

THE LYING GAME

ALSO BY SARA SHEPARD

Pretty Little Liars

Flawless

Perfect

Unbelievable

Wicked

Killer

Heartless

Wanted



THE
**LYING
GAME**

BY

**SARA
SHEPARD**

HARPER

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alloy**entertainment**

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*We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful
about what we pretend to be.*

—KURT VONNEGUT



 PROLOGUE 

I woke up in a dingy claw-foot bathtub in an unfamiliar pink-tiled bathroom. A stack of *Maxims* sat next to the toilet, green toothpaste globbed in the sink, and white drips streaked the mirror. The window showed a dark sky and a full moon. What day of the week was it? Where was I? A frat house at the U of A? Someone's apartment? I could barely remember that my name was Sutton Mercer, or that I lived in the foothills of Tucson, Arizona. I had no idea where my purse was, and I didn't have a clue where I'd parked my car. Actually, what kind of car did I drive? Had someone slipped me something?

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“Emma?” a guy’s voice called from another room.
“You home?”

“I’m busy!” called a voice close by.

A tall, thin girl opened the bathroom door, her tangled dark hair hanging in her face. “Hey!” I leapt to my feet. “Someone’s in here already!” My body felt tingly, as if it had fallen asleep. When I looked down, it seemed like I was flickering on and off, like I was under a strobe light. *Freaky. Someone definitely slipped me something.*

The girl didn’t seem to hear me. She stumbled forward, her face covered in shadows.

“Hello?” I cried, climbing out of the tub. She didn’t look over. “Are you deaf?” Nothing. She pumped a bottle of lavender-scented lotion and rubbed it on her arms.

The door flung open again, and a snub-nosed, unshaven teenage guy burst in. “Oh.” His gaze flew to the girl’s tight-fitting T-shirt, which said NEW YORK NEW YORK ROLLER COASTER on the front. “I didn’t know you were in here, Emma.”

“That’s maybe why the door was *closed*?” Emma pushed him out and slammed it shut. She turned back to the mirror. I stood right behind her. “Hey!” I cried again.

Finally, she looked up. My eyes darted to the mirror to meet her gaze. But when I looked into the glass, I screamed.

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Because Emma looked exactly like me.

And I wasn't there.

Emma turned and walked out of the bathroom, and I followed as if something was yanking me along behind her. Who was this girl? Why did we look the same? Why was I invisible? And why couldn't I remember, well, *anything*? The wrong memories snapped into aching, nostalgic focus—the glittering sunset over the Catalinas, the smell of the lemon trees in my backyard in the morning, the feel of cashmere slippers on my toes. But other things, the most important things, had become muffled and fuzzy, as if I'd lived my whole life underwater. I saw vague shapes, but I couldn't make out what they were. I couldn't remember what I'd done for any summer vacations, who my first kiss had been with, or what it felt like to feel the sun on my face or dance to my favorite song. What *was* my favorite song? And even worse, every second that passed, things got fuzzier and fuzzier. Like they were disappearing.

Like *I* was disappearing.

But then I concentrated really hard and I heard a muffled scream. And suddenly it was like I was somewhere else. I felt pain shooting through my body, before a final, sleepy sensation of my muscles surrendering. As my eyes slowly closed, I saw a blurry, shadowy figure standing over me.

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“Oh my God,” I whispered.

No wonder Emma didn't see me. No wonder I wasn't
in the mirror. I wasn't really here.

I was dead.

 | 
THE DEAD RINGER

Emma Paxton carried her canvas tote and a glass of iced tea out the back door of her new foster family's home on the outskirts of Las Vegas. Cars swished and grumbled on the nearby expressway, and the air smelled heavily of exhaust and the local water treatment plant. The only decorations in the backyard were dusty free weights, a rusted bug zapper, and kitschy terra-cotta statues.

It was a far cry from my backyard in Tucson, which was desert-landscaped to perfection and had a wooden swing set I used to pretend was a castle. Like I said, it was weird and random which details I still remembered and which ones had evaporated away. For the last hour, I'd

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been following Emma trying to make sense of her life and willing myself to remember my own. Not like I had a choice. Everywhere she went, I went. I wasn't entirely sure how I knew these things about Emma, either—they just appeared in my head as I watched her, like a text message popping up in an inbox. I knew the details of her life better than I did my own.

