

Chapter 1



March 2010

The Subaru station wagon comes to a sliding halt in a parking spot out front of the Balsam County police station, the fresh blanket of snow coating the asphalt making the streets slippery.

And my stomach sinks with the realization that I've been tricked by my own mother.

"What happened to going to the *mall, Mom?*" She's been quiet since we pulled out of the driveway; I just assumed she was pissed at me. These days, she usually is.

"Did you honestly think we'd just pretend that nothing happened and go shopping?" Her eyes remain focused ahead as she says, "I had to get you in the car somehow."

I've seen her pull this same trick on our golden Lab, Bingo. He thinks he's going to the park, so he eagerly jumps into the backseat, his tail wagging and his tongue lolling, only to end up at the vet. Falls for it every damn year.

This is so much worse than a trip to the vet.

Shutting off the engine, she unfastens her seat belt. "Okay. You know why we're here."

When I don't unfasten my seat belt, she reaches over and pushes the release button for me. Her expression is stony, her tone is worn-out. "I reported Mr. Philips to the police yesterday. They need your statement, so we are going in there and you are telling them everything *right now.*"

"But . . ." My stomach drops at the same time that heat crawls up my neck. "You promised that you wouldn't do this!"

"I made no such promise, Catherine."

Oh, my God . . . I need to warn Scott before she forces me in there.

It's like she can read my mind. She snatches my phone from my grasp.

“That’s mine! Give it back!” I dive for it, but she holds on to it tight, slapping my hands away.

“The police will want this for evidence.”

“That’s an invasion of my privacy.” I’m doing my best to put up a calm but defiant front. Inside, I’m screaming. Because there *is* evidence on my phone that I should have deleted. That Scott told me to delete and I assured him that I did, but I haven’t yet, not all of it. Not the message where he told me I was beautiful. I love lying in my bed and rereading that one.

“Just drop this already. *Please, Mom.* Or how about let’s just go to the principal. Let him fire Scott if he thinks he needs to. Okay?” I plead.

My mom’s face contorts. “The principal is his *father*. The superintendent is his *uncle*. And his mother *is* a Balsam! You think they’ll want this to get out? They’d just find a way to sweep this under the rug.”

Which is exactly what Scott and I were hoping for when, two nights ago, my mom heard me tiptoeing down the stairs and followed me—quietly, in her nightgown and housecoat—outside and around the corner, to where Scott was waiting for me in his car.

I’m not sure what made her more angry—that she caught me sneaking out to meet up with my English teacher, or that I tried to sell the “he’s helping me with my assignment over spring break” excuse to her, standing on a sidewalk at one in the morning.

“Besides, it’s too late. The police are investigating.” She takes a deep, calming breath. “I have an obligation, Cath. This is what good parents are supposed to do when they find out that a thirty-year-old man has taken advantage of their teenage daughter.”

I squash the urge to roll my eyes. That’ll only infuriate her. “*Nothing happened.* And, besides, age of consent is sixteen. Stop making it sound like he’s some dirty old man.” Scott is fun and handsome and could pass for early twenties. He wears ripped jeans and Vans, rides a motorcycle, and listens to The Hives and Kings of Leon. I’m far from the only girl in school to fall for him. I’ve been infatuated with him from the very first day I sat down in his class.

“He’s your teacher! And what kind of idiot do you take me for? I know exactly what’s going on, so stop lying to me.” She reaches for her door handle.

And I know I'm not going to get anywhere with her by continuing to deny this.

"But Mom . . ." I seize her forearm, feeling the muscles tense beneath my grip. I'm fighting to keep my bottom lip from quivering. "*Please*. I love him. And he loves me." He's told me so. Quiet whispers in between stolen kisses after school lets out and he's helping me with my portfolio for college applications. Loud shouts in between our tangled breaths the two nights I've managed to sneak away and ride my bike to see him.

There's the faintest flicker of pity in her eyes before they harden. "You're barely seventeen, Cath. It's a crush, that's all. It won't last. It's *not real*."

"No, this is different."

"Whatever he's told you, whatever promises he has made, they're all lies. You're a pretty, young girl and he will tell you whatever you want to hear if it means he gets sex."

"You're wrong."

"Even if I am, it doesn't matter because you *cannot* be with him, Catherine!"

"You are just . . . impossible!" I smack the dashboard with my hands, tears of frustration burning my cheeks. She's not listening. She doesn't care how I feel. She doesn't care how happy he makes me.

Her eyes are now focused on the windshield, on the thin blanket of snowflakes settling against the glass. The car didn't even have enough time to warm up in the five-minute drive over. "One day you'll see that I'm right. Until then, you need to stop being so selfish."

Selfish! "But we aren't hurting anyone!"

