

A woman with short blonde hair, seen from behind, is walking away on a stage. She is wearing a black, sequined, backless dress. The stage is lit with several bright spotlights, creating a dramatic atmosphere with lens flares and bokeh effects. The background is dark, and the floor reflects the light.

JENNIFER MURGIA

WHEN
I
WAS
ALICE

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

WHEN
I
WAS
ALICE

**WHEN
I
WAS
ALICE**

JENNIFER MURGIA



**CamCat
Books**

CamCat Publishing, LLC
Fort Collins, Colorado 80524
camcatpublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Hardcover ISBN 9780744310672
Paperback ISBN 9780744310696
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744310719
eBook ISBN 9780744310702
Audiobook ISBN 9780744310726

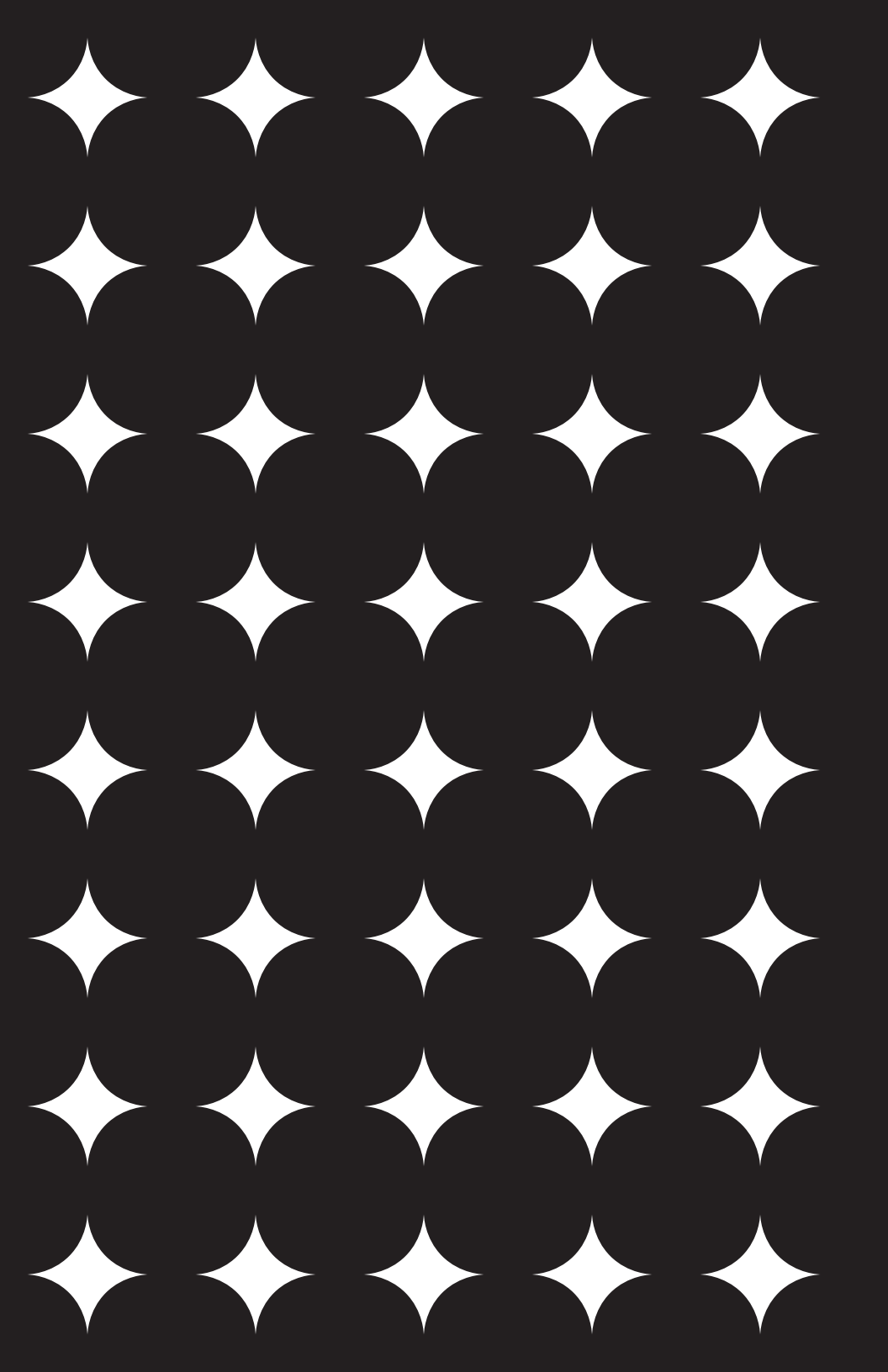
Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available upon request

Book and cover design by Maryann Appel
Interior artwork by Alexandr Bakanov, DavidGoh, Pure Imagination

For my grandmother, the “real” Alice.

And for anyone who needed to fall before they could find themselves.

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# POLICE REPORT

**September 9, 1953**

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**Incident:** Missing Person  
**Location:** Hollywood, CA  
**Details:** Alice Montgomery.  
Actress. Blonde. 5'4".  
**Notes:** Do not alert press

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## CHAPTER ONE



“RYAN?” I LAY MY HAND on the edge of the hospital bed, the cool sheet over my brother’s still body barely ruffled. The machine next to me beeps with steady persistence as clear liquid drips into a tube in his arm. I study him in silent expectation because today, more than ever, I need him to hear me—to give some sort of sign that it’s going to be all right. But Ryan remains still. I quietly watch my brother’s eyelids. Not a single twitch or tremor. No indication that he’s aware I am beside him.

