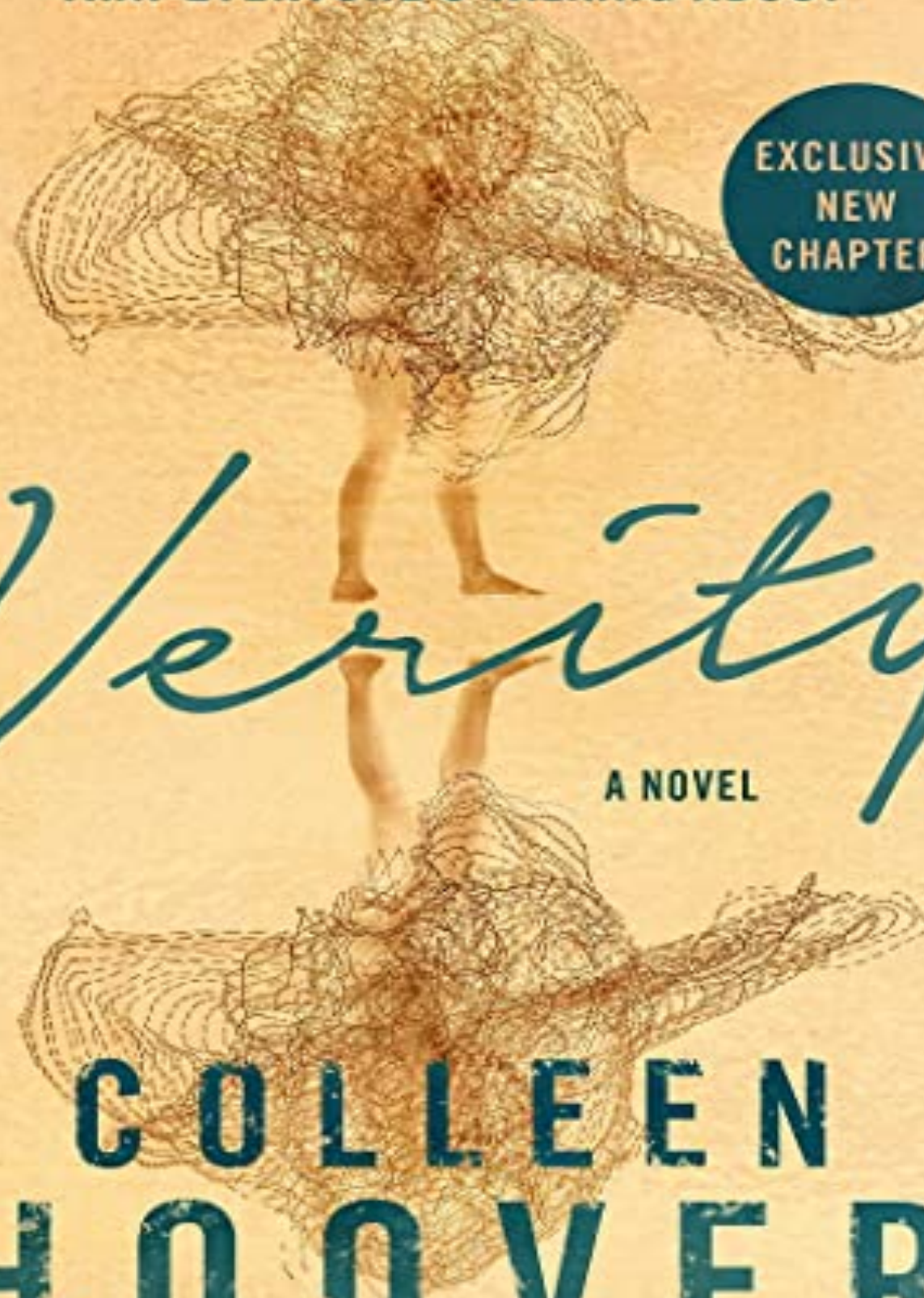


THE *NEW YORK TIMES* PHENOMENON
THAT EVERYONE'S TALKING ABOUT

EXCLUSIVE
NEW
CHAPTER



Verity

A NOVEL

COLLEEN
HOOVER

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

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EPILOGUE

Six months later

Becoming a parent does something to you. It shifts your insides, flips everything on its head. You're no longer the lead character in your own life. You become a side character, a throwaway. The person who takes the bullet, jumps in front of the train, drowns while rescuing the lead.

Nova is three months old now. We chose the name for obvious reasons. We needed a new start, and she gave that to us.

From the moment they laid her on my chest, she became the most important thing to ever come into my life. More important than my career, more important than Jeremy, more important than my guilt.

Until Nova, I had convinced myself that Verity's manuscript must be the truth. But now that I have Nova, I cannot fathom how a mother could write such awful things about her own children if they were untrue. There isn't enough desperation in this career for me to think writing anything negative about my daughter would in any way be helpful

for my imagination. Now I don't know what to believe. Was Verity a monster who actually did those things to her children? Or was she a monster who was sick enough to make it all up for the sake of a writing exercise?

I've concluded that whether the manuscript or the letter was the truth, Verity had to be sick in the head to put any of it down on paper at all. No sane, protective mother would be able to write such horrendous fictional things about a child's passing within days of their actual death. Whether Verity is responsible for that death and whether Jeremy had the right to end Verity's life are no longer questions that haunt me because with the birth of Nova came a true sense of what it means to be a mother. Verity was a dangerous mother either way. I'm convinced of that.

Verity deserved her ending, no matter how much it still haunts me. It's especially haunting me today on what would be her thirty-seventh birthday.

I'm not sure if Jeremy realizes what today's date is. Neither of us have spoken of it. But even though Verity has been dead for almost a year, and I'm finally at peace with her death, I can't shake the competitive feelings I have when it comes to her. Especially on her birthday. Since I became so involved in her personal thoughts through her manuscript, it feels like she carved her initials next to mine at the top of a score card inside my head. No matter what I do, I'm in constant competition with her. I want to be the better writer, the better mother, the better wife.

I was never competitive until I stepped into her life and took over every aspect of it. Now I feel like I have something to prove when no one but me is even keeping score. In

all the areas where Verity failed, I want to excel. In all the areas she excelled, I want to set new world records.

