Four & Twenty Blackbirds

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Wren Peters has never been to Laughing Lake at night before.

She's seen the marshy pond freeze over, of course—plenty of times. There's a cross-country ski trail nearby that she and her older sister trace once a year when they like to pretend they're outdoorsy, so she knows how the smile-shaped lake turns to ice and gathers snow in gentle, tempting layers.

Firs and pines sag with white, their green usually adding color to a landscape that is otherwise forever gray. But at night, there is no green. There isn't even gray.

Everything on Blackbird Island simply turns black or blue. And Laughing Lake, it seems, is *especially* black and blue. A bruise freshly stamped onto skin.

Wren is running.

She doesn't know when she began running, but she does know there is someone behind her who wants her dead. They've made it clear, and now Wren is out of time.

She staggers. The ski trail hasn't been cleared in a few days; the snow is soft and pliable, so she can't see what's underfoot. Worse, she's not dressed for this. She wears plaid pajama pants and a black T-shirt. Her feet are covered only by flimsy, backless slippers—and she has already lost one of those. A mile or so back, it fell in the snow, and she was too afraid to stop and look for it.

Her left foot is now a block of ice.

She sees Laughing Lake through the trees. So flat compared to the slow dips and rises of this trail. Brighter too, with no emaciated trees to hide the night's nearly full moon.

On the other side of the lake is an emergency telephone.

Wren has to get to that telephone.

"Roger," a voice whispers around her. It comes from all directions, like radio static inside a car. It scuttles. It crawls. "Roger, you can't get away from me."

Roger? Wren thinks. *My name isn't Roger.*

She runs faster. This is where the trees end, and somewhere past this, under all the snow—smooth, smooth like frosting on a cake—is the lake and its winter ice. It isn't a big lake. Just a pond really, no more than a hundred steps across.

Wren can make it. She *has* to make it.

"Roger," the static continues, "you can stop running now. There is no escape, don't you see?"

Moonlight careens over Wren; a leafless birch creaks under winter's exhale. The terrain under her feet and snow is flattening.

She glances back. She thinks she sees a figure in the trees. Vaguely human.

But also . . . vaguely inhuman.

Wren feels the ground shift. She feels everything change from *steady* to *unsteady*—from a certainty that declares *this will hold you* to a certainty of *this will not*. But she can't turn back now. She has seen deer cross this lake; surely she can too. Other animals have certainly—there are fresh tracks in the snow.

"Roger, I only show the truth. You know I only show the truth. Stop running, Roger. You will only make it hurt more."

I'm not Roger, Wren thinks, still planting one foot in front of the next. She is, despite her absence of clothing, not cold. Nor is she exerted. Nor is she even afraid.

Or rather, she *is* all of those things, but none of them are her own. They belong to someone else—like this is all just a TV show, and Wren is simply watching it play out onscreen.

She churns faster toward the telephone she knows is on the other side of Laughing Lake. A phone for lost skiers or hikers, or anyone else who might need help out here where civilization is miles and miles away.

And Wren definitely needs help.

She is almost halfway across the lake. She really thinks she can reach the other shore—and she even thinks she can see the bright orange telephone attached to a pole. She will make the call, and she will save not only her own life but the others' too. The ones who weren't supposed to find what they found.

The figure behind Wren *cannot* be allowed to win.

"Except I will win, Roger," the staticky voice says, "because I always do. The wicked must pay, and the truth must prevail."

Suddenly, the figure is no longer behind Wren at all but

emerging from the trees ahead. He is dressed in a pale flight suit, his face hidden in a shadowy pilot's helmet.

But the blade he holds is not hidden. It is wicked, and it is inevitable. Wren sees this and she *knows* this, as her feet stumble to a stop beneath her.

"Do you know why I always win?" the figure asks, his voice clearer now—as if the radio finally found the station it was supposed to land on. "Because people are predictable, Roger. *You* are predictable. And that ice you're standing on? It isn't meant to hold you."

At those words, Wren feels a crack beneath her. She hears it too. A sharp *crunch!* before the snow and surface give way.

The ice opens up. Water and darkness and cold lay claim to everything.

Then Wren Peters wakes up.

2

Wren is late.

It's not her fault, of course. A weird dream in the middle of the night that leaves you sweaty and freaked out will do that to you. Particularly if you can't fall *back* asleep, and in turn require a double tap on the snooze button at six thirty.

It didn't help that Wren's twelve-year-old sister, Angelica, thought it would be funny to steal all of Wren's bras and hide them. *For old times' sake*, she cackled gleefully before fleeing the room. And while a year ago, this would have made Wren plot revenge in the form of stolen Barbies, now Angie's only love is her Tamagotchi—which is much harder to track down and steal.

In other words: not worth the effort.

So, with her boobs bound by an ancient sports bra (that has three holes in it), Wren is a whopping fifteen minutes late staggering to the green Dodge Caravan her mom lets her borrow while she's home from college. And her "good luck" streak

continues when she discovers there are no parking spots near the Good Day Café—which makes zero sense, because it's two days after Christmas and no one on Blackbird Island leaves their house unless they have to. So, by the time Wren finally *does* find a parallel spot, she has wasted another ten minutes.

