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0-5



5-7



7-9



9-12



12+

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## vultures

When faced with tragedy, we gather as many people around us as we possibly can. Mere acquaintances become best friends. Enemies become kindred spirits. We need people so later we can look back and say, "I went through that with them." People who can remind us that what we experienced, what we felt, was real. That we were there. So on that morning in early December, when we were all roused from our cozy dorm rooms just as the gray mist of dawn had started to rise, everyone set about finding that group to cling to. Someone to link arms with to make us feel less vulnerable, less unsure. Less like the world was on the verge of caving in.

My group had found me. They had huddled around me from the moment we stepped out of Billings House and hadn't broken ranks once on the slow walk across the Easton Academy campus to the chapel. Noelle. Ariana. Kiran. Natasha. Then, further out, Cheyenne, Rose, London, Vienna, and the others, their shoes crunching through the frost-caked grass. They wanted me to feel safe. To feel protected.

Or so it must have looked to the outside world. In my world—in my head—I was no longer sure of anything.

Where had the police taken Josh? Was he scared? Was he cold? What was he thinking? I kept seeing his face. The look of shock as they dragged him away. The pleading in his eyes. I kept hearing him tell me he could never hurt Thomas. Could I believe him? Could I believe anyone at Easton anymore?

*It's all lies, Reed, Taylor had written to me. All of it.*

There was a shout in the distance. Someone near me flinched. Everyone paused and turned, but there was nothing to see. Two crows cawed their way across the gray sky overhead, and for a long moment no one moved. Hundreds of steaming clouds of breath mingled in the air around us. Silence.

"Let's go," Noelle said finally, nudging us forward.

I looked at her face for the first time all morning. The cold had turned her cheeks pink, and her brown eyes were bright. Beautiful as ever. She smiled at me reassuringly as the wind tossed her thick brown hair across her face. I didn't smile back.

Footsteps jogged to catch up with us. Soon Dash McCafferty and Gage Coolidge were upon us, falling into step.

"Hey." Dash kissed Noelle's temple. His blond hair had been blown up on the side by the wind and stuck there, making him look even more like an Abercrombie model than usual.

"What was that?" Noelle asked, glancing back over her shoulder.

"Vultures," Gage said through his teeth. His striped rugby scarf was tossed around his neck and chin, and his hair was slick with

water from the shower. He must have been freezing, but he was too cool to show it.

"Reporters," Dash amended. "They're camped out down by the gates. Dean Marcus had them locked last night after the police left. My father got a phone call an hour ago informing him of heightened security measures. They must've called all the parents."

"Fab," Kiran said. "Bet my mother *loved* that wake-up call."

"One of 'em scaled the fence, though. Trey was on his run and saw Scat 'escorting' some slag with a video camera off campus," Gage informed us. He made a fist with one leather-gloved hand and pressed it into his other palm. "Fucking vultures."

"Scat's the head of security," Natasha, my roommate, informed me, noting the question in my eyes.

I had seen him before. Large man. No neck. Perpetual scowl. I never realized anyone knew his name.

"So we're locked in," Kiran stated. She shivered and lifted the fur collar of her coat higher on her throat so that it grazed her perfect cheekbones. With her huge sunglasses covering her eyes and her dark hair down around her face, she looked for all the world like a starlet trying to avoid the paparazzi.

"For now," Dash told us. "Until they figure out what to do next."

"What's to figure?" Noelle asked. "They have the murderer in custody now, don't they?"

I wasn't sure whose scathing look was more deadly, mine or Dash's. Probably his, since I was fairly certain he'd never looked at Noelle like that before in all the time they'd known one another,

which was forever. We had arrived at the open chapel entry. The door was flanked by the Ketlar advisor, Mr. Cross, and my history teacher, Mr. Barber. Dash turned, jaw clenched, and stormed inside without another word to his beloved girlfriend.

"What's his malfunction?" Noelle said.

"I think there's a little something called innocent until proven guilty?" Natasha replied. Noelle rolled her eyes. Rolled her eyes at the suggestion that perhaps Josh Hollis, our friend, had perhaps *not* cold-bloodedly murdered Thomas Pearson.