I chose to breastfeed Nova, simply because Verity didn't breastfeed her twins. And no matter how exhausted I am at night, I try to respond to Nova's cries before Jeremy even has the chance to wake up. I want Jeremy to recognize that I'm much more involved than Verity ever was as a mother—whether she was the *manuscript* mother or the *letter* mother, I aim to outdo either version of her.

I feel like I'm becoming as obsessed with pleasing Jeremy as Verity was in her manuscript, simply because I'm in competition with her. This might have more to do with Verity than Jeremy. I don't know why he has this hold over the women in his life.

Maybe his choice in women is part of being a Chronic. Not only is his life filled with tragedy, it's also filled with obsessive personalities.

I'm standing in mine and Jeremy's bathroom, obsessing over my reflection. I'm still struggling to lose the baby weight, and I doubt it would bother me this much had I never read Verity's manuscript. It eats at me. Every time I shower, every time I look in the mirror, I think about the lines in her manuscript where she spoke about the first time she and Jeremy were together after she gave birth to the twins, and that entire description floats around in my brain like a helium balloon that never deflates. She was so proud of how quickly she bounced back, but I'm not sure my body will ever bounce back.

To make up for the extra weight I'm carrying, I bought a ton of lingerie a month ago in a larger size using Verity's

Victoria's Secret card. It felt like one last punch in her firm, flat stomach.

We chose to have Verity cremated. She's nothing but ash now, but I feel as though I breathed in that ash and will forever be choking on it. She's my Achilles' heel. The thorn in my side. She's been dead for almost an entire year, yet her presence in my mind hasn't waned.

Her death was just the beginning of my haunting. She's a lingering ghost over the life I'm building with Jeremy. She's in our kitchen, in our living room, in my bathroom mirror, floating over our bed when we make love.

I need to figure out a way to exorcize this demon before it drives me mad.

I put on one of the silk nightgowns I purchased—nothing too obvious, but enough to hopefully preoccupy Jeremy for the last two remaining hours of Verity's birthday.

When I open the door to our bedroom, I find Jeremy in our bed, sitting against the headboard reading a book. He's shirtless, wearing navy blue pajama pants with a neon yellow drawstring, his bare feet crossed at the ankles. The sight of him makes a fist of heat grow in my chest as soon as I enter our bedroom.

"Is Crew asleep?" I ask him.

"Yeah," he says, failing to glance up from his book.

I pull back the covers and try to get a peek at the back of the book he's reading as I climb into bed. It's the second thriller he's read from the same author this week, a female, pretty, *married*. Yes, I googled her. She's gorgeous, a raven-haired version of Verity, and her picture is plastered right

on the back cover, so she stares at me from Jeremy's side of the bed while he reads.

It's silly to be jealous of a random author simply because he's reading her book, but he found me this way. He read my books, possibly while lying next to Verity in bed, and then he eventually had Verity's team reach out to me when they decided to hire a new writer. It's only natural that him reading another female author's books would make my stomach hurt.

I lie on my side, tucking my hands under my pillow, and I stare at the woman on the back cover. "Is that book any good?"

"Yeah, it's..." Jeremy stops speaking when he finally notices my cleavage. He immediately snaps the book shut with one hand. "Not as good as yours." He tosses the book behind him, and I hear it land on the floor. It makes me laugh. He rolls toward me, giving me his complete attention.

He couldn't have done a single thing more perfectly in this moment.

Jeremy hooks a finger into my gown and pulls it away from my chest, admiring the swell of my breasts. He kisses the top of my cleavage, and I lift a hand, winding it through his hair, tugging him up to my mouth. I kiss him, slipping my tongue into his mouth, breaking his lips apart.

He releases a mixture of a sigh and a groan, and then rolls on top of me.

The next several minutes are...*good*.

I don't know how to make it mind-blowing, so sex between us is always just good. Not that Jeremy is doing

Verity

anything wrong, but when I've read so many of his sexual encounters with Verity, I can't help but think about those encounters while I'm with him. Verity described in great detail how crazy she would drive him—to the point he would fuck her multiple times in one night.

Jeremy doesn't fuck me. We make love. Maybe that should mean something special, but all it does is fan the flames of insecurity that burn inside me.

Does he not find me as attractive? Does he not crave me like he did her? Do I not drive him mad?

Jeremy is now naked and under the covers, between my legs, the hard length of him being pressed between my thighs as he looks down at me sweetly. *I doubt he ever looked at Verity sweetly, and that thought annoys me.*

I don't know why I want him to be rougher with me. I want him to treat me with a little less care, as if his need to be inside me is so much greater than his need to be gentle. I want the side of Jeremy that Verity used to get. Instead, I get the respectful side, and it makes me feel so much less desired.

He pushes into me so carefully, I have to hold back the roll of my eyes. Since giving birth to Nova, the sex between Jeremy and I is gentle, like he's worried he'll hurt me. It's been twelve weeks. Sometimes I *want* him to hurt me.

"You okay?" he asks.

I bite my cheek because I want to scream, "Yes! Fuck me!" but that would probably be too jarring for him, because that's not our vibe. Instead, I nod and wrap my legs tighter around his hips, urging him to push into me.

Did Verity embellish Jeremy's need for her in her

manuscript? Was a lot of that description in her imagination? Not that sex with Jeremy isn't good. That isn't the problem.

The problem is that I fear sex with *me* isn't good.

If I wrote about Jeremy's desire for me in this moment, it certainly wouldn't match up with the way Verity wrote about him.

Does he miss fucking her?

"Are you okay, Low?"

Jeremy is staring down at me, concern pulling his eyebrows together. He's stopped moving inside me, and I realize he isn't asking me if I'm okay because he thinks it might hurt. He's asking me if I'm okay because I'm obviously somewhere else mentally, and I think he might sense that.

I force a smile. "Yes." I pull Jeremy's mouth down to mine and I kiss him hard, and he responds, and for the next several minutes I'm imagining how I would describe what's happening between us if I were writing my autobiography, and it's nothing like the sex Verity wrote in *So Be It*.

In my version, Jeremy rolls his hips into mine, over and over, and we kiss, and we moan at just the right intervals, and he pauses and uses his practiced fingers to make sure I finish before he does, and then he takes his turn and starts to finish inside of me, and we're a little bit sweaty, but not too sweaty, and we don't wake the children because he shushes me any time I start to make a noise, and when it's over, Jeremy kisses me, and then he rolls off me and I stare at the ceiling and wonder how sad he is that I can't give him the kind of mind-blowing orgasms Verity gave him.

