

"PERFECT FOR FANS OF WE WERE LIARS.
TENSE, TWISTY, AND GORGEOUSLY WRITTEN!"
—KASS MORGAN, New York Times bestselling author of *The 100*

NOTHING BAD



HAPPENS HERE

RACHEL EKSTROM COURAGE

Praise for NOTHING BAD HAPPENS HERE

“The perfect summer read! Rich teens beach-partying in glamorous Nantucket...and then a murder. Enough mystery, twists, secrets, and surprises to keep you reading to the startling finish. Loved it!”

—**R.L. Stine, author of the *Goosebumps* and *Fear Street* series**

“Expertly layered twists and the perfect kiss of the supernatural. Thriller fans, rejoice!”

—**Erin A. Craig, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Thirteenth Child***

“Perfect for fans of *We Were Liars*. You won’t want to miss this tense, twisty, gorgeously written read!”

—**Kass Morgan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The 100* and *The Ravens***

“Part mystery, part thriller, part deep dive into the heart of a grieving teen, *Nothing Bad Happens Here* is compelling and vivid and absolutely pitch-perfect! A summer on Nantucket you won’t forget!”

—**Sarah Beth Durst, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Spellshop***

“One part fairy tale and one part old-fashioned New England whodunit, with a twist I never saw coming!”

—**Katie Cotugno, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Liar’s Beach***

“An atmospheric thriller where darkness is just beneath the surface.”

—**Mindy McGinnis, Edgar Award-winning author of *A Madness So Discreet* and *The Female of the Species***

“A can’t-put-it-down mystery layered with authentic relationships, sharp class commentary, and touches of magical lore. I absolutely devoured it.”

—**Jacqueline West, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Last Things* and the *Books of Elsewhere* series**

“[A] smashing suspense debut! A page-turning exploration of the way the truth gets concealed—and the all-too-human and all-too-necessary desire to find the truth at any cost. Sure to be one of the best YA thrillers of the year. Don’t miss it!”

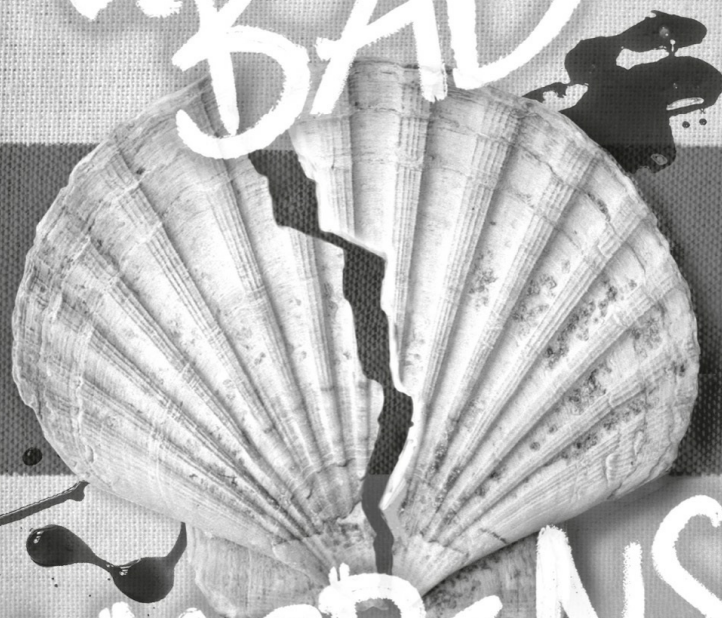
—**David Bell, *New York Times* bestselling author of *She’s Gone* and *Nobody Needs to Know***

“A serpentine sea-misted mystery as elegant and bold as a Nantucket sunset. I was fully seduced by Lucia’s dark and stormy summer and could hardly pull myself away. Rachel Ekstrom Courage’s debut is a riveting, graceful high wire act, a delectable and dynamic New England thriller that pulls no punches. It left me utterly breathless.”

—**Derek Milman, author of *A Darker Mischief* and *Swipe Right for Murder***

RACHEL EKSTROM COURAGE

NOTHING
BAD



HAPPENS
HERE

DELACORTE PRESS

Delacorte Press
An imprint of Random House Children's Books
A division of Penguin Random House LLC
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
penguinrandomhouse.com
GetUnderlined.com

Text copyright © 2025 by Rachel Ekstrom Courage
Cover photo of scallop shell on striped background by Deborah Pendell/Arcangel.com
Cover broken shell and blood stain art used under license from Shutterstock.com
Cover design and hand lettering by Jordy Moses
Interior dark water background by korkeng/stock.adobe.com
Interior cloud mist art by mr Vector/ stock.adobe.com
Interior seaweed by photohamster/stock.adobe.com
Interior emoji art used under license from Shutterstock.com
Interior anchor art by 1arts/stock.adobe.com

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Editor: Hannah Hill
Cover Designer: Trisha Previte
Interior Designer: Cathy Bobak, adapted for ebook
Copy Editor: Colleen Fellingham
Managing Editor: Tamar Schwartz
Production Manager: Tracy Heydweiller

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.
Trade Paperback ISBN 9780593567593
Ebook ISBN 9780593567616

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

ep_prh_7.1a_150522790_c0_r0

Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

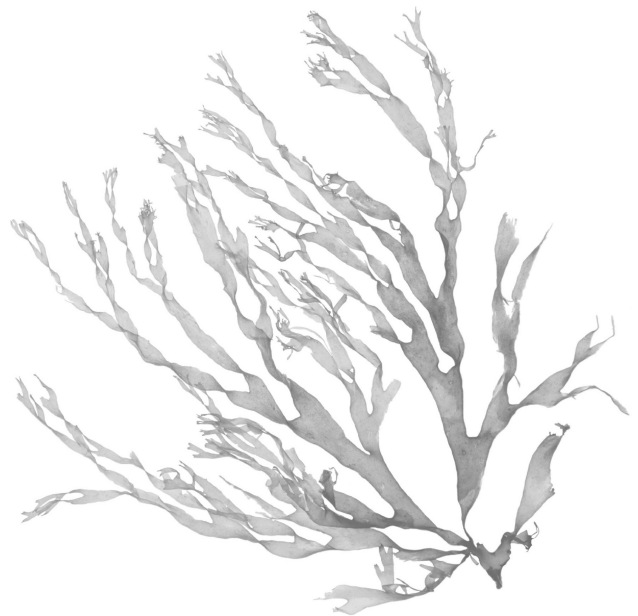
150522790

For all the girls lost at sea

The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter,
more extravagant and bright. —Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

If everything in this world is spoiled...we're going to be spoiled as well!
—*Daisies* (1966)

Life's full of tough choices, isn't it? —Ursula the Sea Witch



Prologue

FROM FAR ABOVE, THE YACHT glittered like a golden pendant, parting the blue-black sea into ribbons of shadowy wake. The deep thump of bass reached beyond the glow of the party lights, occasionally muffled by fitful gusts of wind.

The guests clustered on the party deck, dancing near the DJ and crowding the bar, pretending to be unfazed by the sheer size of the gleaming vessel and the sushi prepared by a celebrity chef. Every few minutes someone's resolve would crack and they'd slip away to snap photos with the dramatic coral sky behind them, capturing their best angles before the golden hour disappeared.

One hundred and fifty feet away, beneath the other end of the craft, a girl's arms and legs refused to obey the signals sent from her frantic brain. She'd fallen dozens of feet from the prow to the inky surface. Blood streamed from the wound above her eye, mixing with the saltwater creeping into her nose and mouth.

Her friends had been right, she realized.

Coming here was a bad idea.

She'd poured herself into her fanciest dress, the kind of thing she'd never worn before she'd gotten swept up in his world. She styled her hair long and loose the way he liked it, adding her most precious piece of jewelry to shimmer against her skin, hoping to catch his dark gaze and provoke his wide, cocky smile. To make him look at her the way he did when he'd first noticed her on the beach, watching him surf.

Or the evening they'd spent in the dunes together.

She wanted to see him again. She needed to.

He hadn't shown up at their usual meeting spot at Cisco Beach for days, and when she'd heard about the party, she knew he'd be there. Though she wasn't exactly *invited*, she'd found a way on board before the yacht glided out of the marina.

She never should have come.

Regret pushed heavily down on her, and she kicked, her leg muscles burning from the effort, straining to stay afloat. She sucked in a deep breath and leaned back, letting the ocean cradle her as blood rolled into the back of her throat like burning copper.

Not long ago she'd been brimming with anticipation as she searched the faces of the partygoers for the only person who made her light up like a campfire on a beach. There'd been a chill on the deck, but she hadn't needed a jacket. Her cheeks warmed as soon as she caught a flash of his honey-colored hair shining like a crown above his crisp white collar as he turned around at the bar, holding two champagne flutes. The laughter dancing across the sculpted planes of his face made her breath catch. She'd waved, trying to capture his attention, biting her lip to stop herself from shouting his name. Her heart thrummed when he moved toward her. Then she saw the two girls at his side, one with a tanned arm wound through his, the other's face hidden behind a glossy curtain of hair as she whispered in his ear.

She squeezed her eyes shut at the memory, sinking a few inches deeper into the waves. Seawater stung the gash on her forehead, making it pulse. She looked around the darkening sea for her friends—for *anyone*—to help, but she was utterly alone. A heavy mist obscured the full moon, so even if someone knew to look for her, they wouldn't see her.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't okay.

She was far too young to die, but she was going to anyway. She let out a wail, an animal-like call of despair, before her body and its halo of blood were swallowed up by the darkness.



CHAPTER 1

I STOOD ALONE ON THE front deck of the ferry as it pushed through the fog. Everyone else was inside, including my mom, who had curled up on a window seat after our two-day drive. It was early June, and we'd left Pittsburgh in time to avoid the heat and humidity that would soon envelop the city. My mom had driven most of the twelve hours herself, only letting me behind the wheel on "easy" highways, and, in the time-honored tradition of mothers of teen drivers, flinching every time I changed lanes. Never mind that I was careful—more careful than she was. I didn't put on eyeliner at red lights, or sip coffee, or change radio stations every five minutes like she did. I was still in that new-driver mode: hands at three and nine, checking my mirrors methodically and staying exactly five miles per hour under the speed limit.

Not that she noticed.

I pulled my hoodie tighter around my face as the mist thickened into a drizzle. The sea air smelled briny and fresh, so much better than the rental car, which was stale with my mom's perfume and the countless bags of pepperoni Combos we gobbled between rest stops. The ferry was a big boat—big enough for cars to park inside it—so it didn't rock, but plowed steadily ahead into the grayish fog. In the cozy warm cabin of the boat, kids were munching Cape Cod potato chips and playing on tablets...but I pretended this was all there was: the mainland behind me and the island ahead of me. I imagined myself dissolving into the fog, my body becoming diaphanous, until I became one with the dark, damp nothingness.

A cold spray of seawater drenched the bottoms of my jeans, dragging me back to reality and its roaring soundtrack of wind and water. We must have hit a big wave. I peered through the fog, past the rusted metal side of the ship

and into the yellow froth churning in its wake. My teeth chattered as the wind buffeted my face, making it feel like November instead of June, but I wanted to stay outside in the freezing wet wind.

I needed some distance from my mom.

For the latter half of my sophomore year, her parenting style had taken a sharp left turn from free-spirited benign neglect to a much more annoying hands-on approach, where she asked about my homework every night and no longer endorsed ice cream for dinner. Instead of talking about her string of boyfriends or fixating on her latest art project, she frequently asked about my feelings, my caffeine consumption, if I'd taken my vitamins, did I ever wish I had a dad in the picture since it had always been just us, if I wanted to see her acupuncturist, did I feel like I was spending too much time scrolling TikTok, and on and on. The long road trip had provided ample opportunity for her to grill me about my emotional state, and now—after hours of relentless prodding—I felt like a deflated balloon, unable to fill myself up again.

I leaned on the cold metal rail and gazed up at the waning, almost-full moon, its edges made milky and indistinct by the fog. My clothes were damp from the spray and the cold was biting, but I still couldn't make myself walk back to the brightly lit cabin, where I imagined my mom was already primping for our arrival. I could practically hear her insisting that I “freshen up,” too—and maybe put on a nicer top from my duffel bag. She wanted me to make a good impression on Todd. After all, he was the reason we were headed to Nantucket, a place I'd never been. Most of my classmates went to summer camp in Ohio or drove to closer vacation spots like Ocean City or Deep Creek for long weekends with their families.

Sammi's family was the exception.

They went to Maine for a month every year, to visit her grandmother and extended family at her cottage, which—judging from the pictures Sammi posted—was her family's way of saying “estate.” Even though she always said I should come, her parents never extended an official invite...so Nantucket would be my first time in New England, my first time going anywhere for an entire summer, my first time meeting Todd in person, and my mom's first time seeing him since their meet-cute at a coffee shop six

months earlier. Todd had been in Pittsburgh for a real estate conference, and when he grabbed her decaf latte by accident, he apologized and asked her out to dinner that night. They went to dinner *again* the next day, and then he had to fly back to Nantucket. Since then, they'd spoken on the phone every night.

If my mom hadn't been so laser-focused on me and my welfare these past few months, I bet she would have flown out to see him or asked him to come visit us. Even though their relationship was long-distance, it was obvious that it was serious from the hours they spent talking to each other.

I could always tell when my mom was on the phone with Todd because her voice climbed into a trilling register that she never used with me. Just a week ago, we'd made dinner and were about to settle on the couch to watch the Scandinavian crime show we were both obsessed with when her phone blared the opening notes from "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" from *My Fair Lady*, her favorite movie. After FaceTiming with him in the kitchen for a few minutes, she'd passed the phone to me, her face pink and happy. I gave her a beseeching look and shook my head. I was already in my pajamas and had a mouthful of Mrs. T's pierogies, the ideal comfort food.

"He wants to ask you something," my mom said, smiling broadly. I swallowed and wiped my mouth. On the screen, Todd sat in a burgundy leather office chair flanked by shelves holding books and a small model ship. He pulled the phone closer, his head taking up the whole frame, and invited me and my mom to stay with him at his home in Nantucket through the end of August.

"Sun, sand, and fresh seafood," he said. "You'll love it."

I pasted a pleasant expression on my face and stared over the edge of the phone at my mom, raising my eyebrows slightly. She of all people knew I avoided the sun like the plague and thought seafood was, well, *gross*, compared to all the other less stinky, land-based options.

She also knew that I didn't like to leave the house these days.

"Just think, summering in New England, like Jackie O!" my mom said after Todd had signed off, trying to hype me up for this change of plans when she *knew* I'd much rather cocoon myself in my room and avoid humanity whenever I wasn't forced to confront it at my bookstore job. "It won't be as

muggy as it is here, and there are beaches, bike paths, and lots of conservation areas. We could even go whale watching!” She listed activities like a human brochure.

“That sounds terrifying,” I’d said, slumping on our ugly plaid couch. “And I’m an indoor cat.” Spring semester of my junior year had finally ended, and I’d thought that meant I wouldn’t have to force myself to do anything else I didn’t want to do—at least until the school year started again.

Just existing this past year had been challenging enough.

“When I was your age, I would have jumped at this chance. You couldn’t drag me out of the water,” my mom had said. She’d told me lots of stories about growing up on Lake Erie, most of which involved swimming, canoeing, and “making her own fun.”

“Then why do we live *here*?” I’d asked pointedly. We had three muddy rivers in Pittsburgh, none of which you’d catch me swimming in, and were completely landlocked in Western Pennsylvania.

“Well, I met your father here and, you know, life happened,” my mom said, sitting at the other end of the couch. As usual, she glossed over the surprise pregnancy (me), the hasty marriage, the even hastier divorce, and the fact that my dad now had another family in Nashville. We only heard from him on my birthday or at Christmas, but usually not both in the same year.

“Life happened” was my mom’s catchall for why she never remarried, why she stayed at her boring receptionist job (well, that and the health insurance), why she never moved to New York and never seriously pursued her interest in art.

She fixed me with her hopeful hazel eyes, making a pleading expression that wrinkled her forehead. She’d made that face a lot over the past year—begging for me to talk to her, to take a shower, to join her on a walk or on a trip to the grocery store. Once she’d dragged me to get manicures together, but I couldn’t bear it—a stranger touching my hands, plucking at my cuticles, at a salon where I could run into people who actually knew me. I’d tearfully left to wait in the car with a wet coat of Wicked on one hand and a base coat on the other, mortified by having a panic attack in public. So why did she think I could do this?

But after springing our new summer plans on me, instead of saying that we didn't have to go if I didn't want to, she'd perched next to me on the couch.

"I really like Todd," she said, fiddling with a slim cable-edged bracelet on her wrist that he'd sent her. "He could be The One. Maybe. I don't know. But spending a whole summer together, with all of us under one roof, is how I'm going to find out. And it will be good for you, too."

She hadn't said that we didn't get to go on vacation very often. That maybe she needed a break from the life we had here. That she deserved to have some fun, beyond working and taking care of her daughter whose melancholy had leaked like a toxic spill into every corner of our two-story house. I knew there was no point in asking why she needed Todd—*What's wrong with it just being us, like it's always been?* I already knew the answer. Like a drowning person, I threatened to drag her with me to the murky depths.

"The change of scenery will do wonders for you," she'd said, fluttering her hands in our dim living room. "The fresh air, the ocean..." Her face lit up. She loved talking about the future. How everything would be better once the sun came out, once this thing or that thing happened. Her optimism made her lovable—but it could also be infuriating.

"The curative powers of sea air," I'd joked, poking her playfully in the arm. I hadn't seen that sparkle in her eyes for a while, and I didn't want to snuff it out. "You make me sound like a Victorian invalid."

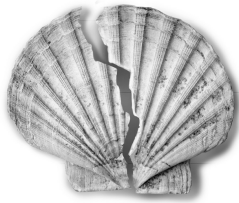
"Well, you're starting to look like one," she'd said, smoothing lank, unbrushed hair back from my face. "And you know I say that with love. Plus, you're my kid, and you don't have a choice."

"Well then," I'd said. "A Victorian invalid summer it is. Sign me up for bloodletting, preferably with leeches."

"It won't be that bad," she'd promised, clasping her hands together. "We'll have picnics and beach days and sunshine and lobster rolls. It will be a wonderful, memorable, *transformative* summer!"

Standing alone on the ferry deck, I wished I could be carried away by the belief that good days were just around the corner. But I had the feeling that

wherever we went, I'd still be me. And the Awful Thing that had happened could never be undone.



CHAPTER 2

THE FOG THINNED, AND THE red glow of a lighthouse grew closer and brighter as we approached the island. Flashes of light illuminated a few plump gray seals lounging on a spit of sand as the ferry plowed past the lighthouse and into the harbor. I would have stayed on the misty prow until we landed, but an earsplitting blast from the ferry horn shocked me out of my thoughts and drove me inside. I shouldered my duffel bag as my mom refreshed her lipstick and smoothed her shoulder-length blond hair. When she was finally ready, we went back outside to wait on the deck while the ferry pulled up to the wharf, water sloshing between the pilings as we inhaled the salty air.

The devious wind undid my mom's careful work as soon as we stepped onto the blustery gangplank. "There he is!" she sang. She waved, and a man in pink shorts with an oatmeal sweater slung over his shoulders waved back. He was tan with silver hair, and his strong jawline framed an unnaturally white smile. I recognized him from FaceTime and from his real estate company's website, which I'd seen when I'd done some recon on him. He could've been anywhere from forty to sixty-something, and he held a huge golf umbrella over his head.

I dragged our bags behind me as Mom rushed ahead and hopped into Todd's arms as a light rain began to fall. He picked her up and twirled her under the umbrella like they were starring in some cheesy old musical.

"This is Lucia, the light of my life," my mom said, her face so sincere that I cringed. Todd unwrapped one arm from my mom's waist and took my hand, gently pulling me out of the rain.

I instinctively flinched at his touch, which was warm and a little clammy.

"It's chillier here than I expected! And foggier," I said, covering my reaction with a little shiver that brought my shoulders up to my ears. Like a

cheerful cartoon version of myself. *What was wrong with me?*

“That’s why they call Nantucket the Little Gray Lady,” Todd said with a wink. “All part of the charm. We’re going to have a great summer.” He shook my hand firmly—like we were in a boardroom and had just struck a deal.

As Todd led us through the parking lot, it occurred to me that we might have done just that: forged an unspoken agreement. I’d get this free island vacation, and in exchange I’d be pleasant and go with the flow. Even though it wasn’t my idea, it honestly seemed fair. We reached a retro-looking, clunky Jeep Wagoneer with wooden panels on the sides and rows of peeling stickers on the bumper. Todd quickly loaded our bags into the back, pushing aside some old blankets and a fishing pole. He opened the passenger-side door for my mom, closing it gently after she got in, then hopped behind the wheel. I climbed into a benchlike back seat that was upholstered in old, flaking leather.

“I thought you’d have more stuff,” Todd said as he turned the key in the ignition and the Jeep roared to life.

“Oh, you know me,” my mom joked. “I like to travel light.”

I held my tongue, not mentioning the piles of emotional baggage we’d dragged with us across several state lines, while Todd pulled out of the parking lot. As the old Jeep bounced over the cobblestone streets, my mom let out a little “Whoop!” and grabbed the dashboard to steady herself. A thin layer of sand crunched under my sneakers, and a faint mildew-and-fish smell emanated from the cargo area behind me. The rain had stopped, so I looked for the button to lower the window, then realized it unrolled with a crank. *Huh, I thought, isn’t Todd supposed to be rich?*

Mom’s past boyfriends had been artsy types like her. Creatives who didn’t have steady jobs, or a home big enough to invite guests for an entire summer. My mom had said Todd was very successful—but the state of his car said otherwise.

With the window down, I peered at the other passengers getting picked up by friends and family or flagging down taxis. I had to keep wiping my glasses on my shirt to clear the droplets of mist collecting on my lenses. As we rolled farther from the wharf, pockets of tourists strolled past restaurants

and bars and T-shirt shops. Everyone seemed to be wearing light pinks and greens and blues, and they all had cable-knit sweaters or sweatshirts emblazoned with the names of Ivy League schools to warm them in the early-evening chill. I looked down at my rain-wet jeans, dark gray hoodie, and Chuck Taylors. My clothes were normal—even cool—for Pittsburgh, but I looked practically goth compared to these walking Easter eggs.

We turned up a wider street and Todd pointed to a three-story building to his right. “That’s the Pacific Club, built by whaling merchants.”

“Todd’s a bit of a history buff,” my mom said, craning her neck to give me a look that seemed to suggest she found this fascinating—and that I should, too.

“Well, it comes with the territory. This island is so full of history, you can’t escape it.” Todd chuckled. I tried to think of a follow-up question so that he’d think I was polite and interested, for my mom’s sake.

“Why is it called the Pacific Club if we’re surrounded by the Atlantic?”

It was the only question I could think of as my mind snagged on what sounded like a mistake. It happened to me all the time—I’d hyperfocus on some irrelevant detail and miss what the person was *actually* trying to say. I hadn’t really known it was a thing I did until Sammi called me “a broken microscope” in the middle of an argument freshman year.

“...such an interesting bit of our maritime past,” Todd was saying, sounding pleased that I’d asked. With a touch of trepidation, I wondered how long a history lesson I’d get. “The whaling industry needed whale oil and had depleted a lot of the local waters, so a lot of our ships chased sperm whales out in the Pacific. I’ll have to take you both to the whaling museum sometime. It’s the perfect thing to do on a rainy day like this.”

I nodded thoughtfully, as if contemplating large-scale whale slaughter was a totally normal and enjoyable diversion. But I had enough images of blood and pain seared into my brain and didn’t need to add any more to it, no matter how educational.

In the same eager tone, Todd pointed out a restaurant that was shaped like an old-fashioned train car and a bunch of art galleries. Everything was brick and quaint, and immaculately painted—like something out of a Norman

Rockwell print. There was nothing neon or junky in sight, and there were no chain stores, either. No Target, not even a 7-Eleven. I wondered where people bought things that weren't watercolor paintings or cashmere throws...and imagined that everyone here shopped in upscale boutiques, buying hand-crafted toilet paper and farmhouse-chic bottles of goat's milk to pour over their artisanal, small-batch granola. Maybe no one wanted things like fast food or slushies.

Not even the teenagers.

I noticed a pack of kids around my age sitting on a bench, vaping and laughing and draping their limbs over each other. A boy in a rugby shirt passed something in a brown bag to a girl in a striped skirt. She took a swig, then tucked it discreetly into a colorful tote. I laughed. Even the "bad kids" of Nantucket looked as wholesome as an ad for breakfast cereal, with sun-kissed faces, collared shirts, and bouncy ponytails.

My mom caught my eye in the rearview mirror.

"See? You're not going to be the only teenager on the island."

"And even better," Todd said, "my son's here, too. He can show you around, introduce you to people."

My mouth went a little dry. *That* was a surprise. Mom had mentioned that Todd had a son, but said that he was a freshman in college and didn't spend much time with his dad. I tried to make eye contact with her in the rearview mirror again, but from her ever-so-slightly raised eyebrows, I guessed that this was news to her, too.

"Eric is here?" she said brightly. "How wonderful."

"He flew back a week ago. He was supposed to do a summer program at Duke, but..." He trailed off, pointing to a red brick building with skinny white columns as we veered past it. "This is the old Pacific National Bank—been here hundreds of years. It survived the Great Fire of 1843, and embezzlement by one of its cashiers a few years after. Before the banks, the Quakers used the honor system, can you believe that?"

He chuckled, shaking his head as he piloted the Jeep out of town and onto a quieter paved road shadowed by huge elm trees and gray-shingled homes. I rested my forehead against the edge of the car window, breathing in

the fresh air and trying to remember any tidbits I'd heard about Eric. What was he like? Did he know about my mom and me? He must, I decided. Surely Todd had mentioned that his girlfriend and her high-school-aged daughter would be houseguests for the summer. I hoped Eric was okay with it. But he was probably as okay with it as I was, which was borderline at best. The more I thought about Todd and Eric, and my mom and me, all spending the summer together, the more I felt nerves like gravel in my stomach, grinding and rolling around.

We turned onto a dirt road lined with thick hedges and bounced over the ruts. The fog had cleared enough for me to see a dark sky speckled with a few early stars, but the dense scrub revealed only brief glimpses of sprawling roofs spaced far apart, their long private drives disappearing from view as we wound our way into the night. Were they vacation homes? I wondered. Or did people live here year-round?

From what I could see, these houses were huge.

Todd caught my wide-eyed gaze in the rearview mirror.

"This area is Tom Nevers," he said. "An old fishing village."

It was a weird name for a neighborhood full of secluded mansions. "Is it named after a person?" I asked. "One of the fishermen?"

"Local lore says that there *was* a man named Tom Never," Todd said. "His original name was something much longer—he was from a Wampanoag family. The story goes that he'd stand at a point out here and keep watch for whales back in the 1600s."

I wondered what his real name had been. Was it something that sounded like Never, or had the same meaning? I wondered how he'd felt about being called Never—or about the area being given his false name. Beneath all the pastels and mansions, I suspected there was a lot I didn't know about this tiny island.

The three of us rode in silence.

After a few long minutes, we pulled onto a driveway paved in crushed shells that crunched under the Jeep's tires. Circling a turnabout with an empty flagpole at its center, we finally arrived in front of an imposing gray-shingled house topped with a small deck on its roof. Three triangular gables faced the

front drive, and white roses crawled up trellises to the second floor, their leaves and petals shivering in the wind. I tried to get a sense of how far back the house went, but it seemed to stretch off into a blur of fog and scrub. It was so unlike our house in Pittsburgh, a perfect square of brick, wedged solidly next to our neighbors on a hilly street with the boundaries of each property clearly defined. I couldn't tell how big this house was, and I was standing right in front of it. *At least we won't be crowded together*, I told myself, remembering the shared bathroom and cramped kitchen at home.

Todd gallantly carried our duffel bags as he leapt up the front steps and propped the door open. He didn't seem bothered that it was unlocked—he just smiled as he beckoned us inside. My mom lifted herself onto her tiptoes to give him a kiss as she swept in ahead of me. The door was already starting to close by the time I followed her into the massive, open-plan foyer...but I was too busy gawking at the rustic wooden floors, soaring white walls, and vaguely modern furniture to take it personally.

It was so fancy that I started unlacing my shoes.

"Oh, you don't need to do that," Todd said, noticing me hovering in the doorway. "Unless you want to. Make yourself at home. Your room is the first one on the right at the top of the stairs. Eric's is the next one over, and your mom and I will be at the end of the hall."

"Is Eric here?" my mom said, glancing around at the understated luxury.

"He just texted," Todd said. "I wanted him home in time to meet you, but you know how boys are—he went out with his buddies and they're not back on dry land yet. We can do introductions in the morning. Now let's get you out of these soggy clothes."

Todd took my mom's jacket and hung it in the closet, then took my damp hoodie to hang next to it. He pulled a beige cashmere wrap from the upper shelf and threw it around my mom's shoulders.

"That's better," he said, kissing her on the hand.

"Go ahead, Lu, why don't you get settled in?" my mom said, giving me meaningful eye contact. I knew she wanted some alone time with Todd and was probably dying for a tour of the house—sans tired, cranky teenager—so I grabbed my bag and climbed the stairs, their voices fading behind me. The

first door on the right opened into a guest room with a four-poster bed made up in pale blue linens with a knobby knit blanket folded at its foot. A spray of white calla lilies curved elegantly over a simple glass vase on a wooden dresser, and a small bookshelf holding a few yellowed paperbacks and seashells rested beneath a window covered by heavy blue drapes.

I pushed the drapes aside and peered out.

The sun had set surreptitiously behind the rain, and it had grown so suddenly dark that all I could see was the reflection of my own face: my hair slipping out of my bun in a halo of frizz and my glasses sliding down my nose. I felt grungy from the trip, and seeing my bedraggled form set against this ridiculously tasteful room made me feel like something unsavory that had washed up with the tide.

Maybe I'd wear my contacts tomorrow instead of my black-framed glasses, which kept fogging up in the misty air. Maybe I'd switch out my jeans for something nicer. I'd make an effort to be pleasant, or at least pretend to be, so that I'd make a good impression on Todd for my mom's sake. I was pretty sure she'd told him about the year I'd had and what I was dealing with, but knowing my mom...she always presented everything in the best light. I didn't want to completely demolish any rose-tinted versions of my story.

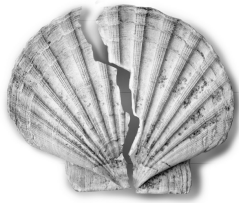
I pressed my nose against the cool glass just as a gust of wind threw a volley of rain against the window. The trees and scrubland around the house whistled and creaked in the gale, and I shivered as I peered harder into the gloom, looking for lights from other houses or streetlights—for *something* to anchor me in the darkness.

But there was nothing.

I snapped the drapes shut, busying myself with unpacking, finding my phone charger, and brushing my teeth in the en suite bathroom. I'd already changed into my wrinkled pajamas by the time I thumbed my phone to life. No notifications, of course, not that I expected any. But as I flicked open TikTok for my evening dose of distraction, I realized that I didn't have any service. I held my phone up, waving it around the room, but I couldn't find a bar. Even when I searched for Wi-Fi networks, none came up on my phone.

I'd have to ask Todd for the network and password.

But not now. Not when I could hear the unmistakable pop of a champagne cork and my mom's delighted laughter. I put my phone down and sank into the lavender-scented sheets, which felt like a luxurious oasis compared to my twin bed at home. I stared at the ceiling, noticing a hairline crack in the paint. I fixated on it as I waited for sleep, leaving the bedside lamp on to ward off the darkness. When I finally closed my eyes and drifted off, I felt like I was still on the deck of the rain-swept ferry, bobbing alone in the middle of the sea.



CHAPTER 3

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I DRESSED in jeans and a top with ruffled sleeves that my mom had bought for me at a T.J. Maxx on the drive from Pittsburgh to Hyannis, Massachusetts, where we'd parked and boarded the ferry. I scraped my hair into a ponytail, popped in my contacts, and swiped on gloss I'd found in an inner pocket of my backpack, tucked away with some dusty pennies and a granola bar wrapper. The top was not something I would have picked out, but I'd promised myself that I'd make an effort for my mom's sake, and that included wearing ruffles. I stepped out of my room just in time to hear a door shut to my right, and I swallowed a startled yelp at the sight of a boy around my age stepping into the hall.

Get it together, I thought. It's just Eric.

Where Todd was clean-cut and impeccably tailored, his son had shaggy, sunshine-colored hair that partially covered his eyes. He wore faded board shorts with a threadbare sweatshirt that had the word "Figawi" emblazoned across its chest.

"Morning," he said, shaking his hair out of his eyes.

They were a pale gray—like everything else on Nantucket—with a slight shadow beneath them, as if he hadn't gotten much sleep. His gaze was intense, sweeping over me like a searchlight. Like he wanted to know everything about me. Or maybe he was just curious in general. His cheeks folded into dimples as he smiled, and I felt a flutter that I shoved away into the darkest recesses of my consciousness.

I couldn't help it: he was cute.

He introduced himself, then made an awkward *Should I hug you or shake your hand?* gesture with his arms. Panicking, I put out my hand like an overeager politician. Whether or not things worked out with my mom and

Todd, it seemed wrong—or at least weird—to find my mom’s boyfriend’s son attractive.

I wished I could ask Sammi. *Am I allowed to think he’s hot?* I imagined saying to her. Instead of answering me directly, she’d ask to see pics first.

“I’m Lucia,” I said, after a slightly too-long pause.

“Welcome to Nantucket,” Eric said, gripping my hand lightly. His was warm and dry and slightly callused. “I’ve heard a lot about you,” he added kindly. My stomach sank. Of course he had. His dad had probably told him all about the tragedy in my recent past. Yet another person’s pity to add to my mom’s and Todd’s. He gave me a soft smile and I felt like a shattered vase, inexpertly glued back together and put on display. “My dad said you play bass?”

“Oh,” I said, surprised that Mom had shared that with Todd. It felt like something from another life. “I did, I guess. I used to be in a band. Sort of.”

“I play drums,” he said.

The flutter in my stomach came back.

Sammi and I had always liked drummers. They’d tended to like her back.

“Nice,” I said, wishing that I could have eked out a more interesting, multisyllabic response. I should have asked him what he played. Who his favorite bands were. But all I could think about was how when Sammi and I played together, it felt like we were creating our own little world of rhythm and chords. Like we were so much bigger—so much louder—than ourselves. But I hadn’t touched an instrument or played a note since that night.

Eric was looking at me, his eyes intent under thick brows.

He’d been saying something and I’d totally missed it.

The broken microscope strikes again, I thought, practically hearing Sammi’s voice in my head.

“We should head downstairs,” he said, gesturing down the hall and indicating for me to go first. “My dad hates waiting.”

“Right. I guess I’m not totally awake yet,” I said, trying to cover for my lapse in attention as I jogged down the stairs.

“Same. I was out way too late. Sorry I wasn’t home when you got here,” he said, padding down to the foyer behind me. My mom and Todd were

already waiting by the door, both clad in khaki pants and striped sweaters. Todd jangled his keys in his pocket, hurrying us along.

“I’m so glad you’ve finally met,” my mom said as we climbed back into Todd’s rickety Jeep. “I just know you’ll be thick as thieves this summer.”

I rolled my eyes internally. My mom’s optimism was irrepressible. But when we reached our destination, I started to share her hopeful mood. The Downyflake was a homey little diner with caramel-colored wooden chairs. We ordered fluffy old-fashioned doughnuts and a side of linguica for the table, a Portuguese sausage popular on the island. I didn’t want to try it, but Todd insisted, and I didn’t want to be rude. It was salty and a bit spicy, and I could see why people ordered it. But I never understood people who liked meat so much they’d want it at breakfast. My mom dunked her doughnut in her coffee and kept peeking over at Todd like a teenager with a crush. I’d never seen her so happy with any of her other boyfriends. *Maybe* Larry, the stand-up comedian/plumber who fixed a leaking toilet for us a couple of years ago. When Todd wiped a touch of maple glaze from the corner of my mom’s mouth, she giggled like a seventh grader.

She hadn’t giggled like that with Larry.

When we’d finished our doughnuts, Todd cleared his throat the way I imagined he would at the beginning of a sales pitch. “Now that we’ve eaten, I’d like to talk to Eric and Lucia about something,” he said, and I got irrationally nervous. Had I done something wrong already? I wondered, feeling the back of my knees sweating against the wooden chair.

“Susan and I have discussed it,” he said, pausing for dramatic effect, “and we think it’s a good idea for the both of you to get jobs this summer.” He folded his hands, looking pleased with himself, like he’d just corrected a clerical error in a spreadsheet. I blinked in a split second of shock, then stared down at my crumb-covered plate to hide the surprise in my eyes.

The knee-sweating feeling intensified.

Once I was old enough, I’d always worked in the summer. But this year, I’d assumed that as a guest on the island, I’d be left to my own devices, which meant reading books or napping in my room. I deserved—no, I *needed*—a summer off after the year I’d had. Or at least the comfort of my usual

summer job, back at home. But that was apparently not what Todd had in mind for me. I tossed my mom a questioning look and she shifted in her seat.

“Lucia, you have college applications coming up next year,” she said with a nervous little smile. “So we thought some extra work experience would be a good way to make this summer count.”

“And to keep you two out of trouble,” Todd chuckled.

I gripped the edge of the table, my surprise turning to anger and sloshing around with the doughnuts in my stomach. Why had my mom decided this with Todd before talking to me, and how long had she known this was the plan for our “vacation”? I couldn’t believe that she hadn’t said anything about this before we arrived, or at least given me a heads-up before breakfast. I’d just met Todd in person last night and now he was the boss of my entire summer.

I shot a glance at Eric, who drummed his fingers on the sticky tablecloth and didn’t meet my eyes. Instead, he gazed out the window to the parking lot with a resigned expression. That was when it clicked: our parents were dating, and they didn’t want their kids underfoot while they *romanced* each other all summer.

I almost gagged at the thought of it.

But at least it made sense.

I swallowed the vinegary taste of betrayal and pushed my face into an empty smile. It was easier to pretend to go with the flow—at least for now. My mom looked tentatively at Todd, who signaled to the server for the check with the impatience of someone who had places to be.

“So. Lucia, we’ll drop you off in town, all right?” Todd said when the check arrived. He opened his wallet and placed a stack of bills on the table. “You can stop in shops or businesses and see if they’re hiring. I know a few folks at the real estate agencies on Main Street—try them and let them know I sent you. Just put yourself out there!”

My mouth hung open, and I kept silent as the server cleared our plates. When was the last time Todd had applied for a job? Decades ago? I had the feeling there was more to it than waltzing in somewhere and “putting yourself out there.” Maybe that would work for someone with his level of

confidence, bluster, and, I don't know—*years of running a successful real estate business?* I was still working on not crying in public or dropping things when I got startled by unexpected sounds, like a door slamming or a dog barking at a passing truck—but sure, let me capitalize on my winning personality and go-getter attitude.

“Eric, I got you a spot at the golf club,” he said, pocketing his wallet. “You start tomorrow.”

“Really, Dad?” Eric said, his voice tense. “You couldn't have asked me what I wanted to do?”

“Well, I can't have you playing drums in your room all summer,” Todd said dismissively. “And surfing isn't a job, last time I checked.”

“I know, but—” Eric started. I looked back down at the table, an uncomfortable witness to this strained father-son exchange at our first meal together.

“Caddying isn't just grunt work,” Todd interrupted, standing up from the table. “It's making connections. Stuart Weston has docked the *Titan* here for the summer, and you know he'll be at the club. You'll want to intern at his firm next year.”

“Yes, yes—the masters of the universe. *Such* an opportunity.” Eric's voice dripped with sarcasm as we followed Todd out of the diner. Part of me wished Eric would try to hide his negative feelings better and go with the flow—at least on the surface—like I was trying to do. But a bigger part of me understood and fully sympathized with him. At least I hadn't been assigned a job I couldn't stand. Eric seemed like he'd probably be happier doing literally anything other than working at the golf club, though I could think of about a hundred jobs he'd like even less.

Like cleaning Porta-Potties.

A soft drizzle began to fall as we pulled out of the parking lot, blending the grayish buildings and sky together through the rain-spattered windows and perfectly matching our moods. My mom peeked over her shoulder and occasionally flashed me an apologetic smile, which only pissed me off more.

“What's the *Titan*?” I whispered to Eric, trying to make conversation.

“Stuart Weston’s yacht. I go to school with his son, and that’s where their family’s staying for the summer,” Eric said, rolling his eyes. “Everyone’s saying it’s too big for the marina. Apparently it has a hot tub and a Pilates studio.”

“All the comforts of home,” I attempted to joke, but Eric didn’t react, fully immersed in his phone.

Todd pulled over next to a white brick building on Main Street that had a mural of a huge compass rose on one side. Destinations and the distances from this very spot were marked in bold black letters: Spain (3,000 miles), Tahiti (14,650 miles), ‘Sconset (7 ½ miles)...Pittsburgh wasn’t on the list, but it felt like it was a million miles away.

If I were there, I’d probably still be in bed, thumbing through photos of Sammi or listening to our music through headphones just to hear her voice again. I’d stay in my room as long as possible, then take the bus to the library in the afternoon. My days would be humid and boring and sad. But at least they’d be familiar, I thought, getting out of the car.

“Hold up,” Todd called from the driver’s-side window. He passed me a wad of crisp bills. “In case you need to get some lunch.”

Eric joined me on the sidewalk, pointing me toward a wide cobblestoned street as Todd’s taillights disappeared into the rain. I watched them go, trying my best not to let my stormy feelings show on my face as he and my mom headed off to do “some serious antiquing.”

I split the wad of twenties, handing half to Eric. He waved me off. “I’m good,” he said, then pointed to his right. “That’s Main Street. You’ll want to start there. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I wasn’t expecting this, exactly.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “My dad takes the Protestant work ethic way too far. You can’t ever visibly relax in his presence or he’ll give you something to do.”

“Good to know,” I said. I tried to find something positive to add as I tucked the twenties into my pocket. “I guess that’s why he’s successful enough to afford a house here.”

Eric scoffed. “That’s what he’d like you to think. That house is a showroom for his business. An investment, like everything else in his life.” I didn’t know what to say to that. He and his dad clearly had some issues and I didn’t want to stir up any more, so I tried to break the tension with a joke.

“I guess I’ll embark upon my hashtag GirlBoss journey, then,” I said with a sigh.

Eric’s scowl turned into the smallest of smiles.

“I’d go with you for moral support,” he said, “but since this is my last day of freedom, I’m going to meet some friends.”

He handed me his dad’s giant golf umbrella and I wrestled it against the wind, nearly dropping my phone. We said an awkward goodbye as he headed to the shuttle stand at the other end of the block and I walked in the opposite direction toward Main Street. My legs were freezing, and most of the stores in town hadn’t even opened yet. I looked around, spotting a cute café with big square windows and an Open sign on the door, remembering my pocketful of cash.

How much did Todd think a sandwich cost, anyway?

The café was empty and cozy, with a black-and-white-tiled floor, and I could hear the whirr of an espresso machine. A radio sat behind the counter, broadcasting the weather report (rainy—big surprise) and local news (a great white shark sighting off Great Point and an uptick in petty crime). I chose a table at the back of the shop and hunched over my phone.

Finally able to get online, I held my breath as I checked my notifications...but there was nothing except some spam in my email. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected, but I hadn’t heard from anyone in my class since we’d left town. Instead of feeling sad, I felt a quiet relief spreading through my body. Friends had texted, and even called, to check on me in the weeks after Sammi’s funeral. But I couldn’t handle their emotions on top of my own, so I hid from everyone. Now that school was over, there was even less reason for anyone to reach out. And why would I want them to? Nothing anyone could say would change things.

It was easier when they stopped trying.

I briefly closed my eyes, then forced myself to focus on the task at hand. I found my résumé in an old email chain and brought it up on my phone's cracked screen. Even though it was over a year old, it was basically up to date: there was my GPA before it slid into the "needs improvement" zone and my extracurriculars—soccer, which I'd quit, and Ragdolls, my band with Sammi. I deleted that section, then bolded my after-school job at a bookshop in Squirrel Hill. I liked to be surrounded by books when I wasn't hanging out with Sammi. Reading—or even just the feeling of knowing that there were endless fictional possibilities to get lost in—helped me forget my loneliness sometimes, though not always. Maybe there was a library or bookstore here that needed another worker. But first, I'd need to convince them to hire me.

I redid my ponytail, pulling it tight against my head, and steeled myself to walk up to the barista, a red-haired guy about my own age, whom I asked for a plain coffee. He smiled from behind the espresso machine and I noted that his eyes were a little pink, like he'd been out late the night before.

"Excuse me, but do you know where I can print something out in town?" I asked, worried that I was more likely to find a thousand cashmere twinsets than a working printer in Nantucket's historic district.

The barista thought for a moment, rubbing his face.

"What do you need to print?" he asked.

"Copies of my résumé," I said. "And, uh, I guess I should ask if you're hiring?"

He grinned. "I wish. We're staffed up. But I think I can help you out."

He finished tamping his coffee grounds and pulled an espresso, then led me behind the counter and into a dusty office lined with heavy metal filing cabinets that looked like they were on the verge of toppling. He tapped the yellowing frame of an ancient PC and placed the espresso on the desk.

"This is better than the drip," he said. "On the house. I'll be up front if you need me."

I smiled back, the rich, sharp scent of the espresso perking me up before I even took a sip. Was everyone here really that nice? Todd didn't lock his house or his car, this guy was giving me free coffee and letting me use the shop's computer...Maybe that was just the way it was on Nantucket.

Unfortunately, the internet was so slow that it took me a full twenty minutes to log on and print out ten copies of my résumé. I hoped I wouldn't need more than that—I didn't want to have to ask to use their computer again. I dropped one of Todd's twenties in the tip jar as I left.

It felt like a good use of the cash.

"Thanks a million," I said.

"Good luck!" The barista made a toasting motion with an iced mocha.

And as I stepped back into the rain on Main Street, I felt two degrees less alone.



CHAPTER 4

AFTER STOPPING INTO EVERY BUSINESS on Main Street—starting with Mitchell’s Book Corner and ending with Murray’s Toggery Shop (apparently “togger” means “clothing,” preferably embroidered with lobsters and whales)—I felt defeated. I’d tried all the restaurants and souvenir shops, even a kite store. I’d attempted to be perky and personable—not my strong suits—but all the positions in town had been filled much earlier in the spring and no one needed any extra help, no matter how much customer service energy I projected.

I let out a full-body sigh of relief when I came upon a gorgeous library with the word “ATHENEUM” painted in gold above four white columns. Its wide front steps were surrounded by their own emerald-green lawn and bounded by a trim white fence. I stepped inside, immediately wanting to get lost in its shelves. When I discovered the children’s section, a cozy space painted a cheery yellow, I felt more comfortable than I had since I’d set foot on the island. Each story was a potential comfort—or escape. Walking my fingers over the colorful spines, I chose a selection of seafaring and Nantucket-themed books: *Nightbirds on Nantucket* (how could I resist that title?); *Peter Duck*, which looked like an old-timey sailing adventure; and *The Selkie Girl*, a picture book with three mermaids that looked more like manatees on the cover.

As I sat on a child-sized wooden chair to page through the books, it occurred to me that the Atheneum might want someone with book experience. I could even use my supervisor at the bookstore back home as a reference...but when I inquired at the main desk, the older librarian kindly and politely told me that they weren’t hiring. I had the brilliant idea to suggest myself as a volunteer, but that didn’t work, either. I thanked the

librarian and sat on a damp wooden bench along the courtyard fence. I left without a job, but at least now I had a new library card and the three books tucked into my backpack. My last few résumés wilted in my hand along with my hopes for finding employment.

It wasn't my fault that no one wanted to hire a seventeen-year-old with no skills on short notice. I'd certainly put myself out there. Still, I felt like a failure.

A shivering, cold failure in ugly ruffled sleeves.

In an effort to keep warm, I paced the worn brick sidewalks, looking for streets I hadn't already explored. I found a whole new avenue near where we'd gotten off the ferry, with storefronts offering T-shirts and sandwiches and bike rentals. As I mentally braced myself for more in-person applications, a patch of blue sky broke through the ceiling of gray clouds. I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, turning my face to the warming rays... and flinched as someone bumped into me, their foot scraping down the back of my heel. "Sorry," I said with a grimace, stepping to the side. A trio of girls around my age drifted past me, barely seeming to register that I'd caused a momentary traffic jam.

"Don't. Ever. Be. Sorry," said one of the girls.

She had long brown hair and tossed the words back to me like the flick of a fishing line. I watched as she stumbled forward over the uneven bricks and linked arms with the other two girls, their heads close together in conversation—absorbed in their own little world as they laughed down the street. Droplets of rain clung to the ends of their hair and sparkled on their shoulders. We'd all been caught in the same downpour, but somehow it looked intentional on them. Like a fashion statement. And the way they leaned into each other with their arms linked reminded me of all the times Sammi would wind her arm through mine whenever we walked into a new place together.

It had started in third grade, when my mom dropped me off at Sammi's older brother's birthday party. Their parents had invited a handful of girls from Sammi's class, and my mom never turned down an opportunity for a

child-free afternoon. Which was why I was out in the rain all day today, I thought wryly.

Some things never changed.

That day, the bowling alley was loud with jangly music and kids shouting over the cracking of the pins. I was frozen, too scared to walk beyond the threshold without my mom, but she'd already driven away. Sammi—decked out in a party hat and a teal shirt with "Samantha" stitched on one side—noticed me and came straight over to link her arm through mine.

"We're in this together," she'd said solemnly. "There's too many boys here, and not enough pizza."

As we got older, it became a habit, especially if we were walking at night or weaving our way through the boisterous South Side after a show. We walked arm in arm everywhere—always, except for the last time I saw her, when I'd stomped on ahead.

Pissed off and impatient.

I suddenly realized that I'd unconsciously followed the group of girls for an entire block, lost in memories, picking at the scab of nostalgia and regret. What if I hadn't stomped on ahead? Would Sammi and I be together right now, laughing, with our heads tilted toward each other? For a second, I let myself imagine it. Then the three girls ducked into a building with a sign hand-painted in sky blue and sunshine yellow: MILK & HONEY.

I was so close behind them that the girl I'd bumped into held the door open for me. She pushed her chestnut waves out of her face to reveal a wide smile beneath a short, round-tipped nose and full cheeks covered with freckles. She had huge dark eyes and wore cutoff jean shorts and a sea-green tank top that showed off shoulders the color of sand. Her unhurried, feline movements reminded me of Sammi. Even though Sammi had quit ballet in eighth grade, she always moved with some of that rarefied grace.

I thanked the brown-haired girl and followed her inside, where the air was perfumed with the scent of waffles and fresh-squeezed juice. Reggae music blared from a speaker, and I watched from the doorway as the girls floated to the register, where a boy in a weathered baseball cap leaned

forward on the counter. He chatted up the girls, offering them free sample after sample of ice cream and sorbet while I waited, shifting my weight from one leg to the other. The brown-haired girl passed the treats to her friends: a girl with warm brown skin and black hair in a loose twist-out wearing a breezy linen romper and a pale girl with curly blond hair in a floral slip dress—both around my age. The curly-haired blonde leaned forward to reach the tasting spoon with something chocolate on it, casually draping herself across the counter like one of the seals I'd seen lounging at the entrance to the Nantucket Harbor. Then she paused to adjust the strap of her dress, which had slipped down her arm.

The guy at the counter didn't even pretend not to stare.

The girl with the twist-out grabbed the spoon from the other one's hand, knocking the coffee-can tip jar from the counter to the floor. The guy didn't seem to mind as the girls crouched to scoop the change and loose dollars back into the jar, bubbling over with apologies.

He barely seemed to notice.

Preoccupied with their orders, he poured three large milkshakes—covering them with whipped cream and placing a cherry on top of each—and handed them to the girls, which they accepted with squeals of thanks. The chestnut-haired one, who had held the door for me, got a dab of cream on her nose as she took a sip. Her slip dress friend swiped it off with a finger and ate it, and they shrieked with laughter as the boy's eyes bulged like he was in an old-timey cartoon. *Oh please*, I thought as the girls sashayed past me to the exit, laden with their bounty.

And then I realized: I hadn't seen them pay for anything.

I turned back to the counter just in time to catch the guy gazing after them with his mouth hanging slightly open. His eyes seemed hazy and out of focus, and I wanted to snap my fingers to shake him out of his hormone-induced daze...but I didn't have to. With the girls back outside, he gradually turned his huge, dopey smile toward me.

"How can I help you?" he asked, blinking slowly.

"I need a job," I said, handing over my least-crumpled résumé, its ink smudged from the rain. "I can make smoothies, work the register, whatever

you need.”

“Okay,” he said, taking my résumé and letting it fall to the counter without a first or second glance. In return, he handed me a frothy pink beverage, then took one for himself.

“Okay, what?” I asked, confused but accepting the drink.

It smelled delicious. Like watermelon and vanilla.

“Okay, you’re hired,” he said. He gestured at my cup, which was filled so high that it had started to drip over its waxed paper sides. “Try it, I made too much. When can you start?”

“When can I—” I didn’t mean to keep echoing him, but I couldn’t believe it. Was he actually offering me a job, just like that? If he was, I wouldn’t have to go back to Todd’s house as an unemployable disappointment. *I’d better seal the deal before he changes his mind*, I thought. “Um. What are the hours, what’s the pay?”

“Hours. Yeah. Can you do six-hour shifts, six days a week?”

His eyes drifted to the front window, plainly hoping to catch one last glimpse of the girls. I cleared my throat, sensing an opportunity in his obvious distraction. “That should work for me. I’ll need twenty dollars an hour, though,” I said quickly, a bit aghast at my own boldness. I’d only gotten half that at my last job. I waited for him to tell me it was too much, and then—when the silence stretched awkwardly between us—opened my mouth to say that I’d do it for less. I didn’t want to lose this chance. *Ten would be plenty*, I’d tell him.

“Twenty,” he said dreamily. “You got it.”

The words I was about to say evaporated in my mouth, my heart pounding with the thrill of getting more than I expected—and so easily, too. *Maybe I should’ve asked for twenty-five*, I thought, but I didn’t want to push my luck. “Are you *sure* you can hire me?” I asked. After all, he was only a teenager like me, and he seemed a little...out of it.

Maybe he was high.

“This is my mom’s place. And she told me to ask around, put up some help wanted flyers for the busy season. So you’re actually saving me work,” he said. “I’m Brendan, by the way. And you can hang out with your friends

here whenever you want, just so you know.” He tossed me a yellow polo shirt from behind the counter, matching the one he wore.

“They’re not—” I started...but the last thing I wanted was for him to change his mind. It was fine if he thought those girls were my friends. “Sure thing,” I said, stuffing the polo into my backpack. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

“Tomorrow,” he said, and took a big juicy slurp from his straw.



CHAPTER 5

I TEXTED MY MOM TO let her know that she could pick me up at Milk & Honey, but her text back said that she and Todd had just sat down to brunch on the far side of the island. She promised to call and let me know when they were done, but it was going to be “a little while.” I stared down at my rain-flecked phone. That could mean anything, from forty-five minutes to a couple of hours, and I’d already been in every store downtown.

How’s the job search going? she asked.

Mission accomplished, I wrote.

I added a smiley face, then deleted it, my thumb hovering over the send button. I shoved my phone back into my pocket instead. If she wanted to know so badly, she and Todd could come and get me. Until then, I was stranded. Drizzle still fell in fits and bursts, and I was worried that I’d end up drenched if I waited in a park or on a bench somewhere. I wandered another block instead, wondering what I was going to do with myself as I approached a wide, orangey-red brick building with white columns and an inviting fan-shaped window above its entranceway.

