grasses, the leaves tickling her legs. It wasn't exactly the most comfortable position, but she hugged onto the bars of the railing, resting her head against the cold metal.

The last time she'd gone to the dam had been to take homecoming pictures only a couple of weeks previously. She'd been excited, her blue dress covered in sequins and glitter that had left trails everywhere. Allison had given up her Saturday to help Claire get ready, curling and pinning her hair, insisting on doing her makeup. It had been nice. Even though Allison hadn't left South Springs after she'd graduated, it still felt like she had to Claire at times; she was never around as much as she used to be.

The heels of Claire and her friends' shoes had kept getting caught in the grating of the overlook, making them stumble and clamber around through laughs. It had been fun and scenic. The pictures had looked great even if they were taken on cellphone cameras; Claire suspected they only looked great because she wore a pair of rose tinted glasses every time she looked at them.

"Don't you have a curfew or something? It's almost ten pm." Claire looked around to see Jake Park picking his way through the grass to the overlook. Clearly he'd just come off work, jeans dirty and stained. His boots jolted the overlook when he stepped heavily onto it, stopping to look over the shrine that had been set up by the townspeople for Allison. The water from the river had done some damage to the older stuff, kicking up water into the air that made the words run and the edges of cards and condolences curl. Claire had picked out the dead flowers and tossed them into the weeds when she'd arrived.

“I’m fifteen; I can do what I want,” Claire told him pointedly.

Jake just grunted. He bent down and plucked up a stuffed animal from the pile, trudging over to throw himself down at her side, legs slotted through the railing bars. He deposited the stuffed dolphin into her lap. It was a strange thing to leave; Allison didn’t even like dolphins. “Might as well have it. Not a lot of good it’s gonna do out here,” Jake said, slumping forward to loop his arms over the rail.

Claire let her fingers press over the soft fur on the dolphin. It must not have been there long, a bit of dirt clinging to its fins but otherwise looking intact and unstained. She found the motion to be soothing and kept at it. She didn’t ask how he was doing; she didn’t need to. He didn’t ask either.

“You come out here before?”

“No,” Claire scoffed. “Just for homecoming pictures once. Allison woulda kicked my ass if she’d seen me at one of those stupid parties.” It felt nice to actually be able to say her name. It seemed like everyone else refused to, and the house was a minefield at any given time; it was difficult to tell what would set her mother off crying or her father into a sulk. Neither of them would say her name or acknowledge her. It was like she never existed except that her presence lingered over everything like a fog.

“Woulda kicked your ass for swearing too,” Jake noted. “I won’t though. I’m the cool down with the man guy. Plus you’re fifteen; you can do what you want.” Jake flashed her just the faintest smile when he said it, but she couldn’t make herself return it. The expression slipped away with a sigh, and Claire almost felt guilty for not making this any easier on him, for refusing to cave into social niceties.

The breeze blew around them as they sat in silence. Claire pulled her jacket closer around her. She didn't need to say that it had been Allison's once, she was sure that Jake probably recognized it. Claire had accumulated a chunk of Allison's clothes over the years between being a young teenager that wanted to be cool like her older sibling, and Allison hiding things she didn't want anymore in the back of Claire's closet for her to find.

"You should come around the house more often," Claire finally said around the burning in her throat. She knew she was on the verge of crying again, and it felt stupid to do it now over some dumb jacket that she'd never even seen her sister wear. "Mom misses having you around, I think."

Jake Park had been a fixture in Claire's life for as long as she could remember. Jake and Allison hadn't been *that* much older than her, but they'd known each other forever. When things had been rough with his dad, he'd slept on a blowup mattress in their living room. As they grew older, he'd become a more permanent resident of their household. He'd always been nice to her.

"I should call her," Jake admitted with a long breath.

"Or you could come by." Claire could hear the bite in her voice, but she didn't really mean it. She knew why he didn't; if she were in his situation, she wouldn't have wanted to either. They were all grieving for Allison, but sometimes it was too much to feel like that's all there was, the grieving. Claire felt surrounded by it in the house, like an oppressive force. Walk too far out of line and the grief was there, like Allison's presence persisted and refused to leave. Claire only felt normal at school and even then, she was now the girl with the dead sister, special treatment and pitying looks abound.

Jake just shrugged. "Wanna see the place we used to hang out at while we were down here?"

“The party place?”

“Nah,” Jake detangled himself from around the railing and stood up. He offered out a hand to help Claire up. “I mean, yeah, we hung out there too, but there’s a little clearing we found when we were younger. We used to ride our bikes down here in the summer, cause it was hot as hell, and we didn’t have money to go to the pool.”

