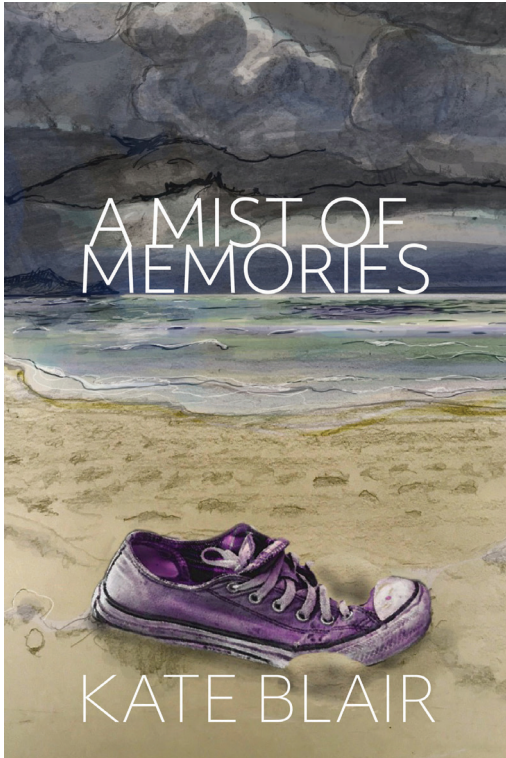


**Excerpt from *A Mist of Memories***

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# Chapter One

## Oleander

Mist seethes in the dark of the underground temple. A tendril creeps forward and an image forms within, separating from the blackness of the fog: a lost memory, tight and dark.

The moment unspools until it is finally clear; a scene hanging upon the air like a projection; a memory of a borrowed boat on dark water.

A girl sits in it as it drifts. There has been no wind to fill the sail for hours. She checks her phone: still no reception. Her jean shorts leave her legs exposed to the evening chill and the damp of the fog. The wind tosses her purple hair as she stares ahead shivering, eyes wide. She flinches away from the edge of the boat, from the images in the mist that surrounds her.

She knows she has made a terrible mistake.

The waves slap lightly against the fiberglass hull as the haze thins a little, and she finally has a break from the visions that have tormented her for hours.

Out of the fog lurches the land she has been looking for. The bare spike of bushes crown the crumbling cliffs, and she cries out with relief.

Her triumph is short-lived. Rocks black as burned bone, sharp as teeth, rip out of the waves ahead of her. She pulls on ropes, tightening the sails, hoping for a miracle. When it doesn't come, she sticks her arm in the chill of the water and paddles desperately.

She is no match for the tide. The relentless waves carry her ship into the stones.

After the crash, she bails with her hands, but her fingers can-

not hold back the sea. She did not steal a life jacket, and when her boat sinks, the undercurrent grabs at her kicking legs. The shore is not far, but she is cold and weak. As she struggles, as the spiteful waves slap her and one purple shoe slips off her thrashing feet, she thinks of everything she left behind, everything that she will never escape: her father's suicide; Rupert, the photograph, and the weight of regret.

As the cold water leeches the last of the strength from her, she wonders if it would be better this way. She wanted to be forgotten. She wanted to leave it all behind. On some level, wasn't this what she was looking for when she started searching for the island?

Finally, inevitably, her cares and her clothes drag her down.

The water closes over her head.

## Chapter Two

### Ajay

MISSING.

It was still a gut-punch to see the word printed across the top of the poster.

*Oleander Dillon, 17 years old, 5'5"*

She grinned at me from the soggy paper stapled to the skeletal tree.

*Last seen July 20 at around 3 p.m. on Southcliff Pier. Purple ombré hair. Wearing a gray shirt, jean shorts, and purple Converse trainers.*

It was October. I'd last seen Oleander on one of the hottest days of the year, and now the gutters were full of rotting leaves. She wasn't coming back; I had to face it. I swallowed and tried to hold it together.

The wet paper had ripped away from the trunk at one corner and flapped in the cold wind. I tried to push it back, to attach it to the tree properly, so other passersby could see her, would know to look for her, but the page was too damp. My thumb went right through it.

I stared at the hole I'd made.

I'd destroyed her face. Changed her into just another missing girl.

"What are you doing?" The voice was outraged.

A woman clutched paper against her chest, a staple gun in her hand. Her long brown hair was frizzy, and her furrowed brow and the set of her jaw was familiar. She was looking past me, at the poster.

