

chapter ONE

I didn't want to go to Paris. Not that I had a choice or anything, but if someone had bothered to ask me how I wanted to spend the summer before my senior year, I would have voted to take all my closest friends to an amazing beach house in California or Florida or something and spend the summer lying out and having fun. Realistically, though—because while my family is comfortable, we're definitely not beach house comfortable—I would have opted just to stay with my best friends in Willow Grove. Lacey, Nikki, and I would spend our days in the good chairs at the pool (now that we were seniors, we could claim the best spots) and nights hanging out together with our group of friends. And on the weekends, when he was free from his internship at his father's law office, Jake and I would go anywhere

we could be alone, whether that meant hanging out in his basement or on the golf course behind his house or even just driving around the dark country roads. Because even though Iowa isn't the most exciting place in the world, I would rather be with my friends at home than be all alone in stupid Paris, where I'd been treated like slave labor and everything smelled bad.

Seeing as how I wasn't given a choice, though, I have to admit there was a tiny part of me that had hoped Paris would work its magic on me, and I'd come home at the end of the summer all Sabrina-ed up, transformed from prom queen runner-up to elegant, worldly Audrey Hepburn-esque homecoming queen. Not that I was mad at Lacey for winning prom queen last spring—we were best friends, so her winning was almost as good as me winning. I just figured that it was my turn to be in the spotlight, and if Paris could help, then at least I could get one good thing out of my summer.

But even though the only fashion choices I had made involved choosing new clothes for the baby after she'd pooped through her diaper, up to that last morning in Paris, I kept a small shred of hope that the city would transfer some of its elegance and allure to me.

Ten minutes into my triumphant return to Iowa, that plan did not seem to be working.

Instead of sweeping across the jet bridge into the airport as I'd imagined—fresh, cool, newly adult—I hobbled behind an old man who had smashed my toes with his

cane. The flight from Paris to Chicago had been bad enough—I'd been pinned between the window and an enormously fat man, my shoulder pressed against the plastic airplane wall in an effort to make myself as small and contained as possible to avoid any further contact with the masses of flesh hanging over our shared armrest. Our plane circled Chicago for almost an hour, sweeping out over Lake Michigan and back, due to traffic on the tarmac or who knows what, but by the time we finally landed, I had to sprint across the airport in four-inch heels, push my way through customs, jump on a stupid train thing to get from the international terminal to the whole other side of the airport, and then run all the way to the end of the concourse. I arrived sweaty, panting, and bruised from where my bag kept hitting me as I ran, only to be seated directly in front of a screaming baby whose every breath gave me PTSD flashbacks to the summer, with Mrs. Easton crying and Mr. Easton yelling and the baby screaming its red little face off. Getting stomped on by Gramps was a fantastic finale to the whole hideous thing.

When I finally limped past security, looking less like Sabrina and more like an escapee from the asylum, I was almost happy to see my mother. At least she couldn't dump me on the spot, as I was sure Jake would do if he saw me in this state. My mother stood at a slight angle, the Leaning Tower of Jacque, with one tanned arm perched on her hip and one hanging down casually at her side, holding a trendy bag. She wore Jackie O sunglasses ("My

namesake!” she always said), and her hair was swept up in a neat summer do. She looked less like a mom and more like a cool older sister.

“Hey,” I said, reaching her. “Where’s Lacey and Nikki? Where’s Jake?”

“What happened to you?” She held me at an arm’s length. “Did you have to ride in the baggage hold?”

I sighed. “There were fat people and screaming babies and running . . . I’m just tired.”

“Oh, honey,” my mother said. “It’s always a good idea to stop in the restroom to freshen up before you leave the terminal.”

“I know.” I did know. I’d been flying with my mother for seventeen years, and each flight required a stop to freshen up. I should have gone directly from my flight to a sink and mirror, but after traveling for eighteen-plus hours, I was so tired that my fatigue seemed to take on physical properties of its own, like it could stand beside me and pull at my hair and clothes.

She glanced around. “This airport is so small, you never know who might see you. You can’t take any chances right now. Not after—”

“Mom,” I said. “I know.”

My mother wrapped her arms around me loosely, raising her voice almost imperceptibly. “I’m so happy you’re home! I missed you! My little girl is all grown up!”

“Okay,” I said. “Seriously, though, where is everybody?”

“I thought we could spend some time together, just the

two of us,” she said. “Plus, the Austins’ barbeque is tonight. I’m sure they’re helping with it.”

