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shallow

Death.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. The only two people I had ever known who had died had died young. Had died beautiful. Had died horrifying, gruesome deaths.

Had died because of me.

Wait. Stop. No.

Not because of me. I couldn't think that way. Not without going insane. Thomas had died because Ariana was psychotic. Cheyenne had died because she was disturbed. It was not my fault. Not mine.

So why couldn't I help thinking that if I had never come to Easton Academy, they would both still be alive? Walking around this campus right now. Laughing. Flirting. Living. Cheyenne had said as much in the e-mail she'd sent me the night she died.

Ignore the note. You did this to me. You ruined my life.

Dead. Because of me.

"Crummy day," Constance Talbot said, hugging her tweed coat closer to herself as the wind whipped her red hair back from her face. The cold September sky above was gray, muddled, threatening rain as we crossed the quad at the center of the Easton Academy campus, together with our Billings housemates. Saturday it had been seventy-five degrees. Now, two days later, it was fifty-five. Had to love that temperamental New England weather. Constance cuddled her chubby, freckled cheeks into her collar and stared at the cobblestone path to the dining hall. At times like this I could easily imagine what she had looked like as a child. Precious. Vulnerable. Innocent.

"I'm glad my coat arrived on Saturday," Sabine DuLac said. Her new coat, befitting her unique style, was white and light blue brocade with old-fashioned cut-glass buttons. It contrasted beautifully with her dark hair and light brown skin. "It was cold in Boston," she added.

Right. Sabine had visited her sister in Boston over the weekend. I had completely forgotten to ask her how it had gone—how her sister was. Some friend I was. I'd have to remember to ask her later.

"It was freezing here, too. And we ended up spending a lot of time outside the dorm," Constance said.

"Because it was too depressing?" I asked.

We had, after all, only found Cheyenne's body on Saturday morning. Just two days ago. I could understand why everyone might be avoiding Billings House. Like Sabine, I had left campus and spent the weekend in New York with my boyfriend, Josh Hollis. I hadn't wanted to come back, but I'd had no choice. Billings was my home. These

girls, most of whom were now gathered around me for warmth as we walked to breakfast, were like my family. For better or worse.

"Well, that, and the cops were all over the place," Tiffany Goulbourne said as she checked some setting on her tiny digital camera. "Going through Cheyenne's stuff, taking pictures of her room . . ."

"Why?" I asked. I had arrived home from the city late the night before and had yet to hear any of this.

"To confirm it was a suicide," Tiffany said, looking ill. Her long white coat blew open and billowed out behind her, but she didn't even seem to notice. She was one of those girls who was able to look perfect whether it was ten thousand degrees and humid or windy and pelting sleet. Tall and ebony-skinned with short-cropped black hair and big brown eyes, she had the cheekbones of a supermodel but preferred to spend her time behind the camera rather than in front of it, a quirk that almost none of the Billings Girls could understand. "Guess after last year they're being cautious. Want to make sure there's no question."

"They even asked us about you, Reed," Astrid Chou said in her cool British accent, her short black hair blowing straight up in the back. "About your row with Cheyenne."

"What?" I blurted, my heart pounding. "They don't think I—"

"No! No," Astrid said, first adamantly, then comfortingly. She put her hand on my arm and looked at me with her steady dark eyes. Astrid was a new transfer this year, but I had met her last December at Cheyenne's Christmas party in Litchfield. For a while I had thought she and Cheyenne were BFFs, but it had turned out that Astrid was more of a kindred spirit than I had thought. Like me, she hadn't

condoned Cheyenne's crazy hazing tactics or her arbitrary ostracizing of some of the other new Billings Girls. I had a feeling she could turn out to be a great friend. Plus, her quirky style and honest, blunt sense of humor were both welcome anomalies in Billings.

"We told them it was just a normal fight between girls," Tiffany clarified. "Nothing weird. Happens all the time. Of course they don't think that you had anything to do with anything."

"They just had to ask," Sabine added. "It's their job."

Even in the face of all this logic, I had to stop. My heart was pounding in my very eyes. It was a suicide. A suicide. I had proof. I had her second suicide note on my computer—not that I was eager to share that with my friends or the police. And okay, according to that second note, which Cheyenne had e-mailed only to me, it had been my fault. But I hadn't actually *killed* her. This was insane.

