

Some Laney's Died

A Skipping Sideways Thriller

By

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Preface

This book contains scenes of violence, sexual situations, and suicide. It also contains scenes of love, resilience, joy, hope, and redemption. And some mind-bending science underlying everything.

Epigraph

“Does regret burn more for things you did or never tried?”

—Delaney West

Prologue

Children playing on the banks of Onion Creek in Falls Park yesterday thought they saw two turtle shells in the shallows. One teenage girl stepped into the water and lifted them out of the mud, only to discover they were skulls. Terrified, she turned around and called to her father who ran to the bank and retrieved them from his daughter. After placing them on the shore, Mr. Alan Tanner looked around the area and found several bones. Two tattered black garbage bags had been trapped in a patch of elephant ears. Each contained bones and remains.

A preliminary report by the Medical Examiner indicates the bones originated from two adolescent girls, possibly related, who died at least two or three years ago, based upon level of decomposition. A search of missing children files from that timeframe has so far yielded no matching reports. Further analysis is pending.

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Chapter One

So far today, I've created seventy-three new universes, all containing another version of Delaney West, age sixteen. An hour ago, I opened the News Alert about the two dead girls; another version of me did not. In another world, she continues to laugh with Kaitlyn as they watch Marissa strip for her boyfriend on FaceTime. That Laney will keep her friends and possibly show some skin herself.

I, however, ran outside to sit in my car, claiming to want no part of their antics. My first sleepover in years, and now they'll think I'm a prude. But reading the article made my head spin and gut cramp.

I thumb through the story again on my phone as my heart pounds. Two or three years ago two teenage girls died, probably murdered, their remains discovered in the same area I found Dad with another woman.

Why does one story make me think of the other?

A warm breeze slings acorns onto my roof. How can it be this warm in December? Or maybe my mind flashes back to a summer outing three years ago—a July Fourth camping trip when I caught my father having sex with a woman I didn't know.

I told Mom what Dad had done, thereby ruining the marriage and the family, pushing Dad out of my life and opening the way for her new boyfriend, Khannan.

And a life of regret for me.

How does anyone know which choice might change her life's direction, especially at thirteen? Simple choices like what to do on July Fourth can have monumental consequences. We'd considered watching an air show or even a movie that day but

decided to camp at the lake. Who would've guessed that decision would change everything?

One choice, one very different life.

Since then, I've written stories of that day with various outcomes. One where I watched through the trees as Dad and Gibbs giggled and tore off each other's clothes then walked away quietly, never telling anyone.

And another version—the real one—where Dad begged me to forget what I had seen and heard and never tell anyone.

“Never tell anyone” is in a lot of versions.

But I did tell because . . . I'm not sure why. At the time I was furious. I remember screaming, hitting, crying. I wouldn't listen to anything Dad said. The woman held her clothes against her chest, mouth open in disbelief as I cursed both of them. After several minutes of my tirade, we locked eyes until hers softened a little as she reached out her hand. I froze, my chest heaving. I could've moved toward her, but I tightened my fists, jerked around, and left.

One version I wrote had me running into her arms, crying as she held me and kissed my head.

On the way back to tell Mom, I collapsed in tears. Sounds of a girl crying and moaning filled my head. Where did they come from? I had no idea. I remembered listening to Dad and the woman moaning and gasping before I yelled at them, but the other sounds were different. Painful, stifled screams above some kind of throbbing motor. And sounds of choking.

Something horrible had happened, but all I could remember was watching Dad and the woman.

I told Mom what I'd seen. A little later, Dad walked into our campsite. Then days of screaming and accusations at home until Mom held me to her as she raised her finger to point beyond Dad's head and beyond our house. "Get out!"

He did.

At the time, I had no idea what would happen to us. I didn't know how one choice could ruin my life or send one version of it, the only one I knew and really wanted, into the void, squeezing my brain forever until I could do nothing but scream or cry. Over and over.