“I didn’t mean to. It kind of ripped.”

I felt like crap saying it. It sounded like a pathetic excuse.

Her eyes flicked to me. “Ajay, right?”

That was one of the things about being brown in a mostly white small town; you were never anonymous. Well, it was probably that and the fact I still wore a face mask everywhere. I wondered what Oleander had said about me. If she’d spoken about me at all.

“You’re Oleander’s mum, right?”

She nodded, still staring at the picture I’d destroyed.

“Sorry.”

She turned her attention to me. The wind blew her thick scarf and rustled the papers in her hands.

“Well,” she said, finally. “If you really want to fix it, you can help me.” She shoved the papers into my hands, then took one from the top of the pile. They were copies of the same poster, but these were dry and new. She peeled the wet version off the tree and stapled the new poster up.

A thought struck me. “You do this every time it rains?”

“I only just started putting these up. I’ve given up on the police. They’ve barely looked. But I’ll need to get these laminated next time.” She took a deep breath. “If I can afford it. Come on, then.”

We moved on to the next tree.

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It took over an hour to replace all the posters. We trudged through the wet leaves, talking about Oleander between the clack of the staple gun. I held the paper flat against trees and poles for her. By the time we’d put up fifty or so, she’d relaxed a little. She even insisted on me calling her Sarah, which was good, because “Ms. Dillon” felt weird, like she was a teacher.

"I heard you lost a sister," she said.

I nodded. I wondered if she'd heard from small-town gossip or if Oleander had told her that it was my fault Meera died.

"Sorry about that. But you have some idea what it's like, right? To lose someone you love."

"Yeah." My voice went a bit weird.

"Did Oleander tell you where she was going?"

I shook my head. "Sorry."

"I didn't even know that was going on, with her and that Rupert guy, and the photo. Did she discuss any of that with you?"

"She wasn't really talking to me by the time she left." It hurt to say it.

"But you used to be friends. You knew her from school, right?"

"We were in the same year, but we met at the gift shop."

"I didn't know that."

"She's one of the first people I met in Southcliff. She helped me get a job."

"You worked at the Treasure Chest too?" Sarah said.

"Next door."

"You know she quit just before she disappeared?"

"Yeah."

"That's one of the reasons the police think she ran away." Sarah narrowed her eyes, evaluating me. "She had printed out photos up in her bedroom, with Post-its stuck on them. I think she might have been deciding where to go. Would you mind looking at them? Maybe you can help me work it out."

I didn't hesitate. "Of course."

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Oleander Dillon's house was a small modern semi, on a road of

identical small modern semis in orangey brick, squeezed together with only an alleyway to the back yards between each pair. A climbing vine had been planted at the front of hers. It had been pretty in late spring, covered with pink flowers when I'd walked her home from work a couple of times. Now it was brown and soggy with October rain.

I took my shoes off at the door automatically, but Sarah didn't. I wasn't sure whether to put mine back on again, but that seemed rude, so I followed her in my socked feet, feeling awkward.

The house was smaller than mine, but they had about twice as much stuff as we did. The hall was lined with cupboards and shelves. There was barely room for all the furniture in the living room, and the coffee table was covered with photo albums. Pictures of Oleander as a baby and a little girl were scattered over the sofa and chairs.

"I'm sorry the place is such a mess," Sarah said.

"It's fine. It's nice."

The stairs went directly up from the back of the living room, and she led me that way. As we went along the narrow upstairs hall, I noticed they had carpets everywhere, even the bathroom. I tried to think of something to say, something normal, but Oleander's mum stared ahead at the shut door at the end of the hall. She took a deep breath.

"I haven't changed anything. I kept it just as she left it, except the note."

"The note?"

"It just said she had to go, and to forget about her." Her mother gave a dry laugh. "As if I could."

She opened the door, and we stepped in.

The first thing I noticed were the Post-its. The yellow of the paper stuck out, scattered over photos tacked to one of the walls. As

I got closer I could see the pictures under the Post-its were normal photos, pictures of friends and family, printed in color on paper. Oleander posed in selfies with Tisha and others on school trips and holidays. There were ones of Sarah and Oleander at various ages, as well as a few with her dad.

“I come in here a lot,” Sarah said. “I just like to see her.”

