

The Longest Trip

When "looking for a husband"
takes on a whole new meaning...



by Elaine Murphy

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CHAPTER ONE

Oh God. Oh my God. Oh dear God.

I replace the phone in its cradle and sit half-dressed on the edge of the bed, hair askew around my face, mascara smudged around one eye, and my fingers clutching a shred of paper. Oh. My. God. I look around the hotel room for something, anything, but nothing jumps out. Nothing reminds me of exactly what I did last night, except, for, well, this. And this does not tell me enough. Or it tells me too much. I would rather know nothing at all. I would rather have done nothing at all. But I have. I think I have done something terrible.

Nothing is missing from the room except the answer to this puzzle. It is a decent-sized room with a view of the Vegas strip, and I glance at the clock more out of habit than anything, then do a double-take when I realize that it is eleven o'clock in the morning and I have been awake for a mere fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes that feel like a whole entire lifetime. A lifetime that is about to end very, very poorly.

I go to the washroom again now and splash cold water on my face, hoping this will wake me up, jar my memory. I stare at myself in the mirror and try to remember something, anything. Our second of two nights in Vegas. Me, Ivy, Alexis. Ivy wore the gold dress, Alexis had that sequined top, I was wearing my little black dress, my favourite. No longer my favourite. Terrible association has made it my least favourite dress. We went out to dinner, ate too much, drank too much. Went out for more drinks. Went dancing. Went gambling.

I swear, God, if I can have this moment to swap one problem for another, I will give away all my money if you just make this half-piece of paper never have happened. Because I have made two phone calls this morning, and they both confirmed two terribly unfortunate things: one, that this half-piece of paper is half of something real, and that the other half is not with my other half.

I force myself back into the room, over to the bed and I pick up the paper from the nightstand. I bring it over to the armchair by the window and collapse into the seat, staring at the capital letters across the top.

CERTIFICATE.

And beneath that, the date, then

JOINED IN MARRIAGE

and then for the worst part:

AND JULIANNA SOPHER.

Those are the worst parts. There could possibly be worse things on the other half of the page, but I can't say for sure, because that other half isn't here. The other half of the page, the other half of the marriage, the other half is not here. And after a quick call to James, confirming that he is still, in fact, at home, and has not made any surprise trips to Vegas – what am I, crazy? – and no, nothing insane happened last night, no, there's nothing I absolutely need to know, he's not playing any tricks on me - after all that, the only conclusion I can come to is that I have married a stranger. This is stupid in itself. This is unfortunate. This is fixable. If I could remember who the stranger was. And it would be just a little less worse if I didn't have to annul my drunken, quickie marriage to someone I can't even remember in order to go ahead with the wedding I have planned for next Sunday. Because I am getting married in seven days, to James Elliot Matthews, safely ensconced in our sleepy little town, with his hooded eyes and his Boston accent and his complete trust in me – I am getting married next Sunday and somehow I have managed to beat myself to the punch.

“You what?” Alexis exclaims, her spoon falling into her bowl of low-fat-high-fiber cereal with a clatter, as Ivy snorts with laughter, still trying to drink her mimosa.

“I'm serious,” I say, flattening my half of the marriage certificate on the table. “I'm serious. I called the chapel and it's real, and I called James, and it's not him.”

“Wait a second,” Ivy says, laughter fading, blonde hair flopping in front of her face. “You got married a week before your wedding to some guy who is not your fiancé?”

“Yes,” I say firmly.

“Well, who then?” asks Alexis.

“I was hoping one of you could tell me,” I say, and Ivy pales even further, downs the rest of her mimosa, and gestures rapidly for another.

“You,” Alexis repeats, just to be certain, “the girl who absolutely, positively, does not even want to be getting married to the guy you’re *engaged to*, you, Julianna Sopher, have married someone else?”

“Yes,” I say.

Ivy and Alexis exchange significant looks but don’t argue. Then Ivy’s mimosa arrives and the waitress flicks a glance at me and I can tell that this is not the first such conversation she has overheard.

The breakfast dishes have been cleared away and the three of us sit huddled around the small table over steaming cups of coffee. Alexis has a piece of paper and a pen, as well as a small map of the hotel, the lobby, the casino, the pool area. She’s a lawyer and very analytical, and now she’s also a detective. We are going to retrace our drunken steps and decide who I married. Or at the very least narrow down the suspect list, because Ivy is naming guys I can’t even remember and there are at least twenty on the list.

How many possible guys are there? Well, we’ve narrowed it down to someone who was in the hotel last night. Definitely a guy. The condom in the bathroom garbage can confirms that, and I feel nauseated again. I didn’t tell Alexis and Ivy that I’m pretty sure I had sex last night, and that I did not have sex with my surely-soon-to-be-ex-fiancé. Why did I drink that fourth piña colada? And the fifth and sixth? And that tequila? Why am I such an idiot?

“Jules!” Alexis taps the map with her pen. I notice that she has drawn little stick figures over the map – a lot of stick figures, and I think these are all the guys I may have married, not just all the people staying in the hotel, though it looks like it – and she points at the elevator. “So,” she begins. “We came out of the elevator, still pretty sober. Remember?”

“Yes,” I nod.

She draws a line on the map. “Then we went to the restaurant for dinner.”

“Wait,” pipes up Ivy. “First we went to the front desk to say that the air conditioner wasn’t working. And we met Bill. Oh, and don’t forget Ted.”

I remember this. I remember Bill and Ted. Really their names. And it would be really great if I, too, could travel back in time.

“Do you think you married one of them?” Alexis asks seriously.

I pause.

“No,” I say. “I don’t.”

Ivy starts to cross their names off the list.

“But then again, last night’s a blank, so anything’s possible.”

Ivy puts question marks by their names.

Alexis draws a dotted line from the elevator to the front desk, then to the restaurant.

“Wait,” says Ivy. “We met those guys checking in, remember? The bachelor party guys.”

“Names?” Alexis asks Ivy, who has a good head for names.

“Well there were eight of them,” says Ivy, who looks at me. “But you were really only looking at Paul, the groom.”

I bury my face in my hands.

“Relax,” Alexis says patting my shoulder. “You didn’t run off to the chapel straight then. Maybe it wasn’t him.”

“I may have ruined two weddings,” I groan.

“It’s not ruined,” she says unconvincingly, using the excuse of drinking coffee to avoid my eyes. “We’ll find the guy, get it annulled, and James will never know.”

“You’re not going to tell James?” Ivy asks, appalled, and Alexis and I both look at her. Ivy has been married to her high school sweetheart for eight years, and has cheated on him with more guys than I can count on both hands. And feet.

“Yeah, no, good call,” Ivy says, reconsidering.

Alexis turns back to the map, writing “Paul” over a group of stick figures clustered in the lobby.

“Then we went to the restaurant, right?” she asks Ivy, who nods.

“Yep. And we met Dan.”

“Dan?” Alexis and I ask in unison.

“Dan,” Ivy repeats. “The maitre d.”

Alexis draws a stick figure at the restaurant door.

“Right. He was nice,” she says as she draws. “British accent.”

Ivy and I exchange a look, because we know that something happened with Alexis and a British accent – serious enough that she won’t talk about it – but neither of us mentions it. There are bigger fish to fry.

“He was flirting with you, Jules,” says Ivy. “And you flirted back.”

“From Bill to Paul to Dan?” I say, at once appalled and impressed with myself.

I drink my coffee, but it's cold. Not that it helps. I have only gotten blackout drunk twice in my life, and I remember nothing about those nights except the excruciating hangover that followed.

"James is the one," Ivy says, putting her cool hand over mine. "You love him enough. Trust me."

I want to snap, "Why on earth would I trust you? How would you know about the one? How many "ones" have you had since your wedding day?" But I don't. I don't say any of this, because Ivy and Alexis are my best friends and they only want what's best for me. Even when I don't agree.

Alexis gives me a small smile because I know she is having the same thought, but then I see something flicker in her eyes, something sad, and I think it's about her time in Africa, and I think it's about the British accent, and I know she won't talk about it, which is disappointing but not unusual.

"I have to get this annulled, right?" I say, looking between their open, honest faces, and they both nod.

"First things first," Alexis says, putting pen to paper. "First things first."

By the time we finish the man map, there are thirty-one potential husbands. These are men I met over the course of the night, though because Ivy, Alexis and I somehow ended up separated in the wee hours of the morning, there is no way for either of them to be sure which guy stood next to me as we pledged to love each other for all eternity. Or at least until the sun came up.

"Okay," says Alexis, draining the last of her coffee. "This is a bit more than I was expecting."

"Really?" asks Ivy. "How many more?"

"Well, honestly," says Alexis, and we are both looking at her curiously, "Thirty."

"Thirty?" we echo.

"I thought it was probably..." She consults the man map, "Paul, the groom-to-be, because I remember thinking you two made a nice couple."

"You don't think James and I make a nice couple?" I ask, a little hurt.

"Honey," Alexis says with exaggerated patience, "half the time *you* don't think the two of you make a nice couple."

Ivy nods her agreement as the waitress clears away the plates and coffee cups. I don't nod, but secretly I agree, too. On the surface, James and I do not make the dream

team I might have imagined, if I ever imagined such a thing for myself, which I never have. I have no concept of the perfect wedding, my perfect dress, perfect cake, perfect place settings. I don't even have a concept of the kind of person who would want to have those kind of concepts. I am not marriage material. Looking at James, I would say the same thing. But James wants to get married. He wants to marry me. He says he just knows. He says he's known since the first night we met. When I ask him to explain how he knows he just shrugs and says that when you know, you know.

The waitress returns with the bill and we all stare at it before Alexis clears her throat. "Anyway, my point was, that if the list were shorter it would just be a matter of knocking on a few doors, asking a few awkward questions, and getting a quick annulment. Now I'm thinking it may be better to just head down to a legal office and ask for help."

"Help knocking on doors?" I ask, and she shakes her head.

"Marriage— Divorce law, is not my specialty, but I know it's possible to get an annulment without the other party being present."

I feel a huge weight lifting off of my shoulders. "Well great then! Let's just do that!" I say. "God. I thought this was a much bigger deal."

"Thing is," Alexis continues, her eyes on the bill. "It's not cheap."

I look at the bill, too, then around the expansive dining room, into the glitzy lobby, and beyond that to the shiny, shimmery casino, with its money-grabbing games. Uh-oh.

Though we will all turn thirty this year, and though we are all employed and housed in relative safety, all three of us are pretty broke. As a lawyer Alexis has just gotten through her piles of student loans and spends her money on plane tickets to do research or pro-bono work or something complicated in a country in Africa that starts with an M. Or an N. She spent eight years paying to get a degree that would take her another eight to pay off so that she could spend the rest of her life not making any money.

Ivy works at a pet groomer's despite the fact that it pays very little over the poverty line, and relies on her husband Doug to pay most of the bills.

I am a painter, painting portraits for whoever orders one. I am not particularly established or known, and generally live commission to commission. Though James co-owns a bar with his cousin, we keep our finances separate, since I barely have any and his could disappear if the business fails. I sincerely hope the bar works out, but it's been on

shaky legs since they opened it two years ago, mainly because James and his cousin keep getting into fistfights.

I reach over and flip open the bill. We have only been here two nights and are scheduled to leave this afternoon, and after one day we were already over budget by fifteen hundred dollars. We are now looking at a sixty dollar breakfast bill, mostly due to Ivy's mimosas, though my untouched plate of steak and eggs did little to ease the hurt.

"Dine and dash?" Ivy suggests with a wry smile, and Alexis pulls out her credit card.

"What's one more dent in the junk heap of my finances?" she asks.

The waitress swoops in and picks up the card, as though she had read Ivy's lips and was just waiting for us to make a run for it.

"So down to the... annulment store?" I say brightly, and Ivy and Alexis nod.

"Bring this," Alexis says, pointing to the marriage certificate scrap, which I dutifully stuff into my purse. "And let's stop by the chapel first, see if they can't just tell us the name."

I have three credit card receipts from the Glitz & Glory Love Chapel on the outskirts of town. As we drive there I stare out the window at the hotels, restaurants, and, of course, casinos, whizzing by. None of them ring a bell. None of them remind me of one man in particular, or even a small handful. Almost nothing of last night remains in any reachable part of my memory, and I study the credit card receipts thoughtfully. Four hundred and eighty-five dollars spread over all three of my now-maxed-out credit cards. I paid for this mess. I am an idiot. At least the receipts are a clue. They tell us which of the zillion tiny chapels I chose for my nuptials, and for this I am grateful. We are supposed to head back home to Emerton, where there are no quickie weddings, no Elvis impersonators waiting to join couples in holy matrimony, no secrets to hide from my boyfriend, my fiancé, tonight.

I watch the crowds of tourists strolling down the strip, snapping pictures of the giant guitars and the sphinx and every other world landmark replicated here in the middle of nowhere, and my stomach clenches in terror. "Oh God," I grunt, feeling sick.

"Are you going to be sick?" Alexis asks from the driver's seat. "Are you going to be sick? Don't be sick in the car. I'll pull over. Don't be sick in the car." The car is a rental, since none of ours could possibly survive this trip, and Emerton is so small a bicycle or a thumb is all you really need to get from point A to point B.

“Don’t pull over,” I gasp, rolling down the window and letting the stifling hot air rush over me, not refreshing at all, but at least it somewhat alleviates the feeling of being smothered by my own stupidity.

“What is it?” Ivy asks, poking her head between the seats from her perch in the back. Her blonde hair swishes over my shoulder like a cool breeze, making me feel momentarily better.

“What if...” I begin, not wanting to say the words, not wanting the act of uttering them to make them a possibility, “What if it’s not someone from the hotel?”

I don’t need to say anything else. Slowly Ivy and Alexis turn to survey the bustling strip, the hundreds and thousands of young, available, potentially now-married men that suddenly seem to be staring at us. I feel like I have *Just Married* stamped across my forehead. *Just Shoot Me* on my back.

“I don’t think so,” says Ivy, and I turn to peer at her from the corner of my eye, not quite daring to hope.

“Why not?” I say as Alexis turns off the radio.

“Well,” says Ivy, fingering one of the credit card receipts thoughtfully. “You don’t remember anything, Alexis stops remembering after one, and I stop remembering after two. So I know that at two o’clock we were in our hotel casino playing roulette with the last of our chips.” About five dollars worth. “We lost and decided to call it a night, said our goodbyes, and headed for the elevators. Alexis thought it would be a great idea to take the stairs up, but you refused, so I went to the stairwell with her, and you went to the elevator. I saw you push the arrow.”

“Okay...” I say, not sure what this has to do with anything.

“My point is,” Ivy continues, waving a credit card receipt, “that the time on this receipt is 2:57am – just enough time for you to meet someone, decide to marry them, hail a cab to the... Glitz & Glory, and do the deed.”

“Okay,” I say, feeling somewhat better. “So it’s likely one of those thirty guys.”

“Thirty-one,” Alexis corrects, and I punch her in the arm. “Save it for the honeymoon,” she says.

The Glitz & Glory lives up to its name. It is gloriously glitzy, but I am not proud to have been married here; the lone worker sits hunched behind a tall counter with a plexiglass window as though trying to hide her identity. I already know her name, because we spoke earlier. I am hoping she doesn’t remember. Her name is Suzanne, and now as we

approach the desk I see that she is an obese middle-aged woman with prematurely gray hair and beady black eyes. Already I can sense that she revels in my distress. A smirk twitches her lips as we stop in front of the glass encasement, the three of us looking between each other as though not quite sure where to start, and I can tell that Suzanne already knows why we are here. She must go through this a thousand times a day. Married by night, annulled by day. I wouldn't be surprised if the little "Glitz & Glory Love Chapel" sign hanging by a small chain inside the window could be flipped over to reveal "Annulment Offices of Suzanne B. Evilbitch." She'd make a killing.

"Can I help you?" she asks, her voice dripping with insincerity, and I wonder what kind of childhood one must have had to turn out like Suzanne.

Alexis and Ivy have been staring at me and finally Alexis gives up and bends slightly, so her face is even with the tiny circle in the plexiglass that allows her to peer directly into Suzanne's fleshy little face. Why on earth is there a plexiglass window in here, anyway? Is it bulletproof?

"...record of marriages from last night and early this morning?" Alexis is saying when I tune back in to the scene at hand.

Suzanne is already shaking her head, tight curls unmoving on her pink scalp, eyes steady on me. "Those records are confidential," she says firmly.

"The reason I ask," Alexis continues sweetly, as though she hasn't heard, "is that my friend was planning to get married here last night, and I was supposed to be her maid of honour—"

"Me too," Ivy pipes up, bending to press her lips close to the circle.

Alexis scowls and pushes her slightly, and Ivy stumbles away from the plexiglass.

"We were supposed to meet here," Alexis is saying, "and our car broke down and now she's checked out of the hotel and we can't get a hold of her, and it's just really important that we know if the wedding happened or not. And with whom, because..."

Suzanne is peering between Ivy and I with greater interest.

"Well," Alexis continues, "the truth is, she was torn between two guys. She followed one to university in New York, and then fell for her dorm advisor, but couldn't quite get over her feelings for the guy she had moved there for in the first place..."

My brow furrows as this story starts to sound suspiciously familiar. And not familiar in a did-I-do-all-that-when-I-was-drunk? kind of way, but in an I've-seen-this-before-on-TV kind of way. Ivy looks confused as well.

“So...” Alexis finishes, “We’re really not sure which guy she married. And since we bought engraved picture frames – one for each guy – it’s just really important that we give her the right one. Otherwise...”

“It would be awkward,” concludes Suzanne, and suddenly she’s seeming a little bit human.

She flips open a large black book, and inside I can see hundreds upon hundreds of meticulously written names and dates. She turns to the last page and it is all I can do not to gasp when I see the number of marriages that took place in one evening/early morning alone. Perhaps she doesn’t remember me after all. Perhaps she has already forgotten my phone call. Or perhaps all those other people have already called here this morning as well, called her a lying whore when she confirmed their marriage was, in fact, real, and slammed down the phone in a slightly-still-drunk-but-rapidly-sobering rage.

“What was the name?” she asks, and Alexis smiles at her, like they’re best friends, and after this whole mess is sorted out we’re all going to go out for a light lunch.

“Sopher,” Alexis says, spelling it out. “Julianna.”

“And the groom?” asks Suzanne, trailing her finger down the page.

“Uh...” says Alexis, and Suzanne looks up sharply. “Isn’t that next to Julianna?”

Suzanne’s finger has paused on a name near the bottom of the list, and I am trying to peer through the fuzzy plexiglass to read it. A sharp red finger nail slides over the line, blocking what little I could see, and I look up to see Suzanne watching me, a decidedly malicious smirk on her face.

“Trouble, dear?” she asks, and I look at her suspiciously.

“No,” I reply, straightening, trying to look casual.

“The name?” Suzanne repeats, looking to Alexis, who looks to me, who looks to Ivy.

“Uh, either Ben...” says Ivy, bending down to the hole in the glass again, and now I cannot hide my suspicious frown, and neither can Suzanne. “Or...”

“Noel?” Suzanne finishes, closing the book with a loud thud.

I look between Ivy and Alexis with something akin to disbelief. Apparently Suzanne was a big fan of *Felicity*, and has not been fooled by their story.

“Look,” I say, elbowing Alexis and Ivy out of the way, bending low so my eyes are level with Suzanne’s. “I got married here last night, you remember it, I don’t, please tell me the name of the guy I married.”

“Confidential,” says Suzanne, slipping the big black book into a big black drawer and locking it with a little metal key, which she slips into her breast pocket.

I unfold the scrap of marriage certificate and hold it up to the glass.

“It’s not confidential if it’s me,” I say firmly, “and this is me. I just need to know who I married.”

“Where’s the other half?” Suzanne asks, brows raised slightly, as though she’s seen my predicament before, but not quite like this.

“Gone,” I mumble.

“Did you call here this morning?” Suzanne asks, rising slightly, and I take a step away from the plexiglass as she presses her face closer to the small cutout, peering up at me.

“Um,” I say, instead of “no,” which would make this all a lot easier.

“Was it either of you?” Suzanne asks, twisting her neck to look both Alexis and Ivy in the eye. They shake their heads, dumbly innocent. “Then that leaves you,” Suzanne says, fixing me with her sharp stare, and I feel my lip wrinkling in distaste, though I try to hide it. Suzanne misses nothing, however, and sneers out stubbornly at me from behind the protective glass window, which is suddenly starting to make a lot more sense.

We leave the white and pink twinkling lights of the Glitz and Glory with neither glitz nor glory nor name. Suzanne, patting her breast pocket with the key to the drawer to the big black book with my husband’s name inside, decided it was time for her lunch break and closed shop, offering me directions to the nearest Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and the phone number of a potential sponsor.

The small legal support office is not quite as busy as I’d imagined, or hoped. It is highly unlikely that I will be just another unmemorable face in a crowd of drunkenly wed folks hoping for a quick annulment so they can get on with their lives.

We hover around the entrance, looking around the large room uncertainly. There are about a dozen desks with computers and telephones and a person manning each one, and eventually a tall thin man with a nametag reading “Dennis” approaches us, his red hair stuck up in a cowlick and a helpful smile on his freckled face.

“Hi!” he says brightly. “I’m Dennis. Welcome to Lippman Legal Support – do you have an appointment?”

“No,” I say. “Do we—Do I need one?”

“Nope,” says Dennis, already turning and gesturing for us to follow. He leads us to his small, cluttered desk in the far corner, and unlike the other desks in the office that are full of piles of official-looking folders and ominous old texts, Dennis’s desk is filled with random toys and those tricky novelty games, like try and separate these two linked hoops, which I find particularly challenging. I reach to pick one up as we take seats across the desk from Dennis, but Alexis puts her hand over mine and shakes her head solemnly.

“So!” Dennis begins, smiling eagerly. “What seems to be the problem?”

I’m not completely convinced that he’s a real lawyer, but pull out my half of the marriage certificate and place it on the desk anyway.

“Oh,” says Dennis, studying it. “Is this everything?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Is it a problem that I don’t happen to know my husband’s name?”

“The Missing Spouse charge is \$215, for the extra paperwork involved,” Dennis explains, rooting around in his desk for a large form. “Are you using your married name?” he asks, handing me a clipboard. I stare at him for a horrified moment, then he laughs loudly, awkwardly, and most of the people in the office turn to stare as he wraps my fingers around a pen. “Kidding!” he giggles, gesturing for me to start signing.

“What is this?” I ask.

“A list of questions confirming that you are legally allowed to get an annulment,” Alexis answers, skimming the page.

I read the first question. Are you and the Defendant related by blood? I initial in the “No” box, confident that although I do not remember my husband, I would not have married a relative.

Question two: At the time of your marriage to the Defendant, were you already legally married to another individual? Close, but no cigar. If only I had made this mistake next week! Or not at all. I initial for another “no.”

To your knowledge, was the Defendant already married on the day of your marriage?

“Is there an “I don’t know” column?” I ask Dennis, who is still watching me with that dazed little smile on his freckled face.

“Nope!” he says cheerily, and I shrug and turn back to the paper.

“Just say no,” Ivy suggests in a whisper. “If you get an annulment under false pretenses, they can just undo it and you’ll be married all over again.”

“That’s not true,” Alexis whispers back, “but say no anyway. Better odds.”

Is it? I don’t know, but with that not being an option, I initial in the ‘No’ box and move on.

Under 18 and requiring proper parental consent? Please no. Insane at the time of the ceremony? I check with Dennis that temporary insanity is not applicable here, and he assures me it is not, so with a sigh I initial another “no.” Fraud? Don’t think so. And finally here it is: Did either you or the Defendant lack the understanding of your actions to the extent that you were incapable of agreeing to the marriage? (ie: too intoxicated to make a knowing decision, etc.) I grin broadly as I initial the ‘Yes’ box and slide the forms back to Dennis. I will never drink again.

“Great!” Dennis says, accepting the clipboard and passing me a second one with yet another form attached.

I read the top line: Application for Annulment.

Something about the formality of the occasion, the strange solemnity of it, jars something in my mind, and suddenly I can see my hand, with a large sparkling diamond ring glowing on the left ring finger, carefully writing my name on another line. My marriage certificate. I remember signing it.

The pen falls from my hand with a clatter, and as I reach down to pick it up, I freeze, my head fortunately hidden under the desk. I stare at my left hand. My bare left hand. No flashy diamond ring. No foreign diamond ring that I have never seen before, and only remember in one drunken flash of memory.

“Oh God,” I utter softly, straightening only to slump again immediately in my seat.

“What?” Ivy asks. “What is it?”

“It’s not there,” I manage, extending the fingers on my left hand as though perhaps the ring was simply lost in the fold of a knuckle. No such luck. The entire hand is empty. I check my right hand, just in case. Nothing. Feel around in my pockets. Nada.

“What are you looking for?” Alexis asks, peering at me, concerned.

I open my mouth to form the words, but the horror of the situation is settling fast upon me, and I cannot manage a single sound. The huge diamond ring that my absentee husband must have given me is gone. Not such a big problem. Except that now my left hand is also entirely empty. Naked. Exposed. Bare of the tiny antique solitaire diamond ring that James gave me on the night he proposed. The ring he told me had been in his family for generations. The ring I had accepted.

“The ring,” Ivy whispers, finally cluing in, and both Alexis and Dennis gasp as they realize what I have just realized.

“No!” Dennis exclaims in a low, shocked voice. “He didn’t!”

“Maybe it’s in the room,” Alexis suggests hopefully, but I know deep down that though we will search the room top to bottom, the ring will not turn up. My wedding ring is gone, and so is my engagement ring.

“We have to find him,” I whisper desperately, looking between Alexis and Ivy and Dennis, then just Alexis and Ivy, because what is Dennis going to do? At the moment he’s looking despondently at the annulment application I have not completed, and therefore cannot be expected to pay for.

“We’ll find him,” Alexis says supportively, determinedly.

“You bet your ass we will,” says Ivy, putting an arm around my shoulders. “No matter what.”

1

He’s not my type.

There’s something careless about his appearance that suggests he’s taken no pains with it and probably never has. I can see every muscle in his arms, bunched and corded like he’s ready for a fight no one else can see. He has a small waist – but not smaller than mine – and jeans that are faded and perfectly fit. His dark hair is curly and cut in no particular style, one piece flopping into his slightly hooded eyes. And he has the most perfectly shaped lips, which are what I’m looking at when I know without raising my eyes that he is looking at me.

I’ve never seen him before, but he must be a friend of a friend, because there are about thirty of us in this small dark pub, and he is laughing and talking with several people I know. Over the din of conversation and music I catch the occasional word, not enough to know the topic – not me – but enough to pick up an accent, maybe Boston or New York – not something I can distinguish between, having never been to either place

myself. I wonder what he is doing here in the middle of winter, in a small town pub with ivy growing outside and a cobblestone street.

Here comes Ivy now, actually, the birthday girl, glowing with her silver-blond hair and the cheap tiara we bought at the dollar store. Her cheeks are flushed and though she'll play it off as having been outside smoking, I feel how warm her skin is as she hugs me and know that she was actually in the back office with Evan, the pub owner, wearing nothing but her cheap tiara and those hideous cowboy boots as he dramatically swept a year's worth of unfilled paperwork off the desk and lifted her onto it. I know his technique because I was in a similar position on my own birthday not too many months ago, sans cowboy boots. Evan is attractive enough, slightly older, slightly bear-like, if you go for that sort of thing, and I was lonely and he was willing and I thought what the hell. And that is the first and last time in the past twelve months that I have had sex. So maybe that's why I'm noticing someone who is distinctly not my type and doesn't pronounce his r's the way he should.

Ivy swirls away with a drink in each hand – searching for her husband, possibly – and I chance a look at him again, only now he's facing away from me, playing pool, bent over for his shot, and I see his shoulders, quite broad, really, and the curl of his dark hair on his neck, and while I don't feel *it* – that thing I'm told I'm supposed to be feeling at the ripe old age of twenty-seven – I feel something that I haven't felt since my fifteen minutes bent over Evan's desk a few months ago. And then he turns around.

Oh God. I know he's coming over. I'm turned back around, I've gulped the last of my drink just a little too quickly and am trying to wipe the tears from my eyes before he gets here. Someone asks me the time, asks if I've seen Ivy – or Evan, for that matter – and I gesture vaguely in the way of the dartboards, a lump in my throat that is not just due to the ungodly-sized mouthful of alcohol I just chucked back.

“Want to take a shot?” I hear softly from behind me, and I get goose bumps all up and down that arm. I turn my head so we are eye to eye, and his are very dark, almost black. He slips the pool stick in front of me; I'm sitting on the stool with my legs slightly apart, and he rests it against my knee.

“I'm really terrible at it,” I say, and then immediately wish that these weren't my first words, that I was able to come up with some clever innuendo that would make him desperate to replace the pool cue with his own body. In any case, I didn't, and it is true. I am terrible at pool. I am terrible at all games. Any game, of any variety, and I am terrible at it. I was always the last picked at sports at school because my team always ended up

losing, even when I was banished to the bench for 9/10ths of the game. I have never won so much as two dollars on a scratch card or a fifty-fifty draw or a game of I Spy. I don't want this guy to lose. I don't want him to move the pool cue, because his hand is wrapped around the top of it, and though he is not touching me, I can feel the heat from his body against my back and I do not mind it at all.

"Uh, it's true," says Dean, leaning across the table, his beefy face bright with alcohol. "If you've got money on it, don't let her play."

"I don't have money on it," he says, and I don't know his name now, but I will later learn that it is James. "And I'm not worried about losing."

We walk back to the pool table, me in the lead, and I feel a slight warm pressure on my spine and realize that it is his hand, resting there ever so lightly, and though we have just met – not even "met" as in officially, as in with names – I do not mind this at all.

We lose. I don't embarrass myself, though I do not sink the shot, but James doesn't mind. When I straighten after missing he is standing very close, and he holds out his hand, though I can barely see it because we are really that close, and I take it, and he says, "My name is James." I tell him my name, Julianna, and he holds onto my hand for another second, not blinking, then smiles and turns away to take his next shot. He does not touch me for the rest of the game – perhaps he realized that neither Dean nor I was joking about the losing – but every time I glance at him – which is a lot – he is looking back at me.

When the game is over he hands the other guy twenty bucks – I raise my eyebrows slightly at this – and indicates that I should follow him to the end of the bar, which I do. It is dark down here; spotty neon light flickers over the front of his dark t-shirt, and he pushes out a stool, which I climb on, as he takes the one at the very end in the corner. He orders and the bartender slides two bottles of beer on coasters in front of us, and though I don't really like beer, I take a sip from mine anyway.

"Who're you here with, Julianna?" he asks after a pause, and I take a second to inhale, rubbing the back of my hand on the cold bottle because suddenly I am *so* warm.

"Everybody," I tell him. "For Ivy's birthday. She's one of my best friends. How do you know her?"

"I don't," he says quickly. "Friend of mine does." Then he drinks his beer, his head back, and I watch his throat as he swallows, as he avoids my eye. "Is your boyfriend around?" He's still not looking at me, and I'm getting a strange feeling.

“No,” I say firmly. I peer at him closely and suddenly I am cooling off very quickly. “Is your girlfriend?”

“Yeah,” he says, looking at me straight on now. “She’s coming over.” His eyes dart past my shoulder and I instinctively push my stool back, maybe because I feel guilty or I’m just not sure if he’s joking and I don’t think I want to play this game. I look over my shoulder and sure enough there is a girl coming towards us, and I recognize her from the general group of people I go out with. Melanie.

“Hey babe,” says Melanie once she reaches us, putting one arm on his shoulder, reaching with the other for his beer, raising it to her lips. She’s got one eye on the game on the television in the corner, and she doesn’t look at all suspicious. He rests one hand on her ass, and he’s still looking at me, though the look I’m giving him feels like it has enough death rays to kill an entire population of Boston- or New York-accented brown-haired men.

Melanie drinks the beer, sets it back on the bar, and smiles at me, a genuine smile that for some reason reminds me that she is a veterinary assistant, pretty *and* smart, and I feel guilty for flirting with someone who I didn’t know was her boyfriend. “Hey Julianna,” she says, and I smile back.

“Hey Melanie.” A part of me wants to run away, but another part of me wants to stand here and talk to James’s girlfriend as though saying, *See, asshole? It was nothing.*

I don’t have to say anything, though, because blessed Ivy chooses this moment to sweep in, slinging her arm through mine and resting her head on my shoulder.

“Jules!” she sings. “Come meet Mark! He’s very curious about you!” I vaguely remember her mentioning a guy named Mark who may or may not work in a bank and who I may or may not have met before. Ivy has good intentions, but she does not know my taste in men. On second thought, neither do I.

Something twitches in James’ jaw, that something I’ve read about, and I suppose it might mean he’s jealous, or just that he has a twitch. I’m ready to leave when Ivy sticks out her hand, a big smile on her face, and announces, “I’m Ivy.”

James takes her hand, offers a quick smile – he’s handsome, dammit – and says, “I’m James.”

“This is Julie,” she says, placing her hand on my stomach by way of introduction, and James turns the small smile on me, and he still doesn’t look quite guilty enough.

“Julianna, Jules, Julie. Which is it?” he says, and I look away.

“Doesn’t matter,” I say, eyes on Melanie. “Good seeing you,” I add. I turn and walk towards the door and this Mark’s general direction, Ivy trailing behind me.

“What’s going on?” she asks, drunk but not that drunk.

“Nothing,” I say.

She glances back over her shoulder. “He’s not your type,” she says confidently, and I force a shrug to prove just how much I don’t care.

I do care, and for the next couple of hours all I can think about is how it felt to have his eyes on me, like his stare was this tactile, tangible thing that I will feel even when I am long out of sight. I know I am not out of sight now, because I spotted him dancing with Melanie a few minutes ago, a slow song, and as soon as I found him in the crowd his eyes snapped up to mine and stayed there until I looked away.

Mark is nice, but he’s a bit plain. Turns out he is a banker, though we haven’t met before, and I normally wouldn’t spend this much time talking to someone so, well, boring, but I want James to see that I don’t need his pool stick or his beer or his girlfriend, I can have anyone I want to. Or at least I can have Mark.

Mark smiles and leans in towards me, and I wonder if he is going to kiss me, and then he does. I’m pretty surprised by this and I do not move away, partly because I am startled, and partly because I am already so far back on my stool that if I move away any further I will fall off, and partly because I suspect James may be watching – I hope so – and Mark’s really not that bad a kisser. I go ahead and put my hand around his neck, my fingers in his blonde hair, and let him kiss me. It goes on for another minute or two, then he pulls back, and says, “You smell good.”

Surprised again. I half-expected him to resume talks of diversification and tax shelters, but he just looks at me, vaguely amused.

“Thanks,” is the best I can do, because it wasn’t a bad kiss, but I don’t want to take it any further. Until I see James by the door, his coat on, holding Melanie’s as she slips into it, and he’s not looking at me, maybe he didn’t even see the kiss, in which case, what the hell? Then he turns, and I know that he saw. I want to smirk, but I don’t. I look away, because we had exchanged perhaps twenty words earlier and I am making far too big a deal out of this. It’s just that it’s been a while since I’ve felt something, anything.

James holds the door for Melanie and they head out, and in the dim light I can see that it’s snowing outside and it looks so wonderfully cold out there that I want to head out, too. I don’t want to bump into James and Melanie, however, so I’ll take my time,

find my coat, wish Ivy a happy birthday – she'd better not be with Evan again – and then I'll walk home, even though I came in somebody's car.

I've been here for a while now and I'm not drunk, and I'm starting to think it's not going to happen. I don't care. I just want to leave. I shoot a small smile at Mark, who is looking a little confused, and though it is a Saturday I tell him I have to work in the morning and hop down off the stool and wind my way into the crowd before he can ask for my number. Mental note to tell Ivy not to give it to him either.

It takes me a few minutes to track down my coat, now with some sticky black stain on the sleeve, and a few more to find Ivy, who is on the phone with Alexis, our other best friend, nearly back from a stint in Africa. When I approach she holds the phone up so I can shout "Hello!" Alexis's laugh rings out, a hollow, tinny sound, and she tells me that she misses me and did I know that Ivy slept with Evan? On cue Ivy and I look around for her husband – not in sight, and also not named Evan – and I tell her I did know. Ivy looks surprised for all of one second then asks if I think anyone else noticed and I say I don't think so. Alexis says she has to go and that she can't wait to see us and she wishes Ivy a happy birthday before hanging up. I tell Ivy that I'm going to take off, too, and she offers me her tiara, which I decline. She looks happy and flirtatious and I wonder if maybe some of us just aren't born with that gene that allows us to be natural flirts, to feel connections with everyone we meet, if maybe I'm just meant to mostly be alone save for a few minutes with pub owners on my birthday.

It is two weeks before I see James again. I have not mentioned him to Ivy, nor to Alexis, who returned from an African country that starts with an M (or N) just three days ago. In fact, I have not said his name aloud, and naturally the more I try not to think about him the more I do, which makes me feel foolish, because there is almost definitely no way that he is still thinking about me. I have made excuses for not going out on the past two weekends, just in case we bump into each other again and he is with Melanie and I am alone, but tonight I must go out, because it is Alexis's first Saturday night back and though Emerton is a small town, people's work schedules and frequent trips out of town (to remember that there is a real world outside of Emerton) mean that there are many people with whom she has yet to catch up.

Alexis hasn't really been herself since her return, and though she blames it on jetlag, I have a sneaking suspicion that it is something more. There is something somehow... older about her, something kind of sad, and I don't think it has anything to

do with witnessing the horrors of a war (she said the country is peaceful) or holding the hand of a starving child (she's a lawyer; she doesn't work with children). I think this for the simple reason that on her second day back we were holed up in her room as Ivy recounted her latest battle with her husband Doug, a battle over which colour to paint the dining room. Ivy was hoping for tangerine, while Doug thought lavender would be soothing. Inwardly I disagreed with both of them, but outwardly I took Ivy's side. As she has on an almost weekly basis since their wedding at the tender age of nineteen, Ivy threatened to divorce Doug, and Doug told her to go ahead. The next day Ivy bought two cans of paint, a roller, and a very sexy set of lavender lingerie, painted the room tangerine, and she and Doug had make-up sex on the dining room table. It was at the end of this conversation that Alexis excused herself to use the washroom, and it was while she was out that her cell phone rang. Ivy and I debated whether or not to answer, and when we finally decided to, it was too late and the caller had gone to voicemail. Turning the phone on, however, allowed us to listen to the message as it was being left, and there was a very masculine British voice on the other end. We only had time to catch a few words before we heard Alexis coming down the hall, but those words were "...need you. Please call me." We looked at each other, both guilty and thrilled, and tossed the phone back on the bed and were studiously examining our nails when Alexis walked in.

"Phone rang," Ivy said nonchalantly, and Alexis, looking disinterested for all the world, picked it up, glanced at the call screen, deleted the voicemail without even listening to it, and sat back down on the bed, her expression not changing at all. Ivy and I exchanged a meaningful glance, but did not confess our small sin. Alexis has never discussed the details of her personal life with us, no matter how desperate we are to know, and judging by the slight tremor in her hand, will not be sharing the details of this particular adventure any time soon.

Anyway, the point is, that Alexis needs tonight, needs to go out with her friends and have a good time and forget about this British accent, and I have to go with her.

Though I know better, I look for James at the pub despite my best efforts not to, then resign myself to the fact that this will not, in fact, be "the night." I don't know what I was expecting anyway, really. How realistic is it to believe that James would have written a poem for each day we were apart then stood on the bar top and read them aloud? Not likely. Nor is it likely that he would have convinced Evan to close his pub on a Saturday night so that the good people of Emerton would have to visit his bar, and therefore we

would have to meet. At which time he would climb up on the bar and read the fourteen poems he had written in the time since our first and only meeting.

I take a seat at the bar and ask for a soda, wiping a hand over my face and watching across the room as Alexis peers at her cell phone, frowns, then presses a button before returning the phone to her purse. Hmm. Interesting.

My drink arrives and I down it in nearly one go, fighting the urge to burp and then wincing as I swallow a huge bubble of air. I feel suddenly flushed and crowded, like the pub is too dark and too noisy and too hot and not even stepping outside in my jeans and sparkly tank and standing alone in the snow will help. I lift the hair off the back of my neck, finish my drink and gesture for another. Then I hear, “Hot?”

I freeze. Suddenly I feel hot and cold, a trickle of sweat running down my spine even as goose bumps spring up on my arms. He is sitting next to me, but because I have turned to watch Alexis, I have my back to him. I know his voice. Unless it’s Rocky, who also has a Boston accent. But someone has to be at their bar on a Saturday night, and... And I’m stalling. I’m stalling because I don’t want to look into those dark eyes and see that slightly curled hair and know that he has a girlfriend. But I can’t sit on this stool staring at nothing forever, so when my drink arrives I push it slowly on its coaster as I turn, and stop when I am looking into a face that is too close for comfort.

“Shouldn’t you be at work?” I ask, and he doesn’t answer, just stares at me, his eyes tracing every line of my face before he turns to the bartender and asks for a beer.

“Want one?” he asks without looking at me, and I ignore him. See how he likes it.

There is a small pop as the cap comes off the beer, then I can hear him swallow, and again, like he’s drinking the entire bottle in one shot. When I glance over though, it’s still half full, and James is still staring at the mirrored wall behind the liquor bottles. I lean my arms on the counter, hands on my glass, and feel the warmth from his body warring with the goose bumps that have still not gone away.

“Where’s your girlfriend?” I ask, because it is clearly what he is waiting for, and without bothering to look at me he lifts the bottle to his lips, says “We broke up,” then drinks deeply.

Everything inside me is celebrating. I want to know all the details, though there’s no tactful way to ask. When? Whose idea was it? Why? Because of me? Where’s Melanie now? Because of me?

But he doesn’t volunteer any more information and I am not going to pry, because if they broke up and it wasn’t because of me, I don’t want to appear needy and desperate.

I don't want to appear needy and desperate under any circumstances, and while part of me is attracted to the side of James that seems to make me want to make the first move, a part of me is a little more traditional and stubborn than that.

"Sorry to hear it," I say, then slide off my stool to go join Alexis and Ivy. One foot is barely on the floor when I feel his fingers wrap around my arm, not roughly, and I can feel the calluses on his fingertips where they press into my skin. The goose bumps melt away and my heart stops for a moment, then I turn slightly to see if he's going to say something, but he doesn't, he just turns my stool with his foot so I'm facing him, so we're facing each other, then closes the distance between us with his mouth, stopping only when his lips press against mine. His lips are hot and soft, and he doesn't move, just rests them there, firmly, his hand still on my arm, his foot between mine on the stool. I open my eyes and find him staring at me, and it's nerve-wracking, this nearness, our eyes so close together I feel dizzy, or maybe that's because I can feel his tongue lightly brushing my lips, and every part of me wants more. More. More of this person that I don't even know. And I want it. I know I do. But I'm also suddenly terrified of this reaction that I have never had before, even during those three years I dated Kyle, my "first love." I don't know yet if this is love, but it is lust like I have never experienced it. And if I thought I needed to step into the snow before, I need to bury myself in an avalanche right about now.

"Come home with me," he murmurs against my lips and I shake my head no, feeling his slight sigh, his fingers trailing up and down my arm, making me shiver. "Let's go to your place," he says instead, but I shake my head again.

"I don't know you," is the best I can come up with, but it is the truth.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know," he says, finally pulling back a few inches, and I furtively suck in as much air as I can. My heart is pounding and I wonder if he can feel the pulse in my wrist against his fingers resting there.

"Too fast," I say, glancing around for Ivy and Alexis, because suddenly I know that I need to go home. Now.

"I can feel your pulse pounding," James says, his fingers rubbing lightly against the thin skin. I shudder, pulling my arm back, and he doesn't reach for me again.

"I have to go," I say, spotting Ivy and sliding off the stool.

"Let me know," he says, and when I glance at him he has turned back to his beer, back to the mirrored wall, like this never just happened.

Let me know. The words ring in my ears all through the week, though I have not told anyone about them. The kiss in the bar felt like a lifetime to me, as though we were engulfed in a sudden bonfire that people could not help but have noticed, and yet no one has mentioned it. I'm sure Ivy and Alexis would have called me on it the second we got outside the pub, but they said nothing, and though the words were on the tip of my tongue the whole ride home and every day thereafter, I have not mentioned it either. I'm not sure why. Apart from the British accent, we do not keep secrets from each other, and it is a physical challenge to keep the words from rolling out of my mouth.

One afternoon I decide to I bake a cake. It's only once the cake is in the oven that I realize that I do not have any frosting, and given that my craving for frosting is the real reason I was making a cake in the first place, I toss on my winter jacket and scurry outside, slipping down the sidewalk as I run the two blocks to the small corner store. This winter has been particularly bitter and cold and I tuck my mitten-less hands in my pockets, making running that much harder. I manage the distance without falling, my hair whipped around my head in some semblance of a bird's nest, and when I step inside the glass doors I am enveloped by warmth and the faint smell of incense.

I smile at Mr. Han, the owner, the man I have never seen anywhere else except in this store, and Mr. Han smiles back as I smooth my tangled hair.

I already know where the frosting is, and even exactly how much it will come to, and I head directly there, blowing on my fingers as I peruse the small selection. I am debating between milk chocolate whipped and cherry vanilla when I know he is beside me. Glancing down I see the black toe of a winter boot near my foot, the cuff of faded jeans, a black winter jacket, hands in the pockets. I look up to meet his.

"Tell me that's for cupcakes," he says, "and not just you and a spoon."

"Hey!" I exclaim, absolutely guilty, just not at this particular moment. "I'm baking a cake."

James smiles at me and I smile back.

"What's the occasion?" he asks, turning to study the frosting.

"Just... baking," I say, unable to come up with anything clever.

"You got it narrowed down?" he asks, shifting slightly closer, and I glance up and down the aisle and we are most definitely alone.

"Um," I say, trying to remember. "The chocolate or..." I'm trailing my fingers along the colourful jars, my mind blank. I can't imagine the taste of frosting. The only

thing I want right now is for him to come just one step closer so we are touching. “Cherry vanilla,” I remember. “Cherry vanilla.”

“That’s a good one,” James says seriously. “Two flavours in one. Quite a deal.”

He shifts a little closer, and I do too, so now our toes are touching and our arms are touching and I look at him a little breathless, wishing I had done my hair or put on more makeup or a better bra, but it doesn’t matter, because he’s looking at me like he really wants to kiss me and I know I look like I really want to kiss him, but he doesn’t close those final inches and I know he is waiting for me to do it. So I do. I kiss him. I lean in slightly, tilt my head a little, and press my lips firmly to his. After a few seconds I feel his hands slip around my back, pulling our middles together, and, completely ignoring the fact that we are in a convenience store aisle, I put my hands in his hair and bring our chests together, too.

James makes a sound low in his throat as his lips part, and so do mine, and his tongue slips between my teeth and I let him, my thumb stroking his cheekbone and wanting to stay here all day, every day, for the rest of my life.

After a minute or two we part, taking two steps back, staring at each other, somewhat surprised, very turned on, a little chagrined. A convenience store!

“Tell me you need help with the cake,” James says in a low voice, and I want very much to do that, but I also feel suddenly embarrassed, and I shake my head. James closes his eyes for a few seconds, then looks back up at me intently. “What are you waiting for?” he asks, not angry, just asking, and I don’t know the answer.

“The cake will burn,” I say, picking up the cherry vanilla frosting and backing toward the end of the aisle, toward Mr. Han, toward the icy winter air that I so desperately need right now. That and a good smack in the head for turning this guy down again. What is the matter with me?

“See you Saturday, Julianna,” James says, and turns and walks in the opposite direction.

I say nothing, just watch him go, appreciating the way the jeans fit and his long legs and his shiny dark hair. Then when he reaches the end of the aisle I turn before he catches me watching him, though he probably already knows, and I hurry up to Mr. Han, drop the right amount of change into his hand, and rush back home to pull my cake out of the oven.

CHAPTER TWO

We study the Man Map as we stand in the hotel lobby, not quite sure how to proceed.

“Well,” I say finally, with a vague shrug in the direction of the front desk, “let’s just start with Bill and Ted, shall we?”

Ivy and Alexis look at each other and nod, and so we head over to the desk, which is free of a line-up, and approach. Ted is working; I am sure this is Ted because of his nametag and because Bill was cuter. Ted is okay though, and he smiles at us pleasantly as we approach.

“Ladies,” he says, with perhaps a bit more formality than the situation requires. Is he being so formal because of something that happened last night? Something like a wedding?

“Hey Ted,” I say, not quite sure how to ease into my question. *Did we get married last night?* But the words aren’t out loud, and I sort of wish they were, because at least then I’d have already gotten it over with.

“Checking out?” Ted asks, fingers flying over the keyboard, not looking especially suspicious, and I see no wedding band on his left hand, which is not to say he’s innocent, just that he... well, isn’t wearing it.

“Oh!” Alexis exclaims, and it is this word that makes us all look at our watches – nearly two o’clock – and remember that checkout time is three, and we are, in fact, checking out today, because today is the day I return to Emerton and my fiancé, James. Good grief. Nausea is welling up again, quick and strong.

“Look, Ted,” I say in a low, urgent voice, leaning across the counter so as not to be overheard by the other counter agents. “We didn’t by chance get married last night, did we?”

Ted blinks, startled, and takes a step back, then looks me over carefully, as though my appearance somehow has the power to change what did or did not happen.

“No,” he says finally. “No. Definitely not.”

“How about Bill?” Ivy asks, stepping forward. “Did he...” She uses her elbow to gesture to me.

Ted starts to shake his head, then stops. “No,” he begins, then, “wait. Well. No. I mean, may—I don’t know.”

“Where is he?” Alexis asks, joining us at the counter, so the three of us are buttressed up against it and Ted is pressed against the far wall like a trapped animal.

“Uh, he called in sick today,” he tells us, looking around for help.

“‘Sick’ as in *married* sick?” I ask suspiciously, wondering if it could really be this easy, if the second guy on the list is actually the guy I am looking for.

“I don’t know,” Ted says. “You’d have to ask him.”

“Where is he?” Alexis presses, and she has that stern lawyer face on, and I know that Ted will not lie to her. Neither would I.

Ted looks around uncomfortably, then cautiously approaches, pulling a pen out of his pocket.

“We’re not supposed to give this stuff out,” he whispers, writing down an address. “It’s just... Well, this is sort of the thing Bill would do.” Sort of the thing he would do? I married someone prone to quickie marriages and ring theft?

Alexis takes the slip of paper with Bill’s address and tucks it into her purse. “Let’s go pack,” she says. “We’ll toss the stuff in the car before tracking down the rest of these guys.”

“What about Bill?” Ivy asks. “Shouldn’t we just head over there first?”

“I’ll go,” Alexis offers. “I’m a light packer. You guys will need the full hour. I’ll pack, find Bill – hopefully he’s the one – and come back to get you two.”

“Okay,” I nod. “We can look for the ring, too. Maybe it’s still in the room.” Maybe. But maybe not.

We separate when we reach the eighth floor. Ivy and Alexis head for their room and me for mine, something that was sort of meant as a gift when Alexis made the reservations, but now seems unfortunate because there’s no way I would have ended up in this predicament with Ivy and Alexis asleep in the same room... right?

I enter my room, tentatively hoping to maybe find a guy there with half a marriage certificate and an apology, but the room is empty and in much the same state of disrepair as I left it. We were only here for two nights and it doesn’t take long to shake

everything out in search of the ring (not here), before cramming the items into my suitcase.

I crawl around on the floor, peer under the dresser and bed, then open every drawer and even the empty mini-fridge in hopes of finding my engagement ring. Nothing.

Twenty minutes later there's a knock on the door and I open it to let Ivy in, dragging her leopard print suitcase behind her, cowboy boots clopping on the thin carpet as she plops herself on the bed.

"Ring's not in my room," she announces, and though I don't see why it would have been there, I appreciate her looking.

"It's not here either," I say, and she shakes her head like that was to be expected. "This sucks, Ivy." I drop onto the bed beside her and rest my head on her shoulder as she pats my back reassuringly.

"It'll be okay, Jules," she says. "People make mistakes. Some they confess, and some they annul and keep secret. This is the latter kind of occasion."

"Do you think it's Bill?" I ask.

Her expression clouds over thoughtfully. "I don't know," she answers. "To be honest with you, Jules, I didn't think you had it in you. I mean, it's like saying you robbed a bank. I don't know which one you'd pick; I'd never expect you to rob a bank."

We take a moment to mull that over.

"At least then I could pay for my annulment," I say.

We meet Alexis downstairs. "So?" Ivy says. "How'd it go? Did Bill give you the ring and some annulment money?"

"Not exactly," Alexis says, looking around the lobby for someone she doesn't find, because she finally returns her gaze to us. "He's gone."

"Gone?" Ivy and I repeat in unison. "Gone?"

"Yeah," Alexis says. "I even made his roommate show me his room. It's completely empty. If he's the one, he took all his stuff along with your rings and fled."

"That bastard!" Ivy exclaims.

"Do you know where he went?" I ask Alexis.

"His roommate said he went back to his parents' place... near the Grand Canyon."

"The Grand Canyon!" I hiss in horror. "That's in... Arizona, right?"

"Right," Alexis says firmly.

“We don’t have time to drive to Arizona! We don’t have money! And what am I going to tell James? Sorry honey, road trip?”

“I could do with a road trip,” Ivy says as we step up to the counter to checkout with a different counter agent. Ted evidently thought it better to hide than risk anymore grilling.

“Well, we’re not sure it’s Bill,” Alexis says logically. “We just can’t cross him off. We’ll track down the rest of the guys on the list – hopefully they haven’t left town – and worst comes to worst, if none of them turn out to be your husband, at least we know which one is, and where to find him.”

“And we’ll get to see the Grand Canyon!” Ivy exclaims enthusiastically, and though I have trouble appreciating her excitement, I *have* always wanted to visit.

Alexis convinces a counter agent to make two extra copies of the Man Map, and after stashing our luggage in the car, we are now each armed with a list and a location: Ivy the restaurants, Alexis the casino, and me the pool/spa/gym area. Ivy and Alexis have each selected a flattering photograph of yours truly to present to any men who are perhaps unable to recall the events of the last night and may need a visual reminder. I am in no position to judge, I remind myself, though my feelings are a little hurt at the thought that someone may not remember marrying me.

I head off alone to the pool/spa/gym area, feeling more than a little apprehensive. Some aggressive reminders from Ivy produced hazy faces to go with a few of the names on our list, but I am not sure that I will be able to positively identify anyone as someone I may or may not have met last night, let alone married. My big strategy then, is to approach pretty much everyone I could conceivably see myself marrying (and a few I couldn’t – Alexis emphasized the importance of recognizing the fact that one’s standards tend to lower when intoxicated) and asking if perhaps we made a huge mistake last night. And would they mind quickly running down to see Dennis with me to annul it. And could you please give me my ring back.

When we regroup in the lobby an hour later, I am completely and utterly embarrassed and ashamed of myself, and would seriously consider purchasing one of the George W. Bush masks randomly for sale in the hotel gift shop if there weren’t a sign next to the stand forbidding the buyer to wear said mask anywhere on the premises.

Alexis looks stern and a little tired, while Ivy looks positively giddy, her skin flushed and glowing, a big smile revealing her straight white teeth.

“Well?” I say, starting with her. “Did you find him?”

“Oh, no,” she says matter-of-factly, like it hadn’t really been likely in the first place.

“Then why are you smiling?” I demand, feeling my heart sink a little.

“There are so many nice people here!” she exclaims.

Alexis and I exchange a look. “Did you have sex with someone when you were supposed to be looking for Jules’s husband?” Alexis snaps, and Ivy straightens abruptly, looking a little bit like a chastised schoolgirl.

“No!” she says defensively. “But I may meet up with him later...”

“We won’t be here later!” I exclaim. “We’re heading back to Emerton as soon as we find this guy and get this thing annulled. And if we don’t find him here, we’ll be on our way to the Grand Canyon! You don’t have time for drinks tonight!”

“Oh,” says Ivy, looking disappointed but consenting. “Oh well.”

“Oh, plus you’re already married,” says Alexis peevishly, and both Ivy and I look at her with raised brows, because Ivy has been cheating on Doug since their first anniversary, and it has never really bothered Alexis before.

“Huh,” says Ivy, and turns to me. “Anyway, I found eleven of the guys on your list, and they all insist that they’re still – legally – single.”

“Eleven?” Alexis and I echo in unison.

“A soccer team made up part of that,” Ivy explains. “Remember we played the slot machines with them? You thought it would be funny to yell ‘Touchdown!’ every time you pulled the handle?”

