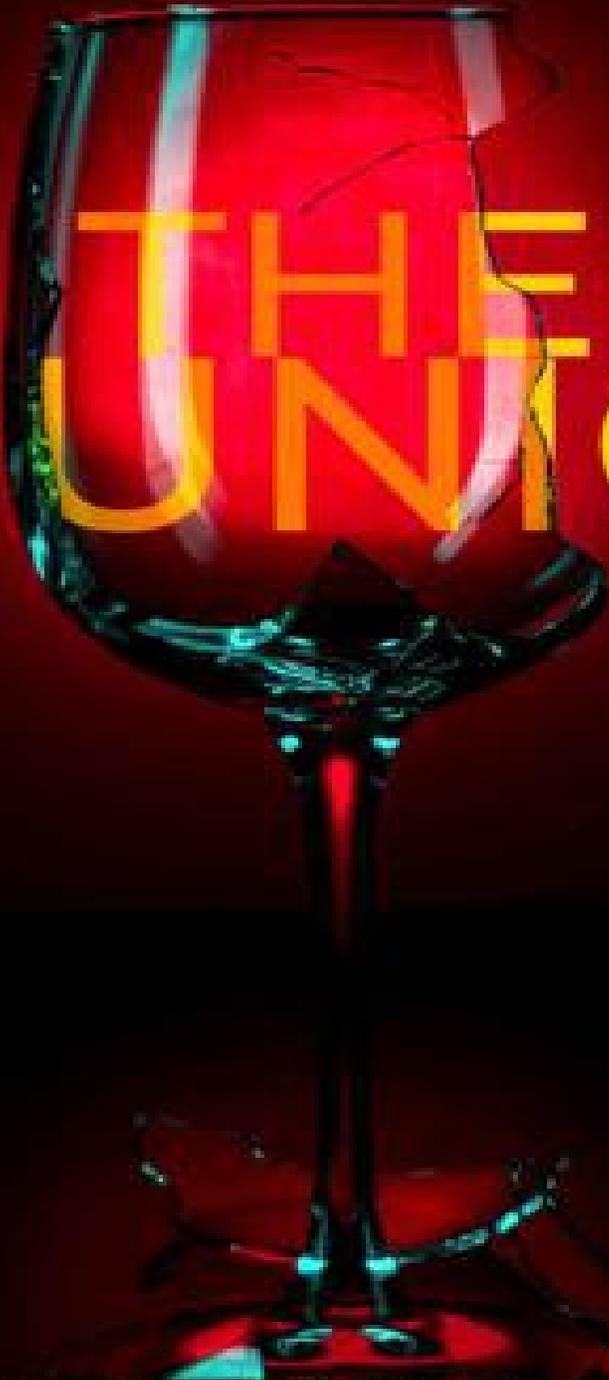


A party to die for...



THE
REUNION

KIERSTEN
MODGLIN

THE REUNION

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Love. Loss. After.

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This book is dedicated to the beautiful memory of the man I told all my first stories to. The one who believed in me, cheered me on, and called to tell me no one would notice that first 1-star review.

Love you, Daddy.

Miss you.

CHAPTER ONE

PRESENT DAY

I didn't want to return to Hotel Lilith.

Not after everything that happened.

Just the sight of it was enough to make my insides quiver, my fingers suddenly too cold on the steering wheel. I sucked my lips inward, chomping down with my teeth to calm my nerves.

It was all going to be fine.

It had to be.

I pulled my Lexus into an empty space—its caviar-colored exterior recently waxed. I should've flown in, to save myself time, but the idea of driving, of having a getaway car and direct path home should I need it, felt safer. I couldn't decide whether to feel relieved or disappointed when there were no familiar faces waiting for me in the parking lot. On one hand, I wanted to show them all what had become of me. I wanted them to know I'd made something of myself. And the car that had cost more than my house growing up was one of the ways I'd planned to prove that.

On the other hand, I was in no hurry to see anyone I'd gone to high school with. In fact, I'd considered not coming at all. I didn't want to. If it wasn't for the nagging need to face what happened, face everyone again, I might not have.

I stepped out of the car and smoothed down my Burberry skirt before making my way toward the trunk.

The hotel was tall and gray, with several windows along the front and sides. The scarlet-shingled roof, brick foundation, and bright, neon red sign at the tallest point were the only color on the drab building. There were three

separate wings, all connected by long corridors and breezeways. The sections on opposite ends sat forward several feet closer to the paved parking lot than the section in the middle, making it so the building formed a ‘U’ shape. Along the front of the middle section, a covered porch with thin, white pillars hosted four white rocking chairs.

The large sign that sat planted in the ground in front of the building matched the sign at the top of the building, though this one wasn’t lit up, but rather handcrafted. It had chipping paint and spiderwebs gathering in the capital L of the name *Lilith*.

I tugged my suitcase from the trunk and set it down. With my head held high and shoulders back, I walked toward the porch, the wheels of my luggage rattling along the pavement behind me.

When I reached the entrance, a man dressed in a sleek black suit with a red pocket square smiled politely, holding the door open for me.

“Good afternoon. Welcome to Hotel Lilith.”

“Good afternoon,” I replied, darting my eyes away from him with my chin tucked into my chest. “Thank you.” If he recognized me, he didn’t say so. These days, I was used to being recognized for different reasons than before. But meeting someone who didn’t recognize me at all was a welcome reprieve.

I strode through the open doorway, across the veined marble floor, and looked around. To my right, there was a long, black desk with red embellishments. The woman behind the desk looked as though she’d been built into the hotel’s aesthetic.

Her onyx eyes matched the black suit she was wearing, a uniform identical to the one worn by the man at the door. Her perfectly symmetrical and pin straight crimson bob was the same shade of red as her lipstick. Her ruby lips stretched into a smile to greet me.

The lobby smelled faintly of bananas, and my eyes traveled up the gray wall behind the woman, checking out the wide-screen television with the Hotel Lilith logo and today’s weather on its screen.

“Hello there. Checking in?” The woman drew my attention back to her and, as I reached the desk, I noticed her dark red nails, click-clacking along the keyboard in front of her, also matched her hair and lips. Had the employees dressed this way before?

I couldn’t remember.

There'd been too much on my mind that night.

"Yes." I cleared my throat, leaning forward as I tried to keep my voice low. "It's under Cait Du Bois."

"Can you spell that for me?" she asked, her brow furrowed slightly as she waited for me to do so. Once I had, she nodded.

"Yes. There you are. Okay, it looks like we have you in a suite." I detected a hint of reverence in her tone. "Will you be needing two key cards or just one?"

"Oh." I clicked my tongue. "You'd better just give me one for now. I'm not sure if my husband will be able to make it or not." It was a lie. He wasn't coming. Why didn't I feel self-assured enough to say that?

It was this place, I knew it.

No longer was I an adult, a mom, a wife, a bestselling author who toured the world and signed autographs for thousands. Here, I was eighteen all over again.

Reliving the worst night of my life.

She set to work, swiping a card through the machine in front of her and sliding it into a small envelope. She scribbled down the room number and passed it to me across the counter. "I'll get someone to bring your bag to your room for you, is—"

"That's alright," I said, probably too quickly, then tried to recover. "I, um, I can get it myself." She appeared startled by my interruption.

"Are you sure?" she asked, leaning over the counter to inspect my bag. "That's what they're here for."

"I'm positive," I assured her.

"Okay." She seemed hesitant, but didn't argue any further. "Your suite is on the third floor, take a right past the elevators. Is there anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable?"

"No, you've been great..." I glanced down, checking her nametag. "Marci. Thank you very much."

"My pleasure. Thank *you* for staying with us. Please let me know if there's anything we can do to make you feel more at home." She twirled a piece of her hair between her fingers as I turned to cross the lobby toward the elevator.

I rode to the third floor in silence, sharing the space with just one other person, whose eyes remained locked on his phone. When we reached my

floor, two older women entered without waiting to allow me off. The door had nearly shut before I could shove my way through.

“Excuse me,” I said as I went, already irritated.

I turned right, searching for my room number, the wheels of my luggage silenced by the hallway carpet. When I spied the number I was looking for, 333, I matched it to my card envelope just to confirm. I stopped, pulling out the key card and placing it to the reader.

As I heard the click, I lowered the card and pushed the door open, stepping inside. The room was oversized and airy, bigger than my first apartment, and carried the same vague banana scent I’d noticed in the lobby. I placed my car keys and sunglasses down on the entry table to my right, moving forward into the sitting room.

There were three gray couches, a red chair, and a TV stand, sitting atop an antique-looking rug that fit the place perfectly. The curtains were drawn, as I liked them, and I reveled in the fact that, for the next few days, I wouldn’t have to deal with my husband insisting we keep them open all day. I could sit in the darkness and relish every minute of it.

They say you should marry someone who can make you laugh. I say you should marry someone who shares your preference when it comes to blinds and curtains. There was nothing that could make us fight quicker.

I placed my suitcase onto the longest couch, running my hands along the sides to search for the zipper. Once it was opened, I pulled out my laptop case, checking over my MacBook closely. It held my latest manuscript, the one I was two weeks behind my deadline on. I should’ve opened the laptop and set to work straightaway, but first, I wanted to call home and let them know I’d made it. I placed the MacBook on the coffee table in the center of the room and closed my suitcase, crossing the room as I dialed his number and stopping in front of the mirror.

It rang twice before he answered. “Hello?” I could hear the twins in the background.

“Gimme it!”

“Bubba, stop!”

My husband sighed, and I could hear their cries growing softer as I assumed he was walking away from them. “Sorry, can you hear me?”

I giggled, crossing my arms and staring at my reflection. The woman who stood before me was practically a stranger. Her strength had been forged

from the tough times she'd endured. The wrinkles already beginning to develop at just twenty-eight were well earned.

"I was calling to see how it's going, but I guess I have my answer," I told him, grinning to myself.

"No, it's fine. They're playing bird doctor right now and fighting over who gets to play with the stuffed parrot Lucy got from the zoo."

"*Bird* doctor, hm? That's a new one."

"Never a dull moment," he said with a long breath. "Did you make it okay? Are you there?"

"I'm here," I said, my eyes traveling up the light charcoal walls toward the intricate wisps and swirls of the ceiling above me, and falling back to the mirror. "I wish you were here with me."

"Trust me, I wish I was too." I heard a crash in the distance and suddenly someone was crying.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry!" I heard Hudson shouting over his sister's wails.

My body tensed, missing them so much already. "Is she okay? What happened?" I asked, listening to my husband's panicked breathing as he rushed toward them.

"Everything's fine. Just a bump." His words were drowned out by Lucy's loud cries, and I cradled the phone in my hands, wishing it was her.

"Hey, baby," I said, trying to comfort her from so far away. It was no use. She couldn't hear me.

"Hey, I've gotta get off here and take care of this. I'll call you back in a bit, okay?" he called over the line.

I nodded, though he couldn't see me, and then her cries were cut short as the call ended. I dropped my hands to my sides, staring closer at my reflection in the mirror. My copper-brown curls had fallen flat during the drive in, flyaways sticking up in every direction. Black mascara had creased under my eyes, the rest of my makeup dry and cakey.

I swiped a finger under each eye and pulled a ponytail holder from my bag, twisting my hair into a bun. I should start writing. I needed to get a few chapters knocked out before dinner, but I didn't want to. Not yet.

I wanted a drink.

I considered calling down for room service, but I didn't want to wait. Instead, I'd go down to the hotel lounge and have a drink to settle in, then

dive straight into the story.

I dug through my bag, searching for leave-in conditioner and swiping a small amount across my hair to tame the flyaways and then made my way back to the door.

I rode the elevator down to the lobby again, my heels clicking across the marble floor as I followed the signs that led to the hotel lounge, ignoring the sign that told me the other direction, left, would take me to the ballroom.

The room filled with memories.

Then again, this entire place was filled with haunting memories. A chill ran over my arms at the thought, and I rubbed them quickly, trying to ease the goose bumps.

“Cait? Oh my god!” a familiar voice called out to me, and I heard his shoes clicking across the floor before I turned to face him. His blond hair had been neatly cut, a faint trace of blond stubble on his strong chin. His build, once long and lean, had filled out, taut muscles poking out from under the gray waffle-knit shirt.

“Sam?” I asked, trying to remain calm, though I suspected my eyes had betrayed me. “What are you doing here?”

“Same as you, genius.” He pulled me into a hug, both arms wrapped tightly around my shoulders. My nerve endings tingled under his touch, my heart ready to explode. As if we hadn’t spent the better portion of ten years apart, my body slid into place in his arms, every bit as familiar and safe as I’d felt back then.

We stayed like that, arms wrapped around each other for far too long, neither of us ready to let go. I felt cool tears pricking my eyes when he finally released me, leaning back but keeping his hands on my shoulders. “God, you look great,” he said, smiling widely as his eyes raked down the length of my body, then back up. “You haven’t aged a day.”

“Well, you’re a good liar,” I said, my cheeks pinkening as I batted back tears, praying they wouldn’t fall. “But thank you. It’s so good to see you.”

“I didn’t know if you’d come.” His eyes danced between mine.

“I’m sorry, I saw your text. I meant to respond, but, truth be told, I wasn’t sure I was going to come until...well, until I pulled into the parking lot, really.”

His nod was understanding. “Hey, no problem. I just assumed Ms. Celebrity was busy and hadn’t seen the message.” My ears burned red as he

teased me, and I tucked my chin to my chest, placing a stray piece of hair behind my ear.

“Oh, it’s not like that...”

He wasn’t wrong about my inbox being full, but that wasn’t why I hadn’t answered. “Besides, I wasn’t sure if I was coming, either. Honestly, if you’d said you weren’t, I might not have,” he went on.

My chest was tight with sudden guilt. “Really?” Sam had been my best friend once, and I hadn’t been fair to him over the years. We hadn’t spoken for years after graduation, but he’d always been there for me when I needed him. He was the man of honor at my wedding, but after that, our calls had gone from weekly, to monthly, then even more sporadic. At that point, it had likely been more than a year since we’d spoken, and I was entirely to blame for the unreturned calls and texts. Sam had tried, always, even when it wasn’t his place, but I’d retreated after everything that happened. I couldn’t bear to face him.

To face anyone.

“Yeah, I mean, you’re the only one I care about seeing.” There was something a little too honest about his words, and I forced myself to look away. He swiped his hand through his hair, tucking it into his pocket. “Hey, have you already checked in?”

“Yeah, I’ve got my room...” My eyes landed on his suitcase still waiting by the front desk. The redheaded receptionist was watching us intently, as if we were her favorite soap opera.

“Cool, I’m getting mine now.” He followed my gaze back toward his bag. “Listen, can you hang on a sec? Let me get my key?”

“I was just going to get a drink,” I said, staring longingly at the entrance to the lounge just a few feet in front of us. I desperately needed some liquid courage if I was going to make it through the next few hours, let alone the next few days.

“Okay, I’ll have them take my bag up, then, and meet you in there.”

I nodded, my heart fluttering. Being in a hotel alone with Sam was a bad enough idea. Drinking alone in a hotel with Sam was even worse. I knew my husband wouldn’t have cared. He trusted me implicitly, and I’d never given him a reason not to, but being back in this place was like stepping into the past.

I didn’t trust myself.

I made my way toward the bar, where a bald man with a handlebar mustache was waiting. He grinned, leaning across the counter as if he'd been waiting for me. I pulled my eyes from the crooked, scarlet bow tie at the base of his neck.

"Hello," he said, patting the counter with both hands when I sat down. His eyes glimmered with pure joy as he watched me with a familiar expression. "What can I get you?"

I ignored it, trying my hardest to be unassuming.

"Whiskey sour," I said, then threw in, "please."

He looked at me as if I'd just given him the keys to the city, his jaw quivering with pure delight. "You got it...*Cait Du Bois*."

I smiled with one side of my mouth.

"It is you, isn't it?" he asked, pulling a drink from a shelf behind him without looking away from me even for a second.

I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear again, considering lying. "It is," I confirmed.

His smile grew wider as he set the empty glass on the counter and began pouring my drink, rolling his eyes with excitement. "I knew it. I'm *such* a fan of yours. *Mine to Kill* changed my life."

I chuckled. "Oh, well, thank you. That's kind of you to say."

"I'm totally serious. My cat's named Milo after Milo Thatcher. I read it five years ago, and it's still my favorite book. I can't believe you're here. I can't believe I'm meeting you." He adjusted his gray suspenders, practically trembling with adrenaline, a hint of tears in his eyes. "This is the coolest—" His eyes darted over my shoulder as I felt a hand on my back.

When I looked over, Sam was standing there. "Am I interrupting?"

The bartender slid my drink to me carefully and I took a sip, the warm, sugary goodness filling my stomach. "Not at all." I glanced at the bartender again, who was still staring at me like you'd watch an exhibit at an aquarium, pure wonderment in his gaze. With Sam by my side, I felt my nerves calm, stepping into the *Cait Du Bois* facade I'd perfected over the years. My worries and insecurities couldn't affect her. "This is delicious, by the way. What's your name?"

"Barry," he said, his pale cheeks suddenly pink, even in the dim light. He tilted his head from one side to the other, letting me in on what must've been a running joke. "Barry the bartender."

“Well, thank you, Barry. For this.” I tilted the drink toward him. “And for your support.”

“Of course, Cait Du Bois,” he said, his lips pressed together to conceal the bright smile. He looked as if he were going to burst at any moment. “Do you think I could get an...” He searched around, swiping a paper napkin from the stack and passing it to me cautiously. “An autograph? It would mean the world to me.”

I nodded, drying my hand on my skirt before reaching for the pen he held out. “Of course.” I scribbled down my autograph for him, much to his squealed delight.

Once I’d signed it, he took the pen back and stared at the napkin with absolute shock. “My friends are never going to believe I met you. Thank you.” He clutched it to his chest.

When I looked over, Sam was staring at me with admiration. Back to business, Barry took Sam’s drink order—Jack and Coke—and prepared it. I tried to ignore the fact that he was still staring at me with fascination.

When he handed over the drink, Sam asked, “You want to get out of here?”

Ignoring the obvious connotation of the phrase, I nodded.

“Absolutely.”

Sam pulled out his card and slid it across the counter. “Can you take care of both our bills with this?”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said firmly, but he was already waving me away.

He touched a hand to his chest, feigning offense. “I haven’t seen you in years. Even if you are rich and famous now, the least you can do is let your best friend buy you a drink.” His expression warmed. “Besides, next round’s on you.”

I pursed my lips as he signed for the drinks and slid the receipt back to Barry, then stood from his chair, waiting for me to do the same. We made our way out of the lounge and I waved at Barry once more, his gaze still fixed on me. Sam threw an arm around me joyfully.

“So is this what life is like for you now? Everyone you meet just fawning over you, *Cait Du Bois*?” he said my name with the same gusto Barry had used.

I shook my head, running the straw of my drink over my teeth.

“Occasionally, maybe, but typically I’m just as invisible as everyone else.”

He grinned slyly, giving me a side-eye. “I doubt that. You were never invisible, Cait.” I looked down, unable to look at him any longer, but he didn’t miss a beat. “Did you ever think we’d be back here? After everything? Back in this place?”

We’d reached the elevator and Sam slid his arm off my shoulder so he could press the button to call it to us. “I’m on the third floor. You?”

“Same, actually. I think Vanessa said the room block had us all pretty close together.”

When the elevator doors opened, we stepped into the empty vessel, waiting for the doors to close again before he spoke. “You never answered my question, by the way.”

“Hm?”

“Did you think we’d be back here? It seems odd to me, don’t you think? Kind of...mean, maybe? Like, shouldn’t we go somewhere else to celebrate rather than the place where...” He trailed off. “You know...”

“I know,” I confirmed. “I hate it here.”

CHAPTER TWO

AGE FIFTEEN

The first day of tenth grade was less than twenty-four hours away. Sam and Jamie were lying on the bottom bunk of my bed, watching me pick through my closet as I tried to decide on the perfect outfit.

“What about this one?” I asked, holding a pinstripe shirt and tiny black vest.

Sam wrinkled his nose and Jamie shook her head. “What about the chunky belt? Let's see that with the red maxi dress again.”

I pulled out the dress, draping my favorite black belt over it. “Oh, this could work.”

“I love it! That's the one.” Jamie clapped her hands together, leaping up from the bed. “Okay, my turn.” She pulled two options from the bag she'd brought, tags still attached to the outfits, and twirled around. She pointed to the first one. “With this, I thought I could scrunch my hair and feel really springy and fun.” Nodding at the other one, she said, “But with this, I'd probably have my hair straight with a bump and gaucho pants.”

I studied both outfits thoughtfully. “The bump, for sure. I'll do mine the same.”

She squealed. “Oh my god, I love it!”

“What shoes are you wearing with it?” I asked her, starting to dig through my own closet as I tried to decide.

“Can this be over now?” Sam asked, groaning as he fell back on the bed. He flipped open the Razr phone in his hand, and I could hear the clicking of the keys. “I thought we were going to go to the movies.”

“This is important,” Jamie said, resting her fists on her hips. “Don't you

want to look good tomorrow?”

He propped himself up on one elbow, running a hand through his hair. “I mean, it’s scientifically impossible for me not to look good, so…”

“Oof, bringing science into this lie now, are we?” I joked. “I guess we’re going to have to find someone new to teach us chemistry, Jamie.”

He threw a pillow at me. “You know you all think I’m sexy.”

“Whatever,” Jamie teased, tossing a scarf at him as she rolled her eyes. “*You know* you’re trying to impress Vanessa Austin with that new hair.”

He flipped his head to the side, brushing the ear-length blond hair from his eyes. “I don’t care what Vanessa Austin thinks about my hair, believe it or not. It’s not like she’ll notice me anyway.”

“You never know,” I told him, crawling across the floor until I was sitting in front of him. “This could be your year, Sam.” He stared at me strangely, his eyes darting back and forth between mine as if he wanted to say something, but before he had a chance, Jamie spoke up.

“It could be all of ours. I, for one, am fully planning to get my first kiss this year. And Cait’s going to, too.”

“What?” Sam scowled. “How do you know?”

I groaned, covering my face. “We made a pact.” I leaned my head back on the bed, staring up at him, then shrugged. “It’s stupid, I know, but it’s the plan. You want in?”

“Who’s to say I haven’t already had my first kiss?” he asked.

“*What?*”

“No way!”

He smirked. “A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“Good thing you’re not a gentleman, then,” Jamie said, patting his leg forcefully. “Come on, are you being dumb? Who was it? Penny?”

His upper lip curled in apparent disgust. “Yeah, right. Why the hell would I kiss *Penny?*”

“You’re always texting her,” she said, swatting his phone. “Always hanging out…” She winked.

His frown grew more exaggerated. “*She’s* always texting *me*. There’s a difference. And I hardly ever hang out with her. She’s my neighbor and we have a ton of classes together. That’s it. She’s not even our age, she just skipped two grades.”

“I thought that’s what you liked about her. She’s all brainy, like you,” I

joked, tapping my fingers on his head as I moved to sit on the bed next to him.

“No. She’s too weird,” he said firmly. “Besides, I like someone else…” His eyes fell to me for a split second, then darted away.

“Who?” Jamie pressed.

His cheeks were pink and he seemed to regret having said anything. “She goes to another school.”

“Who is it?” I asked, a heavy feeling in my stomach. Sam had never mentioned another girl to us, and we told each other everything… Didn’t we?

“You don’t know her.”

“We know who you know,” Jamie argued. “Come on, tell us. Why the secrecy? We tell you when we like someone.”

“Yeah, unfortunately,” he groaned, grabbing the plastic basketball on my floor and tossing it to the ceiling and catching it again.

Refusing to let the conversation be dropped, Jamie asked, “What’s her name?”

“Just forget it,” he said, still tossing and catching. “I was joking. And I haven’t kissed anyone, either.” He caught the ball a final time, tucked it under his arm, and ran a palm over his face.

“I knew it,” she said happily. “Welcome to the pact.”

“Pact?” He scowled. “No, I don’t want to be in your stupid pact.” His phone buzzed on the bed and, without checking it, he shoved it into his pocket.

“Suit yourself.” Jamie shrugged, looking at me. “I, for one, refuse to turn sixteen without having my first kiss.”

Sam looked doubtful. “I think you need someone else to agree to kiss you before you can just make that decision.”

“I have options,” she said defiantly, a fist on her cocked hip. “I’m holding out.”

“Holding out for what?”

I grinned. “For *whom*,” I corrected. “Jamie thinks she’s going to kiss Grant Du Bois.”

“What?” Sam asked, his voice breathless with shock. He fell back on the bed with uproarious laughter. “Yeah, right. Grant Du Bois doesn’t even know you exist.”

“Wrong,” Jamie said firmly. “We had English together last year. He was

my partner for the Edgar Allan Poe thing, remember?”

Sam apparently didn't, but I did. I remembered everything when it came to Grant and the rest of The Populars. I knew they were out of our league, severely out of mine and Sam's, but Jamie had always been well-liked. If any of us were going to get to kiss Grant Du Bois, I had no doubt it would be her.

She wasn't popular, not by any stretch of the imagination, but she was pretty enough, with long, wavy dark hair, freckles, and otherwise porcelain skin. Her parents could afford to buy her new clothes every school year and she'd had braces to straighten her teeth when we were in junior high.

“What about you? Are you planning to kiss one of the losers from Planet Popular, too?” Sam asked, eyeing me.

“Yeah, right,” I said. “In what universe?”

“Don't talk like that,” Jamie scolded, dropping down on the floor next to me. “This is our year, Cait. I'm telling you. This is the year everything changes.” Her eyes were filled with hope as she said it.

She was right, of course.

Just not in the way any of us thought.

CHAPTER THREE

PRESENT DAY

Some days, the words came easily, gliding from my brain as if a hot blade against ice. Other days, the words came to me slowly, each one as if I were having to invent it in my brain before I could use it. This was a slow day. I'd erased and rewritten the same sentence more than seven times and my dialogue was falling flat.

Nothing was working, and I knew it was partially because I couldn't seem to find my focus. When I'd originally planned to return to Spider Lily, and Hotel Lilith in particular, I'd told myself I could put the past behind me and move on. That things would be different, everyone would be different—myself included—and I'd be able to sink into my work without obsessing over everything that happened.

Besides that, with a looming deadline, the idea of writing during the day, writing with complete silence, was impossible to pass up. Since the twins had been born, I'd been home with them, crafting most of my novels late at night after the house had gone quiet. Grant and I had tried a nanny in the beginning, but I found myself distracted—worrying and missing them so much that it did little good. Since their arrival, I tended to write in short bursts at night once I knew they were safe and sound in their beds or when Grant was home from work.

Now that my editor was on my case about finishing this novel and I was set to begin my latest press tour in just a few short weeks, I no longer had that luxury. This was my one chance to buckle down and get it done.

Apparently, I'd vastly overestimated my ability to ignore things. I never could've imagined just how hard it would be for me to work in this place. I

knew it wouldn't be a cakewalk, but time away had muddled my memory and washed away some of the pain. Here, it was back, and I was remembering why I hadn't set foot in Hotel Lilith since I was eighteen years old.

I'd attended prom that night filled with hope for my future, and in a split second, everything had changed. I thought the night was supposed to be the best of my life, though it had turned into anything but.

I closed my laptop, convinced I needed to do something to clear my head. My empty whiskey glass sat on a napkin on the coffee table, and I rested the laptop beside it, then walked into the bedroom.

The room was the same size as the sitting room it shared a wall with, a king-size bed in the center of the room and a long dresser in front of the window. I walked past the TV at the end of the bed and toward the dresser, where my suitcase now lay. I pulled the red curtains back a bit, staring out at the parking lot below. There was a family—husband, wife, and two teenagers—walking toward the hotel. Farther back, a man was loading luggage into his trunk and another man was leading a goldendoodle on a hot pink leash.

The sky had begun to cloud, and I couldn't help feeling giddy over the idea of a storm. Nothing made me happier than thunderstorms, particularly when I was writing. Nothing made me feel more at peace.

I shut the curtain, pulling my shirt over my head and placing it on the bed before stepping out of my flats and unzipping my skirt. I folded my dirty clothes carefully, resting them on the nightstand with a mental note to have them sent down for dry cleaning.

On the opposite wall of the window, there was a door which, I assumed, would lead to the bathroom. I twisted the handle, pleased to see I was right. There was a claw-foot tub in the center of the room with black fixtures to match the tile in the walk-in shower to my left. A wooden bathtub tray was affixed to the sides of the tub, complete with a bottle of wine, a stemless wineglass, three washcloths wrapped with twine, a tea-light candle, a regular-sized candle, and a cellophane-wrapped bath bomb.

I shut the door and began to draw a bath, studying my bare body in the mirror above the built-in dressing table to my right. My body had changed so much in just ten years. Not just the wrinkles or the scars from my cesarean, but there was a softness to my curves now.

At eighteen, I'd been all sharp angles and bony limbs. Now, I was filled out. I was a good forty pounds heavier than I'd been before, but the weight

suiting me. It was the weight of happiness, I thought. A sign that I was accepted and loved, just as I was. Why, then, back in this place, was I second-guessing everything?

Why did I feel the need to pinch the lumps on my hips or cringe at the stretch marks on my thighs?

I hated the way being back here felt.

I hated that it brought back every insecurity and worry I thought I'd left behind.

I pushed the thoughts from my head, dipping my hand in the water to be sure it wasn't too hot before stepping in. I eased myself into the bathtub slowly, sinking down with a loud sigh. The warm water seemed to soothe my every worry, practically erasing them in an instant.

I poured myself a glass of wine and lifted the candle, studying its label. It was from a small candle company in Midland, Ontario, according to the label, which also claimed the scent was *Monkey Farts*. I twisted the lid off, lifting it to my nose with a grin, and inhaled.

It was obvious the familiar banana scent I'd smelled throughout the hotel had come from these candles. I moved things around, searching for a way to light it to no avail. When I got out, I'd have to request a lighter.

In the meantime, I held the wineglass with one hand, resting my head on the edge of the bathtub, eyes closed. I wasn't sure I'd ever felt so at peace as I did in that moment, even as I fought to ignore the worry in my chest.

Why should I feel worried, after all? I was not who I was back then. Not anymore. I'd clawed my way to happiness. Acceptance. If not from the people I went to school with, from the rest of the world.

We'd never had money growing up. I'd been teased for my outdated clothes and the purses Jamie had handed down to me, but now I could buy anything I wanted. I was the only one of my classmates who'd achieved fame to such a degree. The only one with a television show in production and another book currently optioned for film. The only one who traveled the world freely with my family, loving every minute of it.

The popular kids had severely underperformed in comparison to me, so why should I feel the need to impress them? In the end, I guessed it was easy for everyone to fall into who they'd been in high school. The formative years, and all that jazz.

Still, I'd never have been able to afford this room then.

I stared around, taking in the luxurious bathroom with a sudden weight off my chest.

I'd done well.

I was a good person.

None of it was my fault.

I closed my eyes, sinking farther into the water until it was above my shoulders. I brought the wineglass into the tub, resting the bottom on the surface of the water and dropping it below just an inch, then bringing it back up. I watched the glass bobbing almost rhythmically. The alcohol in my belly had begun to make me feel tired.

A sudden rapping at the door caused me to jolt, the red wine sloshing into the water. I placed the glass on the tray carefully and reached for one of the folded towels on the edge of the dressing table to dry my hair.

I wrapped my hair in the towel as the knocking came again. Who could it be? I hadn't ordered anything, and I'd paid for my drink... Hadn't I?

No, Sam paid for it. But it was paid. That was what mattered.

Who else could be at my door? I scooped up the folded robe that lay next to the stack of towels and pulled it on quickly, careful not to slip on the marble floor as I reached for the handle and made my way out of the room and back to the carpet which led into the sitting room.

I neared the door, my heart thudding in my ears, both from the alcohol and fear. I was used to traveling alone, so why was I so jumpy? It was most likely just a member of the hotel staff delivering towels or something of the sort. I leaned forward, pressing one hand to the door as I peered through the peephole, and let out a breath of relief.

"Sam?" I asked, pulling the door open.

"Hey, I, oh—" He stopped, a surprised gaze traveling down the length of my body, then back up. I folded my arms across my chest, tugging at the edges of my robe.

"What are you doing here?"

He raked his hand through his hair. "Sorry, I, uh, I thought I'd see if you wanted to join me for dinner. I didn't mean to interrupt..."

"You aren't. I mean, you are, but..." I sucked in a breath, recalibrating. "I just had a break from writing and thought I'd relax in the bath."

"Ah, okay. Well, do you want me to join you? Er, I mean, sorry, do you want to join me?" His face matched the signature ruby red of Hotel Lilith,

and he chewed his lip nervously, wincing. "I can wait a while."

I fought back a smile. "I really would love to, but I should get back to writing soon. Rain check?"

His hope visibly deflated. "Come on, Cait, we only get a few days together and then who knows when I'll see you again. I miss you. I thought you'd want to catch up." He glanced over my shoulder and into the room, his eyes searching for something behind me. "Unless you have company? Is he here?"

"No, it's just me." I sighed. "Okay, fine, you win. Give me a few minutes to get ready."

He smiled, rapping his knuckles on the doorframe with a dry chuckle. "Yes! Okay, just call me when you're ready." As he started to turn away, I found myself missing him already. He was right, we just had a few days together. The book could wait. I'd be able to write when we got back and, besides, if this story was like all my others, getting out of the house to clear my head was sure to help my writer's block.

"Hey, do you want to wait in here?"

He stopped, looking hesitant. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, why not? You can help me pick out an outfit like old times," I teased.

His smile was sad, and I knew he was remembering the other part of that equation. Our missing puzzle piece.

"Okay, sure," he said finally, stepping past me into the room. "Jesus..." he muttered, lifting his head to stare at the ceiling, then the rest of the room in awe. "They stuck you with a dump, didn't they?"

"The absolute worst."

"I mean, three couches, really? Everyone knows less than five is tacky."

I giggled, and that seemed to delight him. "I've missed you, Cait."

At that moment, it was as if no time had passed between us. We were kids again, playing hide-and-seek in the woods, and teens going for drives to do absolutely nothing after we'd gotten our licenses. Things were always simple with Sam, and I hated that I'd ever let him slip away.

"I've missed you, too," I admitted.

"Can you believe it's been ten years since we were here last? It doesn't look like the place has changed a bit."

"I was thinking the same thing. It's like a time capsule." Both the items

and the memories.

He looked away, nodding slowly before saying, “So, Prince Charming didn’t come?” He shoved his hands into his pockets awkwardly.

“He’s home with the twins. Mom’s having unexpected surgery, so she couldn’t keep them like we planned, and Dad has to help her.”

He winced. “Oh, I hadn’t heard. Is she gonna be okay?”

I waved off his concern. “Oh yeah, she’s a trooper. You know her.”

His laugh was warm and sincere. “I do, indeed.”

“I’m going to blow-dry my hair,” I said, touching the towel still atop my head. “Just...make yourself at home.”

He’d plopped down on the couch before I made it out of the room, flipping on the TV. I walked back into the bedroom, digging through my luggage for an outfit suitable for going out.

I felt oddly conflicted.

In a way, it was easier to be in this place with Sam. I felt safe with him, maybe safer than with anyone else. On the other hand, being with him just made me miss her.

It was always the three of us.

At least, until it wasn’t.

CHAPTER FOUR

AGE FIFTEEN

I waved goodbye to Mr. Donnell on my way out of history, passing the first hallway of gray lockers on my way toward the gym. When something caught my eye, I stopped so quickly Derek Mathis smacked straight into me.

“Jesus, Logan, watch yourself,” he groaned, brushing off the front of his shirt as if *nerd* were contagious.

“Sorry,” I apologized, sidestepping and ignoring the pain in my back where his binder had stabbed me, too transfixed by what I was seeing. I squinted my eyes.

What the...

Jamie was standing at the end of the hallway, near the double doors that led to the breezeway between the computer and science labs. She was giggling incessantly, lost in conversation with none other than Grant Du Bois.

“Hey, Cait!” Someone was standing beside me. I looked over, surprised to see Penny there. Her arms were loaded up with books, her frizzy red hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was distracting me from what I was trying to see, and apparently that was written all over my face. “Sorry, I... I was looking for Sam. Have you seen him?”

“No,” I said, looking back down the hall, wondering if it had all been a mirage. No, they were definitely still there. It was real. My jaw dropped, watching them.

“He was supposed to meet me in the library between classes. I borrowed his book last night and—”

“I haven’t seen him,” I said, not looking at her. I kept my gaze focused on Grant and Jamie, feeling as if the floor had been ripped out from under me.

His body was close to hers, so close I'd bet she could smell his cologne, and he was smiling too. Like...*really smiling*.

I'd never seen any of The Populars look at us like he was looking at her. Almost as if she belonged with him. I watched them, her knee cocked casually, one thumb tucked into the back of her jeans. She tucked her side swept bangs behind her ear, her chest poked out a little extra.

He touched her upper arm, his hand resting on her bare skin for so long I thought my heart was going to burst, and when he released it, he shoved open the double doors and walked out, so much confidence in his walk it didn't seem possible.

Jamie stood there for an extra second, as if she was processing what had just happened, then glanced over. When she met my eye, her jaw dropped open slightly, her pale cheeks pinkening.

I wiggled my fingers at her—a half wave—then shrugged, wanting to ask when we stepped into another dimension. She raced toward me, her smile wide. I realized then that at some point, Penny had walked away from me, but I hadn't noticed, too transfixed by what was happening. What was happening?

“What was that about?” I asked as she grabbed my arm, almost the exact way Grant had just held hers, and forced me to turn so we were walking in the opposite direction.

“Grant Du Bois just asked me out,” she said with a squeal, her eyes wide.

“What?”

She pressed her lips together, nodding, her face still pale. “I...I mean, you saw it, right? I didn't just black out and hallucinate that it happened?”

“I saw it,” I confirmed as a sinking feeling settled in my stomach. “What did he say?”

“He asked if I wanted to hang out Saturday night,” she said simply with a small *no big deal* shrug, though we both knew it was anything but *no big deal*.

“Is he sick? Did he hit his head?” I joked, blinking rapidly as I tried to make sense of it all.

She gave me a sharp glance, her eyes narrowing at me. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“I...I was joking.”

“I told you we had fun together last year in class. Is it impossible for him

to like me?”

“No, of course not, Jamie. He’d be an idiot not to. I said I was only joking...” But, in all reality, I wasn’t. Sure, my best friend was beautiful and hilarious and smart and charismatic, but no one had ever noticed that before. Not one of *them*, anyway. I was worried it was all going to be a prank, that he’d invite her somewhere and not show up, and then she’d be the laughingstock of the school.

I wanted to tell her that, but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings, not when she was obviously so happy. The bell rang overhead, interrupting us, and I cast a worried glance down the hall.

“I’ve still gotta get to my locker. See you during lunch?”

“Okay, have fun in gym,” she said, emphasizing the word *gym* and rolling her eyes. “See you later.”

With that, she was gone, and I rushed to my locker to pull out my gym clothes. I felt selfish for not being happier for her. This was all we’d wanted for so long...to finally feel like we belonged.

But if they hurt her, it would be devastating.

I needed to talk to Sam. He’d know how to approach the subject. Then again, once Jamie made up her mind about something, it was rare we could persuade her to see our side of things.

Whatever their plan was, I was going to get to the bottom of it. If Grant Du Bois hurt my friend, I’d kill him.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENT DAY

Sam and I walked to the restaurant next door to the hotel, an upscale Italian place named Francisco's. By the time our entrées had arrived, we'd fallen into step, conversation easy between us the same way it always had been.

"So, tell me about the twins," he said, swirling the wine in his glass. "They're what...four now?"

I nodded slowly. "Doesn't seem possible, does it?"

"I feel like you were just pregnant last week," he said, shaking his head. "What are they like?"

"Oh...amazing." I closed my eyes, missing them. "They're inquisitive and funny. They love to create; they think we can build literally everything with construction paper and tape. They're always playing dress up and pretend, and as much as they drive each other crazy, they're truly just best friends."

He chuckled under his breath. "Sounds familiar."

I shook my head, pursing my lips. "We didn't drive each other too crazy."

"Speak for yourself." He shoved a breadstick into his mouth, a twinkle in his eye.

"Well, thank god we're past that stage," I said. "What about you? What have you been up to? Are you still freelancing?"

He dusted his hands, swiping his fingers clean with the cloth napkin as he waited to finish chewing his food before he could answer. "Yeah, lots of graphic design work here and there. I've started designing websites, too, which is about as much work and makes me ten times as much."

“That’s amazing.”

He inhaled through his teeth. “Well, I’m no bestselling author, but hey, we both got our dream, right?”

“Did we? I seem to recall you wanting to be a scientist.”

He rolled his eyes, taking another sip of his wine. “Yeah, well, there was no one going to pay for that dream. But I’ve done okay for myself. I love what I do. I’m happy.” He said it as if he were trying to convince himself as well as me.

“I’m glad to hear it.” I lifted my glass to my lips as well. “Truly.”

“You seem happy, too.”

I took a gulp of my wine, not answering. I was, mostly. The same way everyone’s happy in the middle of their life. I had everything I wanted, but somehow it all felt a bit lackluster. A dream is its shiniest when it’s still inside your head.

“If you’d told me this would be us in ten years back then, I never would’ve believed it. I never thought either of us would leave Spider Lily. Certainly never thought my best friend would suddenly become famous.”

“I know,” I agreed, raking my fork across my plate. “But you know I’m not famous with you, right? I’m just Cait. I’m still me.”

He nodded, but looked as if he didn’t entirely believe me. “Tell that to the bartender earlier.”

“Yes, well, that was a one off. Trust me, I can count the number of times I’ve gotten recognized on two hands.”

“You don’t have to dim your light for me, Cait,” he said firmly. “Honestly. I’m proud of you. I know how hard you’ve worked for your success. I remember all the long nights and rejections, remember? You don’t have to convince me it isn’t as amazing as it is. I know we aren’t as close anymore, but I’m still cheering you on from the sidelines.” His soft smile was sad, and he looked down, taking a bite of his ravioli.

I felt a lump grow in my throat. There was so much I wanted to say to him. Thank yous and apologies and explanations. I felt I owed him, but I was a coward. Instead, I said simply, “Who says we aren’t as close anymore? I didn’t get that memo.”

“You didn’t?” He scratched his chin. “Odd. It was in all the papers.”

I snorted, covering my mouth with my fingers. “So, what else have you been up to, hm? Besides being a smart-ass and designing?”

“Nothing, really. I’m back in Wilmington again.”

“Did you leave?”

“I thought I told you,” he said, taking another bite. “Dad tore his rotator cuff, so I moved in with him for a few months last year to help out.”

“I’ll bet your mom loved having you home.” The instant I’d said it, I knew I’d made a mistake. His expression hardened slightly, and I saw the hurt in his eyes.

“They separated last year. Just before it happened actually,” he said, answering the question I hadn’t asked. “Dad’s got an apartment down by the lake now.”

“I’m so sorry, Sam, I had no ide—”

“It’s not your fault. They don’t really talk about it much. It’s all amicable, they just decided they were better not together.”

“It still sucks,” I pointed out. “I’m glad they’re happier, but I can’t imagine it’s been easy on you.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Ya know, it was a surprise in the beginning more than anything. I’d always thought they were really happy and it kind of came out of nowhere, but then again, marriages always look happier from the outside. We still do all the holidays and everything together, so really the only thing that’s changed is that I now have to visit two houses instead of one. As far as divorces go, it seems like it’s been an uneventful one.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said, processing what he’d said. The Dunnigans *had* always seemed happy. The idea that they’d gotten a divorce had ripped the rug out from under me. I knew Sam had already had time to work through it all, but I had to believe he was more hurt over it than he was letting on. “You know you could’ve called me.”

“I probably should’ve, but I didn’t want to talk about it in the beginning. I thought—hoped—that they’d realize it was all a mistake and work it out. By the time I realized it was real, they were in a good place, and I didn’t really know what to say...”

“So, is that why you’re staying at the hotel instead of with them?”

He hesitated, and I worried I’d overstepped. It was so strange, toeing the line of our new relationship. At one point, I knew everything there was to know about Sam, but now, he might as well have been a stranger. I didn’t know him that well anymore, not what he did on a daily basis, not what he did over the course of a month, or a year even. Was he dating anyone? What

did he drive? Who were his friends now?

There was so much left unspoken between us, and I didn't know how to cross the divide from then to now.

Why had we grown apart anyway?

When had it happened?

After everything happened, then after graduation... We'd gotten in touch now and again, tried to pick up where we left off, but the timing was never quite right. After the wedding, we'd been the closest of any time since high school, but even that didn't last long.

We were just in different places in our lives...

He'd met the kids once or twice, but—

"Yeah, something like that," he interrupted my train of thought, rubbing the back of his neck. "Plus, I wanted to be able to hang out with everyone without having to drive a half hour across town. This was just easier. I'm working on a new project, and I knew having Mom or Dad around would distract me, so this was a good chance for perspective without interruption..." He trailed off.

"Well, you're obviously super focused," I teased, tipping my wineglass toward him, and he chuckled.

"Obviously."

"What about you? Why'd you come in so early? Needed an escape from Grant?" Something about the way he said my husband's name made my stomach flip. Sam and Grant had always had a bit of a strained relationship. I knew that was part of the reason we'd grown apart, but it wasn't as if they were enemies anymore.

They just didn't have anything in common.

Nothing but me, anyway.

I pursed my lips, shaking my head. "No, of course not. I'm behind on a deadline and this was a good chance to catch up without distraction. He wanted to be here. He was planning to, if it wasn't for Momma's surgery."

"I'm surprised he let you come."

I jerked my head back, bothered by his words. "He didn't have to *let* me. I needed to write, and we both knew if I was home with the kids and he'd come, I wouldn't be getting anything done, so this was what made sense. We'd already paid for two tickets, so it didn't make sense for neither of us to come."

“I didn’t mean anything by it. I just never expected you to come after everything.”

I shivered, adjusting in my seat. “I didn’t know that I wanted to. I’d be perfectly happy never seeing this place again, truth be told. But it was important to me to show I’m not the little girl who will be run off anymore. That version of Cait is gone.”

He took a sip of his wine. “Well, I’m glad you came, whatever the reason. And honestly, I’m glad you came alone.”

“You are?” Heat rushed to my cheeks.

“Yeah, I mean, how long has it been since we hung out, just the two of us?”

“A lifetime,” I said sadly.

“Exactly. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” I said softly, gripping my wineglass but not lifting it to my lips. It was true. I’d missed Sam so much. “This week will be fun. Like old times.”

His eyes held mine for a bit longer, and I placed a hand to my neck self-consciously. When he spoke again, the deep timbre of his voice was gruff, the look on his face causing my body to tense, wondering if we were thinking of the same memories. “Just like old times.”

CHAPTER SIX

AGE FIFTEEN

Jamie carried her tray across the cafeteria, hesitating when she passed the table where Grant sat with his friends. I watched the crooked grin he gave her with worry. Their date had gone well Saturday night. But I still didn't trust them. Jamie continued walking toward us, a weird smile on her face.

When she reached our table, she paused, staring at us with a hesitant expression. "Hey, guys? You don't mind if I eat with Grant today, do you?"

Sam's eyebrow raised slightly. "What are you talking about? Why would you do that? You eat with us."

She winced, still not sitting down. "Yeah, I know, it's just that... Well, Grant told me I should sit with him today and I thought...you know, it's not a big deal. It's just lunch, right?"

"S-sure," I squeaked out, still blown away by the request. She released a suppressed squeal, bending her knees slightly.

"You guys are the best. Okay, I'll see you after school, right? I'll give you the four-one-one on what it's like on Planet Popular."

"Hey, Jamie?" I called, stopping her in her tracks. She glanced over her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Vanessa and Courtney are over there... Are you sure they'll be okay with it?"

Vanessa and Courtney had done nothing but make our lives miserable since kindergarten. If Jamie tried to sit with them, there was a good chance they'd humiliate her in front of the rest of the school.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, but I could see the worry in her eyes, regardless of what she was saying.

“Okay. We’ll be here if you need anything...”

She gave a stiff nod and her chest rose with a heavy breath, then she set off on her way to greet them. I watched closely, holding my own breath as she approached the table. Every person at the long table looked up, a sea of Populars looking at her, and I felt my muscles tense.

Then, Grant scooted his chair sideways slightly, jutting his head toward the guy next to him—Cameron Fellows—and Cameron picked up his tray, switching to an empty chair at the far end of the table. Grant patted the now empty seat next to him and Jamie sat down. She glanced over at us once, her brows high as if she was in as much disbelief as we were. She turned back to Grant just as he said something to make her laugh.

“Our little girl’s all grown up,” Sam said, feigning tears when I looked back at him. I tossed my dinner roll at him, rolling my eyes.

“Can you ever be serious?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” He picked up the bread, taking a bite of it with a bright smile.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“Jamie can take care of herself. You know that.”

I did, but it wasn’t her I was worried about. It was everyone else.

“Don’t you think it’s weird, though? Why is Grant suddenly so interested in her?”

He was quiet for a while, drawing my attention back to him. When I met his eye, his look was accusatory. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were jealous.”

I scowled, slamming my fork down. “I’m not jealous. I just don’t want her to get hurt. This is Grant we’re talking about. And the rest of The Populars. Why would they want to hang out with Jamie?”

He ran a finger across his brow, shaking his head. “I have no idea, and honestly, I don’t care. She’ll be fine. It’ll get old after a while and Grant will go back to dating Vanessa or Sarah or Courtney or whoever, and Jamie will come back to us and all will be right in the world. Just...let her have her fun while she can.”

I shook my head. “Can’t you see they’re obviously plotting something?”

“Like what?” he asked, mouth full, clearly unbothered.

“I don’t know.” I couldn’t pull my eyes away from the table, watching as Vanessa pointed at the bracelet Jamie was wearing, obviously complimenting it. Even from there, I could see the silver glinting from the friendship bracelet we’d bought years ago. My fingers went to the matching one on my wrist instinctively. Even though they were probably childish, we never took them off. They were too special. Without looking my way, I watched Jamie lower her hand to her lap, as if she were embarrassed by the bracelet. And, by default, embarrassed by me. My appetite was gone instantly. I pushed my tray away.

“Do you want your cake?” he asked, pointing to the small cardboard tray of chocolate cake.

“Take it.”

Sam didn’t need telling twice when it came to food; he never had. He scooped it up, blissfully aware of the inner turmoil I was experiencing. It didn’t matter. I’d tried to tell both him and Jamie my concerns and they’d been dismissed.

Why couldn’t anyone but me see what was happening?

AFTER SCHOOL, I waited for Sam and Jamie by my locker. Sam was the first to arrive, as usual.

“Hey,” he said, wiping sweat from his brow, still dressed in gym shorts, his hair messy and unkempt.

“Hey.”

“How’d the test go?”

I groaned. “As expected. Ms. Hull is the worst. I swear she throws questions in that she didn’t even go over just to make sure we fail...” I trailed off, spying Jamie as she made her way around the corner, books clutched to her chest. “Bout time!” I called, relieved to see she was alone.

“I know, I know...” She rolled her eyes.

“Are you wearing lip gloss?” I asked, furrowing my brow as she drew closer.

“Yeah, so?”

“I’ve never seen you wear lip gloss.”

“I do. All the time.” She reached for her locker, to the left of mine by just a few spaces, and twisted the combination lock, chewing her bottom lip as she concentrated on opening the door.

“Okay, so tell us everything.” Why was she holding out on me? “How did it go? What’s it like over there?” She felt miles away, as if she wasn’t even paying attention. When she slammed her locker shut, she winced, pressing up on her toes as if she was going to explode with information.

“It was...pretty normal, actually.” *What a letdown.*

“Normal?” It was Sam’s turn to scowl.

“Yeah, I mean, they’re actually kind of cool.”

“Cool?” I jerked my head back as if I’d been slapped. “Seriously? How are they cool?” *Besides every conventional way possible.*

“Don’t be like that,” she cautioned me, running a hand over her hair. “I’m not saying I want to be friends with them, I’m just saying...it wouldn’t hurt to give them a chance. Maybe we misjudged them.”

“Misjudged?” I demanded, shaking my head. “Did we misjudge them when they told everyone Sam was *dating* Mr. Navarro?” Our old science teacher. The rumor wasn’t true—Sam wasn’t even gay—but it was enough to make Sam’s fifth grade year miserable and Mr. Navarro left shortly after. No one knows whether it was voluntary, but I suspected it wasn’t.