I nodded, caught up in the images. The Post-its on them had place names in Oleander’s handwriting, showing where they’d been taken: London, Bristol, Plymouth, Exeter, and one that caught my eye. It was of Oleander and her dad, in front of a sign. The island’s name was written on a Post-it too, something French-sounding.

I’d seen this picture before. The last time I’d seen Oleander.

“Where’s this?” I said, reading out the name.

Oleander’s mother peered at it. Then she shrugged. “Never heard of it.”

Funny, how it had slipped from my mind, until I saw the picture again.

“She showed me this picture,” I said.

“When was that?”

“July. She showed me the same photo of this island during that big heat wave in July.”

Sarah tilted her head. Her expression was just as unreadable as her daughter’s.

“Sorry, what island?”

I shook my head. I still couldn’t remember the stupid name. I looked back at the Post-it. The name was obvious when I read it again. It was daft that I’d forgotten. I turned back to Sarah, but the word slipped from my mind again.

I was thinking I was a complete bloody idiot, when I remembered Oleander laughing, back when she’d shown me the picture, as if me forgetting it was the point.



Maybe it was.

I looked back at the place name. Another, earlier memory came back to me: Oleander with a green book at the gift shop. The island's name was in the title of that, too. "I think she was reading about that island too."

"Where's the island?"

"Nearby, Oleander said."

Oleander's mother shrugged, and I wondered if she'd forgotten about the island again, just like I had.

"She can't be anywhere nearby, someone would have seen her by now. She's probably gone somewhere she wouldn't be found easily, like a city."

"Can I use a pen?" I asked.

Sarah nodded, looking confused.

I grabbed the nearest one from Oleander's desk, rolled up my sleeve, and copied the words from the Post-it onto my arm, in bright blue ink.

LEVAY ISLAND.

Sarah pointed at the place names on the Post-its. "But perhaps she was deciding where to run to. She'd have needed help, someone who knew the city she was going to." She gave me a sharp look. "You said you're new to Southcliff, right?"

I nodded, suddenly not liking where this was going. "New-ish."

"Where did you say you were from?"

"London."

She put her finger on the Post-it that said "London." It was a picture of Oleander in front of Tower Bridge.

"Did you take this?"

"No."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

“Please, just tell me.”

“I don’t know! I really don’t!”

Tears were forming in her eyes. She took hold of my hand. “It’s okay if you helped her run away. I know she was going through a lot. Is that why you destroyed her picture? You wanted to keep her hidden?”

“That was an accident. I’m not hiding her, I swear.”

She gave a breathless gasp. “I just want to know if she’s okay. Can you ask her to call, please? It’s been three months. I ... I can’t eat. I can’t sleep. I don’t know what to do. Please.”

I pulled out of her grip, gently. She looked like a drowning woman, reaching to me for help. “You must know where she is. Someone must.”

“I’d tell you if I did. I really would. I promise.”

Her mouth kept moving, shaping the word *please*.

I backed away. “I should go. Sorry.”

She didn’t try to stop me. She just watched until I was out of sight along the landing.

I walked down the stairs as normally as I could manage, put my shoes on and ran off down the street.

## Chapter Three

### Oleander

The office is plain, decorated in tasteful grays. Oleander sits in a gray armchair, used tissues damp and crumpled in her hand. She wants to stuff them in her mouth, right down her throat, to try to smother the scream that threatens to come out.

Next to her is her mother. They face a simple desk, a middle-aged man sitting behind it. He has a slim file closed in front of him, along with a desk phone, a box of tissues, and a brass nameplate identifying him as Gerald Buxton.

“He does not appear to have updated his will since your divorce was finalized, but I’m afraid he had very little in the way of assets.”

Oleander’s mother shakes her head. “That can’t be right.”

“I can only speak to the information I have here, but once his liabilities —”

“He was paid a ton. He had that big house and the classic car. He’d just come back from Thailand.”

“Please, Mum, don’t.”

“I want to make sure you get what you should. He must have money hidden away. He did that when they were working out the child support.”

“Your ex-husband’s house was rented and it appears his car and his recent holiday had been paid for with loans. Perhaps his lifestyle expenditures are why he left so few assets?”

Sarah’s jaw tightens. “This is so like him, to leave us screwed again. I can’t take on any more shifts at the home. I barely see my daughter as it is.”

Oleander reaches for the tissue box again, but it's empty.

