



FROM THE AUTHOR OF *IMPOSTER*

BRADEIGH GODFREY

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praise for bradeigh godfrey

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The Followers

Imposter

the followers

BRADEIGH GODFREY



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For Alison Hammer,

who is proof that an internet friend can turn into a best friend.

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prologue

A heavy pounding yanks Liv from sleep.

Through bleary eyes, she glances at the digital clock on her nightstand: 12:14 a.m. She listens, holding her breath. All she hears is her younger brother breathing in the bunk below.

“Ollie?” Liv whispers into the muggy darkness. Most seventeen-year-old girls might find it annoying to share a room with their brother. Embarrassing, even. But Liv finds it comforting. She doesn’t like being alone in the dark, even here, in their grandmother’s quiet neighborhood.

No answer from the lower bunk. Her brother has always been a sound sleeper, which is a point of pride for Liv. He can relax at night because he knows she’s there.

More pounding on the front door, and Liv flinches.

“Open up. Hey, come on!” It’s a man’s voice, sharp as a broken bottle.

Footsteps on the old staircase; Gran is awake, heading downstairs. Liv hears the click of the deadbolt and the squeak of hinges as the front door opens.

“What are you doing here?” Gran doesn’t sound afraid, and Liv relaxes. Her no-nonsense grandmother will deal with this.

“I need Kristina’s new address,” the man says. His voice—too loud, like he’s not in control of his volume—sparks a flare in Liv’s chest. She knows to be cautious around men when they sound like that.

Slipping out of her bunk, she walks to the open window, squinting down at the front stoop. The man is tall and blond, his face illuminated by the porch light. It’s Sam, her sister Kristina’s ex-boyfriend. Liv’s only met Sam once, but she thought he seemed nice. Not now, though. He’s so tense that Liv stiffens with worry.

He and Kristina dated for a few months when Kristina was living in Ohio, but they broke up before she found out she was pregnant. Liv knows from Kristina that she and Sam have been arguing. Mostly about their daughter, Gabriela—Sam was asking for more time with her, but Kristina didn’t agree. So last month he called social services on Kristina and made up some ridiculous story about her using drugs. Liv can’t believe her sister would do that, not after everything they experienced growing up with their own mother, an addict who had three children with three different men and who has been in and out of prison for years. Sam’s call launched a whole investigation and Kristina was furious. After that, she moved to a new apartment and blocked Sam on her phone.

“Tell me where she is,” Sam demands, one hand pressed against the screen door that separates him from Gran.

“It’s the middle of the night,” Gran says. Still matter of fact, like she’s checking out a customer at the WaWa where she works.

“She’s my daughter, for Christ’s sake. You can’t keep me away from her.”

Liv tries to keep her breathing even. She's thinking about Gabriela. Almost a year old, with arms so chubby Gran calls her a Michelin Man baby. One of the best parts of living with Gran is that they get to watch Gabriela while Kristina is working, and Liv loves getting her up from her naps. Her niece will pull herself up on the side of the pack 'n play and grin, mouth open like a baby bird, black hair sticking out in all directions.

"Sam," Gran says, "listen to me. There's no reason you need to go to Kristina's right now. Go home, calm down. Come back in the morning, and I'll help you reach her."

"I'm not waiting until morning," he says, louder. "I need to see her tonight."

Liv presses her forehead against the screen, her breath coming in gasps.

But Gran seems perfectly in control, her short gray hair glistening as she shakes her head.

"It's late," she says. "You can go tomorrow."

"It'll be your fault if something happens to her tonight."

Sam's voice, a warning growl, sends a shiver down Liv's arms. It's a threat—but is he referring to Kristina? Or Gabriela?

She waits for Gran to rebuff him, but instead she sighs, says, "Alright," and gives Sam the address. "Just don't do anything stupid."

Liv shakes her head. Kristina won't be happy. But Gran hasn't been happy with Kristina lately, either. Liv overheard them arguing in the kitchen, their words cutting off when Liv walked in. But not before she heard Gran say: *You wanna end up like your mother?*

Down on the front porch, Sam turns and jogs across the lawn to a white truck parked on the street. He peels out so quickly that the tires screech.

Behind Liv, Ollie stirs in the lower bunk. “Livi?”

“It’s okay,” she whispers. “Go back to sleep.”

“Okay, g’night,” he mumbles, rolling over.

She climbs up to her bunk and lays on her back, staring at the ceiling. Sam’s words echo in her mind: *It’ll be your fault if something happens to her tonight.*

Liv wishes she could call her sister and warn her that Sam is on his way, but she doesn’t have a cell phone and the landline is in the kitchen. Gran might still be there.

If she’s honest, Liv has to admit that she’s been worried about her sister lately. She’s been struggling ever since her father died a year ago. Unlike Liv and Ollie, Kristina had a loving, involved dad, and losing him devastated her. She used to have a brightness about her—almost like she was glowing inside—but now all the light seems to have drained out of her.

Liv shifts her weight, rolling on her side in bed. Gran’s words to Kristina echo in her mind—*You wanna turn out like your mother?*—but Liv brushes them away. Kristina is nothing like their mother. It hasn’t been an easy year for her, that’s all. Grieving her father. Raising a baby on her own. Fighting with her ex-boyfriend. She just needs a break, Liv tells herself as she closes her eyes.

Tomorrow, she’ll call her sister and offer to take Gabriela for the day. Maybe Gran will let Gabriela stay overnight, so Kristina can get some uninterrupted rest.

Tomorrow, Liv promises herself before falling asleep, she’ll call her sister.

But the next morning, while Liv and Ollie are sitting at the kitchen table eating scrambled eggs, there will be a knock at the door. When Gran opens it, Liv will catch a glimpse of a uniformed police officer and a detective in a dark suit. She will set her fork down and come to the door, where the detective will give her and Gran the news:

Kristina is dead. And Gabriela is gone.

nine years later

one

I am the openest book in the history of open books.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Few situations are more humbling than a pelvic exam—flat on your back, feet in the stirrups, paper gown riding up your thighs, the doctor urging “Scoot down, don’t be shy!” Molly Sullivan usually powered through by telling herself that at least no one else was there to see it. Today, however, this experience would be witnessed by her closest friends.

All 2.7 million of them.

The setting: her gynecologist’s office. The cast: a ruddy-faced cameraman named Pete, a clog-wearing director named Candice, and Molly’s grandmotherly OB-GYN. The props: latex gloves, packets of lube, the longest Q-tip Molly had ever seen, and several metal speculums.

Speculums, or specula? she wondered idly. And who had designed them to look so much like a duckbill?

Focus, she told herself. Soon the entire world would have a front-row seat to one of the most intimate medical evaluations in a woman’s life. Sure, Molly had shared plenty of embarrassing moments online, like the time she’d confused

her eyelash serum with eyelash extension glue and spent two days with one eyelid sealed shut. But nothing like this, and never on such a grand scale.

Candice glanced at Pete. “Ready?”

“Go live on my count,” he said, nodding. “Three, two, and . . .” *One*, he mouthed, pointing at Molly.

“Hello, Invincibles!” she said into the camera a few feet from her face. “I’m partnering today with TKR Pharmaceuticals, a company at the forefront of developing immunotherapy for cervical cancer, and the American Cervical Cancer Coalition. As we know, to catch cervical cancer at an early stage, it’s imperative to get screening done. So I’m here in my gynecologist’s office for my Pap smear and exam. Say hi, Dr. Kallepalli!”

Dr. Kallepalli, near the drapes on Molly’s thighs, waved. The usually calm gynecologist had an expression on her face somewhere between “deer in the headlights” and “deer hit by a truck and bleeding out on the side of the road.” Molly made a mental note to send her a massive bunch of flowers when this was over.

The doctor had readily agreed to participate when Molly asked—declining all compensation, saying it was part of her mission to educate the public—but there was no way to prepare her for the experience of being on a live-streamed video with a following the size of Molly’s. Per the view counter, twenty thousand people had joined. A strong start and growing quickly.

“Two weeks ago,” Molly continued, her confidence returning as she settled into her groove, “I learned that one of my closest friends had been diagnosed with cervical cancer.” Ayla, a fellow influencer and curator of the popular platform

Single Mom By Choice, was thirty-three, just two years older than Molly. Ayla had an excellent prognosis with treatment, but Molly still felt shaken up by the news and compelled to act.

“I realized it’s been three years since my last Pap smear. I’d never dream of missing a doctor appointment for Clover, but it’s easy to forget to take care of myself. Dr. Kallepalli, can you explain why this is so important?”

Pete turned the camera back on the gynecologist, who settled into her doctor role as she spoke about internal exams, breast exams, and Pap smears.

Molly closed her eyes. The lights were giving her a headache, and she needed to save her smile. Even with years of experience on social media, she wasn’t used to camera crews. Most of her video spots were filmed at home using her phone and felt like chatting one on one with a friend. This, by comparison, was a production.

“We’re going to get started,” Dr. Kallepalli said, rolling her stool between Molly’s outstretched legs.

Molly fought the impulse to squeeze her knees together. “The whole point of this video is to break the stigma about getting these exams,” she said into the camera. “It’s part of life as a person with a uterus, and it shouldn’t be something we feel secretive about—”

“You’ll feel cold gel and my fingers,” Dr. Kallepalli said, and then, yes, indeed Molly did feel that.

“It’s important that we advocate for our own health,” Molly continued. “I know this isn’t the sexiest I’ve ever looked in my life, but taking care of our bodies *is* sexy—”

“You’ll feel pressure deep inside,” Dr. Kallepalli said, and *yep-yep- yep* that was some significant pressure right there, doc. “Now I’ll insert the speculum.”

Molly heard several clicks and struggled not to cringe. She had pushed a baby out—an eight-pound, seven-ounce baby—so this should be nothing, right?

But there was something so invasive about it. The cold metal, the slippery gloves, the crinkling paper under her backside. Not that she was going to tell her followers that. This was all about encouraging them to make their own appointments, not a description of the stretch-stretch-stretching—

“Aaaaaand the speculum is in!” Molly said, flashing what she hoped was more smile than grimace at the camera. Camera Guy Pete’s face went beet red.

“I’m preparing to take the sample,” Dr. Kallepalli said, calm and soothing. “We collect cells from your cervix to analyze. You might feel a slight pinch . . .”

More like significant scraping, Molly thought. Like rubbing a cheese grater over your knuckle. An abrasive slide, then stinging, and—relief.

Molly smiled at the camera. “Not so bad!”

Comments scrolled across the monitor, the reactions of viewers. Over ninety thousand people now. The largest reach Molly had ever achieved while live.

amelia cho You’re so brave, Molly! Thanks for doing this.

kailyn o’connell My favorite aunt died of cervical cancer so this is incredibly meaningful to me.

adam engelen Ngl, that looks horrifying af

Molly tried not to wince as the speculum shifted inside her. Next step: respond to the comments, make the viewers feel like they were part of this experience.

“Amelia, thanks so much for watching. Hi, Kailyn! So deeply sorry to hear about your aunt. I can’t imagine how difficult that was. Adam—take a deep breath, honey. The women in your life need your support. And guess what? It’s over!”

Dr. Kallepalli rolled away from Molly’s thighs and stripped off her gloves with a satisfying *pop*. “You did great, Molly. Why don’t you sit up and we’ll talk about what to expect next.”

Molly shuffled back on the exam table, grateful to have her feet out of the stirrups. The paper stuck to her skin, and she hoped that her gown and drapes stayed in place so nothing R-rated was exposed. That might shoot the view counter up even higher, but she had no interest in that kind of attention—despite the critics who liked to call her out for *having no boundaries*.

As Dr. Kallepalli explained the standard medical recommendations on cervical cancer screening, Molly’s mind drifted. She’d promised her four-year-old daughter that once she finished this live stream, they’d go to the park and play, just the two of them. But after that, there would be nothing on her agenda except going home. To her *husband*.

Just thinking the word made her smile. Scott had been gone for two nights, and Molly was bursting with excitement at the thought of seeing him. Would that ever fade, she wondered? She hoped not, but they’d only been married a month, still very much in the honeymoon phase.

The doctor finished, and Molly refocused her attention on the camera.

“Thanks so much for joining me today,” she began. “I hope you’ve learned something new—even if it’s just that you should wear cozy socks to your gyn appointments so your feet don’t freeze in the stirrups.”

One hundred and sixty-seven thousand people were watching now, and Molly reminded herself to imagine them as individuals. Mothers, daughters, friends, sisters, and wives with their own hopes, dreams, and fears. All tuning in, looking to her for advice.

“Our bodies come in different sizes, shapes, colors, and abilities,” Molly said. “It’s easy to fall into the trap of comparing ourselves to someone in a magazine or on Instagram, to think we need to look like that in order to be happy. That’s false, friends. Our bodies are our homes. Our sanctuaries. Today, I’m recommitting to treating mine with respect. Make an appointment to see your doctor to talk about cervical cancer screening. It took a wake-up call from my friend to get me in here, and I hope this will be a wake-up call for you. Now, go be invincible!”

Candice smiled, flashing a thumbs-up as Pete turned off the live stream. “And . . . that’s a wrap.”

two

Here's the thing about posting something online: once it's out there, you can never take it back. It belongs to the world now, not just to you.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

In a shaded playground near the edge of a neighborhood park, Liv Barrett sat on a sticky metal bench, trying not to make it too obvious that she was watching Molly Sullivan.

Molly had seemed ordinary enough at first glance. Her wavy blond hair and freckles gave her a girl-next-door look, and she wasn't doing anything unusual, just pushing her daughter on a swing, sending the little girl squealing and soaring through the sunshine-filled morning.

But there was something about her, some unseen force that drew the eye. And it wasn't just Liv who thought so, judging by the other playground parents who had chatted with her in the past half-hour. Liv supposed it was that essence of celebrity, the same force that drew millions to follow this woman's online presence.

Liv took a shaky breath to calm her nerves, then pretended to sip from her empty coffee cup. She felt awkward and out of place among these doting parents and their children. Her eyes kept filling with tears, and she was grateful for her sunglasses.

Not long ago, the name Molly Sullivan had meant nothing to Liv, who didn't care much about the world of social media influencers. That changed when Liv took a temporary position at a physical therapy clinic and learned that several of her fellow PTs were huge fans; they called themselves Invincibles and followed Molly religiously. It seemed like every conversation—at lunch, on breaks—revolved around Molly's latest posts, videos, and her new book. Even though Liv wasn't interested, it was impossible to avoid seeing Molly's face on their phone screens or hearing her voice share some funny, inspirational anecdote.

Then one month ago, Liv had walked in the break room to see them all gushing over a picture Molly had posted with her new husband. A cursory glance at her coworker's phone, and Liv froze. She knew him.

Sam Howard. Her sister's ex-boyfriend. The man who had somehow evaded the police and FBI for nine long years.

But before Liv could call the police and report what she'd seen, just a few hours later, the picture was gone. Vanished from Molly's Instagram feed like it had never existed. After berating herself for not getting a screenshot, Liv called the cops, but the detective she spoke with wasn't impressed. *You don't have any evidence, sweetie. Especially now that the picture's gone.*

Liv didn't need the picture; she knew it was him. Even though she'd only met him once, even though she had no pictures of him, it didn't matter. When she closed her eyes, she could still see his face as it had looked that night, shadowed by Gran's porch light.

She'd hung up with the detective, and that night, she'd applied for a new temp job in Durango, Colorado, where

Molly lived. If the detective wanted evidence, she would get it.

Since arriving in Durango two months ago, Liv had monitored Molly's social media platforms for any clues to her location. Yesterday, Molly posted about taking a walk by the river (*Loving the beautiful Animas in downtown Durango!* #AnimasRiverTrail #ColoradoLiving) and Liv rushed over there. She scoured the area, but never found her. Today, she'd watched Molly's live Pap smear, but by the time Liv figured out the address for the doctor's office and drove there, the parking lot was empty.

Then, about an hour after the live ended, Molly posted a selfie with her daughter at this park (*Playtime with my girlie!* #DurangoCityPark #ColoradoGirls #AnInvincibleSummer). Liv had dropped everything and jumped in her car, heart pounding with anticipation, palms slick on the steering wheel.

This time, she found her.

She'd easily recognized Molly in her signature pink sunglasses along with a white tank top, understated gold jewelry, and perfectly distressed denim cut-offs. The outfit was straight out of Molly's recent IG post about *Chic + Casual Summer Wear for Every Body*. Molly's daughter, who featured prominently in her social media, wore a princess dress, ragged along the hem, and a plastic crown that kept slipping into her face. Liv didn't care much about the girl; she was too blond and freckled to be Liv's dark-haired, dark-eyed niece. And too young.

Gabriela would be nearly ten years old now, missing since the night Kristina was murdered in her apartment. Missing so long the part of Liv's heart that held her memory had healed over, scarred down. But the thought of finding her niece had turned the scar into an open wound.

A memory bloomed in Liv's mind—a black-eyed, rosy-cheeked baby, reaching out with starfish hands. She swallowed past the yearning and leaned forward, studying Molly. So wholesome, so carefree, and happy. Shouldn't she be withering under the burden of her husband's secret?

Unless she didn't know.

Of course she doesn't know, Liv thought as she uncrossed and re-crossed her legs on the metal bench. No woman (or at least, not a woman like this, bending to kiss her daughter's peach-curve of a cheek) would knowingly marry a murderer. A man who had killed his ex-girlfriend, kidnapped their daughter, and changed his identity.

Liv wished she was a better, braver version of herself. The kind who could walk over and strike up a conversation, extract vital information in the guise of casual chit-chat. But she'd always been terrible at small talk, even with people she knew well. And now? With all these memories flooding her mind? She worried that she wouldn't be able to speak at all.

Still, she needed to find some way to make contact with Molly Sullivan, and soon. Molly had just told her little girl they needed to leave in five minutes. When her daughter jumped off the swing and scampered across the playground after a butterfly, Liv saw her chance. She scooted to the edge of the bench and stood, the backs of her thighs damp with sweat.

The little girl ran closer, plastic crown hanging from her wild curls, eyes focused on the butterfly. Liv took a half-step forward as the child darted in front of her, and the girl collided with her legs. Liv's coffee cup went flying. Small, chubby arms gripped her thighs. She looked down to see blue eyes blinking up at her.

“I’m so sorry!” Molly said, rushing over. “Honey, you need to say excuse me.”

“Scuse me,” the little girl said, her voice tiny and tinkling.

“That’s okay,” Liv managed. She hadn’t planned what to do at this point. “I wasn’t watching where I was going, either.”

“Oh no!” Molly said, noticing Liv’s cup on the ground. “She made you drop your coffee. Let me pay you back.” She dug into the bag slung across her shoulder and pulled out a few dollar bills.

Liv waved the money away, ducking to pick up the cup. “No worries, it’s almost gone.”

“I still feel bad,” Molly said. “We’re new in town, and here we go, ramming into nice people at the park.”

“You’re new here?” Liv asked, straightening.

She already knew this, as did millions of Molly’s closest friends. Molly’s move to Durango, after her recent marriage, had been all over her social media. *Ten Tips for a Blissful Move, Easing the Transition for Children, Starting a Blended Family*. But in a strange break from her usual oversharing, Molly didn’t speak much about her new husband. She’d shared just that one picture, and she never used his name, referring to him only as *Mister Sullivan*.

She’d never mentioned if he had a ten-year-old daughter.

“We moved here a couple weeks ago,” Molly said. “My boyfriend—I mean, my husband—lives here.”

Molly smiled a secret sort of smile, a newlywed smile, like she was carrying around a precious gift the rest of the world hadn’t yet discovered. It would have been heartwarming if Liv

didn't suspect who Molly's husband was—and what he had done.

"I'm new here, too," Liv heard herself saying. She was surprised at how normal she sounded.

Molly's eyes lit up. "Oh, no way! So far everyone I've met is either a tourist or their family's been here for generations. I feel like *such* an outsider. Where are you from?"

"Fresno." Not true, but it was her last place of residence in the string of temporary homes she'd had over the past several years.

Molly's smile grew. The deep dimple on one side gave her face a lopsided, endearing quality. "Really? One of my college roommates was from Fresno. Suzie Ling?"

Liv shook her head. "I don't think—"

"You're a Swiftie?" Molly burst out, making Liv jump. She was pointing at Liv's bag.

Liv glanced down at the row of enamel pins stuck in the strap of her bag; Oliver had given them to her over the years, a nod to their shared obsession with Taylor Alison Swift. "Um, yeah," she said.

Molly's eyes sparkled with excitement. "I *love* her. And those are so cute! A cardigan," she said, leaning in closer, "and a mirrorball! Oh, and this one's for *Midnights*, right? I love that album."

"It's great," Liv said, a little uncomfortable with how close Molly was now standing.

"'Anti-Hero' is one of my favorite songs, ever," Molly went on, seemingly oblivious to Liv's awkwardness. "You know that line about how everyone else is a sexy baby—"

“And she’s a monster on the hill?” Liv completed.

“Yes!” Molly said, eyes lighting up. “I know exactly how that feels. Her lyrics are just . . . perfection. You know?”

Liv nodded, a little surprised. Not that Molly liked Taylor Swift—she talked about it constantly online—but because she, too, resonated with that line. The feeling of being apart from the rest of the world, exiled and unwanted. But why would Molly Sullivan, one of the most adored women on the internet, feel like that?

The little girl tugged Molly’s arm. “Mommy, I wanna do the awesome slide.”

“Okay, sweetie. Just one minute.” Molly glanced back at Liv, her brown eyes wide and friendly. “I’m kind of starving for people to talk to. I don’t have any friends here yet, and summer is my husband’s busy season.”

Liv wanted to ask, *And what does your husband do? What’s his name and date of birth? Did he live in Ohio ten years ago?* But not only would that be strange, it was impossible; her mouth had gone so dry she couldn’t say much at all.