“Or when they got everyone to call you giraffe because you were so tall in seventh grade?” Sam added.

“Of course not,” she said softly. “But that was Vanessa. It wasn’t Grant.”

“It was all of them,” I said firmly. “Grant went along with everything. They all did. What about when they had someone steal my purse and throw it in Billy Eskin’s pond after junior high graduation? The first party we were actually invited to, and they had to make sure we knew we weren’t wanted.”

“I’m not saying they haven’t done horrible things...”

“What about when Courtney and Bryant pantsed you in the school lobby in front of everyone?” Sam asked.

She put her hands up to stop the examples, of which there were plenty. “I get what you’re saying, okay? I get it. They’re the worst. I agree with you. But...Grant’s different than we thought. He’s...” She stared ahead with a far-off look.

“He’s what, Jamie?” I challenged. “Because short of you telling us he had a brain transplant, there’s no way you can explain away how awful they are.

It was fine when you were just talking about kissing him for the sake of it, but now you're acting like..."

"Like what?" she asked, when I didn't say anything right away.

"Like you want to be one of them."

She set her jaw. "Don't talk like that. I'm one of you. One of us. You know that."

Ms. Mullins walked past us. "Have a good night," she called absentmindedly, reminding us the school day was over and we still needed to leave.

"We'll talk about all of this later," I said. "I'm starving. Y'all wanna go to Jewell's or Petals?" The only two restaurants within walking distance.

"Jewell's. I need cheese sticks in my life," Sam said quickly, turning to lead the way down the hall.

"Actually..." Jamie cut us off, and I knew what she was going to say before she'd even had the chance. "Grant wants me to hang out with him after school."

It was a punch to the gut. An affirmation of everything I feared. "Seriously?"

She pressed her lips together, her head drooping to one side. "Come on, Cait, don't make this a thing. We hang out every day after school. It's just one day."

"Whatever," I said, shaking my head and looking at Sam, who looked equally confused and upset.

"Cait, please—"

"Just go, Jamie," I said harshly, my muscles quivering with confusion over her betrayal. "It's fine."

"Why doesn't he just hang out with us?" Sam asked, apparently genuine.

Her forehead crease deepened, and I knew she was thinking what she would never say out loud: *Grant Du Bois would never hang out with us.*

But then...why was he hanging out with her?

"I think he already had something planned..." She glanced over her shoulder. I could suddenly hear him laughing with his friends, coming down the hallway, though I couldn't see him yet. "I promise, tomorrow, we'll hang out like usual. I'll tell you everything." She squealed, pushing up on her tiptoes again and clasping her hands in front of her chest.

"Yeah, yeah. Go. It's fine." I looked down, refusing to watch as she raced

away from us in the direction of Grant's voice. When I met Sam's eye, he offered a small smile.

"I'm still good to go to Jewell's if you want..."

I shrugged, sulking toward the door. None of it felt right without Jamie. "I'm not really hungry anymore. Let's just go home." I felt his hand bump mine, a sign of solidarity as we made our way down the hall and out of the building, a gaping hole in our usual lineup that matched the one I felt growing in my stomach.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PRESENT DAY

Back in my hotel room, I lay in bed, my laptop resting beside me as I flipped mindlessly through the channels. I could feel the mint-scented face mask beginning to dry, my skin becoming tight and itchy as it did.

As soon as it was ready to wash off, I'd be able to start writing, but in the meantime I was looking forward to diving into mindless television I was never free to watch at home. Anything without a singing animal would be quite nice.

On the nightstand, my phone began buzzing, and I ended my search for a show when I saw Grant's name on my screen.

"Hello?"

"Hey, whatcha doing?"

"Oh, just..." I stared over at the unopened laptop. "I was just getting ready to start writing. You?"

"I just put the twins down for bed." His voice sounded lighter, and I heard him take a sip of something, immediately picturing the glass of red wine he had before bed every night.

"How'd today go?"

"Oh, it was fine. Hudson got in trouble for hitting again—"

"I don't know what we're going to do about that." I touched my forehead, planning to rub it, then jerked it back, the green cream of the face mask now smudged on my fingertips. I stood and walked across the room, my hand outstretched, and wiped the concoction on a hand towel in the bathroom.

"I don't know," he said with a yawn, "but that's *Future Grant's* problem. *Right Now Grant* just wants to hear about his beautiful wife's day."

“Oh, he does, hm?” I chuckled, grabbing a washcloth and swiping away the mask gently, revealing fresh, pink skin.

“Mhm.”

“Well, this place hasn’t changed a bit,” I said softly, patting my face dry. “And Sam’s here.”

“Sam?” I heard the tension in his tone.

“Yeah, he came into town early, so we grabbed dinner together.” I didn’t want to lie to him, and now was the perfect time to tell him.

“Oh,” he said simply.

“Anyway, and then I came back to the hotel and got some writing in,” I carried on. “And right now, I’m washing off my face mask and planning to get into bed and write until I fall asleep.”

“That sounds heavenly…” he said, the tension gone. “I wish I was there with you.”

“Me too. You have no idea.”

“Well, I have *some* idea,” he said, his voice deep and filled with sudden longing that sent a swooping sensation through my core. I placed the towel down, flipping off the light as I walked out of the bathroom and back to the bed.

“Tell me more, Mr. Du Bois…”

He chuckled under his breath. “Well, if I were there with you, there would be no writing getting done, I can assure you.”

I batted my eyelashes innocently, though he couldn’t see me. “Oh, no? Well, what else might we be doing, then?”

His breath was heavy through the phone. “I’d love to tell you, but how about I show you instead?”

“What?” I asked, caught off guard as the phone beeped in my hand. I pulled it away from my ear, glancing at the video call notification. When I accepted his request, his background was mostly dark, just the light from the phone screen illuminating his face and the bedpost behind his head. His shirt was off, revealing his bare chest, and, farther up, a rather cocky grin. “Well, hello there.”

“Hello, yourself.” He stared at me, leaning his head to the side slightly.

“God, I miss you,” I admitted with a drawn-out breath. It was true. I hated being away from them all.

“Come home,” he whined. “Take care of me.”

“I would if I could.”

“Did you get much written today?”

I swallowed. “Two chapters.” It was a lie, but I didn’t care as I watched his phone traveling farther down. He stopped, his hand resting on his thigh, so that the only thing in focus was the bulge in his basketball shorts. Even in the background, I watched his mouth upturn into a lustful smile, the one I saw so often in bed.

“Maybe I should come up there for the night,” he said, his voice low again.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

He adjusted himself, tugging at his shorts. “Should I show you?”

My face flamed red. All these years together and he still gave me butterflies. “Mhm. I think you have to now.”

“You first,” he said, running his hands over his chest. “Open your robe.”

I glanced down, where a fair bit of cleavage was already showing, my throat suddenly dry. Were we really going to do this? We weren’t these people...

I slipped my hand underneath my robe, pulling it down suggestively, but stopping short of revealing anything. He watched with pure pleasure, and I could see the evidence of his excitement growing.

Finally, I tugged at the strings of my robe, exposing my chest as he licked his lips. “God, you’re hot.” He laughed, relieving the tension I felt, adrenaline coursing through my body with a vengeance.

“Your turn.”

“As you wish...” He closed his eyes as his hand slipped under the band of his shorts, exposing himself to me finally. “Are you sure you can’t come home?”

My breathing caught in my throat. “I—”

“*Dad!*” He tossed the phone, just as I heard hurried knocks on the door in the background, my screen a blurry, chaotic mess of ceiling, pillow, hand, and now, currently, darkness. I was sure I was staring at the top of our mattress as I pulled my robe tight, my stomach hardening with a sudden manifestation of dread.

His face was back on the screen again. “I’ll call you back,” he said, rolling his eyes as the knocking grew louder. He was standing up from the bed when the call ended, and I fell back onto the pillows with a groan.

I glanced over at my laptop as it taunted me, a reminder that I should've been writing anyway.

I huffed out a breath, blowing my hair from my face. Nothing good ever seemed to happen at Hotel Lilith.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AGE SIXTEEN

She wasn't coming.

I stared at the text message with a hole in my chest, unable to catch my breath. By that point, I guess I shouldn't have been all that shocked. For the last six months, Jamie had done nothing but blow us off in favor of Grant over and over again.

I couldn't remember the last time we'd hung out on the weekends and, even when we did see each other after school, she was always distracted, always on her phone or talking about Grant.

Grant, Grant, Grant, Grant, Grant...

God, I was tired of hearing about him.

But no matter what, no matter how much she'd hurt me, no matter how much she'd let me down, my sweet sixteen was something we'd been talking about since we were ten years old. It was a night we'd planned meticulously, complete with matching party dresses and the drive away from the party in whatever car my parents decided to surprise me with—spoiler alert: that part wasn't happening either.

There was no car.

There were no matching dresses.

My parents had tried their best. Jamie didn't even seem interested in that.

I slammed the phone shut, groaning. How could she do this? How could she just abandon me, forget about me, especially tonight, all for a guy she barely knew.

I mean, sure, she knew Grant like we all did. She knew his dad was the president of the town's only bank, and she knew his mom worked in

insurance. She knew they had one of the nicest houses in Spider Lily. She knew he'd broken his arm in kindergarten by falling off the metal slide that always burned our legs on hot days in the summer. She knew the basics, but he wasn't her friend. *I was.*

I knew everything there was to know about her. More than he could ever know.

Like how her favorite authors were Margaret Peterson Haddix and PC Cast and that she had a magic kit under her bed she still played with when she was bored. I knew how she liked her eggs—fried overwell, try to give her anything runny and she'd gag every time. I knew she ran when she was stressed but ate when she was sad. I knew she drank her mom's wine after she'd gone to bed and how badly she wished she had blonde hair. I even remembered trying to dye it with peroxide once, resulting in the brightest shade of orange either of us had ever seen.

I knew all of this because I was her friend.

Her best friend.

And I'd always thought she was mine, too.

From the first day of kindergarten, sitting next to each other in our homeroom thanks to our last names—Logan and Lawrence—we'd been inseparable.

Until now.

I sulked across the room toward where my parents were sitting at an otherwise empty table, plopping down into the chair beside Mom. We'd rented out the party room at our town's park and spent hours decorating the space, just the three of us and Sam.

It wasn't much. We couldn't afford a DJ and had opted instead for a boom box in the far corner with mixed CDs I'd spent hours creating and a disco ball with the lights turned down.

Mom had taken me to get my hair styled that day and my birthday gift, aside from the party, was the dress I was wearing. Besides a car, it was all I'd wanted. A night with my friends. A night to feel special.

I'd sent out invites to a few of the kids in school, not setting my expectations too high on who would show up, but I never once thought Jamie wouldn't be one of them.

"What's wrong, kiddo?" Mom asked, pulling me into her side for a brief hug. She rubbed her hand down my arm as if she were trying to warm me up.

“Aren’t you having fun?”

I looked out to the makeshift dance floor, where I could see a handful of my classmates dancing awkwardly, talking to each other over the music. Aaron Harrison had a slice of cake on a plate in his hand as he hit on Alison Shelton, and Penny was standing in the corner talking to Sam, both of them relatively still in a crowd of swaying bodies.

“Jamie’s not coming,” I said, placing my phone on the table with a dramatic sigh.

Both my parents leaned forward, releasing audible gasps.

“What?”

“Why not? What happened?”

“Grant Du Bois happened,” I said, arms folded across my chest as I met my mom’s eyes, fighting back tears. I did not want to cry at my own party. I didn’t want to be angry or sad. I just wanted to enjoy myself, but what choice did I have?

It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.

“Oh,” she said, her own eyes glassy and pained as she brushed a piece of hair from my face. “Now, come on. You know Jamie. She knows how important today is to you. I’m sure she wouldn’t miss this. Have you tried to call her?”

“Six times,” I said, shaking my head. “She texted me and said she can’t come because Grant took her to the movies in Martin and they aren’t going to make it back in time.”

Mom’s eyes went distant for a moment, as if she was lost in thought, and then she straightened her shoulders, smoothing her hands over my arms. “Surely they’ll be able to make it back before the party’s over. Are they on their way now? If they leave now, they could—”

“She’s not coming, Mom,” I said crossly. “Just drop it.” As angry as I was, I knew she’d heard my voice crack.

Dad stood. “Is there anything I can do? Does she need a ride? I could go get her.”

“She doesn’t need a ride. She *chose* not to come. She chose him.”

“Oh...” Mom soothed, her hand rubbing circles on my back. I saw her glance up at Dad. “Honey, I’m sorry... Boys make girls do silly things sometimes. I know how badly you wanted her here.”

I sniffled.

“I think the chocolate fountain needs some more...” Dad’s voice trailed off as he walked away from the table, leaving Mom and me alone.

“What do you want to do?” Mom asked. “Want Dad and me to go outside and leave you to dance with your friends? Want to call the party off and go home and open your presents?” She leaned down in her seat, trying to get me to look at her. “Want your momma to get out there and show these kids some of her dance moves?”

I chuckled through my newly formed tears. “God, no.”

She swiped a thumb across my cheek. “Don’t cry, Cait. I know how important it was for Jamie to be here for you, but girls fight sometimes... Don’t let that take away from how much you were looking forward to today. You’re *sixteen*. You’ve been waiting for this day all your life. You have so many other friends here. You look beautiful. Don’t let this little hiccup ruin that.”

“That’s just it, Mom... This isn’t a fight. We aren’t fighting. She just... outgrew me.”

“That’s not true,” Mom said, pulling me into her side as the final wall broke down, the tears spilling over. “Sweetheart, that’s not true and you know it’s not. She loves you. We love you. Sometimes friends just need a cooling period. You and I both know you’ll be back to best friends soon, and...even if that doesn’t happen”—she leaned back, jutting her head toward the dance floor—“you still have so many people who care about you.” She waved her hand in the air. “Jamie-schmamie.”

I looked up, spying Sam headed in our direction. His expression fell from confusion to heartbreak as he saw mine, and as he drew nearer, Mom stood up, letting Sam take her seat.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his hand on my shoulder.

“Nothing.”

“Cait, what is it? Talk to me.”

Mom found Dad next to the chocolate fountain and I watched them leave the room before I answered him.

“Jamie isn’t coming.”

Sam’s expression hardened. “What? Seriously?”

I nodded, opening the text and passing my phone to him. He tapped a button, ready to respond, but I jerked it back from him.

“What are you doing?”

“What did you say to her?”

“I didn’t respond,” I told him.

“You need to. Or let me. She needs to know how shitty this is.”

“Sam!” I scolded him, keeping my voice low as I searched the room to be sure my parents hadn’t reappeared.

“She can’t do this to you, Cait. She’s supposed to be our best friend. She could go to the movies anytime. She’s known about this party for a month.” His hands were clamped into fists as he shook his head in disbelief. “Maybe she’s joking.”

We were already an hour into the party. We both knew she wasn’t joking.

“I should’ve known last week when I asked her to go dress shopping with me and she said to just let her know where I got it and she’d get the same one. She never planned to come tonight, Sam. I’m such an idiot ...”

“Hey,” he said firmly, his shock washing away, replaced with bitterness. “Don’t talk about my friend like that, okay? You’re not an idiot.” He pulled me into a hug with both hands. “You’ve done nothing wrong. Don’t blame yourself. She’s the one you should blame for choosing Grant over you.” I felt his warm breath in my hair and inhaled the scent of his subtle, woody cologne, wanting to sink into it. No one made me feel safer than Sam.

I let myself rest in his arms, closing my eyes and listening to the rhythm of his heartbeat as it thundered in his chest. The song changed from a slow dance to a song Jamie and I used to dance around her house to, and I felt my breathing hitch.

He pulled me away from him, realizing what had happened. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

I nodded without realizing it, and he took my hand in his, pulling me up. Together, we walked across the dance floor, hardly noticed by anyone in attendance, even at my own party, and through the propped open double doors that led to the lobby. Mom and Dad were sitting on the small couch on the far side of the room, next to the exterior door.

“Everything okay?” Mom asked, her eyes dancing between the two of us.

“She needs some air,” Sam said as we moved closer to them, silently communicating much more than his words to them. Mom nodded, reaching forward and touching my arm gently as we moved past before leaning back on the couch. I could feel their eyes on us still, though I couldn’t bear to look at them. I was ashamed to feel this upset, but I couldn’t make it stop.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

My first true heartbreak was coming from the loss of a friend.

I never thought she'd do this.

"Don't forget your jacket," Dad said, standing up and tugging it off a hanger in the coat closet. He handed it to Sam, who placed it on my shoulders gently.

"We won't be gone long," he assured my parents.

"We'll hold down the fort," Mom said, patting Dad's hand as he nodded along. Sam led me out the door and I pulled the jacket closer around me, the bitter February air cold on my exposed skin.

Sam didn't take his arm off me, not as we made it down the steep, paved hill surrounded by trees, and not as we turned left to head toward the playground we'd played on as kids.

When we reached the swing set, he took his jacket off, placing it on the swing first, then gesturing that I should sit down.

"You're not cold?"

"No," he said, though his teeth were chattering. "Your mom would never forgive me if I let you ruin that dress."

I scoffed, staring at the jacket. It was true, but it was also ridiculous. "Sam, don't be silly. Put your jacket back on."

"I'm fine, I swear. If I get cold, you'll be the first to know."

Hesitantly, I tucked my dress under my legs carefully and took a seat. "Well, thank you..."

"Consider it a birthday gift," he said softly, looking away. "And speaking of, I have something for you."

"You already gave me my present."

He shook his head, digging the toe of his shoe into the wood chips below our feet. "That was the pre-present. I have something else, but I was saving it."

"Okay," I said, holding out my hands. "What is it?"

He shoved a hand in his pocket, his eyes locked on mine. I cocked my head to the side, trying to understand what was happening. Why was he acting so strangely? "You have to close your eyes."

"Okay..." I repeated, closing my eyes with my hands held out. I waited, the night completely silent around me except for the noise of our breathing. I heard him shuffle, heard his feet moving through the wood chips, his breaths

growing closer to me.

My breathing grew shallow as I tried to focus...

"Any day now," I teased, but he wasn't laughing.

When I felt something small and light land in my palms, I opened my eyes. I stared at the two bookmarks, picking them up so I could get a closer look. Only, they weren't bookmarks at all.

They were...

"Oh my god! *Alicia Keys*?" I screamed, blinking my eyes rapidly to be sure I was reading the tickets correctly. "Are you serious? You can't be serious? Sam, this is—oh my god. How did you get these?" I swallowed, reality hitting me. "Sam, *how did you get these?* They must've cost a fortune!"

"Don't worry about that. I've been saving for a while. Now"—he pointed to the tickets—"the concert's next month. I already ran it by your parents. Dad's going to drive us to Miami the night before. That was the only condition. Your mom said neither of us can drive that far on our own, so—" I launched myself out of the swing, throwing my arms around his neck.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god! You are the best! I can't believe you did this." I pulled away, checking the tickets again. "Seriously, this is too much. How am I ever going to top these for your birthday?"

He looked away modestly. "It's not that big of a deal."

"Of course it is. This is like...wow." I clutched the tickets to my chest again. "Thank you so much."

"Better than the CD inside?"

"Yes," I said with a laugh. "Better than the CD, but I love that too. Seriously, you are amazing." I sank back into my swing, still staring at the tickets in disbelief.

"Well, they aren't great seats, and I was trying to get one closer to home, but—"

"Sam," I cut him off. "Seriously...stop. This is perfect. Best. Birthday Present. Ever."

He smiled the familiar lopsided grin and brushed his hair from his eyes. "I'm glad you like them."

I rubbed them together in my hands, realizing something for the first time. "You only got two? Did you... Did you know she wasn't coming?"

His lips were a flat line as he shook his head. "No, I could only afford

two. I figured if Jamie wanted to go, she could get her own.” I couldn’t tell if he was lying.

His tone wasn’t as harsh as the words sounded. We both knew Jamie could afford to get whatever she wanted, while our families could rarely afford to splurge. We weren’t poor by any means, but we didn’t have extra. Not like the Lawrences.

I felt cool tears sting my eyes, realizing what had happened without me even noticing it. Or maybe I had noticed it, but I was so busy trying to deny it, it hadn’t sunk in.

“It’s just us now, isn’t it? I don’t think she’s coming back...” He was quiet, looking down as he pushed off the ground, rocking gently. I leaned back, swinging beside him as I waited for an answer.

“You know, I hate to say it, but I think she’s been waiting for her chance to leave us for a while now.”

“What are you talking about?” I gripped the metal links of the chains tighter.

“Last year, when she did that project with Grant, he was all she talked about—”

“Because she had a crush on him—”

“Yeah, but it was more than that. Jamie talked about him all the time. And, remember how excited she was when Vanessa broke up with him? It went beyond a crush for her. And I don’t think it was a coincidence she got a haircut and highlights right after. She’s been acting more like one of them and less like one of us for a long time... She just needed the invitation to switch sides.”

“That’s not true.” I shook my head forcefully. I needed it not to be true. “She’s one of us. You know that.”

“Maybe she was... But she hasn’t been for a long time, Cait. Honestly, I can’t believe you don’t see that. She chose them over us the second she had the chance. I think she resented the fact that we weren’t like them. I think she thought we were bringing her down. She always complained about the way I dress. And she started in on you too, eventually... Don’t you remember her criticizing your clothes last year? She gave you a bunch of her hand-me-downs.”

“Because she didn’t wear them.”

His brows raised, like he didn’t believe me, but he didn’t say anything.

“You think there was another reason?”

He was quiet. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to fight with you.” He shivered. “We should go back in before your parents get worried.”

“Sam, talk to me... We aren’t fighting. What are you saying?”

His jaw was tight, expression conflicted. When he looked at me, his brows drew down. “I think she thought she was better than us.”

My jaw dropped down. *No*. That wasn’t like Jamie. “How can you say that?”

He shook his head, rubbing a hand through his hair. “It doesn’t matter, let’s just—”

“No, it does matter,” I said, my words clipped. “Because you can’t just say something like that. She’s still our best friend.”

“No, she’s not.” He stood from the swing swiftly. “She hasn’t been our friend in months, let alone our best friend. She dropped us, Cait, and for the life of me, I can’t understand why you don’t see that.”

“Because it’s not true!” Now I was standing, every bit as red-faced and angry as he was. His chest rose and fell with heavy breaths and I saw the contemplation in his troubled expression. “What aren’t you telling me?” I demanded. “I know you. There’s something going on, isn’t there?”

He picked up his jacket from the swing, pulling it on quickly and jerking his head toward the building. “We should go in. It’s getting colder.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you talk to me.”

“Cait, please—”

“Sam!” I shrieked, jerking my arm away from him as he reached for it.

“*I overheard her making fun of you with Vanessa.*” He spit the words out, his eyes closed, shadows covering his face in the moonlight. I stood silently, processing the words, pain and confusion filling me as I attempted to swallow down the rage in my gut. It wasn’t true, was it? It couldn’t be. Jamie wouldn’t do that...

Then again, I never would’ve thought Jamie would blow off my sixteenth birthday, either.

“What do you mean?”

“She was just...I don’t know. It was stupid. They were just talking about what you were wearing one day. I didn’t really listen. Vanessa said something and Jamie didn’t stick up for you. She laughed along.” He puffed his cheeks out with a heavy breath.

“When was this? Why didn’t you tell me?” I demanded, my brain scrambling to find a logical excuse. That wasn’t the Jamie I knew. She never would’ve made fun of me. She was my best friend.

“A few weeks ago in Spanish,” he said, rubbing a hand over his cheek.

“Did you say something to her?”

“We were in the middle of class and there was nothing to say... She’s changed, Cait. She’s not the person we knew. The Populars got to her.”

“They aren’t aliens, Sam. They didn’t infiltrate her brain. She’s still our best friend. There must be some explanation. Maybe you misunderstood...”

He pursed his lips, but didn’t argue. “Maybe,” he said finally, closing the distance between us. “You’re freezing. Come on.” My teeth were chattering, though I’d hardly noticed. His hand lifted to cup my cheek, and I felt his thumb brush the space under my eye, but I hadn’t realized I’d been crying. “It’s all going to be okay.”

I dropped my head, more tears falling at his words. “I know...” I agreed. “This just sucks.”

He chuckled, obviously caught off guard. “Yeah. It does suck.” I leaned forward, resting my head on his shoulder, hooking my arms under his.

“I’m glad I’m not too uncool for you.”

He released another laugh, this one loud and carefree. When he pulled back, he placed a forefinger under the edge of my chin, his thumb pressing on the space just under my bottom lip. “You could never be too uncool for me.”

I’d meant it as a joke, but there was nothing funny about the way he was staring at me. My eyes danced back and forth between his, my body burning with a strange, unfamiliar sensation. I wanted to make a joke to break the tension somehow, but words were failing me. He was utterly silent, his eyes saying what he seemed unable to.

He’d never looked at me that way before.

No one had ever looked at me that way before.

“Hey...” he said, his voice practically a whisper. He opened his mouth, then shut it again, his brows bouncing up, then back down as he visibly fought back against whatever it was he was going to say.

I swallowed. It felt as if my breath had formed a lump in my throat.

“Did you...” He still had a hold of my chin, and my heart was racing so fast, I thought maybe his touch was the only thing keeping me standing. I didn’t dare speak, not wanting to interrupt the moment. “Did you ever get

your first kiss?”

My stomach flipped, every nerve ending in my body suddenly awake and alive with electricity. “N-no...” I whispered breathily. I wanted to say that Jamie had won, that she’d beat me at that too, but her name didn’t belong in that moment. Nothing belonged there except me and Sam. It was as if the entire world had faded away.

He glanced toward the sky, and for a half second I thought he was going to back away. I wasn’t sure if that was what I wanted.

What was happening?

Two seconds ago, I’d never thought about Sam this way.

He was my best friend.

Why was he looking at me this way?

Why was I looking at him this way?

“Still have a few hours before your sixteenth birthday is over,” he said, and though I hadn’t seen him move, he felt closer than ever. “Does that count?”

I was lightheaded, unable to move, unable to think, unable to speak. “I...” There was a hint of a smile on his lips, though his eyes were as nervous as I felt, searching mine for the answer to a question he hadn’t asked. He inched his face closer to mine, neither of us breathing for so long I was sure one of us would pass out.

When his eyes closed, mine did too, and the voice in my head that had been asking a million questions was finally silenced.

His lips were dry. That was the first thing I noticed about the kiss, but within seconds, it didn’t seem to matter. He pressed his mouth to mine gently, his hand moving from my chin to my cheek. I inhaled, my lips parting slightly as his other hand slid to my opposite cheek, his fingers in my hair.

My heart was racing so fast I worried it might give out, and I had no idea what to do with my hands or my tongue or...

It was over before it had begun. He stepped back, breathing as heavily as I was. We stared at each other silently for a few moments, neither of us sure what to say, and finally, he nodded.

“Couldn’t let you break the pact.”

The smile that spread to my lips was carefree and whimsical, and in that moment, everything changed. “Nope, couldn’t have that.”

CHAPTER NINE

PRESENT DAY

When I woke up the next morning, the laptop lay open beside me, its screen black. I shut it, sitting up with a loud, obnoxious stretch. Grant always complained when I did that, but in my own bed, completely alone, I could be as loud in the mornings as I wanted to.

Thinking of my husband, I checked my phone, surprised to see I didn't have a missed call from him. I imagined he'd fallen asleep trying to put the twins back down.

Rolling out from under the covers, I slid my feet into the house slippers on the floor and padded toward the bureau, where the coffeepot rested next to the TV. I started a pot, the smell waking me up instantly, and hurried to the bathroom.

Minutes later, I was sitting on the end of the bed with the morning news on and my palms warming against the sides of my mug as I mentally planned out my day—working my schedule around the need to spend most of my time writing.

Now that I was refreshed, it felt like it would be easy enough to do. I wanted to grab breakfast before I started the day and then maybe go for a walk, which always managed to get me in the right headspace to write. Then I'd hole up in the room and knock out a good portion of the story.

With that in mind, I drained the rest of my coffee from the branded mug and slid from my spot, pulling clean clothes and my bag of toiletries from the suitcase.

I didn't do much to get ready, as I had no real plans to see anyone, so a half hour later, with my hair tied back in a loose ponytail and some light

makeup and casual clothing on, I was in the elevator on my way to breakfast.

I wanted to call and check in with Grant again, but I knew he had his hands full, and if the kids were letting him sleep, I had no desire to interrupt that. Besides, I needed to plot the rest of my story, which meant I needed silence.

Once I'd made it to the dining room, I prepared a plate, though I was disappointed to see a good portion of the food had already been picked through with just an hour left for the breakfast schedule—I'd have to wake up earlier tomorrow. I sat down at a table in the far corner near the window, looking out over the pool directly outside.

To my surprise, there were already a few families outside, soaking up the midmorning sun. A toddler ran from his father, and I could practically hear the squeal of delight, his expression radiating happiness as his father scooped him up. Behind him, a woman struggled to get sunscreen on her young child's face, and another woman sat in a lounge chair, a book in hand. I tried to get a glimpse of the cover, but it was no use from where I sat. I was always fascinated when I saw someone reading in public.

I spooned a bit of yogurt into my mouth, clinking the metal spoon on my teeth absentmindedly as I watched them. Perhaps instead of a walk, I'd go for a swim.

It had been years since I'd been in a pool, after all, and it was just as good of exercise, wasn't it? Besides that, this seemed like the perfect time for a swim when it was still relatively uncrowded.

Deciding to go for it, I stood, cleaning up my table and heading back to the room. I changed into a bathing suit and threw a cover-up, sun hat, and sunglasses on. I picked up a towel, my phone, and my room key and made my way back down to the lobby, then out to the pool.

There were a few more people out than had been there before, but still, it was peaceful. A welcome change. I lifted my phone, snapping a picture before I got in the water and posting it to Instagram, tagging Hotel Lilith as my location.

I typed out a fun caption: **Sometimes research means a day at the pool. New book coming soon!** Then added a sun emoji and tapped the button to share it. I was trying to get better about posting more often.

Social media was a necessary evil, unfortunately.

Next, as I slid out of my cover-up, I couldn't help thinking how much the

twins would've loved to be there.

They were positively water babies, always happiest whenever they were in the bath or the small blowup pool we'd gotten them last summer. Grant and I had been talking about having a proper pool installed soon.

I sat down on the edge of the water, easing my feet then legs in gently. I closed my eyes, letting my head fall back, the sun's rays warming my face. I was there for a while, letting my mind wander freely—back to the house, to the kids, to Grant, to Sam. Mostly, however, my mind traveled to the past, though I tried hard to avoid it.

It was impossible not to think about what happened here. Not to remember. Not to be haunted by it all.

No.

I forced the thought away. I wasn't that girl. We'd grown up. It had been a decade, for crying out loud. I was going to enjoy myself here if it killed me.

I immediately regretted my choice of words.

"Hey," a voice behind me called. My eyes shot open, blinking away the dark spots that clouded my vision. I'd been sitting there for what must've been an hour, though I'd hardly realized so much time had gone past. I glanced over my shoulder, surprised to see a woman I didn't recognize watching me cautiously. She looked about my age, perhaps a little younger, with frizzy, shoulder-length black hair and freckles across her nose. There was something oddly familiar about her, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. Like when there's a word on the tip of your tongue but, for the life of you, you can't seem to summon it. "Is it cold?" When she smiled, I noticed her front tooth was slightly crooked, her lips chapped.

"A little," I admitted.

She gestured to the spot beside me, the golden bangles on her wrist clinking together. "Can I?"

She had the entire pool, and there was absolutely no reason for her to sit beside me, but I nodded anyway. "Sure."

Her mouth upturned into a grin and she sat down beside me, pulling out her phone. "This is the best time to come, ya know? Still pretty quiet, not too hot."

I nodded but didn't say anything, hoping she'd get the hint and leave me alone. It wasn't that I didn't want to talk to her, but the truth was, I didn't want to talk to anyone. I just wanted to sit and stare in silence. It had been so

long since I was allowed to do that.

“I like your bathing suit,” she said, realizing I wasn’t going to respond. I glanced down at the olive green suit, giving her a pinched smile.

“Thanks.” Her own suit was bright blue, with purple flowers throughout it. It was too loud for me, too busy, but I felt like I should say something, so I added, “Yours is pretty, too.”

“Oh, thanks.” She appeared pleased, looking down at her own suit and nodding. “Have you already had breakfast? Their French toast is to die for.”

“I ate before I came out, but I must’ve missed their French toast,” I said, looking away again. “I’ll keep that in mind for tomorrow.”

“You should,” she said, then jutted her chin toward the children playing. “Are any of them yours?”

I was quick to shake my head, kicking my legs slowly through the water. “No. It’s just me here.” I was hit with a pang of sadness. God, I missed my family. “What about you?”

“Oh, yeah. No kids for me.” She frowned. “I’m surprised Grant didn’t come with you.”

It took me a moment to process what she’d said, but once I had, I cocked my head to the side, the blood draining from my face. How did she know my husband’s name? “I’m...I’m sorry?”

“Grant,” she said firmly. After a moment, her eyes widened as her jaw went slack. “Oh, no. I’m sorry, did something happen? Are you two not together anymore?”

Every nerve in my body was on high alert, my muscles rigid as I glared at her, trying to determine who she was. “How do you know my husband?”

Her face wrinkled, eyes searching mine. When the wrinkles disappeared, her expression was a sea of calm. “Aren’t you Cait Du Bois?”

I felt the need to flee at the way she’d said my name. *Cait Du Bois*. So, she didn’t know me, not really. She knew of me.

Of course. I’d never made an effort to hide my husband’s name. He was connected to all my social media and I talked about him quite a bit, but this felt different. I was having trouble thinking straight. How had she found me? Had Barry the bartender called his friends to tell them I was staying there? *The little weasel...*

“Yes, I am...” I said, practically whispering. If she was a fan, I didn’t want to offend her, but what an odd question to ask. Why was she so

concerned with whether or not I was alone? Why was she asking about Grant? Something about her felt off. “I’m sorry, how did you know that?” *How did you know where to find me?* I wanted to ask.

She held her hand out for me to shake. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you. I’m Anna. *Huge* fan of yours.” She giggled. “Sorry, this is probably weird, right? I was planning to play it much cooler than this. It’s just...I saw this—” She opened her Instagram and pulled out a photo I’d posted in front of the pool only moments ago. “And, well...I was already here, so I couldn’t help coming over and saying hello. Honestly, I never thought I’d actually find you here. I thought surely I’d missed you. I hope it’s okay that I came by. I can leave if you—”

“Oh, no,” I cut her off, finding my bearings. That was why I recognized her. She was a follower, probably someone I’d interacted with online more than a few times. But why was she here? She’d seen my post and come to meet me? I suddenly felt very exposed, almost violated, and I remembered Grant’s warnings before about never posting my location online until I’d left the place. Why hadn’t I listened to him? “You’re fine. No, it’s okay. I was just confused.”

She scrolled through my feed, pulling up a photo I’d posted of Grant and me weeks ago. “I love reading your posts,” she said, holding out the phone so I could get a better look at the photo. “You seem so happy.”

I fidgeted. “We are, thank you.”

She closed the app, her smile fading. “Is it weird if I ask you something?”

My heart thundered in my chest as I tried to slow its erratic beating. “What’s that?”

“Are we ever going to get a sequel to *The Good Guy*? It’s my favorite of yours, but I’m dying to know what happens to Dalton and Sarah.”

“Oh.” I clutched a hand to my chest, relieved at the simplicity of the question. “Well, you know, I haven’t ruled it out. If I get inspired, I may just write one.”

“I would love that. Actually, I have a copy of it in my room. If we run into each other again, would you mind signing it?”

“Of course.” My heart rate was finally slowing as I began to accept the fact that she truly was a fan. “I’d be happy to.”

“Thanks,” she said, nodding. “Hey, do you have plans for lunch? I’d love to take you out and pick your brain a bit. I’ve dabbled in writing some

myself.”

My smile faded. “I’m sorry... I wish I could. I’m actually on a deadline while I’m here, and I have to get this new book finished.”

Her hands went up in surrender. “Say no more. I totally understand.” Despite what she’d said, I saw the disappointment in her eyes.

“But if I get enough written today, maybe we could grab lunch later this week. How long are you staying? Are you just here for the day?”

“I’d love that.” She beamed at me. “I’m actually in town with my husband for a few days. For his work. I think we leave on Friday.”

It was only Wednesday, which left me plenty of time to live up to my promise to her. “Great. Okay, I’m here all that time too, so we’ll grab lunch at some point soon.” I pulled my legs out of the water, spinning around. “Actually, I should probably get back to work. I just wanted to get some sun this morning before I start working.”

“Don’t let me scare you off,” she said, starting to get out too. “I can go if I’m bothering you.”

“No. You aren’t at all.” I glanced toward the door as a loud family entered, six kids and a cooler in tow. “It’s just going to start getting crowded, and if I don’t start writing soon, I may lose my inspiration.”

“I totally get it,” she said. “It was really nice to meet you. My friends and I buddy read your new releases all the time. They’ll never believe I actually met you.”

“Well, it was really nice to meet you too.” I turned to walk away.

“Have a good day, Cait,” she called after me, still smiling to herself as she walked away. I bent over to grab my cover-up just as she pulled out her phone. I saw her snap a photo of me, the camera in selfie mode, though she didn’t realize I’d caught her, and I only hoped it wouldn’t end up on her Instagram feed.

Perhaps Grant was right. I’d have to be careful about posting my location from now on. Anna seemed harmless enough, but next time, it could be much worse.

CHAPTER TEN

AGE SIXTEEN

“**W**hat do you think about these?” I asked, pulling on the ridiculously oversized sunglasses and checking my reflection in the small store mirror with a wild expression. He laughed.

“I mean, those are obviously the best ones.”

“Right?” I teased. “I think you need a matching pair.”

He grabbed a pair to match me and held up his phone to snap a picture of us, kissing my cheek as it snapped.

“Get a room,” came the snide remark from across the store, followed by the sound of laughter. He pulled his arm away from me as we turned around to see who our audience was.

Vanessa, Courtney, Miranda, Grant, Dylan, Rob, and Jamie stood near the entrance, their watchful eyes drilling into us with disgust.

“Hey,” I said softly, eyes locking with Jamie.

“So, you two are, like, *a thing* now?” Vanessa asked, flipping her blonde hair over her shoulder.

Sam and I hadn’t really put a label on what we were. In truth, most of our relationship still felt the same. We spent most of our time together, the same as we always had, but now, some of that time was spent kissing. I was developing feelings for him that I hadn’t known were possible, but at the same time, that terrified me. I was happy, but so scared at the same time.

If something went wrong and I lost Sam, too, I’d be alone.

Refusing to put a label on it felt safer somehow, as if we could just slide back into our previous existence if we needed to, as long as we never titled it.

“What’s it to you?” Sam asked bitterly. “Shouldn’t you be somewhere

kicking puppies?”

The group laughed, but it was at Sam’s expense, rather than Vanessa’s. “Why would I kick puppies when I have full-grown mutts to tease?” she sneered.

I looked at Jamie, half hoping she’d stick up for us, but she refused to meet my eye. “What do you want, Vanessa? We aren’t bothering you. Just leave us alone.”

“I gladly would, except you’re in my way,” she said, though there was plenty of room for her to walk around us.

“How are we in your way?” I demanded.

“Because I need to look at those,” she said, pointing to the sunglasses in my hand.

“There are others,” I said.

“I can see that. But I want *those*.” Her words were pointed, and as she spoke, a cruel smile spread across her lips.

“Why don’t you just wait your turn, then?” Sam asked, stepping in front of me. “Or did your daddy never teach you how to do that?”

“I don’t know, Sam. What did your daddy teach you?” she asked, then covered her mouth, feigning sincerity. “I guess they taught you all about cleaning up after people, since that’s what you’ll be doing when you’re old enough, hm? Following in dear old Mom and Dad’s footsteps, right?” She stretched out her hand, knocking several pairs of jeans to the floor. “Go on, show us how the pros do it.”

The group behind her laughed, and though Jamie wasn’t laughing, she wasn’t stopping it, either.

“Let it go, Vanessa,” Grant said softly.

“No,” she argued, her nostrils flaring as she stared at us. She pointed at the discarded clothing as if we truly were mutts and she was waiting for us to obey. “*Pick. Them. Up.*”

Sam balled up his fist, stepping toward her. “My parents are better people than you’ll ever be. Don’t you dare—”

“*Sam!*” I grabbed his arm, still in disbelief that Jamie was letting this go on. “Come on, let’s just go.” I placed the sunglasses back on their display and pulled him away from the group, toward the door. “It’s not worth it.”

He didn’t struggle against me, but I could feel his arm trembling in my hands. When we’d made it a few steps, I heard Vanessa laugh again. “What a

bunch of losers. I can't believe you used to hang out with them."

I didn't look back. Couldn't, as cool tears blurred my vision. When we reached the door, I heard Jamie's response. It was quiet, maybe so quiet she thought we wouldn't hear, but I did, and I knew from the way Sam's muscles tensed next to me, he'd heard it too.

"Yeah, me either."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PRESENT DAY

Sam was in the hallway when the elevator doors opened on the third floor. “Good morning,” he sang with a devilish grin.

“Morning.” I stepped out of the elevator. “Where are you off to?”

“Actually, I’d come down to check on you, but you weren’t answering.”

“Oh, I was blowing you off,” I said with a straight face, then cracked a smile.

“That’s what I thought,” he teased right back. “Everyone said fame had gone to your head, but I didn’t want to believe it.” He dusted fake tears from his eyes.

I swatted his chest. “Did you already have breakfast?”

“Are you kidding?” he asked, wincing. “You know it ends at eleven, right? Do you know the last time I was up before eleven? Because I don’t.”

“What are you, seventeen?” I asked with a scowl. “How are you sleeping in past eleven?”

“That’s literally the best part of setting your own schedule, Cait. You’re doing it all wrong.”

“Well, tell that to my four-year-olds.”

He bounced his head side to side, contemplating. “Okay, fair enough. To answer your question minus the sarcasm, no, I haven’t had breakfast. I was just going out to grab something. Want to join me?”

I contemplated it. “I’d love to, but I really should get back to work.”

He sucked in a breath through his teeth, then released it, his shoulders slumping. “You’re right. I probably should, too.” He straightened his shoulders, a wry grin on his face. “Hey, what do you say we work all day,

then meet up for dinner afterward? Like proper adults.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I agreed. “Around five?”

“Five sounds perfect.” He rubbed his stomach, fighting back a yawn, then added, “Oh, by the way, I saw some others from our class this morning. Shelby and Isaiah and Donovan and Mackenzie...they mentioned Cody and Eli will be here later too. I guess they’ve got the event space all week. Shelby said Vanessa told her they’ll be decorating it today, so we could stop by and see everyone, if you wanted to.”

I hesitated, old insecurities washing over me. “I don’t know. One day is enough for me...”

He folded his arms, his gaze locked on the floor. “I know. I just thought...maybe it would be good to see everyone again. We can ignore The Populars, but everyone else would love to see you. You’re kind of a big deal now, you know. And besides, if we break the ice before that night, it might be easier. Just to say hi.”

Suddenly, I wished Grant was with me. At least, if he was there, I wouldn’t feel so out of place. “Do you still talk to people from school?”

“On social media sometimes, yeah, but not really.” He looked like he wanted to say more, but stopped. “You?”

“I haven’t spoken to anyone but you and Grant since it happened.” The warmth vanished from the room, a chill enveloping my skin. I rubbed my hand across my bicep, trying to warm up. “I’m still wondering if I’ll regret even coming.”

“I won’t let you regret it,” he said, his expression somber. “I promise. It’s been ten years. Everything that happened, it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“How can you say that?” I asked, tears filling my eyes.

“You know I don’t mean...” I took a step back, interrupting him.

“You know what, I’m cold. I’ll, uh, I’ll see you at five, okay?”

He watched me walk away, looking regretful with his arms hanging loose at his sides. “Yeah, okay...”

I spun around, digging my room key from the pocket of my cover-up and hurrying inside to keep him from seeing how easily the tears still fell when I thought about that night.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AGE SIXTEEN

I was on the living room floor playing a video game with Sam when the doorbell rang. We looked at each other, our foreheads creased with worry. My parents weren't home, and we weren't expecting anyone, so who could it be?

I pushed up from the floor, walking across the room to look out the window.

"Sam," I said breathlessly, already pulling open the door. He was behind me in an instant, and we both took in the sight at once.

Jamie was standing on my doorstep, her hair soaked through from the rain, mascara streaks staining her cheeks. I stared at her car in the driveway, then back at Sam as I pushed the door open.

"Jamie..." I wasn't sure what to think, torn between wondering if it was all a dream and wondering if it was all a trap. "What are you doing here?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but released only a whimper, placing her face in her hands as her shoulders trembled with cries. I stepped forward and Sam caught the door to keep it from smacking me. Thunder cracked overhead, lightning lighting up the sky, but none of us flinched, so caught up in the moment.

"What's wrong?" Every nerve in my body wanted to reach out to her, to try and hold her, but I couldn't move. I was too afraid. Sam shut the door behind me and I felt his chest against my back, a hand on my shoulder.

"I...I'm so sorry..." She sobbed into her palms. "I was a terrible friend. I..." She shook her head in her hands, not looking up at me. "You must hate me."

I didn't know what to say, still in utter disbelief she was standing in front of me in the first place.

"I don't *hate* you," I said softly, cocking my head to the side. "I don't really feel like I know you anymore... But that doesn't mean I hate you."

She lifted her head from her palms, obviously as shocked as I felt. "Really?"

I swallowed. "We were best friends for ten years. That doesn't just go away."

"Why are you here?" Sam asked, his hand still on my shoulder. His tone was harsher than mine had been. Sam held a grudge much longer than I would. Her eyes bounced up to meet his.

"It's over. It's all over..." She shook her head.

"What's over? You and Grant?" I asked her, taking another step forward. I hated the hope and relief I felt swelling inside my chest.

"All of it. Me and Grant. Me and them. The Populars. I never belonged with them. I knew it then, but—" Lightning cracked overhead once more, startling us this time, and she stepped forward, taking further cover on the porch. "I just wanted to fit in, I guess. It's not an excuse. Er, I guess it is. But it's the worst excuse there is. But I just got caught up in it, you know? In him, mostly. He made me feel...special." Her bottom lip quivered, new tears in her eyes as she looked away, her fist pressed into her lips.

I looked at Sam, who had one brow raised. Begrudgingly, he tilted his chin down slightly, seeming to understand what I was asking without either of us having to say a word. "Do you want to come inside?" I asked, turning back to her.

She brushed away her tears. "Really? Can I?"

Sam pulled open the door, allowing us to walk past him before he stepped in the house, too, and shut it back. We sat down on the couch awkwardly, the house filling with a heavy silence before anyone spoke. "So, did something happen? Did he break up with you?"

She frowned, sniffing dramatically and swiping her cheek with the heel of her hand. "Yeah, he broke up with me."

Once again, guilt swam through my gut over the elation I felt at hearing her news.

Finally, the queen had fallen.

It didn't matter how much I loved said queen, watching her having to

accept the fact that she was wrong, that we would've never hurt her this way, that things would've been better if she stayed with us...

Watching her hurt the way she'd hurt me, well, it was slightly vindicating to say the least.

Still, I tried to pretend I cared, fighting to keep a look of indignation off my face. "Did he say why? Did you two have a fight?"

She looked down, her body crumpling into itself as she rested her elbows on her knees, breaking down into further sobs. "I'm an idiot..."

Sam put a hand on her back and I moved to sit on the opposite side of her, doing the same. "Shhh..." I tried to soothe, still not completely understanding what happened. I should've been telling her that he'd come around, that it would all be okay, but I couldn't. As much as I wanted to make her feel better, I didn't want her to go back to them. I missed her. She'd hurt me. I wanted her back with us.

Where she belonged.

Maybe that made me awful, I didn't know, but it was how I felt, and I couldn't sugarcoat that truth. Not to myself, at least.

"We had sex," she said, her voice cracking so much I wasn't sure I'd heard it. Sam met my eye over her head, and I knew the shock in his expression was mirrored in my own.

"You—" I began, but she cut me off.

"We had sex. I had sex with Grant."

"W-what? When?" The questions tumbled out of me. I didn't know what I wanted to ask or needed to know. How was that possible? Seven months ago, she'd never even had her first kiss. Sex seemed wildly out of the realm of possibility.

"Last week," she said, still not looking at me. "It was stupid. It wasn't like we planned it. It just sort of happened."

"And he broke up with you after?"

She nodded, dragging her palms down her cheeks to wipe away the tears. "Not right away. First, he started being weird and distant. Like he didn't want to talk on the phone at night and he didn't want to hang out as much... And, when we did hang out, he was always distracted." *Sounded vaguely familiar.* "And then today, he told me he thought we should take some space. He said he felt like we moved too fast, but that was on him. It got out of hand, I never planned to..." She trailed off, drawing her lips into her mouth.

“It’s okay,” I said, too dumbstruck to say anything else. “It’s okay.”

She leaned over, resting her cheek on my legs as I continued rubbing her back, staring at Sam. In the end, I’d been right about them, but not in the way I’d expected. They hurt her worse than I’d expected and, try as I might, I couldn’t help wondering if that had been their plan all along.

“I never should’ve tried to be someone I’m not,” she said, and I looked down, staring at the teardrop hanging on the end of her eyelash. “They’re all monsters.”

They are monsters, I agreed silently.

I never said it aloud, not even to Sam in the coming days, but the feelings I had then were unlike anything I’d ever experienced. Unfathomable relief and joy. Peace.

She was finally safe. She’d come back to us, and soon, we’d be able to look at it all as if it were just a bad dream.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PRESENT DAY

I was in the middle of my second chapter of the day, finally in a good headspace for writing, when my phone buzzed.

A text from Grant.

Where do we keep the Band-Aids?

My chest tightened and I slid off the edge of the bed, tapping his name and placing the phone to my ear. He answered immediately, and I heard Hudson crying in the background.

“Hello?” he shouted over the crying.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Who’s hurt?”

“He’s fine,” he said, still shouting. “We were outside and he scraped his knee.” I could hear him rustling through something. “Do we not have any Band-Aids?”

“We do,” I told him. “They’re in the hall closet.”

“I’m looking in the hall closet. Hudson, buddy, you’ve gotta give Daddy a minute. Lucy, put that down—”

“They’re on the third shelf—”

“I’m looking at the—”

“On the right, beside the peroxide.”

“I don’t—” He groaned. “There it is. *Behind* the peroxide. I didn’t see it.”

“Is he okay? Is it bad? Can I see it?”

“I’m sorry, babe, I’ve gotta go.” Hudson’s wails grew louder.

“Can you call me bac—” The call ended and I stared at my screen, feeling defeated. My husband was an excellent father, and doing it alone, even for a short time wasn’t easy, but I knew he could handle it. That didn’t stop the

guilt forming in the pit of my stomach over missing this time with them.

That's the burden parents face, isn't it? When we're with them, we take it all for granted. We wish for time away. We wish for a moment of peace. Then, as soon as we're away, supposed to be enjoying our peace, we wish to be right in the middle of it all again. Childhood is both very long and very short and, as parents, there's nothing we're more aware of than that.

I made my way back to the bed, trying to find my focus again, though I couldn't take my mind off the twins. I stared at my phone, watching and waiting to see Grant's call come through. Surely he was going to call me back. Wouldn't he want to explain why he hadn't the night before?

I shook my head. He had a lot on his plate. I needed to work, to focus, and to make sure missing all that I was would be worth it. When I got back, my book would be finished, and I'd be able to snuggle them a little extra.

Free from distraction.

I pulled my laptop onto my lap, staring at the place where I'd left off.

I typed the next sentence, then erased it. Then typed it again. I checked the clock, wondering if it was almost time to break for lunch.

God, I was hungry.

Where were we going for dinner? Had Sam said?

I opened the web browser, searching for local restaurants...

What was I craving?

AN HOUR LATER, I'd gotten lost in the rabbit hole reading reviews for local restaurants. I closed out of the browser, a strange thought occurring to me.

I hadn't Googled what happened that night in a while.

I wondered what information was out there. Were people still talking about it?

I'd taken Grant's last name, both because it was more interesting than my own, but also because I didn't want anyone to drag up my past when they searched for me. There was a time, after it happened, that my days were consumed with reading articles and posts about that night—all the wild theories about my involvement.

I hadn't done that in years, though I'd required therapy to reach that level of self-restraint. Being back at Hotel Lilith had me curious.

Maybe the rumors had all died down, but I needed to know.

If I was going to face everyone again, I needed to be prepared.