It was the whaling museum Todd had mentioned. The one he’d said was perfect for a rainy day.

As I approached the front doors, I noticed that one of the windows to the side of the entrance was boarded up, with a swath of yellow caution tape across the sill. A toothy edge of shattered glass pushed against the plywood, and the sidewalk beneath it glittered where more glass had been hastily swept up. It was odd, seeing something so broken and jagged right next to the crisp white window frame and the stone planter full of happy pink and purple petunias.

I wondered what had happened.

Had some little kid accidentally broken the window—with an errant elbow or, I don't know, a lacrosse ball or something...or had someone actually tried to break in? I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to steal a bunch of dusty old whale bones, but there was probably some valuable stuff in there. It didn't matter to me either way. All I cared about was getting out of the rain, but there wasn't a lot of seating in the lobby. I headed to the gift shop to kill some time instead, checking my phone on the way.

No updates from my mom yet.

I could picture her sipping a cappuccino while she browsed the menu, if Todd hadn't taken it upon himself to order *for* her. He seemed like that kind of guy. I sighed as I wandered into a cozy space filled with wooden shelving and groups of tourists crowding around mugs with whales on them, Christmas ornaments with whales on them, sweatshirts with whales on them—all at prices that made me roll my eyes. Still, I didn't know how long I'd be waiting, so I took my time browsing the overpriced wares and flipping through coffee table books and histories of the island.

It wasn't long before I was checking my phone again, out of habit.

But there were still no messages.

I'd talked to more strangers today than I had in the past six months, and I was ready to go home—or at least, to Todd's house—and lie down. I stretched my shoulders, sore from the stress of the morning, and wandered over to the toy section. That was the only part of the gift shop I hadn't explored yet, and the glossy black eyes of a plush seal caught my attention. It was nestled in a corner display of stuffed animals. Lobsters and whales and golden retrievers: the complete Nantucket ecosystem. I picked up the seal, instinctively checking its price tag.

It wasn't cheap, but it was so soft that I kind of wanted to buy it.

I certainly had enough cash in my wallet, thanks to Todd.

Back in Pittsburgh, Sammi had a poster of a baby seal with huge, rounded eyes and leopard spots hanging behind her queen-size bed. Or she used to, anyway. Her parents had “adopted” it for her from the World Wildlife Fund for her eleventh birthday, and that little gray seal stayed tacked on Sammi's wall, watching as our sleepovers turned into band practices.

Framed posters of kittens and dolphins were switched out for cooler posters we picked out at the local record store, for touring bands like Sleater-Kinney and the Worriers.

But that seal never changed.

I felt a familiar prickling behind my nose and eyes in the middle of the busy shop, and I covered my face with my hands. I hadn't always been a crier, but these days almost anything could make me well up: A dead bee on a windowsill. A dog with one eye. The opening chords of the first song Sammi and I ever wrote.

Even, apparently, this thirty-four-dollar seal.

I shoved it back into the pile, messing up the perfectly organized display, and hurried over to the book section. There were fewer people there, and I grabbed the first book I could find: a guide to local wildlife. I pretended to be engrossed in the illustrations until I composed myself—but the gift shop was only growing more and more crowded the longer I waited, and the air was uncomfortably warm from the fresh influx of wet tourists. It was hard to keep it together when I couldn't even breathe, so I was about to head outside into the on-again, off-again rain when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

20 more mins, sorry Lu!

I stifled a groan of annoyance as I paced around the store for what felt like the hundredth time, cursing under my breath and sidestepping tourists. As if I wasn't one, too. The fuzzy little seal stared at me with its shiny plastic eyes every time I passed it, so mournfully that I didn't have a choice. I tossed it next to the register along with two crisp twenties.

I might as well, I thought.

I'd adopt it for Sammi.

A nice gray-haired lady behind the register was counting out my change when my mom finally called. "Where *are* you?" she asked, her voice hurried and inquisitive—like she was annoyed that I wasn't already outside and standing in the rain exactly where she'd dropped me off. *It sucks to have to wait,* I wanted to say.

I squeezed my new seal instead.

“In the gift shop,” I said, already heading for the door. “I’ll be outside in a sec.”

I heard a honk and spotted my mom behind the steering wheel of Todd’s old Jeep. She looked so happy that I felt myself smile back reflexively, despite my earlier irritation. She lowered the brand-new sunglasses that were perched on her head. It was impossible not to clock their discreet logo—interlocking C’s—as I climbed into the passenger seat.

“Where’s Todd?” I asked.

“I dropped him off at an important meeting with Stuart Weston,” she said.

I remembered that name from breakfast. The man with the ridiculous yacht. Todd had said Weston’s name kind of breathlessly, like he was referring to royalty—or Taylor Swift. Maybe his yacht really *was* that impressive. But when Todd told Eric that he wanted him to intern at Weston’s company next summer, Eric had definitely been less than pleased.

Maybe he wasn’t swayed by status symbols like that.

I was liking Eric more and more every minute.

“Don’t laugh,” my mom continued, “but Todd’s going to be gone until dinner and won’t feel like going out again, so I’m going to whip us up something at home tonight.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Whip us up *something*?” I repeated incredulously. “Like cereal for dinner? Or scrambled eggs?”

In the Before Times, I made a point of finishing my homework early so I could handle dinner. My mom was always drained from her soul-sucking office job, so I’d make giant salads or stir-fries with whatever we had in the fridge. After dinner, she’d go out on the town with her artsy friends, and left to my own devices, I’d head over to Sammi’s house. We’d write songs and play music in her room until her mom made her stop to focus on her own homework, which she’d usually end up copying from me. But when that all came to a sudden end, my mom stopped going out with her friends on weeknights and our sacred mother-daughter Netflix routine was born. She’d

done her best to take over the dinner duties, I'll give her that, but she was the only person I knew who could burn a pot of boiling water.

"Hey! I can cook," she said, playfully slapping my arm. "When I'm inspired."

When it's for someone like Todd, I thought.

She patted my knee as she steered the Jeep through the narrow streets.

"Honey, you've been through so much at such a young age," she said. I sighed, knowing she meant Sammi. I didn't need a reminder. "And I really appreciate how you've been going with the flow so far—looking for a job and everything. The word on the street is that Eric left his program in North Carolina early, and Todd thought more structure would be a good idea."

I wanted to complain that she should have talked to me first.

That I was going with the flow for *her* sake, not mine.

And it was fine if Todd felt that Eric needed more "structure," but why did I have to get a job, too? Peeking at her from the corner of my eye, I could see how much happier she was already, being here in Nantucket with Todd. Life was a little easier here, at least for her, and she seemed ten years younger as she tapped her fingers on the steering wheel to the local rock radio station.

"It's okay," I said.

"And you know, it's okay to not be okay." She paused, looking at me as if she'd just uttered the most profound insight known to humanity. The sincerity of her expression was too much. I pressed my lips against each other as hard as I could to stifle my laughter, but a half snort came out anyway.

"What?" my mom said, bewildered.

That just made me laugh harder.

"Where did you read that, in a parenting book or something?" I asked, wiping tears from the corners of my eyes. She huffed, turning her gaze back to the road.

"I saw it on Instagram, okay? I thought it was helpful!"

"It is," I laughed. "It is helpful. And it's okay not to be okay," I intoned in a fake-serious voice.

"It is okay not to be okay!" she echoed, matching my deep voice and cementing our catchphrase for the summer.

“Okay,” I said, “I get it.”

“Or not,” she said. “Either way is okay!”

I rolled my eyes, but it felt good to laugh. It had been so long that it actually made my stomach muscles hurt. A few minutes later, we stopped at an upscale general store to pick up an organic chicken, some leafy green vegetables, and a couple bottles of wine. As we stood in the checkout line behind a woman in a brightly patterned shift dress, I noticed a handwritten sign propped in an empty space on a refrigerated shelf. “Yes! We Do Have Sturgeon Caviar. Now Behind Counter, Due to Recent Events.”

“That’s hilarious,” I said, pointing it out to my mom.

“Champagne problems, I suppose,” she joked, then paid for our haul with a matte black credit card I had never seen before. When we were done at the grocery store, we stopped by an antique pickup truck that overflowed with fresh flowers for sale. She asked me to pick out some, and I chose a bouquet of pale pink blooms that looked kind of delicate and lonely above the rusted bumper.

Like they needed a friend.

Back at the house, I trimmed the stems and arranged them in a vase while Mom set out her purchases on the marble kitchen island. Her forehead creased with concentration as she pored over a list she’d made, and as she picked through the groceries for the second and third times, I sensed her mood shift from excitement to *What have I gotten myself into?*

“Hey, what are we making?” I asked. “I can help.”

Her face brightened as she looked up from a stalk of Brussels sprouts.

“You don’t mind?” she asked, taking my offer as her cue to pry the cork from a bottle of white wine on the counter. I pointedly looked at my wrist, eyeing the spot where my watch would be if I ever wore it. It was still a little early in the day for chardonnay, but it wasn’t worth fighting about.

We were on vacation, anyway.

I rinsed the veggies for the salad and preheated the oven while Mom chose a shining copper pan from the gleaming array suspended over the island. After convincing Todd’s stereo system to play some Bob Marley, she started chopping onions, which she slid into a pan of melted butter. The

onions sizzled softly, perfuming the air with a rich, earthy scent. I peeled heirloom potatoes and set a pot of water to boil on the eight-burner stove, and we worked side by side, occasionally checking a recipe or grabbing an ingredient from the fridge. It was the first time I could remember that happening, like we were some picture-perfect mother-and-daughter duo in a Hollywood movie. Having a giant, light-filled kitchen—and everything you could possibly ask for at your fingertips—made cooking a lot more fun.

If I wasn't careful, I'd get used to living like this.

Mom sipped wine as she cooked, but slowly—and she didn't even finish the half glass she'd poured herself. At first I thought she was making a point of it, that it was her way of saying she was trying, too. But the wineglass remained forgotten on the counter as she kept checking the chicken and tasting the sauce, asking if I thought we needed more pepper, and if I thought Todd would want another side dish. From the careful way she set the table with linen napkins and the bouquet I'd arranged, I could tell she wanted everything to be perfect.



"This coq au vin is divine," Todd gushed, squeezing my mom's shoulder. We were all seated at his huge reclaimed-wood dining table beneath a massive modern painting—the kind that probably cost a million dollars—and he was already having seconds.

"Oh, we just threw it together," my mom said, her face slightly flushed from the compliment. "I couldn't have done it without Lucia."

"I'd like to make a toast," Todd announced. "First of all, to Susan, for brightening up this foggy old island. And to Lucia, for pounding the pavement and getting a job."

From beneath the table, Todd lifted out two thick hardcover books. "Since you've shown a taste for local history, I've gotten you something to help you get your sea legs, so to speak."

Dad jokes already, I thought.

He smiled indulgently as he handed me the books. *Away Off Shore* by Nathaniel Philbrick and a thick book of nautical lore and legends with fancy deckled edges.

“Thank you so much,” I said. “That’s really thoughtful.” My mom must have told him what a bookworm I was, and even though these were clearly what Todd would have picked out for himself, it was a kind gesture.

“To new beginnings and to a memorable summer for us all!” He clinked his wineglass against my mom’s. All I had was water, so I toasted with that. “And to Eric. Weston raved about you at lunch. He was in such a good mood that he’s decided to look at some of my properties next week—so the whole family has reason to celebrate!”

“Lucky you,” Eric said in a flat voice. “You bagged a whale.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it,” Todd said with a smile that showed his impressively white teeth. I couldn’t quite tell if he wasn’t picking up on Eric’s sour attitude or was choosing to ignore it. “You have to know what you want and go after it. It’s about hard work and knowing the right people. Something your generation needs to learn.”

I peeked across the table at Eric.

He’d cleaned his plate and was staring down at the pool of leftover sauce like he’d love to disappear into it. I wondered how many times Eric had heard that get-up-and-go speech from his dad; from the tightness in his jaw, it seemed like he was irritated about more than having to caddy for Mr. Stuart Weston this summer.

“I’m heading out,” Eric said, abruptly pushing his chair back from the table. “I won’t be late. I have to be at the golf club by six in the morning.”

“You can go after dessert,” Todd said firmly. “And bring Lucia with you. Introduce her to some young people on the island. Network.”

Eric’s shoulders drooped almost imperceptibly, and I felt a familiar pang of disappointment. He wanted to have fun with his friends, and now he was being asked to bring someone he’d just met and probably didn’t even like.

Me.

“Doesn’t that sound like fun, Lu?” my mom sang, her tone so cloying that it made my teeth hurt. “That is, if you’re up for it, of course...”

“I’m fine, Mom,” I said.

She knew I’d avoided anything social for months, but her tone—and the way she looked at me with so much pity and concern in her eyes—made me feel like an overwatered houseplant drowning at the roots. Even if Eric *didn’t* like me, I wanted to do the opposite of what she expected. Even if it was uncomfortable.

“I guess I’ll tag along, if Eric doesn’t mind,” I said.

My mom raised her eyebrows, her expression pleasantly surprised, like maybe coming here this summer had been a good idea after all. Like maybe her daughter wasn’t destined to be a hopeless loner forever.

She squeezed Todd’s hand.

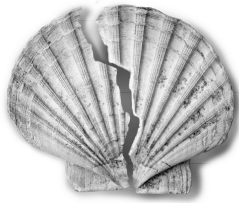
“Let’s let them go,” she said. “More tiramisu for us.”

I got the distinct impression that they were playing footsie under the table.

“I can’t say no to that,” Todd chuckled, visibly relaxing as I tried not to barf. “You two can take the Jeep, but come home at a reasonable hour, okay? And keep an eye on each other. We’re on the buddy system here.”

Sorry, I mouthed to Eric, feeling like an annoying little sister that he had to babysit. He smiled back at me. I didn’t expect it, but I could’ve sworn it was a real smile and not an *I’m being polite to this unfortunate loser I’m being forced to hang out with* smile.

“C’mon, Lu,” he said with a wink. “Your chariot awaits.”



CHAPTER 6

WITH THE WINDOWS DOWN, THE mildewy smell of Todd's old Jeep gave way to the scent of wind and sand and...college boy. Whatever it was—cologne, or maybe his deodorant—Eric smelled good. Like pine trees and sea salt.

It was weird, the two of us alone in the car.

I was used to driving since I was the “responsible one,” with Sammi in the passenger seat playing DJ on her phone or painting her toenails on the dash. Other times I'd be in the back seat of a strange car, behind Sammi and whatever boy she was seeing at the time. The best friend, the third wheel, the sidekick straining to hear the conversation happening up front or feigning indifference and gazing out the window.

And most of the time, I didn't mind.

I wasn't jealous of Sammi. The attention she got wherever she went made perfect sense to me. She had features like cut glass and green eyes set farther apart than most, giving her an otherworldly beauty that people couldn't help but be attracted to.

It wasn't only her looks, though.

It was her energy.

When it was aimed at you, you felt like a cooler, more interesting version of yourself. It's what made her so great onstage. She commanded attention and shredded her guts out, which is why we were immediately invited back after every gig we played.

And honestly, I was happy being her sidekick.

Of course there were times I fantasized about someone being interested in *me* for once. Or having cheekbones like hers, or that kind of magnetic energy.

But that all felt so petty and pointless now.

I'd be the sidekick forever if I could change the past.

I felt my heart pinch with fresh sadness, my shoulders weighed down with sandbags of self-pity. To force myself out of it, I imagined what Sammi would do if she were here. She'd spark up a flirtatious conversation with Eric. She'd roll down her window and stick a bare foot into the breeze. She'd throw her head back and laugh. I couldn't quite summon that kind of energy for myself, but I *could* try to make conversation.

"Thanks for bringing me along," I said, peeking over at Eric.

"No prob," he said, taking a swig from a Nantucket Nectars bottle.

I waited for more, but as the silence lengthened, I realized that was all I was going to get. So much for conversation. I noticed that Eric's phone was sitting in the cupholder and lighting up with texts, but he was laser focused on driving, and an awkward silence filled the Jeep as we bounced over unlit roads lined with hedges and the occasional fence. After a while, the road became a sandy path. With the windows down, the insistent whisper of the ocean masked our silence until Eric pulled over and turned off the car.

I swiveled in my seat for a better look, assuming we'd reached our destination, but I couldn't see anything but beach plum bushes and sand dunes stretching into the distance. There were no houses or buildings in sight, not even a streetlight.

I glanced down at my phone.

No bars.

Eric whistled tunelessly as he reached over my lap, and I instinctively tensed up. Months of binging crime shows were probably to blame, but an uneasy feeling ran up my arms, leaving a trail of goose bumps behind it. Ever since the Awful Thing had happened, my mind often raced to the worst possibilities—even in the safest circumstances—and I didn't know how to stop it.

"One sec," he said.

He rummaged for something in the glove compartment before he opened his door and hopped out. "A little help?" he shouted, disappearing from view. Reassured by the warmth in his voice, I climbed down from my seat and found Eric crouched by the front wheel. He poked at the tire with a silvery

tool that flashed in the moonlight, as if he was working to fix a flat...but I could hear the hiss of escaping air mixing with the salty breeze.

If the tire wasn't flat already, it would be soon.

"Is the car okay?" I gulped, the uneasy feeling flooding back.

I tried not to let it swallow me as I reached for my phone and spun in a circle, searching desperately for reception I knew I wouldn't find. Not out here, off-road in the darkness, invisible to tow trucks and island police. Eric looked up, noticing the worry on my face. "You have to let some air out of the tires to drive on the beach," he explained, grinning at me like it was common knowledge. I frowned back at him. I'd never heard that before.

Was it even legal to drive on a beach?

Eric stood up and pointed to the glove box.

"There's another one in there. You can do the other side."

"Sure thing," I said, feeling very unsure—but it was nice to know I wasn't going to end up on the morning news. Probably. I rummaged through the folded maps and receipts in the glove box until I found another silver pen-shaped object with a rounded bulb on one end. *Do what on the other side?* I wondered...but that didn't stop me from kneeling at the other front tire, unscrewing the cap to the air nozzle, and trying to figure out which end of the silver thing to attach to it. How did it turn on? Was there some kind of button? My palms started to sweat. Could a tire explode? What if I let out too much air and we got stranded out here?

Eric stood over me as I panicked.

"How are you doing with that?" he asked, and I nodded.

"I—uh, I'm..." I gestured to the tire. "I got the cap off."

Eric laughed, but not in a mean way.

"That's the most important part," he said with an encouraging smile.

He showed me how to push one end of the silver gauge into the tire's valve to let out the air, and how to check my progress with the other end of the tool so I'd know how much air pressure was left in the tire and keep it inflated enough to get home. The making-sure-we-got-home part made me a little nervous, and I wanted him to do the rear wheels, too, but Eric made me do them "for practice." It took forever. The tires had to be half empty to drive

on the sand, and every time I let out the teeniest sip of air, I stopped to check the pressure.

The last thing I wanted was to end up stranding us.

When we finally hopped back into the Jeep, we rolled through dunes spotted with clumps of seagrass until we reached a wide strip of beach and pulled up beside some other sporty SUVs and pickups. On the far side of the parked cars, dozens of people circled a bonfire. Some sat on blankets or pieces of driftwood, but most stood, sipping from cans or red Solo cups. It was chilly, and everyone was wearing jeans and sweaters except for one guy with a bleached-out crew cut who was stumbling shirtless through the crowd.

“Townie!” he roared, high-fiving Eric and then me, so hard it stung my palms.

He handed us cans of something and lurched over to a Land Rover that had just pulled up, dispensing two guys and a girl around our age.

“That’s Benji,” Eric said apologetically as I shoved my smarting hand into my back pocket.

“Why’d he call you Townie?” I asked, thinking it was an odd nickname.

“He’s always like that,” Eric said. “It just means that I actually live here, not just in the summer.” The scent of woodsmoke and the flickering orange light against the darkness of the ocean beyond the sand made it feel like Halloween instead of the first days of summer. I was glad I had my hoodie, and I wished I’d worn socks and sneakers instead of flip-flops. When Eric moved closer to the fire and waved me over, I was more than happy to stand next to him, where it was much warmer.

“This is Bryson, Lex, and Warner,” he said, pointing at an athletic South Asian guy in a weathered Hotchkiss sweatshirt and two white girls who looked like they had a twelve-step skincare routine and didn’t wear makeup. It was impossible to tell if their butterscotch tresses were sun-kissed from sailing or from the salon. “We all did tennis camp together when we were little.”

They nodded at me. “Nice to meet you,” said one of the girls.

Her smile stopped below her ski-slope nose and didn’t reach her eyes.

The other pulled out her phone, encased in a blinding teal glitter case, and began texting furiously, completely ignoring me.

“You too,” I said, forcing myself to sound sincere and interested as I tried to remember which was Lex and which was Warner. *I’m going to make an effort here*, I reminded myself.

“Can I borrow you?” A girl’s arm snaked over Eric’s shoulder. He leaned away from the embrace, not letting her pull him away.

“Lucia, this is...,” Eric started, deftly pulling the newcomer into our circle.

“Reagan Morris,” the new girl said, tucking her free hand into her pocket.

Reagan was tan, with thick, perfectly fluffed brows. She wore a blunt chestnut bob that ended at a jawline so sharp it could have been chiseled from a block of marble. In jeans and an oversized linen button-down with casually rolled sleeves, she projected off-duty model vibes...except for her stainless-steel tumbler, which was filled to the brim with something that smelled sharp and medicinal. Like rubbing alcohol.

Or vodka.

“A fresh face,” she said. “I thought I knew everyone here.”

“Lucia’s mom is dating my dad,” Eric said, catching my eyes and shrugging—like he hoped he’d said it right—and I nodded in agreement. “They’re staying with us this summer.”

“Like the Brady Bunch,” Reagan said, looking me up and down and frowning slightly. “Are you at Duke, too?”

“I’m still in high school,” I said, immediately regretting how juvenile that sounded.

“Oh, where?” she asked, cocking her head. I got the distinct impression that a lot rode on my answer. “Do you know Warner? She’s a senior at Brearley.”

“You wouldn’t have heard of it,” I said, meeting her eyes. A smidgen of steel came through in my voice. I didn’t want to have a pissing match with this pedigreed gazelle. From the look of concern in Eric’s widening eyes, I didn’t think he wanted that, either.

He cleared his throat, looking from Reagan to me. “Let’s start over,” he said, placing a hand on each of our shoulders. “Reagan’s from the Cape, but she comes here every summer. Her mom’s the governor, and they have a house in town. Lucia traveled a long way for her very first summer here and doesn’t know anyone. I’m hoping to show her how *friendly* and *welcoming* our beautiful island is.”

Reagan smirked at Eric, then broke the tension with a throaty laugh.

“I’m just making conversation, honey. Eric never shows up anywhere with a girl, and I thought...” She trailed off, throwing a sassy smile to me and then Eric. “It’s good to hear he’s not off the market yet.”

“Reagan,” Eric said smoothly. “Your boyfriend would kill me in my sleep!”

“They were roommates this year,” Reagan stage-whispered to me, loud enough for everyone at the bonfire to hear. “So I guess he technically could have. Tristan’s going to get Eric to pledge Pi Phi with him next year.”

“I am *not* a frat guy,” Eric said, shaking his head at Reagan with an expression of lighthearted horror on his face. “I’d rather die. I’d rather take econ again!”

“Bullsh—” Reagan started.

But she was interrupted when a girl elbowed between me and Eric, breaking through the crowd and nearly tumbling into the fire. The girl laughed as her two friends pulled her up by the armpits, and I instantly recognized them as the three girls I’d seen at Milk & Honey. They giggled and leaned on each other in strappy maxi dresses, their bare arms and shoulders gleaming in the firelight, seemingly unaware of the chill. Their hair was dotted with pinkish blossoms—and a few leaves—as if they’d crawled through some beach plum bushes on their way to the party. I tried not to stare and everyone else seemed to be doing the same, pretending that whatever they’d splashed into their Solo cups was much more interesting than these newcomers.

“Who are they?” I whispered to Eric.

He shook his head as he stared at his shoes. I noticed he hadn’t even cracked open his seltzer. “I don’t know. There are girls like that every

summer.”

I narrowed my eyes, catching his dismissive tone.

“Girls like what?”

“Daytrippers,” Reagan interjected. “They weren’t invited, and they need to leave.”

She stared the girls down, visibly annoyed that they’d captured everyone’s attention—and not hiding how she felt about it. The dark-haired girl who’d spoken to me at Milk & Honey heard Reagan’s snarky comment and approached her as the party quieted around us. I was less than a foot away from the two of them when she snatched the drink from Reagan’s hand and gulped down the contents, the cranberry-colored liquid dribbling down her chin and neck in gleaming rivulets until they disappeared beneath the neckline of her midnight-blue dress.

“Hey!” Reagan snapped. “You can’t just drink other people’s drinks.” Her pearl studs glinted indignantly in the firelight as she waited for a response.

The dark-haired girl dropped the empty cup at her feet, then grabbed a random bottle from the nearest boy and handed it to Reagan. “Here you go, babe,” she said, like a mom giving apple juice to a whiny toddler. Reagan’s jaw dropped as she looked down at the bottle in her hand. Someone let out a peal of laughter and I realized it was me.

I couldn’t help it.

I tried to stop myself, but only succeeded in tamping it down into a fake-sounding cough. Reagan shot me a glare cold enough to freeze a Swiss bank account, and the dark-haired girl and her two friends stared at me before bursting out in their own laughter.

“Let’s do a lap,” Eric muttered, stepping close to my side. “See who else is here.”

As he spoke, the drink thief widened her eyes and whispered something to her two friends, who immediately stopped laughing. I froze. Their vibe was aggressive and unpredictable—like T. rexes. If I didn’t move, maybe there was a chance they wouldn’t pick on me next.

But of course they picked on me next.

"I know you," the one with brown hair purred, sidling over to me. I was getting the feeling that she was the ringleader of the group, and I tightened my grip on my warming seltzer. Maybe it would be fine if she grabbed it. I didn't really want it anyway.

"You're the Milk and Honey girl," said the one with brown skin in a bottle-green maxi. "I remember you." Her deep brown eyes fixed on me so intently that I felt pinned in place.

"Who's your friend, Milk and Honey girl?" the paler one whispered, inching so close to me that I noticed the delicate spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose. She looked like she was wearing the same dress as the other two, but in a lemon-yellow color that matched her hair.

"I have a name," I said, on guard and a little annoyed at the nickname.

"Then tell us!" the ringleader said with a disarming smile. "Because you're the only one worth talking to here." My irritation started to dissipate and I stifled a grin. These girls seemed different from the rest of the prep-school crowd, who acted completely uninterested in me as soon as they discovered I didn't speak their language, full of code words like Sun Valley, Spence, and Flying Point. These three just might have been the most interesting thing about this island so far.

Except for Eric, but I hadn't exactly decided how I felt about Eric.

"It's Lucia," I said. "And who are you?"

"I'm Selah, and this is Tamar and Kezia," the dark-haired ringleader said, wrapping her arm first around the girl in the bottle-green dress and then the freckled girl in yellow. They smiled at me, their faces suddenly warm and open, all traces of their slightly menacing *I could steal your drink* vibe evaporating into the cool night sky as the party picked back up again. Maybe they weren't trying to be rude, calling me Milk & Honey girl.

Maybe that was their version of being friendly.

I hadn't made friends with anyone in so long, I had no idea.

I turned to introduce them to Eric, but he had stepped away from the group. From a slight distance, he was watching Reagan speak intently with a guy in a fleece vest. They'd all three walked away from the light of the bonfire and I could only see the boy's back, but he was deep in a

conversation with Reagan. She pounded the flat of one hand against the other and the boy put a hand on her shoulder—but Reagan shook it off and walked off into the dunes, vest-guy following on her heels. Eric sighed as he turned back to the fire, his expression inscrutable in the unsteady light.

Champagne problems, I thought.

“How’s your drink?” Selah asked, shuffling closer to me.

“Totally disgusting,” I said, pretending to shield it from her. “You don’t want to steal it.”

Selah flung her head back and cackled. “I like this one!”

“Me too,” said her blond friend.

Kezia, I thought, reminding myself of her name so I wouldn’t forget it.

“We were thinking of going swimming,” Tamar said, peeking over her shoulder at the black expanse of water behind us. “Want to join us?”

“Are you insane?” I laughed. “It’s freezing!”

“Not freezing,” Tamar said, her voice firm and authoritative. “It’s nice and warm once you get used to it.” She gestured toward the shoreline as if she were inviting me to step into her limousine. I looked skeptically at Tamar, then at Selah and Kezia.

They couldn’t be serious.

It had been raining all day and the ocean looked cold and forbidding. There was no way I was getting into that water. But Kezia just winked and started walking backward toward the shore, her blond curls fluttering around her head like feathers.

“Come on,” Selah said.

She poked me in the shoulder before she and Tamar turned to follow Kezia. I watched them dubiously as they stepped casually over pebbles and seaweed, not believing they were actually going in until they were ankle deep in the darkness. Soon they were up to their knees in undulating waves.

I started after them. I *wanted* to be the kind of person who would jump into the ocean at night, in that “do one thing a day that scares you” way, and be #ThatGirl, but I stopped just short of the water’s edge, crossing my arms for warmth in the stiff breeze. When an unexpected wave sloshed over my flip-flops, I jumped back in surprise. It soaked the hem of my jeans, but

Tamar was right: the water *wasn't* freezing. It was surprisingly a lot warmer than the evening air, which was getting more and more blustery by the minute. I spun around and scanned the crowd for Eric, finding his broad shoulders and shaggy hair silhouetted against the bonfire.

"Eric! You should feel this!" I called up to him.

Reagan and the other boy had left, leaving Eric surrounded by girls I hadn't met yet. Their tinkling laughter competed with the crackle of the bonfire and soft roar of the ocean, and I couldn't blame them all for gravitating toward him. I was curious whether he *like* liked any of them.

Not that I would care if he did.

"Hell, no!" Eric laughed.

"It's really warm," I shouted. "Look!"

I pointed to the three girls, who had swum a few more feet out, just as Tamar dove under the waves. Eric joined me at the waterline, kicking at the sand with the toe of his burnt-orange Tevas. I'd never thought guys looked good in sandals, but now I officially changed my mind. Standing next to me, he blocked some of the wind and made me feel a little warmer.

"Trust me," he said, leaning close. "That's not a good idea."

He led me back up to the circle of firelight, where the topic had turned to horses. Apparently, the polo season had ended in Palm Beach but there was a competition coming up in Rhode Island. I had nothing at all to contribute to the conversation, and my gaze drifted to the three girls, who were wading out of the shallows and onto dry land. I wasn't the only one watching them. The J.Crew-clad circle stole glances at the wet dresses clinging to their curves, any flashes of jealousy or attraction carefully masked by sips of beer and rolling eyes.

"You should have joined us," Tamar said, scrunching water from her wet curls and twisting them back into place. "That was *very* refreshing."

"What did we miss?" Kezia asked. "Anyone new show up?"

"Just a lot of horse talk," I whispered. "Something about chukkas and divots?"

"Fascinating," said Selah, wringing seawater from the hem of her dress. She surveyed the crowd, which had thinned out while they swam. "This

gathering feels...boring. We're gonna try a house party we heard about in town. Want to join?"

"You can bring your boyfriend," Kezia nodded at Eric and smiled salaciously.

"He's not my boyfriend," I said just as Eric turned around to see who I was talking to.

Please let the sand swallow me up right now, I prayed.

"We're not going," Eric said. "But thanks for the invite."

"Oh, come on," Kezia said, putting a hand on Eric's arm and leaving a soggy imprint. "I promise you'll have a good time." I looked from Eric to the girls, wanting to hang out with them all and relishing the unfamiliar feeling of people actually wanting to be around *me*. People who weren't inviting me out of pity or because their mom told them to, or because they wanted to talk about That Night or how much *they* missed Sammi and couldn't believe she was gone. These girls knew nothing about all that, but they'd decided I was cool enough—or at least different enough—from the rest of the Nantucket crowd to hang out with.

"What do you think?" I said, hoping he'd be game.

Eric gently pulled me aside and leaned in close.

"Those girls are a bad scene," he whispered.

"They seem nice?" I said, temporarily distracted as his whispered breath warmed my ear.

"They're weird. Some summer people..." He trailed off, leaning back on his heels.

"Aren't *I* summer people?" I asked, jokingly pushing his shoulder.

"I mean the party people who come here and trash the place with no respect for anything. Not families who've been coming here for generations," he said.

I dropped my hand from his shoulder. He'd sounded like his dad for a minute there, which definitely killed the vibe.

"So they should only let the *right* kind of people on the island, is that what you're saying?" I asked, my voice dripping with just enough sarcasm to make him realize how ridiculous and exclusionary he sounded.

“It’s not about that.” He sighed. “I just don’t want us to get into any trouble on your first night out. I think we should head back.” He started trudging through the sand toward the Jeep, clearly expecting me to follow. A flare of exasperation heated my face. I wondered what would happen if I dug in my heels and went off with the girls. Would he drive home without me? What would he tell our parents? I didn’t *really* know him yet—and I certainly didn’t know these girls—but something about them made me want to keep the night going. It wasn’t even ten o’clock yet, and summer used to mean staying up late, sleeping in, and enjoying every ounce of freedom before school started again.

I crossed my arms and shivered in the wind.

In previous years, Sammi and I had treasured the early days of summer together before she’d ship off to Maine with her family. We’d spend hours in Schenley Park, singing our own off-key melodies until fireflies rose from the grass like stars. And I’d been starting to feel that way again, in front of the campfire, like a darkened ember briefly stirred to life. But already that feeling was fading away in the biting sea breeze. Why create more tension between Eric and his dad by staying out late? I was just a guest in their house, and I didn’t want to make waves. Or give my mom yet another reason to worry about me. It didn’t make sense, just to hang out with a couple of half-drunk girls I didn’t even know. Even if they were interesting—and interested in me.

I looked at the girls and shrugged.

“He’s my ride,” I said.

Selah stuck out her tongue like a little kid. “You’re missing out,” she said, then turned around and led her two friends down the beach. Part of me had expected them to try harder, to peer-pressure me to join them. Instead, I felt the glow of their attention wane as their footsteps disappeared in the wet sand. I tried not to show my annoyance when I joined Eric in the Jeep, but I couldn’t help letting a tiny sigh escape my chest as I buckled myself in.

“I’m sorry, Lucia,” Eric said. “I have to get up super-early for the golf club.”

“Totally,” I said. “That just felt like the first time in a long time that something sounded, I don’t know, kind of fun.” As soon as I admitted it out

loud, I felt stupid.

“You’re telling me that you weren’t having a scintillating time getting grilled by Reagan, reigning Princess of Nantucket?” he asked in a faux-offended tone as he fired up the Jeep. “Were you left completely unmoved by Blaire and Claire’s exploits on the polo pitch?”

I cracked up, surprised by his jokes.

“But aren’t those your friends?” I laughed. This was his world, after all—the Ralph Lauren aesthetic, the Ivy League schools, the elaborate and expensive sports.

“Most of them, yeah, and some I’ve known forever,” he said, turning onto a busier paved road that seemed to be one of the major arteries of the island. “That doesn’t mean there aren’t more interesting things to talk about once in a while.”

“Like what,” I said. “Stock prices?”

“*Exactly*,” Eric joked.

He braked for a stop sign and looked over at me. “Honestly, though, I know they’re not the most welcoming bunch at first—and except for Benji, they can be a little stuffy.” His eyes were soft. “I know you’ve had a rough year,” he said. “My dad didn’t tell me any of the details, but...yeah, if you ever want to talk, I’m here for you.”

My eyes started doing that prickly thing again.

I looked away from Eric’s kind gray eyes and stared straight ahead at the double yellow line bisecting the road in front of us, with only darkness on either side.

“Thanks, but I’m doing okay,” I said. “Really.”

Eric nodded, and I was grateful he didn’t pry. I didn’t want to start crying in front of him. Better to have even more awkward silence than wreck the friendship we might actually be building.

When we arrived back at the house, Eric gave me a brief hug, which I *platonically* leaned into, absorbing some of his warmth (and his delicious boy smell) before he headed upstairs to his room. There was no sign of my mom and Todd, though they’d left the lights on throughout the first floor. I locked the front door and wandered through the spacious rooms turning off the

lights. A house like this probably had a remote control or voice command for that, but I didn't know where or what it was.

Eric was less worried about wasting electricity. He was already upstairs brushing his teeth or washing his frustratingly blemish-free face, and the sound of running water filled the house as I peered around the darkened living room to locate the stairs, my eyes straining to adjust in the fuzzy blackness. That was when I heard a loud crack near the windows to my left.

It sounded like it came from outside.

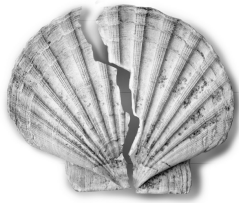
When I heard it again, I held my breath, scanning the room slowly.

Was it a branch snapping against the window, or was someone trying to get in? I turned around quietly, searching for the slightest movement out of the corners of my eyes. The living room furniture looked sharper and more sinister in the darkness, and the windows were opaque black rectangles, revealing nothing beyond the glass.

Everything's fine, I told myself.

You're spooking yourself.

But the house is so big and they keep it unlocked, said the thrumming of my heart as I sprinted up the stairs to my well-lit and tastefully appointed bedroom, leaving behind any mysterious bumps in the night.



CHAPTER 7

I WOKE TO MY MOM gently shaking my shoulder. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I looked around the dim guest room. I could have sworn I'd only nodded off a few minutes ago, while paging through *Nautical Lore and Legends* with the stuffed seal as my pillow.

"Rise and shine, Lu!" my mom sang, pulling open the drapes.

The sky was a pale pink and purple, which meant it was well before the nine o'clock alarm I'd set for myself. I groaned, burying my face in the seal's plush fur.

"Todd woke up early this morning and had a lovely idea! He wants to celebrate your first day of work before you get so busy that you won't have any time for us," she bubbled. "Eric's already left for the club, so it'll just be the three of us. Let's not keep him waiting, okay?"

I sat up and blinked at the rising sun, trying my best to wake up.

Getting out of bed this early was certainly *not* how I liked to celebrate anything.

"How long do I have?" I sighed.

"Oh, ten, fifteen minutes?" my mom said, but I could tell by her tone that she meant five. It sounded like Todd had probably sprung this last-minute celebration on her, too. I'd planned on taking a shower and styling my hair today, to make a good impression for my first day at work. But I hadn't accounted for Todd or my surprise seven a.m. wake-up call.

"Meet you downstairs in a sec," I said flatly.

She nodded, understanding what I really meant.

You owe me one.

I raked a brush through my hair and pulled it into a bun. It was lopsided but presentable enough. I quickly brushed my teeth and swiped some

concealer over a pimple that had sprouted on my forehead overnight, then used the last of my lip gloss. Finally, I pulled on a short floral sundress that was wrinkled from having been stuffed in a duffel bag for the last two days. It was one of the preppier things I owned, but there wasn't time to iron it. I dashed down the stairs, where Todd and Mom waited in navy slacks and pastel cable-knit sweaters. This was the second time they'd nearly matched their outfits—a fashion statement that I sincerely hoped was coincidental and not a trend.

“You’re going to be chilly in that, hon,” said Todd, looking over my bare shoulders. “It’ll warm up this afternoon, though.”

I ran upstairs and grabbed my hoodie.

“Where are we headed?” I asked on the drive out of Tom Nevers toward town. I wanted to add: *And was it truly necessary to get up so early?*

“You’ll see!” Todd said, pulling over on a narrow one-way street and twisting in his seat to hand me another wad of twenties. “I can’t park here, so can you pop in and get us a dozen blueberry muffins, a loaf of Portuguese bread, and some coffee for your mom and me?”

I took the money and jogged across the street to the building that Todd had pointed out, his gold watch hanging heavily around his wrist. The bakery was toasty and perfumed with a sweet and yeasty smell, and fresh bread cooled on racks above a bakery case that displayed pastries like edible jewels. I placed Todd’s order, hoping I remembered everything he’d said, and ordered a coffee for myself, too.

My mom would raise her eyebrows and probably mention that caffeine could spike anxiety, but she owed me.

The muffins were still hot from the oven, and they warmed my lap as we drove. I was tempted to reach into the paper bag more than once, but I stopped myself when I caught Todd’s eye in the rearview mirror. He kept smiling back at me, and I could tell that he really wanted us to wait. We finally parked in a sandy lot and walked down a path to a beach, still deserted at this hour. A few early sailboats skimmed by and seagulls wheeled overhead as Todd unfurled a plaid blanket on the sand beneath a gorgeous salmon-colored sky.

I had to admit, it was worth getting up early for.

Todd and my mom cuddled on the blanket, as the steam from our coffees created clouds of mist in the chilly air. They barely picked at their muffins and ignored the beautiful view, opting to stare into each other's eyes over the top of their paper cups like they were on a first date.

Middle-aged puppy love.

Great.

Wishing I were still in bed, I grabbed a muffin and walked down to the waters' edge. Not to give my mom and Todd the alone time they clearly wanted, but because I didn't really want to sit there and watch them melt into each other's eyes. There was barely any room for me on the blanket anyway.

So I walked as I ate, trying to keep my shoes from getting damp as I followed the line dividing wet sand from dry. Even after I finished my delicious, buttery muffin, I kept walking. It was either that or sit in the damp sand beside the blanket and wait until it was time for Todd to drive me to work. I walked so far that when I turned back, my mom and Todd looked like two tiny dabs of paint in an impressionist beachscape.

That was far enough, I decided.

I lowered myself to sit crisscross on the sand, facing the water, then took several deep breaths, trying to center myself before my first day at my new job. I'd never done anything customer-service-related before, and working in a busy shop seemed a far cry from the quiet solo shelving duties I was used to. I imagined an audience of impatient, entitled tourists shouting at me as I messed up orders and gave incorrect change.

So much for the calming effects of meditation.

I opened my eyes, deciding to focus on the ocean in front of me instead, timing my breath to match each gentle wave as it ruffled into foam on the shore. The water shifted from blue to gray and brownish-blue and back again, a moving, ever-changing aliveness.

Suddenly, a dark smudge among the waves caught my eye. It looked like a person's head. For a fraction of a second, I thought it was someone taking an early-morning swim. On second glance, I was sure it was a dog. A black Lab, maybe, paddling alone and dangerously far out.

Oh god, I thought, scanning the shore for its owners.

But the beach was empty except for me.

I jumped up, a familiar tingle of panic spreading like a rash across my breastbone. *That poor dog*, I thought, wondering if I could lure it to safety. On my feet again and jogging toward the waves, I spotted another head—and then another. They dipped beneath the glistening surface and reappeared a few feet off. As they drifted closer to shore, I saw that the heads were connected to shadowy oblong bodies. It was a pod of seals, I realized, now that I could make out a flash of whisker and the inquisitive points of their snouts. There must have been a dozen of them, floating and swimming and playing together like puppies.

A smile bloomed across my face as I watched them.

This has to be a good omen, I told myself.

A message from Sammi, perhaps.

The sun broke through the haze of clouds and I could see their mottled coats, the almost human expressions on their faces. Their rounded, soft eyes reminded me of my stuffed seal, back on my bed at Todd's house. I stood on the shoreline for a while, watching the seals swim into the distance and feeling the warmth of the sun on my face. Once they disappeared, I turned to head back. Surely I'd given my mom and Todd enough privacy by now, and soon it would be time to drive to Milk & Honey.

I trudged back to the blanket, taking a longer route along the shore to savor my last few moments alone as my shoes crunched over seashells and pebbles. Stepping over a dried-out stick of driftwood, I noticed something shiny wedged in the sand. It was probably just a shard of broken seashell—or the edge of a coin—but there was something about the way it glinted in the early-morning light that made me reach down and brush the sand away for a closer look.

It wasn't a shell.

It was a small golden band.

Probably not real gold, I told myself, pulling it from the sand and revealing a miniature golden basket about the size of an acorn. My first instinct was to put it back where I found it. It wasn't mine.

It could be flotsam from the sea....

But someone could be looking for it.

I rolled it in my palm, admiring the craftsmanship of the tiny basket, the way the metal gleamed in the sun. Then I closed my fist around it. It was too pretty to leave on the beach with the desiccated seaweed and yellowed seafoam. I tucked it in my pocket and followed the curve of the shore, feeling like I'd found a secret good-luck charm, a little gift from the sea. I squeezed it inside my pocket as my sneakers padded across the soft, moist sand. No matter what happened today, I was determined to hang on to the mental image of the seals playing happily in the waves.

To remember my message from Sammi.

When I saw another pale and pearly crescent poking out from beneath a strand of seaweed, I thought I'd found another treasure—or at least a pretty shell. I was already bending down to pull it from the curled dark-green fronds when I felt, deep in my gut, that something was wrong. A sour splash of bile flooded my mouth as I paused, my brain slowly registering that my hand was hovering over something that I somehow knew wasn't a shell.

It was a delicately curved fingernail.

Connected to a finger.

It was a human hand.

I stumbled back in horror, my own hand clapped over my mouth to stifle a scream. But I couldn't scream—I couldn't make a sound. A hand, attached to an arm, completely motionless in the sand emerged from a small pile of driftwood and seaweed. I squeezed my eyes shut to block out what I'd just seen. Surely my mind was playing tricks on me.

Surely this wasn't happening.

I wrenched my eyes open, but the hand was still there.

I forced myself to circle the pile of flotsam and jetsam—and that was when I saw the rest of the girl. She was around my age and partially face down in the surf, her pale form stretched out on the sand in a light pink dress. Her arm extended toward land, like she was reaching for safety, and a gust of wind blew her tangled red hair away from her body, revealing the sharp points of her shoulder blades over an unmoving rib cage.

I couldn't breathe.

She was clearly dead.

For a second I thought of those girls swimming last night—had one of them drowned? But none of them had red hair, as far as I could remember.

A tiny ghost crab crawled out from beneath the girl's torso, and I vomited. *I should do something*, I thought, twisting to puke away from the girl. But what could I do? It was obvious that she was gone. I fumbled in my pocket for my phone. *I should call 911. The Coast Guard*. With shaking hands, I hit the most recent contact in my phone instead.

"Mom," I wailed, then collapsed onto the sand.



The police wrapped me in a blanket and sat me down on the open tailgate of their vehicle, blue and red lights strobing across my mom's worried face. Someone handed me a hot drink in a foam cup. I held it in shaking hands, unable to bring it to my lips, while Todd spoke quietly with the sheriff and my mom rubbed my back through the scratchy blanket. The police asked me questions, took notes, conferred, and asked me the same questions again. They muttered into phones and walkie-talkies. More authorities arrived as a young policewoman stretched a length of yellow crime scene tape across the entrance to the beach. My mom chewed the inside of her lip, something I hadn't seen her do since I'd had my appendix out.

Watery sunshine periodically broke through the morning gloom, brightening the beach and then darkening it again, so quickly that it felt surreal and disorienting. I wanted to sleep. I wished I could've answered the questions from the police better. But there was nothing much to say.

I'd been walking along the beach...

And then I found her.

I didn't know her.

I didn't recognize her.

I'd never been to this island before.

I hadn't seen anything suspicious or out of place—other than the girl, of course. As the questions continued, I repeated myself over and over again. I overexplained. I told the police about my mom and Todd on the blanket and the pod of seals. How I thought I'd found a seashell. I wanted to help, even though I was no help to anyone. After a couple of hours, Todd drove us home, apologizing all the way—to me and to my mom, who was sitting in the back seat with me.

“This kind of thing doesn't happen here.”

He repeated it like a mantra, his voice husky and strained. “This is a quiet little island. Families come here. We don't have all the crime and violence they have on the mainland.”

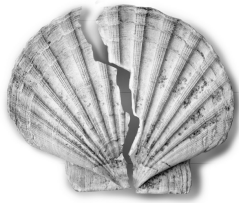
I leaned against the car window and sobbed.

I cried for the girl, and for her family and friends, who were about to face a lifetime of grief. I understood what Todd meant—it was easy to forget the problems of the world in this well-kept little enclave. The charming window boxes, the roses cascading over picket fences, and the cobblestone streets made it feel like a movie set.

A small-town fairy tale with a nautical theme.

A dead girl washing up on a pristine Nantucket beach just didn't make sense, and my mind churned with questions. Who was she? What could have led to such a young life ending like this? Was it some kind of accident? The police would figure it all out, I told myself, but it didn't give me any comfort. Bad things could happen anywhere—to anyone.

I should have known that by now.



CHAPTER 8

I SPENT TWO DAYS HOLED up in my room, unable to get the image of the dead girl out of my head. I checked every news outlet I could find, hoping the authorities had identified her. Now that I had Todd's Wi-Fi password, I checked online—multiple times an hour.

There never seemed to be any new details.

I even called the police station a couple of times to see if they'd made any progress. I thought they'd want to tell me, since I was the one who'd found her, but they politely and firmly told me that they'd share information at the appropriate time. That the investigation was ongoing. But how hard could it be to find someone on one tiny island who knew this girl?

On the second day, Mom gently pulled the phone from my hand.

"I don't think this is healthy for you right now," she said kindly. "And the chief of police reached out to Todd. It's probably a good idea to stop calling the station."

Without my phone, I had nothing to distract me from my morbid thoughts except for the books Todd had given me, and the ones I'd checked out from the children's room at the library. I flipped through them, unable to read more than a few lines at a time. Random words would swim up from the page through my tears, and I'd completely forget what I'd just read. Entire paragraphs were out of the question. It was easier to focus on the line drawings and dreamy watercolors from my library books, but it wasn't long before I tossed those aside to lie facedown on the bed. The only thing that stopped the images of the dead girl was sleep.

On day three I sat up in bed, a tray of pancakes sprinkled with pomegranate seeds on the bedside table beside me. I knew my mom had

made them because they were burned on one side. My mouth twisted with emotion, knowing how much she wanted to care for me, to help me.

As I choked down a dry mouthful, someone knocked on the door and opened it. Eric poked his head in and asked if he could come in. I looked horrible—with matted, unwashed hair and a salty crust around my eyes—but I didn't care.

I waved him in.

"I brought you something," he said, stepping into the room.

He glanced around at the books that were strewn across my unmade bed amid clumps of used tissues and offered me a sad smile. He held out a bracelet made of braided white rope.

"Nothing fancy, but I thought you could use a little gift."

"Thanks," I said automatically, taking the bracelet and slipping it on my wrist.

"Sailors used to wear them to wipe the sweat off their brow," he said. "Some people say they're good luck, but I'm not exactly sure."

I ran a finger over the knobby bracelet. "I could use some better luck."

"Yeah," he sighed. "I can't believe you found that girl."

"Have you heard anything about her?" I asked. "Do they know who she is?"

Eric grimaced, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I haven't heard much about it in the news. I don't think they've solved it yet."

I fell back onto my pillow, an empty feeling in my chest.

That poor girl.

I thought of her body, lonely and cold in a morgue somewhere. It had been three days—there should be some answers at this point, and it felt so wrong that I still didn't know her name. Eric watched me with worried eyes, shifting from one foot to the other.

"I should...um, let you rest," he said.

I nodded absentmindedly, lost in thought.

"But listen—I'm here if you want to talk about it."

But I didn't want to think about dead girls anymore, and I didn't want to talk through my trauma.

I wanted to do something.



CHAPTER 9

I WAS TYING MY SHOES when my mom entered my room a few hours later. I'd dried my hair and gotten dressed in clean black shorts and a Milk & Honey polo.

"I heard the shower," she said. "I'm so glad—" She took in my outfit and the backpack on my neatly made bed. "Honey, what are you doing?"

"I'm ready," I said. "I can't sit in this room anymore. I need to distract myself, so I'm going in to work."

"Honey, you don't have to," my mom said, wrapping me in a suffocating hug. "I called the owner and she completely understands. She's a mom, too. She said you could take as many days as you need." My mom released my shoulders and smoothed the hair back from my face like she did when I was little, when she'd tended to my beestings and skinned knees and painted my nails for me on the first day of school.

But this wasn't a skinned knee.

This was a dead girl.

And we both knew that cups of tea and Band-Aids and hugs—and even plenty of therapy—couldn't change reality.

We'd learned that with Sammi.

"Could I have my phone, please?" I said. "I'll check in a lot, I promise. I just really need a change of scenery." I squirmed from my mom's hands, reaching past her for my backpack. I was starting to feel like her emotional support poodle, smothered by her attention. If I could just get out of this room, I'd be fine. Sure, I was still upset. It had been a shock.

But I didn't even know this girl.

She wasn't a friend of mine.

I hadn't even seen her face.

And people died every day. Even young people, as I well knew. Did I mourn every single death I heard about in the news? Did I freak out every time there was a war or a shooting or a tragic accident? No. I simply happened to find her—it was pure chance that it had been me on that beach that morning. I needed to do something other than fixate on her tangled hair, her outstretched hand, her— *Stop*.

“I’m doing this,” I said.

Firmly, so my mom would know I really meant it.

“But, Lu, I don’t know—”

“I need to go,” I said, my voice cracking just the tiniest bit.

My mom pulled me into another tight hug, mashing the side of my face against her dangling earring. She breathed in deeply, squeezing me even tighter.

“I just want everything to be good for you,” she said with a sigh.

It was the same dreaded phrase I’d hear when she told me to ask my teachers for extra-credit assignments to boost my GPA, and when she’d make me take practice SAT tests that she’d printed out from the internet, even though we both knew there wasn’t much money for college. It was the same phrase she’d repeat like a mantra while driving me to therapy, and the one she’d mutter as she researched grief groups on her laptop at the kitchen table with a juice glass full of screw-top pinot grigio near at hand.

“I know, Mom,” I said.

My classic response.

I pulled away slightly, hinting that the hug was over, but she didn’t release her grip. I wasn’t getting any air—or at least, that was what it felt like.

Suffocation.

I needed to get out of this hug.

I needed to get out of this house.

“You know I’m not supposed to ruminate,” I muttered over her shoulder. “And isolation doesn’t help.” Quoting my therapist back home was not a trick I pulled on her often, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

My mom finally loosened her grasp, resting her hands on my shoulders and staring at me with damp eyes. Her eyeliner was smudged and there was a

new crease between her eyebrows that must have formed overnight. Her gaze was so intense, I had to look up at the reclaimed-wood beams on the ceiling.

“If that’s what you need,” she said.

I nodded, still avoiding her gaze.

“But the second you feel scared or sad or unhappy, I want you to promise that you’ll call me and Todd. We’ll drop everything and come get you, baby girl.”

I forced myself to meet her searching brown eyes.

“Deal,” I said.



At Milk & Honey, Brendan showed me the ropes.

There was a faint scent of weed in his hair, but it was only detectable when we were standing shoulder to shoulder and chopping fruit. He chatted between yawns as he showed me how use the cash register, pointed out where to find refills for the cups and napkins, and made elaborate coffee drinks for us both. I learned that his mom had bought the shop back in the early 2000s. Heard how maybe they’d expand to the mainland someday, but he liked it just fine here on the island, even in the winter. How his brother’s girlfriend’s best friend’s sister had been Meghan Trainor’s babysitter.

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s from here.”

I nodded, eagerly taking in everything he was saying, hoping it would blot out my memories of the beach.

Meanwhile, my phone vibrated in my pocket every hour on the hour, when my mom texted to check up on me. It was exactly what she’d done during my first week back at school, after everything that happened with Sammi. I knew she meant well, but it felt like digital helicopter parenting. I didn’t want Brendan to think I wasn’t doing my job, but I knew if I turned off notifications or didn’t respond, my mom would freak out. So I wrote back short phrases that devolved into simple emojis.

