

CHAPTER ONE

NOW

I yank off the crown.

Embossed with the finest plastic diamonds reading *Bougie Bachelorette*, the thing not only looks ridiculous, it's giving me a headache.

"Come on, Alex," Melody says, turning to me from the front seat. "You're the bachelorette. You have to wear it."

"Maybe later," I lie, since she took the time to buy the monstrosity.

Lainey turns the car key a few times, and the engine putters precariously before finally catching. "Gotta look at that starter," she says, with a grimace.

This does not bode well.

We're in Lainey's used Kia, which is about as sexy as it sounds. But Melody doesn't know how to drive and Jay needed his car, so we didn't have much choice in the matter.

Pulling out of my parking ramp, we make a few turns, then start crawling down the streets of Manhattan.

Tourists crowd the Saks Fifth Avenue Christmas windows, a kitschy throwback in this CGI-dominated world. A block later, a line snakes around the American Girl store, moms and daughters holding hands, dolls dangling everywhere. The soft snow has thickened into soggy flakes, clogging the air, making the city look like a postcard.

"This car sucks in the snow," Lainey says, frowning at the windshield.

"Come on," Melody trills. She's an actress—she trills a lot. "It's an adventure."

Lainey snorts, and I commiserate with her lack of excitement. It's only a month before the wedding, and I'm way behind on my 666 Killer profile. But Melody guilt-tripped me, saying this would be our last hurrah as single ladies, and Lainey didn't have many free weekends with basketball.

Oddly enough, it was Jay who made the final push. He's from Australia, where "hen parties" are more of a thing. "You've known them forever," he said. "They're your best friends. Go crazy. Do it up. Get the policeman strippers or whatever."

I had to laugh at that one. Melody would *possibly* allow male strippers in the name of female empowerment, but Lainey has zero interest in men, let alone naked men.

At least it's just the three of us. A blowout at some random bar would have been worse. I am not, and have never been, a party girl.

"Can you please just tell me where we're going?" I ask, leaning forward closer to their seats.

"Then it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?" Lainey answers.

I look to Melody, who answers with a zipped-lips motion. With a resigned sigh, I lean back again, fiddling with my seatbelt before remembering it doesn't work.

In the front seats, my friends look comical, Lainey's head well above the headrest and Melody's well below. Melody and Lainey are opposites. Lainey is White, skinny, boyish, and proudly six feet. Melody is Chinese-American, buxom with a Betty Boop quality, and proudly four feet eleven. Lainey has a low, gruff voice; Melody a high-pitched, incessantly cheerful one. Lainey would be Grumpy (if Grumpy were six feet), and Melody would be Happy (if Happy harped on intersectional feminism).

I don't think there's a suitable dwarf for me, since I'm not dopey or bashful, and sneezy and sleepy are hardly personality traits. I suppose I'm the median, in height and hair color, at least. I've always been the middle child, the peacemaker, ever since our first days as roommates at UConn.

Jay is right, I've known them forever.

"A hint," I say, butting my head in between their seats. "Just give me a little hint."

They exchange glances. "It involves your internship," Melody says. "Primary research."

"Primary research?" I ask, baffled. I drum my fingers on the cold velour seat. "For the 666 Killer?" I rest my elbows on the back of their seats. "Are we visiting him?"

"Um. No, Alex." Melody throws me a look. "We are not visiting your serial killer."

"He's not *my* serial killer," I correct her.

They answer with silence, which speaks volumes.

So, okay.

Ever since I took on the project, the tenth anniversary of the 666 Killings, I'll admit to being a tad obsessed with Eric Myers. Jay complained about the "disturbing" pictures covering our bedroom floor during my investigation phase. But I was just gathering clues from the murder scene, clues that were possibly (unlikely) missed by the detectives. Stab wounds, defensive wounds, a torn necklace, the butterfly pendant stained in blood.

I was hoping to uncover something new to springboard me from forever-intern to actual reporter on *Crimeline*. The pay would only be marginally less crappy, but reporter would be the next rung on the perilously long ladder up to TV journalist.

Melody finally settles on a pop station as the snow builds around us. We drive for a while, past the landmarks of the city, the skyscrapers, honking taxis, bodegas, and throngs of tourists. I love New York City, I do. But I always feel a sense of relief, somehow, leaving the city. I shouldn't complain. I have a great job. I have a great apartment (due to a great fiancé, who can afford it). Still, I was raised in Vermont. I yearn for wide open spaces. When I come back from visiting my mom, I sometimes feel an invisible net sucking me back into the city. I could never explain that to Jay. And they certainly don't have *Crimeline* reporter jobs in Vermont.

