

BURNED

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A PRETTY LITTLE LIARS NOVEL

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HARPER TEEN

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

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HarperCollins Children's Books, a division of HarperCollins Publishers,
10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.
www.epicreads.com



alloy**entertainment**

Produced by Alloy Entertainment
151 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001

Library of Congress catalog card number: 2012949622

ISBN 978-0-06-208192-6

Typography by Liz Dresner

12 13 14 15 16 CG/RRDH 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



First Edition

To Colleen

Loose lips sink ships.

—AMERICAN IDIOM

HIT AND RUN

Ever told a lie to save yourself? Maybe you blamed the dent in your parents' Mercedes on your brother so you could still go to the spring formal. Maybe you told your Algebra teacher you weren't part of the group of kids who cheated on the midterm, even though you were the one who stole the answer key from her desk. You aren't normally a dishonest person, of course. But desperate times call for desperate measures.

Four pretty girls in Rosewood told some very dark lies to protect themselves. One of those lies even involved walking away from a crime just miles from their home. Even though they hated themselves for leaving the scene, they thought no one would ever know about it.

Guess what. They were wrong.

It had been raining for eight days straight at the end of June in Rosewood, Pennsylvania, a wealthy, idyllic suburb

about twenty miles from Philadelphia, and everyone was beyond fed up. The rain had drowned perfectly manicured lawns and the first blooms in organic vegetable gardens, turning everything to mud. It had waterlogged golf course sand traps, Little League baseball fields, and the Rosewood Peach Orchard, which had been ramping up for its beginning-of-summer bash. The first sidewalk chalk drawings of the season swirled down the gutter, LOST DOG signs turned to pulp, and a single wilted bouquet on the cemetery plot containing the remains of a certain beautiful girl everyone *thought* was named Alison DiLaurentis washed away. People said such biblical rain would surely bring bad luck in the coming year. That wasn't welcome news for Spencer Hastings, Aria Montgomery, Emily Fields, and Hanna Marin, who'd already had more bad luck than they could handle.

No matter how fast the windshield wipers on Aria's Subaru swept across the glass, they couldn't brush off the driving rain quickly enough. Aria squinted through the windshield as she headed down Reeds Lane, a twisty road that bordered thick, dark woods and the Morrell Stream—a bubbling creek that would most likely flood within the hour. Even though there were upscale developments a stone's throw away over the hill, this road was pitch-black, without a single streetlight to guide them.

Then Spencer pointed at something ahead. "Is that it?"

Aria hit the brakes and nearly hydroplaned into a speed limit sign. Emily, who looked tired—she was getting ready

to start a summer program at Temple—peered through the window. “Where? I don’t see anything.”

“There are lights near the creek.” Spencer was already unbuckling her seat belt and springing out of the car. The rain soaked her immediately, and she wished she’d worn something warmer than a tank top and workout shorts. Before Aria had picked her up, she’d been running on the treadmill in preparation for this year’s field hockey season—she hoped she’d be an early decision shoo-in for Princeton after completing the five AP classes she was set to start taking at Penn, but she also wanted to be Rosewood Day’s star field hockey player to get that extra edge.

Spencer climbed over the guardrail and peered down the hill. When she let out a little scream, Aria and Emily looked at each other, then bounded out of the car, too. They pulled their raincoat hoods over their heads and followed Spencer down the embankment.

Yellow headlights shone over the raging creek. A BMW station wagon was T-boned into a tree. The front end was smashed and the airbag dangled limply on the passenger side, but the engine was still humming. Windshield glass littered the forest floor, and the odor of gasoline eclipsed the smell of mud and wet leaves. Near the headlights was a slight, auburn-haired figure staring dazedly around as though she had no idea how she’d gotten there.

“Hanna!” Aria yelled. She ran down the slope to her. Hanna had called them all in a panic just a half hour before, saying she’d been in a crash and needed their help.

“Are you hurt?” Emily touched Hanna’s arm. Her bare skin was slick with rain and covered in tiny shards of glass from the windshield.

“I think I’m okay.” Hanna wiped the rain from her eyes. “It all happened so fast. This car came out of nowhere, knocking me out of the lane. But I don’t know about . . . *her*.”

Her gaze drifted to the car. There was a girl slumped in the passenger seat. Her eyes were closed, and her body was motionless. She had clear skin, high cheekbones, and long eyelashes. Her lips were pretty and bow-shaped, and there was a small mole on her chin.

“Who *is* that?” Spencer asked cautiously. Hanna hadn’t mentioned that anyone was with her.

“Her name’s Madison,” Hanna answered, brushing off a wet leaf that had just blown against her cheek. She had to scream over the sound of the pounding rain, which was so violent it was almost like hail. “I just met her tonight—this is her car. She was really drunk, and I offered to drive her home. She lives somewhere around here, I guess—she gave me directions piecemeal, and she seemed really out of it. Does she look familiar to any of you?”

Everyone shook their heads, slack-jawed.

Then Aria frowned. “*Where* did you meet her?”

Hanna lowered her eyes. “The Cabana.” She sounded sheepish. “It’s a bar on South Street.”

The others exchanged a surprised look. Hanna wasn’t one to turn down a cosmopolitan at a party, but she

wasn't the type to go to a dive bar alone. Then again, they all needed to blow off some steam. Not only had they been tortured the previous year by two stalkers using the alias *A*—first Mona Vanderwaal, Hanna's best friend, and then the real Alison DiLaurentis—but they were also sharing a terrible secret from spring break a few months before. They'd all thought Real Ali had died in a fire in the Poconos, but then she'd appeared in Jamaica to kill them once and for all. The girls had confronted her on the roof deck at the resort, and when Ali had lunged at Hanna, Aria had stepped forward and pushed her over the side. When they ran to the beach to find her body, it was gone. The memory haunted each of them every day.

Hanna wrenched the passenger door open. "I used her phone to call for an ambulance—it'll be here soon. You guys have to help me move her to the driver's seat."

Emily stepped back and raised her eyebrows. "Wait. *What?*"

"Hanna, we can't do that," Spencer said at the same time.

Hanna's eyes flashed. "Look, this wasn't my fault. I wasn't drunk, but I did nurse a drink all night. If I stay here and admit I was driving, I'll definitely get arrested. I might have gotten away with stealing and crashing a car once, but the cops won't go easy on me a second time." Last year, she'd drunkenly stolen her old boyfriend Sean Ackard's car and smashed it into a tree. Mr. Ackard had decided not to press charges, and Hanna had done community service instead.

"I could go to *jail*," Hanna went on. "Don't you realize how that would look? My dad's campaign will be ruined before it even begins." Hanna's father was running for senator in the fall; his campaign was already all over the news. "I can't let him down again."

The rain fell relentlessly. Spencer let out an awkward cough. Aria chewed on her lip, her eyes drifting to the motionless girl. Emily shifted her weight. "But what if she's really hurt? What if moving her makes things worse?"

"And then what do we do?" Aria added. "Just . . . *abandon* her? That seems so . . . *wrong*."

Hanna stared at them in disbelief. Then, setting her jaw, she turned back to the girl. "It's not like we're leaving her here for days. And I don't think she's hurt at all—it seems like she's just passed-out drunk. But if you don't want to help me, I'll just do it myself."

