

Prologue

In every lifetime, there is a moment. A moment so clear, so profoundly unique that it stands out against billions of other moments. When you find a moment such as this one, pay extra close attention to it. It will contain something that defines you in the future.

“Are you certain she’s the one?” Lily whispered.

Frost replied softly, “Pretty sure, she even looks a little like Freja. How old do you think she is? Four, maybe five-years-old?”

From the playground, came something remarkable. A duplicate of the child they’d come to see plopped herself ungracefully onto the grass beside her twin.

Grey remarked, “This is quite the unexpected little glitch, isn’t it? What does this mean? How is this even possible?”

The two were mirror images of each other. Frost replied, “It’s not possible.”

Lily glanced at Frost and whispered, “This definitely complicates things.”

One of the freckle-faced little girls noticed the three Ankh watching. She sprang to her feet, raced over to the fence and stood on her tippy toes. With a giant grin, she stuck her chubby little fingers through the rungs of the fence and squeaked, “Do you want to come in and play?”

Lily gushed, “Aren’t you the most adorable little thing in the whole wide world.”

“What’s your name, delightful little creature?” Grey asked with his Aussie accent.

“I’m not a thing or a creature. I’m a kid. My name is Kayn, and that’s my sister Chloe,” she pointed a tiny finger adorned with messy sparkle nail polish at her twin.

The scrappy child standing at the fence had sand on her lovely frilly white dress, grass in her hair and a frog sticker on her cheek. She radiated joy and the blissful innocence of childhood. Her twin sat up and glared at them. Chloe was clearly not going to be the one out of the two abducted by a random stranger.

Frost was standing there beaming like a fool, so captivated by the scrappy child standing in front of him that he couldn't even speak.

"You guys look like movie stars," Kayn gushed, and then turned her attention to her hand. "I have nail polish on, see," she exclaimed. Her beautiful eyes gleamed with pride as she displayed her wiggling fingers for the rest to see.

"Lovely," Lily appraised. Just as a little boy with a mess of dark curls came running up to the fence and grabbed Kayn's arm.

He glared at the group, leaned over and whispered in her ear assertively, "Chloe says you're not supposed to talk to strangers."

The little girl stated, "Chloe's not the boss of me." She then grasped the fence firmly and stuck her face right against it with her little upturned nose sticking right through to the other side.

Blown away by the feisty, spirited child, Frost touched one of the little girl's dainty fingers through the fence. He met her gaze, marvelling at the innocence and vibrant intensity that shone back through the chain link barrier. His expression changed briefly as he whispered to her under his breath, "It's important you become strong." He touched the tip of her nose with his finger gently.

This is not a Fairy tale. This is a Nightmare . . .

Chapter 1

The Moments Before She Sleeps

The humming of Kayn's blood as it coursed through her veins seemed to sing along to the steady, almost tribal beat of her feet as they pounded rhythmically into the dirt. A veil of earth flowed behind her. She resembled a flaxen-haired angel attempting to outrun a cloud. The dust seemed to follow her for a moment or two longer than it should with not one whisper of wind in the afternoon air. A smile spread across her lips. *Her heart was overflowing with too much joy to be contained beneath a serious competitive demeanour.*

In a moment of clarity, Kayn noticed Kevin wasn't sitting in the grass watching her train. She could picture him rushing to his locker and fumbling with the lock while attempting to keep the facade going. *She wasn't stupid. She didn't really believe he enjoyed watching her run around a track. There was a method to his madness. Her best friend was madly in love with her twin sister. He had been addicted to the mere sight of her since kindergarten.* To anyone else this would make no sense but Kayn understood. *She was Kevin's friend. Chloe was his fantasy.* In her vision of why he was late, he'd been caught in a swarm of students as they squished through the doorway into the gym, shoved up against the wall and his books fell out of his backpack. She found herself laughing aloud as she ran; for thoughts of him always brought a smile to her face. His organizational skills had always left something to be desired. After taking a moment to collect his papers, he would zip up his bag and continue his quest for his moment in the presence of her twin, the always unattainable Chloe Brighton. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him as he raced up the hill and unceremoniously plopped himself down in the grass next to her

school bag. *Things were as they should be.* As she rounded the corner kicking up dust like a champ, he was fiddling with his cell. She knew he was timing her next lap. She flashed past him in a cloud of dust. He smiled at her through the haze.

Her body was lean and freckled from daily exposure to the sun, and her skin glinted with sparkles. Kayn loved coconut sparkle tanning spray. She could see it on her clenched fists each time they flashed by her line of sight. She was a girl with many strange little rituals on her daily to do list. At the beginning of her run, she imagined that she looked quite magical, glittering in the sun, but not by the end. By the end of her training, the glitter tanning spray would cause the track's dust to stick to her whole body in a rather comical way. She would always end up looking like she'd spent her afternoon rolling in it, instead of running on it.

