

**I** was leaning far back, trying not to fall. My hand looked for something to hold on to. I found his shoulder, and then the back of his neck.

He shoved aside a stethoscope and other items that had been in his lap. They clattered to the rug. He scooped up my legs, under my knees, and drew them out. He moved closer to me, lying next to me on the couch.

The leather of the couch made noises as he cuddled next to me.

His lips pressed to mine again, eager.

I welcomed it. I kept my hand on the back of his neck, and instinctively tugged him closer.

Something had changed in kissing him. I didn't know what it was, but it was so much easier to do this now.

Until I realized that they all knew about this. If they walked in, I'd stop, of course.

No longer was it because I feared discovery.

# *The Academy*

The Ghost Bird Series

## Black and Green



Book Eleven



Written by C. L. Stone

Published by

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**From The Academy Series**

The Ghost Bird Series

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**First Days**  
**Friends vs. Family**  
**Forgiveness and Permission**  
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## SURPRISE VISIT

DR. GREEN

Sean Green threw open the driver's-side door to Owen's BMW. He patted his jeans pockets and then reached into his green jacket, finding only his cell phone. "Owen! Goddamnit. I left my keys somewhere."

"No time," Owen said, jogging toward the car. He carried a single backpack across his shoulder. He opened the back door and dropped it on the seat, making a whirling motion with his hand above his head. "Get in. I'll drive."

Sean's head rocked back until he was glaring at the sky. "No," he said in a whine. "You drive too slowly."

"Just get in," he said in a short bark.

Sean grumbled and jogged around the car, landing in the passenger seat and slamming the door. They had parked near their tent at Academy camp. There were piles of supplies in neat rows on a nearby picnic table.

They didn't have time to pack it up. Not now.

Owen wedged himself in behind the wheel, inserted a key and turned the engine over.

Sean sent a text to the others around the camp about their tent and supplies. They'd take down their tents and would keep their things safe until they could be delivered back to their proper owners.

It'd cost them a favor, but they needed to get going.

Not only was Sang's health at risk, but possibly her freedom, perhaps even her life.

Within minutes they were on the road headed back to Summerville.

Sean kept his phone in his lap, staring at the screen, prepared to call a thousand people and yet not wanting to clog phones in the crucial time they had.

The others were taking their time getting Sang packed up to go to her house.

Cameras were being monitored. Phones tapped.

Waiting for information was always the hardest. With information, they could do something. Take action. Make a decision.

Now all he had to focus on was the time ticking away as Owen barely broke the speed limit getting back to Summerville.

Sean groaned, throaty, louder than he meant to, with the frustration bubbling inside him. He gripped the phone harder in his hand, glaring out the windshield.

"I can't risk going any faster," Owen said. He shot him a look. It was one of the rare moments when Owen actually looked human to Sean. His hair was askew, blown by the breeze at the camp and then the rush to get into the car and on the road. He'd replaced his nicer clothes with an older sweater and a pair of old jeans meant to be worn while breaking down camps. Sean hadn't seen him like this in months, maybe not even a year now. Owen never wore jeans.

"Because getting pulled over and getting a speeding ticket will take more time than following the rules," Sean said, repeating the lecture Owen had often given him. "I know, I know..."

"She's not hurt," Owen said. "And she knows to leave if he tries anything dangerous. He wouldn't do to her what her stepmother tried...locking her up. We'll get her out even if he tried."

"The fact is, we don't know what's going on," Sean said. He held on to his phone, turning the screen on every once in a while, anticipating and feeling phantom vibrations every few seconds. He'd take a shock, if any of them wanted to hit the emergency button, just to hear any news. "She doesn't have to go in, you know?"

"I know," Owen said darkly, his eyes narrowing on the road. The sunlight streaming through the windshield reflected off his glasses. He raked his fingers through his hair, and with a few swipes, it was perfect.

He'd always had a knack for hand-combing.

"We could get her out," Sean said. "In a heartbeat. We could stop all this."

"We don't know if she'd want us to," he said. His knuckles were turning white as he gripped the wheel. "But, please, stop tempting me."

Sean smothered another grumble and turned his eyes to the trees they passed by along the way. He folded his arms across his chest, his windbreaker rustling. When it got too warm in the car, he stripped it off and left the T-shirt underneath on, tossing the jacket into the back in a heap.

Owen eyeballed the crumpled jacket in the rearview mirror but said nothing. He tightened his mouth, too polite

to grind his teeth but on the verge of it.

*Good*, Sean said to himself, although he didn't mean it. He knew he was irritated and anxious, without anything to do other than wait.

He was tempted to check the camera signals, but if Victor was already checking them, it would slow things down if he tried to do the same thing. The cameras were handy, but the server could get overloaded if too many of them tried viewing at the same time.

