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whatHAPPENShere

This is how it was supposed to happen:

Lindsay and I were going to graduate high school next year and then hightail it out of Vegas and both go to college in California. We were going to meet supercool guys there—ideally brothers, preferably twins—and start to travel the world with them on summer vacations. They'd carry our backpacks, speak French, know how to taste wine and roll cigarettes. They'd proclaim their love to us in wildly romantic places and after we graduated, they'd propose to us on the Eiffel Tower, or on a gondola in Venice, and we'd say yes. We'd marry them on some remote Italian island and honeymoon in Greece and then eventually have their brilliant, well-behaved babies while we kept cool artsy jobs, like as photographers or writers. We'd rent villas in Tuscany and have big festive dinners with wine and mozzarella. We'd ski past chalets in the Swiss Alps and sip hot chocolate laced with whiskey by open fires. Lindsay and I were going to do it all.

We were going to come home to Las Vegas to visit, sure. Our families would still live here and probably always would. When we came back, we were going to stroll through the Grand Canal Shoppes at the Venetian—the ring and clang of slot machines in our ears—and laugh at how we once thought the fake canals and piazzas were so beautiful, so like the real thing. That was before we saw Venice with our own eyes, smelled it with our own noses, floated on real canals in real gondolas with above-mentioned husbands while being serenaded in Italian by actual Italians.

We were going to come back and stand outside the New York-New York casino for the sole purpose of making fun of it. To think we once thought it a pretty good likeness! To think we were so young! So naïve! We were going to take the elevator to the top of the half-scale Eiffel Tower at the Paris casino and reminisce about our first trip to actual Paris together, the way we ate croissants like crazy and smoked like poets in cafes. We were going to look down on the fountains of Bellagio across the way and think how silly we'd been to ever think how pretty they were; by then, we'd have been to the real Bellagio, in Italy, and seen all the great fountains of Europe. We'd have tossed coins into them with wishes on their wings. By then, we'd know that choreographing a fountain to Sinatra tunes does not a classy fountain make. We'd stand outside the Luxor and just laugh and laugh and laugh about how tiny it was compared to the real pyramids, whose peaks we'd have climbed in Mexico and Egypt.

We were going to see the world together, Lindsay and I. We were going to eat it up, whole. But it didn't happen that way. It didn't happen that way at all.

CHAPTER ONE

Months of begging and pleading had done nothing to change one fact: I was going to Europe and Lindsay was not.

She was lying on my bed, flipping through my Lonely Planet guide to London, and I was packing and pouting. "If you don't quit it," she said, "I'm going to loosen the caps on all your ridiculously cute trial-size toiletries and pack them next to your favorite top."

I folded a T-shirt. "I'm sorry. I just wish it had turned out differently."

"Yeah, well, me, too." She tossed the book into my suitcase. "But if anyone should be pouting, it's me."

She was right, of course. I was going to Europe. I was living out the dream we'd shared since we were little. Lindsay would be stuck here in the oven that is Vegas in summertime, just going to work and going

home at night and minding our dog, Burt, who was staying with her family while we were gone.

My parents had announced on Christmas—when my sister, Zoe, and I no doubt seemed disappointed with that morning’s meager offerings around the tree—that after years (“Years!”) of saving and planning, they were going to take us to Europe for two weeks come summer.

“Two whole weeks?” Zoe had said, clearly not entirely pleased with the prospect of being apart from her beloved loser boyfriend, Johnny, for such a long stretch of time. She was two years older than me but was in the habit of acting like a petulant child.

“You’ll live,” my mother had said, and then she’d turned to me, expectantly. My father did the same.

They no doubt expected my response to be “Oh my God!” or “All my dreams are coming true!” After all, I was the one who was always talking about backpacking through Europe and Southeast Asia, spending summers in Tuscany or at some culinary institute in Paris. I was the one who had plastered the walls of my room with pages ripped from travel magazines of amazing places around the world, places I hoped to someday see firsthand. I was, in a word, obsessed with the world beyond Vegas and even more so with the world beyond the U.S. But going to Europe was one thing; going with your family was another.

I said, “Can Lindsay come?”

My father shook his head and my mother tightened her bathrobe belt, probably imagining using it to strangle the two ingrates she’d raised. She said, “We should get dressed. We’ll be late for Mass.” Which was kind of a funny thing to say, considering we only went to Mass two times a year, on Christmas and Easter. Like anyone was going to miss us or even notice if we were late.

A few days later, when I was still asking the same question about Lindsay, my mother said, “I’ll talk to your father. But even if we say it’s okay, you have to understand, honey, Judy just might not go for it, for a million reasons. The money... I’m not sure I’d let you go with them.” Judy was Lindsay’s mom—Mrs. Woods to me—and also happened to be my mother’s best friend. Her husband, Lindsay and Noah’s dad, had shocked us all a few years before by running off to shack up with a Vegas showgirl. We seriously never saw the guy again and the funny thing was that Mrs. Woods seemed to be the one who minded least.

When my father agreed to our asking Lindsay along, Lindsay and I knew a miracle had occurred. Because my father wasn’t exactly the warm and fuzzy kind of dad who’d think it was a peachy idea to invite his daughter’s friend on a family vacation; my whole life long, he’d been the bad cop to my mom’s good cop, saying no to sleepover parties and dates and all kinds of purchases, and there was a part of me that was, if not scared of him exactly, then certainly wary. But my mother’s persuasive powers were clearly operating at their finest—she convinced him!—and so she promised to talk to Lindsay’s mom.

Thinking Mrs. Woods was sure to agree—that my mother had gotten that bit wrong—Lindsay and I were giddy for a few days, imagining European boyfriends and going shopping on the Champs-Élysées. We paid more attention in French class than ever before, even tried to text each other in French—no small task considering it was hard enough to understand Lindsay’s texting in English; she abbreviated to the point of frustration, then got annoyed when you had to text back “what?” We spent hours on the web, researching the places on the itinerary my parents had selected: London, Paris, Rome, Venice, all the top cities on Lindsay’s and my dream list. These were the cities you had to knock off right out of the gate, the way I saw it. If you’d been to these cities, you were no longer an amateur; after these cities you could expand your horizons in any direction: Amsterdam, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Sydney, Buenos Aires.

It would be good to get started at the age of sixteen since there was so much of the world to see. But Lindsay's mom said no and we were devastated. For a while, Lindsay had pressed for a reason—"just tell me why!" she'd said maybe two thousand times—but all her mom would offer was "because I said so."

"HOW MANY PAIRS OF underwear are you bringing?" Zoe said as she walked into my bedroom in a backbend. Her black hair was in a ponytail, the tip of it brushing the floor. I resisted the temptation to grab a ballpoint pen and draw a face on her upside-down chin. Burt followed her into the room and climbed up on my bed to rest his head on Lindsay's legs. He adored her.

"Well, this is a new trick," Lindsay said with a quick glance at Zoe. She played with Burt's wiry fur; he was a purebred Welsh terrier—an expensive breed that my father splurged on due to completely uncharacteristic passion for the Welshie's characteristic curly hair and long flat face—and couldn't have been cuter if he tried.

"The crab walks like this." Zoe made a quick turn, then shimmied sideways on her hands and feet. "I want to show them I'll take any part they have. Even if it's the stinkin' crab."

The fact that Zoe wanted to join Cirque du Soleil—she'd been training as a dancer and an acrobat in addition to going to college—was probably the number one cause of arguments over the dinner table in our house, but Zoe was not in the least bit discouraged. She walked around on her hands, she watched TV upside down on the couch, and her precious trampoline out back was second only to standing in front of a mirror, admiring herself, as her favorite place to be. Sometimes it was like living with a monkey—a very vain, annoying monkey—and when we were younger, especially, her admitted natural ability would drive me insane. She could slip into the smallest cabinets and closets so she was always a nightmare to play hide-and-seek with. Games usually ended either with me in tears screaming "I can't find her!" or, when I was old enough to know better, just going into the den and watching TV until she got sick of hiding wherever she was.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Lindsay asked as my sister made a full rotation, belly stretched high in the air. My best friend has always sort of been wryly amused with Zoe; the two of them had almost nothing in common.

"No pain, no gain." Zoe rested her butt on the floor, then pushed up again. I couldn't imagine having arms that strong.

"Don't you get dizzy?" Lindsay asked.

"I'm getting used to it." Zoe pushed herself up to stand. "I think." She sat on my bed, looking a bit woozy; her sharp nose seemed out of focus on her face.

"Do you actually have an audition yet?" Lindsay asked, and Zoe tilted her head in contempt at Lindsay. Zoe was mostly all talk, no action, but she constantly insisted she was just honing her craft. You had to apply to be invited to audition for Cirque du Soleil, apparently, and Zoe didn't want to apply for an invitation before she was ready. At least that's what she said. The rest of us were pretty sure that day would never come and my parents, in fact, were counting on it. The idea of their oldest daughter running off to join the circus—even if it was an arty upscale circus—didn't exactly thrill them. Adding to their hatred of the idea was the fact that Johnny, who'd held the title of boyfriend longer than anyone would've expected, wanted to run off and join the circus, too. In the meantime, Zoe and Johnny both worked at

this totally cheesy pirate show outside the Treasure Island casino, where Zoe was one of the sirens who supposedly lured bare-chested pirates like Johnny into troublesome waters. We'd all gone down to watch Zoe's first show when she got cast, and then had never gone again. It was too painful to watch.

"There's a crab?" I wanted to redirect the conversation.

"Yeah. There's a scene on a beach in Ká." Zoe sounded excited now; Ká was the Cirque du Soleil show at the MGM Grand casino on the Strip. "These guys sort of have a fight with a huge crab."

"Well"—Lindsay stood up—"as fascinating as this is, if we're gonna go, Chloe, we should go now." She usually got tired of Zoe about that quickly.

"Where to, kids?" Zoe asked.

"None of your business," I answered. I couldn't believe that once we got on the plane the next day, there'd pretty much be no escape from Zoe for two weeks.

"Well then, how many?" Zoe said.

"How many what?" She was already annoying me and we hadn't even left.

Zoe bent back into her backbend to follow us out of my room, feet leading the way. "Pairs of underwear?"

ZOE HAD BLOCKED MY car in, as per usual, so we walked over to Lindsay's house—just around the block; we could actually see each other's bedroom windows over the fence between our yards—so we could take hers. Her older brother, Noah, with whom I was always falling in and occasionally out of love, was just pulling up, loud music blaring from his car. He was studying hotel management at a college in Arizona and interned at the Four Seasons—a superupscale hotel—when he was home for the summer. Ever since he started working there, he seemed to look down on casinos like Paris and the Venetian and New York-New York with their theme-park attractions, so the fact that I worked at New York-New York, selling photos of people taken on the roller coaster, probably didn't impress him much. But I wasn't entirely impressed with all of his choices in life, either. His internship meant he had to work at the Four Seasons for like five years after college. That meant staying in Vegas, and if Noah was choosing to stay in Vegas there was no way I could choose him. I needed a guy who wanted to see the world. It was the one main criterion I had for the brothers, preferably twins, that Lindsay and I were planning on meeting and marrying.

"Where are you two off to?" he said when he turned the car off and got out. His dark hair flopped down a bit in front of his eyes.

Lindsay said, "The Eiffel Tower."

Since she was working as a lifeguard at the Paris pool for the summer, we didn't have to pay to go up the tower. This meant that we did so pretty often, especially on nights like tonight, at sunset.

"You are aware," Noah said with a wry smile, "that it's a replica. That the actual Eiffel Tower is in a little place called France."

I watched him take a guitar case out of the trunk and I replayed some scenes from our childhood—like the way he made me laugh by buzzing like a bee when I got stung at my thirteenth birthday party, and the way his voice cracked the time he sang a song by firelight on a joint family camping trip. Then I reminded myself that I'd stopped thinking about stuff like that, about how things used to be with him and me.

"Duh," Lindsay said, and we went to get into her car.

"How's it goin', Chloe?" Noah said, so I looked at him quickly and said, "It's going," which was basically the extent of our conversation these days.

There'd been a time when Noah and I would talk for hours—sometimes with Lindsay, sometimes without—about life, and music, and stupid stuff, like whether bugs have thoughts or whether praying mantises ever prayed or how his eyes seemed to change color when he was tired and how mine were like five colors in one. Back then I'd indulged the fantasy that it could actually happen—that Noah and I could and would get together—but then one time, years ago, I went to Lindsay's house when she wasn't home and Noah was. He'd just bought a vintage video game system called Intellivision and we spent hours playing baseball and skiing and blowing up asteroids falling from the sky. My burgeoning crush intensified into what I was convinced was first true love.

Then when Lindsay finally did come home, she looked at us like she'd just walked in on one of her parents having sex with the UPS man. She said, "What's going on here?"

Noah and I had been laughing about how bad the graphics were but had stopped the second Lindsay entered the room. "We were just hanging out," I said. "You weren't home."

"So you're playing video games?" She turned to me. "We hate video games."

I'd just set a new slalom record. "Actually, this one's kind of fun."

"Next time, you should call first," Lindsay said. "So you'll know if I'm not home."

"Good idea." The controller was still in my hand; I dropped it like a hot potato and got up. "I should probably get going."

Up until that point, we'd all always been fine hanging out together—in any configuration of the four of us kids, though I always preferred it when my annoying sister wasn't around—and I'd always felt that Noah, as someone I'd known all my life, held a special place that would never be challenged. So for the challenge to come from Lindsay was a surprise. It was as if she'd walked into the room that day and sniffed that my feelings had taken a turn and for whatever reason—jealousy?—she'd decided they were unacceptable. I never again dared think she'd be happy if I got together with her brother.

DOWN ON THESTRIP, Lindsay threw the car into the employee parking lot and we headed for the entrance to the Eiffel Tower, cutting a path straight across the casino. Lindsay always put her hands at the side of her face, like blinders, when we did this. Because there were all sorts of silly rules in Vegas, if you were under the age of twenty-one like we were. You could walk through the casino at Paris, for example, but you could not stop and stand next to a slot machine. This cracked Lindsay up to no end.

We bypassed the line to buy tickets, which ran through the gift shop—where everything from baby onesies to coffee mugs were emblazoned with the Paris logo—and went up an escalator and down the

long ramp to the elevators. There were tourists getting their pictures taken and the woman with the camera said, "Hey girls."

Lindsay said, "Bonjour!"

The elevator attendant on duty was Maria, who was around our parents' age. Her job was to tell elevator riders the stats of the Paris casino's Eiffel Tower versus the real thing as they traveled up to the observation deck. I pretty much knew the spiel by heart, so I tuned it out as we rode up with a car full of tourists. I was thinking about Noah and the music blaring from his car, about how I'd resolved back on New Year's to stop thinking about Noah at all. Again.

Outside on the observation deck of the fake Eiffel Tower, the sun was just about to set and all of Vegas glowed red. Except for the Strip itself—the casinos—which glowed pink and blue and green and white and every color imaginable. Most of the time I thought that Vegas was ugly, but I was never able to see it that way from the Eiffel Tower. From there, I couldn't help but be wowed by the lights that razzled and dazzled, the way it all shot right up out of the desert like neon fireworks.

Lindsay and I were quiet, the way we often were when we went up the tower, as if stunned into silence by the view—of the faraway desert and the nearby neon both. I looked down on the pool, aglow with turquoise in the night, where I'd sometimes visit Lindsay at work. She'd have a friend sneak me in and then I'd find a lounge chair that faced the tower and imagine I was sunning myself in Paris. Not that there were probably any pools near the Eiffel Tower in Paris but maybe there were. And pretending there were—and that I was at one of them—made me feel cosmopolitan and grown-up and more desperate than ever to graduate and get the heck out of Dodge.

The wind blew our way, carrying a familiar tune, Sinatra's "Luck Be a Lady," and we looked at each other and smiled. That smile of Lindsay's, that night's particular smile, is still etched in my mind. It wasn't a happy smile, not really. It was a sort of knowing smile, a smile that was somehow wise beyond its years.

"Promise me you'll have the best time imaginable," she said as we moved to the side of the tower that faced Bellagio and pushed our way forward near a bunch of German tourists. The fountains in Bellagio's lake were swaying to Sinatra and I wondered, again, how they got the water to do that, how that got to be someone's job, and what the job title was. Water choreographer? Fountaineer? Was there a place you went to study that? Bellagio was one of the Strip hotels that was full of mystery for us. You had to be eighteen to even enter, so at a mere sixteen we'd never been inside and had wasted countless hours speculating on what kinds of sordid adult things went on in there. Lindsay thought maybe it was for nudists. I thought maybe she was right.

"I can text you, too," I said. "I checked online and my phone will work over there."

"I don't want texts," Lindsay said. "I want postcards from every city, and I don't want you to write some dumb checklist of what you've seen. I want to know what it feels like to be there. Promise?"

"Promise." I watched the water of the fountains jump, jive, and wail.

Lindsay looked out at the lake—water shot high with a boom—and said, "I've got some big plans of my own while you're gone." She'd been growing her hair out and it was longer than it had been in years. Sexier somehow, too. A part of me was jealous.

"You do?" I had no idea what she could be talking about.

“Yup.” She looked over her shoulder, checking to see no one was listening, then said, “I’m gonna go to Vegas.”

There were some people speaking French behind me and I was distracted, translating. I wasn’t any surer of Lindsay’s meaning than I was of what the French people were saying even though it should have been perfectly clear. We’d started using the phrase “never been to Vegas” as code for virginity the summer before, when Lindsay had a job in a tourism office. So many people stepped up to her window and said “I’ve never been to Vegas before and…” that Lindsay started thinking it would be funny if it meant something else entirely. Naturally, we had to relate it somehow to sex. Lindsay had never been to Vegas. I had—once, just a few months before—though I hadn’t much liked it there.

“You know”—she elbowed me—“Vegas.”

“You are not,” I said as the realization dawned. She was obviously pulling my leg.

“Am, too.” She sounded dead serious.

“With who?” I asked. Lindsay wasn’t dating anyone, didn’t even have an active crush on anyone, a fact that depressed her to no end.

“Chris Nolan,” she said, and then turned away.

“Chris Nolan?” I bristled at the thought of Lindsay even deigning to talk to Chris Nolan, only the loudest, most cocky football player in Las Vegas High. He was working as a Paris lifeguard this summer, too, and I hated the way he strutted around, whistle at his lips. Somehow his whistle, when he blew it, was worlds more annoying than Lindsay’s. “We don’t even like Chris Nolan.”

Lindsay shrugged. “I like him fine enough.”

“But you can’t!” Chris Nolan and his crew ran with girls who talked about someday having boob jobs. They were the most awful, dominating clique in school.

“Why not?” Lindsay poked her fingers through the high gates of the deck and pulled playfully, but I had a sudden vision of the gates coming loose, of us plummeting to our death. She said, “If you’re going to be all well traveled, at least I’ll be able to say I’ve been to Vegas.”

“But you said you’d wait for the right person to go to Vegas with.” I could hear desperation in my own voice; anyone listening in would’ve thought we were insane. “You said you’d wait till you were in love.” The “like I wish I had” was understood.

Lindsay sighed. “You’re so old-fashioned, Chloe.” She hugged me then, hard. “You need Europe right now more than I do.”

“I’m serious.” I pulled away. “You can’t. Not with Chris Nolan.”

“What, you think I can’t get him?”

“No! Not at all. It’s the opposite!”

“I can totally get him,” she said. “And you’ll be in Europe so you won’t even be able to stop me.”

“Fine,” I said. “Ruin your life if you want to.”

“Fine,” she said. “I will.”

We watched the song play out without talking and then rode the elevator, left the casino, and drove home the same way. Quiet.

“Have fun in Europe,” Lindsay finally said, all snarky, when I got out of her car at my house.

“Have fun in Vegas !” I said, all fake cheery. And then I slammed the door. I didn’t know, of course—couldn’t possibly know—how things would turn out. If I had, I would have hugged her hard. I would have breathed her in. I would have never let her go.

CHAPTER TWO

I could fill the pages of a book with everything I know about Lindsay, like how she got that weird, round puffy scar on her inner right thigh (a pinch from the metal legs of a cot) and what she wanted to be when she grew up from the age of maybe eight (a ballerina) to sixteen (a photojournalist). I could tell stories about her that date back as far as my memory will allow and that book still wouldn’t capture what she was like. She was the sort of person who had to be seen to be believed. Not because she was crazy-looking or shockingly ugly or beautiful. There was just an energy to her that made it seem like she was some kind of rock star or like she was somehow destined for great things. Like she would’ve become some kind of crazy female Bono, saving the world, or some kind of Lucille Ball, cracking the world up instead.

I feel like if I focus on the positive—on the memories, on the past—then I can avoid thinking about what really happened. So I try to think of the good times, the funny times, like the night she bent down to pick up a toothpick she dropped at a party at Tony Montera’s house when we were freshman—new to Las Vegas—and her pants split wide open. She was wearing these really cool, deep pink pants and they just ripped right up the butt.

“And I’m wearing my best grannies,” she’d said. “Of course.”

She’d turned to show me the crinkly gray-white showing through the torn seam, then peeled my cardigan off my shoulders, tied it around her waist and spent the rest of the party making jokes about things being “cheeky” and emphasizing the word “but” in every conversation while I tried not to crack up.

I think of the semester she sat behind me in art class, and the day she kept inching her desk up closer and closer to mine until I had only enough room between my desk and hers to accommodate my rib cage. Lindsay was the kind of person who could do stuff like that and never get in trouble, so I stayed completely still because I knew that if I so much as turned around to tell her to stop, I’d be in detention while she was on her way home. It was because of Lindsay that I’d figured out that there were two kinds of people in the world: people who took chances and got caught, and people who got away with murder. I was firmly in the first group while she was in the latter. And while I’d long envied her ability to break the rules without consequence, I think there was a part of me that resented it, too. Why could Lindsay pull a prank and not get caught, while if I so much as thought about doing the same thing, the principal would be in my face, saying, “Don’t even think about it, Chloe”? What made Lindsay so special?

I don’t think she ever understood my reluctance to go along with her schemes—like faking a flat tire around the corner from Russell Barnes’s house so that we could ring his doorbell and ask for help with

the spare; she had a crush on him at the time—and it's because she couldn't relate to the fear I had of getting in trouble. I was a chronic good girl and Lindsay was not. Sometimes, maybe, I hated her for it. Our principal, who was originally from Ireland, would always say, "You're a real chancer, Lindsay Woods," and that seemed to sum it up just right.

Up until what happened happened, Lindsay had just always been there for me. Our moms had been college roommates and best friends and had both chosen to return, after college, to their hometown in North Carolina to become elementary school teachers. They'd both met the men they were going to marry in college up North and brought them home, too—dragging my father, at least, away from Brooklyn, kicking and screaming—and pretty soon Lindsay and I entered the picture. Technically, of course, Noah and Zoe came first, but it was hard for me to imagine those years without Lindsay and me to bond the families together. We were more like sisters than Zoe and I have ever been, despite our shared blood, our rhyming names, and years of cohabitation. In fact, it was especially hard to believe that our parents somehow concocted the plan to all relocate to Las Vegas—which was recruiting teachers since the population of young families was booming. It seemed more like something that Lindsay and I would have dreamed up ourselves, like they never would have done it without us.

It was the summer before Lindsay and I started high school when we all up and moved to a planned community called Breeza maybe twenty minutes from the Vegas Strip, leaving North Carolina behind. About ninety thousand people lived in Breeza but new houses and communities were still being added on, so that when the whole thing was done it would have two hundred thousand residents. There were restaurants, schools, day care, parks, and playgrounds, and the houses were all designed to look nice on the same street without being identical. You could find duplicates of your own house around, but usually at least a few blocks away. Our house—the model had a ridiculous name like Rioja or Fiesta—was one of the more modest houses available. There were some pretty crazy mansions—in one of Breeza's more exclusive gated communities, where guards sat in little booths by the entrance—that my parents said cost a million dollars. They've always been clear that ours cost nothing even remotely close to that but they've never been specific about money. I went to the website, though, and looked up the stats and figured it was about \$400,000, which sounded to me like an astonishing sum of money until I realized you don't actually pay that amount, a fact which brought me a great deal of relief as Lindsay and I were already concocting our grand plan to own and rent fabulous mansions the whole world over. I became smitten with the word "mortgage" in much the same way that Lindsay had grown fond of "vacation rental."

Lindsay and I visited the Breeza website obsessively before we moved. It made Breeza seem like this amazingly cool place to live but it turned out it really wasn't. It was like any old boring suburb but with more rules. You couldn't paint your house hot pink or do anything remotely fun or original, which seemed to me to go against the very American Dream that Breeza acted like it was presenting prospective homeowners. The website boasted pictures of mountains and flowering cactuses and fake lakes and freshly mowed golf courses but they didn't show you the pictures of the people working in the coffee shop—bored out of their minds—or the wacko mothers at the PTA meetings, or the deadbeat kids who'd turned one of the playgrounds into their own skateboarding hangout. But Lindsay and I found ways to make Vegas more fun than it really was.

Her dad got a job working in a surveillance room in one of the casinos and he liked to refer to himself as the "eye in the sky." There was some old song he'd sing to us, before he ran off with his showgirl not six months after the move—"I am the eye in the sky/ Looking at you-ou-ou/I can read your mind"—and he'd always point his pinkie and index fingers at our eyes like he really meant it. He told us how there were cameras everywhere on the Strip, how if you were parking your car, or having a burger, or taking a swim, or cheating at roulette—if that's even possible and I'm not sure it is—someone could see you. At least if they happened to be watching that one camera right then.

For Lindsay and me, the eye in the sky took on all sorts of powers and romance. We'd imagine that somewhere, in one of the casinos, there were guys who were secretly in love with us. We imagined them following our every move on camera and admiring us from afar, those two girls—were they sisters?—who were always looking beautiful and having fun. We imagined them trying to find ways to randomly bump into us, and then struggling with the decision of whether or not to tell us they'd already secretly fallen in love with us. To encourage their attention, we were always dressed our best when we were anywhere near the Strip and we were sure to laugh and flip our hair in places where cameras were pretty much a given. Lindsay liked to point at diamonds in the windows of her favorite jewelry shop, and imagined that someday, her own personal eye-in-the-sky guy—that's what we called them; it had a nice ring to it—would swoop down into her life with a little black box of something precious in hand. I once suggested, when we were getting ready to spend an afternoon in the mall at Caesars, that we should go in ponytails and sweats, so that our eye in the sky guys could see us looking normal for once, but Lindsay laughed in my face: "I'm not letting my eye-in-the-sky guy see me in sweats until we're married!"

We found a few webcams, too—views of certain casinos and bars and sections of the strip that you could view 24/7 online—and always talked about how it would be fun for one of us, say, to go down to the MGM Grand and ride the escalator that turned up on one of their cameras while the other one stayed at home and watched on the computer, but we'd never gotten around to doing it. Being together was always much more fun.

All that webcam searching, though, introduced me to the fact that satellites that took pictures of Earth were also sometimes called "eyes in the sky," and my own fascination eventually moved away from the ones in the casinos toward these high-powered cameras in space. It amazed me that there were floating machines above the clouds that could take a picture of my school, my house, my life. I wondered how close the cameras could zoom in, whether they could take a picture of the massive pimple I had on my nose the night of my first real date and then tell me how many other girls on the planet were wearing that same dress that night, whether they had pimples, too.

I'd spent hours on the web, looking at satellite maps, and was able to find my own house in satellite pictures of Vegas. If you zoomed in real close you could see my car parked in our driveway. I found photos of everything from the Eiffel Tower to the Vatican to the Great Wall of China—all the places I'd longed to visit ever since I was around the age of five (my parents blame the map of the world that hung next to my childhood crib in North Carolina). And though the technology was still sort of spotty—sometimes you could zoom in and see actual people, like the swirl of tourists waiting to go up the Eiffel Tower, but in other cases, like at the Great Wall, the zoom gave out just when you were getting started—it still amazed me. I knew the images weren't "live" most of the time, but they'd been live once, and that alone was pretty neat. Every once in a while, to crack myself up, I'd just look up at the sky and smile, because you just never knew when a picture of your neighborhood was being taken.

If we hadn't moved to Vegas I'm not sure I would go through life the way I do now, with a sense that someone is always watching me, but on the rare occasions when I dare to do something, well, bad or embarrassing or just plain dumb, I always think of the eye in the sky. I wonder if maybe it's really God, or some higher power, that I'm thinking of, but I'm never sure. These days, sometimes anyway, I wonder if there's an eye that can show me where Lindsay is, and whether she's okay.

CHAPTER THREE

"Hope you're not planning on sulking the whole time," my mother said as she tightened her seat belt and pulled an in-flight magazine from the seat pocket in front of her. She'd been in a great mood all morning she was so excited about the trip, and even though she was scolding me, I could tell from her bright tone that nothing I could do could ruin this for her. "Because if you are"—she flipped a page—"you can get

off the plane right now and go spend two weeks with Mrs. Ames.” Mrs. Ames was a neighbor who treated me like I was ten; two weeks with her would no doubt involve drawing with crayons, playing Sorry!, and drinking chocolate milk ad nauseam.

We were sitting on the runway, waiting to take off, and I looked out the window at the casinos on the Strip. I thought about telling my mom that Lindsay and I had had a fight but I decided against it and just said, “I’m not sulking.”

I could see the tops of a few buildings, the tip of the Luxor pyramid, but I could not see the scene of last night’s fight. And I wasn’t sulking, not really. I was actually happy to be leaving. I wanted Lindsay to feel awful about our fight—as awful as I did—and I was imagining that she’d soon feel even worse than I did because she’d be stuck in her boring Vegas life while I’d be in Europe. She’d be the furthest thing from my mind. Except that I had promised her that I’d send postcards. I wasn’t sure whether promises like that still counted after you had a fight.

I hadn’t been on a plane since we’d moved to Vegas and I’d begged for a window seat, then watched with awe as we busted through a layer of clouds. Suddenly, it looked like we were floating over a field of snow and I wished I could climb out the window and make a snow angel, something I’d only done once in my life, back in North Carolina, during the one big snowstorm of my childhood. Looking out that plane window, I felt like crying for reasons I couldn’t explain; it was like I knew this trip was going to change things—change me—in ways I couldn’t predict.

My junior year hadn’t really been the best and I’d sort of been in a funk all summer stemming from the way things had turned out with Peter, the guy I’d gone to Vegas with. I guess I was feeling a little freaked out, too, about the coming year being the last year of high school. All around me it seemed like people had these superfocused plans and career goals and all I knew about myself was that I wanted to travel and that I was increasingly obsessed, for reasons I couldn’t quite explain, with houses around the world.

I had started spending hours upon hours watching Million Dollar Listing on Bravo and browsing the New York Times Real Estate section online, looking at international listings for luxury homes and vacation rentals. I already had rentals picked out in various countries—I kept printouts of listings and photos in a folder—so that when Lindsay and I were old enough—and rich enough—we’d know where to go. The villa I liked in Tuscany had six bedrooms and a rooftop terrace that looked out on fields of grape trees. The house in Greece was a stone’s throw from one of Santorini’s black beaches and had a view of the ocean, bleached white stone walls, and a circular great room full of plushy couches. There was a massive apartment in a complex on the beach in Croatia, where we’d be able to get cheap massages every day. But none of that seemed to have any bearing on the reality of my existence. Not yet. Wanting to be rich enough to travel the world wasn’t the most practical of goals, nor was being a real-estate mogul.

Flashes of red above the seat back in front of me caught my attention and I sat up in my seat so I could look ahead on the plane. A really cute—goofy-cute—boy around my age was juggling three snack-peanut packets while waiting to use the bathroom. He caught my eyes—he could probably only see my eyes and the top of my head—and dropped a peanut bag and then the other two, as well. He shrugged and smiled at me before bending to pick them up, out of sight. If he looked back at me when he stood back up, I had no way of knowing since I’d promptly looked away. I pulled the in-flight magazine out of the seat pocket in front of me and started to flip.

My father was sitting on the opposite side of my mother—Zoe was directly across the aisle, headphones on—and out of the corner of my eye I could see my mother take my father’s hand and squeeze it meaningfully. She could be so corny sometimes that it killed me, but the truth of the matter was this whole thing, the trip, was her dream. She’d never left the country before and, particularly as she was a teacher,

she thought that made her somehow less qualified as a human being. “Travel expands the mind,” she was always saying, and we were going to spend three nights each in London, Paris, Rome, and Venice in order to find out if she was right. My father, part Italian by heritage, had been reluctant at first, but now seemed happy enough to go along for the ride—especially since the ride included two stops in Italy. He didn’t seem to be expecting any grand transformation within him, or any of us, to occur and he’d said as much. He was pretty overworked at his office—at Vegas’s biggest convention center, organizing and running events for everyone from romance readers to Trekkies to comic book fans—and was mostly concerned about this being the longest vacation he’d taken in his life.

Juggling Boy was walking down the aisle, still juggling, and I made a point of looking away until a red packet of peanuts flew past my parents and landed in the fold of my magazine. I looked up.

“Sorry,” he said.

“That’s okay.” I held out the peanuts.

“You can keep ’em.” He winked. “My treat.”

“Thanks,” I said. And then he disappeared down the aisle.

WE HAD A LAYOVER in New York that I barely remember and when we went to reboard I looked for Juggling Boy by the gate but he wasn’t there. I surprised myself by watching eagerly as people boarded and boarded and then by being disappointed when I saw flight attendants close the doors. The plane pulled away from the gate and it was probably just as well. Because what were the odds that this sort of goofy guy on my plane would be the guy to help me put the whole Peter thing behind me, where the Noah thing was supposed to be, too. But then the plane stopped and the pilot came on the PA: “I’m sorry, folks. We’re going to pull back into the gate real quick. A couple of our passengers from Vegas got delayed and didn’t make it, so we’re going to get back and scoop them up.”

A collective groan filled the plane and everyone, my parents included, started grouching.

“Some people!”

“The nerve!”

“Inconveniencing everyone!”

“I better not miss my connecting flight to Milan.”

A man wearing sunglasses came walking down the aisle then, really strutting his stuff. Juggling Boy trailed behind him, muttering “sorry’s” the whole way. He looked at me again as he passed and I knew for sure he wasn’t gay, wasn’t even shy. He shrugged apologetically and I started hoping against hope that he was on our tour.

It was beyond dorky that we were even on a tour but my mother got a great deal through some Nevada teachers’ organization. If it had been up to me, I would’ve come up with the entire itinerary myself, and booked the whole thing online. I’d have found supercool hotels in hip neighborhoods, and we wouldn’t have to spend our trip shlepping on and off buses in the most touristy parts of town like I knew we would. But I wasn’t about to complain. This had already become, to my mind, my first trip to Europe. I

would get the lay of the land, get the basics out of the way, so that the next time I could venture deeper into what I imagined to be the true cities behind the tourist traps.

When I got up to use the bathroom, Zoe got up, too, and followed me. Both restrooms had green OCCUPIED signs in their lock slots.

“Are we there yet?” Zoe yawned.

“God, this whole thing really is wasted on you, isn’t it?” I shook my head and thought about all those years when Zoe treated me like an annoying dog and I marveled at how our roles had become reversed over the years. She’d always wanted me to go away and so I had; fortunately, I’d had Lindsay to go to. I said, “I wish we could’ve transferred Lindsay’s brain into your body for two weeks. At least she would have been excited about it.”

“Talk to me when you’re my age and have a boyfriend.” Zoe leaned against a wall. “Then tell me how you feel about being dragged on a lame-o family vacation.”

“You could at least pretend,” I said. “For Mom’s sake.” I tried to see where Juggling Boy was sitting, whether he was watching us.

“Pretend what? I’m also missing out on two crucial weeks of training time.”

“Crucial? Give me a break, Zoe.” I was so beyond bored of her pretending Cirque would ever happen; at least I knew my own goals were pie in the sky, way up there with the eye.

“I didn’t want to say anything last night, with Lindsay there, but I applied for an audition this time. For real.” Zoe looked around nervously.

“Did you tell Mom and Dad?” I asked. Applying for an audition before she graduated from college was disobeying direct parental orders.

A bathroom opened and Zoe pushed her way past me and into it. Before she closed the door she said, “Is the Pope Jewish?”

CHAPTER FOUR

In hindsight, I realize that the fight with Lindsay had been growing for weeks, months, maybe even years. Maybe ever since we realized that one of us was going to go to Vegas before the other one, and definitely since I got there first.

I honestly don’t know if I fell prey to all the sex that emanates out over the Las Vegas desert from the Strip, whether seeing pictures of scantily clad showgirls and driving by triple-X video stores, or signs for the world’s largest sex shop made me more curious than people in other places, but I do know that I believed at the time that I was old enough, mature enough, to make the decision. I know now that I was mostly trying to prove a point—to Lindsay, maybe to the world—and that I failed.

Once everything with Peter was over and done with, I guess I latched onto Lindsay’s virginity with a ferociousness that I’d never quite felt about my own. It seemed like Lindsay deserved a better experience than I’d had so I’d recently taken on the role of detractor—always telling her reasons why she should wait, reasons why whatever guy she had her eye on wasn’t worthy.

"I don't see why it's such a big deal," she had said to me one day earlier that summer. We were in my room, reading magazines on a stiflingly hot afternoon.

"You only get to do it the first time once," I said. "It should be special."

"But almost everyone has a bad first experience." Lindsay sniffed a perfume ad and sneezed. "So why not get it out of the way so that you can move on to the second one?"

"That's not how it works."

"Well, no. Not if you're you. Not if you close up shop after your first one-day sale."

We'd started cracking up then, but I remember feeling hurt. Or maybe just sad. Because there wasn't any way I could explain to Lindsay all that I'd missed out on. Like losing my virginity with someone who actually cared more about me than they did about losing their virginity. Like first true love. Like being able to wake up the next morning and look yourself in the eye and feel like something had changed but in a good way—like you'd become a woman, as cheesy as it sounds, and not like you'd become something else. Not a slut, exactly. But maybe someone who could be if she wasn't careful. It's not like I thought Lindsay should wait for Prince Harry or anything. I just thought waiting until you were sure you were completely madly in love with someone was a good idea and wished that that was what I'd done. It seemed to me that virginity was the only thing in the world that people were desperate to give away only to be desperate to get back. I wished my own had been a sort of boomerang that had returned to me just a few seconds later.

I've occasionally accused my parents of being "do as I say, not as I do" parents and I suppose that's how Lindsay had begun to see me. Now that I'd gone to Vegas, she seemed especially eager to get there, too, and whenever I'd tell her to wait, she'd say "You didn't wait" and I'd have to explain again how that was exactly the point. She could learn from my mistake.

She would have, maybe, if I'd told her the whole truth about things.

I sometimes wonder now whether Lindsay had the right idea. Because maybe there really is no good way to lose your virginity. Maybe it's too complicated to ever be purely one thing or another. But when we stood atop the Vegas Eiffel Tower that night before my trip, I felt one hundred percent convinced that if there was a good way—and I was still holding out hope that there was, if not for me, then for her—Chris Nolan wasn't it.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Hey, watch it!" someone yelled. I was yanked back from the curb by the arm. A red double-decker bus blew past, nearly grazing my nose, and the air emptied from my lungs. The pull on my arm was released and my skin throbbed. It was the closest I'd ever come to getting killed.

"Thanks," I said and turned to see Juggling Boy. Up close he was even cuter than he'd looked on the plane. He said, "In England you have to look right, then left, then right again."

