



THE



You've only just met

NEW

But she already knows you so well

GIRL



INGRID ALEXANDRA

Ingrid Alexandra

**The New Girl: A gripping
psychological thriller with
a shocking twist perfect
for fans of Friend Request**

«HarperCollins»

Alexandra I.

The New Girl: A gripping psychological thriller with a shocking twist perfect for fans of Friend Request / I. Alexandra — «HarperCollins»,

You've only just met. But she already knows you so well. When Rachel moves into the spare room in Mary's flat, everyone is quick to jump to the conclusion that there's something strange about her. Everyone apart from Mary. And when Rachel starts sleepwalking, the flatmates' fears grow. But there's something about the new girl that Mary can't help but trust, and having recently escaped a toxic relationship, she needs the support. Rachel becomes a friend and an ally, and Mary soon discovers that they have more in common than she ever could have imagined. In fact, Rachel seems to know more about Mary than she knows about herself... A twisty and unnerving psychological thriller, perfect for fans of Erin Kelly's He Said, She Said and Laura Marshall's Friend Request. *****WHY READERS ARE GIVING THE NEW GIRL *FIVE STARS* 'A really accomplished debut' 'Wow is all I have to say' 'I didn't see the ending coming at all. I thought I had it worked out, but was pleased to be wrong!' 'I devoured this in one sitting' 'A GRIPPING read' 'I spent my day off getting through this in one sitting. It really is that good' 'It kept me hooked right to the end. I would recommend this to everyone...'

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**THE
NEW
GIRL**
INGRID ALEXANDRA

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Dedication

For Vidar, for everything.

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Prologue
20th August 2016
4.17 a.m.

The smell of blood lingers. It's on my clothes, though they have been washed clean. On my skin, though I've scrubbed it raw.

Light is shining through a crack in the door. The yolk-orange glow steals across the bedroom like an intruder, illuminating the white, pinstriped shirt that hangs from the clothes horse. The empty sleeves dangle, twitching now and then in the breeze from the window.

I tune my ears to the sounds in the next room. He's pacing, thinking. '*Mary*,' he mutters. '*Mary, Mary.*'

As I curl against the cold wall, my skin tingles with adrenalin. He always said I couldn't be trusted. Now, he's right. In the closet, under a pile of dirty laundry, there's an overnight bag. It's an old one of my mother's with white daisies embroidered on dark green canvas. A toothbrush, some make-up and a few items of clothing are all it contains. They've been waiting there, waiting for the right moment.

Footsteps sound in the hall and stop outside the door. I hold my breath. The tide is rising, and I can hear the waves as they swell and crash on the nearby shore.

The door opens and he stands, silhouetted by the hall light.

'*Mary, Mary, quite contrary,*' he slurs, the hint of a sneer in his voice. 'What are we going to do with you?'

Chapter One

Three months later

I heave over the basin, but there's nothing left to come up. I spit, turn on the tap and splash my face. It's bad this time, worse than usual. But I know it won't stop me. I'll only do it again.

Gulping a mouthful of stale water from the mug on the sink, I take a deep breath and tiptoe out of the bathroom. Sunlight streams through the floor-to-ceiling windows that lead to the balcony, making me squint. The sky glares sapphire blue, the overzealous shrieks of children and families drift up from the shore below. People out and about, doing whatever it is regular people do on a Sunday afternoon.

Cat is in the open-plan kitchen by the counter, bent forward and shaking out her shower-wet hair. Her fingers comb the long, raven-black strands and fat beads of water drip onto the kitchen floor.

'I'm still freaking out about that accident,' she says through her hair. 'You could have been killed.'

I watch her upside-down face, forcing down my irritation. I could slip in the puddle she's making and crack my skull on the tiles. Then I might *really* be killed. 'It's nothing, just a dent.'

'It's not the car I'm worried about.' Cat tilts her head, one perfectly shaped eyebrow arched. I wonder if she knows I lied about how much I'd had before getting behind the wheel.

I sip the coffee she's made me but it tastes too bitter. 'The car barely hit me. Nothing a little buffing can't get rid of.'

'Which I'll sort out,' Ben interjects, winking at me over his shoulder as he nudges past Cat to get to the kitchen sink. He pours himself a glass of water and swallows it back in three large gulps. 'Once the hangover wears off.'

'Ugh. I guarantee mine's worse than yours,' Cat moans, flipping herself back upright and pushing her wet hair over her shoulder as she leans against the kitchen counter. She looks fine to me. I'm positive I'm the most hung-over. 'Whose idea was it to crack open the vodka?'

Ben and I exchange a look, but before I can be found guilty, Cat's phone rings and she jumps, knocking over the empty cocktail pitcher. It clatters loudly into the sink and my head pounds in response. 'Shit. I'll get that in a sec. This could be about the room.'

Retrieving the pitcher, I make a half-hearted attempt at clearing some of the house-warming collateral while Cat takes the call.

Ben steps over a squashed lime wedge and right into the puddle on the floor. He slips and yelps, arms shooting out, hands finding my shoulders and clamping on. His fingers dig into my flesh.

I gasp, my chest contracting. Ben's laughing, his feet skidding on the floor. Suddenly the ground slips out from under me and my spine connects with something hard. Spots of light dance before my eyes.

'What are you two doing?' Cat shakes her head, one hand on her hip, the other holding her phone in the air. 'You both look retarded.' She looks at me and her brow furrows. 'Mary?'

I shake my head, ducking to hide the tears. When I look up, Ben's there, his face close. His irises are a strange colour – not quite brown, not quite green.

'I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?' he asks.

I can't answer; my throat is too tight.

'Sorry ...' Ben says again, but his kindness is too much. I turn away. Ben lets me go, clears his throat. 'You know,' he says, addressing Cat, 'it's actually your fault we're in this ... situation.' He points to the tiles, which are now more grubby and smeared than wet.

Cat ignores him. 'Good news! I think we might have a candidate for our new roomie!'

‘Seriously?’ I say. The last few applicants have been less than desirable, particularly the creepy middle-aged guy who wouldn’t stop staring at Cat’s cleavage.

‘Yup. She’s our age, I think, doing some kind of arts degree at uni. She works part-time and she’s available right away.’

‘Another *girl*?’ Ben moans, then pauses. ‘Did she sound hot?’

Cat narrows her eyes. ‘You have a *girlfriend*. And I only spoke to her on the phone. How the hell should I know if she’s hot?’

Ben shakes his head sagely. ‘You can tell. And Gia isn’t my *girlfriend*. She’s just a friend.’

‘Does *she* know that?’ Rolling her eyes, Cat turns to me. ‘What do you think? Are you okay to meet her later?’

‘Sure,’ I say with a shrug, but anxiety whispers across my chest at the thought of meeting someone new. I try to ignore it.

‘Great!’ Cat squeals. ‘I’ll just text her to see when she’s available, okay?’

‘No worries.’ I step out of the kitchen and take a moment to breathe.

Eagle-eyed Cat pauses in her texting and slings an arm around my shoulder. ‘You okay there?’

I manage a smile, though I’m still edgy.

‘It’s better here, isn’t it?’ Cat gestures to the high-security intercom system with its intricate array of buttons. ‘I’m glad we’re here. I feel safer, don’t you?’ She smiles in that goofy, affectionate way that only an old friend can and wraps me in her arms.

As I inhale the smell of coconut shampoo and childhood, the waves of the past whoosh and roar in my ears.

Chapter Two

22nd November 2016

Dear Journal,

I guess that's how you're supposed to start a journal entry, isn't it? I've never written a journal before. Or I might have, as a kid at school or something, but I can't remember that far back.

I suppose I should introduce myself. I'm Mary. Hello. It's a while since I've written anything, actually. I used to write a lot, I found it cathartic. Anyway, here I am, making a start. I might not be doing everything Doctor Sarah advised in our last session, but at least I'm doing this. Mark used to say I never followed through with anything. 'Slacker,' he'd call me, as though he was one to talk. Doctor Sarah said keeping a journal will help to record my thoughts and feelings, so I can catalogue my moods and 'compartmentalise my issues', or whatever it is she calls it. She wants me to keep track of any changes. It helps to put things in words sometimes; it makes things seem smaller when you can fit them into a little box. At least, that's what Doctor Sarah tells me.

There's a quote I've got stuck in my head. I can't remember where I heard it, but it goes: 'The only constant is change.' A profound truth summed up in a paradox. It's pretty fitting to my current situation. Nothing is permanent, so you'd better not get too attached to anything, right? I mean, why waste your energy? But we do. It's human nature. People, possessions, ideas – we latch on like molluscs, suctioning for what we crave, whatever we think is going to get us through. The good news? Whatever terrible situation you may find yourself in, it will pass. The bad news? The things you depend on – really depend on – pass too. Often when you least expect it. Often before you realise you're dependent to begin with.

But I digress. So, changes. Where to begin? The biggest one.

I've left.

I got tingles just writing that. Though not good tingles – yet. I'm hoping that will come in time. Yes, there was that initial euphoria – freedom! The world had opened up and suddenly I was able to be a part of it. I wasn't hiding anymore.

But then something happened, I don't know what. It shrank back, I guess. Into a claustrophobic bubble I can't escape. It's as if reality is elastic sometimes; it can expand and contract, or change shape depending solely on how you view it.

My old fears have crept back in, as though they'd been waiting until there was room for them. And now, there is. They say the world gets smaller the more you see of it ... perhaps that's what's happened to me. I'm exploring more of the world now, so it's more accessible, less immense. I say that now, as if I'm the confident, brave person I'm supposed to be, but the truth is I struggle to leave the house most days. The world in here feels so much safer, like I have reign over it, while the world out there reigns over me.

