

GIRL OF DUST AND SMOKE



HALO SCOT

Little Girls and Murder Babies

Now

“I like it when they burn.”

The strange new girl says strange new things. Her name is Isobel.

The residents think she’s a witch. “She knows magic,” they say, carving the air.

But Isobel doesn’t know magic; she knows people. Her whispers are weapons. Her smiles are swords. She knows your heart, and you think her thoughts. Her thoughts are thieves. Her bribes are spells. Her charms are snares. She lures fish into traps, then snaps her shark mind shut.

Isobel has behaved, though. She hasn’t hurt anyone since she arrived. She hurt many before she arrived, but so have all those here. They’re murder babies, parent killers. Happy Hearts is a homeless shelter for little girls and boys who never grew up. They’re runts. Anomalies. Odd, weird, and razor-sharp. “Put them in a corner, and don’t make eye contact,” society says.

Happy Hearts is that corner.

No, murder is not what makes Isobel special here. What makes Isobel special is her hands; they're clean. She doesn't kill; she makes others kill. She hisses in their ears, and they wield her words. She listens for dreams and sharpens desire. *See me.* She sees you. *Hear me.* She hears you. *Know me.* She knows you like a shadow.

"She's dangerous," the cook says.

"She's not like the others," the cleaner says.

"Give her time," the nurse says. "She's young, different. It might take longer, but she'll find her way."

"No," the cook says. "There's something wrong with Isobel."

The cook is right: There's something wrong with Isobel, indeed. In fact, there are many things wrong with Isobel. Things happen around her. Bad things. Scary things. She changes people. She reaches inside and molds their minds. But nobody notices. Nobody resists. Nobody knows she's knotting their strings.

"Daddy's ashes. Mommy's ashes. Sissy and Buddy both fell down," Isobel often says. She's a sickly girl. Skeletal and small, she inspires no intimidation, but intimidate she does. Freckles splatter her ashen skin, and she stands crooked, her spine a vine. Her back is beautiful, her sole beautiful trait. Straight blue-black hair sprouts from her family, but her large violet eyes are her own. The purple came from nowhere. Isobel wishes she came from nowhere, too. Nowhere is better than somewhere, in her experience. You can't hurt shadows. You can't scream in space.

"Where did your family go?" the nurse often asks.

"They flew away."

Those were her first words in this new place: "They flew

away.” Pity. Her family was famous. Legendary, even. Three kids, two parents, one sob story, zero leads. Ash on the wind, over the dusty plains. But Isobel’s hands are squeaky clean, though her soul is dirty as mud. If she speaks, turn around. If she waves, run away. *I want*. Here’s a coin. *I need*. Here’s a hug. *I love*. Here’s a kiss. *I bleed*. Here’s a knife. She uses silent wishes to steal free will, and they thank her for the leash.

“Play with me. I like games,” Isobel says.

So the residents play her games. She makes them jump. She makes them dance. She makes them laugh, and she makes them cry. They think they’re winning, but nobody wins Isobel’s games. It’s fun for her. They pretend it’s fun for them, too.

Yes, Isobel Walsh is a strange new girl in a strange new world saying strange new things. Though she’s more gun than girl, more weapon than woman, twenty-five years old in a world made of clay.

* * *

Isobel is hungry. She’s often hungry. Her parents’ RV always had too much food, but Happy Hearts always has too little.

She calls the others with her flute-like voice. They melt from walls and harden at her feet, wax dolls ready to serve. All in their twenties and thirties, they act like children. They want to be children. Orphans earn pity; vagrants earn disgust.

There’s Rowan. Rowan is a gentle boy. Life is not gentle to gentle boys. Isobel is gentle. She takes his tiny man-baby hand and leads him through the white-washed house. Rowan likes Isobel. Everyone likes Isobel. No one knows why, but they know they do—very, very, *very* much. Isobel knows why, but she won’t tell you. Instead, she whispers in Kenzie’s ear, and

Kenzie surrenders her bread ration. Kenzie likes bread, but she likes Isobel more. Then Fitz, always the hero, yields his water ration, and in a place like Happy Hearts, water is gold. Last and not least, Ula proffers a can of stolen corn. If Housemother and Housefather discover the theft, even Isobel cannot protect Ula. They won't find out, though. They never find out. Isobel is too cunning for them and this world.

