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FROM THE DESK OF

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# Gemma Rose Tucker

## Hallie's Birthday Party—THE PLAN

- Sneak onto the party boat without getting caught (pretend to be caterer. Do hair and makeup first!).
- Pack fancy dress (borrow from one of Bruce's exes. She won't know).
- Make sure Gwyneth finishes putting together the Hallie footage.
- ~~-Talk to Josh about what's going to happen~~
- ~~-Ask Josh what was up with that moment in the ice-cream freezer.~~
- ~~-Tell Josh you're not sure what you're feeling about him because lately you've been having feelings for Ford~~
- Avoid Josh.
- Avoid Teddy.
- If Teddy approaches, go in the other direction. (But what was up with that kiss the other day? He's HALLIE'S boyfriend now. you know, since he dumped me out of the blue in Target and I later found out he'd been cheating on me with her for months. BUT they're together now, and he

shouldn't be kissing me, even if it was just a cheek-kiss-gone-wrong. Do I need to remind him about that?)

-No. Just avoid Teddy!

-Talk to Sophie about Reid. If she really just wants to be friends with him, maybe she should pick a different dress to wear? The poor guy's only human, after all. And it's TOTALLY obvious he's in love with her.

-Talk to Sophie about maybe not dating only bad boys. Especially since they always turn out, well, bad.

-Remember to call Dad in California after the party. He's probably still mad—not surprising, after Hallie sent him my old journal—the one that detailed all the things I was trying to do to make her miserable when we were eleven. But Dad needs to understand that things might have been different if he'd TOLD me about the fact that he was dating Hallie's mother, Karen. Instead I found out by accident, and was terrified it meant he and my mother would never get back together. So of course I panicked and tried to make Hallie miserable so Karen would take her away. And then things got really out of control, and Karen's career got wrecked. But the journal doesn't show that Hallie spent the last five years plotting her

- revenge on ME—stealing Teddy and spending the whole summer getting back at me.
- (If necessary, remind Dad that Karen now has a hugely successful career as a pseudonymous author of vampire erotica. So, really, things worked out for the best.)
  - Tell Dad that Hallie tried to get me framed for a crime and ARRESTED earlier this summer, in addition to charging nine hundred dollars' worth of cheese onto his credit card (don't need to mention that I tricked Hallie into getting her hair cut short or that I got her fired from her babysitting job. These are the kinds of small details he doesn't really need to know).
  - Blend in at the party—be there when the video plays that shows JUST how horrible Hallie is. How many terrible things she did to me over the course of the summer. How she tricked Teddy into being with her in the first place and stole him away from me. Teddy and everyone will finally see the truth about her!
  - Try to grab a mini-cupcake for Ford. He loves those.
  - charge phone.
  - Buy more stationary.



# CHAPTER 1

I shifted in my hard straight-backed chair and tried to ignore the fact that I could feel frosting starting to dry on my cheek. I had been uncomfortable many times in my life—and certainly *many* times this summer, like when I'd been at a pool party and my bathing suit had started to disintegrate—but this probably took the cake. Sitting in the world's least comfortable chair, wearing a borrowed dress that had gotten ripped at the shoulder, frosting in my hair, and getting yelled at by an angry ship's captain for fighting while my dad shook his head disapprovingly . . . it won *My Most Uncomfortable Moment*, hands down.

"I've just never experienced anything like this before!" the captain was saying as he tried to pace around his office. It seemed like maybe he was used to pacing when he was upset, but this was made more difficult by the fact that the office wasn't very big to start with, and now it was filled with me, my dad, Hallie Bridges, and her mom, Karen—not to mention all the baggage

we'd dragged in there with us. "I mean, the last thing I expect when agreeing to have a birthday party on my boat is that the guests will end up brawling and throwing cake at each other, to the point where they have to be physically separated!"

I glanced over at Hallie, who was in the chair next to me. She was sitting up ramrod straight, and I could see that it looked like the heel of one of her shoes was broken off, and her short pixie cut was beyond mussed—and slightly blue, due to the frosting I'd rubbed into it when we were fighting. I closed my eyes for just a second, still not quite able to believe it had happened. It was something I *never* normally would have done . . . but then again, this whole summer could fit under that heading. I hadn't planned to fight with Hallie tonight. Sure, I'd gone to the party with the goal of playing the video compilation that showed the worst of Hallie. It was straight from the source, too, Hallie revealing the truth about who she was—but accidentally, because she didn't know I'd spent the last month with a camera clipped to my shirt.

But even though I'd intended to show the video to everyone—and, once and for all, put an end to this revenge war of ours—I'd had a change of heart at the last minute and called it off. I'd been ready to walk away from all of it. But the video had gotten played anyway, thanks to Gwyneth Davidson and her own secret agenda, which had been unknown to me until the moment it was too late to stop it. Hallie had stalked over to me, furious, as soon as it was over, and while I'd started to explain it hadn't been me, she hadn't given me the chance to continue. She'd shoved me, hard, and when I pushed back to steady

myself, something in me had snapped. All the buildup of a summer of secrets and lies and escalating revenge plans had suddenly come rushing out, and the next thing I knew, Hallie and I had been fighting—dress-ripping, cake-throwing *fighting* in front of everyone, in front of the whole party.

“Do you have anything to say for yourselves?” the captain asked now, looking from me to Hallie.

Hallie turned and looked at me, and I could see there was still fury in her eyes. “I have something to say about the security on this boat,” she snapped. She pointed at me, even though it wasn’t really necessary in a room this small. “Somehow this *person* was able to board the boat and then ruin my party, when she was explicitly not invited.”

“Oh, you think *I* ruined your party?” I asked, turning to face her. “I think you did that on your own.”

“Listen,” Hallie snapped, her voice low and seething. “If you think—”

“Girls!” This was my dad, looking back and forth between us, bewildered. “Really. This is getting out of control.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but then all words left me as once again my gaze drifted down to Karen’s hand—to her *left* hand, and to the giant ring currently sitting there.

The sight of it had been enough to knock all words from me as Hallie and I were pulled apart by our respective parents. Just seeing my dad there had been a major shock on its own—he had told me he was in California, where he lived during the year, working on his latest screenplay. So to see him, in the Hamptons, on the boat for Hallie’s seventeenth-birthday party, had thrown

me for a loop. But I wasn't done being shocked just yet—Hallie had noticed the ring on her mother's hand at the same moment I had. Before we could get an explanation, though, we'd been hustled in here by the captain while the DJ had started playing music again, clearly trying to get the party going after Hallie and I had so decidedly derailed it.

And now, as I looked from my dad to Karen, I couldn't quite believe it was happening, even as the evidence was right in front of me. They had gotten engaged—*engaged*—without even talking to me about it first? My dad hadn't even told me he was dating Karen again, which I thought he might have been able to mention, if he was serious enough about her to propose. Looking back, I should have read the signs—my dad had been happy and distracted, in a fuzzy state for the last month. And he had stopped complaining about having to adapt the film version of *Just Bitten*, the best-selling erotic vampire trilogy. When I'd figured out that the author was actually Karen writing under a pseudonym, I should have put two and two together, especially considering all the time my dad had been spending with the author. But I'd been so caught up in my own drama, I'd missed what was right in front of my face.

“You want to talk about out of control?” Hallie asked now, turning to face her mother. She pointed at Karen's hand, and I realized Hallie had just been thinking the same thing I was. After a summer of either never knowing what she was thinking—or being two steps behind her—it was a bit of a shock. “What's going on there? Don't you think you might have *mentioned* it?”



“Yeah,” I said immediately. Hallie turned to look at me, and it seemed like she was as surprised as I was that we were on the same side of things for once.

“That’s not the issue here,” Karen said as she folded her hands behind her back, her cheeks going pink.

“Exactly,” the captain said, starting to look increasingly uncomfortable that we were bringing personal business into this. “The issue at hand is the behavior that was exhibited, not to mention the damage done, not only to this vessel, but to its reputation. We can’t be seen as an operation where fights break out and destruction is allowed to flourish.”

“I wouldn’t have felt the need for destruction,” Hallie snapped, “if someone hadn’t snuck onto the boat *illegally* and humiliated me in front of all my guests!” Her voice cracked on the last word, and she scowled, like she was angry at herself for showing even the tiniest flicker of emotion. She sat up straighter and crossed her arms over her chest—then uncrossed them when she looked down and must have realized the front of her dress was covered in cake.

“And like I’ve been trying to tell you,” I said, feeling the need to defend myself, especially given the way my dad was currently looking at me, “*it wasn’t me*. I tried to call it off, but Gwyneth went ahead and played it.”

“Gwyneth . . . Bruce’s daughter?” my dad interjected, looking not angry any longer, just baffled. “Why would she do that?” He looked around, like she might be hiding somewhere in the office. “Is she here?”

“She’s at the party,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady but

not able to stop myself from seeing Gwyneth and Josh on the side of the boat, kissing. I wasn't even sure what I was feeling for Josh . . . and I was pretty sure I had moved on from him after he'd made it abundantly clear he was done with me. But still, seeing him and Gwyneth kissing—and seeing the way he'd looked at her—had hit me harder than I'd been prepared for it to.

“Wait, the Gwyneth who's dating Josh?” Karen asked, now sounding as puzzled as my dad.

“No, a *different* Gwyneth,” Hallie snapped. Karen's eyebrows flew up, and a moment later I saw Hallie pale slightly, like she'd just realized she'd crossed a line. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“Why would Gwyneth have done that?” my dad asked.

“Exactly,” Hallie said, turning to glare at me again. “It makes no sense. Gemma's clearly making it up.”

“It's because she's making a *documentary*,” I said, glaring right back at her. “About us. And she needed your reaction for the third act, or something.”

“I thought her documentary was about Bruce,” my dad said, his brow furrowed. I wasn't sure how to tell him I didn't think it was going to get unfurrowed in the near future. “And me,” he added after a moment, no doubt thinking back to the last month we'd all spent staying in Bruce's house, tiny cameras clipped onto our shirts, giving them back to Gwyneth every night so she could bank the footage.