It's funny, the 'heebie-jeebies' (Doctor Sarah uses some of the lamest terms) kick in at the strangest times. Right now, for example, I can smell his cologne, as though he's just been in the apartment. Which I know is impossible – it's probably a waft of the cheap deodorant Ben douses himself with after a shower – but I still get a jolt. Sometimes I'll see him in the faces of people walking past, or in the shadows of my room at night. Adrenalin prickles over my skin like an army of ants and I have to get out, have to walk, skip, do something or I'll go mad.

The fear can be paralysing. Sometimes I don't have the drive to do any of the above. Sometimes all I can bring myself to do is drink. That's proving the hardest habit to break, like saying goodbye to a faithful friend right when you need them most.

I'm lucky. That's what they all keep telling me. Really? Am I? It seems like a pretty ill-fitting word for someone like me. I prefer Doctor Sarah's way of putting it. She says I'm brave (whether she

means it or not). *But lucky? That implies a lack of choice or control, as though I had no say in what happened to me or how it turned out.*

When I left Melbourne, my best friend was willing to pack up her life and move out here with me in a nanosecond. But I'm not 'lucky' to have her – we both put energy into cultivating and sustaining this friendship. It wasn't luck that drove me to leave, although it played a role in those final moments. And it wasn't luck that got us this apartment. It was Cat's tenacity and charm – and the fact that she wouldn't take no for an answer. She wanted me to be somewhere where I could forget the past, she said. Like a change of location has the power to do that. But it's a nice thought anyway.

It is pretty amazing, this place. Not so much the apartment itself – the rooms are small, and there's a disproportionate number of bathrooms to bedrooms (1:4), but it's brand new (still smells of paint), it's high up on the fifth floor with a spacious communal dining/kitchen area, and it has a massive balcony out the front, overlooking the water.

We live right in the heart of the northern beaches of Sydney where I used to come as a child, and I have to say, being this close to the sea is a godsend when it's this stinking hot. We can't really afford to live here, of course, which is why we're looking for a fourth boarder. Ben is studying to be a high-school teacher and works part-time as a support aide for children with disabilities, so you can imagine there's fuck-all money in that. It's noble, though. It suits him, I think. Cat is studying PR and works at the café under our apartment complex.

I don't work – not yet – but I have enough money to pay my share of the rent. I don't worry about money so much; it's the least of my problems. But I know the others do, and it makes me feel guilty.

What I have to focus on, the most important thing, is staying safe. Things could definitely be worse – and they were – but that's in the past. I'm getting better, and I'm letting go. Of course, it'll take time. But it won't take forever. Everything passes, doesn't it?

Sometimes, at dawn, when I've been awake for hours, I get up and tiptoe through the sliding doors that lead from my bedroom to the balcony. There, in the morning mist, amid the salty scent of the ocean and the low roar of the waves, I watch the sun rise over the sea. It's in those moments I feel a sense of calm mingled with a longing, a sadness I can't quite place. Am I nostalgic for a life left behind or for one I never had? I suppose it doesn't matter. Because, for the first time in as long as I can remember, I can almost imagine that everything will be okay.

Chapter Three

The sky is ominous today. Slate-grey clouds hang over the horizon and the sea is the colour of dishwater. Early summer weather is fickle and today it's only sixteen degrees and sheeting with rain.

I tap my foot on the wooden deck, a lukewarm cup of tea in my hands. My eyes flick back and forth to the clock on my phone but time doesn't seem to be passing at all. Why did I agree to this? Cat could have swapped shifts with someone, surely, or Ben could have postponed his 'date'. Isn't this something we should all be doing together?

My foot taps on restlessly, like it's disconnected from the rest of me. *Tap tap tap tap tap tap.* The intercom buzzes and I jump, spilling tea down the front of my T-shirt. 'Shit.'

Rushing into the kitchen, I drop the mug in the sink and mop at my front with a soggy tea towel, which only serves to spread the moisture. The intrusive buzz sounds again and I jab my finger at the silver button on the intercom.

'Hello?' I say. The word sounds hoarse, as if spoken by a heavy smoker. Silence. I clear my throat, 'Hello?'

'Hi! Yes. Um, is this Mary?' It's a soft, husky female voice, not what I was expecting.

'Yes.'

'Hi! It's Rachel. For the room?'

'Right, yeah. Of course. Come on up.'

'Thanks!'

I press the button for the front door and hear a short, low *brrrrrrpt* on the other end.

She's in.

Swallowing thickly, I pour myself some water, then stop. *Shit, I've forgotten. Today of all days.* Dashing to my room, I yank open the top drawer of my dresser and find the aluminium popper pack. I thrust my thumb into the foil twice and throw back the small, white pills with a slug of water. As I'm wiping my mouth on my sleeve, there's a knock at the door.

'Coming!' That's better. Normal-sounding, friendly. I make myself walk slowly to the door, breathe, then open it.

At first all I see is an oversized grey raincoat with a hood and a shadow for a face. Then the hood slides back and a face appears: pale, angular, with a high, domed forehead and hazel eyes. Dimpled cheeks bracket a wide, even-toothed smile. Two small hands reach up to disengage a bundle of dishevelled, shoulder-length blonde hair from the hood of the raincoat.

All thoughts of greeting are erased by the sudden feeling of recognition. A face like that would be hard to forget, I think. But I can't pinpoint where I may have seen her. I almost ask if I know her, but she's thrusting out her small hand, beaming, and saying in that rough-edged voice, 'It's so nice to meet you!'

'Hi. Yes, you too.'

Rachel grasps my hand with fingers that are ice-cold. She's surrounded by the scent of something sharp and sweet. I'm about to pull my hand back when our eyes connect. I feel a jolt; there's something in those wide-set eyes, something that makes me feel exposed.

'Are you okay?' Rachel's peering at me, brow furrowed. I can see the dusting of freckles on her small, upturned nose. She's pretty. Really pretty. And then I wonder if it's okay to think she's pretty when she looks a bit like me. Not a dead ringer, of course, but the basic stats: blonde, slim, around the same age. But I've got nothing on this girl. At my best, I was that balance of plain and pretty that made me approachable, not too intimidating.

'Mary?'

I shake my head to clear it. 'Yeah, yes. Sorry. I just ... Bit of a headache.'

‘You poor thing,’ Rachel puts her hand on my upper arm and squeezes gently. The sleeve of her raincoat rides up and I glimpse a black, Celtic-looking pattern on her wrist. A tattoo? ‘I get headaches a lot, so I totally sympathise. Do you want some ibuprofen or something?’

I force a smile. ‘No, really, I’m fine. Sorry about that. Come in. Would you like a coffee, or a tea maybe?’

‘I’d *love* a coffee, thanks.’ Rachel kicks off her trainers and walks down the hallway and into the kitchen, placing her handbag on the counter. ‘Oh god, *wow*,’ she breathes, her gaze settling on the dark, rolling clouds, the grey sea and the misty mountain beyond. The flailing branches of the fir trees by the shore hint at a storm. ‘This place is amazing.’

‘Yeah. The view is pretty great.’ I flick on the kettle and spoon instant coffee into two mugs. ‘Did you walk here?’

‘Yup. I don’t have a car at the moment.’ Rachel shrugs out of her raincoat to reveal a baggy jumper emblazoned with the Sydney University logo and a pair of black leggings. Her long legs remind me of a dancer’s or a model’s, and I wonder if she has that ‘thigh gap’ everyone has become obsessed with in recent years.

‘Sorry, I didn’t dress up for you.’ She grins and I wonder if she saw me looking. ‘I’m more of a “dress for comfort” kind of girl.’

‘You’re in good company,’ I say with a smile, gesturing to my T-shirt and jeans.

‘Oh, I love your shirt! Where did you find it? Astro Boy is so retro!’

‘It was a gift, ages ago. It’s way too big.’ I pull at the hem of the shirt, which hangs mid-thigh.

‘It really suits you.’ Rachel smiles warmly and I feel my cheeks heat up as though a boy I liked just paid attention to me. Rachel is not just gorgeous; she’s cool, confident. Like I used to be.

The kettle squeals as it reaches boiling point and, grateful for the distraction, I turn and pour hot water into the mugs. ‘Milk? Sugar?’

‘Thanks, yes. Milk and two sugars.’

I slop milk into both mugs, some of it splattering onto the counter, and stir in the sugar. ‘So,’ I say as I hastily wipe up with a grubby cloth and hand Rachel her mug, ‘how about you take a look at the room, see what you think?’

Rachel beams. ‘Great.’

I lead her down the hall. The room is clean and smells of fresh paint. Cat’s family had some furniture in storage so we decided to rent it furnished so we could ask for more money. The space looks neat and inviting. The room is a mirror image of mine, and beyond the glass sliding doors that connect to the balcony, the sea is visible through the mist.

‘Jesus,’ Rachel murmurs, so softly I can barely hear her. ‘I knew it would be nice, but I wasn’t expecting this.’

I smile. There’s something endearing about her reaction. ‘You’re available straight away, is that right?’ I ask. As soon as the words are out, I cringe inwardly. It sounds like I’m already asking her to move in.

Rachel nods, smiling wide. ‘I am, absolutely, yes.’ She takes a sip of coffee as she combs her fingers through a strand of fine, blonde hair. ‘I’m currently crashing on a friend’s couch – *not* ideal – until I find somewhere. I just moved from Melbourne, kind of in a hurry actually, so I’m still finding my feet.’

‘Oh! I’m from Melbourne, too.’