Here's Isobel's queendom: Rowan, Kenzie, Fitz, and Ula. Kenzie talks too much; Ula talks too little. Rowan is too naive; Fitz is too nihilistic. Together, they balance each other and Isobel. They play, eat, sleep, and wake, slaves to routine.

Six in the morning: eyes open, beds made. Isobel leads the dance. They scrub themselves with wipes and dress in white linen tunics with slippers. It's a washed-out world, and Isobel likes it this way. When they're all the same, differences stain bright, blood in the sand, stars in the night.

Next, breakfast: tea and bread. The tea is always weak, and the bread is always stale, but Bara does her best to coax life from dust. The cook is a mother to all searching for one. Isobel is not searching for a mother; she had too much time with her own. But many want mothering, and Bara wants to mother. Wayfarers find solace in her large brown frame, silver hair, and firecracker eyes. She's comforting, sweet. Her voice is honey, and her smile is sugar. Isobel doesn't want sugar; it's addictive, controlling. Isobel is the one in control.

Shoulder to shoulder at the farm table, the residents lick their plates clean, then start chores. It's seven o'clock: wipe dishes, sweep floors, vacuum all the dust. These are the cleaner's jobs, but Caelin is lazy. There's not much to say about him: hazel eyes, oily straw hair, flaky skin, an encyclopedia of complaints. He's dull, skinny, whiny, and useless. Useless is bad. *Useful* is

good, is *safe*. Isobel learned that from her wandering days. So Isobel makes herself useful, and the others follow.

They dig out doors and windows from overnight dust drifts as their faraway neighbors do the same. After, they help Bara stack food and water from their daily truckload. Their rusty van is unsuited for frequent travel, so they rely on these rations. It's not good to rely on anyone or anything. Isobel's parents taught her smart, if not well, but they aren't here now, so Isobel stocks the pantry. She piles cans into a tower and lines two water jugs along the wall—no running taps because of the drought. It's not enough. It's never enough. But they'll survive. Isobel always survives.

After, Fitz and Kenzie take out the trash. There isn't much trash. Waste is a luxury. Rowan and Ula beat the laundry on the line—without water, of course. Wet-washing and wet-baths occur once per month. More often, and the truckloads stop. The truckloads can't stop. They'd all die within days. Rules are important. Isobel's parents taught her that, too.

Chores are done. It's ten o'clock. The residents work on their studies. Online design and development cushion Happy Hearts, and everyone must pull their own weight. After two hours of screen-squinting, it's time for lunch at noon. Bara always serves the same one-pot meal midday: beans, corn, and rice. Isobel doesn't mind. It's food, consistent and steady. She likes consistent and steady. Her parents were neither. Their RV was a rocket through a supernova.

But Isobel doesn't think about them now. She tries not to think about them at all, but she must, because from one to four, residents meet with Nurse Riley for checkups and group therapy. Isobel likes checkups. She likes to feel noticed and pretends to feel wanted. But she doesn't like therapy. Riley is

kind and quiet, dark-skinned and doe-eyed. He listens well, and he asks the right questions. Isobel doesn't like questions. Questions lead to answers, and answers lead to truth. So Isobel lies. Riley knows Isobel lies, but he lets her lie. Everyone lets Isobel lie.

At four after group, they fix things. Something always needs fixing at Happy Hearts. Sew blankets, patch clothes, seal windows and doors. Too much is broken, and there's never enough thread.

Another one-pot meal at six. Dinner is lentils, pasta, and peas—always. Housemother and Housefather join the residents and staff only now. The rest of the day, Elsie and Jessie Croy bunker upstairs in their room. They're odd creatures, neurotic and strict, with beady eyes, salt-and-pepper hair, greasy skin, and bony bodies. When they talk, their voices croak, but they don't talk often. As a long-term homeless shelter, Happy Hearts earns government checks. That's why the Croys bought it, for money, nothing else. They don't care about the residents, and they ignore the staff. Isobel doesn't mind. She likes invisibility.

In the evening, from seven to ten, it's free time. Fitz reads on a tablet from the Croys' online library. He's tall, dark, and broad with a shaved head and warm brown eyes. His conscience is too big, his heart too fragile. He wants to save the world, but the world doesn't want saving.