“She said it was too boring,” I said, and it looked like a tiny flicker of hurt crossed my dad's face before he returned to looking bewildered. “Um, sorry.”

“Wait, someone was *filming* on the boat today?” the captain asked, and I blinked as I looked over at him. I’d almost forgotten he was there. “I wasn’t made aware of that. Did they get the proper permits?”

“You really expect me to believe that?” Hallie asked me, ignoring the captain completely, but with less confidence than before—like some of this was starting to ring true to her.

“Believe what you want,” I said. “It’s the truth.” I looked over at my dad and Karen. “And she was the one who leaked Karen’s identity to the press,” I said, hoping they would believe me and not just think I was passing the blame on to Gwyneth. “Not me. She said she needed to create more drama.”

“So much for a documentary,” Hallie muttered, and I tried not to let the shock appear on my face that we had now agreed on two things in the span of a few minutes. I was sure it was an anomaly, that was all.

“Wait just a minute,” my dad said, shaking his head. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

I shook my head. “It does, though,” I said. “Gwyneth is a lot more like Bruce than you realize. And what would Bruce have done in this situation?”

I saw a look of understanding pass over my dad’s face, and he nodded. Bruce Davidson, his former college roommate-turned major Hollywood producer, was ruthless when it came to getting his movies made, a trait his daughter, I’d realized just a bit too late, had clearly inherited.

“Bruce?” the captain repeated, looking between us.

“Never mind,” I said quickly, feeling like there was really no

need to involve sea captains in this. If we did, I knew Bruce would suddenly get way too interested, and the next thing you knew, he'd be developing a thriller about a party on a boat gone wrong.

"So can we go?" Hallie asked with all the dignity one can muster when there is frosting in your hair.

"Yes," the captain said, looking relieved we were coming back to the issue at hand. "I mean, no. We need to discuss the next steps. The last thing I want is my boat getting a reputation as the kind of vessel where these types of shenanigans happen."

"I assure you . . .," my dad started, just as the walkie-talkie on the captain's desk started crackling.

The captain held up a hand as if to say *Just a minute*, and picked up the walkie. "Yes?" he asked, and as I watched, his expression grew more grave. "Uh-huh," he muttered, turning away from us and holding the walkie up to his ear so we couldn't hear anything being said by the person on the other line—just the sound of static. "Okay," he said as he turned to us again and set the walkie back down on his desk. "We're going to need to revisit this another time. Right now I need all of you back on deck as quickly as possible."

"What's going on?" Karen asked, clearly picking up—like I had—on the captain's tone, which was grave and no-nonsense . . . the way you sounded when something was really wrong.

"This boat is going back to shore immediately," the captain said as Hallie and I got to our feet. "All nonessential emergency boats have been ordered to return to shore."

"Um," I said, wondering if there was something I'd missed. "Why?"

“We just got a report from the National Weather Service,” the captain said, his voice more serious than ever. “We need to get back to shore ASAP. There’s a major storm front bearing down on the Hamptons.”

I glanced over at Hallie, meeting her eyes just as the first clap of thunder sounded.

## CHAPTER 2

“Wow,” Sophie said from the backseat, her voice worried. “It’s really coming down out there.”

I looked out the window and then across Bruce’s SUV at my dad, and folded my arms over my chest. The storm the captain had warned us about didn’t really seem to be happening—to me, it didn’t look like anything more than heavy rain with occasional flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder. It really seemed like every other summer storm, *maybe* a tad heavier than usual, but not by much. I honestly wasn’t sure this whole thing hadn’t just been a ploy by the captain to bring in the boat early and get us all off his ship. “Uh-huh,” I said a moment too late. If I’d been answering anyone else but Sophie, I would have worried I was being incredibly rude, but she’d been my best friend pretty much all my life, and I knew she would forgive me for being distracted.

During the year, Sophie lived in Putnam, Connecticut, like me. But she’d shown up in the Hamptons earlier this summer,

needing a distraction after a bad breakup, and had ended up staying and then babysitting the world's least likable twins. She'd gone to Hallie's party with Reid Franklin—Josh's roommate from boarding school who was spending the summer with him after he'd been fired from his internship—but in the confusion of everyone hustling off the boat and getting into their cars at the marina, she'd walked over to my car, probably out of habit, and ducked in before the rain got really bad. My dad had also headed over to the SUV after a quick, whispered talk with Karen. Since I hadn't even been aware he'd been in this time zone, let alone this state, I had no idea how he'd gotten to the boat in the first place. But when he held out his hand for my keys, it was clear he was coming back to Bruce's with us—and he'd be doing the driving.

A lot had happened quickly when we were hustled out of the captain's quarters—the embers of the party were pretty much squelched out when the announcement came over the PA system, warning there was a storm approaching and there were life jackets available for guests who wished to wear them. I saw Hallie rolling her eyes at me as I took one and belted it around my waist, but I didn't care. It wasn't that I thought some massive storm was going to hit us—though it did, in fact, look like all the other boats around us during the party were making their way in as well—but that I wasn't entirely sure Hallie wouldn't shove me overboard if she got the chance. I also wasn't entirely sure Gwyneth wouldn't do the same thing and tell me it was Hallie, just to give her documentary a little extra excitement.

But the life jacket had somehow come with me in the confusion, and it was now sitting in the backseat next to Sophie, who was keeping up a mostly one-sided conversation about the weather, clearly trying to mitigate some of the silent, angry vibes flying back and forth between my dad and me.

Though we hadn't said anything to each other beyond the basic rudimentary topics about the weather and the best route home, I could sense the tension brewing between us. And it wasn't just that I was mad at my father (which I was). It was also that he was mad at *me*, and I could practically feel it coming off him in waves.

"Sure is," my dad said in response to Sophie, his voice flat, as he turned the wiper speed up. It *did* look like the rain was starting to come down harder now, I had to admit. But it still didn't look like anything worth hauling in a boat over.

I squinted out the rain-streaked window, trying to get a sense of where we were. I wanted to go home and change out of this dress and wash my hair until I was sure there was absolutely no frosting left in it. But mostly, I wanted to not be in this car anymore, confined with my dad, both of us mad at each other.

"When we get back," my dad said, hitting the turn signal with a little more force than was probably strictly necessary, "we're going to call your mother. I don't care if she's in Scotland. She needs to know what you've been up to this summer."

I felt a dull heat creep into my cheeks. "Sure," I said, trying to keep the anger I was feeling out of my voice. "Hey, while we're



at it, why don't we also tell her you decided to get *engaged* without even talking to me about it first? Or, you know, even telling me you were dating someone?"

"Oh, look," Sophie said, her voice straining to be cheerful. "A traffic jam."

"That is not the issue here," my dad said, but I could tell he sounded rattled.

"I think it is," I snapped.

"So I'm just going to put on my headphones," Sophie said as I glanced behind me and saw she was putting her earbuds in. "Not going to be able to hear anything that's happening, that's for sure!" She turned and stared out the window, and I was pretty sure she wanted to be out of this car just as much—if not more—than I currently did.

"I just . . ." I started, then took a breath. While I was pretty sure Sophie could probably hear what was happening, despite the sound of her music coming through her headphones, I needed to get this out. "I just don't understand why you wouldn't tell me something like this," I said, hearing in my voice the hurt I wasn't able to keep hidden. As I spoke, I realized it wasn't just about this—although this was a big part of it. It was about this whole summer, and how I hadn't felt like I could talk to him about what was happening. It was about how I'd realized, in the last two months, that my dad and I stuck to the surface, neither of us going too deep or sharing too much. And that had been fine, or at least not as noticeable, when I'd only seen him on vacations and holidays, a few months a year. But living

in the same house with him all summer, neither one of us telling the other the truth . . . it was harder to ignore. And I really didn't like it.

"I tried," my dad said after we'd driven in the rain, in silence, for a few moments. "I asked how you would feel if I started dating someone."

"Yes," I said, feeling my frustration start to rise again, "but you said it like it was a hypothetical. Not like it was already happening!"

I let out a breath, trying to get control of my emotions again. I wanted to be able to talk to my dad—just like I'd wanted to tell him, five years ago, how much it had hurt me when I'd found out he was secretly seeing Karen. And how maybe all this—including where I'd ended up, in my ripped dress and frosting-covered hair—could have been avoided if we'd just told each other the truth.

My dad swung into Bruce's ridiculously long driveway, and I had to squint through the rain just to see the house in the distance. Bruce's mansion was large enough as to make no sense whatsoever, and you usually didn't have trouble spotting it—quite the opposite, in fact. When I couldn't see it right away, I realized just how hard the rain had started to come down—and finally conceded that maybe the captain was on to something after all.

"Oh, look—the house," Sophie said, sounding beyond relieved as my dad pulled the car into the garage. She took her earbuds out, and the car had barely been put into park before she was opening her door and jumping out. "I'm just going to

head in. See you guys in there,” she said, already speed-walking toward the door, making it abundantly clear just how uncomfortable we’d just made her car ride.

She slammed her door, and my dad cut the engine but didn’t make any move to get out of the car, so I stayed put as well. There was silence between us, the only sound that of the garage door swinging shut, muffling the rain coming down hard outside and beating against the roof.

I glanced around. Normally, the garage housed the cars of Bruce and my dad, along with several old bicycles, none of which ever seemed to have quite enough air in their tires. But now there was barely enough room for the SUV, since the garage was currently filled with construction equipment. Bruce had started to build a helipad earlier this summer (despite the fact that he didn’t own a helicopter), but work on it had been halted when Teddy had chained himself to a backhoe in protest of the destruction of the habitat of the marsh warbler. And it looked like the garage was where the equipment had been stored in the meantime.

I saw that Gwyneth’s hybrid was parked where it always was, next to Bruce’s ridiculous sports car—it was bright purple and low-slung, and nobody living in the house (including Bruce) had any idea how to drive it. “Looks like Gwyneth beat us here,” I said as I gestured to the car, then realized a moment later maybe she hadn’t driven herself over to the party. I’d had no idea she was even going, since she’d kept the fact that she was dating Josh to herself. Though, given that she’d just publicly humiliated his sister at her birthday party, I wasn’t sure how much

longer that relationship was going to last. But either way, in the hustle of everyone leaving, I'd forgotten about Gwyneth—and suddenly worried she was stranded at the marina, looking for a ride home.