Rachel’s eyes pop. ‘Seriously? Wow!’ She beams, hazel eyes twinkling. Again, I have that feeling of exposure, of being really looked at. Being *seen*. I haven’t felt that in a long time. ‘You know – and please don’t think I’m crazy here – but I get this weird feeling like I already know you. You know how sometimes you meet someone and you just *click*?’

A smile touches my lips. ‘Yeah. Actually, I do.’

Rachel puts a hand over her mouth. When she pulls it away, she's grinning. 'I was thinking, oh my God, Mary's going to think I'm a complete freak saying that. But you didn't. Thank fuck!'

A laugh escapes and I can't believe it, I actually laughed.

'And now I've gone and said fuck! See how comfortable I am with you already?'

'Oh, don't worry. I swear all the time,' I tell her. 'Fuck is probably the most frequently used word in my vocabulary.'

Rachel giggles, an airy, girlish sound, and I find myself joining in. I feel lighter all of a sudden. Taller.

A sharp trilling intrudes and it's a moment before I realise what it is. I snatch my phone from my pocket.

Aunty Anne calling.

'Sorry,' I say to Rachel. 'I have to take this.'

'No probs.' Rachel waves a hand in the air. 'Take your time.'

I slip out on the balcony, sliding the door shut behind me. 'Hi, Aunty Anne.'

'Mary, darling.' The familiar voice is muffled by the teeming rain. 'How are you?'

'I'm fine, thanks. What's new?'

There's a pause. The storm's moving in, the mountain across the water barely visible through the mist. 'He's been here again.' There's a note of apology in her tone. 'Asking after you. Mentioning something about police this time.'

A cold shiver moves through me. 'Are you okay?' I ask. 'Did he ...?'

'I'm okay, darling. He tried his best to rattle me, but you know your old aunt, I stood my ground. I told him you were still on holiday. He called me a liar and ... a *fucking bitch* I think it was?'

'God.' I wince. Aunty Anne's not one to mince words. 'That's horrible. I'm so ...'

'Don't be sorry, darling, I just thought you should know.'

'What else did he say?'

'He said ...' A meaty cough comes through the phone; she's been recovering from bronchitis. 'Well, just what I told you. He called me a few things and ...'

I press a finger to my throat, feel my pulse quicken. 'And ... and what else?'

A heavy sigh. 'I suppose you could say there were threats.'

'Like what? Against who?'

Pause. 'Well, me. He was quite worked up. But that's hardly new! I'm sure he didn't really mean it.'

My throat tightens. I'm sick of it, this feeling. 'I'm calling the police,' I say. 'Doctor Sarah said if he makes any threats ...'

'Oh, darling, hush. I'm not telling you so you worry about *me*.' Aunty Anne's voice sounds tinny, distant. 'I've got your uncle and you know damn well no one gets past him. Next time, that bastard is going to leave with more than just a warning.'

My shoulders relax. My uncle, Lieutenant General John, is the main reason I felt okay to leave my aunty in Melbourne.

'I just want to remind you to be careful, Mary.'

'I am,' I assure her. 'He can't find me here and if he did, he'd never get into the building.'

Aunty Anne is saying something, but the rain is coming down in sheets and a clap of thunder drowns out her voice. I run a hand over my mouth, turn to go inside.

Rachel is standing in the doorway. With a gasp, I drop the phone.

'Sorry,' Rachel says, looking sheepish. She bends to pick up my phone and hands it to me. 'I didn't mean to scare you. You just looked so upset ...'

'Aunty Anne? I'll call you back,' I say into the receiver before ending the call.

'Are you okay?' Rachel asks. She has a glob of mascara in the corner of her eye; it's all I can focus on. 'You look like you've seen a ghost. Maybe you should sit down.'

I don't want to sit down. I want a glass of wine, and I want to call Cat and tell her what's happened. I want to smash something, but I do not want to sit down. 'No, I'm okay, really. Just some ... news from back home. Nothing serious.'

'You're sure?' Rachel's standing close, I can see flecks of gold and brown in her irises.

I take a breath, try to smile. 'Everything's fine. I've just got something I need to deal with. Sorry to cut this short, but ...'

Rachel's face clouds. 'Oh. Okay.'

'I'm definitely interested!' I blurt. 'I mean, this isn't because of you ... just bad timing. I'll give you a call later, once I've talked things over with the others.'

Rachel's face relaxes and she gives a small smile; for the first time, she seems uncertain. She steps inside, collects her handbag on her way to the door. 'Okay, thanks. That'd be great. I look forward to speaking to you again. I, uh ...' She ducks her head, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. 'It was really nice meeting you today.'

'Same here. Thanks, Rachel, I'll be in touch very soon.'

Rachel kneels to put her trainers back on, opens the door and walks out. I'm about to close the door behind her when she looks over her shoulder.

'Mary?'

'Yes?'

A pair of sympathetic hazel eyes stare into mine. 'I think you should go and have a lie-down or something. You really don't look too well.'

Chapter Four

As I approach the entry doors to the apartment block, a pungent, spicy scent invades my nostrils. It's probably coming from the sixth-floor apartment with the balcony directly above ours. The couple who live there are always cooking something exotic, in between screaming at each other and having noisy sex. But there's something not quite right about this smell. It's as though something has started to rot.

Holding a hand to my nose, I reach for the letter box to find it unlocked, the flap hanging from its hinges. Letters are scattered on the slate tiles below, one with a filmy, brown stain on the corner. Slick-skinned and weary from my walk, I'm thinking only of a cold shower, and it isn't until I've gathered the mail, shut and locked the flap and taken the lift to the fifth floor that I stop to think. Why was the letter box unlocked? Cat and I never unlock it; it seems strange anyone bothered to open it in the first place seeing as the envelopes usually protrude from the slot.

A scruffy beige suitcase with a hole in the seam greets me as I enter the apartment. It sags sadly against the white hallway wall like a stain. Rachel arrived at seven-thirty this morning, deposited her belongings, and immediately rushed off to work. She didn't bring much, as the room came furnished. So, all day today, the few items comprising Rachel Cummings' worldly possessions have lain where they fell, awaiting her return.

Flicking on the kettle and glancing at the clock (*five-oh-six!*), I change my mind. *Just a glass or two to end the day*, I tell myself as I open the fridge, take out a bottle and slosh the remains of last night's Pinot Grigio into a wine glass. There's plenty more in the bar fridge in the laundry room, I'm sure. Leftovers from the party.

The wine is cool and crisp as it passes my lips and, after a couple more sips, the familiar warmth curls in my stomach like a cat settling in for the night. Humming a catchy tune I heard on the radio, I flip through the mail. An estate agent advertisement, the electricity bill and a letter, the one with the brown stain on it, addressed to someone named Sophia Gates. It's the second time this person's mail has arrived here; Sophia Gates must have been the previous tenant.

I toss the letter into the recycling, take a long pull of wine and then pause, rubbing a finger along my lips. I knew someone named Sophia once. Or Sophie, maybe. I think for a moment but my mind's cloudy, and I can't remember anyone specific. It's probably no one important, yet I have that feeling I get at times, like I'm supposed to remember something but there's a brick wall in my mind and my thoughts stop there. A *blank space*, as I've come to call it.

My wine's nearly gone and no one's home yet, so I top up my glass with a bottle from the laundry. I go to my room, sit at my desk and flip open my laptop. I check my email, trawl through my newsfeed. Without planning to, I google the name Sophia Gates. Images, Facebook pages and LinkedIn accounts pop up, but I don't recognise anyone. I'm being stupid, paranoid as usual. It must just be a coincidence.

'Any mail?' Cat's voice calls from the kitchen, startling me. I hadn't heard the door.

'On the coffee table!' I tell her, gulping a mouthful before hiding the glass under the desk.

A moment later, Cat pops her head around the door frame, sleek black ponytail snaking over her shoulder. Her eyes are unusually bright, probably a result of her afternoon Pilates session. 'Is this all?' she asks, holding up the electricity bill.

'Yes. Uh, and there was one for the previous tenant.'

Cat looks at me sharply. 'Oh, where is it? Do you still have it?'

I shrug. 'Why is she so worried?' 'I just tossed it.'

Cat's shoulders relax. 'Okay. Good. I mean, I just couldn't be bothered collecting them all and taking them down to the estate agent's.'

I frown. 'Cat, did we know anyone called Sophie? At school or something?'

She stares at me for a moment. Then, slowly, she shakes her head. ‘No. Not that I can remember.’
‘Are you sure?’

Cat shrugs. ‘I don’t remember everyone we went to school with, Mary. Look, I’ve been meaning to ask. Have you got around to making that appointment yet?’

‘Appointment?’

Cat gives me a meaningful look. ‘With the psychiatrist. The one Doctor Sarah referred you to. What’s his name ... Doctor Chen? Doctor Chang?’

I worry my lower lip with my teeth, shake my head.

‘Mary.’ Cat clicks her tongue, glancing around the room as if looking for something. I imagine her eyes burning holes in the desk, spotting the wine glass hidden underneath.

‘It’s on my list, I swear.’

Cat eyeballs me with pursed lips, then releases a sigh that tells me she gives up. ‘Pizza for dinner?’

That coaxes a smile from me. ‘Obviously.’

As I sit, stealing sips of wine, drumming my fingers on the desk, I do the thing I always promise myself I won’t do, but then always do. It’s as though some invisible force is steering my hand. I type one letter and, as it does every time, the search engine remembers the sequence of words in an instant.

The articles pop up in the same order they’re always in.

Leads in murder investigation go cold.

Investigation meets dead end.

Murderer never found.

The same grainy black and white picture of his smiling, unsuspecting face stares out at me. And I wonder, for the hundredth time, if he ever saw it coming.

A breeze creeps in from the balcony door, fragrant with brine. Goosebumps rise on my arms; I shiver and close the browser window.

