

PROLOGUE

The night she died, all our phones were turned off.

The police didn't believe us.

Kids don't go anywhere without their mobile phones, they said. You expect us to believe you weren't Snap-facing or Insta-booking or whatever it is you kids do these days at your end-of-term party? That not a single person took a selfie or boomerang or video?

We all had the same answer: *No.*

They checked our phones anyway. Logged into our clouds. But there was nothing to find.

The detectives discovered a scrap of paper at the scene. It was one of the posters that had been stapled to the driftwood gate that marked the entrance to the steps down to the beach. It said in big, bold letters: **NO PHONES, NO CAMERAS, NO SOCIAL MEDIA, NO EXCEPTIONS!**

As if anyone at the party needed a reminder. Because that was the whole point: we'd *wanted* a chance to switch off. To have a party that wouldn't be documented, to dance the night away in blissful anonymity, to have memories that couldn't be fact-checked by photographs and videos. No one broke the rules. No one wanted to. We all had eagle eyes when it came to spotting the telltale

glow of a smartphone screen, or the glint of a camera lens.

Some of us might break a law or two, if we felt compelled. But disobey the rules of our end-of-term party? No one would dare.

The police officer rolled his eyes as he interrogated us one by one. *You mean to say you all followed these rules? I don't believe you.*

But we had nothing to show him. That was the truth. So he asked us to tell him instead.

The beach was alive that night. The bonfire was lit, the flames leaping up into the sky. Some of the logs flashed green as they burned, choked with salt from the sea. As we danced on the beach, our shadows stretched up the chalk cliffs looming over the horseshoe bay so that it looked as if the cliffs were moving. Waves crashed in the distance, the low tide leaving the sand littered with seaweed and shells. The summer evening was warm, the start of another British heatwave.

And, of course, it was rammed with *us*. Out of uniform, it was harder to tell who was who. Ironic, wasn't it, that a uniform designed to make us all look the same actually became a blank canvas on which we could showcase our individuality? Now, in our normal clothes, we looked like regular teens. But we weren't.

We were students of Illumen Hall.

That's what made this party different. At other times of the year, students from nearby schools would come to our events – our Samhain party was legendary and if you

missed our Christmas Extravaganza, you might as well say goodbye to any semblance of a social life.

But the end-of-term beach party was ours. We lived together for the whole year and, whether you enjoyed your time at school or not, separating for the summer suffused everyone with a sense of melancholy. No matter how hard you tried to avoid it, if you were one of the chosen 600 who attended Illumen Hall, you were woven into the fabric of the school. Summer split us apart and this party was a final memory to sustain us through two months of enforced separation.

The smell of charcoal permeated the air. The logs snapped and crackled with the heat, sending up blisters of embers into the rapidly darkening sky. Combined with low house beats and swaying bodies, it was intoxicating – or maybe that was just the copious amounts of alcohol that flowed into our paper cups.

The tide crept in as the hour grew later, until the bay was almost cut off and the only way out was back up the rough-hewn steps cut into the cliff face. It was all beautiful: us, the sand, the waves and the fire.

A blood-curdling scream sliced through the music. The crowd of writhing bodies froze. Then there was a surge, a ripple of panic that leaped from person to person. The screaming continued, the music snapped off, and we rushed as one down towards the water.

The screaming was coming from the sea. A figure was standing by the water. The sun had disappeared from the horizon, but there was enough ambient light to see by.

A body lay on the sand, waves lapping at the soles of her

feet. She was on her front, but her head was tilted to one side, her lips tinged an unnatural blue.

Pale skin, blue lips, tangled strands of hair, twisted limbs.

And, on her back, an elaborate tattoo of a magpie, every detail intricately laid out across her shoulder blades, which jutted out on either side of her spine as sharp as knives. The bird's wings were stretched out so that the edges of the feathers curled across on to her collarbone, and the tail feathers disappeared beneath the back of her dress.

A voice. 'Go back to town and call the police. She's dead.'

AUDREY

Is there anything worse than starting over at a new school?

Turns out there is. Starting over at a new school when it's lashing down with rain and a hurricane-force wind is blowing. In just a few months, I've managed to go from a warm, inviting red-brick high school in sunny Georgia to what looks like a lame-ass version of Hogwarts on an isolated peninsula somewhere in the south of England, and in the worst weather I've ever seen. The windshield wipers of my dad's Merc are moving at lightning speed, the engine still running, the sound mirroring my pounding nerves.

