

Chapter Seventeen

Mariel

Mariel stood behind the Altitude Club bar, wiping a woven napkin over its surface with brusque motions. Her coworker Haleigh glanced over and pursed her lips in concern.

“You don’t need to do that,” Haleigh said, unnecessarily. They both knew that the bar self-cleaned with UV microrays every thirty seconds.

Mariel gave a jerky nod of thanks and let her hand fall to her side, where it clenched into a fist. Ever since Eris’s death, she’d felt like she was being chased by something acrid and burning, and the only way to escape it was to never fall still.

That was why Mariel had taken on more shifts at Altitude. It helped, working until she was exhausted: otherwise she would toss and turn for hours before finally drifting off, to dream in fitful snatches about Eris. But at least in her dreams, Mariel saw Eris with perfect clarity, as if her subconscious remembered things about her that her waking mind had forgotten. Mariel hated those dreams—because she had to wake up from them.

Mariel was terrified of forgetting Eris—and yet she could feel it happening, one slow detail at a time.

Haleigh knew all about Eris, of course. They were friends, or coworkers, or a little of both; tending bar fell in a grey liminal space between work and personal life. When Mariel first started at Altitude, Haleigh, who was only two years older, had taken it upon herself to teach her the ropes. She’d shown Mariel how to scan items for the food-prep stations, how to thread plates onto the dishwasher line, how to slip extra avocado fries from the machine while they were still cooling. Mariel had to admit that she would have been lost without her.

She had liked working in the kitchens. There was something deeply calming about it, all that stainless steel and ruthless machine efficiency. A few years ago, Haleigh had insisted they apply for promotions, to bartender. Mariel wasn’t thrilled at the prospect; she had no desire to make small talk with a bunch of highliers. But she and Haleigh soon settled into a pattern, with Haleigh taking the orders and Mariel crafting the drinks. And Mariel had to admit that the pay was much better this side of the kitchen door.

Her tablet buzzed; Mariel slipped it out of her black skinny jeans and frowned down at the new message.

Party on Saturday, you in? It was her cousin, José.

Sorry, I’m busy, Mariel typed automatically. She wasn’t ready to face one of Jose’s infamous parties. The last one she’d been to, Mariel had brought Eris.

“Everything okay?” Haleigh murmured. There was a shade of significance to her question that Mariel ignored.

She knew that Haleigh had been nursing a crush on her for years now. Which was why she was careful to never, ever reciprocate, no matter how easy it would be to let Haleigh be her meaningless rebound. It wouldn't be meaningless for Haleigh.

But every now and then, when Haleigh glanced over at her, Mariel's breath would catch. Because Haleigh *looked* a little like Eris, with her wide-set grey eyes and long mermaid hair—but a blunter, less dramatic version of Eris, as if you were seeing Eris through dirty flexiglass. It was uncanny.

“Just my cousin,” Mariel answered, a beat too late.

“José? How is he?” Haleigh smiled, and Mariel relaxed a bit, because when she smiled—her features broadening, the freckles on her nose darkening against her blush—Haleigh looked much less like Eris.

Before Mariel could answer, a group of teenage girls had turned the corner and headed directly toward the bar, marching arm-in-arm like some kind of uniformed squadron. They were wearing the blue-and-white plaid skirts of the Berkeley School, the same high school that Eris had attended.

Mariel realized with a start that she recognized one of them. The slender black girl at the center of the group was Leda Cole. Eris's half-sister.

Just before she died, Eris had learned that Leda's dad was actually her dad too. It was a secret that tore apart the fabric of Eris's family, made her question everything about herself—who she was, and what she really wanted. It was the reason Eris and Mariel had fought, the night that Eris died. Which Mariel still hadn't forgiven herself for.

She studied Leda for a breathless moment, searching her features for some trace of Eris, some proof of their shared DNA. Yet she found none. It was impossible to see anything of Eris in haughty, pointed Leda.

Or maybe Mariel didn't *want* to see Eris in Leda.

“Isn't it time for your break? I can handle this group,” Mariel heard herself offer, turning quickly to Haleigh. She felt fueled by a sudden white-hot energy. This was her chance—to watch them, try to find out what had really happened, that night on the roof.