Luckily, Molly seemed okay carrying the conversation. Liv should have guessed she’d be a talker, given her penchant for posting live videos for all the world to see.

“My husband is sort of a hermit,” Molly continued. “He used to live way out on the edge of town, in this tiny cabin buried in the trees. I convinced him to move downtown—there is no way I could survive so far from civilization. My mission this summer is to create a nice community for ourselves. I’m Molly Sullivan, by the way.” She stuck out her hand. “My husband is Scott Wander. He owns a river-rafting business.”

There it was: his new name. His new identity. A rush of exhilaration flooded Liv's mind, but she forced herself to think. She needed to confirm, beyond the slimmest shadow of a doubt, that Scott Wander was the man she was looking for.

Taking a breath, she shook Molly's hand, hoping Molly would keep talking about her family. Maybe mention if Scott had a daughter, a ten-year-old with dark hair and wide-set dark eyes like Kristina's.

Molly, however, patted her little girl's messy hair and set the crown back where it belonged. "And this is my daughter, Chloe."

Liv was startled—Molly always referred to her daughter as Clover online. Apparently it was a pseudonym. She forced a smile and said, "Nice to meet you both."

Liv didn't have much experience with kids, so she couldn't guess Chloe's age. But she was old enough to have opinions, to make memories, to understand if her family fell apart. Liv felt a flash of guilt but brushed it aside. It wasn't Liv's fault that Sam Howard had lied to Molly and her daughter.

"Whass your name?" Chloe said. She had something brown smudged on her cheeks and mouth. Liv fought the urge to lick her thumb and scrub it off.

"I'm Liv."

Chloe shoved her tangled hair out of her face and held up her hand, all the fingers outstretched. Liv had no idea what she was expected to do. Give her a high-five?

"I'm almost a whole hand old," Chloe said.

"That's right." Molly beamed at her daughter. "You'll be five in just a few days."

Liv glanced away to avoid seeing the adoration in Molly's eyes. But it was too late. A tangled, mournful fury began to build in her chest. Kristina hadn't gotten the chance to watch *her* daughter grow up, to push Gabriela on the swings, or celebrate any birthdays at all. Unfair. Horribly, tragically unfair.

Breathe, Liv told herself. But the fury twisted and bubbled inside her until she knew she couldn't stand here talking to Molly for even a second longer. She'd gotten what she needed, she told herself. Now that she knew his name, she could find Scott Wander—and Gabriela.

"Shoot, we need to get going," Molly said, glancing at her pink Apple Watch. "It was nice to meet you. Maybe we'll see you around?"

"Maybe," Liv said, already heading toward her car. But probably not.

In the car, Liv's hands shook so hard she had difficulty buckling herself in. Her mind kept filling with visions of Kristina, face down on her apartment floor, bloody and beaten. The cheery intro music for a podcast started playing automatically, and Liv reached for her phone to turn it off.

But then she recognized the episode—one she'd downloaded yesterday but hadn't listened to yet—and stopped:

A chat with influencer Molly Sullivan about her new book AND her new marriage.

Liv swallowed. Might as well listen.

Never a bad idea to know what you were up against.

three

Transcript

Podcast: Quinn's Picks

Quinn Tompkins: Welcome to this week's episode of Quinn's Picks. I'm thrilled to have a special guest on the podcast today, someone I've admired for years. You know her as the relentlessly optimistic and always authentic Invincible Molly Sullivan from Instagram, TikTok, and her . . . just released, memoir!

I had a chance to sit down with Molly and chat about her life off-screen. I hope you'll learn something new about Molly—as if we needed any more reasons to love her.

Molly, tell me how you first got started on social media.

Molly Sullivan: Five years ago I thought I was living the perfect life. I had a handsome husband, I was pregnant with our first baby, and we'd just purchased our dream home outside Denver. But while I was in labor at the hospital, my husband told me he was stepping out for

some air. He never came back. I soon discovered his business was in serious financial trouble and our savings were wiped out. He'd taken what little money we had left and run off.

The next few weeks were the darkest of my life. Not only had I lost my marriage, I'd lost so much of my social support system. All my friends at the time were friends with my ex-husband, too, and none of them had kids yet, so it seemed like they didn't know how to interact with me. I was alone all day in a big empty house with my little baby, and I needed someone to talk to. To connect with.

I started sharing snapshots of my new life on Instagram—the sleepless nights with a fussy baby, the days I couldn't find time to take a shower, the struggles with breastfeeding—and slowly developed a small following. These amazing women, people I'd never met in my life, would comment on my posts, giving me support and advice through those early months of motherhood. It wasn't long until my online friends became more supportive than my real-life friends. Our society has become fragmented—women used to live in these tight-knit communities with their sisters and mothers and aunts and cousins, but now we're all isolated. I think women are looking for that sense of connection in social media.

QT: How and why did you transition this into a career?

MS: I was a twenty-six-year-old single mom with no income and a massive mortgage on a house that needed

lots of work. Once I exhausted my small savings account that my ex-husband hadn't emptied, I figured my best bet was to sell the house and start over, but the housing market had taken a turn, making it impossible to sell the house in its present state. When my daughter was a couple months old, I started working on fix-it projects. I had no idea how to refinish a wood floor, for example, so I searched on Pinterest for instructions. I found all these amazing women with DIY blogs and YouTube channels. And as I tried and failed and eventually succeeded at my own projects, I documented my process on Instagram with videos and posts.

That's when some small sponsors got involved, giving me a few gallons of paint, a new drill, light fixtures, that sort of thing. Slowly, I went from feeling alone and scared to feeling supported and empowered. By the time the house was ready to sell, I could afford to pay the mortgage myself. I owe it all to this community.

QT: But your first post to truly go viral wasn't about DIY, right? It was that horrible date story.

MS: You mean the one about the guy who took me to McDonald's drive-thru for dinner?

QT: (laughs) Yes! He squeezed the ketchup packets into the cupholder of his car so he could dip fries in it! So gross.

MS: That wasn't even the worst part. When he dropped me off, he asked to use my bathroom—

QT: And tried to steal four rolls of toilet paper by stuffing them down his pants! I remember. It would be hilarious if it wasn't so awful.

MS: I shared that totally on a whim and was shocked to wake up the next morning to all the comments and shares. It was *insane*. I couldn't believe that people cared so much about my life!

QT: Speaking of that, tell us what it's like to share so much on social media. You've been called the Queen of Realness—sharing the good, the bad, and the ugly.

MS: Before my first husband left, he was consumed with maintaining a certain appearance—even though he was secretly putting us into debt, and eventually lost his business. I decided early on in my social media journey that I couldn't be perfect, but I could be authentic. That included letting the world into even my dark moments, my difficult moments—being vulnerable.

QT:How do you balance authenticity and vulnerability as it relates to your child's appearance in social media?

MS: Part of being authentic is showing my real life, and that includes my daughter. I do use a pseudonym for her, and I think carefully about how she will react to all this as she gets older. I always try to remember that my real-life relationships—with my daughter, for example—have to come before my online relationships.

QT: Speaking of relationships—you recently got married. Congratulations!

MS: Thanks so much.

QT: Tell us about your husband! You've been super quiet about him, only sharing one picture. We're all curious!

MS: (Laughs) Mister Sullivan is my opposite in many ways—he's a confirmed introvert—but we share something important: a desire to be our authentic selves. I don't think I've ever met anyone who is as true to himself as he is.

QT: Did he know about your social media presence when you started dating?

MS: I told him about it, but I don't think he understood—he's not even on Facebook! We were able to date and get to know each other without the pressure of the outside world, and I appreciated that. Out of respect for

him, I didn't publicize anything about our relationship until after we were engaged. Moving forward, we'll continue to discuss how to balance social media and our marriage.

QT: Tell us about your memoir, *An Invincible Summer*. I thought it might be a regurgitation of your old Instagram posts but no, this was all new content. I finished it last week and I have to say: I absolutely adored every word! So inspirational.

MS: Thank you. I wanted to honestly reflect on the past five years of my life—the obstacles, but also the triumphs. My only hope is that it'll resonate with people going through their own challenges.

QT: To finish, can you tell us what the phrase “An Invincible Summer” means to you? It's the title of your book but also the mantra for your entire brand.

MS: It's from an essay by Albert Camus, the Nobel Prize-winning French philosopher, and writer. He wrote: “In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.”

My first January as a single mom was also one of the worst winters to ever hit Denver. I was struggling to pay my bills and I even lost heat for a few days. I truly hit rock bottom, but one day I read this quote and it lit me on fire. This idea of an invincible summer within myself became my war cry.

The word invincible means too powerful to be defeated or overcome. It doesn't mean bad things don't happen; it doesn't mean we don't get discouraged or overwhelmed. It means that despite the difficulties, despite the messiness of life, we will not allow ourselves to be defeated.

QT: And that, friends, is why we love Molly Sullivan. Molly, thanks for joining me today. Best of luck with the launch of your new book and your new marriage.

MS: Thanks for having me, Quinn.

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It's easy to dismiss influencer marketing, but it's not going anywhere. In 2022, Instagram influencers alone were paid upwards of one billion dollars for marketing. By 2025, that is expected to grow into ten times that. That's right. A ten-billion-dollar market.

—From the article “Influencers of Influence”

Later that evening, Molly stood in the middle of her kitchen, surrounded by partially unpacked boxes. It would be beautiful once it was all in order: maple cabinets reaching to the ceiling, a farmhouse sink, and antique copper light fixtures. A striking contrast to the kitchen she'd remodeled on her own back in Denver, with its DIY backsplash and hand-painted cabinets.

She'd left her phone upstairs; as soon as the Pap smear live had ended, it started blowing up with notifications. The majority were positive, but some were negative, and a few were downright disgusting. Gross comments were part and parcel of being a woman online, but these felt more personal—maybe because the content of the live was more personal. Molly had a splitting headache and a vague sense of nausea in the pit of her stomach.

Behind her, she heard the back door open, and in an instant, the stress of the day melted away. Scott was home. Just the sight of him walking in the door, broad-shouldered and solid, filled her with pure relief. She all-out ran to greet him, launching herself into his arms. He laughed, a surprised but pleased sound, and picked her up, spinning her around the kitchen. She breathed in the smell of him—sun, river water, and rubber from the rafts.

“Hi, husband,” she whispered against his neck.

“Hi, wife,” he whispered back, then caught her mouth with a kiss.

He tasted like the tuna fish sandwich he’d had for lunch and his lips were dry from being outside all day, but Molly didn’t care. All that mattered was that she could be 100 percent herself around him—no need to weigh her words or analyze her body language or worry about how anyone else would react. His presence felt stable and grounding, the foundation she’d craved for years. This, right here, was why she had moved to this little town, packing up her daughter and everything she owned, upending her career, and confusing the heck out of her followers. She’d done it because of this man, because she’d never fit with anyone the way she fit with him.

She leaned back, arms around his neck as he set her down. He smiled at her, his blue eyes sparkling, his sandy hair dried into disheveled waves. The dogs ran into the room—Hoopi the obedient and reliable German Shepherd, and Bitsy the loveable but dim-witted yellow mutt—their tails wagging as they waited for Scott’s attention. But he was focused on her, kissing her jaw, her neck, whispering that he’d missed her, that he’d been thinking about her nonstop. Molly ran her hands across his broad shoulders and down his arms, muscled from

years of navigating rafts filled with enthusiastic, inexperienced tourists.

Once upon a time, Molly had been one of those enthusiastic tourists, and he'd been her grumpy river guide. Hard to believe that that serious, unapproachable man was the same one now grinning as she gave his biceps an admiring squeeze.

“How'd everything go today?” he asked, bending down to finally pet the dogs.

“Fine,” she said, wondering if he'd watched the replay of her live video. Probably not—he was supportive of her career, but not overly invested in it. Still, she couldn't shake the worry that Scott might get sick of her social media life. He could've easily found someone else—someone else who wasn't *loud, neurotic, and attention-seeking*, as one commenter on today's video had said. Someone who didn't have *thunder thighs and a cellulite problem*.

Shaking that off, she focused on him. “Chloe and I went to the park after my live, and now she's playing in her room.”

“And Ella?”

That was another reason she'd moved here—for Ella, Scott's daughter. So Ella and Chloe could each have a sister and a real, honest-to-goodness family. “She spent most of the day at Lily's house, two doors down.”

“She's already making friends. That's good.” He sounded surprised, though he shouldn't have been. The only reason Ella hadn't had many friends until now was because Scott had kept her so isolated, living in the mountains outside Durango for the past four years. A function of Scott's introverted personality, but probably not the best for his daughter's social

development. Buying a house in the middle of a nice, family-oriented neighborhood would be good for all of them, Molly thought, and Scott had agreed when she suggested it.

“That’s the plan, right?” Molly kissed him again. “I haven’t started dinner yet, but we have chicken breasts we can grill and salad stuff in the fridge.”

“Sounds perfect. I’m going to shower. I’ll be back in a minute to help you.”

Scott swatted her butt as he left to rinse the river off him. He wasn’t the kind of boss to sit in the office and let his employees guide the rafting trips. He needed to know what happened every day on the river. If the water level rose or dropped, if rocks shifted or a tree fell, it could affect the path the guides took through the rapids. His devotion to the business and his employees had always been something Molly admired.

While Scott showered, Molly grabbed her phone from upstairs, checked to make sure the comments on her live hadn’t gotten out of hand, and then got dinner ready. Her phone dinged with a text message and she glanced at it—Ayla, a friend in Denver, the one battling cervical cancer, had sent a picture.

Look what came up on my Facebook memories from this day last year! You’re welcome, sweetie!

It was a picture of Molly and Scott, taken on the day they met.

Molly’s first impulse was to share the picture in her Instagram stories, but she didn’t want a repeat of their huge, nearly-relationship-ending argument when she’d shared the picture after their engagement. Instead, she leaned against the

kitchen counter, smiling as she remembered the moment captured in the photo.

Ayla had convinced Molly to come on an overnight river rafting trip in Durango with a group of other women. Right before they set out, she'd shoved Molly next to their guide and snapped the picture. Molly had her hair in a messy bun and a green life jacket over her swimsuit and shorts. She was grinning like a maniac, holding an oar to the sky like a knight wielding a sword. Scott, on the other hand, looked flat-out annoyed, tension radiating from his shoulders and clenched jaw.

A few hours after that picture had been taken, Molly was on the river and had forgotten all about the awkward moment, determined to have an amazing time despite the unfriendly guide. Being away from her normal life, cut off from the internet, was liberating. She hadn't left Chloe for a single night since her birth. She felt herself expanding, enjoying the company of these funny, strong women, the world unfurling around her as they drifted down the river in the summer sunshine.

"He keeps looking at you," Ayla said as they stopped for lunch at a pull-out point along the river, motioning to their grumpy river guide. "I think he likes you."

Molly shook her head. "He does not. He doesn't even talk. He's probably illiterate."

"With that body, who cares," Ayla said in a low voice.

They camped on a sandy bank for the night, the river guides—Scott and two others, younger and less experienced—making a Dutch oven dinner. Everyone helped set up the tents,

and after dinner they sat around the fire, drinking cold beers and chatting.

“He’s still looking at you,” Ayla whispered, nudging Molly.

Molly noticed his eyes following her over the fire, watching as she told stories and laughed with her friends. It made her self-conscious—that intense stare, almost a glare—and she wondered if her laughter was irritating him and ruining the ambiance. Too bad for him, she told herself and continued to enjoy the evening.

As the fire died down and the stars blinked on overhead, people headed off to their sleeping bags. Molly found herself sitting around the fire with Ayla and Scott. He surprised her by starting to talk, describing the geology and history of the area they were traveling through on the river, and she wondered if he was simply uncomfortable in crowds.

He told them about a lookout they could walk to. “If anyone wants to come, I can take you up there. It’s about a twenty-minute hike.”

“Sounds fun,” Molly said. “You want to come, too, Ayla?”

But Ayla yawned in an exaggerated fashion and stretched her arms over her head. “You go ahead.”

That’s how Molly ended up perched on a peak overlooking the Animas River, chatting with Scott the hot river guide. He was easy to talk to, all alone in the dark, his voice vibrating between them and doing strange things to her insides.

It only took a few minutes to discover they had some things in common—both single parents, each with a big dog and a little girl. His wife had passed away when his daughter was just a baby, so they both knew the challenges of raising a

child alone. That got Molly talking about Chloe, how she hated leaving her but how wonderful it had been to get away. She hadn't realized how trapped she'd felt for the past four years, how limited.

Then she flushed. "You probably think I'm a horrible mother, saying that about my child. I adore her, she's the most important thing in my life, it's just . . ."

"You'll never be free again, no matter what," Scott said, nodding. His eyes were a dark, dark blue, almost black in the dim light.

"Yeah."

As they continued talking, the night turning cool, Molly waited for him to make a move, to take her hand or kiss her. She assumed he brought a lot of women here, that this was his way of getting a little noncommittal action. She didn't really mind. But a couple hours passed in conversation, and he never touched her.

He did watch her face. He listened intently, seriously. And over time, his gaze moved from her eyes and landed firmly on her lips.

But he still didn't kiss her.

Which was fine, because Molly was a thirty-year-old single mom and the last thing she needed was a make-out session with a gorgeous, outdoorsy guy she'd never see again.

Except when she put it that way, it sounded like exactly what she needed.

When he suggested they return to camp, she covered up her disappointment with a big smile and thanked him for bringing her. They headed back through the darkness, Scott leading the way. A few hundred yards from camp, she slipped

on some loose gravel, and he turned to steady her. She sucked in a breath at his touch, his warm, rough hand gripping her arm, fully encircling it—and she wasn't a small, willowy thing.

He was so big. Tall enough, broad enough, that he made her feel like a tiny person. She wasn't used to that—she had always felt taller and curvier and louder than a woman was supposed to be. But Scott seemed to dwarf her, not only with his size, but with his silence.

After a few breathless moments, she told herself *be brave* and lifted her chin, staring into his eyes, black in the darkness, hoping he would make a move and terrified he wouldn't.

His lips met hers in an ever-so-soft and ever-so-brief contact, then he pulled back. Molly wanted more, so she reached her arms around his neck and closed the gap. Within seconds, the kiss intensified, and a deep ache spread through Molly's stomach and down her legs.

His hands circled her waist, ran up her back, and buried themselves in her hair. She leaned back, exposing her neck, and he took the hint, kissing her there with an urgency she hadn't expected. But who was she to argue? It had been so, so long since she'd been held by a man. Her fingers itched to feel him, and she reached under his T-shirt.

At her touch on his bare skin, Scott pulled away, the night air cool on the places his hands had been.

“We'd better get back,” he said.

Molly forced a laugh to cover her sinking embarrassment. “Lead the way.”

The next morning, they all packed up camp and put out the rafts to finish their trip. Scott spent the day in near-silence,

giving terse commands to the women in his raft, not once looking at Molly. By midafternoon they had reached their final destination, loaded up Ayla's car, and headed back to Denver.

Two weeks later, Molly had all but forgotten about him. It was a Friday evening, and she and Chloe were making homemade pizza and taking videos of the process to post. The doorbell rang, and Bitsy leaped up from her spot on the couch, barking. Molly dusted her flour-covered hands on her sunflower-print apron and went to the front door.

She froze when she saw Scott on the stoop. "What are you doing here?"

He shifted his weight, hands in his pockets. "I looked up your address in our records. I can't stop thinking about you. But if you want me to go, I will."

She didn't know what to make of that. He almost seemed like he *did* want to go, as if he was engaging in some kind of internal struggle on her doorstep.

"Do you like pizza?" she asked, opening the door wider.

He stayed all weekend. The first night he fell asleep on her couch after talking until three in the morning. They discovered that they both loved old movie musicals (her favorite: *My Fair Lady*; his favorite: *The Music Man*), caramel popcorn (he made a giant bowl for them to share, using his grandmother's recipe that he had memorized), and board games (especially *Settlers of Catan*). He was still quiet and reserved, just as he'd been on the river trip, but he slowly opened up and relaxed. She did, too; he made her feel so at ease that she felt completely comfortable hanging out in an old pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt from college. The second day they went to the Denver Zoo with Chloe, and she instantly adored this big, gentle man who lifted her onto his shoulders so she

could see over the crowds at every animal enclosure. That night, he slept in Molly's bed. She knew, even that early on, that she was falling hard.

A week later she drove the six hours down to Durango, and a week after he drove back to Denver to spend a few days with her. That turned into a year of back-and-forth drives, long-distance phone calls, introducing their girls and dogs to each other, and finally, finally, a marriage proposal, an engagement ring, and a simple wedding one month ago at the Durango courthouse with their daughters present. Both of them had been married before, so they wanted to keep it focused on the family they were starting.

Now Molly was here, in the kitchen of their new home, watching as her husband returned from his shower. He was carrying Chloe on his back, her favorite tiara falling into her face as he galloped her around the room. His hair was wet, his face freshly shaven. Anticipation rushed through Molly at the thought of what they would be doing as soon as the girls went to sleep.

Scott set Chloe on the ground, and she attached herself to his leg like a baby koala. "How was your day?" he asked Molly.

She told him about the live—he listened attentively, nodding and *hmmm*-ing in all the right places—and then she told them about going to the park with Chloe. "And guess what? I made a new friend there," she said.

"You've lived here less than a month and you already know more people than I do," Scott said, smiling.

"Because I talk to people," Molly said, teasing him. "I introduce myself, I make conversation. It's called being sociable."

“I are sociable,” Chloe repeated in a prim voice.

“Yes, you certainly are,” Molly said. So sociable she had run right into that poor woman at the park.

“Tell me about your new friend.” Scott grabbed the plate of raw chicken and headed out to the back patio. Molly followed, letting the screen door shut behind her after the dogs darted through and started wrestling on the lawn.