I have no recollection of this, and thank God for it. What kind of moron would do that?

“Touchdowns are for football, by the way,” Ivy continues. “In soccer you get... home runs?”

“Three points?” Alexis guesses.

“Doesn’t matter,” I say. “Didn’t marry a soccer player.”

They nod thoughtfully.

“Who else did you cross off?” Alexis asks, and Ivy consults her list.

“Brian the bartender, Chris the bellman, and Francis, the other bartender.”

“Nice work, Ive,” Alexis says, and Ivy smiles proudly. “How’d you do, Jules?”

“Nothing so impressive as Ivy,” I say generously, and Ivy nods like a queen accepting a compliment from a peasant. “But I ruled out eight.”

“I only found four,” Alexis says, disappointed. “William 1, William 2, Greg, and... Lawrence.”

“Ooh, Lawrence!” Ivy exclaims. “The filmmaker! How much longer is he here for?”

Alexis and I stare at her until she gets the point.

“Not important,” she says hastily, and turns back to the Man Map. “So according to this...”

“We’re down to six,” Alexis says.

“Fifteen percent chance I married one of those guys,” I say, for lack of anything better to say.

“Bet on it,” Ivy says supportively.

“Can’t,” I say, despondent. “I’m broke.” We consider that for a moment, then shake it off.

“So how do we track these guys down?” I ask, looking between Ivy and Alexis, but mostly at Alexis, because she has the best ideas.

“Without last names, it’s going to be hard to get room numbers,” she says thoughtfully, tapping the man map. “But we can probably find Paul – the groom – if we ask about bachelor parties staying in the hotel.”

I nod, glad to have Alexis along on this trip. It would be a weight off my shoulders to find Paul, who I actually do remember meeting – he was attractive, his fiancée is a lucky lady – I hope – and to know that I did not marry him, and did not screw up anybody else’s future. I would really prefer that I hadn’t screwed up my own future either, but then again, I’m not the one running away from this problem, so screw Paul! If, in fact, he is the one who stole my ring. If not, best wishes to him and his fiancée.

We spot Ted hiding at the counter, doubtless with one eye on us, and we head over again, eyes on his face and all possible escape routes should he try to make a run for it.

“What?” he hisses, almost desperate, as we approach the counter. “Check out time is three! You shouldn’t even be here!”

“Just one more thing, Ted,” Alexis says, sounding like a strict schoolmarm, and brooking no argument. “We need to know which room a bachelor party is staying in. In particular the groom, a guy named Paul.”

Ted sighs, glances around for his manager, then slides the keyboard out from under the desk.

“Last name?”

“No idea.”

Ted shoots me a look like, What is your problem? then asks, “You don’t even know your own fiancé’s last name?”

“He’s not my fiancé,” I snap, and gesture at the computer. “Look him up.”

Ted types slowly as he processes this. “So you may have married this guy... who came here to celebrate his own impending marriage... to someone else?”

I roll my eyes as if this is old news. “Yes.”

“You two are so fucked!” he whispers unsupportively, and I hear Ivy snicker behind me.

“Ivy!”

“Sorry!” she mumbles.

“Room 950,” Ted reports. “And you have twenty minutes before I call security. You can’t just be running around the hotel looking for a husband when you’re not even guests here.”

“Shut up, Ted,” Ivy says, turning on her booted heel and heading for the elevators. I want to deliver some smart parting shot too before I go, but come up empty and so I just turn and scurry after Alexis and Ivy, ready to find Paul the Groom, the fingers on my right hand crossed in hopes that he is not the one, the fingers on my left kind of hoping that he is.

We huddle in the hall outside door 950 and take a collective deep breath. This could be it, and if it is, we need to be ready to pounce on thieving Paul, tie him up and drag him off to meet Dennis and pay for this annulment. And maybe give us some gas money as compensation for our troubles.

“Ready?” Alexis says, and we lock eyes briefly before I raise my hand to knock on the door.

Here goes.

I knock twice.

No answer.

I turn to Ivy and Alexis in surprise. Not part of the plan.

“Knock again,” Ivy suggests. “Real knocks.”

“Those were real knocks!” I whisper defensively.

“Like this,” she says, stepping forward and kicking the door with her cowboy boot, loud enough to alert Ted (and the security team he has probably called) to our whereabouts.

“Ivy!” I exclaim, shocked, then shut up because now there’s a noise coming from inside the room, and noise that sounds a lot like... footsteps. The door opens to reveal a handsome man about our age wearing boxers and a crown and holding a box of caramel popcorn. “Ladies,” he drawls, holding out the box. “Y’all come for the caramel corn?” He pronounces it like “car-mel” and I kind of do want some, but don’t take any. On second thought, I do, and then Ivy does as well, and after a moment so does Alexis.

After a moment I realize that we are all just standing there chewing, and that this guy is blond and tan and not dark and pale (not vampire pale) like Paul, and perhaps this is the wrong room.

“Um, sorry to bother you,” I say after I have swallowed, eyes on the box of popcorn, wondering if they sell it in the gift shop or if it comes with the room. “We’re looking for Paul, who’s getting married soon. We thought he was in this room.”

“Yeah,” says the guy, scratching himself thoughtfully, and the three of us wince, hoping that’s not the hand he uses to get the—Yeah. Yep, it is. He crunches loudly, and we wait in semi-disgusted silence as he finishes chewing. “Paul’s gone,” he finally announces, then steps back from the door, either to close it or invite us in, but we can’t let him get away without finding Paul, so I step inside as though it were definitely an invitation, and Ivy and Alexis follow.

“Thanks,” I say with a bright smile, an expression that quickly fades as I take in the chaos of the room. We only met them as they checked in two nights ago, which means they haven’t even been staying in the room for forty-eight full hours, and yet the place is a mess. A horrible mess. Host of not one or two but at least a dozen sordid bachelor parties with any number of drunken men sprawled across every inch of furniture, and a large breasted nurse sitting next to a large breasted policewoman nursing martinis at the bar. Mm. Martinis. No. No.

“Hi,” says the nurse, and the three of us smile.

“Hi,” we reply, and the guy with the caramel corn grabs an open beer bottle from the mess of bottles and glasses on the counter and takes a long swig.

“So...” I say, kind of to the guy, kind of to the room at large, hoping any one of these people will have an answer. “Does anybody know where Paul went?”

“Which one’s Paul?” the policewoman asks after a moment, when it’s clear that nobody else is conscious, except the blond guy, who is looking at Ivy with great interest, and—No, she is. She’s looking right back.

“Seriously?” I whisper over my shoulder, and she shrugs carelessly, like, You’ve got your problems, I’ve got mine.

I turn back to the policewoman. “The groom,” I tell her. “Tall, dark... pale?”

“Oh yeah,” she says, with a nod at her... partner, the nurse. “Took off this morning. Right after...”

“Oh, *that* Paul!” says the nurse, nodding vigorously. “Right. Right. Some guys...”

She looks like I should know what the rest of that sentence is going to be, but I have no idea. Some guys... what?

“So he was here all night?” I say, trying to focus on what really matters, and not on the events of this room, pretty certain that I had no part in them.

“Yeah,” drawls the blond guy, slouching onto a bar stool and belching loudly, then reaching for more caramel corn, and, upon finding the box empty, tossing it at the head of a sleeping man, who does not wake, even when it bounces off his face.

“No,” say the nurse and policewoman in unison, and the blond guy shrugs.

“Oh, guess not,” he says, and I decide to ignore him for the rest of the conversation.

“Do you know where he, um, went?” I ask, not wanting to reveal my predicament, though not entirely certain they would care. “And, maybe... what he did?”

“Hard to say,” says the policewoman. “He was having second thoughts about his wedding, we came in here, did our thing, then went in there...” She cocks her head toward a closed door, presumably to a bedroom, “and did our other thing...” This time I can fill in the rest of the sentence.

The nurse takes over. “Then soon as it’s done he starts freaking out. Jumps back into his pants, keeps muttering, ‘I gotta do something, I gotta do something!’ and runs out of the room.”

“What time was this?” Alexis asks, and the two women pause thoughtfully.

“Maybe... two o’clock,” the nurse answers, and Alexis, Ivy, and I exchange significant looks. Perfect time to be coming out of the elevator I was waiting to board, then run down the strip to the Glitz & Glory.

“Do you know where he went?” I ask, but they’re already shaking their heads.

“No clue,” replies the policewoman. “He showed up again around nine this morning in a real rush, grabbed his suitcase and took off again.”

“Did he say anything to give you the impression that he had maybe... gotten married?” I ask tentatively, and their expressions shift to such extreme sympathy that I feel like I may start to cry.

“Don’t worry, honey,” the nurse says soothingly. “They always come back. I bet he’s at home right now, just waiting for you.”

“Hmm,” I say, not quite ready to confess.

“Oh no,” says the blond guy, eyes suddenly sharp now as he studies me. “That’s not his fiancée. I don’t know who she is.”

The nurse and the policewoman turn to me with raised eyebrows and I turn to Alexis and Ivy for help.

“He’s crazy,” Ivy says by way of explanation. “Drunk all the time.” And to my relief the two women nod as if they’ve been there before, and I suspect that they probably have.

There’s a stirring on the couch, and a loud grunt from one of the chairs, and I realize that the men strewn around the room are starting to come to, and the last thing I want is a room full of men supporting blond guy’s accusation that I am not the fiancée I may have accidentally purported to be.

“Well thanks for your time,” Alexis says, reading my mind and backing toward the door, and I’m right behind her – or in front of her, but following, since we’re walking backwards – and Ivy’s right next to me.

Two flights down in the stairwell the three of us stop breathlessly and crouch on a step and I see that Alexis is holding a yellow sheet of paper, something that looks very much like... a hotel bill. With billing information. *Paul’s* billing information.

“Tell me he’s a local,” I say, then issue a quick prayer upwards and a promise to start going to church, though I think we both know it’s too late for that.

“Herman Oaks,” Alexis reads. “Utah.”

“Oh God,” I mutter, burying my face in my hands. “Oh no.”

Ivy pats my back supportively, but I’m starting to feel like I will never feel better.

“If he went anywhere,” Alexis begins, “it would probably be home.”

Ivy is looking between the two of us, more eagerly than I feel is respectful of the situation. They’re both staring at me, waiting for an answer I do not want to give, but am starting to recognize is rapidly becoming less a last resort and more the almost-next step.

“Is it on the way to the Grand Canyon?” I ask, resigned.

We sit in the rental car, still parked at the hotel, but with the engine running so we can blast the air conditioning. “Who’s left?” I ask, peeking out between the two front seats as Ivy and Alexis pull out their respective man maps and lists of names.

“Um... In addition to Bill and Paul, we have Hansel, Ivan, Andrew and Derek,” Ivy reports, biting her lower lip worryingly.

“Any ideas on how to find them?” I ask Alexis, who is staring out the windshield, lost in thought.

“Stroll the streets?” Alexis suggests lamely, and we all look out the windshield at the wilted tourists slumping down sidewalks that appear to sizzle under the blazing afternoon sun.

Paul’s hotel bill is sitting on the dash and I reach ahead and pull it back, staring at it as though it might somehow jar my memory. *I now pronounce you husband and wife. Mr. and Mrs. Paul... July.* His last name is July? I could be Julianna July? Maybe if I were a porn star.

I stare at the list of names, then back at the hotel bill, with Paul’s sloppy signature at the bottom. “Guys,” I say, sticking my head between the front seats and looking first at Alexis, then at Ivy. “Did either of you notice a guest book when we were at the Glitz & Glory?”

“Huh,” says Ivy, frowning as she peers into the guest book at the Glitz & Glory.

We flipped through pages of names with yesterday’s date until we came to the first entries for today, and sure enough, there it is: my easily readable signature, Julianna Sopher. Mrs. Julianna Sopher. I actually wrote *Mrs.* What is my problem?

The more immediate, pressing problem, however, is that the name next to my name is an illegible scrawl, written by a clearly drunken man with his non-writing hand, a hand that may or may not be missing its thumb.

“Looks like a P,” I say, though the truth is, like Paul’s signature, only the first letter has any real shape, and it could just as easily be a—

“I think it’s a D,” says Alexis, looking closely.

“But look at that thing at the bottom,” Ivy says, pointing to something that may or may not have been intentional. “I think it’s a B.”

“Well,” I say, at a loss for words, and we all look at our lists of names. “Can we safely rule out Hansel, Ivan, and Andrew then?”

Ivy nods. “I think so. The first letter is definitely loopy.”

“Definitely,” Alexis agrees, and we cross them off.

“Bill and Paul, check,” I say, when we’re back in the car. “Remind me which one was Derek?”

Alexis looks blank and I turn to Ivy.

“All I have is this,” Ivy says, digging in her purse, and pulling out something small and white. “A business card.”

Alexis takes the card and stares at it with a cocked brow and a somewhat bemused expression.

“What?” I say. “What is it?” Wordlessly she hands me the card, and I take it gingerly, as though it might burst into flames or hold some terrible secret. Derek Somebody, Cowboy-hat wearing father of ten, husband of three. Derek Somebody, ex-con, recent Jesus convert.

But it doesn’t say anything like that. Derek Holt, it reads. King Ranch. And beside that, an embossed image of a horse, rearing wildly, tamed by somebody in a cowboy hat. But I quickly see that that is not what Alexis had been staring at. The address, sans phone number or email address (of course, how quaint) – is not local. In fact, it’s not even nearby. King Ranch, the card reads. Nestled in the beautiful San Juan Mountains... of Colorado.

I stare at Ivy and Alexis, jaw dropped, and Alexis is already unfolding her map. We stare at it desperately, as though through sheer willpower we can move Colorado closer to Nevada.

Alexis finds the Grand Canyon and holds a finger on it, while Ivy scouts out Herman Oaks, Utah, and stabs it with her finger. Reluctantly I peer at the giant space on the map that is Colorado, and the southwestern mountain range identified in small italicized font as San Juan. I extend a shaky finger and touch it to the map, and we all stare, unimpressed.

Herman Oaks and the Grand Canyon are not close, but the King Ranch is much, much farther. Our fingers form an isosceles triangle, tall and thin, with Herman Oaks and the Grand Canyon forming the shorter base, and the San Juan mountains the far distant

apex. From this view it would appear that Herman Oaks and the Grand Canyon are equidistant from Vegas, and deciding which one to start with will be—

A sharp knock on the window jars us from our map reverie and we turn to find a burly security guard staring at us sternly through the driver's side window, which Alexis slowly rolls down.

"Do you ladies have an appointment?" he asks, and on his cue we turn to see the "Reserved – Parking by Appointment Only" signs littering the tiny chapel parking lot. I didn't see Suzanne when we were looking at the guest book, but I have little doubt that she is behind this. What kind of chapel even *needs* a security guard, anyway?

"No," Alexis answers, and Ivy shoots him her most beatific smile. I slouch in the back, hoping to become invisible.

"Have y'all found what you're looking for?" he inquires, nodding at the dreaded map, which Alexis thrusts at Ivy, who tries in vain to refold it back into its original tidy rectangle.

"Sort of," Alexis replies.

"Then you'll be heading home now," he says, and there's a slight rise at the end, like it might be a question, though we all know that it's not.

"We'll be heading somewhere," Alexis says, pressing the button to roll up the window, her voice dismissive, and when I look up her eyes meet mine sympathetically in the rearview mirror.

"Road trip!" Ivy says, turning the radio on as Alexis shifts into reverse.

"Road trip," I echo back faintly, not quite believing my predicament, like I'm watching all this from some knowing place in the sky, either unwilling or unable to help myself.

And then I am back, back in the car, and we are turning onto the shimmering strip of infamous pavement, the car pointed east, and it is with a distant, dim smile that I realize that one wish has come true: We are leaving Las Vegas.

2

When the phone rings on Sunday I pick it up without thinking. I have a paintbrush in one hand but I've been doing more daydreaming than painting and the main subject of my fantasies is James. Convenience stores and James.

"Hello?" I say, the phone tucked between my chin and my ear. I'm expecting Ivy with a new story of a fight with Doug, or, fingers crossed, Alexis, calling to confess all the sordid details of this secret British accent story.

"Hey."

He doesn't say anything else, and he doesn't have to. He is the only person I know with a Boston accent (except his cousin Rocky, who I am not expecting any calls from), and I feel myself smiling even as I put the paintbrush down and try to compose myself.

"Hey," I reply, straightening on the stool. My heart is fluttering in my chest and I twist my right hand, its fingers suddenly cold as all the blood rushes to other parts of my body.

"You busy?" he asks.

"Just doing some work," I answer.

"Painting?"

My brows raise, surprised.

"Rocky told me what you do," he adds, and I didn't even know Rocky knew who I was. Maybe I can be expecting a call from Rocky, then.

"Yeah, I'm painting," I say, not entirely sure where this conversation is going. It's two o'clock in the afternoon on a Sunday, and I usually spend this time working, or napping, or sitting around thinking I should be working or napping.

"You want to get together later?" he asks, later sounding like lay-ta, and I kind of like it. I don't know what he means by get together, and I'm pretty sure that no matter what he does mean by it, I want to be a part of it, but that piece of me that keeps pulling away is warring with the other ninety-eight percent of my body.

“What did you have in mind?” I ask instead, wondering if perhaps that came across as a lurid introduction to phone sex, which is not what I intended it as.

“Dinner,” James says. Dinner. Dinner sounds fine. Dinner sounds safe and public.

“Sure,” I say.

James shows up at seven o’clock on the dot, and I am downstairs waiting for him so he doesn’t have to come up. I wish I had a more stylish winter jacket, but I don’t, and I wish I had more stylish boots and clothes and a better haircut, too. Maybe I should get my eyebrows professionally done.

“Hey,” James says when I step into the lobby, He’s not wearing jeans or his puffy black jacket, and he’s freshly shaven and I can still smell the shaving cream when he steps forward, hooks two fingers under my chin, and kisses me.

Oh God. I want to take off this winter jacket, shout “Follow me!” and race up the stairs to my apartment. But I don’t.

“You smell nice,” I say instead, and he smiles, maybe a little embarrassed.

“Car’s outside,” he says, and holds the door for me to walk through, his hand resting lightly on my lower back as we walk to the car, where he opens that door for me, too.

I hold my breath for the five seconds I am alone in the car, watching James cut across the headlights as he walks around, and I let it out in a noisy whoosh a split second before he opens his door and drops inside. He flashes me a smile and puts the car in gear, pulls away from the curb.

“Where are we going?” I ask, watching his long fingers grip the wheel, noting that the radio has been turned off.

“Carlotti’s,” he says, naming one of those family run Italian places in a really old house, with the dining room on two floors and a huge staircase and a big fireplace and lots of delicious smelling pasta. It isn’t that far away, and as we turn into the parking lot I can hear the crunch of frozen snow beneath the tires and we slide a little bit pulling into a spot. James shuts off the car and hops out, and I start to open my door but he hurries around and does it for me, and I’m a bit surprised.

“Door sticks,” he explains, not backing up as I step out. He kisses me again, a fleeting brush of his tongue, before he steps back and closes the door behind me.

We pick our way across the lot and I wonder if this is our first date, or if the other times count as well. If they count, then this is our third date, which would be a totally

socially acceptable time to sleep with James. If they don't, then this is our first date, and I should have left my legs unshaven as a defense against his considerably attractive... everything.

I smile innocently and we walk inside where it's warm and bustling and the maitre d is already expecting us. "Mr. Matthews," he says by way of greeting, and this is how I learn James's last name. "Good evening."

They take our coats and I hope I'm not underdressed, or overdressed, because the fireplace is quite hot as we pass by. But we don't get a crappy table near the fireplace or the kitchen or the bathroom; they lead us upstairs to a table in the corner, with a rose on the table and pristine place settings and two chairs and plenty of privacy.

We order and make small talk, and I try not to dwell on how long it's been since I've gone out with someone who made me feel this way. Who made me feel anything at all.

When the food arrives I watch covertly as James easily wraps his pasta around his fork, that thing where it's also sort of in the spoon, then pops it neatly in his mouth. I spear a piece of ravioli and chew slowly.

"What's going on with your friend Alexis?" James asks. "She's always checking her phone, looking covert. She just came back from Namibia, right?"

I nod, though I am, in fact, not sure that Namibia is the right country. I really thought it started with an M. Or an N. Who cares? I nod again, knowledgeably.

"When's she going back?"

I pause, fork halfway to my mouth. "She's not," I tell him. "It was a year thing."

"Yeah?" he says, clearly looking like he knows otherwise. "Okay."

"Why?" I ask, suspicious, curious, a little annoyed. Why would James know something about Alexis that I don't know?

"I saw her come out of the travel agent's," he says with a shrug.

"That doesn't mean—"

"With a ticket."

What? A ticket? We stare at each other, James clearly pleased to know something I don't know, and me not quite so pleased with Alexis.

"Well," I say, not really wanting to gossip about my friend, but actually quite eager to get a guy's opinion on this, "the thing is, she went to..." Crap. What country did he say? "...Africa for a year, partly for this research paper, partly for the experience..."

And I explain the whole British accent mystery and how Alexis never tells us anything about guys in her life and James looks interested.

“Drama,” he says, drinking his water, and I smile.

“It is drama,” I say. “It’s like a movie.”

“Maybe she met this old wily British lawyer while she was there, and he was her mentor, but then he became her lover,” James suggests with a smile. “And he mentored her in the ways of the law...”

I snicker, knowing what’s coming.

“...and love, and then after a year she found out he wasn’t really there to help the good people of Namibia, he was stealing from them...”

“Diamonds!” I gasp, and James nods solemnly.

“So he’s an aging British diamond thief who happens to have a law degree...”

And we spend the rest of the dinner spinning stories about Alexis and British accents, and they get a little politically incorrect and extremely inappropriate, and halfway through the bottle of wine I’m laughing because they’re so ridiculous and not because I’m drunk, and James is laughing too, and this is maybe the best first or third date I have ever been on.

After the meal James holds both my coat and the door, then the car door again, and I shiver anxiously I sit in the cold interior waiting for him to walk around. Night’s over. I feel a little sad, a little relieved. Now James will take me home and we’ll sit in the car and there’ll be that awkward pause until he leans over and kisses me, then I’ll open the door and get out and—

James drops in with an icy whoosh as the door closes behind him.

“Fucking cold out,” he mutters, twisting the key in the ignition and turning up the heat, even though it just pushes cold air through the car as we sit there shivering and waiting for the window to defrost.

When we can see James shifts into gear and pulls out of the parking lot, back onto the main road leading into town, driving a little on the slow side. The roads are icy so I can’t be sure if he’s being cautious or just extending our time together or maybe a bit of both, but I don’t mind either way.

When we get into town, however, James does not turn left to go to my street. He turns right, to the opposite part of town, which is not especially far from my part of town,

down a long street filled with small apartment buildings and snow-covered cars lining the curb.

My eyes are flitting left and right, trying to determine where exactly we're going, because it's a Sunday night and his bar isn't open and Evan's pub is in the other direction...

James pulls into the parking lot of a small apartment building, parks in the slot numbered 202 and turns off the car. He unbuckles his seatbelt then turns and reaches across, fiddles with my door handle, and pushes my door slightly open. His eyes on my face, intent and serious, he undoes my seatbelt, then opens his own door and climbs out of the car.

I sit there alone, surprised, a little impressed, a little bit of everything. I can see James, silhouetted by a street lamp, pausing outside the car, hands in his pockets, breath coming out in little white bursts.

Ek.

I put my hand on the door and push it open, stepping out into the freezing night with its full moon and myriad of stars, the dark towers of pine trees giving the road a silent, ghostly feel. I turn at the sound of feet crunching over snow, and follow James to the building, where he produces a set of keys and lets us in.

He bypasses the elevator and heads to the fire door, and we climb up one flight of stairs to the second floor and the first door that James doesn't hold for me. I wonder if he's nervous. I wonder if I am.

He stops in front of door 202 and finds another key, turning the lock. The door swings open slightly and it is dark and quiet inside, and he waits, a quick glance at my face, my shoulder, my knees. I put my hand on the door and push it open a little more, then step inside. It is dark and warm and smells like cleaning products. And that is all I really have time to think because James steps in after me and closes the door behind us, the keys falling to the floor with a clatter as he pushes me up against the wall and kisses me very thoroughly. I don't know when my coat comes off but suddenly I can feel his hands under my shirt, on my stomach, my back, my ass, and his coat is on the floor too, and all at once it's too much and not nearly, not ever, enough.

The next morning I wake up to the sound of water shutting off in the bathroom and I spring out of the bed, dig a tin of breath mints out of my purse and hastily chew on two as I throw on my shirt and scramble around for my underwear. I spot them just as I hear the

handle turning on the bathroom door so I yank on my skirt instead and am stuffing the panties into my purse when I spot James walking down the hall, a white towel wrapped around his waist, his hair damp and curled against his scalp. My mouth tingles, and not just because of the mints.

He pauses in the doorway, looking me over carefully. It's not that late; the sun is still rising and it lights the room, lights him perfectly, and I cannot believe that I had sex with that man last night. More than once.

James does not look pleased, however. He has not moved from the door and his hand is still on his hip, holding up the towel. I wonder if he thinks I'm stealing. He takes a step toward me and I step back, bumping the edge of the bed and sitting down abruptly, gracelessly. James closes the distance between us, letting go of the towel and standing between my knees. He pushes them up, grasps the hem of my skirt and pulls it back down my legs. He removes my shirt in a similar fashion and I feel cold and shy lying there naked before him. But he's naked too, and this appears to be very much what he wants, because he smiles, lowers himself onto me, and murmurs "Better" in my ear.

The next two weeks pass in a blur of James. Let Alexis have her secret British accent and Ivy her numerous affairs – James is my secret affair and definitely the best secret I have ever kept in my life. I don't know why it's a secret, exactly, but James has not mentioned us to anyone either, and we rarely go out together, usually eating in, ordering in, having sex. My bed, his bed, my living room, his living room, kitchen, hallway, office at the bar... Oh my. This is a part of me I am not familiar with, and I hope my inexperience doesn't show. Though if it does, James has tactfully pretended not to notice, and he doesn't seem to be turned off by it in any way. He is kind and funny despite the rough edges, and his Boston accent in my ear as he lies on top of me or behind me or under me has a way of making every part of my body tingle.

One morning while making pancakes James mentions that he has to go to Boston early the next month and have I ever been to Boston? Did I want chocolate chips in my pancakes?

"What?" I ask, looking up from the paper, my hair damp from the shower and sticking uncomfortably to my face.

"Chocolate chips?" James repeats, glancing at me over his shoulder. I nod, though I can tell from the straight line of his back that he is waiting for me to answer the first question and knows that I heard it.

“Why do you have to go to Boston?” I ask as he sprinkles chocolate chips into the pan like a pro.

“My brother’s getting married,” he says.

This is the first I’ve heard of his family. “How many brothers do you have?”

“Three, one sister.”

“What’s his fiancée like?”

“Well,” James says, flipping the pancakes, still not looking at me. “His fiancé is a he, and he’s a nice guy. You know. For a guy.”

He glances over his shoulder at me, brows raised, like, Can you believe this? and I shrug because I don’t know his brother and I’m not going to judge. I like the fact that James doesn’t seem to be too upset with having a gay brother.

“I didn’t know same sex marriages were legal in Boston,” I say, grabbing the syrup from the fridge.

“Get the butter too,” James says, flipping the pancakes onto plates, and I grab the container from the bottom of his strangely meticulous fridge. “It’s more of a commitment ceremony, I guess,” he says, joining me at the counter, putting a fork and knife on my plate as I breathe in the smell of melted chocolate and then smother it with syrup.

“Interesting,” I say, not wanting to say “I’ll come!” in case his earlier query was just that, a question, and not an invitation.

“Yeah,” he says, cutting into his pancakes, chewing a piece slowly, then looking at me over his fork. “So you want to come?”

I pause mid-slice, and nod carefully. “Sure. If you want me to.”

“Well sure,” James returns. “If you want to.”

“Well,” I say. “If that’s what you want.”

“I want what you want.”

“I want you to be happy,” I say.

“I want that for you too,” he replies, and I’m losing the battle to keep the smile off my face. He asked me to come to Boston.

“I’ll come to Boston,” I say.

On Wednesday night Alexis tells Ivy and I she has something to tell us. We meet at Evan’s pub and sit at a small table in the corner and order a plate of something greasy with dipping sauce and a pitcher of beer.

"I'm going back," Alexis says, and I know instantly what she means, but Ivy nearly chokes on her beer.

"Back?" she repeats. "To Africa?"

"Yeah," Alexis replies. "In two weeks."

"For how long?" I ask, already suspecting this, but not wanting it to be true. I missed my friend. I miss her now, even though she's back.

"Six months," she says, looking between us, guilty almost. "I just have to see about something. I don't know. I'm an idiot."

Ivy and I share a look, knowing this is about British accent guy; maybe he's stealing diamonds, maybe he's not, but we don't say anything.

"We'll miss you," Ivy says, and I nod my agreement.

Our platter of fried everything arrives and I am reaching for a mozzarella stick when I hear, "Alexis! You're back!" and we turn in unison to see Melanie – *that* Melanie – hurrying across to our table, a big grin on her face.

"Melanie!" Alexis exclaims, rising to greet her, and they hug. Alexis and Melanie went to the same university and used to drive back home together for long weekends and holidays, and so Alexis knows her better than either Ivy or myself.

Alexis slips back into the booth and gestures for Melanie to sit beside her, but Melanie shakes her head. "I can't stay long," she says, and I wait for her to notice me, to pull my hair and punch me, to somehow know that I am the one who stole her boyfriend, but it doesn't happen. "Hey guys," she says by way of greeting, and Ivy and I say hi back and I chew slowly on my cheese stick, tasting nothing. Of course she doesn't know, I remind myself. And even if she did know, it looks like she's fine. It's been two weeks. Maybe they hadn't been together that long. Maybe you're not a boyfriend stealer after all.

Alexis is telling her that she's about to go back to Africa in two weeks, and I think about my trip to Boston with James and wonder what story I'll tell to cover it up. Will we still be a secret then? How far away is this trip? I'm terrible with dates. Three weeks, four. A long weekend in a new city with a new guy and a forward-thinking commitment ceremony. I smile into my beer. Until I hear it.

"Melanie, babe, what's taking—"

His voice cuts off and I know he has seen me, and I freeze, wondering if please maybe this time it can actually be Rocky's Boston accent, and yet I know that it is not. I look up to see James, stock still at the side of the table, one hand on Melanie's back, probably on top of her long blonde hair, his gaze frozen on mine.

I keep my face blank as Melanie turns, smiles at him, kisses his cheek.

“Sorry sweetie,” she says. “Just catching up with a friend. This is Alexis. We went to school together. And this is Ivy and Julianna.” She gestures to us each in turn, and Ivy and Alexis smile at James, completely unaware that every piece of my heart is lying in a broken mess on the table. I want to cry. I want to throw up. I want to hit something. I want out of this booth, but I am trapped in near the wall.

I nudge Ivy with an elbow and mutter, “Get out, please.” She slides out of the booth with a startled look and I squish past her, my arm bumping James’s as I struggle into a jacket that feels like it will never be warm enough.

“Sorry guys,” I say to Alexis and Ivy, tossing money on the table. “I forgot I had a painting due tomorrow.” Without waiting for their response, I squeeze through the people in the pub, dodge the guys throwing darts and the waitress with her full tray and finally emerge outside into the dark, quiet night.

I gulp in the blissfully cold air as though I had just emerged from a lifetime spent underwater, my fingers numb as I struggle to zip up my coat.

The door slams open behind me and though I somewhat expected it, I am still surprised when I feel his hand on my elbow and his voice in my ear.

“Jules, wait!” he says, louder than necessary as I wrench my arm from his grasp and stalk in the direction of home. I don’t want to cry in front of him. I don’t want him to know that the past two weeks meant anything to me.

My face is burning with humiliation and shame. My feet slip on the sidewalk and I curse angrily as I nearly fall but catch myself.

“Jules.” I know he’s reaching for me, even before I feel his hand on my shoulder, turning me to face him.

“Let go,” I say icily. It is an effort to get the words out past the aching lump in my throat, and I hate that he looks sincerely upset and not smug and not defensive.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Please let me explain.”

It’s such a cliché that I want to hit him, and then I think, Why not? and do, though I’m not especially strong and my fist glances off his shoulder, making him stumble back on the slippery sidewalk, but doing no real damage. Or at least not enough.

“We were broken up,” he says, and I stare at him as though trying to see what the hell I had been doing for the past two weeks. “I swear it. When I told you we were done, we were. I broke it off with her. For you. A chance with you.”

“Not satisfied?” I sneer, though my lips are already starting to freeze and I know that I don’t have long before the tears come, and I will not let him see them. I am humiliated enough.

“She came over a few nights ago, James this and James that...” He stares at me pleadingly. “I didn’t know how to say no. I didn’t want to hurt her. I’m not going to let it go on. I’m going to end it.”

“Take your time,” I say firmly, enjoying the surprise on his face. “Take as long as you need. Take forever. I don’t care. Don’t call me when it’s over. Don’t come to my home or find me in the pub or in the grocery store. Leave me alone.”

“Jules,” he begins again, and I am already turning because the tears are coming. “Julianna, please don’t say that,” he says. “I’ll make it all up to you. This isn’t what I do.”

“Have fun in Boston,” I say without turning around.

I avoid James for two weeks. He calls a few times, even rings the buzzer, but I never answer. I have a few painting commissions, and I use this time to do some of the best work I have ever done, as though finding just the right shadow will make those two weeks never have happened.

I last three days after the Melanie discovery before confessing my sordid two-week secret to Alexis and Ivy. Partly my confession is due to the fact that I had locked myself in my apartment, hermit-like, with six cans of chocolate frosting for several days and they became suspicious, and also because Alexis has a plane to catch and if I break down and tell Ivy after she’s gone, she’ll be hurt. Plus I know she is mad at some British man, and hopefully her rage will transfer to the my situation.

It does.

“That asshole!” she exclaims, nearly dropping her spoonful of frosting.

They had both listened to my shame-faced confession with sober, sincere expressions, and neither took it personally that I had not told them sooner.

“Jules!” Ivy says, mouth agape. “He is so not your type!”

“I know,” I agree, nodding fervently, licking frosting from the roof of my mouth. “Especially not now.”

“Especially now,” she echoes.

“Oh, Jules, I’m so sorry,” Alexis adds, as though this were somehow her fault.

“If you guys had known,” I ask tentatively, “at the beginning... Would you have told me not to go for it?”

There is a moment of silence as they suck thoughtfully on their spoons, then glance at each other.

“No,” Ivy says finally, slowly. “I would have told you to go for it.”

“Yeah,” Alexis agrees. “Me too.”

“Truth is, J,” Ivy continues after a moment, “I mean, since Kyle, you’ve kind of... sworn off guys.”

I think I did love Kyle, my first official boyfriend. We met at college and I fell for him slowly, over time, instead of the instantaneous lust I felt for James. Kyle was handsome and kind, a talented artist who was far better-looking than I was, and he seemed genuinely interested in everything I had to say. It took some time before I believed his interest was genuine, and that I was not just his sometimes-partner in our sketch class or that it was simple coincidence that our art stations always ended up right next to each other, but after a few months of subtle pursuit, a light bulb went off and I realized, *Jules, this guy likes you. Likes you.* And I liked him back.

When he kissed me after a Christmas dorm party I spent the entire two-week vacation wondering what it would be like to kiss him again. Three years later we had settled into a comfortable routine that I believed was love. Everybody else said it was. They gave “us” gifts, they invited “us” out, they called to talk to “us.” Sometimes it was nice being part of an “us,” and sometimes it wasn’t. Sometimes it felt smothering, and sometimes it felt lonely, like in being an “us” I was no longer a me, and Alexis and Ivy became the only people I hung out with alone; all our other friends were couples who wanted to go out as couples, which kind of grated on my nerves.

Evidently the three-year mark was when it started to get to Kyle, too, because one day after class I came back to our tiny apartment to find him packing up his belongings (*our* belongings) and preparing to load them into our Figure Drawing 101 instructor’s car. She was there helping him pack.

“Stella!” I exclaimed, startled at seeing her in our apartment, and failing to notice the glaring emptiness of much of the tiny living room behind her. “What are you doing here?”

“Er...” was her only response before she squeezed past me out the door carrying two large black garbage bags.

“Kyle!” I called into the apartment, kicking off my shoes and only faintly recognizing that there weren’t quite as many pairs of “our” shoes on the rack now as there had been just that morning. “What is Stella Graham doing here?”

I was not suspicious. What this suggests I don’t know, trust or naïveté or simple disillusionment, but in the seemingly eternal moment before my question and his response, my eyes shifted around our living room, then to the kitchen, then the dining room (all visible from the doorway, all reachable in four or less steps) and I knew.

He stepped out of the bedroom then, his shaggy hair mussed, wearing the t-shirt we had gotten on vacation in Disneyland and a pair of shorts, his tanned legs looking too good in flip-flops, a fistful of ties in his hand.

“Jules,” he said, and then stopped, as if he had completed his explanation.

I suppose he had, because the scene was more than clear: he was leaving me for our former nude drawing instructor, and he was moving out.

“Let me help you,” I said, my voice distant. A faint chill settled over me, like a fog that never quite lifted, and I picked up a box to help him pack.

“Maybe,” I finally consent, because Alexis and Ivy are still looking at me. “I guess. I mean, it’s hard to refuse something that’s not really offered, you know?”

“What are you talking about?” Alexis scoffs, putting her frosting aside and firmly pressing the lid on, as though that will save her. “Tons of guys have been after you and you turned them all down!”

“As if!” I exclaim, knowing this to be completely untrue. But Alexis is loyal and supportive, and of course she would say that.

“Whatever,” Ivy retorts, and though we form a triangle on the floor, it suddenly seems that they are on one side, and I am on the other. “What about Mark?”

“Boring,” I say. “Just one time at the bar.”

“Kendall?” Alexis asks.

“Ken Doll?” I return, using our nickname for him, because not only did he look like a Ken doll, but he also had ridiculously muscled and stiff arms that barely bent, like a doll’s.

“Patrick and Dermot?” Ivy suggests, and I look between the new tag team, wondering how it is that they remember these guys better than I do.

“Both in jail,” I remind her, and she concedes that point with a graceful tilt of the head. “Whatever,” I say. “It’s not important. What’s important is that we all hate James.”

“We do,” they echo faithfully, and I nod, putting the lid on my now-empty frosting container and tossing it into the trashcan across the room in a perfect three pointer.

Today is the day of Alexis’s flight back to Africa (I have got to write down the name of the country) and I have just come from the airport where Ivy and I bid her goodbye with many tears and hugs. This is supposed to be a six month trip, but I have seen her take covert cell phone calls on more than one occasion, and I suspect that not only are things back on with British accent, they are probably going to be on for more than six months. But then what do I know about relationships? Maybe I’d just like to see a successful one.

I pull up to my apartment building and park at the curb, absently twisting the key from the ignition. I step outside and shove my hands into my pockets, my breath coming out in long billows of steam, and it is only when I am halfway up the half-heartedly shoveled walkway to the front door that I see James rising from his seat on the icy steps. I freeze.

He looks down at me, hands in the pockets of his puffy black jacket, his legs looking long and lean in his jeans, and I can see that he’s trying but failing to keep his face perfectly blank.

I want to stride right past him, unlock the door and slam it in his face, but I don’t want to go too near him. I don’t want to feel his hand on my arm or anywhere else, to hear him say my name or any other words, and I don’t want to feel my lower lip start to tremble like it is right now.

I turn instead and start stalking back down the sidewalk, thinking that the theatre isn’t so far, and maybe I’ll see a movie, or just hide in there until James goes away.

“Julianna, please talk to me,” James says, all the emphasis on please, and I see a flicker as his fingertips come near my elbow.

I ignore him, keeping my eyes straight ahead, wondering if maybe this isn’t the best way to show him I don’t care, if perhaps acting like I was totally okay with seeing him would have been more convincing, but it may be too late.

I stop, and he stops too, abruptly, surprised at how easily I have surrendered. “Hi,” I say, and it sounds more like, “What?” He just stares at me, part apology and part something else I can’t quite bear to think of. Everything in my chest is compressing in on itself, like it can somehow smother my heart and protect it from whatever the hell it is that James seems to be doing to it.

“Hi,” is all he says, and I stare at him for another moment before sighing tiredly and starting to walk again. I don’t know where I’m going, but I don’t want to turn back.

“Jules, please come somewhere with me. Please talk to me. I’m sorry about... before. Nothing happened with her. I promise.”

“She’s your girlfriend!” I snap before I can bite back the words, and he looks torn, like he can’t quite find the words he’s looking for.

“She’s not,” he says finally. “She’s really not my girlfriend. I told her. Again. I told her I couldn’t do it, that there was someone else.”

“Did you tell her it was me?” I ask, not sure if I wish he had or not.

“No,” he replies.

“Good,” I retort. “But it doesn’t matter. I don’t believe you, and I’m not going to trust you again.”

“I’ll prove it to you,” he says. “Whatever you want.” This catches me off guard. “Anything,” he adds.

“There’s nothing,” I say finally. “I don’t want anything from you.”

“Because of Melanie?” he asks, and he looks pitiful now, hunched and cold even in his puffy jacket, hands deep in his pockets, dark eyes fastened on mine with well-meaning and promise. “I’ll call her right now,” he offers. “If that’s it. If you don’t believe me that that’s over, then I’ll call her now and prove it to you.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me,” I say. “What happened was nothing, and I regret it, and it’s over, and I don’t want to do it again.” I’m lying. Every fiber of my body wants to do it again – and again and again and again – but I’m not willing to go back down that road.

“Six months,” he says. “I’ll find you in six months. And when you still haven’t forgotten a single second of those two weeks, we’ll put this behind us. I know I fucked up, and I’m sorry. I’m not perfect, but I’m not afraid to try this thing either, Julianna, and you can tell yourself and me and your friends that you’re too mad or you just don’t care, but you’re afraid, and you’re going to miss out on the best thing that ever happened to you.”

He’s staring at me so seriously, so close and so intense, that I close my eyes for a second, breathe the stinging cold air up my nose and try in vain to clear my head. A tiny part of me is agreeing with James, is asking why waste six months if something is inevitable, but another, bigger, part of me is saying it’s not inevitable. It’s over. And it always will be.

“I have to go,” I say, stepping away, turning my back on him, heading down the sidewalk, half-listening for his feet on the icy pavement following me. But he doesn’t come. I picture him in my mind, wavy hair disheveled, cheeks red with cold, breath sharp and heavy in the air as he watches me go.

Six months. Starting now.

CHAPTER THREE

We sit in the baking parking lot of a gas station just a few miles out of town, the lights and buildings of Las Vegas shimmering in the afternoon heat like an unwanted mirage.

As if by magic, Ivy had broken out her “emergency only” credit card (the one where the bills were addressed only to Doug) and said that if anything qualified for an emergency, this did. Plus Doug wouldn’t get the bill until well after we had returned, and she would come up with a lie to explain our unexpected mileage in the meantime. (It was unlikely, we had reasoned, that she would be able to explain away an annulment charge. Plus it was kind of tacky to ask your best friend’s husband to pay for it.)

And so, credit card in hand, we had promptly paid for gas, nachos, a case of water, a small desert survival kit, and one of every kind of chocolate bar they had in store. A different kind of survival kit, but just as necessary.

Alexis takes one side of the map, Ivy the other, and we stare at the ominous little southwestern triangle. “Where to first?”

I peer between the seats, junk food wrappers rustling noisily, and stare unhappily at our options. Knowing my luck (or woeful lack thereof), part of me thinks we should start with Derek, the furthest, and work our way back. Another, falsely rich part of me, thinks we should each rent a car and take a location, then drive the lucky guy back to Vegas for a quickie annulment. This option I do not voice aloud, because I doubt Ivy or Alexis would go for it – well, actually, I strongly suspect that Ivy would, but there is the equally strong suspicion that she would not return on time, if at all – and Alexis would probably hit me.

I consider Bill, the missing concierge, who is equally as far away as Paul, the jittery groom. Bill’s hasty and suspicious departure – and, now that I think about it, uncanny resemblance to a slightly younger James – is enough to arouse suspicion in the most trusting of souls. Sure, Paul’s flight was equally hasty, but he had a wedding to

prepare for, a predicament to which I can most definitely relate. But another part of me thinks that Paul is the better choice, because if he did run back to a wedding, he would need to have our marriage annulled in order to follow through on his current engagement. Maybe I'd be doing the guy a favour. Or maybe I'd just kill him. Either way.

"Coin toss?" I suggest, and Alexis cuts me a disbelieving look.

"Do you have a three-sided coin?" she asks dryly, and Ivy snickers.

Hmm. That would have made it much easier.

"How about this?" Ivy asks, turning in her seat to reach past me for the bulging bag of chocolate bars and candy, rummaging inside and pulling out three items: a Butterfinger, a Mr. Goodbar, and a pack of Jolly Ranchers.

"You want to eat our way to a decision?" I ask doubtfully, then reach for the Butterfinger.

"Nooo," she says, holding the candy out of reach. "Give me your purse."

Suspiciously I hand Ivy my bag and watch as she collects her own and Alexis's off the floor in front.

"Close your eyes," she orders, and dutifully I do so, thinking of just how much I would really like to have eaten that Butterfinger. I hear things unzipping, some crinkling, some more zippering, then, "Okay, open your eyes."

I do, blinking against the sunlight spilling through the windshield, and see Alexis holding two purses up, Ivy holding the third.

"There's a bar in each bag," Ivy says. "Jolly Ranchers mean Derek, because he lives on a ranch; Mr. Goodbar is Paul, who is supposed to be getting married; and Butterfinger is Bill, because nothing in here suggested hotel or concierge, and it's alliterative."

I reach out and stab my own bag with a finger, and Ivy slips the handle off Alexis's arm and unzips it, pulling out the...

"Jolly Ranchers," she announces unnecessarily, since we can all see.

"Oh," Alexis and I say in unison, and we stare dismally at the shiny foil packet.

"That's the furthest one," Ivy says, nodding slowly.

"Like three times as far," I say, wondering if time and money will be on our side. My own wedding is not for seven days and it would probably be a good thing if I got back at least a day in advance.

"How about not this one?" I suggest, and Alexis and Ivy quickly nod.

“Yeah, good idea,” Ivy says, pulling the chocolate bars out of the purses and handing them back. I hastily unwrap the Butterfinger and take a bite.

“So it’s between Butterfinger and Goodbar,” Alexis reports. “Which is it?”

“Coin toss,” I say, not wanting to choose and choose wrong.

Alexis fishes a spare coin out of the ashtray and holds it out.

“Heads Paul, tails Bill,” Ivy says as the quarter is tossed.

Alexis catches the coin and flips it over. “Tails,” she announces.

“Bill it is,” I say, and we all look at the quarter.

“Great. A decision,” Alexis echoes. We continue staring at the coin resting on the back of her hand.

Yes. It is great to have made a decision. I lick chocolate off my fingers and mentally pat myself on the back. Old sticky-fingered-fast-fleeing Bill is about to get a visit from his angry wife (hopefully his wife, and not just some irate former hotel guest) and he is really going to be sorry. This is definitely the right choice. We have decided—

“I think it should be Paul first,” I blurt out, and Alexis flips her hand over expertly and catches the quarter in her palm. “He’s getting married soon – to someone else – and if so... I just think we should get the annulment first.”

“He lives in Utah,” Ivy points out. “Maybe two wives is... okay.”

“That’s a stereotype,” Alexis snaps, tossing the quarter back into the ashtray and slamming it shut. “But if that’s the case, you deserve to be some guy’s only wife, only girlfriend, only *one*, and Paul is a bastard.”

Ivy and I exchange a significant look at this outburst, but say nothing. Since Alexis’s second return from Africa there had been no more covert phone calls, no more secret plane tickets, no more anything. Whatever she had returned to had gone horribly wrong and she has since refused to speak about it.

And she doesn’t discuss it now. Instead she puts the car in gear and cuts the wheel sharply to the right, folding the map in one hand so the route to Herman Oaks, Utah, is visible, and this is how we start the husband hunt.

We drive for fifty silent miles before I sit up sharply in the backseat, whacking my elbow on the handle and yelping.

“What is it?” Alexis asks, glancing back over her shoulder. “Bee?”

“No,” I say, my voice a few octaves higher as I rub my throbbing elbow. I don’t know why they call it a funny bone. There is nothing funny about it. I may not be able to use this arm again for a while.

“Jules, what is it?” Ivy interrupts, half-turned in her seat to look at me. “Do you have _____ to _____ pee?”

“I haven’t called James,” I say, brows raised like I can’t quite believe it. How, on the day of my wedding to someone other than my fiancé, do I manage to forget about the one person that could be most hurt by all of this?

“Oh God!” Alexis exclaims, then laughs shortly. “Whoops!”

“Yeah,” I say. Whoops.

The sun has turned a darker orange against the distant horizon, and I glance at the clock: nearly eight. James will be expecting me any minute, and now I have to call and tell him that not only will I not be home tonight, I’m actually headed in the opposite direction. Why, exactly? he’ll rightfully ask, and I’ll say... I’ll say... I have no idea what I’ll say.

“What are you going to tell him?” Ivy asks, still looking at me, concerned.

“No idea,” I respond. “No frickin’ clue.” I pause. “Maybe that I woke up this morning, bound and gagged in the backseat because you guys had secretly decided to extend our weekend by a few days.”

“No,” Alexis says flatly. “That’s stupid. Plus he knows we’re all broke; we wouldn’t have planned this.”

She’s right. I really wish I was a better liar.

“How about we don’t know exactly how it happened, but we woke up this morning at the Grand Canyon and have decided to spend a few days taking in the scenery, now that we’re here?” I try.

“Do you want to use my cell phone?” Alexis offers, but I shake my head mutely. No. I do not want to make this call any sooner than absolutely necessary. Which was about twelve hours ago.

“How long do you think this trip will take?” Ivy asks Alexis. “Driving-wise?”

“Driving...” Alexis says thoughtfully. “Well, assuming we’re right and it’s Paul, we’ll be in Herman Oaks before midnight. That might be too late to drop in, so say we sleep on it and find him first thing in the morning, get the annulment, and head back to Emerton... We should be back around this time tomorrow.”

That's not too bad. Definitely believable on our budget, especially if we've only just miraculously awoken at the Grand Canyon. I wonder if I can buy Grand Canyon postcards here in Nevada?

"If it's not Paul," Alexis continues, "and we head down to Arizona to find Bill... That's another 300 miles, so we'll be there early afternoon, annulled by dinner, and home very early on Tuesday."

Okay. Tuesday. Not so bad. Plenty of time to take part in my wedding preparations... the preparations I haven't exactly had a hand in so far, more than willing to let my mother and James's mother duke it out over floral and seating arrangements.

Because the numbers here are in my favour, I allow myself to overlook the fact that Alexis's calculations have not accounted for things such as sleeping, eating, gas, pee breaks, and any car troubles or erstwhile difficulties we may encounter while traveling solo through the desert.

"If, however," Alexis carries on, "it's not Bill either and we have to head to Colorado... Well, I guess it'll be about eight or nine hours there from the Grand Canyon, not counting the time it takes to find this ranch, because the card just gives the "mountains" as an address..." Oh God. I think I'm going to be sick. I don't want to hear this. I don't want to hear anymore. But I don't tell Alexis to stop talking, and I lean forward so my head is resting next to Ivy's on the headrest. "So say we've found him by lunchtime Wednesday – best case scenario..." I would hardly call anything in these instances "best case," but whatever, "We get the marriage annulled, head back home... It'll be about ten or eleven hours to Vegas, and another five from there to Emerton... So we're looking at lunchtime Thursday."

Lunch. Thursday. Oh God. That's the rehearsal dinner. In my best case worst-case scenario I am barely making it to the rehearsal dinner. I don't even know what the dinner is. I didn't plan the menu. I don't know what the seating arrangements are. I haven't written my vows. I haven't tried on my dress in months. I still don't have shoes or someone to do my hair.

"Here," Alexis says, swerving off the road sharply enough that I bang my already sore elbow against the door again and curse under my breath.

I peer outside into the dim desert night and see the faintly glowing lights of a gas pump and ice box, neon signs promising cool drinks and cigarettes.

“Payphone,” Alexis says into the silence, and when she parks and shuts off the car, windows down, I reach through the front seats and pull the change from the ashtray, a few dollars at least, then climb out and head for the pale blue light of the phone booth.

The receiver feels hot in my hand and I pick it up gingerly, wondering when it was last used, and by whom, and for what reason – because who comes into the middle of nowhere to use a payphone for a legitimate reason? – and I feed all the coins in my hand into the tiny slot and wait for the operator’s voice.

At her prompt I dial James’s work number, knowing he’ll be at the bar now, maybe wondering where I am, or maybe having faith that his loving fiancée is well on her way back home as planned.

“Yeah?”

I hear James’s distracted voice and look around guiltily, as though he’s maybe stepped out from behind the pile of stacked tires. “Hello?”

I shake myself and grip the phone tighter. “It’s me,” I say, and I can picture him sitting at his desk, long-sleeved black shirt, those jeans with the perfect fit, dark shoes, his hair flopping on his forehead, perfect lips curving slightly. I shiver despite the temperature, half wanting to be with him and half wanting to be exactly where I am.

“Hey,” he says, his voice softer, more familiar. “You back?”

I glance toward the car for support, but Alexis and Ivy are just silhouettes, their voices carrying indistinguishably in the air, neither looking at me.

“No,” I say, running my finger over the buttons on the phone, hesitating on the receiver, knowing that one press could end this right now. I drop my hand back to my side.

“I’m going to be late,” I tell him, and there’s no answer. “James?”

“I’m here,” he says, sounding distracted, not at all bothered by the news. “You guys run into traffic?”

“No,” I say.

“Hit the jackpot and having trouble getting all your new clothes home?”

I smile, despite myself, despite the fact that 99% of my brain is occupied with the task of coming up with a good lie.

“We’re actually... taking a road trip,” I say, because this is true and I still haven’t settled on a story.

“A road trip?” he repeats, and I can tell I have his attention now, that whatever he was doing when I called has been set aside and he’s probably sitting straighter in his chair, focused on me. “Where?”

“The Grand Canyon,” I say, wincing, curling my fingers against my leg in some kind of prayer that maybe he can’t see my lying face through the phone.

“You’re going to the Grand Canyon?” he echoes. “Now?”

“We’ll be back...” I start, not knowing what to say. “We’ll be back by Thursday at the latest.”

“Thursday?” he says, a little louder now. “Thursday? You know what Thursday is, right, Jules?”

“The rehearsal,” I tell him. “I know.”

“You know,” he says. “You know.”

“I just...” I want to confess. I just want to tell him and let him decide how to deal with this. Let him decide that he hates me and wants to call this whole thing off, and I’ll just apply for a job at this gas station and live in the desert halfway between Vegas and Herman Oaks, Utah, for the rest of my life.

Or he could say he understands, that it was a mistake, and he could postpone the wedding until I’ve had more time for things, for everything, for this annulment and the Grand Canyon and all the other things I haven’t done and haven’t even thought about doing.

“Jules?” he says, his voice sharp. “You just what?”

“I just have to do this,” I say, and I know it sounds lame but it’s true, I actually *do* have to do this.

“You have to do this,” he repeats, and I am getting tired of him repeating everything I say, like he can’t quite believe that such stupid words are coming out of my mouth at this particular time. “What the hell happened between this morning and right now?” he asks softly.

I don’t really know how to get into what happened between my phone call to him first thing this morning and my phone call now. Upon waking up and finding my marriage certificate scrap I had promptly called James and tried not-so-smoothly to find out if perhaps he had come to Vegas during the night, married me, then run back to Emerton for work in the morning. He hadn’t.

“I just feel like I need more time,” I tell him, hoping he doesn’t repeat it back to me so I hear how weak it sounds. I’ve had this thought a million times over the past months, and have never voiced it.

James sighs loudly into the phone, and I can hear him strumming his fingers on the desk like he does when he’s annoyed but doesn’t want to say the wrong thing.

“I’ll be back,” I promise, and he sighs again.

“You’ll be back,” he repeats, and I really could have had this conversation by myself.

“Yeah,” I say, starting to fidget, ready to hang up. “I have to go.”

“Jules,” he says, like he really can see me, like he knows I’m about to put the phone down. And I know what he’s waiting for.

“I love you,” I tell him softly, facing into the booth like it will absorb the words and neither Alexis nor Ivy will hear that I love my fiancé.

“I love you too,” he says, and then it is he who hangs up on me.