Emma dropped the tote on the faux wrought-iron patio table, plopped down in a plastic lawn chair, and craned her neck upward. The only nice thing about this patio was that it faced away from the casinos, offering a large swath of clear, uninterrupted sky. The moon dangled halfway up the horizon, a bloated alabaster wafer. Emma's gaze drifted to two bright, familiar stars to the east. At nine years old, Emma had wistfully named the star on the right the Mom Star, the star on the left the Dad Star, and the smaller, brightly twinkling spot just below them the Emma Star. She'd made up all kinds of fairy tales about these stars, pretending that they were her real family and that one day they'd all be reunited on earth like they were in the sky.

Emma had been in foster care for most of her life. She'd never met her dad, but she remembered her mother, with whom she had lived until she was five years old. Her mom's name was Becky. She was a slender woman who loved shouting out the answers to *Wheel of Fortune*, dancing around the living room to Michael Jackson songs,

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and reading tabloids that ran stories like *BABY BORN FROM PUMPKIN!* and *BAT BOY LIVES!* Becky used to send Emma on scavenger hunts around their apartment complex, the prize always being a tube of used lipstick or a mini Snickers. She bought Emma frilly tutus and lacy dresses from Goodwill for dress-up. She read Emma *Harry Potter* before bed, making up different voices for every character.

But Becky was like a scratch-off lottery ticket—Emma never quite knew what she was going to get with her. Sometimes Becky spent the whole day crying on the couch, her face contorted and her cheeks streaked with tears. Other times she would drag Emma to the nearest department store and buy her two of everything. “Why do I need two pairs of the same shoes?” Emma would ask. A faraway look would come over Becky’s face. “In case the first pair gets dirty, Emmy.”

Becky could be very forgetful, too—like the time she left Emma at a Circle K. Suddenly unable to breathe, Emma had watched her mother’s car vanish down the shimmering highway. The clerk on duty gave Emma an orange Popsicle and let her sit on the ice freezer at the front of the store while he made some phone calls. When Becky finally returned, she scooped up Emma and gave her a huge hug. For once, she didn’t even complain when Emma dripped sticky orange Popsicle goo on her dress.

One summer night not long after that, Emma slept

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over with Sasha Morgan, a friend from kindergarten. She woke up in the morning to Mrs. Morgan standing in the doorway, a sick look on her face. Apparently, Becky had left a note under the Morgans' front door, saying she'd "gone on a little trip." Some trip *that* was—it had lasted almost thirteen years and counting.

When no one could track down Becky, Sasha's parents turned Emma over to an orphanage in Reno. Prospective adopters had no interest in a five-year-old—they all wanted babies they could mold into mini versions of themselves—so Emma lived in group homes, then foster homes. Though Emma would always love her mom, she couldn't say she missed her—at least not Miserable Becky, Manic Becky, or the Lunatic Becky who'd forgotten her at the Circle K. She did miss the *idea* of a mom though: someone stable and constant who knew her past, looked forward to her future, and loved her unconditionally. Emma had invented the Mom, Dad, and Emma stars in the sky not based on anything she'd ever known, but instead on what she wished she'd had.

The sliding glass door opened, and Emma wheeled around. Travis, her new foster mom's eighteen-year-old son, strutted out and settled on top of the patio table. "Sorry about bursting in on you in the bathroom," he said.

"It's okay," Emma muttered bitterly, slowly inching

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away from Travis's outstretched legs. She was pretty sure Travis *wasn't* sorry. He practically made a sport of trying to see her naked. Today, Travis wore a blue ball cap pulled low over his eyes, a ratty, oversized plaid shirt, and baggy jean shorts with the crotch sagging almost to his knees. There was patchy stubble on his pointy-nosed, thin-lipped, pea-eyed face; he wasn't man enough to actually grow facial hair. His bloodshot brown eyes narrowed lasciviously. Emma could feel his gaze on her, canvassing her tight-fitting NEW YORK NEW YORK camisole, bare, tanned arms, and long legs.

With a grunt, Travis reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a joint, and lit up. As he blew a plume of smoke in her direction, the bug zapper glowed to life. With a crisp snap and a fizzle of blue light, it annihilated yet another mosquito. If only it could do that to Travis, too.