The backyard was one of Molly’s favorite things about the house, with two massive red-leaf maples shading the grass and a disheveled stone patio that would be perfect for entertaining once she applied a bit of love and elbow grease. And found the aforementioned friends.

“She’s from California,” she said. “And she’s new here, too. Her name is Liv.”

Liv had seemed a few years younger than Molly’s own thirty-one years. Small and fragile-looking, with dark hair in a pixie cut. But what had caught Molly’s attention were her dark eyes, large and intense in her pale face. Those eyes had followed Molly while she pushed Chloe on the swing, talking to as many people as possible, trying to cover up the discomfort she felt at Liv’s pointed stare. She assumed Liv had recognized her, and that Liv had been feeling as isolated as Molly had since moving here. Maybe she wanted to connect with someone who felt familiar. Molly had learned over the years that her followers felt like they truly knew her, which was disorienting because Molly didn’t know any of them. But she often wished she *could*.

“I should’ve invited her to the party,” she said.

Scott smiled at her over the top of the grill. “You want to invite her to the birthday party? You hardly know her.”

“It’s my birs-day party,” Chloe chimed in.

“I know, sweetie.” Molly brushed a strand of hair out of Chloe’s face. “But the more the merrier, right? Oh, and she’s a Swiftie, Scott! We bonded over it.”

“Ah,” Scott said, nodding like it all made sense now. “Well then you obviously need to invite her. Are you sure you’re okay with me not being there, though?” His forehead wrinkled as he flipped over a chicken breast. “I still feel bad about missing it.”

“Don’t. It’ll be a bunch of girls running around shrieking, eating too much sugar, and sprinkling glitter all over the house and backyard. You’ll be back the next day and we’ll have our own celebration.”

Scott would be guiding a three-day river rafting trip—he did one every weekend, all summer. Molly figured the party would give her, Chloe, and Ella something to do together while he was gone, and an opportunity to make friends here. Despite her popularity online—or maybe because of it—Molly didn’t have tons of real-life friends, aside from a few mom-friends from Chloe’s preschool and a network of fellow influencers back in Denver. She’d always dreamed of creating a true village, though, and what better place to do it than a small town like Durango? She’d invited twenty-five girls and their mothers, and they’d all RSVPed yes, which was exciting but also nerve-wracking. The party needed to be beautiful enough to post on Instagram, but not so over-the-top that it made her guests uncomfortable. She wouldn’t post any pictures of the guests—she’d learned that it was safer to not include other people on her social media—but her followers would want to see the decorations and the food, enough to feel part of it.

Ella walked through the gate into the backyard, and Scott glanced up, said, “Hey, there’s my girl,” and pulled her into a hug.

“Did you have fun at Lily’s?” Molly asked, smiling at her new stepdaughter. Ella was almost ten years old, with olive skin and wavy black hair, and the same careful smile and quiet personality as Scott. Molly adored her already, but so far the feeling wasn’t exactly mutual.

Ella briefly glanced at Molly, then turned and ran down the hall to her bedroom without saying a word. Molly sighed, watching her go. Ella seemed to regard Molly as an interloper, and Molly couldn’t blame her; she’d had her dad all to herself for years. But Molly had spent the past few months, ever since Scott asked her to marry him, reading about blended families. She was determined to win Ella over, in time.

“I’m sorry,” Scott said quietly. “This is a lot of change for her. New school, new neighborhood, new family members.”

She gave him a bright smile, not wanting him to worry. “We’re settling in just fine. Ella’s going to love me, wait and see.”

His arms slipped around her waist as he whispered, “Let’s get the girls to bed early. I need you tonight.”

She leaned against him and nodded.

McSnark's STOP RUINING MY INTERNET

The official discussion forum for Molly Sullivan of An Invincible Summer

MissLovelyPeach posted:

Ok y'all, who saw that Pap smear video yesterday??
Now we have the mental image of Molly Sullivan getting
a gyne exam forever stuck in our minds.

DanceMom replied:

Can I just add that if your going to have blond
highlights can you PLEAZZZZZ get your roots
done!

IhateMollySullivan4Eva replied:

I guess showing your bad dye job is called being
authentic and vulnerable <eye roll>

BTW Has she posted more about her husband??
I got me a screenshot of that photo she posted
back when they got engaged. He gives me a
Chris Hemsworth vibe. Mmmmmm, Thor

Meow17 replied:

I wonder how long this husband will stick around
the last one left her after less than a year. Im
guessing shes difficult to live with.

IhateMollySullivan4Eva replied:

She has no boundaries. Remember when she got
a call from Clovers preschool that she fell off the
monkey bars and BROKE HER ARM? Molly
started a live video of herself to show the world

how worried she was. Like who does that? GO TAKE CARE OF YOUR KID.

Meow17 replied:

Speaking of Clover I hate that little bitch kid so much why is she always wearing such stupid princess costumes and why doesn't Molly brush her kid's hair????

KaylieBeth [moderator]:

Please remember minors under 18 are not to be discussed on SRMI. Feel free to snark on Molly as much as you want, though!!!

:D

Meow17 replied:

Sorry KaylieBeth. <3

IhateMollySullivan4Eva replied:

Today's video was all about getting attention. Her book fell off the NYT bestseller list and she needs to sell more copies. It's pathetic.

MissLovelyPeach replied:

What's even more pathetic is how her followers eat it up. Those Invincibles are like a flock of sheep all wearing matching Molly Sullivan ponytails and pink sunglasses. Bless their little hearts.

Direct Message

From: user87601 To: IhateMollySullivan4Eva

Can u send me ur screenshot of the picture Molly posted
w her husband

IhateMollySullivan4Eva To: user87601

Sure, here ya go*!

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I want to believe the photo is of you, Sam. I've been staring at it for the past hour, ever since that woman from the chat forum sent it to me, and I'm about 90 percent convinced.

It's your eyes. Not just the color or the shape, although those match the photos I have from ten years ago.

No, it's the guilt I recognize. You looked like that on the night it all happened.

Still, I'm not 100 percent certain it's you. It seems too coincidental. And too stupid, to be honest. What were you thinking, getting involved with an internet celebrity? Shit. I assumed you were smarter than that. You managed to disappear all those years ago, even with so many people searching for you. In my mind, I've built you up into some kind of genius escape artist who evaded not only the brightest minds in law enforcement, but darker minds, too. People like me who have their own reasons for wanting to find you, almost a decade later.

To be honest, I'd given up hope. But you must have gotten complacent. After all this time, you let your guard down.

Not a good decision, my friend.

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How did I meet my husband? Well, that's a private story. But I will say it had something to do with a river, a starry night sky, and a conversation I'll never forget.

—From an interview

on Today.com with Molly Sullivan

Liv stood outside the small business and stared at the name on the door: WANDER FAR ADVENTURES: WHITE WATER SPECIALISTS. It had taken only a few minutes on Google to discover that Molly's husband was the owner and operator of Durango's most successful river rafting tour company.

Liv felt stronger this morning, and less emotional, which was ideal. She needed to stay detached and analytical. But she couldn't help wondering if Scott Wander had named himself after his company or if he'd named his company after himself. Regardless, it grated. He'd created an entire life here, fifteen hundred miles from the scene of his crime.

But Liv needed more than a name. She needed proof it was him.

She was still kicking herself for not screenshotting that photo of him Molly had shared. But Liv hadn't been thinking straight; she'd been stunned, staring at his face on her

coworker's phone, unable to move for several seconds. He was older than the last time she saw him, more weathered, but she recognized that all-American boy face, that square jaw, and straight nose, the blue eyes and sandy-blond hair.

The more she had stared, the more certain she had become, and the sight dragged her back in time nine years, to the worst day of her life. She'd turned and run into the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before vomiting.

She'd told her supervisor she wasn't feeling well and drove home, where she called the police station in Pittsburgh. But of course, the picture had disappeared by then. Liv supposed she couldn't blame the detective for being unimpressed, but did he need to be that dismissive? His words still stung: *You expect me to open a nine-year-old case because you think you recognized some guy in an Instagram picture?*

After some pleading on Liv's part, he'd agreed to touch base with Kent Rasband, the original detective on Kristina's case. Rasband had transferred to another department a few years back, but the new detective said he'd reach out to him and get back to Liv with more information. That had seemed promising: Detective Rasband had been partners with Kristina's dad, Joe Casillas, back when they were both starting out on the force. He'd come to Joe's funeral, too, after he was killed in a routine traffic stop—a tragedy that had sent Kristina on a downward spiral.

Unfortunately, Liv hadn't heard anything since. Which was why she'd come to Durango. The only work available for someone with her degree in physical therapy was a summer position at a skilled nursing facility—the kind of job she usually avoided. Not that she disliked elderly people—she

loved to see them get better. What she disliked was the feeling she got in nursing homes: too many people who had been discarded, unwanted. It was all too familiar; she'd felt that way most of her life, growing up without a stable family, passed between various relatives. Always on the outside.

But the position would give her the chance to track down Sam Howard. And thanks to Molly Sullivan, Liv had found him. Maybe.

Hand on the doorknob, she told herself not to chicken out. Even if she ran into him right here, he probably wouldn't recognize her. He'd only met her once, and she'd been a teenager at the time. With a lift of her chin, Liv walked into the Wander Far office.

"Can I help you?" the college-age girl at the main desk asked, flicking her long brown hair over her shoulder. She had the healthy, fit, excessively tan look that seemed to be rampant in Durango.

"I'm looking for Scott," Liv said. "Is he in?"

The girl shook her head. "He never comes into the office on run days, just heads straight to the river."

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"Are you, like, interested in booking a trip?"

Liv deflected. "Scott Wander . . . he's the owner, yeah?"

"One of them."

"Do you know where he's from?"

The girl's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Liv's stomach flipped over. Get it together, she told herself. She was a twenty-seven-year-old professional with an

advanced degree. There was no reason she couldn't lie her way through this conversation.

"My family is interested in doing a trip later this summer," Liv said. "I wanted to talk about availability. And safety features. We have little kids. My niece and nephew."

"We have trips that kids as young as five can go on," the girl said, relaxing. "Are you looking into a day trip or an overnight?"

"Not sure yet. Do you have a brochure?"

The girl searched through a drawer and handed Liv a pamphlet. She scanned it. There, on the back flap: a three-inch photograph of an orange raft filled with smiling tourists, plunging into white water. On the raft perched a big, blond man with a giant oar in each hand, his face partially obscured by a blue visor. Yes, it was him. Liv could make out a faint smile on his face, and the sight of it felt like a railroad spike in her chest. How dare he smile? How dare he make a life for himself when he had ended Kristina's?

Her sister had been beaten, strangled, and ultimately died from trauma to the head. And her murderer was alive and smiling.

"Is that Scott?" she asked, pointing.

The girl leaned over the desk, grinning in a knowing way. "Yeah, that's him. But he just got married, so don't get any ideas."

Liv's cheeks warmed. "That's not what I meant. I—" Anxiety fluttered through her stomach, and she said the first thing that popped into her mind. "My sister died."

The girl's face paled. "Oh. I'm sorry."

“That’s why I’m here,” Liv said. She racked her mind for some way to fit her outburst into the conversation. “She went to high school with Scott. I’m trying to let people know.”

Which made no sense, but the girl nodded anyway and said, “I can leave him a message, I guess.”

“And you don’t know when he’ll be back?”

The girl called toward an open door behind her, “Hey! When’s Scott coming back?”

“He’s guiding the three-day,” a man shouted from the back room. “Why?”

“Just a customer question.” The girl smiled at Liv, sympathetically this time. “The trip goes until Sunday, and he takes Mondays off. He should be in the office on Tuesday.”

“I’ll come back then,” Liv said. “Thanks for your help.”

She turned to go, disappointed she hadn’t found out more.

“Hang on,” the girl said.

Liv turned around. “Yeah?”

“I didn’t think Scott went to high school around here. I thought he was from back east.”

The hairs on the back of Liv’s neck stood up. “Like where?”

“I don’t know. Ohio? Somewhere like that.” The girl waved her hand behind her, as if dismissing the entire eastern seaboard, and hollered again toward the back room, “Hey— isn’t Scott from Ohio?”

Liv smiled as she headed out the door. *Gotcha.*

Outside, blinking in the southwestern sunshine, Liv pulled out her phone and called her brother. “It’s him,” she said as soon as Oliver answered.

“Huh?” Her brother’s voice sounded muffled.

“I found Sam Howard. He changed his name, moved to Colorado, and started a river-rafting business, but I’m sure it’s him.”

Oliver didn’t respond, and the silence dragged on long enough that Liv started to get worried. Oliver had bad days sometimes, periods of time when he hardly got out of bed. “Ollie? You still there? What’s wrong?”

Oliver coughed. “I’m fine. Late night at work.” There was a rustling noise. When he spoke again, he sounded more alert. “Okay, back up. Is this the guy you think . . .” He trailed off, unable to say the words.

“I don’t *think* it’s him, I *know* it is.”

“Explain.”

Liv headed toward a nearby coffee shop, glancing around to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. Tourists crowded Durango’s Main Ave, a street lined with old-fashioned buildings framed by a backdrop of red-green mountains and blue sky. It looked like something out of an old western movie, and Liv had to admit it was beautiful, cozied between mountains and desert, a river running through the middle of town. The cities she usually worked in had nothing special about them. They were stopping points, places she could live in another generic, beige apartment for a few months before moving on.

“Are you saying you don’t believe me?” she asked her brother.

“No, no, no.” She could practically hear Oliver backpedaling. “But anyone can be anyone in this day and age, especially online. People aren’t always what they seem. I just think you should be careful.”

“I am.”

“Says the woman actively stalking an internet celebrity.”

Liv rolled her eyes and changed the subject. “What if I said Scott Wander is from Ohio?”

Oliver went quiet. “That’s more promising. What’s your next move?”

“Not sure yet,” Liv said, knowing her brother wouldn’t approve of her real plan: trying to coordinate another run-in with Molly today.

She’d made it to the Steaming Bean, a café on the bottom floor of an aging red-brick building. A man wearing a baseball cap came up behind her and headed inside, holding the door open. He smiled, his eyes meeting hers in a friendly manner, but Liv shook her head. She wasn’t ready to go in just yet.

Once the man was gone, Liv returned to her conversation. “If you want to help, you could take a trip to the police station back in Clairton and talk to one of the detectives.”

Oliver barked a laugh. “Yeah, I’m going to drive across Pennsylvania, to the town where the worst experience of our lives occurred, and willingly talk to a cop. Right.”

Liv held in a smile at the image of her brother, with his gauged ears and tattoos, walking into a police station. She still thought of him as the gentle boy she’d shared a room with, but he wasn’t anymore. After Kristina’s death, all the softness had gone out of him. No more writing poetry or even doing his homework; he’d gotten in fights at school and punched holes

in Gran's walls, had barely graduated high school, and had run-ins with the law.

Recently, though, he'd been doing well. He was the evening shift manager at a Chipotle in Brooklyn, which, okay, wasn't a glamorous job, but he had stuck at it for nearly a year. Liv was proud of him. Now if he could just find a nice guy instead of the shitheads he usually dated, she wouldn't have to lay awake at night worrying.

"Don't trash my methods if you're not willing to put in any work to solve this," she said.

"I don't care to solve this," Oliver said, serious. "It's not something either of us needs to be involved in. If he is the guy who . . ." He cleared his throat. "It could be dangerous."

"He has Gabriela," Liv said. The trump card. Oliver couldn't argue with that.

"You know this for sure?"

"Not yet. But I'm going to find out."

"But—"

"But nothing. If I find evidence that proves he is Sam Howard, I will pass it on to the authorities. And if he *is* dangerous, think about what that means for Gabriela."

Oliver sighed, the sigh that meant he didn't agree but knew it was futile to try and talk her out of it. No one knew Liv like her brother. They'd grown up taking care of each other when their mom couldn't. Their mom, a woman so dysfunctional she'd named her son Oliver, not realizing until several days after the birth certificate was signed that she already had a daughter named Olivia. No, Ollie and Liv had learned early in childhood to rely on each other. And after Kristina's death, they'd strapped themselves to each other like two life rafts in a

stormy ocean. Even now, even with the physical distance between them, they hadn't fully untangled. Neither of them was good at letting anyone else get close.

"Be careful," Oliver said, his voice gentler. "You're all I've got."

A lump rose in her throat. The last thing she wanted was for her brother to worry about *her*.

"I'll be fine," she said, trying to sound confident. She opened the door to the coffee shop. "Love you tons."

seven

There are three essential ingredients in any relationship: Honesty. Authenticity. Vulnerability. Without those, it's like—why even bother?

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Morning sun filtered into the kitchen where Molly and Scott sat, finishing breakfast. The girls were still asleep. She relished these moments together, before Scott would leave for three long days and two lonely nights.

“What are your plans today?” he asked, perky as usual in the morning. He’d already dressed in his swim shorts and Chacos, a faded blue visor on his head. His river-rat uniform.

“Mostly getting ready for the party tomorrow. Finish unpacking, pick up the cupcakes, then maybe take the girls and the dogs on a hike after I finish some work stuff.”

She had a check-in call with her assistant back in Denver, a video to edit for TikTok, and some pictures of the house to post on Instagram.

“You should do the Purgatory Creek Trail up near the ski resort,” Scott said. “It drops into a valley with a little stream—great for the dogs. Ella loves it.”

“Then I’ll do it! Anything to make that girl like me.”

“I love that you’re trying so hard with her,” Scott said. He reached for her hand, tugging her out of her chair and so close she was forced to sit on his lap, straddling him. Not that she minded. “You’re going to be good for Ella.” He kissed her. “We’re lucky to have you. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

His hands traveled up her bare legs, under the bottom edge of her T-shirt—his T-shirt. “How will I survive sleeping alone for the next two nights?” he whispered.

“I’m sure you can find another hot single mom to hook up with,” she said, giving him a teasing smile. Now that she knew her quiet, introverted husband, the thought of him hooking up with different women on his overnight trips was laughable.

“You’re the only hot single mom I want.” His fingers drifted under the elastic of her panties.

“I’m not single anymore,” she said in his ear.

“Thank god.”

She ran her hands up his ribs as he kissed her so thoroughly she almost begged him to stay home for twenty more minutes—even ten more minutes. All she really needed was a good ten minutes.

“Daddy?”

Molly leaped off Scott’s lap, bumping the table and tipping her mug over, spilling coffee across the surface. Ella stood in the doorway of the kitchen in her hedgehog pajamas, pushing her tangled dark hair out of her face.

“Good morning, Ella!” Molly yanked down her T-shirt to cover her thighs. “We thought you were still asleep.”

“Clearly,” Ella said, sounding way too much like a weary teenager.

Behind Molly, Scott grabbed a dish towel to sop up the spill. “What’s up, bug?” he said, sounding unconcerned. Which was all well and good for Scott. In Ella’s eyes, he could do no wrong. Molly didn’t have that luxury. She had to be on her toes if she was going to win Ella over. Ella had been wary of Molly ever since Scott first introduced them, but it seemed to have gotten worse since the wedding and the move to the new house.

“How did you sleep?” Molly asked her. “Would you like a pancake? Or scrambled eggs? French toast?”

“No, thank you,” Ella said. “I can get my own cereal.”

“Give me a hug first,” Scott said. “I’m leaving soon.”

Ella did, and Molly moved over to the sink so she wouldn’t get in the way of their father-daughter moment. But she wasn’t far enough to avoid hearing what Ella murmured in his ear.

“Why can’t I stay with Sarah like I used to?”

Sarah, one of the other owners of the river rafting business, had always watched Ella during Scott’s trips. Molly kept her focus on the dishes and didn’t hear Scott’s response. But she did catch Ella’s sigh as the nine-year-old huffed her way to the pantry, poured herself a bowl of cereal, and headed into the living room to turn on the TV.

Ella was just a little girl, Molly reminded herself as she rinsed the sink. A girl who had never shared her father before. *Blending a family requires time and effort*, she’d written on an Instagram post just the other day. *But it’s worth it.*

Tears clouded her eyes and she blinked, trying to chase them away.

When she reached to put her mug in the dishwasher, Scott caught her around the waist and pulled her toward him.

“Hey, it’s going to be great,” he said, kissing her neck. “That’s what you always tell me.”

“I know.”

“It’ll be good for me to get out of the way,” he added. “You two need to create your own relationship, right? And you’ll be better at helping her make friends here than me, anyway.”

Molly agreed with him on that count. Before Scott had settled in Durango four years ago, he’d lived a strange sort of nomadic life, traveling across the country working odd jobs, he and little Ella living out of his old VW Westfalia, now parked in the driveway out back. Molly figured this was a result of growing up an only child, then losing his parents in college and his first wife at the age of twenty four. He was making progress.

“Is there anything I can help you with as I finish unpacking?” she asked as he prepared to leave.

“I’ll get to it,” Scott said. Like he’d been saying for the past week.

Molly was getting a teensy bit impatient with him, since his unpacked boxes were scattered through their bedroom and her office. She wanted the house looking fully lived-in for the party tomorrow.

“I can go through some of your boxes for you,” she said. “Organize—”

“I said I’ll get to it, Molly.” His voice turned hard, and her skin prickled.

“Okay,” she said, stunned. “I’m just trying to help.”

He turned to face her, arms folded, jaw tight. An expression she had gotten to know well over the first few months of their relationship. She hadn’t seen it for a while, though.

“I know.” His voice softened. “I’ll get to them when I get back. All right?”

“Sure.” Her cheeks warmed with embarrassment. She was being a nag, just a few weeks into their marriage. Never mind her good intentions; this was the sort of thing that could grow and fester and eventually ruin a relationship. She tried to smile, to mentally transmit to him that she wasn’t that kind of wife. To convince herself that this marriage would last.

Scott took three giant steps toward her, wrapping his arms around her. She relaxed and let his lips wander over her face and neck. Let her hands do a little wandering, too—enough to cause a small, gratifying groan from his throat.