"Really? What do you think this mess is going to do to our family? We all have to live here! And your brother and sister have to go to the same high school. The rumors and the gossip and . . ." She heaves a sigh. "I'm sure people are already wondering about our parenting abilities. We will be the topic of conversation at every dinner table from Belmont to Sterling after this."

"Yeah, because *you* reported us!" For someone who's so worried about her image, I'm surprised she's not just as eager to keep this quiet as Scott and I are.

"God dammit, Catherine!" My mother explodes. "You are so des-

perate to be treated like an adult. Show me you deserve it and start acting like one. Take responsibility for your own actions.”

“Fine! I’ll end it with him!” Even as I shout the words, I know it’s an empty promise. I’m not ending anything with Scott.

“Oh, it’s ending, all right. And one day, when you’re a parent, hopefully a *long* time from now, you’ll understand why I’m doing this.”

One day, when you’re a parent . . . Next to “because I said so,” that’s her party line. But wasn’t she ever seventeen and in love? “You can’t do this. You’re going to ruin his life. What if they put him in jail?”

“That’s where he belongs, if he’s preying on his students.”

“He’s not *preying* on anyone.”

“Please. It’s you today, and it’ll be some innocent fifteen-year-old tomorrow.”

I hear what she doesn’t say—that I’m not all that *innocent*.

I huff out a sigh. “It was just the once.”

She shakes her head angrily. “Has this been going on since you broke up with that boy?”

I avert my gaze.

“Why couldn’t you have just stayed with him?”

What? “You *hated* Ethan!” I’ve never seen Mom as happy as she was the day I told her that I’d dumped my cigarette-smoking, Mohawk-sporting boyfriend of three months, by far my longest relationship before Scott. She didn’t even ask why, or if I was okay. She didn’t care.

“I’d welcome him back with open arms at this point,” she mutters.

“I don’t want Ethan.” I haven’t given him a moment’s thought since the day I ended things. In hindsight, I don’t know what I ever saw in him. He’s failing half his classes and will likely still be playing video games and bagging groceries at Weiss in ten years’ time.

I don’t want him, or any of the other boyfriends I’ve been with either. That’s what they all are. Boys.

Scott is a *man*, and he makes me feel smart and beautiful and talented. He treats me like we’re equals. We talk about everything from art to music to places around the world that he wants me to see with him. He makes me think about my future.

Our future.

“We’re moving to Philadelphia after I graduate next year. Scott will

get a teaching job there, and I'm going to go to college for art. He's been helping me with my portfolio. Mom, you should see it, it's kick-ass." This is the right angle. College is all she talks about at home.

Cath, where are you applying?

Cath, you won't get in anywhere decent with these grades.

Cath, you can't make it without a college education.

She sighs, drops her gaze to her lap.

"I told you, we're in love." I hold my breath. Maybe this is all just a scare tactic. Maybe she'll sigh again and then tell me to put my seat belt back on and—

"Get out of the car. They're expecting us."

Hot tears stream down my cheeks. "What's Dad going to do when he finds out that you brought me here?" I'm grasping at straws now, and we both know it. Mom and Dad were fighting about me behind closed doors last night, so she must have told him her plan. He may have disagreed with her, but even he knew that she'd do what she wanted to anyway. That's just how she is.

That he wasn't at home this morning is telling. Not that he's around much to begin with.

She collects her purse and keys and steps out of the car without a word.

I consider holding the door locks down and taking a stance, but I know that it's futile. One way or another, Hildy Wright always gets her way.

So I wipe the tears with the back of my hand and throw open the car door. "I hate you!" I scream, using all my strength and anger to slam the door shut.

Maybe I can still run.

Can they actually make me talk?

Do I need a lawyer?

Heavy footfalls crunch in the snow behind me and my back tenses. "Everything all right here?" Sheriff Kerby asks in his smooth, authoritative voice.

"Yes, Marvin. We're just here for Catherine to give her statement." Mom and the sheriff have been in the same bowling league for twenty years. Of course she'd go directly to him.

I take a deep breath and turn to face the older man, his cheeks rosy

from the blistering-cold winter wind. He has a kind smile, but I don't let it fool me. He's about to help my mother ruin my entire life.

But the Philipeses do have a lot of sway around here, I remind myself. And people love Scott. They loved him back when he was taking the Balsam High baseball team to the state championship, and they love him more now that he gave up a teaching job in Philly to move back home and teach here. Maybe that will be enough to get whatever bullshit charges are coming dropped. Scott said it's technically just a misdemeanor and those get tossed all the time, so maybe nothing big will come of it. Then, we'll have the last laugh. And when I move to Philly with him?

My mother will be dead to me.

With grim determination and what feels like a lead ball in my stomach, I march up the steps to the station.

She's wrong. Scott and I are meant to be together.

It *is* real.