And now here she is, where icy sidewalks are forcing her to lose *more* time thanks to Darwinian survival and all that. Sure, Wren might have some natural dancer's grace after a lifetime of training at the Blackbird Dance Collective, but an inch of shimmery blue on concrete is a real dexterity equalizer.

Man, Wren is going to be so pissed if she misses her chance at a slice of pie and a mug of coffee. She has to spend all day at the Blackbird community center to help set up for the New Year's Eve dance recital, and a girl needs calories to get through that, thanks.

Dark windows streak by as Wren carefully passes. Her reflection stutters by too, a smear of red because her coat is a scarlet so vivid it would make a cardinal proud. She passes the closed-up ice cream parlor, Blackbird Scoops. The shuttered bookstore, Bookies & Bobs. The Elegant Island, Rafe's Bistro, the Pudmuddle. Occasionally, Wren passes a store that is either so integral to the community, they can't close in winter (like Hal's Hardware or Big Bear Sporting Goods), or whose owner is so stubborn, they will die before they put out a Closed sign (Opal Bay Bags, Jasmine's Spices & Wines).

Wind off the lake cuts against Wren. The island is under a Winter Storm Warning since last night, but that's not unusual. And unlike people on the mainland, who have to worry about

commutes and traffic and cancellations, people on Blackbird just *get by*, no matter what Mother Nature flings their way.

In fact, that's basically the motto of this frozen island fourteen miles south of the Canadian border: *You'd better figure it out because the Coast Guard won't be here for a while.*

When at last the Good Day Café comes into view through Wren's watery eyes, she's shocked to see the diner is overflowing with patrons. No seriously, they're snaking out the door like entrails from an abdomen.

Which can only mean one thing: the Blackbird Brigade is having a meeting. Part fundraising committee, part charitable outreach program, the Brigade fills in about a hundred gaps across the island that the summer tourists always leave behind.

Wren walks faster. She doesn't mind the fundraising club—in fact, she likes most of its members, even if some of them picked on her when she was a kid—but they are noisy, nosy, and prone to eating all the pie before Wren can get a slice. And come on: *they* can all go to the Sullivan Pie Pantry whenever they want. Meanwhile, this is Wren's *only* chance to savor the buttery crust and oozing orchard fruits.

Once at the entrance, where heat and noise gust against Wren in equal measure, she boogies, then line dances through the crowds. Then it's a grapevine and two chaîné turns before she finally plops down in a booth by the window.

One member of the Inseparables (Wren's three-person dance squad) is already waiting—because Ingrid Sommers is *never* late. Meanwhile, the final member, Ji-hyun Lee, is late because Ji-hyun Lee is *always* late. Even a semester away at college and

strict dance classes worth actual credits have changed nothing about her.

Wren slumps opposite Ingrid.

"You're later than usual," Ingrid says, a blond eyebrow rising.

"Ugh" is all Wren replies as she peels off layers. It's *so* cold outside, and *so hot* in here. Wren can only assume her pale cheeks are as flushed as Ingrid's—which means they're probably as bright as the jacket Wren shoves toward the window.

"I barely slept," she finally explains, yanking off her mustard-colored scarf and dropping it by the napkin dispenser. "I had one of those dreams where you're being chased but you can't run or get ahead, you know?"

Ingrid's eyebrows slant toward sympathetic. She pulls a puckered *I just ate Sour Patch Kids* face. "Sounds like a stress dream. You *do* keep messing up that turn in the dance routine."

"Thanks for rubbing it in." Wren glowers. Although to be fair, Ingrid's not wrong.

After adding her powder-blue hat and matching gloves to her pile of discarded winter gear, Wren cranes her neck toward the central counter, searching for a sign that bleached-blond Mandy is coming to serve them. But all she finds are a lot of faces she's already seen at least twice since getting home from Alvin College a week ago.

"Have you seen Gilly?"

Ingrid shakes her head. Her sour face pinches tighter. "No. I haven't seen your sister. I did order us pie, though. And thank

god I did! Literally, the *whole* Brigade just stampeded in right after me, and I haven't seen Mandy since."

"Hmmm" is all Wren replies. Her older sister's absence is probably no big deal. Just Gilly double-tapping her own snooze button. Nothing to worry about. Nothing that'll lead to drama or Gilly's temper bombing free . . .

"She's probably just late," Wren says quietly, rounding back toward Ingrid across the table. "She has that new cat, Frankie, that's always—"

"—keeping her up all night. Yeah, we know." The third member of the girls' trifecta plops onto the bench next to Ingrid. Ji-hyun's cheeks glow pink, and her warm black hair is a staticky halo as she rips off her brown beanie. Meanwhile, Ingrid's fiercely hair-sprayed blond bun shows nary a hair out of line.

It wouldn't *dare*.

