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Chapter 1

ARRIVAL AT CEDAR GROVE HOSTEL

The cold wind brushed against the trees like leaves rustling in spring. A streetlight flickered along the streets of Tromsø. The nightlife there felt like an abandoned railway station.

The cab pulled up in front of an old, haunted-looking building situated in the middle of a lonely forest. The worn-out signboard hung loosely:

Cedar Grove Hostel.

Theora scrunched up her eyebrows, exhaling an amused sigh.
“It looks weird,” she whispered.

Her twin, Flora, chuckled beside her.
“Exactly why I selected this place.”

Sophie Berger, wrapped in a red shawl, was already pushing the door open.
“Guys, we should’ve never let Flora choose it. But now that we have... let’s go inside. Check-in closes in three minutes,” she reminded.

The five girls rushed up the wooden stairs, bags in hand, the wood creaking with every step. A flickering lamp was the only source of light in the eerily dim building. A woman with waist-length hair and amber eyes stood at the reception desk.

“You must be the girls from California. I’m Martha, and this is Cedar Grove,” she said with a smile — but something about it felt off. She handed over a metal key attached to a cheap wooden tag that read: ‘203.’

She added,

“The rules are:

Don’t come out of the room after midnight.

Never fiddle with things kept on the reception desk.

Don’t speak to the people who come here unnecessarily.”

The girls exchanged a look.

“Guys, what are we waiting for? The staircase is right here—let’s go!” Flora said hastily.

“Impatient girl,” Theora muttered.
“Let us first ask where the room is!”

“Third floor, at the end of the hall,” Martha stated, her eyes hovering over Emilie for a bit too long.

Room 333 smelled faintly of cedar and something one couldn’t quite name. The walls were cracked, covered with a thin layer of rusted white paint. The mirror was slightly broken; there were two bunk beds.

“Seriously? This was the only place you could think of?” Aurora said, shifting her gaze toward Flora.

Flora gave an annoyed expression and began to unpack her luggage. The girls also pulled out a faded flyer from the drawer.

Missing since 2016. Clara Jensen.

Beneath was a grainy photo of a girl with a bob cut, russet eyes, and a lopsided smile.

“Creepy,” said Sophie.

Theora's eyes narrowed.
“First this Martha, and now this flyer.”

Emilie shrugged.
“It adds to the vibe.”

The door creaked open, revealing Aurora with a guilty expression.
“Umm... I guess we have bad news. One of us will have to stay in another room.”

Aurora's gaze flickered to Emilie for a second before traveling to the rest of the girls.

“Ahh, I don’t want any of us to leave,” Flora said.

“Neither do we,” all four of them shouted together. Sophie engulfed them in a hug.

“But one of us has to leave,” Aurora said in a quiet voice.

Theora started sniffing.
“Let’s decide it.”

“We’ll vote,” Flora suggested.

“We’ll write the name of the one we want to evict on a chit. And we won’t write our own names.”

The votes were out, and Sophie collected them all and read them aloud.

“Emilie – 2, Aurora – 2... and the last vote goes to Emilie.”

Emilie felt bile rise in her throat, but she kept quiet. The rest of the girls looked at her sympathetically. One by one, they each hugged her. Flora and Aurora shed silent tears — Flora, the usual sunshine of the group, and Aurora, the one who never cried.

Sophie whispered sweet nothings in an emotional voice while Theora packed Emilie’s belongings, since Emilie wasn’t in the state to do so.

Two hours later, the excited chattering began again, thanks to Flora and Sophie.

But the room missed the warmth of Emilie.

Chapter 2

The Forgotten Fifth

Emilie Mendes in Room No. 334.

One watches them from the end of the hall.

Flora, Theora, Sophie, and Aurora—laughing, dragging their suitcases, moving like they belonged to something I wasn't a part of. Four girls. Four beds. One room.

And me?

Room 334, at the very end of the corridor, beside the flickering bulbs and the broken radiator.

How convenient.

They told me, "It's just how the rooms were designed."

"Not enough beds," Aurora had said quickly, not even meeting my eyes.

Sophie gave a weak smile—one of those four. Apologetic, but not truly. The kind of smile that doesn't reach the eyes.

I knew a lie when I saw one.

They wanted to be together—without me.

And I was the fifth.

Room 334 had all the necessities. One could survive in it.

But I felt like four walls stitched together by silence. I could sense the emptiness. The absence of warmth that a group sometimes carries.

I used to think I was never enough. But seeing my friends together filled me with warmth. I remembered the times when Flora laughed at Sophie and teased her along with Aurora, or when Sophie paired Theora with her endless fascination for space. Moments that reminded me we were together once—laughing at Flora's and my silly jokes, while others just gave her deadpan expressions.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by the taste of something salty—tears.

When had I started crying?

I wasn't meant to cry. I was told to be bold. To be strong.

To achieve things—either by hook or by crook.

They wanted me out, but I wasn't going to be a sobbing mess.

“OMO! Look at the bobblehead”— those jade-green eyes, that face that could stand out in a crowd, even in a full classroom.

“She looks like she’s lost a puppy or something,” said a redhead with a disgusted expression, tossing her words like a grenade.

“Are you talking about me?” I asked, pointing to myself with a confused expression and scrunched-up eyebrows.

“Does anyone else here look like a mix between a chimpanzee and an orangutan?” the redhead chirped.

“We’re Erika and Zara,” she continued. “Erika is the leader of this dorm. And trust me—it wasn’t exactly pleasurable seeing a disgraceful creature like you walk in.”

“If you want to survive here,” Erika added, “you better fly by the ruins—or better yet, live under Erika’s shadow.”

A green-haired girl with thick, middle-framed glasses stood up and moved beside Erika. I wasn’t sure of her name.

“She’s Johanna,” Zara said. “Someone intelligent—something you’ll never be.”

A lump rose in my throat. I rushed to the washroom and stood in front of the mirror.

Was I this hateful?

What used to guide me? Tell me what was right?

Was this the reason my so-called friends kicked me out?

I knew I never had a bond like Flora and Sophie, or Theora and Aurora. But I thought... I thought they didn’t hate me.

Was this revenge for something I wasn’t even fully responsible for?

What’s the point of living if no one even likes you?

I stepped out of the washroom, wiped my tears quickly, and headed to the sleeping area.

Everyone had already taken their places.

When I reached my bed, it was piled with garbage and litter.

I couldn’t sleep in such a mess.

So I lay down on the floor.

And they mocked me.

I tried to cover my ears, but their words cut too deep. I couldn't sleep. I kept wondering what I had done to deserve this.

Soon, the morning bell rang.

Everyone woke up. Just as I started to rise, Erika shoved me to the side with her foot.

Everyone laughed.

The mess I was tangled in felt like it was about to erupt—into something unforgettable.

But then, a sliver of light slipped through a crack in the window.
And for the first time, I felt a spark of hope.

Maybe—just maybe—I wasn't going to be everyone's doormat.
The punching bag for their rage.

I stood up, ready to face whatever was coming.

Because I could feel it—
Something big was about to happen.
Something life-changing.

The rest of the dorm stirred with laughter, hushed whispers, and careless pillow tosses.

My presence was static—disruptive, unwanted.
But I walked forward anyway, even if my legs trembled.

The hallway mirror reflected my face: puffy eyes, red nose, dried tears streaked across my cheeks like war paint.

I didn't recognize the girl staring back.
She looked like someone trying to scream for help underwater.

No one met my eyes at breakfast.

No slurs.

No jokes.

Not even Erika.

They were quiet—and somehow that silence was worse than mockery.
It was cold. Empty. Like I was already a ghost.

When I sat down, I noticed a note folded beneath my tray.

Just one word, written in shaky ink:

“Meet me at midnight near the attic.”

My stomach twisted. I scanned the room.
Zara was laughing at something on her phone.
Erika stirred her coffee—too slowly.

That kind of slow that isn’t natural.

The day dragged.
I couldn’t eat.
Couldn’t focus.
Every whisper felt like it was about me.
Even Flora’s voice in my head had gone quiet—like she’d given up on me too.

That night, I lay still. Eyes wide open.
Shadows moved across the ceiling, even though the air was still.

At 11:57 PM, I slipped out of bed.
Not a creak from the others. Too quiet.

The staircase to the attic was darker than I remembered. The motion sensors weren’t working. Each step echoed like it was screaming into the void.

My hands trembled.
Was this going to be an ambush? A prank?

I reached the door.
My fingers wrapped around the handle. It felt ice cold.

I pushed it open.

A single candle flickered in the center of the attic, its flame dancing with my heartbeat. Shadows twisted across the walls into shapes I couldn’t name.

Then I heard it.

A scraping sound.

Something—or someone—moving behind the crates.

I stepped forward.

“Who’s there?” My voice cracked like shattered glass.

Silence.

Then a whisper—so close, it brushed the back of my neck:

“You should’ve stayed in the dark.”

I spun around.

Empty.

But the air smelled like burning wax and rusted metal.

The candle blew out—on its own.

A low creak echoed through the room.

The door slammed shut.

I lunged for it—

It wouldn’t open.

I was locked in.

In pitch black, I heard whispers. Breathing. Movement.

Not human.

This wasn’t bullying.

This wasn’t a coincidence.

This wasn’t just a prank.

This was something else.

Something darker.

Something waiting.

And whatever it was—

It was going to be

something life-changing.

The door creaked open again, revealing Martha.

She didn’t say a word. But her eyes told me I had to leave.

So I did.

No questions. No resistance. No explanations.

I just walked away.

But I was sure of one thing:

From tomorrow, I'll act normal.

I won't talk about this.

I won't interfere in anything again.

They made me feel oppressed.

And now, I'll make sure I vanish right in front of their eyes.

Chapter 3

CHAPTER 3: Midnight's Warning

The storm had turned mean overnight, almost like it had a soul. It battled the Cedar Grove hostel with such fury that even the strongest windowpanes trembled. Rain lashed the roof in sheets, and the wind groaned through the halls like something alive. The power had already gone out—but the girls barely noticed.

Because Sophie was gone.

“She’s been gone way too long,” Flora said, facing the fireplace, her hands clenched by her sides. “Something happened.”

“She only went to Clara’s office,” Theora replied, her voice soft but steady. “Ten minutes... but that was two hours ago.”

Aurora stood stiffly by the window, tracing the outlines of trees bending in the gale, mumbling, “She would’ve come back. She left her phone, for God’s sake.”

The hallway to the staff wing was darker than the rest of the hostel. At the far end, Martha’s office door stood slightly ajar, swinging gently in the draft.

Flora pushed the door open. The air inside smelled faintly of lavender—like it was trying to mask something worse.

“Sophie?” Theora called, stepping into the dim room. The office looked untouched. The desk was neat. Files stacked perfectly.

But Sophie’s red shawl lay forgotten on the chair.
Aurora found it—no, under the desk.

“I think I’ve seen this—ohh, this is Sophie’s scarf!” she exclaimed.

Emilie gasped. Theora’s face went pale. Flora looked panicked.

“She can never go anywhere without this. It’s horrifying. Let’s go out.”

They turned to leave, but Flora’s phone buzzed with a notification. She checked it—only to find something disturbing:

SHE IS NOT THE ONLY ONE. COUNT THE HANDS.

Seconds later, everyone’s phones began buzzing—flooded with the same message.

“How the hell did we all get the same notification at the same time?” Theora muttered. They stood frozen in fear.

Then, the door creaked open.

Sophie stood there, expressionless. In her hand was a strange, rusted box with a brownish tint. Intricate numbers and letters were carved into it—almost unreadable. The whole thing gave off weird, negative energy.

“Sophie, dopey!! I missed you so much!”

“Where were you, Sophie??”

“We were Hella scared!”

“Finally, you’re back!”

“Did I ever tell you you’re my favourite??”

Questions and relief burst out like fireworks.

“If only you guys would stop talking, I could actually explain,” Sophie sighed.

“Also, I know I’m the baby of the group—it’s natural that you were all concerned.”

She sat down at their usual hangout spot and motioned everyone else to sit too.

“Oh my my! Here’s my shawl—I missed you, Red,” she cooed at her scarf.

“I hope everyone treated you right while I was gone,” she added in her usual dramatic tone.

“Enough, Sophie. Now tell us where you went—and what made you go there when you know we’re in a new place and barely settled,” Theora said calmly, in that calculated tone of hers.

Sophie’s face turned serious. She sat on the floor and exhaled sharply before continuing.

“Girls, Martha called me to her office. At first, I was confused, but I went. When I got there, the office was empty. It was spotless—everything in place. Nothing felt off... until I heard a drawer open by itself. I thought maybe it was just the wind from the open window, but still... I got curious and walked to it.”

“There, I found this board.” She pointed to the item in her hands.

All eyes flicked to the object. It was old, mysterious, and definitely creepy.

“It looks interesting,” Flora said, tilting her head.

“You know what I found? **It’s the Ouija Board.**”

The moment Sophie said it, gasps filled the room.

The only lamp flickered. A cold breeze swept through, brushing against their skin.

“Isn’t that the forbidden game Martha warned us about?” Aurora asked, narrowing her eyes.

“If you’d let her explain...” Theora said with authority, and—like always—everyone listened.

“My Aurora is so smart,” Sophie beamed. “Yes, it’s that exact forbidden game. But I was thinking—why should Flora always come up with the fun ideas? Let me be the fun one this time. I say we play it.”

“Hey hey, Sophie! I love you, but don’t attack me like that. It’s not my fault I’m not a buzzkill,” Flora snickered, throwing a look at Theora and sticking out her tongue.

“Typical Flora,” Theora sighed internally.

“But come on, we’re literally living inside a horror movie right now. Why not play it?” Sophie grinned. Only Flora nodded eagerly. Emilie looked unsure, but not completely against it.

“Please, Theora, Emilie, Aurora. Life’s boring if you don’t take risks. Like... plain bread with orange juice on a ceramic plate. For breakfast,” Flora pleaded with her cutest doe eyes.

Aurora sighed, softening slightly.

Unlike Theora, who hadn’t moved an inch.

“Sometimes I wonder if you were swapped in the hospital, Flora,” Emilie muttered just loud enough for Theora to hear.

“Excuse me!?” Theora snapped.

“Come on, Theora. It’ll just be harmless fun... right, Sophie?”

“Of course! Please, Theora, I beg you. And Aurora—you haven’t fully agreed yet,” Sophie added, flashing puppy eyes.

“Do you guys even care what I think?” Emilie said dramatically. “I feel so ignored.”

“No, dear Emilie,” Flora said. “It’s just that we know you’re not a buzzkill like two people in this room.” She flicked her eyes toward Aurora, who looked genuinely offended.

“Now I’ll show you what real fun means,” Aurora declared, suddenly determined.

“Yayyyy! Aurora said yes!” Sophie squealed.

“You guys will never listen to me, will you?” Theora asked, sighing.

“If everyone agrees, what’s the point in me arguing?” she said, and then added seriously, “But we must be careful. No recklessness. Especially you, Sophie and Flora.”

Despite herself, a small smile escaped her lips.

The five of them jumped up together in excitement.

The game was about to begin.

A tale to unfold.

A mystery to unravel.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4: No Signal No Escape

The wind scratched at the windows like it wanted to be let in.

The girls had gathered in the lounge of Cedar Grove hostel. A low fire burned in the hearth, casting shadows that danced with every crackle. Outside, the snowstorm had picked up—fierce and blinding. Aurora sat by the window, her fingers curled around a chipped mug of cocoa, watching the flakes swirl in chaos.

“Sophie, we already have enough weirdness happening around here,” Aurora said awkwardly.

“Come on, don’t be so boring,” Flora grinned. “It’s just a game.”

“It’s never just a game,” Emilie murmured, but the others were already curious. The atmosphere was perfect—storm outside, flickering lights inside, and an abandoned hostel deep in the woods of Norway.

It was exactly the kind of night horror movies were made of.

They dimmed the lights and formed a circle around the board. Theora, reluctantly, sat beside Sophie, while Flora stayed close to the edge of the room, arms crossed.

“No phones,” Sophie said, collecting them all. “We go analog tonight.”

Just as she placed the phones on the table, the power flickered—

And then died.

Everything went black.

For a few seconds, silence pressed in from all corners.

Then the fire cracked again, and their faces reappeared in its faint glow.

“Perfect,” Sophie said with a smile.

And they started the game.

Each girl took her turn, fingertips brushing the board, and slowly—together—they unlocked something ancient.

The five fingers blended into a tale of terror.

Something that could gnaw at your insides just by thinking of it.

Something that could make you tremble.

Something that could crawl into your dreams and never leave.

Yet they continued, even as invisible voices screamed for them to stop.

