

# Final Cut

OLIVIA  
WORLEY



WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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**EXT. MOTEL — NIGHT**

It always opens with a dead girl. Any slasher fan worth their salt can tell you that: Drew Barrymore in *Scream*, Michael's sister in *Halloween*, that camp counselor and her unlucky boyfriend in *Friday the 13th*. The girl must be pretty. Even better if she knows it.

A girl, a knife, a monster in the shadows—this is the recipe. And God, is it perfect. Too sacred, almost, to defy.

*Almost.*

Because there—waiting in the red glow of the old Coke machine, the one they stuck out here in hopes that this would be a nicer place—is my first departure from the form.

He's early. He's the type to be: floppy blond hair, blue eyes, a slight piggish tilt to his nose, the sort of face that's no doubt booked him at least one tourism commercial. A face that's easy to trust—with every reason to trust the world around him.

Maybe tonight will serve as a lesson.

I step into the light.

"Hey there!" He gives a cheery smile as soon as he sees me, extending a hand. "How are ya?"

We make our introductions, the Southern politeness sliding out of me as easily as the words to an old nursery rhyme as my blood thrums with nervous excitement. If

he thinks it's strange to be meeting this late, he doesn't show it. And if he suspects what's coming . . .

"So," he says. "You said you needed me to sign something?"

Eager to get on with it. He may be polite, but it is past his bedtime.

"Yeah, let me grab it." I reach for my bag, fumble through it like the kind of person he wants me to be. Easy. Friendly. A mirror of himself. "Sorry to make you do this so late. We realized we never got your release form, and with shooting tomorrow and everything, we just want to make sure everything's in order."

"Of course, totally! Excited to get started."

He flashes another smile, just as I'm putting on my best frown. I pause, digging deeper as if to make sure.

"Well, darn. I think I must've left the papers." I laugh, embarrassed. Self-deprecating. "Not even the first day, and I'm already screwing things up." With a sigh, I glance in the direction of the trees, the road just beyond them. "I actually live a little ways down. I can walk back and grab them. Unless you wanted to tag along . . .?"

"Yeah, sure," he says, that smile still plastered on, hoping to reassure me in the wake of my mistake. "I wouldn't mind a walk."

I give my first real smile of the night.

"Well, then, I guess I wouldn't mind the company."

I lead him away from the motel, from its faded light, and toward the shadowy embrace of the pines. Louisiana pines, the ones that gave this little town half its name—rail-thin and tufted green only at the very top,

more concerned with height than with beauty, stretching up and up to the open sky as if to prove what they're capable of when left well enough alone.

Something this boy could learn from the pines, in fact: the value of silence. But he insists on chatting away as we walk, rattling off his other film credits, his courses, all the things he thinks will make him special enough to do what we're all here for: making a movie. Telling a story. Using light and sound and the moving image to capture some little glimmer of humanity, a kernel of truth.

"We can cut through here." I nod at an opening between the pines.

He follows me in without a hitch, the shadows deepening, curling around us. I take a moment to breathe it in—the sap, the night—before I come to a stop.

When I turn to face him, he's watching me with that same genial expression, the light behind it dimmed only slightly in confusion. He doesn't know. Not yet.

"You watch a lot of slashers?" I ask, sliding my camcorder out of my pocket.

He eyes it as I turn it over in my hands. Small, vintage, and a little shitty. Harmless.

Perfect.

"Uh, not really," he says, lifting his eyes from the camera. "I watched a bunch to prepare for this one, though, so I can kind of see the appeal now."

"What changed?" I lift the camera now and press Record.

His eyes fix on the lens.

"Sorry, are you . . . ?"

“A little cast interview,” I lie. “For marketing.”

He nods, still watching the camera. Calibrating, trusting, searching for evidence that this is like every other moment of his life. Safe. That I’m just an odd bird, a glitch in the screen.

“So, what changed?” I press.

“I, uh . . .” He swallows. Still uncomfortable, even as he tries to be my good little actor. “I don’t know. I guess I used to think the violence was a little cheap, or something, but I can see the fun in it, right? Guessing who’s behind the mask, and all. It’s kind of like a game.”

“A game,” I echo, grinning. “You’re not wrong. Only, I’d push back against that specific word. ‘Game.’” I step closer. “There are similarities, of course. Games have rules. Games are about winning. But ‘game’”—another step—“implies an element of fiction. A game is something that can end at the click of a button, as soon as the lights come on. That’s not what this is.” I stop, close enough to feel his quickened breath. “There are rules, and there’s a winner. But this . . .” Close enough to taste his fear. “It’s as real as it gets.”

The moment I live for: when they understand, finally, what’s about to happen.

When he sees the knife in my hand.

For a breath, he freezes. No fight. No flight. Just pure panic in his eyes.