Rowan peers over Fitz's shoulder, brows pinched in concentration. Rowan doesn't read well; he orphanage-hopped till he outgrew the system. He's tiny, a pebble, though he wishes he were a mountain. People walk all over him, and he thanks them for their steps. Auburn ringlets bounce in his wake, and his chestnut eyes are too wide and too bright. He's a twenty-two-year-old child in a world built for ghosts. His bronze skin

shines like a statue's, and he stands proud if not tall.

Fitz helps Rowan read. That's part of his problem: He helps too much. People take advantage of helpers, but Fitz Fletcher suffers both a superhero's name and complex. He wants to help. He *needs* to help.

Kenzie doesn't want or need to help. She's gorgeous, and she knows it. With green eyes, strawberry braids, and olive skin, she commands every room and attracts every eye. She has curves, sass, and legs for days, plus a criminal record just as long. Kenzie doesn't mind the record, but she does mind the scars. She covers her legs with a threadbare blanket as she stands on the dusty sectional and pantomimes with the TV. She's a performer, so she must perform. There are two channels, both of them news, so weather reports (always dust storms) and economic forecasts (always depressing) limit Kenzie's dramatic gusto. It suits her, though. She's a diva, squeezing heartache from humdrum and anguish from ordinary.

Opposite Kenzie, Ula curls in a corner, praying to disappear. She blends into the Kansas dust with beach-sand skin, sky-blue eyes, and wavy hair spun from sunshine. If she wanted to dance, she'd be a dancer, but she doesn't want to dance, not anymore. Quiet and confused, Ula is a feather, soft and sensitive and aching to fly. She can't fly, of course; her parents cut her wings. She cut theirs, too, but she didn't mean to, or so she says. Though she doesn't say much. She watches everything and everyone, especially Isobel.

Isobel plays solitaire. She doesn't like solitaire. She prefers games with opponents, with winning, with success. You cannot beat yourself. You are both winner and loser at once. Solitaire is stupid, Isobel decides, so she tosses the cards across the living room. Ula picks them up and puts them away. Isobel doesn't

even need to ask.

At ten, it's bedtime. Dry-brush teeth, then sleep. There are three bedrooms upstairs: one for residents, one for staff, one for directors. The cots are uncomfortable, and the sheets are chalky with dust. Still, Isobel sleeps well. She doesn't hear the stairs creak when her housemates use the downstairs bathroom in the night. She doesn't hear *squeak-squeak* from the compost toilet lid. She doesn't hear wind against shiplap, or groaning floorboards, or whimpering pendulum lights. No, Isobel hears nothing and dreams nothing here at Happy Hearts. That's how she likes it, dark and empty. Her wandering days were not empty. They were full, too full, and bursting at the seams.

Chase Me

Before

Isobel was born in a storm. Dust clogged her first wails, and smoke stung her unused eyes. She was an angry baby, strange from the start. Her siblings grew bored with her. Bridget and Brodie had better things to do at two. Isobel was a nuisance to her parents as well. The twins had been easy, docile, but Isobel was neither. She was all too aware of her infant state, unable to walk or talk or do anything interesting. Isobel liked interesting. She *needed* interesting. Life on the road was harsh, cruel, and Isobel's first word was "hate."

The Walsh family started with fortunes. The fortunes were bland—and fake, of course. "Magic doesn't exist, Bel," Pa often told his runt, "but people *want* magic to exist, so we pretend it does."

Isobel, now older and unfortunately also wiser, said, "So we're frauds."

Ma scowled. If there was one thing Blaire Walsh wouldn't

tolerate, it was being called a fraud. As it was, she wouldn't tolerate most things and held few friends. She preferred isolation, for herself and her family. Fewer influences. Fewer bad habits. Yes, she scammed people out of money, but times were tough. It was the customer's fault. People would pay any price for hope.

"We aren't frauds," Ma said.

"We're opportunists," Pa added.

"Blake, don't use big words. It's against our brand."

"Yes, ma'am."

And the Walsh family had an ironclad brand. By Isobel's seventh birthday, when the twins were nine, Walsh was a label, a patent. They came alliterated: parents Blaire and Blake, twins Bridget and Brodie, and Bel for Isobel, the tagalong afterthought. Isobel did not like being Bel. Bel was not her name. But her parents didn't listen. They were a package: scrawny and short with "B" names, pale skin, straight blue-black hair, and narrow gray eyes. Isobel's eyes were not gray. Ma and Pa gave her contacts to hide the violet, but Isobel suffered an allergic reaction and could not wear them. Nobody was sympathetic; she was ruining their image. They tried to hide her freckles, too, but dust scratched most makeup away.