For the first time ever, Flora felt uneasy.

Theora, who always made calculated decisions and never doubted them, now desperately wanted to stop.

Aurora, calm and composed, was restless.

Emilie, who had always fought her insecurities, felt those very fears clawing at her skin.

And Sophie, once cheerful and excited, silently wished she could turn back time and undo her decision.

After nearly an hour of being consumed by the game, Theora stood up abruptly.

“Enough!” she snapped. “Everyone, get up. Go to sleep.”

No one argued.

They all stood silently and obliged—like spellbound dolls being put back on a shelf.

The corridor leading to their rooms felt darker than usual. The kind of darkness that horror movies start with.

Cedar Grove no longer looked like a hostel—

It looked like a black hole, waiting to swallow them whole.

Emilie stood up, shivering, and silently walked toward the door.

She looked like she had just seen a shadow.

Everyone else was too scared to speak.

When Emilie disappeared into her room, an eerie silence crept into the lounge.

No one moved. They just looked at each other, eyes wide.

“Come on, let’s sleep now,” Sophie tried to say—

But no voice came out.

A moment later, Theora spoke.

“I think we should sleep now. It’s late.”

Everyone nodded quickly.

They all wanted to sleep...

But none of them could.

Each girl had a gut-deep feeling:

They’d opened a door they couldn’t close.

Now, the darkness was leaking through—

Filling their minds with fear.

Aurora felt something behind her.

She froze.

Paralyzed.

She turned slowly, her heart thudding with every second.

Eyes darting through the shadows—

Looking for movement. For answers. For monsters.

The air thickened, heavy with tension.

She hesitated... body tense.

Then—suddenly—she spun around, terrified.

“Flora, are you CRAZY?!” she yelled.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to mess with me!?

YOU SCARED ME TO DEATH!”

Aurora’s voice echoed through the quiet.

“Haha! Pranked you!” Flora laugh

Chapter 5

Chapter 5: In the Blink of Silence

“Aaaaaaaaah!” all three girls shouted in unison, and Theora gasped with her eyes vivid. The sight before them was so horrifying that for a few moments, all of them forgot to breathe. Another blood-curdling scream followed from Theora, and she ran out of the room.

"What lay before them made them bawl their eyes out."

Flora ran outside to comfort her sister at the sight of Emilie, drenched in blood with her hand and leg sprawled out on the floor, yellow warnings that read “DO NOT CROSS,” and police officers and forensic experts all gathered around her.

“Incandescent lights beeped in deep red repeatedly.”

“This is all our fault,” Sophie wailed, while Aurora sank deep onto the floor as her knees felt like jelly. Theora was constantly puking while Flora held her hair back and patted her, crying as if there were no tomorrow.

After a while, Flora notified their parents about the situation and Theora’s unstable health. They were panicked, but due to legal bounds, they couldn’t visit—still, they made sure to check in with Flora every hour.

When the twins reached Sophie and Aurora, Flora engulfed them all in a bone-crushing hug.

Sophie, like always, blamed herself while they all were grieving.

Theora sat unmoving, now portraying herself as a failure—someone who couldn’t even fulfil a promise she had made to Emilie’s mother. And on top of that, her worst nightmare had been triggered.

“Where were the other girls in this dorm when it occurred?” Aurora sobbed.

“They aren’t in a condition to talk now,” a familiar voice echoed.

The girls turned their heads to find Martha standing there with a disturbing expression, along with two interrogating officers.

“Miss Theora, I suppose you can answer that?” Martha asked, though her voice lacked its usual authority.

“Noooooooo! She isn’t in a state to answer!” Flora exclaimed as Theora sat with her eyes fixed on the floor.

“Then the rest of you, follow me to my cabin,” Martha ordered.

“Guys, I don’t think we should leave Theora like that,” Sophie said, “but we can’t avoid the police either.”

Aurora nodded, still unable to believe Emilie was dead.

They walked in silence to Martha’s cabin.

Martha opened the door to her office and looked back to make sure no one else was following.

Inside, her expression was resolute.

“The police are waiting to speak with you. You are required to go to the police station for the interrogation—and make sure nobody gets to know about this.”

They made their way to a nearby station.

As they stepped into the interrogation room, the girls’ hearts sank.

The cold, sterile atmosphere closed in around them.

The officer’s eyes locked onto each of them—his expression unreadable.

“Let’s begin,” he said, voice firm but detached.

The girls exchanged nervous glances, minds racing with uncertainty.

“You sit here. The rest of you may wait outside,” he said, pointing to Flora.

The questioning had begun, and their words would be scrutinized, analyzed, and potentially used against them.

Flora’s throat tightened with panic.

She couldn’t breathe properly.

She hesitated—part of her wanted to protest, to ask to stay together—but the tension in the room warned her not to test limits.

She stepped back, hands clenched so tightly her knuckles turned white.

The metal door to the interrogation room clicked shut, separating her from the others. Suddenly, the corridor outside felt colder than anything she’d ever known.

The sterile white lights above buzzed faintly as she sat on the bench.

Her legs bounced uncontrollably, heart hammering against her ribs.

She glanced at the officer by the front desk—he didn't look at her.

He just tapped on a screen, indifferent.

Everything around her felt sharp, foreign.

It was like she had wandered into a nightmare.

Even her breath crawled out of her lungs—heavy and suspicious.

She leaned forward, burying her face in her hands, trying to drown out the sounds of her thoughts.

They think it's us... they think it's me...

Every footstep behind the doors made her flinch.

Every creak of the hallway sounded like a scream.

What were they asking Flora right now?

They were grieving.

They were terrified.

And yet—here they were, being treated like criminals.

Flora's fingers trembled as she pulled out her phone to check the time.

No messages.

Her parents would check in soon, but even that didn't soothe her.

Her body was in the station, but her mind kept replaying Emilie's body—

The blood.

The tape.

The—

“Ten days to prove you didn't do this.”

The officer's words echoed louder in her head.

When the door to the interrogation room opened again, she shot to her feet so fast she nearly tripped.

The officer looked at Sophie and said simply:

“You are next.”

Sophie’s breath caught in her throat.

As she stepped inside, the door closed behind her with a dull finality.

And in that moment—standing alone in the harsh light, facing a table across from two unsmiling officers—Sophie realized:

This wasn’t just about proving innocence anymore.

This was about survival.

Chapter 6

The Coldest Chair

The door clicked behind Flora with a soft, final thud.

She stood frozen in the corridor for a moment, blinking under the harsh ceiling lights. The momentary silence was broken only by the faint, muffled voices coming from the room where Sophie now sat, facing the same policemen Flora had just escaped from.

The cold still clung to her skin like the chair had followed her out.

Aurora looked up from the bench, eyes red.

"What did they ask?"

Flora didn't answer right away. She walked past her, sat down heavily beside Theora—still trembling—and let out a long breath.

"I am not sure where to begin," Flora whispered.

Theora glanced at her sister.

"Just... tell us."

Flora leaned back, closed her eyes for a moment, and then spoke.

"They started slow. Like they were trying to make me feel comfortable, but it didn't last."

"What time did you last see Emilie Mendes alive?"

"I told them around 4:10 AM. She was in the common room with us. We were hanging out there as Emily was allotted the other room. We didn't get much time with her, so we had made a plan to hang out this weekend. When I last saw her, drinking that strawberry juice she always had, she smiled at me. That was the last time."

"Were there any signs that she was upset, scared, or acting unusual?"

"They asked that a few times. I said no. But honestly? She did seem... distracted. I didn't think much of it then. Now I can't stop thinking about it."

"They kept circling back," Flora murmured, twisting her fingers. "Like vultures."

"Do you know of anyone who had an issue with Emilie?"

"I hesitated. I mentioned Zara and the weird tension they had last week. Emilie brushed it off, but it might've meant something."

As they sat in the waiting room, the tension was palpable. Flora leaned back in her chair, her eyes fixed on the floor. Theora sat beside her, fidgeting with her hands. Sophie sat across from them, her expression calm, but her eyes betraying a hint of concern.

"I still can't believe Emilie is no more," Theora said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Flora nodded in agreement.

"I know. It's like she vanished into thin air."

Sophie spoke up, her voice measured.

"We need to think back to that day. Did Emilie say anything to any of us that might give us a clue about what happened?"

Theora thought for a moment.

"I remember she was acting strange when we were hanging out in the common room. She seemed distracted, like she was worried about something."

Flora nodded.

"I remember that too. And it felt like there was also some awkward atmosphere between Emilie and her roommates."

Sophie's eyes narrowed.

"That's interesting. I didn't know they were having issues."

Theora's eyes widened.

"Do you think Zara might have something to do with Emilie's disappearance?"

Flora's expression turned thoughtful.

"I don't know, but we should definitely talk to her about it."

As they continued to discuss the events leading up to Emilie's disappearance, the waiting room fell silent—the only sound was the soft hum of the fluorescent lights overhead. The three friends sat in contemplative silence, each lost in their own thoughts, trying to piece together the mystery of Emilie's vanishing.

After a while, Aurora joined them too. Her face was devoid of emotion, like she wasn't feeling anything anymore. She was the closest to Emilie and the most affected—but still, she handled Sophie and Theora with love and care.

"What did they ask you?" Sophie questioned curiously, her face etched in deep concern—and something else.

"The same questions they asked you guys, but in a twisted manner—as if to manipulate me and make me say something fishy. But there was nothing fishy, so I just spoke the truth."

"Girls, I don't know if I'm supposed to say this aloud, but... did they tell you all to be a part of this investigation too?" Theora asked calmly, but her eyes betrayed a storm inside.

"OMG!! Did they tell you too?" Sophie gasped—and the others did too.

"They told me it was because Emilie's dad is a very influential person. He wanted this case closed quickly so it wouldn't affect his image—since he was never really there for her," Aurora elaborated, and the others nodded.

"So, what are we going to do now?" Flora asked quietly, still shaken by the interrogation.

"We have to unravel the mystery of Emilie's death. We have to unravel the truths of the people of Cedar Grove. We have to prove our innocence. And if not—" Aurora paused, her voice cracking, "—then we're doomed. And we'll probably be spending our lives in jail."

Her cheeks were stained with the remnants of her tears.
But now, they were done crying.

It was time to solve the web of lies that had cost Emilie her life.

Chapter 7

Tangled Threads

The hostel had never been this quiet.

Snow blanketed every window, muffling sound and light alike. Inside Cedar Grove, the silence wasn't peaceful — it was suffocating. Flora sat on the edge of her bed, staring at the floorboards as if they might whisper answers.

A knock.

Officer Alex Miller entered, stern as ever, accompanied by a tall man in a grey coat with sharp blue eyes and a leather folder tucked beneath one arm.

"This is Inspector Kai Becker," Alex said. "He'll oversee the lockdown procedures and regulations for the next ten days."

Inspector Becker stepped forward.

"Everyone here is under surveillance until we determine what happened the night Emilie Mendes was found dead. No one leaves. No contact with the outside world. No exceptions."

Aurora opened her mouth to say something, but Inspector Becker raised a finger.

"You are not prisoners — but you are prime suspects."

A chill colder than the Norwegian air swept through the room.

Cedar Grove Investigation Period Protocol

- No room switches
 - Daily check-ins at 10 AM
 - Communal dining only
 - No one to be alone after 9 PM
 - Surveillance in hallways and staircases
 - Questioning schedule to be followed
 - Any breach will be treated as obstruction
-

As soon as they left, Sophie ran her finger down the flyer of Clara Jensen.

“They literally suspect us. I mean, we were her best friends.”

“They are watching our every move,” Theora sighed, eyes flickering to the corner ceiling camera, its red light blinking steadily.

Flora rested her face on the table.

“They think we are hiding something.”

“But we aren’t,” Aurora said. “We’re just... stuck.”

“Tomorrow morning, we will start our mission by interrogating her roommates,” Theora announced, then proceeded to sleep.

Her mind drifted to the promise she had made to Emilie’s mom three years ago.

FLASHBACK

2022, Esenberg Hospital, California

“Theora, come in please,” came the pale voice of a once stunning woman now lying on a deathbed, numerous machines and life support attached.

She was none other than **Samantha Mendes**, the greatest pop singer of the time. The mother of Emilie, and wife of the famous CEO, **Ethan Mendes**.

She had married him for popularity’s sake, but what the world saw as love... only a few closest ones knew the truth.

The one who suffered the most from Ethan’s toxicity was Emilie.

Samantha had conceived twin girls — but only one survived. Emma Mendes was lucky to die rather than live with a father like Ethan. To the world, he was perfect. To Samantha and Emilie, he was a nightmare.

Samantha was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer. Despite all the money, fate had other plans.

This had a tremendous effect on Emilie — she was inconsolable. Aurora, Sophie, and Flora took turns comforting her.

But Theora had been called in for something else.

Samantha acknowledged Theora's calculated yet protective nature. She gave her a responsibility — **to protect Emilie**.

"Auntie, I'm really devastated by this news. You're one of the nicest people I've ever met," Theora said, sitting down. Her face was blank, but her eyes showed her pain.

Samantha chuckled faintly.

"Dear, life is a game... and I failed the 32nd level, I guess."

"Please tell me if there's something I can do to ease your problems," Theora offered.

"Well, there is something. Will you do it for your Auntie?"

"Anything, Auntie."

Samantha kissed her teeth once and began.

"My Emilie never experienced much love. She was raised in luxury — servants, nannies, the best of everything — but what she craved was warmth. We failed to give her that... until she met you all."

"You girls brought out the real Emilie. Now that I won't be around, I want you to protect her. I love all of you — but Aurora is insensitive, Sophie is too ambitious, and Flora is careless. **You**, Theora, are exactly what Emilie needs."

Theora hesitated.

"Auntie, as much as I'd love to... isn't this a really big responsibility? I mean... I'm just a kid."

"You know about her father. She has no one else. Ethan was an orphan. My family cut me off when I became a pop singer. They were orthodox. I was a shame to them."

"I'm so sorry. I will definitely keep your promise."

A small, strained smile appeared on Samantha's lips.

But then Ethan and some doctors barged in. Samantha's expression changed. She urged Theora to leave — and she did, with a heart full of resolve.

Minutes later, Samantha's heart stopped.

The doctors closed her eyes.

Samantha Mendes was no more.

Chapter 8

CHAPTER 8: CASE FILE – EMILIE MENDES

The four girls sat in their dorm room, silence thick around them — heavy with unspoken questions and a haunting sense of something unfinished. They had all been best friends with Emilie. Her sudden death had left them shaken, raw.

Sophie finally broke the silence, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Guys... we need to start investigating her roommates.”

Theora nodded, her eyes sharp with determination.

“I know. I think we should head out.”

The silence stretched again. Each girl was lost in her own thoughts — fear, guilt, confusion. Then, as if on cue, Aurora stood up.

“Come on. We need to go.”

The others nodded. With hushed urgency, they began to plan their next move. After some debate, they decided to visit Emilie’s dorm — the one her roommates had moved out of after the incident. Maybe something was still left behind. A clue. A memory. The truth.

With determination in their steps, they grabbed a few essentials and slipped out into the hallway.

OUTSIDE EMILIE’S ROOM

The hallway was dim, the sick orange glow of an emergency light buzzing above. Room 335 stood at the end — where her roommates had shifted after Emilie’s death. It loomed ahead like a sealed box of secrets.

They paused outside the door.

Sophie leaned in and whispered,

“If Erika, Zara, or Johanna are inside — follow my lead.”

She knocked twice.

A beat passed... then the door creaked open.

Zara stood there, arms crossed, eyes narrowed.

“What do you want?”

“We have questions,” Theora said firmly. “About Emilie.”

Zara hesitated. Then, with a stiff nod, stepped aside.

“Five minutes. That’s all.”

INSIDE ROOM 335

The room was small and sparsely furnished. Tension hung in the air like fog.

Sophie spoke first.

“Emilie told us she didn’t feel comfortable around you three. Said you were mean to her. Especially Erika.”

Erika’s jaw clenched.

“Mean? She was paranoid. Always lost in her own head.”

“She was scared,” Aurora shot back.

Erika rolled her eyes. Before she could say more, Johanna entered, leaning against the dresser. Her arms crossed, expression unreadable.

“Look,” Johanna said flatly, “we didn’t like her. That’s not a crime.”

Silence. Heavy. Awkward.

Then Erika said quietly,

“She told me once... there was something in the mirror. That when she was alone, it mimicked her.”

The four girls exchanged glances. Something cold slid down Theora’s spine.

“Did you see it too?” Sophie asked.

Erika didn’t respond.

Then Zara murmured, almost too quietly to hear,

“Sometimes... it felt like the reflection moved just a second too late. Or smiled when I didn’t.”