“My mom would have given you money for the pool.”

“Yeah, mine too probably, but then we woulda had to ride to one of our houses and ride back to the pool....this was way easier.”

Claire let Jake pull her to her feet, but she frowned at him. “It was easier to bike six miles out of town to come here then it was to bike like three in town, tops, to go to the pool?” She stuck her hands into her pockets, the tips a bit numb from the cold.

“Yeah, definitely. Don’t question me.”

So Claire didn’t even if she thought that they were ridiculous. Allison might have been her sister, but she knew that she would never know her in the same way that Jake did. Now she’d never even have the opportunity to try. It made the burning in her throat worse and left a tension in her fingers. It made her want to run back to her car where she could be alone to scream until it was the only thing she could hear, until it rang in her ears even when the world had gone quiet.

Instead, she followed Jake who had decided that he could let her in on some secret part of their relationship now that she was gone. They didn’t have far to go, Jake taking her down through the trees until they reached the side of the river. The further they walked, the more the area opened up into sandy banks, almost beachy if they hadn’t been in nowhere Iowa. Claire wished it wasn’t so cold and so late; she wanted to pull off her shoes and let her feet sink into the cool sand. Instead, each step buried her just a little bit, making it harder to walk, the little grains

pouring inside the lace holes of her converse. She'd have to dump them out before getting back into her car.

"It's not as cool in the fall," Jake admitted as they walked, heading up a dune and pushing apart the foliage at the top. "In the summer, all this is green and thick and you can't see through it. Kinda like curtains. Now you can see through." He pulled apart the branches for Claire to walk through the next couple feet before coming to an empty sandy spot at the top. The foliage parted in an almost perfect circle around them. Jake immediately flopped down into the sand.

"This is your secret hideaway?" It was honestly unimpressive. Nothing special stood out to her, just another patch of sand.

"Like I said, way cooler in the summer." He didn't pay much attention to her though, digging his fingers into the sand. Claire sighed and sat down across from him. There wasn't much room in the small circle to stretch out. "Here we go." What Claire had thought was Jake just fiddling with the sand turned into him unearthing a small tin box. It couldn't have been bigger than her hand.

He handed it to her. "What's in it?" she couldn't help but ask. The metal was cool in her hand, the edges a bit rusted, probably from having been buried in the sand for however long it had been there.

"Open it."

Claire felt her teeth digging just a bit into her lower lip. She knew it was one of her nervous habits. She'd bitten herself bloody for the first couple of weeks of high school. Allison had bought her lip glosses to cover up the marks. Claire pushed up the top of the tin with her thumbs. The metal grated as it opened, but it didn't cause too much of a problem to open. "The

little army dudes are mine,” Jake supplied helpfully. He reached forward and dug three of the little green figures out of the tin, setting them up on his leg. “The pen was Aliyah’s.”

The only other things inside were a pen in the shape of a cat and a beaded bracelet, made with cheap plastic beads and some yarn. Claire pulled the bracelet out and let the beads slide against her fingers. She felt that burn from only minutes ago back behind her eyes and in the bridge of her nose. “Fuck,” she hissed when the burning turned to actual tears. She scrunched up her nose against the feeling and let the bracelet slide onto her wrist, comically large.

She’d made the bracelet for Allison years ago, just some tiny trinket that she hadn’t thought much of. She’d gone through a phase in middle school where they were all the rage. She’d had hundreds of beads and made dozens of these dumb bracelets. All the girls at school had been making them and wearing them everywhere.

“We put stuff we thought was valuable in there,” Jake said quietly. He seemed to sense the kind of mood Claire was in, probably knew exactly what he’d done, the bastard. She swallowed around the lump in her throat and rubbed her eyes as she pushed her hair back from her face, hoping it looked more natural than it felt. “Cause I mean, c’mon, nothing’s more valuable than these little green guys.”

Claire wiped her eyes, listening to Jake if not entirely processing his inane chatter. He nudged her with his shoulder, noticing her distress, a good-natured movement that made her hiccup, chest tight and stomach swirling. “I feel so stupid crying over a crappy bracelet,” she admitted, voice hitching, throat burning.

“I get it,” he replied, voice quiet. “It helps me, ugh, this sounds dumb, but I just talk to her sometimes? Like, not for real, obviously, but just pretending she’s there? It helps to do it someplace where she feels present, like here; we spent a lot of time here, so it just feels like she’s

not even gone if I just talk to her.” Jake rubbed the back of his neck, blunt nails scratching against short hair, throat bobbing with obvious discomfort.

