

It was a peaceful
babymoon in the
mountains...
until the guests arrived.

THE LAST TRIP

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Love. Lies. Alcohol.

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This one's dedicated to the strongest parts of us that emerge on our darkest days.

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CHAPTER ONE

HER

I should've known something would go wrong when I broke the mirror this morning. I've been nervous all day—Friday the 13th, and all—but I've been cautious. I kept the salt away from me, so I didn't spill it when I made my omelet for breakfast, I made sure the ladder was tucked safely in the closet, and then...the mirror.

This day makes me jumpy every year, but earlier, when my phone rang from across the room and startled me, sending the curling wand in my hand flying straight into the mirror, the dread that filled my stomach was unlike anything I've ever experienced.

It's just after noon when Calvin walks in the door, and if I didn't already suspect it, the look on his face tells me my problems are just beginning.

He drops his briefcase down on the table with a deep breath and runs a hand over his thinning, dark blond hair. He looks tired and worn down, a reminder of how badly we both need this trip.

“Hey, honey,” I call from the bedroom, studying him down the direct path to the kitchen. I fold the shirt in my hands, place it in the open suitcase on the bed, and make my way across the room, through the living room, and toward him. “What's wrong?”

He scrubs a hand over the back of his neck, looking away. “I, um, I think we might need to cancel the trip.”

My throat is tight as I stare at him. “What? Why?” *The trip* is our babymoon—a vacation he’s been promising me for months, to make up for the fact that the baby will be here when we should be celebrating our honeymoon.

His emerald eyes find mine, weary and filled with a sadness I don’t understand. “Something’s...come up.”

Story of our lives lately. “What do you mean? Work? You promised me you’d take the extra days off.” My hands move instinctively toward my growing belly. “It’ll be our last chance before the baby’s here.”

“I know.” He licks his lips, looking away. “I know. I just...it’s not work.”

“Then what is it? You’re scaring me.”

His eyes find mine again, and he nods, like he’s confirming something within himself. “I need to tell you something.”

CHAPTER TWO

HIM — BEFORE

The moment she walks into the lecture hall, every part of my body seems to sense her. There is something different about her demure smile, the way she carries herself. She's confident in a way that draws me to her like a magnet. She takes a seat near the back, opens up her laptop, and crosses one leg over the other, so I can see just a bit more leg under her plaid skirt. I suspect she's doing it on purpose. That she wants me to look, to climb her skin with my gaze like a child on a jungle gym.

A boy sits next to her, and I realize I don't recognize either of them. Granted, I don't recognize many students in this class since I've just stepped in to pass a message to Professor Hazelwood, but if I had seen her anywhere around campus, I'm certain I would remember it.

"Is something the matter?" Professor Hazelwood asks, drawing my attention back to her. She's a squat old woman with gray hair that she always piles on top of her head. Today, there's a coffee stain on her white blouse and maroon lipstick applied as if she were riding a donkey when she did it. She's tenured, so I suppose she's my superior, but in every way that matters, she is useless.

"Sorry, no. That was all." I move around to the front of the desk, lingering near it while Professor Hazelwood goes back to sorting a stack of papers. As she does, I study the girl, waiting for her eyes to lock on mine. She's

traditionally beautiful, with delicate features and a perfect build. My eyes trace the line of her gold necklace, a single pearl resting on her chest, touching her heartbeat.

How many times has she walked past me in the halls or across the campus? How many times have I overlooked her in such an ordinary place? It feels impossible, and yet it has to be the case. The university isn't enormous. We're one of the smaller ones in the city. Chances are we've stood next to each other in line at the coffee cart or passed side by side in the library.

When it finally happens, when her eyes finally find mine, there's a jolt of electricity that hits me everywhere. Suddenly, she's shy. Her eyes land on mine for just a moment, then dart away as if she's been caught doing something naughty.

Then...they're back. As is her confidence from moments ago.

This time, she straightens a little in her seat, ignoring the boy next to her as he says something.

I tilt my head down just slightly, giving an air of authority with a hint of friendliness. The kind of look that says I'm one of the cool professors. I could be your friend.

And I am. I could. It's not a lie. The students here think of me as one of them. I'm not that much older than most of them anyway—midthirties. It's nothing. A blip.

Her perfect cupid's bow lips upturn with a small smile, and finally, painfully, I drag my eyes away. Behind me, Professor Hazelwood clears her throat as the door slams and the final student makes his way to his seat.