"Let's keep it moving, ladies," Mr. Barber said, waving his hand. He stared past us with piercing eyes, as if keeping the lookout for some unknown danger. "Let's keep it moving."

I stepped into the hushed chapel and started down the aisle to the sophomore section. A chill rushed through me at the sudden loss of the Billings Girls' surrounding body heat, but I felt somehow free. I realized fully for the first time that I'd been aching to get away from them. To be alone and have some time to think. Then a cold hand closed around my wrist.

"We'll be right back here if you need us, Reed," Ariana said, her ice blue eyes boring straight through me.

I tried to pull my arm away, but she held firm.

"I know," I told her, speaking my first words of the day.

She released me and smiled angelically. "Good."

*It's all lies, Reed, Taylor had written. All of it.*

I turned my back to her and found my seat.

## new rules

I left my coat on and buttoned, the better to make a fast escape when it was all over. The murmuring in the chapel had a panicked quality. It was obvious that the seniors and juniors near the back knew exactly what had happened, while most of the sophomores and all of the freshmen were speculating cluelessly. The difference was in their eyes. The older students' eyes were narrowed—stunned but pensive. The younger kids had a wide-eyed, what-the-hell-is-going-on look about them. These were the details I noted as I sat. Paying attention to them kept my mind off things I didn't want to think about.

"Do you have any idea what's going on?" Constance Talbot asked, sliding into the seat next to mine. Her red hair was back in a sloppy French braid, good for hiding the fact that it hadn't been washed. Colorful shafts of light came through the stained glass windows and bathed her face in pink and yellow. She shimmied out of her gray wool coat and bent forward, trying to catch my eye. "Reed? Come on. I know you know."

She assumed this because I was in Billings. And the Billings Girls knew everything. Which maybe I did, but too late. Always too late.

"Reed?" she sounded more urgent, concerned. "Reed? Are you okay?"

The chapel doors closed. Silence fell. Everyone faced forward. Even Constance. It was easy to quiet this place when the students were salivating for news. My gloved hands closed into fists on my lap. Dean Marcus stepped up to the altar at the front of the chapel. His wrinkled face looked pale and tired. He pressed both hands into the surface of the podium.

"Students, can I have your attention, please?" he said, even though he already had it. His voice was deep and authoritative. It didn't match his wan appearance. "Thanks to all of you for gathering here quickly and in an orderly fashion. As always I'm impressed with the level of maturity of our student body. I only ask that when you hear what I have to say, you maintain your calm. Right now, more than ever, this community needs to know that it can rely on itself and its members, that we will not let one another down. These are the high standards I expect from the students of Easton. These are the high standards you should expect from yourselves."

There was a lot of shifting and a few murmurs. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Constance look at me.

Dean Marcus took a deep breath. "Students, I regret to inform you that a member of the junior class, Joshua Hollis, has been arrested on suspicion of murder."

"What?"

"Oh my God."

"You've gotta be kidding me. Josh Hollis is a Boy Scout!" someone shouted.

"It's always the quiet ones," someone else said solemnly.

There was no stopping the din now. It consumed the chapel. Constance grabbed my hand. All she got was a cold fist.

"Students! Students!" the dean shouted.

He was ignored. Everyone was busy gasping, blabbering about how they couldn't believe it. Someone, somewhere, was crying. Crying. Who the hell was crying?

"I can't believe this. I can't believe someone we know *killed* someone. . . ."

*He didn't. He didn't do it. Stop saying he did it.*

"Reed. Oh my God. Did you know about this? Are you okay?" Constance asked me, turning so that our knees were touching. "Reed, you're freaking me out here. Say something."

I wanted to. I didn't want to freak her out. But I knew that if I opened my mouth or so much as truly looked at her, I would break down. And I couldn't have that. Not now. Not yet.

"Silence!" Dean Marcus roared. He brought his fist down several times on the surface of the podium. "I will have silence!"

That did it. The place was suddenly as still as night. His watery eyes traveled the room slowly.

"I realize that this is difficult news to hear, and that it is even harder to accept, and that is why I wanted you to hear it from me.