Smiley face heart thumbs-up.

But I barely had time to look at my phone once customers started pouring in, and it was exhausting finding seventeen different ways to surreptitiously text *I'm fine* under the counter.

At a lull between customers at midday, Brendan pulled his own phone out of his pocket and frowned down at it, then looked up at me with slightly bloodshot eyes. I wondered if he'd been at the beach party that night. I hadn't seen him, but that didn't mean he hadn't shown up later. "Did you really find that girl at Great Point?" he asked in a low, serious voice. "It's like, so sad."

I froze halfway through slicing a mango.

His mom must have told him. Because my mom told her.

"Yeah, it's sad," I said, keeping my voice even. I grabbed a stack of bamboo lids to refill the dispenser by the cups. *Don't think about it! Don't think about it*, I told myself—and for a second, the dead girl flashed in my mind's eye. The knobs of her spine, her outstretched hand. A familiar anxiety prickled beneath my chest. *Breathe. You're not on that beach.*

You're here, where it smells like mangoes and strawberries.

"This kind of thing just doesn't happen around here, you know?" Brendan said. He looked like a puppy dog, his green eyes searching for reassurance and connection under his obscenely long eyelashes. But everyone kept saying that, like a stupid broken record.

It certainly wasn't true as far as I was concerned.

I tamped down my nerves with a dash of snark. "No one dies in postcard-perfect Nantucket?" I asked. But I regretted it as soon as the words came out of my mouth. Brendan looked down at the counter, and I realized I sounded flippant and mean.

Guilt flooded my system.

After all, he hadn't meant to trigger me. And maybe Brendan knew the girl on the beach. She'd probably gone to his school, I realized, unless she was a summer person. Whoever she was, she was someone's Sammi.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean—"

"No, you're right," he said. "It's not perfect. But you still don't hear a lot about murders or violence, or any of the crazy stuff that's always happening

on the mainland.”

It was strange to keep hearing about the “mainland” as if it were some faraway place. Nantucket was thirty miles out to sea, but it still had internet and TV and people coming and going every day—it wasn’t like we were on another planet. But then I remembered how Todd didn’t lock the front door to his big house, and how people parked their bikes—and didn’t chain them—all over town. That sense of safety and comfort that everyone here took for granted was just an illusion. It was more like the mainland than anyone wanted to admit.

The dead girl was proof of that.

“It’s terrible. Did you know her?” I asked softly.

Brendan looped his thumbs around the ties of his juice-splattered apron. “That’s the thing,” he said. “She’s not from here. They sent out an email from the high school asking anyone who might know her to come forward, but nobody has any idea who she is.”

“It’s weird that no one knows anything. This place isn’t that big.” I fumbled with the lids, dropping some on the floor. Someone *had* to know her. This was a teeny island—according to Todd, it was only fourteen miles long—and the only way off or on was by boat or plane.

Brendan picked up the lids I’d dropped, putting away the clean ones and tossing the ones that had landed on the floor. “If she was a local, they’d have ID’d her by now.”

“So you think she was a tourist?” I asked.

My mind flashed to the smiling summer people who arrived through the airport and harbor. It would make sense if she’d died in a sea-kayaking accident or Jet Skiing in the rough surf. She’d probably come here for a long weekend of fun in the sun....

And instead, her life was cut short.

“Maybe,” Brendan said, biting his lip as he wiped down the counter, which was already spotless. “But I don’t think we’ll ever find out who she is. This is probably going to get hushed up pretty quickly. It always does.”

“What does?” I asked.

“Anything bad for business. You’ll see,” he said with a jaded sigh. “I know it’s all over the news right now, but it won’t be for long. I give it another day, maybe two.”

I found that hard to believe.

A girl was *dead*.

And no one knew her name.

Finding out who she was, and what happened to her, was surely worth more than a pile of tourism dollars. There must be people in her life who missed her, who wondered where she was. If Sammi had disappeared, her family would have been frantic—organizing searches, offering rewards, making statements on the local news.

I would have done everything I could to get answers if it had happened to Sammi.

My eyes filmed over with tears as I thought about it.

Sammi dying was the most terrible thing that had ever happened to me. Her loss was an awful and ugly hole in my world. But to have someone disappear from your life and to not know the truth...

That seemed even worse.

I wiped my eyes.

I didn’t want to cry in front of Brendan.

The shop started to fill up again and I turned back to my work, smacking globs of ice cream and toppings into lopsided heaps, working faster than before. When I broke my third waffle cone of the day, Brendan gently took the scooper out of my hands and switched places with me. I nodded wordlessly as I took over his job, dumping fruit and vegetables into the industrial blender. I pressed as hard as I could on the tamper, as if I could pulverize my jagged feelings of helplessness into something smoother and more palatable.



CHAPTER 10

MY MOM AND I WERE back on the ferry, leaning against the railing as Nantucket Harbor receded from view. I whirled around to ask why were we leaving so soon—hadn't we just gotten here? Before I could open my mouth, Todd and Eric joined us on the deck. The wind ruffled Eric's shaggy hair, and Todd wrapped my mom in a hug.

"We're all together," he said. "Safe and sound."

The sun had set, and it was so misty that the horizon blurred into the sea, but something caught my eye in the choppy waves, pulling my attention from the pseudo-nuclear family unit. It was a small lifeboat bobbing in the water, and I could just make out the shape of a young woman slumped against the inflatable hull. I pointed to the girl and shouted, but she couldn't hear me over the howling wind. I screamed at the top of my lungs, turning from my mom to Todd and finally to Eric, waving my arms and pointing at the girl in the lifeboat.

But they only stared back blankly, as if I wasn't making any sense.

I ran to the upper deck, looking for crew members—for anyone—to help as I sprinted through the eerily empty ferry. I could feel time ticking away as the lifeboat floated farther into the gloom, every passing second pounding in my chest like the beating of my heart. When I finally found the captain's deck, no one was at the wheel...so I grabbed it, hoping I could steer the ferry closer to the girl, that I could somehow save her. But by the time I managed to spin the wheel and turn the massive ferry around, the lifeboat had already disappeared into the mist.



I was awake before dawn.

My sheets were twisted around my feet, and I'd barely slept. I had a vague memory of trying to say something important to my mom, and to Todd and Eric, and of being so frustrated I could scream. It was obviously a dream, the detritus of my mind churning through the night. I knew that now. But I was still irrationally mad at Eric for not listening to me.

I shook my head clear and swiped the angry tears from my cheeks.

Back in the real world, I was very much on dry land and fumbling for my glasses on a sturdy wooden bed in a rustic-chic house, my stuffed seal next to my pillow. I clicked on the bedside lamp, illuminating a room where everything was solid and polished to a shine, anchoring me to a summer in Todd and Eric's world.

It wasn't the worst port in a storm.

I had my own bathroom for the first time ever.

I could take as long as I wanted in the shower. I could wrap myself in the brand-new fluffy white towels that had been arranged just for me. But all the luxuries in Nantucket weren't enough to rouse me from bed, even though I knew I wouldn't be able to go back to sleep.

The nightmare lingered over me like a fog as I strained to remember the details. Someone needed help. Was it the girl from the beach, trying to tell me something? Flashbacks of that morning swam into my mind's eye. The girl's pale shoulders half hidden by her tangled hair. The shrieks of seagulls as I reached for my phone.

I never fully saw the girl's face.

It had been angled away from me.

But my mind decided it wanted to mess with me, as usual. It didn't take much for me to imagine that it was Sammi's cheek I'd seen pressed against the sand. That I'd found her lifeless body for the second time, helpless and sprawled at my feet.

That wasn't Sammi, I reminded myself.

She was a total stranger.

She wasn't your best friend.

You found her and did the right thing by calling for help.

I couldn't have done anything more, I told myself, trying to be firm. To override the doubt that started to swell at the back of my mind.

I knew that dwelling on bad things—things I couldn't change—was the opposite of what I was supposed to do. But I had to find out if the girl had been identified, if she'd be laid to rest with a proper funeral. It would be soul-crushing for her friends and family, but at least they'd have some closure.

That was what I would have wanted.

I grabbed my phone, which had been charging on the nightstand, and flicked open the browser to search for “Nantucket + body discovered” and “Jane Doe + Nantucket.” I followed every recent link I could find, but no national news sites had covered the story. Only some local Cape-area media that had ads for charter fishing tours in their sidebars. In the *Inquirer & Mirror*, an article announced a town hall meeting to discuss island safety. The agenda included curfews and neighborhood patrols, as well as resources for talking to minors about drugs and “mental hygiene.” More than a few paragraphs were spent explaining the island's low crime rate, echoing Todd and Brendan's refrain—*This sort of thing doesn't happen here*. I skimmed past them, looking for any details about the girl or her identity and settling on a couple of quotes toward the end of the piece:

Nantucket High School Principal Dr. Judy Callomon shared via email: “I've been in touch with the police and can confirm that all NHS students are accounted for. Our hearts go out to the girl's family. Claire Mayeux, chairwoman of the ACK Chamber of Commerce, issued the following statement: “Our deepest condolences to this woman's family. Nantucket is one of the safest places on earth and a family-friendly destination with over 82 miles of beaches and 1,400 acres of conservation land.

The article ended abruptly with a call for tips:

The police urge the public to come forward with any relevant information about the identity of Jane Doe.

Sadness rolled over me like a wave. I tried to ignore it, deciding to keep digging instead of being pulled under by my own grief. I scrolled to the comments section, searching for clues.



[Jerry0]

probably drugs



[R Putterman]

Maybe she washed up from the Vineyard. Or from Portugal. She might not ever have set foot on the island!



[SandyFaraway]

Bet she was in witness protection and that's why no one knows her...



[BoyMom99, posted via Facebook]

THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS <3

That was it?

A seasick feeling rose in my throat as I scrolled down to the bottom of the page. The police had no leads at all. No one knew anything—and everyone in the comments seemed more interested in their own personal

theories than actual evidence. The girl was unclaimed, like a lost piece of luggage instead of a human being.

Images of the dead girl's tangled red hair floated in my head alongside my mom's panicked face and the police—unsmiling but not unkind—asking questions I couldn't answer on an empty stretch of beach. The screams of seagulls blended into the wail of an ambulance, its blue and red lights flashing against a rain-slicked sidewalk: a different night, a different place.

A different girl.

I dropped my head to my hands, trying to force myself back to the here and now. It was almost nine, and I'd probably missed whatever breakfast my mom had made to impress Todd. I forced myself to sit on the edge of the bed until I mustered the will to pull on my yellow Milk & Honey polo and a pair of shorts. I no longer had the energy or desire to shower or avail myself of the fluffy Egyptian cotton towels. I wore a baseball cap and an apron at work anyway. No one would notice if my shirt was wrinkled and I hadn't washed my hair.



After another twenty-minute negotiation about going into work, Mom finally agreed to drive me in Todd's Jeep, where I sank into the soft tan leather of the passenger seat. On the radio, a Beach Boys song ended and the station transitioned to local news from the Cape. A man with a slight Boston accent intoned:

"A teenager's body washed ashore on a Nantucket beach, authorities report, worrying the local community. Suspicious deaths are rare in this peaceful enclave, and officials held a town hall meeting and press conference to address the incident and any possible connection to the reports of an uptick in crime on the island."

My mom reached for the knob on the dashboard.

"Leave it," I said. "I want to hear."

Her hand hovered over the audio controls for a moment, then settled back on the steering wheel.

“We now share a clip of Police Chief Greco at the town hall meeting: ‘We urge anyone who may know this young lady to come forward. We’ve set up an anonymous tip line.’ ”

“ ‘Is there a reward?’ ” a less-audible voice called out, presumably from the audience.

“ ‘Not at this time.’ ”

“Island residents inquired if the Jane Doe could have drifted over from the mainland, but Chief Greco stated that evidence rules out prolonged submersion. When pressed for more detail by attending reporters, the chief declared the investigation to be ongoing and ended the news conference. In other news, we’ll be sharing tips on how to beat the heat, and you asked for it: the best potato salad recipes sent in by our listeners!”

The news transitioned back to music.

Carly Simon sang about clouds in her coffee as I stared at the car speakers, trying to summon more details about the case through sheer force of will. I’d learned at least one thing, though—they’d ruled out prolonged submersion, so that meant that the girl hadn’t been in the water long. Which made sense, considering how she’d looked on the beach.

It meant she’d died recently.

But there isn’t even a reward, I thought.

Frustration simmered into anger in my veins.

Didn’t they want to solve the case? Wasn’t there enough concentrated wealth on this island to help this poor girl? They might not have known who she was, but the reporter hadn’t even said anything about the girl herself except that she was a teenager—no physical description, no identifying features.... I knew from watching crime shows that police investigations often held back certain details from the media. But how did they expect anyone to come forward if they didn’t share *any* information about her?

“Honey, sweetie,” my mom said.

She pulled at my arm, and I realized I was chewing on my cuticles hard enough to make them bleed.

It was something Sammi used to do when she was stressed. Her mother always said how disgusting it was and would yank Sammi's hands from her mouth. After we started Ragdolls, I'd help her wrap Band-Aids around each finger so it wouldn't hurt to play guitar, until she eventually broke the habit. I shook my head clear, realizing that we'd already pulled up in front of Milk & Honey and that my mom was staring at me as the car idled.

Waiting patiently for me to come back to the present.

"We can turn right back around," she said, her hazel eyes rimmed with worry. "You don't have to go in again if you're not up for it—it's just a summer job; it's not important anymore."

Her voice was serious and I knew she meant it.

I could spend the day with her and Todd.

Following them around antique stores.

Or I could stay in my room, scrolling through my phone and watching the ceiling fan spin. I vacantly gazed through the car window at the striped blue-and-yellow awning of Milk & Honey. Both options felt so much worse than a six-hour shift making smoothies.

"I'm okay," I said, cracking open the car door and letting in a warm breeze.

Beyond the confines of the Jeep, the sky was a sparkling blue suffused with a harsh, bright sunshine that chased away any shadows. I made a silent pact with myself to not dwell on anything morbid. I hugged my mom, managing to wriggle out of her grip as she reminded me for the hundredth time to *just call her* if I started to feel sad or anxious.

Or if I needed to talk.

"I will," I said. "I promise."

Inside the store, Brendan took a break from loading receipt paper in the register to hand me a freshly made iced coffee, which I accepted gratefully. He connected his phone to the shop speakers and started playing a Phish bootleg, then launched into an impassioned explanation of why each song was at least twenty minutes long. I sipped my coffee and tried to pay attention, since he was being so nice to me—and because I *wasn't* focusing on dead girls today. It was clear from his bobbing head and shuffling feet that

he loved it, but to me it sounded like music that aliens would play at a circus on Mars.

Which wasn't a bad thing, per se.

It was certainly distracting.

Halfway into our shift, our stream of patrons thinned to a trickle, leaving me and Brendan alone in the shop again. Without the all-encompassing business of serving customers, the uneasy feelings I'd kept at bay began wrapping around me like the arms of a squid. Maybe there'd been developments in the case of the dead girl.

Maybe I could get some closure.

Despite my pact with myself, I pulled out my phone and refreshed the browser. When I didn't find any new articles, I added new tabs with other searches, combining "Jane Doe," "drowning," "accident," "missing girl," "missing teen," "missing woman," "runaway," and "suspicious death" with "Nantucket," "Cape Cod," "New England," "Martha's Vineyard," and anything else I could think of to find out more about her.

A string of results popped up.

As I scrolled, I realized many were from older news reports that went back years and years. And most were about how the missing person was eventually found. I adjusted my search parameters for the past few weeks, adding "Boston" and "Rhode Island" to my search terms because those places seemed to pop up in a lot of the other articles.

But nothing seemed to match the girl I'd found.

There were no active searches for a missing teenager or young woman, no parental pleas for help finding their sweet little girl. Either nobody knew—or cared—that something had happened to this girl, or what really happened to her was being covered up.

Just like Brendan had said it would be.

I realized I was sounding like a conspiracy theorist.

It was possible she was a runaway, and there could have been some other more likely explanation for why no one realized she was gone yet. I looked over at Brendan, who was fiddling with his vape pen, and tapped at my phone screen. Adding local hospitals or shelters to my search might open up some

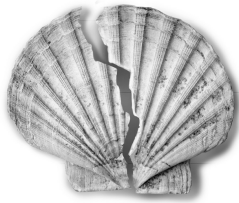
more information...but the bell over the door tinkled, alerting us to a new group of customers, just as I was digging deeper into my search.

I let out a small huff of air.

I didn't want to lose my investigative momentum, but now I'd have to wait on another wave of summer people. I supposed I was a summer person, too, I realized, surprised at how quickly I'd taken to the local vernacular. I shoved the phone into my back pocket, leaving my browser tab open, and composed my face into a less cynical smile. As I turned toward the counter, though, I was startled to see who was right in front of me. It was the three girls from the beach party, looking almost as ragged as I felt. They were clearly hungover, with chapped lips and dark circles under their eyes, and they were wearing the same dresses I'd met them in a few days ago.

But they didn't seem to care how they looked.

"Lucia," Selah said, pointing right at me. "We've been looking for you."



CHAPTER 11

I WAS SURPRISED—AND A TEENY bit flattered—that she remembered my name. I was used to fading into the background, even at our Ragdolls shows, where I played in the shadows at the side of the stage. It was Sammi who always sang in the spotlight. But the way Selah pinned me down with her dark brown eyes was a little unsettling.

“Hi,” I said, wiping my hands on my apron.

Selah’s eyes were so dark that her pupils blended into her irises, forming two deep black pools rimmed in smudged eyeliner. I tried not to stare, but it was easy to get lost in them. Tearing my attention away from Selah, I nodded hello to the other girls. Tamar plucked some biodegradable straws from their holder and spread them out on the counter while she hummed a little song to herself. Kezia chewed on the end of her long blond braid, looking first at the array of ice cream under the plexiglass counter and then at Selah, as if waiting for her permission to order.

Their energy seemed...*off*.

Gone were the look-at-me vibes from when I’d last seen them at the beach party. Even though that was only five days ago, it felt like a lifetime. Before I found the body on the beach—when that girl might still have been alive. Everything was different now.

Starting with this brittle tension between them.

Brendan stared at Selah with an open-mouthed grin, then reached for a mason jar full of marshmallows on a shelf above the counter, letting his polo shirt ride up over his biceps. I’d noticed that he always did something unnecessarily physical—like stretching his arms over his head or lifting something heavy—when cute girls came into the shop.

Selah pursed her lips into an inviting smile.

“I’m hungry,” she said. “Could you surprise me?”

Brendan nodded.

“I got you,” he said, then spun on his heels, grabbing a smoothie cup and gathering an armload of ingredients from the walk-in refrigerator. I guess he’d do anything for a pretty girl. While Brendan started to fill the juicer with fresh strawberries and basil leaves, Selah leaned over the counter and smiled at me.

“We’re having a beach day,” she said, her voice barely a whisper despite the whirr and clank of strawberries getting pulverized. “You should come.” I didn’t know what to say. They’d met me once, for half a minute, and even then I’d bailed on them.

“And bring your not-boyfriend,” Kezia added.

She winked at me as she twirled the wet tail of her braid, and that was when it clicked. The real reason they’d invited me: Eric. Honestly, I couldn’t blame them. They wanted to get to know the good-looking guy from the beach party, and I was the connection. It wasn’t exactly the confidence boost I’d been hoping for, but at least the world made sense again.

“Thanks, but he’s at work all day,” I said, watching while Tamar methodically lined up all the straws she’d spread out on the counter. Kezia snatched one and ripped off the paper packaging, then blew it toward Selah, who batted it away. “And actually, I’m working, too.”

Brendan turned back to the counter, interrupting our conversation to present a frothy pink smoothie to Selah as if it were a diamond ring.

She tasted it, licking her lips.

“You’re amazing,” she said to Brendan.

“Are you sure that boy at the bonfire isn’t your boyfriend?” Kezia asked, peeking coyly from behind her blond curtain bangs. Selah and Kezia cocked their heads, clearly interested in my answer.

“You did leave with him,” Selah purred.

“Eric is *not* my boyfriend,” I insisted.

I was about to launch into a convoluted explanation about how he was my mom’s boyfriend’s son and also my ride, but I stopped myself. I barely knew these girls—why did I owe them any explanation? I also felt a tiny

surge of something I couldn't fully name. Disappointment, maybe—or resignation—at the realization that if any of these stunning girls wanted Eric, that meant there was absolutely no chance for me.

Which I knew was stupid.

I didn't even like him that way.

"Come with us," Selah said, interrupting my thoughts. She leaned her elbows on the counter, so close to me that I got a whiff of sunshine and sea salt along with her strawberry-vanilla-scented breath. I wondered what perfume she wore, or if it was her shampoo.

It smelled divine.

"Thanks, but I'm busy here."

I looked over to Brendan, expecting him to confirm.

The clock over the door showed that it was just a few minutes past one. My workday was barely halfway through, but Tamar was batting her eyes and whispering something to him at the other end of the counter and Brendan was listening to her even more raptly than when he'd been explaining how the album *Billy Breathes* changed his life.

"Busy?" Selah asked.

She looked pointedly around the empty shop.

"I'm supposed to work until four."

Selah made a cartoonish sad face, as if I were just making up excuses to not hang out with them. I got the feeling that none of these girls had ever worked a day in their lives. They were probably used to doing whatever they wanted.

I wondered what that felt like.

Tamar rapped a knuckle against the plate-glass window at the front of the shop and I jerked my head toward the sound. Sunlight bounced off the hood of a car, and I winced at its brilliance. "Look," she said. "Town is dead. No one's coming in. Everyone is at the beach. It's a perfect day for a swim." I peeked at the strip of cobalt-blue sky above the row of shops across the street. Only the lightest of breezes fluttered the leaves on the linden tree outside the window, and there was not a single cloud—or tourist—in sight.

Tamar was right.

It was a perfect beach day.

All our customers were out enjoying the glorious weather, and the shop felt overly warm, the air too stale and sugary to breathe. But I was cooped up here with absolutely nothing to do but make small talk with Brendan and try not to think about the dead girl. *Whatever you do*, I repeated in my mind, *don't think about the dead girl*. I pressed my lips together, busying myself by switching around a stack of medium cups with large.

"Aw, don't make her feel bad," Kezia said, wrapping her pale, freckled arm around Selah's shoulders. "If she doesn't want to go, she doesn't have to go. Right, Lucia?"

"It's not that I don't want to...", I said, hesitating.

But I didn't want to stay here, either.

The aromas in the shop had gone from cloying to suffocating since the girls had walked through the door, and I craved fresh air and cool water on my skin. The urge formed suddenly in my head, so strong it felt like a physical necessity.

I wanted to go with them. I needed to.

But it wasn't up to me.

I wasn't about to lose this job a week into the summer. I'd done the math, and I knew I'd be making more in these three months than I ever had before, not including tips. And without Milk & Honey, I'd be stuck at home with Todd and Mom's well-meaning but oppressive scrutiny.

There was no way I'd just skip out.

"I can't just leave," I said, shaking my head. It was true.

"But Brendan's here!" Selah sang. She slurped the last of her smoothie through her disintegrating straw and cocked her head at him thoughtfully, like she was sizing him up and liked what she saw. "You can man the decks, right? We'd totally owe you."

Brendan grinned. "Yeah, I can watch the shop."

I looked at him incredulously.

"It's fine," I said. "I can stay."

"They're right, it's dead today," Brendan echoed with a shrug. "You don't need to be here." I stared at him for an extra beat, waiting for him to

change his mind or make it clear that he was just playing along as a joke. For him to say that if one of us was cutting work, it should definitely be him. But he just gathered up the loose straws that Kezia had spread across the counter and placed them neatly back in their container.

This poor guy, I thought. Did he really think he'd have a chance with these girls if he did everything they wanted? He must have thought it would help. Or maybe it was something Tamar had said when she'd whispered in his ear. Otherwise, why would he agree to pick up my slack and work alone in an empty shop with no tips in sight? Or maybe he simply felt bad for me, considering what I'd been through.

"You're our hero," Kezia said.

She blew Brendan a kiss.

"Let's head out before he changes his mind," Tamar joked, holding the shop door open to the promise of an afternoon soaked in sunshine. Brendan shielded his eyes to watch her go.

"C'mon," she said.

It seemed settled, though I didn't remember agreeing to leave. I guess Brendan—whatever his reasons—had done that on my behalf. I grabbed my backpack, wondering if I'd be paid for a half day or for just the couple hours I was there. "Call me if it gets busy," I said to Brendan. "I'll come back." I almost couldn't believe what I was doing, but I followed the girls out of the shop.

"Yay!" Tamar yelled, linking her arm through mine as we started down the street.

"I'm so glad you're coming with," Selah said, giddily laughing as she tucked my other arm through hers and grabbed Kezia's elbow, making us a chain of four. "I knew you were cool."

"Selah's been so bored with just me and Kezia." Tamar sighed.

"So where shall we go?" Selah asked. "Surfside? Nobadeer?"

"Wherever the cute boys hang out," Kezia giggled.

"Wait!" I said, pulling everyone to a halt as I stopped in my tracks on the brick sidewalk. "I don't have my bathing suit." I was still in my shorts and Milk & Honey polo, which now sported flecks of pureed fruit with accents of

chocolate sauce. My greasy hair was matted to my head from being under a baseball cap all morning, and I felt like a completely different species from these three girls, who looked like they'd just stepped out of Free People's Instagram feed.

"Bathing suit?" Kezia asked.

She looked at me like I'd said the dumbest thing in the world. My stomach dropped. I hoped these girls didn't expect me to skinny-dip in broad daylight. Or maybe they just wanted to hang out on the beach and not swim? If that was the case, I wished I'd put on sunscreen that morning...but the day had started out gray and foggy, like every other day here.

"We left our stuff at our place, too," Tamar said. "We'll figure it out."

Maybe this wasn't the best idea after all.

Having a beach day with some random girls wasn't exactly something I was prepared for, but now that the prospect of hanging out seemed to be fading away, I wanted to try to make it work. "I guess we could all go home and pick up our suits. I'm on the other side of the island. How about you guys?" I asked, though I wasn't sure if my mom and Todd would be home, and I certainly didn't want them to know I was skipping out on work.

It was one thing if I was depressed and sad. That, my mom understood. I doubted she'd be as cool about me playing hooky for the fun of it.

"And waste one second of this sunshine?" Selah declared, swooping an arm across the sky. "No way. Follow me." She strode confidently ahead, pulling us along in her wake as she swept through the door of a boutique with sundresses in the window.

As my eyes adjusted to the inside of the shop, I blinked at a swirl of bright colors and patterns. Wicker tables displayed beaded sandals and folded scarves alongside rows of oversized sunglasses. A deeply tanned older woman behind a counter glanced up briefly, but when she saw the four of us she smiled politely before looking back down into her phone. The prices were a bit shocking—who would pay that much for a headband with seashells on it?

My new friends, I thought, wondering what I had gotten myself into.

Selah led us to the bathing suit rack toward the back of the store, where she and Kezia and Tamar pawed through the bikinis and one-pieces and held suits up to themselves, making squeals of approval for each other's choices without bothering to check the tags.

It reminded me of thrifting with Sammi, how we used to scour the racks of flannel tops and 1980s formal wear at Goodwill and Red White & Blue, then take our spoils home to Frankenstein the weirdest and cheapest possible outfits for our Ragdolls performances. I hated the musty, mothball smell of those stores, but nothing could compare to finding a standout, one-of-a-kind piece.

Bonus points if it actually fit. Or didn't have any stains.

But here—thanks to the Diptyque candle burning on the counter—it smelled like freesia. As I moved to the sale section at the far end of the rack, I reminded myself not to get carried away by the girls and their shopping frenzy. I could tell that their families were in a different tax bracket than mine. Unlike me, the three of them probably had no limit on their spending.

Must be nice, I thought.

I reached for a plaid tankini on the sale rack—kind of basic, but at least the price wasn't more than I'd make in a week at Milk & Honey. Selah craned her neck, looking at the suit and then me with a pained expression on her face. I had to admit, it *did* look like something a grandmother would wear. Or maybe that grandmother's curtains.

Selah grabbed a simple blue triangle bikini from the rack and shoved it to my chest.

"Much better," she said.

I looked down at the teeny scraps of fabric, imagining how much of my body would be exposed if I actually wore it, and cringed. This was the kind of suit Sammi might have rocked if she were here, but definitely not me.

"I love that you think I can pull this off," I said, placing it back on the rack. "But no thank you."

"You'd slay in that," Selah said. "Trust me."

"I don't want to blind anyone with my pale flesh," I joked. "I'm not a bikini girl." Selah looked at me thoughtfully, then ran her finger down the

line of hangers, selecting a black spaghetti-strap one-piece with a stylized daisy on the front.

“How about this one?”

I reached for it, checking the size and the price.

“Oh no you don’t,” she said, snatching it out of my grasp, then grabbed a magenta halter bikini for herself. “This is my treat.” I let out a nervous laugh. It seemed a little weird that Selah would buy me something so expensive when I’d basically just met her. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that—if it was simply generous...or show-offy. But maybe that was just how these girls rolled.

Maybe impulse buys like this weren’t a big deal to them.

“That’s really nice,” I said. “But you don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t have to, I *want* to,” Selah laughed, flashing a rose-gold AmEx. “That’s what this is for.” She waved to Kezia and Tamar, who trotted over with their arms full of suits. “You can pick *one*,” she said. “I’ve got this.” Kezia and Tamar obediently handed their selections to Selah, as if accustomed to following her orders.

She was clearly the queen bee.

“Kez, you can’t just get bottoms!” Selah laughed.

She swung a pair of sunshine-yellow string bikini bottoms around her index finger as Kezia tracked down the matching top in her size, then shooed us out the door to find their bikes while she settled up. It was so easy being with them that I felt myself buoyed along by their effervescent mood. By their infectious, cheerful energy. Keeping up with all their chatter left little room for morbid thoughts and depressing Google searches.

These girls didn’t have a care in the world.

And for a while, I pretended not to, either.



CHAPTER 12

"SO, WHERE ARE YOU ALL from?" I asked.

I was flanked by Tamar and Kezia as we strode purposefully past Nantucket Bookworks and crossed the street while Selah finished up in the boutique. I was still kind of shocked that I'd left work mid-shift to hang out with three girls I barely knew—and that one of them was currently buying me a two-hundred-dollar designer swimsuit—but it was easy to lose myself in their excitement as they argued about which beach would have the best waves today. The two girls paused beside a bulletin board in front of an upscale souvenir shop called the Hub. The board was fluttering with flyers for dog walkers and boat tours and babysitters, and even one sad message about a missing wedding ring.

Reward upon return.

No questions asked.

"We live overseas," Kezia said.

"We're just here for the summer," Tamar added.

"Cool," I said, trying for a casual tone that conveyed that I regularly hung out with jet-setting teens. "Cool, cool, cool." There was a long bike rack behind the bulletin board, empty except for three clunky, retro-looking bikes with the same weathered charm as Todd's vintage Jeep. One was painted bright red, one was white, and one was cornflower blue.

"And you?" Tamar asked. "Are you local?"

She tugged at the red bike, struggling to dislodge it from the rack. I'd assumed they had a car, but not everyone here did. They could be staying in town, at one of the immaculately landscaped homes of "historic significance." Or at one of the cute little inns I'd noticed on my downtown job search. Parking was tight on Nantucket, so a lot of people biked.

“I’m from Pittsburgh,” I said.

I reached over and pulled the bike free.

Kezia looked at me with confusion through wisps of sun-bleached hair that seemed to have gotten even brighter since I’d met her just a few days ago. It was hard to believe how much everything had changed since then.

I was making friends now, for one.

“In Pennsylvania,” I said.

“Oh,” Kezia said, smiling in thanks as she took the bike from my hands. Soon they’d see me for who I was—a depressing Rust Belt nobody with a recent history of not one but two dead girls. They’d drop me like yesterday’s fast fashion. I had to steer it as far away from me and my pathetic life as humanly possible, if I wanted these girls to keep hanging out with me.

“And, um, where are you staying on the island?” I asked, distracted by Selah, who was swinging a bulging canvas tote as she sashayed toward the bike rack. There were four of us, I realized...and only three bikes. I started to panic, but the others didn’t seem worried.

“We’re on the other side of the island,” Selah said, effortlessly stuffing her bag into the wicker basket of the blue bike. “What about you?”

“Tom Nevers,” I said. “My mom’s boyfriend’s house.”

“Is it waterfront?” Kezia asked. “Does it have a pool?”

“*Ke-ziaaaaah!*” Selah shrieked, shooting an exasperated look at Kezia before turning to me. “You’ll have to excuse our little towheaded friend here,” she said. “She’s totally crass.”

“But we put up with her anyway.” Tamar grinned, pulling the last bike from the rack.

“You know you love me,” Kezia said. She threw an arm around Tamar’s deep-bronze shoulders and planted a kiss on her cheek. Tamar wrinkled her nose and frowned as she disentangled herself from Kezia, then straddled her bike.

“Where to?” she asked, looking to Selah for direction.

“I’m thinking Surfside,” Selah said. “Hop on.”

She nodded toward the handlebars of her bike.

The last time I'd tried that I was barely ten years old, with Sammi. She'd still had training wheels on her purple Huffy when she'd dared me to climb up onto her handlebars, and I distinctly remember us both falling in the alley behind her house. Sammi had cleaned our scrapes herself, shushing me when I howled at the cold sting of alcohol in her upstairs bathroom, surrounded by pink and mint-green tile. She'd ignored her own cuts to stick an extra-large bandage on my knee, pressing it gently to make sure it stayed in place.

We'd always taken care of each other.

Even when it wasn't easy.

"We're not going far," Selah said, breaking my train of thought. "And we can switch if you hate it." I looked dubiously at the rusted handlebars, wondering how I was supposed to climb onto them without making a fool of myself. That was the last thing I wanted to do. But I'd already ditched work and Selah had bought me a swimsuit.

I couldn't bow out now.

"Okay," I said. "No problem."

After a few false starts, I managed to balance myself across the metal beam. My butt was halfway in the basket—where it was partially cushioned by Selah's tote—and my legs dangled on either side of the front wheel. Selah pushed off without warning, the bike wobbling violently as I let out a screech, gripping the inner handlebars for dear life. I could hear Tamar and Kezia laughing behind us, but I didn't care. I just held on as tightly as I could while Selah pedaled faster and faster down the sidewalk, avoiding the cobblestones on the street.

For that, at least, I was thankful.

Soon cobblestones gave way to smoother pavement and we spread out across the entire road, riding three abreast as we rolled through quiet streets lined with tidy gray-shingled homes. The bright midday sun filtered through the shade of hundred-year-old elms, dappling our arms so they looked like sealskin. As we bounced over a patch of gravel, I very much wished that I were wearing a helmet—but there were barely any cars on the road this early in the season, so I tried to stop thinking about all the different ways I could end up in the emergency room and started to enjoy the delicious feeling of

wind in my hair. The girls were standing in their saddles and pedaling hard as they blew through every stop sign we passed, and I noticed that there wasn't a single traffic light on the island to slow us down.

It really was a different world out here.

Coasting out of the historic downtown area, we passed even statelier houses—and a few hotels—nestled behind white picket fences and lush hydrangeas exploding with sky-blue and bubble-gum-pink blossoms. Instead of sidewalks, a border of sand appeared along the blacktop. Selah swerved to avoid it, but she wasn't really committing to one lane or the other. She was more of a right-down-the-center kind of girl. When a Land Rover approached ahead of us, I leaned over my shoulder.

"You're gonna move over, right?" I asked.

I tried to make my voice sound calm, and Selah grinned, waiting until the last possible second to swoop to the side of the road. Kezia and Tamar fell in line behind us, and I squeezed the handlebars as hard as I could with sweaty palms. The Land Rover whooshed by with only inches between us, and I felt something jagged and sharp pinching me somewhere in my torso, right above my stomach. Thanks to my therapist back home, I knew it wasn't a heart attack, it was anxiety—but it felt like a sea urchin was lodged in my rib cage, and it hurt when I breathed. I pictured it in my mind's eye, poking at my lungs with its reddish-purple spines...like it was *trying* to hurt me.

Like it wanted to teach me a lesson.

Go away, I told my anxiety urchin. I'm having fun.

The urchin flexed its spines, and I felt the sting of a hundred needles in my solar plexus. This wasn't how today was supposed to go. I sucked down deep gulps of air and at least one unlucky gnat, trying my hardest to breathe through my nerves as we bounced over the road, the metal frame of Selah's bike digging into my thighs. When we finally passed a sign that said "Surfside" and slowed to a stop in a sandy parking lot packed with SUVs, I hopped off the handlebars with a sigh of relief and rubbed the backs of my complaining thighs.

Not the best way to travel.

The girls leaned their bikes against an overflowing rack of candy-colored beach cruisers as I quietly recovered from my anxiety attack before jogging to catch up with them. They were headed toward a snack stand surrounded by kids with mouths stained blue and red from eating Popsicles and an enterprising seagull snapping up French fries. We jumped down weathered wooden steps, racing to kick off our shoes on the sandy path that cut through the dunes to the beach.

“Ouch,” I hissed.

The sand was burning hot, and I tried to walk on the outer edges of my feet to lessen the pain, but the heat didn’t seem to bother the Three. My heart was still racing from the ride over, but as the sparkling indigo waves swelled into view, it felt like it stuttered to a stop. The last time I’d been at the seashore, I’d found the dead girl. No matter how gorgeous the beach was, I couldn’t shake the feeling that behind all this natural beauty—even in broad daylight, with children’s laughter on the wind—something terrible could be hiding.

“Hey, Lucia!” Selah shouted, noticing that I’d fallen behind.

“Coming!” I called, pretending that I’d dropped something and waving her on to buy myself time. I steeled my nerves, telling myself that this was a different beach and a different situation. That there would be no dead bodies today. I needed to keep walking, to distract myself instead of obsessing over that motionless hand and the reddish hair ruffling in the salty sea breeze. The flash of red and blue lights over a lifeless body.

The rain, soaking through my jean jacket on another night.

So far away from here.

I needed to yank my mind away from that memory.

And I needed to catch up to the others, who had gone on ahead of me, their arms linked again, with Selah at the center. Though I was starting to get a sense of their individual personalities, they were such a tight-knit unit that I couldn’t help but think of them as the other girls. Three new friends for the price of one. Focus on right here and now—not the past, I told myself.

Focus on living.

Just ahead, golden sand stretched out to thundering surf where towering waves smashed onto the shore in a spray of white foam. I watched from afar as the Three sailed through the maze of beach blankets and umbrellas and sun tents and coolers, past sunscreen-slathered babies and older couples in wide-brimmed hats and packs of teens snapping selfies, flexing and smiling and blaring music from their phones.

I hurried to catch up.

By the time I did, the Three were already slipping on their bathing suits underneath their maxi dresses, right there on the beach—in front of everyone. Selah ripped the store's tag off with her teeth while I looked around for a changing room and realized that I'd missed my chance, up by the parking lot. I contemplated wriggling into my bathing suit the way they were, but maneuvering my new one-piece around my shorts was going to be an exercise in futility at best.

And at worst?

I shuddered to think.

"I'll be right back," I said, deciding to retrace my steps back up to the bathrooms for some much-needed privacy. Selah arched a delicate eyebrow as she yanked a ponytail holder out of her long brown hair and dropped it at her feet.

"Don't take too long," she said airily.

"The ocean waits for no one!" Tamar laughed.

I sprinted back up the path to change, running on my toes to minimize contact with the red-hot sand. My new suit fit me like a second skin, and I felt a rush of gratitude to Selah for getting it for me. It was so much better than my old pilling one-piece still rolled up in my duffel bag at Todd's place. I jogged back to our spot, which I recognized by the piles of clothes and the tote Selah had tossed haphazardly onto the sand. The Three were already in the ocean, with only their shining heads poking out from the glistening waves. I smiled as they dove headfirst into the whitecaps, the bottoms of their feet flashing like seashells before they disappeared under the turbulent surf. I assumed that the water was freezing, but they didn't look cold at all.

"I'm coming!" I shouted.

I placed my clothes next to their pile of dresses and adjusted my bathing suit, making sure I didn't have a wedgie, then cautiously tiptoed past the waterline. The first wave to slide over my feet was an icy blast that nearly numbed my ankles. I gasped as another wave surged, splashing over my knees. How did anyone swim in this without a wetsuit?

Were they masochists...or immune to the cold?

Backing up a few steps, I felt my heels sink into the soft, wet sand of the shore. I'd have to do this gradually, letting my body get used to the frosty bite of the ocean. Another wave barreled toward me, hitting me mid thigh and nearly knocking me over. Struggling to keep my balance, I noticed another swell frothing toward me—and this one was even bigger. Just before it crested, Selah turned inland, diving forward with her arms outstretched. She rode the wave all the way up onto the shore and staggered to her feet right next to me.

"Come on," she said, smiling broadly at me with diamonds of seawater sparkling on her eyelashes. "This area is the roughest part. You have to get past where it crashes."

Easier said than done.

But Selah took my hand, leading me deeper into the surf. She looked sleek and at home in this frigid water, but she'd had a few minutes to get used to it—and the wind was so strong that I felt like a plucked and shivering goose. The surge from the previous wave tugged at our legs. It pulled us in deeper, and faster, as another wave gathered its strength a hundred yards out. My stomach filled with dread as the incoming wave grew higher and higher. I turned toward the shore, realizing that it was too late for me to make it back to the safety of the sand.

I cursed beneath my breath.

Gripping Selah's hand, I dug my fingers into her palm. Her huge brown eyes met mine, then softened as she realized how frightened I was. She gave me a wide, reassuring smile, all freckles and confidence. "It looks scarier than it is. I know you can do it."

"I don't want to," I said, shaking my head.

"Take a deep breath," Selah said calmly.

I filled my chest with air.

Selah grinned. "We're going to dive."

The inexorable pull at our legs grew even stronger, and I started to lose my footing in the undertow. The surging wave towered three feet above our heads, an opaque greenish-white wall. I pinched my nose shut with my free hand. Just as the wave started to curl into a glittering barrel, Selah took our joined hands and pushed them straight out ahead of us, yanking me under the ice-cold surface with her. I instinctively closed my eyes as the ocean roared over and under and all around us, lifting my body even as Selah kept pulling me forward. I opened my mouth to yell and salty, gritty sand-water rushed in.

I sputtered, clawing my way to the air.

Salt water burned my nose and throat as I pierced the surface, coughing and treading water like my life depended on it. Selah's face emerged a half-second later, glistening and laughing, and then flashing with concern as I flailed in the surf. She sloshed toward me, then laughed.

"It's not that deep," she said.

She grabbed hold of my arms to stabilize me.

"You're okay," she said. "Lucia, you're okay!"

I stopped trying to fight the current and let my feet fall to a layer of soft sand beneath us. The churning water was too murky to see my legs and I was afraid of stepping on a crab or something spiny, so I bounced on my tiptoes. After a few more salty coughs, the panic subsided. Our dive had pulled us past the violent wave break, and out here the water was only chin deep. We rose and fell with the gentle swells, our feet retuning to the velvety seafloor. Tamar and Kezia floated around us, twisting and rolling languidly as they splashed, reminding me of otters in the zoo. "That was wild!" I shouted, the adrenaline pounding in my veins. "I thought I was going to drown."

Kezia laughed, her face lighting up as she clapped her wet hands in amusement.

"But you didn't, right?" Selah said.

"We'd never let that happen," Kezia agreed.

"Dry land is overrated," Tamar said, bobbing happily as she stared back at the shoreline. Water droplets shimmered in her black hair like a tiara.

“Isn’t it so much better out here?”

I followed her gaze.

The hot sand seemed so far away that I could barely make out our little pile of clothes. I hoped no one was going to steal my phone or my wallet. I still had most of Todd’s twenties stashed in there. But this far out, the crash and sizzle of the surf muffled the squawks of children on the beach. The crowds and their blankets were just colorful blobs against the buff-colored dunes. The world of people faded away beneath the vastness of the sea and sky.

“Yes,” I said.

It was.

We floated together, tilting our faces to the sun.

Even though I could technically stand, I decided to tread water to keep myself warm. I wasn’t used to the freezing temperatures of New England waters yet, but I’d adjusted enough so that it didn’t feel like my body was being wrapped in an icy blanket anymore. And I did feel a little superior to all the people sunning themselves on the beach, too scared of the cold to brave the waves. They had no idea what they were missing.

It was rugged, salty Zen out here.

If a monster wave came, we cheered as we dove under it—or tried to ride it, paddling our way to shore. At first I trailed behind the Three, left behind by a crashing wave while they zoomed on ahead, screeching as they were propelled in a wash of foam all the way to the sand. They seemed to be able to hold their breath so much longer than I could, and instinctively knew exactly when to start paddling to catch each wave at just the right time.

But with practice, I got better.

The hardest part was keeping my bathing suit on, since it felt like the ocean was always trying to tug it down. I tried to hold up its neckline with one hand while bodysurfing, but that was awkward, and I couldn’t help but think about the ugly plaid tankini I hadn’t bought. The one with the industrial-strength straps. Next time, I’d wear something like that. Or better yet, one of those neon rash-guards for surfers, or even a T-shirt. This was

way too much fun to waste even a second worrying about flashing everyone on the beach.

The broad blue sky was full of feathery clouds and the sun bounced off the Atlantic, so bright it was literally dazzling. I could see why people put up with the rain and the foggy chill of Nantucket. Because sometimes there were days like this. Gliding through the salty water with a huge, goofy smile stretched across my face, I felt buoyant. Like a different version of myself.

It was a strange and unfamiliar feeling.

And it felt *good*.

But after what seemed like hours in the ocean, I needed a break. My arms were sore from paddling, and my whole body was a little battered from the waves. I rode one last swell in to shore, then walked over to our stuff as the Three trailed behind me. Since we didn't have a blanket, they just flopped onto the ground and dried in the sun. I lowered myself onto the warm sand, feeling it stick to the back of my legs. Next time, I thought, I'd bring a towel to sit on. I didn't love the feeling of grainy sand clinging to the bottom of my wet bathing suit.

But I'd survive.

Selah and the others kept up a steady patter, asking if I'd met a lot of cute guys on the island and if I'd been invited to any good parties, and had I seen all the yachts docked in the Nantucket harbor. I answered all their questions as best I could, conveniently leaving out the most interesting—and also the worst—thing that had happened to me so far on the island. I'd promised myself not to think about dead girls, and the last thing I wanted was to bring down their mood. They'd think I was a traumatized weirdo, or worse...

They'd pity me.

Sitting with the girls and watching the waves roll in, I found it hard to believe that something so awful had happened so recently—that I'd found a *body* in the sand. It seemed like it had happened to someone else. Every once in a while, I'd notice Selah's gaze drift to the other people on the beach or see the Three making their own silent eye contact. I wondered if they were getting bored with me. "So are you here for the whole summer?" I asked, trying to turn the conversation back toward them.

“Maybe,” Selah said.

She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her bag, along with an old-fashioned silver lighter that she opened with a snap. I was secretly relieved when the lighter wouldn’t catch in the wind and Selah threw it to the sand in frustration. Tamar picked it up, shook out the sand, and tried to make it spark. When that didn’t work, she tucked it back in Selah’s bag.

“We might check out Martha’s Vineyard,” Selah said.

“With your parents?” I asked.

Selah shrugged.

“They just let you do whatever you want?”

“Pretty much,” said Selah.

I tried to imagine what that was like. Not being under my mom’s worried eye, not being anchored to a boring summer job. Not having a care in the world and buying whatever I wanted.

Maybe every day would feel more like today.

“I wouldn’t mind a quick trip to the mainland,” Kezia said in a hopeful tone.

She batted her pale lashes at Selah.

“*Please*,” Tamar said. “No. Not your best idea.”

“We haven’t explored all of town yet, we haven’t seen all the sights, and we haven’t met all the cute boys,” Selah said, shooting Kezia a pointed look that I didn’t quite understand. I didn’t know these girls well enough yet to read their cues.

They were still basically strangers.

“Speaking of cute boys,” Kezia said, unabashed and turning to me with sparkling eyes. “Tell us more about *Eric*.”

I felt my cheeks warm.

It was probably time to reapply sunscreen.

I looked around at our belongings, rummaging through my clothes for a second before I remembered that we didn’t bring any. “He’s, uh...,” I said, reaching into my bag. It was possible I had some moisturizer with SPF in it, or even some ChapStick. Randomly showing up at the beach without hats or umbrellas or any beach gear seemed kind of silly all of a sudden.

“You like him!” Kezia squealed.

“You can hear it in her voice,” Tamar said, wiggling her shoulders.

Selah barked with laughter, and the others—including me—erupted into giggles. I couldn’t help it. I was filled with a carefree lightness that I hadn’t felt in ages, and for a moment, I was transported back to Sammi’s bedroom years ago. I remembered lazing on her fluffy beanbag chair with our sixth-grade yearbook as Sammi drew a heart in glitter pen around her latest crush, Taylor, with his lopsided bowl cut. Back when the most stressful thing in our lives was what we would wear to school the next day, or if Taylor would text her back, or if I could stay over, and if her mom would make us cinnamon rolls in the morning (spoiler alert: she always did).

“Does he have a girlfriend? Or a boyfriend?”

I looked at Tamar, who traced loopy circles in the sand. She was still glistening from our swim, the seawater running down from her dripping twists and collecting in the hollows of her collarbone. She was the quietest—and the most thoughtful—of the Three.

Still waters run deep, I reminded myself.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

But it was a good question.

I knew he had friends, and a job six days a week. I imagined Eric sweating as he hauled golf bags over a manicured course and hating every minute of it. It was easy to feel guilty for being here on the beach while he caddied under the hot sun.

But Eric wasn’t my responsibility.

Like the girls, I barely knew him.

And all their questions reminded me of my earlier worry that the only reason they wanted to be friends with me in the first place was to get closer to him. My good mood wobbled, but I kept my eyes steady on Tamar, waiting for her to look up from the sand. “I can give you his number, if that’s what you want,” I said, not realizing how sharp I sounded until the words left my mouth.

“Hey, now,” Selah said, holding up her hands.

“We’re not after your man,” Tamar laughed.

“He’s not—”

“—but we wouldn’t mind meeting some of his friends,” Selah continued.

“Preferably one with a car,” Kezia added. “Or a boat.”

“Ha,” I said. “You’ve got standards.”

“I do.” Tamar smiled, gesturing at herself with glossy, recently painted nails. “But this one,” she said, shaking her head at Kezia, who was busy pulling a strand of seaweed from her braid. “She does not.”

“I do so!” said Kezia. “My standards are very high. My future boyfriend will not only be adorable, but he will also have a dog. One of those slobbery yellow ones.”

“So you can match?” Selah joked, poking Kezia on her freckled shoulder.

Kezia squealed, laughing, and rolled on the beach. Sitting with the Three, my toes in the sand, the sun on my skin, and my muscles pleasantly tired, I realized that I was finally enjoying life, at least a little bit. Not simply propelling myself through the day until bedtime. Not living inside my memories of Sammi as I grieved, isolated and alone. *Look at me*, I thought, *interacting with people IRL*.

Not a bad place to be.

My therapist would be proud.

That’s when the breeze shifted and a cloud drifted over the sun.

I put on my polo shirt, hoping to warm up in the unexpected shade...and noticed that the beach was suddenly emptying out, with families packing up their blankets and umbrellas along with their boogie boards and sunburned children as the light dimmed from full-on brightness to a softer gold. I’d lost track of time.

It was getting late, but how late?

I fumbled for my phone in my bag to check the time. It was hot to the touch from being left out in the sun, and the little battery symbol was red, which meant it was going to die any second...but it had just enough juice left to let me know I’d messed up.

“Oh crap,” I groaned, “I have to go!”

Eric had planned to pick me up at Milk & Honey thirty minutes ago. I pressed his name to call him—there was no time to text and explain where I was. But just as the phone started to ring, the screen went black in my hand.

Oh no.

“What’s the rush?” Selah asked.

“I’m late. Everyone’s going to be worried. I—” I wedged my feet into my sneakers, not taking the time to wipe the sand off first. My voice sounded distraught, but there wasn’t time to explain why exactly my family might worry.

“You’re leaving?” Tamar asked.

I yanked my shorts up over my damp swimsuit, barely registering the ickiness of the feeling. And how would I get back from here? Since my phone was dead I couldn’t even waste money on getting an Uber or calling one of the island taxis.

“You don’t need to freak out,” Selah said. She combed her fingers through her half-dry waves. “It’s broad daylight.”

I bristled at her dismissive tone. She didn’t know me, not really. Not well enough to talk to me like that. And she certainly didn’t know my very good and hard-to-describe reasons for freaking out. My mom would be frantic if Eric called to say I wasn’t there and no one could reach me. There had been other times I hadn’t answered my phone. Back in Pittsburgh, she’d found me a couple of times wandering through the cemetery where Sammi was buried, once during a rainstorm. I hadn’t had my phone on me, or a coat. After that, she’d changed my therapy appointments from once a week to twice.

And sometimes more.

“I have to go,” I said.

I tried my best to keep my voice level.

I didn’t want to explain that ever since I’d found the girl on the beach, my mom and Todd looked at me like I was a porcelain doll that was perched too close to the edge of a shelf. Like something breakable that needed to be wrapped in tissue paper and placed safely behind glass. Not left to wander an island where girls washed up dead. The last thing I wanted to do was give them any more reasons to look at me that way.

“Can I borrow a phone?” I asked. I looked from one girl to another, pleading with my eyes. “I need to get home.”



CHAPTER 13

"I'M GOING TO GET A car!" I shouted over my shoulder as I pounded up the path swiping through Selah's phone, trying to find a ride-share icon among a dizzying display of unfamiliar apps—from stock trading and crypto stuff to an app for an international auction house.

No TikTok or Insta or the typical things I'd expect.

The rich really are different, I thought, panting as I reached the parking lot.

I tried to calm my hectic breathing and figure out what to do. I didn't have Eric's number memorized and my phone was dead, so I couldn't call him. I *did* know my mom's number, but if I called her I'd have to tell her how I'd ended up at the beach and not at work, which I really, *really* didn't want to do. I brought up Selah's web browser and picked the first phone number that came up for a taxi company. While I waited for someone to answer, Kezia and Tamar caught up to me, their chests heaving.

"We'll help you," Kezia said. "Don't worry."

"No need to make a scene," said Tamar.

She pointed at Selah's tanned back, just a few yards away. Selah was leaning into the open front window of a rusted pickup that had two surfboards poking up from its bed. I could see the outline of a guy in a bucket hat through the windshield.

He was grinning at Selah, hanging on her every word.

"See?" Tamar said. "She's on it."

I squinted at Selah and the grinning guy in the driver's seat. I wondered if she was using the same feminine wiles that had gotten Brendan to give her all those free smoothies at Milk & Honey. Before I could inch any closer to

eavesdrop on their conversation, someone picked up the line at the cab company.

“Hi—hello!” I said breathlessly.

The man on the other end of the phone just coughed by way of answer, but I couldn’t be so easily dissuaded. “How fast can you get to Surfside?” I asked. “For a fare to Tom Nevers.”

“Which day you want it?”

It was a grumpy smoker’s voice, and the dispatcher it belonged to didn’t sound like he was in much of a hurry. “*Which*—today! Right now,” I said, chewing on a cuticle.

This was not going well.

“Oh, uh—I could get you about six-thirty or seven.”

My mouth went dry. Eric would have been looking for me for hours by then. Long enough to scare my mom, and there was no telling who she’d get involved if she thought I was missing. Low-flying police helicopters weren’t totally out of the question. Posters with my face on it: TROUBLED TEEN. RETURN IF FOUND.