“Maybe I’ll try that,” Claire settled on, hoping to ease the tension in the air. Jake appeared tentatively appeased that his suggestion had been received. It didn’t last long before his expression settled, lips thinning and the lines of his face tight. “I’m going to make the sonava bitch that did this pay, all right? I promise.”

“God,” Claire couldn’t help but breathe. “You sound just like my mother. It was an *accident*. She was drunk and fell. Just because everybody in this town wants to sensationalize her doesn’t make it *true*. My sister drank a lot, and she made a stupid mistake.” Claire could feel her voice rising, but she couldn’t find it in herself to stop. Jake just stared at her, eyes maybe just a bit betrayed. Claire stood, brushing the sand off of her leggings. “Nobody wants to talk about that though, do they? They have to make her out to be some perfect martyr, but she’s not. I loved her, don’t get me wrong, but I’m not gonna put her on a pedestal. I just want her to be my sister.” She didn’t wait for Jake to answer, couldn’t bear to hear whatever rebuttal he no doubt was making to form. “I hope you find what you’re looking for,” she finished before stomping back down the dune.

EIGHT

“Jake.” Deputy Phillips let out a long sigh as he entered the tiny conference room, shutting the door behind him. There was a crisp black binder under one of his arms that he set in front of him on the table between the two of them as he sat down. This was the third time the two of them had met like this, across from one another in the tiny conference room that the police department had outfitted as an interrogation room. It was the first time Jake had been in there with his arms handcuffed to the chair he sat on. It reminded him of a movie.

“Deputy Phillips.” Jake could hear the ruefulness in his own voice. “I not good enough for the chief?”

“We’re not here to talk about the Cooper investigation; we’re here to talk about you walking into a bar, drunk off your ass to stab a man.”

“How is good ol’ Ryan?”

“He’ll live. You almost punctured his lung. Missed it by an inch.”

“Damn.”

Jake only smiled when Phillips grimaced at him. “This is hardly a laughing matter, Park,” he snapped. He laid his hands out on the table in front of him, his entire body a line of tense frustration. “You nearly killed a man.”

Jake’s smile dropped. The cuffs rattled against the plastic arms of the chair when he made to gesticulate with his arms, but they fell back down when he remembered his predicament. In the face of Phillips’ mounting frustration, Jake’s tone didn’t dip into anything past mild amusement. “Hey, don’t sell me short. If the other guys at the bar hadn’t held me back, I *would* have killed a man. Oh,” he added almost as an afterthought, “and if I didn’t like Ruth so much. I wouldn’t want her bar to gain a reputation for being a murder joint. That’s why I stabbed him in

the parking lot.” A cheeky wink followed his confession that had Phillips grinding his teeth; Jake only grinned wider.

“Are you confessing to the attempted murder of Ryan Locklin?”

“Hell no! It was self-defense.”

“Self-defense,” Phillips parroted. He flipped open the binder he’d set on the table. Jake couldn’t help but take a peek, the case report from the officers at the scene laid out between the two of them; Jake thought he could see the hint of pictures behind it, likely the images taken at the hospital of Locklin’s injuries. He almost wanted to see them, but it was probably best he couldn’t. “I have the testimonies of the officers at the scene and a few of the witnesses. It says here,” and as he spoke, Jake watched his fingers move over the page, “that you arrived at Ruth’s Taproom around 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday. The other patrons described you as aggressive and looking for a fight.”

“Oh, come off it. I wasn’t looking for a fight. I just wanted to talk.”

“You just wanted to talk.”

“You have a thing for repeating what I say, but yeah. I knew Locklin would be there. I just wanted to talk to him.”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened then?”

Jake really had gone to Ruth’s Taproom just to talk. At least, he thought he had. The weight of the pocketknife shoved down into his jeans noticeable to him but not anymore than his keys usually would have been. He hadn’t driven to the bar all the way on the edge of town. He couldn’t even really remember how he’d gotten there in the first place, but the slight ache in his legs told him he must have made the trip on foot.

He did remember being out at Zach's place. Zach was a rough and tumble kinda guy like Jake saw himself. He was older, already owned his own carpentry business. It had just been the three of them, him and Zach and Zach's wife, Maggie. Jake ran a hand through his hair, feeling the bite of his nails along his scalp. Maggie had mentioned some stupid post Ryan Locklin had decided to make on Facebook about Allison deserving what she'd gotten.

The construction guys always came out to Ruth's after their shift ended, be it a Friday or a Wednesday; it didn't matter to them. That meant that Ryan would be there with the rest of the crew. Ryan who had killed his best friend and could go traipsing around his usual haunts without any worries because the police were less than useless.