Wren, as the "goldilocks" of their crew, has a long ponytail that's not as chaotically tentacular as Ji-hyun's but definitely not tamed like Ingrid's. In fact, Wren is forever trapped between the two ends of these very opposing best friend spectrums. She even looks like a blend of Ingrid and Ji-hyun: not so pale and tall as Ingrid or so dark and solid as Ji-hyun. Her hair is a muddy brown, her skin prone to freckles, and her eyes *almost* hazel at the right angle.

"Look." Ji-hyun shoves a damp newspaper onto the table. "Did you guys see this? I bet this is why the Brigade is meeting."

The girls huddle in to study the headline: *Moose Track Resort Ends Bid to Buy Campground*.

"Oh lord." Wren's toes curl and point in her boots. "I bet you're right." She's surprised Gilly didn't mention this at family dinner two nights ago. Although, as Wren quickly scans the article, she realizes that might be because Gilly didn't know. The deal only fell through two days ago when a new buyer came in—a buyer that isn't named in the article.

As if on cue, a whistle cuts across the café. Everyone quiets. The only sound is a clinking spoon. A sniffle. A clearing throat.

Wren swivels her head, her fingers absently braiding her ponytail. *Weave, braid, weave. Unravel. Repeat.* Her friends' faces blur together, as does everyone else's in the café as her eyes root onto a lean, muscled guy now standing on the central bar of the café.

Not next to it but literally *on* it. Which means he has to hunch his head not to bang wreaths and holiday streamers dangling from the ceiling.

This would be Chase Sullivan, the second oldest (and fully shortest) of the four Sullivan boys.

He wears his usual gray mechanics coveralls, but they're folded over at the waist. His white undershirt is fresh, his dark curls damp from a morning shower. Faded grease and oil mark the uniform, giving him the look of a hardworking blue-collar man—who also happens to be handsome enough to model occasionally on the side. (Why, yes, that *is* him on pages 4, 6, and 9 of the Big Bear Sporting Goods catalog.)

"Blackbird Brigade!" Chase declares. "Thank you for gathering on such short notice—especially with our annual New

Year's Festival about to begin. Now I'm sure you all saw the news about the campground—"

"Screw those guys!"

"We sent 'em packing!"

"Run those millionaires back to the mainland!"

"—and I wanted to assemble everyone so I can, as your esteemed leader, offer a huge thank-you for your efforts." He offers a handsome smirk, eyebrows waggling. "You called up the bastards, sent letters, and made their corporate lives hell for almost two months. And while I don't know *who* bought the campground, I *can* say the lands will remain under Blackbird ownership."

This earns a series of shrieks and hoots, claps and howls. Including from Ingrid and Ji-hyun, who whistle and wave their fists along with everyone else. Not Wren, though. She keeps searching out the window. Keeps glancing toward the door. *Gilly, Gilly, where is Gilly?*

"Don't play coy!" shouts someone near the bar. "You know who bought the lands, don't you, Chase?"

"Yeah," comes another voice. "Who is it?"

Chase smiles his confident Sullivan smile. "Why, it could be a ghost, for all I know. Could even be Airman Kelly himself! Weirder things have happened on Blackbird Island."

"Airman Kelly," Ji-hyun echoes with a snort. "I don't think ghosts can buy property."

"Chase just doesn't want to tell." Ingrid frowns, Ji-hyun nods, and Wren continues preserving her silence. Her intestines

are veritable knots now. She almost wants to skip the incoming pie. (Almost.) And her sister's absence is starting to feel *intentional* instead of simply a forgotten alarm or annoying cat.

As if maybe Chase made sure, somehow, that Gilly wouldn't be here . . . It certainly wouldn't be the first time a Sullivan has pulled something like that. It's what they always do to Wren's family, and what they've always done for the last forty years.

"You do me proud," Chase declares now, raising his hands to quiet the room once more. It takes a few seconds—and he poses on the bar at *just* the right angle to show off his biceps while he waits.

"Last thing, before we all disperse to feast and then set up our festival: if any of you have changed your phone numbers, I need to know for the directory. I'm not playing phone tag with you again, Kenny." He shoots a keen blue stare at a man by the bar, which earns a roar of laughter in reply.

Then Chase's easy smile returns. "Thanks, Brigade. Enjoy that Sullivan pie—baked for you by my mama only yesterday—and tip Mandy well. Chase out." He crooks over to spring down. Spry and graceful like the hockey star he was before he graduated high school four years ago.

A few people shout as he descends. "Thanks, Chase!"

"You're the best, Chase!"

"Blackbird Brigade, ho!"

The young man vanishes from Wren's view. And in his stead, a woman bursts into Wren's line of sight, shoving through the bodies. It's Mandy (the café owner), her hair recently bleached and bright as the snow on a sunny day.

"Here, girls," she has to shout because the volume has keyed right back up to fever pitch. "I got your pies, but you'll have to wait on the coffee. I ran out, and the fresh pot's not done brewing."

"No worries," Wren shouts back, while Ingrid flashes a thumbs-up and Ji-hyun makes grabby hands for the closest slice. "We can wait!"