Maybe I wouldn't have to face them, after all. I could pack my bags back into my car and drive away without a word, never telling anyone what happened or where I went. I could do it, show up back home, and surprise the kids. And Grant.

I dropped my head. Was that the easy way out?

Maybe I wanted the easy way.

Didn't everyone?

I closed the browser. I wasn't going to check. I was going to face what had happened. I knew the truth. It had all blown over, anyway. It was ten years ago. We were kids.

Grant had moved on.

If he had, surely everyone else had too.

Then again, what if part of the reason Grant wasn't coming was because everyone had revolted against him for moving on, for marrying me? It was impossible, wasn't it? None of his old friends would even attend our wedding, but that was unrelated... They'd always hated me. It had nothing to do with that night. Grant would've told me if he thought they were still holding grudges. He's the one who swore it had all died down finally.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to drown out the noise. I needed to get back to work.

No.

I needed answers.

I opened the browser again, giving up on self-restraint and typed in my old name, then began to search:

Cait Logan, Jamie Lawrence, Spider Lily, South Carolina, Hotel Lilith

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AGE SIXTEEN

Two weeks after Jamie and Grant broke up, things had started to get back to the normal I'd missed. Though we still hadn't completely forgiven her for what she'd done, I was starting to understand how it happened, how she got caught up in it all, and I'd made my peace with the situation.

At the end of the day, Jamie was still my best friend and we'd been through too much to throw it away because of a fight. Granted, we'd had fights in the past, and this hurt worse because it wasn't a fight that caused it. She'd made a choice, and we weren't it.

Sam was less forgiving than I was, more because he'd seen firsthand how badly she'd hurt me than anything else, but he followed my lead. I wasn't blind. I noticed the way her gaze still traveled longingly to the popular table at lunch when she thought we hadn't noticed. I saw the way she watched him walk past us in the hallway.

I knew she was still hurting.

Grant was her first love.

Her first everything.

And he'd broken her heart.

I worried about how Jamie would feel seeing Sam and me together. She knew we were dating, she'd seen us together enough while we weren't friends, there was no way she couldn't have, but when she came back, I felt myself pulling away from Sam. It wasn't that my feelings for him had changed, but I didn't want to rub our happiness in her face when she was so far from happy herself.

Sam seemed to understand, but I knew it hurt him too.

Once Jamie had healed and moved on, things could return to normal between the two of us, but I had to wonder how long that would take. We missed each other terribly and had begun to hang out together behind her back just to spend time alone.

That day, the three of us walked to geometry together—the one class we shared—when Grant rounded a corner, nearly slamming into us. He jumped back, his eyes landing on Jamie.

“Whoa, hey,” he said, hands up as he narrowly missed us. “Hey.” He puffed out a breath and I wanted to drag her away, to protect her from seeing him at all costs, but it would do no good. The damage was done.

“Hey,” she said softly. I watched her shrink in front of him, her self-confidence evaporating at once.

“Excuse us.” I stepped around him, trying to get Jamie to do the same. “Come on.”

“Can I talk to you?” he asked, his eyes narrowing at her as if she were the only person in the crowded hall. Sam and I were as invisible as we’d ever been.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you,” Sam said defensively, trying to nudge Jamie toward me, but she was standing firm.

She blinked, seemingly coming out of a trance, and looked at Sam, then at me.

“Please?” Grant asked, ignoring us. “I just want to talk. I tried to call you last night.”

“I was already asleep,” she admitted. “I texted you this morning.”

What? Why hadn’t she mentioned that? Why would she text him back in the first place? After what he’d done, why would she ever want to talk to him again?

“Come on, Jamie. We’re going to be late,” I said, taking another step away from her. I was trying to get her to follow, but I could see it wasn’t going to happen. Already, there was a distance in her expression, a guarded look to her eyes.

She hardly looked at either of us as she said, “Guys, it’s okay. I’m... Can you give me a second? I’ll catch up with you.”

It was a bad idea, a terrible idea, but what could I do? I couldn’t argue with her. She had to make her own decisions, as much as it pained me.

“I...” I wasn’t budging, but Sam moved around her, taking hold of my

arm and pulling me away. He didn't say a word. Deep down, I knew he could see what was happening, maybe even more than I could. I didn't want to believe it.

We'd finally gotten back to normal. Jamie was back. She'd learned her lesson.

At least, I thought she had. Sam pulled me down the hall as I replayed what had just happened in my head. Why would she need to talk to him after what he'd done? Hadn't he hurt her enough?

I supposed the same could be asked about Jamie and me.

Hadn't she hurt *me* enough?

When she made it to class, twenty minutes late with rosy red cheeks and an undeniable smile on her face, she hardly looked our way.

She was gone again. Back to The Populars. We were being dropped, just like before.

This time, the familiar pain stung worse than before.

This time, I had no one to blame but myself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PRESENT DAY

An hour before Sam and I were supposed to meet for dinner, he texted to say that something had come up with his mom and he wasn't going to be back at the hotel until late.

We agreed to rain check our dinner for the next day and I, unwilling to waste my freshly applied makeup and styled hair, decided to eat dinner in the hotel bar anyway.

This time, I sat at a small table near the back of the lounge, sipping on a glass of sangria as I waited for my soup and salad to be brought out. I looked up at the sound of loud laughter, my stomach dropping when I saw the group of women walking into the room.

Vanessa Austin was in the center of the group, Courtney, Michelle, Amber, and Nikki close behind her. They all looked as if their highlights had been freshly done, each of them dressed as if they were attending a formal event, with full faces of makeup, perfectly manicured nails, and fake lashes. They'd aged well, not that I'd expected anything different, and whatever they were laughing at, apparently it was the funniest thing on earth.

"Where should we sit, girls?" Vanessa asked, her accent more Southern than it had once been. I thought I'd heard that she lived in Texas now. "Bar or a table..." She trailed off, looking around. I scooted farther down in my seat, trying to make myself as small and invisible as possible, but it was no use. The lounge wasn't that big, and within seconds, I heard a gasp.

"Well, if it isn't Cait Du Bois in the flesh," she drawled. I looked up, watching her saunter toward me, both hands out to her sides as if she were coming in for a hug. Her blonde hair was shorter than she'd had it in high

school, and she wore it curled now, rather than straight. She grinned at me with too-white teeth, the pink cocktail dress she was wearing a perfect fit on her thin frame.

The girls followed behind her as I braced myself for whatever was coming.

“Cait, how are you?” she asked, lowering herself into the chair in front of me without an invitation. I was at a bistro table with just two seats, so the other girls stood behind her. “You look great,” she said, waving her hand at me casually.

“I’m, um...fine.” I searched each of their faces for a hint of what they were doing, what they wanted. “Grant’s not here,” I said, making sure they knew they could drop the charade. They didn’t have to play nice for my husband, their old friend.

Vanessa tutted. “He sent me a message saying he wasn’t going to make it. Too bad... I would’ve loved to see him. How is he? Your kids are just the cutest.”

A lump formed in my stomach. Grant had never mentioned talking to Vanessa. Did they talk regularly? Why had he needed to talk to her at all? I tried to force away the jealousy.

We were married.

Happily.

So was Vanessa, as far as I knew.

I was being ridiculous.

“Thanks,” I squeaked out, when I realized she was still waiting for me to say something.

“Are you staying at the hotel?” She leaned farther into the table.

“Mhm.”

“Well, girls, looks like we’ve got a bona fide celebrity in our midst. Who knew? You know, I tell everyone I knew you way back when and they never believe me. I have to pull out the yearbook and prove it half the time. Can you believe it?” She pulled out her phone. “Do you mind if we get a selfie? My mother-in-law is one of your biggest fans. She’d just die if she were here.”

Finally, I understood what was happening. Were they really going to pretend everything in our past hadn’t happened because of who I was now? I had half a mind to swat the phone from her hand and laugh in her face. She

may have forgotten how terrible she was to me then, but I hadn't.

Instead, I straightened in my seat slightly, still shell-shocked at what was happening. As she held her phone up, I found myself smiling, posing for the picture dutifully. She snapped three pictures in a row, and I couldn't help noticing that, while I wasn't as bright and shiny as she was in the reflected image on her phone screen, I was every bit as pretty.

As I'd grown up, I'd learned to properly apply makeup and take care of my hair. My acne had cleared up and the weight I'd gained had added shape to my cheek bones. No longer were my features so sharp and gaunt.

Now, I looked like I belonged in a picture next to her.

Actually, I looked like the kind of person Vanessa would request to have a picture with. The kind she bragged about knowing.

When she pulled her phone down, looking over the pictures, she uploaded one to social media, tapping a button to add our location and tagging me.

"Oh, actually—" I said, but she'd already posted it before I realized what was happening.

"Something wrong?" she asked, one perfectly shaped brow raised.

"I just try not to post my location. For safety." *You know, because I'm a celebrity.* I didn't add that last part in, but we both knew it was implied.

She clicked her tongue. "Shoot. I didn't even think about that." She didn't offer to take the photo down, and merely slid her phone into the clutch she was carrying and smiled. "Have you already ordered? We were just going to eat a quick dinner and catch up. I'd love for you to join us. It's been so long."

I was instantly conflicted, part of me yearning to talk to them, to feel included, while the other part of me just wanted to get away. I knew who they really were. I knew the only reason they were talking to me now was because I was *Cait Du Bois*, not because I was Cait.

"I've already ordered, yeah. Maybe another time."

"Well, that's alright. I'm sure they wouldn't mind bringing it to a table where we can all fit." She gestured toward a table on the far side of the room with eight chairs. "Come on, I'm sure you have the best stories to tell. We have so much to catch up on."

I swallowed, taking another sip of my drink and looking at the women standing behind her. I recognized the judgment in their eyes, the worry and fear that had been there for ten years now. They were afraid of me, just like they were before. Suddenly, my skin was covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

“Actually, I should probably get back up to my room. Maybe we could ___”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” she said, her voice as sweet as honey. She stood as I did, looping her arm through mine.

“We’ve been dying to talk to you,” Courtney agreed, moving to the other side. “Haven’t we, girls?”

“Yeah, dying,” Michelle said.

“Grant didn’t tell Vanessa if you’d be here, so we didn’t know,” Amber added.

“But we hoped you’d be here,” Nikki chimed in. “How cool is it that we know a real-life celebrity?”

They led me to the table across the room, practically sitting me down as if I were a toddler, then took their seats, watching me with a strange curiosity.

“So, tell us everything,” Vanessa prompted, tapping her fingers on the table.

“Is it true your last book is getting turned into a movie?” Amber asked. “I read it. It was pretty good.”

“Oh, um, thanks... It’s been optioned, yeah. Nothing may come of it.”

“A lot of books get picked up and nothing comes of it,” Vanessa explained, and I heard the hint of condescension in her tone. “My husband works in the film industry, so I get it.”

The women nodded along as if she were explaining a complicated concept.

“Really?” I asked. “I didn’t know that.”

“He was an actor in college,” she said, wrinkling her nose patronizingly. “Just small, independent stuff. You know, he never really wanted to get into the big Hollywood scene. It was about the art for him, not the fame. Now he’s a reporter for our area in Texas. Kind of a local celebrity.” She bounced her head side to side with feigned humility. “You might’ve heard of him. Brock Stewart, with Channel Sixteen.”

I shook my head. I hadn’t heard of him. Then again, who knew local news anchors outside of their own town unless they had a clip go viral for something embarrassing or hilarious? It wasn’t like the man was Don Lemon.

Without missing a beat, Vanessa’s phone was back out and she pulled up a photo of her husband. Not a selfie or portrait she’d taken, but a shot of him sitting behind a news desk she’d found on the internet.

He was classically handsome with a strong jaw and dark eyes. Attractive enough to catch people's attention, but not enough to outshine his wife. I had the vague suspicion that was exactly how Vanessa wanted it.

I nodded, unsure of what to say. "So is that why you moved to Texas?"

She looked almost offended that I didn't have more to say about her husband but recovered quickly. "Yes, well, L.A. just wasn't for us. And Spider Lily is much too small. Brock grew up in Texas and we wanted to be close to his family. His daddy's a big cattle rancher down there. Brock wanted to be nearby to help out." I stared at the diamond bracelet on her wrist, sure that wasn't the only reason they'd moved back. Vanessa had grown up with money, and from the sound of it, Brock might've come from even more than she had.

"So, what's Grant up to these days?" she asked, propping her chin up in her palm.

"He's in real estate." I wrapped one arm around myself, suddenly cold. What was taking my soup so long?

"Of course he is," she said, though I didn't know what she meant by it.

"What about you? What do you do? All of you..."

"I'm a hairdresser," she said, shrugging one shoulder. "You know, just for something to do. Brock didn't want me working at all. He makes plenty of money, of course. But I didn't want to just be sittin' around the house. I needed something to do." She wrinkled her nose again with a laugh.

"And the rest of you?"

"I'm still in town. I teach at the high school," Courtney said, which made total sense. Of course she wouldn't want to leave the place where she was once the queen bee.

"And I work at the school with her. I took Jan's old job," Amber said. Jan had been the old school secretary. I didn't even know she'd left.

"And I work at the hospital as a respiratory therapist," Michelle told me. Then threw in, "I married Cameron, I don't know if you know. He's a lawyer now."

"I didn't know," I told her. "Congratulations."

"And Nikki's a stay-at-home mom," Vanessa told me before Nikki had the chance.

"I have three girls," Nikki said, looking slightly irritated at Vanessa's condescending tone. "I coach their dance team."

“That’s really sweet,” I said, trying to offer her a small smile. It felt like we’d stepped into an alternate universe. Was this how Jamie felt back then? Thinking of her made my chest tight. I suddenly couldn’t get enough oxygen.

As a waiter rounded the corner, my bowl of soup in his hands, I scooted away from the table, making space for him to set it down. He looked around, trying to decide where I was, then, his gaze landing on me, zipped across the room and placed my dinner in front of me.

“Sorry about the wait,” he said, offering no explanation for it.

“Oh, that’s o—”

“We haven’t been waited on,” Vanessa said, cutting me off. “Are you the only one working or something?”

The man appeared caught off guard. “No. Sorry about that. I can help you now... Are you all ready to order?”

“Obviously,” she said, flicking her hair over her shoulder. The women placed their orders and he jotted them onto a notepad from the pocket of his apron, then dashed away, taking the order of a table a few feet from us.

Vanessa rolled her eyes at him. “You would think they could afford to hire a few extra people, wouldn’t you? How long had you been waiting?”

“Oh, not long,” I said, brushing off her concern. “It’s no big deal.”

“He doesn’t know who you are. I’ll bet if we told him, they’d be in a lot more of a hurry,” she said, her eyes widening.

I lifted my spoon to my lips, blowing on it to cool the liquid down without responding to her. As much as she’d tried to fool me, Vanessa was still who she’d always been. She only had use for the people who could benefit her.

Feeling ill, I forced the first bite into my mouth. Why had I ever agreed to join them? It was obvious I didn’t belong with them. Where was Sam?

“So, I’ve been dying to know,” Courtney said, patting her hands on the table and drawing my attention to her. “Did you start writing thrillers because of what happened? Like, was it your way of...processing everything?”

I furrowed my brow, nearly choking on my soup. “Excuse me?”

She glanced at the other girls, as if waiting to see if they’d back her up. “Well, you know, with all the rumors... I just thought, well, it’s fitting, isn’t it? After we all lived through something so awful. I know we’re not the same. She was your friend, you were the one who...well, you know.” She shivered. “I can’t even imagine.”

She seemed to have forgotten Jamie was their friend, too. I swallowed, fighting back against the soup that was now fighting me. “I, um...” I stood suddenly. “I should go.”

“What? Why?” Vanessa asked, looking shocked.

“I...” I didn’t bother explaining, standing up from the table and hurrying toward the bar. The bartender was deep in conversation with a young couple, but I patted the bar, not in the mood for manners. “Excuse me!” I looked over my shoulder, terrified that they’d come after me, but to my relief, they’d all stayed put in their seats, and I saw hints of smiles on their faces. “Can I get my check for dinner?” I asked when the bartender appeared in front of me.

“Your waiter would be the one to...”

“I have to go. *Now*. I just had soup and sangria. Can you get it for me? Please?” I begged, already pulling out my card. He looked unsure.

“Give me a second.”

I could hear the rumble of whispers and giggles coming from the table, and when I looked over my shoulder, they were all watching me. Minutes later, he returned with my bill and I paid it hastily, my entire body trembling with jitters. Was this their plan? Had they meant to upset me? Were they only being nice to throw me off their trail?

I wasn’t Jamie.

I’d thought I couldn’t be fooled by their games, but I was wrong. I understood how easy it was to get sucked into their world. I wouldn’t fall for it again, though.

I wouldn’t.

I didn’t want to end up like her.

With my card back in my wallet, I left the lounge, trying to calm myself down. As I rounded the corner, I saw another familiar face, and somehow, as impossible as it seemed, my stomach sank even lower.

“Hey!” the woman from the pool earlier called, spying me as she jogged across the lobby. She was dressed in jeans and a plain shirt, her wild hair tied up in a ponytail.

Suddenly, I felt dizzy. The room around me felt smaller. I couldn’t breathe.

The woman had reached me, her expression filled with concern. “Whoa. Are you okay? You look like you’re going to pass out.”

I opened my mouth, unable to speak, and she took hold of my arm.

“Come here. Sit down.” She pulled me to a chair in the center of the lobby and began assessing me, touching my forehead gently with the back of her hand, then holding my cheeks and staring into each of my eyes. She placed two fingers on my wrist. “Your heart is racing. Just breathe... Have you ever had a panic attack before?”

Was that what this was?

Finally, I found my voice. “It’s...not a panic attack.” At least, I didn’t think so. My chest felt so tight. Constricted. I forced a breath from my lips. “I’m okay.” I pulled my arm from her hand gently. It was hard to imagine how I must look to her, but *out of my mind* was at the top of the list of possibilities. “I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to scare you. I just had a bit of a run-in with someone from my past. It was awkward to say the least.”

The worry disappeared from her expression and she leaned back. “An ex?”

“Not exactly,” I said, swiping my hand across my forehead. “I’m really sorry. That was dramatic.” What in the world had come over me? I thought I had a better handle on myself than that. I’d let their words, their accusatory glances, send me back to those days. The darkest time of my life.

“It’s okay. I’m sorry I grabbed you. I’m a nurse, and I just sort of—” She waved her hands in the air. “Went into action.”

“I appreciate it,” I said. “Truly.”

“No problem.” She was still watching me warily. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, it was just...” I shivered. There was no way I was going to get into this with a stranger. “Nothing. Sorry.” I chuckled nervously. “I swear, I’m not usually this all over the place.”

“You’re fine,” she said, her tone gentle. “Look, I don’t want to overstep, but if you want to talk, I’d be happy to listen. Not as a fan, but as a friend. You look like you could use one.”

She was blunt, but in the moment, I appreciated it. I did need a friend. And the only one I had left wasn’t there.

“You don’t have anything you should be doing?”

“My husband’s on a video call, so I have to be out of our suite. I was just heading out to grab dinner by myself. Want to join me?”

I was never one for starting conversations with strangers, but the truth was, I desperately didn’t want to be alone. “That sounds wonderful, actually.”

She stood from her chair, smiling down at me. “Perfect. Let’s get out of here.” And I followed her, without fear or hesitation, without a single thought.

I followed her out the door and toward everything bad that was getting ready to happen. I didn’t see a single part of it coming.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AGE SEVENTEEN

I pulled my headphones from my ears when my bedroom door opened. Mom peered her head inside the room, her brows raised with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"Someone's here to see you," she said, looking as gleeful as a kid on Christmas morning.

I sat up, dusting chip crumbs from my shirt and dog-eared the page in my book. "Huh?" I pulled the headphones completely off my head and stared at her. "Who?" Sam was out of town for the remainder of the summer and no one else ever came to see me.

"It's Grant Du Bois," she said, and I finally understood the pride and disbelief in her eyes. But why would she ever tease me like that?

I snorted, lying back down. "Ha ha."

"I'm serious." She came into the room and shut it behind her, pressing her back to the wood. "He's in the living room with your dad. Do you want me to send him in?"

I sat up, for the first time questioning if she could be serious. "Is this a joke or what? Because it's really not funny. Is Dad planning to prank me if I walk out there or something?" I thought back to the many times it had happened. Dad thought he was hilarious. Always buying whoopie cushions and fake dog poop to try and trick me.

"No." Her tone was hurried, as if she was waiting for me to catch up. "He's really out there. Listen." She cracked the door slightly and we became still. For a moment, I didn't hear anything. Then, when I was getting ready to tell her to knock it off, I heard a voice.

A voice that sounded oddly like Grant Du Bois.

But it was impossible.

Grant Du Bois didn't know I existed.

I shot up from my bed, looking around my room in horror. There were random books and magazines spread across the floor, a pile of dirty clothes in the far corner. The half-eaten bag of chips lay open on my messy bed, atop sheets that hadn't been washed all summer. I looked at myself in the mirror, my wavy hair uncombed and greasy, my face unwashed.

"Mom, I can't see him right now. What does he want? You have to tell him to go away. I'm disgusting."

"Oh, you aren't disgusting." She waved off my concern with her lips pursed, starting to stack up the books on the floor. "Just change clothes and run a comb through your hair. You look fine."

"What is he doing here?"

"I don't know." She stood, swiping her knees clean and gathering the dirty dishes from my desk and bag of chips from the bed. "You'll have to ask him. But I suggest you don't keep him waiting long. Your dad's entertaining him right now, so you can imagine how that's going."

Then, as if she hadn't just dropped a bomb on my life, she made her way toward the door on the opposite side of the room. "I'm going to take these to the kitchen and then I'm sending him back, okay? Hurry up with whatever you need to do."

I shot into action before she'd left, tearing off my shirt and tossing it, along with the entire pile of dirty clothes, into my closet before shutting the closet door to hide the mess. I pulled clean clothes out of my dresser, swiped on fresh deodorant, and rushed to the bathroom to brush my teeth and pull my hair up.

I needed time to put on makeup. There was a pimple on my cheek and my eyes were dark from mascara I hadn't washed off a few days ago. I was disgusting and the universe was cruel.

Without much time, I rushed back into my bedroom, made the bed, and sat down, holding my breath as the door opened seconds later.

"Caity, Grant's here to see you," Mom said, as if we hadn't just talked about it. When she laid eyes on me, her expression beamed with approval. I stood when Grant came into view, an easy smile on his face.

"Hey," he said, waving a hand in the air. Mom backed up, closing the

door behind her. Some might call her a cool mom, and she was, but it was just that she trusted me implicitly. She knew Sam and I were still dating, but we'd been friends my whole life. We'd spent time together in my bedroom, alone with the door shut, all my life.

After she found out we were dating, we had a long talk about keeping the door shut and how she reserved the right to walk in at any time, but her rules remained what they'd always been. As long as I didn't give her a reason not to trust me, she would.

And, since I had a boyfriend and Grant was a creature from another planet who, of course, had no interest in me, I guess the same rules applied for him.

He watched her shut the door before speaking. "Your parents are crazy cool."

I clutched my hands in front of my waist to hide their shaking and nodded. "Oh, thanks."

He stood awkwardly next to the door, his gaze trailing around the room, and it felt as if I were standing naked in front of him. My heart raced in my chest, my face the temperature of the sun. "I like your room, too." He pointed to the bunk bed I'd had my entire life, the top bunk filled with stuffed animals I was now mortified to see him staring at.

"Thanks. It's, uh, it's kind of a mess..." I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear, several strands already coming loose from the ponytail. When my hair began to curl, it was nearly impossible to tame it. "I wasn't expecting company."

"Right." His eyes fell back to meet mine. "Sorry. I shouldn't have just stopped by, but I didn't know your phone number."

"No, it's cool," I said, trying *so hard* to pretend it was cool and not terrifying. "Um, is there a reason you're here or..." *Or did I hit my head?*

I studied his perfect face, the hair that hung in his eyes, the exact right combination of messy and styled. When he met my eyes again, I looked away.

"Not that it's not cool for you to stop by, it's just..." I didn't know what I was trying to say. A lump had formed in my throat, and I was sure no oxygen was making it to my brain with the way all my thoughts had seemed to stop. "Do you want to sit down?" I gestured toward the seat at my desk. "Feel free."

Appearing relieved, he pulled out the white metal chair as if it were the most normal thing in the world. As if this sort of thing—Grant and me just hanging out—happened all the time. He sat down on the pink cushion Mom and I had handsewn when we'd taken a sewing class together a few years ago.

I claimed my spot on the edge of my bed, suddenly very aware of the tan lines on my feet from my flip-flops, the chipped polish on my big toe, and the fact that I hadn't shaved my legs in more than a week.

"So..." He cleared his throat, drawing my gaze back to him. "Sorry, you're probably wondering why I'm here."

"Uh, yeah." I chuckled, tilting my head to the side. "You could say that."

Do you frequently show up to the houses of people you've never spoken more than a few words to?

He held his hands together in his lap, looking just as nervous as I felt. Why was he nervous? Didn't he know who he was?

"It's about Jamie."

My heart sank. "What about her?"

"Nothing bad," he assured me. I reached for the bottle of water on my floor, my mouth suddenly too dry. "Her birthday is in a few weeks."

I'd been trying not to think about that.

"Mhm."

"I know the two of you aren't super close anymore," he went on. "And I know that's partially because of me." His hand went to his chest earnestly, though I wanted to tell him it was one hundred percent because of him. "I hope you know I never meant for Jamie to stop hanging out with you and Sam. She still talks about you all the time."

Yeah. We've heard.

I didn't say it out loud, but I didn't need to. His expression changed as if he'd heard the thought.

"I mean, she still really cares about you. And I really care about her."

Was he there to convince me to be friends with Jamie again? Because that ball was firmly in her court. He was waiting for me to say something, but I had no idea what that was.

"I'll always care about Jamie. She was my best friend for a long time." The thought occurred to me then that this might be a trick. That maybe he was trying to set me up to say something bad about her.

I wouldn't.

"That's good to hear because I want to plan something special for her birthday and I need your help."

My head jerked backward involuntarily, as if I'd been slapped. Whatever I'd been expecting him to say, that wasn't it. "My help?"

"Yeah, yours." He chuckled in that casual way that sent warmth spreading through my stomach. How was it possible for one person to be so effortlessly hot? I felt as if I couldn't breathe. Was this how Jamie felt all the time? "And Sam's, too, if he's up for it."

"But I don't understand." I looked out my window as a car drove past on the highway, half expecting to see someone with a camera waiting for me to embarrass myself. This all felt like a setup. There was nothing I could offer Grant. "Why me?"

"Because you know her the best. Even better than I know her. And I want to surprise her with something I know she'll like."

"Grant, I haven't spoken to Jamie in more than a year. I'm not sure how I can help you. She's different now. Whatever she likes, I'm sure Vanessa and Courtney could tell you more."

His lips spread into a grimace. "I tried to ask them, but they're..." He hung his head, staring down at his hands. "They're still not that close to Jamie. I mean, they like her, sure, but they really only hang out with her if I'm there." He winced. "Please don't tell her I said that. She thinks they're friends, and...I guess they are. They're just really into keeping things the way they were. The originals of the group, ya know? They would never say that to her, or to me, but I know it's how they feel." He shrugged, looking at me with pleading eyes. Something told me they *had* said that to him already. "It's just... They aren't what you were to her. It's complicated."

It wasn't complicated, not really. He was saying what should've been inherently obvious to Jamie. "Don't get me wrong, I'd never let them be rude to her. I don't think they'd want to. They just don't see Jamie like I see her."

I edged closer toward him, practically off the bed. "How *do* you see her?"

He sighed, fidgeting with the computer mouse so my screen came to life. I winced at the collage of Maroon 5 photographs I had saved as my background.

"She's special, you know?" Apparently unable to meet my eye, he continued fidgeting with things on my desk. His finger grazed a stack of

erasers. “I’ve never met anyone as real as her. I mean, you know how she is. She’s funny and, like...crazy smart. We talk about real things, you know? Like life and our futures and college and getting the hell out of Spider Lily and...”

He’d found my stack of CDs, shuffling through them without permission. “It’s just different with her. It doesn’t feel superficial. It feels honest.”

He met my eye for half a second, asking if I understood without a single word, then looked away again. “I know she probably told you how badly I hurt her before, when we broke up, and the truth was... I’ve only done...*that* with two other girls.” His cheeks were so red, it looked like he might explode. “None that I cared about like I care about Jamie.”

He huffed out a breath. “I have no idea why I’m telling you all of this.” The laugh that escaped his throat was nervous. “I guess I’m trying to earn your approval.”

“My approval doesn’t matter to Jamie. She’s not mine anymore. She’s yours. She doesn’t care what I think.”

The color faded from his cheeks and he could finally look at me again. When he did, he looked horrified. “Is that what you think?”

“Oh, come on, Grant, it’s obvious.”

He shook his head. “No, Cait.” My name on his lips sent chills down my spine. “It’s not true. She may not say it, but Jamie still cares that you approve of what she does.”

“Obviously not, because I haven’t approved of what she does for a long time.” The words were out of my mouth before I’d meant for them to be.

To my surprise, he smiled. “She said you were blunt.”

I didn’t respond.

“Look, it’s my fault she’s not around anymore, and I want to fix that. I know she’s miserable without you guys and, even if she puts up a front, she misses hanging out with you. I want to plan a party for her birthday, with your help, and then I want you and Sam to be there.”

“You want me to help you plan a party and then attend it? Are you drunk? Vanessa would have a fit.”

“If it would make you feel better, I won’t invite Vanessa,” he said firmly. “Or anyone who isn’t going to be nice to you.”

“Which is, like...” I pretended to count my fingers. “Oh, wait, *all* of your friends.” I felt cool tears gathering in my eyes and stood, approaching the

mirror to keep him from seeing them. I hated feeling so vulnerable. “No thanks, Grant. Honestly. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, but I don’t think Jamie would want this. She’s happy with you. With The Populars.”

He stood, moving to stand next to me. As he got close, I could smell his cologne—delicious and masculine. It was woodsy, but smoky, and I wanted to bathe in it.

There was something seriously wrong with me.

“Is that what you call us? The Populars?”

I raised my brow. “It’s better than *the assholes*.”

His laughter was genuine, as if I’d caught him off guard. “Fair enough.” I liked making him laugh and hated myself for liking it.

“What do you call us? The Losers?” I challenged him, trying to remind myself why I didn’t want to feel this way. They were harmful. Rude. They’d made my life hell.

“No, of course not,” he said with a scowl. Then, he gave a conceding nod. “Well, I can’t speak for the others, but I don’t. I wouldn’t.”

I couldn’t help rolling my eyes in disbelief. I thought back to the day in the store when they’d knocked the clothes onto the floor and tried to force Sam to pick them up.

That was who Grant was.

Not whatever this was.

He was only being nice to me because he wanted my help.

“I’m serious,” he said, taking another step toward me. Our shoulders were practically touching in front of the window as he tried to get me to look at him. “Cait, I know we haven’t always been the nicest to you, and I’m sorry for that. But Vanessa and I broke up because I was tired of the cattiness. Most of us are, even the ones who won’t stand up to her. I think that’s why she has such a problem with Jamie. It’s like Jamie shows us how things could be. She gets along with everyone. She’s fun. She doesn’t try too hard. Vanessa’s jealous of her because she’s afraid of her.”

“I doubt that. Vanessa’s always been Vanessa. And, whether or not you broke up, you dated her for a long time. And, you know, it wasn’t Vanessa who teased Sam in the locker room in seventh grade, Grant.” I turned to face him finally, my defiance resurfacing. As handsome as he was, as intoxicating as he smelled, I couldn’t allow myself to forget who he was. I wouldn’t make the mistakes Jamie had. “That was you. You and Cameron and all the other

guys.”

He furrowed his brows as if he had no idea what I was talking about. Maybe he didn't. When you torment people on a daily basis, I guess it's easy to lose track of specifics.

“I don't remember that,” he said plainly, and when I scoffed, he cut me off. “But I'm sure I did it. You're right. Vanessa didn't force me to do all the stupid stuff I've done. And I don't have to tell you how awful I've been. But I've changed. Honestly, Cait, I have. Maybe you don't see that, but have I teased you or Sam in years? Even before I started dating Jamie, wasn't I nicer to you after freshman year?”

He scratched his temple. “I'm not trying to make excuses, but seventh grade was the year we found out my dad was sick. I was awful to you before that, I know, and when that happened, I was probably worse.”

He shook his head, turning to walk away from me. “I was just a kid, you know? My dad was dying and my mom was falling apart and my brothers were no help. I didn't know how to handle that. I did it all wrong. I hate thinking about who I was then, but after he died—” He sniffled, and when I looked over at him, I was shocked to see him swipe away a tear on his cheek.

I darted my gaze away in an instant, trying to give him privacy. “After he died, everything changed. I didn't want to be who I was. I wanted to make him proud. All the pain I'd been feeling, I didn't want to make anyone else feel that.”

I folded my arms across my chest, my heart breaking at his story. Maybe that was what he wanted. Maybe this was all part of the plan. In truth, I knew Grant's dad died just before freshman year started, but I didn't know it affected him so badly. I'd never seen any evidence of that.

“I broke up with Vanessa right after, and I've tried—maybe you haven't seen it—but I swear to you I've tried to be better. I may not be doing it right, hell, I don't know, but I'm doing all I can.”

“I'm sorry about your dad.” I kept my tone gentle, moving back toward the bed so I could sit across from him again. “I really am, Grant. I can't even imagine.”

His jaw was tight, his eyes glassy and red. When he spoke, his voice cracked. “It was really tough.” He laughed through his tears, looking down. “God, this was not what I planned when I came over here.”

“It's okay to cry...” I assured him, though he didn't need my permission,

did he? He bounced his head up and down, still not looking at me.

“I’d never known anyone else who’d dealt with such a big loss. Not really. And then when Jamie and I got paired up for a project in class, she mentioned losing her sister.”

Tia.

Sometimes I still forgot Tia had passed away. We were young, still in fourth grade, and she was a few years older. I barely remembered her. Jamie rarely talked about her.

“It felt good not to have to seem so tough for once. Jamie let me... She... She let me grieve in a way I’d never been allowed to before. Not even with my family. I always felt like I had to be tough, but she didn’t make me feel that way. I don’t know if that makes any sense. And I don’t know if she even knows that. In some ways, she’s the one who helped me see how messed up everything was. Here was this girl I’d been awful to most of her life, and she was helping me.”

He looked up finally, a crooked, sad smile on his lips. “Like you’re doing now. I still don’t know why she gave me the time of day, but she did. So, I don’t care if Vanessa gets mad. I don’t care if she turns the whole school against me. I want to make Jamie’s birthday special, and you’re the only one who can help me with that.”

I remained still for a moment, processing all that he was telling me. What exactly was it that he wanted from me? And how did I know I could trust him?

It was true, now that I thought about it, that Grant had been nicer to us since we’d entered high school, but he still hung out with people who weren’t. Jamie, too. Neither of them stuck up for us when we needed them to.

I owed them nothing.

“And I’ll apologize to Sam, too. About the locker room. I owe him that. And I can understand if he still doesn’t want to help, or if you both don’t, but I had to ask. Not for myself, but for her.”

I contemplated what he was saying, turning my hands over in my lap. “Well, that’s all very sweet, but Sam is in Iowa visiting his grandparents for the summer. He won’t be here to help regardless. That just leaves me and, as much as I want to, I really don’t know what good I’d be to you. Like I said, I hardly know her anymore.”

“Anything you can do to help would be amazing. Her family gets back

from vacation at the end of the month, so I don't have a lot of time to prepare. I rented a little cabin for that day so we could have a bonfire, and I was thinking we could do something like a food truck, maybe, or a cookout and, like, a cake..."

It sounded like a lot of work for a birthday party. "How much money is your mom giving you for it?"

He twisted his mouth in thought. "Mom isn't giving me anything. She's not..." Appearing conflicted, he shook his head. "I'm paying for it. But I'll figure it out. Whatever you think we should do, I'll cover it."

He didn't need to say any more to tell me that his mom didn't approve of him and Jamie. They were loaded with money, so if she wasn't helping with the party, my guess was Jamie wasn't good enough for her, just like she wasn't good enough for The Populars. Now it made sense why he'd come to me. He had no one else. Not his family, not his friends. Somehow, that made me feel both powerful and pitiful.

He would've asked anyone else if he had an option. I was his last resort.

"S'mores," I said, thinking aloud. "She loves s'mores. And a food truck would be nice, but expensive. You could easily do a cookout instead."

"Okay, s'mores. Easy enough. And a cookout. Thank you. See, you're already helping."

"I'm not going to go," I cautioned him. "I know what you've said about her wanting me there—which is debatable—but even if she does, I'm not going to be there, alone, while you two hang out with your friends. But I will help you if I can."

"You wouldn't be alone. You'd have me." Heat exploded in my chest. "Us." The heat was gone. "Both of us. I promise you, Cait, we wouldn't let you feel left out."

"Oh, gee, thanks, Grant." I flicked an exaggerated grin his way. "No, I'm not your charity case, and I won't hang around somewhere I'm not wanted —"

"But you are—"

I stood. "I'm not going to change my mind. But, like I said, I will help you. Under one condition."

His exuberant smile was almost contagious.

Almost.

He shot up from the chair, standing directly in front of me. "Name it."

“You can’t ever tell Jamie I was involved. Or Sam, for that matter. Or anyone. Whatever I help you with has to stay between us.”

He cocked his head to the side, worry filling his expression. “Can I ask why? Why wouldn’t you want them to know you did a nice thing? Jamie, at least.”

I sighed. It was complicated. So, so complicated. For one thing, Sam would tell me I shouldn’t do it. He’d tell me I was asking to get hurt and that Jamie didn’t deserve it. He’d try to protect me, but refuse to say *I told you so* when it blew up in my face, even if he was thinking it. I didn’t want him to know how pitiful I was.

And, with Jamie, it was much the same. I didn’t want to give her something else to hold power over me. I didn’t want her to think—*know*—I still cared. I would help Grant because he’d asked, because I was having a hard time turning down the chance to feel seen by him, and because it was what Jamie deserved at one time. It would give me closure on our friendship, knowing that I’d done all I could. That I hadn’t been malicious, even when some people might say it was warranted.

Then, I’d walk away from it all with my head held high.

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” I said gently. “I’m saying I’ll help you and you can take all the credit. Do we have a deal or not?” He watched me outstretch my hand toward him, still apparently unsure, but after a moment, his palm slid against mine. Electricity pulsed through me under his touch, but I didn’t let him see it.

My face was stony. Serious.

It was a business transaction. Nothing more.

“Deal,” he confirmed. “Thank you, Cait.”

“Whatever you say, Grant.” I played it cool until he left minutes later, having exchanged phone numbers and asking if he could stop by the next day to start planning.

Once he was out of my room, I flopped down on the bed, reliving the past hour in my head. It didn’t seem real, and yet everything about it was all too real.

What did Grant have planned?

Was he going to embarrass me somehow?

Could it still be some sort of trick?

My guard remained up, but I could feel it slipping. Was it because he

smelled good? Because he could make my stomach flip with just one look?
Or because he was earnest about what he'd said?

I couldn't decide.

Looking back now, that was always my downfall.

Indecision.

I didn't know what was real and what wasn't. Who was being honest and who was ready to betray me. I wanted to see the good in those I trusted, even when they proved me wrong, but my wall was a mile high for those I didn't trust, even when they fought to prove me right.

In the end, that character flaw—the inability to make a decision on the people in my life—cost me everything. And it was all my fault.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PRESENT DAY

The woman was easy to talk to. Easier than I'd expected, actually. Part of that was because I was so frazzled, but I knew part of it was because she was a casual talker. The kind of person you can talk to for five minutes and feel like you've known them your whole life.

"I swear," she was saying, trying to conceal her laughter. "He believed it until we were teenagers. He'd always sift through the watermelon because he just knew if he ate the seed, it would grow in his belly. No one ever told him differently."

"Well, my husband told our kids that if they eat their carrots enough, they'll be able to see in the dark." I rolled my eyes with delight. "I've never seen them clear their plates so fast."

She shook her head, pressing a finger to her lips. "Okay, you've got to tell me more of these tips for when I have kids. I need to be writing them down."

"They're so much fun." My tone was wistful. I missed them so much. Being away hadn't gotten any easier, despite my hope that it would. I wondered briefly why the woman didn't already have kids. She was married and had to be in her late twenties or early thirties like I was. Initially I'd assumed she didn't want them, or perhaps had struggled to have them—she'd mentioned being childless earlier in the conversation when I brought Lucy and Hudson up—but now I didn't know what to think. It would be rude to ask, but she was obviously still planning to have them at some point, wasn't she?

"Do you plan to have any more?" She lifted the wineglass to her lips, resting the edge of it on her angled tooth.

“Oh, no. Twins run in my husband’s family. I know that’s not technically how it works but, with our luck, if we tried for any more, we’d wind up with another set of them—four kiddos total—and I’m not sure how we manage it with two some days.”

“I understand that. I was an only child, and I don’t know how my parents handled me,” she said with a loud laugh. She ran her fork over her pasta thoughtfully. “Do you have any siblings?”

“No. I was an only child, too.”

“Did it make you really close to your parents? Most only children end up with great relationships with their parents, but I tell you, I did not win that lottery.”

She said it with a teasing tone, but I sensed pain behind her words.

“I’m so sorry...” I studied her, waiting to see if she was going to elaborate. To tell her the truth now—that I had an amazing relationship with my parents—felt especially cruel, but I wasn’t going to lie, either. “My parents and I had our problems, like every teenager, but I’m pretty lucky to have them. We’re much closer now than ever, but we’ve really always had an easy relationship.”

“That’s great.” I wasn’t sure if she genuinely meant it, but I saw no hint of sarcasm in her expression. She leaned forward, as if she were going to tell me a secret. “So, are you ready to talk about what happened back there? Why you seemed so upset? I don’t mean to pry, I just...” She tilted her head side to side. “Well, you looked like you’d seen a ghost.” The chuckle that came from her throat was uncomfortable, and she shoved a forkful of food into her mouth to overcompensate.

I swallowed, instantly brought back to the moment. I shouldn’t tell Anna the truth. I hardly knew her and I didn’t need to talk about what happened. I didn’t need to talk about anything. It would only make things worse.

But, as she stared at me, wanting an answer, I found myself wanting to give her one.

Even if it was just half of one.

“The truth is, I’m in town for my high school reunion and I ran into some girls who were...” I inhaled through my teeth. “Well, we weren’t exactly best friends.”

She tapped her finger against her fork knowingly. “Mean girls?” Then her brows shot up. “Or were *you* the mean girl?”

I smoothed my hands over my dress. “No, definitely not. I would’ve had to be popular to be mean, and I was far from that.”

“No way.” She turned her head slightly, giving me a devious side-eye. “I don’t believe that. You’re *gorgeous*. How could you have been anything but popular?”

I touched my hair, then my neck, looking away as embarrassment overcame me. “Well, trust me, it’s true. My hair was a frizzy mess back then, and I had horrible acne and braces most of my life. I had two close friends, then...then one best friend. I was kind of a loner, I guess. But we all have our burdens to bear. Luckily, I grew up and grew out of my awkward phase.” Desperately wanting to change the subject, I nodded toward her. “What about you? Were you *popular*?” I said the word with a mocking sincerity, batting my eyes and wiggling my shoulders at her.

“No,” she said, her vacant expression draining the pleasantness from our atmosphere at once. “Not really.” She was silent for a while, staring at her plate, then shook her head, as if pulling herself from a trance, and smiled at me shyly. “Oh well, what did they know?” She lifted her half-empty glass in the air. “Here’s to proving everyone wrong.”

Relieved to feel the tension fade at once, I lifted my own glass and tapped it against hers with a growing smile. “Yes, here’s to that. And to us.”

“To us.”

With that, we drank to the truths we’d said aloud and to the many we’d kept to ourselves.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AGE SEVENTEEN

“Perfume or a book?” Grant was out of breath as he jogged across the cabin toward me. I stared down at him, trying to understand what he’d said.

“What?” I asked, just as it hit me. “Oh...for her present?” Jamie was arriving in town the next day. Surely he already had her gift picked out...

“Yeah. I’m torn between the two. There’s this perfume she really likes... Daisy, I think it’s called. But she’s been talking about the new book in a series she wants to read, too.” His eyes traveled over the banner I’d been hanging, nodding with approval. “That looks really nice.”

“Thanks,” I said, climbing down from the ladder I’d been standing on and swiping my hands over my shorts. “Actually, I think I’m done. Unless there’s anything else you can think of.”

“Besides telling me what gift to get her?”

“Right.” I remembered what we’d been talking about. “Well, before I would’ve said get her a book, but I don’t know anymore. Maybe she’d like perfume more. I feel like that should be your call.”

“If you had to choose though?”

I sighed, scratching my forehead. “Um...”

“I’m sorry. I know I’m driving you crazy. I just trust your judgment.”

“Go with the book then. Two books if you can swing it. She reads fast, er...well, she used to, anyway.”

He gave an affirmative nod, practically bouncing in place. “Okay, awesome. Book. Two books. Got it.”

He was obviously nervous, and it made me sad for him. He’d worked so

hard, hard enough it had even shocked me. I'd drawn conclusions about Grant that had little to do with what I knew of him and everything to do with who I expected him to be.

Like the other guys in our grade, I thought he'd be a slacker, afraid of his emotions, and unwilling to do anything for anyone else. But this surprise for Jamie was magnificent. As he'd promised he would, he'd rented a small cabin just outside of town. He had enough s'mores ingredients to feed the town, and we'd put together a simple list of cookout foods that he and his friends would prepare for the party.

He was set to pick her up the next afternoon, by which time everything would be done and I'd be long gone.

"You can stop stressing, okay? She's going to love it."

He nodded but looked unsure. "You don't think it's too much?"

Maybe it was, but I certainly wasn't going to say that to him now. "I think it's brilliant." I glanced around at the decorations—simple and classic. If it had been up to him, he would've had balloons and streamers everywhere. Luckily, I'd stepped in and taken over decorating duty, hanging elegant lanterns and string lights throughout.

It wasn't magazine-worthy by any means, but that just meant Jamie would believe Grant could've pulled it off himself, and that's all I wanted.

"She told me she's never really had a birthday party," he said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

It wasn't true. She'd had a birthday party every year. Her parents had taken us on trips to the beach and the mountains—wherever Jamie wanted to go. What I think she meant was that she'd never had a birthday party with a group of friends. At least, the people she considered to be her friends now.

Though the getaways I'd gotten to experience for Jamie's birthdays were some of my best memories at one time, apparently they meant very little to her.

"Well, she won't be able to say that anymore."

"Are you sure you won't come? It would mean a lot for me to have you there." Grant was staring at me, my face burning under his scrutiny.

"It's fine. I'm supposed to be helping Mom with something tonight anyway." It was a lie. I had a hot date with a can of Pringles and a novel, but there was no way I was going to say that to Grant.

He sighed, looking almost sad as he shoved his hand into his pocket.

“Well, if you change your mind, you know where we’ll be.”

“I do.”

“And I’ll see you at school... It’s not like this is some dramatic goodbye.”

I nodded. “Right.” Except it did feel like a dramatic goodbye. Grant and I had spent the better portion of the summer spending nearly every day together planning the details of this party. Even when I thought we’d planned it down to the second, he insisted we look over things again and again. It seemed every day, even once I’d thought we’d done more than enough, he’d come up with something new that we needed to do or work on. He was nervous, I knew, but it was done. It was perfect. She would love it. So, why was he acting so strangely?

“And we still have each other’s numbers. We can still talk or whatever.”

“Sure.” If he didn’t forget who I was by the time school started, it would be a miracle and we both knew it.

“Right. Okay.” He took a step back, then stepped forward again. “Hey, do you want to go to the bookstore with me?”

It was like asking a dog if he wanted a bone. I was the dog and the books were the bone.

Only the bone was being guarded by an insanely attractive dragon, who would surely hurt the dog.

And, when Jamie returned and school started back, the dog would turn back into a pumpkin... I was getting my metaphors mixed up. Either way, against my better judgment, I heard myself saying, “Yeah.”

“Yeah?” He seemed surprised I’d accepted so easily. Frankly, so was I.

“Books are kind of my thing.” I shrugged, grabbing the ladder. “Let me get this put back in the shed and we can go.”

He moved around me, taking the ladder from my hands. “Here, I’ve got this.”

I watched him hurry across the room, then out the door. I followed him closely as he placed the ladder back inside the small wooden shed before shutting the door and dusting off his hands. “Alright,” he said, nodding. “To the bookstore?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.”

His gaze lingered on me for half a second longer than usual and his neck had turned slightly pink. Was that from the exertion of carrying the ladder?

Or something else?

I shoved the thought away.

I was probably imagining it.

AN HOUR LATER, Grant parked in front of the local bookstore and we walked in together. I half expected people to stare at us strangely, ask why we were together, and call me an impostor, but no one did.

“So, what do you like to read?” he asked, hands stuffed in his pockets as he scanned the aisles.

“Um, mostly mystery stuff, but regular YA stories too. Sarah Dessen, Lois Duncan, Meg Cabot, Margaret Peterson Haddix...” I trailed off, surprised to find that he actually seemed to be listening. “Sorry, I could talk about books all day.”

“Don’t apologize for that,” he replied, his brows drawn down with obvious confusion. “That’s why I brought you.”

“Right.” Reminded of our mission, I directed him to the YA fantasy section of the store. Jamie’s favorite series was about vampire teens, and I knew their covers—dark and brooding, usually featuring teens with supernatural tattoos or moon-shaped necklaces. I pointed to their shelf when I saw them. “There. That’s probably the series she’s talking about. It was always her favorite. Do you know which ones she already has?”

He flipped open the phone in his hand, squinting at the screen, then held it out for me to look. He’d taken a photo of her bookshelf, and staring at the familiar space made my stomach churn.

I’d spent so many hours in front of that bookshelf. In that bedroom.

“Looks like these ones.” He snapped the phone shut, cutting my thoughts short, and pulled two of the books she didn’t already own. “That was easy enough.”

“You really thought of everything.” The sadness hadn’t fully dissipated as we left the aisle. I tried hard not to think about Jamie, about all I’d lost when I lost her, but seeing that picture, her bedroom, the books we’d flipped through together, it brought it all back.

I chomped down on the inside of my cheek. Jamie wasn’t that person anymore. She’d changed and so had I. I was completely lost in thought when

Grant stopped in front of another shelf.

“Oh, hey, Dessen, right? This is the author you mentioned?” He pointed to her books and I nodded.

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“Do you already have all of these?”

I stared at the shelf, already knowing I didn’t own most of them. “Um, probably not. I’ll get them later.” He’d never understand that I couldn’t just buy anything I wanted. I used to read Jamie’s copies, but now I borrowed from the library more than anything. Mom and Dad would buy me a ton of books for Christmas and my birthday, as many as we could afford, but the wait was always agonizing.

“Let me buy you one. Which one do you need?” He was already pulling books off the shelf, and I recoiled at the thought.

“You don’t have to do that. Seriously. I’ll get them another time. I just didn’t bring any money with me.” It was a total lie, and I suspected he knew it as well as I did, but either way, I turned, trying to divert his attention.

“Come on, it’s just a book. You’re not letting me pay you for helping me and you’re not coming to the party to enjoy it, so at least let me do this. That way I don’t feel like such a jerk.”

“You aren’t a jerk. But I don’t even know which ones I own. It’s fine, really.”

“This one looks new.” He pulled a book from the shelf, pointing to the sticker on the front that very clearly said **NEW RELEASE**. “Do you already have it?”

“Um...” I forced a face that I hoped said I was trying to remember.

“Come on, I’m getting it for you. And I’ll give you the receipt, so if you have it, you can come in and exchange it.”

“Grant, seriously,” I tried to argue, but he wasn’t listening. He’d added it to the stack and was already beginning to walk toward the counter. “You don’t have to do this. I can buy the book myself.”

“I know you can, but I want to. Consider it my thank you.” He wasn’t looking at me as he stopped at one of the tables near the checkout, adding a book with a green science-fiction cover from an author whose name I didn’t recognize.

“Who’s that for?” He glanced back at me.

“Me, why?”

“You read?”

“I’ll try not to be offended by that,” he said with a chuckle as he placed the books on the counter.

I’d never once seen Grant read. In fact, he’d refused to read a book in English last year. I remembered Mrs. Hazelwood getting mad over the fact that Grant, Cameron, and Eli had outright refused to turn in any of the assignments about the book.

