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# Prologue

On days like this, I love living in Bury St Edmunds, when the spires of the cream stone cathedral seem illuminated against the vivid blue sky and even the black flintstones on the ruined abbey walls gleam under the sunshine as though they've been polished.

It's only early April, but it's the warmest day of the year so far by a *mile* and I'm already feeling so much better after getting out of the office. I've just come off a phone call with a nightmare client – she and her home renovations are enough to put me off architecture for life: I *need* this coffee break.

I'm wandering amongst the abbey ruins, looking for a wall low enough to perch on and drink my coffee, when I see my fiancé, Scott, sitting on a bench in the shade of a giant fir tree. Before I can call out a delighted hello and go to join him, I register that he's with Nadine.

Scott set up his own landscape gardening business when we moved here from London a year ago, and Nadine started working for him soon after that, days before he asked me to marry him in the rose gardens of a local manor house. She's twenty-nine and is tall and strong with golden skin and an infectious laugh. I liked her the moment I met her and on

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every occasion since then, so I'm not sure why my intended greeting has lodged in my throat.

My partner and his co-worker are almost two feet apart, but there's something about their body language that strikes me as odd. Scott is leaning forward, his white T-shirt stretched taut across his broad back and his forearms planted on his thighs. Nadine has her arms and legs crossed, her face tilted towards Scott's and her typically bouncy, high blonde ponytail seems preternaturally still. The angled position of Scott's face mirrors Nadine's, but neither of them is looking at the other. Nor are they speaking. They seem frozen. Tense.

A squirrel runs along the jagged wall to my left. Birds are singing in the surrounding trees. Children laugh in the distant playground. But I stand and stare, unease creeping over me.

They're sitting apart. They're not doing anything wrong. And yet . . .

Something does not feel right.

Then, suddenly, Scott turns and stares straight at Nadine. There's a strange look on his handsome face, an expression I can't decipher. My heart is in my throat as she slowly lifts her chin and meets his eyes, two perfect side profiles: his thick, dark eyebrows to her flawless arches; his straight nose to her small upturned one; two sets of full lips, serious and unsmiling.

Seconds tick past and darkness washes over me. To go from feeling light and warm to sick and cold is completely hideous.

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They are still staring at each other. And not a word has passed between them.

I jolt as Scott launches himself to his feet and strides off in the direction of town. Nadine watches him until he's out of sight, then visibly exhales, hunching forward and placing her head in her hands. She stays like that for a minute or so before getting up and slowly following Scott.

I realise I'm shaking.

What *was* that?

*Is my fiancé having an affair? And if not, is he thinking about having one?*

Hang on. They only *looked* at each other. They didn't do anything wrong. I like Nadine. I trust Scott.

But something does appear to be going on between them.

My mother has always told me to trust my instincts. But it's hard to trust your instincts when they're breaking your heart.

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# Chapter One

## Three months later

New York was shrouded by cloud cover. I've only ever flown to Indianapolis via Chicago, so I was hoping to see the infamous green void of Central Park bordered by skyscrapers, but by the time the sky finally clears, all it reveals is a patchwork landscape of fields and farms far below.

I've been travelling all day and it will be after 5 p.m. by the time I touch down, which is ten o'clock at night back in the UK. I'm shattered, but thankfully Dad is coming to collect me from the airport. I know that my exhaustion is not entirely due to lack of sleep. The last three months have taken their toll on me.

Scott was sitting at the kitchen table when I arrived home from work that day back in April, after a horrible afternoon of see-sawing between emotions. One minute I'd felt wildly unsettled and the next I'd convinced myself that the look he and Nadine shared meant nothing. But as soon as I saw Scott's face, I knew that my intuition had served me correctly. There *was* something going on between them, but it was an emotional connection, rather than a physical affair.

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He wanted to talk to me as soon as I walked through the front door, which threw me as I was expecting to have to demand answers, not have them dished up to me on a plate. And when he started to confess his feelings, I still thought he planned to ask for my forgiveness – which I know I would have granted. We were getting married in December and were hoping to try for a baby in the New Year. No way was I throwing away our beautiful future just because he'd developed a silly crush.

Maybe I was being naïve, but it took me a while to realise that he was leaving me.

I remember the details of our conversation so clearly. I even remember that his fingernails still had an arc of dirt buried deep, close to his skin, and that he smelled earthy, of fresh air and garden soil. He was so familiar to me and yet so like a stranger. I'd never seen him looking so torn and tormented.