We crawl ahead, the wheels slipping in the snow. Lainey drives cautiously, hunched over the steering wheel. She turns the wipers up a notch, and the rubber squeaks and thumps with every swipe.

Squeak, squeak, thump. Squeak, squeak, thump.

"So, where was Jay, by the way?" Melody asks. She pops a stick of cinnamon gum in her mouth. "I'd thought he'd be here to give you a big send-off."

"He had Greg this weekend."

A family of deer trots by on the side of the highway, and one by one, they dart into the forest.

"Did you finally meet him?" Lainey looks at me from the rearview mirror, appearing fish-eyed in the reflection.

"Yeah," I say, but I don't elaborate.

Jay wanted to wait until the time was right, basically until after we got engaged. We had the clichéd "whirlwind romance," so it didn't take long. We only dated a few months before I moved in with him.

"How did it go?" Melody asks, playing with the radio again.

"Fine," I say, lightly.

I really don't want to get into it. I just want to enjoy our weekend and not ruminate over Greg. On the first "date" with his son, we went for sushi, followed by ice cream sundaes, and Greg barely said a word. Though I had no idea what to say to a twelve-year-old anyway. Jay assured me that I did fine. Afterward, I couldn't really tell if he liked me or hated me. Now I know it was definitely the latter.

"He's shy," I say. "Jay says it'll take time."

They both answer with noncommittal nods, taking my hint and dropping the subject. An hour or so passes, with Melody toying with the radio and Lainey white-knuckling the steering wheel, the wipers keeping up their hypnotic rhythm.

After another thirty minutes, Lainey leans over to peek at Melody's phone map. "Wasn't I supposed to turn left at some point?"

"Another mile," Melody says.

But the phone disagrees.

Left turn up ahead, the feminine voice informs us, sounding authoritative yet docile. Melody once skewered the Google Maps voice as "annoyingly subordinate." And don't get her started on Alexa.

"Up ahead where?" Lainey says. "You said a mile."

"Wait, no. I'm sorry." Melody peers through the blowing snow. "Here, right here," she says, pointing ahead.

"Right here? Or left here?" Lainey asks.

"Left, left!" Melody yells.

Lainey yanks the wheel, and a horn blasts at us from a passing truck. As the wheels spin, she overcorrects, then undercorrects, the back of the car fishtailing. Melody swings into the console and back against the window, possibly overplaying it, but then again, she *is* kind of small. Lainey keeps braking, gripping the steering wheel with her long fingers, the car juddering toward the curb before it finally stops.

We all sit there in silent shock, catching our breath like we just ran a marathon. Lainey looks even paler than usual, her hands trembling, while the wipers keep up their noxious rhythm.

Squeak, squeak, thump. Squeak, squeak, thump.

"I swear I thought it was another mile," Melody says in apology.

Lainey holds up her palm, indicating she should be quiet, and Melody answers with a subdued nod.

Squeak, squeak, thump.

Squeak, squeak, thump.

The defrost churns away, expanding the circle of clear glass in the foggy windshield.

"Listen," I say. "We don't have to go to . . . wherever we're going." I climb forward between the seats again. "We could just turn around and go back. Netflix. Wine. All good. We'll have a very wonderfully relaxed bachelorette party."

Melody turns to me. "With Jay and Greg?"

I shrug. "At one of your apartments, then."

In the ensuing pause, Lainey seems to consider this. I know she'd love to see Ruby, who happens to be in town to see her folks. Playing for the New York Liberty, Lainey's always on the road.

Suddenly, she smacks the steering wheel, making us all jump. "No. We've come this far. We're going all the way."

Melody claps her hands together. "Okay then," she says, pulling her seatbelt back on. "We go down this road for another ten miles before the next turn." She holds up three fingers. "Girl Scout promise." This seals the deal. Melody is twenty-six but mentions her Girl Scout days not infrequently.

Lainey puts the car back in drive, and I settle into the back seat again, yanking my seatbelt, before remembering it doesn't work. "Now can you tell me where we're going?" I ask.

"No," they both answer, sounding like annoyed parents, their toddler in the back seat playing with her crown.