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## PROLOGUE

The girl looked beautiful, sitting in the chair, her arms and ankles bound. She'd put up little fuss as he'd dressed her in the gown, but the drugs he'd given her had helped with that. They'd relaxed her, turning her limbs into flexible putty and making it so she could barely form words. She was helpless while he worked his magic, yet she watched him with judgment. As if he were garbage.

He wanted to rip her eyes from her head!

"Plea... se." Tears fell down her cheeks.

"Don't stress. Soon you'll be where you belong." He smiled at her as she trembled and tried to pull from her restraints. But there was no give.

He grabbed a tube of superglue from a nearby table and unscrewed the lid. She freaked out when she saw him coming toward her, swaying her head wildly side to side.

The drugs were wearing off. He had to work quickly.

"Don't move." He grabbed her jaw, fixing her in place with his vise-like grip, and started to paint her lips with the adhesive.

She squirmed and screamed; the sound trapped in her throat. Based on the smell, she'd vomited in her mouth. He had

sealed her lips just in time. The bile rolled back down her throat, bulging out like a snake swallowing a rat, and she jerked as if she were choking. Shortly after they started, the throes of panic subsided.

“Just a few seconds for it to set.” He stood there, continuing to hold her jaw in place, her lips pursed together. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and the light dimmed in her eyes. She was losing her will to live.

*Just give me more time, and you'll be begging for death...*

While she sat suffering, as she deserved, he felt more alive than he had in years.

She needed to know how girls like her affected those who didn't measure up to perceived standards. People like him were viewed as different and treated as insignificant. The fact she was a byproduct of an ignorant society was no excuse. Everything in life was handed to this type of girl—their cliques, their Prince Charmings, their high-paying jobs, whatever they desired. For them, life was but a dream, sweetheart. With their perfect little lives that fit within the accepted confines established and enforced by society. But he'd never squeeze into that mold or be accepted no matter how “tolerant” people claimed to be. He'd always be seen as different, a freak, an outcast. Even by those who considered themselves open-minded and woke. They were actually the worst—treating him one way to his face and speaking of him cruelly behind his back. Though some were blatantly rude to his face. Truly, open-mindedness and acceptance were things society as a whole paid mere lip service to, nothing more.

But he had no choice but to play along, to claw through life while sacrificing a bit of himself every day. He dared not confront these bigots with their narrow-minded thinking. No rocking the boat. That was, until now...

“There.” He released her and watched as she tried to pull her lips apart.



They didn't move.

Her eyes widened and she protested vehemently—nothing more hitting his ears than mumbles. He should have cut out her tongue... But too late now. Oh well. He was still in control. For once, he would say what happened.

He grinned again, unable to help himself. But his amusement was cut short. Those eyes were watching and judging even after showing her he was the one with the power. How dare she challenge him?

A torrent of rage pulsed through him, and he grabbed a length of chain from the hook on the basement wall.

"Stop looking at me!" he screamed as he wrapped the chain around her neck and pulled it tight.

Little resistance, and it was all over.

He was left breathing like he'd experienced an orgasm. Relief settled over him, calming his heart rate. He stepped back to admire his work.

Her eyes were still staring through him—from beyond the veil of death. Mocking and condescending.

"No!" He looked around for something to remedy the situation, and his gaze fell on paint cans, brushes, and rollers stacked on a shelving unit. They came with his job. But he'd also had to patch up some drywall.

He laid his hand on the perfect tool and returned to the girl. Her eyes were still staring, judging. Not for long.

## ONE

The house felt empty this morning, and Amanda was bored. The fact it was a Saturday and even her seven-year-old daughter, Zoe, had plans made her lack of any even more pathetic. Zoe was staying at a friend's house for another night, and Amanda's boyfriend, Logan Hunter, had cleared out about an hour ago. He had to make a ten o'clock tee time with friends at a local country club. But he'd be back later.

Still, she had hours to pass. She must have been delusional to think some alone time might be nice. She imagined kicking up her feet and reading a book, but who was she kidding? Now it felt like she was facing a gaping void she needed to fill.

She thrummed her fingers on the arm of the couch. The novel in her other hand wasn't offering much, and she'd read the same line ten times. Nothing was going on outside her living room window either. She might as well be watching paint dry.