Mandy nods absently before vanishing whence she came.

The girls grab their forks and start chowing. It tastes like pure heaven . . . but only for a few bites.

Because Gillian *still* isn't here, and Wren isn't stupid; she knows there can only be one reason for that. And the name for it is, indeed, Chase Sullivan.

It's now 7:47. The girls will leave in three minutes to head for the nearby community center for a day of volunteering for their beloved Dance Collective.

When they still lived here, the Inseparables followed this routine every Saturday—just replace *community center* with *dance studio*. Rain or shine, all the way up until graduation, the girls never missed their pie and coffee at the Good Day Café before a day of ballet, tap, jazz, and hip-hop. And although the three of them have put serious efforts into it, they've yet to find a suitable replacement for the Good Day near the Alvin College campus.

What can Wren say? Absolutely nothing beats Mandy's coffee or the Sullivan Orchards pie (although Wren would *never* admit that to a Sullivan).

Bills and coins gather at the center of the table, accumulating like a deeply low-stakes poker game, to the tune of ten dollars and seventy-six cents (plus a two-dollar tip for Mandy). The Sullivan tab, it would seem, only extends to Brigade members.

"I ate too much," Ingrid groans as she adds three crisp dollar bills to the pile. "I should have worn stretchier pants."

"You always say that." Wren digs through her coat pocket to find her money. "Yet you never wear them."

"Because you never remind me."

"Ten, fifteen, forty . . . either of you have a quarter?" Ji-hyun has dumped out a handful of loose change that was, until thirty seconds ago, clanking around at the bottom of her own pockets.

Wren slides a quarter her way. It's literally the only coin she has (lucky, that). The café door chimes. Cold air gusts against Wren's back. Then she watches as her best friends' faces change.

"Gilly, twelve o'clock," Ji-hyun says.

"No, she's six o'clock," Ingrid counters. "Because she's directly behind Wren. That means she's at *your* twelve o'clock."

"Yes, which is obviously what I'm talking about, Ingrid."

"But that's not helpful to Wren. She needs to imagine her own clock."

Wren doesn't hear the rest of her best friends' squabbling. Onstage, their choreography might make them a unit. But offstage, sparks always fly. And Wren doesn't have time to play mediator right now. If Gillian is *here*, then the one thing Wren has been bracing for all morning is about to unfold.

Time drags as Wren spins toward the café door and sees that yes, her sister has come inside—and yes, Gillian wears rage, destruction, and hellfire in those glittering gray eyes of hers. She spots Wren and sneers in a manner that declares, *Don't you dare interfere, Little Bird*. Her hair is an uncombed mess. Her flannel shirt buttons aren't aligned.

Gone is Wren's grace or any cohesion in her muscles at all as she grabbles from the booth to intercept. It's like a tranquilizer has been injected into all of her veins. If she tries to shout *No!*, it'll come out like it does in *The Sandlot*.

In other words, really deep and really long: *NOOOOO!*

Wren shouts it anyway. (It actually sounds perfectly normal.) Then she trips on her red coat, not knowing a sleeve was wrapped around her ankle.

She *kersplats* on the tiles right beside her booth.

By the time she's on her feet again, Gilly has reached Chase's booth—and the fireworks have begun. But, like, the *epic* kind with the 1812 Overture to play alongside them.

"How dare you, Chase." Gilly says these words with lethal precision. She may have only just rolled out of bed, but she has a way of bundling all of her energy inward and then ejecting it outward in deadly lines like a laser beam. No using her hands for emphasis, no quavering words or shaking limbs. "How dare you omit me from the call sheet this morning."

"I did nothing of the sort, Gilly." The way Chase says this, as if he's as cool as a cucumber pulled fresh from a freezer, makes Gilly's accusation sound absurd.

But everyone on Blackbird knows it isn't.

"I've been a member of this Brigade longer than you, Chase, and if anyone on this island has experience with *people grabbing land*, I think that might be me and my family."

Someone coughs near the bar.

It jolts Wren out of a stunned horror she hadn't realized had petrified her muscles. She kicks back into motion.

"Gilly, Gilly." Chase sets down a fork that still has pie on it. "You're overreacting. I'm quite sure you were on the call-around sheet, so someone must have forgotten—"

"Oh, piss off, Chase. We both know that's crap, and I'm tired of you acting like you were elected to this position fair and square."

Chase slides to the end of his seat. Which is honestly brave. Gilly is truly terrifying when she's worked up. Like, you can see exactly why she was awarded Most Likely to Kick Your Ass at her graduation three years ago.

"We all know how you got to the top of the Brigade, just as we all know—every damned person in this café knows!—that you didn't include me on the call around."

"Gilly," Wren says quietly. She has finally reached her older sister's side, but *wow* does she wish she weren't here. "Gilly, hey, um, maybe we could have this conversation elsewhere?" She touches Gillian's elbow.

But Wren might as well be clutching at a black hole for all that Gilly notices. Chase is out of his seat now, and with his height and breadth, he has the presence of a black bear. He might not be as tall as his three brothers, but he still has a solid four inches over Gilly (and Wren).

