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Nina's Diary

July 4

I'm writing this to raise an alarm in the event of my untimely death. This is hard to admit, even to myself, let alone to the world. My husband is planning to kill me. For obvious reasons. He's in love with someone else. And he wants my money.

I'm sitting in my office in the tower room at Windswept as I write. I look out over the ocean. The waves pound the beach as dark clouds sweep in from the east. A storm is coming. This house belonged to my first husband, Edward. On the day we met, I was twenty-three, working in an art gallery, barely scraping by. Edward was fifty and one of the wealthiest men in New York. People said I was a gold-digger. But they were wrong. Edward might not have been the perfect husband, but I loved him. When he got sick, I nursed him. When he died, I grieved him. A year later, I met someone else and fell in love. And I married again.

That was Connor, my second husband. On the night we met, he was thirty. I was fifty and one of the wealthiest women in New York. Connor didn't have a penny. People took that to mean he

could only be after my money. I didn't see it that way. People had been wrong about me. I assumed they were wrong about him, too.

But they were right.

I just finished meeting with the private investigator, and I'm writing this with tears in my eyes. A photograph sits before me on the desk, incontrovertible proof that the two of them are together—and have been for a very long time. I don't know how far it goes, or what they're capable of, but I fear the worst. As Connor well knows, we have an airtight prenup. The prenup says he gets nothing if he cheats. I can divorce him and throw him out on the street. Everything I gave him—the cars, the clothes, the expensive watches, that boat he loves so much, the jet—I can take away. And I will. He knows I will. How far would he go to prevent that from happening? I hope I'm being alarmist, but I fear he'd go to extremes.

I'd throw him out right this minute, but I'm expecting three hundred guests. I'll be holding my annual Fourth of July gala tonight, here at Windswept. It was at that very same party two years ago that I first saw Connor. Infatuation at first sight. I should have slept with him and left it at that, but I'm too much of a romantic. Or just a fool. Well, I won't be foolish tonight. I'll be extremely careful. As soon as my guests leave, as the fireworks fade from the sky over the ocean, I'll confront him. I'll tell him it's over and kick him off my property. I won't do it alone. I'll take precautions. I'll have security with me, because I fear what Connor might do if he knows he's about to lose everything. I'll be careful. I'll do it cleanly, quickly. And this marriage will be done.

It's going to be so hard, though. I still love him. I love him so much that I have to fight the urge to give him another chance. To

ask him to explain the things the investigator found. I can't do that. It would be a terrible mistake. It could even put my life at risk. I don't trust myself with him. That's why I'm leaving this diary where it's sure to be found. If something goes wrong, I want an autopsy. If I die unexpectedly, it was foul play, and Connor was behind it. Connor—and *her*.

2

SOUTHAMPTON, New York, July 5—Noted businesswoman and philanthropist Nina Levitt was found dead early this morning. She was 52.

Mrs. Levitt was discovered unresponsive, floating in the swimming pool at Windswept, her mansion in Southampton, where she had just thrown a lavish party attended by hundreds of guests. She was rushed by ambulance to Stony Brook Southampton Hospital, where she was pronounced dead upon arrival. Cause of death is believed to be drowning, to be confirmed by an autopsy, results of which are pending.

Mrs. Levitt was best known as the widow of real-estate tycoon Edward M. Levitt, the founder of Levitt Global Enterprises, Inc., which maintains offices in New York, Hong Kong, and Dubai. Mrs. Levitt served in various capacities at Levitt Global, including most recently as chairwoman of the board.

During Edward Levitt's lifetime, the couple were fixtures on the social scene in New York and Southampton. Mrs.

Levitt was famous for her lavish parties and fashion sense, and appeared frequently in publications such as *Vogue*, *Town and Country*, and *Avenue*. Her ethereal beauty—she was known for her pale skin and red hair—made her a favorite subject of fashion photographers.

The Levitts' accomplishments as developers of commercial real estate in the United States and abroad, and as collectors and donors of late-twentieth-century contemporary art, were often overshadowed by scandal. The couple were frequent subjects of tabloid stories concerning Mr. Levitt's extramarital affairs. In the years since Mr. Levitt's death, Mrs. Levitt was believed to have found happiness with her second husband, Connor Ford. Mr. Ford is currently an executive at Levitt Global, having enjoyed a meteoric rise within the company since his marriage to Mrs. Levitt.

Mr. Ford did not respond to repeated requests for comment in regard to this story.

3

Tabitha

Memorial Day weekend

The night Connor Ford walked back into my life, I was waitressing, just trying to make ends meet.

