

**STILL LIFE**  
By Courtney Casey

Upmarket family drama/mystery

Since the day their younger sister, Arden, disappeared from her college campus, Sawyer and Tristan Frost have been living vastly different lives.

Tristan began traveling the country—living in a van, cycling through a series of menial hospitality jobs—in an attempt to leave her dysfunctional family and troubled memories behind. Resentful of her sister’s escape, Sawyer stayed back in Michigan to watch over their alcoholic father, all the while descending into addictions of her own.

When Arden’s body is found after seven years, Tristan is forced to come home, causing the past and present to collide. Though the police attribute Arden’s murder to an already incarcerated serial killer, Sawyer suspects otherwise, and tries to convince her sister and her detective ex-boyfriend, Matthew, to help find the real perpetrator. When the truth is revealed, it will obliterate everything Tristan and Sawyer once believed about their lives, their relationships and their sister’s fate.

## Chapter 1 | Sawyer | Now

Lately, Sawyer can only bring herself to watch shows she's seen before.

It's the comfort of it. Of knowing what comes next.

She's amidst her fourth rewatch of a long-canceled sitcom, half-conscious and hazy, when her phone rumbles from where it rests atop her heart, jolting her like a defibrillator. She jerks upright, losing it in the dense nest of blankets surrounding her on the sofa.

By the time she locates it among the folds, the ringing has ceased. Though she could have simply dusted her thumb over the darkened screen to check the time, she glances instead at the antique clock perched on the fireplace mantel.

2:23 a.m.

She blinks, looks again to confirm. Just moments before, it seemed, she'd been rinsing dinner plates while daylight dimmed beyond the kitchen window on the final night of the year. The sunset was a bloodletting, staining the sky a melange of red and orange. And after that, the neighborhood descended into a veritable war zone, a flurry of amateur pyrotechnics that shattered her already spent nerves.

At the realization of the late hour, a surreal sense of foreboding, a kind of premonition, crashes over her head like a wave. Somehow, in the base of her brain, she knows that this moment of peace will be the last for a while. Goosebumps flare up her forearms. The back of her neck grows hot and taut with alertness.

The New Year's resolution she made just hours before—silently, to herself, as the clock marked midnight— was to stop being so damn emotional. Ease off that hair trigger,

embrace calmness. Be more mindful. Avoid jumping to conclusions. Yet, she can already feel that resolve slipping away, like water circling a drain. She has lasted all of two hours.

Before she can check the caller ID for the missed call, the vibration resumes. The photo of a uniform-clad man overtakes the screen. It's an old photo, but her favorite one of him.

Matthew.

Regret and shame, sour and sharp, floods Sawyer's stomach, chased by a white-hot streak she can't name. She doesn't bother with a greeting as she accepts the call.

"I thought you said we shouldn't talk anymore."

A beat, and then: "Sawyer."

One word. Just one word, infused with so much authority, so much formality, that it tells her everything she needs to know. Or nearly everything.

She sucks in a breath, swings her feet over the edge of the couch. "What is it?" she asks, hating the hyper, frayed edge to her voice. "What happened?"

"I'm on the porch. I didn't want to ring the bell so late. Can you open the door?"

She knows, from his cadence and tone—so stilted, so distant—that he has come to deliver the news she's awaited for seven years.

Had she been standing, she would have collapsed onto the sofa. As it is, she becomes momentarily preoccupied by a desire to sink down farther, farther, until the beige shag carpet, the house's foundation, the clay beneath it, the Earth itself consumes her whole.

She should leap to her feet, sprint to the front door. But she doesn't. She remains paralyzed on the couch, phone pressed to the side of her head, the hot screen searing into the whorls of her ear.

"Sawyer?"

“I’m coming.”

She slowly, methodically, disentangles herself from the shroud of blankets and makes her way to the little foyer. She turns the lock on the front door and cracks it open.

Matthew stands on the concrete stoop, looking the same as always. Except his eyes—his cobalt eyes are more downcast than usual, drooping at the edges. It isn’t lost on her that he’s vowed never to do this again, show up here in the middle of the night.

“Can I come in?”

“No.”