And like most Sullivans, he radiates Pure Asshole.

"Still harping about that election, Gilly? Can't accept that no one wanted you to lead our esteemed group because your family is filled with—"

"Don't say it, Chase."

"—unstable, unreliable—"

"I mean it. You finish that sentence, and I will not be held accountable for what comes next."

"—drunks," he finishes, and the look in his eyes isn't just triumphant, it's cruel. Evil prince, wicked fairy-tale cruel. "Including you."

Gilly is practically vibrating now.

But then, so is Wren, and without realizing what she's doing, she's suddenly shouting: "You're a real son of a bitch, Chase, you know that? A real *son of a bitch*. You think just because you're a Sullivan, it makes you better than everyone else on this island. But you're not. You're just a loser who uses his words and his family money to compensate for an absence of . . . Well." Wren flashes her canines in her most vicious smile. "I think we all know what you're missing and where." She grabs her sister's arm. Not gently this time but in a brutal grip that Gilly can't resist.

And Gilly doesn't try to, either. It's clear she's finished speaking her own mind and is quite pleased by what Wren has contributed to the showdown. She even lets her little sister turn her and guide her all the way to the café's exit.

In seconds, they're both stomping into the vicious cold of a Winter Storm Warning.

"What a son of a *bitch*," Wren repeats. She has no jacket, but she's so hyped up on adrenaline now—and hate—that she doesn't feel the fangs of twenty-one-degree cold with an eleven-degree wind chill. "What a fu—"

"Language," Gilly snaps before Wren can finish this. Although she does slide a wry smile Wren's way. "Accurate language, but *language* all the same, Little Bird."

Wren sighs. Her exhale is solid white. Her sister is such a strange juxtaposition. Gilly can be a miniature Bigfoot when her temper gets going—but she also tries *so hard* to keep that temper in check. Or at least she has for the last two years.

Too many wild choices got her arrested when she was nineteen, and ever since then, she has focused hard on never swearing, never drinking, never dating, and instead redirecting her famed temper into making pottery or doing renovations on their grandpa's old house.

But throw the Sullivans into the picture? Well, then it's hard for *anyone* to keep their cool, and Gilly's best attempts at calm never succeed for long.

Gilly aims toward her double-parked Bronco. She left it running, which means it, too, is exhaling white into the morning.

She clearly didn't plan to be here long.

"I'm sorry Chase didn't call you," Wren offers as she and Gilly navigate a mound of snow that has piled up at the curb. "It's not true, you know—what he said about the family being drunks. And . . . about you."

"Oh, I know it's not." Gilly smiles again, but it's a grimmer

one. Wind pulls at her hair, which is a warmer honey shade than Wren's—because Gillian Peters is absolutely the family beauty.

Wren and Angelica, meanwhile, are like those extra bits of clay that get discarded beside Gilly's pottery wheel. Like maybe there's potential in that clay, but in all likelihood, it'll never amount to much beyond shapeless lumps.

"I know I've made plenty of mistakes," Gilly continues, "but just remember this, Little Bird: spite is a great motivator for getting your shit together. And I have a *lot* of spite for that family."

"Language." Wren smiles now too. A laughing smile as she and Gilly are finally over the snow and to the rumbling Bronco that used to belong to their Grandpa Hank.

Gilly snorts. "You can go back to the café now, Little Bird. You're literally shivering."

Wren winces. She doesn't want to go back. Partly because she's worried she'll say something a whole *heck* of a lot worse to Chase . . . but mostly because she's mortified by what she *did* say. She's supposed to be the mild-mannered sister. The one *stopping* scenes, not contributing to them.

Gilly pauses long enough to give Wren a side hug. She smells odd. Like vinegar and rotten eggs. But before Wren can ask about it, Gilly says: "I'll see you at dinner tomorrow night, Little Bird. I told Dad I'd make that rub for the ribs."

"Oooh." Wren is instantly distracted. Wind slices against her. "You mean the one with the cayenne and garlic?"

"Bingo." The Bronco door opens. Heat billows out, smelling

like perfume and the cigarettes Grandpa used to smoke two decades ago. Gilly bangs one snowy boot against the doorjamb before clambering up. Then she bangs the other boot. "Bye, Sis."

The door shuts. Ice and slush crunch down. Yet before Wren can huddle back to the café, the driver's window creak-creaks down and suddenly Gilly is grinning one of her mischievous (and dangerous) grins. "Hey, Little Bird: thanks for defending me. Just so you know, I've never been more proud of you. Those Sullivans might have numbers, but our family? We've got sass—and we look so good using it."

3

The full story of the Sullivan-and-Peters enmity goes something like this: Grandpa Hank and Maurice Sullivan were best friends growing up. When the US joined the fight against Hitler, Hank and Maurice enlisted. But whereas Maurice's naval posting sent him to a base in the Caribbean, where he almost never saw fighting, Grandpa Hank got sent to the Pacific. He saw too *much* fighting, and he came back a different man. Not just from the injury that left him partly lame, but his mind was never the same, either.