The solicitor presses a button on his phone. "Rupert, can you bring some more tissues?"

"Even apart from the mortgage, how am I meant to afford university for her now?"

"I'm sorry I don't have better news for you, Ms. Dillon. I know this is a very difficult time for your family."

"That selfish —"

"Mum!"

Gerald Buxton steepled his fingers. "Maybe your daughter could use a break from this."

Oleander shakes her head quickly. "I'm okay," she lies.

The door to the office opens then, and in steps a young man, carrying tissues. He's tall with a neatly cut mop of blond hair and bright gray eyes. He puts the tissues on the table and turns to leave.

"Rupert, could you take the young lady out for a moment? Perhaps make her a cup of tea?"

For a moment, Rupert looks annoyed, but his gaze falls on Oleander, and his expression softens into a smile. "Of course."

"I'm really fine."

"I'll tell you about anything you miss," her mother says.

"It's just paperwork," the solicitor adds.

Oleander knows she's outnumbered. She wants to argue, but they're just going to clam up until she's gone anyway.

Rupert shows her into an almost-identical office, although the name plate on this desk reads "Sharon Chen." "Sharon's on her hols, so we won't be disturbed." He closes the door gently behind them, and gestures to an empty chair. Oleander sinks into it. Rupert sits next to her.

Oleander rubs at her tears with her hands, wishing her dress had sleeves. She tries to wipe her palms on the fabric of the chair,

subtly.

“Sorry, I should have brought the tissues.”

“It’s okay.” She takes a deep breath and looks at him properly.

He’s good-looking, she realizes. Very good looking. She’d been too preoccupied in the other room to notice, but now they’re alone, and he’s sitting so close to her, she finds she has to try not to stare at those bright gray eyes, and his perfectly square jaw.

He’s wearing a well-fitting suit with a white shirt underneath. She can smell him too, not the overwhelming stench of body spray her male classmates seem to favor, but a citrusy, subtle smell.

He’s leaning toward her, elbows on his thighs, hands clasped. His fingers are inches from her tight-clad knees.

Oleander swallows and looks down at her hands. “Sorry.”

“You’re upset. It’s only natural. You’ve just lost your father.”

She swallows down the guilt. She didn’t “lose” him. She abandoned him.

“You seem a bit young to be a solicitor,” she says.

Rupert looks awkward. “Just qualified.”

“That’s cool.” Oleander feels stupid as soon as she’s said it. She wonders how old he is. Twenty-one, perhaps? Older? Can you be a solicitor straight out of uni?

“Do you want to talk?”

She shrugs.

“I don’t know what was happening in there, but you were staring daggers at your mother.”

“That’s normal though, right? Like, no one gets on with their mums. It’s a fact.”

“You must be going through a very difficult time.”

She feels exposed. “You know ... about us?”

“I don’t mean to pry, and you don’t have to say anything. But yes, I do know a little about your family from what’s on file.”

She feels nauseous. There wouldn't be anything on the file on her part in her dad's death, would there? She can't imagine how there could be. She examines his expression and there's nothing but sympathy in his wide gray eyes. She relaxes, slightly.

"So ... you know my dad killed himself?"

He nodded. "But it's clearly your mother you're angry at."

"I'm not really angry at her. I just ... she's been mad at him since the divorce, you know? But now he can't even defend himself."

"That must be hard."

"I'm not expecting her to be heartbroken or anything, but it makes it impossible to talk to her about this."

"You need someone to talk to. Someone who understands."

"We can barely cover the bills. We can't afford a therapist."

"Look ..." Rupert reaches into his pocket. "I shouldn't do this. But here."

He hands over a business card.

"Message me if you want to talk. I'm not a therapist, but I'm a good listener, I promise."

Oleander takes the card, and as she does so, he cups her hand in his, warm and intimate. Her breathing catches.

"No pressure. Feel free to chuck this in a bin. Just ... don't tell your mother, or my boss, okay? I shouldn't offer, but ..."

Before Oleander can say anything, there's a knock on the door. Rupert lets go of her, and stands, stepping back. Oleander closes her fist around the card and slips her hand into her lap.

Oleander's mother opens the door. "All done, although it was barely worth coming. Let's go home." She looks at her daughter's tear-streaked face. "I'm really sorry, sweetie. Look, I've got a bit of time before the night shift. I'll make tacos. How about that?"