"Thanks," I said, and we waited for the traffic light to turn. I was actually dizzy, probably because our bus had driven us from Heathrow Airport to this street facing London's Hyde Park on the "wrong" side of the road. It made me feel like my whole world had been turned around. Because even though I'd understood before getting on the plane in Vegas that in certain countries people drive on the other side of the road, until I was on that bus, experiencing what it felt like to have it all reversed, I couldn't imagine

how completely bizarre it would be. Surely I was going to get killed or go flying off the road and into a building at any given moment. At corners I was sure we'd clip a car or flatten a pedestrian, but as much as it made me dizzy, it also made me want to laugh. Because I was in England! Where people drove on the wrong side of the street and didn't even know it!

"What are you smiling for?" Juggling Boy asked me. "You just almost died." He laughed.

"I don't know." Looking around I saw more double-deckers and a classic red British phone booth and then people were gathering at the corner to cross the street, too, and I heard their English accents. I was giddy. I said, "I guess I'm smiling because I'm in London."

He didn't know about the crib-side map of the world that had pretty much ruined me for life. He didn't know about the years spent dreaming of being a travel agent or a flight attendant. And he definitely didn't know about the villa in Tuscany or the apartment in Croatia and the way Lindsay and I had it all planned out. He had no idea how huge this was.

"I'm Danny." Juggling Boy held out a hand.

"Chloe," I said, and we shook.

"Cool." He assessed me more closely. "You look like a Chloe."

"I do?"

"Yeah, definitely." The light changed and we started to cross.

"What does a Chloe look like?" I asked, genuinely curious.

He eyed me again. "I don't know. Maybe like you should've been born in Paris."

I liked this guy better by the second.

He said, "So, you're on this dopey teachers' association tour?"

I took a second to remind myself: I am Chloe Swanson and I am in London. I am Chloe Swanson and a double-decker bus almost hit me. I am Chloe Swanson and a strange boy who juggles just saved my life. In London.

"You all right there?" Danny waved a hand in front of my face and I came back to the moment, focusing on his wavy blond hair, his bear-brown eyes.

"Yes, fine," I said, "just never came that close to dying before. And yes, I'm on this dopey tour."

"Who with?"

"My parents and my sister." I pointed to my family, who'd managed to cross the street safely without me. Zoe was being Zoe. I said, "That's my sister walking up the hotel steps on her hands."

"Cool," Danny said, as if there were nothing extraordinary about that at all, and the light changed and we started to cross the street. "Maybe this trip won't suck after all."

“Why would it suck?”

“Dear, dear Chloe,” he said, putting an arm around me, which seemed odd, considering he just met me, but also like the most natural thing in the world. “You obviously haven’t met my father.”

“Hey Danny!”

He turned toward the voice—it belonged to the cocky man with the sunglasses—and said, “Speak of the devil” in a voice that was meant to be light, joking, but wasn’t. I knew right then that there was more to Juggling Danny than met the eye. “I’ll catch you later,” he said, and I watched him walk off.

“I almost just got hit by a bus,” I said to Zoe when I caught up with my family. My parents were checking in and Zoe had righted herself in the lobby. She said, “Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.”

“SLEEP IS THE ENEMY,” my mother declared as Zoe and I both flopped down onto beds the second we got into our room. It was small and sort of old-looking but definitely cute, with antique-looking furniture and a very floral, British-countryside bedspread.

“Come on,” my mother said. She slapped my knees, which were bent at the bed’s edge. “Get up. Throw some water on your face. We have to stay up until a reasonable hour tonight or the jet lag will never leave us be.” She pulled the drapes open dramatically and light flooded the room. “We’re in bloody England!”

I wanted to be excited to be in bloody England, I really did. And I had been, mere minutes before. But the sight and feel of the bed called my attention to the fact that I was dazed, tingly with exhaustion. I hadn’t been able to sleep on the plane at all—thinking about Lindsay and Noah and school and every thing—and we’d flown through the night. It was 7:00 a.m. London time and the day stretched ahead of us like some kind of bizarre torture device; I imagined my mother would have to resort to toothpicks to keep my eyes open.

Zoe was first in the bathroom, freshening up, which gave her her first opportunity to complain about something that wasn’t the way it was back at home: the plumbing system. She made me get up off the bed to go see how the water in the sink came out of two spouts—one hot, one cold. “It’s impossible to get any warm water.”

I shrugged and went to the window to look out on the park. My mother had gone back to my parents’ room—adjoining ours—to freshen up and to make sure my father didn’t crash. I said, “I think you’re supposed to plug the sink and fill it and then use the water from there.” I had no idea if this was true but it seemed as good a solution as any.

“Gross,” Zoe said. “People brush their teeth in this sink. They spit in it.”

“I was just saying...” Even though the park was just a park, it was exciting to just look at it. It was famous. Hyde Park. I didn’t really know why it was famous, except for the fact that it was this big beautiful park in London.

Zoe came into the room with a hand towel, drying her face. “Why would anyone want the hot and cold to come out of two different faucets?”

“I don’t know, Zoe. I think we should talk about it some more. Maybe all day even. It’s really a fascinating topic.”

“Yeah, well, you try to wash your face and then see if you want to be a wiseass.”

I scalded my left hand and nearly froze off my right as I tried to wash my face, but I wasn’t going to complain. Complaining seemed somehow very American, and I wanted to blend in as best I could.

THE TOUR GROUP WAS meeting up in the pub connected to the hotel lobby and from there we’d be herded onto a bus for our city tour. When we arrived, the place was booming. My father went straight for the bar and my mother said, “Paul! Don’t! It’ll only make you sleepy. Alcohol and jet lag don’t mix.”

“Bloody hell, Pam.” He sounded tense. “I’m on vacation and I’m in England for the first time in my life. I’ll have a pint if I want one.” I heard him order a Boddingtons, which was a kind of beer, and when he brought it back to my mom, she took a sip and smiled. He smiled, too.

It was a little scary and weird to be on vacation with my dad, considering how little time we actually spent with him at home; I’m sure my mom and Zoe felt it, too. Because at home my mother was always trying to get him to relax, to lighten up, so it wasn’t clear how he’d handle a week of nothing but relaxation. Those beach vacations back in North Carolina were a long, long time ago and even then, my father was always checking in at work on his phone or laptop. He’d packed his phone for Europe but had promised my mother he wouldn’t check in with work more than once. In fact, my mother had made us all agree there would be no e-mail, no stops in Internet cafés.

I’d spotted Danny at the bar and he looked sad. His dad had his back to him and was talking to a woman with long brown hair. I wasn’t sure whether she was on the tour or not. Then Danny saw me, waved with bright, happy eyes, and came over. “Hey,” he said, Coke glass in hand. I turned away from my family.

“Hey,” I said and nodded toward the bar. “So, that’s your father?”

His gaze followed mine. “According to my birth certificate, yes.” He ran a hand through his hair, which was sort of overgrown and wavy but really soft-looking, and I had a flash of thinking, Who is this guy? Yesterday there had been no Danny in my life and now here he was—a stray boy from nowhere. There was something thrilling about it. He said, “We’re here to bond.” His dad leaned in and said something close to the brunette’s ear; she laughed. “We’re bonding big time,” Danny said. “Can’t you tell? And the best part is that after this whole trip, we’re spending an extra week together. He’s rented a villa in Tuscany.”

My heart leapt. I said, “Could be worse.” A trip to Europe with your father—even if he was maybe a slime like Danny’s or a little scary like mine—didn’t seem like the worst thing in the world. And a week at a villa in Tuscany! If Danny only knew! I was ready to practically declare my love for him if it meant that I’d be invited along.

“Like how?” Danny looked at me hard and I wasn’t sure if it was pure curiosity in his eyes or curiosity mixed with defiance.

“You’re in Europe,” I said. “You could be at a dude ranch. Or camping.”

He nodded his head a few times. "You're absolutely right." He turned so his father was no longer in his line of sight. "So you live in Vegas?"

"Breeza," I said. "You?"

"Henderson," he said. It was a town just outside Vegas, not far from my house at all.

He said, "So you have a boyfriend back at home?"

"God, no," I said without thinking. It was crazy to think that anyone who knew me would think of me having a boyfriend, but then Danny didn't know me. "I mean, no. Not right now."

He looked at me suspiciously. "That surprises the hell out of me."

I probably blushed. "Do you just say everything that you think?" I asked, noting that it was, apparently, contagious.

Danny shrugged. "Pretty much."

I smiled. "Doesn't that get you into trouble?"

"Sometimes, but not really."

"It's... I don't know." I couldn't think of the word but settled on "unsettling."

"Because I'm a guy and I'm supposed to be dark and mysterious, brooding and aloof, never give you the time of day?"

"Exactly!" I thought of Noah then, because ever since that day with the video games I'd started to pull away and sensed that he had, too, matching my efforts and exceeding them. He'd become more of a mystery with each passing day and I'd had to make do with scraps of information I got about him and his life at college from Lindsay. I knew, for example, that he'd had a serious girlfriend this year, and that they'd just broken up. I knew that he'd had a mild case of the chicken pox last semester, even though Mrs. Woods and my mother both swore he had them when he was a baby, the same time Zoe did.

"Sorry to disappoint." Danny raised his Coke as if to toast.

"No. It's actually sorta refreshing."

He finished the rest of his drink in one go and put it down on a low table. "You make me sound like a breath mint."

THAT DAY WE SAW Big Ben—the big clock on the houses of Parliament—and the London Eye—that huge Ferris wheel on the Thames; I got vertigo just looking at it. We saw the Tower of London—an old prison, which sort of creeped me out—and Piccadilly Circus—the London equivalent of Times Square—but the part I loved most was when we stopped for a while in Covent Garden, which wasn't a garden at all but a sort of big square and shopping area where there were tons of shoppers, street performers, and vendors selling everything from flowers to handbags. I stood there, looking

around, and for the first time in my life I felt in my bones what a city felt like. A real city, not some fake replica of a city with a casino and a hotel attached. One of the things I hated about Breeza—attached as it was to that fake city—was how thoroughly suburban it was in every way. This—city life—was what I imagined for myself down the road. I'd go to college somewhere urban, then have a great city career, and then travel out of that city to other cities—and to amazing houses along the way.

We had lunch at a big pub—where I was introduced to curry chips, which were basically French fries with an Indian curry dipping sauce, and split my mother's shepherd's pie—and then started making our way to the bus. At an open-air souvenir shop my family started to browse, so I went to the postcard racks out front. I found a card with a view of the Thames and the Houses of Parliament—taken from the London Eye, a sort of bird's-eye view—and it reminded me of Lindsay and the eye in the sky. I bought it—my parents had given Zoe and me some pocket money—and started to think about what I'd write. Maybe "I'm sorry" and nothing more. Or "Don't go to Vegas," and nothing more. Or maybe I'd just write about London and act like we'd never had our fight at all.

The tour bus made its next stop at Buckingham Palace, where Danny tried to get the guards—with their stoic faces and straight-ahead eyes and big, black marching band hats—to smile. He juggled, he did a stupid dance, he told Zoe to do a handstand.

"I'm wearing a skirt," Zoe said. I'd finally introduced Danny to my family that morning: we'd met his father, too, just briefly, and as I expected, he sort of seemed like a jerk.

"My point exactly!" Danny gesticulated wildly, still trying to get a guard to crack a smile. "If that doesn't do it, nothing will!"

I took a bunch of pictures—of the palace, which was almost as big as a casino, of the guards, of Danny—and already imagined Lindsay looking at photos with me. "Who's that?" she'd say, and I'd say, "That's Danny." I liked the sound of it, of my secret. And I liked the fact that after only a day, Danny—with his long skinny arms and hair that curled in on itself ever so slightly—was already becoming familiar. It had been many moons since I'd had any real interaction with a new boy, and Europe seemed the perfect place to do it.

Our last stop was Abbey Road, which I knew was famous, though I wasn't exactly sure why. Our tour guide pointed out the Beatles' Abbey Road Studios and said that the crosswalk was featured on the cover of the Abbey Road album. He went on to explain that if you called a friend ahead of time, they could watch you walking across via live webcams.

"Oh my God," I said, thinking of the circuits and wires and routers that could put an image of me on Abbey Road in Lindsay's room back home. "My friend Lindsay."

"What about her?" Danny said.

"We used to talk about doing something like this all the time, with a webcam in Vegas. She'd freak if she could see me."

I took my phone out of my bag and started composing a text based on the guide's info. "Go to abbeyroad.com," I wrote. "Look for me now." I hit send and the text went through but I wanted to know if she got it. She needed to be on her computer as soon as was humanly possible.

"Maybe I'll call, too," I said and Danny shrugged. "Why not?"

My father was staring down at me seconds later. He looked at my phone and held out his hand.

“But Dad...”

“But nothing,” he said. “We all made promises to your mother about phones and e-mail.”

“But Lindsay would be able to watch us—”

He didn’t care. “Lindsay can hear all about it when you get home.”

He took the phone out of my hand, turned it off, and put it in the bag he was carrying. “You’ll get it back when we’re home.”

“Oh well,” Danny said softly after my father walked off. “Was worth a shot.”

“Yeah,” I said, suddenly depressed and embarrassed by my father’s rigid ways.

We all walked across the famed crosswalk then, and Danny insisted he get a shot of my family—like the four Beatles—crossing all in a row, so we backtracked and crossed again, this time more deliberately. “Bloody tourists!” someone yelled from a car as we finally stepped onto the curb and Danny shouted, “Bloody locals!” back. We laughed then, and said “bloody” this and “bloody” that the whole way back to the bloody bus.

Zoe sat next to me on the ride back to the hotel. Danny was far away and Lindsay seemed farther away than ever. I wondered what she was doing without me and imagined her and Noah watching movies in their den, laughing at stuff that’s just not that funny because that’s how they were together, like they should’ve been born twins but weren’t. I imagined her hanging around with Chris Nolan and it almost made me sick to my stomach, even from this distance in space, to think of her flirting with him, trying to impress him, when she was so completely out of his league in every way.

“So what’s the deal with your new boyfriend?” Zoe asked. “His dad seems a little sleazy.”

I shook my head and looked out the window because even if she was right about Danny’s dad, I didn’t want her talking trash about them. I didn’t feel about him at all the way I typically did when I liked a boy. I didn’t feel sick to my stomach when he was around or tongue-tied or anything at all. I just felt like me and I suspected that was probably how it was supposed to be.

“Chloe and Danny, sitting in a tree,” Zoe sang.

I said, “God, I can’t wait for you to go back to school.”

“Sucks to be you.” She poked me in the ribs. “I’m not going back to school.”

“What are you talking about?” I rubbed the spot where I could still feel her finger. “You haven’t even been invited to audition yet.”

“I applied for regular jobs at Cirque, in case the audition invitation doesn’t come this time around. Like to be an usher or stagehand and stuff; that way I’ll be around for the next set of auditions. I’m taking a year off, maybe more.”

I studied her face for clues that this was some kind of joke but found none. “I don’t imagine you’ve told

Mom and Dad this?”

“Of course not. And you wouldn’t dare.”

That night’s agenda included taking in a performance of Shakespeare’s *A Comedy of Errors*, so I guess I was thinking melodramatically when I pictured my father’s head exploding all over the tour bus, pictured my mother weeping like a widow, wailing “why oh why?”

“You’re right,” I said. “I wouldn’t.”

That night, after the play, which I spent mostly daydreaming about being in London with Danny and not our families, I wrote out my postcard to Lindsay:

London makes me want to be a royal or a professor or maybe even a punk. It makes me want to eat shepherd’s pie for breakfast and curry chips for lunch and wash it all down with a thick, dark beer. It makes me want to go to the the-ay-tre and talk like Shakespeare doth and read more Dickens stories about the best of times and worst of times. It makes me want to drive on the wrong side of the road and catch Beatlemania and ride all the great Ferris wheels in the world! xxo, Chloe

CHAPTER SIX

When I think about it now, the life that Lindsay and I had in North Carolina feels like something from a book I read. The fact that pictures exist of the two of us making sand castles when we were maybe eight or nine years old—on the white beaches of the Outer Banks—is almost too bizarre to grasp after so many years surrounded by red clay, desert dust, nary an ocean to speak of. But every summer before we moved, our families rented a cramped bungalow a few blocks from the beach, cramming us kids into bunk beds in rooms so small you could reach out and touch all four walls from the beds. The house wasn’t anything fancy at all but it was a short walk to the boardwalk and the beach, where mansions like glass palaces looked out at the shimmering sea.

The last summer before we all moved to Vegas was probably the one that planted the seed for that fight atop the Eiffel Tower, for the strain that surrounded the topic of boys and sex. It was the summer we met Steve and Brian—the summer I realized that no matter how alike Lindsay and I were, there was one big way in which we were fundamentally different. Pretty much every guy we met wanted to get with Lindsay, while I seemed to be more of an acquired taste—and probably would be until the day on which I actually acquired some breasts, if that day ever came.

The video game incident had only recently happened and I was busy trying to convince myself I needed someone more adventurous than Noah, who seemed content to spend his beach vacations playing Scrabble with anyone who’d agree to, and reading big books, and plucking away at his guitar. So Lindsay and I both fell for Steve, a slightly older, totally cute guy on vacation from Pennsylvania with his family and his friend Brian.

On their last night in town, we all cruised the beach until we were sure we’d found an empty house—one of the big ones, too—and then the guys walked around it and tested the windows while we girls hung out on the beach, trying to look casual and keeping a lookout for beach police. Finally, after what seemed like years, we heard a “psst” and got up and said, “oh my God” and hurried up the path to the house, where Steve was holding the front door open. “Welcome,” he said, “to my humble abode.”

We ran around the house in excitement, shushing one another, though who we thought would hear us I have no idea. And then we settled, finally, in an upstairs living room with a wall of windows looking out

on the water. The moon was high and full and bright that night, casting silver light on the ocean's white-crested breakers. I remember thinking the moon was like a spotlight, shining down on the four of us, and I reveled in the attention the world was giving us, but then it became clear that Steve hadn't broken into the house—not that anything got broken, per se, a window had been left unlocked—just so that we could see the house. He'd broken in so that he could have some privacy with Lindsay. The two of them very unsubtly disappeared together and I was left there with Brian, who was cute, but didn't inspire any longing in me at all. That didn't stop him from making a move on me, but I knew that it was more of a pity move than anything. He'd been pretty obviously flirting with Lindsay for days but was clearly the male equivalent of me. He just couldn't outshine Steve when the two of them were in a room.

I suppose it wouldn't have killed me to kiss him, but that was what Lindsay would have wanted me to do. She'd want me to pair up with Brian so that she wouldn't have to feel bad about being with Steve, who she had to know I liked, too. I hadn't come out and said as much, she hadn't, either, but it was clear from the way we'd both talked about the boys, mentioning Steve ten times for every one time we included "and Brian," that we both had our sights set on the same guy.

So when Brian leaned in, I said, "You don't have to do that," and squirmed away. I wondered how many Scrabble points I'd get for playing "squirm."

"I know," he said. "I want to."

"Well, that's sweet of you to say," I said. "But really. Don't feel bad. I get it. It happens all the time at home."

"What does?"

It seemed too complicated to try to say what I really wanted to say—about how I knew that Lindsay was in a different league than I was, and about how even guys who eventually decided they didn't like Lindsay had at least taken a moment to consider whether they did or not, whereas girls like me just never got a second thought. I wasn't sure Brian would really understand anyway. I said, "I just mean, I know you liked Lindsay. And it's okay."

"But I don't," he said. "I like you."

"No you don't," I said. "You just think you have a chance with me."

"Not anymore I don't." He shook his head. "Wow."

"What?"

"Forget it."

We sat there in silence for a while, and then I said, "You really like me?"

"I thought I did, yeah. Now I'm not so sure. And anyway, we're going home tomorrow so there's not really much point."

I said, "No, not really," but felt foolish for having rebuffed him. He was cute and nice. It's not like every guy you kissed was going to be the man of your dreams and I figured I could probably use the practice since, at that point, I'd only ever kissed one boy before, and not even for very long. But the moment had passed. I'd blown it again, and in my head there was a piece of it, at least, that was all Lindsay's fault.

Brian and I talked about the house then, as my future obsession had already started to form. We talked about how much money we thought you would need to make in order to be able to afford a house like it, as your second home. We talked about how cool it must be to live right on the ocean, and wondered whether the people who lived there really appreciated it. Then Lindsay came back out into the living room, with Steve trailing behind her, and their lips were swollen and their smiles barely suppressed. “We have to go,” she said to me. “We’re almost past curfew.”

I deduced that Steve mustn’t have been all Lindsay had cracked him up to be, because if he had been, I’d have found myself—half an hour past curfew—knocking on the door of the room they were in and begging her to please come out so we could go home.

“Did you kiss him?” she asked me as we walked back to the house.

“God, no,” I said, and she said, “You’re such a freak.”

“I am not,” I said. “He’s not my type.” I thought of Noah and his books and said, “He doesn’t even like to read.”

Lindsay’s head snapped to alert. “Oh, I bet he doesn’t play Scrabble, either.”

I nearly gasped, because it meant that I’d been right about that day with the video games, right in thinking that she didn’t approve of my feelings for her brother, and right that something had changed between us as a result.

The next day at the beach house, our moms announced the news that we were all moving to Las Vegas come September, and Lindsay and I had so much to talk about that I forgot how mad I was about Steve, about Noah. It rained all day but we didn’t care, we were so excited. We sat facing each other cross-legged on the bottom bunk for hours and tried to imagine what our new life would be like. We didn’t really know much about Las Vegas, except for the basics. There were casinos; there was sex. What happened there stayed there. We had no idea what living there would be like, and in the end most everything we thought would turn out to be wrong, because we expected it to somehow be better, different. But it wasn’t really. It was only warmer, and less green. But as for high school, it turned out people don’t vary much from place to place: you find people to love and people to hate wherever you go.

Sometimes I feel like if we’d never left North Carolina then none of this ever would have happened. And with each day that passes I find myself thinking more often of the Lindsay I knew in North Carolina—like that was somehow the real Lindsay—than the one I knew in Las Vegas, a place she never quite seemed to belong, though I’ve never been sure why. Maybe because nobody does. When I think of her now, I still see her standing on the beach, the wind in her blond hair, laughing up into the sun.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Three more days in England passed in a blur and then I found myself standing in the shadow of the actual Eiffel Tower for the very first time. It was a clear, sunny day—a sort of happy, yellow, wet sunny, a kind we didn’t get in Vegas—and I wanted to dance and cry at the same time. I snapped a picture and thought, I’m Chloe Swanson and I’m in Paris!

France!

The tower was so big, so amazing—my awe so visceral—that my feet wouldn't move from their chosen spot; my head would not turn away. I closed my eyes and wished it were night, that I'd seen the tower for the first time aglow with light and romance. Strangely, the real Eiffel Tower looked as fake to me as the fake one in Vegas. I'd seen it in movies and on TV so many times that to actually see it, firsthand, was very surreal. That was sort of becoming the defining feeling of the trip, really. Because just as I knew every line and detail of the Vegas Eiffel Tower, I was finding that I knew Vegas Chloe better than I knew the person inhabiting my shoes on the trip. Everything about me—the way my hair felt, the way my skin smelled, the way my laugh sounded—seemed different to me and I couldn't help but wonder whether the Vegas version of me was also somehow fake. It felt great to be away from the boredom of work and the bullshit of school and, even with Zoe being her usual annoying self, I felt for the first in a long time free to just be. I wondered whether my sister and my parents were feeling it, too, whether this was what my mother had meant when she'd said that travel expands the mind. I felt like my mind, my heart, my life was expanding in every which way.

We'd seen a lot of Paris already that morning—we'd glimpsed l'Arc de Triomphe—a huge stone archway at the center of a busy, round intersection—and strolled the Champs-Élysées, the famous shopping strip where the shops had high-concept window displays of crazy runway fashions. We'd been to Notre-Dame Cathedral, where the stained glass windows—so old, so gorgeous—made me wish I knew what I really believed about God and heaven and hell; we'd had a big group lunch at a café where the waiters were as rude as I'd hoped they'd be; and now here we were, waiting on line to go up the tower, after which we'd make our way down to the banks where we'd hop aboard an early-evening cruise on the Seine.

Danny wandered up from his space on the line a few people behind us and said, “Sup?” His dad was on his phone; this seemed to be his favorite pastime right after chatting up women.

“Nothing much,” I said, and we mostly waited in silence as the line moved forward toward the elevator bank.

Danny had almost become a fifth member of our family by this point in the trip. His father was so inattentive and my parents were just so generally blissed out that no one seemed to mind at all, though my family, of course, had speculated in private about the whereabouts of Danny's mother, to whom his father was, according to Danny, still married (“Maybe she just couldn't get the time off,” “Maybe they're headed for Splitsville,” “Maybe she's in rehab”). I liked having him around, and even Zoe seemed to find him entertaining. She'd stopped, at the very least, singing about us sitting in a tree.

Up on the observation deck, it was crowded—like it usually was in Vegas—and I wished, instead, that I were there alone. Or with Lindsay. Or even with just Danny. Luckily, he and I finally found a good view among the hordes, where Paris stretched out as far as we could see. My mother came over and said, “Chloe! Danny! Let me get the two of you.” She stepped up with her camera and Danny stepped close to me, looked me over, and then put an arm around me. His warmth did something funny to me and again, I wished it were night and that there were lights glistening in the so-called City of Light. For a moment I missed all the razzle-dazzle of home—all that neon. I pictured the Vegas Eiffel Tower sticking up off the earth about halfway around from us—next to the Paris casino's big, fake blue-and-gold hot-air balloon. I wished Lindsay could somehow hop into that balloon and float right over.

“I had a fight with my best friend the night before we left,” I said to Danny when my mother wandered off. He was taking pictures of the view but I knew they wouldn't turn out well; shots like that never really did. “I feel awful about it.”

“So call and apologize.” Danny took a picture with me in it, even though I hadn't posed at all.

“But I’m not wrong,” I said. “And it’s not like I can use my phone anyway.”

Danny put his camera away and we started to walk toward a different view, a new direction. “What was it about?”

I shook my head. “It’s complicated.”

We stopped again and looked out at Paris and I tried to find a pool among the gray sprawl, but couldn’t. I imagined Lindsay at the Paris pool, flirting with Chris Nolan without shame.

“I’m pretty sure I could handle it”—Danny smiled—“I mean, if you use small words.”

Given the nature of the fight, I wasn’t sure Danny was someone I should be talking to about it, but my only other options were Zoe and my mom. Thinking of that last night at home, of “Luck Be a Lady,” of that knowing grin of Lindsay’s, I suddenly had to talk to someone. “There’s this guy...” I began.

“Ah, isn’t there always?” Danny laughed.

“Don’t be flip.”

“Sorry.” He rubbed my back and I stiffened against his hand, though I didn’t mean to. I relaxed again a moment later.

“She’s planning on doing something really stupid just to prove she can. He’s not a good guy.”

Danny was quiet for a few seconds. “How stupid are we talking?”

“Really, really stupid. Like can’t-take-it-back-ever stupid.” I couldn’t bring myself to talk about sex explicitly with Danny and I suddenly wondered whether he’d ever been to Vegas and if he’d liked it if he had.

“Well, don’t shoot the messenger”—he had his camera pointed out at Paris again—“but she’s probably gonna do what she’s gonna do whether you like it or not.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

“It’s not the worst thing,” he said, and I wanted to yell at him that he had no idea what he was talking about. “I mean, if it’s what I think it is. A lot of people mess that up and get over it.”

I had to look away because I was afraid he’d see that I was one of those people. Me. I’d messed it up. I just wasn’t sure I’d gotten over it. And I wanted more than anything to know if he was one of those people, too. Because Danny—Danny who, later that evening, would stand with me on the back deck of the boat we rode down the Seine—was the kind of guy who said things like “your hair looks amazing like that” and “you’re way cooler than your sister.” He made me think, for the first time, that I was falling for someone who really and truly seemed like a good guy. Someone who was smart and cute and funny—and not my best friend’s brother.

We floated past a smaller version of the Statue of Liberty on the boat that night. I’d never seen the one in New York in person, so the only thing I had to compare it to was the one at the New York-New York casino, which was bigger than this one, but smaller than the real one. Regardless, it was just weird

to see it there, at the base of a bridge over the Seine, when I was used to seeing it on the Las Vegas Strip, and to associating its image with the U. S. of A. It was like running into a teacher when you're out to dinner with your family or seeing a neighbor walking another neighbor's dog. I wondered, for the first time, how Burt was doing without us.

"Part of me never wants to go back to Vegas," I said, and it probably seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Really?" Danny said. The boat ducked under a bridge and we all fell into shadow.

"Everything there is so fake."

"Yeah, but I mean, there's also something kind of cool about that. I mean, it's a crazy sort of place, with these huge buildings meant to copy some of the greatest architectural styles in the world."

"I know. But they're copies. The originals are so much better. And when you smash them all up together it's so ugly."

"There are ugly places everywhere, though. We're only in Europe long enough to see the good bits."

"I guess." I felt a little twinge of disappointment that Danny was so quick to leap to Vegas's defense.

"No, it's true. We're in this tourist bubble. But you just know bad stuff is going on here, too. And there are ugly neighborhoods. And poor neighborhoods. We're only seeing Europe's best foot."

I smiled. "Well, when you put it like that, it doesn't seem so nice after all. Its best foot?"

"You know what I mean."

I was wearing a dress for the first time on the trip and something about it made me flirty. I elbowed him. "Am I only seeing your best foot?"

"Ow." He rubbed his ribs. "What do you mean?"

I gave him my best appraising look. "Maybe you're really some kind of jerk back home."

He nodded and smiled like he liked the idea of it. He said, "Maybe I am."

MY PARENTS HAD OPTED us out of the tour-group dinner after the cruise that evening because my mother wanted to go to this restaurant she'd read about—on the Île de la Cité, a small island within Paris—so I said good-bye to Danny when we docked and headed off with my family. We were all more dressed up than we'd been in days and there was something exciting about it, this venturing out on our own.

It seemed to me that nearly every woman we passed that night oozed sophistication. They were wearing gorgeous wrap dresses and had barrettes in their hair and I couldn't believe how awful people dressed back home. I wanted to snap photos of these Parisian women and show them to Lindsay so we could take notes for the fabulous future we planned on having. If we were going to travel the world and vacation in fabulous places, we needed much more fabulous clothes. It was probably never too early to start upping the ante.

The restaurant was tiny, dark, and we were seated in a dark wooden booth right near the center of the room. Our waitress was an older woman wearing an apron and I wasn't sure whether she was the owner and chef or not, but she seemed like it. My mother, to my extreme mortification, asked her in English, "Do you speak English?" and the woman said, "Un peu," but seemed a little irritated, so I said, "Je parle un peu Français," and she clapped her hands and said, "Ah, bon!" She handed us menus and said something entirely unintelligible to me.

"Merci," I said, and she walked away, and my mother asked. "What did she say?"

"I have no idea."

My mother was sitting next to me and rubbed my hand. "Well, still! Nice work!"

We used a little phrase book to look up a few questionable items on the menu, and then I ordered. In French. And the woman actually understood what I was saying. It felt like some sort of miracle to me, because French class was one thing, this was something entirely new. Talking to an actual French person! I ordered an asparagus pastry to start and then something that sounded like a chicken stew. My mother ordered a braised rabbit dish and my father—the least adventurous of the group, which was saying something considering my sister was also in the group—ordered a lamb chop. From the first bite, I knew I'd probably never see food the same way again. The asparagus pastry—who'd ever heard of such a thing?—was creamy, flaky, and warm, and the chicken dish I'd ordered made me rethink chicken completely. Every bite was something to savor.

"I think this is the best meal I've ever had," my mother said, and I said, "Me, too." She smiled and said, "Want to try mine?" and I said, "Sure, you want to try mine?" And hers was just as good.

We ordered one dessert—a fruit tart of some kind—to share and after it was delivered to the table, the waitress came back and left a small bowl of creamy white stuff, with a spoon in it.

"What's that?" Zoe asked, her nose crinkling in disgust. She had a thing with creamy white things, especially mayonnaise, so I said, "mayonnaise."

"Gross," she said, and pushed it away and the rest of us laughed.

My mother put a dollop on the tart and my sister nearly screamed in horror. "It's crème fraîche," my mother said. "Like whipped cream, but different."

"Oh," Zoe said. "I knew that."

As silly as it sounds, when we were walking back to the hotel that night, through the tiny winding streets of the Île de la Cité, I felt like something inside me had changed. My body felt not only full from a big meal, but also alive with new possibilities. Because I'd never really seen food and eating as an experience before, and that was the only word I could find to describe what I'd just had. And as full as I was, it left me wanting so much more.

AT THE PALACE AT Versailles the next day, our tour group wound its way through the newly restored Hall of Mirrors—where there were 357 mirrors and more sparkling crystal chandeliers than I could count. I had fantasies of elaborate parties and horse-drawn carriages and a life spent mostly ordering

servants around and strolling through vast gardens, stopping to sit by a fountain—maybe to swoon—with a parasol whenever it suited me. I decided that come Halloween I'd dress up as Marie Antoinette. I'd find a big ballgown and have even bigger hair and I'd powder my face an antique white. I couldn't believe how old the buildings were, that they were still standing—and that furniture and clothes and paintings and frescoes had been preserved all those years. It was hard to imagine that people had walked these same halls all the way back in 1623.

Half of the houses in Vegas were only maybe a decade old and thinking of Vegas, when standing in Versailles, it seemed impossible that anyone would ever choose to live in my hometown willingly. But all of the elaborate columns and trellises of Bellagio and Venice and Paris started to make sense like never before. I wondered what it would be like to be a European girl, my age, raised in Paris or London, and to travel to Las Vegas. It would probably seem like one big cheesy theme park.

After our official tour, we were all left to roam the gardens on our own, so Danny and I trailed behind my parents and Zoe. I started raving about the meal I'd had the night before, but he didn't seem too interested or impressed. "What's with you today?" I finally said.

"Oh, nothing." He kicked some gravel on the path and it sounded like a chalkboard shattering. "Just that while you were out being wined and dined, my life was being ruined."

I stopped walking and looked at him, hoping against hope that he wasn't turning into some psycho because we hadn't invited him to dinner.

"My father finally explained the big reason for this whole stupid trip." He shook his head. "The fucking asshole is leaving my mother."

Hearing that kind of language come from Danny's mouth was so strange that I couldn't speak right away. I think up until that point I'd seen him as this sort of goofy goody-two-shoes kind of guy, but in that moment—and this took me off guard, as well—he seemed more than just cute. He seemed sexy, which was pretty strange, considering he was basically having a meltdown. He just seemed somehow, maybe, manlier.

Even when I was ready to speak I wasn't sure what to say, so I said what you say when that's the case. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm such a loser," Danny said.

"What are you talking about? You're not a loser."

"They separated a while ago but I thought maybe they'd get back together, you know? But I should've known better."

"Well, there was nothing wrong with hoping for it anyway."

"Sorry to be a downer." Danny ran his hands through his hair, pulling, gripping. "I just don't know how I'm going to get through the rest of this trip, and then another week with him in Tuscany."

I shrugged then regretted it, not wanting to seem dismissive. "If it were me, I think I'd just eat my way through it. I mean, it's Italy. You should just eat every amazing thing in your path."

"And the more expensive the better!" Danny allowed himself a smile.

“Exactly!”

We walked on for a while. Zoe was doing slow forward flips along the edge of a massive fountain, treating it like a balance beam. I took a picture of her upside down, set against a statue of a bunch of horses pulling Apollo and his chariot up out of the pool.

“So I was wondering,” Danny said. “I know we were just there, but would you maybe want to go back to the Eiffel Tower tonight?”

I stopped and looked at him funny, wondering whether Zoe had told him how I wanted to see it at night, go up it at night, but not even Zoe knew that I wanted that. He said, “I just think it’d be different, you know. At night.”

He looked weird to me just then and it dawned on me that he was nervous. I couldn’t help myself. I said, “Are you asking me out on a date?”

He smiled and kicked a pebble. “Maybe?”

“In Paris?”

“Uh.” He looked around. “Duh.”

I shook my head. “My dad’ll never go for it.”

“I’m great with parents.”

I repeated, “My dad’ll never go for it.”

Undeterred, Danny said. “Just watch.” He ran ahead and went right up to my dad and I wanted to hide behind a bush with my mortification. Zoe walked my way, upside down, and said, “What’s he doing?”

“Asking if he can take me to the Eiffel Tower tonight.”

She righted herself. “We were just there.”

“So?” It was better that Zoe just didn’t get it. She shrugged and said, “Dad’ll never go for it.”

Danny walked backward in front of my father, talked for a minute, and then my dad shook his head. My mother stepped over to him, whispered something in his ear, and then after a moment my father nodded. He said something, then held out a hand and Danny shook it. My mother’s powers over the man never ceased to amaze.

Danny jogged back to me. “We’re all set,” he said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Zoe said. She ran off toward my parents whining, “Da-ad.”

THE TOUR OF VERSAILLES took most of the day, so when we got back to the hotel, we had just enough time to change before reboarding the bus and heading out to Montmartre for the group dinner,

after which Danny and I would have our date.

Montmartre, I'd learned in French class, was a big hill—the highest point in Paris—best known for the Basilique du Sacré-Coeur, a gorgeous white building that sits on its perch there with an amazing view of the city. The bus got us there with time to kill before our dinner reservation, so we wandered around the base of the building, where artists had small stands set up. One woman's sketches—mostly portraits—looked eerily lifelike and cool. My mother saw them, too. "What do you say, Chloe?" The woman was clearly waiting for her next subject.

"Nah," I said, moving on.

"Come on, it'll be fun." My mother grabbed me and pulled me closer to the woman, whose attention we'd attracted, then looked at me expectantly. "Ask how much?"

"Combien du franc?" I said, and the woman said, "Vingt-cinq."

"Twenty-five," I said to my mother.

She nodded and pushed me forward toward the chair. "Zoe," she called out. "Come on, we'll do yours, too."

I sat down in the chair and right away the woman's hand moved fast and furious across the page, though I couldn't see the results on account of the angle of the easel. I just tried to sit still and not pay attention to the people walking by, who were stopping to look and to see whether the portrait looked like me, and probably deciding whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. It felt like a very long, uncomfortable time before the woman finally said, "C'est finis!" She stood, pulled the paper off the easel, and held it out to my mother.

"Oh, it's lovely," my mother said.

"Oui," the woman said. "C'est belle!" Then she gestured toward me. "Elle est belle!"

"Merci," I said, then went to look at the portrait while Zoe took a seat. She said, "Chloe, how do you say, 'this is my good side'?"

I couldn't quite figure out why but something about the way my sketch had turned out bugged me and for some reason it struck me as wrong that it was just me in it. No Lindsay. No family. Just me.

Danny and his father sat with our family at dinner—at a big outdoor table at a cute bistro in the shadow of Montmartre—and I grew shy around my date. He asked to see my portrait and I was reluctant but my mother unrolled it for him.

"Wow," he said. "That's really cool." He studied it. "It's like you, but not. Like it's you in a few years."

"So I look older?" I asked, and studied the portrait again. Zoe, of course, adored her likeness and I wanted very much to like my own. I wondered if maybe Danny had nailed what was bugging me. Maybe I just looked older.

"Not older exactly," he said slowly. "But maybe wiser. Like you've been through more." Danny spread butter on a piece of bread and took a bite. "It's like she saw the future or something. You know?"