'I do love you, Wren,' he claimed, tears clumping his brown lashes together in spikes. 'In some ways, I wish I'd never met her because I think you and I could have been happy. But lately I've started to wonder if we're really right for each other.'

It had taken him meeting Nadine, working with her almost every day, to recognise how well suited they were, how they clicked on another level.

At that point, they hadn't even spoken to each other about how they felt. Nadine had taken some time off to go and stay with her parents and Scott had sensed it was because she wanted to get some distance from him to clear her head. But

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when she came into work that day in April and handed in her resignation, he realised he couldn't let her go.

I asked him, tearfully, if he thought she was his soulmate, and when he met my eyes, his expression said it all.

I'd read about it in books, seen it in films: the protagonist who is in a relationship with someone who doesn't understand them. Finding love with someone who well and truly does. Nothing can stand in their way. The entire audience is rooting for them.

I never in a million years thought this would happen to me, that *I'd* be the one standing in the way of true love.

Agony and complete and utter helplessness engulfed me as the seriousness of our situation finally dawned on me. There was nothing I could do. There was no fight to be won. The love of *my* life was already lost to me.

Scott and Nadine are together now. I've seen them around town a few times and I'm always on my guard in case I bump into them, but the last straw came the week before last, when I was sitting in my favourite café opposite the Abbey Gate.

Suddenly they were spewed out of the Gate's mouth, hand in hand and smiling, the sun glinting off Nadine's blonde hair as Scott guided her across the busy road. When they walked into the café and saw me sitting with my mum, Scott apologised and quickly backtracked, but catching his eye as he passed by my window, seeing his face, grim and drawn, made me feel physically sick.

'This town is far too small for the both of you, darling,' Mum said with sympathy as I blinked back tears.

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'Why should I be the one to leave?' I asked in a small voice.

'His landscape gardening business is here. He's not going anywhere any time soon. Get away, Wren, even if only for a couple of weeks,' she implored. 'Put some distance between you, give your heart time to recover.'

She was right. I did need a break from home, from work, from Scott, from walking the same streets that we used to walk together, back when he'd hold *my* hand and step in front of traffic for *me*.

So I called my dad that night and asked if I could visit.

Dad is hovering behind the rope when I walk out into Arrivals, his navy-and-red checked shirt tucked into denim jeans.

At the sight of me, his face breaks into a wide grin, his heavily bristled cheeks seeming even rounder than they did when I last saw him at Christmas. He and his wife, Sheryl, went to Paris on holiday, so Scott and I caught the train over and spent some time with them there. This is my first trip back to America in two years.

'Hey, you!' he chirps.

'Hello, Dad.'

I experience a flood of warmth as his arms close around me. I breathe in his familiar scent – soap and washing powder – and know that this will be the last time we hug until we're standing in this very airport in two weeks' time, saying goodbye. The realisation gives me a pang as I withdraw.

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His notoriously scruffy hair, once the same mid-brown shade as mine, is now riddled with grey. Although we both have hazel eyes, that's probably where our resemblance ends.

I don't have much in common with my mother, Robin, either, apart from the fact that we're both named after small birds. Mum likes flowing clothes and bright patterns; I like structured skirts and shirts in dark colours. Her features are warm and open while my face is narrower and, well, I once described it as 'pinched', but she hotly refuted that, telling me I had fine bone structure, like an aristocrat, which made me laugh.

'How was your flight?' Dad asks buoyantly as he relieves me of my suitcase.

'Pretty good,' I reply.

'Tired?'

'A bit.'

'You can nap in the car. Our new home is a couple of hours away.'

My half-sister, Bailey, who's six years my junior, got married earlier this year and settled in her husband's hometown in Southern Indiana. Dad and Sheryl recently relocated to this same small town to be close to them.

There's a lot about this scenario that stings.

My dad is a devoted husband and father. But *I* don't have a whole lot of experience of him being like that. I do know that he loves me, but he's never really been there for me. He doesn't really know me. How could he when we live almost four thousand miles apart and spend no more than a couple of weeks a year in each other's company?

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The July air when we step out of the airport terminal feels like a warm blanket being draped around my shoulders. Before long, we're on a three-lane highway heading away from Indianapolis. We're too far from the city to see its skyscrapers, but I remember them from previous shopping trips. Out here the landscape is mostly flat and far-reaching, peppered with big red barns and grain silos.

