Chapter 1

There was something almost disconcerting about the whole scene. Unnerved, I clenched my fists and sighed a shaky breath. There was something *missing*. Something wasn't *right*. It was one of those moments where you realized that you left your cell phone on the kitchen counter or you forgot your television set was still on when you walked out of the door. My unease grew with every passing moment until it seemed to cloud every one of my senses. I felt lightheaded.

It felt like déjà-vu. I had passed through this exact moment several days prior, I knew that. I understood that everything had been meticulously duplicated. Someone had staged the entire thing knowing that I wouldn't be able to spot the major difference.

"Are you okay, Wen?" A voice murmured, catching my attention. There was something off about her as well. I didn't even notice that she took this class with me. "Wen?"

"Yeah, Juliet. Everything's fine," I forced myself to look away from her, choosing instead to focus on the chicken scratch the teacher had written on the blackboard. The teacher was different as well, a man in his mid-thirties. "Everything's fine."

"You know, considering everything that happened, I wouldn't blame you for being upset," Juliet continued, mindlessly. What did she mean by that? What had happened? I didn't ask her. I couldn't shake the incessant feeling away; it coated me like a veil. "I'm here to talk, you know. Everyone wants to understand why it happened and you were the closest person to him at the time but----damn it all, we really shouldn't talk about this here!"

My eyebrows furrowed but I nodded mechanically. I decided to focus instead on the horrible feeling that was creeping up my spine and slowly reaching the base of my neck. From there, it spread to my shoulders and down my forearm, leaving goose bumps in its wake. 'He' was missing. Juliet caressed my wrist between her slim fingers, rubbing small circles into my skin with her thumb. She yawned as she listened to the teacher continue with his ramblings. I was surprised that no one had heard Juliet. She was a passionate person who didn't really understand how to control her tone. Instead, she would raise her voice so loudly that I'd sigh and force her to quiet down. She was wearing her hair in two long braids that trailed down her shoulders. She had tried to dye her hair pink but she wasn't pleased with the colour's durability. It had started to fade after the second day when the box had clearly guaranteed a week.

"The fact of the matter is the company promised the product's colour to stay in for at least a week. If they can't keep their promises, they should expect an angry customer review on my blog!" She complained as her hair started to turn a slight orange. "I am totally not buying the stuff anymore. I cry mutiny!"

Now her hair was a rusty strawberry blond. She had pulled it up behind her ears with a Western print bandana in order to prevent the acne that began to spread along her hairline. She was wearing a thin application of eyeliner that formed a thick wing near the outer corner of each eye. If anything, the

blackness of the eyeliner and the thick layer of mascara made her icy blue eyes even paler. It wasn't like she cared though; she didn't even wear much more make-up than that. She found that many foundations made her skin itch and that blush was a little unnecessary for everyday use. There were times when Juliet's mother, a socialite upper class woman, dressed Juliet in evening gowns and cocktail dresses for parties. She would force her daughter to wear tons of make-up on evenings of such a nature. I had seen pictures on Facebook but I hadn't been graced with a face-to-face with this side of one of my good friends.

Juliet had a tendency to keep her family life away from her personal life. Most of our mutual friends had no idea that Juliet's parents were filthy rich and that included her boyfriend Gemini since he had been against the idea of the bourgeois class. Don't misunderstand, Juliet's parents loved to post pictures and statuses on the internet focused solely on their eldest daughter and her two siblings but she made sure that they were private. She hadn't even 'friended' her parents. During her weekend escapades to the mall, she often bought ripped jeans, graphic t-shirts, socks which she later mismatched, books, anime merchandise, and new piercings. Her parents didn't approve but paid for these shopping trips so Juliet wouldn't think of running away again. I don't think she would last too long anyhow. She'd be back to her shopping trips; overindulging in things she didn't necessarily need.

She tapped my hand and pulled her hand away, choosing instead to prop her head upon the palm that had been caressing my wrist. I knew that Juliet hated history courses, so she had been pressured into taking the course with me. The class was completely silent. The students seemed to notice the tension in the air. There wasn't the usual scuff of chair legs against the floor, no shouts or cries from the gym class outside, and the whispered conversations from the back of the room had died down. Juliet's boot scraped the floor as she readjusted herself in her seat. She winced as the substitute teacher glanced over his shoulder before returning back to the notes he was writing on the whiteboard. He was writing about a research paper that had been due last class. I hadn't handed it in.

"You see, I believe that your generation welcomes information all too quickly without analyzing or critically thinking about what you've discovered. With the worldwide regime of the internet, you all have information at your fingertips! Having two Wikipedia sources for your research paper isn't acceptable. I asked you to use direct citations of one to two sentences at most. You shouldn't overwhelm yourselves with information since your analysis will be less focused. There is always knowledge that people cannot handle," The substitute teacher squawked as he tapped the whiteboard where '<u>Watch your Citing!</u>' had been underlined. He continued his bumbling, pacing in front of the class as he clucked and preached to a room of uninterested teenagers. He seemed like more of an angry, territorial rooster than a teacher.

"Mr. Carlson!" He cried out in exasperation, focusing on a boy at the back of the room, "Are you still chewing gum in my class?"

I turned around to look at the boy in question, his long curly hair bounced as his shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. He stretched his upper body lazily, demonstrating a tattoo of a wolf placed under his collar bone. He grinned, took the piece of gum out of his mouth, stuck it under the desk he was sitting and said, "Not anymore, Sir."

The substitute stiffened, his hands clenched by his side. Erin Carlson was one of the many people that needed a slap across the face but only ever received a stern talking to. I silently egged the new teacher on. I encouraged the man to do *something* but he dropped his hands against the desk at the front of the room and closed his eyes. After a brief moment of silence, he continued writing notes as if the exchange hadn't happened. He was writing instinctively, distanced by the lack of thought that went into his re-transcribing of something he had memorized earlier in his scholarly career. Everything about the modern education system was sampling and regurgitating information. It was a constant cycle of memorization and transcription. My frustration grew with every symbol written.

He was just another doormat, another person watching his life pass without intervening. It was pitiable that he didn't understand just how meaningless his life had become. He was only a robot with a premeditated purpose. Without direction or instruction, he wouldn't be able to cope.

The harsh smack that echoed through the room did nothing to dispel the anger I was trying to suppress. My body temperature was rising and I fought the urge to scream. I was fighting viciously to avoid that outcome. My forehead started to sting on impact with my desk and I bit my bottom lip. My head was going to throb later and the pain sure as hell wasn't worth it but I was always the type to act first and think about the consequences later. I felt Juliet's eyes boring into me but I was too shocked to glance at her.

This had certainly happened before. There was no doubt about it now; I had forgotten everything.