

CHAPTER FIVE

Malcolm

Sunday, September 9

“You have four kinds of sparkling water,” Mia reports from the depths of our refrigerator. “Not flavors. *Brands*. Perrier, San Pellegrino, LaCroix, and Polar. The last one’s a little down market so I’m guessing it’s a nod to your humble roots. Want one?”

“I want a Coke,” I say without much hope. The Nilssons’ housekeeper, who does all the grocery shopping, isn’t a fan of refined sugar.

It’s the Sunday before school starts, and Mia and I are the only ones here. Mom and Peter left for a drive after lunch, and Katrin and her friends are out back-to-school shopping. “I’m afraid that’s not an option,” Mia says, pulling out two bottles of lemon Polar seltzer and handing one to me. “This refrigerator only contains clear beverages.”

“At least it’s consistent.” I set my bottle down on the kitchen island next to a stack of the college brochures that have started to arrive for Katrin on a daily basis: Brown, Amherst, Georgetown, Cornell. They seem like a stretch for her GPA, but Peter likes people to aim high.

Mia unscrews the cap from her bottle and takes a long swig, making a face. “Ew. This tastes like cleaning solution.”

“We could go to your house, you know.”

Mia shakes her head so violently that her dark, red-tipped hair flies in her face. “No thank you. Tensions are high in the Kwon household, my friend. The Return of Daisy has everyone shook.”

“I thought Daisy coming home was temporary.”

“So did we all,” Mia says in her narrator voice. “And yet, she remains.”

Mia and I are friends partly because, a long time ago, Declan and her sister Daisy were. Lacey Kilduff and Daisy Kwon had been best friends since kindergarten, so once Declan and Lacey started dating, I saw almost as much of Daisy as I did of Lacey. Daisy was my first crush; the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen in real life. I could never figure out what Declan saw in Lacey when Daisy was *right there*. Meanwhile, Mia was in love with both Lacey and Declan. We were a couple of awkward preteens trailing around after our golden siblings and their friends, lapping up whatever scraps of attention they’d throw our way.

And then it all imploded.

Lacey died. Declan left, suspected and disgraced. Daisy went to Princeton just like she was supposed to, graduated with honors, and got a great job at a consulting firm in Boston. Then six weeks ago, she abruptly quit and moved back home with her parents.

Nobody knows why. Not even Mia.

A key jingles in the lock, and loud giggles erupt in the foyer. Katrin comes sweeping into the kitchen with her friends Brooke and Viv, weighted down by brightly colored shopping bags.

“Hey,” she says. She swings her bags onto the kitchen island, almost knocking over Mia’s bottle. “Do *not* go to the Bellevue Mall today. It’s a zoo. Everybody’s buying their homecoming dresses already.” She sighs heavily, like she wasn’t doing the exact same thing. We all got a *Welcome Back* email from the principal last night, including a link to a new school app that lets you view your schedule and sign up for stuff online. The homecoming ballot was already posted, where theoretically you can vote anyone from our class onto the court. But in

reality, everybody knows four of the six spots are already taken by Katrin, Theo, Brooke, and Kyle. Katrin's already getting congratulatory texts from everyone who voted for her.

"Wasn't planning on it," Mia says dryly.

Viv smirks at her. "Well, they don't have Hot Topic, so." Katrin and Brooke giggle, although Brooke looks a little guilty while she does it.

There's a lot about my and Katrin's lives that don't blend well together, and our friends top the list. Brooke's all right, I guess, but Viv's the third wheel in their friend trio, and the insecurity makes her bitchy. Or maybe that's just how she is.

Mia leans forward and rests her middle finger on her chin, but before she can speak I grab a bouquet of cellophane-wrapped flowers from the island. "We should go before it starts raining," I say. "Or hailing."

Katrin wiggles her brows at the flowers. "Who are *those* for?"

"Mr. Bowman," I say, and her teasing grin drops. Brooke makes a strangled sound, her eyes filling with tears. Even Viv shuts up. Katrin sighs and leans against the counter.

"School's not going to be the same without him," she says.

Mia hops off her stool. "Sucks how people in this town keep getting away with murder, doesn't it?"

Viv snorts, pushing a strand of red hair behind one ear. "A hit and run is an *accident*."

