

CHAPTER 1

River Oak was a fairly quiet town. It was tucked away by forests and large hills and it was almost a mile from any real large towns, but it was nice. Lavender used to love to wander around aimlessly in the forests. Playing in the creek, picking apples from the trees.

Then one day, Lavender moved and had to say goodbye to the trees and the creeks and the overall quietness of the town. She and her dad moved to the city for his work. He was a scientist studying human reactions - that's all he'd ever tell her. Even when she begged, he still never went into much detail.

And then there was Lilac. The last time they'd met in person, Lilac was very small, almost tiny. She was very thin and short. Lavender was half a foot taller. Lilac had bright brown eyes and they were pretty big too. She almost looked innocent all the time. Which was fitting, since Lilac was pretty innocent. What was especially strange about her was that she had long blond hair down to her waist, and she absolutely refused to cut it. Even though Lilac and Lavender were polar opposites, they were strangely alike, and became best friends...

Lavender jerked her head up realizing that she was about to fall asleep. Once again she'd managed to get lost in thought while remembering why she was on the 14 hour long car trip. Her dad hated driving almost as much as Lavender hated sitting in the car. Her father might have been even more anxious to arrive than Lavender, which was a bit ironic considering the fact that Lavender had spent months planning this.

Lavender remembered watching the vans and packing up her things. She'd watched with tears in her eyes in a mix of sadness and excitement, determined to look at everything with a positive light. She sat on the doorsteps staring at the moving van, and she barely noticed when Lilac walked up and sat down next to her.

"S-so you're moving? You're really going this time?" Lilac said. She always had a quiet voice and a bit of a stutter. Especially when she got nervous.

"Yeah, but we can always text each other and video chat... I'm sure in school next year you'll make lots of friends..." Lavender smiled, trying to look encouraging. She wasn't sure if what she was saying would happen. Lilac had always been shy and sometimes difficult to understand. But Lavender was sure that eventually she would make some friends. After all, the girls had been friends since they were both five, and they were eleven now.

"It's not the friends I'm worried about... I just... will you..." Lilac started, but she wasn't able to finish. It seemed like her voice failed her. Lavender gave another smile, hoping to encourage Lilac. Rushing her or finishing her sentences were the works things you could do.

Lilac took a deep breath and attempted to finish her sentence, "Lavender, promise that in two years you'll come back? Even just for a little while. You'll come back in two years?"

"Why two years? Why not sooner? Or one?" Lavender asked.

"It has to be two," Lilac said. "It just has to. Promise you'll come back in two years?"

The trick came to a screeching halt. Jerking into reality and reminding her once again that she was daydreaming. She creamed loudly in surprise, as she was thrown forward slightly.

"DAD!" she yelled, "ARE YOU TRYING TO GET US KILLED??? WHY THE HECK DID YOU DO THAT?!" She seemed incredibly furious for someone who often claimed not to get angry.

"I was letting a duck cross!" Her dad, Mr. Green, said defensively with a sheepish grin on his face. Lavender huffed and sank lower into her carseat.

For some reason Lavender and her father looked nothing alike. He had brown hair that was very curly and intelligent looking brown eyes. Lavender's hair was short and black, she was thin and tall almost taller than her father with eyes that were a stormy gray color like a paler less colorful blue. She also had some freckles around her nose. Lavender's hair was weird, since she'd cut it herself, it was fairly uneven and reached just around her shoulders. Also unlike her dad, she had glasses.

It seemed after more countless hours of passing through nothing but trees and feeling motion sick to the point of almost throwing up. Then her dad finally point out that they had only an hour left. Lavender looked back at the luggage she'd brought. She had only brought two suitcases, but she attempted to pack her entire room. It was her first time ever leaving home for such a long period of time. The plan was for Lavender to stay with Lilac for the summer. The plan was for her dad to pick her up sometime in August... two months from now.

"You recognize this?" Her dad asked point at a gas station like building. Lavender shook her head, although it did seem familiar. Of course her dad would remember, he had a great memory. Sometimes when she asked in if it was hereditary, he'd smile and say "obviously not."

"How about this one, surely you remember here?" Lavender followed his finger. He was pointing at a large old brick building. She recognized it instantly. Home. But it wasn't home. Not anymore. Her eyes grew slightly teary as they passed it. But the tears didn't last long. They'd been replaced by the sudden anxiety. If this was their old house, then Lilac house was so close..

Lavender's heart pounded as they pulled into the driveway. She realized that she was basically shaking. She recognized every detail of the incredibly large house, from the random stained glass to the disproportionately large doors, to the balcony, it all looked the same.

AS overjoyed as she felt, Lavender also felt a sense of dread. Should she really do this? A promise is a promise, she stepped out of the car.

As soon as she stepped out, Lavender felt a wave of nausea roll over her. She felt suddenly dizzy, and her knees gave away.

She fell to the ground doing her best not to throw up.

CHAPTER 2

Mr. Green had always known his child to get motion sick. He caught her just in time before she landed face first onto the pavement.

Lavender took a deep breath, and she chugged a bunch of lemon-lime soda. She felt almost embarrassed by what had just happened.

"D-Dad," she finally managed taking a shaky breath, "I think I'm OK now. It might be better when I'm inside and not on the burning pavement." She used the car door to force herself to stand up.

Her dad grabbed the luggage, and together they walked up the path to the enormous house and rang the doorbell. She sometimes envied her friend, she almost seemed rich, what with a giant house and billions of computers.

When the door opened, Lavender stood facing Lilac, whom she immediately met with a tackle hug. Mrs. Jamison, Lilac's mother, came out to greet Mr. Green, and they talked for a bit while Lilac showed Lavender her room.

Lilac's room was big and painted in a dark purple color. It was very different from Lavender's room at home which was a light blue color. The room was messy, the only clean place seeming to be the desk with the computer on it.

As much as Lavender liked using computers, Lilac seemed to be very, very good with them. She seemed to use them 24/7 which Lavender could understand. She even told Lavender some bits about fixing a computer and programming.

Lavender walked over to her shelf of video games. Lilac seemed to get excited when they started to talk about those.

After a while, Mrs. Jamison walked in and found them both deeply engrossed in some console game. It took her about seven tries to get them to look at her.

"I'm glad you guys are having so much fun catching up! I bet you two have a lot to talk about seeing it has been two years," Lilac's mom said idly from the doorway of the room.

"Not exactly Mrs. Jamison," Lavender said, attempting to sound somewhat polite. "We've been talking in video chats but speaking in person is so much different."

Next to Lavender, Lilac shrugged, "sometimes talking behind a screen is easier, other times you wish you could teleport to where they live and slap them upside the head."

Lavender turned slowly to her friend, "you'd never slap someone," she said moving to a distance out of slapping range.

Lilac just shrugged again. "Maybe I wouldn't physically slap them, but mentally is an entire difference." Lilac sat back in her chair looking satisfied.

"How exactly do you mentally slap someone?" Lavender asked trying her best not to let Lilac win the argument. But Lilac had a special form of logic that won all arguments.

"Like this" Lilac said, and she stared at Lavender with an angry expression, picturing with all her might, slapping Lavender right in the face.

Mrs. Jamison sighed heavily "girls," she said, "GIRLS!" The arguing stopped and they both looked at her. She proceeded to talk, "you guys want pizza for dinner? That's OK with you Lavender?" she asked.

"It's fine with me" said Lavender.

Mrs. Jamison left and the girls proceeded with their argument.

Mrs. Jamison looked a lot like her daughter, but with brown eyes and brown, very light brown hair. She always had her hair tied back and always looked tired from work.

Lilac had noted many times that her mom could always be found cleaning, organizing, or fixing something in their giant house. Lilac had always found the house very pretty, it looked old and had a lot of rooms. Lilac liked looking through the boxes of old stuff from her grandparents that lay scattered throughout the boxes of stuff. Just by digging around, she learned that her grandpa used to be an engineer.