I look back at Marissa's door. Maybe I can go back inside and rejoin the party. Let them do what they want while I smile and act cool. That's what I should be doing on a Friday night—hanging out with friends, not sitting in my Outback, listening to the thump of acorns on my hood. I flip down the visor, brush my hair in the mirror then pull golden brown strands from the bristles into a tangled wad. How can something look so good on my head and so nasty in my hand?

But not as bad as what the girl saw after she pulled skulls from the river, expecting to find cute turtles. I can't shake that image from my mind.

And something else, something forgotten, lurking in the shadow just outside my memory—grunts, throbbing, choking.

I need to drive somewhere, anywhere.

After several curves and turns through Marissa's private forest, I merge into a stream of headlights. Austin traffic at its best.

As I drive I think about an evening two years ago when I couldn't stifle my sobs about missing Dad, and Mom heard me. I thought she would've noticed weeks earlier, but she was busy with her research. And being a single mom. My fault.

She ran into my room, held me, rubbed my back and wiped my tears before picking up a few stories—different versions of that day in July when I could've made different choices. After reading a few paragraphs in each, she stared at me, eyes bulging, her forehead turning red. “Why do you write these?”

I tried to catch my breath. Her eyes squinted hard as she flinched away from me. Was she scared of me?

“Because I wish I'd acted differently. I've tried to think of everything I could've done, so maybe . . .”

“Maybe what?” She held some papers in front of her, like a barrier between us.

I sniffed and closed my eyes. “If there's a next time, I'll know better. I'll do the right thing. I'll make a better choice.” I looked away, wondering if I should tell her more. “When I write, I feel I'm there, making the decision all over again. I think I can disappear into the story and do the right thing.”

We locked eyes.

I sighed so deeply, draining all my breath. “Sometimes I don't want to come back,” I whispered.

And for several seconds, I didn't think I would. Everything blurred then started to fade until I had this weird feeling I'd done this before. Just before I blacked out, Mom jerked my hand away from my throat.

“Delaney! What are you doing?”

I hitched in a breath, looked at my hand then at her. “I don’t know. I’ve had weird thoughts lately.”

She frowned. “None of this is your fault. What about Sean doing the right thing? Or me making a different choice? Why are you to blame?”

Heat poured into my face. “I could’ve walked away! As soon as I saw them go into the tent, I could’ve turned around.” I drew up my legs and hugged my knees to my chest, sobbing against my bed.

Mom moved next to me. “You could have, but I’d already seen Gibbs that day, or thought I’d seen her. She had a habit of lurking in his shadow.”

My eyes shot up, and my stomach twisted. “You saw her?” For some reason, I panicked. She’d seen Gibbs? Before I did? What else had she seen?

“I wasn’t sure,” Mom said, “but when I noticed Sean missing, I sent you to look for him. None of this is your fault, Delaney. Your father and Gibbs had a long history together before me. He evidently couldn’t leave her in the past. He made the decision to follow her into the woods. You had nothing to do with it.”

My heart pounded, and I tried to catch my breath. A glimpse of a scene flashed through my mind—a woman following a man into the woods. Or maybe she was younger. Was this from one of my stories? Or some place else?

“How many versions have you written?” She held up one story and pushed the others into a pile.

I grabbed them from the floor and clutched them. “Maybe twenty.” It was actually thirty by that time.

Mom grimaced. “Dear, God.” She touched my cheek. “Maybe you should see a doctor.”

“We already tried that!” I heard myself say too loudly. “He just made it worse.”

Flashback to six weeks of, “How does that make you feel, Delaney?” And, “What are your treatment goals?” And then Mom complaining about spending time and money if all I was going to do was walk out of the sessions. Never again.

She paused, searching my face with her pale gray eyes. They always seemed cold to me. Her thin lips and no makeup reinforced the image. I knew she cared. She just had trouble showing me.

Dr. Hannah Strong is an Endowed Professor of Physics at U.T. Austin and world-famous. Maybe being a female in a typically male discipline forces her to embody her last name, which she kept even while married to Dad. Stocky, thick-boned, and short, she seems the exact opposite of the woman Dad would pursue. Fortunately, he passed his lanky height and looks onto me, though my arms are too long, while Mom gave me at least some of her brains.

