

Chapter 1

Day 1, Sunday

Come to Paris. Your sister is dead.

The rest of the words from Sebastien’s email fade against these opening sentences. The world slams to a halt—again—and I suck in another stupid, shocked breath as though it’s the first time I’m reading his email instead of the eighty-second.

“Nous sommes arrivés, mademoiselle.” The cab driver speaks to me without turning, wide charcoal eyes peering curiously through the rearview mirror. He yanks the parking brake. Stubby fingers push buttons on a digital console displaying the cost of my trip from the airport in euros. The route to Montmartre passed in a blur despite unrelenting morning traffic. Children run wild on the sidewalk beside us, high on summer vacation, fast food wrappers trailing their bands of twos and threes. The urban doorways of this northern pocket of Paris alternate between adult film rental businesses and glass panes leading to residential apartments. Voices rise above the engine’s rumble, words in French carrying through the window; a couple examines an accordion on a collapsible table.

I hesitate before locking my phone, then logic reigns; I count out what I owe. One thing I truly appreciate about Europe: unlike American currency, euros correlate in size to their value; the tiny ten-cent coins are dwarfed by the fifty-cent pieces, which are half the weight of the euro coins. I couldn’t care less about the precise artistry of the European continent on each face.

Angela was born a mere two minutes before me, but she took with her the creativity of the womb, leaving me to steep in pragmatism.

Where is she now? Is she in some drawer? Is it cold? Is she alone?

“Merci, monsieur.” I place the money in the driver’s grooved palm, then exit the cab. Pairs of people move across the open square of the adjacent Pigalle metro stop, as if the buddy system is obligatory—everything better with someone else there to share it. Twin girls with yellow hair skip rope by a fountain, and a breath whooshes out of me as I watch them. Over the fountain’s spouts a sculpture of the Greek goddess Persephone hunches. Her carved expression howls with sadness, and tears of pigeon shit frame her mouth.

When Angela first arrived, she sent photos of herself in front of the Eiffel Tower with silk scarves wrapped around her dark hair, sunglasses covering half her face. Her Grace Kelly phase from adolescence never fully expired. It was Angela’s sense of poise—the confidence that she could rival a princess—that made her so enthralling to men and women. The only stranger I ever idolized was Marie Curie.

Different scenarios leaped to mind when I read the first email from Sebastien saying Angela was missing—then the second, then the third, announcing her death. I tried to rationalize the irrational: Angela was over their relationship and stopped returning his calls. Angela took an impromptu trip to Turkey (her way of moving on). Angela packed up in the middle of the night and changed apartments without telling him. My sister loved a dramatic exit almost as much as a romantic beginning.

I was wrong. After struggling through French headlines on *Le Monde*’s website about a shooting at the Sorbonne University, where Angela was doing doctoral research, I started the

calls. I left ten messages on Angela's voice mail. I called a dozen different numbers associated with the Paris police and spoke with indignant Parisians who could not understand my shitty French. When the American embassy contacted me as Angela's next of kin, the news became real. When Inspector Valentin called to inform me of Angela's probable homicide, it became a nightmare.

"Bracelets, mademoiselle?" A man in a torn T-shirt lurches into my path, waving red and white woven bracelets two inches from my face. He dangles another at my nose, grabs my hand to slip it on my wrist, but I jerk away.

"No!"

He reacts like I slapped him—eyebrows up, open mouth. I add *merci* to my curt rejection, but he's already approaching a young family.

Deep breath. You just got here. Chill the fuck out. I shake the sudden tension from my fists and look upward to the sky. Clear blue strung with wispy cirrus clouds fills my vision as I wait for the clenching fear to pass.

Angela's apartment building is neighbor to a grocer's stand and faces the sprawling expanse of the city block. Along a narrow street opposite the metro stop, a farmers market is underway. Friends kiss each other's cheeks as they pause—more shoppers than I've ever seen at a San Diego market—enjoying the atmosphere, probably making lasting, happy memories. The sweeping melody of an accordion intones the charming soundtrack Paris is known for and makes me grind my teeth.

I set down my duffel bag before the austere wooden entrance to Angela's building. Thanks to a trip to France we took as a family, I recall Montmartre was the center of Parisian street art

about a century ago. Artists splay in chairs beside colorful tableaus or black-and-white photographs every five feet.

I like art—the kind diagramming nervous systems and the human body, sketches from the eighteenth century. Not the kind delineating hopes and desires. Abstract art and the indefinable have always seemed like a waste of time to me.

Give me reason. Give me finite.

Not Angela. My twin sister's uncanny ability to zero in on whatever bleeding heart was nearest in the room was a running joke in our family. We would say she could hear a fly being swatted two houses down. She loved the emotions and complexity of a moment, whether in art, books, or a chubby child's glance at a passing ice cream truck.