Helping? My friends? I loved them, but I wouldn’t exactly call them helpful. Well, Nikki maybe, even Jake, but if Lacey was doing anything but lying out I would eat my boarding pass.

My mother pulled away and started walking toward the baggage claim. “Let’s get your luggage and then go get some lunch. I’m just dying to hear all about Paris.”

I stopped. “What?” She didn’t notice, and I had to kind of shuffle-jog to catch up with her. “You’re dying to hear about Paris?”

The people from my flight had positioned themselves around the baggage carousel. Baby McScreamy was peacefully snoozing in a hippie sling across its mother’s chest. The old man who’d crushed my toes was sitting in a wheelchair at the U-turn. Probably looking for someone else to maim.

“Of course, honey!” My mother planted herself strategically behind a giant linebacker-type guy. “The lights, the museums, the food! The men!” She winked at me, then checked her skinny gold watch. “I hope this doesn’t take too long.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “Lights? Food? I spent the whole time babysitting.”

“Paris is so romantic,” my mother said, and the linebacker turned to give her a smile.

“Romantic?” My mind played a slide show of my summer

in Paris: Nights lying as still as possible on a tiny twin bed, waiting for the ancient fan's breeze to sweep across my face. Borrowing the baby's diaper cream to treat my own heat rash. The time the Eastons left for the opera together and came home separately, an hour apart, both so drunk they were practically crawling, and so hungover the next morning that I had to take the baby on my day off. The man in Aix-en-Provence who had lifted his little daughter over a street planter so she could pee, and how she smiled hazily at passersby as it trickled down between her legs. The time Mrs. Easton threw a piece of expensive china at her husband's head and it flew straight out the window, only to hit a pigeon on the next rooftop and knock it flat dead. "Are you joking?"

"What girl wouldn't kill to be an au pair for the summer?" The linebacker turned around again, and my mother asked him, "Am I right?"

"Sure." He looked her up and down and turned to me. "Listen to your sister."

My mother giggled. "Sister! This is my daughter."

"No way," he said. "You can't be a day over twenty-five."

"Oh, you!" my mother said, and turned to me. "Every girl dreams of spending the summer in Paris. Being an au pair will look so great on your college applications, all that responsibility and international experience!"

"Mother. I was not an au pair! For one thing, au pairs get paid. I was not paid." The baggage carousel grumbled to life, and the first bag tumbled down the ramp.

“They fed you. And housed you! In Paris!”

“What’s your bag look like?” the linebacker asked.

“In exchange for slave labor,” I said. “It was in their best interest to keep me alive so I could continue to do everything for them.”

The linebacker said, “This one’s mine,” and scooped up one of those gigantic hockey bags, slinging it across his shoulders.

My mother rolled her eyes at me, and winked at the linebacker. “Teenagers.”

“For another thing,” I said, “au pairs are supposed to have days off. Like, regularly! Every time I tried to take a day off, Mrs. Easton would cry and beg me to take the baby ‘just this one time.’”

“Oh, there’s your bag!” My mother pointed, and the linebacker grabbed it and swung it off the carousel in one clean motion.

“Where are you parked?” he asked my mother. “I could carry this out for you.”

She put up a token fight but quickly demurred when he insisted. “And they say chivalry is dead!”

He followed her out of the terminal, trotting like a puppy. I thought about calling Lacey or Nikki to pick me up and hiding in a bathroom until they came and rescued me. But my cell phone was still at home in Willow Grove, probably still resting in the top drawer of my mother’s dresser, where she put everything she took away from us, and I was so tired I just wanted to go home, crawl into my

bed, and sleep until everything melted away and I could wake up brand-new at the beginning of my senior year and shake the whole summer off like a long bad dream.

So I followed her, as I'd done my entire life. Nothing, really, had changed.

chapter TWO

My mother talked the whole way home. I tuned in and out, hearing snippets of gossip and updates about her job and something about someone's cat, but mostly I was looking out the window, trying to see every single leaf on every single tree before we passed it. Paris had been beautiful at times, like one night when I'd managed to slip away from the stuffy apartment and walk through the streets alone and ended up on this stone bridge and everything was quiet and I could see the Eiffel Tower lit up in the distance. But I'd missed Iowa, more than I'd even realized: green as far as you can see, the horizon stretching all the way to the sky without a single building interrupting it.

"And I thought we could do our annual shopping trip to Chicago this weekend, even though I'm sure you picked up tons of great clothes in Paris, because I want to take you

over to campus and show you the sorority house and maybe see if we can introduce you to some nice girls who might have some insights about the application process. . . .”