Matthew glances inside, eyes tracing the staircase that leads to the second story. “Is your father home? He should ... probably be here for this.”

“He’s unavailable.” She crosses her arms over her chest, projecting more bravery than she feels. “Just say it, Matthew.”

He inhales, steeling himself, then blows out his breath, along with the words: “They think they found her.”

Though she suspected that was what he’d come here to tell her, the actual phrase pummels her like a blow to the stomach. She doubles over a little, gripping her fingers tighter around her sides.

Matthew steps forward, as if to comfort her, then apparently thinks better of it. He retreats beyond the weathered welcome mat, jamming his hands into his coat pockets.

“Nothing’s certain. There will have to be ...” He swallows, Adam’s apple bobbing. “... lab tests, dental record comparisons, that sort of thing, to be sure. But Sawyer—”

He cuts himself off, begins fiddling with his ring, a gesture Sawyer recognizes as his nervous tic. She averts her eyes.

“Just. Say. It.” She bites off the words, willing this exchange to be over.

“The shoes were there.”

Sawyer can see them now as if it were yesterday, the sparkly teal sneakers threaded with coral laces. The color of a mermaid’s tail, Tristan had said appreciatively. Their mother, on the other hand, had been furious at the sight of the defaced sneakers. They’d once been virgin white and gleaming, purchased new at a price she considered outrageous.

“Where?” Sawyer presses, not sure she truly wants to know. “The shoes were *where?*”

Another pause, then: “In a grave. With ... the bones.”

*Grave.*

*Bones.*

As if fleeing the gravity of those two words, her mind declines to process them and instead unearths a series of inane factoids from a long-ago middle school unit on recycling and waste. The disturbing details from Ms. Hastings’s lecture on mindful consumption had long lingered, buried, in the back of her brain. Waiting for this very moment, apparently.

They’d discussed how long it took for everyday items to decay in a landfill. The revelation had turned her into their household’s self-appointed recycling czar for months.

A tin can: 50 years. A plastic bottle: 450 years. A toothbrush: up to 1,000 years.

A single pair of sneakers: 25-40 years.

Should she be thankful for this, then? That those distinctive shoes had remained, resisting decomposition, while the body attached to them disintegrated into the dirt?

The mental image pushes Sawyer to her limit. She spins from the open front door and makes it to the potted plant in the corner of the foyer just in time. She heaves, vomiting into the

terracotta pot—once, twice, three times. By the end, all that comes up is stomach acid, hot and stinging in her throat.

The plant was dying, anyway. Like everything else, the dieffenbachia had steadily declined in their mother's absence, despite Sawyer's best efforts at resuscitation.

She leans against the wall, sliding down it until her tailbone meets the wood floor, letting her head fall back against the outdated floral wallpaper.

Matthew crosses the threshold with a tentative step. He's wearing his long wool trench coat, the one that makes him look like an old-timey detective. The one that she loved. Loves.

Outside, one final, belated set of fireworks explodes like gunfire, as if to say, *it's done now*.

"Sawyer." Helplessness is etched all over Matthew's face. He creeps toward her in measured motions, a man approaching an unpredictable wounded animal.

"Go," she says, her voice hollow and flat. "I want to be alone."

He hesitates. "They'll want you to come in for a full briefing, I think. Not tonight, of course, but soon. With Tristan, and your father. Can you do that?"

"Please go," she repeats.

He reaches for her then, fingers grazing her forearm. She shrieks as if scalded. "Don't touch me. Just *go!* You can say you did your duty, now *go!*"

Matthew's eyes brim with anguish but he gives a tight nod and heads out into the cold, shutting the door gently behind him.

She allows herself to truly lose control once he's gone. She screams until her throat threatens to shatter, until the wordless wail ebbs into a kind of keening. She pounds her clenched fists against the cool wood of the front door until her knuckles bruise and split.

She fantasizes about breaking things. The clock on the mantel. The glass on the coffee table. The upright piano in the corner that hasn't been touched since her sister left. She imagines smashing her palms down on the keys until they fracture like teeth.

From upstairs, her father's voice comes, raspy and threadbare. "Sawyer? Sawyer? Are you there?"