In all fairness, she'd shift the blame to her job in the Homicide unit of the Prince William County Police Department. It normally kept her so busy that she wasn't left with free time to take up any hobbies.

She could scratch cleaning the house off the list of possibili-

ties. It was spotless in preparation for Logan's visit. Not that he cared about such things, but she did.

*What to do...?* Preferably something that passed the time and accomplished something. One idea came to mind. It ticked off both boxes *and* it had been on the to-do list for a long time. The question was, could she bring herself to do it?

It had been nearly eight years since her husband, Kevin, and daughter, Lindsey, had died in a car accident. Amanda had been in the vehicle that day but was left to live, to grieve and shoulder survivor's guilt. The scattered images and sound of crunching metal could be recalled on command. Though sometimes they surfaced on their own, at unexpected and unwelcome times. But even more crippling was her injuries had also taken her unborn baby and stole her ability to have children in the future. It was as if God hadn't punished her enough and needed to inflict just one more blow.

But then, two years ago, Amanda had met Zoe Parker. She had lost her parents to murder, and Amanda fell fast. They had an instant bond, and Amanda adopted the girl. Confronting any residual grief head-on was no longer an option—it was necessary. She had to clean out Lindsey's room for Zoe. It had been a healing experience. But there was one thing Amanda had yet to tackle. The garage.

Kevin was supposed to organize it, a promise he'd made numerous times, but it had never come to fruition. Boxes had been dumped there when they first moved in, and most of them never left. After the accident, it was easier to shuffle all the junk aside than face what it really meant. The stuff in that garage was the only tangible connection she had left of Kevin and Lindsey. To rid herself of these items was to fully let go of them. But it was time to fully accept that her family was gone and never coming back.

*It is time to move forward...*

She stepped into the garage and let her gaze go over the

mass of cardboard boxes and totes. It might be best if she put this project off until she had a dumpster in the driveway. But she recognized the procrastination tactic.

She took a deep breath. *Think first steps...*

To start, she'd move everything to one side of the garage. Then, she'd sort through everything, making stacks for garbage, for donation, for keeps. She expected little would remain in the latter category, but she couldn't arbitrarily trash it all either.

Just the first part turned out to be hard work that had her sweating like mad. It might only be the third week of May, but summer-like weather had already arrived.

Amanda popped open the garage door for air flow. It let in a warm, slight breeze, but it helped knock off the heat.

As she stood catching her breath, she noted her efforts were already starting to pay off. She could see past the clutter enough to imagine her Honda Civic tucked away inside. The garage would actually be used for what it was intended for. *What a concept.*

But it was too soon to get excited. The next step would be even more time-consuming and emotionally taxing. It wouldn't just be moving a package from here to there. She'd have to look closely inside each one.

*Time to face any demons that may be waiting...*

She headed inside to grab a glass of water and a snack. The clock in the kitchen told her it was one in the afternoon. Time was flying. She grabbed a Coors Light from the fridge.

Kevin would always say there was nothing like a beer on a hot day, and then drink three.

But she had nowhere she needed to be. It wasn't like she had plans to drive. She twisted the cap just as her phone rang. Caller identity showed it was Amanda's fourteen-year-old niece, Ava. It wasn't common for her to call. "Hon, everything okay?"

“No.” There was a gasp for breath that sent shivers up Amanda’s spine.

“What’s happened? Where are you?”

“I need you to come to Prince William Forest Park.”

“Are you okay? Your mom? Dad?”

“I’ll tell you once you get here. Meet me down near the carousel in the kid’s playground area, the one near the Potomac River.”

“Give me ten minutes.” Amanda shut her fridge, popped out and lowered the garage door. She was sweaty and filthy, but none of that mattered right now.

If her niece’s plea told her anything, it was that something was terribly wrong.

## TWO

Amanda found Ava and another young girl about her age, right where Ava told her she would be. Her niece's jeans were soaked through to the knees, and she was holding on to a phone with a flashy case.

"I can explain," Ava jumped in, as she must have noticed the question in Amanda's eyes.

"I'm sure you can." Amanda turned her attention to the other girl—brown hair, freckles dusted across her nose, and a stud in her bottom lip. Her eyes didn't meet Amanda's for long, and based on first impression, Amanda would say she was shy. "And who are you?"

"Nadine Thompson, ma'am." Her voice was small, dispelling any tough-girl image the piercing might have given.

