

CHAPTER 1

The unforgiving edge of Lily's familiar porcelain pillow dug deep into her already-throbbing head. Lily's stomach flipped at the reek of last night's unflushed, poor decisions, and she dry heaved uselessly into the bowl. She either didn't eat much last night or she had already given everything over to the sewers. Each option was just as likely, judging by the agonizing pounding beneath her temples. Probably both, if she was honest with herself.

Jaimie must have had a reason to celebrate last night if Lily allowed herself to go this far—not that she needed much of an excuse. No, just about everyone in the small coastal town of Maplebrook knew to find Lily at the Smoky Pine Bar, either drinking in front of it or serving behind it. Still, it took a special occasion for Lily to get blackout drunk. She racked her brain to remember what had happened last night, but she retched again as she caught another whiff of the bowl's contents. Lily flushed the toilet and sighed as she watched a lock of her long brown hair swirl in the quickly disappearing vomit. She didn't count how many times she flushed after that, resting her head on the seat and watching that lock of hair drag through the now-clean falling and rising water.

Four years later and Lily's sister—in every way but blood—had moved on just fine. It had only taken a few months of mourning for Jaimie to move on with her life, yet Lily was still adrift. Still drowning those painful memories in an ocean of alcohol. Even Jaimie had stopped offering to talk to her about it, resigning to bear witness to her best friend's self-destruction. Lily finally lifted her aching head from the toilet and turned, leaning onto the mildew-stained bathtub. She shivered against the freezing porcelain tub, the grimy tile of her dark bathroom floor, and the

water streaming off her hair that seeped through her shirt and into her chest. She couldn't be bothered to stop it. Couldn't be bothered to stop wallowing.

Only the banging drum of a hangover pulled out this level of pathetic self-pity, and somehow the silence of sobriety was worse. When she was sober, the dark memories of the past and the anxiety of knowing what she had become skittered across her body just beneath the skin like a million lightning-fast worms desperately searching for escape. So, Lily drank, and Jaimie lived life for them both. The perfect job as an elementary school teacher, the perfect little house. Jaimie was thriving, her perfect smile always on display. She even had the perfect, rich boyfriend who lived in the historic Queen Anne-style estate on the edge of town. Mr. Finnian Hawthorne was too busy to visit the Smoky Pine. Too busy to meet his girlfriend's best friend.

Ah—that was the celebration. Jaimie had finally convinced Mr. Fancy-Pants to sleep with her, and Jaimie needed a shot of liquid courage before showtime. Lily knew many patrons at the bar thought Jaimie was a prude for being a virgin at the age of twenty-five, but Lily thought her conviction of waiting for the right one was adorable. Admirable, even. Lily smiled despite the throbbing pain behind her eyes, remembering how nervous Jaimie had been outside Hawthorne Manor. Jaimie took ages to build her courage even with Lily constantly hyping her up.

She had started up the steep, rough-cut granite steps of the manor more times than Lily could count before running back giggling to where Lily stood on the street. Jaimie's poor nose had turned as bright as her red lipstick when she had finally smiled at Lily, promised to tell her everything the next day at the Smoky Pine during Lily's lunch break, and sprinted up the entirety of the stairs. A butler opened the door as soon as she slammed the large brass knocker home, as if he had been watching them the entire time. Jaimie sent a small smile Lily's way before disappearing through the tall oak doors. Her trailing golden hair was the only wave goodbye.

Lily couldn't wait to hear about Jaimie's night. Was the youngest Hawthorne brother good in bed, or did he let his rugged good looks and family money do the heavy lifting? She stretched her legs out in front of her and knocked something over with a soft clunk. Someone had left one of her blue sports drinks within reach and stuck a note to it. Lily smiled again as she read it.

You made me wait outside that stupid house for an hour in the cold, and then you passed out before I could get that sweet ass of yours out of those pants. You owe me.

-Alex

A small laugh escaped her lips as she cracked open the drink and took a deep swig. Lily must have been out-of-this-world drunk if she had finally accepted Alex's advances. He was a thug and a creep, but he had brought her passed-out ass home, put her by the toilet, and left her a drink. A respectful, gentlemanly creep, then. The world still had good people in it, still had good reasons to look to the future instead of the past.

Damn. Was Lily becoming an optimist?

She needed to get to work and pour herself a stiff drink. Determined, she stood and started the shower. In a few quick gulps, Lily finished the sports drink and went to remove her shirt but paused as a loud burst of knocks sounded from the front door of her apartment. There was no way in hell Lily was going to answer that. Her thrown shirt landed in the corner of the bathroom on a large pile of dirty and soiled clothes, and relief flooded through her as she unclasped her bra.

Her pants were around her ankles when the knocking sounded again followed by a deep voice shouting, "Maplebrook Police Department."

Lily groaned. What trouble had she and Alex gotten into on the way home? The police knocked on the door again and called out impatiently. Lily swore and walked clumsily out of the bathroom while pulling up her pants. Barely impeded by the threadbare curtains hung on the opposite wall, sunlight streamed into the cluttered room, revealing the pile of dirty dishes on her nightstand, the unmade bed, a thick layer of dust coating every surface, and another couple piles of clothes both clean and dirty. Lily's face flushed at the thought of Alex seeing her place in this state. First, she passed out on him, then he had seen this pigsty of an apartment, and he *still* wanted to get in her pants? He was either out of his mind or desperate.

Lily grabbed a wrinkled shirt from a clean pile and slipped it on as the police pounded on the front door so hard pain lanced through her head with each knock. She left her bedroom and quickly crossed her small apartment. Lily opened the door and flinched against the painfully bright morning light. Shielding her eyes, she saw the silhouette of large police officer step back from the door and lower his huge fist to his side, resting it on his pistol.

A jolt of fear ran across her body, just under the skin. This was serious. She strained to remember what they had done to deserve a visit from Maplebrook's finest but came up blank.

A slender woman stepped up into the doorframe and said, "Lily Foster?" Her voice was soft, not like the voice of a police officer about to arrest a drunk menace.

A small amount of worry unraveled inside of Lily and escaped with her small sigh, but icy dread still gripped her heart. What was going on?

Lily blinked against the blinding light and saw the officers clearly for the first time. She was shocked to find they weren't in police uniforms but instead in finely tailored suits. The brute of an officer stood a few paces back from his partner. His massive chest barely fit into his dark, buttoned shirt, and his mouth sat in a tight line above his square chin. He lowered his head,

pulled off his knit cap—the only casual part of his attire—and tucked it into his armpit. When his light eyes met Lily's, she found nothing but kindness . . . and sorrow.

The ice surrounding Lily's heart spread throughout her chest making it hard to breathe. The woman standing before Lily was dressed in a sleek gray pantsuit with a shining gold badge tucked into her belt. Her tightly curled hair was pulled back into a ponytail revealing a round, kind face.

She swallowed and asked again, "Miss Foster?"

Lily instinctually took a step back, trying to escape from what was about to shatter her world. "What is this?" she asked.

"Miss Foster, my name is Detective Maya Bailey. I'm here with my partner Travis Bingham," she said, gesturing to the large man behind her. She opened her mouth to speak again but closed it. After a breath she looked into Lily's eyes with nothing but regret and said, "I'm afraid you're going to have to come with us, Miss Foster. Your friend Jaimie Mitchell has been found dead."