Chapter Five

24th November 2016

See? I'm keeping it up. I've promised myself I would. It seems, more often than not, I manage to break my promises to myself. But not this time.

I made it out on my walk today, so that's something. And I'm writing – that's another. But today was warm – too warm, thirty-four degrees – and in this kind of heat, I can't escape that it's officially 'that time of year' again. Decorations are up, songs are playing, adverts are plastered everywhere declaring joyfully that Christmas is coming! But, for me, they may as well be sounding doomsday signals.

When the weather starts to warm up, regular people get excited; they smile more, they go outdoors, they picnic on the beach. They dine al fresco – Mark loved that because it meant he could smoke. And, when it's too hot, they chatter and browse and brunch in shopping malls, escaping the heat in air-conditioned comfort as they prepare for another family Christmas.

Seeing them reminds me of everything I've lost. As soon as I feel that change in the air, the crispness of spring sinking into the muggy heat of summer, the anxiety creeps in. Because Christmas is when it all happened.

So that's where the benchmark has been set. Today I got out of bed, I took a walk, and now I'm writing in my journal. That's my measure of success. I even left my phone on last night. It's been an anxiety trigger lately, so I've kept it off during the night, holding my breath as I switch it on each morning, but there hasn't been any news. No further updates about him from Aunty Anne, which is good. But I can't help but feel it's the calm before the storm.

I suppose I should write it all out here, although I'm not sure I have the strength or the energy to go over it all again. Thinking about those days – still so recent, but a lifetime ago as well – makes me break out in a cold sweat. Melbourne feels haunted; the streets, the apartment, the bars and cafés – I can't picture any of them without remembering him. That's why, when I left him, I had to leave the city, too.

Mark and I lived in Fitzroy North in a bright, spacious two-bedroom apartment a few blocks from busy Brunswick Street. I can still hear the raucous laughter from the streets below, feel the dizzying warmth of the sun slanting through the bedroom skylight in the morning, stirring me from groggy slumber, the pair of us waking to the inevitable hangover. The smell of Mark beside me in bed: tobacco, aftershave and sweat-slicked skin.

In the beginning, I loved it there; the noise, the excitement, the constant feeling that something was happening and that I had to be a part of it. And yet I was never fully part of anything, as I was tethered to my past, and to Mark.

A country girl at heart, I spent many summers on my parents' prosperous vineyard estate, but, after they disappeared, the city became my adopted home. I had to escape somewhere, and those endless city nights, the frenzied crusade for pleasure, drowned out my dark thoughts. As I got caught up in my new world, the memory of those long, hot days in the vineyards picking grapes, my hair in golden braids, Mum and Dad drinking wine in the tasting parlour, grew fuzzy around the edges.

Mark never could have afforded the place we lived in, but I had my inheritance and my government disability payments, so I paid for both of us. I was only sixteen at the time, so everything had to be in Mark's name. Aunty Anne took some convincing, but, bless her, for all her big talk, she could never quite bring herself to say no to her poor orphaned niece.

Mark was twenty-seven back then and, when we first met, he said I was too young for him. But I figured he didn't really mean it; he thought that's what he was supposed to say, because he was always staring at me. I felt like he was trying to see under my clothes. Sometimes there'd be a glint of something – possessiveness, I suspect now – but it didn't occur to me to be frightened back then.

I met him at my group counselling session – the one I forced myself out of my self-made prison to attend. I was there for trauma-related anxiety and depression, following my parents' disappearance, and he was there for drug addiction. That should have rung alarm bells, but, in a strange way, it's like I was looking for exactly that – something new, something dangerous. Something to make me forget.

We weren't in the same group, but I saw him standing alone under a street light during a break one evening, the tips of his eyelashes illuminated by the fluorescent glow, smoke rising above his head in a dirty-white cloud. It made me think of something from an old movie, something sinister yet romantic.

He greeted me with a nod and offered me a cigarette. We smoked in silence, but I could feel his eyes on me, awareness prickling over my skin. It was a stimulus and I craved distraction – any distraction. This became our routine until one night when he asked me if I wanted to hang out with him and his friends later and I said yes. I didn't even hesitate. There was something in Mark. Something I was drawn to, that spoke to a need.

I found out he was moving to the city and needed a flatmate and, as I was desperate to move out from Auntie Anne's, where I'd been since everything happened, and be somewhere new, I figured it was perfect timing. Doctor Sarah had been telling me to try new things, meet new people – and although I was scared, I wanted to try.

One sticky summer evening, just after my seventeenth birthday, we were lounging on beanbags in the new apartment watching fireworks explode over the city. Mark offered me a puff on the joint he was smoking and I was feeling depressed and bored, so I didn't turn it down. We shared the joint and, as it was my first time, I was completely high after only a few puffs. I remember rolling around giggling, then starting to feel weird and tingly and then freaking out that someone was in the apartment.

Mark took me in his arms and spoke in soft, calm tones. His hands were stroking my hair and his breath was hot against my ear and then his lips were on my skin and soon we were kissing, our mouths fusing, hot and wet, his chest pressed against mine, his arms strong and hard under my hands. My mind kept whirring, wondering why it was happening, if it was because I was high, or was it Mark, and did this mean we'd end up together, or was it just because I was there?

I don't remember wanting to sleep with him, but I must have, because he hated men who tricked girls into sex. It was okay, or so I thought. I remember him on top of me and feeling a sharp pain, over and over. Afterwards, he told me I was the most beautiful girl he'd ever met and that he'd been holding back for ages because he thought I was too young. He'd been waiting for me to turn seventeen, because then, as his birthday wasn't until later in the year, it was like it was only ten years between us, which was nothing, really. I was still trying to understand how things with Mark had gone so far so quickly; I couldn't piece together the details. But I had got myself into it, and when he told me about his past – how his older brother had committed suicide when he was a kid, how at five years old he'd found him hanging in the shed – I was struck with all-consuming pity. I could see a deep sadness in him, something that spoke to my own pain. And he seemed to want to be together so intensely, I felt like I was already in too deep. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

We had fun together, for a while. Mark introduced me to vodka and the odd MDMA cap or line of coke, and it felt good. It was just the distraction I'd been looking for. It made me forget myself. I started not showing up for school and then dropping out completely. All I cared about was escaping – quieting my troubled mind with beautiful numbness.

We hadn't been together long when Mark convinced me I didn't need to keep seeing Doctor Sarah. 'If I'm making you so happy,' he'd say, 'what do you need her for? Aren't I enough?'

After I cancelled my last scheduled appointment, I didn't go back to Doctor Sarah for nearly three years.

Looking back, it's so easy to see what was coming. Mark could be anything he needed to be to control me. Attentive or distant. Complimentary or cruel. Cocky or meek. Playing the victim. It was dizzying, addictive. I convinced myself I didn't want 'safe' or 'predictable' – who'd want that when you could have spontaneous and thrilling?

But it was exhausting, too. He was using me up, my energy, my sanity. Day by day, piece by piece.

Sometimes memories of the three years that followed come to me in sensory waves, transporting me back. One cool autumn evening, Mark and I drunkenly weaving our way home from the club, me swaying in heels, the weight of his arm on my shoulder. Losing my balance, the sound of glass splintering as I drop a bottle of wine. His breath, sour in my face, his voice snarling ‘stupid, clumsy bitch!’ Later, the crunch of his fist going through the plasterboard wall, the dull thwack of his knuckles on my temple. The bright white spots dancing, the crimson when I shut my eyes.

After a friend’s party, when I’d spoken to a guy too long, light shining in my face – a torch, he’s shining a torch on me. I’m naked, I’d been undressing when he stormed in, drunk and high. He’s waving the torch in my face, ‘You think you’re so fucking hot, don’t you? You think you’re better than me. Look at you, you fucking slut. Who’d want you?’ And the mirror gleaming, catching the light as he turns it towards me. I see my pale, stricken face, my exposed body, eyes full of fear. I don’t recognise myself.

Another night, on my knees in the hallway. ‘Look what you’ve done,’ he says as blood and mucus drip from my chin. I’ve been throwing up again. It’s bad this time. Alcohol poisoning, I think. His face is pinched and white, a mask of fury. ‘You’re as low as a dog. Only a dog would do something like that.’ And he points to the floor, where my blood has stained the cream carpet, as though I’ve deliberately soiled it.

The times like that, when he didn’t actually hit me, were the worst. I can see his eyes; hard, yet lit as if by sparks. My shame fuelling his perverse pleasure. It felt like I was being punished for something, but I never understood what. I must have done something to deserve it. That’s how I felt, and that’s what I ended up believing.

I was easy to blame, being as troubled and lost as I was. I figured bad things were meant to happen to me. There was something in me that beckoned them. And he helped me to believe it because, apparently, I was the one who started it. I don’t remember anything like that, although there was this one night – I can see myself now, ranting hysterically, hitting at his chest, screaming for him to stop. Stop doing drugs, stop lying, stop stealing from me, stop dealing, just STOP. And I was so, so loud, so out of my mind, that it scares me to remember myself that way.

And then there was That Night. The turning point. But I’m not ready to talk about that yet.

You’d think I’d remember where I got the worst of my injuries – a raised scar on my chest that looks like the work of a small blade – but I don’t. What I remember is the humiliation, the shame, the fear and isolation.

There are different forms of abuse, you see. Doctor Sarah says that kind of abuse, the psychological kind, can be more damaging than physical violence. It’s harder to see coming, can be so insidious, so incremental, that it’s easier to tell yourself you’re imagining it than it is to see what’s really happening.