She lived in the house with her mom and grandparents for a while, but she barely got to know them before they died, leaving the house to her mother.

Lavender had never know her grandparents either. Or uncles, or aunts, or her cousins, or anyone in the family besides her dad and her mom. Sometimes Lilac would make up stories to explain Lavender's weird family history. One of the most believable ones would be that her parents eloped, and decided to cease contact with their families. Or perhaps they really didn't have any families. It was odd, whenever Lavender attempted to ask her parents, they would bite their lips or exchange glances nervously. Sometimes they would tell her a story, but it changed occasionally and the details were inconsistent.

Seeing that Lavender was distracted, Lilac used this as a chance to seize victory. She got to work quickly grabbing a piece of paper and a pen. She wrote the words "I win" on the paper, then taped it onto her face, absolute undeniable proof that she had won the argument.

"That's what happens when you space out," said Lilac. "You can't ever let your guard down!"

"What was that? I wasn't listening to your rant about spacing out."

"You can't space out while I'm telling you not to!"

Lavender was in the middle of trying to come up with a smart reply when the phone rang.

On instinct, Lavender shoved her hand into her pocket before remembering that she'd left it in the suitcase in the other room.

It was Lilac's phone. It seemed as if someone asked her about a reading assignment that they had to do over break. Lilac complained about the project very loudly, and very whiny.

"Don't you love reading? You only have to read two books, then write a paragraph!"

"It's not the reading I don't like," Lilac shook her head, "it's the very idea that they want to make us do homework, over break nonetheless! A break is supposed to be a break from work!"

"OK, OK," Lavender said, "Jeez, remind me to never remind you to do your homework again!"

Lilac sighed and set her phone back on its charger. She sat down on her bed, which was right across from the desk where Lavender was sitting. She felt a twinge of Jealousy about the size of the room that Lilac had.

They both seemed to be thinking of something to say, and for a long while, there became a long awkward pause of silence. After being able to find something to say, Lavender decided to use her go to strategy of looking at something, and making a comment on it. But before she had a chance, Lilac stood up excitedly.

"I haven't told you the new stuff I found in the attic yet, have I?" Lilac slid off her bed, grabbing Lavender's arm. "Let's go into the attic so I can show you!" She looked so excited that it was almost creepy.

CHAPTER 3

Lilac's mother had always been a workaholic. Even now she'd sometimes get caught up in the "big project" she'd been working on, but especially a long time ago when Lilac's father could take care of her.

Lilac barely remembered her father. She only knew him from the bitter stories her mom told. Apparently he used to gamble a lot and had quite the alcohol problem. Then one day, he died when she was three, and despite her mother's work, they were in serious debt.

Lilac and her mom ended up staying with her father's parents in their mansion-like house, but her grandparents hated her mother. From what she could put together, they blamed her for something.

Not even months after they came to live in the house, both of her grandparents died.

Looking through their stuff was the only way she ever felt that she'd get to know them. She learned a lot this way.

She pondered this as she dragged her friend across the hallway of the third floor, and opened a door revealing stairs that led into darkness. Lavender hesitated but Lilac marched confidently up the stairs and turned on a light. The light was dim. It didn't seem to have much of an affect, but Lilac didn't care much anyway.

Lilac proceeded to drag her friend across the giant, cold, dimly lit attic, and made her way through the clutter. Shoved in the corner was a small chest that for whatever reason had a dusty white sheet thrown on top of it. Lilac threw the sheet off the chest, creating an artificial dust storm in the process.

"So... It's a chest?" Lavender asked looking at the strange box placed in front of her. It was lather, and about the size of a coffee table with some tares in the sides.

"No, it's a unicorn," Lilac rolled her eyes at Lavender. "I think the lid is stuck though. I can't seem to open it."

"Let me look up how to open a unicorn," Lavender said, pretending to be looking at a phone. Lilac just rolled her eyes again and brought her attention back on the chest.

"What do you think could be in it?" Lilac pondered out loud. "Maybe it's the body of a child my grandpa murdered! Or gold from a pirate! Or thousand year old documents!"

"I bet it's cosplay," said Lavender.

"You think my grandparents cosplayed?"

"No, not your grandparents. I think your mom cosplays and hid the stuff in here in an unopenable box to hide the shame."

Lilac considered this. It seemed a lot more possible than a body of a child or gold, but still, she couldn't let logic spoil her fantasies.

"So, how do you think we should attempt to do this? Maybe grab a crowbar and try to pry the lid off?" Lavender said looking at the box.

"Crowbars might work! Wait, where am I supposed to get a crowbar?" Lilac said looking around in the attic to see if she could see one. To no one's surprise, it seemed like she'd have to look around to find one.

"Your mom has a toolbox right?" Lavender said thinking aloud. Her dad always had a toolbox afterall, and their parents were both in the same line of work, right? Lilac stopped and stared at her.

"I think she does! In the basement! What does that have to do with anything?"

Lavender sighed. Sometimes her friend wasn't the brightest of people.

"You mom might have a crowbar in her toolbox, obviously!" Lavender said feeling slightly annoyed how unable to catch on her friend could be.

"Will you go to the basement and get it for me?" Lilac said with a puppy dog eyed look. Combined with her already innocent looking doe eyes, she reminded Lavender a bit of a dog begging for food. Still, although Lavender didn't want to upset her friend, she had no idea where the toolbox, or even the basement was. She tried to explain this to Lilac, but she just waved her hand and said "excuses, excuses."

And so, Lavender climbed out of the attic. She made her way down the first floor. Lavender felt kind of shy in someone else's house, but she knew it was silly. She'd slept over here since she was five, once she even ran there in the middle of the night when she was scared! So why was she so scared to go into the basement? Of course, she'd need to start by finding it...

As she was walking into the kitchen, she noticed a random door tucked away in the corner. She figured she had a 50/50 chance of either finding the basement or the pantry.

Lavender decided to open the door. Had it been the pantry, she'd probably have just grabbed the nearest chocolate and then moved on. However, slightly to Lavender's disappointment, it was in fact the basement.

She took a step on the stairs, they were very rickety. The walls were mostly gray, the plaster seemed to be falling off in some places, and the whole place reeked of mildew. She walked over to the shelf with all of the tools. Sure enough, there was a crowbar.

Lavender picked up the heavy metal object and brought it out of the basement.

As she was climbing up the steps to the first floor, Mrs. Jamison stopped her. "What are you doing with a crowbar?" she asked, tracking Lavender's somewhat suspicious movements.

"Oh, I was - we were using it to open a chest in the attic because it's really, really stuck..." Lavender explained.

"Just don't break anything," she said, "and dinner will be here in about an hour."

Lilac's heart skipped a beat as they pried the chest open together. After several failed attempts, they'd finally managed to get it open.

Lilac eagerly rummaged through what was inside. There were a lot of old newspaper clippings and a notebook that had been almost completely filled, along with several broken pieces of jewelry.

Lavender peered over her shoulder, then reached in pulling out a random newspaper and started reading it.

Lilac started reading some of the things written down in the spiral notebook. After the first two pages, she realized it was more of a bunch of observations than an actual notebook.

"She seems happy most of the time. I wonder how she will take the bad news?"

"Her and the Green's child seem to get along real well. They are both a part of this I wonder..."

"The Green's kid seems to have almost 'passed out' again. Oddly enough Lilac didn't seem to feel scared for her friend in the slightest. Perhaps she is naive or oblivious."

"Still, how would she react to a situation that was life or death? Is she even capable of quick decisions?"

There were many more entries too, but it was strangely unsettling, so Lilac decided to stop reading.

She thought about giving the notebook to Lavender, but then thought about the way they were saying “the Green’s kid.” Maybe that’s why it’s so odd, because person who the writer was writing about had the same last name as Lavender.

