

The page features several faint, light gray butterfly silhouettes scattered across the upper and middle sections, adding a decorative touch to the layout.

chapter ONE

*t*he statue has got to go.

That's my first thought as I prep the living room for Dustin's visit later tonight. I know I'm the only one who would notice the discriminating eyes of Mom's four-inch Jesus staring down from the mantel. Dustin probably wouldn't look away from my breasts if the room were two feet deep in holy water. Still, I reach for it.

When my hand fumbles and the statue topples sideways, I pick the thing up and scan the hearth for any other too-holy housewares.

"What are you doing?" My older sister rushes in from the kitchen, scuffles across the carpet, and ignites a spark when

she snatches the statue out of my hand. She settles it back into its ring of dust, adjusting it to its all-seeing viewpoint, and then eases her hand away like she's afraid the thing might fly right up to heaven. Turning, she glares at me.

Great. Caught in the act of abducting a religious icon. Not exactly the act I feared being caught in tonight.

"Actually, Faith"—I stare into her eyes so she won't miss this—"I was wondering if you could give me a lift to the church."

As expected, her whole face lights up, and I'm tempted to let her believe she's finally fished her heathen sister out of the sea of despair. It's better than telling her the truth.

"Amy's going to meet me at a coffee shop near there," I add. Not complete honesty, but close enough.

"Oh." Her face falls. "I'm not sure, Brie. I mean, I wasn't going to—" She flicks her fingernail against her thumb a few times and looks away.

She wasn't going to what? Wasn't going to youth group like she has every single Friday night since she was born? I glance at the clock above her head. Good thing Dustin's not waiting down the street somewhere, which was my initial idea. But me staying home alone on a Friday night would be far from ordinary and I don't want to raise anyone's suspicions. I stare back at Faith until she goes on.

"Celeste doesn't want to go, my car's out of gas, and I

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can't find my Bible." She starts for the kitchen. "Sorry, Brie, I'm not going tonight."

Usually, I strategize about as well as a fly caught in a screen door. But tonight I had taken the initiative to plan something nice—really nice—for Dustin, and tonight, of all nights, Faith's turning into someone I don't even know. What happened to her Big Salvation Plan, the one that wraps around her life in giant, multicolored jawbreaker layers of certainty?

I can't do anything about Celeste cutting out on her. They argued on the phone earlier and I learned a long time ago that I don't understand their friendship well enough to get involved. But I can fix other problems. I reach for my purse. "I have gas money."

She stops in the kitchen doorway.

I dig out the only bill I can find, walk toward her, and push it at her chest. She looks down at my hand like it's covered in warts.

"I know it's only five bucks, but that'll at least get your car to the church and back, right?" Heading to the bookshelves in the living room, I scrunch my nose because the dog, curled up on the couch, must have farted. I pull off a Bible with *Brie Jenkins* inscribed in the bottom corner of its black leather cover. "Here," I say, coughing from the flutters of dust. "Take mine."

“That’s a King James Version,” Faith says. “I really need my N.I.V.”

Faith and her New International Version. Like it matters. And here I thought getting my parents out of the house would be the hard part, but they left before six, barely taking time to say good-bye. When I don’t move my outstretched hand, Faith lets out a sigh and takes my Bible from me.

She opens it, apparently figuring this is the perfect time for her daily devotional, and I call the dog to get him and his raunchy smell out of here. “Nuisance, here, boy.”

Our overweight golden retriever has selective hearing. It’s probably too late anyway; Dustin will certainly end up with blond dog hair all over his pants, but I want to at least try to give the cushions a once-over with the lint roller.

I pry my fingers under the dog’s mass, using all my weight to lug him off. He takes my gesture as an attempt to play and jumps up, frothing all over my freshly made-up face. I fall on my butt and let out a giggly yelp. When I look up, expecting to see Faith laughing, she just stares into the open Bible, and nibbles on her lip.

She shakes her head, and at first I think it’s at me and my stupid predicament, but then she flips the page and scowls hard down at the words. I’m baffled, since I can’t imagine her disagreeing with anything in The Good Book.

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The loops of her blond hair mimic the paisley wallpaper behind her. It's hard to remember when my hair used to be even curlier, before Amy permanently lent me her straightening iron. It takes me a second to notice Faith's whole body trembling.

"Faith, what's—"

"Nothing." She snaps the book shut, and heads for the foyer. Her renewed determination makes me wonder if it had been my eyes that were trembling. "You wanted a ride, right? Let's go."

