

PIECES



G B E N S O N

CHAPTER 1

THE DAY OLLIE SAW THE girl who was all cheekbones and shadowed eyes, something stilled in her chest, and for a second, she forgot how to breathe. High school was transitioning, was flowing. Her sixteenth birthday had come and gone, and everything was that little bit different. The summer had passed, hot and hazy and filled with days by the pool, chlorine drying tight over her skin, the sun leaving her even darker than normal. She thought maybe she could float through the rest of her life.

But that girl brought Ollie's feet crashing back to the ground.

Ollie blinked, her gaze tearing from the girl across the cafeteria. "Who's that?"

"Who?" And, of course, Sara turned, staring obviously, dark eyes narrowing as she took in the scene. "That chick? She was in our class four years ago and disappeared for a while, then came back a grade below us. Um...Carmen?"

There was something about that girl's clothes; they hung a little loose, a little haggard. Something sat around the edges of her expression that Ollie didn't recognize but wanted to know. She did look slightly familiar—a kid Ollie had circled but never collided with, comets skimming past each other.

The imagery whirled in her mind, and she slipped her sketch pad out of her bag, pencil in hand and gaze still half on that girl.

"Why do you care, anyway?"

Ollie tore her gaze away a second time, warmth crawling along her cheeks. "I don't."

And then she'd forgotten her as Sean had slid into the next seat, his tray clattering on the table and his arm clattering over her shoulder. She sank into him, the solidness, the heat of him.

One by one, her friends dropped into their places, and laughter started up as Deon told a story about Mr. Warren and the costume he'd worn to

history class that day. Sara put some straws and forks together to make some kind of catapult, sending fries and grapes to slap across people's cheeks, her teeth flashing white against her dark skin. She was a year older than they were, in the same grade after missing so much school when she was younger. Insanely smart, she could solve a physics equation faster than Ollie could wake up in the morning.

Though that wasn't hard.

Ollie's friends distracted her, and she disappeared into them, as was so easy for her to do.

At home that evening, Ollie slipped in and out of her usual push and pull with her parents. They hovered and then were absent, as if they knew to give their teenage daughter space but then couldn't stop themselves from missing how they all used to talk.

Ollie, once upon a time, had spent hours with her mom, asking her about the hospital and patients and how the heart worked, but that had ebbed away as she'd grown and become more attached to paper and color. Sometimes her father would try to nudge her art more toward design, as if hoping she'd fall into architecture or engineering. But he'd do it gently, his eyes soft.

They always ended up asking how her day was.

"Fine."

"What subjects did you have?"

"I don't know. I did math." She pushed her potatoes around and wondered why it mattered.

"Any tests coming up?"

And she shrugged, like she did every time. Impertinence settled over her shoulders, familiar and grating all at once. She didn't even know where it came from. She did know that these questions, every night at dinner, were like the third degree, even as a small voice inside her told her she was being ridiculous.

But then, later that night, her mom brought her a hot chocolate and quietly left it next to Ollie while she studied, and guilt prickled in her stomach as she mumbled a thank-you and tried to offer something more tangible than grunts and shrugs. Filled with warm, sweet milk, Ollie tucked her feet under herself at the computer chair, her mother leaning against the doorframe. "There's a party this weekend."

PIECES

“Oh?” Her mom seemed to hold back a smile. “So now you want to talk to me?”

Ollie rolled her eyes. “Only a little.”

That made her mother laugh, and Ollie smirked.

“Whose party?”

“Sara’s.”

“Are her parents there?”

“No.”

She may sit in her own house some days, an inexplicable frustration crawling into the back of her mind, but Ollie didn’t lie to her parents beyond a white fib; she’d never needed to.

“Who’s going?” Her mom cocked her head.

“Both soccer teams and a few extras. Deon.”

That girl, Carmen, maybe. Would she go?

“Will Sean be there?”

“Of course.”

Her parents loved Sean. He was polite and nice and respectful. Ollie loved that he was all of those things, but at times, a restlessness was in her feet she couldn’t explain. Something mediocre that tingled in her fingertips. They’d been friends for a while, and the dating was new, unsettled, and not something she felt sure of.

“Will you stay there?”

“If that’s okay?”

Her mom’s lips pursed, and her father appeared behind her.

“Is what okay?”

Ollie rolled her eyes again.