Kayn was in a zen place, appreciating the warmth of the sun's rays whispering across her skin. She rounded the corner kicking up another cloud of dust to outrun just as a jolt of electricity surged through her. Adrenaline rippled a winding path beneath her flesh, igniting her soul, setting it afire with insurmountable pleasure. In this moment, it always felt like she'd been given a gift or anointment of power. She hit the straight stretch again experiencing such transcendent euphoria, she felt baptized by the sweat trickling down her forehead. Alive in a way only a runner could comprehend, every nerve ending was humming, *Faster, Kayn. Go faster.* She was an athlete born to push the limits of her body. Runners were a breed of their own with both incredible days and horrible while training, but it was always worth it. "Don't Call Me Baby," by Madison Avenue was cranked in her ears. She kept pace to the beat, feeling powerful and strong. Kayn made eye contact and grinned as she passed her best friend, acknowledging his presence. Kevin was listening to his music, plucking long green strands of grass out of the ground. He glanced up as she approached and overzealously waved, displaying a giant charming toothy grin. He'd done this since kindergarten and it never failed to induce laughter. She acknowledged his presence by shaking her head and smiling as she slowed her pace. Her heart thumped wildly in defiance to her now walking feet. Kayn licked the sweat from her lips, tasting her salty reward. With a track dust covered hand, she wiped the sweat off her forehead and casually dried her hands on her shorts. She noticed the streaks and wondered if there was

also smeared dirt on her brow. Kayn turned in one fluid movement to greet Kevin, whose grassy scent signalled his arrival at her side. His giant grin told her that her face was most certainly covered in dirt, but he didn't mention it because he was too busy cheering for her. *You'd think she'd just won the Olympics or something equally spectacular. The sight of him cheering with no sound to the music in her ears was more than a little bit adorable.* Kayn yanked out one of her earbuds.

"Holy crap," Kevin yelled in her face. "That's your best time this year. You are going to kick serious butt at the finals next month."

"You know my earbuds are out. I can hear you." Kayn hinted.

"Oh, you think you're pretty cool because you're fast. Well, young lady, plenty of people are fast, but how many people can do this?" Kevin retorted.

He did a peculiar dance involving a twirl and a running man while laughing at her mortification. "Please, stop," she sighed as she surveyed the track and surrounding area for witnesses. Kayn was an attractive girl but had never known the perfection of her twin sister Chloe. *It did stand to reason that she could easily alter her appearance, to match her identical sibling, but she didn't care about superficial things. She was the socially awkward version, and she was fine with that on most days.* Her naturally curly, wheat coloured hair was up in a messy ponytail and she was slick with perspiration as she strolled away from the track knowing she was in desperate need of a shower. Kevin was staring at her with a strange look on his face. *He'd often told her she resembled an Amazonian sized forest nymph. She knew it was probably because she was tall and didn't care if she was covered in dirt. She had never been sure if his observation was meant as a compliment.* He was jogging beside her now attempting to keep up with her long, athletic strides.

Her best friend used to be the most adorable little boy on the planet, but there was a point where she sensed he had stopped feeling adorable. She'd comically surpassed him in height by the end of seventh grade, this was a complication their mothers hadn't anticipated while plotting their nuptials in second grade. Kevin had been in a painfully awkward, acne covered stage for at least three years now. He was still adorable, although possibly only to her. *However, she did notice that his skin was looking clear today.* Kayn grinned as he valiantly attempted to run as fast as she was

walking. Kayn's affliction was different, she was invisible. *To her this was a good thing. It was her preference to blend into the crowd.*

"You are awesome. I mean that, and I'm totally not saying it to butter you up, so you'll put a good word in with your sister," Kevin bantered with a grin.

She loved him to death, but she'd been letting him down easy for like ten years now. She gave Kevin a pat on the shoulder and flung her arm around him as they slowed down to a casual stroll. She sweetly replied, "There's just this one problem, muffin. My sister is way too advanced for you."

"Right...That's what you say to all of the guys stalking your twin," he countered with a grin at her cleverly creative way of calling her sister slutty.

Kayn choked on a laugh and sparred, "Yes, as a matter of fact, it is exactly what I say. I was forced to come up with one token line I use for everyone, it's a time saver.

Kevin's face crinkled into a dimpled grin. He shook his head, feigning distaste as he flirtatiously responded, "I can't believe after all these years, I'm merely a number to you."

His attempted flirtation was cute and perhaps she would have been a little flattered if it was meant for her. Kayn gave Kevin a friendly pat on the shoulder and said, "Just do yourself a favour; take a hint. She's not right for you." She slapped his butt. He yelped and jumped away from the sting of her hand. She teased, "At least have the decency to warn me if you ever find yourself wanting to wear my sister as a skin coat so I can try to get you some help." He shot her a dirty look. Sarcastically, she added, "How hard can it be to arrange an intervention or a creepy exorcism or something in your honour. I would hate to have to visit my best friend in a padded cell somewhere." She winked and waited for his comeback.

"You should have your own comedy show," he taunted.

"It'd be hilarious if it wasn't the truth," Kayn challenged. Her twin, Chloe Brighton, was the polished version of her. She was stylish, popular and always the picture of perfection. Chloe was described with words like captivating, stunning, and provocative. Kayn, on the other hand, was blandly characterized as cute, funny, and a good runner. It didn't seem fair; however, she loved her sister with blind acceptance. They'd always been close but didn't hang out in the same crowd. To be honest, Kayn had no crowd at all. It was just her and Kevin. The only boys who had shown an interest in her were usually after her sister, Chloe.

Kayn, being less sophisticated, would always fall for their games. She would think foolish thoughts like, *maybe this time he likes me?* They'd chat on the phone for a while and inevitably ask to come over to hang out or do homework. Kayn would agree and right when her heart began to flutter with the romantic possibilities of a goodnight kiss or how incredible it would be to have a boyfriend, it would happen. They would make their intentions obvious by saying something like, "Because we are such good friends could you introduce me to your sister, Chloe?"