Lilac closed the notebook, deciding to look at it more later. She looked at the newspaper Lavender was looking at. None of it was all that interesting, a lot of stuff about stocks, occasionally some crime, but nothing very interesting.

Lavender found it somewhat interesting. The newspaper was dated back to the 1940’s and it was surprisingly different from the newspapers they had now. The one she had picked up was a local news, usually not much newsworthy stuff happened in River Oak, but this had an interesting title.

“Man found after 19 year missing.”

Apparently some guy had gone missing and suddenly reappeared out of nowhere with no memories whatsoever.

“I didn’t know this town was capable of having anything interesting going on!” Lavender said mostly to herself.

“Don’t give it that much credit,” Lilac said, she stopped leaning over Lavender and when back to trying to find stuff in the chest. She ended up taking one of the only pieces of jewelry that wasn’t broken entirely, or engulfed in the somehow impossible tangle of necklaces. It was a bracelet with a little copper cat charm, and a few bright blue beads that were all stuck to the silvery chain. Luckily, they were put in in such a way that they wouldn’t fall off because the clasp was broken, so it wasn’t a bracelet so much as a string.

“Look at this! It’s pretty! Plus there’s a cat on it!” Lilac beamed excitedly at the bracelet.

“It’s broken,” Lavender said, “you should take something else or at least get it fixed.”

Lilac shook her head, “I like it the way it is... I bet it was my grandmother’s. I don’t know if we even could fix it.”

“We can fix it,” Lavender said.

Mrs. Jamison was glad that she knew some things about fixing jewelry. She remembered the way that Lilac had smiled and thanked her. For a second, she thought Lilac might cry.

For a second, the memory made her happy, but then it made her feel sick to her stomach.

Lilac had no reason to thank her.

CHAPTER 4

Lavender slept in the room next to Lilac’s room. She’d basically gotten the giant room to herself.

The room’s walls were light green and it had a dark blue rug in the center. Inside the room was pretty standard: a shelf, a dresser, a desk, a bed and a night stand. The only thing

that seemed to really stand out was a picture that hung on one side of the walls. IT was a painting of a mountain landscape, a very beautiful realistic one. Apparently Lilac had painted it herself, which Lavender found amazing since she had zero artistic talent.

There was also a very small window directly above the desk. Lavender found it odd that there was only one window in the room, since Mrs. Jamison claimed to “love natural light.”

Lavender found it hard to sleep and she found herself on her phone watching videos until she couldn't hold her eyes open anymore.

She didn't know until the nightmares that she had forgotten to take her medication.

Her dreams were bright flashes of something. She couldn't exactly decipher what it was, but she also couldn't look away.

But that was tame for her. Soon the scene changed.

She was in the basement of some sort of facility. She was holding an axe in front of her for self defense. She turned to the side and saw Lilac, but her expression was off. Not only was it emotionless, but it was completely blank. She lowered the axe and tried calling out to her, when someone grabbed her from behind.

Lavender work with a start. She gasped and sat up straight in bed taking several breaths to calm herself down. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a shadowy figure that appeared to have a twisted grin on it's dark, eyeless face.

Lavender shrieked as loud as she could and ducked under the covers. She kept telling herself it was just a hallucination, and it would be gone as soon as she brought her head back out.

Soft footsteps grew louder, as someone came hurriedly down the hallway and yanked open the door.

Lavender was afraid to look up until a voice called out “Lavender?”

Lavender looked up to see Lilac standing in the doorway. She got chills looking at the way the darkness made her eye sockets look empty. Lavender realized that Lilac was holding something - a teddy bear. Did Lilac still sleep with them?

“Did I wake you up? Sorry” Lavender said “ I just had... a bad dream” Lavender purposefully left out the part about the hallucinating. She could still see the weird figure with its twisted face.

“You alright?” Lilac said worriedly. “Here,” she set the teddy bear down onto Lavender's lap, “my dad gave this to me a really long time ago... it's like a dream catcher. It helps with bad dreams.”

Lavender picked it up gently, “I didn't see this among your long shelf of video game plushies.”

“That's because I don't put it there. I have so many, I might never find this one.”

It must've been pretty important. It seemed like something that Lilac found very special.

“Thanks” Lavender said.

Lilac smiled, “no problem,” and then she left the room

At first when Lavender woke up, she didn't know where she was. She felt panicked for a second, then calmed down remembering that she was back at Lilac's place.

She felt something uncomfortable and lumpy under her arm digging into her elbow. She picked it up, it was a teddy bear. It looked old, an eye was missing, and the stuffing had worn away so it was floppy. This must've been the "dream catcher" that Lilac had given her. Lavender smiled, thinking it was kind of cute.

Suddenly the doors slammed open. Lavender jumped, startled, nearly falling out of bed.

"GET UP!" Lilac shouted.

"I AM UP!" Lavender tried to reply. But it was too late because Lilac was already racing down the halls screaming "FOOOOOD!"

Lavender could smell breakfast and the aroma was amazing. Her stomach growled and her mouth had raced off like that.

Lavender checked the clock and her phone, it was 9:30, a pretty decent time for her to get up. She hauled herself out of bed and followed the amazing scent into the kitchen.

"Chocolate chip pancakes are the best type of pancakes," Lavender said, looking wistfully for more pancakes.

"Chocolate in general is the best anything," Lilac said trying to lick the melted chocolate off her plate.

"Glad you two enjoyed it," Mrs. Jamison said, "but Lilac, do you really need to lick your plate?"

"Yes, in fact I do."

Lavender looked out the large window.

"It's a nice day outside," she said, "we should go for a walk!"

Lilac made a pouty face, "but that requires movement! We should play videogames and be antisocial!"

"No, I think you girls should get out of the house!" Mrs. Jamison said.

"Not you too mom! Two against one I can't win!" Lilac made another pouty face, but in the end, Two against one always wins.

It'd been awhile since Lavender had walked around River Oak. It was a beautiful, quiet town, although tucked away in mountains and slightly more on the secluded side. They walked past the gas station that her dad pointed out, she tried to think of what was so important about it, but she drew a blank.

As they walked Lilac would occasionally point to something and say "hey, remember..." or "remember when we..." or something along those lines. Lavender couldn't stop thinking about that gas station....

Lavender, without realizing it, walked right into something.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I wasn't paying attention" she said. She looked at the person she just ran into. She was a tall, very muscular girl, no doubt. She had long hair that was blonde but with a slightly orangey hue to it. There was also something about her eyes, they were an intense blue that looked almost purple.

"You... oh," she seemed to just have noticed that Lavender was there at all. "Mmh ok then," she turned to a guy who was standing right behind her. Lavender didn't even notice him standing there beforehand.

"I know her, that's Dr. Green's kid!" The guy said pointing at lavender. The boy was slightly shorter and a lot more scrawny than that girl. He also had skin that was slightly less than than hers. His hair was a dark brown color, but his eyes were the same intense blue color as his sisters. Lavender was also sure that she'd never seen this kid before in her entire life.

"My dad isn't Dr. Green anymore more, he's retired." She said. He wasn't exactly retired though, more so fired.

"Oh...she..." The boy looked at her again. His eyes were kind of creepy, they looked like he was mentally scanning her. She wondered if these kids were robots. The boy looked just behind her. "Oh, wouldja look at that! Dr. Jamieson's kid is here too!"

"OK, HOW DO YOU KNOW OUR PARENTS!" Lavender said. She was starting to feel a little creeped out by these guys. She looked at Lilac, who was trying to avoid eye contact.

"Ok , allow us to introduce ourselves! My name is Milo, and this is my sister Ember," the boy said.

The girl just looked bored, mostly uninterested in the conversation, as if she'd just been imagining something the entire time.

The guy gave the girl a little nudge. She seemed brought back to reality and remember that this was her cute to say something.