She squatted down and tried to lift the girl by the armpits. The girl's body tilted awkwardly to the side like a heavy sack of flour, but she still didn't stir. Grunting, Hanna planted her feet and hoisted the girl upright again. Then she began to shift her across the center console and into the driver's seat.

"Don't do it like that," Emily blurted, stepping forward. "We have to keep her neck stable, in case there's any damage to her spine. We need to find a blanket or a towel, something to keep her neck steady."

Hanna eased the girl back down into the seat, then peered into the back of the station wagon. There was a

towel in the footwell. She grabbed it, rolled it up, and wound it around the girl's neck like a scarf. For a moment, Hanna looked up. The moon had drifted out from behind a cloud and momentarily lit up the road, and the whole forest was alive with movement. The trees swayed violently in the wind. As a flash of lightning turned the sky white, all of them swore they saw something move near the creek bed. An animal, maybe.

"It will probably be easier for us to carry her around the outside of the car instead of trying to shift her from the inside," Emily said. "Han, you take her under the arms, and I'll take her feet."

Spencer stepped forward. "I'll get her around the middle."

Aria reluctantly peered into the car, then grabbed an umbrella from the backseat. "She probably shouldn't get wet."

Hanna looked at all of them gratefully. "Thank you."

Together, Hanna, Spencer, and Emily lifted the girl out of the passenger side of the car and slowly shuffled her around the back and toward the driver's seat. Aria held an umbrella over the girl's body so that not a drop of rain hit her skin. They could barely see through the driving storm, having to blink every few seconds to keep the rain out of their eyes.

And then, halfway around the back, it happened: Spencer's feet slipped in the quicksandlike mud and she lost her grip on the girl. Madison tilted violently inward,

her head banging against the bumper. There was a *snap*—maybe of a tree limb, but maybe of bone. Emily tried to bear the brunt of Madison’s weight, but she slipped, too, jostling Madison’s limp, fragile body even more.

“Jesus!” Hanna screamed. “Hold her up!”

Aria’s hands wobbled as she tried to hold the umbrella steady. “Is she okay?”

“I-I don’t know,” Emily gasped. She glared at Spencer. “Weren’t you watching where you were going?”

“It’s not like I meant to do it!” Spencer stared into Madison’s face. That *snap* resonated in her mind. Was the girl’s neck now tilting at an unnatural angle?

An ambulance wailed in the distance. The girls stared at one another in horror, then started shuffling faster. Aria yanked the driver’s-side door open. The key was still in the ignition, and the left-turn signal was blinking. Hanna, Spencer, and Emily moved the airbag aside and set the girl down in the buttery leather seat behind the wheel. Her body listed to the right. Her eyes were still sealed shut, and the expression on her face was placid.

Emily let out a whimper. “Maybe we should stay here.”

“No!” Hanna screamed. “What if we *did* hurt her? We look even guiltier now!”

The sirens grew louder. “Hurry!” Hanna grabbed her purse from the backseat and slammed the driver’s-side door hard. Spencer shut the passenger door. They scrambled up the hill and dove into Aria’s car just as the ambulance appeared on the ridge. Emily got in the car last.

“Go!” Hanna screamed.

Aria jammed her key in the Subaru’s ignition, and the car sputtered to life. She did a quick three-point turn and sped away.

“Oh my God, oh my God,” Emily sobbed.

“Keep driving,” Spencer growled, peering out the back window at the whirling lights on top of the ambulance. Two EMTs jumped out of the ambulance and carefully maneuvered down the hill. “We can’t let them see us.”

Hanna swiveled around and stared out the window. All kinds of emotions knifed through her. Relief, definitely—at least Madison would get help. But the regret was like a vise around her throat. Had moving Madison made her worse? What had just *happened*?

A low sob burst from her lips. She put her head in her hands and felt the tears come.

Emily started crying, too. So did Aria.

“Stop it, guys,” Spencer snapped, though tears were running down her cheeks as well. “The EMTs will take care of her. She’s probably fine.”

“But what if she’s *not* fine?” Aria cried. “What if we *paralyzed* her?”

“I was just trying to do the right thing by driving her home!” Hanna moaned.

“We know.” Emily hugged her tight. “We know.”

As the Subaru wound around the hairpin turns, there was something else everyone wanted to say but didn’t dare: *At least no one will know about this.* The accident had

happened on a desolate stretch of road. They'd gotten away from the accident before anyone had seen.

They were safe.

The girls waited for the accident to hit the news: CAR CAREENS OFF EMBANKMENT ON REEDS LANE, they imagined the headlines would read. The story might recount the girl's high blood-alcohol level and how badly the car had been smashed up. But what else would the reporters say? What if Madison *was* paralyzed? What if she remembered she hadn't been driving, or even remembered the girls moving her?

All the next day, each of them sat by the TV, checked their phones for breaking news, and kept the radio on low, on alert. But no news came.

A day passed, and then another. Still nothing. It was like the crash had never happened. On the third morning, Hanna got in her car and drove slowly down Reeds Lane, wondering if she'd imagined the whole thing. But no, there was the bent guardrail. There were the skid marks in the mud and a few shards of glass on the forest floor.

"Maybe her family was really embarrassed about what happened and made a deal with the cops to keep it quiet," Spencer suggested when Hanna called her to express her uneasiness at the lack of news. "Remember Nadine Rupert, Melissa's friend? One night, when they were seniors, Nadine got drunk and wrapped her car around a tree. She was fine, but her family begged the cops to keep

the DUI a secret, and they did. Nadine was out of school for a month getting rehab, but she told everyone she was at a spa retreat instead. Later, though, she got drunk again and told Melissa the truth.”

“I just wish I knew if she’s hurt,” Hanna said in a small voice.

“I know.” Spencer sounded worried. “Let’s call the hospital.”

They did, on three-way, but since Hanna didn’t know Madison’s last name, the nurses couldn’t give them any information. Hanna hung up the phone, staring into space. Then she went on the website for Penn State—which was the school Madison said she attended—and did a search for her, hoping she’d find her last name that way. But there were quite a few Madisons in the sophomore class, way too many to go through one by one.

Would she feel better if she came forward and confessed? But even if she explained that another car had come out of nowhere, knocking her off the road, no one would believe her—they’d assume she’d been as wasted as Madison. The cops wouldn’t congratulate her for being honest, either—they’d haul her off to jail. They’d also realize that she’d needed help moving Madison and had had to recruit her friends. They’d be in trouble, too.

Stop thinking about it, Hanna decided resolutely. *Her family wanted to make it go away, and you should do the same.* So she went to the mall. She tanned poolside at the country club. She avoided her stepsister, Kate, and was

a bridesmaid in her father's wedding to Isabel, wearing a hideous green dress. Eventually, she stopped thinking about Madison and the accident every second of the day. The crash hadn't been her fault, after all, and Madison was probably fine. It wasn't like she *knew* Madison, anyway. She'd probably never see her again.

Little did Hanna know that Madison was connected to someone they all knew very well—someone who hated them, in fact. And if that someone knew what they all had done, terrible things might happen. Acts of retribution. Revenge. Torture. That very person might take it upon himself—or herself—to become the very thing all four girls feared most.

A new—and far more frightening—A.