As my closer friends paused around me, waiting for me to recover from my aneurysm, a few of the other Billings Girls rushed ahead to get out of the cold.

"Reed, no one thinks you had anything to do with this," Constance said. "Don't worry."

I swallowed hard. "But they actually thought she might have been . . ." I couldn't even say the word. Not again. Not again.

Tiffany swallowed and pressed her full lips together. "I guess they thought maybe."

I couldn't move. Murdered? They had thought Cheyenne might have been murdered? But why? What would make them think someone would want her dead? Besides me, of course. And our

argument. But that hadn't been my fault. She had tried to steal my boyfriend.

The distinctly metallic rev of a power saw cut through the air. Everyone on the quad paused. A flock of birds took flight from a nearby oak, squawking like mad and scattering bright orange leaves all over the grass. Suddenly my heart was in my throat. I wondered how long it would be before I felt safe on campus again.

"What the hell was that?" Tiffany asked. She lifted her camera to capture a shot of the fleeing birds, never missing an opportunity to create art.

There was already a crowd of students gathered around the propped-open back door to Mitchell Hall, a central building just to the north of the dining hall, which housed the Great Room, several meeting rooms, and the art cemetery, among other things. We all hurried forward. There wasn't much that happened at Easton Academy that the Billings Girls didn't know about first. What was going on?

A few people slipped through the back door and down the wide hall, following the sounds of pounding and sawing and shouting, but I hesitated at the threshold. The windows to the art cemetery were right there. My very proximity to them made my blood curdle.

Josh and Cheyenne. Josh and Cheyenne. Josh and—

"Reed? Come on!"

Rose Sakowitz grabbed my hand and practically yanked my arm out of its socket. She was freakishly strong for someone so petite. But then, she did spend much of her free time in the state-of-the-art Easton gym or competing on the tennis team. I averted my eyes

from the art cemetery door and focused on her bouncing red curls as we followed the crowd down the hall. To the left were the double doors that led to the Great Room. To the right was the large, octagonal solarium with its huge windows that overlooked the perfectly manicured Easton grounds. The room was peppered with leather couches and lined with packed mahogany bookshelves, potted plants, and Oriental carpets. It was supposed to be a place for students to gather and mingle, but there was no television or pool table or any other form of amusement, aside from the literary classics, and I had never known anyone to hang out there. Until now. Half the student body seemed to be gathered in the center of the room—where all the furniture was covered in plastic—gaping at the seven construction workers pounding away near the back wall.

"What's this all about?" Tiffany asked, moving forward to snap a few pictures.

"You guys haven't heard?" Missy Thurber asked, bringing up the rear.

"Heard what?" I asked.

Missy gave me her patented smirk and lifted her nose so high in the air I was pretty sure I could see her tonsils through those massive nostrils of hers. "Amberly Carmichael. She goes here now," she said, brushing her thick blond braid behind her shoulders.

"No way," Constance said.

"How did we not know this?" Tiffany asked.

"Who is Amberly Carmichael?" I asked.

They all laughed and Missy rolled her eyes. She pretty much

lived to roll her eyes at me. "Amberly Carmichael—of the Seattle Carmichaels?" she said. "Reed, come on. Even you must know who she is."

Missy clucked her tongue. I was starting to wonder what would happen if I shoved my fingers up her nose and pulled.

"Amberly's father is Dustin Carmichael. Founder and CEO of Coffee Carma? You've heard of *that*, right?" she said, adjusting the strap of her quilted Vera Bradley tote.

"You have to know Coffee Carma," Lorna Gross echoed. She was always echoing Missy. Last year I hadn't even been sure if Lorna had her own personality, she'd been so busy parroting Missy's every word, move, and wardrobe choice. Lately, however, she'd been displaying a tad more backbone. Maybe it was because of her new nose, or the fact that she'd tamed the frizz factor in her hair, or the fact that she was now a Billings Girl—I wasn't sure, but something had given her more confidence. For the moment, however, she'd fallen back into her bad Missy-mimicking habit.

"Of course I have," I replied. There was a Coffee Carma on every corner in America, even in my lame-ass hometown of Croton, Pennsylvania.

