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ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

LBRIS

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PART 1

1

Charlie

A crash. Books fall to the speckled linoleum floor. They skid a few feet, whirling in circles, and stop near feet. *My feet.* I don't recognize the black sandals, or the red toenails, but they move when I tell them to, so they must be mine. *Right?*

A bell rings. Shriill.

I jump, my heart racing. My eyes move left to right as I scope out my environment, trying not to give myself away.

What kind of bell was that? Where am I?

Kids with backpacks walk briskly into the room, talking and laughing. *A school bell.* They slide into desks, their voices competing in volume. I see movement at my feet and jerk in surprise. Someone is bent over, gathering up books on the floor; a red-faced girl with glasses. Before she stands up, she looks at me with something like fear and then scurries off. People are laughing. When I look around I think they're laughing at me, but it's the girl with glasses they're looking at.

“Charlie!” someone calls. “Didn’t you see that?” And then, “Charlie...what’s your problem...hello...?”

My heart is beating fast, so fast.

Where is this? Why can’t I remember? “Charlie!” someone hisses. I look around. *Who is Charlie? Which one is Charlie?*

There are so many kids; blond hair, ratty hair, brown hair, glasses, no glasses...

A man walks in carrying a briefcase. He sets it on the desk.

The teacher. I am in a classroom, and that is the teacher. High school or college? I wonder.

I stand up suddenly. I’m in the wrong place. Everyone is sitting, but I’m standing...walking.

“Where are you going, Miss Wynwood?” The teacher is looking at me over the rim of his glasses as he riffles through a pile of papers. He slaps them down hard on the desk and I jump. I must be Miss Wynwood.

“She has cramps!” someone calls out. People snicker. I feel a chill creep up my back and crawl across the tops of my arms. They’re laughing at me, except I don’t know who these people are.

I hear a girl’s voice say, “Shut up, Michael.”

“I don’t know,” I say, hearing my voice for the first time. It’s too high. I clear my throat and try again. “I don’t know. I’m not supposed to be here.”

There is more laughing. I glance around at the posters on the wall, the faces of presidents animated with dates beneath them. *History class? High school.*

The man—the teacher—tilts his head to the side like I’ve said the dumbest thing. “And where else are you supposed to be on test day?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Sit down,” he says. I don’t know where I’d go if I left. I

turn around to go back. The girl with the glasses glances up at me as I pass her. She looks away almost as quickly.

As soon as I’m sitting, the teacher starts handing out papers. He walks between desks, his voice a flat drone as he tells us what percentage of our final grade the test will be. When he reaches my desk he pauses, a deep crease between his eyebrows. “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull.” He presses the tip of a fat pointer finger on my desk.

“Whatever it is, I’m sick of it. One more stunt and I’m sending you to the principal’s office.” He slaps the test down in front of me and moves down the line.

I don’t nod, I don’t do anything. I’m trying to decide what to do. Announce to the whole room that I have no idea who and where I am—or pull him aside and tell him quietly. He said no more stunts. My eyes move to the paper in front of me. People are already bent over their tests, pencils scratching.

Fourth Period

History

Mr. Dulcott

There is a space for a name. I’m supposed to write my name, but I don’t know what my name is. *Miss Wynwood*, he called me.

Why don’t I recognize my own name? Or *where* I am?

Or *what* I am?

Every head is bent over their papers except mine. So I sit and stare, straight ahead. Mr. Dulcott glares at me from his desk. The longer I sit, the redder his face becomes.

Time passes and yet my world has stopped. Eventually, Mr. Dulcott stands up, his mouth open to say something to me when the bell rings. “Put your papers on my desk on the way out,” he says, his eyes still on my face. Everyone is filing out

of the door. I stand up and follow them because I don't know what else to do. I keep my eyes on the floor, but I can feel his rage. I don't understand why he's so angry with me. I am in a hallway now, lined on either side by blue lockers.

"Charlie!" someone calls. "Charlie, wait up!" A second later, an arm loops through mine. I expect it to be the girl with the glasses; I don't know why. It's not. But, I know now that I am Charlie. *Charlie Wynwood*. "You forgot your bag," she says, handing over a white backpack. I take it from her, wondering if there's a wallet with a driver's license inside. She keeps her arm looped through mine as we walk. She's shorter than me, with long, dark hair and dewy brown eyes that take up half her face. She is startling and beautiful.

