

CHAPTER ONE



Obsessions usually begin in a fiery cauldron of anger, jealousy, love, or revenge, but Saskia Brown's started in an ordinary high school classroom with bored students and a scuffed linoleum floor.

The class was Early American Innovation and Ingenuity. She'd decided to take it because it sounded hopeful and exciting, and also because it was Pass/Fail. Only last week she and her father had left Arizona and driven thirty-seven hours to Coventon, Connecticut. Though they were mostly settled into their new home, she still felt discombobulated. Better not to overload herself at school, she figured. Better to start slow. Next year, when she had the lay of the land, she could take some AP classes and really push herself.

Besides, there was only a month left in the school year. She hadn't even wanted to start at Coventon High so close to summertime. But her dad had insisted.

"Better to keep busy," he'd said.

To Saskia, it sounded like the same advice he probably gave himself. *Keep your mind occupied. Don't think about Mom.*

The teacher, Mr. Nash, wasn't young, but he acted like he was . . . in a good way. He jumped from topic to topic at a pace that made her head spin. He got excited when he talked, gesturing with his hands, occasionally pumping his fists in the air. His job hadn't made him jaded and cynical like other teachers his age.

The last assignment of the year was to study little-known American pioneers. Mr. Nash had the kids draw names out of a hat. Saskia got a guy named Robert Cornelius. She'd never heard of him. Now she had less than two weeks to research and write a ten-page report and prepare a fifteen-minute oral presentation on him. Back at her old school, giving a presentation wouldn't have been a problem. She'd been outgoing. Extroverted. But here, all she wanted to do was blend in.

No, strike that—all she wanted to do was fade into the background.

Because faded is exactly how I feel, she thought.

Sitting back down, she shoved the scrap of paper aside. She glanced at her bland gray T-shirt and bare, chewed-down fingernails. In her old town, she'd worn black and silver nail polish. She'd had a pair of jeans that she'd splashed with colored paint, Jackson Pollock-style. Sometimes she'd scrawl words she liked on her T-shirts: *agnostic, sensory overload, Rasputin, continental drift, abacus, ambrosia, mercenary*. Back then, she hadn't been afraid to stand out. Not that she'd been super popular. But she'd been fine with that. Fine with being herself: the girl who watched too many old movies; who had a tendency to daydream; whose big, curly, uncontrollable hair seemed to have a mind of its own. The one no one could quite pigeonhole ("Is she Black?" "Nah, her dad's white." "Yeah, but her mom's not.>").

Those days seemed liked ancient history now. They had even before the move.

After word of her mom's affair leaked out, lots of her so-called friends abandoned her, gossiped behind her back. They'd called her mom a cradle snatcher. And Saskia couldn't deny it. Her fifty-year-old mother was seeing a twenty-four-year-old. Gross. Since Saskia had left Arizona, not a single one of her friends had called or texted to make sure she was okay. Not even her best friend, Heather. That hurt a lot. It upset her almost as much her mom's infidelity.

Heather had been unpredictable, maybe even reckless, but Saskia had adored her. The bottom line was that Heather knew

how to have fun—and Saskia had fun with her. During one memorable sleepover, they'd made White Russians at Heather's house on the down-low after her parents had gone to sleep. There hadn't been any milk, so they'd used cream. *Small sips*, Heather had said encouragingly, when Saskia admitted she'd never tried alcohol before. She remembered vomiting as quietly as possible, her stomach churning, hoping the noise wouldn't wake up Heather's parents. She remembered laughing so hard her ribs hurt.

But she also remembered the final text Heather had sent her. Last minute, her supposed best friend had canceled their plans to hang out. Again. Heather had blamed a sore throat, but Saskia had seen her at school that very day, and she'd seemed fine: lively, a little hyper, very Heather-ish. So it was pretty obvious she was blowing Saskia off.

It would have been better if Heather had just come out and said it: *"I don't want to be your friend anymore. Your family is hella embarrassing."*

Better to rip off the Band-Aid all at once, Saskia thought now.

During free period she went to the library and googled "Robert Cornelius" on her laptop. She scanned the entries and picked up some basic info. Cornelius was a pioneer in early photography. He'd worked with photos known as daguerreotypes. His family owned a prosperous gas and lighting company. He had expertise in chemistry and metallurgy. Metallurgy? She made a mental note to look that up later, as well as "daguerreotypes."

She clicked on "images," not expecting much, but getting an eyeful. The same grainy, black-and-white photo appeared over and over again. "Robert Cornelius: Self-Portrait," the captions read. Here was a striking young man with an intense, arresting stare. His arms were crossed defiantly. The collar of his dark coat was turned up. He looked, frankly, like a nineteenth-century badass.

She heard a whistle from behind.

Whipping around, she saw Lila Defensor, her new friend—scratch

that, her *only* friend—at Coventon High. Lila was small, not even five feet. Fun-sized, she called herself. Her freckles, hair, and eyes were all the exact same color of dark amber, a synchronicity that was offset by the bright earrings and headbands she usually wore.