"Welcome, everyone. Let's all get settled down." Her voice is pointed directly at me, warning me to leave, that I've overstepped.

With a nod and a quick glance back her way, something meant to look like an apology, I leave the class. I take the long way, though. Up the stairs, past the girl.

I don't look at her—not much at least. But I don't need to. I have the memory of her face, those eyes, that body, seared into my mind.

CHAPTER THREE

HER — PRESENT DAY

The air kicks on in the small kitchen, filling the silence with the sound of white noise. Though I hear it, I don't move, don't look over. Instead, my gaze is locked entirely on Calvin and the devastation etched there in his features.

"Okay." My voice sounds shaky and unfamiliar. No positive conversation has ever started with *I need to tell you something* and certainly not on Friday the thirteenth. "What is it?"

He rubs his lips together aggressively and takes hold of my arm, nudging me backward. "Let's sit."

"Let's not," I snap. I'm tired. My back hurts. My feet hurt. My hips hurt. This baby is pressing on my lungs and bladder in equal measure, and if he's about to take the one thing I've been looking forward to away from me, I'm not going to accept it with a smile. "Tell me right here."

His thumbs smooth over the skin of my arms, and I grip on to the wooden kitchen chair to my right for support.

"Why can't we go?"

Slowly, with a look that reeks of regret, he drops his hand and pulls out his phone. "I got an email today."

"From the dean or something? We've had this trip planned for over a month now. You said it was already approved."

Scratching his temple, he looks down at the screen, swiping through it before he looks back at me. “It was...” His eyes search mine, seeking answers I can’t provide. A reassurance I can’t muster in my gut. “Look, I had no idea, okay? When I got to work, I had an email from someone who claims...” Another sigh. A puff of air that feels charged with pain. “She says she’s my daughter.”

Ice water splashes across my skin as I stare at him, processing the impossibility of his words. “Your daughter.” It’s all I can bring myself to utter.

He nods. “I guess she found me through the university. I had no idea...” He trails off, and I’m not sure how he was planning to finish that sentence.

“You had no idea she existed or no idea she’d contact you?” I glare at him. If I was talking to my mother, she’d say this is the sort of thing you get when you jump into a relationship with someone you hardly know, but I do know Cal. I know who he is. I know how he loves me.

A year ago, I met him in class, and there was an instant connection. Getting pregnant so quickly wasn’t exactly in the plan, but I wouldn’t change it now. At least if you’d asked me seven minutes ago, that’s what I would’ve said.

Now, I don’t know what to think. Everything feels different. Wrong. Ruined, somehow.

“I had no idea she existed.” He smooths a hand across my back. “I swear to you.”

“But you believe her? You think she’s telling the truth?”

He looks down, running his tongue over his bottom lip. When he looks back up, his nod is subtle. “Her story lines up, yes. There was a girl I dated back in high school, but we lost touch after graduation. I left for college, and she stayed in our hometown. She...” He runs a hand through his hair. “She tried to call me a few times, but once I was in school, I thought the best thing to do was have a clean break. I knew I was never going back there, and I didn’t want to make her think there was a chance for us.”

Reminiscing on his past relationship is about as comfortable as washing my face with sandpaper, but I push forward with the questions anyway. “And where is she now? Have you spoken to her? Confirmed that this girl’s story is even true?” Briefly, an image flashes through my mind—a snapshot in time of our future wedding, his ex sitting in the front row, next to a daughter neither of us knew anything about. How can this be possible? “The woman? Did you try to reach out to her? The girl’s...mother.” My hand goes to my stomach again as I feel our daughter kick. Suddenly, what once seemed so intimate and special about our relationship has been wiped away as quickly as chalk on a chalkboard. A distant memory. Moments ago, I had the unique privilege of carrying his child. Now it’s possible someone else had that privilege first.

With a long breath, he reveals, “No, she, um, she died. But before she passed, she showed the girl pictures of me, told her about me, I guess. And, now that she’s older, she decided to find me. She’s living in Nashville now, too, actually. She said she wants to get to know her father.”

I suck in a sharp breath, processing everything he’s told me in such a short time. “She died.”

He nods, his lips drawn into a tight line. “Yeah. Several years ago, apparently. When the girl was young. I hadn’t heard, but I looked up her obituary after the girl—um, *Janelle*—after Janelle told me. It’s true, from what I can tell.”