He drank too much. He worked too little. And after a decade of that, his wife (Wren's grandma) left him. She took their five kids and moved into her mom's house in Crier's Creek, on the mainland.

It wasn't pretty; it was definitely the lowest point in Grandpa Hank's life.

So when his best friend swooped in and offered to buy up

some worthless land Hank had? When Maurice said, *You can't build on these marshes. Not with all those new wetland protections in place. Let me take this acreage off your hands. Then you can use that money to get your family back.*

Well, Hank was beyond grateful for the support. His family's hundreds of acres, situated at the northern chunk of the island, were indeed worthless thanks to government rules.

Except, of course, it turned out the property wasn't worthless at all. Thanks to Maurice's own time in the navy and some lingering connections, he knew the US government was looking for land. Because now it was the 1950s, the Cold War was just getting underway, and in case you haven't noticed: the US is big. To cover all that ground with their anti-Russian radars, they needed lots of outposts in all sorts of remote areas.

And given that the government doesn't need to care too much about their own regulations regarding wetland habitats . . .

Sure, Maurice Sullivan. We'll lease that new land of yours for our airfield.

Maurice made out like royalty the day his government contract came through. And his family went on to such power and prominence on the island that they really *did* become the rural Midwestern version of princes and kings and lordlings.

They still are today, too, along with all their kids and their grandkids.

Grandpa Hank, meanwhile, was filled with such a fiery wrath on the day he learned he'd been tricked that he quit drinking. He'd already been working to clean up his life, and this sneaky, underhanded, no-good bit of backstabbing (Grandpa's

words) shifted the whole process into overdrive.

Eventually, Grandma Marie and the kids did come back (yay!). But the Peters family never went on to wealth or power or prominence. In fact, out of Hank's five kids, only Wren's mom and Uncle Bill stayed on Blackbird. All of Wren's cousins have now flown the nest . . .

And now Wren has done the same too. She just spent her first semester at Alvin College, and while yes, it's true she hasn't declared a major, surely she'll find *something* that interests her eventually.

She's good at math. And dance. And everyone tells her that gives her prospects for . . . something.

Because abandoning college to come back to Blackbird would be madness. Right? Deciding to forgo student loans and just return home would be *madness*. There aren't many prospects for little birds on this tiny island, especially ones with *Peters* as a last name. And just because Gillian made it work by getting her Realtor's license last year doesn't mean Wren can do the same.

Yet here Wren is, home for the holidays and with a swell in her chest. A dread in her abdomen that feels like a gut punch every time she glances at the calendar in the kitchen and sees her diminishing countdown . . .

She likes college.

She *likes* college.

She likes the campus dance studio and the classrooms, and she *loves* performing at the fancy Moira St. Clair Auditorium with Ji-hyun and Ingrid at her side and an audience full of faces she has never seen before and will probably never see again.

And maybe if Wren keeps telling herself that, she'll eventually start believing it.

Thanks to her best friends, Wren is saved the indignity of facing Chase Sullivan a second time. Ingrid covers the remaining cost of Wren's pie, Ji-hyun grabs Wren's gear, and then—because they are truly awesome—they let Wren spend their four-minute drive in the minivan bellowing a rant they've heard countless times before.

A rant filled with a *great* deal of "language." Which Ingrid and Ji-hyun are always more than happy to add to during any pauses where Wren might need to catch her breath. No, they don't actually have any skin in this ancient feud between the Sullivan and Peters families, but they're *obviously* loyal to the Peters clan.

By the time Wren gets them to the community center parking lot, she is feeling a bit less *spitting-rage-y*. By the time she has parked, she is downgraded to just plain *frothy*. The Winter Storm Warning means the sky blends into the gray walls of the sprawling community center complex, where the only "color" is an enormous blackbird painted on the eastern wall. And while this island might be a famed artists' haven, whoever painted *that* had clearly seen more bald eagles in their lifetime than blackbirds.

By the time the girls bustle into the cold toward the community center, Wren has downgraded from *frothy* into simply *ashamed*. Because why did she let Chase bait her like that? And in front of so many people, no less. Now the Peters name will once more be wagging off tongues across the island.

Wren's shame only magnifies as she and her friends trudge onto the sidewalk leading to the main complex—because from here, there's no avoiding the hockey rink. Which means there's also no avoiding a second Sullivan brother as he leans over the rink's wall with all the ease of a longtime center and barks orders at the youth hockey team skating their eight-year-old hearts out.

Of the four brothers, Archer is both the tallest and the prettiest—and also the closest in age to Wren, having been one grade above her their entire lives. His dark curls are a match to Chase's at this distance, but Wren knows if she were up close, she'd find redder lips and a forever flush on his cheeks.

In combination with his long lashes and startlingly blue eyes, Archer has always had a real Snow White vibe going on. But, like, Snow White with a jawline.

Mirror, mirror on the wall.