She moved closer. “We could find someone else.”

I shook my head then looked away. I tried to speak, but my breaths hitched. My mouth was so dry. “Have you heard from him?” Please say yes, I thought.

“No. Not for over a year.”

My chest felt cold. “Did he ask about me?”

“He did.”

I was afraid to look at her. “Where . . . where is he?”

“At the time he was in Alaska.”

My eyes found hers. “So far? Why?”

She looked down. “I don’t know. Job, maybe. He told me years ago he’d gone as a teenager and liked it.” She met my gaze and tightened her lips. “He was always prone to whimsy. He rarely thought anything through. At least as long as I knew him.”

We both sat in silence. Her thoughts seemed to turn inward, and she sighed. Perhaps she had regrets too.

“What made him call?” I asked.

“Actually, I’m sure he was drunk.” Her lips tightened. “He called me about 5 am, which means it was 2 o’clock his time.” She scoffed, “His night was still young.”

“What did he say about me?”

“He wanted to know if you were still mad at him.”

Oh, God! My chest tightened as I felt tears flood my eyes. “What’d you say?”

“Nothing because he hung up. He was drunk, Delaney.”

“And nothing since then?”

“No.”

I hugged my legs against my chest. Almost every day I had written versions of that episode at the lake and afterward. I had never stopped thinking about him. Once, I had tried to imagine me leaving with him after Mom kicked him out, but I couldn’t make the story work. Why would he want me?

I’d hoped he might call me, and I thought about calling him, but all I could think of saying was, “I’m sorry.” I knew I couldn’t handle his anger at me. I regretted too much already.

“You don’t need to write these stories,” said Mom. “They’re making you feel worse. As much as you want to live in these new versions, you can’t.”

I felt numb. “I know. We can’t change the past.” Tears trickled down my cheeks.

“No, we can’t, but not for the reasons you’re thinking. Every possible choice you or I or they could’ve made already exists in another reality. All the choices we didn’t make live in their own worlds. They split off into separate universes and then move forward in their own time. There is no past to go to.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, wiping the snot off my face. “Split off? How?”

She held my face. “Will you listen, or do you want to keep crying?”

“I’ll listen.” I shuddered and tried to keep my lip from quivering.

She paused and sighed, probably trying to decide how much to dumb down her explanation. I was the top student in the best private school in the city, but I was in eighth grade at the time. And she was a genius. I always felt she couldn’t wait for me to go to college so she could really talk to me.

A thin smile spread across her lips. “Math and science have given us lots of explanations as to why and how things occur, but they also show us how much we don’t know. Light can be both a wave and a particle, for instance. An electron can be in a million different places at the same time. We really don’t understand what gravity is or where it comes from. Maybe it leaks in from another universe.”

“From so far away?”

“Or nearby. Universes can be parallel or like bubbles in a foam, undetectable, on the other side of a thought.”

My mouth dropped open. “How?”

Her eyes twinkled. “You’ve heard of this question: If a tree falls in an empty forest, does it make a sound?”

“Yes.”

“Here’s a better question. Does the tree fall if no one’s there to see it?”

“If you find it on the ground, it fell.”

“Yes, but how could you prove that your observation of the tree didn’t cause it to fall?”

“Because of evidence. The wind or disease in the bark. Saw cuts.”

“Those are still observations. If no one is there, no recording devices of any kind, each tree is both standing and fallen. Only when we look does the tree live or die.”

“That makes no sense. Our eyes aren’t power rays.”

“Exactly,” she grinned. “We don’t force things to happen just because we measure them. According to the Many Worlds Theory, each option exists in its own universe—one where the tree stands, and one where it’s fallen.”

She held my hands. “One year ago you told me what your father had done. Another universe exists where you never told me. One exists where I forgave him, but we live in the one where I didn’t.”

A tingle rose up my neck, and I lifted my stories off the floor. “Then each of these stories describes another universe. Right? Since each option could’ve happened.”

“That’s one way to look at them.”

“What’s the other way?” She tightened her lips. “Creations of an obsessive mind?”