“Are you sure?” They both knew it wasn't like Mariel to volunteer to handle a group like this, alone.

Mariel forced her features into what she hoped was an innocent expression. “You always let me take my break first; let me cover for you for a change. Besides,” she added, “I'm craving cookies, and you're the only one who knows how to get the oven to the right setting. Please?”

“Fine,” Haleigh conceded, and slipped through the door to the kitchens.

Mariel turned back toward the group of girls, studying them with burning curiosity. Next to Leda was an Asian girl with a slick ponytail and angular earrings, and another girl with soft dark hair pulled into a headband. They had all rolled up the sleeves of their Oxford shirts, to reveal delicate charm bracelets or stacked infinity bangles.

“What can I get for you?” she asked, interrupting their conversation.

The girls looked up sharply. “I’ll have a soda water,” Leda decided, and glanced at her friends. “Actually, make it three.”

“Just soda water? I thought you girls were more fun than that,” Mariel said slowly.

There was a beat of silence. She knew this was risky; she could get fired for offering alcohol to underage kids. But they were Eris’s friends, and they were right here, sitting at *her* bar. Mariel didn’t know when she would get another chance like this. Surely offering them something to drink would cause them to lower their inhibitions—to trust her on some subconscious level, lead them to say more around her than they probably should.

“You’re not asking to ret-scan?” the girl with the headband asked, in evident disbelief.

Leda rolled her eyes. “That’s exactly what she’s saying, Jess. Isn’t it?” she added, rounding on Mariel.

“Only if I can have one, too,” Mariel said lightly. Leda shrugged, which Mariel took to mean yes.

She mixed atomic and cranberry juice in a cocktail shaker, then made a show of flipping the crystal tumblers and catching them deftly in her hands, not that anyone was watching. Then she poured four drinks—one for herself, just for show—and slid the other three glasses toward the girls. They nodded in unconcerned thanks and resumed their gossip.

Mariel lingered, listening unobtrusively to the girls’ talk about school and parties and other useless topics; wishing there was some way she could nudge the conversation toward Eris, and what had happened to her. Or if not her death, then her life. It would be nice to talk about Eris with people who had known her. Even if those people were a bunch of empty-headed highlier girls, spending money they had done nothing to earn.

“And then, right there at my birthday brunch, Scott had the nerve to tell me that we’re over!” the one named Jess was recounting in an aggrieved tone. “What do you think he meant by that?”

Mariel was amazed, and amused, by this girl’s self-delusion. It seemed clear enough to her what Scott had meant. He wanted to break up.

“Forget Scott,” Leda said peremptorily. Jess made a low noise in the back of her throat, but to Mariel’s surprise, it was the third girl who protested.

“She can’t just *forget* him,” the girl snapped, reaching a protective hand towards Jess. “We can’t all shut away the things that hurt us as easily as you do.”

“Please, Ming. You know I’m right.” Leda lifted her drink to her lips with seeming nonchalance, but Mariel saw that her hand was trembling. Something about Ming’s comment must have rattled her. Come to think of it, Mariel realized, Leda didn’t actually look so good. She kept uncrossing and re-crossing her legs, twisting a lock of long hair around one finger like a ring. She seemed almost... uneasy. As if she were hiding something.

“Can I get another?” Leda demanded, holding out her empty glass. It took a moment for Mariel to realize that the question had been directed at her. She accepted the glass, watching in amusement as Ming rose slowly to her feet.

“I just remembered somewhere I have to be. I’m out,” Ming announced, brushing invisible dust from her skirt and starting out the door. The other girl, Jess, wordlessly followed.

Leda slumped forward onto her elbows. Her eyes fluttered shut, her spiky lashes sweeping against her hollow cheeks. She took a breath as if bracing herself for some unknowable trial. It made Mariel wonder what awaited her at home.

“What are you looking at?” Leda demanded, and Mariel realized she’d been caught staring.

“Oh, um... here,” she managed, and slid the new drink toward Leda, who ignored it. Leda just gave a bitter sigh, flicked her wrist to pay for the drinks, and walked away.

“Here you go!” Haleigh emerged from the kitchens, a plate of half-burned cookies held triumphantly in her hands. “I had to tinker with the oven’s settings for a while, but I think it worked.”