"Yes! Right! I have a name and it is Ember! Of course! What were we talking about? Oh, hey... it's Dr. Green's kid!" The girl said. Apparently, Ember got distracted very easily and tends to not pay attention at all sometimes. It was either that, or maybe she just didn't care what was happening.

"OK, well I'm Lavender and this is Lilac. Although you might've known thais already, did you know this already?" Lavender said noting that they never told her exactly how they knew who their parents were.

Milo shook his head, "we know your parents and we've seen your pictures, but they never told us your names."

"They?" Lavender's eyebrows knit together.

"You know," said Ember, "the people your parents work for! The ones who -" but Milo stopped her from going on by loudly saying, "Look at the time sis! We should get going before it gets late!"

Ember cocked her head to the side, "I don't see why you're being so obvious but whatever."

And the two of them left, despite Lavender's need for straight answers.

Lavender looked at Lilac, who hadn't said anything that entire time. She knew Lilac was shy, but Lavender realized that she was worse than before she'd left. It was weird. Lilac was fine around all the other kids when Lavender talked to them first, but if Lavender wasn't around or any close friend, Lilac wouldn't be able to make a sound.

That weird encounter had Lavender all worked up. She didn't feel like walking anymore.

"Let's go back," she said.

"OK! That was too weird for me."

On their way back, they passed the gas station again, and it hit her.
That was the place where her parents had met.

CHAPTER 5

Lavender's mother had always been a strict but kind mother. She worked in the science field just like her father did. Lavender always had admired how capable her mother was.

Until they left River Oak.

She heard it once, shortly after they left, a fight. After her parents thought she was asleep.

"You can't give up on it now!"

"I know but... it's our child I don't think I can..."

"If you can't bring yourself to complete this then you might as well quit. She isn't your property. She isn't even mine. She's theirs!"

"But this is... inhumane..."

Lavender couldn't force herself to listen to any more of the conversation. She quietly walked back from the spot on the stairs she sat in, and climbed into her bed. She tried to figure out what the conversation meant, but all she could figure out was it had something to do with one of the science projects they'd been working on.

A week after the fight thing, her mother had vanished without a trace. Police were called, but they concluded that she "ran away to another country."

The last thing that lavender had from her mom was an index card that had a drawing of a yellow eye and "*beware don't trust*" in her mother's handwriting.

Lilac had terrible dreams. First she felt like she was falling into a dark, bottomless abyss, but then she reached out to grab onto something to slow her fall. She reached out and touched something that felt alarmingly like a human hand. Hating the feeling, she recoiled her hand.

Suddenly the fall began to slow until she wasn't falling, but rather floating. Then she realized that she wasn't floating, she was lying on a solid surface. She slowly began to stand up. It was dark, but Lilac could faintly make out something. The room around her wasn't just any room.

A blindingly bright spotlight flashed onto Lilac. She realized that she was on a stage, and there was an audience staring at her, expectantly. Lilac froze up and began to panic. She dropped to her knees and looked wildly around the audience. For some reason, every single member had bright, glow in the dark yellow eyes and a face that remained otherwise emotionless.

Suddenly, someone came up from behind and shoved her off the stage. But Lilac never knew who it was.

She woke up in a cold sweat. Breathing heavily, she tried to calm down. She did everything she could to stop from screaming.

The bad dreams had been going on for a month and it only continuously got worse. She remembered when they'd first started. She dug out her old "dream catcher bear" that her father had given her. It didn't really help, but she really didn't expect it to.

She remember when her father had given it to her. He had so many debts to pay off, but he chose to spend his money on a bear to give her. Little did he know, she'd need that bear desperately, even more so after he died, and she was plagued with constant nightmares. And even more during the short time in River Oak before Ilac met Lavender, when that bear filled the spot of her only friend.

Thinking about the bear, she immediately instinctively brought her hand to the spot by her pillow where she'd always kept it. Then she remember it wasn't there. She'd lent it to Lavender last night, maybe it would help her not have nightmares this time.

And besides, toys like that were for little kids.

She lay her head down on her pillow again.

She could sleep without it.

CHAPTER 6

Lavender realized just how huge Lilac's backyard was. There was a decent size pool and a trampoline, and still, there was a lot of grass and a nice deck too. Lavender always felt jealous but mostly it was about the yard space. She'd been looking out over the yard, from the top of a giant tree fort that they made in a giant oak tree.

IT was a really hot, sunny day out. Lilac had been tasked with bringing lemonade to the tree fort, since she was the less clumsy of the two. Lavender watched her friend from afar, as she emerged from the house holding a half empty pitcher in one hand and a stack of plastic cups in the other. Obviously, Lavender failed to consider how she could get up the ladder though with both of her hands full.

For a brief moment, Lavender considered helping, but then changed her mind and started screaming encouragement out from one of the windows. If mental slaps were real, Lavender was getting mentally punched, but she didn't care.

In the end, Lilac did bring the stuff up, no thanks to Lavender. She ended up making two trips, one where she brought the cups, and one where she very carefully brought the pitcher. And even as carefully as she brought it, she almost dropped it twice.

When Lilac finally managed to make it to the top with the pitcher, Lavender was doubled over laughing on the floor.

"I win!" Lilac said, angrily trying to make Lavender stop laughing.

"It's still funny."

"It is not!"

"You're a-"

"A what?"

"..."

"Exactly."

Lilac gave an angry look, and then looked away. She was obviously still trying to think of a comeback, but gave up. Lavender found that even more hilarious. Lavender decided to change the subject.

"So why did you bring so many cups? We only need two," Lavender said, pointing at the large stack of plastic cups.

Lilac smiled proudly, "I brought a whole bunch, since this is our outdoor spot, this will be our stash! We can keep drinks and candy in here too, my mom recently put a mini fridge in!"

"A mini fridge? Is there anything you don't have?"

Lilac's face darkened and her expression grew serious, but only for a second. "I don't have sanity. Or emotions. Or a soul. So there, three things!"

It was very odd, but the joking response didn't quite seem to fit her expression. Had lavender stricken a nerve on accident? Whoops.

Feeling nervous, she decided to change the subject, yet again.

"What else do you want to do?" Lavender asked, "the tree house is getting a little boring."

"You're bored already?" Lilac said. "Wow, that's a record."

"Not entirely bored, I'm just sick of sitting here in the tree. It's a lot more fun during sleepovers and stuff," Lavender said. She wasn't trying to sound so mean...

"OK, I have an idea," Lilac said, "let's take a walk down to the gas station and get some ice cream!"

Lavender's heart thumped. The gas station. She hadn't been there in years. Her dad refused to tell her the story after her mom left, no matter how much Lavender begged.

"Let's go," she said. "Although gas station ice cream isn't particularly good."

"Still better than the ice cream in our school cafeteria," Lilac reminded her.

"That's not ice cream," Lavender argued, "That's frozen milk on a stick."

"Actually it got worse since you left. I don't even think it counts as milk anymore."

"I didn't think it could get worse," said Lavender, as she walked with Lilac towards the sidewalk.

Lilac stopped, "I need to tell my mom where we are going! Wait here!" And then she ran towards the back door of the house.

Lilac came back out a few seconds later holding her cell phone and a wallet.

"You almost forgot we need money to buy stuff, didn't you!" Lilac said, holding the wallet so that Lavender could see it before slipping it back into the pocket of her hoodie.

"I didn't forget I was making sure that you remembered."

"Well I remembered and you didn't. So there!"

They started walking down the street. Lavender noticed that the sky was already turning pinkish, meaning the sun was starting to set. It cast a golden orangey glow over the town. The gas station was about 10-15 minutes away. Considering that the girls walked slowly, Lavender predicted that it would be dark, or at least close, when they got home.