DANNY AND I WALKED to the Eiffel Tower when the bus dropped us back at the hotel and, again, I grew tongue-tied. Danny, good thing, never seemed to get that way.

“So, what’s your life like back home?” he asked, turning and walking backward in front of me for a few paces. “Tell me everything.”

“Like what?”

He settled in beside me again. “Like, are you popular? I bet you are, and you know. What do you do for fun?”

“I don’t know. Mostly I think about leaving.”

“And going where?”

“College. Anywhere. Everywhere.”

“But what about your family? You guys seem tight. Won’t you miss them?”

I thought about the way for years Zoe had shoved me off, about the way my father was hardly around anyway, about the way my mother worked so hard to make life at home fun in spite of it all. “I don’t know,” I said. “I guess, but it won’t make me stay.”

We’d arrived at the ticket office and didn’t talk much on the way up the tower. I was actually nervous, which felt silly—this was Danny—but still...

“So then, what do you want to be when you grow up, young Chloe?” Danny said when we stepped out onto the observation deck.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Well, yeah”—he smiled—“in the way I asked, but really, what do you want to do with your life?”

I wanted to tell him about the fantasies Lindsay and I shared, of having cool transportable jobs and traveling the world together, but I was afraid it would sound lame or dumb. I wanted to tell him about the folder in my room, the vacation homes, the real-estate mogul within. I opted for, “I’m really not sure yet. You?”

“No freakin’ idea.” For all the complaining I did at home about superfocused people, I’d sort of been hoping for more. But it wasn’t like my answer was any better.

We stood there for a while then and I knew that it was coming. That he was going to kiss me. Or at least that he wanted to but didn’t have the nerve. Danny was the kind of guy who felt the need to experience the Eiffel Tower at night. Which would mean that he also knew that kissing a girl on the Eiffel Tower at night was a good thing to do, something to put on a list of things to do before you die. I liked that about him, the fact that beneath his juggling and joking he was a romantic. He was absolutely, positively boyfriend material, or would be if he had the nerve.

The air around us seemed so clear that Danny was in hi-def when he turned to me, leaned in, and said,

“Hey.”

“Hey,” I said back, looking at his lips and wondering if he was ever going to get on with it.

“I like it up here,” he said, and his arm slid around my back at my waist.

“Me, too,” I said.

“I like you up here,” he said, sort of looking away like he was shy, but I suddenly felt like Danny knew exactly what he was doing, like I should’ve given him more credit.

I smiled and said, “Me, too,” and I felt sexy and brave for maybe the first time in my life. I felt, in a way, like Lindsay.

And then it was happening. His lips were on mine, soft and warm compared to the cool night air, and when he was done I was sort of winded from the thrill of it all and the tingle in my everything. Maybe he’d been to Vegas after all.

I bought a postcard of the tower at night from a street vendor near the base and wrote it out to Lindsay back at the hotel that night with the same hand that had held Danny’s the whole walk back to the hotel.

Paris makes me want to be a poet and write slanty script en Français in leather-bound books at outdoor cafés. It makes me want to smoke fancy cigarettes and wear a beret or a dazzy barrette and live in wrap dresses and funky boots. It makes me want to eat crepes and crème fraîche and drink Burgundy wine. It makes me want to be a teen queen and rule with an iron fist. It makes me want to fall in love. It makes me wish I’d never been to Vegas at all. xo, Chloe

CHAPTER EIGHT

It seems like, a lot of times, when tragic things happen to people, they say they can look back and see that there were signs. Maybe someone said something that seemed strange until whatever happened happened and then their words suddenly made sense. Awful, creepy sense. Maybe someone made a point of saying “I love you” on their way out the door on an ordinary morning, only for it to be the last time they went out that door. But I’ve tried and tried and I can’t say that I saw any of it coming. Yes, my sketch at Montmartre seemed ominous. And yes, there was the fight. But still I felt like the world was my oyster, like I’d barely cracked its shell. I was still operating under the illusion that my life was unfolding exactly according to plan and that Lindsay and I would be fine when I got home, that we’d put that silly fight behind us.

It’s true that maybe she had grown increasingly bored with the scene in school, mostly with the fact that the girls in Chris Nolan’s crew were suddenly ruling the school in a way that Lindsay really wanted to. I guess when he got a job at Paris and Lindsay started seeing him there on a nearly daily basis, it was inevitable someone like her would get sucked into his world. He was one of those supercharmed-seeming guys—rich, good-looking, athletic, popular—that most girls found irresistible. I’d heard that his crew drank a lot and had fake IDs and generally did stuff that I knew would only land me in big trouble if I ever tried it, so I was content to stay away.

I don’t know why, but the whole underage-drinking scene just turned me off. I’d been to parties where people I knew and liked were turned into slurring idiots after a bunch of drinks and I just didn’t get the appeal. I mean, sure, I could see wanting to have a beer or a glass of wine or two, but getting sloshed and stupid wasn’t for me. Lindsay, however, was more intrigued, more curious. She liked to point out

that we'd never be able to sit by the infinity pool I'd decided my dream house would have and reminisce about our wild youth if we didn't have a wild youth.

Still, I didn't think she'd actually go behind my back with her wildness. Not that the Chris Nolan thing was going behind my back, exactly. She'd told me she'd planned on sleeping with him. She never shared the details, though—the when and the where and the how. And I guess the whole time I was away in Europe, there was a part of me that remained convinced that it was all talk, that she was just jealous that I was going away so she had to do something to call attention to herself. I'm not sure I ever really believed she'd go through with it.

Though I didn't see it at the time, I guess maybe we were starting to grow apart, to care about different things. We'd started hanging out with another girl from Breeza, Jenna, in the past year, and I wonder if it was because Jenna—who represented a sort of middle ground between Lindsay and me—was a good buffer for us. We didn't butt heads so much when Jenna was around, probably because we liked the idea of our friendship, of how long we'd known each other. It was almost like we were performers in a play called *Best Friends* and Jenna was the one person in the audience. We'd tell her stories from our past and she seemed envious and interested and we liked that about her. It made us feel better about ourselves, about our friendship.

Having a third was a new thing for us and we both reacted by trying to garner favor with Jenna without ever letting on to the other one that we were doing so. I'd started an e-mail conversation with Jenna, who was as into water sports like snorkeling and parasailing as you can be when you lived in Vegas, about all the cool spring break trips we could take during college, about all the best coral reefs and beaches of the world. Lindsay, for her part, was trying to get Jenna to go for her lifeguard certification so they could work together. There was a nice sense of balance to it all, at least for a while.

But then one night they went out without me.

I never found out much about that night. I know they went to a party. I know there was drinking. I know they both felt like crap the next day. I could only be so mad—I was at a boring party at my father's boss's house, so there was no way I could've gone out with them—and I hid how jealous I really was by just acting completely disinterested in what they'd gotten up to. Still, whenever I left a room and came back—for a few weeks after the party anyway—I sensed they'd been talking about something secretive. Their conversation almost always stopped. After a while I stopped caring, or tried to.

But I wonder now whether I should have pushed harder and made Lindsay spill the beans. Because maybe then I could have prevented what happened. Not that Jenna even ended up having anything directly to do with it all; she didn't go out with Lindsay and Chris that night. But maybe if I'd known what they were up to, I would've known to look for signs. I could've ratted on Lindsay, even, gotten her grounded. Then none of it would have happened at all.

CHAPTER NINE

I stood facing the Trevi Fountain in Rome, rubbing my thumb against a coin in my skirt pocket, contemplating the ideal moment at which to throw. Everywhere around me, people were turning their backs to the fountain and tossing coins over their shoulders. I wondered whether they'd given their coins, their wishes, nearly enough thought.

The fountain was bigger than the replica in Vegas, or at least it looked that way. Here, the fountain was the focal point of a small piazza, while at home the massive entrance to the Caesars mall dwarfed it. I took a photo of the fountain's main figure: a hulking, muscular man with a sea dragon of some kind at his

feet. Meanwhile, Danny was talking history and I was only half paying attention. "This fountain," he said, "was originally supplied with water from the aqueducts, powered by gravity."

"That's just not possible," I said, trying to conceive of it.

We'd just visited the nearby Spanish Steps and I felt, for once, a bit like Zoe: perplexed by why there were Spanish Steps in Rome and not terribly wowed by them. Because, well, they weresteps.

"It's true." Danny sat on the fountain's ledge. "I saw it on thatModern Marvels show or, hang on a second, that can't be right." He smiled. "MaybeAncient Marvels ? Either way, the aqueduct was built in like 200A .D., I think, and it's got a six-inch decline for every kilometer or something like that."

We watched as more and more people threw coins. The bottom of the fountain was a blurry alloy of silver and gold.

Danny said, "They make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year on idiots like the ones you see around us."

"What makes them idiots?" I let go of the coin in my pocket, crossed my arms.

"Throw a coin in the fountain and it means you'll someday return to Rome? Please." Danny shook his head. "If that isn't some big tourist marketing scam, I don't know what is. I mean, if you want to return to Rome, just buy a freakin' plane ticket."

My mother came up behind me then and said, "Chloe, do you need a coin?"

She turned her back to the fountain, closed her eyes, and tossed a coin over her shoulder. I watched it fly through the air, catching the glint of the sun, then plunk into the water and float to the bottom, disappearing into the blur. She was wearing an oversize pair of sunglasses she'd bought from a small stand we'd passed that morning and she looked more cosmopolitan, more European, than she ever had in my lifetime. I was having a hard time picturing her back in Breeza.

"No," I said. "I've got one."

"Danny," my mother said. "Your father's looking for you. He's over there somewhere." She pointed.

Danny groaned and said, "I'll see you all back on the bus."

My father and Zoe came over then and my mother gave Zoe a coin. Zoe pocketed it and said, "Thanks."

"You're supposed to throw it in the fountain," I said.

Zoe rolled her eyes. "Only if I want to return to Rome, and to be honest, I don't think I do."

"Zoe," my mother said. "You're going to have to open up your mind a little bit. It's a big world."

"But I just got my butt pinched!" Zoe protested.

"When? Who?" My mother's face lit with a combination of outrage and amusement, like she wasn't sure which response was appropriate and didn't especially care.

"I don't know. Over there." Zoe waved her hand. "He was gone before I knew what hit me."

"Well." My mother dipped her hand in the fountain, swirled it around. "I guess you should be flattered." Then she and I started to laugh.

Zoe wiped her forehead with her hand. "And God, could it get any hotter?"

It was pretty hot all right. But I was used to that and thought Zoe should be, too.

"God, I'd love to climb right in," my mother said finally. She touched her wet hand to the back of her neck and I tried to imagine my mother doing something so bold as stepping into the fountain. With those sunglasses on it seemed possible she might.

"I dare you," I said. My Vegas mother would never even consider it; I wasn't so sure about this one.

"Oh, it's against the law," she said, sounding almost disappointed, like she would've liked to have done it if it weren't. "There was a movie, *La Dolce Vita*, and the woman climbed into the fountain in this big romantic scene, so there were so many people doing that that they outlawed it."

"That's just dumb," Zoe said.

"Maybe." My mother shrugged. "But they seem to be serious." She pointed at a guard standing near the fountain's far edge.

I wanted to toss my coin, but I didn't want my mother and Zoe to be watching when I did. I wanted to close my eyes and concentrate hard on the fact that yes, I wanted to return to Rome, but I wanted to return with Lindsay. How many times had we sat, she and I, in front of the replica of this very fountain in Vegas and pretended we were sitting in a piazza in Italy instead? I can't even count but we never, ever threw coins into that fountain. We'd decided that if throwing a coin in the real Trevi Fountain meant that you'd someday return to Rome that throwing one in the replica in Vegas meant you'd never leave.

My mother looked at her watch as my father, camera in hand, walked toward us. "It's almost time to head back to the bus," she said, and my father said, "How about a picture of my girls?"

So we sat on the fountain's edge, my mom with one arm around my waist and the other around Zoe's, and we smiled into the sun. When they got up and started following my father through the crowd, I took a deep breath, took a coin from my pocket, and held it in my palm, studying it. I knew you were supposed to throw with your right hand, over your left shoulder, so that's what I did. I turned around really quick as soon as I'd released the coin and watched it bounce off a sculpted Pegasus head then fall into the water. I wondered whether the ricochet would help or hurt the odds that someday I'd be back. I wondered whether the eye in the sky had documented the whole thing, whether it knew, too, what Lindsay was up to at the exact moment that my coin hit the air, or at the moment it sank to the bottom.

That afternoon went to the Colosseum—in the very heart of the city, where Romans whirled around in cars and on scooters—and stood where ancient Romans would have sat to watch all sorts of insane events, like gladiator fights. I tried to remember stuff I'd learned about the Roman Empire in school but all I could do was marvel at how old the place was, how it was a miracle it was still standing, and that we were allowed to enter it. I tried to picture what the ancient stadium would have looked like full and the thought of it sort of terrified me. I generally hated crowds, and I could only imagine that an ancient crowd would be somehow more barbarous or mean. Still, there was something invigorating about being in a

place that had been around for so long. I tried to imagine how many thousands or millions of people had been there before me and felt so small, like a blip, but also like I was a part of something exciting and huge. I'd never looked for the Colosseum through the eye in the sky but decided that when I got home I would.

THAT NIGHT THE WHOLE tour group ate dinner at the restaurant that supposedly invented fettuccine Alfredo, and even though I was skeptical of the claim—the place was big and bustling and just reeked of tourist trap—I couldn't stop myself from ordering the signature dish, which ended up being—tourist trap or not—better than any fettuccine Alfredo I'd had before. The pasta was perfectly cooked and light and fresh—"That's homemade pasta," my mother said, the second our plates arrived—and the sauce was creamy and buttery and delicious in every way.

Danny sat with his father at one of the other tables reserved for the group and kept making faces at me all night, making me laugh. So while my parents talked with one of the older couples on our tour about whatever it was we were going to be doing the next day, I indulged a fantasy that Danny and I were older and were in Rome alone, having some amazing romantic dinner in a place that definitely wasn't a tourist trap. We'd rent a scooter to get around and we'd go back to see the Trevi Fountain at night and reminisce about the first time we saw it, how young we were, how we didn't yet know we were falling in love. We hadn't kissed again or talked about the kiss and I wasn't sure whether there would be more kissing as the trip went on—I sort of hoped so—or whether that was it, whether it was one perfect moment that Danny, for whatever reason, thought was best left untouched. I know that when we all said good night post-fettuccine, I was sort of disappointed. Zoe and I watched a James Bond movie dubbed in Italian on TV in our room—I sometimes thought my dream job would be as a location scout for movies—and I kicked myself for forgetting to buy Lindsay a postcard, though we were in Rome one more day.

WE TOOK A BUS ride to the village of Tivoli the next day, to visit some famous gardens, which sounded a little bit boring after having just seen the gardens at Versailles—until we got there and saw that these were no ordinary gardens. There were fountains and more fountains everywhere—one was even called the Hundred Fountains—and once my mother read something from a brochure about the "eternal battle between water and stone," I was hooked.

Fountains and gardens were sculpted into ledges and ponds and everywhere you turned, there was some kind of movement of water. It reminded me a little bit of the gardens at Caesars Palace, which I guess made sense, Caesar being Roman and all, but there was so much more greenery and lushness in Tivoli that the gardens in Vegas paled. How could they not? Vegas was in the middle of the desert and Italy was wine country. Everywhere I looked, water and sculpture and greenery came together to form something completely unique. There were gods and goddesses and dragons of stone, there were terraced gardens and shrubs cut into swirls and spirals, and while the water didn't jump, jive, and wail—or shoot nearly as high with a boom—these fountains were elegant and lovely and seemed to have been designed not to defy nature or gravity but to enhance our view of it. I was in awe and taking pictures constantly. The whole enterprise made the fountains at Bellagio seem sort of obscene, too in-your-face.

Danny came up behind me and grabbed my elbow hard. "Ask your parents if we can go off on our own."

"What? Why?"

He smiled. “Why do you think?”

My gut tightened with nerves but I think I smiled back. I called out to my mother without thinking twice. “Mom, can we go do our own thing?”

She turned and her face was serene. “Okay,” she said. Luckily for me, my European mother was having too much fun on her own to care too much about me. “Be back at the main gate in an hour, though.”

I looked at my watch. “Okay. Thanks.”

“How come she gets to go off on her own?” Zoe whined loudly.

“She’s not going off on her own.” My mother was nonchalant. “She’s with Danny.”

“Yeah, well, what’s so special about Danny?” This kind of thing pretty much summed up my sister; Danny was standing right there.

“He’s a polite, smart, articulate young man,” my mother said. The “unlike your loser boyfriend, Johnny” was implied.

“Thanks, Mrs. Swanson,” Danny said to seal the deal. My mother was a sucker for a polite boy. But Danny wasn’t quite as polite as she thought. That morning, he’d started sneaking in kisses whenever he could—“Yesterday was torture,” he’d said when we’d ducked behind a big pillar in the lobby of the hotel—and the whole day suddenly had an exciting, illicit feel about it.

Danny and I took off up a steep path and came upon a fountain that had a waterfall you could walk under.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing my hand. “Let’s go.”

So we started down the path that led behind the waterfall and then stepped over some slippery rocks, holding on to a damp railing that I was incredibly grateful existed. We stopped behind the waterfall and looked out at a blurry world through a sheet of white water, then Danny kissed me and we were both getting damp and sort of laughing and then we were getting more wet than damp and Danny said, “Come on,” again and I followed him back out into the open. He was holding my hand and looking around with a serious expression on his face, and then he led me over to a hedge, peeked around it, and said, “Bingo.”

He pulled me around the corner, into a nook with a stone bench and a sculpture of a dwarf holding a lantern. He pulled me down next to him on the bench and then we started really kissing and I felt so alive and, well, European, even. It had been a long time since I’d really let go—months and months since, well, Peter—and I was proud of myself for maybe, finally, moving on.

Danny pulled away and looked at me, his arms still around me. “God, next week is going to suck.”

He wouldn’t be back from Tuscany for a week. I was supremely jealous, of course—increasingly so as the days wore on. He had a few pictures with him, printed from the villa’s website, and they were just gorgeous. I wanted them badly for my folder at home, almost as badly as I wanted to go.

“I’m going to own a villa in Tuscany someday,” I blurted.

Danny pushed my hair behind my right ear. "Going to win the lottery or something?"

"No," I said. "I'm going to save and buy something small early on and then sell that for a profit and buy something bigger. And so on and so on."

He looked at me funny.

"What?"

"So, that's the plan. You're a future real-estate mogul?"

"Something like that," I said. "And hey"—I elbowed him—"why not?"

He shrugged. "I've just never met a girl who wanted to get into real estate. It's usually they want to be a writer or fashion designer or lawyer."

"Well, I don't know. I might become something else, too."

He nodded. "So Tuscany, huh?"

"Yeah. But I want other houses, too. I'd like to divide my time."

Lindsay and I talked about dividing our time all the time.

Danny said, "Huh?"

"You know how sometimes you read about people, like writers or musicians, and they say they 'divide their time between Los Angeles and London'? That's what I want. Only I want to divide my time among places. More than two."

"So you're highly motivated and grammatically savvy. What more could a guy ask for?" I smiled and he smiled and said, "Oh, and a great kisser, too."

I'm sure I blushed.

He breathed hard again. "The only thing that's going to make Tuscany bearable is that at the end I'll go home and you'll be there. My very own Trumpette."

And just like that, a charge of anxiety seemed to electrify every part of me. Because having a romantic adventure on a European vacation was one thing, but how would Danny fit into my life in Vegas, if he fit in at all? Would Lindsay like him? Would he like Lindsay? What would people at school think of my new boyfriend? Would anybody care? Would Noah? And what if my crush didn't survive the trip back home? It was one thing to have a crush on someone in a sort of bubble, another entirely to sustain it in the long term.

Danny went to kiss me again and all I could think about was Noah. Noah, who barely gave me the time of day. Noah, who would probably never leave Las Vegas. I was halfway across the world, kissing another boy, and still, I couldn't kick the habit.

"Whoa," Danny said, bringing me back to the moment. "You looked like you were a thousand miles away just now."

“We are a thousand miles away, you idiot.” I got up. “Come on. We should really look around.”

“Okay.” He fake-pouted. “If you say so.” He tried to pull me back down. “But I really think we’d have a lot more fun here.”

“Danny,” I whined. “Come on. We’re in Rome!”

“All right, all right. Promise me we’ll make out all the time when we’re back home.”

It was easier to just say “I promise” than to figure out why I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

I lay in bed later that night in the hotel, listening to Zoe snore, and thinking still about Noah. In my head I was replaying scenes from the day—the kissing at the Tivoli gardens first among them—and replacing Danny with Noah and imagining that with Noah I wouldn’t have that knot of doubt in my belly.

I’d bought a postcard of the Trevi Fountain for Lindsay and wrote it out, suddenly realizing that there was a chance that Noah would read my postcard, had maybe been reading them all along. It all depended on who got to the mailbox first.

Rome makes me want to toss coins in every fountain I see. It makes me want to be a gladiator or senator, who wears a toga and say things like “Et tu, Brute?” It makes me want to squish grapes with my feet and ride a scooter and make long, soft pasta from nothing but flour and eggs. It makes me wish my name were Elena or Nicola. It makes me want to take a siesta, and to make a red sauce from scratch. It makes me want to live la dolce vita every day. xo, Chloe

CHAPTER TEN

In the wake of everything that happened, memories of my childhood with Lindsay, things that I’d long forgotten, surface unexpectedly all the time. Sometimes it’s as if they spring from my brain like fiction, until I realize, no, wait, that happened to me. That happened to Lindsay and me. Lost things take on a mythical quality, I’m learning, because sometimes it doesn’t even feel like Lindsay’s real. Sometimes, like when her name comes up with someone who didn’t know her, and when I explain what happened, it feels like I’m making it up. “Oh my God, really?” people will always say, and I’ll have to think hard before I say, “Yes. She was my best friend.”

When I read the newspaper now—or watch the news—it’s entirely different than it was before. I see the horror stories now—of two-year-olds who survive car crashes in which their parents perish; of people whose parents die on the way to their wedding; of women standing on curbs while their husbands are dragged under buses; of campuses strewn with bullets—32 dead!; of people who just slip and fall and bam, wind up impaled and dead on a wrought-iron fence; of dog attacks, of shark attacks, of cruise ships that sink and small planes that won’t fly—and think how I’d never truly seen them before.

I try to imagine what it was like to be that two-year-old, that bride, that woman on the curb, those kids on campus. I think of all the people out there who’ve read about Lindsay—were there hundreds? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands?—and wonder if any of them have ever imagined what it would be like if that were their best friend.

If God is really like one big eye in the sky, I sometimes wonder how He could bear the pain of watching it all go down. Because to look down on all the awful things that happen to people every day—to see and absorb it all—well, I can only picture hearts exploding, satellites blown to bits, glass and metal and

blood and tears scattered across the galaxy. There'd be no way to contain the pain, no way to make sense of it all. I struggle to make sense of just one tragedy—this one in a million—and only because it happened to me, only because it's the one thing that made my own heart explode.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

And so we were in Venice, the last city on our trip. Soon, I'd be home in Vegas. I'd have to face Lindsay and work and, before long, senior year and everything that came with it and after it. I'd have to live without seeing Danny every day and I'd have to decide how I felt about that. Would I be lovelorn or relieved? My father would go back to working like a dog; my mother would go back to pretending he didn't; and Zoe would either get invited to a Cirque audition or not—and either go back to school or not. Either way, there'd be fallout at home.

Danny had just bought a bag of bird food from a vendor and was about to feed pigeons in the Piazza San Marco, a huge square that attracted almost as many birds as tourists. It dawned on me that the front façade of the Venetian casino was supposed to mimic this square, and that it did a pretty awful job.

As if reading my mind, Danny said, "It's hard to believe you'll be back in Vegas in two days."

I was pushing away all thoughts of Noah and all memories of yesterday's bout with anxiety and starting to imagine that maybe Danny and I would become a couple, that maybe we'd even go to Vegas together in Vegas. I had a quick thought of wishing that Lindsay actually had gone to Vegas while I was away. Because then sex would be something we could talk about more openly, more freely. We'd both be in the same boat. But as soon as I pictured Chris Nolan's face—and that whistle dangling from his lips—the wishing stopped.

Danny said, "Well, here goes nothing," and dumped some bird food out of the small bag and into his hands. He held his arms out and within seconds, birds were landing on his hands, arms, head, and shoulders. I stood a comfortable distance away, laughing and taking pictures and being glad it wasn't me with those winged rats on my head but also jealous that it wasn't me. Then Danny took a step forward and grabbed on to me and then the birds were all over me, too—tiny, clawing sensations on my head and arms—and I mostly had my eyes closed, but when they were open I could see my parents taking pictures and smiling, proudly, like I'd just won a medal and not just let nasty birds land on me. And I was mad at Danny for dragging me into his pigeon drama but also glad, and it seemed to me a very Lindsay thing of him to do. It had long been clear to me that I was more of a sidelines kind of person than a marathoner, more of a benchwarmer than a starter, and I wished I could figure out why I'd turned out that way because maybe I'd change it if I could. It seemed like life was more fun as a Danny or a Lindsay. Even, dare I say it, as a Zoe.

Our tour group had lunch at an outdoor café in the piazza, where a band was playing songs I didn't recognize; something about the accordion lent them all an Italian flavor, a romantic feel, and I watched Danny sit with his father, mostly silent. I hoped, for his sake, that things improved when they were in Tuscany, that they somehow found a way to bond, the way they'd set out to do, or that, at the very least, they wouldn't spend the next week mostly ignoring each other.

"Isn't this incredible?" my mother said maybe ten times and it was almost painful to watch how excited she was about every second of our time in Venice—the city she had been saying from the get-go would be the highlight of the trip for her. I wanted her to calm down a little and then felt horribly guilty for it. She'd never been to Europe when she was in high school; she'd never been anywhere at all. She deserved to be excited but for some reason it still pained me. Maybe because I could already see us growing apart, could already see the cracks forming that would eventually cause the continental drift. For

me this was the start of something, a lifetime of globetrotting and jet-setting as the world opened up for me, wide. For her, I couldn't help but think it felt like a mission accomplished. She could go back to her real life content now.

"I think we should ditch the group thing this afternoon," my mother said. She was looking at our tour itinerary. "They're going to Murano to watch glass blowers, but I thought maybe we'd just wander, maybe take a gondola ride?"

"They're a rip-off," my father said. He popped a potato chip into his mouth.

"I don't care," my mother said. She picked through the snack mix we'd been given, pulled out something resembling a Dorito.

"But they're so touristy," Zoe said. She was primping and taking pictures of us and my best guess was that it was because of the two hot guys at the next table.

"Yes." My mother sat up straight in her chair. "And we're tourists." She sipped her beer.

I said, "I'll go with you, Mom." In this case, I didn't care if it was touristy. I wanted to ride on a gondola; I wanted to be able to tell Lindsay all about it.

"Come on." My mother kissed my father on the cheek and he made a funny face, then wiped his cheek. "It'll be fun."

"I actually want to go to Murano," my father said. "I've always wanted to see people blowing glass."

"You have?" My mother looked at my father like he was a stranger then. I guess we all did. Because my father wasn't the kind of guy you'd ever think would have a sort of secret little dream like that. He seemed to know it, too.

"Yes," he said, almost defensively, and I thought about Burt, the only other real evidence we had of my father's capacity for quirks of passion. He said, "As a matter of fact, I have. It's a big thing, you know. Murano glass."

"Okay, then," my mother said, raising her glass as if to toast. "We'll go to Murano."

If I could have, I would have stayed where we were for hours, just ordering one fancy Italian soda after another and watching the world go by. With the end of the trip coming so fast it suddenly seemed of the utmost importance to savor every moment and this one—soaking up the sun while sipping a lime soda at a café in the Piazza San Marco, studying the sculptures decorating the top of the basilica: horses, lions, angels—seemed an important one to savor. I looked up at the sky and smiled just in case—Zoe's camera buzzed—and when I looked back down, Danny was looking at me kind of intensely. Then he looked up at the sky and smiled, too.

MURANO WAS AN ISLAND farther out in the lagoon on which Venice sat and, while it was pretty neat to see glass blowing this way and that, manipulated with iron rods and air and gravity, I felt, during moments like the Murano tour, like I was on a class trip. I preferred, instead, the meals, the downtime, the walking, the moments during which I felt free to just be myself and absorb whatever I wanted.

So one of my favorite mornings in Venice ended up being the next one, when my family got up early and took a little water taxi—technically a gondola but without the plushy seats and privacy you get when you hire one just for yourself—across the Grand Canal to an outdoor market. My parents had to stop to cuff their pants—Zoe and I had both worn skirts—before we walked through the fish market, where the pavement was a minefield of fishy water puddles and streams. But if you didn't look down—or for that matter, inhale—the market was just amazing. There were huge whole fish on display, with spiky noses and massive fins. And there was loads of hustle and bustle, like every chef in town had come down to buy his fish there. We wandered into the adjacent market—vegetables there—and took pictures because the colors were so bright. I didn't even recognize some of the vegetables, but they were pretty—purple and pointy, round and red. Vendors were selling clumps of fresh herbs and it made me loathe our supermarket, with its fluorescent light and arctic air-conditioning and sickly-sweet cupcakes and dried-out hot wings in flimsy plastic containers. How fun it would be to shop this way, instead—to head out on foot or on a bicycle with a basket and buy a loaf of bread here, a vegetable there, then a piece of fish over there. There was something so urban and, well, European about the idea. I wasn't sure there was a farmers' market or fish market or anything like it in all of Nevada.

We wandered away from the market after a while, over to a small storefront where people were gathered, sipping what looked like champagne and eating tiny sandwiches. “Anybody hungry?” my mother said, eyes sparked with excitement.

“Me. I am.” I was, and the sandwiches looked cute enough to eat.

“Yeah,” Zoe said. “I guess.”

My mother, who'd done a CD course in basic Italian before the trip, stepped up to the glass case where sandwiches were on display and ordered. “Quattro Prosciutto di Parma e Parmesan Reggiano e due Prosecco, per favore.”

She turned and smiled at me when the man behind the counter went about readying the order, then turned back. She took the first glass of bubbly wine that was passed across the counter, took a sip, and then handed it to me. “We can share.”

“We can?” I smiled and could not believe what was happening. My own mother offering me a sip of wine in Italy. And before noon!

My father had his limits. “Pam, it's like nine A.M.!”

My mother waved him off. “But we're in Venice!”

My mother handed me a sandwich then. Prosciutto and Parmesan on a tiny roll. It was delicious and we ate them really fast and then ordered four more. I sipped the Prosecco—I'd had beer before, of course, and even a vodka tonic, but this was so much better. It was light and bubbly and a little bit sweet and I couldn't believe I was drinking it.

“Don't go getting any ideas, by the way,” my mother said. “This is the one time before you turn twenty-one that I approve of a sip or two of alcohol. Understood?”

“Understood,” I said and took another sip, and then another bite, and then another sip. I realized how the flavors played off one another, complemented one another. The saltiness of the ham and the dryness of the wine cut with a tiny bit of sweet. I knew what a sommelier was—Jenna's dad was the sommelier at some fancy restaurant at Bellagio; Lindsay once asked him about her nudist theory—and now I

understood how it could actually be a profession. With so many foods, and so many wines, the knowledge required to know what would taste well with what would be endless, unknowable.

DANNY ANDIHAD our second date that afternoon; Zoe was content to just go shopping with my parents—probably figuring she'd convince them to buy her one of the elaborate masks she'd been eyeing, ones designed for the festival ofcarnivale—and I was happy to have a break from them all. I was looking forward to time alone with Danny, too, but that anxiety I'd felt when we were making out in the Tivoli gardens hadn't entirely gone away. I still liked being around him, but kissing him had started to make my belly knot up. With the end of the trip nearing, I was increasingly nervous about making the transition from daily sightseeing with Danny to life back at home with Danny. I wasn't sure how it was going to work but a part of me was starting to think that maybe friends was the way to go. The other part of me was clinging to the idea that it would be fun to have a boyfriend senior year.

Since Danny said the activity for the date was up to me, I opted for a tour of the Ca' d'Oro—one of the great palaces on the Grand Canal. I wanted desperately to know what the inside of one of these incredible houses felt like, how the canal looked from the veranda of an aging mansion. The place had been turned into an art museum and we bought the audiotape tour at Danny's insistence, but I didn't care so much about the commentary on the art as I did about the history of the house itself. At one point, according to the tape, a wealthy man had bought it and given it as a gift to a prominent Venetian ballerina, who was collecting palaces on the Grand Canal. I hit stop on my tape player, then rewound to make sure I'd heard that bit right. I had.

Midway through the tour I stood on a veranda overlooking the Grand Canal and wished that Lindsay were there to see it with me, to imagine ourselves being gifted with Venetian palaces by men who were courting us. I wondered whether it was going to be fun or awkward to tell Lindsay about the trip, about everything I'd seen and smelled and tasted and felt. I was definitely living up to my promise to her, to have the best time imaginable, but I couldn't help but wonder whether, once I got home, she'd be happy to hear all my stories. I couldn't help but think that if our roles were swapped, I'd be too jealous to really want to hear about it all. I couldn't help but think that Lindsay liked things the way they were, with her the brave and daring one and me living in her shadow.

"Hey," Danny said. He'd peeked around the corner into the room where the tour was to end. "Check this out."

"I'll be right there," I said, and he disappeared around the corner again. I took my camera out and took my own picture. It didn't come out great, but something about it seemed right. It was a moment I wanted to capture but for some reason I wanted to capture it alone. I'd been secretly studying that sketch of me from Montmartre after Zoe went to sleep each night. I couldn't shake how strange it was—like me and yet not. I wondered if maybe a photo could be taken that would capture that same version of me, or whether she didn't even exist yet, whether life had to happen first.

I put my camera away and headed off toward the room where Danny was, only to stop, startled, as soon as I entered. A delicate sculpture made of wire and glass filled the air. Light coming in through the windows glinted off odd shapes that dangled as if in flight. It was like the largest mobile I could ever imagine, all bursting with blues and greens and pinks.

Danny found me and said, "It's called 'the Hanging Garden.'"

It was quite possibly the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

A big white round bed of sorts sat in the middle of the room and two women were lying on it, looking up. I wanted them to hurry up and leave so I could take their place.

Danny said, "Pretty cool, huh?"

"Amazing," I said. "I want to take it home with me."

"That would probably cause some problems going through customs."

I was still watching the couch, waiting for an opening. And then it came. "Come on," I said to Danny as the women gathered their handbags and got up. I reached the bed just as the women stood to leave and turned and sat and then lay back. The air above me was an explosion color and made me think of flowers and wind chimes and wrinkles in time. Danny lay down beside me and said, "Wow."

"Yeah."

We just lay there in silence for a few minutes and all I could think was that I never wanted the trip to end. Life at home was so boring, so routine, but here, in Europe, every day brought its own surprises. It was almost too much to take in, because when you're not sure you're ever going to return to the place where you're standing, you look at it differently. Photographs are great, but they can only remind you of what it was really like to be there, how you really felt in that moment. I was afraid I was forgetting things—like that very moment, the way the Hanging Garden made it seem as though I, too, were floating in midair—as quickly as I was experiencing them. I studied the details—circles and squares and shapes like birds and stars and flowers made out of stained glass and strung together like a satin spiderweb that trapped pure color—but I knew I'd never be able to describe it all to Lindsay, if she'd even listen, in a way that would do it any justice at all, and that made me sad. It had never occurred to me before how much of our friendship was based on shared experiences—there were hardly any experiences we hadn't shared!—and I started to wonder how we'd fare when life put us on different paths. Like what if we didn't end up going to the same college? Or living in the same part of the country? Or meeting brothers, preferably twins? Travel really did expand the mind—I was sure of it now—and I wondered whether Lindsay, whose mind hadn't been expanded, would seem somehow different, lesser, when I got home. We'd have to make this last year of high school the best ever.

Danny shifted beside me and then he took my hand in his and I thought, Now this is something that I always want to remember. And I'm happy that this is all mine.

"It's weird," he said when we were back out on the streets of Venice and walking nowhere in particular. "I don't know what it's going to feel like to not see you every day."

"I know," I said. "It'll be strange."

"But I'll be home in a week. July twenty-ninth. So, hmmm. On August first, I'll pick you up at noon and we'll go out on the town."

"At noon?"

"Yes, high noon, if you will." He pulled a pen and a small notebook from his jacket pocket. "Give me your address."

I took the pen but said, "Why don't you just call me when you get home? I'll give you my number."

“Because it’ll be more fun—and, dare I say, romantic—this way.” He pulled me toward him with hands on my waist and we kissed.

“Okay,” I said. “If you say so.”

We walked and looked at shops and sat by small canals and took pictures on bridges and then we realized, almost simultaneously, that we were lost. Soon we were practically racing down alleys and over bridges, running into dead ends and canals, at a sort of frantic pace. After a while, my heart was beating so fast and then we dead-ended again at a canal—the water was green and chopping and high and my bones told me that it was true that Venice was sinking—and Danny pinned me up against the wall of a building and we kissed really intensely and it was all sort of scary and thrilling. His hands found the skin at my waist, under my top, and I twitched from the shock of it but his lips stayed on mine, determined. I wanted badly to give in to the moment, but I wanted more for the moment to remain what it was: romantic, thrilling. Hands up my shirt complicated that, made it about something else, something I wasn’t ready to deal with. Not after everything that had happened with Peter. Not in a strange corner of Venice with a guy that, when it came down to it, I barely knew.

“We should really get back,” I said. “They’ll be worried.”

Danny exhaled hard and pulled a map out of his pocket, studied it. “Okay,” he said, “follow me.”

“Just like that you can get us unlost?”

“Just like that.” Danny turned to go, then stopped. “But wait. This might be the last time I get to do this.” He kissed me again, this time more sweetly than before, and I felt like maybe I was in over my head with Danny, like maybe he liked me way more than he should.

My family had off-tour dinner plans again and since Danny and his dad were leaving for Tuscany in the morning and wouldn’t be on our airport shuttle, this was our last night together. We said an awkward good-bye back at the hotel, in the lobby. “High noon,” he said.

I nodded. “I’ll be waiting.”

“All right.” He looked like he desperately didn’t want to go, but a part of me was looking forward to a break from him; I wasn’t sure why. He said, “See you in Vegas, Trumpette.”

IN A SMALL RESTAURANT down a tiny alley, my mother ordered for all of us and I found myself eating the most amazing meatballs I’d ever had and also black linguine in a black squid sauce. From the looks of it I was sure I was going to hate it but then my mother offered me fifty bucks to try it—just once—and so I did. And it was good. My mind struggled with the fact that I was eating something black—I couldn’t think of any other black food I’d ever eaten—but delicious. It didn’t seem to make sense at all.

We took a gondola ride that night, after all—just the four of us—and even my father seemed to relax into it. Venice looked different from the water and we went down tiny canals that vaporetto can’t go down, and under bridges that made our gondolier have to duck, and everything around us seemed like a carnival that we were being given a private tour of. I loved Venice more in those moments on the water than I’d loved it before, and I’d pretty much loved it from the second I set foot there.

