To Nat, Jack and Gemma

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CIRCLE OF LIARS

KATE FRANCIS

USBORNE

PROLOGUE

The air in the bunker tasted bitter and dank. The kind of air you'd expect to take your last breath in, gasping for help as you tried to saw zip ties off your wrists with a rusty nail.

An arched, corrugated roof was lit by a string of bare bulbs, crudely nailed along the spine. The hum of a generator reverberated around and around, making the walls vibrate. It was not a place you'd want to spend time in.

But someone obviously had.

At one end there was a small kitchenette stocked with packets of ramen and a Nespresso machine. A camping toilet was discreetly tucked behind a plastic curtain; next to this stood an army cot, with weights and a chin-up bar set out underneath in a tidy row.

Further down, an eerie blue glow lit up the wall. A makeshift desk was propped in front of a bank of sophisticated monitors. The screens were all on, lit with colourful images of empty stretches of desert, a cluster of pink buildings, dark rooms. The screen in the centre showed a vintage road sign, winking on and off, over and over, its letters stark against a sweeping, empty skyline: *Motel Loba, No Vacancy*.

Eyes on everything. Nothing moved, yet.

A cork board hung behind the desk. Eight photos were pinned on it next to a crumpled twenty-dollar bill – school photos with a traditional green backdrop. Eight smiling faces, brimming with self-consciousness, heads cocked, posing for the camera. Attractive and well-groomed – these weren't kids; they were young adults, with one foot already out of the door of high school, ready to take on the world. Their futures ahead of them.

A small red light flashed on one of the monitors. There was movement in the corner of the screen. A bus pulled into view, caught in a sunset glow, slowing to a stop close to the flashing sign. The door opened and a figure slouched out, followed by another, then another. Teenagers, laughing, joking around, dragging bags and backpacks behind them. Chatting and jostling, oblivious.

Their photos on the wall watched them silently, smiling into the air; unable to speak, unable to warn themselves not to get off the bus. To go back to where they'd come from. To run before it was too late.

One by one they came, moving, spreading across the monitors, across the desert, into the motel. With each step, red lights flickered on, motion detectors woke up, cameras caught them. Silently tracking everything.

A loud creak cut through the heavy air.

A lone figure stood up and moved out of the shadows where they had been sitting – watching. The blue light from the monitors caught the edge of their dark clothes, momentarily outlining them; well-built, average height, a grey hoodie pulled low over their face.

Stepping close to the desk, the figure studied the screens intently, identifying each of the kids, counting them off against the photos on the wall. Everyone accounted for. All present.

Taking a deep breath, they sank into the desk chair. So, this was it. All these long months – all the planning and preparation had led to this moment. It was here at last. The first move had been made, and so far, everything was going according to plan.

After three hundred and sixty-four days, it was finally time.

Payback.



1 | Ana

Three hundred and sixty-four days.

Technically it was three hundred and sixty-three days since the hospital had declared Danny Reyes dead, though they were wrong. His heart might have kept going for an extra day, pushed along by all the machines at his bedside, but he was already gone.

Ana Reyes knew it; she'd felt the exact moment her twin brother had let go, curled up on the floor of the school locker room. Too much pain to bear, too little left to cling to. A softening – a gentle catch at the top of his breath, then gone. So quickly. So easily.

That was three hundred and sixty-four days ago, and tomorrow it would be a year.

Happy fucking anniversary.

Ana pulled her headphones down and stretched her arms out, shaking off the stiffness from the long bus ride. She looked around at her home for the next three days.

A vintage motel sign loomed over her, flickering on and off, red then yellow, the garish lights clashing starkly with the desert sunset sky.

Welcome to the Motel Loba.

The run-down old motel had obviously seen better days, if not better decades.