And then survival instinct catches up with him. He runs, but it’s too late now—I bear down, shoving him to the ground with a thud. There’s grunting, shifting, kicking, and then—*then*—the give, the blade sinking into the soft meat of his stomach.

It's exhilarating, even now—never failing to amaze me, the thrilling mundanity of this, the guts and flesh and breath. I keep the camcorder trained as I swing again and again, the euphoria fading away to industry, making sure the movement stops, that the deed is well and truly done.

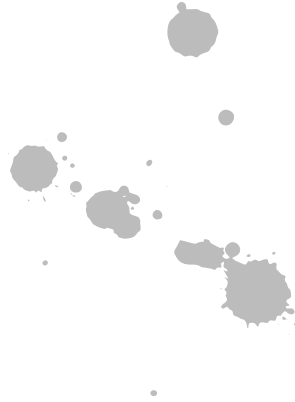
Finally, he's quiet.

I catch my breath. I rise.

A slow smile spreads across my face.

I've broken the rules, but it's all for a good cause. The highest of all. Because, I think, as I wipe the blood from my camcorder with my sleeve—isn't that the point of mastering conventions? You earn the right to break them.

And that's when the real fun begins.



## CASTING CALL: *SWAMP CREATURES* (Independent Feature Film)

Inspired by classic slasher films of the 80s and 90s, *Swamp Creatures* follows a group of horror-loving friends as a masked killer wreaks havoc on their small Louisiana town. We are casting the following roles:

**SAM (lead):** Female, 18. Like the classic “final girls” of the genre, Sam is brave and resourceful, but also vulnerable. There’s nothing she won’t do to protect the people she loves—even if it puts her face-to-face with a terrifying killer.

**RICH (lead):** Male, 18. Sam’s boyfriend and a charming, confident film buff. While a bit of a bad boy, Rich also has a heart of gold.

**ANNA (supporting):** Female, 18. A band geek and horror fan, Anna is the artistic one of the group. Though she can be sarcastic, Anna loves her friends and is determined to catch the killer.

**BRITTANY (supporting):** Female, 18. Cheerleader Brittany can be a bit of a mean girl, but there’s more to her than meets the eye.

**BILL (supporting):** Male, 18. Bill is a popular jock who can seem a bit shallow, even though he’s devoted to his friends—and especially his girlfriend, Brittany.

**ELLIOT (supporting):** Male, 16. A teacher’s pet and a bit standoffish, Elliot doesn’t quite fit in with the rest of the group.

**MR. TORRANCE (supporting):** Male, early 30s. A teacher at the local high school.

## **New Message From Jason Hooper**

Hello Hazel,

I am the writer and producer of *Swamp Creatures*, an independent feature film shooting this summer in Pine Springs, Louisiana. I came across your résumé on StageSite, and I think you could be a great fit for the role of our “final girl,” Sam. If you are interested, please submit a self-taped audition according to the attached instructions.

Hope to hear from you soon!

Best,  
Jason

7



**F**IFTEEN YEARS SINCE I'VE BEEN to Pine Springs, and as much as I don't remember about this town, there's one thing I can say for sure: it's pretty much a shithole.

Take the motel. Outside, a light flickers over a grimy letter board that reads WELCOME GUESTS—only I guess it could also be WELCOME GHOSTS, because the *U* and the *E* are missing. Given the general vibe of this place, there's some room for interpretation. There's also RV parking and free Wi-Fi, according to the half of the sign that doesn't look like an unfinished game of hangman.

I adjust the duffel on my shoulder, careful not to jostle my headphones. They're my graduation present from Mom, blissfully soundproof and therefore my most treasured possession. They're also dead, or else they'd be blasting music loud enough to tune out the swampy quiet of this place.

The Pine Springs Motel looks like anything else you'd find off a highway two hours west of New Orleans. Aesthetically, it's somewhere between a strip mall and a prison: two long stories lined with rooms, all tucked under a flat, dilapidated roof, the only colors somewhere on the spectrum from beige to

brown besides the deep green of the trees that ring the building and lot. It's the kind of place where you *would* park an RV—somewhere in-between. Somewhere barely worth mentioning.

And it's the beginning of the rest of my life.

Okay, that's melodramatic. But maybe that's just baked into actors, our fundamental flaw. Still, at the risk of being earnest—a disease I try my very best to avoid—I can't fight the little jolts of excitement zipping down my spine as I make my way up to the office door. Because here, however shitty, is where I'll be staying as I shoot my first-ever feature film. And it will be good. It's got to be.

I can still count the worry lines on Mom's face as she helped me pack up the car.

*You sure you want to do this, Haze?*

A question that has a million meanings. *Are you sure about this gap-year thing?*

*Are you sure you want to go back there?*

It's not that Mom wants me to give up on acting, not specifically. She's worried about me. And deep down, we both know she's worried about the memories still lurking here.