“Can another cab get here sooner?” I pleaded, frowning as Selah walked toward me with a satisfied grin on her face.

“No, ma’am, it’s just me today,” said the voice on the phone.

Crap, I thought, but I didn’t have a chance to say that to the cabbie because Selah had grabbed her phone from my hand.

“I got us a ride!” she said. “You’re welcome.”

A mixture of relief and apprehension swirled in my stomach as Selah led us over to the rusted pickup and hopped into the front seat next to the guy in the bucket hat. He saluted us over his shoulder with his pinkie and thumb, and motioned for the rest of us to climb into the bed of the truck.

I stepped on the bumper, hesitating.

I needed to get back to Todd’s house and this was a free ride, but I’d never ridden in the back of a truck before. It seemed dangerous, and faint warning bells about getting into a stranger’s car chimed at the back of my mind. But I wasn’t alone—I was with the Three—and it was broad daylight,

as Selah had pointed out. Just because I'd found a dead girl didn't mean I had to be paranoid about everything.

"Thanks a lot," I said, taking Tamar's outstretched hand and letting her pull me onto the truck.

I lowered myself onto a stray boogie board as we rumbled out of the lot. Gripping the sides of the truck bed, I wished I'd thought to squeeze in the front with Selah, where there was at least a chance of a seat belt. The ruts in the road rattled my bones as Kezia shrieked and laughed with every bump.

"Are you going to get in trouble?" Tamar shouted over the roaring wind.

"I hope not," I shouted back. "It's...complicated." I turned my head to face the houses and trees whizzing past us so I wouldn't have to answer any more questions.

There'd be plenty of those soon enough.

My mouth was dry from the sun and salt, and I could feel the beginnings of a sunburn prickling across my shoulders and back. With the wind in my hair and the hum of the truck, time seemed to compress. Before I knew it, we were at the intersection of Milestone Road and the turnoff to Tom Nevers.

Almost there.

My backside was killing me, and I vowed to never, ever ride in the back of a pickup again. But even though I was sunburned and bruised, I didn't want this day to end. With every passing second we drew closer to the shadows of Todd's enormous house and farther from the day I'd spent with Selah, Tamar, and Kezia.

Once they dropped me off, I'd be back to a lonely, stifling existence with my mom and Todd—and the Three would remain together, living their best lives without me. At the thought of it, the buoyancy I'd felt earlier that day completely ebbed away.

As if she could sense my mood shifting, Selah poked her head out the back window of the truck and yelled in my direction. "We're going to a party tomorrow night at Cliffside. We can get you in if you want to go."

At her words, the exhilaration of our beach day flickered back to life in the pit of my stomach. They still wanted to hang out with me, even after I melted down in the parking lot. Selah was just about to tell me where to meet

them when the roar of an engine muffled her words. A familiar, battered old Jeep barreled down the narrow road, throwing up a cloud of dust behind it. As it slowed, Eric's tousled blond head poked out the driver's-side window.

He stopped as he registered the three of us in the truck bed, taking in our scraggly beach hair and sun-glazed faces. He gave a longer, more penetrating look to the driver of the truck and to Selah. "I was just coming to pick you up," he said. "I waited for you to call, but then I thought I should come look for you."

I quickly scrambled over the gate of the truck and dropped to the ground with a grunt. "I—um—I forgot you were coming to get me, and then my phone died, so I caught a ride with my friends."

In the back of the pickup, I'd decided to calmly explain my delay to my mom and Todd. To assuage everyone's worries by saying I'd lost track of time but I'd finally made some friends and was really finding my footing, and to please not make a big deal about it. I had my entire speech worked out and ready to go. I hoped they'd buy it.

But maybe I wouldn't need it—as long as Eric didn't mention anything.

He looked over to Kezia, who was hanging over the edge of the truck bed, her curves very much on display. It was possible that Eric recognized the Three from the bonfire. He hadn't had anything nice to say about them that night, but Kezia didn't know that.

I winced as she blew him a kiss. Tamar watched the entire exchange as if she were enjoying the show with a bucket of popcorn.

"Hmm," Eric said, frowning as his eyes darted from Kezia to Selah to the driver of the rusted truck and back to me. "Welp! I'll take you the rest of the way." He popped his passenger-side door open and I hopped in.

"Meet us tomorrow!" Selah shouted. "The party!"

"She can't make it," Eric said before I had a chance to say anything. "We're going out to dinner with our parents. They have these impossible reservations at the Hydrangea House."

I swiveled to face Eric.

A fake, polite smile tightened his features.

I didn't love how he'd answered for me. And no one had said anything to *me* about a family dinner...but then again, I hadn't exactly been checking my phone for the past couple of hours. It sounded like another one of Todd's last-minute ideas, and of course my mom would fall over herself to go along with it. The realization hit me, right here on this dusty dirt road a mile from the sparkling ocean.

I was a guest here, in Todd's house.

My time was not my own.

"Skip it," Selah said, flicking her eyebrows upward. I smiled despite myself. For a second I wondered...what if I blew off dinner tomorrow and went out with the Three? A wild feeling jumped in my chest. I squashed it down as I buckled my seat belt, tossing the selfish thought from my mind. I'd been reckless enough today, thinking only of myself.

The very thing I'd accused Sammi of.

The reason I'd said those terrible words to her.

"My dad would kill us," Eric said. "And if anyone's skipping it, it should be me. Tie and jacket required." He puffed out his cheeks and exhaled with a mock goofy sigh, then executed an impressive three-point turn in the narrow road. I could tell he was trying to backtrack from his earlier attitude, which hadn't won him any points—but my irritation at him dissipated instantly. His time wasn't really his own, either, and he was just as stuck as I was. We both were going to have to do whatever Todd wanted this summer.

We were in it together.



CHAPTER 14

THE NEXT DAY WAS A Saturday and I didn't have to go in to Milk & Honey, but Eric was scheduled to work at the club. Though the morning started out sunny, as soon as we finished our breakfast of scrambled eggs and airy Portuguese bread, the sky grew overcast.

"Sorry it's not a beach day, hon," my mom said.

I pressed my lips together, hiding a smile.

Thanks to Eric, who had graciously not mentioned anything to her and Todd, she had no idea that I'd already had the best beach day of my life...so I wasn't too disappointed when Todd took us on a driving tour of the island instead, pointing out the sights. In the back seat, I checked online for any news about the dead girl. There weren't any updates except that the story was "ongoing," and there were plenty of articles about rising crime on the island. There'd been two break-ins the night before, at Sayle's Seafood and Aunt Leah's Fudge. The cash registers hadn't been compromised, but hundreds of dollars of fresh fish, scallops, and shellfish were gone—and almost an entire case of fudge.

I scrolled on, looking for more-serious reports.

One couple claimed that their wallets had been taken during a night of singing at the Club Car, along with an antique lighter and a charm bracelet... but when I caught my mom craning her neck to peer at my screen, I closed the browser and made a show of tucking my phone away. I pasted a rapt expression on my face as I tuned back in to Todd's lecture on how whaling had made this tiny island the wealthiest place on earth in the 1800s.

"Huh," I said. "That's really interesting."

As the cloudy day transformed into a full-on rainy one, Todd aimed the Jeep back downtown. "Ladies, it's now officially a whaling museum day," he

said with a note of excitement in his voice. “Lucia, you’ll get to see some of the things from the books I gave you. Well, maybe not a mermaid or a kraken, but a sperm whale jawbone—and a whole whale’s skeleton, actually. They’ve got harpoons and scrimshaw, a Fresnel lens...” He droned on about the whaleship *Essex* and *Moby Dick*.

“You know, I’ve never actually read any Melville,” my mom said.

“We’ll stop by Mitchell’s afterward and fix that.” Todd grinned.

My mom turned back to me and made a silly *What did I get myself into?* face. I stifled a giggle, feeling momentarily like a normal teenage girl and not someone who’d recently found a dead body. My brief moment of levity sank out of reach as I flashed back to that morning on the beach. I didn’t really feel like going to a museum full of bones and teeth.

It actually felt pretty wrong.

As we parked and joined a long line of rainy-day tourists in the lobby, my shoulders prickled from all the sun I’d gotten yesterday. I wondered what the Three were up to right now. Were they out shopping or having a lazy day together, reading on a porch somewhere, sheltered from the rain? I guessed they could also be out doing touristy things like this.

But it was hard to imagine them here.

I tried to keep my mind on the Three as we wandered through the exhibits about colonial life on Nantucket: candle making, whale hunting, and sailors carving scrimshaw and weaving baskets during lonely months at sea. My mom and Todd held hands as I trailed behind them, and while they pointed out every single item in the museum to each other, it dawned on me that this relationship might last. Todd seemed nice enough, and I’d never seen my mom this giddy. I frowned, wondering if Todd might become a more permanent part of our lives.

I pushed ahead through the rest of the museum and loitered by the ecology section, pausing to read each informational plaque as I waited for the lovebirds to catch up. I learned about the wildlife on the island and how so much of it was protected now—it was illegal to even *approach* a sea mammal, whether it was a whale, a dolphin, or a seal. It was a far cry from the island’s history, when so many whales were slaughtered to extinction in

the drive to accumulate wealth and the government actually paid a cash bounty for seal noses.

That last fact filled my stomach with a sour disgust.



After a long day of historical education, I was granted a few hours to myself before dinner. I retreated to my room, keeping an eye out for Eric in the hallway, but he wasn't back yet.

In the fogged-up mirror after my shower, I realized my face and shoulders were a raw pink from yesterday's sun. Underneath the lines from my bathing suit, my skin looked pale and almost green in contrast. I hunted through the bathroom drawers, finding a treasure trove of new Kiehl's products, all unopened. I slathered on moisturizer and then coated my face with concealer, trying in vain to cover the sunburn. The final effect was caked-on and unconvincing, as if I were wearing a mask.

I wondered if the other girls had also gotten burned.

Were they smoothing La Mer into their skin before they got dressed for the party? Were they doing each other's makeup? I tried to summon the feeling I had on the beach, when I was happy and brave and surrounded by friends. Except for the vivid proof on my skin, it was hard to believe that day had been real.

It felt more like a hazy, very good dream.

I blinked at my reflection in the mirror.

Even though I'd just showered, I was starting to sweat, and the heavy concealer was beading on my cheeks. My hair hung limp and heavy on the back of my neck, and I knew it would take forever to dry. I opened the small bathroom window to let out the humidity and a welcome gust of fresh air buffeted my face. The wind smelled as if it had rained while I was in the shower, and a fresh earthy scent rose from the garden below.

I closed my eyes and let the air cool me down, mentally scrolling through all the clothes I'd brought from Pittsburgh and trying—and failing—to think of a combination that would be appropriate for tonight's five-star dinner. Selah would have the perfect outfit in her closet, I was sure. I wished I had something that would make me feel effortlessly cool, like her.

I opened my eyes.

It was barely twilight, and the dull green brush undulated in the wind like ocean waves. I gazed into the distance, past the roses that cascaded over the fence in the backyard and to the scrub beyond it. The breeze shifted direction as I watched, and I suddenly felt certain that I wasn't alone. The hairs on my arms rose as I scanned the fluttering leaves. Could someone have been watching me from the bushes, some rando Peeping Tom?

I heard a scrabbling among the branches.

Probably a bird, my rational mind said. *But it sounded bigger than that*, I thought. I tightened my towel around my chest and tried to follow the sound with my eyes. It could have been a fox. Or a raccoon. Did they even have foxes and raccoons here? It seemed like they'd only allow cute little hedgehogs.

And golden retrievers. They were everywhere on this island.

I was still staring out into the brush when a knock on the bathroom door startled me. I banged my head on the window frame, muttering an unholy combination of syllables as my mom peeked her head around the door. Her hair was blown out in a sleeker style than she usually wore, and her makeup looked different. More minimal, with less eyeliner and more blush. Or maybe that was just her inner glow from being with Todd.

"I got you a dress!" she sang.

I arched my brows.

"Well, Todd got it," she said. "We got it. I picked it out. If Todd had picked it out..." She trailed off with a breathy laugh.

"We'd all be in coordinating nautical gear?" I joked.

"Yes!" Mom cackled. "Mother and daughter sailor dresses, with Eric in a sailor suit."

"And Todd in a captain's hat," I added.

I cringed at the mental image.

“He only wears that as a joke,” my mom chided, motioning me into the bedroom. That stopped me in my tracks, but I decided to let it go. I really didn’t want to know. At the center of my bed, a shopping bag sat like a bouquet, spilling over with tissue paper next to a shoebox bearing the word “Tuckernuck.” I reached into the bag and pulled out a sundress in cream-colored linen.

I held it at arm’s length, dubious.

It looked boring and demure, like something an old-fashioned doll would wear. My mom saw my hesitation and held the dress against me, fluffing out the skirt. “You have to try it on!” she said. “It looked so beautiful on the mannequin.”

I rolled my eyes but did as I was told.

In the bathroom, the pale fabric made my skin look sun-kissed instead of red, and the belt at the waist gave me a bit more of a feminine shape than I actually had. It looked good. I slipped on the new sandals she’d bought me, supple caramel leather with a low heel. I had to admit, my mom knew how to shop for clothes.

“Okay,” I said, feigning exasperation. “You were right!”

But my mom was already on her way out of the room.

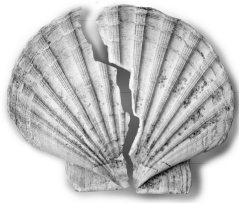
“Wheels up in ten!” she chirped.

I braided my hair quickly, then pinned it over my head in a rough approximation of how Selah had worn hers at the bonfire. I looked like a deranged milkmaid. I let the braid fall to one shoulder, then rushed downstairs, where everyone was waiting.

“Wow,” said Todd as I reached the foyer.

My mom beamed. “See? I told you.”

My face burned, and I looked down at the chipped green polish on my toes to avoid everyone’s eyes. Eric, I noticed, looked pretty good himself. He was wearing navy pants and a white button-down shirt that set off his tan and his golden hair, with a brass-buttoned jacket folded over his arm. He smiled back. Then he cleared his throat and opened the front door to the cool Nantucket evening.



CHAPTER 15

ERIC HELD THE JEEP DOOR open for me. When I put my hand on the doorframe to hoist myself up, he grinned at the rope bracelet on my wrist.

“You’re wearing it!” he said.

I nodded, suddenly self-conscious.

“It’ll fit better the more you swim with it on.” The bracelet was loose enough that I’d easily slipped it on over my hand, and Eric’s fingers brushed mine as he checked the tightness of the rough, woven band. “The water makes it shrink to the size of your wrist.”

I busied myself with my seat belt, trying not to blush from the touch of his hand.

“Thanks for not saying anything to them about yesterday,” I whispered, tilting my head toward our parents, who were fiddling with the radio dials in the front of the Jeep.

My mom wanted Adele.

Todd wanted the news.

“Don’t worry about it,” Eric whispered, matching my conspiratorial tone. “But I wanted to tell you about another cool thing we have here on the island. Back on the mainland, I think you call them phone chargers?”

“Ha.” I jokingly punched him in his upper arm. It was solid under his blazer, I noticed with a little flutter in my stomach. I cleared my throat and tucked my arms tight against my sides.

I’d keep my hands to myself from now on.

He leaned closer to me, and I got the faintest whiff of that warm and piney boy smell as we rolled through Tom Nevers. “Sorry if I came off as intense yesterday. I was just worried,” he said. “Considering...everything.”

I nodded, not knowing what to say.

I couldn't quite explain what had come over me when I decided to play hooky, but inside, I didn't regret it for one second. "Honestly, that little adventure helped me," I finally said. "To not think about it."

He stared at me for a beat before answering, his gray eyes softening as I met his gaze. "That makes sense," he said. "Anything to get that image out of your head."

He turned to the window, his face thoughtful in the flickering lights from oncoming cars, and I tried my best not to think about the dead girl.

Or Eric's hand brushing against mine.

Todd pulled up to a stop sign and turned his head to the back seat. "I want to thank you both for coming tonight. Lucia, I know you've had a shock, and things haven't been easy for you this week." My mom rubbed Todd's shoulder as he paused, facing the road again. "This dinner is a big deal for me—literally. Stuart Weston is seriously considering buying my marquis property in 'Sconset. He and his family will be joining us to cement our potential new business together, and it's critical that everything go perfectly tonight."

Eric let out a sigh that was at least fifty percent groan.

"So let's all be on our best behavior, okay? No table dancing," my mom added, trying to lighten the mood—but Todd wasn't taking the hint. His eyes darted to Eric in the rearview mirror, then landed on me. I couldn't help but feel like his little speech was more for my benefit than anyone else's.

"We'll simply keep the conversation appropriate to the occasion," Todd said, nodding at me. "It's part business, part pleasure, so...you know, positive and upbeat."

I knew what he meant: No dead girl talk at the table. And no peeking at my phone to check the crime blotter.

Eric and I nodded obediently as the Jeep rolled between rustic stone pillars and onto a crushed-shell path bisecting an emerald-green lawn. Todd pulled up in front of a massive gray-shingled building with a picturesque and pointy roof—like a New England version of a fairy-tale castle. Hydrangeas in deep periwinkle and raspberry tumbled over a white picket fence, and old-fashioned lampposts flickered in the deepening twilight. Live piano music

emanated from somewhere inside the building. I had to fight the urge to check my phone one more time. *There probably aren't any updates on the case from the last five minutes*, I told myself sternly.

Todd tossed his keys to the valet and offered his arm to my mom in one smooth motion, like he'd been perfecting the move his entire life. Before my mom let herself be led inside, she turned and winked at me as if to say, *Isn't this fun?*

I tried to smile back.

Now that I knew more about the important dinner ahead of us—and the role I was expected to play—I felt a familiar prickle in my chest. It was the sea urchin again, popping in to remind me that I might say something stupid or morbid or awkward. That I'd probably use the wrong fork or spill clam chowder all over my new dress and completely ruin the evening.

I wished I could go back in time and still be at the beach with the Three, where the sun had bleached the darker thoughts from my mind and the rolling surf had washed my insecurities away. I tried to summon the feeling of being carefree and living in the moment.

But it was as easy to capture as a handful of sea-foam.

"Hey, Lu?" Eric said. I grinned at the nickname. Only people close to me called me Lu.

Mom and Todd were already making their way up the broad steps to the entrance, and Eric was looking at me expectantly. Though he was all dressed up, his hair was disarmingly windblown, and something about his awkward smile made me realize that—sea urchin or not—being exactly where I was wasn't the worst thing in the world.

"You look like you're about to walk the plank," he said.

"This place is..." I trailed off.

I didn't want to sound ungrateful.

Or like I'd never been anywhere this fancy.

"Ridiculously stuffy and overpriced?" Eric whispered in my ear. "It's basically Goldman Sachs in restaurant form. That's why my dad loves it."

I bit back a laugh.

“I was going to say nice,” I whispered back as a white-haired man in an impeccably tailored suit led us to a large round table with a mound of ivory hydrangeas as the centerpiece.

A bald leather-faced man in an open-necked gingham shirt stood up from his seat, next to a woman with poreless skin stretched tight over prominent cheekbones. Her dark-wash denim and white linen top somehow made her look better dressed than the rest of us in our more formal outfits. The man clapped Todd on the back in greeting.

“Stuart!” Todd said, extending his hand for an obligatory shake. “So good to see you and Candace. This is Susan,” he said, motioning to my mom. She stepped forward with a friendly smile, and Stuart grasped her shoulders as he pulled her in to give her a peck on both cheeks. My mom covered her startled reaction with a little laugh.

“And this is Lucia, her daughter,” Todd said.

Now that I knew cheek kissing was an option, I waved—just in case—but Stuart wasn’t having that. He shook my hand with a death grip. “And of course you know Eric,” Todd said, gripping Eric’s shoulder as my mom moved to the other side of the table to greet Candace.

The two women embraced like old friends.

“The best caddy in the biz,” Stuart bellowed, his voice gravelly and deep from a lifetime of scotch and cigars. He feinted like an old-timey boxer before he chucked Eric on the shoulder, hard enough that it could’ve hurt. I stiffened, but Eric kept his expression even—then laughed, his face splitting into a cocksure smile I’d never seen before.

At least, not on Eric.

“The biggest cheater on the Eastern Seaboard!” Eric said, matching Stuart’s jovial tone. My mouth hung open in momentary shock that Eric would say something like that out loud, and at this special dinner that was supposed to be so important to his dad. But Stuart only threw his head back and roared with laughter.

“I told you I liked this kid,” he said to his wife.

The adults all chuckled as we took our seats, and I realized that Eric knew exactly what he was doing. He’d learned how to deal with men like this

from his hours on the golf course.

And from living with his dad.

“Eric,” Candace purred, running a finger along Eric’s lapel. “What a lovely sport coat.”

“*Our* son is running late, as usual,” said Stuart, gesturing to the empty place setting right next to mine. Just then, the maître d’ approached, leading a young man around Eric’s age to the table.

“Speak of the—” Eric said.

“Tristan,” Stuart grumbled. “Nice of you to join us.”

The boy bent to kiss his mother on the cheek, then shook hands with his dad and Todd. Dressed in jeans and a pale button-down shirt, he clearly got his casual elegance (and his cheekbones) from his mom. His hair was a dark caramel blond swept back from his chiseled face and held in place by a pair of retro-looking Ray-Bans. He had heavy brows and eyes as blue as the ocean, and he carried himself like royalty. The confidence rolling off him could be bottled and sold, I thought. He stopped to squeeze Eric’s shoulders as he sauntered over to the chair next to mine, and Eric flashed the table a hundred-watt smile—but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Long time, roomie,” Tristan said.

“What’s up,” Eric said.

“And who is *this*?”

Tristan fixed his blue gaze on me, then turned to Eric, whose wide smile was still plastered across his face...but it was looking less convincing with every passing second.

“You holding out on me, bro?”

Tristan reached out and took my hand lightly, not crushing it like his father had, as Eric introduced us. The moment stretched out so long that I wondered if he was going to lift my hand to his lips and kiss it. But of course, he didn’t. I placed my napkin on my lap, smoothing my hands over the thick fabric.

“We’d love to have you over sometime,” my mom said at the opposite end of the table, making small talk with Candace.

Oblivious to the tension between the boys.

“We’re making a quick hop to the Caymans for a few weeks, but we *need* to have a girls’ day when we’re back,” Candace said. “Give me your number.” As the two women bent over their phones, Tristan turned to me.

“What have you been up to this summer?” he asked, leaning so close that our elbows touched. *Is he flirting with me?* I wondered, trying not to flinch at the telltale prickle beneath my sternum.

“I just got here a week ago,” I said, repositioning my arms on my lap. “I’m working at Milk and Honey.” I didn’t mention hanging out at the beach with my new friends. Or finding the dead girl. *Make a good impression*, I reminded myself. “How about you?”

“I’m out on the water as much as I can be,” Tristan said.

He raised a crystal water glass to his lips just as the server, an elderly man in a dark suit, handed us our menus. As I skimmed the options, I realized that my menu didn’t list any prices.

I peeked over at Eric’s.

His menu had prices.

“What kind of antiquated nonsense is this?” I hissed. I knew Todd was footing the bill, but that didn’t mean a woman wouldn’t *ever* pay—and besides, I didn’t want to accidentally order something extravagant and make a fool of myself. It turned out I wasn’t even going to get the chance.

Neither was Eric.

He closed his menu, surreptitiously nodding toward the head of the table, where—even though Todd was supposedly the host of this dinner—Stuart was ordering for everyone. By the time I realized what was happening, he was handing his own menu back to the waiter and asking for two bottles of red wine “to start us off.” I knew my mom preferred white, but she looked positively thrilled with Stuart’s selection of an expensive French vintage when he instructed the sommelier to offer her the first taste.

Dish after dish was presented to the table in perfect synchronization by an army of waiters, all wearing white gloves. Polite conversation bounced across the appetizers like a tennis ball, and I tried to keep up my end of it between the bluefish pâté, a tower made of truffles, and a salad of delicate

microgreens. When the main courses of lobster, halibut, and Wagyu steak were served, I caught my mom's attention across the table.

This is over-the-top, I wanted to tell her.

But her eyes sparkled in the candlelight and she mimed a toast at me as if to say *Isn't this delightful?* It had been a long time since I'd seen her this happy. And she *did* look truly happy, leaning against Todd to whisper in his ear and to taste the lobster claw he'd cracked open to share with her. The stress and worry that had shadowed her face since my grisly discovery at the beach were gone. Here, at this table set with crystal and silver, it was easy to pretend everything was perfect. That tragedy and death weren't a part of this world.

The conversation started to fracture as we worked our way through the entrées. Todd and Stuart talked business while my mom and Candace sipped their wine, listening politely. With the parents preoccupied, Tristan wandered off—and returned a few minutes later balancing three martinis in his hands.

They were as full as they could be.

And Tristan didn't spill a drop as he leaned over my shoulder.

"I didn't know if you like yours dirty," he murmured, setting down one of those triangular glasses with a delicate stem that you only see in movies. "So I just followed my heart."

Eric rolled his eyes.

"I should have warned you about this guy," he said. He grinned like he was joking, but I could sense a note of genuine apology beneath the dorm-room banter. "He's a real prince."

Tristan smiled, choosing to ignore the dig.

"We deserve to have a good time, too," he said.

I tossed a nervous glance at the adults.

"They're not going to say anything." Tristan smirked, raising his glass to toast his parents. "They don't even know we're here."

Eric shrugged.

"He's right," Eric relented, taking an exploratory sip from his glass and then setting it back on the table. I lifted my own glass to my nose. It smelled

sharp and salty like the sea, but I didn't think drinking it would qualify as "my best behavior."

"Bottoms up," Tristan said.

He gave me a wicked glance as he downed his entire drink in one long and deep swallow. "Your boy over here doesn't know how to have a good time," he said, his lips wet with vodka as he pointed at Eric with a toothpick full of olives. "I, on the other hand..."

"I'm well aware of what you get up to," Eric said.

It was that half-joking, half-serious tone I'd overheard boys use with each other in school hallways and soccer fields. But there was a simmering tension underneath his words. I wondered if they'd had issues being roommates at Duke, or if this was just how they related to each other in this world of golf clubs and yachts.

It felt surreal, sitting at this swanky restaurant, surrounded by people who didn't have a care in the world, while a girl lay dead in morgue. I tried to yank my attention back to what Eric and Tristan were saying, but the clinking glasses and the hum of conversation faded away. All I could think of was tangled copper hair. An outstretched arm, an unmoving rib cage.

I put down my fork.

I wasn't hungry anymore.

I wanted to check my phone again, or find a television and turn on the news.

But I was stuck here.

And I had to play the part of a well-adjusted teen, at least until the dishes were cleared and the bill was paid. Taking a gulp of cold water, I forced a vague smile onto my face and daydreamed about yesterday and the addictive freedom of riding the waves. To that horrible moment when I'd thought I was drowning, and the full-body glow of relief when I'd realized my feet could reach the ground. I tried to remember that feeling.

To grasp onto it.

I sipped more water, then tasted the martini. It was disgusting, and I quickly put it down.

Eric was watching me closely with eyes as gray as the Nantucket sound. “You okay?” he mouthed, and I felt a warm flush creep into my cheeks.

From the martini, I told myself.

Not the boy.

Just as dessert was served (lavender crème brûlée, pear sorbet, and flourless chocolate cake), I heard a familiar laugh, loud and unabashed. I turned in my seat, craning my neck, and saw the backs of three girls seated at the bar at the far end of the room. The flush in my cheeks deepened as I recognized Selah’s wavy brown hair curling down over her freckled shoulders. On either side of her were Tamar’s dark twists and Kezia’s blond curls, both pinned into causal updos.

They were *here*.



CHAPTER 16

KEZIA CLAPPED LIKE A LITTLE kid at a birthday party as the bartender removed their empty cocktail glasses and placed a platter of oysters on the bar in front of them. Selah turned, as if she could sense my eyes on her, and didn't even seem surprised to see me. She just waved, grinning from across the room.

I grinned right back at her.

They were actually here.

Selah tapped the other two on their shoulders, and they lit up when they spotted me. Even Tamar—the most watchful and serious of the three—seemed delighted to see me, and a little trill of excitement danced up my spine. It was all I needed to snap out of my melancholy haze. Just like that, the evening came into focus. The candlelight seemed just a little brighter, the sounds a little sharper.

I grabbed Eric's arm and pointed.

"Look—it's my friends," I whispered. "Think we can go say hi?" The dinner had been interminable, but I wasn't sure what the rules were anymore. If getting up and joining another table before we were excused would reflect badly on Todd.

Eric's arm stiffened under my touch.

He shook his head, almost imperceptibly—like he was trying not to make a scene—but the Three were already climbing down from their barstools and weaving their way to our table.

"Lucia and *Er-ic*!" Selah sang, leaning over and giving me a forceful hug that knocked me into Eric's firm shoulder. When she released me, Eric glared at her with his eyebrows raised.

"Fancy meeting you here," she said.

“What are the chances?” Eric asked, and it didn’t take Sherlock Holmes to detect the sarcasm in his voice. “I thought you ladies had big plans tonight.”

“Plans change,” Selah said.

“And who’s your friend?” Tamar said, peering down at Tristan.

The rest of the table paused in their conversation to look at the Three.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us to your family?” Selah asked. The girls demurely extended their hands to each of the adults, the picture of propriety.

I quickly introduced them.

“I told you she’d make friends,” Todd said with a note of satisfaction in his voice as he leaned toward my mom.

As if he’d orchestrated this all for me.

My mom smiled warmly at them.

I could tell that she was taking in their Coach slides, pastel dresses, and discreet diamond studs. Standing next to them, I realized that my linen dress had wrinkled into dozens of creases across my lap from sitting at dinner. I hadn’t thought to wear any jewelry—not that I had anything like diamonds. I felt like a dandelion in a patch of tiger lilies.

“Lucia’s always been good at making friends,” my mom said proudly. She was great at revisionist history. I remembered how she’d begged me to spend time with the other girls in my class after everything happened with Sammi, and how deflated she’d look when I’d once again be fused to the couch with a bowl of double ramen and Netflix on a Friday night.

“I’d like to make some new friends, too,” Tristan joked as he stood to introduce himself. He looked the Three up and down as if he’d just been served dessert. “Are you staying here at the inn?”

“We’re staying nearby,” Selah said airily.

“Just here for a bite,” Tamar said, flashing a toothy smile.

“Mind if we steal Lucia for a while?” Kezia asked sweetly, looking from my mom to Todd. She grinned at Eric and Tristan, then added: “And the boys, too?”

Todd glanced at Stuart.

Stuart was on his third glass of red wine and waved languidly with one hand, as if he couldn't care less.

"You kids have fun," he said.

Are you sure? my mom mouthed to me.

After all, I was her porcelain doll...but if I had to sit through one more minute of this suffocating dinner I was going to scream. Going out with the Three was the release I needed, even if it meant sharing them with Eric and half-drunk Tristan. I nodded.

"Don't stay out too late," my mom said.

"We'll take good care of her," Selah assured her, then offered Tristan her arm. He took it without one look back at his parents, and the six of us wound through the crowded dining room to a flagstone patio out back, where diners sat at smaller tables arranged around a swimming pool. The pool glimmered under the twinkling lights, its ripples dancing in the breeze.

"*Oooh*—let's swim!" Kezia squealed.

She looked to Selah for approval, her big brown eyes wide with excitement, but Selah shook her head.

Tristan laughed as we passed the pool to sit along the low stone wall at the far edge of the patio, with a distant view of the ocean.

"You're a wild one, aren't you?" he said, tugging at a golden curl that had escaped from Kezia's updo.

"Where's your girlfriend tonight, Tristan?" Eric asked, loud enough that the entire patio heard him. Kezia tucked the curl behind her ear and shot Tristan a dirty look.

"You have a girlfriend?"

"I'm seeing someone," Tristan said casually—as if the entire patio hadn't turned their attention to him. "I heard that you stole her drink at a beach party. She wouldn't shut up about it."

Selah raised an eyebrow.

Reagan, I thought, putting two and two together. The politician's daughter.

She wasn't my favorite person on the island, but I didn't love Tristan's tone—especially if she was his girlfriend. It sounded like they deserved to be

together...and judging from the darting glances the Three were shooting at each other, they felt the same way.

“You must have some balls, getting between Reagan and her vodka,” Tristan chuckled, focusing his gaze on Selah. He stood up from the wall and stretched. “So where to now, ladies?”

“The view’s pretty nice out here,” Eric said, gesturing at the grayish-blue waves in the distance.

“I have a better idea,” Selah said. “Follow me.”

She pulled up her knees, then swung her legs over the stone wall. Kezia, Tamar, and Tristan followed her lead, hoisting themselves over and dropping four feet to the other side. I hesitated as I watched them climb, not wanting to get any dirt on my new dress.

“May I?” Eric asked.

He stepped toward me with his arms outstretched. I nodded, and he placed his hands on my waist and lifted me onto the wall, where I teetered for a moment. Not *quite* as graceful as a lady being helped into a carriage by a gentleman in a Jane Austen novel, but close enough. When he let go, I missed the warmth where his hands had been.

Do not start getting a crush on this guy, I told myself. My life was hard enough already—I didn’t need to make it harder.

The Three strode ahead down a crushed-shell path with Tristan in their midst, and an electric, fizzy feeling bubbled beneath my skin as the six of us walked through an old wooden gate, young and alive with a perfect summer night stretching out ahead of us.

“And why isn’t Reagan with you tonight?” Selah asked, peeking at Tristan through her long lashes.

“It’s not like we’re married,” Tristan said.

“But you *are* exclusive,” Eric said pointedly, catching Tristan by surprise as we caught up to the group. “And your dad would love it if you put a ring on it someday. Bring a little class to the family.”

Tristan whirled in his tracks.

He wasn’t visibly seething, but something about his cold smile and the set of his shoulders made me feel like he was going to punch Eric. He cocked

his head instead. “You’re right,” he said. “Maybe I should get her some jewelry.” Tristan flicked his blazing blue eyes at me, then zeroed in on Eric. “Like that nice bracelet you got Lucia at the golf club gift shop. What did that set you back, four, five dollars?”

My jaw dropped as I watched the two boys stare daggers at each other. Kezia bit her lower lip, very much enjoying the spectacle, and Tamar looked as nervous as I felt, while Selah walked between the boys, placing a calming hand on each of their chests.

“Stop it,” she said. “You’re stressing Lucia out.” She looked from one to the other, a mix of consternation and bemusement fighting for control on her freckled face. “Don’t you want to have a good time?”

Tristan took a step back, smoothing his perfect hair back into place with both hands. He spat at his feet, a gesture that struck me as surprisingly crude. Eric glanced at me, an unexpectedly sheepish expression flashing across the planes of his face.

“We’re chill,” Eric said. “Not a big deal.”

“Eric knows I’m just messing with him,” Tristan said.

“Boys will be boys, as they say,” Selah sighed, as if she were accustomed to their antics. “Let’s go down to the beach and pretend this never happened.”

“Maybe you can kiss and make up,” Kezia sang.

“Is there a bonfire happening or something?” Tristan asked, looking dubiously toward the deserted beach in the distance. “I don’t see anything.”

“We can make our own party,” said Selah. “Speaking of...” She trailed off, considering Tristan. “Were you at that big yacht party at the beginning of the summer, by any chance?”

Tristan peered at Selah for a moment, then laughed, throwing an arm around her. “I go to a lot of parties,” he said. “Work hard, play hard—right, Eric?”

Eric rolled his eyes and fiddled with his rope bracelet. His was a little grayer than mine, a perfect fit on his tanned wrist.

“Our friend was planning to go,” Selah continued. “I wonder if you saw her there.”

Tristan looked down at his smartwatch, as if he were growing bored with the conversation. "I don't know. Who's your friend?"

"Her name's Ari," Selah said. "Do you know her?"

Tristan pursed his lips, then shrugged. "Never heard of her."

"Ah well," Selah said. "Shot in the dark."

"Now, that's a good idea," Tristan said. "Shots!"

"Fine," Eric sighed. "Let's go back inside. It'll be pitch-dark soon, and there's nothing going on at the beach."

"But I want to go swimming!" Kezia pouted.

"Me too," I said.

"You're outnumbered, dude," Selah said, cheekily matching Eric's and Tristan's tough-guy tones. "You're coming with us." I shot Eric a pleading look, remembering how he'd reacted to the Three the night we first saw them. I knew he thought they were bad news, but I needed him to give them another chance. To see how they could make the most boring day feel exciting.

I put my hand on his arm.

"Let's hang out a little longer," I said.

"We don't have anything to drink or otherwise enjoy, unless you girls planned ahead?" Tristan asked. The Three looked from one to the other, and Eric shook his head. "Then I'm out," Tristan said, already scrolling through a screen full of texts on his phone. "Reagan beckons."

Kezia blew a raspberry at his back as he turned and headed back up the path. "Say hi to your girlfriend for me," she shouted.

Eric muttered something under his breath that sounded like *good riddance*.

"We don't need him," Selah said.

She tugged on Eric's arm, not giving him a chance to change his mind as she led us farther down the path and into the twilight. It wasn't long before we'd reached a cute little cluster of one-story cottages perched along a bluff overlooking the sea. Their windows glowed amber with the gently setting sun, and we cut between them on our way to the beach, forging through tidy gardens until we found ourselves in a backyard littered with metal croquet wickets.

Unlike the others, this yard wasn't empty. Two guys a few years older than us—probably college-age—lounged in Adirondack chairs. I took a deep breath as I looked at them, wondering if we were about to get yelled at.

The boy wearing a backwards baseball cap was busy filling a glass from an amber bottle while the other fiddled with his phone. Both were wearing those weathered-pink pants I'd seen all over Nantucket. In their penny loafers and pastel polo shirts they looked like they were cosplaying the middle-aged men they'd inevitably become. It didn't take much imagination to picture them with ruddier faces and thicker frames, strolling through buildings that bore their names and ordering for the table.

Like Stuart Weston.

"Let's start at the Gazebo....," the one pouring the drinks was saying—and then he stopped himself midpour, his eyes darting from Kezia and Tamar to Eric and Selah...and finally landing on me. His gaze seemed to linger, and I wondered if the last rays of sunlight were making my new dress see-through.

My eyes are up here, Sammi would have shouted.

"I'm getting the car, okay?" the one on the phone said, waiting for an answer that didn't come and then looking up when he realized his friend was busy staring at us. Selah waved at the boys, laughing at their expressions of blank surprise, then pulled Eric and me behind her as she traipsed down the garden path.

Toward the beach and away from private property.

"How long before they start following us?" She giggled, her long hair brushing my arm as we ran. I pressed my lips together in a smile, fighting the urge to look over my shoulder.

I didn't need to look.

I could feel their eyes on our backs.

Skipping down a set of wooden stairs, we emerged on a narrow strip of sand scattered with clumps of dried seaweed. The sun had nearly set, and the sky was stained a bright electric pink. Eric climbed up on an empty lifeguard platform, surveying the empty beach. I watched him shield his eyes as he stood framed in clouds and the last vestiges of molten sunshine.

Like a sailor in an oil painting, I thought.

“Unzip me,” said Selah, stepping in front of me.

“What?” I asked, shaking my head clear. She lifted her curtain of hair so I could reach the heavy silver zipper at the neck of her dress. “You’re going to skinny-dip?”

“This dress is vintage,” she said.

Like that was all the explanation I needed.

I grasped the zipper and hesitated. We’d had an epic beach day together and I was excited about tonight...but we weren’t *that* close. Even if she couldn’t reach her zipper by herself, she had Tamar and Kezia here. And helping her take off her clothes felt a lot more intimate than helping my mom zip up her dress.

Selah shifted her weight impatiently.

We were a long way from Pittsburgh.

I pulled the heavy zipper, revealing a pink cursive label that said “The Lilly” and then a white bra strap fastened beneath Selah’s shoulder blades. I glanced up at Eric. He shook his head and lifted his palms, as if he wanted no part in this. *These girls*, he mouthed, circling his finger next to his head.

I bristled at the implication that he was calling my new friends crazy.

They were adventurous and brash and didn’t care what other people thought.

Kezia and Tamar helped each other out of their outfits, and it wasn’t long before they were down to their underwear. Selah shimmied out of her dress and handed it to me as if I were a clerk in a boutique. I automatically folded and smoothed the embroidered fabric—then wondered what the heck I was supposed to do with it. Eric had been keeping one nervous eye on us from his perch on the lifeguard’s tower, but when Kezia moved to unhook her bra, he clapped his hands over his face.

“This is *not* Ibiza!” he shouted.

Kezia pouted up at Eric but left her undergarments on. Her pale, freckled curves reflected the last of the sun as she and Tamar grabbed their dresses from the sand and tossed them up for Eric to hold. The two of them sprinted to the water, splashing their way through gentle waves until they were about

waist deep. Selah strolled after them slowly, stopping as her knees disappeared in the waves. That's when she turned to face us, hands on her hips.

"Come on, you two," she called.

"You're nuts!" Eric shouted.

Selah lifted her arms over her head in response, falling backward into the brown-blue water. When she finally surfaced, her long hair was plastered to her head.

"It feels *delicious*," she laughed.

I remembered tumbling through the waves with the Three just the other day and took a step toward the shoreline. More than anything, I wanted to feel that powerful effervescence again.

"Don't you want to go in?" I asked.

I was hoping Eric would say yes, that he'd be carried away by the impulsiveness of the moment, but he scrunched his face instead, like he'd bitten into a lemon. For a second, I had a glimpse of what he must have looked like as a little boy, before he grew tall and angular.

"No way," he said. "It looks calm out there, but the undertow is really strong." A muscle in his jaw clenched, and it seemed like he was stopping himself from saying more. I cocked an eyebrow, trying to summon some of Selah's persuasiveness.

But even Selah hadn't been able to convince him.

What chance did I have?

I watched the Three twist and float in the gentle swells without me, feeling unfairly tethered to land. Selah waved to us from the water, which was so placid it reflected the colors of the sunset like a mirror, and I kicked off my shoes. Hesitating. Should I strip down to my underwear? How stupid would I look in my boring, nonmatching briefs and bralette? *Being in underwear is no more naked than wearing a bathing suit*, I told myself.

"Those girls are ridiculous," Eric muttered, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Who are they showing off for?"

"I don't know," I said. *Probably you*. "But I'm going in."

Eric looked confused, like I'd surprised and disappointed him. He caught himself when he saw my face starting to fall. "Do what you want," he said, letting out a resigned sigh. "But don't go out too far."

I kicked off my sandals and wriggled out of my dress but decided to keep wearing the ivory slip that had come with it. "Hold these, please," I said, handing both my dress and Selah's up to Eric. He tucked them under his arm, alongside Tamar's and Kezia's.

He can just hang out by himself, then, I thought.

Life was short, as I knew all too well.

And tonight, I was deciding to actually *live* it—for once—instead of watching from the sidelines. I jogged through the shallows, feeling cold and exposed in the night air...but proud of my own boldness. Beyond a short but harrowing stretch of sharp shells and rubbery seaweed, the sand beneath my feet finally softened and the water deepened. It splashed my calves and then my knees, enveloping me in a surprisingly warm embrace.

Once it reached my waist, I dove under.

The water was shallow enough to have been heated up by the sun, and it almost exactly matched the temperature of my body. It was relaxing and inviting all at once, like a bath that wasn't too hot or too cold, and I lost myself in it—pretending I was one with the ocean. It was the best swim of my life—even with the occasional strands of reddish seaweed clinging to my arms and legs like ghosts reaching up from the sea floor.

Eric was seriously missing out.

"You made it." Tamar smiled.

"Lucia knows how to have fun," Selah pronounced, tossing a piece of seaweed at me. I batted it away and smiled back at her.

Kezia sighed. "Too bad Eric doesn't."

I peered back to shore.

Eric had sat down on the lifeguard bench, our pile of dresses heaped next to him. He looked anxious, folding and refolding his arms across his chest.

"He's just...responsible," I said. "Sensible."

Careful, I thought.

Considerate.

We swam in slow arcs parallel to the shore, keeping our bodies submerged in the warmth of the water. I savored being with the Three again, with no conversation or sounds except the gentle lapping of waves. Out here, I had some distance from Eric's weird tensions—with Tristan, with the Three, and even with me—and from the watchful eyes of my mom and Todd. This languid, peaceful feeling was so different from the adrenaline rush of riding the crashing waves at Surfside under the hot midday sun.

But it was equally delicious, as Selah had put it.

The water was only up to our necks, and the sea was so calm that it barely rippled with our movements. We weren't too far out...and he could sulk all he wanted, but I wasn't leaving yet. If he had something to say to me, he could swim out here and say it. I tilted my head back into the warmth of the ocean, feeling it caress and buoy me as I leaned into it with my whole body.

Forgetting Eric and Tristan.

And the dead girl in the sand.

Soon enough I'd swim back to shore, back to reality and responsibility and all the gut-wrenching anxiety that came with it. It was surprisingly easy to float here, and since the water was calm, I didn't have to pinch my nose or hold my breath. I closed my eyes and listened to the ocean gently gurgle in my ears, savoring the peace of being in the sea as darkness fell.

"It's perfect, isn't it?" Selah said.

"This is really ni—"

A loud "Whoop!" erupted behind us, shattering the tranquility of the moment. Two guys emerged from the footpath onto the beach, running as fast as they could. As they neared the water, I realized that it was the two college bros we'd come across on our way here.

"Want company?" one of them shouted.

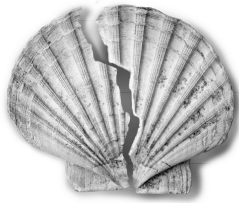
"Ab-so-lute-ly," Selah called.

I stopped floating and treaded water, watching as the boys stripped down to their clinging boxer briefs and proceeded to screech and splash through the shallows like wild hyenas.

"It's freezing!" the one in the hat yelled.

“Don’t be such a wuss,” the other one shouted, shoving his friend beneath the surface and wrestling in the shallows. He had floppy brown hair and a tattoo of Greek letters on his bicep.

My heart rate spiked as they lurched toward us, and an uneasy feeling in my gut told me that the night was about to change.



CHAPTER 17

SELAH GRINNED, HER EYES AND teeth flashing in the last crimson rays of sunset. “I knew they’d come,” she said. I didn’t answer. I just spun in the shoulder-high water, my arms dragging loosely behind me, while Kezia swam toward the boys.

I’d had a feeling they’d follow us.

I just wished they hadn’t.

The first boy roared as he came up for air. He fished around in the shallows for his hat, then tackled his floppy-haired friend. Their roughhousing created ripples on the previously smooth surface, and Kezia egged them on, splashing them both as they floundered. A hungry smile spread across Hat Boy’s face as he blinked the salt from his eyes.

It was exactly the opening he’d been hoping for.

“Oh no you didn’t,” he said.

Kezia smiled back at him.

“Oh yes,” she said. “I did.”

He dove toward her, his floppy-haired friend forgotten as he grabbed wetly for Kezia, trying to dunk her. She twisted out of his grasp and laughed at his lumbering attempts to catch her as she orbited him, just out of reach. She’d lure him in, only to flick beads of water into his face.

Tamar studied Kezia from a distance, tilting her head and fighting a wicked smile that finally won. One moment she was treading water next to me, and the next she vanished under the waves.

“This should be good,” Selah said. Then she dove beneath the surface.

I watched Kezia tease the boys in silence as Tamar and Selah disappeared beneath the water for a long time. When they finally surfaced, it was beneath the boy in the hat. I heard him howl in surprise as the girls

hoisted him in the air, the salt water on their arms glistening like stars, before dropping him into the surf. Kezia clapped, squealing with delight.

It only spurred the boys on.

They were really trying now.

But they didn't have a chance. The Three dove underwater whenever the boys lurched in their direction, and their teasing developed a rhythm that the boys didn't seem to get. Like they were swimming in fast-forward and the boys were moving at half speed at best. "Okay, okay!" Hat Boy finally shouted. "Let's have a truce, all right? We give up!"

His friend just nodded, too winded to speak.

"Who knew losing could feel so good," Hat Boy said, finally wading close enough to Kezia to wrap his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into his embrace, her long blond hair settling on his sunburned arms like seaweed as they floated next to Tamar and the other boy—all four of them paddling and laughing and whispering in each other's ears. I ducked my head under the water, hiding my disappointment.

This night was supposed to be different.

These girls were supposed to be different.

I stayed under as long as I could, counting to ten and back before finally rising. I smoothed my wet hair with both hands behind my ears and tried to keep the frustration from my face when I heard Eric calling out from shore. The wind stopped his words from reaching me, but I could tell what he wanted. Night had fully descended, and it was getting harder to see the beach. The navy blue sky was speckled with stars, and a pale quarter moon glimmered overhead. It felt closer and brighter than ever before, and Eric's white dress shirt glowed beneath it like a lighthouse as he paced on the beach, calling me away from the Three and back to land.

Part of me knew he was right.

They *were* impulsive.

And a little scary.

I stretched my legs in the water, feeling for the soft sand beneath me—but a familiar flash of panic surged through me as I failed to find solid

ground. I faltered, truly alone now and keenly aware of the subtle currents that I knew were slowly pulling me out into the Atlantic.

I turned to find Selah surfacing behind the boy with the floppy hair. Tamar was whispering to him, her fingers cradling the back of his neck. Just beyond them, Kezia was making out with Hat Boy, and all their heads were bobbing just above the waterline as Selah wordlessly observed them. She dragged her hand across Tamar's shoulders and exchanged a mysterious, wicked glance with her.

That escalated quickly, I thought.

I paused for a moment, feeling strangely removed from myself as my magical night with the Three soured in front of my eyes. I wasn't mad at them, exactly—they could do whatever they wanted—but I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do now.

Watching the Three completely focus on flirting with these boys gave me a familiar, murky feeling that I'd thought I'd buried in the past.

Of being an afterthought.

A tagalong.

The dorky, quiet third wheel, somehow always in the way when guys would chat Sammi up after a show. Or at a coffee shop. Even in line for the Phantom's Revenge, our favorite roller coaster at Kennywood.

Only, now I was...I counted their shadowy heads.

The *sixth* wheel?

I'd always had a sense for when I wasn't wanted, and I knew I wasn't exciting enough to keep the Three's attention. Not when they could be showing off and hooking up in the moonlight. The last time I'd felt this way was my very last night with Sammi, and if that wasn't a sign that I really shouldn't be here, I didn't know what was. Now that my adrenaline was wearing off, I was uncomfortably aware of how chilly the water had become. My flimsy slip clung to my goose-bumped skin and I shivered. I was relieved I could still see Eric brooding on the shore.

It was time to swim back to land.

I didn't want to interrupt the Three to say goodbye, so I didn't tell them I was leaving. I just swam quietly away, trying not to splash too much. With

each kick, my legs grew heavier—and when I'd been swimming for a few minutes and the beach didn't seem any closer, I realized just how far out we'd gone. I was tired by the time I approached the shore, where Eric waited for me, my wrinkled dress flapping in his hands like a flag.

"There you are," he said.

There was a note of relief in his voice.

It was hard to get out of the shallows, where I had to fight my way through a mass of seaweed and over a pointy-shelled gauntlet of pain. When I finally made it onto the cold, dry sand, Eric looked away as I wriggled into my thin linen dress. My arms and legs were laced with spidery filaments of red seaweed, as if I were covered in scratches. The night air was bracing without a towel to dry myself, and my teeth started to chatter.

Eric threw his sport coat over my shoulders.

"Don't!" I shrieked, worrying I'd ruin it.

I was sopping wet and his jacket was probably from Brooks Brothers. "You're not getting hypothermia on my watch," Eric joked. "Even though you ditched me and left me standing here like a human coatrack." I was relieved that he wasn't as mad as he'd looked when I'd seen him waving on the sand. I inhaled the aftershave clinging to the fabric of his jacket and felt a little warmer. I kept thinking the worst of him.

And he kept proving me wrong.

He was infuriatingly perfect.

"Your dad said we could call him for a ride," I said, trudging alongside him as we left the beach, passing a tangle of driftwood and a safety sign about rip currents. I wondered if I'd been caught in one. I was so tired I could barely walk...and it didn't help that my waterlogged slip was clinging to my legs, making each step an effort.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Eric showed me his phone screen. "I am *not* calling my dad."

It had only felt like we were down at the beach for half an hour or so, but the glowing numbers on his phone revealed that it was past one a.m. The sky was pitch-black, and the beach road ahead of us was dark and empty. I dug in my bag for my phone, expecting a screen full of texts and attempted calls

from my mom—but there were no missed calls, voicemails, or messages. She must have felt comfortable about me being out with Eric. Or she was so engrossed in spending time with Todd that she wasn't even thinking of her daughter's whereabouts or what time she came home. They were probably fast asleep, not realizing we were still out, I thought with a touch of relief.

There was nothing available on the ride-share apps, so we decided to walk the two miles to Tom Nevers. It was that or spend the night in the dunes. Two miles wasn't far in theory, but I struggled to keep up with Eric's longer stride. Of course, his pants were dry and he wasn't wearing sandals. I'd lost my hair elastic, and my thick braid had unraveled into a tangled mess.

Those two miles were a marathon.

I couldn't wait to get out of my dress and collapse into my bed the moment we reached Todd's house, a looming shape in an eerie cloud of mist. No lights were on, at least at the front of the house, and nobody was waiting up for us. If they had been, they'd given up. We wearily climbed the front steps, but when Eric reached to open the door...

It didn't budge.

I couldn't believe it—they'd locked us out.

"I thought nobody locked their doors on Nantucket?"

"We don't, usually. But I know my dad has been following this so-called crime wave," Eric said, rattling the door a few more times. "But it's just stupid kids. Shoplifters and pickpockets."

I thought back to the fudge shop break-in I'd read about. High school kids, looking for a thrill—and maybe a sugar high. That sounded about right. It didn't seem like anything Todd needed to be worried about.

Unless it was the dead girl washing up on a beach that had spooked him.

"You don't have a key?" I asked.

"I didn't bring it," Eric said. I could tell he was trying to keep his cool, but I could hear the exasperation rising in his voice. "Only because we never used to lock our doors here."

I peeked under the welcome mat—where people always hid their keys in movies—but I didn't find anything except for a few startled doodlebugs. "Do you keep an extra one under a flowerpot or something?"

Eric shook his head. "We shouldn't have stayed out so late."

"I'll text my mom, or call her," I said.

"It's not worth waking them up." Eric sighed. "Follow me."

He led me around the corner of the house, staying close to the line of hedges. Rosebushes huddled together like shaggy creatures sleeping in the moonlight, and Eric picked his way between two of them, pointing to a trellis that ascended to the second floor. Its thin wooden slats were heavy with roses, their petals shut tight against the night air. Eric reached up, his dress shirt stretching across his shoulders as he scaled the trellis easily. A few loose leaves fluttered down as he looked back at me, his face completely in shadow and surrounded by the soft outline of his hair.

"Come on," he whispered. "You can do it."

He'd assumed I was nervous about scaling the side of the house, and I was happy to let him think that. The truth was, I'd been staring at him. And I didn't want to admit that even to myself. I followed Eric up the trellis, my fingers and toes scraping for purchase against the thin strips of wood, which felt much flimsier now that I was several feet off the ground. Ahead of me, Eric had reached a second-story window, which he eased open with one hand, clinging to a wooden shutter with the other for leverage.

He waved down at me, then lifted himself over the sill.

I hurried after him as he disappeared, stifling a yelp when I gripped the final rung of the trellis and a thorn pierced the meat of my palm. Eric grasped my arms and pulled me up through the pain, and I tumbled inside, landing on him in an ungainly heap. My face was smashed against his shirt collar and my torso pressed against his. I could feel the warmth of his chest through our clothes as it rose and fell with his breath, and I lingered there for a split second before I pulled myself off.