Jake swallowed to push down his rising anger. His anger didn't blaze like it had through middle and high school when all he'd only wanted to do the exactly opposite of what his parents told him; when he could only get into screaming matches with his teachers and try to pick fights with anyone that breathed too close to him. He felt calm, collected; he felt like his head sat straighter on his shoulders than it had in a long time.

He'd just come to talk. Absolutely.

It wasn't *his* fault that Hank had stopped him in the doorway to the bar, hands out and placating. Hank wasn't a big guy, hardly filled the doorframe which only meant that Jake could make out the eyes of everyone in the bar on him even before he'd made his way inside. He smiled ruefully when his eyes caught on Heather Locklin's, seated at one of the booths with her fellow beautician coworkers. They went to Ruth's every Tuesday. Maggie and Heather had always been close; Maggie must have warned them. Heather's eyes darted away, and Jake could see her try to talk to her friends, but the drama had all of their attention's captured.

It felt like the entire bar held its breath, waiting to see what would happen.

Jake raised his hands, fingers splayed and weaponless. “I just came to talk. Can’t a guy talk?”

“Are you drunk?” Hank asked.

“Stone-cold sober,” he replied, and he was. Hadn’t had a lick at Zach’s.

Jake watched as Hank ducked his head to look out the door around him. “Anybody with you?”

“Just me.”

Hank didn’t seem happy about it, but he stepped aside, letting Jake in. He could feel the gazes of everyone in the room, the way the building had gone quiet to watch the potential blowout. He wondered if he *had* come looking for a fight if anyone really would have stopped him. Would someone have stepped between him and Ryan? Would they have tried to hold Jake back or just shepherded the two of them out into the parking lot?

Jake ignored all of them and slid up to the bar next to Ryan. He didn’t sit down, and Ryan didn’t move. Jake had been hoping for a bit of fear, maybe some apprehension at least, but Ryan hardly twitched and looked far from worried even with Jake looming over him.

“The fuck you want, Park?” Ryan grumbled. Ruth stood nearby, practically glaring over at Hank for letting Jake into the building. By just opening his mouth, Jake could smell the alcohol rolling off of Ryan’s breath. No wonder he seemed to be unperturbed, liquid courage could do that for you.

“I’m just here to talk,” Jake reiterated.

Ryan let out a booming laugh, the sound loud in the relative quiet. The jukebox still played, but without the sound of other conversation, it hardly amounted to much other noise.

“What makes you think that I want to talk to you?”

“Yeah, here’s the thing,” Jake said, popping the knuckles on his fingers to relieve the tension. He hadn’t realized how much he’d been clenching his fists together until he gave his joints the reprieve. “I’m not exactly asking.”

“Well, I ain’t moving, so talk.” Jake swallowed down the urge to shout and holler. He would be the bigger man here. When Jake didn’t answer right away, Ryan shot him a nasty smirk. “So, what? You wanna hear about how I did away with that pretty redhead?” Ryan snorted and swallowed the last bit of his beer. “Keep looking because I didn’t touch her.”

“Like fucking hell you didn’t,” Jake snarled. “You think half the town didn’t see the way you followed her around panting like a dog? God, she fucking hated you. Didja finally hear that she was planning on taking out a restraining order, so you had to get your hands on her before she could?”

“She wouldn’ta done it. She didn’t give a rat’s ass about me.”

“Of course she didn’t, you dickwad. She was a lesbian, you know? Bet that thought didn’t even pass through your tiny dickish head.” It wasn’t his secret to tell, had never been, but it felt oddly freeing to say it. Allison was dead; it wasn’t like she could hate him for it. In fact, he rather thought she’d be happy to shake up the town like that after she was gone. Pretty, sweet little Allison Cooper, the town lesbian. She woulda fucking loved it now that there were no consequences.

It felt like the entire bar had sucked in a breath to hear it said aloud. Because of that it took Jake a long moment to realize that Ryan looked entirely unsurprised. In that moment, Jake felt offset, like he’d been walking only to figure out there wasn’t another stair underfoot, landing just a bit too heavily on solid ground.

Ryan already knew.

“Not that it matters,” Jake forced himself to say. He’d felt rather in control of the situation up until this point. His emotional state? Shot to hell. Done for. But he’d felt on top when it came to Ryan, into directing this conversation. Now he felt like he was a kid again, proud for waking up early for school only to find out an hour later it was Sunday. “Allison wouldn’t have dated you if she had been straight.”

Ryan stood up from his seat and raised his hand. Jake didn’t flinch back from the expected punch, but Ryan just shoved him away. He stood a good foot taller than Jake on his feet, but Jake had always been short; he liked to think it helped with his balance. “Get out of my face, Park.” He moved to push back against Jake again, but he easily swatted Ryan’s hand away. “What do I owe you, Ruth?”