Back off, pot breath, Emma wanted to say. *It's no wonder no girl will get near you.* But she bit her tongue; the comment would have to go into her Comebacks I Should've Said file, a list she'd compiled in a black cloth notebook hidden in her top drawer. The Comebacks list, CISS for short, was filled with pithy, snarky remarks Emma had longed to say to foster moms, creepy neighbors, bitchy girls at school, and a whole host of others. For the most part, Emma held her tongue—it was easier to keep quiet, not make trouble, and become whatever type of girl a

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situation needed her to be. Along the way, Emma had picked up some pretty impressive coping skills: At age ten, she honed her reflexes when Mr. Smythe, a tempestuous foster parent, got into one of his object-throwing moods. When Emma lived in Henderson with Ursula and Steve, the two hippies who grew their own food but were clueless about how to cook it, Emma had begrudgingly taken over kitchen duties, whipping up zucchini bread, veggie gratins, and some awesome stir-fries.

It had been just two months since Emma had moved in with Clarice, a single mom who worked as a bartender for VIP gamblers at The M Resort. Since then, Emma had spent the summer taking pictures, playing marathon games of Minesweeper on the banged-up BlackBerry her friend Alex had given her before she'd left her last foster home in Henderson, and working part-time operating the roller coaster at the New York New York casino. And, oh yeah, avoiding Travis as much as she could.

It hadn't started out that way, though. At first, Emma had tried to make nice with her new foster brother, hoping they could be friends. It wasn't like every foster family sucked and she'd never made friends with the other kids; it just sometimes took a lot of effort on her part. She'd feigned interest in all of the YouTube videos Travis watched about how to be a small-time thug: how to unlock a car with a cell phone, how to hack soda machines, how to open a

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padlock with a beer can. She'd suffered through a couple of Ultimate Fighting Championship matches on TV, even attempting to learn the wrestling-move vocabulary. But the nicety had ended for Emma a week later, when Travis tried to feel her up while she was standing in front of the open fridge. "You've been so friendly," he'd murmured in her ear, before Emma had "accidentally" kicked him in the crotch.

All Emma wanted to do was get through her senior year here. It was the end of August, and school started on Wednesday. She had the option of leaving Clarice's when she turned eighteen in two weeks, but that would mean quitting school, finding an apartment, and getting a full-time job to pay rent. Clarice had told Emma's social worker that Emma could stay here until she got her diploma. *Nine more months*, Emma chanted to herself like a mantra. She could hold on until then, couldn't she?

Travis took another hit off the joint. "You want some?" he asked in a choked voice, holding the smoke in his lungs.

"No thanks," Emma said stiffly.

Travis finally exhaled. "Sweet little Emma," he said in a syrupy voice. "But you aren't always this good, are you?"

Emma craned her neck up at the sky and paused on the Mom, Dad, and Emma stars again. Farther down the horizon was a star she'd recently named the Boyfriend Star. It

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seemed to be hovering closer than usual to the Emma Star tonight—maybe it was a sign. Perhaps this would be the year she'd meet her perfect boyfriend, someone she was destined to be with.

“Shit,” Travis whispered suddenly, noticing something inside the house. He quickly stubbed out the joint and threw it under Emma's chair just as Clarice appeared on the back deck. Emma scowled at the joint's smoldering tip—nice of Travis to try to pin it on her—and covered it with her shoe.

Clarice still had on her work uniform: a tuxedo jacket, silky white shirt, and black bow tie. Her dyed blond hair was slicked into an impeccable French twist, and her mouth was smeared with bright fuchsia lipstick that didn't flatter anyone's skin tone. She held a white envelope in her hands.

“I'm missing two hundred and fifty dollars,” Clarice announced flatly. The empty envelope crinkled. “It was a personal tip from Bruce Willis. He signed one of the bills. I was going to put it in my scrapbook.”

Emma sighed sympathetically. The only thing she'd gleaned about Clarice was that she was absolutely obsessed with celebrities. She kept a scrapbook describing every celeb interaction she'd ever had, and glossy signed head shots lined the wall space in the breakfast nook. Occasionally, Clarice and Emma ran into each other in the kitchen

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around noon, which was the crack of dawn for Clarice after a bar shift. The only thing Clarice ever wanted to talk about was how she'd had a long conversation with the latest winner of *American Idol* the night before, or how a certain action film starlet's boobs were definitely fake, or how the host of a dating reality show was kind of a bitch. Emma was always intrigued. She didn't care much about celebrity dirt but dreamed of someday being an investigative journalist. Not that she ever told Clarice that. Not that Clarice had ever asked anything personal about her.