“Thank you.” Mariel reached eagerly for one of the charred cookies. For some reason, she had always love the taste of nearly-burned food, whether it was toast or vegetables or marshmallows. She’d tried to teach Eris to roast marshmallows once, over the small cook-fire in their kitchen, only for Eris to plunge hers directly into the flame. “Your way is too slow,” she’d declared, and Mariel couldn’t help but laugh at her impatience.

Haleigh set the tray of cookies on the counter and turned curiously to Mariel. “How was the group?”

“The usual. You know the type.”

Haleigh tapped at the touch-screen to see their check. “That tip isn’t exactly usual,” she replied, and the surprise in her voice made Mariel glance over. When she saw how much Leda had left, her stomach twisted angrily. Why did Leda have to go and leave a tip like that, when all Mariel wanted was to hate her in peace?

She welled her eyes shut, trying to keep hold of her resentment. She preferred it to sadness. It was easier to get a grip on, inside her head.

“Are you doing the offsite catering job next month?”

Haleigh’s voice seemed to emanate from an impossible distance; as if she were standing at the top of one of the Tower’s long elevator shafts, and Mariel was huddled at the bottom. “Catering job?” she repeated, blinking in confusion. She forced herself to listen to Haleigh’s next words.

“At some Under the Sea party. They’re still looking for wait staff, especially bartenders. We could work it together.” Haleigh tapped at the touch-screen to pull up the job description.

Seeking personable, professional servers for a black-tie gala, minimum one year experience. Courteous interaction with guests is a must...

Interaction with guests. Hadn’t Mariel tried that tonight, only to fail at it miserably?

But things might be different at a big, crowded party. Leda and Avery would probably be at that gala—Avery, who had let Eris up onto the roof the night she fell, and Leda, Eris’s half-sister. And she knew, with an instinctive certainty, that neither girl had told the complete truth about that night.

If she came to that party, she could keep observing them. Watch for inconsistencies in their behavior. Maybe one of them would get too drunk, and slip up, and reveal something.

“You know what? I’m in.” She gave an opaque smile, and reached for another blackened cookie.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Mariel

Mariel watched as Leda leaned over a high-top table, the voluminous skirts of her gown cascading heavily around her. She willed Leda to come this way, toward the bar, which Mariel was trapped behind. But so far Leda hadn't moved.

"Two whiskey sodas, please," asked a boy with golden-brown skin and dark eyes. Mariel jolted to sudden recognition. This was Leda's date; Watt, if she remembered correctly. He wasn't a highlier like the others. So what was he doing here?

Mariel made the drinks stronger than normal, then moved along the bar as he headed back to Leda, trying desperately to listen.

Leda glanced up at Watt's approach, her features becoming more brittle as she tried, visibly, to hide behind her usual mask. But it didn't quite fit. She gave the whiskey a slow stir, holding up the glass for inspection as if it couldn't be trusted. "How much alcohol do you think it would take, to make us forget all the things we've done?" Leda said.

Those sounded like the words of someone who'd made a mistake. Someone with regrets. Mariel edged as close as she dared, tossing a few limes in the slicer to have something to do. People kept trying to order more drinks, but she just nodded and ignored them.

Watt was saying something; from his body language, probably an attempt at levity. Leda stared at him through her lashes, unusually serious. "What about that night..." Mariel heard her ask, but couldn't catch the rest under the noise of the room.

Watt had reddened, clearly uncomfortable. He answered, and Mariel swore she heard the word *roof*. This was it, the truth about Eris's death, at last—

A stack of glasses clattered loudly to the floor. Mariel realized, belatedly, that she had been the one to knock them over.

Everyone stared at her accusatorily. Everyone except for Leda and Watt, who were wrapped up in their own private drama, the air between them heated and raw. God, what was going *on* over there?

"At least these are flexiglass," said Mariel's boss Esme, not unkindly, as she knelt to help collect the glasses. Mariel nodded woodenly. Tears pricked at the backs of her eyelids.

When she looked back up, she was unsurprised to see that Leda and Watt were gone.

This is never going to work, whispered a hateful voice inside her head. *You shouldn't have bothered to try*. And Mariel knew, with a sudden flash of certainty, that it was right.