And I will never forgive her for this.



December 2010

I sit with my hands folded in front of me, fighting the urge to shrink into my seat as I quietly watch Lou Green drag her pen down the length of my résumé. Misty warned me that the owner of Diamonds would seem a bit intimidating, with her stern face and harsh tone.

I so desperately need this job that I've been unsettled by nerves all last night and this morning. By the time I stepped through the diner's doors fifteen minutes ago, overwhelmed by the buzzing voices and clanging pots in the kitchen and the potent smell of hot pancakes and sizzling bacon, my stomach was churning fast enough to make butter.

It doesn't help that Lou's interviewing me in a booth, smack-dab in the middle of all the bustle, where countless sets of eyes can survey me with abandon—some merely stealing glances, others downright staring.

Are they always so interested in potential new staff? Or is it just an interest in me, the high school slut who tried to put Scott Philipeses in jail?

“So you have no waitressing experience.” Lou says it so bluntly, I

can't tell if she's merely stating a fact or pointing out a reason why this interview should end now.

"No, ma'am. But I'm a fast learner."

"Aren't they all," she murmurs dryly, more to herself. "You livin' with Misty?"

I nod. "For about three months now." In the apartment she shares with her long-haul-truck-driving father who's home one night a month. I moved out of my parents' house on my eighteenth birthday, when my mother could no longer force me to stay. It's her legal duty, after all, to house her children until they reach the age of majority. And Hildy Wright is all about the law.

"And how's that goin'?" Lou asks.

"Fine." For the most part. Misty isn't the sharpest tool in the shed and she rarely shuts up—a nightmare early in the morning when I prefer to drink my coffee in quiet solitude and she's all bubbly. But I can't complain because she's given me a place to live and she'll be the reason I get this job, if I do. Plus, she's pretty much the only friend I have left.

From the expression on Lou's face, I can only imagine what she thinks of Misty. Her opinion can't be all bad, though, given she hasn't fired her, and she humored her request to interview me.

"I see you were a cashier at the Weiss in Balsam, from November of last year until March?"

"Yes. That's right. Five months."

"What happened?"

"It wasn't a good fit." I swallow the knot that's forming, thinking about the day the manager, Susan Graph, pulled me into her office to hand me my vacation pay and tell me that it would be best if I didn't come in anymore, due to what was going on in my personal life. This, after only a month earlier giving me a glowing employee review. The worst part about it is that I have to shop there because it's the only grocery store in Balsam.

"I can work any shifts you want. Early mornings, midnights . . . anything." I'm trying not to sound too desperate, but I don't think I'm succeeding. Then again, maybe employers like desperate employees—we'll put up with just about anything. And I *will* put up with just about anything. Misty makes good money in tips. The kind of money I need

so I can save up and get as far away from Balsam County as soon as possible. I've been waiting for a job opening here for months.

"How will you get here? Do you have a car?"

"With Misty, for now. And I figured I could buy something cheap after a few months." Diamonds is a fifteen-minute drive from Balsam, on Route 33, way too far to bike.

Lou's pen shifts back to my education. She frowns. "You haven't finished high school?"

"No, ma'am."

She peers up at me from behind thick-rimmed glasses, her curly mouse-brown hair framing her face in a short crop. If I had to guess, I'd put her in her midfifties, though it's hard to say. "Don't you know how important having your high school diploma is?"

I swallow against the rising shame. "I do, but . . . I decided to take a year off." I'd thought of lying about it on my résumé, but Misty warned me that Lou'd fire me for lying if she ever found out.

Plus, there's no way Lou hasn't heard about "the Philips mess," as my mother likes to call it. Everyone around here knows about it. It's been the talk of the local news since Scott was arrested nine months ago.

"People makin' it hard on you, are they?" She poses it as a question, but I get the feeling she already knows the answer.

I nod.

"That whole business with that teacher is . . ." Lou purses her lips, and I grit my teeth, waiting for her to say something like "What kind of girl are you?" or give me a stern "You should be ashamed of yourself" frown. She would be far from the first. I've heard it plenty and from every direction, it seems, especially after I recanted my statement ten days later—after I learned that no DA would force a seventeen-year-old "victim" to testify—and the charges against him were dropped. At the store, where Scott's family and friends have more than once passed by me, making comments about how I deserve to be punished for trying to ruin his reputation, how I should stick to boys my own age, how someone needs to teach me to close my legs. At school, where the many students who adore Scott trailed after me in the halls, hissing "slut" and "skank" and "attention whore." Walking down Main Street, where strangers point me out to their friends.

I've become a local celebrity, as ridiculous as that sounds.

“You and him . . . it’s over and done with, right?” Lou says instead.