I follow her, but she picks up the hall phone and dials while she slips on her shoes.

"Oh, good, you're still there," she says into the handset. "I'm driving my sister to the church, so I think I am going to go. That's my sign." Her forehead creases as she stares at the floor listening.

At least she doesn't sound angry with Celeste anymore. Though she doesn't exactly sound cheery either.

"Nothing dangerous, but I need you, Celeste," Faith prods.

I wonder what kind of crazy, shake-in-your-shoes idea the church has planned for them tonight. Perhaps they'll play tag in the parking lot in bare feet.

When she glances up from her call and notices I'm still there, she whispers, "Hold on," into the receiver and moves down the hall with the phone pressed to her chest.

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Fine. Not like I wanted to listen in on *that* conversation anyway. I open the door, calling, “Don’t worry about me. I’ll just be in the car,” loud enough so they can both hear me.

Whatever. So what if they don’t want me in their stupid inner circle. My own circle’s coming together and it’ll be much better than their little saintly one.

I collapse into the front seat of her Toyota and decide once again that I’ll have to try harder to get Dad to take me driving so I can finally get my license. Then I won’t have to ask Faith for anything, won’t have to concern myself with what she and her friends are up to. Swiping the chip bags from around my feet, I shove them into her already full garbage bag. As I reach for one more wrapper on the dash, a new sticker above the stereo catches my eye. Or at least it wasn’t here the last time I was in this traveling garbage dump. The round yellow sticker has an artsy cross on it. Almost scribbled-looking, but preprinted on there.

Faith slides into the driver’s seat and I’m about to reprimand her for defacing her vehicle—I mean, at least she has one—but I stop myself when I see the tense look on her face.

“All worked out?” I ask, even though I know Faith almost always gets her way with Celeste.

“You need a ride home, too?” she asks, backing out and then driving down the street with her eyes straight ahead.

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Her fingers grip the steering wheel at ten and two like it's a life preserver.

"No. Amy'll drop me." I haven't thought of a reason why *Amy* couldn't pick me up, and I hope Faith won't think to ask.

Her hands loosen and drop to the lower half of the wheel. She nods, apparently relieved that I'm not going to be any more of a burden. For a second I wonder why things had to change between us. Why aren't we still friends, or at least siblings who can have a normal conversation? But the thought is gone as soon as it enters my head.

After stopping at the corner gas station, she reaches to turn on the radio, confirming there'll be no sisterly chatter on the car ride over. Once she starts singing along, I decide I much prefer listening to her singing voice over arguing with her anyway. I nudge the radio volume down. Faith is used to this move of mine, and keeps singing without any reaction. And this is the way I like her voice—not tied to her church worship group or up on stage with everyone staring in amazement. Just her singing and me listening.

We pull into the large church parking lot, and Faith backs into a spot near the perimeter. She turns off the engine and we sit there, both staring ahead at the looming steeple.

"You okay, then?" Faith asks after several seconds.

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I take that as my cue to reach for the door handle. “Sure.” Something in me wonders if I should ask her the same question. “Are you—”

But a dark-haired girl with a ponytail scurries over to the driver’s side and interrupts us. “Faith, oh my gosh, it’s so good to see you!”

Faith and I get out on either side, and I raise my eyebrows. Only at church can people get so excited to see each other after only a day or two apart.

“Oh, you brought your sister.” The girl nods approvingly.

I pull my arms across my chest and feel the scratchy condom wrapper I’d stashed in my bra. More teens move in toward Faith, toward us, and I get a mental picture of them grabbing my hands and singing “Kumbaya.”

And just then, Faith’s dark-haired friend makes her way around the car with a hand outstretched. I stare down at it.

“I’m not staying,” I say, tucking my hands behind my back. “I mean, I’m meeting someone . . . over there.” I point over my shoulder. “Thanks for the ride,” I call out, but Faith waves me off, since she’s now surrounded by several of her elated youth-group buddies.

I dash across the street and make a show of ducking into the Rio Café. After waiting a few minutes to make sure it’s safe, I slip out into the dark alley alongside the coffee shop and

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race through to the next street over. The street is deserted and I hug my purse to my chest. I wish Dustin could pick me up in front of the coffee shop, but I can't chance Faith catching sight of me heading back to the house with my boyfriend.

I slink into the shadow of the art supplies store so I won't be obvious to any stray, lonely men driving past, and pull out my cell phone. After checking the street sign, I text Dustin with the coordinates.