Something snaps in the shadows. I spin to look at the trees, but there's nothing there. Probably a squirrel or a nutria, whatever the hell else is hiding in this swamp of a town.

Or maybe I'm letting the ghost stories get to me. Which feels ironic, in a way. Because you can't be afraid of ghost stories when they're all about you.

WELCOME G\_\_STS.

I give the sign one last look before I open the office door.

Inside, it's just as drab as the exterior: beige walls, grimy carpeted floor, not much space for anything besides two

scratchy-looking chairs, a mostly empty shelf of brochures, and a check-in desk, behind which sits a middle-aged white woman with cat's-eye glasses and the biggest cup of gas-station soda I've ever seen. A battery-powered fan putters away beside her, doing its best to fight the muggy heat that's crept in from outside, even this late at night.

"Checking in?" she asks. I detect a light Cajun accent, and also the clear implication that this is an inconvenience. Although I guess that's fair. Judging from the pile of half-done scratch-offs on the desk, DEB, MANAGER—according to her name tag—had more exciting plans than my arrival.

"Yeah," I say. "Lejeune."

I pronounce it "Luh-JUNE," and Deb gives me a look. Probably, she also knows that the correct Cajun pronunciation is "Luh-JERN," but at some point, my ancestors must've gotten tired of correcting people, because "Luh-JUNE" is how Mom and I have always said it. But if Deb minds that much, she doesn't say. Instead, she takes a long slurp of her drink to gird herself for the hardship of searching my name on a computer that might be older than I am.

"Hazel?" she asks finally.

"Haze. But yeah."

Deb eyes me over her glasses like she doesn't approve. Of nicknames or of me in general, I couldn't say which. I could try to tell her that "Haze" is what I've always been called, or that "Hazel Lejeune" sounds too much like a scrapped character from *Gone with the Wind* for my liking, but I don't think Deb seems like the type to care.

To prove it, she takes a fifteen-second slurp of soda before digging around her desk to find my key.

"Room six," she says, handing it over. It's an honest-to-God

key, with a ring and everything—like a prop out of *Psycho*. Which is kind of cool, actually.

“You one of them movie people?”

The way Deb says it, “movie people” might be synonymous with “hosts of a flesh-eating parasite.”

“Yeah,” I tell her with a little rush of pride. Even if Deb clearly doesn’t want us here, I can’t help but feel excited knowing that I’m a part of it. *The movie people*.

Deb huffs, settling deeper into her seat. “Out-of-towners are always looking to dig up all that Pine Springs Slasher stuff.”

My grip tightens on the warm metal of the key.

She frowns. “Puttin’ y’all up here to—”

“Do you need anything else from me, or am I checked in?” It comes out ruder than I meant it to, but it works. Deb drops it.

“Just your ID,” she says.

I must have finally pushed Deb over the edge, because when I hand her my license, there’s no soda slurp involved—she barely glances at it before handing it back.

“Hazel Lejeune,” she mutters, almost to herself. “Swear I heard that somewhere before.”

I snatch my license quickly, my heart jumping. There’s no way she can know—but then I’d guess stories in Pine Springs run river-deep. I wait for her to put two and two together, for the moment that proves coming here was a mistake.

Deb goes back to her scratch-offs. I let out a little breath of relief.

I’m already halfway to the door when she calls, almost like an afterthought, “Welcome to Pine Springs.”

She doesn’t say “welcome back,” but I can’t help feeling the echo of it as I step out into the muggy night. Even if I was too

little to really remember, this place feels familiar: the darkness, the quiet, a waterlogged weight to the air that seeps into everything. The walls. My bones.

I'm not sure yet if it's really a welcome or something else—a creature catching a familiar scent. Flashing its teeth in the moonlight, hungry for the taste it's been missing.



The door sticks. I have to give it a hard shove before it finally swings open to my room: small, with cream walls and burgundy carpeting so dark that the shade could definitely have been chosen to disguise spilled blood, which, all things considered, is sort of awesome. There's one full bed with beige covers, a desk, a rickety chair, a TV, and a hulking AC unit, which is what really grabs my attention.

Dropping my duffel on the floor, I walk over to the AC and crank it up. It gives a mildly concerning wheeze, but the cool air still comes, and I sigh with relief, flopping back onto the springy bed.

The drive from Pensacola to Pine Springs was a little less than five hours, but I'm used to a trek. We've only been in Florida for the past two years—usually the longest we'll spend somewhere before packing it all up again. Before that, we were just outside of D.C. Before *that*, a stint in Chicago. The moves are always for Mom's work: she's in sales, and she's good at it, which means there's no shortage of promotions and companies trying to poach her from each other. Sure, she could stay in one place and climb the ranks there, but that would take longer, and anyway, she doesn't want to. It's important to see the world, she tells me. To experience new things. And it is.