Looking at my parents, snuggled up close in the seat facing me and Zoe, I couldn't remember a time when they'd seemed happier. My father had obviously taken to the land of his maternal ancestors and seemed softer somehow, smiling more easily, showing more affection for my mom and for us, too. And my mother, who'd gone so far as to piece together almost an entirely new wardrobe in the year leading up to the trip, seemed somehow to be gloating in her own cosmopolitan-ness. All week I'd been catching her looking around at her surroundings—whether it was gypsy fire eaters putting on a show near a wine bar where we had dinner one night, shops full of Murano glass, or a gondola floating across a canal—with a sort of contentedness I'd never seen in her eyes at home.

I saw Danny and his father when my family was walking back to the hotel that night. They were sitting outside a wine bar, watching a mime make boo-hoo faces while pitching a slow-motion tantrum on the sidewalk. I considered calling out to him, but I didn't. We'd already said good-bye. That part of the trip was done.

I felt sad that night that the Venice postcard—a sunny shot of the Rialto Bridge over the Grand Canal—was the last one I'd be writing and I wondered how many days after I arrived home it would arrive in Lindsay's mailbox. It seemed dumb to send it, when I could hand-deliver it faster, but handing a person a postcard seemed even dumber. I lay in bed after Zoe had fallen asleep with her carnival mask resting on her face and I wondered, as I watched the light from the street strike the jewels on the mask's purple and green swirls, when I'd next be spending a night in Europe. Would it be months from now? Years? How many? Then, finally, I put pen to postcard:

Venice makes me want to blow glass and row row row your boat. It makes me want to eat squid-ink pasta every day and eat fire from the ends of spinning sticks and drink wine on cobblestone streets as gondolas float past. It makes me want to play the accordion and buy fish too big to carry and drink Prosecco for breakfast and eat prosciutto and Parmesan by the pound. It makes me want to collect palaces on the Grand Canal and even let pigeons land on my arms. Venice makes me want to get lost and never be found. xo, Chloe

This is how it was supposed to happen:

I was going to go to Europe and have the time of my life. I was going to eat amazing food, see amazing things, and come home the same but different. Better. Wiser. Braver. Maybe even cooler. The world was going to open up for me, wide.

I was going to meet a boy in Europe, a sweet, funny boy, and it was going to turn out that he also lived in Vegas. We were going to come home and become a proper boyfriend and girlfriend, the kind who held hands, laughed so hard they snorted soda out their noses, and gave each other small, random gifts, like Elvis snow globes and plastic spider rings. Lindsay was going to love him and he was going to slide right into my life, like it was all meant to be. In a while, I might even go to Vegas with him and it would be sweet and wonderful and it would wipe out the memory of the first, not so sweet, not so wonderful time.

Lindsay was going to meet someone, too. She'd have come to her senses about Chris Nolan—they would most definitely not have gone to Vegas together—and she'd find some really sweet but cool and outgoing guy, maybe a new transfer at school, or a friend of the guy I was with. They'd become a super

couple, too. We'd double date and then, probably, we'd both break up with them before we went away to school.

I was going to apply to all the same colleges as Lindsay and we'd land in California but would maybe do a junior year abroad—in London or Paris—or spend summers in cool, international programs for people interested in languages, or history, or architecture, or anything that could get us to Europe. In between, we'd study on California's beaches and meet those brothers (preferably twins). We'd find surprisingly lucrative jobs so that we could sock away more money than anyone else our age was socking away, and I'd buy an apartment somewhere cool when we graduated and Lindsay could live there, too. From there, Trumpette's plans for global real-estate investing would kick in. Soon, I'd have houses to divide my time among, so that even when I was away, I was home.

We were going to grow old together, Lindsay and I. Slowly. Gracefully. In dream houses in the Italian countryside, and maybe near a cliff in Ireland, and on some island in the Caribbean, where everything is painted pink and blue, like seashells. We'd sip fancy cocktails while our arms dangled over the edge of my infinity pool, and we'd both die old, happy, and loved.

But it didn't happen that way. It didn't happen that way at all.

It happened like this:

We got home and everything about Vegas—even our house—looked weird: oversized, undersized, fake. Then my father sat us all down in the living room, despite a chorus of protests—"But I have to call Johnny!" "But I have to call Lindsay!" "But I have to call Judy!"—and then my mother looked at my father, and the look on his face was just awful, and she said, "Paul, you're scaring us." And then he told us—Lindsay was dead—and it suddenly felt like life itself was this weird fake thing, like a bad movie, and my brain didn't know how to process anything. Like the howling cry in the room; was it coming out of my mouth or my mother's? Words that I spoke sounded scripted and my actions—like calling Lindsay's cell phone, which was disconnected, then getting my phone back from my dad and listening to messages from Noah and Jenna from that night, that night that went horribly wrong—made me feel like a marionette on a puppeteer's strings. My thoughts, too—like how it must be some mistake, some cruel joke—felt false, unreal.

This could not be happening.

Not now.

Not ever.

Not to me.

The information came in a blur—my father had checked the home phone messages from the airport, then had found news stories on the web using his phone web browser—then I was suddenly upstairs, in my room at the computer, Googling. I found the news stories, the details: Lindsay had gone missing after a night out at Neon, a new nightclub in the Vox casino. She'd gotten separated from her friends—who I knew weren't really her friends at all; there were no names named in the stories but it just had to be Chris

Nolan's gang—and somehow ended up walking around on her own. Her body was discovered in a Dumpster—in a duffle bag—two days later. She'd been beaten, raped, and strangled, and the police still had no idea who'd done it.

Surveillance cameras at the club that night showed Lindsay, seemingly intoxicated, talking to a man near the back exit and at first he was a suspect but had later been identified as a bartender who'd tried to help her. He'd asked her to wait there; he'd be right back; he'd help her find a cab. But when he'd come back, Lindsay was nowhere to be found. Surveillance cameras from establishments located between the club and the Dumpster had been reviewed to no avail. She'd been given a funeral and buried. We'd missed it all.

Having taken in too much too quickly—in a duffle bag—I went into the bathroom and retched while my mother held my hair and cried. Zoe stood in the hallway, saying, "Ohmigod, ohmigod" over and over. Then I cleaned up and went outside and ran to Lindsay's house, where I was sure I was going to find out it really was a big mistake. And then there was Noah, at the front door, saying, "Well, look who decided to grace us with her presence." I said, "Please tell me it isn't true," and then he said, "Yeah, Chloe. It's a big joke. Ha-ha. We really got you good."

I was crying and not understanding why he was being so mean, and I said, "We don't go to clubs," and he said, "We were in Europe," and then he said, "Go home, Chloe," and closed the door in my face.

I just stood there and he opened the door again and Burt came bounding out, embarrassingly happy to see me, dragging his leash behind him. I picked up the handle end without a word.

At home I told my mother what happened and she went over to try to talk to Mrs. Woods, only Mrs. Woods wouldn't see her, either. I called Jenna and she came over—wearing lip gloss, which annoyed me, because who thinks to put on lip gloss when your friend has just been murdered?

"What happened?" I asked through tears and she cried, too, and told me how Lindsay had gone out with Chris Nolan and they'd had a fight or something and then he'd left, and his friends had, too, stranding Lindsay on the Strip alone.

"Was he arrested?" I said, fists clenched so hard that my hands hurt all the way to my shoulders.

Jenna shook her head. "He didn't do anything illegal."

My head was about to explode.

Then when I told her about what happened with Noah and how he seemed mad at me, she said, "You were her best friend, Chloe," and I said, "I know," and she said, "It was just bad that you weren't at the funeral," and I said, "But I was in Europe. I didn't know!" And then I was explaining about not being able to check e-mail or voicemail and then Jenna told me about Lindsay's mom's "fucked up" eulogy, how she'd gotten up in the front of the church and said that Lindsay's death was a lesson to us all, that you get what you deserve in life when you break the rules like Lindsay had. Noah had gotten up and led her away from the lectern as she let out sobs in primal bursts. "It was like a dog barking," Jenna said. "Really freaky."

Then Jenna had to go home and my family all sat around the kitchen table, picking at pieces of a frozen pizza that my mother had heated up. I couldn't stop thinking about Mrs. Woods barking. I couldn't reconcile the image with the woman I knew, the most upbeat, fun mom you'd ever hope for. And then upstairs, I listened to my messages again and saw that I had texts, too. From Lindsay. There were two

and the first one read: “look me in the I.” It had obviously been cut off, but it sounded to me like some kind of dare. Look me in the eye...and what? There was a text after it that said, simply, “Aloha.”

In bed that night, the word, “Aloha,” echoed in my head until it started to sound like a made-up word, one I couldn’t possibly understand because it meant nothing. I heard the sound of a plane overhead—closer than normal—and I clutched my pillow and thought, Maybe this is it. Maybe this is how I’m going to die. All Donnie Darko—style, with plane parts crashing down on me through the roof. All the bravery I’d been feeling for the past few weeks was being sucked out of my heart, as if by a vacuum. Because if Lindsay—totally charmed Lindsay—could meet such a grisly fate, it was only a matter of time before something awful happened to us all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Arhythmic thumping woke me up in the morning and I lay in bed, trying to figure out the source of the sound through lingering jet-lagged sleep.

Zoe.

On her trampoline.

Then I remembered.

We were home. Lindsay was dead.

No airplane parts had impaled my body or my bed—I was alive—but yesterday my world had crashed in on me. Suddenly furious at my sister’s callousness, I went to the window and opened it. “Zoe!”

She looked up at the end of a midair somersault and then bounced, but with less energy. She made a series of minijumps and said, “What?”

“What?” I couldn’t believe she could be so insensitive. “What do you think?” I nodded in the direction of Lindsay’s house.

“Sorry,” Zoe said. She went to the edge of the trampoline, grabbed its edge with both hands, flipped off.

I slammed the window shut and climbed back into bed, prepared to cry, but the tears wouldn’t come. It was all too unreal-feeling, still, all too hard to believe. Lindsay. Dead. Murdered. It was the kind of stuff I read about in the papers—not the kind of thing that actually happened to me. So I got up and turned on my computer and set out to read every news story I could find about what happened to her. The details were the same as they’d been the day before but I guess I was hoping for more of a clue, a clue as to why. She’d been wearing a miniskirt and a tube top—several stories noted this—and I wondered what miniskirt, what tube top, and why they mentioned them at all. She wasn’t a missing person. It’s not like she needed to be identified. Her body had been found.

In a duffle bag.

Zoe came into my room and sat on the bed, folding her legs up into a lotus position, ankles on top of knees. “I know it’s going to sound harsh, but I really need to practice.”

“God, Zoe,” I snapped, not looking away from the computer. “It’s never going to happen.”

She said, "I got an audition."

I turned. "You did?"

"Yeah." She was pissed—her face tight—and she had every right to be. "I did."

She got up and I said, "Zoe, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

"No, that's fine," she said. "Nobody believes in me, but whatever. I believe. Johnny believes. So screw the rest of you." She walked out, then came back and said, "And FYI, I think they knew. Or Dad, at least."

"Knew what?" I heard my own voice soften.

"About Lindsay. When we were away."

"How?" I wanted to tell her about the weird text messages, to see if maybe I was missing something obvious, but thought maybe I should think some more about what it might mean before I let anyone else influence me.

"I don't know. But I mean, Mrs. Woods had our whole itinerary. They would have left messages at the hotel."

My mom was best friends with Mrs. Woods. There was no way. "But how could they keep a secret like that?"

"I don't know. But what's the alternative? Tell us and fly home?"

"Yes! Exactly!"

Zoe shrugged. "There was that one night. In Rome, when the clerk at the front desk called Dad over."

At the time, the moment had barely registered but I remembered it well enough; my father had later told my mother they'd needed to swipe his credit card and that had been the end of it. But the dates matched: our last day in Rome was the same day as Lindsay's body had been found. But no, there was no way. "But she's my best friend. And Mrs. Woods is Mom's best friend."

Zoe shook her head. "Well, Mom couldn't have known."

"But Dad? Really?" I didn't want to believe it was true.

Zoe shrugged. "I don't know. It's just the way he bought my mask and the gondola ride and everything in Venice. And the way he was sort of, I don't know. Different? He totally knew."

I started thinking about things in Venice but I couldn't say I saw that much of a difference. Yes he'd gotten all worked up about seeing glassblowers, and maybe he'd been more subdued, but there was nothing that seemed glaring. Zoe said, "He probably didn't want to ruin your trip."

"It's ruined now anyway."

Zoe unknotted herself and got up and left and I went back to my news reading, to the tube top, the

miniskirt, the fact that Lindsay's murderer was still at large.

THE DAY PASSED MORE slowly than any day of my life had to date. My mother forced me out of bed and into the shower so that we could go to the police to talk about the texts. A detective had called while we were away, too. They'd found Lindsay's phone and wanted to talk to me. So I told them what I knew, that the texts made no sense. They seemed to believe me and told me that if anything—anything—sprang to mind, I should call. Their interest only fueled my growing sense that the messages meant something terribly important and I just wasn't getting it. What if Lindsay's woeful texting skills—and my own idiocy—were going to conspire to allow her killer to go free?

On the way home, my mother said, "What am I going to do about Judy?" and it occurred to me that if my father had never confiscated my phone in London, I could've texted Lindsay back: "What?" Then there'd be no mystery. I'd know. I'd know whether there was something I could have done to help.

I started to cry without even realizing it at first. My mom started crying then, too, and something about that made the whole situation seem sadder, more alarming. Because my mother was always the one who knew how to hold it together, who knew what to say to make me feel better. Suddenly, and for the first time, we were both completely at a loss as to what to do and I felt uneasy, unmoored, like a gondola floating down a dark canal. I wanted my mother to say that everything would be okay even though I knew it wouldn't. It could never be okay again. I couldn't bring myself to tell her what I'd heard about Mrs. Woods, about the barking sobs. I couldn't bring myself to ask her about Zoe's theory that they knew.

After that initial burst of activity, things seemed to grind to a standstill. I couldn't watch TV. I couldn't eat. I didn't want to go anywhere. So I went back on the web.

And Googled for "odds of being murdered."

And learned that a person is murdered somewhere in the world every sixty seconds. Which sounded like an unbelievable fact. I sat there for a few minutes and thought, Now, that's another one, then watched the clock for sixty seconds and said, "Now, another one." I figured out how many minutes there were in a day and tried to process the fact that 1,440 people were killed the same day Lindsay was. Some more clicking led me to this list:

Odds of fatally slipping in bath or shower: 2,232 to 1

Odds of drowning in a bathtub: 685,000 to 1

Odds of being killed on a five-mile bus trip: 500,000,000 to 1

Odds of being killed sometime in the next year in any sort of transportation accident: 77 to 1

Odds of being killed in any sort of nontransportation accident: 69 to 1

Odds of being struck by lightning: 576,000 to 1

Odds of being killed by lightning: 2,320,000 to 1

Odds of being murdered: 18,000 to 1

Odds of getting away with murder: 2 to 1

All those odds got me thinking of the thousands of people who were sitting in casinos at the very moment, gambling away their millions or their bottom dollar. I imagined the ringing of the machines, the happy clang of someone winning on nickel slots, the mechanical clack of the roulette wheel, bursts of excitement from the craps tables. It was hard to understand how the world was going on without her.

I reached for the picture above my desk—of me and Lindsay in the first car of the roller coaster at New York-New York, arms in the air, smiling pretty. We'd taken maybe ten of them during the year I'd been working at the coaster, because we were determined that we wouldn't look like idiots in the photo, like most people did in theirs. So we worked as hard as we could to maintain composure, and cute smiles, while inside we wanted to scream. I wondered whether dying in a roller-coaster accident qualified as a transportation accident or not and marveled at our daring. How could we have been so cavalier?

I had a crazy idea, then, to try to somehow find satellite footage of the funeral on the web. It seemed not only possible but also likely that the eye in the sky had captured it all. Even if all I could see were tiny black ants winding their way through the cemetery gates, it'd be something. But I Googled for the cemetery and clicked on the satellite view and the Google red bubble put the cemetery right flat in the middle of the street. Technology had failed me.

My mom popped her head in again after a while and said, "Whatcha doing?"

"Nothing." I quickly closed my browser.

"You want to maybe call a friend?" my mother suggested.

I said, "Like who?" because we both knew I didn't really have other friends. But of course I'd have to call Jenna again. Her messages on my phone had been echoing in my head right along with Noah's. His—"Chloe, call me immediately"—had come first and Jenna's followed: "Ohmigod, Chloe, I can't believe it." Then later, she'd tried again: "I just remembered you're away. Are you coming home for the funeral?" I wasn't sure I was ready to face her again after yesterday's lip-gloss incident.

"Well, why don't you come downstairs for a while." My mother nodded toward the stairs. "We'll bake cookies or something?"

"Okay," I said, and added, "I don't think I'm in the mood for cookies, though."

"I'm not, either," my mother said and I followed her downstairs.

Overnight—no, sooner than that, even—she'd reverted to her normal Vegas mom persona and I felt the loss of my cool European mom sharply in my gut as I trailed her into the kitchen. She'd been so happy. We'd all been so happy—especially in Venice, even Zoe—that it was that much worse to be so sad, to see my mother so sad, too. As a family we'd gone from our highest high to our lowest low in the space of a day.

WE WERE SPOONING STICKY clumps of cookie dough onto a baking sheet when I couldn't hold it in any longer. I needed to know if my parents knew about what happened before we came home. I said, "Where's Dad?"

"Where else," she said. It was a familiar refrain. We'd once joked that they should rename the convention center that: Where Else.

We scooped more sticky piles then and I thought about Noah closing the door. I said, "So you remember that night in Rome, when we came back from dinner and the clerk at the hotel desk called Dad over?"

I tried to visualize the scene in my head. How serious had the clerk looked? Had my father seemed out of sorts when he'd come back to the room?

"Mnn. Not really," my mother said. She pried the last dollop of dough from a spoon with her skinny index finger. "Oh!" She looked up. "When he needed the credit card?"

"Yeah." I could still hear Noah's snarky "We were in Europe." "But I mean, what if it wasn't about the credit card?"

"I'm not following."

"Mrs. Woods had our itinerary. I think they would've called." I put down the last of my clumps and thought about the anger in Noah's face. I couldn't think of any other way to explain such rage, such rage directed at me. "What if Dad got a message?"

My mother slid the cookie sheet into the oven, then took off the oven mitt and sat at the kitchen table, running a hand through her hair. "I see where you're going with this, honey. But your father would have never been able to keep a secret like that."

I wanted to say, "Are you sure?" but I knew what she'd say. She'd say she was sure. I also knew she'd ask him about it, that the truth would eventually come out. She said, "I know you wish you'd been here, honey. We all do. But there was nothing we could have done. Okay?"

I nodded, fighting back tears.

"And now," she said sadly, "now, I think we're just scapegoats, someone to focus anger on."

She put her elbows on the table and rubbed her eyes. When she looked at me again she said, "Maybe you'll walk some cookies over there?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so, Mom."

ICALLED JENNA AND she insisted on coming right over. I hoped she wouldn't turn up looking cute and wearing lip gloss again but she did.

"So I got these weird texts from Lindsay," I said after we'd run through the basics again—namely, the fact that we couldn't believe it had happened at all. I clarified, "They're from that night."

“Weird how?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t want to go there, to the top of the Eiffel Tower, but I had to. “I mean, was she still mad at me, do you know?”

“Stillmad?” Jenna’s interest perked up; Lindsay and I had been dumb to ever take Jenna, or anyone, on as a third. “I didn’t know she was mad in the first place.”

I sighed disappointment. “We had a fight before I left.”

“What about?”

I was about to say “Chris Nolan” but I couldn’t. If Lindsay hadn’t told Jenna about our fight, she might not have mentioned going to Vegas with Chris, either. It felt wrong to betray her confidence if that was the case.

“Oh, it was no big deal,” I said. “Anyway, look.” I held it out to her and she read aloud from the screen: “Look me in the I.”

“Yeah.” I took the phone back.

“No idea,” Jenna said. “Maybe she sent it by accident.”

“Twice?” I said. “There was one after it that just said ‘aloha.’”

Jenna shrugged and said, “I smell cookies.”

I was obviously not going to get any help from Jenna. “My mom made some, if you want.”

“Cool,” she said and I couldn’t believe she was thinking about cookies. I said, “I read all the stories in the news and if you go by their time line and compare it to when these were sent, it was after she’d lost the group, but before, well, obviously...”

“I don’t know what to tell you.” Jenna sounded bored with me. “But I wouldn’t obsess over it.”

Something else had been bugging me, too, and Jenna’s supershort skirt triggered me to say, “Why do they keep saying that she was wearing a miniskirt?” I said. “I mean, what’s that got to do with anything?”

Jenna shrugged. “I think people think maybe if she hadn’t been dressed like that it might not have happened.”

“That’s insane.”

“I guess.”

“Youguess?”

“I just mean she was dressed to look sexy, is all.”

“So?!” I was starting to see how Jenna and I were not so hot at being just two. “I mean, the guy who

did it is obviously some sick and twisted person. He could've picked anybody."

She got up and looked in the mirror, flipping her hair. "What are you getting mad at me for?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Days passed in a blur of half-eaten meals and naps and Googling futilely for news about a break in the case, and then I woke one morning alone in the house for the first time since we'd gotten home. My father was Where Else, where he'd pretty much been since we got home, which made it blessedly easy for me to avoid him; my mother, according to the note on the fridge, was food shopping because we were all starting to accept that we actually needed to eat on occasion; and Zoe had told me the previous night that she'd be at her gymnastics studio all day, getting ready for her audition next week, but to tell Mom she was shopping with Johnny if it came up. Her big secret from my parents suddenly seemed like the least of my problems. I was actually proud of her for going for it, for maybe proving us all wrong.

I called Jenna, because being alone didn't feel quite right, but she didn't pick up and I didn't leave a message. I stared at the text messages again, like I'd been doing every day, and lay in bed, trying to let my subconscious do the work for me. When nothing happened I gave up. Downstairs, things felt too quiet and I checked the locks on the doors and windows before going into the den to turn on the TV.

I flipped through the channels until I saw a woman onscreen crying. She was reading a letter from her son, a soldier who died in Iraq. When she finished, they showed some pictures of him—he barely looked older than Noah—and then they flashed a picture of another guy, said he'd died in an explosion outside Baghdad. His mother and girlfriend then appeared, and they started reading letters and crying and I started crying right along with them. Burt trotted into the room and curled up in a ball beside my thigh. My hand found his soft ears and rubbed. I had a sudden, morbid wish that this was all that the channel played, so I could mourn Lindsay along with all these lost soldiers. I wondered how the odds of dying in Iraq stacked up against the odds here.

The lights flicked on—I twitched in my seat—and Zoe said, "What are you doing?"

"You scared the shit out of me." My heartbeat had spiked and I wondered if it was possible to have a heart attack at the age of sixteen. "I thought you were practicing for your big audition." I didn't mean to be sarcastic about it but it was an old habit when it came to my sister. My heartbeat began to settle.

"Well, I'm not." She looked at the television; two women were crying. "Turns out the studio's booked. What are you doing?"

"Duh. Watching TV," I said. "What's it to you?"

A woman was holding her husband's hand as he sobbed openly, reading from a letter: I don't want you to worry about me, because I'm going to be fine....

Zoe said, "This isn't watching TV. This is torturing yourself. Come on." She snatched the remote from my hand and turned off the TV. "We're going to get our nails done."

I wasn't convinced that my sister had ever had any true friends, so it was no surprise to me that it was obviously beyond her capacity to understand my loss. To Zoe, who had the emotional maturity of a moth, friends seemed more like handbags, changing with whim and season and in constant supply. Ask her whatever happened to Melissa or Sara and she'd say, "Oh, we don't hang out anymore," like it was just the way of the world. I wondered then, as she pulled me up off the couch, nearly ripping my arm

from its socket, how she would have handled it if it were me and not Lindsay who had died. I could almost see someone asking her, “Whatever happened to your sister?” and her saying, “Oh, I don’t see her around the house much anymore.”

“You may be going to get your nails done.” I sat down again when she let go of me, picked up the remote again, and turned the TV back on. “But I am most definitely not.”

She pulled up the shades on the windows, and said, “Up! Now! Go put some decent clothes on.”

“Zoe,” I whined.

“I’m serious. Come on.” She tugged on my arm. “You have to get out of the house.”

I wasn’t exactly sure how many days we’d been home and I hadn’t been outside except to go down to the police station that one time, and to take Burt for the occasional walk. Some air would probably do me good and we weren’t going very far—only down to the main drag in Breeza. If that odds list was right, it was unlikely I’d be murdered or hit by a car or slip and crack my skull when I was only going about a mile up the road. I dragged myself off the couch, went upstairs to put on something presentable, then met Zoe by the front door.

Together we stepped out into a wall of heat and, right away, the sun made my head hurt. I had to cover my eyes against the shock of it as we walked to Zoe’s baking car, and I realized I should have put sunscreen on. I’d have to Google again, to see what the odds of dying of skin cancer were.

“Shouldn’t you be back at work by now?” Zoe asked, and just the thought of it—laughing people on a death-defying roller coaster, the sunny glare of the Strip with the Paris Eiffel Tower looming in the distance—was enough to make my stomach drop and then lift out of me, roller coaster-style. I took out my phone and called my boss, Tom; he was a good boss and I felt bad for leaving him in the lurch. Zoe was right that I should’ve checked in by now.

“Oh, Chloe,” he said. “I’m so sorry. We’re all just so shaken up by the whole thing.”

I said, “I don’t know if I can come back yet.”

“Take as much time as you need,” he said without hesitation. “We’ll still be here.”

“Good,” Zoe said when I hung up and told her what he’d said. “We can spend the day together.”

“Why are you suddenly interested in sisterly bonding?” I said when we were getting out of the car maybe a minute later, having, for the time being anyway, survived those 1 in 77 odds.

Zoe said, “Have you looked at yourself in a mirror recently?”

“No.” I honestly couldn’t say I had.

She shook her head and opened the door to the salon. I ducked in, grateful I hadn’t run into anyone I knew. It would look bad. My getting my nails done. My acting like things were in any way normal.

Inside, I submitted to the manicurist’s will, inwardly admitting that it felt good. Her hands massaged my hands and I closed my eyes and almost felt like I could fall asleep. “Now,” she said, and I opened my eyes; she was Korean and sweet-looking, with a wide smile. “You pick color.”

“Oh,” I said. “Just clear.”

My sister appeared over my shoulder, with a tiny bottle of bright pink polish in hand. “She’ll have this.”

“Zoe,” I moaned.

“Just trust me, okay.” She sat back down in front of her own manicurist, giving her hands over again. “Pink makes everything better.”

We didn’t talk for a while then and I was thinking of a day—years ago—when Lindsay and I had painted our nails green for St. Patrick’s Day. Then the woman doing my nails said, “You are sisters, yes?” and I thought of all the times Zoe had pretended she didn’t know me, whenever she thought it would make her seem cooler or older.

Zoe said “yes” before I had a chance to tote out my usual “unfortunately, yes.” She looked at me, face hard with meaning, and said, “Yes, we are.”

“SO COME ON,” ZOE said when we were done drying our nails under fans and ultraviolet lights; I’d spent the whole time wondering whether the purple light could cause cancer, whether it could seep from my hands to other parts or whether they’d just have to be chopped off to prevent the spread of the disease. “The new Bourne movie starts in fifteen minutes.”

All I wanted to do was go home. “You really don’t have to do this. You can just take me home.”

“I don’t want to take you home.” Zoe’s phone rang then and as she pulled it out to answer it, she said, “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

She looked at her caller ID, looked momentarily confused, then said “hello?” to whoever was on the line.

The movie theater was just a few paces away, in the same mall complex, so we walked over and I waited for Zoe to hang up. “Okay,” she said. “Thanks. Yeah, definitely.”

She clicked her phone shut and looked pained.

I just waited.

“Someone canceled and I can get into the studio. I really need to do some prep work.”

“Sure.” The lump was back, bulging in my throat. “It’s okay.”

“Come on. I’ll drive you home.”

I looked at the twenty-dollar bill in my hand and thought of the inside of the dark theater—likely empty, likely very air-conditioned—and of Jason Bourne and his world of international intrigue. Suddenly, escape from my life to cities like Turin and London and Algiers—without having to risk life and limb by boarding a plane—seemed like the ideal way to spend a few hours. “I think I’ll go anyway.”

Zoe seemed taken off guard. She cocked her head. “You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“But how will you get home?” She already had her car keys out.

“I’ll walk.” There was less chance of getting killed that way anyway.

I waited until she was in her car, backing out of her parking spot before I called Jenna. She could meet me if she hurried, since the previews would probably last fifteen minutes anyway. When she picked up, I asked her if she wanted to come down.

“This is hard for me to say,” she said but she didn’t sound like she was under any real strain.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. It’s just...” She breathed hard. “It’s like suddenly you want to be my best friend, and I don’t know. It makes me feel weird. Because you know, sometimes you and Lindsay could be kind of exclusive and it hurt me.”

“Okay,” I said, thinking it had been a mistake to get into it with Jenna about what Lindsay had been wearing that night. Jenna didn’t like to be challenged—about anything—and I knew that about her. Still, if she wanted to avoid me, she could have chosen something more along the lines of “I’m not feeling well” or “It’s my brother’s birthday.” Something clean and simple. But there was something refreshing about her honesty. If there was one thing Jenna was bad at, it was BS, and I decided maybe I should try to become bad at it, too. Starting right then. So I didn’t apologize or try to cajole her. I just said, “I’m sorry you feel that way” before I hung up.

So I went to the movies alone, which I’d never done before. There had never been any need. But once the lights went dark and the previews started, I didn’t actually mind it as much as I thought I would—until I remembered that Lindsay’s murderer was still at large; he could have been in that movie theater for all I knew and there I was, too. I wasn’t wearing a tube top and miniskirt but I was alone, and no one but Zoe—dear useless Zoe—knew where I was.

As the lights went dark, someone came down my row and they didn’t stop until they were at the seat next to me. I sat up and pulled my knees in, assuming that they wanted to get past me, but he—I could tell it was a he—took the seat next to me. My whole body tensed—run!—because how could he have found me? Had Lindsay and I done something to piss someone off? Was it my turn to die? The odds of being murdered had popped up at 18,000 to 1 and the fact that my best friend had already been murdered didn’t actually improve my odds at all. It could still happen to me. It was about to. I could feel it in the way my skin turned cold.

Then I recognized the form beside me as Noah’s. He didn’t say a word and the movie started and my body’s response set a new course. Every nerve ending under my skin felt alert, raw, and all I wanted was for him to take that hand of his and to reach over to take hold of mine. I couldn’t think of the last time I’d been this close to him. If I moved my arm or my knee even a couple of inches it would have hit him. Our shoulders, too. All Noah had to do was walk up to me and sit beside me without a word, and I was right back where I was when I was ten or twelve or fourteen, mooning over my best friend’s older brother in the only spaces in my heart kept secret from her. Years had passed and nothing about me had changed at all. In that moment, more than ever, I wished all of these feelings for him would just go away because now more than ever the situation seemed doomed.

The movie passed in a blur of car chases and fistfights and sniper hits and, before I knew what was happening, the final credits rolled and Noah was gone. I didn't see him anywhere when I left the theater so I started the walk home, careful to cross at corners with the lights. His car pulled up alongside me after a few minutes.

I stopped walking and waited for him to roll down a window and say something, but he didn't. He leaned over without making eye contact and opened the passenger-side door. I got in.

In the car, we were no more talkative than we had been in the theater and since it was a short drive, we were home before either of us had actually said a word. When he stopped the car in front of my house, I wanted to say something meaningful and important—something that would snap us out of whatever it was we were in—but I didn't. I said, "Thanks," then got out and closed the door.

The house was empty, so I went up to my room and checked the messages on my phone. My mom had left voicemail—"Where are you? I'm worried about you. Call me."—and a text from Jenna read, "I'm sorry. Call me." But I didn't feel like calling her. She suddenly didn't seem like best-friend material at all. Still, beggars couldn't be choosers. I called.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey." We were silent for a while.

Finally she said, "I didn't mean what I said before. Or, I mean, I meant it. But not really. I mean, I still want to be friends."

"I understand." I rolled my eyes at myself in the mirror hanging above my dresser. When Lindsay was alive, it didn't really matter that I only had one best friend. I thought that's how it should be. If a friend is your best, by definition, there should only be one. But without her it was like I was some weird lone animal on Noah's Ark, where everyone else has already found a bosom buddy.

"So I just heard this really weird thing." That quickly, Jenna was able to move on. "I don't want to upset you but you should know."

I waited and she said, "Actually, maybe I should come over."

For someone who didn't want to be my new best friend, she was sure pretty eager. Within minutes, she plopped down on the bed, lip gloss and all. Was it possible I'd never noticed before that Jenna always wore lip gloss? She said, "People are saying she slept with Chris Nolan the night before."

It felt like a slap. "Who's saying that?"

"Chris Nolan."

"What did he say?"

Again, Jenna's eyes fired with excitement. I wasn't sure whether to kill her or not but imagined the two of us atop the Eiffel Tower on the Strip, me pushing her off. "That at least Lindsay didn't die a virgin."

I couldn't locate my voice.

“And Chris Nolan and that crowd?” Jenna’s eyes suddenly filled with trepidation and I couldn’t blame her. I probably looked homicidal.

“Yeah?” If I could have yanked words from her mouth I would’ve. It was like she was enjoying this, knowing more than me. Knowing more than me about my best friend, the funeral, the murder, everything.

“They’re having a party Wednesday night.”

“Party” sounded like a foreign word, maybe from the same language as “aloha”; it was a concept I could no longer wrap my head around. The fact that people in the world were having parties while Lindsay was dead was just crazy. The fact that Chris Nolan could abandon Lindsay on the Strip and not feel guilty enough to at least lay low for a while blew my mind.

“I can’t believe he has the nerve,” I said, and Jenna flipped her hair. She said, “It’s not like he killed her.”

“But if he hadn’t left her alone there!”

Jenna shrugged. “I don’t know why I even brought it up,” she said.

“You’re not going, are you?”

“Of course not,” she said, and I wasn’t sure whether her answer was tinged with disappointment, like she knew it would be bad to go but wanted to anyway. “I mean, it’s a Wednesday night, and I have to work anyway. And it’s all the way out by that ghost town toward Lake Mead.”

I’d never actually been to a ghost town before but I knew what they were—whole neighborhoods of empty new houses. Vegas was one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States, apparently, but too many developers had rushed in to fill too small of a demand.

“Do you think it’s true?” I said suddenly. “I mean, about her and Chris? Did she say anything?”

It pained me to have to ask Jenna this, to have to rely on her for information. Each day that passed that I didn’t ask her to tell me every detail of the wake and funeral—like what Lindsay had been wearing, and who, exactly, had been there—felt like some kind of twisted victory.

“Not to me,” she said, and the relief was complicated, because I wasn’t sure whether I was relieved that Lindsay hadn’t said anything to Jenna about her plan to go to Vegas with Chris Nolan or relieved because the fact that she hadn’t said anything meant that maybe, please God, Chris Nolan was lying.

I thought about telling Jenna about Noah then—about the movies, our own weird sort of silent film. But I decided against it. She wouldn’t understand. Not when I didn’t understand it myself.

THAT NIGHT, WHEN I sat down at the dinner table across from my father for the first time since the day we’d gotten home, I could barely look him in the eye. I’d be able to tell, if I did, whether he’d known or not—whether he was carrying a secret around with him. And there must’ve been a part of me that didn’t want to know, because instead of asking him, I just picked at my lasagna while activity and conversation swirled around me. My parents were talking about the convention my father was running that week—for celebrity impersonators—and he seemed like he was in a bad mood, one I certainly

wasn't going to make any worse. "I mean, come on," he said. "How the hell are you supposed to take someone seriously when they're acting like Regis Philbin?"

Zoe was at work and I wished she weren't, just so things wouldn't feel quite so awkward at home. I pictured her all dolled up in her siren costume, giving Johnny come-hither looks from her rocky perch, and couldn't help but feel that somewhere along the way, like maybe when we'd moved to Vegas, things had gone terribly wrong. Then my father said, "I saw Noah today."

I looked up and said, "Where?"

"Buying the paper at Mickey's." He got up and went to his workbag and pulled out a newspaper. "Lindsay's in the news again."

I put my fork down and took up the paper. My father kept talking as I read the lead story. He said, "The mayor is upping his efforts to have more security cameras on the Strip. He's using Lindsay's case as an example."

"I've always thought it was a good idea," my mother said. "I mean, the casinos spend all this money to try to smoke out cheaters, they should spend some on public safety, as well."

I skimmed the article, which only really mentioned Lindsay in passing. It was more about how certain casinos—like Paris and MGM; nothing new to me—had surveillance on the Strip at all times, and how the rest should follow. My parents kept talking but all I could think about was the eye in the sky and how it had failed Lindsay. It's not like you could have cameras on every inch of every block—I knew that—but I'd read about cities around the world, like London, with aggressive surveillance systems and I didn't much mind if my rights were being violated if it meant the streets were safer. I wasn't planning on doing anything that would get me in trouble. I didn't have anything to hide.

My mother said, "I bet that would mean a lot to Judy. If we made things more safe around Breeza; maybe put in cameras, more gates. Sort of as a tribute to Lindsay?"

My father and I just looked at her as she nodded to herself. "There's a board meeting in a few weeks," she said. "Maybe I'll present something."

"So did you talk to him?" I said to my father after a minute, and he looked at me blankly. It was the wrong question to ask, really. I should've said, "Did you know? Did you fail me the way the eye failed Lindsay?" But I couldn't get the words out. I wished I could impersonate someone else, maybe Barbara Walters, and let her do the interrogating.

"Noah?" He picked at his lasagna. "No."

"Paul," my mother moaned. "You should've asked after Judy. You should have said that if they needed anything, anything at all..."

ILAY IN BED that night and wondered how things might have been different if I'd never gone away, if Lindsay had maybe called me that night, whether she would have answered if I'd texted her back "What?" In my fantasy, I was a hero but I wondered.... If she'd called, would I have said, "Stay put; I'll come get you?" Then would I have driven down to the club to get her? I didn't know. I didn't know whether I would have had the right thing to say or whether I would've been feeling so left out that I

would've told her it was late, to sober up and go home. Or call a cab and grow up.

Look me in the eye...and what?

An idea had started to take shape in my belly that afternoon and I realized, lying there, that it wasn't going to go away. Because sitting around and thinking, no matter how hard, wasn't going to change a thing. And when I remembered those 2 to 1 odds for getting away with murder, I thought, Not on my watch.

I needed to take action.

I needed to confront Chris.

I needed to look him in the eye and tell him what I thought of him, and I needed to see if he could explain the texts.

I had to go to that party.

But there was no way I'd go out to a ghost town alone and I had no one to go with me. Zoe wouldn't be seen dead at a high school party. Jenna already said she was working. And Noah was, well, Noah.

I must've fallen asleep, trying to dream up an accomplice, because my phone woke me up and I picked up in a panic. The room was dark; I had no idea what time it was. Something awful must have happened to somebody. Something else awful.

"It's Noah," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Oh," I said. "Hi." My heart started thumping against my chest because maybe he had news. Maybe they'd caught him.

He said, "I was wondering if you could come over some night and help me go through my sister's stuff." He took a breath. "My mother's in no shape to deal and I don't know who else to ask."

"Of course." I pictured Noah at Lindsay's funeral, leading his mother away from the microphone. "When?"

"I don't know." He sounded pained. "Tomorrow night? Around seven?"