That was okay, her parents decided. Isobel had two mutations, two dangers to the brand, but she was the smallest, so she could hide. Isobel liked hiding. Bridget and Brodie did not like hiding. Isobel shrank in the back while they sat front and center, club feet out and proud beside their good ones, beautiful in every way. Isobel's feet were fine, but her spine curved like a snake. Still, she could outrun the twins' taunts and her parents' complaints.

"Bel, come back," Ma and Pa called, their voices brassy and

blunt.

“Bel, there’s cake,” Bridget and Brodie lied, their voices reedy and sharp.

Isobel’s voice was quiet, a flute, and she whispered, “No, Sissy and Buddy. There’s never any cake.”

Soon, the Walshes ignored Isobel. Their four-person unit worked like a charm, like that fool’s magic Pa always rambled on about. When the twins reached twelve, they started vlogging on their phones, and their RV life became a sensation. They were in the thick of crisis, and people loved to rubberneck struggle. Comments exploded with questions about homeschooling, rations, rest stops, waste dumps, caravans, and dust markets. The twins glamorized nomadic life, and America devoured their lies.

Their most popular video, with over three million likes, was an RV tour plus fortune-telling session. Their RV was nothing special in their current caravan, but to coastal city dwellers and listless suburbanites, the RV was escape, was freedom. On the outside, white trim and chipped red paint welcomed visitors to their metallic home. Bridget giggled in the video, banging the door, always so rough with things, with life.

Behind the camera, Brodie narrated the interior as they stepped inside. There was a tiny kitchen across from a table with booths. Enamel mugs ringed with tea stains sat on the counters. Camping pots, pans, crockery, and cutlery dirtied the sink. Behind the kitchen, a couch and TV faced each other, and in the back were two bedrooms: one for parents, one for kids. Isobel didn’t like sharing a bed with the twins. She didn’t sleep much, and she didn’t sleep well, especially when Pa drove. His whistling carried from the front to the back, hacking Isobel’s dreams into nightmares.

After the video tour came the session. Ma and Pa sat in one booth, and their victim sat across the cramped table in the other. The twins filmed in the kitchen while Isobel watched from the couch. *Make them come to you*, Ma always taught. *Make them chase you*. And they did. Everyone chased the Walshes. This client was no different, a young nomad with little direction and less ambition. The Walsh brand could work with that.

“Yes,” Pa said, holding one of the client’s hands while Ma held the other. “Today is a turning point for you. Change is scary, but you must embrace it.”

“Faith is key,” Ma said. “Trust yourself. You will know the right road when you see it. Do not be afraid to choose the wild path.”

“But be gentle with yourself. Be firm in your decision, but soft in your judgment. Other travelers wait for your guidance.”

“You will meet someone radical and someone conservative. Your fate is to become a bridge.”

The video continued for another twenty minutes of vague and noncommittal nonsense. Isobel left halfway through filming, but its popularity haunted her. “Choose the wild path” became a slogan—a borderline religion to some. Fellow wanderers recognized Isobel by her squid-ink hair and pearl-white skin, begging her for fortunes, for fate. That’s what they all wanted: fate, destiny. *You mean something. You’re special*. But they meant nothing, and nobody was special, so Isobel always murmured a weak, “Be wild,” to deflect desperation with ambiguity.

Even at ten, Isobel understood too much. Walsh was a brand—an all-American, authentic, marketable brand. *Chase me*. People chased them. *Need me*. People needed them. Targets stalked the red and white RV, seeking redemption.

“Make them wait,” Ma instructed.

“Absence increases value,” Pa added.

“Blake, language.”

“Sorry, Blaire. What I mean is, the less they see you, the more they want you. Better?”

“Better.”

Vocabulary was a sin in the Walsh household. They were approachable, everyday people, just like you and yours. Isobel hated the costumes, the facade. She hated most things at this point in her short life.

“Bel, are you listening?” Pa asked.

“Yes,” Isobel said, obedient—on the surface. She always listened. That was her job. She listened for whispers, then she weaponized secrets. Her family couldn’t control her as they controlled the others, because they taught her all their tricks: their first mistake.