"Why were you acting so weird in there?" she asks. "You knocked the shrimp's books on the floor and then spaced out."

I can smell her perfume; it's familiar and too sweet, like a million flowers competing for attention. I think of the girl with the glasses, the look on her face as she bent to scoop up her books. If I did that, why don't I remember?

"I—"

"It's lunch, why are you walking that way?" She pulls me down a different corridor, past more students. They all look at me...little glances. I wonder if they know me, and why I don't know me. I don't know why I don't tell her, tell Mr. Dulcote, grab someone random and tell them that I don't know who or where I am. By the time I'm seriously entertaining the idea, we're through a set of double doors in the cafeteria. Noise and color; bodies that all have a unique smell, bright fluorescent lights that make everything look ugly. *Oh, God*. I clutch at my shirt.

The girl on my arm is babbling. Andrew this, Marcy that. She likes Andrew and hates Marcy. I don't know who either of them is. She corrals me to the food line. We get salad and Diet Cokes. Then we are sliding our trays on a table. There

are already people sitting there: four boys, two girls. I realize we are completing a group with even numbers. All the girls are matched with a guy. Everyone looks up at me expectantly, like I'm supposed to say something, do something. The only place left to sit is next to a guy with dark hair. I sit slowly, both hands flat on the table. His eyes dart toward me and then he bends over his tray of food. I can see the finest beads of sweat on his forehead, just below his hairline.

"You two are so awkward sometimes," says a new girl, blonde, across from me. She's looking from me to the guy I'm sitting next to. He looks up from his macaroni and I realize he's just moving things around on his plate. He hasn't taken a bite, despite how busy he looks. He looks at me and I look at him, then we both look back at the blonde girl.

"Did something happen that we should know about?" she asks. "No," we say in unison.

He's my boyfriend. I know by the way they're treating us. He suddenly smiles at me with his brilliantly white teeth and reaches to put an arm around my shoulders.

"We're all good," he says, squeezing my arm. I automatically stiffen, but when I see the six sets of eyes on my face, I lean in and play along. It's frightening not knowing who you are—even more frightening thinking you'll get it wrong. I'm scared now, really scared. It's gone too far. If I say something now I'll look...*crazy*. His affection seems to make everyone relax. Everyone except...him. They go back to talking, but all the words blend together: football, a party, more football. The guy sitting next to me laughs and joins in with their conversation, his arm never straying from my shoulders. They call him Silas. They call me Charlie. The dark-haired girl with the big eyes is Annika. I forget everyone else's names in the noise.

Lunch is finally over and we all get up. I walk next to Silas, or rather he walks next to me. I have no idea where I'm going. Annika flanks my free side, winding her arms through mine

and chatting about cheerleading practice. She's making me feel claustrophobic. When we reach an annex in the hallway, I lean over and speak to her so only she can hear. "Can you walk me to my next class?" Her face becomes serious. She breaks away to say something to her boyfriend, and then our arms are looped again.

I turn to Silas. "Annika is going to walk me to my next class."

"Okay," he says. He looks relieved. "I'll see you...later." He heads off in the opposite direction.

Annika turns to me as soon as he's out of sight. "Where's he going?"

I shrug. "To class."

She shakes her head like she's confused. "I don't get you guys. One day you're all over each other, the next you're acting like you can't stand to be in the same room. You really need to make a decision about him, Charlie."

She stops outside a doorway.

"This is me..." I say, to see if she'll protest. She doesn't. "Call me later," she says. "I want to know about last night."

I nod. When she disappears into the sea of faces, I step into the classroom. I don't know where to sit, so I wander to the back row and slide into a seat by the window. I'm early, so I open my backpack. There's a wallet wedged between a couple of notebooks and a makeup bag. I pull it out and flip it open to reveal a driver's license with a picture of a beaming, dark-haired girl. *Me.*

*Charlize Margaret Wynwood
2417 Holcourt Way
New Orleans, LA*

I'm seventeen. My birthday is March twenty-first. I live in Louisiana. I study the picture in the top left corner and I don't

recognize the face. It's my face, but I've never seen it. I'm... *pretty.* I only have twenty-eight dollars.

The seats are filling up. The one beside me stays empty, almost like everyone is too afraid to sit there. I'm in Spanish class. The teacher is pretty and young; her name is Mrs. Cardona. She doesn't look at me like she hates me, like so many other people are looking at me. We start with tenses.

I have no past. I have no past.