We drive straight through to Herman Oaks, arriving shortly after midnight, and, deciding that we aren’t staying long enough to warrant it, nor do we have enough money to afford it, we rule out getting a room somewhere and decide to sleep in the car.

After a brief circle of the small, pristine town that we cannot rule out as being a commune because it’s too dark to see any... commune-like indicators, we settle on the empty parking lot of a large grocery store and settle in to wait for a more reasonable hour to knock on Paul’s door.

While it is perfect sleeping weather, the car is dreadfully cramped and uncomfortable and every two hours we wake up more irritated than the time before to change seats so that everyone has the opportunity to sort of stretch out their legs in the back, which, to be honest, is no more comfortable than the front.

The first knock of the day, however, is not on Paul’s door, but on the driver’s side window, and I pop open my eyes half-hoping to find Paul on the other side asking “What took you so long?” Instead I find myself looking into the worn face of a middle-aged police officer holding a flashlight, which he promptly shines in my face, blinding me.

“What the fuck!” Alexis shrieks, coming instantly awake as though in the middle of a war zone.

“Alexis!” I hiss, trying to elbow her, but instead find my hand trapped in my seatbelt and so hit the horn, thoroughly waking everybody up and making the police officer pull out his two-way radio.

“What’s going on?” Ivy demands, popping up in the back, peering around rapidly like she is in the same war as Alexis.

“The red coats are coming and we’re out of rations!” I whisper frantically.

“Roll down this window, ma’am,” the cop orders, tapping again with the flashlight. I roll my eyes before fumbling for the keys in the ignition and turning the car on, rolling down the window, and turning it back off.

“Morning,” I say, trying to smile, but finding my lips stuck uncomfortably to my gums. When is the last time I brushed my teeth? Or washed my face? My stomach grumbles. Or eaten?

It was only yesterday that I had gotten drunkenly married, but already it feels like a long time ago. Like I’ve been away camping and have returned home grimy, every crevice filled with sand and smoke and mysterious husbands.

“What’s your business in Herman Oaks?” the cop demands, and I note that his name, embroidered on his pocket, reads Officer Churchill.

“We’re visiting a friend,” I say, sort of truthfully. A friend I might murder. “But we got in too late to drop by, so we thought we’d wait until the sun came up.”

Alexis and Ivy nod supportively, and I hear a crunch as Ivy bites into a chocolate bar, making my stomach rumble loudly.

“Who’s your friend?” Officer Churchill asks, and down the street I can see the slow approach of another squad car. Seriously?

“Paul,” I tell him. “Paul...”

“July,” Ivy pipes up. “He’s getting married, and we came to congratulate him.”

“Y’all know Mary then?” he asks, leaning in curiously, not so formal anymore, as though Paul’s name is a password and we are now accepted members of the Herman Oaks community. Or cult.

“Who?” the three of us chorus blankly.

“Mary,” he repeats, looking at each of our faces in turn, the dome casting our faces in harsh, suspicious shadow.

“Um...” I say, wondering if it is worth trying to lie.

A gun, I think. To turn on Paul, if he's the runaway groom, or on myself, if he's not.

We enter the diner, pleasantly surprised to find it homey and delicious-smelling. "Morning!" chirps the waitress, a plump older woman with puffy blond hair and large red-framed glasses. "Three?"

"Um, yes, please," I say, as Ivy elbows me out of the way.

"Bathroom?" she asks abruptly, and the waitress, whose nametag reads "Barbara Jean" points to a short hallway, toward which Ivy hurriedly scurries.

Alexis and I follow Barbara Jean to a booth near the window, with a terrific view of the parking lot and our rental car.

"Coffee?" Barbara Jean asks, and Alexis and I both nod.

"Three, please," I say. Barbara Jean sets down the menus and heads off, stopping at other tables and laughing a laugh I can't imagine laughing at 6:45 in the morning.

"That was soooo necessary!" Ivy exclaims, slipping into the booth next to Alexis, and I face the two of them tiredly.

"I should have brought my toothbrush in," I groan, catching a whiff of my morning breath as Barbara Jean sets down three steaming mugs of coffee.

"Thank you," Alexis says gratefully, face already buried in the cup.

"You girls need a few more minutes with the menus, then?" Barbara Jean asks, and we nod. "Y'all look tired. Been traveling a while?"

At this the entire diner quiets, and we know that everyone else has stopped mid-sentence, mid-swallow, mid-breath to hear our response. And not only do we know, they know we know, and they don't care. This is potentially big news.

"We're here for Paul's wedding," I say cautiously. "Is he... around?"

There's a general gasp of awkward horror from the diner patrons, and Ivy, Alexis and I turn in our seats to peer out over the room as best we can.

"Has something happened?" Ivy asks, feigning innocence that Alexis and I try to match. "Is Paul okay?"

"Well..." Barbara Jean begins, as though she's a doctor about to deliver really bad news. *Paul's just learned he has three heads, and they don't know which one the brain's in!*

There's a morbid tension in the diner, fellow breakfasters leaning in to listen like someone who already knows the gory details of a car crash, but needs to hear them a second time to get a really good visual.

“Thing is...” Barbara Jean continues, obviously relishing her role as bearer of what-might-be-bad news. “Paul... went to Vegas.”

There is a sharp intake of breath at this revelation, and the whole diner is sitting up straight in their seats, like they can’t believe their trusted Barbara Jean said the V-word in front of strangers, but they’re all secretly practicing saying it in their heads.

Alexis, Ivy, and I share a look like, What the hell? We know Paul went to Vegas. *We* went to Vegas. And if what happened in Vegas had actually *stayed* in Vegas, I wouldn’t be in Herman Oaks, Utah, right now!

“Did he, um, come back?” Alexis asks, glancing warily between Ivy and I. Is that a safe question? I shrug at her. No clue.

“Oh, he came back,” Barbara Jean says, tapping her stubby pencil on her order pad. “He came back and he went right into hiding.”

“What?” the three of us ask in unison. “Hiding?”

“Hiding,” the diner echoes, and we jump.

“At his house?” I ask. “His house at 115 Rosebush Lane? The house he shares with Mary?”

“No!” This shout comes from the entire diner, and the three of us jump again, and even Barbara Jean looks startled at their vehemence.

“Oh...” I say, not quite sure what to add.

“Honey,” Barbara Jean asks quietly, “when was the last time you saw Paul?”

I look frantically from Ivy to Alexis. I don’t think I should say the V-word, but I suspect that an answer like ‘high school’ would not fly with these people, who seem to know every detail about everybody, especially those connected to Paul July.

But Barbara Jean isn’t waiting for my answer.

“Paul and Mary are waiting for marriage before they live together,” she informs me seriously. “They are very true to God’s wish, and would never condone living in sin.”

Oh God. Oh God. Paul’s a virgin. I know it. Paul has been sullied before his wedding night. By me? Well, technically, we would have been married at the time (unless we did it in reverse order, which I can’t be entirely sure of) so maybe that’s forgivable, even if he did flee the next day... Even if I had promised myself to another man (not God).

Oh dear.

“Are y’all on the guest list?” asks an old man in plaid at the counter. “Because I know the names on that list, and your faces don’t match any of ‘em.”

The diner's interest in us is renewed, and they peer curiously at our booth.

"No," I tell the diner at large. "I'm afraid we're not on the guest list. We just..." May have married Paul and need a quick annulment. "We just really wanted to congratulate Paul – and Mary – on their tremendous virtue and commitment."

There is a moment of tense silence, until every head in the diner bobs in unison and Alexis, Ivy, and I are once again welcome.

"Well I'm sure it's just an oversight," says one lady. "We can fit you in, can't we Tony?"

We look over to see Father Tony at the far end of the counter, nodding graciously.

"Of course," he says with a welcoming smile.

"Oh," I say, thinking how awkward it would be to be at my own husband's wedding. "We don't..."

"Nonsense, honey," Barbara Jean interjects. "You traveled all this way, you deserve a break. And what better break than a beautiful wedding? I baked the cake."

"Oh, that's terrific," I say, thinking, Mm, cake. "But we weren't planning on attending, so we didn't really bring anything appropriate to wear."

"Not to worry!" exclaims a rail-thin woman of indeterminate age. "I own the bridal shop in town. We closed for the occasion—" Shops are *closing* for this wedding? Just how big a deal is this? "... but we can make an exception and get you three outfitted just beautifully!"

"And we'll do your hair!" offer two middle-aged woman and skinny teenage boy, all with strangely dyed hair.

"Wow," I begin, looking desperately to Ivy, then Alexis, as both of them stare back at me uselessly. "That's all so generous..."

"We couldn't impose..." Alexis contributes.

"You have so much to do already," Ivy demurs, and I nod at her. Good one.

But the citizens of Herman Oaks are having none of it. They're going to be at what appears to be the bash of the year, and so are we, like it or not.

After a covert teeth-brushing in the diner bathroom, the three of us climb into the rental car and follow Bettina, the skinny bridal shop owner, to the other side of town (all of eight blocks) to select our wedding ensembles. Ivy drives this time, which gives me plenty of opportunity to ponder the fact that I'm not exactly sure what I wore to my own

wedding, let alone what anyone else who may have been there had on. What does one wear to a stranger's wedding?

I gaze idly out the window and slowly it dawns on me that the entire town is closed for this wedding. Today is... Monday, right? Yes. Monday, and not a store is open. Not Rise 'N Shine Bakery, not Donnas' Dos (at which we have an appointment two hours from now), not the quaint antique shop or the used book store, and not... Herman July Developments. Not July Jewelers, July & July, Esq., not even July Gas & Go, next to Bettina's Bridal.

That's a lot of July. And seeing the name on a building marquee five times in five blocks makes the name Herman July just a little suspicious... Herman July. Herman Oaks. What the hell have I maybe married into?

Alexis pokes her neck in between the window and my chair, her eyes inches from mine and strangely bug-like.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" she asks awkwardly, and I think she may be stuck. I put my hand on her forehead and help push her head out.

"That the Julys appear to own this town?" I ask.

"Either that or it's one big happy family," Ivy says, looking a little uncertain.

"Should we follow Bettina or hit the gas?" I ask, looking between them. "Maybe I could just send Paul a letter asking him to return the ring."

"If he's the one who has it," Alexis reminds me. "Plus we came all this way."

"Plus Bettina's already out of the car and waving at us," Ivy adds, turning into the bridal store lot and parking next to Bettina. "Get ready to be dressed like the gems of July."

Bettina is not related to the Julys, but she does confirm that not only did Paul's great-great-great grandfather Herman July found this town (and name it after himself), all subsequent July sons set up shop here, too, leaving the town approximately 90% in the family's hands. But no one seems to mind. The Julys are kind, generous, and hospitable, and those are three mighty good virtues.

We'll see, I think.

I soon find myself ensconced in a floor-length lilac gown made of satin, the kind I remember seeing at prom thirteen years ago, but which is not currently available in any market except that of Herman Oaks. At my expression Bettina explains that while she knows it may not be quite this season's (or last's), with everyone in town attending the

wedding (which is, she confirms, the social event of the season) they're running a little short on selection, and this is the only thing in my size. Well, this and Alexis and Ivy's dresses, because we're all approximately the same size.

And I have fared a bit better than Alexis, who resembles nothing so much as a piece of asparagus in a fitted knee-length green dress with shiny green ruffles at the collar. I meet Ivy's eye and bite my cheek, which Alexis notices and kicks me for.

Ivy's dress is perhaps the most... versatile, in that it could be worn to both a wedding and a funeral, which may come in handy on a day like today. With her bright hair, however, she looks slightly less than gothic in the black velvet sheath that Bettina insists she pair with dark hosiery – for the sake of decency.

“Oh, yes,” Ivy says fervently. “Decency. Quite a virtue!”

The dress fitting doesn't take long, and Bettina waves off our attempts to pay (thank God), and sends us out with three cellophane-covered fashion faux pas.

We still have an hour before our hair appointment, and I want to use this time to track down Paul, find out if we're married and, if so, get my ring back, get our annulment, and get out of town before anybody notices we're gone. Sorry, Bettina.

Dropping into the driver's seat, however, Alexis's face goes from extreme shock to comically blank as she glances at her cell phone.

“What is it?” Ivy asks, slipping in beside her as I climb over the junk food wrappers in the back seat. “Is everything okay?”

“Fine,” Alexis replies shortly. “Fine.”

Ivy glances at me out of the corner of her eye and I shrug. Clearly everything is not fine in cell phone land, but God knows we won't get the truth out of Alexis, who pulls out of the lot and turns back toward the hair salon.

“We still have an hour,” Ivy points out, and Alexis nods.

“I know. But we passed Rosebush Lane on the way down here, so I thought...”

Rosebush Lane. Paul's street. Where Paul is ostensibly in hiding, and has been for the past twenty-four hours. Well not anymore, I think, as Alexis makes the turn onto the wide street with large old homes and skillfully landscaped yards. The truth is about to come out.

115 Rosebush Lane looks exactly like a 115 Rosebush Lane should look. The house is a rambling Victorian painted a muted rose with pristine white trim. There are rose bushes lining the front porch and a lone car parked in the drive. We stop behind it and I pause

with my hand on the door, noticing that neither Ivy nor Alexis is making a move to get out. "Are you guys coming in?" I ask, and there's an awkward pause.

"Uh, no," Alexis answers finally. "I'm going to... go for a walk."

A walk. With her cell phone, no doubt.

"I'm going to go for a walk, too," Ivy says, then hastily adds, "In the opposite direction," as she catches Alexis's threatening look.

I can kind of understand their reluctance. I feel the same way. I wish I could go for a walk. In fact, I'd walk all the way back to Emerton if it made this whole situation disappear. Because as uncomfortable as it had been asking strangers in a Vegas hotel if they were my husband, it is an entirely different story to have stolen someone's hotel bill to learn their address, then traveled three hundred miles in the opposite direction of your own home to ask them the same question. Especially if the answer is no. Or especially if the answer is yes. We'll see.

"Okay," I say. "I guess I'll go knock on the door."

"Okay," Alexis and Ivy say in unison, neither one moving to get out, like they have to make sure I go up to the house instead of jumping into the front seat and driving away as soon as they exit.

"I'm going," I say, still in my seat.

"Okay," they reply, still in theirs.

"Okay," I say, taking a deep breath. Okay.

The July door knocker is a heavy square with a thick gold *J* that smacks resoundingly on its backer when I thwack it hard against the door. I don't know where in this house Paul is hiding, but I traveled all this way, he'd better hear me.

Somebody does. There's a slight noise coming from inside the house, and I look frantically over my shoulder to see Ivy and Alexis already walking down the drive. They shoot me reassuring looks but make no move to join me; in fact, they look more than ready to run should the occasion call for it.

The door opens, and there he is: Paul, in all his dimly remembered glory. He is tall and on the thin side, dressed in dark slacks and a white button down shirt that I vaguely recognize as probably part of his wedding attire. Well, at least he's thinking of attending. Apart from the clothing, however, Paul appears not so much ready to go to a wedding as maybe a grave. Perhaps Ivy's dress will come in handy after all. Maybe I could wear it.

In the second-that-feels-like-an-hour that we stare at each other, Paul's expression doesn't change. His mouth is slightly open, like a goldfish, his eyes dark and wide in his pale face, and I wonder if he's ill, or if he's waiting to say something. Maybe if he doesn't recognize me I can pretend to be someone else, a Vegas official, here to validate all recently-issued marriage certificates, and could I please just see yours, sir. Your half. And the ring you stole?

"Paul," I say, and he blinks once, then again, then a third time, as though to reassure himself that he is staring at a real person and not a ghost.

"Oh dear," he says quietly, his bony fingers wrapped so tightly around the edge of the door that they are stark white. "Oh dear," he repeats. "You're here."

3

Six months can pass quickly or slowly, depending on what you are or are not doing. I am half-heartedly working on a few painting commissions. I am waiting for Alexis. I am eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

For the first month (okay, three) I feel a sickening ache in my stomach every morning when I wake up. I am not worried that it is morning sickness, though that is Ivy's suggestion almost every time I tell her about it. It is an absence I have never known. Like an intricate tower of blocks missing a few center pieces I appear whole, but there is most definitely something amiss. I tell myself I am missing Alexis.

I don't need to try to avoid James, because he is never around. He is not at the pub or the grocery store or the movies, he's not getting gas or walking down the street or checking the mail. He doesn't call. I wonder constantly if this is because he has come to the same realization I swore I had come to, which is that our two weeks together meant nothing, and he no longer cares.

I don't feel angry anymore. I feel bereft. I feel stupid. I feel worried. I feel like I dug myself this grave, and now I have to lie in it. And then I do feel angry, because James was the one with a girlfriend, and now I am upset that I dumped a liar. I feel like an idiot.

This cycle lasts three months until Ivy threatens to hit me if I mention it once more, and if I don't change out of my jogging pants and come to work with her on a Sunday because she's on probation and she was supposed to scour the shop from top to bottom yesterday and instead she slept in and then went shopping.

"You want me to help you clean the dog salon?" I ask dryly. I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor, jogging pants in place, with a selection of paint before me and a blank canvass propped up against the wall. I am waiting, and have been for about an hour, for the right light to start painting. Maybe it will be today, but maybe not.

“I want,” Ivy says frostily, “you to get off your ass and act like a human being again. Do you think you can get away with this because Alexis is gone? Because I’m telling her every lame thing you’re doing – or not doing – and she is writing them down. You’ll regret this.”

I already do regret this. I have never felt this way, not even in the weeks after Kyle moved out. I regret meeting James, falling for James, breaking up with James, missing James. I regret that one thing leads to the next and I regret that it all ends up the same way every time I replay it in my head: it’s over.

“Get,” Ivy begins, kicking me hard in the ass, and I yelp. “Up.” She kicks me again, this time in the kidney, and I scramble forward out of the way. “Get up!”

“I’m getting up!” I exclaim from my ungraceful perch on all fours, my toes stuck inside the leg of my extra large jogging pants. “I’m trying to!”

“Get out of those pants and get a pair of scissors!” Ivy snaps, and I look at her to see if she’s serious, if maybe I can defy her and not get the scissors, but Ivy, who in twenty-plus years of friendship has never really looked mad, looks furious. She looks fed up. She looks like the scissors may not just be for the pants.

“Don’t cut them,” I say, scurrying towards the door. “I’ll wash them.”

“No,” she says, coming after me. “If you wash them you can wear them. I’m cutting them to shreds.”

“No,” I say, hurrying to my bedroom, but she’s right there behind me, forcing her way in.

“Take them off,” she orders, staring at me.

“Ivy!” I protest. “Not while you’re here!”

“One,” she begins, taking an ominous step forward. “Two…”

I untie the pants and push them down, grateful for my long t-shirt so she cannot see my cartoon print underwear, but she’s not even looking. Ivy’s already rooting through my dresser, pulling out new underwear – surprisingly sexy underwear I’d forgotten I had, actually – and a pair of jeans that are not doggie day spa-cleaning appropriate, because they cost me a whole commission cheque, and a white tank top.

“Get dressed,” she says, hurling the clothes at me.

“I don’t want to wear these jeans,” I say, trying to get to the dresser, though she stops me with both her body and a murderous look. “Ivy, really,” I try again. “I’m getting dressed. I’m coming with you. I don’t want to ruin my jeans.”

“Why not?” she snaps, stopping me with her tone. “You don’t wear them anywhere else.”

“Yes I do,” I argue, but then that’s all I say, because I know that the last time I wore these jeans I was out with Ivy and Alexis, having fun.

Ivy cocks a smug brow and I want to hit her but am afraid she’ll cut more than just the jogging pants.

“Fine,” I concede ungraciously. “Fine. I don’t wear the jeans anymore. But I will. Just not today. I’ll stop wearing the jogging pants.”

“Walk and talk, Jules,” she says as she yanks open the front door and tosses me a jacket. “*Hot Diggity Dog* is not going to clean itself.”

Ivy finds herself on “probation” at *Hot Diggity Dog* about once every three months, usually for something like forgetting to turn off the water completely at night or making a long distance phone call, and probation is almost always a day cleaning the shop. Personally I think her boss, Miles, makes up the probation charges just to force Ivy to actually clean something, and I suspect that Ivy agrees only because she likes having the shop to herself. What she doesn’t like, however, is cleaning, and I regularly find myself roped into her probation duties, usually doing most of the work.

Today though, Ivy is right there with me, gloved hand immersed in soapy water, wiping down the sinks and the grooming tables, sterilizing nail clippers and scissors and other instruments I can’t even identify.

She dusts the framed pet photos on the wall and even plumps up the dog pillows in the display window. I know something is wrong.

“Ivy?” I ask, setting my sopping sponge down on the counter and watching her long blonde hair swing in its ponytail as she wipes down the doorway. “Is everything okay?”

She’s silent for a minute, and I watch her finish cleaning the door before finally turning to face me.

“What is it...” she begins, then stops, avoiding my eyes. “I mean, how do you...” She shakes her head as though embarrassed, a flush stealing up her cheeks. “Jules,” she tries again, and I see tears welling up in her eyes, and I wonder if I’ve been so horrible these past three months that she is still mad at me.

“Ivy?” I prompt, half worried that I’ll start to cry myself.

“Just how do you be alone?” she blurts out, and I stop mid-step, about to go to her and apologize for my bad friend behavior, and now I just stare at her.

“What do you mean?” I ask, going to her, hugging her, wondering just what the hell’s been going on. “Is everything okay?”

Another stupid question, I know, because obviously she wouldn’t be cleaning and crying, especially cleaning, if everything were okay.

“Nothing,” she says, sniffing loudly, wiping her nose with her glove, and pulling away. “No. Nothing. It’s fine.”

“Ivy, I’m sorry I’ve been, you know, distant for the past few months, but you can still tell me. You’re cleaning. I know something is up.”

“It’s stupid,” she says, turning back to her work. “I’m just dwelling on stupid things.”

“Like what?” I try, but she’s already shaking her head.

“Just clean, Jules,” she says, not looking at me. “Please.”

A few weeks of not talking about the scene at HDD later, Ivy comes over to help me paint my dining room, and because she didn’t cut up my sweatpants, I wear them today. I see her glance suspiciously in the direction of my pants more than once however, and vow to hide both them and my scissors.

“Did you talk to Alexis on Sunday?” I ask, brow furrowed as I paint carefully along the trim.

“Oh yes,” Ivy says, and I can hear the smile in her voice. “Did you hear what I heard?”

“An incredibly sexy British accent?” I ask, a smile spreading across my face, and Ivy laughs gleefully.

“God, I hope she brings him back for us to meet,” she says. “I need to put a face to that voice. My imagination is running rampant.”

There is a loud bang suddenly from the living room, and Ivy and I jump, my paintbrush skidding up the wall in an unappealing brown streak. We’re in the dining room and the bang was almost definitely the front door slamming open, and now we can hear grunts and laboured breathing from the living room. Ivy and I look at each other in terror.

Slowly I crawl to the doorway and poke my head around the corner to peer into the living room: empty. But the door to my apartment is wide open, and there is a large green sack sitting just inside it.

“What is it?” Ivy whispers, and I look back over my shoulder and shrug as best I can from all fours.

“A big green bag,” I reply, then jump as a tall figure emerges from my bedroom, head turning frantically. “Ahh!” I scream, and Ivy screams because I did, and then the figure screams, and then we all shut up right on cue.

“Alexis?” Ivy says tentatively, crawling over to me and together we peer across at Alexis, long hair mussed around her mascara-streaked face, standing desperately in the doorway to my bedroom looking horribly, despairingly lost.

“Oh,” she says in a broken voice, and stumbles towards us as though we’re lost in the desert and all out of water. “Oh,” she repeats, sinking to her knees and flinging her arms around our necks, pulling us in, hugging us tightly, and Ivy and I exchange looks behind her head as we wrap one arm around our friend and keep the other on the floor for balance.

“It’s over,” Alexis sobs, her shoulders heaving, breath coming out in wracking gasps. “It’s over and I never want to talk about it again.”

So we don’t talk about Ivy’s problem and we don’t talk about Alexis’s and we don’t talk about mine. Alexis helps us finish painting the apartment then we all crash at her place because mine smells like poison.

We order pizza and rent all the good movies that came out while Alexis was gone (though none about Africa, Britain, or love), and we update her on all the Emerton gossip, which takes approximately five minutes.

Around three we turn out the last light and lie sprawled around the living room, Alexis on the couch, Ivy and I on air mattresses on the floor, and I hear Alexis’s hitched breathing and wonder whether any of this is ever really worth it.

A few days later I climb the steps to my apartment on the second floor and push open the fire door to step into the hallway, freezing when I see the dark-coated figure hesitating in front of my door. His back is to me but I would recognize him anywhere, and he turns when he hears the door swing shut behind me.

Eventually I take a step, then another and another, until I’m a few feet away, and I look at James and he looks at me, a small sheepish smile on his face, and he shrugs.

He looks perfect. He looks sexy. My heart starts beating double-time.

“Six months is a long time,” he says, hands in his pockets, and shrugs again, glancing down at his feet. I see his fingers flex and relax in his pockets, and then he glances up as though he’d like me to say something.

“Erm...” I say, and frown at myself, because I hadn’t meant to say that.

James takes a deep breath like he’s about to speak, but he doesn’t. And I don’t, and we just stand there like idiots. It’s a little strange, but it’s not awkward, and a long-suppressed yearning shoots up my body, starting in my toes and reaching every part of me.

I cover the distance between us, throwing my arms around his neck like we’re in a movie, and I kiss him like I’ve never kissed anybody before. And like he’s rehearsed it a thousand times, James matches every move perfectly, and I’m feeling a thousand things right now, not the least of which is relief.

A week later I’m sitting in the pub with Alexis and Ivy, sharing a plate of something that I’m sure has been deep fried more than once.

We have not discussed Alexis’s British debacle since her return home, and though I have tried on two separate occasions to get Ivy to open up about what made her cry that day at *Hot Diggity Dog*, she won’t share either. So I have not told them about my reunion with James. In fact, I haven’t really allowed myself to think about my reunion with James because I’m not too sure where it’s going. Is it a secret? Is it for real? Is it something worth talking about? A part of me does want to tell my two best friends about it, but other parts of me are holding back. First, I can hardly tell Alexis about my “luck” in the romance department while she’s secretly heartbroken, and second, I kind of feel like a dupe for taking back a guy who previously kind of sort of cheated on me. It’s a gray area. But no part of me feels hesitant about being back with James now. In fact, every tiny particle of my body celebrates this fact, and hopes to keep the party going for some time to come. But is this a party for two, or is everybody invited?

Eventually I realize that Ivy and Alexis are staring at something over my shoulder. I follow the line of their gaze and see James approaching.

“Hey Jules,” he says when he arrives, and he doesn’t wait for an invite, just slides into the booth next to me, his arm settling comfortably across my shoulders, his perfect lips curved in a faint smile. “Ivy. Alexis,” he says with a nod in their direction.

“James,” they reply, their eyes flickering between us with something that is not surprise.

And then we sit there, sort of awkwardly, a strange frisson of energy zigzagging around the booth, and a part of me is prickling with pride at James's presence, and another part of me is irritated that no one is saying anything about it.

And then Ivy and Alexis laugh. They laugh so loudly that people in the pub turn and glance at us, and James reaches over nonchalantly and picks up my glass and takes a swallow, his other arm warm and heavy across my shoulders, and he doesn't seem bothered by this at all. Doesn't seem to be going anywhere any time soon.

"Crap," Ivy says finally, and reaches for her purse, yanking out makeup and jewelry and tissues before finally finding a crumpled ten dollar bill and smoothing it on the table in front of Alexis.

"Called it," Alexis says, picking up the ten, folding it neatly in two, and tucking it in her pocket.

"Called what?" I demand, not quite believing what just happened. Did they bet on me? Did they know about this?

"Babe," James says, the first time he's called me this, and I turn my head slightly to look at him, and his face is very, very close. "Babe," he says again softly, his lips curling into an all too appealing smile.

So this is how we really begin.

CHAPTER FOUR

I follow Paul inside the large house, its décor slightly dated, slightly funeral home-like. He's literally dragging his feet as he leads the way down a long, dark hallway, and I notice that he has one foot clad in a droopy white sock, the other entirely bare, but

equally white and droopy. It belatedly occurs to me that this could be my first time crossing the threshold with my new husband.

Paul heads up a long, steep staircase, and I cautiously follow, ears open for any sound of company, but none comes, and our footsteps are eaten up by the thick carpeting and an air so tense and stale it feels hard to breathe.

What? I'm wondering, my mind spinning in leisurely swirls, like an old ceiling fan in the middle of a muggy summer. What now? What do I say to this clearly depressed man who could very possibly be my husband? Why are we going upstairs? What am I hoping for? An explanation or just an annulment? An apology for my troubles?

I open my mouth to speak, but Paul trudges into the first room at the top of the stairs, a strangely boy-ish room for someone who seems so much older than his years. The walls are a pale blue and there are framed posters for sports teams whose names I don't recognize. Dusty trophies sit on wall-mounted shelves and there is a small single bed tucked into the corner with some kind of space-themed comforter spread neatly across the top.

"Paul, do you still live here?" I ask, and at those seemingly harmless words Paul crumples onto the bed, knees drawn up to his chest, lone bare foot poking over the edge, and I stare at his toes, shocked and uncomfortable as he starts to cry.

Oh God. Oh dear. What the hell do I do?

"Erm..." I try, not sure how to begin. Tentatively I approach and pat his shoulder, and he sobs harder, burying his pale face in a faded Jupiter, fingers twisting in the comforter. "Paul... I need to know..."

His sobs only grow louder, and I look desperately around the room for a tissue or a gun or somewhere to hide, or at least sit, but there is nothing but the floor and the bed. I reluctantly ease myself down onto the bed near Paul's head, and sit there awkwardly with my hands folded in my lap as he finishes crying.

"Mnmhph," he says, slowly straightening, planting his socked foot on the floor and tucking the bare one protectively under his knee.

Our eyes meet then, and I see not the expected guilt or shame I had come in search of, but quite rather... fear. And an almost palpable desperation.

"You have to help me," he whispers, and his lower lip trembles like he may cry again. I better not have married a crier.

“Paul,” I try again, and I feel extremely out of place and uncomfortable, like a father trying to talk to his daughter about menstruation. “Did we maybe get married in V ___”

“Don’t say it!” he utters shrilly, raising a bony hand as though to shield himself from the V-word.

“Fine,” I say testily. “I won’t say it. But I need to know if we got married... there.”

I give Paul a stern look and feel a tiny glow of satisfaction when he withers slightly under my gaze, and then he blinks slowly, stupidly, as my question sinks in.

“What?” he says, brows furrowing, looking for the first time since our reunion like he is not about to cry.

“Did we get married in Ve—you know. Nevada.”

Paul’s dark brows furrow even more, until they’re joined across his forehead, and he looks completely bewildered.

“Married?” he repeats. “Me? And you?”

I nod, a little annoyed. “Yeah.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head slowly, looking for all the world like a child.

“You’re sure?” I say, stern look firmly affixed, but his gaze doesn’t waver.

“Oh, I’m sure,” he says, and then he laughs, a high, kind of crazy laugh, as though that would be great, just great. “Ha ha!” he exclaims, clapping his hands, eyes raising to the ceiling as if in prayer. “Ha!”

Ha. It’s not that funny.

“Did you steal anything from me?” I ask, and he stops laughing, face suddenly sober.

“No,” he says, and he looks like the paragon of innocence, his eyes dark and wide in his pale face, and though I know he’s closer to thirty, he’s looking like a scrawny fifteen year old right about now.

“I need you to tell me the truth, Paul,” I try anyway. “I need to know if we got married in... Nevada, and if you stole my ring and ran away.”

He opens his mouth to interrupt, but I rush on. “I know you’re supposed to get married today, and I don’t want anything from you but my ring and the annulment. So if you’ve got it... please. Just tell me.”

“It’s Julianna, right?” he says, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Oh God. Here I am, seven hundred miles from home, asking a virtual stranger if he might be my husband, and he’s not even sure of my name.

“Yes,” I say tersely.

“Julianna,” he continues, “I didn’t marry you. I didn’t steal your ring. If I did I would give it back, I promise.”

“You’re sure? You remember the night before last?”

At this Paul’s eyes water again.

“Yes,” he says, lowering his gaze. “I remember it all.”

Suddenly I feel a thrill of concern shoot up my spine, and I sit a little straighter on the bed. He looks... guilty. I stare at Paul, waiting for him to say more, but nothing comes, he just sits there, hands folded in his lap, head down, so I can see the slight bald patch starting at the top of his head, and then I notice the tears. Dripping profusely from his cheeks right onto his exposed, bony ankle.

“What now?” I snap, not sure how I should be feeling. Do I believe him? Yes. Am I relieved? Yes. Kind of. No. Because if Paul’s not the guy, that means I have another trip to make, and yet for some reason I can’t quite bring myself to walk out on someone so obviously... suffering.

“I did it,” he whispers, and I do a double take.

“You stole my ring?” I exclaim, feeling newly betrayed.

“No!” he wails, meeting my eyes again finally. “Not your stupid ring! I did... *it!* You know... *it.*”

“You had sex?” I try, just to be extra sure, because there was a condom in my hotel room bathroom yesterday morning, and I’m not sure who I shared it with. But surely I didn’t sleep with one guy and marry another?

“Yesssss,” Paul hisses, eyes darting around frantically.

“So?” I reply, trying to shrug, trying to act like it’s no big deal.

“I had sex with two women!” Paul whispers, eyes still frantic. “Two strippers!”

And I remember the helpful nurse and policewoman telling me how they did their thing, then Paul grabbed his pants and fled, only to return hours later for his belongings, then retreat to the safety of his Herman Oaks mansion.

“Oh...” I say slowly, and a part of me wants to slap Paul for making such a big deal out of this, while another part of me wants to hug him, reassure him, and then still slap him. “Okay... Um, that was, the, uh... first... time... for you? Ever?”

Paul nods, his dark, wet eyes on mine like a trusting puppy. Do I smack his nose or cuddle him? Give him a treat or smother him with his solar system-printed pillow?

“And you ran away because you felt guilty?” I guess. He nods and I can see his slumped shoulders straightening as the burden lifts slightly. “You feel guilty because of Mary?”

He nods again, lip trembling, but he valiantly steadies it.

“We were waiting for each other,” he tells me, and he grasps my hand tightly, suddenly, as though I can make it all go away.

I wish.

“Mary and I were born on the same day in the same hospital,” he says, watching our fingers where they twine. “I don’t remember a day without her. The first day of school, first dance, first kiss, first... everything. And *only*... everything. Until now.” He looks at me pleadingly. “What do I do?”

I want to yank my hand away, but I force myself not to.

“Paul,” I begin, not sure if this is the right thing to say, but feeling like it needs to be mentioned. “You know that Mary won’t... be able to tell, right?”

Paul blinks, and for a second I think that this is news to him.

“Of course I know that!” he snaps. “But that’s not the point, is it? The point is I did it, I betrayed her, and she loves me and I did this! I went to that stupid... Vegas—” (he looks around for the devil to appear, but he doesn’t) “... and I had sex with that nurse and that policewoman and now here you are...” His voice trails off, and his brow furrows again, then his eyes flick back to mine. “Wait,” he says. “Why are you here?”

Uh-oh.

“Erm,” I say. “Well, you know. Like I said. I wanted to know if you had stolen my ring.”

“And if we were married?” he asks, incredulously.

“Yes,” I reply.

“You married somebody in Vegas?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re already engaged!”

“Yes.”

“But that’s not the guy you married?”

“No.”

“Oh my,” Paul says.

“Yeah,” I say, making a move to stand, but Paul pulls me back down to the bed and looks at me seriously.

“It’s an awful city,” he says, and I nod just to be agreeable. “And it makes people do terrible things.”

“You’ve heard that what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas, right?” I try.

“How can I marry Mary on a foundation built of anything but trust?” Paul counters, and I don’t have an answer. “I had sex with two... professionals in Vegas, and I can’t deceive Mary. I can’t hide anymore. I have to tell her the truth.”

“Paul?” comes a faint voice from the door, and in unison Paul and I turn from our place on the bed to see who can only be Mary, standing shocked in the doorway. She’s as pale as Paul with midnight black hair tumbling around a pretty, stunned face.

I look awkwardly between the two, expecting Mary to either flee or viciously attack, but she does neither.

“Mary,” Paul says, dropping my hands, and Mary doesn’t look at all suspicious, and I suspect it’s because she’s already overheard the worst.

“You’re okay,” she whispers. Her hands are trembling and I can see that she is not so okay and that I should definitely not be privy to this moment.

“I’ll just go,” I say, rising, hoping they don’t stop me, which they don’t, and I ease out the door past Mary. Her quiet, gasping breaths are the last thing I hear before my exit is swallowed up by the stairs.

Outside, I stand on the sidewalk and inhale deeply, trying to calm the tremors in my legs. Okay. So I probably haven’t ruined Paul’s life, though he may have. There is a wedding scheduled to take place in two hours and apart from the now not-so-happy-couple, I am the only one who knows that it’s most likely not going to be happening. When an entire town shuts down for your wedding, it had better take place, and I do not want to be present when six generations of Julys learn the truth.

I look up and down the street for Ivy or Alexis, but they are nowhere to be seen. Our appointment at the hair salon is in ten minutes, and since it’s walking distance from the July house, I figure the girls can walk and I take the car, whose keys still hang in the ignition.

There are no people in the street, no lights on in storefronts, no traffic. Herman Oaks is like a ghost town, soon to be full of angry poltergeists when they learn that the event of the season is cancelled. Oh God. I feel bad for Paul, worse for Mary, and

extremely anxious for myself. Is this what it will feel like if the truth of my drunken misdeed comes out? I'm torn. Part of me wonders if maybe this pain would be worth the sheer relief of not having to go through with the wedding, and part of me wonders if I'm just a coward and I'll be able to laugh off all these silly misgivings come Monday once I've been married for twenty-four hours.

You *have* been married for twenty-four hours, a niggling part of my brain reminds me, and I shake my head to lose the thought. I'll dwell on my problems when we're safely away from the soon-to-be-bloodbath of Herman Oaks.

I pull into the salon lot and park, spotting Ivy sitting on the curb next to a good looking guy with floppy bronze hair who may or may not be the caramel corn guy from V-word. They are both eating ice cream cones, and for a split second I wonder just how Ivy does it.

"Hey," I say, climbing out of the car, wanting to scoop Ivy up, toss her in the back, and speed off down the road in search of Alexis and the highway. We need to get out of Herman Oaks, not eat ice cream with strangers.

But Ivy has a different plan.

"Hey Jules," she says, smiling cheerfully. She tips her ice cream cone at the guy next to her. "This is Lucas."

I force a smile at Lucas, who smiles genially back at me, then return my gaze to Ivy. Let's go, I try to say telepathically. Get in the car. Keep the ice cream, we just have to go.

"How'd it go?" Ivy asks, and I glance at Lucas, who appears not to know what I have been up to.

"All clear," I say, and Ivy nods.

"Wait," she says then. "All clear here... or all clear there?"

"All clear here," I say, the emphasis on here, like, *and now we need to be going* there.

Ivy's pale brow furrows and she licks her ice cream cone thoughtfully.

"We should probably find Alexis," I say, and she flicks a glance at Lucas, clearly loathe to leave her new friend of approximately one hour.

"Is that her?" Lucas asks, choosing this moment to start speaking, and I turn to see Alexis cutting through the parking lot, cell phone not in sight.

"Hey," she says, and Ivy introduces Lucas. "Hey," Alexis says again, then turns her look to me. "How'd it go?"

“All clear,” I say, and Alexis gives me the same confused look Ivy did.

“All clear...” she says, darting a glance at my still-bare left hand, “here?”

“Yeah,” I say, not quite sure what she’s talking about either. “Not the one.”

Ivy and Alexis nod, finally getting it, and I think we’re all on the same page.

“So...” I say, nodding at the car, and they both look at it, too, and it’s hot here in Herman Oaks, and none of us want to get back in the car, least of all Ivy, who is sharing a very meaningful look with Lucas. I mean, *how?* In an hour??

“Ivy!” I say, slightly louder than intended, and she snaps her head back around to me, then shoots a last reluctant glance at Lucas.

“Oh, okay,” she sighs, and stands.

Lucas stands, too.

“So I’ll see you at the wedding?” he asks, and the three of us glance at the ugly dresses hanging in the back of the car.

“Right,” Ivy says, and I hope she knows she’s lying, because there is no wedding, and we are about to get the hell out of dodge.

“Right,” I echo, hand on her elbow. Alexis is already opening the passenger door, and I have the keys in my hand.

“There you are!” comes a loud voice, and the three of us freeze, then thaw, then turn to see the two middle-aged women from the diner approaching, both with matching pumpkin-orange hair and bright red smiles. The teenage boy trails sullenly behind them.

“All ready, then?” says the second of the women, and then there’s some awkward hand shaking and introductions and I’m trying to think of the best excuse for not getting our hair done and attending the wedding after all. The second best excuse after “There is no wedding.”

I look from Ivy to Alexis, who are looking at me helplessly, and Lucas stands there smiling like an idiot, because now he thinks that he still has a chance with Ivy. From the look on her face he might.

“Oh,” I say lamely, wracking my suddenly empty brain. “You know, we don’t want to take up your time... You have your own preparations, and we really shouldn’t intrude.”

“No problem!” exclaims the woman who introduced herself as Donna D. “We’re all ready to go!”

“Everyone’s so excited about this wedding,” adds Donna C., clapping her hands together. “It’s like Christmas morning. We just couldn’t wait!”

“Oh... great,” I say, trying to smile.

“So let’s get inside then!” they say together, and the teenager, Elton, with choppy blue hair and a perpetually sullen expression, pulls out a full key ring and unlocks the salon door.

“Aghah...” I say, unable to decide on a real word.

But Elton and the Donnas don’t mind, and so Ivy, Alexis and I are ushered inside, Lucas trailing not far behind.

Donna C. slaps Velcro curlers onto Ivy’s long blonde hair while Elton peruses Alexis’s wavy mane with a disturbingly unpleasant look. Donna D., on the other hand, is flipping cheerfully through a book of hairstyles that has seen better days. Probably in 1978, when it was first published.

“Got one!” she says, snapping the book closed before I can see the hairdo, and I squirm uncomfortably in my seat. “Oh, don’t fret,” she says, resting her hands thoughtfully on my shoulders, and maybe she means it to be calming, but it just feels like she’s holding me in place.

“This is just a style, right?” I confirm. “No... scissors?”

Donna D. laughs, and Donna C. does, too, though I’m not sure she knows why. Elton resumes his sullen stare and Alexis shoots me a worried look in the mirror.

“Now Julianna,” Donna D. begins, picking up a comb and starting to separate my hair. “Don’t worry. You are going to look fantastic. Y’all may be strangers now, but when we’re finished with you you’ll fit right into Herman Oaks.”

“And be better looking than half the folk already here!” Donna C. chimes in.

“Yeah,” Elton grunts, and Alexis grips the armrests tightly.

An hour later we are squished into the back pew of the Herman Oaks Multidemoninational Church along with the entire town, all dressed to the nines, or what the nines may have been in the mid-eighties. My hair hangs in Farrah Fawcett waves, completing my eighth grade graduation dance look, and Alexis’s hair is piled on top of her head and held in place with what look like chopsticks. Combined with the asparagus dress, she looks like a tasty Asian dish. Ivy’s hair is a riot of corkscrew curls, and with her black wedding/funeral sheath, black tights, and bright red lipstick, she looks like a

lost Miss Universe contestant, or the newly widowed town gold-digger. Lucas, sitting beside her, doesn't seem to mind.

Most people, like us, have arrived early, and the church, whose first stones were laid by the original Herman July, is stifling. Sweat trickles down my back, and I am grateful to be sitting near the door, which someone thoughtfully left open, so every now and again a faint breeze meanders in.

There is a loud murmur passing through the pews, and I catch the occasional word, enough to know that the question of the day is Will Paul be making an appearance? I am tense and hot, my stomach twisting itself into a million tiny knots. Even though no one knows my potential role in the debacle, I feel like I have the power to predict a train derailment and yet cannot get the words out. Go home, I want to tell the townspeople. Turn on your air conditioners and put your dresses back in their plastic bags: there is no wedding.

Up front I can see a group of people with dark curly hair that I assume to be Mary's family, and judging by the smiles stretching their faces, they don't know what Mary knows.

I feel sick.

I turn to Alexis, who is pressed up against my left, and pry our sweaty arms apart.

"God," she whispers, eyes flickering through the church. "How long do you think this is going to take?"

"Oh, about ten seconds," I whisper back. "Then a good hour or so for Paul's lynching."

I feel like I'm about to watch a fellow prisoner be executed, knowing that my turn is just a few days away. My stomach lurches and I turn my head to try and catch the fresh air seeping in from outside. I get nothing by a mouthful of stale, dry heat, and my vision swims.

"I'm so hot," I hiss, and Alexis nods.

"Tell me about it," she says. "This place smells like B.O."

It does, now that she mentions it.

"Maybe we should make a run for it," I suggest, sotto voce. "Before the... announcement."

We had been looking for an opportunity to escape since the salon, but Elton and the Donnas had insisted we dress in the shop then travel to the church in their salon van, which was much cleaner and more spacious than our rental car. And then we had been

swept up in the wave of Herman Oaks citizens arriving at the church, and under constant surveillance ever since. Even now people are still craning their necks to catch a look at the three new girls in their ridiculously dated wedding wear.

“Do I have a rash?” Alexis asks, prying at the large ruffled collar on her asparagus dress. “I feel like I have a rash.”

I try and peer into her collar, but can see nothing.

“No,” I tell her. And that’s when I notice that Ivy’s gone. “Hey, where’s Ivy?” I ask, nudging Alexis unnecessarily, making us both sweat.

“What?” she mutters, turning to look to her left, where Ivy had been sitting cuddled up with Lucas, despite the heat. There are approximately twelve inches of space where they had been, and Alexis slides over into it, our flesh pulling apart with a sickening suction noise.

“Fucking hell!” she exclaims, and more than a few people turn.

We freeze, not sure how to explain that one, so we both look around as though trying to find the source of the curse.

When people eventually turn back to their gossip about Paul and Mary – and shouldn’t at least one of them be here by now? I’m not wearing a watch, but the wedding has got to be about to start – Alexis and I crane our necks this way and that, but find no trace of Ivy.

“She can’t be serious!” I hiss, and Alexis shakes her head.

“It’s that single-girl wedding thing,” she says wryly. “She’s wondering when it will be her turn.”

“Every fricking week,” I say furiously, and she nods, the colour rising in her cheeks, and I wonder if maybe she does have a rash.

“Let’s look outside,” she suggests. “There’s no way they can be in here, doing what they’re doing.”

“Sacrilege,” I say dryly, and she smiles weakly, like wilted asparagus.

I shift in my seat and start to rise, only to drop right back down as the heavy door swings open and Paul enters, followed by two men in police uniforms.

“Oh God!” I whisper, and Alexis is frozen too, staring wide-eyed after the groom and his police escorts.

The church has gone quiet, the only sound their soft footsteps in the unimaginably long aisle, and the faint squeak of the church door sliding closed.

I try inconspicuously to wipe the sweat off my brow, then watch in concern as Paul takes his place at the front of the church, the two police officers standing to his left. They face the church, their expressions grim, and Paul looks worse than I remember. Even from here I can see his hands trembling, and Father Tony stares at him solemnly.

There is an expectant tension threading through the pews, and I straighten in my seat, ready to run for it if the mob suddenly turns on Paul. I am on the edge of my seat waiting for the announcement, the apology, the tears, and I assume everybody else is, and I am so tightly wound that I nearly fall into the aisle when the first strains of the Wedding March blare from the organ.

I'm sure I make some kind of noise as I catch myself, but it is drowned out by the straining chords from the organ, and I glance at Alexis in shock. *What?*

The song plays, and I watch Paul and the two police officers who must be his groomsmen, wondering if this is a joke and if he's waited well past the last minute, but he's not looking at me. He's twisting his pale, bony hands together frantically, his eyes fastened on the heavy door right behind me.

And then it opens.

There is a muted gasp from every person in the church as Mary steps in, escorted by her father, Officer Churchill, in full police regalia, and Mary looks like an angel in her flowing wedding dress, her dark curls trailing down her back.

Officer Churchill spots me just as he passes, and does a rapid double take, and I give him a small smile then stick my leg in the door to keep it from closing any further.

I feel the butterflies in my stomach starting to riot.

It's too hot in here. It's too loud. It's too... everything.

I feel the bile rising in my throat and it's too late, I can't stop it. The heat washes over me in nauseating waves and I hurl myself out the door, hoping that not too many people notice.

I vomit over the edge of the steps, the smell of roses wafting around me, and then I feel a hand on my back, and out of the corner of my eye I see Alexis. My eyes well up and I can't control the tears.

"It's okay," she says.

"It's not," I say.

"It is," she says, then pulls at the ruffles on her dress.

“What did I do?” I whisper, wiping at my mouth, and she tugs me onto my feet and hugs me, despite the heat and everything else. The ruffles on her asparagus dress do feel kind of scratchy, and every inch of me feels hot and tingly.

“Did anyone notice?” I ask, and she shakes her head, slowly pulling back.

“Not really,” she says. “They were watching the bride.”

I sniffle, feeling intensely conflicted.

“They’re getting married?” I say in a small voice, and Alexis shrugs helplessly.

“Guess so.”

“But she heard him,” I argue. “She heard him tell me about the strippers... She... She knows.”

Alexis avoids my eyes for a long moment, breathing in deeply, and I think she’s about to tell me something significant, then her eyes shutter again and she smiles blandly.

“Let’s find Ivy and get out of here,” she says.

We find Ivy and Lucas stumbling out of the salon van a few minutes later, Ivy’s curls already frizzing in the heat, Lucas looking very much in love.

“Is it over?” Ivy asks, stumbling in her high heels, and I notice that she’s no longer wearing the black tights.

“We have to go,” I say coldly, not knowing exactly how long a typical wedding ceremony lasts, and wanting to be out of town before anyone realizes we’re no longer in our seats. If they care.

Ivy shoots a quick glance at Lucas, who seems to have expected this, and he gives her a small smile and shrug, and she returns the look, almost regretful.

“Bye babe,” Lucas says softly, and when he kisses her I see lipstick stains on his collar. He turns and jogs towards the back of the church, where I assume he knows about a secret entrance or something.

I want to yell at Ivy for making us stay this long, but Alexis shoots me a look that says *not now*, and we scurry toward the street as best we can in our towering heels and awkward dresses.

I give a squawk of frustration after just a few feet, and Alexis and Ivy screech to a halt.

“I can’t run in this thing!” I complain loudly, feeling the sweat snake uncomfortably down my spine, my knees rubbing together under the confines of the dress.

“*You* can’t run?” Alexis exclaims, her asparagus dress even more fitted than mine.

“Take them off,” Ivy decides firmly, kicking off her shoes. She taps the black car next to us, and I recognize it as Bettina, the bridal shop owner’s. “We’ll leave them in here.”

Bettina, like everyone in Herman Oaks, does not lock her car doors.

I glance around, hesitating for all of one second, but this town is empty, every single person inside that stifling old church watching Mary forgive Paul his sins and marry him anyway. Would that be James and I next week? I wonder fleetingly. Will I walk down the aisle, not knowing if he’ll be waiting at the other end?

I shake my head to discourage thoughts of my own life, then reach behind me to unzip the lavender cocoon Bettina calls a dress and push it down to my ankles. I step out of it and then my shoes, and Alexis heaves a grateful sigh as she shimmies out of the asparagus dress.

“That’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen,” Ivy comments, yanking open the back door of Bettina’s truck and tossing her dress and shoes inside. Alexis and I follow suit, then Ivy slams the door shut and we stand there, barefoot and in our underwear, the faintest of breezes trying vainly to dry up the sheen of sweat that covers us all.

“Okay,” I say after a moment. “Run.”

The salon is about four blocks from the church, and we run hastily down the empty sidewalks, feet burning on the asphalt, feeling the sweat bead on the nape of our necks.

We reach the car both too quickly and not quick enough, and hop around with quiet curses as we pry open the now-sizzling door handles and drop inside. The three of us sit facing outwards in our seats, doors wide open, feet lifted off the ground, fanning ourselves and the interior of the car.

Ivy has the keys so I take her place in the back and we close the doors with a resounding thud, feeling slightly reassured when the locks click into place.

“Where to?” Ivy asks ten minutes later, and I struggle to sit up, having been lying comfortably on my back and staring up at the expanse of bright blue sky.

“Um,” I say, not wanting to decide, not wanting to have to.

“Grand Canyon or the San Juan Mountains,” Alexis says helpfully.

“Both very scenic,” Ivy adds.

"I'm always wrong," I complain, and neither of them disagree with me. "What would you guys do?"

"Head back to Vegas, break into Suzanne's apartment when she's sleeping, sneak the key out its hiding place, and look up the name of the guy you married in her big black book," Alexis replies.

"Hmm," I say, considering.

"Flip a coin?" Ivy suggests, rummaging in the ashtray for a quarter.

"Look what that did for us last time," I say, flopping back into the seat.

"Last time," Ivy reminds me, "you did the opposite of what the coin suggested."

A green interstate sign whizzes past the window, and I straighten again in the seat.

"What did that sign say?" I ask, and Ivy and Alexis share a look.

Ivy slams on the brakes and we squeal down the highway a few feet before coming to a halt. Then she puts the car in reverse and backs over our newly made tire tracks until we can read the sign again.

The sign offers mileage to several towns, the last being "Grand Canyon, 300 miles."

It *is* closer, I think. And if we drove all the way to the San Juan Mountains and it wasn't... what's his name... But, another part of me counters, if you're thinking Grand Canyon, odds are that you should go to Colorado. Odds are, I remind myself, fifty-fifty, when you only have two options. So how come I'm wrong one hundred percent of the time?

"Grand Canyon," I say decisively, thinking this is the most logical thing because it's closest. And the odds, despite my past history, are even.

4

The *Emerton Gazette* is putting out a new issue (the first in approximately four months) and Alexis and I stare at Ivy as she tries to make up the horoscopes.

“What do the stars tell me?” she muses, peering out the coffee shop window and into the sunny afternoon sky.

“Nothing?” Alexis guesses, and I smile.

“Don’t mess with the master,” Ivy warns, pointing her pen at Alexis. “I already know your future.”

“Uh-oh,” I say. “Another bad perm?”

Alexis winces at the memory.

“Worse,” Ivy says ominously.

“A second date with Jared?” I guess, and Alexis gasps in horror.

“Yep,” Ivy answers, grinning evilly, writing it down in her little notebook, the pen moving in gleeful swipes across the page.

“You jerk,” Alexis says, and we all laugh.

Alexis had reluctantly accepted a date with Jared, an all-too-quiet but extremely attractive guy we had gone to high school with, but never really known. He delivers packages for the local courier, and had recently begun flirting with Alexis at the law office she now works at. He has shaggy brown hair and really amazing blue eyes, and though we all suspect that he delivers more drugs than mail, Alexis had gone against her better judgment and accepted when he asked her out.

In secret Ivy and I discuss that dating Jared is Alexis’s way of getting back at mystery British man, and we have spent many hours on the phone contemplating the ways in which Alexis might relay news of her date to him. Covert photographs was our favourite theory, and we snickered as we pictured Alexis snapping photos with her cell phone as she made out with Jared in the back of his delivery van.

“I don’t even want to know what you two morons are thinking about,” she interrupts, sipping from her coffee cup and glaring at us over the rim.

Ivy and I laugh but otherwise keep quiet.

Alexis hasn’t said much about her date with Jared, except that she is pretty certain she was privy to an illegal transaction and definitely subjected to some inept groping. This seems to rate pretty high in Jared’s little black book, however, because he keeps calling the law office and leaving voice messages for Alexis, then dropping by without the excuse of a delivery to try and ask her out again in person.

“What’s my future hold?” I ask Ivy, and she stares thoughtfully at the notebook. I can see half a page of scribbled notes, but no words jump out.

“Haven’t gotten there yet,” she replies.

“What’s your cosmic question?” Alexis asks, knowing instinctively that I am trying to get out of making a real decision on my own.

“How do I know if I’m in love with James,” I tell her.

“You are,” Ivy and Alexis reply in unison, and I straighten, startled.

“I am?” I echo.

“Did he tell you he loves you?” Ivy asks.

“No.” I shake my head to emphasize the response. I’m not sure whether or not I want him to say it.

“He’s waiting for you?” Alexis guesses, and I nod.

Ivy whistles. “I hope he’s patient.”