“Then what was the lesson?” Ma asked. She itched to exercise her infamous temper.

“Make targets chase us for their approval and attention.”

Ma slapped the table. Isobel startled. The twins grinned. Pa mediated. He always kept his cool, even when he shouldn’t.

“They’re not targets,” he said. “They’re clients.”

“And don’t use ‘approval’ or ‘attention,’” Ma snapped. “It’s not on-brand. It’s too...clinical.”

“Yes, Ma,” Isobel said.

“We only want what’s best for you, Bel,” Pa said.

“Call me Isobel.”

“Go to your room.”

Isobel didn’t. She stormed out of the RV and shouted over her skeletal shoulder, “Chase me.”

Her family didn’t chase her. They wouldn’t risk their image. But Isobel wasn’t an image. Isobel was a blur.

Pretty Pennies and Ugly Ducklings

Now

Isobel is not a pretty girl. That's a good thing, because the world has too many pretty girls, all fighting for the spotlight. No, Isobel is an ugly girl, fighting for the shadows.

Well, not ugly exactly, but not beautiful. Her eyes are nice, but her face is forgettable. She's too skinny, too small, too unsettling and strange. Isobel knows this. She wins no glances unless others recognize her (in)famous genes. *You're a Walsh*, they'd say, stuck between awe and fear. But nobody winks, catcalls, or courts Isobel. This suits her. Isobel craves control, and romance is a cataclysm.

"Isobel, tell me about your parents," Nurse Riley says in group. He crosses his legs, clasps his hands, and focuses on her. The other residents form a circle in the living room, cross-legged on the floor. Isobel is the only one on the couch, her musty throne.

“They flew away,” Isobel says yet again. She hates questions, but she hates answers more.

“Before they flew away,” Riley presses, “what were they like?”

“They called me Bel. I am not Bel.”

Kenzie twirls a braid. Ula hugs her knees. Rowan fiddles with his tunic, and Fitz frowns at the dust-coated window. They didn’t share much, either. Parent killers don’t want to talk about parents. Though in their cases, murder was a mistake. Isobel doesn’t make mistakes.

Riley sighs, uncrosses his legs. A dust bunny floats across the floor. “Isobel, I can’t help you unless you let me help you.”

“I don’t need help,” Isobel says. “I need food, water, and shelter. That’s why I’m here.”

“But what about the future? What are your plans?”

“I don’t make plans.”

“Then what about goals?”

“I live in the moment. You should, too.”

Frustrated, Riley rubs his dark face. “If you could be anything, what would you be?”

“A bird,” Isobel says.

“I mean in terms of career.”

“Yes, a bird.”

“I worry about you, Isobel.”

“I worry about you, too, Riley.”

Group is over. Again, no progress. Isobel prefers treading water. She’s happy in her puddle. She doesn’t want to join a lake.

The door and window seals need fixing, so Isobel encourages Kenzie and Fitz to shoulder the work. How? Kenzie wants new lipstick, so Isobel steals some from Bara. Fitz wants extra reading time, so Isobel smuggles him a tablet. They both owe

her, so they both pay their dues.

Rowan and Ula do not owe Isobel today, so Rowan patches a blanket while Ula mends Isobel's tunic. There's a tear near the bottom from when Isobel stacked cans this morning—that's the lie Isobel told Riley. The truth? Isobel sleepwalks. It's a dangerous pastime, one which annoys her. No control, no memory. Ula caught her once and kept her secret. Isobel has trusted Ula ever since, but not too much.

"Can you...um...never mind," Ula says. She blushes scarlet and hides behind her sunshine hair.

Isobel arches a blue-black eyebrow. She does not ask, "Can you what?" She does not reply, "It's okay, you can tell me." In fact, she does not say anything, nor does she need to. Silence sparks tongues.

"Sorry, it's...the hem," Ula says. "To make it even..."

Ula does not finish her sentence. Her voice is soft, her words clumsy. Isobel likes Ula's voice and words. They're warm, gooey. She can weave them into her web.

"I don't need it even," Isobel says.

"Right...of course." Ula eyes Isobel's crooked posture, then blushes deeper, red-hot regret. "Oh, no...I didn't mean... however you want—"

"It's fine." It's not fine. Isobel's spine is crooked. But that's not Ula's fault. Despite Isobel's quirks, she is not one to lash out. She blames the source and no one else. This is not mercy, but a different shade of control. Strength means forging flaws into armor. Isobel's spine is one of her many shields.