I was standing by the bar at the Baldwin Grill, waiting to pick up drink orders for my tables, when I happened to glance out the window. A sexy black sports car with New York plates was just pulling into the parking lot, and I remember thinking, *That guy must be lost*. We don't rate the jet set, and that car screamed money. Don't get me wrong. The Grill is right on Baldwin Lake, one of the prettiest spots in New Hampshire. This area used to be ritzy back in the day. But not anymore. We draw a rowdy crowd in the summertime, folks from Mass., New York, and Jersey who can't afford the shore. Partiers and big drinkers. They come for the local microbrews scrawled on the chalkboard and the big-screen TV tuned to the game. But they're not the rich and famous, no way.

As I watched, a man got out. A tall, gorgeous man. And it was *him*. He glanced at the restaurant with an air of purpose and started walking toward the entrance. I couldn't believe it. My heart was pounding. I started to sweat.

Connor and I were together for just one summer, back when I was seventeen. It was a tumultuous summer for us both. We fell into each other's arms and stayed there, clinging for dear life, until they pried us apart. To this day, nobody has ever reached me like he did. I'd been married and divorced, in and out of my share of half-assed relationships. But I'd never gotten over him.

Now, there he was, looking cool and gorgeous in dark jeans and a crisp white shirt. And here I was, pushing thirty, makeup melting off my face, my clothes smelling like food, as the love of my life walked through the door ten feet from where I stood. What did I do? I panicked. I backed into a customer, knocking his half-empty beer out of his hand and onto the floor, where it rolled around and splattered people's shoes.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. Let me take care of that," I said.

In the ensuing chaos, as I raced to get paper towels, mop up the mess, and replace the poor man's drink, I lost track of Connor in the crowd. On this Friday before Memorial Day, the Baldwin Grill was jammed to capacity. You couldn't turn around without bumping into some beefy, red-faced guy who was sloppy drunk. Which made me wonder—what the hell was Connor doing here, anyway? His family sold their lake house years ago, after his grandmother died. The lake had gone downhill since then, while Connor had only come up in the world. He'd married a woman who was rich and famous, and their pictures were constantly in the tabloids. Shouldn't he be on a yacht somewhere with Nina Levitt, instead of at a second-rate sports bar, rubbing elbows with the common people?

Unless.

Could he possibly be looking for me?

“Hey, Tabitha, I just sat a hot guy in your section,” the hostess called out as I passed by with my tray of drinks.

And I knew it was him.

I almost turned around and told her to give him to somebody else so he wouldn’t see me like this. Let’s face it, even if I wasn’t waitressing, I’m not what I was at seventeen. Who is? But we were fully booked tonight, and short-staffed. There was nobody to cover my table. I’d have to face him, whether I liked it or not.

Out on the terrace, it was a party scene. The sun hadn’t yet set, but everybody had their buzz on. Music blasted from the speakers. Motorboats raced across the water, and somebody was shooting off Roman candles from the dock. I saw Connor out of the corner of my eye. He was seated at a table along the railing, facing the restaurant, his back to the lake, scanning the crowd like he was looking for somebody. A woman, presumably. His famous wife must be joining him, and he’d saved her the chair with the view. A gentleman, as always. That gave my heart a wrench.

It took a while before I could get to him. I had two tables waiting for drinks, three ready to order, two with food sitting in the kitchen that I needed to get out, and two others ready to pay. I was glad for the delay, which gave me time to collect myself. I’d dreamed of this moment so often. Sometimes it ended with us in each other’s arms. Sometimes with me telling him off for letting his family come between us. Never once did it involve me taking his drink order.

When I couldn’t avoid it any longer, I grabbed a pitcher of water and headed for his table. And found myself looking right into his eyes. Those hazel eyes I’d loved so well the summer I was seventeen.

Tabitha

Thirteen years before

The first time I saw Connor Ford, he was standing by the pool at the Baldwin Lake Country Club, in swim trunks and Ray-Bans, surrounded by a gaggle of girls. I was working as a pool girl, setting up beach chairs, collecting soggy towels, fetching burgers and shakes from the grill window. The moms would sit tanning and day-drinking while the kids screamed and splashed and threw food, and the dads hit on me. But I liked spending my days in the sun, and I enjoyed the party atmosphere, even if it wasn't meant for me.