James has other plans. That night he calls me from work, and I can tell he’s in his office by the muted but rhythmic thud of bass in the background.

“Hey,” he says when I pick up, and I turn off the television and I curl up on the couch.

“Hey yourself,” I say, surprised to be hearing from him. It’s after midnight, and he doesn’t normally call before coming over. “What’s up?”

“I’m wondering...” James begins, and every muscle in my body tightens like I’m getting ready to run, away from or to James, I’m not sure. “I’m wondering...” he repeats, “if you’re in love with me.”

It’s not a question. He’s not waiting for an answer, he’s just putting it out there. I open my mouth to respond, but no sound comes out.

“Why?” I ask, at great length.

“I don’t want to be alone in this,” he answers, and the next words come easily.

“You’re not alone,” I tell him, and this is true. This is also a cop out, because then I don’t have to be specific.

“Be specific,” he says, and I frown. I wonder if he has cameras in my apartment.

“You weren’t specific,” I point out. Immature, I know, but still better than yanking the phone from the wall and saying we got disconnected.

“Okay...” he says, impatient, a little nervous. “I love you.”

I wince. I feel bad for James. Even I’m frustrated with me. Just say it, I think. Just say it back and get it over with.

“On a scale of one to ten,” James says, maybe just to end the silence, “I would say that my feelings for you are somewhere around a nine. And dropping.”

I cringe.

“Okay...” I say, thinking frantically. Definitely not one or two or three. Or four. Definitely not ten. Nine? If I say nine will he think I’m just saying that to placate him? I can’t say much lower than nine or he’ll be offended.

“Just tell me the truth, Jules.” He interrupts my thoughts.

“James, why are you calling at midnight to ask me this?” I counter.

“So I can think about something else,” he answers instantly, and I believe him.

“Oh,” I say.

We sit in silence until he hangs up.

This is the nine month mark from when I first met James, and I have now not heard from him in over a week. I have also not called him. We are not calling each other because I have not answered his question. I still don’t have an answer.

Alexis says I am just afraid, and Ivy says I am wise. I think she’s saying this because she has still not come up with a horoscope for my sign yet, and has not used “wise” in any of the other ones.

I miss him and I feel guilty. I know I am doing this to myself, and I have the sneaking suspicion that a great many of the “bad” moments in my life have been caused by my own inaction. Or by an action on my part that could then result in an inaction, like me actively not picking up the phone, so I can inactively not talk to my boyfriend.

The sound of a flurry of fists hitting my door jars me out of my contemplation and I jump from the couch, startled.

“Anybody home?” Alexis calls, barging in, quickly followed by Ivy.

“Can you never knock normally?” I demand.

“You should lock your door,” Ivy suggests, straight-faced. She then looks pointedly at Alexis, who looks at her shoes, then looks at me.

“Okay, ugh,” she groans, and I give Ivy a look like, What on earth?

Ivy grins.

“I have a date with Jared tomorrow,” Alexis reports, and the laugh comes out before I can stop it. “Shut up!” Alexis snaps, but she’s smiling too, and I laugh again.

“What are you thinking?” I ask, dropping back onto the couch, joined by Ivy. Alexis takes the chair facing us.

“He cornered me!” she explains, burying her face in her hands. I can see her blushing, even through her mortification. “And then he stood really close and... I don’t know. I couldn’t get out of it.”

“You didn’t want to get out of it,” Ivy accuses, and I laugh again.

A part of me knows that this is only teasing; if Jared really meant something to Alexis, there is little doubt that she would not tell us about it. The fact that she is admitting to some romantic failure makes me suspicious, and rightly so.

“So,” Ivy says, turning to me meaningfully, and I look between the two of them.

“What?” I ask, paranoid.

“Any phone calls?” she asks, brows raised.

“No,” I say, not bothering to pretend not to understand. They both think I’m an idiot for not just calling James up, ignoring the number thing, and telling him I love him. Who cares how much? It’ll only improve with time. And isn’t it better to be with James than be without him?

“Yeah, well, we’ve decided you have to call him,” Ivy informs me, and Alexis nods sternly.

“You two are the lamest tag team,” I accuse, but they are unmoved.

“If I faced Jared, you have to face James,” Alexis says. “James does not have a criminal record.”

I look at Ivy.

“What great thing did you do this week?” I ask her.

“I asked Miles for a promotion,” she says smugly.

“Oh!” I exclaim, surprised, since she’s been working there for years and never once asked for a raise. Though I think she may sometimes skim money from the till.

“What did he say?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head, but smiling all the same, and I suspect that she only asked for the promotion so they could gang up on me. We did things we didn’t want to do, now it’s your turn.

“Well I’m not calling James,” I say firmly. “I’ll call him when I’m ready.”

“Jules,” Alexis says. “That will take forever.”

“Or be never,” Ivy adds.

I glare between the two of them. “I hope this isn’t all you came by for,” I say, and they exchange looks, evidently deciding to drop the subject – for now – and change tactics.

“Actually, it’s not,” Ivy says. “We’re going to follow Alexis on her date tomorrow.”

“It’s not a date,” Alexis cuts in, “but I will need back up.”

“What?” I ask, utterly confused.

Alexis throws a pillow at me.

“Jared’s taking me on his Hinesborough route to make deliveries tomorrow,” she says. “And I’m pretty sure I’m not going to make it through the day, so I’ll need you two to trail us, then pick me up and drive me home when I give the signal.”

I look at Ivy, piqued.

“I’m not going to spend the day trailing you and your drug dealing date,” I inform her. “I have a life.”

They give both me and my silent phone significant looks.

“I hate you,” I say.

“This is ridiculous,” I tell Ivy, shivering in the car as we pause at a stop sign on our way out of Emerton. It’s seven o’clock in the morning on a Saturday, and we are watching the taillights of Jared’s blue delivery van disappear into the early morning fog.

“I know!” Ivy exclaims from the passenger seat, but she sounds almost giddy. Her breath comes out in little white pants, and she huddles deeper into her parka. “It was supposed to be nice today,” she adds.

“Perfect tracking weather,” I say dryly, carefully navigating a sharp turn in the road, trying to keep the red haze of the delivery van’s headlights in sight through the fog.

“I’ve kind of been seeing Evan,” Ivy says too casually, and I can’t keep the surprise from my face.

“Really?” I say, not sure what exactly I should say. Pub owner Evan. A little bit older, a little bit of a town whore. Ivy’s my best friend, but this may be a good match. If she weren’t married.

“Yeah,” she says, thoughtfully chewing a cookie. “I don’t know. Only sort of.”

“Since your birthday?” I ask, racking my brain for some sign apart from her flushed face that night nine months ago.

“Yeah,” she says again. “Sort of.”

“Well...” I try, wanting details, wanting to process this. I know she’s had lots of affairs since being married, but I’m not sure why she stays married. “Good?” I say finally.

“Watch out,” Ivy says, squinting through the windshield. “I think he’s taking the dirt road.”

We watch as the van’s taillights disappear off to the right. It’s hard to see the sign with this much fog, but I know this is the way out to farm country, land of blueberry and raspberry bushes and more than a few pot growing operations.

“What kind of date is this?” I ask, waiting a few moments before making the same turn.

“There’s a lot we don’t know about Alexis,” Ivy says wryly. “The things she doesn’t tell us, even the things she does.”

“Maybe it’s for our own good,” I say.

“This is so not good,” Ivy whispers much later that day as we sit in the icy car, parked in the loading bay of a dark strip mall.

“Everything hurts,” I complain, trying to shift in my feet, numb fingers gripping the leather and shrieking with the effort. “How many deliveries can he possibly have?”

“I’m guessing none,” Ivy says dryly. “Considering he hasn’t opened the back of the van in about four hours.”

This is true. After a few seemingly legitimate deliveries on the Hinesborough route, a few packages to homes, businesses, and two men standing under trees – our first sign – Jared and Alexis’s date had taken a more complicated turn.

To start with, he was much harder to follow when he knew he was most likely doing something illegal, and we lost them twice, only picking up the trail again after Alexis pleaded bathroom break and called to tell us their location. Furthermore, we had

quickly burned through all the food in Ivy's book bag (I hadn't had the foresight to bring any) and we were starving and had been for the past hour.

Jared had taken Alexis to lunch at a small roadside diner with only one other car in the parking lot, and because Jared would recognize us, Ivy and I had not been able to go inside. Ivy had called Alexis under the guise of not being parked directly outside, and commanded that she order us some lunch, which she had not, so when they finally left the diner we had hastened inside, ordered hot turkey sandwiches, and taken them for the road... which held no sign of Alexis and Jared. This was the first time we had lost them.

"I think I may have to pee," Ivy mutters, "but my ass is too cold to tell for sure."

"What are they doing in there?" I ask, and the words fog up the tiny hole I had cleared in the windshield. "It's taking forever."

We have been parked back here for nearly forty minutes, and my teeth clatter with cold. The strip mall was closed when we arrived; it is now around seven o'clock in the evening and there are no other "deliveries" being made. Alexis and Jared had parked in front of loading bay three, climbed out, and disappeared inside the nearly invisible door next to the larger garage-style door most of the legal deliveries probably entered through.

"What do you think?" Ivy asks thoughtfully. "Strip mall custodian sells pot to kids?"

"I'm going with the mall security guard," I say. "He'd have a reason to be loitering in the back alley at night, looking for trouble."

"Yeah, so he could sell it drugs," Ivy cracks, and we laugh as best we can through our shivers.

"Five more minutes," I say, wrapping my fingers around the steering wheel in a poorly-thought out gesture, quickly snapping my hands back inside my jacket and shaking harder. "Then we're out of here."

"Do you think she's okay?" Ivy asks cautiously, and we rub tiny concentric circles on the windshield and peer out as best we can towards loading bay three, about a hundred yards ahead of us. We are parked at the far corner, in the one lane for "in traffic," and without reversing back through the narrow lane, our only way out is to troll right by the people we are tailing, one of whom is in on the plan.

"Wouldn't it be awful if she asked us to tail her date, we did, and then we just sat outside while she was... I don't know, killed?" Ivy continues, and I stare at her in horror.

“Ivy!” I exclaim, keeping my voice low though there is no one around to hear us. “They’re probably having coffee with the security guard and the custodian and finalizing a friendly drug deal.”

But we both turn to peer silently out the window, suddenly a little more tense. Why on earth Alexis, who took an oath to uphold the law, or at least practice it – I think – would agree to be privy to something like this is beyond me. The only reason Ivy and I could come up with – and we have had many, many hours today to ponder this – is that she is hoping to make the British guy mad. You may steal diamonds, but look! my new boyfriend deals drugs! And I go along with him! Aha!

The shrill ring of Ivy’s cell phone makes us both jump in alarm, and my seatbelt cuts painfully into my frozen thighs.

“It’s Alexis!” Ivy hisses, reading the display screen. “Lex?” she says, switching the phone on. A pause. I can hear the faint squawk of Alexis’s voice, but am unable to make out the words. “Yeah, we’re right outside... What? Okay. We’ll start the car... We’ll honk when we’re outside. The back window will be open, just dive in.”

She beeps off the phone and turns to me, lips curling slightly when she sees my slack-jawed expression.

“She’s going to dive in the window?” I demand, alarmed. “What the hell’s going on?”

“It’s the custodian,” Ivy announces smugly, “and apparently he and Jared disappeared into one of the clothing stores about five minutes ago and haven’t come out, and she’s too afraid of the mannequins to go in after them, and she really has to pee, so...”

“Why on earth does she need to dive in?” I exclaim. “Why can’t she just get in normally?”

“Well...” Ivy begins, reaching over to twist the keys in the ignition, and the car reluctantly rumbles to life. “I think she’s getting a bit... suspicious.”

I want to ask more, but chills are racing up and down my back that have nothing to do with the cold. Or at least only half to do with the cold. Mannequins are scary, is what I’m thinking as I press the button to roll down the back window, letting even more icy air in.

“Here goes,” I say, inching forward carefully, expecting snarling Dobermans to leap in the open window at any moment and bite my ear off.

But nothing happens. The loading bay is pitch black and silent except for our tires crunching over the icy pavement, and when we are about six feet from loading bay three, whose loading ramp is level with the roof of the car, I honk, and the nearly invisible door swings open to reveal a pale Alexis.

Thank God! she mouths, her lips dark on her white skin, and she scurries forward, evidently seeing the issues with diving through a window that is partly blocked by the cement ramp.

It's six feet to the ground and that's clearly the only option, so I pull forward to the far side and click open the locks as Alexis levers herself down off the ramp, landing with a soft grunt.

"Thank God," she repeats, this time out loud, her hand on the back door handle, head lowered to the window, and that's all she has time to say before a million lights flicker on and there's a loud crashing sound and what sounds like firecrackers exploding.

"Ahh!" the three of us scream, and I instinctively hit the gas as Alexis instinctively throws herself through the window and Ivy instinctively locks the doors.

"Freeze!"

I'm already freezing, but Alexis stops mid-jump, or maybe it's her puffy parka that stops her, leaving her wedged half-in, half-out the window. My first instinct is to hit the gas, but at the last instant I manage to jerk my foot to the brake and stomp on it hard. In a second we are surrounded, and I hear the air being knocked out of Alexis's lungs as she is unceremoniously yanked from the back window.

Ivy and I exchange looks, then I awkwardly shut off the car, just in time to hear, "Come out with your hands up!"

Ivy looks at me, mouth open.

"Seriously?" she whispers.

The best I can do is shrug.

To be honest, ninety percent of my brain is not allowing me to process this, and the remaining ten percent is still rattling with cold. But we hesitantly open the doors and step out simultaneously, hands up and eyes squinting against the glare.

It is hard to see with so many lights shining and what seem like a million men dressed in black and carrying big guns milling around, but Ivy and I are quickly pressed face-first against the car, our eyes meeting over the roof, and somewhere in the distance I can hear Alexis demanding to know what is going on.

Ivy raises her brows at me and I raise mine back, and we silently agree to remain silent, as they are currently informing us is our right, and then we are handcuffed, knees knocking together with fear and cold, and led to the back of separate squad cars.

I can't believe this.

I'm cold and I'm scared and I am beyond curious.

It takes about three minutes to get answers as Jared, cuffed, is led out of the nearly invisible door by two police officers, closely followed by a man in a dark blue janitor's uniform (also cuffed) and – aha! – a security guard, also in cuffs.

When Alexis gets out of jail, her secret British man is going to be furious.

I snicker at my own joke, and the rustle of clothing is the only thing that alerts me to the presence of the man in the driver's seat. He turns to glance at me through the plexiglass partition, but when I open my mouth to speak only a gasp of white air escapes. I shiver and try to sink deeper into my jacket and he takes pity on me and starts the car, which takes a while to warm up. Eventually it dawns on me that if this car is taking so long to get warm, it must have been cold for a while... In fact, it's pretty much as cold as my car was, which means... Hmm. Is it possible that we were not the only people trailing Alexis on her date today? I hadn't noticed anybody following us, but then again, I wasn't looking, and aren't they supposed to be trained for this sort of thing? And if this car is cold, then surely it must have been parked nearby for at least as long as we had been, which means while we waited for Alexis at loading bay three, they were waiting for us to... do something. What exactly do they think our role in this is? Ivy and I are creepy spectators, but apart from parking in strange places and gossiping, we have not done anything wrong.

Alexis, however... I shiver again, this time not from the cold, and the heater finally sparks to life with a whoosh, hot air spewing from the front and taking an eternity to reach the back.

When we get to the police station I am led down a dim hallway to a small room with a mirrored wall and a folding table with a metal chair on either side. I am no longer handcuffed and I take the seat on the far side, peering into the mirror with great interest. This is no doubt an interrogation room, and that is no doubt a two-way mirror, and I am wondering what I could possibly be interrogated about. Well, I guess I kind of know what they might be wondering about, but I do not know my answer. Should I ask for a lawyer?

I do nothing but sit, my hands wrapped around a Styrofoam cup filled with weak tea, and watch the hands on the clock above the door tick slowly past the nine.

It is another hour before someone enters, a female deputy in an ill-fitting gray suit, and she asks if I'm done with the tea and would I mind following her. I frown. I have not been interrogated. In fact, she is my first and only visitor, and I have far more questions than answers. To start with, where are Ivy and Alexis?

I follow her down a short hallway, and then we round the corner and I see Ivy and Alexis sitting with two other women in a small holding cell. I wonder if they think I flipped on them.

"In here," the deputy says, distracted, as she unlocks the door and holds it open for me to pass through.

I am dimly aware of the door clicking shut behind me as Ivy grabs me in a tight hug, and when she releases me we turn slowly to face Alexis, who looks a bit embarrassed, and more than a little ashamed.

"Are you okay?" she asks finally, and I nod, thinking that this is the right answer, though I can't be entirely sure, since I have no idea what just happened.

"Alexis..." I begin cautiously. "What the hell?" She buries her face in her hands then, and slumps onto the metal bench that lines two of the short walls. Ivy and I take a seat on either side of her. Alexis is not crying, but she can't look at us either, and I hear her trying to steady her breathing.

"I'm sorry," she mumbles through her fingers, and Ivy and I look at each other over her head and shrug.

"It's okay," Ivy says soothingly, patting her back.

"Is it?" Alexis asks, peeking at me from one eye.

"It's fine," I assure her, still not sure what exactly is fine. "What's going on?"

"They asked me questions about Jared," Alexis answers. "And Jerry and Fritz."

"Who?" Ivy and I ask in unison, and Alexis shrugs.

"No idea. I mean, except for Jared. And... well, I guess you saw what happened."

I look around the cell cautiously. We are joined by a stringy-haired girl no older than fourteen who looks extremely haggard, and a middle-aged woman with a bright red nose and watery blue eyes. They don't look like police informants.

"Well..." I say, "We watched you make some deliveries, then head into the mall for a while..."

Alexis gives me a wry look.

“Not a delivery,” she informs us. “A pick up.”

“A pick up?” Ivy echoes, and Alexis shrugs helplessly.

“That’s what I’m hearing,” she replies. “They asked me questions for an hour, but seemed to believe that I didn’t know what was going on.”

“Alexis...” I start, hesitant. “You *didn’t* know what was going on, did you?”

“No!” she splutters, and her surprise sounds genuine. “Of course not!” Then she, too, looks around the cell before lowering her voice. “I mean, I knew he was maybe delivering more than, you know, paperwork, but I didn’t know he was the focus of an ongoing sting operation.” She looks between the two of us again. “What did they ask you?”

“Nothing.” Ivy answers before me. “I’ve been in here the whole time.”

They look at me.

“I was in an interrogation room,” I inform them, almost proudly. “But nobody asked me any questions.”

“None?” Alexis demands, and I shake my head.

“None.”

Alexis sighs again.

“We should be able to go home soon,” she says. “I mean, I guess it kind of depends on what Jared tells them, but he didn’t know about the two of you trailing us, so there’s no reason for them to keep you...”

“We’re not leaving you here alone,” Ivy says firmly, though I don’t quite echo that sentiment. If Alexis wants some prison stories to tell her secret British man, then she can do that alone as well.

But we’re not going to prison. Jared tells them Alexis had no idea what was going on, he had no idea Ivy and I were waiting outside, and they believe him. We’re not who they’re after, and they seem to sense our lack of involvement. At least that’s the impression they get when they check our criminal records.

“Y’all are going to need a new ride,” the deputy from earlier informs us as we shuffle tiredly out of the cell, leaving our cellmates behind with a wave. “Car’s impounded until it’s been cleared.”

The words mean nothing to me at this point. We have been here for approximately five hours, and it's after two in the morning. My head is swimming, my eyes are blurry, and I want nothing more than to curl up on the cell bench and fall asleep.

"I'm too tired to drive anyway," I mumble to Ivy and Alexis, who yawn their agreement. We pause in front of the payphone in the lobby, the night dark and cold beyond the double glass doors, and I shiver. Ivy digs coins from the bottom of her purse, hands me a couple, then takes the rest to the coffee machine, punching in an order for three murky cups.

"Are you calling Doug?" I ask her, and she looks up while the coffee gurgles, and Alexis gives me a pointed look.

"No," Ivy answers, shaking her head. "Doug's asleep."

I look at Alexis.

"Did you have someone to call?" I ask her, and she shakes her head, too. I look between them blearily, stupidly, my head fuzzy and extremely slow to clear. When it does, however, I feel my heart drop to my toes.

"Oh," I say dumbly.

He answers on the first ring. I can hear the muted thud of the base and he sounds distracted. "Hello?" he repeats.

I take a deep breath.

"Jules?" he says at the same moment I say, "It's me."

"Yeah," I say. "It's me."

A pause.

"What's up?"

A longer pause.

"One more time," James says, two hours later when we are alone in his car, having dropped off Alexis and Ivy at their respective homes.

The mud-like coffee from earlier is burning a hole in my stomach and I feel more awake than I want to.

"I already told you," I protest, but James ignores the plea in my voice as he makes a right turn onto my street.

Uh-oh. My street. My apartment. Not his place. Not the bar. I wonder if he's planning to come up.

He parks at the curb in front of my building and leaves the car idling, answering my unspoken question.

I sigh heavily and tell him everything again, from Jared to the tailing to the sting operation to the jail. He shakes his head, his hair flopping into his eyes, and he pushes it aside impatiently, like he wants to say something but refuses.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” is what he settles on, then he faces forward again, knuckles white around the wheel, eyes determinedly avoiding mine.

It’s four o’clock in the morning and neither of us wants to fight. I don’t even know what about at this point.

“Thanks for coming to get us,” I say in a small voice, and he glances at me out of the corner of his eye.

“Of course,” he says matter-of-factly, like how ridiculous that I should expect to catch a bus home from jail.

“James,” I say, and my heart stutters in my chest, because I know what he wants to hear, and I know he would never take me along on a drug run or leave me waiting at a police station.

“Don’t say it,” he says softly, and his tone tells me he means it. He doesn’t look at me, just focuses outside on the dark icy road, and I feel a hot lump rise in my throat. I get out of the car before I say something we’ll both regret.

Another James-free week passes and the tiny thrill of being arrested wears off. I am sad. I’m not sure if we’ve broken up or we’re in the process of breaking up, but I’m tired and I’m frustrated.

“His ego’s hurt!” Ivy exclaims, back in the diner, a huge plate of pancakes before her and a fork in her hand.

“Yup,” Alexis nods, chewing a strip of bacon thoughtfully. “He’s kind of macho, you know?”

Do I know? Of course I know. Do I know how to get around that? I do not.

“What do I do?” I ask, but am interrupted when Alexis’s cell phone vibrates. We stare silently as it jitters across the table, bumping into Ivy’s plate before stopping. We twist our heads to read the display screen: Jared.

“Ha,” Alexis says. “I win.”

“Damn,” Ivy mutters, pulling five dollars out of her bag and putting it on the table.

Jared has called Alexis five times a day every day since our night in jail, and she has not kept these calls a secret, nor has she answered any one of them.

“What does he expect me to say?” she muses out loud, and she seems genuinely puzzled, but not the least bit interested. Which I suppose makes sense, even if Jared is impossibly attractive.

“Maybe he wants an alibi,” Ivy suggests through a mouthful of dough.

“Or a good lawyer,” I offer, and Alexis smirks.

Jared is out on bail until his hearing next week and rumours are swirling that he may not go to prison at all if he gives up the people who supply him with his “delivery” orders. Upon hearing of that night’s adventures, Alexis’s bosses had promptly installed an intercom, and though they refuse to let Jared in, she suspects that they are considering it, if only for the chance to offer their services.

Doug seemed neither surprised nor interested when Ivy stumbled in that morning, dropping exhaustedly into bed. He kissed her cheek, said he was glad she was safe, and resumed his soft, steady snoring. Ivy looked disappointed when retelling the story, but not surprised, either. Looking between the two of them, I know I have it good. Someone who is willing to drive to the next county to pick up me and my friends from jail, someone who is willing to put his heart on the line for someone who has trouble doing the same, someone who brings me cherry vanilla icing when I have a cold and even when I don’t.

“I’m going to do it,” I say firmly, standing suddenly.

Ivy pauses in her chewing. “*It it?*” she asks.

“*It it,*” I confirm.

“Good luck,” Alexis says, and I turn and walk out before I can talk myself out of *it*.

It is eleven o’clock on Saturday morning and usually at this time James will be at the bar doing inventory or payroll or some kind of back office work, so it is a bit of a surprise when I pull up and catch the back of his head as he disappears around the side of the low square building. I climb out of the car, briefly wondering if he saw me and did not stop, and follow him.

The morning is crisp and sunny, though the ground is slightly muddy from the melted frost. I avoid the slippery patches and make my way gingerly to the back of the building, where I can hear a thud and the rattling of cans and bottles. I round the corner in

time to see James heave a giant black trash bag into the dumpster, surrounded by tipped milk crates and a surprising number of beer and liquor bottles.

“Hey,” I say, and he whirls quickly – evidently he did not see me pull in – and the lid to the dumpster slams closed with a loud bang, making us both jump.

Despite the slight chill James is wearing a sleeveless white shirt with his perfect-fitting jeans, and his eyes are dark and brooding when they focus on mine. He doesn’t speak, just glares at me, almost petulant.

“What happened back here?” I ask, taking a few tentative steps closer, so there are only a few feet separating us – that and the stench from the dumpster. I wrinkle my nose and take a few steps back.

James shrugs, eyes flickering over the mess, and something – guilt? – passes behind his eyes, disappearing as quickly as it came.

I feel a twinge in my chest and remember my purpose in coming here, and as I stare at that purpose he snatches up the rubber gloves, puts them on, and begins collecting bottles and standing them in milk crates.

“James...” I begin, but he cuts me off with a wave of a yellow-gloved hand.

I crouch in front of him, a milk crate between us, and he avoids my eyes as he jams bottle after bottle inside. A flush has risen up in his cheeks, and I can’t tell if it’s exertion or embarrassment or anger.

“James,” I start again, and he jumps up suddenly, startling me, and whips off the gloves, throwing them to the ground. “What the--?” I exclaim, rising slowly, warily, as he towers above me. I see the bunched muscles in his arms, his hands in fists at his sides, and something in me hurts.

“Don’t,” he says through gritted teeth, and now I know he’s hurt, so I take a step around the milk crate and reach for him, but he steps away.

I take another step and he steps away again, and when I take a third step he skirts around me, heading back the way we came.

“Just go home, Jules,” he throws over his shoulder, and I feel tears springing to my eyes, because I don’t want this to be the end, even if I deserve it.

James is in his office, the door unlocked, sitting at his desk. His fists are clenched on the desk in front of him and he doesn’t look up when I enter, not even when I go around the desk to stand behind him, resting my hands on his shoulders. I feel the angry tension there, smooth my fingers over his shiny hair, take a few steadying breaths.

“I love you,” I say softly, honestly, the words trembling past my lips but coming out steady. “We’re talking like, eight, eight and a half here.”

James doesn’t move, his body rigid like a statue, and I lean down slowly to kiss the crown of his head, smell his shampoo, wonder if this might be the last time. My fingers trail down his arms, over the taut biceps, back up to his shoulders, over his neck, and I rub lightly, then harder, feeling the tension slowly ease.

Eventually he raises his hands to his face, dropping his head forward as I continue with the massage, and I move my hands lower, over his shoulder blades, feeling the strong line of his spine, rubbing the knots there.

Slowly he turns the chair so his back is to the desk, so I’m standing between his knees and I have to stop the massage. My fingers trace his and he drops his hands to the arms of the chair, so I stroke his cheeks, his ears, his chin.

“Again,” he says, voice low, eyes still not on mine.

“I love you,” I repeat.

“Again,” he says, and my knees are starting to buckle.

“I love you,” I say again, and he takes my hands in his, holds them there between us, like a bridge.

“Again,” he whispers, and I can barely stand up.

“I love you,” I say, not hesitating, not stammering. The words don’t stick in my throat or ring untrue, I don’t feel nauseous or dizzy or doubtful at all; though I’ve practiced a hundred times in the past week, this is the first time that those three impossible little words have felt right.

CHAPTER FIVE

We stop for gas somewhere just past the Arizona state line, and it's dinnertime and my stomach is rumbling. Though it is only Monday evening, only twenty-four hours since we left the big V-word, it feels like a lifetime. Leaving Emerton feels like a dream. Like the tail end of a dream that you know is ending, and one half of your consciousness is struggling to hold on to it while the other is aching aware of the imminent beep of the alarm clock. The clock always wins.

I lie in the backseat, bare feet braced against the window, the sun bracketed between my toes. The desert is hot and beautiful, but after a few hours of colourful sand and flat-topped hills, the beauty becomes kind of monotonous. Depressing. Even Ivy, who can normally keep up a steady stream of mindless chatter, has grown quiet.

I'm alone now, for the moment; Ivy went to pay for the gas (thanks, Doug), while Alexis sought out a bathroom. I idly unwrap a chocolate bar without looking at the name, and it makes a satisfying crunch when I bite into it.

Ivy drops back into the driver's seat with a thud, Alexis mimicking the motion in the passenger seat, and turns to face me, hands extended, saying, "Look."

I do look. And my mouth drops open.

Because in her right hand is her credit card. And in her left hand is her credit card. The same credit card, equally halved.

I open my mouth to speak, but no sound comes out. I want to believe it was an accident, that maybe Ivy sat on it or it just... melted in two, but the cut is sharp and even, clearly the work of scissors.

"Yeah," she says, reading my mind. "Doug."

Alexis heaves a heavy sigh and turns to face me as I pull myself up, the leather on the seats pulling away from my back with a noisy squelch.

"So..." I begin, not quite sure where to begin. "We can't pay for the gas?"

“It fit on my card,” Alexis says, running a hand through her hair. “Which has to be so far over its limit right now it’s not even funny.”

“How over the limit can it go?” I ask, maybe a little too hopeful.

“We’ll find out when they bring out the scissors,” she says dryly, and Ivy fans herself with both halves of her credit card.

“Mine are maxed out...” I say thoughtfully. “But I just assumed that because I had reached the limit I couldn’t spend anymore...”

“Next stop is on you,” Ivy says, starting up the car. “Asshole Doug.”

“Yeah,” Alexis echoes, unconvincing.

I put on my seatbelt as Ivy squeals onto the empty road, leaving the lonely gas station behind.

“Have you called him yet?” I ask her. “Doug?”

“Why?” she asks, reaching for the radio, finding only static.

“To tell him you’re okay?”

She shrugs, eyes on the road. “He knows,” she replies. Alexis looks at me over her shoulder and I drop the subject, sinking back.

An hour and one confounding wrong turn later (how do you make a wrong turn in the desert? Where could you possibly think you’re going?) we pass a small wooden sign with *Gettys* carved in uneven capital letters. From the distance Gettys appeared to be a small block of homes and businesses, and from the inside it appears that our original assumption was correct. The streets are all at ninety degree angles, the yards fresh green sod that may have been dropped from the sky, the homes single level bungalows with more than a few cacti sitting in pots on the doorsteps.

It is still light out, though the sun is beginning to drop, and a glance at my watch shows that it’s just after seven o’clock. There are few people out this evening, and we crawl along cautiously, our map identifying Gettys, but not its streets.

I squint into the setting sun in an effort to read the street signs. My eyes quickly flick over the business names on either side of the main road, and I give a small sigh of relief when there are no obvious familial connections.

“Just ask someone,” Alexis mutters, her head resting against the passenger side window, a vent directed at her face in an attempt to either cool down or stay awake, I can’t say which. None of us slept well last night, and the driving, chocolate-based diet,

and more driving, has left us all a little worse for the wear. Even Ivy's curls seem to have wilted considerably over the last fifty miles.

"How far can it be?" I ask, but pull over anyway, leaning across Alexis to ask directions to Bill's house. We don't know his last name, and Bill isn't exactly the most original name, but the man on the sidewalk seems to know exactly who I'm referring to. He puts a hand on his brow to block the sun as he bends down to peer in the window, and Alexis pulls back slightly, loathe to give up her air conditioning, but also naturally suspicious.

"Bill Havana," he murmurs, peering at the three of us, and I hear Ivy snort in the back seat, but ignore her.

"Erm, yes," I say, hoping there aren't too many other Bills at that address. I steal a quick glance at the crumpled paper with Bill's address. "Nine... Dilophosaurus Drive." After more than a few dinosaur-themed street names and a small dinosaur museum at the edge of town, it did not take a genius to figure out the town pride.

"Nother six blocks or so," the man answers. "You're looking at the Jurassic area, then. Take a left on Scuttelosaurus Street and you'll see it. Now's probably not the best time," he adds, but I'm not interested in what's best for Bill's schedule right now.

"Thank you," I say, easing away from the curb as Alexis rolls up the window just in time to prevent Ivy's peals of laughter from ringing into the streets. "Oh shut up," I tell her, but she just laughs louder, hands on her stomach as though she's making an effort to keep it in.

"Julianna Havana!" she cracks, eyes shut, and now that I glare back at her, I can see that she is literally crying with laughter.

"Knock it off," I mutter.

"Oh God, I hope it's him," she snorts, and when I look at Alexis out of the corner of my eye, I see that she is trying but failing to keep the smirk off her face.

The sign for Scuttelosaurus Street appears on the left and I flip on the blinker though there is nobody behind me and turn onto a street that looks the same as all the other streets. This feels like the kind of town that could disappear over night, much as it was probably built. All the houses are the kind you see on the back of a semi on the highway, held to the ground by nothing more than gravity, easy to pick up and shift to the left or right should the need arise.

Dilophosaurus Drive is about seven houses in, and I make a right onto the deserted two-lane road with nearly identical bungalows evenly spaced on either side. The thing that's different about this street, however, is that there are no cars anywhere. Not parked along the curb, not in the driveways, and since there are no garages visible, not tucked away out of sight. Two shiny green lawns have flags mounted, and both flags are at half-mast.

"Who died?" Ivy asks, finally done with the laughter, and Alexis's head swivels left and right, evidently on the same page.

"The whole street, from the looks of it," she answers, and I stop the car in the middle of the street, which means about six houses from either end, since it's not very long.

"The man said this probably wasn't a good time," I say slowly, and I feel the frown coming on though I try to stop it so I don't wrinkle. It doesn't work. Maybe the whole street is dead, as extinct as its namesake. I shudder and inch forward so we're stopped in front of Bill Havana's house, number nine, its drapes drawn, no car in the drive. "Doesn't look like he's home," I offer, loathe to get out of the car. What if there's an airborne virus sweeping through Gettys, and we wind up becoming three mummified bodies, found ten years from now when the next folks stumble across this little desert hell?

But I put my hand on the door anyway and push it open, sniffing cautiously, glancing at Ivy and Alexis, who both look scared despite attempts to look supportive. "No phone calls?" I ask. "No walks?" They shake their heads like no amount of money would get them out of the car, and with a sigh I climb out and shut the door behind me, jumping when the sound seems to be cut off in the stifling, smothering air of Dilophosaurus Drive.

I take a deep breath then regret it, though the air smells of absolutely nothing (lots of deadly gases are odorless), and wipe my suddenly sweaty palms on my jeans as I take reluctant-but-hasty steps up the drive. Heat radiates from the asphalt and through my shoes, and maybe it's the weather or my overactive imagination or a combination of the two, but I'm sweating by the time I'm on the doorstep. I raise my hand to the small white bell and press before I can talk myself out of it and run screaming back to the car. Which is still an option.

Still an option.

Still.

I give it a minute, then press the bell again. I hear it chime distantly inside the house, and if I can hear it, they can hear it, but there are no voices or footsteps to suggest anyone coming to see who's calling on this creepy dead street.

I glance back at the car, half expecting to find it empty, but Alexis and Ivy are there, faces pressed against the glass. I shrug and ring the bell once more for good measure, then turn and stride back down the drive, suddenly much more confident.

That confidence dissipates once I'm back in the car, however, because while I am relieved that no zombie or vampire opened the door to number nine Dilophosaurus Drive, I still don't have a husband to pay for the annulment. And return my ring.

I shift in the seat to look between Ivy and Alexis, and they both look a little lost.

"Should we wait?" I ask, the thought a little appealing, because then we could sleep, but also alarming, because then a zombie could sneak up on us.

"Not here," Ivy says quickly. I put the car in gear, totally agreeing with her, and turn to speed back to the safety of Scuttelosaurus Street, which, if not bustling, at least has a few cars and signs of life on it. The lone flag, I notice, however, is also at half-mast.

"Half-mast..." I start, hesitant. "That means something bad, right? Somebody died?"

"I think so," Alexis replies, fiddling with the radio. "We haven't had good reception in a while. You don't think some horrible world event has happened, do you?"

I shudder at the thought and don't feel any better when the only sound from the speakers is static, much like what one would hear if an alien invasion had occurred in their small desert town.

I turn back onto the main street, feeling a little safer now that there are people who don't appear to be flesh-eaters or bloodsuckers or aliens strolling down the sidewalks, and again I can't help but notice the absence of any amount of vehicular traffic. I'm no private eye, but the half-mast flags and lack of Jurassic-area life suggests that they may be at some kind of funereal gathering.

Ivy's reading my mind.

"Look," she says, pointing out the window to one of the official green signs that point out points of community interest, like libraries and hospitals and post offices. "Cemetery."

I look, though I don't really want to see it, and sure enough there's a tiny white cross above a white arrow with "300 yards" beneath it.

“Bill had better not be dead,” I say, not especially sympathetic to his plight. Unless... “I can’t be a beneficiary after twenty-four hours of marriage, can I?” I ask Alexis, who shakes her head.

“I doubt he changed his will,” she answers practically.

Well. An annulment may cost money, but being a widow doesn’t.

The small cemetery parking lot is full and the side street is lined with all the cars that probably belong on Dilophosaurus Drive. I creep along until I find a space to wedge the car into, and judging by the cluster of people at the far edge of the cemetery, it’s obvious that there is just one burial tonight. I have a bad feeling. And not an alien invasion feeling, but a... guilty feeling. Crashing a wedding is one thing, crashing a burial is quite another. Especially dressed like this.

“We should put on something nicer,” Ivy announces, and Alexis and I exchange worried looks.

“Or just wait in the car,” I suggest, rolling down the window to let whatever breeze may exist wash over my clammy skin.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Alexis says, opening the door and heading around to the trunk, which I pop open for her. She disappears from sight for a moment, then closes the lid gingerly, and returns with three black dresses, handing one to each of us.

I stare at mine in horror.

“What’s the matter?” she snaps, and I shake my head.

“I can’t wear this,” I say, and she gives me a sharp look.

“Why not? It’s your favourite.”

“It *was* my favourite,” I clarify. “Until I got married in it. I can’t possibly wear my wedding dress to a funeral.”

“It’s your only black dress,” she says, already unbuttoning her pants, and in the rearview I see Ivy getting changed, too.

“You guys really think we can crash a funeral?” I demand, and they both make muffled noises of confirmation as they pull dresses over their heads.

“It’s not so much a crashing,” Ivy says soothingly, “as a joining. We’re joining them in mourning, finding Bill, then running away.”

“We’re never going to see these people again,” Alexis adds, and this is the reasoning that has me putting my wedding dress back on.

It smells like cologne and I freeze, dress over my head, as images come racing back to me. Post-wedding images of the dress in this position, only headed in the opposite direction. My heated skin, calloused hands on my waist, pulling the dress up, my lips seeking his, the room too dark to see...

And then it's light again. I blink and see Alexis leaning in, having just yanked the dress down.

"Did you remember something?" Ivy asks, far too intuitive. "Did you see Bill? Is it him?"

I shake my head, disturbed by the thoughts. From the brief look of things, it appeared I was more than happy to be married. More than happy to be making this mistake.

"I don't know who it was," I mutter finally, shimmying out of my jeans, grateful for the rush of air over my bare legs, and we hurry back to the trunk barefoot and slip into more burial-appropriate footwear, if sparkly stilettos can be considered appropriate.

I feel even more anxious now than before – if possible – as we gingerly make our way across the grassy cemetery, past even lines of crosses and tombstones and lonely gray plaques.

The low drone of the minister's voice suggests that everybody at the burial may be as eager for it to end as we are. And maybe it is because of this boredom, or just because it's completely wrong to show up late to a burial, many heads turn as the three of us approach in Vegas going-out ensembles and curiously dated hairstyles.

I flick reassuring smiles at the appalled faces and see Ivy and Alexis doing the same as we shuffle to the back of the respectably large crowd. Judging from the size of Gettys, I would say that at least twenty percent of its population is currently huddled around this person's grave. I am torn between equal hope that it's not Bill's grave and also that it is. Though with my luck he would be buried with my engagement ring, and I would have a tough time explaining that.

It's tacky, but I inch my way in through the crowd – honestly, if they were that close to the deceased, they'd be at the front of the pack, wouldn't they? – and cross my fingers that maybe the tombstone is already up and I'll be able to read the name engraved there.

I emerge from the overly-perfumed crowd and find myself next to a weeping middle-aged woman wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a lacy black veil. I peer closely, just in case: not Bill. My eyes dart around the circle of front row mourners, mostly older

folks, mostly dry-eyed, like this is not a tragic surprise. Like it's not the loss of a young life.

The woman next to me cries louder as the minister speaks about the deceased's life, and I'm getting the impression that this guy – and it is a guy, that much I know – led a long life, probably more than the twenty-odd years Bill had. Has. I glance this way and that, catching a glimpse of Ivy's blonde hair through the crowd, and she meets my eyes and shakes her head.

The minister finally seems to be winding down. Something about ashes and dust, and that has got to be the end. Everyone murmurs "Amen" in chorus, and I join in a little belatedly, the second syllable coming out when everyone has finished, and somebody clears their throat disapprovingly. I study my aching feet, trying not to make a run for it.

The crowd starts to disperse and I spot Ivy's curls at the far edge. I'm about to head that way when a firm hand takes my elbow and a low voice hisses in my ear, "There you are."

I freeze and turn my head slowly to find Bill Havana – if that's his last name; who cares, it's the Bill from Vegas – glaring at me from approximately two inches away. He's dressed in black and his eyes are rimmed in red and he looks equal parts devastated and furious.

Now that I've got his attention, I don't quite know what to say.

"Erm, do you have my ring?" is what comes out.

Bill blinks once, twice, like he didn't understand the question.

"Get in the car," he says, propelling me toward the far side of the cemetery, away from where our own car is parked, away from Ivy and Alexis who have joined the throng of mourners headed in the opposite direction. I'm not sure if I should yell for help or kick him in the shin, but I settle for stumbling along after him, my arm secure in his almost painful grip, and it is only when I notice a group of young guys following us that I start to fight. I kick Bill in the back of the leg.

"Ow!" he exclaims, whirling to face me. "What the hell?!"

"Let go!" I hiss, trying not to cause a scene, which doesn't make sense if I'm about to be murdered by angry mourners.

To my surprise he does let go, and he fishes out a handkerchief from his pocket and turns his head to blow his nose, wiping discreetly at his eyes. The group of guys has halted, about fifteen feet away, and Bill turns his gaze back to me.

"Why'd you kick me?" he demands, and I shake my head, disbelieving.

“Do you even know who I am?” I demand back.

“Of course I do!” he snaps, taking my arm again and leading me ostensibly to the lone car parked on the far side of the cemetery.

I hear muted footsteps behind us and kick him in the leg again, nearly losing my balance on one stiletto heel.

“Why’d you kick me again?!” he shrieks, and I yank my arm free and put my hands on my hips, hoping Alexis’s stern lawyer face works, or better yet, that Alexis and Ivy run to my aid with cans of pepper spray.

“I am not going anywhere with you and your little gang!” I state firmly, and his gaze wanders over my shoulder to the again-paused group of men, and he sighs. “We can do this right here,” I continue, while he seems to be weak. “I want my ring. And anything else you stole.”

“Stole?” he echoes, and despite his despair he manages to look bemused. “What could I have possibly stolen? *You’re* the one who ran from *me*.”

Ivy, Alexis and I stare across the table at Bill and his three friends. We are sitting in the small, cozy kitchen of number nine Dilophosaurus Drive, and have been for about ten minutes now. Nobody really knows where to begin. Who died? Are we married? Did you steal my ring? Who died?

Alexis, Ivy and I exchange uncomfortable looks. The air conditioning is not on, and the idea of a breeze that’s passing through the open windows is not enough to stop sweat from springing up on my hairline and trickling down into my ear. I swipe at it, irritated, then finally look at Bill straight on.

“So,” I say, and everyone looks relieved that someone is finally talking. “I’m sorry to come at a bad time, but I need to know... if we’re married.” I was trying to keep my voice level for the whole sentence, but the last four words came out in a something of a baritone.

Bill looks at me, unimpressed.

“No,” he says, and one of his friends snickers. Three sets of icy female eyes freeze him in his laughter tracks and he shuts up.

“Then what...” I begin. “Why... How... I mean, you knew me.”

“Yeah,” he says dryly. “I know you. I saw you two days ago. You got me fired. It stuck in my mind.”

“What?” Alexis, Ivy and I say in unison, and Ivy especially looks at me like, When did you manage that?

I have no idea. Before or after the mystery elevator husband?

“I’m... sorry,” I say, and wonder how many times I’ll apologize while I’m in Gettys. I really don’t have much of a leg to stand on if Bill didn’t marry me and then run away. Now I’m just a creepy funeral crasher. “I don’t remember that.”

“Of course you don’t,” he snorts, and another of his friends stands and goes to the refrigerator, which I can see now is packed with casserole dishes and grocery store party platters. The friend – Simon, I think – is pretty hot. His shoulders are broad under his sports jacket and he has strawberry blond hair and a strong jaw. Now that I’m not worried about being stuffed into the trunk of the car, I can look at Bill’s friends a little more objectively. Especially when one of them is bringing a cheese plate to the table. Yes! Food! Lunch feels like a lifetime ago, and even though it may not be appropriate, Alexis, Ivy and I help ourselves to some snacks.

Nobody says anything while we chew, and finally I look back at Bill who is looking back at me.

“Could you please just tell me what you remember of that night?” I ask him, masking my impatience with cheese and a cracker. “Anything would be helpful at this point.”

“Well,” he says with strong exaggeration, like he’s told this story a million times and I haven’t been listening, “do you remember when you guys came down to complain about the air conditioning and I noticed you and you noticed me and I noticed your ring?”

I nod. Yes. Sober for that part.

“And then two nights ago, the night you got me fired, you came stumbling into the lobby some time really late – or really early – shouting about how you were going to get married. I didn’t think much of it, because I knew you were engaged, but then you asked me to recommend a good chapel and when I asked if you didn’t already have one booked in your hometown, you told me to shut up and mind my own business.”

My eyebrows raise. I do not remember this. And I don’t like this version of events. So far it is sounding like nobody tricked me into this marriage.

“And?” I prompt.

“You really don’t remember?” he sighs. “You grabbed the phone book out of my hand, started inviting everyone in the lobby to your wedding, laughed like a maniac, and said, ‘Practice makes perfect, Bill!’ again and again. Then you told me to call you a cab, a

limo, a horse drawn carriage, a bullet-proof SUV, and when I reminded you that you were already engaged, you offered me your ring as payment for making the phone call.”

“M-My engagement ring?” I stammer. Then: “Which one?”

“A nice one,” he replies. “Smaller. Tasteful. Older.”

Must be James’s. It has to be. I gave it away?

“Do you still have it?” I ask, feeling ready to cry. I feel embarrassed and ashamed. All along to have been thinking – and accusing! – that my ring was stolen when in fact I gave it away?

“I didn’t take it!” Bill exclaims. “Are you kidding? You were out of your mind. But you know what? You were determined. You ran outside and flagged something down and headed to the chapel. Last I saw of you.”

“That got you fired?” Alexis interjects, frowning, and all heads turn to hear Bill’s response.

“Erm, no,” he says, a faint flush rising up his neck and blooming across his cheeks. “Well... actually, just considering everything that was going on, I thought maybe I would try to stop you... So when you were running to the door, I kind of... tackled you.”

My eyebrows rise again.

When getting dressed for Paul’s wedding I had noticed some strange bruises on my hips that I had not stopped – or wanted – to consider, thinking they were maybe extreme sex bruises I was better off pretending not to notice. But this. Well. This is much less awkward.

“And then when I tackled you you started screaming for help, saying I was attacking you and trying to steal your “choice,” and that’s pretty much how I got fired.”

“For tackling a guest,” Simon echoes, peering between Bill and me.

“I was trying to help you,” Bill says defensively, and I look at him helplessly. “But you were freakishly strong.”

“Thanks?” I try, because it would have been really great if he were just a little bit stronger.

We’re in Gettys Pub, which is, you guessed it, the one pub in Gettys. Bill and his friends want to drink their pain away – because it was, we have finally confirmed, Bill’s father’s funeral today – and Ivy and Alexis don’t want to drive anymore. Neither do I, but now that everyone in town has heard of my drunken misadventures, I can feel more than a few

eyes on me as I hesitantly lift the bottle of beer to my lips. I should just stick to water; these people clearly think I'm an out-of-town alcoholic (in Vegas, this may in fact be the case) but the first round is on the house and, quite frankly, getting a little drunk would probably work wonders for the humiliation I'm feeling.

Everyone in Gettys thinks it's completely appropriate to make jokes about my husband hunt. They've set up a map and tossed darts to suggest where I should look next, taken a poll to ensure that no one else in Gettys may have married me (two men said they couldn't be sure), and have even started a pool as to how quickly James will dump me if/when he learns about what happened in Vegas.

"So you're kind of screwed, huh?" comes a voice, and I blink my eyes and find Simon sinking into the seat across from me. I was alone at the table, lost in my thoughts and hoping to be lost in the shadows, and it takes me a second to focus on his handsome face. His very handsome face.

"Yeah," I say in response to his question. "You know."

"Y'all heading out in the morning?"

I watch his throat work as he takes a swallow of beer, and I don't know what is wrong with me (besides all the obvious things) but Simon is looking ridiculously good.

"Yeah," I say, another stimulating conversational piece. "Looks like it."

"Where to next?" Simon asks, and he seems genuinely curious and not like he's using this information to get ahead in the pool.

"San Juan mountains," I reply.

"The mountains?" he repeats. "All of them?"

I smile and shrug in spite of myself. "We have the name of the ranch. We'll just start asking around, I suppose. Trust me. I've asked more awkward questions than "Have you heard of this ranch?""

Simon smiles back, drinks again, looks ridiculously sexy again. "Fair enough."

It's finally cooling off a little, just enough to where I'm warm but not sticky, and I lift my hair off my neck and tie it back.

"Want to get out of here?" Simon asks, and I give a start.

"What?" I say, and he grins.

"Sorry, didn't mean it quite like that," he laughs. "I know you already have a husband and a fiancé, but there's this gorge nearby we sometimes hang out at. I think we're heading over later. Want to come?"

Yes. Yes, Simon. I do.

But I've said enough "I dos" lately, so this time I say no.

"No," I say. "Sorry. But it's been a long day."

Simon smiles again and I want to take back my answer. Or take a cold shower.

"Too bad," he says, standing when Bill and the other two friends, Max and Cameron, join us. I stand too, so it's not awkward.

Bill is barely able to stand up unsupported, and secretly I hope he makes some drunken mistake tonight that will make everyone forget about mine.

"Here," Bill says, thrusting something into my hand. I hear the dint of metal and look down to see a modest key ring in my palm. "Stay at my place, 'kay?" he asks, and suddenly he looks much younger than his twenty-three years. "Make sure my mom's okay. And don't tell her that I'm drunk. Tell her I'm... working."

I try to keep a straight face and accidentally meet Simon's eye, and he smiles at me, a slow, sexy smile, and not for the first time I wish I weren't married.

"I'll do that," I tell Bill with a solemn nod, and Ivy and Alexis have joined us at this point.

"We'll bring him by in the morning," Simon says. The foursome heads for the door, stumbling out under Bill's weight, but not before Simon glances back one last time. And of course I'm still looking.

Ivy and Alexis are fast asleep on the roll-out couch across from me, their pale toes an arm's length from my head. They had showered first and tumbled into bed, and now, at God-only-knows-what-hour, I am finally laying my head on a pillow and staring out through the living room window at the star-spangled sky.

Sleep. Thank you.

"Hello?"

I re-open my eyes but don't move.

"Hello?" A woman's voice. Quavering slightly, though not from fear. It must be Bill's mother. Bill's recently widowed mother, coming downstairs in the middle of the night and finding three strange girls asleep in her living room, her son nowhere to be found.

"Hi," I reply, before she speaks again. Before she runs for the phone or a kitchen knife. "Um, we're friends of Bill's."

I hear her pad off softly in the opposite direction, then, after a second, muted light from the kitchen spills into the living room. I crane my neck over the armrest and peer

behind the couch to see her silhouetted in the kitchen doorway, staring into the living room. I want to close my eyes and pretend to have been talking in my sleep, but I don't have the heart. Or the courage.

I get up.

Not for the first time today, I eat cheese and crackers and stare across the kitchen table at a resident of number nine Dilophosaurus Drive. Caroline Havana sips coffee heavily laced with Bailey's (in fact it's Bailey's with a few coffee grinds at the bottom) and stares over my shoulder. Half-asleep and grouchy-but-dutiful Alexis and Ivy sit on either side of me. I take another cracker and wait.

I'm not anxious to speak. Caroline Havana is perhaps the only person in town who does not know why I am really here, and I'm not eager to get into it. And staring at her strained face, she's not really keen on hearing the details either. She's got her own problems. I understand.

In fact, the more I look at her, the more I realize that she's not all that old to be burying a husband. Mid-forties at the oldest. And sitting in her kitchen at four in the morning with three strangers.

"Ugh," she groans. Her head drops forward suddenly, landing with a clunk on her coffee cup, then staying there.

Alexis, Ivy and I straighten in our seats and stare at each other. What do we do? She didn't just... die, did she? Oh my—

"What a day," Caroline exclaims, sitting back up and drinking her "coffee," a red ring on her forehead.

I look at Ivy and Alexis for support, but they just look bleakly back.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," I say, wincing even as the trite words come out of my mouth.

Caroline lets out a long breath and peers around the room.

"I want to paint this kitchen," she announces, and I blink. Eh? "And I definitely want to trade in the car. And I should probably redo the bathroom while I'm at it. Maybe I'll go on vacation and have the house redone while I'm gone. That would be nice, wouldn't it? Coming home to a completely different space? One that doesn't remind me quite so much of the past twenty years?"

"Um..." I say.

"What's nice this time of year?" she asks.

Vegas, I think.

“France?” I say. I have no idea. I’ve never been to France.

“Mmm,” she replies thoughtfully. “Maybe.”

I look between Alexis and Ivy. Back at Caroline. Her eyes are fastened on mine.

“You know what we should do?” she asks, and I don’t know the answer to this one, either.

“Erm,” I say, hoping she’ll just tell me.

“Something crazy,” she says, and she’s looking more awake by the second. I, on the other hand, am awake merely out of a misplaced sense of obligation, and drifting unrelentingly towards dreamland with each passing second. I miss the couch. But Caroline is waiting, and I have a feeling that I will not be able to trudge back to my temporary bed until I have agreed to do something crazy. What the hell.

“Sure,” I say, and Ivy and Alexis swivel their heads to look at me. I shrug.

“Great,” Caroline says. “This will be fun.”

I don’t know what she’s talking about. Did she mention something specific that I was asleep for? I can’t be sure. Caroline looks pretty cheerful for a recently-widowed woman drinking with three strangers at four in the morning.

“So,” I say carefully. “See you in the morning.”

Caroline instantly looks broken. Her eyebrows raise and the corners of her mouth quirk down and it’s like a plaster mask breaking, tiny cracks and crevices appearing and expanding until whole pieces topple off.

A tear trickles from the corner of one eye and weaves a shaky pattern down her cheek. Uh-oh.

“Who are you?” she finally asks, and I don’t want to get into it.

“Friends of Bill’s,” I tell her. “From Vegas.”

She nods thoughtfully, balancing her chin on her folded hands, and I think it’s the only thing holding her head up.

“Vegas,” she whispers. “Do you know what I did in Vegas?”

I look at Ivy and Alexis, who are looking a little more awake. Please do not tell me that Caroline is also married to a stranger.

“I married Pierce in Vegas,” she continues. “It was the best day of my life.”

I hope Pierce is Bill’s father.

“Pierce is – was – Bill’s father,” Caroline tells us. Phew. “And I just thought the idea of getting married in Vegas was so romantic. I mean, twenty-five years ago it wasn’t

quite the quickie marriage haven it is today...” (I look away) “...But getting married in the desert, watching the sun set on the horizon, looking out over hundreds of empty miles and thinking we could do anything, be anything, go anywhere. It was perfect.”

Hmm. It actually does sound kind of nice.

