

Chapter 1

DESPITE BLASTING THE AIR-CONDITIONING, MY HANDS ARE sweaty on the steering wheel. The sun seems brighter up north than I'm used to, the light so harsh and white I'm squinting through the windshield despite my sunglasses.

The car smells like stress sweat, and antiseptic cleaning agent, and pine, courtesy of the jaunty little air freshener hanging from the mirror. It's bright pink and heart-shaped, which makes me think it *should* smell like strawberry, something that irritates me more than it ought to.

The combination of smells reminds me of a hospital room. I wonder if the car rental people thought about that. If there was some other, worse smell here before, and they decided this was preferable.

I've been on the road for over four hours now, the rolling fields of sprouting wheat and rye slowly and steadily being replaced by woods, first sparse and lush, now thick and impenetrable. I've only stopped twice, first to use the bathroom, then to get some terrible burnt roadside coffee.

When my phone rings, I twitch, my hands slipping on the wheel momentarily. For a second, I think it'll be them, somehow. That they're calling to tell me they know that I'm a fraud, that they've reported me to the police, and that I won't be admitted to the clinic.

But then I see the name flashing on the fancy Bluetooth-connected touch screen on the dashboard, and I feel myself relaxing for the first time today.

It takes me a couple of seconds to figure out how to accept the call, but then my best friend's voice fills the car at maximum volume.

"Isobel!" Armin yells at me.

"Holy fuck, that's loud." I struggle to turn the volume down. As I fiddle with the different faux buttons on the touch screen, I once again curse inwardly over my decision to get a shiny modern vehicle at the rental place.

I thought it would help with my cover story. But I won't have any use for a cover story if I end up crashing the rented car into a tree because I can't figure out how to operate it.

"Are you still alive?" Armin asks me as I finally manage to get his voice down to a manageable level.

"More or less," I respond, noticing that I'm using my speakerphone voice but unable to stop myself. Slightly louder and more articulated than normal, as though I'm talking to someone who's hard of hearing.

"Have they murdered you yet?" he continues, not acknowledging what I've said. "Did they tar and feather you? Or put you in a bear costume and burn you in a pagan ritual? Put a cage full of bees on your head?"

"Not yet." I laugh. "But I am still on my way there, so don't give up hope."

Armin sighs.

"All I want is to be interviewed for one of those true crime podcasts," he ponders wistfully. "Like, I want to go on *My Favorite Murder* or *The Witching Hour* and talk about what a wonderful person you were, and how all I want is to see justice served."

"I don't think they are doing *The Witching Hour* anymore," I say, mildly distracted by a sign warning me for potential moose crossings up ahead.

Jesus, I really am in the rural north.

"Also, I think you'd come across better on TV. One of those Netflix originals, you know?"

Armin hums thoughtfully.

"You might have a point there," he says. "I know exactly what I'd wear, too."

"Well, I'll do my very best to get murdered so that your dreams can

come true,” I tell him, a smile still lingering on my face as my anxiety begins to fade, little by little.

“Seriously, though.” Armin’s voice grows serious. “How are you feeling? Still feeling good? Pumped?”

I consider lying, but he’d hear it in my voice if I did.

“Nervous, mostly,” I respond. “But it’s too late to back out now.”

A few moments of silence pass by, and then he says, the levity leeching from his voice, “If you want to back out, I’ll help you out with it. I can loan you some money, you know.”

A pang of something akin to shame hits me, makes my palms prickle and my cheeks grow hot.

“I’d never ask you for that,” I say, trying to make it sound lighthearted, knowing I’m not successful.

“I know,” Armin sighs. “I know that. But I just wanted to offer.” He pauses for a moment, and then adds: “Again.”

There is a lingering discomfort in the silence that follows, stemming from the talk we had last night.

I can see his face as clearly now as I could fourteen hours ago, sitting in a small, dingy pub—my choice, not his—his sharp, regal features softened by the dim lighting, his eyes full of concern.

It hadn’t been a fight. Not really. But it had been as close to a fight as we’d had since we were teenagers.

“All right,” he says, clearly making an effort to try and brighten the mood. “I’ll quiz you before you get there. How did you hear about the Break-Up Rehab?”

“They won’t call it that,” I correct him. “Apparently, they’re very particular about calling it by its legal name.”

Another car passes me, going the opposite direction; it’s a sleek, shiny gray BMW. There’s a woman in the driver’s seat.

For a fleeting second, I wonder if she’s coming from the clinic, but then I shake off the thought. There are lots of other reasons she’d be on this road.

Most of the people going to the clinic probably don’t drive themselves

there, either. Based on the price tag, they probably have a driver take them.

Or a helicopter.

More likely, the woman just lives somewhere around here, in one of the small, quaint, interchangeable towns I've passed in the last hour and a half.

She might not even be aware of the clinic, or the rumors around it, at all.