“Be careful, they’ll roll out of your head, and then how will you show me you think I’m lame?”

He made the worst dad jokes. Her mother actually snorted.

“Is it okay if I stay at Sara’s? She’s having a party.”

“A party?” He clutched a hand over his heart. “Teenagers like...parties?”

Her mother was going to strain herself repressing her smile.

“You’re not funny, Dad.”

He kind of was, even if he mostly just tried to annoy her these days.

“It’s fine with me. Lou?”

“It’s fine. As long as you call us if things get out of hand. I’d rather deal with messy, drunk you than messy, drunk, missing you. Okay?”

G BENSON

When Ollie nodded, her mother added, “Just don’t do anything we wouldn’t do.”

A belly laugh emanated from her father, followed by a wink from her mother, and they both turned to walk away.

“You’re both gross!” Ollie called after them.

Their only answer was determined kissy noises.

* * *

The next week, she saw the girl, Carmen, again. Ollie’s art class had gone out to the sports grounds to draw people in live action.

To sit and let the charcoal spill over the page, to shape the things that moved and melded into something tangible in front of her, was easy for Ollie. A corner filled with feet tackling a ball, the fluidity caught and held on her paper. Trees spilled over a side of her paper, a shirtless teenager who should have been doing other things caught climbing the tree, his muscles tightening and pulling and evident. The flick of a ponytail as someone went to take a shot at goal. Ollie’s eyes traced the grounds for something else to capture and stopped again.

The ponytail on her page belonged to Carmen. Ollie’s fingers stilled over the notebook, and it felt like charcoal was seeping into her blood to permanently stain her insides. Maybe it would leave the memory of Carmen there forever. Skimming her eyes from the paper to the soccer game for the next half hour, Ollie watched as Carmen’s PE team won their soccer match solely thanks to her. Carmen’s eyes held a glint, a spark absent the other week in the cafeteria, and Ollie’s hands moved of their own accord, capturing that look and immortalizing that gleam on paper. Heat spread through her chest, and she swallowed hard, wondering why her gaze was glued to the muscles in Carmen’s arms, to the pull of her calf when she kicked.

Carmen’s skin was a dark bronze, her eyes a brown liquor.

Ollie spent the afternoon trying to ask her friends subtle questions to learn more about her, but none of them had anything solid.

“I think her last name is García.” Deon lay back on the grass near the football field, his skin as dark as the rich earth they lay on. He gave a shrug. “But I’m not sure. She’s not in any of our classes now.”

PIECES

Sara shifted, jostling Ollie's head where it lay in her lap. "Yeah, she's a year below. One of the others in the Queer and Ally Club mentioned something about her being in their class."

Since Sara had finally stopped wiggling, Ollie relaxed, an arm thrown over her eyes. The sun was weakly warm, as if trying to cling to summer. Over the last month, they'd been doing the same thing, staying by the pool on weekends and ignoring the bite to the water, wearing shorts and tanks that brought forth goose bumps. But now the utter lack of warmth was obvious. The sweater Ollie had begrudgingly pulled on was not doing much to warm her. "Is that movie night for the club tonight or tomorrow night?" she asked.

Sara's voice, rich and warm, drifted toward her. "Tonight. We're watching *But I'm a Cheerleader*."

"I love that one," Ollie said.

Gravelly and filled with sleep like it always was just after lunch, Deon's voice chimed in. "You love the actress."

"Truth."

Ollie knew she liked guys *and* girls. *Bisexual* was a label she claimed easily in the safety of her friends. Her parents didn't know, yet, but it seemed unimportant until it was necessary to tell them. Sean didn't care, and her friends all fluttered under the queer umbrella with her: her acceptance was here, and one day, she figured she'd think more about it.

* * *

The next day at school, Ollie saw Carmen walking away from her locker, and before she could stop herself, she accidentally-kind-of-on-purpose shouldered Carmen as she walked past, her mouth dry and her heart pounding while she had no idea why. Ollie was never shy. A faux apology spilled from her lips, and Carmen gave a one-shouldered shrug, the light brown, almost amber, of her eyes caught on Ollie's.

"It's okay."

It wasn't okay, because Ollie didn't want just an acceptance of an apology and for it to be over. Dark smudges sat under Carmen's eyes, but somehow that made their color more vibrant. There was a forest in those eyes, the bark and wild growth of secrets and depth that Ollie wanted to disappear

into. She wanted to draw that complexity, to find a color that completely matched and layer it thick over paper.