My gaze drifts toward the two lumps that are his feet at the end of the bed. I wait for movement but there is none. “I know we planned this months ago. You helped me go over all the lines so I’d nail this, only . . .” My voice snags in my throat, which has suddenly gone dry with the truth: I am going to let him down.

This week my brother was supposed to start his final project at UCLA’s School of Theater, Film, and Television. He rented a space downtown to hold auditions for his senior thesis in his major,



directing—a modernized version of *Rebel without a Cause*—his favorite movie of all time. When he told me he wanted me to try out for a lead role in his student film—Natalie Wood’s character—I pushed for a smaller part. But acting was never for me. In fact, the entire entertainment industry was never for me. It’s his thing.

Weighted down with guilt, I know this project is huge, even without the connection to his favorite film. It’s his chance to prove he wants to and can direct, therefore breaking into the competitive Hollywood film industry.

Except . . . last week, Ryan went to Lake Hollywood Park, tolerating the tourists, to stare up at the white letters of the Hollywood sign. He often goes there to daydream of one day defying the rules and climbing the infamous letter *H*—carving his name there after his first Hollywood success, signaling to eternity that indeed he is an integral part of the mystique he so adores.

On the way home, Ryan’s car spun out of control on Mulholland Highway, busting through the fencing on the other side of the road and down the embankment. An injured coyote was found lying in the middle of the road—apparently the cause of the accident.

That night Mom sat in this very chair next to him, her shoulders shaking with violent sobs. And when the doctors told us Ryan had slipped into a coma, Dad stood so straight, his face pained beyond belief, that he looked as if he were afraid to move. Every day since, we’ve been keeping a silent vigil, hoping and praying Ryan will wake up.

“You’re here early,” the morning-shift nurse interrupts as she enters the room, the pants of her navy blue scrubs swishing with each step. She smiles at me and proceeds to assess Ryan’s vitals, her quick fingers pressing the confusing buttons on the machine next to his bed.

“I just wanted to check on him,” I reply, watching as she loops another bag of IV fluid onto the hooked stand.

The nurse moves to the other side of the room and scribbles the next staff shift on the whiteboard, then gives me a thoughtful look. “He can hear you, you know. He may not be able to show it, but he’s in there.” She tilts her head, then gives me an encouraging smile before leaving me alone with my brother.

I stand and lean over the bed, gazing down at his inert form beneath the covers. The tiny cuts on his face have already scabbed over and the growth of a thin beard covers his chin. “I hope she’s right—that you can hear me.” The words are thick in my throat. “And that you know how much we love you and need you to wake up.” I squeeze his limp hand and pause, hoping the contact of our skin might trigger something—anything. “I really hope you forgive me,” I murmur as everything else I want to say coats my tongue with regret.



IT TAKES TWO loops around the block on Vine Street before I spot an empty space along the curb. The tiny office my brother rented, which is about the size of a storage closet, is still a block away on Yucca Street, and even though my audition time for the student film my brother is supposed to direct is in ten minutes, I can’t bring myself to get out of the car.

I should have gone right home after leaving the hospital, but my guilt set me on autopilot, as if I’d find the courage to go through with the audition—to do this one thing for my brother. But as soon as I turn off the engine, it’s as if I’m paralyzed.

There’s a tug of war inside me. I’ve reasoned with myself that he’ll understand why I can’t do it—not while he’s in the hospital, not while my parents and I are scared to death he isn’t going to wake up—that bailing on something so important to him doesn’t mean I’m giving up hope. Hope that he’ll wake up. Hope that his student

film gets made. Hope that he'll graduate. Hope that life will go on as planned, the accident but a little bump in the road.

Even at the library, where I sit at the circulation desk all day and shelve carts of books, Ryan's accident follows me like a shadow. I've overheard patrons between the stacks, people from our neighborhood, kids my brother and I went to school with, ask, "Is Ryan Brighton still in the hospital?"

The conversations are always muffled, yet I zero in on every mention of *accident*, *car wreck*, and *coma*. Their words like knives stab my heart, little by little.

Now, a mere block away from what is supposed to be my brother's future, my brain conjures black tire marks on the road and glass scattered by the bushes. An image of Ryan's too-still body flashes inside my head. He should be here, waiting for me to show up to claim my role in his film, not hooked up to machines, clinging to life. And I should have stayed at the hospital, talking to him like the nurse suggested, encouraging him to wake up.

As if knowing my car is parked in the shadow of the Capitol Records building, my phone pings with a text from my best friend, Beth, who's landed a job there answering phones in one of the offices.

*Just wanted to say good luck!*

I tuck my chin to my chest and will my heart rate to slow to a normal pace. Only it's not my heart I worry about. I haven't even opened my mouth, but I feel the familiar seizing of my throat. A tightness telling me my vocal cords are gearing up to get stuck on repeat. I had thought my childhood impediment was gone, but it started again when my parents told me Ryan had been airlifted to the hospital.

*Changed my mind, I text back. I'm a terrible person.*

*Now listen to me, Grace Brighton. You're not terrible. If it's not what you want, then don't do it. Ryan will understand.*

My thumbs hover over my screen, but Beth already knows my reasons—the ones that are warring inside me.

That even though I should help my brother, I'm tired of being Ryan's shadow. Tired of being compared to him. Tired of trying to be what he wants me to be.

That I've chosen to defend my job at the library and not go to college. Tired of living at home when all I want is my own place. Beth and I have talked about renting an apartment together, but I don't have enough money. My high-school graduation was at the onset of the pandemic, causing me to lose two years of deciding what I wanted—hence, my reason for still being so dependent on my parents.