1

BEWARE, YE LIARS

On a blustery Monday morning in late March, Spencer Hastings stared into the vintage Louis Vuitton trunk on her queen-sized bed. It was packed full of things for her upcoming journey on the Rosewood Day Prep Eco Cruise to the Caribbean, a combination of class trip and environmental-science seminar. Using the trunk was a long-standing good-luck tradition: It had once belonged to Regina Hastings, Spencer's great-great-grandmother. Regina had bought a first-class reservation on the *Titanic* but decided to stay in Southampton for a few extra weeks and take the next steamer out.

As Spencer tossed a third bottle of sunscreen onto the top of the pile, her phone let out a *bloop*. A text bubble appeared on the screen from Reefer Fredericks. *Hey buddy, it said. What are you up to?*

Spencer found Reefer's number in her contacts list

and dialed it. “I’m packing for the trip,” she said when he answered on the first ring. “You?”

“Just putting some last-minute things together,” Reefer answered. “But I’m bummed. I can’t find my Speedo.”

“Oh, please,” Spencer teased, curling a tendril of honey-blond hair around her finger. “You don’t own a Speedo.”

“You got me.” Reefer chuckled. “But I really *can’t* find my trunks.”

Spencer’s heart did a flip as she thought about Reefer in swim trunks—she could tell through his T-shirt that he was toned. His school was going on the cruise, too, along with several other private schools in the tristate area.

She’d met Reefer at a Princeton Early Admission dinner a few weeks earlier, and although she hadn’t been into his hippy, pothead vibe at first, he ended up being the best thing she got out of her disastrous pre-frosh weekend on campus.

Since she’d returned to Rosewood, they’d been texting and calling each other . . . a *lot*. During a *Dr. Who* marathon on BBC America, they’d called one another during the commercial breaks to discuss the doctor’s bizarre alien adversaries. Spencer introduced Reefer to Mumford & Sons, and Reefer schooled her on the Grateful Dead, Phish, and other jam bands, and before she knew it, she had developed a massive crush on him. He was fun, clever, and more than that, nothing seemed to shake him. He was the human equivalent of a hot-stone massage—just the type of guy Spencer needed right now.

She hoped that something would happen between them on the trip. The top deck of the cruise ship seemed like the perfect setting for a first kiss, the tropical sunset like a huge bonfire all around them. Or maybe their kiss would happen on a dive—they were both taking a scuba class together. Maybe they'd be swimming around a crop of neon-pink coral, and suddenly their hands would touch under the water, and they'd swim to the surface, pull off their masks, and then . . .

Reefer coughed on the other end, and Spencer blushed as if she'd voiced the thoughts aloud. In actuality, she wasn't sure what Reefer thought about her—he'd been flirty at Princeton, but for all she knew, he was like that with all girls.

Suddenly, a banner on her TV caught her eye. DEATH IN JAMAICA: MURDERED GIRL INVESTIGATION BEGINS. A familiar blond girl's picture flashed on screen. TABITHA CLARK, a caption read.

"Uh, Reefer?" Spencer said abruptly. "I have to go."

Spencer hung up and stared at the TV. A stern-looking gray-haired man appeared next. MICHAEL PAULSON, FBI, said a caption under his face. "We're beginning to put together the pieces of what might have caused Ms. Clark's death," he said to a group of reporters. "Apparently, Ms. Clark traveled to Jamaica alone, but we're trying to re-create a timeline of where she was and who she was with that day."

After that, the news shifted to a story about a murder in Fishtown. Suddenly, the cheerful, colorful resort-wear

folded neatly in the steamer trunk looked perverse and ridiculous. The smiling sun on the sunscreen bottle seemed to be sneering at her. It was ridiculous to be jetting off on a tropical trip like nothing was wrong. *Everything* was wrong. She was a coldhearted killer, and the cops were narrowing in on her fast.

Ever since Spencer and her friends discovered that they'd killed Tabitha Clark—not the real Alison DiLaurentis, as they'd all thought—Spencer hadn't been able to draw in a full breath. At first the cops had thought Tabitha had accidentally drowned, but now they knew she'd been murdered. And the police weren't the only ones.

New A knew, too.

Spencer had no idea who New A, the insidious text messenger who knew everything about their lives, might be. First, she and the others had thought it was Real Ali—maybe she'd survived the fall off the roof deck and was after them once and for all. But then the authorities identified the washed-up remains as Tabitha's, and they realized how crazy they'd been to even consider that Ali had survived the fire in the Poconos. Her bones might not have been found, but she'd been inside the house when it exploded. There was no way she could have gotten out, even though Emily still clung to that theory.

Next, the girls had thought A might be Kelsey Pierce, whom Spencer had framed for drug possession the previous summer. Kelsey made sense: Not only had

Spencer wronged her, but Kelsey had also been in Jamaica at the same time the girls were.

But that turned out to be a dead end. Next they had thought A was Gayle Riggs, the woman to whom Emily had promised—and then unpromised—her unborn baby, and who happened to be Tabitha's stepmom. But that theory fell through when Gayle ended up dead in her driveway. Even more chilling? They were pretty sure New A had killed her.

Which was baffling—and terrifying. Did Gayle know something she shouldn't have? Or had A meant to kill Spencer and the others instead? And A knew *everything*. Not only had A sent pictures of the girls talking to Tabitha during dinner the night they'd killed her, but the girls had also received a picture of Tabitha's broken body on the sand. It was like A had been poised and ready on the beach, camera in hand, predicting the fall before it happened. There was another weird twist, too: Tabitha had been a patient at the Preserve at Addison-Stevens, a mental hospital, at the same time Real Ali had been there. Had they been friends? Was that why Tabitha acted so much like Ali in Jamaica?

Spencer's phone bleated again, and she jumped. Aria Montgomery's name flashed on the screen. "You're watching the news, aren't you?" Spencer said when she answered.

"Yeah." Aria sounded distraught. "Emily and Hanna are on the line, too."

“You guys, what are we going to *do*?” Hanna Marin said shrilly. “Should we tell the cops we were at the resort, or should we keep quiet? But if we *do* keep quiet, and then someone *else* tells the cops we were there, we’ll look guilty, right?”

“Calm down.” Spencer eyed the news again. Tabitha’s father, who was also Gayle’s husband, was on the screen now. He looked exhausted—as he should. Both his wife and his daughter had been murdered in the span of a year.

“Maybe we should just turn ourselves in,” Aria suggested.

“Are you crazy?” Emily Fields whispered.

“Okay, maybe *I* should turn myself in.” Aria backtracked. “I was the one who pushed her. I’m the guiltiest.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Spencer said quickly, lowering her voice. “We *all* did it, not just you. And no one is turning themselves in, okay?”

A tiny movement outside caught her eye, but when she went to the window, she didn’t see anything suspicious. Her mother’s fiancé, Mr. Pennythistle, had parked his enormous SUV in the driveway. The new woman who’d moved into the Cavanaugh house across the street was kneeling in the flower bed, weeding. And to the left, Spencer could just make out Alison DiLaurentis’s old bedroom window. When Ali had lived there, the pink curtains were always flung open, but the room’s new owner, Maya St. Germain, always kept the wooden blinds twisted closed.

