

The background is a collage of torn, aged paper in shades of cream and light green. A large, detailed dragonfly is positioned in the upper left corner. Several smaller, faint dragonflies are scattered across the top right. A silver chain bracelet with a large bell and a heart-shaped charm is visible in the lower right. The text is layered over this background.

WANTED *you* MORE

*a hate-to-love you
age gap romance*

B. CELESTE

WANTED *You* MORE

B. CELESTE

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OTHER BOOKS BY B. CELESTE

[The Truth about Heartbreak](#)

[The Truth about Tomorrow](#)

[The Truth about Us](#)

[Underneath the Sycamore Tree](#)

[All the Shattered Pieces](#)

[Where the Little Birds Go](#)

[Where the Little Birds Are](#)

[Into the Clear Water](#)

[Color Me Pretty](#)

[Tell Me When It's Over](#)

[Tell Me Why It's Wrong](#)

[Dare You to Hate Me](#)

[Beg You to Trust Me](#)

[Make You Miss Me](#)

[When It Rains](#)

Here's to 2023

B is back

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PLAYLIST

“I Miss the Misery” – Halestorm

“I Wish I Didn’t Give a Shit” – Atlus

“Drunk Texts” – Kode

“Wanted You More” – Lady A

“Not Like I’m In Love With You” – Lauren Weintraub

“Heavy” – Linkin Park ft. Kiiara

“This Love (Taylor’s Version)” – Taylor Swift

“Bad Decisions” – Ariana Grande

“Falling” – Harry Styles

“My Mind & Me” – Selena Gomez

TRIGGER WARNING

This book deals with the aftermath of a public shooting. While nothing is detailed graphically, in this novel, it could be triggering to some.

PROLOGUE

Summer 2012

I WAS EIGHT years old when I experienced the threat of oblivion for the first time, and it started with all of my favorite things. Slightly charred hotdogs covered in bittersweet ketchup, sour pink lemonade, and my family.

The start of the end began with the firework display.

Bright.

Loud.

Beautiful.

Reds. Whites. Blues.

Until the noisy cheer of the packed crowd in Shakespeare Park turned into noisy chaos as everybody started to scatter.

I looked to my left, where my mother had disappeared to the bathroom with my little brother, Wolfe, then to my right to search for my father's familiar face, where he'd been talking to a family friend about golf. Instead of my family, I saw a mass of others running toward me with fear-stricken faces.

"Mommy?" I call out, dodging the people grabbing their kids from the foldable lawn chairs spread along the grass.

The fireworks are getting louder.

Closer.

I don't know when the park stopped smelling like the yummy grilled food from the barbecues or food trucks, but soon a pungent odor took over the space that became too thick and suffocating to bear.

I stumble when someone smacks into me from the side, then nearly fall when somebody else runs into me from the other side. "Daddy? Where are you?"

Suddenly, hands grab me from under the arms and pick me up despite my wild protest. When I look over my shoulder, the blurry image of the older man who delivers our mail is who I see. "We need to run, kid."

"But Mommy and Daddy—"

"We'll meet them," the red-faced man whose name I can't remember tells me, although he doesn't sound like he's telling the truth. He's winded and

breathing funny as he's keeping pace with the others running, and the *bang, bang, bang* gets louder and louder.

Red, white, and blues light up the sky.

They don't seem very pretty anymore.

When I try searching around us, the mailman's grip tightens around me as one of those large hands that delivers all of Mom's Amazon packages blocks my eyes. "Don't look, Austen."

His voice is hoarse, making my weird name sound stranger coming from him. My parents are both English professors, which is why they named me after Jane Austen and my little brother after Virginia Woolf.

"When we get to the parking lot," he says, struggling for air as he hauls me closer to his chest, "I'm going to put you down and you need to run to safe—" His directions get cut off by a horrible, gargling sound before we drop to the ground in a tangled heap that makes it hard to breathe from the weight of his body on my back.

Something wet seeps into my pretty new shirt that has a glitter heart in the middle with stripes like the American flag. I begged Mom to buy it for me even though she hates glitter. When I see her, I'll tell her I'll get rid of it. I'll get rid of whatever she wants. There's a Barbie that melted in the hot sun a few years ago that freaks her out, but I've been too attached to get rid of it. I'd let her throw that out too.