"Fine," Armin says. "How did you hear about *the Himlafall Clinic*?"

I smirk at the mockery in his voice.

"Well, I first heard about *the Himlafall Clinic*—"

"You can't say it like that," he interrupts me. "They will sus you out. You have to say it like you mean it."

"Fine," I say, taking a deep breath. "I first heard about the Himlafall Clinic a few months ago. An influencer I was following went to the clinic after separating from her partner, and the way she spoke about her experience really made an impact on me."

"Which influencer?" Armin shoots back, lightning quick.

"Lina Lee," I answer immediately. "Suck it," I add.

"I'm on your side, dickhead," Armin mutters, before continuing. "Okay, Lina Lee, very good."

"Do you know who Lina Lee is?" I ask him.

"Yeah. Tanya was obsessed with her. She used to make me look at pictures of Lina Lee and ask me if I thought she was prettier than her."

"Shocker that the relationship didn't work out," I say, my voice dry as a bone.

"Yeah, yeah," Armin says. "Whatever. We're not talking about me. Back to your cover story. So, Isobel, what made you decide to seek out treatment at the clinic?"

I strike a sad, beaten-down tone.

"My boyfriend of four years, Kaveh, broke up with me a month ago," I say, adding a tremor to my voice. "I felt like my whole life fell apart. I couldn't sleep, couldn't work. . . . I lost almost twenty pounds because I couldn't keep any food down."

"Tell me more about this boyfriend," Armin says. "Very handsome, was

he? Successful? Grew up with three sisters, which meant he wasn't embarrassed to buy tampons for you?"

I laugh.

"Yeah, he was a real catch. Love of my life." I feel awkward after saying that, and, so as not to let it linger, I add: "Thanks again for agreeing to lend me your pictures for the Instagram, by the way."

"No problem," he says. "I'm honored you asked me to play the role of the scoundrel who broke your heart."

I've been building the fake social media account for about four months at this point. I named it @IsobelAnderssen01, mentioned in the first post that my previous (nonexistent) account had been hacked in order to justify why it didn't go farther back. I started posting pictures of food and cute dogs and, once in a while, Armin, with cutesy couple captions like "Brunch with this one!" and "We scrub up pretty good!" All to build the image of a normal woman in an average over-thirty relationship, someone who was pretty sure she was heading for marriage and two-point-four kids within a couple of years.

And then, a month ago, I let the account go dark.

"Do you really think they are going to look you up?" Armin asks me.

"I don't know," I say. "But based on what I've heard . . . maybe."

The road has started climbing again, and the car climbs along with it. According to the map, I'm getting close. Only five minutes to go.

"Listen," Armin says, and I hear all the things he's not saying in the silent seconds that follow, an echo from last night.

"I'm really not sure this is a good idea, Isobel. It's a lot of money. You might not find anything. And I'm still not convinced this doesn't legally constitute fraud."

"Just . . . take care of yourself, okay?"

I don't know if I imagine his voice wavering.

"You know I will," I say, quietly. "And I won't be alone. Sandra is going to be there. You know she'd never let anything happen to me. She's a mama bear."

"I know. She told me the same thing a couple of days ago when I called her to try to talk her out of it." He sighs. "Call me every day, okay? And

don't get angry with me for saying this, but if you change your mind, I can come pick you up. I'll pose as your boyfriend. Say that I decided I couldn't live without you, that I've changed my ways."

"It's going to be fine," I tell him.

Just as I reach the crest of the hill, I see the sign.

It doesn't look like the other road signs. This one has clearly not been put up by the government, which makes me wonder if it's even legal, but with the amount of taxes Himlafall Clinic must be paying, I can't imagine anyone caring.

It's a slim wooden sign, about four feet long, painted a partially transparent white to show the wood underneath, which makes it look like a naked cake.

On the sign is written, in tall, slightly curling letters:

WELCOME TO HIMLAFALL. YOUR NEW LIFE BEGINS TODAY.

. . . with an arrow pointing down a wide, well-kept side road.

"I think I'm here," I tell Armin, breath slightly catching. "I mean, I think *it's* here. I think I've made it."

"Last chance to turn back," Armin says, and I know he's only halfway joking. If that.

"Seriously, it's going to be fine," I laugh, my voice pitched high, my heart thrumming in my chest.

I'm anxious, sure. But I'm also excited.

After so many long hours alone in my room, trying to get people to come forward, setting up my trail of breadcrumbs, taking out a loan I might not be able to pay back . . . I'm finally here.

It's been six months and four days since I stumbled upon the forum post that set me on this path.

If all goes right, I'll be able to take the Himlafall Clinic, and Dr. Martina Hastings, down.

Kick-start the career that has, so far, utterly failed to materialize.

And maybe, just maybe, once and for all, prove to both myself and the world that I am nothing like the man who raised me.

If I pull this off, the sign will have been right. My new life will, indeed, have started today.