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DEVIL'S EYE

THE CUT

TO NORTHERN TRAILS
AND THE CUT

MAIN TRAIL

POPULAR
SWIMMING SPOTS

ARCH

LAKE

NOW

Start with this, with a bruise-blue sky. Then the clouds gathered low on the horizon, their bellies bloodshot with sunset. And last, the billboard frame and the picture stretched across it: three girls wearing summer smiles. Edie, Jane, and Luce. My best friends, my favorites. Salt-cedar's, too, now that they're gone.

For the first few days after they put the billboard up, there was almost always someone here in its shadow. Praying, sometimes, or leaving behind wildflower bouquets. Today it's just me, heat rippling off the road as I balance astride my bike. I came to say goodbye. To take a moment for the four of us before it's all lit candles and bullshit speeches down at the vigil.

"You'd hate it," I whisper to them. The crowds, the

noise. The marina's too busy to launch from. And you need reservations at Bullfrog's now; tourists steal our table every night.

I know some people are happy about it. It's the most activity the town has seen in years. Finally, Saltcedar looks like the pictures in those brochures—sunburned teenagers in life jackets, little kids diving off the backs of houseboats while their parents watch from the upper decks, drinks in hand. But these people don't care that the lake is going dry. They don't care that there's a half-built neighborhood abandoned at the end of my street. They just care that a year ago exactly, my best friends wandered into the dark and let Saltcedar Canyon swallow them whole.

A shaft of sunlight sneaks past the corner of the billboard. I lift a hand to block it. Blink hard as the gas station beyond swims into focus. Through the window, I can see Glen at the register, his face lit up red by the Budweiser sign on the wall. He's wearing one of the T-shirts that the vigil volunteers have been handing out all week. Same picture as the billboard printed across his chest, same text underneath: Bring Them Home. He's probably about to close up and head down to the lake. I'd better hurry, or I'll be one of the last to arrive.

I kick off on my bike. Listen to the crunch of grit under the tires. Glance back at my street, dotted with prefab houses, then keep straight toward the rest of town. Coast

easy and free down the hill, eyes drifting shut. If I listen hard, I can feel the girls with me, the air curving around their bodies. They're everywhere. In the lodge lobby, Jane waving as the elevator doors close between her and us. On my front steps, Edie's head bent over her phone as she waits for me to do up my laces. At the water's edge, Luce pointing toward the canyon arch.

Somewhere behind me, a car engine rumbles, getting closer. I swing to the side and pedal harder. None of those memories will count for much if I'm late.

The lodge is off to the right, parking lot already almost full with out-of-state plates. A man I don't recognize is waiting near the entrance next to a table stacked high with candles. I ignore the one he holds out to me. Keep going, slip between two pickups toward the far side of the lot where Mr. and Mrs. Bristow are standing, sweat patches stark against their white vigil T-shirts.

It's been a while since I've seen Jane's parents in person, but some things haven't changed. The sunscreen on Mr. Bristow's forehead, not quite rubbed in. The glint of Mrs. Bristow's wedding ring as she twists it absently around her knuckle. She's got her hair pulled back—heavy and dark like her daughter's. Jane used to lie out in the boat as we drifted, her hair spread long and gleaming over Luce's lap. Gathering sunlight in its strands until it was too hot to touch.

I leave my bike leaning against somebody's back bumper. Wipe my clammy palms dry on my shorts before I close the last gap between me and Jane's parents. "Hi," I say, skirting another group of volunteers. "Sorry, I know I'm late."

Mr. Bristow sees me first. "Not at all," he says, and waves me closer. "You're right on time."

Next to him, Mrs. Bristow doesn't look up. She's poring over a clipboard, her mouth moving silently as she reads something off it. Her speech for the vigil, maybe. Is she nervous? Sure, there'll be cameras there, reporters and news trucks, but you'd think she'd be used to that after the press tour she and her husband have done on Jane's behalf.

Mr. Bristow nudges her. "Carrie? Carrie, it's Jane's friend."

"Hmm?" She meets my eyes, and for a moment I think she doesn't recognize me, but then she blinks, seems to wake from a long midnight. "Oh, Nan. You're here."

She wraps me up in a hug. I lean in, let her tuck my head against her neck the way she might if I were Jane. Is she remembering the same thing I am? Six or seven summers back, me waiting in the shade with my dad to meet Mom after her shift at the lodge front desk. Jane climbing out of the Bristows' rental SUV, her mother's words carrying across the pavement: "See, there's a girl your age."

Jane waved at me then. It took me days to work up the nerve to wave back.

"It's good to see you, sweetheart," she says as she releases me. "Gosh, were you this tall last summer?"