"She's my best friend, Aunt Amanda, since forever."

"What's going on, Ava?" Amanda's heart was thumping away, fixed on her niece's deer-in-the-headlights look and recalling her panicked tone on the phone.

"Nadine's sister has been missing since Wednesday night."

The skin tightened on the back of Amanda's neck. She had sensitivity when it came to young girls disappearing. Chalk that

up to a sex-trafficking ring in Prince William County she'd brought down the better part of two years ago. She might have knocked out its key players, but she lived on eggshells fearing that more would rise in their place and operations would resume. "This is a matter for the police. Has your mother reported her missing?" she directed at Nadine.

"I don't think so."

"Aunt Amanda, you *are* the police. That's why I called you. We found this. It was in the river." Ava handed Amanda the phone and pointed to a spot along the riverbank. "I went into the water after it."

*That explained Ava's wet pant legs...*

"It's Reese's." Again, Nadine's voice was tiny, childish, inward.

Amanda turned the phone over. Blue rhinestones on the case were laid out to form the letters *RT*. Reese Thompson. "I'm going to need more information, girls." Reese had been missing for three days and the police hadn't been notified? Surely there was a reasonable explanation for that. Were Nadine and Ava making more out of Reese being AWOL than her parents? Then again, Amanda didn't know what kind of parents they were. They might be absent from their lives, letting the TV be the babysitter as they shuffled from one job to the next, moving through their lives like zombies.

"Mom and Reese had a nasty fight," Nadine began. "Reese stormed out the door, screaming that she never wanted to see Mom again."

It sounded like a teenager trying to assert her independence. "How old is your sister?"

"Eighteen. She was voted prom queen. The prom is tonight, and I haven't been able to reach her since she left."

This tidbit had Amanda feeling a bit more worried again. What would cause a prom queen to up and disappear before her big moment? It didn't sound like it would be something

she'd have done willingly. Unless it was a dramatic attempt for more attention. "Reese might be staying with a friend. Have you talked to any of them?" She pushed away her niggling worries, opting to be the picture of strength and reason.

"They say they haven't seen her," Nadine said, her posture taller, more composed.

Amanda considered that it was possible one of them was sheltering Reese, not talking to the younger sister on directions from Reese herself. And there was an age difference that the older girls wouldn't ignore. They were high-school seniors, whereas Nadine was only in grade nine, assuming she and Ava were in the same year.

"Something's wrong. I know it here." Ava clenched a hand into a fist and held it to her stomach. "And doesn't Grandpa always say to trust your gut?"

Amanda's father, Nathan Steele, had served as police chief for the PWCPD, a path she would gladly follow—one day to its conclusion. He had retired about seven years ago. "He does say that."

"Then, please, listen to me," Ava said. "Reese is in trouble."

"Has she ever run away before, Nadine?" Amanda asked.

"Yes, but she always comes back after she's cooled off. And she always takes my calls."

Amanda assembled the limited pieces of intel together—prom queen runs away days before the main event *and* tosses her phone? It didn't make much sense. "All right, let's get you home, Nadine." She wanted to know what argument had Reese running, but she'd leave that question for the mother. "Girls, get in my car." Nadine's sister had been missing for three days. An innocent explanation might exist, but the churning acid in Amanda's gut told her otherwise. Something very bad had befallen Reese.



## THREE

Amanda followed the directions she'd received from Ava and Nadine. She glanced in the rearview mirror at the girls in the backseat, feeling for them. Logic told Amanda that Reese hadn't tossed her own phone. Amanda had taken precautions by securing the device in an evidence bag she'd plucked from her trunk. No need for gloves at this point. The phone had taken a swim in the Potomac. The best hope for a lead would come from what was on the SIM card. And if digital forensic techs failed to resuscitate it, the service provider might come through when they provided records and the GPS history. The latter would let them track the girl's last movements. "Do you have any idea how your sister's phone might have ended up in the river?"

"She wouldn't have done it," Nadine said.

"Does she go to that park often though?"

"Uh-huh. To think and write poetry. That's why we came here... to look for her. Then we just happened to see the phone in the water."

"Has she ever tossed a phone before?" Another attempt to

review past behavior. Amanda glanced in the rearview at Nadine.

“She’d never.” Nadine bit her bottom lip, and the flesh whitened.