I wanted to tell you this before it came out in the newspapers, before rumors started flying, because I wanted to remind you that we here at Easton support one another. Let us all remember one of the most important laws of our society—that a person is innocent until he or she is proven guilty,” the dean said, leaning over the podium. Somewhere, I knew Natasha was smirking. “If Mr. Hollis is proven to be guilty, we will deal with it then, but until that time he is still a member of this community, and as such he is due our respect and support.”

For that one moment, I liked the dean. I liked him very much.

“Now, I don’t have to tell you that the next few weeks are going to be a trying time for this academy,” the dean continued. “Not only do you all face the challenge of final exams, but there will be reporters, gossip hounds, and so-called newspeople, all bent on bringing this institution to its knees. We all know how cruel the media can be, and they adore a scandal like this one. I also know how seductive the spotlight can be, so I have taken steps to ensure that none of you are tempted. From today on, the gates around this campus are closed to outsiders. No one other than your immediate family—your parents, your guardians—will be allowed on campus.”

There was a long pause. No one moved.

“More important, no students will be allowed to leave this campus unless in the company of a parent or guardian.”

This got a reaction. How could it not? I had been hearing murmurs for weeks about trips to New York and Boston. Shopping excursions, club-hopping, posh holiday dinners at exclusive restau-

rants. In one fell swoop the dean was robbing these privileged kids of their lifestyles.

"Do not even think about testing me on this one, people. It is nonnegotiable," the dean continued. "If you do attempt to test me, there will be dire consequences."

Once again his glare set upon each of us. The faculty members who stood along the walls seemed to crowd in toward us, like they were ready to grab anyone who tried to make a break for it.

"We will concentrate on our studies. We will remember what this institution is all about, and we will live it every day. Tradition. Honor. Excellence."

"Tradition. Honor. Excellence," the student body mumbled grumpily.

Like it was all about them. Like the most important thing said at this assembly had been about the locked gates, the new restrictions.

Like Josh had already been forgotten.

## motive

For once I didn't even bother getting food. Not that I'd been able to eat much lately, but usually I at least went through the motions, got myself a trayful of whatever and maybe tried to take at least one bite. But I was tired of pretending. Who the hell was I keeping up appearances for, anyway? I walked along the wall of the cavernous cafeteria, past all the quaint paintings of rural New England set in their ornate frames, listening to the chatter bouncing off the domed ceiling. The students around me stared and whispered, but I was used to that by now.

I sat at our usual table, alone, and slumped in my chair with one question plaguing my mind: Who *had* killed Thomas? I knew Josh hadn't done it. Knew it in my bones. But if he hadn't, then who had? I had to know. More important, the police had to know. If the real killer was exposed, they would have to let Josh go. As simple as that. But who else could possibly have done it? Who had a reason to kill Thomas?

Noelle and the others arrived with their trays of hot oatmeal, toasted bagels, and steaming coffee, and crowded in around me.

"Reed, I know you're depressed and all, but bad posture isn't going to make it any better," Kiran said. She perched on the edge of her own chair, slim legs crossed at the ankle, and lifted a heavy, scented magazine from her bag.

"Give her one day to wallow, Emily Post," Noelle said.

Kiran shrugged. "Fine, but when you're a hunchback at forty, don't come crying to me."

Dash dropped like a boulder into the chair across from Noelle and stabbed repeatedly at his oatmeal with his spoon.

"Problem?" Noelle asked, arching a brow.

Dash stared. "No. Everything's fine, actually. One friend dead, one in jail. I don't know about you guys, but I'm feeling pretty damn upbeat."

"I just can't believe he did it," Noelle pondered. "Little Josh Hollis, a murderer."

"You're the one who decided it was him," I blurted.

All movement at the table stopped. Like someone had hit the pause button on my life.

"Excuse me?" Noelle said.

I could rewind. Take it back. But I didn't want to. The incredulity with which she'd said those two words made me want to hurl something at her. Last night she had been all cocky assurances that Josh was a psycho. That he had potentially murdered before. She had no right to act surprised and appalled.

"You! You're the one who called the police on him," I said. "And now all of a sudden you're shocked?"

Noelle slowly placed her glass of juice down on the table. "Let me clarify something, Reed. I was suspicious before, not certain."

"Well, I don't know what makes you so certain now," Dash said. "Just because the police arrested him, that doesn't make him guilty."

"Boy has a point," Natasha said.