Connor was nineteen and gorgeous, and Nell Ford's grandson besides. Mrs. Ford, a prima donna with a deep tan and a Brahmin accent, who wore pearls with her golf clothes, owned the biggest house on the lake. Though even back then, Baldwin Lake wasn't what it had once been. That sense of coming down in the world probably had something to do with Nell Ford's snobbish attitude. According to my grandma Jean, she'd take the smallest lapse in service as a personal slight and wouldn't rest until some poor slob paid with their job. Grandma Jean, who'd worked at the country

club for years, had gotten me the pool-girl gig that summer. The one piece of advice she gave me when I started was to steer clear of Nell Ford and her family. Right—easier said than done. Ford grandchildren were everywhere I turned. They were spoiled and bratty—private-school kids from New York and Connecticut, who ran wild and made tons of noise and mess. I spent my days fetching food for them, cleaning up after them, and feeling put-upon by them. Until Connor arrived, and everything changed.

For the first week or so, I watched him from the corner of my eye as I went about my duties, too intimidated to speak to him. One hot afternoon in early July, I discovered he'd been watching me, too.

I don't know where everyone had disappeared to. Connor was alone, lounging on his usual chair with his sunglasses on, his skin all delicious and tan and gleaming, looking like he must smell of coconuts.

"Hey, Tabby, c'mere," he said, like we were old friends.

I'd been collecting dirty dishes that were baking in the sun. I had to look around to make sure he was talking to me.

"Yeah, you," he said, grinning.

I shouldn't've been surprised. I was seventeen that summer, fit and tan, my hair bright from the sun. My uniform was itty-bitty short shorts, Keds, and a polo with the club crest. Plenty of men stared. Even so, I had assumed Connor was out of my league.

As I walked over to him, he took off the Ray-Bans. His eyes were a hazel I've never seen the equal of, green and gold and gray all at once, with long sooty lashes.

"I wasn't sure."

"You're the only Tabby around here, aren't you?"

I wore a name tag for the job, but most club members didn't bother to look at it. They waved a hand or said "Hey" to summon me. His grandmother, Mrs. Ford, actually snapped her fingers—that's just how she rolled. So, I was surprised that Connor even knew my name, let alone that he'd use it. I put the dishes down and walked over to him.

"It's Tabitha. Nobody calls me Tabby."

"I do."

I nodded, trying to play it cool, when really I wanted to whoop and turn a cartwheel because Connor Ford had a pet name for me.

"So, listen. My cousin Robbie and I have this band. We're playing in the clubhouse at nine tonight, in the TV room off the dining hall. You should come."

"You want me to come hear your band?"

"Why not? You got someplace better to go?"

"Staff isn't allowed at club events. There's a policy against it."

"Well, look, this isn't an actual club event. It's just some kids jamming. So, that rule doesn't apply."

"I don't know."

"Just say I invited you. It's a stupid rule, anyway. Nobody's gonna care."

Nobody except your grandmother, I wanted to say.

"I can't. Thanks for asking, though. That's nice of you."

He looked at me steadily. I felt dizzy, staring into those eyes.

"Well, if you change your mind, no tickets required. I'll even dedicate a song to you."

I laughed. "I'll think about it."

"You do that."

I walked away, beaming. For the rest of that day, I floated

through my chores, slowly convincing myself not only that I could pull it off, but that I had to. A guy I had an awful crush on had asked me to come hear his band play. Why shouldn't I go? He was right. The rule was stupid. Yet, sneaking out wouldn't be easy. My grandparents' house was tiny, and if Grandma Jean caught me, she'd be upset.

I'd been living with my grandparents for years at that point, and though I loved them to pieces, I longed to escape. I'd grown up an army brat, moving every year. When I was ten, my mom died. At the funeral, her parents, Grandma Jean and Grandpa Ray, convinced my dad to let me spend the summer with them. When summer ended, everyone agreed I should stay on. Everyone but me. Nobody asked me what I wanted. My grandparents became my legal guardians. To this day, I don't know which was harder—my mother dying, or my father letting me go so easily. At least Mom wanted me. Dad eventually remarried and moved to Texas with his new wife and kids. I was not invited to join them.

Every time I went near the pool that afternoon, Connor made an excuse to talk to me. He ordered a milkshake and three Cokes in a three-hour period, brushing his fingers against mine when I handed him something, making me flush and stutter.

The pool closed at six. At ten of, I was collecting ketchup squeeze bottles from the grill area when Connor came up behind me. He put his hands on my waist and spun me around to face him. He was so tall. I could smell the suntan lotion, warm on his skin.

"Tell me I'm gonna see you later, Tabby. Please?" he said.

"I want to."

"Then, what's the problem?"

"Besides that I could get fired? I'd have to sneak out."

“I sneak out all the time. And it’s just a job, right?”