Jake ignored the muted relief on Ruth’s face to hear that Ryan would be settling up and leaving. All she probably wanted was for the troublemakers to step out where they wouldn’t be her problem anymore. Jake almost felt bad for continuing to be antagonistic despite her. “Oh, running away are you? Ryan Locklin afraid of the only fucking guy in town willing to stand up to him. You should be afraid of me,” he snarled. Even as he said the words, letting his anger bare its teeth, he knew it was only another sign that he’d lost control of the conversation.

He couldn’t stop himself.

“Maybe I should do what the police won’t, huh? Everybody knows you killed her, so would it really be a loss?”

“You think anybody in this town cares that some little lesbian tramp kicked it?” Ryan cut him off with a snap. He swayed on his feet, obviously feeling the alcohol, settling his tab with Ruth, forgotten. “Nobody in this town gives a shit, Park. It’s better without her.”

Jake didn't even realize he'd thrown the punch until Hank had hauled him back away from Ryan and toward the door. "All right, talk over," the older man huffed, shoving Jake closer to the exit. He didn't even really put up a fight, letting Hank manhandle him with the gobsmacked look on Ryan's face plastered into his head, hand raised to his jaw to feel the tenderness of his skin. Clearly he hadn't thought Jake had it in him. None of them had.

With that realization, Jake pulled himself away from Hank and stormed out of the bar. His hand didn't hurt, but it tingled like he'd laid on it wrong. He'd probably done a bit of damage to it on Ryan's hard jaw, but the adrenaline pulsing through him made the pain evaporate into tense energy.

"I didn't kill her!" Ryan snarled, pushing his way out into the open air. Jake turned around to see him backlit against the lights from the bar, his face masked in shadow because of it. He stormed up to Jake, and as he came closer, Jake could see blood on the edge of his mouth; he hoped he'd knocked loose a tooth or two. "But maybe I should get rid of her little whore girlfriend. Surprised no one's been smart enough to string her up from a tree yet."

Much like the punch inside the bar, Jake didn't register anything that happened until it had already been done. When the rushing in his ears diminished enough for him to focus, he already had the knife in his hand, and Ryan had slumped in his grip with a garbled sort of sound working its way out of his throat. Disgusted, Jake pulled back, the knife coming with him and leaving a sticky trail on his hand and against his jeans. Ryan fell the rest of the way onto the gravel parking lot. The blade on the knife hadn't even been that long.

NINE

“Hey, Allison. This is, uh, this is really weird, isn’t it?”

Claire sat on her bed, rubbing her hands together. When she pushed her hair back behind her ear, the plastic beads of the bracelet she’d made knocked against her face. Taking a deep breath, she tried again, “Hi, Allison. I miss you. I’m sure you already know that, but I wanted to make sure you heard me say it. I know I was never much of a hugger, but I really wish I could take that back.”

She’d made sure to wait until both her parents were out to try out Jake’s suggestion of talking to Allison. It wasn’t that easy of a task. Everything in the house had been weird since Allison had died. The whole place seemed to be holding its breath, a wealth of tension. Her parents could hardly stand to be in the same room, but her mother refused to leave the house most days.

But everyone had to buy groceries at some point, and her dad sure as hell wasn’t going to be the one to do it. So, here Claire was, sitting in an empty house, talking to her dead sister. Yup, it was definitely really weird.

“I’m thinking of going into your room,” Claire said quietly. She wondered if she should look toward the ceiling. That’s where people looked when they were talking to an omnipotent presence, right? She stared at her hands. “Mom doesn’t want anybody in there, which is dumb because I know that she’s been going in there to clean. Maybe she just wants to keep you all to herself. Dumb,” she reiterated. “It’s super dumb because you haven’t even lived in that room for like four years. It’s not even like you left anything important. Nobody made a big deal about going in your room before you were dead, and you were still gone then. Maybe it felt like an invasion of privacy.” It didn’t take long to reach the outside of Allison’s door. It stood at the end

of the hallway, next to their parents' room, the door stark, white, and unassuming. "Okay, now it feels weird that I'm here."

Claire took a deep breath, feeling like she needed to psych herself up.

"This is fine," she told Allison, or herself, she wasn't exactly sure. "I'm just gonna go in there and steal some of the clothes you left because you actually had a pretty good fashion sense even if Mom hated everything you wore. It's trendy now, so she doesn't bother me too much about it." Claire pushed open the door and stepped inside. "Look, this is fine."

