

## RAVELED

### Chapter 1

*Allison... present*

Sixteen years since my last trip to this park and not a tree had changed. Even the sidewalk jutted up in the same angry crevices that had worn out my childhood bicycle tires. Maybe the concrete walkway had reached its breaking point decades ago and decided to fight back, forcing the persistent roots down into the darkness to tangle amongst themselves. Determined to hold its own, the sidewalk put on a daily show for the humans above, pretending that everything below was peachy keen, thank you very much. Nothing to see here, folks. No seedy underbelly thrashing beneath. The citizens of Lavitte, North Carolina, kindly returned the favor. They traveled over the façade every day, smiling and waving and warning kids on training wheels to watch out for the bumps. They jogged over the fractured surface to the beat of their music, pretending that life offered up wishes and dreams, rainbows and sprinkles. No need to stick fingers into the cracks or peel back the surface to examine the source of the sour rumblings beneath. But everybody knew they were there.

If the old physics truism held, that every action was met with an equal and opposite reaction, then what kind of forces jumped back and forth between the man and the sidewalk on Maple Street sixteen years ago? Did the sidewalk absorb his depravity when he grabbed a young girl off her bike on that sweltering August evening, projecting it to the gnarled roots below, or did the evildoer absorb the pretense from the sly footpath that life was nothing but a grand cabaret?

Probably the latter. Seemed to be the choice of most everyone in Lavitte.

“Ding, ding!” A little girl, so Gerber perfect that she looked like a hologram, rang her bicycle bell at me. “Excuse me, Lady.”

“Mattie,” her mom said, “it’s ‘excuse me, *ma’am*’.”

Thanks, but I’ll take *lady* over *ma’am* any day. Christ, I was only a few years older than the mom. Still, I couldn’t fault the teaching of proper manners in good ol’ Lavitte. Manners were our

foundation, our sidewalk. Until they were discarded altogether and replaced with rage.

“Sorry about that,” the mom said, her mineral powder make-up and bright denim jeans mirrored by every other mother at the park. “She’s still wobbly. Just got her training wheels off. I didn’t think she was ready, but you know how dads are, always ready to push ‘em out of the nest a little earlier than we are.”

I looked around, desperate for her to be talking to anyone other than me, but her reflective lenses aimed squarely at mine whenever she wasn’t scanning the area for her daughter.

“Which one is yours?” she said.

It took me longer than it should have to realize she thought I was a card-carrying mom. “I don’t have one. Or any, for that matter. I’m not a mom.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Her eyes strayed to the ground before she lifted her slim face back up, a plastered smile concealing her grief. For what? The possibility that my ovaries lacked viable eggs? The presumed melancholy thump of my heart over not having a vulnerable child to screw up for the next eighteen years? If anything, she should be sorry if I did have a kid. But I couldn’t afford to alienate anyone on my first day back, so I played nice. Besides, odds were I knew this chick in some capacity or other. It’s not that Lavitte wasn’t big enough for two big guns; it’s that Lavitte wasn’t big enough for any two people to remain strangers. If you didn’t know a person directly, you *sho’ly* knew their cousin.

“I grew up here and used to play in this park,” I said with more saccharine sweetness than my mother’s Sweet Sunday Sugar Fudge. “I’m back to, uh,”—uh oh, hadn’t worked out an excuse for being back in town yet, but as it turned out, I hardly needed one.

“You’re visiting family, of course.” She proffered a hand, all bird bones and stickiness from the freeze-pops she’d served the kids earlier. “I’m Abby. Abby Westerling. You probably know the name.”

She meant the Westerling part, no doubt. The original Mr. and Mrs. Westerling had owned the big general store in town, then sold some land to a developer and used that money to buy up half of Lavitte. They had a penchant for naming things after themselves, so we were saddled with Westerling Medical Center, Westerling Children’s Museum, and Westerling Theater. For all I knew, a raunchy truck would pass by boasting Westerling Trash and Disposal. Why not? Plenty of garbage here in Lavitte.