I never believed it was abuse until the end. Mark got worse just before I left. I’ll never know if it was the real him or just his drug abuse getting out of control, fucking with his mind, turning him from a sad, angry person into a psychotic one. He was so paranoid, thinking everyone – including me – was out to get him.

At two a.m. one night in early September, just over three months ago now, I grabbed the overnight bag I’d stashed in the cupboard while Mark was passed out, hailed a taxi and went to Auntie Anne’s. She didn’t say a word when I arrived. I stepped into her arms with a strangled sob and she just held me, listened as I told her fragments of the story, brought me endless cups of tea. She made up my old room and I knew without her saying it that I was free to stay as long as I wanted.

I spent a week holed up in that room, staring at the peeling paint on the ceiling. The collection of books, posters and stuffed animals seemed then to belong to a different person, a version of myself I no longer recognised. Like a childhood friend I’d outgrown. The rose-petal wallpaper and smiling stuffed toys that I once found so comforting now seemed to be mocking me, not oblivious but apathetic to the

fear I felt in my bones. Everything felt unbalanced, wrong. Yet I was too afraid to leave my room, too afraid of what lay in wait beyond those four walls.

My fears weren't unfounded. Mark came a couple of times, making his threats, even after Uncle John threw him out on his back. I knew I couldn't stay there. Not when he knew where I was.

I managed to muster the energy to change my phone number and only gave it to the people I trusted. It was a shock to realise how shallow that pool of people had become: Aunty Anne, Uncle John and Cat. There was no one else. No friendships to show for the years I'd spent with Mark, no one who cared enough to wonder whether I was okay.

Cat came. Of course she did. Aunty Anne called her, told her just enough, and it wasn't long before I heard a familiar knock on my bedroom door. Rap-rap-rap. Rap!

I remember the shame of having to tell her the dirty, rotten truth. Having to admit she was right. But Cat's calm, no-nonsense care was just what I needed. She didn't dwell, didn't say she'd told me so. She let me speak but didn't let me steep in my misery. This is our chance, she said. This is our chance to do what we've always wanted and get out of this dump. Start again. In Sydney, by the beach, the way we used to dream.

So we did it. Or Cat did it, I should say, and I willingly followed. Barely two weeks later, we were piling ourselves and our luggage into a coach, exuberant and terrified, waving goodbye to Aunty Anne as she stood on the porch, a hanky pressed to her mouth. I don't know what she was feeling, whether she was fighting tears or some other emotion. Aunty Anne's thoughts were rarely unknown, but her feelings were always a mystery.

Doctor Sarah dealt out her rules, of course. As did my aunt. But they both trusted Cat. They knew she knew my story, had my back, and would take care of things. Of me.

And so here we are. Starting over. Away from Mark and everything that happened in Melbourne.

Sometimes, still, the guilt slithers in. The seeds he sowed grow inside me. It's all my fault – I'm useless and selfish. I shouldn't have left him. I think of busy Brunswick Street, of the apartment, of those crazy nights and lazy days, the salty tang of fear. I can almost feel the permanent brick in my gut, the waiting and wondering, the rotting from the inside. What will he do next?

I think of those moments when he trusted me enough to let his mask slip, and I saw what no one had ever seen. Something small, startled. Something decaying slowly, eroding what remained of the good in him. Because there's good in everyone. Isn't there?

I suppose it doesn't matter. Mark, and my life with him, is in the past, and there's no going back. Melbourne is haunted now. Every street, every bar, every café. The ghosts of Mark and me are everywhere.

Chapter Six

'Mary.'

My fingers dig into the pillow and a groan escapes.

'Mary, Mary, quite contrary.'

I open my eyes to a room full of shadows, my heart thundering. There's a low whisper somewhere nearby.

Shhhhhhh. Shhhhhhh.

Is someone whispering? Is it the waves?

A scream pierces the air, followed by a thud.

I lunge for the lamp switch, and yellow light spills into the room. Jaunty shadows paint the walls, but there's no one here.

'You dumb, fucking bitch! This is the last time!'

'Fuck you, you don't even care! You never did!'

The voices are coming from outside. It's the couple upstairs, fighting again. They must be on the balcony.

I sigh with relief, but my heart is still racing and my mouth is dry. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and tiptoe out the door. The clock on the microwave reads 03:30 as I creep through the fragrant summer darkness into the kitchen. I could wait until my vision adjusts, but I'm dying for water, so I slide my hand along the hallway wall until my fingertips find the switch. Fluorescent lights blink to life and it's a moment before I can see.

Rachel stands in front of me.

With a shout I stumble backwards, the small of my back slamming into the countertop. *'Ow. Sorry, I ... I didn't think anyone ...'* I stop. There's something funny about the way Rachel's standing. And her expression. She's hunched over the counter, both hands flat on its surface, staring into what would have been darkness before I turned on the light. *'Rachel?'*

She remains silent, staring ahead. A strange chill creeps through me.

'Rachel? It's just me, Mary.'

She cocks her head, those golden-hazel eyes meeting mine, but they're blank. Unseeing.

I take a step backwards. Then something changes. I can't explain it. It's like there was a film over Rachel's eyes, and now it's peeling back and they're clear again. She's looking, not through me, but at me.

'Hey.' She smiles, blinks. She stares down at her hands, still pressed flat to the counter, and pulls them away as though she's been burned. She puts them behind her back, turns to me, smiles wider. *'Just, uh ... came to get some water.'*

'Right, yeah. Me too.' If I knew her better, I'd make some joke, tell her she was out of it like a zombie. I'd ask her if she was sleepwalking, whether that's something she does sometimes. I'd make sure she's okay. But we only met two days ago, this is her first night here, and ingrained social etiquette overrules. I say nothing.

'Did I disturb you?' Her pretty smile is still in place, but there's something in her expression. Worry? I can't help but notice the network of blood vessels in the whites of her eyes, like fine red cobwebs, and the dark circles beneath.

'No! No, you're fine. I'm just thirsty.' I quickly grab a couple of glasses from the washing-up rack and fill them at the sink. I hand one to Rachel.

It's as if the gesture vanquishes Rachel's strange mood. Her eyes shine as she takes the glass. *'Thanks.'*

'Sure.' I shrug, looking away, feeling like I should say something more, but *what?*

Muffled shouts sound from outside and Rachel glances towards the balcony doors. She purses her lips. ‘Are they always like that?’

I mirror her expression. ‘Often, yes, unfortunately.’

Rachel sighs softly. She turns to me, and the way the light hits her eyes makes them gleam. ‘Are you okay? After the other day, I mean. I got the feeling something really bad happened.’

‘Oh. No ... well. It’s nothing, honestly.’

There’s the sound of a door banging, more muffled shouts. Someone crying, pleading.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ Rachel looks so sincere. I’m touched that she would remember.

‘No.’ I shake my head. ‘Sorry, um ... I’d just rather try to forget about it.’

She tilts her head to one side and smiles. ‘I know the feeling.’ She pauses, not taking her eyes off me. ‘Well, night ... roomie.’ Her smile widens, as though she’s pleased with the idea, and she steps close to me, her arm brushing mine. Her hair smells flowery, feminine. She pauses – or do I imagine that? – before stepping past.

‘Night,’ I mumble, shuffling out of her way.

I ignore the weird feeling, the fact that my heart is racing and my senses have gone on alert. I rest my palm over the light switch, watching as Rachel’s slim, white figure crosses the living area and disappears into her room. Then I press the switch, plunging the world back into darkness.

Chapter Seven

26th November 2016

I woke up covered in blood.

That is the one thing I'm sure of, the one memory that has survived. But the events leading up to it are fragmented, uncertain. Sometimes it's hard to tell what's real and what I've imagined since. And that's what frightens me. The not knowing.

I said I'd write about the turning point. I'm ready now. It's been on my mind, little things throughout the day triggering memories, beckoning me to dive into those murky pools to see what lies beneath. When it starts to get dark, when the sound of the waves travels faster in the thin night air, it sounds like they're whispering to me. Telling stories from the past. Like what happened That Night.

Mark and I were at a party several months ago. We'd moved just south of the city – Mark's decision, of course – to an apartment in Black Rock, two streets from the beach. Some rich friend of his, a skinny, drug-addled insurance manager none too ambiguously nicknamed Dealer Dan, was hosting a party in his penthouse apartment overlooking Brighton Beach. To the untrained eye, Mark looked like he had something to celebrate. But I knew better. From the speed at which his stress levels had peaked, I could guess how bad it was – and the deeper the debt, the bigger the blowout.

Mark was on top form that night, high on coke and a cocktail of whatever else, looking for trouble. I'd taken shelter in the bathroom to clear my head after he disappeared without explanation. A line of coke had sent my head spinning in the worst way; that had never happened before, and at one point I was sure I was going to pass out.

That's when my memory gets sketchy. I remember looking at my face in the mirror, seeing irises nearly engulfed by pupils that seemed to pulse as I stared. My face was out of focus, my skin blotchy, unnaturally pale. Someone knocked on the door and, when I turned my head, I saw stars, and then I threw up in the sink until there was red behind my eyelids.

In search of Mark, I followed some people who were making their way down to the beach. But I don't remember how I got there – there's another of those blank spaces. Next thing I knew, I was by the shore. There were houses nearby, and I could hear people in the distance. I think they must have been running into the water; I remember silhouettes against a street light, squeals and laughter, and the rumble of the ocean.

I don't know what happened after that; I must have passed out. Sometimes there are snippets, like the sound of someone yelling, or maybe screaming, a face peering down at me, the ocean whispering its secrets. But mostly, it's blank.

When I came to, Mark was standing over me shouting, hands gesturing wildly, his eyes crazed and gleaming. He was staring at me, at something near my stomach, but I didn't know why, and a coil of panic tightened in my gut. When I looked down, all I could see was blood.