Everyone froze.

No one laughed.

No one called it stupid.

And then—

knock knock.

The door swung open and Officer Alex Miller stepped inside.

“Girls. I need to speak with you. Now.”

Their hearts pounded as they followed him out.

At the end of the hallway stood Inspector Kai Becker, arms crossed. He pulled Alex aside, but his words weren’t quiet enough.

“This wasn’t just a murder,” Kai said, his tone low but grave. “The girl knew something. But she died before she could reveal it.”

Some girls frowned, curiosity piqued. Others flinched.

Suddenly, soft sobs echoed in the corridor.

It was Sophie.

“If only we hadn’t left Emilie alone... If we’d just tried harder to stay in the same room... or moved to another hostel... maybe she’d still be alive. This is our fault.”

Her voice cracked, tears streaming.

Aurora moved forward to comfort her, while Zara stood awkwardly nearby, uncertain.

Kai kept a neutral face but waved at the others.

“Stay back. Give your report.”

Alex stepped forward, voice all business.

“What did you gather from the interrogation?”

Theora stepped up, handing over a folder.

“Sir, this is the report Flora and I compiled. Based on what we got from Erika, Zara, and Johanna.”

Kai nodded, flipping through it.

“Good progress. Keep working — maybe then you’ll avoid jail.”

The girls exchanged uneasy glances.

“You may leave,” Alex said curtly.

With that, the officers headed toward Martha’s office.

The girls slowly drifted in separate directions — each haunted by the same question:

What had Emilie known that got her killed?

And deeper still...

what hadn’t they told the officers?

Because none of them had admitted the truth —

That the night Emilie died...

They had played the Ouija board.

It was forbidden in the hostel.

It was a stupid risk.

But they did it.

And now, none of them could say if what happened that night had been a coincidence...

or a consequence.

They had made a pact to never speak of it.

But truth doesn’t stay buried forever.

And when it rises —

it brings darkness with it.

Everyone is a suspect.

But only one is the killer.

And the web they’ve fallen into?

It’s darker, deeper, and far more twisted than any of them ever imagined.

Chapter 9

CHAPTER 9: Pieces of Her

Officer Anna Olsen was new to the Black Doorway case — but not to investigations. Calm and observant, she had a quiet way of reading people and piecing together clues others often missed.

As she entered the hostel's interrogation room, Anna carried the weight of the investigation in her eyes but the steadiness of someone determined to uncover the truth — no matter how dark it got.

Her sharp gaze dropped to the small key in her hand.
It might unlock more than just a drawer.
It might unlock the truth behind Emilie's death.

The hostel was unusually quiet that morning — the second day after Emilie had died.

The early sun tried to break through thick gray clouds but only cast a dull, cold light over the Black Doorway's worn wooden floors and peeling wallpaper.

Inside, the police had claimed a corner room as their investigation base. Forensic technicians moved with precision, dusting surfaces and collecting samples from Emilie's sealed room — now completely off-limits to hostel occupants.

Anna sat at a narrow table, flipping through a slim folder filled with photographs and notes compiled overnight. Beside her, forensic analyst Raj Patel examined the mirror, now wrapped in protective plastic film.

"We found traces of an unusual adhesive on the back," Raj explained, pointing at close-up images on his tablet. "It's not typical household glue. It's a rare compound. Whoever did this... knew what they were doing."

Anna nodded, mind spinning.

The mirror. Found in Emilie's room — cracked, the shards still embedded in the frame.

It was the only object in the room that seemed to whisper secrets.

Her phone buzzed sharply.

A message from Alex Miller:

"Meet me outside. We need to talk."

She rose and made her way through the dim hallway toward the hostel's back exit.

Alex was waiting beneath the overhang, face pale and grim.

"Why the sudden call?" she asked, folding her arms.

Alex glanced behind him, voice low.

"We didn't really leave last night."

Anna's brow creased.

"What do you mean?"

"We told the girls there was an urgent matter," he said slowly. "But the truth is... we found something in the forensic report this morning. Something we can't ignore."

Inspector Kai Becker appeared behind them, nodding grimly.

"We discovered the same rare chemical from the mirror — not just on the back, but around the crack in the frame too," Kai said. "Someone tampered with it. On purpose."

Anna's eyes narrowed.

"And the footage? Did you get anything?"

Alex tapped open a clip on his tablet.

"Look here. 2:55 a.m. Movement near Emilie's door. It's blurry — but someone's definitely there."

"She saw someone she wasn't supposed to," Anna murmured.

Alex rewound the footage.

"Let's check earlier. We might've missed something."

He scrubbed back to 2:40 a.m. The hallway was empty. Shadows flickered from the distant window. Then — at 2:47 — movement.

A figure entered from the far side. Taller. Slower.

But instead of approaching Emilie's door, the figure stopped — just barely in frame — facing the cracked mirror outside the bathroom.

Between Emilie's room and the main girls' dorm.

Anna leaned closer.

“Pause. Enhance that frame.”

Alex tapped quickly, adjusting the brightness and contrast.

As the shadows lifted, a faint outline became clear — hoodie up, face hidden. But one thing stood out:

A distinct faded patch on the left sleeve.

Kai leaned in.

“That’s not a staff uniform.”

“No,” Anna said slowly. “That’s a varsity jacket.”

She rushed to a file, flipping through a set of printed photos from the hostel’s welcome event weeks earlier. Twenty faces, smiling under string lights. She jabbed her finger toward the back row.

“There. Julian Vance. Same jacket. Same build. Same slouch. Same faded patch.”

Alex’s lips tightened.

“He told us he was asleep during the time of death. Claimed he hadn’t spoken to Emilie in days.”

Kai nodded, jaw tense.

“And yet there he is. At her door. Right near the mirror.”

“And maybe not just watching,” Alex added quietly. “Maybe waiting.”

Anna’s thoughts raced.

Julian — distant, quiet, too quiet. Always hovering in the background, never really questioned.

“What if Emilie saw him?” she whispered. “What if she knew something about him?”

Kai pulled out a folded piece of paper from his coat — Emilie’s final note. The one found hidden in her sketchbook.

“Don’t trust what you see. I saw her again. In the mirror. It’s not over.”

He exhaled.

“Or maybe... it wasn’t her Emilie saw.”

Anna stood up, heart pounding.

“Get Julian in here. Now.”

Chapter 10

CHAPTER 10: Another Suspect

Julian Vancer, a mess worker at Cedar Grove hostel, was summoned by Officer Anna through Assistant Raj. He walked into the interrogation room looking like a man on the edge — face twisted in confusion, like he was hanging between life and death.

Officers Anna and Alex sat across the cold metal table, eyes sharp. As Julian entered, he was flanked by two constables, his hands chained. They held him firmly, their stance tense — like they were ready for war.

Alex gave a quick nod.

“Unchain him. Make him sit.”

Julian was shoved onto the interrogation chair.

“So, you’re the killer of a 17-year-old girl,” Alex snapped. “The one who murdered Emilie Mendes.”

Julian kept his eyes fixed on the floor, jaw clenched so tight it looked painful. He said nothing.

When he didn’t respond, one constable grabbed his collar and struck him with a metal baton.

Julian’s eyes widened. He snapped out of it.

“WHAT?!” he cried. “You think I killed Emilie? Are you out of your minds?!”

Anna stood up and slapped him — hard. The room went dead silent.

“You dare scream at us?” she growled. “After committing such a heinous act? You should be sentenced to death.”

Julian let out a dry, humorless laugh.

“Now I get it. You couldn’t find the real killer, so you’re pinning it on me? Or maybe the real culprit paid you off.”

That was it. Alex stood, fists clenched.

“You little—!”

Anna threw out her arm, stopping him.

“Don’t.”

She sat back down, crossing her legs coolly.

“We have proof.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve got your fake ‘evidence’ all ready,” Julian mocked.

Without a word, Alex flipped his laptop around and pressed play on a surveillance clip.

Julian leaned forward.

The blood drained from his face.

There he was — in a black varsity jacket — standing outside Emilie’s dorm. 2:55 a.m. Just two minutes before her death.

Anna smirked.

“What now? Gonna say that’s your doppelgänger?”

Julian looked down. Swallowed.

“You’ve misunderstood this.”

“Then explain,” Alex snapped. “Go on, Your Highness.”

Julian nodded.

“Yes. That’s me. I won’t deny it.”

He took a deep breath.

“But it’s not what it looks like. I was there because Johanna — one of Emilie’s roommates — is my niece. My maternal niece.”

Both officers stiffened slightly.

“She’s the reason I recommended this hostel to her. She’s obsessed with comics — especially banned ones that aren’t allowed here. She begged me to get them for her. Her mother — my sister — passed away years ago. She was all I had. And Johanna... she’s the only family I have left. That’s why I couldn’t say no.”

“For how long?” Alex asked coldly.

“A year,” Julian said. “She’d call me late at night, and I’d quietly drop off her comics.”

“Why only at night?” Anna pressed.

“Because it’s against hostel rules. If anyone saw me, especially a student, they could report me for favoritism. So I waited until everyone was asleep.”

He looked at them, pleading.

“I swear on everything — I didn’t kill her. I had no reason to.”

Anna narrowed her eyes.

“Why should we believe you?”

“Check the CCTV,” Julian said quickly. “I’ve been visiting her room at night for a year. She’ll confirm it. Ask Johanna.”

“If you’re lying,” Alex said, voice sharp, “you’ll be shredded into pieces.”

Just then, a voice came from the doorway.

“We already did.”

They turned.

It was **Theora**, holding a report in her hand. Her expression was unreadable, but her eyes burned with clarity.

“What?” Alex blinked. His voice softened as he saw her.

“We questioned Johanna while you were interrogating Mr. Julian,” Theora said. “Here’s the report.”

She stepped forward and handed it over.

“Johanna confirmed everything. Julian is her uncle. She admitted to using him to smuggle comics. She’s with Martha right now — taking punishment for breaking hostel protocols. But she’s innocent.”

Alex smiled faintly.

“Good job. You’re making solid progress.”

He ruffled Theora’s hair lightly and handed the file to Anna.

Anna raised a brow, flipping it open. She read quickly, then gave a small nod.

“You’re free to go,” she said to Theora with the faintest smile.

Then her expression turned cold as ice.

“As for you,” she said to Julian, “you’re still a major suspect. You’ll be kept in holding until your name is completely cleared. And once it is, you’ll still face punishment from Martha for your... ‘comic smuggling stunt’.”

Julian didn’t argue. He looked... empty. Lifeless. Just nodded.

The constables stood him up and dragged him down the corridor toward the holding cells.

Day Two ended.

But the darkness surrounding Emilie’s death?

Still thick.

Still hungry.

And they were nowhere closer to the truth.

Chapter 11

CHAPTER 11: The Sister in the Shadows

In a dusty archive room, heavy with the scent of old wood and mildew, Aurora knelt beside an unlogged carton marked:

“EMILIE MENDES – ROOM 335: PERSONAL EFFECTS.”

It wasn’t tagged. It hadn’t been entered in the chain of evidence.

Officer Kai had missed it.

Aurora carefully peeled back the tape. Inside were sketchbooks, a cracked makeup mirror, and tucked between the pages of a notebook... a single, unmarked photograph.

Her heart nearly stopped.

The photo showed a younger Emilie — maybe twelve or thirteen — with a resigned, blank expression. Beside her stood a tall, gaunt woman with wild black hair... and only one eye. The other socket was sunken and scarred. Yet her expression was oddly peaceful. **Unsettlingly peaceful.**

“That’s the woman from her sketches,” Sophie whispered.

“The one in the mirror,” Flora’s voice shook.

Without a word, Theora took the photo and ran to the police office.

MEANWHILE

Officer Alex Miller was reviewing surveillance footage when Anna entered. Her eyes were serious, voice firm:

“This was found in a sealed box from Emilie’s room. It wasn’t documented. Aurora says Emilie may have drawn this woman before.”

She dropped the photo on his desk.

ALEX’S POV

I looked down... and the world stopped.

No.

Impossible.

And yet — there she was.

Linnea Miller.

My sister.

Faded, older, but still unmistakably her.

She was supposed to be gone. Buried. Forgotten.

I had locked that truth away twelve years ago.

Anna was watching me.

My voice, practiced and flat, came out smoothly:

“She might be... a distant relative. Or a nurse from an old center. Hard to tell in this condition.”

Anna squinted.

“Flora said Emilie always felt watched. That this woman would appear in the mirror. Could it be trauma-induced hallucinations?”

“Possibly,” I replied quickly. “But let’s not chase shadows. Focus on the footage. Julian passed Emilie’s room exactly two minutes before the time of death.”

Anna nodded and turned to leave.

But I couldn’t stop staring at the photo.

My fingers hovered over it like it would burn me.

FLASHBACK – MILLER HOUSE, 2019

The asylum fire.

2019.

No survivors reported.

Except one.

Patient #813 – Linnea Miller.

Committed for paranoid hallucinations. Violent episodes. Hearing voices.

I was twenty then.

She had been brought home after the fire.
She was burned. Badly. Her eye — gone. Her body — stitched back together just to survive.

Linnea sat on the bed, bandages everywhere.

“It hurts,” she whispered. “They said I was insane. They kept me in there. You never visited me.”

“I wanted to. But the reports... they forced me to stay away,” I said softly, sitting beside her and gently stroking her hair.

Her voice cracked.

“I wish I died in the fire.”

I pressed my fingers to her lips. Wiped her tears.

“Linnea, I need you to promise me something.”

She let out a faint, broken laugh.

“What now? Want my other eye too?”

I swallowed hard.

“Stay in the shadows. They’ll come for you again. But if I fake your death... if I hold a funeral and say you died from the injuries, no one will search.”

She looked at me, searching.

“I’m trying to get promoted. I can protect you. But only if you stay hidden. It’s risky... but it’s the only way.”

She paused.

And then... nodded.

She agreed.

And we kept the lie alive.

Until now.

Now she was back.

AUTHOR’S POV

That evening, Sina — a quiet, former staff member — approached Alex with trembling hands.

“Detective... I don’t know what Emilie told you. But she knew things. She wasn’t imagining the woman. I... I think she was real.”

Alex looked up, sharp.

“What woman?”

“She called her the watcher. She said she came through mirrors.”

Alex’s expression hardened.

“You need to write this down. Bring it to Officer Anna by tomorrow morning.”

Sina hesitated.

“But what if she’s still here?” she whispered.

Alex didn’t respond.

But in his mind, one thought echoed:

You're right to be scared.

Later that night, Alex stood alone in front of the hallway mirror.

He looked into it.

At first, nothing.

Then — like a shift in shadow — **Emilie appeared behind him.** Standing still. Watching.

And beside her — **Linnea.**

Unmoving. One eye gone.
The other, locked on his reflection.

Alex didn’t flinch.

“I’ll protect what’s left,” he whispered. “Even if it means lying. Even if it means hiding you.”

He turned and walked away.

The photo... still burned in his pocket.

Chapter 12

CHAPTER 12 – SHE SHOWED ME THE TRUTH

THEORA

I lay in bed, eyes wide open. Sleep wasn't coming. The clock blinked 4:20 a.m.— the exact time Emilie had died.

The silence in the room felt suffocating, like something was waiting to be revealed.

And then...

Everything around me blurred. The dorm faded, and I was standing alone in the cold, dim hallway of the hostel. My footsteps echoed softly, but the air was too still.

At the end of the corridor — I saw her.

Emilie.

Pale. Quiet. Staring into the hallway mirror.

Her eyes weren't afraid. They were filled with sorrow... and urgency.

I felt pulled toward her. Like she needed me to see something.

She didn't speak. Just looked at me. Then... her reflection in the mirror flickered. Behind her, a shadowy figure moved — blurry, lurking just out of frame.

My heart nearly stopped.

Then, Emilie slowly pointed downward — toward a small, worn wooden box under the mirror.

I knelt, hands trembling, and opened it.

Inside was a folded photograph — yellowed with age.

Emilie's eyes locked onto mine.

And in my mind, clear as glass, I heard her whisper:

“Find the truth... but don't tell them.”

I gasped awake. Drenched in sweat.

It didn't feel like a dream. It felt like a warning.

I threw on a sweater, heart racing, and slipped quietly into the hallway. The hostel was silent.

And there it was — just like in the dream.

The mirror. And beneath it... the box.

Hands shaking, I opened it.

The photograph.

Same one.

I unfolded it — and froze.

Alex Miller. Smiling.

Beside him stood her — the woman from Emilie's photo. The woman with one eye.

My stomach dropped.

What was this? How was no one talking about this connection? Why was this hidden?