We were in my bedroom, I realized.

Alone, together, in my bedroom.

"Sorry!" I whispered, rocking back on my heels.

The moonlight flashed across his face as he grinned.

"That's a difficult move," Eric said, pushing himself up with one arm so that he was half reclining on the floor. "I give it a ten out of ten." With his

dress shirt rumpled from the climb and a leaf in his hair, he looked mischievous and wild—the total opposite of the buttoned-up, best-behavior Eric on display at the Hydrangea House, or during the puffed-up pissing contest with Tristan.

I liked this Eric better.

I slipped off his dinner jacket.

“Thanks for this,” I said, folding it for him.

“No problem,” he said. “I’d let you keep it, but I’m sure I’ll need it the next time my dad wants to impress Stuart Weston.”

“It seemed like you did a good job of that,” I said.

“That whole family’s gross. Do you even know how Stuart makes his money? By ruining other companies. I wish my dad weren’t sucking up to him,” Eric said. “I was so relieved to come back here after the semester ended and finally get away from Tristan. Then I find out they’re docking here all summer, and my dad invites them to dinner.”

“But he was your roommate,” I said. “Why did you want to get away from him?”

“He’s a shallow, horrible person. I’m sure you picked up on that,” he said. I certainly had. “The things he’s done—and the way he treats girls...” Eric trailed off.

“Like Reagan Morris?” I asked.

“Like any girl—especially drunk ones, or insecure ones, or ones who are dazzled by everything he has,” he said, his tone acidic and harsh.

I drew back slightly at the rancor in his voice. “Then why does Reagan put up with him?”

“I guess because it works out well for her, too, you know?” Eric said. I didn’t know. “Stuart donates a ton to all her mom’s campaigns.”

I frowned. “Is everything really that...transactional?”

“Isn’t it?” Eric said. “That’s just how people are.”

I disagreed, and I didn’t love seeing this cynical side of him. “That’s not how *everyone* is.” I pulled myself up off the floor and sat on the edge of my bed. “I’m not like that, for starters.”

“And I like that about you, Lu,” Eric said. “But don’t you think that’s a little naive? What about Selah’s clique—you don’t think they’re after something?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, completely bewildered. “They’re not after anything.”

Except maybe boys.

“You didn’t notice that they left without paying at dinner?” he asked. “Or that they ask every guy they meet if he has a girlfriend—or a boat? Doesn’t that seem weird to you?”

I let out an incredulous laugh.

The idea that they’d dined and dashed—waltzing out of Hydrangea House without paying for their oysters and expensive drinks—seemed both unlikely *and* impossible. Maybe they had a tab there. Maybe they’d paid and Eric hadn’t seen. If they hadn’t, surely someone would have stopped them.

Eric had been weird about the Three since the beginning, but his dislike for them seemed a little outsized.

“You really hate them, don’t you?” I said, trying to understand.

“I just don’t trust them,” Eric said. “You saw yourself tonight how they ignored you once some guys showed up. Is that how friends act—is that how friends should treat you?” His furrowed brow hid his eyes in shadow.

“They’re just not...stuck-up. They like to have a good time.” I wasn’t sure why I was defending them, exactly. True, tonight had been weirder than I’d expected. But that didn’t cancel out the way I could feel when I was with them.

Carefree and alive.

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt,” Eric said.

I let out a long breath. He was protective of me, which I liked—to a point. But the Three were a lot more interesting than the stuffy crowd of Patagonia vests that Eric had introduced me to at the beach. Or his wealthy frenemies like Tristan and Reagan.

“I appreciate you looking out for me,” I said, so softly that I could barely hear myself over the whir of the ceiling fan. Part of me wished we could get

back to the half-romantic moment we'd been having on my bedroom floor before the conversation swerved, but Eric was heading toward the door.

He leaned on the doorframe, his dress shirt tight against his arms.

"My pleasure, Lucia," he said. "Good night."



CHAPTER 18

MY MIND WAS UNSETTLED AFTER my chat with Eric. I paged through the book of nautical lore Todd had given me, hoping it would put me right to sleep. But I found the stories and woodcut illustrations of sea monsters, ghost ships, and sirens so interesting that I read on deep into the night. My lids were growing heavy as I came to a section on selkies, seals who could transform into women by removing their skin. Sometimes men would steal their coats, keeping them on land to marry. But if the woman found her seal coat, she'd leave her human children crying on shore when she returned to the sea. I clutched my stuffed seal as I finally drifted off, thinking of those sad children left behind.

That was exactly how I felt without Sammi: abandoned and lonely.

I awoke the next morning to the smell of burned pancakes and freshly brewed coffee. I'd dreamed of the dead girl again. I was chasing after her, trying to ask her something...but when she finally turned around, it was Sammi's face looking back at me.

Guilt crashed over me like a wave as I lay in my warm and comfy bed, still tired from my late night. I'd been so focused on Eric—how we'd talked in the dark in my bedroom, and how I'd felt when I accidentally tumbled on top of him—and gotten so engrossed reading maritime myths that I'd almost totally forgotten about the dead girl.

I felt like I'd let her down somehow. Like I was too swept up in my own drama and not working hard enough to find out who she was.

I jumped out of bed, grabbing my phone from the dresser. It was possible that the police had figured everything out. That she'd been identified by now. I flicked open the browser on my phone and refreshed a dozen tabs' worth of

search history as I jogged down to the kitchen, hoping that the police had solved the case.

Mom and Todd sat in the breakfast nook with their heads bent together, whispering softly and seriously in a patch of bright sunshine. Too preoccupied to notice me as I sidestepped the platter of blackened pancakes and grabbed a bowl of cereal. I stood at the counter while I ate.

I checked the *Inquirer and Mirror* and the *Nantucket Current* first, but the first headline I saw was MALE, 19, VICTIM OF BRUTAL ASSAULT IN SIASCONSET. My heart rate spiked as I skimmed the first paragraphs of the article for details.

Not another dead teenager.

Please.

An unidentified male was found unconscious on 'Sconset Beach early this morning with "unspecified injuries," according to local police. The victim's wallet and other valuables were reported missing, and the victim claimed to have no memory of the incident. Authorities have not ruled out foul play.

'Sconset.

That was the beach we were at last night. With those college boys.

A dark, cold feeling wrapped around my chest like the arms of a squid. The tentacles tightened as I remembered how the night had turned once they'd shown up. I wondered what had happened after we'd left.

The victim could have been anyone, I told myself. You don't know that it was one of the boys from last night. It could have been on another section of that beach.

But how big was that beach? And what time had the incident occurred? What if it was one of those guys? Could there have been someone else on that beach last night, waiting to rob some careless, distracted party boy? 'Sconset had seemed completely empty to me last night, but there could've been someone hiding in the shadowy bluffs.

Watching us swim.

Choosing their moment.

I shivered in the cheerful warmth of the kitchen.

If Eric and I had stayed even later, it might have been him that I read about in the *Nantucket Current*. We could have been hurt. *The Three* could have been hurt by whoever had done this.

My mind raced with awful possibilities, and I wished I could find out how the girls were doing.

But I didn't have their numbers to check on them.

I didn't even know where they were staying.

Maybe they'd seen or heard something. If they were the only other people on the beach...

My thoughts stuttered to a stop.

It was a little weird, I had to admit, that I didn't know how to contact them and I had no idea where they were staying. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I didn't actually know *anything* about them. They could be lying in a proverbial ditch, and I'd have no idea.

I shook my head, trying to force my whirlpool of thoughts to be calm, rational, and orderly. Why did I always jump to the worst conclusions about everything? *You know why*, my anxiety urchin reminded me. My spoon clattered into my cereal bowl, splashing milk on the Italian marble counter.

I had no reason to jump to ridiculous conclusions based on one paragraph in the newspaper. The article didn't even describe the victim.

I wiped up the spilled milk with an embroidered dishcloth. My mom looked up from her conversation with Todd, her eyes curious and concerned, and she walked over to me when she saw the look on my face.

"Sweetie," she said. "Are you okay?" She wrapped an arm around my shoulders. Her bathrobe was new and fluffy, and I leaned into the softness, filling my lungs with the scent of fresh laundry. "You got in late last night. But I'm so glad you found some friends here on the island."

"I-I'm fine, I think," I said. "But look."

I tilted my phone so she could see it, showing her the article about the assault. My mom skimmed it with a furrowed brow. "That poor boy," she

said, smoothing my matted hair off my forehead. “Todd keeps saying there’s more crime than usual this summer.”

I nodded into her fuzzy shoulder.

Todd *did* keep saying that. The local news did, too.

I wanted to tell her that Eric and I had been there last night, on that same beach. That my friends had been there, too, and that I wasn’t sure if they were okay.

I met my mom’s gaze, my eyes watering.

“Honey,” she said, holding me at arm’s length so she could get a good look at me. “Is this reminding you of, you know—that girl?” I blinked, my mind reeling with possibilities as she rubbed a tear from my cheek.

I hadn’t even made that connection.

At least not consciously.

Oh god, I thought. *The dead girl*.

Both she and this boy had been found motionless in the sand. The only difference was that he was still alive.

“Down here it says he’s expected to make a full recovery,” my mom said, tapping at my phone screen. “He’s going to be okay. But I’m so sorry, baby—I think maybe this triggered some stuff for you.”

She wrapped me in a hug.

It’s okay, I told myself. *It’s probably not related*.

But I couldn’t help wondering if something similar had happened to the dead girl. If she’d been alone on the beach after midnight—in the wrong place at the wrong time when a night out curdled into danger—and she just hadn’t been as lucky.

If she’d been out partying...or trusting the wrong person on a moonlit walk in the sand.

It was odd that two young people had both been found in the morning, on a beach, only a couple of weeks apart.

What were the chances?

Perhaps the incidents were unrelated and this wasn’t something I should worry about. After all, the college boy was going to be fine.

But...what if there was some connection?

What if someone on the island was targeting young people on the beaches at night?

My breath caught in my chest, and I firmly reminded myself that my brain was doing what it did best: asking questions, imagining the worst, making impossible connections, focusing on the wrong detail, and leaping to terrible conclusions. I could practically hear Sammi calling me a broken microscope in her singsong voice, and she'd be right. I was focusing on all the similarities between the two victims and getting carried away.

I couldn't let my brain run to dark and paranoid places every time something bad happened in the world. I focused on the burned-pancake smell hovering in the kitchen. On the vase of wilting flowers on the counter. On the softness of my mom's arms around me, supporting me in a loving hug. But the hug felt a little too tight.

Once again, I couldn't breathe.

"I need some air," I said. I struggled free from her embrace. "And I have to get ready for work."

My mom nodded, releasing me—but first she placed her hands on either side of my face, pressing my cheeks together as if she were trying to push all of her love into me.

"Would you like me to find you a therapist on the island?" she said. "Or set up something virtual with your doctor back home?"

I shook my head.

There wasn't anything wrong with me.

There was something wrong with this island.

"Let's put a pin in it," my mom said, removing her hands from my cheeks. "But I'm keeping my eye on you. If you're sure you want to go to work today, I want you to come straight home—actually, scratch that. I'll pick you up. You just let me know when."



It was my first day alone in the shop.

Brendan was out fishing for the day, but he said he'd keep his phone on in case I had any questions. Or I could call his mom, the owner, who I still hadn't met. She rarely came by the shop since she had another job mid-island. Business was slow, and I had plenty of time to keep refreshing the news on my phone. But there were no updates to the article I'd seen that morning.

Or any new details on Jane Doe.

But when I expanded my search to include the "crime uptick" that Todd kept talking about, I found a ton of articles about the increase in criminal activity on the island. I scrolled through angry comments and letters to the editor about the spike in incidents—as well as a bunch of ridiculous, bloviating opinions about what the island should do about it, including stopping ferry service to keep out the "riffraff from the mainland."

And imposing an island-wide curfew.

Complaints about the apparent crime wave seemed to focus on petty thefts and not on drug dealing or violence. The assaulted boy and my dead girl stood out as the only major crimes—and it was hard to imagine there wasn't a connection.

I tried to focus on concrete facts.

The boy's wallet was taken.

That made sense, considering the increase in reports of pickpocketing, as well as wallet and purse thefts from cars...but it wasn't much to go on. If only there were a pattern that would point me in the right direction. To an answer hidden in the details. Maybe I was being a broken microscope, but I couldn't shake the feeling that the dead girl's appearance could be related to some of the other crimes on the island. My mind snagged on the fact that I had nothing to hang this on. No proof of connection, at least not yet.

I decided to make a list.

A list of every crime on Nantucket.

I didn't have a notebook with me; I hadn't expected to need one. But there were fat rolls of receipt paper in the supply closet. I tore off a foot-long

strip and started scrolling through my pages and pages of searches, jotting down every single mention of a crime.

Missing phones. Missing wallets. Purses taken from unlocked cars, or while their owners dined in restaurants. One homeowner reported some jewelry and clothing missing, but their flat-screens and laptops had been left untouched. Their valuable artwork was similarly spared, but their wine fridge had been emptied, and a demolished tub of ice cream was left stuck to the kitchen counter.

Because the crimes were mostly petty thefts, the comments-section regulars liked to blame drugs—but if it was thieves who were ransacking the wealthy for drug money, you'd think they'd take the bigger-ticket items like electronics, to resell for cash.

One *Current* article stated that authorities dusted for fingerprints at several homes and didn't find a single match in their criminal databases. The perpetrators weren't in the system already, which was a big red line through everybody's favorite theory of drugs and repeat criminals, as far as I was concerned.

I'd reached the end of the articles, and I surveyed my paltry list on the curling strip of receipt paper, flattening it out as I chewed the tip of my ballpoint pen.

It wasn't much.

But the breathless reporting on this handful of bizarre incidents ate away at space that should have been used for the Jane Doe investigation. A girl's life was more important than missing jewelry and stolen caviar.

Even in Nantucket.

With my list spread out in front of me, I took a deep breath and asked myself the one big question I wasn't sure I could answer: Was there a connection between this list and the girl I'd found on the beach?

Had the girl caught the perpetrators in the act and paid the ultimate price? Or could she have been a thief herself—part of a crime ring, *Bling Ring*—style?

I blinked, remembering that the crimes had continued after I'd found her. *But when did they start?* I wondered.

I smacked myself in the forehead, wishing I'd thought to add the date next to every crime. *It's not like you've done this before*, I reminded myself. *And it's not like you have better things to do*. I'd only had one customer so far today, and the afternoon was stretching out ahead of me like an empty roll of receipt paper.

I retraced my digital steps.

Scrolling back through the news reports, I wrote down the date that each crime was reported. "Kids always do crazy things around the full moon," said a shopkeeper quoted in the report. I thought back to the fuzzy, indistinct moon I'd observed from the ferry deck as my mom and I arrived on the island in early June. It had looked almost full then, which was right around when the more bizarre incidences—like the fudge and seafood shop break-ins—had begun.

I gripped the pen in my hand.

Thinking.

My brain had that tired, jangly feeling it got when I was trying too hard to focus. There was *something* here, I knew there was. The timing was a hint, but it wasn't the full picture.

There was some other layer missing.

I thought back to all the Scandinavian crime shows my mom liked to watch, with their dour-faced detectives scowling in the snow. Whether it was on a giant whiteboard, a pane of glass, or a piece of paper, they always used a map, marking crimes and clues in two dimensions to zero in on the killer.

I looked around the inside of the store, thinking. Then I saw it.

I grabbed a tri-fold tourist map from the plastic holder by the door, flipping it over to the side that showed the whole island. Buttery sunlight poured through the windows, and I knew I had a while. With the weather this nice, everyone would be at the beach—at least until it turned. I used a ballpoint pen to circle the spot where I'd found the dead girl, pushing down hard into the glossy paper. Hard enough to make a groove. After that, I marked a little X at every crime scene from my list. If an address or intersection wasn't specifically named, I'd make a big circle around the entire neighborhood.

I knew my map wasn't accurate. Not strictly speaking.

To start with, it was an illustrated crescent of an island with hot spots marked by cartoon lobsters and seagulls on surfboards. As I looked at the map, it was pretty clear to me that there was no cluster of crime around the beach where I'd found the girl on the eastern edge of the island. Most of the business crimes happened in town—at the center-north of the island—and the home break-ins were scattered inland on the southern side.

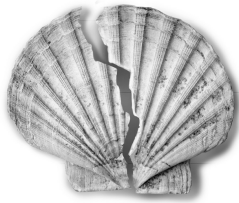
I tapped my pen against the counter, thinking. This could mean Jane Doe had nothing to do with the other crimes. That even though *someone* was helping themselves to a summer of luxury, it could be unrelated to the girl on the beach. There was obviously a difference between causing someone's death and ransacking kitchens or shoplifting trinkets.

Right?

I tapped the chewed-up ballpoint pen against the counter, second-guessing myself and trying to come up with the type of person who'd do all of that.

I still had too many questions.

And none of the answers that kept bubbling up into the back of my mind were making me feel any better.



CHAPTER 19

THE NEXT FEW DAYS, MY world was a blur of working at the shop and surreptitiously adding to my growing pile of notes. I transferred them from the flimsy receipt paper to a slim notebook, with the marked-up map of Nantucket folded inside. I'd tried using the Notes app on my phone, but I needed something tangible to make sense of my findings—something I could hold in my hand. And pulling the notebook from my back pocket when no one was watching made me feel like Harriet the Spy.

Every day, my mom drove to Milk & Honey, timing her arrival to fifteen minutes before my shift ended. Sometimes she'd idle near the shop and wait for me to come out; other times she'd park and come in to order something. I knew she was keeping an eye on me, hoping I wouldn't backslide into the depths of depression I knew all too well.

The first few times, I worried Brendan would think there was something weird about my mom showing up so much, like I was a kindergartner getting picked up from school. But he just chatted her up like he did with everyone, suggesting new smoothie combinations to try and offering free ice cream samples with a laid-back, gummy smile. The routine, the normalness of it all, felt comforting, if a little dull. And I hadn't seen—or heard from—The Three since that night.

I wondered if they'd tired of me, moved on to more interesting and exciting new friends. Maybe the fact that I hadn't joined in on their seductive antics and bailed on them revealed my true boring, third-wheel nature.

The other part of me worried about them even more since I'd heard about the boy on the beach. If he was one of the guys we'd met, what if the person who'd attacked him had also done something horrible to the Three?

With every passing day, I wondered why they hadn't stopped by the shop to check in. The fact that they hadn't—plus the fact that we'd never exchanged numbers—made me think that Eric was right about the Three. Maybe they weren't really my friends. Sammi had always texted me the morning after a gig. Even if she'd ditched me for a guy the night before, like the girls had done at 'Sconset. She'd always make it up to me the next day, full of apologies and self-deprecating jokes.

But these girls weren't Sammi.

Apparently, our brief acquaintance had meant more to me than it had to them.

Customers poured in and out of the shop, but no one mentioned anything about the dead girl or the recent assault. Day to day, there was absolutely no visible evidence of the so-called crime wave: families and well-off couples ordered their overpriced treats and paid for them, then waltzed to the beach or shopping or pickleball. The pastel-hued good life with no specter of violence in sight.

And I was stuck here, making frozen concoctions for smiling and sun-kissed faces until my fingers went numb. Acting cheerful and trying my best to pretend that nothing bad ever happened on this picture-perfect island.

Even when it did.

But no matter how hard I tried, every time I closed my eyes I saw images of the dead girl, the ghost crab, or the boy found unconscious. All proof that terrible things could happen here.

The images morphed into the wet asphalt in Pittsburgh.

The piercing sirens, shattering the night.

Sammi being taken away in an ambulance.

The only thing that seemed to keep those images at bay was my DIY investigation, as meager as it was. I kept thinking that if I could just connect enough dots, I could bring *something* to the police that would get them to look at the dead girl's case again. That I could help her in my own small way.

Which was why, alone in the shop, I spread out my notes on the counter and pored over them for some detail I'd missed. My thoughts were

interrupted by Brendan texting me to let me know he was running late and ask if I could stay another hour until he arrived.

Just close up if you can't, he said.

I can cover, I texted back.

He and his mom had been so understanding about me taking a bunch of days off before I'd even really started, it was the least I could do. And I'd worked enough hours by now that I knew I could do it without asking Brendan a million questions. Then I called my mom to let her know that she shouldn't come get me for another hour or so. She sounded relieved, telling me she was picking out some upholstery with Todd at the Marine Home Center and could use the extra time but would be right there when I was ready to leave.

"Love you, Lu," she said.

The shop was still empty, so I said it back.

Since I'd be working extra hours, I made myself a giant milkshake with chocolate and strawberry ice cream and a scoop of every single topping—nuts and sprinkles and Boba balls and caramel sauce. The concoction looked disgusting, and I felt a momentary flash of guilt at the sheer wastefulness of it. It wasn't like I could put any of the ingredients back. But I took a taste, and it was delicious. Then I turned my attention back to my trusty crime notebook and map, losing myself in the facts I practically had memorized by now.

Some time later, I jerked my head from my notes as the shop bell rang. It was my first customer in hours, breaking my train of thought. While I'd been focusing on my notes, the late-afternoon sun had disappeared behind some clouds, and the shop windows had begun to mist with a light drizzle.

Which meant that the summer crowd would soon be leaving the beach to head into town.

I was going to be slammed.

Ugh, I thought. *Of course.*

Just when I told Brendan I'd cover for him.

"Hey, girly-pop!" a singsong voice called out.

I straightened and froze as Selah twirled into the shop. A flood of relief and a touch of uneasiness flooded my system as Kezia and Tamar tottered in on platform sandals that were incredibly impractical for the island's cobblestone streets. All three were rocking crop tops and high-waisted shorts that would look more at home in a music video than on a misty New England afternoon.

"We came to rescue you," Tamar said.

"It's about to get busy here," I said, realizing that I'd left the map on the counter. I slid it toward myself, tucking it into my shorts pocket as casually as possible and trying to keep my voice even. "I haven't seen you all in a while—is everyone okay?"

Selah gave me a smile so warm that I felt myself reflexively smiling back at her and the others, and the shop itself seemed brighter with them here. Finally seeing the carefree, kind faces of my only friends here made me realize how much I'd missed them. After several days without them, I'd turned into a sour-faced detective in my own pathetic crime drama. It wasn't who I wanted to be.

"We're bored," Selah said, answering for the Three.

There was something about Selah's pronouncement that made me want to come up with something fun, an outrageous plan to banish boredom forever. To skip out on work and go to the beach. To give in to whatever adventures the Three would bring me.

But even though I'd missed them—I wasn't a doormat.

"So where've you been?" I asked, playing it cool. "After 'Sconset, you kind of disappeared on me. And I don't have any of your numbers."

"We met this guy and sailed to Tuckernuck," Kezia said. "We totally lost track of time."

"It wasn't that fun," Tamar added.

"Maybe if you'd been there, it wouldn't have sucked," Selah said, warming that little ember of friendship back to life. "We missed you."

I decided to drop it. They were here now, and wanted to hang out with me.

“I see you’re all doing your part to stimulate the economy,” I said, gesturing at the glossy shopping bags dangling from Tamar’s and Kezia’s arms.

“Yes,” Selah said. “And it’s time to do yours.”

I crossed my arms behind the counter.

“We need new outfits for the Fourth,” Selah said, her full lips quirking at the dubious look on my face. “Wanna come shopping with us?”

I’d gathered from Todd that the Fourth of July was a big deal here, based on the fact that he’d already written out an itinerary so we could enjoy the festivities as a family. Apparently, red, white, and blue attire was mandatory. Todd had scored us invites to a garden party at the historic Morris House, hosted by Reagan’s political powerhouse mother. He’d do his real estate networking and schmooze with Mariah Morris. My mom, Eric, and I would complete his image as a wholesome family man, just trying to help (extremely wealthy) families make lifelong memories on Nantucket—by buying multimillion-dollar properties through him.

So I really *did* need a new outfit. The seaweed-stained linen dress I’d worn to the Hydrangea House wouldn’t do, and neither would the clothes I’d brought from home.

“I’m game,” I said hastily. “But I can’t leave until Brendan gets here.”

“Are you sure?” Kezia purred.

“He wouldn’t mind if you left with *us*,” Selah said.

I’m sure he wouldn’t, I thought, remembering how glassy-eyed and generous he’d been with the Three. But even though he told me I could close up if I needed to, I called him. When he answered I could hear screeching seagulls in the distance.

“Is it okay if I head out?” I said, trying to channel a dose of Selah’s breezy charm. “My friends came by—and they need my help with something.” Part of that was true, so I told myself I wasn’t fully lying.

“A friend in need? I get it—no prob,” Brendan said. “Just close up.” I gave a huge smile and thumbs-up sign to the Three. I hung up before he had a chance to change his mind. I slipped off my apron and grabbed my bag, flipping the Closed sign over the shop door.

As we strode up Main Street and turned right on Broad, the Three stood out like birds of paradise among seagulls. They were too bright in their colorful crop tops and shorts, too loud for our subdued and drizzly surroundings. Walking next to Selah in my crusty work clothes, I felt more like a pigeon than a bird of paradise or even a seagull. Maybe some shopping would fix that.

We strolled past higher-end T-shirt shops and a natural oil perfumery, taking up the whole sidewalk as we passed art galleries and textile boutiques and small businesses festooned with American flags waving in the fitful breeze. The girls paused in front of a shingled storefront with window boxes fashioned out of driftwood and overflowing with tumbling white and blue blossoms, their tendrils cascading all the way to the ground. The doors were propped open to admit a steady stream of barre-toned, expensively highlighted women in chunky white sweaters. An ironwork anchor with wings hung above the entrance.

Selah pulled me inside, her nails digging into my arm.

“Ow,” I said, trying to prompt an apology, but she was already charging ahead into the softly lit interior with Tamar and Kezia at her heels. The store—stocked with gingham and cashmere and seersucker in every shade of pastel—felt like a museum of classic New England style, but the discreet handwritten tags were a reminder that everything had a price.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, interrupting my browsing.

It was Eric. I waved at the girls, indicating that I needed to take the call. I ducked outside the shop and answered.

“Hey—how are you doing?” Eric asked, a rasp of concern in his voice. “Your mom is still with my dad—they’re deciding on patio furniture, apparently—and they asked me to pick you up when you’re ready. It sounded like they’re going to be looking at fabric swatches for a while, so I’m just gonna get an Uber and meet you in town, okay?”

I hesitated for a moment. I didn’t want to go home already, now that the Three were back in my life. “I’ve met up with some friends,” I said smoothly. “I can take a car home when I’m done. You don’t need to come meet me.”

I could hear Eric take in a sharp breath.

“It’s not those three girls, is it?” he said. I knew he didn’t like them, especially because of their antics the other night. But I didn’t want to lie to him. Plus, he knew I had no other friends on this island.

“Yes,” I said. “We’re going shopping. Girl time, you know?”

“Lu,” Eric said tensely. “I didn’t want to bring this up, but did you hear about that kid they found at ’Sconset?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I was a little freaked out when I saw an article about it. Do you think we should tell the police we were nearby that night?”

“And tell them what? It would only make the police look at us like suspects,” Eric said.

“But—” I started.

“And don’t you think it’s a little suspicious that that happened the very same night we were there—with *them*?”

I peeked through the shop window at Kezia, who was holding up a scarf and looking in the mirror. “What are you saying?” I whispered. “That maybe they saw something?”

Eric sighed into the phone. “Do you really want the cops grilling you about your so-called friends? I know you like them...but has it occurred to you that maybe they’re the ones responsible?”

My mouth dropped open. I thought back to the Three’s brazen antics from the other night, the way they’d taunted those boys in the water. There’d been a chaotic edge to the night that I couldn’t deny.

But that didn’t mean that they were behind the assault.

“It’s plausible,” Eric continued. “They’re out of control. Don’t you think they’re capable of something like that?”

“I know they’re a bit...wild. But they’re my *friends*.” It was obvious Eric didn’t like them, but I couldn’t imagine them hurting anyone.

“If you say so,” Eric muttered. “But keep an eye on them. Let me know if they skip out on any bills again. Have you ever seen them pay for anything?”

“Ha,” I said, frowning. I mentally scrolled through my memory of Selah shooing me, Tamar, and Kezia out of that fancy boutique, then handing us all brand-new bathing suits.

I hadn't seen her pay for them, and she hadn't brought them out in a shopping bag emblazoned with the store logo. Could she have stolen them? She seemed like the kind of person who might do that, just for the thrill of it. But it was also very possible she'd paid for them and stuffed them into her bag, like any eco-conscious person these days.

Enough, I told myself, willing the gears in my mind to stop spinning. *Take a deep breath.*

Eric was just suspicious of them because he didn't like them.

Protective, I corrected myself.

The Three were typical privileged girls, careless at times but not criminal. And even if—and it was a huge if—if they'd dined and dashed the other night, and even if Selah had stolen those swimsuits she'd given out on our beach day, that didn't mean they'd had anything to do with the 'Sconset assault or the supposed uptick in crime.

But he'd planted seeds of doubt in my mind about my new friends.

"I will," I said, deciding that I'd pay attention to the Three today, keeping an eye out for any odd behavior. I'd make a mental list of everything that would prove Eric wrong.

Eric was quiet for a moment. "Just be careful," he finally said. "I'm not trying to be weird. I've been freaked out, too, by what happened to that kid."

"I totally get it," I said. "But I'll be done soon."

"Okay," he said. "Call me if you change your mind?"

I smiled at the warm protectiveness in his voice.

I couldn't help myself.

"Deal," I said, ending the call and stepping back into the store.

As Selah and the others pawed through the racks of clothes along one wall, I lingered over a table of bracelets made of fine filaments of metal that were bent to look like rope, with a delicate winged anchor symbol forming the clasp. I picked up one in rose gold, turning it gingerly to check the price: \$395.

Nope, not for me.

Selah pulled me past the jewelry and over to the dresses, which were hanging in chromatic order. I reached for a black sheath dress, thinking that

something cool and effortless would make me look—well, cool and effortless. And it was my favorite color. I held it up to my chest, giving Selah an expectant look.

“Ugh,” she said. “You look dead in that.”

I frowned as she grabbed a navy dress in the same style as the black one and held it up to my frame.

“Nope, still dead,” she said.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” I replied in a sarcastic tone. I didn’t love the “dead” comment, considering everything I’d been through. But Selah didn’t know that. Selah barked out a laugh, and I forced a smile.

“Try this instead,” she said.

She held up a polka-dot dress with spaghetti straps.

“No way,” I said, flexing my newfound autonomy. Selah seemed to like the challenge. She grinned as she brandished a sunflower-yellow minidress (“Hard no”) and then a navy blue jumpsuit (“Double no”). I stopped her when she started to reach for a sleeveless petal-pink dress with a square neck.

“Heck no,” I said. “I do not wear pink!”

Selah gave me a look as if she were rolling her eyes with her entire being. “Just try it,” she said as Tamar and Kezia reappeared with their arms full of clothing. “Trust me.”

I sighed, relenting.

They dragged me to the fitting rooms and we squeezed into one stall while Selah prowled the rest of the store. Tamar wiggled into a green-and-white seersucker sundress with wide straps, setting off her deep complexion and bringing out the bronze dusting of freckles across her nose and chest. Kezia pulled on a pair of high-waisted red pants with two rows of brass buttons and a plain white cashmere tank.

“You look like a sailor!” Tamar said, laughing.

Kezia scoffed and pulled an exaggerated offended face. She pushed Tamar’s shoulder, knocking her against the dressing room mirror with a thump. I sucked in a breath at the sudden burst of aggression. But instead of being angry, Tamar burst into laughter. Then Kezia cracked up, leaning

against the dozens of dresses we'd hung from hooks on the dressing room walls.

I smiled, playing along.

But I kept to my side of the stall and slipped on the pink dress.

It was lower cut than I usually wore, showing off my neck and clavicle. Tamar stopped roughhousing long enough to squeeze behind me and zip me up as Kezia gasped.

"You look..." She trailed off.

"Stunning," Tamar said, peering over my shoulder. I stepped past the girls to check myself out in the mirror. The feather-light fabric billowed away from my body like an upside-down tulip, the fabric swirling around my knees. The color brought life to my cheeks, as if someone had lit a candle inside me.

I didn't look dead, that was for sure.

Kezia yanked the curtain to the side, gesturing at me like I was a masterpiece she'd painted herself. Selah looked me up and down, then lifted my hair away from my face in a temporary updo. I felt a little bit like Cinderella getting dressed by her fairy godmother.

"You're getting that," Selah said decisively as I checked the price tag. It was over two hundred dollars, and Selah saw my face fall as I clocked the amount. I wondered if she'd offer to buy it for me, like she'd done with the designer swimsuit.

And I'd watch her actually pay for it.

I changed out of the dress and walked up to the counter, where I stood in line behind Selah, who was checking out with a dress and a pair of shoes. She grabbed the pink dress from my hands and placed it on the counter in front of the clerk without even bothering to ask me. She didn't stuff it into her bag or under her clothes. A check in the "innocent" column.

Then the salesclerk, in a navy blazer, cleared his throat officiously.

"I'm so sorry," he said, handing Selah her card. "This one doesn't seem to be working. Do you have another I can run?"

Selah let out a little huff of annoyance.

"Hold this," she said, digging in her purse.

She passed me a bottle of water, a mini Mason Pearson brush, and a phone in a glittery teal case that seemed vaguely familiar. It was so big it was nearly a tablet—definitely not the same phone she'd handed me on the beach when I tried to call a cab. That one had a dark leather case. I juggled the contents of her purse as she searched, pulling out another card and handing it to the clerk.

"Here," she said.

"Hm." The clerk furrowed his brow. "I wonder if our system is slow today." He blew on the metal chip and stuck the card back into the reader, then tried entering Selah's information manually. I craned my neck, trying to read the name on the card, but I couldn't see it from my current angle.

Selah gave the clerk an impatient glare.

"Let's skip the shoes," she said.

She pushed them to the side.

"Just the dresses."

The clerk swiped her card again and frowned. "There's an ATM down the block if that would be easier," he said with a pained expression on his face. I could feel the eyes of the other shoppers on the back of my neck, and secondhand embarrassment heated my face like a rash. People here probably didn't overdraw their cards very often, and Selah was starting to cause a scene.

She sighed. "I'm so disorganized." Frowning, she turned to me. "Can you spot me, Lucia?"

The clerk took that as a cue and swiveled his iPad toward me. My eyes widened as I looked at the total on the screen. I probably had enough in my account, with everything I'd stashed away from Milk & Honey. I had barely paid for anything on the island, and the wads of twenties that Todd passed out like candy went a long way.

Selah's brown eyes pleaded with mine.

I offered the clerk my debit card with a silent prayer that it would go through...and when it did, I felt a giddy rush of relief.

"My hero," Selah said, throwing her arm around my shoulders. "I'll get you back, I promise." I just bit my lip as the realization started to sink in: my

entire paycheck from the summer so far—all the money I’d earned from standing at attention and forcing a smile while I made fruit smoothies—had gone up in smoke.

And that check mark in the innocent column now had a question mark next to it.

Selah hurried us out the door as soon as our dresses were wrapped in tissue paper and gently folded into a stiff paper bag—but instead of stopping and worrying about her cards, she just wandered into the next shop. I followed her in, my eyes glossing over rows of organic bath bombs and lotions, and candles with self-help-inspired names like “gratitude” and “manifest.” All the fonts were minimalist and everything in sight was beige and ethically sourced, with packaging that was biodegradable (according to only a million signs in the store).

I lifted a few of the candles to my nose and wondered if Selah had just gifted me.

Or if I’d simply helped a friend in need.

There was no way for me to know if those declined cards were hers or if she’d stolen them. Not without a confrontation. I wasn’t ready to broach the subject with her. Not until I had more reasons to.

I picked up a candle called “evolve” and sniffed it, expecting another hit of fresh florals and spring rain—but it smelled deep and smoky, with a metallic undertone. It was weird, but I kind of liked it.

I turned the candle over.

Seventy-five dollars.

For a candle!

Kezia and Tamar tested each sample bottle on the front table, slathering lotions over their hands and arms as I wandered over to a display of organic makeup. The two of them followed me, sticking their fingers in the shimmery palettes like they were their own personal makeup kits and laughing as they patted blush and bronzer and highlighter on each other’s faces. The effect was more acid pixie-core than New England quiet luxury.

But they pulled it off.

Tamar turned to me, swiping a wash of highlighter across my face with her fingers. It was a weird sensation, having someone else do my makeup. Tamar's breath was soft on my face as she dabbed a few fake freckles onto my nose and cheeks with a light brown eyeliner. It was a level of physical closeness I hadn't felt with a friend since Sammi attempted to do siren eyes on my hooded lids with liquid liner for a ninth-grade dance. It had looked sexy on Sammi, but the same technique ended up making me look like the offspring of a clown and a raccoon. Spotting us from across the store, Selah hurried over and grabbed my shoulders, turning me to face the mirror.

I braced myself for another raccoon moment.

At first, I didn't recognize myself.

This was a carefree, sun-kissed woman.

Not an anxious teenager who had dark circles under her eyes from obsessing over her own DIY criminal investigation. The girl in the mirror didn't look like she tore at her own cuticles or picked at the acne on her chin until it turned angry and red. I turned, facing one way and then the other.

It was me, but better. Way better.

My hair had grown an inch or two since I'd last worn it down. The length weighted my uneven frizz into something closer to a wave, and the sun and salt had lightened a few strands at my temples. I leaned closer, investigating my pores. The fancy skin care products I'd found in the guest bathroom had been working wonders, and I couldn't help but smile as Selah peeked around my head, gazing at herself in the mirror and matching my expression. With my fake freckles, we almost looked like sisters.

In the mirror behind us, I saw Kezia swipe on some perfume from a rollerball, sniff her wrist, then slip the rollerball into her bag. I blinked a few times, processing what I'd just seen, before returning my gaze to Selah's. Kezia had definitely just stolen something, and I needed to pretend that I hadn't noticed. My mouth went dry as it sank in: *Eric was right about them.*

The Three were capable of shoplifting—I'd just seen it with my own eyes. But did that mean they'd committed other crimes on the island? And did it mean that Selah had just taken advantage of me in the dress shop? I chewed the inside of my lip as I seriously considered the idea that they

weren't simply wealthy girls who floated through life not worrying about price tags. Maybe there was more to their story.

I thought back to when I'd tried to use Selah's phone to book an Uber—there were all those finance apps, and notifications from an auction house.

Was that even her phone?

Or was I just scared and jumping to suspicious conclusions?

Selah had all those apps on her phone because she came from a different world—a world of wealth and privilege that I didn't understand. And just because I hadn't seen them settle up at the Hydrangea House didn't mean they hadn't paid.

They *had* been awfully vague about where they were from, and they never talked about their families. They certainly looked the part of privileged teens, with Lilly Pulitzer dresses and diamond studs.

But all that stuff could be stolen, my anxiety urchin whispered.

I didn't want to believe it. They'd been so nice to me. Much nicer than Reagan and Tristan and the rest of Eric's friends.

I decided I wouldn't let my mind run off to dark places, or let my emotions cloud my judgment. Instead, I'd gather evidence.

I just needed to observe them a little longer and maybe, just maybe catch them in the act. *The act of what?* I wasn't exactly sure. Stealing something else? Try to get them to admit that they attacked that boy on the beach?

Or maybe, I thought desperately, maybe I was wrong.

Maybe all my investigating was making me paranoid. My tendency to believe the worst had taken Eric's mistrust and run with it. I wanted to believe that Selah would pay me back for her dress. And perhaps Kezia just stole that perfume on a whim. Even if she was a thrill-seeking shoplifter, it didn't mean these girls were guilty of everything else.

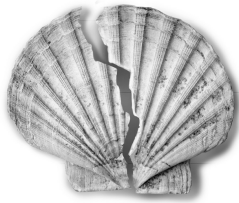
But I could already feel my anxiety urchin making itself comfortable behind my breastbone. The questions came, each one driving my heart rate just a teeny bit higher.

What if Eric was right? What if my new friends who'd swept me up in their whirlwind of beach days and shopping sprees and makeovers had another side to them?

As I thought back to the list of crimes in my notebook, it was easy to imagine it as the trail of three teenage grifters stealing and devouring their way through sumptuous Nantucket homes.

I didn't want to imagine it that way. But what else could it be?

There was only one way to find out.



CHAPTER 20

I WAVED MY PHONE AT the Three and made an apologetic face. “Hey, Selah,” I said. “I’m sorry, I have to bail. My mom’s about to pick me up—we have an appointment.”

Selah put down a small jar of luxury bath salts, and Tamar paused halfway through applying a lipstick sample on Kezia. Kezia turned and pouted, the lipstick leaving a bright red smear across her cheek.

“Aw,” said Selah. “Bummer.”

“We should hang out soon, though,” I said breezily. “Just give me your numbers, okay?” It was only for a split second, but I could have sworn the Three darted glances at each other.

“Sure thing,” Selah said. “What’s yours?”

She extracted her phone from a sleek cross-body bag adorned with a gold YSL logo. The sparkly teal case caught my eye for the second time that day as Selah jabbed at the screen to unlock it, and as I stared at it, I noticed a white monogram at the bottom. I couldn’t make out all the letters, but I saw a “W.” It was a different phone from the one I’d borrowed at Surfside, I was sure of it.

Selah’s purse was different, too.

And expensive.

Two more check marks in the not-so-innocent column, I thought, rattling off my number as I watched Selah punch it into her new phone. I thought back to the so-called crime wave. Could I see Selah and her sidekicks snagging someone’s phone or wallet? Helping themselves to someone else’s stuff?

Maybe, I admitted to myself, I could.

“And yours?” I asked, raising my eyebrows expectantly.

“I’ll text it to you,” Selah said.

“She’ll put us on the chain,” Tamar added.

“Can you do it now?” I forced myself to say. “I don’t want you to forget.”

Selah glanced at the other two, then smiled tightly at me. “Of course.” My phone lit up with a 203 area code.

“Perfect,” I said, offering them an awkward thumbs-up. “I’ll see you soon!” I tried to look normal as I backed out of the store, but I could tell by the way the Three followed me with their big, dark eyes that they knew something was off.

Crap, I thought.

My anxiety urchin poked me with its spines.

I was being ridiculous, I told myself. Being suspicious of the only people who’d befriended me here. I didn’t know what was normal in this world of extreme privilege.

But I did know that I had to look into a few things—if only for my own peace of mind.

I walked out of the store purposefully, trying to appear as if I was running late to meet my ride. I checked behind me, quickly and discreetly, then ducked into the T-shirt shop next door.

I didn’t waste any time browsing.

Grabbing an oversized hoodie with a cartoon whale on the chest and a white bucket hat, I made my way to the checkout and paid with four of Todd’s twenties, not waiting for change. I pulled on my purchases right there at the register and peered out the front windows, hiding behind a mannequin decked out in a Vineyard Vines polo and a straw hat.

I could feel the clerk staring at me. In a past life, I would’ve felt self-conscious.

But I didn’t care what he or any of the snickering tourists in the store thought of me. I was on a mission, even if I didn’t have a plan. It would have been nice if I’d had one of those, but I hadn’t known the Three were going to waltz back into Milk & Honey today. The only thing I knew for sure was that

I had to seize the opportunity to follow them and watch them. See where they were staying. How they acted. If they stole anything else, for example.

If they were grifters.

For the first time this summer, I was glad for the blustery New England weather.

It gave me the perfect disguise.

I pulled the hood up over my hat to obscure my face (ignoring the toddler who stood behind me, watching my every move). After an awkward minute pretending to decide between two identical polo shirts while peeking through the window display, I finally saw the Three emerge from the gift shop next door. I tensed, realizing that they could walk in here next and I'd have to try to evade them—or face them and come up with some excuse for what I was doing. Admit my preposterous suspicions and reveal just how paranoid I'd become.

But they wouldn't set foot in a souvenir shop.

Their vibe was more international *couture*.

They pranced right past me, their heads thrown back with laughter. Selah was carrying a small gift bag emblazoned with the shop's minimalist logo, while the other girls carried their previous haul. *So they actually paid for something*, I thought. But that didn't mean they hadn't used a stolen card or two, I reminded myself.

I couldn't keep second-guessing everything.

I had to know for sure.

Once the girls disappeared from view, I slipped out of the shop. Following them at a distance, I watched them float in and out of a few stores as they made their way down Main Street. The wet sidewalks were filling up with families heading to early dinners in town, and I tried to blend in with the crowd, making sure to keep a cluster of summer people between myself and the Three.

The girls slowed their pace at the corner of Main and Union, where several boxy island shuttles were loading and unloading riders. The Three shielded their eyes as they consulted a laminated map posted on a wooden pole, checked the signs on three of the vans, and finally entered one.

I hesitated, not knowing what to do.

Obviously, I couldn't get in the shuttle with them—my disguise wasn't *that* good—and I didn't have a car. Even if I were able to get an Uber in the next thirty seconds, it seemed unlikely that I'd be able to convince a driver to randomly follow an island shuttle without knowing the destination.

That kind of stuff only happened in movies.

I whirled around, looking for a solution.

A handful of bikes leaned against each other in a nearby rack, their glossy frames dripping with rain. Even with all the talk about crime, few of them were actually locked. The island was trusting like that. *It's wealthy like that*, I thought, remembering how the summer crowd walked around without a care in the world, knowing they were insulated from life's bumps and bruises. The shuttle roared to life as the driver turned on the engine.

It was now or never.

Making a spur-of-the-moment decision, I grabbed one of the unlocked bikes: an old, beat-up racing bike with handlebars curving back like a ram's horns.

I told myself I'd return it.

I told myself that its owner wasn't going to ride it in the rain anyway. I hoped it belonged to some well-off tourist and not an islander who would need it to get home from work.

But I didn't have a choice.

I straddled the seat, balancing my foot on one of the wet pedals. *This is exactly what a grifter would do*, I thought, momentarily frozen with guilt. *Justify that they need something, then take it.*

The shuttle was slowly pulling out of its parking spot, and I was about to lose my chance to follow the Three, but I fumbled for the notebook in my pocket and scribbled a quick note.

SORRY, I wrote. *BACK SOON!*

I added my phone number, then hastily folded the paper in thirds, hoping that would protect the ink from the rain. As the shuttle waited to merge into traffic, I attached the folded note with a hair tie to the dripping rack, in the

space that was previously occupied by the bike I'd randomly chosen. It wasn't perfect, but it was the best I could do in a rush.

I was still an honest person. Sort of.

I hopped on the pedals and pushed down hard to get some momentum. Standing in the seat, I followed the shuttle until its next stop several blocks away—then paused a few car lengths behind it, catching my breath until it started back up again. This process continued, stop after stop, as we headed down Washington Street with the steel-gray waters of the harbor to my left.

Playing cat and mouse.

The frequent stops meant that I wouldn't be left in the dust as we passed out of the historic district. I bounced over the cobblestones, riding up onto what might have been a bike path or just the gravelly shoulder of the road. It was hard to tell with the rain falling like needles. I squinted against it as I pedaled, making sure I kept the shuttle in sight and didn't lag too far behind. It wasn't long before we reached a large rotary, and I coasted after the shuttle as it veered to the left, splashing its way onto a busier street that I recognized.

Milestone Road.

There was a true bike path I could use now—one that was actually protected from traffic—and I splashed onto it as I pedaled harder and harder. Milestone was a main artery on Nantucket, the closest thing the island had to a highway, and I was starting to struggle to keep up with the shuttle. Even with a few stops here and there, it almost disappeared in the mist ahead of me as I pushed to keep its glowing taillights in view.

C'mon, Lucia, I told myself.

My breath ragged in my ears.

You can do this.

Just as the drizzle had turned into a shower, the rain turned into a pounding downpour. Heavy drops smacked my face, drenching my hoodie and weighing it down as I strained forward on the bike through sheer force of will. The shuttle was speeding up and making fewer stops now, and I doubted I'd be able to reach it again. It felt like I'd biked for miles—and maybe I had. With only the hazy gray road ahead of me and an unbroken line of trees to my right, it was impossible to tell.

I should give up, I thought. I'll never make it.

What if I just gave up? I wondered. If I did, I'd be left with dozens of unanswered questions about the Three. Whether or not they were somehow connected to the rash of crimes on the island—including that boy on the beach. Then a darker, scarier thought entered my mind: *And what about that girl on the beach you found? What if they had something to do with that?*

I shivered and wiped rain from my face with one hand as if I could push that thought away. The Three were my friends, after all. A cold, ugly feeling formed in the pit of my stomach. I was freezing, wet, and riding a stolen bike in a thunderstorm—toward some potentially very bad people.

I took in a ragged breath and kept pedaling. If I stopped now, I'd be failing the dead girl. I'd have no new information and nothing to share with the cops. Just my notebook and a scribbled map.

It wasn't enough.

You can do this, I imagined Sammi saying. *Push through the hard part and get to the other side.* The first time she'd said it to me, I was having a panic attack before our eighth-grade graduation. I couldn't breathe and thought my royal blue polyester gown was suffocating me. I was just about to rip it off and skip the ceremony altogether when Sammi squeezed my hand.

She always seemed to know what to say, and when I needed her to say it.

You can do this.

She whispered it to me when anxiety struck right before Ragdolls first stepped onstage. And she'd said it to me on the night of our last gig. Our last good memory together. Now she was dead, and so was my mystery girl.

I had to push through, for both of them.

I ignored the burning in my calves, pedaling past the pain as I started to close the distance between the shuttle and me. I kept pedaling as the rain faded to a drizzle and finally became a heavy mist that hovered over glistening puddles. It was easier to see the shuttle ahead of me now, and I gave quiet thanks as it began to slow, flashing its blinkers and pulling to the side of the road in the middle of nowhere.

Three figures climbed out.

I was still a block away, at best, but I would have recognized the self-confidence of their silhouettes from a mile away. I felt a burst of energy at the sight of them—or maybe it was adrenaline or nerves—but I forced myself to splash to a stop instead. I didn't want to spook them. Not now that I was finally getting closer to finding out where the Three went when they weren't with me, and what they were really up to on the island.

I angled my borrowed bike into the shadow of a hedge, its sharp leaves dripping leftover rain on my head as I held my breath, watching in silence.

Waiting to see where they'd go now.

They walked a long block on the side of the road, toward the next intersection. I trailed behind them, my soaking-wet bucket hat pulled low over my face as they turned and disappeared on a road marked Russell's Way. I would have made a note of it, but there wasn't time. I repeated it to myself so I'd remember—*Milestone and Russell's Way*—as I peered around an overgrown hydrangea bush and down a dirt road covered with a loose layer of stones. It led straight through the moorlike scrubland and would have been hard to ride down on the sunniest day. With all the rain, it was an accident waiting to happen.

Plus, I needed to keep hidden.

I stashed the bike in the underbrush and pulled out my phone, dropping a pin so I'd know where I'd left it. As far as I'd ridden it, I was still telling myself that I'd return it as soon as I could. That I'd have it back on the rack before its owner even realized it was gone. My phone screen showed a couple of texts from my mom, which I quickly responded to. That was easier than ignoring them in the long run—so I lied to her, telling her that Brendan needed me to stay a little later.

I felt bad about lying, but I couldn't tell my mom the truth. Not when she already thought I was one bad headline away from a breakdown. As an extra layer of protection and plausible deniability, I shot her and Eric a quick text letting them know my phone was about to die.

Then I put it on airplane mode.

With the bike safely hidden, I crept slowly down the road, keeping as close to the line of brush as I could. If the girls happened to turn and look

behind them, I hoped I'd blend in. Wet leaves and branches tugged against my arm, and my hoodie collected brambles as I inched along the road.

You can do this, I told myself.

My clothes were heavy with rain and my shoes were coated in something halfway between dirt and mud. They squelched with every heavy step, and doubt crept in as I imagined what I must look like sneaking down the side of the road in the shadows, chasing after three pretty girls with my face hidden. It occurred to me that they could just be going home to their summer house after a long day of shopping in town.

They could be perfectly normal people.

And maybe all überwealthy girls acted like them—irresponsible and bored and a little out of control. The things I'd thought were suspicious could totally be standard operating procedure if you hated your Wall Street dad, or whatever. It didn't mean they were behind the rash of crime on the island. Or my dead girl.

A girl's death is a far cry from shoplifting, I told myself. *Don't go off the deep end.*

The phrase echoed faintly in my mind, and I wasn't sure if it was Sammi's voice I was imagining or my own.

I clung to my hope that my suspicions were overblown. If I was wrong, it would mean that the Three didn't have anything to do with the incidents on the island.

Including the dead girl.

It would mean we could still be friends.

But what if you're right? I stumbled over a rock and looked up from the slippery path. The road had opened up into a wider expanse of beachy wilderness. The windswept grasses of the moors reached to the horizon, but the girls were nowhere in sight.

Crap.

I'd lost them.

But they couldn't have gone far.

I continued down the road, which fed into a deserted parking lot. Beyond the asphalt, I could make out a pavilion next to a sodden baseball diamond.

Deep gold sunlight slanted beneath a line of gray clouds, and I could sense more than see the ocean just beyond.

What were the Three doing out here...

...and where the heck were they?

I spun on my heels, searching the horizon for three familiar figures—and my stomach dropped when I realized I was all alone.

As I turned in a slow circle, I knew I'd screwed up. I'd stolen a bike and I'd come all this way in the rain to find out exactly nothing. Dejected, I looked down at my shoes.

And saw fresh footprints in the wet dirt.

Three sets of them, walking side by side next to the distinctive pattern of my muddy Chuck Taylors. *Ha!* I wanted to shout. Feeling like a waterlogged Nancy Drew, I followed the footprints past the pavilion and the baseball field until the sandy dirt turned to grass and I found that I had no more footprints left to follow.

I glanced around frantically.

Looking for clues.

There was no summer house here.

There wasn't a hotel or a bed-and-breakfast, or even a shed. It was just a grassy mound on a bluff overlooking the sea in the middle of nowhere. I circled the mound, tripping over shifting rocks and sand as the ground sloped away beneath my feet.

Do not tumble off this cliff, I told myself.

Squatting to steady myself on the sudden incline, I realized that the loose rock was the exposed ledge of a wall that had been built into one side of the mound. I walked to the other side, inhaling sharply when I saw a rusted metal arch with a door in its center. The door was flanked by two boarded-up portholes. It looked some kind of bunker.

Or a crust-punk hobbit's house.

The Three wouldn't set one Tory Burch-shod foot in here, I thought. But I'd followed them all the way out here, and the moors were empty for half a mile in every direction.

Where else could they be?

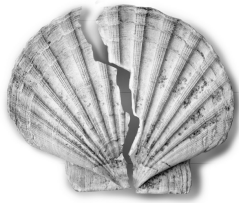
I examined the structure, hoping it would prove me wrong. Stones and driftwood were piled up against the door, which looked like it hadn't been opened in decades. I stepped closer, searching for a handle or some other way of getting in.

Not that I wanted to get in.

But just to check.

As I stepped toward the rusted door, my shoe knocked against something that made a sharp tinkling sound. Like glass hitting stone. I bent down, brushing away the accumulated sand to find an empty champagne bottle. Not the typical cans of soda and beer you'd expect to find at a sketchy hidden party spot.

I pulled out my phone to take some photos and to drop another pin, then flinched at the sound of movement. "Hey, Lu," Selah said. Her voice, singsong and unmistakable, rang out from somewhere above me. Startling me so badly I dropped my phone on my muddy sneakers. "What are you doing here?"



CHAPTER 21

I LOOKED UP TO SEE three heads peering down at me.