“I need to go,” he said, but didn’t pull away.

“So go.”

“I can’t seem to.” He kissed her again, ran his palms down her ribs. “I’ll be back Sunday.”

“I’ll be counting the hours. Be careful.”

He pulled away and winked at her. “I’m always careful.”

And then Molly was alone in the kitchen, facing an empty weekend.

An hour later, Molly parked her car on Main Avenue. She smiled at the tourists walking down the sidewalks and thought, *I am not a tourist anymore*. She was now a Durango local. She belonged in this blue-sky college town and year-round recreation destination. This was where she would put down roots, make a home, and build a life.

“I can’t wait to see my awesome cupcakes!” Chloe was saying to Ella in the backseat. Shouting, really. “They’re gonna be unicorns with tiny little golden corns. Mommy said so.”

“Horns,” Ella corrected gently. “Unicorns have horns, not corns.”

“That makes no sense,” Chloe said.

Molly smothered a grin. “You two stay here, okay? I’ll get the cupcakes and be back in two minutes.”

As she headed down the street to the bakery, Molly made her daily check-in call to her new assistant.

“Are you seriously calling me with your actual voice?” Brookelle asked after she picked up. “I haven’t done this in, like, five years.”

Brookelle—whip-smart, scarily sarcastic, and eight years younger than Molly—hated talking on the phone, saying it was for grandmas and poor people, like bar soap. For the most part they communicated via text, but Molly didn’t have time for that as she hustled down the sidewalk to the bakery.

“Give me the updates, please,” Molly said, and Brookelle ran through their engagement metrics: traffic, bounce rate, and conversion rate for the website; viewers, watch time, and subscriber growth for TikTok; comments, reach, and impressions for Instagram. Some were up, some were down,

but overall, everything sounded stable. That wasn't great—if you're not growing, you're dying—but it also wasn't atypical for summertime.

Molly had hired Brookelle a few weeks before her book launched two months ago. It was the first time she'd had anyone work for her full-time, though she'd used freelance web developers, publicists, and various consultants over the years. Brookelle was responsible for the nuts and bolts of the brand, including communicating with sponsors. This freed Molly to focus on big-picture marketing and development, the book, and her new family. Still, it was strangely disorienting to not be responsible for the entirety of her social media presence.

“I have a home tour planned for next week,” Molly said. “I'll send you the footage by Wednesday.”

“Got it,” Brookelle said, brisk and efficient. Molly imagined her, with her sleek black topknot and bold eyebrows, typing notes while sipping an açai smoothie.

“Anything else?” Molly asked.

“Actually, yeah,” Brookelle said, her voice dropping. “I've been keeping tabs on the snark sites—”

“I don't want to hear about it.” Molly would never understand the appeal of consuming someone's content for the sole purpose of mocking it online.

“Someone's been seeking info about you and your family,” Brookelle said. “Trying to find your address, for example. It's just some anonymous username—no profile pic or anything.”

“Is this something I need to worry about?”

Molly had never been stalked—though she had a few obsessive fans, including a teenager named Eddie Langford

who had gone so far as to rob a Walgreens, steal her favorite candy, and leave it on her doorstep—but it was a constant, low-level worry in the back of her mind.

“Not sure yet,” Brookelle said. “I’ve asked Kev to take a look.”

Kev was a digital forensics specialist. Molly had worked with him in the past, when she’d needed to prove another influencer was stealing her posts.

“Good idea,” Molly said. She stepped around a middle-aged couple wearing cowboy hats. “It should be against the website’s code of conduct to seek personal information like that—”

“It is,” Brookelle said. “I messaged the website owner and told her she better cooperate or we’d get our attorney involved. She was bitchy at first, but then I talked about subpoenas and lawsuits and she caved.”

“Nice,” Molly said, glad that Brookelle was on her side. She could be vicious. “Gotta go. Chat later, ’kay?”

Outside Sweet Cakes Bakery, Molly paused, breathing in the scent of sugar, butter, and flour. The nectar of the gods. She took a selfie in front of the window and posted it in her Instagram stories:

Picking up the unicorn cupcakes for Clover’s party!
@sweetcakesbakery

Then she headed in the door.

“Can I help you?” the teenage girl at the counter asked, barely looking up.

“I’m here to pick up an order of cupcakes,” Molly said. “It’s under Molly Sullivan.”

The girl froze, then glanced up with widened eyes. “Omigod. You’re—you’re Molly Sullivan! *The* Molly Sullivan?” She squealed. “*You’re* picking up the cupcakes? I thought you had, like, people to do that for you or something.”

Molly smiled, ignoring the sinking feeling in her stomach. It was difficult always being “on” for other people, and after talking to Brookelle, she was distracted. But she had vowed to be approachable and accessible to any of her followers. That’s what mattered: not Molly’s to-do list, not her own discomfort, but the fact that this girl felt noticed and appreciated.

“It’s just me,” Molly said, doing a little curtsy.

“I’m a *huge* fan,” the girl said. “I was super excited when I heard you were moving here, but I seriously never thought I’d meet you in person.” She paused, her smile fading. “My mom passed away last year, and your posts were, like, the only things that made me smile for so long.”

Molly brought a hand to her heart. “Oh, my sweet friend! I can’t tell you how much that means to me. Can I give you a hug?”

The girl’s face broke into another huge smile. “Of course! My friends are going to literally lose their minds. Can I take a selfie with you?”

“I’d be honored.”

eight

To be a millennial today means existing in two realities, living your life while also observing it, constantly questioning if these experiences are sharable or not. The walls between public and private spaces are so thin they are nearly nonexistent. Where does my brand end and my personal life begin?

—Article from Influenced.com:

“Pretty Little Liars: Inside the Lives of Social Media Superstars”

At the coffee shop, Liv sat in the corner near the windows where she could be alone and see across the street to the bakery. Per Molly’s Instagram stories yesterday, she would be arriving at some point this morning to pick up cupcakes for her daughter’s party.

The Steaming Bean was filled with smiling tourists and townspeople—a couple with a baby in a stroller, two old guys playing checkers, and a group of students studying and laughing near the window. The brick walls of the cafe boasted a cheerful array of local art and photos. But Liv’s attention was on the document on her laptop where she kept information about Sam Howard.

New name: Scott Wander

From: Ohio?

Recently married.

Wife: Molly Sullivan of An Invincible Summer

Used to be a hermit living outside of town, per wife

Owns river rafting business

Has Gabriela? Need to find out.

Okay, not impressive. Maybe Oliver was right. Liv had no business trying to solve a crime that had stumped the police and the FBI. But she was here for seven more weeks, working a job that only used 30 percent of her brain, so she might as well see what she could learn.

She added another item to the list:

Is he dangerous? Specifically: is Gabriela in danger? PRIORITY.

“Is this seat taken?” a man asked.

Liv waved a hand without looking up from her laptop. “No, you can take it.”

She expected him to take the extra chair and use it for another table, but he sat, placing his coffee cup on the table between them. Surprised—and a little annoyed—she looked up. It was the man who had tried to hold the door open for her while she was on the phone. A local, she guessed. Messy brown hair under a baseball cap, beard, his threadbare T-shirt almost see-through in spots. Back in Pittsburgh, she might have thought he was homeless, but this scruffy, outdoorsy look wasn't unusual here.

Liv turned back to her laptop. Random men didn't approach her because they wanted to get to know her. She'd been told over and over that she had the kind of vibe that kept the world at a distance. Not just resting bitch face—resting serial killer face, as Oliver sometimes teased. Whatever. Baseball cap guy needed a place to sit in a crowded coffee shop, she had an extra chair. As long as he left her alone, it was fine.

“You're new here, yeah?”

She lifted her eyes to his, holding in an exasperated sigh. “Maybe I've lived here my entire life.”

He leaned forward, motioning toward her with his muffin, eyes crinkling as he smiled. “No, you don't look like a Durango girl.”

She glanced down at herself, wondering what gave her away. Maybe it was her clothes—she always dressed in shades of gray and black. People here were more casual and colorful, with denim cut-offs, cargo shorts, flip-flops. Or maybe it was her pale, pale skin—everyone in Durango seemed to come in shades between golden-tan and toasted-brown.

“Maybe I'm a tourist,” she said, scanning the street outside the bakery for any sign of Molly Sullivan. Nothing yet.

“I'm guessing not. Tourists don't hide alone in corners with their laptops.” His voice held the hint of a laugh.

“I'm not hiding. And I'm here for work.”

At least 75 percent of her wished he would go away; she needed to keep an eye on the bakery, and she didn't want to get distracted. The rest of her—the part that was all too aware of how long it had been since she'd been this close to anyone who wasn't one of her patients—wanted him to keep talking.

He was attractive, sure. She had realized that with a second glance at his face: warm brown eyes, beard threaded with golden-red. But it was more than that. She was lonely. She hadn't seen Oliver in person for over a year, and he was the only person she could truly relax around. She wondered what it would be like to let down her guard, even for a moment.

Unfortunately, she tended to get nervous around good-looking men and words became even more difficult to shuttle from her brain to her mouth.

The guy seemed perfectly at ease, though. He leaned back and took a large bite of muffin. "Where are you from?"

"Fresno." The same lie she'd told Molly the day before. She glanced over at the bakery: still no sign of Molly.

"You don't seem like a California girl."

"Probably because I grew up all over." Not a lie.

He nodded and took a sip of coffee. "What do you do for work?"

Stick to the truth when possible, Liv reminded herself. "I'm a physical therapist. It's a temp position, just for the summer. Covering for someone on maternity leave."

He nodded again, a slow, intent nod, like he was digesting her words. Her cheeks flushed; she wasn't used to men—or anyone, for that matter—paying her much attention.

"And what do you think of our fair city?" he said, one arm outstretched toward the windows.

"It's nice."

"That's it? You're in a town that boasts world-class rock-climbing, fly-fishing, mountain biking, hiking, and skiing, all within a short drive. And all you can say is it's *nice*?"

“It’s pretty here,” she said, trying for a pleasant smile. “Hot, though.”

“Yeah, it tends to get that way.” His eyes were laughing at her. “Everyone’s predicting it’ll be the hottest summer on record. Thanks, climate change.”

“Wow.” She didn’t know what else to say. Sometimes she could go days, even weeks, without engaging in meaningful conversation with anyone but her brother.

This guy, however, seemed to have no problem filling the silence. “Do you always work temporary positions?”

“Yes, since I graduated two years ago.” Which was around the time Gran had died. Oliver was already living in New York by then, couch surfing between various friends’ apartments, so Liv had no reason to stick around in Pittsburgh.

“That’s an interesting idea. You get to see the country, travel, and have the benefits of being a tourist but the comfort of a home base.”

Except Oliver said Liv was the worst tourist in the world. She tended to stick to the same few activities everywhere she went: find the closest grocery store and coffee shop; map out a three-mile loop to run during the week and a longer loop to run on Sundays. When she wasn’t running or working, she was reading, watching documentaries on Netflix, or FaceTiming Oliver.

This guy looked like he’d be the best kind of tourist. The kind who found hole-in-the-wall restaurants and locals-only bars, who spent time off the beaten track and came away with new friends everywhere he went.

And for an instant, she wished she could be the kind of person who did that, too.

“So,” he said, tipping his coffee cup toward her, “where’s your family?”

Family. The word made her chest ache. But before she could think of how to answer, her phone pinged with a notification: *Molly Sullivan has posted a new Instagram story*. Liv sucked in a breath—a selfie in front of Sweet Cakes Bakery.

Liv stood, her chair legs screeching against the ground. “I—I gotta go,” she said as she gathered up her laptop and bag. “Nice chatting with you.”

“Uh, you too,” he said. “See you around?”

But Liv was already out the door.

When she reached the bakery, she saw Molly inside at the cash register. Molly’s blond hair was pulled up in a high ponytail, and her pink sunglasses were perched on her head. Liv’s stomach clenched. She waited until the door swung open and Molly stepped out, balancing a giant cardboard box in her arms and calling *thank you* over her shoulder.

But as Molly stepped off the threshold, she lost her balance, struggling to contain the box as it teetered toward the sidewalk. Impulsively, Liv took a step forward and caught the box, steadying it.

“Thank you so much!” Molly said. Her face brightened when she saw Liv, her one-sided dimple showing. “Oh, hi! We met at the park, right? I’m Molly. My little girl ran into you. You must think we’re both klutzes.”

“It’s okay.” Liv smiled, anxiety running through her limbs. “I hope whatever is inside didn’t get damaged.”

Molly's eyes widened. "That would be bad."

She carefully set the box on the ground and lifted the lid to reveal rows of cupcakes, frosted pink and purple, with something golden sticking up in the centers.

"What are they?" Liv asked. "Little unicorns?"

Molly laughed. "Exactly. They're for Chloe's birthday party tomorrow. She's obsessed."

"Sounds like fun," Liv lied. A house full of strangers was her idea of hell.

"I hope so. Chloe needs some friends, and I let my stepdaughter invite some girls, too."

Liv's heart kicked at that one word: stepdaughter.

"I left the girls in the car," Molly said, waving an arm. "They're just down the street."

Liv helped Molly pick up the box of cupcakes, trying to sneak a glimpse at Molly's daughter and stepdaughter in the parked car. But the morning sun made it impossible to see through the windows.

"I hope the party goes well," Liv said, racking her brain for some way to keep Molly here, to keep her talking.

"You know what?" Molly said, brightening. "You should come."

"Oh, I . . ."

Molly nodded eagerly. "Please, it would be a favor to me! Scott's gone, and my house will be overrun by little girls. Everyone who's coming already knows everyone else and I'll feel totally out of place—plus, you can meet some new people, too! I would love to have you."

Liv hesitated. Going to Molly's house would be the perfect chance to gather information about Scott. But more than that, she might find Gabriela. A memory bloomed in her mind: chubby outstretched hands, baby-soft skin, pink lips blowing bubbles. Desperate longing swelled in her chest.

Molly was still talking, something about party favors and decorations. She finished by saying, "And I'm making unicorn margaritas for any moms who come."

Liv forced a smile; she wasn't a fan of overly sweet cocktails. But access to Molly's home was worth faking smiles and pleasantries. "That sounds fun. I'd love to meet more people in town."

"Great! We're not too far from here. Fifth Ave, between Eighth and Ninth Street. The only house with a bright yellow door. Party starts at three! Unicorn margaritas—whoo-hoo!"

Molly did a little twirl, grimacing as she almost dropped the box of cupcakes again, then hurried off.

nine

Am I an extrovert? Heck, yeah! But my in-house introvert, Mister Sullivan, has taught me the value of quiet and solitude. We balance each other out.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

By that afternoon Molly had taken the girls on a hike, to 7-11 for Slurpees, then outside again to build fairy houses in the backyard. Ella had seemed to enjoy the hike, climbing on rocks and skipping ahead with the dogs and Chloe, though she'd hardly looked at Molly. Ditto with the fairy houses: Ella seemed to love helping Chloe but didn't engage much with Molly. But overall, a success. Now Ella had gone to her new friend Lily's house down the street, Chloe had fallen asleep on the couch, and the dogs were snoozing on the floor in the afternoon sun.

She picked up her phone, ready to start a live video, then paused. This close-up camera angle wasn't doing her any favors lately. She'd always shown her true self, with or without makeup, zero filters, but at thirty-one, she was starting to look a little tired. She could just imagine the snarky comments: *Molly's looking absolutely ANCIENT! Someone please tell her to start using a RETINOL CREAM.* She already did, thank you very much.

Here we go, she told herself. She could do this. It was her actual, literal job.

“Hi there, Invincibles!” she said, smiling at the camera. “I’m here in my new office-slash-guest room. You might recognize this bed from my old house.” She turned the camera to give a view of the room. “And here’s my new desk. It’s an antique secretary I found at a thrift store right here in Durango. Isn’t it gorgeous?”

Within seconds, the hearts and comments started to come in:

You’re looking great, Molly! So happy to see you adjusting to your new life in Durango.

*Can’t wait to see more of the house. We need a full tour!
XOXO*

I love that desk. My grandma had one just like it.

Like chatting with friends, Molly imagined, though it had been a while since she’d chatted with an actual friend. Was it weird that she’d become more comfortable interacting with people online than in real life?

“I want to thank everyone for their well-wishes on my new marriage,” she continued, brushing that thought away. “I’m thrilled, as you can imagine, but there have been some questions about my husband and why he’s keeping a low profile online.”

Apparently some of her followers thought Scott didn’t really exist. Others thought she wasn’t emotionally secure enough to share her hot husband with the world, and still others were pissed that she had “sold out” and succumbed to the drudgery of marriage after years of being a Strong Single Mama.

“I talk a lot about living your truth,” Molly said. “Living according to your values and priorities. Well, Mister Sullivan values his privacy, and I respect that. But he respects my priorities too, so don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

She continued chatting about her day until it was time to wrap up. Then she focused, imagining the hundreds of thousands of people who would view this video, individuals with their own hopes and fears, searching for connection in a big lonely world.

“Before I go, let me leave you with this: You, mama in the kitchen prepping dinner for your kiddos who are only going to eat three bites: I see you. You, working girl heading home from a long day at the office where your boss yelled at you for something that wasn’t your fault: I see you. You, recently single and heading out on your first date tonight: I see you, too. I believe in you. I love you. You are not alone out there. Thanks for watching and we’ll chat tomorrow. Now, go be Invincible!”

She smiled and pocketed her phone, thinking about how much things had changed in the past five years. Back when she’d first felt the yearning to reach out online for support, she’d had only a couple hundred followers. Chloe had been a month old and would only sleep if she was being held. Molly remembered pacing the halls so many times she’d nearly worn a path into the carpet.

But more than she’d needed help with the baby, she’d needed someone to talk to. She’d always hated being alone. It made her anxious and twitchy.

Molly’s mind drifted back to that night. She’d been wearing the same sweatshirt and leggings for at least three

days, and they were covered with leaked breast milk and spit-up stains . . .

Her arms ached from hours of holding her wailing baby, and a dark thought had crossed her mind: she could put Chloe in her bassinet, get in the car, and drive away. She could call the police and tell them there was a baby in the house, then hang up. She could leave and never come back.

No. She pressed her nose into the crook of Chloe's neck and breathed in her sweet infant scent. She would never do that. But she would give anything—everything—to connect with just one person who knew how she felt at that moment.

Chloe settled down and Molly eased her into the bassinet. A tiny cry, a jerk of her arms—Molly held her breath—then she relaxed, and Molly released a long sigh. She knew she should sleep, but instead she settled on the couch and opened Instagram. The more she scrolled, the lonelier she felt; all these friends and family members had no idea what was going on in her life. She wanted to reach out to them. To connect.

On a whim, she took a selfie, then studied it. Her forehead was shiny, her eyes bloodshot, and her hair a mess. It wasn't a flattering picture, but it was real. And in that moment, she wanted someone to know that *this* was her reality.

She started to type a caption. *Hi, everyone, it's been a while. My husband left me, my baby won't sleep, and I might be losing my mind.*

She deleted that, then started over. *I'm so lonely and exhausted and I want to give up.*

She deleted that, too. The sky had brightened outside, a few birds beginning their predawn singing. In the bassinet, Chloe stirred, found her thumb, and started sucking.

Molly began to type.

There's no food in my refrigerator except a jar of Greek olives and an ancient casserole. I haven't washed my hair in six days. I'm so tired I've started hallucinating—at least, I think I'm hallucinating. Either that or Ryan Gosling really is standing shirtless in my living room, saying, "Hey girl, there's nothing sexier than a nursing bra."

She smiled to herself and kept typing, letting the words pour out until the caption was full, then pressed post. Hardly anyone would read it, she was sure of that. It was a one-sided conversation, a shout into the void of the interwebs. But imagining someone out there, listening, had lessened her anxiety.

She dozed, then woke to Chloe fussing. As Molly heaved her red-faced infant into her arms, something caught her eye on her phone screen. An Instagram alert. A friend from way back in high school had commented on her post.

Hi Molly! This was hilarious and SO SO true. My little one is four months and I promise you, it gets better. If you ever need someone to commiserate with, I'm here. I hope you keep posting—you made me laugh so hard I might have peed a little.

Molly read the message, then read it again. She stood, patted Chloe's back, and stooped to read the comment a third time, her smile widening as her eyes filled with tears.

Well, she had thought, that's something.

Over time, that something became everything—a means to support herself and her daughter, her career, and her identity.

And now she was here, in her beautiful new home, starting a new life with a man she adored.

She turned and nearly stumbled over one of Scott's dozen boxes. Yes, she adored him, but couldn't he unpack his stuff? Swallowing her annoyance, she told herself she'd haul the boxes upstairs to the attic, let him go through them in his own time.

The first one she picked up was labeled PHOTO ALBUMS, and Molly bit back a sigh. In the attic, Durango's summer heat might warp the photographs. But she had a shelf in her closet that was perfect.

The cracked yellowing tape peeled off easily. She lifted the albums out, spilling a few loose photos onto the carpet. One caught her eye: a much-younger Scott, sitting on a hospital bed with a dark-haired woman, a baby between them.

Molly leaned forward. She'd never seen a picture of Scott's first wife. He almost never mentioned her, and when he did, his face would cloud over. Molly knew she had died in a tragic accident when Ella was around a year old. The grief of losing her had caused Scott to spend the next few years avoiding society, moving around the country. Molly thought she understood what had driven him to do that: the frantic desire to create a safe world for himself and his daughter. Her response to tragedy had been to seek more connection; Scott's was to avoid it.

She leaned forward, studying Scott's awkward smile in the photo. His wife seemed exhausted, but she was pretty—dark-haired and dark-eyed, even darker than Ella. Latina, maybe. They held the baby stiffly between them, as if neither could understand how they had ended up with her.