Knowing Jeremy, he'd tell me our sex life is perfect.

Maybe it is. But I don't want perfect. I want to be wanted by him more than he wanted Verity, so perfect is not what I'm striving for. I'm striving for better than, but how can I possibly know where I rank when we don't speak of Verity? I can't very well ask him, "So who is better? Me or the dead one?"

Jeremy is tucked against my side now, breathing heavily, and he's running a lazy finger between my breasts. "It happened again," he says. His voice breaks me out of my spiraling cycle of self-doubt.

"What happened again?"

"We forgot to use a condom."

"We should be fine, I'm still breastfeeding." We've been using the LAM method, and while it isn't foolproof, neither is the pill, or condoms.

"Do you want me to get you a towel?" he asks, lifting onto his elbow.

I cling to him. "No, please don't get up."

Jeremy kisses my cheek and then rests his head near mine on my pillow, continuing the trail of invisible art he's tracing over my skin with his fingers. "How'd writing go today?" he asks.

He doesn't ask often because most days it doesn't go well, but it's as if he can tell when it's safe to ask. He knows the moods I bring to bed are often a reflection of how successful I feel during the workday.

"Writing was good," I say. I'm not lying. I worked a lot while I was pregnant in an attempt to avoid thinking about anything else, so I only have two novels left in Verity's series. *Truth and Honor*.

How ironic.

I have to submit *Truth* first, and everything about this book reminds me of Verity. Even her name means truth. I can't get away from her, even in book titles.

Perhaps this is my punishment for what we did to her.

"I submitted the synopsis for the second-to-last book in the series today. I'm hoping to hear something tomorrow."

"I don't know how you do it," Jeremy says. "You write a lot faster than she did."

He might mean that as a compliment, but most writers don't like being told they're quick. Quick in the publishing world translates to lazy and lacking, and my fear is that the publisher will tell me my work is second-rate next to Verity's.

I want to change the subject and move it far away from Verity and her writing. "We should take a vacation," I suggest. "Somewhere warm."

"With a baby? And a six-year-old kid?" Jeremy asks.

"We can either be stuck in this house with a baby and a kid or stuck on a much warmer beach in Mexico with a baby and a kid. I vote beach."

Jeremy laughs. "I'll look into it later this week."

Verity didn't write about these moments much—the intimate moments shared after sex. She wrote about their exhaustion and how they'd fall asleep without speaking, so I have this to relish in. Maybe our sex isn't as mind-blowing, but Jeremy enjoys my company more than he enjoyed hers.

I cling to that.

"Would you be upset if you got pregnant again?" His index finger is circling my right nipple now, his thoughts back on the fact that we didn't use a condom.

"I don't know that I'd be happy. Nova is still so young," I look at his face, examining it for clues. "Would you?"

Jeremy's eyes journey back to mine. "I'd have a hundred babies with you, Low."

I feel his compliment slide over me, and I think, *Take that, Verity. Happy fucking birthday.*

He runs his thumb over my nipple, and I feel some of my breastmilk ease out with the contact. It's sticky and warm beneath his thumb as he continues sliding it across my breast. Jeremy is watching his hand intently as he runs his thumb back and forth. "Can I taste it?" His eyes meet mine again, and the thought of him doing something with me that I'm not sure he did with Verity makes my thighs clench with desire.

"Yes."

Jeremy's eyes glimmer with curiosity, and then he lowers his mouth to my breast and closes his lips gently over my nipple. He starts to suck, and it's both odd and exhilarating. His right hand is sliding over my hip and then my outer thigh as he continues pulling at my nipple with the suction of his mouth. He squeezes my ass and with a final lick of his tongue, he releases me from his mouth.

He's smiling as he looks down at me. "It's sweeter than I thought it would be."

I want him to do it again, for longer this time, but he gives me the kind of kiss that indicates it's time for bed. It's almost always the same, a very routine goodnight, always one brief kiss against my mouth and then one against my cheek, and then he says, "I love you," and he makes his way back to his side of the bed so he can double check that his

phone is charging before turning off his light and adjusting his pillow.

Routine goodnights are also something Verity never described. I don't know if I should be disappointed that we have them or flattered.

"Crew has been wanting a beach day to play with his sand toys," Jeremy says. "We should take him tomorrow afternoon after I finish laying the patio stones."

"You don't think it's too cold for Nova?"

"We can bundle her up."

I roll over and put an arm over Jeremy's chest. His fingers meet my elbow.

Jeremy kisses the top of my head, and we fall asleep like that, his fingers grazing my elbow, and my arm against the heart beating inside his chest.

...

Our new home in Southport is located right where the Cape Fear River bleeds into the Atlantic Ocean. The water is brackish, with both freshwater life and marine life. Some might feel it's the best of both worlds.

I can't help but feel it's the worst of both.

I loved it here in the beginning. We bought the first available house we came across as soon as we discovered I was pregnant. The timing of conception was too close to Verity's death for us to be comfortable back in Vermont, so we picked a new area of the country neither of us were familiar with. I've always dreamed of living in a coastal town with a house on the water, but we moved out of Jeremy

and Verity's home in such a hurry, I'm not sure I would have picked our specific house if I had time to be more selective. We didn't realize that the fifteen-foot stretch of sand near our dock is swallowed up by water several months out of the year, which is why we always load up the car and take a short drive to a better beach when Crew wants to build sandcastles.

There's only one other car parked in the area of the section of beach we choose. I put Nova into her stroller while Jeremy grabs Crew's sand toys out of the trunk. Crew starts to run ahead of us.

"Crew, wait for us!" Jeremy yells. Crew stops and looks back at us impatiently.

I place the diaper bag on the handle of the stroller. "Go ahead, I'll catch up," I say to Jeremy.

"You sure?"

"I've got it."

Jeremy walks ahead of us to catch up with Crew, and they disappear over the dunes. I lock up the car, then push Nova in the stroller toward the beach entrance.