After we’d paid, I was silent on our way back to the car. “Do you want to get a coffee or something?” He pointed to the coffee shop across the street.

“Uh, sure.” I was still lost in thought as he placed our bag inside his truck. When I started to get in, he shook his head.

“Come on, we’ll walk.”

“We aren’t going through the drive thru?”

“I didn’t plan on it. Unless you have somewhere to go.”

I shut the truck door and he waited for me to reach him before we walked across the quiet parking lot toward the coffee shop. He held the door open for me, the cool air from the shop hitting my face. It was small and quiet, with two booths on the left wall, two round tables in the center, and two square tables on the right wall. A counter that ran the entire length of the small building was directly in front of me, its tin-sided counter and chalkboard signs simple, open, and inviting. I recognized the woman waiting behind the counter. She’d graduated a few years before us, but I couldn’t remember her name.

She hardly took her eyes off Grant as we approached her, greeting him by name.

“Get whatever you want,” he told me, his wallet already out as he placed his order. What was happening? Why had he taken me for coffee?

Why was he buying me things?

Was this all to thank me for helping him?

Or was it something else?

It was ridiculous. Impossible.

But it was happening...

Was I imagining all of this? Was it wishful thinking to wonder if he was actually enjoying spending time with me?

Grant’s iced coffee was done first, but he waited for the woman to pass my caramel frappé over the counter before he turned to leave. I expected him

to lead me back toward his truck, but instead he headed for the door to the courtyard and held it open for me again.

August temperatures were brutal, but the wind was blowing, and in the shade from the building, it was almost bearable. We sat down across from each other at a concrete table and Grant took a sip of his coffee, expelling a loud, satisfied sigh.

“Have you ever had coffee here before?”

“What, you mean this exclusive coffee shop?” I settled back in my chair with a sort of casualness that would’ve been impossible just days before. “Yeah, I’ve been here once or twice.”

“Ha ha!” His laugh was caustic. “Okay, smart aleck. I’ve never seen you here before.”

“You just don’t pay attention.”

“Fair enough.” He took another sip of his drink, his arm draped over the back of his chair. “Have you seen me here before?”

Of course, was the answer, but I wasn’t going to say that. Instead, I said, “Yeah, a few times.”

He scratched his jaw, the smile wiped from his face. “Well, I’m sorry I didn’t say hello.”

“Eh.” I shrugged with one shoulder, staring out at the passing cars on the street. Any one of them could be watching us. Wondering why we were together. Planning to tell Jamie. “No big deal. You usually don’t.” I hadn’t meant for it to sound as rude as it did. Grant and I had formed an odd sort of relationship over the summer and, whatever it was, I didn’t want to ruin it. It felt weird to know I wouldn’t see him again tomorrow. Nearly every one of my summer memories revolved around him.

Part of that was because we were just about the only kids left in town when almost everyone else had gone away for the summer, and part of it was because none of his friends who *were* left in town wanted to help him plan a party for Jamie. So, out of necessity, he’d chosen me.

But that time was coming to an end whether we liked it or not. We both knew it.

At that moment, I realized what this was. What it had to be. The book. The coffee. This was his goodbye. His final send-off before things returned to normal.

Before he started ignoring me again.

When we went back to school, it would be as if none of this had ever happened.

I couldn't stop the bitterness from filling my chest. When I met his eye, I was surprised to see him staring at me carefully, his mouth open as if he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

No problem, I understood it now. Maybe better than I ever had.

"You don't have to say anything, Grant. Really."

"No, I should've said hello to you. I'm sorry, honestly."

We weren't even talking about the same thing. "Well, thank you. But it's fine. We run in different crowds. We don't have to pretend any differently."

"We do, but we aren't that different. Maybe I always thought we were, but...you're cool, Cait."

I made a noise that was a mix of a snort and a scoff. I was a lot of things, but *cool* certainly wasn't one.

"You don't have to butter me up, Grant. I've already done everything you wanted."

"I'm not—" He groaned, taking another drink and looking away, his lips locked tight. When he looked back at me, he leaned forward, his green eyes drilling into mine. "I'm not saying any of this to get something from you. I'm saying it because it's true. I didn't know you before, Cait, and maybe that was mostly my fault, but it's also yours."

"Excuse me?" I demanded.

"You have a wall up to keep us out. When I try to compliment you, you shut me down. When I try to talk to you—really talk, about something that doesn't have to do with the party—you shut down."

"Can you really blame me? After all you've put us through?"

His lips curled with disbelief. "Like what? What have we done that's so awful? I'm not saying we didn't ignore you, and I know you've mentioned teasing your boyfriend in the locker room—" He sneered when he said *boyfriend*, as if it were a curse word. "But honestly, have I ever done anything outright cruel to you? It's an honest question, because I don't remember it, if so."

"Grant..." My voice was breathless as I stared at him. "It's not always about what you've done. It's about what you've allowed to happen. It's about every single time Vanessa has teased me for not having the best clothes or for my hand-me-down purses and you've laughed along. It's about the time in

fourth grade when I drew Daniel for Secret Santa and I bought him that game that was apparently old and uncool and he threw it away and laughed at me in front of the entire class and you sat by his side doing the same. It's about the time my dad came to class for Parents' Day and you all teased me about the stains on his work pants."

I felt tears in my eyes, but I refused to look away. I wanted him to see my pain. Wanted him to feel it, no matter how uncomfortable it made him. "It's about all the times your friends wouldn't eat anything I brought for class parties because they said my family could only afford food from the town food pantry—which wasn't even true. But, so what if it was? Or every time I've gotten paired up with one of you, in class or in gym, and you all act like it's a punishment. It's about every time one of your friends has made fun of me, or made fun of my friends, and you've not only not stopped it, but you've laughed right along with it. You don't have to be the one throwing the flames in order to help spread the fire."

He watched me, his eyes darting back and forth as he listened to my every word. When it was obvious I was done speaking, he glanced down, then back up. "Cait, I'm really sorry."

"It's—"

"No," he cut me off, a hand up. "No. It's not okay. It's not even close to okay. I thought we were just being kids. I didn't think about how it would affect you. I didn't..." He sighed, his face in his palm. "I didn't think. But that's no excuse and you didn't deserve any of what we did to you. You or Sam or Jamie or any of the others..."

I wanted to challenge him to name three of the others, but I couldn't speak. He seemed sincere enough, but I was a terrible judge of character. I wanted to believe him because he was attractive. That was it. Not because of who he was. He was still attractive when his laughter resulted in me spending lunch eating alone in the bathroom.

"I know you have no reason to believe me, but I hope you do." He jabbed his forefinger into the tabletop. "From here on out, I won't let it happen, okay? If I hear it or see it, I'll shut it down—"

"Grant—"

"No, I'm serious. I care about you."

"You don't know me."

"I know enough to know that you helped me this summer when you had

no real reason to. In fact, you had reasons *not* to. But you still did it.” I looked away, peeling the paper off the side of my cup to keep my hands busy. “And I’m just really sorry that I ever hurt you. I’ve had fun with you this week. You remind me of Jamie... Of how she was when we first met. When she didn’t care what other people thought of her... Or us. Honestly, I wish I could make her remember that part of herself. It’s refreshing. Spending this month with you, it reminded me of why I fell for her.” His expression was unsure, and when I met his eyes, his gaze didn’t falter. My body was tingly, my head fuzzy. What was he saying?

“I can’t change Jamie back to who she was,” I said, after a moment. He looked away, clearing his throat.

“I know that.”

“She’s a big girl. She has to make her own choices.”

“I know that too.”

“If you’re trying to get us to spend time together so I can remind her of her old self—”

“That’s not what this is!”

“Well, whatever this is, whatever it was, it all goes back to normal after today. She’ll be back, we’ll go back to school, and it’s going to be like it was. You’ll be you and I’ll go back to being me...”

I was just rambling, honestly, trying to make sense of the feelings swirling throughout my body. I was angry with him, but I appreciated the way he’d treated me this summer. Believe it or not, I’d actually had fun with him. Once I got over the fact that he was who he was, Grant was easy to talk to. I’d probably laughed more in the past month than I had all year.

Part of that was because I’d been so lonely, but I knew part of it was because we had a lot more in common than we’d realized.

Now I had to wonder if he was just using me to remind him of who Jamie used to be.

“What if I don’t want that?” he asked, all the color draining from his face. I furrowed my brow. “What are you talking about?”

“What if I don’t want to go back to how it was?” He blinked out of his trance. “What if I want to hang out with you again?”

Was this how he’d won Jamie over? This charming act?

I shook my head. “Jamie wouldn’t like that.”

“Or Sam?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

“Sam would think I’d lost my mind if he knew I was here right now.”

He chuckled, tapping his cup on the table. “Jamie, too.”

I didn’t need the confirmation. I already knew Jamie wouldn’t approve of us spending time together, but she had nothing to worry about. “Luckily for them both, we’ll never have to see each other again after this.”

“Yeah, lucky for them...”

“Good riddance,” I tried to joke, but it fell flat.

“Right.” He was staring into space stoically now, apparently lost in thought. “Can’t wait to get out of here and never see you again.”

I grinned sadly with a corner of my mouth. “Are you planning to leave? Really?”

“Yeah, I’ll probably get out of here after graduation. Nashville, most likely. It’s where my parents went to college. What about you?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I told him honestly. “But what about Jamie? Is she going with you?” Jamie had always talked about moving to California. I wondered if her plans had changed.

“I don’t know.” He tapped a finger to his lips. “We talked about it... before. I don’t know what her plans are anymore, honestly. Or mine, for that matter.”

“Grant?”

His gaze flicked up to me. “Yeah?”

“Please don’t hurt her again.”

His brows knitted together. “Jamie?”

I nodded.

“What are you talking about?”

“Forget it. It’s none of my business.” I had no idea why I’d said it. Perhaps to remind myself it had happened. He’d done one of the worst things you can do to someone you love.

“No, tell me,” he pressed, leaning forward. “What are you talking about?”

“I just want you both to be happy. I don’t know the details of what happened before, but I know how upset she was. I’ve spent so long hating you because you took her from us, but also because you left her after...” I picked at the paper on my cup some more, unable to look at him.

“After we had sex?” he asked. A flicker of desire passed through me as he said the word. Suddenly, my heartbeat was entirely too loud. “Is that what you’re talking about?”

Again, I nodded, unable to speak.

His eyes fell to the table, then went back up to meet mine. He appeared...*confused*. "What did she tell you about that night?"

"We don't have to get into it." *Why did I bring this up?*

"No. I want to know."

"She didn't tell me much. Just that you'd *done it*, and you broke up with her after."

He released a puff of breath through his nose, leaning back in his chair. "She didn't tell you why?"

"No..."

He nodded slowly, his jaw jutting out. "Okay." I wanted to ask what the reason was, but I didn't feel like it was my place. "Well, there's more to the story. Let's just say that. I won't betray her trust by talking about it, but I'm not the villain she made me out to be, I can promise you that."

I nodded, my heart still racing. "I shouldn't have said anything."

He reached across the table, tracing his finger across my knuckles, seeming unaware he'd even done it. "I can't stand to think you've thought that about me this whole time. Hate me for what I've done, Cait, but don't hate me for something I haven't." His eyes drilled into mine, time seeming to slow down. We sat like that for a moment, our skin connected, lightning shooting through my body.

Then, realizing what was happening, I pulled my hand back, clearing my throat and standing up. "We should... We should probably go, don't you think? You still have to get ready for tomorrow."

He pressed the button on the side of his phone, staring at the time and nodding, albeit reluctantly. "Yeah, probably."

I stood, my head foggy. I didn't understand what was happening. It felt like one thing, but I knew it couldn't possibly be that thing. Grant was crazy about Jamie and I was...me. Why, then, was he looking at me like that? Was I imagining it? I had to be.

He was Grant and I was me.

Whatever I thought was happening clearly wasn't.

After a few moments, he stood too, and we walked back to the car. At one point, I felt his hand brush mine once more, but he looked away and it never happened again.

I was imagining it.

I repeated it over and over again in my head.
This was over.
This had never really begun.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PRESENT DAY

I was lying in bed when the text message came through. I jumped up, thinking it would either be Grant or Sam. As I neared the dresser and lifted the phone, watching the screen come to life, I stared down at the screen.

The text was from an unknown number.

I tapped the message, waiting for it to open, and when it did, my body went cold.

Cait, it's Anna. Sorry, weird request, but do you mind if I stay with you tonight?

Anna from the pool? From dinner?

My throat was dry as I reread the message. Was she serious?

More importantly, why would she ask that?

How had she gotten my phone number?

I stared at the screen, unsure of what to do. What could I do? I liked Anna. She'd been kind to me.

But I didn't know her well enough to invite her to stay with me.

We were still practically strangers, and I'd have trouble inviting even my closest friends to stay with me. Besides that, I needed to work. It was already Wednesday, which left me just a few days until the reunion to get this book done.

I placed the phone down, deciding the best solution was to pretend I'd never seen the text message. For all I knew, it could be a prank. And, besides that, *how* had she gotten my phone number?

It bothered me terribly.

Despite being in the public eye, I'd tried really hard to maintain as much

privacy as possible. My phone number wasn't listed anywhere online that I knew of.

Had someone given it to her?

Had she managed to find it online anyway?

The possibilities swirled through my head, my pulse racing. All that mattered was that I was going to ignore her and hope she got the hint. There was a good chance I'd never see her again anyway.

I walked across the floor cautiously, but as my phone buzzed again, I launched toward it, scooping it up.

Another text from the same number.

Sorry, I know it's probably weird that I'm texting you. My husband and I got into a huge fight and he left with our bags. I have no money, no ride, and nowhere to stay. I'm sure it'll blow over and he'll cool off by tomorrow, but you're the only person I know here. I wouldn't ask if I had any other options. I swear I'll be the best roommate ever!

I read the message twice, my heart pounding. She still hadn't addressed how she had my number in the first place, but if that was the case, if she was alone and had nowhere to stay and no one to call, how could I leave her stranded?

The more I thought about it, though, the stranger the situation felt. Why was she texting me? Why wasn't she calling him?

If Grant ever abandoned me like this, I would've been furious. It wasn't normal for a husband to drive off and leave you without anything. Where did he think she was going to go? What did he think she would do?

It crossed my mind vaguely that perhaps he was abusive. How would I feel if something happened and I'd done nothing? I sat down in the chair next to the dresser, mulling it over.

What choice did I really have?

I could ignore her and pretend I hadn't seen it. When we'd left the restaurant two hours ago, I'd told her I was preparing to work all night, so it wouldn't be unreasonable to ask her to believe that I'd been working and away from my phone.

I could tell her I'd fallen asleep, too. It was late, after all. Or maybe I was in the shower.

Then again, who was to say I'd ever see her again? Maybe her husband would come back for her and she'd leave with him.

I could tell her she had the wrong number. But that still left me not knowing how she got it in the first place. If I wasn't going to let her stay, it felt safer not to text her back at all.

Of course, there was still the option that I could invite her up. Be a good Samaritan.

But good Samaritans often ended up with their own true crime documentaries, and I had no desire to do that.

Maybe I could just book her a room for the night. Would that be rude? Decidedly less rude than ignoring her, but probably more rude than letting her stay with me.

I could say that I needed to work, but that I was happy to book her a room.

Then again, the more I thought about her somehow getting my number and texting me without permission, the angrier I became. Then, the anger turned into worry. How much did I know about Anna anyway?

She'd admitted to coming to find me outside by the pool. She obviously followed me on social media. She'd come out at just the right time tonight to invite me to dinner.

What if she was stalking me?

What if she was an obsessed fan?

I swallowed, thinking back. What was her social media handle? I couldn't remember. Had she ever shown me a picture of her husband to prove he even existed?

No.

The answer was definitely no.

For all I knew, Anna found out where I went to school, learned about the reunion, and came here hoping to find me. I'd walked right into her trap and now she was forcing herself into my life further.

Ice-cold fear shot through me like lightning as I realized I'd told her I was staying there alone. She knew my husband wasn't coming.

I scrolled through my contacts and clicked on Grant's name, waiting impatiently for the line to begin ringing. When he picked up, the deep, gravelly tone to his voice told me he'd been asleep.

"Hello?"

"Hey, I need to talk to you."

He fought through a yawn, waking up. "What is it? Are you okay?"

“I’m okay,” I told him. It was the truth, but I didn’t know for how long. “Something strange happened.”

“Strange how?” Another yawn.

“So, I met this girl here. Her name’s Anna. She saw me out by the pool this morning and started talking to me. Apparently she’s a fan and...” I started to tell him about the Instagram post, but wanting to avoid being scolded about the dangers of posting my location online, decided to leave that part out. “She saw me and we started talking. Anyway, I was supposed to go out to dinner with Sam tonight, but then he had to cancel and I ended up running into Vanessa and got all freaked out—”

“Hold on.” He sounded more awake now. “Freaked out, why? What happened?”

“She was just talking about that night and what happened. And she mentioned that you told her you weren’t coming, which caught me off guard because I didn’t know you were still talking to Vanessa.”

“I’m not,” he said defensively. “She sent me a message to ask if I was coming and I told her no because of your mom’s surgery, but that you were planning to come. That was it.”

“I’m not mad,” I said, a half-truth. “Anyway, it’s not the point—”

“Why was she talking about that night? You mean she was talking about Jamie? About what happened?”

“Yeah, and—”

“Why would she do that?”

“Because they all still believe I had something to do with it.”

“That’s ridiculous. You had nothing to do with Jamie’s death.”

I sucked in a sharp breath at the word, the phrase I’d refused to say for the better part of ten years. It was too harsh. Sometimes I still believed I could avoid thinking about it enough that it might stop being true.

“I know.”

“You were not to blame. And everyone that said differently back then was a coward. You know that.”

“I know,” I squeaked.

He let out a long breath. “Are you sure you’re okay? Do you want me to come? Maybe I could call one of my brothers and see if they could watch the twins...” His words grew quieter as he thought aloud.

The idea of either of Grant’s twin brothers, Deke and Ridge, watching our

children was enough to send me running home. “No,” I said too quickly.

He seemed relieved by that. At five years older than Grant, the twins still acted like teenagers themselves, neither settled down, neither holding a steady job for longer than a year or two at a time. In fact, up until last year, at thirty-three years old, they still lived together.

“No. It’s okay. I’m not really worried about Vanessa, that’s not why I’m calling.” We’d gotten off track.

“It’s not?”

“No, it’s about Anna.”

“Anna?”

“The girl I was telling you about—”

“Right, right. Okay, so what about her?”

“Well, after I ran into Vanessa, I ended up seeing Anna and we went out for drinks because I needed to unwind—”

“I thought you were supposed to be writing—”

“Grant! Please just listen to me,” I begged.

“Fine, okay.” He was obviously joking, but I was not in the mood to joke. I was too afraid.

“She just texted me—I never gave her my number. I have no idea how she has mine—but she texted me and asked if she could come stay in my room because apparently she got in a huge fight with her husband and he left her with no money and nowhere to go.”

“What?” he asked with a gasp. “Seriously?”

“Apparently so. She said she needed a place to crash until the fight blows over.”

“You aren’t going to let her, are you?” His tone was hesitant but firm. I was grateful he could confirm it was as bad an idea as I’d originally thought.

“I...well, no. I don’t want to, but I didn’t want to be rude, either.”

“Be rude, Cait. You don’t know this girl from Adam. You can’t just let her come stay with you. Does she know you’re staying alone?”

“Yes.”

“Have you texted her back?”

“No.” Finally an answer I could be proud of. He seemed relieved to hear that.

“Okay, good. Don’t text her back. Don’t respond. If she’s having problems with her marriage, she can call someone else. I’m sure the front

desk could arrange a ride for her. She's not your responsibility. I know that sounds harsh, but you just have to nip it in the bud now. Otherwise, she'll keep coming back with new favors. And that's if she's not actually dangerous. You don't need to get involved in whatever she's got going on." He sighed. "This is why I hated the idea of you being there alone."

"I know. But I'm okay," I told him, trying to stifle his worry. "Honestly, I am. I'm okay. My door is locked. I've got my phone if anything happens. I just wanted to call and make sure you didn't think I was overreacting to be worried."

"Not at all," he confirmed. "I'd rather you be safe than sorry. If you see her again, or if she keeps bothering you, you should report her to the front desk. I wouldn't engage with her at all."

"Okay." I sighed. "How are the kids?"

"Fine," he said, stifling another yawn. "They're wiped out. We played in the rain today and they've been asleep for a few hours."

"Sounds like *you're* all wiped out," I said with a small laugh.

"I meant to call you, but once I got them down, I just passed out."

"It's okay. How's Hudson after his accident earlier?"

"Dr. Dad got him all fixed up," Grant said proudly. "But they miss you. We all do."

"I miss you too."

"Are you getting quite a bit done?"

My eyes trailed over to the laptop I'd hardly touched since my arrival. "Quite a bit, yeah." He yawned again. "Look, I'll let you go. I'm sorry I woke you."

"No, no, I want to talk. We got interrupted the other night." His tone was sly.

"We did," I agreed, but I was in no mood to continue, still too freaked out by Anna's texts. "But we'll have to rain check. I was right in the middle of writing a big scene."

"Rain check, then," he said, not bothering to argue. I was sure he'd be back asleep within minutes of getting off the phone.

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Be safe, okay? Call me in the morning."

"I will. Give the babies kisses for me."

We ended the call and I lowered the phone from my ear, surprised to see

another text from Anna waiting for me. I opened it, the dread that had only recently begun to fade coming back in full force.

I'm going to get coffee. Send me your room number. See you in a bit, roomie!

CHAPTER TWENTY

AGE SEVENTEEN

The night of Jamie's party, I sat at home, wondering if it was going well. Wondering if Grant had broken our pact and told her I'd helped.

Part of me wished he had.

I watched my phone all night, jumping when it went off, half expecting it to be Jamie asking me to come by and half expecting it to be Grant telling me what I thought he wanted to tell me.

Was it crazy to think he had feelings for me?

Maybe.

Probably.

So how was it possible that I'd developed these strong, confusing feelings for him in such a short amount of time? I was convinced I'd be able to let him go. That what I had done was just for Jamie.

It would happen, I would forget these feelings, I assured myself. I just needed to take time to let them fade away.

It was like when you have a dream about someone and you wake up with feelings for them. But, after a few hours you realize it was just a dream and the person is actually a jerk.

Except Grant wasn't a jerk.

Was he?

My head was so conflicted.

Taylor Swift's heartbreak matched my own as she sang on, the sound carrying throughout the room from the CD player on my dresser.

When a text from Sam came through, I rolled over, lying on my belly as I opened it. **What ya doing? Miss you. Can't wait to see you.**

Sam and I hadn't spoken much over the summer. I told him it was because I'd been busy helping Mom clean out the garage and attic, which was partially true.

Mom *was* cleaning out the garage and attic.

And I *had* been busy.

I didn't want to lie to him. Sam was my best friend. The only friend I had left.

He was my boyfriend, too, and someone I cared about on the deepest level.

But Sam was protective over me, particularly when it came to Jamie. I knew if I told him I was helping plan a birthday party for her, he'd accuse me of being a pushover. Or worse, he'd say I was doing it so I could feel like I was part of The Populars.

Which wasn't true.

I had no desire to be part of that clique.

My time with Grant had made me realize how much more like a cult than a clique it was. Honestly, it didn't even seem as if Grant enjoyed it all that much. Why he still hung around with them was beyond me. And now he'd brought Jamie into the fold, too.

Just lying in bed. Miss you too. When will you be home?

He was set to return in the next few days, and I couldn't wait to see him. Sam coming home was sure to bring me to a sense of normalcy again. I'd remember why he was the right guy for me, not Grant.

Not that any of that mattered because Grant—

I froze as my phone screen lit up with his name. Grant was calling me. Had something gone wrong? Had he forgotten where we put something?

With a trembling thumb, I pressed the button to answer the call. "Hello?"

"Hey. Are you busy?"

"Um—" I checked the time again, wondering if I was confused. "No. Aren't you?"

"No, the party is off."

"Wait, what?" I sat up straight, sure I'd heard him wrong. "Off? What do you mean?"

"It's over. Are you at home?"

"Is this a joke? Are you, like, trying to convince me to come? Because I've already told you—"

“It’s not a joke. No one showed up. None of our friends. Not a single one.”

“Oh, my god...” I covered my mouth with my fingertips. “Jamie must be devastated.”

He scoffed. “Devastated... No, she was mad, actually.”

“Mad?”

“*Are you at home?*” he asked again, more adamantly this time.

“Yes, why?”

“I’m pulling in your driveway. Can I see you?”

I peered out the window, spying his headlights slowing down in front of my house. “I’m...I’m in my pajamas.”

“I don’t care.” He was unwavering. “Please, Cait. I really need someone to talk to, and I can’t talk to anyone else.”

“I, um—” I thought quickly, looking around my room. I knew Mom wouldn’t care, but shouldn’t I be establishing some sort of boundaries? I wasn’t some lonely girl who would be available at his every beck and call until he returned to his real friends. Still, I found myself reaching for clothes out of the pile of folded laundry I’d been meaning to put up. “Yeah, okay. Give me five minutes.”

AT MY WORD, five minutes later, I climbed into his truck. He was dressed in a simple black T-shirt and jeans, his hair hanging just over his eyebrows casually. The truck smelled like him, maybe even more than usual.

Once I’d buckled in, he put the truck in drive, pulling out of the driveway slowly.

“So, what happened?”

He gripped the wheel with both hands. “Right before I went to pick her up, Cameron and Eli bailed. Then, after I’d picked her up, Nathan texted to say he couldn’t make it, either. When we got back to the cabin, I was trying not to panic, but by the time we’d made it, I had texts from everyone: Vanessa, Courtney, Brian, Nikki, Amber, Daniel, Michelle, Alex, Isaac, Lucas...” He rattled off a list of all their friends. “Every single person I’d invited canceled at the last minute.”

“Seriously?” I asked, though I couldn’t lie and say I was totally surprised.

They'd all refused to help him plan it, but they were still his friends, weren't they? Was this their way of letting him know where they stood with Jamie? Of effectively shunning her without fighting with Grant? "She must've been devastated."

"No, actually," he said with so much anger in his voice I checked the seat behind me to make sure no one was going to launch up and tell me this had all been a trap. "She was mad. At me."

I jerked my head back with shock. "Mad at you? *Why?*"

"Because I'd spoiled the surprise and told her about it on our way there. I was just so excited, and then when we got there, she was upset because no one was coming. I told her it wasn't a big deal, that we could still have fun, just the two of us, but she wanted to go home."

"It sounds like she was embarrassed more than anything. I can't say I blame her. But none of that's your fault. It just shows you what kind of friends you have." I couldn't resist throwing that part in there. "You'd told them how important today was and they didn't show because it would've made Jamie happy for them to be there. You said they aren't happy about you two being together anyway, so you had to at least believe they might've done this, right?"

"No," he said firmly, his voice radiating disbelief. "Of course not. If I thought, for even a second, that they would've pulled this, I wouldn't have planned it in the first place." He turned off the main road, down a side street, then another. It seemed like he was just driving, with no real plan forward, not truly paying attention to the road. "They're my friends, you know? I thought they'd be there for me. They've never let me down like this."

"I'm really sorry. You put so much work into this for nothing. I wish Jamie would've stayed and seen it all for you. With or without your friends, it would've been really special."

"I tried to tell her that. And then I told her we could invite others, and she said she didn't want people to come because they pitied her. She told me I'd embarrassed her. She wouldn't listen to me. She just made me take her home. She only cares about what everyone else thinks."

"That's not true—"

"It is," he argued heatedly. "Do you want to know how I know? Do you want to know why I broke up with her after we had sex?"

"I, um—" I didn't know if I did.

“Because she only slept with me because I told her I’d slept with Vanessa before. And, right afterward, she texted Vanessa and Courtney to tell them. We weren’t even dressed yet and she had her phone out. She used me, Cait. And then she made me look like the bad guy. To you. To my friends. I felt so stupid. I *feel* so stupid.” His shoulders drooped with the weight of what had happened. We turned down another side road, getting farther and farther from town. “I’m her ticket to what she wants. I’m starting to think she never cared about me at all.”

I didn’t know what to say. What he was describing was awful. I couldn’t blame him for breaking up with Jamie after that. Did she want so badly to fit in that she was willing to burn the people who cared about her?

Unfortunately, I already knew the answer to that.

“I’m sorry...”

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m just...” He sighed, unable to say whatever it was he was trying to.

“You’re not stupid,” I promised him, reaching across the vehicle and touching his arm gently. He glanced down at my hand, then back to the road, almost as if he’d forgotten I was there. I pulled my hand back. “You’re not. She does care about you. You did a really nice thing, Grant. And if your friends want to be jerks, let them. Trust me, as bad as it hurts, you’ll survive it.”

He laughed dryly. “Yeah, I guess you have experience in that department, hm?”

He knew I did, thanks to his girlfriend, but I wasn’t going to talk badly about her now. Not when I knew things would be back to normal between them in no time. “Jamie will cool down and realize what you did for her. She just needs a minute.”

“What if I don’t want to give her a minute?” he demanded. “I’ve worked so hard on this. *You’ve* worked so hard on this. For it to all be thrown back in my face.” He slowed the car down suddenly, pulling over in a gravelly area next to a cornfield.

With a sharp breath, he turned in his seat to look at me. “When my friends bailed on me, I thought it was the worst thing that could’ve possibly happened to me. But then, I tried to tell myself it would be fine because Jamie and I would make the best of it. We’d still have fun. Good riddance to them.”

He shook his head, looking down with a wry grin. “Who was I kidding? Jamie cared about the party because everyone was supposed to be there. She wanted to hang out with Vanessa and Courtney more than she wanted to see me.” He stared off, lost in thought. “Was she like this before? Because I swear I never saw it. She’s just like them.”

“She’s not,” I told him, though we both knew it was a lie. Whoever Jamie was before, she’d turned into one of them.

“She is, Cait. And I should’ve known. She’s changed so much.”

“Grant, she’s just hurt.”

“But why? Why should she care who didn’t show up? *I* was there. Shouldn’t that be all that matters? And, even if she was hurt, shouldn’t she have at least made an attempt to make the best of it? For my sake?”

I didn’t know the answer to that. I didn’t know what was right or wrong in this scenario. Jamie had hurt his feelings, but her own feelings had been hurt. Could I honestly say I would’ve done anything differently? I didn’t know.

“She’ll come around. And, when she does, she’ll appreciate all you did for her.”

“I just don’t know if I’ll be here when that time comes,” he said with a sigh. Without warning, he opened the truck door and stepped out.

“Where are you going?” I asked. He grinned over his shoulder at me, a carefree grin that looked out of place on his troubled face, and juted his head toward the back of the truck.

“Come on. You’ll see.”

A chill ran over my skin as I stared at the cornfield. Was he going to kill me? Was Jamie waiting in the bed of the truck to attack me? Were The Populars going to launch themselves out of the corn and laugh at me?

Everything seemed possible because I was in Grant Du Bois’s truck in the middle of the night, and that clearly meant I was living in an alternate reality anyway.

I opened my door against my better judgment. My shoes crunched on the gravel underfoot as I made my way back to the truck bed. Grant had the tailgate down and was sitting on the end of it, his legs swinging casually.

The truck bed was filled with the bags of ingredients for s’mores and he’d torn one of each open, stacking a marshmallow and piece of chocolate on top of a graham cracker before taking a bite. Crumbs gathered around his lips and

he brushed them off with an embarrassed grin.

He patted the spot next to him, and when he'd swallowed his food, he said, "Come on. Someone's gotta help me eat all of this."

I couldn't help laughing as I jumped up onto the tailgate next to him. "You think we're going to be able to eat six bags of s'mores ingredients?"

"Nothing's impossible, Cait," he said, something in his voice causing my stomach to hitch.

I pulled out a graham cracker, placing the marshmallow and chocolate on top. "I think these are supposed to be heated up," I teased.

"That's what I've heard. Unfortunately, we're fresh out of fire."

"Whatever will we do?" I waited until he looked away to force the first bite into my mouth. As much as I loved this dessert, it was always awkward to eat. I thought back to the many times Jamie, Sam, and I would eat s'mores in her backyard, always laughing at the ridiculous mess they made.

The thought sent a wave of sadness over me, and I had to look away. The taste of s'mores would always make me think of her. From here on, I knew they'd make me think of this night, too, and everything between then and now.

He waited politely for me to swallow my food before asking, "Are you ready for school to start back?"

"I guess so. I mean, I'm never really ready. What about you?"

"I used to be." His expression was solemn. "But I don't know what this year will look like for me."

"Oh, please." I nibbled a piece of marshmallow. "You know everything will work out for you. It always does. You'll make up with your friends, and with Jamie, by next week, and all will be right with the kingdom again."

He nodded, but it was unconvincing.

"It's going to be okay, Grant. I promise you."

He turned his head to look at me, his mouth opening, then closing. When he opened it again, I knew whatever he was going to say would be life altering. "What are you going to tell Sam about this summer?"

"What about it?"

"About us."

Us. The word sent a flame through my body, radiating through my core and down to my fingers and toes. I tried to act unaffected. "I didn't plan on telling him anything. Not because of you, but because of Jamie. He'd be

disappointed if he knew I did something to help her after the way she's treated us." I rushed to explain that response. "I mean, he loves Jamie, don't get me wrong. He's just been really hurt by her. We both have. And he doesn't want to see me hurt anymore."

"You don't think he'd be jealous of us spending so much time together?"

"Me and you?" My brows shot up and I bounced the hand that held my half-eaten s'more between our chests.

"Yeah."

"He'd have nothing to be jealous of."

His face fell. "Why do you say that?"

"Because this isn't real life, Grant." I sighed, shaking my head. "We both know that."

"Do we?"

"*Don't* we?"

"I don't know." He finished the last bite of his s'more and dusted off his hands. "What I know is that I've had a lot of fun with you this summer. More than I expected to."

"So, I'm not such a loser after all?" I asked, a mockingly surprised look on my face.

His response was quick and firm. "You're not a loser. Don't talk like that."

"Look, I've had fun with you, too. Honestly. It wasn't half as bad as I expected it would be." He rolled his eyes playfully at my joke. "But we both know that when school starts back, this summer will just be what it was. A summer. And all summers come to an end."

"But what if it didn't have to?" He had the wide-eyed optimism of someone whose hopes had never been crushed.

"What are you asking me, Grant?"

He huffed out a breath, rubbing his forehead. "I have no idea, honestly. I'm just... I don't know."

"Talk to me," I begged him, though I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

"I don't know what to say. I know I'm not making any sense, even to myself. I just feel like I'm saying goodbye to you, and that scares me."

His honesty, even through the smog of his awkward embarrassment, cut through to me. So, I wasn't just imagining it after all. "You don't have to say

goodbye to me, Grant. You'll still see me at school." I paused. "But I'm not going to be some secret friend you pick up in the middle of the night to talk to and then ignore in class, either."

"That's not what I was suggesting."

"What were you suggesting, then?" I demanded.

"I can't say."

Now he was just being infuriating.

"Why can't you?"

"Because of Jamie. And Sam."

"Grant." I let his name slip out of my mouth through gritted teeth. "Stop playing games."

"Who says I'm playing?" he asked, looking up at me from behind his dark hair. "I think I like you, Cait. *Like you*, like you. And I can't tell if you feel the same way, but there it is. That's the truth."

I shook my head, sick with disbelief. "What are you talking about? Is this some kind of joke?"

He hopped down from the tailgate, standing in front of me with a serious expression. "Why would I joke about that?"

"B-because you have a girlfriend."

"And you have a boyfriend."

"Right. Yes. And we're...we're on different planets, Grant. If your friends don't like Jamie, they certainly won't like me. And I can't be her for you. You can't just do this because she's mad at you. Are you trying to get even with her? Trying to make her feel bad? Trying to make yourself feel better? Because you can't just—"

His lips were on mine suddenly, cutting off my sentence. I froze, unsure what was happening. His smoky cologne enveloped me, and I felt his hands cup my face. His kiss was sweet from the s'mores, yet warm and gentle. Unlike my first kiss with Sam, Grant's lips weren't dry, but rather perfect, in fact. In a split second, the kiss ended. His hands dropped away from my face, and he leaned back, staring at me with determination. "If I was trying to make Jamie mad, I would've gone back to Vanessa. If I was trying to make myself feel better, I can promise you I would've found someone less complicated. That's not what this is, Cait. This is...it's different."

I put my fingers to my lips, still waiting to wake up in my bed and realize it had all been a dream. "But...but you just put together a birthday party for

Jamie. *Your girlfriend.*”

“Yeah, I did.” He took a step back. “And while I did that, I found myself dreading her coming home. Not because I didn’t care about her anymore, but because being with you reminded me of the qualities I liked in Jamie. Qualities she’s lost and given up since she started hanging out with Vanessa and Courtney. I liked her because she was different from them, but now she’s just a clone.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Maybe it’s not.” He gave an exaggerated shrug. “But it’s how I feel. She used me to become one of them, but I could’ve had any of them. It’s not what I wanted then, and it’s not what I want now. It just took me spending time with you to realize it.”

“So, what? You just want me to replace Jamie? Be who she used to be for you? Until what, Grant? Until you get tired of *me*, too?”

“This isn’t about me getting tired of her,” he said firmly, wagging a finger at me. “This is about her changing.”

“People change,” I said, no clue why I was defending her.

“They do. They do change.” He tapped his finger on his chest. “I’ve changed.” His gaze raked down the length of my body and I felt warmth spread across my skin. “I know what I want now.”

“And what’s that?” I asked breathlessly.

He gave a stilted nod. “Break up with Sam and find out.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

PRESENT DAY

I barely slept most of the night, though none of that sleeplessness was put to use with writing my story. I tossed and turned, agonizing over my decision to ignore Anna and worrying that she was either going to find out my room number and try to break in or leave bad reviews for my books online.

When morning came, I dressed quickly, tying my hair back, and made my way toward the dining room downstairs, checking around corners as I went. I didn't want to hide from her—for all I knew she was long gone anyway—but my plan was to grab a quick breakfast and bring it back to my room to eat.

As I rounded the corner, my chest tightened, blood draining from my face. There, in the center of the lobby, sat the woman. She had a suitcase resting at her feet. When she saw me, she stood, waving her hand over her head dramatically, and shouted, "Hey, Cait! It's me, Anna!"

Begrudgingly, I walked toward her, grateful I'd left my phone in my room. "Hey." I forced a yawn. "What are you doing out here?"

"Didn't you get my text messages last night?" she asked, her tone remaining light and friendly.

"Text messages? No... I was up writing all night and just came down for some food. I haven't checked my phone."

"Well, thank goodness. I thought you were ignoring me." She slapped a hand to her chest dramatically. "My husband left me here, so I need to stay with you if that's okay." She was already picking up her bag, preparing to walk with me.

"Oh," I said flatly, my heart pounding in my chest. "I'm really sorry...it's

just, well, I need to write. I can't have anyone else in there while I'm working or I'll get distracted."

"Oh, I won't be a bother. I swear. I'll just read a book or something while you work. You won't even know I'm there."

"I..." I thought I might pass out, and in some ways, I wished I would. I hated confrontation so much. "It's just that...well, I'm kind of a mess and I like to be able to move around when I'm writing. I'm really sorry, Anna. Is there anything else I can do?"

She set her bag down. "I don't understand. I thought we were friends..."

"Well, I just met you." I laughed awkwardly as I spoke.

Her jaw tightened, tears brimming her eyes. "So, what am I supposed to do? I have nowhere to go. No money."

"When is your husband coming back?"

"I have no idea," she said with a sigh, running a hand through her hair. "We had this big fight and he stormed out. He only left me one suitcase with some of my clothes. I think he just forgot it, really. I don't even have a phone charger. My phone will die soon."

"I'm really sorry. Maybe I could book you a room or something..."

"I don't understand why I can't just stay with you. You said we were friends. We had so much fun last night." Her voice was growing louder, echoing through the mostly empty lobby.

As far as I could remember, I'd never said we were friends. "I... Anna, we did have fun. Calm down, okay? It's just—"

"Just what? Just that you were only lying so I'd listen to you complain about the mean girls from your school? But when it's me who needs you, you're not going to help?"

"Now, that's not fair—"

"Just let me stay with you, Cait. What's it going to hurt? Let me stay with you and call my husband. It'll blow over soon."

"Hang on... I thought you said your husband took your bags."

She gestured toward the sole suitcase in front of her. "He did. This is all I have left."

"But you said you were buying coffee last night. How did you pay for it?"

"With an app on my phone... I thought you didn't get my text messages?"

I'd blown that story, but the more I thought about hers, the more and

more holes I was finding in it. Was she even staying in this hotel? Had I ever seen her with a room key? Did her husband even exist? My throat was dry as I asked my next question. “What room were you staying in? With your husband?”

“Why are you asking me this?” she demanded, shifting her eyes from one side of the room to the next.

“I, um... You know what? Never mind. Of course, you can stay with me.”

“I can?” She clasped her hands in front of her chest. “Oh thank you!”

“Sure. I can’t leave you alone out here. Will you do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Will you go grab some extra coffee and some containers of yogurt for our room? I’ll talk to the front desk about getting us a few extra towels and things. Don’t worry, Anna.” I hoped my voice wasn’t shaking too badly. “We’ll get this all sorted out.”

“Girls’ day,” she whisper-yelled, hands in the air. “Okay, be right back. Can you keep an eye on my bag for me?”

“Of course.”

As soon as she’d made it past me, I rushed forward to the front desk, moving as quickly and quietly as I could.

“C-can I help you?” Marci asked with a flustered expression, her dark eyes wide.

“Yes, please. There’s a woman here, and I think she might be stalking me.”

“Stalking you?” She didn’t look as if she believed me.

“Yes. I posted a picture outside at the pool yesterday and she said she was a fan of mine. We went out to eat and I thought she seemed normal, but she got my number somehow and she’s begging me to let her stay with me. When I said no, she got really angry. Maybe I’m being paranoid, but I’m worried... I don’t even know if she’s really staying at the hotel. Can you check? Is there any way you can check and tell me if she’s really a guest? Or, was a guest? She said her husband left her here with no money and I don’t know how she got my phone number, but I’m really freaking out.” I stopped talking, taking sharp gulps of air as my panic began to bubble over.

Marci was calm and collected. “Okay, let’s see what we can do. Hotel policy says I can’t confirm if a guest is staying here, but maybe there’s a

workaround. We never want you to feel unsafe here. What's the woman's name?"

"Anna."

She waited.

"Um, Anna is all I know. She didn't give me a last name."

"Anna is a fairly common name..." She ran a finger across her red thumbnail. I glanced behind me, terrified she'd come out and see us talking.

"I realize that. Maybe you recognize her? Could I, could you have me hide somewhere and you could go check and see if she's familiar to you?"

She stared at me as if she thought I was playing a joke on her.

"I realize how that sounds, but I'm really afraid she's unstable. If she realizes what I'm doing, I don't know how she'd react. I need you to get me somewhere safe."

"Do you want to go to your room? I could ask one of the hotel security officers to check her out and we could call you with an update."

"Yeah, okay..." I said, trying to convince myself that was a good idea. If she knew my room number, she would've already come up. My room was the safest place for me. "But I don't want her to see me leaving and try to follow."

"Of course. Come with me." She walked around the side of her desk and pulled open a small half door, allowing me to step through. From there, we moved quickly, behind her desk and through a small doorway with a placard that read *Office: Employees Only*. We went through the door and she shut it behind us. The room was larger than I'd expected. There was a desk that lined one entire wall, with a computer, a printer, and papers scattered across it. There was a small pinboard behind it with random notices and a schedule, and to the right, a printed-out phone tree. Above the desk, there were matching cabinets with labels detailing what office supplies were inside each one.

She lifted a stack of sticky notes from the counter and pulled the pen cap off with her teeth. "Okay," she said, placing the cap on the back of the pen. "So, you said her name is Anna. What does Anna look like?"

"She's about my age, with frizzy black hair and freckles. She's average height and build. Oh, and she has a crooked front tooth." I tapped my tooth to show her which one. "There's a suitcase in the middle of the lobby. It's a hard-shell pink one. She'll be coming back for it."

She took sloppy notes. “Okay, great. I’ll pass this along.” She pointed to a door on the opposite wall. “If you go through this door, it’ll take you to the stairs. Do you have somewhere to be this morning or can you wait for my call?”

“I’ll be in my room all day.”

“Good.” She nodded. “Remind me of your name again.”

“Cait Du Bois.”

“Right, thank you. Go straight up to your room, then, and I’ll call you as soon as I hear back from the security team. If you have any problems, just call. And don’t answer your door for anyone without hearing from me first.”

“Thank you, Marci. For believing me.”

Her brows drew down with sincerity. “Of course. I just want you to feel safe.”

It felt good to be taken seriously, when I’d expected not to be. I didn’t know why I’d been preparing for that—maybe because I thought I might be being ridiculous. Things like this didn’t happen to me. I wasn’t nearly famous enough for a stalker. Then again, things like this happened to ordinary people every day. I’d rather be safe than take a chance on not following my gut.

I made my way toward the door, no longer thinking about breakfast or anything else as I waved one last time to Marci and then pulled it open. The door led to a stairwell and I darted up the steps, taking two at a time in a hurry to get back to the solace of my room.

When I’d reached the third floor, I stepped out into the hall, trying to orient myself. I was at the opposite end of the hall from where the elevators would’ve left me, so I rushed forward, reading the numbers next to the doors as I passed.

As I neared my room, I pulled the key card from my pocket. I shoved the door open with gusto, slamming it behind me, pressing my back against the wood, and letting out a sigh.

With my back pressed to the door, I tried to catch my breath. I stood there for minutes on end, processing what had happened. How would the woman react when she noticed I was gone? Or when they confronted her?

Would they confront her?

She had never said for sure that they were going to speak to the woman, only that they would look for her. What if the woman denied talking to me? What if she pretended she didn’t know what they were talking about? What

then? Who would they believe? Would they think I was being dramatic? That I'd wasted their time?

I didn't have to wonder long because soon enough the landline phone next to my bed was ringing. I rushed across the sitting room and into the bedroom, lifting the phone and placing it to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Ms. Du Bois?"

"Yes, it is," I said, nodding slowly. The voice wasn't Marci's, but rather a man's.

"Ms. Du Bois, this is Evan, with the Hotel Lilith security team. Marci asked that I call and give you an update on the situation with the hotel guest."

"Yes?"

"Well, I've searched the dining room for the woman you described, and I didn't find her. Likewise, the suitcase you mentioned..." I could hear him flipping through notes. "Hard shell. Pink case. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Okay, well, it's gone."

I sucked in a breath. "Gone?"

"Gone. A woman matching the description you provided was seen taking the suitcase from the lobby and walking out the front door while Marci was briefing me on the situation."

"She...she left?" Had she heard them talking?

"She left. Whoever the woman was, I don't think she'll be bothering you anymore. She's no longer on the premises and we will keep an eye out for her if she were to return."

"Thank you," I whispered, breathless. How was she gone? Why?

Had she guessed what I was doing? Had Marci tipped her off?

The man ended the call by telling me I could reach out again if I had any issues and left me in silence.

I should've felt relieved, knowing she was gone and I could relax again, but I didn't feel relieved. I didn't feel safe.

Why had she left so quickly?

Where did she go?

More importantly, would she come back?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AGE EIGHTEEN

I didn't break up with Sam. When it came down to it, I couldn't do it. I didn't trust myself and I didn't trust Grant. For all I knew, I'd do it, and Grant would change his mind shortly after. Sam was all I had left. If I broke up with him, broke his heart, I wasn't sure what it would mean for me.

Choosing Grant would mean burning every bridge I'd ever had, and unlike Jamie, I wasn't willing to do that.

So I shoved down my feelings and pretended they didn't exist. And like I'd expected, Grant did the same.

We went about our lives as if the summer had never happened. As if our lives hadn't been forever changed by our time together. I thought I was doing a pretty good job of pretending, too, until the day of my eighteenth birthday.

Sam's parents were out of town for his cousin's wedding and we'd ordered in from my favorite restaurant. We were picking at leftovers, curled up on the couch with a rerun of *The Office* on the TV, when he turned his head to look at me.

"So, was this everything you thought your eighteenth birthday would look like?"

I patted his leg, forcing a grin. "Everything."

"I'm really glad we were able to spend it together." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, the sentence coming out awkward and forced.

"Me too," I said, my brows scrunching together. "Is everything okay?"

"More than okay," he said, nodding his head quickly. His hand cupped my cheek and he pressed his lips to mine, then backed away, staring at me with a question in his eyes. He moved forward again, his mouth meeting

mine slower this time.

My pulse raced as his other hand moved to my opposite cheek, his tongue parting my lips. He leaned forward, inching us farther down until he was lying on top of me. His palm slipped under my shirt, his skin warm against mine, and my heart suddenly felt as if it was going to explode.

The room was too small.

I was suffocating.

I gripped his hand, pulling my head back away from him. “What are you doing?”

He was propped up on his elbow, staring down at me with loving, patient eyes. “Kissing you. Is that a crime?”

“No. It’s certainly not a crime,” I said, my voice low as his lips met mine again.

“Good,” he whispered in between kisses. “Because I’d have to do it anyway.” I closed my eyes, trying to keep calm. We didn’t have to do anything I didn’t want to. Sam had been clear about that the many times we’d talked about it.

Not that we’d planned it for that night, but I’d known it was coming. We’d been dating for exactly two years today. It was time.

And I did want this, didn’t I?

It was what everyone our age was doing. And Sam was more patient with me than anyone else likely would’ve been. I wanted it to feel right, but would it ever? Maybe it was better to just get it over with and out of the way.

As if he’d read my mind, Sam stood, holding out his hand and pulling me with him toward his bedroom. It was the bedroom where I’d learned to play mancala and sculpted a paper-mache rendition of the earth’s layers a few years ago. The bedroom where Sam, Jamie, and I had spent plenty of summers pigging out on junk food and watching VHS tapes of recorded *NSYNC concerts and old Disney Channel movies. The bedroom where so much of my life had happened, and it was hard to separate that version of myself from this version.

I never thought this was how it would go.

But I wanted it to be Sam. He cared about me. He always had. And I cared about him too.

I’d let Grant get into my head. Even months later, I hadn’t been able to shake him. What was I supposed to do? I’d made my choice. I’d chosen Sam.

I couldn't go back on that.

Wouldn't.

He pushed open his door, the pungent, woodsy scent of his usually subtle cologne burned my nostrils, and I noticed he'd cleaned the room for us. His bed, which I'd never once seen made before, had clean, unwrinkled sheets and his comforter was tucked in perfectly, folded down near the top.

His desk had been organized, his gaming console neatly placed under the TV stand.

He'd been planning this.

There was a candle on his desk and a lighter lying next to it. He released my hand, bending down to light it and flipping on the radio. A smooth Ne-Yo track began to play, sending my heart racing faster than I'd thought possible only moments ago.

When he reached for my hand again, his expression was coated in desire, his blue eyes fiery and lips parted as he pulled me to him. He pressed our chests together, brushing hair out of my eyes.

"Is this okay?" he whispered.

I nodded, my knees weak.

He ran his hands over my hair, his eyes raking across my face slowly. When his lips met mine again, it was as if nothing else in the world existed. The room seemed to swell, taking up the universe so that it was only us and this feeling. This explosive, overwhelming feeling, as if I were free-falling, suffocating, and collapsing inwardly all at once. My body tingled with adrenaline, like tiny flames throughout my fingers and toes, but I was also cold. Nothing and everything made sense as he pulled my shirt over my head.

Sam was seeing me naked.

My Sam.

My best friend Sam.

But he wasn't looking at me like a best friend.

Not at all.

Next, his shirt was over his head, our bodies back together, skin on skin, heartbeats syncing. He pulled me to his bed, our kisses growing more passionate.

"Still...okay?" he asked breathlessly.

I nodded, unable to breathe as I felt his hands on the button of my pants. My body trembled under his touch.

Was I doing it right?

Was this how it was supposed to go?

Neither of us had any experience at this, but he certainly seemed more confident than I felt. I watched him pull a condom from the drawer, my breathing growing shaky and shallow. When he leaned back down to kiss me, I closed my eyes, sinking into the feeling.

Giving in to it.

To him.

I wanted to feel every moment, to burn it into my memory.

“I love you,” he whispered, his face next to my ear as I felt him between my legs. “I love you, Cait.”

I squeezed my eyes shut harder, too transfixed by what was happening to respond.