A second later, though, I remembered who I was thinking of. Gwyneth was not the type to get stranded anywhere. She was great at taking care of herself—no matter what the consequences might be for anyone else.

“Looks like it,” my dad said, matching my tone, and hearing this, I felt my stomach sink. Was this what we were going to go back to—one moment of getting close to maybe talking about something real only to revert to talking about the most superficial stuff immediately after? Suddenly there was so much unsaid between us, I wasn't even sure how to begin to fix it.

But, I realized a moment later, maybe there was a reason neither one of us was making a move to get out of the car yet. Maybe my dad *wanted* to talk to me about real stuff, wanted to open up, but just didn't know how. And maybe I'd have to be the one to help him get there. “I . . .,” I started, then took a big, shaky breath, feeling like we were entering uncharted territory, and I was without a map or a GPS or any kind of guide that would tell me if I were heading in the wrong direction entirely. But I figured there was nothing to do but jump in. “I'm really sorry about everything that happened with Hallie this summer,” I said. It was like I was feeling my way along in the dark, not really sure where I was going but just needing to keep moving forward. “And I am *really* sorry for what I did five years ago. I've never stopped being sorry about that. I tried, earlier this summer, to

make up for it, but . . .” My voice trailed off as I realized my dad probably didn’t need to hear, at this moment, how I’d gone under Sophie’s identity to try to make things right with Hallie . . . not knowing, of course, that Hallie knew exactly who I was and was using that to her advantage, extracting her revenge at every turn. I glanced across the car. My dad was looking down at the steering wheel, not speaking, but I could tell he was listening.

I took a breath and went on. “But I guess I never felt like I could tell you about it? And that’s not good. I mean . . .” My voice was starting to get shaky, and I drew in a sharp breath trying to gather myself. It was feeling like a lot of old wounds, old hurts, were threatening to rise to the surface, and I pushed back against them as hard as I could, just trying to get through this. “I mean, you’re my dad,” I said, making myself put a lighthearted spin on the last word, so I wouldn’t burst into tears. “And I want us to be able to tell each other everything.” I paused then, realizing what I’d just said. “Well, maybe not *everything*,” I added quickly. “But more things. Most things. What . . . I mean, how does that sound to you?” I held my breath as I looked over at him, hoping maybe this could be a way forward for us. Because, really, all this—the whole mess with Hallie—had begun when he hadn’t told me about Karen. If he had, maybe I wouldn’t have acted the way I did when I was eleven. Maybe I wouldn’t have spent this whole summer first trying to make things right with Hallie, and then vowing retribution and trying to make her pay. Maybe I could have told him about how the thing I was most afraid of when I’d found out he was first dating Karen—that he’d leave to

be with her family and I'd never see him again—had actually come to pass when he'd moved to California and out of my daily life, so I only saw him a few times a year. How I missed him and wanted this—wanted us—to be better.

My dad had been nodding along as I'd been speaking, and now he took a deep breath of his own. "I think . . .," he started, then shook his head. "I think I have to tell you something," he said, and I could hear in his voice that he was nervous, and not like when he was nervous because Bruce was yelling at him about getting his draft in on time. Nervous in a real way. "Karen and I," he said, running his hand along the steering wheel, then letting out a breath and turning to me. "We didn't get engaged."

"Oh," I said, blinking at him in surprise. I felt myself start to smile, and it was like a weight was slowly lifting off my shoulders, like with every second I was starting to feel a little lighter. "Well, *good*," I said with a small laugh, realizing maybe this whole thing had just been a misunderstanding. After all, they hadn't exactly come out and *said* they'd gotten engaged, had they? Maybe Karen was just into wearing huge diamonds on her left ring finger. I mean, it was possible. I didn't know her life. "That's great," I said, feeling my smile widen, "because—"

"I mean, we didn't get *engaged*," my dad said again, interrupting me. "We got married."

## CHAPTER 3

I stepped inside Bruce's foyer, my dad behind me. I looked around, feeling a little numb. Everything appeared just as it had been when I'd left earlier that afternoon—it was a gigantic room, bigger than my bedroom back home, despite the fact that its only purpose was to lead you to the other rooms—the TV room and kitchen off to the left; straight ahead, the grand curving staircase that brought you up to the main bedrooms; and the hallways that led to Bruce's domain—his office, screening room, and brag room, which was basically just a room for his collection of trophies and memorabilia. There was a giant stuffed polar bear in the corner, but even that wasn't weird—it had been there for weeks now, a gift from the studio in an attempt to convince my dad to write an animated time-traveling Christmas movie. But despite the fact that everything looked just the same as it had a few hours ago, it felt like, by all rights, that it *should* have looked different. When a bombshell that large is dropped, you want to see the effects of it, somehow.

“Gem?” my dad asked as he set his keys on the console table (something we were never allowed to do when Rosie, Bruce’s longtime assistant, was in town), and started to head toward his office. “You . . . okay?”

I nodded, but even as I did, I was wondering why I was making that movement with my head. I was *not* okay. I hadn’t been okay since my dad had told me he and Karen were now *married*. I think he’d expected me to, but I hadn’t asked any follow-up questions, hadn’t pressed him for any details. Because if I did that, this was real. And my dad had married Karen Bridges without talking to me about it first, without even telling me they were dating again. And that was something I just wasn’t feeling up to handling at the moment.

“Well . . . okay,” he said, taking another step away, though I could sense his hesitation. “But if you want to talk or anything, I’ll just be in there. And we should see about dinner soon.”

“Dinner,” I repeated, and I could hear how flat my voice was sounding. “Right. Sure.” I looked down at the marble floor, wondering if my dad was picking up on how not okay with this I was. And maybe he was, but he didn’t seem to care, as he just nodded and headed back down the hall to his office, the door shutting with a small click.

I looked around the empty, quiet foyer. I could hear the sound of rain beating down on the roof above me. It had rained this summer, but I didn’t think I’d ever heard it quite this loud before. Maybe it was because there was nobody rushing through, making noise, so the only sound I could hear was the rain on the roof and the occasional rumbles of thunder in the distance.



I could feel a dangerous, restless energy in my chest, like I was about to do or say something I knew I'd later regret but wasn't going to be able to stop myself from doing or saying. I knew I'd felt this way before, but I couldn't put my finger on exactly when. Feeling like I should probably not be around other people right now, not when I was feeling so out of control, I headed up to my room, taking the steps two at a time.

Twenty minutes later I'd showered and changed out of the party dress that, unfortunately for Bruce's ex-wife, I had a feeling was now ruined. But I figured, as I headed back downstairs, if she really cared about it, she would have come back to get it sometime in the last three years.

I had somehow hoped my shower would have magically made things better, but as I passed my dad's office door, I could feel all the same feelings rushing back again at full force. And just like that, I knew when I'd felt this same way before. It was five years ago. It was the moment I'd found out about my dad and Karen. The moment that everything had changed.

I had the same upset, churning feeling happening now. The same recklessness, the same willingness to forge ahead and forget about the consequences. But it was even worse now, because what had just happened was definitive proof that *nothing* had changed in the last five years. My dad was still making decisions that would impact my life, but not telling me about them. We were still keeping secrets from each other. We were right back where we'd been—except it was somehow worse this time around.

I took a half-step toward my dad's door. I wasn't really sure

what I was going to say to him, but I knew I had to say something. I didn't think I could let this go—I didn't think I *should*, not feeling the way I currently was—like I was on the verge of exploding.

“Gem?” I turned around, and there was Ford Davidson, leaning against the doorway that led to the kitchen and giving me one of his half-smiles.

“Hi,” I said, taking a step toward him, smiling back automatically. But before I could reach him, a revelation came flooding in. I suddenly remembered what I'd realized on the boat, right before everything had fallen apart. Ford was Bruce's son, and in addition to being a championship surfer, he was a computer genius who went to boarding school in Silicon Valley, along with other computer geniuses. I'd had a crush on him since we were kids, back when he was short and chubby, with thick glasses and headgear. Even though he'd given me my first kiss on my thirteenth birthday, nothing had ever happened between us since. But this summer, post-Teddy and post-Josh, I'd been thinking about Ford a lot more than ever before, and wondering if there could be a real possibility of an us. But even though Sophie had been encouraging me to go for it, I'd held back. Even though it seemed like maybe he was also thinking along the same lines, I'd been terrified I would make a move, he wouldn't feel the same way, and our friendship—which was so important to me—would be wrecked. But then, on the ship, I'd had a realization that had seemed to change everything.

Gwyneth had mentioned Ford's algorithm, the one he'd been working on all summer, the one I still wasn't entirely sure about

the function of—his Galvanized Empathic Multipurpose Media Algorithm. We'd been teasing him about it all summer, telling him he needed a different name. And when Gwyneth had mentioned it in passing, it was like something in my brain finally clicked, and I'd realized what it was—what had been in front of my face for weeks now. It was an acronym. It spelled out *GEMMA*.

He'd named it after me.

Only the night before, when Sophie had been asking me why I didn't want to tell Ford how I felt, or make a move, I told her our friendship meant too much to me—I didn't want to do something that might strain or jeopardize it . . . not without some sign he felt the same way. And there had been my sign. I had realized, as I'd stared at the words that spelled out my name, knowing it wasn't a coincidence—Ford was way too methodical for that—that Ford had stood by me through everything. He'd learned about what I'd done to Hallie when we were kids, and he hadn't dropped me as his friend. He'd even helped me during the revenge war, strategizing with me about ideas, but also more immediate concerns, like what to do with the nine hundred dollars of cheese Hallie had sent to the house and charged my dad for. But he had been just as understanding when I told him I wanted to stop. Josh had dropped me the second he'd found out I'd been lying to him about who I was. And I'd never told Teddy about what I'd done when I was eleven, because I had a feeling he'd never see me the same way again. But it had been Ford—Ford, this whole time—seeing me for who I was, flaws and all, and accepting me.