I'm relieved to see it's completely deserted in this immediate area, just how we prefer it. Jeremy reaches a spot about ten feet from the water and drops the blanket for me and Nova, then he continues with Crew to a softer part of the sand. He dumps the bag of sand toys out and then heads back in our direction.

Jeremy pushes the stroller the rest of the way to the blanket. It's a little bit windier than I'd hoped it would be, but Jeremy uses the diaper bag and a few packs of Capri Sun to hold down the corners of the blanket.

Once we're unpacked and I get settled with Nova, Jeremy looks at his Apple watch and then at me. "I'm gonna get a run in. Will you three be okay?"

Jeremy took up running shortly after Verity *died in her sleep*. It started with him running three or four mornings a week after we moved here. Now it's seven. Sometimes evenings, too.

"Didn't you already go for a run this morning?"

"It clears my head," he says.

I laugh. "You run so much now; I'm starting to worry about the number of things that need clearing." I mean it as a joke, but Jeremy's expression is somber.

"I won't go far," he says, his voice more weighted than before. "Are you good?"

"We'll be fine." I receive his quick kiss before he takes off toward the water. I watch as he stretches for about a minute. The runs have toned him up. The more I loosen, the tighter he gets.

Jeremy takes off in a sprint and I watch him until he's nothing more than a speck against the sand. Nova begins to fuss, so I pull her out of the stroller and hold her in my lap.

Crew surprisingly abandons his sand toys after about ten minutes and makes his way over to me. He goes straight for the diaper bag where I packed the drinks and snacks, and he digs out a Capri Sun that isn't being used as a blanket weight. He struggles with the straw for a moment, so I offer to do it for him.

"Do you think your baby sister will like Capri Sun as much as you do?" I get the straw successfully into the hole and hand it back to him.

He takes a sip and then says, "I don't like it that much." I laugh. "It's all you ever want to drink."

"It's the only thing you and my dad ever buy me." He tosses the half-full packet of juice on the blanket and turns to go back to his sand toys. The juice is leaking out all over the blanket, but I'm holding Nova and I'm not nimble enough to reach it.

"Crew!"

He ignores me. I look down the beach for Jeremy, but all I can see is one person walking a small dog on a leash.

I leave the juice packet where it is. The blanket is already covered in sand, what's a little juice going to hurt?

Crew and I have struggled to find our footing. We have our moments where it seems like we could become a team, but then he'll say or do something to throw me off. It reminds me a lot of the first day I showed up at their house, when he slammed the front door in my face.

It's the little things he does that disturb me, but nothing concerning enough that I could even go to Jeremy. I went to him once with a major concern I had regarding Crew, and Jeremy brushed it off like I was overreacting.

It was about two weeks before Nova's birth. I was very pregnant, and we were still trying to settle on a name for Nova. I'll never forget that moment, as much as Jeremy tries to encourage me to let it go.

Crew was seated at the kitchen table, eating a bowl of cereal. I was attempting to make small talk with him as I poured myself a cup of coffee. I said, "Crew, what should we name your baby sister?"

He shrugged and said, "I don't care. She's just gonna die." I was stunned silent; I couldn't even ask him to repeat himself.

Later, when I told Jeremy what happened, he assured me that it was just Crew's way of protecting himself—that it meant nothing. "Both of his sisters are gone, it's natural he would assume the worst outcome with the new sibling," Jeremy said.

I felt like nothing more than an intrusive stepmother in that moment. I realized there was a bond between Jeremy and Crew that I wasn't willing to threaten after that conversation, so I never brought it up again. I tucked it away for safekeeping, where I tuck away all the other smaller, less concerning things Crew says.

Perhaps I should burn that memory so I can release my distrust of Crew, but Jeremy wasn't there when Crew bit the knife, and he wasn't in the room when Crew said his baby sister was *just going to die*, so I feel it's my responsibility to be extra cautious of Crew's potential behaviors.

I love him, but I don't know if I can ever fully trust him. Which is disappointing because he's just a little boy.

Watching him from this spot while he sits and builds a sandcastle, I'd never imagine a child that innocent-looking could hold the traumatic memories his mind holds.

Nova starts to show signs that she's hungry, so I lower my shirt and begin breastfeeding her while I keep an eye on Crew. He knows how to swim, but Jeremy and I are extremely protective of him, for obvious reasons. It's too cold to swim now anyway, but we're known to have a rogue

wave every now and then, so anytime we're at the beach, we don't let him leave our sight.

The person walking the dog is getting closer to us. For a cautious moment I wonder if I should stop breastfeeding, but when I see it's a woman, I'm not as concerned. The dog looks like a Yorkie from here. I watch as soon as Crew sees the dog, hoping he doesn't go bother the woman, but the dog seems just as excited to spot Crew. They veer in his direction, and even though they're about ten feet away, it still makes me nervous that a stranger is getting that close to him. If she speaks to Crew, she'll likely speak to me, and Jeremy and I keep to ourselves for very good reasons.

I feel a weight form in my stomach with every step closer she takes. I can't place her, but she seems familiar. Dread washes over me. You're being paranoid, Lowen. No, *you're being cautious*. Paranoid. *Cautious*.

This is the exact reason we rarely leave the house. The beach is the only place we usually go, and we only do this when we know it'll be deserted. We're both more than a little fearful about being recognized together.

We've told no one about us, nor have we told anyone about Nova. It helps that neither of us have connections we weren't sad to sever. My mother had just died before I met Jeremy, and his parents have passed, so it was easy to get away from the life we knew.

Corey doesn't even know I had Jeremy's baby, or that I'm living with Jeremy and Crew. After Verity died, Jeremy and I separated ourselves from one another to minimize suspicion over Verity's death. April never even knew I came back to live with Jeremy and Crew, and no one else knew

we were together in a romantic sense, so we've done all we can to keep it that way. I met very few people in Jeremy's life when I was working for him because his entire life was Verity and his children.

We haven't made an effort to make friends because the fewer people who know us, the less likely anyone will be to grow suspicious, or tie our intimate relationship to Verity's death in any way.

Jeremy and I have also done everything we can to separate ourselves from Verity's brand. Jeremy even dropped his last name, ridding himself of Crawford altogether. He and Crew go by my last name as of five months ago. When Nova was born, we gave her our same last name.

We're the Ashleigh family now.

