

Chapter 1

June, Now

I grew up the youngest of five girls and my childhood best friend was Maisy Morgan.

This is all anyone from my hometown knows about me.

One more time, for emphasis: this is all anyone from my *tiny, gossipy* hometown in rural East Tennessee knows about me. They could advise you on the latest drama between Earl's Mowing Service (the incumbent) and Merle's Mowers (the new biz in town). They could inform you of Mr. Dalrymple's medical ailments even though I'm pretty sure that gossip is illegal. They could tell you who last checked out an obscure library book about the best closing arguments in American legal history. Because if you aren't bribing the librarian for a list of who's reading what, how else do you stay informed?

But when it comes to me, nobody inquired much. If someone did, an easy sound bite was on the tip of the tongue:

Oh, Paige Lancaster? Well, you know, she's the youngest of five girls, and her best friend growing up was Maisy Morgan.

I'm not being hyperbolic. I overheard this exact sentence when I was seventeen, while hidden behind a booth at the Tri-Cities Spring Market. But my ears didn't even have time to burn; the gossips immediately moved on to juicier topics, like Mr. Dalrymple's insurance plan and the lawsuit Earl filed against Merle, which he promised the whole town would have the best closing argument in American legal history.

Nothing more to say on Paige Lancaster, apparently. It's almost like my older sisters and Maisy Morgan had enough personality between the five of them that I was never asked to develop one. I certainly never had an identifier like they each did.