*I'm already late, I text back. I'm sure someone better for the role will get it.*

I check the time on my phone. In all honesty, I can haul myself down the street and make it. But the longer I look at the screen, each passing second tells me I'm blowing my chance—perhaps even blowing Ryan's future.

All those weeks of practicing—of getting excited at the smile on his face each time he whipped out a new script for me to practice. Gone. Maybe he'll understand once he wakes up; maybe he won't hate me when I tell him this is something I could only do with him there. If he can't watch me, I can't—won't—perform.

I take a deep breath and type back, *Text you later. Heading home.*

It takes a few minutes for the dots to appear on my screen that mean she's texting back.

*Next time you're at the hospital, tell Ryan I'm praying he pulls through.*

I toss my phone onto the passenger seat and start my car, wondering what I can possibly do to make this up to him.



## CHAPTER TWO



**T**HE SIGHT OF MY PARENTS' cars in the driveway wrenches my stomach. Every free moment they have is spent at the hospital, while I join them after work and in the evenings, so it's no wonder seeing their cars parked side by side, and knowing they are both inside the house, causes my heart to thud faster. I ease my Subaru between the recycling cans against the curb and take a deep breath. They've likely learned I skipped the audition, and their disappointment will bombard me as soon as I open the door.

Or it could be what I've dreaded most these last few days.

The instant I let myself in the front door the back of my neck grows slick and clammy. A terrible feeling crawls over my skin, and just as I am about to brace myself for the worst, my mom pokes her head out from around the corner of the kitchen. She holds a finger to her mouth and nods toward the living room, where my dad sleeps on the couch. I realize now that if something had happened, my parents would be at the hospital, not home. But since they are, the

house is too quiet—there are no sounds of crying and anguish. I’m suddenly overwhelmed with guilt over not staying by Ryan’s side instead of sitting in my car on Vine, going over all the reasons why I didn’t want to audition for his student film.

“Your dad and I came home to get a little rest, but I’m heading over to the hospital shortly. I was just getting a few things to take with me.”

“But Ryan . . . he’s . . .”

“No change yet, sweetie.” My mother looks like she hasn’t slept in days. Her eyes are puffy beneath her makeup, and she’s hastily twisted her hair into a messy ponytail.

“I’ll come with you, just give me a sec.”

Mom touches my arm and gives it a soft rub. “I’ll take this one. You get some rest.” She looks over at my father. “I don’t want you to worry more than you already are right now. The doctors told us Ryan’s vitals are stable. We just need to wait and see what happens.”

I nod, but her words don’t convince me.

She shuffles softly back into the kitchen, leaving me alone in the hall, not asking about the audition, sparing me an explanation. Before my brother’s accident, my mother was on top of everyone’s schedule, but these days home feels like an alien planet. Dad sleeps more than usual, stressed from his busy work schedule he’s tried to fit around the hospital’s visiting hours, and my mom spends more time by Ryan’s bedside than at home—which is how it should be.

But I miss the weekends when we’d all be home together—the smell of popcorn lingering in the air after dinner and the soft strains of vintage music seeping beneath Ryan’s door when he would spend weekend nights at home. I’d give anything to hear my family’s noises filling one end of the house to the other in our ranch house in Beachwood Canyon—a home my parents could barely afford in the nineties after they got married, until my dad landed a job with a pharmaceutical company, working his way up to executive.

At the end of the hall, Ryan's bedroom door stands open across from mine, the room as quiet as a tomb.

I take a deep breath and slip inside.

The silence is stifling.

I used to drown out the sound of Ryan shuffling around, reciting lines, listening to music, shouting into his PlayStation headset. Now it's as if his room is waiting for his return like the rest of us. His bed is made the way my mom does it, not Ryan's messy excuse of pulling the comforter up over his tangled sheets. His things are untouched yet clean, as if newly dusted—another “unlike Ryan” observation, since my brother thrives in his organized mess.

My eye catches the worn leather jacket hanging over the back of his gaming chair. God, he loves this jacket so much—a replica of one James Dean wore. My mom brought it home from the hospital along with the rest of Ryan's things and painstakingly pulled the glass shards from the sleeve. I place my hand on the supple leather, my fingertips tracing over the jagged rip in the shoulder. The smell of his cologne rises from the collar, causing my breath to hitch in my throat as I realize my brother is the same age as James Dean was when he died.

The microwave beeps down the hall, alerting me that Mom is making another frozen dinner. My stomach rumbles but I ignore it as I stare at the *Rebel without a Cause* movie poster hanging on the wall above his bed. Even if Ryan wakes up within the next few days it will be a while before he's allowed to come home.

I've never heard of anyone waking from a coma and bouncing back into their life, but I pray with everything I have that Ryan will. Even if he's angry with me for not auditioning today. For jeopardizing his student film, his calling card for getting his foot in the door in Hollywood.

With a heavy heart, I run my finger over the papers scattered across Ryan's desk, touching his future and past as they lie together

in a heap. His class schedule sits on top of old play scripts he's never wanted to throw away, insisting I use them to practice my meager acting skills.

Mom is still puttering around the kitchen, allowing me to steal a moment to slide open the drawer of my brother's desk. My breath rushes out of me at the sight of Ryan's phone lying there. The screen is splintered and cracked, and the side of its case is dented. It's gut-wrenching proof of the severity of his accident—the awful reminder that my brother is just as broken and battered, fighting for his life behind the stillness of his eyelids and the silence of our prayers.

Gingerly, I pick up the phone and cradle it in my hands. If Ryan can't be here right now, then this is the closest I can be to him; a glimpse of his life before the accident to manifest that he'll make it.

My finger presses the home button. If the battery hasn't died, then surely the wreck damaged its inner mechanics; but to my amazement, the screen sputters then illuminates as if it's just fine.