"The money was in this envelope in my bedroom when I left for work this afternoon." Clarice stared straight at Emma, her eyes squinting. "Now it's not. Is there something you want to tell me?"

Emma sneaked a peek at Travis, but he was fiddling with his BlackBerry. As he scrolled through his photos, Emma noticed a blurry shot of her at the bathroom mirror. Her hair was wet, and she'd knotted a towel under her arms.

Cheeks burning, Emma turned to Clarice. "I don't know anything about it," she said in the most diplomatic voice she could muster. "But maybe you should ask Travis. He might know."

"Excuse me?" Travis's voice cracked. "I didn't take any money."

Emma made an incredulous noise at the back of her throat.

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“You know I wouldn’t do that, Mom,” Travis went on. He stood and pulled up his shorts around his waist. “I know how hard you work. I *did* see Emma go into your room today though.”

“What?” Emma whirled around to face him. “I did not!”

“Did too,” Travis shot back. As soon as he turned his back on his mom, his expression morphed from a fake smile to a wrinkled-nose, narrowed-eyes glower.

Emma gaped. It was amazing how calmly he lied. “I’ve seen you go through your mom’s purse,” she announced.

Clarice leaned against the table, twisting her mouth to the right. “*Travis* did that?”

“No, I didn’t.” Travis pointed accusingly at Emma. “Why would you believe her? You don’t even *know* this girl.”

“I don’t need money!” Emma pressed her hands to her chest. “I have a job! I’m fine!” She’d been working for years. Before the roller coaster, she’d had a job as Head Goat Girl at a local petting zoo, she’d dressed up as a toga-robed Statue of Liberty and stood on the street corner to advertise a local credit union, and she’d even sold knives door-to-door. She’d saved more than two grand and stashed it in a half-empty Tampax box in her bedroom. Travis hadn’t found the money yet, probably because the tampons were a better security system

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against creepy boys than a rabid pack of Rottweilers.

Clarice gazed at Travis, who was giving her a sickening, pouty smile. As she creased the empty envelope back and forth in her hands, a suspicious look crossed her face. It looked as if she momentarily saw through Travis's facade.

"Look." Travis walked over to his mom and put his arm on her shoulder. "I think you need to know what Emma's really all about." He pulled his BlackBerry from his pocket again and began to fiddle with the click wheel.

"What do you mean?" Emma walked over to them.

Travis gave her a sanctimonious look, hiding the BlackBerry screen from view. "I was going to talk to you about this in private. But it's too late for that now."

"Talk to me about *what*?" Emma lunged forward, making the citronella candle in the center of the table wobble.

"*You* know what." Travis tapped away on the keyboard with his thumbs. A mosquito buzzed around his head, but he didn't bother to flick it away. "You're a sick freak."

"What do you mean, Travis?" Clarice's fuchsia-lined lips pursed worriedly.

Finally, Travis lowered the BlackBerry so everyone could see. "This," he announced.

A stiff, hot wind blew against Emma's cheek, the dusty air irritating her eyes. The blue-black evening sky seemed to darken a few shades. Travis breathed heavily next to her, reeking of pot smoke, and pulled up a generic video

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uploading site. With a flourish, he typed in the keyword *SuttonInAZ* and hit **PLAY**.

A video slowly loaded. A handheld camera panned over a clearing. No sound escaped from the speakers, as if the microphone had been muted. The camera whipped around to show a figure sitting in a chair with a black blindfold covering half her face. A round silver locket on a thick chain clung to a bony, feminine collarbone.

The girl thrashed her head frantically back and forth, the locket bouncing wildly. The picture went dark for a moment, and suddenly someone slipped behind her and pulled the necklace chain back so that it pressed up against the girl's throat. The girl's head arched back. She flailed her arms and kicked her legs.

"Oh my God." Clarice's hand flew to her mouth.

"What *is* this?" Emma whispered.