Five minutes into class the door opens. Silas walks in, his eyes downcast. I think he's here to tell me something, or to bring me something. I brace myself, ready to pretend, but Mrs. Cardona comments jokingly about his lateness. He takes the only available seat next to me and stares straight ahead. I stare at him. I don't stop staring at him until finally, he turns his head to look at me. A line of sweat rolls down the side of his face.

His eyes are wide. Wide...just like mine.

2

*Silas**Three hours.*

It's been almost three hours, and my mind is still in a haze.

No, not a haze. Not even a dense fog. It feels as if I'm wandering around in a pitch-black room, searching for the light switch.

"You okay?" Charlie asks. I've been staring at her for several seconds, attempting to regain some semblance of familiarity from a face that should apparently be the *most* familiar to me.

Nothing.

She looks down at her desk and her thick black hair falls between us like blinders. I want a better look at her. I need something to grab me, something familiar. I want to predict a birthmark or a freckle on her before I see it, because I need *something* recognizable. I'll grasp at any piece of her that might convince me I'm not losing my mind.

She reaches her hand up, finally, and tucks her hair behind her ear. She looks up at me through two wide and completely unfamiliar eyes. The crease between her brows deepens and she begins biting at the pad of her thumb.

She's worried about me. About us, maybe.

Us.

I want to ask her if she knows what might have happened to me, but I don't want to scare her. How do I explain that I don't know her? How do I explain this to *anyone*? I've spent the last three hours trying to act natural. At first I was convinced I must have used some kind of illegal substance that caused me to black out, but this is different from blacking out. This is different from being high or drunk, and I have no idea how I even know that. I don't remember anything beyond three hours ago.

"Hey." Charlie reaches out like she's going to touch me, then draws back. "Are you okay?"

I grip the sleeve of my shirt and wipe the sheen of moisture off my forehead. When she glances back up at me, I see the concern still filling her eyes. I force my lips to form a smile.

"I'm fine," I mutter. "Long night."

As soon as I say it, I cringe. I have no idea what kind of night I had, and if this girl sitting across from me really is my girlfriend, then a sentence like that probably isn't very reassuring.

I see a small twitch in her eye and she tilts her head. "Why was it a long night?"

Shit.

"Silas." The voice comes from the front of the room. I look up. "No talking," the teacher says. She returns to her instruction, not too concerned with my reaction to being singled out. I glance back at Charlie, briefly, and then immediately stare down at my desk. My fingers trace over names carved into

the wood. Charlie is still staring at me, but I don't look at her. I flip my hand over, and I run two fingers over the callouses across the inside of my palm.

Do I work? Mow lawns for a living?

Maybe it's from football. During lunch I decided to use my time to observe everyone around me, and I learned I have football practice this afternoon. I have no idea what time or where, but I've somehow made it through the last few hours without knowing when or where I'm supposed to be. I may not have any sort of recollection right now, but I'm learning that I'm very good at faking it. *Too good, maybe.*

I flip my other hand over and find the same rough callouses on that palm.

Maybe I live on a farm.

No. I don't.

I don't know how I know, but even without being able to recall anything, I seem to have an immediate sense of what assumptions of mine are accurate and which are not. It could just be process of elimination, rather than intuition or memory. For example, I don't feel like someone who lives on a farm would be wearing the clothes I have on. Nice clothes. *Trendy?* Looking down at my shoes, if someone asked me if I have rich parents, I'd tell them, "Yes, I do." And I don't know how, because I don't remember my parents.

I don't know where I live, who I live with, or if I look more like my mother or my father.

I don't even know what I look like.

I stand abruptly, shoving the desk a few loud inches forward in the process. Everyone in the class turns to face me other than Charlie, because she hasn't stopped staring at me since I sat down. Her eyes aren't inquisitive or kind.

Her eyes are accusing.

The teacher glares at me, but doesn't seem at all surprised

by the loss of everyone's attention to me. She just stands, complacent, waiting for me to announce my reason for the sudden disruption.

I swallow. "Bathroom." My lips are sticky. My mouth is dry. My mind is wrecked. I don't wait for permission before I begin to head in that direction. I can feel everyone's stares as I push through the door.

I go right and make it to the end of the hall without finding a restroom. I backtrack and pass by my classroom door, continuing until I round the corner and find the restroom. I push open the door, hoping for solitude, but someone is standing at the urinal with his back to me. I turn to the sink, but don't look into the mirror. I stare down at the sink, placing my hands on either side of it, gripping tightly. I inhale.