I open my mouth to deny that it ever started, but her eyes narrow, as if calling me on the lie. And so I answer with a small nod instead, even as my throat tightens and the first prickles of tears touch my eyes. Great, I’m going to cry in my interview. I’m sure Lou will be chomping at the bit to hire me now.

But the whole ordeal still stings today, even more than it did the day Scott was let go on bail and wouldn’t answer my phone calls and texts. I convinced myself that he had no choice but to avoid me, that it must be a condition of his release.

And it was . . . partly.

The rumors began quickly and spread like a stomach virus at a day care, just as nasty. Whispers in art class—but not so quiet I couldn’t hear them—about how I had thrown myself at him and then accused him of rape; how he turned me down and I was so mad I decided to destroy his life; how I was a stalker who’d lingered around his house late at night, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. If anyone considered the alternative—that Scott and I *had* been together, that I’d been forced to give a statement—they kept it to themselves.

The charges were dropped and Scott’s job was reinstated, only he was no longer teaching my art class. He was no longer glancing my way as we passed in the halls.

It was as if what we’d had, had never happened.

As if I didn’t exist.

Lou clears her throat. “Well, that’s for the best. Nothing was ever going to come of that, anyway.”

“No, I guess not,” I agree softly. Too bad it took me so long to see.

A waitress strolls past with a plate of fried onions and my stomach does a full flip from the smell.

“You okay? You’re awful pale all of a sudden.”

“I’m fine.” I glance over at Misty, punching an order into the computer. She grins and gives me the thumbs-up. I wish I could be as confident as her.

A woman at the table two over from us is staring at me. That’s Dr. Ramona Perkins, my dentist. Or ex-dentist. In April, we got a phone call to tell us that her office was reducing its patient load and that she would no longer be able to accept my family for appointments. In a

town of three thousand, Perkins Dentistry is the only office. Now my family has to drive almost thirty minutes away, to the far side of Belmont, to get their teeth looked after.

My mother was in shock at first, given she started with Ramona's father, John Perkins, when she moved to Balsam twenty years ago. But after a few questions, she found out that Dr. Perkins is best friends with Scott's mother, Melissa Philips.

The other two women have the decency to look away, but Dr. Perkins spears me with a haughty glare and then offers loudly, "Wives will have to hold on to their husbands when they come in here, with that one serving them."

"You know what? I think we're better off talkin' in my office." Lou heaves her squat, plump body from the booth, collecting my résumé on her way past, not so much as glancing Ramona's way. She leads me through the kitchen, where a heavy-set, ebony-skinned man is flipping pancakes through the air with one hand and stirring a pot of grits with the other with deft precision. "That's Leroy. He's the head cook around here."

"But she takes me home at night and does my laundry. Occasionally refers to me as 'husband' too." Leroy winks, and then his face splits into a wide grin.

I force a returning smile, but I'm afraid it's unpleasant at best because the overpowering stench of grease from the deep fryers is making saliva pool in my mouth.

"Three tables of four just came in," Lou warns him. "Don't know why it's so damn busy all of a sudden. I should be out there coverin' tables. We'll wrap this up quick. Here's my office, right . . ."

I lose her words as I shove through the door marked STAFF RESTROOM, making it just in time to dive for the toilet before my oatmeal makes its reappearance.

Lou's waiting for me when I step out a few minutes later, her arms folded over her ample chest, the look on her face unreadable but alarming all the same.

"The smell of sausage must have gotten to me."

"You can't handle the smell of breakfast sausage and you want to work in a diner?" I can almost hear the "you idiot" that she mentally tacked on to the end of that.

"I don't know what happened. I guess I'm just really nervous." I *really* need this job. "I promise it won't happen again."

She twists her lips in thought and then heaves an exasperated sigh. "Stay here." She disappears into her office and returns a moment later. "I keep a box of these in my office. Between all my waitresses, we have at least five scares like this a year. I'd rather make my girls know one way or another than have them droppin' dishes and forgettin' orders all day long because they're eaten up by worry for the wonder. So do me a favor. Go on back in there and pee on this."

I stare at the thin foil-wrapped package she just shoved in my hand, feeling my cheeks burn. "No . . . I'm not . . . This isn't . . ." I'm on the pill.

"You a hundred percent sure of that?"

I quietly do the math in my head. It's been how long since . . .

Oh, my God.

"Yeah, thought so. Go on, now." Lou ushers me through the door with a forceful hand, pulling it shut behind me.

With a flushed face, I quietly fumble with the wrapping, though I don't know why. It's not like she doesn't know what I'm doing. "This must be the worst interview you've ever had?" I call out with a weak giggle as I position myself on the seat, stick in hand, hoping I'm doing this right.

"Nope. A girl from out near Sterling has you beat. Cops came in and arrested her right after she finished tellin' me how trustworthy she is. Turns out she robbed her previous employer the weekend before."