The strangler pulled the chain harder and harder. Whoever it was had a mask over his head, so Emma couldn't see his face. After about thirty seconds, the girl in the video stopped struggling and went limp.

Emma backed away from the screen. Had they just watched someone *die*? What the hell? And what did this have to do with her?

The camera remained fixed on the blindfolded girl. She wasn't moving. Then the picture went momentarily dark again. When an image snapped back on the screen,

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the camera was tilted over, fallen on the ground. Emma could still see a sideways shot of the figure in the chair. Someone walked up to the girl and pulled the blindfold off her head. After a long pause, the girl coughed. Tears dotted her eyes. The corners of her mouth pulled down. She blinked slowly. For a split second before the screen went dark, she stared half consciously into the lens.

Emma's jaw dropped to her worn Converse sneakers.

Clarice gasped loudly.

"Ha," Travis said triumphantly. "I *told* you."

Emma stared at the girl's huge, blue eyes, slightly upturned nose, and round face. She looked *exactly* like her.

That was because the girl in the video was me.



THAT'S RIGHT, BLAME THE FOSTER KID

Emma grabbed the phone from Travis's hands and started the clip over, staring hard at the image. As the person reached out and began to choke the blindfolded girl, fear streaked through Emma's stomach. When the anonymous hand pulled off the blindfold, Emma's identical face appeared on the screen. Emma had the same thick, wavy, chestnut-brown hair as the girl in the movie. The same round chin. The same pink lips kids used to tease Emma about, saying they were puffy as though she'd had an allergic reaction. She shuddered.

I watched the video again in horror, too. The locket glinting in the light caused a tiny shard of a memory to



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surface: I remembered lifting the lid of my baby box, pulling out the locket from under a half-chewed teething giraffe, a lacy receiving blanket, and a pair of knit booties, and putting it around my neck. The video itself brought back nothing though. I didn't know if it had happened in my backyard . . . or three states away. I wished I could slap my post-death memory across the face.

But the video had to be how I died, right? Especially from that quick flashback I'd had when I'd awakened in Emma's bathroom: that face close to mine, my heart beating hard, my murderer standing above me. But I had no idea how this whole death thing worked: Had I popped into Emma's world the moment after I'd taken my last breath, or was it days—*months*—later? And how did the video get posted online? Had my family seen it? My friends? Was this some kind of twisted ransom note?

Emma finally glanced up from the screen. "Where did you find this?" she asked Travis.

"Guess someone didn't know she was a star on the Internet, huh?" Travis snatched the phone from her hands.

Clarice raked her fingers through her hair. She kept glancing from the video screen to Emma's face. "Is this what you do for fun?" she asked Emma in a hoarse voice.

"She probably does it to get high." Travis paced around the patio like a prowling lion. "I knew some girls at school

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last year who were, like, obsessed with it. One of them almost died.”

Clarice clapped her hand over her mouth. “What’s wrong with you?”

Emma’s eyes darted from Travis to Clarice. “Wait, no. That’s not *me*. The girl in this video is someone else.”

Travis rolled his eyes. “Someone who looks exactly like you?” he deadpanned. “Let me guess. A long-lost sister? An evil twin?”

There was a low rumbling of thunder in the distance. The breeze smelled like wet pavement, a telltale sign that a storm was close. *A long-lost sister*. The idea ignited in Emma’s mind like a Fourth of July sparkler. It was possible. She’d asked Social Services once if Becky had had any other kids she’d abandoned along the way, but they said they didn’t know.

A thought burned in my mind, too: I was adopted. That much I remembered. It was common knowledge in my family; my parents had never tried to hide it. They’d told me my adoption had been a last-minute scramble and they’d never met my birth mother. *Could* it be possible? It explained why I was literally stuck to this girl who looked just like me, following her around as if our souls had been tethered together.

Clarice tapped her long nails on the table. “I don’t tolerate lying or stealing in this house, Emma.”

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Emma felt like she'd just been kicked in the stomach. "That's not me in the video," she protested. "And I didn't steal from you. I swear."

Emma reached for her canvas bag on the patio table. All she had to do was call Eddie, her manager at the roller coaster. He'd vouch for her hours today. But Travis got to her bag first, knocking it over so all of its contents spilled out onto the pavement.

"Oops!" he cried gleefully.