"Sure." The temptation to say "it's a date" was extraordinary. But I didn't, of course. Instead, I just felt guilty that there was already a part of me that was looking forward to it, to spending time with Noah. Even though we were barely speaking, he was the only real connection to Lindsay I had left.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I wouldn't say that going to Vegas with Peter put me off sex entirely but Lindsay would have. And I know now that I only really have myself to blame—for not listening to my heart's own hesitancy, for wanting things to be one way while knowing they were another. I ended up sleeping with him in part because it would help me keep him, realizing too late that I didn't really want to—or rather, that I didn't want to be kept.

He was my first real boyfriend and it was the one time in life when things seemed to work out well for

Lindsay and me in that regard: she had a boyfriend, too. But while she and Matt were sort of a goofy couple—more like brother and sister than anything resembling, well, lovers—Peter and I were all into the big declarations. I'd taken a break from crushing on Noah—he was away at his freshman year in college—and I thought I could just transfer all that passion over to Peter, who seemed more than interested in having it transferred his way. He told me I was beautiful. He told me he'd never met anyone like me. He told me he could see us together—like down the line. And even though there was a part of me that didn't want to see us together down the line—what would it mean for those brothers, preferably twins?—maybe Lindsay and I had just had it all wrong. Maybe this was the way it was supposed to go. Me with Peter; her with Matt. We all seemed happy enough.

Peter was a senior—Matt was only a junior like us—so there was a part of me that felt that our relationship, by nature, was somehow more mature than Lindsay's right from the start. Peter was applying to colleges and talking about the future a lot, whereas Lindsay and Matt were just hanging out and doing the high school thing together. I confess there was a part of me that felt superior that Peter felt more like, well, a man.

We'd met at a party at Jenna's house, of all places—Peter was friends with Jenna's older brother—but I'd seen him around school before and thought he was pretty cute. When he told me, at the party, that he was hoping to backpack around Europe before going to college, I was even more interested.

He didn't know a lot about Europe—a fact I found a little disappointing at first—but before long I was like his own private travel agent. We spent hours poring over his tour guides and surfing the Internet, trying to plan out his trip. Though there was no possible way I'd ever be allowed, I imagined myself going with him and so planned the trip out exactly the way I would've done it myself. The project sort of fueled the relationship and even made it seem more exciting than it ever really was, though I wasn't convinced any relationship in high school could ever really be that exciting. High school to me was a snore, but backpacking in Europe was my dream, and the fact that Peter was going to do it—and soon!—was a sort of vicarious thrill for me. If he hadn't been planning that trip, I'm not sure we'd have had much “in common” at all. He was always saying he wished I could go with him and I was always saying “me, too,” and the fact that I was imagining us in all these romantic places together added some romance to our ho-hum dating life in Vegas.

But then Peter started pushing and pushing with the physical stuff and I, eventually, started pushing back less. My body seemed to be betraying my own desires—to save myself for that one true love. I couldn't be sure that Peter was it. How was anyone ever sure? I didn't know. But I figured when you were sure, you just were. And I wasn't. Peter, though, acted like he was sure enough for the both of us—or sure enough, at least, that it would be great, meaningful, that he'd never forget me and I'd never forget him, no matter what happened. There would be no regrets.

I told Lindsay about my predicament one night and she said, “I don't know. I just don't see you having sex with him.”

I held my voice steady when I said, “Why not?”

She laughed. “I just can't see you having sex with anyone, I guess!”

“Right back at you,” I snapped.

“Hey, don't be like that,” she said.

But I was like that. Because what she really meant was that I wasn't sexy and never would be and no

one would ever see me that way, not the way they saw her.

NO REGRETS.

In some ways it seems like a laughable concept to me now. And I think back on it all with a sort of shock that I could ever have been so naïve. These days I see regret as a sort of constant companion, the same kind that Lindsay used to be.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The doorbell rang and rang and rang and even though it was noon, I was still in bed and had no intention of getting up. I yelled, “Mom! The door!” but my words seemed to ricochet off every wall of every empty room and come right back to my mouth. Burt started barking excitedly and I remembered my mother had told me she was going to go food shopping, was going to try to bring groceries over to Mrs. Woods.

When the bell rang for the fifth or sixth or seventh time, I threw my covers off. I grabbed a hoodie and pulled it on, figuring the UPS man could handle pajama bottoms but not my flimsy camisole top. If it turned out it was a murderer ringing the bell, at least the newspaper articles wouldn’t be able to say that I was barely dressed. That I had it coming.

The bell rang again just as I got to the foyer and I said, “All right, already” as I whipped the door open. “God!”

Danny looked crestfallen. He said, “Hi.”

“Danny,” I said, and my brain went to work.

Danny.

Remember Danny?

Danny who kissed you on the Eiffel Tower—the real Eiffel Tower.

Danny who told you you looked like you should’ve been born in France and who got you lost in Venice and then got you found.

I said, “Hi.”

“You don’t remember,” he said. He came forward and pulled me into a hug.

“Remember what?” I said, and as soon as I said it, I remembered. We’d made plans.

High noon.

No phone calls.

It would be more dramatic—“dare I say romantic”—that way.

He said, "We had a date," and I could tell from the forced upbeat tone of his voice that he was sort of upset but pretending not to be. He'd been picturing our reunion, anticipating it the whole time he was in Tuscany. I honestly hadn't thought about Danny since I got home.

"Something awful's happened," I said, and when I said it, I had this guilty feeling, like I was using Lindsay as some sort of excuse. "Lindsay's dead."

"Who's Lindsay?" Danny looked confused and almost, well, amused, like he thought maybe Lindsay was a pet turtle or hamster.

"Lindsay!" I'd talked about her a million times, hadn't I? "My best friend."

"Ohmigod." He came forward to hug me again and I let him. But even as tears started to come I turned wooden, stiff in his arms. He pulled away, pushed a hair off my damp cheek, and looked baffled. "But how? I don't understand. Was she sick?"

I shook my head, wiping tears. "Did you read about that murder?" Again, it felt like I was making it up. My voice sounded hollow, false, my words fake.

"Ohmigod," he said. Then he kept saying that over and over. Oh my God. Oh my God. And even though I'd probably said it a million times myself, it suddenly struck me as such a dumb phrase. What did God have to do with anything? And was He really "my" God, if I didn't know what I believed? And "oh"? Oh, it was so stupid.

"Danny!" My mother came through the front door with several bags of groceries and set them down so that she could give Danny a hug. "Welcome back! How was Tuscany?"

"It was okay."

My mother saw our faces, realized it wasn't time for chitchat. "Did you come to take Chloe out?" She was beside herself with excitement over the prospect of my actually leaving the house and she was hiding it poorly.

"I did." Danny looked guilty. "But I didn't know what happened."

"It's just awful." My mother put her arm around me. "We're all just devastated." She looked at me then, assessed me. "Chloe, go get dressed. Danny, come on. I'll get you some lemonade while you wait."

I didn't move. I said, "I don't want to go out."

My mother turned in the hall. "It'll be good for you. Even a walk around the block, hmmm?"

"But I really don't—"

"It's just around the block," she said brightly for Danny's benefit, but I could hear the true tone underneath. It wasn't a suggestion but an order.

Soon Danny and I were strolling down the street. In Breeza. Which made no sense at all. Danny had made sense when he was Juggling Boy on the plane. He'd made sense when he was kissing me on the Eiffel Tower and making out with me behind bushes at the Tivoli gardens. He made sense in Venice, with pigeons on his arms. I plotted a course that would take us in the opposite direction of Noah's house, far

away from Jenna's.

"How are you holding up?" he asked after we walked in silence for a while. I had no idea where we were going; there was no place to go.

I stopped walking and said, "You really don't remember me talking about her? Our plans to travel the world and all that?"

He stopped, too. "I remember your plans, Trumpette." The nickname annoyed me. "But no, sorry."

"I told you about the fight we had."

"That, I remember." He sounded pleased with himself. "She slept with some guy."

"We don't know that," I snapped.

We walked for a while then and Europe seemed so long ago. It seemed like that must have been someone else who'd gone there—who'd gotten on a plane and flown across an ocean without a moment's hesitation. Because that girl who wanted to travel the world, to sip spiked hot chocolate in chalets in the Alps and walk on black beaches on Greek Islands? She was gone. In her place was this new Chloe, who thought daily about planes falling from the sky and murderers and car wrecks. A Chloe who was consumed by guilt, who couldn't shake the feeling that none of this would have happened if she'd never gone away. And that the secret to it all was a puzzle she was too stupid to solve. Noah had every right to be mad.

"You know what the hardest thing is?" I realized that I could speak more freely to Danny, an outsider, than I could to anyone I knew. "People are mad at me. For not being here. For missing the wake and funeral and everything. Like they don't get that, of course, I wish I'd been here."

Danny said, "I'm sure they're not mad at you, Chloe."

"No, they are!" I was thinking of Noah's "Chloe, go home." Of the way he hadn't looked me in the eyes since I got home. Going through Lindsay's things with him later that night was going to be torture, and I was in no way deluding myself into thinking his asking me to do so meant I was in any way forgiven. It was almost as if he was punishing me by asking for my help. I was starting to think I deserved it because there was a part of me that was glad I wasn't home when it had all happened. Because I would have been a total basket case; I would've made a scene to rival Mrs. Woods's barking sobs.

"Who's mad at you?"

"Well, her brother, for one." It felt weird to mention Noah to Danny, like a betrayal, though I wasn't sure of whom.

"I'm sure he's just dealing with stuff in his own way. It must be really hard for him, too."

"Of course it is," I snapped.

Danny, to his credit, just let that go. I felt awful for being such a bitch to him, so I came clean about what was really bothering me, about what I hadn't been able to admit to anyone yet, had only seconds ago admitted to myself. "I'm mad at myself, too."

“Why?”

It was so obvious that I almost wanted to shake him. “If I was here, maybe I could’ve stopped her from going.”

Maybe, if I’d never gone away, she would have never gotten a fake ID or even been in a position to be invited to go out with Chris; maybe she’d have been with me instead. And on the off chance that I’d gotten a fake ID, too, and had gone along with her I’d have never let her get drunk or go out of my sight. At the very least I would’ve gotten her texts and known what was going on and maybe I’d have been able to help. I started to cry again and said, “I really can’t believe this happened.”

“It’s not your fault, Chloe,” Danny said, but coming from him it didn’t mean a thing. I was about to tell him about the texts when he said, “What was she doing out at night by herself anyway?”

I wanted to smack him, because that so wasn’t the point. I didn’t have the energy to fight, though, or even to cry anymore.

We walked a bit more but I’d purposely steered us back toward my house. Vegas Danny just didn’t seem as cute or as interesting as Europe Danny had and I didn’t much feel like hanging out with him. Then he said, “Let’s go out another time, okay? Maybe tomorrow? There’s someplace I’d like to take you.”

Tonight I was seeing Noah; tomorrow, was the ghost town party. I had a vision of tumbleweed rolling through my own heart, dusty and dry, and realized Danny had resurfaced at exactly the right time. After all, I needed an accomplice. I said, “Actually, there’s a party I might want to go to tomorrow night if you’re interested.”

“A party?” Danny made a face. “Really?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t want to let on what I was up to, how I was going to confront Chris. “I haven’t seen anybody since I’ve been away. I think it’d be good for me. I’ve barely left the house.”

“Okay, then,” Danny said. “Whatever you want. But I still have someplace I want to take you first. As a surprise. I mean, if that’s okay.”

Surprises were supposed to be fun, happy. I wasn’t much in the mood for one but couldn’t exactly say no. I said, “Sure. Of course. Sounds fun.”

Outside my house, it looked like Danny might kiss me—he had that look in his eye—but then thought better of it. A sad sort of relief flooded my heart.

Inside, in the kitchen, my mother was on the phone. “Thanks, Tom,” she said. “Thanks a lot.” She hung up.

“Who’s Tom?” I said. The only Tom I knew was my boss.

“Your boss.” She went to the fridge and took out a lemon. She closed the fridge, opened it again, put the lemon back.

“What are you talking to Tom for?” My spine tightened.

Since the lemon diversion hadn't helped, she turned and took a confrontational stance, arms crossed over her chest. "You're going back to work tomorrow."

I shook my head. "No way."

"Yes way." She put her hands on her hips. "I'm not going to fight with you about this. You need to get out of the house. You need to get back into the routine of things. It's the only way."

"The only way?" A Wild West shoot-out erupted inside me. "What are you, like, suddenly an expert in what someone's supposed to do when their best friend is murdered? How exactly did that happen?"

My mother stood there, stunned. I wanted to just turn and leave the room but for some reason I couldn't. We weren't done. Because I suddenly very much didn't want my mother to be mad at me. Because what if something were to happen to her? What if I were to storm upstairs in a huff only to come back down later and find that she'd accidentally sliced herself open and bled to death? Or dropped dead of a heart attack? Or been struck by lightning at the kitchen sink? I'd never be able to forgive myself.

"I'm only trying to help, Chloe." Her voice wilted with each word. "We can call him back if you want. I just thought it might be time. To at least give it a shot."

I started crying then, because something about going back to work, something about moving on, felt wrong. It felt like I was accepting that Lindsay was really dead and I thought she'd expect more of me. My mother pulled me into a hug and I let her and then I said, "Okay. I'll go."

She pulled back and ran a hand over my head and said, "That's my girl."

"Any luck with Mrs. Woods?" I said then.

"No." She sighed. I wiped tears away from my eyes and she did, too. "I wrote her a letter last night, too, and explained again that we didn't know, that of course we would've come home right away. And I wrote about how I'm going to work on a new safety proposal for Breeza, in Lindsay's honor. She wouldn't come to the door, so I left the letter with some groceries. I don't know what else I can do."

I wanted to tell her that her idea was misguided but didn't have the heart. Instead I said, "Did you ask Dad?" And as I said it, I realized I couldn't count the times I'd said those words in that exact order before. My mother was my main way of communicating with my father and always had been.

"Ask him what?"

"Whether he got a message. In Rome."

"I don't have to ask him, honey." She shook her head. "There's just no way."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

That night, Lindsay's room pulsed with quiet, which felt strange, considering I associated it with nothing but music and Lindsay's constant chatter and the sound of IM dings and phones ringing and music and more music. She and Noah always had that in common. Their music.

I interrupted the pulse. "So where should we start?"

We were standing in the doorway and Noah already looked defeated by the task ahead of us. He said, "Clothes, I guess?"

"Okay. Yeah." I moved toward Lindsay's closet hesitantly. I half expected her to pop out from behind its doors with a "boo!"

Noah said, "I guess we should separate out stuff to maybe keep? And stuff to donate?" He sat on the bed. "I don't know. I've never done this before."

"Me, neither." I opened the closet and her clothes looked like angry commuters, all jammed together in too small a space. "We probably need a pile for just plain garbage, too."

"Sounds like a plan," Noah said. "I'll start with the dresser."

Clothes that Lindsay hadn't worn in years were easy to purge. I couldn't remember her wearing a lot of it, so it didn't feel like it was her stuff at all. But then things got more challenging—the clothes she wore pretty much regularly a few weeks before, and a few things from years and years ago that sparked memories. When I found the sweatshirt with hearts and sparkly studs—with Lindsay's name written all over it in her own hand—I held it in my hands and felt like I was going to pass out. I crossed the room and sat on the bed and studied the shirt. We'd had them made at a stand in the mall, where you wrote on the shirt with markers and then they processed it somehow so that it wouldn't wash out. In an album somewhere in that very room—and in my room at home, too—there were pictures of me in my Chloe sweatshirt and her in her Lindsay sweatshirt from when we were maybe ten or twelve years old.

"I'm sorry." Noah sat down next to me. I thought back to the movie theater as I studied his bony knee, peeking out from the edge of his shorts. "I shouldn't have asked you to do this."

"No," I said. "It's okay. It's just, we had matching ones."

"I remember." He took it out of my hands, held it up by its shoulders in front of him. "I thought you looked like a couple of idiots, running around with matching sweatshirts and acting like it was cool."

"It was cool!"

"Uh. I hate to break it to you, but it wasn't."

I shrugged. "We always wished we were twins, I guess."

He held it toward me. "You want it?"

"Nah," I said. "I guess not." He tossed it in the garbage pile, then we both went back to work. My ears were practically bleeding from the strain of our not talking after having talked somewhat normally for those few seconds.

Noah said, "Would it be weird if I put music on?" and relief crashed over me. I said, "I don't think so. It's weird to be in here without any."

"That's what I thought."

So he put some music on—some mellow guy singing over a laid-back sort of rock with occasional bursts of trumpets and strings and more. It was the perfect soundtrack for what we were doing, if it was

possible for such a thing to exist.

Mrs. Woods appeared in the doorway then and I'd never seen her looking worse. Between her knotty long hair, gray skin, and hunched shoulders, she looked like she was halfway through getting ready to go to a Halloween party as a zombie. It was hard to believe this was the same woman with whom I'd spent so many afternoons of my life, doing silly things like having water balloon fights or trying to jump double Dutch while juggling.

"What are you doing," she said flatly to Noah. She hadn't spotted me yet and I hoped she wouldn't.

"Sorting through some stuff," Noah said.

"Just get rid of it all." She waved a hand, then saw me and said, "Oh, hello."

"I'm so sorry about everything," I said, and she said, "Of course you are, sweetie," but it didn't sound sweet, then she shuffled away down the hall.

Noah turned to me with a pained look in his eyes when she was gone and he looked like he was about to talk, and I thought that he was going to say something about the funeral, about his mother's eulogy. I thought he was going to say something that would get us talking for real—about why he was so mean to me, about what my mom could do to get through to his mom—and that it would make it all alright again. He said, "What do you say we call it a night?"

I nodded.

Noah followed me downstairs and then I turned and said, "Okay. Good night," in what felt like our most awkward good-bye ever.

"Don't be stupid," he said.

I must've looked confused.

He said, "I'm walking you home."

I shook my head. "You don't have to."

"Yes." He nodded once. "Yes, I do."

We walked in silence and there was so much to say that I couldn't figure out where to start. I wanted him to know how awful I felt about everything, and to tell him that life hadn't been fair to him—or to his mom. I wanted to tell him my mom was so, so worried about her.

I wanted to know what it had been like for him. To hear the news, to live through that night. Whether he felt, like I did, like life had suddenly become some bad made-for-TV movie. Whether he was having as hard a time understanding how this could have happened to us as I was. Whether he ever wondered, like I did, if the killer would soon come after him, too. I felt my phone in my pocket and thought maybe I'd tell him about the texts. Or maybe ask him about the voicemails he'd left me, whether he'd thought to try our hotel. Because then I'd never have to ask my dad. But I didn't have the chance or the nerve to ask Noah a thing.

We were already at my house and he said, "Can you maybe come over again? I don't know. I've got to

work tomorrow, so maybe Thursday night?”

“Sure,” I said, then he turned to go.

“Did you see Mrs. Woods?” my mother asked when I walked into the kitchen. She looked sort of crazed, too, like Mrs. Woods had—her hair all mussed up and her leg jittering under the table. Telling her about the zombie Judy I’d seen would only make her feel worse. I shook my head and my mother went back to typing. “Whatcha working on?” I said.

“My proposal for making Breeza safer.” She pulled her hands away from the keyboard. “If you have any ideas, you should let me know.”

“Okay,” I said, but I knew there was no way to make Breeza safer. There was no way to make the world safer, so why would Breeza be any different? “I’m going to bed,” I said.

My mother looked at her watch. “Your father will be home any minute. Why don’t you stay up with me, hmm? You two barely see each other.”

Which is exactly the point, I thought.

“I’m really tired, Mom,” I said. “I’ve got work in the morning.”

Upstairs, I looked out my bedroom window, across two yards, and looked at Lindsay’s window. We used to try to flash signals at each other with flashlights before going to bed, though they never got more complicated than two flashes for “are you there?”, one back for “yes,” and three for “good night.” Her window was dark, dead, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever really looked over to the right before, to Noah’s room. His light was on—low and slightly amber—and I wondered whether, if I thought hard enough about him, I could draw him over to the window. I concentrated really hard for a few seconds but there was no movement across the still, dark void of the yards. Not even a single molecule of air seemed to move in the space between us.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My mother knocked loudly on my door the next morning and I could tell from her tone—it was her third attempt to rouse me—that she was losing patience. “Come on, Chloe. You’re gonna be late.”

I’d agreed to go back to work, yes, but it seemed somehow cruel to me that I was being tasked with the return to normal when nothing was normal at all. Lindsay was still dead. Her murderer was still out there. I still had no idea if her message meant anything. The possibility that I might have a breakthrough after talking to Chris that night was the only thing that got me out of bed.

By the time I’d showered and dressed and gone downstairs, my mother had made eggs and they had gotten cold. I could tell from her body language—she was on one of her cook-and-freeze jags and was moving things around the kitchen with a bit too much slamming—that she was frustrated with me but didn’t want to say as much.

I said, “So if it’s okay, I’m going to go to a party with Danny tonight.”

She was taking a dish of baked ziti from the oven and her joy was so apparent, I swore she was going to drop the pan and splatter steaming pasta and ricotta across the floor. “Oh, honey, that’s a great idea!” she said with a bit too much verve.

I went to the fridge and thought about having some water but it hadn't tasted good lately. Not that water tasted like anything, so it must've been something in me that had turned foul. I said, "Let's not get carried away."

She was peeking at the ziti underneath the tin-foil cover. When it tore a bit—a clean slice—she said "dammit," then took the whole cover off. The pasta almost looked appetizing to me, which was new.

"You two had so much fun in Europe, Chloe. You were always laughing. Give the guy a shot, will you?"

I wished I could explain that I really wanted to be the girl who laughed with Danny and thought he was boyfriend potential, but that a switch had been flicked and I didn't know how to unflick it.

She blew on a piece of ziti, preparing to taste-test it. "Whose party is it?"

Normally, the answer to this would have had to be written down and left by the phone. Normally, I would be required to leave the person's name, the address, the phone number. Normally, my mother and I would fight about the fact that she wanted to call whatever number I left to make sure there would be chaperones. Obviously, that could not happen this time.

"Some friend of Danny's from chess club," I said, and I hated myself for it. For laying it on so thick. She came over and pulled me into her arms so tight that I felt guilty in her embrace.

"I'm proud of you, honey. You're so strong. It's good that you're going. Branching out. Spending time with people who aren't all caught up in the same emotions."

"Thanks," I said, and the guilt was like bile.

I'D SORT OF GOTTEN used to the craziness of the Strip over the years but that day Las Vegas Boulevard's cluster of casinos looked foreign, new, insane. Outside each casino, huge digital screens advertised concerts, shows, burlesque extravaganzas, and ten-dollar all-you-can-eat buffets. Cars zipped under pedestrian walkways teeming with tourists and, overhead, planes beelined for McCarran. There was a volcano erupting in front of the Mirage and a pirate mutiny taking place at Treasure Island. With all the distractions I wondered whether the odds of dying in a car crash—1 in 77, such an unfathomable number—were higher on the Las Vegas Strip. At a stoplight, I looked around at the cars and other drivers and thought, We're all going to die. My mother and father were going to die. Zoe was going to die. Jenna, Noah, everyone. Me. I was going to die.

When I got to New York-New York, I had a few minutes to kill before my shift, so I walked out to the Strip, to the tiny harbor in front of the fake Statue of Liberty. There was a fireboat in the water there, spraying water like fireboats do, and the whole scene looked so sad and futile. Because a fireboat? Really? Was there a more pathetic and desperate idea ever in history? If you were on a boat that was burning at sea, weren't you pretty much doomed?

Up at the coaster, Tom's eyes were shot through with sympathy. He said, "I just can't believe it."

I watched as a yellow set of cars went upside down through the coaster's loop and thought, not for the first time, that it was pretty dumb for a coaster that was supposed to be like a New York taxi ride to go upside down; I'd never understood why they hadn't made a replica of the Coney Island Cyclone instead.

“I keep picturing you two riding the coaster together.” Tom shook his head. “I can’t get it out of my mind.”

I realized I knew nothing about Tom, knew nothing of the tragedies, if any, that had touched his life. Had he lost a parent when he was young? Or a sibling? Had the great love of his life drowned in a lake or dropped dead at a baseball game? Tom, I thought. Tom is going to die, too.

There wasn’t much to say beyond what we’d already said, so I took up my station. I looked at the pictures coming out of the printer in the photo booth, of the people on the ride in progress, and they looked like fools, every one of them. Their faces wrinkled gruesomely in the wind and still, moments later, they came to me—clueless, winded, and laughing—and shelled out eighteen bucks for keepsake copies. With each photo I sold, I studied the person buying it and wondered about their secret sorrows, whether they had any...or whether they just didn’t get it at all.

I wasn’t sure any day of my life to date had ever passed so slowly, then I realized I’d been having that feeling a lot. I wondered whether this was what life was going to be like for me. Whether everything that had ground to a near standstill would stay there. Without Lindsay around, the hours of the day seemed endless. And with each laughing person who came off the coaster, with each “ohmigod, that was awesome,” the scream deep inside of me inched closer to my throat.

Me, I thought. I am the fireboat.

But in a few hours I’d see Chris Nolan. And while confronting him at a party wasn’t ideal, I didn’t want to confront him alone, either. So it would have to do. Danny would have to do.

I looked down the Strip. With the bright Day-Glo towers of the castle exterior of Excalibur, and the pyramid of the Luxor in the way, I couldn’t see the Four Seasons. I could only wonder whether Noah was there, whether he’d ever looked up at the fake skyscrapers of New York-New York and at the taxi-cab coaster and had a thought for me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Something about the amount of effort that Danny had obviously put into looking nice—crisp shirt, actual product of some kind in his hair—made my stomach sour. Suddenly, the fact that he was cute seemed like a bad thing, because it made it harder for me to justify what I was feeling, which was an overall, skin-crawling reluctance to spend any time at all in his company. I was using him—I knew that—and it didn’t make me feel good about myself. Still, it didn’t stop me from playing my part to the best of my ability. So I smiled when he smiled over at me; and when he squeezed my hand and said, “This is nice,” I said, “Yeah.”

Vegas Chloe, I told myself, wasn’t really a bitch, just a girl on a mission. It couldn’t be helped.

We were heading in the direction of the Strip and I honestly had no guesses as to where we were even going—what kind of surprise it might be—when we turned into the parking lot at Paris. My stomach contracted as I realized that Danny was taking me to the Eiffel Tower. He had no idea that I hadn’t been there since the night of the fight, the night I last saw Lindsay. I’d never told him that we had watched the fountain show, and the sunset—that that was one of our things that we did, she and I—and that that was the last time I’d ever seen her, alive or otherwise.

“I guess I should’ve blindfolded you or something,” Danny said. “You’ve probably already figured it out.

Come on.”

He took my hand and started cutting a path through the parking lot, and then through the casino, to the ticket office.

“It’s really expensive, Danny,” I said when we arrived at the souvenir shop where they sold tickets. “Let’s skip it.”

“Money is no object.” He dropped my hand and reached for his wallet.

“But it’s like eighteen dollars each!” I said.

“Chloe. I want to.” He stopped and pulled me close and kissed me quickly and I felt nothing. I didn’t have the heart to protest after that, though, so we approached the desk, where, thankfully, I didn’t recognize the cashier.

Danny gently rubbed my thumb with his as we were waiting for the elevator and I wanted to scream at him to stop, and to yank my hand away, especially when I saw that Maria was there, working the elevator. With so many people around, we couldn’t exactly talk, so we just exchanged a look of something—sympathy, understanding—and then I kept my head down and tried to breathe. Finally released into the open air on the observation deck, I took a huge breath and let Danny lead me to the edge. He said, “Well, it ain’t Paris, but it’s fun to remember, right?”

I nodded noncommittally. The air seemed remarkably still, lifeless.

“God, remember that night, Chloe?” Danny turned to me and put his hands on my waist; the weight on my hips felt like an anchor pulling me down. “How perfect it all was. The whole time in Paris, really. Like the boat ride on the Seine. I wish we could go back, just the two of us.”

I knew what I was supposed to say—“me, too,” all breathy and girly—but I just couldn’t get the words out. Here was this perfectly cute and charming guy who wanted to whisk me away back to Paris with him but all I could think about was Lindsay, and how this was almost the last place I ever saw her, and about Noah, who would probably never whisk anyone, let alone me, to anywhere. Here was this thoughtful, sweet guy who wasted perfectly good money to take me up a lame half-scale Eiffel Tower just because he thought it would make me think of happier times, and all I could think was that I didn’t want to think of happier times. I wanted them back. And I didn’t want to go to Paris or anywhere with Danny, because God only knew what might happen when I was gone this time. I was growing increasingly convinced that this whole thing was a sign that Vegas was where I was meant to spend my whole miserable life. That escape was futile. Maybe Noah had the right idea. I could ask Tom about management training programs at New York-New York and call it a day, a life.

“But I don’t know.” Danny just kept on talking and it started to annoy me that he could remain so oblivious to my misery; he just couldn’t read me, didn’t really know me at all. “Which did you love more, Paris or Venice?”

I watched the fountains at Bellagio sway to “Luck Be a Lady”—there was a rumble and then a boom as white water streams shot high—and felt like Europe was a dream that I was forgetting more and more with each passing moment. I hadn’t plugged my camera into my computer since getting home. It seemed like it would be too painful, would induce too much guilt. Because where had I been, precisely, when Lindsay had taken her last breath? I’d been avoiding trying to imagine the details of her murder but the urge was starting to become a nuisance, popping up and buzzing in my ear like an annoying mosquito, at

random moments. Like this one. Beaten and strangled. Found in a duffle bag in a Dumpster. I had to do whatever I could to make sure he got caught.

“So which one,” Danny asked, “Venice or Paris?”

I remembered the way I’d stood on the real Eiffel Tower, halfway around the world, and wished that Lindsay could ride the Paris hot-air balloon across the Atlantic to meet me. Now, I looked at the big fake balloon and wished it could take me to wherever she was.

“I honestly don’t know,” I said conclusively, like I’d been thinking deeply about the question all along. “So,” I said, trying to sound upbeat, casual, “about this party...”

We started to walk around the observation deck, heading back to the elevators. He said, “You sure you’re up for it?”

“I am.” I nodded and avoided eye contact.

Look me in the eye...and what?

AS SOON AS WE turned onto the block where the party was, Danny knew something was up; his driving slowed and his body turned rigid, alert. The houses around us were all dark—not a porch light to speak of—and in the absence of cars or bikes or anything, it looked like something out of a postapocalyptic horror movie, like zombies might start to teeter-walk out in front of the car at any second. Maybe Mrs. Woods would be less of a zombie if there were a break in the case. I felt sure I held the key.

Danny said, “You sure this is the right block?”

“I’m sure.” We rounded the bend of the cul-de-sac and found proof that we weren’t the two lone survivors of some mysterious toxic blast or alien attack. The party house was obviously chosen for its tucked-away position. Tons of cars were parked askew out front and a glow from the windows seemed to pulse with the far-off sounds of a bass line.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Danny said. “Police shut these parties down all the time.”

He had stopped the car and I opened the door and said, “We won’t stay long.”

“Close the door, Chloe.”

“No.” I already had a foot out.

“So I can park,” he added, this time sounding annoyed.

“Oh.” I pulled my foot back in. “Okay.”

Once we parked, I didn’t give Danny a chance to say anything more before I started up the path to the house. It was too late to turn back. I’d come to ask Chris about the text messages and I would.

Some girls I recognized from school—they were cheerleaders who moved through the world always at

one another's side, like a chain gang—stumbled out the front door and started passing around a pack of cigarettes. If they saw me and Danny brush past, they didn't indicate as much. They were drunk, that much was clear.

Inside, it was sardine city and I started to swim through the crowd. The second I saw Chris—dancing close with a cheerleader who'd broken free—I knew that my mission was misguided. I'd be barking up the wrong tree, trying to ask him anything at all about that night, about Lindsay, about the text—especially here. He wouldn't be able to explain it any more than I could; he wouldn't even want to. The cheerleader had her butt in his crotch and he was waving a hand in the air—palm out—while holding a beer in the other and I wanted to scream. His face—so smug—seemed to be somehow magnetically attracting the palm of my hand. I would not be able to resist the pull.

The flow of the crowd pushed me toward the kitchen and a keg in the corner seemed to draw me toward it.

“Do you see any of your friends?” Danny asked then, and I couldn't think of what to say back. I grabbed a cup from a shiny red stack on top of the keg and a guy filled it up after filling his own.

“Thanks,” I said, then turned and Danny was giving me this look. It was a look that meant that he knew now that whatever I was up to, it was trouble. That Vegas Chloe, post-best friend's murder, was more than he bargained for. That he liked the European version of me better than this one.

I said, “Meet me by the door in one minute.”

He looked confused as I turned and headed toward Chris, but I knew he'd be where I asked him to be. Danny was no Chris. Danny would never leave without the girl he came with.

Chris saw me, and the look on his face changed from smug to something else. There was a split second where he didn't seem sure what was going on—whether I'd come to party or not—and then he saw the beer cup in my hand and he seemed to know. Looking at him, I wished that this ghost town really were haunted and that a portal on some evil poltergeist would open up over Chris's head and suck him away into the oblivion of some malevolent white light. No such luck, so I threw the beer right into his face and he said, “What the fuck?” and so did a bunch of other people who'd gotten wet. I just said, “That's for abandoning my best friend, you fucking asshole,” and was already halfway toward the door. I locked eyes with Danny and said, “Go! Go!” He opened the front door and I ducked down and ran out under his arm and booked for the car, which Danny unlocked with a beep-beep. We both got into the car then and I said, “Hurry!”

“Why? What?” He fumbled with his keys.

I had no idea what I thought might happen but it seemed like I'd somehow poked a hole in the world—myworld—and that things might come crashing in.

Nothing did.

We pulled away from the curb and off the block, back through zombieland, and I knew that all of Las Vegas would forever be a ghost town. Lindsay was a girl in blue shorts and a blue-and-white-striped tank top, jumping rope in front of her house. She was a figure moving through the mall at Caesars, a shadow on the Eiffel Tower, a laughing girl walking through casinos with hands by her eyes like blinders. Maybe the next day, I'd pack a bag at home, take the car, and move into one of these dark, quiet houses. No one would bother me. No one would lie to me. No one would know I was alive at all.

“What the fuck, Chloe?” Danny said, and I thought back to Versailles, to the first time I’d heard him curse. I was a bad person. I hadn’t even asked him about Tuscany, about the situation with his parents. This didn’t seem like the time.

I didn’t say anything at all the whole way home and when we pulled up in front of my house, Danny killed the engine. He reached over, took my hand, and breathed hard as we just sat there. Then he said, “I miss you, Chloe.”

I said, “Me, too,” but I didn’t mean, like he probably thought, that I missed him. I meant that I missed me, too. I missed the me I was before all this happened. The me who kissed Danny on the Eiffel Tower and thought life was wonderful and grand.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Zoe was out on her trampoline in the morning and I didn’t have the heart to tell her to stop. Besides, it seemed irrational now, my thinking that Noah and his family would somehow be traumatized by the sight of Lindsay’s head or feet popping up over the fence every now and then. Like they didn’t have better things to worry about.

I knew I did.

Chris Nolan wasn’t going to help figure out the texts—I’d been a fool to think he would—so I was going to have to do it on my own. My mother had been a useless sounding board so now, with my options pretty limited, Zoe seemed as good a place as any to start.

I went downstairs in my pajamas, grabbed a piece of cold toast off a plate on the kitchen counter, and went out the sliding doors to the back patio. Zoe did a tight little somersault in the air and then bounced a few times on her feet. I remembered right then that her audition was the next day.

I said, “So tomorrow’s the big day, huh?” I took a seat on one of the lounge chairs on the patio and took a bite of toast.

“Yup.” Another flip. “Do or die.”

“Make it or break it.” Zoe and I sometimes liked to talk in clichés at each other, like it was a game.

She cocked her head. “Live and let live.”

The sun was warm on my bare feet and it felt good; I was tired of clichés. “Are you nervous?”

Zoe bounced high, did a wide split, and touched her toes; sometimes she seriously looked capable of flight. “Like I could throw up at any second.”

I sort of felt the same way about going back to Lindsay’s room that night.

Zoe was still talking. “Which isn’t great when you consider I’ll be doing flips and acrobatics and possibly hanging upside down doing a crab.”

I took another bite of toast. “You’ll be fine.”

“Well, I hope so.” She sprang up into the air and did a wide split, touching both feet in midair with her hands. She said, “That better not be my toast.”

I shrugged. “Finders keepers.”

I ate the last bite, lay back and closed my eyes, and had a memory of all the mornings and afternoons Lindsay and I had spent hanging out out there, either before it got too hot or after the sun had peaked. We’d close our eyes and imagine we were in the backyard of some fantastic house somewhere. We imagined that infinity-edge pool, with its water running off into the horizon. We imagined fountains and Jacuzzis and outdoor fireplaces and more, and pictured ourselves throwing fabulous parties with amazing food and fascinating people. Behind closed lids, my eyes burned. None of that would ever happen. No houses, no parties, no brothers, preferably twins.

“I got these weird texts from Lindsay,” I said, opening my eyes.

“Yeah, Mom told me,” Zoe said, bouncing. “I didn’t want to bug you about it. She said you were frustrated.”

That sounded very mature for Zoe, who had a long history of bugging me. I said, “I still can’t figure out what they mean.”

So she asked what they said and I told her. Then she flipped off the trampoline and came toward me, walking on long legs. I felt the same way I often did around Zoe, like I had three left feet at the ball. I always thought it was because she didn’t want me around, but I realized at that moment that it was because she was so graceful that it could throw me off balance even when I was sitting down.

She sat in a lounge chair next to me. “Do you guys know anybody from Hawaii? Or have some weird plan to move there or something?”

I sat up in my chair, excited to be brainstorming. “Nope.” At least not that I could think of.

Zoe crinkled her nose. “No guy from Hawaii?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.” Chris Nolan certainly didn’t look Hawaiian.

“Nohouse in Hawaii?”

“Nope.” I never got the impression Zoe had paid much attention to my interests but apparently she had.

We sat in silence then and it felt nice for once, even in spite of my disappointment over the fact that our brainstorming session had already, apparently, run its course.

BEFOREILEFT, I spent a few minutes looking through my dream home folder, wondering if there was something in there about Hawaii, something that would make sense, but there wasn’t. Not that I could see. Then, instead of going straight to work, I found myself—as if on autopilot—driving to the Vox casino, to Neon, the club Lindsay went to that night. I pulled into the deserted parking lot near the club’s entrance. Maybe just being there, closer to where things went wrong, would help me to understand.

I closed my eyes and imagined people queued up to get into the club. I tried to imagine Lindsay inside,

wearing a tube top and miniskirt, but for some reason I just couldn't picture it. The inside of Neon was as much a mystery as the inside of the whole of Bellagio, so I couldn't get a visual.

I needed to get inside that club.

Everybody in Las Vegas High knew where you went to get a fake ID. His name was Skeeter—he worked at an arcade on the Strip—and rumor had it he had a shady uncle in the DMV, because the licenses were indistinguishable from the real thing. I looked at my watch and I was already incredibly late for work; a little later wouldn't make a difference.

I parked in the New York-New York employee lot, called Tom and apologized for running late, then walked down the Strip a bit and crossed Las Vegas Boulevard, entering the arcade where Skeeter worked. After checking the nametags of the two people working the floor, I determined he wasn't there but I wanted to be sure. I picked a guy and went up to him. "Hey," I said. "Is Skeeter working today?"

"Comes on at one," he said, and I thanked him.

