

Chapter Two



SUNDAY, JUNE 15

10:12 A.M.

“WHEN IN DOUBT, you must assume that the fluid in front of you is blood.”

The man saying this to me is at least a hundred years old. He has the kind of wrinkles that you could hide quarters in, and they tighten now as he frowns at me.

Gene is my trainer today at Rocket 4D Theater, and he takes his job as seriously as handling the nuclear codes. I can tell he's not sure about me, no matter how hard I try to show him that I've already memorized the employee handbook. For the past two days that we've worked together, I've accepted every one of Gene's suggestions: hold the broom with exactly this many inches between your hands when you sweep, stand outside at precisely fifteen minutes before showtime and not a minute after, ensure that your belt buckle is centered under the buttons of your red polo shirt.

I do it all because I respect Gene and, more importantly, be-

cause I must keep this job. Each day since my interview, I've woken up terrified that someone will take this away from me.

And I can't afford to lose anything else.

"Never touch any kind of fluid without first taking the proper safety precautions," Gene warns me, holding up a shaky finger in front of my face. "Doing so puts you at risk of serious infection—and even death."

At the final word, he turns his cloudy gray eyes back to the puddle between our feet, and I follow his gaze. It's dark red, splattered wide across the concrete. Both Gene and I wear the same shiny black leather shoes, the kind I generally associate with lunch ladies. On me, they look large, and the calf-high red socks that I am required to wear with them don't help. Gene's red socks are covered by his blue slacks. Regardless, I know he's still wearing them under there because it's a rule, and Gene follows every single one.

"When approaching a possible contamination," Gene says in a heavy voice, "it's important to—"

There's a snort of laughter to our left that cuts Gene off. I turn to see Ivy, our other usher, shaking her head as she watches us. She's sitting on a bench, an erotic novel called *Under the Evertree* propped up in her lap.

"Gene, you've gotta chill," she says, shutting the book as she hops up from the bench. "You and I both know that isn't blood."

Gene's eyes narrow, his furry gray eyebrows knitting together.

"Ivy," Gene begins. "You know the protocol. All fluids must—"

"That's not a *fluid*," Ivy insists. "That's literally a Popsicle. You can see the stick."

She points down, and I'm momentarily distracted by the lines of a tattoo peeking out of the sweatband she has to wear on her

wrist to cover it up. Raw power emanates from every inch of Ivy, from her black-brown curly hair to her perfect cat eye to her dark emerald nail polish that's the ideal shade for her deep tan skin. This is technically against dress code, but no one says anything to her about it. Not even Gene.

I wish Ivy was my trainer today. She's nineteen and already training other ushers, a clear example of her excellence, even if she and Gene occasionally—often—disagree. But today, since she's not my trainer and is just the other usher stationed here at Rocket, she's spent most of the day lounging on the blue benches reading. Apparently, though, this was something she just couldn't let slide.

I'm grateful. Because as much as I want to abide by every one of Gene's rules, there's no denying that what is slowly widening in puddle form on the ground is, indeed, a red Popsicle. The stick that Ivy pointed out is buried somewhat by a small mound of red ice, and there's nothing bloodlike about it once you really look. I peer up at Gene, finding his eyes still narrowed, some fight happening internally.

"I'm trying to get Greta to understand protocol," he says. "And if—"

But Gene's distracted. Outside the open doors, a large crow caws and lands on the ground. Gene's face takes on a different expression, the kind I've only ever seen in war movies.

Birds are Gene's natural enemy, specifically this crow. A white line snakes across its beak, some kind of scar from tormenting other long-suffering theme-park employees. Gene abandons the Popsicle to move slowly toward the bird. He cups his hands over his mouth and caws at it, but it doesn't move. So he grabs the nearest broom, hoisting it up near his side like a sword.

Ivy smirks. “Well, that takes care of that.”

I blink from her to Gene. “Should I . . . help him?”

“Yeah,” Ivy says, rolling her eyes. “You should go get rags and some cleaner for this fucking bloodbath.”

She grins at me, and something inside me swells. I force myself to not rush to the back for the rags and cleaner, instead attempting to look casual and nonchalant as I go, the way Ivy is now as she checks her nails in the dusty light of the empty theater.

When I come back with a bucket full of rags and cleaner, she directs me on how best to deal with the Popsicle, then takes some of the rags to start cleaning the benches. The rags themselves are almost paper-thin, made from the worn-down shirts of former employees, so you need at least five to really make any progress. It also doesn't help that the way Ivy chooses to clean the benches is by putting a spray bottle in one hand and a rag in another, followed by sprinting down the aisles between the benches, spraying and wiping in one motion before switching to get the other side. This is definitely not Gene's approved method, but one glance outside shows me he's still in a standoff with his bird, so I let it go and focus on attacking my own mess.

It's as sticky as I imagined, the sugar practically glued to the concrete. There's a syrupy scent that mixes with the ammonia from the cleaner, and I momentarily wish I'd grabbed the gloves that I know Gene would have insisted I wear. But it's too late, so I go in the way Ivy showed me, spraying and wiping with the rags.

I wonder what it would look like to have to clean up actual blood. Would it wipe away this easily? Would it pool the same way?

The thought makes me pause. At some point, I probably will have to clean up actual blood. Someone might break their nose after running too fast on the benches. They might slice themselves

on one of the sharp metal edges of our old fences. They might fall and crack their knees on the concrete walkway outside the theater.

Or something worse might happen.

Someone could die.

That's happened here at Hyper Kid, after all.

It came up in my research, though I already obviously knew the basics. Everybody who's grown up here in North County knows what happened when the park opened, about the girl who died. It's the kind of story so bloody and gruesome that it gets passed around at slumber parties and during breaks in class. There was never any resolution, so the story's only gotten more twisted as time goes on. But the basics have always stayed the same.

It was twenty years ago, and Hyper Kid Magic Land was about to open to the public. The park was hosting a staff-only preview party with a few rides open for the employees to try before the public got the chance. Not everything was done yet—there were still a couple of weeks to go—but mostly, everything was ready. The people interviewed about that night said that it all smelled like fresh paint and construction. They talked about the ample food and drinks. It was a celebration, the kind of night when nothing should go wrong . . . and yet everything does.

She was a performer. Beautiful. Well liked. "Sweet," according to one article. They also said she had a "bright future" ahead of her, the way doomed girls always seem to.

It's funny, I guess. Assistant Principal Taggart used to tell me I had a "bright future" ahead of me, too, back when I was a freshman.

Before I destroyed everything. Everything that I am determined to rebuild in a way that that girl from twenty

years ago will never be able to. She'll always be frozen in time, frozen in a moment when her choices—good or bad, no one actually knows— caught up to her.

There's one picture of her that everyone seems to love, her senior photo, taken on the beach with her dark brown hair flying over her shoulder.

There's another photo, too, from later, that they always liked to put next to the senior photo. One that was leaked. One of the crime scene. Her hand, bloodied and slashed, flung out of the tarp that covered the rest of her body.

This is where the details start to get fuzzy. No one knows when she died that night—though there are countless true-crime theories—and the firsthand accounts of her friends all stop around seven p.m., when the girl left their group. The only confirmed detail after that is that her body was found the next morning in one of the gondolas that swing above the park. It was a janitor who found her, casually sweeping in the shadow of the ride. He felt a drop on his cheek and assumed it was rain.

It wasn't.