Sean tucked a thumb close to his mouth and started biting a nail absently.

"You should be thinking about what we'll need to do once we can get her to the hospital," Owen said. "Maybe you should have someone prepare some sort of test?"

"Because she fainted?" Sean asked and shook his head. "There's nothing to prepare for. I'll do another couple of blood tests, but I bet she didn't eat like she promised she would."

"She's clearly got low blood pressure. It's the stress."

"I agree," Sean said. He stared out the window, not really looking at anything, but picturing the time Sang had been carried into the nurse's office, looking pale and tired. She'd been getting better, but this week had been quite over the top. "Even if she'd been okay with her girl team, she has a lot to be stressed out over."

"There might be underlying causes for these fainting spells," Owen said. "She wasn't having seizures, was she? We're not looking at epilepsy, are we?"

"They would have noticed a seizure," Sean said, and he shut his eyes, wanting to focus, but too many questions popped into his brain. He opened them, looking over at Owen. "There's no point in doctoring when the patient and the data aren't in front of you. We're doing guesswork."

Owen closed his mouth and pressed his lips together. Sean couldn't blame him. Answers were what they were continually looking for, especially when it came to Sang. Would they ever have a day they wouldn't worry about her?

Suddenly, the phone rang in his hands and he pushed the button quickly, bringing it to his ear.

"What?" he asked quickly. "What is it?"

There was silence for a moment, and then a heavily accented voice spoke over the phone, female and mature. "Is something wrong?"

"Mother?" Sean choked out with surprise, sitting up straight as an arrow in the car. He'd been so anxious expecting a call from the guys that this threw him off. "What...how...hello." He coughed and then continued, "Hey, I meant to call you."

He pictured his mother as he spoke, a Japanese woman, short, thin with few wrinkles and minimal gray strands of hair at the temples, which she often dyed to keep her hair completely ebony in color.

It was her eyes that made him shiver. The darkness that demanded perfection.

If there were ever a tiger mom, Sean's adoptive mother was the epitome.

There was a very long pause, and eventually his mother spoke. "I am calling to let you know I'll be in town soon."

Sean squeezed his eyes closed tightly and pinched the bridge of his nose. Not now. "What? Oh. That's...nice." Now? Right now? She always had the perfect timing...

"If that's not a problem," she said in haste. "Do you have some sort of trouble?"

"No, Mother," he said and looked longingly at Owen, silently pleading for some help. Tell him that this emergency is way more important than his mother visiting. Give him an excuse to put off this visit. "What brings you down?"

"Work," she said. "Temporary, but it might be a month or more. I can secure an apartment closer to downtown—"

"No, I wouldn't hear of it," Sean said, although he didn't mean it. She knew full well he had a spare bedroom. She'd agonize over the cost of another apartment and would never let him hear the end of it if he didn't invite her to stay. "Of course you should stay with me. The guest room is yours."

Owen remained quiet, but his hands twisted at the wheel. He was displeased with this news.

Silence again on the phone. "Oh, I shouldn't do that," she said. "I wouldn't want to impose."

Within Japanese culture, it was really hard for her to do anything but politely decline at first and make him insist she stay. It was the same dance she had gone through with him since he'd moved out and she had come to stay.

If the timing had been a bit better, he might have even enjoyed her visit—as much as he could enjoy her constant criticisms. She wouldn't understand the fuss he was making about a girl.

"Of course, Mom," Sean said, feeling the regret drip through his body at agreeing to this. "Stay with me. When are you getting here?"

“There’s a cheap flight tonight,” she said. “I can call a cab. Or Uber.”

*Tonight? Why so last-minute?* Sean spoke through his teeth. “No, it’s fine. I can come pick you up. Text me the details?”

“Is something wrong?” she asked. “Why do you sound like your mouth is broken?”

Sean coughed and then spoke properly. “Sorry, Mom. Might be the phone reception.”

“I’ll see you tonight.”

The phone silenced, and Sean dropped it into his lap. He pressed his back against the seat in a stretch and leaned his head back. “Tell me I can just sleep at the hospital and claim I need to work overtime.”

“Isn’t that what you do most of the time anyway?” Owen asked. “But I agree. This isn’t the best timing.”

“She may not understand about Sang,” Sean said, rolling his head to look out the side window. Trees zoomed by, making him dizzy. “No, she wouldn’t understand. Not at all.”

“Because she’s sixteen,” Owen said.

“Because...yeah,” Sean said and sighed, closing his eyes. He knew this was going to be a problem. For another two years, perhaps, he and Owen would have to conceal their interest, hide their feelings about Sang to everyone else. She was close to them in age, so close that in two years, it wouldn’t matter.

But for the next two years, other people really wouldn’t understand it.

Not to mention that they were a part of a group of nine other guys also trying to win her affection and love.