*Poor thing...* “Okay, we’ll see if we can find out some answers. In the meantime, try to stay positive.”

“Kind of hard, Mrs. Steele,” Nadine said. “The prom starts in a few hours.”

Ava whispered to her friend, correcting her.

“Ms. Steele. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. You can call me Amanda.” She had let the form of address wash over her, an understandable assumption. But having just been boxes deep in memories of wedded bliss, her heart cinched. It also brought a twinge of regret at not taking Kevin’s surname, James, as per tradition. She’d opted to remain with her maiden one, thinking it might aid her career ambitions with her father blazing the trail ahead. She glanced at the clock on the dash. 2:12 PM. “When does prom start?”

“Doors open at six thirty,” Nadine said.

“Aunt Amanda, I think someone took Reese, and she’s...”

Amanda glanced over her shoulder, admiring her niece’s confidence and instinct. But she was putting on a bold, brave front for the sake of her friend. “Let’s work everything out, okay? I’ll speak with Nadine’s parents and go from there.” One of the first things she was going to suggest was they file a missing person report.

“It’s just Mom where we live,” Nadine said. “Dad lives somewhere else.”

That sparked hope. “Any chance that Reese went there?”

“Nope. I checked his place. He was at work... where he always is.” Nadine rolled her eyes.

The rest of the drive was quiet. Amanda looked in the rearview mirror a few more times and once spotted her niece reaching for her friend’s hand. It was lovely to watch Ava

growing into such a great person. To think that Lindsey would be about her age now if not for the accident. There was only eleven months between them, with Ava being the eldest. What would Lindsey have been like? But Amanda pushed that thought aside, focusing again on Ava. Her biggest concerns should be schoolwork, recreation, boys, how to style her hair, and what clothes to wear. Ava certainly shouldn't be worried about the welfare of a friend's sister. The fact she obviously was, though, further endeared her to Amanda.

She pulled into the driveway, and Nadine jumped from the car and headed into the house. Ava and Amanda walked up to the door together. She wished to shelter her niece from the ugliness in the world, but she feared it was rushing right for her.

She put her arm around Ava, and her niece turned to her.

"Please, find Reese."

"I will do all I can." Amanda normally handled homicide cases, but she'd ask for an exception to be made. Since she was close with her sergeant, she'd use that to get the necessary approval to proceed.

"Ava... who is this?" a woman said as she stepped back to let Nadine inside. The girl hurried down a hallway. "And why is Nadine crying?"

"This is my aunt. She's a police detective. Is Nadine going to her room?"

"I assume so." There was a slight tremor in her voice, and she avoided making eye contact with Amanda.

Ava hugged the woman and retreated into the house.

In the following silence, the woman offered up small talk. "Ava's such a good kid. And a great friend to both my girls. So, you're a detective?"

"Amanda Steele." She held out her hand but drew it back when the woman didn't take hold. "You're Nadine and Reese's mother?"

“Yeah. Clarissa. Did something happen to Reese?” Her eyes flicked up to meet Amanda’s.

“Not sure yet, ma’am, but when did you last see her?”

“Wednesday evening.” Clarissa’s eyes pooled with tears. “If something happened to her, it’s all my fault. I should have let her have her way. But she’s run away before. She’s always come back. How could I have known?” She was shaking and rubbing her arms.

“May I come in?” It might be best that Clarissa get off her feet before they discussed Reese any more.

“Sure. This way.”

Amanda walked past a wall filled with framed photos, many of which were of Clarissa with her girls.

Clarissa pointed one out to Amanda. It showed the three of them posed in front of a Christmas tree. Reese’s grin was wide, and her eyes were bright. Amanda could almost hear the girl laugh.

“This was taken for Christmas cards just six months ago. She has an incredible smile.”

“She does.”

Once they got settled in the living room, Amanda pulled out the evidence bag with Reese’s cell phone. “The girls found this in the Potomac River this afternoon. They tell me it’s Reese’s. Can you think of why she might have thrown it into the water?”

Clarissa blinked slowly, matching her gaze with Amanda’s. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Amanda agreed. Her gut was telling her that this story might not have a happy ending. Clarissa’s eyes begged for a positive spin. To give one would equate to a lie, but Amanda wasn’t going to lay out the worst-case scenario yet either. “I recommend that you file a missing person report, and I’m going to speak with my sergeant to see if I can get the clearance to investigate.”