Molly remembered that feeling—the shocked uncertainty as the nurse placed her own baby girl in her arms. But she hadn't had anyone to sit on the hospital bed with her, and the picture set off a deep longing in her chest. She didn't have any pictures of her ex-husband with their baby. Whenever Chloe asked about her dad, Molly simply said he hadn't been ready to be a daddy. How would she someday explain he hadn't even stayed long enough to meet her? Molly had no idea where her first husband even lived now. The last time Jake had written, it had been to blast her for spreading lies about their marriage on social media.

You and I both know the story you're telling isn't the truth. But hey, if it makes you internet-famous, knock yourself out.

It wasn't to make herself internet famous, she had written back. It was to support herself because he'd left her high and dry with a newborn and a house needing thousands of dollars of work. He hadn't responded.

Footsteps echoed behind her, and Molly turned to see Ella at the office door.

“Hi!” Molly said. “Did you have a fun time at Lily's? Are you hungry? I can slice you some apples.”

“No, thank you.” Ella paused, then pointed. “What's that picture? Is it . . .”

Molly turned the photo to show her. “It's your mom, right?”

“I guess so. I've never seen a picture of her.”

Never? Molly swallowed back her disappointment in Scott. “Would you like to have it?”

Ella hesitated. “I don't think my dad will want me to. He doesn't like being reminded of her.”

Molly's heart constricted at the longing in Ella's voice. No matter how much Scott was hurting, he should have understood his daughter needed to feel connected to her mother. Turning, she rummaged through the closet until she found a frame that would fit.

"How about this," Molly said, putting the picture inside. "You can keep it for now, and I'll talk to your dad about it when he gets back."

Ella glanced at the picture frame again, hesitating. Then, with a swift motion, she took it and headed down the hall to her room.

Later that night, Molly went to Chloe's room and tucked her into bed.

"This is your last night as a four-year-old," she told Chloe.

Chloe nodded and snuggled against Bitsy. Molly had brought their gentle, dopey dog home from the Humane Society when Chloe was just six months old. The dog had been with them through the best and worst times of their lives. Chloe's tiny hands stroked her fur.

"Tomorrow I'll be bigger and bigger."

"Yep, you'll be five years old. A whole hand." She held up her hand, and Chloe pressed her small palm against it.

"And we'll have my awesome unicorn party," Chloe said. *Awesome* was her favorite word lately.

"Absolutely," Molly said, kissing her forehead.

"Sing me my favorite song," Chloe said.

Molly couldn't say no to that. She heaved Chloe onto her lap, the little girl's legs dangling, and rocked her back and forth. She was thrilled about starting their new life with Scott and Ella, but sometimes a small part of her missed the way things had been. Back when it was just Molly and Chloe and Bitsy, all the time.

She started Chloe's favorite song, about the bear that went over the mountain to see what he could see—except Molly always changed the “he” to a “she” because she didn't want Chloe to grow up thinking her experience as a girl was less important than a boy's. And when the bear got to the other side, what did she see? Just another mountain. Always another mountain.

Molly liked to imagine that bear as a mother with a cub, wandering the forest, searching for a comfortable valley to rest in. Molly understood. Her life for the past five years had been a never-ending series of mountains. But now, with Scott, she didn't have to face them alone.

She kissed Chloe goodnight and lifted her into bed. Then she slipped into Ella's room, where she had fallen asleep with a book across her chest. Hoopi, on the floor near her bed, raised his massive tan and black head, ears alert. Guarding his girl child until his master returned.

Molly lifted the book off Ella and set it on her nightstand—next to the framed picture of a newborn Ella with her parents.

Molly smiled and turned out the light as she shut the door.

ten

So far, all I know is the town you live in and the name of the woman you married. Lucky for me, your wife is an imbecile who posts everything she does online. Shouldn't be too difficult to locate you.

At some point I'll need to go to Durango, but not yet. I have time to scope out the area, to watch your wife online to see what other details she drops about you. To gather information about her, too—her daily routine, the places she visits, the people she associates with.

Why did you marry this woman, this Molly Sullivan? She seems like a nice human being, too nice to be dragged into your mess.

(I'm using the term "married" loosely here, since she isn't actually married to *you*. To Sam Howard.)

Maybe you're just lonely. Maybe you wanted a normal life, the kind of easy, predictable domesticity you've never had. Which, let's be honest, is your own damn fault. Kristina told you to stay away from her, and you should have listened. Kristina would still be alive, and you would still be Sam Howard, and I would be . . . well, I guess I wouldn't be stalking the internet looking for you, would I?

I wonder if you understand what you have. What you took that night.

I'm guessing not, because if you did, you could've used it long ago. Still, you could figure it out at any time. And that would destroy everything I've worked for.

You made a mistake that night, Sam, and soon you'll have to face the consequences.

eleven

Over half of the world's population is on social media. That's four billion people liking, sharing, commenting, and connecting. We're all looking for something to belong to, something bigger than ourselves.

—*An Invincible Summer: A Memoir*

“You can't be serious,” Oliver said.

Liv flopped on her bed and centered her laptop so she could see her brother's face on the screen. Oliver looked exhausted, his dark hair matted to one side, as if he'd been up all night and was fighting a hangover.

She had just explained about the party at Molly's, bracing herself for Oliver's disapproval, and it had come as swiftly as she'd predicted.

“I'm dead serious,” she said. “We're talking about our niece here. How do we know Sam isn't abusive or a pervert or something?”

Oliver's expression hardened. When they were little, their mother had gone through a string of awful boyfriends, which had led a young Liv to institute the No Child Left Behind rule

—neither of them left the other’s side when their mom had a man in the apartment.

“Fine,” he said, “but I still don’t like it.”

“What do you not like?” Liv asked, losing patience. “She’s our niece, Ol.”

“Half-niece.”

Liv bristled. “What does that matter? Am I just your *half*-sister? We’ve never thought about each other that way. Never.”

He sighed and scrubbed a hand through his dark hair. “Not you, Livi. But Kristina, yeah, she felt more like a half-sister. She had another parent besides Mom.”

This was true. Whenever their mother couldn’t take care of them—if she was in rehab or prison—Oliver and Liv would stay with relatives, their aunt and uncle’s house, or Gran’s. But Kristina got to stay with her dad. Joe Casillas had been their mother’s high school boyfriend, and he’d grown up to be a police officer with a cozy house and an endless supply of dad jokes. Occasionally, Kristina would invite Liv and Ollie to sleep over. They’d watch movies and eat popcorn, and in the morning, Joe would make animal-shaped pancakes and Kristina would tease him, saying they all looked like manatees. Liv would watch them bantering together, father and daughter, and a yearning so strong it took her breath away would fill her. She wanted a family like this, a home like this, a kitchen always full of food, and a parent who was always around.

But to Oliver, that may have seemed like a world he’d never belong to.

Liv pulled the computer into her lap and stared at the camera, willing her brother to understand. “Our niece is being

raised by the man who brutally murdered her mother. He should spend the rest of his life in prison. This is about what's best for Gabriela. Kristina would have wanted us to take care of her."

They had talked about this over the years, what they'd do if they ever got Gabriela back. It didn't have to be a fantasy anymore. Liv had a solid career; she could put down roots somewhere, Oliver could join them, and they could raise Gabriela together.

Oliver nodded, and she knew he understood. "What if this Molly person figures out who you are?"

"She won't. I'll drop in, make sure it's Gabriela, and get out."

Liv's biggest worry was that Scott would take off again with Gabriela before she could turn him in to the police. This kept her from confronting him directly, although she wished she could. Since seeing his picture on Molly's Instagram feed, she had imagined meeting him face to face. She wanted to look him in the eye and let all the years of pent-up rage spill out. She wanted him to suffer like he had made Kristina suffer, like he had made Liv and Oliver and Gran suffer in the aftermath.

"Oh, hey," Liv said, remembering something, "did I tell you about the letter I got from the bank?"

"Bank? What bank?"

The letter had come just the day before, from a branch of the PNC bank in Pittsburgh, finally arriving after weeks of being forwarded from her prior temporary addresses. "Apparently Kristina had a safe deposit box and she put me as next of kin—well, Gran first, then me. She paid in advance for

ten years. The letter said the lease expires in eight weeks. I can keep paying or claim the contents. Otherwise, it'll be opened and turned over to the state. What do you think is in there?"

"Who knows."

Liv chewed a thumbnail, thinking. Kristina had moved around a lot, lived in some shady apartments. She'd probably needed somewhere to store her valuables. Not that she had many, to Liv's knowledge.

Then something occurred to her. "Oh, maybe her necklace is in there—remember the one Joe gave her for her high school graduation?"

Oliver shook his head. "I hardly remember her graduation at all."

Liv wasn't surprised; he'd been only ten at the time. But she remembered it, vividly. Joe had brought a bouquet of pink roses for Kristina, and after the ceremony he'd rushed to find her, crushing the flowers between them as they embraced. *I'm so proud of you, honey*, he had said, wiping tears from his eyes.

Liv had watched, envy burning a path through her chest, as Kristina patted her dad's cheeks and whispered, *I love you, Daddy*.

That's when he'd given her the necklace, a gold cross with a rose in the center. But it hadn't been recovered after her death; Liv had asked Gran about it. There was a strong chance that the police had simply misplaced it, but maybe Kristina had put it in her safe deposit box?

"Listen," Oliver said, bringing her back to their conversation. "I know you don't want to hear this, but what if

you go to this party and meet the stepdaughter and she's not Gabriela? Then what?"

That was exactly what she feared. The disappointment would be crushing.

"Then at least I'll know." She swallowed. "Gotta go—time for my run."

The empty streets of Durango spread out before Liv as she ran, the only sound her rhythmic footsteps and breathing. The temp agency had picked a decent place to put her up for the summer, a newer development north of town. It hugged a red-tinged hill running up Durango's east side, and as Liv ran, she admired the gorgeous views of the La Plata Mountains.

She passed a few other early-morning runners but did not allow anyone to pass her—a point of pride, stemming from her high school and college track days. Running had pulled her through after Kristina's death. Or rather, Gran's insistence that she *get off her ass and do something*. At her first track practice she'd run so hard she vomited on her scuffed-up sneakers. That's what had hooked her: the promise of pain from a different source, cleaner than the pain within her. Running became a way to channel the anger, to compress it.

The next day she was back again, running even harder. A few months later, she lost her first meet by a fraction of a second and vowed it wouldn't happen again.

In high school she'd run almost everything, including cross-country, but at the University of Pittsburgh she'd specialized in the 400 and 800 meters. She'd done well enough to keep her scholarship, her golden ticket out of the life she'd been heading for: dead-end job, maybe an unplanned

pregnancy, like her grandmother and mother and sister before her.

In college she discovered something else: if she could choose the classes, she enjoyed school. She did well enough to get accepted to Pitt's physical therapy program, one of the best in the nation. Sometimes it still shocked her that she, Olivia Kay Barrett, daughter of an addict mother and a deadbeat, unknown father, had ended up with a doctorate-level degree.

Maybe it was all the thoughts of Kristina, but as the miles passed, Liv's mind refused to go blank, no matter how hard she pushed herself. Memories of the morning after Kristina died kept drifting back. The way all the color had drained from Gran's face. *Dear God*, she kept repeating. *Dear, dear God*. They were all sitting together on her stiff floral sofa. Oliver had cried silently, smearing tears across his face with the back of his hand. Liv had dug her nails into her palms and tried not to throw up.

"We are investigating this as a homicide," Detective Rasband had said. He looked like Mr. Clean, Liv remembered thinking, with his shiny bald head. No earring, though. "And we must assume the child is in danger, as well. I'm so sorry."

Kristina had been beaten to death, he said, faltering over the words. Blunt force trauma to the head. Liv remembered how he'd wiped his eyes with his handkerchief. The entire police department was devastated that this had happened to Joe's girl, especially Rasband since Joe had been his partner years ago.

Liv had jumped in: "Kristina's ex-boyfriend came here looking for her last night."

Detective Rasband's eyebrows shot up as he fired questions about Sam and Kristina. How long were they

involved? Is he the father of the child? Did they ever argue?

But then Gran had cleared her throat and told Liv and Ollie to go upstairs. Later that day, she told them to start packing. They were going to spend the rest of the summer with their aunt and uncle in West Virginia.

When Liv thought back, she wondered what might have been different if Gran hadn't sent them away. It had been nice to avoid the intensity of the investigation, the police officers and FBI agents, the reporters who came by looking for a scoop. But Liv's aunt and uncle had followed Gran's advice and refused to speak about the case, which meant Liv and Oliver had to learn everything from the media.

Which only made Liv more obsessed. Whenever she closed her eyes, she'd see Kristina's head bashed in, her skull crumpled like an eggshell.

At first, the media had focused on Sam Howard. The ex-boyfriend was the obvious suspect, especially because he had disappeared. But over time, the narrative shifted. Kristina's autopsy revealed high levels of alcohol in her system, as well as antidepressants, opioids, and benzodiazepines, which matched the prescription bottles in her medicine cabinet. Speculation mounted that she was selling them, had gotten in with the wrong crowd, leading to an altercation and her death.

Liv never believed it. Kristina would not have put her daughter at risk.

But she was powerless to stop it, this narrative that distilled the entirety of her sister's existence to a single point: the negligent mother, the addict. Liv had wanted to scream at the world, to make them see her sister as a real person. Kristina loved boy bands, Dr. Pepper-flavored LipSmackers, and big hoop earrings. She made the best triple-chocolate-

chunk cookies in the world. She loved her baby and was determined to be a better mother than their own mom had been.

Losing Kristina had been shattering. Watching the media reduce her to a two-dimensional caricature was almost worse.

After returning to Gran's house two months later, the case was off-limits as a topic of conversation. Gran hardly spoke at all, in fact. So Liv would stay up late with Oliver, reviewing everything they knew in urgent whispers, neither of them able to sleep.

"Sam always wanted Gabriela for himself," Liv would say. "He must have run off with her. He must be raising her somewhere."

"Maybe," Oliver had said. "Or maybe the police haven't found either of them because . . ."

"Because what?" Liv had demanded.

Even as teenagers, Oliver knew better than to rupture Liv's fragile hope. He sighed and said, "Nothing."

Liv picked up the pace on her run, hot tears stinging her eyes. Faster and harder, as if she could outrun the memories. The hard finality of losing Kristina. The hazy uncertainty of losing Gabriela. The weeks and months that passed with no leads.

Gabriela might not be alive, Liv had admitted to herself years ago. But the hope persisted, dormant embers of a fire that her time in Durango had stoked to flame. Liv burned with the need to find her niece, to bring Kristina's killer to justice.

A long, gradually increasing hill stretched ahead, and Liv pressed her feet into the asphalt and propelled herself up,

relishing the burn in her legs and lungs. Better than blankness, this relentless, full-body agony allowed no room for other feelings. The sun rose in front of her, a burning yellow yolk. Sweat dripped down her face and chest.

The sound of footsteps made her lose focus. She glanced over her shoulder and saw another runner, a man in shorts and a green T-shirt, thirty or forty feet behind. Not in the mood to be beaten, she increased her speed. She expected him to drop away, but another quick glance revealed he was gaining on her.

In a burst of competitive frustration, Liv dug her feet into the pavement, shoes scrabbling on loose rock, legs and lungs screaming with exertion. And still he gained, coming alongside her, his breathing as loud as her own.

Just before she crumpled on her overcooked-noodle legs, they reached the top of the hill. Liv refused to give the other runner the satisfaction of seeing her collapse; she stepped to the edge of the trail and bent double, head between her knees. Her stomach twisted and roiled, but worse than that was the frustration of not beating him.

Whatever. He had nearly a foot on her in height. She waited for him to pass by, to run down the other side of the hill, but he didn't. He stopped a few feet away, hands on hips, sucking in giant gulps of air.

“What are you doing, trying to kill me?” he wheezed.

“You didn't have to keep up,” Liv managed between her own ragged breaths. “You were supposed to back off.”

“I didn't want to let you win.”

“I didn't want to let *you* win,” she said.

When her breathing calmed, she straightened, wiping sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. The man stood upright, too, and she finally got a good look at the runner who had chased her up the hill.

Messy brown hair, laughter-creased eyes, scruffy almost-beard threaded with golden-red.

“Coffee shop guy,” she said.

He smiled, chocolate brown eyes crinkling around the edges. “Coffee shop girl.”

A few minutes later they were running together, taking it easy so they could talk without losing breath. His name was Jeremiah, he’d said, and he had lived in Durango his entire life. He ran upright, with excellent form and long strides. Liv would have admired it—from a strictly professional, anatomical point-of-view—if she hadn’t been so irritated. She scrambled to stay next to him, determined that this guy with legs up to her armpits would not know she found it difficult.

“Do you work with athletes?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” Liv said, surprised that he’d remembered she was a physical therapist. “The job I’m doing now is in a skilled nursing facility. An old folks’ home.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s a job.”

“But if you’re going to devote your life to something, you should be passionate about it, right?”

“That’s a privileged perspective, you know?” Liv said, glancing over. “I’m the first person in my family to attend

college, let alone graduate school. The fact that I can pay my bills and have health insurance seems like a good deal.”

“Fair enough.” He sent her a look that reminded her of the way he’d looked when she saw him at the coffee shop—as if a laugh lived right below the surface. She got the feeling that he liked the pushback. It gave her the confidence to ask him something, when she normally would have stayed quiet.

“What do you do?”

“I’m a CPA.”

She almost stopped running, imagining Jeremiah gripping a mechanical pencil, hunched over a page full of numbers. “An accountant? That’s the last thing I would’ve predicted. Are you—”

“A nerd?” he interrupted, laughing.

“I was going to ask if you’re passionate about it.”

“It’s a job.” He grinned, throwing her words back at her. “It pays the bills so I can do what I enjoy.”

“Which is . . .”

“Hike, fish, camp, rock climb, mountain bike, ski in the winter.”

He looked like the kind of guy who was always outside. Face a little sunburned, weathered around the forehead and eyes. Weathered in a nice way, Liv realized, and forced herself to pay attention to the road ahead.

He glanced over at her, and she felt self-conscious about the sweat on her face and neck, running into her sports bra.

“What do you do for fun?” he asked.

That always struck Liv as an odd question—as if everyone had the luxury of doing things just for the fun of it. “I’ve moved around so much the past few years, I haven’t settled into any specific hobbies.”

“Except running,” he said, nodding at her legs. She didn’t feel self-conscious about that—her legs were her best feature. But she wasn’t used to caring if guys noticed them.

“Running isn’t a hobby,” she said. “Running is life.”

She turned up the speed, silently daring him to keep up. Most people wouldn’t have the stamina—not after sprinting up that hill—but he met her challenge with his own, forcing her to work hard to stay with him.

The city was waking up below, the streets filling with early-morning traffic. It would be another scorcher, and Liv wondered if they’d ever get a break from the heat. Durango was supposed to be temperate, thanks to the 6500-foot altitude, but this summer was smashing records nearly every day.

Jeremiah stayed with her back to her street, which meant she had covered at least six miles. Liv secretly hoped he had started out just before hitting the hill, that his fresh legs were the reason he’d kept up with her so easily.

“We’re almost to my place,” she said, trying to conceal her rapid breathing. “I’m in that apartment complex right over there.”

“Gotcha. I’m further the other way. Maybe we’ll run into each other again.”

“Thanks for the run, Jeremiah.”

He waved as he jogged off. A vague disappointment settled into Liv’s chest. She’d enjoyed talking to him, and she didn’t want it to end.

She made it another half-block before she heard his voice.

“Hey, Liv?” he shouted, and she turned around. He had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, hands on his hips. Staring her straight in the face, his eyes locked onto hers. It made her feel strangely naked.

“What?” she yelled.

“Do you have plans tonight?”

“Yes, sorry,” she said, disappointed. But she couldn’t miss Molly’s party.

“How about next weekend?”

She ran a hand over her face, trying to wipe away the embarrassingly wide smile. “That works. Friday?”

He sent her a grin that warmed her from toes to nose. “Friday.”

twelve

No matter how authentic I try to be online, I'm still only showing the highlight reel of my life. You don't see all the stuff dropped on the cutting room floor. So please, please don't compare your outtakes with everyone else's highlight reel.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Molly was ready for the party. Cupcakes on the kitchen counter, pink-and-purple goodie bags lined up on the table by the front door. Decorations hung, party favors ready, games prepped. She'd snapped pictures of the decor and sent them to Brookelle to edit. The unicorn party theme was going to be a huge hit, she was certain of it, and she needed a hit right now.

After years of steadily climbing, her engagement had plateaued, as Brookelle had reported the last time they chatted. Nothing to be worried about, Molly told herself, but a colorful, fun party-planning post was just the thing to get her mojo back.

But she still had time to kill before the guests arrived. A trickle of sweat rolled down Molly's back as she contemplated what to do next. She wasn't the type who could sit still, which she worried would drive Scott crazy. What if he realized he'd made a gigantic mistake in marrying her? He would discover

she was neurotic and attention-seeking, loud and needy, that she had horrible PMS and bad morning breath. And then he would pack up the Westfalia with Ella and Hoopi and take off on a cross-country adventure and she'd never see him again.

Maybe an irrational worry, but “idle hands, idle minds,” as her mother would say, so she headed down the hall to her office. A few of Scott's boxes were still haphazardly stacked on the floor by her desk, and she figured she could at least move them into the closet. Molly had plans for this room—an Instagrammable workspace that would double as a guest room should her parents ever decide to make the trip from Wisconsin.

Her mom was still bewildered by her daughter settling in this tiny southwestern town. “DurAHngo,” she would say, her mouth widening on the unfamiliar word. Molly's dad, for his part, was more concerned about her marrying a river rafting guide. “I sure hope he has a day job,” he'd said, unaware that Molly brought in more money than his own dental practice.