"Well, Dustin wrote a check to Easton at the beginning of the year. A check with a lot of zeroes. His only stipulation was that he wanted them to build a Coffee Carma on campus, so . . ." Missy lifted her palm, gesturing to the construction behind her.

"Good to know our new headmaster can be bought," Tiffany said under her breath.

"We're getting a Coffee Carma?" Vienna Clark shrieked, grasping London Simmons's arm. "Omigod! What have I been saying every morning for the past three years?"

"That you would *kill* for an iced caramel macchiato with extra whip?" London replied happily, tossing her teased brown hair. The two of them grasped hands and squealed, jumping up and down.

London Simmons and Vienna Clark were the serious party girls of Billings, and they did everything together—they traveled together, got their highlights done together, went for seaweed wraps and Brazilian waxes and eyebrow threading together. They were both petite girls with ample chests who preferred clothes of the low-cut, miniskirted variety. Of the two, Vienna was slightly more intelligent, London slightly more moody, but other than that they were practically twins. The Twin Cities were basically harmless and fun to be around, but watching them and the rest of my friends now, I felt sick to my stomach. They were wide-eyed, excited, buzzing with the news. Didn't any of them remember what had happened this weekend? Could a classmate's suicide really be erased by the promise of overpriced legal stimulants?

"I can't believe they're doing this right now," I said. "Couldn't they have at least waited a week? Shouldn't we all be, I don't know, mourning?" The Twin Cities had been Cheyenne's classmates for three years. I couldn't believe I had been forced to point this out.

London and Vienna stopped bouncing and instantly became contrite.

"You're right," London said. "Cheyenne *so* would have loved this. Coffee Carma was her favorite."

"Speaking of Her Billionairess," Missy said under her breath.

We all turned around to find an impish girl with loose blond curls walking toward us, flanked by two clone-ish friends. She was "too matchy-matchy," a phrase Kiran Hayes used to throw around while critiquing outfits last year. Kiran hated it when a girl's clothing choices seemed overly planned, and she would send anyone committing this sartorial offense back to her room to change. Amberly's matchiness took the form of a black, gray, and red plaid skirt topped by a gray T-shirt and black cardigan. Her red Marc Jacobs bag was the same shade as the red cabbie hat perched jauntily atop her head. Her scarlet heels clicked on the marble floor as she walked right up to me and smiled.

"Hi, Reed!" she said.

Like she knew me. Like we were old friends.

"Hi . . . Amberly?" I replied uncertainly.

"Isn't it so exciting? A Coffee Carma right here on Easton's campus!"

"Yeah. It's great." Why was she talking to me?

"Here. My father said I could give a few of these out, but only to special friends," Amberly said, leaning toward me and lowering her voice. She took out a small plastic card with tie-dyed swirls all over it.

"Um, thanks. What is it?" I asked, running my fingers along the slippery edges.

"It's a Carma Card!" she said, clearly incredulous that I didn't know. "Flash that baby and it means free coffee for life!"

The Billings Girls started muttering around me, wondering, no doubt, why I deserved to be granted the holy grail of gift cards and

they, apparently, did not. I wondered the same thing myself, but forced myself to smile at this odd little person.

"Wow. Thanks."

I waited for her to go away, but she didn't move.

"So. Have you seen Noelle?" Amberly asked. "I heard she finally got off probation."

My heart stopped pounding. All my friends fell silent as the grave. Yes, I had seen Noelle, just two nights ago in the city. And the encounter had left me completely freaked. Left me wondering what her plans were. Left me wondering if she somehow knew that I had been e-mailing Dash McCafferty, whom—I had been relieved to hear—was no longer her boyfriend. However, she hadn't shared the details of the breakup, hadn't even told me if it had been recent or if it had, perhaps, happened last year when she'd been arrested for her role in Thomas Pearson's murder. The whole thing had been surreal—exciting and confusing at the same time. I had yet to tell any of the Billings Girls about it, and wasn't sure I wanted to, because knowing them, they would grill me about every last detail, from her designer shoes to her current weight, until I screamed. So why was this stranger asking me about her?

"Um . . . no," I lied. "Haven't seen her."

