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# Chapter 1
## Molly Graham-Bishop

Some sleeps felt like minutes. Others, years.

Molly woke to loose, lazy limbs and a meteorologically significant pressure system inside her skull. Joints like jelly, thoughts a dense fog. She refused to open her eyes, cheek pressed into a downy pillow.

She was nothing more than candle wax dripped between bedsheets, warm enough to stay softened. Relaxation was a rarity in her tension-powered body, one that not even a blooming headache could ruin.

For the sake of languid limbs and a cozy bed, she could put off her incredible weekend to-do list a little while longer. No matter that she had a cram session scheduled with her Research Methods study group. And the groceries she desperately needed to grab, lest she live another day on past-their-prime bananas and her dwindling supply of trail mix. And the several chapters of leisure reading she'd promised herself she'd make time for.

Her mattress shifted, weight displaced. An arm wrapped around her middle from behind, a solid body lining itself up against her back.

Whatever luxuriant warmth had been softening Molly's body froze.

Had Simon made the drive over for the weekend?

The arm around her middle pulled her closer. Elegant fingers danced across her bare stomach, exposed by a disheveled sleeping shirt. Then, a mouth against her skin. Lips pressed to the muscle stretching between the base of her neck and her shoulder joint, shooting a frisson of heat down her spine. A sense of comfort began coaxing softness from her again.

"It's too early to be thinking that loud." A low voice floated against the back of her neck.

Not Simon's, but familiar enough in an uncanny way to burst panic bright behind her ribs.

"Oh, no you don't," the man said, tightening his hold. "It's far too early for productivity. I plan on keeping you in this bed for at least another hour. And I was promised waffles."

Molly thrashed, tearing herself from his grip and out of the bed. Eyes finally open, brain fully drenched in adrenaline, she noticed for the first time that this room, this bed she'd woken up in, didn't belong to her.

She staggered back, disoriented. Unfamiliar furniture. Unfamiliar walls. Unfamiliar sheets. Unfamiliar clothes on her own body. And an unfamiliar—or perhaps too inexplicably familiar—man in the bed looking up at her with wide, icy blue eyes and a mouth dropped open in what looked like preemptive question.

"What the fuck?" Molly breathed.

Aster Bishop—*Aster Bishop*—was staring at her from between deep-navy sheets. And she had very few thoughts left in her head besides screaming obscenities and boatloads of fear. Boatloads enough to fill shipping yards, entire harbors.

Bishop's pale blond hair was mussed, and he lay shirtless—a bewilderingly compelling sight—sleep rumpled, and looking equally as confused as Molly felt.

Her temple throbbed with a flash of pain. Sucking in a breath, she winced as a jolt of vertigo spun her vision.

"Molly? Are you okay?" Just hearing Bishop's voice had Molly backing further away, tripping into an armoire.

Her eyes rolled at another crack of pulsing pain, stronger than before. It ripped a panicked laugh-cry from her throat. So much pain roared inside her skull that she literally couldn't think straight, nothing left behind but inappropriate laughter.

What other option was there when staring at Aster Bishop's half-naked form cautiously rising from a bed and looking at her as if she'd lost her mind?

Maybe she had.

There was no conceivable series of events that made waking up in *his* bed a possibility.

She was still laughing. A feeble, unhinged sound barely a step away from crying. What explanation was there for the fact that she remembered nothing of whatever events led to this bedroom? Each possibility jumping the queue to catch her attention was worse than the last.

Bishop crossed the room, ignoring her panicked order for him to stay away. Her knees buckled, brain on fire.

Distantly, she heard "*Mols*?" Fingertips digging into her skin, hands trying to hold her up. It was a nickname she didn't know, laced with concern she had no reference for.

Whatever else Bishop said fell away.

Her last half-aware observation, framed by rapidly darkening tunnel vision, was that Aster Bishop had a very nice face when he wasn't scowling at her.

Bright lights.

Muddy, mired thoughts.

Molly woke with her eyes closed in another unfamiliar place.

Struggling to full consciousness felt like swimming upstream in her own skin and making pit stops in swirling eddies to acknowledge aches, confusion, and the swarming sensory input beyond her body.

Her left leg twinged with a dull ache. Her head felt cotton-stuffed, tacky, and sluggish. Machines beeped. Things on wheels rolled. Conversations swelled. Footsteps came and went. And a gentle, tender voice said something from nearby.