My eyes get heavy as I think about all the things I'd change for her. She can cut my long hair like she's been wanting to and style it however she wants. I'll wear pigtails again like I did when I was little.

No matter how much I try to wiggle from under the crushing weight above me, I can't seem to break free.

Energy draining the longer I fight for air, I feel myself falling asleep, wondering when Mom, Dad, and Wolfe will find me.

That's when the fireworks finally fade into the distance, and things slowly get quieter. My ears ringing is the only sound I hear until my eyelids finally close.

SUMMER 2022

CHAPTER ONE

THE WIND WHIPS away the plume of smoke I blow out the bottom of the window that I cracked open. I'm reaching for the lavender air freshener spray when I hear, "You're not supposed to do that."

Spraying the can around me as I lean back on the cushioned pillow seat, I give my little brother a quick once-over to see the disapproval molded across his face. Even behind his thick blue glasses with a glare in the lens and the long brown hair covering most of his forehead, I can see his furrowed brows pinched with judgment. He acts older than most fifteen-year-old boys but looks a lot younger.

"What are you going to do? Tattle?"

Wolfe frowns, walking into my room and closing the door behind him. He stays by the door awkwardly. "Dad is doing the best he can. Why isn't that ever good enough for you?"

I take another puff of the joint before leaning forward to exhale it out the window. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He walks over, nose scrunching, when he locks eyes on the item between my fingers. "He asked you to stop smoking months ago. And this was Mom's favorite room. Can't you stop for her if you can't for him?"

Wolfe isn't the type of boy to do anything malicious, so I know he's not intentionally playing unfairly. He's closer with Dad than I am, so he wants me to stop doing the exact opposite of what our father always tells me.

Like smoking.

And drinking.

And having sex. Not that he knows I'm doing that. I'm just going to assume he wouldn't be okay with that. What father would be?

Nose twitching, I scratch it before glancing around the room. Everything in here is white. Too white. White walls save the accent wall with a blue floral pattern on it. White bedding with fuzzy blue pillows. Hardwood floors with a white rug that Wolfe and I used to drag our feet across to create static to zap each other with. All the furniture is white with gold handles and colorful accents covering them because Mom loved pops of bright colors.

“The room will be fine,” is all I tell him, toying with the rolled joint. “It’s not like cigarette smoke that can ruin white walls. Plus, it takes a long time before it stains stuff anyway. Mom’s room won’t be tainted by me.”

This time, my little brother is silent. It doesn’t stop me from seeing the pain on his face when I do turn toward him.

Closing my eyes for a second, I reach outside and press the end of the joint against the ashtray I keep on the windowsill. Leaving it out there, I carefully close the window and spray the freshener again to get rid of the strong smell.

“Happy?” I grumble, pushing off the cushion and walking over to where my phone is plugged in on the nightstand. Next to my phone is a picture frame I can’t force myself to move, no matter how haunting the image inside it is.

Unlike Wolfe, who has Mom’s chocolate brown hair, big green eyes, and bright, toothy smile just like the one in the image immortalized by my bed, the only thing I got from her is my button nose, pointy chin, and leggy stature. My ash blond hair makes me look washed out, which isn’t hard to do because of my pale, pinkish-toned skin that never gets much color, no matter how long I’m in the sun. I get my hair, and haunted brown eyes, from my father.

Sometimes it’s hard to look at Wolfe because he’s practically Mom’s twin. Everybody around Cherry Cove has said so. I used to be a little jealous because Mom was effortlessly beautiful. She’d been in the Miss America pageant once, and even though she didn’t win, she might as well have. People still say she was cheated by coming in third place.

When I notice my brother still staring, I flop down onto my mattress and pat the empty spot beside me. He doesn’t hesitate to take the invitation. We used to do this all the time growing up. When he’d have bad dreams, I’d sneak into his room and tell him random stories about Mom until he fell asleep.

Wolfe lies beside me, staring at the ceiling just like me. We’re silent for what feels like forever before he asks, “Does it hurt?”

It. I try not moving my hand to the spot just below my right collarbone that he’s referencing. My arm hasn’t been the same since that day. The doctor I saw for it when the pain got unbearable said it was probably fibromyalgia—which was a cop-out response when they couldn’t find an actual reason for the sudden chronic pain. Nothing came up in blood work or image screenings, so they said it was a trauma response from the “traumatic event” I’d experienced.