I had realized this back on the boat, and had had my phone

out—I had been about to call him. I hadn't figured out what I was going to say—yet—but I'd known then he was the only person I wanted to talk to. But that was just before the video had started to play, and everything had crashed down around my feet.

But now . . . here was Ford, standing in front of me. Was this my moment? Should I tell him how I felt? Should I at least ask him about the algorithm?

“You okay?” Ford asked, taking a step closer to me, causing my heart to beat harder. I looked up at him—it was still something that occasionally took me by surprise, since for years he'd been shorter than me—at his black-black hair sticking up in little spikes, his tan skin, his hipster-cool glasses. He was *Ford*; he was someone I knew as well as anyone. But the thought of talking to him about this—about moving things into another direction—made me feel like I was looking at a complete stranger. And I was suddenly more nervous around him than I could remember being in a long, long time.

“Yeah,” I said, going to smooth down my hair and then realizing it was still wet. I twisted it quickly up into a knot, just to buy myself some time as I tried to figure out if this was my moment. I'd been all ready to call Ford on the phone from the boat, but that had been before my fight with Hallie, before the bombshell my dad had just dropped on me. And plus, there was the fact that this was much harder to do face-to-face. But I wasn't sure this was going to get any easier the longer I put it off. I took a breath. “So . . .” I started just as Ford turned and headed back into the kitchen.

“How was the party?” he asked as I followed, trying not to

jump when a clap of thunder sounded, louder than ever before, making me feel like the foundations of the house were rattling.

“Good,” I said automatically, just trying to get myself back into the space where I could maybe think about telling him I was having feelings for him. Ford pulled open the fridge and held out a bottle of water to me, a question in his eyes, and I nodded and took it. “I mean, not good,” I amended a moment later, when I realized what I’d just said. “It was pretty bad, actually. Hallie and I got into a fight.”

Ford had raised his water bottle to his lips, and he paused it there as he quirked an eyebrow at me. “Well, that’s not exactly new,” he said.

“No, an *actual* fight,” I said, taking a sip of my own water as I gave him the abridged version—Gwyneth going ahead and playing the video anyway, Gwyneth’s secret documentary, Hallie’s inability to believe me when I told her I wasn’t behind it. Ford had taken a seat at the kitchen counter during the retelling of this, and had been listening to me, occasionally shaking his head or grimacing at just the right places.

“Well, she’s not going to be able to use any of it,” he pointed out as I stopped to take a breath and then a drink of water. “Unless she got releases from everyone on the boat, which I highly doubt.”

I nodded. It was cold comfort at the moment, but it was something to know that Hallie and I throwing cake at each other wouldn’t be able to be featured in Gwyneth’s documentary. “But that’s not even the worst of it,” I said, feeling my stomach sink as I remembered the reality of what my dad had done.

“It gets worse?” Ford asked, sounding scared, and I nodded.

“Yeah,” I said with a grim laugh as the feelings that had been coursing through me earlier threatened to return at full force. It was anger mixed with frustration, and the strength of it scared me. “My dad just told me a few minutes ago. He and Karen—they got *married*.” I looked at Ford and waited, ready for him to be just as outraged and angry at this as I was.

But Ford just shook his head. “Man,” he said, “I’m sorry about that, Gem. Paul didn’t even give you a heads up?” He gave me a sympathetic grimace. “That’s rough.”

“It’s not *rough*,” I said, feeling my voice start to rise. “It’s . . . I mean, you did hear me, right? My dad got *married*. Behind my back, without talking to me about it first, without even telling me he was dating her.”

“I heard you,” Ford said, giving me another one of his half-smiles. “But you know my last three stepmothers? Bruce just had Rosie send me an e-mail letting me know I had a new relative.”

“That’s different,” I said immediately, realizing a moment too late that maybe Ford hadn’t been the person to talk to about this. Both of his parents had been remarried and divorced countless times, so he was used to this by now.

“How is it *different*?” Ford asked, his voice more quiet, and I suddenly wondered if I’d overstepped.

“No, I mean, it’s not,” I said quickly, shaking my head. “It’s just . . .” I wasn’t sure what to say to follow that, and an awkward silence fell between us. And we never had awkward silences. I looked across the kitchen counter at him. Suddenly the thought of bringing up the algorithm, or telling him how

I was feeling . . . this didn't seem like it was the moment. I should have just done it back in the hallway, shouldn't have even hesitated. Because now things were just feeling . . . off between us. I took a breath, to try to set this right again. "All I was trying to say was—"

Before I could continue, the doorbell rang. Ford and I both glanced at the door and then looked at each other. "You expecting anyone?" he asked.

"No," I said as I started to head toward the front door, Ford falling into step alongside me. "You?"

"Nope," he said. "And I really don't know who'd be stupid enough to be out in this weather."

We started across the foyer just as Sophie was coming down the stairs, also having changed out of her party dress, her expression furrowed. "Who's *outside* in this?" she asked. "It's miserable out there."

"It's just a little rain," I said as we headed for the door.

"It's more than a little rain," Sophie said, shaking her head. "Have you looked recently?"

Not answering this, I pulled open the front door and felt my jaw drop in surprise. Standing on the front steps in the rain, all looking unhappy about it, were Karen, Reid, Teddy, Josh, and Hallie.

## CHAPTER 4

“This is so weird,” Sophie whispered to me ten minutes later as we looked at the unlikely group that had assembled in Bruce’s living room. “What is even *happening*?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head, still trying to understand how this had come to be. I caught Ford’s eye from across the room—somehow he’d gotten pulled into a conversation with Reid, who was talking away at him, gesturing big, not seeming to notice that Ford was moving farther and farther away from him on the couch, clearly trying to make his escape.

When we’d opened the door, I’d just stared at the collective group on the doorstep, all of whom were wet and in formal wear and none of whom looked happy to be there, wondering what this meant. Before I could ask, though, my dad had appeared in the doorway, motioning everyone inside, offering people warm drinks and towels—which seemed a little extreme to me, since they’d only been standing in the rain for a few minutes, not



swimming the English Channel or anything. But I had to admit, as I pushed the door closed against the wind that was starting to howl, that Sophie had been right—it was getting pretty bad out there. Even just in the time since my dad had driven us home, the weather seemed to have gotten exponentially worse.

When I'd closed the door and everyone was safely inside, I'd received my answer—this collective group had all taken a car service to the boat, and so had gotten back in it after the party had so abruptly ended. But the storm really must have gotten worse than I'd realized, because the car—which had just been a regular Lincoln Town Car—couldn't get through to Karen's house due to flooding. They'd needed to go someplace so she could get picked up in the SUV the service would send . . . and the closest address was, it seemed, Bruce's.

Everyone had congregated in the living room and was just now waiting for the SUV that was supposedly on its way. But I couldn't stop staring at the group that had assembled, feeling a little bit like I'd just woken up in one of my worst nightmares.

Two of my exes—though I wasn't *really* sure Josh counted, because we'd never been official—were there. Not to mention Hallie, who was still shooting me death glares every few minutes, like she needed to keep me reassured she was still furious at me. The only person in the room who I didn't have some kind of complicated history with was Reid, who was also, incidentally, the only person who seemed happy to be there.

And it was clear, from looking at everyone for a few seconds, it wasn't just me who people were mad at. There were bad

feelings flying fast and furious within this group. Hallie and Teddy were huddled in a corner, having what looked like an intense conversation, their voices getting raised occasionally, neither one of them looking very happy, and Josh was sitting on the couch, his arms folded over his chest, occasionally glaring at his sister.

Bruce's giant TV had been turned on to the Weather Channel, but the volume was off, so we were left with images of storm warnings flashing across the screen, and meteorologists in foul-weather gear standing on beaches, holding umbrellas that always seemed on the verge of blowing away. Again, Sophie had been right—while I'd been focusing on the bombshell my dad had dropped, I'd failed to notice that the storm outside had gotten much, much worse—to the point where even the non-weather channels seemed to be covering it. A rumble of thunder shook the house, and the lights flickered for a moment. I glanced out the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the living room, at the trees being whipped back and forth by the wind, their branches waving wildly, and was suddenly grateful, even though I was surrounded by people I'd rather not be around, that I was inside, and dry. The storm starting to rage outside was looking worse by the minute.

My dad and Karen were standing across the room from me, both of them occasionally sending worried looks at the television as Karen continually called the car service company, trying to get specifics on when their SUV would be coming.

Even though I wasn't sure it was the best idea for me to be near my dad or Karen at the moment—I felt like I was a

heartbeat away from turning to both of them and yelling, *What were you two thinking?!*—I was trying to keep an ear out for the car updates, feeling as invested in the answer as Karen was. I was more than ready for everyone who didn't currently live in Bruce's house to leave, and it worried me that, according to the news, roads were getting more treacherous, flooded, and accident-filled by the moment.

"Now I'm not getting any reception," Karen said as she lowered her phone and shook her head. "I just wanted to get an ETA." I saw Hallie and Josh shoot their mother looks that clearly said *Get us out of here*, and Karen turned to my dad. "Is there a landline I can use?"

My dad nodded, motioning for Karen to follow him. "In my office," he said. "This way." They left, and I glanced at Sophie, trying to catch her eye so I could silently get her to leave with me. I mean, did we really have to stay there, in a room where at least half the people were furious at me? I wanted to have some alone time with her anyway, to talk to her about what had happened with my dad and find out what was going on with her and Reid—despite Sophie swearing up and down that he wasn't her type, they'd looked *very* cozy on the boat. But Sophie wasn't looking at me, and when I followed her gaze, I understood why. Reid was walking toward us, smoothing down his hair as he went, and Sophie's smile was getting wider the nearer he got. Ford mostly seemed thrilled to be done with being forced into a conversation with Reid, and he widened his eyes at me from across the room.

"Hi, Sophie," Reid said, and I noticed his cheeks were flushed.

I looked between the two of them, trying to figure out what was happening here. Reid had had a crush on Sophie from practically the moment he'd seen her, but it no longer appeared one-sided, since Sophie was smiling back up at him.