The voice spoke again: closer, easier to discern.

"Molly, if you can hear me, can you give my hand a squeeze? You're at New Hope Regional Hospital. You're safe, and we're here to help however we can. Are you in any pain?" A soft hand slid into Molly's.

Molly liked the gentle voice. It was velvet in her eardrums. She squeezed as exhaustion pulled her remaining energy downstream.

Forcing her eyes open, she found a figure at her bedside. A middle-aged white woman with dark brown hair streaked with shining silver. Tightness carved worry lines at the corners of her

eyes as she watched Molly. No fewer than six pens in varying colors hung from the pocket on the front of her scrubs.

Drowned out by observation, Molly missed her doctor's smile-softened introduction. Dr. Murphy, perhaps? Molly blinked, and a cloudy film slid over her eyes. She blinked again, trying to banish it. The doctor continued, "Are you in any pain?"

Molly swallowed, throat caught on dryness, on anxiety. Her doctor pulled a cup from the rolling table at Molly's bedside and angled a straw to her lips. Was it Murray? Dr. Murray sounded like a name that could belong to a woman with a small arsenal of pens hanging from her pocket.

Molly wasn't sure why she thought that. Or why it mattered. Her brain felt like hot soup, skull stewing.

She sipped, ice-cold water releasing her voice, weak and raspy. "No pain."

Not enough that mattered, anyway. Sure, her head throbbed, her back was sore, and her shin twinged. But those felt like inconsequential things when waking up in a hospital bed. She sucked down more water before the doctor pulled her cup away.

"Molly, do you think you're feeling up to answering a few questions?"

From the light blue curtain partitioning Molly's tiny room from what must have been a whole bustling hospital ward, a man poked his head in, only belatedly adding a slightly breathless *knock, knock*.

"Heads up," he said. "We're about two minutes from calling security."

Without waiting for a response, he disappeared, leaving Molly's doctor with a strained cheerfulness pulling her cheeks.

"Where were we?" She clicked through several screens on the rolling computer beside Molly's bed. "Can I ask you a few questions?"

Molly wasn't sure she trusted her own voice. She simply nodded.

"If at any point you need a break or feel too unwell to continue, just let me know." A meaningful pause. "What's your full name?"

Molly blinked, struck by absurdity. "Molly—" She broke off, coughing, and then tried again. "Molly Elizabeth Graham."

Her doctor made a note.

"And what state are we in?"

"Connecticut."

Another note.

"And how old are you?"

An unfamiliar rush of hot panic fluttered beneath Molly's skin as she answered. "Twenty-one."

Yet another note.

"What happened?" Molly asked, her voice cracking. "Am I okay?" Her fluttering panic swelled from her stomach to her chest.

The doctor whose name she still didn't know offered another smile. Molly assumed it was meant to be reassuring.

"These diagnostic questions are only meant to establish a baseline."

"A baseline for what?" Molly asked. Her skin felt alive: a flock of birds, a swarm of insects, a school of fish.

"I know this is frightening," the doctor said, glancing to a machine by Molly's bed. "Let's try focusing on one thing at a time. Just one thing. Can you try taking a deep breath for me?"

Molly tried, truly she did, but her exhale sputtered.

"You're alright," the doctor said. And suddenly, a hand rested

on Molly's forearm. Warm, light pressure through a thin hospital blanket. "But you've had an accident."

When she didn't continue, Molly asked, "An accident?"

Molly realized she was shaking. Never in her life had her body ever genuinely, uncontrollably shook.

"What kind of accident?" Apart from the fear and the confusion, Molly felt *fine.* Fine enough, at least. Fine enough not to require a hospital.

"Your imaging shows evidence of brain trauma. Two small bleeds, which we technically call strokes, that happened sometime yesterday morning," her doctor said, pausing before she went on. "I need to ask, do you feel safe at home?"

Thoughts caught on *brain trauma*, Molly barely registered anything else.

When her doctor (Moore, maybe?) repeated the question about safety, Molly nodded.

"Yes, of course. I'm fine." Because she was fine. Perfectly fine. Completely and totally fine. Aside from the splitting headache.

Her doctor's features remained neutral. "You have no reason to feel unsafe? Physically or emotionally in danger?"

"I—no. I'm fine." Alannah was a great roommate and one of her closest friends. And Pawntès, the world's clingiest cat, was only a danger if he decided to smother her in her sleep.