I snap my phone shut and blow on my sweaty palms. *What if I'm not ready?* Dustin's been patient—too patient, Amy says. And now that I've given him so many hints, how could I say no?

I won't, I decide only a second later. Even though I'm not completely at ease with this, who is, their first time?

I look up just in time to see a familiar red Toyota sail by. The smiley antenna ball catches my attention, and I squint at the back of a blond curly head in the driver's seat. It's Faith.

Worse, she's headed back in the direction of our house. There goes my special night with Dustin. Though the thought does make my racing heart slow a little.

When Dustin's lights gleam around the corner and onto the deserted street where I wait, I put Faith out of my mind. I paste on a smile, smooth down my straightened hair with both hands, and step out of the shadows into the bright lights.



chapter TWO

i slip into the passenger seat of Dustin's yellow Mustang, lean over, and kiss him on the cheek. He smiles, and slides a sandy-colored lock of hair behind his ear. The dimple on his cheek makes my heart flutter.

"Where to?" he asks, sliding one hand onto my knee. I place my hand on his, stopping him before he reaches the hem of my skirt.

My mind works fast and I remember a barn bash one of Dustin's friends mentioned. "Evan's party?" I say.

"I thought we were going to your place." He inches his hand up my thigh.

I hadn't actually told him that but I guess I'd been

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obvious enough. “We can’t. My sister’s home.” I add a pouty huff to pretend I’m just as upset about it as he is.

He looks over at me with a suggestive smile, and then past me to the backseat. “We could . . . park somewhere.”

I follow his eyes. Oh, how romantic. Sticky vinyl clinging to my bare ass. Perfect.

“I heard it’s supposed to be a big deal at Evan’s.” I make my voice sound light.

“Oh.” He meets my eyes.

I flinch away, not wanting to give his gaze time to convince me.

“Right.” He turns and studies the mirror on his visor.

I can’t tell if I’ve offended him. “It’s just . . .” I tug my skirt back down. “I was hoping to get to know some of your friends.”

He stays quiet for a few seconds, letting the car idle on the edge of the curb. Then, without a word, he puts it in gear.

I spend the first few minutes of the car ride thinking about how to make things better with him. I take about a hundred deep breaths and make a mental promise to myself to set up another night for us soon. Now that I’ve had a practice run, I’ll be much more comfortable with it next time.

“Did you finish your poem?” Dustin interrupts my thoughts

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and with that one question, not a hint of abrasion in his voice, all is right with my world again.

“Um, almost.” My face heats up. I’m flattered that he remembered what I’d been working on earlier when he called. That he cares enough to ask. But I just hope he doesn’t want to hear some of it. My poetry’s not good, not like Faith and her music or anything. Still, it gives me hope that one day I will share all my inner workings and passions with him. When I figure out what those are.

He shoots me a grin and one solid nod, but doesn’t say anything else. It’s like he knows my exact thoughts and he won’t ask for more until I’m ready. I can’t hold back a little internal squeak. We’re so perfect for each other.

It takes longer than I expect to get to the farmhouse out in the middle of nowhere, but I don’t mind. Dustin talks about some of his classes this week and asks me what I think about every little thing. We’re in different classes, different grades even, but I appreciate the fact that he wants to talk to me about the stuff in his life so much when we’re alone, so I try to offer intelligent replies.

When we pull up the dirt drive of the party house, a crowd assembles by Dustin’s door. I let myself out and stand on the passenger side while Dustin slaps a few hands and says his hellos. A couple of I-don’t-need-to-shower-more-than-

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once-a-week guys partying in the back of a pickup truck call for me to come over. Not by my name, but by a more endearing alias, “Hey, baby.” I ignore them.

The thing about guys in Sharon, Oregon, is that the majority of them wear this tougher-than-granite act, cracking bottles open with their teeth, their jean buckles, their forearms. I figure it’s to make up for living in a town with a girl’s name.

Dustin and I walk across the yard and look for our friends. Well, Dustin’s friends, if one wants to get technical, but I’m sure it won’t take long before they’ll be my friends too. I reach over and intertwine my fingers with his, pulling my shoulders back and standing a little taller. The number of people who watch our trek feels a bit unsettling, but exciting at the same time. This is my third big party with Dustin and I think I could get used to this.

A bonfire blazes in front of an abandoned farmhouse on our left. The barn, missing a side wall and lit up by a half-dozen hanging lanterns, sits straight ahead with the guts of the place in plain view.