Ollie licked her lips, which suddenly felt chapped, and the fact she'd been rushing to meet Sean slipped to the back of her mind. She leaned against the locker next to Carmen. "Are you coming to Williams's party this weekend?"

Those eyes widened, eyebrows climbing. "What's a Williams?"

Carmen's lips quirked up in a way that Ollie wanted to see more often. Anytime she'd spotted her, Carmen had seemed so serious, and now that curve was a surprise. She gave a huff of a laugh. "Sara Williams. Foster sister of the captain of the guys' soccer team?"

"Oh." Something flashed, a shadow that flittered across Carmen's face at the description. "I, uh, hadn't heard anything about it."

"You should come. It's kind of open invite. Her parents are away."

Carmen gave a vacant nod and shuffled her feet, a hint that Carmen was about to move on. A trill of desperation ran up Ollie's spine.

"Maybe." Carmen's gaze was on the ground, somewhere near Ollie's feet.

Before Carmen could leave, Ollie blurted out, "Why aren't you on the team, anyway? I saw you score six goals in class the other day."

The words had left her lips before Ollie had contemplated them, before she had considered the fact they proved she'd been watching Carmen. She wanted to regret them, to reel them back in to sit somewhere no one could pick them apart, but Carmen had pressed back against the lockers, in a mirror of Ollie's position, and Ollie couldn't feel any regret at all.

"I don't like soccer."

She didn't have to know the girl to know this was a lie. "I'm Olivia." She stuck her hand out, stiff and awkward, and cursed herself for it. "But everyone calls me Ollie."

"Carmen."

They shook once, hands dropping quickly, Ollie panicking that she'd hold on too long, so she let go too soon. Carmen pushed her hands into her back pockets.

"I know," Ollie said, hoping it sounded smooth and not like she was a stalker. The hesitant smile told her that maybe she'd managed it.

CHAPTER 2

THE NIGHT WAS STIFLING, LEAVING Carmen's skin itchy.

There were nights she dreamed of crawling out of her skin. Of pulling at herself until her seams fell apart in threads and she could scatter grains of herself over the floor. Some nights, when her house had been without an adult for more than a week, she felt like running. She'd jump a bus and then a plane and disappear into another country, never to be seen again. Her feet would lose themselves on paths built centuries upon centuries ago, fruit she'd never seen would explode over her tongue, and her fingers would trace ruins time itself hadn't been able to erase. And slowly, painfully, like stretching a canvas until it was the size it had been made for, she'd become who she was meant to be.

But then Mattie would shuffle into her room in the dead of the night like he had tonight, rubbing sleep from his eyes. His cheekbones were sharp like hers, but his black curls and dark mahogany skin were both from a father who wasn't hers at all. His father had never known he existed, and her father had died not long after Carmen had been born. Carmen sometimes let herself wonder if everything would be different if he hadn't died—if her mother had gotten that vacant look in her eyes from his death or if it had always been there.

But then, if he hadn't died, Carmen wouldn't have Mattie.

Like he did tonight, he would curl into her bed, too big for it at eight years old, but she'd never send him away. Carmen would lie there, and the warm, even breaths against the crook of her neck would stitch up those holes in her, would pull her feet back until she accepted that she had to stay where she was.

She always would for Mattie.

That girl in school had been staring at her lately, the girl with a mess of curls on her head and eyes that were the blue of oceans and skies in flashes.

With her hands stained in paint and wishes and her skin a deep dark brown, Ollie had left a feeling of normalcy in Carmen's chest. It was a light feeling that sat next to the heavy stone her mother always left inside her as Carmen walked her brother home from school, as she made him dinner with the last remnants of pasta in the cupboard, and even as she made sure he did his homework, brushed his teeth, went to bed.

The gas was out, so they had no hot water; she had boiled the pasta in the kettle and hoped they didn't lose the electricity too.

That stone inside her just grew heavier. Would her mother be back tomorrow? They really were out of food this time. She would have to scavenge soon.

She hated doing that.

That was how it started. Too many times without lunch at school got noticed. The hang of clothes, the distracted look in a hungry kid's face. All that sent them down a road Carmen and Mattie had gone down twice before. And Carmen couldn't walk it again, had promised Mattie they wouldn't as his nails dug desperately into her neck after the last time they had been separated for far too long.