"Reid," she said with her very best patented flirt-giggle. I tried to keep the incredulous expression off my face. Sophie had originally agreed to go with Reid to Hallie's party just to get information—but at some point, when I'd been too wrapped up in my own drama to notice, had her feelings become real?

Reid took his eyes off Sophie with what seemed like real difficulty and then looked at me. "Gemma," he said, his voice getting more serious. "Can I ask you something?"

"Um," I said, feeling my defenses go up. What if he wanted an explanation for what he thought had happened at the party? I racked my brain, trying to remember if he'd been in any of the footage we'd shown. Or maybe he had realized I'd been filming him as well, on the mini-camera I'd been wearing for the last three weeks, and was mad about the invasion of his privacy?

It wasn't like I knew Reid all that well, but we'd worked together at the local ice-cream shop, Sweet & Delicious—or we had, until I'd gotten fired. Was he putting any of it together? All the times I'd arranged for him to be absent so I could scheme against Hallie—or recover from one of her schemes against me? "Okay," I finally said when I realized I hadn't answered him. I braced myself for the worst.

But Reid just smiled at me in his vague, pleasant way. "Where's your bathroom?"

“Down the hall, to the left.” This was said, not by me, but by Josh and Teddy simultaneously. They both looked over at each other, surprised, and Teddy narrowed his eyes at Josh. Josh knew where things were in this house from the night he’d spent here when we’d both been recovering from food poisoning (Hallie-induced, I later learned). Nothing had really happened between us at the time, but that didn’t mean I hadn’t wanted something to. And Teddy, I realized, must have learned the layout of the house from the time he spent in the backyard, chained to a backhoe.

“I, uh . . .,” Teddy said, leaving Hallie and walking over to Josh, who stood up from the couch. “I didn’t realize you’d been here before.”

“Once or twice,” Josh said, raising an eyebrow at Teddy. “Back when Gemma and I . . .” He looked over at me, and I felt something in my stomach twist as I watched his expression change, becoming closed-off and unhappy. “Back before I knew she was plotting against my sister,” he said, shaking his head at me.

I took a breath, realizing this was probably the easiest way—just tell everyone, all at once, and hope they believed me. “I didn’t want you to see that footage,” I said, and I was met with skeptical looks from everyone except Sophie and Ford. “Well, initially I did. But then I called it off. Gwyneth went ahead and did it on her own.” As I said this, I looked around, realizing I still hadn’t seen Gwyneth in all the time I’d been home. Bruce’s house was big enough that this wasn’t *that* surprising, but I really would have thought I would have at least seen her passing

through. I thought back to her car in the garage, wondering again if she'd even driven. Maybe my assumption that she'd been here this whole time had been off from the beginning.

"The video was very *illuminating*," Teddy said, his voice cold as he looked right at Hallie. "Things I wish I'd known earlier. Like that my entire relationship was a sham—"

"Teddy," Hallie interrupted him, her face turning bright red as she looked at all of us. She walked closer to him and lowered her voice, but I could still hear every word. "Can we talk about this in private?"

"I don't think so," Teddy said, taking a step back from her, shaking his head. "Why would you think I'd want to talk to you after what I was just shown? Are you crazy?"

"Hey," Josh said, taking a step toward Teddy, his expression serious. "Don't talk to my sister that way."

"Josh, I can handle myself," Hallie snapped.

"Oh really?" he asked, turning to her. "Like how you can lie to me for the last five years? Watching that video, it was like I don't even know you anymore."

"Well, whose fault is that?" Hallie asked, and I could hear her voice was shaking—though with anger or suppressed tears, I wasn't sure. She pointed at me, her eyes narrowing. "Who do we have to thank for that?"

Hallie, Teddy, and Josh all looked at me, and I took a breath to try to defend myself just as Teddy spoke again. "The problem isn't that I saw you say those things," he snapped. "The point is that you said them!" It seemed like the fight was starting in

earnest again, and I took a small step back, hoping to be left out of it for the time being.

I exchanged a look with Sophie, and I saw Ford getting out of the line of fire and coming to join us at the back of the room. “So,” Ford said, nodding toward Josh, Hallie, and Teddy, who were starting to argue again, everyone talking over each other. “You know when I said you should feel free to let your friends hang out here whenever?”

“Ha-ha,” I said a little hollowly. “They’re leaving soon,” I added, crossing my fingers as I said it, hoping it would be true. “Don’t worry.”

Ford just raised an eyebrow at me and then nodded toward the window, where the storm seemed to be getting worse than ever. “You sure about that?”

I looked around, feeling my stomach sink, worried that the answer was getting closer to no with every passing minute.

“Also,” Ford said, pulling out his phone and frowning down at it, “where the heck is my sister?”

“I just don’t know why you didn’t tell me the truth!” I saw that Hallie and Teddy were back to talking to each other, although *fighting* might have been a better word. Looking from one to the other, I couldn’t help thinking that this looked like the beginning of a breakup if I’d ever seen one.

“Because,” Hallie said, taking a glance back at the rest of us before lowering her voice again. “Because at first I didn’t realize . . . I didn’t know . . .”

“Whoa.” Reid had returned from the bathroom, and I looked

over to see his eyes were wide as he watched the drama unfolding. “How long was I gone?”

Ford looked at Reid and seemed to pale slightly, then walked around the group to stand right next to me, clearly worried about getting caught in another conversation with him.

“Safer over here,” Ford said quietly, leaning down to whisper in my ear, his breath against my neck.

“Uh-huh,” I managed, concentrating on staying upright and sounding as normal as possible. But I was suddenly all too aware of how close to me he was standing, and how I could have leaned over and rested my head against his chest. I swallowed and blinked hard, forcing myself to concentrate on what was happening and where I currently was. But I knew, just from the fact that I was losing the ability to speak and think clearly while standing this close to him, that I would have to tell him, sooner or later, how I felt. The GEMMA thing was practically an open invitation, and I shouldn’t have let the weird vibe between us earlier stop me.

“I can’t trust you!” Teddy yelled, and I saw something in Hallie’s face crumple—like the confident mask she always wore was starting to slip away. “How can I ever trust you again? Everything you told me was a lie.”

“No,” Hallie said, shaking her head, wiping tears away as they fell, and I looked down at my bare feet and their chipped polish, suddenly feeling like I was seeing something I really shouldn’t see.

“It was,” Teddy said, his voice getting low and serious. “You *know* how much I value honesty. It’s one of my core belief



systems. And you violated that right from the beginning. What does that say about you? What does it say about *me*, that I didn't even see it?"

"I just . . ." Hallie said, her voice shaking as she looked at all of us, then back at Teddy, lowering her voice slightly, but not enough that we all still couldn't hear her. "I just think, if you listened to me—if we could talk this out—"

"There's no point," Teddy said, and I could hear the decisive note in his voice. Teddy was incredibly stubborn, and he usually believed he was right—which was why when he made up his mind about something, it was almost impossible to get him to change it. I'd had two years' experience with this and knew it all too well. "Hallie—we're so done. This is over."

"What?" Hallie asked, her voice breaking. "Teddy—"

"Hey," Josh said, standing up and pointing the remote at the TV, cranking up the volume. I leaned forward to see a reporter in foul-weather gear standing on what I was pretty sure was a beach—but the rain and wind were intense enough that it was difficult to tell.

"There is a *major* storm bearing down on the Hamptons and outlying areas," the reporter was saying, almost yelling to be heard over the sound of the wind. "This is a severe storm warning. We will be watching this closely, since there is a strong chance this could turn into a hurricane."

"Wait, what?" Sophie asked, leaning closer to the TV. Nobody was talking now—aside from Hallie's sniffing, the TV was the only sound in the room.

"Please, for your safety, do *not* venture out into this. We're

recommending that everybody stay in their homes. I repeat—for the foreseeable future, please stay where you are.”

I looked around the room, feeling my stomach plunge again, seeing the horror I was feeling reflected in everyone’s expressions.

This could *not* be happening.

## CHAPTER 5

It was happening.

“Okay,” my dad said to me through the walkie-talkie over long bursts of static. “How’s everyone doing?”

I took a breath and then let it out before I allowed myself to reply. “Well . . .” I said as I looked around. Almost everyone was hunched over their phones, fights having stopped and everyone retreating to their separate corners, trying to find a way out of there and looking for proof that this news report could be something other than the truth. Everyone looked more miserable than before—except Sophie and Reid. Reid, upon hearing he was going to be stuck in the same house as Sophie—possibly overnight—had been practically humming.

My dad and Karen had returned from my dad’s office to find all of us staring in horror at the television. It turned out that the car Karen had thought was coming was stuck on the side of the road with a blown-out tire, and it was clear it wouldn’t

be coming anytime soon. Even if the tire somehow got fixed—in the pouring rain—the news was also reporting on all the roads that were currently being closed, one right after the other, until it seemed like there was really no way out of the Hamp-ton, not without a helicopter or a submarine. Unlike the rest of us, my dad seemed to accept the fact that we were all marooned here, and he’d jumped into action, along with Karen. They got guest rooms organized (not hard in Bruce’s mansion, which had way too many rooms to make any logical sense, most of which I’d never even been in) and had unearthed a set of walkie-talkies from Bruce’s office. My dad had given one to me, since cell reception was getting worse by the minute. Then he and Karen had gone off to set up the guesthouse for themselves. I was just pretending all the setting up of rooms was just precautionary, just for people to have places if they needed some alone time. I really wasn’t letting myself accept the fact that I might be stuck here, overnight, with Hallie, Josh, and Teddy (Reid, I didn’t really mind so much). And it was clear everyone else pretty much felt the same way—they seemed to be in collective denial, trying to find a way out of this.

Ford had started to get seriously worried about Gwyneth’s whereabouts the longer we went without hearing from her, and he’d texted her until he’d gotten a response. She’d texted back that she was in the middle of something, but okay, and would call soon. “What could she be in the *middle* of?” Ford had asked me, sounding incredulous. “There’s a hurricane out there!”