'Be good, Audrey,' he says, without turning around from the front seat.

Be good. Have words ever been so loaded? What he really means is, *Don't screw this up – don't make things worse – only two more years until you're no longer our responsibility and we can wash our hands of you once and for all.* But, of course, none of those things are *actually* said. They're in the tightness of my dad's shoulders and the fact that Mom isn't here at all, but away with Jason, my younger brother, in the south of France. Edison, my older brother, is at college in New Haven, and so no help there either.

I don't answer Dad. Instead, I take a deep breath and stare out the window. If I thought it looked ancient on the website, *IRL* Illumen Hall makes me feel like I've stepped back into a different century. It looks positively medieval. Like it wouldn't be a surprise to see the severed heads of bad students staked between the turrets, *Game of Thrones*-style. Still, I'd risk the wrath of the Lannisters over staying in the car with my dad for a second longer, so I open the door, clutch my Chanel bag to my chest and brave the rain.

He shouts something as I run towards the entrance of the school, but his words are swept away by the wind.

I make a spectacular entrance, tumbling through the doors as they open smoothly, and, before I know it, I'm dripping rain on to a polished hardwood floor.

The noise of the storm outside is almost completely swallowed up by the building as the doors close softly behind me, and the quiet is disconcerting. I slowly lift my eyes, trying to take everything in. My gaze stops at a huge portrait of an imposing woman dressed in an elaborate emerald silk gown. She's staring down at the door as if she's judging every person who enters. I feel about two inches tall – which is surprising because I'm five eleven and normally tower over everybody.

'Intimidating, isn't it?'

I spin around to see a woman dressed in a smart pale-pink suit with matching low-heeled pumps.

'Yeaaah.' My Southern drawl echoes round the atrium. *Ugh*. I've never managed to *sound* as out of place as I feel.

'You must be Miss Wagner?'

'Oh, uh, just Audrey is fine,' I say.

Her lips pull into a tight smile – she doesn't look like she takes too kindly to the idea of casual greetings. 'I'm Mrs Abbott, headmistress of Illumen Hall.' She extends her hand and I shake it weakly. 'I saw you and your father pull up in the courtyard – I'm sorry I didn't come out to greet you, but . . .' She shrugs, and gestures to the puddle I'm making on the floor. 'Your things have arrived safely, so I'll show you up to your room.'

I raise an eyebrow. I know my dad's company is big and important, but is it normal for the principal – *headmistress* – to act as tour guide? 'Where is everyone?' I ask.

'Most pupils won't be here until this afternoon, in time for the welcome assembly.'

She's walking away before her sentence is even finished, and I scramble to keep up, my flip-flops squelching on the wood floor. I bump my hip into the banister, only just stopping myself from cussing. *Klutsy, loud, foul-mouthed American* isn't the first impression I want to give Mrs Abbott. I'm never this awkward back home, but here I can't help craning my neck to gawk at the lofty ceiling with its intricate carved stonework, or at the gigantic paintings that almost completely cover the walls. I've never been in a place like this that wasn't a museum or a gallery.

'We've put you in Helios House,' says Mrs Abbott, climbing the stairs. 'You'll be sharing a room with one of our top pupils, Miss Moore-Zhang, so you can direct any questions that you have to her. She'll give you the full tour once you're settled in.'

I take a deep breath. I really hope that my new room-

mate and I will be good friends. I want a fresh start here – new country, new school and a whole new set of friends. Brendan, my then-boyfriend, laughed when he found out I'd be sharing a room. *You? Princess Audrey?* A good reminder of why he's now an ex-boyfriend.

We turn down a hallway on the second floor where we need to step over a fairly large pile of rubble. Mrs Abbott tuts loudly at a gaping hole in the ceiling.

She sees the frown on my face. 'We've had some building work done over the summer that I've been *promised* will be finished by tomorrow.' She raises her voice as she says that last part. I think I catch an answering grunt from deep inside the cavernous ceiling. I wonder if Mrs Abbott thinks I'm gonna report back to my dad. *As if.*

I try not to get too much dust on my bag as I follow Mrs Abbott down the hallway. 'Did you bring your ID card?' she asks me as we stop by a pair of double doors.