'How's Bailey settling into married life?' I ask, trying to ignore a small spike of jealousy.

I've never considered my beautiful half-sister to be particularly competitive, so I'm sure she *wasn't* racing me down the aisle when she decided to tie the knot in Las Vegas, but now that my wedding has been called off, the ring on her finger does feel a little galling.

'She's happy,' Dad replies with a shrug, turning down the air con now that the car has cooled.

'Do you get on with Casey?'

I haven't even met Bailey's new husband yet. Scott and I were invited to the wedding, but with only a week's notice, we didn't feel it was expected of us to go. Bailey has always been impulsive.

'Everyone gets along with Casey,' Dad replies. 'He's a good guy.'

'That's cool.'

I don't mean for my voice to sound thin, but Dad shoots me a pained look.

'I was sorry to hear about Scott,' he says. 'I thought he was a good guy too.'

'He was,' I reply quietly. 'I guess he still is.' I swallow

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down the lump in my throat and add with forced flippancy, 'Can't help who you fall in love with, right?'

Dad clears his throat. 'Right.'

We let that sit between us for a while.

My parents met when they were in their early twenties and travelling around Europe. They fell hopelessly in love, and when Dad's visa ran out, Mum moved to Phoenix, Arizona, to be with him. They were married and expecting me within a year.

It was a straightforward case of too young, too soon. At least, that's how Dad described it to me when, as a resentful teenager, I tried to get to the bottom of why his head was so easily turned by another woman, a professor at the University of Arizona where Dad was working as a groundskeeper.

It's always been a mystery to me how someone like Sheryl could fall for a man like Dad – she's nine years older and a whole lot wiser. I get the attraction part – objectively speaking, my dad was kind of hot: Sheryl used to take her coffee breaks outside in the gardens so she could chat to him.

Harder to understand is how an affair between an academic and a groundskeeper turned into something serious enough that they were willing to devastate his wife and child.

Because, when Sheryl fell pregnant with Bailey, Dad chose them over us. Sheryl convinced Dad to move to Indiana to be closer to her family and found a position at the university in Bloomington. My heartbroken mother took me home to the UK, and Bailey got to grow up with my dad as her own.

This trip is not without its emotional complications.

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I must nod off because it doesn't feel like we've been traveling for two hours when Dad rouses me.

'We're coming into town,' he says. 'I thought you might like to see it.'

I force my stinging, tired eyes to focus on the view outside my window. We're on a long, straight road, whizzing past fast food and restaurant chains: Taco Bell, KFC, Hardee's, Wendy's. We pass a car wash and a garage and then the road morphs into a residential street with intersections every few hundred metres. Some of the homes are two-storey with gabled dormers, red-tiled roofs and basement windows peeking out above neatly mown lawns. Others are bungalows of white weatherboard with brightly painted shutters in lime green or cornflower blue. We crest a small hill and continue over the other side, where there's more of the same before we reach what Dad says is the 'historical downtown'.

Ahead is a large square around a central courthouse with a tall clock tower. The building gleams white in the fading sunshine, and as Dad drives around it, multiple Doric columns come into view.

'That's the Hoosier National Forest off in the distance,' Dad says as we leave the town centre and head through another residential sector where many of the homes have red, white and blue banners hanging from their front porches. I've missed the Fourth of July celebrations by only a week.

'And Bailey and Casey live along there,' Dad adds, nodding out the window.

There's a sign at the edge of the road that reads: *Wetherill*  
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*Farm – Pick Your Own*, with an arrow pointing in the direction we're heading.

'Yours?' I ask.

'Yep.' He nods proudly.

Beneath the cursive black-with-white-infill lettering are painted illustrations of fruit and vegetables. I make out peach, pear, apple, pumpkin and watermelon before we drive past.

'You do watermelons too?'

'Not this year,' Dad replies as we cross over a tumbling river on an old iron bridge that's painted rust red. 'Only pumpkins for Halloween. The previous owners grew melons, but we figured we'd better give ourselves time to get to grips with the orchards first. Hopefully we won't get into trouble for false advertising,' he jokes.