"Thank you. I'm sorry, but I have a hard time believing that one of us could kill someone," Dash said, the color in his face rising.

"It happens all the time," Ariana said lightly, as though she were announcing the weather forecast. "People snap."

"Yeah, but not Josh. The guy's like a Disney character," Dash said.

"All I know is, I'm glad it's over," Kiran said, flipping blithely through her magazine. "I've been so stressed out, I missed all the calls for the good spring shows. If that slut Melenka gets first curtain at Stella McCartney, *I'm* going to kill someone."

My fingers closed around Natasha's butter knife. Natasha's hand gently covered mine.

"Wow, Kiran, you just rose to previously uncharted levels of shallowness," Natasha said.

"Do you come with a mute button?" Kiran responded. "Because I, for one, am sick of your high-and-mightiness."

"Well, well! The bitch is back!" Gage said, patting Kiran on the back so hard she flinched. "It's a pleasure."

He was right. Kiran was in rare form. Possibly even meaner than she'd been before Thomas's disappearance. These people really thought it was over. Josh had done it. Throw away the key.

"It just doesn't make any sense, that's all I'm saying," Gage put in. "Don't you need a motive for murder? What the hell would Josh's motive have been? He and Thomas were so close they were practically gay."

A couple of people chuckled. My stomach clenched.

"Wow. So I guess we *all* took our immaturity pills this morning," Natasha said pointedly. She'd just been outed to all of us a couple of months back, which made Gage's joke particularly appalling.

"No offense," Gage said, without an ounce of sincerity. "All I'm saying is, maybe it was a crime of passion," he suggested, looking directly at me.

Ariana coughed and quickly covered her mouth with her napkin. Noelle eyed her like she was afraid she might choke, but made no move to help.

"They weren't actually gay," Ariana added, gaining control of her cough.

"No. Not like that. I'm saying maybe Josh killed Pearson because of a new girl."

My entire face prickled with heat. Gage smiled at my obvious discomfort.

"You're saying Josh . . . killed Thomas . . . because he wanted me?" I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Why not? It's not like it hasn't been done before," Gage said,

leaning toward me across the table. "We all know they both wanted your body, though I, for one, never got the appeal." His cold eyes flicked over me like I was dirt. "You're nothing but trouble, New Girl. Have been ever since you got here."

"Shut up, Coolidge," Noelle said, watching my face.

"What? You can't say it isn't true. She—"

Dash brought his fist down on the table. Dishes and silverware jumped. "Back off her, man."

That was a tone no one could ignore. Gage's glee finally left him, and he dropped back in his chair like a petulant child. Everyone else slowly went back to their meals. I found myself staring at the wall clock over Gage's head, watching the second hand tick, tick, tick, until breakfast was finally over and we were released.

## crack security

My classrooms felt smaller and grayer than usual. The tall windows looked out on a slate-gray sky, and now and then the wind would whip a tree branch against an ancient windowpane and everyone would jump. It was like we were all waiting for a bomb to drop, and why not? Every time we reached a tentative peace around this place, something huge happened to unsettle us all again. It was the status quo.

Each class that day began either with a lecture on staying the course, or a group therapy session about our feelings—all except for history. Mr. Barber being the no-nonsense type, he got right down to a review of the homework. I kept waiting for him to call on me, to try to embarrass me in front of the class. I even had a few choice comebacks all lined up. But in a rare show of compassion, the man ignored my existence.

As soon as classes let out for the day, I ran across the withering grass to Gwendolyn Hall, an old, condemned class building with



crumbling stone walls and boarded-up windows. I bounded up the deteriorating steps and into the alcove in front of the door, trying not to think about the last time I'd been there—who I'd been with. Trying not to imagine spirits and ghosts and moments I could never live again. Hands shaking, I stashed my book bag under one of the benches. The place was like a cave, dark and cold—at least twenty degrees colder than the air outside. No one ever came to Gwendolyn unless it was for a quick tryst, and I had to hope that on a day like today, the make-out spot would remain deserted.

On my way out I paused for the splittest of seconds. I couldn't help it. The last time I had been here, I'd been with Thomas. Right there. Right on that bench, with his lips and his hands and his warmth. . . . God, it had been perfect then. I had been so naïve. So happy. No idea what was coming. The pointlessness of it all threatened to overwhelm me. But then I threw up a brick wall inside my mind to stay the flood. I couldn't indulge that kind of self-pity right now. I was on a mission.