But I also know the other reason for the moves, the one we

don't talk about: Mom is scared of what will happen if we stay somewhere too long. If the past catches up with us.

And now I'm running headfirst back into it.

*The Pine Springs Slasher.* The name feels as tangible as the damp in the air, sticking to my skin, and I can't help myself. It's like picking a scab or scratching an itch, the urge to pull out my phone and look it up.

The familiar headlines are all there, fifteen years later: FIVE PINE SPRINGS SENIORS MURDERED. TEACHER CONFESSES. CAL DUPRE, THE PINE SPRINGS SLASHER, BEHIND BARS, LEAVING A WIFE AND THREE-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER TO DEAL WITH THE FALLOUT.

I scroll through them all like it's a compulsion—like maybe if I read them all, they won't be true. Like if I read them all, I'll understand. I keep scrolling even as everything in me screams to chuck my phone away and put on a movie, the scarier the better. That's what I usually do when I get like this: distract myself with the most gruesome, terrifying film I can find.

The first time I ever watched a slasher, I was ten and sleeping over at my friend Destiny's house. I don't remember exactly how it started or which of us put it on—only that as I heard the first eerie notes of that iconic *Halloween* theme music, a feeling dug like gnarled roots into the pit of my stomach, letting me know that this was grown-up and scary and therefore *everything*. That night, Destiny was too terrified to sleep. But as I lay awake, heart racing, it wasn't fear. It was victory. Because I'd faced the dark, frightening thing and won.

When Mom found out, she was angrier than I'd ever seen her. Even in my ten-year-old head, I remember being confused by her reaction. This was Sadie Lejeune, the woman who, a couple times a year, would let me play hooky so we could

watch movies all day: *The Princess Bride*, *The Goonies*, *Paper Moon*, a diet of greats she was determined to raise me on, even if I was a little too young for them. What was so bad about two kids sneaking a scary movie?

Back then, I had no idea who my father really was. I knew I *had* one, at least in the sense that biological existence required it, but I also knew that some kids only lived with their mom, and that was enough. It was for me, anyway.

So, I figured I'd keep the peace and watch my slashers in secret. That lasted until I was thirteen, when Mom caught me rewatching *Friday the 13th* and we had the blowout fight that led to the truth: my father was Cal Dupre, the Pine Springs Slasher, serving a life sentence in prison because he'd done exactly the kind of thing I was so obsessed with watching on-screen.

After that, I might have given up slashers. But I couldn't. I'm sure a psychologist would have a field day with this one, but it's the truth: I was already in too deep. Since *Halloween*, I'd been ravenous for them, devouring everything from the classics to the B-movie deep cuts.

Mom didn't get it. We argued about it for almost a year after that first big fight until, eventually, she gave in: I was old enough to make my own choices, so she'd either have to leave me alone or get on board. And she did try—a few times, she sat down to watch one with me but only ever made it through the first few kills before she was “too tired” for more. What I couldn't quite explain to her—what I wished she'd understand—was that these movies were like therapy. In a slasher, the killer is always unmasked. The blood is always corn syrup and food coloring. And even though it's all fake, there's something real in it, too. Because if Laurie Strode and

Sidney Prescott can overcome as much as they have and still come out swinging, then maybe I can, too.

With new purpose beating behind my ribs, I close the search results and open my email, navigating to the welcome message from our first assistant director, Wren Olivera, which includes our call sheet and script pages for tomorrow. So far, that's all she's sent of the *Swamp Creatures* screenplay—which is a little nerve-racking. I'm pretty good at memorizing lines, but I wish I had the whole script to prepare ahead of time.

Still, for all I know, this is just how professional film sets work. My résumé is pretty bare besides a few student films I weaseled my way into throughout high school. I'm grateful to be doing a feature at all, and I'm going to make it work.

I scroll to my first scene: 4: INT. CLASSROOM – DAY.

My character, Sam, has a lot of lines in this one, but it's not just the memorization I'm anxious about. Not having the full script makes it hard to make real choices about who this character is. But based on the scenes I have and the ones I read for the audition, I've got enough of a picture to know that Sam is in my wheelhouse: she's a high school senior with a penchant for horror movies (check, even if technically I graduated last month); a nice, charming boyfriend (not exactly, but I can use my imagination); and dreams much bigger than her current life has to offer (checked, starred, and underlined). But most importantly, Sam is the final girl. She's smart. Resourceful. The one left standing when the killer's bloody rampage meets its inevitable end.

That, I can relate to.

I'm about to start running through my lines when my phone buzzes. I grab it, expecting a “you made it?” call from Mom that I'm already feeling guilty for not preempting, but it's not her.

It's a different number, one I recognize. One that sends panic skittering like beetles down my back.