I open his camera roll and scroll, and my eyes unexpectedly fill with tears. I'm reminded that Ryan's the smart kid. The Brightons' shining star.

He always has been, while I'm a disappointment.

Ambushed by emotion, I hover my thumb over the screen, ready to swipe away my brother's pre-summer memories when I catch a glimpse of something I've never seen before. There are a couple of screenshots of Old Hollywood photos—much like the ones my brother found at the flea market at the beginning of summer.

A photo of James Dean stares up at me, his blond hair catching the sunlight and his arm draped around a woman's shoulders. She looks oddly familiar. I enlarge it with my fingers as tiny goosebumps spread over my arms. The young woman in the photo looks like . . . me. A fifties version of me. The same hair color, the same



cheekbones, the same eyes. Along the lower portion of the image is a caption that appears to be handwritten in faded pencil: *1953. Hollywood. James Dean and Al . . .* The rest of the name is too faded to read, as if someone's thumb rubbed over it long ago.

I stare at it, puzzled. Ryan had to have noticed the woman's resemblance to me, but then why hadn't he shown it to me?

"I'll be back later," Mom whisper-calls from the hallway, the aroma of lasagna creeping closer.

My brain is still trying to figure out what I'm looking at as I hear the front door open and then close. It's most likely a coincidence that maybe Ryan never noticed; his obsession with James Dean so huge that he mentally cropped out the woman next to him. She's probably not even an actress—just a fan who was lucky enough to have her photo taken with him.

But the more I study it, something about it feels off—something I can't quite put my finger on. In its background is a familiar steel beam and the edge of a white, metal structure. The Hollywood sign. I'd recognize it anywhere.

That's when I notice the sparkle on the woman's wrist. Goose bumps travel from my arms to the back of my neck. I hurry across the hall and into my room, opening my closet for a box of junk I've kept since childhood, and root through it until my fingers touch the bottom. Buried beneath trinkets and knickknacks I haven't touched in years is the bracelet my mom gave me when I was little. I pull it free and hold it up to the photo.

I shake my head. This is impossible.

A bracelet with two charms hangs from the young woman's wrist in Ryan's photo. A race car and a ladybug. I pick through the charms on my bracelet: a four-leaf clover, a silver cat . . . nearly a dozen, all crammed together in a jingly collection—and attached to the links nearest the clasp are a race car and a ladybug.

Just like the bracelet the woman in the picture is wearing.



MY FATHER'S GENTLE snores waft from the living room even though Mom went to bed hours ago after arriving home. I step down the hall and let myself out the kitchen door to the hum of cicadas in the nearby trees and make my way along the side of the house to the front. The street is empty and quiet—it's just past eleven, an hour when most of my neighbors are inside winding down for the rest of the night.

Dressed in black leggings and a hoodie, I feel every bit a criminal for what I'm about to do. I tug my hood over my head as I begin the brisk walk toward the end of my street—to the dead end where the metal gate guards the precarious ascent toward the mountain-top. Clouds thicken overhead and a flash of heat lightning in the distance brightens the sky in shades of a fresh bruise. A rumble of thunder bellows but it doesn't slow me down.

Just ahead is the door in white stucco—a pedestrian entrance to the packed dirt trail. It looks like an invitation in a fairy tale, even though I know what lies beyond may not have a happily ever after. My chances of getting caught are extremely high, if not by the officers sitting in the cruiser at the mouth of the trail, then surely by the infrared cameras dotting the incline of Mount Lee.

I hang back a little, my entire body like a loose wire as I contemplate turning around. There is another flash of lightning, this time closer and not set so high in the clouds. I'm close enough to hear the scanner through the open window of the cruiser; something about "All units proceed to . . ." and then a garbled address and a crack of thunder so loud it rattles my bones. The officers grumble in annoyance, due to the radio or the storm, I don't know, but they start their engine and leave their post.

A flash of lighting streaks above the houses, followed by another loud boom—this one closer, as if hovering over the intersection

of Deronda and Mulholland—and all at once the streetlights blink out and the nearby houses go dark.

I can't believe my luck.

Moments later, the beam of a flashlight zigzags down the hillside, and a ranger emerges from the pedestrian door, locking it behind him. He makes his way to a blue car across from me and starts it. I linger beside the wall lining the street, crouched low near the wheel of a parked car, murmuring to myself that I'm the biggest idiot for thinking this will work.

But it does.

The car k-turns, nearly catching me in the glow of its headlights in the cramped space the street allows, and drives off. The moment the taillights are gone I sprint for the gate, ignoring the posted signs that the park is closed, that there are cameras—that I should leave. If the storm continues, I tell myself, the power might be out long enough for what I'm about to do.

It's dawning on me how stupid this really is. Stupid. Dangerous. Illegal. If Ryan knew, he'd tell me that I have a death wish. But after today . . . what I did—or didn't do—feels like a mistake I need to make right.

Hesitantly, I touch the metal gate, my heart in my throat as I wait for something to happen. Nothing does. I even dare a peek at the small camera near the door, but the red light indicating it's on is completely black. And then I do it. I climb over the metal gate and sprint, keeping to the left side of the trail, avoiding the long erosion crack in the packed dirt so I won't twist an ankle. Several times I nearly trip and fall into the sagebrush and thorns that bank the path, but the fear of encountering a rattlesnake pushes me on, away from the vegetational edge.

I've hiked here many times with my parents and Ryan, but never alone. Never past park hours. Tonight I keep a steady pace, knowing if I think too long about the consequences, my fear will slow me

down. Another flash of lightning, and the radio tower is illuminated in the distance. I just need to get to the sign—those white letters urging me to forget I shouldn't be here. That I'm supposed to be the good daughter, the good sister, not some whining child who thinks independence begins with a criminal record.