Spencer sat down on the bed. “Maybe it doesn’t matter that the cops figured out Tabitha was killed. There’s still no way they can trace the murder back to us.”

“Unless A talks,” Emily warned. “And who knows what A is capable of—A might not stop at blaming Tabitha’s murder on us. A could frame us for killing Gayle, too. We were there.”

“Has anyone heard from A?” Aria asked. “It’s weird that A’s been quiet since Gayle’s funeral.” The funeral had been almost a week ago.

“I haven’t,” Spencer said.

“Me neither,” Emily piped up.

“A’s probably planning the next big attack.” Hanna sounded worried.

“We need to stop it before it happens,” Spencer said.

Hanna snorted. “How are we going to do *that*?”

Spencer walked over to her bed and nervously fingered the gold latch on the steamer trunk. She didn’t even have the beginning of an answer. Whoever New A was, New A was *crazy*. How could she anticipate a lunatic’s next move?

“A killed Gayle,” Spencer said after a moment. “If we figure out who A is, we can go to the cops.”

“Yeah, and then A will turn around and tell the cops about *us*,” Hanna pointed out.

“Maybe the cops wouldn’t believe a murderer,” Spencer said.

“Yeah, but A has *pictures* to prove it,” Aria hissed.

“Not of us specifically,” Spencer said. “And anyway, if we figure out who A is, maybe we could find them and delete them.”

Aria sniffed. “That all sounds great if we were, like, James Bond. Right now we don’t know who A *is*.”

“You know, it’s good we’re going on this trip,” Hanna said after a moment. “It’ll give us time to think.”

Aria scoffed. “You really think A is going to leave us alone?”

Hanna breathed in. “Are you saying A might *come*?”

“I hope not,” Aria said, “but I’m not holding my breath.”

“Me neither,” Spencer said. She’d considered the possibility of A being on board, too. The idea of being trapped in the middle of the ocean with a psycho was chilling.

“How do you guys feel about going back to the Caribbean?” Emily asked nervously. “I feel like it will remind me of . . . everything.”

Aria moaned.

“At least we aren’t going to *Jamaica*,” Hanna said. The cruise ship was stopping in St. Martin, Puerto Rico, and Bermuda.

Spencer shut her eyes and thought about how excited she’d been to go to Jamaica last spring break. They had all planned to put Real Ali, the evil A notes they’d received from her, and their near-death in the Poconos

behind them. She'd packed bikinis, T-shirts, and the same Neutrogena sunscreen she'd plopped in the steamer trunk, hope rising in her chest. *It's all over*, she'd kept thinking. *My life is going to be great now.*

She glanced at the clock on her bedside table. "Guys, it's ten. We'd better go." They were supposed to be at the boat docks in Newark, New Jersey, a little after noon.

"*Shit*," Hanna said.

"See ya there," Aria answered.

Everyone hung up. Spencer dropped her phone in her canvas beach bag, then hefted it onto her shoulder and righted the steamer trunk on its wheelie-board. When she was almost to the door, something out the window caught her attention once more.

She walked over to the window again and stared out at the DiLaurentises' yard. At first, she wasn't sure what was different. The tennis courts, which the new family had built over the half-dug hole where the workers had found Courtney DiLaurentis's body, were empty. The wooden blinds at Ali's old window were still shut. The multilevel deck at the back, where the girls used to hold court, gossiping and boy-rating, was swept clean of leaves. But then she saw it: There was a child-sized life preserver in the middle of Ali's yard. It was red-and-white striped, like a candy cane, and had large, curly, pirate-like script across the bottom that read DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES.

Acid rose in Spencer's throat. Even though there was no one around, it still felt like the preserver was a message expressly from A. *Better hang on to this for dear life*, A seemed to be saying, *because I might just make you walk the plank.*

2

EMILY'S LITTLE MERMAID

The road leading up to the Newark shipyards was a nondescript two-lane highway with generic-looking office complexes, gas stations, and seedy bars. But when Emily Fields and her father took a sharp left and pulled onto the waterfront, the sky opened up, the scent of salt hung heavy in the air, and the enormous Celebrity cruise ship rose before her like a giant, many-tiered wedding cake.

“Whoa,” Emily breathed. The ship stretched several city blocks, and there were more circular portholes on each level than she could count. Emily had read in the Eco Cruise brochure that the vessel contained a theater, a casino, a gym with nineteen treadmills, a yoga studio, a hair salon and spa, thirteen restaurants, eleven lounges, a rock-climbing wall, and a wave pool.

Mr. Fields pulled into an available parking space near a big tent with a banner that read **PASSENGERS, CHECK IN HERE!** There was a line of thirty or so kids with suitcases

and duffels. After he cut the engine, he sat staring straight ahead. Seagulls circled the sky. Two girls squealed excitedly when they saw each other.

Emily cleared her throat awkwardly. "Thanks for the ride."

Mr. Fields turned abruptly and looked at her hard. His eyes were iron-cold, and two curved lines accentuated his mouth like parentheses.

"Dad . . ." Emily's stomach started to hurt. "Can we talk about this?"

Mr. Fields set his jaw and faced front. Then he turned up the radio. They'd been listening to a New York news station for the second half of the drive; now a reporter was droning on about someone nicknamed the Preppy Thief who'd escaped from a New Jersey holding cell that morning. "Ms. Katherine DeLong might be armed and dangerous," the reporter was saying. "And now, on to weather . . ."

Emily twisted the volume down again. "Dad?"

But her father didn't pay any attention. Emily's jaw wobbled. Last week, she'd broken down and told her parents that she'd secretly had a baby girl over the summer and had given her up for adoption shortly after she was born. She'd omitted a few of the more sordid details, like accepting money from Gayle Riggs, a wealthy woman who'd wanted the baby, and then changing her mind and returning the payment, which A had intercepted. But she'd told them a lot. How she'd hid in her sister

Carolyn's dorm room in Philadelphia during the third trimester. How she had seen an ob-gyn in the city and had a scheduled C-section at Jefferson Hospital.

Emily's mom hadn't blinked through the whole story. After Emily had finished, Mrs. Fields took a long sip of her tea and thanked Emily for being honest. She even asked Emily if she was okay.

The clouds had parted in Emily's mind. Her mom was being *normal*—cool, even! “I’m holding up,” she’d answered. “The baby is with a really great family—I saw them the other day. They named her Violet. She’s seven months now.”

Then a muscle in Mrs. Fields's cheek twitched. “Seven months?”

“Yep,” Emily said. “She smiles. And waves. They’re wonderful parents.”

And then, like a light switch abruptly flipped on, reality hit Emily's mom at full force. She blindly groped for her husband's hand as though she were on a sinking ice floe. After letting out a squeak, she leapt up and ran to the bathroom.

Mr. Fields sat, stunned, for a moment. Then he turned to Emily. “Did you say your sister knew about this, too?”

“Yes, but please don't be mad at her,” Emily said in a small voice.

Since that day, Emily's mom had barely come out of her bedroom. Mr. Fields handled the chores, making dinner, signing Emily's permission slips, and doing the

laundry. Every time Emily tried to broach the subject with him, her dad shut her down. And forget about talking to her mom: Whenever Emily even got near her parents' bedroom, her father appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, like a rabid, protective guard dog, shooing her away.