Mum bristled when I told her that Dad and Sheryl had bought a Pick Your Own produce farm. She was a fruit picker at a citrus farm when we lived in Phoenix and she works at a garden centre now. She's always loved being out in the open and tending to nature, even if the work itself isn't particularly challenging.

She once confided that she felt Dad had rubbed salt into her wounds when he left her not just for another woman, but for a professor. Now Sheryl has swapped academia for what is basically Mum's dream job. It's no surprise she feels sore.

Laid out before us on the other side of the bridge is farmland, vast and sprawling for miles. We drive alongside a field of something green and leafy for a short while before Dad takes a left onto a dirt track.

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'Here's home,' he says, turning right almost immediately into a long, tree-lined driveway.

There's an identical *Wetherill Farm – Pick Your Own* sign on the grassy verge and the drive splits, leading to a black wooden barn on the left, beyond which are fields of fruit trees. At the end of the right-hand fork is a two-storey farmhouse fashioned out of light grey weatherboard. The left-hand third of it has a gabled front with three big windows. On the right, three smaller, matching gabled dormers protrude from the grey slate roof, beneath which runs a long veranda. The rose beds at the front of the house are bursting with pinky-orange blooms and there are three stone steps leading up to a door painted midnight blue.

This door opens as Dad cuts the engine. I reach for my handle and climb out of the car to greet Sheryl.

'Wren! Welcome!' she calls, coming down the steps.

I once saw Sheryl wide-eyed with horror at finding a rogue grey strand in amongst her lustrous dark-chocolate locks, and she never used to leave the house without a full face of make-up. But in the last few years, Sheryl has gone au naturel. In place of long, shiny hair is a short grey bob, and her face is cosmetic-free – even her trademark plum-pink lipstick is missing.

Her personality, I'm sure, remains unchanged. She'll still be as bold and opinionated as ever and I could see from the way she came down the steps that she still carries herself with an air of importance. But despite this less-than-favourable-sounding description, I don't dislike her. In many ways, I respect her, and I even refer to her as 'dynamic' to friends, a

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label that always makes me feel disloyal to Mum. We get on okay, but it's taken us years to reach this point, and our relationship is far from perfect.

'Hello, Sheryl.' I give her a hug, making it quick because she doesn't like people invading her personal space.

At five foot nine, she's taller than me by four inches, and she's always been enviably curvier and bustier, even more so now. Dad told me she's been baking a lot since retiring from her university position, which made me smile because he always did the lion's share of the cooking. I could never have pictured Sheryl as a country girl, but the image is less blurred now that she's in front of me.

'What a beautiful house,' I say.

Sheryl beams and places her hands on her hips, looking up at the first floor. 'We love it. Come and have a look inside. Or shall I give you a tour of the orchards first? No, come inside,' she decides before Dad or I can get a word in edgewise. 'You must be exhausted.'

The interior of the house is very traditional, with walls painted in muted shades of green, grey and blue and white-accented details on the window frames, cornices and banister. The furniture I recognise mostly from their previous home: antiques that Sheryl inherited from her parents when they passed away. The floor is polished dark wood, broken up by worn rugs, except in the kitchen where it's tiled terracotta. It smells of cinnamon in here.

'Cinnamon peach cake,' Sheryl says proudly when I spy the baked goods on the counter. 'I made it especially for you.'

'Aw, thanks,' I reply, touched.

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Paige Toon

The farm opens to peach-picking customers next weekend. Apples and pears will follow later in the season.

‘Do you want some now or would you like to have a look upstairs?’ she asks. ‘Let’s put your bag upstairs first. See your bedroom.’

She’s off down the corridor before I can answer. Dad and I smile at each other and follow in her footsteps.

I can just about cope with Sheryl’s bossiness these days, but there was a time when I wasn’t as relaxed. When I was younger, I’d tug against Sheryl’s ropes and try to mark territory that had long been marked by her. That wasn’t much fun for anyone.

I’ve since learned that it’s better not to go into battle with her, and I’ll certainly be trying to abide by her rules over the next two weeks.

God knows, I don’t need any more stress in my life right now.

## Chapter Two

I wake up early the next morning, after a miraculous full night's sleep. I managed to hang on until about 10 p.m. before crashing out in the same marshmallowy double bed that Sheryl and Dad had in the guest room of their former home.

They used to live in Bloomington, a pretty, vibrant university city, where they moved just before Bailey was born. It's an hour north, the midway point between here and Indianapolis, and they had a cream brick house on a tidy corner plot in a leafy green suburb.