Her mother would be back the next day. She would.

She had to be.

Carmen buried her face into Mattie's hair and breathed him in, the smell of kid—grass and school and pure Mattie—settling around her.

If her mother came home, Carmen had a semblance of a chance of going out that weekend. Shame flashed in her belly that *that* was a huge part of the reason she hoped her mother would come back. If Mattie could go to a sleepover, there would be an adult around, just in case.

And Carmen could feel like other teenagers, just for one night.

The next afternoon, though, she wasn't there, and Mattie and Carmen sat at the table that wobbled, with marks cut into it where her mother had once chopped at white powder. When Carmen had walked in and found her doing that, she'd taken Mattie's hand, dragged him out, and hadn't taken him home until stupidly late.

Mattie's fingers ran along one of the lines, his thumbnail following it like a train on its track.

At times, Carmen felt like that: like a train on a precarious track where just one waver could derail them all.

PIECES

“She’s been gone a week.” His voice was high, nerves plucking at his vowels. Carmen was pretty sure kids his age didn’t normally keep track of time like that.

“Yeah, she has. But...” She waited for him to look up, his eyes deep and dark, and Carmen could swear they had been like that when he was a baby: knowing and wise and too pure for what he’d been born into. “...I got us dinner.”

And those eyes lit up. He didn’t ask where, and Carmen didn’t tell him. She pulled out a container from her bag, followed by a second one, and they ate until they thought they’d be sick. Carmen didn’t tell him she’d pulled money from a teacher’s bag, her heart in her throat and her hands clammy. She didn’t do it a lot, especially now, but there was no way she’d risk listening to her brother’s stomach rumble emptily next to her in bed again. They’d had nothing to take to school. Lies dripped from both their tongues, adept at covers and half-truths, but it really would be noticed soon.

The cafeteria lunch for kids with no money was almost as bad as not having any lunch at all.

Her mother needed to come back, and anger itched under Carmen’s skin that they needed her at all.

“I love noodles.” His plump lips rounded, and he slurped one up.

Carmen’s laugh, rare and unheard in that house, bounced off the walls.

Their mother didn’t come back the next day, but she did Friday. She had blown-wide pupils and a slur to her voice and was clutching money too closely that Carmen didn’t want to ask about.

Mattie, no longer tiny and easily supplicated, gave his mother a grim smile, his eyes only lighting up a little when she handed him a new Nintendo DS. He quickly said, “Thanks, Mom.”

And Carmen’s heart swelled, pushed against her ribs, and choked her at the way he really did mean the words.

* * *

So, Saturday night, Carmen found herself at a party far from the city center.

People spilled from room to room, the house huge, the property huge, the atmosphere huge—Carmen had walked a mile and a half from the bus to get there, a bottle in hand pilfered from her mother’s bag.

Their hot water still wasn't on, so Carmen had taken a cold shower. Before Mattie had gone to his friend's house, she'd heated the kettle to make a bath that wasn't freezing and forced him into it.

He gave in. They knew how to cover.

When Carmen left the house, her mother had already been gone for hours, eyes glassy as she'd taken her keys. She'd smelled like vodka. It'd made Carmen hesitate before leaving. If something happened and Mattie needed to go home... But she'd pushed it aside. He was safe at a friend's.

Carmen hated alcohol, hated the burn, the smell. Hated the way it made her mother into someone Carmen swore she hadn't been once upon a time. But that may have been a false thing to swear to, a lie to sit heavy on her shoulders. Because, really, Carmen barely remembered a time her mother wasn't high on something, gambling away what they had, forgetting she had two children at home who needed her to be something.

But even Carmen knew, in her zero experience with this, that you never turned up to a party without something. Her heart thudded at the amount of people—the laughing, the shrieking—and she uncapped the bottle and took a swig, purely with the hope of faking some confidence. Her face scrunched up at the taste. She'd never spent much time with people her own age outside of school. She wasn't sure she could slide in comfortably and pretend she fit in among them, worried about kissing, tests, the next soccer game, and anything else in between.

Her feet ghosted from room to room, and something inside her clenched as she realized she didn't really know anyone. That missed school year hung wide between her and everyone else, and she hadn't exactly tried very hard before anyway. She never knew how: the ground that was meant to be common had always been foreign under her own feet, and she couldn't expect someone else to attempt to step over it.