Emily had no idea what to do. She would have preferred her parents send her to reform school or to live with her über-religious relatives in Iowa, like they'd done when they were mad at her in the past. Maybe she shouldn't have told her parents about the baby, but she didn't want them to find out from someone else—like New A. The Rosewood PD knew, too, as well as Isaac, the baby's father, and Mr. Clark, Gayle's husband.

Amazingly, the news about the baby hadn't made its way around Rosewood Day, but it didn't matter—Emily still felt like a pariah. Add in the fact that she'd witnessed a murder two weeks prior and that the police were now investigating Tabitha's death, and most days she could barely hold it together. She was also more certain than ever that A was Real Ali—that she'd survived the fire in the Poconos and was out to get them once and for all. Real Ali had framed Kelsey Pierce, driving Emily to almost kill her at Floating Man Quarry. Then she'd thrown suspicion on Gayle, shooting her when she got in the way. Emily shivered. What would she do next?

A loud horn on the boat roused her from her thoughts. "Well, I guess I should go," Emily said softly, glancing at her dad again. "Thanks for, um, still letting me go on this."

Mr. Fields took a sip from his water bottle. “Thank the teacher who nominated you for the scholarship. And Father Fleming. I still don’t think you *should* go.”

Emily fiddled with the University of North Carolina ball cap in her lap. Her parents didn’t have money to send their kids on frivolous class trips, but she’d won a scholarship through her botany class. After her parents had found out about the baby, Mr. Fields had gone to Father Fleming, their priest, to ask if they should still let her attend. Father Fleming had said they should—it would give them time to process what had happened and figure out their feelings.

There was nothing left for Emily to do but open the door, grab her bags, and start toward the check-in tent. She hadn’t walked but three steps when her dad gunned the engine and took off down the road, not even staying to see the boat off as most parents were. She blinked back tears, trying hard not to cry.

As she joined the line, a twentysomething guy wearing a pair of red, star-shaped sunglasses bounded up to her. “I’m on to you!” he said, wagging a finger.

Tabitha’s face flashed in Emily’s mind. “W-what?” she croaked.

“You’re totally a secret Cirque du Soleil fan!” The guy stuck out his hand. “The name’s Jeremy. I’m your cruise director this week. How would you like to be a guest in tonight’s kickoff Cirque du Soleil performance in the theater? The show’s theme is Mother Earth, in honor of this being an Eco Cruise and all.”

Several kids nearby stopped and smirked. “I think I’ll pass,” Emily mumbled, scurrying forward.

She flashed her passport to the check-in girl and was given a key to her cabin, a meal card and daily menu, and a map of the boat. Last but not least, she received a pamphlet that listed the various classes, activities, seminars, group meetings, and volunteer opportunities for the week—students were required to participate in one for-credit class and volunteer in the ship’s “community,” helping to clean, cook, plan events, or take care of the ship’s enormous endangered-fish aquarium, and so on. The volunteer spots were on a first-come, first-serve basis; Emily had already signed up for lifeguard duty at the main pool. She still didn’t know which class she’d take, though, so she scanned the list quickly. There was Exploring the Reefs Responsibly, Hunt for Sunken (Eco)Treasure, Clean Up the Tide Pools in a Kayak. She decided on a course called Caribbean Bird-Watching.

She boarded an elevator that would take her to her room. A calypso band played loudly on an upper deck, the bass thudding through the walls. A few girls were talking about a great bar in St. Martin they’d heard about. Two guys chattered about kiteboarding in Puerto Rico. Everyone was dressed in shorts and flip-flops, even though it was forty-five degrees outside.

Emily envied their carefree excitement—she couldn’t even coax the corners of her lips to bend into a smile. All she could think about was her mother’s vacant eyes,

her dad's punishing scowl, the hatred in their hearts. The FBI agent on the news this morning. Gayle's dead body. Tabitha's face just as she realized she was falling. A lurking in the darkness, laughing, ready to hurt her for real.

She thought about Ali, too—Real Ali *and* Their Ali. All this time, Emily had been hiding a secret: In the Poconos, the girls had escaped the house just before it blew up, with Real Ali still inside. What the others didn't know, however, was that Emily had left the cabin door open so that Real Ali could escape, too. She'd told everyone she'd closed it tight. And when the cops didn't find her body, Emily was positive Real Ali *had* gotten out and was still alive.

For many, many months, Emily had hoped that Real Ali would come to her senses and apologize to all of them for being A. Emily would be the first one to forgive her, of course. After all, she'd loved Ali—*both* Alis. She'd kissed both of them, Their Ali in her tree house in seventh grade, and Real Ali last year.

But that was before Real Ali messed with her daughter. Some of the notes from A threatened Violet's life. It was then that she realized Real Ali was beyond the pale. Real Ali didn't care for Emily at all, and she certainly had no intention of trying to make things right. She was just . . . *evil*. Almost immediately, the hope and love Emily had felt withered away, leaving a huge hole in her heart.

The elevator dinged, and an automated voice announced that they were on the Sunshine deck. A bunch of

kids marched down the long, garishly carpeted hall to find their rooms. Not wanting to get stuck behind them, Emily turned toward the sliding-glass door that led to a small patio overlooking the water instead. She stepped through it and let the chilly sea air fill her lungs.

Gulls called overhead. Traffic swished in the distance. The waves had foamy white tops, and a lifeboat bobbed seven decks below. Then Emily heard a cough and jumped. A girl with olive skin and long, chestnut-colored hair stood at the far end of the balcony. She wore dark sunglasses, a white eyelet dress, and ballet flats with pink-and-white grosgrain ribbon trim.

Emily didn't speak at first. The girl was so ethereal and quiet that she thought she might be a ghost.

But then the girl turned and smiled. "Hey."

"Oh!" Emily said, stepping back. "Y-you scared me. I wasn't sure you were real."

The corners of the girl's mouth turned up. "Do you *often* see people that aren't real?"

"Never anyone like *you*," Emily blurted, and then clamped her mouth shut. Why had she just said that?

The girl raised her eyebrows, taking her sunglasses off. And then she strolled over. Up close, Emily could see the dimples on her cheeks. Her arresting green eyes sparkled, and she smelled so fragrantly of jasmine perfume that Emily felt a little light-headed.

"Maybe I *am* a ghost," the girl whispered. "Or a mermaid. We *are* at sea, after all."

Then she touched the tip of Emily's nose, turned around, and disappeared through the sliding door. Emily remained in a cloud of jasmine, her mouth hanging open, the tip of her nose tingling. She wasn't sure what had just happened, but she definitely liked it. For one fleeting second, the ghost—or mermaid, or whatever she was—had made her forget absolutely everything wrong with her life.

3

THE BEST COUPLES ALWAYS COMPROMISE

“Welcome to the Activity and Volunteer Fair!” a sandy-haired guy said to Aria Montgomery and her boyfriend, Noel Kahn, as they walked up to the ship’s casino. “Aren’t you *so* psyched to be here?”

“Uh, sure,” Noel said, looking at the guy warily.

“Awesome!” the guy said. Aria was almost positive she’d owned an identical version of the star-shaped sunglasses he was wearing when she was six. He stood uncomfortably close to her when he talked.