Sometimes Sean wondered if it mattered. No one could know what they were doing. Another Academy group had a similar relationship: Lily, Liam, and a few other men had stayed together.

They stayed together by having a house in the middle of nowhere. They managed things by not telling anyone about themselves.

Was that their destiny? To hide?

“There has to be a way, Owen,” Sean said.

The corner of Owen’s mouth dipped, and his gray eyes narrowed at the windshield. “We’ll find out. But first, we have to get there and stop whatever is happening.”

## THE RETURN

### SANG

**K**ota called my name with such a desperate tone in his voice, so eerie that I'd never forget it.

A heavy twist of emotion had captured my heart that week. At camp, I'd been with a group of girls who had stressed me out. Being with them meant I was being torn away from a group of guys I wanted to stay with.

The guys, on occasion, also seemed to encourage me to go with them, as if pushing me into it.

However, by displaying what an emotional wreck I really was, somehow that had convinced a council to stay with my group.

The boys then fought over me. Enough that I couldn't help but think they'd split over me.

I didn't think I had any feeling stronger than the anxiousness I felt over the nine guys who argued about whether they could share a unique relationship with me.

Not until Kota called for me, in a panic, and I was rushed out of Victor's home and into North's Jeep.

Kota drove. His hands were tight against the wheel, his lips pulled back until his teeth were bared, clenched. He wore the same dingy jeans and a sweater he put on at the last minute before running out the door and getting into the car.

Nathan sat next to him in the passenger seat. His reddish hair was askew as his window was cracked just enough to let some of the cool air in to combat the sun beating into the windshield.

His hand was stuffed up against his face as he leaned his elbow against the door, glaring at the trees and traffic going by.

I was crammed into the rear seat between Victor and Gabriel. Shoulder to shoulder, they too stared out the windows on either side of them.

I could only look forward, at the miles closing in on returning to Summerville, to Sunnyvale Court, where my house was.

Where my father was.

The others were forced to stay at Victor's house to collect laptops and supplies.

Just in case.

The fact that we had to prepare for anything made it difficult. I sensed it, even from the inside of the Jeep.

The silence.

The tight mouths.

The clenched hands.

They'd been in an argument and now had to work together.

My father was back, and from the way Mr. Blackbourne had described it, he was calling the school, asking for Mr. Hendricks or someone who could bring me back from school camp. That's where I'd told my sister I'd be.

Kota had been the last of them to speak to me as we were leaving the house. "If he came home to check in and found you gone, he might be worried something had happened to you. Remember, he's just as desperate to keep your background a secret. Now that your stepmother hasn't been around to keep you at home, he's probably worried about exposure. Especially now that you know, and you could tell anyone."

It was dangerous that he was calling around for me. While they were capable of monitoring the calls and redirecting any call to designated Academy people who would say whatever we wanted, someone like Volto, or if one of Mr. Hendricks's people were watching the house...

Disaster was waiting for me if my father made any mistakes right now.

The twisted knots in my heart tightened with every mile as we got closer. Despite the panic, I was still in turmoil over the argument I'd overheard. Gabriel had held my hand, and the more they argued, the closer he got, until near the end, to where we were clinging to each other. We'd stared silently into each other's eyes, knowing what the other was thinking.

*It can't end.* We had to stick together. The more they fought, the more it was obvious to us. We had to find a way to convince Kota. Mr. Blackbourne had been right. Kota was the core of the team. Without him believing in it, the others would doubt.

We would fail.

We would break.

I folded my arms over my stomach. I'd put on fresh underwear, no bra, a bulky sweatshirt that I suddenly realized might have been Luke's because it was baby blue and too big for me, and cotton shorts. They were the first things I had seen inside that were my size. I didn't recognize them, and for all I knew, they weren't shorts at all, but one of the boys' boxers and I was too panicked to notice the difference. I'd dressed quickly inside Victor's closet, not daring to waste time.

My father's return wasn't unexpected, but it had happened without warning, and with the rest of us so far away. The fact that he'd called around asking for me made us much more worried. Maybe he was just worried about me. Maybe he was upset that I'd left Marie alone for a week. Had something happened to her? An accident?

"What about my mother?" I asked Kota in general as he drove and then regretted looking to him for an answer. His hands were locked at ten and two, and he edged over the speed limit, despite being such a stickler for road rules. He hadn't even gotten on my case about my seat belt, which at first I had forgotten about but had slowly, quietly put on. I refocused on Victor beside me. "My stepmother, I mean. Is it because of her? Did he come back about her? Is she out of the hospital?"

"She can't be," Victor whispered. He picked up my hand and held it tight enough that my fingers tingled, threatening to become numb. "We would have been notified. Although she's been demanding a transfer to a different hospital, one that would let her go home."