And it was, honestly. A pang of sadness echoed in her chest, but it didn't ache as much as she'd expected it too. Allison hadn't lived in the room in over a year, ever since she'd moved into her apartment, and the room felt exactly like it hadn't been lived in. The bed had been made, sure, but there were only a few trinkets that really spoke of having a history here. Most everything else felt clean and sterile. Claire couldn't help but wonder what sort of energy her mother felt when she was in here. Whatever it was, Claire couldn't feel it.

Frowning, Claire stepped into the room and immediately went for the curtains, pulling them open. Sunlight came through and lit up the room, making the absence of anything Allison all the more stark. A couple of pictures were still pinned to the wall, and Claire reached up to pull down the cord holding them up so that she could see them better. One was a picture that Claire recognized from Allison's senior prom, her and Jake and Aliyah wrapped around each other in the park. Jake and Allison were both in crisp suits, one white and one dark, Allison's white outfit a contrast against Aliyah's dark skin and full navy blue ballgown. The three of them all seemed different and out of place and happy.

The second and third pictures were both cross country pictures, one of Allison winning conference all-star and the other a staged photo of the entire team. Claire pinned them back into

place on the wall wondering if her mother would notice that they were just the slightest bit out of place and recognize that someone else had been in the room. Claire wondered why these three pictures hadn't made it to her apartment when she'd left or if she'd just had duplicates to take with her.

Claire sat down heavily on the bed, ruining the crisp sheets, just another sign that she'd been in a place where she wasn't welcomed. She stuck her hands in the front of her hoodie, fingers moving over the beads on the bracelet she wore. As she did so, her fingers closed over a sharp square slip of paper. She pulled out the business card, remembering how the reporter guy that had been at the house the week before had pressed it into her hand when her parents had refused to take it.

She'd forgotten all about it.

Turning the card over and over in her hands, she found herself watching the movement of her fingers, the way the shiny black ink of the card caught in the light coming in from the window, without any thoughts. She'd been finding herself in these moments more and more lately, the disjointed feeling of floating where nothing quite mattered and the ache in her chest lessened with the blankness of her mind.

“Claire!”

She couldn't help but let out a gasped groan at the whiplash, turning to face her mother in the doorway. Her mother hadn't spent a day since Allison's death looking anything less than immaculately put together: clean clothes, styled hair, when all Claire wanted to do was sulk around in a hoodie and sweats. Her dad said it was her mother's way of coping, but Claire just felt the bitter sting of resentment. Maybe her mother wasn't keeping her out of Allison's room in

some misguided sense of preservation but to try to wipe the last traces of Allison out of their life.

“You know you’re not supposed to be in here,” her mother continued when she didn’t say anything. Neither of them made a move, staring across the space of the remnants of what had been Allison’s life, years ago now.

“Why not?” Claire couldn’t help but snap, slipping the card into her pocket before her mother realized what it was; she’d be furious if she knew that Claire was even contemplating giving the reporters a call. “Vultures” her mother had called them when they’d come asking for a quick interview to “capture a true image of Allison” as they’d said. Claire found herself wanting to call, wanting to talk about Allison to someone that had never known her.

“Because I’m your mother, and I said so,” her mother snapped, pushing her way into the room to shift everything just slightly as if she needed to put them back into their proper place even though Claire had only touched the photos on the wall.

“You don’t get to keep Allison all to yourself,” Claire snapped, jumping to her feet and crossing her arms over her chest. She found herself standing between her mother and the door, her mother’s brown eyes wide and surprised. “She was *my* sister.”

“And she was *my* daughter!”

“I’m your daughter too!” Claire squeezed her arms where they were crossed, fingernails biting into the skin through the weave of her sweater. “You can’t just keep me and Dad out of her room and tell us not to touch her things. You’re not the only one that misses her.”

Her mother’s voice turned softer, and while Claire couldn’t find it in herself to look at her, knowing the burning in her eyes would spill over if she did, she could tell that her mother had stopped moving. “I know that. We all miss her.”

“Then you could act like it,” her voice dimmed to match the new and fragile tone in the air. “It’s like we can’t even say her name around here anymore, and I hate it.” Claire swiped at her eyes and hoped that her mother didn’t notice.

Even from a few feet away, Claire watched her mother’s uncertain pause, the way she struggled to compose herself for whatever she wanted to say or do next. Claire wanted to say that she was sorry, she wanted to be able to put this behind them, to have her mother comfort her the way she’d wanted for the last few weeks, months. She couldn’t bring herself to do it, something between them somehow broken and jagged now in a way it hadn’t been before.

“I’m going out,” Claire finally said. Where before she’d been angry, now it felt like all of that anger had burnt everything else out of her. She felt weighted down by the fatigue of her emotions, the hollowed out cavity in her chest. She pushed past her mother and out into the hallway without really paying attention.