“And it was perfect,” Caroline carries on, and I am getting the distinct feeling that Caroline is not tired at all, that she is, in fact, just getting warmed up. “And two years later we had Bill, and I thought life couldn’t get any better. And you know what?” Uh-oh. “It didn’t.”

She swipes roughly at her eyes, reaches under the table and pulls out a hidden bottle of Bailey’s, dumps more into her mug and drinks deeply, belatedly offering me the bottle. I shake my head and she shrugs.

“Pierce was twenty-five when he got sick,” Caroline says sadly. “And forty-five when he died. And he never got better. He never got... He just never... He...”

Maybe I’m moved, or maybe I’m just tired, but I feel my eyes welling up with tears. Caroline takes this as a sign of encouragement and takes another gulp of courage.

“Pierce was wonderful. He tried not to complain. He was strong. He was brave. He was funny... But the truth is, sometimes, when he didn’t think I was looking, I’d catch him staring out the window, or at the wall, at the ceiling... And I knew what he was thinking.”

“What?” Ivy asks, almost breathless.

“He was thinking that if he’d known he’d only had twenty-five years to live – to really live – if he would have made the same choices,” Caroline answers. “If he would have married me in Vegas. If he’d have had Bill. Moved to Gettys.” Tears are pouring down her face. “You know how I knew that?” she asks, and it’s rhetorical, because I do know the answer, and in any case, she’s not waiting for my guess. “Because I thought the same thing. Every day. If I had known that he’d get sick, would I have made the same choice. Would I have said yes when he asked me to marry him. Would I have had Bill. Would I have loved him the same?”

“And?” Alexis whispers, and we all lean in for her response.

“No,” she says. “Not at all.”

5

So James and I are in love. The sick kind of love, where everything the other person does is perfect and they look sexy all the time. I don't remember it being like this with Kyle. With Kyle it felt more appropriate. We had our cozy apartment in our artsy neighbourhood with crafty friends who played instruments and didn't wear shoes. We both painted and sometimes sold things and would celebrate with bottles of cheap red wine. I felt like I was supposed to be with Kyle, like he was a reflection of what I was and where I was going.

When I look at James I do not see myself. I see nothing but right now, and I like it. I like the right now a lot. James grins and kisses me as he heads out to work and I smile and keep smiling even after he's gone. That's how disgusting I am. Ivy and Alexis remind me of it constantly.

I'm still smiling when the phone rings. I make the mistake of picking up.

"Hello?"

"Julianna." Uh-oh. My mother. My mother's unimpressed voice.

I get along with my parents. They live about half an hour away on an acre of land outside of Emerton and we talk every once in a while. We don't fight, we just don't have that much to say. I haven't seen them in a few months, but Emerton is small and I'm sure that if anything had happened to them I'd have heard. And vice versa.

"Hi mom."

She dispenses with the preliminaries. I already know why.

"Is there anything you wanted to tell me?" she asks, her voice tight.

No.

I wait her out.

"You did not tell me you were dating a hooligan," she says finally. "I had to hear it from Mrs. Fuller." Mrs. Fuller is Ivy's mom. Though my mother has known her my

entire life thanks to my friendship with Ivy, she still refers to her as Mrs. Fuller. Even I don't call her Mrs. Fuller. I don't think anybody does.

"Oh," I answer, arching my back so it cracks. "Yes. I am."

"Julianna—" she starts.

"Mom," I interrupt. "Nobody says hooligan anymore."

"No?" she asks dryly. "What do they say?"

"Thug," I tell her. "Gangster. Perp."

"Stop watching cop shows," she says, and I smile. She does not often have a sense of humour, but when it appears it is sometimes the same as mine. "He runs a bar, then?"

"Yeah," I say. "The one that's not Evan's pub."

"Is it serious?"

"Us or the bar?"

"Jules."

"Yes," I say, grateful that James is not around to hear this. "I guess it is."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me," she says, managing to sound hurt.

"Yeah, well. You still found out," I say.

She sighs. "I've seen him," she announces after a moment. "He looks like a criminal."

"Well, he is in a gang." I can see her eyes rolling. "I had to join, too," I continue. "To show my love and support. I was jumped in."

"How romantic."

"It's the only family I need," I inform her. "So you should be nicer to me."

"I hope the gang colours are flattering," she offers. I laugh and I know that she's trying not to, despite her displeasure at being kept out of the loop.

"How's Dad?" I ask, hoping to change the subject.

"Oh, around," she says vaguely. That's always her answer. It's always pretty much true. He doesn't have a sense of humour at all, so our conversations are particularly uncomfortable.

"Good," I say, and an awkward silence ensues.

"Well bring him over," my mother says finally. "This is neutral territory."

"I'll have to clear it with our leader," I reply. "I think he wants me to have his baby."

"Perfect," my mother answers. "I've always wanted grandchildren."

I stare at James in surprise. We are folding laundry and I asked him if he wanted to have dinner with my parents. He agreed instantly, and I have been staring at him ever since.

“What?” he says, putting a towel on top of the pile. It is not folded properly, but I’ll fix it later.

“Just like that?” I ask. “Okay?”

“What should I have said?” He shrugs. “I’d like to meet them.”

I frown. “Why?”

“To embarrass you, Jules,” he says dryly. “Why do you think? To see where you grew up. What you’re going to look like in thirty years. Little Julianna artwork.”

“There is no artwork,” I inform him. “They’re not sentimental.”

He shrugs again. “Whatever. It’s rude to say no.”

“My mother thinks you’re a hooligan,” I tell him, and maybe I’m trying to goad him a little bit, but he’s not biting. Instead he wriggles his brows, hooded eyes looking slightly criminal-like.

“Maybe I’ll steal something,” he replies.

We arrive at the house one minute before the deadline my mother had set, and I’m nervous. It’s a nice night but goose bumps are running up and down my arms and James rubs my hand reassuringly.

“They don’t bite,” he tells me, though he’s never met them.

“Why are you so okay with this?” I demand, looking at him as we trudge up the drive. “Have you met lots of parents?”

He looks away.

We’ve never really had the exes discussion. I don’t know a lot about his dating history, and he doesn’t know about mine. About Kyle. Which pretty much sums it up.

“Really?” I say, stopping. “How many?”

“Not now,” he says, not stopping.

“James,” I say sharply, but he looks at me as he raises his hand and deliberately knocks on the door.

“Not now,” he repeats, turning on a thousand-watt grin as the door opens.

I spend the entire evening feeling conflicted. On the one hand I am pleasantly surprised at how truly well James and my parents are getting along. On the other hand, I am distressed at how much practice he must have had at this. If it had been a low, appropriate

number, surely he would have just told me outside. It must be high. It must be. Even my father is laughing, and he doesn't have a sense of humour.

"Julianna?" My mother interrupts my thoughts. "Is that true?"

I pause, chin in hand, and look between the three of them. I haven't been listening for the better of part of an hour. They hadn't seemed to mind.

"Um... yes," I decide.

"You weren't even listening," she accuses.

"Nope," James agrees. "Not for a second."

"It's a terrible habit," my mother says, almost conversational, and I stare at her stubbornly.

I see James smile out of the corner of my eye. My mother sees this and smiles, too. For some reason my father smiles. I don't like that everybody is in on something that I am not. I don't like that James said "not now." Twice.

I eat more pie.

James refuses to discuss it on the drive back to my apartment. Or what I think is going to be my apartment, but when we reach the intersection where we would normally turn left, he turns right. To his apartment. And this is not good. Because he wants to be on his home turf when he tells me whatever it is he's been refusing to tell me.

Once parked he reaches across, shoves open my door, and climbs out his own side. I remain seated.

"I'm not going up there until you tell me," I say firmly.

"I'm not having this discussion in the parking lot," he replies.

"You wouldn't have it anywhere," I snap.

"Exactly," he snaps back. "But if I am going to have it, it'll be upstairs. Now get out if you want to talk about this."

I don't appreciate his attitude, but I do want to know, and then again I don't, but curiosity wins and I climb out and slam the door and stalk to the building with ill grace. James puts his hand on my hip as we enter and I shake it off. He puts it back, knowing that it annoys me.

"Stop it," I mutter, pushing open the fire door to his floor.

"You stop it," he says back, pinning me against his door with his shoulder as he unlocks it, kissing me as we stumble inside.

“Knock it off,” I mumble, pushing at his chest as he shuts the door behind us and advances. I take a few steps backwards before bumping into the hall table and he leans in deliberately close and drops the keys behind me before pausing with his face inches from mine.

“Seventeen,” he says, then pushes away and heads into the kitchen.

I remain frozen against the hall table, dimly aware of the sound of the fridge door opening, a bottle cap popping off, silence.

Seventeen. Am I offended by that number or not? Is that the number of girlfriends he’s had or the girls he’s slept with or the number of parents he’s met? What the hell is seventeen?

“What does that even mean?” I call.

“Total,” he calls back, and after a moment he steps into the living room, into my line of sight, and his bottle of beer is nearly empty. Fortification. He stares at me. “You?”

I still don’t know how I feel about seventeen. I mean, I guess I feel fine. It has nothing to do with me. Except that I’m number seventeen. Right? Nothing wrong with that. He works in a bar, he’s good looking, charismatic... Why isn’t the number higher? No. I don’t want a higher number. I don’t want this conversation after all.

He’s still looking at me, beer paused en route to his mouth. He must think I’m counting. Ha. Let him wait.

I pretend to count discreetly on my fingers, mumbling under my breath, starting, stopping, starting again.

He smiles.

“Five,” I tell him. It’s the truth.

“That guy Mark?” he says quickly. Too quickly. My brows shoot up.

“Banker Mark?” I say, surprised, and he scowls.

“Fucker,” he snaps. “He’s banned from the bar.”

I laugh. “Not him,” I say.

“No?” he asks. “Then who?”

I’m not getting into names. Particularly when there are only five, and when one is his and one is the rival pub owner’s. Hell no.

“Let’s not have this conversation,” I say instead. “Let’s just go to bed. Celebrate the fact that meet the parents is over.”

James hesitates a split-second too long, then looks at me, finishes his beer, and sets it down on the coffee table.

“Actually,” he says, swallowing. “About that.”

The house that James grew up in is a three story brick structure with a small but tidy lawn and two cars parked in the driveway. He lives in a cozy neighbourhood of similarly tidy houses; the kind of street kids can ride their bikes on and not worry about being kidnapped or run over.

James pulls both our bags out of the trunk and carries them to the door. I walk a few nervous paces behind, but don't have time to turn tail and run before the front door bursts open and a plump middle-aged woman with platinum blonde hair and an apron steps out and throws her arms around James.

“Jimmy!” she squeals, and he drops the bags, wraps his arms around her, gives a goofy smile.

“Hey ma,” he says in response, and she squeezes him for another moment before noticing me hovering at the base of the stairs.

“Oh,” she says, but not in disappointment. Oh, like I've just gotten to the last page of the book and am only now just learning that though the hero pretended not to love her, he carried a picture of his childhood sweetheart in his wallet all through the war. Oh, like I'm something special.

I try to smile. “Hi,” I say cleverly.

Mrs. Matthews takes two steps down the stairs and wraps me in a fresh bread-scented hug, and I feel an unexpected rush of emotion. I love my parents, but we are not affectionate. We do not hug strangers; we rarely hug each other.

She releases me and when she steps back I see that the rest of James's family is crowded in the small doorway, grinning alternately between James and myself, and the neighbours on either side have opened their front doors and are peering out as well.

“That Jimmy?” calls an extremely old Italian lady from the house on the right.

“Hi Mrs. Virelli,” James answers, and her response is to retreat inside and close the door.

“Come in, come in!” his mother exclaims, remembering that we are standing on the stoop. Still nervous though not dreading it quite so much, I follow the Matthews family inside.

In short order I am introduced to his four siblings: older brothers Vincent, Ricky, and Stephen, and younger sister Moira. The four boys look enough alike to be identified as

siblings from a mile away, but Moira looks like her mother, like an imposter. Impossibly blonde with wide eyes and soft, round build, unlike her wiry brothers. Marina retreats to the kitchen just as James's father Tony ambles in. He stares at me for a long moment before finally giving me a slight smile and shaking my hand like, You might be okay. I'll decide after dinner.

James twines his fingers through mine.

"Ooh, James," Moira says like a true little sister. "This must be for real if we're seeing public displays of affection."

"Please," says Ricky. "If we're seeing her at all it has to be real. Or at least not make believe."

"Shut up, assholes," James says, and they all grin.

"James talks about you all the time," Tony puts in, and it is clear that they are loving this moment, and James squirms, making it even easier for them. "Always saying you're very beautiful. For the first time, he wasn't lying."

I smile again, and feel like a dope for not having a clever response. I just don't know what to say. I feel overwhelmed, and am grateful for James's tight grip on my hand. I take a deep breath and my stomach rumbles.

"Marina!" Tony bellows. "Supper ready?"

"It would be, if someone hadn't eaten all the meatballs!" she hollers back.

"It's really nice to meet all of you," I offer lamely.

Fortunately they seem happy enough with me not being make believe to overlook my lack of conversational skills and James lets go of my hand to pick up our bags.

"We'll just take this stuff upstairs then come back down for dinner," he says, heading for a staircase tucked into the corner, pictures lining the walls.

"Paper thin walls," Ricky reminds him as we head up, and everybody laughs, even as I flush red.

I don't know if James and I are sharing a room here or not – but James seems to know exactly where we're going. I steal a glance at the yellowed photographs on the wall as we pass, trying (and failing) to spot a young James.

"In here," he says, gesturing to a room at the end of a long, narrow hallway, doors on either side revealing small, dated bedrooms.

"Has this place changed since you left?" I ask, following him into a similarly small room that suggests we may have been transported back in time. Triangular pennants are tacked to the walls, dusty trophies cover the bookshelf, a stack of comic books is

heaped in the corner. A cartoon bedspread covers the double bed and a display of army men parade across the dresser.

“No,” he answers with a smile.

I touch the trophies thoughtfully, reading James’s name on the base of each one. First place for wrestling, track and field, little league champions. There’s a white square of matte paper tucked on the far side and I turn it over, feeling my heart flip in my chest. James, no older than eight or nine, a big gap in his front teeth, smiling into the camera with his little cowlick and button-up shirt. A sweetness and openness I’ve rarely seen in him as an adult.

My stomach rumbles again and James takes the picture to study it.

“Vincent beat me up for stealing this shirt from his closet,” he informs me. “Got blood on it that ma couldn’t get out, had to throw it away.”

“I can’t see anybody beating you up,” I say, and it’s true. It’s easy to picture him in a fistfight, but not losing.

“That’s why I like you,” he says.

There are eighteen people at the dinner table, and enough food for twice that many, though James and his brothers make pretty short work of it. Vincent, Ricky, and Moira’s spouses have turned up with their children (two apiece, two sets of twins – note to self: never get pregnant), and Kenneth, Stephen’s partner, is there as well. Though they have been legally committed for more than six months, I still notice Tony darting them uncertain, disbelieving glances from the corner of his eye.

When I’m not spying on Tony spying on Stephen, I can’t help but catch sly little looks being darted my way by all the adults. I wonder if I have something on my face or if there’s a joke I’m not in on, but when I glance at James I see that he’s blushing – actually blushing – and trying not to smile. I don’t know what this means, but now’s not the time to ask. Later. In private. In the room with trophies and paper thin walls.

“You gonna see the city tomorrow, Julianna?” Vincent asks around a mouthful of bread, and I put down my wine glass and nod.

“I think so,” I reply.

“First time here, huh?” says Ricky, shaking his head as if he has never met another person who hasn’t been to Boston – entirely possible, since I don’t think he’s ever actually left the city – and I nod again.

“Yep.” Where are my sparkling social skills? Why wasn’t I raised better than this?

Tomorrow is the fourth of July and James has told me about the amazing fireworks display over the Charles River at least fifteen hundred times. I'm looking forward to it, and not just because James has built it up. I'm looking forward to it because I've never spent the fourth of July on a blanket watching fireworks with a boyfriend. During the years Kyle and I were together he always chose the first week of July to head home to visit his parents in Arizona, leaving me to tag along with Ivy, Doug, Alexis and whoever she was seeing at the time to watch Emerton's underwhelming display.

Something warm settles over me. Nothing tangible, just a cozy, general sense of well-being, of... rightness. Like I *should* be crammed into this tiny space at this table, stuffed to the point of nausea, accepting a piece of apple pie with ice cream and smiling when James's leg bumps mine. I keep the smile in place when I feel his bare toes on my feet, and try not to laugh when they awkwardly tickle their way up my calf and back down. He's trying to make me snort ice cream through my nose, I'm sure of it, but I will not crack. I shoot him a look out of the corner of my eye and he looks at me with mock innocence. Too many people are looking for me to give him the look I want to give him, so I tell Marina the pie is delicious.

"Ma's a great cook," James agrees, the picture of wholesomeness. He drops his hand beneath the table and in short order I feel it on my thigh. High on my thigh.

I discreetly slap his hand away, but he tightens his grip and I straighten in my seat.

"What?" I say so low under my breath that I make practically no sound at all. But James just smiles. He drums his fingers casually along my thigh, and I clench my legs tightly together and grip his wrist in what I hope is a shockingly painful death claw. He makes a sound only a dog could hear but doesn't let go.

"Give up," he says in a low tone, not missing a bite of his pie, even managing to serve himself a second slice with his left hand and not get any crumbs on the table.

"I'm trying to eat," I reply, and he grins.

"Nobody's stopping you."

I roll my eyes but take a deep breath and release his wrist, trying to focus on not choking on my pie, trying to smile politely and answer questions and bond - dammit, bond! - with his family, but I am thinking about one thing and one thing only, and it has nothing to do with pie.

“What is the matter with you?” I hiss hours later as we finally retreat to our tiny room. It is after midnight but there are no stars visible through the open window; the breeze drifting in is a welcome contrast to the still-too-hot temperature of the house.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” James says, pulling his t-shirt over his head, and I get distracted for a second watching the muscles in his chest move.

He knows exactly what I am talking about. I have spent the past several hours in a torturously... lustful... state after his skilled under-the-table display. It is too hot and the walls are too thin and the blanket on the bed has cartoons on it, for crying out loud, but all I can think about – and have been thinking about, for hours – is getting James naked in the first semi-private space available.

He grins, reading my mind.

“Take your clothes off,” he says.

“I’m mad,” I lie.

“Take ‘em off anyway. It’s hot. Come to bed.”

“The walls are paper thin.”

“Are not.”

“Stephen said—”

“Stephen’s a liar.”

“You’d say that even if it weren’t true.”

He smirks unapologetically. “Yep.”

I pull the shade on the window and dig around in my bag for a t-shirt to sleep in.

“You don’t need pajamas, Jules,” James says dryly.

“What if someone comes in?” I ask.

“I locked the door,” he answers, and I find myself frowning, even as I strip down to my underwear and join him in the small, lumpy bed.

“How many girls did you bring here when you were younger?” I ask, and he gives me a stern look.

“I’m not talking about other girls when I’m in bed with you,” he says firmly. “I’m not even thinking about them. There is no one on my mind but you.”

“Shut up,” I say, “and tell me.”

“Lots,” he answers. “Tons. Too many to count. And you get to benefit from this fount of experience. Now stop talking.”

My first instinct is to argue, but the past four hours of inappropriate lusting beats that instinct down and I shrug and let James kiss me, and then kiss him back under the watchful eye of the miniature army.

The next day is like something out of a movie. We take the subway downtown and visit the museum, watch a baseball game, stroll around the Harvard campus and eat lunch under a tree, pretending we're incredibly smart students. So smart we study all summer.

Maybe it's because Emerton is so small, or maybe I'm just blind, but for the first time I notice – really notice – the way other girls check out James. Not that I blame them. He looks good in his white t-shirt and jeans, broad shoulders stretching the cotton, the denim faded in all the right places. He holds my hand and I don't feel jealous or possessive. I feel kind of smug. Mine all mine, ladies. That's right. Eat it up.

“What are you thinking?” he asks, giving me a strange look.

I blink. “What? Nothing,” I lie.

“You were just smiling?” he says doubtfully.

“Nothing important,” I respond, and he shrugs.

We're winding our way through the absolute mob of people who line the Charles River hours before the fireworks are set to begin. There are hotdogs and mini donuts and soft drinks galore. We buy some of everything and stake out a spot where we'll have a great view... of the sky. Apparently there will be some semi-famous people performing a little ways away, but I don't care to move. I'm happy to be right here. The weather is perfect, that's Harvard across the way (my alma mater), and I have mini donuts in one hand, James's hand in the other. It's embarrassing how dopey and happy I feel.

“You've got that smile again,” James mentions, stretching out on the blanket with a sigh, leaning his head back and raising his face to the sun.

“Remind me what's wrong with smiling?” I ask, popping a whole donut in my mouth while his eyes are closed.

“Did you just eat a whole donut in one bite?” he guesses, still not opening his eyes.

“No,” I lie, but it comes out with a tiny spray of crumbs.

He laughs, head still thrown back, and he looks perfectly sculpted, his dark hair slightly haloed by the sun, his lips perfectly curved and soft. Impulsively I lean over and kiss him, gently, sincerely.

His eyes open and meet mine and stay there. Neither one of us moves.

“I love you,” he murmurs.

“Me too,” I say back, and mean it.

James didn't lie about the fireworks. They were amazing. They were eternal. The city's fireworks budget must be equal to Emerton's entire value as a town. Maybe more. People oohed and ahed and, for the first time, I was among them. It's dark and late but still perfectly balmy and people are slowly unfolding themselves, wiping grass off their shorts and shaking out blankets, laughing and talking, stumbling, some, and shuffling off toward the overcrowded subway, the jam-packed streets.

“Hang on a bit,” James says, tugging lightly on my arm. “Let it thin out.”

I'm okay with that. I'd be totally okay spending the entire night right here. We stare at the city lights and the moon and the rapidly dispersing crowd and smile at each other.

“Thanks for taking me to Boston,” I say. “I love it. All these people driving their cahs around Hahvahd.” I try to mimic the accent and he laughs.

“I love this place,” he says. “Sometimes I forget how much.” He looks at me. “You fit right in.”

“Because of my accent?” I joke, and he smiles briefly. I start to stand, stretching out my back, my legs, and the smile flickers, then fades completely. His eyes appear darker and I can't read his expression. I'm not sure what just happened. “You okay?” I ask tentatively, and he doesn't answer.

I look around and we're pretty much alone, except for a few hunched figures collecting discarded cans and bottles, cigarette butts and who knows what else.

“Jules,” he says. He's still on the blanket, and when I look at him his hair has flopped onto his forehead and his head is down so I can't see his face. There's a strange note in his voice that I haven't heard before. I put my hand on his head.

“You alright?” I try again, and he twists his head slightly and moves like he's about to stand, but instead he's just kneeling, and I wonder if he's sick. I glance around us again, but we're pretty much alone, and I wonder how our perfect day is going to end.

“Jules,” he repeats, like he's trying to steady himself, and he's on one knee, hands clasped on top of the denim, and when he looks at me his eyes are as black as midnight, intense and serious. “Julianna Sopher,” he says, and he glances down at his hands, and I realize that they are not just folded on his knee, they are holding something, and Oh. My. God.

“I love you. I would do anything for you. There is no one I would rather spend every second of every day thinking about, looking at, talking to. I know, to the bottom of my soul, that you are the one, and I want very much to ask if you would please marry me.”

He opens the black velvet box and the most beautiful diamond solitaire winks out, shockingly perfect, like I am dreaming it all up myself. My heart stops beating and the noise of the city fades and all I can see is James and the ring and in a second even that is gone as the tears fill my eyes and spill down my cheeks. I never thought I’d cry in this moment. I don’t suppose I had ever really considered this moment. We’ve only been back together a few months. It’s too fast, part of my brain says. “Yes,” the other part says. The part that speaks out loud.

James’s family knew all along. The next morning they are all gathered in the kitchen trying too hard to look casual, but every single eye is on my left hand. I dutifully extend it, the smile creeping across my face before I’m even aware of it.

“Oh!” Marina exclaims softly, and she holds my hand in her soft, pale fingers and then looks at me, really looks at me, before folding me into her arms. I let her. I don’t know what else to do. And everyone else is still looking at me, huge smiles on their faces. James is behind me and I see his brothers shooting him smug looks like, We knew this would happen to you too, bro, and James doesn’t look like he minds one bit.

It’s late when we get back to Emerton and Rocky has left James a thousand messages complaining about being left alone to do all the work at the club. I tell James to drop me off at home, I’m tired and I have painting to do, but really I’m just going to go to bed and stare at my new ring. James walks me to my door, inspects my apartment for signs of burglary, assures me it’s empty, and kisses me good night. I watch him disappear into the stairwell then go inside and close the door. For a long moment I just stand there, staring into the empty space, fleetingly grateful for the moment of silence. I don’t think I spent a single moment alone the entire time we were in Boston. The quiet is nice. It’s—

A sharp knock on the door, then a jangle of keys, and I jump away just in time for the door to burst open and Ivy to enter. She stops short, her face comically surprised to see me standing so close, and then she grins.

“He came!” she utters, and she’s so excited it’s part whisper, part shriek.

“What?” I ask. “Who did?”

She dances past me into the apartment, spinning in gleeful circles.

“He came he came he came!” she sings, and I really don’t know what she’s talking about.

“Ivy...” I begin.

“Oh my God, Jules, I can’t believe you missed it!” she exclaims, stopping to face me, shaking her head, blonde hair flopping over her shoulders.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” I say. “He came? Who? What?”

“Secret British guy,” Ivy says in a terrible British accent, and my jaw drops jealously.

“He *came*?” I say stupidly.

“He came!” Ivy trills.

“Oh my God!” I make my way to the couch and drop down, physically drained but intense curiosity keeping me awake. “What did he do? What does he look like? Is he worth all this secrecy?”

Ivy sinks into the chair across from me and leans in over her knees, like she has to physically contain herself to avoid exploding with details.

“So worth it,” she says in a low voice. “So, so worth it. So perfectly Britishly doctorly looking and that accent... Just... Amazing.”

“What happened?” I ask, leaning in just in case I miss a word.

“That’s the thing,” Ivy says, slumping slightly. “I was leaving Alexis’s place and as I got to the sidewalk this cab was pulling up, and this really hot guy got out. I slowed down to look at him, but I had no idea who he was, and I was about five steps down the road when I heard Alexis say, “What are you doing here?” and this sexy British voice go, “I came for you.””

My mouth is hanging open.

“I can’t believe I missed it!” I moan.

“Well, that’s about all you missed,” Ivy says with a frown, “because I turned around when I heard him speak and Alexis gave me the death look and they went inside and by the same time the next day he was gone and Alexis wasn’t saying a word.”

“No,” I say.

“Yes,” Ivy says. “Not one single bit of information.”

“Unfair,” I say, covering my mouth in a weak attempt to stifle a yawn.

“Oh. My. God.” Each word falls out of her mouth like a stone. All the blood vanishes from her face.

“What?” I straighten on the couch, concerned.

“What is that on your hand?!” Ivy shrieks, pointing unnecessarily at my left hand.

“Oh,” I say, suddenly at a loss for words. Wishing I had Alexis’s death look so I didn’t have to answer this question right now. I’m too tired. I’m too...

“I knew it!” Ivy jumps up and does another happy dance. “I knew it! I so called this!”

“You called it?” I repeat.

“I knew you were going to marry James. I knew he was the one. Jules, he’s so great for you. You’re so... This is just... Oh...”

And then she’s sobbing, kneeling on the couch in front of me, her arms flung heavily around my shoulders, and she’s almost too thin, I can feel her ribs through her blouse, and she grabs my hand and twists it painfully as she stares at the ring.

“It’s so you,” she whispers, tiny tear tracks on her pale skin.

“Are you okay?” I ask awkwardly. Maybe it’s just too much news for one apartment to handle.

“I’m so happy for you,” Ivy says with a small smile. “Now get up.”

“What the fuck?!” Alexis roars, yanking open the door of her tiny bungalow at two in the morning.

“Look!” Ivy shrieks, ignoring the death look and yanking my hand up in front of Alexis’s face.

“Oh my God!” Alexis cries, flinging her arms around me. “I knew it! I so called this!”

“I called it first!” Ivy sings, pushing past Alexis into the dark house, doing another little happy dance.

“Jules!” Alexis exclaims, pulling back and looking into my face. “How did he do it? What did he say?”

“Um,” I say, stepping inside as Alexis closes the door behind us and we stand in the hall looking at each other. “Well... I don’t know. I mean, it was after the fireworks, and he waited until all the people were gone, then got down on one knee...”

“Fireworks,” Ivy breathes, like it’s the most romantic notion she’s ever heard.

“James is so right for you,” Alexis says with a sincere smile, and we all take a moment to look at my ring, which really is just perfect. “I knew this would happen.”

“Me too,” Ivy says, and I’m kind of tired of hearing people say they knew and looking smug. How could everyone *not* in the relationship know? It’s only been three months. How could anyone *in* the relationship know? And then Ivy hugs me, and Alexis hugs us, and the three of us hug like idiots, and the longer we hug, the worse I start to feel.

CHAPTER SIX

It is the next morning and I am still on the couch at number nine Dilophosaurus Drive. I know this because there is a vague sense of unease surrounding me, and I know that once again I have made promises in the early morning hours that I only partially remember and don’t really want to keep. But how do you say no to a recently widowed woman who just wants some company that doesn’t remind her of her dead husband? You don’t. You say yes. Maybe we won’t have to go along. Maybe Caroline will be too hung over to do any of the things she was suggesting in the middle of the night. Or maybe she’ll just forget.

“Ready?” Caroline trills, and Ivy, Alexis, and I straighten in unison in our respective beds.

“Morning,” we all mumble.

“Come on!” Caroline says loudly. “We’ll eat on the way.”

I look between Ivy and Alexis who look like they can't quite remember what I may have agreed to on their behalf either.

"Great," is all I say. Hopefully Caroline's plans for the day involve a pit stop at a ranch in the San Juan mountains and a quick annulment. I cross my fingers as I stand up and stretch.

It's far too windy to eat my bagel. Caroline's first stop was a car dealership, where she traded in her responsible old sedan for a bright red convertible. None of us could figure out a tactful way to suggest that she take some time before making this impulse purchase, so we just watched as she signed on the dotted line, snatched up the keys, and said, "Let's go!"

Our next stop, fortunately, was a small bakery, where we picked up coffee and pastries and got back in the car, none of us really taking into account that with both the windows and the gas pedal down, eating would not be the simple task it once was. But Caroline doesn't really seem to care, and hair whips into my mouth as I try to shove bite-size pieces of bagel in. I turn to look at Ivy and Alexis in the backseat, but they are hunkered down trying to eat as well.

The reason the wind is so strong right now is because we are out on open desert road, headed only God knows where. Caroline's reasoning had been that anyone she actually knew would try to talk her out of this ("this" still being a mystery to me) and so she had made her plans for fifty miles away, in a slightly larger town called Seville, which I can't find on the map, even when it isn't being blown around.

Caroline shouts something and I lean towards her slightly, trying to understand, but all I can really make out are her lips moving and something that sounds like an owl hoot.

"What?" I yell, and hair whips into my eye, blinding me temporarily.

"I asked what you were doing here!" Caroline repeats, and I consider pretending I can't hear, but pause too long then look to Ivy and Alexis for support. They shrug and hold their hair back with their hands.

"Long story!" I call back.

"What?" Caroline shouts.

"Too noisy!" I holler, and shrug helplessly. I lean back in my seat and pinch off a tiny piece of bagel, rolling it into an aerodynamic little ball and letting it fly into my mouth, grateful for the wind.

“Not too noisy now,” Caroline says conversationally, and once again I find myself sitting in a vinyl seat in a strange salon with a cape draped over my shoulder and a middle-aged woman staring perplexedly at my head. Caroline is in the seat next to me, Ivy and Alexis opposite her, and while Caroline is here for the bleached blonde look she has always secretly admired, the three of us have signed on for only a trim. What the hell. I was going to get it cut before the wedding anyway.

“Um,” I say, and the other three hairdressers make no pretense of not listening. The stylist separates my wet hair and clips most of it on top of my head, the ends trickling down to cover my eyes, and since I can’t see their judgment (and I’m really not planning to come back to Seville ever again) I decide to tell the truth. Plus I haven’t come up with the lie I’m going to tell James yet, so I’m still stuck with the truth. “I accidentally got married in Vegas,” I admit, and I can hear heads turning in unison. “And I can’t remember who, so I’m just traveling around... asking.”

“Who did you think you married in Gettys?” Caroline asks.

“Um, Bill,” I answer, and there is a long moment of silence.

And then Caroline breaks into hysterical laughter.

Just as abruptly she breaks off.

“Did you?” she asks.

“No,” I tell her, and she resumes laughing. There is even some tittering among the stylists, and I use my pinkie finger to push hair out of my eyes to look at Ivy and Alexis, who look back at me supportively. “Anyway,” I say loudly, interrupting her laughter. “I probably know who it is now, so I’ll have to get going after this haircut.”

The laughter ends.

“But we have plans,” Caroline points out, and once again she sounds like a recent widow, and not a convertible-buying soon-to-be-bleached-blonde stranger.

“Erm,” I say.

“What’s the hurry?” she asks reasonably. “You find your husband today, tomorrow, the day after? Take your time. Leave tomorrow.”

“I kind of have another wedding,” I admit, and all heads turn to Ivy and Alexis.

“One of you?” Caroline asks, and there’s an awkward pause.

“No,” I finally say, and after a moment all heads turn back to me.

“Oh,” Caroline says.

“Oh,” the stylists echo.

“Yeah,” I say.

“All the more reason to jump,” Caroline says, and last night’s promises come screaming back to me.

“This,” says our instructor, a scrawny man in his forties (or fifties, or sixties) who reeks of cigarettes, “is your parachute. This is the rip cord...”

I look over at Alexis and Ivy. Caroline is hanging onto this man’s every word, which is probably a good idea, but we are two hours into our beginner skydiving course and I can’t quite figure how to get out of it. In fact, two hours ago Caroline shelled out eight hundred dollars – cash – for four lessons, which kind of makes me feel obliged to go. Which I know sounds stupid. My epitaph will read, *Didn’t really want to jump out of the plane, but didn’t want to be rude. Daughter of Arthur and Heather, wife of [?]*.

We head outside to practice our exit technique, and I stare disapprovingly at the shoddy wooden frame meant to represent the airplane door, wing, and, surprisingly, the tiny step just outside the door. Good for getting in, who knew it was also good for leaping out?

“You with the hair,” says our instructor, and I realize he’s pointing at me. I feel a little flattered that he mentioned my hair, since it does have a nice sheen to now. I know he didn’t mention the sheen, but—

“Today,” he interrupts dryly, and I scurry to the frame, climb inside, and kneel just in front of what would be the door if this were a real plane. Everybody is watching me and I feel foolish.

“When I give the word,” he continues, “you’re going to rise up, place one hand above the door, the other right here near the top of the frame. Your left foot will go out onto the step...” I’m going to put my foot outside of an airplane. While it’s in the air. This doesn’t sound right. But I put my foot where instructed, and in a moment I am braced in the door, staring back at the rest of my classmates, another half dozen people in addition to the four of us. You’re all idiots! I want to shout, but I’m in no position to do so. This is an expensive form of suicide.

“I said THREE!” the instructor bellows, and I feel a hand on the small of my back and have just enough time to get my legs under me as I’m shoved out of the plane. The class applauds as I trudge back. It won’t be suicide if he pushes me. I’ll be murdered. I’ll have to be sure not to be the last one jumping so there’s a witness. Sorry, James. Julianna wanted to marry you, but she got pushed out of a plane, and, sadly, died.

“Next!” he calls, and a skinny guy heads up to the makeshift plane while his friends snicker behind him.

“I can’t think of any way out of this,” I whisper to Ivy and Alexis as they wait their turn to mock jump.

“I don’t want a way out,” Ivy responds, and I look at her in surprise. “This is great. I can’t wait.”

“It’s a flying airplane!” I exclaim, and she shrugs.

“It’ll be fun. Something new,” she says.

“This whole trip is something new,” I snap. “And it is not especially fun.”

She shrugs again and I feel irritation rising up inside of me.

“I’m having fun,” she says.

I turn to Alexis, who seems to echo Ivy’s sentiment.

Before I can try to convince them to run away (or at least help me steal Caroline’s car keys), Caroline is climbing up into the frame and kneeling in front of the instructor.

“That’s great, Caroline,” he says, suddenly kind, and I frown when I see Caroline smile “kindly” back at him. The instructor, who Caroline coyly calls Ray, is not watching Caroline’s hands or feet as she braces herself in the doorway. And he does not push her out of the plane. When she jumps it is graceful and easy, like she’s been doing this all her life, and maybe a lifetime of dreaming about it is all the practice she needs.

Five hours later and I have still not made my escape. Maybe I’m leaving it to the last minute. Maybe I’ll make a run for it in a second. In another second. Right after they strap the parachute to my back. Yeah. Now I’ll go.

Except now I’m dressed head-to-toe in a grass-stained gray jumpsuit, massive goggles, and a suspiciously scratched up blue helmet. And now I’m following Ray, Caroline, Ivy, and Alexis to the tiny piece of tin that is going to carry us up into the sky and then spit us out.

My hands start to tremble as soon as I sit down on the tiny bench that serves as our seat. I’m terrified. We are the first in our class to go up, and I do not feel prepared. I didn’t listen carefully enough in class. There are two cords to pull – which one is right? Which is the emergency? What if I pull that one first? What if I pull both? What if my goggles fall off? What if I have to pee?

“I’m so excited!” Caroline whispers, squeezing my hand tightly, looking at Ray the whole time. And when I look at Ray, he’s looking at her, taking his eyes off her face

only long enough to shoot me an evil look. “I’ve always wanted to do this,” Caroline explains, and her grip on my hand is not enough to stop it from shaking. “It just never felt right, you know? My sick husband at home and me jumping out of an airplane.”

I avoid her sincere gaze and pretend to look out the window, which I immediately regret, because we are bouncing along the dirt path, getting faster and faster until with a whoosh we are no longer on the ground. My stomach lurches nervously. And maybe a little guiltily, too.

We’re climbing higher and higher and the plane is making terrible rattling sounds, like the wings are being wrenched off and we are all going to be consumed in a fiery inferno before we even have a chance to open our parachutes. Suddenly jumping doesn’t seem so bad.

“Okay!” Ray calls, pushing open the door and securing it.

Jumping seems bad.

“Who’s first?”

“Me!” Ivy scrambles off the bench eagerly, her blonde ponytail tucked down the back of her stained jumpsuit, and she flashes us a wide grin as she clambers to her knees before Ray, who checks her pack, taps her shoulder, and nods.

With characteristic confidence Ivy braces herself in the door, and my heart stops for a split second when she sticks a foot outside onto the step. Don’t, I think. Don’t don’t don’t don’t don’t. I chant it until it loses its meaning but I never say it out loud. And burning tears fill my eyes and spill out when Ivy shoves off with her right foot and vanishes out the door.

“Oh!” The sob tears out of my throat before I even know it’s coming, and I clamp a still-trembling hand over my mouth. Caroline misunderstands and hands me an air sickness bag, but I wave it away and put my head between my knees.

Calm down, I tell myself. Calm down. You are not afraid of heights. Ivy is fine. Everything is going to be okay. It’s all going to be fine.

“Look!” Caroline shouts over the roar of the engine, and I turn to peer out the tiny window at a little blue circle floating lazily away from us. Ivy. Safe in her parachute. It barely makes me feel better.

“Next!” Ray calls, and when it’s clear that I’m not moving and Caroline is still gazing at Ray, Alexis shrugs and takes her place at the door.

Not again. Not again. The Don’t chant builds up until it’s a drone in my head, but again I keep quiet, stupidly mute as I watch my other best friend hurl herself into thin air.

This time I manage to swallow the sob, but the tears just won't stop coming, and they're on my neck and making the suddenly too-tight collar of the jumpsuit damp and itchy and I just want it off. I want it all off. This helmet and these goggles and this parachute.

"Next!" Ray hollers, and I suspect he's maybe said it a few times, I just hadn't heard. I look helplessly at Caroline who clearly wants some alone time in the plane with Ray, but I can't make myself offer to jump first. She finally smiles and takes her place at the door, and I stare out the window at the two floating parachutes as Ray's voice echoes in the tiny interior.

"One, two, three, go!" he shouts, and I squeeze my eyes shut tight, count to five, and open them in time to see Caroline's parachute explode open in a bright red rush.

A sound I've never heard myself make before, a terrified, strangled gasp, rings in my ears, and my fingers are cold and numb as they grip the edge of the window and watch the parachutes grow smaller and smaller as they descend.

"Next!" Ray hollers, and my feet feel like lead. Too heavy for this parachute. Too heavy for everything. "NEXT!"

I pry my fingers free one at a time, and they look like bleached sticks popping off the metal frame. I turn slowly in my seat and look at Ray through fogged goggles.

"Get over here," he says gruffly, but his hand is unexpectedly gentle around my arm, tugging me to my knees in front of the door, where the air wipes the tears off my face in an instant. I can see and smell the nicotine on his fingers as Ray lifts up my goggles, allowing them to clear, then re-settles them over my face. I breathe in through my nose, watching my hands on the gray floor, trembling with the violent thrust of the wind.

"Come on," Ray says, his voice penetrating my terrified haze. "You'll be fine. Just jump."

Just jump, I tell myself. It's just a jump. Just one step and then it's over. You can do it. But I can't make myself move. I can't tear my eyes away from the floor, can't bear the thought of standing in that doorway and throwing myself into the unknown. I'm not ready. How can I possibly be ready for this?

"You'll only know when you jump!" Ray shouts, and I wonder fleetingly if I've been thinking aloud. "Let's go! Stand up!"

My knees bump each other hard enough to leave a mark as I stagger to my feet. I can barely unfold my fingers as my right hand takes its place on the side of the door, my left hand reaches for the top, and my right foot steadies itself in the corner.

The wind flutters noisily through my chute and a frightened yelp slips out, but that's it. My throat is cold and my eyelashes are sticking together, but I'm still here. I'm alive. I'm alright. I jumped and it turned out okay.

Caroline gives us the keys to the convertible and a handful of cash (we do not ask where she got it) and asks us to tell Bill a story about her being in mourning or visiting a cousin or something. We try to look surprised as we agree, but I don't think we pull it off; it is blisteringly obvious to everyone in the vicinity that Caroline is going to spend the rest of her afternoon and evening and probably the morning in Ray's rickety little trailer, and I feel kind of sad when I realize that this is the first time in twenty-five years that she has not slept next to a man out of a sense of obligation.

We say goodbye to the rest of our class, everyone's adrenaline pumping, knees a little weak after an afternoon of skydiving. Now that it's over, it doesn't really feel like I did it, and indeed, part of me thinks I may have made it all up.

"I'll drive," Ivy offers, and I hand her the keys wordlessly.

It is twilight now, and I can't believe that we have spent an entire day in (or near) Gettys instead of getting on with the real purpose behind our trip. I also can't believe that I have put off calling James this long, despite having had access to several telephones. I still don't know what to say. I don't know what he'll say. I'm kind of afraid to hear it. But mostly I'm afraid of what I'll say. I don't want to get it wrong. So I just don't call.

We arrive in Gettys just after eight; the light is fading but it's still warm enough to make me sweat. Bill waits on the porch, arms crossed as we approach, and I feel almost like a guilty teenager returning from a joyride.

"Where's my mother?" Bill demands. Simon and Max and Cameron join him outside, and though I tell myself not to, I lock eyes with Simon and feel a tiny thrill pass through me.

"Where is my mother?" Bill repeats, his voice stern, angry, concerned, and a little hung over.

"Visiting a sick cousin," I say, at the same moment Alexis says "Mourning" and Ivy says "Shopping."

There's an awkward pause, and I see Simon's lips quirk in a sexy little smile.

"All of those things," I say lamely, and Bill clearly does not believe me.

“Whose car is that?” he snaps, and Alexis, Ivy, and I all say “Mine” in unison. We are the worst liars on the planet.

“Really?” Bill says. “All three of yours?”

“Yes,” I say cautiously. “We bought it together.”

“What about your rental car?” he asks, and we all turn to look at our dull little car parked at the curb.

“Boring,” Ivy says, brushing past Bill and going inside. “Is there lasagna left?”

“Yeah,” says Cameron, and I think this is the first word I’ve heard him say. I flick him an absent glance, then look again. Uh-oh. He is exactly Ivy’s type. And before the door can close behind her, Cameron is catching the handle and following her inside. Not again.

I feel Simon’s eyes on my face and my cheeks heat as I try to look anywhere but at him. I fail. I cannot do this. I am both married and engaged. I am not this girl. I am not attracted to every man I meet. I do not cheat on boyfriends. I do not lust after men who are not celebrities. I just don’t.

Except now I do.

“Yes or no on the lasagna?” Alexis asks, and Bill looks at her.

“Yes,” he says.

“Terrific,” she says, and goes inside. So now it’s Bill and Max and Simon and I.

“Find your husband?” Bill asks.

“No.”

“Do anything interesting?”

Leapt out of a plane after your newly bleached blonde mother?

“No.”

Bill sighs and goes inside, and after a quick look at Simon, Max follows him. I wonder if Max can speak. I don’t really care.

“Hungry?” Simon asks.

More than you know, I think.

“Yes,” I say. Yes.

Simon takes the keys and we take the convertible to a small barbecue restaurant (Simon calls it a “joint,” but I can’t pull it off) at the edge of town. There are tables out back that look over the desert, and we sit at one in the corner, relatively alone. Only one person has

given me a knowing grin so far, and I pretended not to see it. Yep. I'm married and engaged and neither one of those men is here right now. Judge away.

The owner, Smith, is shaped like an apple but makes his way over to us with surprising speed.

"Ribs?" he growls, and Simon and I exchange looks, then nod. I have a feeling that ordering anything else, say, off the menu, would be frowned upon.

"Tea?"

We nod again, and I hope he's referring to iced tea, because a hot beverage is not what I need right now. A cold shower, definitely.

"How was your day?" Simon asks after a moment, and I focus again on his handsome face. His eyes crinkle at the corners and his close-cropped hair shines in the lights of the restaurant.

"Y'know," I say, feigning casualness. "Watched a strange widow buy a car then jumped out of an airplane after her."

"Par for the course?" he asks, and I think he's joking, then realize that he really wouldn't know any different. Maybe to him I am this girl. This girl who gets quickie married in Vegas and takes spontaneous road trips and skydives and eats ribs with sexy men. Maybe I could be that girl.

I smile instead of answering. Let him think whatever he wants.

Smith returns with two huge glasses of iced tea, and I gulp mine gratefully, holding the slippery glass against my forehead until my brain starts to freeze.

"How do you deal with this heat?" I ask Simon, and he gives me that smile.

"We take our clothes off," he replies.

I force myself to hold his gaze. This girl would.

"I'll take you to the gorge later, if you want," he offers. "You can swim. Cool off."

Like a loser, I hesitate.

"Bring your friends," he adds kindly. "There's plenty of room. It's a gorge."

I smile.

I think, I have to call my fiancé.

But I hear myself agree.

The ribs are good and the iced tea is good and the conversation is good, and all this is weighing fairly heavily on me as we drive to the gorge. I've never been in a gorge before. I don't think I've ever even seen one. I try to dwell on this. I try to tell myself it will be

exciting and new, but in all honesty, the only thing I am really thinking about is that we are driving to a gorge to go swimming and I know for a fact that there are no bathing suits or towels in this convertible.

I steal a glance at Simon. Even in profile he is beautiful. Next to James, he is probably the most attractive man I have ever been this close to. And it does not escape me that he is (physically) James' polar opposite. James is wiry and tough, Simon is big and broad. James has dark hair and eyes, Simon is fair. James is in Emerton, Simon is here.

He catches me looking and smiles. I smile back.

"Here we are," he announces, and I straighten in my seat to see that we are, in fact, parked at the edge of a huge black abyss. I feel an uncomfortable mix of relief and disappointment that we are not the only ones here; we have stopped next to my own rental car.

Now that I listen for it, I can indeed hear the dull roar of invisible water. We climb out of the car and Simon magically produces a flashlight and reaches for my hand.

"Careful on the way down," he says unnecessarily, because it's nearly pitch black and all I see is a huge gaping hole in the earth and no safe way to enter it.

But there is a way, and I suppose it's all the Gettys kids have to do, because there is a rough path with makeshift railings that descends steeply into the gorge. Simon goes ahead of me and I watch the thin beam of light bounce around the dark rocks. I concentrate on not falling and not letting go of Simon's large, warm hand. He squeezes my fingers reassuringly, and after a while I hear Ivy's familiar peal of laughter, and a deeper, masculine laugh shortly thereafter.

"This way," Simon says when we reach the bottom, and the rushing roar is much louder now. As my eyes eventually adjust, I realize that we are in a tiny alcove in the gorge, with the main waters tearing past about twenty feet away. Small, crude torches stick out of the rocks at random intervals, allowing enough light to see a small stack of towels and discarded clothing on the rocks, and as I approach I see that Ivy and Alexis are splashing about in the water with Cameron, Max, and Bill.

"How deep is it?" I ask, not wanting to seem apprehensive, but definitely feeling that way. I don't want to face my life right now, but I don't want to end it either.

"Five feet at best," Simon answers, already tugging his shirt over his head, and I steal a glance at his strong, defined chest, then look away. Then look back.

I squint at the figures in the water, and it's too dark to be certain, but the glimmering white bodies bouncing around do not appear to be clad in any kind of

swimwear. And Simon answers my unspoken question a second later when I hear his buckle clatter onto the rocks and look over to see that he is fully, perfectly, naked.

“See you in there,” he says with a wicked grin, and then he strides confidently into the water and dives under.

Now I am left in the awkward predicament of being the only clothed person in a group full of nudes. It’ll just be weird if I keep my underwear on. But it would also be right. I am a married woman, after all. I laugh inwardly at my own lame joke, and hope it’s too dark for anyone to see my nervousness.

Come on, I remind myself. You are that girl. No one is going to know. It’s just one night. In a gorge. In the dark.

I slowly slip my jeans down over my hips and step out of them, and there’s no sudden silence from the group, so I guess no one cares that I am the last one in. Except I look out at them and Simon is standing there, waist deep in the water, watching me.

I swallow and pull my t-shirt over my head. The water sounds wonderfully fresh and it’s dark and that’s how I convince myself to take off my bra and panties, crouch down awkwardly and tuck them under my jeans, then cautiously wade into the water.

As soon as I’m immersed up to my knees I crouch down so just my shoulders are head are visible, and I feel much better with my flimsy, wet shield. Because Simon is still looking at me, and I still want him to be. I duck under water and hold my breath for as long as I can.

The alcove is approximately thirty feet wide and twenty feet long, plenty of space for everyone to swim along peacefully, forgetting that I am submerged over here. But a sudden shift in the water and a pair of glowing white knees tells me that this is not the case. I slowly float up until my head is bobbing just above the surface. Just to be sure, I kneel on the hard rock beneath me and use my hands to cover myself.

Simon smiles down at me, then lowers himself so he’s sitting, too, and I don’t think he’s fooled at all. I don’t think he thinks I’m that girl, no matter how fun she might be. I think he knows I’m terrified of what I’m doing, and I think he’s trying to make it easier on me. Like hiding his penis could make me forget that it exists.

“Like it?” he asks, gesturing a split-second too late to the alcove, so I can read more than one meaning behind his words.

“Yes,” I manage, running a damp hand over my face. “It’s very nice.”

He smiles.

I peer behind him at the other five, who are a safe distance away, securely distracted by their own games. Ivy is married, but she shares none of my trepidation.

“Come here,” Simon says, rising slightly, still conscious of keeping his lower half below the water level. He heads toward the mouth of the alcove, the rushing water just beyond. I follow, feeling the current swirl ever more powerfully around my feet as we approach.

The water is deeper here, maybe four feet, and Simon walks upright to close the last of the distance, then braces one strong arm on a rock at the very edge of the alcove.

“Come here,” he repeats, even though I’m right behind him. I’m still crouched awkwardly in the water, trying to keep myself covered, and it’s becoming more and more embarrassing to hide my nakedness than to show it. I take a deep breath, clench all my muscles, release them, then slowly stand, so my torso is above water, and I tiptoe tremulously to Simon’s outstretched hand.

He does not pretend to not look at my breasts, but it is a friendly, pleasant glance, and then he’s taking my hand in his and tugging me to him, so I can feel the spray of the rushing water on my stomach and the rest of the alcove melts away in the roar of the rapids. He places me right in front of him, my back to his chest, then, still bracing his right arm on the wall, carefully wraps his left arm around my stomach, calloused fingers splayed across my rib cage, breasts balanced on his arm.

“Lean back,” he whispers in my ear, and thoughtlessly I do so, trusting myself to him. I extend my legs so they bounce on the surface of the rapids, Simon’s strong arm locked around my waist.

I close my eyes, enjoying the strange feeling of having one half of my body in active turmoil, the other in a secure, steady peace.

I don’t know when he starts touching my breast, but when I become aware of it, I don’t stop him. I open my eyes and look straight over the rushing water and into the utter blackness of the gorge.

6

I stand in the bridal shop, overwhelmed to the point of horror. I'm-being-chased-by-a-maniac-with-a-machete horror. There's nowhere to run. Everywhere I turn there's another white dress of taffeta or silk or satin or a hundred other fabrics I don't recognize or like, and where there's not a swath of material there's a mirror reflecting all of it back at me. And in the middle is my face, which I try to avoid looking at even more than the dresses, because I'm whiter than even the most virginal gown, and I feel dizzy. But I don't want to sit down. Because sitting down will give Priscilla, the shop owner, time to pull out another dozen dresses that would be just perfect for me.

"Not the one," I announce, trying to sound firm when what I really want to do is yank the gazillionth dress over my head and run naked out the door. But I don't. I force myself to walk normally back into the change room, wriggle out of the voluminous gown, and pull on another one. Which I also hate. I take it off and put on another, hoping Priscilla isn't keeping count. I don't imagine that she is. I've been here for nearly two hours and the only thing she's counting at this point is the minutes left until she can close shop.

My mother – and Ivy and Alexis to a lesser extent – had warned me against coming home without a dress, but it's hard to buy something as important as a wedding

dress when you have no idea what it is you want. It's especially hard when Priscilla doesn't know either. Because this dress is extremely low cut and tight, and I wouldn't wear a bathing suit that revealed this much skin.

"Well?" Priscilla calls from the other side of the curtain. I can hear her biting her manicured nails.

"No luck," I tell her.

"Come on out," she insists. "Maybe I—"

I stick my head out. "Can't we just say I stayed until five?" I plead. "We'll tell them I tried on every dress, narrowed it down, but haven't made a decision."

Priscilla stares at me for a long moment, then pulls a cigarette out of her vintage Chanel suit jacket and twirls it between her long red nails contemplatively.

"Your mother has called four times," she finally tells me, eyes on the cigarette. "I can't let you leave without a dress."

"What if I can't find one?" I demand.

"If you can't *choose* one," she corrects, "it's not the dresses' fault."

I yank the curtain shut and slither out of the skintight dress. "I've tried on two thousand dresses," I try, failing to keep the desperately whiny note out of my voice.

"Trust me," Priscilla responds dryly, "I know."

"And this one's too tight," I whimper, kicking it off my foot and out under the curtain.

"Don't kick the dresses," Priscilla says mildly.

I catch a faint whiff of cigarette smoke through the curtain. "Are you smoking?" I ask in disbelief.

"It's my shop," Priscilla replies. "Now try this one." She thrusts another wad of white fabric into the change room, having forgone all pretense of formality and politeness.

I sigh and unzip the dress, stepping into it and bending my arm uncomfortably to yank the zipper halfway up my back. I sling another hand over my shoulder to pull it the rest of the way up. It doesn't feel awful.

Slowly I turn to survey myself in the mirror.

It doesn't look awful.

"Well?" Priscilla asks, and the smell of smoke is stronger.

"It's not awful," I answer, and she yanks the curtain open and studies me carefully, burning cigarette held lightly in her right hand.

“Not awful at all,” she says, and I suspect this is the highest praise she has left to give me.

I look in the mirror again. It’s a nice dress, if you’re in the market for one. It’s relatively simple, with thick straps and a respectfully low neck cut straight across. It’s fitted through the bodice, flowing loosely over my hips to the ground. The bodice is shiny and there’s some kind of lacy embellishment, and flowers or something sporadically dot the skirt, but it’s okay. It’s fine. It’s the least worst of all the dresses I’ve tried on today, which means it’s probably the last one in the store.