"I guess she didn't get the job." And, I suspect, neither will I.

Over the flush of the toilet, I hear Lou call out, "Two minutes for the results!"

I take my time washing my hands as I wait, avoiding the little strip that sits on the back of the toilet, forming its answer. The sense of failure overwhelming me. I spent a lot of time getting ready for today's interview, ironing a simple white blouse I borrowed from Misty, curling the ends of my ash-blond hair so it falls nicely over my shoulders. Misty said Lou likes subtle makeup so I skipped the black eyeliner and stuck with lip gloss rather than the bright pink that I usually wear.

Pots are clanging and loud voices are calling out orders in the

kitchen. "I know you're busy. It's okay if you have to take care of your customers. I'll show myself out."

There's no response, and I start to think that Lou is gone until she calls out, "Time's up!"

Taking a deep breath, I reach for the stick with a trembling hand.

"No, no, no . . ." My back hits the wall and I slide to the floor, my eyes glued to the second dark pink line. There's no mistaking it.

Oh, my God.

But how? I'm on the pill! Granted, I missed a few here and there, especially over the past couple of months.

Hot tears roll down my cheeks as I grip the test, thinking back to the only night this could have happened. I was so hurt . . .

So drunk.

So stupid.

As if I haven't fucked up my life enough. How am I going to do this? I can't live at Misty's with a baby, and there's no way I'm crawling back home. I don't have a job and now who the hell is going to hire me?

The door opens without warning and Lou steps in, peering down at me with my arms wrapped around my knees, sobbing uncontrollably. It doesn't take a genius to figure out the results, I guess.

She hesitates, but only for a second. I get the impression Lou isn't the type of person to beat around the bush. "Do you know who the father is?"

Fair question to ask the town slut, I guess.

I bob my head.

"How far along are you?"

I quietly do the math. "Seven weeks, maybe? Or eight?"

"You gonna tell him? Get him to help?"

"I don't know."

"It's only right."

I avert my gaze to the faded rose linoleum floor. I think I've sufficiently screwed up my chances at getting this job.

Misty comes barreling into the tight space. "Leroy said you were—" Her voice cuts off when she sees the test in my hands. "Oh, no . . . Cath!" Her hands go to her stomach, pressing against it. "Oh no, oh no, oh no!" After a moment, "This is all my fault!" She looks about ready to burst into tears.

“You’re not exactly equipped to be blamed for this, Misty,” Lou points out.

“No, but I’m the one who convinced DJ to bring his friend from New York to that party, so he and Cath could meet.”

“DJ, your ex?” Lou spits out his name. I’m guessing she dislikes him. Most people do. DJ Harvey is a snake disguised as a hot guy. If cash goes missing from your house at a party, you can bet it’s in his pocket. If there’s a fistfight and he’s around, you can bet he provoked it. Smashed window or spray-painted wall? Check for his fingerprints. I never understood how Misty could ignore the shadiness. It has only hurt her reputation.

Misty’s blonde curls bob with her nod.

Lou sighs. “And I suppose the guy who got arrested with him is this friend from New York?” Everyone around here has heard about DJ and another guy getting busted for dealing marijuana and coke in Belmont the very next day after that party. It was a reprieve for me, because it gave people something else to talk about. Misty was smart enough to dump DJ right away, though she cried for a week after.

Another head bob.

Another heavy sigh. “On second thought, I wouldn’t be too quick to say anything. No one needs to know your baby’s daddy is a drug dealer. Not like he’s gonna be able to support you from jail anyway, and it sounds like he’s gonna be there awhile.”

“People saw me get into his van, though.” Actually, they saw Matt *drag* me into his van after I lunged for a girl who spat in my hair. In all the months of gossip and sneers since Scott was arrested, it was the first time I had physically lashed out. I was drunk and so angry; I couldn’t help myself.

Matt lit a joint and we hung out in the back of his VW van for hours, complaining about how fucked up life is as the party raged around us. It felt good talking to someone who didn’t know a soul around here besides DJ and didn’t seem to give a shit whether I slept with my teacher or not.

He wasn’t bad-looking and had me laughing by the time he leaned over to kiss me . . .

And now I’m pregnant.

As if I haven’t provided these people with enough to gossip about.

Not that I should be worrying what people say or what they think about me anymore. I have a bigger issue now. Another human being to take care of, when I can't even take care of myself.

"Don't matter what they saw, as long as you don't admit to anything. It's none of anyone's business," Lou tells her. "Misty, you've got tables to take care of. And you keep your trap shut about this if you're a real friend, got it?"

Misty offers me a sympathetic smile and then ducks out of the bathroom.

"Okay, let's get some saltines and water in you to settle that stomach, and then you can sit down with the menu. It's big, but the sooner you learn it, the faster you can move from hosting and bussing to waiting on your own tables."