Connor could afford to think that way. I couldn’t. But his smile sent a thrill right through me.

“All right. I’ll be there.”

“That’s my girl,” he said, and I loved the sound of that.

That night at supper in the cramped kitchen, things seemed particularly grim. Grandpa Ray was suffering from his emphysema, and Grandma Jean had had a bad day at work.

“This damn recession,” she said, her face gaunt, her eyes tired behind her glasses. “They’re talking layoffs.”

“Not you, Grandma Jean. They couldn’t get along without you.”

“You’re sweet, honey.”

“You guys go watch TV. I’ll clean up.”

I washed the dishes by hand, since the dishwasher had broken last year and never been fixed. We sat on the sofa for a while and watched the History Channel. Time dragged. I could feel life happening outside the walls without me. I wondered what Connor was doing right then.

By eight-thirty, Grandpa was snoring loudly, and Grandma was nodding. A loud commercial came on, and her head jerked up.

“I think maybe we’ll turn in. Help me get Grandpa to bed, Tabitha.”

My grandfather leaned on my arm, wheezing, as we walked down the narrow hallway, Grandma Jean wheeling his oxygen tank alongside us. He hadn’t worked in years because of his condition, so money was always tight. We lived in a tiny ranch-style house in Baldwin, one town over from Lakeside, where the country club was located. The lake and the big houses were all in Lakeside. Baldwin

was where the working folks lived. Our house had two bedrooms side by side with a paper-thin wall in between. If I wanted to leave the house, I'd have to walk right by my grandparents' door.

I spent some time picking my outfit and doing my makeup, then tiptoed to their bedroom door and listened. Loud snores from Grandpa Ray. Nothing from Grandma Jean, but that didn't mean she was sleeping. I went around the house turning off lights like I was closing up, then returned to my room, shutting the door with an intentionally loud thud. I sat on the bed and listened to the silence. At five to nine, I was done waiting. I crept out of my room, down the hall to the front door.

Outside, the night air smelled sweet, and light still glowed in the northern sky. I felt like I was taking my life in my hands for the first time, and that it had been a long time coming. I wheeled my bike down the driveway and set off. Twenty minutes later, I was at the club, hurrying past the kitchen and dining hall on my way to the TV room, praying that nobody I knew was working late.

The TV room was jammed with kids lounging on the rug. They'd taken the chairs out, pushed the sofas back against the wall. The lights were dimmed. Connor and three other guys stood on the carpeted riser that passed for a stage. They were in the middle of a song—a cover of “Desperado,” by the Eagles. He had a guitar slung across his chest, and he looked even taller and more perfect in the spotlight than he did in the sunshine by the pool. I plowed through the crowd to a spot right up front, sinking down cross-legged on the floor.

The band was called Big Summer, and they were pretty good. Connor sang in a soulful, quavering voice that was all the rage among indie singers then. I ate it up. *These things that are pleasing*

you will hurt you somehow. I should have paid more attention to those words, but I was too busy worrying that he hadn't noticed me come in because the spotlight was shining in his eyes. I'd risked everything to get here. What if he didn't even see me? But I needn't have worried. Toward the end, there was a pause in the music as he consulted with his bandmates. He walked back to the microphone and looked right down at me.

"This is for Tabby in the front row, with the long blond hair," he said, and the band broke into a cover of "Wonderful Tonight." As he sang of the girl brushing her long, blond hair, I trembled and wiped away tears. My heart felt like it would explode. When he'd finished playing, all his friends whooped and hollered, but he didn't pay them any mind. He came right up to me—the pool girl in the front row, Cinderella at the ball.

"Told you I'd dedicate a song to you. Are you glad you came?"

"Totally."

People saw us. I didn't care. He took my hand. We went out on the golf course and made out under the stars. And that was just the beginning.

5

After that first night, as far as I was concerned, any moment not spent with Connor wasn't worth living. Most nights, I'd sneak out of the house and ride my bike to the golf course. We'd lie together on a blanket in the moonlight, the sweet smell of the grass all around us, kissing, whispering, laughing, our hands slipping beneath each other's clothes. I'd never known anyone like him. He was good-looking as a prince, but that wasn't what got to me. It was the things he said, how he carried himself, everything he knew. At work during the day, I'd take the long way back to the kitchen, stopping by the tennis courts just to watch him play. When he was out on the lake water-skiing, I'd drop what I was doing to gawk. The talent, the grace—I couldn't take my eyes off him. He'd been to private school, read great books, been to Paris and Hawaii. He was in college now, real college—not some certificate program to get a dull job that you'd spend your life doing, just to die. The boys I'd dated at Baldwin High had no ambition beyond this sorry town. And no interest in me, beyond that I was a pretty girl who might sleep with them. Connor paid

attention to me. He listened. He confided in me. He sought my advice. He was as head-over-heels as I was. He didn't ask for sex until I was ready (which, okay, happened within a week of when we started dating). He said *I love you* first. He made me feel worthy, like we were equals.