Two wings of baby-pink rooms stretched out on either side of a cracked asphalt parking lot with a cluster of lonely outbuildings scattered around behind. A lone palm tree stood sentinel over a fenced-off pool area in the middle of the lot. There were no cars, no people, no signs of life – only flat empty desert on all sides, the road they had arrived on ending just feet from the sign. Red dust coated every surface, weeds sprouted from the cracks. It had a post-apocalyptic appearance; all it needed was a zombie on the hunt for a busload of fresh meat.

Ana sighed.

The fresh meat had arrived ten minutes ago: seven restless high schoolers, now spread around the motel, loudly taking over the place as though they owned it. The whining had started before the bus even pulled into the parking lot. It was certainly not the fancy hotel they'd been promised in the invitation.

But she didn't mind. It was as good as anywhere.

There was no good place to commemorate the worst day of your life. The darkness travelled with her, now and for ever. The location didn't matter. Even home, the place where she had once felt safe and happy, was now heavy with pain and loss. The memories were everywhere – at the yellow kitchen table, in the shared bedroom, the empty bed – dark blue sheets untouched. A hollowness haunted her mother's eyes, the rift between them cutting through their small life together. The shared understanding that in some sick, karmic twist, the better twin had died. A silently acknowledged truth that it should have been her.

At least here, in the ass-end of nowhere, she could do the one

thing that mattered most. She could give her mother space to mourn her dead son, without having to look at her living daughter.

Ana took a deep breath.

The desert air tasted different somehow, salt and sage. A wind was blowing across the darkening plains, whipping up small bits of sand and dirt, prickling the skin on her legs. A circle of light from the sign illuminated the ground at her feet, flashing on and off, like a police car warning her to get out of the way.

Time to check in – she couldn't hide out here for ever. It was only three days, she reminded herself. How bad could it be?

Hoisting her duffel bag onto her back, Ana turned her back on the desert and headed in the direction of the north wing of the motel and a dusty window with a red neon sign that optimistically declared:

REC P ION

"It's a shithole!"

Ana knew the voice instantly – she'd spent the last eight hours on the bus trying to avoid listening to it. Two figures were standing by the bus, their raised voices echoing across the empty parking lot. Keeping her distance, Ana watched them warily. She really didn't need to get involved in one of Ellis's dramas.

Ellis Locke was well over six feet of rock-hard, point-guard muscle and fancied himself the boss of St Francis High's senior class. He was standing next to the doorway, looming over the diminutive bus driver.

"This is meant to be a trip to a *luxury* desert retreat," Ellis shouted, thrusting a small black card in the driver's face. "Look at

the fucking invite. This place is nothing like the photo. Where's the spa? Where are the yoga yurts and the stables? It doesn't even have cell reception!"

The driver, a short, middle-aged man with a stained grey uniform that stretched tightly in all the wrong places, did not seem impressed at being shouted at by someone young enough to be his grandkid.

"Sorry, kiddo. This *shithole*, as you call it, is where y'all are stayin' for the next three nights."

"Are you kidding me? This trip was the top prize in our school raffle. The *top* prize. Last year they went to Palm fucking Springs. *Does this look like Palm Springs?* We are clearly in the wrong place."

The driver pulled a rolled-up sheet of paper out of his back pocket and thrust it in front of Ellis, jabbing his finger at the itinerary.

"Look. It's right here, see? Motel Loba. Here's the map. I'm paid to bring y'all right here, and that's what I done. You got a problem with that, you take it up with the school."

"How am I supposed to do that, genius? We don't have *fucking cell*!" Ellis snapped in his cocksure, LA-royalty accent. He snatched the itinerary out of the driver's hands and pored over the words furiously. Not finding anything to help his case, he flicked the older man's name tag dismissively. "All right – well, Benny, is it? There has clearly been a huge mistake. This place is not acceptable. You need to get on that radio of yours and find us alternative accommodation immediately. Do you understand?"

Benny hiked up his belt and pulled himself up to his full, unimpressive height.

"Whad'ya think this is? The nineties? I don't have a radio, kid. I use a phone same as everyone else. You got no effing cell – I got no

effing cell." Benny chuckled loudly, cascading into a hacking smoker's cough.