No idea what I’d say if I needed to respond.

He repeated it a third time and I pulled his lips to mine, kissing him to quiet him. I couldn’t think about love. Not the kind of love he was talking about, so I didn’t. We didn’t say anything else until it was over.

When it was, he lay next to me, staring up at the ceiling with heavy, ragged breaths. He looked over at me once, his finger brushing my cheek. I hadn’t realized I was crying until he wiped the tear away.

Panicking, he propped himself up on his elbow. “Are you okay? What’s wrong? Did I hurt you? Did something happen?”

“No,” I tried to assure him, though I didn’t know the truth myself. “No, everything’s perfect.”

I wanted it to be. More than I’ve ever wanted anything, I wanted that moment to feel as perfect as I’d built it up in my head to be. But it wasn’t. And I had no idea why.

I was crying harder when he pulled me into his arms, my face resting on his bare chest.

The immense pressure to tell him I loved him back was building in me, though he’d never once mentioned it. I knew Sam wasn’t that guy. He wouldn’t force me to say anything I wasn’t ready to. He wouldn’t passive-aggressively make me feel guilty until I did.

I was doing that to myself enough for the both of us.

He held me, rubbing a hand over my back rhythmically as he sighed, his deep breaths almost lulling me to sleep. When I’d finally stopped crying, he

kissed my head.

“We don’t have to do it again if you aren't ready. I’m...I’m sorry, Cait. Whatever I did, I’m so sorry.”

When I looked up, there were tears in his own eyes, and my heart broke seeing them. “You did nothing wrong,” I swore to him, kissing his lips, and then I heard myself saying the words, even though I knew they weren’t true. “I love you, too, Sam.”

His smile warmed the cold places in my chest, and I told myself I could make it true, even if it wasn’t. Sam was it for me. He had to be.

I wasn’t going to end up like Jamie.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PRESENT DAY

She's gone.
She's gone.
She's gone.

I repeated the words in my head every time I heard a bump in the hallway, trying desperately—and failing—to keep my focus on my work. The security team had searched high and low for the girl, but she was nowhere to be found.

They'd seen her leave on the cameras.

She was gone.

I assumed she'd seen me talking to the staff, or noticed I was gone, and had gotten worried. Either way, I had no reason to believe she was coming back. I'd tried to call Grant once, but he hadn't answered. As tempted as I was to stare at pictures of my family, consumed with worry and completely homesick, considering running home to them, I knew I couldn't. It wasn't an option.

So I sat and stared at my laptop, willing the words to form. I reached for my wineglass with a shaking hand, trying to reason with myself. I was just on high alert because of what happened to Jamie and because we were getting closer and closer to the event where I'd have to face everyone again. That was all this was.

I'd always jumped to conclusions and assumed the worst, and now, maybe more than ever, I was at my worst. I rubbed my dry, sore eyes, suppressing a yawn.

I'd let myself get worked up over what was potentially nothing.

And now, the problem was gone. I was locked safely behind my door. No one was going to bother me.

I typed out a sentence, decided it was the worst I'd ever written, and erased it. Then repeated.

This book was never going to get written if I couldn't manage to—

My phone buzzed from the nightstand and I lunged for it, stretching across the bed. Grant's name shone on the screen and I swiped my thumb across it.

Oh, thank god.

"Hello?"

"Hey," he said, his voice high-pitched and worried. "Just saw I missed your call. Everything okay?"

"I ran into the woman again," I said, all in one breath. I could feel my nerves soothing at the sound of his voice, my heart rate slowing slightly.

"The woman from last night?"

"Mhm."

"And?" He waited for me to go on.

"And she was saying all this stuff about coming up to my room and not making a lot of sense. She didn't have any money but she was going to buy coffee... I don't know. I told her I'd book her own room because I needed to work and she just wasn't taking it for an answer. So, I told her I'd meet her in the dining room after I got extra towels and I took the stairs up to my room instead—"

"You did *what*? Did she follow you? Why didn't you tell anyone?" he demanded.

"I did. I told the woman working the front desk and she had the security team check for her, but by the time they did, she was gone. They said they have her on camera leaving."

"Oh." He let out a breath, sounding relieved. "Okay then. So you're alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm in my room working now."

"Do they have her description? Are they going to keep an eye out for her? You didn't tell her your room number, did you?"

"No, of course not. And yeah, they're keeping an eye out and they said I could call if I hear from her again."

"Do you think you should call the— Hudson, *stop that*. Get it out of your

mouth. Hang on, babe.” I could hear a swishing sound as he moved the phone, but I couldn’t hear Hudson in the background. I listened carefully to the sound of Grant mumbling something away from the speaker. “Okay, I’m back. What was I saying?”

“Um.” I tried to recall. “Oh, you were asking if I’d called the...I’m assuming you were going to ask—”

“The police, yeah,” he confirmed, before I finished the sentence.

“No,” I said with a huff. “I don’t think there’s much they could do. It’s not like she’s—”

“Hudson, you’re going to fall! *Get down.*” His voice was distant again and I heard a loud thud, then the sound of one of the children crying. It took a long time for Grant to make it back to the phone, as I waited with bated breath. When he did, he apologized once more.

“I’m sorry, babe. Can I call you back? They’re— Lucy, get away from there—” He was gone again and I put down the phone, ending the call with frustration. I tapped out a quick text.

You’ve got your hands full and I’m fine. Call me tonight. XO.

I wasn’t done discussing what had happened though, and with Grant preoccupied, I was running low on options. Sam still wasn’t returning my texts. As far as I knew, he hadn’t made it back to the hotel. I scrolled through my contacts, tapping Mom’s name.

When she answered, she sounded groggy and hoarse. “Hello?”

“Momma? How are you feeling?” My dad had sent me an update yesterday when she’d gotten out of surgery, but I hadn’t had a chance to speak to her yet.

“I’m okay,” she said. “Just a little...” She sucked in a breath through her teeth. “Just a little sore.”

“How did they say it went?”

“Okay,” she told me. “I’ll be sore for a while, and I start physical therapy a week from tomorrow.”

“Is Dad taking good care of you?”

“Waiting on her hand and foot,” Dad informed me in the background.

“I’ll be fine, Caity. Just resting. I’m catching up on my *Grey’s Anatomy*. Can you believe that show’s still going?”

“Yeah, I know. I’m glad you’re getting your rest in. I told Dad if you need anything, Grant can order in or drop stuff by. Just let us know.”

“He’s called to check in, too,” Mom said with a dry laugh. “It sounds like he’s got enough on his plate over there.”

“The kids are certainly taking advantage of outnumbering him.”

“We’ll all be fine,” she assured me. “How’s your trip going? Is it weird being back in Spider Lily? Running into all your old friends?”

I resisted the urge to laugh. “Weird, yes. And I’ve seen a few familiar faces. Sam’s here.” I picked the skin around my nail.

“Oh, he is? Have you gotten to talk to him? I just saw Renee posted something online the other day about his new job. Did you know that? He’s doing design work for an animated film, I think she said.”

“He didn’t mention it, no,” I said, wondering why it hadn’t come up. What a cool thing to be able to brag about. “But we haven’t gotten to talk too much. We were supposed to get dinner together last night but he had to go home.”

“So, he’s staying at the hotel then? Or do you mean home, home? Surely he didn’t drive back to Wilmington last night.”

“No, back to Renee’s. He’s staying at the hotel.”

“Goodness, why? I can’t imagine anyone would want to stay in that place if they had a choice.”

“He’s working on a job. Actually, that must be the one you’re talking about. He needed some time to work, and I think it would be hard for him to do it at home.”

“I hope he’s visiting his parents. I heard they separated.” She clicked her tongue. “Poor kid can’t catch a break.”

I pressed my lips together. “He mentioned that. But, despite it all, he says they’re really happy. He seems happy, too.”

She was quiet for a moment. It had always been a source of contention for us that I’d married Grant and not Sam. Don’t get me wrong, Mom loved both of them. But she’d always had a sweet spot for Sam.

The day I broke his heart, I’m pretty sure I broke hers, too.

“Well, I’m glad you’re both having a nice time.”

Realizing I’d nearly forgotten why I called, I stood from the bed, walking to stand in front of the window. I moved the curtain gently, peering outside. “Actually, there’s something that happened and I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“What’s that?” Concern had etched its way into her tone.

“I had this really weird experience. There’s this girl here…” I relayed the story exactly how it had happened, without leaving a detail out. When I was done, I waited for her reaction, which seemed to come at a snail’s pace. “Are you still there?”

“I’m here,” she said gently. “I’m just trying to process it all. Do you think she could be a fan of yours? Could she have followed you there?”

“It’s crossed my mind, yeah. But I’m worried I’m overreacting.”

“There’s no such thing, sweetheart. You need to trust your gut instinct. If it’s telling you something’s wrong, it’s because there’s something wrong.”

My gut instinct had been on vacation most of my life. I had no idea if the way I was feeling was warranted. “I just don’t know why she was insisting that she stay with me. I mean, we’d just met. Some people are just…like that, though, right? Extra friendly?”

“She wasn’t being friendly though, from the sound of it. She was pushy. Well-intentioned people listen to the boundaries set by others. If she’s not doing that, you did the right thing by seeking help.”

Outside, I watched a group of teens taking a selfie next to the oversized oak tree by the entrance. They giggled, swiping through the photos, and I couldn’t help thinking of Jamie, as I so often did. I tried not to think of her, did a great job of making everyone think I never did, but the truth was, of course I did.

I missed her every day.

I regretted what happened.

I hated myself for what I did.

“Are you there?” Mom’s voice brought me back to reality.

“Sorry, yeah. I was distracted. Thanks, I’m glad you agree. I really didn’t get a bad vibe from her in the beginning, but the more that happened, the worse it got, and I just couldn’t ignore it.”

“You’re smart, Caity Cat. Don’t ignore that gut, okay?”

“I won’t,” I vowed.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Do you need me to send your dad up there?”

I couldn’t fight the smile. I was nearly thirty, but to them, I’d always be a baby. Truth be told, I wouldn’t have minded the security that having my dad with me would bring, but I did need to work. Besides, she needed him more than I did. “No, it’s okay. I’ll be fine. Everything’s taken care of now anyway. I really just wanted to check on you and tell you all about my fancy

life.” I laughed.

She was giggling on the other line when I said, “I love you, Momma. Get better soon, okay?”

“I’ll do my best. Say bye to your dad.”

“Bye!” I called, then heard him echo the sentiment. “I’ll talk to you soon.” With that, I ended the call and placed my phone down on the dresser. As usual, talking to my mom had calmed my nerves.

I made my way back to the bed and froze seconds before climbing into it.

Knock, knock, knock.

Someone was at the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

AGE EIGHTEEN

I was behind the counter of the Petal Café, counting back change to a grown man with one hand held out, the other gripping his phone. He'd placed his order without making eye contact with me a single time.

"Have a great day." I smiled at him, glancing at the tip jar once, its bottom littered with pennies but not much else.

His head jerked upward with a quick nod and he was out the door. As he shoved out of it, I caught sight of the person walking inside, his carefree smile enough to send my stomach spiraling. I looked over my shoulder, hoping I'd find Cara in the back. If I did, I'd ask her to wait on Grant so I could hide.

As luck would have it, I was the only employee in sight.

"Hello," I greeted him, warm and friendly, as if he were just another customer.

He'd looked straight through me the first time, but when he heard my voice, his eyes searched the room with a mission, landing on me quickly. "Hey." His head bobbed backward a bit. If he knew I worked there, his rendition of not knowing was incredibly believable. He pointed to me, then looked around, as if he were being pranked. "You work here?"

"I just started," I told him. "I was at Jewell's before..."

"Before it closed, right," he said, nodding slowly. "I remember you worked there."

I had no idea he knew I worked there, let alone that he remembered.

"Yeah, I took a few months off after that, for the holiday, but I needed to get started somewhere before graduation."

“You plan on staying around here, then? After graduation? Did you ever decide?”

“Um...” I clicked my tongue, thinking back to our conversation over coffees last summer. It seemed like a lifetime ago. “I don’t know yet. I don’t want to go too far from my parents, no. But I don’t know that I want to stay here, either.” I paused. “What about you?”

“I’m still planning on going to Vandy. In Nashville.” He nodded, but it was hesitant.

“Oh, okay.” Nashville was several hours away. Our time together was coming to an end. Then again, so much was coming to an end. We’d graduate in just two months and then it was very likely I’d never see most of the people I went to school with again, especially if I got out of Spider Lily, which I fully intended to do.

“It’s...it’s good to see you.” He moved closer to the counter, lowering his voice, though we were the only ones in the restaurant besides Cara, who was probably hiding in the bathroom fluffing her hair or reapplying her lipstick for the fifth time that day.

“You too.”

“I’ve tried to call you a few times.”

“I know,” I said, not bothering to explain why I hadn’t answered. We both knew why.

“How’s...Sam?”

“Fine. How’s Jamie?”

“Fine.” He glanced up at the menu board above my head, reminding me that I was still on the clock.

“Can I get you something?”

He was silent and I was pretty sure he was reading the menu, although it had been the same for our entire lives. When he opened his mouth, his eyes fell back to me. “What are you doing tonight?”

“What?”

“Do you have plans?”

“I’m...working.” I gestured around the room, as if it weren’t obvious.

“What time do you get off?”

“Late.”

He grinned. “How late?”

“Grant...”

“Cait.”

I sighed. “I can’t see you. You know that’s a bad idea.”

“You’re seeing me right now.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I just want to hang out. As friends. There’s no pressure, I swear.”

There was always pressure where Grant was concerned, but I wasn’t going to say as much. “I’m hanging out with Sam after work.”

“Oh.” His face fell. “Okay, what about tomorrow?”

“I’m working.”

“And after work?”

I pursed my lips, and he answered his own question. “Sam again?”

I nodded. “He is my boyfriend. I thought you’d be with Jamie.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t bother to hide his disappointment. “She’s going to Vegas with her mom for some work thing for the weekend.”

So, once again, I was just a backup. I didn’t know how to respond, but luckily, I didn’t need to. He pointed to the sign above my head. “Can I just get a coffee, please?”

“You don’t want food?”

He gave me a crooked grin. “I’m not going to make you cook for me, Cait.”

“It’s literally my job. If you want food, order food.” The sentence came out more as a command than anything, bitterness seeping through. I wasn’t sure if I felt bitter because he was so obviously using me when Jamie wasn’t there or because I was embarrassed to have to prepare food for him.

“I don’t want food,” he said. “I’m stuffed. I ate some peanuts on the way over. Coffee’s fine.”

“Suit yourself. Do you want room for cream?”

“Please.”

I prepared the drink and rang up his order. As he was paying, he asked, “Are you going to prom?”

“I plan to. Are you?”

“Yeah, of course. I guess I’ll see you there.”

“I’ll see you at school before then.”

He nodded, tapping his finger in the air. “Yeah. Just...save me a dance at prom, okay?”

I shook my head. “I’ll have a date.”

“What?” he asked, already out the door. “I can’t hear you. See you on the dance floor.” The door shut, the *ching, ching* of the bell the only remaining sound in the quiet café. My cheeks burned red as I turned around, wondering what in the hell had just happened.

THAT NIGHT, when I got off, Sam was waiting outside for me. He got out of his car, rushing around to my side to open my door. When I reached him, he kissed my lips and I handed him the bag of cookies I always brought him after my shift.

“What’d you bring me tonight?” he asked giddily.

“They’re strawberry cheesecake, I think.”

By the time he’d made it back around to his seat, one of the three cookies had already been devoured and he wore a satisfied smile on his face. “These might be my new favorite.”

“Every flavor I’ve brought you has been your new favorite.”

“You just happen to pick the best cookies, then.” He teased, popping the next whole cookie between his teeth and holding it there as he fiddled with the radio.

“I missed my calling, then, I guess.” I watched as the cookie, still resting between his teeth, began to break in half, the exposed half threatening to fall down his chin and the front of his shirt. As it broke, he caught it just in time.

“So, how was your day?”

I rested my head on the back of my seat, staring out the window. “It was good. My feet are killing me. I just want to lie down.”

“Snacks and a movie tonight, then?”

“Is that okay?”

“Of course.” He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “We can go to the festival tomorrow instead.”

Shoot.

I’d completely forgotten he’d asked me to go with him to the music festival downtown after work. I slapped my forehead. “No, I just forgot. We can still go. Maybe we could just stop by the house and let me change shoes.”

“It’s fine,” he assured me. “It’ll be just as fun tomorrow when you’re rested.”

“Don’t you have to work tomorrow?”

“Not until three, so we can go around lunch if you’re up for it.”

“That won’t be any fun for you. What time will the music even start?”

“Eleven, I think,” he said, cool and collected as always. “Seriously, it’s fine. I’m just as happy to spend the night watching movies with you.”

“Are your parents working tonight?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Dad’s on midnights, but Mom will be home by the time we get there.”

I’d only been back to his house twice since we’d had sex for the first time last month, and I’d yet to face his parents. In some ways, it was worse than facing my own.

“Is she okay with me coming over?” I asked, wincing. I didn’t think he’d told her, though Sam’s parents would probably be more open to it than mine would. We were both eighteen now, so there wasn’t a lot they could do, but I’d rather avoid the awkwardness if we could.

“Of course,” he said. “Don’t worry. They don’t know. And besides, she’d kick me out before she would you.”

He wasn’t wrong. “Why is it both our parents like each other’s kid better than their own?”

He took another bite of his cookie. “I think they both like you more, if we’re being honest.”

“I can tell you for a fact that’s not true. My mom thinks you hung the moon.”

“Well, good. Maybe she’ll put in a good word for me when I need to ask your dad for permission to marry you.”

A rock sank in my stomach, as heavy as a boulder, and the tension was instantly palpable in the car. Sam chuckled under his breath, an odd, strangled sort of chuckle that told me he was feeling the pressure of his statement.

“Do you think we’ll get married?” I asked, feeling rather unsure myself. I didn’t know what love was supposed to feel like. True love, the kind where you’re ready to get married and have babies, but the way I felt about Sam wasn’t how the movies had sold it to me. I cared about him so much, but there was no way I felt ready to even consider marriage. Was he already thinking about it?

We were legally old enough, but did that mean we should?

Was this how it would always feel?

These were things I couldn't bring up with Sam, and I had no one else to talk to about them. My parents would say we were far too young to be having such conversations, but their opinions weren't what mattered.

More than anything, I wanted to talk to Jamie, but those days were long gone.

Every decision had to be my own and I was not equipped.

We sat in silence, before I decided to fill it by saying simply, "Yeah, well, I think you'll be good in that department."

He reached over, taking my hand again and stroking it with his thumb.

"What do you think comes next for us, Sam?" I asked, unable to meet his eye as the question sat between us.

"What? You mean after tonight?"

"No, after prom. After graduation. What does the future look like for us?"

"Is this because I said the thing about marriage?"

"It got me thinking, yeah."

"Good things, I hope?" He was trying to get me to look at him, but I kept my gaze trained straight ahead.

"Not necessarily good or bad. Just...things. Like, what do you plan to do? We've never really talked about it. Neither of us have huge dreams or set plans, so what do you want to do?"

His fingers released mine, then reclaimed them. "Um, well, I'll probably stay around here. Work at the factory like dad. Buy a house. Get married. Have babies. Get a dog. Maybe some chickens." His voice was whimsical as he spoke, as if what he was saying was the ultimate dream.

And maybe it was.

I felt selfish for not wanting it more.

What was wrong with me?

"You don't want to leave Spider Lily?" I asked. Up until the last few months, I wasn't even sure I wanted to leave Spider Lily, but now, it was all I could think about. I was suffocating in our town. I needed wide open spaces and new experiences.

"Um..." He half laughed, as if he thought I was joking, but the smile fell from his face when he saw I wasn't. "No. No, I hadn't planned on it. Why? Do you?" He paused, but I didn't answer straightaway. "Come on, Cait, our families are here. What would your parents do if we moved away? We're

both only children. We can't just abandon them. Besides, I thought you liked it here."

"I do," I said defensively. "I never said I don't like it here."

"Yeah, but you're being really weird and quiet right now. What's going on? Why would you ask me about leaving Spider Lily? Is that what you're planning to do? You've never mentioned it before."

In truth, I'd never thought about leaving my home. Not seriously. Sam was right, besides him, my parents were my best friends. I didn't want to leave them. I didn't know that I wanted to leave the only home I'd ever known.

I hated Grant for putting the idea in my head in the first place.

I hated myself for clinging onto it.

"I don't know." I traced my fingers along the stitching in the leather of my seat. "I've just been thinking lately—"

"About what?"

"About leaving. Getting away for college. Maybe to a big city that's not too far. Nashville or Atlanta, maybe."

He looked at me as if I'd suggested we book the next rocket for Mars. "What are you talking about right now? Why are you just mentioning this for the first time? You've never said anything about this."

"Don't make a big deal about it—"

"It *is* a big deal! This is a really big deal, Cait. We're two months from graduating. I thought our future was set. I thought we'd get an apartment together, maybe. Start our lives. I'm not saying I was going to propose or anything, but I never thought you'd be talking about leaving this place. Leaving me. Did...did something happen? Did I do something wrong?"

"No," I said, trying to assure him. I reached over, placing my hand on his leg. The pain he was experiencing was evident in his eyes, further cementing the dismal feeling in the pit of my stomach. "No, of course not. You're perfect, Sam. You are. I'm not saying I want to break up or that any of those plans won't happen. I'm just talking. There's nothing that says you couldn't come with me if I did decide to leave."

"I'm not going to Nashville or Atlanta," he said with an upturned top lip. As if he couldn't believe I'd even suggest it. "You know I hate cities. Traffic, crime... I'll never understand what makes it attractive to people."

"New opportunities? New people? New perspective?" I offered, trying to

get him to see my side of things.

“New doesn’t necessarily equal better.”

“Of course not.”

He sighed, rubbing his eye with his palm. “Hey, I’m not trying to tell you that you can’t do this. Obviously. Maybe we could do the long distance thing if you wanted to go to school somewhere else... I don’t know. I’m just kind of blindsided. I wish we’d talked about it before now.”

“We’re talking about it now. And, who knows, maybe there’s nothing to talk about. I’m just... I don’t even know.” I dropped my hands to my lap dramatically.

“Is this just about getting out of here for a while? ’Cause we could just take a vacation after graduation. Hit the coast for a while. Go back to Florida or Wilmington maybe. We both loved those places when we went with Jamie’s family.”

I sank lower in my seat. “A vacation would be nice, yeah.”

“Sound like a plan, then?”

I nodded, fighting back tears and words I could never bring myself to say. There was so much more I wanted to tell him, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t do anything but sit and wait, watching as the trees outside the window flew by as fast as my life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

PRESENT DAY

I checked the peephole before opening the door, relieved to see the familiar face.

“Hey stranger,” he said as I scanned the hallway cautiously.

“Is everything okay?” I said at the same time. We waited for the other to go on and eventually, I did. “You didn’t text me back.”

“Yeah.” He pulled his phone from his pocket. “Sorry. Last night was crazy and then my phone died earlier this morning.” He tapped the screen, as if to prove it.

“What happened?”

“Mom fell and I had to take her to the hospital. I didn’t expect to be there all night so I didn’t take my charger with me.”

Worry replaced the frustration quickly. “Oh my god, is she okay?”

“She’s fine, bullheaded as ever, but she broke a bone in her wrist. We were in the ER all night.”

“That’s awful.”

“It was scary, probably more for me than her, but she’ll be okay. She said to tell you hi, by the way.”

“Funny, my mom said to tell you the same.” Realizing we were still standing in the hallway, I stepped back, gesturing to the open room. “Want to come in for a bit?”

“Am I bothering you? I figured you were working but I wanted to see if you wanted to retry that meal I promised you and didn’t want to wait for my phone to charge. I haven’t even changed clothes since last night.”

“You’re not bothering me,” I assured him. “Come in. I wanted to talk to

you about something anyway.”

Giving me an odd look, he walked past me and into the sitting room. I shut the door behind him. “Talk to me about what?”

“Well, I don’t want you to worry, but I think I have a stalker.”

“A stalker?” he asked, his face wrinkling with shock.

“Yeah. I don’t know what else to make of it. There’s this woman here who has been following me around, popping up in random places at the perfect time, and then last night, she texted me and asked if she could stay with me.” He was silent, processing the story, so I went on. “I ignored her, and then this morning, she was waiting for me downstairs. She kept insisting on coming to my room. I even offered to get her a different room, but she didn’t want it.”

“Do you know her? How does she have your phone number?”

“That’s just it, I have no idea. She told me she’s a fan of my books and she follows me on social media, but I don’t know how she could’ve gotten my phone number.”

“Did you tell the hotel staff? They need to kick her out. Is she staying here? Why did she need a room in the first place?” He wasn’t panicking, but rather looked completely confused.

“I did tell the staff, but by that time, she’d left. They’re supposed to be keeping an eye out for her. She was staying here, but she got in a fight with her husband and he left her here without a room or money, apparently. That’s what she said, anyway.” I bounced my head side to side, remembering the flaw in that story. “But then she went and bought coffee, so I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t know about any of it. She could’ve been lying about everything.”

“But she’s gone now?” he asked, looking relieved.

“Supposedly.”

“You don’t think so?”

“I hope so. I’m just sort of shaken up about it.”

He reached his hands out, drawing me into his hug. I breathed out of my mouth, trying not to inhale the scent of his cologne. I knew it would bring me back, let all the memories flood me once more, and I wasn’t sure I could handle it.

I’d loved Sam once, and that love would never truly fade.

I’d been a stupid teenager and broken off an amazing thing, broken my

best friend's heart. I didn't deserve to be comforted by him now. I wasn't allowed to feel regret over what happened.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here. I'm sorry that happened."

I slid my arms back around him, finding comfort in his embrace. "Thank you."

He kissed my forehead, but seemed to regret it immediately, his body tensing. "Is there anything I can do for you? I mean, it sounds like the hotel is on it as far as keeping her out of here, but do you want me to stay for a while to make you feel better? Or bring lunch to your room? Make a store run? Anything?"

"I'm okay, honestly," I told him, pulling myself out of his arms. I missed his touch the second it ended. "But I'd love for you to stay if you're not busy. I'm sure you're tired, so you can take a nap or whatever you need to do."

"I need a shower more than anything," he said, looking around. "Do you mind?"

I swallowed. "No, not at all." Images of Sam in the shower filled my mind, and I forced them away.

"Cool. It won't take me long and then I'll probably take a nap." He let out a loud yawn as if only realizing then how tired he was.

"Sounds good. I'll be writing anyway. You rest and then we'll hang out tonight."

"Okay." He was silent, watching me for a moment, as if he was going to say something else, or maybe waiting for me to say something else, but eventually he turned, heading back for the door. "I'll go grab my bag and charger, and I'll be back."

When he returned just minutes later, we sank into the routine as if it was old hat. It all felt very domestic and eerily normal. A peek at the life we could've had. A life together.

I made myself stop thinking about it, but then I was only thinking about how I shouldn't be thinking about it.

I loved my husband. Grant was good to me. I loved our children. They were my entire world. I didn't regret marrying him. Choosing him.

I didn't regret our life.

But I couldn't deny the feelings Sam still gave me. A sort of comfort no one else had ever provided. Grant was exhilarating, even now. Sam was cozy. Like an old, reliable sweater you could easily slip into again and again.

At the end of the day, I'd chosen the little black dress that made me feel amazing. The one I loved wearing out of the house. The one that made everyone see me, notice me, envy me.

But the sweater was always there. And on hard days, I still craved the sweater. Even if I rarely allowed myself to admit it.

The bathroom door opened and Sam emerged, steam billowing around his dripping wet form. His blond hair was messy, his white towel clinging to his waist. He crossed the room, digging through the bag he'd placed next to mine without meeting my eye.

There was nothing sweater-like about him in this state.

I fought against the urge to stare, looking back down at my laptop.

It was taking him way too long to find his clothes. I was hot, my throat dry, mind a muddled mess. I'd never felt *this* way about Sam. Never. Even on our best days.

Stop it.

I was being ridiculous.

I loved Grant.

Finally, with his clothes in hand, he headed back into the bathroom. When he shut the door, I flopped back on the bed, my eyes wide. What was happening to me?

I was losing my mind.

Rap, rap, rap.

I shot up from the bed, a hand to my chest.

Was that—

I stood, tiptoeing across the room quietly with a racing heart. There was no doubt there'd been a knock on the door, but who on earth could it be? Sam was already here. No one else knew which room was mine.

If it was housekeeping, they would've announced themselves.

The front desk or security would've called.

So who could it be? When I'd reached the door, I steadied my breath, pressing up on my tiptoes to check the peephole. I could see the distorted hallway, and I moved my head around, trying to see every angle.

Had I imagined it? I couldn't have. It was too real.

The bathroom door opened.

"Where'd you go?" Sam asked, and I stepped backward so he could see me from the bedroom. He'd changed into sweatpants and a T-shirt. His hair

was still messy.

“I heard a knock at the door.”

His eyes widened and he crossed the room to reach me in a second.
“What? Who was it?”

“I don’t know.” I kept my voice low. “There’s no one out there.”

He put a hand up, keeping me back as he made his way to the door and checked, then nodded, confirming what I’d seen. He pulled open the door partially, looking out, then opening it all the way.

When he looked back at me, there was a hint of concern in his expression. Was he concerned about my safety? Or that I was imagining things?

We stared at the empty hallway together, the weight of the question hanging between us.

I *had* heard something. Hadn’t I?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

AGE EIGHTEEN

I was in the last stall in our high school bathroom when I heard her come in. I would've recognized that voice anywhere. She was crying, it sounded like. I didn't dare move.

"I just don't understand," she said, sniffing.

"He didn't give you a reason?" Vanessa asked.

"No," she whined. Someone pulled an excessive amount of paper towels from the dispenser. "He said he doesn't want to lead me on if he's not *feeling it* anymore. What does that even mean?"

Was she talking about Grant?

"What a jerk," Vanessa said, though even from where I was, I could tell she was fighting a smile when she said it.

"There's someone else. I know there is," Jamie said.

Had Grant broken up with her?

I heard someone gasp, but it didn't sound like Vanessa then. Who else could it have been? Courtney, maybe? Those two were practically attached at the hip.

"Why do you think that?" It was Amber, I realized as soon as she spoke. "Did he say something?"

"No, I can just tell. He's been so weird all year really. But I just thought it was because he was stressed about his college applications. We had that huge fight on my birthday and it's just never been the same. I don't know what I did wrong." She broke down into sobs then as my mind went back to that night. He'd told me then he didn't know if he could go back to the way things were. That he didn't feel the same about Jamie after what she'd done. Had he

meant it?

“I love him.” I stifled a gasp of my own at that one. Did she really love him? I’d never heard her say as much. Had he said it back if she had? My stomach tightened with dread.

“I know,” Amber soothed. “It’s going to be okay. He’ll come around.”

Vanessa was oddly silent.

“What am I going to do about prom now? I’ve already gotten my dress. I can’t go alone.”

He wasn’t going with her to prom? Was that a coincidence? He’d asked me to dance with him, but I’d said no. I was going with Sam.

I felt cool sweat beading at my hairline. What was I going to do? Maybe I was jumping to conclusions. Maybe there *was* someone else, and whoever it was, it wasn’t me.

My throat tightened instinctively at the thought.

“Do you want me to talk to him?” Vanessa asked.

“You’d do that for me?” Jamie asked.

“Mhm. Of course,” she responded, her voice sickly sweet.

Jamie sobbed again. “What if there is someone else? What if he takes her? I’ll never be able to show my face here again. I’ll have to drop out.”

I felt the same way, though it wasn’t my place to have any such feelings. The idea of Grant taking anyone else to prom, but especially someone besides Jamie, was devastating. I didn’t want to think about it. Had he moved on from his pursuit of me so easily?

“Don’t talk like that,” Amber said. “It’s all going to be okay. Besides, your dress is killer. He’ll wish he’d never let you go when he sees you in it.”

“You think so?” She sniffled again.

“Totally,” she replied encouragingly. The bell rang out overhead, letting us know lunch had ended and we had just five minutes to get to class. I couldn’t leave now. I was trapped until the others left. Luckily, I heard Jamie sigh.

“I have to go freshen up my makeup. I have English next with Grant. I don’t want him to know I’ve been crying.”

“Go on, we’ll catch up,” Vanessa told her. Seconds later, I heard the door open, the deafening sounds of the crowded hallway filling the room. They were silenced as the door shut again.

“I can’t believe they broke up,” Amber said, sounding horrified.

“It’s about time,” Vanessa said, releasing a catty laugh. My heart hurt for Jamie. “Grant knows we’re going to prom together. That’s been the plan since we were babies. He had his fun with Jamie, but now it’s time to get serious about our futures and his future is with me.” She popped her lips like I’d seen her do when applying lipstick in that same mirror so many times.

“Have you talked to him?” That was Courtney. So she *was* there.

“Not yet, but I will. Thank God I’m having a good hair day.” She giggled again.

“They’re always good for you, Ness,” Amber said earnestly.

She didn’t bother saying thank you. “Hey, can you text Jamie later today and tell her we aren’t hanging out after school?”

“We aren’t?” Courtney asked.

“Well, duh. Of course *we* are. But Jamie doesn’t need to be there. She can go back where she belongs now that Grant’s done with her. All is finally right in the universe.” Their voices were growing distant and I heard the door open again, the roar of the hallway flooding my ears.

When it shut, I was left in silence, horrified by what I’d just heard.

IT WAS one of the few afternoons I had off, though Sam was scheduled to work, so I had nothing to do. I thought about reaching out to Jamie, telling her I’d heard about the breakup, but I still wasn’t sure what I wanted to say to her, if anything.

And besides, she hadn’t reached out to me, either. Maybe she didn’t want to.

I was on my bed, finishing up a report that wasn’t due until the end of the week in history, when I heard a knock at the door.

“Come in,” I called, wondering why she was waiting. Mom was on her way out to a parent-teacher meeting with her classroom parents, so I assumed she was going to tell me she’d made something easy for dinner. Dad wouldn’t be home for a few hours still.

Actually, when I looked at the clock, I realized Mom should’ve already been gone. I glanced back to the door, which still hadn’t opened. “Who’s there?” I called, standing up from the bed.

I heard him clear his throat before he spoke. “S-sorry. It’s me.”

“Grant?” I pulled the door open in a hurry, utterly confused. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you, but your Mom was leaving. She said to come on in... I tried to call a few times. I thought maybe you were ignoring me.”

I looked over to where my phone was charging on my desk. I hadn’t remembered to switch silent mode off from school, as I wasn’t expecting any calls. “I wasn’t. I haven’t checked my phone since I got home.” That still didn’t explain what he was doing there. I thought back to the conversation I’d overheard.

“I thought so. I went by the café, but you weren’t there.”

“Is...everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he said with a huffed breath. He was pale, his eyes darting around the room. “Um, I just wanted to talk to you. Is...is that okay?”

“It’s a free country,” I said, shrugging and stepping back. He moved forward into the room, fidgeting nervously with his hands.

“Um, I’m not sure if you heard Jamie and I broke up...”

I didn’t confirm or deny it. Instead, I folded my arms across my chest, more to hide their shaking than anything.

“Anyway,” he went on, “we did. We broke up today. Er, I broke up with her.”

I nodded slowly, waiting for him to say more. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“No. Don’t be sorry.” I must’ve looked offended, because he quickly added, “I mean, I’m sorry I hurt her. It just wasn’t what... *She* wasn’t what I wanted anymore. She changed, I told you that. She changed and I tried to convince myself she was just finding her place in the group and that she was still the same girl underneath it all, but the truth is, I was kidding myself. And lying to her. Which wasn’t helping either of us.”

“What are you saying, Grant? Why are you telling me this?”

“Because seven months ago, I asked you to choose me, but I realized I never fully chose you.” He swallowed, his deep green eyes meeting mine. “So now I am. I’m all in, Cait. Putting myself out there for you. I’m choosing you.”

I shook my head. He was looking at me as if I should’ve just come bounding into his arms, but I still had Sam to think about. “I never asked you to choose me, Grant.”

He was expressionless, watching me closely. “I know that.”

“I’m still dating Sam.”

“I know that, too.”

“So what do you want me to say?” I asked, not taking my eyes off of him. My heart was racing so fast I felt lightheaded.

“I want you to tell me how you feel. Do you not have feelings for me?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, searching inside myself for an answer. What did I feel for Grant? Something, surely. But what was it? I couldn’t shut the panicking voice inside me up enough to get a clear answer.

I’d had a crush on him for as long as I could remember.

I wasn’t alone in that. He was every girl in my grade’s crush. Now, suddenly, he wanted me back. But he didn’t know me. Not really. He knew a version of me. The kind of watered-down version of a person that you can digest over the length of a single summer. He knew the best parts, but he didn’t know the darkness.

He didn’t know how selfish I was. How much I needed time alone. How indecisive I was. How I rewatched the same movies over and over rather than trying anything new. He didn’t know how much I hated to shave my legs and how rarely I did. Or how much I overate wild amounts of junk food.

He didn’t know how clumsy I was. Or how I ground my teeth in my sleep. He didn’t know the dark parts of my life—my nonexistent relationship with my grandparents because of my grandfather’s drinking, the terror I felt when driving over a bridge, the fact that I once broke my arm falling from a tree and am now wildly afraid of heights, the perfectionist complex I suffered from because, as an only child, I always felt the need to push harder and do more. The way I never felt good enough. The self-deprecating thoughts. The frustration I felt with myself over my indecisiveness. The emptiness I felt when I thought about my future. The lack of plans. The lack of decision-making skills.

Sam knew all of that and he loved me anyway. He’d never give up on me.

If I took a chance on Grant, what if he decided I wasn’t who he thought I was, either? Because I wasn’t. Most assuredly, I wasn’t.

“Grant, look...”

He inhaled sharply, as if he was going to argue, but he stopped. Waiting.

“I had a lot of fun last summer. Honestly, I did. And I’d be lying to you to say I don’t have feelings for you. But the truth is, I don’t know you and you don’t know me. Not really. So, for you to throw away what you have with

Jamie—”

“What we had isn’t right for me anymore. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I’m not confused, I’m—”

“Or for me to throw away what I have with Sam,” I went on, cutting him off. “It would be crazy. And there’s less risk for you, because if it doesn’t work out for you, you still have friends. Nothing really changes for you. But Sam is all I have.”

“That’s not true,” he said, but it was. We both knew it was.

“He’s been very good to me.” I closed my eyes. “Inconceivably good. I can’t hurt him.”

“That’s what I thought about Jamie, too. But then, I realized keeping her around to protect her from being hurt was going to hurt her anyway in the long run. You can’t trick your heart. You can’t convince it or reason with it or bribe it. It is what it is and we are what we are, and at the end of the day, the only reason we go through all we do is so that we can be happy, right? To give up or to say you have to stay with him—or anyone—because you don’t want to hurt him or you might ruin your friendship, is so dismissive of what you truly want. It’s not your job to make his life okay, Cait. And maybe that’s harsh. I get that you’re friends—”

“Best friends. Best, Grant. He’s all I have. I’m all he has.” If I broke up with him, it left him with no one. It would be worse than the pain Jamie had caused when she left us. I couldn’t do that to him.

“We’re months away from graduation. Life will change. We’ll all move on, make new friends, meet new people. Sam will find someone new. It’s not your job to protect him from life. And maybe that’s what you’re doing. Or maybe”—he took a step forward—“maybe you’re building a wall up around yourself, convincing yourself this is the only way, because you’re trying to protect yourself. But living in fear isn’t living.”

“It’s not that simple. I don’t know if I’ll leave. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Stop worrying about that. Stop listening to the voice in your head. Stop listening to the fear.” He took another step forward, reaching out a hand for mine. I stared at him but didn’t react. His hand stayed firm, waiting. “Take down the wall for just a second. Listen to yourself. Don’t worry about Sam, or me, or your future, or Jamie, or the people at school... Don’t worry about anything. Just stop worrying. Stop thinking. And let yourself feel. What do

you want, Cait? Underneath everything you think you *should* want, everything you'll permit yourself to want, what is it you *actually* want?"

"You sound like a self-help book," I remarked snidely.

"Then shut up and let me help."

I closed my eyes, trying to do what he was asking. I forced away thoughts of hurting Sam, disappointing my parents, what it would mean for my future, what Jamie would think, what everyone would think...

It was undeniable that I was curious about being with Grant, that we'd built a true connection I wanted to explore, but wasn't that normal? Wasn't it normal to want new, exciting things? It was why people cheated or threw away perfectly good items in exchange for a newer model. It didn't make it right. It made me human, maybe. Selfish, definitely.

I opened my eyes. "I don't know what I want. And, as much as I hear you, I don't know how to live without the wall. It's part of me. It protects me. And the people I love. If you're looking for someone brave enough to walk away from it all for a chance that this might work, you've got the wrong girl." I started to turn away, but he caught my hand. "Grant—"

"Just listen to me." He dropped my hand. I started to argue, but he spoke too quickly. "I'm not going to force you. Or beg you. I do still have a little self-respect, believe it or not. But I want you to be really sure of what you want. If that's not me, fine. But let that be because you truly don't want to be with me, not because you're afraid of hurting him. I think we could have something really great. You make me happy, Cait. I know that sounds stupid to say when we've only spent a few weeks together more than half a year ago, but since then, I've felt different. I'm more aware of my unhappiness than ever before. Maybe you think I'm being ridiculous, but maybe you feel it too."

His eyes danced between mine. "I don't want to give up knowing I didn't do everything I could to make sure I don't have to live with that feeling. But from here, I don't know what else I can do. So, tell me to walk away and I will." He inhaled. "But otherwise, I'm going to kiss you right now. Because one kiss wasn't nearly enough."

I should've stopped him. I felt the words forming on my tongue, but they never left my mouth. Instead, I felt my guard dropping, my heart thundering loudly in my ears as he waited, the weight of the moment hanging between us. Then, he leaned forward, ever so slowly, closing his eyes as he did, and

his lips found mine.

I remembered him.

In the way you catch a vaguely familiar scent that brings you back to a specific childhood memory, or the feeling of pulling up to the house or place you haven't visited in several months. Kissing him was like coming home, though he'd never been my home. It was the only feeling I could remotely compare to the way my heart swelled to dangerous levels, my head spinning.

His hands cupped the sides of my face, his fingers laced through my hair, and the breath he released told me he felt it too.

No matter how badly I needed to deny it, there was something between Grant and me. Something special. Something real.

More real than anything else in my life.

It terrified and exhilarated me all at once.

I heard the sound of the door opening without comprehending that it was happening. It was only when Grant pulled back, when I heard a sharp inhale, a gasp that hadn't come from him, that I knew something was wrong.

I opened my eyes, staring at the open doorway, where Jamie and Sam stood, their eyes locked on mine.

"I— I can explain—" I said, but we all knew there was no explanation.

Well, there was one.

I'd been set up and I'd walked straight into the trap.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

PRESENT DAY

For the first time all week, I found myself able to focus. I wrote two new chapters while Sam napped on the couch in the sitting room. I was all set to begin working on my third chapter when I noticed the time.

It was already half past six and my stomach was beginning to grumble. I knew I shouldn't wake him up—he deserved to sleep—but I also didn't want to leave him in the room by himself.

Not because I didn't trust him, but because I didn't think it seemed very nice.

Deciding on a compromise, I picked up my cell phone, dismissed the social media notifications, and searched for the pizza place we'd ordered from countless times as kids.

I dialed the number, but it had been disconnected. I searched for them on Facebook, but the page hadn't been updated since 2016. The last post was an announcement that they were closing down and thanking the community for twenty years.

I frowned. Isn't it strange how the little things, the smallest memories and pieces of our childhood feel like they're the only things cementing our past in place? As we get older and more and more things change, it's as if we're slowly losing our grip on a place we once occupied in the world. I found myself thinking about that more and more as my old home became nearly unrecognizable.

Coming home was a reminder of all I'd lost.

There were two pizza places still in operation in Spider Lily, so I chose one and called to place the order. I knew how Sam had once liked his pizza,

but I wasn't sure if that had changed. I had to hope he was still a pepperoni and banana peppers guy.

While I waited for the pizza, I moved around the room, picking up my hairbrush and makeup bag and placing them back in my suitcase. I tossed the bag of chips from my nightstand into the trash and poured out a half-empty bottle of water that had been sitting there since my arrival.

Sam had a pair of shorts laying over the chair next to my bed from when he'd changed after the shower, and I picked them up, carrying them to his suitcase. The suitcase was open, so I folded the shorts carefully and laid them inside, on top of his stack of clothes.

I made my way back across the room and into the bathroom, noticing his bottle of cologne on the sink. I checked over my shoulder, making sure I didn't have an audience before lifting the bottle to my nose slowly, inhaling his scent just once.

Why was I torturing myself like this?

I didn't think I could ever forget Sam's scent.

I picked up the towels from the floor and hung them up to dry, making a mental note to call down for fresh ones soon. Noticing Sam's toiletry bag sitting on the dressing table, I moved toward it slowly.

What sort of things did he keep when he traveled, I wondered?

Grant packed more than I did sometimes. Beard oils, cologne, aftershave, razors, shaving cream, facial moisturizer, combs, nail clippers... The list went on and on. I pictured Sam being much less high maintenance.

It wasn't my business, really, but I couldn't stop myself from peeking into his bag. I crossed the room slowly, reaching for it, and jumped when I heard the shrill ring of his phone in the other room.

I raced out of the bathroom, looking guilty as sin, and into the sitting room where Sam was still sleeping. "Sam, wake up. Your phone's ringing," I told him, glancing at it on the charger. I spied his mom's name on the screen and instantly worried something was wrong. "Sam," I called again. He'd always been a heavy sleeper. I reached down to shake him but changed my mind. Sam wouldn't care if I answered the call. Besides, if it was something simple, I'd rather take the call and let him sleep. I'd hate to wake him up if it was something I could handle.

I lifted the phone to my ear, walking away from him and keeping my voice low. "Hey, Renee!"

“Who is this?” She sounded exactly the same.

“It’s Cait.”

“Oh, Cait!” Her voice was high-pitched and delighted, and I couldn’t help smiling. “How are you, sweetheart? It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“It’s good to hear yours, too,” I told her. “I’m doing well. Sam’s just napping. Do you need me to wake him?”

“Oh, no... I can call him back later. How’s that new book coming? You know I read them all.”

“I know. I’m so glad you do. How are you feeling?”

“Oh, you know... I take it day to day,” she said softly. “I know it’s been hard on Sam.”

She wasn’t talking about her wrist, but rather the divorce, and it felt rude to correct her. “Yeah, I’m sure. He just wants what’s best for you.”

“That’s my Sam. Always thinking of others,” she mused. “So, how long are you in town? What do you say I cook a big meal for the two of you before you head back home?”

“Can you cook?”

She blew air from her lips. “Pffft. Can I cook? Have you bumped your head? I seem to remember a certain young lady scarfing down my cooking.”

I laughed. “Oh, I couldn’t forget your cooking. Doritos casserole, taco salad, pasta salad... My stomach is rumbling just thinking about it. I just meant with your wrist, I thought you’d be taking it easy.”

“What’s wrong with my wrist?” she asked.

I was still for a moment, trying to think. Wasn’t it her wrist that he’d said she hurt? “Isn’t it broken?”

She chuckled. “Not that I know of.”

“Oh, maybe I’m confused...”

“The only thing broken around here is the dadgum vacuum cleaner again, but that’s nothing new. Come on by, okay? I’m serious. I’ll cook all your favorites.”

“That...that sounds good.” Why had Sam lied to me? Had he lied? Surely I hadn’t misunderstood.

“Okay, hun. Gosh, it’s so good to hear from you. Listen, just have Sam call me when he can, okay? Nothing urgent. And come see me before you leave town. Let me know about dinner.”

“I will,” I promised, not entirely listening. My head was spinning with the

revelation.

We ended the call and I stared at the phone screen, locked behind a passcode I didn't know anymore. I didn't have a right to snoop and I wasn't sure I wanted to, but why had Sam lied?

I was sure he had his reasons, but I hated whatever they were.

What reason could he have for lying to me?

Maybe because he didn't want to tell me he was blowing me off? There was a time Sam would've chosen me over everyone. Everything. It was unreasonable to expect that hadn't changed, but why couldn't he just be honest with me?

I contemplated whether or not to bring it up to him as I made my way back to the sitting room and plugged the phone back into its charger. I stared down at Sam, peacefully asleep, wondering what it was he'd done last night.

A few minutes later, when the knock came at the door, I spied the pizza guy through the peephole. I'd given them a fake name, just in case, so when I opened it, he said, "Norma?"

I nodded, handing him a twenty as a tip and taking the pizza from the bag he was holding. When I shut the door, Sam had begun to wake up. Leave it to him to wake up for the smell of food. He lifted his head over the back of the couch, staring at me with one squinted eye.

"Pizza?" he croaked.

"Yeah, sorry. I was trying not to wake you." I sucked in a breath through gritted teeth. He glanced at the digital clock near the TV, jumping up as if he was shocked.

"Wow, I can't believe it's this late. Why didn't you wake me? I only meant to sleep for an hour or two." He checked his phone, then looked back at me.

"It's fine." I carried the pizza to the coffee table and set the box down. "You were tired and needed to sleep. Besides, I was writing, so it all worked out. And now"—I flipped the top of the box open dramatically, one hand in the air—"voilà! Dinner."

"You remembered my order?" He laughed, rubbing his eyes.

"Well, yeah. It helps that it's mine, too."

He tossed the blanket off his legs, freeing himself to lean forward and help himself to a slice as I sat down on the other couch. "Hey, did you know Moretti's closed down?"

He glanced at me, one brow raised, chewing with a cheek full of food.

“In 2016, apparently.”

He nodded, unable to speak. When he swallowed the last of his food, he said, “Yeah, I do remember that, actually. It was after Penny moved away. Mr. Moretti was planning to pass it down to her once he retired, but she either didn’t want it or couldn’t take it... I can’t remember. So, he closed it instead. Mom said he was pretty broken up about it for a while, but I think it was just too much on him.”

“Do they still talk?”

“Occasionally. He’s in bad health, last I heard. Mom goes next door to check on him when she can. He fell. Actually, he was working here when that happened, if I remember right, and he, like, broke his hip. I think that had something to do with the restaurant closing too. It was just too much on him. Mom had always said doing both was too much anyway. My parents tried to help when they could, but they didn’t have much time, either. I’d kind of forgotten it closed until you mentioned it,” he said sadly.

“Wow. I didn’t know anything about it.” I picked at a piece of pepperoni on my pizza absentmindedly. “But Mom and Dad moved to Florida in 2016, so they probably wouldn’t have heard, either. Why didn’t they just hire someone to run it? Moretti’s is a staple of Spider Lily.”

Shrugging a shoulder and swiping sauce from his cheek with his thumb, he said, “No idea. I think there was a falling-out when Penny left. Her dad thought she’d stick around to help him after her mom died, but then she didn’t, so... I guess he just checked out.”

“I didn’t even know she left Spider Lily. You still talk to her?”

He swallowed, standing up. “Not much. Do you want a drink?” He crossed the room to the minibar and pulled out two bottles of water.

“Thanks.” I took one from him, my palm chilling instantly. “I don’t know why it makes me so sad, but it does.”

“I know.” He twisted the cap off, staring into space stoically. “My god, that place was like a second home to us. The arcade... Do you remember those stupid little bouncy balls? We’d spend like five dollars trying to win one in that machine.”

I snorted. “They were probably worth ten cents.”

“We thought they were so special.”

“They were special,” I insisted. “I remember the first time you won one.”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“You don’t?”

He shook his head, taking another bite and pulling the blanket around him.

“We’d been playing for...most of our lives, but probably like three hours that day. We all combined our change and we ended up with a bag full of quarters. I mean, it couldn’t have been that big, but in my memory, it feels like it was huge.” I held my arms out, to show the size. “Anyway, we were, like, eight maybe. Nine? And Dylan Prescott had just given me a black eye by accident in gym class.”

“Playing basketball,” Sam filled in, the memory hitting him.

“Yes, that’s right. And we were down to our last few quarters.” My lips spread wide across my face, a smile so big it practically hurt. “You insisted you were close to getting one, and you did.” I held my hand out, still remembering the feel of the rubber in my palm. “It was lime green with these little white swirls.” I pressed my lips together, trying to conceal my smile. “You gave it to me on our walk home that day.”

“I remember,” he said, a somber, nostalgic look in his eye. “I wanted to cheer you up.”