Dr. M made another note on her screen. "I've already put in a request with neurology for a more comprehensive workup. But I'd like to go through a few more questions right now, if that's alright, and see what you can answer correctly."

"I can answer them all correctly."

"Let's not worry about—"

"*Should* I be worried?" Molly's hot panic vanished, leaving something cold and vacant in its place. Terror.

The reassuring touch on Molly's arm remained. "You've experienced a brain injury. Thus far you appear to have fared incredibly well. We haven't noted any paralysis, and your speech and motor skills appear unimpacted. But we're still evaluating you for side effects, which can include memory loss—"

"Memory loss?" The words felt leaden on Molly's tongue.

"We hope only temporary. The mind is a powerful and adaptive thing, but it can also be unpredictable. Let's focus on what you do know. One thing at a time. We *are* in Connecticut."

Cold terror clashed with a renewed surge of hot panic, two sides of the same terrible coin.

Her doctor—Dr. Misfortune, it seemed—continued, "You were partially right about your name being Molly Graham. Your intake information, however, has you listed as—"

A roar from beyond the curtain cut her short.

"Where the *fuck* is my wife?"

Muffled voices. Something that sounded like a struggle.

"Get *off* me, Waters. I'm not waiting any longer—"

Waters? Roy was here? Molly's heart leaped at the thought of her best friend.

She'd hit the jackpot at eight years old when moving from Arizona to Connecticut meant becoming neighbors with Roy. Unfailingly patient, he regularly let his new neighbor pester him with passages from her favorite books. In exchange, Molly hit more balls around more fields than she ever would have of her own volition, but Roy, even as a kid, was excellent at fairness, and that had made for an easy friendship.

If anyone could make this confusing mess less horrible, it was him. He was a notoriously gentle bad news deliverer, and Molly had made him open all her college admissions letters just in case. If she had to receive bad news, she wanted to hear it from him.

"Almost twenty-four hours, Waters—"

"They're going to kick you out if you don't—"

More muffled voices, some shouting from further away.

"She's my wife!"

The curtain flew open, several rings ripping from the rod as fabric fluttered limply to the ground.

Aster Bishop stood there, blond hair in wild disarray. He struggled against Roy, whose nose was bleeding. Bishop looked like he wore some of Roy's blood on the front of his otherwise crisp white shirt.

Security appeared behind them, dragging Bishop out of the room. A good thing too, since he'd clearly lost his faculties. Maybe he was the one who needed the neurological exam.

"She's my fucking wife!" Bishop shouted again as security hauled him away.

Roy sheepishly met Molly's gaze. Aside from the blood trickling down his face and his golden-brown hair looking messier than usual, he appeared otherwise unfazed by whatever had just happened with Bishop. Between his strong posture, steady hazel eyes, and slightly crooked nose from a formative T-ball incident, Roy's arrival brought the familiarity and comfort Molly desperately needed.

"Uh. Hi, Molly." He glanced around as if seeking direction or permission to speak.

"Roy," Molly began, voice shredded by panic. "Why was Aster Bishop screaming bloody murder about his," and the word almost strangled her as she said it, "wife?"

Roy's eyes blew wide.

Dr. Maybe-This-Is-All-a-Nightmare sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose as if this was but another ridiculous series of events on an already unruly day. "That's what we were getting to," she said. "There were two questions you got wrong, Molly. You are twenty-seven years old. And your name is Molly Graham-Bishop."

Six years had passed without her knowing it. Six years they said she'd forgotten.

Sedatives ultimately came into play when she insisted, loudly, that there was no way in hell her name was Graham-Bishop, and that *Aster Bishop*, of all people—arrogant, awful Aster Bishop—was her husband.

She wasn't wearing a ring, so obviously it wasn't true. Never mind the logical part of her brain that suggested any personal effects had likely been taken from her for safekeeping.

The next few days passed in an anxious blur that yielded no real answers. Her team of doctors, a carousel of names and faces she simply didn't have the energy to remember, sat with her, irritatingly calm, and explained her diagnosis, her care plan, her limits, and what she could expect in the coming months. They walked her through concerning evidence of physical trauma on the crown of her head, scans that showed hemorrhaging in her brain, and asked her yet again if she felt safe at home.

It seemed like an asinine question when they were telling her

in the same breath that she'd lost a significant chunk of long-term memory. How on earth would she know?

