

A
POCKET FULL
OF POSIES

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

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CHAPTER ONE

Parker ducked her head as she darted through the dark neighborhood streets, the slap of her feet carrying her through the empty night.

Don't look back.

She rounded the corner, her heart thundering in her throat, her breath catching in her chest.

Don't slow down.

Tears pricked at the inside corners of her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks.

Don't think about Dani.

This thought, however, was the one that tripped her up. A stitch dug into her side. She stumbled and threw out a hand, bracing herself as she fell against a brick wall. The grit coated her palm, sandpaper rubbing her raw, opening her up. Her heaving breaths echoed off

the building, ricocheting right back into her ears.

It wasn't her fault.

They'd both known the risks.

Dani would be fine.

But no matter how many times Parker told herself this, she couldn't shake the doubt. The guilt. She couldn't forget what she'd done.

Fingers shaking, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone. She stared at the empty screen, waiting for Dani to tell her she was okay. That she'd gotten out, too. They couldn't lose everything over a stupid prank.

But they hadn't had a choice. They were freshmen. How could they possibly skirt around initiation? They were instructed to break into their rivals' school and take pictures with the district championship trophy. Then, before leaving, they would have to cut the strings on every one of their rackets, a parting gift so the girls would know they'd been there.

Dani hadn't wanted to do it. She and Parker had argued about it earlier that day. Breaking into another school and taking a picture was one thing. But destroying those rackets crossed the line. It was property damage. And what if they got caught? They could get kicked off the team. They could lose their scholarships. Was it really worth the risk?

But these girls were rich, Parker had argued. They could afford new strings. And going through with the prank was the only way they were ever going to fit in at their new school. On

their new team. The other girls didn't care how good they were on the court. This was the only way to earn their respect and make things better.

Dani still hadn't wanted to go through with it, but Parker had insisted. She needed this, and she'd used her best-friend pull to convince Dani that she needed it, too.

So they did it. They broke into the school. They got their snapshot with the trophy. But then, with the twang of that first snapped string still vibrating in the air, a walkie-talkie crackled. A flashlight swept through the room. A security guard burst through the door and started shouting for both of them to remain still and put their hands where he could see them. And without thinking, Parker had done something stupid.

She'd jumped up, rushing toward the man. She'd knocked into him before he knew what was happening, booking it right through the open door and into the hallway, where she didn't hesitate—not for a second.

As she'd bolted away, she'd ignored the guard's cries for her to stop. She'd only thought about her own freedom. She'd left Dani behind to take the fall. She'd abandoned her best friend. And now she had no idea what would happen to her.

Dani would get suspended. Maybe even be put on probation. And what if she lost her scholarship? What if she got kicked off the team? Parker couldn't play tennis without her. They were doubles partners. They were supposed to have each other's backs.

Parker slowed her pace once she felt certain that no one had

followed her. She wanted to scream. She wanted to go back in time and change what she'd done, but she couldn't. And the worst part was that even though she was furious at herself, a part of her felt relieved that she'd gotten away.

Her parents were dealing with enough as it was. They couldn't even make it through dinner without dropping into an uncomfortable silence, the kind where Parker focused on the food on her plate to avoid all the things her parents wouldn't say in front of her.

But she still heard their whisper fights at night, still saw the frustrated looks her mom leveled at her dad every time he sat down in his recliner or disappeared into the bedroom for a nap. Parker couldn't help but notice the way her mother hesitated at the grocery store, taking a few items out of their cart before they checked out.

Her mom had reached the end of her patience, and Parker worried about what would happen next. The last thing her parents needed was her getting into trouble at school. Or worse, getting expelled. Something like that could set off an explosion and blow her family apart for good.

Parker slapped her phone against her thigh as she took a deep breath, leaning against the gritty wall for support. She glanced around, but the streets were still deserted. She was still alone. Guilt squeezed her insides, wringing her out until her heart hiccuped. She smacked her leg again, happy when it stung. And then again. She didn't know if Dani would forgive her. She

didn't know if she should. What if Dani got expelled? She and Parker weren't rich kids like the rest of them. Scholarship kids didn't get second chances.