“I didn’t say that. I know it’s a lot to absorb. Look all this up. Read about it. This is what I think about every day, what I try to understand and explain to others. I don’t have room in my brain to worry about one decision I made long ago. The average adult makes 35,000 choices each day, and I am certainly above average in everything I do.” She winked.

She wanted me to smile, to give her a hug, and put my foolishness behind me so we could get to bed. But all I could think of was how to jump from one universe to another. If I could imagine what happens in another bubble, then why couldn’t I be there? When I wrote, I saw real people saying and doing real things. There was no difference in my mind between what I saw with my eyes and what I imagined I saw. So wasn’t I in another universe when I used my imagination?

I couldn’t go back in time, but maybe I could skip sideways. “When I write, I live in these different worlds.”

“In your mind, Laney.”

“Could I ever see another universe?”

She shifted her legs and moved closer. “Let’s try this thought experiment. In one universe, you decide to stay inside the house. In another, you run outside to play in the rain. The you inside the house looks out the window by chance at the same time as the you outside looks through the window inside the house. What would either of you see?”

I wanted to say, “Each other,” but I knew she’d scoff at me. So I gave the answer she wanted. “An empty, dry living room and an empty, wet front yard?”

“Yes, because the act of looking causes another split in your own universe, one that fits logically into your particular story. Besides, by the time either of you decide to

look through the window, you would have already made a dozen decisions, creating more universes which have moved forward in their own time frame. How would either of you ever catch the other?"

I stood, holding my stories. My brain was like a racehorse, ready to take off as soon as she moved away from the gate. "I need to write something."

She stared at me, mouth open, right eye squinting slightly like she didn't recognize me. Then she shook her head. She held her hand up for me to help her stand. "You're not going to stop this obsession, are you?"

I pulled her up. "No. I can't."

She tightened her lips and touched my cheek. "Maybe . . ."

"No." My words rushed out of my mouth. "Thanks for explaining this to me, Mom. I'll read more about what you told me, and then we can talk again." I turned toward my desk and pulled out my chair.

"Please don't stay up too late, Delaney."

"Sure." I sat in my chair and tapped my keyboard to awaken my computer.

I heard my door close then tried to imagine all the worlds my choices had created. In one of them, surely, Hannah Strong and Sean West still lived together in our house, happy, with a perfectly normal daughter who doesn't dream about losing herself in unseen universes. Or finding herself in them.

Chapter Two

Some time after I left Marissa's sleepover, I drove by the park where the girls were found. I don't remember why. Later, I arrived home. My mind was in a fog for the rest of that weekend. I read the article about the two girls many times. I tried to imagine what had happened to them, even wrote several pages of their story, but stopped. I tried imagining the other option of staying at Marissa's and never opening the story on my phone. That version was more interesting, but ultimately led nowhere. I think I studied for finals.

A simple choice had changed my life and sent my father packing. Another choice—reading the article—has possibly changed things, though I'm not sure how. Make a few choices here and there, and pretty soon—bang—you're in a universe you never intended to visit. Better to know each decision and make sure it's the right one. And to recognize the important ones.

Months ago I decided to keep track of each choice, trying to avoid mistakes. But some days it's hard because I deliberate over each option, afraid to commit to only one.

I worry that counting is crazy and unhealthy. Sometimes I try to stop, but it's like being trapped underwater. I'm holding my breath, but it can only last so long before I panic, before I worry about drowning. Eventually I have to break through the surface, gasping for air, and realize I just made a choice that could've killed me.

I have to stay focused. Too much is at stake.

Monday, I decided to just do and not think. Didn't worry about each choice. Just took them as they came. Clothes, driving route, parking space, who to respond to in the hallway, who to seek out, whose invitation to accept or reject. As a result, I beat my

previous record of just over two hundred recorded choices. None of them seemed life changing, but who knows?

Today, I start over and am up to ten when I watch Khannan grimace as Mom kisses his cheek before she rushes out the door this morning. I could've turned away to fill my travel cup with coffee. But I don't.