"Not in my book," Mia says. "The hitting part, maybe. Not the running. Mr. Bowman might still be alive if whoever did it stopped to get help."

Katrin puts an arm around Brooke, who's started to cry, silently. It's been like that all week whenever I run into people from school; they're fine one minute and sobbing the next.

Which does kind of bring back memories of Lacey's death. Minus all the news cameras. "How are you getting to the cemetery?" Katrin asks me.

"Mom's car," I say.

"I blocked her in. Just take mine," she says, reaching into her bag for the keys.

Fine by me. Katrin has a BMW X6, which is fun to drive. She doesn't offer it up often, but I jump at the chance when she does. I grab the keys and make a hasty exit before she can change her mind.

"How can you stand living with her?" Mia grumbles as we head for the car. Then she turns and walks backward, gazing back at the Nilssons' enormous house. "Well, I guess the side perks aren't bad, are they?"

I open the X6's door and slide into the car's buttery leather interior. Sometimes, I still can't believe this is my life. "Could be worse," I say.

It's a quick trip to Echo Ridge Cemetery, and Mia spends most of it flipping rapidly through all of Katrin's pre-programmed radio stations. "Nope. Nope. Nope. Nope," she keeps muttering, right up until I pull through the wrought iron gates.

Echo Ridge has one of those colonial-era cemeteries with graves that date back to the 1600s. The trees surrounding it are ancient, so huge that their branches act like a canopy above us. Tall, twisting bushes line smooth gray paths, and the whole space is enclosed within a stone wall. The gravestones are all shapes and sizes: tiny stumps barely visible in the grass; tall slabs of stone with names carved across the front in block letters; a few statues of angels or children.

Mr. Bowman's grave is in the newer section. We spot it right away; the grass in front is covered with flowers, stuffed animals, and notes. The simple gray stone is carved with his name, the years of his life, and an inscription:

Tell me and I forget

Teach me and I may remember

Involve me and I learn

I unwrap our bouquet and silently add it to the pile. I thought there'd be something I'd want to say when I got here, but my throat closes as a wave of nausea hits me.

Mom and I were still visiting family in New Hampshire when Mr. Bowman died, so we missed his funeral. Part of me was sorry, but another part was relieved. I haven't been to a funeral since I went to Lacey's five years ago. She was buried in her homecoming dress, and all her friends wore theirs to her funeral, creating splashes of bright colors in the sea of black. It was hot for late September, and I remember sweating in my itchy suit beside my father. The stares and whispers about Declan had already started. My brother stood apart from us, still as a statue, while my father pulled at the collar of his shirt like the scrutiny was choking him.

My parents lasted about six months after Lacey died. Things weren't great before then. On the surface their arguments were always about money—utility bills and car repairs and the second job Mom thought Dad should get when they cut his hours at the warehouse. But really, it was about the fact that at some point over the years, they'd stopped liking one another. They never yelled or screamed; just walked around with so much simmering resentment that it spread through the entire house like poisonous gas.

At first I was glad when he left. Then, when he moved in with a woman half his age and kept forgetting to send support checks, I got angry. But I couldn't show it, because *angry* had become something people said about Declan in hushed, accusing tones.

Mia's wobbly voice brings me back into the present. "It sucks that you're gone, Mr. Bowman. Thanks for always being so nice and never comparing me to Daisy, unlike every other

teacher in the history of the world. Thanks for making science almost interesting. I hope karma smacks whoever did this in the ass and they get exactly what they deserve.”

My eyes sting. I blink and look away, catching an unexpected glimpse of red in the distance. I blink again, then squint. “What’s that?”

Mia shades her eyes and follows my gaze. “What’s what?”

It’s impossible to tell from where we’re standing. We start picking our way across the grass, through a section of squat, colonial-era graves carved with winged skulls. *Here lyeth the Body of Mrs. Samuel White*, reads the last one we pass. Mia, momentarily distracted, aims a pretend kick at the stone. “She had her own name, asshole,” she says. Then we’re finally close enough to fully see what caught our eye back at Mr. Bowman’s grave, and stop in our tracks.