She'd been dwelling on this for months—hunting down snippets and shreds of information, eavesdropping on conversations she could barely hear, fixated on the lives of complete strangers. She'd scratched circles in her own brain, trying to figure out the truth, and for what? She hadn't found anything, and she never would.

These highliers protected each other from people like her. No matter what she tried—and hell, she'd tried everything, she had even come to a party at the *bottom of the river* in an attempt to learn something—she would never actually find anything.

She needed to give up this madcap search for justice. Because if she didn't stop, it would destroy her.

"I quit," she heard herself whisper.

At first Esme didn't react. "I quit," Mariel said again, more loudly, and took an emphatic step back. Now she'd caught Esme's attention, not to mention that of a few guests.

Esme blinked. "Now? You can't—not in the middle of—"

"Yes, now. I'm sorry," Mariel replied. From the other end of the bar she saw Haleigh casting her concerned glances. But what right did Haleigh have anyway, to be worried on her behalf? Mariel didn't need her; didn't need anyone but Eris, and Eris was gone.

Esme pleaded with her to please stay at least through the end of tonight, but Mariel couldn't take another minute of this. She was done, for good.

She headed past the service elevator, which was hidden behind oversized palm fronds and decorative coral. Her shoulders were drawn up defensively, her movements stiff. Ignoring the stares of party guests, she marched right on up the party's main staircase: a sweeping thing constructed out of a gelatinous and glittering hydrocarbon, which swayed gently in the river's currents, like the frond of some plant. No one moved to stop her.

When she emerged onto the pier, she glanced back down at the river's surface, searching for some glimpse of the party below. Yet all she saw was the implacable grey surface of the waves. No hint at what was happening beneath, hundreds of people laughing and dancing in a bubble on the river floor. How shockingly easy it would be to damage this tunnel, leave them to drown below, killing all of New York society in a single lethal swoop.

It would be the work of a moment, really.

Mariel stumbled backwards, unnerved by the violence of that thought. This was exactly why she needed to step away from this quest for justice—it was eating away at her, transforming her into someone she didn't recognize.

She stumbled onto the upTower lift, gripping tight to a stability pole. As the lift jolted upwards and then stopped, over and over again, Mariel wondered in a daze what she would do now. She hadn't really thought past the moment where she walked away from the party—away from the upper-floor world, and all the pain it contained.

On the way home, her steps slowed outside the Ivy, and some strange impulse made her glance inside.

IV Stop—or "the Ivy," people called it—was an IV therapy franchise that barely operated within the bounds of legality. Ostensibly, the stores distributed nothing more than vitamins, fluids, and

electrolytes. But everyone knew that if you asked the right questions and paid the right price, you could get something way more intense blasted through those needles. After all, intravenous immersion was still the fastest and most effective way to get drugs into your body; faster even than those patches that seeped caffeine directly through the skin.

Mariel had heard plenty about the Ivy through the years, mostly at José's parties. But she'd never actually been there.

Without fully meaning to, she had ventured through the doors.

A few chairs were scattered throughout, shrouded behind privacy screens like the ones used at school on test days. The walls were painted white—though when Mariel looked at them, bursts of color danced curiously at the edges of her vision, as if someone just out of sight was waving a flag. When Mariel turned to look, there was nothing there.

“Hey there, my name is Billy. What can I get for you today?” A guy with freckles and sandy blond hair appeared behind the counter.

Mariel blinked, suddenly dazed. “Oh, I wasn't... I don't...”

“We have a special on Vitamin-C boosters and probiotics right now.” Billy took in Mariel's appearance, her disheveled hair and most likely wild eyes, and cleared his throat. “Or if it's your first time, I would recommend a standard oxygen-fluid combo. How are you feeling—tired, sore, stressed?”

Sad, Mariel thought, and before she could burst the thought bubble and make it vanish, the word had escaped her lips.

“Sad?” Billy repeated. “Is everything okay?”

“Not really,” Mariel said, and sighed. She might as well tell him. “My girlfriend died.”

Billy's eyes widened in recognition. “You're José's cousin, aren't you?”