"Oh. Well, if you do, tell her Amberly said hi," she told me with a smile. "Our families are very old friends," she added, touching my arm with her fingertips. I was suddenly so hot that I thought the plastic card in my hand might melt and fuse to my skin. So that was why she'd given me the card above anyone else. She knew I was friends with the ever-powerful Noelle Lange.

"Oh. Okay," I replied shiftily. "Again, thanks for this."

"My pleasure," she replied, the smile widening. She had a row of perfectly white, square teeth. "I'll see you around."

She fluttered her fingers and strode away, hips wagging slightly beneath her plaid skirt. Her friends, who hadn't said a word or changed expression the entire time, scurried off behind her.

"What was that all about?" Missy sniffed the moment Amberly was gone.

"I have no idea," I replied.

"So have you really not heard from Noelle?" Rose asked me. "Not at all?"

"You know what, guys? I'm starving," I said quickly. "Let's just go to breakfast."

I turned toward the door and was met by a seriously red-cheeked Gage Coolidge, storming toward me like his pants were on fire. His usually gelled-up hair had been tossed around by the wind, and half of it was plastered to his forehead. He wore trendy jeans, trendier sneakers, and a thick gray sweater that highlighted his wide shoulders and lithe form. Boy would have been hot if his soul wasn't made of tar.

"Well, we're screwed," he said, his jaw clenched. Now that he was within sniffing distance, his semisour aftershave overwhelmed me. I had to take a step back to keep breathing.

"What's the matter?" Sabine asked, stepping forward. She'd had a crush on Gage since the beginning of the year—something I could neither comprehend nor thwart, no matter how hard I tried.

"I just got a text from my friend at Chapin," he said, whipping open his phone as proof. "Cheyenne's father canceled the Legacy!"

There was a general gasp from those around us, like a bomb had just gone off outside.

"What!?" Portia Ahronian snapped. She snatched the cell phone from him and gaped at it, raising her other, perfectly manicured hand to her chest, where it rested just below her omnipresent collection of gold necklaces. The gold offset her olive skin and dark hair to perfection, but in my opinion she could have cut back on the multitude of chains by one or two.

"Wait. How does Cheyenne's dad get to cancel the Legacy?" I asked. As far as I knew, the Legacy was a yearly party dating back decades. All the East Coast private schools were involved, and last year the party on Park Avenue had been attended by thousands. Only students who could claim to be third-generation private school attendees were invited, and your history had to go back much further than that in order to get a plus one. According to Walt Whittaker, with whom I'd attended the event last fall (since I was the first person in my family ever to set foot in a private school, I'd needed him to get me in), the same family had been hosting it for years.

"The Dreskins finally bailed," Rose explained. "Said they couldn't handle the insurance liability anymore. So Cheyenne begged her father to step in and host. It was her pet project, and Cheyenne's dad never said no to her, so . . ."

"Why didn't she tell us?" Tiffany asked.

"She wanted it to be a surprise. She only told me once the plans

were set. She just couldn't keep it in anymore," Rose replied. "It was supposed to be at the Litchfield house."

Rose and Cheyenne had been roommates the year before, and Rose had been closer to Cheyenne than anyone else in the house. Their friendship had made it all the more difficult for her to side with me during the whole hazing fiasco, I knew.

"And now we're totally screwed," Gage said, wrenching his phone from Portia's grasp. "God. Cheyenne knew her dad was throwing this thing. Couldn't she have at least waited till effing November to off herself?"

The sudden angry peel of the electric saw felt as if it were piercing right through my brain. "What did you just say?"

Gage looked at me, his eyes wide with mock innocence. "What? I'm just saying."

"You're sick, you know that?" I snapped. "All of you are sick! Cheyenne's dead, for God's sake! And all you can think about are coffee bars and parties? What's the matter with you?"

No one answered me. Tiffany hid behind her camera, taking pictures of the work in progress. Constance's cheeks turned pink, Portia toyed with her necklaces, Sabine fiddled with the glass buttons on her coat, and Rose appeared close to tears. London and Vienna looked at each other, disturbed, as if I were the one embarrassing them. Well, fine. If I was so humiliating to have around, I would just leave them to their wallowing. I couldn't look at them right now anyway.