Once I was reading on the back porch and heard her crying. I set down my dinosaur book and found Angela inside our tree house giving a memorial service for a butterfly whose wings she'd accidentally torn off. Not knowing what to do, I hugged her and told her we could bury the insect like a dinosaur. Then someone would find its fossil one day. We used the box from my new microscope as the coffin and a sheet of newspaper for a cushion, not yet understanding the process of fossilization.

The call box of her building displays her name—DARBY ANGELA—and every cell in my body seems to draw another stupid, shocked breath that this is happening. I press her button. In spite of myself, I imagine her light cadence answering: *Good day, Moon.*

Tears well in my eyes, seeing her so clearly I could pull her from my thoughts. I lean into the metal bars—cool on the sudden flush that heats my cheek—while my knees bang against the wrought iron gate of the glass entryway. Sobs climb my throat, clawing to air the pain that balls

my fists, when a man, late twenties, appears, standing behind the glass. Startled, I step back as he opens the door; his tall frame barely fits within the shadowy entry.

“Bonjour, mademoiselle.” Dark hair is parted meticulously to the side. “Shayna?”

I steel myself in the company of this stranger, who I now realize must be my sister’s boyfriend. A man I didn’t know existed until his emails arrived. “Yes, that’s me.”

“I am Sebastien. Call me Seb,” he adds. His accent wrestles with consonants in English, making them thick and adding extra syllables. *Call me Seb-uh.*

In the narrow hallway, aquamarine walls emphasize lustrous marble tile. The temperature instantly plummets once I’m inside, the chill jolting my senses. I wipe my chin as the door shuts with a vacant click. What if Angela were the one greeting me instead of this *Seb-uh*? She would have rushed forward, thrown her arms around me—our last words, spoken in anger, forgotten—and squeezed until I heard a vertebra crack. I would have protested, groaned aloud, but inwardly loved it, had I ever visited while she was alive.

Our footsteps ring through the lobby as Seb leads me to a winding iron staircase, past a single door marked CONCIERGE. Beneath, atop a bristly doormat, headlines blaze from a newspaper’s front page. Most of the text could be in Russian, for all I recognize it, but the side column’s title I know immediately: Traffic. Instead of feeling gratified I’m reading French in Paris, irritation tenses my jaw; the daily commute is what makes the news around here, not my sister’s death.

“May I?” Seb takes my duffel bag, then raises both eyebrows at its light weight. Clothing for only three days makes for easy travel. We step onto the stairs, single file, before he abruptly turns back.

“Please forgive me.” With a trembling finger, he touches the hair at my shoulder. “You are

exactly identical. Except—”

“My eyes, I know.” I step back in the confined space. The look on his face disturbs me. Is that longing? Desire? For Angela, obviously. I’m a sad substitute for what has been taken from us both.

Seb leans in closer, and his scent is musty, like a library or a coat retrieved from a winter storage bin. “Forgive me. Is one eye green?”

I nod, pressing against the railing of the staircase. The metal digs in above my kidneys. “Angela’s are both brown. It’s the only way we differ. Phenotypically.” As identical twins, Angela and I have gotten this kind of curious reaction all our lives. The stares, the awed giggles. It’s old hat for me and beyond tactless on Seb’s part in this situation, regardless of whether he’s in mourning, too.

“How unusual for a Chinese woman. Half—of course. Your Scottish side is probably where that green comes from.” Seb releases a sigh. “Your mixed heritage was something Angela was very proud of.”

Seb dissolves into tears, dropping my bag. His broad shoulders shake as his large hands cradle his face. One moves to his heart. I glance to the second floor for help, then back toward the front door—but we’re alone. Part of me wants to sympathize with him and share Angela experiences together, to revel in our memories of her and support each other as best we can. Instead I stand frozen, hoping he remembers who he is and who I am as quickly as he lost his shit.

A sob-hiccup escapes from his fingers.

My hand rises, hesitates at his back, then pats lightly.

I have no idea what the hell to say here. Seriously. I just want to do what I came to do and go home. I'm holding on by a thread myself and can't spare a second of comfort for anyone else. A grimace slides down my face as I recall all the material left to review so I'm up to speed before classes start in a week. It sounds callous, but finally starting medical school is all that's kept me going these last few weeks, last few years. My parents and I have been working toward this since high school, and it's only now within reach. Angela, on the other hand, was never interested in following such a traditional path. She always munched baguettes to her own beat—obsessed with World War II, literature, and cultures since we were kids. *The odd lady out*, she liked to say. Hence why she stayed on as a doctoral candidate in the Sorbonne's history program.

At least, that's what she'd decided three years ago—the last time we talked.