It doesn't escape Wren's notice that Ji-hyun and Ingrid chassé to her right side and form a shield. Not that Archer is paying any attention to the girls. He's wholly focused on the array of children scrambling across the rink in some kind of pass-the-puck drill.

Then the girls are past the rink; the *clack, clack, scrape* of pucks and sticks and floundering skates fade; and the community center's main entrance looms. Icicles hang over the double doors like torture devices. Blue salt eats at ice on pavement.

Moments later, as they push inside, heat thick with the fragrance of bleach and wood polish washes across them. Also voices. *So* many voices attached to *so* many bodies. Because

the residents of Blackbird take their annual New Year's Festival very seriously. It's *the* fundraiser that keeps the community center running year-round. It's a two-day affair filled with art booths, charity auctions, a dance recital, a hockey tournament, and a full-on New Year's Eve Ball (complete with disco decorations and live music).

Hands down, it's one of the most fun events of the year . . . and *also* one of the biggest vectors for island gossip. Which means that before lunchtime today, everyone will know exactly what Wren said to Chase in the Good Day Café.

Ugh. She should have slept more. Stupid stress dream. She's usually so *careful* with her temper.

Once inside the community center, Wren peels off layers as the girls aim right, toward the theater. This is always the problem in winter: you're freezing your tits off, but as soon as you get indoors, the heat suffocates. She's literally sweating by the time she reaches the backstage area and tosses her winter gear onto an accumulating pile of wool, down, polyester, and fleece.

Then she twists toward the stage, where a spotlight already shines and twelve girls in fluffy costumes skip by.

Wren's stomach sinks low. Her throat pinches tight. And for reasons she really can't explain—and doesn't want to—she finds her eyes aching and static tickling down her neck.

She scratches at the static. Then scratches again when it doesn't spark away but instead spreads. It's like Frankie the cat's tongue but all over her. In her ears. In her mouth. Her throat, her eyeballs—

"Come on, Wren." Ingrid grabs hold of Wren's elbow. And

just like that, the static vanishes. No spark. Simply gone. "Let's find Miss Justine," Ingrid continues, "and see where she wants us helping."

"Yep," Wren answers, too shrill. Too fake. "Let's go."

It turns out that Miss Justine wants help with set assembly and taping the stage for various starting positions. The hours bleed by with Wren and her besties pas de bourrée–ing and glissading around kindergartners and middle schoolers, around beginners in tap shoes and advanced students en pointe.

Wren has to forcibly resist her (frequent) urges to offer assistance to Holly Richards, who keeps flubbing the landing for her pirouettes en dedans. Or to Tracy King, whose cramp rolls are *not* landing with the proper rhythm. And oh my goodness, Evan Jacobs! That guy is so *not* pointing hard enough on those arabesques!

But Wren squashes down her criticisms. She's *not* a teacher at the Dance Collective. She is *not* a dancer here any longer. She is just a volunteer, and in eight days she will return to Alvin College, where she will be happy, happy, happy!

At noon, Holly's mom arrives armed with pizza boxes, and Wren ducks out long enough to find the bathroom. The rest of the community center is abuzz by now, with volunteers assembling booths and stalls for the art fair, a stage for the musicians, and the expected disco balls and strobe lights for maximum dancing pleasure in the gym.

Twice on her way to the bathroom, Wren catches someone staring at her.

One of those times, she also hears her sister's name audibly whispered: *Gillian Peters—did you hear what happened this morning?*

Wren wishes she'd brought Ji-hyun with her, who'd snap *Get a life.* Or even Ingrid, who'd do her best *I'm disappointed in you* glare. Instead, Wren herself just hunches down. Like always.

Because it's one thing to enjoy being onstage and performing by choice. It's another to be forced into a scene because of the Sullivans. *But were you* really *forced, Little Bird? You didn't have to snap at Chase like Gilly did.*

"Hey, Wren. Wait up."

Her footsteps skitter. Her stomach drops to her toes, and Wren suddenly feels so physically ill, she just might vomit like that one and *only* time she rode a roller coaster at Cedar Point.

Wren debates marching on and pretending she didn't hear . . . but then the voice calls out again: "Hey, Wren. You got a sec?"

She has no choice but to turn and face Archer Sullivan.

"Your brother started it," she says before he can reach her.

Archer's pace skips a beat. His dark eyebrows pinch tight. His winter-pale face scrunches up. "Huh? Started what?"

Now Wren is the one to let her face scrunch as Archer comes to a stop before her. He's dressed in a gray hockey jersey and track pants. A packed duffel hangs from his left shoulder, while he grips a hockey stick in his right hand.

"You mean," Wren asks, "you *don't* want to talk about what happened at the Good Day?"

"Oh no." Archer rocks back. "Do I want to know what happened at the Good Day?"

"Probably not." Wren's scrunching becomes a wince. "I might have called your brother a son of a bitch."

A laugh bursts from Archer's mouth—except it's not *quite* a laugh because he never smiles. "I bet he didn't like that."

"No, but he deserved it."

"Probably." Archer's fingers tighten around the stick. "But that's not why I was looking for you. I actually saw you pass the rink, but you didn't hear me calling your name."