They gave no easy solutions. They tempered her hope with maybes, possibilities, and potentials. They spoke of no absolutes and offered very little confidence, leaving Molly with the sense that when she got her memories back, *if* she got them back, it would be a long and difficult road to navigate.

"The brain is both very powerful and very delicate," one of her many doctors had said.

"I don't want another useless platitude."

"Mrs. Graham-Bishop—"

"It's just Graham," Molly snapped.

"We can't control how the brain recovers from traumas like this. All we can do is closely monitor your progress."

"I'm hoping for something a little more proactive than that."

His smile shifted closer to pity than kindness. "Why don't you try resting for a bit?"

When their advice wasn't to manage difficult news one chunk at a time, it was to sleep. Rest. Recover.

As if a nap might easily reconcile her past with her present when she had to contend with anomalies like Aster Bishop.

He entered her room slowly, trailing several paces behind a particularly chipper nurse with the brightest green eyes and prettiest lashes Molly had ever seen. While the nurse began measuring Molly's vitals for what felt like the thousandth time in the last several days, Bishop stood in the doorway looking spectral.

Aster Bishop embodied an uncanny valley in a way Molly hadn't known was possible. Here was the haunted adult version

of a boy she once knew. There was no denying that Bishop had grown into his features. The sharp, pointed angles in his face, shoulders, and arms she remembered from their contentious time in high school together had smoothed, broadening into a man's frame. Less sharp, more *refined*. She'd caught glimpses of the beginnings of this in college but had tried not to waste her attention on anything Bishop was getting up to, dubiously evolving handsomeness or otherwise.

Beyond that uncanny valley, Bishop looked weary to his core. Exhaustion worn in deep purple bags beneath his eyes. Fear worn in a heavy crease between his brows. Hope worn in tight lips pulled ever so slightly at the edges, as if caught between relief and sadness.

She should have felt more sympathy than she did. Molly knew that. But of all the people she'd asked after, that Bishop was her first official visitor after only briefly speaking to Roy felt like a punishment more than a reward.

After several seconds of truly uncomfortable staring, during which time the nurse fussed over Molly's heart rate, Bishop finally sat on the hard plastic chair on the far side of the room. It groaned under his weight, and he winced like the creaking was a protest to his presence.

To Molly, it was.

"One hundred over seventy-five; that's very good," the nurse said as the blood pressure band on Molly's arm deflated.

Bishop didn't say anything.

Molly didn't say anything.

"Blood oxygen is a little lower than I'd like." Molly may have stopped breathing for a moment there.

Bishop opened his mouth like he might speak, and Molly had to look at the drop tile ceiling. No words ever came. Not until the nurse spoke again.

"We have you scheduled for a final round of imaging, and then it looks like we're prepping you for discharge." She glanced between Molly and Bishop. "I should be taking you over there right now, but why don't I give you two a couple of minutes?"

And just like that, Molly was alone in her room with Aster Bishop.

He stood when she looked over at him. Too formal. Chokingly awkward. It echoed, horrifyingly, of the last time she'd been alone with him. That had been at graduation, together in a small room prior to delivering their respective speeches. Hers as valedictorian. His as class president. Four years of a vicious academic rivalry, and all its adjacent cruelties, coming to a close. He'd stood when she entered the room, then looked like he regretted it—then, bafflingly, gestured for her to have his seat. Molly didn't know which of them was more shocked by his stilted "Good luck" when she was called to give her speech. He'd corrected himself a beat later, adding, "Don't choke." And that was that. The last thing she remembered him saying to her.

Molly nearly hit the call button on her bed. She couldn't do this. She liked to think she was a mature, well-adjusted person. But no amount of maturity could prepare someone for the absurdity of a situation like this.

Still, he said nothing.

She said nothing.

And that nothing gobbled up all the air in the room, leaving her to feel like she was suffocating beneath her sheets.

"Do you know anything about my dad?" The question burst from her, the only one she could think to ask when her alternatives were "Are you still a pompous ass?" and "How the hell did we end up married?"

Appallingly, he also seemed like her best option for news about her dad, who, to Molly's last recollection, was on the back end of two heart attacks in the last year.

When Bishop tensed, Molly soldiered on, desperate. "The hospital staff doesn't know anything, and so I haven't—"

"I told him not to come."

In that one sentence, any attempted goodwill she'd been trying to conjure for Bishop withered away.