It wasn’t until she’d shoved her shoes onto her feet that her mother decided to say anything, her figure a shadow at the edge of the hallway, “Where are you going?”

“Out,” Claire reiterated, wanting to sound bitter but only hearing how tired she felt. A nap sounded excellent; she might have considered going back down toward the river, sleeping on that dune that Jake had shown her if it weren’t so cold out. “Does it really matter?”

Her mother didn’t answer, so Claire pulled on her coat and let the door slam shut behind her.

TEN

“Aliyah!”

Aliyah had always thought that Allison and Claire could have been twins if it wasn't for Allison's hair turning auburn when Claire's stayed the bright blonde of her childhood. Over the phone, where faces weren't involved, they could have been the same person. Aliyah had grown more used to it in the last year, letting Claire's voice wash over her through the phone, and feeling her chest ache at the sound a little bit less each time. She hoped that one day their conversations wouldn't leave her feeling like she'd been flayed open just by the sound of that voice.

This time was easier, seeing Claire sitting by herself on a lone park swing. Her hair had grown longer, blonde curls pulled haphazardly into a loose ponytail. Aliyah locked her car, picking her way across the lawn to meet Claire in the deserted park. One of South Spring's three churches towered on the edge of the property, the gold trim around the red bricks glinting in the September sunlight.

The weather had already turned colder than the year before, and Aliyah found herself glad she'd decided to bring her coat with her. Tucking her ears more securely beneath her beanie, she sat down on the empty swing beside Claire, giving the other woman a smile that she thought might have even been genuine.

“How are you?” Claire asked immediately, her own smile dimmed but sympathetic.

“Surviving,” Aliyah answered. It was the answer she gave everyone who asked, the same answer she'd been using the last year. In the quiet between them, she continued, admitting, “Good, actually. As good as, well, as good as I can be.” *As either of us can be*, she thought, but didn't say.

Claire clearly understood.

When Allison had been alive, Aliyah had paid little attention to Claire. She'd been a tagalong occasionally, following her older sister and her friends around as little sisters had the tendency to do, but that's all. In the last year, she'd been invaluable to Aliyah. They'd bonded over their mutual grief; sometimes Aliyah felt as if their sudden and devastating connection made Claire the only one she *could* turn to.

After the wildfire rumor had swept through town that Allison had been a lesbian, it hadn't been difficult for people to piece together that she and Allison had been in a relationship. People had written scathing messages to her online, people she didn't even know, but with South Springs listed as their hometown on their profiles, but many of them that she did. Her family had moved two towns over to get out of the fire, and Aliyah hadn't been back from college since.

Claire had been the only one to reach out with a tentative olive branch. Aliyah still had no idea how Allison's parents felt.

"How's your aunt?" Aliyah asked.

"Good!" Claire sounded so terribly sincere, blue eyes bright as she pushed herself in little arcs on her swing. "It's really nice to not have to be," Claire just sort of gestured wildly around the two of them, "well, here, I guess. Waterloo is a lot busier, there's so much more to do. I definitely don't miss it." Aliyah nodded in agreement, "It must not be anything compared to Philly though!"

Aliyah just shrugged back at her, fingers fiddling with a tear in her leggings. "Never been to Waterloo, so I'm not sure." She stayed quiet for a moment, letting it settle around them. "Have you been to see your mom, yet?" she asked quietly.

For the first time since she'd arrived Claire looked away, staring off into the distance, eyes seeming to follow the sturdy lines of the church. "I haven't," she finally seemed to settle on. "We don't really talk anymore. I sort of feel like I lost my mom and my sister at the same time. It's weird. She's just obsessed with what happened."

"She's still grieving."

"Yeah," Claire bit back. She'd sharpened her voice on the edges, but Aliyah knew, well, thought, that Claire wasn't bitter with her. "I'm grieving too," she continued, sound rising, "and you're grieving, and this whole damn town seems to be grieving, which is *stupid*, because it's not like any of them actually cared. *Stupid.*"

"But things are good with your aunt?"

Claire let out a huff of breath, not quite a laugh but enough of one to seemingly cool her quick anger. With a nod of confirmation, she answered, "Things are good with my aunt. Great actually. I really do like it much better there. People are certainly less catty."

"It's nice to be anonymous for a little bit," Aliyah agreed. She couldn't imagine what life had been like for Claire following everything that had happened. Dead sister, semi-absent parents, and a whole town absolutely in your business. Aliyah had struggled, was still struggling, with Allison's death, but at least she hadn't had to go to school as the dead-girl's girlfriend; she'd been allowed her anonymity, and it had largely helped keep her sane.