I rushed back to our dorm, photo clutched in my hand like a live wire.

The girls looked up the second I walked in.

"I saw Emilie," I breathed. "She showed me this. She wants us to know something. Something the police are hiding."

Flora leaned in. Her voice dropped.

"Alex and the one-eyed woman... together? This changes everything."

Sophie's jaw tightened. "If he knew her... and her connection to Emilie... there's a whole side of the story we don't know."

Aurora nodded slowly. "We have to be careful."

"I'm serious," I said. "We can't tell the police. Not yet. Alex is leading the case — if he's connected, he might be hiding something."

Flora's eyes hardened. "Then we figure it out ourselves."

A heavy silence followed. The hostel curtains rustled in the wind.

“Are we sure about this?” Aurora asked. “If we’re right... then the guy leading this entire investigation is hiding something huge.”

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Flora said. “Emilie trusted us. She didn’t come to me for nothing.”

“She came to all of us,” I whispered. “In different ways. We just weren’t listening.”

Sophie sighed. “Then our next move needs to be careful. No confronting Alex. Not yet.”

“I’ll look into the woman,” Aurora offered. “She might be listed in the official yearbook with the investigation files. We just have to sneak in.”

“I’ll keep the photo safe,” I said, folding it and slipping it into my sweater. “We can’t let it fall into the wrong hands.”

Sophie hugged her knees. “You think Emilie knew it would come to this? That we’d have to dig?”

Aurora’s voice was soft. “Maybe not all of it. But... she knew something was wrong. That’s why she left us pieces, not answers.”

“I keep wondering what we missed,” I murmured. “Some clue. Something small.”

Flora leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “Well, we’re not missing it now.”

Aurora nodded. “We have to be smart. No rushing.”

Sophie added, “Quiet too. If someone is hiding something... they could already be watching.”

I stood up. Fierce.

“Let’s go get that file.”

“Wait, that’s risky—” Flora started.

But the moment I narrowed my eyes — she shut up.

Minutes later, we were crouched under the wooden table of the office. Sophie tiptoed nervously to the cabinet.

Earlier, she had declared: “I’ll walk up, grab the file, boom — done.”

Yeah. No.

Her heart was pounding. Her feet moved like they were glued to the floor.

The file was there. Red. Slightly rugged. Tucked between two massive ones.

As she reached for it... BOOM.

One of the fat files tumbled forward.

Sophie's hand flew to her mouth. Frozen.

Flora dove forward like a superhero and caught it mid-air.

Everyone blinked — full slow-motion Bollywood scene.

Flora stood up, smirking like she'd won an Olympic medal.

Sophie groaned. "Ugh. I hate being humbled."

Before Theora could roast her, Aurora swooped in and grabbed the investigation file. Time to get serious.

Aurora flipped through until she found:

Officer Alex Miller

Age: 25

DOB: 27 June 1999

Post: Senior Investigation Officer

Parents: Hanna & Leonardo Miller

Address: 23/49, MILLER Mansion, Tromsø

[Photo Attached]

She tried to match the photo with the one-eyed woman, but the mother's photo didn't match.

Sophie took the file, about to slide it back — when she noticed a tiny chipped passport-sized photo on the same page.

She pulled it out. And froze.

It matched.

Beneath it, the name was covered with dried nail polish.

“If we chip it off, we’ll know,” Flora said. “Who has big nails?”

Everyone stared at her.

She answered herself.

With her almond-shaped nails, she started scraping. But the polish fought back. And Flora? Loved a challenge.

That’s when—

Footsteps.

“Oh sh*t,” Sophie hissed. “Someone’s coming!”

Panic mode activated.

Aurora tried to help Flora chip faster. Sophie and I stood watch.

The door began to turn—

And Martha walked in.

Sophie and I threw ourselves in front of her like shields.

Meanwhile, Aurora and Flora shoved the file back into place.

Martha raised her brow. Too calm.

“What are you girls doing here?”

Aurora, smooth as ever, stepped forward.

“We were looking for Officer Kai. We found something. A report.”

Martha nodded slowly.

“Well... the cameras here are destroyed. Until they’re repaired — stay out.”

Then she paused. “Also — Emilie’s autopsy report is out. My office. Tomorrow morning. 8 a.m. sharp.”

She brushed dust off her jacket and walked out.

The air stilled.

The girls exchanged looks.

More questions. More shadows. More secrets.

And now — Emilie's final report.

They braced themselves.

Whatever came next...

Would change everything.

Chapter 13

CHAPTER 13 – WHAT THE BODY REVEALED

The morning light spilled into Cedar Grove Hostel, but it did little to warm the tense atmosphere inside. Flora, Theora, Sophie, and Aurora sat silently in the lounge, eyes fixed on the door to Martha's office.

At exactly 8:00 a.m., the door creaked open.

Martha Dudik stood there, holding a brown envelope — thick, sealed, and heavy with truth.

The postmortem report.

“Come in,” she said softly.

The girls followed her inside, hearts pounding, nerves coiled tight like rope.

Martha sat at her desk, laid the envelope flat, and carefully broke the seal. She pulled out a crisp, typed document and cleared her throat.

TROMSØ FORENSIC MEDICAL EXAMINATION REPORT

Name: Emilie Mendes

Age: 17 years

Date of Examination: 7 June 2024

Examiner: Dr. Ingrid H. Larsen, Forensic Pathologist

Case Number: 2024-TF-4578

Summary of Findings:

Cause of Death:

Blunt force trauma to the occipital region of the skull, resulting in cerebral hemorrhage.

Time of Death:

Estimated between 4:15 a.m. and 4:20 a.m. on 7 June 2024.

External Injuries:

Multiple contusions and abrasions on the forearms and hands, consistent with defensive wounds.

Bruising around wrists and ankles, suggesting possible restraint or forceful holding.

Additional Findings:

Scratches and bruises on the lower back and flanks, consistent with physical struggle.

Fingernail scrapings revealed traces of black acrylic paint.

Residue of industrial-strength adhesive found along the edges of the bathroom mirror in subject's room.

Toxicology:

No substances detected in blood or urine.

Comments:

The victim was attacked from behind.

She attempted to defend herself.

The nature of the wounds suggests use of a heavy blunt object — possibly a hammer or crowbar.

The adhesive residue and paint traces indicate staging or environmental tampering.

Signature:

Dr. Ingrid H. Larsen

Tromsø Forensic Medical Examiner

Martha folded the report carefully and looked up.

“That’s everything.”

Theora’s fists clenched.

“She was held down... she fought back.”

“She didn’t die instantly,” Martha said quietly. “The injuries were critical, but death took minutes. Not seconds.”

Aurora’s voice was barely a whisper.

“The mirror... the adhesive. It wasn’t just broken. Someone set her up.”

Flora swallowed hard.

“Who would do something so... cruel?”

The silence in the room turned heavy. The truth was sitting in front of them, too monstrous to fully grasp.

And then — Theora snapped.

“I can’t... I can’t breathe,” she gasped, bolting to her feet.

Aurora rushed to her side.

“Theo, look at me. Breathe. In... out... in...”

“No—no, I see her—Emilie—blood everywhere,” Theora’s voice cracked. “And the pain—and the silence after—”

Sophie quickly grabbed a bottle of water and unscrewed the cap.

Flora sat beside Theora, gently rubbing her back.

“We’re here. You’re safe. Just breathe.”

But no one in that room felt safe anymore.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14: The Forgotten Blood

Kai sat alone on the bench, the letter trembling in his hands.

Rain had started again—soft, persistent. Around him, the crowd had thinned. Mourners left with quiet nods and murmured condolences, but Kai remained. A wooden box rested beside him, opened to reveal a faded photo, a hospital band, and the envelope he had avoided opening since the funeral.

He blinked—

—and just like that, the world faded.

Ten Years Ago – Tromsø

The sky over Tromsø was iron-Gray, heavy with rain that slid down the apartment windows in thin, steady lines. Inside, the silence between them was louder than any storm.

Clara zipped the suitcase slowly. Deliberately. Like every sound it made hurt her.

Kai stood by the kitchen doorway, arms limp, eyes red. He looked years younger than he was—vulnerable in a way he never let himself be. Not as a police officer. Not even in grief.

“You’re leaving,” he whispered. “You’re really leaving.”

Clara paused, her back still to him. “I have to.”

“Why?” His voice cracked. “Why now? After everything?”

She turned slightly—just enough for him to see the tight line of her mouth, the way her eyes glistened. But no tears fell.

“I have to,” she repeated softly.

Kai stepped forward, barely steady. “You don’t have to do anything, Clara. Not without talking to me. Not like this.”

She shook her head. “It’s not that simple.” Her voice trembled, thick with emotion. “I’m leaving because I have my reasons. And I don’t feel the need to explain.”

“Then at least tell me where I lacked,” Kai begged. “Let me fix it. And you’re taking our daughter too?”

“I have legal custody of Jenny. I have every right to take her with me,” Clara said, standing with her bag.

“Life is about emotions, not laws,” Kai choked out, his tears finally breaking free.

“I guess this was the lesson,” Clara whispered, looking at him one last time.

“Pretty faces and pretty words don’t equal pretty souls, Kai. Goodbye.”

Her words pierced straight through him. The day felt too heavy to carry.

Outside, Clara stood with her two best friends, Samantha and Linnea. She hugged them tightly, whispering something only they could hear. All three were sobbing—afraid to let go.

The trio had always been inseparable, bound since childhood. They had stood by each other through everything. A friendship that had lasted a lifetime... until now, when Clara decided to drift away.

She never told anyone the real reason for leaving—but she made sure it would be recorded as a “missing case.” Samantha’s husband, Ethan, handled the formalities after Samantha begged him to. Kai, being a police officer, handled the rest. He had no choice but to fulfil Clara’s last wish before she disappeared.

Clara and Kai had adopted Jenny from foster care when she was just a newborn. Her birth parents had given her up due to financial struggles. Even her name—Jenny—was chosen by Clara.

When Clara decided to leave, she took full custody of Jenny. She didn’t even ask for alimony.

Jenny, only 10 at the time, didn’t understand much—but still agreed to go with Clara.

As adults, each woman had chosen different paths. Samantha became a pop star, married Ethan, and had a daughter—Emilie. Linnea became a psychologist working with asylum patients. Clara had once tried philanthropy but didn’t succeed. She eventually chose a quieter life as a homemaker, married to Kai and raising Jenny.

That’s why no one knew how Clara would manage after leaving. She had no income, no alimony, and still took Jenny with her.

Without even looking back for a final goodbye, Clara walked toward the cab, holding Jenny's hand. Jenny smiled and waved at Kai, Samantha, Linnea—and 10-year-old Emilie.

Kai tried to smile back. He tried to wave. But he failed.

He cried instead.

FLASHBACK ENDS

Kai was jolted back to the present by a gentle shake on his shoulder—a distant relative, asking if he was okay.

He smiled weakly and nodded. His lips tasted of salt. He wiped the tears away.

That moment had shattered something in him. He had never been the same.

His mother died the day he was born.

At 10, he lost his favourite aunt, who had been like a mother—and his uncle blamed him for it.

At 20, he lost his beloved dog.

And when Clara left... with Jenny... it broke him.

That was the moment Kai changed into who he was now—stoic, cold, detached.

He looked at the box beside him again. Inside, there was a sketch.

It was a drawing of him and Jenny—drawn by Jenny herself, years ago.

Beneath it was a note, written by his father.

TO KAI,

MY SON, YOU HAVE SUFFERED A LOT IN LIFE, AND YOU WERE UNCONSOLEABLE WHEN CLARA AND JENNY LEFT YOU. WHEN I FOUND THIS SKETCH THAT JENNY HAD DRAWN OF YOU TWO, I KEPT IT AWAY. I WAS AFRAID IT WOULD ONLY MAKE YOU MISS HER MORE.

DON'T BE ANGRY WITH ME. MAYBE IT WAS THE WRONG DECISION IN YOUR EYES.

FROM,

YOUR DAD

Kai clutched the letter and the photograph to his chest.

He cried silently. As if—just maybe—holding them tight enough could bring back what he had lost.

A shattered hope.

One that had never been fulfilled.

Chapter 15

Ch 15 : The Three Faces

The rain tapped gently against the frosted windows of the Cedar Grove police outpost. Inside, Anna Olsen stood quietly, flipping through a thin but confidential file—its corners worn from time, its pages lined with names, timelines, and photographs. Her eyes paused on three faces: Samantha, Clara Jensen, and Linnea.

She closed the file and walked out into the hallway where Officer Raj Patel stood reviewing a tablet.

"Raj," Anna said calmly but firmly. "I want you to take these photographs to the girls—Flora, Theora, Sophie, and Aurora. Ask them if they recognize anyone. But don't lead them. Let them talk."

Raj frowned, taking the file from her. "You think they'll see something we haven't?"

Anna's eyes narrowed. "They lived close to Emilie. They may have seen something—someone—they didn't realize was important."

In the lounge of Cedar Grove Hostel, the four girls sat cross-legged on the couch, the air tense with unspoken theories and unresolved grief. Raj Patel entered with a brown folder in hand.

"Girls," he said gently. "I'm going to show you a few photographs. All I ask is that you tell me if any of these faces feel familiar."

He placed the first photo on the table—Samantha, a woman with hauntingly tired eyes and a soft smile.

Sophie leaned in. "That's... Emilie's mother, right?"

Raj nodded.

Then came Clara Jensen's photo—her face confident, almost cold, but younger than the missing posters the girls had seen.

"I've seen her before," Theora whispered. "Not here... I think in one of Emilie's sketchbooks."

The final photo was of that woman, her expression neutral, but her features so painfully familiar.

Flora's voice cracked. "That's the girl in the photo Alex kept hidden in her drawer."

Aurora stared. "We assumed it was an old relative... but they all look connected. Somehow."

Later that evening, the girls gathered in their room, sketchbook pages and notes spread across the floor. The silence was heavy—not just with suspicion, but with realization.

"They were connected," Sophie said. "Clara, Samantha, and that woman. This wasn't just about Emilie."

Theora's fingers ran over a page. "Aunt Samantha... her mom... the woman Emilie trusted. The one who died. She knew something. Maybe even about Clara's disappearance."

"And Samantha knew Clara and that woman," Flora added. "They are together in this picture, all smiling."

"Which brings us back to this unknown woman," Aurora concluded. "Why did Emilie keep their photo hidden if they were close?"

At the station, Anna stood once again in the evidence room, this time alone. She opened the confidential file that included an internal report from years earlier—a cross-investigation involving Samantha, Clara, and Linnea.

The file also included one unmarked page, a personal note Emilie wrote during an interview:

"I saw her again. She wasn't the same. But I knew it was Aunt Linnea."

Anna had known. She had read the investigative link between Linnea and Officer Alex Miller—her brother—and Kai Becker's involvement with Clara years ago. She could have said something earlier—but she didn't.

Because facts, not relations, led the case.

She closed the file slowly and whispered to herself, "No bias. No protection. Just truth."

The investigation was getting deeper. No matter how hard they tried to untangle the web, they were getting more and more involved in this mess. Secrets that were meant to be buried were being brought back to life after a simple murder case shook them all. This case wasn't just ordinary—it was something much deeper than that.

On the other hand, the girls were on their way to Anna's office as part of their daily report based on whatever they had collected for the case.

As they passed through Alex's office, they heard a faint—very faint—sound of someone sobbing. Flora and Aurora missed it, but Sophie noticed. "Is someone... Shall we check?" Sophie whispered softly.

"No, it isn't appreciated if we eavesdrop—" Aurora was about to give a lecture, but then they heard some words: "Why d-did th-they have to do th-this..." A masculine, trembling voice came through the door, and before the girls could stop themselves, their feet moved by default.

The sight they saw was confusing, but intriguing enough. They saw Officer Alex crying like a baby, holding a photo frame in his trembling hands. He was whispering sweet nothings to the figure.

"I guess we should leave. It's not right to watch someone being vulnerable, especially someone we know. We have nothing to do with whoever he is crying for," Sophie affirmed. But Flora held her hand.

"Or we do have something to do with it," she intervened.

"Huh?" Aurora asked, clearly confused.

Flora pointed to the photo frame in Alex's hand. "Don't you guys think that this figure is similar to the woman we saw Alex with in the previous investigations?"

Aurora and Sophie squinted their eyes—then gasped.

"Yes, this is the same woman," they both said in chorus.

"I miss you... my Linnea. I miss you so much," Alex sobbed again. And before he could turn to the window, the girls ducked their heads and decided to confront Officer Anna for clarity—because this might just be a misunderstanding.