Somehow, Carmen found herself in a conversation with an old classmate that started awkwardly but ended up flowing, a river in its bed, smooth and easy. They shared a drink and a laugh, and another boy joined in and held his hand up with a grin. "That goal in PE the other day? Like, *seriously*."

His hand hung there, and Carmen stared at it. With raised eyebrows, he wriggled his fingers, and Carmen laughed, the sound too obviously like relief to her ears. She slapped her hand against his.

"Why aren't you on the team?" he asked.

PIECES

He had kind eyes and a kind face. A shadow shaded his jaw. His eyes were a little unfocused, probably from the drink sloshing in the red cup in his hand.

The question made her swallow and eye the room. Could she sidle away, out of this conversation? Her cheeks were already growing hot. She couldn't afford the registration, the equipment, the cleats, the time to train. What if Mattie needed something? Their mother was gone more often than not.

"You really should join. The girls' team is kickass, and you'd make a great striker. Hey, dude." He turned to his friend, Jacob, the one Carmen had started talking with at first. "Isn't there that program now? Money to get girls onto the soccer team, to pay for stuff 'cause they're desperate for decent players?"

He said it innocently, but maybe he wasn't so oblivious after all and didn't want to offer it to her like charity. Hope, or something like it, ballooned in her throat.

"Yeah, I heard the coaches talking about it."

The guy whose name she still didn't know turned back to her. "You should totally talk to them. I'll recommend you, if you want."

And that's when it clicked: he was the captain of the boys' soccer team. This was his house.

She smiled despite herself. "Okay."

Overwhelmed and a little light-headed, Carmen slipped away when they started talking about starting a chugging contest. After wandering through rooms full of people, Carmen didn't see Ollie and ended up outside, surrounded by cool, still air. When she sat down, the cold quickly seeped into her jeans from the grass, but she didn't mind, because as she tilted her head up, the sky was a blanket of whirling stars and black clouds. She took a sip from the bottle between her legs and watched the patterns overhead with her tipsy gaze.

Maybe she could play soccer.

That was like something beyond her reach, something silly.

Someone plopped down next to her, fingers brushing over hers to steal the bottle from between her legs. Carmen was too hazy to be surprised, and a giggle washed over her as she turned her head. She was struck by the

sight of Ollie tipping the bottle back to take a sip. A loud “ugh” followed the swallow.

A husky laugh fell from Carmen’s throat, unfamiliar, and she watched Ollie’s profile as she ran a tongue over her lip. Something pulled low in Carmen’s stomach. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Ollie looked at her. “You made it.”

“That I did.”

Ollie held the bottle out, and Carmen couldn’t say no to the stormy offer in those eyes. She took a long sip.

“Are you having fun?” Ollie asked.

Something like delight painted across her features as she watched Carmen swallow the burning liquid down. Her skin was such a delicate shade of brown, yet the blue of her eyes was bright, an intriguing contrast that left Carmen tripping over her words.

“I am.”

“You sound surprised.”

Carmen looked around, the noise filtering out of the open doorway and people trickling through the doors, their laughter loud and raucous. Couples were making out in every darkened corner, one even on a trampoline. “I suppose I am.” She turned back to Ollie. “This isn’t usually my scene.”

“Hmm.” Ollie clicked her tongue and pressed against Carmen. Her shoulder was warm, a heavy weight of young comfort.

She was so easily affectionate, and Carmen didn’t want to stiffen at the touch, but she did a little. But Ollie didn’t even seem to notice. She tilted her head to stare at Carmen. “And what is your scene?”

Carmen would have waded into Ollie’s eyes and never come out again if someone offered her the chance. She shrugged and said nothing and instead offered the bottle to Ollie for another sip.

When Ollie held it out toward her again, Carmen tried to take it back. With a laugh, Ollie held on, their fingers slipping together against the neck of the bottle, sticky with spilled spirits. Ollie tugged, gravity happened, and they tumbled together, a tangle on the ground. Ollie’s hair splayed out around her head, and Carmen’s fingers trailed over it, like tendrils of fog against her skin. Ollie’s hand was stuck between their chests. Surely, she would be able to feel the thumping of Carmen’s heart through muscle and bone and skin.

“Ollie!”

And with that, they were pulled away, hauled onto their feet.