"Why?" Her voice was surprisingly level.

Bishop stepped closer, mouth open like he meant to say something else, but nothing came out. His face twisted before he finally managed a weak response. "His arrhythmia has been . . . not great. His doctors have concerns about him flying. I didn't think—I didn't think you'd want him to risk it. Arizona to Connecticut is a long flight."

"You told him not to come—not to be here for me—because *you* thought you knew what I'd want?" For what must have been the thousandth time in her life, Molly hated that her dad had moved back to Arizona during her sophomore year at boarding school. Even if she understood the need to follow decent job opportunities and live closer to Molly's elderly grandmother, that move had still turned geography into a very real logistical challenge between them. One that often chafed.

Bishop's posture sank, a kind of emotional defeat evident in

his exhale. Molly wasn't used to anything but a staggeringly confident Aster Bishop, swaggering through life like his mere existence was a gift to all of humanity.

He'd called her "Charity Case" more than her own name because she'd been a scholarship student.

He'd spent several months tallying the price of all his shoes and watches relative to Laburnum Preparatory Academy's tuition and then reminding Molly how many days of her education he was wearing at any given moment.

He'd made her sob in a bathroom stall over a particularly well-landed insult on at least two separate occasions.

He'd once accused her of plagiarism and tried getting her expelled.

And then he'd fought her tooth and nail in their grade point rankings, nearly taking the valedictorian title for himself as if he didn't already have *everything*.

He was an old teenage wound she had no interest in reopening.

The only thing Aster Bishop knew about her was how to make her miserable.

She would not cry in front of him. She'd promised herself that years ago—more years than she remembered, evidently.

Molly would never know if Bishop planned to answer, because her nurse came bustling back in with far too much optimism in her bouncing gait.

"Got to get you over to imaging," she said, unlocking the wheel brake on Molly's bed. She turned to Bishop. "It'll be a couple of hours if you're planning on waiting. There's—"

"He's not waiting," Molly cut in. "He's leaving."

When she was returned to her room, Molly resigned herself to doing exactly what her doctors asked of her. She slept.

When she woke, Alannah sat at her bedside.

Molly blinked, drinking in a welcome, familiar face. Alannah's hair was still buzzed close to her head, as it had been since they were eighteen and she'd used Simon's clippers to cut it all off because "who had the time?" She had the same dark, almost photoshop-perfect skin; the same wide, long-lashed eyes that balanced an impossible line between open kindness and subtle suspicion. Molly suddenly felt like weeping.

"Hey," Alannah whispered. "I brought you a change of clothes. And some cupcakes. I've been calling them concussion cakes, but I guess that's not really accurate. 'Amnesia cakes' doesn't really have the same ring. And I've got no idea how soon is too soon. Still in the hospital feels like maybe too soon, doesn't it?" She dragged in a breath and visibly refocused herself. "How are you feeling?"

Groggy. Tired. Grieving. Maybe a little inappropriately amused. And so very, very confused. Molly's face must have said enough. Alannah scooted closer to the bed, chair scraping against laminate floor. Carefully, she reached out and held Molly's hand.

"I spoke to your nurse on my way in. They're working on your discharge paperwork right now. It . . . looked like a lot," Alannah said. "But apart from your head, of course, they said you're doing really well."

Molly felt a little unsteady. This was Alannah, who'd been one of Molly's best friends since their freshman year of high school.

Alannah, who on closer study, didn't quite look exactly how Molly remembered her. In between the basic facts of her appear-

ance, Molly couldn't deny the presence of six lost years in her face, in her posture. Alannah was the same, but she was also different. And Molly couldn't make sense of that.

"You look . . ." Molly began, not really knowing how to go on.

"Exhausted. I look exhausted," Alannah supplied with a forced laugh. "My best friend is in the hospital, and I have two children under the age of four. I can't remember the last time I slept." She gave Molly's hand a squeeze. "I've been *so* worried about you."

Molly stared, her world a top spinning too close to a table's edge. "Children?"

Alannah's eyes widened. "I wasn't . . . don't worry about that for now. I'm so sorry. We're supposed to reintroduce information slowly. Try not to overwhelm you. I guess emotional distress can worsen physical symptoms."

It was too big a thing to brush aside.