It was a while before my senses returned to me. The white noise in my head cleared and I could hear Mark ranting about something, some eight ball I'd supposedly been carrying for him. I had no idea what he was talking about, but he found the drugs in my purse, wrapped me up in his coat and dragged me to the car. As far as we know, no one saw us.

Later, I stood naked in our laundry, my arms crossed over my chest, shivering with disgust and fear as I watched Mark pile our clothes into the washing machine. As he switched it on and it slowly filled up with water, I knew in my bones that the blood turning the soap suds pink wasn't mine.

Whose it was, and how it got there, I'll never know.

Once I'd washed myself clean, I lay in our bed, awaiting the inevitable. But it never came. Mark paced the hall – I could see his shadow, hear his drunken muttering above the roar and hiss of the sea. But then he went silent and, not long after, I could hear rattling snores in the living room. He didn't

come to bed, which was strange. I knew my bag was packed and waiting for me if I needed it. But I started having second thoughts.

The next day we heard the news that a guy had been found dead at Dealer Dan's party. An unemployed twenty-eight-year-old man named Tom Forrester, known to police for drug dealing and petty theft. It was shocking to find out someone had died at a party we attended, possibly while we were there, but I didn't know the guy so I wasn't too cut up about it.

It wasn't until Mark started acting strangely that I began to worry. We'd talked about it once we had sobered up, and Mark had convinced me we had nothing to do with whatever had gone on. The guy was found bludgeoned to death. They think it was a brick, even though they never found the murder weapon. Pretty gruesome. If he was a drug dealer, the most likely scenario was that his death was related to money or drugs. Which was what they ended up suspecting anyway, even though the murderer was never caught. The fact I couldn't ignore then, and that haunts me now when I trawl through those old newspaper articles, is that Mark had recently lost a lot of money and – I suspected – was dealing drugs again.

Everyone who was at the party was questioned. We waited for days, for weeks, for the cops to arrive, but they never did. We couldn't guess why, but we considered ourselves lucky.

The blood. Neither of us could account for it. I racked my brain trying to remember details. If I'd seen anything that night, it could have helped with the investigation. I knew I'd headed towards the beach and passed out. I know I woke up with a bump on the back of my head and some bruises on my arms, but nothing more serious than my usual drunken mishaps. Though Mark had been missing and I couldn't vouch for where he'd been, he told me he was down the road scoring from a mate and, as that was usually the case when he was MIA, I hoped it was the truth.

Mark's story was that he'd come looking for me after meeting his mate, and that he'd asked around but no one knew where I was. Apparently he saw some guy passed out but thought nothing of it because 'it was a drug party, for fuck's sake'. So he went looking down by the beach and found me semi-conscious in a nearby side street. Covered in someone else's blood. Why was I there? What had happened to me?

He convinced me we had nothing to do with the guy's death, that it probably wasn't even the guy he saw. He said I should keep my mouth shut about the blood. It was probably mine, he said, even though there wasn't more than a scratch on my body. It was on him too, I remember that much, but he claimed it came from me, when he'd carried me to the car. He said that maybe I'd thrown it up or something. It would be stupid to say anything about it, he told me.

I knew he wasn't saying these things to protect me, like he claimed. He had enough of a record to get in some serious trouble if it was dredged up, so he was protecting himself from further involvement with the police.

I tried not to think about what it meant that Mark would just leave someone in a state like that. The guy was unconscious. Maybe Mark didn't see the blood – or maybe it wasn't even Tom Forrester he saw, who knows. But he walked away. He didn't even try to help. I wanted to scream at him, to get him to look at himself, look at what kind of person he'd become. But, by that stage, I'd learned a few things. And I knew what would happen if I questioned him.

Chapter Eight

The sand is gritty and damp between my toes as I pace the beach. It's late afternoon but the sun is still high and people are swimming, fishing, huddled in groups under beach umbrellas. I've always felt a tidal pull towards the sea. A water baby, Mum used to call me. I feel it now, the pull, as though the ocean is calling to my blood.

I spent many summers on the coast with my parents before they disappeared. It's hard to believe that was five years ago. Something inside me has always known they're not coming back. Not now, after all this time. And yet I watch the families at play, and hope lingers. *Hope dies last*, Doctor Sarah says. But that's not why I'm here, it's really not. I'm here because I have to be. Doctor Sarah says so.

The ocean is a different colour each day. Today it's grey-brown, the colour of a puddle after rain. The storms have stirred things up, clouding the water with seaweed and sand. The humid air is ripe with something, perhaps anticipation, another storm on its way, and I'm edgy, unable to shake the feeling I'm being watched.

I push on, forcing one foot to follow the other, ignoring the prickles on the back of my neck. If I don't do this, I've already failed, and I can't afford that. Doctor Sarah says it's a measure of my control over my anxiety. If I can manage a walk each day, I'm doing okay. I can feel proud of something. An achievement. Because there's not much else I'm proud of at the moment.

Children are shrieking and splashing, their browned, skinny bodies darting in and out of waves. A man stands nearby, motionless, facing the sea. Their father, I suppose.

There's movement in the fir trees lining the surrounding parkland, but when I look, it's only the branches quivering in the breeze. I close my hand around the device in my pocket. It's become a comfort thing, clutching it tight, running my fingers over the small, round buttons. It's a personal alarm, one that cost a small fortune, but it's worth it. I've had it since Aunty Anne started worrying every time I left her sight. Bringing it with me is another of her 'conditions' for me moving out. One press of a button and the nearest law enforcement is notified of my location. Someone will come straight away. You can't put a price on peace of mind, Aunty Anne said. I'm with her on that.

Walking clears my head and most days, after the initial fear, I enjoy it. But today something's off. I check my phone: no messages. I watch people going about their business: surfers bobbing on the waves, teenagers in school uniform eating burgers and fish and chips outside the kiosk, people strolling after a day's work, families squabbling and playing. How do they do it? How do they carry on each day, taking care of business, of their families, of themselves? I used to be able to do the same. I went to school, worked weekends at the local café. I had a family ...

I plug my mouth with a finger and bite down until I feel the familiar pain. Step after step, breath after breath, I come to the curve in the bay where the water is shallow. This is the spot. A few more metres and I can turn back, my day's quota done.

A heavenly beam of light has burst through the low clouds, illuminating each wave and ripple on the water's surface. There's a houseboat floating a few metres from the shore, a dilapidated-looking thing, mostly wood with peeling white paint, a blue stripe around its perimeter, little round windows in the cabin below its bow. I must have seen it before; those little windows seem familiar. I imagine peering out of them, watching the waves roll past. What would it be like to live on the sea, sailing away whenever you please?

My throat feels dry and I recall the bottle of wine I sneaked into my room last night. It's about time to replenish, so I opt out of walking the last few metres and head back to the apartment.

In the kitchen, Cat's washing up and sipping from a glass of wine. Perfect. I'd forgotten it's Friday – there'll be no hiding tonight.

She smiles at me over her shoulder. 'Hey, you! Nice walk today?'

'Yeah, it was fine.'

Cat nods at her wine glass. ‘The rest of the bottle’s chilling in the freezer. Mine’s warm, I’m afraid. I couldn’t wait.’ She grimaces as she sips.

‘Bad day?’ I open the freezer and help myself to the wine.

‘You have no idea. Gia’s been bawling to me again and I’m like, I already told you! Ben’s just not ...’

‘Ben’s just not what?’ a voice says from behind us.

Cat winces but then breaks into a giggle as Ben stands in the hallway, scratching the hairy, tanned flesh exposed between his shorts and T-shirt.

‘Have you been napping this whole time?’ she asks.

‘Yeah. Have you been talking about me this whole time? What am I “not”?’

Cat exhales through her nose. ‘Gia thinks you two are dating and I keep telling her you’re *not* interested.’

‘Who says I’m not?’

‘Um, *you* do. You say it all the time!’

‘I’m interested in certain *parts* of her ...’

‘Ugh. Ben, you just ...’

‘I was talking about her brain!’ Ben laughs. ‘I’m just not ... you know. Into her like *that*.’ He turns to me and grins.

‘Then you need to fucking tell her, you idiot,’ Cat snaps. ‘I’m sick of her just showing up here.’

Watching them, I feel suddenly tired. I pick up my glass and go to the couch, start scrolling through my emails. There’s a Facebook notification from a name I don’t recognise. *Jake Morns*.

Without thinking, I click on it.

I will find you.

My blood turns to ice. The wine glass trembles in my hand as the familiar panic rises. I set the glass down on the coffee table and bite down hard on my lower lip. What was I thinking? I should have known better than to believe blocking Mark’s email would work. This is him, it has to be. There’s no picture, of course, just the little blue thumbnail with a blank face. *Jake Morns*. Yup. I rearrange the letters ... *Mark Jones*.

Saliva sticks in my throat. I close my eyes, and Mark’s face appears. And then another image comes, as clear as day.

Mark’s mouth, a gaping black hole, open in a scream. Eyes like brimstone under the street lamp, a voice yelling ‘Run!’ and a name, but I don’t catch it. The waves are growling in the background, it’s hard to hear. I’m on the ground near a low wall, shivering though it’s not cold. Mark’s crouched on the ground. He’s holding something, something with sharp edges. Something wet and gleaming.

A bloodied brick.

‘Mary, Mary, quite contrary. What are we going to do with you?’

The room reappears around me, white curtains, early evening light. Birds are twittering.

‘Mary?’ Cat’s standing by the counter, pale-faced, her brow knitted.

Ben’s staring.

My stomach turns over and I stand and run, just making it to the bathroom in time.