Her parents had offered to help out after Molly's first husband left her, but she'd wanted to be independent. As the middle child of five, Molly had grown up believing that her parents were too busy and overwhelmed to worry much about her. Now her siblings were married with kids of their own, all living within a few miles of their parents, and Molly felt out of the loop, like the distance between them was so much more than physical. Her parents FaceTimed to see Chloe every couple of weeks, but otherwise Molly was on her own. Still, she held out hope that one day they'd come for a visit to meet Scott and Ella.

Turning her attention back to Scott's boxes, she carefully stacked them in her closet. As she lifted the last one, it slipped

from her hands, and out tumbled a small safe. Black, locked, probably waterproof, and fireproof. Somewhere you might keep important documents, or a handgun.

A shiver ran down her spine. She wouldn't be surprised if Scott owned a gun, and if he did, she knew he'd be responsible and keep it locked up. But it was something she should know about, right? Especially being home alone with two little girls.

She rummaged around in the bottom of the box for a key to the safe, but couldn't find anything. Probably on Scott's key ring, miles downriver on the Animas. Or—Scott kept an old cigar box full of random junk in his top dresser drawer. She saw it every time she put away his underwear. On a whim, she walked down the hall, into her bedroom.

The box was there, faded and yellowed, with an owl on the front. Inside were Father's Day cards from Ella, a pocketknife, and old coins from foreign countries. And, at the bottom, a key ring that held two small keys, one gold, and one silver. She grabbed them.

Back in the office, Molly hesitated, wondering if she ought to be getting into Scott's things. But, she told herself, she needed to know if there was a gun in her house. There was no way to reach Scott to ask him. And besides, they were married. They were supposed to share everything.

She stuck the gold key in the lock, but it didn't fit. The silver one did, though, and Molly's heart rate sped up as she lifted the lid of the safe. Inside were some papers, a few notebooks, and a bundle of envelopes. No gun. Her heart rate slowed, and she looked closer.

Right on top was Ella's birth certificate. Ella Jane Wander, born ten years ago on October 23 in Akron, Ohio. Mother: Kristie Jane Castro. Father: Scott Nicholas Wander. Molly's

eyes lingered over Ella's mother's name. Kristie Castro, Scott's first love, gone too soon.

She also found Scott's birth certificate and read his parents' names. Gary and Meredith. She remembered asking about his family when they'd first started dating, the cloud that had come over his expression. *I don't really have any family*, he'd said. *My parents died years ago*.

Beneath his and Ella's was another birth certificate. In fact, it was identical to Ella's, and Molly blinked, confused—why would Ella have two birth certificates? Her confusion deepened as she looked closer. This one wasn't for Ella. It was for a Gabriela Jane Casillas.

Late afternoon sun slanted through the shutters across the room, casting bars of light on the document as she lifted it. Gabriela had also been born ten years ago, like Ella, but on October 20 instead October 23. Mother: Kristina Jane Casillas. No father listed.

Molly held the two documents in her hand. Same watermark, same ink color. Different names. Slightly different dates. It didn't make sense.

“Mommy?”

Molly turned to see Chloe standing in the doorway, her blond curls a halo around her face. “Hi, sweetie! Are you done playing?”

“Uh-huh. Can I get on my awesome party clothes now?”

Molly glanced at her watch—an hour until the party started. No time to look at the other contents of the safe, but she sifted through them quickly, just to see: a bundle of envelopes, held together by a rubber band; a leather-bound book that looked like some sort of ledger, full of columns of

dates and dollar amounts; six notebooks full of Scott's scrawling handwriting. Journals, maybe.

And in a small plastic bag, a gold chain necklace holding a delicate cross. It glinted as she lifted it to the light, shifting inside the plastic. There was a rose in the center of the cross, and the clasp on the chain was broken. The design seemed familiar, but she couldn't place it.

"Whatcha doin'?" Chloe said, weaseling her head under Molly's armpit.

"Just organizing, honey, I'm almost done."

Chloe butted her head against Molly's boob, making Molly wince. "Stop ordanizing. You shouldn't ordanize when you have a party to get ready for."

"You're right," Molly said. She stuffed the papers back into the safe, closed the lid, and secured it with the key. Then she placed it on the shelf in the closet. "Let's get ready for your birthday party, sweetness, okay?"

After dropping the key back into Scott's cigar box, Molly followed Chloe to her bedroom. She would talk to Scott when he returned. He would have an explanation for all of it.

thirteen

I don't know if heaven is real, but if it is, I hope it's a gigantic never-ending party. All of us hanging out together for eternity, with good food, music, and drinks. Doesn't that sound wonderful?

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv sat in her car outside Molly's tidy home with the bright yellow door. Anxiety fluttered in her chest like a horde of dark moths—and not just because she could imagine the noise and chaos inside. What if Oliver was right, and she had it all wrong?

But if there was the slightest chance Gabriela could be in that house, she had to try.

That thought propelled Liv out of her car. But even after knocking twice and ringing the doorbell, no one answered. With a deep breath, she turned the doorknob. It wasn't locked.

When she walked inside, she barely had time to register the interior, which was familiar from Molly's posts—cozy living room, multicolored throw pillows on the sofa and armchairs, balloons and streamers on the ceiling—before two giant dogs pounded across the hardwood floor toward her, tails wagging, one barking joyfully. Liv froze.

“Liv! I’m glad you’re here!” Molly hurried over, her lopsided dimple in full force. She gave a command to the German Shepherd, who sat instantly, and grabbed the collar of the yellow dog before it jumped on Liv. “This is Bitsy. She’s a sweetheart, just overexcited. Come in, come in!”

Molly looked genuinely glad to see her—but she probably made everyone feel that way. Her blond hair was pulled back in a sideways braid, wavy tendrils framing her face. Liv had seen Molly do a video tutorial about this hairstyle a few days ago. She wore an oversized T-shirt, knotted on one side, featuring a fluorescent multicolored unicorn rearing on its hind legs, glitter spewing from its horn. Ridiculously over-the-top, like everything she did, and probably setting off a new trend at this very moment.

“Sorry I’m late,” Liv said.

Molly waved her apology away. “No, this is perfect. We’re finishing a craft in the backyard, then we’ll open presents and do cupcakes and ice cream while the moms chat. I told you about the unicorn margaritas, right?”

Liv tried to shake the awkwardness from her limbs as she followed Molly out to the backyard, where throngs of little girls were gathered on the lawn. A group of moms sat in lawn chairs on the patio, and Molly introduced her. They blurred together in Liv’s mind, a mass of Ashleys and Melissas and Stephanies, all holding fluorescent pink drinks in plastic margarita glasses, the rims crusted with colored sprinkles.

“That’s a fun . . . um, craft,” one of the Ashleys said, nodding at the lawn.

Liv followed her gaze to where the girls were finger-painting giant canvases hung from the fence, swirling the colorful paint with their hands, giggling as they smeared as

much paint on each other as the canvases. She couldn't make out any of the faces well enough to recognize Gabriela, and she exhaled, impatient.

"Yeah, that's really brave," one of the other moms said, fanning herself with a paper plate. One of the Stephanies, Liv thought. "Letting them get so . . . messy. Most moms wouldn't want party clothes to be ruined."

Liv recognized that tone, the faux-compliment grenade being lobbed in Molly's direction. Liv had been the object of plenty of those back in high school. *That's so unique*, Lilah Anderson had said when she'd shaved her head after Kristina's death. *Most girls wouldn't want to look like a cancer victim.*

Most girls hadn't lost their sister in a brutal unsolved murder, either.

"We can just hose them off at the end," Molly said, waving at Chloe on the lawn, who seemed delighted.

The Stephanie blinked. "Delilah's wearing a new dress."

"How much of this is going online?" another mom asked, and Liv couldn't tell if she was worried or excited about the possibility.

"I won't post anything with your girls," Molly assured her. "Just pictures of Chloe and the decorations."

"Oh," the mom said, frowning.

Liv sat in a chair on the edge of the group and tried to swallow past the tightness in her throat. None of the girls were obviously Gabriela, and now this entire business seemed like a silly, misguided waste of time.

"Liv, this is Sarah," Molly said, motioning to another woman nearby. "She's an Army wife, married to a member of

the Southern Ute tribe—did I get that right? She runs the river-rafting business with Scott. Sarah, my new friend Liv.”

Sarah, fortyish with wavy auburn hair and a sleeping toddler on her lap, stuck out her free hand to shake Liv’s. “Scott runs the rivers, I run the business. And Maya runs the books.”

“Nice to meet you,” Liv said. “Who’s Maya?”

Sarah laughed. “A pain in my ass.”

“Scott’s friend,” Molly explained. “Maya and Sarah inherited the business from their dad when he passed away, and then Scott joined in.”

“How do you know Molly?” Sarah asked after Molly walked away to snap pictures and play hostess.

“We met the other day. I just moved to Durango for work ___”

“And Molly immediately invited you.” Sarah nodded, shifting the sleeping toddler against her chest. Liv caught a glimpse of sweaty black hair and dark lashes.

“Pretty much.”

“Molly’s the friendliest person I’ve ever met, but it can be a little overwhelming,” Sarah said, laughing. “She’s great for Scott. Have you met him yet?”

Liv shook her head, hoping Sarah would keep talking. She had learned early in life that the best way to keep someone talking was to stay quiet but attentive, like a therapist or a priest. Most people would end up saying much more than they planned.

The toddler in Sarah’s arms whimpered, and she patted his back. “We were lucky to convince him to settle down here and

buy into the business. After Dad died, we tried to keep it going, but Maya's too laid-back. Meaning lazy as shit." She shook her head but smiled, as if she loved her sister despite her words.

"How did you meet Scott?" Liv asked. "Is he from Durango, too?"

"No, he moved here a few years ago. He and Maya became good friends, and we asked him to join the business. He's done a great job turning it around."

Liv wondered about Maya, this woman Scott was such "good friends" with, but she couldn't think of anything to ask that wouldn't sound nosy.

Out on the lawn, Molly had gathered the girls to open presents. Liv recognized her daughter, with her freckles and messy blond hair. Today, instead of a princess crown, she wore a headband with a golden unicorn horn protruding from it.

Liv dug her fingernails into her thighs. So many long years of hoping she'd find Gabriela were culminating right here, right now. She scanned the older girls. A few could have been Kristina's daughter, could have had Gabriela's dark hair and olive skin.

Possibly. Which wasn't good enough.

It took Chloe five minutes to rip through her presents, to squeals and screams of laughter from the girls. Liv's head started to ache. The girls gathered around the unicorn cupcakes, singing Happy Birthday off-key. Soon enough they were running to the far ends of the yard with cupcakes and juice boxes, and it was quiet for the first time since Liv had arrived.

“Great party,” Sarah said as Molly sank into a chair nearby. “So much work, though.”

“Look at those smiling faces,” Molly said. “That makes it all worth it. And not just for Chloe, either. Look at Ella.”

Liv snapped into focus. *Ella.*

“She was nervous about moving here,” Molly continued. “A new neighborhood, a new school in the fall. But she’s doing so well.”

Sarah nodded at Molly. “She’s doing great. And a hell of a lot better with you around than just Scott.”

“Which one is Ella?” Liv asked Molly, hoping her question didn’t seem odd.

Molly smiled at her. “Ella is my new stepdaughter. She’s right there,” she pointed, “in the blue shirt, sitting on the blanket.”

Liv leaned forward, on the edge of her seat. When she saw the girl, her breath caught.

Dark brown hair curling softly to her shoulders. Wide-set brown eyes framed by thick lashes. She could be Kristina’s daughter. Maybe.

Liv had been hoping for something more than maybe, though. For the heavens to open, for a beam of light to come down and rest upon the girl’s head, identifying her without a doubt as Gabriela. Her heart dropped with disappointment and she blinked away sudden tears.

Molly stood, grinning at the women. “I think it’s time for another unicorn margarita, don’t you think?”

“Hell yes,” Sarah said.

Soon the party wound down. Liv refused a second margarita, and not just because the strawberry-flavored drinks were cloyingly sweet. She didn't want to forget why she was there: to gather information and get out. So far, she hadn't discovered anything useful.

Everyone else was leaving, grabbing goody bags, giving hugs, and saying goodbye. The mothers clutched their daughters, clucking their tongues at the messes on the girls' clothes while Molly grinned her wide-as-Main-Street smile.

Liv ended up behind two moms who whispered to each other as they put their daughters' shoes on.

"I thought she'd be filming this," one said. "I spent two hours getting myself and Hazel ready."

The other mom sniffed. "I guess the little people of Durango aren't *invincible* enough to be in her videos."

Liv stepped past them, racking her mind for any reason to look through the house. She needed proof, something to connect Molly's stepdaughter to Gabriela.

"Can I use your restroom?" she asked.

"It's down the hall," Molly said, motioning. "Last door on the right. But don't leave yet! We didn't even get a chance to talk."

"Oh, I . . ."

Molly's big brown eyes were pleading. "I told Chloe and Ella they could watch a movie after the party. I could use some company, too."

Liv hesitated, but she was saved from having to answer by an Ashley/Melissa/Stephanie coming over to say goodbye. She

headed down the hallway, her pulse quickening. Sneaking through Molly's house, searching for evidence—it felt vaguely sordid.

The hallway had five doors—three on the right, two on the left. Liv could see the bathroom door at the end of the hall, open, the light on. Instead of heading that way, she opened the first door on the right. Inside was a pink daybed mounded with stuffed animals, and a few half-naked Barbie dolls strewn on the floor. Chloe's room, most likely. Liv moved on to the next door. Nudging it open, she saw a queen-sized bed and an old-fashioned desk in the corner. The guest room/office Molly had shown in her live yesterday.

That left the two doors on the left, both shut. Holding her breath, pulse pounding, Liv gripped the doorknob of the first door and turned it.

A king-size bed took up most of the space—the master bedroom. She scanned the dresser and nightstands for pictures, maybe a photograph from their wedding, so she could compare Scott Wander's face with her memory of Sam Howard. But the room didn't look like it had been fully decorated; there was nothing on the furniture or walls. Liv considered rifling through the laundry basket—couldn't those CSI experts find DNA on anything?—but dismissed the idea. She didn't have time. She could hear Molly at the front door, thanking everyone for coming and encouraging Chloe to say goodbye politely.

Liv sucked in a breath and opened the final door. She took in the room: a light blue quilt on the bed, a bottle of mint-green nail polish, and a paperback Harry Potter book on the nightstand. Signs of a ten-year-old girl.

And next to the book, a framed picture. A photograph of Kristina, twenty-two years old, with baby Gabriela in her arms. Beside her, the man Liv knew as Sam Howard.

A thrill ran through her body. She itched to call Oliver and share the news, but instead she snapped a picture of the photograph with her phone.

“Everything okay, Liv?”

Liv whirled around, fumbling her phone back into her pocket. “I couldn’t find the bathroom.”

“It’s the last door on the right,” Molly said, eyes narrowing. “Like I told you.”

“Sorry. I . . .” Liv stumbled over her words. “I opened the wrong door, but then I saw this nightstand. I love it.”

“Thanks. I found it at an estate sale and painted it Ella’s favorite color.”

Liv forced an awkward smile and rushed past Molly, down the hall into the bathroom, her hands shaking. She splashed water on her face, then stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes looked wild and exhilarated, her short dark hair sticking up like disheveled crow’s feathers. She counted to a hundred, trying to calm her racing heart.

Gabriela. Right here in this house.

Liv poked her head out of the bathroom and walked down the hall, floorboards creaking underfoot. All the guests were gone, Molly and Chloe nowhere to be found. She entered the living room and saw Ella sitting on the couch, knees curled into her chest, eyes fixed on the TV.

Gabriela. No doubt about it, not after that photo on the nightstand. Liv paused, captivated by the sight of her niece.

Now she could see the resemblance to Kristina in her full lips and chin, her profile, the way her forehead sloped gently into her nose.

When Liv was maybe five or six, back when her mother sort of had her act together and all three of her children lived under the same roof, she used to stare at Kristina's profile, just like this. They would sit on the couch, cereal bowls on their laps, watching Saturday morning cartoons. Liv spent much of the time watching Kristina, gauging her response to the shows. If Kristina laughed, Liv would laugh. If Kristina rolled her eyes, Liv would, too. She wanted to be just like her older sister.

A rush of hatred for Sam Howard nearly knocked her over. Not just for killing Kristina, but for taking Gabriela, for stealing all the memories they should have made over the years. Liv should know her niece's favorite color, her favorite foods, and TV shows. Instead she felt like a stranger. Ella probably knew nothing about her history. She was supposed to be Gabriela Casillas—Kristina had given her baby her last name, to honor her father and their Puerto Rican roots. Obliterating that, turning her into the generic Ella Wander? It made Liv sick.

“Are you okay?” Ella asked. She turned to look at Liv, her eyes wide and concerned.

Liv forced herself to relax her clenched fists and smile. “You remind me of someone I used to know.”

“Who?”

Before Liv could make up an answer, Molly returned with Chloe, now dressed in pink pajamas.

Molly's eyes lit up. "You're still here—I'm so glad! Do you want to stay for pizza? Oh, I know—we could sit outside on the patio and listen to some Taylor, I can open a bottle of wine, it'll be perf—"

"I can't," Liv said. "I need to get back."

"Oh." Molly's gaze fell to the floor. "Well, thanks for coming."

Liv couldn't stop looking at Ella's face. Trying to memorize it so she could tell Oliver everything. The way the corners of her mouth turned down when she concentrated, the way her eyelashes curled up.

"Can I get your phone number?" Molly asked. "Maybe we could hang out again?"

Liv didn't expect she'd be staying in Durango long, especially once she turned Sam Howard in. But it would be useful to have Molly's cell number—one more thing to pass along to the authorities.

"Sure," she told Molly, and they exchanged numbers. "Have a great night."

As Liv drove away, she mentally composed the email she planned to send the detective. Subject: *Here's that evidence you wanted.*

McSnark's STOP RUINING MY INTERNET

The official discussion forum for Molly Sullivan of An Invincible Summer

FannyPackLuvr posted:

I'm sorry, but that unicorn party for Clover's birthday was NOT up to her usual level. How many times have we seen unicorn parties lately, anyway? Like, I've seen a half dozen in the past few months. It's nothing new or unique and the fact that she THINKS it's unique is sad.

MamaLlama99 posted:

Her posts seem sort of half-assed lately. I liked her better when she was single. Maybe it's because she was more interesting back then, or maybe because now she's not posting about the husband or stepdaughter so it's totally obvious she's leaving out parts of her life. Either way, I miss the old Molly and I never thought I'd say that.

SierraAngel replied:

THIS x 1000!

ColoradoGrrl posted:

So I live down the street from Molly and her family. I was at that party. My daughter came home filthy and the goody bags were junk.

Meow17 replied:

OOOOHHH we need details @ColoradoGrrl What is she like IRL and have you met the Mister?

ColoradoGrrl replied:

His name is Scott Wander, and yeah, I've met him. He owns a river-rafting company in town and he's kind of

an asshole. Hardly talks to anyone. Molly, on the other hand, talks way too much. Big surprise, right?

user95798 replied to ColoradoGrrl:

Can u tell me which house they live in @ColoradoGrrl

ColoradoGrrl replied to user95798:

Um, no way am I telling you that. That's creepy. Who the F are you, anyway?

fourteen

I'm getting antsy. The weeks are ticking by—six weeks, to be exact, until the bank opens Kristina's safe deposit box and turns its contents over to the state.

I can't let that happen.

I should've figured out a way to access the box years ago. That was a mistake on my part. I got lazy. Figured it wouldn't be too difficult, but time has caught up with me. Last night I woke up in a sweat, because what if you don't have that key anymore? What if you got rid of it?

That's why I called the bank this morning. And guess what I found out? Someone else has access to that safe deposit box.

Kristina's sister.

Since I don't have the key, I'll need a notarized letter from her giving me permission to open the box. It'll be simple to forge the letter and bribe a notary, but I need a copy of her driver's license. That has to be authentic, because the bank will verify it with the state. And that's the tricky part, because I don't know where she lives now.

But I'll find her.

I'm good at that.

fifteen

Connection is Magical

—Molly Sullivan (available from her Etsy shop on a mug, a mousepad, and a vintage metal sign)

Scott was home! Hallelujah! Molly had made it through her first of many weekends without him. They were all together now, her own family in her own backyard, roasting marshmallows in the fire pit as the sun went down.

“How was the party?” Scott asked, as he helped Chloe spear a marshmallow on her roasting stick. Ella sat across from them, focused on toasting her marshmallow the perfect golden-brown.

Molly shrugged. “It was okay.”

His forehead wrinkled in concern. “What happened?”

Molly had tried to tell herself it wasn’t a big deal, that she was imagining things. But . . . “I don’t know.” She lowered her voice so the girls wouldn’t hear. “It just didn’t seem comfortable. Like somehow I did everything all wrong.”

“How is that possible? You kick ass at parties.”

She did! Well, usually. She was delightful and fun, or she had been, back in her old life. For this party, Molly had avoided talking about anything related to social media, not

wanting to make anyone uncomfortable, hoping for some genuine connections. But these Durango moms had grown up together, friends since elementary school, a tight-knit web. And it seemed like they'd shown up ready to make their debut, rather than get to know Molly and her family.

"I'm not sure I fit in with the moms here," Molly said finally.

"But Sarah was there, wasn't she?"

Molly nodded. Sarah was enough of a Durango institution that she could get away with not quite fitting in. Sarah sort of intimidated Molly, though; she had that tough-as-nails attitude that seemed necessary for military wives.

"Sarah was great. And Liv came, too, which was lovely of her." Although Molly had hoped she'd stay a little longer; instead, Liv bolted out of the house like she couldn't wait to get away. That had stung more than Molly would have expected. She shook her head, refocusing. "It was fine—we'll have a zillion friends by the end of the summer. You just wait."

"We don't need friends," Scott said, his voice gently teasing.