We had more in common than I ever would've guessed. The year before, his father had left his mother for a younger woman and now had an infant son. Connor's parents' divorce wasn't yet final. His father was hiding assets and screwing them over on support payments. In the meantime, Connor, his mother, and his siblings were financially dependent on his grandmother. Nell Ford paid for their schools, the divorce lawyer, the mortgage on their house, but her generosity came with strings. His whole family did whatever she said, for fear that she'd cut them off.

People at the club knew there was something between us. How could they not? We'd spend all morning circling each other, hands brushing, heads together, giggling at our inside jokes. At noon sharp, I'd take my lunch break, grabbing a vanilla shake from the grill and heading to the boathouse, where he'd be waiting. It was cool inside after the glaring midday sun, with the sound of water lapping, and dark except for the shimmer of light around the boat launch. Connor would step out from behind the rows of stacked canoes and kayaks. He'd kiss me and lead me up the stairs to the storage loft. We'd lie back against piles of moldy life jackets, sipping the milkshake, kissing. To this day, the taste of a vanilla milkshake evokes the feel of his mouth on mine.

One day toward the end of summer, we were up in the loft when I heard the door open below.

“Tabitha? I know you’re up there,” my boss, Gil, called from the bottom of the stairs. “I need you at the counter. *Now.*”

We hurriedly arranged our clothes and came down blushing. Gil was my dad’s age, balding and paunchy—not a bad guy, but a stickler. There was nothing he could do to Connor except tell him to get lost. But I was a different story. Once Connor was gone, Gil put me on probation, which meant I’d be fired if I did the slightest thing wrong.

“I’m going to hold off on telling the general manager about the misuse of club facilities. But Jean’s a friend of mine—”

“Oh, no. Please, Gil. Don’t tell her.”

“Of course I’m gonna tell her. I should’ve told her a long time ago. It’s been obvious something was going on, and now it’s gotten out of hand. This is for your own good.”

In the car on the way home that evening, the air was thick as thunderclouds.

“Grandma Jean, Gil said he was going to speak to you. I can explain—”

“Honestly, Tabitha, I can’t discuss this when I’m driving. I’m too upset.”

Grandma Jean’s eyes were red. Had she been crying? I looked out the window, stomach sinking, my eyes prickling, too.

Later that night, I was up to my elbows in soapy water, washing the supper dishes, when she came up beside me. She looked crumpled and soft—wearing a printed housedress and plastic sandals, her iron-gray hair frizzing around her forehead in the humid kitchen.

“Come into the living room. I don’t want Grandpa overhearing this. His heart can’t take it.”

As I dried my hands on a dish towel and followed her, my guilt flowered into resentment. I hadn't done anything wrong. Having a boyfriend wasn't a crime. I didn't need a lecture. But, as she sat down on the sofa and patted the space beside her, the disappointment in her eyes tugged at me.

"Don't be upset, Grandma. I know what I'm doing. I've had health class since middle school."

Her jaw clenched with determination.

"This isn't about the facts of life, Tabitha. It's about the Fords. I know that family, and they're bad news. You can't trust them."

"Connor's not like the rest of them."

"My guess is, when push comes to shove, he is. Exactly like them."

"You don't know him. You think he's some kind of entitled, spoiled brat. But you couldn't be more wrong. He's not taking advantage of me. He's wonderful to me. I *love* him."

Her faded blue eyes went wide behind her glasses. "Oh, gosh. This is worse than I thought."

"It is not. It's the best thing that's ever happened to me. Why can't you just be happy for me?"

"Because I'm worried about you. I know Nell Ford. She won't tolerate her family mixing with the likes of us. And she rules those kids with an iron fist."

"I don't care what his grandmother is like. I've barely said two words to her all summer."

"Okay, now. Doesn't that tell you something, that he won't introduce you to his family?"

That brought me up short.

"He does introduce me. I know his sisters and all his cousins."

“Know them as friends? Or because you fetch their food and clean up their messes?”