"You have children? That's . . . new." Molly's thoughts lurched. "Or not that new, I guess." The world might have been insistent that Molly was currently pushing twenty-eight, but everything in her head still felt like she was in her early twenties. The reality of having families and children still felt light-years away, decisions still unmade. "Wait, whose are they? Are they Roy's—your kids, I mean?"

They'd had a plan, the four of them. Molly and Roy, childhood best friends, plus Simon and Alannah, the twins they'd met at the snobby boarding school that viewed them all as less than. Molly and Roy had been scholarship kids, Molly for academics, Roy for baseball. Alannah and Simon's dad taught English, and their mom worked in administration; scholarship and faculty kids were evidently the same sort of unworthy to Laburnum legacy students.

In the end, it made perfect sense when Roy fell for Alannah and Molly fell for Simon. They were meant to have joint proposals, weddings, honeymoons, *lives.*

Alannah laughed, and it felt like the first genuine sound to enter Molly's hospital room in days. "Yes, they're Roy's. Well, he had a part in it at least. Takes two to tango and all that. Jessa will tell you she's four, but she's still three. And Thomas is a little over ten months. You were my maid of honor, of course."

Alannah smiled. Despite the tiredness woven into her features, her joy was undeniable, obvious in an internalized, radiating way.

A strange new grief swallowed Molly whole. "It doesn't feel real."

"I know," Alannah said before grimacing. "Well, I don't. How could I? But I'm here. I came because I heard things didn't go well with . . . *Anyway*, we thought it would be best if I was the one to give you the basics about your life."

"Before I have to go live it?"

Alannah pressed her lips together. "Pretty much."

A nurse stepped through the curtain, holding what looked like an entire filing cabinet's worth of information. Molly declined a final verbal review of her paperwork, insistent that she was very capable of reading it on her own, and pointedly ignoring that she was not meant to read for long periods of time for the next several weeks. There were certain immutable facts about her person that not even brain damage could derail, and reading was one of them.

She glanced down at her name, or what was supposed to be her name, printed on her papers.

"Alannah. Please tell me the Graham-Bishop thing has been an elaborate joke." Molly's own voice nearly choked her. She'd been avoiding thinking too hard about it.

Alannah didn't answer. Instead, she said, "I heard you've been asking about Simon."

Molly's stomach dropped. When she hadn't been asking after her dad, or Roy, or Alannah, she'd been asking for Simon. Pointlessly, she assumed, given the context clues.

"We didn't think it was smart for him to visit. And he agreed. He sends his love though. He's been as worried as the rest of us."

"But I'm not his—we're not . . . together anymore?" It was a stupid, mortifying thing to have to ask.

Alannah's face fell. "The last thing you remember is when we were all twenty-one, right?"

Molly sighed at that nonanswer but nodded.

Alannah's head tilted as she pinpointed that place in their shared history. "So, Roy had been playing in the minors for almost two years by then. And I'd just wrapped up my culinary program and had been traveling with him, which meant you basically had our apartment to yourself. You and Simon were still doing long distance. And it was your last year in college with Bishop."

"I wasn't in college *with* Bishop. We happened to end up in the same place. We never even spoke."

"All I meant was that you weren't in college with me and Roy and Simon," Alannah said mildly. "It was a technicality, not an accusation." She squeezed Molly's hand. "You and Simon broke up about halfway through senior year. It was the right decision. You both agreed. And *still* agree."

"Forgive me for not having the same frame of reference as you do." Molly hated how snappish she sounded.

"Molly . . . you're happy now, you know. Bishop is still *Bishop*,

but he's . . . well, he's grown on us. And you're *good* together. Though I'll be denying it if you ever tell him I said that."

The idea of being *good* with Bishop twisted like a kind of nausea in the pit of her stomach. Being good with him implied far too many things about attraction and affection and intimacy that had Molly's heart feeling like it might gallop straight out of her chest. "I have no interest in telling Bishop anything whatsoever."

Alannah frowned, posture straightening. "Right. So, Roy and I already have a bed made up for you if staying with us is what you want. I'm doing some amazing things in my slow cooker these days, so there's a whole birria experience on the menu for tomorrow that you'll definitely love. We support you, whatever you want to do." A pause, then, "But it *is* supposed to be good for you to be in familiar surroundings. And you do already share a place with Bishop so . . ." Alannah trailed off.

"You aren't honestly suggesting I go live with him?" Molly's heart thrashed at the thought of sharing a home with Bishop. Joint routines. Groggy mornings. Late nights. A bed draped in navy sheets.