Friends, was an uncomplicated word Kayn despised from a young age because of Chloe. It felt like the wind from a breath that would blow out every candle of hope she'd kept lit inside of her heart her whole life to date. Kayn would be blatantly lying if she said the constantly repeating scenario hadn't bred resentment. Still, she never let it show. Not once had she freaked out at her for stealing imaginary boyfriends or for simply being morally bankrupt. She'd learned at a young age that her twin didn't adhere to the same ethical, moral codes everyone else followed. Kayn had this thing called a conscience which included guilt and a little voice in her ear, repeating, *Don't do it*, until she chose to listen. She was certain Chloe's inner voice urged, *Do it*, because there was no need for sentiment or morality in Chloe's mind. The self-contained universe revolving around her was simply amazing. One could stand with mouth agape for hours listening to stories of mini catastrophes her wombmate caused during a 24-hour period. It was like she was protected in her own little snow globe and life's chaos merely surrounded her. Occasionally someone stirred up her water, but it swirled around her like everything else did, never really touching her or causing her to lose a second of control. She was unaffected by the world around her, unwavering through life's currents. *She couldn't get mad at the boys who fell for her, she truly believed her sister had the mythical powers of a siren. Chloe was alluring, enticing and seemed to have catnip for men on her somewhere. How had the game ended up in one of the babies and not the other? They were in the same womb for nine months. It wasn't fair.* Kevin's opinion was the only one she valued. He understood the power her sister held. They'd joke about it on a regular basis, but as soon as Chloe was within a ten-foot radius, even he couldn't tell you his name. It infuriated her to no end. She stopped walking and looked back. *It felt like she was being watched.* Kayn shivered as an icy breeze passed through her, fluttered through the grass, carried on up the hill

and stirred up the dust on the track. *That was weird? She just needed a rest. She must have overworked herself today.* Kayn shook her head and looked at the trees surrounding the track. *They were completely still? A random cold spot on a swelteringly hot day was a little strange.* She turned her attention back to her friend, attempting to hush the nagging voice in her mind that kept repeating, *Something's wrong.*

"Someone walk over your grave?" Kevin whispered in her ear, breaking the silence.

Kayn smiled at Grandma Winnie's quote. She always said that if someone shivered in her presence. If you sneezed, she'd say a ghost passed through you. If Kayn was called out for shivering, her retort was always, "But I'm not dead Granny." The elderly woman's response was usually something wise and ominous like, if only you knew how irrelevant that word is. Kevin's grandmother seemed to have a direct line to the spirit world and nearly all their random chats were more than a wee bit creepy. They'd spend hours talking about dreams. She was a quirky, warm, witty woman who treasured her from day one. Kayn was a faithful member of team Granny because she, unlike the rest of the planet despised her twin. Winnie couldn't even breathe when Chloe was in the room. She'd pretend to gasp for oxygen, making foul stench related declarations, believable enough to cause her twin to smell her own armpits. Chloe, being completely void of respect for her elders or pretty much anybody else, would refer to her as a crazy old bat or a witch. Quite often, Granny Winnie would call Chloe out on an evil deed or two like she'd read her mind.

The clear blue-sky changed in a matter of moments from clear to a powder of fluffy white clouds. *Strange weather.* Her pulse raced, all she could smell was the scent of fresh cut grass and pine needles from the trees lining the far side of the track. It struck her as odd. *They were quite a distance from the trees.* She heard the amplified sound of the grass rustling underfoot and felt uneasy. Snapping back to reality as Kevin's feet came into her line of sight, she looked his way, raised her brows and pointed to his untied shoelaces. He bent in front of her and tied up his shoes. Kayn began to speak as if she were reading his obituary. "I can see the paper now; it would read something like this: Kevin Smith was a wonderful boy, so smart and good looking but a little clumsy. Had he only tied his shoes he wouldn't have fallen down the stairs and found himself impaled on a janitor's broom. Remember kids. Tie your shoes. Safety first."

“Have I told you lately that you’re an asshole?” he jouted as she finished the latest version of his obituary.

She didn’t have a comeback just a nasty case of the heebie jeebies. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Kayn glanced behind her and then from side to side, unable to shake the unnerving feeling that something was coming. There was a hollow ache in her chest and a strange sensation that lingered each time she swallowed.

Kevin leaned in and whispered in her ear, “Your sketchy behaviour this afternoon is beginning to creep me out.

His warm breath in her ear caused her to shiver again and she had the strangest urge to kiss him square on the lips. *It must be low blood sugar.* She replied, “No... Just over tired I guess.” She glanced back again.

“Stop looking behind us, you’re freaking me out,” Kevin asserted.

She shook her head and giggled, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me today, I’m sorry.”

He twirled around in a circle and added, “Nobody is coming, I swear.”

“I know,” Kayn answered. “I’m feeling a little off. Maybe I’m coming down with something?”

“We should be more worried about your creepy behaviour causing you a nasty case of whiplash.” Kevin chuckled as he flung his arm around her shoulder and gave her a buddy-like squeeze. “You should go have a shower, muffin; your kind of sweaty and nasty. What do you do, cover yourself in honey before you go for a run?” Kevin chuckled as he smelled his hands and groaned, “Ewww, that’s not honey.”

Kayn sparred, “There you go talking dirty, literally; it’s kind of hot, all this talk of toxins and waste.”

“What was your boyfriends’ name again?” he innocently, asked.

As they started walking again, she gave him a solid shove in jest. “You should call up your invisible girlfriend and ask her what her name is love monkey,” she jeered and winked.