Dustin and I don’t acknowledge anyone else in the yard. Mostly guys. Mostly drunk. We’re heading to where the rest of the party rages, on the upper floor of the barn. Juniors and seniors, less drunk and less biceps-flaunting than the lawn

crowd, chat and joke in small groups. A large table displays a full spread of alcohol.

“Cool,” Dustin says. “Let’s go.”

He pulls my hand, but I don’t move. My feet are wrapped in lead weights. The open-air platform—with no railings, fences, or even chicken wire—combined with all levels of inebriation, terrifies me. I swallow at the lump lodged in my throat.

“Why don’t we just stay down here for a bit,” I say.

“Yeah, right.” He looks at me like I’ve just suggested we play hopscotch on the mounds of manure. “Let’s get a drink.”

I scan the yard around me looking for an excuse, but there’s nothing. Nothing enticing about ditching the fun crowd above for the guys who are vomiting by the swing set, or the ones lying flat on their backs with draining beer bottles propped in their mouths like frothing baby bottles.

I try a different, more honest, approach. “Um, do you really think it’s safe up there?”

Dustin belts out a laugh like I’ve just said the funniest thing he’s ever heard, then gives my arm a good yank toward the barn entrance.

My mouth feels like I’ve sucked on a lint ball. *The loft is probably safer than it looks*, I tell myself over and over and over again on the thirty feet it takes to get to the barn. *Dustin*

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wouldn't take me there if it wasn't. And so far tonight, no one's fallen. I scan the ground around me to make sure.

Inside the barn, a stereo above cranks out some old Fergie tune. Halfway along the wall, there's a staircase. It's a curlicue access that looks like the fries they make in the school cafeteria. Dustin drags me toward it while I try to keep my mind on cafeteria food. Fries, ketchup, that disgusting, overcooked pasta.

I take deep breaths and concentrate on the rickety railing and cross-mesh metal of each stair. When the light from the top floor comes into view, I back up a step. Dustin almost trips, and gets his bearings before tugging on my hand once again.

When I force myself to step onto the platform at the top, vertigo hits me and I drop Dustin's hand to grasp the wall. The dim lanterns streak across the ceiling like a crazed disco ball. People, laughing and talking, come in and out of focus.

"Let's just hang out here for a bit." I focus on the dusty wood-plank floor and force some steadiness to my voice. By the time my breathing evens and I look up, Dustin stands across the platform, filling a shot glass at the booze table. Did he even hear me?

He chats with a group of guys, knocks back the drink, and makes a face that for a second I can't recognize as someone I would ever be attracted to. Someone comes up the

stairs behind me and I'm forced to slide over so they can get through.

My BFF Amy stands a few feet away from Dustin, talking to a group of girls near the ledge. Actually, Amy's not *really* my BFF. Not like Faith and Celeste, who've been attached at the hip since kindergarten. Amy and I are more like BFFN—Best Friends For Now. Or BFWIW—Best Friends While It Works.

Amy has Big Plans, just like everyone else in my life. Hers include makeup artistry and working at MAC Cosmetics. I've learned to apply perfect eyeliner and toenail polish, but try as I might, I can't drum up the kind of excitement it would take to organize my life around flawless foundation.

I wave. She holds up a drink toward me, her eyebrows raised.

I smile back, because Amy doesn't really drink. She had too much at the first pep rally last year and ended up passed out half-naked in the school parking lot. Since then, she discreetly nurses one drink throughout a whole party.

She gestures for me to come over, even though she knows about my fear of heights. I can hardly remind her from here. I shake my head, and then motion for her to come over to where I'm glued against the wall.

She nods and holds up a *one second* sign to me before turning back to finish her conversation.

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Perfect. At least I won't look so completely alone. Dustin now holds a beer in one hand and a shot in the other, though he still doesn't seem to be making a move back in my direction. Maybe I should have just parked with him somewhere. I let go of the wall with one hand and try to wave him down, but he's caught up telling one of his jokes and doesn't notice.

I'm startled by a vibration in my pocket, and at first I slap at it, thinking a bug crawled on me. Then it dawns on me, and I dig for my cell to look at the display.

My parents. *Crap.*

The deal is, I can go out late on weekends because my parents are actually pretty cool despite their heavy church involvement, but I always have to tell someone in the family where I'm going and I have to answer my phone when they call. One time I forgot to charge the stupid thing and got grounded for two weeks because I didn't pick up. And that was on a Sunday afternoon.

Of course they might alter the rules a little if they knew about the booze table, the lack of parental supervision, and the guy who picked me up. I press my cell to my ear, cupping my hand over my mouth to help deaden the music and voices.