“Jamie was so jealous. That was the first time she ever accused you of having a crush on me.”

He chuckled, running his tongue across his teeth. “The first of many.” He rubbed a hand over his belly, not looking at me when he said, “To be fair, she was never wrong.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “That’s not true.”

“Of course it is.”

I cocked my head to the side with a scoff. “Sam, you did not have a crush on me when we were eight years old. Or ten or thirteen. Or fourteen, for that matter. I was awkward and lanky, and I needed braces badly, and—”

“You were never awkward, Cait. Not to me.” He met my eye then, leaning forward over his knees as he reached for another slice of pizza, his cheeks tinged pink.

I couldn’t find my voice, and even if I could’ve, my brain had turned to mush. I stared in silence as he sat back, breaking eye contact again.

“I’ve had a crush on you our entire lives. I just didn’t have the balls to say anything until your birthday. But I was crazy about you. If you couldn’t see

that..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "I was never *that* subtle."

"You've never told me that before."

"You never asked."

"Sam, I'm sorry."

"For what?"

I had no real answer. Sorry for everything, honestly. For the way I'd hurt him, for hurting him for so much longer than I'd realized, for losing touch, for never being there for him like he was for me. "For not seeing you sooner."

He seemed to let the apology sit with him a moment, mulling it over. "You saw what you needed to see. I can't fault you for that. You weren't ready. Hell, I wasn't ready. We were just kids, Cait. You were my best friend. I had a crush on you because you had light-up tennis shoes. If anything, I'm glad we waited as long as we did. If I'd screwed it up and lost you before we got to be together—really be together—I'd never have forgiven myself."

"Do you regret it now?" I asked, not completely sure I wanted to know the answer. "Telling me? Do you regret it now that you know how it ended?"

His eyes widened with horror. "Did you really just ask me that?"

"It's a fair question. I was awful to you. If the tables were reversed, I'm not sure I'd be sitting across from you eating pizza right now." I picked at a frayed string in the stitching on the couch. "You were always better than me. More forgiving than me."

"Cait, I—I don't regret a single minute with you. I'd do it all over again in a second. Without hesitation. You were...you were the love of my life."

I felt heat rush to my cheeks. "We were kids—"

"I know how I felt about you. And it was real. We may have been too young, but I'll never regret what we had, for however long we had it. Being with you was, I mean, those are some of my favorite memories." He ran a hand over his jaw. "I was hurt by what happened. You hurt me. But you were a kid, too. As angry as I was then, I don't blame you anymore. I was trying to force you to stay in a place you didn't want to. I was holding you back—"

"No." I held up a hand, cutting him off. "No, you weren't at all. You never held me back. I was selfish and stupid and thoughtless. You deserved better. And I'm sorry." There were tears stinging my eyes, but I couldn't stop speaking. Everything I'd needed to say to him for so long was finally pouring

out of me.

“You don’t have to—”

“No, I want to. I know I said it back then, but I want you to hear it from me now. I’m sorry for hurting you. I’m sorry for what I did. I’m just so sorry...” I was shaking as he moved toward me, crossing the space between us in seconds so he was next to me on the couch, an arm around my shoulders.

“You don’t owe me an apology.” He pulled me to him, resting his cheek on the crown of my head. “You don’t. I love you, Cait. You will always be the person I care about most in this world. That hasn’t changed. We were dumb kids. It’s over and it all worked out for the best. We were better off as friends anyway.”

I nodded against his shirt, allowing myself to fully breathe in his scent. “I’m sorry I’m crying.” I swiped a finger under my eyes. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“It’s this place,” he said. “Being here... With these people. This place. It’s weird. I keep feeling like it’s almost cruel to have it here, you know? Like doing this means what happened to her didn’t matter.”

“I know.” I sniffled. “I hate it. I know we don’t have a lot of options in town, but this place feels...”

“Haunted,” he filled in. “Like she’s still here. Watching us.”

A chill ran down my spine at his words, my body suddenly uncomfortable. “Don’t say that. She’s gone, Sam. She’s been gone.”

He pulled back away from me a bit. “Of course she is. It just feels wrong, I guess, is all I’m saying. Jamie would’ve hated us coming back together without her.”

“She would’ve.” *That* I could agree with.

I was trying to work out how to ask him what I needed to ask. To bring up the fact that I knew he’d lied about his mom’s injury, but I didn’t know how to do it. I felt sure there was a reasonable explanation, but the longer I waited it out, the darker the theories in my head grew.

“Hey, Sam?”

“Hm?” he asked, taking a sip of his water.

“While you were sleeping, your mom called...”

He nearly choked on his drink, coughing loudly and pounding a hand to his chest. I reached for him. “Are you okay?”

“Sorry,” he wheezed. “Wrong pipe. Did you say my mom?”

I nodded, rubbing my lips together. “I answered.”

He waited for me to go on. “And? Is she...okay?”

“She wants you to call her back, and...she told me she never hurt her wrist.” I winced, almost feeling guilty for bringing it up.

He was quiet at first, not saying anything right away. I half expected him to tell me I was wrong, or that she was joking, but that wasn’t Sam. He wasn’t a liar, so why had he lied?

Eventually, he dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry. She’s right. I don’t know why I lied.”

“Why did you? What were you doing?”

He stood, expelling a dramatic sigh. “I was going to try and surprise you, but I guess the cat’s out of the bag.” He stalked across the room and into the bedroom, returning moments later with a black book in his hands. He reclaimed his seat next to me, and I stared at the book for a moment, trying to understand. “I had this made for you a while back and was planning to ship it, but I kept forgetting.” He flipped open the first page, revealing a graduation photo of me.

“A scrapbook?” I asked, running my fingers along the intricate detailing of my name under the photograph.

“Sort of, I guess. The company calls it a memory book. I’ve got all kinds of photos and different awards and stuff that you’ve won. Pictures from school. Your mom helped me put it together.” He turned through pages of pictures—the year I’d played soccer in elementary school, the play I was in as a child, Christmas pageants, science fairs. Dozens and dozens of pictures of the two of us, and a few of the three of us. Every time I saw Jamie’s face, my chest grew tight. Near the end, there were photos of my wedding, book signings, and a photo of myself holding the twins the day they were born.

“Sam...this is...”

“It’s not a big deal,” he said, waving me off. When he placed the book in my lap, I was shocked by the weight of it.

“It is. This must’ve cost a fortune.”

“Nah, I did some graphic design work for the company and they gave it to me for free. Seriously, no big deal. I thought the kids might like to see the version of you I remember.”

I opened the book again, flipping back through the pages with tears in my

eyes and a lump in my throat. I regretted ever thinking Sam could lie for reasons that weren't entirely noble.

"Thank you," I said through my tears.

"You're welcome." He was eating again. "I'm glad you like it, and I'm sorry I lied."

I'd stopped on a photo of the three of us, staring down at our smiling faces. Sam and I had changed so much since then, our features growing and maturing. I wondered what Jamie would look like as an adult.

Still just as beautiful, I was sure.

I hated looking at her, but I couldn't pull my eyes away.

"Do you miss her?" Sam asked softly.

"More than anything," I admitted. It was true. I did miss her, but just thinking of her brought me pain. "I wish she was still here."

"Who knows? Maybe she still is?" he said. "Watching over us. Keeping us out of trouble. Probably barking at us about how many calories are in this thing." He gestured toward the pizza with a grin.

He was joking, of course, but I hated the joke.

I liked to think Jamie was at peace.

That she was somewhere watching over us. That she'd forgiven me.

The idea of her ghost roaming the halls of Hotel Lilith was too much to bear.

It wasn't possible.

Jamie was dead.

Gone.

She wasn't watching us.

She wasn't still hanging around.

No, the truth of what happened died with her that night.

Only two people knew what I'd done—me and her. And we'd both take that secret to the grave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

AGE EIGHTEEN

“**W**hat the hell are you two doing?” Grant asked Jamie and Sam as they stood in my doorway.

At the same time, I faced him, venom pulsing through my veins. My lips were still tingling from our kiss. “*You set me up,*” I shouted.

He whipped his head around to look at me, a ghastly expression on his features. “What? *No!* No, Cait, I had nothing to do with this.”

I couldn’t think straight, couldn’t process his denial as I looked around at each of them, so much anger and heartbreak coursing through me, I could hardly breathe. I met Sam’s anger-filled eyes. “Sam, I—”

“No, Grant’s right. He didn’t set you up. Turns out he didn’t need to,” Sam said bitterly, his gaze falling to the floor.

“I don’t understand... This was a mistake. It shouldn’t have happened.”

“Was the last time a mistake, too?” he demanded.

“The last...” I looked at Grant again. Had he told Sam about the night of Jamie’s party? “What is he talking about?” I demanded.

“I have no idea.” Looking dumbfounded, Grant spoke to Jamie. “What’s going on? What are you doing here? Why did you come? What did you do?”

When it was Jamie’s turn to speak, it was me she looked at. “He told me he kissed you the night of my birthday. And that he started having feelings for you this summer.”

I was breathless, my voice barely above a whisper. “You wha—”

“So, when he left, I called Sam to meet me here. Apparently you never told him about the kiss.” A cruel smile twisted on her lips, her head tilted to the side in mock confusion.

“I wasn’t trying to hide it from you,” I lied. “I just—”

“We were coming to confront you, but what we found was so much better. When we got here, we saw his truck. Sam didn’t want to believe it, but I convinced him to come inside. We knocked on the front door and no one answered. And now, Sam, see for yourself why that was.”

“No,” I said firmly. “It wasn’t like that.” I tried to catch Sam’s eye, but he was an expert at evading me. “Sam, this wasn’t that. I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry you had to see this, but it’s not... I mean, I’m not cheating on you.”

“So, what? You’re saying you don’t have feelings for him?” I had no idea how long they’d been listening and I didn’t want to hurt him worse by lying.

“It’s complicated. But what matters is that—” He scoffed, already turning to walk away, but I spoke louder, following him. “—that I’m with you. That I care about you.” I grabbed his arm. “Sam, please listen to me!”

He jerked out of my grasp when we reached the front door. “Cait, let me go. I don’t want to do or say something I’ll regret, so just...just let me go.” His jaw was locked tight, his hands balled into fists, but I could see the pain in his expression. I knew what I’d done, and it was killing me.

This wasn’t my fault, but in every way that mattered, I had caused it.

I should’ve said no. I should’ve asked Grant to leave.

My head and heart were conflicted, waging war inside my chest. I dropped his arm, tears brimming my eyes.

“Please don’t go. I love you, Sam.”

He met my gaze one last time, shaking his head. “Apparently not enough.” His eyes glistened from the agony I’d caused him, and he let the screen door slam on his way to his car. I could hear Jamie and Grant arguing from my bedroom and a new fury filled me.

I raced back down the hall, my hands trembling.

“Get out!” I demanded before I’d even reached the room. “Both of you!”

“Cait, I’m so sorry,” Grant pleaded. “I swear to you I had no idea she was going to do this.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I just lost Sam, and I don’t think he’ll ever forgive me.”

“Serves you right,” Jamie sniveled. “Poor little Cait always has to get everything. Well, not anymore.”

“What are you even talking about, Jamie? I don’t get anything! You’re the popular one. You’re the one with money and fancy things. Did I really do

something to make you hate me this badly?”

“You stole Grant from me! He left me for you!” she shrieked.

“Okay, there’s a huge difference between stealing him and him leaving you. I didn’t take Grant from you.” I gave him a sideways glance but continued on, grateful he wasn’t arguing. “When he kissed me this summer, I *could’ve* stolen him. He asked me to be with him, but I didn’t. Not for you, but for Sam. I didn’t want to hurt him. I never wanted to take Grant from you, regardless of my feelings. Whatever’s going on between you two, it has nothing to do with me. And, you know what? Sure, hurt me because you’re mad, but Sam’s innocent in all of this. You had no right—no reason—to hurt him.”

She squared her shoulders to me, her face practically unrecognizable behind the cold facade. When had she become so cruel? How had she changed so much? “I’m not the one who hurt him, Cait. You are. I just opened his eyes to what was going on.”

“There’s nothing going on!” I screamed, my hands down at my sides. “Grant and I aren’t together!”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

Grant stepped forward, placing himself between us, his voice low but determined when he spoke. “Jamie, you crossed so many lines. I told you we are done. You didn’t need to come here. Your problem is with me. Not Cait. Not Sam.”

“We’re all just one big happy family, didn’t you know?” she asked, her nose wrinkled with feigned delight. I spied tears in her eyes then.

“Do you even care? I mean, really, truly care that we’re broken up? Or are you more worried about what everyone will think of you without me? Because I was starting to feel less like a boyfriend and more like a prop.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, spare me the dramatics.”

I stomped my foot, calling their attention to me. “Hello? Am I speaking to myself? I’d like you both to go. Now.” When they didn’t move, I spoke louder. “I said *now!*” I pointed my finger toward the door. Jamie turned with a soft *hmph*, obviously proud of herself, and headed for the door. Grant was slower to move, his gaze lingering on me.

“Cait, I—” He gripped the door, his mouth dropping open with words unspoken between us.

“I can’t right now. Please just go.” I was on the verge of breaking down

into outright sobs, but I couldn't let him see that. For a moment, I feared he would argue with me, but I was relieved when, instead, he turned away from me, giving a final, solemn nod.

"I'm sorry." With a sigh, he walked from the room and down the long hall. When I heard the door shut, I sank onto the floor, my knees to my chest as the sobs began to tear through me.

What did I do?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

PRESENT DAY

Sam and I were still on the couch, catching up and reminiscing, when the hotel room's phone rang. I looked at him, then into the bedroom. Who would be calling that phone?

I thought of the call I'd received earlier, the one from hotel security, and a lump formed in my throat. Maybe it was Grant. I'd expected him to call my cell phone, but I realized at that moment it was still sitting in the bedroom.

I hurried toward the phone faster, picking it up as I fought to catch my breath. "Hello?"

There was no immediate response on the other end of the line. I looked at the phone, then pressed it to my ear harder. "Hello?" I called again.

This time, I heard steady breathing. The hair on my arms stood at attention, a chill lingering on the back of my neck. "Hello? Who is this?" I begged, hoping I was wrong.

"Cait?" came the girl's response. "Cait, is that you?"

"Who is this?" I demanded, ice running through my veins at breakneck speed.

"It's me. We got separated earlier. Can I still come up and stay with you?"

I stared at the phone. "How...how did you get my room number?"

"You gave it to me, silly," she said with a giggle.

"No, I didn't."

"Of course, you did."

"Look, I don't know who you are or what you want, but you're scaring me. I've already alerted hotel security. If you call me again, I'm going to

report you to the police.” Sam was in the room now, watching me with a worried expression.

“Who is it?” he mouthed silently. “*Her?*”

“Oh, the police,” she said with a wicked laugh. “Now that’ll be a treat. You don’t exactly have the best relationship with them, do you?”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, but I knew. I knew what she was saying, what she was implying.

“Let me talk to her,” Sam whispered, holding out his hand. I turned away, ignoring him.

“Don’t call me again. Don’t contact me. If you do, I will have you arrested for stalking and harassment.” Was that even a thing? Did I have a chance at having her arrested? I had no idea.

She laughed again, then fell silent. I stared, waiting. Then, all at once, almost as if she had transformed into someone else entirely, she replied with a deep voice, “Not if I get you first.”

I dropped the receiver, panic radiating in my core, when, at the same time, I heard a thud coming from the sitting room.

She’d found me.

She was at my door.

CHAPTER THIRTY

AGE EIGHTEEN

The day Grant kissed me was the beginning of the end of everything I once knew. Sam wouldn't speak to me—not that I blamed him. It seemed he and Jamie had been brought back together by their mutual hatred for me.

Grant was as popular as ever. I'd seen him laughing and chatting with his friends in the halls and in class. There was a noticeable Jamie-shaped hole in their lineup, but it was hard to surmise that anyone cared.

After everything that had happened, it was only me who was alone. Only me who was hurt by my own stupid actions. I'd known it was what would happen. I'd known what would come of being selfish, but I'd given in anyway.

I counted down the days until graduation, with prom no longer on my radar. I'd never expected my last days of high school to be filled with complete enjoyment, but I hated that any such hope had been stripped away from me now. I was on the outskirts. A loser, even by my usual standards.

Even more invisible than I always had been.

As the days passed, my hopelessness grew. Sam was never going to forgive me. I'd lost my two best friends at once. Grant had tried to talk to me a few times too, stopping me in the hall once or twice, texting me, and even trying to pass a note my way in class, but I ignored him completely. If I had any hope of getting Sam to forgive me, I had to be sure he knew I wasn't still talking to Grant.

Which was why, that afternoon, two weeks after our kiss when Grant came by the café again, my heart sank.

What was he doing there? He knew it was where I worked and he knew he should stay away.

“Hey,” he said, approaching the counter upon entering the building. There were a few customers eating and chatting quietly at their tables.

I glared at him. “What do you want?”

“To talk to you. I know you’re upset, but I’ve been trying to get ahold of you to apologize for what happened.”

I kept my voice low. “I appreciate that, I really do, but it doesn’t fix anything. I messed everything up, Grant. I’m all alone, and—”

“You’re not alone, not if you’ll talk to me, I’ve—”

A customer walked up, holding out a hand. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said, glowering at us irritably. “But can I get a napkin?”

“Of course.” I handed him a stack of napkins and waited until he walked away before turning back to Grant. “Look, you’re going to get me in trouble. Just go, okay?”

“No, not until you talk to me. You won’t talk to me at school. You won’t answer my calls or come to the door at home—”

“There’s nothing to say—”

“There is. And it’s this: I know you’re hurt. I know I’m the one who caused it. I get it, okay? I hate what went down and how it did, but I don’t regret kissing you. Not the first time or this one. I don’t regret the truth coming out. I don’t regret telling you how I feel about you.”

Cara came around the corner, obviously eavesdropping on our whispered conversation.

“Everything okay?” she asked, one brow raised.

“Can you cover for just a sec? I need to take a break.” I was already untying my apron, giving her no choice. I hung it on the rack and walked around from behind the counter, grabbing Grant’s arm and pulling him outside. We stood by the side of the building in the shadows. I had no idea what to say to him.

“I meant what I said in there. Maybe I’m being too pushy. Maybe you blame me. Maybe you *should* blame me. But you said before that you do have feelings for me and you couldn’t act on them because of Sam—” That wasn’t exactly what I’d said, but I didn’t argue. “Well, now you don’t have an excuse. So, don’t be alone. Be with me.” He reached out his hand, touching my arm. “I know this is shitty timing and I know you’re furious

with me over the way things happened, but the way I feel about you hasn't changed."

"How can you say that? How are we going to be together, Grant? I'm me and you're...*you*."

His response came back dry and sarcastic. "That's generally how identities work, yeah."

"But what will your friends think? If they were mad over Jamie, they're going to be furious about me. I know what it's like to lose everyone you have. Trust me, as angry as I am with you, I wouldn't wish this on you."

"Cait, I don't care about that. Don't you get it? I don't care. If they aren't my friends because of who I'm dating, then they aren't my friends. Period. It didn't stop me from dating Jamie, and it won't stop me from being with you, either. They don't control me. And, if they want to, if it's us against the world...I'm okay with that, too."

"It's all very courageous when you say it, but you have no idea how debilitating the loneliness is."

"So don't be lonely." His hand traveled down my arm, gripping my hand. "Don't be lonely, Cait. All you have to do is say yes."

"He's going to hate me."

"He's not," he swore.

"You don't know him."

"I know how he feels," he said. "How he feels about you." His eyes searched mine, glimmering with hope and warmth. "Because I feel the same way. I see the version of you he loves, and I could never hate you. So he can't, either. He's hurt, yes. But he'll come around."

"You have no way to know that."

"I do. Trust me, I do. It may take a while, but friends are friends. Period. I know how close you were. I know you're hurting right now. But that's no reason to deny your feelings. Think about it. As angry as you were with Jamie, you took her back when she needed you, didn't you?"

"That wasn't the same—"

"And if she came to you right now and said she needed you, you'd accept her in a heartbeat, wouldn't you?"

I swallowed. He was right, and he knew it. My connection with Jamie and Sam went deeper than any argument, no matter how big.

"Sam loves you. I don't have to know him to know that. He'll forgive

you. He'll come around. But lying to him, suppressing your feelings for me, and pretending to love him, it's not going to do anything but hurt you both in the long run. The heart wants what it wants, Cait. Sometimes you just have to give in to it and let the world burn around you."

I felt a silent tear slip down my cheek. He lifted his thumb to dry it, but paused, a question in his expression. I closed my eyes, giving him permission, and felt his skin graze mine. Electricity shot through me under his touch.

When I opened my eyes again, it was clear he'd felt it too.

"It's going to be okay. We're all going to be okay," he promised, squeezing the hand he still held in his.

I nodded, letting my head fall to rest on his shoulder. He didn't try to kiss me, not right then. But somehow, the embrace, his arms around my back and my face buried in the crook of his neck, was the most intimate moment I'd ever experienced.

I was falling in love with him and I hardly knew him.

My entire world had gone up in flames, and I was still holding the match.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

PRESENT DAY

Sam and I stared at the door, the phone still hanging off its receiver. “Who was that?” he asked again. “What did they want? Was it the girl from earlier?”

I nodded, my heart racing, mouth dry. “She said she’s going to get me.”

He pointed to the door. “*Get you?* What does that mean? Is she outside?”

We were already making our way toward the door cautiously, sizing it up as if it were a rabid dog. “Should I call security?”

“I don’t... I don’t know. What did she mean, *get you?*”

“Who’s outside?” I begged.

He held out a hand to keep me back, pressing his eye up against it. “No one’s there.”

“Someone’s there,” I insisted, nearing hysterics.

He gripped my shoulders. “Cait, talk to me. What happened? What did she say?”

I couldn’t answer, couldn’t focus on anything but the door. Licking my lips, I searched my brain for the memory. “Um, she...she asked if she could come up. And I asked how she got my room number. She said I gave it to her, but I know I didn’t. I told her I’d call the police and she said she’d get me. She had this...this voice.” The memory was haunting.

“Voice?” he asked, his face wrinkling with a mixture of horror and confusion.

“Like a man’s voice, or...a creature. Something evil. She sounded possessed.”

He shook his head. “What else did she say?”

“Nothing. I dropped the phone, and that’s when we heard the bang on the door.”

He looked out the peephole again, his hands trembling on the wood of the door. He held up a hand to keep me back again. “I’m going to open it.”

“Wait!” I cried.

“There’s no one out here,” he said. “I just want to be sure.”

“She could be waiting on the other side of the wall. She could have a gun. Or a knife. Please, Sam, don’t!” I was crying now, and upon hearing that, he moved his hand off the door handle.

“Okay,” he said with a sigh. “Okay. You’re right. Let’s be safe. We’ll call security first.”

I nodded, jogging back across the room and picking up the phone. I hung it up, waiting for the tone to return, then dialed the three-digit code to reach the front desk.

“Front desk, this is Jacob,” came a cheery voice.

“Jacob, I need to speak with someone in security please,” I said, all in one breath.

“Oh.” He sounded startled. “Okay. Sure. Let me just... Okay. Um, okay, is everything okay?”

“I don’t know. I spoke to someone earlier named...” I tried to remember. “Evan, I think it was. Is he still there?”

“Evan?” He seemed flustered, but recovered quickly. “Yes, Evan’s still here. Do you want to speak to him?”

“Please.”

“Certainly. One moment.” Something clicked, and pleasant-sounding hold music began to drone on over the line. I checked over my shoulder, wondering if the woman was still there. Apparently having the same idea, Sam was standing guard by the door, keeping his body angled so he could clearly see me, but also the doorway.

After a moment, the familiar voice I’d spoken to earlier picked up. “Security, this is Evan.”

“Evan, hi. This is Cait Du Bois in room three thirty-three. We spoke earlier about—”

“The woman who was bothering you, yes, I remember.” His tone was urgent. “Is everything okay?”

Perhaps he could hear the panic in my tone, or perhaps he just always

sounded so serious. Either way, I appreciated it.

“Yes. Er, no. I don’t know. She called me earlier. She called my room. And she said she was going to *get me*. Exact words.”

“Wait, she called your hotel room?”

“Yes.”

“How did she get that number?”

I could hear him typing something. “I have no idea,” I said, running a hand over the arm that held my phone, trying to warm myself up. “But she was outside my door. She banged on it when I was talking to her. I’m afraid to look outside.”

He stopped typing. “She came to your room?” I could hear him moving around.

“Yes, she was... She said she’d get me and then we heard a bang at the door. It had to be her.”

“Is your door lock engaged? The silver, manual one?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Okay, good.” He was back to typing. “I’m searching through the security footage right now. Stay on the line with me, okay, Mrs. Du Bois?”

“Yes, okay.”

I listened to the rhythmic, steady sounds of his breathing. Suddenly, he inhaled sharply. “There...”

“What is it?”

“Five minutes ago, someone *was* outside of your door.”

“Someone?”

“I can’t see who it is,” he complained. “They’re wearing a hood. Medium build, average height. No distinguishing features that I can make out.”

“It had to be her.”

“Hold on... What the...”

“What? What is it?” Sam was watching me now, the worry evident on his face.

“Looks like they left something.”

“Left something?”

He was typing something again. “Yes. There’s a...a package outside of your door right now. Something small. Whoever it was, they placed it there, pounded once on your door, and bolted.”

“They’re gone?” Sam’s shoulders lost some of their tension, but mine

weren't so lucky. What could she have left? And why?

"Yes. There's no one there. They left the hallway and headed down the stairwell. Were you expecting any kind of package?"

"A package? No, nothing." Sam glanced at the door, leaving my side at once as he rushed toward the door.

Evan cursed under his breath. "Okay, listen to me carefully: I want you to stay in your room. I'm going to have to call the police to investigate."

"The police..." I felt as if I were going to pass out, my head going dizzy. "I don't understand." Sam had disappeared around the corner and I heard the door swing open.

"Mrs. Du Bois, do you hear any sort of beeping? Like...a timer?"

My knees went weak as I realized what he was implying. I launched myself forward, dropping the phone. "Sam, don't!"

Evan shouted something over the phone line, but I couldn't hear him, and even if I could've, I couldn't answer. I couldn't do anything, because as he was asking, I watched in what felt like slow motion as Sam's hands grasped the small, yellow box sitting on the ground.

I closed my eyes, bracing for impact.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

AGE EIGHTEEN

The night of prom came a week after Grant and I had begun dating. I didn't want to go. Being with Grant was both the best and worst thing that had ever happened to me. On one hand, I was most certainly no longer invisible, but thrown straight into the public eye. I'd thought I hated being invisible, but now I craved it more than I'd thought was possible.

I missed making it through class without being stared at or whispered about. I missed walking down the hallway without a single person trying to talk to me.

And it wasn't like everyone suddenly wanted to be my friend.

Quite the opposite, in fact. Now, everyone wanted to know why I thought I was so special—I didn't. Or why Grant would want me—I had no idea.

I was picked on, bumped into, and sneered at more times than ever before, and it had only been a week. The only person who wasn't staring at me was the one I wished would—Sam. He didn't look my way a single time.

So when Grant suggested we go to prom together, I thought he'd lost his mind. There was no way. First of all—practically—the dress I'd purchased matched Sam's tie, and I'd never feel comfortable wearing it with anyone but him. Second, I had no time to get a new dress. We'd already canceled my hair appointment, and I had no desire to be in public with Grant more than was necessary. In truth, by that point, I was just counting down until I could get out of that town for good.

But Grant was convincing. He always had that going for him.

"Come on, you can't just skip prom. It's important."

"Why is it important? So you can hang out with your friends?"

“No, so I can hang out with you,” he insisted. “I want to be with you.”

“So, we’ll stay in and rent some movies. You can be with me either way, and only one of those options involves me being publicly ridiculed.”

He sank down onto the bed next to me, his brow wrinkling with concern as he brushed the hair from my eyes. “Hey, you know I’m not going to let that happen. I said something to Shane and Brandon today in class, and I’ll say something to anyone else I see treating you that way. People are just interested because it’s new. Pretty soon, it will be old news and everyone will move on to something else.”

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

He kissed my forehead. “I don’t care what anyone thinks, so why do you?”

“Um, maybe because no one’s shoving you into lockers.”

“No one’s shoving you into lockers, either,” he said with a laugh.

“Metaphorical ones, anyway.”

“Okay, fine.” He bowed his head in acceptance. “Well, I promise I won’t let anyone shove you into a metaphorical locker. Besides that, we can’t let them keep us from going.”

“Says who?”

“Me. If we give in, it’ll look like they scared us off. They won.”

“I’m not all that big on winning anyway,” I whined.

“Stop,” he said, his tone firm, but still light. “Don’t you want to look back and know you went to prom anyway? We just have a few more weeks with these people. But you’ll have that memory, or lack of a memory, for the rest of your life. Don’t let them scare you, Cait. What’s the worst that could happen?”

I glared at him, wrinkling my nose with a huff of breath. “Well, even if I wanted to go, I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Then we’ll go shopping.”

I stared at him. “I can’t ask my mom to buy me another dress, and I don’t have nearly enough saved up to buy one. My car insurance is due soon.”

“So, I’ll buy you one,” he offered casually.

I patted his knee. “Thank you. You’re very sweet. But no, you can’t buy me a dress.”

“Says who?”

“Says me,” I retorted. “Seriously, if you want to go, you can go. I’ll

probably just watch a movie, veg out, and crash early.”

He stood, walking to my closet. “If you won’t let me buy you one, what about this?” He tugged on a cocktail dress I’d worn to my cousin’s wedding last spring.

“That’s not a prom dress.”

“So, we’ll make it one. I’ll wear, like, I don’t know, khaki pants. It’ll be a whole thing.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a dress code that says that’s not allowed.”

“A dress code?” he asked, as if it were a foreign concept.

“Yeah, you know, the thing they sent home when they announced the prom theme? The paper with the styles of dresses we’re allowed to wear. All the rules about fingertip lengths and dress cuts.”

His brows bounced up. “Yeah, I guess I never really paid attention to that. I didn’t think they were serious about it.”

“You do know that girls get kicked out of prom and class all the time for violating some dumb, arbitrary rule about how we dress, right?”

“I mean, I knew there were rules, but I’ve never really thought about them, I guess. I just wear what I feel like wearing.”

“Therein lies the problem,” I groaned. “If I wore that, I’d get kicked out anyway. It’s not formal enough, and there’s a rule about sweetheart necklines.”

He twisted his mouth. Obviously, I was speaking a foreign language to him. “Hey, what if you traded in the dress. You could sell it and use the money for a new one.”

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea.”

“My aunt runs a shop in Spartanburg. You could take it there. She’d give you whatever you paid for it if I asked her to.”

“Oh, you’re just bound and determined to save me, aren’t you?” I asked with a sigh.

“Whatever it takes.” He kissed my cheek.

“Fine, whatever. I’ll find a new dress. But you have to go with me. If I’m being put through the torture of shopping for another prom dress, then so are you.”

“It will be worth it.”

“You’d better hope so.” I wagged a finger at him.

“It’s going to be a night we’ll always remember.” He kissed my cheek

again. “Promise.”

HE WAS RIGHT ABOUT THAT.

When prom night rolled around, he met me at the door, dressed in a simple, black tux, with a teal tie that matched the dress we’d chosen. He carried an elegant corsage and placed it on my wrist. We posed for the obligatory pictures, ignoring the tears gathering in my mom’s eyes as she went on and on about how fast I was growing up.

Dad gave Grant the talk about getting me home safely, as if I was incapable of taking care of myself.

And then, we were off. It would be a lie to say I wasn’t nervous. I was terrified of what the night would bring. But no matter what I thought, I could’ve never prepared myself for what would actually go down.

Prom night was the last night any of us saw Jamie alive.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

PRESENT DAY

“**W**hat’s wrong?” Sam asked, staring at me, then the package in his hand strangely. “What is this?”

I could still hear the faint sound of Evan’s voice practically shouting at me through the phone across the room from where I stood. Sam shut and dead-bolted the door, waiting for my answer.

We were still alive.

We hadn’t died.

“I don’t know,” I told Sam. “He said not to pick it up.”

He blanched. “Shit. Should I put it down?”

“I don’t know. Just... Just don’t move.” I tried to catch my breath as I ran back to the phone, picking it up and placing it to my ear.

“I’m here. I’m sorry. My...my friend is here. He picked up the package.”

“*What?* I told you to leave it,” he said.

“I didn’t relay it quickly enough. What should we do?”

“What’s going on?” Sam asked again. “Did they leave this for you? What is it?”

At the same time, Evan was asking, “Is it heavy? How much does it weigh?”

“I—” I struggled to talk to both of them at once.

“Mrs. Du Bois, is it heavy?” Evan asked again. “About what size is the package? Can you describe it to me?”

I repeated the questions to Sam.

“It’s really light,” he said, shaking his head and weighing it in his hands. “Almost feels empty.”

I filled Evan in. “It’s small enough to fit in his palm. Should we open it or...”

“No, you shouldn’t open it. You shouldn’t even be touching it. Have your friend place it down very carefully. It’s small and light, there’s no beeping noise, and you’ve already moved it. I don’t think it’s a bomb, but there’s still a chance that whatever is in there could be harmful to you. If you weren’t expecting it, we need to turn it in to the police and let them okay it.”

I thought of Jamie’s death...

This felt eerily similar all of a sudden. Was it happening again?

Was someone else going to die?

I swallowed. Without saying goodbye, the line clicked and Evan was gone.

“Hello? Earth to Cait. Can you tell me something? Are we dying today or...” Sam demanded. Blinking out of my trance, I shook my head.

“Sorry, put it down. Just be gentle. He’s coming up to get it. They have to turn it in to the police.”

He balked at the suggestion. “The police? What the hell? Why? What is it?”

“I have no idea. He saw someone place it in front of our door just now, and I’m not expecting anything.”

“Someone? Who? The girl?”

“They had a hood on. He couldn’t see.”

“A hood? In the dead of summer? They had to be hiding who they were.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

His brows raised, an idea striking him. “Could it have been Grant? Did he send you something?”

The thought hadn’t occurred to me. “If he did, he should get a refund on delivery,” I said stiffly, searching for my phone. I picked it up and called him at once.

“Hel—”

“Grant, hey, it’s me. Listen, did you try to send me something?”

“Well, hello to you too,” he chirped.

“I’m serious. Did you try to send me something?”

“No. Why? Is everything okay?” He was serious then.

“Someone left a package at my door. We’re having to turn it over to the police.”

“Why? What was in it?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted, feeling helpless and trapped. “That girl found out my room number. She called and threatened me and then someone dropped this package off.”

“Oh, my god.” I could hear the sounds of the twins playing in the background going faint. “What did they do? Did they catch her? Did they find out who did it?”

“No, this all just happened. Whoever it was is gone.”

Someone was knocking at the door, and Sam turned to answer it.

“Check the peephole,” I warned, and he nodded.

“Who are you talking to?” Grant asked.

“Sam’s here.”

“Sam? Why?”

“Because of all of this,” I said simply. A man dressed in an official-looking uniform was standing in the sitting room, talking to Sam. “I have to go.”

“Go? Wait, no! You need to talk to me. What’s going on? Do I need to come there?”

“No, keep the babies safe. I’ll call soon.”

The twins were shouting again.

“Wait—”

But I was already off the call. I shoved the phone in my pocket, feeling guilty at once, as the stranger in the room introduced himself. His black dress shirt had the words **HOTEL SECURITY** printed on it in white lettering just above the pocket. Below that was his name, **EVAN**.

“Mrs. Du Bois,” he said, holding out a hand. “I’m Evan. Nice to officially meet you.” He glanced toward the package. “Is this it?”

I nodded. “Mhm.”

He pulled on gloves and held out a plastic bag that he transferred the package into carefully, his hands steady and sure. “I’m really sorry this is happening to you. For now, we’ll get this turned over to the local police, along with the security tape. If it’s safe, hopefully we’ll know something soon. If not, they’ll be able to investigate. They’re sending someone now to retrieve this, and I’m sure they’ll want to collect a brief statement from you.”

“How did she find my room number? What if she tries to break in?” I folded my arms across my chest.

“I don’t know, ma’am. We’ve been on high alert for anyone matching the description you provided, but nothing has come up. If she managed to get in, I’m not sure how it happened. My shift is almost over, but rest assured, I will let my night manager know and we’ll have someone watching your hallway and room closely.”

“That’s not good enough,” Sam said angrily, stepping forward. “Do you even carry guns? What will happen if this psycho tries to break in?”

“Well, as I told Mrs. Du Bois earlier, I’d recommend keeping the manual lock engaged at all times.”

“And will that lock stop a bullet? *No*. She needs to be moved. This is a serious lack of security on your end. You need to switch her to another room, on another floor, immediately. We don’t know what this woman is capable of. The fact that she was able to get her room number means one of your employees must’ve given it to her. You need to be checking with your staff and you, personally, need to relocate her and keep her name off your books until you figure out who’s leaking sensitive information.”

I stared at him, shocked to hear Sam so assertive. To my surprise, Evan agreed in an instant.

“Of course. I’m happy to have her switch rooms. Assuming that’s okay with you?” he asked me.

“More than okay.” I never wanted to see this room again. Or this hotel for that matter. Maybe Grant was right. Maybe I should go home...

“Okay. Let me see what I can do.” He handed me a business card. “This has my cell phone number on it in case you can’t reach me in the office. If you need anything before I make it back, call me. Don’t leave this room. I’ll personally escort you to another one and will bring the police to you there before I leave for the night.”

“Thank you,” I said, still trying to process all that was happening. Within minutes, Sam was ushering Evan out of the room. When he was gone, he locked the door again, then turned to me.

“It’s not safe for you here, Cait. I think you need to leave.”

It wasn’t groundbreaking news. I’d just been toying with the idea myself, but I hated the thought that I was running away again. This hotel had a way of making me do that.

“Maybe we should wait and see what the cops have to say. Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe it really was just a package that got left at the wrong door.”

“At the same time as the woman called? That’s too big a coincidence.”

That was true. “I can’t just leave, Sam. She has my cell phone number. What if she follows me? What if she knows where I live? What if she knows where my kids are?” At that thought, I was overwhelmed by panic, unable to catch my breath as the room seemed to shrink around me.

Sam was at my side, both hands on my arms. “No, that won’t happen. We can go somewhere else. You and me. I’ll protect you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You aren’t asking.”

I pulled my phone from my pocket, spying three missed calls from Grant. “I need to call Grant back and tell him what’s going on. He’s probably freaking out.”

“Sure, of course.” Sam stepped back.

As I swiped my thumb across the screen, waking it up again, I paused, looking over my shoulder. He’d crossed the room, standing close to the door in what looked like an effort to give me privacy. “Hey, Sam?”

“Yeah?” He spun around.

“There was something she said... Maybe I’m reading too much into it...”

“What was it?” One brow raised slightly.

“She mentioned that I didn’t have a good history with the police. It made me... I don’t know, it made me feel like she knows what happened to Jamie. About me being a suspect. About all of it.”

“How could she have known? You were never arrested or charged.”

“I know. It makes me think maybe she knows me from somewhere else. Or someone told her something.”

“And you’re sure she doesn’t look familiar to you?”

“No, not at all.”

“Was she young? Maybe a younger sibling of someone we went to school with? Or...” He twisted his lips in thought. “Maybe she’s the kid of one of the cops in town. That would make sense as to how she knew about it.”

“She’s our age, I’d guess, maybe a little younger. She has black hair, kind of frizzy, and freckles.”

He froze, studying me. “Cait—”

“What?” I asked, wondering if I’d rung a bell with him.

He was hesitant to say anything, his lips pressed into a thin line.

“Sam, what? What is it?”

“It’s impossible, I know, but...it’s also a really huge coincidence.”

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head. “Do you not realize what you just said? Who you described?”

“What are you talking about?”

He drew out a long breath. “I know what you’re going to say, but the woman you’re describing... She sounds just like Jamie.”

My insides liquefied, a draft passing over me in the room. I ran a hand over my bicep. “Jamie’s dead, Sam. It can’t be Jamie. I know what she looks like anyway.”

He nodded, but there was a hint of a question in his eyes that had me doubting myself. Jamie had died all those years ago in this very hotel.

I saw her body.

I attended her funeral.

I was questioned for her murder.

This woman might share some of her characteristics, but she wasn’t Jamie. It was impossible... Wasn’t it?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

AGE EIGHTEEN

When we walked into Hotel Lilith's ballroom the night of prom, my stomach was full of dread. The butterflies I always felt with Grant had grown claws and grasped onto my flesh, causing me true pain. I was nauseous and cold, sweat beading along my hairline. I was wringing my hands together, toying with the charmeuse by gathering it in bunches and rolling it between my fingers.

Noticing the habit, Grant took my hand, knocking the fabric loose. "Just relax," he said softly. "Everything's going to be fine."

He led me to a long table on the far left side of the room. Refreshments and students lined both sides. He ladled us out a glass of punch each, giving a fist bump to a guy across the table a grade below us.

Colton?

Nolan?

I couldn't remember his name.

"Hey Grant," an obnoxiously sweet voice from behind us called. When we turned around, Vanessa was waiting there. She was gorgeous as ever, wearing a mermaid cut dress that was definitely not on the list of approved styles, with a full face of makeup and perfectly curled hair. Her group stood behind her, looking smug. Her lips curled into a flawless smile and she gave a mockingly modest look at the ground, as if she were waiting for him to compliment her.

"Hey, Ness." I was still waiting for him to tell her how great she looked—which, there was no question she did—and she seemed irritated when it didn't happen. Instead, he cleared his throat, looking at the girls behind her.

“Ladies.” Then, his gaze went back to Vanessa. “Where’s Cameron?”

She gestured a hand over her shoulder casually. “Around here somewhere.”

“Cool.” He looped an arm around my waist, inhaling. “Well, I’ll see you around.”

For the first time, Vanessa glanced my way. “Sorry, Cait. I didn’t see you there.” Her gaze scanned my dress scrupulously. “That’s certainly an interesting dress.”

I felt my stomach clench under her scrutiny, but Grant’s grip on my waist tightened. “Yeah, she didn’t want to wear the same dress as everyone else.” He scanned the group of girls behind her, almost all of whom were wearing either the same style or same color of dress as she was. “How embarrassing would that be?”

Her tone was scathing. “Yes, we wouldn’t want Cait Logan to fit in, now would we?”

With that, before Grant could respond, she spun on her heel and headed for the dance floor. The girls followed her in an almost cultlike fashion, and I couldn’t help thinking of a sci-fi movie Sam and I had watched once filled with robotic teenagers who’d had their brains removed and replaced with mechanical parts.

“Don’t worry about them. They’re just jealous.” We both knew that wasn’t the case, but I didn’t argue as he tipped back the last of his punch, then crushed his cup and tossed it into the trash. “You want to dance?”

I didn’t. I wanted to run home and hide my face, but I couldn’t tell that to Grant. He was persistent. Determined. Once he set his mind to something, he couldn’t be persuaded to abandon the pursuit. Grant was infuriatingly positive and truly couldn’t understand why certain people disliking me bothered me so much.

Then again, he’d never been disliked.

Well, except maybe by me.

He led me to the dance floor and wrapped his arms around my waist. My hands went to his shoulders and we swayed. I wanted so badly to lose myself in the moment, but, try as I might, I couldn’t seem to do so. Grant stared at me, but I couldn’t stop watching everyone else, wondering who was staring at me. What they were thinking.

I was so exhausted by it all.

So completely exhausted.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sam and Penny walking into the event space. Jamie and a boy I didn't recognize were close behind them. Sam's eyes found me within seconds and then he looked away, an arm around Penny's shoulders. My eyes fell to the tie that matched the dress I was supposed to be wearing. He'd worn it after all. Bitterness swelled in my chest. If he was trying to make me jealous, I refused to let it work.

In truth, I didn't miss dating Sam. Maybe I'd known for a while that the spark I'd once felt for him had dimmed considerably, but it was never more evident than right then. But still, I was jealous of Penny and Jamie. That they still held on to him. That he was still their friend. Sam was fiercely loyal. There was little I could've done to ever force him to give up on me, which was why I was terrified of us starting to date in the first place. I knew that breaking his heart would ruin what we had. What we'd always had.

Thinking back, I probably would've married him to keep from hurting him. I would've lived my life in service of making sure he didn't feel pain. Grant had saved me from that future, but I wasn't sure if I would ever feel grateful for it.

I missed Sam as much as I'd miss an amputated limb. He was a part of me that I'd never get back.

I looked away, focusing on Grant. It was obvious the interaction hadn't gone unnoticed, and I rested my head on his shoulder.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I said. With Grant, it wasn't a lie. I don't think I was ever pretending to be attracted to Sam, but it was different. We were humans, not campfires, so I hated to attribute it to a lack of spark, but that was the best way I could think of to describe it.

Being with Sam felt safe. Being with Grant was anything but.

Still, I felt happier with him than I'd ever felt with Sam. Despite the ridicule and resentment from my classmates, I wanted to be with Grant.

And it had nothing to do with who he was. Even if that was how it had started, the connection we'd built felt real. I would've been equally happy to hole up somewhere with Grant and never resurface.

I caught sight of a flash of Penny's red hair just as she and Sam walked across the gym in front of us. Surprisingly, they were alone. I looked around, searching for Jamie. Where had she gone?

I'd lost sight of her. I checked with Grant, wondering if he was watching her, but his eyes were only on me.

"What's going on behind those pretty eyes?" he asked, sensing something was wrong.

"Oh, you know, just the usual inner teenage turmoil." I was relieved to feel some of the tension leaving my shoulders at just admitting that.

He laughed under his breath. "So overrated."

"Tell me about it."

"Just look at me." We locked eyes on command. "Don't worry about anyone else. They're not really here. It's you and me. We're all that matters. Us."

It was easy enough to get lost in his eyes, the mix of blue and bright green—colors reminiscent of a tropical sea in some far-off destination. But more than that, it was the way the eyes looked at me. For reasons I still didn't understand, Grant seemed entranced by me and I never wanted the feeling to end.

"Breathe," he reminded me, pressing his lips to my cheeks, then my mouth, the kiss gentle. For just a moment, it seemed to calm me. I felt some of the worry wash away as quickly as a tide drawing sand away from the shore.

When we broke apart, I found it easier to pretend it was just us. To let the crowd fade away. The sound of the music carried us as we swayed.

"Can I ask you something?" he asked, his voice low in my ear.

"Anything."

"What comes next for you?"

"Hm?" I wasn't sure I'd heard him right.

"What comes next? We've never talked about it."

It was true, I guessed. I knew all about Grant's future plans, but I hadn't told him any of mine. Mostly because I still didn't know what they were. "I haven't decided, I guess."

"You know I'm going to Nashville," he said gently, a question in his eyes, if not his words.

"Mhm."

"Would you ever think about coming with me?" His expression was stoic.

"Um, I don't know..." I said, staring at him. "I mean, I haven't decided which school I'm going to, if any, and I don't want to put too much pressure

on us.”

“Look, I’m not saying we have to get married, or even live together, I just think... I’m having fun getting to know you. I’m not ready for that to end.”

When he put it like that, it certainly didn’t seem like the worst idea, but we hadn’t even been dating for a month. How could we even consider it? “I don’t know. What if we broke up? It would be so awkward.”

He seemed caught off guard by the question. “Well, I’m not planning on that happening, but if it does, it does. Like I said, we don’t have to get too serious yet. I just thought going there together could be fun. And we can continue this.” He kissed my mouth. “And that.”

His kiss still lingered on my lips, but I couldn’t allow him to distract me. “What if I say no?”

His brows drew down. “Why would you? You already said you don’t know what you’re going to do. Come to Nashville with me. It’ll be fun.”

“I don’t know. My parents are here... My whole life is here. Nashville is really far away.”

“It’s less than a day’s drive away—”

“I know, Grant.”

“Long distance is hard... We’d eventually grow apart. I’m not trying to give you an ultimatum, but if one of us has solid plans and the other doesn’t, I’d think you could be flexible.” His tone was gruff now. We’d stopped swaying in the middle of the floor, despite the music continuing to play.

“I’m not saying I won’t be, I just didn’t expect to be making this decision right now.” I gestured around us. “This is all kind of sudden, don’t you think? I haven’t had time to decide what I want. I can’t believe you’re already ready to ask something like that.”

He scoffed, dropping his hands away from me in frustration. “Like what? Like asking my girlfriend to keep seeing me?”

“So it *is* an ultimatum?” I asked, my jaw locked tight. I’d told Sam I might want to leave and that wasn’t a lie, but I hadn’t decided or talked to my parents and I wouldn’t make that decision without their blessing. And, if I did leave, I was thinking of going an hour or two away, not six hours. Besides that, Grant and I were still very new. And this, the thought that I could lose him before we’d even really begun, was what scared me most of all. If we broke up, I’d have no one.

“No, but it’s a fair question. And you’re not even considering it.”

“I *am* considering it. I never said I wouldn’t.”

“Really? Because all I’m hearing are reasons it won’t work.”

I shook my head, reaching out my arms to him. Around us, people were beginning to stare. I had a feeling they were all taking too much pleasure out of our argument. “You’re not being fair. Can’t we just keep dancing and deal with this another day?”

If he noticed the others staring, he didn’t say so. Instead, he looked down, backing away from me even farther. He raised his hand to keep me from following him. “I just need some air, Cait. Give me a minute, okay?” With that, he walked out of the room, leaving me alone in the center of the dance floor.

I’D BEEN SITTING at an otherwise empty table on the far side of the event space for close to an hour when I heard the chair scratch across the hardwood floor and looked up, expecting and hoping to see that Grant had cooled down and returned.

If I’d been the one to drive, I would’ve left already. My phone was in Grant’s car or I would’ve considered calling for a ride. But I didn’t truly want to call my parents for a ride anyway. I hated the idea of telling them I’d already screwed this up.

Instead of Grant, it was Sam standing across from me. His expression was unsure. I nodded slowly, giving him permission to sit, though he didn’t need it.

“Where’s Penny?”

“She went to the bathroom,” he said, tapping the table with his fingers. “You okay?”

I nodded, then shook my head as unexpected tears poured out of my eyes. “Sam, I’m so sorry.”

He studied me carefully, not accepting the apology straightaway, but his expression was kinder than I deserved. “I know.”

“I never meant for any of this to happen. Truly, I didn’t.”

“Are you happy?” he asked. I was afraid to ask him the same thing.

“A day ago? Yes. Right now?” I scoffed, brushing away my tears. “I don’t know what I am.”

He glanced at his fingers on the table. “Did something happen?”

“I don’t really know.”

“I saw Grant walk away. Looked like you were fighting.”

“I don’t know what happened,” I said, crying again. I was already a cliché—crying on prom night—and I hated myself for it. I wanted to talk to Sam about everything, but he didn’t deserve that. I deserved to suffer in solitude. He would never have left me alone on the dance floor. Sam would never have treated me this way.

Suddenly, another chair from our table was pulled out. The guy Jamie had come with was there. I still didn’t know his name.

“Hey.” He gave a sharp nod in Sam’s direction. When he noticed me, his head fell back a bit, spying my tears. “Whoa, sorry, am I interrupting something?”

“No, you’re fine,” I said quickly, sniffing.

“This is Cait.” Sam pointed to me. “This is Jamie’s date, Dudley. He goes to Oakbrook.”

“Hey,” he said with another nod.

“Hi.”

“Where’s Jamie?” Sam asked him.

He looked over his shoulder nonchalantly. “Around here somewhere. She told me she was going to the bathroom like an hour ago, and I haven’t seen her since. I’m starting to think I got stood up.”

“Penny will be back in a minute. We can ask her if Jamie’s in there,” Sam said simply. “I’m sure she’s just talking with someone. Cait and I have always said she could talk to anyone about anything. And for hours at that.”

He glanced across the table, waiting for me to agree. “It’s true. So, you two are back to being friends now?” I asked Sam.

“I don’t know. I mean, not like we were. But we’re something. After everything...”

“She went back to using you.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Is that what you think?”

“If Grant took her back, she’d walk away in a heartbeat. You’re just her fallback friend, Sam, and you know it.”

“Yeah, well, she’s the only friend I’ve got lately. Fallback or not.”

“You’ve got me,” I said firmly. “You know that.”

He pushed back from the table. “I can’t... I can’t be your friend, Cait. I

care about you. I'll always be there for you. But it's too hard right now."

I knew that was the case, but that didn't make it hurt less. It was my turn to push away from the table. I stood suddenly. "I know. I should go."

"Wait! You don't have to go!" he called, standing too, but I was already darting away, fresh tears blurring my vision.