Rolling that shoulder before settling further into the bed, I murmur, “No. Not as much as it did anyway.”

I guess it’s not a total lie. There are good days and bad, but I get why he asked. When he first caught me smoking pot, I’d told him it helped with the pain. That was the truth. Mostly. Now, I’ve just gotten used to how weed makes me feel.

Turning onto my side to face him, I use my bent arm as a pillow and rest my cheek against it while I study my brother’s profile. The acne cream I bought him is working because his skin has cleared up. He’d been complaining about his breakouts for weeks, so I’d done a ton of research and found the perfect stuff that one of our local pharmacies carried. I’d left it on his dresser with a note on instructions that the pharmacist suggested. That night, he’d knocked on my bedroom door to say thank you, and instead of me sneaking out like I normally would, we stayed in to watch cheesy horror movies.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” he mumbles, turning his head to face me and pushing his glasses up his nose.

My lips curl downward. “I’m sorry for being such a bitch all the time.”

He blinks after a second. “You’re not a bitch, Austen. You just try really hard to make people think you are.”

His words strike me deep in the chest, but like always, I don’t let him see it. Making sure my metaphorical mask is firmly in place, I flop back onto my back and say, “You should think about contacts. Those glasses hide too much of your face.”

A snort of amusement comes from him before he replies with, “Your breath stinks. Go brush your teeth.”

CHAPTER TWO

NO CONVERSATION THAT begins with “So, I was thinking,” ever ends well when it comes from the mouth of Marybelle Lanette Stratus. The last time my best friend of three years uttered those exact words, we wound up in the back of a cop car wrapped in nothing but thin towels while being threatened with indecent exposure charges. Turns out, skinny dipping in the lake with two random boys who were in town for the tourist season wasn’t the best idea. They stole our clothes, money, and dignity, and bolted, never to be seen again.

“You thinking is scary,” I remark, snickering when she shoots me a look from across the counter of Sips, our one and only smoothie shop in Cherry Cove, New York. Despite having classes together on and off throughout middle school, it wasn’t until we both got hired here that we became friends. She didn’t care about who I was or what my past was before my family moved here permanently. Enough of the town knew us from our summers spent at the house we only used to occupy during a couple months out of the year, but everyone knew the reason we sold our other house an hour away after the news broke about that horrible Fourth of July weekend.

Dad couldn’t afford two houses after Mom’s death, and he felt it was best for all of our sanity to leave Limepeak and all the bad memories the small town held. It’s almost ironic in a sad way. The one July Fourth we decided to spend in Limepeak with friends and family, and it scarred us forever. I remember asking why we couldn’t stay in Cherry Cove like we did every Independence Day, and Mom said it was because giving new traditions a chance was worth a shot.

Marybelle didn’t pay attention to any of that stuff. I wasn’t the girl who survived a mass shooting, or the girl whose mother—along with other innocent victims—didn’t. I was simply Austen Magnolia Cole. The girl whose craziness equaled her own, much to my father’s dismay. Although sometimes I think he tends to look the other way is because he’s glad I have a friend.

For a long time, I had nobody.

At least, that’s what it felt like.

“Har har,” Marybelle says vacantly, watching the last customers leave before turning to me with a giddy smile on her face. “So, I was thinking about that party over by the marina. The country club is closed for a private party, and guess who rented it?”

As if I’d ever get the answer right. Cherry Cove is full of rich people who can afford to do something like that. Who needs an *entire* country club for a party anyway?

Marybelle answers her own question with a mischievous grin. “Cheyanne.” The name instantly sours my stomach, and the second she sees my face, she doesn’t let me get a word of dismissal in. “Before you say no, think about it. That bitch ruined your last two birthdays, and let’s not forget the ridiculous locker incident. She hasn’t forgiven you since the Conner thing, and that mess was his fault to begin with.”