'Oh, um . . .' I dig through my handbag, knowing I put that stupid school pass somewhere. It's the size of a credit card, and apparently my key to all different areas of the school – including my accommodation.

Mrs Abbott waits a few seconds and, when my searching becomes even more frantic, lets out the tiniest huff of annoyance. She takes her own pass out from her suit pocket and swipes us in. 'You must keep your card safe – without it, you'll have trouble getting around.'

'Here it is!' I say, finally prising it free from between a make-up compact and my AirPods case. I make a big show of putting it in the front zipper of my bag. We pass by something that looks like mailboxes, covered by a glass

window, and I catch my name written underneath one of the shelves.

‘Here we are.’ We’re outside room number seven. ‘Your home for the rest of the year. Sorry I have to dash off – as you can see, there’s a lot going on that needs sorting out before the chaos tomorrow. I’m sure Miss Moore-Zhang will be along shortly. In the meantime, settle yourself in and unpack. And, Miss Wagner – welcome to Illumen Hall.’

‘Thanks,’ I say. About a billion questions bubble to the surface, but Mrs Abbott doesn’t hang around to hear them. I take a deep breath, steel myself and push open the door.

The first thing I notice is a deep bay window, right opposite the door, framed with voluminous white voiles and heavy brown velvet curtains. Across it sits a little bench covered in forest-green satin. It looks like the ideal reading nook – even I might be tempted to curl up with a book once in a while – and even though it’s stormy outside I can tell the window will bring a lot of light into the room in nice weather. The walls are panelled in rich cherry-coloured wood and there are two single beds pressed up against the walls on either side, along with two matching wardrobes, two desks and two dressers. It’s as if a mirror has been placed down the centre of the room.

There are some loose boards in the hardwood floor that rattle as I step on them, but nothing a good rug won’t cover. With a few pictures to warm up the wood, some ornaments dotted around . . . it won’t be so bad. I smile to myself and take out my phone to send a picture to Lydia,

my best friend back home. She's obsessed with interior design so will have plenty of ideas about how to jazz it up.

My boxes and suitcases are in the hallway outside, but I'm in no rush to move them in. Still, the first thing I take out is my school uniform, which is pressed and fresh in its bag from the dry-cleaner's. I unzip the bag and stare at the uniform – my new outfit for the rest of the year. The blazer is a deep navy-blue wool, with gold buttons in the shape of stars. The pleated skirt is the same, accented with stitches in gold thread. It's not so bad.

I jump as a voice comes from behind me. 'Don't get too comfortable. This room is cursed.'

‘This room is cursed,’ I say, pushing my way round the tall, white, blond, slightly fragile-looking new girl in the doorway.

Be kind. Mum’s words ring in my ears. Lola’s awful accident at the start of the summer is already making this year difficult enough. But it’s hard to be kind when I’m about to meet the girl I’m giving up my privacy for.

And it’s especially hard to be kind when everything about her screams that we won’t get along. In one hand she’s got an oversized smartphone with a pink, fluffy case, and over her shoulder is a flashy designer bag. It must be freezing outside, but she has *flip-flops* on. I don’t like to pass judgement on someone before talking to them, but she’s making it too easy.

She darts round at the sound of my voice, her big blue eyes widening with fear. ‘Oh my God, you scared me. Hi, I’m Audrey!’

Oh, it gets worse. She’s American.

She hangs her dry-cleaning on the back of the door and extends her arms towards me, a grin showing off her perfect white teeth. ‘So pleased to meet you!’ she says.

I dodge her hug. ‘Oh wow . . . too soon,’ I mutter. Ignoring her pained expression, I walk past her and place

my battered leather satchel down on one of the beds to claim it. It's the better bed – the one with the view out of the bay window and the brand-new mattress, things you'd only know if you'd studied this place inside and out, like I have. 'I'll take this side,' I say – stating the obvious, but then she probably needs that.

Shrugging, she places her bag on the bed opposite. She sits down and the ancient springs creak. I wonder which dusty storage room they dragged it out of – turning this spacious single room into a cramped double.

'So, you're my new roomie,' she says.

'Your powers of deduction are marvellous,' I respond, putting on my poshest-sounding voice. 'I'm Ivy.'