I once visited in autumn and the colours of the trees lining practically every street were breathtaking.

That's the thing about Indiana: it gets very cold and very hot and the extreme temperatures mean that autumn is the star of the seasonal show. I'd like to return again at that time of year, but right now it's the height of summer.

Pale yellow light oozes beneath the white blinds of the two dormer windows and, when I check the clock on the bedside table, I see that it's not quite 7 a.m.

It smells of cinnamon in here too, albeit a synthetic version, courtesy of the potpourri on one of the window sills. I like the scent – it reminds me of America's shopping malls and home stores: warm and welcoming.

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## Paige Toon

Mum always said that Phoenix smelled of orange blossom. She claimed the desert air was infused with it.

I was only six when we left, so my memories of Phoenix are vague. I remember the three tall, fat cacti in our backyard, the man-made city beach that had sprinklers on the sand because it was too hot to walk on and the local swimming pool that was so highly chlorinated it turned my hair green. I remember the desert sands sweeping down the roads and Camelback Mountain fading into the skyline beyond distant bungalows. I remember the vast, multicoloured layers of the Grand Canyon and the clear green water and smooth rock edges of Lake Powell. I remember tiny hummingbirds that fluttered like butterflies and prairie dogs that I tried but never managed to feed by hand. And I remember my dad tucking me in at night, calling me his 'Little Bird', the nickname he came up with when I was small and has long since stopped using.

I also remember the arguments. The screaming. The tears that were shed. I remember the tracks on my dad's cheeks as he kissed me goodbye and left through our front door for the last time.

I shut off my mind to these images because there are some things I'd rather forget.

Bailey arrives as we're sitting down for breakfast, without forewarning or an invitation. She lets herself in through the front door and is in the hallway before we even realise she's there.

'Heeeyyy!' she shouts like the Fonz, only a taller, curvier,

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prettier version. She's Sheryl's mini-me and everything I'm not.

I get up from the table and she's upon me in seconds, dressed for work in a smart black skirt and white cap-sleeve blouse and smelling of ylang-ylang perfume.

'It's so good to see you!' she cries, squeezing the breath from my lungs with the force of her brief embrace.

'You too,' I reply.

Our father's smile beams back at me, though his two dimples are currently hidden behind stubble. Her eyes are so big, brown and gorgeously expressive that she earned the nickname 'Boo' when she was younger.

'How was your flight? How are *you*?' Bailey asks, sweeping her glossy chestnut-brown locks over one shoulder.

As a teenager, her hair came almost to her waist in wavy curls, but the last time I saw her she was wearing it at just-below jaw-length.

I've had the same dead straight mousy-brown hair all my life. I can't even call it chestnut or chocolate: it's pure vermin.

'Good and good,' I reply. 'How about you? How's Casey?' The knot in my stomach is a reminder that I won't be following her up the aisle any time soon.

'Great. Hey, I wondered if you're free for dinner later?'

I glance at Dad and Sheryl.

'Not you,' Bailey says to Dad with a frown, and he freezes, mid-nod. She laughs at his put-out expression. 'I want my big sis all to myself. It's Friday night. I thought we'd go to Dirk's.'

'I'm guessing Dirk's is a bar, not a person?' I flash Dad

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a look to check he's all right with being excluded, but he's good-naturedly shrugging at Sheryl.

'Both. Dirk is the owner of Dirk's the bar. It's a bit like that bar we went out to last time in Bloomington? Remember that night?'

I do remember. It was five years ago: she was twenty-two and I was twenty-eight and we both got smashed. It was the best night we'd ever had together, the first time I could see the possibilities for us not only as siblings, but as friends.

It's not that we didn't get on before that, but it was harder when I was a teenager and she was a pesky brat running rings around our dad.

Unfortunately, our last night out together was also the last time we saw each other in person. She moved to the West Coast soon after that.

'I'll come get you at seven.'

'Is that okay?' I check with Dad, wondering if it will be possible for Bailey and me to pick up where we left off.

I feel a small surge of optimism at the thought, but it's quickly chased away by doubt. So much has happened in the last five years. So much has happened in the last five *months*. The simple truth is, I barely know my half-sister and she barely knows me.

'Fine by us,' Dad replies. 'We've got plenty of time to catch up.'