“Well?” Priscilla prompts.

I give myself one last look. I don’t even know how much it costs.

“Fine,” I say.

I let myself into James and Rocky’s apartment and quietly shut the door behind me, leaning against it with a sigh of relief. The kitchen and living room are dark and I don’t bother turning on lights as I head toward the hall table with the answering machine and its blinking red light. I hesitate briefly before pressing play. One message.

“Hello James, it’s your mother. Marina. Are you listening to this? What time is it? Where are you? I have—Oh, what now, Tony? I don’t know. Look in the freezer. James? Are you still there? Should I press a button? Well, anyway, I hope you get this, because I have a few questions about the wedding and I haven’t been able to get a hold of Julianna. Neither has her mother. Do you know if she got a dress? And how she’s styling her hair? And what flowers she wants in her bouquet? Do the maids of honour have dresses? Are you writing your own vows? Is the church okay? Any dietary restrictions for the caterers because they need to know soon, we’ve already put down the deposit. And can you confirm Julianna’s number for me, because she’s not returning—” Beep.

Crap. Crap. I’ve gotten their messages. But they’ve all been overwhelming wedding questions and I haven’t known what to say, so like the vegetables you buy with every intention of eating, I just leave them on the machine for a respectable amount of time, then toss them when they get old.

I stare at the still-blinking light, my finger hovering over the delete button. It’s not my machine, I tell myself. You can’t delete other people’s messages. But she’s *telling* on you, Bad Julianna whispers. You’ll get in trouble if James hears this message.

“It’s okay, I already heard it,” James says quietly from somewhere in the dark, and I leap a mile in the air, a high-pitched yelp ripping from my throat. When my feet

touch the floor I crouch there, fingers balanced on the hardwood, trying to catch my breath and force my heart back down into my chest.

“Oh God,” I mutter, startled tears in my eyes. “Oh God, James. You nearly killed me. Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

I stay crouched down, heart thudding, and glance up into the living room. My eyes have adjusted and the faint light spilling in through the window glints off James’s legs where he sits in the chair in the corner.

“I wrote the questions down,” he says, “but I guess I have the answers.”

I take a few steadying breaths and stand on wobbly knees. Christ, he scared me. He knew I was coming here. He’s not supposed to be home for another two hours. What’s he doing waiting in the dark like some kind of crazy stalker? (Who stalks people in his own home.)

“James you scared the crap out of me,” I say crossly, hoping he’ll apologize and forget about Marina’s message.

I fumble for the switch and turn on the overhead light, blinking as it flickers on, then instantly wishing I had left it off. Because James doesn’t look angry at all. He looks...bleak. Disappointed. Hurt. Sad. Not surprised.

“Jules,” he says softly, and my lower lip starts to tremble.

“What?” I say tersely, digging in my bag for a bottle of water I stashed there earlier, drinking half of it, my pulse accelerating, suddenly way, way too hot.

“Do you know what today is?” James asks. I rack my brain helplessly. What today is? God. Not an anniversary? Or a birthday? Not the wedding day? Did someone die? Was I supposed to be somewhere? I was doing wedding stuff. That has to count for something, right?

“It’s Friday,” I say with false confidence. I mean, it is Friday, but I don’t suppose that’s the answer he was looking for.

“It’s two months before the wedding,” James tells me. “Sixty days. Which means...” He hesitates uncomfortably before plowing on. “Which means if you don’t want to get married, you should say so now. Before it’s too late.”

Oh God. Oh God. Here it is. My out. The white horse and the knight riding in to whisk me off into the sunset and away from this freaking wedding and all its formality and... and... stuff.

But I make the mistake of looking at James, who is conscientiously not looking at me. And then I make the mistake of wondering what would happen to us if I said I didn't want to get married. If I asked if we could just wait a while. If I said no.

And then he does look at me, looks right into my eyes, as open and as honest as he's been far too many times, and he doesn't have to speak for me to know the answer. To know that it will all be over if I say no. To know that it won't be okay. And I don't know what to say. Because I want both. I want James and I want time and I want out of this horribly awkward moment where someone's heart is on a platter and I'm the only one who can drop it and watch it smash into a million pieces. And while I want to drop the platter and run, I can't. I simply can't do it. I don't have the courage. So I wave the white knight and his horse away, and like a coward I shake my head, even though it feels like it weighs a thousand pounds.

"Don't be silly," I hear myself lie. "I don't want to say anything."

CHAPTER SEVEN

I want to stay right where I am and let Simon's fingers do all the deciding for me. I want to keep my eyes closed and my feet in the rapids and feel his chest against my back and his hand on my breast and throw caution to the wind. But more and more I am thinking about James; even as I try to banish his face it appears behind my eyelids as though engraved there. And I know, temptation be damned, that while I can maybe excuse a drunken night in Vegas and chalk it up to nerves and icy umbrella drinks, that I am not drunk now, and I am not afraid, and even if James could forgive me for this road trip and everything on it, I could not forgive myself.

"I'm sorry," I repeat as Simon takes my hand and helps me up the last few steep steps to the top of the gorge. Though it is after midnight and the moon is just a tiny sliver in the sky, I blink as though I have walked into the sun. The pitch blackness of the gorge was like a protective blanket, and up here, back in the desert, in the "light," where bad deeds are not swallowed up by the rapids, I feel even more naked and exposed.

"No problem," says Simon easily, and he's acting like this happens all the time, but I feel intensely awkward as he heads to the convertible and opens my door before going around and climbing into the driver's side.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay?" I ask hesitantly. "I can drive back."

"Yeah?" he replies. "Which way is Bill's house?"
I look left. I look right.

"Get in," Simon orders, and I do.

He starts up the car and I sit with my hands folded in my lap, my jeans sticking uncomfortably to my thighs, and when he starts driving he goes way too fast and damp hair whips painfully into my cheek. But I don't say anything. I know that the magazines I read when I was thirteen said you never had to apologize to a boy for stopping him when things went too far, but I owe Simon something, even if it's not sex. Even if I've already apologized thirty-five times. So I sit quietly and don't complain. And when he turns up the music and I hate the song, I keep quiet then, too.

This is the first time I have ever been grateful to see number nine Dilophosaurus Drive, and when Simon parks and turns off the car, my gratitude turns into utter

confusion. Especially when he opens his door and gets out. And heads up the walk and onto the porch and unlocks the front door and reaches inside and turns on the porch light.

I get out nervously and try to take a long time closing my door (not an easy thing to do). I thought Simon got the point at the gorge, but it would appear that he had interpreted my “Stop” to mean “Stop... for now.” I walk up the stone walkway to the front door like prisoners must walk to the execution room, only I’m heading towards a very sexy man that I have seen very wet and naked and I’m the one going to flip the switch or whatever it is that they do.

I climb the steps cautiously and we stand there with the porch light so bright it’s nearly blinding and the tension between us so thick I can almost hold it. I look at Simon.

He extends his hand.

I stare at it.

He unfolds his fingers. The keys glint in his palm.

I look at his expressionless face again, then take the keys, careful not to touch his skin. A moth thuds into the porch light and we both glance at it, then quickly avert our eyes, blinking away the spots. As though there haven’t been enough already, we give it another awkward moment, then Simon clears his throat.

“Off in the morning?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say, realizing it’s true.

“Then it was nice meeting you,” he says, and it looks like he’s going to hold out his hand for a shake, then reconsiders and stuffs it in his pocket.

“You too,” I say, realizing that’s true, too.

I make the mistake of looking at him again, and his eyes are so dark blue that I can’t look away. He takes his hand out of his pocket and smooths it over my cheek until his fingers are in my damp hair and his lips are on mine.

I don’t stop him. I don’t know how long it lasts, but when Simon pulls away I recognize this as a goodbye kiss, as a what-might-have-been kiss, and I feel both sad and relieved.

“Drive safe,” he says as he turns and heads down the steps. He looks back once as he heads down Dilophosaurus Drive, and when he vanishes into the dark I go inside someone else’s home and close the door.

I know it’s late, but I press the ten numbers and wait patiently as the phone rings. Three times. Four. Five. Six—

“What the hell?” comes James’s muffled, sleepy, irritated voice.

I blink, surprised by the tears, and look around the living room for tissues but see none.

“Who is this?” James demands groggily.

“Me,” I manage, and I lie back on the couch in the dark living room, tucked under a sheet, phone to my ear.

“God, Jules,” James says, and that’s all he says.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly.

“What for?” he asks.

“For the lateness,” I tell him. “For the time right now and how many days it’s been and everything.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I answer. “Are you?”

There’s a long pause.

“You tell me,” he finally says.

I don’t respond.

“Where are you?” he asks.

“Um, Arizona,” I say mid-yawn, doing that thing where the person who wakes you up in the first place falls asleep mid-conversation. “Near the Grand Canyon.”

“What’d you think?” James says.

“What?”

“Of the Grand Canyon,” he says. “What do you think? Is it nice?”

“We haven’t actually gotten there yet,” I admit. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“When are you coming back?”

“Couple of days,” I tell him, crossing my bare fingers, half-hoping that I’m telling the truth.

“Couple of days,” he repeats.

“I just wanted to say hi,” I say. “Go back to sleep.”

“Are you…” He trails off, and I wait. “Are you alone?” he finally asks.

I feel a slight tenderness around my lips from Simon’s stubble.

“Very,” I tell him.

With the exception of myself, the house is empty when I awake the next morning. The only cars are the ones I have the keys to: the convertible and our rental. Neither Ivy nor Alexis made it home last night. “Home” being Bill’s house.

I shut the front door and look around for an air conditioner, because even at eight o’clock in the morning the house is boiling and sweat is already beading on my neck. I peruse the living room thoughtfully, scanning dozens of “I’m sorry for your loss” cards and dated family photographs. I feel like an interloper and the silence at number nine Dilophosaurus Drive is cloying.

I dig out yet another party tray from the fridge and munch on cheese and crackers and deli meat, eyes darting to the clock. Now that I know Bill is not my husband, it seems extremely strange and inappropriate to still be in his house and eating food from his father’s funeral.

The crackers and cheese become harder to chew and finally I give up on eating and return the tray to the fridge, rinse out my glass, and put it in the rack by the sink. I have to get out of here. I want Alexis and Ivy to come back and I want to get in the rental car and drive out of Gettys and away from everything.

At nine thirty I start up the car and drive until I pass a teenager on the street and ask which way the gorge is. She tells me to head southeast out of town and I’ll pass it in ten minutes, and her directions are accurate. Unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on how you look at it – when I arrive, I am also the only one at this location. Faint tire tracks remain, but no vehicles. And, when I peer cautiously into the gorge, I am relieved to see that there are no tiny bodies floating facedown in the water.

It is after ten when I finally turn back down Dilophosaurus Drive, and now there is a new car parked in the drive behind the convertible. Well, it’s actually very old and unsafe-looking, but it wasn’t here when I left. I stop at the curb and head back up the drive, letting myself in as though I actually do live here, fervently hoping that this is Bill’s car and not skydiving Ray’s. I want to get out of Gettys, not explain what I’m still doing here.

“Jules!” Ivy trills, running out of the kitchen when I enter, half a sandwich in her hand. “Where have you been?” She raises her eyebrows suggestively, and it occurs to me that it may look as though I am the one late getting back, instead of the one doing the waiting.

“I’ve been looking for you,” I say irritably, and she immediately steps back, surprised at my bad mood. “Are you ready to go?”

“Um, yeah,” she says, taking a bite of her sandwich, staring at me over the crust. “Two secs.”

Alexis comes down the stairs then, hair damp, and I know her well enough to know that she was not a mere chaperone last night. She has that look about her, the one Ivy always has and the one Alexis always refuses to discuss.

“Fun night?” I ask peevishly, and she cocks a brow.

“You?” she asks, collecting her socks from the pull-out couch and then tucking in the sheet and folding up the bed.

“No,” I say shortly, then repeat, “You?”

She gives me a long, stern look.

“Yes,” she says finally, like the subject is closed, and I feel irritation welling up inside of me. Maybe it’s irrational, but this is my trip. This is my journey and they’re on it to support me, not delay it. And coming back whenever they feel like it when I have a deadline – a wedding – is not fine. And this is not the end of this conversation. And—

“Seen my mother?” Bill asks, coming down the stairs in socks and boxers, not bothering to cover his mouth when he yawns.

“She’s with some guy named Ray at a skydiving school half an hour from here,” I tell him, and he stops on the bottom step.

“What?” he asks stupidly.

I turn to Alexis, annoyed that he’s so freaking stupid. “Are you ready?” I snap.

“Are we in a rush now?” she returns.

“I got some cake and crackers, a leftover lasagna, some cereal...” Ivy trails off as she re-emerges from the kitchen with her loot and spots Bill standing stupefied on the bottom step. “Hope that’s okay,” she asks belatedly.

“Skydiving?” Bill says.

“Just put it in the car,” I tell Ivy.

“What’s up your ass?” Alexis mutters, pushing past me to put on her shoes.

“Isn’t that your area of expertise?” I snap back, and we glare at each other as she ties her laces.

“Thanks for everything, Bill,” she says finally, heading over to shake his hand. Bill is still on the bottom step and I suspect that now that his hangover is easing, the facts of the last couple of days are truly sinking in. And since I shouldn’t have been here in the first place, I really don’t want to be around for this.

“Yes, please say thank you and goodbye to your mother,” I say, also shaking his limp hand. He stares at me blankly and I fleetingly wonder if it’s a good idea to leave him alone in this state. “And, um, thank you for what you tried to do in Vegas,” I add lamely. “And I’m sorry for being here.”

His lower lip is starting to tremble and I’m really thinking we should call someone to keep him company or take him with us, but then there’s the sound of someone moving around upstairs and Alexis stiffens.

“Let’s go!” she hisses, darting for the door and disappearing outside.

“Will you be alright?” I ask Bill, his cool fingers still wrapped around my hand. No answer. “Okay then. Goodbye.”

I follow Alexis out the front door, into the car, and buckle my seatbelt as she floors it, leaving number nine Dilophosaurus Drive in the heavy desert dust.

“What’d you do, steal from him?” Ivy asks as we squeal past the “*Thank you for visiting Gettys. We hope you had a dino-mite time!*” sign.

“Who was it?” I ask, realizing I still don’t who exactly they each hooked up with.

“Max,” Ivy answers from the backseat, resting her hands on our headrests and leaning forward, though our current speed suggests that this is a fatal idea.

“You?” I inquire.

“Cameron,” Ivy replies.

I bite my tongue. A husband and a boyfriend in Emerton, a quickie in a van in Herman Oaks, a fling in a gorge in Gettys... The only place Ivy hasn’t cheated on her husband is, ironically, Sin City.

And Alexis. I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, but she’s focused on our side of the two lane highway that leads to sand and more sand. Which is good, considering we’re going about fifty miles over the speed limit.

“Could you slow down?” I ask finally, the question coming out a bit sharper than intended, but not unfairly so.

“Is the rush over?” she asks dryly, but eases up on the gas.

“What does that mean?” I demand.

“It means,” she says slowly, like I’m an idiot, “that one minute you’ll do whatever it takes to avoid returning to Emerton, and the next you’re mad because people aren’t waiting on you to decide what time we leave Gettys.”

I stare at her, mouth slightly open.

“If you wanted to stay in Gettys,” I reply coldly, “it’s not too late to turn around.”

Alexis’s jaw clenches and for a split-second I think she may actually turn the car around, but she doesn’t. She reaches forward, flicks on the radio, and turns up the volume.

“Ow!” Ivy exclaims as the speakers vibrate behind her head.

I turn the radio off.

Alexis turns it on.

I turn the volume all the way down.

She glares at me.

“What is your fucking problem, Julianna?” she snaps.

“What’s yours?” I retort. “You’re the one who had sex last night, I’d like to think it loosened you up a little.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” she bites back. “Sex with strangers doesn’t make me feel uncharacteristically footloose and fancy free.”

“No kidding,” I mutter.

She inhales and exhales raggedly, and I cock my head slightly to glimpse Ivy in my side mirror, her head leaning against the door, her expression unutterably sad.

We drive in silence for three full hours and then it’s time to stop for gas. We’re at Four Corners, the place where Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico all meet, but none of us are having nearly as much fun as the other people visiting the site. It’s not until I spot a postcard for the Grand Canyon that I realize we never stopped to see it.

Thanks to the cash Caroline spotted us, we are able to pay for our gas, and even a tense little lunch that I can barely get down. Now that we are in Colorado (depending on which square you step on), my nerves are strung as tight as piano strings, and each bite, each noise from either Alexis or Ivy, even their breathing, grates.

We’re sitting at a picnic table, Ivy and Alexis on one side, me on the other, and it does not escape me that this is probably the way the chips would fall should I start a fight right now. Which I kind of want to do. Because they are both breathing so damn loud. One of the party trays sits between us and I take a piece of cheese and bite off a small corner. I tell myself I need the fuel for the next few hours of our trip; I need all the strength I can get. In approximately three hours (it really depends on how easy it is to navigate the San Juan mountains, or at least to find someone who’s heard of King Ranch) I will be face to face with Derek Holt, potential husband and ring thief.

I stare at my bare finger thoughtfully. It looks nice. Naked, but nice.

Ivy bites noisily into a stack of crackers and tiny crumbs spatter across the table, landing on my arm.

“Ivy!” I exclaim accusingly, brushing at my arm.

She frowns at me. “Sorry, Jules.”

“Christ,” I mutter, and she and Alexis exchange a significant look. “What?” I demand. They don’t respond. “What?”

“What the hell is your problem?” Alexis finally snaps back.

“Wha—Wha—” I can barely get the words out for the sudden fury rising up in my throat. What is my problem? Is she kidding me? What is my problem? I am hot and humiliated and hunting down a stranger whom I may have married in Vegas. I am broke and sweaty and I have nothing to look forward to. Not three hours from now, not ten hours from now, not ten days from now. Because in ten days I am either going to be very married or very single, and I don’t know which possibility terrifies me more. “What’s my problem?” I finally utter. “My problem is that you guys don’t seem to be taking this very seriously. What were you doing last night? No, don’t answer that. What were you doing this morning? We’re supposed to be getting this thing over with, not taking our sweet ass time in Gettys!”

“We didn’t have a departure time!” Alexis argues. “So I don’t know what you’re so freaking mad about. We’re on our way to the ranch. We’re here. *I’ve* been driving for the past three hours, for crying out loud.”

“If driving is an issue, hand over the keys,” I snap, and she pretty much hurls them at me, which makes both Ivy and I jump in surprise. The keys hit my chest and fall into my lap, and I stare at them for a surprised second before snatching them up and slamming them onto the table hard enough to draw stares.

“Did you just throw these at me?” I hiss.

“Is that what it looked like?” Alexis tosses back.

“Uh, girls,” Ivy tries to interject, but like rabid cats, we just whirl on her.

“Don’t even pretend you’re not a part of this,” I say icily.

“What did I do?” Ivy protests.

“What did you do? Or *who* did you do?” I snap, and Ivy flinches. “Or, if we want to make the list shorter, who didn’t you do?”

“Lay off her,” Alexis interrupts, but it’s not happening.

“I’d be the first,” I say meanly, and Ivy blanches.

“You bitch,” Ivy says in a low voice. “You’re judging me?”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm down before answering, but Ivy beats me to it.

“We’re in the middle of freaking nowhere hunting down the stranger you married so you can divorce him and marry another guy next week, and *you’re judging me?*”

“You’re supposed to be supporting me,” I respond coldly. “Not screwing a guy in each town we stop in.”

“What I do is none of your fucking business,” she retorts, but her voice is quavering.

“At least she knows who she slept with,” Alexis pipes up. “Who was it you married in Vegas? Oh, still not sure?”

“At least I’m not hiding it,” I snap back. “At least I don’t take secret cell phone calls and pretend they didn’t happen or pretend that everything is perfect in my life and I don’t care even though some British guy broke my heart in Africa and I refuse to fucking get over it.”

“You know nothing about that,” Alexis breathes.

“No thanks to you,” I reply.

“Why would I tell you anything?” she retorts. “What good advice could you possibly give me? You’ve got the guy you wanted. He doesn’t have a wife he forgot to mention. And he’s not the one traipsing about the fucking desert in an attempt to avoid a wedding he shouldn’t even have agreed to if he didn’t have the fucking balls to go through with it.”

“Girls—” Ivy interrupts, starting to stand.

“I’m “traipsing through the desert” so I can get an annulment so I can through with the wedding,” I hiss.

“Oh, who are you kidding?” Alexis scoffs. “You’d go to the opposite end of the earth if it meant finding any excuse, no matter how slim, to avoid this wedding.”

“I—”

But she’s not finished. “If you don’t have the nerve to call it off, don’t you dare try to deny that you’re out here because you know if you wait long enough James will do it for you. That’s what you do, Julianna. You make other people make decisions for you and then you refuse to take any responsibility for it.”

“Me?” I exclaim, stunned. “I don’t take responsibility for things? Who got us thrown in jail? Who went along on a drug run so they could prove to their freaking British mystery man that they were over them?”

“A, I apologized for that, and B, I am over him.”

“Uh, no,” Ivy pipes in. “You didn’t apologize, and you are so not over him.”

“What would you know?” Alexis demands, whirling on her.

Ivy’s sitting back down now, cheeks flushed. “What would I know? I’ve spent the past year watching you avoid every man and every instance where someone could actually get to you because you can’t get over this guy, no matter how hard you try. And no matter how many times he tries to talk to you—Oh, don’t pretend he doesn’t call or I didn’t see him that day – you run him off.”

“Which is worse?” Alexis asks icily. “Running away from every man or jumping into bed with every other one so I can avoid the guy I don’t love but have stayed with for ten years?”

“Then what happened?” Ivy demands. “Let us in on the secret, Alexis. Because the only one you’re kidding with all this ‘I’m fine’ crap is yourself.”

Alexis stares at her trembling hands. Her cheeks are bright red and I can see a trickle of sweat running down her hairline, settling next to her ear. She swipes at it roughly.

“He broke my fucking heart,” she finally says in a low voice, not meeting our eyes. “I went over the first time and fell for him and it was perfect. And then it was time for my flight and he never asked me to stay. Didn’t ask me to come back. And when I asked if he even wanted me to, he said no.”

My jaw drops. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ivy looking equally surprised.

“And then he started calling,” Alexis continues. “And calling and calling, all this, ‘I’m sorry, I’m crazy about you, I’m an idiot, please come back.’ And like an idiot, I went. And for a year, it was perfect.” She takes a shaky breath. “Until his wife stopped by.”

I cover my still-open mouth with my hand.

Alexis laughs bitterly and tells us the rest, still staring at her twined fingers. Apparently the British Mystery Man – one very sexy Dr. Heath Carter – worked with the same organization Alexis was assigned to, and after wooing her back, seduced her fully and completely, promising complete and eternal devotion, and seemed to mean every word of it. Until the very beautiful and regal Dr. Helena Carter turned up for a surprise visit, introduced herself to Alexis (unaware that she was sharing sleeping quarters with her husband), and went off to reunite with Heath. Whereupon Alexis had promptly packed her bags, caught a bus to the capital, boarded the next plane back home, and

turned her phone permanently to voice mail. Then changed the number altogether. And returned all his letters marked “No Such Address.” And when he traveled to Emerton on his three days off to tell her that he had been separated from his wife for years, they were getting a divorce and he would do anything to prove that to her, she had told him that she hated him – completely and eternally – and sent him away. And he had gone. And she had not felt any better.

We sit in stunned silence for a moment after the story, and I stare at the party platter feeling nauseous. The cheese is turning rubbery and tiny bits of perspiration glisten on the shiny surface.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Alexis says, burying her face in her hands, shoulders shaking. But when Ivy puts a tentative hand on her back, she shakes it off, rises jerkily from the bench, and looks us both in the eye. “I’ll find my own way back to Emerton.”

We sit silently for a few minutes once Alexis has disappeared, conscientiously avoiding each other’s eyes. But it’s too hot to pretend we’re not here for much longer, and so I finally turn to Ivy.

“What about Evan?” I ask. “What about Doug?”

Ivy takes a shaky breath.

“What about them?” she tries, but her smile trembles.

“What are you doing, Ive?”

“What are you doing, Jules?” she counters.

“Running away,” I admit.

Ivy snuffles, and I study her pretty, angelic face as she avoids mine. I have to give her credit. We’ve been on the road for four days and already I’ve broken down; she’s been running for ten years, just not far enough.

“Yeah, well,” she says.

I twist the cap off my bottle of water and drink reluctantly. It’s warm and tastes like chlorine. I wince, but Ivy takes the bottle and drinks anyway.

I wait.

Ivy sighs heavily. “Evan wants to marry me,” she says, and my brows shoot up.

“What?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Because I’m so successful in my current marriage.”

A laugh gurgles up in my throat and I’m too late to cut it off. But Ivy doesn’t seem offended.

“You’re right to be running, Jules. Run as far as you can. Run as fast. Marriage is horrible. It’s terrifying. It’s for-fucking-ever. And British doctors and small-town blondes and pale guys in Utah are all afraid of it and everybody fails and it’s one miserable freaking game.”

It’s probably the sun pounding down on my head, but this sounds like the funniest advice I have ever, ever received. I’m trying to drink while she talks, but water squirts out of my nose and I cover my mouth to try and compose myself. And fail.

“Laugh it up,” Ivy says, kicking me under the table, but I see her lips quirk. “It’s lots of fun.”

“You seem to have fun,” I say, shoulders still shaking, even though I mean the words as a serious inquiry.

“It’s fun for about an hour,” she shrugs. “And then I go back home and Doug looks at me and doesn’t say anything and I spend the rest of the week wondering why we’re even in this house together, why we don’t just split up, and I never come up with an answer. No matter how many places I look.” She looks at me. “And yes, I know I’ve looked under a lot of beds.”

I feel bad for my earlier comments. I’m in no position to judge Ivy. Or Alexis. Or Doug. Or James. Or anyone presently visiting Four Corners, no matter how many socks and sandals combos are marching around exclaiming, “I’m in Utah! No, Arizona! Hang on, New Mexico, be there in a second!”

“I’m sorry for what I said before,” I apologize, meaning it. “It’s none of my business and I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Forget it,” Ivy mutters, running her hands over her face. “Maybe you should have said it ten years ago. Maybe then things would be different.”

“I thought you were happy,” I say, faltering at the end, because suddenly I’m remembering that afternoon at *Hot Diggity Dog*, Ivy trying not to cry, a note of desperation in her voice as she asks “How do you be alone?” And conceited me at the time, thinking she meant me. How can *I* stand being alone. When it had nothing to do with me and everything to do with her. “Oh, Ivy,” I say softly, and silent tears stream down her cheeks and her shoulders shake but she keeps her head up and tries in vain to compose herself.

“Would it be different?” she whispers. “If I left Doug and married Evan? How do I know it wouldn’t be the same?”

“You’d be okay by yourself,” I tell her. “You’d be fine. And Alexis and I would be there for you whenever you needed us.”

“I moved out of my parents’ house and into Doug’s,” she sobs, and people are starting to stare, though she’s completely oblivious. “I don’t know if I could do it. I don’t know what I need. I mean, money? Company? Someone to sleep next to? What’s my problem?”

“You’ve just never tried it,” I say, feeling like something of a hypocrite, since the reason we’re here in the first place is because I’m running from something I’m afraid to try. “It’d be okay. I did it. And more than likely I’ll still be doing it when we get back to Emerton.”

“James will forgive you,” Ivy says with surprising certainty. “He wants to be married to you. God only knows what that feels like.”

“Does Doug want to be married to you?” I ask gently, and she shrugs.

“Who the hell knows what Doug wants?” she responds. “Who knows what anyone wants? I know what I don’t want. I don’t want to go back home to Doug and that house and nobody saying what needs to be said.”

I wait.

“But I don’t want to be alone,” she says softly. “I don’t think I can do it.”

I think of Alexis, alone in her bungalow, resisting what must be a million urges to run back to her mystery British doctor. I try not to think of me, sitting here at Four Corners because I’m too afraid to go home and do what needs to be done. Or go to King Ranch and do what needs to be done.

“You can do it,” I tell her. “You have to do it.”

And I’m not just talking to Ivy.

Ivy leaves. A tour group has space on their bus so she pays the driver twenty bucks to take her to the nearest town with a bus station and waves goodbye through the tinted window. I watch the bus until it disappears into the horizon, then wipe tears I didn’t know I was crying off my cheeks. But I’m not sad. I’m tired. I’m frustrated. I’m nervous. I’m terrified. I’m going to King Ranch. But first I have one more stop to make.

Langton is a small, tidy town about an hour’s ride east of Four Corners, on the Colorado side of the Colorado-New Mexico border. It’s like a little adobe suburb, minus the city and most of the people. But there are minivans and kitschy mailboxes and people walking

their dogs and it's the perfect little town for a perfect little family. I have never been to Langton, but I have seen it in my mind a thousand times. I've studied it on the map, memorized the main streets and one small cul-de-sac in particular: 18 Winston Cove, Langton, Colorado.

I find the house easily enough, a single-story adobe bungalow with a bright green lawn and a mailbox shaped like a rooster. There's a minivan in the drive and curtains in the front window and a sprinkler squirting in rapidfire bursts across the yard.

I park at the curb and stare across the passenger seat at the neat little house. A simple home. Nothing malicious going on here. Nothing evil or twisted or worth my sad little obsession. And yet I only look away when tears cloud my vision and threaten to spill over.

"God, Jules," I mutter, just to hear something over my pounding heart. "Get a grip."

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, staring at my trembling fingers until they steady, keeping my head tipped back slightly until the tears dry up or are reabsorbed or whatever unshed tears do, and try to distract myself. I recite the alphabet backwards until I make it through without a single mistake. I do all the times tables up to twelve. I name the fifty states, and then the Canadian provinces. I tell myself to drive away. I tell myself to get out and knock on the door. But I've been here too many times in my dreams to walk away now, and even as my brain shouts for me to put the key back in the ignition, I'm reaching for the handle. Which I don't have time to grab before there's a sharp, startled rap on the driver's side window.

I turn and his face is three inches from mine, just the same as I remember it.

7

Ivy buries her head in her hands. “Ugh,” she says, staring down at the plate of half-eaten pancakes before her, but not referring to them. Alexis uses this opportunity to spear one of the pancakes – the one with the most chocolate chips – drop it onto her plate, douse it in syrup, and eat. “I know that one had the most chocolate,” Ivy says, still not looking up.

I look at Alexis, who looks back at me, shrugs, and chews.

We’ve been in the diner for about half an hour, and Ivy has been pulling what I like to call “An Alexis.” Something’s up, but God forbid she actually say what it is. Instead she ordered pancakes, miserably ate half, then put her head in her hands and said “Ugh.” Which brings us to the present.

“Can I have those?” I ask politely, reaching across the table for the remaining pancakes.

“If you can make me invisible, you can have them,” Ivy offers, but she’s already half-heartedly pushing the plate over. Alexis snags another pancake and I frown at her. She shrugs again.

“No can do on the invisibility,” I reply, stealing the syrup from Alexis and drizzling it in a tidy pattern over the pancakes. “Anything else?”

“Time machine?” Ivy tries.

“Mmm. Out of order.”

“Bullet to the head?” she asks.

“Alexis?” I say.

Alexis checks her purse. “Fresh out,” she reports.

“Damn,” Ivy mutters.

“Ivy,” I say patiently. “Out with it.”

“I need... something,” she says unhelpfully. “I just need to get out of here. Be invisible. Maybe move to the mountains.”

Alexis and I peer dubiously outside. We haven’t seen a mountain in, well, months. There are none around here. Or anywhere near here.

“But don’t you have... ties... here?” Alexis asks tentatively, and Ivy glares at her.

“You’re very special, Alexis,” she responds flatly, “but I need to disappear.”

“Ha ha,” says Alexis, and I snicker for real. I thought it was funny. They both glare at me and it’s my turn to shrug and chew.

“Is it Doug?” I guess, and Ivy nods.

“And Evan?” Alexis adds, and Ivy nods again.

“Anyone else?” I ask after a moment, and Ivy shakes her head.

“What have I done?” she moans. “What is the matter with me? I just... I don’t even know what to do! Why is it so hard to leave Doug? Why can’t I just pack up my shit and go?”

I wince. Because I have been asking myself the same question for awhile now. James has broached the subject of moving in together after the wedding, and to avoid the subject I have been avoiding him, which is not good, because the wedding is in ten days and surely it takes longer than that to find a place. Which James swears he has. Even my mother has seen it, and she says it’s great. In between both of our current apartments. I think she’s already filled out the application. The only thing we’re/they’re waiting for is for me to agree to pack up my shit and go. Which is why I’m avoiding them. My cell phone chooses this moment to start vibrating, and we watch it dance across the table.

“Mother or fiancé?” Ivy asks, peering at the screen.

“Who cares?” I ask, shoveling in some more pancakes.

Alexis’s phone starts to vibrate, and we stare at it as it shuffles noisily across the table.

Ivy laughs in spite of herself, and I do too. Because Alexis isn’t answering either. And then as if on cue, Ivy’s phone starts to vibrate. She shoves it to the centre of the table so the three phones bump together, all of them unhappy about being unanswered for the two hundredth time today.

We watch them until they all fall silent, then look at each other.

“It’s too early to drink, right?” Alexis asks.

Ivy and I look at our watches. Ten thirty. In the morning.

“Yeah,” we say, disappointed.

“Wouldn’t it be great if there was a place where it was totally okay to have a drink with breakfast?” Ivy asks.

“And where our cell phones didn’t get reception?” Alexis chimes in.

“And where nobody knew us and couldn’t stake out our homes?” I add, and we all nod in agreement.

“Julianna!” My mother’s voice rings loudly through the diner, and the three of us stiffen. Alexis and Ivy have been on the receiving end of that stern voice on more than one occasion, and when she sounds like this, you know you’re really in trouble. They stand up quickly.

“Bye Jules,” says Ivy.

“Good luck,” says Alexis.

“Don’t leave me!” I hiss, but they’re already running away. I look around for an escape, but my mother is squeezing into the booth, trapping me against the window in case I should try to make a run for it.

“Morning dear,” she says dryly, and I force a smile onto my face.

“Hi mom,” I reply.

She picks up my phone, presses a few buttons I didn’t know she knew how to use, and scrolls through my missed calls list.

“So it does work,” she muses, and I stare silently ahead. She sighs and puts the phone down, turning to face me. I can smell her perfume. It’s not bad, but I feel nauseous. I know she wants to talk—

“About the wedding,” she starts, and I feel my palms beginning to sweat. “I just wanted to tell you that I was nervous too,” she says. “Cold feet are very common. You just get over it. You don’t not answer your phone.”

“Good talk,” I say, nudging her with my thigh so I can slide out of the booth, but she’s not budging. She pulls a three-layered contract out of her purse and lays it on the table.

“Sign,” she commands. I know without glancing at it that it’s a rental agreement for the apartment she and James have chosen for us. Even I know that’s not right, but she’s pressing a pen into my hand. “Sign,” she repeats.

“I’m not signing for something I haven’t even seen,” I say firmly, putting the pen down.

“Then let’s go now,” she says, clearly having anticipated my answer.

“Mom,” I say, and it’s my turn to bury my face in my hands and stare at the remnants of Ivy’s pancakes. “Just go away. I need some time.”

“You know what, Julianna?” she asks sharply. “Time is what you don’t have. What you do have is responsibility. A responsibility to your fiancé, who happens to be far too good for you if you ask me—”

“I didn’t,” I snap, feelings hurt.

She ignores me. “But he tolerates this behavior because he loves you, and he trusts you, and he knows that in the end you’ll come around.”

The end. The end. What a nice way to think of my wedding day. The end. That about sums it up.

“This wedding isn’t just going to go away,” she’s saying, and I regret tuning back into her little tirade, but she’s sitting so close that I can’t shut it out. “Now start acting like a grown up and face the world,” she concludes.

Ugh. Facing the world is the last thing I want to do. I feel sick just thinking about it. Ivy has the right idea. The mountains sound terrific. I’d live like a hermit and eat venison and drink rain water I collected in barrels. I wouldn’t even have my cell phone, just Ivy and Alexis living in shacks nearby and each morning we would check our snares and traps for squirrels and rabbits and roast them on homemade spits and not deal with British men or Boston men or married men ever again.

I’m hiding out at home three hours later when there’s an extremely loud pounding on the door. I haven’t been doing much except ignoring the phone, and now it seems that someone has found a way around it.

“JULES!” Ivy bellows. I can hear keys jangling on the other side and figure that she’ll get it open eventually, so I don’t move.

“Let me do it,” I hear Alexis say, then there’s some bumping and a strange thud, then the two of them are struggling in through the door with a couple of carry-on suitcases.

“Um,” I say with a frown, slowly standing.

“We’ve been calling you all afternoon!” Ivy snaps, though she doesn’t seem angry. “Get dressed. We’ve got a plan.”

“A plan?” I echo.

“Vegas!” Alexis exclaims cheerfully, and I haven’t seen her look this happy in quite some time. Like a load has been lifted from her shoulders and she’s free as a bird. “Pack your stuff!”

“What? Now?” I say, then wonder what on earth I’m waiting for. Why shouldn’t I go to Vegas? I don’t know anyone in Vegas! And it’s so far from Emerton! “Okay!” I say, hurrying to my room, where Ivy is already yanking my suitcase out from under the bed. “How long are we thinking?” I ask.

“Weekend,” Alexis answers, tossing clothes from my closet. Tank tops, sundresses, little black dress, bathing suit, jeans, glittery heels.

“Fun,” I say, though all I’m really thinking is “Far.” So, so far. Hours. “Do we have a vehicle?”

“Rented,” Ivy replies. “And waiting outside.”

I start to ask about Doug – and Evan – then stop. Because if I ask about Ivy’s significant others, someone will be able to ask about mine. Which is actually a good point, because... What about James?

“I guess I should tell James I’m going,” I say reluctantly.

“Tell him it’s your bachelorette weekend,” Alexis suggests, zipping up my suitcase. “A surprise. You didn’t want to hurt our feelings by saying no.”

“Yeah,” says Ivy, smoothing the covers on my bed. “Plus it’s Vegas.”

I smile. Then frown. “I think I have to do it in person,” I tell them. James is particularly unhappy about getting lame little messages on his answering machine from me each night when he knows I am perfectly capable of tracking him down.

Ivy and Alexis exchange a look.

“Don’t take long,” Alexis says, tugging the suitcase out of the room and to the front door. “We made reservations for tonight, so we have to get going so we’ll actually be spending the night we’re paying for in the city.”

“How *are* we paying for this?” I ask, trailing behind.

“Credit,” Ivy answers.

I know that James will be at the bar preparing for tonight, so that’s where Alexis drives us. I sprawl across the back seat as Ivy chatters animatedly up front about how she was at home, flipping through an atlas and dreaming of all the places she wished she were, and then realized that she could find most of them (or at least their famous landmarks) in Vegas.

I’m not really listening. I’m wondering how James will react to the news that I’m leaving town a week and a half before the big day. I’m hoping he interprets the fact that I am going on a bachelorette weekend as a sign that I am on board for the whole wedding thing, because bachelorette weekends are for women who are getting married, and I am one of those. Yes. I sure am.

I glance up front to be sure that Ivy and Alexis aren’t watching me for any strange reason, then slip my hand in my purse and feel around for the tiny bottle of anti-anxiety

pills I secretly started taking when things began to feel too overwhelming. Like they do pretty much every day. Sometimes twice. Which is still one pill below the recommended daily dose, so I'm not worried that I have a problem. Or at least not a drug problem, because now we're parking in front of the bar and I'm about to face a whole other problem.

"Be right back," I say more casually than I feel, sliding out of the backseat and taking a steadying breath when my feet hit the pavement. Yeah. Fresh air is not going to be quite enough to calm my nerves.

I pull open the doors and step into the cool, dim interior. I can hear muted voices from somewhere in the darkness, but until my eyes adjust I feel invisible and use the opportunity to slip a tiny yellow pill under my tongue. Just taking it makes me feel better. Like less of a coward.

"Hello?" I call, walking forward, and soon I can see the bar and the light bouncing off the neatly arranged glasses and bottles.

"Hey," Rocky answers, not turning around from where he's unloading a crate of wine behind the bar.

"Is James in the office?" I ask unnecessarily, because I can hear his voice coming from down the hall.

"Yep," Rocky replies, ever the chatterbox.

"Thanks."

I head down the hall, my steps slowing as I near the slightly ajar office door. I pause at the payphones and swish my tongue around my mouth, making sure there's no pill residue left in there. I know anxiety is a real disorder and I shouldn't be keeping the prescription a secret, but I still haven't told anyone, not even Ivy or Alexis. And I got it filled at the pharmacy in Franklin, where I bought my wedding dress. And though the pharmacist tried to make small talk, I kept my head down and hustled away. Just in case. People talk.

I knock lightly on the door then push it open, and James is sitting on the corner of the desk, one foot on the floor, one dangling off the edge as he talks on the phone.

"...third Friday in a row," he's saying as I enter. "She gets sick every Thursday, that's what you're telling me? That is a very unusual set of symptoms. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Well this is your last warning." He rolls his eyes at me. "You're sure she'll be better tomorrow? That's what it says on the internet? Terrific. Yeah. See you tomorrow. Be on time." He hangs up and smiles at me. "You're still alive," James says. His accent sounds

somehow more pronounced, and I think it's sexy. "I was starting to think I'd be widowed before I ever got married."

I wince. "That's morbid," I tell him and he shrugs, sliding off the desk and coming to wrap me in a hug. He smells like clean laundry, strong and warm, and I hug him back, feeling his warmth seeping into me, soothing me.

"You okay?" he asks, stepping back slightly, peering into my face.

"Yeah," I lie. "Yeah. Fine. Just, um... Just..."

A worried frown creases his dark brows, and his hands tighten ever so slightly on my shoulders.

"Just... I'm going to Vegas," I say, and now his brows rise high up on his forehead.

"Vegas?" he repeats. "*Las Vegas?*"

I nod. "Yes."

James purses his lips and looks around the room and I know he's trying to think of all the ways he could be misinterpreting this. And when his eyes finally return to mine, I know he understands that he does, in fact, understand me.

"You're going to Las Vegas," he says. "Ten days before the wedding."

"Yes," I answer.

"When?" he asks.

"Now," I reply.

"Now," he repeats, and I nod again. His hands are still on my shoulders and I can see the shadows slipping into his dark eyes, and he's trying not to look angry or worried though I know him well enough to know that he's both.

"It's a surprise," I start.

"No kidding," he snaps.

I ignore him. "A bachelorette weekend," I say. "Ivy and Alexis planned it. They're waiting outside."

"You been returning their phone calls?" he asks, and I twist out from under his hands and roll my shoulders.

"I came here," I say defensively. "In person."

"Thank you," James says dryly. "How thoughtful."

"Which was obviously the right thing to do," I snap. "Since you're such a delight."

“My fiancée – who’s been in hiding these past couple of weeks – turns up ten days before the wedding to kindly inform me that she’s taking off for the weekend and I’m supposed to say what, Julianna?” he returns. “What kind of reception were you expecting?”

“I’ll see you when I get back,” I say, turning.

“When will that be?” James asks.

“Monday,” I say.

“Monday,” he repeats.

“Is that okay with you?” I ask, not at all sincere. When he doesn’t answer, I leave anyway.

My hands are trembling despite the anxiety medication and I’m five or six feet from the doors when I hear footsteps behind me. I know it’s James and I pause, not wanting to leave on a bad note, but not really knowing how to say what he wants me to say.

He stops behind me and wraps his arms around my shoulders, and I can feel his breath on my neck and goose bumps pop up everywhere. He kisses my cheek.

“Come back,” he says.

“I will,” I say.

“Come back,” he repeats. “No matter what.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

He raps on the window again. “Jules?” comes the familiar voice, slightly muffled through the glass, and like a moron I turn the keys in the ignition so the battery comes on and roll down the window.

“Hey Kyle,” I say, extremely casually.

He raises his brows. “Hey Julianna,” he replies.

I stare at him. He cut his hair. His face is clean shaven. He must have gotten contacts or laser surgery, and his blue eyes look bigger without his glasses. He’s put on a little weight, a good amount, and his face looks fuller, his jaw stronger, older. He looks like the future we never had.

“Are you okay?” he finally asks. I blink again and refocus on his face, still inches away, and drag in a deep breath.

“Yes, sorry,” I say, relieved to sound normal. “Must be the heat. Lots of driving. I just... ended up here.”

“Where are you going?” he asks, puzzled but not annoyed.

“Um, San Juan mountains,” I reply evasively, hoping he doesn’t ask why.

“Why?” he asks.

I avoid his eyes. “To visit a ranch.”

“Lots of ranches there,” he says, waiting for details I cannot give.

“Well,” I begin, at the same moment he says, “Why don’t you come in for a minute?”

“Oh—” I say, but he’s opening my door, and he looks a little concerned for me.

“Have a glass of water or something,” he says. “You look pale. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Though my brain is saying *No, no, drive away, you fool*, my seatbelt is already unbuckled, and my feet are out the door.

“I’m fine,” I say. “It’s just been a strange couple of days.”

I follow him up the drive and through the front door, and it feels totally natural to be here with him. He looks comfortable, like he belongs. I take the seat he indicates in the kitchen and watch as he pulls out a jug of water from the refrigerator and fills up two glasses and sits down opposite me, sliding one across.

“Thanks,” I say. Our fingers touch as I accept the glass. His are warm and smooth, unlike the days we lived together, when they were covered in paint or paper cuts or random bits of glue.

We sip in silence.

“You look great, Jules,” he says awkwardly, and I know that’s not true. I look pale and tired and sweaty and confused, and he’s probably waiting for me to start speaking a Martian language so he can pick up the phone and call the nearest psychiatric ward to have me committed.

“Thanks,” I say again, then drink half the glass of water. “I didn’t really know I was coming here,” I finally admit. “I just... I was at Four Corners, and started driving, and when I saw the sign for Langton I just... took that exit.”

“How’d you get the address?” Kyle asks, his brow furrowing in an all-too-familiar way. When we were together I had loved his eyes, his asymmetrical brows, his long hair, his ever-present stubble.

I smile without really knowing why. Then I stop, because I remember his question.

“Um, I found your wedding invitation not too long ago,” I say. “And it was on there. And it kind of burned itself into my brain.”

He has the decency to look chagrined.

“Anyway,” I continue. “I mean, I’m not staying. I have to get back to Emerton. And first I have to go to this ranch. So I just thought... I don’t know. I guess I thought I’d say hi.”

Kyle drinks thoughtfully and I seize the opportunity to look around the tidy little kitchen, sunlight spilling in perfectly through the window with a tiny row of potted herbs growing on the sill. Dishes dry in a rack on the counter and the refrigerator is covered with magnets... And crayon artwork. Unless Kyle and the whore have regressed, I would have to assume...

“You have kids?” I blurt out, still staring at the fridge, and I feel the glass slipping from my fingers and manage to catch it at the very last second.

Kyle blushes then – actually blushes – something he only does when he’s supremely uncomfortable. And I realize now that the cut hair and the stronger jaw and the sprinkler in the front lawn are not the signs of my ex-boyfriend, but of someone’s dad. Someone’s husband. Someone’s family.

Kyle looks at me and he knows I know, and I feel frozen, too numb to be completely horrified, but it’s in there somewhere. Because I may not have been thinking straight at the time, but I know the wedding invitation did not arrive too long after he left me. Not long enough. Like maybe they were in a rush.

“Oh God,” I say, and it sounds like someone else is speaking. “She was pregnant.”

Kyle runs a hand over his face and suddenly this kitchen is way too hot. The fan spinning overhead barely moves and the air is thick and heavy.

“Jules, I’m sorry,” he finally says, and I know he doesn’t mean it. He doesn’t mean it at all. Kyle fits in here, and I don’t. It’s as simple as that. For all the “look how free and young and artsy we are” trappings of our life together, Kyle wanted this. His life was always coming to this place, and mine wasn’t. I don’t want this. I don’t want a sprinkler or children’s artwork on the refrigerator. And he did. He does. And it had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with him. And that pregnant art whore.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I say, and in some distant part of my brain I realize that I mean it. “Boy or girl?”

He looks at me, pained, then drinks the last of his water as though for fortification.

“Both,” he answers. “Philip is four, Miriam’s two.”

“Huh,” I say, balancing my open jaw on my hand. “Huh.”

I let the words sink in. I let this place sink in. For the first time in too long I am not thinking about my upcoming wedding or my past wedding or my current predicament. I am here. And I know I don’t belong. And it’s not my fault.

“I guess I’ll be going,” I announce, sliding the water glass back across the table and rising. “Thanks for the water. Thanks for everything. Good luck.”

Kyle stands too suddenly and bumps the table and the glasses clink together noisily.

“Kyle?” comes her voice, and there’s the faint squeak of the screen door opening and tiny thuds of bare feet on hardwood.

Kyle looks at me and it's his turn to be frozen and horrified, and I gesture to the back door like, Want me to sneak out? His mouth is slightly open and his eyes are too wide, and he doesn't answer and then it's too late because there she is. The whore.

Her face is comically blank as she takes me in, standing here in her kitchen, ostensibly having shared a glass of water and an afternoon of raunchy sex with her husband. Ha. Joke's on you, Stella. Because she's a little heavier and she looks older than I remember, and I know she was a few years older than us to begin with, and sun and motherhood has aged her. But she's still pretty. And as much as I want it to be untrue, she fits in here. Her flowing white top and her curly hair and bare feet and the two tiny children curled around each leg peering back at me belong here.

I smile at Philip and Miriam; Philip smiles back but Miriam starts to cry, and I can't really blame her.

"What's going on?" Stella asks with remarkable calmness.

"Jules—Julianna, just stopped in to say hi," Kyle tells her.

"You have a lovely home," I say with an insincere smile, and I think, you know what? This is how it feels. This is how it feels to come home to find Kyle with another woman. And then I realize that I don't really care.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" Stella inquires, prying the children off of her legs and stepping into the kitchen, a plastic bag of fried chicken and fries swinging from her hand, and it smells so good that I'm tempted to say yes.

But not that tempted.

"No," I say with another smile. This one is sincere, this one is just for me, and who cares if they don't get it or if they think I've lost my mind. I get to leave Langton, and they do not. So keep your chicken. "Nice seeing you again. Take care."

And there's really nothing more to say. So I squeeze past the three people still in the doorway, feel my stomach clench as I smell that delicious chicken – I may have to get some on my way out of town – and stride down the hall, out the screen door, and back to my steaming little rental car.

It is early evening when I finally arrive in Durango, nestled in the San Juan mountains. Looking between my map and Derek Holt's business card for King Ranch, Durango seemed the most likely place to find directions to the ranch, and also to find food. I don't have quite enough of Caroline's money left for lodging (not if I want to pay for gas and food, which I do), so my big plan is to ask around, find the ranch, and get this over with

tonight. And my big plan is promptly foiled when I learn that King Ranch is an hour and a half of winding mountain road away from Durango. And that they go to bed early.

It's guilt and an increasing antsy-ness that prompts me to fill up the tank, prop my hand-drawn map on the dash, and make my way out of town. The sun is sinking pretty quickly now, spraying orange and pink and purple light through the trees that line either side of the thin, twisting road. Mountains are visible in all directions, and every now and then a sign hangs on the side of the road, promising this ranch or that if you just follow the barely visible dirt path at its base.

Sometimes the road is level with the land beside it, and sometimes the land around me drops away into unexpected cliffs and gullies. For the most part my left is a huge wall of rock, and the higher I climb into the mountains the less and less I see land on my right. Just an ominous edge of rock, gravel trickling off to the forest below. The signs for ranches are few and far between now, or maybe it's just because it's dark and the combination of headlights and starlight isn't quite enough to reassure me, but I feel very much alone out here. What was I thinking, leaving the securely populated Durango? What am I going to do? Park at the edge of the ranch? Drive up and park near the house or the paddock or whatever structures they have on ranches? I can see the headlines now. *Man Mistakes New Wife for Trespasser, Accidentally Shoots Her.*

I'm starting to think I must have passed the turn off when the deer jumps out. True to the saying, it freezes and stares back at me, big, woeful eyes peering right into the windshield, even as my tires spin uselessly on the cracked pavement and I continue careening right towards it. I have three choices: hit the deer. Hit the mountain. Drive off the cliff. I choose option four: scream, cover my eyes, and stomp on the brake. There is a horrible screeching sound and the wheel whacks my elbow hard as it whips around violently. I hear gravel crunch, feel the tires fighting a losing battle, and we skid... skid... and stop. A soft, gentle thud as the front corner of the car touches the mountainside and it's over, my foot still pressed firmly down on the brake. Slowly I lower my hands, check that I am not still screaming like a fool, then look around. I don't think I'm dead, but it's too dark out to really be sure. Is the deer dead? I don't see it. I didn't feel it... did I?

I reluctantly put the car in park, then put on the emergency brake and take the keys out, just in case. I dig around in the dash and am relieved to find a small flashlight nestled in with the insurance papers and owner's manual. Then I open the door and step out.

My first thought is that it's cooler than I had expected, and I feel goose bumps jumping out over my arms and legs. The dome light comes on, temporarily blinding me, so I stand anxiously by the side of the car, one hand gripping the door just in case I've come to a stop right at the edge of the cliff and am inches from falling over.

There is a faint scuffle to my right – or my left, or behind me, it's hard to say in the dark – and I whip the flashlight around frantically. I'm not especially outdoorsy, but I know that mountain lions live in the mountains, and they eat people. And so do bears. And wolves. Crap. Forget the deer. They can have it. I'm getting back in the car.

I sigh and turn the keys in the ignition, and when the headlights come on, that's when I see it: A sign. Facing away from me. I frown. I don't really want to get out, nor do I want to drive six feet just to read a sign that is probably going to say something like, Warning: Cougar Season.

I tell myself to get a grip and look around. I am in the wrong lane, for one thing. Or at least I would be, if the long-neglected road were marked. As it is it's barely wide enough for two vehicles, and any oncoming traffic would more than likely smash into me because I am on what could technically be considered their side. This is the reason I give myself for driving six feet so I'm just past the sign, then rolling my window down ever-so-slightly, shining the flashlight out, and reading the words I have been waiting for: King Ranch: 1.3 miles.

Aha! Yes! It's not fake! The address on the card was correct, if extremely unspecific. And somehow I drove right past it. Not to worry. I will simply turn around, drive very carefully back down the mountain for 1.3 miles, and find it. Easy as pie. Except...

The road is ten feet wide at best. I think. I don't really know measurements. But it looks barely wide enough for me to lie down head-to-head with myself, so I guesstimate ten feet. And I am facing upward along the very edge of the cliff, giving myself little room to safely turn around. In fact, I'm pretty sure I can't. But I haven't seen a place to turn around in far too long, and I'm not willing to back down the winding mountain road when I have had enough trouble driving up it facing forward. So I have two choices: Carry on past my destination until I find a wide enough space to turn around, or... turn around. Say a prayer and turn around.

I can't sit here forever. I'm wasting time, wasting gas, just... wasting. And driving forward would be wasteful. This car isn't huge. I can turn it around. I took Driver's Ed. I failed the test three times, but I remember the basics of the three-point turn. There are

three points, like a... triangle. I'll just cut the wheel hard to my left and turn so I'm pointed at the face of rock, cut the wheel hard to my right and reverse very slowly until I'm pointed basically downhill, and then straighten out and drive down to King Ranch. So simple. So...

Crap. I've executed the first part of the three-point turn plan and am nose-to-nose with the giant wall of rock. I am definitely in both lanes. If any cars come from either direction I am in a bad place. And the taillights do very little to illuminate the pitch blackness of the cliff that I know is a very short distance behind me. What difference does it make if I drive off a cliff quickly or slowly? I bite my lip and tap on the gas pedal. I bump into the wall. Right. Reverse. I take a deep breath and try again. Tap. Tap. One inch. Two. After three minutes I am less than two feet from the wall of rock. Definitely not enough room to turn around. I don't want to get out to see how far I am, but know that I must. I'll just do it very quickly.

I push the door open, shine the flashlight towards the back tires, and scurry to take a look. I expect to walk over the edge at any minute, but it is actually about three feet from the trunk of the car. Oh. So. A little more room than I expected.

I dash back into the car, steady myself, and reverse another couple of feet. Rocks crunch under the tires and I wait for the road to give way to nothingness. But it doesn't, and soon I'm far enough away from the wall that I should be able to... If I just turn... A little more... And... Yes. Yes. I have done it. I am facing back down the hill. In no time at all... Oh. Well. It's eleven o'clock now. I may have to review my driver's education book when I get home. I'm pretty sure the three-point plan wasn't divided into three ten minute installments. But whatever. At least there was no one around to witness this. Which is pretty much the same as it not happening. Haha! Suckers.