Now my walkie crackled with static, and I lifted it to my ear. “Gem?” my dad asked.

“Right,” I said, pressing the button on the side, realizing I’d left him hanging. “Uh . . . I guess it’s going okay.”

“Hey, I think I might have gotten a taxi,” Teddy said, hunched over his phone. “It could be here in an hour, and . . .” His face fell. “Oh, it’s not a hybrid.”

“Even if you could get a taxi, they’ve closed most of the bridges,” Ford said as he looked up from his spot on the couch, where he had done something to Bruce’s flat-screen so it was showing five news reports at once. Ford was probably used to it, since he was always coding using multiple monitors, but it was making me a little bit dizzy to keep looking between the images. “I think we’re all stuck here for the moment.”

“Well, I need you to help out,” my dad said to me, static cutting in every other word. “Get all the supplies you can from the garage. We’ll be back to the main house soon.”

I heard the *we* in there, and felt myself gripping the walkie more tightly. The arrival of the unwanted guests and the sudden danger of the storm had meant I hadn’t had an opportunity to talk to my dad—but I wasn’t sure what I would say even if I got one. I still couldn’t seem to get beyond my anger about this—and how blindsided I felt. And the same feeling I’d last had when I was eleven, the unshakable belief that something had to be done about this.

“Okay,” I said, and waited for another moment, but I heard only static—my dad was no longer on the other end. I set the walkie down on the hall table, glancing out toward Bruce’s backyard for just a second. I hadn’t spent much time in the guesthouse, since it hadn’t really seemed necessary, considering

there were more rooms than I knew what to do with *inside* the house. It was on the edge of Bruce's property, and not exactly close—Bruce's property was huge, over ten acres, and the guest-house was all the way at the back of it. You couldn't even see it from the main house, and it wasn't an inviting walk even when it *wasn't* raining—so I was pretty sure my dad and Karen were going to be soaked through by the time they got back here.

I looked around the living room, at the increasingly dire reports from all the different reporters on the television, and suddenly wished Bruce and his longtime assistant, Rosie, weren't currently in Los Angeles. Bruce wouldn't be much use in this situation—beyond trying to develop it into some kind of disaster movie, no doubt getting people working on a treatment before the rain had even stopped—but Rosie was the kind of person you wanted around in a crisis. She would have handled everything by now—she probably even would have found a way to get the people who clearly didn't want to be here home again. Rosie could work absolute miracles—I'd seen it happen.

"Anyone want to help me get supplies?" I called a little halfheartedly, and wasn't surprised when nobody jumped up to help. I knew if I asked Ford specifically, he would have. But at the moment he was staring at the TV, and I wasn't even really sure he'd heard me. And even though I wanted to talk to Ford—sooner rather than later—I wasn't sure I wanted to try to do it when he was fixated on the Weather Channel. "Okay then," I said with a sigh as I headed off to the garage.

When I stepped inside, I closed the door behind me and leaned back against it for just a moment, realizing the silence

was actually a nice change after the yelling and then the strained silences of the TV room. I turned the lights on, and was happy to see they came to life right away—I was trying to tell myself that the flickering a few moments ago was just a one-off thing. But even so, my dad insisted we had to be prepared—which was why I was in the garage. I gathered up flashlights and lanterns, and I found a box of vanilla-scented jar candles, all engraved with the words *New Beginnings*. I stared at the candles for a good five minutes before I realized they must have been left over from one of Bruce’s weddings.

My dad had asked me to see if there were any sandbags, but I couldn’t find any, which seemed like really bad news to me, considering Bruce’s house was right on the beach. It had been one of my favorite things about Bruce’s place, but now it was seeming like not such a good idea to have put the house there—particularly if the flooding all five news channels kept reporting on was going to continue happening.

I had just gathered up an armful of supplies—it looked like I was going to have to make two trips to get them all back to the house—when I heard my name.

“Gemma?” I jumped, and three of the flashlights I’d had in my arms went flying, rolling across the garage floor and under what looked like some kind of a crane. I whirled around and saw Teddy standing in the doorway.

“Hi,” I muttered as I set down the rest of the things I was carrying on the workbench and then went to go look for the flashlights.

“You okay?” he asked, taking a step farther into the garage.

“Sorry if I scared you.” He looked around, squinting at the construction equipment. “Hey, my backhoe,” he said, looking across the garage.

I picked up one of the flashlights and winced when I saw that the glass was cracked—meaning we were down one, and it wasn’t like we’d had all that many to begin with. “Oh,” I said, straightening up as I went to go find the other two, suddenly remembering what had just happened back in the house. “Um . . . sorry about you and Hallie.” I stopped immediately after speaking, going over what I’d just said—a sentence I never would have expected to say a few weeks or months ago. But, I realized a moment later, it wasn’t untrue. I *was* sorry—maybe because getting broken up with in front of a roomful of people had to be terrible, probably almost as bad as getting dumped in the gardening aisle of Target.

I straightened up and then took a step back when I realized Teddy was much closer to me than I’d expected him to be. “Are you?” he asked, his voice lower than it normally was. “Are you really sorry we’re not together anymore?” He looked at me closely, his eyes not leaving mine.

I just blinked at him for a second. I was about to ask what was going on with him, when I suddenly remembered what had happened on the boat. Teddy had come up to me, looking much more confused—and more unsure—than I was used to seeing him. Teddy had always been beyond confident—it was one of the things that had appealed to me so much when we’d first started dating. Teddy knew exactly who he was and how he felt



about things—it didn't matter if the issue was saving the marsh warbler or what movie he thought we should see that weekend. He always acted with conviction, which was why it had unnerved me to hear him sound so unsure. But what he said next had thrown me for even more of a loop. He told me he'd been thinking about me, and wondered if he'd made a mistake in breaking up with me—if we should think about getting back together.

It was exactly what I would have given anything to have heard him say—six weeks ago, before he'd totally turned my life upside down.

In the moment when I'd looked at him on the boat, though, I'd realized I wasn't even tempted by this offer. The Gemma who had been with Teddy was someone I didn't even recognize anymore.

But now I realized I'd never actually answered him—and Teddy, based on the way he was looking at me, hadn't forgotten about this.

“Because, Gem,” he said, running his hand through his hair and pulling on the ends, the way he only ever did when he was really stressed out, “now that I'm single, I was thinking . . . you know, maybe . . .”

“You've been single,” I said, incredulous, “for *maybe* twenty minutes. Are you kidding me?”

“Um,” Teddy said, and I saw him deflate slightly, his shoulders hunching. “I don't know. . . .”

“Teddy,” I said, shaking my head as I went to find the last

two flashlights. They'd cracked too, so I put them back on the shelf and realized we now had only one flashlight. But that didn't mean there might not be others in the house somewhere. I decided the best course of action might just be to tell everyone that there had only been one in the garage—and hope nobody asked any questions.

“What?” he asked, staring down at the floor of the garage, his expression slightly petulant.

“I just . . .” I said as I looked at him for a long moment. I was trying to recall the guy I'd been so taken with two years ago, the one who seemed to have all the answers, but it was getting harder and harder to make him out. “It's like I don't even know you anymore,” I said.

Teddy looked up at me, his brow furrowing. “But you do, Gem; that's the thing,” he said, taking a step closer to me. “Like I said on the boat, I feel like I haven't even been myself since we broke up. I mean, I sold Bruce my life rights so he could destroy the habitat of the marsh warbler. Who *does* something like that? Who have I become?”

“Um,” I said, feeling my eyes widen. Teddy seemed to be spiraling, which I'd seen only once, on election day, when he was certain he was going to lose the junior class presidency, which he later won by a landslide.

“But if we were still together, that wouldn't have happened,” Teddy went on, and I frowned, not at all following the train of thought that had led him there. “I'd still understand myself. I wouldn't have let myself get dazzled by someone who was only looking out for herself. . . .”

“We were together when you got *dazzled* by her,” I pointed out, hearing my own voice rise.

“Oh,” Teddy said more quietly now, nodding a few too many times. “Right. Never mind about that one.”

“I actually don’t think this has anything to do with me,” I said a moment later, a little more gently. Yes, Teddy had cheated on me. He’d broken my heart. But I was totally over him now, and all that was left were lingering friendship-type feelings (because it wasn’t as simple as friendship yet. Maybe just friendship-adjacent) for someone who’d once meant a lot to me. “I think . . . maybe this is about you.”

Teddy blinked at me. “You’re right,” he said, a note of surprise in his voice. “I need to figure out how this all went wrong.”

“Okay,” I said, picking up an armful of supplies and gesturing to Teddy to take some. “So, while you’re doing that, want to help me out?”

“It’s like I need to take a walkabout,” he said, talking over me. “Or a vision quest . . .”

“Well, there’s an almost-hurricane going on,” I pointed out as I gave up and grabbed the rest of the supplies myself. “So I don’t think a walkabout is going to happen anytime soon.”

“Oh,” Teddy said, and his shoulders slumped even farther. “I just need . . . someplace I can get centered again. Someplace where I can find the real me . . .”

“Um,” I said as I pushed open the door with my foot, as my arms were full and Teddy wasn’t making a move to help. “I’m pretty sure Bruce has a meditation room somewhere on the second floor. But—”

“Perfect,” Teddy said, nodding and walking past me, leaving me to turn off the light with my shoulder. “Thank you, Gemma. I shall return when things are as they should be.”

“Wait, Teddy—” I called after him, but he was already disappearing down the hall and heading up to the second floor, taking the steps two at a time. I rolled my eyes and then headed back across the foyer, dropping the supplies on the kitchen island and looking a little worriedly out at the weather, which seemed to be getting worse by the minute. I squinted at the rain to try to see if it looked like the ocean was starting to get closer to the house, but I could barely make out anything in the stormy darkness.

Then I headed back into the TV room, hoping maybe, somehow, some miracle had been worked while I’d been away, and everyone who didn’t normally live here would have figured out a way to leave.