“I have a girlfriend. Her name is Chloe. She just doesn’t know it yet,” he teased.

Ugh, he couldn’t help himself. She understood this, but he knew constant talk of her sister irritated her to no end. It was his easy smackdown in a comedy standoff. “Do you know what the difference between you and a stalker is?” she responded sweetly.

“Do tell, oh wise and mighty stalking connoisseur,” he sighed.

“It's whether or not you're wearing my sister's stolen thong underwear right now,” she teased. Kayn wrestled with Kevin while attempting a stealth look down the back of his shorts.

“Hey, hey... simmer down. I swear, I'll yell rape. I'm going commando. Pulling my shorts off isn't a great idea,” he laughed as he fended her off.

“Like you could handle me,” she chuckled. Kayn cringed with pain as she shifted her heavy bag to her other shoulder. It always had twenty pounds of books in it. *She couldn't memorize her locker combination. She was utterly horrible with numbers. That was her excuse. The real reason being she'd be obliged to speak to the vapid girls that hung out around her locker. She liked to be left alone in her own little world.*

Kevin grabbed her heavy bag off her as he added, “Hey, I'll have you know I've been going commando since my first wedgie in fifth grade. Once they grab for underwear and don't find any, they back right off.”

Doubling over in a fit of giggles, Kayn chuckled, “I honestly don't doubt that for a second.”

“You learn lots of nifty little things to help you manoeuvre through geekdom unscathed if you're crafty, you know,” he said as they began walking again.

Kevin was carrying both of their bags. He was trying to be a gentleman and that was adorable, but she also knew how heavy her bag was. She smiled as she snatched her bag back. *These moments always made her wonder if they'd ever be something more. Would he ever make a move? She wasn't sure if he had any. If he ever tried something, she'd probably just assume it was a joke.* He caught her staring and winked. *What was she even thinking? She must be hormonal today.*

He nudged her and teased, “So, about that Chloe thing we were discussing earlier. Is it really so impossible?”

With a disapproving wince, she patiently scolded, “Stop talking about Chloe, I'm sick of it.”

“Shush,” he responded, placing a finger over his pursed lips. “You know not to speak of her voodoo powers.”

She grinned. *It was the truth. The phrase, Chloe has a boyfriend was easily comparable to cursing out loud in the Brighton house. Her sister ran like she was on fire from every boy she'd ever dated. Seemingly normal guys would lose their marbles. The fear of losing her would make their sanity*

unfold like a reversal of an origami swan. It would start with a vehicle outside of the house in the middle of the night and escalate. Once Chloe grew annoyed by their obsessive behaviour, they'd break up and no matter how wonderful they were, things always went dark. It wasn't just those she dated. Random guys would break into the house and steal objects belonging to her. After a couple trips the police station, where full-grown men were fawning all over her, her parents understood what she'd always known, Voodoo Powers. "The last guy she broke up with went crazy. Let's talk about something else." *The last thing she needed was to be caught gossiping by one of Chloe's minions.* They looked at each other and giggled. A stinging slap on Kayn's butt made her jump. There stood her infamous moderately evil twin. The living breathing cover girl commercial was gracing them with her badass presence.

With a slight glance, Chloe acknowledged Kevin's presence, he turned ten shades of red like she'd whispered something dirty in his ear. *He's completely pathetic.* Kayn shook her head.

Chloe threw an arm around her, then shoved her away saying, "Ewww, yuck, gross, you're all sweaty. Listen, backstabbing witch with a B, I'm not feeling that hot today. I'm on my way home. Do you need a ride?" Chloe donned a show stopping smile.

It was like her sister's life was an endless beauty pageant where she was always prepared for a picture. Her show pony offspring was sarcastic ninety-nine percent of the time so Kayn rarely took her insults seriously, "I'm all good. I'm going for a shower, then to Kevin's for dinner."

Chloe kissed her cheek, grimaced and whispered, "Yes, go have that shower." She dramatically sighed, "I'm grounded again for no good reason."

"Shocking," Kevin mumbled.

She suspected her sister purposely got grounded to have a forced break from social responsibilities. If medals were doled out in the Olympics for groundings achieved in a three-year period, she'd have a gold medal.

"Bye Kevy!" Chloe sang as she flounced off.

"Voodoo powers," Kevin whispered.

"I heard that you little stinker," Chloe sparred.

As they strolled away, Kayn casually prodded, "I bet when you thought of sexy couple nicknames little stinker wasn't one of them." *She couldn't help it, she was on a roll.* He socked her arm.

She spun around and accused, "I can't believe you'd do that." Kayn rubbed her arm pretending to be upset.

"I didn't actually hurt you, did I?" Kevin whispered right away.

He knew he'd been had, when her serious look crumbled into a grin. She chuckled, "No hitting women," and smoked his arm twice as hard.

"What woman? I don't see a woman? Oh, you mean you?" he countered rubbing his arm, pretending to search for one.

"I will butt you out like a cigarette, little man!" She made a fist, joking around.

Kevin glared at her. *Oh, no. He had that expression. Game over. Whoops...She'd gone too far.* It was all fun and games until she made one too many short jokes.

"I'm not little," he exclaimed and stomped away, towards the facility.

"How about vertically challenged?" Kayn innocently replied. *She was digging her own grave and knew it. He could argue for hours.*

"I might look short to an Amazonian like you," he countered.