Ana walked on, suppressing the urge to smile. At least Benny the bus driver was giving as good as he got. Ellis was on one of his master-of-the-universe benders and unlikely to stop until he got what he wanted. No question, Ellis could be a spoiled brat, but a small part of Ana rooted for him. Yes, he was an asshole *and* rich *and* entitled.

But Danny had loved him. That counted for something.

The beautiful people had taken over the *rec p ion* – Danny's friends. They were sheltering from the end-of-day heat in the shade of the old motel building.

Jade Clark was posing on a worn and cracked pink pleather sofa, happily taking snaps, while her boyfriend, Jax Patel, pranced around in front of her, phone held high on the search for bars. Their designer bags and fabulous on-brand clothes were at odds with their shabby, dated surroundings, like a Vogue photo shoot in a dumpster.

Alex Cabrera was sitting by the window, his guitar propped next to him. He glanced up at the door when Ana walked in, peering at her through a curtain of floppy black hair. He looked off somehow – his usually tan skin was unnaturally pale.

Carsick. Ana knew it. She knew him. Like the back of her own hand.

At least – she used to. Before.

She turned away, shutting down the memories before they could take hold, and walked over to the reception desk.

Any hope of a speedy check-in faded as she looked around.

Something was off about this whole place. The desk was a relic from the eighties – floral, pink laminate with dark wood panelling. There were Christmas decorations hanging from the yellowed ceiling tiles over the counter, even though it was April; a thick layer of dust covered every surface. Behind the counter, a cracked glass door opened onto what looked like a deserted office.

A hand-scrawled message on a chalkboard behind the desk read:

LEFT FOR FAMILY EMERGENCY –
CHECK YOURSELF IN

Ana wondered when the emergency had happened. 1985? There was no way this was still a functioning motel.

"Don't bother checking in. There's no one here. It's like completely deserted." Jade glanced up at Ana. "We're obviously in the wrong place. Ellis went to sort it out with the driver." She sighed, a long, world-weary sigh and examined her nails. Jade had perfected the art of sounding bored at all times. Enthusiasm was for lesser mortals.

"No cell in here either," Jax muttered, waving his phone at Jade. "This whole place is a total dead zone."

"Seriously? Can you even call yourself a motel if you don't have Wi-Fi? Is that legal?" Jade monotoned. She sat up, her perfectly straightened hair swinging behind her in a glorious golden arc. "What is taking Ellis so long? Low key, I need a shower so badly."

"Don't worry, babe." Jax threw her one of his easy smiles. "Ellis said he's gonna sort it. I reckon we'll be leaving soon enough." He cocked his adorable head and grinned at his phone camera. "So, hey, guys, I'm in this creepy, abandoned motel…"

Jade rolled her eyes, and looked around for another source of amusement, locking in on Alex.

"I'm so bored. Play something for me, Alex," she cajoled, flopping forward onto the sofa, draping herself across the length of it.

Ana felt a flash of something uncomfortable. She hated that Alex had crossed to the dark side, that he was one of the popular kids now, invited to all the hottest parties, sitting with the cool crowd at lunch. It wasn't the Alex she knew. The kind, gentle boy from the apartment next to hers.

Danny's best friend.

"If we're gonna be stuck here, I need cheering up." Jade peeked at Alex over the back of the sofa, pouting like a toddler in a shopping cart. "Pleeeease."

Say no, Ana willed him. *Tell her you're carsick. Just tell her no.* She didn't want to watch Alex playing for Jade Clark, performing like he was the paid entertainment.

Alex looked miserable, but he reached for his guitar case. His eyes flicked up for the briefest moment, catching Ana.

She swallowed and looked away, her cheeks flushing. It felt as though they were still at school; the entire air space was dominated by the St Francis royals. They had staked their entitled claim to this trip already – to the bus, to the motel…to Alex – pushing everyone else to the edges. Same old, same old.