I pushed the double doors open and made my way into the hotel lobby. It was elegant—various shades of reds, grays, and blacks, and the man at the front desk was watching me carefully from behind thick-framed glasses.

Mr. Donnell, the history teacher, was standing just ahead, his hands folded behind his back. He looked concerned when he noticed me. "You okay, Cait?"

"Fine," I said, slowing down as I walked past him, praying he wouldn't stop me.

I crossed the lobby quickly, my heels clicking on the marble floor, and went through the bathroom doors next to the elevator. Vanessa and Courtney were there, reapplying lipstick and powder. They fell silent when they saw me.

"Rough night, Logan?" Vanessa asked, laughing before I could respond.

Without answering, I pulled open a stall door and stepped inside. I tried to stifle my sobs in my palm, not wanting them to hear me crying, though the evidence had been written all over my face.

After a few moments, they walked back across the bathroom toward the door. When they reached the stall where I'd taken solace, I heard the sound of her nails across the painted metal door.

She stopped, her voice too close, just inches from where I was standing. "Maybe next time you'll remember where you're meant to be, hm? Grant doesn't belong with anyone like *you*." She stood still for a moment, maybe waiting to see if I was going to respond, and then the door opened and shut, leaving me alone in the room.

The sobs I'd sequestered in my chest broke free, ricocheting through my body. I trembled and snotted and swiped away tears as fast as they could fall, trying to make sense of it all.

I'd never wanted to come to prom in the first place, and now Grant had abandoned me. Sam was rightfully hurt. Jamie hated me. Everyone hated me. Once I'd thought I gave them no reason to do so, but now, I'd given them no reason *not* to. I'd become everything I hated. I was worse than Jamie.

I was alone.

Utterly alone.

And the worst part was how much I deserved it.

Once I'd managed to calm myself down, I pulled out a wad of toilet paper, dabbing my eyes and paying no attention to the orange and black makeup that rubbed off. I was going to have to call my parents. I needed to go home.

I threw the soiled tissue away and opened the stall door. My purse with my phone was still in Grant's car. I had to find him.

I didn't bother glancing at my appearance as I pulled open the bathroom door and walked back out into the lobby. I perked up as I heard a familiar voice, following the sound. Instead of heading back to the ballroom, I turned down a narrow hallway. There was a metal door straight in front of me with a sign that said **Employees Only**.

Farther down, I turned another corner, hearing his voice growing closer.

"This wasn't the plan," he was saying.

Relief and fear fluttered in my chest, overwhelming me. Who was he talking to? What was I going to say to him? I didn't want to fight. I just wanted to leave. Maybe he wouldn't try to stop me anyway. Maybe he was so angry he'd want me to leave, too.

I rounded the corner and froze, the blood draining from my face.

I felt a rushing sensation in my stomach, trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

They'd both turned to face me. I assumed the sound of my heels alerted them that I was coming.

Grant pushed Jamie back away from him and stepped away from the wall.

"Cait, this isn't what it looks like," he said, taking another step away from her, his lips still red from their kiss. She'd had a firm grasp on the collar of his jacket when I saw them at first, and now, her hands were still holding their place in the air, as if she hadn't realized he was gone.

He reached for me, but I backed away, nearly tripping as I shook my head. "No."

My breathing was shallow. How was it possible? Why was he kissing Jamie in the hallway? He'd come to prom with me. He was dating me.

In the distance, Jamie was watching it all unfold with a wicked smile on her face. Her hands had finally moved, her arms now tucked across her chest.

“Please, let me explain!” he cried.

“No!” I shook my head in horror, unable to catch my breath.

“Cait!”

“Leave me alone!” I shouted, turning away from them and darting down the hall as fast as I could move in my heels.

“Cait, please!” Grant was faster than me, his shoes heavy on the floor, his breathing much less labored. We slowed down in the lobby when we passed Mr. Donnell, who watched us suspiciously.

“Everything okay?”

“Yep,” we said at the same time. I prayed he’d believe us.

We were walking side by side as we reached the center of the lobby and I turned for the exit doors.

“Are you leaving?” Mr. Donnell asked.

“No,” Grant said.

At the same time, I said, “Yes.”

“Have a good night. Be safe going home.”

I shoved the door open without waiting for permission, and to my dismay—or maybe relief—Grant came with me. “Cait, let me explain.”

“Oh, you don’t have to explain. I know what I saw.”

“No, you don’t.”

“How can you say that?” I demanded, swinging my arms as I whipped around to face him. I shook my head, continuing to walk. To where, I had no idea. “I saw you kissing her. I just want to go home. You can go back to seeing her, and everything will be right in the world. Don’t you worry about me, Grant Du Bois.”

He grabbed my arm, trying to stop me, but I jerked it away. “I don’t want to be with Jamie. I’m sorry you saw that. She cornered me and we were talking, and it just—it just happened. I swear to you—”

“I don’t care, Grant! I don’t care about your excuse, which is a lame one. I was talking to Sam, too, but I didn’t kiss him!”

“I didn’t kiss her. *She* kissed *me*. She grabbed my jacket and shoved me into the wall. It happened in a split second!”

“And I just happened to be lucky enough to catch that second? You really expect me to believe that?”

“Yes! It was a mistake. I don’t want Jamie. I want you.”

“Well, you have a shitty way of showing it. You left me alone in the

middle of the dance floor. I had no one to talk to. No one to spend time with. I was just alone, and you didn't care."

"Is that what this is about?"

"No!" I shouted. "This is about everything. I want to go home." We'd reached the parking lot. "Unlock your car so I can get my phone and call for a ride."

"What? No. I'm your date. If you insist on going home, I'll take you home. But I'd much rather you just hear me out."

"Well, I won't be doing that. And I'm also not getting in the car with you."

"You're being ridiculous. This is all just a misunderstanding. Hear me out. Please?"

"I don't even want to look at you, let alone talk to you. You knew how big a risk it was for me to date you, how much I was giving up, but I did it anyway because you promised me it would be okay. You promised you wouldn't let me get hurt—"

He grabbed my arm again. "I don't want to hurt you, Cait. What you saw was—"

"I just want to leave." I jerked my arm out of his grasp again. Had I really expected this to go any differently? How could I have been so stupid? Of course he'd choose Jamie. Of course he would. I had no one to blame for this heartache but myself. I'd lost everything. "This was a mistake."

We stopped at his car and he stared at me with a shell-shocked expression. "What was?"

"This. All of this. Us."

"You don't mean that."

"I really do." I tugged at the car door. "I need my phone, Grant."

"Let me take you home. Let's talk."

"I don't want to talk to you," I fumed. "I never want to see you again."

His eyes were glassy as he pulled the key fob from his pocket and pressed the button. "Please don't say that. I know you're hurt. I know I messed up, but—"

I grabbed my purse from the car, slamming his door shut. "Goodbye, Grant."

"It's not safe for you to go alone," he said. "At least let me bring you home. I promised your parents I'd take care of you."

“Newsflash: you’ve already broken that promise.” I stared at my phone screen, then back at him. I wiggled my fingers in the direction of the hotel. “Go on. Back to your party. I’m sure Jamie’s waiting.”

“I don’t want Jamie. Why aren’t you listening to me? I want to be with you. She did this. She tricked me. I thought she was trying to really listen to me. I was telling her that I’d messed up by asking you to go to Nashville with me. I wasn’t even angry with you, I was just embarrassed. I thought I’d made a fool of myself. I thought she was trying to be there for me. She knows you. I wanted her to help me make this right. But, she’s sneaky, just like she was when she caught us together. She tricked me, and I fell for it.”

“Yeah, well, unfortunately, I guess she got even. Now I know what it feels like to be cheated on, too.” I didn’t know if he was telling the truth. All I knew was that I’d never been so hurt and angry. His betrayal ran through my core like a knife. I’d given up everything to be with him, gone against my better judgment and risked everything, and this was what I got for it. My chest burned, my lungs too tight to take in enough oxygen.

“That’s not fair. I didn’t cheat on you. And I didn’t cheat on her, either. Jamie and I weren’t dating when we kissed.”

“The second time, maybe.”

“Fine. True. But I didn’t cheat on you tonight. I swear to you I didn’t. What you saw was nothing. I just—”

“Please, just stop!” I cried, covering my ears. “Please, Grant, I can’t do this right now. Please. If you care about me at all, just go.” I desperately didn’t want him to see the tears in my eyes. I didn’t want him to know how badly he’d hurt me. I only wanted him to see the anger.

Time seemed to stand still as he watched me in disbelief. “Please, Cait... Don’t do this. I don’t want to lose you.”

“*Just go!*” I bellowed.

His shoulders dropped and he stepped back, shaking his head. He was waiting for me to change my mind, but I wasn’t going to. “I’m sorry,” he said gently.

“Sorry isn’t good enough,” I said through bared teeth. I couldn’t get the image of his mouth on hers out of my head, couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d enjoyed it. Even if he hadn’t instigated it, he’d wanted it. He wanted her.

He nodded finally, his lips pressed together. Then, he turned on his heel and walked away, appearing defeated. I watched him trudge up the front

steps to the hotel, glancing back at me just once.

My entire future, my entire present, had just imploded and I had no idea what to do about it. I was miles from home, but I didn't want to call my parents yet. I just wanted to think. To sit and breathe.

I'd made this mess and I needed to feel the pain, then figure out how to clean it up.

I never wanted to see these people again.

Specifically one of them.

If I never saw Jamie again, I'd die happy.

LITTLE DID I KNOW, I was going to get that wish.

When we returned to school Monday morning, rumors of Jamie's disappearance had already begun to circulate.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

PRESENT DAY

I wasn't sure how or when we'd fallen asleep. The next morning, settled into the new room Evan had moved us to, Sam and I were awoken by the sound of a knock on the door.

The panic and worry came flooding back, first because I'd temporarily forgotten having to switch rooms and had no idea where we were, then because I didn't know who was outside.

Luckily, Sam made it to the door first, checking to see who our unexpected visitor was. Only Evan and the police were supposed to know we'd switched rooms, but that did little to calm my nerves until I saw his shoulders relax.

"It's the police," he said, glancing back at me quickly. I pulled my faded orange cardigan around me tighter as he unhooked the locks and turned the knob.

The two police officers from the night before were there, the yellow box in their hand.

"Good morning," the first officer said, taking in our disheveled appearance. His name started with a P, I thought...Parker, Patterson? "I'm sorry to disturb you all."

A glance at the clock told me it was after noon already, but we'd been up all night worrying, so I wasn't surprised we'd slept in.

"No, you're fine. Come on in," I said finally, realizing they were still waiting for permission. I stared at the box with a growing sense of worry. Once I could see his name tag, I realized I'd been right. Officer Parker stood in front of me. "Did you find anything?" If they were handling it so casually

now, they had to know it wasn't dangerous, right?

"We did. It's okay." He turned it over in his hands. "Nothing dangerous. Looks like just a prank. There's a photo in here, looks like it's been cut up, erm—" He looked at the man next to him. "—somewhat aggressively." It was almost a question. The second officer nodded in agreement.

"A *photo*?" I asked. "A photo of what?"

"Hard to say, but we tested it for a few things. There are no signs of any sort of chemical or irritant." He held the box out. "It's yours to do what you want with it, now that we've cleared it."

"A cut up photograph? Doesn't that sound like a threat to you?" Sam asked as I reached for the package somewhat hesitantly.

The officers were obviously unconcerned. "I don't think so," said Parker. "Believe me, we're taking this seriously, but there's nothing in that box other than the photo. And, while it may be disturbing, it's not a threat. We're working to trace the call you received to your phone last night, but other than that, there's not a whole lot to go off of."

"Could you fingerprint it?" he asked.

"We could," the second officer—I still couldn't read his nametag—said hesitantly. "But again, there's no real reason to. Without a threat to your life or bodily harm, it's not warranted. Now, if the woman shows up again, or if you feel like you're in true danger, you can report it or call 911. I think it's very likely just someone who thought they were being funny." He glanced up at the ceiling. "High school reunion and all that. People tend to get a bit wild. And, given the history of your class and this place..." He didn't seem to know what to say next.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

His expression went serious. "Nothing. I'm just saying we don't believe you're in any danger, Mrs. Du Bois. But, if something changes, we're just a phone call away."

"Is it even safe for her to stay here?" Sam asked.

"It's your call. You need to do what you feel comfortable with. After we spoke last night, the hotel security manager let us know he'd switched your rooms and booked you in this one under a fake name, is that correct?" We nodded. "So, no one knows which room you're in. She won't be able to call or harass you anymore. I don't see any reason for you to be unsafe, but again, that's your call. If something happens to make you feel like you're in danger,

you know where to reach us.”

“Something *other* than what has already happened, you mean?” Sam pressed, obviously agitated.

“It’s fine, Sam,” I tried to shush him.

“As we’ve said, it seems like more of a prank than anything.” That was Officer Parker again.

“She said she was going to *get her*,” Sam pointed out. “You think that’s all fine and dandy?”

The officers exchanged a glance. “‘Get her’ is pretty vague. We don’t consider it a credible threat. As I said, we will try to track the number that called your room last night. Most likely, it’s the same number she texted you from, which belongs to a burner cell. Right now, we just don’t have a lot to go off of.”

We were quiet for a moment as I pondered what they were saying. Were they right? Had I overreacted? Was it possible this girl was just playing an elaborate prank of some kind?

Officer Parker adjusted his belt. “Right, well, we’ll get out of your hair then. If you need anything, just give us a call. Or call 911 if it’s an emergency.” He reached for the door and the second officer nodded his head toward me.

“Have a nice day.”

With that, they were out the door, and Sam and I were left alone, staring at the box in horror.

“What do you want to do?” he asked. “We can throw that out and leave. Get you out of here and somewhere safe.”

The thought was tempting. I was worried. I wanted to go home and kiss my babies and pretend this nightmare wasn’t happening. But what if the officers were right? What if this was all just some silly prank? I wouldn’t put it past my classmates to pull something like this. And it wasn’t like the woman had tried to hurt me necessarily. I just didn’t know what to think, and I knew, even if I were to go home, I would never stop thinking about and worrying about this situation. If there was even a chance I could get to the bottom of it, I had to do that.

“I want to know the truth about what this girl wants and whatever’s going on. Whatever it is,” I told him after a moment, bouncing the box in my hand. “And it looks like we have our first clue.”

“You’re going to open it?”

“I have to know,” I said softly, then moved to the coffee table, opening the lid with shaking hands. He was behind me as I turned it over, pouring the contents out onto the table top.

Random, assorted pieces fell out, no rhyme or reason to their shapes or sizes. Some edges were blunt, while others were jagged, as if they’d been torn. As I began to turn the pieces over, trying to make sense of the makeshift puzzle, Sam kneeled down next to me to help.

We worked in silence for minutes on end, turning pieces over, flipping and rotating them as we tried to figure out what the picture was. It was large, the size of a poster, and pretty quickly, the image of my face began to take shape.

But I wasn’t alone in the picture.

A chill ran over me when, as we neared the end, it became clear that Jamie was there as well. The soft, pink top Jamie wore and the way she’d worn her hair—wiry, crunchy curls—aged the picture. It was a photo we’d taken years earlier, in junior high. A time before cell phones gained popularity, back when digital cameras were all the rage. We were smiling from the back seat of her parents' car. If you panned the photo over farther, Sam would’ve been sitting just next to me, but you could only see his arm in the photo.

As the final piece of the puzzle came together, I gasped, feeling cool tears in my eyes.

Below our faces, on our necks in red marker, someone had written the words **BESTIES FOR LIFE** in capital letters, then crossed the phrase out and replaced it with a new one: **MURDERER**

“What does it mean?” Sam asked.

“I have no idea...” I could hardly speak, panic spreading throughout my core. I had to stop this. I had to find out what this woman wanted before she ruined everything.

It was no wonder the cops had thought it was a prank. That’s exactly what it looked like. But I knew better. Whatever this was, it was a message.

Someone knew what I’d done ten years ago, and they were going to make sure everyone else knew it, too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

AGE EIGHTEEN

Six days after prom night, they found Jamie's body. They'd searched high and low for her, around the hotel, then around the town. They questioned us all about what we knew—her parents, her friends and her classmates, her enemies.

I wasn't sure where I fell on that list anymore.

It was assumed Jamie would turn up. That she'd gone away to blow off steam after what had happened between her and Grant. It wasn't like her, she'd never run away before, but when she never made it back to the ballroom after that confrontation, it seemed like the only possibility.

After all, Spider Lily was a small town. It was safe.

I don't think anyone believed anything bad could've happened to her.

So, when her body was found in the air duct of an obscure, unused storage room in the basement of the hotel, the town went into a panic. As far as everyone knew, Grant and I were the last to see her alive. That hallway was the last place anyone saw her. The last call she'd made was to me.

All of this compounded and made me the most likely suspect to everyone I knew. Overnight, I went from being a normal girl, to being the one people glared at, the one people crossed the street to avoid. We received prank phone calls all hours of the day and night. People egged our house and shouted obscenities when they drove past.

I'd never forget being called into the police station the day they found her, after all my classmates had most assuredly painted an awful picture of me. I'd spoken to the police when she was missing, but this was different. This was serious. I was being questioned for murder. My parents were there,

on either side of me, along with the lawyer we couldn't afford.

The police asked me about what happened, and I had to lay out every painful detail about that night, the fight with Jamie, and the one-hour window in between when I'd left the hotel and when my parents had picked me up.

I'd sat outside, trying to cool down, and when I called them, I had to wait for them to come. That was it.

There was nothing suspicious about it.

I never reentered the hotel.

I didn't kill Jamie.

I repeated the details and those statements over and over again, praying they'd believe me. They were impossible to read. I didn't know if I'd ever walk out of that building again.

But, in the end, they didn't have enough evidence against me. No DNA in the room. Mr. Donnell had seen me leave, but never come back, and my parents could vouch for the fact that I had called them shortly after that. The gap in between could be explained away by my fight outside with Grant.

After all, would I have had enough time to sneak back inside the hotel, set up a plan to kill her, execute it, hide her body, then make it back outside without anyone noticing? More than that, would I have been strong enough to lift her into that air duct alone? Would I have been able to sneak back in undetected in the first place?

There were more questions than answers and, to add to the mystery, the police had to grapple with the fact that the hotel cameras had been shut off before the event began. There wasn't a security team back then, and no one had noticed until it was too late. The suspicion eventually fell off of me and onto the hotel employees, but by then, it was too late for me.

No matter what the police said, the people in town and the kids at school never really let it go. For the next two months, I had the word *murderer* painted on my locker, fake blood poured into my purse, and random, late-night texts telling me I was guilty. Everyone believed it.

Everyone except Sam and Grant, it seemed, but even they kept their distance from me. I couldn't blame them, really. Being near me put them directly in the line of fire, but I can't say it didn't hurt.

I locked myself in my room after school, refusing to answer their texts or calls. Refusing to see anyone. I couldn't bear to wonder if they might've believed it, too, deep down. Couldn't bear to see the suspicion in their eyes.

Even if they told me they believed I was innocent, I knew they were hearing the rumors, which had only grown larger and louder as the time passed.

I thought I was alone before, but I'd never been more alone than I was during those final weeks of my senior year. Eventually, the threats, pranks, and phone calls tapered off, but it wasn't the same.

I wasn't the same.

I'd done nothing wrong, but I felt like I needed to look over my shoulder every moment of the day.

After graduation, I planned to never set foot in that school, hotel, or town again. I said goodbye to Sam and Grant separately. There was so much unspoken between us, but it would have to remain that way. I wasn't in a place to unpack our history or make amends. I just needed to breathe again.

If there was ever any question about my future in Spider Lily, Jamie's death ended that. I couldn't stay. I had to leave. I had to put distance between myself and my past.

And so, I had. I'd left and rented an apartment two hours west of Spider Lily. I picked up a job in the back of a bookstore, stocking shelves but never having to deal with people, and I settled into the, albeit selfish, idea that, as her final act, Jamie had ruined my life.

Even in death, she'd somehow won.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

PRESENT DAY

O vernight, I'd missed several more of Grant's phone calls. So, when we were done staring at the picture in horror, I moved across the room to call him. The room Evan had put us in wasn't a suite; he'd claimed they were all booked up. Instead, it was a small room with a single couch, small coffee table, and two queen beds.

I didn't have nearly enough privacy to make the phone call to my husband, but I wasn't going to leave the room for anything just yet.

"Hello?" Grant said, answering on the first ring. He'd obviously been waiting for me.

There was silence in the background, an odd occurrence at noon.

"Hey, I'm sorry, I—"

"What's going on? Where are you? You didn't call me back and I've been panicking. Is everything okay? What happened?"

"I know, I'm sorry. I'm fine. They had to move me to another room to keep me safe, and the police were here because we got this weird package. It's been a whole process—"

"The police? My god, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Everything's fine—"

"Just come home." He sighed. "Please just come home. You don't care about seeing those people anyway. It's not important enough to risk your life for."

I rested a fist on my hip, trying to sound braver than I felt. "I can't run from this. Not now. We agreed it was important for me to face what happened. To face everyone and show them I have nothing to be ashamed of."

This was my hometown and I let them take it from me, but I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm taking control back. I'm not going to be afraid."

"What are you talking about? Do you think someone there has something to do with what's going on? You think this is about what happened to Jamie?"

"I don't know, but it's a really big coincidence if not." I wasn't going to tell him about the picture of Jamie, or the fact that the woman resembled her. Not yet. "I want to get to the bottom of it all, Grant, so I need you to trust me."

"I do trust you, sweetheart. It's everyone else I don't trust."

"I know. But everything's under control."

His voice cracked. "We need you, Cait. We need you here. Let me come and get you. I can drop the kids off with your parents for the day. You don't have to be some hero right now..."

"The reunion is tonight. I just need a few more hours to work through everything, and I'll be home tomorrow. I promise you I'll be careful. I won't do anything impulsive."

"This entire plan is impulsive. You have a woman potentially stalking you, the police are now involved, and instead of leaving, you're just staying put? Why?"

I sighed. It still didn't make sense, not even to me. "I just... I don't want to come home now. I feel like I can't yet. What if this woman is dangerous? I don't want to lead her to our house. To the babies."

"Okay, but you're not a superhero, babe. You have to let the police do their job and protect yourself. If she's dangerous, I don't want you there alone."

"I will be careful, I promise. We have to protect the kids first. We don't know what she wants. And I'm not alone. I've got Sam here, and the hotel security." He grumbled at the mention of Sam, but didn't say anything. "It's all going to be okay. I promise. I'll see you in less than twenty-four hours. If it gets too dangerous, I swear I'll leave. For right now, the police think it's all a prank. For all we know, they could be right. I just need to know or it will always worry me."

He sucked in a breath through his teeth. "I'm not going to change your mind, am I?"

"I think some of your stubbornness has finally worn off on me."

“Okay, fine, stay. But I have rules.”

“Like what?”

“I want you to call me hourly and check in. Just to let me know you’re okay. A call, not a text. I need to hear your voice. Otherwise, I’m dropping the kids off and getting on a plane. I’m not going to sit here and worry all day.”

“Okay, I will.”

“Promise me, Cait.”

“I promise.”

“What room number are you in now?”

“Two eighteen.”

“Okay, two eighteen,” he repeated. “So if I don’t hear from you, I’ll call you, call your room, and then I’m coming to get you. Please don’t put me through that.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll take care of myself.”

“As good of care as you’d take of the kids?”

“Swear,” I said.

“Okay.” He paused. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” I vowed. “I’ll talk to you in an hour.” I glanced up at the clock.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

We ended the call and I turned back to Sam, who was studying the picture with intense concentration. I wondered if he’d been busying himself so it wouldn’t look like he was eavesdropping, though it was impossible not to in the tiny hotel room. “Everything okay at home?” he asked.

I nodded, sinking down onto the couch next to him. “Yeah, everything’s fine.” We turned our attention back to the picture. “How could anyone have gotten this? It was before social media, even. They couldn’t have found it online.”

“The only person who would have it is Jamie,” he said firmly, as if he were trying to convince us both. “I realize I sound crazy, but I’m telling you, something isn’t right about all of this.”

“I know,” I agreed. “But it’s impossible. She was found. She’s been buried. She can’t be alive. It has to be someone else.”

“But, if not her, who?”

I shook my head, utterly baffled. “Do you think someone here has something to do with it? It’s my first time really back in Spider Lily. The cops could’ve been right about it being a prank related to the reunion. I wouldn’t put it past Vanessa or Courtney to pull something like this just to get me to leave.”

His mouth twisted in thought. “Yeah, maybe, but it doesn’t explain how they would’ve gotten this picture.”

“Maybe Jamie shared it with them when they were friends.”

He didn’t look entirely convinced, but he also didn’t argue. When the hotel room phone rang, we met each other’s eyes. I reached across the table and lifted the phone to my ear, hesitating before speaking.

There was silence on the other line. Then, steady breathing.

What if it was Evan? Or the police? “Hello?”

The breathing continued.

Slow...

Steady...

“Who is this?”

I knew the answer, but it was impossible. No one knew where we were staying. No one knew where to find us.

“How did you find me?”

Sam was trying to pull the phone from my ear.

“How did you find me?” I demanded again. How was it she kept figuring out where I was? How did she manage to locate me so easily? Who was she? What did she want?

I swatted Sam’s hand away and stood as he tried to take the phone again.

“How did you get my room number?” I demanded, my wild, desperate eyes meeting Sam’s.

“He gave it to me,” she whispered, releasing a low, rumbling laugh.

“He? He who?”

The phone clicked and the call ended. She’d hung up on me. I stared at the receiver, Sam watching me closely.

“That was her?”

I nodded wordlessly.

“What? How? How could she possibly know where you are?”

My gaze was unfocused as I ran through the call in my head again, trying to make sense of it all. “She said...*he* told her.”

“He? He who?”

“I don’t know. No one knows we’re here.”

“Except the police. And Evan.”

“Why would they tell her anything?”

“Maybe she hacked the hotel’s system. Maybe that’s how she found you the first time,” Sam said. “Or maybe someone told her where you are. Evan or one of the officers... Maybe they know each other.”

“But why? I don’t know any of them. Or her. What could they possibly want?”

“I don’t know,” he said, turning back to the picture. “But it has to be related to Jamie somehow, doesn’t it? And that night? This place, the picture, the message, the fact that she looks like her... It’s someone who remembers what happened, remembers the investigation, and they’re using it against you. But that still doesn’t explain how this woman sees and knows everything we do. It’s like she’s everywhere all the time... It’s impossible, but so is everything about this situation. Maybe it’s Vanessa, like you said, but I just don’t see how she’d be pulling this off. I don’t know how anyone could. Or why, for that matter? It’s elaborate... What are they hoping to get from it?”

As he rambled, I stared at the message written on the photograph, **MURDERER**, unable to catch my breath. “I have no idea,” I said softly. “If they’re just trying to scare me, it’s definitely worked. This feels eerily similar to the days after they found Jamie. All the pranks and hatred... It could easily be someone here.”

“I agree. But who? And how are they pulling it off? Someone who works here must be giving them information.” He tapped a finger to his bottom lip, his brow furrowed.

“Someone doesn’t want me here,” I said firmly. “And that’s why I can’t leave yet. They aren’t going to run me off, Sam. Not again.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

AGE TWENTY

Two years after our graduation, I saw Grant again for the first time.

I'd come home for the weekend, just to check in with my parents, and as I drove through the tiny town square, there he was. He'd traded in the old truck for a sleek Mustang, and the hair that had once fallen in his eyes so casually had now been cut short. He wore it in one of those fancy pompadour styles.

He was getting in his car when I pulled into the lot across the street. Even as I did it, I had to question if it was a mistake. Maybe I just wanted to see him for a second longer. He probably wouldn't even recognize me. I'd gained weight, dyed my hair, and learned to properly apply makeup.

I sat across the street from him, watching as he tossed an oversized shopping bag into the back seat. When he looked up, shielding his face from the sun, our eyes met.

I remained still, frozen in place as I waited to see his next move. He stared at me for a moment longer, as if he, too, was frozen, and I began to worry I'd made a huge mistake. Maybe he didn't want to see me. Maybe he was glad we'd been apart for so long. Maybe he thought I was a weirdo parking across the street and stalking him.

Then, to my relief, he lowered his hand from his brow, checked the street for cars, and jogged across to me. When he reached my window, I rolled it down, feeling like the moment was taking place inside a Jell-O cup. Everything in slow motion.

"Cait?" he asked, his voice breathless, evidently both from the jog across the street and our interaction. His gaze trailed over my body, then back up to

my face. I was dressed in yoga pants and a tank top—definitely not making a fashion statement—my hair had been pulled up into a messy bun, and I had an open bag of potato chips in the passenger seat. When I pictured running into my exes someday, this was not how I wanted it to go. Then again, I had no one to blame but myself. Why had I stopped again? “What...what are you doing here?”

“Um—” I tucked an imaginary piece of hair behind my ear out of habit. “I’m in town to visit my parents. It’s Dad’s birthday this weekend.”

“Oh, nice,” he said with a nod, then patted the window trim where his arm rested. “Tell him I said hello.”

“I will.”

“Cool... Cool... Well, um, you look great.” He gestured toward me.

“Oh...” I looked away, mentally scrutinizing myself. He was an impeccable liar. “Thanks. You do too.”

“Are you staying long? It’s...” He expelled a long, drawn-out breath. “God, it’s really good to see you.”

I was surprised to hear him say that, after the way things had ended between us and the amount of time it had been since either of us tried to call or text. “I’m just staying for the weekend. I’ll go back home Tuesday.”

“Where’s home?”

“Oh, I’m living outside of Gatlinburg, actually.”

“For school or...”

“No, I’m not in school. I just wanted a change of scenery, you know?”

“Sure,” he said, looking over his shoulder.

“What about you? Did you end up in Nashville like you planned?”

“I did, yeah.” His voice was proud, and I wanted to feel proud of him, but I only felt bitterness. He’d gotten to live a good life, while mine had been ruined. Over the years, I’d struggled with the fact that Grant and I both should’ve been suspects, as we were the last to see her alive apparently, but it was only my reputation that had ended up on the line. Even when we were both questioned by police, it was me who people chose to go after. “I love it there.”

“I’m glad.”

There was an awkward, pregnant pause where neither of us seemed to know what to say next. Just as I was going to dismiss myself, he said, “What are you doing right now? Can we hang out? Like old times?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I gestured down at my rumpled appearance. “I’m not dressed to do anything and my parents are expecting me.”

“You look fine.” His mouth turned down into a frown. “Come on. Please?”

“Are you sure you want to be seen in this town with me?” It was only partially a joke.

He seemed confused, then shook his head. “You don’t think everyone still blames you for what happened to Jamie, do you? Come on, they’ve all moved on. Grown up. Trust me, we all know you had nothing to do with it. Even back then, I think most everyone knew. It was just fresh and people needed someone to blame.”

“You included?” Something about the way he’d said it so casually, as if it hadn’t been the worst period of my life, made me furious.

Guilt weighed on his features. “I never thought you had anything to do with it. You know that.”

“How would I? You basically disappeared, Grant.”

Now it was his turn to be angry. “I came to your house! Your mom said you didn’t want to see anyone. I texted you. I tried to—”

“Yeah, you were willing to try when no one was around. But at school, you completely backed off and left me to deal with it alone.”

“You’d broken up with me on prom night. I was trying to give you your space. I didn’t want to be embarrassed in front of everyone, or to embarrass you, for that matter. I didn’t know how to handle it. You were dealing with so much, and you never tried to contact me, either.”

“Yeah, like you mentioned, I was sort of dealing with things.”

His hands went up in surrender. “Okay, fine. You’re right. I could’ve done more back then, and I’m sorry I didn’t. Truly, I’m sorry. I hate thinking about how I acted back then. But I want to make it right now. I promise you, as far as everyone’s concerned, it’s blown over. Hardly anyone even remembers it happened.”

“It was just two years ago... Her murderer hasn’t been found. I don’t want them to forget, I just want them to know I’m innocent.”

“Cait, please... We all miss Jamie, okay? It’s been hard, but she’s gone. We have to move on. I don’t want to dig through our past. I don’t want to think about all that. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I admitted.

He seemed pleased. “Good. I want to catch up, find out what’s going on with you. Can I just take you to dinner? We can even go out of town if you want. Or we can go back to your parents’? Or mine? I’ve got the pool house, so we’d have privacy. Whatever will make you comfortable.”

I stared at the dark stubble he’d grown out on his chin as it caught a hint of sunlight, the sharp features that had matured so much in just a short time. The idea of privacy with him was both enticing and terrifying, but I heard myself saying, “Okay. Sure.”

He nodded gleefully, patting the window trim again. “Alright!”

“If you want to follow me, I need to go home and change first, so I can let my parents know what we’re doing. Then I’ll ride with you to your house.”

“You got it, ma’am.” He tipped his head to me, playing up his Southern accent.

I rolled my eyes as he jogged away, back to his car. It was so good to see him, he was right. But I couldn’t help wondering if I was making a mistake. Had everyone really forgotten all the vitriol they felt for me just a few years ago? As far as I knew, there were no serious suspects for her murder, aside from the hotel workers. Nothing had really changed. So, why the change of heart?

AN HOUR LATER, I’d unloaded my bag into my old bedroom, kissed my parents hello, changed clothes, made my messy bun a little less messy, brushed my teeth, and applied a bit of makeup. When I heard Grant’s voice in the living room with my parents, I couldn’t help reminiscing about the times before when I’d heard the same thing.

It felt like a lifetime ago.

I stood still for a moment, traveling back through time in my mind. Things were so simple then, weren’t they?

Before.

That summer when it was just Grant and me. When no one had an opinion about us because no one knew there *was* an *us*. It made me sad then, to think of all that had changed. I could point to an exact moment where my life had started to go downhill, and it was both the best and worst memory of my life.

If I'd never agreed to help Grant with the party, maybe none of this would've happened. Maybe Jamie would still be alive. Maybe Sam and I would've gotten married.

It was like an alternate universe, but I imagined, even if it wasn't perfect, I would've been happier then. As hard as I fell for Grant, I'd lost him too. This reality was incredibly bleak.

I walked out of the bedroom, still dressed down in a simple pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and tried to get a read on my parents' expressions. Were they mad? Confused? I hadn't warned them that Grant was coming, still trying to decide how to bring it up. Besides that, I hadn't known he'd be coming inside, though given our track record, I should've guessed. Grant went after what he wanted. Always.

But did he want me again?

More importantly, did I want him?

We weren't the people we were all those years ago.

We'd both changed, experienced new things. If he thought I was going to be a casual weekend hookup, he was dead wrong.

"You look great, sweetie," Mom said, taking a long look at me. "You didn't tell us Grant was coming by." She was smiling, but I searched for a hint of judgment in her tone or eyes. My parents had adored Grant at one time, but I didn't know how they felt about him anymore.

"It was kind of last minute," I mumbled. "I won't be gone long."

"Go on, have fun. Just call us if you won't make it back for dinner and I won't set your plate. Of course, Grant, you're welcome to join us."

As she rambled on, ever polite, I watched my dad. He was less forgiving than Mom, apparently. I could practically see the memory of picking up his crying teenage daughter, alone and in the dark, at the end of the hotel parking lot, in his expression. He'd trusted Grant to take care of me once, and he'd failed him.

I patted Dad's shoulder, seeming to bring him back to the present, and he looked at me as he spoke, "Be careful. Call us if you need anything."

"I'll be fine," I swore. "I won't be gone long."

With that, we both said goodbye to my parents and made our way out to Grant's car in the driveway. He held the door open for me, waiting until I was in my seat to shut it and jog around to his side.

"So, back to my place, then?"

I nodded. “How long are you in town, anyway?”

“For the summer. I’ll go back in August.”

“Is it weird? Being back?”

He seemed to ponder the question. “It makes me realize how small Spider Lily is. Growing up, this place felt like the whole world, you know? Like, obviously, I knew there was more out there, but outside of the places we’d gone on vacation, this kind of felt like all there was. Or like everyone lived in a place just like this. Getting out there, meeting new people, seeing new things, it opens you up.”

I couldn’t help tensing over the “meeting new people” comment, but I tried not to let it show.

“It also makes me miss being here.” He glanced sideways at me. “We didn’t know how good we had it back then, you know? No responsibilities. No cares. Just...fun.”

“Speak for yourself. High school was anything but fun for most of us.”

We crossed the town center, turning in the direction of the country club where Grant’s parents lived. “I know it wasn’t easy on you,” he said sadly. “Do you feel like you got a fresh start by getting away from here? Are you happier there?”

“I don’t know.” The answer was honest. Most days, I wasn’t sure if I was happy. I was going through the motions. I’d never been a partier. I sat at home, watching reruns of my favorite shows and emptying bottles of wine. I didn’t have any more friends in Gatlinburg than I’d had in Spider Lily. Maybe the problem was me, after all. “I never really had a chance to decide if I wanted to leave Spider Lily. It was always something I questioned, but in the end, I didn’t have a choice. Even if I miss it, I don’t feel like I can come home. What I miss most, though, is being close to my parents. But then again, in some ways, it doesn’t feel far enough away. Part of me wishes I could move across the country, you know?”

“Where would you go if you could?” he asked as we turned down a tree-lined street so unlike the streets on my side of town.

“I don’t know. West, maybe? Somewhere totally different. Or the coast? A coast? I’ve always dreamed of living at the beach.”

“I thought you hated the ocean.” A wrinkle formed in the space between his brows.

“I don’t hate the ocean, but I don’t understand people’s desire to swim in

it. It's filled with urine and bodies and dead animals and garbage and god knows what else. Not to mention there are literally animals in there that will kill you, and you won't see them coming, and if they don't, a tide could come in and sweep you under without any warning. It's maddening to me how people can consider any part of it relaxing." I paused, out of breath and realizing I'd just gone on an unnecessary ramble. "But I'm just fine sitting on the sand and watching the waves with a book in my hands. And, if I lived there, I'd get a pool and swim year round."

He listened intently to me as I spoke, and I realized how good of a listener he actually was. That was something I'd always appreciated about Grant. We'd known each other, *really* known each other, for such a short time, but he'd always made a point to learn about me. He made me feel important.

"I actually can't believe you remembered that," I said softly, sincerely impressed.

"I remember everything about you, Cait." He gripped the steering wheel tighter, his face pale. "I...I know we only dated for a short time, and I know the way we ended things was awful"—his hand went to his chest as he glanced at me—"on my part. There's not a day that goes by where I don't think about you and wish things could've been different." He turned into the driveway of the three-story white house, pulling around to the back, where the long pool led to a pool house the size of my actual house.

I stared ahead, watching the sun glistening off the water, unable to look his way. "I wish things could've been different, too. You really hurt me."

He put the car in park, turning his body to face me. "I know I did. I was a dumb kid, and I tried to make all these excuses instead of just owning what happened. I swear to you, I wasn't the one who kissed Jamie. I was just talking to her and she kissed me. But that doesn't really matter. What matters is that I shouldn't have been there in the first place. I should've stayed and talked things out with you like an adult instead of running away. I handled it all wrong. And then Jamie died and I just didn't know what to do or how to talk to you about any of it. I was scared—for you, for me. I was trying to process everything. I didn't know what to say to you or how to make it better."

"I know," I said simply. There was nothing else to say. We couldn't go back and make it right. Nothing could change what had already happened, no

matter how awful it was.

“I’ve thought about calling you a million times since we graduated, but I didn’t know what to say. I was embarrassed and hurt...” He ran a hand through his hair. “I know I pushed too hard that night. We were still so new and it was ridiculous to expect you to move away with me. I was just scared about leaving you, or losing you. And I lost you anyway.”

I met his eyes then, the weight of the sadness sitting between us. “I’m sorry I wasn’t ready. I know why you asked. It makes sense. But I was scared, too.”

He pushed open his car door, waving for me to do the same. When I stepped out of the car, he hurried forward, opening the gate that led to the pool and allowed me to walk past him. I’d only been in the pool house once before, when we were dating, and I could see that they’d redone it since then. The vinyl siding still matched the house, but the double French doors had been replaced with a different style, and the flooring was new, too.

He pulled one of the doors open and we walked in. The house smelled of him, and I held my breath, trying not to fall into his trap. It was easy enough to imagine going back to the way things were, moving on from all the pain and trying to find a better way forward, but in truth, in just a few days, I’d have to be back in my apartment. I had no idea when or if I’d see him again.

I had to remember that.

He gestured that I should sit down on the white leather sofa as he walked in front of me. “Can I get you something to drink? Beer? Wine? Water? I think I’ve got some sodas in here too...” He pulled open the stainless steel fridge, leaning his head down and shuffling stuff around to see what was available.

“Water’s fine,” I said, and Grant appeared in front of me moments later with a glass bottle of name-brand water. I found myself having to remember how accustomed I once was to his wealth. Now, it was catching me off guard as it had when we first started hanging out.

When I thought of wealth, I pictured the fancy cars and large houses, but it was always the smaller things that shocked me. The name brand *everything*, the fact that he never checked his bank account, always knowing money would just be there, the packages that were always showing up for him, the way he never wore anything more than once or twice. Grant dripped with wealth and he’d never known any different.

He sat down on the couch next to me, watching me quietly for a moment. “I’m really glad you came.”

“I’m really glad you asked,” I told him. “I wasn’t expecting to run into you.”

“I thought I was imagining things when I saw you.”

“Me too, at first. Then, I didn’t know if you’d recognize me.”

“Of course I did. You look exactly the same,” he lied. “Every bit as beautiful.” His eyes lingered on me for a moment, the tension between us thick and laden with history and words unspoken. He looked away all too soon, clearing his throat. “So, tell me about yourself. Your life. What’s new?”

“Nothing really. I work at a bookstore now. And I have plants.” He chuckled at that. “And...well, that’s it. I’m pretty boring. Like always.”

“You were never boring,” he said firmly, knocking his knuckle into my arm playfully. “I’ve missed you.” He reached out his hand, brushing my cheek with his thumb. “I know you weren’t ready, but I wish you could’ve gone to Nashville with me. I think you’d love it there.”

“Maybe,” I said with a shake of my head. “I don’t know. If we would’ve broken up there, it would’ve been uncomfortable for both of us.”

He remained stoic and unfazed. “Fair enough, but I have more faith in us than that. We would’ve made it.”

It was doubtful, since we already hadn’t, but I didn’t argue.

He rested the bottle against his bottom lip. When he spoke again, his expression was unsure, his green eyes taking in every inch of my face, not lingering anywhere too long. “Are you...seeing anyone?”

“No,” I said quickly. “Are you?”

“No. I’ve dated around—in the interest of full transparency—but nothing’s been serious.”

“Same,” I agreed with a nod.

“I wish you were staying longer...” He’d moved closer to me, our bodies just inches apart. It was obvious he was planning to pick up where we’d left off before *that night*, but I couldn’t do that. Not to myself and not to him.

“A few days is more than enough for me,” I told him honestly. “I can’t stay long.”

He smirked. “Your plants would miss you?”

“Something like that.”

“Are you happy, Cait?” he asked, a pensive quality to his voice.

I didn't know how to answer that. I wasn't *unhappy* per se, but I wasn't necessarily over-the-moon daily, either. I inhaled, rubbing a hand over my thigh. "Living the dream," I teased noncommittally.

"I hope you are." He looked away. "I can't tell you how much I wish I could go back and fix things between us. I'd do anything—"

"You can't, though," I cut him off. "And there's no point living in the past. Let's just move forward, okay? I can't go back there."

Even as I said it, I couldn't deny the way my imagination was already working in overdrive. The idea that Grant and I could still have a chance to be together, despite all we'd gone through, was intoxicating. A life with him, so different from the one I was currently living...

My heart swelled at the possibility, no matter how impossible. We'd been robbed of a future before—my anger, our silly fight, then everything that happened with Jamie had stolen it away from us. But now, was it possible?

With Grant, I wouldn't have to be so lonely anymore. I could be happy again. There'd never been a time when I could honestly deny our spark. I saw it in his eyes even then; he felt it, too. But it was ridiculous. We only had the weekend. Then again, there was a time when we'd only had the summer...

He was slow to smile, but eventually he did. "To our future, then?" he asked, holding his can of beer up. "Whatever it looks like."

"To our future," I agreed, tapping my bottle to his.

TWO HOURS LATER, Grant kissed me for the first time since prom night.

By the end of the weekend, he asked me to stay for the summer, to move into the pool house with him, and to come back to Nashville with him.

I had every reason to say no, but I didn't.

I gave up my apartment and moved back to Spider Lily for the summer, then to Nashville after that.

We started over. Started fresh. We were stronger. Better. Finally, everything just worked.

I loved him. Maybe I'd always known that. Grant saw me in a way no one ever had. It felt different with him.

After he graduated two years later, he surprised me with the keys to a beach house in Naples, Florida. He swore he'd been planning it from the

moment I told him I wanted to move to the coast.

He also proposed, and we were married in a small ceremony with just our parents and closest friends and family there. Sam stood by my side, though our relationship was struggling to find a place in between where it currently was and what it had once been.

When we moved to Naples, my parents came too. The twins were born a few years later. All was well. I was finally over-the-moon happy.

And it was all, like so much else in my life, because of Grant.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

PRESENT DAY

“I just think you need to leave,” Sam said firmly.

We’d been going over the photograph, the phone calls, the text messages, and my encounters with the woman for the past hour, but nothing was clicking. “Whatever’s going on here, it’s not worth risking your life.”

“That’s what Grant said,” I told him, “but what does that say about me? Am I still the frightened little girl I was back then? Am I just going to let the mean girls win, if they are behind this? And what about my kids? If it’s not just a prank to get me to leave, what if she were to follow me? I can’t risk it. I need to find out what she wants, what *they* want, and make everyone realize I had nothing to do with Jamie’s death and they can’t scare me anymore, once and for all.”

Sam was pacing by the window, looking out at the parking lot. “But what if she’s dangerous? Playing brave won’t save you. This isn’t one of your stories.”

I scowled at him. “I’m not delusional, Sam. I know it’s not one of my stories.”

“What if we confront Vanessa? If someone’s behind this, it has to be her. And, if not, she’d at least know about it, right? After all this time, she’s still the queen bee.”

“If we confront her without proof, she’ll just deny it. We have to play her game and win.”

“And if she’s not behind it? If this woman is dangerous? Then what?”

He had a point. I thought back to the way this had all escalated so quickly, how the woman’s voice had changed to something deep and

terrifying on the phone with me, how her text messages had been so insistent.

“Then I have to protect my family. I can’t go home and spend my life looking over my shoulder and wondering if she’s coming and when. I need to understand why this is happening. What does it have to do with Jamie? With me? How did she get this picture?” I gestured to the coffee table.

He opened his mouth as if he were going to say something, then shut it again.

“What? Do you think that’s crazy?”

“No, I just...” He crossed the room quickly, his hands on either side of my face without warning. He pressed his lips to mine, my body tensing, then relaxing under his kiss. It was quick and urgent, and when he released me, his chest swelled with a deep breath.

“What was that?” I asked, a hand to my lips.

“That was in case I never get the chance to do it again. I know you’re married. I know you chose Grant, but I’ve wanted to do that for years now, and if you’re about to go out and play the hero, I couldn’t stand the thought that this might be my last chance.”

I should’ve scolded him, been angry, but I couldn’t. The kiss was what I needed. It brought me back to reality, reminded me of what was at stake. I couldn’t let this be anyone’s last chance. I had to get to the bottom of it and keep myself, and Sam, safe.

It was funny, once I’d been unable to kiss Grant because of my obligation to Sam. Now, it seemed the situation had reversed. My feelings for Sam, feelings that had once been muted and obligatory, were growing more and more confusing, while my feelings for Grant, once passionate and intense, now felt muddled.

I loved my husband, but these few days with Sam had me questioning my choice. Had I made the right one all those years ago? And, even if I didn’t, would I ever do anything about it? It was unlikely. We had the twins to think about now. I felt guilty for even considering the possibility. Obviously, Sam still had feelings for me. Was it wrong to keep him close while I dealt with this?

My head was so fuzzy and confused. I couldn’t determine right from wrong anymore.

My phone buzzed, interrupting my thoughts. I lifted it from where it rested next to my suitcase and stared in horror at the screen.

In large capital letters, from a new number I didn't recognize, the message read:

HE WAS NEVER YOURS

"What is it?" Sam asked, still looking shell-shocked from our kiss. I lowered the screen, letting him read over the message. "Is it from her? The girl?"

"It has to be," I said. "But this is another number."

"Maybe she is working with someone else, then..."

"Maybe." I chewed my bottom lip, trying to think.

"Who's *he*?" he asked, his eyes widening. "Grant?"

I swallowed, locking my phone screen. "I guess so, but now I'm even more confused. I don't understand what's happening."

"Okay..." He held his hands in the air, his fingers splayed. "Hear me out. What if, somehow, Vanessa isn't actually behind this? What if it's Jamie? What if she never died?" he asked. "What if whoever they found just looked like her? What if they were wrong?"

"And what? She just went into hiding? She never told anyone or came forward?" I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to think. "That doesn't make any sense. And they had her funeral. We all saw her body. Her parents were there. We'd know if she wasn't dead."

"Does she have a twin?" he asked. "Like some secret twin we don't know about?"

I dropped my hand, staring at him dubiously. "Now it's you who needs to be reminded that this isn't one of my books."

"I'm just saying... All these clues are pointing us to Jamie. So what else could it be? She's the only one who wanted Grant back then. She's the only one who had access to this picture."

It was completely ridiculous, but he wasn't wrong. As I contemplated it, an idea came to me suddenly, though it was one I desperately didn't want to explore. "We need to talk to her parents."

"What? Why?" He was already shaking his head.

"Because, if there's any chance Jamie's somehow still alive, they'd be the ones who'd know."

He was slow to nod, but eventually he did. "I'm good with anything that means we can leave this hotel, but what are we going to say? *Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence, I know you buried your daughter ten years ago, but we just*

wanted to make sure she was really dead?"

I ignored him, walking away from him and opening my suitcase. "It's not a perfect plan, but it's what we've got. Get changed so we can go."

He hesitated. "Maybe we should tell the police about the text message."

"It's still not a threat," I pointed out. "I don't see how this text will help them. They already know she has my phone number because she texted to see about staying in my room."

He moved to his own suitcase, pulling out fresh clothes. As he dug around, I caught sight of something silver in the mesh part of his luggage.

"Is that a wedding ring?"

He followed my gaze. "It's Dad's. He gave it to me after the divorce."

"Oh." I felt bad for bringing it up and returned to my bag.

"It's hard on kids, you know? Divorce. I'm not sure it matters how young or old you are when it happens."

I swallowed, unable to look at him. "I'm really sorry, Sam."

"Sometimes I think it would've been better when I was younger. Maybe I would've grown up not knowing any differently."

"Were they unhappy when we were young?" His parents had always seemed happy, but I knew the truth often hid behind closed doors.

"I didn't think so, but people are good at pretending to be happy." His words were pointed, and I had a feeling he was talking about more than just his parents.

I changed the subject quickly. "Um, well, I'll get changed first."

He didn't try to stop me as I moved past him, his kiss still lingering on my lips. I knew there was so much he wanted to say to me, but I couldn't focus on that now. There was too much else going on.

We put on clean clothes quickly, brushing our hair and teeth, and met at the door. We were worried, it was written all over our faces, but I didn't see any other choice. When Sam took my hand, squeezing it just once, I let him, so grateful to have him with me.

I didn't know if I'd be brave enough to do this on my own.

As he dropped my hand, we walked from the room, checking to be sure it was locked behind us. We made our way down to the lobby and then out to my car.

Soon, we were driving through the quiet streets of Spider Lily. My spirit had lifted considerably since leaving Hotel Lilith. I felt safer. Freer. As if I

could just keep driving and never look back.

Once or twice, I considered the possibility.

We made it to Jamie's old house in under twenty minutes. The two-story brick home hadn't changed much since I'd last seen it. We'd spent so much of our childhood lounging between the two oak trees in the front yard and running down the large hill in the back.

Sam felt it too, I knew, as I heard him inhale sharply.

This place felt like coming home, even though it was no longer our home. No longer her home, either.

I'd never processed Jamie's death in a healthy way. Mostly, I'd avoided thinking about it or her. I cried on the day we found out, and at her funeral, but between the fear at school and the worry over what was coming, I spent much of my time shoving down my emotions for the sake of survival.

Now though, I felt my emotions beginning to overtake me. I didn't want to cry, not in front of Sam, not really at all, but as I stepped out onto the sidewalk we'd meticulously chaked and painted too many times to count, I felt the tears forming in my eyes.