The morning crawled and then, on my break, I went back. This time the arcade was loud with dings and gunfire and I was jumpy, too, from knowing he'd be there, from knowing what I was planning. When I walked past a machine that growled, I nearly leaped out of my skin. Then I saw a guy who had to be Skeeter working at the back of an unplugged machine and the adrenaline got rechanneled back into my mission. I approached and said, "Are you Skeeter?"

He didn't look up. "Depends on who's asking."

"Me," I said, already annoyed. "I'm asking."

"What's it to you?" He wore a coin-dispenser belt and a JOE'SARCADEbaseball cap.

I looked around to be sure no one was in earshot. "I need ID. And I hear you're the sort of guy who can make that happen."

"You do, do you?" He looked up now. "I don't know what would've given anyone that impression."

"Cut the crap, will you? I'm not a cop or whatever."

"Feisty!" He stood up, said, "Wait here," and disappeared behind a door that said EMPLOYEESONLY.

I lingered by a machine with a fancy snowboarding contraption that you stood on when you played. Onscreen, computer-generated slopes whipped by at an astonishing speed, and snowboarding struck me as a particularly stupid way in which to die.

Skeeter came back out and handed me a piece of paper. "Everything you need to know is on there," he said, looking around with squirrely eyes. "E-mail me everything tonight and I'll have it in the morning. But don't come back here. I don't want to get fired. I'll tell you where to meet me to get it."

My phone buzzed then. A text from Jenna read, "Where R you? I am at NYNY." A nice, tidy text, the sort that Lindsay had always been incapable of writing. I wanted to text Lindsay's phone and say, "What the f?" even though I knew she'd never answer.

I folded up the paper and put it in my pocket, said, “thanks,” then texted Jenna back: “B there in 2 secs.” When I got back to the photo booth, she was waiting for me, looking a little pale and rough, despite the lip gloss.

“Hey,” I said. “You can come back.” So she came into the booth with me. The coaster was in midride and a wave of screams wafted our way.

“I heard about what you did,” Jenna said, and it sounded really accusatory. This was going to be interesting.

“Yeah?” I pictured the look on Chris Nolan’s face when the beer smacked right into it. I regretted not using my hand instead.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t think you’d care. Besides, you were working, weren’t you?”

“Yeah.” Jenna seemed pissy and it sort of cracked me up. She either wanted to be my new bestest friend or she didn’t and she needed to make up her mind. “I mean, you could have told me what you were going to do. I could’ve maybe talked you out of it.”

My head jerked back. “Why would you want to talk me out of it?”

She looked at me, mouth open, like I was some subhuman species, incapable of complex, rational thought. “Because you can’t go around throwing beers in people’s faces and still expect them to like you.”

“Honestly, Jenna”—my hands tensed into fists—“I could give a flying fuck if Chris Nolan likes me.” I could’ve broken bones in my own fingers. “You do remember he’s the person who abandoned Lindsay at the club, right? You remember that this was all his fault?”

Jenna stiffened and I noted the pull under her eyes, the pastiness of that pale complexion. “It’s not like he knew what would happen,” she said. “And I mean, the way you just went right up to him and—”

“Oh my God,” I said as the realization dawned on me that Jenna had been one of the sardines. She had to have been. She’d seen it all with her own eyes and what I was seeing now was Jenna hungover.

“What?” Her eyes darted away and she looked at her nails; they were a darker shade of pink than my own.

“I don’t believe it,” I said, now even more convinced of it. “You were there!”

She froze, then said, “Someone asked me to switch nights at work. So I went. So what?” Her glossy lips arranged themselves into a defensive pout.

I shook my head and stopped myself from calling her a traitor; it was so pathetic it was almost funny. If Lindsay were alive, this moment would mark the end of our threesome. Jenna was simply not worthy.

Tom raised his eyebrows at me from his post near the coaster—bless his heart, he was checking to see if I needed rescuing—so I said to Jenna, “I’m getting the evil eye. I really need to get back to work.”

She left quickly, happily, a fish let off the hook.

WHEN I GOT HOME I went straight to my room, closed and locked the door, and sent my e-mail to Skeeter. He needed basic info—what name, address, and birthday I wanted on the ID—and then a picture. I'd scanned my passport photos onto my computer so that bit was easy enough. Now all I needed was an alibi—an excuse to go out the next night that wouldn't call attention to itself. I needed to set something in motion soon.

At dinner, my mother said, "Oh! Zoe. I'm meeting with a few of the community board folks tomorrow and need you to take Burt to the vet in the morning."

"But I can't!" my sister blurted with a bit too much desperation in her voice. She was obviously overemotional on account of her nerves and I felt bad for her but also saw that the very opportunity I needed—to hold something over Zoe and get what I needed in return—had presented itself. The universe was cooperating nicely with my plans.

"Your father had to go out of town for a few days unexpectedly." My mother's voice shook. "So I'm going to need some extra help around here." She had never been that active with the board before and something about her new zealotry about her safety project worried me. It seemed like she was distracting herself from actually making things with Mrs. Woods better—maybe by talking to my dad, even, about what really happened—but I wasn't really one to talk. I was distracting myself, too. My father's business trip meant I could maybe take a few days to get my courage up.

"I'll take him," I said before things could go any further.

"You will?" my mother asked, just as Zoe said the same thing.

"Sure," I said.

"Okay." My mother sounded a tiny bit confused. Then she went on with what she was doing.

Zoe mouthed "thank you" behind my mother's back, then said, "Well, there's a first time for everything," obviously not wanting the scene to appear too nicey-nice. There was a certain genius to her thinking at times.

"Careful," my mother said. "Or she'll change her mind."

But there was no way I'd change my mind, not if I could get Zoe in on my alibi. I'd hit her up later that night, because right after dinner I was expected over at Lindsay's house.

No, not Lindsay's.

Noah's.

"Do you think you'll see Judy?" my mother asked as I was leaving.

"I doubt it," I said.

Her eyes were hopeful. "Do you think you could ask Noah if she read my letter?"

I said, “I don’t know, Mom. It’s complicated.”

She nodded and I left.

WE FINISHED GOING THROUGH Lindsay’s clothes that night, leaving a few pieces that were too emotional, too Lindsay, like the leather jacket she wore every day the weather allowed. Somehow, the Lindsay sweatshirt had found its way out of the garbage pile Noah had put it in two nights before and it hung on a hanger—one half of a set of twins. I’d have to make sure no one would throw out my Chloe sweatshirt when I died.

I moved on to Lindsay’s desk—started going through papers from school, sorting through books—while Noah started in on the stuff under her bed. Her things were so familiar to me, it was as if they were my own, and I tried to figure out how many hours, if you counted them all up, I’d spent in that room over the years. My math failed me early on.

I turned at the sound of a zipper. Noah was holding one of the pillows from Lindsay’s bed and was unzipping its case. I said, “What are you doing?”

“There’s something in here.” He stuck a hand inside the case, and pulled a red leather notebook from inside the pillow.

“What is it?” I asked.

Noah dropped the pillow. “By the looks of it, her journal.”

I put down the school paper I was holding—Lindsay had gotten an A for “Where the Sun Don’t Shine: The Viability of Solar Power in the Pacific Northwest”—and said, “Lindsay doesn’t keep a journal.”

He flipped through a couple of pages and I recognized, even across the room, Lindsay’s perfect cursive. “Apparently, she does.” He closed the book. “Did.”

I didn’t know what to say. Lindsay and I had never had any secrets from each other. Or at least I didn’t think we had.

“Should we read it?” Noah asked.

“No,” I said instinctively. “God, no.” But then I wondered when the last time she wrote was. I wondered if it might explain why Lindsay would be so stupid as to go out to a club on the Strip with Chris Nolan and his asshole crew. I wondered if it would confirm my heart’s deepest wish that she had not had sex with him. I wondered, too, whether Noah had heard the rumors, whether he wanted to beat Chris Nolan up as badly as I did. Then there was the possibility that the journal might help me make sense of the texts.

“You’re right. We can’t.” He put the book down, like it was hot like a fire. “She’d kill us.”

The words hung in the air between us.

“But what do we do with it?” Noah finally said. “Burn it?”

“We can’t!” I got up and touched the book, picked it up and turned it in my hands.

“Calm down.” Noah got up and went back to work, dealing with a few shoe boxes of junk he’d pulled from under the bed. “It was just an idea.”

“A bad one.” I set aside a stack of notes I’d written Lindsay, not wanting them to fall into the wrong hands. For the first time since sending them, I wondered about the fate of my postcards from Europe. They were nowhere to be found.

“Fine,” he said. “Then what’s your idea?”

“You should probably give it to the police.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He put the book aside but it was like an elephant in the room while we worked for another half hour or so. Finally, Noah broke the silence. He said, “I heard you threw a beer in Nolan’s face.”

“How did you hear?”

“I have my sources.”

I was sort of embarrassed by the whole thing, especially now that Noah had heard. I thought about telling him about my plan to go to the club, about the texts, so he’d know that I wasn’t just some unhinged madwoman running around town seeking revenge.

Noah said, “I bet that felt pretty good.”

I allowed myself a smile and it felt like bending my knees the wrong way. But then I relaxed into it and nodded. “It really did.”

Then Noah’s face turned serious, like a cloud had rolled in over it. “Come here, there’s something I want to show you.”

I trailed him down the hall into his room, where he sat down at his computer and started to move the mouse around, clicking this and that while I looked around. I’d dreamed of being invited into this room for so long that it was hard to believe this was it. There were music posters everywhere and a huge map of the world—that was a surprise—hung on the wall above his bed. A guitar sat propped up on a stand in a corner, and the shelves in the far corner were jammed with books.

“Pull that chair over,” Noah said, pointing. So I grabbed the chair from the corner and pulled it up beside him. He was opening up a video player and then playing footage of people in a club.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Just wait,” he said.

The angle switched to that of a different camera, which revealed a more zoomed-in shot.

“Keep your eye on the bottom left corner,” Noah said, and I did, only to see Lindsay and Chris Nolan pop into the frame. They were dancing and laughing. Chris was holding a drink and Lindsay was, too.

“Where did you get this?” I said.

“The police,” Noah said, and together we watched as Lindsay danced and danced, throwing her head back, then the camera changed again and she was gone. From another angle, there was more dancing—just Lindsay this time, no Chris—and then a shot of a bar, where Lindsay was waiting, presumably to order a drink. You could see the bartender taking her order, mixing a drink, and putting it on the bar. Lindsay put money down, turned, drank, and then walked out of the frame. It was like watching a ghost moving through the world and even though I knew it wasn’t possible, she looked almost translucent, like you could reach out and put a hand right through her.

I looked at the progress bar below the video screen. There was maybe an inch to go.

I just watched as the camera at the back exit of the club showed Lindsay walking out, staggering a little, cell phone in hand. She stood near the back door—in the alley I’d visited just the day before—and pressed some buttons on her phone, then held it to her ear. She looked around nervously, then seemed to look right up at the camera. Whoever she was calling was obviously not answering; I wondered who it was and whether it would’ve been me if I hadn’t been away. Then there was a man there, smoking a cigarette and standing near Lindsay, who was leaning against the exterior wall, and then crouching against it. The guy bent down in front of her, put a hand on her shoulder, then helped her up. He looked at his watch, then went inside. Lindsay watched him go back through the door they’d both come out of, then she walked out of the screen.

The video stopped and the player’s screen went black. Someone had hit a pause button on my lungs. I couldn’t take a breath. She was gone again, and I wanted her—even an image of her—back.

Noah got up and closed the video window before pushing his rolling chair away from the desk.

“That’s the guy who tried to help her,” I said.

“Yeah.” Noah sighed.

“Why wouldn’t she have waited?”

“I have no idea.” Noah seemed at once sad and agitated and I got jittery, too. I was thinking of how I could find this guy, this good Samaritan, when I went to the club the next night. Because maybe he could explain. And I wanted to know exactly what they’d talked about, in case it would help me figure out the texts. I thought again about telling Noah about my plan—the texts—but there wasn’t any point, not when he might try to stop me, not when I didn’t have any clue what the messages meant. I took the fact that he’d shown me this video as a sign that I was on the right track, that I wasn’t losing my mind.

At the same time, there was a sort of inexplicable calm that came over me, having seen what I’d seen. Because something about seeing Lindsay—live, in the flesh, dancing her heart out—made me happy. I’d been so mad at her for going to the club at all that night but I’d also been jealous. That she did it without me, I guess. But there was no reason to be jealous: She’d always wanted to go out dancing in one of the big clubs. I’d always wanted to go to Europe. We’d just both gotten what we wanted. The fact that Lindsay’s night went wrong didn’t make her any more guilty than I was of growing apart just enough for us to have room to grow up.

“Has your mother seen this?” I asked.

“No way,” Noah said.

“Maybe it would help.”

“Doubt it.”

I couldn't explain why I thought it would, why I thought it might make her see that it wasn't Lindsay's fault, that she was just being Lindsay.

He walked me home and we were almost to my house when he stopped and said, “Do you want to walk for a while? I'm sort of fired up for some reason. I don't really feel like heading back.”

“Okay.” This was unexpected. “Sure.”

And so we walked, and unlike walking with Danny, walking with Noah felt almost normal, even though we'd never gone for a walk together before. Even though no one in Breezaever really walked. It made me miss Europe, where I'd felt that I could walk for miles, from the tippy-toe of Italy's boot all the way up to the top and beyond.

Out of nowhere, Noah asked me, “You ever think about those lists people make, of things to do before you die?”

I remembered thinking, in Paris, that kissing someone on the Eiffel Tower should be on such a list, then remembered that I'd once put it on one. “Lindsay and I made one, when we were maybe twelve.”

Noah gave me a serious, appraising look. “Yeah?”

I nodded.

He said, “So what do you want to do before you die?”

Before all this happened, there'd been so many things, but that had changed in ways I now couldn't explain. “I don't know anymore.”

“What do you mean, anymore?”

“I used to want to see all sorts of stuff, do all sorts of crazy things. Now...” I paused. “Now, I don't know. Now a lot of it seems kind of stupid.”

“Name some. Some of the things you used to want to do.”

I picked something far-fetched that I was pretty sure had made it on to the list. “I thought I'd like to see the Great Wall of China.”

He tilted his head. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.” I was relaxing into being around him again for the first time in weeks, maybe years. “I saw this documentary about how many people and years it took to build it and I just felt like you can't know that something like that exists and not want to do everything in your power to go see it.”

Noah nodded approvingly. “I'd love to see the Great Wall.”

“You would?”

He said, “Why do you sound so surprised?”

I just shrugged. It just wasn’t the sort of thing I expected from Noah, who’d sold his soul to the Four Seasons. I couldn’t imagine him anywhere but Vegas. For a while, not so long ago, that fact about him had seemed sad, but now it seemed somehow reassuring. I could stay here and he’d be here, too.

“What else?”

“I don’t know. Lindsay and I had all sorts of stupid stuff on it. Like ‘swim in an infinity pool’ and ‘wear a designer dress.’”

“It’s not stupid. I mean, the point is to do stuff you think would be fun.”

“Yeah, but some important things would be good, too.”

“What, like winning the Nobel Peace Prize?”

“Well, yeah. That’s better than, you know, ‘Go skiing.’”

“Was that on your list, too?” He was almost laughing.

I smiled in embarrassment. “Maybe.”

“Infinity pool. Skiing. Dress. You could knock those off in a weekend.”

“I don’t even care about those things anymore. Now what I most want to do before I die is grow old.” I smiled. “Though I wouldn’t mind growing old in a house with an infinity pool.”

“My boss has one of those,” Noah said. “At his beach house in California. And one of the Four Seasons in Thailand? Every bungalow has its own little infinity pool. It’s pretty incredible, from what I’ve seen in pictures anyway.”

Our pace had slowed but we’d finally completed a loop around the block and arrived at my house. By the sidewalk Noah didn’t seem to want to leave any more than I wanted him to. I suddenly very much didn’t want this very strange night to end. He said, “So who was the guy you were at the party with? I heard you were whisked away.”

It took me a second to adjust to the topic change. “Oh, Danny. He was on the trip.”

He looked down at his shoe when he said, “Are you guys going out?”

“No,” I said, probably a little too quickly. “Nothing like that.”

“Right,” he said, then he turned to go. “I guess I’ll see you around.”

MY MOTHER WAS WATCHING TV in the den, so I announced that I was home and then went upstairs to find Zoe. I needed to get my alibi set up.

My sister was standing on her hands in the middle of her room, moving her legs slowly like scissor blades. I said, "I need you to do something for me."

"I figured." She put her right foot down and then her left, then slowly rolled up to stand, one vertebra at a time.

Her antics seemed almost normal in her room, which she'd pretty much decorated like a circus tent. Big swaths of fabric clung to the walls and billowed overhead, meeting in the middle of the ceiling in a burst of color. Posters of circuses past and present covered nearly every remaining surface.

I said, "I'm going to call the house phone and I need you to answer it and pretend it's Jenna. For me. I'll handle the rest."

"Fine." Zoe huffed. "Whatever. I need a glass of water anyway." She started down the stairs and I went to my room and dialed the house phone. I heard it ringing downstairs and I heard Zoe say, "I got it!"

"Hello?" she said through my phone.

"Hi," I said. "This is Jenna. Can I please speak to Chloe?"

"Sure, Jenna," Zoe said. "Hang on."

"Chloe!" she called up the stairs and I hung up my phone and started downstairs. "It's Jenna!"

I went into the kitchen and took the phone from Zoe. She went to the fridge for some water and my mother, as if on cue, wandered into the room.

"Hey," I said to the dead line. "What's up?"

I waited a few seconds, then said, "Oh, my battery died. I'm charging it." Then a beat. "Tomorrow? What time?"

Then I waited a few more seconds. "Hold on. Let me ask."

I turned to my mother, held the phone to my stomach. "Can I go out with Jenna tomorrow? Probably just to a movie. Or we might just watch a DVD at her house."

"Sure," my mom said. "Sounds fun."

I put the phone back to my mouth. "She said yes," I said, then waited. "Okay. Cool. 'Bye."

I hung up and went back upstairs and Zoe trailed behind me. "Okay," she said. "So now you have to tell me what you're really doing tomorrow."

"No way."

"Yeah way."

"Uh-uh. Not if you want me to take Burt to the vet."

Zoe huffed and rolled her eyes and went into her room, closing the door. I opened it and said, “Break a leg tomorrow.”

She said, “Yeah, yeah.”

In my room that night, everything looked different. I started to imagine what each item, each piece of paper in my possession would mean if someone came in there after I died to clean out my stuff, to decide what should stay or go. I tried to imagine Zoe and Noah going through my things together. But Zoe, who didn’t seem to have a sentimental bone in her body, would just want to trash everything, so I pictured Noah alone instead. I imagined him seeing the stuffed animal in the corner—a weird snowman with a top hat that counts down from ten to one, then shouts “Welcome to the year 2000!” in an Australian accent—and wondered what he’d think of me for having it. If I were dead I couldn’t explain that my parents had a party that year, that one of their friends brought it as a gift, that we all thought it was hilarious and I’d refused to let them throw it out. Noah hadn’t been at the party but I had no idea why. If I were dead I wouldn’t be able to explain how Lindsay and I had done perfect-accent versions of the countdown ourselves countless times over the years and had decided that one year, ideally our first year out of college, we’d ring in the new year in Australia. I’d never be able to explain that whenever I was feeling down or beaten up by school or my sister or a guy like Peter, I pressed the snowman’s hand and listened to him do his thing, and things didn’t feel quite so bad. I pressed the snowman’s hand then, and sat with it on my bed.

“Ten...” I had a fantasy then that it was me and Noah who were in Australia... “nine...” at a gorgeous restaurant with a water view... “eight...” where fireworks filled the sky over Sydney... “seven...” while we sat at a fancy table... “six...” white linen, real silver... “five...” hoisting champagne glasses... “four...” bursting with bubbly... “three...” and gazing at each other... “two...” like old lovers and new at the same time... “one...” and kissing at the stroke of midnight.

“Welcome to the year 2000!”

The snowman played “Auld Lang Syne” then and jiggled and I almost didn’t hear my phone ring but when I did, I was sure it was going to be Noah. I was sure that he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about me, either. I picked up and said, “Hello?” without even looking at the caller ID. I was that sure.

Danny said, “Hey,” and even the snowman seemed to melt.

As we talked I started looking through old boxes and drawers, trying to find the list that Lindsay and I had made, of fifty things to do before you die. I wanted to know whether we’d put “Ring in the new year in Australia” on it, and whether there was maybe something about Hawaii, something I’d long forgotten that would somehow explain why Lindsay would text me the word “aloha.”

Danny, meanwhile, was apologizing for the way we left things after the ghost town party and I was, too, though I wasn’t sure I even meant what I was saying. He was talking about making plans, and I was “yes”ing him but not really paying attention.

“What are you doing?” he asked finally. “You sound distracted and I hear all sorts of shuffling.”

“Nothing,” I said when I unfolded yet another piece of paper and it turned out it wasn’t the list. I mustn’t have saved it after all.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I said, not having any idea what he was talking about. “What time again?”

“Seven.”

“And where are we going? Oh, no wait. Not tomorrow.” I’d be going to Neon, trying to glimpse something elusive about Lindsay’s last night. “I can’t. How about Saturday?”

“God, Chloe. Were you even listening at all?”

“I’m sorry. I was looking for something.”

“Fine, then. Saturday night. In-N-Out Burger.”

“Great.”

We hung up and I thought, In-N-Out Burger?

Really?

Because this was a boy I’d met in Europe, where I’d had one of the best meals of my life, where I’d eaten amazing Prosciutto and Parmesan sandwiches, and fresh-made fettuccine Alfredo, and even black squid ink pasta. The idea of going out for burgers depressed me, as did the fact that the life I’d imagined for me and Danny—the way we were going to become boyfriend and girlfriend and be happy—was just never going to happen. The dread of having to tell him that was a weight in my gut as I climbed into my bed. I wasn’t sure its frame would hold me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Everything went smoothly at the vet’s office in the morning—it was just a routine appointment—and Burt and I were on our way home again in no time. Which was good, because I had important stuff to take care of. I texted Skeeter—he’d sent me a text that said that the goods were ready—and asked him where I could meet him. His answer, randomly enough: the parking lot of the Tropicana. Burt was content to sniff the wind, and Skeeter, ever the pro, was right where he said he’d be, small envelope in hand. He got into the car and said, “Okay, drive,” so I did.

“Why couldn’t you just give it to me there?” I said.

“Cause of the cameras and shit, man. Big Brother’s always watching.”

It pained me that Skeeter and his ilk were seen through the same eye in the sky as I was. The whole thing seemed suddenly wildly less romantic than Lindsay and I had made it out to be. And the idea that the eye was something to be avoided and feared was the opposite of how I’d always felt. For the first time, I saw the eye as some ominous force that knew who’d killed Lindsay but wouldn’t share the information with the rest of us.

“That’s your money there,” I said, gesturing to the center console as I took a right onto Las Vegas Boulevard. He picked up the envelope, then opened the glove compartment, tossing his own small envelope in there. I stopped at a light in front of the MGM Grand. A sign for Ká reminded me that I’d know, within the hour, how Zoe’s crab walk had gone.

“This is my stop.” Skeeter opened the door just as the light changed. “Pleasure doing business with

you,” he said, and I said, “Likewise.”

AT HOME, I GAVE Burt a treat before heading into the den. Zoe sat on the couch, crying—knees pulled up to her chest—and Johnny, the picture of swashbuckling with his dirty blond hair in a loose ponytail, was rubbing her back. My gut contorted like an acrobat in full tuck.

“How’d it go?” I asked softly.

“It went great,” Johnny said eagerly, desperation in his eyes. “But she messed up one thing and she’s freaking out about it.”

Zoe played with a disintegrating wet tissue; it looked like a piece of old lace.

“I’m sure everyone makes mistakes,” I said, and took a seat in the recliner.

“No,” my sister said sadly. “They don’t. I saw a bunch of people auditioning and they didn’t make mistakes at all. And you didn’t make any mistakes.” She shot Johnny a look and he looked at me for help.

“But they probably think they did,” I said. “Probably no one even noticed whatever you think your mistake was.”

Zoe exhaled hard and loud, then snapped, “I fell, Chloe. Flat on my face. I think they noticed.”

That couldn’t be good. But still, I wanted to be supportive. “Well, I’m sure they see it all the time.”

“This sucks,” she said, resting her head back on the couch. “I’m going to be an usher for the rest of my life. If I even get that job.”

“I’m sure you were great,” I said, then got up to leave them alone. I couldn’t resist poking my head back in, though, and saying, “You remember about tonight, right? I’m going to Jenna’s.”

“Yeah, Chloe, I remember.” Zoe winked an exaggerated wink.

I went to my closet then and tried to find something cool enough to wear to a nightclub. There was only one option: a shimmery black top with a plunging neckline that Lindsay had all but dared me to buy. I’d have to change in the car, since my mother would never let me leave the house in it, so I packed a small bag. I put my highest, coolest black mules in it along with the top, then packed a glittery necklace and a small purse full of makeup.

I looked at my face in the mirror and wondered whether it was really possible I’d pass for twenty-one, whether I could manipulate my features to look more like the version of me in the sketch from Paris. Then I thought about Lindsay and her tube top and miniskirt and sexy long hair and wondered whether I, too, would be “asking for it.” Whether, with Lindsay gone, I’d taken up her role and become a “chancer,” too, and whether I was about to get what I deserved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I never told Lindsay that I had decided to go to Vegas with Peter. She and Matt were sort of going

through a rough patch—she was bored of him, though she refused to admit it—and I knew she'd be jealous. Frankly, that was sort of the whole point. It felt exciting and bold to decide something entirely on my own and—and this is important, I think—I did decide for myself to do it. I don't put that on Peter, or Lindsay; I never have.

There were logistics to sort out, of course. Namely, the when and where. And so there was a bit of a waiting period after the decision had been made. We weren't old enough to get a hotel room—at least not anywhere we'd want to stay on such an occasion—and that seemed sort of cruelly funny to us. There were more than 150,000 hotel rooms in Vegas and it looked like we'd be going to Vegas in the backseat of Peter's car.

But then an opportunity presented itself. Peter's parents were going to dinner and a show with old friends of theirs who were visiting from out of town. They'd be out all night and, as Peter had no brothers or sisters, the house would be empty. It wasn't ideal—ideal to me would have been a room with a view in Paris or a tinypensione in Venice, with sheer white curtains billowing in the breeze—but it would do.

Once the date was set, the temptation to tell Lindsay was enormous. But things with Matt weren't getting any better, so it seemed wiser just to keep it to myself. Besides, there was a part of me that had started to enjoy the idea of having a secret from Lindsay in particular. She had this way about her sometimes, this way that made it seem like she knew it all, and I felt a certain power in the fact that this was one thing she didn't know and wouldn't know until it was done.

The night before, I almost told her everything. The plan. What I was going to wear. How I'd made a secret trip to Victoria's Secret to buy a matching bra and underwear set, how I wasn't sure I had the courage to wear it. But then I remembered what she'd said, how she couldn't see me having sex with anyone, and I held my tongue. I was excited that I was about to prove her wrong.

When Peter picked me up on the big night, I felt like something enormous was happening, like the eye was watching me—just me—as I set out to become, well, a woman. In the car, he smelled like soap and his hair was still damp and I remember thinking about how much I liked kissing him and more and how, really, this wouldn't be any different. And how Lindsay would be lucky if she didn't die of shock when I told her. In fact, I wasn't sure what I was looking forward to more: going to Vegas or being able to tell Lindsay I'd gone. Now I think I know.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I didn't realize the flaw in my plan until I left the house. There was a lag time between when I left for "Jenna's"—a reasonable seven—and the time the club opened. Ten. I drove the main road out of Breeza slowly and weighed options for ways to kill three hours.

I was too hopped up to sit through a movie; besides, a matinee during the week was one thing but it was a Friday night and I worried about someone seeing me out alone. Then I wondered whether Noah ever went to the movies alone at night; what the odds were that he and I might bump into each other in a darkened movie theater twice in one lifetime. I didn't want to venture too far from the Strip, either, and just like that it hit me:

Bellagio.

I had an ID that said I was twenty-one. You had to be eighteen to even get in. It was perfect. I'd park there and walk over to the club when the time was right. So I reset my course with a new buzz of excitement thrumming through my heart. The feeling I felt was like a relative of the one I'd had when my

family had boarded the plane to Europe—a sort of first cousin of both excitement and fear. I was sure the night would change me, one way or another.

Once I arrived at Bellagio, I didn't see quite what the big deal was, or why you had to be eighteen to get in. No one was naked; it was just a casino. Shiny, white, and fancy, but still, just a casino. I was a little disappointed. After I ducked into a bathroom to change—doing so in the car with a killer on the loose had ultimately seemed like a bad idea—I found myself on a long corridor, a mall, really, and I doubted I could afford anything in it. I lingered in front of a jewelry store, thinking of Lindsay and her eye in the sky guy. I saw a necklace she would've loved and touched the glass, almost pointing. It struck me that no one on the planet knew where I was at that moment. They'd only ever find me if they looked for me through the eye.

I came to the main lobby then—people moved every which way among some cushy chairs—and looked up at hundreds of blown-glass flowers on the ceiling. They were stunning and glittery—bursting with reds, blues, yellows, and greens—and I thought back to the Hanging Garden. I wondered whether my father knew about these flowers and whether he'd had a second to think about Murano glass since we'd been home, whether he thought it had lived up to the hype. I wondered, too, whether he really was carrying around a dark secret about a message in Rome and whether he'd take it to his grave like people in epic stories did. I'd pretty much accepted that I was never going to ask him about it and figured I might as well just ride out the rest of my time before college the way I'd ridden out the previous years: just intimidated enough by my father to not do anything about it.

I kept wandering then and discovered the Bellagio conservatory and botanical gardens. Hundreds of real flowers floated in a beautiful blue pool and tangled roses climbed all over a white gazebo. I thought of Zoe walking on her hands on the Apollo fountain's edge at Versailles, and the dwarf statue in the nook where Danny and I had kissed, the nook where I'd thought I'd rather be kissing Noah.

Next I found the art gallery—they sold their last ticket at 8:30, which it almost was—so I paid and stepped right into an Ansel Adams exhibit. Lindsay had worshiped his work after she started wanting to be a photographer. She had a poster in her room at one point—of the moon way high and full over Yosemite—and I looked around the gallery for it. Finding it made me sad. There were pictures of Wyoming and Colorado and other states I'd never been to, and for the first time since I'd come home, I was suddenly interested in firing up the camera, in remembering Europe and how great it had been. Bellagio was making me feel like a tourist, and I liked it.

When I left the gallery—God, three hours felt like a long time—I heard music and saw the fountains doing their thing through the doors of a restaurant/bar. I walked past the maître-d'—said, "I'm meeting someone at the bar"—and then found an empty terrace by the lake and stepped out. White water danced on air to Elvis Presley's "Viva Las Vegas" and I remembered those first days after we'd found out we were moving, how Lindsay got her hands on an Elvis Presley CD with "Viva Las Vegas" on it, and how we'd try to sing along but couldn't remember any of the words except the "Viva Las Vegas" of the chorus, which we'd shout at the top of our lungs. I thought about how we were so young and full of hope then, and then I felt foolish for thinking that way, like an old lady. I was only sixteen.

I left the bar when the song ended and headed for the casino floor. When I stepped onto the carpet, I half expected an alarm to go off but it didn't, so I sat down in front of a quarter slot machine and dug through my purse. Pulling out a ten-dollar bill, I fed it to the machine and a cocktail waitress approached. I ordered a gin and tonic.

As soon as she left, I grew convinced she'd come back with casino security, but I'd just put money in the machine so I wasn't going anywhere. As plump cherries and black bars whirled on the machine's

cylinders, I studied the chart above them—of the odds of each kind of win—and wondered what the chances were that I'd get into the club and that I'd get what I wanted out of it if I did. I wasn't even sure what I wanted, I just knew that I had to go. Finding that bartender—his name was James Wilk; I'd looked it up—would be a bonus.

The waitress returned with my drink and I tipped her two dollars, then sat there and tried to kill as much time as I could. A few times I'd have sworn I was being watched, but of course I'd feel that way considering what I was up to. My ten dollars turned into twenty at one point, but then I just kept playing and pretty soon it was all gone. I'd never gambled before and it seemed kind of boring, ultimately, though of course it was only slots.

I got up and walked down long aisles of tables where people were playing Let It Ride and Pai Gow poker and Caribbean stud. I saw a roulette wheel, walked over, and watched it spin and spin. The man running the game called out, "Red twenty-five," and then swept a rake across the table. No one had won and that struck me as just about right, considering the odds of life in general and how they were stacked against us. But wouldn't it have been great if someone had?

I watched some craps then—the game seemed so festive, with people always cheering and blowing on their dice excitedly—and I stood there wondering whether anyone in the surveillance room had their eye on me. Maybe they thought I was up to something, maybe sending secret signals to one of the players. Again, I felt like I was being followed, but knew it was all in my mind. After so many years of imagining eye-in-the-sky guys with Lindsay, it was only natural. After having a friend murdered, and knowing her killer was still at large, a certain amount of paranoia was healthy. A cocktail waitress walked past with a tray full of half-empty drinks and I put my empty glass on it. It was, I could hardly believe it, time to go.

"HOW YOU DOING TONIGHT?" the bouncer at Neon said, and I said, "Great. How about you?"

"It's all good," he said, then he handed back my ID and put a plastic bracelet on my right wrist. The place was so mobbed I'd waited half an hour to get to this point.

Inside, the club throbbed with darkness and near-deafening music pumped the air. I stood on a balcony near the entrance, overlooking the dance floor, my heart beating wildly like the music. There was a massive bar to the right of the dance floor—the only bar, from what I could tell—and I set out to find James Wilk. Winding through the thickening crowd, I felt terrified and thrilled—like my skin was pulsing—and wondered whether that was how Lindsay had felt, too.

At the bar, I ordered a beer from a girl bartender and looked at the other two men. Neither of them looked like the man I'd seen on that surveillance video. I thought, A braver girl would ask a bartender if James was working tonight, supercasual, but I wasn't up to the task. Not yet.

A guy came up and ordered a drink right next to me and I just stood there and sipped my beer and waited for him to be done, to move on. He turned toward me, leaned into my ear. "I like your pink nails!"

"Thanks!" I smiled a small smile. Zoe had said that pink made everything better; I wasn't convinced.

"This place is wild, huh?" He was cute and maybe twenty-two years old, with a hook nose and dark eyes.

“Yeah,” I said, and nodded. It was so loud it didn’t seem worth the effort to talk.

“You want to dance?” he asked, and I nodded before I could stop myself. Because wasn’t that the point? To see what it had been like to be Lindsay that night? To try to steal for myself some of whatever it was she’d been after?

He said, “I’m Peter,” and I thought, Just my luck, then said, “Chloe,” immediately wondering whether I should have used a fake name. He took my hand and led me onto the dance floor.

The music pulsed fast, deep, and a woman moaned something I couldn’t understand over and over and Peter started dancing really close to me. He slid his left hand around my waist and pulled me tight into him, then leaned into my ear and said, “You’re cute. You from around here?”

I shook my head and said, “No. Just visiting.”

“From where?” he asked, and I said, “New York.” It was big and didn’t require me to have an accent.

“Cool,” he said and then we kept dancing and the song seemed to meld seamlessly into a new song and everyone around me seemed to know the song—whoops and whistles intensified—and then Peter pulled me closer and his cheek was against mine and my mind grew frantic with not knowing or understanding what I was doing and feeling—freedom?—because I was scared and ecstatic at the same time and Peter smelled really good and I guess I liked the idea that he thought I was cute and was into me and maybe two Peters would somehow cancel each other out.

A strong hand gripped my arm and I thought, Fuck, because maybe this was the moment when Peter turned psycho—maybe revealed himself to be Lindsay’s killer—and I was going to end up with two Peters to regret, but then I saw this confused look on his face—directed at someone next to me—and then I turned my head and looked at the hand on my arm and saw that it was attached to Noah. He dragged me across the dance floor.

“What are you doing?” I screamed. “Let go of me!”

But he didn’t. Not even when we got to the exit and he said, “Thanks, man,” to the bouncer on the way out. Out to the alley behind the club, the one from the tape. I said, “What in the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“What do I think I’m doing?” He was shaking his head. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I couldn’t explain: I didn’t feel like I should have to, not to him. I looked up and saw a camera on a post, jutting out from the building. This was the camera that had captured James Wilk coming up to her, talking to her, offering to help. In my mind I replayed the footage of her getting up and walking away and wanted to scream.

“God, Chloe!” Noah was shouting. “What are you trying to do, get yourself killed, too?”

“Of course not!” I could not take my eyes off that camera. I wanted to look right through and ask the person on the other side why they hadn’t done anything, like tilted or panned or zoomed or gone out into the world to help my best friend.

“Come on,” Noah said. “I’m taking you home.”

I said, “No,” because I was there, I was alive, so I could.

“Stop acting like a child,” Noah said.

“You’re the one who’s acting like a child,” I snapped and the confusion of it all—of the fact that Noah was there at all—came back. “What are you even doing here?”

I stormed off in the direction of the entrance, where I asked the bouncer who’d let me in if James Wilk was working.

“Sure is.”

For some reason the answer surprised me. I had no choice but to forge ahead. “I know this is going to sound crazy, but the girl who was murdered after she left here that night a few weeks ago, she was my best friend, and I know he tried to help her and I really want to talk to him about it.”

The bouncer looked at me, then at Noah, who was standing right behind me, then back at me, and said, “Hold on.” He picked up a walkie-talkie and said, “Boss lady, can you send James to the front door?”

A female voice crackled through. “What’s up?”

“Long story.” The bouncer looked at me with sad eyes. “Can you do it?”

The crackled voice said, “Okay, boss man.”

He put the walkie-talkie down on a high stool and I said, “Thanks,” stepping aside to wait.

James appeared a few minutes later and the bouncer said, “This girl needs to talk to you.” Spotting Noah, James said, “Hey, man,” and Noah came forward and shook his hand. He said, “Good to see you again,” and James said, “What’s up?”

Noah swept his arm out in a gesture directed at me and James turned my way. Noah walked away.

HE TURNED OUT TO be the nicest guy imaginable. But he didn’t know anything about the text messages or “aloha” or why Lindsay didn’t wait for him. I was disappointed but not surprised.

When I was done with James, I walked over to Noah, who’d been waiting, and followed him to his car. He opened the door locks with a remotebeep-beep and I got in. I didn’t feel like I had much choice about it at that point. I’d had two drinks in a short span so I’d have to leave my car at Bellagio overnight. I said, “How did you know where I was?”

“How do you think?” he said with a sort of weary disappointment.

I looked at my pink nails—chipped and worn—and thought, Zoe.

“So you’ve been following me all night?”

“Yup.”

Noah didn't start the car so we just sat there, under white streetlights. He said, "What were you showing him on your phone?"

It was time to come clean. "Text messages that Lindsay sent me. That night."

Noah's eyes went wide. "Can I see?"

I took out my phone, pulled up the first message, and handed it to him. "There's one more that came a minute later. It says, 'Aloha.'"

"What does it mean?"

"I have no idea. I already talked to the police about them."

"That's weird," Noah said. "They never mentioned them to us."

I shrugged. "I'm sure they had their reasons."

He just stared at the phone, then he said, "There's something missing." He held the phone out. "Between the 'look' and the 'me.'"