No one knows I write Verity's books since I write them under my pen name, Laura Chase. When people ask what I do for a living, I tell them I'm a writer and I give them the names of my original books written under Lowen Ashleigh. Jeremy tells people he's in real estate. They're both safe things to say.

Other than the publisher who worked a business deal through Jeremy and my agent, no one we meet in the future will know I write Verity's books. Her readers are aware she's dead and that her series has been taken over, but they'll never know the face of the writer behind it.

We keep to ourselves as much as we can, even though, at this point, it would be impossible to pin Verity's death on Jeremy. She was cremated. Any evidence is long gone. At this point, it would purely be circumstantial.

Even still. Better safe than sorry, which is why I'm

praying to any deity that will listen that this woman keeps walking and minds her business.

She doesn't.

She pauses a few feet from Crew, and it looks like she's speaking to him. She glances in my direction, then looks at Crew again. She's saying something I can't hear over the sound of the ocean, and then she waves at me.

I return a smaller wave, anticipating the inevitable conversation with a face full of dread. I pull Nova from my breast and put my shirt back into place, glancing down the beach for signs of Jeremy. I can see him, but he's so far away, I can't even tell if he's jogging toward us or away from us.

The woman begins to head toward me, her blonde hair blowing flyaways into her face. She's wearing sunglasses, but she pushes them on top of her head as she approaches. She's pretty in a basic way. Maybe that's why I feel like she's familiar, because she looks like the typical millennial woman I try to avoid. Which is most of them.

Her eyes are glued to Nova, as if her presence alone weren't enough of an intrusion. I've only been a mother for a few months, but it's long enough to realize how entitled people feel to infants. Strangers just assume new mothers want a break and that asking to hold a baby is normal behavior, but I find it insensitive at best.

"Hi," the woman says.

I nod, but I don't speak the word *hi*. I'm not here to make friends.

"You don't remember me?" she asks.

Fuck. *Remember her?* I tilt my head, attempting to

place her while pushing down the fear that's fighting to crawl onto my face.

"No reason you should," she says, waving off her own question. She motions back toward Crew. "I recognized Crew and then..." She looks back at me and smiles. "Imagine my surprise when I saw you."

She recognized Crew?

My eyes immediately search for Jeremy again. I need him to protect me from this moment. I don't know the people in Jeremy's life, I don't know what I'm supposed to say, I don't know who I'm supposed to be right now. *Lowen Ashleigh? Laura Chase? A family friend?*

"Do we know each other?" I ask, controlling the tremble in my voice.

"Not really." The woman is staring at Nova again, her eyes filled with curiosity. *Or is that suspicion?* And what did she mean by *not really*? She knows Crew's name, which means she has to know him in some capacity.

Was she Jeremy's realtor? Does she work at the local grocery store?

I can't place her, no matter how hard I'm trying.

Crew is walking up to us now, another reason for me to grow nervous. I don't know what he'll say if I lie to this woman in his presence. Crew grabs the Capri Sun he dropped earlier and sips from it, staring at me and the woman.

She motions toward Nova. "Is this your daughter?"

That's a safe question. I can answer that, because I'm obviously Nova's mother, and this woman can be given that information without it compromising anything else.

"Yes."

"She's beautiful," the woman says. "How old?"

I don't like this question. I'm pondering whether to answer it when Crew says, "She was born three months ago. She's my sister." He says it with pride and excitement, and any other time that would make me melt, but instead, I'm filled with fear because I still don't know who this woman is and if she should be given that kind of delicate information.

I can tell almost immediately that she's taken aback by Crew's comment. She glances nervously at him, as if I'm some sort of danger to him, as if she knows him better than I do, and she should know information such as Crew having a new sibling.

"So that would make Jeremy the father?" The woman tilts her head, her eyes narrowing in my direction.

She knows Jeremy's name? "I'm sorry," I say, pulling Nova a little tighter. I stand up so that I'm eye-to-eye with this woman. "Do I know you?"

She smiles with her lips, but her eyes don't get the hint. "I'm Patricia," she says. "We've met before, at the grocery store back in Vermont. You had just moved in with Verity and Jeremy." She motions toward Nova. "And now you have a...*baby* with him." She says that in the most unfriendly way possible.

Patricia. The woman Jeremy insulted at the store. It's coming back to me now, crashing into me, knocking the breath from me. He asked her how Sherman was—her husband's name is William. It upset her. Patricia and Jeremy were fake friendly, he doesn't actually like this woman. Nor does he trust her.

Which means I can't trust her.

I can see Jeremy approaching us from behind her at a distance. He pauses about twenty feet from us at the edge of the water. He's watching this unfold, too far to hear what's being said, but hopefully close enough to know I need help. Now.

My mouth is dry and Nova is beginning to work up a cry and I feel like I'm about to have a panic attack and everything is coming at me at once and I have no idea how to respond with answers to simple questions that somehow feel so life-threatening.

"Patricia."

Jeremy is right behind her now.

Thank God.

His voice makes her jump, and she throws a hand against her chest and spins around. She wasn't expecting him to be here. "Jeremy. Hi."

He walks between me and Patricia, putting a hand on Crew's shoulder, as if he's making it clear that there's an invisible line she doesn't need to cross. He snakes his other hand protectively around me, squeezing my side reassuringly. To anyone else, he would appear pleasant, *your average doting husband and father*, but I can see the tension in his shoulders, in the set of his jaw.

I'm thankful heartbeats are felt more than heard because mine is pounding so hard, my guilt would be obvious to anyone who could hear it. I attempt to hush Nova's burgeoning cries by pulling her up to my shoulder and bouncing her a little while I watch the interaction between Patricia and Jeremy.

"What are you doing in North Carolina?" Jeremy asks.

"William and I have a place here." Her eyes move back to me, and she studies my face for a moment. "What are you two doing here?" she asks, giving her focused attention back to Jeremy. "Is this where you ran off to after selling the Vermont house? We were all so curious." The way her eyes travel back to me accusingly makes it clear what she's implying.

"We're just visiting," Jeremy says with a believable lie. "Vacation."

Patricia nods, then motions toward Nova. "You failed to mention at the funeral that you were going to be a father again."

An obvious dig now that she's done the math. Jeremy says nothing. He grips tighter at my waist, as if he's needing my support to keep him from saying something he shouldn't. He bites his tongue for several seconds. Then, "It was good to see you," he says, clearing space for her to exit.