By lunch, I'm at thirty-five when I drive home and yell at a girl about my age wearing shades practically running from my front door in a pleated miniskirt.

"Who the hell are you?" I bark.

I could've bitten my lip and pretended to find something in my car until she pulled away in hers. But I don't.

About my height but showing so much more skin than I've ever dared to, she flashes her white teeth behind purple lipstick and brushes past me, saying nothing, headed toward her red Outback. Mine is white.

Is there a gold stud in her tongue?

She hurries down the sidewalk, her skirt riding up obscenely with each step. She waves at me and purposely spreads her legs as she slides into the seat, smiling again before she shuts her door. Then she guns her car around the rest of our circular driveway and races down the street.

I'd left my graphing calculator on my desk this morning and need it for class this afternoon, so I have to go inside.

The foyer reeks of weed. Sofa pillows lie scattered around the living room, and a chair stands in the middle of the kitchen, ropes sagging in loops onto the seat. Others lie curled around the legs.

Visions of Khannan's skinny body filling the chair grate against my eyes. I shake my head and turn away, trying to keep the bile out of my throat.

I don't want to see this. I want to scream but force myself to take deep breaths instead.

The same thing has happened again—a man my Mom trusted has cheated on her! And I doubt it is Khannan's first time.

He and his son, Eddie, moved into our house a year ago. Mom seemed happy and asked me to give the man a chance, and I did. But during the past few weeks, his boredom with her has become more obvious, to me at least. Despite his gourmet dinners for us each night. Despite rubbing her feet with lotion as they watch TV. The man is faking it, I'm certain.

But I already screwed up one of her relationships. I can't do it to her again.

I stare at the ropes and see a flash of wrists tied together. A girl's? Did he tie her up? What the hell?

A door opens down the hall. My throat tightens, and I hold my breath, trying to back away. I hear footsteps. Or think I do.

I run as quietly as I can to my room and close the door. My calculator rests on top of a folded section of newspaper I read last night. I grab both, head toward the window, and pop off the screen, which I shove under my bed like I've done many times before when I needed to sneak out of the house. Straddling the tree limb, I reach back and push the window down before jumping to the ground and running around to the driveway. My face burns as my eyes stare at the front door, willing it to stay closed until I leave our neighborhood.

I barely get to my class on time, say nothing to anyone, and plop into my seat near the back of the room. During the next fifty minutes, I scribble down every choice I'd made from the time I'd left school to sitting at my desk. Then I write, "What do I do now?"

I can't tell Mom. Not again. But not telling her has its own consequences. Doing nothing is still doing something.

Truthfully, I want Khannan to leave. I've always thought there was something phony about him, and now I have proof. Supposedly, he's a software engineer who works at home as often as his office. Maybe he has his dominatrix (or slave) visit him every time he works at home—or just looks at porn all day. Isn't that what guys do?

My mother needs someone besides Khannan, but she claims she loves him. She's told me how lonely she was until she met him. He makes her feel special—remember foot rubs and dinner. And his son, Eddie, my age, is usually pleasant and polite—even cute—but mostly invisible now since he hides in his room with his Xbox. At first, he asked me to help him with math, but stopped after I finally got tired of him telling me how hot I am. Just another horny boy.

When Dad lived with us, we had fun—fishing, camping, hiking. We took trips to national parks. He laughed loud and gave frequent hugs. And he was spontaneous, which got the better of him when Gibbs showed up at our July Fourth picnic at Onion Falls—cut-off top and short shorts, long legs and golden hair. Stand Gibbs next to Mom, and no one, absolutely no one would choose Mom. Except for another physicist, maybe.

Or Khannan, who is her best friend, she says. An illusion he perpetuates while he cheats. Or maybe because he cheats.

Who knows what goes on inside men's minds? Do they know? Do they make real choices or just follow their dicks everywhere?

I glance two rows up and see Terry thumbing his phone in his lap while he pretends to be taking notes, his long hair hiding his eyes. What's he looking at? He was one of the guys Marissa and Kaitlyn FaceTimed in their underwear on Friday before I left.

"Hey, Laney," Garrett whispers from behind. He's the only person I allow to call me that, the same name my father used. "Reach back."