I took the phone and saw it: Two spaces where one should have been. I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it before. But it was a text from Lindsay, possibly the worst texter in history. It was probably a slip of the finger, nothing more. But if it wasn't... I started to think of things that could go in there and my brain sparked. A jolt ran up my spine.

"What?" Noah almost sounded scared.

It wasn't a dare at all. It had nothing to do with our fight.

"Chloe, what is it?"

"What if it was supposed to be a number four in there. 'Look for me in the eye.'"

He shook his head. "I still don't get it."

"The eye in the sky. She's telling me to look for her on camera."

Noah still looked confused, but to me it made perfect sense.

"When I was in England I texted her when I was on Abbey Road because they have this webcam where people can watch you walking across it. This must've been sort of a response to that."

Noah was nodding now. He said, "But the police looked for video between the club and where she was found. The club video with that bartender is all there was."

There was only one explanation. "They were looking in the wrong place."

"What's the right place?"

"The second text," I said aloud. But it still didn't make any sense to me and I wanted to strangle Lindsay

for it. I started to cry. "I don't know what it means." I wiped tears from my eyes.

"Chloe, hey." Noah reached over and squeezed my hand. "It's okay. It's probably nothing."

"But it is! And I'm not seeing it."

"Well, let's talk it out while we drive." He started the car. "Tell me about this eye-in-the-sky business."

"There are all these cameras around Vegas, and we used to sort of act for them, pose for them. But this must be a webcam, where I could potentially see her for real."

"Okay," he said leadingly.

We were driving down the Strip and I could see the blue hot-air balloon of Paris ahead. "Paris has them. MGM Grand has one. The Hard Rock has one in the bar by the pool. There's another one I'm forgetting, though."

"Well, look around. We're right here."

It felt weird to be in the quiet bubble of Noah's car, driving down the Strip, as busy as I'd ever seen it. I looked out the window at the neon and the crowds and it all looked sort of seedy and scary. It turned my stomach to think of Lindsay having been out there at night on her own. My head hurt from thinking.

We were stopped at a light when Noah said, "It's not the Imperial Palace, is it?"

"Yes." I could almost feel the synapses firing in my brain. "They have webcams." It was a crappy casino so Lindsay and I had never paid its cameras much mind. "How did you know?"

Noah nodded his head up toward the right side of the windshield and I looked up and over at the Imperial Palace entrance. A banner stretched across the sidewalk: HAWAIIAN LUAU EVERY THURSDAY AND SATURDAY NIGHT .

"Aloha," I said dreamily, and then I felt tingly, almost like a spirit had stepped through my body and taken something out with it. The light changed and Noah pulled the car over and I got out and started looking around—up and around—and then I saw it. The camera.

"Look," I said, and Noah's gaze followed my hand. Then he took his phone out of his pocket.

"Who are you calling?" I asked and he held up a finger to say wait.

"Detective Hodge?" He looked at me hard. "It's Noah Woods."

NOAH DROVE ME HOME after the cops left us with a promise to pull video from the camera, and from the luau cameras, too. I felt oddly excited and was trying hard to think of something to say about it all but then it felt nice to just be quiet with Noah.

I'd already been told more times than I needed to be—by myself, by Noah, by the police—that the time the text was sent indicated it was before Lindsay encountered trouble, that the fact that she'd sent it at all—such a playful message—meant that maybe it was just that, and that there'd be no sign of anyone

else involved in the night's events, if the casino even had the archived footage. I'd been told not to get my hopes up, but my hopes weren't exactly listening. The eye in the sky would come through. It had to.

My mother was at the front door—arms crossed—when I got out of Noah's car way past curfew.

"I can explain," I said, and then inside I told her how I'd figured out the texts, how the police were going to look into the Imperial Palace angle. I left out the parts about Bellagio, about the club, and told her my car was at the Four Seasons where I'd met up with Noah before going to talk to the police. I'd ride in to work with Zoe over the weekend to get it.

She sighed and hugged me and said, "The police don't even think to call your mother?" Then she got up and started turning off lights. "Let's go to bed, hmmm?"

Upstairs, I thought about knocking on Zoe's door, waking her up and telling her she had some nerve, telling Noah to follow me around like I was a child, but it had all worked out in the end. Someday, maybe, I'd even thank her.

I changed out of my shimmery top and wondered whether my mother had even noticed it—and whether Noah had—then I lay in bed wondering whether I could go back in time and watch the webcam of Abbey Road. If I could, I'd watch myself and see if I looked somehow different. I got up and took my portrait from France out of its cardboard tube and stared myself down. The sketch didn't actually seem that "off" anymore. Maybe I'd just grown used to looking at it, or maybe Danny was right and I just looked older, wiser, in it—and now maybe I was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I spent most of the next day in my pajamas, watching the webcam images from the Imperial Palace load and reload endlessly. Each frame showed people walking down the Strip, with the luau banner hanging overhead like a taunt. I don't even know what I was looking for but I felt duty-bound to try to see if there were more clues to be figured out. I wanted to call Noah, to recap the previous night's events, but somehow it didn't feel right, to intrude like that when he and his mom were probably still trying to process everything that was going on.

When I heard the doorbell ring that evening, it didn't much faze me. Then Zoe appeared at my bedroom door and said, "Danny's here."

"Oh, shit." I jumped up from my desk chair. I'd completely forgotten about our dinner date and knew that admitting to forgetting another date with him would be awful. "Tell him I'll be right down," I said as I stepped out of my sleep pants and pulled on jeans.

"He's too nice of a guy to string along, Chloe," Zoe said, and I said, "I'm not stringing him along." The fact that Zoe was going out with Pirate Johnny disqualified her from giving me boy advice.

I finished getting dressed, brushed my hair, and put it up in a ponytail, then put on some makeup and threw a few things into my bag. He'd never know I'd forgotten.

Downstairs, Danny was talking with Zoe in the foyer, and then he and I stepped out. When we got into the car, he said, "You forgot again, didn't you?"

"What?" I said. "No!"

“Don’t lie to me.” He smiled, but only with his mouth, not with those bear-brown eyes. “You forgot.”

I couldn’t, in good faith, protest. “How’d you know?”

He looked me over. “Ponytail.”

I must’ve looked confused.

He started driving and said, “In my limited experience, girls don’t wear ponytails on dates. They might put their hair up during the date. But they don’t start out that way.”

I said, “You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?”

He nodded and said, “As a matter of fact, I do.”

I apologized, then, and explained about the texts, and how I’d figured out what they meant last night, and how I’d been preoccupied with the Imperial Palace webcam all day, and how there was finally a tiny bit of hope that the crime would be solved. “Oh my God,” I said as an idea formed. “We could go! Right now. To the luau.”

“Really?” He sounded unconvinced.

“Really,” I said. “I mean, I don’t know.” I knew it sounded crazy. “Maybe I’d see something that would have meant something to me and Lindsay.”

Danny had just pulled the car into the restaurant lot and I had just decided that I wouldn’t go in.

“Come on.” He turned off the car. “Let’s go have dinner.”

I sat and watched as happy groups went in and out of In-N-Out Burger. I knew I didn’t belong there. I said, “The more I think about it, the more I really want to go to the luau.”

He looked away and sighed and said, “I can’t do this again, Chloe.”

“Do what?”

“This!” he yelled, and gripped the steering wheel. He wasn’t looking at me, but I wasn’t looking at him, either. “Play chauffeur while you’re chasing ghosts.”

Anger seeped into every molecule of my body. I said, “Then don’t.”

I got out of the car and got my phone out. I had the number of a local taxi company programmed and I called it. My car was still parked at Bellagio so I could go to the luau then pick up my car and drive home.

I stood by the In-N-Out doors and willed Danny to leave but he didn’t. He came over and said, “I just think you should let the police do their job and you do yours.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“I don’t know.” He looked around, as if looking to pluck a good answer from the air. “Getting on with

your life.”

“It hasn’t even been three weeks!” I said.

“I know!” he shouted, then his tone softened. “Come on. Let’s eat. Please.”

There was no turning back for me, no softening of my tone. “I already called a cab.”

“Don’t be silly.”

Top molars clamped against bottom at my jaw. “I amnot being silly.”

He was still there—standing quietly, waiting, watching—when my cab pulled up and then away.

AS NERVOUS ASI was when I paid a whopping fifty dollars to get into the luau—poolside in a big courtyard—the soothing sounds of a slow Hawaiian song put me a bit more at ease. And as a dozen girls with long, dark hair did a slow hula dance in sync—hands moving through the air like dolphins in the sea—I decided it was the most beautiful kind of dancing I’d ever seen. Zoe had the hair and the body; if the circus didn’t pan out, all she needed were some lessons and she’d be able to quit her ridiculous siren job and dance the hula for a living instead.

When the dancers left the stage area, men in grass skirts came out carrying large batons and then lit the ends of them on fire and started their own elaborate dance, this one louder, more aggressive—primal. From their seats at long dining tables, tons of tourists watched as they ate while others browsed the buffet lines with plates in hand.

Since I didn’t feel like sitting with strangers, I moved to the bar and took a seat. I wasn’t going to get a drink since I had to drive home, but it seemed like a good place to perch. “I’m just waiting for someone,” I said when the bartender asked me if I wanted something. And even though it was a lie, it ended up not seeming like one because Noah appeared at my side. My skin felt electrified as he took the barstool next to me.

“Chloe, Chloe, Chloe,” he said. “What are we going to do with you?”

I said, “We’re not going to do anything.” Then added, “Are you like a crazy stalker now? Following me around?”

“That would be tricky, considering I’ve been here for twenty minutes and just saw you walk in.”

I wished I had ordered a drink because then I would have had something to do, something to sip.

He said, “What are you doing here?”

“Same thing you’re doing here.”

He sighed. “There’s one camera over there, pointed at the stage. There’s another there, past that dessert table, and there’s one over there.” He pointed to a camera high in a corner at the end of the bar. “Pointed at the register. This here—” he gestured to the bartender “—is Tim. He’s been interviewed by the police because he was working that night, but he doesn’t remember seeing Lindsay.”

Tim, who was washing glasses under the ledge of the bar, said, "Sorry."

A man with a ukulele had taken the stage and was sitting on a high stool. He started plucking and then began singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." It was lovely, really, on the ukulele, and his voice silenced the crowd. I sat there, listening and wishing everything were different, that Lindsay had maybe just gone off to see the wizard, like Dorothy had, and would come back to us when she learned there was no place like home. It was a song about escape and distant places and it stirred up a tornado in my heart. When the dust settled I had a clear memory of a summer at the beach, when Mrs. Woods took Lindsay and me to the local five-and-dime and bought us grass skirts and Hawaiian leis. She'd taken us back to the beach house and we'd hula danced in the backyard.

"Your mother taught us how to hula dance one summer," I said.

"Yeah?"

I nodded. "You think this has anything to do with that?"

"I honestly wish I knew." We sat for a while, then Noah said, "Come on, I'll walk you to your car."

"I'm hungry," I said. "And I already paid fifty bucks."

"All right, then." He got up. "We'll eat."

And so we ate, Noah and I, taking turns going up to various buffet tables and carving stations. We were quiet through our first two plates, then he sat down with a dessert plate and said, "I went to Hawaii last year for school. We did this project with a hotel there where we basically ran the hotel for the day."

I swallowed a piece of pineapple dipped in chocolate from my own plate. "Sounds fun."

"Yeah." He nodded. "It was."

He went back to eating and I knew I had to say something to keep the conversation going, before silence gripped us again. "What was it like? Hawaii, I mean."

"Well it wasn't anything like this." He nodded at the stage where more hula girls were dancing. "It was more like, I don't know, going to Mars."

I cocked my head. "What do you mean?"

"The scale of things, it's just out of control." He put his fork down. "Like you think you're looking at shrubs but they're trees, but the mountain is so far away and so big you just can't really process it. Or you look down into a valley and you think you're looking at a bird but it turns out it's a helicopter. And it's just, I don't know. Even though we were working, it was the most relaxing week of my life that I can think of."

"Sounds pretty amazing."

"Yeah." He smiled. "But what am I telling you for?" He wiped his mouth with his napkin.

I must have looked confused.

He said, “You probably own a house there by now.”

A drummer took the stage and started playing so loud that we couldn’t, realistically, talk anymore.

“Come on,” Noah practically screamed. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

I told him it was at Bellagio, and he just shrugged.

And so we walked. It wasn’t far but it felt like a long walk, past the gardens of Caesars Palace and the lake in front of Bellagio. Noah slowed his pace as the fountains kicked in; they were swaying to Elton John’s “Your Song” and I wished that it were playing for me and Noah, but it wasn’t our song. We didn’t have one.

Noah slowed as we walked by and said, “Remember when you had to explain to Lindsay that Bellagio was actually a place in Italy?”

“Yeah,” I said, surprised he’d remember something like that.

“You couldn’t believe she didn’t know that.” He smiled. “But I didn’t know it, either.”

“You didn’t?”

“Nope.”

We kept walking then and reached my car. “Do you want me to drive you back to your car?”

“Nah,” he said. “I’m good.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me something?” He put his hands in his front jeans pockets.

I just looked at him and waited.

“Promise me if you’re going to go anywhere else—you know, like last night, tonight—that you’ll let me know first.”

I nodded and he turned to go. The night he slammed the door in my face when I’d come home from the trip felt like a lifetime ago, and I thought maybe, somewhere along the way, I’d been forgiven.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A few days and then weeks passed without any news from the police—or from Danny, for that matter—and I started to lose faith in the eye in the sky. New headlines appeared—things like “Video Surveillance Review Expanded in Quest for Teen’s Murderer”—but beyond that, nothing. Maybe my Imperial Palace luau theory was hogwash. Maybe it was time to start accepting that they’d never catch the guy.

Without explicit approval, life had started to return to normal. I went to work. I came home. Sometimes I hung out with some of the gang from work, seeing as I had no other real friends to speak of. Sometimes

I just hung out at home and sat in front of the computer, watching the Imperial Palace webcam, thinking maybe now that I'd given up I'd see something important, almost without trying.

I'd heard that Jenna had started going out with Chris Nolan's older brother and figured that was the end of her. Meanwhile, Zoe moped around the house, still waiting for word from Cirque du Soleil. My mother pecked away at her proposals to turn Breeza into an ironclad oasis of safety, and on the rare occasions when my father was home, we darted and bobbed around each other, like scaredy-cat boxers. Was the truth really going to change anything anyway?

Noah and I got together to go through Lindsay's stuff a few more times—he'd become an Imperial Palace webcam addict, too—and then finally, a week or two after the realization about the texts, we got down to the hard stuff, to the letters and photos. That stuff was going to be hard to look at, let alone throw away. It was the very stuff of Lindsay's life—her report cards and awards from school and the notes she and I wrote in class; the letters she received from her long-ago pen pal in England; drawings she'd made in art class of inbred-looking dogs and misshapen fruit in primary colors. We were sifting through papers and pictures when my eye was drawn to a stack of garbage in the corner. Sticking out of a shiny black bag was an item I knew well.

"Is that Lindsay's dollhouse?" I asked.

"Yeah," Noah said. "It was behind a ton of crap in the top of the closet. I can't believe she still has that hunk of junk." He added, "Had it."

Tenses had persisted in being weird. It felt wrong to talk about Lindsay in the present tense, but wrong to talk about her in the past, too.

I went to the house, pulled it out of the bag, and turned it around so that I could see into its rooms; the memories of the way Lindsay and I used to play with the house were almost too much for my heart to handle. I studied the furniture—knocked over and piled in tiny corners—and I remembered playing interior decorator to Lindsay's rich and eccentric owner. I remembered bringing my Barbie Dream House over so that we could set them up side by side and pretend to be neighbors. We'd become so interested in recent years in real houses, in real estates, that I'd almost forgotten. Forgotten that this, probably, was how it all started.

"Would you mind if I took this?" I asked, setting a tiny chair from a kitchen set aright.

"Uh." Noah looked at me funny. "Okay, I guess."

"I just..." I looked back at the house. "I can't explain."

"Take it. It's yours." Noah went back to work and I thought the topic was dead. Then he said, "What is it with you and houses, anyway?"

"I don't know, really. But I think this is what started it all."

"You should really see my boss's beach house." He shook his head. "We had a retreat there last year. Suffice it to say there's a minigolf course."

"No!"

"Yes." Noah smiled halfway. "You going to run home and add that to your blueprints?"

“I don’t have blueprints.” I liked that he was mocking me. “It’s just a folder, with pictures. But I realize it’s all a pipe dream anyway. I’ll be lucky if I can afford to buy a trailer at the rate I’m going.”

“Chloe,” Noah said. “You’re in high school. Give yourself a break.”

“I know,” I said, but that didn’t make me feel any better. I was feeling more depressed than I had in days. Seeing all of her stuff was too much to bear.

“I’m not really up to this tonight,” Noah said, and I took comfort in how in sync we were, even if he didn’t know it.

I said, “I’m sure this stuff can wait a while.”

Noah looked around. “Actually, I think I can probably handle it from here.”

So we were done. I was being dismissed. It was a complicated thing to feel sad about.

He walked me home in silence then, and it felt like a different kind of silence. A better kind.

“Thanks for all your help,” Noah said when we got to my house.

“Of course,” I said, and turned to go.

He grabbed my arm to stop me, then immediately let go. “And hey”—he looked down at the ground—“I’m sorry about how I acted. You know. When you came home.”

I just nodded. Tears formed behind my eyes but I felt like I should fight them.

“I was mad that you weren’t there.” He ran a hand through his hair. “But not for the reasons you think. Not for the reason I led you to believe.”

I didn’t know what to say. He seemed to be doing okay on his own.

“I wanted you to be there for me.” He put his hand to his heart and I wanted to put mine over it. “Because if there was anybody who could come close to understanding what I was going through, it was you.”

“I know.” I was so relieved that this conversation was happening that I felt physically lighter on my feet. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

He looked up at my house. “God, the first thing I did when I found out what happened was to come here. It was three a.m. probably and the house was dark, so I figured everyone was asleep. I rang the bell over and over and even threw rocks at your window and then I remembered you were away.”

I pictured the scene, pictured Noah standing in the backyard, throwing rocks at my window. I couldn’t imagine it, and yet I could.

“You were the only person I wanted to see.”

I nodded and he looked away, then said, “I left messages, Chloe.”

I would only let myself hear half of what he was saying. I said, “I didn’t get them until we got home. My father took my phone away.”

Noah was shaking his head and I knew what he was going to say and then he said it: “I called the hotel in Rome.”

“But we didn’t get a message,” I said angrily, because even as I was saying it, I knew that Noah wouldn’t lie about this, that my father was the liar, that I couldn’t hide from it anymore.

“Well,” he said, kind of snottily. “I called again to confirm that your father did.”

I shook my head and fought the childish urge to cover my ears. “My mother swears they didn’t know.”

He shrugged, then said, “I just wanted that out there. I had to say it. It’s not like it matters now anyway.”

I PUT THE DOLLHOUSE on the kitchen table, as my father—tonight, of all nights, he was home—sat there with the newspaper and said to my mother, “But we specifically chose to live in a nongated village.”

She was reading instructions from a box of brownie mix. “But they weren’t even really offering the gated ones when we bought.”

“Still,” my father said. He looked at the dollhouse and said, “What the heck is that?” He pushed a Breeza newsletter toward me. “They want to put gates up and build fences around all the nongated villages. And your mother is leading the charge.”

I read from the paper on the table:

In light of recent, tragic events, members of the Breeza community have raised the issue of adding gates to our nongated communities, in addition to other new security measures, including curfews and night patrols. The board invites you to discuss all such proposed security measures at this month’s board meeting.

“It’s a good idea!” my mother said. “All the violence and the sex from the Strip. It’s only a matter of time before it starts spilling out. We have to be ready. We have to protect our children.”

All their chatter was distracting the anger simmering inside me. I needed to get it to the surface...and fast. Before I exploded. Before I lost my nerve.

“So we lock them away like Rapunzel?” My father got up and went to the fridge. “I’d love to lock the girls up until they were thirty, Pam, but it’s just not realistic.” He turned to me. “What do you think, Chloe?”

I wanted to say that a fence can’t protect you from the world any more than your parents can. That you can do everything right—or wrong—and it doesn’t matter. That you can beat breast cancer only to get run over by an ice-cream truck. That we’re all doomed in the end. Words somehow couldn’t get to my mouth.

“You know, Chloe,” my father said breezily, “sometimes people find it interesting to actually have

opinions on things.”

I snapped.

In two.

Finally.

I said, “Sometimes people find it interesting to tell the truth, too.”

I could barely breathe. “Like about messages they got while they were in Rome.”

My mother looked at my father, whose face really said it all. She dropped an egg; it hit the linoleum with a hollow thwack and spread yellow yolk in a splatter across the floor.

“Youknew !” I started crying and shouting. “Youknew and you didn’t tell us and you went around like everything was okay.”

My father looked at my mother then—she looked horrified, crushed—and she dissolved into tears at the kitchen table. She’d really never doubted him.

I couldn’t bear to look at either of them another second. I scooped up the dollhouse and left.

“Chloe!” my father shouted after me, and I could hear his footfalls behind me on the stairs. I put the dollhouse down in the corner of my room, then went to slam the door but he got a foot in. The door bounced back open. I grabbed a pillow and hugged it to my chest, sitting on the bed. As I started wiping my tears away, I realized they wouldn’t stop.

He breathed hard in the doorway, then said, “Remember when we were in Versailles?”

“Go away, Dad,” I said angrily—teeth clenched—but he said, “Just listen,” then went on. “Danny asked me if he could take you out that night.”

I pulled the pillow over my head but I could still hear him and he knew it: “And I said no, but then your mother said something to me. You want to know what she said?”

“What,Dad?” I said into the pillow. “What did she say?”

“She said, ‘You don’t want to be the guy who ruins this trip for her.’”

I pulled my face up. “You think that justified what you did?”

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I really thought I was doing what was best for you. You were just”—he paused, looking for a word—“thriving in Europe. I couldn’t be the one to ruin that...”

“But we could have at least been at the funeral.”

“And I’m sure it was awful!” he nearly shouted.

We were quiet for a moment, then he said, “Maybe I didn’t want to go. Maybe I didn’t want to be here.”

“You’re a coward,” I said, crying again, even though I’d had the same thought before, felt almost lucky to have missed it all. I said, “I didn’t get to say good-bye.”

“I’ll tell you something I know for sure, saying good-bye is overrated.” He stepped out into the hallway and said, “I hope you can forgive me. In your own time. Your mother, too.”

I looked across the room at the dollhouse when he was gone. Something about it scared me. Because the memories it evoked were so powerful that it was almost as if the house had trapped them and held them hostage all these years. Now it unleashed the long-ago Christmas, when I was maybe eight years old, when I got my Barbie Dream House. Within a week I’d knocked down one of the walls. My parents had come into the living room, where I was cleaning up pieces of plastic and particleboard, and my mother had said, “What happened?”

I said, “Barbie needed more room for dinner parties.”

“Let me see that,” my mother said, and I handed her the remains of the wall. “Paul.” She’d turned to my dad. “She broke it.”

“It’s not broken.” My father had reached down and stroked my head. “It’s better.”

“WHAT THE HELL WAS that about?” Zoe asked from the doorway.

“Don’t you knock?” I said, by rote. Zoe never knocked.

“I never knock,” she said.

“You were right. Dad knew.”

She sat down at the foot of my bed. “No shit.” She took my hand in hers to study my pink nail polish, now woefully chipped. “That really, really sucks,” she said, then she got up and walked out. A few seconds later she was back with a cotton ball and nail polish remover. She took my hand in hers and went to work on the pink. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess.”

She’d made quick work of one hand. “I got a callback.”

I sat up. “You did?”

“Yeah.” She’d moved on to my other hand. “Johnny did, too.”

“See, I told you you didn’t screw up as bad as you thought.”

“I know. I’m so excited.” She shook her head, almost in disbelief, cleared polish off the last nail, then closed up the remover bottle. “I mean, this could really be it, you know? Everything I’ve worked for for so long.”

She lay back on my bed and looked all dreamy. “Johnny and I could get our own place. And I mean, if

we got cast in the same show? How amazing would that be? The pay's pretty good. We could even get a house if we wanted."

I wanted to say, "Johnny? Really?" Because for all of my gripes about my sister the one thing I knew was that she could do better than Johnny. But I just said, "I'm sure you'll nail it. When is it?"

"Next week." She bolted upright. "I've got so much work to do."

She left and I changed and climbed into bed and lay there, thinking about the house, somewhere in the Alps—either in Switzerland or France, I'd have to consult my folder—that has a wall of windows three stories high that looks out over the mountains. Neither Lindsay nor I had ever been skiing before but we'd always imagined ourselves renting the house for a season and taking lessons from men with names like Lars or Nils. There's a huge stone fireplace in the great room and a hot tub on a deck off to one side. In an adjacent wing—beyond the massive kitchen, with a table that seats twelve—there are six bedrooms. We were going to have three each, and as I drifted off to sleep I started filling them all on my own instead. One for my parents. One for Zoe and some future superhusband who wasn't Johnny. One for me and Noah, one for Mrs. Woods, one for our son, if we had one, and one for a daughter, if we had one. She could bring her best friend, her Lindsay. It was maybe a fantasy worth having, and maybe it had always been mine, and not mine and Lindsay's, after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Life at home the next day—a Sunday—wasn't fun, with my mother very obviously not speaking to my father. Zoe cleared out, making up an afternoon movie date with Johnny when in reality she was going to the studio to prep for her callback. I was saved by a miracle of sorts: a call from Danny.

We hadn't spoken since our fight about the luau and he wanted to know if I wanted to have dinner at In-N-Out Burger that night, since we'd never gotten around to it last time. I said if he could make it lunch, we were on. I figured I owed him that much—lunch—just for being the kind of guy that would still call after all we'd been through. But from the second he picked me up, I knew it was a mistake. It was torturous to watch him act like everything was okay, really, like our future together still held the promise of something romantic when to my mind it should've been completely obvious that it didn't.

"It's nice to see you," he said, when we settled in at a table with burgers and fries.

"It's nice to see you, too," I said, and it was. Sort of.

"I have something for you, actually." He pulled an envelope out of his back jeans pocket and slid it across the table.

I opened it up and was faced with a smiling picture of myself with the bustle of Venice's Grand Canal—vaporetti, gondolas, palaces, the works—behind me. I was wearing my mother's oversize shades and I was so happy that it actually hurt to look. I said, "That's a great shot," and then flipped through the other photos—me at Abbey Road, me by the Trevi Fountain in a photo I'd never even known Danny had taken, me mimicking the poses of one of the statues in the gardens at Versailles. Each picture was more painfully gorgeous and fun than the next.

"I thought it would be good to remind you," Danny said as I slid them back into the envelope.

"Of what?" I bristled.

“Of how much fun we had. How much fun we can still have.”

I put the pictures down and busied myself with the final bites of my burger. I hadn't realized how hungry I was and Danny obviously was, too. After a few minutes of eating in silence, we were already almost done.

“Come on,” he said with new enthusiasm. “Let's go somewhere.”

We got up and tossed our trash in a bin, then went back out into the day. When we reached the car, Danny came around to my side with me to open the door.

“Hey,” he said, and I barely had the time to recognize the look in his eyes—intense, burning—before his lips hit mine.

I pushed him away and turned my head. “What are you doing?”

He ran a hand through his hair, looking tortured. “God, Chloe, I don't know. I just don't get what's happening.”

“So what, you decide to turn into an asshole?”

“No. It's just, God. I don't know.” He shook his head. “You think I like this, chasing after you like some lovelorn loser?”

I said, “Please take me home.”

“Not again, come on. Let's talk.”

“There's nothing to talk about. I just don't feel the same way. I'm sorry.”

“But in Europe...”

“Things change.”

He muttered, “Well, you sure changed.” And I couldn't bring myself to say another word. Not even on the way home when he said, “Say something, Chloe,” and “I'm sorry. Okay?”

WHEN I GOT HOME, my mother was sitting at the kitchen table. She said, “We need to talk,” and I yelled, “Why does everybody suddenly want to talk?”

She was holding my fake ID in her hands. She looked like she'd been crying.

I tried on defiant for size. “You went through my stuff?”

Her face showed a flash of surprise at my counterattack, then her angry jaw returned. “Nice try. Now sit down.”

I did as I was told.

“And no, I didn’t go through your stuff. I decided somebody had to pick the clothes up off your floor and wash them, and it was in your jeans.”

How could I have been so dumb? “It’s not what you think.”

“I just can’t even begin to imagine how, after what happened to Lindsay, you’d be going to places where there’s drinking. And I thought Jenna was more sensible. If you were even with Jenna.”

“I wasn’t drinking,” I said, because that seemed to be the bigger issue. I wouldn’t cop to going out to a club alone; I’d let her assume Jenna had been there, too.

“Then why do you need a fake ID?” Her voice sounded desperate and I felt guilty for becoming the kind of daughter who could cause her mother so much worry.

“I just wanted to get into the club. Once. I only went once. Just to see it. I can’t explain why. I just needed to see it.” In our shiny, bright kitchen, all of the excitement of running around town at night, playing detective, suddenly felt false, unreal.

My mother looked at the ID.

“Really,” I said. “It won’t happen again.”

She got up and got the scissors from the junk drawer next to the fridge and put them in front of me on the table with the ID. I cut it up right there in front of her, though I knew it didn’t really matter. I could always get another one. Not that I would, but I could. Skeeter wasn’t going anywhere.

“And don’t think I didn’t notice that top you were wearing,” my mother said as she dumped cold tea into the kitchen sink. She was facing away from me when she said, “I’m not saying Lindsay was ‘asking for it’ but—”

I snapped, “Then don’t,” and left the room.

I went straight for my bed and had a full-on angry cry. Because I couldn’t go on defending Lindsay when the truth was I was furious at her—for letting this happen, for wearing the damn miniskirt and tube top. I’d never admit it to anyone, but maybe she had asked for it, like she’d gotten what she deserved for going out with a fake ID and turning into one of the drunken idiots I so despised. If I’d given a eulogy, maybe I would’ve said the same thing Mrs. Woods had.

I tried to remember how I’d felt when I’d seen her through the eye in the sky, dancing her heart out at Neon—and how pretty and happy and otherworldly she looked. I remembered feeling happy for her, for having had a night like that, a night where she got what she wanted. I couldn’t muster the feeling again.

I hid out in my room for the rest of the afternoon and then my mother came up, knocked, and opened the door. “Your sister and I are having dinner, if you’d like to join us.”

I was starving. I climbed up off my bed and followed her downstairs.

Zoe was setting four places at the table and my mother swept one placemat away. “Your father can fix something later.” He was in the den watching TV.

Zoe said, “Mom,” in a sort of pleading voice and my mother said, “Don’t start with me.”

MY FATHER CAME INTO the kitchen when we were cleaning up. He said, "I think you're going to want to see this." He had the TV remote in his hand and nodded toward the den. "They have a shot of a 'person of interest.'"

I felt sick. We all followed him into the den and he hit play.

I'd expected him to look like the root of all evil, or like a crazy person, but he didn't. He just looked like a regular guy. They'd found him on video surveillance at Imperial Palace.

"Like you said they would," my mother said.

My phone rang then—Noah—and for a foolish second, I wondered if I'd forgotten that we'd made plans to go through more of Lindsay's stuff, but then remembered, no, we'd finished. There was nothing left to do. It was a weird thing to miss.

He said "Did you hear?"

"Yeah." Then there was silence that was heavy with meaning.

He said, "You want to, I don't know, go do something?"

"Okay," I said.

"I'll swing by in ten minutes?"

I almost had a girly meltdown then—Ten minutes! How was I going to make myself presentable in ten minutes!—but reminded myself that it was Noah. It wasn't a date. I decided against changing out of my shorts and tank top but opted for a ponytail, remembering Danny's observation that girls never wear them on dates. When I put on lip gloss, I wondered whether Jenna was having fun with her new friends, whether she ever had any guilt for crossing over to the other side.

The doorbell rang when I knew I was too far away to be the first to get there. I heard my mother say, "Noah. Hello," like she was confused, and then I was there in the foyer and I said, "We're going for a walk. I won't be long."

"Oh," my mother said, then her tone turned really serious. "Noah," she said, "I didn't know. You have to tell her that. She has to believe me."

Noah looked like he was choking on words, so I grabbed his arm and said, "Let's go."

We walked in silence for a while, stopped at the corner, where the crosswalk was beeping that the light was about to change. "You want ice cream or anything?" Noah said finally.

"Not really." I couldn't lie to him.

"Me, neither." We started walking again, heading nowhere. "There's no place to go in this shithole neighborhood."

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” I said, because he seemed pissed.

“No, come on. I’m sorry. Let’s...I don’t know. Let’s just go to the playground or something.”

“Okay.”

So we walked and I felt like we had a companion walking between us—that thing between me and Noah, that unspoken awkwardness that had surfaced in moments like this ever since my trip, since the afternoon of the video games, really. It seemed like we were only ever relaxed together when we were with Lindsay—or going through Lindsay’s things—and I wondered whether it was because with Lindsay around, or even the memory of her, I knew nothing could ever happen. Still, it felt wrong that the person who I should most have been able to relate to now was the one person I really couldn’t talk to.

“God, I can’t wait to get back to school,” Noah sighed. “I hate it here. Always have, really.”

I’d never really heard him talk shit about Vegas before. I said, “That seems like a weird thing to say for somebody who has sold their soul to the Four Seasons.”

“How do you figure?”

I shrugged. “Aren’t you going to be stuck working here for like five years after college?”

He almost laughed. “You’re joking, right?”

My blank face must’ve made it clear that I wasn’t.

He said, “I can work at any Four Seasons around the world. I’m not coming back after I graduate.”

“Oh.” A weird mix of envy and longing crashed over me. Noah was leaving. Noah was leaving me. “Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. Probably one of the new hotels, just because there’s more room for growth there. Maybe Thailand, or Egypt. Or maybe Europe. Like Paris or Prague. I have no idea, really. But hopefully I’ll get to move around a lot.”

More suddenly than seemed physically possible, I was going to cry. There he was, ready to travel the world like Lindsay and I had always wanted to, and all I wanted to do was beg him, Don’t go.

“You should see these hotels,” he said, taking a seat on a swing. I took the swing next to him and was happy for the dark—for the fact that we weren’t facing each other. “Each one is more amazing than the next.”

“I had no idea,” I said.

Lindsay’s Noah, my Noah, was leaving.

I let out a sniffing sound before I could prevent it, and then he looked over and said, “Hey, what’s wrong?” Then before I even knew what was happening, he was standing in front of me and his hand had scooped around so that it was cradling the back of my head. “Come here,” he said, and pulled me up into a hug. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Yes you are,” I said into his neck. I could taste my own tears and I pulled away, feeling dumb.

“Hey,” he said, and then he tilted my head up with a finger on my chin and he kissed me. Just once, soft and sweet. Then he pulled back, only maybe a couple of inches, and seemed to study my face—eyes, hair, mouth—and said, “Okay, this is really weird.”

“Bad weird,” I said, “or good?” Then he pulled me in and kissed me again and this time there was no sweetness, nothing soft. It was everything we had in us and had been holding back for so long and our hands were all over each other and then somehow we were moving away from the swings and onto a grassy patch and then we were on the ground and he was on top of me and my body had never felt so awake, so completely terrified and exhilarated at the same time. I didn’t know how much time passed while we kissed like there really was no tomorrow, but then something shifted in him—I could feel it practically from his lips to his toes—and there was a sort of sweetness and calm that took over. We stopped to catch our breath and he kissed me on the nose.

“God, Chloe,” he whispered.

“What?” I whispered back.

“I don’t know.” He rolled off me and lay beside me, taking my hand in his. He said, “I think I’ve wanted to do that for a long time.”

“You think?” I turned my head toward him; grass tickled my neck.

“No,” he said. “I’m pretty sure.”

We just lay there for a while, looking up at the stars—they were superclear that night, like tiny cosmic lights trained directly on us—and I pictured the eye in the sky, floating out there in space somewhere while I was just the tiniest of blips. Then I said what had to be said: “What do you think she’d make of this?”

He propped himself up on an elbow and looked at me. “I don’t know,” he said. “I mean...” He hesitated. “If she were still alive, I don’t even know if...” He lay back down. “I just don’t know if we’d be here at all.”

I got up and started to walk away.

“Chloe, wait!”

“I gotta go,” I said over my shoulder.

He caught up with me and grabbed my arm, then stood in front of me. “What’s wrong?”

“You just said you never would have kissed me if Lindsay weren’t dead.”

“You’re twisting things,” he said. “I just mean we’ve gotten closer, is all. Because of what happened.”

“We shouldn’t be here,” I said, because all I could think about was Lindsay looking down on us, marveling at the fact that her killer had been identified and here Noah and I were, kissing when we should be out looking for him. I had to go home and take a closer look at the person of interest, think hard about whether Lindsay and I had ever seen him before. “Let go of my arm.”

“Fine,” he said. “Leave.” He let go.

“You’re the one who’s leaving.” I walked off into the night.

He followed me all the way home, and as badly as I wanted to turn around and run back into his arms, I also wanted to run in the opposite direction.

IPASSED THE DEN on my way upstairs and saw my father making up the pullout sofa bed. Not good. But there wasn’t anything I could do about it. I’d already started sort of forgiving him—for giving me Venice, for being a little bit of a coward, like me—I just hadn’t let him know. My mother, presumably tucked away in their bed upstairs, obviously hadn’t yet begun to thaw.

I could still taste Noah on my lips, so I didn’t brush my teeth. I just undressed and climbed into bed in my underwear. My body still felt tingly all over and God, he was a good kisser. And I was happy, at least a part of me was, because it meant it hadn’t all been in my head all those years. If I could talk to Lindsay I’d want to say, Ha, told you so, even though I’d never really told her in the first place. It was a familiar feeling and I realized that was because, yes, I’d had it before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Peter had cleaned up his room and bought some candles. When he lit them, I thought about blowing them right out, calling the whole thing off. I should have gone home, called Lindsay, and laughed about how I almost went to Vegas and then didn’t. But I couldn’t. I knew she’d say that she’d told me so, that she couldn’t see me having sex with anyone. I knew she’d be the one laughing hardest.

Then things were happening and I started to feel sort of powerful and also like I was just playing my part in a scene that had been acted out countless times by teenagers the whole world over.

“Wait.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, now.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, hold it.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, more.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

And then we were in it and then it was over and I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to laugh or cry. Because, really. That was it? And yes, that was it! I’d gotten over it. And it was over. It seemed

impossible to feel the way I did. It was like looking at two sides of the same coin at once.

Peter asked me if I wanted to watch a movie then, and I said, “Sure,” while in my mind I was screaming, A movie? A fucking movie? So I sat there and watched *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Peter’s idea of a thoughtful pick for the occasion, and as he sat there, seeming, I don’t know, smug? He actually made cracks about how a forty-year-old virgin was something neither of us would ever be. I should’ve known that going to Vegas would be nothing like I thought going to Vegas should be. Moving to Vegas certainly hadn’t been.

I don’t know if it’s because Lindsay and I had been referring to sex as “going to Vegas” for so long, but I felt horribly claustrophobic in Vegas all of a sudden, like I was choking. I went home that night and the pictures on the walls of my room—of Venice, of the Taj Mahal, of the Leaning Tower of Pisa—seemed somehow to taunt me. Because something about what Peter and I had done made me feel trapped, made my life feel smaller rather than larger. Though we’d used a condom, pregnant paranoia gripped me hard, because that would mean the end of everything. I’d never get out of this town if I kept going the way I was going.