Of course he knew José, she thought, unsurprised. Mariel watched all the hesitation melt from Billy's smile as he realized that she wasn't any kind of undercover cop. “This one's on the house. I owe José,” he assured her. “Just leave it to me. I promise, I have something that'll make you feel happy again.”

Mariel was going to say no thank you and go home, she really was, but it was so much easier to just nod. To allow herself to be led gently to a chair, her arm strapped to an armrest, a swab wiped gently over the skin of her inner elbow. Besides, what did she have to go home for? She'd quit her job, her girlfriend was dead, and her sweet clueless parents had no idea how to talk to her anymore.

“This is a combination of metholymyacin and oxytocin, with a little dash of oblivicet,” Billy explained. He fiddled with an unmarked vial, squeezing a few droplets of it into a bag. “When did you last eat something? Just trying to figure out your dosage.”

Mariel frowned. She couldn't remember when she'd last eaten. Surely she'd had breakfast with her family this morning? “A few hours ago,” she lied.

Billy made several more adjustments to the pouch of liquid, then approached the side of Mariel's chair. “Ready?” he asked, and when she nodded, pierced a needle cleanly through her skin.

Everything suddenly felt soft and silvery. The privacy screen furled around them like a wisp of broken cloud; Mariel could see through it, but in a vague hazy way. She blinked and looked instead at the wall. Those colored shapes still danced maddeningly at the corner of her vision.

“How do you do that? Is it a hologram?” she asked, nodding at the wall.

Billy followed her gaze in evident confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“The colors, the way they’re always darting away...” Mariel trailed off.

“It’s okay,” Billy murmured, in a way that made her wonder whether he saw them. Maybe she really should eat something. “Just tip your head back and close your eyes. Soon you’re going to forget all about the girl you lost.”

“No,” Mariel tried to say, but Billy wasn’t listening. She didn’t *want* to forget; she just wanted to be happy again! How could she possibly set out to forget Eris? Eris, who’d been all sparks and fire, spontaneous and maddening and impossible to look away from. No, she wanted to hold tight to her memories of Eris, which were fading too quickly as it was.

She tried to shake her head in protest, but it felt so heavy. Mariel’s eyes fluttered shut.

Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing, to let go of this pain. To move through the world without a constant ache in her side.

The warmth of the drug settled over her, smoothing the edges of reality. Mariel couldn’t fight it anymore. She forgot her sadness, forgot her anger, forgot how afraid she had once been of forgetting.

Chapter Forty-Two

Mariel

Mariel was dangerously close to becoming a regular at the Ivy.

She didn't set out to, of course. Each time she lost her grip on her willpower and went back there, she would feel momentarily better—until she crashed brutally down from the high, and then the pain of missing Eris would crash over her even worse than before.

When that happened, she had gotten in the habit of coming to see Eris.

Mariel wound slowly along the gravel paths of Cifleur Cemetery. It was a crisp, golden afternoon; the sun streamed over private family plots, set back behind manicured hedges or stone pillars. She took the long route, through the older part of the cemetery, where the headstones were carved with angels or birds or clasped hands. Mariel much preferred them to ultramodern plots like the Radsons', where the headstones were as heavy and sharp as the Tower itself. They weren't even carved with people's names, but instead displayed everything by hologram. It felt too impersonal, too ephemeral, to Mariel. She knew it was eccentric of her, but when she died, she wanted an old-fashioned carved gravestone—so that someday, in a hundred years, people passing by might wonder who she was, and who she had loved.

When Mariel finally arrived at Eris's grave, she was startled to find that she had company.

Avery Fuller was sprawled on a scarf before Eris's headstone. A candle flickered before her, and a strange assortment of objects—a handful of chocolates, a gold sequin, a perfume bottle—were scattered nearby. Mariel realized with a start that Avery wasn't praying. She was sleeping.

Mariel moved to shake Avery awake, just as Avery mumbled something in her sleep. Mariel froze.

"I'm so sorry, Eris," Avery breathed. Her eyes moving rapidly beneath their lids. "For all of it." Mariel felt transfixed with horror as Avery shifted restlessly. "I'm sorry I wasn't... that night..."

Shit. Mariel's blood was suddenly shot through with adrenaline, her heart beating so fast it must be glowing through her skin. Avery was talking about *that* night.

Avery blamed herself for Eris's death.