*I'm not, she thinks wildly. I'm not here. I'm not here, and this isn't happening.*

She doesn't answer, but the intrusion on her outburst gives her pause. She reclaims her seat on the floor, nearly panting as the rage and shock begins to abate, just a little.

Her father falls silent.

The mantel clock ticks, ticks, ticks. Is she imagining that the timepiece sounds more aggressive than usual? It reverberates in her ears and her chest like a second heartbeat.

After a while, she stumbles to her feet, pitching and tipping, woozy as if she's been drinking, even though she hasn't been. Not tonight. It's her first sober night in a long time. She'd been so fleetingly proud of that, sipping her San Pellegrino in front of the television while wishing it were sparkling wine.

She locates her phone, the screen now blank and dark. She awakens it, navigates through the contacts to the number she no longer knows by heart.

She dials her sister. The one who isn't dead, but might as well be.

## Chapter 2 | Tristan | Now

The night the authorities find her missing sister, Tristan is at her usual post behind the front desk at La Tropicana.

She waves politely at the passing residents, all en route to New Year's Eve festivities. Men in smart suits and shined shoes. Women in stiletto heels and sequined gowns, toting \$500 handbags. Balenciaga? Prada? It's all the same to her.

A few proceed to their waiting Ubers as if she doesn't exist. As if she seamlessly blends into the furnishings, as unremarkable as a leather chair or a travertine coffee table.

Most pause to chat, though. They cluck their tongues in sympathy over her obligation to work the holiday. They hand her candy and leftover Christmas cookies and, in one case, a miniature bottle of Fireball. Gifts of penance, she supposes, for their obscene wealth. For their ability to live in a sleek, newly constructed building with a 24-hour concierge while she attends to their every need clad in cheap black trousers from Target.

Fashion shortcomings aside, Tristan is the ideal choice for the first face La Tropicana's guests saw, and she knows it. She is unfailingly pleasant. Discreet. She could greet 31B's wife one morning and his mistress the next without so much as a twitch of her eyebrow. She's perfected the art of wiping her face clean of every emotion.

Though she's the only non-Latina employee, her hospitality skills overrides her barely serviceable Spanish. It's nothing a broad smile and a few well-placed *lo sientos* can't fix. And she tries; that goes a long way. She's worked in bars and hotels and apartment buildings all over the United States. She's honed her skills in college towns and seaside resorts, in shabby, squat



complexes and fifty-story skyscrapers. She has the confidence—the delusion?— to believe she can win over virtually anyone.

The pile of offerings that amasses before her by end of shift confirmed as much. She tucked the Fireball into her bag, hoping the cameras hadn't taken note

Santi relieves her at 11 p.m., sweeping into the lobby in his usual sweet, skunky cloud of just-smoked marijuana. Like Tristan, he wears crisp black pants, white button-down shirt, ridiculous bowtie fastened at his throat. He'll be perfectly presentable, as long as no one sniffs him.

"*Feliz año nuevo,*" he sings, pushing past the swinging half-door that separated the front desk from the cushy lobby.

"You too. Hope it's a quiet night, for your sake." Tristan hefts her bag over her shoulder, preparing to leave.

Santi's dark eyes cloud with suspicion, running up and down the length of her body as if searching for some kind of sign. Some kind of clue.

"What?" she asks. She glances down, checking her uniform for dust bunnies or food stains.

"You're leaving again, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm leaving. It's end of shift. Did you think I was going to stay and keep you company out of pity?" Her voice brims with humor, but she shifts her bag to the opposite shoulder, an unconscious tell.

Santi leans back in the ergonomic desk chair, crossing his arms over his chest, appraising her with lifted eyebrow. "Not leaving for tonight. *Leaving*. You've got that ... look. That restless look."

Tristan doesn't reply. She glances out the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the manicured front gardens, where the penthouse residents are climbing into a sleek Lamborghini the color of a ripe banana. The sour expressions stamped into their faces suggests they're already bickering. A semi-permanent state of affairs.

"Maybe someday you'll tell me what you're running from?" he needles. "Or better yet, just ... stop? We need you here. *I* need you here. *Please* don't leave me alone with Luisa and Carlos. You know they barely equal one employee combined."