“Yes, I’m familiar,” I said. “You married a Westerling?”

“Unfortunately, not a direct one.” She giggled. “Well, that sounds plain wrong. What I mean is, I married a Westerling cousin. We’re the poor relations.”

The three-carat diamond on her left hand screamed otherwise, but might also suggest a desperate cousin, scrambling to keep up with his surname.

“I was a Murphy before that,” she said.

I knew a huge Murphy family in middle school. Nine kids, with several delinquents among the academic standouts. The boys were mostly ugly, the girls auburn-haired and cute. More than a few hated my family. She might be one of them. I didn’t pursue it as she seemed the type to volunteer plenty.

“So, who are you visiting?” she asked.

“My mom still lives here but she might put her house on the market. My dad passed away a while back, so I try to come and see her a little more often.”

Hey, it was almost the truth. More than the local sidewalks offered.

“Sorry about your dad. Your mom must appreciate the visits. What’s your name, by the way?”

I realized I hadn’t introduced myself. Guess it was time to watch the dark shadow crawl over pretty Abby Murphy Westerling’s face as she tried to recall the outcome of the trial. She’d have to sort the truth from distorted childhood memories. Surely, her recollection of events had grown sinister and inconceivable, like a cancer, until it was something best not spoken of, best not acknowledged, treated as folklore. But here it was in the flesh. Or at least its descendant. I could lie. No skin off my back. But I had come here to do exactly the opposite. Might as well start the ball rolling through the dirt, muck, gossip, and disgust, dredging up all the denials until it snowballed into a big pile of rotteness, untenable and best disposed of at the Westerling Dump. The very ball I’d come here to stick a big fork in. Dig in, everybody!

“I’m Allison.”

The first name alone gave her a small start as she searched my face for clues. The nose, definitely the same perfect nose as the mother, so elegantly sloped and dimpled at the tip that even mannequins envied it because theirs looked so plastic. But I was never envied by other humans. At least not in Lavitte. Not after that night.

Abby repeated my name, possibly without realizing it. “Allison.” Quietly, it slipped from her lips, like a secret, a whisper of a memory. I took off my sunglasses and wiped them with the

thin blue tee-shirt I'd thrown on this morning, giving her a glimpse of my eyes. That usually did it for people. The eyes. Because my father's eyes had been nothing less than mesmerizing, right up until the day he died, when they bulged a bit more than usual. Regular pieces of onyx, his eyes were, shined to brilliance. And they were big. Big as puddles. Disproportionately large for his face. *Doe eyes*, the ladies used to say. *Unexpected*, one of the Charlotte newspapers had reported. And I'd inherited them as if they'd been transplanted. At least they fit on my face somehow. Balanced by my full lips, my mother would retort in the old days when I complained I looked like an alien. Nowadays, peering into the endless pools of chocolate liquid swirling deliciously on my face, my mother probably felt sick to her stomach. She never made her Sweet Sunday Sugar Fudge anymore. Who would eat it if she did?

"Allison Fennimore," I said, my plump lips framing a smile. "You probably know the name."

Abby Westerling found a quick, urgent excuse to leave my company. She gathered her Gerber Peas baby, murmured an apology to the other mothers, maybe with a cautioning nod in my direction, and skedaddled. Whatever. Nothing could hurt me now. I was Lavitte's favorite Teflon Daughter.

## Chapter 2

*Allison... present*

I pulled into the two-car, detached garage of my childhood home, wondering why I'd driven to the park in the first place. It was only a mile away and the exercise would have done me good. Being out of the city was already costing me a good thirty blocks a day of serious hoofing.

The brakes on my mother's Buick squealed as I pressed them, so I added *Fix Brakes* to the mental list of things I needed to accomplish before returning home. Ironic that my mother had to pay to get her car serviced.