Footsteps sounded on the path nearby. Mariel hesitated—Avery was stirring, still murmuring—but the steps weren't halting. At the last moment, Mariel darted into a neighboring plot and retreated towards the path.

She crouched behind one of the imposing stone pillars and watched as a boy with dark hair knelt next to Avery. Avery sat up, rubbing at her eyes, her cheeks flush with color. She gave a self-conscious laugh and said something inaudible.

Mariel watched in mounting frustration as the boy replied. She thought she heard him say Eris's name. She edged closer, straining to listen—

A twig snapped beneath her clunky boot.

The two highliers looked up, directly into her eyes. Mariel didn't hesitate. She turned and sprinted away before either of them could ask who she was.

All that afternoon, Mariel turned Avery's words over in her mind, trying to make sense of them. Was Avery the one who'd caused Eris's death; or did she only blame herself because Eris had died at her apartment? It was maddening—Mariel had overheard just enough to send her mind spinning again. Enough to make her wish, frantically, that she'd heard more.

She had tried so hard to set aside her quest for vengeance, but all she'd succeeded in doing was muffling it beneath a layer of numbness. And now the numbness was gone, and she felt hungry and sharp and alive again, all the way to her nerve endings.

She couldn't give up. Eris deserved better.

Mariel pulled her tablet out of her pocket, wondering where exactly she should start—only to pause at the event listed on today's calendar. *Staff Holiday Party at Altitude.*

The holiday party was everyone's favorite day of the year. The owner closed the entire club, kept it open only for the staff, who ate and drank whatever they wanted on a gloriously unending tab. Everyone dressed up in heels and tight dresses, becoming virtually unrecognizable from their rumpled workday selves. Someone always got too drunk and tried to break into the hot tub in the locker room. Last year they had hijacked the sound system to sing karaoke. It was the type of night, Mariel thought wistfully, that Eris would have thrived on.

If she wanted to resume her search for the truth, tonight wasn't a bad place to start.

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A few hours later, Mariel paused in the entrance to Altitude Club, adjusting the chain-link strap of her purse over one shoulder. Her breath settled uneasily in her lungs. She'd forgotten what a heady feeling it was, entering the club through the front entrance, the way a member would.

No wonder Eris turned out so brightly self-confident, if this was how the world presented itself to her.

Mariel hadn't been back to Altitude since before the Under the Sea party, when she announced to everyone that she quit. As she passed through the gilded atrium towards the wood-paneled bar, she ran a hand along a curved banister. Out on the illusion patio, her former coworkers clustered under suspended candelabra, clinking glasses as they gazed out at the night sky.

A few people mumbled confused greetings to her, the former employee crashing the holiday party. Mariel just nodded at them, pushing further through the crowds. She grabbed a shot from a hovertray—the owner never let them use those during working hours, said it ruined the “human touch.” But Mariel had always appreciated the convenience.

That was when she saw Eris.

She was standing in a pool of light, glancing over one shoulder like a woman in a Vermeer painting. Mariel stumbled forward through the crowds, stomping on a few toes, but it didn't matter; nothing mattered except that she get to Eris—

Then Eris turned around, and it wasn't Eris at all, It was Haleigh.

Of course, Mariel thought, as the anguish diffused through her body. This couldn't be Eris, because Eris was dead. Sometimes Mariel willfully forgot that. Or half-forgot it. She was like those creatures with two brains; dolphins, or was it turtles? One of her brains knew the truth, and the other kept stubbornly ignoring it.

"Mariel! How are you?" Haleigh flashed an eager smile. She had on a black flared dress and gold hoop earrings.

"I'm okay," Mariel managed. Her eyes flicked through the crowded room. "Do you know where Esme is? I wanted to ask her if she might... give me my job back."

They had shifted closer to the bar. A few of the kitchen staff were messing around back there, mixing cocktails in absurd proportions. Light flecked down from crystal chandeliers.

Haleigh shook her head with a rueful, admonishing smile. "I get it, you just want a free trip to Dubai."

"Dubai?"

"You haven't heard? We're all going, for the opening of the new Tower."