His pleas amuse and unsettle her in equal measure. "Good night, Santi," she says, turning away.

For once, he takes the hint, changes topics. "Well, I sure hope you're headed to some wild New Year's party. I need to live vicariously. I want a full report."

Tristan smirks. "Sorry to disappoint. I'll be in the same place I always am."

"Then at least bring me a glass of champagne at midnight?" he calls after her, voice ripe with hope.

She doesn't answer, just shakes her head, smiling.

Instead of making a beeline for the street, as most departing staff do, she heads in the opposite direction: inward, toward the bank of elevators. She rides one to the seventh floor, winds her way through the opulent ivory- and silver-hued hallways, until she reaches the exit to the resident parking.

The nighttime breeze, damp and cloying, whips her dark ponytail as she steps out onto the garage's rooftop. The skyline of downtown Miami and the Brickell district loom in the distance, the tall, slender buildings limned in violet and turquoise. The sky is already alight with

premature fireworks, the air pierced with concussive booms and high-pitched shrieks. It's almost a welcome change from the usual chorus of car horns.

When Tristan leans over the metal rail, she can see families congregating below. Faceless shapes, distant and unknowable. In the center of the streets, unnervingly close to parked cars, they detonate their cheap firecrackers. Traffic be damned—it's a holiday. Fountains of colorful sparks fizz and pop, casting the rows of identical houses in technicolor before winking out.

She vaguely wonders how many Miamians will lose a finger or an eye tonight.

The converted van she calls home squats in the far corner of the rooftop. Perk of the job: The ability to park in a reserved slot for free. Along with the ability to use the building's gym to work out, and its locker room for showering. Its wi-fi for her sparse correspondence.

Inside the van, she swaps her scratchy dress pants for buttery leggings and pulls on an oversized Southern Michigan University T-shirt, nearly transparent from use. It once belonged to her sister, and despite its pathetic condition, she can't bear to part with it.

She turns on the NYE countdown, the one in Times Square, as she cooks herself an omelette on her hot plate, trying not to think about La Tropicana's residents dining on caviar and filet mignon. The pan spits oil while, on the small wall-mounted TV, a washed-up rapper struts on an elevated stage.

"I thought you were dead," she says to the screen, as if the singer can hear her. As if the fact that he's writhing and gyrating in real time doesn't negate the statement.

The tiny compartment reeks of eggs and burnt cheese by the time she's finished. Even her pillow and blanket aren't spared from the stink. But that's the accepted risk of compressing

your entire life into a few square feet. She's used to it by now. One of the many tradeoffs for nearly absolute freedom.

She opens the double back doors to let in the humid night air. As she watches the sky explode with color, she feels a pang of nostalgia, as if already missing Miami. Already remembering it. She'll be gone soon, she knows. She can feel the itch building, like insects burrowing under her skin. How Santi had sensed it, she doesn't know.

She's memorized the layout of the streets, latticework imprinted on her mind. She no longer admires the passing buildings while riding the Metrorail, allowing them instead to pass in a blur of metal and wood and stucco. She rarely becomes giddy these days when a giant iguana skitters across her path. She's stopped pausing to appreciate the big, symmetrical palm tree on Santander and 37th, the one she'd once, early on, inwardly declared her very *favorite* palm tree.

Miami is a lover she's outgrown.

And that means it's time to move on.

She will remember the city fondly, maybe even return someday, when enough had changed to trigger that unparalleled arousal that came with entering a new city. When she could wander around, bumbling and ignorant, discovering new sights, new people, new experiences around every corner. When everything was shiny and new. Completely and blissfully unexpected.

Once things became predictable, she was out.

The decision unshackles her, makes her heart trip with lightness. She approaches the rear wall of her living quarters, stooped over to avoid knocking her head. On the panel that separates the back of the van from the cab, a map of the United States hangs on a cork board. Twenty-four states colored in thus far.

Now, she takes the purple Sharpie, tethered to the board by a string, and colors in the shape of Florida. Number twenty-five.

It's her ritual. How she says farewell to a place.

An electric thrill sparks in her chest at the possibilities ahead. Her eyes roam the outlines of the remaining states, trying to imagine what life would be like in Arizona. In Washington. In Montana.