I decline the call, my heart pounding loud in the silence. For a few seconds, I stare at the screen, expecting it to light up again, but it doesn't. In spite of myself, I get up and glance out the room's one window, which faces out onto a lot behind the motel. There's no one there. Of course there isn't.

I breathe out, closing the blinds and then going back to my bed. I'm being ridiculous, obviously. I'm fine. To prove it to myself, I shoot Mom a text to let her know I made it, set my phone on Do Not Disturb, and focus back on the script.

Reading over the scene again, I feel a new excitement bubbling. I expected the ghost stories, the reminders, but *this*—this is why I'm here. To get my foot in the door. To make something good. To prove to Mom that she doesn't have to worry about me, because I can do this.

And if that means being here, back in the town she's spent fifteen years trying to keep me from?

Then fuck it. I'll be the best final girl Pine Springs has ever seen.

## 2

**T**HE MORNING BEGINS WITH A series of good omens: my bangs dried okay, my clothes didn't wrinkle too bad in my suitcase, and I remembered to charge my headphones last night. It almost makes up for the fact that I'm up at the ass crack of dawn.

For once, I'm *awake*. Light spills through the gauzy motel curtains as I wrangle myself into an all-black outfit, fully committing to the dark color palette even in the heat—which, according to my weather app, is already in the high eighties, because hell hath no fury like a Louisiana summer. I'll be changing into a costume once I get there anyway. That's what I love about acting: it doesn't matter how I walk on set or even who I am. I can slip into whoever I need to be as easily as pulling this old, pilling T-shirt over my head.

I check Wren's email one more time to confirm that all the actors are getting picked up for set at seven. In school, it was always a miracle if I made it to my first class less than five minutes late—regardless of where in the country we were living. No matter how early I set my alarm, getting out of bed was worse than pulling teeth. And even once I did, there was music and coffee and last-minute homework-cramming to deal

with, all with Mom's intermittent shouts to remind me that I couldn't be late *again*, and me assuring her I wouldn't be, even meaning it, until suddenly time stretched and there we were in the car, Mom pushing the school-zone speed limits with a long-suffering silence much worse than *I told you so*.

But this? This is where I thrive. This is where I can pop up before my six thirty alarm without even needing caffeine, because this is what I'm made for.

I give my lines one more run-through, double-check my backpack for the essentials, and then grab my headphones, pulling up my music. Today's playlist is an obvious choice: Don't Go in There, my curated mix of all the best horror-movie soundtracks. I scroll down to "Profondo Rosso," aka "Deep Red"—the theme song from the 1975 giallo film of the same name—and press Play. This movie's got all the hallmarks of the Italian slasher genre: weird dubbing, a killer in fabulous black leather gloves, and plenty of gratuitous violence. Also, most importantly, a soundtrack of absolute bangers by a band called Goblin.

The synth and electric guitar are just starting to go hard as hell when I open the door and step onto the outdoor walkway. I turn to lock it behind me, double-checking the handle—not because I'm afraid of ghosts, but because I don't trust Deb not to go through my stuff.

And then there's a hand on my shoulder.

"*Shit.*" I spin around, pulling off my headphones as I face a guy about my age. He's tall and tanned, with swoopy brown hair and a white T-shirt that makes me wonder if he's actually trying to be a Billy Loomis look-alike. He's also chewing a toothpick like a wannabe cowboy, and instantly, I hate him.

"Sorry," he says, in a way where I know he's not. "Didn't

mean to scare you. Figured you must be on *Swamp Creatures*, too.” He takes out the toothpick with one hand and extends the other. “Cameron Cormier.”

He has a slight Southern accent and the kind of easy smile people write books about—like, it’s *actually* crooked. I glance down to escape it, and that’s when I notice the real-life cowboy boots he’s wearing under his jeans. *Good Lord.*

I consider putting my headphones on before deciding that it would be too rude, even for me—as Mom is always reminding me. It’s hard to make friends when odds are I’ll be in another state before graduation, so somewhere along the way, I lost the motivation. But maybe this is the place to start.

“Haze,” I say, taking his hand, because he seems to actually be serious about that. His palm is softer than I thought it would be, but with the firm sort of grip that his good Southern parents must have instilled in him. I shake it quickly. “I’m playing Sam.”

A mischievous smirk tugs at his lips, and already, I know what he’s about to say.

“I’m Rich.”

Because of course. Of *course* this guy is my on-screen boyfriend.

“Haze,” Cameron repeats, like he’s trying it on for size. He cups his hand to block out the sun and looks down at me. “That a mononym sort of thing? Like Zendaya?”

His tone is genuine, but there’s a teasing glint in his eye that pulls a chuckle out of me—more at the ridiculousness of the idea than anything.