If I would just look at myself, my reflection could trigger a memory, or maybe just give me a small sense of recognition. Something. *Anything.*

The guy who was standing at the urinal seconds before is now standing next to me, leaning against a sink with his arms folded. When I glance over at him, he's glaring at me. His hair is so blond, it's almost white. His skin is so pale, it reminds me of a jellyfish. Translucent, almost.

I can remember what jellyfish look like, but I have no idea what I'll find when I look at myself in the mirror?

"You look like shit, Nash," he says with a smirk.

Nash?

Everyone else has been calling me Silas. Nash must be my last name. I would check my wallet, but there isn't one in my pocket. Just a wad of cash. A wallet is one of the first things I looked for after...well, after it happened.

"Not feeling too hot," I grumble in response.

For a few seconds, the guy doesn't respond. He just continues to stare at me the same way Charlie was staring at me in

class, but with less concern and way more contentment. The guy smirks and pushes off the sink. He stands up straight, but is still about an inch shy of reaching my height. He takes a step forward, and I gather by the look in his eye that he isn't closing in on me out of concern for my health.

"We still haven't settled Friday night," the guy says to me. "Is that why you're here now?" His nostrils flare when he speaks and his hands drop to his sides, clenching and unclenching twice.

I have a two-second silent debate with myself, aware that if I step away from him, it'll make me look like a coward. However, I'm also aware that if I step forward, I'll be challenging him to something I don't want to deal with right now. He obviously has issues with me and whatever it was that I chose to do Friday night that pissed him off.

I compromise by giving him no reaction whatsoever. *Look unaffected.*

I lazily move my attention to the sink and turn one of the knobs until a stream of water begins to pour from the faucet. "Save it for the field," I say. I immediately want to take back those words. I hadn't considered he might not even play football. I assumed he did based on his size, but if he doesn't, my comment will have not made a damn bit of sense. I hold my breath and wait for him to correct me, or call me out.

Neither of those things happens.

He stares for a few more seconds, and then he shoulders past me, purposefully bumping me on his way out the door. I cup my hands under the stream of water and take a sip. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and glance up. At *myself*.

At Silas Nash.

What the hell kind of name is that, anyway?

I'm staring, emotionless, into a pair of unfamiliar, dark eyes. I feel as though I'm staring at two eyes I've never seen before,

despite the fact that I've more than likely looked at these eyes on a daily basis since I was old enough to reach a mirror.

I'm as familiar with this person in the reflection as I am with the girl who is—*according to some guy named Andrew*—the girl I've been "banging" for two years now.

I'm as familiar with this person in the reflection as I am with every single aspect of my life right now.

Which is not familiar at all. "Who *are* you?" I whisper to him.

The bathroom door begins to open slowly, and my eyes move from my reflection to the reflection of the door. A hand appears, gripping the door. I recognize the sleek, red polish on the tips of her fingers. *The girl I've been "banging" for more than two years.*

"Silas?"

I stand up straight and turn to face the door full-on as she peeks around it. When her eyes meet mine, it's only for two seconds. She glances away, scanning the rest of the bathroom.

"It's just me," I say. She nods and makes it the rest of the way through the door, albeit extremely hesitantly. I wish I knew how to reassure her that everything is okay so she won't grow suspicious. I also wish I remembered her, or anything about our relationship, because I want to tell her. I *need* to tell her. I need for someone else to know, so that I can ask questions.

But how does a guy tell his girlfriend he has no idea who she is? Who he himself is?

He doesn't tell her. He pretends, just like he's been pretending with everyone else.

One hundred silent questions fill her eyes at once, and I immediately want to dodge them all. "I'm fine, Charlie." I smile at her, because it feels like something I should do. "Just not feeling so hot. Go back to class."

She doesn't move. She doesn't smile.

She stays where she is, unaffected by my instruction. She reminds me of one of those animals on springs you'd ride on a playground. The kind you push, but they just bounce right back up. I feel like if someone were to shove her shoulders, she'd lean straight back, feet in place, and then bounce right back up again.

I don't remember what those things are called, but I do make a mental note that I somehow remember them. I've made a lot of mental notes in the last three hours.

I'm a senior.

My name is Silas.

Nash might be my last name. My girlfriend's name is Charlie. I play football.