“The name’s Jeremy. I’m your cruise director for the week,” he went on. “And we’re going to have fun, fun, fun! We have the best shows on the sea—and the funniest comedian in Lou the Earth Crusader. You’ll laugh—and learn how to save the planet!” He ushered them inside. “Walk around! Make new friends! And don’t forget to choose an activity and a volunteer task!”

Aria looked around. Humming slot machines, green-felt poker and blackjack tables, and a curved, marble-topped bar stretched as far as the eye could see. But there were no liquor bottles behind the bar, no cards sitting on the tables, and when Noel pressed a button on the slot machine, a message came up that said TRY AGAIN LATER.

Noel glanced at another cruise worker, a glossy-lipped woman in a white suit. “Can we gamble?”

“Oh, yes, on casino night!” The woman had a glazed-over, Barbie-doll expression on her face. “You don’t win real money, though—you get these cute little dolphin coins you can take home as souvenirs! They’re made by tribal women in South Africa from 100 percent recycled wool!”

Noel wrinkled his nose. Aria nudged him in the ribs. “It’s probably a good thing we can’t play for money, you know. Remember that time we played blackjack and you tried to count cards? I whipped your butt.”

“You did not,” Noel said gruffly.

“Did too!”

“Well, I demand a rematch. Even if it’s for recycled dolphin tokens.” One corner of Noel’s mouth rose.

Aria smiled happily. It felt so good to be getting along with Noel again. They’d been fighting a lot recently, first because Aria was sure that Noel had a crush on his family’s exchange student, Klaudia, who luckily was having visa issues and couldn’t come on the cruise. Then Aria had discovered a secret about Noel’s father, which had

led to more trouble between them. But they'd reconciled about everything, and now they were great.

They moved deeper into the casino, looking at activity booths for hiking expeditions, art walks, and mandatory for-credit classes like Convert Your Vehicle to Corn Power! Then Noel squeezed her arm.

"Are you sure it was okay that I took that lesson this morning?" he asked.

"Of course," Aria answered in a mature voice. The ship had disembarked a few hours earlier, and Noel had almost immediately abandoned Aria to surf with an ex-pro in the wave pool. Now he smelled overpoweringly like chlorine, and his eyes were a little droopy, the way they always got when he'd had a hard workout.

"Come on," Noel urged. "Tell the truth."

Aria sighed. "Okay, maybe I'm a *little* disappointed we didn't spend the first few hours together. Especially when the boat sailed out of the harbor. They played 'Over the Rainbow!' It was really cute and romantic. But we'll have lots of time to spend together, right?"

"Of course." Noel took Aria's face in his hands. "You know, I really like this new let's-always-be-honest policy."

"Me too," Aria said, but then fiddled with the ties on her sailboat-printed blouse. She and Noel were really trying to stick to an honesty-is-the-best-policy rule, telling each other the truth about everything. When Aria didn't want to watch *Game of Thrones* on HBO *again*, she said so. When Noel really, *really* wanted McDonald's drive-

thru instead of another dinner at Aria's favorite vegan restaurant, he made it clear.

It was liberating, but Aria also felt like a fraud because she still hadn't told him her *big* secrets, like what had happened in Iceland last summer—only one person knew about that. He didn't know that there was a new A in town, either, or that she and her friends had done something terrible in Jamaica.

Worse, now that Tabitha's death had been deemed a murder, Noel was suddenly interested in the story. While the two of them were hanging out at his house a few days earlier, a CNN report about Tabitha had popped on the screen. Noel had paused and squinted at Tabitha's picture. "She looks really familiar," he'd murmured.

Aria had quickly changed the channel, but she could feel Noel's mind working. He'd taken note of Tabitha while in Jamaica. When would he make the connection? Once he did, he'd likely tell the police everything he remembered about her from the trip. He'd tell them that Aria had been with him in Jamaica, too, and then the police would ask *her* questions.

On the phone with the girls, she'd mentioned an idea that had been brewing in her mind all week: turning herself in. On one hand, it would be a huge relief—she wouldn't have to hide anymore. On the other, her life would be over. Did she really want that?

Aria had hoped to use the time on this cruise to really figure out what she wanted to do, but she worried about

the police investigation. What if the cops figured it out before she'd decided? What if A gave them a clue they didn't even know A *had* yet? Aria would rather the confession be on *her* terms, *her* decision, but it felt like she was running out of time.

Now they passed a bunch of booths offering sign-ups for short-fiction workshops, pottery classes, and an eco-tour sponsored by Greenpeace. Then Aria spied a sign that said SCAVENGER HUNT! Next to it were pictures of kids looking at clues, riding down zip-lines, and trekking through the rain forest. EXPLORE THE ISLANDS! a sign read. MAKE AN ENVIRONMENTAL DIFFERENCE! WIN BIG PRIZES!

"Cool." Aria grabbed a flyer.

A pudgy strawberry-blonde with a name tag that said GRETCHEN stepped forward, a big smile on her freckly face. "Interested?" she asked. "We give you clues that send you all around the three islands. There's some research involved, so it would meet your for-credit class requirement. It'll be a lot of fun, too."

"That sounds great." Aria could easily imagine hunting for clues and exploring the islands with Noel. But when she looked at Noel for his opinion, he was talking to a tall guy with sunburned cheeks at another table. BECOME A CHAMPION SURFER IN SEVEN DAYS, read a banner over Sunburned Guy's head. Amazingly, it was a for-credit class, too, the cruise ship's version of PE.

"Dude, sign me up," Noel said excitedly, grabbing a pen from a cup with a surfer on the front.

“Noel, wait.” Aria caught his arm. “Doesn’t this look like it could be fun for both of us?” She pointed to the scavenger hunt sign.

Noel frowned. “Let’s surf instead.”

Aria turned to Sunburned Guy, who was presumably the instructor. “Is it okay that I’m not a strong swimmer?”

He wrinkled his freckled nose. “Can you do the crawl?”

“I can dog-paddle,” she said optimistically. She had never technically learned how to swim—there were so many other more interesting activities she’d wanted to try out when she was little instead. Cliff-diving in Jamaica had terrified her half to death. She’d always made Emily stay very close to where she landed so she could rescue her if she needed it.

The instructor looked skeptical. “Surfers need to be able to paddle through some pretty tough waves. I don’t think you’d be able to handle it.”

Noel looked crushed. Aria smiled at him. “Take the surf lessons anyway.”

“No!” he said quickly.

“It’s okay.” Aria squeezed his hands. “Who cares if we don’t do the same activity? We could do the same volunteer job, maybe. Or hang out at other times.”

“Are you sure?” Noel’s voice wavered.

“Absolutely.” Aria kissed his nose. “I want us both to be happy.”

Noel wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off the ground. “You’re the sweetest person in the world.”

He put her down, and for a moment, Aria *did* feel pretty sweet. But then the back of her neck prickled, and she sensed someone's presence behind her. She peered through the crowd of kids, the activity booths, and the blinking slot machines. There was a big banner over an empty table that read PROTECT THE SEAS. SAVE THE PLANET. LIVE LIFE TO THE FULLEST. A shadow moved behind it, and then a door marked STAFF ONLY eased shut. Aria's heart jumped, and she stared hard at the door, willing whoever it was to return.