I'd been following them this entire time and somehow, they were the ones who'd ended up catching me. My stomach flipped as I tried to think of something—of *anything*—to say while Selah arched her brows and smiled widely.

Showing her teeth.

All of a sudden, I felt like prey.

"I—I just wanted to see where you guys were staying," I stammered, too nervous to think up a good cover story. I wasn't sure a good cover story even existed in this particular situation. Such as when a pack of mysterious friends surprises you from above in an undisclosed location with sparkling malice in their eyes.

"I wanted to know more about you," I said, picking up my phone from the mud and sliding it into my pocket.

The Three clambered down the sides of the bunker and surrounded me. *This was a mistake*, I thought, remembering the dead girl. My hands started to sweat and I shoved them into my sweatshirt pocket. I hadn't gathered any evidence, I'd lied about where I was going—and now they were on to me. I glanced behind me, hoping to see a beachcomber on the sand.

But of course, we were all alone.

On a secluded bluff.

Surrounded by empty, windswept moors.

If the Three were grifters, or worse—if they had something to do with the dead girl—what could I possibly do right now that would stop them from trying to shut me up? Selah looked me up and down, taking in my dripping, bramble-snagged disguise.

“Nice outfit,” she said, spitting her words out like they were rotten. “I hope you didn’t dress up for us.”

“She’s just curious,” Tamar said.

I gave silent thanks for Tamar, who had always seemed the most even-keeled. Compared to Kezia, anyway. Her tone was reassuringly even as she glanced from me to Selah, a soft and sad smile quirking the corner of her mouth.

“Maybe this isn’t a bad thing,” Tamar continued.

“We can trust Lulu,” Kezia whined, bouncing on her bare feet as she tugged on Selah’s arm. “Right? She’s our friend.”

Selah let her eyes half close as she thought.

“I did always think you were a little bit like us,” she finally said, and I wondered what that meant. Had she somehow gotten the impression that I was wild and cool, or secretly rich?

Or some kind of murderous thief?

It didn’t really matter now.

What mattered was getting out of here.

“I am,” I said, trying to make them think of me as their friend and not as a witness they’d have to hush up. “You’re the only people I like on the island. You’re my *only* friends. Or at least, I thought we were friends—that’s why I followed you out here.”

“Oh?” Selah said. “Isn’t Eric your friend?”

They’d always been so focused on Eric, which—considering their penchant for cute boys and potential marks to rob—now made a lot of sense.

“It’s complicated,” I said. “Sometimes I don’t know who my true friends are.” I looked from one girl to the other, trying to read their faces.

“Is that why you’re being so weird?” Kezia demanded in a high voice. She grinned awkwardly at her own outburst, but nobody else was laughing. “No offense,” she whispered.

“Tell us the truth,” Selah said, stepping forward as she fixed me with an intense gaze that softened in front of my eyes like molten chocolate. She raised her eyebrows slightly, almost imperceptibly adjusting her expression. She looked so sweet and innocent now.

Like an old friend who just wanted to understand me.

It made me want to tell her everything.

What would be the harm? I thought, the words ready to roll off my tongue even though I already knew the answer. My inner voice was screaming it at the back of my head.

They're dangerous, it shouted.

But I didn't care about that anymore.

Tamar and Kezia joined Selah, their deep, dark eyes wordlessly pleading with me to tell them everything I was thinking and feeling. My head started to feel a little fuzzy, and I wobbled, my knees weakening beneath me. I suddenly understood why Brendan was always giving them freebies. There was something about them....

Something about their eyes.

"Let's take her inside," Tamar suggested.

"Good idea," Kezia said, laying two warm hands on my shoulders and squeezing gently. "We need to sit and talk." I tried to nod, but my vision had gone a little blurry and my tongue felt heavy in my mouth, like I'd been drugged.

Or maybe hypnotized.

Two separate instincts fought inside me as I tried and failed to speak: an impulse to follow them into the metal structure...and the urge to run away as fast as I could. I thought my fear and a healthy sense of self-preservation would kick-start my body into a sprint. But if I ran away now—I might be safer, but I wouldn't have any answers.

Tamar gently tugged my elbow, and my legs carried me to the entrance before I realized I'd made a decision. I blinked numbly as Selah kicked aside a pile of driftwood. It had been hiding a hole in the metal that was big enough to duck through.

And that's exactly what she did.

I followed her into the shadows.

A musty, moldering smell enveloped me as soon as I stooped inside a dark, cobwebbed space, and I covered my nose as we stood and walked farther into the shadowy rounded passageway.

Our footsteps echoed behind us.

“It’s an abandoned bunker,” Selah said.

“No one comes here anymore!” Kezia sang. Like that was a good thing.

Tamar didn’t say anything at all. She just walked quietly beside me, guiding me lightly by the arm as my eyes struggled to adjust to the grainy darkness. I could just barely make out mounds of clothes and beach towels scattered over the ground, reminding me of the “doom piles” of dirty laundry in my room back home in Pittsburgh.

“What is this place?” I said.

I was glad to have found my voice again, now that the Three weren’t pinning me down with their eyes...but I didn’t want to push it. Not when I was trapped underground inside a rusted metal tube. I caught glimmers of jewelry and the sheen of leather purses strewn at our feet, alongside candy wrappers and soda cans and even a small marble statue of a mermaid that looked like it had been broken off a fountain, surrounded by a handful of wallets and dozens of makeup palettes. It was like a pirate’s lair bursting with treasure and an episode of *Hoarders* all at once.

A magpie’s den in the middle of a sorority house.

I tried to make sense of what I was seeing.

I’d come here for answers—but what did *this* mean? The Three were *definitely* grifters, I thought as I stumbled over a literal pile of jewelry.

And this must be their stash house.

Or were they living here?

There was a slight stink of food that had been left out in the sun, and I thought I saw a fish skeleton poking out from under one of the piles. I shifted uncomfortably. *What was I doing here?*

And how fast could I get out?

The girls stretched out on the floor, making themselves as comfortable as possible as they propped themselves languidly against heaps of designer clothes. I shuffled over to a lump of discarded beach towels and tentatively sat down, joining them on the cold ground while trying to touch as little of it as possible.

A mouse scampered somewhere in the shadows.

Selah flicked an antique silver lighter, illuminating her face from below as she lit a candle. I could tell it was one of the seventy-five-dollar ones I'd seen in the boutique earlier that day, which felt like another planet now. A bright citrusy fragrance filled the bunker, not quite masking the mildewy animal scent lurking in the air. The warm candlelight danced over Selah's face as she leaned toward me.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Her eyes shone like a cat's.

"Why did you follow us?" Selah stared at me without blinking, and a warm, hypnotic feeling suffused my body. Kezia squeezed my hand, and Tamar nodded encouragingly.

There was no denying it anymore, based on my surroundings: they were a hundred percent behind the crime wave on Nantucket. I leaned back woozily against the curved wall. Despite my fears, I wanted to tell them everything. I filled my lungs with dank and musty air.

"I wanna know what your deal is," I said. "I want to know who you really are."

The Three looked at each other.

"And what happened with that boy at 'Sconset. And what's going on with this creepy clubhouse." I gestured at the bunker. "What the heck are you three doing out here?" I hadn't meant to shout, but my voice bounced and echoed against the corroding metal of the bunker, sounding wavery and wild. All my questions for them spilled out like a waterfall that I wasn't able to stop.

Selah nodded, but I wasn't done.

"And most of all," I said, pausing to gather myself before I asked the hardest question of all, "I need to know if you had *anything* to do with the dead girl."

"Dead girl?" Kezia whispered, her grip tightening on my hand.

"Whoa," Tamar said. "What are you saying?"

"What dead girl?" Selah asked, her voice loud enough to cut through Tamar and Kezia's cross talk. I watched her over the flickering candle. Was she playing dumb?

“The one I found on the beach,” I said calmly. “The Jane Doe, the girl that no one’s talking about, that the police weren’t able to identify?”

The Three looked at one other, their faces hard to read. They stared in perfect silence until Selah sat down heavily, her eyes hollow and scared. She cleared her throat, then spoke very quietly.

“What exactly are you talking about?” Selah said hoarsely.

I pulled out my phone, flicking through screenshots of the results of my news searches. I picked a recent one and zoomed in on the text.

“Haven’t you been paying attention?” I asked.

Selah scanned the article, her face pale and drawn. “It doesn’t say anything about this girl. What did she look like?”

“She was our age,” I said, my voice softer now. “I was the one who found her. I didn’t see much of her face. She was...”

I broke off into a partial sob as I saw the girl again in my mind’s eye. Her shoulder, jarringly smooth against the golden sand.

Her tangled hair.

The knobs of her spine.

“She had red hair,” I said, and suddenly I started sobbing like I was right there when it happened: her outstretched hand, the shock upon realizing what I’d found, the little ghost crab.

Oh god, I thought. The ghost crab.

“Was her hair long?” Tamar whispered.

“Long and tangled,” I said.

As if the tangles were important.

I hated the thought of the wind and the water ruining that poor girl’s hair as she lay there, helpless against the elements.

“And the worst part is, no one even knows who she is. Fingerprints haven’t ID’d her. Nobody’s come forward to claim her. And now I see all of this—” I gestured to the clearly stolen goods all around us. “I have a lot of questions.”

I realized that I was nearly shouting. The emotions were washing over me so roughly that I didn’t care. I put my head in my hands, hiccuping into

the cuffs of my hoodie, which was too soaked from the rain to wipe away my tears.

“Was she wearing a pink dress?” Kezia whispered.

I looked up and nodded.

I saw their faces fall and their jaws drop.

It was obvious that they knew her.

Tamar held one hand over her mouth as if she was going to throw up. Kezia’s face had grown so pale that her lips disappeared into the whiteness of her skin. Selah’s gaze slid to the floor, her eyes two flat black orbs.

Like a shark’s.

The hypnotic haze and drive for answers that had helped coax me inside the bunker evaporated with each heaving sob, leaving only a heavy sadness that engulfed me as I stared down at my mud-spattered shoes. When I finally looked up, I saw silent tears streaming down Kezia’s face. Tamar’s, too.

But Selah wasn’t crying at all.

Her face was a stone mask, devoid of emotion.

“She was our friend.” Kezia sniffled, her cheeks glistening as she hugged her chest and rocked gently in the candlelight.

Tamar nodded sadly. “We thought she’d left us,” she said. “We didn’t know she was dead. And we didn’t have anything to do with her death, if that’s what you think.”

Selah stood up, pacing around the bunker.

“We don’t know it’s her!” she shouted, kicking a pile of purses into the darkness. “Lucia never even met her. She could be *anywhere*. She could have gone to the mainland.”

Selah stormed deeper into the bunker as we shivered on the floor.

“She. Can. Not. Be. Dead!”

Selah slapped the rusted metal wall with every syllable as she shrieked, and the anxiety in my gut grew spines and teeth. I flicked my eyes toward the exit, wondering if I could make it back out into the daylight if I had to. Tamar held her tongue through Selah’s outburst, though her lips trembled violently.

“Lucia described her exactly,” she said softly.

Selah huffed in the darkness and crossed her arms.

“You know it’s true,” Tamar said.

“That’s why we couldn’t find her,” Kezia whispered.

“It *can’t* be true!” Selah shouted. She sank down onto the grime of the floor and pressed her hands to her face, pushing her knuckles into her eyes. She stayed like that for a while, and I was too scared to move or speak for fear of her reaction.

She finally lifted her head, her shining eyes finding me in the shadows. “You made a mistake,” she said. “Maybe you saw something or someone, swimming or floating or...resting.”

I remembered the police tape.

The hint of dried blood at her hairline.

“She was—gone,” I said.

I didn’t want to say the word “dead” again.

Not to Selah, and not now. It felt too harsh and too ugly, too clinical in the face of their grief. And with the way they were reacting, I couldn’t imagine that they’d killed her. Still, something was nagging at me. Why was this the first time they’d heard about the dead girl? It was all over the news.

Or it had been, I told myself.

For a hot second.

I knew that murder was too bad for business to stay on the front pages for long. Though I was sure most Islanders were aware of the case, the tourists were here to have a good time—especially the teenagers.

Unless these girls were lying to me.

But I didn’t think they could fake these reactions of shock and grief.

“I’m sorry,” I said, squatting next to Selah and rubbing her back to comfort her. Her spine felt like a steel wire beneath my hand. I looked up at Tamar and Kezia, who were holding each other and crying. “I didn’t know you knew her.”

This is so messed up, I thought.

But I had to know if she was telling the truth.

“You really didn’t know she was dead?” I asked.

Selah shook off my hand like I was a cockroach that had landed on her back, then turned to face me, a hurt and bewildered expression flashing in her

eyes. I pressed, wanting to shake the answers out of her.

“Why didn’t you go to the police and tell them she was missing? Didn’t she answer her phone? They could have tracked her signal or GPS or something.”

“We thought we’d find her,” Tamar said.

“We thought she was holed up with her boyfriend on a boat somewhere,” Kezia said. “We asked everyone, trying to find him—”

“We’d had a fight,” Selah interrupted. “Before she went missing.”

“About the boyfriend,” Tamar explained.

“And she never came back,” Kezia wailed.

Selah shook her head. Her eyes were red-rimmed and haunted.

“We never stopped looking for her,” she said.

“But who *is* she? Isn’t her family worried, and wondering where she is?” My voice was hoarse from all the crying. Kezia hunched down into a fetal position and hugged her knees while Tamar shot a pleading look at Selah.

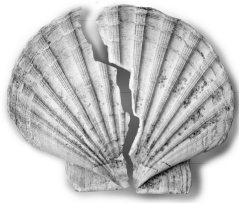
“Her name was Ari,” Tamar said.

“It’s all my fault...,” Kezia cried, dissolving into a fresh round of sobs.

Then Selah reached down and slapped her, shutting us all up with her sudden burst of violence.

“It’s *not* your fault this happened. Ari made her choice when she left us. She wanted to be with that asshole,” she said slowly and firmly, as if willing it to be true.

“But she didn’t want to die!” Kezia yelled, snot streaming down her face. “Why is she *dead*?”



CHAPTER 22

"THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I'M TRYING to find out," I said. "I've been looking for answers ever since I found her."

Every eye in the bunker was on me.

"Tell me everything you can," I continued. "Maybe we can figure it out together."

Tamar looked at Selah, who nodded sharply as Kezia blinked through her tears. "It was Ari's idea to come here," Kezia said, still holding her knees and rocking in place as she spoke.

"I didn't want to come," Tamar added. "I voted for the Vineyard."

"And then she left us to stay with him," Selah said, scowling at the thought of it. "Or that's what I thought, anyway. He could have taken her someplace."

"Who's *him*?" I asked.

"Her boyfriend," Selah said, a mix of sadness and disgust in her voice. "The last time we saw her, she was getting ready to go to a party on his yacht, even though he didn't invite her. She was obsessed with him."

"Not obsessed," Kezia said. "In love."

"We didn't think he was a good idea," Tamar said while Selah paced the width of the bunker.

"She wouldn't listen to us," Kezia sighed.

"But who *is* he? What's his name?" I pressed, my heart pounding in my ears. If I could get a name connected to Jane Doe, I could go to the police... or call it in as an anonymous tip.

"She never told us," Selah barked bitterly.

"We just knew he was gorgeous and blond and had eyes like the ocean," Tamar said.

“He had a big yacht, too,” Kezia said.

In my mind, a thought turned like a key in a lock.

I rubbed my temples as the teeth of the key caught, cracking open a sliver of a possibility. There was a lot of wealth on Nantucket, and plenty of good-looking boys with blue eyes. But how many could say they had a “big yacht”?

But I knew one of them, even if the yacht was technically his father’s. And his hair was blond, too. My mouth went dry as I listened.

“She’d meet him at night,” Kezia said.

“Always in secret,” Selah hissed.

Because he was cheating on his girlfriend, I thought. The well-connected politician’s daughter, Reagan.

I didn’t want to jump to any conclusions. To give the Three false hope. But the boy I had in mind would *definitely* cheat on his girlfriend.

I thought back to the night of the bonfire at the beach, when I’d met Reagan Morris. I hadn’t liked her then...

And I felt a little sorry for her now.

But at least she wasn’t dead.

“She went to that party,” Tamar said. “And she never came back.”

“We’ve been looking for her boyfriend everywhere, hoping we’d find Ari through him,” Kezia said. Suddenly, their questions about every guy they met, including Eric—if he had a girlfriend, if he had a boat—made a *lot* more sense. So did their eagerness to go everywhere and meet everyone.

They’d been looking for someone.

They’d been looking for Ari.

“Do you know how many gorgeous boys there are on Nantucket with that exact same description?” Kezia asked, half crying. Tamar rubbed her back as Kezia blew her nose right into her hand.

“I think I might know one,” I said cautiously.

Be careful, I told myself.

This was just a theory.

And it didn’t mean he’d killed her, or that he had anything to do with her death. But he might know something. And he might have been the last person

to see Ari alive. The Three moved as one, raising their dark, round eyes to meet mine.

“Tell us,” Selah said.

I took a deep breath.

“You remember that guy from Hydrangea House? You met him for, like, five minutes,” I said slowly. “He left before we went down to the beach. Listen, I’m not saying it’s him...but his family is loaded and they have an enormous yacht.”

“The arrogant one,” Kezia said.

“He *was* kind of handsome,” said Tamar.

“Blond hair,” Selah said, chewing thoughtfully on a fingernail. “Blue eyes, big boat. But didn’t he say he had a girlfriend?”

“I don’t think having a girlfriend means anything to this guy,” I said. “I’ve only met him once, but I’m sure he would have cheated on Reagan with any of us in a hot minute.”

But he *would* have tried to keep it secret. Especially since it seemed like their relationship was very quid pro quo for their families.

Boys like him didn’t like to get caught.

“But I asked him if he’d seen Ari at the party,” Selah said. “Remember?”

“He could have lied,” Tamar said. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“His name was Tristan,” Selah said, her forehead wrinkling as she made herself remember. “Do you know where he is right now?”

I imagined that Tristan was either sipping martinis with Reagan at an overpriced restaurant or trying to pick up drunk girls with his bros at some off-the-beaten-path bar.

But just because he was a jerk didn’t mean he was guilty.

But he was my number one suspect.

“I’ll tell you everything I know,” I said. “But when we go to the police, they’re going to have a lot of questions for you.” *And I still do, too*, I thought, glancing around the bunker.

It wasn’t a stretch to think that the Three were behind the recent crime wave, and they’d be in serious trouble if that came up at the station. I started to estimate the value of everything they’d stolen, starting with prices I knew:

a three-hundred-dollar dress, a thousand-dollar purse. I could see a whole closet's worth of designer clothes strewn across the floor from where I was standing, and that was just a quick glance in the dark.

Was it going to be a felony? I wondered.

Would they end up in jail?

And another open-ended question gnawed at me.

"What happened that night at 'Sconset?" I asked, realizing that they still hadn't told me about the boy on the beach. "A guy our age was found really beaten up, right on the beach where we—"

"That was unfortunate," Selah said.

My stomach dropped. The girls *had* been involved. I wrestled again with my decision not to go to the police sooner.

"He wouldn't let go of me," Kezia said. "We were having fun and then it got scary."

"We had to protect ourselves." Tamar shrugged. "Can you blame us?"

I looked from one girl to the other. Those aggressive boys had seemed capable of anything. I tried to reconcile my relief that the Three had emerged from the situation unscathed with the fact that they'd still left one on the beach, unconscious. And that they'd taken his wallet.

"Don't feel bad for him," said Selah. "He got what he deserved."

I frowned, unsettled and wondering how safe I was in this bunker.

But now one of Eric's theories about the Three was proven correct. I didn't have all the facts, but some of my reasons for being nervous were justified. I'd have to tread carefully.

"Okay," I said, "but we're going to have to figure out what we're going to say to the police. Obviously we won't mention what happened in 'Sconset or let them know about this place," I said. "But they're going to want to know why you didn't come forward sooner."

"We don't need to go to the police," Tamar said.

"We'll take care of this ourselves," Selah said.

"We *have* to go to the police," I said, nervous laughter bubbling up in my throat. "That's what this is all about, finding out what happened to your friend. I thought that's what we're all trying to do here!"

“We can’t go to the police,” Selah said simply.

Of course they’d be afraid of getting in trouble. But if they didn’t go to the authorities, how would Ari get justice? I started to feel heat rising in my cheeks. If they really cared about their friend, they’d do the right thing.

“Then tell your parents or send in an anonymous tip!” I said, my voice trembling with frustration. “I’ll do it myself, if you won’t.”

Ari was dead. Didn’t they want to know the truth? Didn’t they want justice for their friend? The right thing to do was so obvious to me. But maybe they were more selfish—and had more to hide—than I originally had suspected.

Of course they don’t want to get caught, even to help their dead friend. Knowing this, I realized I had to get out of there. I stood up and headed toward the door, but Selah whipped out her arm, catching mine in a death grip.

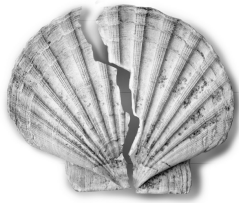
“You’re not going anywhere,” she said.

“I’m going to help the dead girl!” I hissed, tugging my arm free. “Something you’re all too scared to do.” The other two girls rose from their makeshift seats. They drew closer in the flickering darkness, hovering on either side of Selah. My hands tightened into fists.

“Stop calling her that!” Kezia cried, lunging closer to me.

“Her name was Ari,” Tamar growled.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, jerking back. I tripped over a pile of shoes, and something shattered under my foot. I staggered, trying to get my bearings, when my heel skidded on something slippery. Selah reached out to me and I didn’t know if she meant to push me or help pull me up, and I fell backward, hitting my head on something painfully hard.



CHAPTER 23

I TRIED TO OPEN MY eyes, but my lids wouldn't budge. My arms and legs felt too heavy to move. My head was sodden and foggy, as if I'd been underwater a long time.

"She's hurt." It sounded like Kezia's voice, floating somewhere above my head.

"Is she breathing?" Tamar's voice, concerned.

"Just give her a minute," Selah said, her voice overlapping with the other two.

"When she wakes up, I think we should tell her," Kezia said.

"I think she can handle it," Tamar added.

"I don't think she can," Selah said.

Handle what? I wondered. I strained to speak, but like my eyes, my mouth wouldn't open. Instead, I groaned, trying to roll onto my side. Maybe I could push myself up.

"Shhh, it's okay," one of the voices said. I couldn't tell whose it was.

"What is happening?" I tried to force the words out.

"She's saying something—listen." I felt a soft hand caress my face, brushing the hair from my forehead.

I thrashed, trying to shake off the hand and open my eyes. All I could see was blackness. If I hadn't felt the cold floor of the bunker beneath me, I'd have sworn I was floating in a void.

"She's not going to believe us," Tamar said.

"We could show her?" Kezia said.

"You're so naïve," Selah laughed bitterly. "We're not risking that."

Their voices rippled then, so that I couldn't make out individual words. Their soft babble sounded like water rushing over stones. I let it lull me back

into oblivion.

When the blackness began to dissolve into a grayish haze, I was able to feel my fingers and toes again. Selah was telling me a story about Ari. How Ari fell in love with a boy. How they had feared the worst when she didn't come home from the party.

We thought she'd gotten lost or hurt, or that he was keeping her. There are stories about things like that, stories they tell when you're little: some islander stealing your coat and plastering it up in his walls.

But she wasn't stuck, another voice said. *She wasn't hidden away—* The voice cut off in a choking sob as someone punched a wall. The impact of flesh on metal rang dully in the darkness.

We should never have come to this island. The voice floated above me, dried-out and sad, like wind scraping across dead leaves.

Though I was half sure I'd lost my mind, something about these words sounded familiar. The legends I'd read about sealskin and selkies in my books back at Todd's house. Stories of transformation and mysterious women from the sea.

"You know you're completely delusional, right?" I wrenched my eyes open, finally able to speak. I looked up at the corrugated metal ceiling in disbelief, then laughed, a feral trilling sound that came out too loud. An appropriate reaction to the things I was hearing. "You know the difference between make-believe and the real world, where your friend is dead on a slab in the coroner's office?" I said to Selah's worried face, hovering upside down over mine. Her eyes were red and full of tears.

Kezia gasped, snatching her hand back from where it had been resting on my forehead.

"She was just telling you a fairy tale to keep you calm," Tamar said in a cold voice. "Chill."

"It's okay," Selah said. "She's so out of it she doesn't even know what she's saying."

I squeezed my eyes shut again. Maybe I'd fallen from my bicycle and gotten knocked out. I could be in a hospital bed right now. The thought was appealing. Maybe the voices I'd overheard were nurses hovering around me.

Checking my vitals. Attaching an IV full of painkillers, distorting my thoughts. I leaned into that comforting thought and let the fuzzy blackness swallow me up once again. As I lay there, I felt my body pleasantly dissolve, until Selah shook me awake again.

Selah took my hand and led me to the back of the bunker, where garment bags and dresses in every color hung haphazardly from a rusted pipe that ran the length of the ceiling. She pulled down a shiny black garment bag that had the words “MIU MIU” printed across it in thick, curvy white letters.

“This one’s mine,” she said.

She gestured at the bag, indicating I should open it.

I gently pulled the golden zipper, revealing what looked to be a pale gray cloak with a pattern of darker spots scattered across it. A strong smell of brine and animal musk permeated the room. I reached out with one hand and felt the incredible softness of the material. Something about it felt alive, not like a piece of clothing. I pulled my arm away in shock.

You’re still dreaming, I told myself.

The others pulled down two more heavy bags—Givenchy and Vivienne Westwood this time—and lifted out their cloaks. The one marked “Celine” remained alone on the rack.

That one must have been Ari’s, I thought.

Had they taken the bags from someone’s walk-in closet or charmed them out of another unlucky store? Either way, the gowns they’d originally carried had been tossed aside—likely on the floor of this bunker—to make room for something far more valuable.

“Let’s go for a swim,” Selah said, rolling up her cloak and tucking it under her arm. I followed her out of the bunker, so unsteady on my feet that I felt like I was floating.

“A lot of things are better here,” she said as we walked to the edge of the bluff. “Like Frette sheets on memory-foam beds in climate-controlled houses. Oysters on ice, shells already open. Clams drenched in butter.”

We followed a narrow deer path through dry scrub that turned into beach grass as we neared a stretch of sand.

“Lobster you don’t have to catch,” Tamar said. “Now, that was a revelation.”

“Some things were awful,” Kezia said as we reached the water’s edge, pulling her dress over her head and getting it stuck on her long blond hair. I leaned over and loosened her neckline, freeing her. “Like walking in heels.”

Now all three stood naked on the beach, and I looked away, my eyes running along the line of grass-covered dunes that stretched down the shore. While the Three threw their cloaks over their shoulders like ceremonial robes, Selah told me of a different life, one buoyed by salt and sea.

Of warm bodies in the water, of wilderness and bliss.

Unleashed from the lies she’d been living on land, she told me tales about filling her lungs and diving down deep. Of being wild and free. Of unfathomable wonder, and danger and hunger.

I sank down, sitting cross-legged in the cold, wet sand. As I listened to her, everything weird and mysterious about the Three began to make a strange sort of sense.

The way they swam, the way they lived. The vagueness and the secrets.

The Three walked to the water’s edge, the ends of their cloaks dragging in the sand. Huddling closer together, they held hands...and I could hear the rising and falling of their voices from shore.

I wanted to tell them not to swim with those heavy cloaks on. That they would be dragged down in invisible riptides, no matter how strong they were. I tried to warn them that they could drown, but no words escaped my lips.

Maybe you don’t want to stop them, my inner voice said. Maybe you want to see if it’s true.

The Three waded farther out and dove into the glistening waters. Soon, three sinuous gray forms floated beyond the wave break. I walked closer to the edge, shielding my eyes from the soft afternoon sun with the curve of my hand.

For the first time in my life, I understood how people throughout the world had come up with myths about selkies and mermaids. They’d see manatees or seals cavorting in the waves and their imaginations did the rest.

The incoming tide sloshed at my feet as three glossy gray seals floated in the distance.

Their big round eyes stared back at me, warm and human.

I staggered backward, falling into the shallows.

Even from a distance, I could see they had pointy snouts with long, pale whiskers on either side, and a few more above their eyes. Spotted markings like freckles were strewn over their upside-down-teardrop nostrils.

My chest pounded faster and faster, my knees weakening as questions caught in my throat, unspoken. I sat down in the surf, not trusting myself to stand as shimmering black spots crowded the edge of my vision. They blended in with the patterns on the seals' coats as the tide surged around my hips, tugging me out to sea.

They're selkies, I thought, my head pounding with wonder—and pain.



CHAPTER 24

WHEN I CAME TO, THREE dark heads hovered over me, three silhouettes against a carmine sky. I coughed, rubbing grit from my eyes. Their faces were creased in concern—fully human, no whiskers in sight. I pushed my hands down into the powdery sand and lifted myself into a seated position against the bunker, shielded from the wind. I remembered slipping on something and falling, followed by the sensation of blacking out. They must have carried me here to get some air.

I wondered how long I'd been out, and if I'd done any major damage in my fall. It must have been bad, I thought, remembering the visions of seals and cloaks I'd dreamed while unconscious. What if it had been real? I looked behind the girls, just in case their dappled cloaks were rolled up, nestled together in the sand.

"Are you okay?" Kezia asked.

"We were so worried," said Tamar.

She squeezed my hand as they searched my face for answers, and I squeezed back.

"I feel like I'm losing my mind right now," I said, my voice breaking with a burst of unexpected emotion as hot tears ran down my cheeks.

I closed my eyes, centering myself.

"She's just freaked out from her fall," Selah said. "Right, Lu?"

I nodded weakly. "Freaked out" didn't even begin to cover it. Part of me wanted to shut my eyes again and sink back to that moment when myths and legends could be true, when there were selkies among us, stealing boyfriends and designer dresses.

What kind of world would that be? I thought.

“Now that you’ve rejoined the living,” Selah said, “we should probably go find Tristan. If you’re up for it,” she added. I tensed, gripping her arm. Hoping to talk some sense into her.

“I’m not sure we should confront—”

“Just to ask him questions,” Selah interrupted.

“No confrontation,” Tamar added. “Right?”

Selah nodded, looking at Tamar, then Kezia. “We don’t want to scare him off.”

“And then we’ll go to the police,” I added.

“Of course,” Selah said quickly, her eyes flashing darkly as she snapped her head back to me. “But we need to find Tristan first.”

“What if he’s dangerous?” I asked, imagining what it would look like if the four of us accused him of something. I thought about his powerful family and their political connections. About all the favors Stuart Weston would call in, and the armies of lawyers he likely had on speed dial. “What if he denies everything?”

“We just need to get him alone,” Selah said. “We’re pretty good at getting people to open up to us.”

I thought of how persuasive they could be when they fixed me—or Brendan, or anyone—with their intense gazes. Maybe they’d get him to admit something, or at least trip him up in some lies. We didn’t yet know for sure what had happened to Ari, and this seemed as good a first step as any.

Selah leaned closer to me.

“Are you with us?”

The question hung in the briny air.

“I am,” I said. “I know where he’ll be on the Fourth of July. There’s a garden party at the Morris House, in town,” I said, remembering the bullet-pointed itinerary Todd had written out on a legal pad, underscoring the words “festive attire.”

How could I forget it?

“I’m sure Tristan will be there,” I said.

“We can wait a few days,” Kezia said.

Tamar nodded. “Just tell us if you see him sooner.”

“Can you give us the address?” Selah asked, tilting her head.

I pulled my phone from my pocket to search for the address and was greeted with the time on my brightly glowing lock screen. It was already past eight o’clock.

Oh no, I thought, jumping to my feet.

I’d put it on airplane mode and I hadn’t thought to check it since. I’d told my mom and Eric that I’d only be another hour or two before I’d borrowed the bike and chased the Three in the rainstorm, before I found their bunker.

It had definitely been longer than an hour or two.

I turned off airplane mode, holding my breath as notifications flooded my screen. I might have been knocked out, imagining a world of wild magic swimming in the waves...but that didn’t mean my mom wasn’t going to lock me up in Todd’s house for the rest of the summer if I didn’t fix this now.

“I have to go,” I said. “But I’ll text you!”

I sprinted inland toward the road, calling my mom as my feet slipped in the sand in my haste. I put her on speaker while I ran so I could talk her down while I swiped around for an Uber.

“Lucia! Lu—are you all right?” My mom sounded worried. Like she’d been crying. Guilt filled me to the brim for worrying her.

“I’m fine! I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize my—”

“Lucia, where are you?” It was a stern male voice.

Todd must have grabbed the phone from my mom.

“I’m on my way—I’m only about a mile from the house. I have a car coming to pick me up. I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Give me your exact location *right now*.”

Todd sounded angry, and my stomach twisted in knots as I ran past the bluff, through the moor and past the muddy ballpark. “I’m in a field,” I said, remembering that I’d stashed the bike near Milestone Road and Russell’s Way.

But that was before I’d walked so far.

I swiped the map open on my phone as I finally caught sight of a street.

“I think I’m on New South Road.”

“That’s five minutes away,” Todd said. “We’re already in the car. Stay there, send your mother a pin.” I heard my mom’s voice in the background, and then a muffled argument as Todd handed her the phone.

“A *field*?” my mom said breathlessly.

“I’m sorry,” I said for the hundredth time.

“What were you thinking? What are you doing?”

I realized I only had a very short amount of time in which to come up with some reason I was out here. Something plausible. Something that would make sense to Mom and Todd—and not sound completely irresponsible. I fumbled with the phone, trying to send a pin.

“I’m fine!” I said. “Just a few hours late.”

“And how was I supposed to know you were ‘fine’?” my mom snapped. “My fragile, unstable daughter decided to disappear when teenagers are getting beaten up and bodies are washing ashore....”

“I texted you!” I shouted.

I heard Todd grumbling in the background.

“I *told* you,” I yelled. “My phone was dying!”

“You *lied*.” My mom’s voice warbled with emotion. “You said you were covering for Brendan. But then an hour passed, and then another, and your phone was *still* off. I thought it was dead, that you weren’t able to reach me, so I went there to pick you up.”

My mom would have been confused when she showed up at a closed Milk & Honey expecting to find me. It wouldn’t have taken long for her to realize I wasn’t where I’d said I’d be, and she would’ve assumed the worst.

“I called Brendan and his mother,” she said. “She came right down when I told her what happened. She said you’d left without locking the register.”

My stomach dropped. In my haste to follow the Three, I’d messed up. Badly.

Fast-approaching headlights appeared on the road to my left, and the Jeep screeched to a halt, throwing up a cloud of dust. My mom jumped out of the driver’s side and clutched me in a hug so tight I couldn’t breathe.

“You scared me,” she said, digging her fingers into my shoulders. “Don’t you *ever* do that again.”

She held me on the road for a long while, and I didn't even try to pull away. I knew she'd been right to worry and to be upset.

But I also wasn't sorry.



Back at Todd's house, I was marched right up to my room. When we passed Eric in the foyer, he raised his eyebrows and mouthed *Are you okay?* But there was no time to answer.

I didn't know what to say, anyway. I was in huge trouble.

I sat down on the bed and clutched my stuffed seal to my stomach while Todd explained in measured tones how worried I had made my mom and him, and how we needed to set some basic ground rules if we were going to function as a family this summer. And that we all needed to respect those rules. How he expected better of me, though he understood I was under a lot of emotional strain. I flashed back to what my mom had said on the phone.

Fragile and unstable.

"But life's tough, kiddo," he said, setting a heavy hand on my shoulder. I felt like he was explaining unfavorable market conditions to an underperforming employee at his real estate agency. "You've got to let the tough stuff make you stronger."

I shook off his hand.

"I'm sorry," I said. "What else can I do?"

"I'll let your mother answer that," he said. "I'll leave you two to talk. The bottom line is: I'm glad you're safe." He left the bedroom door open and my mom tiptoed in.

She perched on the edge of the bed, crumpled tissues clutched in her hand.

"I just don't understand what you were doing out there," she said, brushing my stringy, wind-tangled hair from my forehead. "If you wanted to go somewhere, I'd have driven you."

I could just tell her the truth, I thought, stifling a bitter laugh.

There was no way I could tell her that I'd been following the Three, suspecting they were criminals. That I'd been tracking down leads for my investigation into Ari, the dead girl. Much less that I'd passed out and seen selkies swimming in the rolling waves.

She'd think I'd actually lost my mind.

"I *did* cover for Brendan," I said.

That part was technically true.

"For a while, anyway. But then I decided to take a walk to the beach. There's been so much going on, I just needed a little time by myself. To process, you know?"

"In the rain?" she asked.

Her eyes looked deeply into mine, like she was trying to peer inside my head.

"I lost track of time." I shrugged, looking down at the fluffy seal in my lap...and grimaced at the irony.

My mom shook her head.

"I feel like I don't understand you anymore."

"I'm just figuring some stuff out," I said. *Also not a lie.*

"You can do plenty of that closer to home, where I can keep an eye on you. Todd and I discussed it, and you're going to be grounded for the time being," my mom said firmly, clapping her hands down on her thighs. "It's for your own good."

"Are you kidding me?" I asked.

I needed to be able to meet up with the Three.

To finish what I started.

For Ari and Sammi, and me.

"You'll have the run of the house and this very nice room," my mom continued as she stood up and walked to the door. "And if we go somewhere, we'll go as a family."

"We're *not* a family," I scoffed. "And Todd is not my dad." My mom paused at the door and shot me a serious look. Her whole tough love act was new, and I was sure it was Todd's influence.

I wasn't a fan, to say the least.

"Well, we might be a family one day," she said, her voice quavering as she started to close the door behind her. "If you don't give me a heart attack first."

I rolled my eyes, falling backward on the bed.

My phone dinged and I reached for it, hoping it was Selah and the girls.

Where is my bike? said a text from an unknown number. My phone buzzed in my hand as a photo came through. It was a picture of the water-stained note I'd tied to the bike rack in town.

SORRY, it said. BACK SOON.



CHAPTER 25

BRENDAN FIRED ME AS NICELY as he could.

I could tell from his text that it was his mom's idea, and I didn't hold it against him—after all, I *had* left Milk & Honey without closing down properly. One of my many mistakes that day. “Hey, dude,” he'd written, “your mom said you're going thru it, so don't worry about work. 😊 I'll put your last paycheck in the mail.”

I'd hearted his message without responding.

I hadn't known what to say.

Now that I was grounded with no place to be, I had all the time in the world to hide away in my room. It was all I'd wanted when we first got to Nantucket, but everything was different now.

I finally had a name—*Ari*—and was making real progress on finding out what happened to her. I had a tenuous plan with the Three to get to the bottom of it. Soon it would be in the hands of the police, and I'd have closure. Maybe then I could move on. To what, I didn't yet know.

But for now I was grounded. Stuck in a well-appointed guest room for the foreseeable future. Forbidden to leave Todd's house on my own.

Though I had the run of the house, I spent most of my time in my room so I wouldn't cross paths with my mom or Todd. When they'd leave for another interior design-related errand, I'd creep down to raid the fridge and sprawl out on Todd's beige couch, munching on Portuguese bread sandwiches layered with Cape Cod potato chips and slices of cheese, not caring if I left crumbs on his furniture. They were redoing everything anyway, since Todd would be making a fortune once the Weston deal went through. One night at dinner he'd said he wanted my mom to put her own stamp on the house, to feel more at home here. Eric and I had traded looks,

bugging out our eyes at each other. Wondering if we were going to become stepsiblings before too long.

In my luxurious captivity I pored over Tristan's social media, searching for photos of him with girls who weren't Reagan. There were a lot to choose from. He was surrounded in most of his pictures, flashing his dazzling smile against a beachy sunset or dancing in some club. There were lots of photos of him and Reagan, too, looking like poster children for orthodontia with their picture-perfect smiles.

I scrolled through Reagan's socials, too. Then I expanded my search to anyone who was tagged in photos with either of them, following a trail of studiously unstyled candids from brunches and clambakes to backyard parties on emerald-green lawns. A lot of it looked like Nantucket, but Tristan and Reagan's social circle liked to travel. As I dug deeper and deeper, I saw everything from tropical palm trees to the Manhattan skyline. Eric appeared in some of their pictures, and so did Benji and a few other faces I recognized from the bonfire party. Eric's socials were sparse, mostly shots of the ocean. Not that I was stalking his feed.

I searched for the Three as well but couldn't find anything. I didn't know their last names. *Maybe selkies don't use social media*, I joked silently to myself.

But in all my searches, there was no trace of Ari.

My eyes burned from staring at my phone. I'd gotten a lot more familiar with Tristan's social universe and his orbiting satellites, but I hadn't found anything concrete.

No leads, no smoking guns.

I cracked my neck and knuckles, reopening all my different social apps and wishing I could go back in time and befriend everyone in Tristan's timeline, just in case they'd Snapchatted anything interesting that night. I focused on a date in early June instead. Most of his friends had posted photos that evening, and they were all dressed up in blazers and strapless dresses, smiling on what looked like the deck of a boat strung with twinkle lights.

I'd never been to a party on a yacht before, but I knew a yacht party when I saw one. Coincidentally, it was the night before the ferry brought me

and my mom to Nantucket. A constellation of photos offered glimpses into the evening: the shiny brass railing sparkling with the flash of a hundred selfies, the gleaming white hull in the background of every shot, the orange sky marbled with darkening clouds.

I scrolled through them a million times, obsessing over details.

Until I saw something I hadn't noticed before, something that made me pause. I'd met a girl named Lex briefly at the bonfire party. Her face had come up a few times in my digital snooping, so I'd made a point of connecting the dots: she and Reagan were friends—or friendly, at least—at Princeton, and now they were both on the island for the summer. I was randomly scrolling through one of Lex's feeds, expanding my search, when my thumb hovered over a picture of Reagan. She was posing with another random girl from Lex's account, and Lex had captioned her post "The Future Is Female," which made me snort.

But that wasn't what caught my eye.

I'd skimmed over this photo the first time I'd seen it, because at first glance Reagan and the other girl were taking up most of the frame.

But this time I looked past their faces, into the blur of the background.

Behind Reagan's chestnut bob, a swatch of a pale pink fabric swept over a set of stairs, and a delicate ankle in a strappy sandal poked out beneath it. Next to the ankle was a denim-clad leg. Clearly just two partygoers climbing to the upper deck, and I couldn't even see their faces. But it was the only dress in that shade of pink I'd seen in any of the hundreds of pictures, and I'd seen it before.

Tangled around Ari's legs.

Washed up on the beach.

I zoomed in as far as I could.

There was nothing special about the jeans. They were medium wash and not particularly skinny or wide-legged. I couldn't even tell if it was a boy's leg or a girl's from the few pixelated inches of denim I could see behind Reagan, and the foot beneath it was blurry with movement. Was it Tristan, chasing a private moment with Ari while Reagan was distracted with selfies?

Or did that leg belong to someone else?

I quickly downloaded the photo, my hands trembling slightly. This could be my first *real* piece of evidence—besides what the Three had told me—that placed Ari on the yacht. That *potentially* placed her on the yacht, I corrected myself.

It was just a foot and a splash of color.

But it was time-stamped, and after cross-referencing with other photos, I was sure it was from the yacht party the night Ari had disappeared.

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

I rubbed my eyes.

They felt grainy and dry from all the research, and I knew I had to take a break from staring at my screen. Mom and Todd had gone out “to look at fixtures,” whatever that meant, so the coast was clear for another hour at least. I slipped my phone in my pocket and headed to the end of the second-floor hallway, where a ship's ladder was bolted to the wall. It was painted in the same tasteful ecru as the rest of the house and hiding in plain sight, but I'd ignored it all summer, assuming it was attic access to a bunch of old junk. But it was the one place in Todd's house that I hadn't yet explored, and boredom got the best of me.

I climbed the ladder.

When I reached the ceiling, I pushed up on a dark wooden panel that slid inward and upward: a trapdoor into an unfinished space full of exposed beams and pink insulation. Climbing into the attic, I noticed another trapdoor above my head: a secret passage within a passage. A tasseled velvet rope hung from it, swinging gently from the rafters.

I felt like Alice in Wonderland. And a little silly.

But I tugged the velvet rope.

And with an unexpected blast of fresh air, one end of the attic's ceiling descended at an angle, revealing a row of built-in stairs. The washed-out blue sky was just overhead, and a rush of wind tousled my hair. I climbed the steps slowly, out of the unfinished attic and into the clouds.

I was on the widow's walk. Or more precisely, according to Todd, a captain's walk.

Todd had pointed them out on almost every house we saw during those first few days on the island, when he was still playing tour guide and showing off for my mom. It was where the sailors' wives would watch the sea for the return of the ships that carried their husbands, or merchants would wait for their goods to come in. There were two weathered Adirondack chairs on the tiny deck, along with a few dead moths.

I leaned against the peeling wooden railing, looking out over the moors. Their greenish-gray grasses undulated like waves in the blustery wind, and in the distance I could see just a hint of the ocean, a dark blue ribbon beneath the vast powder-blue sky. I sat on the cleaner Adirondack chair, tilting my face to the sun and watching the fluffy clouds float by like scoops of ice cream.

Not that it mattered, but I actually missed my Milk & Honey shifts now. Even on rainy days, when I knew the shop would be packed. I even missed the tourists.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

An actual phone call. Selah was terrible at texting.

"Do you want us to break you out?" Selah asked.

"Thanks for asking," I said. "I just have to lie low for a while, until they calm down. Have you made any progress on tying Tristan to what happened to Ari?"

"No," Selah said. "Have you?"

"Actually, yes." I told her about the photo and texted it to her phone, then waited for her response. "Does it look like Ari's dress?" I asked. "It's barely the hem, but it's all I could find."

"One second," she said.

I could hear Selah consulting with Tamar and Kezia in the background—could hear them passing the phone around—but I couldn't wait for an answer. The staircase to the widow's walk creaked as Eric's shaggy head emerged.

"I gotta go," I said, clicking off the call.

"I thought you might be up here." Eric smiled. He was carrying two bottles of Nantucket Nectars and he handed me one, along with a chocolate

chunk cookie from the Bake Shop.

“Sorry it’s not something stronger,” he joked.

I gladly accepted the bottle of juice and the cookie, still warm in its waxed-paper wrapper. “My hero,” I said gratefully. “Much better than my usual crust of stale bread.”

“I know it sucks,” he said, settling down on the other Adirondack chair and stretching his legs out in front of him. “Are you hanging in there or have the bastards ground you down?”

It was a reference I recognized, a battle cry for trapped women everywhere. Quoting Atwood and bringing me cookies put Eric in the running to be my favorite person ever.

If only he weren’t Todd’s son.

“I’m just fabulous,” I deadpanned, slipping my phone facedown onto the arm of my chair. He didn’t need to know I was still investigating. Nobody did, not until I had more evidence. “It’s very peaceful up here,” I said, waving the cookie at the stunning view.

Eric nodded as he sipped his juice.

“So, my dad asked me to talk with you,” he said, trying to sound casual. “To see if you’re feeling...okay?”

I put down the cookie and faced him.

“I’m feeling totally normal,” I said, wondering what he and his dad were getting at. “I didn’t do anything wrong, you know. I just lost track of time. They’re really overreacting.”

Eric nodded, but I could tell he didn’t believe me.

“Weren’t you hanging out with those girls when you disappeared?” he asked. “The ones who steal drinks and jump in the ocean half-naked? They’re more than a bad influence—I think they’re dangerous.”

He let the implication hang in the wind. That they’d attacked that boy. That they could hurt me, too.

But I didn’t answer him.

I just turned my head toward the moors and the dark line of the horizon.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, scooching around in his chair to better face me. “I didn’t say anything about them, or about the day you came home in

the back of a truck...even when your mom tried to pump me for information.”

“Thanks,” I said. “But I don’t think they’re as bad as you think they are.”

And maybe not as bad as your friends are, I thought.

It felt uncomfortable keeping things from Eric when he’d been so loyal to me, but if I told him what I’d learned and who I suspected, he might not believe me.

Eric looked down at my phone, facedown on the arm of the Adirondack.

“You’re not still playing *True Detective*, are you?” he joked. “That’s probably not a good idea. You can’t dwell on things like that.” I hesitated. He knew how much the dead girl—Ari, I told myself, *she has a name*—had affected me. I also considered telling Eric what the Three had done in ‘Sconset, and why. But I had to tread very carefully if I was going to ask him about Tristan Weston.

Let alone accuse him of being involved in a crime.

They were college roommates.

Eric still caddied for Tristan’s dad. And Stuart Weston was the big fish Todd was trying to catch this summer. Even though Eric had barely concealed his less-than-friendly feelings about Tristan...there was just too much baggage there.

“Not playing detective,” I said.

Which was true; I wasn’t playing.

“But I have been curious about Tristan.”

Eric’s eyes widened.

“Did he try to hit on you again?” he asked, sitting bolt upright in his chair. “You know, he asked for your number, but I didn’t think you deserved that kind of punishment.”

That tidbit took me aback, but I quickly recovered.

“No,” I said. “I haven’t talked to him since our dinner, but I did see him chatting up a girl who wasn’t Reagan. Do you think he’s cheating?” I was misleading him, but it was for a good cause. It was possible that Eric would know if Tristan had been seeing a red-haired girl on the side.

Eric frowned.

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” he said. “But you might have noticed that Tristan and I aren’t close.”

“You don’t say,” I joked. “I thought you were going to punch him that night at Hydrangea House.” Eric puffed out his cheeks as he flipped his backward baseball hat to the front.

“I honestly can’t stand him,” he said. “He’s an awful human being, and I would know after living with him for a year.” Then he sighed, staring at the moors. “I can’t tell you how many times he’d rope me into covering for him when he was seeing multiple girls. One of them came to our dorm crying, and he gave her one of his random pills to calm her down. When she had a terrible reaction to it, he blamed it on me, saying I had been dealing all this off-brand stuff in our room. That’s why I got kicked out of the summer program.”

I gasped. I’d had no idea the real reason he’d left suddenly. Poor Eric, getting framed by his shady roommate. It certainly explained all the tension between the boys. And why Eric wanted absolutely nothing to do with Tristan—or his dad.

“But you told your dad it wasn’t you, right?” I said, a surge of distaste for Tristan filling me with anger. “Surely someone at school would believe your word over his?”

“Of course I did,” Eric said. “But the Westons give a ton of money to the school, and it wasn’t like my dad was going to involve lawyers. So we worked everything out. I thought it was all over, until the *Titan* docked here for the summer.”

I sat back in my chair, letting it all sink in. “You worked it out?”

“Let’s just say my senior year is paid for.” Eric shrugged, an embarrassed grimace stretching across his face. “It’s fine.”

“You took the fall for him?” I gripped the arms of the Adirondack, hating the Weston family—and their millions—even more. “It’s not fine!”

“I admire your sense of justice,” Eric said, shaking his head. “But honestly, it’s better to be on their good side. Same thing with Reagan’s family,” he added.

“I can’t believe this,” I said.

“This brings me back to the reason I’m up here,” he said, shifting in his seat as he changed the subject.

“It wasn’t just to enjoy this beautiful view?” I grumbled.

“The view is beautiful,” he said, fixing his gaze on me. In the bright rooftop sunlight his gray eyes glinted silver. Then he looked back over the moors and cleared his throat. “But my dad wanted us to have this very special talk. Saturday is that garden party fundraiser for Reagan’s mom....”

“Yes,” I said slowly, waiting for the next shoe to drop. “Your dad has mentioned it about a million times, not counting the written reminders.”

“He still wants us all to go, even though you’re supposed to be grounded. Do you think you’re up for it?”

I looked at him incredulously.

“I’m pretty sure I can handle tea sandwiches and lemonade,” I said. “Unless parasols are required?”

If I went, I’d be able to question Tristan.

Eric leaned toward me, putting a brotherly hand on my knee. “My dad doesn’t want you acting erratic. I think what he wants to know is...are you going to wander off again—or do anything, you know, unstable?”

I frowned, wishing that at least Eric wouldn’t think the worst of me. That if I told him what I’d really been up to, he’d understand.

“The mayor will probably be there. The chief of police. Stuart Weston. Maybe even a senator or two. People my dad is trying to sell houses to. You see what I’m saying?” He smiled awkwardly.

I rolled my eyes. Not only was Todd trying to act like my dad, but now Eric was formally submitting his application for the same role. I felt like he’d dumped an entire pitcher of cold water over any warm feelings I’d had toward him.

“Of course I won’t,” I said with a tight, fake smile. I was disappointed that Eric wouldn’t assume better of me. “I’ll be on my best behavior,” I said snidely, standing to climb back down the stairs to my room.

“Lu,” he said, jumping to his feet. “I didn’t mean it to come out the way it sounded. You know I think this whole thing is stupid.”

“Okay,” I said. “Since keeping up appearances with all these people is so important to everyone, you can tell your dad that I’ll give an Oscar-worthy performance of a happy teenager. And you can *both* stop trying to tell me what I can and can’t do.”

Eric reached toward me and grabbed lightly for my shoulder as I moved to leave. “Lucia,” he said, his voice apologetic. “I’m really sorry. I’m not like that. I’ve been trying to get our parents to ease up on you. This whole grounding thing—it’s overkill.”

I took in his sincere eyes and the pleading expression on his gorgeous face. My anger cooled, just a bit. I paused, about to step through the trapdoor.

“I know things have been hard on you,” Eric continued, “and if I’d lost a best friend, I don’t know what I’d do or how I’d act. For what it’s worth, I think you’re dealing with it really well.” He looked down at his feet.

I sat on the top step and tried to smile. But my face wouldn’t cooperate, and I could feel it falling. Even though I had some purpose now, Sammi’s death still hit me like a boulder every time I thought about it. Unwanted tears started running down my face, and I brushed them away, trying not to look like the fragile and unstable girl everyone thought I was.

“Lu, I’m sorry—I was trying to do the *opposite* of make you cry,” Eric said, sitting on the step next to me. He put a tentative arm around my shoulders, the weight of it strong and reassuring. I leaned toward him, sniffing into his T-shirt.

“I know,” I said. “Sometimes it overwhelms me.”

I thought back to that night. We’d played our tenth real gig at a dingy club in Oakland and we were supposed to be home by eleven, since it was a school night. Of course, we hadn’t even gotten onstage until ten-thirty, and after we played, Sammi chatted with a guy at the bar for what seemed like forever. She didn’t pick up my subtle hints or my outright pleading that we needed to go as the time crept toward one a.m.

“Sammi and I fought right before she died,” I said softly. I remembered shouting at her, then rushing out of the venue, not looking back. Looking for our parked car in the rain, ignoring the sound of Sammi running after me. “And I saw it happen.”

“Oh my god, Lu, I didn’t know you were there when it happened. Jesus.” Eric squeezed my shoulder tighter.

“I had stomped on ahead of her. I was so angry. She was always ignoring me for some dumb boy,” I explained, twisting my hands together as I spoke. “No offense.”

Eric listened and squeezed my arm while I told him everything.

“I started the engine, not waiting for Sammi. Figured she could find her own way home.” I sniffled. “She was apologizing and trying to get into the car, and out of spite—out of stupid pettiness—I kept the doors locked. Just for a second, to show her I was mad.”

I was full-on sobbing now, remembering the narrow two-lane road behind the venue. It had been a bear to parallel park as cars sped by. I’d hopped into my mom’s Subaru and started the car. She’d been stumbling behind me in ridiculously chunky boots.

I gasped for air while Eric listened, holding me tight.

Sammi had tried to open the passenger-side door, but I didn’t unlock it. Just to give her a little taste of having to wait for me, for once. But then she came around the front of the car and into the street. Lifting her fist to bang on my window, trying to get me to listen.

“I was gonna let her in the car, but then—” The speeding SUV. No headlights, the driver likely impaired. They hadn’t even stopped.