When they did get to the gas station, Lavender hesitated for a second. She remembered when her dad had pointed it out to her a few days ago. Some random gas station that was where her parents met, but they never said how.

Lavender had been to this gas station about a million times, why was she only just now realizing how off it felt? It was the feeling she always got thinking about her parents, wasn't it weird how little they told her? They said they'd met at a gas station, but never how, and she'd never been able to meet any family of theirs. She didn't even know if they had any family. For all she knew, her dad was the only family member she had. There was also her mother's disappearance...

Lilac could see the unease in Lavender's eyes. She didn't quite understand why Lavender looked so frightened. It was just a gas station, nothing particularly scary, right? So why were she and her friend still standing outside of the gas station awkwardly?

"Do you want to go in?" Lilac said. She was a little worried about her friend. "I'll just get something for you."

Lavender realized that she had just been standing there. She shook her head, "nah, it's fine. Besides, you'd never be able to pay the person."

Lavender walked into the gas station ahead of Lilac, as if to try and prove this. She walked straight to the freezer full of ice cream, which was in the back opposite the wall with the bathrooms.

The inside of the gas station was just what you expect from a gas station. Nothing at all like a Romance hot spot or a dating website.

Lavender looked at the ice creams, trying to carefully select something while also picturing how her dad could've met her mom here. She pictured her mom, an employee, her dad walks in listing off elements of the periodic table, they meet eyes and bam, the ship sets sail.

The funny thing was, the more that she pictured it, the more accurate it seemed.

Lilac picked her ice cream fast, she just picked the first item with chocolate on it. Lavender spent a lot of time carefully choosing, ruling out ones with ingredients she didn't like, trying to decide between ice cream or a popsicle. She ended up with some strange variant of what she believe to be an ice cream sandwich.

When they walked up to the front counter, Lilac handed the ice cream to Lavender, who handed it to the guy at the counter. He looked about 18, and had a weird spiky hairdo, and several earrings. He broadly repeated a total of money, which lead to Lilac nervously digging through her wallet for cash, accidentally spilling several coins in the process. While she scampered across the floor looking for her mess of spilled coins, lavender calmly straightened out the money that was all crinkled up from being harshly shoved in a wallet then pulled out again by Lilac, and she calmly handed the money to the employee.

"You're supposed to be less clumsy than me!" Lavender said, once they were outside of the gas station.

"I am! Most of the time! At least I can somewhat balance from those three ballet classes I took!"

Lavender had been right about the sky being dark. While it wasn't entirely black, the sky was noticeably darker in color, a dark blue looking color. It was too early for stars though.

Lavender always liked being inside at night. Lilac got easily scared, but Lavender always found it more calming than creepy.

Then again, Lavender didn't get very easily scared, and often liked things others would find creepy. Sometimes, lavender considered growing her hair super long so she could put it in front of her face and make herself look like the girl from The Ring. An instant way to freak people out. It could've been the perfect halloween costume, if she stopped cutting her hair for awhile.

AS they were walking, LAVender decided to share this idea with Lilac, but as she started talking about it, a dog started barking from out of nowhere and broke off its leash, chasing after them and barking viciously.

The girls screamed and sprinted away as fast as they could. Normally Lavender loved dogs, but in this case, the dog was the size of a small horse and chasing them down the street.

Lavender ran as fast as she could, slightly faster than Lilac. The house was just barely in sight when she heard someone yell.

"Hey! Buster! Come here boy!"

The dog stopped chasing them and ran across the street. Lavender followed the dog to thank whomever had just saved them. She couldn't see from a distance it was too dark from where she stood.

Upon getting closer, she saw a familiar face. It was Milo! He was holding the dog by what was left of the leash.

"Thanks I guess for saving us from that dog! Is it yours?"

Milo nodded, "more or less, and I didn't save you, he just wanted to play! Forcefully, but he wanted to play."

"So it's safe to pet him?"

"Go ahead."

Lavender slowly started to pet the giant dog. "We just got scared, the dog is a little bit... huge."

"He's huge," Milo agreed, "but he doesn't know that.... He thinks he's a lap dog."

CHAPTER 7

Lavender Had a strange dream where she was in the gas station being chased around by a pack of dogs., Suddenly, she heard a weird noise, and woke up. Sure, Lavender liked dogs, but she'd always preferred cats. Now she could clearly see why.

But Lavender's thoughts were interrupted by a weird noise. It sounded like heavy footsteps barging up a staircase. But the footsteps stopped too early to have been walking up the stairs to the third floor. Lavender got up out of bed and walked into the hallway. Towards the other end, Lavender could see no one on the staircase, but the door to Lilac's room sat wide open. Lavender peaked in, expecting Lilc to be in there. Instead, the blankets to Lilac's bed were tossed to the side and Lilac was nowhere to be found.

A sudden bad feeling spread over Lavender as she instinctively turned and ran into the spot where the hallway curved. From there, she could see the other door that had been left wide open. The door to the attic.

Lavender walked up the steps carefully. A light had been turned on, but it was dim. A lot of the previous clutter had been moved to the sides, making way for a random table. Lilc was

sitting at the table, but something was off about her. Her eyes were empty, hollow looking, but they also had a strange yellow glow. Her face was expressionless, and it didn't change, despite Lavender moving closer. She didn't seem to know or care that Lavender was even there at all. She was also holding a very large knife.

Slowly, Lilac flattened her hand down on the table, and with the knife in her hand, stuck her fingers as hard as she could. She did it again while swaying back and forth.

Lavender let out a shocked scream and stumbled backwards, feeling sick. Lilac kept chopping at her fingers until Lavender lost it. She jumped up, wrestling the knife out of Lilac's hands. She didn't put up a fight. She instead reached for the knife, then her eyes went normal brown for a second. She screamed and tried to jump out of her chair, suddenly collapsing onto the floor.

Lavender was so in shock that she fell to her knees.

Mrs. Jamison ran up the stairs, only to find her child passed out and covered in blood, while Lavender sat on the floor holding a bloody knife.

As soon as Lavender saw Mrs. Jamison, she dropped the knife. Her hands were shaking so badly. She ran up and hugged Mrs. Jamison as if she were her own mother. She hugged her crying, panicked.

"I-I don't understand, why would she cut her own fingers...?" and then Lavender would start crying.

Mrs. Jamison felt sick to her stomach, not because of the blood, but because of guilt.

CHAPTER 8

Lilac awoke to realize that she was lying in a hospital bed. She couldn't remember what had happened. She only remembered saying goodnight to Lavender and lying down to go to sleep. She also realized that the nearest hospital was 30 minutes to an hour away from River Oak.

Lilac could see that her right hand had been heavily bandaged. But something was wrong. Had they drugged her? Her hand was numb. Lilac had a sudden feeling of dread.

Lilac looked around the room. It was very white, white furniture, white walls, white floors. The bed she was on was pushed up against the wall across from a very crappy looking TV. There was a side table next to her bed with an alarm clock on it, and several boxes of chocolates. There were also two chairs in the corner opposite the one her bed.

She noticed that her bandaged hand didn't even hurt that much. Not any more than her head did, at least. Her head hurt very badly, there was a pounding headache, and it was the type that seemed to move all over her head.

Somebody opened the door, scaring Lilac so much that she nearly jumped out of her bed. Opening the door was a nurse, followed by her mother.

"Look, she's awake!" the nurse said cheerfully.

"So she is," her mom said, "how's her hand?"

"Aren't you straight forward!" The nurse said avoiding the question.

"Wh-what-what's going on? What happened? What happened to my hand?" Lilac hated them talking like she wasn't there, especially when she had no idea what was happening.

"You don't remember?" The nurse asked.

Lilac shook her head.

"Well, apparently you cut your fingers with a knife. Luckily your friend stopped you, but..." the nurse stopped herself and put on a fake smile.

"But? But? But what!" Lilac's mother said. She suddenly sounded pretty angry.