She frowns, picking at the edge of a baby pink, manicured fingernail. I turn my back on her, feigning interest in the contents of my bag, but feel a twinge of regret. It's not *her* fault I'm in such a terrible mood. Well, OK, it kind of is. But she doesn't know that.

I've been dreaming of this year ever since my first night at Illumen Hall – staring at the ceiling, listening to other girls toss and turn and snore in shared accommodation – because finally, *finally*, I'd get to have my very own room. I've been grafting, working every angle, on my very best behaviour, so that I would be the *one* lower-sixth student in Helios to earn the privilege of having their own room. When it was confirmed at the end of last term, it was better than any prize.

Because Illumen Hall is my home. Much more so than my mum's tiny council flat. And the time had finally come where I didn't have to share that home with anyone else; I was going to get my own space – Lola's old room. I'd

always envied it, and I hoped, in the aftermath of her passing, it would help me feel close to her.

That was until Mrs Abbott asked me to volunteer to share that space with Audrey Wagner. The American.

It wasn't really a request – it was a demand and, if Mrs Abbott demands, you do not contest.

'How long have you been coming to school here?' she asks my back. I exhale loudly through my nose as I continue to empty my bag. When I don't respond, she keeps going. *Ugh, can't this girl take a hint?*

'I don't know how y'all can live in a place like this. I feel like I'm in a freakin' museum.' Her accent grates on my nerves, but I'm curious enough that I turn round to face her again.

She smiles really widely so that I can see every tooth in her mouth. Her teeth are extremely symmetrical and almost glimmering white; I'm a little jealous. Her eyes are a shade of blue that reminds me of a china doll and, although her hair is down and rained on, it's tousled and beachy and looks effortlessly boho.

She seems so innocent and earnest. Is this what they mean by Southern charm? I realign myself. I don't need to be friends with this girl, but the history of Illumen Hall is one of my favourite subjects and I can't resist. 'This part of the building is actually pretty new – Victorian, I think.'

Her jaw drops. 'Isn't that, like, a hundred years old?'

I roll my eyes. 'You want old? We've got a building here that dates back to 1487.'

'Wow. We have some buildings from the 1800s in

Savannah – that’s the town I’m from – and that’s considered . . . really fucking old.’

I suppress a smile. Maybe not so sweet and innocent after all.

I spin round abruptly. I came here to claim my bed and I’ve done that now. I have too much work to do this year, too much to focus on, and plenty of friends like Harriet, Tom, Max and Teddy; I don’t need another. She’s already ruined my year by turning up, and I don’t *want* to like her. I plan on us just sharing space and being civil to one another. I walk towards the door, but, as soon as I do, she’s on her feet.

‘Hey, well, maybe you can show me around? You seem to know a lot about the place. And I promise I’m a great roommate. I can make killer s’mores with a candle and a fork . . .’

I frown. ‘What’s a s’more?’ I ask, despite knowing full well.

‘Oh, you don’t have those here? They’re delicious. Toasted marshmallow and chocolate between two graham crackers . . .’

‘Graham crackers?’ This is too easy.

She trips on her tongue. ‘Like, uh, a kinda cookie-type thing?’

I wait, one eyebrow raised.

Her shoulders slump. ‘You don’t have those either?’

I shake my head. ‘But that sounds like just the kind of skill you need around here – you’ll fit right in,’ I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

‘You’re hilarious,’ she says, her eyes tightening at the corners. Our senses of humour are clearly very different. This interaction is starting to feel awkward even for me.

This girl really has no idea what she's letting herself in for. I know the reason Mrs Abbott asked me to offer up my room is because she thought I'd take her under my wing and make sure she's buckled up for the ride that is sixth form. Maybe last year I would have. But that was before the horrifying event on the beach a couple of months ago. Before Lola. Before my privacy became more important to me than ever before.

Be kind. Mum's words ring in my ears again. I grit my teeth. 'I'm sure s'mores are great,' I say with an exaggerated sigh. 'All this talk of food has made me hungry. Want me to show you how to get to the dining hall? We have a welcome assembly in a few hours, so you've got time to grab something to eat first.'

'Are you sure?' She tentatively picks her bag up off the bed. Maybe I really put her off with that s'mores banter. She pauses, her eyes scanning the room.

'You coming or what?'