The dirt trail morphs into a haphazardly paved road and my heart beats wildly as I near the ranger station. The small booth is dark, empty, but I still can't slow my heart. Not until I reach the iconic letters stretching like giants across the dark mountainside, spelling out **H - O - L - L - Y - W - O - O - D**.

Just before the bend in the road leading toward the central communications facility at the summit, I spy a large boulder against the fence, granting me entrance to the wild brush beneath the sign. I go for it. My legs burn with the effort to scale the terrain, my skin scraped and stinging from the tangled brush. At times the hill is so steep I have to lean over my knees to propel myself upward, but it's to my advantage. If the power comes back on, if a helicopter flies overhead, they won't be able to get me until I crest the top.

Only I'm not going to the top.

I set my sights on the white *H* in front of me and trudge on. It stands high and beautiful, encouraging me to reach its base where it's anchored into the earth, even as the storm grows closer, lighting up the sky within the clouds above.

Finally, I reach it. My lungs burn for air and sweat coats my skin beneath my sweatshirt. I'm itching from the shrubs, and I'm scared . . . so scared. But there is no helicopter flying overhead telling me to leave. The cameras hidden on the letters are dark. No one is watching. It's just me and the Hollywood sign, as if the universe has granted me access to this elusive part of the mountain to make amends for what I failed to do today.

This is what Ryan always wanted—to come here and make his mark. But I'm not Ryan. I'm here for something else. If the universe

is on my side tonight, then I'm placing my trust in the powers that be to hear what I have to say.

My heart is heavy as I stand at the base of the *H*, and all at once, my emotions crash down on me. My body trembles, unleashing all the tears I've been holding inside.

"Please, whoever is listening, please let my brother be all right," I choke out. "Please let him wake up. I promise I'll . . ." But what promise can I make that's big enough? To be a better sister? One who isn't resentful of living in his shadow all the time. One who's brave enough to be different from my perfect brother—and the expectations of our parents. That doesn't seem good enough, and now that I'm here, I don't know what to promise. What to trade for the biggest wish I could ever make.

I swipe my tears from my cheeks and look up at the letter *H*—this white, gleaming talisman my brother looks to for bigger and brighter things to come—a career that will allow him to live his dream. To him this letter is a beacon of hope, that whatever he wants from life can be his. Even after a horrific accident. Even after cheating death because I know . . . *I know* . . . he's going to make it.

And then something comes over me—a need so fierce to make a wish and really, truly believe in it as he does.

My feet move as if by a gravitational pull toward the maintenance ladder hanging along the side of the *H*. Only it's too high. It hovers about five feet off the ground, so to reach it, I jump and grab onto the first horizontal bar attached to the back of the letter and pull myself up.

Making it to the second bar is just as tricky, but I do it and then inch myself to the end where the bar meets the bottom of the ladder, hoisting myself onto the bottom rung. I focus on the motion of my hands reaching and pulling until I am feet above the ground. Arm over arm, rung after rung, I climb, my eyes scanning the back of the sign and the letter *O* next to me for the little red light of the camera

to suddenly blink on. But it's dark, and it's only me and the sign and the stormy sky overhead.

I inch my way toward the very top of the *H*, carefully and slowly in the dark. When the ladder ends in open air, I draw in a tremendous breath and gaze down the mountainside at the city toward the sweeping hills of Hollywood, the reservoir glistening in the dark, and far across the flatter landscape at the rising skyscrapers of downtown LA. I know in my heart that this is the perfect place for my wish to take flight—as close to the stars as possible.

“Please, *please* don't let my brother die,” I beg. “He's a good person and doesn't deserve this. Please give him that bright future he wants . . . just please . . . let him wake up, let him have that chance.”

It doesn't feel like enough, even though the ache of the wish weighs heavily within my bones. I'm scared that my actions today will sabotage him.

*If only I could go back and make things right . . .*

I will my words to hold importance, imagining them floating high above me toward someone, *something*, that might have the power to make them come true.

If only Ryan were here right now, gazing out at the city below. He would love this, and I vow to myself that I'll bring him here—that I'll tempt fate again to climb this sign with him. Because I know—I just know—that everything has lined up just right for me to be here, to make this wish for him.

I hold on to the thought for another moment, but I am cold and alone at the top of the gargantuan letter. The ground yawns dark and wide below. *Stay calm*, I tell myself. *Just concentrate on making it back down to the ground*. But climbing down seems an impossible feat, let alone getting down the mountain without alerting the police.

A flash of lightning blazes across the sky, even closer now that I'm almost fifty feet above the ground, hanging on to a sheet of metal

in the middle of a thunder-and-lightning storm. Oh God, this was stupid. Forget about being arrested—I'll be dead if I don't climb back down.

Thunder follows, deep and menacing, and shakes me enough that my foot slips, leaving my legs to pedal wildly in the air as my hands grasp the top of the *H*. My phone slides from the pocket of my hoodie, pinging loudly against the back of the sign before being swallowed by the darkness below.

Lightning again—this time striking the radio tower behind me. Angry sparks rain toward the ground, caught in a sudden gust of wind and the onset of pelting raindrops. And then I hear it: the rumble of a car between the rolls of thunder and the thuds of my terrified pulse in my ears. Flashing red and blue lights climb the trail to my left, up Mount Lee, closer and closer.