"You already live with him," Alannah said gently.

"Not *me*. Not—we're talking about Bishop. *Aster Bishop*. Snotty, self-centered, status-obsessed *Bishop*. With his wardrobe that could have paid for both our tuitions ten times over, which he never let us forget. And that sneering laugh he always used right before he twisted the English language into a weapon. And his . . . *face*. He made my life miserable at Laburnum. All our lives, in case *you've* forgotten." She paused, knuckles pressing into the stiff mattress beneath her as she steeled herself. "They keep asking me if I feel safe at home. I think they're worried he's hurting me."

Alannah's face hardened. "Molly, he would never. And if he did, Roy and I would know about it."

"You don't know that. You hear all the time about how well some women can hide it—"

"I'm telling you. That man worships the ground you walk on."

"That doesn't mean he's not capable of—I mean, you knew him at Laburnum."

"I did. He was a classic teenage asshole. And I remind him of that regularly. But he wasn't *violent*. I think he was more likely to run from a fight than start one, even then. And he's changed. A *lot*. Which is painful to admit. But if you're worried, *of course* you can stay with us."

"Alannah, I—I can't. I can't go live with him."

Alannah squeezed her hand. "Okay, that's totally fine."

It struck Molly then, another wave of grief. This time for her home. Her belongings. The apartment she'd shared with the woman next to her, with its frustrating dead bolt and tropical rainforest levels of humidity. Her bookshelves and books and dehumidifier constantly running in an effort to keep them safe. She wondered about her cat and her bed and her many knitted blankets, all courtesy of Alannah and Simon's mom.

She felt like an island sinking into the sea. Wave after wave slowly crumbling her shoreline, pulling her sands out to open ocean. There was too much to grieve, big things and tiny things, and too much to keep track of.

But she refused to drown.

Alannah smiled gently at her, perhaps sensing her turmoil. "Roy and I were hoping to take you to dinner, if you're up to it. Ease you back in to . . . everything, I guess."

Molly's posture slumped, ramrod tension collapsing. "Burgers?"

"The greasiest."

"Fries and onion rings?"

"Multiple orders, obviously."

Gathering herself, Molly took her doctor's advice and tried to focus on one thing at a time.

After conquering the doldrums of discharge, Molly sat with Roy and Alannah at their favorite burger joint tucked into one end of an ancient strip mall, unchanged for decades.

And that constancy was a good thing. For that moment, familiarity was a flicker of hope—even in the form of greasy cheeseburgers and fries drowning in malt vinegar—keeping her grounded as she sat with two of her best friends and this strange new reality between them.

They were very much like the Roy and Alannah Molly recalled. Roy: ushering them to the perfect booth for a fast-food campout, guessing everyone's orders with a prescience borne from years of practice, and jumping to grab their trays the moment their number was called. Alannah: commenting on the age of the fry oil with the judgment of someone who actually knows a thing or two about fry oil, yet devouring her onion rings anyway. Alannah and Roy together: fiercely in love and obvious about it, if lingering glances and insistences on sharing each other's meals were any indication.

Molly almost felt like a passenger in the whole experience, oddly passive as she relaxed into the ease of having Roy acquire every condiment under the sun while Alannah pondered which ice cream parlor would earn their patronage that evening.

It was all so normal, so familiar.

But at the same time, Roy and Alannah seemed older, *different*. Roy was more glued to his phone than Molly had ever seen him, regularly checking the time or for updates from the babysitter, often interrupting himself mid-sentence to report on what the kids were up to. And Alannah had at some point decided that mustard *wasn't* the devil's golden punishment on the world and happily smothered her burger with it. At Molly's bewildered expression—Alannah's anti-mustard crusade had once involved a passionate PowerPoint presentation—she simply shrugged and said, "It was my pregnancy with Jessa. Craved it all the time and it never really went away. There was a week when it was the only thing I could eat. Spooned it straight from the jar." To which Roy added with a good-natured exasperation, "The jar of fancy, expensive French stuff, by the way."

These were little differences that shone like neon signs in Molly's face. She couldn't help but feel like they'd lived a life without her, even when she'd allegedly been right there with them. Not remembering made it feel very much like they'd left her behind.

"So," Roy began, fingers walking their way across the table, helping himself to whatever fries and onion rings Molly hadn't finished. "You're coming home with us, yeah?"