She bites her lower lip. She looks afraid and it sends a shiver down my spine. *What does she have to be afraid of?*

'You said something when you first came in. That this room was cursed? What did you mean by that?' She's staring at me now.

I take a deep breath, working hard to maintain my calm exterior. I don't want her to feel comfortable. I want her to leave. 'Oh, that . . . didn't Mrs Abbott tell you? The last girl who lived in this room drowned.'

AUDREY

Well, *that's* morbid. I shudder. We lock eyes for a few long moments. She's already in her school uniform, a shiny badge with the letter P engraved on the front pinned to her lapel. With her tanned summer skin, neatly trimmed dark bob and slight frame, she might look unassuming at first, but her words pack a punch.

And I definitely don't need to hear any more about a drowning.

'You know what? I think I'll find my own way around. I mean, it's a school. Not exactly an escape room. See you later.'

I don't think this is what Ivy expects. Her shoulders tighten. I've never seen someone go so still. But, just as quickly, she shrugs. 'Suit yourself.'

I expect her to at least point me in the direction of the dining hall, but she flounces off without another word. I take a deep breath. Without knowing it, I've been picking at the edge of my nail polish and, if I continue, it will lift off – along with the top layer of my nail. I force my hands apart, curling my fingers inside my palm. This chick – this *school* – does not get to mess with my manicure.

It can't be too difficult to navigate my way around this place.

There's an old-fashioned lock on the door in addition to

the hotel-style key-card entry, but I wasn't given a key, so I slip my laptop underneath the bedsheets and close the heavy door behind me. With no real point of reference, I choose to walk in the opposite direction to the one I came from with Mrs Abbott.

God, I really hope everyone in this place isn't as unpleasant as my room-mate. I'm used to being popular – I *want* people to like me. I can already feel myself trying to think of ways to earn Ivy's friendship. Her bag was pretty old and shabby, and I have at least three like it back home I could bring her to replace it . . .

No, that was the old Audrey. The one who bent over backwards for people like a master yogi of friendships. And where did that get me? Contorted into knots that proved impossible to untangle. I'm not gonna do that again.

When the hallway opens up into another grand atrium, with staircases leading off in different directions, I open Snapchat to send Lydia a selfie. I pose, leaning up against the polished banister, trying to get as much of the grandeur of the hall in as possible (while still looking cute). I add a series of heart-eye emojis to the image, and hit send. There's a heavy weight on my chest. I miss her so much.

Well, I miss the Audrey and Lydia of six months ago. Before everything changed. I shake my head. This is my fresh start.

The sound of voices drifts up from the stairs below, which I guess means other students are starting to arrive. My stomach flips at the thought of meeting new people. It *has* to go better than it did with Ivy, or else this is gonna be a very long final two years of high school – or sixth

form, as they call it here. I check my image in the screen. My eye make-up, carefully applied this morning, is smudged at the corner. I dab at it with my ring finger.

‘Better not let the housemistress see that, or you could be in a lot of trouble.’

The deep voice makes me jump and my cellphone slips from my hand. I squeal, the inevitability of what’s about to happen registering even though I know I can’t react quick enough to stop it. The phone bounces on the gleaming steps once, twice . . .

It comes to a stop at the feet of the guy who interrupted me. I stumble down the stairs after it, my flip-flops slapping loudly. He drops to one knee and scoops it up, then presents it to me in an exaggerated manner. ‘M’lady,’ he says. ‘Your iPhone.’

I don’t even have time to register whether he’s hot or not (normally my first priority). I snatch my phone from his open palm, ignoring his wry grin, and turn it over.

I groan and slump on to the step. A spiderweb of cracks splays across the top corner of the screen, with one jagged line spreading down to the bottom. Even though I know it’s stupid, that it’s just a phone – easily replaced with a quick email to Dad – I have to bite down on my bottom lip to stop tears welling up.

The guy sits down next to me. ‘I hear that’s seven months of bad luck.’

I roll my eyes. ‘That’s mirrors, not phone screens. And don’t you mean seven years?’

‘Seven years is for an *actual* mirror. This is a digital version. Moves faster.’ He waits for a beat – maybe

expecting me to laugh or something. But I'm still in shock. 'You know, I could fix that for you,' he says.