'Don't know how long I'll last,' I warn Bailey. 'I'll be jet-lagged.'

If she's expecting me to be the life and soul of the party, she'll be sorely disappointed.

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'Yeah, yeah,' she brushes me off before checking her watch. 'Gotta go! I'm late for work! See ya later.'

'See you.'

With kisses on Dad and Sheryl's cheeks, Bailey, the whirlwind, is off.

My half-sister returns to collect me bang on seven.

'You look great!' she exclaims.

I'm wearing a fitted, knee-length, sleeveless black dress with white beading around a V-cut neckline. It's the sort of thing I'd opt for at home on a night out, but looking at Bailey, who has changed out of her work clothes into a denim skirt and white T-shirt, I feel overdressed.

'You too. But are you sure I'm all right in this?' I ask uncertainly.

'Absolutely,' she reassures me firmly. 'Come on, it gets busy on Friday nights. Let's go.'

Dirk's is on the west side of the town square we drove around yesterday, in the basement of a three-storey, flat-roofed, utilitarian-looking building. Large rectangular windows with black frames break up the plain red-brick face. The riff from 'Fever' by the Black Keys is playing as we enter the building, and the music grows louder as we walk down the stairs and open the door to the venue. The walls are exposed red brickwork hung with framed posters of rock bands – everyone from the Rolling Stones to Kings of Leon.

It's a bit low-rent and kind of dirty, but I like it, and as 'Fever' morphs into 'R U Mine?' by Arctic Monkeys, I like it even more.

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I may not look it, but I'm a bit of a rock chick at heart. Scott wasn't really into music – if he had a choice, he'd rather have the TV on than the radio. I wonder what Nadine prefers.

No. I don't want to think about Scott and Nadine tonight. I very much doubt that they're thinking about me.

'What are we drinking?' Bailey asks as we reach the bar, squinting at the line-up of spirits against the wall.

I pick up a menu lying discarded on the counter, suddenly determined to throw myself into having a good time. It's sticky to the touch and lists a selection of burgers, hot dogs, loaded fries and nachos. I flip it over, searching for a cocktail menu, but the other side is blank.

Silly me. This is so not a cocktail kind of place.

The barman materialises in front of us. He has gauges in his ears and blond hair so wispy you can see his scalp through it. He doesn't smile or speak, merely slaps two cardboard coasters on the bar in front of us and nods at Bailey.

'Hey, Dirk!' she exclaims brightly. His expression remains unchanged. She glances at me. 'Rum and Coke?'

'Sure.'

Dirk gets to work and Bailey laughingly says in my ear: 'He's an asshole, but that's part of his charm. I'll get him to smile at me if it's the last thing I do.'

I believe her.

'Want to grab that table? I'll bring the drinks.'

Several pairs of eyes follow me as I wind my way across the room, making me really regret my outfit choice. I wish Bailey had told me to change. She's so much more outgoing

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than I am – being overdressed wouldn't bother her. It's one of the many, many ways in which we are different.

I sit down between a table hosting four grizzled old biker dudes, and another seating three middle-aged men in primary-coloured T-shirts and baseball caps. Bailey and I appear to be the youngest people in this joint, and we're also the only women, but if this bothers her, she doesn't show it.

'Cheers!' she says as she joins me.

'Cheers! And hey, congratulations on your marriage!'

In overcompensating for my insecurities, I sound over-enthusiastic, but she seems oblivious to my tone.

She laughs. 'Mom's still pissed that I denied her of her one big chance to prance around as mother of the bride. At least I gave notice, even if it was only one week.'

'Was there any reason for the rush?' I ask hesitantly.

'Nah,' she replies, guessing where my thoughts were heading with that question. 'We wanted to tie the knot without any hassle. I deal with enough of that crap for work.'

Bailey is an events manager.

'How is work? You're at the same place as Casey, right?'

'Yeah, at the golf club.' She jabs her thumb over her shoulder. 'It's on the outskirts of town, about a ten-minute drive that way.'

Casey is a golf pro. He and Bailey met in California when he was competing at a tournament she'd helped to organise. He never made it to the big time and now he tutors. He was offered a position back here and, as his parents and brother still live in this town, he was keen to return to put down roots.

'And you like your job?' I ask.

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She shrugs. 'It's all right. I've done three weddings and two retirement parties so far, but the work's not very varied. I'm worried I'll be bored out of my brain by Christmas and then I don't know what I'll do. If Casey and his parents get their way, I'll have a bun in the oven by then.'