Wait . . . I stare up at the woman who hovers over me in the tiny but clean staff restroom. "You want me to work?"

She shrugs. "Better to stay busy than to leave free time for regrets, I always say."

"But, I mean, you're *actually* giving me the job? *Why?*" I can't help sounding incredulous.

She twists her lips. "Well, I'd say you need this job more than you did when you walked through my door twenty minutes ago, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, but . . ." Dr. Perkins's words come to mind. "Aren't you worried what your customers will say?"

She snorts. "I don't have any use for *those* kind of customers. They're the same kind who think I shouldn't be married to my husband for the color of his skin. Besides, anyone who can't see how that teacher used you for his own needs is a damn fool." She rests her hands on her hips. "So, do you want the job or not?"

"Yes." I furiously wipe the tears from my cheeks with my palms.

"Well, all right, then. And no more cryin'. Leroy doesn't allow cryin' in the kitchen. Gets him all flustered and then he starts droppin' pancakes. Ask Misty, she'll tell ya."

I force a smile and pull myself to my feet, trying in vain to ignore that voice in the back of my head, screaming at me.

Telling me how badly I've fucked up my life.

Chapter 2



May 2017

Tonight is a night of firsts.

And lasts.

As in, I will *never* agree to a blind date *ever* again.

“So I says to the guy . . .” Gord’s fleshy hands wave over his dinner plate—he’s a hand-talker—“I says, ‘Walkin’ out that door without buyin’ this car would be a travesty I can’t allow you to suffer.” He pauses and leans in, to build suspense, I guess, before slapping the table. “He drove off the lot with a mighty-fine Dodge that same afternoon.”

Gord Mayberry, future owner of Mayberry’s New and Used Vehicle Dealership when his father croaks—information he shared three minutes into our date—is a self-proclaimed master car salesman. The doughy thirty-five-year-old has regaled me with countless dealership stories while sucking the meat off his rib bone dinner, and I have smiled politely and nibbled on my french fries, struggling to keep my gaze from the prominent mole perched above his left brow, the two dark hairs sprouting from it begging to be plucked.

I wish I didn’t have to drive so I could drown my disappointment in a bottle of cheap house chardonnay.

Why Lou thought her nephew and I would mesh, I can’t figure out. I’m trying my best not to be vain, to get beyond the utter lack of physical attraction, and focus on the positives—the man owns a house, he has a great job, he’s educated. He has all his teeth.

He’d provide well for Brenna and me. A helluva lot better than I can do on my own.

And seeing as I’m a twenty-four-year-old truck stop diner waitress with a tattered suitcase’s worth of baggage in tow, who hasn’t so much as kissed a man in over three years, maybe I don’t have a right to be judgmental.

The server comes around to set a dessert menu on the table and clear our plates, earning my soft sigh of relief that I'll be going home soon. "Can I get you something else?"

Gord yanks the napkin out from where he tucked it in his collar and rubs his sticky BBQ sauce-covered fingers against it. "I'll have some of that divine blueberry pie of yours. How about you, Cathy?"

"No, thank you. I'm full." I stifle my groan. He's one of those people who assume Catherine and Cathy are automatically interchangeable. Maybe I'll tack on a "Gordy" to see how he likes it.

"Watching that gorgeous figure of yours, aren't you." He grins and reaches across the table. I panic and quickly occupy my hands with my dishes.

"Thanks, doll. But I've got it," the middle-aged woman chides with a wink, collecting the cutlery from me, freeing my hands for Gord's waiting grasp.

I tuck them under my thighs instead.

He finally relents, leaning back into his side of the booth, checking his sparse blond hair in the window's reflection. He's not fooling anyone with that comb-over. "So . . . *Catherine Wright*." His emerald-green eyes—really, the only appealing attribute this man has—study me with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. We've sat at this table for almost an hour and he has yet to ask me a single thing about myself.

And I know exactly what he's thinking right now.

The Catherine Wright.

Gord may be a decade older than me and from the much larger Belmont, but I'd be stupid to think he doesn't remember the stories from way back when. That he hasn't heard *all* about me. Or at least the troublesome teenage version of me. The one who couldn't possibly have changed enough after all these years for people to just forgive and forget.

Hell, for all I know, that's why he agreed to this blind date. Maybe he's banking on the hope that I haven't changed at all and that he has a chance of getting laid tonight. I'm betting it's been a while for him, too.

"Yup. That's me." I meet his gaze with a hard one of my own. One that says, "I dare you." Actually, I *do* want him to dredge up things better left in the past. It'll give me a good excuse to walk out and end this train wreck of a date.

I see the decision in his eyes a moment before he averts his gaze to the bottle of ketchup on the table, his fingers wrapping around it absently. “My aunt Lou says you’ve been working at Diamonds for seven years now.”