"Well, with the condition that her hand was in...we... we had to remove one of the fingers." The nurse was trying to sound positive, "but at least it was only the pinkie, nothing too important!" she said, but the nurse's joke didn't help very much.

Mrs. Jamison didn't say anything, but she looked very worried. Lilac had never seen such an upset look on her mother's face before. Still, something bothered Lilac very much. Actually, a lot of things bothered her, but this one seemed to stick out.

"Why... did I chop my own finger off?" Lilac asked. "I don't even remember doing it!"

The nurse sighed really not looking forward to this. "We've all been trying to figure that out. You've never had any thoughts of harming yourself before?"

"NO. Are you saying I did it on purpose?"

"Oh no, but you never know sometimes! Some people do crazy things. Honestly, we have to ask just to be sure. We also suggest maybe you give her a psychiatric analysis, just to see..."

They were doing it again, talking as if she wasn't in the room. Also, it seemed like the nurse had been suggesting that she did it on purpose.

The door opened again, this time it was Lavender following a second nurse. The first nurse looked at the two who just walked in. "Let's talk outside," then pulled her mom out of the room.

Lavender ran up to Lilac and gave her a hug so hard she almost squeezed her to death, . Then she angrily forced herself back and gave Lilac a look.

"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, YOU SCARED ME TO DEATH!"

"You don't look very dead."

"I am. Trust me. And that's not the point. Why did you cut up your hand like that???"

"Maybe it was an accident?" Lilac still couldn't figure out the answer for herself.

"It looked very intentional." Lavender said, glaring into Lilac's eyes, trying to make her be honest.

But she was being honest.

There were tears welled up in Lilac's eyes, but she ignored them. "I honestly don't know what happened. The last thing I remember is lying down..."

To her surprise, Lavender nodded in agreement. "I agree with you, something isn't quite adding up here. When I saw you, your eyes looked yellow and hollow. I don't know why, but there's so much wrong with the situation here."

Lavender then placed something that Lilac didn't even notice she was holding onto the bed. It was a small cat toy from the gift shop.

"Remember when you got your tonsils removed/ I got you so many stuffed animals that it became the start of your enormous collection." LAVender said, looking at yet another plushie she had given Lilac.

Lilac smiled. "Now I have even more to add to my collection!"

The plan was for her to eventually give her collection to charity, but that was eventually, and she wanted to have a large collection before that.

Then, Mrs. Jamison walked back in. "We're going to go," she said.

Lavender looked upset, "you're going to leave her at the hospital alone all night?"

"Well, it's only for a few nights, I'm sure she can handle it."

Lavender didn't agree. She knew that Lilac got scared easily. But who was she to talk back to Lilac's mother?

CHAPTER 9

It was kind of weird being at the house alone without Lilac. She wasn't completely alone, but it still felt strange. She suddenly felt like a stranger, like more of a burden than a guest. Normally she couldn't even stand silence but she didn't know what to say.

She sat on her phone, texting her dad, explaining what had happened. She was shaking, but felt slightly better, now knowing her friend would be OK. Down a finger, but OK.

Lavender had never been the most empathetic person. She'd never cry during sad scenes in movies or anything like that at least. While she didn't cry, seeing her friend like that, she wanted to. Her eyes watered, she'd wanted to cry, but she didn't. She knew for sure that if the roles were reversed, Lilac would have cried, and probably wouldn't have even tried to hide it. Until Lavender teased her for it. Strangely enough, Lilac's mother hadn't cried either. In fact, she stayed strangely calm. She didn't panic, unlike Lavender.

Lavender looked at her phone, no response from her father. She stared at the painting on the wall, maybe it would give her good luck or something. Then she heard yelling. Confused, Lavender rushed down the stairs, pausing at the bottom step. Hidden by the wall, she peeked at the front door, she could see an angered Mrs. Jamison, who must've answered the door, and standing in the doorway was... her father?

She felt very confused. Why had her father driven 13 hours, and not responded to her texts? Why was there yelling?

Now extremely confused and more than a little curious, Lavender perched on the stairs and eavesdropped on their conversation.

"Now listen here Amelia. Our experiments seem to be working. Why take them to the lab? It would be dangerous to reveal ourselves to them!" It was weird hearing Mrs. Jamison being called by her first name. It was also creepy hearing her father talk like that. Was he talking about his work?

"I know, but... I just watched my own child cut up her hand! I'm not sure if this is right..."

"Listen, it may be hard, but the sacrifice will be worth it! This could be a very dangerous weapon, but think of all the ways it could help people! Also... think of the money we'll make! Won't it be nice to finally pay off your husband's debts?"

"It's still not right... I never meant for Lavender to see..."

"It's OK. Nobody here is a good human being, they're all criminals. Or debtors. River Oak was a way to escape your past. People should've known there'd be a price."

Mrs. Jamison paused for a very long time before saying, "please leave. What if Lavender saw you?"

As if on cue, Lavender let go of the railing, slipping and falling down several stairs. Lavender tried to get up quickly and run up the stairs, but Mrs. Jamison was already at the bottom of the stairs.

"You were listening?" Mrs. Jamison said, with a very disappointed look on her face.

"Maybe"

She sighed heavily, "great, and now that was just what we needed."

"Can you please explain what's going on?" Lavender was practically begging

"Sweetie, come here," her dad said gently. Lavender walked over cautiously. Her dad seemed to be digging in his pockets for something. When she got close enough, her father grabbed her by the arm and wouldn't let go. She screamed and tried to pull away as her dad brought out a giant syringe.

"This will be much easier if you don't pull away."

She closed her eyes, feeling a slight pinch. She suddenly felt dizzy.

She stumbled back, her sight went blurry and began to dim. "W-What was that?" her voice trembled.

"Just a tranquilizer of sorts," her dad said casually.

Lavender looked desperately at Mrs. Jamison for help, but she just stared back, poker faced.

"Dad...I...hate you" Lavender said. A sudden drowsiness increased and the world around her grew darker, until it all went black.

CHAPTER 10

When Lavender awoke, she'd been handcuffed to a chair in a room that was completely gray with barren walls. The only thing she could make out was the door, which seemed to have no handle. It could probably only be opened from the outside. There was also a light, only one light though, and it was a bare bulb that hung loosely from wires in the ceiling.

Lavender felt very confused. She noticed that one of the lenses on her glasses had been cracked. If someone was trying to torture information out of her, the crack in her glasses might've been the perfect way to do so.

The door opened and her father walked in.

"I'm sorry," her father said, "I'm sorry for doing this. But I had to. Your mother disagreed with this, but I had to go through with it anyway."

"So... I was part of your sick experiment all along? Why, dad?"

Her father looked away, guilty.

"I'm not even your real father. Your parents abandon you and the state gave you to us. You belong to our project."

Tears stung her eyes. "But Dad -"

"I AM NOT YOUR FATHER!"

The sudden outburst scared her. Her eyes watered but as much as she wanted to cry, she fought the tears back.

"That's why I don't have any other family? YOU weren't allowed to tell anyone about me." Lavender was trying to keep her cool. This man, he felt like a stranger. There was no way this was the same guy who drove her here.

"Yes. You're right. And it's pretty much your fault your mother left, too. She had these weird ideas. She thought we could stop the experiments, maybe even start a family." He chuckled to himself. "Since her heart wasn't in it, she ran away. The only person I loved left me. It's your fault!"

Lavender almost wanted to feel sympathy for him, but she couldn't. This sounded absolutely crazy to her. If anything, it was a lame excuse.

"Where are we?" Lavender asked finally.

"In a special room in Amelia - Mrs. Jamison's basement." Her father said.

But Lavender had already been in the basement. She hadn't seen any secret rooms, but then again, she hadn't been looking for one.

"Why are you down here with me? Shouldn't you be dissecting a frog or whatever?"