'Is that what you want?'

'Hell no, I'm *way* too young for that!'

Her eyes go into full-on baby 'Boo' mode and I can't help but laugh.

'How old is Casey?' Bailey is twenty-seven, but I'd heard he's a fair bit older.

'Thirty-four. Completely over the hill,' she teases, knowing full well that her husband is only a year older than I am.

'Oi!' I exclaim, dipping the tip of my finger into my drink and flicking it at her.

She squeals with laughter and a surprising bubble of joy bursts inside my chest. Maybe we *can* pick up where we left off . . .

Indeed, the longer we sit there chatting and drinking, the happier and more relaxed I feel. I did need a break from everything that was going on at home, but I'm also glad of this chance to bond with my half-sister. This wouldn't be as easy if Scott were here.

We grab a couple of burgers and more drinks to wash them down with and then Bailey heads off to use the restroom while I return to the bar for Round Three.

Or is it Round Four? I've lost count.

'Ain't No Rest for the Wicked' by Cage the Elephant is blaring out of the speakers and I almost sing along because

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*Only Love Can Hurt Like This*

I love this song, then Stevie Nicks' 'Edge of Seventeen' kicks in and there's no way I can keep still.

Dirk hands over our drinks and I swear his eyebrow lifts when I beam at him. Out of the corner of my eye, I see that two tall, broad men have come through the door, but then all my attention is directed at trying not to spill our drinks as I weave my way back to the table. By the time I sit down and look over at the bar, they have their backs to me.

The guy on the right with shaggy brown hair, wearing faded blue jeans and a grey T-shirt, fractionally bigger than the guy on the left in height and breadth. His friend has carelessly messy dark blond hair and he's wearing black jeans and desert boots with a checked shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He places one hand on his friend's shoulder.

'Wren?'

I look up to see that another man has arrived at our table.

'Casey!' I belatedly realise, jumping to my feet.

I've seen him in photos, of course, but his pin-straight black hair used to be longer and he had a moustache.

'It's so good to finally meet you!' Casey exclaims into my ear, giving me a fierce hug.

'You too!'

'Case!' Bailey cries as she reappears, throwing her arms around him.

He's only an inch or so taller than her.

He laughs and pats her back, his cheeks pink as she lets him go and flops into her seat. He pulls out a chair with far more control.

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'Do you want a drink, Casey? Can I get you a drink?' I'm trying to sound sober and failing.

'No, no, I'll go to the bar.' He scoots his chair back out from the table and pauses. 'Are you good?'

'So good,' Bailey says, lifting up her full glass and knocking it against mine as he gets to his feet.

'I'm making a terrible first impression on your new husband,' I whisper, not as quietly as I meant to.

'Not at all! He'll love you! He already does. You're related to me. And he loves me. Very, very much.'

'I can tell.'

'And I love him.' She enunciates her words slowly and deliberately.

'He seems very lovable,' I agree.

'You've only just met him!' She slaps her hand on the table and stares at me accusingly. Her features relax a moment later and she nods wisely. 'But you're right. He is very, very lovable.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' Casey says as he sits back down.

Bailey and I gawp at him with astonishment.

'How did you get served so quickly?' she asks as he swigs from his bottle of beer.

'Dirk had it ready on the bar for me,' he replies, smacking his lips.

'But Dirk is an asshole,' Bailey says with genuine confusion.

Casey chuckles and shakes his head. 'Nah, he's okay. I've known him forever. This is the first place I got legally wasted. Dirk drove me home to save me ending up in a ditch.'

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'How have I never heard that story?' she asks with a frown.

'I don't know,' Casey replies with a shrug.

'I thought you hated it here.'

'I don't hate it, but I don't want to come here every other weekend.'

'Anywhere is better than the golf club,' Bailey says in a monotone voice.

My eyes have been darting back and forth while they've had this conversation, but then my half-sister seems to remember I'm there and smiles at me brightly.

'Anyway!' she exclaims. 'Wren likes it here, don't you, Wren?'

'I do. The music's cool.'

The two guys from the bar have made their way over to the pool table. Bailey sees where my attention is headed and glances over her shoulder, clocking them. She turns back to me and gives me a cheeky grin, raising one eyebrow.

'What?' I ask.