She purposely averts her gaze from the upper Midwest. *That* is most certainly not under consideration.

In the end, she chooses Colorado. She sprawls on her narrow mattress, doors still thrown open to the Miami skyline beyond, and thumbs through photos online. Majestic pine trees. Snow-capped mountains. The complete opposite of South Florida.

Tomorrow, she will draft her resignation letter. Tomorrow, she'll break the news to Santi and Luisa and the rest of the Tropicana crew. Tomorrow, she'll begin her deep-dive research into Colorado. Potential campsites. Potential hospitality leads.

Within two weeks, she'll be on her way. She's never bailed on an employer without proper notice. She changes jobs so frequently that she needs to keep her behavioral record pristine, so she can always snag a positive reference when needed.

Decision made, she allows herself to savor what's left of New Year's Eve in the Magic City. She sits with legs swinging from the bumper of the van, listening to party horns blare below, watching a trio of escaped candy-colored balloons lift languidly toward the clouds. She drinks the Fireball straight from the plastic bottle. The warmth of the cinnamon whiskey spreads through her belly and chest, causing sweat to bead at her hairline.

When the ball in Times Square kisses the ground, when the obligatory “Auld Lang Syne” begins to play, she brings a chilled glass of sparkling wine down to Santi. Cava, not champagne, but close enough. He gives her a little kiss of gratitude on her cheek, veering dangerously close to her lips. She smiles and pushes him away, shaking her head again, before returning to the van.

It’s a good night. She thinks this, gratitude shimmering in the space behind her eyes, as she drifts into sleep.

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The phone shrieks beside her ear, startling her awake. She’s been immersed in a dream, a disturbing dream in which the sparks of fireworks sprung directly from her neighbors’ fingertips, igniting a battle in the streets below. The instruments of revelry turned into weaponry.

Though she had “do not disturb” activated overnight, the phone—anticipating an emergency—is programmed to ring when select contacts call more than once in a row. The front desk of La Tropicana, just in case. A handful of old friends she hasn’t heard from in years. Family.

She fumbles for the device, sends it clattering to the floor of the van. She curses as she roots around beneath the rudimentary bed. Without her glasses, she can’t make out the caller ID, but she has a sneaking suspicion it’s Santi, pleading for mid-shift refreshment or companionship.

Before she can even say hello, a voice she hasn’t heard in ages pipes through the speaker.

Not Santi.

“They found her,” the caller says, tone uncharacteristically flattened and hollowed out, scraped clean of emotion. Leaving no doubt as to what *found* meant. “You need to come home.”

### Chapter 3 | Arden | Then

The guy's name was J. Nolan Langford, a fancy name for a very *not* fancy boy.

Arden never asked what the J stood for. To inquire would only validate the absurdity of that nebulous floating first initial, which suggested he'd be better suited to Harvard or Yale than this smallish public college in south-central Michigan. She just called him Nolan, and he never instructed her otherwise.

She'd seen his picture online, but like most carefully curated internet images, it didn't really do him justice. The first thing she noticed, as he approached with a six-pack of Labatts swinging from his fingers, was his posture. He slouched as he walked, as if trying to wedge his body through a low doorway. That was the kind of thing—along with the distinctly juvenile aura that enveloped him like a haze of smoke—that couldn't be ascertained from a picture.

He was several years older than her, a junior, yet she immediately sensed the skewed power dynamic at play. He was one of those boys who still hadn't fully grown into his own skin. A late bloomer of sorts.

*She* was the confident one. *She* held the cards. And she liked this.

“Arden?”

“That's me.” She sprang up from the low stone retaining wall where she'd been waiting, gave him a peck on the cheek that caused a scarlet flush to spread, unchecked, over his neck and face. “Glad we finally got to meet in person.”

They had chatted online for a few weeks now, a tentative friendship born of curiosity and opportunity. When his initial message popped up on her screen, Arden saw a chance to dive headfirst into her new life by aligning with someone older, and snatched it.



She returned to her seat and deliberately crossed her legs, feeling her denim shorts ride up higher than her mother would consider proper. Though it was the first week of September, the fall chill hadn't set in yet; summer was in extra innings.