She'd begged Allison off from telling anyone about them for years, afraid of what it would mean for Allison's perfectly sculpted high school image. Even now, she couldn't imagine what it would have done to Allison's social life, for her ability to even live in a place where people would have constantly been speculating on her private life as soon as she left a room.

“There’s going to be a memorial later,” Claire said, completely breaking Aliyah’s spiraling thoughts, “down at the dam. They’ve made some sort of plaque, I guess? I have no idea what it says; I’m sure my mother wrote some stupid epitaph or something.” Claire turned back around to look at her, fingers gripped tight around the metal links of the swing. “You going to go?”

“Probably not,” Aliyah answered. Not entirely true. She’d go down later, after everyone else had left their candles and their bouquets of flowers like they had the year before, just to see what they’d put up. Maybe say something. She couldn’t imagine trying to go down there when there were people; her stomach twisted together at the very thought.

The feeling only worsened when she considered going to Allison’s gravesite. Absolutely out of the question.

“I might go later,” Claire continued. “They’re doing a prayer service and revealing the memorial or whatever, but tonight. They’re going to have a vigil, I guess, with candles and I don’t know what else, but it seems nice. My aunt will go and run interference with my mother, hopefully.” Claire gave a little shrug.

“Everything’s really different now, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I think so. No Allison,” and Aliyah found herself proud of how Claire’s voice didn’t even stutter over her sister’s name, “no Jake,” she sighed, “different.”

Aliyah sighed, balancing back enough to look up at the sky, wide and blue. “I haven’t been following much, but I heard they’re talking a maximum sentence.”

“I heard that too, twenty-five years. He’s lucky he didn’t kill the guy.”

“Unless-?” Aliyah didn’t finish her thought, let the question sit in the open air between them. A year later and she still didn’t know what to think, didn’t know if she even really wanted

to know what happened last September. It ate at her, made her insides burn, but it was almost easier *not* knowing. Jake had been entirely certain Ryan Locklin had been involved in whatever happened that night, would likely be facing maximum prison time for that belief. In some ways it was a comforting lie to fall into. It meant that whatever hurtful things she'd said to Allison the day before she'd died hadn't caused her to do anything rash. It also meant that Allison's killer would never face repercussions for what they did that night.

"No," Claire stated firmly. "Whatever happened was an accident, and we *all* need to let it go." Claire frowned, shaking her head before letting out a long breath. "Not *let it go*," she rephrased with a huff, "not let it go, but we need to move on, move forward."

"You've been talking to a therapist," Aliyah couldn't help but point out, wiping at the tears in her eyes.

"So what if I have? That's a *good* thing, because she's *right*."

Aliyah looked back up at the sky. "I know."

RETURNING TO SOUTH SPRINGS

Emily Whitney Des Moines Register

Nearly a year ago now, I along with former *Des Moines Register* crime journalist, Dallas Martin, visited South Springs for the first time. The rural farming town had a lot to offer in the way of coffee shops and hair salons, but when we visited, a blanket of grief had coated the town after the death of local cross country star Allison Cooper.

I've returned to South Springs and not a lot appears to have changed. A group of old town veterans still gather every morning at the Java Hut, the hardware store with its foggy windows stands on the corner of the main street, and a beauty salon occupies every other business. The blanket of grief from my last visit lingers in the air even a year later.

Coming into town, I passed a billboard with Allison's picture; the colors haven't faded at all. Her presence still permeates in South Springs, even though she isn't there. "It's been difficult for the town to move on," a local resident told me, "especially with all the other things happening. It's like a wave." Only a few months after Allison's death, a violent confrontation between local residents Jacob Park and Ryan Locklin occurred at Ruth's Taproom resulting in Locklin's hospitalization; Park has since begun serving his 25 year sentence.

Walking through town, one can feel the tension in the air. During my visit last year, the residents were filled with confusion and despair, trying to make sense of what had happened in their little community. Now on my return, I've found suspicion and animosity to be the prevailing attitude among residents; many of them that welcomed and spoke with me on my first visit refused to this time around. Those who would talk to me told me of their experiences being questioned by the Cooper family's private investigator, hired through a GoFundMe campaign organized by Kathy Cooper. They spoke in whispers about their suspicions on what happened last year. It seems that of everyone in town, the South Springs police are the only ones that believe in accidents.

After a year with no steady leads, it seems that no one will ever truly know what happened to Allison Cooper on the last night of her life. As the first unexplainable death in South Springs in over 50 years, the tragic event will likely continue to shadow the town for months to come.

The Cooper family asks that anyone with information that could lead to an arrest, please contact Bolson Investigations.