"Touché," Kayn admitted, grinning. *He had to stop, the laughter she'd been suppressing would escape.*

"I'm still growing," he complained with a pitchy voice.

Kayn doubled over laughing. *She couldn't help it.*

"Can you please be done laughing now," Kevin said as they walked into the fitness center.

"I'll see you in fifteen minutes, sexy," she whispered, sultry as a porn star. Grinning as she shoved on the door to the change room.

"Quit mocking me Amazonian!" he shouted dramatically.

His last joking retort echoed in the concrete and tile room. The cool floor soothed her aching feet. It had only taken her a few months to wear out another pair of running shoes. Her mom would kill her if she asked for another pair this year. She dropped her runners. The sound of her shoes landing on the tile, echoed and repeated a few times making it sound like someone dropped another pair. *She was alone.* Kevin was waiting for her but there was no hurry. He was probably having a coffee and ogling the girl's swim team. *He was fine.* Kayn stripped down and gazed at her reflection. She pulled her hair out of her ponytail; it fell in damp loose ringlets down her bare shoulders. She tilted her head, posing seductively. Her face was freckled from hours of training in the sun. In the winter her freckles disappeared, and her skin was porcelain white. *Maybe, she should*

start wearing makeup to school? She could look just like Chloe if she wanted to. Kayn sucked in her cheeks, plastered a giant pageant style smile on her face and scrunched up her nose. *She enjoyed being dorky and a little bit weird. It would take far too much effort to pull off her sister's level of perfection. She didn't need to be perfect. She would wither and fade if she had to live her life under a microscope. She did prefer to let her strange roam free.* Her stomach cramped. She stopped and glanced over her shoulder at her reflection in the mirror one last time on her way to the shower. The conversation she'd had with her sister flashed through her memory. *She quite often had sympathy pains when her twin wasn't feeling good. Chloe was feeling sick today, that's all this was.* Kayn pulled aside the plastic curtain and turned on the water, it began to tap dance against the bottom of the stall. When it was just the right temperature, she stood under the spray and smiled as the water beat against her weary exercise savaged muscles. She lathered herself up with lovely scented pump soap and started humming a few bars of her favourite running song. Just as she began to let go and sing the words, she heard the door open. Feeling awkward, she silently rinsed herself off, stepped out of the shower and started towel drying her hair. She didn't hear any footsteps and there appeared to be nobody else in the change room with her... *Weird?* As she passed by the mirror again, she glanced at her reflection, wondered if Chloe ever wanted to be more like her and blew off that nutty idea.

She was only five minutes younger than her sister, but her twin had always acted five years older. *She had no voodoo powers and all she ever felt around boys was undeniably awkward. Maybe she should ask Chloe to teach her something...anything? It would be nice if someone asked her on a date before she was eighty. Kevin's obsession with Chloe was really beginning to irritate her. Having feelings for him wouldn't be a great move friendship-wise. There it was again...that ominous word... friends.*

Kayn dried herself off, feeling the moisture from her damp hair, trailing a river down her spine. As she dressed, her train of thought kept travelling back to the possibility that she might have feelings for her best friend. *What was with her thoughts today?* She grabbed her bag, hoping Kevin hadn't reached the point of being epically frustrated while waiting for her. She forced open the door with an over-exaggerated grunt and saw him sitting on the railing waiting patiently. He was looking up at the sky with his mouth agape in a comical way. Kayn walked up and teased, "Trying to catch flies?"

“Always,” Kevin sparred with quick wit and a dimpled grin

“What are we looking at?” Kayn asked as she gazed at the heavens, mimicking his open-mouthed awe.

“Come on, I’ll show you,” Kevin laughed. He took her hand as they strolled to the field.

She’d lived this moment a thousand times. Kevin sprawled in the grass, and she did the same. “Oh, wow. I get it. Look at how fast the clouds are moving. I noticed it earlier...Weird. Maybe there’s a storm coming?” Kayn whispered while observing the sky from her spot in the plush cushion of greenery. Suddenly, a sharp pain seared through her core. She grabbed her stomach, sucked in a deep breath and gasped, “What the hell was that?”

“You okay, Brighton?” Kevin asked as he sat up and reached for her.

Kayn winced again as she doubled over, her insides afire with strange penetrating pain. Kevin placed his hand on her midriff, and the pain disappeared as quickly as it had begun.

He looked at her and stated, “I bet you need a big glass of water and something to eat?”

She shook off the feeling she was missing something and stood up. *It was probably just a twin thing, but he was right, she’d skipped lunch. She was just dehydrated and hungry.* With the pain gone, she replied, “Yeah, that’s probably it.”

“You skipped lunch again, didn’t you?” he scolded with a disapproving look.

She admitted, “Guilty as charged, I do believe that I did not eat lunch today.” *There was a simple explanation for the sharp undefined pain that she had experienced.* She was often practicing at lunchtime and would forget to eat. Shivers crawled up her spine. She felt the urge to look behind her. Concerned, she spun around, trying to shake off the uncomfortable sensation that had been plaguing her all afternoon. Her internal dialogue was still whispering, *be careful.* She shook off the anxiety. *It’s just low blood sugar or the heat.* As they strolled home, they stopped by the turn off to Lakeshore Drive. She recalled the last horror movie they watched. *It had taken place at a lake. It was probably just a mix of a bunch of things. Low blood sugar, heat exhaustion, and recalling a horror movie was enough to make anyone feel a bit wonky.* She laughed at her overactive imagination.