"I do!"

He reached over and squeezed her thigh. "I know. Especially since I'm gone a lot. Just tell me what I can do to help."

"A barbecue," she said. "I want to host a big neighborhood barbecue on the Fourth of July."

"I thought we could go camping that weekend, the four of us," Scott said, popping a marshmallow in his mouth.

“Scott,” she said, smiling even as she tried to look severe, “this is what people do—they move to a new house, they meet the neighbors. They host parties and serve hamburgers and fill drinks and chit-chat.”

Scott grinned. “All right. For you? Entertaining hordes of people I barely know sounds like a great idea.”

“Thanks, sweetie,” Molly said, and leaned over to kiss his cheek, where a speck of marshmallow had smeared.

“Kissing!” Chloe yelled, pointing at them. “Yucky!”

Scott laughed and pulled Molly closer, kissing her hard on the mouth before jumping up and growling, sending both girls scurrying across the lawn. Molly leaned back against her chair, smiling as Scott grabbed a girl in each arm, spinning them around the lawn while they shrieked with laughter and the dogs chased after them.

After the fire died down, Molly tucked Chloe into bed while Scott did the same for Ella. Then she went into her bedroom, looking forward to having her husband to herself.

She heard Scott saying goodnight to Ella, then the soft thud of her bedroom door closing.

“Why is there a picture of Ella’s mother on her nightstand?”

His voice sounded odd. Brittle. The hairs on the back of Molly’s neck lifted. She’d only heard him speak this way once before.

“I . . . I found it when I was moving your boxes,” she said.

“Why were you going through my boxes? I told you to stay out of them.”

“No, you didn’t,” she said, bristling at the edge in his voice. “You said you would get to them later. I moved them for you.”

The muscles in his face hardened. “Why did you give that picture to Ella?”

“I thought she might like it. She said she’s never seen a picture of her mom.”

Scott didn’t answer, just folded his arms across his chest, his jaw clenched.

“She said she wanted it—I asked her,” Molly said, trying to ignore the whisper of fear running through her mind at his reaction. “I wouldn’t have given it to her if she didn’t want it.”

“But you didn’t ask *me*.”

“You weren’t here.”

“I know!” His fist thudded against the door frame, and Molly flinched.

“Scott?”

He met her eyes, his angry expression dissolving into a mixture of emotions—sadness, regret, apology. Molly had seen that look before, back when they were dating, during talks about their future. Scott had been nervous about a new marriage, the effect on Ella. But those conversations had always ended with him kissing her and whispering, *I adore you, Molly Sullivan. I can’t live without you.*

This time, he said something else. “How would you like a picture of Jake staring at you from Chloe’s nightstand?”

“That’s a different situation—he abandoned us.” She softened her voice. “I know it’s painful for you, but Ella

deserves to know more about her mom. You should have seen her face. She was thrilled.”

He relaxed, the tension leaving his shoulders. “You’re right. It’s been nine years. It’s probably fine.”

For some reason this made her think about those birth certificates in the safe—Ella’s, and the one that wasn’t. Then she remembered his fist against the doorframe, the controlled force behind it. She’d only seen him get truly angry once, and she had no desire to experience that again, especially when she’d been looking forward to taking him to bed soon.

“I’m sorry I got into your boxes,” she said.

“No, I’m sorry—I overreacted. I’m not used to sharing my space.” He stepped forward, running his hands up her bare arms, spreading warmth along her skin. “But there isn’t anyone else I’d rather share it with. Forgive me?”

“Of course.” She smiled. “Are the girls asleep?”

“I’m sure they are.”

“Then come here, husband. I missed you.”

Later, Molly rolled into Scott’s warm body, relishing the way he pulled her toward him. This man, this moment, this life. She had never expected any of it, but she was grateful. His hands, his lips, his whispered adorations had erased the worries and frustrations of the day. She felt liquid and languid, listening to his soft, even breathing in their moonlit bedroom.

He stirred next to her. “Hey, Mol?”

“Yeah?”

“You didn’t happen to find a safe when you were moving my boxes, did you?”

She hesitated. “I did. Why?”

“Just wanted to make sure it didn’t get lost in the move.”

“It didn’t. It’s in the office closet.”

“Thanks.” He seemed to be almost asleep again, but then he said, “You didn’t open it, did you?”

Molly hated lying. She positively hated untruth in any form, especially after everything that had happened with Jake, but she didn’t want Scott to turn tense and angry again. All the tiny failures of the weekend seemed to layer together—the microtension with Ella, the subtle judgments at the party, and Scott’s reaction to the picture of Ella’s mom.

So she said something that wasn’t quite a lie. “There wasn’t a key with it.”

His shoulders relaxed. “Oh. Yeah. I’ll find it tomorrow. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

It was nothing, she told herself, but she couldn’t fall asleep for a long time.

sixteen

I'm not interested in perfection. Perfect is boring!
You know what isn't boring? Authenticity. Wouldn't
the world be an amazing place if we all accepted
each other as the complicated, multifaceted,
imperfect beings we are?

—*An Invincible Summer: A Memoir*

Liv sat cross-legged on her bed, laptop in front of her, FaceTime open, and waited for Oliver to receive the text message she'd just sent. She held her breath, watching as he looked at his phone. His messy black hair fell into his face, and the dark circles under his eyes made Liv worry he hadn't been sleeping enough.

"You found this in Gabriela's room?" His voice was a whisper.

"Yes."

"And you saw her? You met her? What does she look like?"

"She's beautiful." Liv's voice caught. "Not exactly like Kristina, but there are similarities."

"You found her." Oliver ran a hand over his face, wiping his eyes. "You actually found her, Livi. I'm sorry I doubted

you.”

She rarely saw much emotion from her brother. It reminded her of the boy he had been before Kristina’s death: sweet, vulnerable.

“I took that picture of them on the hospital bed,” Liv said. “The original one.”

“You did?”

She nodded. “The day after Gabriela was born. You don’t remember going to see her with Gran? You were there, too.”

“I remember being at the hospital in Pittsburgh to see Kristina and the baby. I don’t remember much about Sam, though.”

Kristina had been living in Ohio when she’d dated Sam, so that was the first time any of them had met him. Oliver had spent most of the visit slumped on the couch, ignoring everyone else while he doodled in his notebook.

Liv remembered Sam’s discomfort, the way he and Kristina had barely made eye contact. His gaze had followed baby Gabriela no matter who held her, as if she were a fragile, precious object. *What would it be like to have a father who had looked at me that way?* Liv had wondered, blissfully unaware of what Sam would later do to keep his baby.

When Gran had left the hospital room (she’d said she needed some air, meaning a smoke), Sam had handed Liv his phone and asked her to take a picture. That was the photo she found in Ella’s room: Kristina and Sam on the hospital bed, the baby held between them.

“What do we do?” Liv asked Oliver, dragging her mind back to the present.

“Do you think Gabriela is safe?”

Liv had no way of knowing if Scott Wander was a danger to his daughter, but she felt certain that Molly would never have married a man who obviously mistreated his daughter—which didn’t mean anything long-term, but in the short-term it was reassuring.

“I don’t think she’s in any immediate danger,” Liv told her brother.

“Then we have time to think about how to handle this. You could email that picture to the detective you contacted, right? He said to tell him if you found any new information.”

“Yes, but who knows if he’ll even pay attention to this.” Liv chewed on her lip. She didn’t want to spend another two weeks waiting for the detective to get back to her. “I wish the original detective was still there. Remember him?”

“Sort of.”

Liv had last spoken to Detective Kent Rasband a year after Kristina’s death, when he stopped by to let Gran know that he’d reached a dead end on the case. He’d rubbed his shiny, bald head and said he was terribly sorry. The entire police department had taken a personal interest in the case, but it hadn’t been enough.

The media attention hadn’t lasted long, either. By Kristina’s funeral a few weeks later, most of it had blown over. Liv always wondered if the press would have cared more if the murdered woman had been white, blond, and blue-eyed, a Kristin instead of a Kristina. And if the kidnapped baby hadn’t been little black-haired Gabriela Casillas.

“Oliver,” Liv said, aware she was about to ask something big of her brother. “Would you drive there and ask to speak to

someone about the case? You can go to the bank and open her safe deposit box, too. Maybe there's something in there linking Scott to everything."

"You've been watching too many crime shows," Oliver said. "I'm sure she just put her car title or some extra cash in it."

He was probably right, but she couldn't shake the childish hope that her sister's graduation necklace might be waiting. "Whatever she kept there, I want it. It's the last thing we have of her."

Oliver deliberated, pressing his lips together. "I'd have to ask for time off at work, and we're short-staffed right now. And I'd have to borrow a car from someone if I'm going to make that long-ass drive."

"But you'll do it anyway?" she said, hopefully.

He sighed and ran his hands through his messy hair. "Here's my offer, take it or leave it: you email the picture to that detective and see what he says. *And* you figure out what the bank requires in order to give me access to the safe deposit box. In the meantime, I'll see if I can find someone to lend me a car. Maybe Elton."

"Elton?" Liv perked up. She hadn't heard that name in a few months. "The law student you were seeing? He sounded nice."

Oliver's face clouded over. "He is nice. That's why I'm not seeing him anymore. But he might let me borrow his car."

seventeen

Ultimately, the problem with Molly Sullivan is that not only has she failed to create anything new or important, she's failed to create anything necessary. She's spouting the same inane philosophy we've all heard from much more articulate sources. Nothing more than a watered-down version of feel-good Self Esteem culture mixed with a pep talk for the Instagram generation. Useless, nonsensical, ridiculous drivel.

—Review of *An Invincible Summer: A Memoir*,
LATimes.com

Within twenty-four hours, Molly Sullivan's followers posted over ten thousand comments disagreeing with the review and crashed the website

The best part about Scott's weekend trips, Molly discovered, were the Mondays afterward when he was home all day. After a lazy morning and brunch, he'd taken the girls to the pool so Molly could work.

As she went through her endless to-do list in her office, she couldn't help feeling nostalgic for the old days when it

used to be so much simpler: take a few pictures, post them on Instagram, block the creepy men who send dick pics.

Now she had to think about TikTok trends and the ever-changing Instagram algorithm and would that video do better in her stories or as a Reel? Plus the constant discussion of her life by random people online. Just today she had learned of two separate TikTok accounts created to comment on her: @FanGirl_InvincibleMolly had thirty thousand followers, which was cool, but @InvincibleMollyHaterSquad had two hundred thousand, which was decidedly *not*. She had no idea why these people cared so much; if you don't like me, she wanted to say, just don't follow me.

Then there was the fact that someone, or maybe multiple someones, was still trolling the snark sites and subreddits for information about her. Brookelle kept a close watch, and she said the posts were always with a generic username and no profile picture. Every time Brookelle reported it to the forum managers, that username was discontinued, but a new one would pop up shortly thereafter. Kev, the tech guy, hadn't been able to identify an IP address—something about a proxy server or VPN. It made Molly uneasy, but with an online footprint as large as hers, it was impossible to have true privacy.

That evening, after Scott and the girls came home and ate dinner, the four of them went for a bike ride along the Animas River trail. The shade was decent, the river giving off a muggy coolness. Chloe rode the tag-along attached to Scott's bike, jabbering his ears off. Molly snapped a few pictures, capturing Chloe's goofy grin as Scott rounded a curve. The tag-along attachment was part of a sponsorship, and Molly had nearly missed the deadline for posting about it.

Ella ended up riding near Molly, and Molly was hopeful they could have a chance to talk. But every time she tried to start a conversation with Ella, the little girl shut her down with a one-word answer and eventually Molly gave up.

In the silence, her mind drifted to the birth certificates—she couldn't help it. Ella Jane Wander. Gabriela Jane Casillas. The names looped through her thoughts, over and over, as she pedaled her bike past neighborhoods and ponds and parks. Ella Jane Wander. Gabriela Jane Casillas.

She didn't know much about Scott's first wife, Molly realized. She'd imagined them as a young, headstrong couple, so head-over-heels in love that they'd married right after college and had a baby, only to have tragedy strike a year later. If she were totally honest, she'd have to admit she liked imagining Scott as a tragic figure. Or more accurately, imagining that she, Molly Sullivan, had been the woman to pull him out of his years of loneliness and grief.

Maybe she should have insisted he talk about his past with her, but she'd always thought she was being supportive by letting him talk when he was ready. But wasn't it odd he hadn't even told Molly how his first wife died? He'd said it was an accident. She'd assumed *car* accident. Now she wondered.

From the beginning, Molly had been attracted to Scott's total lack of pretentiousness. Too many guys had tried to use her online popularity for their own benefit, but while Scott seemed to admire what she'd accomplished, he'd never seemed overly invested.

Which was why his reaction when she'd posted the picture of him announcing their engagement had been so strange. Molly hadn't posted about their relationship while they were

dating, but once the ring was on her finger, she couldn't wait to share her good news with the world. It was just a simple snapshot of the two of them, taken in the woods near Scott's cabin.

The next morning, she awoke to find Scott standing next to the bed, holding his phone.

"You posted a picture of me on Instagram," he said.

Molly sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "Yes, announcing our engagement."

"I don't want you to post anything about me online." His voice had a brittle edge, and she squinted up at him, confused.

"Anything at all? Ever? You're a huge part of my life—I can't just leave you out."

His face flashed with panic. "Have you posted pictures of Ella?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't, not without asking." Molly bit her lip, trying to keep her voice even. "But honestly, don't you think you're overreacting? Everyone shares pictures of themselves online."

"Everyone doesn't have millions of followers on Instagram." He ran a hand through his sandy blond hair. "Christ, Molly, you had some psycho kid stalking you. Wasn't that enough to make you stop oversharing?"

She stood up, arms folded over her sleep shirt. "Okay, first of all: Eddie was not a psycho. And that happened three years ago."

Eddie Langford was the seventeen-year-old fan who'd gotten perhaps a tiny bit obsessed with Molly. He hadn't been dangerous, though.

Scott waved a hand in exasperation. “He robbed a Walgreens to bring you your favorite candy!”

Twenty-four packs of her favorite candy, in fact. She’d done a video spot about chocolate-covered cinnamon bears and why they were the quintessential savory-sweet treat. Eddie robbed the Walgreens that night, then waited on Molly’s doorstep, surrounded by bags of candy, until she opened the door. It had been disconcerting, yes, especially when she realized how easily he’d found her home, but she’d never felt threatened.

“That’s hardly scary, Scott. Come on. Some fans get a little weird. It’s part of the job, you know that.”

He exhaled, sat on the bed, and took her hands. “Try to think of it from my perspective, as someone who loves you. As your future husband. Molly girl, it makes me nervous.”

She softened. He was worried; that was understandable. “I know, but you have to trust me. I know how to handle myself.”

“I do,” he said, although he didn’t seem convinced. “I don’t see why you share all this, though. Is it some need for validation?”

Her cheeks stung with irritation, and the next words popped out before she could think them through: “Is the alternative to be like you and totally isolate myself from everyone?”

“You don’t have to share everything!” He threw up his hands. “All these pictures and videos and blogs. It’s relentless.”

“I share them because it’s my job. It’s how I make my living.”

“Great way to make a living—selling yourself to the world!”

“Selling myself! Do you have any idea how insulting that is?” Molly took a gulping breath, the words tumbling out. “Billions of people share pictures and videos about their life, but because I figured out a way to support myself doing it, there’s something dirty about that?”

Usually, Molly was able to brush off criticism of her online persona—she knew it was part of making herself vulnerable to the world. Better to be an open book and risk a few people hating her than closing herself off and staying on the shelf.

She wished more people would realize she wasn’t just blabbing about the mundane details of her life. That live video she’d started after getting the call about Chloe’s broken arm—the snark-site commenters had nearly eaten her alive for that one. But they couldn’t understand how it had felt, getting that phone call, not having anyone else to turn to for support. She didn’t have a husband; her mom lived a thousand miles away, and she’d just wanted someone—anyone—to be there for her.

She could brush away all that criticism because the people closest to her, her real friends, supported her. Scott, from the beginning of their relationship, had supported her. Or at least, she thought he had—but this fight had made her doubt that connection.

“If this is how you feel about my work,” she said, “then we need to rethink this thing between us.”

She walked past him, not looking at his face. If she did, she would crumple. Being married to the wrong person was much worse than being alone, she knew this. So she kept her mind carefully blank—don’t think, don’t talk, and for heaven’s

sake, don't cry—as she packed her things, loaded the car, then went to wake Chloe so they could drive back to Denver.

Scott met her in the hallway, blocking the way with his broad shoulders. “Hang on.”

Her chin wobbled treacherously. She didn't look up at him. “I need to get Chloe.”

“Molly, please stop.” His hands landed gently on her shoulders, anchoring her. “Do you know why I fell in love with you?”

She shook her head, her vision blurred with tears.

“I watched you on that river-rafting trip, how you talked to every single person in the group, got to know them. You taught everyone a song during a stretch of river when people usually get bored. You held hands with that woman who got scared after the first set of rapids. By the end of the day, you'd given everyone on the raft a funny nickname.”

Molly barely remembered any of this—it was just what she did.

Scott's voice turned warmer, softer. “After so many years on our own, me and Ella, I got used to being isolated. I guess it made me feel safe, like I couldn't lose anyone if I didn't let them in.” He paused. “But when I met you, this gorgeous, vibrant, outgoing woman—I fell hard, Mol. I couldn't help it. I've never met anyone as . . . as connected as you are. You make the world a better place just by existing.”

Her face was a mess of tears, her nose running, and her throat thick with emotion. His arms came around her, and she melted against him.

“Molly girl,” he whispered, “I would never ask you to stop sharing yourself with the world. But can you be patient with

me? I'm not as good at it as you are."

They had figured it out that day, after a long discussion. Molly promised not to post anything about Scott or Ella without asking beforehand, and Scott promised to support Molly's work. They each promised to be honest with the other. Relationships with real people, Molly had always believed, took priority over anything she did online.

Now, as Scott turned his bike back toward home, the girls trailing after him like ducklings, a wave of guilt rushed over Molly. She should have come clean right away, as soon as he asked about the safe. Now if she brought it up, he would know she had lied to him.

Which didn't mean she needed to *keep* lying. The more you lie, the easier it gets. And a relationship based on lies isn't a real relationship at all. Molly knew that firsthand, and she wasn't about to make that mistake again.

As soon as they were alone later that evening, she told him, "I need to talk to you about something."

The girls had gone off to their rooms to play. Scott was out in the backyard, throwing a tennis ball for Hoopi, who obediently returned it to his feet each time. Bitsy, who couldn't retrieve worth a darn, simply ran back and forth, wagging her plummy yellow tail.

Scott paused, tennis ball in hand, Hoopi poised to chase after it. "What's up?"

"I think we should sit down."

His smile faded. "Okay."

He followed her to the bench near the fire pit, where they sat together, holding hands. The setting sun cast a purple-red

glow across the lawn. Dragonflies zipped past, humming through the evening air.

“You’re making me nervous,” Scott said. “What’s going on?”

Her stomach twisted—lying always made her feel sick—and she promised herself she would be completely honest with him from now on. “Remember when you asked if I opened your safe?”

His hand, holding hers, tensed. “Yes.”

“Well, I did open it. I found the key in your cigar box.”

“Why did you do that?”

“I guess I just . . .” She swallowed. “I was worried there was a gun in there, and I thought I should know if we had a gun in the house.”

He turned to face her, his eyes dark with something she couldn’t identify. “But you didn’t go through it, did you?”

“I did, actually. I found two birth certificates. One for Ella, and one for a Gabriela Casillas.”

His eyes cut away from hers, focusing somewhere out on the lawn. A muscle in his jaw twitched. Anxiety threaded through her limbs, but she forced herself to continue. “I can’t think of any reason why you would have those. Any good reason, I mean. But we promised we would be honest with each other, which is why I wanted to come clean with you. And give you a chance to explain.”

He blew out a slow rush of air, then leaned forward and pressed his hands together, palms in, like a prayer. “You want to know why I have those birth certificates?”

“Yes.”

“I was never married to Ella’s mother.”

It was the last thing she’d expected him to say, and she blinked in surprise. “You weren’t? Why would you make something like that up?”

“I didn’t. Well, not on purpose. A couple years ago, Ella got interested in weddings—stuff she saw on TV, I guess—and started pestering me about my wedding to her mother. I said something to get her to stop asking about it, and ever since, that’s the story I ran with. I didn’t want to tell her the truth, which was that I hardly knew her mother.”

Molly blinked again. “You hardly knew her? But you had a baby together.”

“We met at a party—I was a senior at Ohio State, and she worked at a department store in town. It wasn’t serious, and she ended it a couple weeks later. I didn’t hear from her until she called and said she was pregnant.”

“With Ella.”

He nodded. “She said the baby was mine, but I wasn’t sure.”

Molly’s image of a young and earnest Scott, marrying his sweetheart right out of college, shifted in her mind. She imagined him cocky and handsome, hooking up with Ella’s mother, getting her pregnant, then not believing her when she approached him.

“But you had slept with her.”

“Yes.”

“Without protection.”

He glanced at her face. “Yes, Molly. I was twenty-two. Did you never do anything stupid when you were young?”

She cringed; of course she had. “I’m sorry. Go on.”

“Well, I didn’t react the way I should have. When I asked her how she knew the baby was mine, she got upset and told me she didn’t want to see me. I didn’t hear from her again until she was in the hospital, after Ella was born.”

“That’s the picture on Ella’s nightstand, then?” Molly recalled the awkwardness in the picture. She’d attributed it to the difficulty of adjusting to a newborn. No, it was because Scott and Ella’s mother hardly knew each other.

He nodded. “That’s why I didn’t want Ella to have it in her room. It was the strangest day of my life—I had a baby, all of a sudden. But I decided that I would do the right thing and help take care of her.”

“Good.” That seemed more like the Scott she knew, responsible almost to a fault.