I hit the gas.

And reverse back over the cliff.

8

We make it to Vegas while it's still light outside and stick our heads out the windows to olge the sheer grandeur of the strip.

“Which one's us?” I ask, and Ivy points to something up ahead.

“That one, I think,” she answers, and I don't really care that I can't see it. I peer at the crowded sidewalks and marvel at how many people there are in Vegas who don't know me. Who don't know that I'm getting married next weekend and won't be asking what my dress looks like or to see my ring. And even if they did know, there are probably a thousand other women in just my position waiting eagerly to spill all the wedding-related details.

The lobby is huge and glitzy and jammed with people. I can see at least three restaurants from where I'm standing and the beckoning lights of the casino flash off the polished floors. Ivy grabs my hand and we giggle foolishly. We're standing in line to check in next to a large group of guys, at the centre of which stands a tall, thin guy with dark eyes that remind me very much of James's. He's much paler, and much more nervous-looking, but something about him draws me. I feel myself smiling before I even realize I'm doing it. Maybe it's him, or maybe it's Vegas. Who cares.

“Hi,” I say, and Ivy echoes it behind me. Several of the men in the group turn and look us over baldly, but the tall guy keeps his eyes on mine and smiles back.

“Hi,” he says.

“I'm Julianna,” I tell him. “And this is my friend Ivy. We're here for the weekend.” And we may have started drinking in the car.

“I'm Paul,” he replies. He extends his hand and we shake. “I'm here for the weekend, too.” He takes a deep, shaky breath. “I'm getting married.”

“Me too!” I exclaim, louder than necessary, and any of the men in Paul’s party who had been looking at me hopefully look away quickly, like I’m diseased.

“Hello,” comes a male voice, and I glance toward the front desk to see that our group is being called.

“That’s us,” I say unnecessarily, as Alexis is already stepping up to the counter, where a thin clerk in an over-starched suit types something into the computer. “See you around, Paul,” I say.

“See you, Julianna,” he replies with a small smile, and I really feel like I’ve found a friend here.

Ivy tugs me to the counter and we flank Alexis. I read the clerk’s name: Ted. Ted flashes us a polite smile as we lean forward to watch him type.

“This room has a Jacuzzi, right?” Ivy asks, giving him her best smile. And flashing a little cleavage, which Ted peeks at.

“Right,” Ted says, hitting a few more keys. Adding the Jacuzzi.

I hear Paul’s party approach the agent next to us and glance over to see if he’s looking at me: he is. Our eyes meet and I look away. I try to tell myself to count to ten and look back, but get distracted by the handsome guy walking past Ted behind the counter, also dressed in a uniform, not looking quite so starched. Looking quite... hot, really. I squint, but can’t read his nametag. Not that it matters. I’m engaged, right? I’m not here to flirt with hot hotel employees. My eyes flicker back to Paul. Or other engaged people.

Ted slides our room keys across the counter. “Rooms 801 and 807,” he says. “Take the elevator up to the eighth floor.” He gestures to a bank of shiny gold elevators across the lobby and we thank him and wheel our suitcases away.

Alexis hands me the key to 807 as we wait for the elevators. “One of the last nights you’ll get to sleep in a big bed all by yourself,” she says kindly. I smile appreciatively at her reflection in the elevator doors. “That and they only had rooms with two singles or a king size,” she adds.

The elevator arrives and we squish in with some elderly couples and ride in giddy silence up to our floor. 801 is right next to the elevators, and 807 is a few doors down, so I say goodbye to Ivy and Alexis and agree to meet them in their room in fifteen minutes so we can go eat.

I enter my room and stop, closing the door behind me and leaning against it. Without looking, I feel around for the chain and push it in the little slot, locking the door.

From this high up the sounds of traffic are absent and the only thing I can hear right now is my own blood rushing through my head. I'm in Vegas. And I'm totally alone. I feel like a great weight has been lifted off of my shoulders. Or maybe that's just the combination of the alcohol and the little yellow pillow.

I shake myself and lift the suitcase onto the bed, opening it up and flipping through the unfolded clothes Ivy and Alexis had tossed in. The only real going-out outfit seems to be my favourite black dress and some glittery heels, and since it's my only outfit and I have no money to buy another one for tomorrow night, I make myself a promise not to spill anything or somehow lose it. And then I put it on, strap on my shoes, pull my hair up, refresh my makeup, and head to room 801.

I don't remember much of the first night in Vegas. Spinning wheels and cherries and sevens and cold drinks and something about a fountain... Dancers in cages hanging from the ceiling and fireworks and a pirate ship and blisters on my feet from dancing too much. When I wake up the next morning I'm still in my dress and my heels and there are no offensive stains so I consider it a good night. And it's only ten o'clock. And I'm still in Vegas. And I'm totally alone. I smile.

In the elevator Ivy chatters about how fun last night was, recalling so many already-forgotten events that I wonder if we were even hanging out together. I frown at the slightly gritty remnants of the anti-anxiety medication under my tongue and wonder if one of the side effects is loss of memory. Probably. When combined with alcohol. I mentally shake my head and tell myself not to worry. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, and you can't be guilty if you can't remember what it was you did to feel guilty about in the first place.

A disembodied elevator voice announces our arrival in the lobby and we quickly agree to bypass the hotel's restaurants and stroll down the strip until something catches our fancy. Which something does, just ten steps out of the elevator's gleaming gold doors. A man, tall and blond and impossibly handsome, strolling across the lobby's shiny floors and turning every female head in the huge room. His jeans are fitted and faded and disappear into worn cowboy boots. He's got a bright white shirt and an actual lariat around his neck, and his beautiful head is topped with a white cowboy hat. I have never in my life had a cowboy fantasy, but it's not too late to start. Not when the cowboy in question looks like Brad Pitt in *Thelma & Louise*, minus the fondness for robbery. Or even with it.

I pull my eyes away and force my attention back to my rumbling stomach, but he's still in sight, headed for the casino, casually oblivious to the female attention. So I steal one more quick glance at him, reminding myself that not only am I engaged to be married, but cowboys aren't my type, and there's no way a guy like that would go for me anyway. And then he turns his beautiful head ever-so-slightly and his eyes meet mine like he knows what he's going to find, and his lips curve into a perfect and sexy grin, and I'm too much of a loser to smile back. Instead I blink like a thirteen-year-old wallflower being asked to dance, and then he's gone.

Our quest for food lasts all of five minutes, until we are lured by the promise of a huge brunch buffet and mimosas. I wonder aloud if it isn't a little early for us to be drinking, but Ivy reminds me it's Vegas, kicks up her cowboy-booted foot in some kind of demonstration, and I agree that mimosas sound good.

Four pancakes, five strips of bacon and six mimosas later, we stagger back into the bright sunshine, orient ourselves, and join the throng of people ambling casually down the strip. We look at art and lions and dancing girls, visit Venice and Paris and New York. Everything is tidy and opulent and shining, and we agree to pop into every casino that feels lucky; Ivy and Alexis even allow me to play. Then I lose six hundred dollars and they banish me from the betting tables and say I can only play games that cost a quarter.

As per the status quo of the rest of my gaming life, I don't win anything all day, but I'm not put off. By dinnertime we're all starting to wilt a little, and decide to head back to the hotel, take a nap in our nicely air conditioned rooms, then meet up for dinner and dancing and gambling and more.

A few hours later I'm slipping back into the little black dress and glittery heels, piling my hair on top of my head and adding another coat of mascara to my lashes, thinking I look pretty darn good. My stomach is roaring ravenously and I pat it, promising that food is not far away. When I reach Ivy and Alexis's room, their stomachs are having the same argument.

We head down to the lobby, making a beeline for the reception desk so Ivy can complain about their non-functioning air conditioner. Ooh, I think as we approach. The hot guy from yesterday is working. Most excellent.

"Good evening," he says politely as we near. "How are you enjoying your stay?"

“Everything’s great,” Ivy says dismissively, focused on her air conditioning needs. “Everything except the air conditioner in room 801. It’s too hot to sleep. We called down a couple of hours ago, but no one came up.”

“I’m sorry about that,” the hot clerk replies smoothly, typing something into his computer. I use this opportunity to peer at his nametag. Bill. Now that I look a bit closer, I see that he actually looks kind of young. But somehow old. He has the still-round cheeks from childhood, but there are fine lines around his eyes and mouth that add a few years. His shoulders are broad beneath the hotel-issued jacket, and his nails are neat and tidy.

“Alexis Arnett?” Bill asks Ivy, and she jerks a finger in Alexis’s direction.

“We’re sharing,” she informs him. “We’re both equally hot.”

Bill smiles to himself. “Of course,” he says politely, and then his eyes flick up and meet mine and the ends of his mouth quirk up a little, and I feel like we’re sharing a private joke. Which we kind of are, because neither Ivy nor Alexis are smiling, and I wonder why. We’re in Vegas, the night is young, food and drinks and a million other opportunities are on the horizon.

Bill seems to read their displeasure at the lack of air conditioning and prompt service, and smiles reassuringly. “I’ll send maintenance up immediately,” he promises. “By the time you return from the night’s activities, your room will be perfectly air conditioned. And if, due to some unforeseen circumstance, the air conditioner cannot be repaired, I will personally move you to a more agreeable room.”

I look between Ivy and Alexis. They seem mollified. I look at Bill. He looks at me. We both smile.

“Is that everything?” he asks, ostensibly speaking to Ivy, but his gaze is still locked with mine. When did the world suddenly become populated with so many hot men? And when did they all start smiling at me? This engagement ring is both a blessing and a curse, it would seem. Even as I think the words it starts to tighten on my finger and I twist it self-consciously. Bill’s eyes follow the action and his smile quirks slightly as he sees the diamond on the fourth finger of my left hand.

“I guess that’s everything,” I hear myself say, and Ivy takes my arm and leads the way across the lobby to the restaurant.

“Table for three, please,” Alexis says to the green eyed maître d standing at the front of the expansive restaurant. There is, of course, a long buffet lining the far wall, but to be honest, I’m feeling a bit buffet-ed out. And I’d like to hit up a breakfast buffet

before we go in the morning, and only eating one plate of food tonight will make that seem much less unhealthy.

The maitre d's nametag reads "Dan," and he smiles at us pleasantly as he collects menus from the small alcove tucked in behind him.

"How are you enjoying Las Vegas?" he asks with a charming British accent.

"Delightful," says Ivy, also in a British accent, and Alexis and I give a start, but she keeps a bright smile in place and Dan is none the wiser.

"Visiting from England?" Dan asks, leading the way into the restaurant, past table upon table of increasingly more delicious food. My stomach rumbles.

"No," Alexis interjects firmly, before Ivy can respond. "Emerton. About five hours west."

Dan flashes her a smile over his shoulder, then stops at a table for four and pulls out a chair for her. Alexis glares at him and pulls out her own chair, and Dan's smile falters a little bit.

"Americans," Ivy murmurs apologetically, accent still in effect. She slips into the chair next to Alexis, leaving me to accept Dan's proffered seat.

"Thank you," I say, and he smiles at me in acknowledgement.

This hotel must only staff very attractive people, I think as I take the menu and open it, my eyes drifting over the top to ogle the buffet. No, Julianna. No.

"Your server will be right with you," Dan informs us, heading away from Alexis's fulminous glare.

"Really, Alexis," I chastise. "Not all British accents are a sign of the devil."

"She's right," Ivy chimes in, still with the accent. "Don't be so coarse."

"Why are you such a tool?" Alexis asks her, and there is a brief pause before we all snicker into our menus.

We pretend not to remember how many mimosas we had with breakfast or that Ivy and Alexis's mini-bar is now empty and that there are about three hundred calories per cocktail, and order a round of piña coladas, because we're on vacation and they don't serve them at either Evan's pub or James' and Rocky's bar, and really, we deserve them.

I resist the temptation of the steaming buffet and its endless lineup, as do Ivy and Alexis. We order things that are well outside our budget (fifteen dollars doesn't really seem that doable once you're actually in Vegas) and then, since the piña coladas are gone, order another round.

Our food arrives shortly after and we thank the server and ask for just one more round of drinks. They seem to be evaporating in this Vegas heat.

We finish dinner and somewhere between the main course and dessert Ivy manages to introduce herself (and Alexis and I by proxy) to a soccer team that's here to celebrate a big win or something (I don't know anything about soccer), and now we're heading across the glittery lobby in the midst of fifteen or twenty or maybe more soccer jerseys. Truth be told, it's only ten thirty and I'm kind of starting to see double. In my tremendous effort to be responsible, I resisted the urge to take just one more little yellow pill (though there is one tucked into my tiny pocket, in case of emergency) and instead steadied my hand with another piña colada. The last one. I swear.

I couldn't tell you the name of the night club if you paid me. All I know is that because we are with a group of hot, muscled soccer players (and I'd like to think because we're hot, if not muscled, ourselves) we're allowed to skip the line and saunter on into the club first. Which we do, and then I stop cold. Because this is like no club I have ever seen before. I'm still lucid enough to wonder if it's the alcohol/anti-anxiety medication working, but I would swear that there are people in here drinking fire. Lots of people. Lots of people with sparkly skin and perfect bodies and even the dancers hanging from the ceiling are drinking fire.

I am still doubting myself when, before we can edge our way even a third of the distance to the bar, a server on rollerskates, her hair wound up like Medusa's, is offering us a tray of smoking green drinks that she proceeds to set on fire. Then put in our hands. I look at everyone around me and they are all excited, laughing, deciding how best to drink their flaming drinks, but I do not understand their amusement. The drink is on fire. It's on fire. There are flames coming out of something that I am holding in my hand! And then it's out. The fire vanishes, and the soccer players and Ivy and even Alexis toss back their drinks in one unified swallow. I blink rapidly, then don't want to be the odd man out, so I hastily swallow my heated green concoction, even though I vowed earlier not to drink anymore. It's good. And actually, I'm not even sure that this would qualify as an alcoholic beverage, because most of the alcohol was probably burned off with the fire. So really it's more like a juice. And I should probably get another one, because now that the fire hazard has passed, I feel kind of parched.

“Hey,” says one of the soccer players whose name I have already forgotten, and who, if I’m honest, I don’t actually remember being introduced to in the first place. I smile up at him anyway.

“Hey,” I say back, and he smiles, revealing impossibly white teeth and arched eyebrows that I cannot stop staring at because they are so perfect.

“Dance?” he asks, holding out a tanned hand. I think that I probably shouldn’t, then think no, I probably should, but it doesn’t matter because I’m already taking his hand and waiting for him to lead the way so I can read the name on the back of his shirt... Mercado. Something Mercado. Let’s just hope his friends call him by his surname, hmm?

We wind our way into the writhing throng of bodies and the music is so loud that it is impossible to hear whatever Mercado is saying, so I just smile and nod and join the general motion of the club and he does too and he’s quite a good dancer. There are flaming drinks absolutely everywhere and maybe it’s that or maybe it’s a combination of everything, but I feel hot and a little dizzy. I can feel the sweat collecting at the nape of my neck but I just throw my hands in the air and dance anyway. Song after song plays and Mercado doesn’t get tired and neither do I, and I feel a lightness and an ease that I haven’t felt in a very long time. And almost on cue there’s a loud fizzing noise and then a pop and a tiny pink firecracker, followed quickly by purple, green and red, explodes over the crowd.

“You’re very beautiful!” Mercado shouts in what was probably meant to be a romantic whisper, and while I normally roll my eyes at these kinds of compliments, I toss my head and shoot Mercado what I hope is a sexy grin and turn around so my back is to his chest and we are dancing and dancing, faster and faster, flaming drinks and firecrackers and such loud music.

Then, like a hallucinogenic reminder, a bride and groom emerge from the crowd and start dancing right in front of me. So close that I can reach out my shaking fingers and touch the veil she’s wearing, see the ebullient smiles on their red faces, catch the glint of their wedding rings. They turn their megawatt grins on Mercado and I and I glance over my shoulder at Mercado and his eyes are inches from mine and suddenly getting married doesn’t seem so scary. I mean, you just come out and dance and drink fire drinks afterwards. What’s the big deal? I can do this. I can get married. I should get married.

“They look very happy!” Mercado shouts in my ear, and I turn around to face him again and wrap my left arm around his shoulder so my engagement ring is safely out of sight.

“Marriage is not scary!” I holler back.

“Awesome!” he yells.

I’m not sure how many songs and fire drinks later we stumble out of the crowd, but I’m beyond grateful to be wearing black because I can feel the sweat pouring down my spine. We slip outside for some cooler air and it is with no small shock that I discover that it is midnight.

Away from the crowd and the fire and the noise, Mercado and I smile at each other nervously, and I fan the back of my neck and let my eyes scan the road as though I’m going to see someone I know.

“Want a seat?” someone asks. “We’ve got air conditioning!”

Mercado and I turn to see a long white limousine stopped in front of us, a woman with tightly curled hair and a fleshy face peering out of the driver’s side window.

“Hop in,” she tells us. “Cool down.”

I look at Mercado and he looks at me, and sitting and cool sounds perfect right about now, so when Mercado opens the back door I don’t hesitate for a second before sliding in. And she’s right. It is cool. The leather is sleek and black and there’s a fully stocked bar on the far side and we’re the only people in here.

“Fantastic,” I say to Mercado, angling myself so the cool air is blowing right on my neck, and he closes the door and slides in across from me and smiles.

“I’m Suzanne,” says the woman, lowering the partition right behind Mercado’s head and making him jump. We lock eyes and try not to laugh and he switches seats so he’s right beside me, his arm around my neck, and it feels like something I could get used to.

Suzanne passes back two brochures that we dutifully accept, and scrawled across the front in sparkly pink lettering are the words *Glitz & Glory Love Chapel*. Hmm, I think. I like glitz. I like glory.

“You two look young and in love,” Suzanne continues, and maybe if I hadn’t had so many piña coladas with dinner or maybe if she weren’t so darn persuasive, I would have heard the slightly rehearsed quality in her voice. “The Glitz & Glory Love Chapel would be honoured to help you seal and celebrate your love. We’re open until four

o'clock every morning, and still have some bookings left. Why don't I take you down to the chapel so you can experience the romantic setting for yourselves?"

It does not occur to me that I do not know Mercado's first name or that I already have another fiancé; we are both nodding agreeably to Suzanne's suggestion and smiling and popping open the champagne as we drive down the glittering, fabulous strip to what is sure to be the equally fabulous and glittery Glitz & Glory Love Chapel.

And it is fabulous! Pink and shiny with lights and palm trees and arched white doors and happy couples in shorts and summer dresses clasping hands and looking very much in love. Like this is a good place to get married. None of them look nervous or concerned. The Glitz & Glory is the place. I just know it. And Mercado knows it too, so when Suzanne asks us if 3:00am is okay, we agree and book the spot.

Suzanne does not offer to drive us back down the strip to the club. In fact, after swiping my credit cards, she really doesn't seem that interested in us or our love at all. Her whole friendly "come in and cool off" demeanor has vanished. Huh.

I look at Mercado and he looks at me and we shrug and leave the chapel, and when we do more than a few people yell cheerful "Congratulations!" and throw what feels like gravel at us.

"Thank you, thank you!" Mercado calls back, waving like a movie star, and I think it's kind of funny even though something hits me in the eye, so I stumble along and wave my grateful thanks as well.

With the time set, Mercado and I run out of things to say to each other. Or maybe it's that making sure every step falls evenly in front of the next one requires all our concentration so we can't make small talk. We walk silently side by side, carefully focused on following the lines in the pavement so we don't veer into traffic, and after a few minutes Mercado takes my arm and gestures to the casino we're directly in front of.

"Let's go in!" he yells, even though yelling is no longer necessary.

I nod in response and watch as he leads the way. He disappears into the crowded lobby and I hurry to catch up, pausing to stand on my tiptoes to find his dark head in the distance. It is at some point in between the doors to the street and the entrance to the casino that I decide not to follow Mercado after all. It is ridiculous to marry somebody whose first name you don't even know. I should call James and tell him that we have an appointment at 3:00am and that if he really wants to marry me he should be waiting in front of the Glitz & Glory Love Chapel in a nice tux at that time.

I'd like to think that I would have called James, but in my haste to leave the hotel with as little to carry as possible, I only really came out with a couple of credit cards, my room key, and what little cash I still had tucked discreetly into my dress. I know that Ivy and Alexis have their phones, however, so I'll just call one of them and ask to borrow theirs. Which really doesn't solve the problem that I don't have a cell phone right now. In fact, as I stand on my glittery heels and pivot around the gleaming lobby, I can't find any phones at all. And the more I think about it the more I realize that I haven't seen a phone all day and what if Vegas doesn't have phones? I don't know how far I am from my hotel. I don't know how far I am from the club. Even the Glitz & Glory and mean Suzanne seem too far away to ever find again. I feel panic welling up in my chest and try to fight it down but suddenly there's just not enough air in this lobby and I want to get back onto the street where there's lots of air but there are too many people and I—

“You okay, miss?”

It takes a moment for me to realize that the question is directed at me, to hear the warm, slow drawl, to recognize the presence of another body close-but-not-touching mine. And even before I turn my head I know what I am going to see.

I stare foolishly at the white cowboy hat for I don't know how long, and then his lips spread into a beautiful, calm smile, and he reaches out a hand to touch me, then stops himself, instead touching the brim of his hat, his hip.

“Are you okay?” he asks again, blue eyes sincere and concerned, and this time I manage to nod, because even in this sea of strangers in this foreign hotel lobby, I feel anchored by his presence. I've seen him before. He knows where the right hotel is. He may even have a phone. My hero.

“I think I'm lost,” I finally say. He smiles again like that's kind of funny, but also like he totally understands, and I'm glad he doesn't ask anymore questions because all I can think is that he is the most beautiful man in the world.

“You're flushed,” he says, and this time he places his fingers on my shoulder blade and pushes me gently toward the doors to the street. “Let's step outside for a second. Are your friends with you?”

If I were smarter or more sober or warier, I would have maybe thought that these were the words of a man wondering if anybody would notice that I was missing in the morning. As it is, I am grateful that he knows which way is out and that he remembers me from earlier, because surely he will know which way to go when we get outside.

Which he does. “You’re not too far,” he says, pointing at something down the street, something tall with lots of lights that looks like every single other thing in the vicinity.

“I’m sorry,” I say for no reason in particular, pressing the backs of my clammy fingers to my cheeks, surprised at just how hot they feel. “I’m sorry,” I repeat. “I need to call my friends. I’m not sure I can make it.”

“No worries,” he replies, pulling a cell phone out of his pocket. Even in my current state I can’t help but notice that it is almost confusingly brand new, with buttons and features I can’t comprehend. “What’s the number?”

I rattle off Alexis’s phone number since she’s more likely than Ivy to have her phone on, or at least to hear it, or not have lost it, and I can hear it ringing as this stranger in this white cowboy hat hands this space age gadget over and I press it to my ear.

Please pick up, I think. Please. Please.

“Hello?” comes Alexis’s suspicious voice. The first thing I notice is that there is very little noise in the background. So likely they have left the club. Or this phone is so new that it cuts out all background noise. I should get one. “Hello?” she repeats sharply.

“Lex,” I say. “It’s me.”

“Jules!” she exclaims, and I feel guilty at the relief in her voice.

“Is it her?” I hear Ivy ask, and Alexis replies, “Why else would I have said ‘Jules!’?”

“Where are you?” Alexis asks me.

“I’m not sure,” I answer, then peer across the street and name the famous landmark that looms ominously over us. “...I think,” I finish. “Is there only one?”

The white cowboy hat nods and I smile at him.

“You’re not far from the hotel,” Alexis answers. “We noticed you were gone and started looking for you, and now we’re about three blocks from our place. Can you get back there? We’ll meet you in the lobby. Ivy wants to check that the a/c is fixed, so we’ll be yelling at the desk guy if it’s not.”

“Bill,” I say, distracted.

“What?” she asks.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll meet you in the lobby. Apparently I can see the hotel from here.”

“Whose phone is this?” Alexis asks, but I’m already pressing a few glowing buttons to shut it off. The cowboy takes it from my hands, presses one very obvious button, and the phone goes dark.

“Sorry to have listened,” he says unnecessarily. “But I’m heading back that way myself if you want company.”

“Thank you,” I say, glancing back into the casino one last, useless time, in case Mercado is there so I can tell him the wedding is off. Strangely (and for the first time ever), I feel a pang of sadness at the words. The wedding is off. Pause. Yep. There it is: Sorrow.

“You okay to walk?” the cowboy asks, looking down the street for a cab.

“Yes, please,” I say. “I mean, the fresh air is good. It’s necessary.”

“Okay,” he says, and I like his voice. I like the solidness of his presence and the perfection of his beautiful face.

“I’m Julianna,” I announce, studying my feet as I do my best to walk in a straight line.

“Julianna,” he says as though trying it out. “Nice to meet you. I’m Derek Holt.”

He reaches across his body to shake my hand, and I fold my fingers into his and feel instantly safer, steadier.

“Nice to meet you,” I hear myself say. “Derek Holt.”

Ivy and Alexis are in the lobby when we reach the hotel. “Jules!” Ivy exclaims, enveloping me in a comforting hug that almost instantly helps me to forget my recent anxiety and remember that this is my last night in Vegas and I need to live it up.

“Hey!” I say back. Alexis hugs me quickly but tightly, then they both step back and fold their arms over their chests and look from me to Derek and back to me.

“Oh,” I say hastily. “Oh. Oh. Ivy, Alexis, this is Derek Holt. He helped me find the hotel again. Derek these are my friends, Ivy and Alexis.”

To his credit, Derek is not intimidated by the strangely stern expressions on either of my friends’ faces. He smiles warmly and holds out his hand until they glance warily at one another and unfold their arms long enough to shake politely and say “How do you do?”

“Nice boots,” Derek says to Ivy, and already I know he’s won her over. What I’m not so sure about is why he has to win either of them over in the first place. Apart from the looks in the lobby, have we met before and completely forgotten about it? I am not

the kind of person who gets so drunk she forgets important things. Honestly. “Have you had time to visit the casino tonight?” Derek asks the three of us, gesturing to the pulsing lights and polished metal of the casino on the other side of the lobby.

“No,” I say quickly, before Alexis can terrorize him. “No, that’s a great idea. We’ll just... We’ll meet you in there. Is that okay?”

“Course it is,” he says easily, tipping his hat to Ivy and Alexis, his perfect grin faltering only slightly at Alexis’s stony glare. He strolls away, turning heads with every step.

“Seriously!” I exclaim, turning on Alexis. “What is your problem?”

“What is *my* problem?” Alexis returns. “What is *my* problem? Where were you, Jules? Where were you and what the hell were you doing?”

I step back, startled. “What do you mean?” I ask, and Ivy intervenes when Alexis takes a menacing step forward.

“What she means,” Ivy interjects, “is that when we couldn’t find you in the night club we went outside in time to see you leaving in a white limousine with “Just Married!” written on the back window and cans trailing from the bumper!”

I had most definitely not noticed *that* when I’d gotten in.

“I didn’t...” I begin. “I just wanted to sit down. I didn’t know there were cans.”

“Did you marry him?” Alexis demands, jerking her thumb towards the casino. “Did you marry some cowboy you just met?”

“Alexis!” I exclaim. “Don’t be ridiculous! Of course I didn’t marry Derek Holt.” (I am absolutely not mentioning that I booked a time to become Mrs. X Mercado.)

“You’re sure?” she asks. “Because your eyes are pretty glassy and you might not remember.”

“I remember everything,” I say firmly. “I’m just tired. And happy. And single.”

Alexis looks at Ivy who looks at Alexis and nods.

“He wasn’t wearing a ring,” Ivy says. “I checked.”

Alexis considers this, then takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

“Okay,” she says finally. “Okay. Sorry. I just didn’t want you to mess things up with James. Or do anything you might regret.”

“I didn’t,” I say. “I won’t. I promise.”

When we get to the casino Derek has already secured us spots at a Blackjack table and there are three even piles of chips sitting in front of three empty seats.

“What’s this?” Ivy asks, looking around for the chips’ owners.

“From me to you,” Derek says with a smile, tipping his hat like a gentleman.

“Oh,” I say, pushing mine away. “This is a mistake. I lose everything. You have no idea. I don’t want to be wasteful.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Derek replies. “It’s only money.”

Ivy and Alexis’s brows shoot up, and for the first time tonight I start to consider what it would be like to be Mrs. Derek Holt. To walk into designer shops and come out with a stack of boxes and bags too high to fit into my customized limousine, dropping hundred dollar bills into charity pots and waving away the smiles of gratitude with a benevolent, “It’s only money.”

“Do you live in Vegas, Derek?” I ask. Even before I have fully formed the question an icy drink is in my hand and I’m sipping from the straw and it’s sugary and delicious and I feel very happy to have it.

“Stay,” he tells the dealer, then turns his attention to me. “No,” he answers, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a small white business card. “No, I have a ranch in Colorado. San Juan mountains, to be more specific.”

“As specific as a mountain range can possibly be,” Alexis comments dryly from over my shoulder, but when I glance back at her I can see that her cheeks are pink and she’s too far gone to be truly acerbic.

“That’s how we like it,” Derek says, and I look at the card with its embossed cowboy and horse before passing it to Alexis who passes it to Ivy, who pockets it. “Tucked away where no one can find you. Come out when you feel like it, retreat to the mountains when you need to be alone. I’m heading back in the morning.”

The ranch sounds perfect to me. Not that I’m constantly surrounded by people in Emerton, I remind myself, but the thought that I could be so hidden away that my address is a mountain range... It’s like the hermit life, but with amenities. And cowboys.

I’m not sure quite when Alexis and Ivy splinter off, but I find myself alone with Derek at a high rollers or high stakes or whatever it’s called table, at which I am most definitely not allowed to play. Derek insists I stay, however, as his lucky charm. And since nobody has ever considered me “lucky” before (and with good reason), I feel flattered and sit down next to him.

I don’t know anything about poker though I smile and nod along as Derek explains about flops and something being up the river. I don’t understand why you only

get two cards. I don't know why three of the people at the table are wearing sunglasses at one forty-five in the morning. I would judge them, but they're all rich and there must be a reason for it, so I try to focus on what Derek is saying out the corner of his mouth, cowboy hat held in one hand to cover his barely moving lips.

"...odds are he doesn't have it," he finishes. "What do you think?"

What do I think? I think. What do I think? I have no idea what he's even talking about! I don't even know the value of the massive pile of chips that appear to be at stake! In fact... I scan the faces at the table and count: six. Until one second ago, I didn't know there were six other people playing this game! What I think is if Derek really thinks I know what I think, then he is up the river in more ways than whatever the poker term means.

"I think you know what to do," I say reassuringly, but he doesn't fall for it. He smiles at me from behind the hat, and my head is behind the hat, too, which means that our faces are really close together, and even this close up he is so impossibly handsome.

"In or out?" he asks, and his breath smells minty.

I look at the table. I look at his (our) cards, but they're face down.

"I lose at everything," I whisper.

"In or out?" he whispers back.

I try not to smile, but can't help it. Oh dear. Oh dear.

"In," I say, and he puts the hat on his head, turns confidently to the table, and pushes his chips into the ring or whatever it's called in poker.

"All in," he says, and I see eyes widen even behind the sunglasses. Not so mysterious now, fellas!

"All in," the dealer echoes, sounding bored.

The other players mumble and look at their cards and fiddle with their chips and try to play it cool, but whatever just happened was not what they expected.

Eventually all but one fold, and the other guy has too many chips to really worry about. He also kind of smells, like he's been here for days amassing these chips and failing to bathe.

I don't completely know what's going on, but my stomach is fluttering anxiously and the sounds of the casino have disappeared and all I can hear is my heart pounding in my chest, and maybe Derek's, too. His fingers move toward the cards in slow motion, and the other player mimics the action. All too casually Derek flicks the cards over and

they land with an almost audible sound, flipping over to reveal their faces. But I'm not looking at them. I'm looking at the other guy. And his face says it all.

"Yes!" I shriek, jumping out of my seat, spinning around, and when I revolve so I'm face-to-face with Derek he's out of his seat, too, and the cool, collected cowboy is temporarily replaced with someone who thought for sure he was going to lose but didn't.

Derek laughs uproariously and throws his arms around me. I throw mine around him and sound restores itself and I hear hands clapping and finally notice that we are surrounded by an impressive crowd that is equally impressed with us.

The other guy extends his hand and shakes first mine, then Derek's.

"Nice playing," he says in a low voice, but he doesn't seem bitter. He gestures at me absently as he collects what remains of his chip pile. "She's a keeper," he tells Derek. "Let me know if it doesn't work out."

I try to laugh but the smile sticks on my face awkwardly, though nobody else seems to notice. Eventually the crowd disperses, the dealer calls for a break or a new dealer or something, and we have a few minutes to collect ourselves.

"Wow," I say as we resettle into our seats. "I don't really know what happened there, but it was very exciting."

"I knew you were special, the first second I saw you in the lobby," Derek says kindly.

I remember our first "encounter," if eye contact can be counted as an encounter. *I knew*, I hear him repeat in my head. *I knew*. Certainly I had felt something there, that time in the lobby. And the other time, too. And all of tonight. Is that what's been missing? Is that the "knowing" I'm supposed to have?

I study Derek through narrowed eyes as he restacks his chips, sips from his drink, eyes crinkling up at the corners as he feels me watching him. I can't help but smile. This is not the strange forced smile of a few moments before. This smile feels natural. It feels right. It feels a bit rubbery, like maybe I've had twenty drinks today.

"You're a good teacher," I say finally. Derek lifts his glass and I lift mine and for some reason we toast to it. We hold the stare a little too long and I feel the glass slipping through my fingers, though whether it's from condensation or nerves, I couldn't say.

"Any time you want to practice," Derek says, and I don't think he's talking strictly about poker. I think I do want to practice. I need to practice. And who better to practice with than Derek? He's a terrific teacher. Really top notch. And he's handsome. And rich. What better training husband could one ask for? Everybody knows that Vegas

weddings don't mean anything. They are *meaningless*. And sometimes the things that seem so scary, aren't so scary after you've done them once...

"What are you thinking?" Derek asks.

I open my mouth, but the words are hard to push out. I'm terrified of marriage. I'm afraid of weddings. Could I possibly be contemplating asking a perfect (perfect being the operative word) stranger (maybe that's the operative word) to marry me?

"I have a favour to ask..." I begin. And when I'm finished, the strangest look crosses Derek's face.

"I'll be right back," he says.

I watch him do everything but run from the casino. I look around the table and everybody is most definitely not looking at me. Not looking at me in such a way that I know that they were most definitely listening to the desperate lady trying to pick up the rich cowboy. Oh God. Oh dear.

I feel flames rising in my cheeks and tears in my eyes and those icy drinks are really coming back to haunt me. My hands are shaking when I raise them to my face and then I'm pushing my seat away and standing up on wobbly legs and doing my best to appear poised and confident as I near-run out of the casino, hopefully not looking like I'm chasing Derek.

The lobby is blessedly clear except for a few stragglers, and I make a beeline for the revolving doors and fresh air and people who didn't just hear me make a fool out of myself.

"Everything okay, Miss Sopher?" comes a male voice, and I barely slow as I see Bill the desk clerk coming out from behind the counter.

"Just need some air," I say with a phony smile.

"Would you like some water?" he asks, genuine concern in his eyes, and I wonder how bad I look. How truly awful I must appear. I wonder if he'd marry me. If anybody would. If I am so wretched... No. No. I just need some fresh air. And then I will go upstairs and pretend like this never happened.

I pause at the spinning glass and gold doors. "I'm not getting married," I tell Bill.

He stops short on the polished lobby floor, skidding forward a few inches, coming to a halt a few feet away from me. His eyes flicker to my engagement ring.

"Okay?" he says.

I swipe at my bleary eyes. “Okay,” I say.

Outside I am under the huge canopy that blocks the sun during the day and provides pleasing cover at night. I head to the large potted palm trees that line either side of the door and don’t stop until I am fully in shadow. The air here feels blessedly cool and I smooth my dress, smooth my hair, smooth my cheeks, but nothing feels smooth. Nothing feels okay. I feel like I just avoided making a big mistake, but I feel like not making it was an even bigger mistake. That sounds stupid. Now I feel stupid. I don’t feel anonymous enough in Vegas. I just...

I don’t think about it anymore. I’ve been trying hard all day, but if I’m about to head upstairs anyway, then surely one more little yellow pill can’t hurt. If anything it will cheer me up until I fall deeply, welcomingly, into sleep. So I pull out my one emergency tablet and slip it under my tongue, breathing in through my nose as it dissolves, watching limousines and cabs race up and down the strip, admiring the confidence of girls in dresses that cover less than my skimpiest bikini, wishing only briefly that I could be one of them. That I could be anyone else, just for a night. Anyone but Julianna Sopher.

I sigh at my own melodrama, then turn on my glittery heels and head back inside, narrowly avoiding being mowed down by a tall, pale blur of a man running madly across the lobby and out the doors I just entered. Normally I would pause to watch him flee (robbery?), but tonight is not the night. Careful to avoid Bill’s curious, concerned stare, I push the glowing up arrow and peer at the numbers above the doors. Twenty-second floor, both of them. Interesting.

“Jules!” I turn at the sound of Ivy’s voice and see Ivy and Alexis clattering across the lobby. “Are you done?” Ivy asks. “Did you win?”

I stare between my two best friends and try not to laugh or cry, because one will surely lead to the other, and then I would never stop.

“I didn’t win,” I say. “Did you?”

“No!” they exclaim in unison. “We are so screwed!” Then they laugh, and, as predicted, have a hard time stopping.

“Come upstairs!” Alexis urges, tugging on my arm.

“I am going upstairs,” I say, pointing to the elevators that are moving impossibly slowly.

“No!” Alexis exclaims. “Up the stairs. Let’s take the stairs!”

“It burns calories!” Ivy explains.

“That’s okay,” I say. “You guys go ahead.”

“Okay!” Ivy chirps. “You’re missing out! See you in the morning!”

“See you!” Alexis sings, and they scurry off for the fire doors, arms linked.

I sigh heavily as they disappear and turn back to the elevators and the gleaming gold doors, trying hard not to look at my reflection. I can’t do it, I think. I can’t get married next week. I can’t marry James. If this (“this” being twenty plus cocktails and more yellow pills than the recommended daily dosage) is what it takes to get me down the aisle, then I can’t do it. This was my chance. Liquid and powder courage, maybe, but it was the best I could do.

I feel strangely bereft. And strangely happy. And a little dizzy. I study the antique solitaire on my left hand and think that it will be a pity when it’s no longer there, but it will also be a burden lifted. No more wondering. I will go back to Emerton tomorrow and tell James that the wedding is off. I am not the marrying type. Then I figure, Why wait? and slip the ring off and tuck it into my barely-there pocket. I study my now-bare hand thoughtfully.

“Perfect,” he says, and I look up, startled, as the elevator doors I hadn’t even heard open glide shut behind him. He slides a huge diamond onto my waiting hand. “You ready?” he asks.

CHAPTER NINE

It's too early in the morning to be awake, but I know I must open my eyes. I must move. I'm not quite sure how it came to be, but I am at sea. And I am surrounded by fog, and hidden in the fog are boats, lots of them, and they are all blowing those dreadfully loud foghorns, alerting all the other boats to their presence. I don't want to move. My legs feel heavy and when I shift my feet my legs come alive with pins and needles and I wince, and wincing moves my head so I hit the horn—

Ahh! What the hell?! I jerk my head back sharply, eyes flying open, and while this action confirms that I am neither in a boat nor at sea, it does not explain much. Because I seem to be in some kind of spacecraft, and I am tipped forward at such an angle that the only thing keeping my forehead from the windshield is my seatbelt. Which is really pressing on my bladder, which is really full. Which doesn't explain...

And then it comes back to me. The ranch. The road. The three point turn. The premature self-congratulating. The reversing off the cliff. I remember more than I want to. I remember the terrifying grate of rock on the undercarriage of the car, the sound of metal screeching as it snapped and bent, the sharp clatter of the taillights smashing, the car flipping, tree branches scratching the windows, me convinced I was about to die in a fiery inferno, leaving a complete stranger a widower.

And yet here I am. Wheels touched down, the car at a forty-five degree angle, bumper pressed against a long, now-tilted fence. I reach up and turn the rearview mirror, but behind me all I can see is the splintered back window and more trees. The cliff must have been more of a steep incline, with the trees cushioning my fall. They tossed me about willy nilly, but they didn't kill me. Though this foghorn noise might.

I shake my head and instantly regret it, but the sharp pain does clear my eyes and allow them to focus on the blinking brown stares on the other side of the fence. Dozens of long-lashed eyes, pink tongues, sniffing noses. Cows. Too many to count. Mooing incessantly.

I run my hands over my body tentatively, though the nearly-gone tingling in my legs tells me that I am not paralyzed, and I am relieved and more than a little surprised to find nothing broken, no huge puddles of blood. A few scratches, some bruises, a headache and a screaming bladder, but alive. And being mooded at.

I hop carefully out of the car, take care of business, and as I straighten and fix my pants, I squint into the distance. It's hard to see much through the fog; the sun is barely up and the trees block most of its light. The cows, however, are being lit from behind, which suggests they must be in some kind of pasture or plotted land, and if they're being kept in, there must be someone keeping them in, so...

From up close I can see that the fence is actually a bit less rudimentary than my initial impression. It is about four feet tall with several rows of sharp barbed wire, and I haven't watched enough prison escape movies to know the best way over. I look left, then right, then straight ahead into the sleepy brown sea of cow eyes.

"Someone go get help," I try. They blink at me. One cow sneezes. Less-than-gracefully I pull myself up onto the crumpled hood, swing my hands at the cows so a few shift to the side out of my way, then jump over the fence, landing with a thud on the trampled grass on the other side. When I straighten all I can see are cows stretching in all directions until they disappear into the fog. Gently swaying white and brown bodies showing semi-detached interest in the new intruder.

I hesitantly reach out to touch one, feeling its coarse hair under my palm, and when it doesn't bite me I find the courage to press through the throng of animals, which isn't easy, because there are a lot of them, and they're quite uninterested in moving.

"Come on," I mutter, pressing a little harder, making very little progress.

"Easier if you had a horse, wouldn't you say?"

I roll my eyes and pat the cow presently blocking my way, then stiffen. Who the hell just said that?

I turn this way and that, but no one is visible. Even I know that cows can't talk. Maybe there's a friendly horse in the area, willing to offer its services for a small fee. Kidding. I know horses can't talk either. But someone said it, and unless I'm losing my mind...

My eyes follow the slow shifting of the cows until they focus on a tall shape emerging from the thick fog about fifteen feet away. The cows part with a low murmur and I stand amongst them, bruised and tattered, wondering if I should announce that I am not a cow thief, hoping I don't get shot.

I see the white cowboy hat first, and my jaw drops open. Derek brings the horse to a halt in front of me, then drops down easily from the saddle. He takes a few steps forward, looks me over curiously, then smiles. “We were wondering what was keeping you,” he says. “Welcome to King Ranch, Julianna.”

For the most part I am too stunned to say much of anything, let alone kick Derek in the shins and demand an annulment and the return of my stolen ring. Plus he doesn't exactly look guilty. I stare up into his still unfairly handsome face and try to keep my expression blank, which isn't hard, given the hour and the fact that my heart has mostly stopped beating. My only coherent thought is, *He's wearing the same shirt.*

He came out alone on horseback, so we ride back together, me seated stiffly before him on the saddle, Derek casually graceful behind me, his thighs on either side of mine. While the proximity is a little unnerving, I am grateful for the fact that I am a) not stranded in the mountains with a bunch of cows, b) dead, and c) able to hide my face. Because seeing him there in front of me, in the same shirt he wore when he stepped off the elevator, is bringing back a lot of memories. A lot of embarrassing, unflattering memories that make my gut clench anxiously and my face burn. Maybe I was better off not knowing exactly how it was that I came to be in this position. Maybe...

“Wait!” I shout into the fog, and Derek instantly pulls on the reins or whatever it is you do to stop a horse.

“What is it?” Derek asks, his lips unnervingly close to my ear.

“My car,” I say. “I have to get something out of my car.”

“What?” he asks. “Why didn't you get it in the first place?”

“I didn't...” I begin, not really wanting to explain. “I didn't think of it,” I finish lamely. Truth is, I didn't remember. I didn't remember slipping off the antique solitaire James had given me and tucking it into my little black dress. I'd spent the past thousand miles calling these men ring thieves when the truth was, nobody had stolen my ring. I'd simply forgotten that I'd taken it off. I am so glad I didn't open this little reunion with shrieking accusations of “Ring thief! Ring thief!” Then I'd really look like an idiot. As it stands now, I'm the girl you met in Vegas who appeared in your cow pasture early one foggy morning. But he'd been expecting me. How was that possible? Do they have cameras out here? Because if they saw me reverse off the cliff and then didn't come out to investigate for six or seven hours...

“How did you know I was here?” I ask Derek as he turns the horse around and maneuvers his way through the horses with comfortable murmurs of “Outta the way now, Hilda,” and “Looking good, Josephine.” (Seriously.)

“Oh, your friend Ivy wired you some money,” he replies easily. “Said you might need it.”

“How’d you know I was *here* here?” I inquire, gesturing to the sea of cows.

“Oh that,” Derek answers. “Well, I ride out every morning to round up the horses and when I saw the cows clustered up here I figured I’d better come take a look. Never expected to find you in here amongst them, but I’ve found stranger things.”

“Like what?”

He pauses. “Maybe I haven’t found stranger things,” he says.

When we reach the fence Derek helps me back up and I crawl over the roof of the car and slide down the trunk until my feet touch the ground. I dig out my keys, pop the trunk open, and rummage through my suitcase until I find the my crumpled formerly-favourite little black dress. I stick my fingers into the lone, small pocket: empty. I frown, feel around on the other side. Nothing. The pocket is small and deep, not easy for a ring to fall out of, unless said dress was upside down. Which it would have been, when Derek helped pull it over my head—

Oh. No. No. No. Now that part is coming back to me too. A few minutes ago my recollection had ended with Derek stepping out of the elevator, and I had added on the Bill tackling me part from Bill’s story. But I didn’t (and still don’t) remember the ceremony. And I didn’t remember the sex. Didn’t. Past tense. Because now I do. Oh Lord, do I ever. Don’t! I warn myself. Don’t think about it! But of course I can’t stop. Of course I can’t block out the memories of my dark, cool hotel room, Derek’s skin hot against mine, the dress not coming off quite fast enough, my own eagerly complicit participation in the whole thing. He didn’t trick me, he didn’t force me. Even in the dark I imagine I can see the glint of the giant ring on my left hand, the ring James didn’t give me. The one I didn’t lose. I remember Derek’s soft lips on mine, his tongue, his hands, every part of him. I remember it all. How on earth am I supposed to get back on that horse?

“Did you find it?” he calls, and I straighten so quickly that I whack my head – hard. I make a sound that’s half exclamation of pain, half curse.

“Still looking!” I shout back, and while I was aiming for cheerful and sane, the words come out as strangled and guilty. Or at least that’s how they sound to me.

I feel around the bottom of my suitcase, dipping my fingers into the little wells around the wheels, but I know the ring is not there. We combed my room from top to bottom, and I now distinctly remember taking the dress off in there. It must have fallen out before then. But I also know deep down that it couldn't have fallen out. It must have been taken out. And I was the only one who knew it was in there.

"Julianna?" Derek calls. "I have to get back. Do you need some help looking?"

"No," I call back, grabbing a fresh change of clothes and my makeup bag – why not? "I've got it."

I slam the trunk closed and crawl back over the car, accepting Derek's hand as he helps me over the barbed wire. He takes in the clothes and cosmetics bag but doesn't say anything, just boosts me back onto the horse and settles in behind me. I close my eyes and stifle the groan that's threatening to erupt. The horse sets off at a comfortable trot and each bounce brings Derek's hips against mine, his denim clad thighs clasped loosely around me, this whole thing bringing back too many feelings.

The fog is slowly lifting and as we make our way down the sloping field I'm able to see more of the pristine expanse of land Derek calls home.

"Very nice... land," I say, just for something to say.

"I think so," he replies.

"Did you grow up here?" I ask.

"Sure did," he says. "Grew up, still live, and hope to die here."

"Wow," I say. "That's very... committed. Did you inherit the ranch?"

He hesitates.

"Maybe one day."

Maybe one day?

"Do your parents live here?" I ask, trying very hard not to make it sound like, "Do you still live with your parents, you man-boy?"

"Uh, yeah," he answers. "My mother and I run this place."

His mother. Terrific. Maybe I should ask for the annulment now so there's no audience for the awkward conversation we really need to have.

"Derek?" I begin.

"Yes?" he answers.

"Do you, uh, remember what happened in Vegas?"

A slight pause. "Yes."

"The... wedding?" I press.

Another pause. “Yes.”

So I’m not out of my mind. I might not be at my best right now, but I’m not crazy. I married someone in Vegas, and now I have found him. And apparently he... agrees.

“Maybe we could talk about it,” I say, and I feel his arms tensing on the reins. I should have waited for witnesses.

“About that,” he says finally, steering the horse down a narrow dirt trail, where not too far ahead I can make out the emerging shape of a stable. “I was hoping... Well, Julianna, I was hoping you could play along for a bit,” he says.

I frown. “What?”

“If you would just let my mother, well, believe it, for a bit, I’d appreciate it,” he says.

My first instinct is to laugh. And laugh and laugh and laugh at the irony of this whole situation. But then I think about it a little more. I had asked Derek for a practice marriage, and now he’s asking me to keep up the charade. The difference here is that I was horribly drunk when I made my request, and he’s completely sober.

We’re fifteen feet from the stables when he pulls on the reins and the horse stops abruptly. “Please,” he says in a low voice, his lips against my ear. “Just for a little while.”

I try to look at him out of the corner of my eye, but a flash of red at the stable door distracts me.

“Please,” he repeats.

Truth be told, I don’t exactly know what it is that I’m pretending to be going along with. Because if I’m supposed to be pretending to be Derek’s wife – if he wants his mother to think we’re married – why did he run off in the first place? And if he wants me to pretend that we’re not married – we either never were married, or we had it annulled – then how would she know about it to begin with, unless he had told her?

The horse trots easily to the stable where the woman I presume to be Derek’s mother wipes her hands on already-dirty jeans and waits for us. Derek holds my arm as I slide down, then follows close behind me. And then he slips his arms around my waist, locks his fingers in front, and rests his chin on my shoulder. Which answers my first question: looks like we’re pretending to be married. Which is weird, since we actually are married. No need for the pretense.

“Mom,” Derek says, and the word comes out a bit standoff-ish, which she doesn’t really seem to notice, because her ice blue eyes are locked firmly on my face.

“Derek,” she says, still looking at me. I use the opportunity to look back at her, though I suspect my gaze isn’t quite as harsh. Derek’s mother may have been beautiful at one point, but it’s hard to tell with the leathery skin and the flat line of her lips. I make a mental note to be more diligent in my use of sunscreen. Suddenly she blinks, takes a short step backward, and looks me up and down, scrutinizing. Locked in Derek’s arms, I just stand there awkwardly, trying not to feel self-conscious. “So this is her,” she says finally, and I flash her a fleeting smile, hoping she likes me, though I suppose it really doesn’t matter.

“Julianna Holt,” Derek says, emphasis on my new fake/sort-of-real last name, “meet my mother, Maggie Holt.”

Maggie glares at me for one more instant before jutting out a weathered hand with dirt caked under her stubby nails.

“Julianna,” she says stiffly.

I wiggle my arm out from Derek’s grasp and put my hand in hers, feeling her hard calluses on my palms, already doubting that ranch life is for me.

“Mrs. Holt,” I say. “So nice meet you.”

She drops my hand like I’m diseased – like I’m the one with dirt under my nails and jagged calluses – and puts her hands on her hips.

“Uh huh,” she says suspiciously, once again looking me up and down, for what, I have no idea. If Derek weren’t holding on to me so tightly I’d be hiding behind the horse. What is this woman’s problem?

My stomach growls loudly, and, while perhaps a little embarrassing, I feel mainly gratitude, because it breaks up the awkward silence that hangs around us, colder and heavier than the fog.

“Guess it’s time for breakfast,” Derek says, finally loosening his grip and taking a step back, threading his fingers through mine, a gesture that Maggie does not miss.

“Guess so,” Maggie says, but nobody moves.

“Great,” I say, just to be a part of things, but both of them ignore me.

Not too far from the stables is a long, low ranch house with a huge porch that I assume offers amazing mountain views when not obscured by fog. The dark wood of the logs and the wildflowers growing in pots along the window ledges make it look like a home, but is not quite enough to disguise the sheer size and, well, grandeur of the place. Maggie may

not be a pampered kept woman, but there is little doubt in my mind that she has the money to be one if she were so inclined.

Derek takes off his boots and I remove my flip flops and he shows me down a long hallway past at least four bedrooms, stopping at the last room, which, I discover upon entering, is not a guest room. If the collection of white cowboy hats suggests anything, this is Derek's room. I stop short and he bumps into me.

"Uh..." I stammer. "Uh..."

"Bathroom's through there," Derek says, pointing to a door in the far corner, pressing my change of clothes and make-up bag into my numb fingers. "I'll get breakfast started. Come out whenever you're ready."

I take two trance-like steps into the room, knowing at once that I should not be doing this, but also really unable to come up with any specific reasons why exactly I shouldn't be, when Derek speaks. I turn at the sound of his voice, and already he is halfway out of the room, fingers around the edge of the door, tugging it closed.

"Kitchen's back down the hall and on the right," he tells me. "Follow the smell of food. And, um, we've been dating for a year, got married on a whim, and the reason you're a few days late getting here is because your grandma passed away. Sorry. Okay. Bye."

And before I can get a word out, he pulls the door closed and leaves me standing alone in my fake marital bedroom.

I ignore my initial urge to snoop, reasoning that the more time I spend in here the longer it will take me to get food, money, and away from the ranch. How, exactly, I'm going to get away from the ranch is still a bit of a mystery, given that all four wheels of my rental car aren't even on the ground, but I store that thought away with all the other issues I'm currently in denial about.

I try to be strong and practical and forgo a shower, but one glimpse at my shiny skin and limp hair and Derek's surprising array of high end toiletries weakens me, and in an instant I'm slipping out of my damp, horse-smelling clothes and into the hot spray of the shower. I shampoo, rinse, repeat, then condition and exfoliate and moisturize until I feel a bit more prepared to face the day. While I would definitely have preferred to find my ring in the trunk, I'm glad now to have brought clean clothes and makeup as a tiny defense against Maggie's intense scrutiny. Even so armored, I'm a little reluctant to leave the steamy, scented sanctuary of the bathroom. But I do.

I follow the dark hallway back the way we came, turning right when the smell of frying bacon and eggs gets the strongest, and find myself in another long hall with light coming from an archway further down on the right side. How big is this place? My footsteps are silent on the smooth wood floor and I feel a little guilty when Maggie and Derek's unself-conscious conversation drifts back to where they have no idea I can hear. I stop and listen.

"... you and not your money?" Maggie is saying.

"She doesn't even know that stuff," Derek replies.

"How can she have dated you – secretly – for a year, and not know what you do?" Maggie demands.

"She knows what I do," Derek answers patiently. "Of course she does. But she's a city girl, not a rancher, and she has no idea how much this place is worth. Trust me."

"I trust you," Maggie snaps back. "It's her I don't trust."

"You don't trust any of the girls I bring home!" Derek retorts, and for the first time ever I hear him raise his voice. "'Get married, Derek! I'll retire when you bring home a wife, Derek! Where are my grandchildren, Derek? I need to leave this place to somebody, Derek!'" he says in a high, shrill voice meant to be Maggie's. "Well I do have a wife, mom, and she's here, and she's staying."

My brows raise at this. My silence may have suggested – okay, promised – my participation in this little charade, but not *forever*. Not even for a week. Not even for a day. I was kind of thinking my role would be over when the breakfast dishes were cleared.

Maggie is silent and Derek is silent and the only sound is metal scraping on metal and the soft thwack of something hitting something else. Smells of frying meat and warm bread waft out and I paste a smile on my face, cover the remaining distance to the kitchen doorway, and step inside.