"How...?" Ula shakes her head, severing the question.

Isobel is disappointed. Ula is curious. Ula is not supposed to be curious.

"I've always been this way," Isobel says, her tone a scythe.

Ula shirks away, and Isobel leaves to plant more weeds.

* * *

“I’m sorry.”

At breakfast the next morning, Ula apologizes.

“No worries,” Isobel says, though she does worry about Ula. The woman is a key, but Isobel likes her doors locked.

“I..like your spine,” Ula says. She says strange things, too, but Ula is a pretty girl, so she can get away with saying strange things.

“I like silence,” Isobel returns. She finishes her bland tea and dry bread, then stands to start chores—well, to bribe others to start chores. *Work smarter, not harder*. Pa loved to parrot that at dinners. Isobel loved to fantasize about his death.

“I’m bored,” Kenzie complains. “Every day, it’s the same damn song.”

Good, Isobel thinks. She likes boredom. Boredom is predictable. Boredom is safe. She knows what excitement feels like, and it doesn’t feel great.

“Everywhere is boring,” Fitz says, sweeping the floor. “If you want to move, then move, but don’t expect anything different.”

“You’re such a killjoy,” Kenzie says. She wipes the dishes, leaving grimy streaks. “Indulge my wanderlust for once.”

“Stability is more important than wanderlust.”

“Ah, yes, because you’re so *wise*.”

“Stop it,” Rowan says. He and Fitz have grown closer lately. Though Rowan is still a gentle boy, Fitz reveals his hidden edge. Isobel notices. She notices everything.

Kenzie laughs. “Calm down, Rowan. I’m teasing.”

“Well...don’t.” Rowan’s words are not frightening, but Kenzie

lets it go. She has never understood love in the human sense. Music is her love, her passion, and it makes more sense than people.

People don't make sense.

People make trouble.

Want Me

Before

“Ma has a gun.”

Ma pulled Bridget close and covered Brodie’s eyes. He did not remember Isobel. She sat on the RV couch, young and confused.

“It’s okay, honey,” Pa told Bridget. “She’s practicing.”

Ma was not practicing. Isobel knew this. Pa knew this. Bridget and Brodie did not know this.

“I’m scared, Pa,” Brodie said. “What if Ma hurts us?”

“Ma won’t hurt you,” Pa said. “Ma loves you. She’s cleaning it, that’s all.”

Ma was not cleaning it. Isobel knew this, too. She knew too much, but Pa still forgot about her.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Blake,” Ma shouted outside the RV. She banged on the wall, and the tin box shivered. “If I hear a siren, this whole place’ll blow.”

Pa didn’t do anything stupid, though he should have done

something, and stupid was better than nothing. He could have called the police, or started the engine, or hid the kids in the back while he calmed his wife outside. But he did none of those things, because Ma was not bluffing. Isobel knew this as well. She knew her mother would raze the place. Isobel would, too, if given the chance.

“It’s the middle of the night, Blaire,” Pa shouted back. “Let’s talk tomorrow.”

“It’s always tomorrow with you,” Ma said. “I’m done with tomorrow. Let me see the kids.” She slammed the gun into the RV, and the metal bawled.

By now, the caravan had awoken. They didn’t interfere, though. These were the Walshes. They were famous, rehearsing. They knew what they were doing. If Isobel screamed, the caravan would think it was staged. If Isobel called for help, the cops would think it was a prank. She was trapped in a filthy RV with twins who ignored her and a father who forgot her. Helpless. Powerless. *Weak*—

No.

Isobel was never weak.

“Let me see my babies!” Ma shouted. She banged the RV again. The metal splintered Isobel’s ears. She slid off the couch and crept toward the back.

“When you’re calm, Blaire, of course,” Pa said. He was always calm—always far too calm. Bridget sobbed. Brodie shook. Pa clenched his jaw and waited.

Isobel did not wait.

Force would not work. Fighting fire with fire led to a bigger fire. Neither would logic. Reason fueled Ma’s moods. But praise was her off switch. It couldn’t come from Isobel, though. No, Isobel’s hands must remain clean.

At the back of the chipped red RV, a door squeaked open and closed. Isobel flew between the squeaks. Nobody heard. Nobody saw. Ma shrieked louder. Pa spoke softer. Bridget and Brodie cried like babies, even though they were fourteen. Isobel did not cry. She was never allowed to be a baby.