Patricia forces a smile, but I can see the nervousness begin to seep in, as if she's realizing she happened upon something she should have walked straight past. She takes a step back, staring another moment before she says, "Yes. Good to see you." She looks down at Crew. "And you, Crew." She looks at me with a firm jaw, saying nothing as she spins and begins to walk away.

Jeremy doesn't move a muscle. He waits and watches her. She pulls on her dog's leash, urging it away from our area while looking back over her shoulder for one final, nervous glance.

Jeremy still has his arm around me when he whispers, "I need you to take Crew to the car."

I swing my attention to him. "Why?"

Jeremy looks left and then right, checking the beach for others. Then he faces me, placing two firm hands on my shoulders. I've never seen him look so resigned. He massages his thumbs gently into my shoulders. "You know I love you, right?" *What a loaded question.* He looks me back and forth between the eyes. "She's suspicious, Low. In ten seconds, she's going to be calling her friends and turning this into something."

"Into what?" I whisper, not wanting to admit that our entire futures are at stake.

"Into exactly what it is," Jeremy says, releasing me. "Take them to the car and wait for me." Jeremy looks in Patricia's direction, and then bends down, slipping off his sneakers. "Don't leave anything behind, not even a piece of trash." He throws everything—his shoes, the Capri Suns, the diaper bag—onto the blanket. He rushes to Crew's sand toys and packs them up, knocking over evidence of the sandcastle before walking back to us and tossing the toys onto the blanket. Then he wads up the blanket into one big ball.

"Why are we leaving?" Crew says.

Jeremy shoves everything into the bottom of the stroller and then pries Nova from my chest. He puts her in the stroller, her cries even louder now. "We'll come back another day, Crew. It's about to be dark."

My pulse is erratic. *Why did he take off his shoes?* "Jeremy?" My voice is a whisper because it's the only sound I can muster through my fear. I've seen him like this before—determined and withdrawn. *Once.*

"Go." He points toward the car, indicating he'll follow us soon. The look in his eyes is terrifying, so I don't say anything. I don't even ask him to stop and think about whatever he's about to do.

I can feel my panic beginning to bubble, so I grip the stroller and Crew's hand and start walking away in silence. When we're almost to the edge of the sand, I glance over my shoulder, just as I see Jeremy reach Patricia.

She doesn't see or hear Jeremy coming. Neither does the dog. Patricia is there, and then she isn't.

Jeremy is kneeling in the water, his knee pressed into her back, his hands putting pressure on the back of her head. They're too far away for me to hear anything, but I can see enough to know what's happening. I glance around us, checking for eyewitnesses, then I pull Crew even faster toward the car.

I can feel my cheeks burning and the tears stinging my eyes. I'm grateful Crew pays me very little attention, otherwise he might notice I'm on the verge of falling apart right now. Part of me is in panic mode because I don't want Jeremy to be caught, but part of me is in panic mode because I feel like I should be helping Patricia.

But saving her life would possibly mean risking mine.

It's too late to save her, even though my phone is in my hand now and my index finger is on the number nine. But I fail to push it because I don't know that I want to call for help. I don't know that I can blame Jeremy for doing this. It's her or us.

Her or us.

When we make it to the car, I urge Crew into the

backseat before looking back out at the beach. When I do dare to glance back, I can't see anything over the dunes. I have no idea what's transpiring. I have no idea if it's over.

I look around again, ensuring our privacy, and then I transfer Nova from the stroller to the car seat. She's crying harder now. Crew is pouting because we have to leave, but I ignore his pleas to stay. I'm just trying to pay attention as I pack everything into the car so as not to leave anything behind.

When everything is put away, I climb into the passenger seat and wait for Jeremy. The wait feels like forever.

"Nova, stop crying," Crew mutters. He gets annoyed with her crying sometimes, but I'm not in a position to do anything about it in this moment. I can only focus on getting out of here, but we can't do that until Jeremy returns.

Where is he?

"Shut up!" Crew yells at Nova.

I turn around and look at him. "Crew!"

He folds his arms over his chest and plops back against his seat. "Where's my dad?"

"He's coming."

My stomach is churning when I finally see Jeremy make his way around the dunes. He keeps his head down as he makes a beeline for the car. Our eyes meet briefly as he climbs into the driver's seat. The look he gives me is full of shame. Maybe even fear.

He's soaking wet, his hair dripping beads of water down his forehead and into his eyes as he starts the car. He wipes them away with his wet shirt.

"Did you go swimming?" Crew says. "Why are you wet?"

"I fell in the water." Jeremy's voice is curt. I notice his

bottom lip is shivering from the cold as he begins to back out of the spot. Nova is crying even louder now, and my husband just killed a woman, and I didn't do a goddamn thing to stop him, and Nova is still crying and I can't take it. I can't take the screams, the fear of being caught, the knowledge of knowing what Jeremy just did, so I lean over the seat and unbuckle her. I ease her out of the car seat and bring her to my chest as I face forward again. I give her my breast and the car grows quieter.

As we're pulling away from the beach, Jeremy reaches for my hand and squeezes it. When I look at him, he's staring hard at me.

"We had to," he whispers.

I nod, because maybe we did, but I wish he wouldn't have said *we*.

We didn't just drown someone.

He did.

I glance out my window and let the tears silently fall.

...

Nova was asleep when we arrived home, so I laid her in her crib. I made Crew take a shower to get the sand off while I heated up a quick dinner for him. I turned the television on and let him eat in front of it like today is just another day.

Maybe if I pretend hard enough that today is like any other day, it'll eventually feel true.

Jeremy went straight to the bedroom when we made it home. We haven't spoken yet. I'm taking care of the kids while he takes care of the evidence.

I don't know how to wrap my mind around what happened. I don't know which part I should be the most worried about. I don't know if I'm an accomplice. That's two women dead at his hands now. Am I really going to wait around until he decides to make me number three?

He wouldn't do that. *Get that out of your head, Lowen.*

He was protecting me. *Us.* We just ran into one of the very few people in this world we hoped to never run into. It was unfortunate circumstances, but the chance of anyone tying it back to Jeremy is unlikely.