We drove across the bridge just outside of town, broad concrete rather than narrow stone, but the river beneath us was wide and clean and sparkling in the August sun. After the bridge it was just another two miles into Willow Grove, first the chain stores on the outskirts and then the cute little shops around the central park downtown.

“. . . started thinking about what you’re going to wear on the first day of school? Because you really need to make a strong impression after what happened last spring. But, of course, if you remind everyone you spent the summer in Paris, that should help people forget—”

“We have a stoplight now?” I asked.

My mother glanced up at the red light over the intersection, seeming surprised. “Yes, I suppose they did just install that in June. I’m so used to it already!”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She laughed. “It’s just a stoplight, sweetheart.”

I slouched in my seat. “It would have been nice to know, that’s all.”

The light turned green and we rolled forward, heading down Main Street. The houses were a familiar assortment of one-story ranches, small square boxes, cute bungalows, and nice big Victorians, but my eyes were peeled for any other changes my mother had failed to mention: new siding on this house, a stump on that corner where there used

to be a tall oak tree. When we finally pulled into our own driveway, I stiffened. “You painted the front door.”

“Don’t you love it? I know red is such a bold choice, but Stella said it would improve our curb appeal, and as usual she was right!”

“I think it sucks.” I got out of the car and slammed the door behind me, leaving my bags in the trunk for my mother to deal with.

I felt more human after a much-needed nap, shower, and luxuriously long primping session in preparation for the Austins’ barbeque. I wouldn’t make the same mistake twice in one day: the first time Jake saw me would be perfect. The sounds of my mother and sister yelling at each other floated upstairs, and I listened idly as I pumiced my feet. While I was gone, Miranda had gotten her driver’s license, cashed in four years of babysitting money for a beater Honda, dyed her hair burgundy, and changed her name to “Mirror.” I’d left behind a gangly, geeky freshman and came back to find an angry alternaten.

The yelling seemed to wear itself out with a few last slammed doors, and I gave myself a final appraisal in the mirror. My hair was darker than it had been in years, thanks to a summer away from my colorist, but it was kind of working. I pursed my lips thoughtfully. I might pull off the Audrey transformation thing yet.

My mother seemed relieved to see me looking more like myself. “Isn’t that so much better, honey?”

“I love my shower,” I said. “I love my bed and my closet and my window, but mostly I love my shower.”

My sister stood in the corner, scowling. “What’s so great about it?”

“Water pressure is a beautiful thing, Miranda, my dear. In Paris—”

“My name is Mirror.” Her voice was a shard of glass. “Can I go now? I’m picking up Jeremy, and the movie starts at six.”

“You know, honey,” my mother said, ignoring her, “if you’d just take a little rejuvenating spritzer on the plane with you, like I suggested, your skin wouldn’t look so sallow after traveling.”

I felt my shoulders sag. “I know that, Mother. But I didn’t have—”

“Can I go?” my sister asked, interrupting me again. We had been on the same team as kids, us against Mom, until about middle school, when all the things our mother had nagged us about over the years—*stand up straight, you don’t want to look cheap; don’t frown, you’ll get wrinkles; brush your hair, it looks like a rat’s nest; no more cookies, you don’t want to get fat; smile, you never know who might be falling in love with you!*—suddenly made sense to me. Seemed important. I wanted in on my mother’s secrets. The triangle shifted its balance and I allied myself with our mother, leaving Miranda out in the distance, the lonely isosceles angle.

My mother sighed. “Fine. But I want you home by ten. And please say goodbye to Daddy before you go.”

Miranda gave me a superior look. “Have fun at the Austin Freakshow.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. I hadn’t seen Jake since June. It was stupid, but I was nervous to see him again. What if things were weird? What if I didn’t live up to his memory of me? Had I embarrassed myself in the letters I’d sent him? I’d filled up an entire notebook with letters to him and to Lacey, but I’d gotten only postcards and short notes in reply. But that was because they were busy—normal people didn’t have time to write long letters anymore, not unless you were stuck all by yourself without a cell phone or email in a country where you didn’t even speak the language.

“Like you don’t know,” my sister said. “Stella can’t even move her face from all the botulism she gets injected in it—”

“It’s called Botox,” my mother interrupted. “And it’s not cheap.”

I had a brief pang of jealousy that Miranda had seen Jake all summer. Of course my mother would have dragged her over to the Austins’ when Stella needed help with the latest wedding. Not that I imagined they were suddenly best friends—I doubted they’d even talked—but she got to be in the same room with him while I would have killed just to be in the same country.