My gaze shifts to the camera on the letter *O*. The light on the camera is red. *No no no . . .*

I have to get down. But the next crack of lightning catches me off guard, causing me to lean over the top rim of the *H* at a frightening angle. And then the rain comes. The deluge causes my grip to lose its hold. My feet lose purchase on the slick ladder beneath me, dangling. The pull is too strong, heaving me over the edge and into the cold, open air . . . and just as another flash of searing lightning grazes the sky, I lose my grip altogether. I plummet past the framework of the sign—falling . . . falling . . .



## CHAPTER THREE

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I AM DEAD. I AM SURE of it—only there is no pain. The light shining against my eyelids is too bright for this time of night. There is no thunder, no violent crack of lightning, no rustling of wind-blown shrubs in the storm. My body is warm and still, not soaked from the rain . . . and yet there is a wetness on my forehead. I gingerly press my fingertips to it, feeling a damp cloth against my skin, then pull it away and open my eyes.

A song plays in the background, familiar, but static interrupts the smooth chords. Voices whisper, shuffling and pausing as I lift myself up onto my elbows. Around me, a group of unfamiliar faces has crowded, and a pretty woman, her sleek ponytail the color of spun caramel, is seated closest to my elbow.

“Miss Montgomery,” she whispers gently. “Are you feeling all right?”

I stare back, my lips forming words stuck somewhere deep in my throat. “Wh . . . what did you call me?”



“Oh—I—err . . .” The woman stammers, then she plucks the cloth from my fingers. “I’ll just . . . I’ll just freshen this up.” She inches away past the wall of people craning to see, and I am left alone with their curious faces.

One by one, the unfamiliar group gathers closer, plumping the pillows nestled beneath me, fretting over every detail. I graze the plush softness beneath my fingers. Didn’t I fall? It all happened so fast. I remember plunging into nothingness but have no recollection of impact. Something should have broken . . . I wiggle my fingers, my toes . . . They all seem to be working.

A man with a bright blue handkerchief knotted about his throat pushes forward and offers me a flask. I force a smile. My throat feels like sandpaper, but the noxious fumes swirling up from the flask tells me this is definitely not water. I wave it away.

Their questions bombard me, each as confusing as the next.

“What happened, Alice?”

“Alice, would you like another pillow? A brandy, perhaps?”

I don’t understand what they are talking about. *Alice? Why do they keep calling me Alice?*

“It must have been the heat . . .”

“Why is she wearing the same clothes she filmed in last Friday . . .”

“It wasn’t the heat. She’s been . . .”

“I’ve been what?”

The shrill tone of my voice silences the onlookers. The woman with the ponytail comes back and stands beside me, carefully placing a fresh washcloth on my forehead.

“Do you remember anything, Miss Montgomery? Anything at all?” she whispers.

*Miss Mont . . . Who?*

“I . . .” I force my eyes wide open and concentrate on the wall over her shoulder, hoping it will help me remember—anything.

The room is small. Am I in a hospital? It doesn't look like it— not a police station either. Nothing makes sense. All I feel is a vivid panic as it all comes rushing back. *The trip to the sign. I made a wish and . . .*

*I fell.*

*From the Hollywood sign.*

The feeling comes back to me of what it felt like to hover atop the *H*, with the wind rushing all around and the city a blanket of diamonds below. I was rushing because I saw the police car drive up the mountain. The rain came. I slipped. That's the logical explanation. And if that was true, then how am I . . . here? It must be a hospital. I'm either injured and can't feel it, or the police escorted me to the psych ward.

"Is Ryan, okay? Can I see him?" I sit up too quickly, the blood rushing from my head in a hot wave.

The woman at my side cocks her head and looks at the other concerned faces huddled around us. I follow her gaze to the tall young man standing near the door. He seems to be about my age, and his dark hair and ice-blue eyes make a startling contrast; there is the slightest hint of a shy smile on his lips as he watches with interest.

"Ryan?" she asks, pulling my attention back to her. A deep knot forms between her brows. "I don't know anyone at the studio named Ryan."

"My brother," I answer.

She only looks at me and shakes her head. "I didn't know you had a brother."

It's as if the floor has been pulled out from beneath me, and once again, I am plunging through the empty air.

"Water," I mutter, choking on my confusion. "Does anyone have water? I'm so thirsty."

"Get some water, ice." She snaps her fingers at a dough-faced woman who hovers closely. "But Alice," she continues as she looks

at me, her tone gentle as if I am a small, lost child she needs to be very careful with. “You’ve been gone for days.”

*Alice? Days?*

“Gone where?” I shake my groggy head. My thoughts flow thick as tar, and the bright lights hurt my eyes. “Who’s Alice?”

“We’ve all been worried,” the woman prattles on, taking no notice of my confusion. “You’ve been missing for a whole week, but then you showed up this morning on set and then fainted. Where have you been?”

“Maybe she skipped off for a little rendezvous?” the man with the flask interrupts with a smirk.

The woman returns with a glass of water in time to jab him in the arm.

“What? It happens!” His suggestion gives way to a symphony of agreeable sighs.

I sip the water, grateful for its coolness against my parched throat, but I can’t stop my fingers from trembling around the glass. The charm bracelet clinks against it. Only two charms hang from it now—the same charms the young woman in my brother’s photo wore. Did the others break off during my fall? A wave of uncomfortable heat sweeps over me. The already tiny room feels smaller by the minute.

“Can I get a little air?” I wave my free hand.

“You heard her,” the woman with the swaying ponytail orders. “She’s fine now, back to work.”

Only I don’t feel fine. I feel a little sick. And confused. And . . .

The door swings open, sending a bolt of searing-hot sunshine into the room, and my body bristles with panic.