"Car brakes," I repeated to myself in an effort to remember the task long enough to write it down in the kitchen. Hopefully my mom hadn't thrown out the list I'd started this morning, which included *Leak in Basement*, *Stuck Shower Door*, *60-Watt Bulbs for Back Porch*, and *Call Realtor*. The types of things the man of the house might do, especially if he was good with his hands. Like a mechanic.

As I walked toward the house, I tried to envision the structure the way a buyer would: two-story colonial with a basement; lots of windows for sunlight; fresh marigold paint; flowered patio; stone walkway; cute and homey; cursed. I sighed. Maybe it had been long enough that it would finally sell.

Couldn't believe my mother had stayed here all these years, like a wound begging for salt. Even if she'd been forced to take a loss, she could have started over again in a town where the Fennimore name was less notorious, where images of little Shelby Anderson didn't crop up like a fated internet search the moment people heard Artie Fennimore's name. Or pictures of Bobby Kettrick's golden mug, with the too-white teeth and the square jaw that looked like it came from anywhere but Lavitte. Heck, there might be dozens of Arthur Fennimores out and about in the country whose name conjured joy in people's minds. Imagine that. An old children's game of word association popped into my head. *You say horsey, I say ride. You say Fennimore, I say joy.* Ha! Too far-fetched even for me.

I entered through the back door into the kitchen, staring at the list I'd made. What was it I wanted to put on there? Something to do with the house? With transportation? Oh yes, the brakes. I wrote it down. This was how my mind worked lately. In circles. Between my brother

going to mandatory rehab, my mother dabbling in dementia, and the recent airing of *Big Crimes*, *Small Towns* on cable, I felt trapped on a mental merry-go-round, the gears grinding against the bones of my inner ear, the music stuck in a dissonant minor chord. In the old days, Lavitte residents would have jotted down *Artie's Autos*, but nowadays they simply wrote *Fix Brakes*.

“You’re home already, honey?” my mother said. “Did school get out early?” She shuffled into the kitchen as if her legs didn’t have the energy to lift her feet. Odd the way the dementia came escorted by physical weakness. As if the mind told the body to match the message. Other times, she was her old self and walked with a smooth gait that looked youthful compared to her sixty years, as if her hips contained springs and her feet could negotiate clouds.

“Hey, Mom, it’s me, Allison. I’m here visiting from New York, where I live. I’m all grown up.”

If only. I guided her to one of the wooden chairs I’d always found too heavy for the kitchen, more suitable for a dining room. But the dining room had been forever cluttered with my mother’s projects—ranging from a collection of wreaths for the Christmas Bazaar to the infamous scrapbooking attempt during which she’d hot-glued half a dozen photos to her fingers before giving up. Oh well, it was never boring and a few of her projects had turned out okay, like the pressed flowers, the knitted hats we never wore or needed, and the intricate jewelry she’d beaded for years after my father’s death. It had kept her busy and, most of all, alone—away from the judgment of so-called friends.

“You didn’t get in trouble with the principal, did you, Allison? You’re usually so good.”

Yes, that was Allison Fennimore. Sweet girl. Teacher’s pet. Good listener. Hell, any 15-year-old who could sit quietly through a day of testimony in which her father was called *a sociopathic slaughterer out for revenge over the theft of a few screwdrivers* had no choice but to be a good listener. But good and a quarter’ll get you a cup of coffee. Lousy coffee at that.

I’d lost the reputation overnight, of course. Because a good girl couldn’t possibly come from a man who shot people in cold blood or yanked young girls off their bicycles. The same man who couldn’t even get up the nerve to do whatever it was he wanted to do to the girl in the first place, who killed without rhyme, reason or remorse. Of course, who could show remorse for something they denied doing? To show remorse was to show guilt. And my father never felt guilty about anything, at least not that I knew of. Arthur “Artie” Fennimore was famous for putting it all in God’s hands and believing that if God was at the wheel, then He knew what He

was doing and there must be a gold-plated and indisputable reason for it. If Artie Fennimore took his fist to his wife on the occasional, drunken Saturday night, that was God's fist. God must have been trying to teach Justine Fennimore a thing or two about pleasing her man. If God every so often felt the need to withhold affection from a socially awkward young girl, He might as well use Artie Fennimore to do His bidding.