As Oleander stands, she glances back at Rupert. He's stand-

ing with his hands behind his back, looking professional. If she couldn't feel the edges of his card cutting into the palm of her hand, she'd think she'd imagined the whole thing.

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Oleander types several messages to Rupert but deletes each of them.

Was she misreading things or was there a vibe back there? He's cute. Like ridiculously cute. She didn't know they made faces that perfect in real life. But he was probably just being kind, offering a sympathetic ear to a troubled teen.

She does want someone to talk to, someone better at listening than her mother, or Tisha, who is an awesome best friend in most ways, but has no idea how to handle the new, sad Oleander.

Is it really such a huge stretch that there might have been something between them? She's been mistaken for a uni student before. She's nearly seventeen. There's only four years between them, if he's twenty-one.

Finally, Oleander writes the simplest message she can think of, and hits "send" before she can change her mind. Immediately, she feels stupid. He was being polite, that's all. She's just bothering him.

But the reply pops up almost immediately.

*I'm so glad you messaged. I'd been hoping you would.*

She waits for him near a park on the edge of town, like he asked. She's early and it's colder than she thought. She wishes she hadn't worn a short skirt. She paces to keep warm, looking at the pictures of her dad that she's uploaded to her phone.

There are pictures of her tiny hand in his, in front of a castle when she was a toddler; three grinning faces from when her family was still young and whole. There are toes stuck in the sand of a

French beach a year later, still the three of them, her father's nose red with sunburn. Then later photos, selfies she took of the every-other-weekend visits she used to have with him: trips to theme parks and museums before those became few and far between. He blamed the pandemic for keeping them apart after the divorce, but it started before then, and as things got back to normal he had other excuses: he was too busy; he was too tired.

Then his girlfriend left him and the real problems began.

At first Oleander was happy that he was back in touch. There's a selfie on her phone she took of the two of them in his favorite pub, where he let her have beer or wine. He needed someone to talk to about his break-up. At the beginning she was proud that he thought she was worthy of trust. She didn't mind answering when her phone woke her in the middle of the night. She was happy he thought she was such a good listener.

But it soon became clear that she wasn't helping. He got worse, turned bitter. She didn't like the way he talked about Fiona, the misogynistic language he used. She suspected he was drunk when he contacted her; his messages were full of badly spelled words and weird autocorrects.

When she suggested he might need professional help he took it personally. He accused her of trying to palm him off onto leeches who would charge him hundreds of pounds to make him whine about his mother or put him on drugs to zombify him.

Soon, she found she was the one with excuses, but he kept messaging.

Once, he showed up at her house with beery breath, on a night he knew her mum was working. He asked if they could go somewhere so he could talk, but she didn't want to get in a car with him when he'd been drinking. She lied and said she had a friend coming over.



She wasn't sure if she should let him drive home, but he insisted he'd only had the one beer and wouldn't let her call a taxi. She didn't know how to stop him, short of getting him arrested. She watched him pull out of her road and messaged twenty minutes later to make sure he got home safe.

In the pictures on Oleander's phone, her father sometimes grins, but as time passes his expression is more and more strained.

She wonders why she never noticed that, until it was too late.

Rupert pulls up, leans over the passenger seat and opens the door from inside.

"I'm so sorry I asked you to meet out here. I didn't know it would be so cold," he says. "Get in, and I'll crank up the heat to warm you up."

Oleander climbs in, while Rupert leans over to the back seat, picks up a bouquet and hands it to her: a dozen white roses.

"Thank you." She clutches them, a little startled from the gesture.

"White roses are for friendship," he says.

"Friendship. Nice." She hopes she's hidden the disappointment in her voice. Of course she's too young for him. She was silly to think he could be interested. Still, she appreciates the gesture. It's nice to know where she stands before she embarrasses herself.

He pulls away from the curb and she struggles to strap herself in while holding the flowers. "I'm sorry I was such a mess in your office."

He waves a hand. "Will readings are always emotional. It happens at a job like mine. You obviously needed someone to talk to."

"Thanks so much for offering," she says.

"It's my pleasure. Honestly, I appreciate the excuse to get out of the house."

Oleander nods. "Your parents driving you up the wall, too?"

He grins, as if what she's said is adorable. "I don't live with my parents. But my housemate has been, yes."

Oleander looks out of the side window to cover her embarrassment. "He's annoying you then?"