Saskia had gravitated toward Lila the second she'd seen her. Walking near each other in a hallway, they had rolled their eyes in tandem at a girl leaning against her locker, pouting and preening as she took selfies. "That's a serious commitment to self-absorption," Lila had whispered to Saskia, who'd known at that moment that she and Lila were like two Twix bars in the same wrapper.

Like Saskia, Lila had little patience for shallow people. But unlike Saskia, Lila radiated confidence and self-possession. Even her sassy cherry-red glasses screamed smart and quirky rather than socially inept. The fact that Lila had a part-time job at Western Connecticut State and got to hang around college students only added to her coolness quotient.

"He's not bad for a dead guy," Lila said, gazing at Robert Cornelius. "He *is* dead, right?"

"Yeah, he's gotta be. This is from, like, the 1800s."

"Who is he?" Lila leaned closer to Saskia's screen.

Saskia told her what little she knew, adding, "I guess that photo's the first self-portrait ever taken."

Lila stared unblinking for several seconds, her eyes both lively and contemplative. Suddenly her face lit up in recognition. "Wait a minute; I've seen this photo before! It's in the library where I work."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, Western Connecticut has an archive of thousands of old photos: tintypes, cyanotypes, ambrotypes, daguerreotypes. It's, like, the second biggest in the country."

"Random."

"Completely. That's got to be a daguerreotype, right?"

Saskia was impressed. "It is. How'd you know . . . and what the heck is a daguerreotype?"

"I've been working at the archive a year now, so I've had to

learn out of necessity. Don't want to get fired, right? Daguerreotypes were made on sheets of copper plated with a coat of silver. Photography back then was complicated."

Lila dropped her backpack on the floor with a *thunk* and slumped into a seat. The unzipped pack revealed a trove of thick, heavy books. Saskia didn't know how she hauled them all around. "What did you do," Saskia asked, "take the college library with you?"

"Pretty much."

"Ever hear of Kindle?"

"I'm old school," Lila said. "I like the smell of old paper and dust." She took a book out and sniffed the binding.

Saskia laughed. "Weirdo."

Lila didn't react. She was gazing at the screen again, a pensive look on her face. "Hey, I hate to break this to you, but I just realized something. By taking this picture, Cornelius basically invented the selfie."

"Oh my god, you're right!"

Saskia and Lila looked at each other and burst out laughing. When they'd regained their composure, Lila said, "I could show you the photo in the archive, if you want . . ."

"You could smuggle me in?"

"Don't you want to see the actual daguerreotype?"

Saskia nodded. "Yeah, of course, but I don't want to get you in trouble."

"I like to live on the edge," Lila joked. She pulled out a Western Connecticut State employee ID card she kept dangling on a chain around her neck. "For real, it's no problem; I've got access. And the security guard there—Rich—he loves me."

"And you're absolutely sure this guy Cornelius is there?"

Both girls again looked at the image on the smudged screen of Saskia's laptop. They felt the weight of the man's stare. Saskia sensed he was almost challenging her.

"I'm sure," Lila replied, adjusting her vivid ikat headband. "I never forget a pretty face."



For the rest of the day Saskia couldn't get Robert Cornelius out of her head. He kept coming back to her like a song on repeat, only instead of lyrics buzzing in her brain, she saw his daguerreotype.

She couldn't wait to go with Lila to the archives, not just because she'd get to see his image firsthand, but also because she hadn't been out with a friend in a long time. A really long time. She had a feeling hanging out with Lila would be a good change of pace. Besides, what high school girl *didn't* want to hang out at a college?

After last period, Saskia went to her locker to gather her homework. She tried not to tense up when the girl with the neighboring locker, Paige Sampras, appeared beside her. In her brief time at Coventon High School, Saskia had learned a few things: avoid the girls' restroom across from the auditorium—it was *always* gross; sit in the back of Mr. Gionni's class because he had dog food breath; befriend Paige Sampras if you wanted to look cool.

At Saskia's old school, there had been the usual queen bees: cheerleader types who wielded their gleaming popularity like lightsabers. But Paige seemed different. For one thing, she was accomplished: top ten in their class, editor of the school's literary magazine, captain of the swim team. Plus, she was nice. Sunny, with an easy charm. Even though she could have gotten away with being a snob, she acted pleasant to everybody.

Saskia stared at her out of the corner of her eye. She searched for a zit, a mole, some sign of mortal imperfection.

Nothing.

"What do you think of school so far?" Paige asked, turning to her with a smile.

Saskia's cheeks warmed. She felt like she were staring into the eyes of a movie star or something. "I don't know."

"It takes a while to settle in, I guess."

Under Paige's gaze, she felt self-conscious. She liked her body

just fine, but her clothes were beyond boring: baggy shorts and that terrible gray T-shirt. Talk about faded. Meanwhile, Paige looked great in a black tank dress that drew attention to her waist, which was small like Vivien Leigh's in *Gone with the Wind*. Saskia thought that she should stop watching so many old movies.