“It happened so fast,” I said. “She was hit.”

The horrible impact.

The squelch of metal.

“I killed her,” I said. “She’s dead because of me.”

I sagged against Eric’s sturdy frame and cried as he held me. He didn’t ask questions. He didn’t try to make me stop crying. He didn’t suggest a brisk walk or deep breaths or a therapy appointment.

He didn’t tell me to stop ruminating on it. He didn’t tell me that time would heal all wounds. He didn’t interrupt me to tell me it wasn’t my fault, or that God works in mysterious ways. He just listened.

No one had ever done that.

I was grateful.

“I haven’t told anyone that,” I said.

Not my therapist. Not the Three. Not even my mom.

When my sobs finally subsided, I looked up at Eric. His face was streaked with tears and his eyes were full of understanding. He pulled me closer and I sank into the safety and strength of his arms.

“Thank you,” I said after a few minutes. “You don’t have to keep sitting with me. We should probably go inside.”

“I’m here for you as long as you need me,” he said.



CHAPTER 26

THE WEATHER ON THE FOURTH of July was perfect.

The skies were clear and blue, without a cloud to be seen, as if Reagan's family was so powerful that Nantucket's standard fog wouldn't dare ruin their garden party. If we didn't have to go to this event—and if I hadn't been grounded—it would have been the ideal beach day with the Three.

But we had more important things to do.

After Todd parked the Jeep, he and my mom and Eric and I walked several blocks beneath the peeling trunks of giant elm trees. We were dressed in varying degrees of gingham and seersucker, picked out and purchased by my mom and Todd, and we paraded in single file until we reached an imposing red brick house with crisp white trim, black shutters, and a bronze historical placard by the door.

"Why isn't this house gray shingle like the rest of the island?" I asked, broken microscope in full effect. "Isn't that the law here?"

Todd fell into step with me, delighted for the chance to give another lecture. "It's so nice to see you taking an interest, Lucia. It was built by the Morris whaling family back in the eighteen hundreds. Before the island had zoning rules, only the incredibly wealthy could afford to bring brick over from the mainland."

Todd smiled at me indulgently, and I felt like I wasn't on thin ice with him anymore.

Asking about anything historical put me back in the good-girl column, apparently. Maybe if I kept it up, I could reduce my sentence.

"It's one of Nantucket's first trophy homes," Todd continued. "Full of historical artifacts and family heirlooms. We're very lucky to have this chance to peek inside."

“How interesting,” I said, wondering if Tristan had already arrived.

As we climbed a small set of stairs that led to the double front doors, I wondered how many dead whales—*exactly*—were needed to build a house like this. I was tempted to ask the young man wearing a light khaki suit and a discreet flesh-colored earpiece who was standing in front of the velvet rope that stretched across the threshold. He stood holding a clipboard and wore thick tortoiseshell glasses that I suspected were nonprescription.

“Name?” the young man said.

“Gifford family,” Todd said. “The four of us.”

I shot a glance at Eric to see if he’d caught that, but he was firing off a text on his phone. I looked at my mom, my eyebrows raised. She winked at me from beneath her new straw hat, the Nantucket red lining underneath the rim a perfect match to her new sundress. She was glowing and cheerful, and I wondered when we’d become a family with one last name.

“Gifford family,” the young man said, lifting the red velvet rope.

Once inside, we filed down a long hallway, passing room after room of heavy mahogany furniture and busts of jowly men. I joined Todd in peeking through every single doorway, looking for Tristan—or the Three. There were curio cabinets filled with scrimshaw and porcelain, and antique carpets in muted reds and blues. The walls were covered with paintings of landscapes and horses and sailboats.

I paused in front of a seascape. Its subject was a small wooden dinghy that held a handful of sailors desperately trying not to tumble into the violent, churning waves as a whale thrashed in front of them.

“A Nantucket sleigh ride,” Todd said, looking over my shoulder. “They’d harpoon a whale and it would drag them for miles through the open ocean, like a life-or-death roller coaster, until it tired out and they finally managed to kill it.”

I leaned in for a closer look.

My breath caught in my chest.

I could feel the excitement and uneasiness in the artwork, in the rough layers of color and the places where the brush had carved through the paint, leaving deep grooves on the canvas. The faces of the men were just dabs of

oil and pigment, but I could sense their fear—and the desperation of the angry whale, the crimson tip of a harpoon piercing its chest. There was something about it that reminded me of the Three.

The wild intensity.

And tragic beauty.

Everyone had moved on ahead of me, through a set of French doors that had been flung open to reveal a stone patio overlooking lush gardens with a small hedge maze in their center. I hurried to catch up with Eric as he grabbed two mimosas from a silver tray and toasted me with one of them.

Thank you, I mouthed.

“Thanks, son,” Todd said, deftly lifting both drinks from Eric’s hands and offering one to my mom. “You two can stick to orange juice.” Todd and my mom clinked glasses, and I rolled my eyes theatrically as he gave her a big smooch on the cheek.

“Nice try, though,” I said, nudging Eric’s elbow with my own.

“I could have sworn it was just juice. We’ll have to find some way to survive this event,” he whispered, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “We’re in this together.”

I leaned into his firm torso. I felt so much closer to him after our conversation on the widow’s walk. But even so—I couldn’t tell him everything that was on my mind today. I needed to find the Three. And Tristan.

“Let’s grab something else,” I said, cocking my head toward the food and drink stations set up around the perimeter of the garden. We descended the stone steps together and weaved through the gingham-shirted crowd, putting some distance between ourselves and our parents.

Our parents, I repeated to myself.

I could honestly imagine Todd proposing to my mom any day now.

Tristan and Reagan emerged from a clump of white-haired guests, looking like movie stars. Tristan had his sunglasses pushed up on his head, his eyes brighter and bluer than his Oxford shirt, his teeth ultrawhite against his tan. Reagan was in a navy scoop-necked dress with a sparkly pendant dangling just under her prominent collarbone. It took me a second to notice

that Benji, Eric's high-fiving friend from the bonfire, was with them, sipping a cola, in a maroon-and-navy rugby shirt that looked like it could use an iron.

"Long time, buddy!" Tristan roared, pulling Eric into a hug as if they were the best of friends. Then he turned to me and shook my hand politely. I barely recognized this version of him. The drunken flirt I'd met at Hydrangea House was nowhere in sight.

"So nice to see you again, Lucy."

"Lucia," Eric corrected him.

Benji gave us both a sloppy high five. I braced myself, remembering the hearty slap he'd given me at the bonfire, but this one was far less painful.

I waved awkwardly at Reagan.

"Hey," I said as she leaned in for an unexpected hug. I could feel her necklace digging into my chest, and I had to stop myself from flinching. We'd only met once and weren't exactly on hugging terms....

But I didn't want to ruin the day.

I was to be on my best behavior.

"Thank *god* you two are here," she said, her breath hot on my neck. "We're the only people under fifty on the list."

As she pulled away to hug Eric, I got a better glimpse of the dazzling jewelry that had dug into my skin. It was a lidded basket the size of a walnut, studded with glittering pink stones.

My breath caught.

A tiny basket.

I tried not to stare at her necklace as Eric and I made small talk with Tristan and Reagan, but—like the broken microscope Sammi always said I was—I couldn't stop focusing on it.

"You like it?" Reagan asked, sliding the basket from side to side on its dainty gold chain. "It's a little flashy, but it's the thought that counts. Tristan gave it to me today."

I've seen a basket like that before..., I thought.

It was exactly the same size and shape as the one shoved in the top drawer of my dresser, hidden behind a pair of sunglasses and a stick of deodorant. The one I'd found on the beach.

Right before I found Ari.

“We’re celebrating,” Tristan explained.

“Celebrating what?” Eric asked.

He looked from Reagan to Tristan, eyebrows raised.

“Tris is transferring to Princeton and we’re getting an apartment together!” Reagan beamed, like she’d bagged her own whale. “Finally living the dream after an entire year apart.”

“Woohoo!” Benji warbled, rattling the ice in his glass.

“That’s awesome,” I said brightly, wondering whose idea this really was—Tristan’s, so he could lock it down with the daughter of a powerful political dynasty? Or Reagan’s, so she could keep a closer eye on him?

“Congrats, dude,” Eric said, jokingly punching Tristan in the arm.

“There’s gonna be a new wing of the library with his daddy’s name on it,” Benji slurred in my ear. I subtly inched away from him, reclaiming my personal space.

“You’re a trip, Benj,” Tristan said. “Why don’t you go get us all some refills?” He clapped Benji on the shoulder, hard enough to make his point. Benji slunk away toward one of the tables filled with beverages.

“Your necklace is *stunning*,” I said, sidling up to Reagan. “Can I take a closer peek?” She nodded like she was doing me a favor, and I leaned in close enough to smell her spicy floral perfume. Though this basket was studded with gems, it was shaped just like the plain golden basket back in my room. It had the same delicate scrimshaw oval on its top, featuring the same little lighthouse. And it had the same golden handle, with a loop for a chain. I lifted it and peered at the bottom, curious if there was an inscription.

ME + YOU it said in minuscule sans serif type.

“That’s really sweet,” I said, gears turning. I thought back to the little basket I’d found. At the time, I’d assumed it was something a beachcomber or picnicker had dropped. But it could have fallen off Ari’s neck, its delicate chain broken in the surf.

It could have been a gift from Tristan.

“It’s a lightship basket,” Reagan said. “Like that one over there.” She pointed to an impeccable older woman who was carrying a toaster-sized

wicker basket on her arm like a purse.

“An old Nantucket tradition,” Eric said.

“Then I’m going to have to ask your dad all about it,” I joked. *And see if there’s a way I can prove that Tristan bought a different one, for a different girl*, I thought. I tried to remember if there had been an inscription on the basket I’d found. “ME + YOU” was vague enough to forget, if I’d seen anything like it.

But I hadn’t thought to look.

As I racked my brain, one of the black-clad servers whispered something in Reagan’s ear and pointed to the far side of the garden. Three beautiful girls in flouncy, floaty dresses with big puffy sleeves were peering over a white wooden fence: Tamar in a sunflower print, Kezia in a cloud pattern on a robin’s-egg-blue background, and Selah in gauzy black. They even had little fascinators perched in their braided updos.

Garden party chic on steroids.

“They’re insisting that they know you,” the server said to Reagan. “But I can’t find their names on the list.”

“Better odds for me,” Benji said. “Nice.”

The Three peered over the gate and waved. Eric turned to me, his eyes bugged out accusingly, as if I’d personally invited them. Which, of course, I had.

“I don’t know what they’re doing here,” I muttered to Eric out of the side of my mouth.

And bit down a smile.

The clipboard guy emerged from the house and walked over to the gate, talking intently to the Three and trying not to make a scene. Even from across the garden, I could tell Selah was working her magic on him, widening her dark brown eyes as she gestured to the clipboard. It had only been a few days since I’d seen her, but it felt like forever.

“Excuse me,” I said, picking my way across the lush green grass. “I know them.”

But Reagan was right on my heels.

“No, no, no,” she was saying, not quite shouting at the guy with the clipboard as she flicked her hand in the air, like she was brushing away gnats. “Those girls are not allowed in.” I twisted my face into an apologetic grimace, mouthing *Sorry* to Selah as Reagan tugged on my shoulder.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s not give them any more attention.”

She pushed through the crowd, looping back to the boys. She guided us over to a table where a bartender poured pink lemonade into little glasses with wedges of strawberry on their rims. Each drink sported a toothpick flag emblazoned with the name *MORRIS* in red, white, and royal blue. I craned my neck, watching the guy with the clipboard shoo the Three away as if they were seagulls at a picnic.

I tried to keep an unbothered smile on my face, but I wondered what I’d do if the Three couldn’t get into the party. Would I have to confront Tristan all by myself?

“My mom’s just super strict about the list,” Reagan said, giving me a shiny politician’s smile. “And Tristan doesn’t need any more distractions at the moment, right, baby?” She leaned over and gave him a kiss, leaving a smudge of clear lip gloss on his tanned cheek, like a lioness marking her territory.

Tristan just rolled his eyes and sipped his drink.

“I’m gonna find the restroom,” I said, slipping away as discreetly as I could.

I weaved through the garden and headed for the house, keeping an eye out for my mom and Todd, but I couldn’t pick out either of them in the sea of pearl-adorned women with smooth, unmoving foreheads. The only difference between them was the color of their tasteful sheath dresses. The men similarly matched each other in sport coats and pants in patriotic colors. They moved from conversation to conversation with a palpable sense of ease.

An ease I didn’t share.

I ducked into the first powder room I could find, texting Selah as soon as I closed the door. *Sorry! I’ll figure out what I can*, I wrote, then searched for “gold basket necklace + nantucket” and got a screen full of links. I was keenly aware of how long I’d been gone as I scrolled through them. I didn’t

want my mom or Eric—or Todd—to come looking for me, thinking I’d run off again.

Like I couldn’t be trusted.

I hurried out of the powder room and back to the garden, stopping by a table laid with a pale circle of melting Brie. It had been decorated with figs and drizzled with honey, then surrounded by an array of sliced French bread and seeded crackers. Realizing I was starving, I filled a plate before I went back into the lion’s den of Tristan, Reagan, and Benji. I was just turning to grab one last dollop of Brie when I smacked right into the Three.

“You got in!” I squealed, fumbling my plate of cheese as they enveloped me in a tight hug.

“You know what they say,” Kezia laughed, picking a plump fig from my plate with her fingers and popping it into her mouth. “When one door closes, crawl through the bushes!”

“What’d you find out?” Tamar asked.

She plucked a giant shrimp from the buffet and bit it in half, its bright red cocktail sauce dripping down her chin.

“Bon appétit!” Selah said, toasting me primly with a mini quiche. The effect was only slightly ruined by the fleck of parsley at the corner of her mouth. Pulling a fresh plate from a nearby station, she piled it so high that a few pink shrimp fell to the grass at her feet.

I glanced around nervously.

The eyes of nearby adults were already on us.

Two silver-haired women whispered to each other behind their neutral gel manicures, their stares graduating from discreet judgment to open disdain.

“I love you,” I said. “But you’re making a scene.”

Selah shrugged. “I’m hungry.”

I watched in horror as she demolished her plate and refilled it with heaping handfuls of loose shrimp. Kezia and Tamar similarly stuffed their faces, not even pausing to use a napkin. There was a weird, manic energy to the way they were consuming everything in sight. Like they hadn’t eaten anything today, or this week—or this month.

“Listen,” I whispered, drawing them in closer. “Reagan’s wearing a necklace that looks like something I found right before I saw Ari. A little golden basket.”

Kezia’s eyes widened.

“Ari had a necklace like that,” Selah confirmed. “I’d need to see it to be sure, but it sounds like the one she had.”

“Do you think Tristan gave it to her?” I asked. “She didn’t...pick it out for herself?” Knowing how these girls rolled, Ari could have pilfered it from anywhere or anyone.

“He definitely got it for her. That’s why she loved it,” Kezia said.

I nodded, mentally filing away my new clue.

“So that’s another link between them, then.”

“I’m telling you,” Selah growled, “he did it. I just know it.”

“Relax,” I whispered, nodding toward a server who was coming to refresh the platters. “What if someone hears you?”

“So what?” Selah snapped.

Her eyes were impatient and annoyed, and the sharpness in her voice rendered me momentarily speechless. There was a tension running through her like electricity, and she set her plate down so hard that the rest of the shrimp bounced off onto the white tablecloth.

So hard that she scared me.

I wondered if she was in her right mind, whatever that meant. Her eyes weren’t red, but her pupils seemed dilated—as if she’d swallowed something stronger than weak garden party mimosas.

“I’m going to confront him,” Selah hissed. “He’s going down for what he did.”

“Ari deserved better,” Tamar added.

“But—” A heavy hand clamped down on my shoulder, making me jump. The girls fell silent, and in a fraction of a second their body language shifted from angry to coquettish.

“Hello there,” Kezia breathed. “What a lovely—”

“Lucia,” Eric said, ignoring the Three.

I turned to face Eric. Benji was hovering behind him, smirking and slightly sweaty, and Eric's entire body was tight with stress.

"Tristan and Reagan sent us over here to deal with...this," he said, gesturing at the Three. And at the white tablecloth, now covered in shrimp tails and splatters of red cocktail sauce. "Please don't make us involve her mom's security."

I took a step back, like he'd slapped me.

Since when do you do Reagan and Tristan's bidding? I wanted to shout. Remembering how he'd struck a deal with Tristan before. How he preferred to not make waves with people like them. But as outraged as I felt, I had to admit that maybe it was better to convince the Three to leave without getting any adults involved.

I couldn't risk any more trouble.

Selah looked Eric up and down, sucking the last of the sauce from her thumb.

"Not before I talk to Tristan," she said. "Come on, girls." I watched, openmouthed, as the Three stalked through the yard, right up to Tristan and Reagan.

Selah leaned in close, speaking vehemently and trying to pull Tristan off to the side of the garden. But Tristan dug in his heels and lifted two pacifying hands in front of his chest.

My stomach dropped. Was she accusing him right now, in front of everyone? Before I could jog over there, four khaki-suited men rushed Selah. Two of the men pinned her arms to her sides and marched her off the premises, two others tugging Kezia and Tamar behind them.

I clenched my hands together, trying to stop them from shaking. Eric looked at me, his face white.

"Let's maybe make ourselves scarce," Eric said.

I nodded, hoping the rest of the party hadn't connected me with the Three. And wondering what exactly Selah had said to Tristan—and if he'd said anything back. And what, if anything, Reagan had heard.

As we pushed our way to the fringes of the party, Benji grabbed my arm.

“Tristan’s parents are going out of town tomorrow,” he said, buffeting me with his garlic-and-shrimp breath. “There’s gonna be a party on their yacht. You should come. And bring your hot friends.”

“Thanks,” I said, the gears in my mind spinning back into action. *Maybe* I could bring my friends, if they didn’t end up in a squad car on their way back to the bunker. Selah was acting like a bomb with a lit fuse, and I didn’t know what the blowback might be. But even more important—the party could be an opportunity to get Tristan alone. Maybe I could find out what really happened that night.

“You have fun, Benj,” Eric said. He tugged me by the arm, pulling me behind a hydrangea bush, away from prying eyes. “We’re definitely not going to that party. Don’t even think about it.”

“Because I’m grounded?” I said.

“No,” he said. “Because Tristan—and his parties—are bad news. I’d never set foot on that yacht, and I wouldn’t ever want you to, either.”



CHAPTER 27

BACK IN MY ROOM THE following day, I researched all the places you could buy jeweled basket necklaces on the island. I finally narrowed it down to two jewelers and clicked through their websites to get an idea of their inventory. Both sold simple gold baskets like the one I'd found, and both had jewel-encrusted versions like Reagan's.

The simple ones were pricey.

Reagan's was astronomical.

I downloaded a free privacy app to mask my phone number, then dialed the first store. I tried to make my voice sound polished and professional, pretending I was an adult who knew what they were doing and taking it from there.

"Good morning," I said, a sparkle in my voice. "I'm appraising a collection for a client and I wondered if you could give me some information."

"What can I help you with, exactly?" asked a plummy male voice on the other end of the line. I took a deep breath, settling into my character, then explained that I was trying to find out if two specific necklaces had both been purchased at that particular store.

And when.

And by whom.

"We don't really keep those kinds of records, dear," the man said, "and even if we did, we couldn't just give out information like that over the phone. I'm sure you can appreciate that."

I tried asking again. He might have personally sold Tristan both necklaces—and surely he'd remember a college kid buying thousands of dollars' worth of jewelry in one summer.

“Our clients expect the highest level of service and the utmost discretion,” the man said, his friendly voice frosting over before he hung up on me.

I called the other jeweler, repeating the process.

I briefly considered using a British accent to disguise my voice a bit and give my request a little more gravitas, but I decided it would be a disaster if I even attempted it.

I got the expected results—but with a twist.

The second jeweler also hung up on me, but first he asked me if either of the pieces had a trademark or a hallmark. I turned Ari’s little basket over in my hands—but except for its golden weave, its surface was completely smooth. There was no trademark and no personal engraving like I’d seen on Reagan’s. I closed my eyes, conjuring her necklace in my mind. I’d held her basket in my hands, but if it had been stamped with any other marks besides ME + YOU...I couldn’t picture it. Every inch of her basket had been dripping with pink stones.

Where would a jeweler’s mark even fit?

I flopped back on the bed, defeated.

I’d done everything I could think to do while confined to my room. My investigation had hit a tasteful beige wall, and it was covered in Todd’s collection of maritime paintings.

I called Selah.

“No news on the basket,” I reported.

I could hear the babble of voices in the background. “We’re watching the *Titan*,” Selah said. The Westons’ yacht. “They’re loading lots of stuff—plastic crates, baskets of flowers, bags of ice.”

“He’s throwing a party,” I confessed. “His friend Benji mentioned it.”

All morning I’d wrestled with the idea of telling them about it. It would be the perfect opportunity to investigate more, to pump everyone there about the last yacht party. And if I had the chance, I could get Tristan alone and ask him some very pointed questions. Except—I was still grounded.

And I wasn’t so sure about Selah. She’d scared me at the garden party. I wondered if I’d be more successful at getting answers on my own.

“So, let’s go,” she said. “We’ll meet at the marina.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” I hedged, hesitating as I flashed back to the fistfuls of shrimp and the anger in her eyes. If that was how the Three acted at parties, I’d have better luck alone. Catching Tristan was going to take a little tact and finesse.

Right now, Selah was more like a wrecking ball.

“This is our chance to talk to Tristan—without tons of adults around,” she said, barely concealing her frustration. “We have to be there.”

“Maybe I should go on my own,” I said. “You were...a little intense at the garden party.”

“But he could be dangerous, like you said,” Selah warned. “It’s better if we go as a group.”

I nodded quietly, thinking about Ari and how she’d ended up. Selah had a point. And it wouldn’t matter if I tried to prevent them from going to the party. The Three were going to show up either way.

And I didn’t want to go alone.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s make a plan.”



I spent the rest of the day in my room with the door locked. I didn’t venture up to the widow’s walk or forage for food in the kitchen. The last thing I wanted was to run into my mom.

Or Todd, or even Eric.

I didn’t have time to waste.

I waited until I heard footsteps retreating down the stairs, the front door closing and locking in their wake. And then I waited a little longer, making sure I was alone in the house before I crept out of my room and into the bedroom my mom shared with Todd. It was my first time crossing that particular threshold.

But desperate times called for it.

The big four-poster bed was immaculately made up with masculine blue linens. But Mom had chaotically conquered one of the dresser tops with piles of makeup and hair products. There was a mini framed photo of me as a baby, surrounded by loose change and a few tissues. I pawed through the mess, looking for her jewelry bag. When I finally found it, I shook out a basic silver chain and pocketed it.

That was mission number one.

I turned to Todd's dresser.

It was a completely empty stretch of oak. Its gleaming surface was unbroken by wallets or watches, or even a pair of reading glasses. But if he had any spare twenties lying around, I could definitely use them—especially now that I didn't have my Milk & Honey paycheck to get me through the summer. I eased the top drawer open, finding rows of socks in black, navy, gray, and white arranged in chromatic order.

Of course he organizes his socks, I thought, wondering how he put up with my mom.

And then I saw it.

A little box in robin's-egg-blue leather, tucked carefully away in the far-left corner of Todd's tidy dresser drawer.

My breath caught in my chest. I knew what that meant—for my mom and for me. Before I had time to think about it, I shoved the drawer shut and hurried back to my room, where I strung the silver chain through the gold basket charm.

It didn't match, but it would work.

I slid it into my purse, securing it in a zipped pocket, then shoved my entire purse into the backpack. I rolled up the pink dress I'd bought with Selah and put that in, too, along with the fancy sandals my mom had bought me, a tube of lip gloss, and some dangly pearl earrings.

Zipping it closed, I tossed my backpack into my closet and hopped in the shower, where I shaved my legs and used every expensive product I could find.

I couldn't believe I was going this far.

But it was all or nothing now.

I dried my hair, then pulled on a pair of jeans and my trusty hoodie and lay flat on my bed, flipping through the book of nautical lore and anxiously skimming it as I bided my time.

I was too nervous to read.

I set my phone to vibrate, keeping an eye out for Selah's call.

I heard Todd and my mom pull into the driveway, the Jeep doors slamming before they made their way inside. I only hoped they'd be in bed for the night before the yacht left the dock. Around seven o'clock, my mom knocked on my door.

"Do you want some dinner, sweetie?"

"No thanks!" I shouted. "I'm resting."

At seven-thirty, she poked her head inside.

"Are you sure you don't want to come down?" she asked, looking almost sheepish. Like she was sorry to be interrupting me, and sorry I was grounded. "Or I could bring you up something?"

I smiled, trying to look tired but grateful.

"I had a big lunch," I said, "so I'm good. I'm just tired. I'm going to go to bed early tonight and start fresh tomorrow."

My mom frowned, looking me over.

"Haven't you heard about those studies that say teenagers need at least ten hours of sleep per night?" I added.

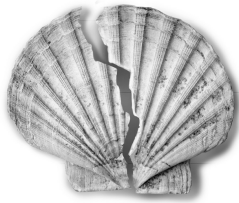
She raised her eyebrows skeptically. "I'll look into it," she said.

At eight o'clock, she popped her head in again. I was still in my jeans, but I'd turned off the light and gotten under the covers. I blinked up at her from beneath the duvet.

"Good night, sweetie," she said.

"Good night," I said.

It was almost time.



CHAPTER 28

I WAITED IN BED FOR another half hour, feeling guilty in the dark, before Selah finally called. “It looks like people are starting to show up,” she said. “How fast can you get down here?”

“Soon,” I said.

I swiped at my phone screen, ordering a car to the address of a rental house half a mile away. Sliding out of bed, I fluffed my duvet up with extra blankets and clothes to make it look like someone was under the covers. A classic move from every single kids’ movie. I felt dumb doing it, but I had to just in case my mom popped her head in one last time. I debated locking the bedroom door from the inside, but I didn’t want her checking on me and finding herself locked out. I could almost hear her shouting through the door.

Dummy in the bed it is.

Grabbing my backpack, I hoisted open the window and peered into the hedges below. It wasn’t that late yet, but there wasn’t a lot of ambient light out on the moors. Beyond the glow of my phone, everything looked like a shadowy void.

But I had to do this.

For Ari, I thought.

I swung my leg over the sill, easing my foot down until it bumped the first rung of the trellis. Slowly and carefully, I felt my way down past the vines rung by rung, my calves shaking from the effort as I clung to the side of Todd’s house. It wasn’t my first time hanging from the slender trellis...but I hadn’t realized how much scarier it would be at night, climbing backward into the darkness.

Push through the hard part, I told myself.

You’re almost there.

I jumped the last few feet to the ground with a relieved exhalation. I tiptoed over the lawn as quietly as I could, then ran down the driveway, my backpack bouncing with every step. The cool night air filled my lungs as I raced down the dark dirt road, my heart pounding in my chest.

But it was too late to turn back now.



The driver didn't seem fazed to be picking me up on the side of a dark road, all alone with my backpack bulging out behind me. They flashed their lights as they slowed down, and ten minutes later they were dropping me off at the marina. I ran to the public restroom, where the Three were waiting for me in metallic strappy heels and shimmery dresses in varying shades of silver and smoke, which hugged their bodies like second skins. I shrugged out of my jeans and T-shirt in one of the stalls, pulling on my pink dress and slipping into my sandals.

"Almost done," I said as I tucked my backpack behind a large trash can.

Selah zipped up my dress and Tamar attacked my face with blush and eyeliner and volumizing mascara while Kezia frowned, her dark eyes darting between me and the clock on her phone.

"More eyeliner," she said.

Tamar obeyed, circling my eyes one last time before turning me toward the row of sinks and the cloudy bathroom mirror above them, looking pleased with the final result. I jerked back in surprise when I saw myself through the streaks.

I looked *fierce*.

My eyes especially.

Instead of cat eye or puppy eyeliner, Tamar had tightlined and then smudged the makeup all the way around my lids, making the whites of my eyes pop against my brown irises. The effect was intense and almost mesmerizing.

Selkie eyes, I thought.

“Hurry!” Selah shouted.

She ran from the bathroom as soon as she saw I was done, jogging down the bumpy brick sidewalk in four-inch heels as she led us to the wharf, past old-fashioned lampposts and a line of docked pleasure boats. Masts from sailboats and navigation antennas stuck up like toothpicks on a party platter as we neared the marina, the air smelling decidedly fishier.

“This way,” Selah said.

She took my arm when we reached the wooden dock, our heels sticking between the weathered slats as the straps of our shoes bit into our ankles. I glanced back at Kezia and Tamar, a few steps behind us. They were struggling in their heels, leaning on the weathered pilings that lined the dock as their laughter bounced up to the stars above us.

I smiled to myself.

It felt good to be together again.

My friends and me: out for the night, and on a mission. I might’ve lied to my mom and snuck out of the house, and—yes—I was about to confront a potential murderer...but even though I knew my anxiety urchin could show up at any time, it beat sitting alone at home, swiping through old texts and photos, missing a friend who was never coming back. And anything was better than biding my time in the gilded cage of Todd’s tasteful home, waiting for the inevitable moment when he would propose to my mom.

When our lives would change forever.

I shook that thought from my head as we tripped past powerboats adorned with fishing-rods and sleek sailboats with bare masts, all battened down for the night. Halfway along the pier, we paused to admire the huge ship at the end of the dock. More mansion than boat, Stuart Weston’s yacht loomed over the marina, its navy hull topped with two gleaming white layers like a wedding cake, all lit up with party lights. Three staggered levels of open-air decks hung off the rear of the ship—the largest big enough to host an entire high school prom—while the front half sharpened to an aggressive-looking point. Kezia and Tamar caught up to us, linking their arms with ours

as we stared up at the *Titan*. Their skin felt comfortingly warm against mine, which was cold from the breeze off the water.

I wished we had thought to bring sweaters.

But that would have ruined our outfits.



Deep bass notes emanated from the *Titan* as we approached a little chain across the pier from which dangled a discreet painted sign: OWNERS AND CREW ONLY.

Selah didn't even break her stride.

She lifted one elegant leg and stepped over the chain, with Tamar and Kezia following. I looked over my shoulder, expecting to hear a guard call out and stop us, but nobody did. I stepped over the chain, hoping we didn't need an actual invitation to get on board. Benji had drunkenly invited me at Reagan's mom's garden party...but who knew if Benji's invite counted.

It wasn't his yacht, after all.

Up close, the *Titan* sparkled like a luxurious mirage, its amber lights illuminating the wooden dock and a crop of smaller watercraft. It wasn't as big or as bulky as the ferry I'd taken from the mainland to Nantucket, but for one family, it was huge. A faint scent of diesel hung in the air and a pounding beat echoed across the water, advertising the party to everyone within earshot. When one song bled into another, I realized there was a professional DJ on the middle deck. One level down, partygoers milled around and half-heartedly danced in the champagne glow of the night.

A few curious faces peered at us from beyond the railing, one with familiar ruddy cheeks and bleached-blond hair.

Benji.

"Lucia!" he shouted. "You made it!"

For once, I was happy to see him.

He was our ticket on board, after all, but a feeling somewhere between anxiety and anticipation twisted in my stomach when I realized we were really doing this: semi-crashing this party and confronting Tristan. I'd let myself get swept along in the excitement of sneaking out of the house and racing to get ready with the Three, temporarily forgetting our endgame.

Were we really going through with our plan?

My throat went dry at the thought.

"Shall we?" Selah said, a wicked smile on her face.

We tottered up the gangplank toward Benji, who was waiting with a few of the guys I recognized from random party photos. Craning my neck, I scanned as many faces on deck as I could from this angle, wondering if Tristan would spot us boarding. All he had to do was shake his handsome blond head and we'd be escorted right back down to the dock.

But then, maybe Selah could sweet-talk our way in.

Don't be so sure about that, my anxiety urchin whispered. *Her powers of persuasion didn't work so well at the garden party.* I squashed that thought down. We'd never find out exactly what had happened to Ari if we couldn't get in, so we'd get on board somehow. I tried to summon Selah's confident, sexy aura as we reached the top of the ramp where Benji stood in a pink polo shirt with a popped collar that blended into his flushed cheeks. I threw my shoulders back and lowered my lashes just the tiniest bit. It was hard to do both at the same time—especially in heels—but we were on a mission.

"Hey," I attempted to purr. "Room for a few more?"

At my side, Selah tossed her hair over her freckled shoulder.

We knew we looked good.

"Hell, yes!" Benji roared, and we stepped on board like we were working a catwalk. Just beyond him, a group of girls danced between two seating areas at the back of the deck while their dates jostled around a bar hidden beneath the overhang of yet another deck. I recognized a lot of the faces from the bonfire—and I could connect names and even friend groups to most of them, thanks to my comprehensive investigation into everyone's socials.

"Oh yeah," Benji said. "New rule: no heels." He pointed at his own flat brown shoes, worn without socks. They had white rubber soles that wouldn't

dent the soft wood of the deck. “Topsiders are okay, though, if you want to switch?”

I rolled my eyes.

The no-heels rule was fine by me, since just the walk over the dock and up the gangplank had been painful. The four of us yanked off our heels with barely concealed sighs of relief and tossed them onto a motley assortment of non-boat shoes discarded near the entrance.

“You remember my friends,” I said.

I gestured to Selah, Tamar, and Kezia, who were already looking past Benji to scan the crowd. “How could I forget?” Benji snickered, his eyes darting between us. “The four of you make quite a scene wherever you show up.” He lurched over to kiss each of us on the cheek, and I tried not to pull back when his sunburned lips touched my face. He was being friendly tonight. A little too friendly, thanks to whatever he’d been indulging in.

But it meant his guard was down.

I could use that to our advantage.

“Hey,” I said, waving my hand in front of his face to redirect his eyes from Selah’s neckline. “You haven’t seen a pretty girl with long red hair, have you?”

Benji turned to me, squinting my face into focus.

“I only have eyes for you, babe,” he joked.

“I’m so flattered,” I said, forcing a giggle that wasn’t going to win me an Oscar. Not that Benji could tell. “But seriously, we’re trying to find our friend Ari—we’re supposed to meet her here.” The Three watched silently as I tried to get some sort of answer from Benji, who was looking slightly past me as his pre-partying started to catch up with him.

“Red hair, kinda wavy?” I said, miming waist-length hair for his benefit.

Benji looked at me, then down at his topsiders.

“Nope,” he said. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

Selah leaned into my side, her breath hot against my ear. “Why are you wasting time on him?” she whispered. “He’s useless. We need to find Tristan.”

I nodded but didn't budge as I continued to smile at Benji, trying to read his reaction. The truth was, I disagreed with Selah. Who knew what Benji had seen or heard? And the fact that he was still staring down at his topsiders made him seem a little guilty.

Like he was hiding something.

"Have you seen a girl *like* that around here, though, at other times?" I pressed. "Maybe with Tristan?" I could feel Selah pulling away from me, drawn to the heart of the party, but Benji's face remained studiously blank—so blank that I could practically hear him straining to keep it that way. His eyes twitched between his shoes and the dock as he swayed on his feet, searching for an answer that never came.

Interesting, I thought. Maybe he *had* seen Ari with Tristan.

But if he had, he wasn't about to admit it.

Selah tugged on my hand.

Before I could think of a suitable conversational dismount, she was pulling me away from Benji and dragging me toward the crowded bar. The bar itself was inlaid with mother-of-pearl and looked well stocked, but there was no bartender behind it. Just rows and rows of bottles on display so everyone could help themselves: seltzers and juice, every kind of soda, champagne chilling in buckets, a tub full of beers from Cisco Brewers, and even little bowls of sliced fruit for garnish. We poured ourselves seltzers with wedges of lemon. It might have been the party of the summer for everyone else, but we were here to get answers and needed clear heads.

I gripped my glass, feeling subtle movement beneath my feet as the yacht pulled out of its slip and inched away from the dock. A slight cheer went up among the crowd, and a few celebratory corks popped into the harbor like muffled gunshots. My chest tightened at the sound.

We'd made it on board.

There really was no going back now.

As the yacht maneuvered away from the dock, the four of us wound our way through the party, circling a dance floor surrounded by modern outdoor couches that were packed with high-school and college-aged kids. There wasn't an actual adult in sight, and I hoped the captain or the pilot—or

whoever was in charge of steering a ship this size—was the grizzled exception to the sea of youthful faces surrounding me.

“Where *is* he?” Selah wondered out loud as we paused on the side of the ship closest to land, trying to get a better view of the crowd. She drummed her fingers on the metal railing, impatiently scanning the smiling partygoers. “This is his party, right?”

“Do you think Benji tipped him off?” Tamar asked. “Maybe we shouldn’t have asked him about Ari.”

“We had to bring her up,” I said. “We need to find out who she talked to. It’s pretty much the same crowd tonight as the night Ari disappeared. One of them has to know *something*.” My voice wavered in the salty breeze. There was a brittle edge to the evening, out here on the water as the sunset’s last glow faded into the dark horizon.

Like it could shatter any second.

Selah bit her lip. “We should split up and look for him,” she said.

I felt Tamar stiffen next to me. “Maybe...we shouldn’t,” she said, a quaver in her voice. Selah’s eyebrows rose a few millimeters. She was used to Tamar and Kezia following her lead without question. But Tamar wasn’t looking to Selah for approval. Her gaze was fixed on the sky behind Selah. It had deepened to a darker blue and the clouds shifted from white to gray. “Something terrible happened to Ari here, without us.”

Her voice was just a whisper, but her words landed heavily.

This was the last place anyone had seen Ari alive.

She could have been killed right here, on the *Titan*.

Tamar broke the silence. “Can we please stick together?”

Selah nodded slowly. Beneath her smeared eyeliner, half-moon shadows shone through her concealer, giving her a haunted look I recognized. I’d seen it on my own face in the mirror, so often I’d thought it was normal. She wasn’t just pissed-off and looking for answers. Behind her confident, it-girl persona, she was exhausted and sad.

Grief was taking its toll.

“Of course,” she said, opening her arms and pulling Tamar and Kezia in for a hug. Kezia wrapped an arm around me and drew me in, too. The

warmth of their bodies and their breath inside the circle warmed me like a bonfire against the cold Nantucket wind at our backs. The moment stretched, none of us wanting to step away and face the chill, until Selah released us.

“Let’s find him,” she said.

We nodded, striding along the glossy white side of the main cabin until we reached a white stairway that led up to the middle deck, where I could hear the DJ and music blasting through the speakers.

Kezia stopped, pointing first at the railing and then at the steps.

“Doesn’t this look familiar?”

She was right.

They looked exactly like the stairs in the picture I’d texted them earlier, from the party when Ari disappeared. I opened the photo on my phone, comparing the staircase in front of me to the one in the picture. The only difference seemed to be the sliver of pink fabric and denim-clad legs in the top-right corner of the photo on my phone. I pinched my screen, zooming in and out from the dainty strap that was cutting into the back of a feminine ankle.

Matching reference points.

“It’s exactly the same,” I said. “We should see what’s up there.”

But just as I started to climb the stairs, a pair of suntanned feet in chunky heels flashed in front of me. They were pedicured in the palest nude and adorned with a circular gold logo I’d seen in some of the fancier island boutiques. It was Reagan, descending the staircase in a pleated white dress that seemed too sweet and innocent for the sneer on her face. She was followed by the almost identical Lex and a mousy girl named Warner who I recognized from the bonfire party.

All in similar block-heeled sandals.

But heels aren’t allowed, I thought.

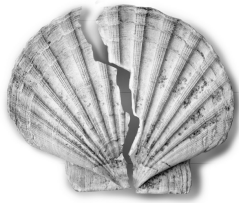
“I can’t believe they let you on board,” Reagan hissed, looking at me like she’d just found a hair in her food as she pushed past us with her besties in tow. Her nostrils were slightly flared and her glossed lips curled over her perfect teeth. She obviously didn’t like us, didn’t like *me*. I could understand

that, after the garden party. But the sudden flush of her cheeks suggested she was feeling more than that.

She seemed *angry*.

As she tried to push past me, I noticed a familiar golden gleam at her throat and something inside me tilted a few degrees. A new thought entered my mind, clear as a bell. I glanced again at Reagan's necklace, so similar to the one in my purse. *Hell hath no fury...*, I thought.

...like a woman scorned.



CHAPTER 29

I REALIZED THAT WE'D BEEN so focused on Tristan that we might have missed another potential suspect. Someone who also had a motive to get rid of Ari. Reagan was in a serious relationship with Tristan and wouldn't want anything to jeopardize that. She could have been the one to hurt Ari—perhaps a crime of passion, fueled by fury and jealousy.

"Hey, Reagan," I said, stepping in front of the trio so that they couldn't squeeze by.

Reagan shot me a look so withering I felt like the smallest, ugliest creature on the planet. Like I didn't belong here or anywhere, not even back home in Pittsburgh.

My mouth went dry and my words faltered.

I'm doing this for Ari, I reminded myself.

Plus, I had my three friends at my back.

I cleared my throat. "We're actually looking for our friend Ari. Gorgeous, long reddish hair. Have you seen her?" I stared unblinkingly at Reagan, watching for even the tiniest expression of guilt. My stomach sank at her lack of reaction to Ari's name and description. It was like she didn't know her at all: there was no recognition, much less guilt.

She clearly didn't have anything to do with her death.

So much for my new theory.

"I'm really not concerned with your little friends," Reagan said in a condescending tone. "And since I can't kick you out"—she shrugged at the expanse of choppy gray water around us—"how about you just stay the hell away from me?"

I bit my lip and nodded.

Stepping aside, I felt Selah slink up next to me.

“Do you think *Tristan* knows where she is?” Selah said, taking my place as she matched Reagan’s tone and added a smirk. The two sidekicks, Lex and Warner, looked nervously at their queen bee. I scanned Reagan’s face again, gauging her response.

She blinked a few times, surprised.

Maybe even startled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, flicking her eyes between me and Selah. “What exactly are you four suggesting?”

“Nothing,” I said apologetically, placing a pacifying hand on Selah’s back. “It doesn’t mean anything. We’d just heard that they might be acquainted.” I let that last word hang in the air for a moment while Reagan absently fiddled with the pendant on her neck. Lex and Warner shifted uneasily beside her, and I turned my attention to them.

Tamar and Kezia joined me, fixing them with their big brown eyes.

“How about you two?” Tamar asked, her voice so soft and soothing that Lex and Warner actually leaned in to better hear her over the pounding techno beat. “Ari was at Tristan’s last party on the *Titan*. Do you remember meeting a girl with long red hair and a light pink dress that night?”

Even Reagan seemed to be drawn in by Tamar.

She blinked, reconsidering her answer.

Once again, I wondered how it was possible that the Three were so persuasive. Their ability to get people to open up to them—to do and say what they wanted—felt like magic to me, but they were beautiful girls who knew how to manipulate. Logically, I knew it was probably just charisma, that magnetic mixture of self-confidence and charm...but it was almost uncanny to see them in action, like they were mesmerizing their prey with some mystical supernatural power. Like they really were the selkies I’d envisioned.

I watched Lex carefully as she shook her head. Slowly, like she was underwater.

“I might have seen her,” Warner whispered, cocking her head. Her eyes were glassy with the memory as she stared off into the distance—like she was

looking at Ari now, on some internal replay. “But only for a second. I didn’t actually meet her.”

“Where did you see her?” Tamar asked.

Even though she wasn’t talking to me, Tamar’s voice felt like a fuzzy blanket of calm over my nervous system. I yawned, forgetting for a moment where I was—and what I was up to.

“Who was she with?” Tamar asked.

“We *don’t* know that girl,” Reagan interrupted.

“Are you sure about that?” Selah inched closer to Reagan until she was practically in her face, and I wondered if she was trying to force Reagan’s eyes to focus on her own.

Reagan wasn’t buying it any longer.

“We’re done here,” she snapped.

She pushed between me and Selah, crushing my toes beneath the hard soles of her shoes. It wasn’t fair: the rest of us padded around in bare feet. I hopped on one foot, wincing while I rubbed my toes.

“I thought heels weren’t allowed,” I grumbled.

“Tristan’s dad’s stupid rule,” Reagan said. “He doesn’t want trash like you scuffing up his deck.” She stalked off to the rear of the boat, where the party was growing louder, and Lex and Warner trotted after her, jogging to catch up. As I watched them go, I realized that the yacht had passed a lighthouse and a line of rocky jetties.

We were heading for open ocean now.

I turned to the Three, clutching my throbbing foot. I could already tell I was going to have a bruise. “What do you think?” I asked, dying to hear their takes on our encounter with Reagan and her minions.

“I don’t think she knew Ari,” Tamar shrugged. “But I can confirm she’s a total bitch.”

“That other girl saw her,” Kezia said, wrinkling her forehead.

“That’s something,” I agreed.

“I don’t trust anyone on this boat,” Selah said. “Present company excluded. All I know is that Ari never talked about anyone else. Just the guy she thought was her boyfriend.”

Tamar and Kezia nodded in agreement.

“So she stuck pretty close to him, then—or maybe he kept her away from his friends on purpose, since they all know Reagan,” I said, then shook my head. “But if he was hiding her, it wouldn’t make sense for him to invite her to a party on a boat with everyone he knows.”

“Maybe she wasn’t invited,” Tamar said. “It didn’t stop us.”

“Ari had been complaining that she felt like he was pulling away,” Kezia added, a wistful look on her face. “Maybe he didn’t want her here, but she showed up anyway....”

“When did she say that?” Selah asked. “And why didn’t she tell me?” She pounded a fist into the meat of her other hand.

Kezia paled beneath her freckles. “She mentioned it a few days before she disappeared. She said he hadn’t been showing up at their usual spots. But she’d heard about the party and knew that’s where she could find him,” she said, looking down at her hands. Her nails had been freshly painted a pearly gray, but her cuticles were ragged and bitten. She closed her eyes against the tears that were starting to form. “I thought maybe it was true love. Or that’s what I hoped, anyway.”

Selah looked up at the sky and sighed heavily. “It probably was, for Ari. But Tristan...you’ve seen how he acts,” she said.

We all nodded. He’d blatantly flirted with Kezia—and he’d tried it with me, too, all under the nose of his old-money girlfriend. Not to mention what Eric had told me about his behavior at college. He was a two-faced snake, and I was a little surprised that Reagan didn’t see it. Or maybe she just didn’t want to. Either way, he couldn’t be trusted.

What happened to Ari was proof of that.

“Let’s find him,” I said.

We climbed the stairs, chasing the phantom of the pink dress to the central deck. There were a few stray couples huddled on a horseshoe-shaped couch in front of the DJ booth, but none of them included Tristan—and they were all so wrapped up in their own shouted conversations that they didn’t even notice us. We continued up another set of stairs, to the uppermost deck. The wind howled as we climbed, whipping my hair away from my face and

partially muffling the music below as the lights of the marina slid away in the distance.

It was darker on the top deck, above the party lights.

And lonelier.

It was just us four up here, barefoot and shivering in the breeze.

“Let’s check every inch of this boat,” Selah said. “Maybe he’s up front.”

We rounded the corner of what looked like the ship’s cockpit, ducking beneath the windows. The captain—I assumed there had to be one *somewhere*—was hopefully too busy guiding Mr. Weston’s massive yacht out of the harbor to notice us, but there was no point in risking being seen and redirected down to the rest of the party. We fought the deafening winds as we crept up the narrowing corridor, heading toward the tapering prow of the ship.

But there was no one else up here. We turned to go back.

Since it was a long drop into the Atlantic, I kept one hand gripped on the rail and my eyes trained on my bruising toes as the yacht pushed through choppy waves.

I took one careful step and then another, until I noticed a few faded black marks on the white fiberglass a few feet ahead of me. I put out my hand, halting Selah, who stumbled on my heels. Crouching, I inspected the marks with my phone’s flashlight on high. “Look at this,” I shouted to the Three. They leaned over my shoulders. “What does that look like to you?”

“I don’t know,” Kezia said. “Dirt?”

I rubbed them with my finger.

The marks stayed put.

The smudges were broken into several short lines, some of which had actually gouged shallow grooves into the smooth white surface. There was some smearing across the marks, as if it someone had tried to scrub them clean.

I ran my hand across the gouges.

They were so narrow.

Like claw marks.

I pulled up the photo of the staircase again—the denim pants, the flash of pink—then ran my finger down one of the rough grooves.

It was about the width of a shoe heel.

Almost stiletto-sized.

“See her shoe?” I asked, pointing from my phone to the deck. “She was up here in heels at the last party, we know that. *She* could have made these marks. Benji said it was a new rule,” I said, putting the pieces together. “Someone scratched up the deck here. Hence, the rule.”

“They could be from anyone wearing heels,” Tamar pointed out.

“*Maybe* they were from Ari’s shoes,” Kezia said.

I nodded, bracing myself as the yacht gently rocked underfoot.

Selah looked up from the marks to me and smiled sadly. “There’s no way of knowing for sure,” she said. “We need to hear it from Tristan.”

I knew she was right, but I also had a feeling these marks meant something. That they were *important*. I took a few photos with and without flash, then took a brief video to show where exactly they were on the deck. I emailed it all to myself—adding to my makeshift case file—then hurried to catch up with Selah, who was prowling back toward the stairway with Kezia and Tamar in her wake. As we retraced our steps down to the relative shelter of the DJ’s deck, I noticed that all the couples were gone. In their place were a group of guys in button-down shirts, all holding crystal glasses and laughing over the boom of the speakers.

Kezia squeezed my arm.

“There he is!” she cried.

At the very center of the horseshoe, Tristan reigned over his party like a prince at court, his gathered friends hanging on his every word. Mid-story, he gestured wildly as he talked—not noticing that he was spilling his drink on the sycophant to his right. He spilled even more of it when he saw us, his mouth hanging open for a fraction of a second.

But he quickly recovered.

“Stowaways!” he roared.

The guys surrounding him all swiveled to face us, like the gingham-clad arms of the giant social squid that was Tristan Weston.

“Ahoy, sailors,” Selah sang out, doing an ironic salute that started at her forehead and ended with her hand on her curvy hip. Tristan quickly glanced to both sides and eyed the stairwells.

Checking for Reagan, I presumed.

“Who let you scallywags on board?” he said with a tight, fake smile.

A chill ran up the back of my neck. The jagged edge beneath his banter was obvious to me, but if the Three noticed his tone, they didn’t show it.

“We were wondering where the VIPs were,” Selah said, plopping herself on the sofa between Tristan and the boy who’d gotten spilled on. He seemed delighted to be wedged against her. “And now we’ve finally found you.”

“Has Reagan seen you yet? Because I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t antagonize my girlfriend tonight. She’s actually in a good mood for once.”

Tristan laughed, grandstanding for his friends.

Taking his cue, they laughed, too.

There it was: the casual disdain for a girl he’d just committed himself to with a piece of jewelry that could cover a year of college somewhere. As toxic as Reagan and her girl gang were, I actually felt sorry for her.

Nobody deserved to be a punch line.

And definitely not for Tristan.

“We’ll keep our distance,” Selah purred, brushing an imaginary speck of dust from Tristan’s collared shirt while I hovered awkwardly at the edge of the seating area. Tamar and Kezia squeezed in at the other end of the couch, wiggling a little to make enough room.

“We just want to have a good time,” Tamar said.

“Speaking of...,” I said, screwing up my courage and smiling as flirtatiously as I could at the group of red-cheeked boys. “Mind if we borrow him?” The boys hooted, pushing Tristan up from his seat like he’d just won the lottery.

“Have fun!” one of the guys yelled.

I wanted to roll my eyes, but we were flirting for a reason.

We had to find out what Tristan knew—and what he had done. Whether or not he was responsible for Ari’s death, I was convinced he was the last person who’d seen her alive...and I wasn’t the only one. As soon as we’d

pulled him away from the crowd, Selah dropped her sultry smile. “Have you seen Ari around anywhere?” she asked, keeping up the charade that we were simply looking for our friend. “I thought she’d be here.”

Tristan paused and tilted his head back, feigning confusion.

But his eyes flickered in recognition.

I clocked a wave of *something* flash across his face, too quickly for me to pin down. Was it fear, or irritation? Whatever caused his brows to furrow ever so slightly, it was a dead giveaway. He’d known her, and he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Who’s Ari?” he asked, his voice carefully neutral. His eyes darted back to his cronies, just a few yards away.

“The one you’ve secretly been meeting for weeks?” Selah said, her voice sharp. “The girl you’ve been hooking up with?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Tristan said evenly. He crossed his arms, tucking his hands beneath his biceps as if making himself look bigger would make the questions stop. Selah’s lips quirked at that.

“I think you’re lying,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Tristan said.

He glanced at me and widened his eyes as if to say *Can you believe this chick?*

I stared blankly back at him as Selah mounted her offense, even louder this time. “I think you were cheating on Reagan with her. Or cheating on Ari with Reagan.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Tristan said. He uncrossed his arms and reached for Selah, his first impulse clearly to pull her aside and shut her up before anyone else heard what she was saying—but she jerked back.

“*Don’t. Touch. Me,*” Selah said, almost shouting. “And I don’t care who hears us. But it sounds like you do.”

“Okay, okay,” Tristan said. “Let’s go somewhere private.”

Tamar and I shared a glance.

“The upper deck is empty,” I said, thinking of those marks on the fiberglass. I watched for Tristan’s reaction to that, but he didn’t look startled or nervous at the mention of the upper deck.

“Fine,” he said. “Let’s make it quick, though.”

This time, instead of braving the wind on the outer decks and walkways, we followed Tristan through a heavy door into the cabin. In the hushed luxury of his father’s yacht, the noise of the party disappeared. My feet sank into a thick cream-colored carpet as he led us beneath a shimmering crystal chandelier, through a maze of sumptuous furniture and mahogany-paneled walls.

As we approached a spiral staircase, I recalled what Eric had said about Tristan’s dad: that his empire was based on buying up and killing other companies. Hostile takeovers, layoffs, forced bankruptcies, and ransacked pensions had paid for all of this. I couldn’t help but notice artfully framed photos of Stuart Weston and his family with politicians (like Reagan’s mom, of course) and celebrities—famous musicians, actors, and a few recognizable tech CEOs. There was even a picture of his wife with a former president. *This is what all those millions can buy*, I thought as we ascended the stairs.

Access and power.

Tristan pushed open another heavy door at the top of the stairs and we found ourselves on a secluded deck at the prow of the yacht, where there was no chance of anyone overhearing us. I surreptitiously pressed record on the voice memo app on my phone and shoved it down into the neck of my dress, held in place by the band of my bra. If we could get a confession, or even something incriminating, out of this conversation, I could send it to the police.

And I could finally get some closure.

“More private this way,” Tristan shouted over the wind.

He looked nervously between the four of us as we faced him. The sky behind Tristan was a midnight blue now, with only a faint blur of magenta where the sun had set. At the other end of the vessel, I imagined the party was starting to rage, but we could hear none of it from here. I pulled Ari’s golden basket from my pocket, letting it dangle from its borrowed silver chain.

I held it up to Tristan’s face.

“Do you recognize this?” I asked.

Tristan squinted, like he was seeing the basket for the first time in his life. Like he hadn't just bought Reagan a matching one. "That's a lightship basket," he said with a dismissive laugh. "They're literally everywhere on this island."

"You gave it to Ari," I said. "Didn't you?"

"I'm telling you again—I absolutely don't know what you're talking about," Tristan said. "Can you just drop your ridiculous theories?" He was stonewalling me, I knew it. But I didn't know what tack to take to draw the truth out of him. He was clearly a practiced liar, but I plowed ahead with what I knew...and what I suspected to be true. It was a risky move, accusing Tristan to his face without the proof to back it up.