"Me too," Nolan said, collapsing beside her in a tangle of gangly limbs. He almost breathed the words, as if relieved that she matched her photo. No obvious defects, no Photoshop crimes committed. He handed her the six-pack with both hands, as if presenting an offering.

Was it painfully cliché to enlist a guy she met online to buy her alcohol on her first night at college? Yeah, probably. But it also seemed ... required. A rite of passage.

She was free now, or at least more so. Forty-five minutes by highway from her mother's overprotective gaze. From her suffocating paranoia, which had seemingly already infected her eldest sister and threatened to poison the rest of them in good time.

Turned loose on a stereotypical ivy-covered campus, crawling with other teenagers newly released from their cages, the sheer electric possibility raced through Arden's veins. She was ready to guzzle freedom like her cohorts, at this very minute, were guzzling spiked punch in frat house living rooms.

Perhaps if her sisters had been cooler, she could have simply texted them and requested a special delivery. A bottle of rum or vodka or anything she could mix with Red Bull. They might have deigned to leave their off-campus housing and return to the freshman dorms they'd once called home. Might have helped initiate their youngest sister into college life properly.

Unfortunately, her sisters were anything but cool. She loved them, yes—secretly admired them, even—but they were not cool. Especially not Sawyer, who always seemed six seconds away from a mental breakdown. The last thing Arden wanted was to trigger some invisible trip wire that would send them scurrying back to their mother to report on her misdeeds.

Their mother had quite literally wept for joy over Arden's acceptance to Southern Michigan. Not for the educational opportunities, though the school's art program was regionally renowned. No, she was comforted by the idea that Arden's older sisters could monitor her on the shared campus. Keep her "rebellious nature" in check. Make sure she didn't veer off-track.

Ever the contrarian, Arden applied to far more schools than necessary, hopeful for a far-flung alternative. California, maybe. Alaska. Overseas, even. God, anything to get the hell away from her mother's death grip. But in the end, only SMU offered a scholarship. So here she was, drinking very Canadian beer with a very Michigan boy, fifty miles from where she grew up.

She told Nolan this now, minus the derisive parts about him and the beer, as he twisted the cap off the first bottle and handed it to her. Its sides felt slick as a newly caught fish in her grasp. She tightened her fingers around its girth, determined not to spill her very first collegiate drink.

"Well," Nolan said, "I'm kind of glad for it, I guess."

"Why?"

"If your sisters were the kind of people who would buy you alcohol, you probably wouldn't have met up with me."

The comment dripped with desperation, but Arden said nothing, just smiled tightly and took a sip. She wondered if he considered this a date. She didn't. She simply considered it one new experience to kick off four years full of them.

En route to their rendezvous spot, she had noticed that the main quad, the one in the center of campus, thrummed with students like a beating heart. Young men and women reacquainting with old friends, eating from grease-spattered carryout containers, sprawling out

on blankets to read books. The books were always something acclaimed or controversial, of course, their covers spread wide to the world to ensure notice.

But here, in the secluded law quad, Arden and Nolan's only company was the occasional older law student, head bent, mind elsewhere. Their posture said it all: There was no time for debauchery when a lifetime of pursuing truth and justice and potential riches lay ahead. Their time for amusement had passed when they crossed the dais to collect their undergraduate diplomas. They had one foot in the real world now.

As she watched the tightly wound future lawyers stride by, Arden recalled how her mother had tried to nudge her into something suitable for pre-law or pre-med. "An artist, really? You'll never make any money, Arden Rose," she'd admonished, more than once. "Do you want to be living hand to mouth in some grimy studio apartment? You'll be a cliché."

"I'll be authentic," was all Arden replied, leaving her mother to shake her head, as if she'd said something deeply disappointing. As if her daughter's attempts to be genuine were some kind of personal affront.

Another pair of students passed, heads bent in hushed conversation. The girl was a stranger, but the slice of cheekbone glimpsed on the sandy-haired boy made Arden's heart surge in recognition.

"Matthew!" she called, unable to suppress the girlish enthusiasm in her voice.

Arden didn't miss the faint proprietary shadow that darted across Nolan's face. She was here with him, or supposed to be, and now she was summoning strange boys from across the law quad. She ignored his expression and bounced to her feet, approaching the couple, who had both swung their heads her way in surprise.