"Hey, I meant to say this before, but if you ever want to hang out," Paige said, "let me know. I can introduce you to some people, maybe show you 'round town."

Saskia's face felt as if it were on fire. "Th-thanks," she stuttered. "That would be great."

She smiled at Paige, but Paige's attention had shifted. A boy had stopped by to talk. "Hey," he said to Paige.

Paige slammed her locker door a little harder than she needed to. "Hey, yourself."

"How've you been?"

"Josh, have you met Saskia?" Paige asked, avoiding the question.

If Saskia had been nervous before, now she was full-on panicked. She didn't know if Josh recognized her, but she more than recognized him. He was in her Early American Innovation and Ingenuity class. He sat a couple of rows in front of her: a brooding, quiet, detached, mesmerizing boy. Today Saskia had caught him shuffling a deck of cards until Mr. Nash had confiscated them.

We haven't met, Saskia wanted to say, *but in my daydreams you play an Asian Jim Stark in Rebel Without a Cause. I'm your girlfriend, a brown Natalie Wood, like when she played an improbable Puerto Rican in West Side Story.*

"Nah, I don't think so," he replied, causing Saskia to wince.

"Well, consider this your official introduction," Paige said. "Josh McClane, meet Saskia Brown. Saskia Brown, meet Josh McClane."

Josh saluted her without much interest, then looked away. "Did you hear that Ethan's planning a party?" The question was clearly meant for Paige. "You going?"

Paige blew back a wisp of hair. "I doubt it."

"Why not?"

“Better things to do, I guess.” She turned again to Saskia, who wished she had one iota of Paige’s game. “Are you going, Saskia?” she asked.

“Um, I don’t know yet.” The truth was, Sasika didn’t know who Ethan was.

Josh leaned on Paige’s locker door, bending his head close to hers. “I was hoping you’d be there,” he murmured.

“Well, don’t get your hopes up.”

Suddenly Saskia felt like a fly on the wall. A very awkward fly.

“We’ll talk later?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Paige said.

He straightened up. His inky-dark eyes grew sulky. “See you later, then, I guess.”

Saskia watched him shuffle away in his Chuck Taylors, backpack flung over his shoulder. Restless and tortured, just like Jim Stark.

“Do you guys have a history or something?” she blurted, surprised the words had come out of her mouth.

Luckily Paige chuckled. “History’s the right word. Ancient history.”

“I think he’s still into you.”

“Nah, he’s just nostalgic.”

Saskia looked in the direction he’d gone. He rounded a corner, disappearing from view. “Why’d you break up?”

“God, I don’t know. We’re like a freakin’ Taylor Swift song. Always on and off.”

Saskia deposited the last of her books into her backpack and shut the locker door. “Someday you can tell me the story.”

“Sure,” Paige replied. “Someday when we have, like, a hundred hours to kill.”

Saskia sat in the middle of her bed, pillows all around, and stared at her laptop. She had read half of the twenty or so Robert Cornelius entries sprinkled on Google, and was hungry for more. Each tidbit was like opening a door into Cornelius’s world—a world so

different from her own, before Wi-Fi and TV, social media and cell phones. A simpler world, maybe, but Saskia wasn't so sure when she stared at Cornelius's self-portrait. Something about his expression—the ardent, appraising eyes—made her think there had been nothing simple at all about his life.

She'd learned his basic biography. He was the son of Christian Cornelius, a Dutch immigrant in Philadelphia. As a boy he'd gone to private school. From there, he'd worked for his father, mastering many skills, included silver-plating. He became so adept at silver-plating, in fact, that the Smithsonian Institute hired him for jobs. Eventually, he developed an interest in daguerreotypes. Between 1839 and 1843, he partnered with a chemist, Paul Beck Goddard, and operated two photography studios. Yet he decided to give up photography shortly thereafter, and abruptly went back to running the family's prosperous gas and lighting company.

As for his personal life, Cornelius had married a woman named Harriet Comely in 1832. They'd had eight children together, five daughters and three sons. Cornelius had lived to the age of eighty-four. Of all the daguerreotypes he'd made in his lifetime, only a handful still existed.

Online, Saskia waded through old newspaper articles, encyclopedia entries, and chemistry texts. She read about his home city, Philadelphia, and what it had been like during his lifetime. But she still had questions about Cornelius's life. She wanted to know why he'd given up photography. Was it because he'd made more money in lighting? Or had he grown tired of his studios? None of the sources said.

She stared again at his face, trying to tease out an answer from his expression. But he was inscrutable. A little like Josh McClane.

At six thirty, hunger pangs drove her out of her room and into the kitchen. She microwaved a Healthy Choice frozen meal—there were about fifty of them stacked in the freezer—and joined her father in the small adjoining living room. She usually tried to stay out of there. The carpet stank of cat pee. Saskia wouldn't have been surprised if the previous owner had been a crazy cat lady.