Clarissa rocked back and forth. “I can’t believe it’s come to this. I just thought she was ghosting me. Isn’t that what the kids call it, when people just stop talking to you? But now”—she pinched the tip of her nose—“some perv might have her.”

“Let’s not leap to that conclusion.” Amanda spoke as calmly as she could, doing her best to mask her own fears.

“Please, you have to investigate this. Find her. I trust you as Ava’s aunt.”

With that declaration, duty, responsibility, and hopeful expectation all landed on Amanda’s shoulders. But what if she couldn’t deliver? What if the answers weren’t good ones? What if Reese was dead? “I’ll do my best. To start with, I’ll ask that you file a missing person report.”

Clarissa nodded.

“It would help to know a few things about your daughter—where she likes to hang out, names of her friends, a boyfriend, if she has one. I’ll also need to speak with her father.”

“Pft. That man is maddening. Works all the time. He used to throw money at the girls. As if that can make up for him not being around.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Separated?”

“Divorced. Four years ago. Thank God.”

When Amanda was married to Kevin, it never escaped her how blessed she was by stability and a faithful partner, a spouse who was her best friend. So many people didn’t have that. “Do you know where Reese might have gone after she left here?”

“Laurel Wilkinson is her best friend. I’d imagine she would have at least texted her about our fight. Vented, whatever you want to call it.”

Easy enough to confirm with Laurel or through Reese’s phone records. “Is Reese on your phone plan?”

“She is.”

“Okay, I’ll be putting through a warrant to request her information, correspondence, that type of thing.”

“Of course. Go ahead.”

“And her social media accounts. Which ones is she active on?”

“Oh, it would be best to ask Nadine about that.”

“Will do. In the meantime, I’m going to get an officer here to file that missing person report.”

“Can’t you do that?”

Amanda laid her hand on Clarissa’s forearm. “I’m going to start looking for your daughter.”

Seconds passed. Clarissa eventually nodded and blinked, tears squeezing from her eyes and running down her cheeks.

Amanda called dispatch and requested an officer come out. She was advised one would be around in ten minutes. She hung up and passed this message along to Clarissa. “And just keep positive. That’s the best thing right now.” She’d said the same to Nadine but saying it to the mother felt shallow and meaningless. No amount of positive thinking could bring the girl to the doorstep. Just like Amanda’s optimism never had her family walking away from that car crash.

“I need to make another call.” Amanda stood and stepped outside. She pressed the contact for her sergeant. He’d just returned to the job earlier that month after being off for a year and two months to recover from brain surgery to remove a tumor. His voice calmed her when he answered. “Hey, boss,” she said.

He groaned—just slightly. “Amanda? You do realize it’s Saturday, one of your days off?”

“What makes you think I’m calling about work?”

“The *boss* bit gave it away.”

“Ah, right.” She was smiling, unable to help it. Scott Malone, family friend for as long as she could remember, and a best friend to her father as they both worked their way up the ranks. Malone had been content to stay at sergeant, unlike her

father, who had his eye on police chief from the start of his career. “Well, something has come up.”

“Do you seek out things to investigate?”

“It’s a teenage girl, Sarge.” It felt amazing calling him that. While he was convalescing, a transplant from the New York City PD, Katherine Graves, was brought in—a woman with a hard edge. She’d just started to grow on Amanda when Malone’s return pushed her out. But Graves was more than happy to go. She’d turned down a transfer to another unit, relinquished her badge, and took an early retirement package. She was still in Prince William County, but had reinvented herself for the next chapter of her life.

“Go on.”

“She’s missing and—”

“We’re not Missing Persons, Steele, you know that. And you said teenage girl, right? Flights of fancy, all that.”

“She’s been missing for three days. We both know the likelihood of finding this girl alive now is slim to none.” This is part of the reason Amanda had made this call outside of Clarissa’s earshot. She needed the ability to talk freely.

Malone grumbled something that was incoherent.

Amanda continued. “The girl fought with her mother just before, but I’m telling you something is off here.” She shared that prom was that night and Reese had been voted queen. “Her family can’t reach her. Don’t know about friends yet or her father, but the girl’s phone was pulled from the Potomac River.”

“Who found that?”