“Denny!” the boy exclaimed, using the pet name he’d bestowed upon her years before. He extended his arms to embrace her. His chest vibrated against hers as he spoke: “I still can’t believe you’re old enough to be in college.”

“Skipping a grade helps,” she quipped.

Nolan sauntered over. His hands were empty, and Arden, glancing over, noticed he’d slipped the six-pack behind a bush, obscuring it from sight.

“Hey, I’m Nolan,” he said, as if anyone had asked. “Nolan Langford.”

“Matthew Shanahan.” Matthew reached out to shake the younger boy’s hand, a distinctly Midwestern gesture, and after a moment’s hesitation, Nolan accepted it. “I’m ... friends with Arden and her family, from back in Clairmont.”

*That’s an understatement*, Arden thought wryly, but she said nothing, just nodded in confirmation.

“You go here?” Nolan asked. His skeptical tone suggested he was trying to ascertain whether Matthew posed any competition. Arden fought the urge to elbow him, warn him to take it down a notch. Why else would Matthew be wandering through the law quad? Did Nolan think he followed her from home? Seriously?

The older boy seemed not to notice the petulant undercurrent of Nolan’s question, or perhaps simply chose to ignore it. “Yeah, I’m first-year law.”

“Ah.”

Matthew seemed to remember the girl beside him then. He allowed his palm to connect with hers, their fingers automatically intertwining. “This is my ... girlfriend, Jessamine Prior. She’s visiting for the weekend.”

“Oh God,” the girl laughed, wincing at the sound of her full name. “Please, it’s just Jess.”

Arden’s eyes wandered over her. Long, strawberry-blond ponytail. A spattering of freckles across an upturned nose. Average height, average weight. Average everything, pretty much, except for her casually athletic build. The straps of her tank top revealed moderately toned arms and shoulders, suggesting someone who commits to doing hot yoga three days a week or lifting small hand weights regularly. She had nothing on Sawyer, looks-wise.

But Jess’s green-gray eyes were friendly enough, and when they traveled down Arden’s legs to her feet, they lit up.

“Those shoes are fantastic,” she said.

Arden did a little overwrought dance move to show off the shimmery teal sneakers, kicking one leg up behind her.

“Thanks,” she said. “I painted them myself.”

“Arden’s an artist,” Matthew said, smiling. His tone carried a note of pride, as if she were his own accomplished little sister. Jess smiled too, and nodded politely.

“That might be an overstatement,” Arden said. “I’m trying to be, anyway.”

Nolan’s desire to make Matthew and Jess disappear was palpable. “Well, we’d better get back to it,” he said, as if they’d been doing something far more significant than drinking Labatts and shooting the shit.

He tugged on Arden’s arm in a way she didn’t like, another gesture that oozed with possessiveness. Irritation prickled at the base of her skull. She decided then that she would finish out the six-pack with Nolan, but she would not see him again, if she could help it. She did not come to college to be owned by anyone. Quite the opposite, actually.

“Us too,” Matthew said. He leaned in for another half-hug. “Good to see you, Denny. Let me know if you need anything, OK?”

He and Jess left then, hand in hand, heading toward the entry to the law dorms with its mullioned windows. Arden resisted the urge to follow. Instead, she reluctantly trailed after Nolan, returning to their hidden six-pack and their stone wall.

“So,” he said. “It’s your very first day. What are you looking forward to the most?”

He was clearly trying to regain control of the evening, refocus the attention back on himself. Arden knew he would not broach the subject of Matthew again, in hopes that she would forget about him.

She decided to play along. She set her nearly empty bottle on the wall and leaned back onto the elevated grass plateau beyond it, shifting her weight into her palms. There was much less light pollution at the campus than in her suburban hellscape of a hometown. Above them, the early autumn sky glittered with a thousand stars. A fitting nod, she thought, to the endless possibilities ahead.

“Everything,” she said. “I finally, *finally*, get to live.”

She was aware the flowery statement was just as cliché as this whole night with Nolan. Yet, the words tasted as sweet on her tongue as the lingering, starchy notes of the forbidden beer.