I move my hand behind my seat. He pushes a paper into my palm and drags his fingertips along my wrist while I push my tips against his. Long, strong fingers—he plays keyboard—with extra soft skin. Sometimes I'll hold my hand back during class, and he'll stroke it, so softly. I get breathless and tingly everywhere. I clutch the paper then open it on my desk.

Sneak out tonight at 2? We can see the Leonid Meteor Showers together.

My heart races. I'd love to. We could hold hands and count the streaks of light.

I write back. *Not sure I can. There may be a blowout at my house tonight. Talk later.*

I hold the paper out for him, wanting to feel his fingers again, but the bell rings, and everyone stands.

"What've you been writing?" He bends toward my notebook still open on my desk. "I watched you filling up that page the whole period."

I pick up my notebook before he can see any of the words. “Which is why you’re making a C in this class.” I smile and push some hair behind my ear. It hangs below my shoulders now.

“True. But then I couldn’t ask you to tutor me.”

I look into his dark brown eyes, dancing above the freckles on his cheeks. Tall, lean, a little awkward sometimes, but always cute. I wonder how he would react if he knew I wrote stories about him. I wet my lips. “If we didn’t spend so much time studying, maybe we could do something else.”

He grins. “Like what?” His eyes flash to my breasts.

“Watch the meteor shower, silly.” I raise my brows. “What else would we do?”

We walk toward the exit. “But I don’t think I can go tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because I haven’t decided whether to tell or not tell.” He stops in the hall, looking confused. I smile and snicker softly. “You’ve got that look down pat. It’s too cute.” I kiss his cheek quickly. He almost drops his books. “Talk to you later.”

I turn my back and walk toward the Pre-cal room, sporting a big smile, knowing his eyes are glued to me. That’s a moment he won’t forget. And a choice I won’t regret.

A few hours later, I park in my driveway, staring at the front door. What will I see inside? The chair and ropes? A satiated Khannan? What will I say to him?

I can’t sit out here forever, so I grab my pack from the seat next to me and notice the newspaper underneath. Toward the bottom is the headline *DNA Evidence Suggests Skeletons Were Twin Sisters*.

Chapter Three

I read that story at least ten times last night. I've always wanted a sister and never understood why I am an only child. I remember playing in front of a mirror, imagining the other girl was my twin, like I was looking through a glass into another world. She couldn't sit next to me, but she was just on the other side of the barrier. I never told anyone, but my sister sometimes moved and spoke differently than I.

Why would someone murder twins?

Why anything? I mean, so often explanations make sense only after the fact, as if reasons are concocted to get to a specific result—which already happened and surprised everyone.

Of course, one can always call the unexplainable an illusion or a mental aberration. Some might claim I had a wild imagination as a child, or maybe I was a little crazy. Neither of which explains anything, especially the fact that my twin and I touched sometimes. When Mom told me the girl inside the house couldn't see the girl looking into the house, I had to bite my lip. I knew they could sometimes because I had seen her.

I shove the newspaper into my pack and start to exit the car, still unsure what I'll say to Khannan.

I stop.

I should think this through and consider all the options first. Why wait until I make a choice—probably in anger or frustration—and then spend so much time and energy writing about what I should have done? Think of all the possibilities now and make a better choice.

I close the car door and let my imagination go, hanging on as it enters the house.

The foyer smells like Febreze, way too much of it. One of the sofa cushions is turned around with the zipper in front. Smiling to myself, I know I have him. No way a cushion in my mother's house would be backwards. Tip-toeing around the corner, I peek into the kitchen. Empty. The granite counters reflect the skylight above, and the terra cotta tile clicks under my shoes as I approach the kitchen table slowly.

And then I see it. A chair with a crack in the back near the seat. And an ooze of wood glue. Made by someone pushing back and straining against the stimulation. I pull the back slightly and open the break just as Khannan walks in, reading the newspaper.

He stops in his tracks, glances at the chair, licks his lips. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Which time? Now? Or earlier?" I allow a slight smile to stretch my lips and raise my brows.