I guess we’re not taking a trip down memory lane just yet.

“Six and a half years.” Since the day after I found out I was going to have Brenna, through my entire pregnancy.

I was carrying a plate of grits in one hand and an open-face turkey sandwich in the other the day that my water broke. As far as truck stop owners who have to deal with amniotic fluid all over their tile floor during the dinner rush go, Lou was pretty sympathetic.

He lets out a low whistle. “I don’t envy you, on your feet all day, servin’ tables for tips. I mean, Aunt Lou’s doin’ all right, but that’s because she owns the diner. But I see those older ladies who’ve been workin’ at it awhile and”—he ducks his head and glances over his shoulder for, I assume, our waitress—“they don’t weather well in that kind of job, all haggard by the time they hit forty.”

Working at Diamonds when I’m forty is not something I want to be thinking about right now, so I push that fear away and offer a tight smile. “It’s a job for now.” It’s more steady than seasonal work at the resort, more stable than the Hungry Caterpillar café or the Sweet Stop or the dozen other little tourist stops in Balsam, and it pays a lot more than a place like Dollar Dayz. I shudder at the thought of standing behind the counter at the local dollar store all day, ringing up discounted nylons and aluminum foil for the local elderly, for \$7.25 an hour.

Sure, between the housing subsidy, the food stamps, and other government help I qualify for each month, I’d still get by, but just barely.

Gord drags the last of his Dr Pepper through his straw, making a slurping sound. “Not exactly a *dream* job, though.”

“Some of us don’t have the luxury of chasing after our dream job.” *Our parents don’t hand us businesses and futures.* Truth is, there aren’t a lot of career options in Balsam, Pennsylvania, to begin with. Sure, we’re the county seat, but we’re a tourist town of three thousand—a lot more during the summer and winter seasons—with one grocery store, one gas station, two schools, two churches, a few inns, a main street of tiny shops, cafés, and restaurants that operate on limited hours throughout

the week. Oh, and a pool hall to give the locals something to do. Plus, I didn't exactly win over Balsam-area employers enough early on in life with my "false accusations" to warrant much consideration from anyone who's hiring. I still count myself lucky that Lou ever gave me a chance when she did.

He frowns, obviously picking up on the edge in my voice. "I just meant that you need something better for the future. You have that little girl to take care of."

Despite his condescending tone, his words—just the mention of Brenna—make me smile. The one bright spot in my life, in the form of a rambunctious five-, soon-to-be six-year-old. "We're doing fine."

"I hear her daddy ain't around."

I force my smile to stay put. "Nope."

He leans in, as if he's got a secret. "So, he's a drug dealer?"

This is the problem with where I live. Small towns, small lives.

Big mouths.

I clear the irritation from my throat, hoping he'll take the hint that I don't talk about Brenna's father.

Sliding a toothpick between his front teeth, he works away at a piece of dinner. "You know, some people still think you and that teacher had somethin' goin' on after all, and it's *his* kid."

Gord has not taken the hint.

I glare at him until he averts his gaze to the ketchup label.

"Course, they also say it wouldn't make much sense what with timing and all, now would it?"

"Not unless I had the reproductive system of an elephant."

He scratches his chin in thought. "He moved out of state, didn't he?"

"No idea." Just after Christmas of that horrible year. To Memphis, Tennessee, with Linda—his ex-girlfriend, who he had reconciled with about two months after charges were dropped. The woman who is now his wife. They've since had two children together. A few of the more spiteful Philips family members still love to talk out loud about Scott every now and then, when I'm passing by them carrying plates to customers, or in line at the bank or grocery store. I think it's their polite way of saying, "Look how happy he is despite you trying to ruin his life."

I do my best to ignore them, because I'm not pining over a man who hurt me so deeply, who cared more about saving his own skin than protecting mine. It took a few years for me to understand how badly Scott used and manipulated me, to accept that I was a vulnerable and infatuated teenage girl that he took full advantage of.

Now I just count my blessings that he's far enough away from me that I don't have to see him. I heard he's come around a few times at Christmas, but otherwise his visits seem rare. Shockingly—and thankfully—I've never once run into him.

"So your daughter's daddy . . . he don't even want to see his little girl?"

"Nope." If he's somehow heard that she exists, he's made no efforts to reach out, which is exactly how I want it to be.

"I'll tell ya, you need to be gettin' money out of him, is what you need to be doin'," Gord says, poking at the air with a stubby index finger in a scolding manner.

"I don't want his money and I don't want him in our lives." And I don't need this guy—or anyone, for that matter—telling me I should want otherwise. We can do this on our own, Brenna and I.

Gord pauses to stare at me, and I feel him weighing my words. "Well . . . I guess you're your own woman."