"She is. But we're not here to talk about my problems. I wanted to see how you were holding up."

"I'm okay."

"How are things with your mother?"

She shrugs. "Not great. She's trying, though."

"But ...?"

"She's worried about money. About paying for my university. She works a lot. That's why she was like that at your office. Sorry."

"She's a nurse, right?"

"She works at a nursing home. She's a care assistant."

"Well, you seem smart. Maybe you can get a scholarship of some kind. Or support yourself with modeling."

Oleander looks sharply at him, to see if he's joking. But he's staring at the road, and his gaze hasn't flickered. She knows she's not hideous or anything, but she's definitely not model material.

"I'm sorry. I'm getting off track. You were talking about your mother."

The compliment was too big, too unexpected. She's not sure how to respond. She looks down at the white flowers, wrapped in crinkly plastic that sticks to her hands. He was complimenting her as a friend, obviously.

"I ... She's impossible to talk to. My best friend isn't much better. She just keeps saying I'm feeling guilty for no reason."

He glances at her. "Feeling guilty? What for?"

She wants to kick herself. She didn't mean to get into that. But he threw her off with the ridiculous modeling comment.

"Um. Where is it we're going?"

“You’re going to love it. We’re not far now.”

But it’s another fifteen minutes before they arrive. The restaurant is two towns over. It’s clearly expensive, and Oleander feels out of place as they step into the elegant, dimly lit room. It looks romantic. If it weren’t for him making things clear with the flowers, she’d think this was a date.

Red tablecloths drip from intimate tables. Dark velvet wallpaper congeals in the corners behind the candlelight. The murmur of polite conversation and the genteel tinkle of cutlery fill the air as a man in a suit leads Rupert and Oleander to their table.

Oleander takes it all in, wide-eyed. It’s easily the nicest restaurant she’s been to. Rupert pulls a chair out for her, and she sits awkwardly, tugging her black skirt down over her bare legs.

Rupert takes his own seat and smiles over the table. “I hope you don’t mind me bringing you all the way here. I wanted to take you somewhere quiet so you could relax and talk, somewhere we won’t be interrupted by anyone we know.”

“It’s lovely.” She opens the menu and bites at the inside of her cheek as she reads the prices.

“Obviously, the meal is my treat,” Rupert says.

“Thank you, that’s very generous.” Oleander still frowns at the list. She doesn’t want to order anything too expensive and seem greedy, but the menu is in French, and she doesn’t know what half the dishes are.

Rupert seems to notice her awkwardness. “I can order for you if you want. I know this place well.”

She exhales, glad he’s so thoughtful. “That’s probably a good idea. Thanks.” She closes her menu and looks around at the room as the waiter returns and takes Rupert’s order.

They are the youngest people there, by some margin, and she notices the eyes on them, watching almost hungrily. Rupert draws

the gaze of the room. He exudes old-fashioned charm, matching the restaurant perfectly.

She pulls down her skirt again.

“Relax. You look lovely.”

“Thanks.” She pushes her hair behind her ears, but it quickly escapes again, falling back over her cheek.

“No, I mean it. You have a black-and-white film star look about you. I mean, if you didn’t have the purple hair. If you cut it short, you’d be the spitting image of a twenties movie star, like Clara Bow.”

She nods. Her fingers itch to grab her phone so she can google the name.

The waiter brings a bottle of wine to the table and makes a show of displaying it to them on a white cloth. He pours a little for Rupert, who sips it, and nods. The waiter fills both their glasses.

Oleander looks at the red wine in front of her nervously. “So. I really don’t know anything about you. How ... old are you?”

“Early twenties. You’re basically seventeen, right?”

“Yes. You know that from our file?”

He nods at her glass of wine and winks. “I won’t tell the waiter if you won’t.”

Oleander’s shoulders relax slightly. She picks up her glass and takes what she hopes is a sophisticated-looking sip. She’s not sure what to do with her hands, so finds herself taking a few more sips. She’s relieved when the waiter returns, carrying two plates with elegantly balanced towers of small white disks.

“Sautéed scallops,” Rupert says. Oleander watches carefully to see which fork he picks up and mirrors him as he takes his first bites. He smiles, encouragingly. It does taste good, mostly of garlic and butter. There’s not much of it, and Rupert is done with his quickly.

“So,” he says, putting his cutlery down. “How are you doing?”