Nathan twisted in his seat until he faced me. "We're working on pretending to do so, and just driving her around the block in an ambulance and bringing her back inside the hospital from a different entrance, giving her a new room and a new doctor."

"How long...can they keep her there?" I asked.

Nathan turned back around to face the windshield again but continued to speak. "For now, at least. She's still talking divorce, but also she wants doctors who just give her whatever medications she wants. The stuff that makes her so loopy."

"We won't be able to keep her forever," Kota said. He breathed in deeply through his nose and out through his mouth, turning his head slightly as he checked all of the mirrors. "For now, though, she isn't a problem. She's being monitored, and they are doing everything they can to make sure she's stable, both physically and mentally."

I settled into the seat, bringing up my legs and lifting the sweatshirt to roll it over the top of my knees and cocoon myself inside. I dipped my head to my knees, darkening the light and warming myself with my own breath to stop the onset of goose bumps along my body. If he rolled up the window, it was too stuffy, and with it open even just a crack, it was cold.

"He's probably just checking up on me," I said, more out of hope. "He came back, but...he'll go again. He didn't want to be here."

Victor's palm found my back, and he rubbed warmly, leaning in. "It'll be fine. We won't be too far away, and we'll be listening to whatever he says."

"We should have done something before now," Nathan mumbled under his breath. "This shouldn't be a problem."

"We don't know what's going on," Kota said. "And he wasn't the one tying her up and leaving her to die. Despite whatever we might assume about his past, he's never laid a finger on her." He lifted his head and peered back at me for the first time since leaving the house. "Right?"

I nodded, chewing my lip. I couldn't remember the last time my father had ever done anything to me—punishment or a hug. His interactions with me usually only showed indifference. On occasion, he did stand up to my stepmother when I'd been on the floor for hours and he finally noticed. Otherwise, he stayed out of it.

Probably so she wouldn't tell the world about me. He only stepped in when things got too extreme, and it would affect my health, so that someone at school would look closer.

"Hopefully, he's back just to check on the house and panicked when you weren't there," Kota continued. "That's what we have to assume. It's why we left your old room the way it was. So he'd think you were still around. Remember?"

I did remember. Some clothes, books and other things had been left behind. The bed had been made. My old trunk was still there.

My bedroom had a small door leading to an attic space. Inside, I'd left the old wardrobe, too, despite wanting to bring it out. The attic was still mostly soundproof. It had pictures inside, along with lights and a beanbag chair. We'd left it because we weren't sure if my dad would be back on occasion, maybe over weekends like he used to before my mother had gone into the hospital.

Originally, even I'd assumed he would come back every couple of weeks, maybe to refill the fridge and pantry with food and to pay the bills.

I'd stopped thinking he would be back when he'd started paying the bills from wherever he was staying now. He'd sent Marie some cash to pay for food, although Marie hadn't told me about it.

Because he'd taken steps not to come back, I had assumed he wouldn't, and I'd settled into the idea that I'd never see him again.

I was nervous about that now, about seeing his face. I'd yelled at him while his wife was possibly dying on the way to the hospital. He'd returned, only to tell me he was leaving and to put a trampoline in the backyard, as if that could make up for the fact that he was going away.

He'd refused to tell me about my past. About where I'd come from and who my mother was.

I wished we could avoid seeing him now. What would he really do if I never showed up? Would he give up and just disappear again? It wasn't like he could call the cops to search for me. He would never do it.

Despite my wish, the car pulled onto Sunnyvale Court.

To avoid any attention in case Mr. Hendricks had someone watching the road, Kota parked at Bob's Diner. It was New Year's Day. The neon sign glowed, advertising it was open, yet the parking lot was almost empty. It was probably a good thing it was slow.

Most of the employees were Academy, and many of them, including some of us, had been at camp all week.

Kota turned off the engine. He twisted in the seat to look back at me. "Remember," he said, "go in, tell him you've been at school camp. You can give him most of the details. Whatever might convince him this was just a normal school thing and you decided to go. Given his history, he's probably only concerned because it could lead to exposure, so just promise not to do it again."

Despite his calm demeanor, his eyes were wide, and his knuckles were still white from having gripped the steering wheel so tightly and now being balled into fists.

Victor pulled out his own phone and passed it to me. "You'll need to hang on to this," he said. "I turned the sound off. It's probably best if you hide it." The case was white. Mine had cracked, and in the chaos, I wasn't exactly sure where it was at the moment.

I didn't have a bra on right now, so I tucked the phone into my underwear at my back. With the shorts' waistband tight, it should stay at my waist if I didn't bounce around too much. "Can you still listen with it at my back?"

"We can listen through it or through your father's cell phone if needed," Victor said. "And we'll have the cameras running so we can see what's going on. It'll drain the battery, so don't forget to charge it."