Always seemed like an excuse to me.

"Everything's okay, Mom," I said. "No call from the principal coming your way. Can I make you some tea?"

"No thanks, honey, I think I'll just rest. I'm so tired. Must be that time of the month."

My mother hadn't had a time of the month for eight years, but if she wanted an excuse for a good nap, let her enjoy it. If anyone deserved an altered state of consciousness, it was Justine Fennimore. She shuffled toward the spare room I'd converted to a bedroom so she wouldn't have to manage the stairs as often. Then she turned back to me and tilted her beautiful face, framed by dark hair worn in the same, short coif since her twenties. Her lips parted to say something, but then a slow shock crescendoed on her face as she rejoined reality. Not a fun place to be.

"Kevin," she said, the two syllables of my brother's name carrying enough weight that it made her shoulders slump.

"Yes, Mom, Kevin should call today. Around three." Precisely at three, actually, because that was Kevin's allotted time for his five-minute call.

I waited for my mother to lapse into concerns about Kevin getting off the school bus at three, hoping for her sake that she was still in Dementiaville, but no such reprieve today. Clarity had come and she knew full well why he would call at three. It must break her heart, at least what was left of it.

"I've got to go out again, Mom, but Selena's in the sunroom if you need anything."

Selena, a tall, muscular, Guatemalan woman I had hired as my mom's caretaker, made out like a bandit. Twenty bucks an hour to make sure her charge didn't wander off or do anything dangerous. Not sure how Selena accomplished these responsibilities while napping on the couch most afternoons, but so far so good. Whenever I walked in on her, she swore she wasn't asleep, but rather, she suffered from a bad case of dry eye syndrome and needed to minimize her corneal exposure to air. After explaining this the first time, she'd tried to sell me the Brooklyn Bridge.

"I'll be back in time for Kevin's call," I said.

I could have told my mom where I was headed, but it would have ripped out another piece of her soul and forced it through the shredder. That's how it had been for me when I got the call from Kevin a few weeks ago. My landline phone, silent for months at a time, had rung early in the morning, throwing me for a dreaded loop. My friends knew I worked until 3:00 a.m. and they were forbidden to call before noon...

\*\*\* *Twenty Days Earlier* \*\*\*

"Hello?"

"Allison, it's Kevin."

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least it wasn't someone calling to report a death or an arrest for murder—distinct and precedented possibilities in the Fennimore family. "Kevin? Thought you could only use the phone—"

"Look, I don't have a lot of time," he said. "Cashing in a favor to call this early."

"Cash *me* in a favor and don't tell me what you had to do for your favor."

"Can you get in here tomorrow? I need you to do something for me. It's big."

I sat upright, not an easy accomplishment on my cheap mattress. "Is it legal?" I asked, realizing too late that eager ears were probably monitoring his call and would perk up at the mention of skirting the law.

"I want to reopen the case," Kevin said. "You know, against Dad."

I laughed and slumped back. "Kevin, please. You get a few sober months under your belt and you suddenly have time for deep reflection? Oh, I know what's going on here. What's the title?"

"Of what?" he said, his patience with me often a surprise.

"The book you're writing about Dad. Going with Lavitte Lasher? The Fennimore Fiend? No, too reticent. I've always been partial to Maniac Mechanic myself."

"Stop screwing around," Kevin said. "Although those titles aren't bad."

"What's this about then? Seeking closure?" My tone mocked him for even considering the concept. Children of convicted murderers, guilty or innocent, had no relationship with such psychological malarkey.

"This is the longest I've been sober, Allie. Give me a chance."

“A chance to what? Open old wounds? Make Mom miserable? Step into the insanity of claustrophobic Lavitte? No thanks.”

“Something’s rolling around in my head,” he said.