“Not exactly sure I could pull that off.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.” Cameron winks, which is not

a thing that I've ever seen a real person do—but somehow, it works for him.

“It's Lejeune,” I say. “My last name.”

Sudden heat prickles my cheeks, and I head quickly for the stairs so he doesn't see it. Definitely not because I'm into him—I'm just embarrassed at his shameless flirting, is all. Because if there's one thing I know, it's that this fake-cowboy schtick will *not* work on me.

“Haze Lejeune,” Cameron repeats, like it feels good to say. “Real name or stage?”

“Real.”

“Lucky.”

“Yours?”

“I'll never tell.” I can hear that sideways grin again, even without looking at it. “You nervous, Haze Lejeune?”

When I glance back, his cocky smirk has a clear subtext: *I'm not*.

I stand up straighter, refusing to let him clock my nerves.

“No,” I say. “Why?”

He gestures to my headphones. “You forgot to turn off your music.”

It's not until he says it that I notice the tinny version of Goblin still rocking out from my speakers. I pause it, ears burning.

“It's cool if you are,” Cameron says. “On my first feature, I was shaking in my boots. I stayed up so late running my lines that I couldn't see straight.”

His *first feature*. Clearly one of many.

“What makes you think it's my first?” I ask, ignoring the part where he's right.

He grins again.

“Because,” he says, lowering his voice like it’s our little secret, “my room is right next door, and I heard you doing the same thing.”

Now I can’t hide my scowl. But it’s my own fault. Looking at Cameron, with his smug look and put-on Southern charm, I wonder why I ever thought I could give him the benefit of the doubt.

Thankfully, there are only a few more steps between me and the parking lot. I practically leap down them, finding that three other people are already here waiting: a girl and a guy around our age and a man who’s probably in his thirties. Cameron and I are the last ones down—and judging from the way he strides right into their orbit, you’d think this was a party in his honor.

“Morning,” he says breezily. “Y’all on *Swamp Creatures*, too? I’m Cameron Cormier, and this is Haze Lejeune. Rich and Sam, respectively.”

I give a small wave, wary of being looped into some sort of dynamic duo with Cameron, but I guess it’s bound to happen when we’re playing opposite each other.

The girl steps forward first.

“Nina Rivera,” she says, taking off her narrow white sunglasses. “I’m playing Anna.”

The band geek of the film’s friend group—but I definitely don’t get “geeky” from Nina. She couldn’t look more out of place in this small, swampy town: the smiling city girl in a trendy white maxi skirt, with big doe eyes and light brown skin, her short brown hair pulled into a ponytail to reveal thick gold hoops. For some reason—the good posture or the melodic speaking voice, maybe—I get the vibe that Nina does musical theater.

Cameron’s toothpick reappears, and Nina’s smile wavers

for a brief look of disgust—and for that reason alone, I think I like her.

The other boy, who's been cleaning his wire-rim glasses with a cloth, sticks them back onto his nose.

“Lucas. Um, Murphy,” he says, like he isn't sure if he should do the full-name thing. He rakes a hand through his auburn curls and adds, almost bashfully, “Bill.”

Bill is the jock character, but Lucas is gangly and nervous, pale arms sticking out of his short-sleeved button-down as he shakes our hands. The only sport I'd buy him playing is competitive chess, but I'm sure he nailed the audition, or he wouldn't be here.

The older actor is right behind Lucas.

“Hi there, I'm Harry Clark. Resident grown-up, it seems.” He gives a self-deprecating chuckle. “I'm playing Mr. Torrance—which shouldn't be too much of a stretch. I teach English in New Orleans.”

With his glasses, sandy beard, and collared shirt, he totally looks the part.

Before we can get any deeper into our introductions, a white SUV peels into the parking lot, stopping just ahead of us. A woman climbs out of the driver's seat, wearing an all-black getup similar to my own. She's tall and curvy, maybe late twenties to early thirties, with bright purple glasses and a long black braid. But it's the urgent, frazzled energy and walkies bulging from two separate pockets that immediately mark her as Wren, our first AD—the director's right hand, in charge of all things logistical.

“Hi, everyone,” she says in a rushed, apologetic voice, like she's ten minutes late instead of two. “I'm assuming you're

my actors, right? I'm Wren Olivera." She stops, counting us. "Looks like we're all here. Everyone ready?"

"Just about," Cameron answers for us.

"Great!" Wren claps, turning back to the van. "Let's rock and roll."

Cameron gives an overdramatic *ladies first* sort of gesture to me and Nina, and we exchange a look. She's definitely not into the whole cocky-Southern-boy act either, and I'm thrilled we're on the same page.

Once we're all piled in, Wren reverses out of the parking spot, slinging her arm around the passenger seat in a perfect execution of how every suburban dad backs up their car. Already, I feel like I could trust her with my life.