Afterwards, I stare into the vomit-specked basin, feeling numb.

‘Mary?’ Cat’s voice calls from behind the door.

I don’t answer and she lets herself in.

‘Hey, what’s wrong?’

‘It’s Mark,’ I say, my voice devoid of emotion.

‘What’s Mark? What’s he done?’

I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand and notice it’s trembling.

Mind reeling, I turn to look at Cat. ‘He killed someone.’

Chapter Nine

27th November 2016

My mind slips back to that rainy night in late August. This time, there was no doubt that the blood was mine. I watched as the dark red droplets turned into pale streaks and washed away, and once I'd finished purging the contents of my stomach, I stood alone in the shower. The temperature was turned way up, stinging the fresh cut on my head, yet the shivering wouldn't stop. I felt like I was standing at a crossroads, my fate dependent on the path I chose. Danger lay behind and ahead, and though it didn't have a definite form, though I couldn't quite identify it, I knew that somehow I'd choose the right path this time. I had to. My life depended on it.

I coaxed the chunks of vomit down the plughole with my foot and jammed my hand over the body-wash dispenser repeatedly. Amber liquid oozed onto the white tiles and turned to foam beneath the spray, filling the shower with the scent of artificial peach. I aimed the shower head at the foam until the last of the mess bubbled its way down the drain.

When the tiles were clean, I sank to my knees, letting the hot water pound against my back. I splayed my hands on the tiles, noting my grazed knuckles and tattered fingernails. The back of my head hurt. My back hurt. Everything hurt.

Through the drone and whine of the running shower, I could hear rhythmic thudding in the next room. A single crash, then a loud monosyllabic exclamation; I couldn't make out the word.

He appeared through the fogged-up glass like a ghost. He looked different to me somehow, like the structure of him had changed, morphed. Maybe it was the residual chemicals in my system. Or maybe it was because something had changed.

'What are we going to do with you, Mary?' His voice was muffled, but I could hear the familiar sing-song tone in his voice. They were words that would haunt my dreams for months to follow.

After what he'd just done to me, I couldn't bear to speak to him. I was cold under the hot spray, so cold. He stripped off his boxers and opened the shower screen, stepping inside. My body reacted, trembling furiously. And I knew. I knew a line had been crossed this time, that he'd done something that couldn't be undone. Deep and cold in my bones, I knew that if I survived the night that I had to get out. There might not be another chance. If I didn't go soon, I wasn't going to get out of there alive.

I broke, then. I sobbed and sobbed, not from fear, astonishingly, and not with self-pity. I sobbed for us. For him. And he didn't know what was coming, that we were breaking apart, that we'd already broken. That the end was near and it didn't matter how bad he was, my skin would miss him, my brain and body would crave their fix and my heart would break a thousand times before it would heal. I cried for him, because I knew it would break him too. Because even monsters bleed.

He didn't know why I cried or why he held me, but still he did it and it made it worse, this small act of kindness, if kindness is what it was. If such a person knows what kindness is. He held me, wet and naked and shivering, and rubbed his hand down my back, pushed my wet hair out of my face and kissed my forehead with finality – or was I imagining that? – and I didn't know what he was thinking. I was too afraid to ask.

So I let him hold me and I cried and cried until my throat was raw, my voice hoarse. Because it didn't matter what he'd done. I had loved him. I had given myself to him and he had squandered that gift, cheapened it, and what was all of it for? Our love, if that's what it was, reduced to nothing. A drop in the ocean. A blip on the radar. A moment in time spent and lost and forgotten. Meaningless. Over.

And it was like I'd known it was coming. Was waiting for the moment when I'd know, for sure. This cold resolve, like steel in its certainty, took over. And the shivering stopped. The crying stopped. And we stood, not speaking, for what felt like eternity, with the white noise of water falling, and I don't know if it was the shower or the rain outside the window, the roar of the ocean in the distance.

We were still for so long, I wondered if we were dead. But he sensed the change in me, felt the shift in my body. And then his hands slid up my back, cupped the base of my skull. Gently, so gently, until his fingers tightened and needles of pain shot down my spine. His thumbs lifted my chin and he whispered, his breath hot in my ear.

'If you leave, I'll kill you.'

Chapter Ten

My head's pounding in time with my pulse as I stare at the peeling paint on the stark, white walls of the waiting room.

'Are you sure you want to do this?' Cat's words, spoken as I left the apartment this morning, reverberate in my mind. She thinks I should be talking to the psychiatrist Doctor Sarah referred me to. She thinks they'll be able to help with my memories, '*if they're real*'. She doesn't believe me, I can tell. And now the doubts have crept in, stealing through the hangover haze, dulling the burn of determination.

My stomach feels like a washing machine. I should have eaten something, but I lacked the appetite. Of course I don't want to do this. No one wants to have to do something like this. But what choice do I have? Knowing what he's done, that he's after me ...

'Miss Baker?'

I stand abruptly, like an officer called to attention. A twenty-something, slim female cop with fluffy, ash-blond hair tucked under her cap beckons me from the doorway.

'I'm Officer Dean. Come on through.' She smiles at me, perhaps noticing my unease, and I jerk my lips upwards in a poor imitation.

The hallway is narrow and hot; I wipe the beads of sweat that materialise on my forehead with the back of my sleeve. At the end of the hall, Officer Dean opens a door and, inside, a black-haired man, mid to late thirties, sits behind a desk, a coffee cup pressed to his lips. He sets the cup down and nods in my direction.

'Miss Baker. I'm Sergeant Moore. We spoke on the phone this morning.'

'Yes, of course. Hello.'

He gestures to a seat and I sit as the female officer nods at both of us and leaves the room.

'So, Miss Baker.' The sergeant smiles, a vague, reflexive gesture. He has a chin dimple and a mole on his left cheek the size of a five-cent piece. 'How can I help?'

My mind goes blank. I look from my lap to the sergeant's face and back again, trying to think, trying to rein in the anxiety.

'Take your time,' Sergeant Moore says. 'I have all day.' I can't tell if he's being sarcastic. His expression doesn't change.

My ears burn. I notice his gaze lowering and I wonder if I've overdressed. I felt a mess this morning, so I put more effort than usual into my make-up and clothing.

Moore taps his fingers on the notepad that lies open on the desk in front of him. 'You wanted to talk to me about the Tom Forrester case, is that correct?'

I sit up straight, try to look him in the eye. 'That's right.'

'What was it you wanted to tell me?'

I swallow thickly. Can I be sure of what I witnessed? Closing my eyes, I see Mark's cold stare, fingers curled around the bloodied brick.

If you leave, I'll kill you.

I glance at the notepad on the sergeant's desk, but he's moved his hand away. I take a breath. 'I want to tell you that I witnessed ... I ... I saw my boyfriend kill him. He killed Tom Forrester.'

Sergeant Moore regards me for several silent seconds. 'You saw your ... *boyfriend* ... kill Tom Forrester.'

'Ex,' I blurt. 'Ex-boyfriend.'

'Okay. Can you specify exactly what you saw?'

'I didn't ... I didn't see him *do it*, exactly,' I correct myself, wanting to make sure I tell the whole truth. 'We were at a party ... He ... my ex. His name's Mark. Mark went missing for a few hours and I went to look for him. I think I passed out for a while ... I'm not sure what happened.'

But when I woke up, or maybe it was before that ...’ My heart pounds in my ears. I’m jumbling it all up, not saying it right.

‘Go on.’

‘I saw him with the weapon. There was blood ... There was a brick. A brick with blood.’

Sergeant Moore’s lips thin. His eyes remain unreadable. ‘So ... he was holding a brick.’

I grimace. That sounds pathetic, like nothing. But he doesn’t know Mark like I know him. He doesn’t know the rest.

‘Yes. A brick with blood on it. It was the night Tom was murdered ... We were near where he was found.’ I’m not a hundred per cent sure that part’s true, but it can’t have been far – the body was found somewhere near the beach and I distinctly remember the sound of waves nearby.

‘That’s all you saw?’

I nod.

‘Do you know the whereabouts of this ... weapon?’

‘No. He must have got rid of it. Maybe he threw it in the ocean or something.’

Moore doesn’t say anything.

‘Look, I know it doesn’t sound like much, but if you knew Mark ... He’s dangerous. And it makes sense, it all makes sense. I saw Mark with a brick, the guy – Tom. He was killed with a brick.’

‘Yes, I’m familiar with the case.’ Again, I can’t read the sergeant’s tone.

‘Look, Mark knows I saw what he did. That’s why he’s threatening me.’

‘He’s threatened you?’ That seemed to get his attention.

‘Yes, I ... here.’ I show Moore the Facebook message.

Moore inspects my phone with a furrowed brow. ‘This isn’t a direct threat. Unless someone makes a threat of harm against themselves or someone else, we are unable to act.’

‘Yes, but he *has*! He’s threatened to kill me.’

Moore raises his eyebrows. ‘When was this?’

‘I ...’ I think back. ‘I don’t know. Three months ago?’

‘And you reported this?’

‘I ... well, no.’

Moore shakes his head. ‘Miss Baker ...’

I blow out a frustrated sigh. ‘Look ... that doesn’t matter. I know he did it! It adds up. Tom was a drug dealer ... my ... Mark was into drugs. He was dealing at the time, I’m sure of it!’

‘Hmm.’ Something in Sergeant Moore’s face has closed off. He looks almost bored, or annoyed, and this fills me with fear. Why isn’t he more concerned?

‘Had you been drinking at the time, Miss Baker?’

My cheeks burn. ‘I ... I’d had some wine, yes.’

‘And was that all?’