The “Conner thing” happened almost three years ago. Marybelle and I went to some school party where I met a blond boy with a boy-next-door kind of face—cute and innocent. We’d gone from dancing and drinking warm beer to making out on the couch in the packed living room. What I quickly learned was that he was certainly not innocent. He was dating Cheyanne Kraus, the host of the party and one of the *it* girls at school. Captain of the debate team, organizer of the school’s newest Green Earth club, where they save whales or something, and a member of the community service commission, where they apparently do good somehow. These days, nerd is the new sexy, which means the nerdier you are, the more popular you are.

I made out with Cheyanne’s boyfriend; she found out, and she’s made my life a living hell since. I’ll give her credit—she doesn’t tiptoe around my feelings like everybody else. Unfortunately, that also means she has no boundaries for the shit she likes to pull. Like on my fifteenth birthday, when she called the bakery to switch my cake from chocolate to carrot, which is the one flavor I hate, and the design from a basic “happy birthday” message to “sorry you were born” with red, white, and blue flowers bordering the white frosting.

Three colors I despise these days.

Or my sixteenth birthday last year when she paid a few of the football players one hundred dollars each to crash the small get-together Dad hosted for me by setting off firecrackers. I’d been paralyzed with fear as soon as the loud crackles began, but it wasn’t just me I cared about. The second I saw my

father's white face, and my brother's violent shaking as he sporadically looked around to figure out where the best hiding spot was, I knew Cheyanne had gone too far.

She can fuck with me, but I draw the line when she messes with my little brother. I may have been the sibling to be marked physically by that horrible night nearly ten years ago, but Wolfe, Dad, and everybody else who attended the fireworks show were marked mentally and emotionally.

"I don't think it's a good idea, Belles," I prompt the bubbly brunette, hoping she'll drop it.

I should have known better. "Don't they say that about the *best* ideas? You should totally stoop to her level and crash her birthday party. I heard that she's seeing one of the lacrosse players now. If I find out which one, we can both move in on him and—"

"That's what got me into this mess," I cut her off, scowling as I start our nightly closing routine. "I'm not interested in repeating that same mistake twice. Who knows what else Cheyanne is capable of?"

That keeps her quiet for a few seconds before I hear her sigh dramatically. "I guess we could just smoke at the Diamond and hang out unless your dad locks you away again."

Truthfully, Dad never "locked me away" two weeks ago when she asked me to hang out. I just didn't feel like going out. I'd barely slept the night before, Wolfe was on my back about never being home, and Dad lectured me about staying out of trouble this summer. I never told him I would, but I secretly told myself I'd try.

For them.

I ball up the rag I'm using to wipe up the countertop and throw it at her, giggling when it strikes the side of her face. She bats the slightly damp fabric away with a glare but can't help except join in with my laughter.

"The Diamond sounds like fun," I tell her once our laughter subsides. "Usual time?"

Her eyes brighten before she all but tackles me with a hug. "Yes! I'll pick you up around the corner and bring one of the bottles of wine from my parents' cellar."

I return her hug and let out a quiet breath that eases some of the tight muscles in my chest that have been there since I woke up.

* * *

I KNOW THE second we round the corner of West Harbor Road that we're not going to our favorite abandoned hangout that everybody refers to as the Diamond—or the diamond in the rough. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know where we're heading instead. In a matter of seconds, we'll see the litup country club perched on the steep hill for the entire town to see. It's a beautiful building that resembles a castle and screams wealth.

Tugging on the hem of my denim cutoffs, I turn toward Marybelle as she turns into the long driveway leading to one of the many parking lots. "What are you doing?"

She doesn't bother looking guilty when she briefly glances in my direction. "You don't have to do anything, but I am. I told my brother's goonie friend that I'd give him head if he helped me get back at Cheyanne tonight."

My nose scrunches. "Ew! You're not actually going to give that weirdo a blow job, are you? He always smells like booze and Lucky Charms."

Marybelle scoffs. "Do you really have to ask? I'm not putting my lips anywhere near him. He doesn't need to know that."

I'm a little uncomfortable by this whole conversation, mostly because I have no idea what's up her sleeve. "What did you need him for? Last time he helped us, it was collecting all that dog poop to put in bags and light on fire in front of the teachers who gave us detention."

I still don't want to know where he got all that, since he doesn't have a dog.

My best friend bats her lashes at me, but I don't buy her innocence at all. "It's probably better you don't know."