"Hello!" I yell. My parents' meeting shouldn't be over for at least another hour. I can't believe one of them ducked out to check up on me.

A muffled voice sounds on the other end. I plug my other ear to hear better.

“Hello?” I say again.

“Brie . . . can you . . . are you . . .”

“Dad, there’s a band here at Café Rio. I can barely hear you.” I step into the stairwell and crouch down, pulling my arms over my head to deaden the sound. Things are slightly quieter, in the way a football game might be quieter than a rock concert. “Dad, you there?”

“I need—” He sounds like he’s choking or sick or something. I’ve never heard him like this. He’s always so . . . composed.

“Dad, are you okay?”

“. . . the hospital . . . I can’t . . .”

The hospital? “Are you hurt?” I bring my fist to my mouth. *Or maybe it’s Mom.* “Dad?”

“Just come . . . the hospital . . .”

Silence follows and I look at the display on my phone. It reads CALL ENDED.

I click on my phone book and dial Dad back. It goes straight to his voice mail. Following the tone, I ramble on in a panic. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m coming to the hospital as soon as I can. I hope everything . . . everybody’s okay. Is Mom with you? Okay, I guess I’ll see you soon.”

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Next, I scroll to my sister's number and hit send. Hers also goes right to voice mail. Faith always has her phone on, even when she's at home. She's the super-responsible one. Never been grounded for anything.

Turning cell phones off must be a hospital rule. Which means she's already there and I, of course, will be the last of the family to arrive.

One minuscule step at a time, I move along the wall toward Dustin, who's now near the open edge of the platform.

I can do this, I tell myself. I focus on the floor and attempt to slow my breathing.

At least I'll be there for only a second. Long enough to drag Dustin out so he can drive me. I slide my hand along the wall until I reach him. He doesn't notice me right away and laughs too loudly at another guy's joke.

Keeping one hand on the wall, I reach over and tug at his plaid overshirt. He finds my hand, laces his fingers through mine, and with a sudden tug, I'm at his side. By the edge. My heart beats like a thunderstorm in my chest.

He looks over. "Hey, babe. You gotta hear this." He turns back to his friend. "Evan, tell Brie about this guy."

"Dustin, I gotta go." My sweaty hand nearly slips from his. I wrap my other hand around his wrist for some sense of security.

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“It’s the funniest thing,” he says, as though he doesn’t hear me. “Tell her what his mom made him do.”

I pull him toward the staircase. “I mean it, Dustin. There’s some kind of emergency with my family. I need a ride.”

Dustin takes a big swig of his drink, and then passes it to Evan. “The girlfriend wants to get out of here. You know what that means.” He raises his eyebrows at Evan. His words slur, but I don’t care. Nor do I care about the show he’s putting on for his buddy. I force my mouth into a smile and hold my lips tight to keep my teeth still.

When Dustin reaches in his pocket for his keys, the motion knocks him off balance. The edge is so close. Suddenly, he jerks me down by the hand. The whole barn spins and I scream, squeezing my eyes shut. A roar fills my ears, Dustin’s hand slips from mine, and black spots blur my vision. The next thing I know, someone else’s arms grip my waist and I’m pulled, lifted . . . saved. I pry open my eyes and am amazed to see I didn’t go over.

Dustin rummages on the floor of the loft, still near the edge. “Where the hell are my keys?”

The group around him laughs, but he doesn’t notice. Evan, my apparent savior, leans over me, asking if I’m okay. I still hear my scream echoing into the night.

I nod. “I just . . . I gotta go.”

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I crawl away from the edge, over to Amy, and grab her leg.

“Yeah, he’s so cute. I swear—” She stops and stares down at me like I’m some kind of psycho poodle.

“Amy, I need a ride. It’s an emergency. I have to get to the hospital.”

After a second, recognition crosses her face. She glances at the girl she was talking to, then back to me with more concern. “Oh. Okay. I’ll drop you off.”

She doesn’t say anything until we get into her brother’s beater Hyundai, and I’m glad. I just need to concentrate on my breathing for a few minutes.

“So, are you and Dustin on the outs, or what?”

“Huh?” I rattle the door to make sure it’s shut. “No, he’s just drunk.”

“I don’t know.” She shakes her head. “I wouldn’t leave him there like that. You better be careful. He could have anyone—”

“I’ve kind of got more important things to worry about at the moment, Amy.” She hasn’t even asked about the hospital. I could be dying of internal bleeding for all she knows.