Seb takes a measured breath. "Please excuse me. It has been a very hard time." Deep-blue eyes dart to mine. "I am so sorry, I mean, of course you know that. Angela is your sister. It is—"

"Fine. I'd just like to get up to her apartment. Whenever you're ready," I add, relieved that he's stopped blubbing. Does that make me heartless? No. It makes me pragmatic, efficient, and no doubt mired in some selfish stage of grief.

He snuffles, then continues up the stairs, bag in hand. We move at a melancholy pace. When we reach the landing of Angela's floor, Seb turns to me with a weak smile. I stand awkwardly while he digs in his pockets for the key.

"I'm sorry, I don't know much about you," I begin. "Do you live here? How long have you known . . ." *No*. "How long did you know my sister?"

He pauses, examining the key ring. A pocket flashlight hanging from it catches the light. "She did not share much about me?"

I flounder for the right words. Even I'm aware of how hurtful this could be. "No. Well, we really haven't spoken in three years. Since our parents' funeral."

He nods. "I feared as much—she was always very private. We did not live together, but we were in a relationship for a year before . . . before the shooting."

Hearing the words in person drives reality home in a way that was missing while processing details alone in San Diego. I let down my guard a little. "You know, your emails were pretty confusing at first. You said Angela disappeared in a shooting at the university, then you wrote that she died. I thought she'd been shot, but the police said they found her in the river. Is that right? Did the shooter take her?"

"You did not have an English speaker discuss with you?"

"The inspector spoke English, but the connection was pretty bad each time."

Seb turns an ancient key in a gray door, the only door in this blunted hallway. "I see. I was so distraught when I wrote to you, my English must have translated poorly. She disappeared during the chaos, and the shooter killed himself. Her body was found ten days later in the Seine, unidentifiable but for her tattoo. The police still do not know who is responsible for her death."

"Tattoo?"

"The one on her ankle." He stoops to lift his pant leg, revealing a Gemini astrology symbol on his own ankle. Two vertical pillars are bookended by horizontal curves—a Roman numeral two, bent at the top and bottom. The symbol for twins. "We got them together one day, after she said I was her other half. Her twin. Figuratively, of course," he adds, checking my reaction.

The hurt I feel throbs all over, pierces my jaw. Angela refused to come home for Mom and Dad's memorial service. Then she had the nerve to replace me, her only family left, with this

yahoo—even figuratively.

A cold wave of remorse replaces my outrage. I will never have the chance to bicker with her again. To make up and apologize for my own self-absorbed actions years ago. My sister is gone.

Fresh tears prick my eyes. “Are we going inside?”

Seb doesn’t move. Instead, he places a hand on my shoulder. “You will identify the remains, then help me clean out her apartment, yes? I would also like to recount her last steps together if you think it is possible. The police do not know how she got from campus to the river. No other student was removed from school property in this sense. We must find out who targeted her and what happened. I could never replace the knowledge of a true twin,” he adds, lowering his head.

Long lashes, the kind to make any housewife in Orange County jealous, cling to his skin, still wet. I nod. For the first time since I arrived, a flicker of hope ignites that coming here was the right thing to do. I owe it to Angela to learn more about her last years. To meet the people—the life—she chose as her own.

He opens the door, allowing me to pass through first. On a whiteboard above a desk at the far end of Angela’s studio apartment is her familiar scrawl. My heartbeat quickens seeing her writing—maybe one of the last things she ever wrote.

But as Seb closes the door and turns the lock behind us, I realize the words on the whiteboard aren’t in English or in French. Instead, I recognize the childhood language Angela and I invented, the one we used whenever we didn’t want our parents to know something. As we got older and grew apart, the language became a throwback to more innocent times.

I inch closer to the whiteboard, while Seb moves to the bachelor-size refrigerator in the corner.

Greek letters written in Angela's slant cover most of the whiteboard. Your average kid from San Diego would probably consider Greek an alien language—especially with the letters written backward and upside down, as they are here—but not us. The dots and swishes that decorate the flat tops of the symbols form a pattern that feels like home. I absorb the words as casually as if it had been weeks instead of years since my sister and I last exchanged notes.

Too casually. Too fast to really grasp their meaning. I read a second time. A third. I blink, and the symbols pulse through my eyelids and set fire to the brief reprieve of calm I felt a moment earlier.

“Are you thirsty? Hungry? How are you feeling?” Seb rummages in the kitchenette cabinets, then stops when I don't answer.

Every exposed hair on my legs, arms, and neck stands on end. Angela's message to me reads:

ALIVE. TRUST NOONE.

“Shayna?” Sebastien's voice is at my ear. “How are you feeling?”

No one. Not even her boyfriend? The man with a key to her apartment and hands the size of waffle irons.

I turn to face his barrel chest and raise my eyes to his.

“Parched.”