The door remained shut. And yet, drifting over the sound of the slot machines, the whoops of the activity leaders, and the chattering of all of the kids stuffed into the room, there was a thin, eerie laugh. Aria's heart dropped to her feet. Whenever she heard that laugh, whether by coincidence or not, someone was always close.

A.

4

HELLO, ROOMIE!

Later that night, Hanna Marin sat with her boyfriend, Mike Montgomery, in a plush booth at Café Moonlight, an al fresco restaurant on the top deck of the boat. Bright, twinkling stars served as the ceiling, and a light, salty-smelling breeze occasionally blew out the candles on the tables. Waiters dashed to and fro delivering big salads featuring organic vegetables, jerk-seasoned free-range chicken, and the best organic sweet-potato fries Hanna had ever tasted. A reggae band played a Bob Marley song, the musicians dressed up in tropical-print garb.

When the song ended, the cruise director, whom Hanna had started calling “Creepy Jeremy” because of how close he stood to people when he spoke and the weird smile that seemed to be tattooed across his face, grabbed the microphone. “These guys are amazing, huh? But if you think *you’re* better, show off your skills at the *America’s Got Talent* extravaganza on Sunday night! Start working

on your act now, guys! First prize is a Vespa scooter!”

Mike crossed his arms over his chest. “Noel and I are going to do a hip-hop act.”

Hanna gave him a crazy look. “You’re actually going to *participate* in the talent show?”

Mike shrugged. “Didn’t you hear him? First prize is a Vespa. And Noel and I put together some sick rhymes in Jamaica.”

Hanna nearly choked on a fry. The last thing she wanted to do was reminisce about Jamaica. But everything today had reminded her of that awful trip: The artificial strawberry smell of someone’s spray-on sunscreen, the brand of orange drink sold in one of the cafés, a boy’s T-shirt that said JAMAICAN ME CRAZY! There was a Jamaican-themed party planned for two days from now, which didn’t even make sense since they weren’t going to Jamaica on this cruise.

She grabbed another fry and stuffed it into her mouth, resolving not to think about Jamaica on this trip—or any of the other shitty things that had happened. Like the fact that she’d recently witnessed a murder. And, oh yeah, that *she* was the intended target. Or that the cops were *this* close to figuring out what they did to Tabitha. What would happen when they did? Her family would be disgraced, of course. Her dad’s senatorial campaign would be ruined. Hanna would have a long life in prison to look forward to.

James Freed, a friend of Mike’s, appeared at their table. “Dude.” He sank into a seat. “Did you hear about the

Catholic girls' school that's here? They are *H-O-T*." He whispered the letters dramatically. "Apparently they're dying for some."

"*Hello*, James?" Hanna leveled a stare at him, reminding him she was Mike's girlfriend.

James looked at Hanna apathetically. "Hey." Then he turned back to Mike. "Some of the beaches in St. Martin allow nudity. Wanna help convince the Catholic girls to take a little trek with us?"

"Definitely." Mike practically began to drool.

Hanna pinched his arm. "Like hell you will!"

"Just kidding," Mike said quickly, then leaned toward her. "Unless you want to make it a threesome."

Hanna pinched him again. Then she flicked a lock of auburn hair over her shoulder and peered at James. "What Catholic school are you talking about?"

Again, James looked at Hanna like she was one of the pesky horseflies that had buzzed around them during the ship's departure. "I don't know. Villa . . . something."

"Villa Louisa?" Hanna spat.

"I think that's it." James squinted at her. "Why, are you thinking of stalking them?"

Hanna pressed her nails into the heel of her hand. "Very funny." Two weeks ago, she'd won Mike away from what she now called his "mistake," Colleen Bebris, despite the fact that A had sent the entire school an embarrassing video montage of Hanna trying to dig up something naughty about Colleen by stalking her. Though Mike

seemed to have forgotten the video, no one else had. Girls from Rosewood Day and some of the other private schools nudged each other and giggled at her as she'd boarded this morning. When she'd tried to take a spin class this afternoon, a not-even-that-cute-or-thin girl from the Quaker school had quickly set her water bottle on a free bike, saying it was saved. Hanna felt like she had a big sign on her back that said LOSER and just didn't know about it.

Hanna knew *of* the Villa Louisa girls, but she didn't know any personally. People from other schools called them Villa Gorillas. They pranced around the King James Mall wearing their plaid jumpers and naughty-girl knee-socks like they were *sooo* sexy, making eyes at every available (and unavailable) guy. Every Gorilla was thinner and blonder and more beautiful than the next, and the rumor was that they were all incredibly sexually talented. A lot of people had theories as to why: The holy water the nuns blessed them with actually contained an ancient aphrodisiac. Their uniforms were too tight in all the right places. They all had über-strict parents who forbade them to speak to any boy, anytime, and they were dying for male interaction. Apparently, Kate, Hanna's stepsister, knew a few girls from the school, but Kate had decided to stay home to do a community service project with her boyfriend, Sean Ackard, instead of going on the cruise.

"Hey!" Mike looked excited as he nudged Hanna. "Maybe your roommate is someone from Villa Louisa!"

“Then you’re never coming in my room,” Hanna joked. But she felt a little worried. Everyone on the cruise had been assigned roommates randomly—Jeremy had boasted that he’d personally pulled names out of a captain’s hat. No one had known who they’d be stuck with until they got on the ship. There had been no sign of Hanna’s roommate when she’d put her stuff down this morning.

Rooming with a Villa Gorilla was a terrible possibility. Hanna couldn’t be the *uglier* roommate. And she felt like she was skating on thin ice with popularity-hungry Mike, anyway, what with everyone snubbing her.

The conversation between Mike and James moved from the Villa girls to the fact that several people had already had things stolen from their rooms. “It’s not iPads or cell phones, either,” James said. “It’s random crap like shampoo and socks.”

“Dude, I’d better hide my boxers,” Mike joked.

Then James pulled a flask out of his bag. “Want some?” he asked, pushing it toward Mike, though not Hanna. When he unscrewed the cap, the scent of freshly squeezed limes wafted out.

Hanna inhaled the fragrant limes of the margarita—it was one of her favorite aromas, though it had been ages since she’d smelled it. Suddenly, a memory of the last time she really remembered the scent wriggled its way into her mind. The memory was about the other secret she was keeping, the one about Madison last summer.

She'd been in Philly with her dad that day to attend a political rally for one of his cronies—her dad's campaign hadn't really ramped up yet, but he'd done his fair share of handshaking and drumming up financial support. Afterward, when her dad had gone to a fancy dinner at the Four Seasons, Hanna had wandered over to South Street, wanting to get lost in the crowd of sightseers. Even though she was psyched that her dad was running for office, the secret from spring break weighed heavily on her. What if someone found out about it?

She'd noticed someone smiling at her from one of the side streets and saw an attractive guy standing in front of a bar called the Cabana. He was cute in that clean-cut, interchangeable-frat-boy way.

"Drinks are half-off right now," he said, pointing to the bar. "Come in for happy hour."

"Uh, I have a boyfriend," Hanna said quickly.

One corner of the guy's mouth turned up. "I'm the bartender. I'm just on a break right now. I'm not trying to hit on you."