But one glance around the room told me nothing had changed. Everyone was still in the same places I’d left them, but now they all were looking more despondent than before. I took a breath to say something to Sophie, when my phone beeped with a text message, and a second later I heard Ford’s phone and Josh’s phone beep as well, and I looked down at mine.

### **Gwyneth Davidson**

Hi, babe! Sorry about the thing on the boat.

But when you see the final cut, you’ll know it was worth it.

Footage looks insane!! ☺

It seemed like maybe things were getting a little intense,  
so I'm hopping on a flight to L.A. now—  
got some editing to do. Talk soon! xoxoxo

I stared down at the phone in my hand, trying to get my head around it—Gwyneth had just made a huge mess and then left, only telling me after the fact. I shook my head as I read the message again, wondering why I was surprised—frankly, I probably should have expected this from her. And it did answer the question of where she was—the longer I hadn't heard from her, and the more the storm raged on, the more worried I'd started to get, even though I was still furious with her.

"You get a message from Gwyn?" Ford asked, looking over the couch at me.

"Yeah," I said, holding up my phone. I shook my head. "Apparently, she's skipping town."

"What?" Hallie asked, her jaw dropping. "She just *left*?"

"Had to go back to L.A.," Josh said, disbelief in his voice as he looked down at his own phone.

"Wait," Ford said, sitting up straighter, some of the laid-back surfer cadence leaving his voice as it became sharper and big-brother protective. "Why is my sister texting you?"

"Oh," Josh said, swallowing and then looking at Ford, like he was only now noticing how tall and in shape he looked. He cleared his throat and then said, a little haltingly, "Well—Gwyneth and I, we're actually—"

"They're dating," I said, taking pity on Josh, who looked

beyond uncomfortable as he stumbled through this explanation.

“Oh, *you’re* the guy,” Ford said, understanding dawning in his eyes. He turned to me, no longer protective, just thrilled with his victory. “Didn’t I tell you there had to be a guy?”

I nodded. “You did,” I said, trying to match his triumphant grin with a smile of my own. When Ford and I had been speculating that there was someone Gwyneth was secretly dating—or at least crushing on—it had just been fun, since the last person I would have expected her to be dating was Josh. But unless Ford had picked up on what Josh had said earlier—or almost said—he hadn’t known about our history. And then a moment later I wondered if what Josh and I had even *counted* as history—what was it called when you had a crush on someone, made out with them once, and then there was nothing except the possibility of a kiss in an ice-cream freezer?

“Wait, how did Gwyneth get on a plane?” Sophie asked the room in general.

“She probably went to the airport,” Reid said helpfully from the couch.

“No, it’s a good question,” Josh said as he pointed to the TV. “I thought I saw they were grounding all the planes.”

Ford shrugged and shook his head. “Gwyneth has a way of getting what she wants,” he said, and without being able to help it, my eyes darted toward Josh. “No doubt she got on the last one out. She’s got good luck that way.”

“But . . .” Sophie said, and I could see her brow was

furrowed—she was clearly still trying to get this to make logical sense.

“I just can’t believe she would leave like this,” Josh said hollowly as he sat down on the arm of the couch, staring at his phone. “I mean . . . she pulls a stunt like that at Hallie’s party and then just leaves without even talking to me?”

“It’s not really personal,” I said, walking over to the couch and sitting next to Sophie. Josh shot me a skeptical look, and I went on, “It’s just Gwyneth. She does this sometimes.” It was more than sometimes, but I didn’t think Josh would really find that information helpful at the moment.

“It’s true,” Ford said as he came to sit on the couch that faced me. He leaned forward, smiling at me. “Remember when she told us all she was going to make dinner? She’d just watched a *SuperChef* marathon, I think.”

I nodded, a hazy memory starting to come back into focus. “When we were, like, thirteen?” I asked, and Ford nodded. “Yeah, so we came back from the beach to find Gwyneth gone, the kitchen a disaster, no food, and a note saying she actually got bored halfway through cooking and we should get pizza instead.”

Ford laughed, shaking his head. “And it turned out she’d been hiding the whole time in my dad’s office, just waiting for everyone to either stop being mad at her or go to bed, whichever came first.”

I found myself laughing as well, but this died down as I looked around the room. We weren’t thirteen anymore, and this

wasn't about not cleaning up the kitchen. There were actual consequences here, and she had shown the video on the boat, knowing there would be. To leave after that, assuming the rest of us would just deal with it . . . I shook my head. "I know this is what she does," I said to Ford. "But to make this big a mess, deliberately, and then not have the courage to face the consequences . . ."

There was a loud, sharp laugh from across the room, the kind of laugh that was designed to show you actually *don't* find something funny. I looked over and saw Hallie staring at me in disbelief. "Are you actually saying this right now? Are you really that unaware?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. She took a step toward me, and I stood up. Hallie looked upset enough that I could feel my heart start to beat harder, like my body was preparing me for conflict, for fight or flight. And right now it looked like Hallie was choosing fight. It hit me just then that we'd never actually resolved the fight we'd had on the boat, the one that had devolved into cake-throwing and shoving. It had been interrupted by our parents and all their revelations. But now it was like everything was coming back at full force, like we'd just had a time-out we'd both agreed was now over.

"Seriously?" she asked, her voice sharp, and the heads of everyone else in the room whipped back and forth as they looked from me to Hallie, like this was a particularly intense tennis match. "So Gwyneth creates a giant mess, spills all kinds of secrets, and then doesn't even have the courage to stick around and face her consequences. Because she's that much of a coward."



Hallie just stared at me, anger and contempt mingling in her expression. “Remind you of anyone?”

I felt heat flood my cheeks as I understood she was talking about me. And then I felt doubly embarrassed when I realized I wasn’t sure which time she was talking about . . . what I’d done when we were eleven, or when I’d fled back to Connecticut last week, rather than sorting out the mess my life here had become. “I came back,” I said, standing up straighter and walking over to her. “And I never intended for you to see that video—”

“Oh, who cares about the video?” Hallie snapped. “You always have an excuse, don’t you?” Hallie asked, her voice getting more and more angry as she took another step closer to me. “It’s always something with you.” She raised her voice, making it high-pitched and whiny. “*It wasn’t me, it was Gwyneth. I was just eleven, I didn’t know any better. I was lying for a good reason, I promise.*”

“It’s not the *best* Gemma impression,” Ford said faux-thoughtfully, and I knew he was trying to distract me, lighten the mood, but it really seemed like things had gone too far for that.

“Don’t pretend you’re so innocent in this,” I said, hearing the anger in my own voice increase as I took a step closer to Hallie as well. I wasn’t about to let her rewrite history—either of this summer or of the five years preceding. “There was nothing in that video you didn’t actually say or do. You might not like admitting the truth, but—”

“The *truth*?” Hallie yelled, and I could see it in her face—this was a fight that had been a very long time brewing, and

everything was finally coming to the surface. She shook her head. “Do you have any idea what that word even means?”

“I know it means not *pretending* I met someone by accident, when I was planning on using him,” I said, and Hallie flinched. “I know it means not framing someone for theft—”

“Wait, what?” Josh asked his sister. He was looking increasingly freaked out. “What is she talking about?”

I took a breath to answer him, but Hallie was already going on. “Oh, so you just *pretended* to be someone else for six weeks, but I should let that go,” Hallie said, rolling her eyes theatrically. “You create this crazy web of lies, you hurt my brother—”

“Guys,” Josh said, looking very uncomfortable about being dragged into this. “I—”

“Because I wanted to make things right with you!” I yelled at her, as though volume could get this across when nothing else had. “Because I never stopped feeling horrible about what happened when we were kids. Because—”

“Like I can believe anything you say,” Hallie said, shaking her head. “Like you’re not just saying whatever you need to—”

“No, that’s *you*,” I snapped, and Hallie’s eyes widened.

“I swear to God, Gemma,” she said, her voice low and angry, “if you think I’m going to put up with this—”

“Well, you’re going to have to learn how to,” I snapped, “considering what’s happening.”

Hallie took a breath, like she was about to hurl an insult back at me, but she stopped, her brow furrowing. “What do you mean?” she asked. “Considering what?”

I blinked at her and then looked across the room to Josh, to

see he looked just as confused as Hallie did. I realized with a start that they didn't know. That my dad had told me, but Karen hadn't told her kids yet. Which wasn't really that surprising, since my dad and I had had a moment together, but there had been a number of unhappy people with them in the car the Bridges had come here in. For just a moment I thought about it. I thought about throwing this information, this bombshell, in her face, and watching as she heard the news. But no matter how I felt about Hallie, telling her this felt like a bridge too far. It felt like I was crossing a line I wouldn't be able to uncross. "Nothing," I said, looking down at my hands, but not before seeing Ford's sympathetic grimace—he had, it seemed, been able to read in my expression exactly what I'd stopped myself from saying.

"Not nothing." This was Josh who'd spoken, to my surprise. He'd stood up and was crossing the room toward me, his eyes searching mine. "You were about to say something, Gemma. What is it?"

"It's *nothing*," I insisted, breaking eye contact and looking down at my bare feet, wishing I hadn't been quite so easy to read—you would have thought after a summer of deception, I would have gotten a little better at it by now.

"Gemma." This was Hallie, her voice low and serious. "Tell me."

I looked between them, and I knew there was really only one thing to do. I wouldn't be telling them to hurt them—I would be telling them because they'd figured it out anyway. "Let's talk in the kitchen," I said, feeling like if I was going to give them

the worst news they'd received in a while, they could at least hear it in private.

"Wait, why?" Sophie called, looking crestfallen, as the three of us started to walk down the hallway together. "Come on! We're all, you know, kind of friends here!"

When we made it to the kitchen, I placed myself on the other side of the kitchen island from Josh and Hallie, feeling like some distance might be good if they decided to start throwing things. "So . . . here's the thing," I said, taking a breath, and I told them what I knew, which wasn't much—I hadn't asked my dad any follow-ups, so I basically just knew the bare bones.

"No," Hallie said when I'd finished, and she and Josh had me repeat myself twice. Both of them looked like I felt—like we were all suddenly trapped in one of our worst nightmares together. "They can't have. Not without telling us."