Nathan opened Gabriel's door, allowing him to get out, and then Nathan reached in and took my hand to help me scoot along until I was stepping on the gravel of the parking lot.

"No matter what," Nathan said as he closed the door, "if you feel threatened, walk out the door. I'm not going to be far."

"Me, either," Gabriel mumbled. His crystal eyes darkened, his lips taut.

Nathan shot him just as dark a look.

No one was happy with this.

Or they were still moody after the fight they'd had. It was hard to tell.

There was no time to tell them what I'd heard, and I didn't dare bring it up. In the moment, my heart was pounding so loud. This was worse than the week leading to camp. There had been no warning, and now I was returning home for the first time in what felt like eons.

I breathed in the cold January air. I wasn't sure of the time, but I considered it had to be past noon at least. How different my world had become since yesterday, or even this morning. Camp had changed me. Despite my issues with being around girls, and the disaster I'd become around the shower, the Academy had shown me a world of kindness. Coming back had been a trip through a wardrobe...the Academy had been Narnia, and now I was back, blinking, wondering if it had all been a dream, because the real world wasn't nearly as nice.

I needed to avoid being seen coming in, just in case.

I repeated what I needed to do in my head while we walked along the path through the woods.

I'd walk in.

He'd ask where I'd been.

I would say I was at camp.

He'd fuss about it, but I'd say sorry, wouldn't happen again.

He might stay a day or two, but even so, he'd be gone for work. By Monday at the latest, he'd go.

He wouldn't come upstairs. I might even just go for a walk while he was there.

I'd avoid him, like before.

I'd be able to sneak out to be around the guys, and they could sneak inside at night.

Once my father left, and we were sure he was gone, I'd be free again.

A thin layer of leaves crunched under my feet as I walked. Kota led the way and carried a pack loaded with a laptop to monitor everything. Nathan and Gabriel walked beside me. Victor followed.

"If you need someone to vouch, we can always call Carla," Kota said, talking about a sort of friend I'd made at camp. "She'll even do it without a favor."

I didn't dare bother Carla. She was nice, even if we'd started out at odds that week. Between her and the other girls, as much as they were very nice, I'd left under poor circumstances, in the middle of the night, and never wanted to see them again. I was too embarrassed.

Still, in my heart, I knew if I asked her, Carla, or Lake, or anyone at the Academy would help if I asked.

It was a thought that was supposed to calm me down; however, my heart wouldn't stop racing.

I swallowed a thousand times on that walk. My heart felt like it was in my throat. My nerves were overwrought with anxiety. I didn't think I'd ever feel calm again, I'd been so high-strung for so long.

When the path twisted and I found the bridge that led to the backyard, we stopped.

We stood together in a line, with me in the center, and we watched.

We waited.

Nathan shifted until he was behind me, looking over my head. His hands found my shoulders, and he massaged.

Victor claimed my right hand.

Gabriel my left.

Kota gripped the pack he was wearing.

We all stared.

Waiting for explosions.

The house didn't seem any different to me, but we were seeing the back. The shed blocked the view of the drive. The screened-in back porch was empty.

The blinds were down. That was normal for my house.

The trampoline we had finished stood quietly, the metal rim reflecting sunlight. The grass was a little overgrown, but the process had slowed for winter, and patches of it were brown. Despite the break in clouds and the blue sky above, the day still felt gray and gloomy with the bare trees and the chill.

"I'll get this over with," I said, suddenly determined. My father wouldn't stay on. "He's just here to pay a bill and check up on us. He'll leave again."

"Let's hope so," Kota said. He found his phone. He turned it on, pushed a pink heart...my icon. The screen gave an option for video feeds, and he checked one. "I see him," he said. "He's in his bedroom, making the bed." He picked his head up and looked out toward the back window that led to my parents' en suite bathroom. "So he's staying at least one night."

"Okay," I said. That was in sync with what I was thinking before. "Yes. He's here for a night. Maybe two. He'll be gone on Monday. I can probably walk in there, show my face, and once he's busy, I'll sneak right back out again."

"We'll send someone in," Kota said, not looking at me but continuing to look at the house. "We'll keep an eye on it and find a good time to head up. Someone will be in the attic at all times at the least."

"You said he wouldn't hurt her," Victor said. He turned to face Kota, looking past me to do so. "Why send someone in if she isn't staying?"

"It's not about him," Kota said and turned back to me. His green eyes had a depth of sadness I'd rarely seen in them, and it now seemed to envelop him enough to scare me. "It may take a few hours for you to establish a routine, and figure out if you'll be able to get out. And you should really rest a bit since...because..." He paused, lowering his eyes to the ground. I knew he was thinking about this morning, when I'd fainted. "But it's up to you. Do you want us to?"