He narrows his eyes, looking more puzzled and afraid. "Now."

"At lunch I came by the house just as a cute young girl was leaving."

He swallows and widens his eyes. "I'm not sure who . . ."

I fold my arms and lean against the counter. "Kind of young for you, don't you think?"

He coughs. "For me?"

"Who else? Eddie?" I almost laugh.

"Delaney, do you not remember?"

“I remember sofa cushions all over the floor and this chair right here,” I say as I drag it to the center of the kitchen, “with ropes.” I grin and shake my head. “Ropes, Khannan? Really?”

Khannan moves away slightly then sits down at the table. “Let’s go through this from the beginning. Eddie claimed he was sick this morning, so he stayed home. I came home before lunch to check on him and found him naked in this chair, struggling to get up. I heard noises by the front door, so I ran to check them out. A . . . teenage girl, as you put it, was frantically trying to put on her clothes.”

I try not to smirk and laugh but can’t stop a weird bark from escaping my mouth. “So Eddie’s the one messing around. Not you?”

“Certainly not me.”

“And who was the girl?”

He bites his lip and narrows his eyes. “You, Delaney.”

I’m drowning in ice water and cover my mouth. I can’t breathe.

“It’s OK, Delaney.” He stands. “We can keep this between us, and I’ve already spoken to Eddie. That will not happen again.”

I close my eyes.

*My phone vibrates, and I gasp for breath. I jerk up in my car seat, reach for my phone, and see a message from Mom. *I just received exciting news! Will be home soon.**

I’m still having trouble breathing, so I open my car door, hoping to let in some cool air. But an 80° breeze blows against me. It’s December in Austin, Texas, and it’s this hot!

Am I going crazy?

I close my eyes and try to see the girl's face again, but so much is covered by her sunglasses. Her hair is my color, and our figures are the same—large in the bust, slim in the hips.

Me with Eddie? I shudder. Why would my imagination take me there?

I grab my stuff, lock the car, and walk toward the house. Some leaves have fallen, mixed with acorns, but not because of any change in the weather. Just exhaustion from hanging on during this endless summer. Seems like we run the air conditioner year round.

Panic surges for some reason as I open the door. No smell of weed. No overdose of Febreze.

My legs wobble as I call, “Khannan!” Silence. “Eddie!” More silence.

The sofa. Check the sofa. I stumble-run into the living room and note the cushions. All correctly placed. Then into the kitchen where I grab a chair and check for glue. Nothing.

My heart thumps against my chest. I sling my pack onto my shoulder, pinning my hair against my back. Damn! I yank my hair out from under the strap with a snarl and a yelp.

I try to calm down, breathing slowly, deeply, and feel sweat trickle from my armpits.

The screen! I race to my bedroom, toss my pack on the bed and collapse onto my knees, reaching for the screen, which I had removed earlier. Nothing. Looking up to the window, I notice the screen in place and the window locked.

But I removed it. I couldn't have locked the window from outside.

Unless I never went out the window and raced out the front door like Khannan said.

I run to the kitchen again and kneel down to check the chair, carefully rubbing my fingertips along the back. Nothing. No groove. No ridge.

If there's no crack, then I'd just imagined Khannan's story about me and Eddie. Why would I do that?

But if the window is locked, then I never jumped out of it.

Unless Khannan put the screen back and flipped the lock. What's the point of that? Is he trying to make me believe I didn't come home today?

I growl in frustration. Khannan will get away with his cheating by making me look crazy!

Ropes. Where are the ropes?

I run to their bedroom and snap open the door. Of course, the bed is made. Another of Khannan's endearing traits.

I walk through both of their closets. His is immaculate, but he certainly doesn't clean hers. Dirty underwear litters her floor, and several garments hang precariously on tilting hangers.

The nightstands!

All I find in his are some books, a pistol, and a few bottles of pills.

But Mom's bottom drawer contains the ropes. Lots of them. More than I saw this afternoon.

And a half-opened box, revealing two vibrators. Carefully lifting the box lid, I find fur-lined handcuffs, a blindfold, and two ball gags. My stomach sinks, but for some reason my heart races. Vibrators?