"No way," Josh echoed, shaking his head.

I shrugged. While I wasn't happy they were reacting this way, it at least made more sense to me. Ford's reaction to the news had been so cavalier, it was like we'd been talking about two entirely separate things.

"So we'd be . . . related," Hallie said, pointing between the two of us, her voice laced with equal parts disgust and disbelief. "We'd be . . ."

"Sisters," I finished, shaking my head right after, like that might erase the word.

Even though Hallie didn't speak, it was like I could practically feel her reacting to the word, the shudder she was trying to suppress. "I have to talk to my mom," she said. She looked

outside, in the direction of the guesthouse and the torrential rain, and then pulled out her cell phone and walked into the hallway.

“There isn’t any reception,” I called after her. I took a breath to tell her to use the walkie, but she was already disappearing from view, lifting her phone to her ear.

I looked at Josh across the kitchen island, and for just a moment there was only the sound of the wind howling outside, suddenly seeming much louder than it had before.

I suddenly realized this was the first time we’d been alone since our moment in the ice-cream freezer, our almost-kiss I was now seeing in a totally different light, now that I knew he’d been with Gwyneth while it was happening. But still—there was a piece of my mind I couldn’t turn off when I saw him, the piece that reminded me we’d once kissed and it was really, *really* good and we should do it again soon.

“So, um,” Josh said, clearing his throat, and crossing and uncrossing his arms. “We’d be related. You and me.”

“Um,” I said as I felt my stomach turn. “I guess we . . . um, already are?”

Josh paled slightly under his tan, and I realized I felt the exact same way. I’d just had make-out flashbacks with someone who was now, it seemed, my *stepbrother*. I sat down on one of the kitchen island stools, feeling like standing up was getting to be a little too much.

“I can’t believe they’ve done this to us,” Josh said a little hollowly. “I mean . . . it’s not like this is ever going to work out.”

I nodded without looking at him. I’d been upset enough

when my dad had told me, but now the reality was starting to ring more true. This wasn't just about my dad and Karen and my dad not telling me. This was about how he would be forcing me into a family with a person who I hated and who hated me, and another person who I had unsettled, complicated romantic feelings for. As the enormity of it all came crashing down on me, for a moment it was like I couldn't breathe.

"I'm going to try to talk to Gwyneth before she gets on her plane," Josh said, standing up and pulling out his cell phone. I took a breath to say something, but then let it out as I gave up, since apparently none of the Bridges siblings cared to hear that they weren't going to get calls through because the reception was so bad.

I sat alone at the kitchen island, the thoughts swirling in my head starting to move faster and faster. It felt like I was where I was five years ago—except now I was older and, if not necessarily wiser, I at least knew a little more. I knew how to make some things happen. And so did Hallie . . .

The thought made me sit up straight. I dismissed it immediately but then found that it didn't leave quite as quickly as I wanted it to.

"I couldn't get through." I looked up and saw Hallie standing at the other end of the kitchen from me, her arms crossed. I'd been so lost in thought, I hadn't even heard her come back into the room.

There was silence between us, but it was crackling and angry, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to address what was happening, or if I wanted to get back into the argument we'd been

having in the captain's quarters before we'd been interrupted. There were so many axes to grind between us, and so many grudges we were keeping, it was almost hard to know where to begin.

"This can't happen," Hallie finally said, breaking the silence.

I nodded. "I know," I said. "I mean . . . *sisters?*" Even the word was enough to make my stomach clench.

"No," she said firmly. "It's pretty much the worst idea I've ever heard."

"Can you imagine?" I said, trying for a laugh, but failing utterly as I thought about what the reality of that might actually mean. Hallie and I, joined together forever at holiday dinners and on vacations. Never knowing if I could actually trust her, always looking over my shoulder, my relationship with my dad wrecked. Being related, even by marriage, to Josh, having to see him and his new girlfriends all the time . . . and the thought that this might be *forever*. That Hallie might be an inextricable part of my life, ruining every holiday and special event into the foreseeable future.

"Actually, I can," Hallie said, and as I looked at her expression, I had a feeling she'd just gone down the same thought process I had (minus the Josh stuff, of course). She turned to me and, mixed with the dawning horror of what our situation might look like, I could see determination in her face. "We have to do something about it."

I paused for a moment before speaking, not knowing if I should tell her I'd just had pretty much the same thought. I

wanted to take her word for it, but I knew just what a skilled liar she was, how many times she'd fooled me. "We?" I finally echoed, not wanting to put myself out there with a more direct question, only to be shot down.

"We," Hallie said grimly. "It's the only way we're going to be able to stop this."

"Uh-uh," I said, shaking my head. "And what happens when you turn around and stab me in the back? How many times do you expect me to fall for this?"

"Fall for what?" Hallie snapped, narrowing her eyes at me. "I told you before I was done, but then you turned around and stole my job—"

"Oh, don't pretend," I spat, feeling the frustrations of this very long day bubble to the surface all at once, like a pot that had been simmering too long suddenly boiling over. "You told me you were done, and then you turned around and sent your reporter friend here to take a picture of Bruce's award."

Hallie's eyebrows shot up, and she seemed to be genuinely confused. For just a moment I almost believed her, but then I remembered how many other times I'd given her the benefit of the doubt this summer, and how it had always, always come back to bite me. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure," I muttered, shaking my head. "Sure you don't. I'm just saying, I can't trust you. I should have learned it earlier this summer, but I finally know that now. So tell me, why should I suddenly start?"

"Because we want the same thing for once," Hallie said simply. I had a retort all ready to go, but the logic of this made me



pull it back and realize—much as I hated to admit it—she was right.

I nodded slowly. “We have to break them up,” I said, realizing this was what had been swirling in my head ever since my dad had told me. It was my eleven-year-old plan all over again—except this time, I’d have someone on my side. And that this time, it was about the greater good. I wasn’t hiding it under the umbrella of doing it for my dad. I would be doing this for me—and Hallie and Josh. I would be doing this so I wouldn’t spend my life connected to people who hated me. And I realized I didn’t even feel guilty about it. My dad didn’t care enough about me to run this past me, or even give me a heads up. Why should I make the same allowance for him? “You’re right,” I said, the words feeling unfamiliar to me even as I said them.

Hallie looked at me and let out a breath, then crossed and uncrossed her arms. I wondered if she was feeling the same thing I was—that we were now in uncharted territory.

“So . . . we’re calling a truce?” I asked, feeling the need to get this out in the open as clear as possible. Hallie had played me before, and I had no reason to believe she wouldn’t do it again.

“I think this is much bigger than our little feud,” she said dismissively. I was about to agree with her when something hit me.

“That isn’t a yes or no,” I pointed out, my voice coming out sharp and spiky. I hated having to do this—hated having to parse every word—but I really felt like I had no other choice. Hallie had driven me to it.

“Hm,” Hallie said, one eyebrow raised, and maybe—unless

I was just imagining it—a little more respect in her eyes as she looked at me. “Well, I meant it,” she said. “Truce. This,” she said, gesturing between the two of us, “is over. For the moment. We have bigger fish to fry. Agreed?”

I looked at her, trying to get my head around the fact that we were now on the same side, united by a common goal that was bigger than both of us. Even as I tried to think about Hallie in this way—not as my enemy, not as someone trying to hurt me, but as someone I was going to need to work with, part of me was screaming that this was a mistake, that Hallie couldn’t be trusted, that every time I thought things were different, I got burned. But I swallowed hard and made myself nod. Because I knew, somewhere deep down, Hallie was right. That this *was* bigger than either of us, and I was going to have to put my own feelings, my worries and fears aside, and do the unthinkable—I was going to have to work with Hallie.

“So what do you think?” Hallie asked, and I thought I could hear a note of worry creeping into her voice. I wondered if she was realizing the same thing I just had—if we were going to do this, we were going to do it together. That, like it or not, we needed each other.

“I’ll never trust you,” I said, looking at her steadily across the kitchen. I didn’t want her to think, as she so often had (and not without cause) that I was an easy mark, that I was just going to forgive and forget. I wanted to make sure she knew our wounds went too deep—that no matter what happened here, it wasn’t like we were ever going to be BFFs, talking about clothes and fixing each other’s hair. It just wasn’t going to happen.

“I’ll never *like* you,” Hallie replied immediately.

“So what’s the plan?” I asked, now that this had gotten out of the way, and we were both on the same page. “We break them up?”

“A reverse *Parent Trap*,” Hallie said slowly, nodding.

I suddenly flashed back to the summer we were eleven, when we’d watched that movie obsessively whenever there was a chance of a rainy day—she’d preferred the new version; I’d been partial to the original.

I started to take a breath, asking her if she really thought we were capable of doing this, but stopped myself before the words came out. I thought about how Hallie had planned her revenge against me for five years, about how methodically I’d tried to get her and Karen to leave the Hamptons when we were kids. I thought about the escalating war that had consumed both of us for the past few weeks. If anyone could pull this off, we could. It was also the first time it had really hit me—or that I was willing to admit to—just how similar we actually were.

“Shake on it?” I asked, feeling that having Hallie promise not to sabotage me was one thing, but I could use a bit more concrete proof. I suddenly wished I was still wearing one of Gwyneth’s cameras. I looked into the living room, wondering if we could ask someone to witness something if we refused to tell them what it was about, or, alternately, if it would be possible to find a local notary in this weather.

Hallie nodded and reached out her hand to me, but then stopped, her hand in midair. “Hey,” she said slowly, like she was remembering something from a long way back. “Do you

remember that thing we used to say as kids? When we had a really important secret?”

I just blinked at her for a moment, trying to recall this—and then, all at once, there it was. The thing Hallie and I had said to each other when exchanging information about the boys we liked or the secrets we hid from our parents or the things we just wanted to stay totally between us. It had been our catchphrase, and I’d totally forgotten it until right now. “Cross my heart . . .” I started, making the old gesture out of habit.

“Not my fingers,” Hallie finished, and we exchanged a tiny smile. Then she held out her hand to me, all the way this time, and I only hesitated for a moment before reaching out.

And we shook on it.