“—and Jake’s dad is always pulling weird macho head trips on Jake, challenging him to play H-O-R-S-E or whatever, putting him in headlocks, calling him a pussy if he doesn’t want to go hunting with him,” Miranda continued. “Major creepers.”

“Whatever, Miranda. He’s just messing around.”

She shrugged. “Okay. And I’m sure he’ll be just messing around when he ties some gay kid to the back of a truck and drags him down the highway.”

“God! Exaggerate much?”

“Miranda!” my mother snapped. “The Austins are good people. If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.”

My sister rolled her eyes. “Sorry, Mommie Dearest.” She spun lazily and headed up to her room, stomping each foot as she went.

“Well!” My mother flashed me a brilliant smile. “Don’t mind her; she’s going through a difficult phase!” She reached up to untuck a strand of hair from behind my ear and style it casually around my face. “Anyway, it’s been hard for her, trying to follow in your footsteps. She looks up to you, Paige.”

“She does?” I could smell my mother’s perfume, lemony and light, and I had a sudden impulse to hug her.

“Of course she does.” She finished pulling at my hair and stepped back, scrutinizing her work. “It can’t be easy to follow her perfect older sister.”

“I’m not perfect.”

“You know what I mean.” She glanced in the hall mirror, which hung above a faux-antique, faux-French writing desk, straightening first the collar of her shirt and then the mirror itself. “Stand up straight, honey; slouching adds five pounds.”

My mother timed our arrival at the party so we weren't the first ones there, but we weren't the last, either. The long driveway was lined with cars, like beads on a necklace, and we had to walk a ways to get up to the front door. My heart pounded with a mix of anticipation and nerves. Automatically, I glanced at his bedroom window, but it was empty. From the front, the house looked nearly abandoned, save for the catering truck parked near the garage on the side of the house. Everyone would be gathered around the pool in back.

The Austins' house was on a small hill overlooking a golf course. The neighborhood was shaped like a saucer, with the houses perched around the rim and the golf course in the sunken middle. The homes all had huge yards bordering the course, and Jake's yard was the largest, dropping sharply down from the pool into a terraced retaining wall and then to a long, manicured green space that blended seamlessly into the fourteenth hole. Thick stands of trees on both sides blocked direct views of the neighbors, though on a nice day you could stand right at the edge of the terrace and peer around the curve of the course to see Lacey's house up by the eleventh. Nikki lived

in an older, slightly dumpier development near the front entrance of the course. My mother had been scheming to move us out to this neighborhood since she first started working for Stella Austin, but sometimes I suspected she secretly loved our strange, sprawling Victorian in town.

Mrs. Austin greeted us at the door, kissing my mother on both cheeks and my father on the mouth. “Just give that to the bartender,” she told him, gesturing to the bottle of wine my mother had spent twenty minutes agonizing over in the store. “Paige!” She kissed me on both cheeks. “How was Paris? Did you make it to the spa I suggested?”

“I didn’t really have . . .”

But she had already turned to my mother. “Jacque, I’m so glad you followed my suggestion! Paige seems so mature now! And what girl wouldn’t kill to be an au pair for the summer?”

My mother nodded. “Oh, I agree completely.” She turned to my father and mimicked Mrs. Austin’s tone. “Dear, why don’t you take that back to the bartender?”

Mrs. Austin looked at me for a moment, appraising. “A summer in Paris,” she said at last. “Oh, to be young again!”

“I know!” my mother agreed. “I would love to be an au pair! Free room and board, and the best part? You get to give the baby back at the end of the day!”

Mrs. Austin laughed and waved toward the back of the house. “Everyone’s out by the pool, dear. Please remind Jake to reapply sunblock; I can’t have him peeling in the church directory pictures next week.”

As if I were already gone, Mrs. Austin grabbed my mother by the arm and dragged her toward the kitchen. “Now, about the McIntyre wedding. . . .”

Before stepping through the familiar glass doors into the Austins’ backyard, I sweet-talked the bartender into a glass of pinot grigio, glancing around to be sure my father had already wandered off in search of Jake’s dad. One good thing I could say about the Eastons: they taught me how to appreciate good wine. I got only one good sip, though, before Nikki screamed my name and hurled herself through the open glass doors, crushing me in a hug and spilling the rest of my wine in the process.

“Oh my God, Paige, how are you? When did you get back? Why didn’t you call us? Look at your hair! Did you get it cut in Paris?”