“Teachers used to call that your brain.”

“You’re going to Lavitte, anyway, right?”

“To put Mom’s house on the market. Not to reminisce about Bobby Ketrick.”

Kevin sighed. I could picture him now. Callused hands, dark, shiny hair, and a scruffy growth on his face that the women loved. At least women who also enjoyed leather jackets, flea-bitten mattresses, and cheap, imported beer. But above the stubble, the same full, crooked lips as mine, the scar on his left cheekbone from the playground seesaw, and the vibrant olive eyes—when his brain wasn’t swimming in alcohol.

“I need you to talk to some people,” he said. “I got it all coordinated. You wouldn’t believe how the stars are aligned.”

“Please don’t go all *stars-aligned* on me, Kev. Besides, Dad is dead. What does it matter?”

The confluence of discussing my dad’s case while staring at the bland piece of art on my wall called *Possibilities* actually made me tremble. I forced myself to close my eyes and fight the impulse to slam the phone as loudly as I could in my brother’s ear. He was supposed to be the mellow one, the cool, distant guy who didn’t talk about the case, the one who let me know it was okay to gloss over it.

“I gotta go,” Kevin said. “Favor’s up. Come by tomorrow. It’s your day off anyway.”

“I’ve played this record too many times,” I said, tugging at a piece of hair with my hand. “Only scratches left. Sorry you wasted your favor.”

I reached the heavy phone receiver out toward its cradle. Slowly. Part of me didn’t want to disconnect from the bizarre fantasy that I could storm into Lavitte, rip through its healed skin, and reveal the infection still lingering there. But most of me wanted to move forward, away from a past with tentacles so tangled in my soul that to completely disconnect might be to die.

“Tomorrow at nine!” Kevin shouted just before I let the phone drop into its nest. A brother who knew me too well, as if he sensed the phone was distant from my ear. I hung up. Now I’d never get back to sleep. I lurched from the comfort of my mattress and yanked the blinds up. Dust flew out from between the neglected slats and made me cough. I brushed it away but it hung in the air like tear gas. I staggered back to bed and curled into myself, knotted up on the

inside, my eyes wide and wondering.

Reopen my dad's case? What the hell was he thinking? Where was he when the case was still fresh, when the people and places weren't covered in denial and grime, the events untainted by their infamy? I knew where. Drunk in some godforsaken rented room, or sobbing it out with some tattooed hooker, always trying to forget. Maybe if Kevin could avoid prison after rehab, he could put his off-the-charts I.Q. to better use than trying to steer around a Subaru driven by a blotto, 17-year-old, lacrosse star. The young athlete had entered the New Jersey Turnpike going the wrong way on the same night that Kevin had decided to pay me a visit in New York City. Kevin had tried his damndest to avoid the kid, but Kevin was a Fennimore; we never landed on the lucky side of the rainbow. According to the skid marks, Kevin had managed a masterful swerve followed by a NASCAR-worthy spinout, but he who doesn't die in that pathetic scenario loses. Kevin's blood alcohol level tested on the edge of New Jersey's stringent legal limit. At least they'd gone easy on him and put him in mandatory rehab first. With good behavior and positive counselor reports, he might get a lighter sentence, but he still needed to pay the price for killing a teenager while under the influence. Hardly a first in our family.

## Chapter 3

*Allison... nineteen days earlier*

Of course I went to see my brother. The medium-security rehabilitation facility couldn't have been more contradictory. Rusted, barbed wire fencing around a wildflower-dappled field. Armed guards stationed at posts festooned with climbing vines of trumpet honeysuckle. An architecturally impressive medieval building with the latest in bulletproof, wired windows. Confined freedom. Open space with restricted boundaries. Pretty yet ugly. Even the name fought against itself: Drywaters. A clever play on drying out and getting sober? Probably didn't sit well with the guys who abstained from the liquid poison and opted for the straight-to-the-vein high. The whole place made me itch inside where no fingernail could scratch. As an inmate, I wouldn't know whether to explore my inner feelings or hunker down in a paranoid corner and babble sweet nothings.