This time, it’s not just graffiti. Three dolls hang from the top of the mausoleum, nooses around their necks. They’re all wearing crowns and long, glittering dresses drenched in red paint. And just like at the Cultural Center, red letters drip across the white stone beneath them like blood:

I’M BACK

PICK YOUR QUEEN, ECHO RIDGE

HAPPY HOMECOMING

A garish, red-spattered corsage decorates a grave next to the mausoleum, and my stomach twists because I remember this section of the cemetery. I stood almost exactly here when Lacey was buried. Mia chokes out a furious gasp when she makes the same connection, and lunges forward like she’s about to sweep the bloody-looking corsage off the top of Lacey’s grave. I catch her arm before she can.

“Don’t. We shouldn’t touch anything.” And then my disgust takes a brief backseat to another unwelcome thought. “Shit. I have to be the one to report this *again*.”

I got lucky last week, sort of. The new girl, Ellery, believed me enough that when we went inside to tell an adult, she didn’t mention she’d found me holding the can. But the whispers started buzzing through the Cultural Center anyway, and they’ve been following me around ever since. Twice in one week isn’t great. Not in line with the *Keep Your Head Down Till You Can Get Out* strategy I’ve been working on ever since Declan left town.

“Maybe somebody else already has and the police just haven’t gotten here yet?” Mia says, looking around us. “It’s the middle of the day. People are in and out of here all the time.”

“You’d think we’d have heard, though.” Echo Ridge gossip channels are fast and foolproof. Even Mia and I are in the loop now that Katrin has my cell number.

Mia bites her lip. “We could take off and let somebody else make the call. Except ... we told Katrin we were coming here, didn’t we? So that won’t work. It’d actually look worse if you *didn’t* say something. Plus it’s just—mega creepy.” She digs the toe of her Doc Martens into the thick, bright green grass. “I mean, do you think this is a *warning* or something? Like what happened to Lacey is going to happen again?”

“Seems like impression they’re going for,” I keep my voice casual while my brain spins, trying to make sense of what’s in front of us. Mia pulls out her phone and starts taking pictures, circling the mausoleum so she can capture every angle. She’s nearly done when a loud, rustling noise makes us both jump. My heart thuds against my chest until a familiar figure bursts through a pair of bushes near the back of the cemetery. It’s Vance Puckett. He lives behind the cemetery and probably cuts through here every day on his way to ... wherever he goes. I’d say the liquor store, but it’s not open on Sunday.

Vance starts weaving down the path toward the main entrance. He's only a few feet away when he finally notices us, flicking a bored glance our way that turns into a startled double take when he sees the mausoleum. He stops so short that he almost falls over. "What the hell?"

Vance Puckett is the only person in Echo Ridge who's had a worse post high-school descent than my brother. He used to run a contracting business until he got sued over faulty wiring in a house that burned down in Solsbury. It's been one long slide into the bottom of a whiskey bottle ever since. There were a rash of petty break-ins through the Nilssons' neighborhood right around the same time that Vance installed a satellite dish on his roof, so everyone assumes he's found a new strategy for paying his bills. He's never been caught at anything, though.

"We just found this," I say. I don't know why I feel the need to explain myself to Vance Puckett, but here we are.

He shuffles closer and circles the mausoleum, letting out a low whistle when he finishes his examination. He smells faintly of booze like always, his hands jammed into the pockets of his olive green hunting jacket. "Pretty girls make graves," he says finally. "You know that song?"

Mia and I exchange glances as she edges closer to me. "Huh?" I say.

"The Smiths," Vance says. "Fits this town, doesn't it? Echo Ridge keeps losing its homecoming queens. Or their sisters." His eyes roam across the three dolls. "Somebody got creative."

"It's not *creative*," Mia says coldly. "It's horrible."

"Never said it wasn't." Vance sniffs loudly and makes a shooing motion with his hand. "Why are you still here? Run along and tell the powers that be."

I don't like getting ordered around by Vance Puckett, but I don't want to stick around, either. "We were just about to."

I start toward Katrin's car with Mia at my side, but Vance's sharp "Hey!" makes us turn again. He points toward me with an unsteady finger. "You. Might want to tell that sister of yours to lie low for a change. Doesn't seem like a great year to be homecoming queen, does it?"