Now he has my attention. I blink as I take him in for the first time. He *is* hot, a white guy with a thick mass of brown hair, warm honey-brown eyes, sharp cheekbones and a chiselled jaw. He's wearing his school blazer over a shirt and jeans, which already makes him better dressed than any of the Georgia boys I'm used to hanging out with, who were never out of board shorts and loose T-shirts. His eyelashes are so long the tips brush his brow bone. I smile. 'You can?'

'Well, new girl, this actually makes things easier.' He reaches into his inside blazer pocket and pulls out an old iPhone in a cheap Pokémon cover. 'Take this. We can change the cover,' he adds.

I arch an eyebrow. 'What are you, some kind of black-market phone dealer?'

He laughs, and the sound echoing off the grand atrium walls is so loud it makes me cringe. The school feels almost like a church, so it's as if his laughter is desecrating its sanctity. But he doesn't seem to notice. Maybe, once you're used to this place, you can be as loud as you want. 'Not like that. Here, we've done this all wrong. I'm Theodore.'

I smile. 'Audrey.'

'Ah,' he says.

'What does "Ah" mean?'

He blushes, and the pink from his cheeks seems to spread all the way up into his hairline. It's cute. 'You're Ivy's new room-mate.'

'Oh, so you know Ivy?'

'Everyone knows Ivy,' he replies. His lip quirks at the

edge. ‘So, let’s say fifty quid for the phone?’ He waggles the Pikachu device at me.

I stand up, suddenly uncomfortable. I’m not gonna buy some crappy old phone from this guy. I grip my broken one like a shield. ‘I’m good. I’ll keep this one.’

‘Oh no . . . you don’t get it. Everyone needs a –’

‘I’ll be fine.’ I move down a few stairs.

‘Well, if you change your mind, I hang around in the SCR most of the time.’

I nod, but I have no idea what or where the SCR is. I just wanna get out of there. So far, at Illumen Hall, I’ve met three people – and they’ve all weirded me out. This is not what I expected.

I race down the stairs, only to be engulfed by a wave of students entering through a set of heavy double doors.

I dart one last glance back up, but Theodore’s gone. *For the best*, I think. After all, my break-up with Brendan is still fresh. In fact, I have a voice note from him I haven’t listened to . . .

I shake my head, dispersing thoughts of the hot English boy I just met and the even hotter guy I left behind in the States. This is supposed to be my new start.

No drama with guys.

No bitchy friends.

And *definitely* no more drownings.

‘Enter each row from the left-hand side, please, and fill the seats all the way to the front . . .’ I gesture towards the wooden chairs by the stage as students bumble into the assembly hall, one behind the other, whispering and gossiping. There’s a low buzz of excitement in the air from the new intake, mixed with first-day-of-school nerves. Everyone else is more sombre than usual, especially when they see what’s on the stage. It’s enough to shut up even the chattiest of people.

I try to keep my eyes off it, and remain focused on the task at hand.

Being a prefect, you’re entitled to a lot of perks, but they come with eye-wateringly boring responsibilities – like overseeing the students filing into assembly every week. I know . . . surely able-bodied humans are capable of taking a seat in an orderly fashion? Well, turns out not so much. If we left them to it, it’d be chaos. It’s exhausting watching the newbies wobble around like lost sheep, and having to herd them like a sheepdog is really draining my bank of enthusiasm on this gloomy evening.

When I snap loudly at a first year who decides to jump a chair like he’s practising his hurdles, Mrs Abbott gives

me one of her ‘looks’, her piercing grey eyes narrowing as she watches how I control the situation. I send her a sharp smile back, making sure to give my most flattering and charming teeth-baring grin, which is then acknowledged with an eyeroll. Mrs Abbott and I have a very complex relationship. I don’t think she approves of my background – but she can’t deny that I earned my place here. We grate on each other like bickering relatives, but I always manage to win her over somehow.

The new Year Sevens are pretty funny to watch. They gawp at the size of the hall, the faded gold-etched names of the head boys and girls and their prefects listed on mahogany plaques around the wall, going all the way back to the mid-eighteenth century. My name is up there this year under ‘Prefect’, etched in sparkling new gold leaf. But one name is conspicuously missing from this year’s head girl spot. And Araminta Pierce’s is there in its place.