I looked away, flushing. She was right, of course. At six, when the pool closed, the Ford kids would pile into cousin Robbie’s Jeep or cousin Hope’s Land Rover and take off God knows where. I wasn’t invited. That hurt, because wherever they were going—into town, or to the mall, or just home for supper—was sure to be more exciting than anywhere I’d ever been or ever would go. Sometimes I’d pick up extra hours serving dinner in the dining hall. On those nights, I’d look across the lake, see the glow of their firepit and feel the call of everything I was missing. Marshmallow roasts. Beers and joints getting passed around if their grandmother wasn’t at home. Connor and Robbie strumming their guitars. The girl cousins in their cutoffs and Birkenstocks and fishermen sweaters, flipping their broom-straight hair and laughing throaty laughs at the boys’ jokes. The boy cousins deigned to talk to me now that I had something going with Connor. But the girl cousins pretended I didn’t exist.

“They’re not your friends, are they?” Grandma Jean said.

It was easier to be mad at her than at Connor. I got to my feet, full of righteous indignation.

“I’m almost eighteen, and this is *my* life.”

“Honey, I know it’s hard, living here with the old folks. It’s hard for me, too. I’m sure we both wish your mom was around to deal with this situation, but she’s not.”

“Grandma, I don’t know how else to put this. My love life is none of your business.”

“I’ve raised you since you were a girl. I’ve earned the right to speak my mind. As for my business, the club is literally my

business. It's my livelihood. Don't you think it affects me—Gil catching my granddaughter, who I asked him to hire, half-naked in the boathouse?"

"He never saw me half-naked. That's a lie."

"Maybe he didn't see, but he sure as heck knew. I'm not a prude, Tabitha, and I'm not trying to control you. But that's not nice. It's disrespectful to the job, to your boss, to me. To yourself."

As she spoke, and her words sank in, I began to feel smaller, until I wished I could sink into the sofa and disappear. She was right. I'd been selfish. I hadn't stopped to think how my behavior would affect her. This was my grandma, who'd taken me in, who'd raised me. She deserved better than how I'd behaved.

"You're right," I said. "That *was* wrong of me, Grandma. I see that now. I apologize. I won't do it again, promise. Forgive me?"

The relief on her face broke my heart.

"I forgive you."

"I love you, Grandma Jean."

"I love you, too."

We hugged, tears in our eyes.

"Now, that was exhausting. Time for bed."

I pecked her soft cheek and watched her walk heavily down the hall, my heart full of love for her. That was at eight o'clock.

By ten, I was jonesing for Connor so bad that I couldn't see straight. The need to touch him, kiss him, feel his skin against mine, overwhelmed my guilt and my better judgment. I'd promised Grandma not to mess around at the club. And I would keep that promise. But I never said I'd stop seeing him. As long as we didn't go to the boathouse—or the golf course, which was club property—then I wouldn't be breaking my word.

I put on a cute sundress, lip gloss, and mascara. I fluffed my hair and spritzed on perfume. I tiptoed out the door.

Outside, the night air was velvety and redolent of summer. I hurried down the block to where Connor was waiting for me in Robbie's old Jeep, top down, open to the indigo sky. A yellow moon sat low on the horizon, surrounded by a haze of humidity. I climbed up into the passenger seat. Connor grabbed me and kissed me breathless.

"Something bad happened," I said, pulling away. "Gil told my grandmother about finding us in the boathouse. I almost didn't come out tonight."

"Shit. Are you okay?"

"Yes, but she's upset. I promised her we wouldn't hook up at the club anymore."

"Don't say that. I can't go all day without a fix of you, you know that."

He slipped the strap of my dress from my shoulder, nuzzling my neck, his hand sliding up my thigh. My breath got faster. But I twisted away, worried the neighbors might see.

"Not here. I want to keep my promise to her."

"Okay."

He turned the car on.

"We can't go to the golf course, either."

"Why not? It's totally deserted at night. Nobody will ever know."

"I can't take the risk. I'd be breaking my word."

"So where we gonna go? I need to be alone with you, like now."

We kissed some more. His hand slipped inside my panties. It took willpower, but I moved it away.

"I need you, too. Just not here, and not at the club. *Think.*"

"Okay. We could park in the woods near the Bear Creek trailhead," he said.

"That's so creepy at night. Anywhere outdoors—I don't know. What about your grandmother's house? Can we go there?"

"It's risky. I'd have to sneak you up the back stairs, so my grandmother doesn't find out. You don't want her recognizing you from the club."

That rankled. It reminded me of what Grandma had said earlier—about Connor not wanting to introduce me to his family.

"I don't? Or you don't?"

He gave me a look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Are you ashamed of me?"