He was right. Did I think it would be so simple? I'd walk in, talk to him, but what if I needed to be seen more?

I could spend the weekend there, if needed. That wouldn't be too bad if they were there with me anyway. "Don't let anyone go up there unless you're sure it's safe," I said. "Don't let them get caught."

He nodded sharply.

That was it. Decision made. Despite heading back, I wouldn't be alone.

I was never alone.

I left them and crossed the bridge, still feeling their warm touch in my palms and at my shoulders, and I tried to keep that memory with me. I ducked my head and kept going.

When I was halfway across the yard, I heard a short whistle. I panicked, worried someone inside would hear, and I stopped, turning back.

Kota had stepped into view, waving to me.

I started to turn back. Was something wrong? I stood in the yard, puzzled, trying to figure out if he was telling me to hurry up for some reason, or to go back. With the way he was waving to me, I couldn't figure out his meaning.

“Sang!” Marie’s voice came at me like a punch in the back. I spun around again, hoping Kota would retreat and let me handle this. I wasn’t sure if seeing him would spur her to say something to our father.

Marie was at the edge of the wide driveway, her arms crossed over her chest. She was barefoot, wearing jeans and a sweater. Her eyes were wide, her straight brown hair in a ponytail. She motioned for me to hurry. “Come quick.”

I started slowly toward her, looking over my shoulder once.

Kota had disappeared again out of sight.

Was that what Kota had been warning me about? That Marie was outside?

I hurried to her. It was too late to turn back now.

I was back.

## THREE PLUS TWO MAKES CATACLYSM

Marie waited in the driveway while I charged through the yard toward her. Her hair was frizzy around her face, and she brushed the strands out of her eyes and back behind her ear. She shook her head, making a displeased frown. “You won’t believe this,” she said, grumbling. “I just can’t believe it.”

“What?” I said, wanting to ask her more, but I stopped, distracted by the car parked in the drive just outside the garage.

My father’s car. I’d expected it, but then something struck me hard at seeing it in that particular spot. It wasn’t *in* the garage.

I glanced up the road, looking out for mysterious cars around that could belong to Mr. Hendricks or someone who worked for him. Had anyone seen him drive in?

Had anything happened within view of the road that I should worry about?

“Come see,” Marie said, interrupting my scan of the street. She padded into the garage.

I trailed behind, coming around the edge of the house.

A minivan was parked in one of the garage spaces, luggage strapped to the top of it. The second parking spot in the garage was taken up by cardboard boxes stacked neatly in rows.

The minivan had a North Carolina license plate.

“Who...” I started to say, the questions falling from my lips the moment I thought of them. I couldn’t get a full phrase out after that.

Panic claimed me. Deep down in my bones, I was shaking.

That had to be what Kota was trying to warn me about. Could it be social services?

If that was the case, why was the plate from North Carolina? And what were the boxes for? Were they packing up what little I had and moving me out?

Was that why he’d demanded I come back? Because the police had demanded it?

Did they drive minivans?

Marie walked past it all and went directly for a short flight of steps that led up to the side door. She put her hand on the handle, and then waited for me.

I eased myself around the minivan, and as I got closer, I heard a deep humming coming from inside the house.

A vacuum.

Our father never did housework. Not that I’d ever seen him. We usually did it.

Now everything made even less sense. He had been making the bed. I didn’t know much about social services, or the police, but if they’d discovered my existence and had come to take me, he wouldn’t be vacuuming the house.

Would he?

I stalled just before taking that first step on the stairs. After a week of camp, and with my issues with the guys, I wasn’t sure I could handle this new problem.

This wasn’t what we’d expected.

This shook the plan I’d had right out of my brain.

Marie’s wide, terrified brown eyes told me she wasn’t about to enter without me. It was like when we were kids, and we’d gotten into trouble for leaving toys out, or playing out in the yard after dark.

Marie never faced the music alone. We went together, usually so she could point a finger of blame at me.

I was used to it.

I could leave when I wanted. Kota was so close. He’d agree I could.

If I really needed him to, he’d help me escape.

Those thoughts gave me the courage to follow Marie inside.

I was her shadow now. She was a little taller than me, and I could almost hide behind her.

Once we were around the door and could shut it, I stopped, staring around Marie’s arm in disbelief.

A woman with fluffy curls of auburn hair held a vacuum in her hand. She ran it over and over along the carpet, making perfect W shapes as she went along, but then did it again in the same spot, as if she couldn't get the carpet clean enough. Our orange couch was gone, replaced by a red one, or so I thought until I realized it was the same shape and it might have a cover.

She continued to vacuum with us standing behind her. I was too afraid to speak to let her know we were here, and Marie didn't say anything.