Instead, Lola’s full name is written beneath a large photo projected on to a screen at the back of the stage. Even in black and white, you can see her skin glowing and her eyes sparkling. Lola would have hated that photo. She’s perfection personified in it, right down to the stray perfect curl in her blond hair that looped just above her ear. But, by the end of last year, she’d shaved an undercut into her long blond locks, and her eyes were rimmed with kohl so black it made her light blue irises seem translucent. And then there was that magpie tattoo.

Everyone – even her best friends – had been shocked by that.

The words underneath the photo read:

DOLORES RADCLIFFE
FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS

They make me catch my breath. It still doesn't seem real. In all my years at this school, we've never been struck by any sort of tragedy – not of this magnitude.

There's an easel onstage too, draped in a red velvet sheet. I half expect Lola to burst out from underneath it, laughing, like it was all a big prank.

If she was still here, everything would be so different. This assembly would be joyful, not sombre. I'd have been by her side, running her errands, while she did her head-student duties. I never minded grabbing her coffee in the morning or helping her with her coursework because it meant I got to spend time with her – and being around Lola instantly increased your credibility. She was so alluring, so effortlessly beautiful that basically everyone fancied her. But it wasn't just her aesthetic that made her so magnetic. She was warm and charming and every word that rolled off her tongue left an impact. Her laugh had you smiling so hard your jaw would ache. Being in her orbit was a joy as pure as being on the beach, listening to the waves, sand between your toes and a cold cider in your hand.

It all feels so empty without her.

I turn round, blinking, and usher the last of the older students into their seats. It's been weeks – an entire summer – since Lola's death and many sunsets, hook-ups, break-ups and tropical Kent showers. Time carries on ticking.

I feel a stab of jealousy at the sight of fellow students

who appear fine. Smiling and greeting each other like it's a normal first day back, as if Lola's death hasn't shattered them like it has me. My vow had been to try and start the school year without letting it affect me too much. But it's clear, from how I feel seeing Lola's face once more, that's not going to happen.

I take my own seat at the end of a row, next to Teddy. He's the other prefect for Helios House – and my boyfriend. Sort of. He gives my knuckles a squeeze and I brush his fingers, but don't make eye contact. That might just send me over the edge, and I don't want to break down right now.

There's a clip of heels on the wooden stage, and I close my eyes for a second.

Mrs Abbott walks to the centre of the stage and fiddles with her microphone. I watch as Araminta and the new head boy, Xander Tamura, stand beside Mrs Abbott like her bodyguards. A student is playing 'Stuff We Did' on the piano at the side of the stage. The song is from the Disney film *Up*, one of Lola's favourite films, and a really beautiful, delicate piece to play. I've played the piano since I was old enough to sit at one and now I teach other boarding students at weekends.

Teddy whispers, 'Didn't you and Clover play this song together once? That kid isn't doing it as well as you two.'

'Yeah, we did.' I smile at the mention of Clover. She's two years below me – my fledgling – and I've taken my task of mentoring her very seriously. She'll be somewhere backstage, adjusting the lights and pulling on cables, probably wearing some outspoken, swearsy T-shirt under

her blazer. How she gets away with that I don't know, but I admire her gutsy attitude. Everyone knows Clover. If there's a protest on the grounds about the amount of water the school uses or the fact that the canteen doesn't provide enough plant-based options, you can guarantee Clover will be fronting it, with some sort of elaborate signage, and sometimes – on the rare occasion it's not locked in her office – Mrs Abbott's megaphone.

We're very different people, Clover and I – she likes meditation, singing in the choir, and will go for days without shaving her armpits and legs just to prove that women shouldn't conform to societal expectations. She's a bit Marmite – you either love her or hate her – but she doesn't give a damn either way. I admire the passion she pours into everything she does. In that way, we're kindred spirits and, as a result, we're friends.

Mrs Abbott's voice brings me back to the present. 'Welcome back, students of Illumen Hall. It is only fitting that we begin our year by taking a moment to recognize a huge loss for our small community: Dolores Radcliffe, or as many of you knew her, Lola.' Mrs Abbott shifts on the spot. Her voice wobbles. 'I also want to take this opportunity to thank those of you who helped the police with your statements and eyewitness accounts. I can imagine it's been a very hard summer for many of you.'