As they made their way to Anna's office and explained the situation to Assistant Raj, he relayed it to Anna. She decided it was time and asked Raj to inform the girls that she would meet them the next day, as she needed some time to grasp and comprehend the situation herself.

The girls sighed and slumped their shoulders. They were missing Theora—her scolding, her facepalms, her everything. They didn't know what was coming next, but one thing was for sure—something big was coming up. They made their way back to the hostel, hearts racing with worry and anticipation.

Chapter 16

Ch 16 : The Sister in the Shadows

The girls sat on the couch in Anna's office, their gazes fixed on the photograph lying on the table. Anna's eyes were locked on the photo too.

"So, what was the fuss about?" Anna questioned, raising her brows.

"Mam, actually we need to tell you something. We saw Officer Alex crying in his office. We didn't mean to eavesdrop, but we overheard him saying a name—Linnea—while holding a photograph in his hands. When we looked closely, it matched the one Assistant Raj sent. So we're here to clear things up," Aurora explained effortlessly.

"I see you girls have figured it out," Anna sighed. "Fine. It's time, I guess." Saying this, she stood up and grabbed the same investigation file they had tried to fetch the previous day.

"The truth is... from what I know, Linnea is Alex's sister, who was also friends with Samantha and Clara. That's what I could figure out from the pictures."

"Sister???" Sophie gasped. "How many twists are there in this case?!"

Aurora, still composed, said, "Mam, we would like to know about it from Officer Alex as a part of the investigation, since this piece of information plays a crucial role."

Anna pondered for a moment and then nodded. She stood up and made her way out, with the girls trailing behind.

"Alex, I think you might have something to share with us, right?" Anna smirked.

"Huh?? What are you guys talking about?" Alex's face drowned in sheer confusion.

"Linnea... we're talking about her," Flora sighed, her usual demeanor long forgotten.

Alex's face turned pale in horror, but he tried to play it cool. "Who? Lana what? I don't know anyone like her."

Anna handed over the polaroids of Linnea's pictures—one with Emilie, and one with Samantha and Clara. "No need to lie anymore. Just tell the truth."

Tears gathered in Alex's eyes, threatening to spill, and he finally broke down, sobbing. "Linnea Miller is my sister. She was the dearest to me. After our parents died, she was the one who took care of me—acting like a mother when she was supposed to live her own life and not pacify me all the time," he sobbed, pausing before continuing.

"2019—the most horrific year of my life. A fire broke out in the asylum where she worked. All the patients and staff—basically everyone—died. Except... my Linnea. She survived. My Linnea survived but... instead of being happy, everyone blamed her. They accused her of causing the fire. And the reason?" He chuckled hollowly. "She survived. That was enough for them to blame her, even though she lost her eye. No empathy. No compassion. Nothing. They held her accountable for the fire and tried to institutionalize her, claiming she wasn't mentally stable." Tears spilled freely, continuously.

His eyes darkened, and he continued, "So, I did what I had to do—as her brother. She did everything for me. It was my turn. I used my position in police training and pronounced her dead. I asked her to stay in the shadows forever. That was the only way I could protect her—and I did. Two years later, the judiciary system proved her innocent, but I couldn't bring her back because she was 'officially' dead. So, she's still kept in the shadows. But I think this case involves her—and she should speak, if she can help solve a little girl's murder."

Alex wiped his tears and stood up. "We are traveling to Victoria Street to meet her. Be friendly. She gets scared easily and has avoided physical contact for six years now."

The girls meekly nodded—part of them eager to solve the case, the other hesitant and unsure why something inside them said: Don't go.

But they went—in Alex's car instead of the official hostel bus, so Linnea wouldn't panic and could feel comfortable.

The ride to Victoria Street was tense and quiet. Theora sat by the window, watching the houses and lampposts blur past, while Sophie clutched her notebook with shaking hands. Aurora glanced occasionally at Alex, who hadn't said a word since they left.

"Is it far?" Flora finally asked, her voice almost a whisper.

"Just a few more minutes," Alex murmured, eyes focused ahead. "She lives in the old caretaker's cottage behind Saint Lowell's Chapel. No one goes there anymore."

When they arrived, the car rolled to a slow stop in front of a small, ivy-covered house. It looked like it had been plucked from another time—quiet, almost forgotten. The paint was peeling, and moss grew along the walls, but the garden was carefully tended.

“She still loves roses,” Alex said with a faint smile, which faded as quickly as it came.

They stepped out of the car, the crunch of gravel loud in the silence. Alex walked to the front door and knocked three times, slowly.

No answer.

He waited.

Then, the door creaked open just an inch. A pale eye peered out.

“Linnea,” Alex said softly. “It’s me.”

There was a pause—then the door opened fully.

Linnea stood in the doorway, her figure fragile, her left eye covered with a faded medical patch. Her expression was unreadable, her hands trembling at her sides.

“A-Alex?” she whispered.

“I need your help,” he said gently. “These girls—they’re investigating Emilie’s case. Something’s... something’s come up. We think it may be connected to the past.”

Her gaze drifted to the four girls. She flinched slightly, taking a step back.

“They’re kind,” Alex said quickly. “And careful. You can trust them.”

After a long pause, Linnea gave a small, almost imperceptible nod and stepped aside.

Inside, the atmosphere was strange—quiet and filled with fading traces of someone who had stopped living for herself long ago. Books were stacked in corners, half-finished paintings rested on the floor. A photo frame lay facedown on a dusty shelf.

Linnea’s gaze wandered across the girls before settling on the name Alex had whispered—Emilie. A flicker of something passed through her eye—confusion? Worry?

“Wait...” she whispered. “Why... Emilie? What about her?”

The room felt heavier. The girls exchanged looks. No one wanted to say it. Not like this. Not to someone who looked like she'd barely survived her own life.

Alex swallowed hard. "Linnea... Emilie is... she's gone."

The silence that followed was deafening.

Linnea froze. Her lips parted, but no sound came. It was like the words hadn't registered—like they refused to.

"She was—" Flora began softly, but Linnea held up a trembling hand.

"No..." Linnea whispered, shaking her head. Her knees gave way and she sank into the nearest chair, clutching the armrest so tightly her knuckles turned white. "No, no, no... she—she used to come here. She used to paint here with me. She was just a little girl with a big heart... she... I taught her how to mix colours properly..."

Tears began streaming down her cheeks—silent at first, then trembling sobs wracked her chest.

Alex knelt by her side, his hand gently covering hers. "She loved you, Linnea. We saw your picture in her sketchbook. She remembered you."

Linnea's cries grew louder, grief collapsing years of silence. "They all go away, Alex. Clara, Samantha, and now Emilie. It's like I'm cursed... like everyone I love is just... taken."

Sophie, eyes red with tears, stepped closer and placed the sketchbook—Emilie's sketchbook—on the table.

"We found this in her room," she said softly. "There's a note in there... about the mirror. About seeing someone again. We think it's connected to you. Or your past."

Linnea's sobs quieted slightly as she looked at the book. She reached out hesitantly, her fingers brushing over the worn leather cover. When she flipped it open, the note stared back at her:

"Don't trust what you see. I saw her again. In the mirror. It's not over."

Linnea's lips trembled.

"I thought it was over," she whispered. "I prayed it was over."

Before anyone could speak, Alex's phone buzzed. He checked it, brow furrowing, then moved toward the window.

"...Alex?" Aurora asked.

He didn't respond right away. Just stared blankly at the message on the screen.

Then he turned around slowly, his face pale as paper.

"That was Martha."

His voice was low. Hollow.

"There's been another death at the hostel."

A sharp intake of breath filled the room. Everyone froze.

"Who?" Flora asked, voice cracking.

Alex didn't answer. He looked straight at Linnea.

"It's starting again."

Chapter 17

Ch 17 : Second Silence

The door of Linnea's house shut behind them, closing off the heavy grief they had just witnessed. The car ride back was silent—no one spoke. The sky outside had dimmed, as if the world itself was mourning.

Inside the vehicle, Alex drove with a stone face. Anna stared straight ahead, fists clenched in her lap. In the backseat, Flora, Aurora, and Sophie exchanged nervous glances, trying to piece together what could be worse than what they had just left behind.

But they already knew—it wasn't over.

As they arrived, the hostel loomed under the dark sky. The porch light flickered.

Inside, Theora was already waiting near the staircase, pacing nervously. As soon as she saw the group, she rushed forward.

"You're back! What's going on? What happened? Everyone's saying there's been a—"

Her words caught in her throat.

Anna stepped forward quickly.

"Theora, wait—don't come upstairs."

"But why? Who is it?"

"It's bad. You don't need to see it. Please—stay here."

But Theora's breathing had already started to shift—quick, shallow gasps.

"What's happening—why won't anyone tell me anything?"

Her knees buckled. She leaned against the wall, one hand to her chest. A full-blown panic attack was kicking in.

"You're okay, Theora. You're safe. Look at me. Just breathe."

Room 334, Emilie's old room, stood sealed. But the horror had moved next door.

Room 335 stood open—just a sliver of light escaping.

Inside, Zara and Johanna knelt near the edge of a bed, their eyes red and swollen. Between them, under a white bedsheet, lay Erika.

Her arm slipped from beneath the sheet. Pale. Lifeless.

Flora stepped in and froze.

Sophie followed behind her, hand covering her mouth. Aurora stood just inside the door, her face pale.

“Oh my God...” Sophie whispered.

Zara spoke first, her voice broken.

Something inside Sophie snapped and she started to yell, garnering all the attention.

“Why do we have to be in this mess, huh?? Why are we solving murder cases like it’s our job?? We clearly know we’re not involved in this. You know what? I don’t regret saying this—but I wish I was never ever friends with Emilie. She’s tangled us in her world. I know it’s not her fault, but why did she hide everything from us when she knew her family and her past weren’t normal at all?” she roared.

Aurora gasped, stunned by Sophie’s outburst—especially because Sophie was always lovely, kind, and never yelled.

Flora stood still, her eyes wide in astonishment at Sophie. But instead of saying anything, she quietly took Sophie to the room where they both freshened up. Then Flora sat down beside her.

Sophie looked at Flora closely before muttering softly, “I’m tired of this. I’m scared of everything. Why is this happening to us? It’s not like we’re in some book, movie, or series, for God’s sake,” she exasperated.

Tears cascaded down Flora’s cheeks and she pulled Sophie into a silent hug—a hug where no words were spoken, only emotions.

Tears rolled down both of their faces.

After an hour or so, they drifted apart and silently promised to go through this together. They made their way toward the lobby.

Meanwhile, something ridiculous was occurring.

Theora, initially consoled and held back by Kai, had broken through the barriers and stepped inside. Her heart crumbled into pieces and panic flooded her system. Her breathing became shallow, her knees weak, and she instantly fainted.

Aurora's eyes, previously emotionless, flickered when she saw Theora collapse—and her heart stopped. Without thinking, she rushed to Theora and embraced her. Panic seeped into her too—a fear of losing someone again gripped her. Before she could say anything, the paramedics dragged Theora away.

Aurora stood almost robotically outside the infirmary where Theora was laid out on a stretcher. At that moment, she was questioning her life.

She was never supposed to be here.

She was not meant to be solving murders.

She was supposed to be studying, chasing her dream of becoming a doctor like her mother. She should've been listening to Sophie's space rants, Flora's jokes, and even Theora's scoldings.

She didn't cry—because her body felt hollow.

The nurse came out, catching Aurora's attention.

The nurse stood composed, a small, polite smile on her face. She placed a hand on Aurora's shoulder and said, "Theora is fine. She just needs rest. Please make sure no one talks or hints at today's incident."

Aurora nodded emotionlessly. Her eyes wandered aimlessly as she walked back to her dorm, without visiting Theora.

Later, once the girls had calmed down enough to speak, they went to Theora.

They all pretended everything was fine—even though inside, the storm hadn't passed.

Once they were composed again, they remembered the promise they had made—to serve justice for Emilie.

They couldn't break it.

Not now.

After all, somewhere deep inside, they knew... they were responsible.

Responsible for letting Emilie go by another name. Responsible for making her feel left out.

This couldn't end—not unfinished.

They were bound to complete the promise.

Even if it suffocated all of them.

Chapter 18

Ch 18 : Comfort in Chaos

Theora didn't know what woke her.

Maybe it was the wind, or a change in pressure—like the air in the room had shifted. She blinked, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. Everything was still. Too still.

She sat up slowly. Aurora was asleep beside her, Sophie's blanket had half-slipped off, and Flora had rolled into the wall like usual. But something felt... wrong.

Then came the sound.

Footsteps. Slow. Deliberate. Just outside their door.

Theora's breath caught in her throat. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and tiptoed across the room. The old floor creaked under her weight. She hesitated—then cracked the door open just an inch.

And froze.

Martha was standing there. Not moving. Not speaking. Not even looking directly at the door. Just standing in the hallway in her nightgown, arms hanging loosely by her sides, staring straight ahead at nothing.

Theora's heart began pounding in her ears. She didn't breathe. Didn't blink.

Then—Martha tilted her head. Just slightly. Not toward the door, but in that weird way that made it look like she sensed something. Her expression didn't change. No emotion. No fear. No sleepiness.

Theora shut the door as silently as she could, then backed away fast. Her back hit the bed. She slid down, hand over her chest.

She didn't sleep again that night.

Morning hit with a soft drizzle tapping on the windowpanes. The common area was quiet—too quiet for a place that had seen two deaths.

The four girls sat on the worn-out couch, facing her. Martha, her usual calm self, sat with a cup of chamomile tea. Her legs were crossed, and her lips curved into a

polite smile, like she was about to host a book club, not be questioned about a murder night.

Aurora was the first to break the silence.

“Where were you last night around 2 a.m.?”

Martha blinked. “Oh... I was doing my routine check.”

“Routine check?” Sophie repeated, raising a brow.

“Yes,” Martha said softly. “I just like to walk around... make sure everyone’s in their rooms. That’s all.”

Theora frowned. “You were standing outside our door. Not walking. Just... standing.”

Martha tilted her head again, that same eerie movement. “Ah. That. I... I zoned out. I do that sometimes. It’s a condition. I forget where I am for a few seconds. Nothing dangerous.”

Her polite smile didn’t falter. If anything, it deepened—like nothing was out of the ordinary.

“Oh, I’m sorry if that frightened you,” she said gently. “Sometimes I pause to gather my thoughts. I tend to... drift.”

“You weren’t walking,” Theora said, voice quiet but steady. “You were just standing there. No expression. Just... staring.”

Martha tilted her head again. “I’ve been told I do that. The nurse thinks it’s low blood pressure. Sometimes I blank out for a moment or two. It’s nothing serious.”

Aurora glanced at the others. “So it was just a coincidence?”

“I like to check that everyone’s safe,” Martha replied. “I suppose I was near your door when I drifted off. Again, I’m sorry if it scared you.”

Before anyone else could speak, Anna walked in holding a file.

“The girls reported something unusual last night,” she said, looking at Martha.

Martha turned to her calmly. “I explained. Just one of my spells, likely from my BP again. It happens.”

Anna paused, watching her a moment longer than necessary. Her eyes searched Martha's face—but there was nothing. No guilt. No nervousness. No flicker of discomfort.

Just calm.

“Well,” Anna said at last, placing the file on the table, “as long as no one was harmed, let's move on.”

The room fell into a thick silence. The girls exchanged looks, unspoken questions passing between them. But no one pushed further.

Not yet.

Martha took another sip of her tea. “I do appreciate your concern,” she said, still smiling. “But I promise you—I would never hurt anyone.”

Sophie's voice was quiet. “No one said you did.”

Martha's eyes met hers for a moment. Then she nodded politely, as if dismissing the tension entirely.

“I think I'll go water the garden before it rains,” she said cheerfully, standing and brushing imaginary dust off her skirt. “A calm mind needs a calm space, after all.”

And with that, she walked out—steady, serene, as if the hallway from last night had never happened.

Anna sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Let's just be careful,” she murmured. “All of us.”

As the door clicked shut behind Martha, Theora finally let out the breath she'd been holding.

Flora broke the silence. “We're not imagining things, right?”

“No,” Aurora said. “We're not.”

“She's hiding something,” Theora added. “And whatever it is... it's creeping closer.”

The girls didn't speak after that. But they all felt it—the air had shifted again.

Flora tugged at the frayed edge of her sleeve. “What kind of spells was she talking about? That didn't look like zoning out. That looked like...”

“Possession?” Sophie muttered under her breath.

Aurora gave her a sharp look—but no one disagreed.

They huddled closer on the couch, the soft drizzle outside becoming a steady patter. Theora glanced toward the hallway. It was empty again, just like last night—but that didn’t make it feel any safer.