"I'm, er…just going to see if there's a landline…or something…" Ana mumbled to no one in particular, heading for the small office. "In case we need to call someone…about the mix-up…or whatever…"

Anything to get out of there.

* * *

The office looked just as abandoned as the reception area. Dust motes floated lazily in the stale air, catching strips of evening light through the blinds before settling on the rows of filing cabinets that lined the walls.

Ana scanned the room but there wasn't much to see. Apart from a boxy, outdated computer on the desk, it was pretty much empty, with a thick layer of dust on every surface. Ana walked over to the desk. If there was ethernet, at least they could email the school. She tapped on the old keyboard, then reached around to switch the monitor on, hoping for signs of life, but nothing happened.

Musical notes drifted through from the reception. Chords. Alex was tuning up, getting ready to amuse Jade. Ana wished she'd shut the door behind her.

Where the hell is Raya? she thought irritably. There were seven of them on this trip, but Raya Mori was the only one she was remotely close to. At least, she had been before the fire – they had barely spent any time together this past year – it had just been too messy, too sad. As soon as they'd arrived, Raya had predictably disappeared. No doubt she was smoking weed behind some random building with Caden Loftus, St Francis High's resident drug dealer. They were probably making up for lost time and getting their vacation started with a bang. This trip was awkward enough as it was; if her only friend was going to be missing in action the whole time, it was going to suck.

Sighing, Ana turned to leave, when she noticed a small pink rectangle on the corner of the desk. She picked it up; it was an envelope addressed to *St Francis High*.

So, they *were* expected.

For a moment she was tempted to rip the envelope open, but then thought better of it. She would let Ellis and the others deal with it. They were the ones who had a problem with staying – they could sort it out. All she wanted was to keep her head down and stay below the radar for the next three days. She would give it to them, then go dig out Raya from whichever hole she was hiding in.

As she walked back into the reception, she was relieved to see that Jade had lost interest in Alex and was staring sadly at her useless phone. Jax was squatting on the vintage linoleum floor, taking artful photos. Alex glanced over, guitar balanced lightly on his knee.

"I, er…I found this in the office," Ana said, holding up the envelope. No one responded. "It's a letter or something, addressed to us. I guess we're in the right place after all?" This made the others look up.

"Did you open it?" Jade looked mildly interested, for the first time. She rolled herself lazily off the sofa and walked over. "So, what does it say?"

"I didn't open it. I ju—"

Ana never finished the sentence.

A brilliant flash of white light hit first, almost immediately followed by a deafening boom that rocked the building to its foundation. The windows shuddered, the door smacked open; clouds of dust and plaster fell from the ceiling.

Ana flinched and dropped to the floor beneath the reception desk, instinctively burying her head in her hands.

For several moments she didn't dare move – her mind was reeling. What had just happened? She listened, holding her breath as dust sank heavily around her, settling on the floor, her clothes. Her heart was beating wildly.

What had just happened?

A cough snapped her out of it.

Alex. She scrambled to her feet, looking around, finding him. He was on the floor by the window, dusting himself off. Their eyes met – there was shock in his expression, and something else. Something familiar. Just like a year ago. *It was happening again.*

That look was all it took – as though someone had shaken her hard, waking her up. Instantly all senses were firing.

Alex was okay. She could see Jade and Jax moving around, coughing. The reception was still standing, still intact. The explosion had come from outside, from the parking lot.

She ran around the desk and out through the open door, Alex following close behind. The desert air pulsed with heat as they turned to face an immense cloud of black smoke towering over their heads. Underneath they could just make out a burning shell of twisted metal, flames licking through the frame.

The breath locked in Ana's throat as she stood, watching the fire crackle, consuming everything. Alex moved next to her. Slowly she turned to look at him, her shock mirrored in his eyes.

They both knew what this meant. Their bus was gone. Their ride home was gone.

Over their heads, the road sign winked at them through the thick smoke – red and yellow lights catching the edges of the dark cloud. On and off. Over and over. Never-ending.

Welcome to the Motel Loba. No vacancy. Enjoy your stay…