I checked my face in the rear view mirror. Still me. I'd given up on make-up six years ago. No matter what I tried, people noticed my eyes. Enhancing them was like putting a banana split on top of a hot fudge sundae, and minimizing them meant overdoing everything else. With no desire to make any part of my existence conspicuous, I settled for a thin layer of moisturizer and a pinch of the cheeks. Besides, it was my brother in there. No matter what I did, I'd still remind him of Dad.

A male guard with dirty fingernails and the odor to match searched my purse. A female guard with stubby fingernails and a butch haircut patted me down. I mused as to why a metal detector couldn't replace them. Perhaps because it couldn't grunt and give directions with dismissive head nods. After another dozen layers of security, including sign-in sheets, an *actual* metal detector, a relinquishment of the package I'd brought, and a verbal confirmation that I wouldn't pass Kevin any illegal substances, the visiting room proved underwhelming. For all that trouble, I should have been wheeled in on a throne and offered a platter of hand-peeled grapes while Kevin sat on a velvet cushion at my feet. The fold-out tables and metal chairs would have to suffice.

"Hey," I said to my fatigued-looking brother, the only guy in the room aside from the bored guard. Kevin's eyelids looked heavy enough to sink a ship, and the usually erect posture that

added power to his six-foot frame seemed defeated. I performed jazz-fingers to show off my empty hands. “Brought you some brownies, and those gross hard candies you like, but some dude with a wonky eye is giving them a CAT-Scan. Making sure I didn’t slip an alternate life in there for you.”

He gave his usual half-grin, the one where the right side of his mouth curled up to meet the far end of his right eye. When we were younger, I made it a challenge to make Kevin laugh. I mean really laugh. It was the only way to see his teeth. And he was handsome as anything when he flashed those choppers and let loose with an unguarded reaction to life. These days, those teeth had to be in deep hibernation, hidden behind pale lips on a face that desperately needed some sun.

We’d never been the hugging type, at least not as adults, but Kevin did stand up and lift his chin as I approached. “Hey, Allison. Thanks for coming.”

“Didn’t have much of a choice. You kinda played the *I’m In Rehab* card.”

We sat down across from each other, the chairs scraping loudly in the cold, high-ceilinged room. No noise-reduction optimization from the architect here as the only soft thing around was the guard’s gut. The cavernous quality of the place made me feel like one of those mountain climbers who appeared as a mere dot in a panoramic shot of sheer rock. I should have packed some spare oxygen for this meeting.

“Mom doing okay?” he said.

“Sometimes. On my last visit, her caretaker hinted that my presence brings on more of her spells.”

That made Kevin chuckle. “You and me. We bring out the best in people.”

We discussed the assisted living community Mom was considering as her next residence. It would be quite a leap to go from a homey, inviting, four-bedroom house to a pre-furnished, pastel-colored community where walkers outnumbered strollers and her current acre of grass would morph into a professionally maintained spit of sod. Kevin expressed his disgust with her desire to stay in Lavitte. I expressed my disgust with the housing market. With the family business out of the way, I gave him the floor. He was the one who’d called for this meeting, after all. I let him ramble on for ten minutes about everything in our dad’s case that bothered him, like the lack of a clear motive for my father to shoot Bobby Kettrick in the middle of the night in his own auto body shop. Or why Dad claimed to have screwed on a silencer to shoot a gopher at six

a.m., but not to shoot Bobby through the heart hours earlier. Kevin rolled his eyes multiple times over the utter lack of motive for our father to kidnap and kill young Shelby Anderson. With no history of violence against anyone except his own wife, our dad had become a notorious double-murderer of two teenagers in a town where people didn't even break the 18 MPH limit. Now, finally, with the whiplash speed of a sloth, things seemed to bother Kevin.