Kevin yanked a handful of grass from the earth, inhaled its fragrance and ominously declared, “Just what I thought.”

“What’s that?” she enquired, knowing he was about to make a joke about the movie.

“It’s hillbilly urine, we’d better get our tasty selves’ home,” he announced with dramatic flair. Kevin ominously pointed in the direction of his house, proving if there was ever doubt, he had no acting chops.

“Let’s get out of here you geek,” Kayn chuckled. She sighed as she slowly shook her head.

He grinned at her, posed like at the start line of a race and added, “It’s got to be close to five, I’m sure dinner’s already on the table.”

They looked at each other, eyeing up the competition before simultaneously grinning. They sprinted through the field before the trails. They’d been doing this ritual race home since they were allowed out of their yards as children. Kevin had always been a sneaky opponent because there was no possible way to beat her in a race without trickery involved. He shoved her as per usual, and she fell with a gentle thud into the grass. “Cheater!” She hollered after him as he ran away cackling. Sprawling dramatically in the grass grinning, she gave him a head start before spitting out freshly mowed grass, scrambling to her feet and beginning her pursuit. She was right on his tail even with his rule stretching head start. She slowed her pace. *It was good for him to win sometimes.* Kevin let out an obnoxiously raucous cheer as he vaulted over the fence to his yard. He raised his arms in fanfare and took a bow. *He’d never won graciously in their ten years of friendship. She’d take one for the team to see him this happy.* They entered Kevin’s house. Her stomach grumbled loudly as the delicious aroma of his mom’s cooking filled her senses.

Mrs. Smith greeted her with an enormous loving bear hug. She raised her brows and brushed the grass off Kayn’s back while addressing them both, “You two are absolutely covered in grass. Brush yourselves off outside and go wash your hands. Make it quick, we’re all at the table ready to eat.”

They brushed the grass off each other outside and raced for the bathroom. *This time he legitimately beat her.* When Kevin came out, he gave her a playful shove as he passed. She stepped into the washroom, glanced into the mirror and giggled as she picked strands of grass out of her hair. She quickly washed her hands. *How wrong must it look when two teenagers of the opposite sex show up for dinner covered in grass? Well, anyone else, with them platonic wrestling would be completely normal. If her dad walked in and they were wrestling*

on her bed, he wouldn't even flinch. Kayn wandered into the dining room and sat at her usual spot. *Kevin's family mirrored her own. They were always cracking jokes and chatting loudly about their day.* She loved everything about the Smith house, from the mismatched frames filled with family photos in the dining room to the outdated green shag carpet in the den. The ambiance was completed by a cozy couch set with two fluffy lounging felines. Kevin's granny sat at the head of the table. Her wispy white hair was even more wildly untamed than usual. She'd always been able to envision Kevin's grandmother as a beautiful younger woman because of the black and white picture of her in the hall. Beautiful, didn't encompass Granny in her youth, for she had been enchanting. She had rich crimson curls and exquisitely structured cheekbones. There was power and immeasurable strength of spirit in her eyes. Yet, physically, she looked as thin and frail as a newborn fawn. She hadn't been the picture of pin up perfection, but she had an unexplainable quality that made you curious. You wanted to know more about her. There were thousands of untold stories in her eyes. She was a girl with many secrets. The chapters were written in the creases of her smile. Granny always wore lipstick ten shades too dark for her teeth that were worn and yellowed from age. *She always seemed to have something stuck in them.* If she got some false teeth it would make her look a decade younger, but she didn't seem to care in the least. *She was famished.* Kayn devoured her meal. Finishing it quickly, she reached for another bun. *Granny Winnie had been staring at her for a good fifteen minutes and it didn't even look like she'd blinked. She hadn't even attempted to touch her meal. Was she alright? She hadn't spoken a word. She was usually talking everyone's ears off.* Smiling widely, Kayn enquired, "How was your day, Granny?"

Granny Winnie whispered, "You know something's amiss, don't you?" Her eyes widened. She covered her mouth with both hands like she'd said something naughty.

Granny was always saying ominous random things, and this wasn't even the creepiest thing this week. Kayn took a bite of her bun, unsure of how to respond.

"Kayn had stomach pain earlier. She forgot to eat lunch. It was probably that." Kevin answered for her.

Kevin's mom scolded, "You are going to make yourself sick, honey. You need to eat properly!"

She nodded her silent agreement.

“Perhaps,” Granny Winnie replied.

Kayn looked at her and she glanced down at her plate. *Granny looked a little ill today.* It felt like she had more to say, but she remained silent. Feeling eyes on her, Kayn peered up from her dinner.

With unmasked sadness, Granny warned, “Always listen to your instincts, child. They are never wrong.”

She’d been saying that for years so she brushed it off. Kayn didn’t really want to go home but they’d reached the age where boy-girl sleepovers were frowned upon. As she was preparing to leave, Granny made her way over, embraced her so tightly she couldn’t breathe and whispered in Kayn’s ear, “You survive this night. You fight hard.”

There would be at least a three-hour-long conversation about spiritual things, if she asked her to explain what she meant. She didn’t have the mental steam left inside of her to go through the motions today. Kayn excused herself and went to the bathroom. She called home; it went to voicemail. *Chloe was probably on the phone. Heaven forbid she had a crisis and needed to talk to her parents.* Chloe also had a cell, but she was always grounded from it, and they still allowed her to talk on the landline for hours, which meant nobody else could get through. She tried her mom’s cell, knowing she was going to be a few minutes late and left a message when there was no answer. She shoved her phone back in her pocket and tip-toed down the hall to Kevin’s room. *She had time for a prank to liven up his evening.* When she reappeared, Kevin’s mom handed her a bag of farm fresh eggs for her family from the chickens in their backyard. His dad offered to drive her because it was already dark.