“Hi, Nikki,” I gasped, untangling myself from her hold. “I literally *just* got home.”

“How was Paris? Was it so amazing? You are so lucky; I wish my mom would send me to Paris! Did you get this skirt there? I love it! And you look so skinny, you bitch!” She hugged me again.

I blinked. Nikki was the one who looked skinny, scary skinny. She must have lost fifteen pounds since I’d seen her last. Her legs weren’t much thicker than my forearms, and that they could hold her up seemed a miracle of physics. “You’ve lost weight. . . .” I ventured.

She glanced down. “Whatever, I’m such a tub! I’m

starting a new diet next week, though. I've been so busy all summer; things have been so crazy! I've been working super hard on this thing . . .”

Behind her, Jake and Lacey appeared at the same time, coming around the corner from the side yard. His hand was on her back, but before I could even feel jealous, I realized why: she was walking with a cane. A cane! She leaned on it with every other step, like a WW II vet. My cheeks felt hot and the back of my throat cramped up. Why hadn't anyone told me about the cane?

They saw me at the same time. Jake crossed the flagstones in two strides and swung me up in a hug. I wrapped my arms around his neck, closed my eyes, and concentrated on the scent I'd been attempting to imagine all summer long. He was taller than I remembered, and thicker, and so much more real. When the scent of his skin threatened to overwhelm all my senses, I pulled back, looking at him, drinking in every cadence of texture and light in his face, every detail. My Jake. He smiled indulgently at my scrutiny.

All summer I'd rehearsed what I would say to him when I finally saw him. I would say all the things that I couldn't write in a letter, all the things that sounded cheesy on paper but that would sound just right with my voice in his ear, his hands around my waist. I would tell him how important he was to me and how hard it was to fall asleep at night without him on the other end of my phone, his breath growing steadier as he fell asleep with me, cradled

in the palm of my hand. But now, confronted with the real Jake, I couldn't think of a single sentence. "Hi," I said finally.

"Hi yourself."

Lacey reached us a moment later, leaning on the cane. If I was at a loss for words with Jake, I was utterly speechless when it came to Lacey. I wanted desperately to ask her what had happened. But I had a bad feeling that I already knew—and the fact that nobody had thought to mention this to me made me quake inside.

With no other option, I went with the time-honored tradition of pretending nothing was wrong. "Lacey! It's so good to see you!" I wrapped my arms around her gingerly. "I missed you so much!" She felt fragile in my arms, even more than skinny Nikki, as if her bones were made of something finer than the rest of ours.

"Thanks." She reached up and pulled at the tiny gold cross on her necklace, sliding it up and down the thin chain.

"You look really great," I said.

"Yeah, right." Her mouth tucked itself into a flower of disapproval, and I shrank a little inside. The look had been directed at others hundreds of times; at me, almost never.

We were all quiet for a moment, staring just past one another, until Jake suggested we girls go sit by the pool and offered to bring us drinks. Lacey flashed him a grateful smile, brilliant in comparison to the frown I'd earned. Nikki clapped her hands. "Yay! Just like old times! Girl

talk!” She skipped over to Lacey, wrapped a bony arm around Lacey’s waist, and managed to contain her bounciness all the way to the far end of the pool. Left alone, I squeezed my eyes shut and took two deep breaths before fixing a giant smile to my face and following them.

My parents would be the last to leave the Austins’; my mother would be hostessing alongside Stella until the end. She was one of the primary planners for Jake’s mom’s business, Stella Austin Events. They did weddings and graduations and fiftieth anniversary parties and bar mitzvahs and any other event the residents of central Iowa could dream up for themselves. She’d been waiting for a promotion to partner for years, but something always came up that got in the way: an audit, a slow year, a bad wedding. “You know how the business world is,” she’d tell us over dinner, her eyes glistening in the light from the candles she lit. “The rat race and all. What really matters is the dreams I can help make come true.”

I claimed jet lag around ten, angling for a ride home from Jake so we would have some time together at last. All evening he’d been solicitous to Lacey, offering to bring drinks and then a blanket from the house after the sun went down. He was a good guy, I told myself, and I was awful for wishing that he weren’t quite so devoted to poor, crippled Lacey. But I did.