Haleigh explained that Fuller Industries was launching its newest real estate venture, and had decided to bring the Altitude staff to work the event. Apparently they would rather cover the travel expenses for people they could trust, rather than train new staff in Dubai. "Seems extravagant, but I guess they're really pulling out all the stops," Haleigh exclaimed. "You should come! I'm sure Esme would let you back."

Dubai. Avery would be there for sure, and Mariel suspected that Leda would be, too. A huge party, teeming with people, halfway around the world. She could get them alone, find a way to make them say what had really happened that night. Half-formed thoughts jumbled in Mariel's mind, schemes begun and discarded with frightening speed, each a bit darker than the last.

"You're right," she said slowly. "It's too good an opportunity to pass up." *Much, much too good.*

Haleigh began to turn away. But for some reason—maybe her visit to the cemetery, earlier, or the illicit shiver of what she could do in Dubai—Mariel found that she didn't want her to leave.

She reached out to brush Haleigh's arm, and watched the shock of it sizzle up the other girl's skin. Haleigh looked up, a million questions in her gaze, but Mariel didn't want to face any of them right now.

She lowered her mouth to Haleigh's.

She kissed her slowly, eyes closed, being careful not to touch her with her hands because that would ruin the spell—would definitely not feel like Eris, since Haleigh was too tall, her shoulders too broad.

It wasn't working. Mariel knew what it was like to kiss the real Eris, and no matter how much Haleigh looked like her, no matter that they were in a glamorous upper-floor setting, it wasn't enough.

When she pulled away, there was a breathless smile on Haleigh's face. On some level Mariel knew there would be repercussions, knew there was a *reason* that she hadn't gotten involved with Haleigh before; that it was wrong, or cruel. But she couldn't remember anymore, or maybe she just didn't care. The two halves of her brain seemed to be working at cross purposes.

One of the hovertrays zipped past, laden with shot glasses. Mariel grabbed two of them and handed one to Haleigh. "To Dubai!" she declared, with a fizzy brightness she didn't feel, and knocked back the shot in a single motion.

She imagined finding Avery and Leda in Dubai, confronting them about Eris's death. Making them pay.

"You seem... happy," Haleigh said slowly, and Mariel realized that she was smiling.

"I guess I am." For the first time since Eris's death, Mariel felt like she had a chance. Like she might learn what had happened that night, once and for all.

Like she could give Eris the vengeance she deserved.

The atomic burned pleasantly in Mariel's stomach. The crowds were louder, more jostling, a new spiky energy jolting through them. The evening was reaching its tipping point. When Mariel leaned in to kiss Haleigh again, the other girl's hands snaked over Mariel's shoulders, to tangle heavily in her hair.

She should have another shot of atomic, Mariel thought, with a curious sense of detachment. It would muffle the guilt that kept tugging at her. And maybe it would make fake Eris feel just a little bit more like the real thing.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Mariel

“So this is Dubai,” Haleigh breathed, unable to hide her excitement.

The entire Altitude Club staff were packed onto an extended autocars, the kind with rows of plasticky seats. The air felt thick with anticipation and that heady recklessness that comes from being away from home. More than one person would end up in the wrong bed before the night was over, Mariel thought, with another sidelong glance at Haleigh. Herself included.

There was a collective gasp as the city swung into full view, its curved roofs and spires gleaming chrome and white and gold. Against the sweeping background of sand, it had a studied, almost artificial glamour.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Haleigh pressed her face against the window, her breath fogging the immaculate flexiglass.

“It is,” Mariel said quietly.

For a moment, she let herself imagine what it would be like, if she’d come here under different circumstances. She would wander down to the market to haggle for rugs she couldn’t afford, sit out on a terrace and watch the sunset, drink tea out of a colorful mug.

It was a nice daydream, even if it did wither and die in the bleak face of reality.

Mariel glanced out the window, which had become reflective in the morning glare. She was shocked at the empty, hateful stranger staring back at her. Her mouth looked pinched, her eyes narrowed. When had Mariel become this person?

I did it for you, Eris, she thought desperately, but she knew the excuse was thin. She didn’t used to be the type of girl who used another person for her own ends—who hurt someone without a backward glance. And if Eris were here, she most definitely wouldn’t approve.

“You okay?” Haleigh asked, hearing Mariel’s intake of breath.

“Just a headache. I didn’t sleep much on the flight.”