“Janelle is...the daughter? *Your* daughter?”

His nod, the truth in it, shatters my heart. “I’m so sorry.”

I know sitting with your feelings and being open about everything is all trendy and hip now, but honestly, I’m not that person. I hate being sad. I hate crying. I hate dealing with my feelings in any way if I can avoid it. It’s not totally healthy, I get that, but it’s always served me well until this pregnancy, which seems to have taken the reins on my emotions, forcing me to be vulnerable in a way I never have. Still, I force away the sadness bubbling in my gut like a shaken can of Sprite.

Really, what does he have to be sorry for? It's not like he lied. This isn't an affair. He didn't know any more than I did, but still, I feel betrayed. When his hand reaches forward for my arm, I jerk away on instinct. "What are you going to do?"

"I..." He pauses, rebounding from the retraction. "I don't know, I guess. I wanted to talk to you before I did anything."

"But you don't want to go on vacation anymore, so clearly you've made that decision on your own."

His face wrinkles as he leans toward me, struggling to understand. "I assumed you wouldn't want to."

"This is the last trip before the baby comes. And once the baby's here, we won't have time for a trip for just the two of us for a long time. No honeymoon. Nothing. I don't know what the rest of this will mean. I need time to process, but if we're going to do it, I want to go on the trip that we planned. We can't let this derail everything. We both said we need this vacation."

The wrinkles on his face smooth out as he processes what I've said. "You still want to go? Together?"

I don't know. The truth is I don't know anything, but I refuse to let her win like this. I refuse to hand him over just because this daughter has come out of nowhere to disrupt our lives.

Our daughter deserves his attention, as do I. "Yeah. I do."

He leans forward to kiss my lips, and I let him, though it's unenthusiastic.

"And I want to meet her," I tell him. "Before the baby, but after the trip."

"Whatever you want."

It's funny, though. I don't want any of this.

CHAPTER FOUR

HIM — BEFORE

The coffee shop is buzzing with students milling about, chatting over their laptops and mugs of fancy drinks. On average days, I avoid this place like the plague. My spot is across town. They play normal music, offer sizes in plain English, with flavors and varieties that sound like words you might've heard before, and have lights that actually work and aren't strangely dim for inexplicable reasons.

Today, I'm here. For her.

She's here because why the hell wouldn't she be? It's where the cool kids go, where they *hang* or *chill* or whatever they do these days. It doesn't take long for me to scan the crowd and find her sitting at a table with two other girls her age.

I cross the coffee shop slowly, the plan still coming together in my head. When I reach the table where she's sitting, my hip bumps it. The move is gentle enough it could be an honest accident.

If I were an honest man.

So I stop, like any gentleman would do. "*Oh. Oops.* Sorry about that." I smile at the girls as they grab their drinks, careful they don't spill on their laptops. I place my hands on the table, steadying it. "Everyone okay?"

They nod in unison, uttering various versions of niceties to let me know there's no lasting damage. I take my time studying each of them. They're

lovely, truly. In that way that screams youth.

I'm not exactly decrepit, okay? Just a decade-ish older than they are, but there is something vast that separates us. A lifetime of lived experiences. They still think they have all the time in the world, but I know I no longer do.

I smile at the three women—each one pretty, but not as pretty as *the* one. My eyes find her last, landing on her lazily as if I'm not really paying attention and can't be bothered to care about her.

When I do, she's staring at me. Hard.

As if she's just been waiting for me to find her. As if she's been waiting for this exact moment, where our paths would cross again outside of the classroom. Outside of the university.

As if...

As if she doesn't recognize me at all, but she wants to.

"Hi," she says, breathless. Has she been thinking about me as much as I've been thinking about her? Or is it possible she doesn't realize who I am? It's hard to be offended when the opportunities this provides just became so clear.

"Hi." I hold out my hand toward her. "I don't think we've met, but I'm sorry for the spill. May I buy you a new drink?"

She takes my hand slowly, and I wait for her to correct me, to ruin everything by telling me she knows exactly who I am, but she doesn't. Instead, her perfect lips press together with a grin just before she says, "Actually..." She glances at the tiny spill on the table—not nearly enough to warrant a new drink—and returns her gaze to mine. "That sounds perfect."