“This is Sara.” Ollie threw her arm easily over the girl’s shoulder.

With nimble movements, Sara pulled grass out of Ollie’s hair, her big, dark eyes throwing a wink at Carmen.

Brashness normally made her uncomfortable, but the motion sat easily on the shoulders of the plump Sara, and Carmen found herself smiling.

They were called inside to a game with a ping-pong ball and cups. Carmen remembered the party game from a book. Turned out she sucked at it.

“I chose the wrong team,” Ollie declared with a wide, cheery grin and a nudge to Carmen’s shoulder after tossing a ball over the table and missing all the cups. She blew a kiss to the boy across the table, Sean, one of many names thrown Carmen’s way over the evening.

The other day, Carmen had seen Ollie nuzzle his neck in the corridor at school.

Sara grinned at them, bumping her hip against Sean’s. “It doesn’t matter whose team you’re on. You always suck.”

The ping-pong ball landed with a *splat* in a cup, and Ollie pouted but picked it up and drank the contents. She put the cup back down with a twist of her mouth. “Who put Jaeger in the cups?”

“You did.” Carmen said it with a laugh, and Ollie rolled her eyes.

“True. Well, I have terrible ideas. You’ll learn that.” Ollie closed an eye, lined up her shot, and threw the ball. It bounced off one of the cups’ rims, and Sara and Sean crowed. “My ideas are about as terrible as I am at this game.”

There was another *splat* as Sean got the ball in a cup that was for Carmen.

Ollie winked. “But you suck too, so we can suck together.” She held the drink out, swaying a little. Or maybe that was Carmen? “Bottoms up!”

The alcohol was burning in Carmen’s stomach, but she didn’t care, because Ollie really was an affectionate person. Her hand ran down Carmen’s arm at one moment, and later her arm slung over Carmen’s shoulders. She was full of fist bumps and high fives and cheers and loud groans when they had to drink again. At some point, she pulled the snapback cap off the head of one of her many friends—a kid named Deon. It sat backward on

her head, ridiculous. If Carmen stumbled, it was into Ollie, who giggled and pulled her in closer. Everything was a blur, but it wasn't a bad feeling.

When they lost their second game, Ollie threw up her hands and shook her head. "God, no. No more. We're shit."

Their place went easily to others more than willing to take it. She led Carmen to the bathroom, a smile on her face, and when they fell through the door and against the sink, they were wrapped up in each other.

"I thought you had to pee?"

Ollie shrugged, her nose against Carmen's neck and her breath sending shivers down Carmen's back. "Not anymore."

Carmen pushed the hat away and it fell into the sink. It had sat too low on Ollie's forehead. She wanted to see her with no shadows falling over those eyes.

When Ollie's lips pressed to the sensitive skin over Carmen's pounding pulse, Carmen's own parted in a sigh. No one had ever touched her there, like that, with softness and uncertainty. She swallowed heavily and felt the lips against her throat curve up in a smile. They trailed to her mouth, and it seemed so simple to kiss her, to fall into the safety of Ollie's warm mouth, the wetness of her tongue against Carmen's own. Carmen's first kiss, drunk in a bathroom. Her first kiss, delivered in a way she'd always thought she'd never want but now wouldn't change for anything.

Ollie's glasses fogged up, and she giggled, the sound a delight. She pushed them on top of her head. Fingers buried in her hair, and Carmen's nails scraped skin she exposed by plucking at Ollie's shirt.

Carmen had known, had known she could fall into Ollie and not crawl her way out, because why would she want to?

* * *

Hours later, Carmen stumbled through her front door, a thousand memories of her mother doing the same thing crashing into her. The smell of alcohol and disappointment dragged itself inside, not far behind. Something rebellious stirred under the knee-jerk disgust that swelled up in her. Carmen was sixteen, was smart, was young, was desperate for something that tasted like normal—she could do this just once.

Squaring her shoulders, swaying only a little, Carmen stumbled down the hallway, her keys rattling on a table before they dropped heavily to the

PIECES

ground. For a moment, she eyed them, then decided they weren't worth the effort. Before she could turn to go to her room, she froze. Her mouth was dry. Water. Water would help this situation. She turned for the living room, but paused in the doorway. A blurry shape on the sofa slowly came into focus.

Carmen's hand gripped the doorframe, fingers biting into the wood. "Mattie?"

