

PROLOGUE

1 day before due date

THE HAND THAT holds the knife is mine but feels like a stranger's.

Pinned between the soot-stained wall and a dumpster, its blue-painted exterior dented and streaked, the man is on his knees, hands raised in surrender. The blade touches his neck where the pale folds of his skin contrast with his tan face, like rings on a tree.

I am prepared to cut this man. To kill him. This is not me; I am not this person.

But here I am.

The smells of piss and garbage and stale alcohol mix with night air and the scent of rain. My fingers are unfamiliar, nails black with grime, palms scraped and sore and soiled with something that, in the dark, might be grease or dried blood.

I regain focus as the light of the caged bulb overhead flashes across the metal blade.

“Where is Mara?” I demand.

“I’m not lying, I swear. I don’t know where she is.”

I press harder and the tip of the knife dents his skin, its tension holding the blade on the surface. Any harder, the knife will slice through.

“You don’t have to do this,” the man says. “This ain’t going to solve nothing.”

“Where would she go?”

“I haven’t seen her in years. I swear—” He starts to turn, twisting away from the blade.

“Don’t move,” I warn, shifting the long edge of the knife against his skin. “You knew her.”

“I did. But it’s been years since I seen her. Most peaceful years I ever spent.” He inches farther from the blade, driving his shoulder into the dumpster.

“No,” I snap. That’s not Mara. My partner in the biggest undertaking of my life, Mara is my oldest and most loyal friend. *I would do anything for you, Lexi.* From the start of our friendship in middle school—the three of us. Together every lunch, huddled at the cafeteria table we’d claimed junior year. Friday night sleepovers. The notebook we passed between us with confessions about our crushes, dreaming of our futures. First drinks. Double dates. Whispered plans to attend the same college, to be roommates in the dorms.

The knife slips and I clench it tighter, drawing the point into his skin. He cries out as blood beads at the site, swelling into a fat droplet before rolling down his neck. I don’t recognize myself, but I have no choice. Everything depends on finding her.

“Where did she work?” I ask.

“It’s been years since—”

“Where?” I interrupt.

“Mostly at bars—she had jobs six, sometimes seven days a week, on and off.” He motions down the darkened alley, toward the street. “She’s worked at most of these places.”

I’m focused on my next question, calculating how to unlock a memory from this man that will lead me to Mara when he grips my wrist and twists toward me, bending my arm until I cry out and release the weapon. He snatches it off the ground and wields it like an expert.

“You want to know about Mara Vannatta? She’s a user. She used me like she used everyone.” He talks so fast I can barely keep track of his

words. The knife hovers in my face as he fires anger like darts. That blade makes it impossible to focus, to hear his words.

“Whatever she took, you’re not getting it back.” Spittle sprays from his lips and strikes my cheek. Lunging, he shoves me with his free hand, and I land hard on my tailbone. I expect him to turn away, but instead he swings around, swiping the blade at my chest, so close that I lurch backward and slam into the dumpster. He grabs a fistful of my hair and throws me down on the eroded asphalt, pebbles shredding my hands and knees. The impact expels the air from my lungs, and I struggle to inhale.

“Come to my club and fucking threaten me,” he sneers and kicks hard into my ribs. “Get the fuck out of here.”

Curled on my side, I wait for the next blow.

It doesn’t come.

Something clatters to the ground, and I spot the discarded knife as the man slips back into the club.

A line of scalding heat burns across my chest, my own panic alongside something else. Still lying on the asphalt, I finger the damp fabric of my shirt, a tacky sensation. Blood. The knife sliced the skin. Tenderly, I tug the neckline away to see how much blood has soaked into the fabric.

I stretch to reach the knife, the motion sending a lancing pain where his shoe connected with my ribs. With shallow breaths, I wipe the knife clean on my jeans and press the lever along its ridge to close the blade. I will have to learn to be better with it. Or get another weapon.

I am going to find Mara Vannatta if it kills me.

I touch the bloody cotton of my shirt and wonder if it might.