"I'm ashamed of *her*. She's a massive snob. If she recognized you, she'd throw a fit, just because you work at the club."

"So what if she does throw a fit? Are you afraid she'd cut you off?"

He got defensive. "I mean, sure, but that's not the reason. I don't want to subject you to her temper tantrums, that's all."

"I'll take my chances."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Don't say I didn't warn you."

We raced across town, music blasting, the wind in our hair. He didn't speak. His expression said he was worried, maybe even angry with me. So far gone was I with crazy love that I spent the drive admiring how his eyebrows drew together, the way his jaw clenched, his perfect bone structure.

When we got to the road that wound around the lake, Connor

slowed down and shut the music off. As we approached the Ford house, my armpits felt damp and my chest felt tight. I didn't want to meet his grandmother. She scared me senseless. I just wanted him to want to introduce us. He'd proved he was willing to. Now I wished we could go somewhere else. But I'd made enough of a fuss that I couldn't back down.

We turned in to the driveway. The rambling, shingled house was mostly dark, except for a couple of lights on upstairs.

"Are they sleeping?" I said.

"My grandmother goes to bed by ten. Mom's in Connecticut for a court date, and my aunt and uncle went back to the city."

I breathed out in relief.

We picked our way down the driveway, which was parked up with cars and littered with fallen bikes and sports equipment. He took me in the back way, through the screen porch. Viewed from across the lake, Nell Ford's house sparkled. Up close was a different story. The screen door sagged on its hinges. The porch was crammed with musty old furniture. We stepped through the door into a large kitchen, its appliances decades out of date. A tang of garbage hung in the air, just like in any old house.

Connor led me up the creaky back stairs to the third floor, where he pushed open a bedroom door. The room was narrow and dark, with two sets of bunk beds and clothing strewn across the floor. Robbie lounged on a bottom bunk, talking on his flip phone. Two other Ford kids were on the bed above, staring at a Nintendo screen, their gangly legs hanging off. Their names were Tyler and Caleb, though they were called Punk and Boo. They were brothers, maybe twelve or thirteen. They gawked as I entered.

"You guys know Tabby," Connor said.

“Tabby, *what uuup*,” Robbie said, slurring as he closed his phone.

He sounded drunk, or high.

“I need the room,” Connor said.

Robbie got up, yanking on Punk’s leg where it hung off the bed.

“You heard the man. Move it, dudes,” he said.

The younger boys followed Robbie out, poking each other and grinning. Connor shut the door and took me by the hands, drawing me down onto the lower bunk on the opposite side of the room. It must be his bed. It was narrow and lumpy, with a green wool blanket that felt scratchy against my skin as he undressed me. But I loved being in the place he slept each night, and I adored the way he looked at me.

“Your body is unreal. I’m crazy for you, you know that, right?” he said.

The bed squeaked like crazy as we made love. I heard giggling coming from the other side of the door.

We didn’t get caught that night. Therefore, naturally—despite the obvious dangers of hooking up in his grandmother’s house—we did it again the next night, and the night after that, until it became a habit. Three or four nights a week, I’d sneak out. Connor would pick me up at the end of my street. We’d get to his house late, when it was dark and quiet, and sneak up the back stairs. I never ran into Nell Ford.

Never—until I did.

All the Ford kids knew about our rendezvous, and I’d been worried that someone would snitch. Connor claimed that could never happen. All the cousins were guilty of something. Knowing each other’s secrets created mutual assured destruction. But we

hadn't reckoned with the effect of Connor's feud with his middle sister, Chloe. What had gone wrong between them, I didn't fully understand, though I knew it had something to do with the parents' divorce. One night, out of the blue, Chloe decided to tell.

We were lying under the scratchy blanket when Mrs. Ford pounded on the bedroom door.

"Connor, open up. Have you got a girl in there?"

"*Shit*, it's my grandmother," he said, under his breath.

We jumped up and pulled our clothes on. I started to speak, but he shook his head and put a finger to his lips, nodding toward the door.

"Coming right out, Grandmother. One second."

Nell Ford couldn't wait. She threw the door open and caught us half-dressed. I had my shorts and bra on but not my top. Connor was just stepping into his jeans. He stumbled and nearly toppled over.

"Wait a minute, Grandmother. Stay out."

"Don't tell me what to do. This is my house. So. You're Jean Parker's granddaughter? What does your grandmother think of your behavior?"

Connor looked stricken. "Tabby is my friend."

She looked me up and down, her face puckering with distaste.

"Apparently, quite a close friend."

"I'll take her home."

"She can get herself home. You and I need to talk, young man."