"I needed to check up on you" her father said, "deprivation from the drug can cause severe hallucinations."

"The drug...?" But she realized even before she said it. The pills she had been taking to "help with sleep" had been the cause of her problem this entire time. She felt so angry, and yet... something about this was funny.

Lavender strangely found it hilarious. She started giggling but little by little her laughter became hysterical.

"Are you having a mental breakdown or something?" her father asked, strangely unfazed by her sudden outburst.

Lavender took a deep breath and it stopped. "So, you're experimenting with some sort of drug? What is it, to fight the flu? To cure cancer? To cure AIDS or the cold? There better be a great reason why you're doing this! Please tell me there is!"

"Had it been something like that, I'd feel less guilty," her father sighed, "but I'm afraid not. What we're doing is slightly more sinister."

CHAPTER 11

"Lilac! Lilac wakeup!"

Lilac had been shaken awake. She groaned and sat up, aware that she was still in the hospital. She also noticed that the boy who saved them from the dog yesterday was staring at her.

Had it been yesterday? Had she really spent a full day in the hospital? Something about that felt wrong...

"Morning sleepy head," the kid said. "Glad you're finally awake."

"You're that... that one guy..." Lilac said. Her words seemed to fail her, but more confusion than lack of confidence, for once.

"Yes, I'm the one guy. The name's Milo. Now can we please hurry up? We're kind of in a bit of a mess you see," the boy said impatiently.

Lilac slid off the bed and wobbled slightly. Afraid she might fall, Milo attempted to steady her by grabbing her hand, and she yelped in pain. "Sssh! Be quiet! We're sneaking out of a hospital!!"

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes by she nodded.

"But why are we breaking out!" She asked as quietly as possible.

"Because your friend is in trouble. And we need her to be OK, because she's a very important puzzle piece. If we can get her before they do, we can set them far back in their plans. It won't stop them, but it will help."

Lilac was very confused. She hardly understood what Milo was talking about.

"Who are 'they'?" Lilac asked, following Milo, as they walked as quietly as possible down the halls.

"The River Oak Research Foundation," Milo said, "I think it's something like that. Just know that it's an organization called the River Oak something or other."

"The River Oak something or other" Lilac repeated.

They turned the corner, and avoiding a desk with a nurse, made their way to the elevator.

Milo nervously pressed the down button about thirty times before the elevator doors finally opened, and Milo grabbed her by the hand, pulling her inside. Luckily it was the good hand this time, but unluckily, he nearly pulled her arm out of its socket. Once the elevator doors shut, he let out a breath of relief.

"Please explain more about what is happening. I'm... confused." Lilac said.

"I guess they wouldn't have told you," Milo sighed. "To be fair, you are just another one of their pawns."

"Pawns? I'm not very good at chess."

"No, no, not chess. Well not entirely. There's a lot of strategy, but it's not exactly chess."

"So it's a game? I'm not a fan of board games, but I definitely play a lot of video games."

Milo looked especially annoyed. "NO. It's not a game. OK, you know how earlier I mentioned the River Oak Research Foundation? They are a group of scientists studying something. For awhile, it was harmless... but their most recent project got very out of hand."

Lilac was almost afraid to ask, "what was their most recent project?"

"You figure it out." Milo said as the elevator doors opened. He grabbed her once again by the hand and started pulling her through the hospital until the main doors were just within reach. Then, they were outside.

It was so early that it was dark outside, and still very cold. Lilac realized that she had only been wearing a hospital gown, which would explain why she couldn't stop shivering. It was obvious even to Milo that she was cold, but he didn't care. Yes, escape had been easy, but he'd have to find a way to get back, and before they were out of time.

Just then, he spotted a car. He didn't have the keys, but he could just hotwire it. He wasn't old enough and had no idea how to drive, but that didn't matter. Priorities.

He started to drag Lilac again, but this time she wouldn't budge.

"What are you doing? We're wasting time!" Milo attempted to drag her again, but she stepped back.

"What's going on? W-Why is it so important that we go?"

Milo didn't have time for interrogation, so he decided to answer. "What's going on is mind control, and unless you want everyone in River Oak to go crazy and for your best friend to die, I suggest you get into the car."

"Are you even old enough to drive?"

"No, now can you just get in?"

"What's the magi word?"

"JUST GET IN THE CAR!"

Lilac got in hesitantly and then grumbled, "I was looking for please."

CHAPTER 12

She'd tortured not only a town full of people, but her own child as well. The regret that Amelia had been feeling was almost too much to handle.

Of course Mr. Green had called people in, they planned on taking Lavender to the lab. But was it really worth it? She couldn't help but feel bad, she'd hurt so many people, and all just to pay off some stupid debts. She made herself sick, but it was too late to turn back.

Mrs. Jamison decided that maybe she should have a talk with Lavender. The least she could do was tell the kid what Mr. Green would not.

"What do you want?" It sounded rude, but Lavender didn't care.

"I... wanted to talk to you."

"Oh sure that's what you want! I bet you want to hook me up to wires and see how much you can zap me until I die!" It sounded rude, which Lavender almost never sounded when talking to Mrs. Jamison. It was almost weird talking to an adult that wasn't her father with sarcasm.

"I'm really sorry, but it had to be you, it had to be this town! IT was so isolated it made for the perfect spot!" Mrs. Jamison said.

"Perfect spot for what? What project are you working on?"

Mrs. Jamison looked like she was regretting what she was about to say. "We've been working on a drug that can control people's minds."

"But! How do you control people's minds with a drug?"

"It's quite simple. The drug lowers your ability to think, basically making you a puppet. Some people do have less of a reaction, but it works on almost everyone. One of the downsides is that it can be somewhat addictive and when you stop taking it, it causes hallucinations."

"What, so you've been using me as a puppet this whole time?"

"No, quite the opposite. Since you naturally had less of a reaction, we decided to use you in a different way. We slowly gave you little doses until you work up an immunity to it. But just like some people are less affected by it, some people are more affected. Kind of like Lilac. Lilac was so easy to use...we told her that it needed to be two years for you two to see each other, when really it was so we could build up your immunity, and start to poison the water supply without raising suspicion. Lilac didn't even need a reason why, but she decided to agree and tell you it had to be two years."

"So Lilac and I were your test subjects? What about the town? You brought up the town before."

"Noone in this town is a good person. They're all criminals, debtors, gamblers. Plus this place is so secret, so hidden. And that's why we use the town. We give everyone in the town the drug by putting it in the water. In fact, the day when Lilac cut her hand, we put it in the water supply. We gave it to everyone, and you were the only one not affected. So our immunity worked!"

"This is disgusting," Lavender said.

"I know. I'm sorry."

Milo and Lilac had been driving in silence for the past twenty minutes. Milo had no idea how to drive, and the speeding probably didn't help. He'd almost swerved into a ditch, and then a tree, and then another ditch. Lilac kept somewhat quiet, but he could feel her silently judging him.

"How old are you?" She finally asked. The question caught Milo off guard.

"How old am I? I don't know exactly, I think I'm like 14, 15? Maybe."

Lilac seemed unsatisfied by the answer. "How do you not know how old you are?"

"Look, I grew up in a lab, they probably kept a record, but they don't exactly celebrate birthday parties!" Milo realized what he'd just said and stopped talking. But a little too late.

"You grew up in a lab? You mean you're a test subject?"

"I was," he said, "I was, just like Lavender. And just like you. Me and my sister Ember, that was. But the drug made Ember go crazy, and I started copying the way she was acting, so they gave up on us and tossed us aside. As far as they know, we're dead and Lavender is the only successful subject."

Lilac nodded, but seemed afraid to ask anything more.

Being in the car with an almost stranger was just as awkward for both of them. The drove along in even more silence, it was slightly dark, and the road was mostly deserted. Aside from phone lines, there were only trees. Not once did they see another car go by. It made Lilac realize just how isolated River Oak really was.