The drive was uneventful. The same old scenery flashed by her window. As they pulled up in front of her house, she leaned across the seat and thanked Kevin’s dad with a hug. She opened the door and took a deep breath. *The air smelled like wet cherry blossoms. It must have been raining while they were eating dinner.* She stepped out of the car into a puddle and twisted her ankle. *Of course.* With a soaked foot, eggs and school bag in hand, she hobbled up the steep driveway towards the front door.

She lived in a wooded somewhat isolated area. Normally she would have darted from Kevin’s dad’s car into the house, but her ankle stung each time she put pressure on it. As she came closer, she noticed the door was partially open. *It was a little windy out and quite normal for the door to be unlocked. Maybe it was left ajar*

and opened by the wind? She heard tires on gravel and turned just in time to see Kevin's father driving away. Kayn felt off, apprehensive as she made her way up the long gravel driveway to the door that seemed to have a life of its own, shifting from cracked to closed with the breeze. She dug out her phone to look at the time. *Quarter after eight. She was fifteen minutes late.* The door moved again. She shook her head and laughed. *This was obviously a prank. They'd left the door open, and entrance lights off to freak her out. Chloe was probably hiding around the corner. Practical jokes were a daily occurrence in their household.* Slivers of light from the moon flashed through the branches as they swayed in the wind and for a moment it felt like they were waving her away. *She was being silly.* She shoved her cell into her pants, pocket dialling Kevin by accident.

"I'm home!" Kayn yelled as she kicked off her shoes and dropped her school bag. She flicked on the light and nothing happened. *The power wasn't out. She'd seen the lights on upstairs as she walked up the driveway. It's just a burnt-out lightbulb.* She massaged her ankle. *Great, there goes the track meet.* Kayn tried to take off her wet socks, but a stab of pain from her freshly twisted ankle caused her to place a hand on the wall while attempting to balance. Her hand slid off the wall as she struggled to tug off her sopping wet sock. "Kevin's mom gave us eggs," she called out quietly, suddenly aware she was alone in the house. *Where would they go at this hour? Her mind sorted through the possible scenarios. Something wasn't right.* "Mom...Dad?" She called...answered by silence. She went to close the door and felt something wet. A faint sliver of light was streaming through the doorway. She stepped into it and held out her hand. *Her palm was covered in blood.* Ripples of adrenaline coursed through her. *Whose blood was this? It felt like thousands of spiders were running on the surface of her skin.* She froze, paralyzed by fear as shivers of terror crawled across her flesh. She gingerly stepped backwards. A dark figure loomed at the end of the hallway. *Who was that?*

Her sister's voice screamed, "Run Kayn!" In a pitch so raw, primal and shrill that it lit her survival instinct on fire. She spun around and ran, bringing the eggs with her. She sensed someone chasing her but looking back would only slow her down. Kayn ran with no rhyme or reason in the direction she was pointed in. Halfway across the back lawn she slipped in wet grass and scrambled forward, knowing someone was a second behind her. She spotted the overgrown opening to the trails, threw the bag

of eggs to slow her attacker, and raced for them, knowing there were a million places to hide. Fuelled by animalistic survival instinct, she burst through the blackberry brambles blocking the path, ignoring the pain as they tore at her flesh for it only heightened the self-preservation that possessed and drove her forward. She barrelled through the overgrowth, where instinct prompted. The crunching of leaves and twigs in the trail behind her told her he was close; far too close to do anything but react. She slipped in the mud again, skidding yet not falling. She'd now lost her precious half a second lead, allowing her hunter to close the space between them. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest, threatening to burst right through her skin as her tired legs propelled her body through the winding trail. The rocks on the path brutalized her feet as the sharp reaching branches and twigs slashed at her legs.

"You have to run faster Kayn! Run faster!" her sister's voice screeched inside Kayn's terror-driven mind.

The ground was crunching directly behind her. He was so close that she could feel his breath on her hair and neck as he panted. *He was almost touching her. He was fast, inhumanly fast.* A rush of adrenaline edged her ahead. *She could see lights from the neighbour's house peeking through the trees. She was going to make it. She was almost there.* The darkness that pursued her was keeping pace. *Almost to safety...just over the creek.* Her bare feet hit the wooden bridge. *Almost there. She was going to make it.* Kayn felt the elation of victory. She was about to burst through the bushes as something hot was driven into her back. Her eyes widened in terror as the knife plunged into her again. The blade seared a molten trail of excruciating pain. A sweaty hand muffled her gasp of shock as she sunk to her knees in disbelief. Her captor's arms, slick with perspiration, constricted around her neck crushing her larynx with the strength of a python. *Screaming and pleading for her life was now impossible.*

He continuously brought her to the brink of strangulation and then harshly revived her. Each time her eyes slipped shut, she felt the slicing, searing pain of his blade as he brutalized her stomach and chest until her eyes remained open in terror. Blood sputtered from between her parted lips as she attempted to speak. She could see a shadow on the patio through the trees in the luminescence of the porch lights. *Someone was out there having a cigarette. They were so close. Help me, oh, God, please help me; see me, please, I'm right here,* Kayn's mind screamed. He continued to

plunge the knife into her. *He's killing me...Please*, her soul pleaded as her vision blurred from her tears. She gurgled as she choked and sputtered out blood. *Why, why are you doing this to me?*