‘No.’ My voice comes out small. ‘I’d had a bit of ... cocaine.’

‘I see. What did you say your first name was again ...?’

‘Mary. Mary Baker.’

‘And your boyfriend’s name?’

‘*Ex*-boyfriend. Mark Jones.’

Sergeant Moore turns to his computer and starts tapping at the keys. His eyes scan the screen and he pauses, frowns. Starts clicking his tongue.

‘The thing is, Miss Baker, this case has already been investigated by the Victoria police. Although no one’s been charged, it’s suspected to be gang-related. Those gangs are hard to infiltrate, but they’ve got their best people on the job. Your *ex*-boyfriend isn’t in a gang, is he?’

‘I honestly don’t know,’ I sigh and reluctantly add, ‘but I don’t think so.’

‘See, the thing puzzling me most,’ Sergeant Moore says, rubbing the dimple in his chin, ‘is that everyone who was at the party the night Tom Forrester was murdered was interviewed by police. It’s

all here.’ He taps the computer screen, though it’s faced away from me. ‘And there’s no record of any statements from either you or a Mark Jones.’

‘Yes. Yes, I know ... because the police never showed up. We thought it was weird, too.’

Moore purses his lips. All friendliness has vanished from his expression. ‘I’ll cut to the chase, Miss Baker, so we don’t waste any more of each other’s time. Maybe you weren’t interviewed by the police because you weren’t actually at that party. Were you?’

My jaw drops. ‘What?’

‘It was a private party. There was a guest list. Everyone’s name was checked off that list, and neither yours nor your boyfriend’s name was on it. As far as the records are concerned, you were never there.’

I shake my head, at a loss. ‘I don’t ... I can’t explain that. I was at the party. I remember ...’

But Moore has stopped listening.

‘One more thing before you go,’ he says, sounding bored. ‘I believe you’re in possession of a personal alarm linked to the police triple zero emergency line and GPS system? I’d appreciate it if you refrained from using it except in real emergencies. After the next false alarm, our officers might not show up. And the device will be confiscated. Wasting police time is an offence. Do you understand?’

I feel the blood drain from my face.

‘Miss Baker?’

I don’t trust myself to speak. I don’t understand what’s going on. I haven’t used my alarm – not even once.

‘Look. I understand you’re afraid,’ Moore says, his voice softer than before. ‘But these things need to be addressed in the right manner. We’re not here to solve petty disputes. If your ex-boyfriend threatens you, feel free to contact me. Otherwise, I’ll ask you to refrain from wasting our time.’ He picks up a business card and holds it out to me.

I clench my fists to stop myself from snatching the card and storming out.

Sergeant Moore turns to his computer, his focus already elsewhere. ‘Officer Dean will show you out.’

I take the card and walk rigidly to the door, down the stuffy hallway and out into the blinding daylight.

Chapter Eleven

28th November 2016

I can't have come this far only to let the bastard win.

But it's impossible to think now. Impossible to do anything when my head's all over the place. I'm running low on meds and have had to ration them. I need my head clear so I can figure out what I need to do, how to make them listen, and that means sticking to the correct dosage. I know I need to book the appointment I keep putting off. I know Cat won't let it go until I do. But therein lies the dilemma; with the way I'm feeling, seeing someone new – someone that's not Doctor Sarah – is unfathomable. But if I don't, I'm going to run out of meds. Soon. And then I'll feel much, much worse.

Even now, despite everything that's going on – or is it because of it? – I'm afraid. I suppose it's natural not to want to have someone peel back your skin and poke around inside with that detached clinical manner some psychs can have. But I can't help thinking there's more to it than that. Can't help thinking, as I sometimes do, that something's missing. That there was something left unfinished with Doctor Sarah, and it's putting me off.

I owe Doctor Sarah my life. Just before I moved to Sydney, when we had our last session, I told her exactly that. She wouldn't accept that, of course. She said I was responsible for my own actions, that it was I who had the courage to leave. But I didn't feel brave. It felt like I'd dodged a bullet, that it came down to luck, more so than any deliberate action on my part.

It took a lot to get me to her office that day. I was ashamed. Because she'd seen the signs, had tried to warn me, and I'd run into the arms of danger anyway. It makes me determined to show her I can do this, that I won't repeat the mistakes of the past. I won't let Mark win this time.

Determination doesn't stop the fear. It doesn't make it easy. But that's what they say, isn't it? Courage is being afraid to do something and doing it anyway.

We hugged at the end of our last session, even though I know she's not really supposed to do that with clients. That's how close we'd become. I know she was proud of my progress, and so was I. She told me that she'd just given me the tools, but I'd saved myself. I know she's right, but it only feels like part of the story.

Ever since, I've had her in my mind. Her voice whispers in my ear when I doubt myself, and I know, I KNOW, what's true and what's right. I know to trust my instincts. I know what Mark has done, even if I can't remember.

There's so much crammed into my brain it hurts. I know what needs to be done and I know the steps to take, but it's like my thoughts are scraps of tissue paper caught in an updraught. Every time I reach out to grasp one, they swirl out of my reach.

I think of Doctor Sarah's last words to me as I left her office, her glasses perched on the end of her aquiline nose, her smooth auburn hair brushing the shoulders of her suit jacket as her eyes held mine.

'Take care of yourself, Mary.'

She didn't say it like a friend would, a throwaway line when saying goodbye, 'take care of yourself!' And of course she'd have meant it quite literally. I was her patient, and my mental health was her concern. But there was something in her tone that alerted my senses. Something that had me replaying the words in my head for weeks afterwards.

I know she feared for my safety. That's why there were so many conditions for me moving up here: the alarm, Cat's protection, seeing the new shrink. Maybe, as an expert, she had a better idea of what Mark was really capable of. Maybe she suspected what he'd done – or at least what he was capable of doing – before I realised it myself. But surely she would have said something if she thought I was in mortal danger ... wouldn't she?

Doctor Sarah didn't show any emotion in our sessions. She was a true professional and, even though I sensed that she felt for me, 'getting emotionally involved' would have been unprofessional. And, for the most part, she played her role to perfection. I never saw the mask slip. But that last time, I felt like she was transmitting a message, something her eyes were saying that her mouth wouldn't – or couldn't.

And a part of me can't help but wonder. What was Doctor Sarah holding back?

Chapter Twelve

After my visit to the station, I'm down two glasses of wine, drumming my fingers on the kitchen counter while Cat massages my neck. She's making soothing noises, but I'm sure she's thinking *I told you so*. I don't feel soothed. I'm worked up, irrationally angry at Sergeant Moore. The arrogant dick.

I'm angry at myself. I should have planned what I was going to say, should have mentioned Mark's previous offences – the guy has a record! – and what he did to me, what he's probably done to others. I should have shown them photos – I'm sure I took some at the party. I could prove it, prove I was there and that I'm not some crazy ex-girlfriend out for revenge. The anger feels good for the moment; it's better than feeling hopeless and scared.

It's almost eight thirty when the key turns in the front door and Gia breezes in, bottle of wine in hand. Ben chokes on his beer.

'Well hello to you, too, *bello*,' she says, planting a noisy kiss on his cheek.

Cat turns to me with wide eyes. She bites back a grin.

'Since when do you have keys?' Ben mutters.

'Oh, I ran into Rachel downstairs and she lent me her set. She said she'd bring back some stuff to make mojitos!' Gia laughs, corkscrew curls bobbing.

Cat and I glance at Ben, who shrugs, rolls his eyes and takes a swig of beer.

This is why you can't get rid of her, I think. *You need to grow a pair*.

We wait a while, but Rachel doesn't appear, so we open a bottle of wine.

'Cheers to us!' Gia says, and we clink our glasses.

Tonight's sunset paints the sky with brushstrokes of peach and lilac and the four of us are drawn to the balcony, where we lounge on deckchairs and beanbags. Cat puts on some chill-out music and we chat idly as an hour slips by, along with two bottles of wine.

'So what do you think of the new girl?' Gia's curly head is lolling over the back of the deckchair she's lounged on.

No one speaks for a moment. I clear my throat. 'She's sweet.'

'Ben thinks she's crazy,' Gia giggles.

Ben clears his throat. 'I didn't say that, exactly.'

Cat glances at me, then back at the view.

'Oh, not really of course.' Gia collects herself on her elbows, reaching down to claim her wine glass and throwing back the last mouthful. 'But he's dated crazy before. I think he thinks he's an expert.'

'Ben thinks he's an expert on a lot of things.' Cat rolls her eyes. 'But you don't have the best track record, do ya buddy?'

The two girls dissolve into wine-induced giggles as Ben sulks on his beanbag.

'But seriously,' Gia says in a stage whisper, sculpted eyebrows raised. 'Have you guys noticed that Rachel's *really* thin? And she wears that big, baggy hoodie all the time, which I find weird because girls like that usually like to show off their bodies, you know?' Gia illustrates her point with a shake of her shoulders, which makes her breasts jiggle.

Cat nods as she stares into her wine glass and my hand tightens around mine.

Okay, Rachel wears baggy clothes, I've noticed that too. But it feels too early to be making any kind of judgement. I don't want things to get awkward in the apartment if we start gossiping.

'Maybe she's just got body issues,' Cat says.

'Maybe she's hiding a deformity or something!' Gia exclaims, like she's taking pleasure in the idea.

Ben's pointedly ignoring the conversation.

‘Don’t say that,’ I snap, and Gia’s eyes widen. She turns to Cat, but Cat looks away. Just at that moment, I see movement in my peripheral vision and turn to find Rachel standing in the doorway, holding a bottle of rum and a bag full of limes. Her eyes are dark, like the light behind them has been switched off. Without a word, she turns and goes back inside.

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