Amanda realized she’d possibly talked herself into a tight corner, approaching close to a conflict of interest. But it wasn’t like she knew the Thompson family before today. She told Malone about Ava and that the missing girl was her friend’s sister.

“What I’m hearing is Ava’s out there playing investigator. Sounds like she might be the next with Steele blood to wind up

on the payroll. But, I agree, this isn't sounding good. Has the mother filed a missing person report?"

"She will be. But I wanted to clear this with you, because I'm investigating." She framed it in the affirmative and held her breath. Malone had a soft spot for her, but he wasn't a pushover.

"Huh. Well, then, why even call me?"

She smiled. A person who didn't know Malone well might assume he'd be ticked off by her presumptuousness, that he'd view it as an insult against his authority. She was armed with knowing his admiration for initiative. "I wanted to keep you in the loop."

"Why thank you."

"You're welcome." Another twitch of a smile. "I want to bring Trent in to help." Trent Stenson was her work partner of over two years now.

"Oh, just leave Trent to his weekend. Before you lecture me on how callous that sounds, the girl may be staying lost of her own initiative. I trust you can figure out whether that's the case on your own."

*Nothing like pressure...* This was the second time in a matter of minutes someone had expressed confidence in her abilities. "I'll do everything I can. But if I need more help, I'll be calling Trent."

"Uh-huh."

She'd take that as approval. "Actually, I could use help with that phone I mentioned. It needs to go to the lab for processing. Unlikely that it will give us prints since it's been in the river, but we might get something from it. In the meantime, it would be advantageous to get a warrant for her phone records."

"Get it done, then."

"While I'm actively searching for the girl? How is that possible?" Ideally, Trent would be working on securing the warrant at the same time.

Silence stretched across the line, drawing out for longer



than she was comfortable with. But she had to bite her lip and remain quiet, play to its power.

“Fine,” Malone eventually huffed out. “Give Trent a call, but afford him some leash. He might have a life this weekend.”

*Ouch!*

“Amanda, good luck finding this girl. Keep me posted.”

“Thanks, Sarge.” She ended the call with a quick thank you. To those who didn’t know him well, Malone would have sounded like his relaxation trumped a missing girl, but it was a protective mechanism he used to keep his emotions from clouding his judgment. She was quite sure her call had just wrecked his weekend.

She next selected Trent’s number from her favorites. It rang through to voicemail. Apparently, he did have things going on this weekend. She left a message, asking that he call as soon as possible. Even then could be too late to save Reese. Heck, now might be.

But she’d take her own advice to the Thompsons. She’d cling to that teeny glimmer of hope inside that Reese was still alive. It would give her fuel to fight for a happy ending.

A police cruiser pulled up, and Officer Cochran got out of the vehicle. Amanda couldn’t have made a better choice for this job. Traci was empathetic with a solid head on her shoulders. It might also help for Clarissa to speak with a woman.

“Detective Steele,” Traci greeted her as she reached the front door. Her expression was grim, pre-armed with why she was there.

“Hi. I’ll advise Ms. Thompson you’re here and make the introductions.”

After doing that, Amanda went to speak with Nadine and Ava. Clarissa directed her to the second bedroom on the right.

Amanda stopped next to the first one though, looking inside. A gown hung from a hanger over the top of a closet door. *Reese’s prom dress...*

Amanda entered for a closer look. It was a pale pink, the bodice fitted, and the skirt flared out like a mermaid's tale. Sequins enhanced a lace pattern in shimmering thread that flowed the length of the dress. It would have transformed any teenage girl into a princess, or in this case, a queen. She touched the fabric, her fingers barely grazing the material, and she closed her eyes and made a wish that Reese would have the chance to wear it.

"Aunt Amanda?" Ava stopped at the doorway. "I thought I heard you telling Clarissa you were wanting to speak with us."

"Good ears." A tense silence budded, and Amanda added. "I got sidetracked, noticing her dress. It's stunning."

Ava looked past her, eyes widening as if she were seeing the gown for the first time. "It is." Her niece frowned. "I'll take you to Nadine."

They left Reese's room and found Nadine sitting on her bed, a tissue bunched in her hands. Her face was blotchy and pink, tears having made tracks down her cheeks and leaving their mark. Amanda's heart fractured at the sight. The girl must be terrified.