"But—"

"*Sit down*. And you, please leave my house. Now."

I looked at Connor. He wouldn't meet my eyes. He sat down on the bed and hung his head. I walked out, past the grandmother,

down the stairs. Robbie was sitting on the screen porch. I borrowed his phone to call Grandma Jean to come get me.

When she pulled up fifteen minutes later, I was sitting on the front steps, dry-eyed in the dark. Connor hadn't come looking for me. But Nell Ford must've been watching from the window. As I walked down the driveway, the front door flew open, and she rushed past me, bearing down on my poor grandmother.

"Jean Parker, I need a word with you."

Grandma Jean got out of the car and met her with shoulders squared. They had it out right there on the front lawn, loud enough to wake the neighbors. Grandma Jean stood up for me, and told Mrs. Ford to look after her grandchildren, who everybody knew ran wild all over town. It was hardly a fair fight. The next day, I was let go from the club. Grandma Jean got an official reprimand in her file for inappropriate conduct toward a member. Later that year, when layoffs came, the blot on her record gave them an excuse to fire her. As for Connor, he called the next day to apologize. When I wouldn't come to the phone, he kept calling, until he gave up and wrote me a letter. When I didn't answer that, he wrote again. I burned the letters unopened. Eventually, he stopped writing.

I didn't see him again until he walked into the Baldwin Grill on Memorial Day weekend, thirteen years later.

6

Tabitha

Memorial Day weekend, present day

Those eyes.

I felt dizzy. I had to grab the back of the empty chair across from him to steady myself. I took a breath. Connor looked shocked. Then he looked transported. His cheeks flushed, his eyes widened, he shook his head slightly. He broke into a huge grin. That sparkling, ravishing smile that I'd never managed to forget, hard as I tried.

"*Tabby*. It's you, right? How incredible to find you here," he said, and laughed out loud.

Connor's smile was as beautiful and carefree as I remembered—white teeth, crinkles around the eyes, a dimple in his cheek. He had the sort of smile that makes a young girl fall in love. Or a grown woman. All I know is, my stomach fluttered the way it had the very first time I saw him. Which scared me. Every time I saw his picture online, it threw me for days. What would a real-life encounter do to me?

I was speechless, and my silence confused him.

"Wait, you do remember me?" he said, looking worried.

"I'm just—*shocked*."

"You scared me there for a minute. I thought maybe you forgot."

"Never."

The silence lengthened as we gazed at each other.

"You look amazing," he said.

"You look even better. Marriage agrees with you, I guess."

"You know about that?"

"The whole world knows, Connor. You're famous."

"*She's* famous. I'm just Mr. Nina Levitt."

I nodded at the empty seat across the table from his. "Would you prefer to wait for her to place your drink order?"

"Huh?"

Only then did his gaze take in my white shirt and black pants—the typical waitstaff uniform—and the pitcher of water in my hand.

"You *work* here."

"I do," I said, in as cool a tone as I could muster.

My cheeks felt hot as I filled his water glass. We'd never been equals. But now the gap between us was wider than ever.

"Can I start you with a cocktail? Or, would you prefer to wait for your wife?"

It was his turn to flush. "She's not coming. This is a solo trip."

"All right, then. What can I get you to drink?"

"Uh, Hendrick's and tonic?"

"Certainly."

"Hey, no, wait. Can we start over? Please, sit down for a few minutes. I'd love to catch up."

"I'm sorry, that's not possible when I'm working."

"Quickly, then—give me the basics."

He touched the empty spot on my left ring finger where my hand clutched the chair back.

"You're not married, I see," he said.

The way my body reacted to his touch—that unnerved me. I took a step back.

"I was. I'm divorced."

"Children?"

"No."

"Me, neither. It's funny, whenever I think about you—"

He paused. My heart skipped a beat.

"You think about me?"

"I envision you with a minivan full of kids. You always wanted a big family."

"I was an only, remember? I wanted what I never had. Your family seemed so jolly."

"Jolly, no. We were crazy."

"Hah, you said it, not me. Still, I was jealous. I remember you wanted kids, too."

We'd talked about that, once, lying in the grass out on the golf course under a sky full of stars. Not how many kids we each wanted, but how many we would have together. Boys, girls, what we'd name them.

"I'm so glad you're still here at Baldwin Lake," he said.

"That makes one of us."

"Otherwise, I never would have found you."

He gazed up at me intently. The moment seemed to stretch out in time. Back to the past, off to the future, like we were picking up where we'd left off. But that wasn't possible.

"I, um. I have tables waiting. I'll be back with your cocktail."