I spend several minutes taking the items from the stroller, and I put them away like it's any other day. I throw the blanket into the wash and make my way toward the bedroom. My legs are shaking so bad, I don't know how I make it down the hall. I've been calm up until this moment, but right now I can't tell if I'm about to scream or cry or vomit because my body is rejecting everything that just happened back on that beach.

I'm sobbing before I even get the door open. Jeremy is standing in the middle of the room, still dressed, still soaking wet.

My presence pulls him out of his trance. Jeremy walks over to me and wraps his arms around me right as I start to collapse. He moves me toward the bed and sits with me. He cradles me in his protective *murderous* arms.

"I had to, Low. She was going to say something to someone."

I try to work in words between sobs, but I can't.

"No one will know," he says reassuringly. "No one was around. She didn't even scratch me; I came at her from

behind. She drowned." He forces me to make eye contact with him. "Patricia drowned, Lowen." He says that lie with the same seriousness as when he repeated to me that Verity died in her sleep.

Verity died in her sleep.

Patricia drowned.

I don't like this pattern. But I'm a part of this pattern. I helped him weave it.

I've never been more scared of him than I am in this moment.

I've never felt more protected by him than I do in this moment.

My emotions are warring against each other, but deep down I know he did this for me. For us. For Nova, for Crew, for our family.

Jeremy needs my reassurance, I can see it in the way he's looking at me, waiting for me to compose myself. He hasn't taken a shower yet because he needs to know he's safe in his own house—that I'm not going to betray him. I suck in a breath and fight to keep the remainder of my tears at bay.

I don't want to lose him. I can't. But if I don't reassure him that I'm keeping this secret, I fear he'll start to see me as a liability. I'd much rather be his accomplice than his liability. "What do you need me to do?"

Half of Jeremy's tension eases with my question. He kisses me, and I kiss him back, and then he just presses his forehead to mine. "I don't know. I need to think." He closes his eyes and pulls me against him, holding me in silence, soothing a hand over the back of my head.

"Thank you." I say it in a whisper against his neck, but only because it's all that's left of my voice. The fear has overtaken the rest. "I know you did it for us, Jeremy."

I can't tell if I'm pretending or if I'm being serious, but the words feel necessary, like a survival instinct. *Am I scared of him?*

No. I was there, this isn't his fault, *this is entirely his fault*, he had to do it, *an innocent woman is dead*, she accidentally drowned, *he murdered her*, I think I might be going crazy.

"I need to shower," he says, standing. He walks into the bathroom and closes the door behind him. I hear the shower start to run.

Several minutes pass as I barely move a muscle. My lips are trembling. My heart is clenching. I hope Patricia wasn't a mother. I hope Jeremy didn't take her away from a child. *But if he didn't do what he did, she would have said something incriminating that could have ripped me apart from mine.*

I try to look ahead, at my future, and imagine what it could be. Me, Jeremy, Crew, and Nova, living somewhere warm, possibly San Diego, remaining invisible in the crowd, living a low-key life, never being forced to murder anyone ever again.

Or staying here, too close to Jeremy's past with Verity, too close to Patricia's living husband, too close to our mistakes, too close to mistakes we might have to make in the future.

When they find Patricia's body, they'll likely rule it an accidental drowning. Her family will mourn, but they'll

Verity
move on, Jeremy and I will never be brought into the fold, we can put this behind us like we put the last murder behind us.

Jeremy and I will live happily ever after. If he doesn't find the next author he reads intriguing enough to hire and bring into our home. If he doesn't see me as a liability and make me his third casualty.

I'm getting in my own head. *Get out of your head, Lowen. Jeremy loves you. Jeremy is a family man. Jeremy isn't as attracted to you as he was to Verity.*

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," I whisper.

I stand up, wanting the doubts out of my head, squeezing my temples.

I want to leave thoughts of Verity and Patricia behind. I want to move to the West Coast and never think of them again. I want to leave the guilt behind, and the insecurity. Jeremy loves me. Look what he's done for me. For our family.

He never loved Verity like this.

Maybe I'm the one holding us back. Maybe Jeremy loves and desires me more than I can even comprehend. Maybe it's *me* that's allowing Verity to infiltrate my confidence.

Jeremy probably needs me more in this moment than he's ever needed anyone, and I'm just leaving him alone in his thoughts while I war with my own insecurities.

I need to solidify his trust in me.

I walk to the bathroom and open the door, closing it quietly behind me. I take off my clothes, dropping them next to his on the floor. When I step into the shower, Jeremy's

back is to me. His head is hanging between his shoulders as he lets the shower beat the tension out of the back of his neck. He doesn't hear me behind him, so when my hands meet his skin, he flinches and spins to face me.

I don't say anything. I'm quiet as I stare back at him, stepping into him. My breasts meet his chest, and his hands fall to my hips.

I keep my eyes locked on his as I kiss him, soft, a gentle peck on the lips. "I love you so much," I whisper. Then, without breaking our stare, I slowly lower myself to my knees in front of him, completely submitting to him.

I keep my eyes on Jeremy's as I lean forward, sliding my tongue over the length of him. He twitches against my mouth, but he's hardening, weaving a hand into my hair. I lick him again, this time closing my mouth over the tip of him.

This is the last thing he expected from this shower, I can see that in his expression as he looks down at me with eyes filled with conflicting desire. I'm throwing him a curve ball during what's possibly one of the worst moments of his life.

Boredom breeds in routine, though, and I can't risk Jeremy growing bored with me. I might be too scared of the idea of that. If Jeremy someday decides he's bored with me, he can't just let me go. I know too much.

If I'm no longer an accomplice, all that's left of me is liability.

He curves his hand around my head and pushes himself so far into my mouth, he hits the back of my throat, testing how much of him I can take in.

I pass the test and then take even more of him, and as soon as I gag, the thrill of him pushing his limit with me overshadows the horror of what we've been through tonight. He clutches my head with both hands and holds me still while he forces my mouth to contain him as deep as I can stand for as long as I can until I'm forced to pull back and gasp for air.

He lets me take two quick breaths, and then he's back in my mouth, holding me onto him, watching my struggle as my nails dig into his thighs.

The third time he does it, my nails draw blood from his skin, but that only seems to make him harder somehow. He holds on even longer. Several painful seconds later, he releases me, but before I can even catch a full breath, Jeremy is spinning me around.