Studying the woman, it was clear her hair was dyed, too vibrant and unusual to be a real color. It was layered, with some curls along the edges, and brushed straight at her crown. It was old-fashioned—like I'd seen in pictures of girls from the sixties. She was stout, with wide shoulders. Her legs and arms seemed lean; it was her torso that was her weight. She wore floral-printed pants, and her silky black shirt billowed around her, hanging down to mid thigh.

I folded my arms over my stomach, nervously rubbing my fingers together, feeling the sweatshirt between my fingers as I clutched the material. I felt oddly underdressed.

The woman turned, caught sight of us and shut off the vacuum with a quick snap of the button. She examined us head to toe, looking quickly at Marie and then taking a deeper, more quizzical look at me.

She released the vacuum to take a few steps toward us. "Is this her?" she asked Marie.

Marie nodded and motioned to me with a wave. "This is Sang."

I bit my lip and hid my hands behind my back. "H...hello?" I said, questions zipping through my brain, fizzling before I could find the nerve to speak.

She narrowed her eyes as she studied me. "You're a mess," she said. "You were at camp?"

A mess? I glanced down, wondering if she meant the shorts. I'd taken a bath at Victor's house. Was my hair looking awful? "Yes, camp," I mumbled softly and then hesitated before giving any more information. I wasn't a great liar, so I wanted to be cautious about saying any more than necessary.

"Where are your things?" she asked quickly.

"Still at camp," I said. With the phone tucked into the shorts behind my back, I wondered if they could hear this. "I came as quickly as I could. My stuff will be brought back for me later."

She turned the full force of her eyes, accusing, in my direction. "And how in the world did you get permission to go on this trip? Your father didn't know about it."

I dropped my gaze from her face to her black shirt. My cheeks burned. "I didn't...it was hard to contact him." Who was she? And why did she care?

"That doesn't give you permission to go. And what's this news I heard from your school counselor about skipping classes?" she asked.

My throat closed in as I stared at her. School counselor? Mrs. Wright? This made me think she was from social services, but why vacuum the floor? "I think there was a mistake—"

I stopped when my father stepped in from the kitchen. His hair seemed grayer to me, starting from the temples and threading back into the dark. His skin was a deep tan color, his eyes dark, like Marie's. He was in what Marie and I knew to be his weekend wear: a pair of old brown slacks too worn for work and a gray sweatshirt, dingy at the elbows and tattered at the sleeves.

The woman turned to him and looked over his attire. Wrinkles formed at her lips as she frowned. "I think you can afford more suitable casual clothes, dear."

*Dear?* My jaw fell open and I looked at Marie.

Marie's eyebrows were up, her eyes wide. *I told you.*

Was this... this was...

"Sang," my father said, his voice gruffer than I remembered. "This is Carol. She..." He paused.

"I'm his new wife," she said and straightened her stance, rolling her shoulders back. "Unofficial yet, but it's close enough for me. We've been meaning to contact a lawyer to go after those very complicated divorce papers, since she's been in the hospital." She shot a look at my father. "Right?"

His eyes dropped. "Yeah," he said. "I'll figure it out."

I knew my father well enough to know that "I'll figure it out" usually meant he didn't know and he'd wait until people forgot and never do it. He avoided looking at any of us, one of the hallmarks of our family: never look anyone in the eyes.

Marie's eyes were wide, and wild, but her lips stayed firmly closed. I kept my questions to myself, afraid to speak. Did it matter what I said? The guys, if they could see and hear all this, were probably already working out what to do.

I couldn't have pictured this.

I wasn't prepared for this. Not right now.

A divorce. If a lawyer was brought in, he would ask who I was. My ghost status would be over for the Academy before I'd even had a chance to consider what being a ghost meant.

My record would be looked at carefully. Why was my birth certificate forged? Where did they get my Social Security number? They were questions I didn't know the answer to. Whatever lies he'd told this woman, he must have gotten in too deep. Or did she know, and this was her way of "fixing" the situation?

It was a risky move, because it might reveal the secret my father carried. My mother had been underaged when she had given birth to me, and there was still a hanging question as to whether it had been consensual or not.

I had a feeling she didn't know. That he'd lied about who we were and what was going on here.

I could tell in the way his shoulders slouched. In the way that he seemed defeated.

How he usually looked when his wife overruled him in any decision, which was often.

Now he was letting this lady tell him what to do?

As much as I didn't want to feel sorry for him, I was affected by this too, and if he'd lied, I'd have to find out what he'd told her. If this woman exposed him, she'd expose me, too. I'd be given a real birth certificate, given a record.

If my father got into trouble over what had happened in the past, he'd go to jail. What would happen to me then?

What happened when I was no longer a ghost bird? I'd asked the Academy council to release the boys of their debt that involved me if I'd become what they wanted. Yet if I wasn't a ghost bird, what could I offer them then?