I know what jellyfish look like.

Charlie tilts her head and the corner of her mouth twitches slightly. Her lips part, and for a moment, all I hear are nervous breaths. When she finally forms words, I want to hide from them. I want to tell her to close her eyes and count to twenty until I'm too far away to hear her question.

"What's my last name, Silas?"

Her voice is like smoke. Soft and wispy and then gone.

I can't tell if she's extremely intuitive or if I'm doing a horrible job of covering up the fact that I know nothing. For a moment, I debate whether or not I should tell her. If I tell her and she believes me, she might be able to answer a lot of questions I have. But if I tell her and she *doesn't* believe me...

"Babe," I say with a dismissive laugh. *Do I call her babe?* "What kind of question is that?"

She lifts the foot I was positive was stuck to the floor, and she takes a step forward. She takes another. She continues toward me until she's about a foot away; close enough that I can smell her.

Lilies.

She smells like lilies, and I don't know how I can possibly remember what lilies smell like, but somehow not remember the actual person standing in front of me who smells like them.

Her eyes haven't left mine, not even once. "Silas," she says. "What's my last name?"

I work my jaw back and forth, and then turn around to face the sink again. I lean forward and grip it tightly with both hands. I slowly lift my eyes until they meet hers in the reflection.

"Your last name?" My mouth is dry again and my words come out scratchy.

She waits.

I look away from her and back at the eyes of the unfamiliar guy in the mirror. "I... I can't remember."

She disappears from the reflection, followed immediately by a loud smack. It reminds me of the sound the fish make at Pike Place Market, when they toss and catch them in the wax paper.

Smack!

I spin around and she's lying on the tile floor, eyes closed, arms splayed out. I immediately kneel down and lift her head, but as soon as I have her elevated several inches off the floor, her eyelids begin to flutter open.

"Charlie?"

She sucks in a rush of air and sits up. She pulls herself out of my arms and shoves me away, almost as if she's afraid of me. I keep my hands positioned near her in case she attempts to stand, but she doesn't. She remains seated on the floor with her palms pressed into the tile.

"You passed out," I tell her.

She frowns at me. "I'm aware of that."

I don't speak again. I should probably know what all her

expressions mean, but I don't. I don't know if she's scared or angry or...

"I'm confused," she says, shaking her head. "I... Can you..." She pauses, and then makes an attempt to stand. I stand with her, but I can tell she doesn't like this by the way she glares at my hands that are slightly lifted, waiting to catch her should she start to fall again.

She takes two steps away from me and crosses an arm over her chest. She brings her opposite hand up and begins chewing on the pad of her thumb again. She studies me quietly for a moment and then pulls her thumb from her mouth, making a fist. "You didn't know we had class together after lunch." Her words are spoken with a layer of accusation. "You don't know my last name."

I shake my head, admitting to the two things I can't deny. "What can you remember?" she asks.

She's scared. Nervous. Suspicious. Our emotions are reflections of one another, and that's when the clarity hits.

She may not feel familiar. I may not feel familiar. But our actions—our demeanor—they're exactly the same.

"What do I remember?" I repeat her question in an attempt to buy myself a few more seconds to allow my suspicions to gain footing.

She waits for my answer.

"History," I say, attempting to remember as far back as I can. "Books. I saw a girl drop her books." I grab my neck again and squeeze.

"Oh, God." She takes a quick step toward me. "That's... that's the first thing *I* remember."

My heart jumps to my throat.

She begins to shake her head. "I don't like this. It doesn't make sense." She appears calm—calmer than I feel. Her voice is steady. The only fear I see is in the stretched whites of her

eyes. I pull her to me without thinking, but I think it's more for my own relief rather than to put her at ease. She doesn't pull away, and for a second, I wonder if this is normal for us. I wonder if we're in love.

I tighten my hold until I feel her stiffen against me. "We need to figure this out," she says, separating herself from me.

My first instinct is to tell her it'll be okay, that I'll figure it out. I'm flooded with an overwhelming need to protect her—only I have no idea how to do that when we're both experiencing the same reality.

The bell rings, signaling the end of Spanish. Within seconds, the bathroom door will probably open. Lockers will be slamming shut. We'll have to figure out what classes we're supposed to be in next. I take her hand and pull her behind me as I push open the bathroom door.

"Where are we going?" she asks.

I look at her over my shoulder and shrug. "I have no idea. I just know I want to leave."