Ava sat next to her friend.

"Nadine, your mother is in the living room with an officer filing a missing person report for your sister." She was matter-of-fact, successfully presenting a much-needed strong front.

Nadine sniffled and looked at Amanda. "Where is she? She wouldn't ghost us like this. At least, I can't believe she would. Do you think she hurt herself or that someone took her?"

The girl had clearly given thought to her sister's fate, and Amanda was stuck on her first theory. "Was Reese unhappy?"

"I don't think so." Nadine nudged a shoulder into her cheek.

"Do you think that Reese could have hurt herself?"

"No idea. But she'd never throw out her phone. She was

mad at Mom, not me. She'd never leave me." This admission started a fresh crying jag.

Amanda gave the girl a few moments. "Sadly, we can't know what's going on in a person's mind. Was your sister depressed or distant before she ran away?" She thought she'd try again. There had to be some reason Nadine would mention suicide, or was it just denial that someone else had intended her sister harm?

"Nah. I don't know what I was thinking. Reese was always happy. She had every reason to be."

"Such as?" Amanda asked.

Nadine didn't look at her when she replied. Her gaze was fixed on her hands in her lap. "She was popular. Prom queen."

"Ah, I see." Amanda didn't take Reese's popularity to mean she was above depression though, and it was noteworthy that Nadine had suggested it. The girl's body language was a mix of sadness and possible jealousy. Did that mean anything or was it merely sibling rivalry? She'd dig deeper to unearth why Nadine had even mentioned suicide. Was it as Amanda thought, an unwillingness to accept some monster might have hurt her sister? "Did Reese ever try to hurt herself before?"

Nadine glanced down at the floor, swaying her legs. Ava shuffled along the edge of the mattress and put an arm around her friend. "It's okay, you can talk to my aunt Amanda. She's here to help."

Nadine slowly nodded.

"When was this?"

"After Mom and Dad's divorce went through."

"Four years ago?"

Nadine looked at Amanda and nodded. "Reese ended up in the hospital. She, ah, cut her wrist. But the doctors said the nicks weren't deep. Mom thought it was for attention." Nadine picked at the tissue in her hand, pieces of it snowing down on her lap.

Amanda bristled at that remark. How could Clarissa have callously disregarded her daughter's call for help? "Well, no matter how deep, your sister must have been hurting."

"She was. We both were."

"Nadine, do you know of anyone who might have reason to hurt your sister?" Amanda hated going there, but she had to ask. Broaching the difficult questions came with the job. Without the answers, there were too many uncertainties. Just suspicions, hypotheticals, and best guesses.

"Why?" Nadine spat. "She was popular, and my sister wasn't a bully." Nadine met Amanda's eyes, defiance filling them.

The girl's quick defense left Amanda wondering if she'd used it before. By extension that might mean that at least one person had considered Reese a bully. And anytime there was a vote for prom queen, someone's feelings were hurt. Popular people attracted enemies. "Do you know who else ran for prom queen?"

"Makayla Mann."

Amanda pecked the name into the notepad app on her phone. "Do you have a number for her, by chance?"

"No, and she wasn't anyone Reese hung around."

That tidbit had Amanda wanting to speak with her. "All right. What social platforms was your sister on?"

"All of them, but she spent most of her time on Snap VidPic."

Amanda was familiar with the app from a previous investigation. It encouraged picture sharing with little text.

Nadine added, "She's obsessed with taking selfies. She's a little self-absorbed at times."

"Well, that's good to know." Amanda smiled gently at Nadine, to set her at ease. But all of this was helpful. If Reese was a self-absorbed bully, that elixir opened the potential for

injured parties. “I’ll need to know all her social handles, but could you show me her Snap VidPic profile right now?”

“Ah, sure.” Nadine pulled a cell phone from a pocket, moved her finger around on the screen, and handed it to Amanda.

She scanned down the profile, noting immediately the last post was from Wednesday, presumably following her storming from the house. It was a picture of Reese scowling with the hashtag: Momssuck.

Before that update, it appeared Reese shared pictures one to three times a day. Nadine was right about her sister and the selfies. Every post included Reese’s face, whether alone or with friends. It was daunting to think Amanda might meet everyone on this feed. That’s if the investigation dragged out.

Was it too much to hope Reese would come walking through the front door with some elaborate story?

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