I clenched my teeth, wishing I could say something, or walk out. It would be easier, but it wouldn't help me, and it could make things worse for the guys with the Academy.

Carol zeroed in on my face, undeterred, and focused on my eyes, making it hard to avoid looking at her. "Maybe it's for the best we got here so soon. Your grades are tolerable, but we can't have anyone in this house skipping school. I wish this wasn't the first impression you got of me, but your father told me your mother was the disciplinarian of the house, so I'm taking it upon myself to take charge." She pointed to Marie and me. "As of this moment, you're both to help me clean this house from top to bottom until it is finished. You're to remain in this house and are not permitted to leave until school is back in session."

"I didn't skip school," Marie said. "Why do I have to clean? Everything's already done."

"Everyone helps," Carol said. "And there's a lot to do. There's enough dust in this house for us all."

Marie pointed at me. "She skipped. She wasn't even here. Make her do it. I've been on my own for the last—"

"Enough!" Carol snapped.

Marie's lips closed and her head jerked back, eyes widening with a silent anger.

"I don't argue with children," Carol said. "I'll let the back talk go this time. I know this is a shock."

Marie twitched her lips, but she only glared at Carol. Before I'd left for camp, she was cleaning the house up. I wonder if she had known Carol was coming at all. And if she'd known Dad was returning, why hadn't she said anything? I wondered if it was to get me into trouble.

Carol continued. "We'll have a proper discussion this evening once you've both cleaned your rooms, and have had time to soak in the new situation. We're going to have to learn to work together. Marie, once you're done cleaning your room, I want you to focus on studying. Your grades aren't exactly where I'd like them to be. I've never let any of my children settle for less than an A, and I don't plan on letting either of you slip."

*Her children?*

We were hers now? Maybe I'd gotten the wrong impression from that, but she was ordering us

around like...we were her kids.

I looked at the floor, my heart racing, and tried so hard to stop myself from visibly shaking. Could she just walk in here and tell us what to do like that? That wasn't the most important question on my mind, though. "I...um..." I said quietly, finding my voice weak. I didn't want to be rude to Carol, since I had no idea what was going on and didn't want her to think I was more of a problem child than she probably already thought, if she were to believe my father or Marie.

"Yes, Sang?" Carol asked. While still a sharply asked question, there was a smidgen of curiosity. "Was something I said unclear?"

"I..." I didn't even want to ask, but I had to know. "I just..."

"You should look at the person you're talking to in the eyes," she said.

I gazed at her face, but found I avoided looking at her eyes directly by staring at her cheeks or chin. Suddenly I'd become my old self, unable to look anyone in the eyes for fear of them seeing the real me.

The real me was crying inside, afraid of this change. "How...how long will you be..."

"You want to know how long I'm staying?" she asked and smirked. "Dear, we've sold my house. This is our new home. For now, at least. Once the divorce is over, we'll sell this one, too. We've been talking about moving to Savannah. I love that city. I think it will make a great new start for all of us."

Savannah! Another state away, where the guys might not be able to get to. Most of them had family ties and jobs here, including the Academy.

I closed my mouth, swallowing. In a few moments, my entire life had been flipped upside down, again. A new stepmother. Divorce. Exposure. Moving to a new town.

The boys.

The Academy.

Could it all be over?

My brain quit on me, all questions paused. It was all I could do to keep standing where I was and not break down in front of everyone.

"Where are we supposed to go if you sell the house?" Marie asked.

Carol interlaced her fingers and covered her midsection in a relaxed pose. "I know you girls just moved here, but your father has been promoted. He'll have to travel more for work, but it means we can move wherever we want. I picked a lovely city with a lot of culture. If you help me make this work, we can get a bigger house with room for everyone." She gazed with a smile to my father. "Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

My father nodded, with a small but tense smile in return. "Of course," he said.

My face fell, shocked at the banter of what seemed like flirting from her, and his almost-masked terrified look. My skin rippled with goose bumps. How soon would a divorce be over? How soon could this house sell that we'd be gone?

Could it be a couple of weeks? Everything inside of me electrified with fear, and a tight ball formed in my stomach.

Could I stop this?

"Now, up to your rooms," she said quickly and gave us a dismissive wave. "And, Sang, I'm sorry, but your room was bigger and had all that extra space in the attic for storage. You'll have to make do with a roommate until we move. You can move your things in with Marie, or sort it out with my son. Split the room in half, maybe."

Her son? My room?

I looked to Marie, who scowled, silent. This wasn't a surprise to her.

Carol waved us off again with a harsher stare. She was displeased we weren't obeying her instantly.

Our father disappeared into the kitchen, his footsteps fading as he went back toward his bedroom.

Carol went back to vacuuming.

Marie and I slowly made our way from the family room into the living room.

There were noises above me. Footsteps.

Her son was upstairs.

In my room.



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