“She’s too calm,” Aurora whispered. “Like she knows something we don’t.”

“She always knows something,” Flora said. “Remember when she warned Anna about the basement door sticking—before it did?”

“That’s just Martha,” Theora replied, though her voice lacked conviction. “She notices things.”

“Or causes them,” Sophie muttered.

No one laughed.

For a moment, silence again.

Then Flora said it aloud: “Do you think she had something to do with the other deaths?”

It was the first time any of them had said it directly.

No one answered.

Aurora looked toward the closed door. “We can’t go to the police. Not without evidence. They’d say we’re just scared kids making things up.”

“And if Martha found out?” Sophie added. “We’re stuck here. She has access to our rooms. Our files.”

That thought settled over them like a fog.

Eventually, Anna returned with a tray of mismatched mugs and leftover biscuits from breakfast. “Here. Eat something,” she said, trying too hard to sound casual.

They each took a cup without a word.

Then, like some unspoken defence mechanism, their minds began to drift—to homework, to the drama in Room 335. The moment passed like a ripple on a pond.

Theora clutched her tea. It was warm, comforting. Normal.

Maybe that was the scariest part.

Theora hadn't touched her biscuit. Her fingers tightened around the cup as she stared into the milky tea, watching the steam curl and vanish.

Sophie noticed. "You okay?"

Theora gave a faint nod, but it was the kind that invited questions rather than answered them.

Aurora leaned back into the couch. "We're all on edge. It's been a long week. Maybe we're just..." She hesitated, then looked gently at Theora. "Maybe last night felt scarier than it really was."

Theora's jaw tightened. "You think I imagined it?"

"No," Aurora said quickly. "Not imagined. Just... magnified. You haven't been sleeping well. That can mess with how things feel."

Sophie chimed in, softer now. "You did say your chest was tight all night. Could've been one of your anxiety spells, right? Like before?"

Theora stared at her. "So you're saying I panicked. Again."

"No," Flora added carefully, "just that maybe your brain's trying to protect you. Filling in blanks. You saw Martha, sure. But maybe she was only there for a second and moved on. Maybe your fear made it feel like more."

There was a long pause.

Theora wanted to argue. She remembered the way Martha stood. Still. Hollow. Like the shadow of something waiting to be remembered. But now that daylight had fully set in, and everyone else seemed fine, the certainty of that moment began to flicker.

"I guess," she said finally. "Could've been that."

The girls nodded, all too ready to accept the answer they needed.

Flora let out a breath she'd been holding. "I mean... Martha's weird, sure, but if she really was dangerous, wouldn't something have happened already?"

"Yeah," Sophie agreed. "She's always been a little spacey. The head tilts, the muttering—but that's just her."

“Harmless,” Aurora finished, like she was sealing the thought shut.

Theora managed a small smile. It felt like pressing a lid over a boiling pot.

Anna returned briefly to collect the tray, chatting idly about weekend chores and laundry schedules. The mundane washed over them like a warm bath. No one brought up the night again.

By evening, the storm outside had stopped. The windowpanes were fogged from the indoor warmth. A board game lay half-finished on the coffee table. Sophie had drawn a sketch in the corner of a notepad—a cat in a top hat.

Martha passed them in the hallway once, humming softly, her hands covered in potting soil from the garden. She gave them a nod and a peaceful smile.

Theora didn’t flinch this time.

Because now, everyone else had decided:

It was nothing.

It was her.

And for a while—maybe that made it easier to breathe.

Chapter 19

Ch 19: THE DEAD SILENCE

The clouds above Cedar Grove Hostel hung heavy, as if the sky itself carried secrets. Kai Becker stepped out of the police car, his face tired from travel, grief, and frustration.

He had just returned from his father's funeral. One day away. Just one.

Inside, the hostel felt strangely quiet. That's when he noticed Anna's files were missing. Alex's jacket—gone. The girls weren't in their rooms.

He headed straight for the investigation room.

Anna looked up as he walked in. Alex was standing near the whiteboard. Flora, Sophie, Aurora, and Theora sat together on the old leather couch, their eyes heavy.

Kai's voice was sharp. "Where were you all yesterday?"

Anna blinked. "We went to see Linnea Shawn."

"You what?"

Alex cleared his throat. "She agreed to talk. The girls were already involved in the previous clues. We didn't expect her to open up, but she asked for time."

Kai's jaw tightened. "She was my wife's best friend. You went without me?"

"She said she'd call," Sophie said quietly. "She promised."

Flora added, "She didn't seem okay. Like something was bothering her."

Kai looked around the room—then noticed something off in everyone's expressions.

"What else happened?"

Anna hesitated. "We didn't want to tell you right after the funeral."

He narrowed his eyes.

Alex spoke softly:

"Erika's dead. We found her last night in Room 335."

Silence.

Kai's hands curled into fists. "She's what?"

Aurora nodded. "Martha found her. She didn't scream. She didn't fight. She was just... cold."

Kai turned away. He had only been gone a day, and now Erika was gone.

Something didn't feel right.

"She promised to talk. Why didn't she?" he repeated. "I'll go back. Linnea might've changed her mind."

The gate creaked as Kai walked in. Linnea's front porch had a stillness that pressed down on him.

He knocked. No answer.

"Linnea?" he called, opening the door.

The lights were off. The kettle had boiled dry on the stove. Her phone buzzed silently on the side table.

Then he saw her.

Linnea lay collapsed near her writing desk.

Still. Cold. Lifeless.

Kai's chest tightened. He stepped forward slowly. No pulse. Her lips were parted slightly, as if she had tried to speak.

Linnea's hand was clenched around something: a photograph. He carefully pried her cold fingers open.

The photo was old. Faded. Clara Jensen smiled brightly in it, caught mid-laughter. But next to her... there was a figure. A person had been standing beside her—but their face, torso, even their arm had been savagely scratched out, black ink cutting across the photo like scars.

Torn at the corners. Someone Linnea had wanted to forget—or someone she feared.

Kai stared at it. This wasn't just any photo. The background matched the asylum garden from years ago.

Linnea had said nothing during their last talk, but this... this was a scream for help.

He looked around. The rest of the room was untouched. No signs of a struggle. No broken furniture. Her tea mug sat beside an unopened letter addressed to her.

He picked it up. The handwriting was neat—but something about it was off. Too careful.

Inside was just one sentence:

“You should’ve stayed in the shadows.”

Kai’s throat dried.

He stepped back toward the desk, something tugging at the edge of his vision. Beneath the unopened letter, partially hidden by the photograph, was a sheet of thin notepaper—like the kind Linnea used to journal or sketch on. The corner was torn, the edges slightly singed.

He lifted it carefully.

The top of the page had a word—or maybe a name—written in Linnea’s unmistakable handwriting. The strokes were delicate, thoughtful. But the name itself was completely unreadable.

The paper had been scratched over, again and again, deep jagged lines etched with something sharp. Not just pen marks—slashes. Gouges that had almost torn through the page entirely.

Below the mess, in neat, almost too-perfect handwriting, sat the same words from the letter:

“You should’ve stayed in the shadows.”

Kai’s hand tightened around the page. Whoever did this didn’t just want Linnea dead—they wanted her erased. Her connections severed. Her voice obliterated.

But Linnea had tried.

She had written a name.

She had started to reveal the truth—and that was enough for someone to kill her.

A chill crept down Kai’s spine. He tucked the torn paper into a file and scanned the room once more. There were no footprints, no broken locks. Just silence, suffocating and heavy.

This wasn't just a murder.

It was a warning.

A message meant for anyone who dared speak next.

Chapter 20

The girl who wasn't gone

The air inside the Cedar Grove investigation room felt heavier than usual. Every breath was thick with something unspoken, something almost unbearable. The four girls sat quietly on the worn leather couch—Flora fidgeting with her sleeves, Theora staring blankly ahead, Aurora biting her lip, and Sophie watching the adults with silent intensity.

Alex stood near the whiteboard, arms folded tightly across his chest. Kai Becker, freshly returned from Linnea's lifeless house, leaned against the window, his fingers twitching at his side. The sharp lines of his jaw were drawn tighter than ever.

Anna Olsen broke the silence. Her gloves made a soft snapping sound as she opened two official-looking envelopes marked with red ink: POSTMORTEM REPORT.

"We got the autopsies," she said, voice low.

Kai straightened. "Read Linnea's first."

Anna flipped the paper open. "Cause of death: poisoning. Fast-acting. Synthetic compound. No visible injection marks. No oral traces."

Alex narrowed his eyes. "Airborne?"

Anna nodded slowly. "Could be inhaled. The kettle was boiled dry. She might've breathed it in."

Sophie swallowed. "So it wasn't suicide?"

"No," Anna said. "It was deliberate. And calculated."

The tension stretched like a wire.

Kai's voice came again, quiet but cutting through the heavy air.

"Clara."

She stopped at the threshold, her back still to them.

"Were you involved?" he asked. "In any of it?"

For a second, the only sound was the distant thunder rolling over Cedar Grove.

Clara didn't turn around. She stayed there, motionless, as if the question itself had pulled her into a memory too heavy to lift. Her back was still to them, rainwater trailing in quiet drops from her coat onto the wooden floor.

Then—slowly—she turned just enough to glance at him over her shoulder.

Her eyes locked with his. Cold. Emotionless. Silent.

She didn't speak. She didn't nod. She didn't deny it.

She just held his gaze for one long, unreadable moment.

Then—without a word—she stepped back to the table, picked up the water-stained folder, and tucked it under her arm.

Anna instinctively stepped forward. “Wait—”

Clara turned to her, her gaze sharp. Just enough to freeze Anna mid-step.

“Not yet,” Clara said quietly.

And with that, she walked out. No explanation. No second glance.

The door clicked shut behind her.

The room stayed frozen, the air thick with everything she hadn't said.

Aurora's whisper broke the silence. “She took the evidence...”

Sophie swallowed. “So we're back to guessing.”

“No,” Kai muttered. “We're not guessing anymore. We're watching.”

He turned toward the window, rain streaking down the glass.

“She came here to send a message.”

“And?” Anna asked softly.

Kai's jaw tightened. “That she's not finished.”

Anna opened the second file. Her lips pressed together as she read. “Erika. Manual strangulation. Rope burns, bruising consistent with slow asphyxiation.”

“But no signs of resistance,” Alex added. “That's the weirdest part.”

“Which means,” Kai said darkly, “she knew the killer.” No one spoke.

Aurora finally whispered, “Why would someone kill them both... in such different ways?”

Kai’s voice was low, bitter. “Because this isn’t about revenge. It’s about control.”

Alex glanced at the whiteboard filled with photos, timelines, and theories. “Clara. Linnea. Emilie. Erika. All connected somehow. And all of us... running out of time.”

A sudden gust of wind slammed against the window.

And then—

The door creaked open.

Everyone turned.

Standing in the doorway, drenched from the storm, was a figure no one expected to ever see again.

Clara Jensen. Her black hoodie was soaked, her coat clinging to her frame, eyes dark with something unreadable. In one hand, she held a thin, water-stained folder. She looked calm. Tired. Like she’d walked through hell to get there.

Kai’s mouth opened slowly. “Clara?”

Clara blinked, her voice smooth. “Still alive. Surprise.”

The girls froze. Flora gripped Theora’s hand. Sophie’s heart was thundering. Aurora felt like the floor dropped beneath her.

Alex stepped back instinctively. “That’s not possible. You disappeared six years ago.”

“I know,” Clara said. “That was the plan.”

She stepped into the room like she had every right to be there and dropped the folder onto the table. The file slapped the wood softly, but it felt like a thunderclap.

“I told Linnea to stop digging,” Clara said, brushing wet strands of hair behind her ear. “She didn’t listen.” “You killed her?” Kai asked, stunned.

Clara’s eyes flicked toward him, almost amused. “No. But I warned her. And now she’s gone.”

Anna moved toward her slowly. “Where have you been, Clara?”

“In the shadows,” Clara said. “Where I was safest. Where I watched all of you try and fail to see what was right in front of you.”

“Why now?” Flora asked, voice trembling.

Clara looked at her. “Because you’re running out of time. And so am I.”

She turned toward Kai. “You’ve been looking in the wrong place. Asking the wrong questions.”

“Then help us,” Alex said.

Clara looked at Johanna—who had silently stepped back toward the wall, pale and shaking. “She saw it,” Clara said coldly. “Both times. When Emilie died. And when Erika was taken. But she stayed silent.”

Everyone’s gaze snapped to Johanna.

“No...” Johanna whispered.

“Yes,” Clara said. “You watched it happen and did nothing. I begged you to speak. You didn’t.”

Johanna shook her head. “I didn’t—I couldn’t—”

Clara interrupted her. “You could’ve saved her.”

Tears filled Johanna’s eyes, but Clara had already turned.

Chapter 21

Ch 21: The Quietest One

The rain outside hadn't stopped for hours.

It pattered like whispers against the windows of the old Cedar Grove hostel, as if something outside was trying to speak but didn't know the words. Inside, a storm of a different kind was gathering.

Johanna sat hunched in the corner of the lounge, the cushions swallowing her like waves. Her hoodie was pulled tight over her face, but the redness of her eyes gave everything away. She hadn't been sleeping. Maybe she hadn't slept properly since Emilie died.

Flora stood closest to her, arms folded. Theora hovered near the wall, looking pale, her eyes flickering between everyone in the room. Aurora leaned against the doorframe, and Sophie stood near the table, where Clara had just left the folder.

None of them had spoken for a full minute.

It was Sophie who finally broke the silence.

"We know what Clara said," she said, voice calm but firm. "You saw something, Johanna. Something you never told anyone."

Johanna's hands shook.

"I didn't mean to lie," she whispered. "I just—there wasn't a right moment."

Flora's eyes narrowed. "People died. You could've helped us find out who did it."

"I was scared!" Johanna shouted, sudden and sharp. "You think I wanted to hold it in? That I enjoyed knowing what I know?"

Everyone froze. Theora slowly stepped forward, voice trembling.

"Then tell us now."

Johanna breathed out shakily, her voice beginning to crack.

"The night Emilie died... I wasn't asleep. I was up late sketching. Around 2:50, I heard something from the hallway. Not footsteps. Just... humming. Low. Weird. Like someone was humming with her, in sync. And then it stopped."

She wiped her eyes, sniffing.

“I didn’t go out. I told myself it was nothing. But I heard the hum again the night Erika died.”

Aurora’s brows furrowed. “Both nights?”

Johanna nodded. “There was this smell too. Rosemary. Strong, but only for a second. And then Erika’s voice, calling for help, but... muffled. I opened the door just a crack. She was reaching for something — a silver chain. Maybe a locket. But then — nothing.”

Flora’s throat tightened. “Why didn’t you say this before?”

“I thought... maybe I imagined it. Or maybe it was too late. And I just... froze.”

She collapsed back into the chair like the weight of those memories had physically drained her.

The silence that followed was broken by a soft creak. The door opened.

And there was Clara.

Rain dripped off her coat. Her eyes met theirs — cool and unreadable.

“Now you know,” she said, nodding once at Johanna.

Sophie stepped forward, her voice low. “You said you brought us something.”

Clara reached into her coat and pulled out a thin folder. She dropped it onto the table. It landed with a flat thud.

Flora lunged forward, flipping it open. Blank.

Every single page inside was empty — except for one. A small handwritten note in the center:

“Come back to Cedar Grove if you want the contents.”

Aurora blinked. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Theora’s breathing started to speed up. “This place again? Everything always comes back to it.”

Clara didn’t flinch. “The truth is there. Always has been.”

“And what about your clue?” Sophie asked. “Follow the quiet ones. They always hold the loudest truths.’ What does that even mean?”

Clara smiled faintly. “You’ll understand soon.”

And without another word, she turned and walked out of the room.

For a few seconds, no one moved.

The door clicked shut behind Clara.

The silence she left behind was deafening.

Sophie stared at the folder as if willing the note inside to change. Aurora rubbed her temples. Johanna hadn't moved — she seemed even smaller now, like a shadow of herself.

But Theora — Theora had gone completely still.

Her eyes widened, unfocused. Her breathing grew shallow, fast. One hand reached instinctively for the wall, fingers fumbling as if trying to grip air.

“Theora?” Flora stepped toward her.

Theora’s chest heaved.

“I—I can’t—” she whispered. “I can’t breathe.”

Panic was tightening around her like a rope. Her legs gave way and she slid to the floor, back against the wall. Her fingers clawed weakly at her sweater as her vision narrowed. Sophie dropped beside her, gently grabbing her shoulders.

“Hey—hey, you’re okay. Just breathe with me. In, out. You’re safe, Theora.”

But Theora wasn’t listening.