So I broke up with Peter the next day. Which wasn’t at all what was supposed to happen. And probably doesn’t seem like something I should be embarrassed about, but I am. When I told Lindsay about it, she said, “Was it that bad?”

All I could think to say was, “Well, it wasn’t that good.”

The truth was I just felt like he’d only want to do it again, and again, and that that was all my life would be about. Ending things with Peter and dreaming of escape was the only thing that let me breathe. I wish I could say that he took it all in stride but after his initial “but why”s and “I don’t understand”s he left me with this parting caveat: “It wasn’t that great anyway.”

As if I needed to be reminded.

Peter graduated and went away to college a few months later—he never did take that amazing backpacking trip we’d planned—and I didn’t have to see him around anymore but he haunted me anyway. He suddenly embodied the fact that I could sabotage my own life plan if I wasn’t careful.

Of course I never told Lindsay that I went to Vegas with Peter just because I was out to prove to her that I was sexy and desirable, too. That she didn’t have the monopoly on that. So the fact that she’d turned around a year or so later and thought she’d be proving something—to me, to the world—by sleeping with Chris Nolan made it all harder to bear. If I’d told her the whole story, if I’d told her that using your virginity to prove something to anybody, let alone to your best friend, was dumber than dumb, then maybe none of it would have happened at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Noah left messages every day, more than once a day. “Call me,” he’d say, and nothing else. Or, “You can’t avoid me forever,” which was also what he said when he appeared at the front door one day, maybe a week after that first kiss.

“I don’t have to avoid you forever,” I said. “You’ll go back to school soon and then you’re leaving for real after graduation anyway.”

He looked down at the doormat; our name, Swanson, was worn from wear and it seemed apt; our

family was, too. “She’d hate this, you know.”

I said, “That’s why I think we should stay apart.”

“No,” he said. “She’d hate that we’re not talking, or that we’re doing whatever this bullshit is instead of being together.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“No you don’t.”

“Well, I read her journal, and—”

“I don’t want to know.” I put my hands to my ears and he pulled them down.

“Then I won’t tell you,” he said. “But you can’t shut me out. I won’t let you.”

“You really shouldn’t have read it.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But reading it made me feel close to her again, and I liked it. So I don’t regret it. And there’s stuff in there you’d want to know.”

My mother’s voice came from inside, “Chloe! Set the table.”

THE DOORBELL RANG DURING dinner and my sister was the quickest out of her chair. My father had been invited back to the table but not back into his own bedroom, so meals were still tricky. There was a lot of standing and reaching for bowls, in lieu of asking that anything be passed, and conversation was stilted at best. Add in the fact that Zoe’s callback was the next day—my parents didn’t know anything about it—and it was no wonder none of us wanted to be there.

“Well, well, well,” Zoe said, returning to the table. “What have we here! A mystery package for Chloe.” She waved it in the air—it was a parcel the size of a notebook—and said, “A little elf must have left it. There was no one there.”

I got up and said, “Give it to me.”

She started to rip the paper. “It must be from a secret admirer.”

“Zoe!” I screamed as years of frustration over just this kind of treatment came to the surface at once; I’d had it with Zoe treating me like a child.

“Zoe,” my father said sternly.

“I’ll tell them,” I said, sinking as low as I could; my voice was almost a growl. “I really will.”

Zoe stopped—frozen and glaring—and handed the package to me. I went to leave the room.

“Hey,” my mother said. “We’re having dinner here. And what is she going to tell us that shut you up so fast?”

I stopped and turned. My mother was looking at Zoe and waiting.

Zoe looked at me and said, “Tell them if you want. I’m tired of this anyway.”

But it felt wrong to be the one to say it. I just couldn’t do it and I regretted being such a heel, even if Zoe had provoked me.

She took a deep breath, let it out hard, and said, “I got invited to audition for Cirque; I went.”

I watched my parents’ faces stiffen.

“And I got called back for a second audition,” she said. “It’s tomorrow.”

My mother’s eyes filled with tears and she slowly started to cry. “That’s wonderful, honey.”

Zoe and I looked at each other as if to say, “What the...?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Zoe said. “You forbid me from doing this, and then I do it behind your back and all you can say is ‘that’s wonderful, honey’?”

“I don’t know.” My mother took a sip of wine. I hadn’t even realized she’d been drinking wine. “Things have changed,” she said, looking pointedly at my father. “For all of us.”

“So you’re not going to forbid me from going?” Zoe couldn’t hide her disbelief.

“You’re nineteen, Zoe.” My mother finished her wine and I wondered if maybe she’d had enough. “You can do whatever you want.”

“Dad?” Zoe asked, because surely some kind of punishment would come from him.

He shrugged. “If you get in and drop out of school now, you’re on your own financially if you ever want to go back.”

Zoe looked at me again and we both raised our eyebrows. This was certainly unexpected. We started laughing then, and my mother laughed, too. She stopped herself short, though, and looked at my father with a cold stare. Then she looked back at Zoe and me and said, “Why don’t we girls go out for dessert?”

My father got up to put his plate in the dishwasher and left the room.

AFTER WE GOT BACK from the ice-cream parlor, where my mother wouldn’t stop talking about that week’s board meeting, how it was really going to help things with Mrs. Woods, I locked the door to my room and settled on my bed with the brown parcel—Lindsay’s journal—in my hands. Just looking at it sort of gave me a chill, so holding it in my hands was even creepier. This was Lindsay’s journal. It was about to reveal to me her most secret thoughts, thoughts she’d never meant to share with anyone else in the world. I felt torn because I really did believe it was, on a certain level, wrong. But the police had read

it, Noah had read it, so the spell was already sort of broken. I was not the first one to betray her by invading her privacy, and that somehow made it more bearable.

I meant to read it from start to finish but quickly lost patience with the day to day, and with stories that I already knew, and soon I was skipping ahead, frantically, to the final pages with writing on them. I wanted to get to the part about our fight, about Chris Nolan, about those last days when she was here and I was gone.

Well, I couldn't go through with it. Chris was rarin' to go, of course, but, God, I don't know if it's Chloe who's ruined it for me but I found myself there with him, and he was feeling me up and I could tell he was getting excited for more, and I just couldn't do it. I could kill her, really, for putting all that crap in my head about how it should be special, how you should be in love, but then maybe she's right. Or maybe it's not Chloe at all. Maybe it's me who doesn't want to end up like her. Bitter. Scared to death to get close to somebody new. Anyway, we're all going out to some club tomorrow night. Maybe I'll feel differently about it all then.

So she hadn't gone through with it.

I think I took my first deep breath since I'd been home.

Then I flipped through the blank pages at the back of the book to be sure there wasn't more. An envelope fell to the ground and I picked it up. Noah had written a note on the front. "I need the journal back, but this is for you." I opened it and unfolded a piece of paper. It was "Lindsay and Chloe's List of 50 Things to Do Before We Die."

- 1. Kiss a boy
- 2. Make love
- 3. See the world's great cities
- 4. Live abroad
- 5. Make love abroad
- 6. Learn to ski
- 7. Skydive
- 8. Scuba dive
- 9. Have a baby
- 10. Take a helicopter ride
- 11. Go whale watching
- 12. Swim with dolphins
- 13. Drink a Guinness in an Irish pub in Dublin on St. Paddy's Day
- 14. Wear a designer dress
- 15. Own an actual diamond
- 16. Have a garden
- 17. Become respected in our chosen fields
- 18. Kiss someone on the top of the Empire State Building
- 19. Kiss someone on the Eiffel Tower
- 20. Go on a cruise
- 21. Order a bottle of "your finest champagne"
- 22. Go to a nude beach
- 23. See the Northern Lights
- 24. Join the Peace Corps
- 25. Go back to North Carolina and rent a house on the beach for the summer

- 26. Drive a convertible
- 27. Go to a luau in Hawaii
- 28. Camp in the Grand Canyon
- 29. Learn the trapeze
- 30. Go to the Olympics (preferably winter)
- 31. Go ice skating at Rockefeller Center in NYC
- 32. Learn how to cook fabulous meals
- 33. Throw fabulous parties
- 34. Swim in an infinity pool
- 35. Ride on the back of a motorcycle
- 36. Go to Australia
- 37. Get married
- 38. Learn how to surf
- 39. Run with the bulls in Pamplona
- 40. See the Leaning Tower of Pisa
- 41. Spend a night on an uninhabited island
- 42. Go fishing and eat what you catch
- 43. Drink a margarita on Isla Margarita
- 44. Go to a World Cup match in Brazil
- 45. Run a marathon
- 46. Ride the Coney Island Cyclone
- 47.
- 48.
- 49.
- 50.

I wanted to check off some things on the list, things I'd done, but the paper felt like a relic, like it shouldn't be tampered with. I couldn't believe how crazy and brave we thought we were. Because, skydiving? And running with the bulls in Pamplona? There was just no way.

The four blank slots at the end were typical of Lindsay. She lost interest in most things before they were really done. I didn't want to be like that, so I picked up the journal again, started at the beginning, and read every word. I nearly stopped breathing when I got to this:

Chloe slept with Peter last night and then dumped him today. How screwed up is that? She's obviously scared of getting close to anybody but WOW. For someone who was so hell-bent on doing it "right," she sure messed it up big time. I wish she'd told me what she was planning on doing, because I would've talked her out of it. And can you believe she didn't tell me? What the hell is THAT about? Matt and I have talked about doing it but I don't think he's "the one."

This is the passage I returned to when I was done, because "She's obviously scared of getting close to anybody but WOW" just wouldn't go away. How my closest friend in the world could think that—when I'd told her almost everything there was to know about me—just blew my mind. But it was true that even with Lindsay, my best friend, I'd held back some of the most important stuff, the stuff that really cut to the core of who I was. And it was too late to do anything about it.

IKNOCKED ON THE front door over at Lindsay's house and wondered when I'd stop thinking of it

as that, how much time would have to pass before she was no longer the foremost thought in my brain. Noah's face said he'd been expecting me. "You want to come up?" he said.

"I just wanted to drop this off." I held out the journal and he said, "Come up," and I said, "Noah," and he mimicked my tone and said, "Chloe."

He turned to go up the stairs and I followed.

In his room, there was music playing and the lights were turned down low. I saw a stack of postcards across the room on his desk and realized that they were mine. My European postcards to Lindsay. I imagined the postcard I would write her from her brother's room if I could: Noah's room makes me want to stay there forever and also to run for the hills. It makes me want to kiss and be mushy and declare my love. It makes me want to crank up the music—loud—and dance until I drop. It makes me want to follow him to Thailand or Egypt or the ends of the earth .

I put the journal down on his desk.

He said, "So you read it."

"Yeah." I sat down on the bed, then felt immediately self-conscious. I couldn't believe he knew about Peter. It wasn't fair. "And I really wish you hadn't."

Noah shrugged. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, I think more highly of you than ever after reading that journal." He was doing quarter turns left and right in his desk chair while I sat facing him. "You were a great friend to her. I don't really have a friend like that."

We were quiet for a minute, then he said, "I was sort of glad to know that Nolan's been lying."

"Me, too," I said. "But it's not the kind of rumor that can be undone."

"Eh," he said. "Don't be so sure."

There were so many questions I'd want to ask Lindsay about what she'd written. Noah was as close as I'd ever get. I said, "Do I seem bitter?"

"Not to me." His eyes were the color they got when he was tired. Gray.

"I am scared, though," I said, surprising myself. "But not of the things she thought I was scared of. Now I'm pretty much scared of everything."

"Like what?"

"Dying, mostly. In a plane crash or car accident or just crossing the street or choking on my breakfast or having something fall on my head, or cutting myself with a knife or getting murdered or struck by lightning."

"Chloe," he said, sort of patronizingly.

"No, I'm serious."

"But none of that's going to happen."

I said, “The odds of dying in a car accident are one in seventy-seven. Seventy-seven!”

“But think of the millions of people who live their lives and grow old and the really awful shit just doesn’t happen. And you sure as hell don’t act scared, going out to clubs on your own to try to find Lindsay’s killer. You have to be brave to do something like that.” He smiled. “And a little bit dumb, too.”

I smiled and said, “I should really go,” and he moved to sit next to me and said, “You should really stay.”

I got up and he stood up and blocked my way. He said, “Come on, this is crazy.”

We were face-to-face.

“I think I want to be with you, Chloe. And I think you want to be with me.”

We were so close that anyone watching us would’ve assumed we were about to kiss. And there was a big part of me—most of me—that desperately wanted that, and to think that we really stood a chance. But did anyone ever really stand a chance? When it came down to it, what, really, was the point? Because no, the odds of getting murdered weren’t that high, but when you combined it with the odds of dying in a car crash or in a plane crash or getting some weird virus or having scaffolding fall on your head or getting stuck out in a horrible snowstorm...when you added them all up, it was a miracle any of us survived a day. No matter what, I was only going to lose him in the end, the same way I’d lost Lindsay. The way I was going to lose everyone else.

“Just let me go, Noah,” I said, and I could hear something in my voice I wasn’t sure I’d heard in it before. World-weariness. I sounded like the oldest person I knew.

I LOOKED AT THE list again when I got home, and my first thought was that if Lindsay were still alive we really would have done a lot of the things on it, maybe even all of them. But as I looked more closely, I realized I’d maybe been wrong to think that Lindsay had always been the brave one with me just along for the ride. Because half of these were written in my hand and the other half in Lindsay’s, and everything I’d written was way more adventurous than anything she’d written. While she’d wanted to “get married,” I’d wanted to “see the Northern Lights.” She’d wanted “your finest champagne,” and I’d countered with a “spend a night on an uninhabited island.” Somewhere along the way our mythologies got crossed and I’d combined our dreams. The list was hard evidence of the brave girl I’d been and desperately wanted to be again, maybe still was, underneath it all.

Suddenly the blank slots on the page seemed like a dare. Relic or not, I grabbed a pen and decided to fill in four things—real things—that I’d really want to do before I died. Because I could die. Any of us could be here one day and gone the next—the very next, as in tomorrow—and it suddenly seemed wrong that this, the way things had been since we got home, was how things would be left. So I filled in #47 with “Help Mom re: Mrs. Woods,” and #48 with “Help Dad re: Mom.” I considered things like blackmailing Chris Nolan and doing something mean to Jenna but then reminded myself that this stuff was supposed to be for real, like if I was really going to die.

So I filled in #49 with “Show Zoe you really support her” and then I stared at #50. I almost wrote in “Catch Lindsay’s killer,” but I knew that the odds were against me, that if he was going to get caught it was up to fate, to the world, and not to me. There was no way I could conspire to cross paths with him,

or to track him down, so I had to think of something else.

I knew what I wanted to write, what I wanted to do more than anything before I died, but committing it to paper was something else entirely. It would mean being brave and fearless and would be far harder than ever getting to Australia or running a marathon or even going to a nude beach. It would mean I'd have to stop thinking about death all the time, and about all the things that can go wrong in life and in love. With pen in hand, I thought, No, I can't possibly write it—"Tell Noah I love him"—but then I went ahead and did it anyway.

He called me later that night while I was staring at the image of the alleged killer—the person of interest—making sure it was ingrained in my mind in case I happened to pass him on the street.

"I copied the list before I gave it to you," Noah said. "I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not." I was looking at #50, thinking I should just say it right then. "It was silly anyway."

"I didn't think it was silly at all."

"Seriously," I said, knowing I'd use numbers 47 to 49 as ways to put off #50 as long as I could. "Running with the bulls? I'd never do that in a million years." I scanned the list. "And skydiving? And God, there were so many more that were just as dumb."

I heard him breathing then, heard him thinking. "You're still alive, Chloe."

I went to my window to look out at his and I wanted desperately to say "I know" because maybe it was starting to sink in. It was me who'd wanted to see the world, and rent and own fabulous homes. Just me. But I wasn't ready yet. I said, "So I should go to Pamplona and run with the bulls?"

It scared me to see him standing at his window, looking out at me. "No," he said through the phone. He put a palm up to the glass. "But you could run with me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

When I offered to drive Zoe to her audition the next morning and to wait for her to come out, my mother's eyes lit up. She said, "I'll come, too," and then my father said, "Me, too."

"Great," I said before my mother could protest. I'd been planning on just focusing on Zoe and #49, but if I could get my parents to spend more time together, that meant maybe some progress on #48, as well. As it turned out, we had to take two cars because I had to go straight from Zoe's audition to work. When my mother got in my car, my sister got in my dad's, presumably to try to even things out, and I followed my dad's car downtown. My mom and I didn't talk much on the ride in; she was nervous about the board meeting that week and I still didn't tell her not to go. I had other things on my mind, namely #48.

"I just want to say one thing," I said, and she looked over. "If it had been up to me, I'm not sure I would've told you, either."

"Why's that?" she asked wearily.

"You were happier than I've seen you in a long time, maybe ever."

She looked out the window then, away from me, and a few seconds later I saw her hand reach up, wiping a tear from under her sunglasses. It seemed like I'd said enough.

After we dropped Zoe off, we parked the cars side-by-side and rolled down the windows, then put on the same radio station and waited. I wondered what the odds were that that old "Eye in the Sky" song would come on and how long it would be before someone identified or spotted Lindsay's killer, whether there'd soon be news of some crazy car chase, or an arrest. Underneath it all I was feeling something strange. Excited, maybe. And happy. For Zoe.

When she came out, she was nearly bursting with nervous excitement. She said, "I don't know, guys."

"What? What?" we all said.

She stood between the two cars, inhaled, exhaled, and said, "I think it went really well. And they said they'd let me know later this afternoon."

"That soon?" I asked.

She nodded, "I know!"

"Oh, honey, that's great," my mother said, and my father said the same thing at the same time and they looked at each other—past me and past Zoe, through the cars' open windows—and sort of smiled. It was hard to be angry and bursting with pride at the same time. Then Zoe and my mom both got into my dad's car and I went off to work.

The coaster looked different somehow and I wondered if maybe it had been painted overnight. Was it maybe a different shade of yellow than it had been a few days ago? Then I realized, no, it was me. I was different. The coaster didn't look so menacing anymore. And when people screamed from the highest peak, it sounded less like terror and more like glee. Something about the list had fired me up, brought things into focus. I needed to do something to help that feeling along, to see me through the final four. At shift's end, I told Tom that I wanted to go for a ride.

It wasn't the Coney Island Cyclone.

It wasn't even a replica.

But it was all I had.

The security bars came down and locked and I tested them with my hands. Then the coaster clicked and clanked into motion and I closed my eyes and tried to picture myself in New York, in Brooklyn, out at Coney Island, where the air would smell like sea salt and hot dogs. I made a silent promise to Lindsay that I'd do my best to cross, at the very least, the Cyclone off the list. At the top of its highest peak, I'd smile wide for the eye, with my hands in the air, wind whipping wildly through my fingers and my hair.

IN THE KITCHEN AT home, Zoe sat crying. My mother stood next to her, rubbing her back. I nearly skidded to a halt. I said, "Oh, Zoe. Already?"

She looked up with sadness in her eyes. "They just called."

My mother said, "And she got cast."

Her bright tone didn't seem quite right and confusion must have shown on my face. I had no idea what was going on.

Zoe blew her nose and I said, very slowly, "I don't understand."

My mother went to the cabinet for a glass, then to the fridge for water. "She got offered a part, but not here in Vegas. It's part of one of the traveling shows." She looked at Zoe and warily added, "In Europe."

"Zoe!" I slumped into the chair across from her. "That's great!"

"It's not great," she snapped. "It sucks," then her tears really started up again.

I honestly couldn't believe what I was witnessing. "You're kidding me, right?" I almost laughed.

"Chloe," my mother berated.

I said, "Do you know how many millions of people would give an arm and a leg for the chance to travel the world with Cirque du Soleil?"

Zoe snapped, "Yeah, well, I'm not one of them. I wanted it to be here."

"Well, then, you're an idiot."

"Chloe," my mother said more sharply this time and then she looked at me and said, "Johnny got cast here in Vegas."

"Oh Christ!" I said, "This is about leaving Johnny?"

"It's not that!" Zoe said, and then more softly she added, "It's not just that."

"Right," I said. "Sure it isn't."

I wasn't much behaving like someone who wanted to accomplish #49 but it just really lit me up that Zoe still didn't see how amazing our trip had been. And it had been. I'd almost forgotten that myself.

Upstairs, I plugged my camera into my computer and pulled the pictures of Europe off it. I went to a website where you can design photo albums. And while at first I was making the album for Zoe—to inspire her—I realized I was making it for me, too. And maybe even for Danny, who should probably have gone on the list, too. When I was done, I ordered three albums and paid for express processing and shipping. It suddenly seemed of the utmost importance that I have one—and that Zoe and Danny did, too.

Johnny came by that night and I waited and waited and waited until I heard Zoe leave him in her room and go to the bathroom. I stormed down to her room and said, "Hey."

"Hey," he said, as surprised as I was that we were about to have our first ever one-on-one conversation. I'd interrupted him admiring his own six-pack; he let his T-shirt fall back down.

“Hey,” I said again, feeling stupid because we’d already said that, like, what? Four times? “You have to let Zoe go.”

Johnny shrugged. “She can do whatever she wants.”

I shook my head. “You have to tell her you want her to go.”

He snorted. “But I don’t want her to go.”

God, this guy could be thick. “Well, then, you need to pretend that you do. Isn’t that on your résumé? Ac-tor?”

He rolled his eyes. “Why would I do that?”

If I hadn’t been afraid of being overheard I would’ve screamed at him. Instead, I calmly said, “Because you either love her or you don’t and either way, it’s the right thing to do.”

I heard the toilet flush and rushed back to my room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Venetian actually looked pretty and grand when I approached a few days later and saw Danny sitting on the ledge of one of the gondola docks out front. I’d called him that morning—when the photo albums arrived—and asked him to meet me there. Before heading out, I’d slid Zoe’s album under her door. I wondered if she’d found it yet, if she’d read my note: If you’re not destined to be in a traveling circus, I don’t know who is.

“Hey,” I said, taking a seat beside Danny. In a flash I remembered him standing in the real Piazza San Marco—pigeons on his arms, and then on mine—and the memory made me smile. I remembered sitting there as my father professed his interest in the glassblowers on Murano, and a familiar old tug—I guess they call it wanderlust—pulled inside me. For the first time since being in Venice I wanted more than anything to go back.

Danny looked goofy again, more like Juggling Boy than the Danny I’d eventually come to know. The spark, what there had been of one, was gone and the person beside me looked like... a friend. If he’d have me. I pulled the photo album out of my bag.

“I wanted you to have this,” I said, and Danny took it and put it on his knees and opened to the first page. It was a picture of the two of us, the one my mother took of us atop the Eiffel Tower. I’d hesitated before deciding to open with that one—Zoe’s album started with a picture of her upside down by Apollo’s chariot—but it wasn’t a picture of us on the night we kissed; it was from early that same day so it carried less, well, something. Zoe had got it right when she said he was too nice of a guy to string along.

“This is great,” Danny said, flipping pages. There were pictures of us making funny faces by the guards of Buckingham Palace, and of us ducking down in front of fountains, pretending to be spouting water from our mouths. There were shots of us at Abbey Road and on the Rialto Bridge, and on the sunset cruise on the Seine.

Danny flipped and flipped, smiling and making comments—“Is that really what my hair looks like from the back?”—and I looked at the pictures along with him and felt so lucky that I’d had such a great summer adventure, that I’d seen how beautiful the world could be before learning how ugly it could be,

too. Danny got to a picture Zoe had taken—of me, sitting in the Piazza San Marco, smiling up at the sky—and I was glad I'd put it in the album, not so much for Danny's sake, but for my own. The look on my face was one of pure joy, the photo itself like a relic of some happier time. I'd been forcing myself to look at it at least a few times a day, because somewhere deep inside, a movement had started, a movement toward an old, new me—the me with a list of things to do before I died.

Danny finished flipping. "Thanks a lot for this," he said. "It means a lot. Even if things didn't end up going exactly like I would've liked them to."

"Sorry about that," I said, and he said, "Hey, your loss, babe."

I smiled and we looked on as a gondolier untied one of the boats and hopped in it. He started pushing the boat in toward the inner canals of the casino. "Hey," I said. "Let's go for a ride."

"You're joking, right?"

"No," I said. "My treat."

So I flagged down a gondolier and into the casino mall we cruised, me and Danny and a fake Italian gondolier who was singing at the top of his lungs.

Danny said, "So, I have to ask. I mean, was it something I said?"

We cruised under a bridge. "Nothing like that."

"I can't believe I've become this guy, but, uh"—he winced—"is there someone else?"

"Sort of," I said. "Yeah." I settled back into the cushioned seat. "But I'm not sure it's really going to work out. He's going back to school and then he'll probably be working abroad and stuff next summer and after that."

"So?"

"So. I'm here."

"For one more year."

"Or forever. Who knows?" But even as I said it, I knew that I wouldn't stay. That my old dreams, withering and near dead after Lindsay died, were taking root again.

Danny said, "I don't believe you for one second, Trumpette," and I smiled because Danny, at least, wasn't going to become something to regret. And maybe Peter never should've been, either. Because maybe that was just the way life was.

"Hey," I said. "I'm so sorry I never asked..." We cruised under a bridge and I decided the first thing I'd do when I went back to Venice for real would be to get lost like Danny and I had. "How's things with your mom and dad?"

THEY MADE AN ARREST that night and Noah called me first thing in the morning to tell me, before I

saw it on the news. His name was Robert Helman, which sounded so normal that it couldn't be right.

There were some things the police still couldn't figure out and probably never would—namely how he'd lured Lindsay away from the Strip that night—but the video evidence had led them to Helman and his DNA matched DNA on the duffle bag. The case was solid, a conviction all but assured.

"I have something I want you to see," Noah said. "Can you come over?"

So I went, and we sat by his computer and watched as Lindsay did a hula dance for the cameras in front of the Imperial Palace. She might have been wearing a tube top and a miniskirt but for all the world it looked to me like she was wearing a coconut bikini top and a grass skirt, her hula was so convincing, so completely transporting. If I never made it to a luau in Hawaii, I'd always feel, because of Lindsay, like I had.

Noah walked me to the front door and was getting ready to walk me home when I saw Mrs. Woods shuffling into the kitchen and thought about my mom, at home preparing for that night's meeting, and about #47. "Hi, Mrs. Woods," I said, raising my voice.

Noah said, "What are you doing?"

"Oh, hi, Chloe," his mom said wearily. She had come into the living room, wearing her bathrobe.

"I need to talk to you," I said. "It's important."

So she sat down and I told her about my mother and how she wasn't talking to my father, and how my father was miserable, too, about what he'd done. I told her about my mother's ridiculous proposal, about the board meeting that night, and how I'd heard about her eulogy and how I'd felt the same way for a while but how it wasn't Lindsay's fault, that she'd only been being who she was. We went upstairs so Noah could show her the hula dance—I was glad for a reason to watch it again—and Mrs. Woods watched quietly, smiling a little bit behind her tears.

We were all back in the living room when the doorbell rang. I got up to answer it even though it wasn't my house. Because I knew who it would be. I'd just called my mother.

She followed me into the living room and said, "Judy."

They went right to each other and hugged and Mrs. Woods said, "Pam."

They sat down next to each other on the couch, clutching hands, and my mother said, "I'm so, so sorry," and Mrs. Woods said, "I know, I know."

Noah and I slipped away as I heard Mrs. Woods say, "Skip the meeting, Pam. Please. I need you here with me more than we need whatever ridiculous scheme you were dreaming up." There was some humor in her voice and Noah raised his eyebrows at me.

"Of course," my mother said, laughing through her cry. "Of course."

"I've been so angry," Mrs. Woods said.

And my mother said, "And you had every right."

MY MOTHER CALLED UP to Noah's room for me a little while later and we walked home together. "Thank you for that," my mother said when we got to our house. She ran a hand over my head and kissed me on the cheek and I didn't mind.

"Mom?" Zoe called from upstairs. "Is that you?"

"Yeah?" My mother cocked her head.

"Is your suitcase bigger than mine?" Zoe appeared in the kitchen in the wake of her question. She had dust bunnies stuck in her messed-up hair and was talking through her carnivale mask. It made her look so exotic, so mysterious, so completely out of place in our kitchen.

"I don't know. Why?"

My father emerged from the den, presumably to see what the ruckus was about.

Zoe pulled her mask away. "I'm packing."

We all stopped and stared.

"I decided to go." Zoe shrugged. "Rehearsals start this week."

"Oh, honey! That's so exciting," my mother said, and my father went to the fridge. He said, "This calls for a celebration" and produced a bottle of Prosecco that I hadn't seen in there before.

"Paul," my mother scolded.

He said, "You let them have some in Italy."

"Fine," she said. "But don't think you're off the hook."

I could tell from her face, though, softer than it had been in weeks, that she would start to forgive him now that Mrs. Woods had started to forgive her. That #48 was mostly going to take care of itself.

Zoe said, "Wait." She looked at the clock on the oven. "What happened at the meeting?"

"Oh." My mother squeezed my hand. "I decided not to go after all."

Zoe looked confused. "I don't get it."

My mother looked at me and said, "It's a long story."

My father opened the bottle with a pop and then poured the bubbling drink and we got the camera out and took turns posing with Zoe's mask. I realized I would actually miss having her walking around on her hands and doing constant backbends and crab walks. Everything was changing so fast and even though I knew she'd be back to visit when the tour had a break, and even though she wouldn't be leaving for a few days, I went to her and hugged her hard. She hugged me back, then went to get the photo album, to show my parents what I'd done.

UPSTAIRS, I PULLED OUT the list Lindsay and I had made and crossed off numbers 47, 48, and 49. Then I scanned the list for another thing I could tick off—maybe I should try for all of them—before accepting that #50 was still there, staring me in the face.

Tell Noah I love him.

It seemed an impossible task as I stood at my window, looking over at his—his light was on—and questioned whether it was even really true or not. Did I love him? Did I really need to tell him? If I died tomorrow, or if he did, would I regret not having told him that he was right, that yes, I wanted to be with him but was scared? I couldn't think of anything I'd regret more. I dialed his number.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hey." I returned to the window.

He just waited and I said, "So I've been thinking."

"Yeah?"

"About running with the bulls." I pictured us on a terrace in Pamplona, watching the bulls—and the people crazy enough to run with them—wind their way through the cobblestone streets below. I pictured us holding hands and kissing with excitement and having the time of our lives. The scene was so real that it was almost like it was already happening. Noah and I had a long list of things to do together before we died; we just hadn't made it yet.

"You have, have you?" he said dryly, and his figure appeared at the window.

I said, "Yeah," and put my hand up to the glass.

He put his hand up, too, and said, "How about tomorrow morning?"

CHAPTER THIRTY

Noah picked me up in a red convertible. "What the hell is this?" I said.

"A convertible."

"So I see."

"Get in. I'll explain later."

So I got in, and we didn't really talk much and Noah put a CD in—it was some kind of neo-punk band, with a sound that was lively and happy and raw and I liked it. I hadn't really been listening to music much all summer and it dawned on me that it was because Lindsay had been the DJ in our friendship. It was always Lindsay who was buying CDs, downloading MP3s, introducing me to new bands. Without her, I was pretty much lost.

The CD ended too soon and Noah pointed to a case of CDs in the center console. "You can pick out something else, if you want." He had to shout over the wind. We were on a highway, traveling west

through the desert. He hadn't told me where we were going and I didn't care but with every mile we were getting closer to California, the place I'd long seen as my stepping-stone to greater things, better places.

I shrugged. "I actually wouldn't mind hearing that one again," I said, and so he hit play again. We must've played that CD five times before our first pit stop, by which point I knew every word.

"Who is this anyway?" I asked after we'd stopped at a Burger King for lunch and bathrooms.

"They're called the Exploding Hearts."

"I think they're my new favorite band," I said, and Noah looked at me strangely and then held out the keys. "Your turn."

"Yeah?"

"I need a break."

"Okay," I said, and then we got back in the car and started the CD again and were on our way, though to where I still didn't know.

At our next rest stop—way past a WELCOME TO CALIFORNIA sign—Noah took over the driving again. After a while, he said, "Look in the glove compartment," so I did. There was a copy of the list Lindsay and I had made—the fifty things list—with a pen clipped to it. "You can go ahead and check off number twenty-six."

Drive a convertible.

I felt weird—I'd been tricked—but then the wind whipped through me like a drug. I opened the pen up and crossed it off. "Anything else?" I said.

"Not yet."

Number two—make love—seemed to leap out off the page as I put it back in the glove compartment. Because no, Peter didn't count. But no, not Noah. He'd never. Would he? Because if this was some elaborate plan to get me in bed, it wasn't going to work. Or maybe it was. I wasn't sure. The thought that maybe we were on our way to the Four Seasons, where he'd booked us some fancy suite, was enough to make my stomach churn with anxiety. Or was it excitement. I couldn't much tell the difference anymore and I'd started to think that maybe that was what it was like—life. Maybe good things—the really good things—always had an edge to them, a scary edge. Maybe the only good things in life were the ones worth being a little afraid of.

The Exploding Hearts CD had just ended again and I asked Noah, "Do they have any other records?" I laughed.

He shook his head and looked sort of faraway and said, "No. There's just the one."

"Did they break up?"

"They died, actually. Three of the four."

I'd started the CD over again and their happy, bouncy guitars blared through the speakers. It seemed as impossible that three members of this band could be dead as it did that Lindsay was. "But how?"

"A car accident. A few years ago. They were on tour. Near Portland, I think."

I remembered the 1 in 77 odds. But what were the odds that three of the four guys in your band would all die in the same one? It was impossible to calculate and I figured I should just stop trying, that life was always changing the odds anyway.

"I'm sorry," Noah said. "I shouldn't have brought the CD. It's sort of a downer."

"No," I said, because there was something comforting about the fact that their CD was here—that it still existed—in Noah's car. With us. I suddenly wished Lindsay had recorded a CD. "It's okay," I said. I nodded and closed my eyes and put my head back and let the sun warm my face. "I'm glad I know."

We drove on and Noah said, "You never told me about your trip."

And so I did. I told him about almost getting hit by a double-decker bus, about tossing a coin in the fountain in Rome and the food—God, the food—and about the Hanging Garden, and getting lost in Venice. I told him about the squid-ink pasta—blacker than night—about my father and the trip out to Murano, where they blew glass, about the pigeons in the Piazza San Marco, how it felt to have their tiny claws on my head. Then I told him how my father had finally admitted that, yes, he'd gotten the message and had selfishly made the decision to stay on his own, how he'd been different, how we'd all been different, how my mother had practically been another person entirely, how I'd seemed so happy and how he couldn't bear to bring it all to a crashing end sooner than necessary.

"I think maybe he did the right thing," Noah said after I'd exhausted all my stories and he confessed to reading all my postcards.

"Maybe," I said.

After a while, we were on local roads in a beach town and then we were parked in the driveway of a gorgeous house with more windows than I could count and a front garden worthy of Versailles.

"Where are we?" I asked, as Noah got out of the car. Without the wind whipping past us, and without the car's engine on, everything seemed suddenly quiet.

Noah looked up at the house. "It's my boss's house."

"Oh, Noah. I really don't feel like dealing with—"

He shook a set of keys in his hand. "He's not here. Come on. And bring your list."

I followed Noah up a stone path to the house and he unlocked the door. It felt illicit, like we were breaking in, and I liked that Noah made me feel more bold than scared. I thought of the last time I'd been in a palatial beach house, all those years ago, during the summer of Steve and Brian, and remembered Lindsay's swollen lips, Brian's misguided pass at me, my awkward rebuff.

"Come here." Noah took my hand and led me through the house, and then he said, "Close your eyes." And I did.

I followed his lead and he said, "Okay, step up a bit, you're going over a ledge." I stopped, lifted my right foot, put it up and out, like the hokeypokey. I found solid ground again, not exactly where I expected it.

"We're almost there," he said, and I gripped his hand with my other hand, too. "I don't like this feeling," I said.

"Open," he said. So I did.

The infinity pool was blue and white and shimmering in the sun and the ocean was right beyond it, like it was supposed to be.

"Oh my God," I said, and I wished Lindsay were there with us, wished we could spend the whole day there together, imagining we owned the house and that the world was still ours for the taking.

I stripped my top off and Noah's eyes went wide and then I stepped out of my shorts and he took his shirt off but I was already in the pool, underwater, lips tight, and then surfacing and floating over to the edge of the pool—the infinity edge—where the water disappeared off into the horizon. I imagined the other side of the ocean and felt my body sort of fade away as I saw myself flowing over the edge of the pool and into the ocean and swimming all the way across the world, to meet whatever awaited me there. It was as if my eyes had become binoculars and could look out there and see the Eiffel Tower and the Taj Mahal and everything I'd seen and was yet to see in the world. It was all right there. Ready. Waiting. For me.

THEY SAY THAT WHAT happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, but I knew in my heart that that wasn't true. That what happened there would follow me wherever I went and that Lindsay would travel with me to the tops of the Swiss Alps, and to the bogs of the Irish countryside and to see the Northern Lights in Iceland and maybe even—because you just never know—to the Great Wall. She'd be with me when I lounged on the Amalfi Coast and rented a scooter in Monte Carlo and when I returned to Rome. I would go back to the Trevi Fountain—this time late at night, when the tourists were all asleep—and I would toss another coin in. Then I would close my eyes against the night sky and the golden glow of the fountain lights and toss one for her, too.

NOAH CAME UP BEHIND me then and I turned and hooked my arms around his neck and we kissed and the world seemed to fall away and suddenly I knew that this was how you dealt with the odds. With the 1 in 77, with the constant barrage of bad news and horrible stories and seemingly astronomical odds against you. You dealt by living, by loving, and by dreaming until the very end.

"Think you're up for minigolf?" Noah asked.

He was all wet and open with that same crooked smile that his sister always had and I felt the pieces of my heart reassemble themselves.

I said, "I'm up for anything."

This is how it was supposed to happen:

Noah was going to take me inside and afterward we were going to spend the afternoon playing minigolf and swimming and looking off into the horizon, talking about the things we really wanted to do before we died, and I was going to cross off #50 and more. He was going to take me home to Vegas and we were going to throw a going-away party for Zoe, who'd have the time of her life on her European Cirque du Soleil tour, before she got a post back in Vegas, where she wanted to be. I was going to be a little bit less intimidated by my father, a little more inclined to tell him what I thought without my mother stuck in the middle.

Noah was going to go back to school in Arizona, but not before a mysterious little rumor started about little Chris Nolan; about how Lindsay had written about him in her little diary. The first week of school, Nolan was going to admit he'd never slept with her, that there was no way Lindsay could have even known how big or little he was.

I was going to visit Noah on weekends until I decided where I wanted to go to school. Then Noah would graduate and get transferred to the Four Seasons in whatever city I was going to college. Two years later, when I graduated, we'd pick the most beautiful, most exotic Four Seasons we could find and we'd go there together. We'd live in Paris or Egypt or Bali or Prague and I'd get a job there, too, doing whatever it was I decided I wanted to do with my life. We'd travel the world together—we'd eat it up, whole—and we'd never stop talking about stuff like whether bugs had thoughts, whether praying mantises ever prayed, and about Lindsay. We'd reminisce about all the crazy things she did, how she'd been a real chancer, how that hula dance had really been something.

This is how it's happening right now.

And now....

And now....