She felt the competing rhythms of their hearts, as his sweaty torso pressed intimately against hers. Her stomach churned with revulsion as she felt the warmth of his rapid excited breathing against her neck. His quiet laughter echoed in her mind as a raspy male voice began whispering things she couldn't understand. Her blood had soaked through her clothes and it was trickling down her arms. *She was going to die*. He released her. She slumped forward and tried to grasp the ground with her fingertips, but no matter how hard she struggled from within the confines of her mind she couldn't move. Her breath came in short laboured attempts as a soothing voice whispered, *Sleep, it's time to go to sleep*. As she closed her eyes, she heard Grandma Winnie's final words to her, *'You survive. You fight hard.'* She screamed from within, clawing at the soil and forcing herself up to her knees. Suddenly, there was a blinding explosion of pain across her head and face. The lights flickered and went out.

In the woods lay a bleeding angel in all her glory. Her arms posed gracefully above her head, her hair soaked in the mud, blood, and feces in which she lay. Dying, fading into the other realm, her form was christened by the rain, as the trees had begun to weep upon her for the brutality she had endured.

Kayn awoke in frigid darkness to the fragrance of damp moss, tree sap and the sweet metallic taste of her own blood in her mouth. Images from her childhood flickered through her mind as the pain recycled in waves until it slowly dulled and become a tolerable numbness. *She was so cold. Where was she?* Her body gave an involuntary shudder as her mind fed her slivers, flashes of inhuman savagery she'd suffered until she understood where she was and how she'd come to be dying in the forest all alone. *If she kept her eyes closed, he might believe her to be gone. She could slip away peacefully and become one with the forest.* She could hear the soothing sound of raindrops as they tapped on the branches above her. *Maybe, he was gone?* She opened her eyes and imagined the lush green branches of the cedar trees above as giant arms, capable of offering her protection from the elements. At first the image was nurturing and beautiful, but then the trees came to life. They cackled and mocked, "You're going to die you silly bitch," as they waved their branches to the haunting sound of rattling raindrops and the howling of the wind. Kayn's

consciousness snapped back to reality. *She'd lost a lot of blood. None of this was real.* The forest floor was alive with a dancing mist that seemed to add a thickness to the tapping sound of the raindrops. Writhing in the mud as her essence moistened the ground beneath her, Kayn willed her body to move; her fingers clawed at the soil until she was spent. For a moment she lay still, feeling like a half dead animal waiting to be finished off by its hunter. With her eyes gazing towards the heavens, she'd been watching a stream of light from the moon that had made it through the cover of rain clouds and branches. *It felt like she was breathing through a pinched straw.* She concentrated on each breath...*in and out...a little air.* The glimmer of the ray vanished, leaving only cold isolating darkness and the flickering of blurry confusing images. *Help me.* The only answer to her soul's plea was the crackling quiet sound of the rain. What little vision she had clouded with tears. She screamed from within the confines of her mind as the blindingly excruciating pain abruptly returned. As the wave of agony passed, she sensed his presence. She tried to focus through the glossy film of her tears. His dark shadow ominously loomed as it had in the hallway. *Please, please... No more.* Now only a few feet away, he was watching her. She willed herself to grasp at the moist cold earth with her fingers, but she was unable to move. *Her body was now nothing more than a broken shell. How cruel for her mind to still see; to still desire life at this point.* As his form loomed above her, Kayn looked into his eyes with a desperate plea, *why are you doing this?* Her body gave an involuntary shudder. Kayn realised she was naked, completely exposed to the elements. *Why was she naked?* Her eyes filled with tears again. She felt instant, overwhelming shame.

The dark mass of her violator knelt beside her and leaned in. She could smell his putrid breath as it moistened her face. There was an electrical current between Kayn and the man in the dark, it was like a charge. Every hair on her body stood on end as he ran a finger over her exposed breast and said, "You were never meant to be born, this situation had to be corrected."

His knife glinted in the light from the moon as it was raised above her chest. *Yes,* she thought. *Let it be over now.* She closed her eyes as he sliced into her flesh and opened them with acceptance. *She felt no more pain.* She stared deeply into his eyes as hers filled with tears.

With a voice thick with emotion, he spoke, "From this life unto the next." He slowly carved a symbol into the flesh above her heart.

She lay limp in his arms, still conscious of what was happening, as he pulled her close and cradled her naked body like a baby, rocking her broken violated flesh in his arms, stroking her blood-soaked hair. He began to sob as if he were repentant in some way for how he had tortured her.

As her vision flickered one last time, the man was gone; it was her mother looking into her eyes. Her mother's eyes were filled with so much love that it seemed to release her from pain and fear as it had when she was a small child. Her mother cradled her as a baby, rocking her back and forth. *She was safe now in her mother's arms. She was at peace. Mommy, her heart sang, you're here to save me.* The warmth of her mother's love enveloped her tortured soul. She looked into her mother's eyes. Her mother lovingly touched her face and started to sing a song that she had sung to her every night when she was small...

Sleep, sweet sleep till the morning.

Just dream away and close your eyes.

My love, you'll be safe until the morning.

Sleeping in my arms, all through the night.

Although bad dreams come to scare you,

my love will scare them all away. My heart...

The lights flickered, the pain went away, and her mother was holding her, singing: "Sleep, sweet sleep."

The Beginning

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