Hanna peered into the bar. It wasn't really her type of place—there was an outdated Phillies schedule in the window, a naked girl-silhouette doormat at the front door, and the smell of stale beer and cigarettes. But there was an old-timey jukebox in the back playing a classic country song. No one knew, but old country songs were her weakness. She wanted to sit in the darkness and not think for a while. Besides, this didn't seem like the kind of place

anyone from her dad's campaign would go, meaning they wouldn't catch her.

So she followed the guy in. A couple of downtrodden-looking men and women nursed beers at the bar, and two guys were halfheartedly playing darts in the back.

The bartender who'd coaxed her inside had now taken his post behind the counter. "I'm Jackson, by the way," he'd said. "What can I get you?"

Hanna didn't really want anything to drink, but she asked for a margarita anyway. As she inhaled the drink's syrupy sweetness someone called out from the other end of the bar, "Watch out. Those things are super potent."

It was a slender girl a few years older than Hanna with wide blue eyes and high cheekbones. There was something sporty about her broad shoulders, freshly scrubbed skin, and high blond ponytail. She nudged her chin toward Hanna's drink. "Seriously. Jackson should have warned you."

Hanna licked her fingers clean. "Thanks. I'll remember that."

The girl grabbed her cocktail, got up, and slid into a seat next to her. "He's kind of cute."

Hanna shrugged. "He looks like he rows crew. Not my thing."

The girl sipped her drink. "I dare you to ask him to do a shot with us."

"That's okay," Hanna said quickly. She wasn't in the partying mood.

The girl cocked her head. “Is someone scared?”

Hanna flinched. Ali used to dare Hanna, Emily, Aria, and Spencer to do all kinds of things they didn’t want to do, teasing that they were scared when they refused. She always made them feel like such losers.

“Fine.” Hanna flagged Jackson over and ordered three lemon drops—one for him, too. The bartender and the girl knocked theirs back, but Hanna dumped hers on the floor when they weren’t looking.

The girl sloppily wiped her mouth and gave Hanna an approving grin. “What’s your name, anyway?”

“Olivia.” Hanna blurted out the first name that came to mind. It was the name of her father and Isabel’s wedding planner, whom she’d spoken with earlier that day.

“I’m Madison.” Madison raised her empty shot glass. “I’m having one last hurrah before I head back to Penn State. I’m on academic probation there, and if they catch you with even the teensiest bit of alcohol on your breath, they go ballistic. Where do you go to school?”

“Temple.” It was another think-fast answer—Emily was starting a summer program at Temple next week.

Madison asked Hanna more questions about herself, and Hanna made up more details. She said she was a cross-country runner, that she wanted to be a lawyer, and that she lived in Yarmouth, which was near Rosewood but *not* Rosewood. It felt good to slip into someone else’s identity for a few hours. This fictitious Olivia didn’t have two murderous BFFs and various stalkers. Her life seemed

so enviously simple. The only real thing she shared was that she was going on a trip to Reykjavik, Iceland, soon with Aria, Noel, and Mike. “Is that the place where you can smoke pot in the streets?” Madison asked excitedly.

Hanna shook her head. “No, that’s Amsterdam.” Madison looked disappointed.

Madison told Hanna that she lived in the area, though she didn’t say where. At first, she put on a good face about going back to school next fall, but as she downed drink after drink, her enthusiasm seemed forced and manufactured.

Within an hour, Madison became aggressively flirtatious with every guy at the bar—especially Jackson, who she said shopped at the store where she worked. Eventually, she slurred her words, dropped things, and spilled her sixth drink across the bar. As Hanna ran for napkins, Jackson scooped up the empty glass. Hanna wanted to tell him to cut Madison off—she could barely stand up.

“We’re taking a quick break, but we’ll be right back!” the steel drum player boomed, jarring Hanna from her thoughts. She looked around. The plate of fries was now empty. James was gone, and Mike was fiddling with his cell phone. She gritted her teeth, annoyed she’d given Madison any thought. Hadn’t she just told herself *not* to think about all the crappy things in her past?

“I still have no signal,” Mike grumbled, punching buttons. “What if it stays this way through the whole trip?”

“The crew told us the service is spotty,” Hanna reminded

him. “Besides, why do you need your phone so badly right now? Are you secretly texting with a Villa girl?”

“Never,” Mike said, then stood. “I’m going to unpack. Wanna meet up later in your room?” His eyes danced playfully.

“Yes, but only if my roommate *isn’t* a Villa girl,” Hanna said. “I’ll let you know.”

Then she headed toward her cabin, which was two decks down and through a labyrinth of hallways. On her way there, she spied Zelda Millings, a cool girl from Doringbell Friends who was always at Noel Kahn’s parties. “Hey, Zelda!” she called out.

Zelda looked at Hanna, then sniffed and pretended to talk on her cell phone. Hanna glanced around, horrified that someone might have seen.

As she slipped the keycard into the lock and opened the door, the room looked different than when she’d left it. The lights Hanna had turned off were on again, and the TV was blaring.

“Hello?” Hanna called tentatively, peering around. Someone had dumped their suitcase on the second bed. A pair of bright-yellow skinny jeans lay on the floor. A silky scarf, several T-shirts—in size extra-small—and a pair of espadrilles were spread across the mattress. Hanna’s gaze scanned the rest of the room. There wasn’t a plaid Catholic schoolgirl uniform in sight. *Yes.*

“Hello?” she called again, more happily this time.

A figure appeared in the balcony doorway. “*Hanna?*”

Hanna's eyes adjusted. Standing before her, in a cloud of her signature Kate Spade Twirl, was a girl with long, supple limbs, white-blond hair, and ice-blue eyes. It was someone Hanna hadn't prepared for at all.

"Oh," Hanna said stupidly. It wasn't a Villa girl. It was Naomi Zeigler.

She braced herself, waiting for an insult to spew from Naomi's mouth—probably something about her being a stalker. Or maybe Naomi would groan and march out of the room, disappointed that she'd gotten stuck with Hanna, the ship's biggest dork.

But the corners of Naomi's lips edged up in a grin. "Oh thank *God*," she blurted, slumping in relief. "I was so afraid they were going to stick me with someone like Chassey Bledsoe!"

She strode up to Hanna and linked her arm through her elbow, which was stiff with caution. "I am *so* glad you're here," Naomi gushed. She squeezed Hanna's arm. "I need someone to party with. What do you say?"

Hanna licked her lips. She wanted to ask Naomi where her BFF, Riley Wolfe, was, but now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen Riley anywhere. Maybe she hadn't come.

She glanced at her reflection in the mirror over the bureau. Her auburn hair hung glossily down her back, the zits on her forehead seemed to have suddenly cleared up, and her arms looked toned and trim, not bloated from stress eating. Even though Naomi was probably glomming

on to Hanna because her other friends weren't aboard, it had been a long time since a popular girl had begged her to hang. And with everyone still snickering about her little stalking episode, the offer felt even more tantalizing. With Naomi at her side, she'd become a queen bee again in no time. And isn't that what she'd wanted, forever?

I'm Hanna Marin, and I'm fabulous, she used to say when she was friends with Mona. And, okay, maybe she didn't feel *quite* as fabulous these days, but surely she still had a little bit of sparkle left in her.

She turned to Naomi and squeezed her arm back. "Let's party."