Emma watched helplessly as her tattered copy of *The Sun Also Rises* landed on a dusty anthill. A crumpled ticket for a free all-you-can-eat BBQ buffet at MGM Grand got caught in the breeze and drifted toward Travis's free weights. Her BlackBerry and a tube of cherry-flavored ChapStick skittered to a stop next to a terra-cotta turtle. Last but not least, there was a suspicious-looking wad of bills held together with a thick purple rubber band. The wad thudded to the patio, bounced once, and landed in front of Clarice's chunky heels.

Emma was too stunned to speak. Clarice snatched the money and licked her pointer finger to count it. "Two hundred," she said when she was finished. She held up a twenty with blue scribble in the upper left-hand corner. Even in the fading light, Emma could see a big looped *B*, presumably for *Bruce Willis*. "What did you do with the other fifty?"

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A neighbor's wind chimes tinkled in the distance. Emma's insides were frozen. "I-I have no idea how that got in my bag."

Behind her, Travis snickered. "*Busted.*" He was leaning casually against the stucco wall, just to the left of the big round thermometer. He crossed his arms over his chest, and his top lip was curled in a sneer.

The hair on the back of Emma's neck rose. All at once, she understood what was going on. Her lips started to twitch, just like they always did when she was about to lose it. "*You did this!*" She pointed a finger at Travis. "You set me up!"

Travis smirked. Something inside Emma broke loose. Screw keeping the peace. Screw adapting to whatever the foster family needed her to be. She shot for him, grabbing Travis by his meaty neck.

"Emma!" Clarice shrieked, pulling her off her son. Emma staggered backward, bumping against one of the patio chairs.

Clarice spun Emma around so that they were face-to-face. "What's gotten into you?"

Emma didn't answer. She glowered at Travis again. He had flattened himself against the wall, his arms in front of him protectively, but there was a thrilled glow in his eyes.

Clarice turned away from Emma, sank down in the chair, and rubbed her eyes. Mascara smudged on her

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fingertips. “This isn’t working,” she said softly after a moment. She raised her head and gazed soberly at Emma. “I thought you were a sweet, nice girl who wouldn’t cause any trouble, Emma, but this is too much for us.”

“I didn’t *do* anything,” Emma whispered. “I swear.”

Clarice pulled out a nail file and started nervously sawing on her pinkie. “You can stay until your birthday, but after that you’re on your own.”

Emma blinked. “You’re kicking me *out*?”

Clarice stopped filing. Her face softened. “I’m sorry,” she said gently. “But this is the best choice for all of us.”

Emma turned away and stared hard at the ugly block wall at the back of the property.

“I wish things were different.” Clarice pulled the sliding door open and padded back into the house. As soon as she was out of view, Travis peeled himself off the wall and straightened up to full height.

He sauntered casually around Emma, scooped up the tiny nub of the joint that was still under the chair, blew off the bits of dried grass that had stuck to the tip, and dropped it into his enormous pants pocket. “You’re lucky she didn’t press charges,” he said in a slimy voice.

Emma said nothing as he swaggered back into the house. She wanted to leap up and claw his eyes out, but her legs felt like they had been filled with heavy wet clay. Her eyes blurred with tears. *This* again. Every time a foster family

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told Emma she had to move on, she invariably thought back to the cold, lonely moment when she'd realized Becky had ditched her for good. Emma had stayed a week at Sasha Morgan's house while the police tried to track down her mom. She'd put on a brave face, playing Candy Land, watching *Dora the Explorer*, and making scavenger hunts for Sasha like the ones Becky had masterminded for her. But every night in the glow of Sasha's Cinderella night-light, Emma struggled to read the parts of *Harry Potter* she could understand—which weren't many. She'd barely mastered *The Cat in the Hat*. She needed her mom to read the big words. She needed her mom to do the voices. Even now, it still hurt.

The patio was silent. The wind blew the hanging spider plants and palm trees sideways. Emma stared blankly at the terra-cotta sculpture of a shapely woman that Travis and his friends liked to dry-hump. So that was that. No more staying here until the end of high school. No more applying to a photojournalism program at USC . . . or even community college. She had nowhere to go. No one to turn to. Unless . . .

Suddenly, the image from the video fluttered through her mind once more. *A long-lost sister*. Her heart lifted. She had to find her.

If only I could have told her it was too late.