She struggles to swallow her mouthful quickly so she can reply. “Good. Well, I mean no. Not good. But you know.”

“How are things with your mother?”

Oleander shakes her head. “She doesn’t really get it. She can’t ever see my father as anyone other than the man she divorced.”

“Divorce is so sad. That must have been hard for you.”

“It’s better that they’re divorced. Trust me. But they were happy once. I made a photo album. I’ve got some pictures from back when they were together.” She reaches for her phone, then stops herself, looking around. “But this doesn’t seem like the kind of place I should be on my phone.”

Rupert gives a little laugh. “Maybe not. But perhaps you could show me later?”

Oleander quickly turns off the screen and puts it face down on the table. She takes another sip of her wine.

“Sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Rupert says, gently. “But you were talking about your mother.”

“Oh, yes. I mean, she’s upset at him for killing himself, and for leaving us with nothing, not even the child support money, and I guess that’s kind of understandable, but it’s hard.”

A waiter appears, removing their plates smoothly.

“Your parents divorced, and your mother resented your father. Do you think that had something to do with ... what he did?”

Oleander takes a gulp of wine and finds her glass is empty.

The waiter is at her elbow almost immediately, refilling her glass.

“Slowly, okay?” Rupert whispers as the waiter departs.

“No,” Oleander says.

“What?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean ‘no’ about the wine. I meant about Mum.

I don't think that's why he did it."

"Why do you think he did it?"

She can feel the memory like a dark shape underwater, threatening to surface. She can't let it. Not here, not now. She can't tell him. She's not even sure she could get the words out. And if he knew the truth, he'd hate her.

She picks up her glass, gulps down the wine.

"I ... don't know. But I should have listened to him more. Been there for him more."

"I'm sure you did all you could. I heard you were the one who found him."

Another nod. Another swig of wine.

He swears under his breath. "Wow. I'm so sorry. That's ... you shouldn't have had to go through that. No one should."

She's clutching her wine glass so hard she's surprised it doesn't shatter.

She tries to breathe, tries not to panic, tries to focus on the flicker of the candle on the table between them. She tries to push down the images that threaten the fragile grip she has on herself, tries to keep it submerged.

She looks back up at Rupert and plasters a smile on her face.

"That's enough about me. Let's talk about you. What made you decide to be a solicitor?"

The question feels inane to her, but Rupert brightens.

"It's a funny story, actually."

It turns out to be a long story, and she's grateful for that. She wonders if he could see she was struggling and he's trying to take her mind off things. And he's right, it is funny. It's about a prank gone wrong, where Rupert stopped a pub landlord from calling the police on his friends by pretending to be a lawyer. She laughs in all the right places, but when she tries to talk, her tongue stumbles

over the words, like stones in her mouth. She's drunk too much.

She eats when her *coq au vin* comes, although she can barely taste it. The bones are awkward, and she's uncoordinated with the wine. She doesn't want to make a mess, so she ends up leaving most of the meat on the thing.

Rupert doesn't ask any more questions and she's relieved, even though she's not sure if she's bored him, or if he's being considerate. It's nice not to talk, nice to stare at his handsome face, nice to have something else to think about. This restaurant, this man, this wine makes her feel like someone else, no longer Oleander Dillon, and she likes it.

She struggles to stay awake on the drive home, digging her nails into her palms as the alcohol tightens its grip. She should have listened to him, should have drunk slower. Rupert opens the car door for her back at the park where he picked her up, and she stumbles out.

"I'm so glad you opened up to me."

She doesn't feel open. She feels clenched tight, a ball wrapped around the memory that she can't face.

But it has been a good night, or at least better than the nights she's become used to, crying alone in her bedroom. It's the wine making her feel nauseous tonight, not the shame. The evening has been a distraction. The booze has numbed the sharp edges of her grief.

Rupert looks thoughtful. "You know, I thought I was doing you a favor, taking you out so I could lend an ear. But I had a great time with you tonight. You're much more mature than I expected. You're interesting, and a really good listener."

"Thanks."

He looks awkward. "Would you like to go out again sometime? Not just for someone to talk to, but maybe, you know ..."

It's the wine that makes her blurt out the word. "A date?"

He gives a rueful laugh. "I guess so. If it's not totally out of line for me to ask. We can absolutely just stay friends if you would prefer. But it might be nice. What do you think?"

Dizzy in the gray of his gaze, Oleander nods.