"So, boss," Harry starts, turning to Wren from the passenger seat, "where we headed today?"

I watch Wren's reflection in the rearview, intrigued for the answer. She didn't put our specific location on the call sheet, but the scenes all take place in a classroom.

"The local high school," she says. "They just got out for summer break last week, so we'll have it all to ourselves."

An anxious buzzing starts up in my stomach. Suddenly, I'm too aware of my breath, of how close I am to Nina and Cameron on either side of me. The local high school. Does that mean—

"Pine Springs High?" Lucas perks up from the back seat.

"Yep," Wren says casually, confirming what I probably should have suspected from the jump. Because this makes sense. Pine Springs has a population of just over two thousand. It's probably the only high school in town.

Then why do I feel like I'm climbing to the top of a roller coaster, seconds from a stomach-plunging drop?

“Whoa,” Lucas breathes, as if to underscore the thought. “That’s where it happened, right?”

“Where what happened?” Nina asks.

Wren is driving at exactly the speed limit, but now it feels like the van is barreling toward a cliff’s edge: this thing I knew without a doubt was coming, even as I prayed we’d somehow avoid it. I resist the urge to dig my bitten-down nails into my thighs as Lucas launches us into the cavern below.

“The Pine Springs Slasher murders.”

It’s out there for approximately half a second before Cameron’s eyes widen in recognition.

“Oh, right.” He whistles. “Jeez, I probably haven’t thought about that since the third grade.”

Nina’s eyebrows lift curiously. “Care to explain for those of us clearly out of the loop?”

She glances at me when she says it, and I realize she thinks I’m like her—an outsider, free of an accent or any trace of Southern charm. It makes me relax a little, even as something like regret pings in the back of my brain.

Lucas sits forward like a storyteller at a campfire.

“Fifteen years ago,” he begins, pitching his voice low, “five seniors at Pine Springs High were *murdered*.”

He gives the word a ghostly gravity, and I’ll give it to him—nerdy or not, he’s a good actor.

“They were all in the film club together,” Lucas goes on. “It was run by this English teacher, Cal Dupre. He was great, apparently. Teacher of the Year a couple times. Only it seemed like his club was cursed. Because a few months before graduation, one of his students was stabbed to death and dumped in the swamp for the gators. A couple weeks after some locals found her body, another film-club student—the first girl’s

boyfriend—turned up dead in the same swamp. Stabbed, just like her. No one tied it back to Cal at first, 'cause they were more focused on the girlfriend-boyfriend angle. But then, a few days after graduation, Cal hosted his annual wrap party to celebrate the film-club graduates—or the ones who were still alive, anyway. They all watched a movie in this old shed Cal converted into a home theater, and the next morning . . .”

Lucas pauses, building suspense, and even I'm holding my breath—my hands clenched to fists, fighting hard to keep my face neutral as he builds to the grand finale.

“All three of those students were found murdered in the swamp. Slashed to death with a chain saw.”

Nina grimaces, and Harry shakes his head.

“Awful,” he says.

Lucas nods gravely. “Cal swore they all went home after the party, but the cops searched his shed anyway, since that was the last place the kids were seen alive, and *boom*—there was the chain saw, hidden under the shed. Cal had cleaned it off, but it was a perfect match for the injuries. His DNA was all over the bodies, too. Even after they arrested him, Cal swore he was innocent, but eventually, he confessed.”

Nina scoffs. “Guess the guilt about murdering five kids finally caught up with him?”

“Or the police just wore him down,” Lucas says. “Gave him a deal. No one really knows—just like they don't know why he did it.”

There's an ice-cold sting at the top of my spine, like metal pressed to my skin.

“God.” Nina shudders, putting her little sunglasses back on. “And some men just buy a boat when they're having a mid-life crisis.”

“He was only thirty-three,” Lucas says, almost sadly. “Which makes him almost fifty now. Still serving life in Angola.”

His voice fades in appropriately dramatic fashion, earning a moment of silence from the car. I keep my focus on the window, the pines rolling past.

That was the SparkNotes edition, I guess, but the part of me without a self-protective instinct wants to tell Lucas that he’s got it wrong. Not about the facts but about the students. Because they weren’t just bodies in a swamp. They were real people with futures ahead of them: Bella Thibodeaux, the first victim, a head cheerleader who dreamed of becoming an actress; her boyfriend, Beau Abbott, a football star with a scholarship to play at Clemson; Abby Sanchez, headed to film school in California to become a director; Susie Trahan, class valedictorian; and Reeve Warner, Susie’s boyfriend, who was already helping support his mom and four younger siblings with a job at the local diner, dreaming of buying them all a new house one day. If Cal’s victims had survived, they would all be as old now as he was then, with careers and partners, maybe even kids.

But because of my father, they’re frozen at eighteen.