“Feelin’ better, sweetheart?” A man steps into the doorway. His white shirt looks crumpled from the heat, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He has a pencil stashed behind an ear, a cigarette balanced between his lips, and a thick stack of pages clutched in his hand,

which he waves toward me in a flurry of annoyance. He's obviously upset with me, but I'm relieved he isn't a cop come to reprimand or arrest me for climbing the Hollywood sign.

He nods. "Great! Good to hear it!"

Hear what? I haven't answered him yet. He hasn't let me. He plucks the cigarette from his lips and points it at me. "You have a lot of nerve, holding production up like this. It's your lucky day, I don't have time to hear about your escapades."

"But I . . . I . . ."

The woman who's been speaking to me places herself between me and the man with the jabbing cigarette. "Yes, yes, we'll be right on it. Just give the poor girl a minute to get her bearings."

The whole interaction unfolds as if in slow motion. Whoever this woman is, she holds some control.

"We'll resume when Miss Montgomery is back on set." The man gives me one last look before turning to leave.

The older woman who brought me the glass of water stands next to me. She has streaks of gray in her black hair and wears a smock smeared with crisscrossing shades of red and pink over her doughy figure.

Hairpins spill from her pockets each time she leans over to adjust the blanket someone has draped across my legs.

"Who was that man?" I ask. A deep breath shudders in my chest. "And why did he call me Miss Montgomery?"

"Oh dear." The woman appraises me with concern. "You must have bumped your head hard."

On instinct I press my hand against the back of my head, wincing at the tender flesh beneath my tangled hair.

"Is this your first time working with Mr. Fuss-and-Bother?" she asks. "That's what the studio gets for hiring a new assistant director at the last minute. All pomp and circumstance. No offense, but he rubs people the wrong way around here."

My hand stays glued to my head. The soothing warmth from my palm is the most calming thing in the room, and I really need calming. It keeps me from thinking too hard on the woman's words. Here? Where is *here*, exactly?

The woman hums to herself as she bends to retrieve another handful of fallen hair pins. "If you're feeling better, I'll be back for a redo." She points at the top of my head and twirls her finger in the air. "Not enough hours in the day, I tell you."

The woman with the ponytail stays with me. She studies me for a few moments without saying a word, then she slowly sits on the end of the couch near my feet. "Alice," she says softly, and I detect a hint of caution. "Do you remember anything? Anything at all?"

Of course I do. I made a wish. I fell. I should be in a lot of trouble right now.

"We were filming on location by the Hollywood sign last Friday and, well . . ." she pauses. "You disappeared. You never showed up on set on Monday. We were about to involve the police, but then you appeared this morning, wandering on the hill below the sign. You fainted just as we reached you, but you didn't seem to be hurt. Then we brought you here to the studio." Her voice is slow and steady, but she clenches her fingers in her lap. "Did you get lost? Did something happen out there? Because if anything did, we should report—"

"No," I cut her off. "I don't remember what happened."

"You don't remember *anything*? But you've been gone for an entire week."

I shake my head. "Nothing."

Nothing I can share. These strange people and the fact that I'm not lying in a heap at the bottom of the sign has me completely baffled. I want to replay everything in my head—the wish, the fall—in private. I need to know if Ryan is okay and where I am. If what she says is true, I wandered from the sign and am now in the trailer of some set at some movie-studio lot. Alice's trailer, apparently.

Only . . . everyone here believes *I* am Alice. Whoever that is. I don't know what is happening and I suddenly feel dizzy.

"Actually, can I have a minute by myself?"

The woman nods knowingly and rises to her feet, closing the door behind her.

Now that I am alone, I look around, taking it all in. The walls of the tiny room are a serene pale pink. Gossamer curtains sway slowly in the warm breeze from the open window. Part of me wishes for the unfamiliar woman to return, maybe offer me another cool cloth for my head. I want to hide beneath it and shield the burning tears forming beneath my lids as I mull over what she's told me. That I've been missing. No. I was on top of Mount Lee. I remember it clearly.

*Alice* has been missing. But who is Alice?

I sit up again, my head swimming in a seasick haze.

Panic burns bright and hot in my chest. I need to let my parents know I'm all right. The storm probably woke them, and knowing my mother, if the power went out, she would have gone into my room to check on me and found me missing. Even worse than that thought, could the storm have affected the hospital? I'm sure they have generators, but I'm worried the machines my brother is hooked up to may have lost power. Unless . . . my wish worked and he's no longer in a coma. My wish did *something*, because right now I can't explain where I am or why everyone thinks I'm someone named Alice.