That wasn’t a lie. Mariel had spent the entire flight in a low-level state of agitation, her mind fluttering through the various steps in her plan, over and over. It was a flimsy plan, far too easy to poke holes in. But right now it was all she had.

She’d been watching them for weeks now. All of them—Avery, Leda, and the two others, Rylin and Watt, who were in much deeper than Mariel had ever guessed. When she wasn’t working at Altitude or with Haleigh, Mariel was tailing the four of them. Tracking their movements. Learning their patterns of behavior. She was the stranger standing across the lift from them, the girl lingering at the ice cream shop by their school, the casual observer when they ran in the park or stopped to grab a coffee. And after weeks of observation, Mariel knew only one thing for certain. Leda Cole was at the center of this tangled mess.

Leda had woven the net that drew them all together. No matter which thread Mariel tugged on, it inevitably led back to Leda. She was the one with the answers.

Tonight, Mariel would find her. She had volunteered to work the least popular bar—the one near the edge of the property, which no one else wanted because it would be slow business, fewer tips. But Mariel was gambling on the fact that Leda would be drawn to its isolation. And if not, she would resort to drastic measures, figure out a way to hunt her down if she had to.

Then she would maneuver a way to get Leda alone, and ask her what had happened that night.

Mariel reached into her pocket, and heard the reassuring clunk of the vial she'd purchased from Billy. He'd been instantly wary when she asked for it; that kind of inhibition-reducing drug was usually intended for crime. But in the end he'd acquired some for her.

Mariel wished she could do this *without* spiking Leda's drink, of course. But how else could she get Leda to reveal the secrets that she'd spent months hiding?

Their autobus was approaching the base of the Mirrors. The two towers soared overhead, etherium bridges shooting across them in bursts of electric light. From this distance they seemed to stretch impossibly skyward. Not as high as the Tower in New York—Mariel wondered if that was the Fullers' doing, if they liked being able to claim that they had the highest penthouse on earth. Surely it wasn't an accident that all their later Towers all had a different architectural style; were wider, or had an interesting shape, or were built in a pair. None of them surpassed the original New York Tower in height.

They passed into a tunnel and emerged inside the tower itself, in an interior docking area. Autocars gleamed in the fluorescent lighting like beetles all around them.

Esme stood at the front of the bus, her voice projected throughout the space by microspeakers. "We're here!" she cried out, and clapped her hands. "Everyone please report directly to the kitchens. We're all hands on deck today."

Mariel filed out of the bus alongside the others, down a series of hallways and into the event space kitchen—a cavernous, gleaming hall full of heat and shouting, like a frantic symphony. Bots were busy with simple food prep: slicing tuna into thin strips, rolling goat cheese into tiny arancini, whipping sea salt with cream. Further down the line, human chefs oversaw the preparation of enormous pasta bowls, or decorated bite-sized cookies with icing.

Mariel headed straight for the bar area, where the head mixologist was barking out orders, directing blends of her famous custom-made cocktails. "Chop some lemons for me," she commanded Mariel, brusquely.

As Mariel fed citrus fruits into the chopper machine, her eyes kept being drawn to the razor edge of the knives, the gleam of the chopper's blade, the sharp tines on the massive serving forks. It all seemed suddenly deadly. This whole kitchen was a forest of death; death was lurking at every corner, ready to snatch you up if you weren't careful. She shivered with a sudden sense of foreboding.

“I’m so excited to see what everyone is wearing tonight,” Haleigh was saying next to her, oblivious.

Mariel bit her lip against a familiar wave of guilt. She shouldn’t be leading Haleigh on like this, letting her serve as a human band-aid. She didn’t care about Haleigh the way that Haleigh cared about her. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t an even trade, exchanging one broken heart for another.

But maybe when this was all over, when she had the answers she so desperately craved, Mariel could change. Maybe she could move on, and try being with Haleigh for real.

She reached for Haleigh’s hand and held to it like a lifeline. If Haleigh was surprised by the gesture of affection, she didn’t show it. She just glanced over at Mariel and smiled.

Mariel was so close to discovering the truth. And once she did, nothing would be the same, for any of them.

I’ll always love you, Eris, she swore. I won’t let you down.