"Smells good!" I say brightly, though my smile dims by half when I see Maggie's cold stare. At least I know it's not me, specifically. It's every woman Derek dates. We're all gold diggers. Yep. Because what I really want to do is develop calluses and know the names of all my cows. I'm more than a little tempted to tell the truth right now and call a cab or horse service or something to take me back to Durango and the tiny airport I passed on the way in, but somewhere between Derek's pleading gaze and Maggie's frosty glare I decide to participate. Give Maggie something to really worry about.

“Know what your appetite’s like first thing in the morning,” Derek says with a suggestive smile, handing me a plate heaping with eggs, bacon, steak, and toast. There’s actually no way he would know what my appetite is in the morning, given that he ran away on what would have been our one and only morning together, but I am famished and this food looks great.

“Thank you,” I say, casually glancing at the empty plate he holds in his hand, reading the name on the bottom. “Wow!” I exclaim, hoping I don’t make a total fool of myself. “Is this Royal Copenhagen china? How exp... How exquisite!”

Derek looks at me for a split second too long, his smile wavering oddly, then he shrugs and heaps food on the plate in his hand. “We bring out the good stuff for our important guests,” he replies.

I giggle and take my seat across from Maggie, who looks less-than-thrilled at my perceptive gold digger eyes. “He’s so generous,” I say in a stage whisper, and she pushes her chair away noisily and goes to the stove to pour a cup of coffee, choosing to remain there than sit with me.

I shrug and dig in, eating ravenously, trying not to scratch the plate with my fork, just in case it really is valuable. Maggie only returns to the table when Derek joins me, then sits opposite us, like an interrogation officer. I nearly choke when she pulls a folded up scrap of paper from her pocket, smooths it on the table, and studies it thoughtfully. It’s Derek’s half of the marriage certificate. I have my half in my purse. I imagine fitting them together and beams of light shooting out from the paper and turning this all into a fairy tale. But I leave my marriage certificate scrap where it is.

“How long is it you two’ve known each other?” Maggie asks.

“A year,” we answer around mutual mouthfuls of steak and eggs.

“Huh,” she says. “And where’d you meet again?”

“Vegas,” we reply. Ooh. This is easy. And kind of fun.

“Where is it you’re from?” Maggie asks me, but her eyes are now on Derek. Derek gestures to his mouth like it’s too full to speak, and I make a show of swallowing and dabbing at the corners of my mouth before answering. It briefly occurs to me to lie, but then I figure I’ll never keep anything straight if I do, so I go ahead and tell her I’m from Emerton, maybe exaggerating its description a little so I sound more like the city girl Derek said I was.

Maggie looks displeased for the entire meal and no number of right answers or smiles or jokes makes her mouth curve up in a smile. Derek, however, seems more than

happy with my performance, and I'm thinking I have a really good chance of getting him to pay for the annulment. And maybe fly me back to Emerton. Or at least tow my car out of the woods. And fix it.

When breakfast is over Maggie leaves to do some kind of ranch work and Derek and I retire to his room, where he closes and locks the door behind us.

"So," he says, taking a few steps before turning back to face me.

"So," I say.

We stare at each other. How exactly to begin?

"Well..." I start. "I guess we should get an annulment."

Derek's brows raise in surprise.

"Pardon?" he asks.

"An annulment," I repeat cautiously. "I'm going to need one."

He stares at me.

"Do you think..." he begins. "Do you think we're married?"

Now it's my brows that raise. "Yes," I reply. "Why the hell else would I be here?"

"So you think," Derek continues as if I hadn't even spoken. "You think that I married you and just ran off?"

I almost can't speak. Why would I possibly think anything else?

"Why," I repeat, "would I be here if I didn't think that?"

He shrugs, and for the first time I look past how hot he is and think that maybe, just maybe, he's a huge idiot.

"If you didn't marry me and run off, what exactly happened?" I demand.

"I got it annulled!" Derek hisses, eyes darting over my shoulder to the door, as though Maggie's ear is pressed to the other side. "Of course I did! What do you take me for?"

"Obviously," I snap, stepping towards him, feeling a little pleased when he takes matching steps back, "I take you for the kind of guy who marries somebody in Vegas then takes off in the morning without bothering to mention that you're going to get an annulment!"

He looks guilty. Which he absolutely is.

"Do you have any idea what I've been going through?" I steam. "I've been trying to track you down for days. I'm getting married on Sunday. I have a life to get back to. I'm supposed to be at a dress rehearsal. I'm supposed—I'm supposed..." My voice chokes off, equal parts rage and sorrow rising up. "Why did you take half the marriage

certificate? Why not the whole thing? Why any of it? Why? Why?" I can't keep the words from rising up to a pitch so high neither of us can hear the final "Why?"

"Keep your voice down!" Derek whispers frantically, tugging me away from the door and quickly opening it, peering out, then shutting and locking it again. "I know you're getting married this weekend – you only told me about a thousand times!"

"Why didn't you wake me?" I say, trying not to cry. "Why didn't you say something?"

"You were dead to the world!" he exclaims. "Do you have any idea how much you had to drink?"

Yes. Vaguely. No.

"I got the annulment on my way out of town – you're not the only one with a life outside of Vegas, you know."

I glare at him.

"And I thought about taking the whole certificate, but you were pretty big on the idea of this being a practice marriage that I thought you'd appreciate the token of your "trial run" and feel better about the real deal later in the week!"

My jaw drops. "You can't be serious!"

"Of course I'm serious!" he replies. "I needed my half to convince my mother I was really married. And it seemed wrong to take the whole thing, when, might I mention, it was all your idea—"

Yeah. Yeah. I know that. Now. "Did you steal my ring?" I interrupt, and his mouth opens and closes wordlessly, like a fish.

"What?" he says.

"Did. You. Steal. My. Ring," I repeat coldly.

"It was my ring!" Derek says defensively. "Did you think I was going to let you keep your practice wedding ring? Maybe my mother was right!"

"Your mother doesn't even know me!" I snap. "*You* don't even know me! And I'm not talking about that hideous thing you gave me, I'm talking about the meaningful antique my fiancé gave me!"

"That ring was not hideous!" Derek gasps.

"Was too!" I retort.

"If your first ring was of such tremendous sentimental value, why wasn't it on your finger when I put my ring on there?"

I falter slightly. "I had temporarily taken it off."

“If you took it off, why are you asking if I stole it?” he demands.

“Because it’s gone!” I shout, and we both fall quiet.

“Why are you crying?” Derek demands after a moment. “Don’t cry, my mom will get suspicious.”

“Your mother is already suspicious!” I snap, wiping viciously at my cheeks, feeling tears I hadn’t actually known were falling. “And I’m not crying. I’m just... thinking.”

“About what?” he asks.

“About...” I falter. I’m thinking about how I’m a twelve hour drive from Emerton, which I know deep down I have to return to, and about how I can use the time to think about all the things I’ll say to James, all of them revolving around how sorry I am. And how I’ll pay him back for the ring. Or find another one that looks very much like the first. And did I mention that I’m sorry? “I’m just going to go,” I say weakly.

“How?”

“How what?”

“How are you going to go?” he asks. “Your car is stuck part way in a tree.”

I look around the room as though seeing it for the first time. My eyes lock on the large window with its paisley curtains and its beautiful green view of trees and mountains and more mountains. Derek may have a point.

“Um,” I say.

He waits me out. And then it comes to me.

“You said Ivy transferred some money,” I recall. “I’ll use that.”

Derek fishes around on a dresser along the wall, digging out a crumpled white envelope and handing it to me. I peek inside.

“It’s not enough to pay back the rental company for leaving their car on a mountain,” he points out. It’s not enough to buy a new identity, either.

“Hmm,” I agree. It’s enough to rent a new car and pay for food and gas if I drive straight through without getting a hotel. It’s enough for a one-way plane ticket or a bus ride and a change of clothes. It is not enough to just shirk my responsibilities and leave my rental car to the cows. Plus my stuff is still in there.

“Look,” Derek says after a moment. “Why don’t you keep the money. I’ve seen you gamble; I know you need it. Why don’t we promise now that if you help me, I’ll help you?”

“Help me how?” I ask.

“My friend’s a mechanic,” he answers. “I’ll have him take a look at your car.”

“Is he a magician?” I press. “How’s he going to get it out of there?”

“I’ll work on that.”

I fold the envelope with Ivy’s money inside (it is addressed to Julianna Sopher, King Ranch, San Juan Mountains, Somewhere) and tuck it into my pocket. And I’m sticking out my hand to make what I swear is the last stupid decision in my life, when something occurs to me.

“Wait,” I say, taking my hand back. “Help *you* how?”

Before conceding to Derek’s “plan,” I insist on witnessing for myself the sight of my car being maneuvered out of its current position, through the cow pasture, past the stables and the main house, and to the narrow dirt road that I presumably missed on my way in. This is all accomplished with the help of three pick-up trucks and four of Derek’s cowboy friends, at least two of whom came out not so much to help as to see this with their own two eyes. The whole thing takes about an hour and a half and leaves a good portion of the fence and pasture ruined, and several parts of my rental car’s undercarriage on the ground. The guys name the pieces as they pick them up, but it sounds like gibberish to me. As long as they know what they are and how to replace them, I don’t care.

Derek’s part of the plan would perhaps have been more fun if reality weren’t intruding so unfortunately on my thought process. His deal was simple: convince his mother that she’d rather he remain single and inherit the ranch than be married to me and inherit it. Since she seemed pretty far gone down that path anyway, it made an afternoon of not-so-discreet label-checking, horse pricing, and name dropping a little easier. By dinnertime she was convinced that I had mapped out the property so I could sell it in tiny little clumps in order to finance my growing shoe collection, and it was probably the “Did you know that horse meat is considered a delicacy in some parts of the world?” comment that cemented her opinion.

As I sit alone in Derek’s bed that night and page aimlessly through a copy of a horse breeding manual (the only reading material that I could find), I can hear their heated argument from the two-turns-away kitchen. The words are indistinct, but the gist is clear: she’s a land-destroying horse-eating shoe-collecting gold digger and if you divorce her I’ll sign the ranch over right now. Or something along those lines.

Derek’s friend had called to say the car would be ready first thing in the morning, though I may want to bring along the number for AAA and a couple rolls of duct tape.

And a bus schedule. I accepted the duct tape, but assured them I had bigger things on my mind than car troubles. Did they know any jewelers in town specializing in antique diamond solitaires for less than four hundred dollars? No?

It's ten o'clock when Derek finally stumbles in, exhausted no doubt by the "conversation" with his mother and the fact that he wakes up at four thirty in the morning each day. I watch with one eyebrow cocked as he slips his white cowboy hat off, slaps it on his thigh, and hangs it on the back of the door. Said brow shoots up a little higher when he removes his large belt buckle and long-sleeved shirt so he is standing barefoot in faded jeans and a white tee.

"Success," he informs me with a smile that I do not return. "What?" he asks.

"What are you doing?" I demand, as though it should be obvious.

"I'm going to brush my teeth," he says clearly, "and then I'm going to sleep. Enjoying the manual?"

I set the manual down on the bedside table with a thunk. "No, I am not enjoying the manual," I reply. "And where, exactly, are you going to sleep?"

Now it's his eyebrow that's rising.

"I'm going to sleep right here, pretend wife," he says firmly.

"I thought you said you were successful!" I say in a loud whisper.

"I will be fully successful tomorrow when she wakes up and you're gone," he replies.

"What time will that be?" I demand peevishly. "Three o'clock?"

"Car'll be ready sometime tonight," he says, ignoring my petty tone. "They'll bring it down and leave it in the drive. You can go whenever you wake up."

"And until then?" I press.

"Until then I'm sleeping here," Derek says. "I fulfilled my end of the bargain. You fulfill yours. Play wife until the morning when you decide to leave me for the funeral director who helped bury your grandmother."

"What?" I exclaim.

"A little extreme," Derek concedes, "but believable."

I turn off the bedside lamp and flop over onto my side as Derek chuckles and heads for the bathroom. I listen as he flips on the light and closes the door, water running softly. I tell myself that I have already done far worse this trip than simply sleep next to someone. No part of me believes that Derek wants to sleep with me again, though my recollection of our one night together is that it was pretty good. Even if my recollection

does have a few holes in it. Hmm. I frown as something niggles at the back of my mind, so close I can almost taste it. I stare into the darkness, my eyes slowly adjusting to take in Derek's glowing white hat on the back of the door. I know I've seen this before. Feelings are coming back to me, slower, foggier feelings, and I imagine I'm back in Vegas, waking up in the middle of the night (or very early morning), wondering where I am, who I'm with, and what I've done. And spotting the white cowboy hat on the chair. I force myself to focus on the memory as I hear Derek's distracting movements in the bathroom. I stare at the hat and will myself to remember. The hat. The hat.

Lying in bed in Vegas, Derek snoring softly behind me, staring at his hat. Wondering where the hell I am. My feet hit the floor with a soft thud and I creep around quietly, light from the strip offering the bare minimum to find my glittery heels, my bra, my little black dress. I slip it over my head, nearly smothering myself as the zipper tangles in my hair, and I yank it down. Backwards. The room spins as I pull it back up, twist it around, stick my arm in the wrong hole. Spot the huge, glittering rock on my left hand and don't recognize it. I know what I have done now. Derek mutters something in his sleep and I turn sharply to look at him, as though that will undo the past several hours. I can fix this, I think blurrily. I can fix this. I will give this ring back. I will just... I tug and tug, but the ring's a little on the tight side. Or maybe alcohol caused my skin to swell. Is that a possibility? How is it that it went on there so easily? Honestly. Just. Get. Off. I bite my tongue to stifle the cry as the ring jerks painfully past my knuckle and bounces across the carpeted floor and out of sight under the bed. Still half-in, half-out of my little black dress I crawl after it, lying on my stomach as my hand reaches into the darkness, fumbling around desperately. Nausea makes the room spin and I rest my head on the carpet, fingers flexing uselessly, willing myself not to fall asleep here. And just as I start to drift off, I'm awakened by something sharp and hard pressing uncomfortably into my hipbone. I mutter to myself and swipe at it, but it's stuck inside my dress. With my cheek still pressed to the carpet, eyes closed, mouth open, I fumble with one hand under the bed and use the fingers of my other hand to search inside the tiny pocket of my dress for the culprit.

I find the rings at the same time and sit up, knees against my chest, back against the bed, holding one in each hand and staring at them in the moonlight that spills across the floor. I don't know what I'm feeling right now. I don't know if I should put either one on or give both of them back. I don't even know what I want to do. My brain can't handle this right now. My tangled dress is too tight against my chest and I pull it back up over

my head, tossing it to the floor so I can breathe again. I close my fingers over the rings and will myself to think. I have to get out of here. I should head down the hall to Ivy and Alexis's room and confess everything and convince them to drive me back to Emerton. Everything will be okay. Or as okay as okay can be. I'm going to do the right thing. I'm going... I'm going... My eyes will not stay open. The darkness will not stop shifting and undulating, causing my stomach to imitate its unceasing swells. I don't need to deal with this right now, I tell myself. I'll fix it in the morning. For now I'll just put things back the way they were, and deal with it in the morning. Derek's jeans are hanging over the chair next to his hat, so I crawl naked across the floor and stick the ring in his pocket. Then I put the other ring on the fourth finger of my left hand and crawl back into bed. Things will be better in the morning.

My eyes fly open. I'm curled up on my side, hands fisted under my head, and ever so slowly I shift them forward so I can see my ten bare fingers. My dream may have been a memory or may have been just a dream, but who the hell cares because it's my only hope right now. Please, I think, tossing the covers back and throwing my legs to the floor, reaching for the light then stopping as I hear Derek's faint snore and turn to find him fast asleep on the other side of the bed. I slept in a t-shirt and shorts Derek lent me (Maggie had refused to share a nightgown on account of I might run off with it) and it takes little time to relocate my clothes from yesterday and change back into them.

I distinctly remember [dreaming?] putting the ring into the back pocket of Derek's jeans, so all I have to do is find the jeans, pray he hasn't washed them in the intervening four – or has it been five? Six? – days, pray that the “dream” was really a memory, pray that the ring hasn't fallen out, and sneak out of the ranch and back off the mountain, ostensibly for a lurid rendezvous with a funeral director.

With the exception of the white cowboy hat collection, there is very little décor in the room, so it doesn't take long to locate the laundry basket. It's full. Perfect. Hopefully this means he hasn't washed the jeans yet. I tiptoe to the basket and slowly pull out clothing, all of which basically stink like sweat and animals. And sweaty animals. But my frown quickly dissolves when I find a pair of jeans. Please, I think. Please. I plunge my fingers into the back pockets: nothing. Front pockets: nothing. I swallow my disappointment. So he has more than one pair of jeans.

Six minutes later the laundry basket is empty and I am surrounded by two heaping piles of reeking clothing: one denim, one everything else. Eight pairs of turned-inside-out

blue jeans later, I am still sans ring. I tell myself not to worry. These are the dirty jeans. Maybe he has clean ones somewhere. Clean ones that he wore in Vegas but considered clean and so didn't put in his laundry basket.

I glance at Derek – still sleeping soundly; probably unconscious after being exposed to these horrible laundry fumes – and head to the dresser, slowly pulling out drawer after drawer. Socks, underwear, t-shirts, long-sleeved shirts... But no jeans. I look at the closed closet doors. Not where I keep my jeans, but now's no time to judge. I ease one door open and stop, jaw dropping in horror. It is the denim mother lode! An entire rack of hanging denim, stretching into the dark recesses of the closet. What is with this guy? Who owns this many pairs of jeans?

One hundred and eight pockets later – who has twenty-seven pairs of jeans hanging up in their closet?! – I still have not found my ring. It is getting harder to stifle the panicked scream rising up in my throat, and harder still to prevent my bare fingers from gripping one of the plush goose down pillows and smothering Derek with it. My face is hot and my hands are trembling and I'm forcing myself to take deep breath after deep breath to stay calm. Don't flip out. Don't murder anybody.

I suck in a mouthful of denim-tasting air and stumble backwards, almost sitting on the bed, but not quite ready to give up the dream of sneaking out of here without any goodbyes as we had agreed. I'm starting to doubt that Derek is really asleep, but if he's doing his part and making this departure "easier," then I can do mine. I just have to think. I have to pee and think.

The jeans are in the bathroom.

He must have left them here after his shower last night. I know instantly that these are the ones. They look like all the others, and maybe it's just desperation, but I feel an overwhelming confidence that these jeans are *the* jeans. I crouch slowly, eyes blinking in the bright light, and extend my hand, gingerly picking up the jeans by a belt loop, frowning at the horsey smell.

I let the jeans twist on my finger of their own volition, and they stop when the back pockets are facing me. I wipe my sweaty fingers on my leg and reach for the pocket closest to me, index finger extended, eyes clamped tightly shut. *Please*. And as though it were meant to be, (thirty six pairs of jeans later), my finger slips easily into a tiny, warm metal band. I pull my hand out and stare at the antique diamond solitaire until my eyes water and tears drip down my cheeks and relief – as much as can be felt when the worst

is still yet to come – washes over me in heavy, consuming waves. Oh God. Oh God. Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you everyone.

I hesitate before pushing the ring onto the fourth finger of my left hand. Even though I'm grateful to have it back, it still doesn't seem like it belongs there, but at least this way I can keep an eye on it until I figure out exactly what to do. Seeing it glint on my hand flips a switch inside me, and suddenly I am back in motion. I brush my teeth quickly, fix my hair, smear on some of Derek's expensive moisturizer, then flip off the light, collect my makeup bag and purse, and tiptoe out of the bathroom.

I creep across the bedroom as quietly as I can, eyes flitting unwittingly to Derek, who continues to fake-sleep. A part of me feels like I should say something, but a bigger part of me says no, and so, in a reversal of our Vegas roles, this time I'm the one slipping out the bedroom door.

CHAPTER TEN

The sun has set when I pass the tiny wooden sign announcing my arrival in Emerton. I know I'm just delaying the inevitable by not heading right over to James's apartment, but I don't want to face him with fourteen plus hours of sweat and grime clinging to my body. I want a change of clothes, maybe a quick shower, a nice layer of makeup for armor. And I'm going to need it. Not only will I have James to deal with, his family is here as well.

I hide the car in the alley behind my building and slip inside, grateful to be home. I leave my bags by the front door, turn the lock behind me, then tiptoe around the apartment warily, just in case. The only sign of life, if I can even call it that, is the frantically blinking light on my phone, indicating many waiting messages. I don't need to pick up the phone to know what they say.

I grab my makeup bag and head straight for the shower, turning the water on full blast and stepping in without looking at myself in the mirror. I wash every strand of hair twice, soap up thoroughly, shave my legs, exfoliate my face. When I've done everything I can possibly think of to do in the shower except curl up and vanish, I linger on. It is only when the water runs cold that I twist off the taps and step out, grateful for the steam blanketing the mirror.

I blow dry my hair extra carefully, decide on a flowing white top to go with my jeans, and head into the now steam-free bathroom to put on makeup. It's petty and useless, but it makes me feel better. I unzip the tiny case holding my cosmetics and frown. All my makeup is accounted for, but there is a folded up piece of paper that was not here when I opened this bag yesterday. I reach inside warily and pull it out, unfolding it slowly, knowing it had to come from Derek or Maggie, the only people who would have had access.

My jaw drops as I read the words at the top of the page and the paper falls from my hand. I scramble to pick it up, scanning it quickly just to be sure. FINAL NOTICE OF NULLITY. I hadn't even thought to ask for it. I crawl out of the bathroom to my purse, just a few feet away, and pull out the half of my marriage certificate. I hold the creased papers side-by-side. I stare at them both until the words blur, then blink away my tears, resolutely folding up both pieces of paper and sticking them under the couch cushions.

It might be just be me, but the air outside James's apartment feels thick and uncomfortably heavy. My shirt sticks to my back and, in the short distance from my car to the front door, damp hairs manage to cling to the nape of my neck. I have keys to the building so there's no need to press the buzzer. When I get into the fire escape I take a few steadying breaths that do not help at all and start the short climb up. I pause at the top, swallow thickly, then pull open the door.

Even though I also have keys for James's door, I find myself hesitating outside, hand raised to knock. Is that weird? If I was innocent of any wrongdoing, I wouldn't be afraid to just march in. If everything were okay, I would unlock the door, step inside and announce my presence with a nice, big smile.

I knock.

Wait.

Knock again.

Nothing.

The keys are already in my hand, so I choose the appropriate one and slide it into the lock. It turns easily and I push the door open. The apartment is dark and cool. "James?" I call softly, closing the door quietly behind me, hesitating before turning on the hall light. The fluorescent bulb flickers noisily as it comes on, its steady hum the only sound louder than my pounding heart. "James?" I try again.

I don't hear him approach, just see his socked feet step into the hall. My eyes travel slowly upwards, over the faded jeans, the black t-shirt, to his tired, dark eyes. We stare at each other for a long, tenuous moment, and I don't know what to do or what to say or what's about to happen.

James moves first. His strides are quick and long and before I know what's happening his arms are around me and his face is buried in my neck and he's squeezing so tightly that I can barely breathe. But I don't move or complain. I wrap my arms under

his, hands folding over his shoulders, and his damp breath on my skin gives me goose bumps. Something like relief washes over me. But it's only temporary.

All too soon James pulls away, takes a step back, and looks into my face. He studies every inch of skin and I'm grateful for the makeup, though maybe wishing I had put more on. I try not to look at him but I can't tear my eyes away, and when he looks at me his eyes are so dark and fathomless that I can't guess what he's thinking.

He speaks first.

"Why?" he asks, and it could apply to so many things. I've seen James a lot of ways, happy, sad, angry, frustrated, but never quite so... broken. And never because of me.

I know Ivy and Alexis too well to think that they would have told him about the quickie marriage, so I can rule out that as part of his "Why?" question. The two thousand other potential queries, however...

"I'm sorry," I say instead, because that's probably my answer to all two thousand questions anyway. I'm sorry for so much more than he would ever ask me to apologize for, and I'm sorry even for that. For a guy who knows what he wants and asks it of someone who's simply not able to give it. Who runs away instead of facing the truth.

"I'm crazy about you," he says softly. "I've been fucking in love with you from the first second I saw you. I know you didn't know it then, but I never doubted that you would, Jules. I never thought..." He shakes his head like he really doesn't know what he thought. But I understand. Not even I would have guessed that in my lifetime I would possess the power to hurt someone this much.

"I'm crazy about you too," I reply, and it's the truth. I absolutely am.

"But it's not enough," James says.

"It's not enough time," I correct, which is the truth, too. And why I haven't found the courage to say so before is beyond me.

James sucks in a deep breath at these words he must have known were coming, and I hear the catch in his voice when he speaks next.

"Why didn't you say so?" he asks. "Why let it go this far?"

"I just..." I try to explain what I can't even understand myself. "I think with time ___"

"This was a pretty serious deadline, wouldn't you say?" he interrupts. "If you wanted time, wasn't this taking a bit of a risk?"

"Yes," I whisper.

“Can you even guess how I feel?” he demands, voice raising slightly, hands fisting at his sides, and I hope he gets angry. I hope he yells and I hope he hates and I hope it’s enough to abate some of the guilt I’m feeling. Because I don’t know what else will. “Can you even imagine what these past days have been like? I’m supposed to be the one with cold feet, Julianna! I’m supposed to be nervous! And you’re supposed to fucking *be here!*”

“I’m sorry—”

“You missed the rehearsal dinner. You didn’t even want to buy the goddamn dress. You can’t pick out china or a menu or write a vow— How did I not see this?”

“I’m sorry,” I try again, but he’s not hearing me.

“Where did you go?” he demands. I blink at the sudden change of subject. Somehow I had managed to forget that that was bound to come up. “What did you do?” he presses.

I try not to hesitate. I don’t know how much of the truth to tell him. How much will make it worse, if any of it could possibly make it better.

“I went to Colorado,” I finally say.

“I thought you were going to the Grand Canyon,” he counters.

“We- we didn’t quite make it there,” I answer. “We went to Four Corners, we went to...”

“Arizona, right? You went to Arizona? To that guy- to Kyle? Did you go see your ex-boyfriend? The guy who fucking left you for your art teacher?”

I don’t need to speak for him to see the answer on my face. But he sees far more than is actually there.

“Just for like, an hour,” I say hastily. “I didn’t even know I was going there, I just... found myself in front of his house, and...”

“Were Ivy and Alexis with you?”

I shake my head. “No. They left at Four Corners.”

“So you went alone to visit your ex? Days before our wedding, you decide it’s a good idea to visit this guy?”

“I didn’t plan it, James,” I say, and he flinches when I say his name. “I didn’t know I was going there. I swear it wasn’t the purpose, or the goal, or whatever. It wasn’t even anything. I just had to see.”

I expect him to ask what it is I had to see, and what I did see, but he’s far more perceptive than that.

“What was the goal, then, Julianna?” he asks sharply. “What was your *purpose*?”

I stare at him mutely. I don’t want to say. But there’s no way not to.

“I got married,” I whisper, and he looks at me in shock, takes two steps back as though I’ve hit him. Then he takes two steps forward, like he’s going to hit me.

“Say that again,” he orders.

I force myself to stay right where I am. “I got married,” I repeat. “In Vegas. Drunkenly.” An awkward pause. “I’m sorry.”

His mouth falls open and he looks around like maybe he’s searching for the hidden camera or the clue that this is all a dream. That the girl who doesn’t even want to get married to the guy she claims to be crazy about married somebody else a week before the wedding.

“To whom?” he asks, and he actually cracks his knuckles, like Derek’s right outside, ready to defend my honour.

“A stranger,” I tell him. “Just this guy. And I went to Colorado to get it annulled.”

“And did you?”

I nod. Why bother admitting that it had been annulled the morning after and my entire road trip had been for no reason at all? Why, even though that is the truth, does it feel completely wrong?

“Yes,” I reply. “It was nothing.”

“Nothing,” James repeats blankly, and he sags back against the wall like the fight has gone out of him, like it’s going to take days for this news to sink in. I watch as his eyes fall to my left hand, to the tiny diamond glinting there. “Did he give you a ring?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Did you wear it?”

I nod again. “I guess so. Briefly.”

“What’d you do with my ring?”

I resist the urge to look up and to the right, like liars do. “Just put it in my pocket.”

“How was the wedding?”

I freeze at the question, and not just because his voice is so cold, but because the truth is, I still don’t remember. I remember deciding to get married, I remember consummating the marriage, but I don’t remember the ceremony itself. Not a single second of it.

“I don’t remember,” I mumble, and James barks out a laugh, a sharp, horrible sound in this empty apartment. He cuts off abruptly.

“Did you fuck him?”

I wince at the word, and look slowly up at James, into his handsome face, his hurt black eyes. The lie comes too easily.

“No.”

At this point I’m not sure that anything could make things worse, but I don’t see what good the truth could do here, since it doesn’t look like I could possibly hurt James any more. He inhales deeply, exhales slowly, repeats the process. With every breath the lines in his body relax, but it does nothing to reduce the horrible tension in the room.

As I wait for God only knows what to happen, my eyes drift down the hallway and into the dim living room, light from the streetlamps spilling across the floor. I frown. Something’s different. I push past James and turn on the light. The room is nearly empty. Boxes are stacked against the wall; just the couch and television remain unpacked. Right. I nod. We’re supposed to be moving in four days. But that’s not what’s missing here.

“Where’s your family?” I ask, turning slowly to face James. “Where’s their stuff? The suitcases?”

Knowing that I was stressed enough about our upcoming nuptials, James had declared my apartment off-limits to his family. Because of this most of them were crashing at his apartment while Rocky spent the week at his girlfriend’s, and a couple of spillover guests had wound up at my parents’ house. But there is no sign of them now. And this is a very, very bad sign.

James steps quietly into the room, eyes flitting over the boxes before returning to my face.

“They’re gone,” he says.

“Gone?” I repeat dumbly.

“Back to Boston,” he clarifies.

I shake my head. “Why?”

“Why?” he echoes. “Why? Because I sent them there.”

“But...” I say, lips moving soundlessly. “But...”

“What were they going to stick around for?” James asks softly. “For this?”

My eyes meet his and I finally see in his face what I have wanted to see for so long but couldn’t bear to ask for: understanding. “The wedding’s off,” he says quietly.

My shoulders rock as silent, heaving sobs roll through me, but James doesn't move. I sink onto the couch and bury my face in my hands and it's sorrow and guilt and – I'm ashamed to say – relief – that washes over me in uncontrollable waves. My knees bump together and the tears and noise come, and for a while it feels like my crying is the only sound in all of Emerton.

"I'm sorry," I mumble through my fingers, wiping my cheeks with the backs of my hands, knowing it's not going to do any good. "I'm sorry."

James has slouched back against the stack of moving boxes, and he only shakes his head at my words. Maybe he's not so surprised. Maybe he's known this for days. Or maybe he's known it for months. Maybe we both have.

I stand.

James looks up when I approach and holds his hand out for me to drop the tiny diamond ring into his palm. I open my mouth to apologize again, but close it. James avoids my eyes and studies the ring, and I want to touch him but decide against it. I've done nothing, but it's more than enough.

So I go.

That night I lie alone in bed, in my apartment, phone unplugged, messages deleted without ever having been listened to. Hot, silent tears stream down my cheeks and soak my pillow, but I make no move to wipe them away.

I hold the marriage certificate scrap in one hand, the annulment notice in the other, and clench them tightly in my fists. My dark bedroom feels like a black hole, like an endless void that I'll be spinning through for all of eternity. But even now, feeling like I've lost everything I could possibly lose, I know something I didn't know five days ago:

I am not Julianna July.

I am not Julianna Havana.

I am not Julianna Mercado or Julianna Holt.

Come Sunday, I will not be Julianna Matthews.

For better or for worse, I am Julianna Sopher.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I sip rapidly cooling coffee as Ivy and Alexis sit across from me, mouths open in shock again, but for completely new reasons.

“Why didn’t he leave a note?” Alexis demands furiously. “He could have saved us – you – a lot of trouble!”

“What an ass!” Ivy fumes.

I’ve gotten to the part where I sneak out of Derek’s house for my seedy rendezvous with my grandmother’s funeral director, and so far Ivy and Alexis have reacted appropriately and supportively at each turn in the story. But even they have their limits, and I’m more than a little afraid that everyone in town is going to be on James’s side when they learn [why] we have broken up.

They’re silent for a moment then, and when they exchange a knowing look, I know they know. How could they not? How could anyone go about canceling a wedding in a town the size of Emerton without word of it leaking out? Of course they know. I was the last to find out. Very fitting.

I extend my left hand weakly, and they glance dutifully at my bare fingers.

“So I saw James,” I start, and my lower lip quivers and I feel tears pricking my eyes.

“How much did you tell him?” Ivy asks gently, and a rogue tear spills over.

“Almost everything,” I admit. “I told him I got married. That it was annulled.” A beat. “Don’t mention that I slept with Derek,” I add, and their faces go comically blank.

“You slept with the cowboy?” Ivy squeals.

Uh-oh. Apparently *I* hadn’t mentioned it, either.

“I’m so sorry, Jules,” Alexis says, wrapping me in a hug that has me fighting back the tears again. “This sucks.”

She pulls back and I wipe at my face, avoiding their eyes. She's right. This does suck. I hurt and humiliated and betrayed someone I loved, and everything about it sucks. But something inside of me has lifted, a weight I hadn't known I was carrying, even as it had grown heavier over the past months. Not getting married is the right decision. I *know* it. I don't appreciate the irony, but this I do know. I feel it.

"Is everybody talking about it?" I ask, and they both nod.

"Pretty much," Ivy murmurs, filling her mouth with muffin so she doesn't have to provide details.

"They don't know the specifics," Alexis adds. "Like, why, or anything. Just that it's not happening."

"Have you talked to your mother?" Ivy asks, glancing at my still-unplugged phone.

"No," I say. "I haven't talked to anyone except James and now you two. I don't want to. I can't face it right now."

Ivy and Alexis exchange another significant look. "Well..." Alexis begins awkwardly, and Ivy gives her an encouraging nod. I frown suspiciously.

"What?" I demand. "What's going on?"

Alexis takes a shaky breath and looks again to Ivy for support.

"Well," she starts again. "Jules, I'm getting married."

Sixty hours later I am sitting in the very church I was supposed to be getting married in at this exact moment, waiting for the doors to open and for Alexis Arnett, about to become Mrs. Heath Carter, to walk down the aisle. Apparently Heath had arrived in Emerton hours after our departure for Vegas, set up camp in Alexis's house and called and texted and emailed her saying he wasn't going to leave without her and that she would have to come back eventually. Which she did.

I feel very awkward. I also feel happy. And relieved. But mostly I feel uncomfortable. Because everyone in Emerton who was supposed to come to my wedding is now here for hers. And they are all staring at me. *Eyes on the bride!* I try to communicate telepathically, but if they hear me they're not listening. Plus Phillip, who works at the car rental place and whose face turned beet red but who said not a word when I returned the car keys and the portion of my rental agreement that confirmed I had, in fact, purchased insurance, is here, and I know he took pictures of the car and showed them to everybody, so they're probably discussing that, too.

My mother and father sit on my left, Doug on my right, Ivy next to him at the end of the pew. At the pew just across the aisle sits Evan, the pub owner. I am not the only one who feels extremely uncomfortable right now. The church is air conditioned, but there is a tiny trickle of sweat making its way down the side of Ivy's face. I can't help but smirk.

"Is something funny, Julianna?" my mother asks warningly, like I'm seven years old again and trying not to laugh at the old ladies singing in church.

"No," I whisper back.

I still haven't plugged my phone in, and because of it I had managed to avoid my mother until approximately thirty minutes ago when she found me in the church parking lot and insisted quite furiously that I sit with her. Because the wedding was pulled together so quickly and because none of Heath's family or friends from England is present, there is no wedding party. And no reception. Everyone agreed it was too tacky to use the hall Marina and my mother had rented. I wanted to inquire about the cake, but decided against it. Maybe I'll make a secret phone call later on.

"Are you okay?" my mother asks stiffly.

"Yes," I return, just as stiffly. "You?"

"It's not me who was supposed to be getting married today," she says coolly, and I feel the irritation prickling at my skin and the flush rising in my cheeks. "What I mean," she hastens, "is are you okay... being here?"

"I'm fine being here," I finally answer.

"I know you didn't want to be here at all," my mother continues, and anger has my shoulders tensing. She's going to do this *here*?

"I don't think now is the time," I say through gritted teeth.

"What I mean," she plows on, and when I glance over I see my father's fingers wrap around hers comfortingly. What is going on? "What I mean," she repeats, "is that you didn't want to be here, and I should have seen that, and I didn't. I was so focused on trying to make sure that you didn't panic and make a huge mistake that I didn't see... See, well, that it was inevitable."

"Inevitable that I would screw up? Gee, thanks, mom," I mutter, feeling again like that scolded seven year old.

"Sometimes," my mother adds, "it's better to hurt now, rather than later. When it's too late."

"What?" I hiss.

“If you didn’t want to marry James,” she says, “you shouldn’t have married James. I might not have gone about it the same way, but you made the right decision, Julianna. I know it hurts, but it’s better to know that now than once the cake is cut.”

The cake.

“It’s in our refrigerator, by the way. If you want some, you’re going to have to come over and tell us what the hell happened in Vegas,” she finishes.

For what feels like the hundredth time today, I feel tears welling up in my eyes.

“Oh don’t cry,” she mutters, pressing a tissue into my hand. “You can have the cake.”

The church air conditioning feels like it’s been shut off and I tug uncomfortably at the neck of my dress. Is it me or has this thing shrunk in the time I’ve been sitting here? I sigh and force myself to tune into the proceedings. Alexis and Heath face each other and hold hands, the minister smiling benignly between them.

“I, Heath Carter, take you, Alexis Arnett, for my lawful wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. I will love and honour you all the days of my life.”

Despite my reticent feelings toward marriage, I do feel a little teary. I look at their joined hands and sniffle, hearing the same sound echoed on my right. I peek over to see Ivy mopping at her eyes, mascara smudged. She looks at me and shrugs helplessly.

“Alexis,” the minister begins. “Please repeat after me.”

“I, Alexis Arnett...”

And something clicks inside me. The air is sucked out of the church. My heart stutters, then stops beating altogether. The room spins and the people around me fade into a dark blur. I wonder if I’m fainting or dying, and frown as tiny twinkling lights speckle my vision. I blink, wipe my eyes, and slowly things come into focus. Tiny Christmas lights and peeling white pews. Glitter and gold and fake pink flowers and... Elvis?

“Julianna,” Elvis says, upper lip curling unattractively. “Please repeat after me.”

I stare into Derek’s beautiful face, slightly shadowed by the white cowboy hat he hasn’t taken off, and smile. Behind Derek stands Robert, and behind me Robert’s fiancée Anna. They’re getting married next and have kindly agreed to witness our magical ceremony.

I can't seem to stop smiling as I repeat after Elvis. "I, Julianna Sopher, take you, James Matthews, to be my lawful husband..."

The tinny organ music halts and there's an awkward silence.

"Um." Elvis finally speaks and I turn my head to glance at him. What is his problem? "If you could repeat *exactly* what I say," he says, heavy drawl faltering slightly.

"Sure," I nod. Though I think I've been doing that.

He begins again. "I, Julianna Sopher..."

"I, Julianna Sopher," I echo dutifully.

"Take you, *Derek Holt...*"

"Take you, Derek Holt..."

When Derek slips the gigantic diamond back onto my left hand (he had taken it back just before the ceremony, explaining that he only had the one, which was fine, since I didn't have anything to give him), my upper lip curls in my own poor Elvis imitation. It's just so big. And gaudy. Not the kind of thing I'd pick out for myself.

But I don't have time to mention it before Elvis is pronouncing us husband and wife and we're kissing and Robert and Anna are clapping and the organ music soars to an almost painful crescendo.

I stand when everyone else stands, clap when they clap, smile when my mother elbows me in the side. Tears are streaming down my face but I couldn't honestly say what I was crying about. The guests are slowly coming back into focus, Alexis's huge grin, Heath beside her, smiling widely, proudly, happily. No one pelts them with rice. The organ music is muted but still jubilant. Everyone seems happy.

That should have been me. The thought comes out of nowhere, hits me square in the stomach like a two-by-four. I fight to draw in breath, feel the blush stealing up my chest, my neck, my cheeks, until I'm sure my entire body is glowing like a stupid, guilty red beacon. My knees feel weak and I need to sit down but now everybody is filing out. I can't. I drop back into the pew, cover my face with a hand and wave my mother and everybody else past. They don't ask any questions, and since we're at the front it doesn't take long to lose most of the audience. I put my head between my knees and struggle to breathe.

I, Julianna Sopher, take you, James Matthews...

I watch the tears drip to the floor between my feet, sniffle miserably, wonder if I'm always going to be so contrary. I didn't want to get married. It was too fast. I wasn't

sure. I didn't know. But now I know. I've been saying it every day for the past week, but only now does it really sink in: I have made a huge mistake.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Doug stands completely frozen in the middle of the living room, divorce papers in hand. His mouth forms words that don't materialize and he looks slowly from the papers to Ivy to me to the suitcases in both our hands. I wish Alexis were here. Or that I wasn't. But Ivy hadn't wanted to ask her newly married best friend to help with her divorce, so here I am, witnessing a moment so inevitable, so painful, it feels eternal.

It's been approximately four minutes and thirty-seven seconds since Ivy handed Doug the manila envelope then stood back to watch him open it. She hadn't said a word and even now when I steal a glance at her, her face is strangely impassive. I don't quite know what I expected her reaction to be, but maybe a little bit of guilt would make sense. Or relief. A weight off her shoulders. But she looks instead like a mannequin: a plastic, heartless doll.

It's dark outside and I want to run out there and hide but I promised I'd stay until the deed was done, and it's starting to seem like that might take a while. Doug blinks slowly and looks around the room.

"The stuff?" he asks finally. For the past six weeks Ivy had slowly been transferring her belongings from her house with Doug to what's going to be her house with Evan. Whenever Doug questioned a missing item Ivy would say it was being cleaned, being repaired, broken beyond repair, out of date, or "What are you talking about? We never had a unicorn lamp." (Presently resting on the desk in Evan's guest room.)

Ivy nods, her jaw set once again in that uncharacteristically hard line. She means this, and he knows it.

Doug turns in a small circle, surveying the room, eyes taking in every missing item, not seeming upset so much as shocked. He heads over to the bookshelf and runs his fingers along the dusty ledges, and for the first time Ivy's expression shifts into something resembling a frown. Our eyes meet and she shrugs, perplexed; I know she didn't take anything from the bookshelf. That's Doug's stuff. His sports trophies and how-to manuals and a record collection they never listen to but that he still keeps in meticulous order.

And then he finds what he's looking for, smooths the legal papers on a free shelf, and pops the top off the pen. In a sharp, swift motion he signs his name on the top page, flips to the next, signs there too, signs wherever he's supposed to, and once he's finished he recaps the pen, replaces the papers in the envelope, and turns and hands it to Ivy.

"Have a nice life," he says, turning on his heel and walking out of the room.

I sit alone in my apartment an hour later, staring at the painting I've been working on for a week. It's coming along nicely but looking at it now I can't see what the point is anymore. I love painting, it's what I do, but my heart is not in it. And having witnessed the brutally loveless scene at Ivy's – well, Doug's – house earlier this evening, I am slowly becoming convinced that a heart is pretty key in doing anything well. So maybe I'll work on this painting tomorrow. Or the next day. Or the next day. Or whenever my heart feels like it's back in one piece. Or at least a few manageable-sized chunks.

I head to the kitchen for a glass of water, trying not to think of Ivy as I left her at Evan's house. Evan had been gracious and considerate, smiling but also understanding that Ivy had just finished doing something very difficult. But Ivy had seemed unusually

remote as she stood there on the stoop, suitcases just inside the door, ready to step into her new life. Like maybe she knew she was making a big mistake, but was too afraid to stop herself from making it. And I had known it too and just watched her.

The glass nearly falls out of my hand when there's a pounding on my door. Then another knock, then the distinct-yet-muffled sound of a boot making contact. I peer around the corner warily, and the shuffling noises and lowered voices slowly filter in.

"...packed somewhere," I hear Ivy's voice say.

"Mine too," Alexis replies, and I know they're talking about keys so I unlock the door and swing it open to reveal Ivy and Alexis standing in the hall amidst half a dozen mismatched suitcases and several bursting cardboard boxes.

"Hey," I say as Alexis stuffs a suitcase into my hand.

"Hey," she says, pushing past me with two cases in tow.

"Hey," Ivy says, following her in, and this time I recognize the two suitcases she's wheeling as the same two I had wheeled out of her house that night.

I turn to survey them as they drop wearily onto the couch.

"Do you have any water?" Alexis asks. "I'm parched."

"Me too," Ivy says. "This stuff weighs a ton."

I head mechanically into the kitchen, pour two glasses of water, and return to the living room, handing each of them a glass then taking a seat in the chair opposite them. I peer closely at Ivy and see the mannequin-like qualities are gone, as is the resolute set of her jaw. She looks older, tired. Relieved.

She smiles at me fleetingly.

"Mind if I stay a while?" she asks.

The plan was to give James six months, like he tried to give me, but I only make it another two weeks before caving, which is how I have come to be standing in a rather fancy hallway with muted mauve walls and pewter light sconces and newly carpeted floors. I take a deep breath and knock on the thick wooden door to James's new apartment. What was supposed to have been *our* new apartment.

"Yeah?" comes a muted Boston accent from behind the door, and I cover the peephole with my hand and listen as the footsteps get louder as they approach. There's a muttering sound and I know he's trying to see through the peephole, then I hear a chain slide and a lock click and I watch as the brass doorknob turns in what can only be described as slow motion. The door opens.

My jaw drops.

“Rocky,” I utter, stunned.

Rocky stares back at me, looking extremely uncomfortable. “Hey Jules,” he says awkwardly.

I open my mouth to say hi back, but the word sounds trite and stupid when there are so many other things to say.

“Do you live here?” is what I settle on, and I push the door open but remain in the hall, peering past Rocky down a long, bright hallway that leads to what must be the dining room and a whole wall of floor to ceiling windows. I don’t need to see more to know that it’s perfect.

“Uh, yeah,” Rocky answers, tipping back on his heels as though he’d like to run but has nowhere to go. “Got the landlord to transfer the lease... Extenuating circumstances. Y’know.”

Of course I know. I’d be embarrassed but I’m too relieved for that.

“Is James at the old place then?” I ask, blood rushing back to replace the numbness in my extremities.

Rocky shakes his head, that guilty look flashing in his eyes again. “No,” he says.

“Then where is he?” I press, staring at him carefully.

Rocky closes his eyes, runs his hand over his mouth, looks like he wishes he were anywhere but here in this beautiful apartment that should have been mine.

“Rocky?” I say sharply.

“Jules,” he returns, reluctantly meeting my eyes. “Jules, he went back to Boston.”

Ivy, Alexis and I inquire as casually as possible as to the future of James’ and Rocky’s bar. All reports indicate that they’re doing good business, and no, no one has been hired to fill in for James as manager or co-owner or whatever they would be. What no one does know is if he’s planning on coming back.

I try several times to call him myself to ask but always chicken out mid-dial. This is largely due to the fact that the only number I have for him in Boston is his parents’ house, and I can’t imagine that they would be overjoyed to pass on a message from me. I’m not even sure if James told them about Vegas; he cancelled the wedding and sent them home halfway through the rehearsal dinner I had missed – before he even knew what I had done. But he’s been in Boston for nearly three months now and I imagine the topic must have come up. I may never be able to visit the east coast again.

I stare ruefully at the departure board at the small airport a few miles out of Emerton, hopefully giving the impression of checking the status of Alexis's outgoing flight (on time), but secretly checking to see how often planes fly from here to Boston. Often, as it turns out. And even though I know it's a long shot, my eyes keep drifting over to the arrivals gate just in case James strolls through with his carry-on luggage and forgiveness in his heart. Which of course he doesn't.

"Okay," Alexis says, turning to Ivy and I. "It's time."

Heath is buying magazines or candy or something, but it's really just an excuse to leave the three of us alone. Despite the fact that we had all promised that we would not cry at the airport today, everybody's eyes are red and more than a few tissues have been used. This time Alexis and Heath are leaving for *Namibia* – haha! I remember! Plus it says so on her itinerary, which I have in my hand – for good. And whenever they leave Namibia they'll be heading back to England, where Heath's family has an estate. An *estate*. I will definitely be visiting Alexis for tea or water polo or whatever it is that people do on estates.

"I'll miss you," Alexis says as we all hug, a mass of tear-smearred faces and runny noses.

"Write lots," Ivy orders, and I nod my agreement.

"And send lots of pictures," I say. "And call us."

"And come back for holidays," Ivy adds. "Or invite us to... Where?"

"Namibia," Alexis and I remind her. (Tee-hee.)

The anonymous voice announces final call for Alexis's flight and Heath ambles over to us, handsome and doctor-ly, and, if Alexis is to be believed (and I think she is) worth all the hassle.

"Well ladies," he says in his no-longer-mysterious-accent, "it was nice to meet you, even better to marry your friend, and I wish you both luck in everything."

"Luck?" Ivy scoffs. "Bah."

We all laugh nervously, sadly, then Heath looks at Alexis and Alexis looks at Heath and we all try not to cry. Ivy fails. I last about one second longer.

"Don't!" Alexis groans, but tears spill out of her eyes too.

"I love you," I tell her, and she hugs me tightly.

"I love you too," she whispers.

"Me too," Ivy adds, joining in the hug.

Then Alexis pulls away reluctantly and Ivy and I hold hands and watch her walk through the gate with Heath, glancing back one last time before disappearing out of sight.

Ivy and I turn to each other when she's gone.

"Rough," Ivy says with a shaky breath.

"Ugh," I agree. "Airports are so *sad*."

We head to the seats that look over the runway and watch the tiny plane that will take Alexis to some big city where she'll get on a bigger plane and fly somewhere else and get on another plane. Sure, the itinerary is still in my pocket, but I don't feel like looking at it.

All too quickly the stairs are pulled away and the door closes and the plane rolls slightly backward. We watch it taxi slowly in circles, lights flashing, men with orange batons pointing this way and that, and then finally the plane moves forward, engines spinning as it rolls faster and faster to the end of the tarmac before taking off.

When the plane disappears into the sky Ivy stands and turns to look down at me.

"Ready?" she asks, but I'm still staring outside. "Jules?"

"That should have been me," I say, and Ivy blinks.

"What?"

"That should have been me," I repeat.

"You and Heath?" Ivy jokes. "He's not your type."

I smile because I'm supposed to, stand up because I'm supposed to, follow Ivy through the small airport and out to the car because I'm supposed to. Of course I can't get on a plane and fly to Boston right now.

Not without luggage.

I manage to head home, pack, make Ivy swear not to bring any strange men back to the apartment while I'm gone, then cab it back to the airport in time for the next flight to Boston. Ivy offered to drive me but I a) didn't want to die on the way to the airport, and b) couldn't stand another goodbye. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but I've packed enough clothes for any emergency road trips that may pop up. My fingers twitch nervously against my thigh as I take my seat next to the window and my stomach lurches when we take off, but I have left the little yellow pills behind, and I decline any offers of alcoholic beverages. Whatever I do on this trip will be under my own power.

On one hand it takes forever to get to Boston, and on the other we get there much too quickly. I check into the motel, buy a map, and locate James's house, about ten miles

away. I sit on the lumpy mattress and study the map, find the Charles River, guesstimate the spot we sat to watch the fireworks, where James proposed, where I said yes. I find the elementary school he attended, the high school he graduated from, the police station he visited on more than one misbegotten occasion. I fall asleep in the clothes I wore on the plane and wake up with a sore neck.

On my one and only other trip to Boston James had pointed out a park he used to run through when he was in high school, then later whenever he returned home from college or Emerton. It's a pretty park with green grass and quaint benches and bike and running trails winding through the thick trees. James showed me the trail he liked on our visit and I had brought a book and sat on a bench to read while he ran.

I find that same bench again this morning and sit down with a book and a Styrofoam cup of untouched coffee. It's a little after six and the air is chilly, dew glistens on the grass and the sun isn't quite up. There are a few dedicated runners pounding by, but while I remember that James liked to run early, I don't remember the exact time, so here I am, just sitting, like a creepy stalker.

I try to sip my coffee and look casual, but I'm too nervous to keep up the charade for long. The trail is hidden mostly by trees except for a fifty yard stretch behind my bench so I can hear the runners approaching but can't see them until they emerge from the woods about ten yards from me. With each crunch of gravel my heart rate picks up until I can feel the pulse pounding in my throat, and each time that it's not James my heart sinks in my chest. I haven't even thought of what to say. I haven't allowed myself to imagine his reaction. I'm wearing running shoes in case he doesn't stop. I'm prepared to leave my book and my coffee and chase him until he hears me out. Until—

Oh dear God that's him. He's not out of the woods yet but I can hear his breathing and it's so familiar and now it's so close and—

I sink low on the bench, pull up the hood of my sweater and hide my face in my book until I hear James pass behind me. I count to three then turn to look, just in time to catch a glimpse of him disappearing back into the trees, legs long and lean in his shorts, muscles in his arms taut and perfect.

I feel frozen to the spot. I couldn't move if an army of hippos were to come bearing down on me right this instant. I feel high from the brief sighting, but also petrified. The coffee is cold when I throw it into the trash can and leave the park. I'll try again tomorrow.

I try and fail again the next day and the day after that. I spend the intervening time in my room and in the art gallery; most of the time I spend outside the motel I spend worrying that I'll bump into one of the members of James's extended family and have to explain what I'm doing in town and why I haven't announced myself. Trying, I think. Almost there.

The motel is not free and the attached restaurant's food is not good, and three nights is more than I can warrant paying for without making any progress. Especially since I am still paying off my Vegas trip and this newest venture is rapidly racking my credit cards right back up. I'll do it tomorrow, I vow as I curl up uncomfortably on the double bed. Tomorrow, no matter what.

I guess James took today off. I wave at Carlisle, a seventy-year old man who runs in this park every day and introduced himself two days ago after seeing me lurking on the park bench. I think he thought I'd be less inclined to murder him if I knew he had a wife in a nursing home, two ungrateful grown children and one adorable grandchild. And a dog. Or maybe he just likes to talk. Whatever the case, he watches as I leave the park today, book in hand, still not having read a single page.

On day five I get to the park early. I have done my hair, my makeup, and I'm wearing my best jeans. Last night I told the clerk that I would be checking out today, just to give myself some more incentive to do this. Not that the prospect of spending the rest of my life sitting in a Boston park for three hours not reading a book isn't motivation enough.

James normally passes by around seven fifteen, and at seven o'clock I start getting jittery. My feet are tapping and I knot my fingers together to keep from pulling at my carefully blow dried hair. I count the number of birds I see, name a chocolate bar for each letter of the alphabet, count backwards from a hundred. When I hear footsteps on the gravel, my heart beats double time. I wait.

The breathing is wrong. It's not him.

I turn my head anxiously when the runner comes into view. Not James.

I let out a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding and glance at my watch. Seven-oh-six. Nearly there.

Ten minutes later I hear footsteps again. Before I can think about it I push myself up off the bench and walk to the middle of the trail. The crunch of gravel gets louder, the

steady intake of breath, the rhythmic thunk of shoes on the ground. Closer and closer and closer. I close my eyes.

“Morning, Julianna.”

My heart stops.

“Morning, Carlisle.”

I open my eyes and shoot him a weak smile.

He looks at me a bit oddly, but doesn't stop running.

I hold my breath until he's out of sight, rest my hands on my knees and drag in mouthful after mouthful of cool, damp air. When I finally straighten and look at my watch, it's seven twenty-four. I want to scream. I want to stomp my feet and kick the bench and chase all the birds out of the park.

But I just stand there.

At seven thirty-one I hear someone approaching.

I stare into the woods and listen carefully. Sneakers hitting the ground, gravel crunching, breaths huffing in, pushing out. Steady. Familiar. It's him. I know it.

The footsteps get louder as he nears. A glimpse of white through the trees. Three more seconds and he'll be out of the woods, right in front of me, once again.

I wonder if he'll stop, if he'll smile, if he'll turn and run in the opposite direction. I think about if he'll speak first or if I will, and if so, what I'll say. For too many weeks I've thought of nothing but this moment, but now can't remember a single opening line. I don't know what James would want to hear in this situation. I've tried putting myself in his shoes and imagining what would make me take him back, but I always come up empty. The only thing I do know for sure is that no matter how this reunion goes, I'm doing the right thing. If he sends me away, I'll know that I tried. That I made a mistake and I admitted it and I've finally managed to make a decision, consequences be damned. I'm not afraid of the unknown anymore; I'm done running. For the first time in my life I am following my heart, and it has led me here.

THE END