Making a face, I lean back with a loud sigh as we drive toward the back entrance, where a lot of the staff go in and out. It's basically like a servant's quarters, so the rich people don't have to associate with them beyond saying "yes" to a refill of their sparkling waters. "If you didn't want me to know anything, you probably shouldn't have brought me here, dum-dum."

"I want you to see her face."

"Marybelle—"

"It's too late, babes. Judd is already here and doing what I told him, so you'll just have to sit back and say 'thank you' when we get a front row seat of the horror show."

I blink slowly. “This isn’t going to be a *Carrie* moment, is it? Because you know how I feel about blood.”

The thought makes me queasy to my stomach as I toy with the fringes hanging off my crop top. It looks like one of those tasseled cowboy jackets, which I paired with an old pair of cowboy boots that I found in Mom’s old closet. I think she wore them in her pageant days, so wearing them makes me feel close to her. When Dad first saw me wear them, he’d gotten quiet before saying, “*They look good on you, kiddo.*”

“Chill, there’s no blood involved.”

Sitting back, I watch warily through the windshield as we pull up next to a beat-up pickup truck that I know belongs to Judd Watson. Unlike Marybelle, who grins ear to ear as she puts the car in park and unbuckles, I stay plastered to my seat. My stomach tightens when I see the number of expensive cars in the members’ lot, telling me there are a ton of people inside about to witness whatever the psycho beside me has up her nonexistent sleeve.

My best friend adjusts her boobs in the tiny top that barely covers her large chest before cracking open the door. “You sure you don’t want to come with? I’m doing this for you.”

That’s only partly the truth, and we both know it. Cheyanne and a few of her friends who are bound to be inside spread a rumor about Marybelle being a lesbian. The guy she’d been crushing on stopped talking to her, and she’s never forgiven any of the girls involved.

I pull out my phone from where I tucked it under my thigh. “I’m fine here where it’s safe. Try not to get in too much trouble.”

She shoots me a wink and says, “If I do, I’ll shove Judd under the bus and run like hell.”

My eyes go down to the heeled sandals she’s wearing. “Good luck with that.”

Sticking her tongue out at me, she slides out and shuts the door with one final wave before disappearing, where Judd is sticking his head out of a side door of the building. How he got in there, I don’t want to know. I know he has unusual skills involving picking locks and breaking and entering, taught to him by his father, who is in jail for the same things.

Trying to distract myself by scrolling through social media on my phone, I giggle at a few funny memes I save and send to my brother, knowing he’ll

laugh too. He tried getting me to stay in tonight with bribery of my favorite triple chocolate brownie from the vegan pastry shop on Main Street. Out of all the colorful, welcoming buildings that attract tourists with their fun signs and bright flags, Queenie's Pastries is my favorite. Not only because they give me the middle piece every time, but because they let me sneak into the back at the end of the day and listen to Queenie herself tell me stories from her years traveling the world.

I'm smiling at my brother's reply to the pictures I sent when I hear something that pulls my attention upward. The front doors of the club open, and a crowd of people rush out, all yelling something with their arms over their faces.

The scene makes my heart hammer. And before I can stop it, my mind pulls me back to *that* day. I get out of Marybelle's car and run in the opposite direction of everybody else with one thought in the forefront of my mind.

Make it to safety.

My feet propel me faster and faster until I'm at the edge of the property that's surrounded by old stone walls that must be at least a century old. I climb over a broken section of the wall to hide behind the stacks of stones, tucking my knees against my chest and wrapping my arms around them. I try being quiet, remembering how important that was before.

It'd been hard to breathe.

Hard not to cry.

It was good I passed out under the weight of the man who had saved me. The two people responsible for every single one of my nightmares thought I was dead too, because I lay in a pool of blood that mostly wasn't my own.

I can still feel the stickiness coating my skin—wet, thick, and smelling heavily of iron.

To this day, I can't wear red, and the sight of blood...

Cowering into myself when I hear sirens coming from a distance, I try doing what my old counselor advised me to and count backward from ten. My chest tightens despite the effort to flood air inside it. I know I'm moments away from a full-blown panic attack, and the last time that happened, I hyperventilated and nearly passed out.

The pesky voice in my head keeps telling me to run as the sirens get closer and closer, but instead of listening, I hold myself tighter. The stonewall is a perfect block against the breeze coming in from the lake and the noise