Lucas is looking out the window now, excitement still glimmering in his eyes—the strange, exhilarating comedown of telling a good ghost story, probably, but also something else.

“You’re pretty into this case, huh?” I ask, wary. Because I recognize that thrilled gleam: it’s a staple of the true-crime junkies Mom has always tried to protect us from, the ones so eager for a story they’ll cross every line in the name of justice.

Lucas reddens a little. “I’ve always been into true crime. Not in, like, a weird way. I’m, uh . . . I’m pretty anxious, so

it's almost like exposure therapy." His cheeks flush deeper. "I don't believe in exploiting victims, though. This one just . . . I mean, I grew up a couple hours from here, so the case is close to home, like, *literally*, and—"

"It's fine," I say, softening—mostly because I'm sort of worried he might combust. "You're allowed to be into it. I mean, we're all clearly into some macabre shit, or else we wouldn't be here."

Lucas gives a shy smile. "That's a good point."

I manage a little smile back. There's something so harmless about him, I can't help it.

"Did you know about the Pine Springs Slasher, too?" Nina asks me.

My heart judders, launching me back into defense mode.

"Not really," I lie. "It sounds a little familiar. I've moved around a lot, so maybe I heard of it somewhere."

"It made the rounds at the playground in Baton Rouge, that's for sure," Cameron adds. "I used to think it was made up, though. Like a Bloody Mary sort of thing."

Nina shrugs. "Guess it never made its way up to New Jersey."

"It's become a sort of legend here," Wren adds, and I can't tell if I'm imagining a hint of discomfort in the way she grips the wheel. "There's a few ghost tours, people coming to look at the old Dupre house. That sort of thing."

I get a sudden flash of a red door, a porch swing, a big shed out back, things I'm not sure if I'm really remembering or if I just know them from the pictures I've seen online.

My stomach turns.

"Are you from here?" I ask, suddenly afraid of her answer.

I relax when Wren shakes her head.

“No, Texas. But I live in New Orleans now, with Autumn, our director—my girlfriend.”

The tips of her ears go a little pink, like she’s worried the slip will make us think she got this job through nepotism, but I can already tell from her pin-straight posture and firm ten-and-two grip that Wren was born to keep a film shoot on track.

In the quiet that follows, Wren turns on the radio, static crackling as she spins the dial. I breathe out, glad for the break in this conversation. When Wren lands on a country station, my hands twitch for my headphones—but actually, this feels like an appropriate score for the moment as we head into town.

Which is maybe a generous term, because this one is as small as it gets. The highway exit curves into a road where the only signs of life are a gas station, a drugstore, and power lines crisscrossing between the trees. Then, a little farther down, we see the first houses: flat and modest, all of them spread out, with giant green yards in between, tall pines standing guard. As we drive, I spot three different homes with boats parked on the lawn.

Yeah, we’re definitely in small-town Louisiana.

I wonder, suddenly, how close we are to the house, to where it happened. If we could even be passing it now. But I push the thought from my mind as Wren turns us onto Main Street. The van ambles past a tiny grocery store, an even tinier police station, a church, and a brewery—because this is Louisiana, where drunkenness is next to godliness, literally. We also pass a diner, and I wonder, with a wave of uneasiness, if it’s the same one where Reeve Warner worked fifteen years ago. And then, like the thought summoned it, we arrive at the not-quite scene of the crime: Pine Springs High.

It's a brick building, bigger than any of the others we've seen so far but still small enough that it couldn't possibly fit more than a few hundred students. There's nothing all that distinctive about it, and that might be the worst part. Image-search a small-town high school, and this is what you'd get. Not a single indication of the horrors that once crept inside.

Wren parks the van in a small lot beside the school, and we all climb out. I squint through the sun at the town square, which sits just across the road from us. It's like something out of a Deep South *Gilmore Girls*: a gazebo in the middle of the grassy space, surrounded by the multicolored tents of a farmer's market. Even this early, people are milling around with bags of vegetables and big cups of lemonade that make my mouth water in the heat. My stomach grumbles at the smell of fried dough, reminding me that I haven't eaten yet.

"All right," Wren says, locking the van behind her once Lucas has crawled his way out from the back seat. "Y'all ready?"

I take one more look at the quaint scene in the town square, trying to find some shred of familiarity. I'm sure I've been here, even if I was too young to remember. I picture three-year-old me running around in the grass, catching burrs in my clothes, Mom eyeing a basket of bright red tomatoes.

And Cal. He must have been there, too. Watching. Maybe even running behind me, playing like he wanted to catch me.

Just like that, the sunny thought is blotted out by a dark cloud. I turn away, focusing instead on the school, my first-ever film set. The place still haunted by my father's victims.

*Ready*, I think in answer to Wren's question, because I have to be. Because there's no other choice.

We follow her in.