She was somewhere else.

A memory was clawing its way to the surface, uninvited. From years ago.

She was thirteen, sitting quietly in Emilie’s room. Samantha, Emilie’s mother, was in the next room. Theora had wandered out to use the bathroom — and froze in the hallway.

She heard voices. Low. Urgent.

Samantha’s voice rose above the hush:

“The quietest ones are the loudest ones.”

Theora remembered standing still, her skin crawling, the words imprinting themselves like frost across her spine. There was something about how Samantha said it. Not metaphorically. Not kindly.

Almost like a warning.

She came back to the present, gasping.

“I heard it,” she whispered. “Back then.”

—

On the other hand, the door of the investigation dorms clicked shut.

Yes, a meeting of all the officers was conducted. The silence was deafening until Kai broke it.

“Only two days are left for the girls to prove themselves. It’s almost as if we are getting tangled and tangled but can’t get out of this web,” he spoke in an authoritative tone, but it lacked the usual softness.

“For now, we’ve released Julian Vance, as he was found completely innocent. So tick him off,” Anna ordered to Alex, who was sitting on a wooden chair with a list kept on the mahogany table where the names of all suspects were written.

Suspects of Linnea Miller, Erika Nilsen, and Emilie Mendes case

1. Julian Vance ☐
2. Johanna Viker ☒
3. Theora Cummins ☐
4. Flora Cummins ☒
5. Sophie Berger ☒
6. Aurora Shawn ☒
7. Clara Jensen ☒
8. Martha Dudik ☐

Alex ticked off Julian’s name and handed the list over to Assistant Raj.

The officers again went silent, unsure of what to say, when Kai spoke. “Clara is here for a mission. I know her too well. She must’ve been plotting something all these years. I don’t even know where my Jennie is.”

He chuckled hollowly, as if it hurt to even talk.

“She is one of our prime suspects, but she’s also an important clue — so we shall be mindful enough not to let her know we’re after her,” Anna confirmed, before standing up and making her way to her dorm.

Seeing her, Alex and Raj also parted ways to their dorms.

Kai was still. No movement.

His eyes were rimmed red and had faint purple smudges around them. He hadn’t slept in days — not since he returned from his dad’s funeral.

He missed Clara. He always thought he did, but now that she was here, he didn’t want to talk to her at all.

He stood there lifeless, then sank to the floor. His eyes closed gently, eyelashes fluttering in an effort to stay awake — but exhaustion gave way, and he slept.

—

Meanwhile, Johanna was under complete supervision as she stayed alone. Luckily, Zara had been taken by her parents given the situation here, so Johanna remained in the room alone. She tried to sleep, but sleep never came — not after her confession.

The girls also rested on their bunk beds, trying to catch sleep — but it was long gone.

Morning came, but peace didn’t.

A pale glow broke through the windows of the Cedar Grove hostel, but the coldness in the air was far from the usual mountain chill. It was thicker, heavier — like a warning.

One by one, the officers stirred in their rooms. Anna sat up first, her instincts razor-sharp even before her mind was fully awake. She rubbed her eyes, stood up, and reached for her coat.

Raj knocked on her door the next minute, his face already drained of color.

“Come quickly,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

In the dorm hallway, a soft murmur began to grow louder — panicked footsteps, hushed gasps.

In Johanna’s room, the scream came first.

It was sharp. Frantic. Raw.

Kai jolted up from the floor, heart pounding. His exhaustion vanished like smoke. Within seconds, he raced toward the sound, bumping into Alex on the way. The two officers didn't exchange words — just followed the scream.

They barged into Johanna's room to find her standing, pale as a sheet, her back glued to the wall, finger trembling as she pointed at the mirror.

Everyone else gathered, huddled behind her.

And there it was.

"Next is one of you."

Written in what unmistakably looked like blood, streaked across the mirror in thick, chilling strokes. The dripping was still fresh, the metallic scent sharp in the air.

Anna immediately stepped forward, pushing Johanna gently aside and instructing Raj, "Get the gloves. No one touches anything."

The girls — Sophie, Aurora, Theora, Flora — had now gathered in the hallway, drawn in by the chaos.

Theora's hands flew to her mouth.

Sophie took a step back.

Flora gripped the wall, whispering, "Oh my God..."

Aurora was frozen. Only her eyes moved.

Johanna finally found her voice, choking out, "I didn't write that... I swear. I—I didn't even go near the mirror after I woke up."

"We believe you," Kai said firmly, though his voice sounded distant.

Anna turned to face them all. "Everyone stays in sight. No wandering. We are now on complete lockdown. The killer is playing games again — and this time, they've made it personal."

The hostel was awake.

And fear had a face again.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22: "THE MASKS IN THE DARK"

The wind outside Cedar Grove had grown fiercer, clawing at the windows like some restless thing begging to be let in.

Inside the girls' dormitory, the air was equally restless.

The two bunk beds lined the pale walls. It wasn't comfort that tucked the girls in that night — it was exhaustion, tension, and a quiet dread.

Kai stood just inside the doorway, the low light behind him throwing his shadow across the room. His gaze swept over the girls — Theora, Flora, Aurora, Sophie, Johanna — all tucked under their blankets, wide-eyed.

"We have a reason to believe the killer may return tonight," he said softly.

Gasps. A held breath. Silence.

"But no one will be harmed," he added. "We're going to be right here. Watching. You'll be safe."

Anna stood behind him, arms crossed, jaw tense. Alex gave a small nod from the hall.

None of the girls replied.

Eventually, Kai pulled the door almost shut — not locking it, but leaving it just slightly ajar.

The hallway fell still.

So did the dorm.

Minutes passed. Then an hour. One by one, the girls drifted into sleep. Or the closest thing to it.

At 2:47 a.m., Theora stirred.

She let out a small gasp — sharp, breathless — her hand clutched at her chest. She began to shake. Theora got up shakily, stumbling down from the bunk bed, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

Her legs wobbled beneath her as she pressed her back to the wall, hand still at her chest. Her eyes darted wildly, as though the room were spinning. A panic attack

— and this one looked real. Her breaths were short, shallow, as if the air itself refused to reach her lungs.

Then...

A faint creak.

The dorm door opened slowly, soundlessly.

Two figures slipped inside, dressed in black. Their faces were hidden beneath pale, distorted masks. They didn't speak — just moved with quiet, calculated steps toward Theora. They believed she was too weak to fight and too dazed to scream.

She didn't move. Didn't run.

Her body was frozen in place, like fear had pinned her spine to the wall.

The masked figures stepped closer, silent, deliberate — like they weren't just walking, but hunting.

Then — a sudden slam.

The wardrobe door burst open.

“Don't move!”

The shout shattered the silence. Anna Olsen lunged forward, her voice sharp like a bullet. Gun raised, stance firm. She didn't hesitate.

The two masked women flinched.

One spun on her heel and bolted toward the door.

The other wasn't fast enough.

Kai came out from the shadows near the bathroom, tackling her to the floor in one brutal, clean move. The masked girl thrashed wildly, trying to escape his grip. Her hood slipped. Strands of hair fell out — long, dark, unmistakably feminine. Still, she fought like a cornered animal.

Alex came rushing down the corridor, catching a glimpse of the fleeing figure. “I've got the runner!” he shouted, sprinting after her.

Back in the dorm, Sophie had jolted upright. Aurora threw her blanket aside, leapt down, and rushed to Theora.

“Theora, look at me — look at me. You’re okay, you’re okay,” she whispered, holding Theora’s shoulders.

But Theora couldn’t stop shaking. Her mouth parted like she wanted to scream, but only shallow, panicked breaths came out. Flora stared, eyes wide, frozen halfway out of her bed.

On the floor, the masked girl screamed as Anna grabbed her arms and Kai clipped the cuffs on her wrists.

“LET ME GO! You don’t know what you’re doing!” she shouted, her voice distorted by fear... or fury.

Kai pinned her down, his voice low but deadly: “You’re done.”

The dorm lights flickered. Johanna stumbled out from her bunk, eyes huge. She looked from the door to the restrained girl on the ground, to Theora gasping against Aurora.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

Like her brain had just caught up with what her eyes had seen.

Like she knew something she wasn’t ready to say.

Then — silence.

Just the distant sound of footsteps pounding down the hallway as Alex chased the second suspect.

Anna stood, face pale but steady. “We need backup. Now.”

She looked down at the masked girl, who was smiling now — an eerie, awful grin.

“You’re too late,” the girl whispered. “It’s already started.”

Aurora looked at her, confused. “What’s started?”

The girl didn’t answer.

Anna yanked the mask off the captured girl’s face.

Gasps exploded around the room.

Kai stepped back as if struck.

“...Clara??”

The masked girl — no, Clara — didn't flinch. Her smile remained frozen in place, as though it belonged to someone else entirely. Her eyes, however, told a different story: fury, betrayal, something darker.

"No," Kai whispered, stumbling backward. "No. This... this isn't real."

Clara tilted her head, eyes narrowing. "I told you," she murmured, "you were looking in the wrong direction."

Anna stepped between them, her voice sharp. "Kai, step out. Now."

But Kai didn't move. His gaze remained locked on Clara. His wife. The woman he'd loved, lived with — and then, she left him years ago.

"How long?" he asked, his voice barely audible.

Clara gave a soft, cruel laugh. "Long enough."

FLASHBACK.

The investigation room, in the evening. Dim. Cold. Silent except for the hum of fluorescent lights.

Theora sat stiffly at the end of the table, her knuckles white around a cup of untouched tea. Aurora sat beside her. Sophie leaned forward. Johanna and Flora were nearby, watching intently.

Across from them, Kai, Anna, and Alex stood by a whiteboard full of notes, patterns, timelines.

"The killer strikes when the target is weakest," Anna said. "That's been the pattern."

"When they're alone, distracted, sick... or in Theora's case, mid-panic attack," Alex added.

Theora's voice shook. "You want me to... fake one?"

Kai met her eyes. "Only if you're ready. Only if you can. The theory is: if they think you're too weak to scream, they'll come in for the kill. But we'll be there. Anna and I in the wardrobe. Alex down the hallway. The second they show their faces — it's over."

Aurora bristled. "It's too dangerous."

"But it's controlled," Anna said. "Everything will be in place. We just need them to bite."

A beat of silence.

Then Theora nodded slowly. “I can do it.”

Flora loomed away. Johanna bit her lip. Sophie sat expressionless.

The plan was set.

BACK TO PRESENT.

It worked.

Mostly.

Except...

Kai stared at Clara like the world had split beneath him.

“You... I thought you just went away after that. But you... why did you do this to everyone?” Kai snapped, his eyes full of rage and mouth agape in disbelief.

Clara’s grin faltered. Her voice, when it came, was ice: “And still, you never saw me.”

The room pulsed with tension. Theora, still trembling in Sophie’s arms, finally whispered:

“She wasn’t working alone.”

Everyone turned to her.

Anna straightened. “The other girl. The one who ran?”

“She’s not just an accomplice,” Sophie said softly. “She’s the instigator. Clara didn’t smile until she ran. Like she knew... whatever happens next, it’s in her hands now,” Anna completed.

Alex came inside, panting. “We lost her. I couldn’t... couldn’t catch her. I am so sorry. She’s still out there.” His voice became heavy.

Johanna’s face paled.

Everyone was too stunned to speak anything.

It was time for Clara’s investigation — which was going to be really tough, given Clara was clever and wasn’t going to open up easily at all.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 — The Girl Who Vanished

The room was cold.

Not because of the weather — but because of who was sitting in it.

Clara Jensen.

Handcuffed. Silent. A crooked smile stretched across her lips like she already knew she wouldn't be staying long.

Anna Olsen sat across from her, a recorder ticking quietly on the table. Kai stood near the door, arms crossed. Alex leaned against the wall, arms folded tight, eyes never leaving Clara's face.

Anna leaned in. "You were caught in a mask. Inside the girls' dormitory. Dressed like the one who got away. Want to tell us why?"

Clara shrugged. "Maybe I like black. Very slimming."

"You think this is a joke?" Kai said, voice stern.

She met his eyes. Something flickered there. Old pain, maybe. Or satisfaction.

"No. I think this is exactly what was meant to happen," Clara said, her expression unreadable.

Anna kept her tone calm. "You played a smart game, Clara. Got the right masks. Right timing. Even used Theora's panic attack. Clever. But you made one mistake."

That made Clara's smile twitch — just for a second.

"If she hadn't zoned out, everything would've gone fine," Clara said, a trace of anger in her voice.

Silence.

Kai stepped forward. "The receptionist...? You're talking about Martha Dudik, right? According to our records, she has low BP. She tends to zone out for short periods."

Clara's lips parted slightly. She realized what she had just said.

“No... what are you saying? Martha is not my accomplice,” she said, trying to sound firm — but her nervousness was showing.

Too late.

“You just exposed your accomplice,” Anna said, smirking.

“You clearly meant Martha. And now you’re going to tell us why she was in the corridor that night. Why Theora saw her just standing there — like she was waiting,” Alex said coldly.

Clara didn’t respond. Her eyes narrowed. But her silence screamed the truth.

Kai turned to the frosted window. “She came to kill someone that night, didn’t she?” he muttered. “But something went wrong.”

Clara shifted in her seat. The handcuffs clinked softly.

Anna pulled a small ziplock bag from her pocket and dropped it onto the table. Inside: a single black glove.

“This was found the night Raj Patel was attacked. He almost caught the person. She fought back, tried to choke him — and dropped this.”

Clara’s face didn’t move.

“It matches the set we found in your locker,” Anna added.

“I have lots of gloves,” Clara said, voice low.

“But only one pair made of that material, with that frayed seam,” Kai said. “And Raj remembers exactly how cold her hands were.”

Clara looked at the glove, then away. Her jaw clenched.

“Raj also smelled something—” Anna began.

Clara cut in. “So? He was delirious. You said he passed out.”

“Exactly,” Anna snapped. “He passed out — because of what she gave him.”

Alex stepped forward. “You want to keep denying it? Go ahead. But we know who your partner is now. And it started when she zoned out.”

A flicker of fear crossed Clara’s face.

“You said it yourself,” Alex continued. “If she hadn’t zoned out, everything would’ve gone fine.”

“No—” Clara started, then stopped.

Kai raised a brow. “No?”

Her lips parted, but nothing came out.

Anna leaned in. “It’s too late, Clara. Raj woke up. He told us everything.”

FLASHBACK — St. Emeren’s Medical Centre, Room 106

The only sound was the steady beep of the heart monitor beside Raj Patel’s bed. His skin was pale, bruises faintly visible beneath his hospital gown.

Anna stood near the window. Kai beside her. Alex paced slowly at the foot of the bed.

Anna gently placed a zip lock bag on the tray. Inside it: the black glove.

“This,” she said, “was found near the laundry exit. You said she dropped something when she ran.”

Raj leaned forward, wincing. He looked at the glove.

“That’s the one,” he said hoarsely. “I remember. I almost had her. She turned fast, shoved me back, grabbed my neck. Her hands—”

He paused.

“—they were freezing. Not from the weather. Like... like she wasn’t fully there.”

Kai frowned. “You mean emotionally?”

Raj shook his head. “No. Physically. Like something was off with her circulation.”

He drew in a shaky breath.

“Then she held something under my nose. Crushed pills or something — bitter, chemical. Burned going in.”

“You blacked out,” Alex said.

“Yeah. Woke up here.”

A knock. Dr. Rajul Deshmukh stepped in, holding a clipboard.

“I see we’re all awake,” he said kindly, nodding to Raj, then turning to the officers. “We ran a tox screen. The compound in his system was heavy — Midorexol.”

Anna blinked. “What is that?”

“It’s used in rare cases of extreme low blood pressure,” Rajul said. “It slows the heart, causes dizziness, blackouts — especially dangerous for healthy individuals.”

Alex narrowed his eyes. “Could someone use it to knock someone out?”

Rajul nodded. “If crushed and inhaled? Yes. Under stress, it can knock someone out instantly.”

Kai stepped forward. “And the attacker had taken it too?”

Raj nodded slowly. “I could smell it on her breath. Strong. She took it herself. That’s how I knew — she has low blood pressure. She zoned out for a second when she turned. Almost missed her cue. It was subtle... but I saw it.”

He looked at them.

“That wasn’t someone panicking. That was someone who knew how to get away.”

Anna exchanged looks with Kai and Alex.

“And we know who in Cedar Grove uses that medication,” she said.

Kai’s voice was grim.

“Martha Dudik.”

Present — Cedar Grove Investigation Room

Clara Jensen’s silence had lasted too long.

Anna leaned in. “You exposed her, Clara. Don’t try to backtrack.”