"I think so." I smile uneasily. She's doing her best to seem normal, but her eyes are red and her voice is hoarse. It's painfully obvious she's been crying. I look away, gesture to the crowd. "This is all . . . There's so many people here for them. You must be really pleased."

"Of course," Mr. Bristow says. "It's a testament to the girls."

"Is there anything you need?" Mrs. Bristow asks, all but interrupting him. There's a hunger in her stare, like she wishes she hadn't let go of me. "We have water and sunblock over by the lodge entrance, and— Oh, you need a T-shirt." She flags down a passing volunteer. "Can we get Nan a shirt? What size are you, honey? A medium? Let's get you a medium, yeah."

Moments later a T-shirt is thrust into my hands, so fresh out of the box that the creases where it was folded are still sharp. I crumple it up against my ribs. Make sure I can't see any of the girls' faces.

"Thanks," I say. "I'll change before the marina."

"Speaking of," Mr. Bristow interjects, "we should head down. The Gales are already there."

I'm not surprised they aren't here with the Bristows.

Edie's parents used to get along so well with Jane's. In those first few months after the girls disappeared, they did everything as a quartet—every interview, every press conference. But Saltcedar rich isn't Salt Lake City rich. Before long, it was only the Bristows flying to New York and LA. Only the Bristows appearing on national TV, only Jane that anyone was talking about. I don't think the Gales would ever admit to being angry, but they don't have to; everybody knows they are anyway.

Still, it could be worse. At least they tried. Luce's dad couldn't even do that.

"What about Mr. Allard?" I ask. "Is he here?"

Mrs. Bristow's smile goes stiff, her eyes darting to the crowd milling around us. "Kent was invited," she says, too politely. "I'm not sure he'll be able to make it, though."

I think we're all hoping he won't. Whenever Kent Allard shows up, he brings trouble with him. Shouting, crying. Stories and ghosts and the smell of alcohol.

I guess I understand it. Luce's mom left spring of last year, and then Luce disappeared that summer. Both Allard women gone by the time the cold came, and Kent so ruined by it that even the police left him alone after a while.

Mr. Bristow's hand lands on my shoulder for a second, startling me. "What about your parents, Nan? I don't think I've seen them yet."

"My mom's working," I say. She'll be inside at the

lodge's front desk, waiting for the parking lot to empty out before she comes down to the lake. "I'm not sure if my dad will make it. He said he'll try, but he might have to cover someone's shift."

Dad works three hours away in Bryce, just like half the people in this town. He's a ranger with the national park—so was Luce's dad, until they fired him last spring—and he's home so rarely that I don't always recognize his truck in the driveway.

"Well," Mrs. Bristow says, "tell your mom to take two candles. She can light one for him if he's running late."

"I'm sure she will." I smile, aiming for reassuring. "Don't worry. Everything's gonna be great. They'll love it."

For a moment we lock eyes, and I know neither of us is sure exactly who I mean. Her mouth opens, a question, maybe, taking shape, but a volunteer calls to her, waving her over.

"I'm sorry, Nan. If you'll excuse us?"

I barely have time to nod before she and Mr. Bristow are heading for the lot entrance. A group of volunteers parts to let them pass. Silence carried with them, but it only lasts a moment before the noise starts up again. People everywhere, checking lists, carrying boxes, and all the while, wearing those damn T-shirts. No matter where I turn, there they are—Edie, Luce, and Jane. Their awful, empty smiles.

I look down at the T-shirt Mrs. Bristow gave me. I should duck into the lodge bathroom and slip it on. Leave the shirt I'm wearing in my mom's staff locker, go down to the beach dressed like everyone else. Light my candle and send my little paper boat out onto the water.

But I can't. When I got up this morning, there wasn't any choice. I put on cutoffs, sandals, and one of my dad's old button-ups hanging open over my bathing suit. Just like what I was wearing the day the girls disappeared, to make sure they recognize me when I go to say goodbye.

I drop the shirt in a box of spares on my way out of the parking lot. Back out to the road, the lake spread below. Already the shore is thick with onlookers. I can hear music playing, faint on the wind. Jane's favorite song. I remember she sang it that day, in the canyon. Stood there by the water's edge with her eyes closed as her voice echoed off the stone. If I went back, would I hear it still? Would I find them all there waiting for me?

Is that what you want? a voice like Luce's whispers in my head.

I lift my chin, let the wind slice across my neck. Of course, I tell her. I miss you. I love you all so much.

She laughs, low and long, and as I start down toward the lake, I hear her answer. Yeah, right, she says. Yeah fucking right.