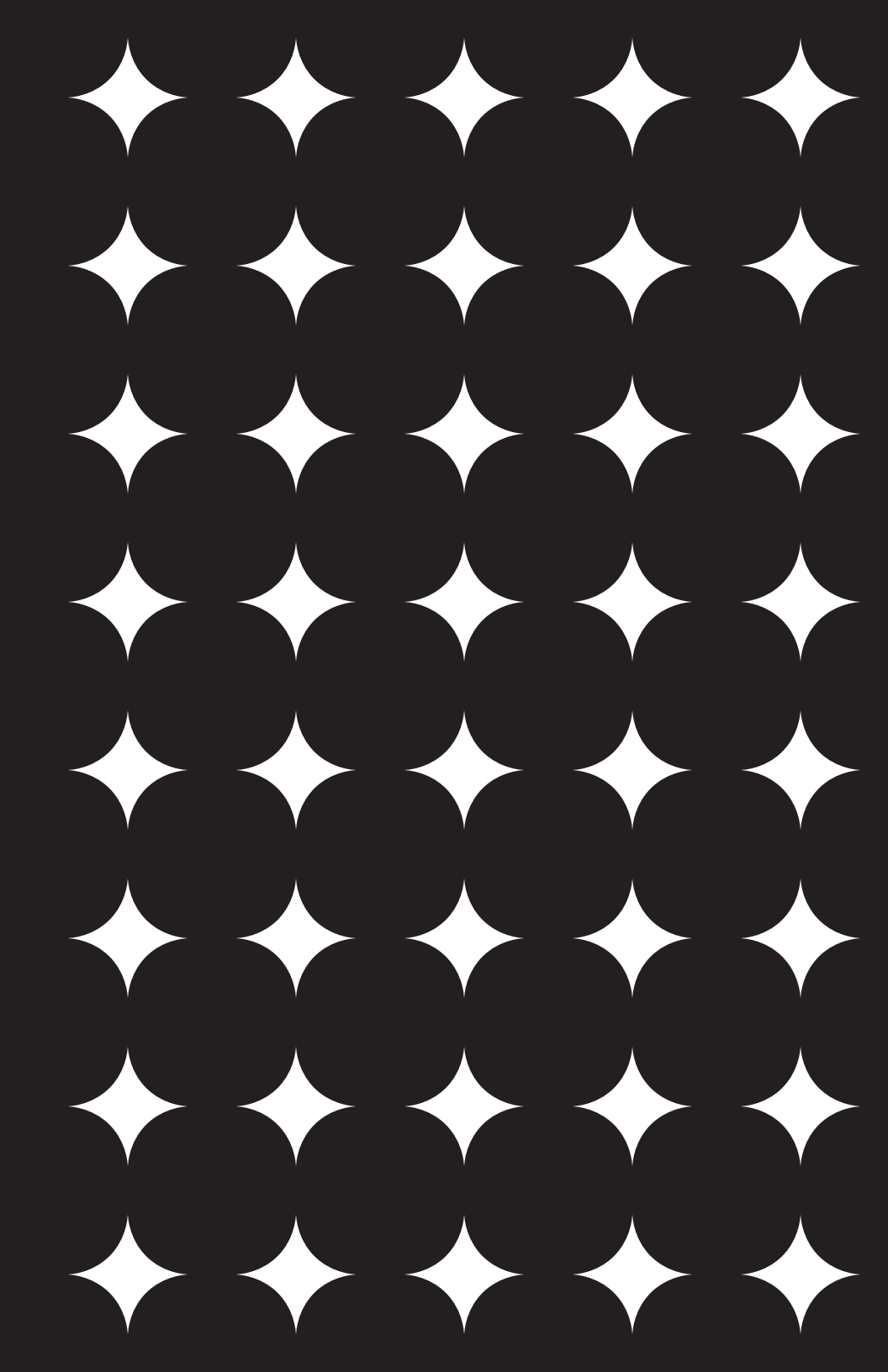
The blanket covering my legs slips to the floor and I let out a gasp. Instead of my leggings, my shins are half covered by the rumpled remains of a soiled dress, my ankles dotted with streaks of dirt and tiny scratches I must have gotten on my way up to the sign. On shaky legs I rise and pad across the floor toward a large, arched mirror over a cluttered makeup table. Round bulbs the size of my hand frame the glass, casting a soft light as I peer into it.

A shiver tears down my spine. My face is covered in smears of dirt, but I can see bright makeup beneath it, makeup I never put on.

My hair is curled just so at my temples, falling to subtle waves that rest on my shoulders, not the mess I'd expected from falling fifty feet and rolling down the hill. And the dress: beneath the grit it's the sheerest blush I've ever seen. The fabric is a delicate chiffon, the soft layers of the skirt gliding through my fingers.

I lean closer to the mirror. The hairstyle. The expression in my eyes. Goose bumps dot my arms as disbelief churns through my body.

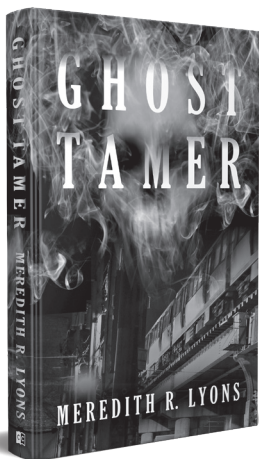
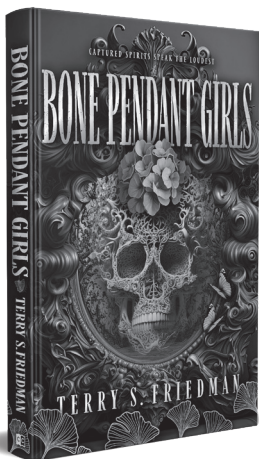
I look exactly like the girl in Ryan's photo.





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# FAME IS A DANGEROUS GAME

**A**S HER BROTHER LIES IN A COMA after a near-fatal car accident, twenty-two-year-old Grace Brighton climbs the Hollywood Sign to make a desperate wish for his recovery. She loses her footing and plummets to the ground below—only there is no impact. Instead, she finds herself the center of attention at a film studio . . . in 1953 Hollywood. Everyone believes she's Alice Montgomery, a rising star she bears an eerie resemblance to, who disappeared just days earlier.


Grace has no choice but to step into Alice's shoes. Meeting Alice's entourage and noticing not everyone is happy that she is back, Grace begins to suspect that something terrible has happened to the young actress. Afraid Alice's miraculous return has now made her a target, Grace must find out who wants to harm Alice to find her way back to her own time. When she discovers one of the missing starlet's deepest, darkest secrets, Grace finds herself in grave danger—she may die long before she's even been born.

  
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Cover Design: Maryann Appel  
Cover Artwork: Enjoynz, Rysak, Unizyne

Fiction / Mystery  
USD\$17.99 CAD\$23.99 GBP£14.99

ISBN 978-0-7443-1069-6 90000



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