"I've learned to be."

"I do like that." Gord winks at the waitress as she delivers his slice of pie. Scooping up a forkful, he shoves a large chunk in his mouth before continuing, bits of crust tumbling out. "You gettin' on with your family now? Aunt Lou said you had a rocky go of things with them. Didn't they boot you out or something?"

I don't bother to hide the flat stare at him, though in truth I'm more annoyed at Lou. Sure, she's the reason I'm standing on my own two feet right now, but that doesn't give her the right to discuss my personal past at length with her nephew before sending him off on a date with me.

Gord's hands go up to pat the air in a sign of surrender. "Okay . . . okay. No need to get your panties in a bunch. I didn't mean no harm." Gord waves his fork in the air between us, a smile filling his face. "You know . . . there just might be a job for someone like you at Mayberry's. I'm thinking of hiring my own personal assistant. Play your cards right

and you could find yourself with a bright future ahead of you. You know, benefits and stuff. You wouldn't need no welfare." He pauses, watching me, waiting for my reaction.

I think this is the part where I'm supposed to start gushing and thanking him profusely for saving me from my lackluster future.

I force a smile and remind myself that this is Lou's beloved nephew that she speaks so highly of, and I have to bite my tongue.

He eats his pie and rambles on about *his* town of Belmont, twenty-five minutes south of Balsam. How it's got a Target, a movie theater, shopping mall, and four grocery stores instead of just the one Weiss; and it's closer to Route 33 South, which gets him to Philadelphia in an hour and twenty minutes; how there's more opportunity and I should seriously consider leaving my stagnant little tourist town and move closer to him.

I smile and pretend to listen, happy not to be answering any more questions about my personal life. When the waitress drops off the check and he quickly collects it, I breathe a sigh of relief that he's going to pick up the tab. This night has already cost me a dinner shift and a babysitter.

"Halsies is twenty each," he announces, leaning his bulky body to the left to pull his wallet from his pocket.

Right.

Except he had pie and a bottle of Bud to go along with his Dr Pepper and full rack of ribs, so it's not really even. Not even close. I could argue, but instead I count out the bills because I want to be done with this guy as quickly and politely as possible, and get home to Brenna.

He grins as he collects the money and sets it next to him on the table. I know what he's doing—making it look like he's paying for the full check. "That was one heck of a meal."

I should tell him about the purple chunk of blueberry skin sitting on his front tooth.

I *really* should.

Instead, I climb out of the booth and slide my arms into my black faux-leather jacket. It's early May and the days are growing longer and warmer, but there's still a chill to the air.

Though I try for a quick wave and getaway at the restaurant door, Gord insists that I need an escort to my car at the back of the parking

lot. So I spend the entire way hugging my purse, clutching my keys, and praying to God that he doesn't try to kiss me. There is no way in hell my lips are going anywhere near this guy.

"This is me," I announce, stopping in front of my black Grand Prix.

He shakes his head with mock dismay, his eyes roaming the body, settling on the rust that eats away at the rear wheel well. "You've got to be kidding me."

"It still works." Thanks to the help of my friend Keith, who knows enough about cars to fix whatever ails it and takes payment in the form of beer IOUs. I owe the guy about twenty cases by now.

Gord slides a business card out of his pocket and hands it to me. "You need to come by my store. I'll get you into a good, safe car for a steal. As little as five."

"Five *hundred*?" That's more than what I paid for this car, a 2000 model with a hundred and thirty thousand miles on it.

He chuckles, but it carries a superior twinge. "Well, I guess we could see what arrangements can be made for the woman Gord Mayberry is dating."

Oh, God. He just referred to himself in the third person.

His hot, sweaty hand closes over mine, and I immediately tense. "I had a great time tonight, Catherine."

"Really?" *Were we on the same date?*

"Oh, believe me, I had my reservations. Plenty of people warned me about you when I told them we were going out. You know, especially because of that whole Philips thing."

That whole Philips "thing."

Gord's gaze lingers over the simple black dress that peeks out from beneath my open jacket. I chose it because it flatters my slim, toned frame and, back when I was getting ready for my blind date and had real hope for Lou's "tall, successful blond" nephew, I wanted to look good.

"I'd like to do this again," he says, taking a step closer.

I plaster on my friendliest smile as I take a big step back. "How about I call you?" I am never calling him. Ever.

If he realizes that's a standard blow-off line, I can't tell. "I'll be waiting. Anxiously." His green eyes drift down to my mouth and he

hesitates for a second before swooping in, so fast that I barely have time to turn my head. His wet lips land on my cheek.

With an awkward giggle, I pry my hand from his grip and duck into my car, slamming my palm against the door lock before he gets the foolish idea to try again.

Ugh. Thank God this night is over.