'What do you mean, *what?*'

'What do you mean, what do I mean, *what?*'

She bursts out laughing. 'How can you say that without tripping over your words?'

'I've had six more years to perfect speaking drunk.'

'To perfect speaking drunk,' she repeats, putting on a plummy English accent. I'm not sure if the added lisp is intentional, but it sounds hilarious.

Casey looks bemused as we both drunkenly crack up.

'Sorry, Casey,' I say when we've more or less calmed

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down. 'You are way behind. I think you need to get a tequila shot or something.'

'I thought I'd drive you guys home. You left your car in the parking lot, right?' he asks Bailey.

'Case, *NO*,' Bailey shouts. 'We can walk!'

'Come on, Casey,' I say cajolingly. 'Join us for a few drinks. This is the best night out I've had in months.'

'Aah!' Bailey seems tickled by my statement.

'It's true.'

She grins into her drink, oblivious to the pain I feel at *why* I haven't enjoyed going out lately.

She hasn't asked me about Scott. We've talked about work and our parents and light-hearted subjects like music and movies, but she hasn't gone near the subject of my ex-fiancé.

That's probably a good thing. I don't want to talk about Scott tonight anyway, and I'm not sure I want to talk about him at all to my half-sister. Things are obviously going well between Bailey and Casey and I have no desire to bring down the mood.

There are a few more women and younger people in here now, including some preppy-looking guys in pastel polo shirts, but the men over at the pool table still stand out. The taller of the two is facing this way and he's ruggedly handsome, a description I don't think I have ever used about another human being, but which feels uncannily fitting. He's deeply tanned with a broad forehead and a jawline that you can tell is strong, even though it's graced with heavy, dark stubble. He's like a male model crossed with a caveman.

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His friend with the dirty-blond hair and yellow-and-black checked shirt still has his back to us.

Bailey's head pops into my line of vision, wagging from side to side in an impressive execution of the dance move from 'Walk Like an Egyptian'.

'Earth to Wren.' She glances over her shoulder before returning her gaze to me with a grin.

'Sorry,' I apologise, reaching for my drink.

'Someone keeps getting distracted,' she sings. 'Or perhaps someone is *looking* for a distraction?'

I almost choke on my mouthful.

'That's Jonas, right?' Bailey glances significantly at the model caveman, then at Casey, who nods. 'If you're looking for a distraction, I hear he's a good one,' she adds.

'Bailey.' Casey's tone is mildly chastising.

'Oh, come on,' she replies, slapping his arm. 'Last time we saw him here, you told me he'd slept with half the women in this town.'

'That's an exaggeration,' Casey replies. 'But I don't imagine your sister wants to be another notch on his belt.' He looks at me for confirmation.

'I don't want to be another notch on *anyone's* belt right now, thanks.'

I'm not sure I even fancy him.

If I were sober, I'd be able to tell.

'Who's his pal?' Bailey asks Casey.

'Can you stop staring at them, please?' he asks her reasonably.

Bailey smirks at me but does as she's asked. She's partially

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blocking my view, so at least I can look past her without it being too obvious.

‘That’s Anders,’ Casey answers her question. ‘And they’re not friends, they’re brothers.’

‘Case knows everyone in this town,’ Bailey tells me as an aside.

‘I know *of* people,’ Casey corrects her. ‘I don’t know them well enough to talk to. Anders was in the year above me when we were in school. Jonas is a couple of years older than that.’

That makes them about thirty-five and thirty-seven.

‘Are they from around here?’ I ask. ‘Their names sound Scandinavian.’

‘The whole family has Swedish names, going back generations. They take their heritage very seriously. The Fredrickson farm has been passed down for something like two hundred years.’ There’s a touch of reverence in his tone.

‘They’re farmers?’ I ask.

‘Jonas is,’ Casey replies. ‘Their parents too. Anders lives in Indy, though.’ That’s the nickname for Indianapolis. ‘Last I heard, he was working for an IndyCar team, which is pretty cool.’

That *is* pretty cool. Dad and Sheryl once took Bailey and me to the Indy 500, a five-hundred-mile-long car race around an oval racetrack. It’s billed as ‘the Greatest Spectacle in Racing’ and is part of the Triple Crown of Motorsport, along with the Monaco Grand Prix and the 24 Hours of Le Mans, but I thought it sounded boring when Dad told

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