I offered as much to the conversation as the fly on the edge of the table. Kevin didn't seem to care. He needed me because I could walk out of here. My hands could dig and scrape with abandon, and my mouth wasn't confined to five-minute segments of freedom. I could be his eyes and ears, a tool in his hands.

"Please, Allison. Just talk to a few folks. They're all gonna be there."

"Who's going to be where?" I said, wrenching my eyes from the fly's frantic maneuvers to my brother's fixed, intensive plea.

"Enzo Rodriguez is going home for his cousin's wedding. Smitty'll be in town for the 15-year reunion, and to visit his mom and dad. They still live on Marshall. And Jasper Shifflett is nearby, I think. He might attend the reunion. If not, I hired a private investigator to dig him up."

"Tell your P.I. to try Mars."

Kevin laughed. "I know, right? Anyway, you have to talk to them. It's the perfect combo. Enzo, Smitty and Jasper. They'll be right there in Lavitte and that'll make them more vulnerable. They won't be expecting it."

"Expecting what?"

"A confrontation about that night. Especially from you."

If I were the hitting type, I'd have slapped some sense into my brother. As it was, I settled for abject nausea and said one of the few words that still held power in my life. "No, Kevin. Just no." I emphasized my point with a horizontal slice of my hand through the air, like an ump calling a play safe, which this one surely wasn't. "That's the last group of people I want to see. Have you forgotten what our dad did to the town hero?"

"I know. I know." Kevin sounded more energetic than he had in the sixteen years since he'd left Lavitte. "Listen, you found a better way to deal with all of this than me. Maybe 'cause you were younger."

"Yes, dealing with your dad's murder trial at age fifteen is a walk in the park."

"Either way, you took the high road. I never rose above sewer level."

“Don’t beat yourself up,” I said with an uncharacteristic sensitivity that only Kevin seemed able to root out in me. “You send Mom money and you’ve always looked out for me.”

“Not like I should have. But hey, nothing like involuntary rehab to sober you up. And now that I’m finally ready to confront some issues, I’m stuck in this shithole.” He lowered his head to utter his next statement, and I could see his mouth curling in embarrassment. “I, uh, I did some hypnosis in here, believe it or not.”

“Not.”

“Seriously,” he said, animated by my pessimism. “It’s amazing what they’ll spend your tax dollars on. I’m hoping for a total breakthrough. I gotta believe there’s something from that night that’ll piece it all together, maybe smooth out this rocky road I’ve been on.”

The guy across from me sounded nothing like my brother and my scowl let him know it.

“Look,” he said, “even though you think I’ve squandered all my potential—”

“*Squandered*. Break out the SAT guide.”

“Shut up.” Curvy grin. “I’ve learned a lot about human nature over the years, and there’s too much that’s not right about that night. One thing’s for sure: They lied.”

“Who?”

“Everybody.”

“Conspiracy theory? Taking a page out of Jasper Shifflett’s book, are we?”

Jasper Shifflett. Two years ahead of me in high school. Probably considered his own birth a conspiracy between his parents. He might have been right, too, because he sure hadn’t won the lottery with those two: Frail and Frailer. Jasper had been too smart for his own good. He’d hung around with Bobby Kettrick and Smitty in high school as part of a havoc-causing trio, playing the part of the smart, calm one or the evil genius, depending on the level of cannabis coursing through his veins. I never did understand his attraction to Bobby and Smitty; maybe their presence helped numb his overactive brain.

“Here’s a universal truth,” Kevin said. “Everybody lies to save their own ass, or the ass of someone they love. As soon as Dad became the scapegoat, the whole town piled on to save themselves.”

“Going all negative Zen on me now?” I said.

“Live the life I’ve lived and you’ll learn: never put anything past anybody. I mean anybody.”

I slanted forward far enough to stir the interest of the nearby guard, but he had too good a slouch going to follow through with anything. “That’s real breaking news, Kev. What else you got? That people suck?”

“You’re gonna do this, right, Allie? I got a detective in Lavitte putting the files together from Dad’s case. Nice guy. Blake Barkley.”