I didn't look at Sam as we made our way up the walk. He was right, I still had no idea what we were going to say to the Lawrences. Once, they'd been like parents to us, but after Jamie became popular, I felt them pulling away. When I saw them in the store, their eyes no longer met ours. The Christmas cards they'd once sent our families had stopped. In truth, I think the Lawrences always believed their daughter was too good for us.

They weren't as rich as the Du Bois family, but they were far from as poor as Sam and I. They were proudly upper middle class, and they wanted everyone to know it. I found myself resenting them for that, more than ever before, as we made our way to their front door. They were our family once, and they'd abandoned us too.

As I thought that, it occurred to me that maybe they felt the same way about us. Did they think we'd abandoned them? After all, I'd never reached out after Jamie's death, but with the suspicion, I never felt I could. My parents had warned me to stay away from them completely while the investigation was ongoing and, as far as I knew, I guess it never really ended.

Sam looked at me, and I nodded, letting him know I still wanted to go through with the plan without having to say a word. He lifted his hand to the wood and knocked three times, then we stepped back in unison.

We waited a few moments before we finally saw a shadow in the window, a swish of the sheer curtains. When the door swung open, Carla stood in front of us. She hadn't aged well. Her once-smooth skin had gone wrinkled and sallow in such a short time. She'd given up dying her roots, her hair more gray than black now.

She was dressed in a sweat suit with her hair pulled back away from her face. She narrowed her gaze at us, her lips forming a hard line that told us we weren't welcome there. "What are you doing here?" she sniveled.

"Hey, Mrs. Lawrence," Sam said gently. "We're in town for the reunion."

"I heard about that," she said. "Having it at that damn hotel, as if the crooks who own it aren't murderers."

I cocked my head to the side, trying to understand. I'd never heard anything about the hotel owners being involved in Jamie's death, but I wasn't going to argue. "I wanted to apologize for never coming by after Jamie's..." I couldn't bring myself to say the word. Not to her. She looked so much like Jamie it pained me to stare too long. "After what happened."

"Well, it's about time," she said. "But apologies won't do anything for Jamie now. You two abandoned her when she needed you. You left her alone with those kids, and she died because of it." She looked at Sam. "She went with *you*, and you never brought her home to me."

"I couldn't have known," Sam said quickly. "If I'd known what was going to happen, if I could go back, I'd never have let her leave my sight. You have to know that. We loved her."

"Sam's right. It wasn't his fault. She was our best friend," I chimed in. "No matter what was going on, we would've done anything to save her."

She directed her attention back to me, her arms crossed. "Well, it seems like everything worked out for you with her gone anyway, didn't it? You're married to Grant Du Bois, aren't you? After you stole him from her. Some friend..."

Was she really still holding on to a grudge over that?

"I didn't steal Grant. It's a long story, and I'm sorry if that hurt Jamie, but that's not why we came by. I don't want to argue with you. We were hoping we could come inside and talk."

"About what?" she asked, not budging.

"About Jamie," I said. "Some weird stuff is going on at the hotel, and we have questions. I thought you might be able to answer them."

“Well, forget it,” she said, waving her hands in the air. “I answered all the questions I cared to answer back then. I’m not digging up the past and reliving the loss of my daughter all over again.” She looked us up and down. “Especially not with you. Let us grieve in peace.”

“Wait, Mrs. Lawrence, please just—”

“Please leave.” She reached for the door.

“Wait, just a min—” Sam’s plea was cut short as she shut the door in our faces, landing us promptly at our dead end.

I shrugged, trying to decide our next move. “It was a long shot anyway.” We made our way back to the car without a word and, as we sank into our seats, he sighed.

“What do you think about trying to text her back?”

“Who? The girl?”

“Yeah. See if you can arrange a meet-up. Maybe we could set her up somehow.”

I contemplated the suggestion, ready to shut it down at first, but the more I thought about it, it wasn’t the worst idea. “It’s worth a shot.” I pulled out my phone, ready to tap out a message, but there was another waiting for me.

If you aren’t back at Hotel Lilith in the next hour, I’ll find you.

If I can’t find you, I’ll find the ones you love. Better hurry.

CHAPTER FORTY

PRESENT DAY

We had just a few minutes to spare when we arrived back to the hotel, rushing inside panting and breathless. We hurried up to my room, checking behind the doors and in the shower to make sure no one had broken in.

Our things remained untouched.

I responded to the message once I'd regained control of my breathing.

We're back. Where are you? I want to meet you.

Now, we wai—

The response was almost instantaneous. **I thought you'd never ask. The room where it happened. Two hours. Come alone.**

I read the message twice. Sam moved around to look over my shoulder, reading it with me. "The room where it happened? Where what happened? Where she died?"

"I don't know what else it could be."

"You're not going in there alone."

"She said I have to—"

"I don't care what she said, Cait," Sam said, his hands on my shoulders. "You are not going anywhere alone. Not for a second. I meant what I told Mrs. Lawrence, I wouldn't have let Jamie out of my sight then and I'm not letting you out of my sight now. Not a chance."

I nodded. "Okay... Okay. Well, we have to think. We have two hours to come up with a plan."

"We should call the police, that's the plan. We should call them and have them meet her instead. They can arrest her and you'll be safe."

“You saw how quickly she knew we’d left. If we try to trick her with the police, there’s a chance she could do something even worse. Maybe if we just talk to her she would tell us if someone’s put her up to this. Or what she wants if not.”

“You’re tricking her anyway by bringing me after she said to come alone.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of it?”

“No,” he said quickly. “No, definitely not. I just... I don’t know what to do. What do you think she could want that you could even give her? What if it somehow is Jamie and she wants revenge for what happened? What if she believes you stole Grant and she wants to take him back?”

“No,” I dismissed his concern immediately. “Jamie would never hurt me.” I had to believe that was true.

“Then why would she do this?” he asked, scratching his head.

“I still don’t think it’s Jamie. Not really. But I do think it has something to do with Jamie. My money is still on Vanessa and the others.”

“Okay, fine. What if they are behind it all?”

“Then I want to show them I’m not going to be scared off.”

“What if they plan to hurt you?”

My blood suddenly ran cold, and I gasped. “Sam.” I could hardly stand to utter the words in my head.

“Yeah?”

“What if they were the ones who killed Jamie? Because they hated her for being in their group.”

“What? No! No way.”

“Think about it... They *hated* Jamie. Vanessa especially. Grant told me she thought Jamie was trying to replace her. What if she couldn’t let that happen?”

His face went instantly serious. “Cait... If that’s the case, if The Populars somehow did this, would Grant know about it?”

The possibility made me feel sick. “Do you mean then...or now?”

“Either.”

“He couldn’t. Wouldn’t. No...” I tried to think. Grant would never hurt me. And he wouldn’t have hurt Jamie. I trusted him. I loved him.

I thought back to the way he’d acted that night. He’d have no reason to hurt Jamie... Would he?

No. It was ridiculous.

“He’d never hurt me,” I told him.

“Then maybe he knows something about what happened all those years ago. Maybe he heard a rumor or a joke between one of his friends. It’s worth a shot asking?”

“How can I ask him that?”

“Just try,” he insisted. “Blame it on me if you have to. We need to know.”

Hesitantly, I lifted my phone, opening my call list and tapping Grant’s name. It rang four times, then went to voicemail.

“He didn’t answer.”

He was quiet and emotionless as he sank into the couch. “It’s not too late to leave,” he said, though I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or himself.

“Sam, I can’t make you stay. I won’t. I know you must think I’m crazy. But I can’t leave yet. Especially now. Not until I know the truth. Before, it was just about myself, but this is so much bigger than that. If they hurt Jamie, they have to be brought to justice.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose you.” When he looked up at me, there was a glimmer of tears in his eyes.

“No one’s losing anyone,” I swore. “But we need to get ready. We have two hours. We need a plan.”

WE SPENT the next two hours searching for layouts of the hotel online, trying to figure out the best way to do this. In the end, it was decided that Sam would wait in the bathroom in the lobby while I went down into the basement. I’d call him and leave my phone on speaker so he could listen to whatever was happening. If things went south, he’d call the police or burst in to try and help, preferably both. Either way, the woman was watching us, and it was the safest way for me to not be alone, while still seeming alone.

When the time had come, we hugged as if it were going to be the last time. He looked as though he wanted to kiss me, but if he did, he didn’t act on it. I wasn’t sure I would’ve stopped him.

We walked out of the room in what felt like slow motion, panic radiating through me. My chest was tight with trepidation, my heart thundering in my chest. We reached the bottom floor and split up before we reached the lobby.

He went right toward the bathroom and I kept straight, headed for the same hallway where I'd caught Grant and Jamie together a decade before.

The ghosts of those memories haunted me. I felt eighteen again, small and insignificant. Afraid.

I was none of those things anymore, I tried to remind myself, and I wouldn't let anyone tell me any differently.

The door to the basement and the storage room where they'd found Jamie was just a few feet from where I'd encountered them in the hallway. I'd passed it that very night, not knowing what would happen there just a few hours later.

It was hard for me to think about what happened that night. *How* it happened. Had she been lured down? Or carried down afterward?

The thought made me want to turn around and bolt, but I stayed strong.

I turned the knob to the basement door that was marked **EMPLOYEES ONLY**. We knew the layout well, both from the hotel map available online, but also from the police reports and questions all those years ago.

The door was metal and heavy, but thankfully, when I turned the knob, it was silent. I opened it slowly, staring into the dark abyss. If someone was in the basement, I couldn't see them. I couldn't see anything. I turned my phone flashlight on, seeing the flashing green icon at the top of my screen that let me know I was still connected with Sam. I imagined him listening closely, worrying from a distance. The door shut behind me, bathing me in darkness just as I saw the first hint of the staircase cloaked in shadows.

Using the dim beam of light from my phone, I eased my way down the stairs, gripping onto the wooden railing tightly. I shone the light around the room, trying to catch a glimpse of something. Or rather, someone.

"Hello?" I called, my chest tight.

When I reached the final step, I saw the light switch along the gray concrete wall. I flipped it up, grateful when the light came on instantly, illuminating the room. The basement was long and narrow, with four concrete posts making the corners of a square around me. On the far wall, there were stacks of boxes and old totes. On the right, I spied ladders and cleaning equipment.

I spun around, trying to make sense of what was going on. Where was she hiding? Was she already here?

"Hello?" I called again. "I'm here... I'm alone." My voice echoed

through the quiet space, but there was no answer. I walked across the room, my shoes noisy on the concrete floor.

My heart rate accelerated as I pushed open the small door to the storage room, or what had once been a storage room. It was mostly bare now, just a few odds and ends. An old stapler, a few boxes of browning envelopes, some broken down boxes. When I spied something lying on the floor in the room, I moved slowly, shoving my phone into my pocket. When the door to the storage room shut behind me, I whipped around, sure the girl would be there waiting. But she wasn't. I was still alone.

I turned my attention back to the thing on the floor, now close enough to see what it was.

When I saw it, I gasped, the blood draining from my face.

“What the...”

I bent down without thinking, reaching for the tiny object with trembling hands. I turned the bracelet over in my hands, running my fingers across the dingy, silver squares with letters that spelled out the words **BEST FRIENDS**.

I'd once had one just like it. But mine was safely at home.

This bracelet belonged to Jamie.

My vision tunneled as I processed it, looking up just as I heard a voice coming from outside the room, in the basement. I made my way back to the door, shoving the bracelet in my pocket as I weighed my options. I could hide out in here, make it so she couldn't open the door, but it would be a match of our strengths until Sam could make it down here. Was I strong enough to fight her off?

I heard the soft sound of a voice again. What was she saying?

What if she'd locked me in? Claustrophobia overtook me, the room closing in on me, and I jerked open the door, staring around the room.

The empty room.

Still, I was alone. But I could definitely hear a voice.

Was that a voice?

It was definitely something...

“Hello?” I called. The noise grew louder.

No. It wasn't a voice. It was the sound of sobbing. Someone was crying.

“Who's there?”

The crying got even louder, more pronounced. I knew the voice. I knew it, but it was impossible. More than that, it was invisible.

I was alone in the basement, and yet I could hear her crying.

“Jamie? Is that you?”

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I looked down. When I did, I nearly dropped my phone. The text message stared up at me, taunting me.

WHO ELSE WOULD IT BE?

“Cait?” she called my name, her voice coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I bolted, hurrying up the stairs as fast as my legs could carry me.

She was just behind me, I was sure of it. The ghost of my dead best friend was coming to get me. To make me pay for what I’d done. I tripped near the top, slamming onto the stairs with my full weight, and preparing for my death when the door at the top of the stairs tore open. Sam stood in the doorway, panic coating his expression.

“What is it? What happened?” he asked, reaching for my hand. I grabbed it, and we rushed out of the room faster than I thought possible. My stomach burned, my lungs ached, my legs felt like jelly. I couldn’t catch my breath. I was going to pass out. I was going to be sick.

“It’s Jamie...” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t know how. But she’s back.”

“What are you talking about? You saw her?”

“No, but I could hear her. And she left this.” He blanched as I held out my palm, revealing the bracelet. Recognition flooded his expression, and he shook his head.

“What do you mean? She’s down there?”

“The room was empty, but I could hear her... It was like she was right in front of me. All around me. I don’t know what’s going on. Maybe you were right. Maybe this place is haunted. I never thought I’d be saying this, but she’s still here. It’s like she never left.”

Suddenly, he was a skeptic. “It’s impossible.”

I showed him the text. “It’s completely impossible,” I agreed. “But it’s real all the same.”

“But why? Even if...” He looked over his shoulder, then lowered his voice. “*If* Jamie is somehow haunting this hotel...” The absurdity of what he was saying was written all over his expression. “Why would she want to hurt you or scare you? You think she’s holding some sort of grudge over Grant after all these years?”

“No.” I bit the inside of my cheek. “It’s something else.”

“What else is there?” he demanded.

I looked down the quiet hallway. “We need to go back to my room. There’s... Sam, there’s something I need to tell you about that night. Something I’ve never told anyone.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

AGE EIGHTEEN—PROM NIGHT

I paced the parking lot, utterly fuming over what had happened. Grant had gone inside fifteen minutes ago, and I was still alone, sitting on the filthy ground as I planned out my next move.

I needed to call my parents, but I could only imagine what they'd think. I couldn't even make it through a prom night without some sort of mess. I couldn't even hold on to the friends I'd had my whole life, let alone my boyfriend.

I was angry with myself, my face stained with tears and makeup as I sniffled, running a hand under my nose.

When my phone began buzzing in my purse, I thought it might be Grant, calling to make sure I'd made it home okay. It would serve him right to worry some. If not Grant, it could've been Sam.

Maybe he would come out to check on me, and I could finally apologize for how badly I'd managed to screw things up.

The name on my screen was the last one I'd imagined I'd see.

Jamie

I considered ignoring her, but I was curious what she'd have to say. Maybe she just wanted to rub it in my face. If that was the case, I'd hang up on her. Against my better judgment, I pressed the phone to my ear. "What do you want?"

Instead of an answer, I heard rapid breathing.

"Hello?"

For a split second, I felt dread swim through me as I imagined they were having sex and she'd called me in the middle of it. *How sick...*

I started to hang up when I heard her whisper. "Cait?"

"Hello?" I snarled. "What?"

"Cait, please... I'm in trouble. I need your help." She coughed, whimpering.

"Ha ha, yeah right." I pulled my phone away from my ear.

"I can't get out of the basement, Cait. The door's stuck..." She stopped talking, and I could hear her breathing loudly again. "Please. I can't...get out. I wasn't supposed to be down here... I was supposed to be...meeting him, but no one's here. Please. I don't want to get in trouble."

I shook my head. "Why should I care if you can't get out of anywhere, Jamie? I hope you get in trouble! We aren't friends. Why don't you call one of your stupid popular friends?"

"I tried! No one's answering... Cait, please." She was crying then, coughing too. "Please, I'm scared. I know you're mad. You have...every right to be. If you care about...me at all—"

"I'm not falling for it," I told her vehemently. "I'm not going to be some little prank for you and your friends. I'm not your entertainment tonight. Sorry."

"That's not... Please, I'm...sorry. Please..." She was still crying, and she sounded like she was out of breath. As if she were running or struggling. I imagined she was tugging on the door while she talked to me, though I could hardly focus through my rage-filled thoughts. "Cait?" she asked again. "Is... that you?"

"What are you talking about?" I spun around, looking for her. Did she see me? Where was she? I knew this was a trap. I darted between cars, searching for her. Wherever she was, I couldn't let her catch up to me. I was sure whatever her plan was, it wouldn't be good.

"Cait?" she whined, and then there were more sobs.

I stood, waiting and watching for her, but she wasn't there.

"Cait?" her voice had grown faint. "Please. The...door... I can't..." She never said anything else. The line was silent, but the call hadn't disconnected.

"Very funny," I said. "I'm leaving, Jamie. Got it? You won. Congratu-freaking-lations. Have him if that's what's important to you. You got him and lost me. Not that you care about that," I rambled to the silent line. "I never want to see you again. I hate you. Do you hear me? I hate you. I wish you'd never been my friend." With that, new tears burned my eyes, the events of the

night coming back to me, and I ended the call heatedly, searching for my mom's number in my call log again.

I didn't care about making my parents worry or feel disappointed in me anymore. I just wanted to go home.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY

“I don’t understand,” Sam said, shaking his head as he paced the floor in front of me, pinching his bottom lip between his pointer finger and thumb.

“She called me that night. Before she died. It was the last call she made. She tried to tell me she was in trouble, but I was just so angry... I wasn’t listening. I wasn’t thinking. I thought she was trying to trick me. I just never thought she could be serious.”

“So, what? The call just ended?”

“She was quiet and I was angry,” I sobbed. “I told her I hated her and I hung up.”

Sam sat down next to me, his arms around my shoulders in an attempt to comfort me, but it was no use. No one had been able to comfort me in years, not my parents, not my therapist. Only my writing, but only because I could use it to block everything else out. It was the only thing that seemed to silence everything else. If only for a moment.

“She knew you didn’t hate her,” he said softly.

“She couldn’t. *I* don’t even know I didn’t hate her. Maybe I did. Maybe I do. I was so angry, Sam. So, so angry. She hurt me. Over and over again, and I was just done.”

He pulled his arm back but didn’t scoot away from me. If anyone could understand my feelings toward Jamie, it was Sam. “So, what did the police say? Did you tell them?”

“When they reported her missing, I told my parents about the phone call. We went to the police station and told them about it. They searched the

basement and that storage room, but there was no sign of her, so they wrote me off. I didn't know what else to do... Then they found her later in the air duct. They said I was the last call in her log."

"But...if she had her phone, why didn't she just call 911?"

"I don't know," I said. "The police never said. From what she said on the call, she thought she'd get into trouble, I guess. She said she was meeting someone. We weren't supposed to have left the ballroom, so if a teacher caught her down there, if she'd called the police, maybe she would've been in trouble. No one else was answering. I guess she thought she had time, but they said whatever it was that poisoned her, the...like, gas stuff?" He nodded. "They said she might not have realized what the smell was. The basement smells so bad anyway. So she didn't know she was dying until it was too late. She just needed someone to let her out."

"But you know it's not your fault."

"If I'd gone to her, if I'd taken her seriously, she might still be alive—"

"Or you might both be dead. Someone put that gas down there for a reason. It's not your fault. There's nothing you could've done."

"I could've saved her if I'd tried."

"You couldn't have known."

"She told me, Sam. She told me she couldn't get out of the basement. She was coughing. She was dying on the phone with me, and I just yelled at her." I was outright sobbing then, and I felt his arm slide back around me. "I'll never forgive myself. I thought by coming back here, I'd be able to face up to the trauma of that night and move on from it. My therapist even said it might be good for me. But now I know we were all wrong. I can't move on, and Jamie can't either. Even after death, she can't forgive me."

"Cait, it's just...it's not possible. I know everything points to it being Jamie, I've been saying that all day, too, but if it is her, what does that mean? What does she want? And how is it no one else has seen her? She's texting you, she's shown up in person a few times, she's delivering packages... If she's doing all that *as a ghost*, don't you think she's been here all this time? If she'd been haunting Hotel Lilith, wouldn't we have heard about it? There has to be a logical explanation. I know you just went through something traumatic, but I think we're overlooking the fact that somehow, maybe Jamie isn't dead."

"But we saw her!" I sobbed. "We saw her body."

“What if we were wrong?”

“How could we have been wrong about that?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, hanging his head. “Maybe we should consider Vanessa being behind it again.”

“It has to be Jamie. Who else would have that photograph? The bracelet? The crying in the basement...it sounded exactly like how it sounded that night. The cries, the coughs, the way she said my name. No one else heard that call. No one but me and Jamie. There’s no other explanation.”

“Maybe Jamie is helping Vanessa set you up.”

“She can’t be alive,” I bellowed, so angry and frustrated I could no longer control myself. I wanted so desperately for something to make sense. Anything. I needed to understand what was happening.

He was patient with me, speaking softly again after a moment. “Then we need to get you out. I don’t care what the risks are. If you think someone’s going to hurt you—ghost or not—we have to get you out of here. I can stay behind and keep searching—”

“No, I can’t let you do that—”

“I’m not going to give you a choice! I’m not going to lose you!”

I opened my mouth to respond, but the buzzing of my phone interrupted us again. I stared at the text message from one of the unknown numbers she’d been using with a new wave of horror.

“I can’t go,” I said firmly, holding the phone out for him to read. “She wants to see us. Both of us.”

Just like old times, besties. Get ready to party like it’s 2012. Await further instructions. See you very soon. Tell anyone about this and two very sweet kids will pay the price. XO!

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

PRESENT DAY

When the time for the reunion rolled around, Sam and I had dressed in our best clothing. We'd done our hair, I'd applied my makeup, and we looked as if we were planning to go out just like it was any other night.

But inside, I knew we were both experiencing inner turmoil. I'd tried to call Grant a few more times, but I was still getting no answer. It had me worried, but I was hoping he'd just gotten distracted with the kids. I couldn't bear to think it could be anything else.

I wrote a note to him and tucked it into my bag, choosing that over a dramatic text message, in case I ended up back in my room in just a few hours and the goodbye text would seem ridiculous. With the note, I'd be able to throw it away without anyone ever knowing I'd overreacted so badly. I knew that was going to be the case, but I wanted to be prepared just in case.

God, I felt so overdramatic. I was scared, which was reasonable, but I knew there had to be an explanation for it all. Now that my nerves had calmed down, I was thinking more clearly.

Sam watched as I zipped the bag up, not bothering to ask what the note said.

When we reached the door, he glanced at me. "No matter what happens, I'll do everything I can to protect you," he vowed, his words like a knife to my gut.

"Please don't," I begged him. "If you can get yourself out, Sam, please do it. You're not to blame for any of this. This is on me."

He leaned forward, pressing his lips to my cheek. "It's no one's fault except whoever killed her. And that wasn't you. You're a good person, Cait.

You have a beautiful life and someone—a whole family—to go home to. In my life, it's just me. If the world can afford to lose either of us right now, it's gotta be me. I'm expendable."

"You've never been expendable to me." Tears muddled my vision, and I looked down, sniffing. I attempted to laugh through my tears, adding, "Let's just agree to disagree and hope neither of us has to go, deal?"

His eyes were soft. "Deal." He scratched the back of his neck.

For a split second, as I weighed my next move, I considered bolting instead. Hurrying to the car and never thinking of this town or these people again. But if someone was pranking me, I wanted to put an end to it. I wanted to prove to myself I wouldn't be frightened off so easily ever again. And, if it was Jamie's ghost, I wanted to help her find peace. Maybe Sam was right. Maybe I'd been reading and writing for so long I wanted a satisfying resolution to her story, but the fact that her killer had never been brought to justice had always bothered me.

Maybe if I helped the crime be solved, I could finally forgive myself for letting her down. Sam was solemn as we made our way out into the hall, our hands locked together as if we were the only things keeping each other in place.

Before we'd even made it to the ballroom, we could hear the music playing. The room was illuminated with various shades of neon colors while the DJ—a short man with large arms and a perfectly round beer belly—played music from the far side of the room.

We entered the space quietly, hoping to go unnoticed, and I dropped Sam's hand at once, my other hand squeezing my cell phone with a viselike grip. I saw Vanessa and her friends giggling from the center of the dance floor and had a hard time imagining that they weren't making fun of me in some way.

A banner hung across the room that read, **Welcome Back, Class of 2012!**

The night was eerily similar to the one a decade ago. The groups were the same, the feelings the same...

I wanted to confront Vanessa right then, to call them all out for whatever this was. How could they be talking and laughing like my life wasn't falling apart? Then again, I still had no proof they were involved, and I had no desire to make an even bigger fool of myself.

No, I'd avoid them at all costs, but I wouldn't hide. This was my reunion,

too. If they were behind everything that was happening, I wanted them to see that I wasn't affected by it. That they hadn't won.

Everywhere I looked, people were mingling and having a good time. Sam tugged me toward the refreshment table, and I couldn't help thinking that this might've been the way that night was supposed to go. With just a few changes, this would've been how I spent prom. If that were the case, would everything be different? Would Jamie still be alive? Would I be married? Would I be married *to Grant*? Would Hudson and Lucy exist? The possibilities were endless, reminding me of just how fragile our existence is. Everything is hanging by a thread every day. A single move, a single choice, can change the course of your life completely.

We filled our cups, but neither of us took a sip as we stood awkwardly, trying to blend in and pretend everything wasn't falling apart. Every squeal, every cackle, every boom or pop of the walls, or someone's chair scraping across the floor had me on edge. I jerked my head around whenever anyone entered the room.

Around me was a magnificent party. Inside me, a storm.

Once, I saw a call coming in from Grant, finally. I hated myself for ignoring it, regretting it the second I had, but I needed to stay focused. If I spoke to him now, it would only upset me.

I had to wait for the text.

I'd see him again, I promised myself. No matter what, I'd see him again.

When the text message finally arrived, holding the instructions we were told to await, I read the four simple words slowly. Small as they were, they held the weight of our entire worlds in them.

Come back. I'm waiting.

I showed the message to Sam without a word, the night too reminiscent of the past as I made my way out of the event space and into the lobby. Marci watched us from behind her desk. She didn't say a word as we crossed in front of her on the way toward the hallway.

There was no one to stop us this time. No one to protect us.

We made it to the hallway, then the door, and Sam grabbed my shoulders, his icy-blue eyes drilling into mine. "Are you sure about this? It's not too late to turn around."

I leaned forward, pressing my lips to his quickly without a moment's hesitation. "I will always love you, Sam. And I'll always be sorry about the

way things happened between us. You don't owe me this. You don't have to come with me."

He stared at me. "There's no way in hell I'd let you go alone."

"Then, here we go." My chest puffed with a heavy breath, and I opened the door. This time, when we walked in, the light was already on.

Still on?

I hadn't exactly turned it off on my way out.

I stared down the narrow stairwell, unable to see anything but a small patch of concrete floor below. I held my breath as we walked down the stairs side by side, our hands running along the concrete wall.

Is this what Jamie did in her last moments?

Is this how it ended for her?

Is this how she died?

When we reached the last step, I found the room empty again. I pushed forward, reaching the storage closet. "This is it," I told him, tapping on the door. "This is the room where they found her."

He nodded, his jaw hanging open. "I remember the pictures in the paper."

I turned the handle, shoving the door open with all my strength. As it opened, both of us holding our breath, I heard the sound of footsteps behind us. Then, a voice. "Well, well, well, look who decided to show up for the party, after all."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY

“**Y**ou?” Sam demanded as we turned to face her, stepping forward in front of me. The door to the storage room slammed shut behind us, making me jump.

The woman I’d met earlier in my stay glared at us, a wicked smile on her painted lips. Like us, she was dressed for a party. But I still didn’t understand.

“Her?” I asked Sam. “You know her?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, his jaw tight. He still wasn’t looking at me. “And you do, too. It’s Penny.”

“Penny?” I asked, furrowing my brow. There was no way this girl was Penny. She looked nothing like the pudgy redhead we’d gone to school with. “What are you talking about?” I looked at her for confirmation, and she wasn’t denying it.

She smiled sweetly at me, her eyes dark and menacing. “That’s right, Cait. Remember me?”

“What are you doing here?” Sam demanded. “What the hell is this about?”

“I’m so confused...” I said softly. “What is going on?”

“Oh, he didn’t mention it? I’m Sam’s wife.” She lifted her hand to show off the diamond on her finger.

I looked at Sam, then back at her, my body trembling.

“Cait, I can explain...” he said, his hands up in surrender.

“Don’t explain it to her,” she roared. “Explain it to me.” She spoke to me through gritted teeth. “He was never yours.” Suddenly, the words in her text

made sense. She wasn't talking about Grant. She was talking about Sam. She'd always been in love with him.

Always.

I'd suspected it most of our life. But why was she doing this? I wasn't trying to take Sam from her.

"What do you want from me?" I demanded, stepping back away from them both. "Why are you doing this?" I asked her. "I don't want to take Sam from you. I'm happily married."

"Penny, you need to leave. This has nothing to do with you," Sam said, moving forward and trying to grab her arm. "This is insane."

She jerked it away, darting across the room, her smile never leaving her face. "Maybe I *am* insane, sweet husband. Maybe you've finally done it. Maybe you've finally driven me mad after all these years."

"What is she talking about, Sam?"

"Don't ask him. He'll only lie to you," she said, taunting me. "Just like he lied to you about me. Just like he's lied to us both all along."

I felt my knees beginning to give out, so I reached for the stack of boxes near the far wall, trying to keep myself from passing out.

"Sam didn't tell you he's married, did he?" she asked.

"When did you dye your hair?" he was asking her. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I was sick of the lies," she snapped, her hands on either side of her head. "Sick of being sweet, little Penny. Sick of it all."

Her voice had gone deep and feral, like it had on the phone. She looked at me. "I've loved him my entire life. Like the idiot I am. And he claimed he loved me, too. All those years ago, even when he was with you, he told me he loved me."

I waited for Sam to deny it, but he didn't. She went on.

"Then, when you broke up, we finally started dating. Officially. Out in the open. No more stolen kisses on the back seat of the school bus. No more hands up my shirt in my bedroom, but pretending not to see me in the halls at school. No more sex in the treehouse at night and pretending to love *you* during the day. I'd spent so long living like that, with him promising me I was the one he loved, that you were fragile because of Jamie and he had to protect you."

Tears stung my eyes, my throat tight.

It was impossible...

Was she saying that Sam had been secretly seeing both of us in high school? That he was kissing us both? Sleeping with us both? How many times had I asked him if he had a crush on Penny after seeing them together and he'd insisted she was just his weird neighbor? Was he truly lying to me all that time?

"No, finally, he was ready to let everyone know we were together. Finally, you'd let him go and he was mine. But, you see, the thing about a liar is, they're *really* good at lying... Even to themselves. Sam could never love me fully, not while he was still in love with you. And he said he wasn't. He swore to me he wasn't. But he was. He still wanted to be with you, would've dropped me for you any second. I knew that. I knew it but I loved him anyway."

She ran her hands through her hair wildly, her breathing erratic.

I didn't want to believe anything she was saying, but she had the ring to prove her story. Then, I thought back to the ring in his suitcase. Did it really belong to his dad? Or was it his own?

"Is she serious?" I demanded. I was having a hard time catching my breath, my hand clutching my chest.

He wasn't looking at me, but his next statement was a confirmation. "It's done, Penny. It's all done. You don't have to do this. You shouldn't be here right now. She's married. We're married. She's not trying to steal me away. I've told you that."

My breathing was growing shallow, my vision blurring. Was I crying? I couldn't breathe. My chest was constricting, each breath harder to take. I couldn't keep myself upright any longer. My knees gave out, and I crashed to the ground.

"Are you okay?" Sam rushed toward me, but Penny was quicker, stopping him from reaching me.

"Ah, ah, ah!" she cautioned, waving her finger in the air. "Not until she's heard everything."

"What did you do? What do you want?" he demanded.

"The truth, Sam. The truth will set us all free."

"What truth?" I demanded from the ground.

"Do you want to tell her or should I?" she asked.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Please just leave. Let's go back

to my room. We can talk about this. Cait doesn't have to be involved." Was it just my imagination or did he genuinely seem worried? Penny was hurting, but she wasn't actually dangerous, was she?

"Oh, but which room, Sam?" Her head leaned toward one shoulder, then the other. "The room you told me you were staying in? Or the room where you were staying with Cait?"

His eyes widened. "I wasn't staying with her." He sounded so convincing, he almost had me fooled.

"Don't lie to me!" She slapped his cheek, the sound reverberating through the room.

"How do you know that?" I demanded. "How did you know which room I was in?"

"He told me," she grinned, repeating what she'd said on the phone earlier.

"Cait, I'm so sorry. She was supposed to be in Wilmington. At home. I had no idea she was here. I had no idea she was even worried. Everything was fine."

"You told her where you were staying? Why didn't you tell me?" I begged. "We went over the list of who knew where we were, but Penny had never come up."

"I didn't think she'd ever do anything like this. She was supposed to be at home. I thought I was just telling my wife where I was. I'm so sorry..."

"Why are you apologizing to her?" Penny demanded, her voice getting more unhinged as the conversation went on. "You should be apologizing to me. We're supposed to be married, Sam."

"We *are* married!"

"You don't lie to your wife. All this time, things have been amazing. And then as soon as you catch a whiff of your darling little Cait, suddenly everything's up in the air again."

"Hang on," he said, wagging his finger in the air. "That's why you wanted me to come home Wednesday night?"

"Wednesday?" I asked, but they weren't looking at me. Wednesday was the night I'd had dinner with Anna.

She was smiling proudly. "I came into town Tuesday night, just like you. I knew you were lying about why you didn't want me to come. I knew you'd be slipping back into your old habits, and I couldn't have it. When I saw the two of you together at the bar, I had to do something."

“So, what? You pretended to need me home and then lied when I got there and said you’d had to go to work? It was all a lie? And meanwhile you were here with Cait?” He glanced at me for the first time. I desperately needed to stand up, but I couldn’t find the strength.

“I needed to talk to her without you catching me,” she said simply. “I needed to make sure you wouldn’t interrupt us.”

“So, that’s why you went home? Not because you wanted to get that book for me, but because your wife needed you to?” I asked, my chest burning with anger. I could hear my pulse in my ears.

“I’m sorry, Cait. I never wanted to lie to you. I just didn’t know how to tell you.”

“She’s your wife!”

“He was always embarrassed by me,” she mused, twirling a piece of hair around her finger.

“That’s not true,” he argued.

“Then why didn’t you tell her? You were the man of honor at her wedding and you wouldn’t even tell her about ours.”

He put his face in his palms, growling loudly. “I don’t know, okay? I don’t know! Can we just stop this, please? Can we all just go home?”

“Oh, no. Not quite yet,” Penny said, a finger to her chin. “Just be patient.”

Sam’s face had gone red and he looked as if he was going to lash out at any moment. He put a hand to his own chest, shaking his head.

“I don’t understand...” I drew their attention back to me. “How did you do this? How did you pull it off? The crying? I know I heard Jamie crying... You sounded so much like her.” My head throbbed with outright confusion. Sam’s eyes darted to me, then back to her as we waited for the answer. “And why did you tell me your name was Anna?”

The woman cackled. “Well, I was always studious, little Penny, wasn’t I? Good little Penny. No one even bothered to know my name once that stupid nickname stuck. Even you. You, who were supposed to be my best friend,” she sneered at Sam. “Were they best friends? They were friends, sure. And neighbors. But had he considered her his *best* friend? More lies... I couldn’t tell which way was up. Why had he lied about so much?”

“It’s not the end of the world. You had red hair, so we called you Penny. So what?” he said. “I thought you liked the nickname. You never complained about it. Is that what this is all about? A stupid nickname?”

“Maybe if you’d let me finish speaking you’d know, wouldn’t you?” she demanded. “No, I was tired of playing the fill-in. Tired of you coming to me when she couldn’t hang out. Tired of watching your eyes close when we were together, knowing you were thinking about her. *Tired, tired, tired, tired.* I was done waiting for you, Sam. I’d spent all that time waiting and buying into your lies. I knew that you’d always choose her over me. And I finally had you. Finally, we were in public together. You invited me to prom when the two of you broke up. It was the happiest I’d ever been. But still, I had to live with knowing you’d leave me if you had the chance. Knowing my happiness could be ripped away at a moment’s notice. I saw the two of you at the table together, talking, laughing. I knew it was only a matter of time before you went back to her. I couldn’t let that happen. The only way to be sure you wouldn’t leave me was to be sure you could never have *her* again.”

She narrowed her gaze at me briefly, then turned back to him. “That was when I knew I had to kill her.”

“Kill me?” My head bobbed back and forth. I was lightheaded and dizzy. I was going to be sick. The air had been sucked from my lungs, my body ice cold at the callous way she’d said the words.

“Not you,” she said, as if it were obvious. “Then he would’ve just grieved you and it would’ve been a whole thing. No, I needed you to be with Grant. I needed Sam to stay mad at you. There was only one way to make sure that happened.”

Realizing what she was saying, I felt my head lean back against the stack of boxes behind me, the weight of the truth slamming into my chest.

“*You killed Jamie?*” Sam asked, a hand on his stomach.

“I would’ve killed everyone to be with you. Don’t you get that?” she asked, her teeth bared. She looked like a wild animal, waiting to attack. How had he married her? Why? What did he see in this woman?

“It wasn’t painful. I was kind to her. We’d just learned about lethal chlorine gas in chemistry, remember? It was simple enough to mix up. Then all I had to do was get her in the basement. I told her Grant wanted to meet her down there, in the storage closet, and she all but ran to meet him. Once she was there, I locked the door. I should’ve grabbed her cell phone, but I wasn’t thinking. Luckily, only one person answered her calls that night.”

Her grin grew wild again. “I recorded it from outside the storage room door.” She shrugged one shoulder. “Thought it might come in handy. Turns

out I was right.”

“How could you...” I couldn’t focus. Suddenly, I doubled over in a coughing fit, sobs tearing through me, my vision blurring even more.

She covered her mouth, laughing boisterously. “You should’ve seen your face. Did you honestly think there was a ghost?” She spun in circles, her hands clasped in front of her. “A ghost, can you imagine? Jamie? Oh, Jamie? Are you here?”

I placed a hand to my temple, trying to ease the ache inside my skull. “But how did you get her friendship bracelet? And the picture?”

“They were mine,” Sam said, looking at her for confirmation. Her eyes twinkled with delight. “Weren’t they?”

“Bingo!” she chanted, her arms in the air.

I’d forgotten we gave Sam a friendship bracelet when Jamie and I bought ours. He’d never worn it. Actually, I thought he’d thrown it away. And his arm was in the picture, now that I was thinking about it... Why hadn’t I considered that he might have a copy of it, too?

Because I trusted Sam.

Implicitly.

Apparently, I was a fool for doing so. That was always going to be my downfall.

“And it was easy enough to get your number from his phone, too. When he told me he thought he should come to the reunion alone since I wasn’t really in his class, I knew what he was going to do. I recognized the old patterns at once. We were back to being teenagers again, and he was going to try and play us both. I couldn’t go back to living that way. I just couldn’t.”

“Sam?” I begged, though I knew it was useless. “Please tell me she’s lying...”

He shook his head, then dropped to his knees as well, his hand still on his chest. “I’m sorry, Cait. I don’t know why I did it. I swear to you, I love you. I was just a stupid kid. I never meant to hurt you. Or you,” he told Penny. Or *Anna*? I didn’t know what we were supposed to call her now.

His gaze flicked to her again, clearly piecing something else together. “So that’s why the cameras were off that night? Did your dad help you?”

Her dad.

The manager of the hotel.

Of course.

“No,” she said, surprising me as she wrinkled her nose. Suddenly, it looked as if she was crying. “He’d...never have helped me. But I knew how to...turn off the cameras. It was easy enough.” She was fighting for breath through her tears. “Just like I...knew how to watch you...all this week. The system here is...easy to hack. Always has been. Even if...you’d never told me what room you were in, I would’ve found you.”

“So now what?” I asked, looking at her. My breaths were coming harder, too. A cough tickled my throat. “What do you want? What’s your plan?” I coughed again, harder this time. I hated the smell down here.

She grinned, sinking down onto the floor with Sam and me, not bothering to wipe away her tears. “When Sam...said he wanted to come here alone, I thought...I’d surprise him, reveal his secret to you, and ruin...his week. But then...I knew there’d always be another time. Another chance for...him to break my heart and ruin my life, and then...I thought, why not...”

She adjusted her position on the floor carefully. “Why not...settle it once and for all? I dyed...my hair, but I really...hadn’t changed much else. I thought, if you...were nice to me, I could tell you the truth. I thought...if you were nice to me...maybe I could accept that I’d...misjudged you or that you’d changed. Maybe you weren’t so...bad anymore. But you didn’t even *recognize* me. I even...introduced myself to you with my...real name, but it didn’t matter. You were everything I remembered. So self-absorbed. So awful...to everyone who wasn’t a means to an end. You villainized The Populars for being shitty to us all, but...you were just as shitty to everyone below you. Everyone less than.”

“That’s not true!” I tried to argue, a pain growing in my stomach.

“You didn’t even...remember what I looked like, even though...you saw me practically every day!”

“You...dyed your hair. You’ve lost like a hundred...pounds! How was I supposed to...recognize you?” I was on the verge of a panic attack, unable to catch my breath. “We’ve all changed.”

“You didn’t even know my...real name, Cait. That didn’t change. You...never invited me to hang out with your friends. You dismissed me whenever I came around. You knew Sam and I were...close, but you never let me into your circle, even once Jamie left.”

“I hardly knew you!” I put a hand to my mouth, coughing. When I pulled my hand away, there was blood in my palm. *What the...*

“Exactly,” she said. “And that was...entirely your fault. I was never worthy...of the great Cait Logan.” I was no longer paying attention to her, but instead, staring at the blood in my palm curiously. Was I imagining it? I felt so lightheaded. Something wasn’t right. What was happening?

Sam was resting against one of the concrete posts, staring into space as everything seemed to wash over him. He coughed, too.

“So what’s...your plan?” he demanded. “What do you want with us? With...Cait?”

A sharp pain shot through my temple as I began to cough again.

No.

I realized what was happening, what she’d done, but it was too late.

“Don’t you get it?” she asked, her eyes watering more as she began to cough along with us. Her breathing was labored. It felt as if something heavy was crushing my chest. “There’s no...Sam left to claim. No...you. No...me. They’ll find us just like they... found her, though none of us will have the... strength left to try to climb to safety like she did. If only she’d been a little... quicker, a little stronger, she might’ve made it...” She gave over into a fit of coughs just as I remembered where they’d found Jamie.

In the air ducts.

She was trying to get to safety.

To clean air.

No one put her there, after all.

As the thought hit me, I felt the warm blood begin dripping down my nose. “You...you did this?” I touched the blood, then tried to stand, but it was no use. I had no energy. My vision was growing fuzzy. I was dying.

Just like she’d died.

“It’s poetic really...” Penny—Anna—*whoever* coughed again, lying down on the concrete. “Best friends in life. Best friends in...death.” A sound escaped her throat that was a mix between a cough and a laugh. “I’m finally part of the...club.”

Dark spots filled my vision as I tried to think. I’d walked right into her trap. How hadn’t I seen it coming? How hadn’t I seen any of it coming?

I felt my head slide down the boxes, landing on the cold concrete. This was it.

How it ends.

I’d never see my children again.

My husband.

My parents.

Jamie...

My thoughts were with her as my subconscious faded away.

I'm sorry...

The darkness took over and finally, tired of fighting, I succumbed.

I'm sorry...

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

PRESENT DAY

I recognized the strong arms carrying me, the warm, smoky scent overwhelming me, bringing me back.

In death, I'd come back to him. My heaven. My home. My husband.

"Cait?" I could hear his voice lulling me into the afterlife, could feel his arms gripping me tight.

Take care of the babies, I told him without saying a word. I was dying. I was sorry.

"Cait? Can you hear me?" he asked, this time with more force. I felt his arms leave my body as I was placed onto something solid and cool. His hand grasped my cheeks and then something else covered my mouth. Something cold. Hard. I inhaled, coughing as a cool mist touched my lips, my nose. I breathed. For the first time, it didn't burn so much to breathe.

"Cait?" Grant was distant this time, and I couldn't smell him anymore. "What's happening?"

It's going to be okay...

I'll be okay...

I'll still be with you.

I wanted to tell him all those things, but I couldn't say anything. I was lifted again, my body floating, then falling onto something decidedly less comfortable. I was moving then, but not moving at all. "What's wrong with her? Why isn't she waking up?" I heard my husband ask.

Husband.

My husband.

Grant.

I love you, Grant.

Someone else was speaking, but I couldn't focus on them. I was dying, after all. I only wanted to hear my husband. I was moving some more, a steady, rhythmic rumbling below me. Like a shopping cart at that store I loved.

"Cait?" I heard him again, bringing me back to the present. His hand was on mine. I would've known it anywhere. The way his fingers fit into mine. The ridge on the back of his thumb where he'd broken it in junior high. "Cait, please." He was crying, and it was all my fault.

All my fault.

A cough swelled in my throat, but I didn't want to release it. It would hurt.

God, it would—

I coughed, unable to hold it back any longer, and I heard him cry out. "Cait? Oh, thank god." He was hugging me. There were hands on me. His scent was back. The cool mist continued.

I could breathe.

I could breathe.

I could breathe.

When I opened my eyes, I was staring at a starry sky, and the red, neon Hotel Lilith sign above my head. I blinked, glancing around.

"Can you hear me?" Grant was asking. Someone I didn't know was standing next to him, waving a light in my face. Someone else had something cold on my chest. Someone was holding my hand.

Nothing made sense.

Was this death? Was I dead?

"No," came the answer to a question I hadn't realized I asked aloud. "No." Grant smiled through his tears. "You're not dead. You're not dead." He hugged me again, his head on my chest.

The EMTs—my mind finally recalled the word for the people who wore the uniform they were wearing—eased Grant back, and then all at once, I was floating again, wheeled inside the back of an ambulance, taking away my starry, black, infinite view, and replacing it with a cold, silver ceiling just feet from my face.

"What...happened?" I squeaked out as Grant came into my view again, sitting next to my bed.

“You didn’t call me,” he said, shaking his head, tears spilling out of his eyes. “You promised you’d call every hour or else I’d come and get you.” He was crying again, wiping his tears away as fast as they fell. “You didn’t call.”

“The kids?” I panicked, my eyes wide as I tried to sit up.

“They’re with your parents.” He eased me back down onto the bed. “They’re safe. They’re fine. I hopped on the first flight I could catch and flew down here. By the time you called me back, I was already on the plane. I tried to call you again when I landed, but you didn’t answer. I rushed over here, and when I got here, they couldn’t find you in your room. I demanded to talk to security. Some guy named Evan came and met me. We pulled up footage and noticed that one of the cameras near the back had been turned off. That was when I knew. It felt just like before. I couldn’t... I couldn’t...” He shook his head, rubbing his lips together as he composed himself. “I rushed to the basement without a plan, and I saw you...” He covered his mouth, new tears falling onto his beautiful cheeks. I lifted a hand to dry them, but I was too weak to reach him. “I thought you were dead. I thought you were gone.”

“I’m here...” I croaked out.

“Someone called the police while Evan and I rushed downstairs. I grabbed you and ran. I didn’t know what happened, but I had to get you to safety.”

“Sam?” I asked, my voice trembling.

“He’s alive,” he said quickly. “You all were. You, Sam, the other woman... But barely. I’m so sorry, Cait. I should’ve been there. I should’ve never let you come alone.”

“Not...your fault.”

He kissed my fingertips. “I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

I smiled. That was perfectly fine with me. I thought back over everything that had happened. The weight of Sam’s betrayal. The lies I’d believed. But I wasn’t innocent, either.

Was Penny right about me?

Was I as bad as Jamie and Vanessa?

Did I think of myself as better than Penny?

I couldn’t change what I’d done back then, but I wanted to be better. I would do better. And I’d start by bringing Jamie’s killer to justice. Finally, the truth could be known.

“The girl... Penny. Anna. She killed...Jamie. She’s...Sam’s wife.”

Grant glanced worriedly at the EMT, and I heard someone moving around outside the vehicle. As I focused more, I could hear other voices, radios. The police had arrived. By some miracle, the police had arrived and I could finally tell them the truth about everything.

“She told me...everything,” I said, trying to sit up. Grant pushed my shoulders down gently.

“There will be time for all that later. Right now, you just need to focus on breathing.”

Already lightheaded from trying to sit up, I lay back down, taking gulps of air. “I...love...you.”

He gasped, placing his lips to my forehead. “I love you too,” he whispered, his breath in my hair. “I love you so much.”

I knew then I’d made the right choice. All along, my gut had led me to Grant. Even when I’d questioned my decision, I’d always felt something between us. Things were right.

I had questioned my judgment so often in my life, feeling unable to read people, but with Grant, I never had to read him. He showed me who he was over and over again until I believed it.

It was rare to find people like that.

But I had. I’d been lucky.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked, giving me that lopsided grin I loved so much.

“Just...thinking...I should email my...editor.”

His head fell back with laughter. “*That’s* what you’re thinking right now? I’m sure Susan will understand your deadline needing to be pushed back.”

“I have...a new idea,” I choked out.

“Okay, tell me later,” he said. “Just rest right now. We’ll have time for all of that once we know you’re okay. You just need to breathe.” He said it lovingly, his hands caressing my face. “God, I love you, you stubborn, amazing woman.”

He was right, of course. There would be time. We had all the time we needed. For now, I just wanted to be there with him. Hold his hand.

During my time at Hotel Lilith, I’d solved a mystery.

I’d lost a friend.

I’d discovered the truth.

I'd validated my choice.

It had been a full week's work and plenty of research for my new novel.

I was going to take it in a completely different direction.

A little bit ghost story.

A little bit romance.

A little bit memoir.

Somehow, it felt like my way of making amends with Jamie.

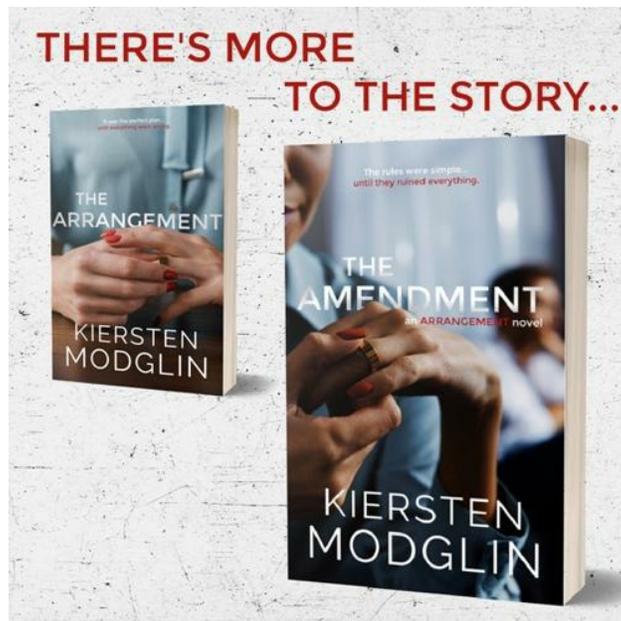
And with my younger self. My apology for not loving her enough. For not trusting her judgment. For hating her so much for so long.

The new story would be all about reconnecting with myself again, with a town I'd once loved, with a friend I would forever be grieving, and with a past I'd tried to outrun.

The more I thought about it, I wanted to call it *The Reunion*.

Because that's what it was, in every single way.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



KIERSTEN MODGLIN is an Amazon Top 30 bestselling author of psychological thrillers, a member of International Thriller Writers, Novelists, Inc., and the Alliance of Independent Authors. Kiersten is a KDP Select All-Star, a recipient of ThrillerFix's Best Psychological Thriller Award and *Suspense Magazine's* Best Book of 2021 Award. Kiersten grew up in rural western Kentucky with dreams of someday publishing a book or two. With more than thirty books published to date, Kiersten now lives in Nashville, Tennessee with her husband, daughter, and their two Boston Terriers: Cedric and Georgie. She is best known for her unpredictable psychological suspense. Kiersten's work is currently being translated into multiple languages and readers across the world refer to her as 'The Queen of Twists.' A Netflix addict, Shonda Rhimes superfan, psychology fanatic, and *indoor* enthusiast, Kiersten enjoys rainy days spent with her nose in a book.

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