“Give them to me,” Ma screeched.

“Blaire, please,” Pa said.

“They’re *mine*.”

“Yes, they are, but you need to calm down.”

A bang. A gunshot. A runaway bullet. Twin teenage sobs. The Walsh brand faded into the background as Isobel wove through the caravan. She finger-combed her hair and smoothed her nightgown. Presentable. *Powerful*. People knew her. People wanted her. And she knew who wanted her most. Well, a version of her.

Knock, knock, knock.

A door creaked open. A fan’s jaw dropped. His navy pajamas blended into his navy RV. Some people became their home. Isobel would never become hers.

“Bridget?” the boy asked. “Bridget Walsh?”

Isobel thanked fate for the dark. In the midnight lamplight of the rest stop, she could pass for her sister. Isobel was famous, too, but in a logistical way. She was an entry on a form, a scribble on a list, never her own separate title. Bridget was more than a title. Bridget was a symbol, a *sex* symbol—almost legal, already polished on a pedestal for her fleeting flash in the sun.

The boy was Bridget’s age, also fourteen. Isobel knew this, because he wrote it in his every comment: “So it wouldn’t be weird if we were together.”

It would be weird, username *xxxJoey14*.

It would be weirder still if Bridget's stalker knew this was Isobel, only twelve.

xxxJoey14 didn't know, though. He didn't notice Isobel's violet eyes or freckles. He didn't spot her two good feet or crooked spine. All Joey saw was the hint of a figure teasing the cotton nightgown, and the suggestion of breasts was enough to melt his puberty-mauled brain.

"Sorry it's late," Isobel said, invoking Bridget's confidence. She had none of her own. "I couldn't get away before. Parents and all."

Joey didn't answer. It was possible he *couldn't* answer. Too much blood pooled between his legs for thoughts to form up top. He lived with his parents, too, but they were asleep. Isobel's parents were not. She remembered this with sharp urgency and let a strap slip down her arm. She was a child, but she had lived a thousand years.

"I read all your messages," Isobel said. "I wanted to reply, but nothing seemed good enough, so here I am."

"So here you are," Joey choked out.

Isobel let a tear fall. She wasn't crying—she didn't cry—but she could control her body the same as others' minds.

The tear animated Joey. "Bridget, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," Isobel said, wiping her eyes that were not gray, that were not Bridget's. "It's...stupid."

"I'm sure it's not stupid. How can I help?" Joey was eager to please, and Isobel was eager to tease.

"No, it's fine. I don't want to put you out."

"You'd never put me out. What is it?"

Isobel paused and pretended she didn't let her strap slip further. "My mother...Ma. She's sad about the latest video. She thinks people didn't like it."

Joey's eyes ballooned in his skull. "Didn't like it? I *loved* it. All my friends did, too. The trail mix part was *genius*. Showed life on the road."

It was not genius, but Isobel was. She shifted her nightgown—oops, a thigh—and braided the rest of his strings.

"Would you mind...if it's not a bother...telling her that?" Isobel asked. "She could use a boost. I'll mention you in the next video."

She would not mention him, but Joey would not remember. His first glimpse of breast erased all the rest.

Isobel glanced down and summoned a blush. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry. So embarrassing." *Want me.*

Joey wanted her. "S'not embarrassing," he babbled, tonguetied by a nipple. He wandered toward the Walsh trailer, a clown grin on his face.

He didn't see Ma's gun.

Or smell the diesel.

Or see the real Bridget inside.

Or watch Isobel sneak back into the RV.

He didn't see fear or danger or death in the night.

All he saw was Isobel's breast in his mind.

"Mrs. Walsh, your latest video was *epic*," Joey exclaimed. "*Super* brilliant."

Ma faded from fire to smoke. "Sorry?"

"The trail mix video. My buddies and I *loved* it."

And Ma's gun vanished. *Magic*. No such thing.

Joey vomited praise while Ma drank in fame. Pa, Bridget, and Brodie didn't know that Isobel had saved their lives. Isobel knew. Isobel knew too much. She fell asleep, knotted in a ball, molested by nightmares, forced to grow old. She was never a baby, rarely a child, always an object, forever a treat.

Joey left an hour later with autographs and a story to sell.