Molly snorted. "Unless either of you wants to pose a convincing argument as to why I should go live with a stranger. Well, a sort-of stranger with whom I have no love lost"—Alannah's expression twitched, just slightly, at Molly's choice of words—"then yes, I'm going home with you."

Roy shook his head. "Never here to argue with you. I don't think I've ever won, anyway. Just here to help however I can."

Alannah sat conspicuously silent.

Molly's head tilted. "Do *you* have an argument for going to live with him?"

"Uh—nope," Alannah said in the least confident tone possible. "Well, okay, kind of. It's just—I'm not trying to push you, really. I would literally *love* to have you around all the time. But, like I mentioned at the hospital, I do wonder if being somewhere familiar would be good for you. I only want what's best for you, you know?"

"You and Roy *are* familiar," Molly insisted.

"*Yes*, we are," Alannah said, scooting closer to Molly in their booth and slinging an arm around her shoulders with a squeeze. "But it's a little different. And, I don't know, maybe it's a silly way to think about it, but I feel like you deserve to trust yourself. You know, the you who picked your life and made it what it is now."

That, above all else, struck a nerve. A nerve Molly would have, frankly, preferred to have left unstruck.

Molly was a lot of things, afraid maybe most of all. But she liked to think she was brave too. Brave enough to face her own life. Smart enough to trust that a version of herself had made all the decisions that led her here, even if she didn't remember them. She was neither a coward nor an idiot, and she hated that hiding from her home with Bishop might imply she was both.

"Oh no," she said softly, a new decision crystalizing inside her. She sank against Alannah in their booth. "I don't like how much sense that makes."

Alannah just hugged her tighter.

# Before

*Feels wrong to leave you here."*

*Molly almost sighed as her dad got out of his old pickup for the third time since beginning this goodbye process.*

*"That's kind of how boarding school works," she said as he approached.*

*If he kept looking so uncertain, she wouldn't be able to hold it together. She was supposed to meet Roy for a practice walk-through of her class schedule in twenty minutes, and he'd know instantly if she'd been crying. Then he'd tease her for it, because he'd already been at Laburnum for two weeks for his athletics intensive and apparently boarding school was "no big deal."*

*This whole thing had been her idea, after all. She was ready for it. She'd toured, she'd interviewed, she'd stalked the admissions website at midnight, seven a.m., and nearly every hour in between. She'd imagined herself here so vividly that she'd tried to photoshop herself into one of the brochure photos when pitching the idea to her dad.*

*Her dad, who now pulled her into yet another hug. She'd had more hugs from him in the last fifteen minutes than she'd had in the last calendar year. Historically, Richard Graham wasn't much of a hugger,*

*but it appeared that moving his fourteen-year-old only child into her prestigious prep school dormitory was adequate inspiration to change his ways.*

*"I'll be fine, Dad." Molly couldn't think too hard about him driving away. It made her sinuses sting.*

*He pulled back, all serious eyes, full beard, and oversized work jacket that he forced around Molly's shoulders despite the muggy August heat. "You'll study hard."*

*"I always do."*

*"This is an amazing opportunity."*

*"I know. That's why I wanted to go here."*

*Molly jumped when a car honked from behind them.*

*He pulled her into one more forceful hug, whispered, "Alright, I'll get out of your hair. Love you, kid," and suddenly he was in his truck. He was pulling away. And Molly was alone.*

*Until a skinny, blindingly blond, sour-looking boy emerged from the car that had honked at them. He was mostly elbows and knees, even under his pristine school uniform and carefully styled hair. He had the look of those boys who hadn't stretched out yet, but whose bones were in the process of preparing for it.*

*As the car he'd exited quickly pulled away, a similarly blond man in the driver's seat, Molly couldn't help but compare the length of this boy's goodbye with her own.*

*She watched as his attention followed the retreating car, face pinching. He frowned, glancing down at the suitcase beside him then back at the car again. He hadn't even gotten a wave. That, maybe more than her dad's many hugs, made her want to cry again. She bled pity, feeling terrible for his nonexistent farewell.*

*When his eyes met hers, he sneered.*

*His gaze raked up and down her person with a scoff that leaked disdain. Molly pulled her dad's jacket tighter around her middle.*

*"What'd you do, beg a local hobo to drop you off?" he said in cut-glass tones before turning on his heel to leave.*