CHAPTER FIVE

HER — PRESENT DAY

The car ride to the cabin is mostly quiet. I turn my music on shuffle, but even when my favorite songs come on, I can't bring myself to sing along. Everything feels scrambled, as if the puzzle we've just finally finished working on, meticulously putting together piece by piece, has been smashed by a pair of fists in a split second. As if the beautiful picture I had for our life now lies with corners here and edges there.

This trip was supposed to be special. Beautiful. Romantic. Instead, it's forever tainted. I don't know that there is any way to recover from this, but what does that mean for the child growing in my stomach right now? Will this family be broken before she's brought into it? Will she never get to see the beautiful puzzle I crafted for her?

I meant what I said earlier—I understand this isn't Calvin's fault. Or, rather, there's no one to blame. I understand that he hasn't done anything wrong, but it hurts all the same. I feel as if something priceless has been stolen from me, and it's impossible it will ever be returned.

Is it selfish to wish the daughter had never come forward? That we'd been allowed to live in blissful ignorance for the rest of our lives? Foolish, perhaps, but preferable.

What is she hoping for anyway? She's grown. Twenty-five or so, from what Cal has said. Is she actually looking for a father figure? Why? We have

no money, no resources to share. We're strangers to her. We could be awful people.

At the same time, some smaller part of me wants to see things from her point of view. As someone who grew up without a father, I would've given anything to know him, even if I were to only be given the chance as an adult. It's not her fault she didn't get this opportunity until now. The rational part of my brain knows that we never stop wanting our parents, needing to understand where and whom we come from. But I'm not feeling so rational right now. I'm just feeling hurt and alone.

I fight against the tears stinging my eyes, feeling angry and exhausted and devastated and selfish all at once. I hate what this revelation has done to my stability, both in my life and in my head. I feel as if I'm standing on steadily cracking ground, as if everything I knew this morning when I woke up has been torn away from me, crumbled as easily as a piece of toast.

I don't want to be this woman. You always think you'd be better. Stronger. That you'd react better than the woman you're watching go through it. That you'd say he should have a relationship with his surprise daughter, that he absolutely should do whatever he feels is right, and you'll be here no matter what. The rock. The stable ground.

But believing it and doing it are two different things, and right now I'm incapable of maintaining a shred of dignity. I only want to curl up and cry, to let my mother console me as she so often did when I was a child.

That's one of the most painful parts of all of this. Doing the pregnancy without her has been hard enough, and that's not to mention the upcoming wedding and the birth of her grandchild. Now I long for another conversation. At least one that's not one-sided.

I can talk and talk as much as I like, but it's been nearly a year since my mother recognized me. Most days she thinks I'm her sister, Wendy, who passed away before her sixteenth birthday. Some days she thinks I'm a nurse in her care home.

It doesn't get easier. Some small part of me always hopes she'll recover—that she'll defy the odds and come back from this. That one day I'll walk into

her room at the nursing home, and she'll smile up at me and say my name, apologize for being gone for so long, and swear to me she'll never leave again. I dream that she'll hold her first grandchild, that she'll walk me down the aisle like we've always talked about her doing, that she'll be here for the important moments that remain.

But it's just a pipe dream. An impossibility as realistic as Calvin telling me this whole thing with his long-lost daughter is a joke.

As if she can sense my sadness, our daughter kicks me, and I can see the ripple of movement under my skin through my shirt. It's as if she wants to remind me that I'm not alone. That we're in this together. Us against the world.

I glance over at Cal, the man who was supposed to be different, who was supposed to show me the perfect example of a father for our daughter when I never had one to look up to. Suddenly, the sheen that once radiated off of him has dimmed.

Suddenly, he's looking less like my perfect fiancé and more human than ever before.

The dark roads are blanketed in a thin layer of white snow, the dark lines our tires carve into the white being covered just as fast as they appear. I knew from watching the weather there would be light snow in Tennessee today, nothing really to worry about, but that doesn't make the ascent up the mountain any less terrifying.

Seeming to sense my fear, Cal reaches across to my seat and takes my hand. I'm too nervous to even try to pull away from him.

"Don't worry. I've got you. It's just snow," he says, with that charming smile on his lips like I'm being foolish. "It's not slick."

"I told you we should've come yesterday, before the snow set in." I've been watching the weather all week, worrying about the storm coming in despite Cal's insistence we would be fine.

"We couldn't get the cabin early. I never heard back from the owners. Besides, I had class."