“Sounds like a cartoon dog.” An image of a bloated, burping detective in an ill-fitting suit filled my mind. With a hound dog face, of course. I pictured him standing over my diminutive father, beating a confession out of him while checking his watch repeatedly to see if it was time to go home and crack open a beer. He’d already have humiliated my dad by flashing pictures of the young victims—the cobalt-eyed, fast-footed Bobby Kettrick, and little, freckle-faced Shelby Anderson.

“Here’s the thing, Kevin, Mom’s not gonna know otherwise even if you do discover some breakthrough.”

“*I’ll* know otherwise.”

My patience began a slow collapse. Discussing the past was not a muscle I flexed. Ever. The entirety of my remaining muscles tensed up with the sudden overuse of this atrophied one. I tried to shake it off with a measured glance around the room, taking in the dust dancing in the morning sun, and the crack in the wall behind Kevin’s head that resembled the east coast of the United States, but my eyes returned to the pleading, desperate expression of my formerly robust sibling. “Again,” I said, “why does it matter?”

Kevin inhaled slowly, looked down at his fingers. I followed his gaze, shocked to see my father’s hands at the ends of his arms. The sight softened my snide expression. So that was it. Kevin was turning into my dad and he wanted a new ending.

“There’s this empty space in my head,” he said. “It hurts like hell. All the time. And it rattles.” He shook his head so I could hear it, then smirked. “Whacko, right? How can empty space rattle? But that’s just it. It’s not empty. There’s something there and I can’t get to it. You know when you can’t think of a word?”

“I know it too well lately.”

“It’s *that* feeling, multiplied by a thousand, multiplied by sixteen years. Not knowing the details of that night is eating at me. It’s like the space has teeth, and it’s hungry—and it’s growing. I even feel it in my stomach. Sometimes at night, my whole body shakes.” He put up a

hand to stop me from the predictable retort. “And no, it’s not the DT’s.”

“Too easy,” I said. “Give me some credit.”

“Anyway,” he said, “if I could wrap my mind around it—even if the truth is worse than anything we think—at least it would end this torture.”

I guffawed. A worse truth? Like my dad left victims buried in shallow graves from Maine to Florida? That he fathered a secret family who all grew up to be killers themselves? Well, you never knew.

Kevin bit his lower lip and looked me straight in the eyes. “I managed it all these years by drinking and drugging.”

“Alert the presses,” I said, my sympathy meter in need of a serious jolt.

“There’s a reason they call it serving time,” he said. “Too much time to think and nothing to numb that spot except dealing with it.” He drove the knuckle of his index finger into his head like he wanted to bore a hole and pull out the diseased emptiness. I could picture him yanking out a contaminated, throbbing blob with a grotesque mouth, and big, wet lips. It would scream at him: *You wanna know what happened that night? You really wanna know? ‘Cause I’ll tell you. And once I tell you, you can’t put me back. I’ll be out in the world to stay and I’m not easily dealt with. Still wanna know, sucker?*

I wasn’t sure how I’d answer the disgusting thing. I’d grown accustomed to life in denial and ignorance.

“It’s like trying to do a Rubik’s Cube blind,” Kevin said. “You gotta be my eyes, Alley Cat. Can’t you at least try? I have money stashed away. I can cover you for—”

“It’s not the money, Kevin!”

“What is it, then?”

“I got my own issues, you know. And when I do something, I really do it. I dive into this cesspool, I might drown.”

“I’ll resuscitate you.”

I sighed. “You know me. Writing ten-page essays when the teacher asked for three. Working five hours overtime when the boss asked for two. Besides, it’d be me against Lavitte.”

“When’d you ever let that stop you?”

He knew exactly what to say. We were cut from the same frayed cloth, after all.

His face hardened, making his eyes glaze over. For a moment, he looked like my mother in

one of her less aware states. "I don't want to end up like Dad, you know?"

I knew.