I’d hoped to use the ride home to talk to Jake, find out what he’d been up to over the summer—his letters had

been vague—and get him to explain what, exactly, was wrong with Lacey, but I’d underestimated the impact his driving would have on me. It was the first time I’d ridden with anyone but my mom since last spring, and though I hadn’t anticipated it, I was scared. There were so many things that could go wrong: a moment’s distraction, a fraction of an inch in the wrong direction, a half pound of pressure on the accelerator instead of the brake. I didn’t breathe until he pulled his silver car into my dark driveway.

We were quiet for a moment, and he reached forward to turn up the music. “I love this song.”

Even through the wide windshield, the Iowa stars were sharply defined against the low black sky. The moon hung in a crescent above the neighbor’s garage. I took a breath. “Jake?”

“Yeah?” He put his hand on my knee, rubbing his thumb against my bare skin. I shivered.

“Is Lacey—I mean, is she okay? I mean, obviously not, but . . .”

Jake’s thumb slowed against my leg. “Well,” he said. “She had a rough summer.”

I sighed. “Who didn’t?”

He shot me a look and I immediately felt like a jerk. “She was the last to get out of the hospital, and by then you were long gone. I think it was hard on her that you left without saying goodbye.”

“I didn’t have a chance to! I—”

“Okay, but it still hurt, babe.” He didn’t look at me, and

I wondered if he was talking only about Lacey. “The fact that you got to go to Paris —”

“Got? My mother dumped me on the Eastons so she could do damage control. I spent the whole summer working my ass off taking care of their disgusting baby. At least Lacey got to hang out by the pool.”

“Paige, Lacey had to have, like, seven hours of surgery on her leg, and for a while they were worried that she might lose it. They didn’t even know if she would walk again! She was in physical therapy all summer.”

Ugh, poor Lacey. Why hadn’t anyone said anything in their letters?

“Plus, she was grounded the whole summer. Her parents were really freaked out.”

Nikki had been the one driving, but Lacey’s parents must have freaked out for the same reason my parents did: Thou shalt not mar thy parents’ reputations. “Well, at least she wasn’t bound, gagged, thrown in a trunk, and driven across state lines in the middle of the night.”

He looked at me. “Bound and gagged?”

“Basically.”

I waited for Jake to laugh, or at least smile. He didn’t.

“You know what I mean!” I said in a rush. “I didn’t even get to say goodbye to anyone! Not even you! I had to spend the whole summer with crazy people! You don’t even know how much I wished I could trade places with Lacey or Nikki or you or anyone!”

He shrugged. “I know, babe, but all Lacey sees is that she got crippled and you got to go to Paris.”

Crippled? Wasn't that a little melodramatic? I bit my lip and looked out the window. It was my first night back, and I didn't want to fight. Why were we talking about Lacey anyway? I wanted to talk about us. Or better, not talk. The tip of the crescent moon dipped behind the garage roof, and I wondered how long we'd been sitting here—and how long it would be until he kissed me. From the moment I'd settled myself into the plane bound for Paris, the only thing I'd wanted was to get back to Jake. Every night in Europe I dreamed that I was next to him, and every morning I kept my eyes closed an extra moment, trying to capture the feel of his fingers on my skin, the weight of his arm across my chest.

Now here we were, alone under a blanket of dappled shadows created by the streetlights shining through the trees. Half turning in the plush seat, I looked at Jake's face. Shadows fell across the hollows of his eyes and throat, but I could still see his smile. “Hi,” I said quietly.

“Hi yourself,” he said. There was a long second where we both just looked at each other. Then he reached across the gearshift and pulled me toward him, his wide hand on my back. “Come here.”

It had been twelve weeks, but the minute he kissed me it was like no time had passed: his slightly chapped lips against mine, his tongue wandering across my bottom lip

and the tips of my teeth, his fingers winding through my hair. I smiled into the kiss, loving him as much in that moment as I ever had. “Hey, princess,” he whispered.

“Hey,” I whispered back. Even with my eyes closed, I could sense the speckled shadows fall across my face as I kissed him.

His hand slid under my shirt and I shivered. His kisses trailed down my neck, along the line of my jaw, and his hands fumbled with the clasp of my bra. I pulled back slightly, waking as though from a trance. “Hey,” I murmured, reaching for his hand. “A little fast. . . .”

He pressed his mouth against the side of my face, half kissing, half whispering. “We’ve gone farther than this before.”

“Yeah,” I said, waking up a little more fully. “But not since last spring. Can we just take it slow?”

Jake buried his face in my shoulder and traced his lips across the hint of skin at the top of my collar. “I missed you so much, Paige.”

“I missed you, too, Jake.” For a scary second, the words didn’t sound true, so I repeated them until they did. “I missed you so much.”