Clara stared at the glove on the table like it was a ticking bomb. Then, finally — a breath.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “It was Martha.”

Alex didn’t flinch. Kai didn’t move. Only the recorder ticked, louder with every second.

“She’s been in it since the beginning,” Clara said. “Long before any of you realized something was wrong. She knows how to disappear. How to be invisible in plain sight.”

Anna folded her hands. “Why? What was her reason?”

Clara looked up. Her eyes sharpened. “Same as mine. Same as everyone who’s been used and discarded.”

“By who?” Kai pressed. “Who asked you to do all this?”

Clara smiled bitterly. “You already know the answer.”

Alex’s voice sliced through the room. “Don’t play games. Say the name.”

But Clara only shook her head. Smile creeping back. “You think you’re close. You think the clues point one way. But this web?” She raised her cuffed hands. “It’s bigger than you think.”

“Martha was in the corridor yesterday. She attacked Raj,” Anna said. “Was she going to kill him?”

Clara looked away.

“No,” she whispered. “Raj wasn’t supposed to be there. He was in the wrong place.”

“Then what was the plan?” Alex demanded.

“To scare them,” Clara said flatly. “Shake the foundation. Make them question everything. Spread fear.”

“Why scare them?” Kai asked again. “Who benefits from that?”

Clara’s hands curled into fists. “You don’t get it. This wasn’t random. It wasn’t a game. It was a warning. One we were told to deliver.”

Anna’s voice hardened. “Told by who?”

Clara’s eyes drifted — distant again.

“Martha said it would all make sense eventually. We were just a part of something bigger. Everything we did... was only the beginning.”

Alex stepped closer. “You are not just a pawn. You planned the attacks. You drugged Raj. You targeted those girls.”

“And yet I’m still not the monster,” Clara muttered.

“No?” Anna asked. “Then who is?”

Clara’s lips parted — and then, just a whisper:

“They watch everything.”

Anna frowned. “Who watches?”

“They never came to us directly,” Clara said. “Only instructions. Messages. Packages. Codes. Martha understood it better. She said there were levels. People above us.”

“You’re stalling,” Alex snapped. “Names. Give us a damn name.”

“I don’t have one,” Clara shot back. “We never saw them. Just orders. And threats.”

“Threats?” Kai’s voice dropped.

Clara hesitated — then nodded. “They threatened my brother. Martha’s sister. Said if we didn’t do it, we’d be next.”

Silence.

“Who sent the packages?” Anna asked. “Where from?”

Clara bit her lip, eyes glistening. “No return address. Always delivered at night. But the last stamp... had something scratched off. I tried to read it. It looked like... ‘Level 2C.’”

Kai frowned. “That’s not an address.”

“I know,” Clara murmured. “Martha said it wasn’t meant to be one. It was a reminder.”

“A reminder of what?” Alex asked.

Clara’s voice dropped.

“That we’re replaceable.”

Anna leaned back, staring at the girl who once seemed untouchable.

“You realize,” she said, “you’ve just opened a whole new door.”

Clara nodded. “And you’re not going to like what’s on the other side.”

The recorder kept ticking.

Outside, the wind howled softly against the frosted glass — as if someone else was listening.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 — She Knows

Cedar Grove Interrogation Room — 4:07 A.M.

The lights buzzed faintly overhead, flickering just enough to make the silence heavier.

Martha Dudik sat motionless in the metal chair. No cuffs. No bruises. Just a blank expression — and eyes that didn't blink enough.

Anna Olsen placed the recorder on the table and hit the red button.

Kai Becker leaned against the door. Alex Miller paced slowly behind Anna, watching Martha like she might explode.

"State your name for the record," Anna said.

"Martha. Dudik."

"You were seen in the corridor outside Room 335 at 2:57 a.m., wearing black, gloves, and possibly a mask. What were you doing there?"

Martha looked up, a ghost of a smile on her lips.

"She told me to."

Anna blinked. "Who?"

"She."

Alex frowned. "Martha, stop being cryptic. Clara's already confessed. You were her accomplice. We need the full picture now."

Martha tilted her head slowly, like a broken doll.

"No. I was never her accomplice. Clara just followed the signs. But she... she was the reason everything started again."

Kai stepped forward. "Who is 'she'? Say a name."

"I can't," Martha said softly.

Her face twitched — a flicker of something real. Her fingers tapped the edge of the table once. Then twice. Her expression shifted — from blank to something darker. Controlled. Tight.

"I don't like being ignored."

Anna's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

"I follow rules. I make rules. And when people break them... it gets loud in my head. I can't stop thinking about it. I see it over and over until something snaps."

Kai didn't blink. "Are you saying you hold grudges?"

Martha turned to him.

"Not grudges. Punishments."

Silence hit the room like a slap.

Alex spoke quietly. "What happened in the hostel, Martha?"

She gave a faint, almost childlike smile.

"They weren't supposed to play with that board. It was forbidden. I told them not to. I warned Emilie myself."

Anna leaned in. "What board?"

Martha stared straight ahead.

"The Ouija board."

Kai and Anna exchanged a sharp glance.

"And you saw them playing?" Anna asked.

"I didn't just see them," Martha whispered. "I watched everything."

FLASHBACK — Room 333, 11:42 P.M.

The hallway was silent, lit only by a soft candle glow seeping through a cracked door.

Martha stood outside Room 333, still as stone. Her hand hovered near the knob, but she didn't touch it. Instead, she leaned in, peering through the windowpane.

Inside, the five girls sat in a circle — Theora, Flora, Aurora, Sophie... and Emilie.

They whispered nervously. A hand-drawn Ouija board was spread across the floor — made from the back of Emilie's sketchbook. A silver coin rested in the center, flickering in the candlelight.

"Guys, Martha said not to do this," Emilie whispered.

“She says a lot of weird stuff,” Sophie muttered, rolling her eyes. “She’s just paranoid.”

But Emilie’s fingers still rested lightly on the coin.

Cedar Grove Interrogation Room — 4:18 A.M.

The flickering lights overhead pulsed once more.

Anna drew back. “So Emilie didn’t listen to your warning.”

Martha’s jaw tightened.

“She laughed at it.”

Kai exhaled. “And that’s when you decided she had to die?”

Martha didn’t answer immediately. Her eyes drifted upward, like she was listening to something far away — a hum. A signal. A memory.

“I have a problem,” she said, voice flat as concrete. “When people deny things... when they lie to themselves or ignore the truth I show them—”

Her head twitched again.

“I go a little... off. Like something inside me starts scratching at the walls. I can’t breathe until it’s quiet again.”

Anna’s voice dropped. “And killing Emilie made it quiet?”

“She broke the rule,” Martha said simply. “She needed to be... corrected.”

Alex slammed his hand on the table.

“Who told you to do it, Martha?! We know someone’s pulling strings. Who was it?!”

But Martha only smiled — crooked and cold.

“I can’t tell you.”

The tension cracked like glass.

Anna stood and paced. Two officers entered, on edge. They grabbed Martha by the collar, shoving her against the wall.

“Start talking!” one barked.

Still no fear. Still no struggle.

But Martha's tone changed. Lower. Slower. Like a ticking clock.

"Check the recorder."

Anna turned. "What?"

"The recorder," Martha repeated. "Every time someone died... it was there. A sound. Barely audible. A hum."

Kai moved toward the recorder.

"You're saying the recorder made a sound?"

"No," Martha said. "Something else did. But it left traces. The IP address. It's not just recording — it's connected. Each time the humming came... someone accessed it remotely."

Anna and Alex froze.

"You're saying we've been... watched?" Alex asked.

Martha nodded.

"You missed something. But it's still there. Waiting for you to listen."

Anna raised her hand. "Let her go."

The officers hesitated — then stepped back.

"She's giving us something," Anna said.

Martha's eyes fluttered shut for a moment. Her voice dropped again, barely audible.

"I didn't start this. I just... obeyed. She is still out there."

Anna turned to the team, sharp and fast.

"Run a trace on the recorder's IP history. Every instance. Cross-check it with the murders."

Kai's jaw tightened. "We've been chasing shadows. But this—this could be the break."

Alex stood still, processing.

"We find the signal... we find her."

Martha smiled.

“I told you... She knows.”

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 — The House That Shouldn't Exist

Cedar Grove Command Room — 5:03 A.M.

The IP trace had locked in.

Anna stood frozen, heart pounding, eyes fixed on the glowing screen.

“It’s bouncing through proxies,” the tech said. “But the origin’s real. Private cabin. Outside Tromsø.”

“Registered under what name?” Alex asked.

“Mira Sølheim,” the tech replied. “Fake ID. No official record.”

Kai leaned closer. “But that’s where the signal came from?”

“Yes. Someone accessed the recorder from that location... right before each death.”

Anna’s voice turned to ice.

“Suit up. We move now.”

Scene Shift — 7:09 A.M., Tromsø Outskirts

The car halted on a snow-drowned path. In the clearing stood a cabin—its windows boarded, roof sagging under layers of ice. Every surface was frostbitten—except the doorknob, gleaming like it had just been touched.

No lights.

But something felt wrong.

“It’s too quiet,” Kai muttered.

“She’s here,” Alex said. “I know it.”

Guns drawn, they moved in.

Inside: silent. Not abandoned—staged.

Sketches lined the walls. A single candle burned low. A mirror was shrouded under black cloth.

The air was still warm.

Someone had just been here.

The Back Room

Anna approached the final door—left ajar.

She pushed it open.

A single wooden chair faced them. In it sat a girl—still, calm, and eerily composed.

Hair tied back. Hoodie neat. Black gloves folded beside her.

She didn't move. Didn't blink. She was waiting.

Alex's voice cracked.

"No."

Kai: "That's—"

Anna: "Samantha Mendes."

Alive.

The woman declared dead three years ago.

And she was smiling.

"Samantha Mendes. The cover's blown," Anna said, still reeling from shock.

Samantha looked up. Her eyes—sunken, afraid. But behind that fear, something cracked. Something wild.

Anna saw it a second too late.

"Wait—!"

Samantha's hand darted under the blanket—reaching not for safety, but for steel.

A flash of metal. A blade.

She lunged.

The room erupted.

Alex tackled her, knocking the knife away. It skidded across the floor with a shriek.

Samantha screamed—rageful, not afraid. Like something caged had finally uncoiled.

Kai restrained her arms. “Don’t move,” he growled.

She twisted, kicked, spat—but it was over.

She wasn’t strong enough anymore.

Not after three years of hiding in her own grave.

Anna picked up the blade. Crude. Homemade. But sharp.

“She was going to kill again,” she murmured.

Samantha laughed—low, broken.

“You think this is the end?” she whispered.

Alex leaned in. “No. This is just your confession.”

As they led her out, Samantha turned her gaze to the fire-damaged mirror—the one she had painted over again and again.

One Hour Later — Cedar Grove Interrogation Room

Samantha sat in the center chair, handcuffed—between Clara and Martha.

Clara was silently sobbing.

Martha—completely zoned out.

On the wall before them: three framed photos.

Three victims, smiling.

The room filled with people—everyone involved. The end was here. Closure was close.

But everyone asked the same silent question:

Was any punishment enough for the ones we loved and lost?

Alex sat slumped in a chair—present, but hollow.

Anna's voice cut through the stillness.

"I don't even have the words for you three. But this is necessary. No compassion is owed. Just tell us why."

Her eyes shifted to Kai and Theora, who nodded numbly.

Kai hit record. "Miss Samantha Mendes, begin with your so-called death act."

Samantha smiled, unbothered.

"It's not all my fault. And once I explain, you'll see—I'm not going to jail."

Anna snapped, "Open up. Now."

Samantha's eyes glinted. "Fine."

Flashback — Esenburgh Hospital, 2008

"Congratulations, Mrs. Mendes. Twin girls," said Dr. Lia, cradling two infants.

Samantha weakly handed over \$20,000.

"Don't tell Ethan. Please."

The doctor paused—then nodded, greedily accepting.

Clara entered, guilt etched on her face. "Are you sure about this?"

"We don't have time. Take one now."

Samantha handed over a baby. Clara wrapped her in her arms and climbed out the window.

But before she could return—

Ethan barged in.

"Where are the babies?!"

Samantha masked her panic. "One didn't survive... the other's here."

Tears. Convincing ones.

Ethan believed it.

“Typical. Useless as always,” he snapped, snatching the baby. “We’ll name her Emilie. Final word.”

And just like that, he was gone.

Samantha lay motionless, eyes wide. “Why me?” she whispered.

From that day, she hated Clara—for not returning.

Clara, broken, claimed the other baby as her own. She named her Jennie and raised her in a false identity.

10 Years Later

Samantha forced Clara to leave Tromsø and report Jennie as missing. She said it was for Jennie’s protection—Ethan had started getting suspicious.

Clara begged to stay. Samantha refused.

Over the years, she changed. Hardened.

Back to Present

“Ethan blamed me for everything,” Samantha continued. “In front of Emilie, he tortured me. And she just sat there. She was the reason for it all.”

Her laugh was twisted.

“So I made a plan. When Emilie turned 15, I faked my death. Even made Theora promise to keep it a secret—for sympathy. It worked. I was free.”

“But Emilie? She was still smiling. Living. After what I’d endured? No.”

“I made Clara help. Threatened to expose Jennie. Dragged Martha in too—threatened her brother. She was already unstable anyway.”

“And when they played that stupid board game, the plan went live.”

“For Erika? She discovered a recording. So we crushed the phone—and her.”

“For Linnea? She overheard us. So we poisoned her. Simple.”

“I didn’t choose this path. My mind did. You can’t punish me for that.”

She smiled.

Unblinking.

Unremorseful.

The Room Fell Silent

Everyone was frozen.

Alex remembered Linnea—his childhood companion. Did a mistake in timing deserve death?

The girls remembered Emilie. Seventeen. Born into chaos. Did she deserve abandonment, abuse, murder—by her own mother?

Kai remembered Clara and Jennie. Did Clara really love him? Did she ever trust him?

Johanna remembered Erika. Had her own cruelty caused Erika to meddle—and pay with her life?

Was Samantha's instability an excuse? Was Ethan's abuse a justification?

Was a game worth three lives?

Everyone had flaws.

But did any flaw justify murder?

We all make mistakes.

But sometimes, one mistake... ends everything.

THE END

Epilogue

Six Months Later

Cedar Grove was now just a name—whispers of a past too heavy to carry. The girls had left, not with closure, but with strength. College corridors replaced haunted hallways. Laughter returned, but quieter. The trauma still lingered—in glances, in dreams, in silence. But they were healing. Slowly. Together.

Samantha Mendes, broken and confused, had been sent to a high-security therapy center after her trial. What she did... what she saw... couldn't just be erased. Not even by time.

Martha followed her, her mind cracked from the lies she lived in. Therapy was her sentence—a different kind of prison.

Clara Jensen and Ethan Mendes didn't get that chance. The truth caught up with them—every masked lie, every scream they silenced. They were sentenced to life behind bars. Justice wasn't pretty. But it was done.

The girls often messaged each other, late at night when memories came crawling back. They shared memes, exam stress, even dumb selfies. But every chat ended the same way—

"I miss Emilie."

Because some people are never really gone.

One rainy evening, as the thunder rolled in and the group chat buzzed with notifications, Flora opened her mailbox and found it.

A letter.

From Someone

And suddenly...

It wasn't over yet.

One day, Flora recieved an anonymous letter

She read the writing aloud.

"To the Four Girls Who Survived."

A silence fell over them again — but this time, different.

Her fingers hesitated at the flap before finally opening it.

"She wasn't the only one. "

Inside was a single sheet of paper.

Typewritten.

It read:

"This is just the beginning."

And below that, a single symbol:

⚡

She looked up slowly.

> “What...?”

Flora whispered to her self, “There’s someone else?”

She stepped back.

Flora stared at the note in her hand.

No sound. No wind.

Just the chilling realization:

It wasn’t over.

Not yet.

THE END

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We didn't just write a story—we brought a world to life.

Thank you to everyone who believed in it and felt it. The mystery, the loss, the truth—it was all real to us.

And now, it's yours too.

From Aditi:

That's how the story started.

It was just a normal day during our Hindi literature period, when the teacher told us to write an answer about a time our friend helped us. So, Maahi and I started imagining a fun little scene—just for laughs.

We joked that Tanvi has long hair, so she'd do something dramatic with it. We imagined us all going into a forest, fighting animals. I'm tall, so I'd help with something wild. Maahi is strong, so she'd take charge. Saanvi is a little chubby, so she'd bring the vibes. 🖋️

That random imagination?

It became this.

A whole book. A whole mystery. A whole world.

And now you're part of it.