He was huddled in a ball. The clock above him said three in the morning.

He said nothing, so Carmen, dread rippling in her belly, hurried over to sit next to him. When her hand ran across the plane of his shoulder blades, they quivered under her palm. "Mattie? Why aren't you at your friend's house?"

"Mom picked me up. Then she went out." His voice was hoarse, probably scratched from hours of crying. "She went out and left me alone."

Carmen never left him alone. Never. Her lips were numb. "Why did she pick you up?"

"I don't know. She was saying all kinds of stuff, weird stuff, then left the house. She didn't even say why."

Guilt flared. Carmen wrapped her arms completely around Mattie, pulling him half into her lap, not caring how his legs didn't fit anymore.

"She was gone, but so were you."

His sobs were hot against her neck. Hot and wet and everything she had promised herself she would never play a part in. Carmen would never be their mother. But the smell of spirits clung to her clothes, it was early morning, and her brother was sobbing. Disgust at herself curled in her lungs, her breathing halting at the choking sensation of it.

She wanted to tell him sorry, to fix it, but instead she held him to her chest and rocked him, the way he'd liked when he was small, the way her mother had shown her to do before she went away for a few nights, before Mattie could even crawl.

Sniffing into her shirt, he pulled his head back, his face wrinkled. "You smell."

"Sorry."

He opened his mouth to say something but snapped it shut, and he whipped his head around, staring out the window.

G BENSON

It took Carmen longer, but her drunken brain registered the blue-and-red lights washing the room, washing Mattie's face in a ghostly image of wide eyes and open mouth.

“Not again,” he whispered, his words settling deep in Carmen's chest.

CHAPTER 3

CARMEN'S HEART WAS THUDDING, a beat so fast she thought she was going to be sick. In her arms, Mattie was shaking; his eyes still hadn't left the window. And in a moment, everything shrank to a kind of clarity, a focal point. Carmen bit her lip, looking from out the window and back to Mattie, the broken look on his face shattering her insides.

"No." His voice scraped out, rasping, grating over Carmen's cheek. His eyes screwed shut, and he shook his head again and again and again. "No. No. Carmen. No. Not again. I don't want to go back."

Something in Carmen's throat expanded, a lump growing bigger and bigger, and she couldn't swallow past it. She could only hope the evidence of it didn't leak out of her eyes. The sound of a door slamming shut, followed by another, echoed in her ears, and anxiety flared deep in her gut, so far down, clawing up and trying to fight at the rest of her. How were they here again?

"I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't." The voice was a whisper in her ear, but Mattie may as well have been screaming.

Their chests expanded in time, too fast, oxygen saturating their blood and too much carbon dioxide expelling from their bodies as they drew shallow, panicked breaths. Carmen desperately tried to grab on to a solid thought. "Mattie." She didn't recognize her own voice, the desperation, the plea. "Mattie, look at me." She clasped his burning cheeks, his hair curling at the edges of her fingers. He shook his head in her grasp, and she clung to him, her voice low. "Mattie, please."

He forced his eyes open, and the look in them cracked her down the middle.

"Mattie, listen to me carefully. Take a breath in, slowly."

He did as she said, and that was all she had time to let him do. Knocks pounded at the door, echoing alongside the flurry in her chest, and Mattie's breathing sped up again.

"I need you to go to your room."

When he stood, she pushed him on shaky legs in the right direction.

Fists pounded at the door again, and Carmen waited until she heard the *snick* of her bedroom door. Of course he went to her room and not his own. She pulled open the front door.

The lights were even brighter outside, and Carmen closed her eyes for a moment, squinting when she finally opened them again. A man and a woman stood in front of her, both with grim expressions that did nothing to ease the tightness in Carmen's chest. The constantly flashing colors coming from their car bounced off their metal badges and reminded her of the party she'd just left.

"Carmen García?"

She nodded, gripping the door. She waited, like last time, to be told her mother had been arrested again. Once for drugs. Another for leaving minors alone, which constituted neglect. What had happened now? Carmen had made sure no one could think neglect this time around, hadn't she?

"We're really very sorry to tell you this, but there's been an accident."

The rest of their words filtered out, were nothing. Their mouths moved, and Carmen watched them silently, the indistinct sound buzzing in her ears, getting louder and louder.

Her mother was dead, and that meant foster care would be permanent this time.