But I had to do something.

To shake *something* loose.

"Ari had one just like Reagan's. The real ones are quite an investment. Not a lot of guys would be able afford them, but you give them to the girls you're seeing. And I think you were the last person to see Ari alive."

His eyes widened just the tiniest bit.

But he kept his mouth shut and crossed his arms.

"We think you wanted to make sure Reagan didn't find out about Ari. And we're pretty sure you're the reason she ended up dead," I said, straining to project my words over the wind. I was shivering now, and I regretted coming up to this deck—surrounded by the encroaching night—instead of confronting him quietly in front of his guests, or in the warmth and brightness of one the lavish staterooms.

"This is pointless," Tristan said.

He turned to leave, then thought better of it.

"Does Eric know you're here, making accusations?" he asked, his voice cold and threatening, his mouth hardening into a bad impression of a smile. "Because I'm sure his dad would be *thrilled* to know how you're talking to me."

I faltered at the truth in his statement.

He was right: I was making a powerful enemy. In the last five minutes, I'd probably tanked Todd's real estate deal with Stuart Weston. I wondered

how that would play out, if Todd would hold it against me—or my mom. It made me sick to think about her, back home in Pittsburgh and crying at the kitchen table with half a bottle of supermarket chardonnay to keep her company. Even in a best-case scenario, we'd catch Tristan...

And everyone would be mad at me for sneaking out.

For taking the risk of confronting him directly.

For accusing the island's golden boy of murder.

But if I could catch Ari's killer, I had to try.

"I don't care," I said. "I just care about what happened to Ari."

Tristan laughed wryly and turned to the cabin, firing a parting shot over his shoulder. "Eric told me that you had some issues," he said, his voice too calm for the moment. "He said you were unstable. But I didn't know you'd gone off the deep end."

My face flamed red-hot in the wind.

He was calling me crazy.

And what *exactly* had Eric told Tristan about me?

"I haven't gone off the deep end," I growled. "And if I'm wrong, then you'll have a perfectly good alibi for when Ari disappeared. Maybe I should check with everyone on board?" Before I could think of what to say next, Selah quietly slipped in front of Tristan, blocking him from leaving the deck. Without warning, her hand darted out to slap him. He grabbed her wrist in self-defense, but not before she scratched his face, leaving two long gouges down his cheek.

They quickly reddened with trickles of blood.

"We're not playing around," she said, yanking her wrist free from his grasp.

A prickle of fear crept over my neck and shoulders as I watched a droplet of blood soak into Tristan's white collar. I glanced back at Kezia and Tamar. They were both staring at Selah with widening eyes, their faces tight with matching worry. They looked just as startled and scared as I felt, and my stomach twisted with the terrible realization that I was right.

I'd known something bad was going to happen tonight.

Tristan pressed a hand to his cheek, glowering at Selah. “You’re a complete psycho,” he said. “And you’ll be hearing from my dad’s attorney.”

Selah laughed, deep and throaty. “I’m so scared,” she said.

“Selah!” I hissed. “*Please*—we’re just here for answers.”

“Well, now he’s taking us seriously,” she said. She plucked the silver chain from my hand and dangled it in front of Tristan, who snatched it away from her. His ugly smile curled into a sneer as he fought with Selah for our one piece of evidence, the one thing in this world that I *knew* tied Tristan to Ari. The slender chain tightened around Selah’s fingers as Tamar and Kezia joined in, grabbing at Tristan while he yanked back with his entire body—and all four of them fell to the deck in a pile of elbows and knees as they scrambled for Ari’s golden charm.

“Stop it!” I screamed.

But there was no reasoning with any of them now.

I kept my eyes pinned to the metallic flash of the basket amid the tangle of arms and legs as Tristan struggled beneath the Three, watching in horror as it slammed against the floor in his tightly clenched fist. Selah yanked back, pushing against Tristan’s chest with all her might. From the sidelines, I saw what was happening before anyone else. The slender chain had snapped, sending Selah sprawling toward the railing, her back crashing against it as Tristan rolled free from Kezia and Tamar.

In the confusion, the charm skittered across the deck.

I jumped on it as fast as I could.

When I scooped it up, I could feel that the basket itself was broken in my hand. Damaged in the struggle, it felt like two pieces instead of one, but I waited until the Three and Tristan had disentangled themselves before I dared to check. As they quietly stared at me, I inspected the delicate jewelry cradled in my palm.

It wasn’t broken, I realized.

It was open.

I slid a fingernail under the lid of the tiny basket, which had started to separate from the rest of the charm. I hadn’t realized it did that. The tiny clasp was packed with sand, its hinges weathered from its time in the sea, but

after a few seconds I was able to pry the lid fully open. Dumping the little basket into my palm revealed a few grains of sand and a miniature penny. Selah climbed to her feet as I worked and leaned in close, her breath hot and ragged on my neck, then snatched the golden basket.

“Look,” she said triumphantly, showing me the inside of the lid.

I held it up to the light and peered inside. The tiniest inscription glinted back at me.

ME + YOU.



CHAPTER 30

I HELD THE OPEN BASKET up to Tristan's sweating face. He was breathing heavily, his eyes jumping warily between Kezia and Selah and Tamar. The bleeding on his cheeks had stopped, but the scratches were still an angry red.

"Does this jog your memory?" I asked.

Tristan's mouth fell open in surprise; then he covered his reaction by clearing his throat. A long, tense moment passed with no sound except the slosh of waves against the prow and a distant thump of drum and bass.

"That doesn't mean anything," he said, crossing his arms.

His confidence—his *smugness*—filled me with a cold wash of anger, especially after he'd tried his best to steal the charm from us. I hoped my phone, still pressed against my sternum, was picking up every word he said. I couldn't wait for him to face the authorities and answer for what he'd done. Would they take him away in handcuffs...or would his powerful father arrange for him to turn himself in, an army of lawyers in tow?

I hoped there'd be a courtroom sketch.

I wanted to see him squirm.

But most of all, I hoped he'd feel guilt for what he'd done.

"Reagan showed me the same inscription on her new necklace," I said confidently. "Should I ask her about it?"

The four of us moved in closer.

A pack of wolves circling our prey.

"She knows you're insane. She won't listen to you," Tristan said. His eyes darted behind us, looking for an easy way out—for a convenient party guest to pull him away—but everyone else was worlds away on the dance floor below. Still, my heart pounded in my chest. Tristan was the man of the

hour, and it wasn't too far-fetched to think that someone, somewhere, would come looking for him.

"If I went to this jeweler and showed them Ari's basket, with this particular inscription, are you saying that it wouldn't be traced back to Tristan Weston?" I enunciated his full name clearly for the sake of the recording. "Or to your dad, if you bought it with his credit card?"

Tristan focused his ice-blue eyes on me.

"I don't know how you got wrapped up with these nobodies and their conspiracy theories, but you need to stop." He uncrossed his arms and leaned against the ship's railing, squaring his shoulders. "You don't know who you're dealing with. I could shut you up so fast—"

"Like you shut up Ari?" Selah cut him off.

Her voice was brittle and dangerous.

"We know you were seeing her," she said. "We have proof. We know she came to your party, we know she was up here with you. And now she's dead."

"You can't prove anything," he hissed. "I'm not exactly worried."

"How much money does it take to cover up a murder charge?" I asked. "Maybe you have more than enough. But what if Princeton finds out, what if Reagan finds out? What if I send every journalist in town—in the country—everything we know? Your dad's such a big shot, I'm sure he has a million enemies. They'd be happy to run the story."

Tristan ran a cold eye over each of us.

"Why don't you just tell us what happened?" Tamar said, her voice a soft counterpoint to Selah's harshness. "Maybe there's a good explanation. If you tell us the truth, we don't have to tell anyone else."

Tristan scoffed and crossed his arms again.

"She's right," Kezia murmured in a breathy, mesmerizing tone.

"We won't tell, we swear," Tamar agreed. "Right, Selah?"

Selah took a deep breath and unfurrowed her brow. She twisted her lips into an apologetic smile. "I know I've been overreacting, but all we want is the truth. I promise not to make trouble if you just tell us what happened. We'll leave the island, and no one will hear anything about it." She fixed him

with her gaze, breaking past his defensiveness and his arrogance. “Please,” she said, tears trickling from the corner of her eyes.

Was this all part of an act? I wondered.

Or was it true desperation?

Tristan uncrossed his arms, stuffing his hands in his pockets. Buttons had been ripped from his shirt in the fight, and it hung open at his chest, blood-speckled and wrinkled, as he closed his eyes—then blew out a long sigh, as if he’d decided something.

Maybe he was going to try to talk his way out of it. Maybe he was going to try to bargain with us or bribe us.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll tell you what I know. But this ends here.”

My head swam as I looked from Selah to Tristan. This was it—the truth.

“I met Ari right after we docked here,” he said, his voice flat and expressionless. “I was teaching myself to surf and all of a sudden she was there, watching me from the shore.”

Kezia and Tamar looked at each other and nodded. This matched up with what they already knew.

“We hit it off. I’d see her there every morning. So we started spending time together. Sometimes I’d meet her there at night.” A little smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. I had a pretty good idea of what they got up to at night.

“Then what happened?” Selah breathed, drawing imperceptibly closer to Tristan.

I could see his eyes softening under a filmy haze, his inner resolve fading.

He took his hands from his pockets and pushed them through his hair. His shoulders sagged, and he opened his mouth to speak.

It’s happening! I thought, biting my lip to keep from screaming. I put a hand to my chest, feeling that my phone was still secure.

“I gave her the necklace,” he admitted slowly, as if under the influence of their attention. “I wanted her to stop begging me to introduce her to my family, to bring her around my friends, so I thought a nice gift would chill her out for a while.”

I held my breath, afraid to break the spell.

“What happened at the party?” Tamar asked, sidling even closer to Tristan.

I suddenly found myself ever-so-subtly nudged to the sidelines, on the outside of the Three as they pushed in around Tristan. But he was finally talking, and I leaned in as close as I could, hoping my phone was recording clearly over the wind.

“She just showed up!” Tristan said, blinking at Selah like he was seeing her for the first time. “I have no idea how she got on board. She knew I was staying here, but I hadn’t told her anything about the party.” He shook his head ruefully, as if it were all Ari’s fault for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. “She was acting crazy, making a scene. But I didn’t kill her!”

Selah pinned Tristan with her dark, penetrating gaze.

I could tell she didn’t believe him.

“Tell me what happened from beginning to end,” she demanded. The four of us stared at Tristan, holding our breath.

“I knew I needed to get rid of her before Reagan or her friends saw, so I pulled her into one of the staterooms—just to try to talk some sense into her.” Tristan’s breath became rapid, and he clenched and unclenched his hands at his sides. “I didn’t mean for her to end up *dead*.”

I turned to the side, pretending to cough while I snuck a glance down the neck of my dress at the edge of my phone screen. My voice memo was still recording. *So far, so good*, I thought. Just a few more details and we’d have enough evidence to take to the police. Even though it wouldn’t bring Ari back, I felt a surge of pride that we’d be delivering some small measure of justice.

When I looked up again, something had shifted. Selah’s hair was blowing wildly around her head, carried by the wind. Her face was a pale moon against the black Nantucket sky, and she looked like some kind of pagan goddess. Time seemed to stop as she reached out with one freckled arm and placed a hand around Tristan’s trembling throat. He froze, the whites of his eyes expanding as he stared down at Selah.

“What are you doing?” I whispered. “He’s telling us everything.”

I looked to Tamar and Kezia for support, but their faces were transformed by hatred and grief. Kezia was practically panting in anger, and their eyes had flattened from warm, familiar browns into colorless voids. They were no longer the eyes of my unusually persuasive, wickedly charming friends. They were something more vicious and cold-blooded.

I recoiled, my back flattening against the sliding door behind me. “Maybe we should all take a breath,” I said, forcing the words from my pounding chest as a heavy and terrible feeling settled over me like a cloak.

“Continue,” Selah ordered, keeping her hand on Tristan’s throat.

He lifted his hands to Selah’s forearm, trying to loosen her viselike grip on his neck. But nothing happened. It was as if she had taken all of his strength for her own.

“I needed her to shut up,” he rasped.

Selah flexed her hand around his throat.

Tightening until his veins bulged.

“And then?”

“I gave her some pills,” he wheezed. “I’m not sure how much. I knew she needed to calm down. I had to take care of the situation before it became a bigger problem.” Tristan shrugged, like ending a girl’s life was no big deal. “But then—”

I think it was the shrug that did it.

In a burst of anger Selah pushed down on his neck, shoving him right in his Adam’s apple. Tristan tottered for a moment, his arms wheeling as he gulped for air—his face a mask of shock and fear. “I swear, I didn’t—” Tristan coughed. Selah shoved him again, this time in the chest.

His body tipped backward, toppling over the rail.

Into the sea.

I rushed to the railing. I thought I saw the pale smudge of his white shirt in the darkness, but when I blinked it disappeared beneath the waves. He was already gone.

“What the *hell*?” I screamed, whirling around to face Selah.

The Three were cackling—no, they were crying. Holding each other and gasping for breath.

I felt bile rise in the back of my throat.

What had they done?

I leaned back over the railing, looking for any signs of Tristan, but there was nothing to see. I retched overboard, a watery sourness scraping my throat as sharp nails grabbed at my shoulders, pulling me away from the edge.

I fumbled in my dress for my phone, flicking shut my recording app and trying to dial 911 with shaking fingers. Before I hit the final “1,” Selah yanked the phone from my hand and tossed it overboard.

I stared up at her, mouth agape.

“What are you doing?” I rasped. “We have to call for help!”

The Three closed in around me as I stared from one to the other, hyperventilating.

They sat me down on the deck, pinning me between them.

Their arms prevented me from breaking away as I thrashed, yelling incoherently and trying to get free. I needed to tell the captain. I needed to call the Coast Guard. Maybe there was a way to save him. *But does he deserve to be saved?* a little voice inside me asked. I screwed my eyes shut and tried to breathe. I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t do anything, pinned down like this by...by who, or by what?

Were they my friends? Or grifters and murderers? Or—my wild visions springing to mind—something else entirely?

As my breathing slowed, I opened my eyes to make sure this was all really happening. It didn’t feel real—it was more like a nightmare. With my eyes open I could clearly see Selah and Kezia and Tamar staring right back at me, their faces patchy and tear-streaked. Selah clutched me in her arms.

Squeezing me so tight I could barely breathe.

“He deserved it,” she sobbed. “He killed Ari.”

“He deserved it,” Tamar echoed, as if trying to convince herself.

“He really did,” Kezia murmured soothingly, rubbing my back in circular motions. I staggered to my feet and peered over the railing, scanning the waves again for the bright cotton of his shirt, his golden hair, a waving arm—but there was nothing to see.

“We have to tell someone,” I said.

My voice sounded hollow, and I could barely hear myself above the wind and waves. The sea was choppy tonight, the current brisk, and we were far enough out that even if Tristan had survived the fall, there was no way he could swim to shore.

“What’s done is done,” Selah said, her voice thick with the tears that still ran down her face.



CHAPTER 31

THE THREE PULLED ME GENTLY to my feet and led me away from the railing where I'd seen Tristan engulfed by hungry waves.

Yet another image to haunt me.

My entire body was numb with shock, and I barely realized I was being guided back inside.

"We need to go down to the main level," Selah said, tugging me toward the spiral staircase. "To make it look like we've been mingling at the party this whole time." I balked, digging my heels into the deep ivory carpet. I couldn't join the party and act carefree and fun, pretending I hadn't seen someone pushed to his death less than ten minutes ago.

Even if it helped us look less guilty.

I gaped at the Three as they swiped their fingers under their eyes, wiping away the last of their tears, and helped each other finger-comb their hair so it looked less windblown. Noticing the haunted look in my eyes, Tamar gently took my hand and led me down the stairs. "Come on," she said. "I'll find you a place to sit." She sat me on a cream-colored couch and I clutched a scratchy throw pillow to my chest as Selah and Kezia joined us. A girl who was looking for a bathroom stopped to stare when she saw my tear-streaked face.

"Aw, is your friend okay?" she asked Kezia.

"She just had a little too much fun," Kezia said smoothly.

"So we're taking care of her," Tamar added, smiling at the girl.

From the quiet of the cabin, I watched as the party raged on the middle deck, the reflections on the glass doors making the dancing figures look distorted and menacing. Every so often someone would duck inside to get a break from the chilly night air, laughing and pink-cheeked. Fully oblivious to the violence that had claimed the host of this party.

No one seemed to notice Tristan's absence.

At least not yet.

My body felt heavy and light at the same time.

The last time I'd felt this way was right after I'd found Ari. Selah was telling me something with a furrowed brow, but I couldn't focus on her words—only her face. Her freckles looked more pronounced than usual, her movements quick and sleek like an animal's...and her features—even the shape of her head—seemed distinctly seal-like in the bright interior lights. I looked to Tamar and Kezia, noticing the deeper spray of freckles across their noses and cheeks, like a spotted coat. Their large, expressive eyes. The world seemed to snap into focus for a split second as I saw a glimpse of *something*.

Something that should have been impossible.

I shook my head clear.

You're in shock, I told myself. *You're losing your grip on reality*.

But it made too much sense to ignore: the way the Three swam, the way they ate. Their bunker strewn with trash and designer bags. All the things that didn't add up. I'd already figured out that they weren't careless rich girls from a vastly different world. But maybe they weren't grifters, either, thieving and partying their way through a hedonistic summer.

Maybe they were something else.

"We're going to create a diversion," Selah said, snapping her fingers in front of my face. "And then we need to get off this boat. That's the plan, okay?"

My head swam and I held it in my hands.

"Are you listening, Lucia?" Tamar asked. "We need to get moving."

I dragged my mind up from the shadowy depths, where the light was so low that you might mistake a girl for a selkie. Or vice versa. I blinked slowly at the Three, taking in their urgent expressions as I scanned the curved lines of their faces, looking for clues.

"Someone's going to realize he's gone," Kezia whispered.

I nodded blankly.

"Lucia," she said. "We *can't* be here when that happens."

“And we can’t wait until the *Titan* docks at the marina to leave—the police are going to want to talk to everyone,” Selah said. “To comb this ship and find out what happened. We have to make sure there’s nothing to find, that nobody will trace this back to us.”

“Can you pull yourself together?” Tamar asked.

I looked down at my shaking limbs.

My strength had gone, along with almost everything I understood about this world. Selah must have noticed my state of crisis, because she didn’t skip a beat before she turned to Kezia. “Stay with Lucia,” she said hurriedly. “See if you can get her ready—we’re running out of time.”

Kezia nodded.

“Let’s start with the engine room,” Selah said to Tamar.

The engine room? I thought, watching the two girls dash out of the cabin with determined expressions on their faces. I looked at Kezia, frantically realizing that Selah’s big plans for the evening had gotten even bigger. “What are they doing?” I asked. “And what did she mean when she said we have to get off this boat?”

Kezia took a deep breath.

“We’re going to swim,” she said.

I could feel my panic spreading to my face.

“We’re not *that* far from shore,” she said. “I’ll show you.”

Kezia pulled me up off the couch and opened the glass doors, filling the cabin with the sound of a sped-up Lana Del Rey remix. We followed it out into the party, weaving through the throng to the edge of the dance floor. The clouds had parted, and I was momentarily struck by the sheer number of stars coalescing into the ghostly band of the Milky Way, and by the glowing half moon. Unlike the night I’d arrived on the Nantucket ferry, this moon was clear, its edges sharp and well-defined against the velvety sky. Kezia pointed at a bright light in the near distance, rotating and flashing through the darkness.

A lighthouse.

“That’s Great Point,” she said. “We’re on the side of it that faces the sound, which means we won’t get swept away to Portugal. The other side of

Great Point is open ocean. That's a different story, but this way is easier. We won't be fighting the current."

My mouth went dry.

She was serious about swimming.

I wasn't about to jump into the Atlantic and try to paddle that far, no matter what side of the lighthouse we were on or what the current was doing. "That seems..." *Insane! Suicidal! Ridiculous!* I wanted to shout.

"I can't do it," I finally said.

"We'll help you," Kezia said. "We're strong swimmers."

I glanced around the deck, looking for lifeboats or Jet Skis, or even an inflatable dinghy. There had to be several on a ship this size.

"How about a lifeboat?" I asked.

Kezia frowned. "They'd find us in an instant."

I gripped the deck railing, staring out at Great Point.

It was a tall white structure with a little house-shaped building at its side and a flat stretch of beach surrounding it. There weren't any rocks or jetties to smash against—only an expanse of soft sand, made visible in fleeting increments by the rhythmic sweep of the light.

To be honest, it didn't seem so far away.

Except for the stretch of choppy dark blue danger in between.

Selah and Tamar reappeared at our sides—looking flushed and sweaty enough to fit in with everyone else on the dance floor—just as a piercing alarm started pinging. Another joined it, beeping and blaring as bright red emergency lights began to strobe.

"We have to go," Selah said.

"*What did you do?*" I hissed, breathing so fast that my head started to spin again. I hadn't wanted to leave the safety of the boat, but now I realized with a chill that staying on board wasn't going to be a safe option, either. In the center of the deck, a few kids still danced and swayed while the alarms blended with the music, but others were starting to look around in concern. I watched a group of girls set down their drinks and rummage for their phones.

"We created some chaos," Selah said.

“She messed with the engine,” Tamar explained. “And I pulled the fire alarm.”

“Let’s get down to the swim deck,” Selah said, her voice calm and steady as she motioned for us to follow her. “Nobody’s going to see us leaving from there.” The sprinkler system engaged as she walked, its metal spigots showering everyone with freezing cold water.

Shrieks rose through the night as the music abruptly stopped.

I covered my ears.

Everyone was shouting in confusion.

The chaos didn’t seem to bother Selah. She pulled me by the arm, leading me toward a set of stairs that descended to an even lower deck as Tamar and Kezia jogged behind us. “Last chance,” she shouted, the sprinkler water streaming down her face in rivulets. I searched her eyes, looking for a reason to go with her after everything she’d done.

To risk everything and trust these girls.

She stared back at me, her eyes unblinking.

“Swim with us or wait here for the Coast Guard.”

Tamar and Kezia weren’t waiting for me to decide. They each had a leg over the low fiberglass wall of the swim deck and they were drawing in huge gulps of breath, chests heaving as they readied themselves. The flashing emergency lights carved out the hollows of their faces and dappled their skin with a pattern I’d seen before.

On harbor seals.

“I can’t,” I cried. “I want to, but I can’t!”

“We’ll tow you in,” Kezia shouted. “It’ll be okay.”

“You’re one of us now. You’re in this just as deep,” Tamar pleaded.

“I’d never let you drown, you know that,” Selah said, putting two heavy hands on my shoulders and looking deep into my eyes. Hers had gone round, her irises so full that there was no white rim around them. A sudden flash of orange reflected in the moist blackness of her eyes and I staggered backward, glancing at the decks above. A handful of crew members in crisp white uniforms were springing into action, tossing neon life vests into the crowd as

a sickly burning smell filled the air and black smoke rolled from the open doors of the main cabin.

Stuart Weston's yacht is burning down, I thought.

They'd done more than mess with the engine.

They'd started a fire.

The guests screamed into their phones over the piercing shriek of the alarms while the yacht's staff corralled them away from the thick plumes of greasy smoke that billowed upward, engulfing the stars I'd admired just a moment ago in a choking haze. I turned back to the Three.

Tamar and Kezia were already in the water, their heads bobbing above the surface.

"It's now or never, Lucia!" Selah shouted.

I stood at the edge of the deck, where steps descended into darkness, salt water sloshing over my bare feet. All I had to do was walk down a few of them, or simply jump. I'd be saving myself from this burning boat and from being questioned about Tristan. The Three would help me swim to shore. All I had to do was dive in and join them.

I took a deep breath.

Shuffling to the top of the first step, I curled my toes over the edge. *I can do this*, I said to myself: I can jump into the water and swim toward the light. I grabbed a white-and-orange life preserver from a nearby hook and looped it over my shoulder—just in case—as Selah stood next to me and smiled encouragingly.

My anxiety urchin spiked at the pit of my gut.

Don't do this! it yelled.

But I won't be doing it alone, I told myself.

Selah squeezed my arm and nodded before executing a perfect swan dive, barely making a splash as she entered the waves. I wanted to follow her so badly. To swim as far away as we could, leaving the rising fire and noxious smoke behind. With every passing second, the yacht was feeling more and more dangerous than the water, and there were three heads watching me from the waves a few yards away, their eyes reflecting the orange glow of the flames.

Waiting for me to join them.

But I couldn't do it.

I told my legs to move, to step forward into the night, but they were like steel poles anchored to the deck. At first I thought it was a fear of the unknown, of the powerful waves and the long swim to shore. I tried to push through it, to let the screams and flames motivate me to jump...but the longer I stood watching the Three tread water in the night, the more I realized what I was truly scared of—and it wasn't the waves or the fire.

It was how easy it had been for them.

And for me, to be sucked into it.

They were the best friends I had—and we were all in this together, like Tamar said—but they'd actually killed Tristan. He might have deserved it, but they were still murderers...and I hadn't been willing or able to stop them. I should have figured out a way to call the police, I should have told *someone*. The Lucia who was friends with Sammi would never have even been here.

And if I went with the Three now, who would I become?

I stepped back from the edge.

Blinking the tears from my eyes, I watched their shadowy forms slowly float out of view—disappearing without another word, leaving me all alone as the yacht burned into the Atlantic. I stood on the swimming deck for a long time after that, cold water lapping over my feet, until a voice called from above. “Who’s down there? Are you okay?”

I jerked my eyes away from the water. It was Warner, Reagan’s mousy friend, her face pale and strained.

“Get up here!” she shouted. “They’re doing a head count.”

Her voice was a high-pitched shriek.

I scrambled up the stairs, her panic snapping me back into the present as the skeleton crew desperately tried to keep order. Benji sprinted by me with a roar, wielding a fire extinguisher like a seasoned pro, while the rest of the crowd surged away from the smoke. *They’ve already called for help*, I told myself, trying to quell my own panic as I was shuffled into a group with Warner, Reagan, and Lex, all of whom were sobbing.

“We’re sinking!” Warner wailed. “I’m gonna throw up.”

“This can’t be happening,” said Reagan, white-lipped and shivering, her cool-girl attitude nowhere to be seen. She clutched my arm, forgetting—in the rush of the moment—that she hated me. “You haven’t seen Tristan anywhere, have you?”

I couldn’t speak. I shook my head instead.

Reagan pressed her phone to her ear. “My mom can fix this,” she muttered over and over again, waiting for someone on the other end to pick up. She stole a glance at me. “Where are your horrible friends?” she asked coldly.

I swallowed, carefully considering my words. “I honestly don’t know. I haven’t seen them since the fire.”

It was more than Lex and Warner could bear.

They slumped cross-legged on the floor, working themselves up into hyperventilation, and even though I didn’t really know them, I wrapped my arms around their shaking shoulders.

“Help is coming,” I said, sounding calmer than I felt. “There are probably a million fire extinguishers on board. And we’re not that far from shore.” As I said it, a pair of red and blue lights flashed across the waves, racing toward the *Titan*. Voices crackled over a loudspeaker, too far away for me to understand. *Look for the helpers*, I thought as a white Coast Guard ship cut through the night, remembering what Mr. Rogers said as relief flooded my limbs.

We’re being saved.



CHAPTER 32

THE COAST GUARD PULLED UP alongside the Titan to grateful cheers from the terrified crowd. This group of teenage partiers were all going to be in so much trouble, especially when somebody realized that Tristan was missing. Or if his body washed up on the shore, like Ari's—but I tried not to think about that now. For the moment, we were saved, and as Reagan and Lex pulled me to my feet, I noticed that the flames and smoke were already starting to dissipate in the wind. The sprinklers and the crew—with Benji's debatable help—had finally extinguished the fire.

I scanned the darkness one last time.

There was no sign of the Three.

Under the Coast Guard's supervision, we were lowered from the wreckage of Stuart Weston's yacht in lifeboats, then ferried a few yards to the waiting patrol boat. Each lifeboat fit only a fraction of the party, and Lex, Warner, Reagan, and I shared one with seven other people. Their shocked and trembling faces painted a very different picture from the snippets of their beautiful lives I'd pored over on Instagram, looking for Ari.

I wondered what they were going to post about this.

"Has anyone seen Tristan?" Reagan asked.

She asked it as we were boarding the lifeboat, and then again when we climbed aboard the patrol boat, its flashing red and blue lights casting shadows on her face. She walked around to every shivering group she passed, and every time she asked, she sounded a little more fragile.

I slipped away, unable to meet her worried eyes.

Someone draped a foil blanket over my shoulders, and I tapped at my chest, feeling for my phone. I had to call my mom and tell her I was safe, and

sorry for sneaking out. That coming to this party had been an awful, terrible idea—but that we'd been rescued.

That I'd never, ever lie to her again.

But I couldn't call her because my phone was gone, along with my evidence—thrown into the ocean by Selah. Ari's golden basket had been lost in the shuffle, and I was empty-handed in terms of clues, I realized with despair. Without any evidence, I couldn't prove who killed Ari, even though I knew the truth. *Maybe it's better this way*, I thought. That recording implicated the Three—and me, as well. Maybe it didn't matter anymore, now that Tristan was dead.

I borrowed Warner's phone to call my mom, but the phone network must have been overloaded with everyone trying to reach their families, because none of my calls or texts went through. The whole island was probably abuzz with the news that Stuart Weston's yacht was burning in the middle of the Nantucket Sound, its privileged guests fearing for their lives. I tried a few more times, then gave up, hoping that my mom thought I was still home in bed and wasn't worrying herself sick.

That she hadn't found out I was gone.

I could see fire trucks and police cars parked right up on the wharf as we approached the harbor, their emergency lights blazing like fireworks against the night sky, and my heart tightened in my chest. It looked like the entire town had come to gawk. When I finally stumbled down the gangway to dry land—still clutching my thermal emergency cape over my shoulders—my legs turned to jelly when I recognized my mom standing on a bench and shouting my name over and over. Even from a distance, I could see that her face was pinched with stress, her eyes frantic as Todd stood at her side, one arm wrapped around her and the other holding a phone to his ear. She was already sprinting toward me before I set foot on the wharf, where she enveloped me in a full-bodied hug. It was only then, in her arms, that the full weight of the night registered. I fell to my knees and she fell with me, and we cried and held each other as the survivors of Tristan's party disembarked around us.

Relief and sadness churned through me like a whirlpool.

So much had happened since I'd last seen her.

And there was so much I couldn't undo.

Todd knelt beside us, awkwardly hugging my mom and me while we cried. After a long while I pulled away to catch my breath and my mom examined my face, her eyes red and searching. Looking for injuries. "Are you okay? Oh my god, Lucia," she said.

She burst into fresh tears.

Only then did I notice Eric standing off to one side. He stepped forward when he saw that I'd seen him, wrapping me in his own tight-armed hug. I held on to his shoulders, savoring the solid ground beneath our feet and the firmness of Eric's chest.

He was warm and safe and smelled like home.

When I finally let go, my mom smoothed my tangled hair back from my forehead. That was when I realized that she and Todd had left the house in a hurry, with windbreakers hastily thrown over matching striped pajama sets. "If it wasn't for Eric, we wouldn't have even known you were on that boat," my mom said. "When I checked on you and you were gone, I freaked out."

"You almost gave your mother a heart attack." Todd frowned.

"So we woke up Eric," my mom continued, breathlessly relating her own version of the night. "And he said he thought you might have gone to that party."

Eric held his hands up.

"I didn't mean to rat on you—but I was worried, too," he said, his voice strained with emotion.

I understood—he couldn't keep a secret like that, not when my mom was losing her mind and nobody knew where I was. I looked from one face to the other, fighting back tears. It seemed like their relief at finding me safe and sound—and not drowned or burned—overpowered any anger they might have felt at my sneaking out.

At least for now.

"By the time we got down here, they were already bringing you in," Todd said.

“You should have *seen* Todd in action.” My mom beamed, looking up at him with wet eyes. “I drove while he called the governor, trying to get a helicopter out to the *Titan*.”

“You called the governor?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“Lucia, I called everyone,” he said, roughly rubbing the stubble on his chin. “I did everything I could think of. We could not lose you.”

My face crumpled in a fresh round of tears as Mom, Todd, and Eric huddled around me. Their warmth—their worry for me—felt stronger and more reassuring than anything I’d felt with the Three.

They might not have understood me, not fully.

But they loved me.

I didn’t care anymore if my mom wanted to marry Todd, or if she wanted to move us from Pennsylvania to Massachusetts. After all I’d been through, all I cared about was being together. And safe on dry land. I’d had enough of the ocean and the terrible things that could happen there.

I leaned into their warmth as we headed to the Jeep, and I clung to that feeling, trying to drown out the guilt that was slowly seeping into my bones and clouding my subconscious. Should I say something about Tristan? Should I keep silent?

And what about the Three...?

My mind churned with unanswerable questions.

When I thought of Selah and Tamar and Kezia, my thoughts were twisted by complicated, murky feelings. They’d said I was one of them and made me feel wanted. But they’d done the unspeakable in their drive to avenge Ari. *And*, I thought, picturing Ari’s body alone on the beach, *maybe you’re glad they did*.



CHAPTER 33

I SHRIEKED AT THE FERRY horn's unexpected blast as we pulled away from the wharf, the gentle waves glittering like cut sapphires in the sun. It was the best weather of the entire summer, but it wasn't a beach day for us. Instead of staying through the end of August, we'd decided to leave early, in the middle of July...after only a month on the island.

It hadn't been the plan.

But we hadn't planned for any of this—and after the *Titan* burned, we all needed a fresh start somewhere new. Todd gave up his dream of selling big-ticket vacation homes, deciding to focus on the mainland's rental market instead. Less reward, but less risk, he said. He certainly wasn't going to be selling any multi-million-dollar island mansions to Stuart Weston, who was consumed by the search for his missing son, presumed drowned in the Nantucket Sound.

My mom had told Todd that we needed some stability.

Some quiet after the tumultuous summer.

I agreed wholeheartedly, even if it meant that we'd be moving into a newly purchased four-bedroom house in Brookline, Massachusetts. I liked that our new neighborhood shared a name with our old one in Pittsburgh, even though I knew that everything would be different there. My mom would get to start over in a new city with the love of her life. I'd start senior year at a new school where no one knew me or Sammi or looked at me with pity in their eyes.

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the salty air.

Everything's going to be okay, I told myself.

The sky was cloudless—its endless, faded blue seamlessly stretching from one horizon to the other—and the future felt as bright as the sparkling

sun on the waves. Todd handed me, Eric, and my mom a shiny penny each as the ferry plowed through the harbor. As we rounded the squat white lighthouse at Brant Point, we tossed our pennies into the water.

I watched them glimmer like sequins on the way down.

“That’s another Nantucket tradition,” Todd said. He put his arms around my mom and me. “It means you’ll come back someday.”

My mom brushed my hair back from my face and gave me a serious look. “Only if you want to, Lu,” she said, gathering me into a hug. “You’ve been through so much.”

She’d said that over and over again.

So had the therapist my mom had dragged me to the day after the party... and the police, who’d interviewed everyone who came off the *Titan* that night. But I hadn’t seen anything odd at the party, other than the smoke and the panicked teenagers. And I hadn’t seen much of Tristan, actually, now that they mentioned it. And when I *had* seen him, across the dance floor, I hadn’t noticed anyone in particular hanging around him.

He’d seemed a little out of it, I thought.

Like maybe he’d drunk too much...

But of course I couldn’t be sure, I told the police, since I hadn’t had much of a chance to talk to Tristan at the party. They’d asked me about the three girls I’d been seen with. Apparently an unnamed party had mentioned them. *Reagan*, I thought, *or maybe Benji*. I told the police the truth: that I’d met some girls like that this summer, but I barely knew them and didn’t even know their last names. After only twenty minutes of questions with my mom, Todd, and an attorney present, I’d been released. The investigation into Tristan’s disappearance would be thorough, I knew, saturating the local and national news for the rest of the summer. But even with the police and the Coast Guard, and a huge reward, and the best private investigators money could buy, I wondered if they’d ever find his body.

It didn’t seem likely.

And even though Tristan was young and handsome and rich, the world hadn’t stopped when he died. It hadn’t stopped for my best friend, Sammi. And it certainly hadn’t stopped for Ari.

It didn't stop for anyone.

After we rounded Brant Point Lighthouse, I wandered off to the front of the ferry. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts while I watched the island slowly recede into the distance. Long lines of whitecaps rolled toward it, washing up against a thin strip of sand bordered with shimmering beach grass. The longer I stared, the more the view resembled the soft, blurred quality of a watercolor painting. I was about to leave and rejoin my mom in our seats, when something unusual caught my eye. Three dark heads, close together, bobbing in the waves beyond the point. From a distance, it was impossible to tell whether they were seals or human—and I wasn't sure it mattered.

I squinted, staring into the light.

I wanted it to be them.

I imagined they were seeing me off before going back to wherever they'd come from, now that they'd gotten revenge for Ari. Even after everything they'd done, I knew a part of me would always miss them. I pulled out my brand-new phone (thanks, Todd) and filmed horizontally, framing the figures in the center of my screen as I hit record and zoomed in, trying to capture as much of them as I could in one tiny rectangle.

Not that they were so easily defined.

I felt a warm presence by my side.

It was Eric, shuffling next to me.

"Thank god it's all over," he said. "Right?"

I nodded, still recording—keeping the silhouettes centered as they shrank to three little dots on my screen. Like a hopeful ellipsis, I thought, at the end of a sentence.

I didn't want them to fade away.

But I knew they would.

"I wish I'd never set foot on that yacht," I said.

"Same here," Eric said. "The worst place on earth."

My heart stutter-stopped. I lowered my arms, slipping my phone into my hoodie's loose center pocket without closing the video app. Back when we'd had our heart-to-heart on the widow's walk, Eric said that he had never—and

would never—set foot on Stuart Weston’s yacht. That he hated Tristan and his family’s monstrous displays of wealth; that he wouldn’t be caught *dead* on the *Titan*. I gripped the railing, hard, and took a deep, steadying breath.

It could have been a slip of the tongue.

Maybe he just wished that *I* had never set foot on the *Titan*. Either way, I decided to try to keep him talking. “I know you think it was weird how I was so obsessed with the dead girl. But when I was on the *Titan*, I found something out,” I said slowly.

Eric turned to face me, his questioning eyes an intense gray.

“Tristan was cheating on Reagan with that girl,” I continued. “I think he might have actually pushed her overboard—do you think that’s possible?”

Eric nodded, his lips pressed into a hard line.

“I wouldn’t say this to anyone else, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he did. He was a narcissist with a mean streak—and he never deserved Reagan or Ari.”

My mouth went dry and I gripped the railing harder.

I had never, ever called her Ari. I hadn’t even known her name until the Three told me about her. At home, with my mom and Eric and Todd, she’d always been the dead girl. The police and the news reports had never mentioned her name—because they’d never known it.

A cold, slick feeling crawled over my skin.

“What was that?” I asked, keeping my tone light, as if I hadn’t heard him over the wind on the open ocean. Eric slowly turned back toward the sea, his face ashen as he realized what he’d said. His mouth hung open, but no sound came out.

“You knew her name,” I said.

He’d discouraged me from investigating. He’d denied knowing about Tristan’s latest girl on the side. And he’d denied being on the yacht that night.

He’d lied to me, over and over and over again.

What else had he lied about?

“I—I heard *you* say it,” he said.

I shook my head, knowing for certain that he hadn't. As far as I knew, the only other people who'd definitely known her name were Tristan and the Three.

And Tristan was dead.

"You met her at the party, then," I said, trying to keep my voice even—as if this little detail was no big deal. "I thought you said you weren't there?"

Eric chewed his lower lip, deciding what to say.

What story he'd be able to spin.

He shook his head, deciding on nothing.

"Now that you mention it," I bluffed, "I think I saw a photo of you and Ari on the boat that night." The blurry leg photo was hardly proof of anything, but he didn't need to know that. "You were in the background, so that's probably why you weren't tagged."

"You're confused," Eric said.

He leaned forward, pushing against the railing.

"You could have been one of the last people to see her alive," I whispered. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because!" Eric blurted out.

He ran a hand roughly through his shaggy blond hair, staring straight out into the choppy blue ocean instead of meeting my eyes. "Because as soon as my dad called to tell me what happened on the beach that morning, I knew it had to be her."

I froze for a moment, stunned that he'd known her identity all along. "You could have spoken up. Or at least told me," I said softly. "You knew I was trying to find out who she was."

"And that's exactly why I couldn't," Eric snapped. "If I'd said anything, there would have been a whole investigation."

"Okay," I said slowly—to give myself a half second to think. "But if you'd told the cops who she was and who she was dating, and they'd found out that Tristan killed her, wouldn't that have been a good thing?"

Eric scoffed.

"Do you think Tristan would have actually gone down for that?" he said, spitting out each word as if it tasted sour in his mouth. "He'd try to put the

blame on me. Again. I couldn't risk it."

I blinked at Eric.

Not understanding.

"But why would he blame *you*?" I asked, and as soon as I said it, something clicked in my brain. I stayed silent for a moment longer, collecting my thoughts. Tristan wasn't my favorite person in the world, but he'd maintained his innocence until the very end. I replayed his last few seconds in my mind, shivering at the memory of that windswept night.

I didn't— he'd coughed, just before falling to the waves.

His final words swallowed by the sea.

I didn't kill her.

"Ari showed up at the party, uninvited, and was about to make a scene. Tristan asked me to distract her, to get her away from Reagan," Eric said, talking quickly now to fill the silence.

Poor Ari, I thought.

She'd loved Tristan, according to Kezia, and she'd probably had no idea that Tristan had a girlfriend. That she was just a secret sidepiece. "He always relied on me to clean up his messes," Eric said, tensing with a sudden anger. "All through freshman year. And I was sick of it." That lined up with what he'd told me before, about taking the fall for Tristan, and everything being hushed up with plenty of money. "I told him I'd help him, but this was the last time."

I put a hand on Eric's arm, trying to keep him calm.

"So what did you do then?" I asked.

"Since we were already out of the harbor when she showed up, he'd taken her to his dad's stateroom and given her something to calm her down. He had her locked in there," Eric said, shaking his head at the thought of it. "He didn't want to deal with it, so he sent me to check on her." I moved my hand up his arm to his shoulder and squeezed as reassuringly as I could manage, stepping in front of him as I did so to get a better look at his face.

He was blinking rapidly, not meeting my gaze.

"It's okay," I murmured. "You can tell me."

“When I opened the door, she was *hysterical*,” Eric said. “She’d wrecked the room, emptied all the drawers, and was screaming about how she was his girlfriend, that he couldn’t keep her locked up like that.”

I nodded slowly, trying not to spook him.

To keep him talking.

“She really thought they were in love, though, right?” I said. “She must have been furious that he’d been stringing her along....”

“He didn’t deserve her,” Eric said.

I nodded again.

Tristan was the worst.

He was a liar and a cheater and a sneering narcissist, like Eric had said. He expected other people to clean up his messes. But a terrible feeling was growing at the bottom of my gut—and it was telling me that maybe, just maybe, Tristan wasn’t the murderer.

“If she was angry,” I asked, “did she attack you?”

I meted out my words carefully.

Not wanting to upset him.

“I tried so hard to get her to quiet down,” Eric said, his mouth trembling. “But she was out of control. She even looked different—her eyes had gone all round and black, like she was on something.”

I nodded again, thinking about how the Three’s eyes had changed right before Tristan went overboard. Or maybe it was from whatever pill Tristan had given Ari, I thought grimly.

Eric’s breathing grew shallow, and I tilted his face down so that we were eye to eye. Holding his head in my hands, I summoned as much of the persuasiveness of the Three as I could, trying to channel the powerful way they got people to open up to them. When they got them to do what they wanted.

“What happened?” I whispered.

I tried to make my eyes gentle and soft.

“You can tell me,” I said again, trying to sound warm and inviting, to purr like Selah—but I had to force the words out. Staring up into Eric’s watering eyes, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the truth anymore.

Push through the hard part, I heard Sammi saying.

"I promise, it's going to be okay," I breathed, my voice barely a whisper.

"She came at me," he whimpered. "She was swinging at me, grunting like an animal. She got through the door."

I stepped closer, trying not to miss a single word.

"It was like she was possessed. She was screaming and slapping me, and I had to stop her from getting down the stairs." Eric was starting to cry now, and my own eyes burned with tears.

"Of course you did," I murmured.

I took his hands in mine and squeezed.

Encouraging him to tell me more.

"I tried to wrap my arms around her, just to keep her from hurting herself, and she fought me. I've never seen anything like it. She got past me, and I—" He broke off into a choking sob.

My breath caught in my chest.

I didn't want to hear any more. I wanted to look away and forget this ever happened. But I had to follow this horrible trail to the end. "Did she get hurt?" I asked, trying to give him time to answer and struggling to maintain a soft, empathetic expression. To play the part of a good listener: here for him and on his side, no matter what.

Even if he killed a girl.

Eric nodded, taking in big gulps of air.

"I panicked. I tried to shove her back toward the stateroom and I guess I pushed too hard.... She went over the rail. She hit her head on the way down. And then she went under and didn't come back up." He was breathing so heavily that I thought he might throw up, but at least he had the luxury of breathing.

Unlike Ari and Tristan.

"And then?" I said, my voice like broken glass. My carefully managed facade was crumbling fast, and I fought to keep from flushing with rage or shattering into tears.

"And then..." He rasped harder.

Eric looked out to sea.

“Did you call for help?” I asked. “Did you try to save her?”

He turned his head slowly back to me, his pupils so huge they left only a thin circle of gray in his bloodshot whites. “I didn’t do anything,” he said, his chest rising and falling as he sobbed. “I just stood there on the deck, freaking out. And trying to figure out what I was going to tell Tristan. I stayed up there all night, until the party was over.”

I blinked, not wanting to believe it.

Eric killed Ari.

I watched him cry, remembering Tristan’s white button-down shirt disappearing in the waves. Eric had been in shock, like me. But unlike me, Eric wasn’t just an innocent bystander. Maybe he hadn’t meant to kill her, but he had. He’d wrestled Ari over the railing and left her to die.

I flinched at a sudden flash of a memory.

The curve of Ari’s cold arm in the sand.

I closed my eyes and pressed my fingers against them, making jagged red and orange circles bloom on the inside of my lids. It felt as if the ferry deck had slanted sharply beneath my feet, capsizing everything I’d known and trusted all summer. I tried to put myself in Eric’s shoes, watching Ari tumble over the railing and sink beneath the waves.

Just as Selah had done with Tristan.

I saw myself as Ari, too.

I felt the terror of falling, cut abruptly short by oblivion. I reeled at all the lies and betrayal—at the person I thought Eric was—I could feel myself falling into a deep ocean of pain along with her. Opening my eyes again, I looked at *everything* differently: Eric’s warnings against going to the party. His dark, simmering tension with Tristan. The way he’d discouraged me from my investigation into Ari’s death. His cautious and sweetly protective demeanor had all been an act, or some kind of twisted white-knight reaction to what he’d done to Ari.

I felt sick to my stomach.

“I think we should tell someone,” I said.

Eric gripped my hand so hard that it hurt. “I can’t—I *can’t*,” he whispered. “I feel so bad, and I know I deserve that. But it’s all over now,

and we're leaving the island. Nobody needs to know."

"You'll feel better if you confess," I said.

So softly I was surprised he heard me.

Eric gripped my arms even harder.

"You of all people should understand," he urged. "C'mon, Lu. I know what happened back in Pittsburgh. I might not have made the best choices that night, but I didn't mean for her to *die*! You know exactly what that's like."

He was talking about Sammi.

I drew in a deep breath, my blood pumping hot in every vein in my body. The thoughtless, bitter words that rainy night. The stupid hurt feelings. The locked doors and the crash. I shook my head sadly.

"Please, Eric," I said. "Do the right thing."

He took both of my hands in his, rubbing his thumbs over my knuckles like he'd done in our almost-romantic moment together, when I'd first told him about Sammi. His touch felt clammy and repulsive now, and I wanted to fling his hands off as he pulled me closer.

"Please don't say anything. Please."

I needed to be smart.

Now that I knew what Eric was capable of, I had to make sure I played this exactly right—or else it could be me washing up on the shore. I nodded up at him, removing my hands from his and patting his chest. "I won't tell anyone. Just...", I said, "just give me a minute to process."

I wanted to scream at him.

To grab his throat and hold him up against the railing, like Selah had done with Tristan. I wanted to drag my nails down his face. Because we *weren't* the same. He'd pushed Ari overboard and done nothing to help her, but I hadn't killed Tristan that night.

And I *hadn't* killed Sammi.

We were nothing alike.

"Be right back," I murmured. "I think I need to splash some water on my face." I plastered on a reassuring smile as I backed into the ferry's cabin, but as soon as I was out of sight, I felt my legs weaken beneath me as bile rose in

my throat. It was the same feeling I'd had after Tristan went over the railing, but I couldn't stop to steady myself.

There wasn't time.

Rushing through the cabin, I saw my mom snuggled against Todd in a window-view booth. She grinned up at him, stroking the side of his face. The emerald-cut diamond on her left hand flashed for a moment, catching the light. *Could I really wreck that?* I asked myself.

Didn't she deserve to be happy?

I pushed through another heavy metal door, heading outside again...but on the opposite side of the ferry, as far away from Eric as I could get. I was facing the mainland now, and looking ahead—to the future—I pulled out my phone with trembling hands. It was still recording from my earlier video, thank goodness, and I pressed stop. Making sure it saved, I attached it to an email for safekeeping.

I thought of Ari and Sammi and Tristan.

I thought of my mom, who was finally happy.

And I even thought of Todd, who loved her and wanted to give both of us the best in life. Would it be possible to maintain that fantasy of a happy family, knowing what Eric had done? I could try to carry on as if I'd never found out. There was only another month until Eric would fly back to college several states away. And there was only one more year for me before I was off to college myself. I could time my visits home to avoid Eric. I could make it work.

If I kept quiet, I'd keep the peace.

And if I shared what I knew...

I shook my head.

I couldn't imagine the fallout, how it could so easily destroy the family we'd just begun to be together. I sank to the hard metal deck of the ferry, ocean spray seeping through my jeans as I thought of how my—and Selah's and Kezia's and Tamar's—life had been changed forever by this beautiful and brutal summer on the island.

Ari hadn't survived it.

And Eric...

If I was being truly and totally honest with myself, he hadn't survived it, either. Both Eric and Tristan bore the stain of Ari's death. One of them was already at the bottom of the sea, but the other had actually killed her—the one who'd wrapped a caring arm around my shoulders so many times, who'd listened to me open up about Sammi. And warned me away from the Three, all while treating me as if I were gullible and unstable. Who'd pretended to be the perfect guy all summer.

And he'd been hiding a deadly secret the whole time.

It was all so much clearer now.

I looked down at my phone, my finger hovering over the email with the recording attached. *Push through the hard part*, I told myself. I knew what I needed to do.

For Ari.

For myself.

It wasn't going to be easy.

But I couldn't keep silent.

I wasn't going to lie like Eric and pretend it never happened, painting a candy coating over the rotten truth. I looked up the general tip line for the Nantucket police and added their address to the email with Eric's confession. I pictured Ari, laughing and alive on a sunny beach, sprinting to meet up with the Three. I pictured Sammi screaming her heart out into a microphone, with me right there next to her. I summoned the wild and beautiful fury of the selkies.

And then I hit send.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, thank you to my husband (and favorite writer), Nick. I will never be able to express how much you inspire me every day. Whether you were encouraging me to dig deep in the creation of this story or lovingly pointing out my addiction to commas, you helped me more than I can say. This book would not exist without you, and I would not have been able to think of myself as a writer without your steadfast love and encouragement. Thank you for being my lighthouse when I was in stormy seas.

To my parents, Rich and Sandy Ekstrom, whose love, support, and belief buoyed me through difficult deadlines. I'm so grateful to my dad for reading J.R.R. Tolkien and Farley Mowat to me when I was a little kid (only later in life did I realize he'd edited out the tough parts) and to my mom for inspiring me with her own creativity (and for sparking my interest in the spooky side of Nantucket by—safely!—turning off our car's headlights in the fog). Since I was blessed with such wonderful parents, I was nervous to write about girls behaving badly in this book...and just so you know: this is all fiction, I promise!

Thank you to the teachers and librarians who've fostered my love for reading and writing at the Ellis School.

A humongous thank you to my dear friend and agent, Andrea Somberg, who overcame the potential friendship-ending cringe of reading my roughest drafts and took me on as a client. I am so appreciative of everything you've done for me, as an agent and a friend, and I can't even begin to express my gratitude except to say that any writer would be so lucky to have a brilliant human being like you in their corner.

Deep thanks also to the incomparable Hannah Hill for being an amazing editor. Your editorial savvy, enthusiasm, and patience are the gold standard, and I'm so lucky to be publishing my first book with you. To the whole team

at Delacorte Press and Penguin Random House—thank you, thank you, thank you for the work you’ve put into this book, especially Ari Lewin, Makena Cioni, managing editor Tamar Schwartz, associate copy director Colleen Fellingham, cover designer Trisha Previte, and interior designer Cathy Bobak.

Immense thanks to Harvey Klinger and to Heather and Danny Baror.

I’d also like to thank some of the best book people I know: Ryan Labay at the Akron-Summit County Library in Ohio, where I first spoke not as an agent but as an author. To booksellers everywhere, especially Susan Hans O’Connor at Penguin Bookshop and Robin Carroll at Riverstone Books. Thank you to Elizabeth May at the Peters Township Public Library (and to her teen writers group), and thank you to the students of Nick Courage’s Writing Youth Literature class at the University of Pittsburgh. Thank you to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and to the New York Society Library, where pieces of this book were written, and to the Nantucket Athenaeum and Mitchell’s Book Corner, where I developed my love for mysterious and seafaring stories as a child and young adult.

Thank you to my cousin Selah for letting me borrow her beautiful name.

Thank you to the Nantucket Film Festival for my internship experiences in my early adulthood, which gave me a whole new perspective on the island and on storytelling.

And last but not least, my heartfelt gratitude to the wild women, writer friends, and selkies I’ve been blessed to encounter in my life, whether you’ve helped me in ways large or small, spoken kind words along the way, or inspired me from afar: Erin Craig, Kass Morgan, R.L. Stine, Katie Cotugno, Jacqueline West, Sarah Beth Durst, Mindy McGinnis, David Bell, Derek Milman, Elizabeth Seamans, Abby Wilson, Emily Erstling, Tamar Krishnamurti, Emily Askin, Lindsay Patross, Bess Newman, Alisa Drooker, Danielle Chiotti, Moira McGuinley, Jeff Garvin, Jaclyn Goldis, Shannon Takaoka, Justin Hargett, Alex Hargett, Allison Carey, Annie Colvin, Adrienne Petrosini, The Henry Family, Janine Jelks-Seale, T. Kamara, Katie Glosser, Katie Kurtzman, Michael Lotenero, Bat Matthews (my favorite

enfant terrible), Věra Chytilová, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, and Laura Jane Grace.

About the Author

Rachel Ekstrom Courage grew up spending summers on Nantucket, wishing something mysterious and magical would happen to her. A literary agent by day, she lives in Pittsburgh with her husband (the children's book author Nick Courage) and their dog, Chaely.

rachelekstromcourage.com

 @rachelekstromcourage

 @rachelekstromcourage



***What's next on
your reading list?***

**Discover your next
great read!**

**Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this
author.**

Sign up now.

150522790