Sniffing starts up in little groups across the hall and tissues are passed round liberally. Lola's close friends, Jane and Heloise, are just to the right of me, holding in great heaving sobs by gulping loudly and blowing their noses. She really was loved by everyone. She had this ability to

make people feel like they belonged at the school – even though she could trace her family’s attendance at Illumen almost all the way back to its inception, she didn’t hold that above anyone else’s head.

Lola had seen something in me. It’s hard to explain our relationship – I wasn’t one of her best friends, but I looked up to her and she mentored me. I felt like I knew her – maybe even more so than the people she hung out with. The official cause of death from the police is ‘by misadventure’, since there was no note left for her family. But we’re all warned over and over about the danger of walking near the cliffs, especially at night. To go there deliberately, to walk so close to the edge . . . The word ‘suicide’ floated round the edge of everyone’s speculation, and I suppose you never know what demons people are hiding.

I’ve been gripping my hands together so tightly I’ve left little half-moon indents in my palm. Dr Kinfeld would not be happy – maybe I’d have to book another therapy appointment with her, even though I’m officially signed off.

‘But, although we mourn and try to learn how to live with our feelings of loss and sadness, we must also remember that Dolores Radcliffe would not have wanted us to think of her only with tears, because she was a source of light and beauty in our lives. It’s why I’m delighted to announce that, with the support of Lola’s parents, Mr and Mrs Radcliffe, we’ll be renaming the swimming pool in her honour this year.’

The hall breaks out into thunderous applause as Mrs Abbott points to Mr and Mrs Radcliffe, who I can see now are sitting in the front row. Mrs Radcliffe is still dressed in

funereal black with a shock of red at her neck in the form of a scarf. Mr Radcliffe looks solemn by her side. Next to them is Lola's handsome older brother, Patrick, whom I haven't seen since he went off to uni years before. He'd been head boy when I first started at Illumen Hall. The Radcliffes were IH royalty. Even their parents met at this school.

Lola would be the only one who never got to graduate.

'We also have a beautiful portrait of Dolores, which I will ask her parents to unveil at the end of today's assembly. It will be hung at the entrance of Helios House, where she spent so many happy years. If anyone needs to speak to the school counsellor, please arrange it through your form tutor or come to me,' Mrs Abbott continues. 'Help is available to anyone who needs it, so please don't suffer in silence.'

She moves on to the standard part of her speech now, the one we hear every year. Now this is more comforting. It's part of the bubble of life at Illumen Hall. The safety net. I actually feel myself relax, my muscles melting into the chair. I hadn't realized how much all the talk about Lola's death had set me on edge.

'Moving forward, I want to welcome our new students! I'm sorry your first day has begun like this, but Illumen Hall welcomes you with open arms and we're all so pleased to have you here . . .'

Just as Mrs Abbott is about to move on to why Illumen Hall is the best place to learn and grow, there's a thunderous bang – and the electricity goes out. The room is plunged into darkness. Gasps and cries ring out, and Mrs Abbott's voice shouts over the din, 'Keep calm,

everyone!’ Without the amplification from the microphone, she might as well be trying to calm a herd of wildebeest preparing to stampede. There’s a growing energy in the room, some kind of urge to run, to move, and wind rushes on to my face like someone’s opened a door to escape.

It only lasts a couple of breaths before there’s another pop, and the lights come back on. ‘Sorry,’ says a voice from the back of the room. Like meerkats, we all turn our heads at the same time, spotting a grizzled handyman in dark blue overalls wiping his hands down his front. ‘Blew a fuse. All fixed now.’

‘Settle down, please,’ says Mrs Abbott, barely able to contain her irritation. I wouldn’t want to be in that man’s shoes. ‘As you all know, we’re having some work done in the school that should be finished soon, but in the meantime there may be some . . . unexpected disruptions.’

But the buzz in the hall grows again. Teddy nudges my shoulder. ‘Did you give this to me?’

He holds up a rectangle of neon-orange paper, a flyer. I shake my head. ‘No, of course not.’

‘Oh, you’ve got one too,’ he says.

I look down at my lap. Sure enough, there’s a flyer sitting there – a rectangle of dayglo pink that wasn’t there a few minutes ago. Frowning, I pick it up and turn it over.

I KNOW WHO KILLED LOLA . . .

AND ONE OF YOU IS NEXT

<http://whokilledlola.com>