Footsteps coming down the hall!

I shut her drawer then see the vibrator in my hand. Khannan opens the door, and I whip my arm behind me.

He stops and stares, clenching his eye muscles.

My chest won't stop heaving. "I . . . I needed something."

He holds a shopping bag from Barnes and Noble. "That's OK." Gracious. Pleasant. As always. "Did you find it?"

"Yeah. I'm so embarrassed." I know my face is blood red. My brain is frantically searching for a reason to give him. My hands slowly move to my stomach, my right grasping the vibrator. His eyes widen and he smiles.

"Mom said I could borrow one of hers." I know he's blushing, but his dark skin won't show it. "I should've waited until she was home instead of searching through her drawers." I look to the floor. "Maybe we could keep this to ourselves?"

Almost too quickly, he says, "Sure, Delaney." He strides to the dresser and sets the bag on top. "I won't tell anyone."

"Thanks, Khannan. I appreciate this." In our first version, he also said he wouldn't tell anyone about me and Eddie. Earlier, I was trying to decide whether to tell Mom about him and the girl.

"Never tell anyone" seems to be my refrain.

He turns his back and opens a drawer. "Not a problem."

I move toward the door, trying to decide if I should ask about earlier today, but I'm not sure I want to hear the answer. "Were you in the house at lunch today? I came home to get my calculator, and I thought I heard footsteps. Kinda freaked me out."

He turns around and smiles.

My mind flashes through scenes like I'm channel surfing. I swear I hear Khannan say all this at the same time: "No, but Eddie stayed home." Then, "Yes, I was, and I thought I heard footsteps too. But when I checked, no one was there." Then, "No."

I stare at him. What did he really say? My chest cramps. "Weird." I turn to leave.

"Delaney?"

I stop and jerk around. "Yeah?"

"Maybe you should put that . . ."

I see the vibrator in my hand and gasp. "Right." I shove it into my shirt.

"Thanks."

I half-run to my room and shut the door. Sagging against the wall, I pull the vibrator from my shirt and look at it. Why did I take this? I don't even remember picking it up.

I've never seen or held one of these, but for some reason, it seems familiar. Bright pink with buttons on the end.

I can't believe my mother has this. Or that she would use it with him. My stomach flips, and I can't get enough air into my lungs. I clutch the toy to my stomach and look to the ceiling.

What about the girl? And the chair? What's going on with me?

I close my eyes and see Kaitlyn squirming on the floor, moaning, as Marissa laughs, pointing her phone at her.

“Your turn, Delaney.” Kaitlyn holds the vibrator in her hand. “You’ll love it!”

Marissa laughs and yells, “Wait!” She moves closer to me.

My legs twitch and shake as a jolt of electricity shoots through me. I feel pressure building . . . building. I scream. I hear applause and laughter.

“Delaney!” Mom calls from outside my door.

I find the vibrator pushed between my legs, pulsating, one hand clutching my neck. What the hell? My body convulses in sobs. I want to scream *Stop!* But my throat feels squeezed. I can’t breathe! I can’t breathe!

I jerk up and bang my head against the wall. My other hand grasps my throat.
Shit.

“Delaney, I need to tell you something. Come to the kitchen. Please.”

I relax my fingers, pull myself up, turn off the toy, and push it into my pack. Sweat covers my face as I see myself in the mirror above my dresser. I swear she smiles back at me.

I left Marissa’s house. I didn’t do anything.

And I didn’t have sex with Eddie, either.

“Delaney!”

“I’m coming.” I wipe my face and fluff my hair. My legs feel like jelly as I look in the mirror. I did not stay at Marissa’s. When they started FaceTiming, I went to the bathroom for twenty minutes and read the News Alert. When I opened the door, Marissa

was chasing Kaitlyn around with a vibrator. I didn't see her use it. I left the house and drove home.

Is my imagination filling in the gaps? Am I seeing what could've happened if I'd stayed? Why?

Am I losing my mind? Where are these stories coming from?

Are they real?