Throwing the hood of my gray sweatshirt over my head, I hugged my coat close to me, looked both ways, and ran. The tall gray buildings of Easton loomed over me on all sides, glaring down at me like disapproving elders. I ignored the creeping feeling of being watched and upped the pace.

Behind the trees on the north end of the property, there was a fence. Cut out of that fence was a hole, big enough for a girl in a ball gown to crouch through. Everyone in Billings and Ketlar knew where the hole was—it had allowed us to sneak out and in on the

night of the Legacy, the night all this misery had begun. I just hoped we were the only ones who knew about it. For a few long moments I was out in the open for anyone to see and snag and expel, but I refused to look anywhere but straight ahead. The dean's warnings rang in my head, but I ignored them. If someone was going to catch me, they were going to catch me on the run.

My lungs burned from the cold as I ducked through the line of trees, branches snapping at my face. I threw my back against the fence and sucked in a breath. Then I held it and listened. No air sirens, no shouting, no rabid guard dogs lusting for blood.

Walking sideways, I slowly made my way along the fence until I found the hole. Flashes from the night of the Legacy accosted me. Cold, wet feet; mud-stained skirts; Josh's hand as he helped me through. The look on his face when he'd told me they'd found Thomas. That Thomas was dead. My heart seized just thinking about it. If anyone needed proof that Josh was innocent, they needed to have been there at that moment. Unfortunately, I couldn't replicate my memory and play it for the judge and jury.

I shoved myself through the opening, caring little for the thousand-dollar coat Kiran had given me, then headed for the road. When my feet hit asphalt, I felt home free, but then I saw it, out of the corner of my eye: the media camp. At least four vans, their satellite antennae looming up into the sky. Dozens and dozens of reporters, cameramen, and various lackeys. They were all grouped around the Easton gates as if they might open at any second, like the gates of Oz, and admit them to the story of their lives.

Holding my breath, I sprinted across the street and ducked into the forest of trees on the opposite side of the road. Under cover, I made my way through piles of wet leaves and over fallen branches, the wet permeating my sneakers and soaking my socks. As I passed the crowd, I saw a man in a blue jumper perched on a ladder, affixing a security camera to a pillar at the side of the gates. The reporters shouted questions up at him.

"How do the students feel, knowing the administration has allowed a murderer to walk among them for the past few months?"

"Is there a feeling of terror on campus?"

"What are the boy's friends like? Do you believe he had any accomplices?"

These people were evil. I could only imagine the salivating they would do at my feet if I stepped into the clear and offered up my story. But that wasn't me. I didn't want a spotlight. I just wanted my boyfriend back. Half a mile up the road, I emerged onto the street again and speed-walked toward town.

## accomplice

The windows along Main Street in the Village of Easton glowed with welcoming warmth. Even with the cold, the streets were bustling, pairs of ladies strolled the sidewalks, popping into shops as tiny bells tinkled overhead. A woman in a black suit whisked the priceless jewelry out of the display window of one store as I passed by, getting ready to close up for the evening. She caught my eye and smiled quizzically, probably amused by the odd sight of a teenage girl in a designer coat and a tattered gray sweatshirt hood pulled tightly around her face. I ducked my head, sidestepped a couple on their way into a swank steakhouse, and kept walking toward the center of town.

VILLAGE OF EASTON, ESTABLISHED 1840. That was what the plaque on the quaint brick police station read. I stepped through the doors into a small, well-lit office, bustling with uniformed officers and detectives. I had a feeling that this was not a normal scene. That the place was usually a lot less active than this. After all, they had a

murder suspect in custody. I bet no one had clocked out since they'd brought Josh through the doors. This was far too exciting for them.

Two people jumped up from chairs near the wall the moment they saw me. One shoved a tape recorder in my face.

"What's your name, Miss? Do you go to Easton Academy?"

There was a blur of movement and suddenly I was being roughly escorted toward the wall by Detective Hauer. He gave me an exasperated look and turned around, effectively blocking me from the reporters.