"Oh . . . no. I didn't. So . . . what do you want?" She doesn't mean for this to come out as suspicious-sounding as it does, but also . . .

She and Archer aren't exactly friends. They're not enemies, either—not like all the other Sullivan and Peters members are. Instead, they've simply gone their entire lives pretending the other doesn't exist. And as much as Wren might hate the Sullivans *on principle*, she's never had any reason to directly focus that hatred on Archer.

Because it's kind of impossible to. There's just nothing there to hate, and Archer Sullivan's only real sin is that he's boring. Like *ploddingly* boring. A Good Boy™ who always got good grades growing up. Who is always blandly polite to everyone on the island. He never talks much, his smile never reaches his eyes, and if there's anything moderately interesting happening inside those brilliantly blue irises (that look perpetually sleepy—as if even *he* finds himself boring), Wren has never seen a sign of it.

"I read that essay you wrote," Archer explains. "The one in the *Blackbird Gazette*? About island smuggling during Prohibition?"

Wren's attention sharpens. This is quite literally the last thing she would have expected a Sullivan to bring up. Or *anyone* for that matter.

"It was a good summary," Archer continues. "Concise and well researched."

"Um . . . thanks?"

He scrubs a hand through his thick, dark curls. His blue eyes flick sideways. "Yeah, well, I thought you might want to know that Louie at the Historical Society buys essays about the island. I don't think he pays much, but . . ." He shrugs. "I figure a few hundred bucks is better than nothing."

A few hundred bucks is *way* better than nothing. Especially since Wren's student loans feel more terrifying by the day, and she has no idea how she's going to pay for her living expenses once her scholarship money expires at the end of this year. And while Archer might not know about her financials, this is still a genuinely thoughtful thing for him to have shared with her.

"Thanks, Archer." Wren smiles. A *real* smile, even if her stomach is still waiting for the final loop the loop on this roller coaster. "I'll look into that."

His forever blush brightens. His hooded eyes, however, do not. "No problem, Wren." He nods in a way that is both an acknowledgment *and* a goodbye rolled into one. Then he and his lean, long frame stride away.

Wren is about to follow suit and *finally* reach her intended destination (wow, she really needs to pee!), when Ji-hyun

erupts beside her. Like, literally *erupts* in a spray of wild hair and her signature Country Apple body spray.

"Squeeeeeeeee," she screeches into Wren's ear while her hand forcibly claws at Wren's bicep. "Squeeeeeeee!"

"Whoa!" Wren staggers back. "Where did you come from . . . ?" She trails off when she sees what Ji-hyun is holding. "Holy crap! *You* got a white rose?"

"Don't sound so surprised." Ji-hyun swats Wren with it, releasing a burst of sweet fragrance. "You know I've been on a mission—and look. It has paid off. A volunteer from the Roses for Hope booth just delivered it to me." She shoves a card at Wren, who hastily accepts it.

"'Dear Ji-hyun,'" Wren reads. "'Roses are red, violets are blue. Please go to the New Year's Eve Ball with me—will you say I do?'" Wren gives a low whistle. "I have a few notes on the meter here, but *A* for effort."

Ji-hyun swats the rose at Wren again. "I told you manifestation was real, didn't I? And yet again, it has paid off."

Wren doesn't point out that in addition to Ji-hyun's daily recitations of *Tyler Goodall will invite me to the New Year's Eve Ball* for the past two weeks, she has also shown up at his family's coffee shop almost daily. And then flirted with him. *Hard*.

"Have you accepted?"

"Pshhhh. A girl can't be *that* easy to get, Wren. I'll let him sweat it until the end of the day. He's out on the rink right now anyway, prepping for the tournament. But I'll pop by the coffee

shop this afternoon." She bounces a shoulder. "You know how it is."

Wren absolutely does *not* know how it is. She has literally only ever had three boyfriends, and they all proved to be incompatible for her in assorted ways. (Jeffrey: couldn't kiss; Pete: cheated on her; Mark: realized he was not into girls.)

"He's going to be freaking out all day, you know."

"Which is the point." Ji-hyun wags the rose in Wren's face. "I'm sure Ingrid will say I'm being 'unnecessarily cruel.' But she's had the same boyfriend for six years, so what does she know about boys?"

A lot actually, Wren wants to say. Because Ingrid—unlike Ji-hyun the Serial Dater and Wren the Lone Wolf—is the only one of their trio to actually maintain a healthy relationship for longer than two weeks. (And knowing Cory, he will have bought Ingrid at least a dozen of these Roses for Hope from the booth set up in the hall.)

But Wren wisely keeps her mouth shut. Because this has always been the problem of being the "goldilocks" of their three bears: Wren is often left keeping the peace somewhere in the middle.

"Come on," Ji-hyun now commands, folding her card back into its envelope. "Ingrid and I already ate, but she saved you a slice. And then of course put paper towels all over the top to absorb the grease." Eye roll. "What doesn't she understand about the *grease is the best part*?"