As if she can read my mind, she asks, “So someone’s hurt, or what?”

“I don’t know. I mean, my dad sounded awful, and what if—” I stop myself. Faith’s big on speaking things into existence. Not that I believe in that stuff, but still. We sit in silence

through the next traffic light. Small beads of rain land on the windshield, and when she turns on her wipers they sound much too loud in the quiet car.

“Wow, I sure hope everyone’s okay,” Amy says.

But something’s really wrong and she isn’t driving fast enough. When we round the corner and the hospital comes into view, I fling the door open. “You know what? It’s fine. Just drop me here.”

She screeches the brakes. “Are you nuts? I’ll drive you, Brie. I’m driving you, aren’t I?” She shakes her head. “Shut the door and stop being such a bitch about everything.”

Amy calling me a bitch is like Faith calling me religious. But Amy’s the least of my problems. I yank the door closed. The quicker I can get there and find out what’s going on, the better.

She turns into the parking lot. “Look! Your dad’s van!” She uses her “making amends” voice.

“Great.” I jump from the car and force out my reply. “Thanks a lot for the ride, Amy. I really appreciate it.” I wave as I run past her car. She doesn’t offer to park. To come in. To find out if my family is okay. Instead, she nearly hits a light post when she zooms backward to spin in the direction we came from.

Amy’s always been pretty self-absorbed and I don’t have

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time to be offended about it now. I race through the automatic doors and straight for the elevator, accosted by the antiseptic smell. Pushing the up button, it hits me that I have no idea what floor they're on. I scan the wallboard and see EMERGENCY CARE—4TH FLOOR just as the elevator doors open.

When I step off the elevator onto the fourth floor, the first thing that strikes me is the seriousness of it. Nurses and doctors bury their heads in clipboards. A man inches along with a walker as though it's stuck in sludge. I'm almost positive people don't have cute, healthy babies on this floor.

At the nurse's station, I spot my sister's blond hair, and the frumpy gray sweatshirt I saw her in earlier tonight. She leans over the counter toward the receptionist. I let out my breath and march over. At least she'll be able to tell me what's going on.

As I'm about to grab her by the shoulder, the red stitching on the seam of her top makes me stop. It's not the same shirt.

She turns to face me, the striking blonde who's not my sister, and moves aside so I can speak to the nurses.

"It's awful," one heavyset nurse is saying to another, completely ignoring me. "They must be having a horrible time."

"Excuse me?"

They both stop and turn to me.

"Jenkins?" I say as a question, since I'm not really sure who

I'm looking for. My mouth tastes like metal when I speak.

The gossiping nurse frowns. She glances at the other nurse, and then points down the hall. "Uh, yes. The last door on the left."

By the time I'm halfway down the wide hallway, the word "Chapel" posted above the last set of doors comes into view. Of course. Where else would Dad be? Must be on his knees in there with the hospital chaplain. My parents' Big Plan is called predestination, and this is what they do in times of crises. Or anytime, really. They meet with other churchies.

My heart still beats hard against my ribs, especially when I notice the police officer pacing in front of the chapel door. I shimmy past him and nudge the door open. My parents are both inside, alone on either side of the small room, and I let out a small breath at the sight of them. The wood walls and ceiling seem jarring after the sterile hospital hallway. Mom perches on a chair to my left, bent forward, and in shadow. The solitary light from the far side of the room shines down on Dad, hunched over the pulpit.

"I got here as fast as I could. What's—"

Dad looks up with tears streaming down his face. I glance from him to Mom, then to the rest of the sparse room. The four empty benches. The plants in pots along the side of the room that look too similar and too perfect to be real. Dad holds

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a gray sweatshirt, one without red stitching, and crumples it in his tight grip.

“Where’s Faith?” I ask.

There’s a pause and time stops. Suddenly, Mom and Dad come at me so fast and so panicked that I feel like a baby choking on a penny. Having no idea what’s going on or how to react, I ball my fists and pull them to my face. My parents throw their smothering arms around me and I feel explosive heaves from their chests, as though the only air in the room is coming from them.

At least *they’re* breathing. My lungs are stuck together with Krazy Glue. “Where’s Faith?” I ask again, but it comes out in little more than a squeak.

Mom lets out a howl of a cry.

My parents squeeze me tighter and pet my head as though I’m a dog or a farm animal, and suddenly, I understand.

Faith isn’t here. Isn’t coming here.

I gasp, and my Krazy-Glued lungs tear apart.

I’m no longer the black sheep of the family.

I’m the only one.