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Beth IS DEAD

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For my sisters

CHAPTER ONE



(NOW)

On the first morning of a new year, Beth is not in her bed.

From the hallway, I peer into her room, and my heart moves to my throat. Sunlight falls on her pillow, dust suspended in the air. Beth should be here, tucked under her quilt, chest rising and falling, but there's only a dent in her mattress.

I stand on tiptoe and sigh a little breath of relief. Amy's not here either, the top bunk unmade, blankets in a heap. She's younger than Beth by about two years and ten thousand brain cells, but I feel better knowing they're together. This isn't the first time Amy's spent the entire night at Sallie Gardiner's annual New Year's Eve party.

Last year she passed out in Sallie's claw-foot tub—wouldn't it be nice to have a claw-foot tub?—until Mom showed up the next morning and dragged her to the car. Embarrassing, to say the least.

It's hard to believe she'd do it again after the way Mom worried, but that's Amy.

I text her, and her alone, because I know this isn't Beth's fault.

Where are you???

Three dots appear, but after a second of rippling, they stop.

I swear, if Mom wakes up to these empty bunks, I'll wrestle Amy to the ground. Mom doesn't deserve that kind of stress, especially not after a New Year's Eve night shift at the hospital—stomachs pumped, fingers blown off by misfired fireworks.

I text Amy again.

If you're not home before Mom's up . . .

I leave it at that, an open threat, and return to my room to keep working on my manuscript. I meant to stay up all night, but I've been crashing lately, snoring on my desk when I can't keep my eyes open any longer. I don't believe in writer's block—my creativity is a constant, unstoppable force—but right now my thoughts are moving like wet concrete.

I open my notebook to the page that acted as my pillow last night. It's smudged, but I can still make out the last of my scribbles.

I need a better idea. Something good enough to convince my editor that she didn't make a mistake by offering me a book deal. I rev myself up to start working again, when the back staircase creaks.

At once I jump up from my desk, a rush of relief. "Okay, next time you two want to pull an all-nighter, maybe you can shoot me a—"

Amy stares back at me, hunched and alone. At fifteen,

she's still flat-chested and skinny, with blond hair cut to her shoulders and streaked pink.

"Keep it down," she whispers.

"Where's—"

"Seriously, shut up. Mom's door is wide open." She eases up the final step and sheds her coat, revealing the skintight dress she wore last night. As she enters the bunk room, she furrows her brow. "Where's Beth?"

I cross the hallway, a bite in my voice. "You tell me."

Amy looks stunned, slow to process. "She's not home?"

"Does it look like she's home?"

"Shit," she exhales. "Mom's going to kill me."

I picture our doe-eyed sister alone at Sallie's party, passed out on one of the Gardiners' leather couches, too drunk to drive—or even walk—home. "You're worried about Mom? What about Beth?"

Amy whips out her phone to call our sister, but it goes straight to voicemail. "I'll try Sallie. She was with Beth when I left last night."

"Last night? You left last *night*?"

Amy grips her phone between her shoulder and her ear so she can search a pile of clothes that has gathered on the floor.

I duck to interrupt. "Where the hell did you go?"

"I stayed with . . ." She pauses, and I can't tell if she's listening to Sallie's voicemail message or searching for an answer. "Florence. Yeah, I stayed with Florence."

I look at her sideways.

Amy and our cousin, Florence, are a matching set. Both

of them blond, attached at the hip, but if they'd left the party together, they would've crashed here. Florence lives in a house with rules. Not the kind of rules that Mom enforces—be thoughtful, clean up after yourself—but the tightfisted kind that make you want to break things. Strict curfew, no makeup, no dating until college. "You went to Aunt Mary's after midnight?"

"We snuck in," says Amy, but her cheeks flush pink.

"And you left Beth alone?"

She finds a hoodie, tugs it over her head. "She's my big sister. I'm not her babysitter."

"She doesn't party like you do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Amy knows good and well what it means. Beth doesn't take stupid risks the way she does. Doesn't ruin things the way she does. Beth wouldn't stay out all night unless something happened—especially now. In just a few short days, she leaves for boarding school, and she has a million things to do before we send her off.

"Come on," I say. "Let's go find her."

"No." Amy beats me to my keys, holds them behind her back. "We'll wake Mom."

She's not wrong. My army-green Jeep has an old, grimy engine that sometimes takes three, four rattling tries to get going. "You expect me to walk?" I ask.

"The Gardiners' house isn't that far."

I glance back at my writing, a mess of half-baked ideas. This excursion will waste twenty minutes at the very least, but I'm the oldest sister now. That's what Meg said when she went to college. Distractions come with the territory.

"Fine," I huff. "But we're taking the shortcut."

Amy hates taking the shortcut from our neighborhood to Sallie's, up a steep bridge and through the park. I think it reminds her of Dad, who's been away for six months and thirteen days (not that anyone's counting). When we were little, he'd take us to the park to stargaze, and I'll admit, it hurts to remember those moments—but the park's our quickest shortcut by at least a mile.

Amy storms ahead of me, leads me into the cold. When the wind blows, she tightens her arms across her chest, but her teeth chatter like her body's too exhausted to keep warm. Like she didn't rest at all last night.

As we trudge toward the end of the block, Laurie's house looms overhead. He's the only kid in town who lives in a modern home instead of an old colonial, the result of his grandmother having just enough money and influence to sway the historical society into allowing her to build new.

His room looks dark, and I figure he must be sleeping. He and I have forgone Sallie's party since we met there freshman year, because both of us hate that sort of thing, but he usually stays up well past midnight toasting the New Year with his grandmother. "She's the best company," he always says.

Out of nowhere, Amy stops and we collide.

My voice comes out on a forced exhale. "What're you—"

"Jo." She gazes into the distance, squatting for a better view up the street. "What is that?"

I shove past her, less than amused. "I know you hate the shortcut, but this is getting a little—"

"Jo, wait." She tugs my coat hard and stares at the hill next to Laurie's house, a steep luge of rocks and tree roots. "I thought I saw . . ." Without warning, she charges ahead, tearing through brush and snow.

"Amy!" I yell.

But she keeps going, forging up the hill beside the bridge.

"Amy, stop!"

She ventures into the trees, takes an uncharted path up the steepest rocks.

"You're going to fall," I say.

She stops at the base of an old gnarly tree, and her phone slips from her hand, her knees bending ever so slightly, as if the earth is shifting beneath her.

I draw a shaky breath. "Come down from there."

But just then she lets out a sound that I'll never forget as long as I live. Her voice breaks from her chest, brittle and crumbling. "Beth?"

That single syllable echoes down the street, and all other sound falls away. Snow clings to the air for a moment, unmoving.

Amy screams. "Jo!" She grips her knees, shuddering. "Jo!"

Without a thought, I run, and unlike Amy, I don't stop, only slow. The sight at the base of the tree is so unimaginable that I'm pulled toward it.

At first it's like a poem that doesn't make sense until you've read it a few times.

Beth is lying in the snow. And the snow is red. And the red isn't just pooled around her but seeping from her. And her eyes are open, but behind them, she's gone.