"Look, you two already have our official statement. You're gonna get nothing else here, so why don't you just go look under some other rock?"

The reporters scurried out, and I removed my hood and stood up straight. This was not going to be easy.

"What are you doing here, Reed?" the detective asked me. His blue shirt was wrinkled and the sleeves rolled up. There was some kind of tattoo on his forearm, but when he saw me looking, he crossed his arms over his chest.

"I want to see Josh," I told him, lifting my chin.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," he replied.

And just like that, there he was. Past Hauer's shoulder, Josh appeared. His hands were cuffed, and a woman with a severe bun and pointy features gripped his arm. They were all the way on the other side of the bullpen area, putting at least a dozen officers between him and me. It would take a miracle to get one word in, but

I had to try. I stepped aside, out from the shadow of Detective Hauer's bulk, and Josh's eyes lit up.

"Reed!"

Every cop in the place looked from him to me and back again.

"Josh! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine! I—"

"Get him out of here!" Detective Hauer bellowed, exasperated.

Josh's eyes filled with terror as the woman yanked on his arm. I took a few steps forward but was blocked by a security counter. He was just a few feet away, but I couldn't get near him. I could have clawed my way out of my skin.

"No. Wait a second!" Josh struggled away, took a step toward me. "Talk to Lewis-Hanneman and Blake! They saw me that night!" he shouted as the woman took hold of him again, this time with a lot more conviction. Lewis-Hanneman and Blake. The dean's assistant and Thomas's brother, Blake Pearson. I'd heard rumors. Was he saying the rumors were true? That they were *still* having an affair? "The art cemetery! Reed! Please! Get them to tell the truth!"

Then he was shoved through a door and the door was slammed.

That was all I needed. The slam popped a balloon inside of me, and I burst into tears.

"Come with me, Reed." The detective's voice was low and soothing and right in my ear. "Come on, kid. Come here."

My hands were over my face as I sobbed. I choked for breath. I felt his palm on my back, leading me somewhere. I fell into a chair without seeing it. Folded my arms on a table and cradled my head.

Soft words were spoken. A door opened and closed. A chair was pulled out. When I could finally breathe again, I lifted my head. My nose was so clogged I had to breathe through my mouth, and my face was tight from the tears.

"This is so wrong!" I wailed, throwing my arms out straight.

Detective Hauer was sitting across from me. He leaned forward and placed the tips of his fingers together. "Reed—"

"You can't keep him here! He didn't do anything!"

"Reed—"

"No! You have to let me talk to him," I begged. "Please!"

"Reed!"

His shout brought me up short. I sniffled and wiped under my nose with the end of my sleeve, shaking as I looked away. The detective pushed a cup of water toward me and nodded at it. I took a drink. Until that moment I hadn't realized how empty my body was.

"I'm very sorry that you're mixed up in all of this," the detective said calmly. "But you need to go back to school now. You need to try to get back to your life."

I snorted.

"Come on, you've got school. You've got your friends. Don't you have finals to study for?"

"Like any of that matters," I said.

He scooted closer to me. "You have to trust that we're doing our job. You have to trust that we're going to get this right. You need to stay out of it, Reed. For your own good."

"But . . . but what about what he just said?" I asked, sitting up.

"About Blake Pearson and the secretary from school. Were they there? Does he have an alibi?"

"We've looked into it," he said impatiently.

"And?"

"And I can't divulge any details of our investigation," he told me.

"But you have to tell me! I need to know what's—"

"We have our suspect, Reed," Hauer said through his teeth. "Don't go giving my superiors a reason to think he had an accomplice."

A cold finger of dread slid down my spine. He wasn't serious. He couldn't be.

"Now, we are going to get up and leave this office quietly," he said. "I'll drive you back to campus."

He glanced at the one window high in the wall. It was already pitch-black outside, courtesy of December.

"I don't need a ride. I'm sure it's perfectly safe," I told him, finally regaining control. I stood up and lifted my hood. "After all, you've got the big, bad killer all locked up, don't you?" I added sarcastically.

He sighed, puffing out his cheeks. Like he didn't know what to do with me. Well, he didn't have to do anything. I could take care of myself. I turned around and strode out of the room, proudly surprised that my knees didn't so much as quiver along the way.