

## Prologue

Barbed wire surrounds the Hollywood Forever Cemetery. I stand guard in the hallway of the mausoleum. Adeline, with her bat-gray nails, scratches the copper letters on the crypt plate.

“Stop it,” Bama says. She’s sitting under Valentino’s grave.

Hunter tilts his head.

The silence feels like syrup on wool.

With God in Joy and the Beauty of Youth. Adeline kisses the inscription.

“Barbara La Marr was one of the first movie stars, she came to Hollywood at fifteen,” she says, still scratching. “She was smart, bubbly, impatient, and it all got out of hand. When she died, they called her the girl who was too beautiful to live.”

“So now I am doomed? Thanks for the pep talk. I needed that.” Bama slams her Red Bull against the opposite wall, just under the crypt. Adeline’s eyes drill into her. Hunter tucks his tail between his legs.

The limousines drive into the cemetery and stop at the right bank of the lake.

“Want me to report?”

“Please don’t.” Bama looks at me as if she hasn’t eaten in days or underwent a bloodletting ritual.

Then Adeline walks up to her, kneels and kisses her.

It’s a shock. But I can explain it. Adeline wants to mute all false hope and vulnerability.

I turn away. A fly bumps against the stained glass.

I’m drunk. We’re all drunk. LA is bubblegum, Bama once told me, and the bubble exploded all over my face.

All that matters now is I made friends. A thief, a troll, a taxidermist and a traumatized dog.

You are already judging me. It's fine. Not long ago, I hoped people would figure me out. But it's hard to understand someone else and still believe in yourself. Go ahead, try it.

You grow up in a mess you want no part of, so you resist. It won't work. Like washing blood from your hair with the Tsubaki shampoo that smells of rotten oranges. Staring at the pink waterfall. It'll never get clean again.

When it's over, we walk outside. They're waiting at the grave. We scatter the seeds; a Korean custom. Rose of Sharon, a sturdy plant, with invasive roots that will enclose the casket. Next year they'll bloom, technicolor fed by darkness. Like this town.

Bama won't let go of Adeline's hand. She wanted it to be Elki's. But Elki was never hers. The girl was a poppy in a field of GMO wheat. If I hadn't met her on my first day in LA, I wouldn't have blown up my whole life. Still, if I could do it all over again, I'd climb in the backseat of her Cruiser.

As I look up, I see, behind the Paramount Pictures water tower, peach-colored smoke blowing through the palm trees. It's getting closer. They warn homeowners on the hills to prepare in case of a wildfire. Escape routes are drawn up and rehearsed, but most residents choose to take a stand, hoses in hand. Too proud, and year in and year out, they manage to save their homes. Till one day the fire comes at you from every direction, gets hold of your roof, penetrates, and your facade starts to burn. You may think you can handle it, but once sparks fly, they'll turn all your illusions into a heap of ashes.