Lilac had been tempted to take a nap in the car, but decided against it. She thought about suggesting the radio, but knew there was probably nothing good on. She decided to try to start a conversation. "So... um... They're using Lavender as a test subject?" She realized that was probably a bad question to ask, but she seemingly never knew what to say.

"Not just her, the entire town of River Oak. You especially."

"But they've been mind controlling Lavender?" Lilac was suddenly afraid, what if the Lavender she'd known had only been a test the entire time.

"No. The one being controlled is you. She's the only person besides me who can't be controlled. You are one of the easiest."

Mrs. Jamison couldn't bare it. The look on Lavender's face as she called her disgusting. The knowledge that she made her own child attempt to cut her fingers off. She kept telling herself that she was doing the right thing! But the way that Mr. Green looked right now made her

seriously question all of that. He didn't seem the least bit upset or guilty at all. He seemed to actually enjoy this.

She didn't know why she was doing this, but Amelia found herself grabbing the keys to the handcuffs that restrained her and held her in a chair.

Amelia then grabbed lavender by the arms and, avoiding Mr. Green, quietly led her to the back door.

"Why are you -?" Lavender tried to ask, but Amelia cut her off.

"Go before I change my mind"

Lavender didn't need to be told twice. She sprinted out the back and ran around to the front of the house, where she was met with a wall of fire. Not wanting to get burned, she staggered back, trying to look for a gap where she could pass without getting burned. She spotted a place where the flames were low enough for her to jump over. When she got over, she noticed almost every building had been completely engulfed in flames.

Amelia watched as the flames came closer, beginning to engulf the house. Perhaps it was a divine punishment or karma. The mansion would burn and she along with it.

"Amelia, we need to leave, this place is burning! Get Lavender and let's go!"

Amelia didn't budge. Mr. Green was confused. He grabbed her arm, "Amelia, do you hear-" she slapped his hand away.

"There's no leaving now," she said.

"But what about the project? The money? The greater good? We must have here! We're the only ones who've mastered the use of the drug!"

"Then let it die with us" she said. "No one needs to know of such an evil thing"

Lavender walked cautiously down the street. She heard footsteps walking up behind her quietly. They were muffled, but they were there she spun around to see Ember.

"Hey!" she said loudly, "you should get out of here!"

Ember paid no attention to her and kept walking forward. Lavender realized that she was walking right towards her. When she got close enough, ember sprung on her with surprise strength, wrestling her to the ground and leaving her pinned down.

"This town, this town is irredeemable. These people are bad, bad. They deserve no second chance. No, no, no they don't!" Ember began spouting nonsense frantically. She gripped her fingers very tightly around Lavender's neck, but LAVender could just barely breathe.

"W-What? Get-Off-Me!" Lavender said, or at least tried to.

Ember took her hands off her neck but kept Lavender pinned to the ground.

"This town is a bad place. We watched it burn, and fix this place. You can't always fix what's been broken, but you can scrap it and start entirely new!"

Lavender started to realize just how crazy Ember sounded. "You-You did this?"

Ember nodded with a crazy smile and held up a box of matches.

Lavender tried with all of her strength to force Ember to let her go. She waited until Embers grip on her arms loosened to shove her hands off and sprint away. Ember was surprised by this and she tried to chase after Lavender, but she wasn't fast enough and gave up. She threw herself to her knees.

"Come back! DON'T LEAVE ME!" She wailed, but Lavender didn't turn around.

Lavender sprinted as fast as she could. She didn't even know what direction she was going anymore. She had to slow down., she could barely see with all of the smoke. Her eyes stung. She also could barely breathe. She began coughing and fell to the ground, still coughing. Her vision began to blur, so she curled up on the ground. He eyes were filled with tears, but whether it was the smoke or the hopelessness, she couldn't tell.

CHAPTER 13

Milo pulled up the car, only to see the town on fire.

"HOLY CRAP!" Lilac said, but then she looked slightly embarrassed, " sorry, I shouldn't use bad words."

"You really didn't," Milo said, getting out of the car. He had some far worse words going through his head at the moment. "Ok, here's the plan. We find Lavender and then we leave."

"What about any other survivors?"

"It's unlikely that there are any," Milo said grimly.

"Then what makes you think Lavender survived?"

"Nothing, but we should at least look, right? Look, no going into buildings, but if you happen to see any survivors, you can help them, OK?" Milo said.

That seemed to brighten Lilac's mood a little. So they walked straight into a burning town. They walked around shouting for Lavender, but got no reply. They walked all around, doing their best to avoid the fires. They kept on calling, over and over, but each time the only answer was the crackling flames.

They were both beginning to lose hope when Lilac spotted something in the distance and started sprinting towards it.

Milo shouted "KEY! WAIT!" and began sprinting after her.

When he caught up to her, he saw Lilac kneeling on the ground next to Lavender. Lavender was just gaining consciousness as she opened her eyes and tried to sit up.

"Lilac!" she said squinting.

"Yes I'm here, and Milo's here too" she pointed at Milo.

"Yes, and this place is on fire" Milo said, motioning to the flames that surrounded them.

"The fire... Ember started this fire," Lavender said.

Milo looked surprised, "where is she? Is she with you?"

Lavender shook her head, "No, she tried to pin me down, I ran away."

"Should we go look for her?" asked Lilac.

Milo looked away, "No... let's just... let's just get Lavender out of here."

"You want to leave your sister?" Lilac sounded genuine, but Milo ignored it.

"She's not even my real sister. Just someone who was like my sister, but something went wrong. She hadn't been the same since. It's better this way, trust me." Milo didn't truly believe that, but he hoped she'd made it away safely. He didn't hope too much though.

Lavender opened her eyes and sat up. She'd been lying in the back seat of a car. She could see in the front seats was Lilac, and some kid she'd felt like she knew but she'd forgotten his name...

She realized the boy in the front looked like he'd been crying, and then all at once, the memories hit her.

"I'm sorry about your sister. It was my fault, I could've stayed near her..." Lavender almost wanted to cry, but she kept her composure. Her voice did crack a bit though, which she found very annoying.

"It's not your fault. She was slowly going insane anyway. Plus, it's still possible she survived. I am the one who said to leave without looking. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine." Milo said, though he almost sounded angry.

In the passenger seat, Lilac murmured something in her sleep, and then shifted around slightly. Lavender noticed that she still had bandaging on her hand.

"So, what's the plan now, Milo?"

"We forget any of this happened, we get fake names, we live somewhere else."

"Oh yeah, that's reasonable"

"River Oak doesn't even exist, remember? Plus we don't want the organization to find us." Milo said. This seemed rather stupid to Lavender, but she had no other ideas.

She was only thirteen, there's no way she could get a job, or learn to survive while also hiding from an organization, especially one full of geniuses.

Then she had an idea.

"I know one person who can help us, but the problem is she's hiding, and I haven't talked to her in almost a year."

"And who are we looking for?" Milo said skeptically.

"My mom, well my adoptive mother," Lavender almost couldn't believe she was saying this.

Milo looked at her. "I cannot believe you said that. I know where your mom is."

She stared at him "really?" she started to feel hopeful.

"Yes. She's the one who told me and Ember where to find you!"

For the first time in awhile, Lavender felt hope of seeing her mother. But she also, suddenly felt sick. She didn't quite understand why, shouldn't she be happy?

Whatever, she just pushed the bad thoughts aside and tried to fall asleep before the motion sickness set in.

But she didn't sleep very well, she was bombarded with constant nightmares. She realized why she felt so weird, she hadn't taken the drug in a while, and even if she started, she'd have been immune to it anyway.

Now, she'd have to live with the nightmarish hallucinations. She didn't want anyone to worry, so she quietly curled up in the back, and tried again to fall asleep.