Suddenly, Parker's phone came to life in her hand. She whipped it around, but it wasn't Dani.

It was Callie, their team captain, checking in on them. Had they finished the prank? Did they get the photographic proof? Parker didn't know what to say. She still couldn't think straight. So she came out with the truth, let it spill from her fingertips before hitting send.

Three dots appeared on her screen while Callie typed and Parker could only hold her breath. Could only wait and pray for a miracle—that Callie might have some way out of this.

You got caught?

The message popped up, and Parker heard her captain's anger in those three words.

How stupid are you?

Did Dani tell on us?

Is she going to rat us out?

You're going to get us all in trouble.

Teammates don't snitch on each other.

Does Dani know that?

Are you going to remind her?

Have you thought about where your loyalties lie?

You better make the right choice.

You don't want to be BB forever, do you?

Parker froze as she read the last text from Callie. She flinched at the nickname, Callie making her threat clear.

Not that it was a surprise. That was the only currency their captain seemed to understand. Why had it taken Parker so long to realize that? Why hadn't she stood up to the senior? Or at least questioned her leadership? Her rules? These initiation stunts she'd forced them to pull?

But Parker knew why. It was because Parker needed a reset from that horribly embarrassing first day. She needed to get rid of that nickname. Of *BB*. She wanted to have friends. She wanted the rest of the team to like her.

But she didn't care about any of that now.

"Where are you, Dani?"

Parker's whisper came out as a prayer. One that, after a

couple of minutes, hadn't been answered. So, pocketing her phone, she turned and kept walking, making her way through the streets on autopilot, her mind wrapped up in everything else. She didn't even realize she'd made it to her apartment building and up the four flights of stairs until her keys jingled as she pulled them out.

Parker stopped, recognizing it was past her curfew. Pressing her ear to the door, she listened hard for signs of life. Would her parents be fighting? Had they even realized she'd snuck out?

In the past couple of months, Parker had pretty much been able to do her own thing. Her parents had been so consumed by their own troubles that they'd left her alone. She knew they wouldn't have checked on her in her room. Which meant she had to be quiet. If she could sneak in, then she wouldn't get into any more trouble.

Holding her breath, Parker slowly inserted the key into the lock. She twisted the knob a fraction at a time, wincing as the latch popped free, a sliver of light peeking out from the apartment. She inched the door open just enough to squeeze inside and took the same amount of care closing it behind her. Then she paused, standing there on her own welcome mat, waiting to see if her parents would barge in and catch her.

But no one appeared. No one seemed to have heard her late arrival. This might have been the first lucky turn of the night.

Rising to her tiptoes, Parker crept down the hallway. She snuck through the empty kitchen and slunk past the living room, where the TV was on even though no one seemed to be in there watching it. She got to her bedroom and could just make out the sound of muffled voices, the light seeping out from underneath her parents' door, blinking as they paced back and forth on the other side. Parker slid into her room. She didn't dare risk listening in on them. It could only be bad.

Safely inside her room, Parker tore off her jacket. As she threw it on the floor, the night began to catch up to her. Her head started spinning. Her mind began racing again. Her stomach flipped until she thought she might throw up. She grappled to slow down, to regain some kind of steadiness. But then she saw the photo on her dresser. Dani's face staring back at her, a trophy hoisted between their interwoven arms.

Parker gulped, feeling the lump work its way down her throat. She remembered that day when she and Dani had won their first tournament. City champions in their age group. How could Parker face her now? How would Dani ever be able to trust her on the court again?

Parker had left her in that equipment room to take full responsibility for a prank that Dani hadn't even wanted to do in the first place. And at the end, Parker hadn't even turned around when her best friend had whisper-screamed her name. Parker hadn't slowed down at all, too focused on saving her own skin.