"Bend over," he commands, pushing me forward, bending me at the waist.

I press my palms against the shower wall right in time to brace myself before he slams into me from behind. I scream, and he doesn't shush me this time. He grabs a fist full of my hair and pulls it while he fucks me harder, enjoying my noises, wanting more of them, louder, faster, until he's leaning over my back, his legs trembling against mine as he comes.

"*Fuck.*" He groans, and it's so loud, it reverberates in the shower, and I feel it in my stomach. Jeremy's fingers are digging into my hips as he empties himself inside of me, thrusting slowly in and out, until he pulls out of me completely.

He tugs at my hair and spins me until I'm facing him again, then his tongue is buried deep in my mouth.

He's never kissed me like this—with the desire Verity

described in her manuscript. It's thrilling, and for a brief moment I'm able to forget the reality we're trying to escape when he hooks one of my legs around him, pushes my back against the shower wall and slips his hand between my thighs. He pushes two fingers into me, leaving his thumb to run circles over my clit. I love this possessive side of him so much, I whimper against his mouth. I might even be whimpering in pain because he isn't touching me with the tenderness I'm used to. His hand is working against me with such force, I'll feel the bruises for the next few days.

Jeremy swallows my moans until I begin to fall apart, and even then he somehow pushes his fingers deeper, putting even more pressure against me. I'm crying when I finally come, but I could have been crying when I got into the shower to begin with, I can't even remember.

Even through my tears, I realize I'm smiling after that fuck, somehow, and my own smile terrifies me, so I wipe it away before he notices it in our kiss. This is no time to be keeping score with Verity, yet here I am, mentally ticking off the fact that Jeremy desires me in this moment like he used to desire her. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

After a minute of recovering in each other's arms, Jeremy pulls me until I'm under the stream of water. Then he kisses the side of my head and exits the shower.

I remain under the stream, hoping the hot water will ease the emotions coursing through me. I don't know how to separate all these feelings and place them where they need to go. Everything is jumbled together, wadding in the center of my chest like a ball of barbed wire putting pressure on my ribcage, making it hard to breathe.

It feels like Jeremy is still choking me. I eventually get out of the shower and dry off, then pull a robe from the back of the door. I walk into the bedroom and Jeremy is seated at the edge of the bed, staring at the television. The evening news is on and he's watching it intently. It's too soon for what happened earlier to be on the news, it can't have been more than an hour ago that it even happened, but I accept his paranoia and leave the room to go check on the kids.

Crew is still sitting in front of the television, his attention focused solely on the screen. I can't help but notice how he and Jeremy are both in separate parts of the house, mimicking one another unknowingly.

I pass the living room and make my way into Nova's bedroom. I quietly tiptoe over to her crib and look down at her.

I slap a hand over my mouth.

No.

I almost collapse, so I grip the edge of her crib to hold myself up. "Jeremy." His name comes out in a weak cough from my mouth. Then I scream it. "Jeremy!" I rush out of the room in search of Nova. "Jeremy!"

He's halfway down the hall when he catches me in his arms. "What's wrong?"

"She's gone," I whisper. "She's not there!" I can't hide the panic. Jeremy releases me and rushes to Nova's room, but he somehow beats me to the living room after finding her crib empty.

"Where's your sister?" Jeremy says to Crew. Crew looks at us like he can't understand why we're so

upset. "She was crying again," he says. Then he looks back at the television. "I couldn't hear my show."

"Where is she?!" Jeremy yells it this time, unable to hold back his fear, which causes more terror to settle in my shoulders and threaten to sink me to the floor. He's pulling Crew to his feet by his arm and I'm holding onto the wall, my fingernails clawing into the wooden doorframe.

"I put her outside," Crew admits, seemingly confused by our intense reactions.

Outside?

Jeremy is out the front door and I'm right behind him. The sun has set and it's dark, but the security light on the house flicks on with our presence. When I hear Nova's cry, relief spills back into me, but not enough of it to prevent the panic.

Jeremy and I spot her at the same exact time. She's about ten feet from the front door, lying on the grass, crying her heart out.

Jeremy rushes to her and swoops her up and I'm sobbing as he makes his way back to me. He hands her to me and then marches into the house and directly to the living room. I can hear him yelling at Crew, but I don't stay for the punishment.

I rush Nova to my bedroom and slam the door and curl up with her on my bed, checking her for injuries or, God forbid, ant bites.

She's okay.

She's okay.

I'm still sobbing, but she's okay.

There's a voice in my head saying, "Go. Go. Leave him."

Verity

But I don't know if the voice is even mine, and I don't know if it's telling me to leave Jeremy, or to leave Crew, or to leave both of them. I'm being crazy, *you're being sane*, he's a kid, *he's damaged*, he's a kid, *he's dangerous*.

Jeremy is in our room now, sliding into the bed with us. He wraps his arm over me and presses a kiss against the side of my head, and then to the top of Nova's head. "She's okay, Low," he says, rubbing my arm reassuringly. "I'm sorry."

I don't know what he's apologizing for. Is he sorry Crew just ruined any trust I had left in him? Is he sorry he murdered a woman tonight? Is he sorry he killed Verity last year? Is he sorry he ever brought me into his fucked-up home and his fucked-up family to begin with?

I cry for so long, Nova finally falls asleep next to me.

Jeremy has long since moved to his side of the bed. The television is now playing late-night news and Jeremy's attention is focused on the screen, and I don't think I trust a single person under this roof. Not even myself.

I hear bits and pieces of what the news anchor is saying that has Jeremy's undivided attention. *Body, drowned, dog found safe nearby, family notified*. I close my eyes, listening for anything that might be bad news for us, but nothing is said.

"It's fine," Jeremy says, clicking off the television. "They think it was an accident. It's fine."

He's attempting to convince himself that maybe one small part of our lives *will* be fine, but nothing else is.

Nothing in my world is fine.

I sleep next to a man who has killed two women he has

deemed as threats. I sleep down the hall from a disturbed child who has seen more trauma in one lifetime than most entire families combined.

And then there's me, still keeping score with a dead woman, *and somehow losing.*

Losing the game, losing my mind, nothing in my world is fine.

We can try to run from the Crawford name, but in the end, another tragedy will always be patiently waiting for us. We're nothing but a family of Chronics.

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