“Kris didn’t want me around, though. She picked the name without asking me and didn’t put me on the birth certificate. I still wasn’t sure I was actually Ella’s father.”

“Then what?” Molly squeezed Scott’s hand.

He squeezed back, his eyes not meeting hers. “I didn’t hear from her for a while, but then she started calling, asking me for money. She still wouldn’t let me see Ella. Did you know that unmarried fathers have no custodial rights? None. I was completely at Kris’s mercy, and I told her I wouldn’t give her anything unless we got a paternity test.” He paused, his eyes unfocused. Something dark flitted across his face, then disappeared.

“And?” Molly nudged.

Scott cleared his throat. “The test was positive—I’m Ella’s father. That was a relief, and I knew I needed to step up. I was

living a couple hours away, but I'd drive to see Ella every weekend. Kris . . . she was struggling. Her father died a few months after Ella was born. Kris was drinking too much, and using something to cope—prescription drugs, maybe. I worried it wasn't a safe environment for Ella, so I called social services. They sent someone over to check it out."

"You did the right thing." Once again, this sounded like the man Molly knew. The father she knew Scott to be. It was a relief to hear it.

He shook his head, guilt and regret spilling across his face. "The next day, Kris disappeared with Ella. It took me a couple weeks to track her down. She was living in a dirty apartment in another town, and it seemed, I don't know, shifty. The thought of Ella living there—it terrified me. Kris still didn't want me around, and I was nervous to call Child Protective Services in case she ran again, so I tried to keep tabs on Ella as much as I could."

He paused, jaw tensing. Molly held her breath, waiting for him to continue.

When he spoke, his voice was low and gravelly, as if the words were being raked across a stone wall. "One night Kris was found dead. An accidental overdose. I was able to take Ella, since I had that positive paternity test. I had to adopt her, legally, since I wasn't on the birth certificate. They gave her a new birth certificate after the adoption."

Comprehension dawned as Molly realized what he was telling her—the tragedy, but also how he had responded. "You changed her name."

"I always called her Ella, so that's what I wrote down. That whole year is kind of a blur. I was twenty-four years old and suddenly I had full responsibility for a one-year-old child."

It made sense—Scott’s reluctance to talk about his past, his refusal to discuss Ella’s mother, the way he always worried things were going to fall apart.

“It wasn’t your fault her mother died,” Molly said.

He shrugged. His face was shadowed in the evening light, and the lines around his eyes and mouth seemed deeper. This was painful for him to talk about, she could tell. He blamed himself, and he worried she would blame him, too.

“If I hadn’t called social services, Kris wouldn’t have taken off; she wouldn’t have escalated her drinking and drug use. Anyway, you know what happened after.”

She did. He’d moved across the United States, living out of the Westfalia, working odd jobs until he’d settled with Ella in Durango four years ago.

“I feel awful for putting that picture in Ella’s room,” she said.

“No, you were right. Ella deserves to know more about her mom. But listen, I don’t want her to know we weren’t together. And I definitely don’t want Ella to know she overdosed.”

Molly couldn’t blame him, but he couldn’t keep the truth from his daughter forever. “Just because you don’t talk about it doesn’t mean she doesn’t wonder,” she said, hoping she wasn’t overstepping. “She’s too afraid to ask, thinking she’ll upset you.”

He nodded, and she could see her words sinking in. “I know. I need to figure out how to talk to her about it.”

A rush of tenderness came over Molly, for the way he’d cared for Ella when most young men his age would have walked away. She leaned her head against his shoulder. “Thanks for telling me. And I’m sorry I snooped.”

He kissed the top of her head, and she could feel his relief, the tension melting from his body. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. I’m too used to being on my own. Thanks for being patient with me.”

She smiled and kissed him. Just like she told her followers, vulnerability could be painful sometimes, but it was always worth it.

eighteen

I have good news and bad news, Sam.

The bad news: turns out Kristina's sister isn't easy to locate. She attended the University of Pittsburgh, then worked at three different temp jobs in Maryland, Florida, and Nebraska, respectively. But after that, I lost her. She doesn't leave much of a trail online.

Unlike your wife.

That's the good news. For me, anyway. You'll probably disagree.

Your wife is my bird in the hand. Though you might not have that key anymore, my guess is that you do. It seems very in character for you to hold on to something like that. Not because you feel sentimental about it. Because you feel guilty.

So, I just booked my flights to Durango.

Watch out, Sam. I'm coming.

nineteen

I firmly believe you have to approach each first date with the thought that this could be IT. This person could be MY person. This night could be the start of my forever. I reject the idea that we should protect our hearts from the risk of disappointment. What's more disappointing than our own failure to hope?

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv stood in front of her mirror, fussing with her outfit. She hadn't been on a date in years, so she didn't have many date-worthy clothes, and she had no idea what kind of a date this was going to be. Jeremiah had only said he would pick her up at seven o'clock for dinner.

The past week had dragged. Liv had heard from the detective she'd emailed, but all he'd said was that he would look into it, and get back to her. She'd checked her email at least fifteen times a day since then, but nothing.

Oliver hadn't gotten any closer to driving to Pittsburgh to open Kristina's safe deposit box, and there didn't seem to be much point in Liv sending the required documentation—a notarized letter and copy of her driver's license—until he did. His lack of urgency was making Liv crabby and frustrated;

whenever she texted him about it, he'd respond with a gif of someone rolling their eyes, which just made her more irritated. She knew there probably wasn't anything of value in there, but she still didn't want the state to end up with Kristina's possessions, which meant he had to open the safe deposit box before the end of the summer.

The date with Jeremiah was a welcome distraction from all of that.

Liv finally settled on a simple cotton skirt, high-heeled sandals, and a white sleeveless shirt. Her hair was its usual dark, low-maintenance pixie, but she put on some lipstick and a quick brush of mascara.

As she finished, there was a knock at her door. She swallowed, told herself to relax, and went to open it.

Jeremiah stood on her doorstep, wearing a white golf shirt with a Durango Brewing Company logo and bright-colored trail running shoes. It was the first time Liv had seen him looking like he'd put effort into his appearance—shirt collar crisp, facial hair trimmed, messy hair almost tamed—and she liked what she saw.

But he didn't seem to share the sentiment, because his face fell.

“Oh no,” he said. “You can't wear that tonight.”

“Why not?” Her face warmed with embarrassment.

“Because we're going hiking.”

“You said we were having dinner.”

He leaned against the doorframe, and his eyes started laughing. “We're having dinner on our hike. You should change.”

“I don’t have hiking boots.”

“You’ve lived in Durango for a full two weeks and you don’t have hiking boots yet?” Then he grinned. “Wear your running shoes. It’s not a long way.”

He waited inside while she went to the bedroom and exchanged her skirt for shorts, sandals for running shoes. When she returned, he was wandering around, investigating her living room.

Liv paused, seeing her apartment through his eyes. Beige walls, brown sofa, small kitchen with two generic wooden stools. The only personal items were in her bedroom—a quilt Gran had made when Liv left for college and a photograph of her, Kristina, and Oliver on the nightstand. Just how she liked it: easy to move, easy to leave. She thought back to Molly’s house, chock-full of color and warmth, like Molly herself, and wondered if her bland apartment said something about her own personality. A depressing thought.

“Nice place you got here,” Jeremiah said, leaning in to examine the mass-produced art print hanging over the sofa.

“It’s provided by the temp company I work for,” Liv explained. “They all look something like this.”

“It’s like living in a Holiday Inn.”

She shrugged. She had never cared before. “Am I dressed better now, sir?” She held out her hands and curtsied, feeling instantly foolish.

But Jeremiah grinned and nodded, hands on his hips as he appraised her. Her cheeks warmed at the way he was watching her—that intent stare she’d first noticed at the coffee shop. Like he was memorizing her. “You look great.”

“Let’s go, then.”

Ninety minutes later, they were on top of Smelter Mountain near the south end of the valley, overlooking Durango as the sun went down. The Animas River meandered through town like a lazy snake, bracketed by a grid of streetlights amidst the buildings and trees.

The hike had only taken an hour, and aside from a few spots where they scrambled up loose rock, it hadn't been difficult. Liv had never been on a date like this, one where she ended up sweaty and out of breath—well, not at the beginning of the date. She liked it.

Jeremiah carried a backpack the entire way, and once they reached the top and caught their breath, he unpacked. She expected something like smashed peanut butter sandwiches and potato chips, but Jeremiah surprised her. First, he unfurled a blanket, laying it on the dusty ground. Then he opened the backpack to reveal compartments for real plates and silverware, cloth napkins and wine glasses, and a demi bottle of red wine. Even a little pocket for the corkscrew.

“I wouldn't have pegged you for a wine aficionado,” Liv said. “Isn't this a beer town?” She had counted at least five or six brewing companies so far.

“I'm not, and it is.” He grinned. “But I'm trying to impress you.”

She found herself grinning back. “Don't tell anyone, but it's working.”

Jeremiah laid out a picnic feast for them, cheese and crackers, tiny gourmet sandwiches, and fruit kabobs. They sat next to each other on the blanket and ate, chatting and watching the sunset. It was cooler up here, a welcome break

from the summer heat. The snow-capped peaks of the San Juan Mountains turned pink and purple, and the lights in the valley winked on, mirrored by the stars above.

“Tell me about you,” Jeremiah said after a while. “What’s your story?”

From the way he looked at her face, he seemed like he really wanted to know. And she wanted to tell him.

“Nothing too interesting. I grew up bouncing between different relatives’ houses. I went to University of Pittsburgh for undergrad and grad school, and you know about my temp positions.”

He nodded. “Why’d you bounce between different relatives’ homes?”

“My mom struggled with the responsibility of raising kids.” To put it mildly. But then, her mother had been raising three children at the age of twenty-six, younger than Liv was now.

“Where is she now?”

“Who knows?” The words came out harsher than she intended, and she softened them with a smile. “We haven’t spoken in years.”

“And your dad?”

“Never met him.”

He fell silent, the laughter dissolving from his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Better off not knowing, considering the type of men my mom tended to go for.”

“Any siblings?”

“Younger brother, older sister.”

“Middle child—interesting. I wouldn’t have guessed.” He leaned back and studied her. “You struck me as an oldest child, a rule-follower, someone who looked out for the younger ones. Like you were forced to grow up too fast.”

Something about the way he said those words, or maybe the intensity in his gaze, made Liv feel as if he could see right through her. The feeling was disorienting, and she wanted the attention off her past. She nudged him with her shoulder. “I’d bet twenty bucks you’re a youngest child.”

“You are correct,” he said, eyes twinkling. “I have an older brother and sister. Are you close to your siblings?”

“My brother, yes. We talk almost every day—either on the phone or FaceTime, and we text constantly. My sister—” She cleared her throat. “She died when I was seventeen.”

She forced herself to take another sip of wine. This was way, way too much information for a first date.

But Jeremiah didn’t seem alarmed, or annoyed, or sorry for her. He just studied her face. “What was she like? Your sister?”

No one had asked her about Kristina in years. Sometimes Liv wondered if anyone but her or Oliver ever spoke her name at all. Gran had never liked talking about Kristina. *It won’t bring her back*, she’d always say. Liv didn’t know how to capture her sister in words, the fierce love Kristina had for her younger siblings—and her baby—but also the darkness she’d carried around with her near the end. Darkness Liv hadn’t fully recognized at the time.

“She always remembered our birthdays,” Liv said in a quiet voice. “Our mom wasn’t very reliable, but my sister

made sure we had something to open.”

It sounded trite, saying it out loud, and she didn't expect him to understand. But another memory blossomed and rushed out of her mouth before she could stop it.

“And when my brother came out, officially, at the age of fifteen, Kristina was great.”

Gran had barely acknowledged Oliver's announcement, saying only, *Don't expect me to stick a rainbow flag in my yard*. Liv had wanted to shake her, to make her see how nervous Oliver was, how much he needed reassurance that he was still loved and accepted. Kristina's response had been completely different.

“She had us both over, decorated her whole apartment in rainbow colors, and made us matching rainbow shirts and a giant rainbow cake. It was cheesy, way over the top, but my brother went home smiling that night.”

“She sounds wonderful. I'm sorry you lost her.”

His words sent a stab of guilt through her chest. If Liv had just called Kristina that night to warn her about Sam, instead of going back to sleep . . .

Shaking it off, she turned the conversation back to him. “Are you close to your brother and sister?”

“My sister, yes. But my brother and I had a falling out a few years ago. I did something stupid, and he can't get over it.”

He said the words flippantly, so she raised an eyebrow and grinned at him. “Let me guess. It was about a girl.”

She expected him to laugh, but he didn't. His eyes cut away from hers, and his face took on a darker expression.

“Something like that. We haven’t spoken in years. I know it’s not the same as you losing your sister—not at all—but sometimes it feels like it would be easier if . . .” He glanced up, cheeks flushing. “I don’t mean it like that. I just mean—”

“If he were dead, at least there’d be a good reason why he won’t talk to you,” she finished. She felt the same way about her mother, who’d been out of prison for seven years but had never once reached out to Liv. Good riddance, she’d tell herself. And yet she lived with the ache of abandonment every day.

Jeremiah nodded. “Exactly.”

After that, he steered the talk back to lighter subjects. Soon Liv was laughing as he told her about the time, growing up, when he’d caught a baby muskrat in a stream using a fishing net. The terrified muskrat had scampered up his arm and into his hair while he shrieked and ran in circles until his older sister finally extracted the rodent.

Liv relaxed, enjoying the conversation, the food, and the wine. Watching Jeremiah’s face in the fading light, the way his lashes cast shadows on his cheeks and his smile flashed when he laughed.

“So,” he said, after draining his glass. “Was this worth changing clothes for?”

“The view is stunning. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“My pleasure.” He reached over and took her wine glass, setting it down carefully on the cutting board near the remaining pieces of cheese. “Thank you for coming with me.”

He cupped her chin with one hand, stroking her cheek with his thumb as his eyes dropped to her lips. His touch sent shivers across her skin, surprising her. Liv wasn’t the type to

go all tingly and fluttery at the touch of a man. But he, too, seemed surprised by whatever it was between them. His breath caught, and soon they were both leaning toward each other.

Their lips met, in the awkward way of two people trying this for the first time. Liv opened her eyes slightly to see his face, blurry and close, his own eyes closed in concentration. Then his eyes opened and met hers, and she faltered. It was as if he saw straight through the pupils, beyond the surface and directly to her core.

Then his mouth curved into a smile, and the moment softened into something more playful. When their lips met again, it was a dance, a dare, a test. He tasted like wine and chocolate; his beard tickled, and Liv turned toward him, a sunflower following the sun. She soaked in the pleasure of being close to another human being, the way it grounded her in her body, in this moment, this place. Despite her solitary life, she always craved contact.

Soon they were horizontal on the blanket, touching and kissing, exploring and tasting, and she realized she wanted more. She wanted him, specifically, this man who laughed at her one moment, challenged her the next, and pierced her walls with a look. She wanted his soft mouth, his warm skin, his long, lean muscles under her hands. And she didn't want to stop.

When he finally pulled away, they were both breathless. He smiled. Not a teasing smile this time, but a contented one.

“That was nice,” he said.

“Very nice.”

“I guess my picnic did the job.”

A smile spread across her face. “I guess so.”

On the hike down, it was fully dark, but Jeremiah had a headlamp for each of them. They chatted and held hands, and all Liv could think of was getting him off the mountain, into her apartment, and finishing what they'd started.

But back in his Jeep, something shifted. His face settled into a strange, somber expression, his eyes fixed on the road in front of them. Her stomach clamped down. This was a bad sign. A guy who went silent and rigid after a make-out session was talking himself out of the situation.

When they reached her apartment complex, he parked the car and walked her to her apartment door, but stopped a few paces away.

“Thank you for dinner and the hike,” she said, her voice sounding too loud. “I had a great time.”

He glanced at her face, then at the ground. “Thanks for being a good sport about it. Not every girl would be okay with a hike and a picnic for a date, especially when she was expecting something else.”

Before she could change her mind, Liv blurted, “Do you want to come in?”

He rocked back on his heels, hands stuffed into his pockets. “I’m not sure that’s such a great idea.”

“Okay. That’s okay. It’s late.” She was babbling, embarrassment settling in her stomach like rotten milk. “I’m planning on a long run in the morning, so I should get some sleep.”

“Have a good night,” he said, already turning around.

Liv changed and climbed into bed, hating herself for being disappointed. It didn't matter. She was here to make sure Sam Howard went to prison, not to get involved with men.

A glance at her phone revealed an email that sent her heart racing.

Ms. Barrett,

I've forwarded your email to Kent Rasband. As you know, he was the original detective on your sister's case. He and I spoke on the phone today, and he will be reaching out to you shortly with further information.

Her heart thumped, reminding her: *this* was why she was here. She wished she could call Oliver and tell him, but it was nearly midnight, and two hours later for him. Even he should be asleep. Instead, she buried her face in her pillow and forced herself to close her eyes.

twenty

“The good thing about my job is that I can do it anywhere, anytime. The bad thing about my job is that I can do it anywhere, anytime. It’s relentless.”

—Molly Sullivan, on the podcast

Inside Her: The Secret Lives of Influencers

“I need to make a call for work,” Molly told the girls, who barely looked up. They were huddled together on the sofa, late-afternoon sun streaming through the curtains, staring at the iPad.

Molly didn’t like the girls to spend too much time on screens, but she did love to see them together. Ella’s arm around Chloe’s shoulders, Chloe’s golden curls mixing with Ella’s dark waves.

“And there’s a picture of me, and there’s another picture of me,” Chloe was saying.

“There’s a lot of pictures of you,” Ella said in a small voice.

“Because my mommy loves me *so* much.” Chloe bounced in her seat. “And see that one, too? That’s my mommy and me at the park.”

“I was there,” Ella said, sounding wistful. “I remember that.”

They were looking at her Instagram feed, Molly realized. Before this, she had never considered how it would seem to Ella: all the photos of Chloe, none of her.

Molly took a step forward, clearing her throat. “Hello, ladies. Sneaking the iPad again?” She raised an eyebrow and tried to look stern, but Chloe giggled. Molly settled on the couch next to Ella and nudged her shoulder. “Your dad asked me not to post any pictures of you. Otherwise, you’d be all over it, I promise.”

Ella nodded in her serious way. “Why doesn’t he want me to be on your Instagram? Does he think I’m not . . .” she hesitated, and Molly’s mind filled in the blank: *pretty enough?*

“He wants to protect you. You’re the most important person in the world to him.”

Ella looked up at her, a skeptical expression on her face.

“Oh, don’t look so shocked,” Molly said with a smile. “You’ll always be his number one girl, and I’m fine with that.”

Ella shrugged, looking down at Molly’s Instagram feed. All those smiling pictures of Clover looked back.

“What if we post a picture in my stories?” Molly suggested, and Ella’s eyes lit up. The picture would only be up for twenty-four hours. Scott would never even see it, but if it made Ella happy . . .

“Okay,” Ella said, nodding.

Molly took out her phone. “I read once that Oprah says ‘yeah’ when she gets her picture taken—gives a more natural smile. Ready girls? One, two, three . . .”

“Yeah!” they all said in unison, and Molly snapped the picture. Chloe’s eyes were sparkling as usual, but Ella . . . Ella’s face looked like someone had flicked on a stadium full of lights inside her. The biggest, brightest smile Molly had ever seen.

Which was what Molly reminded herself to focus on as she uploaded the picture, rather than the uneasy feeling in her stomach.

She started a movie for the girls so she could focus on work for a couple hours. First up, time to call Brookelle. A few weeks ago, she’d signed them up to beta-test a new app called Avachat. Molly didn’t quite understand it, but essentially the app created an avatar to appear on the phone screen in place of the user, speaking the words as you said them. *It’s FaceTime meets Snapchat meets virtual reality*, as Brookelle had put it.

Molly sank onto the chair in her office and looked at her phone, trying to focus on the conversation. Brookelle’s avatar—black hair in a bun, chunky purple glasses, and blood-red lips—was saying that Molly’s strategy of distancing herself from *An Invincible Summer* since moving to Durango was having a negative effect on her following.

“How negative?” Molly asked, putting a hand to her forehead. In the corner of her phone screen, her avatar—wavy blond hair, freckles—did the same.

“Four sponsors have pulled out this week.”

That was bad. “I just need a little time off, to adjust to my new life,” she said.

“A new life in which your five-year-old doesn’t wear a helmet when riding a bike?”

Molly blew out a breath, trying to cover her exasperation. She had posted *one* measly picture of Chloe sitting on the tag-along without a helmet—a *posed* picture!—and people had gone ballistic. During the actual bike ride with the family, Chloe had been wearing her helmet, but that’s not what the Almighty Mom-Shamers of the Internet had focused on.

“I’ll write an apology post. We’ll partner with a bike helmet company to give away a thousand helmets to needy children. It’ll be fine.”

“Love that idea. Making a mental note. All the shit about the helmet got you some new visitors, so let’s capitalize on that.” Brookelle’s avatar arched one bold eyebrow. “I’m more worried about the fact that you don’t share much about Scott or Ella—”

“I did just share a picture of Chloe and Ella in my story—”

“One story doesn’t matter,” Brookelle said, dismissing that with a flick of her hand. “You used to share everything about your life, and now you’re not. That’s hurting your brand.”

Molly hated thinking of it that way, as a brand. She preferred to think of her followers as a web of friendship, woven around the world. Her posts and videos are like silvery threads, tiny but strong, connecting them heart-to-heart.

But she wasn’t stupid enough to say that out loud. Brookelle would say she was being delusional, and Brookelle scared Molly a little bit.

“Your brand is you, the original Molly Sullivan, Queen of Realness, Everybody’s Best Friend,” Brookelle continued. “Enough influencers out there do home design or book reviews or whatever—your thing is being funny and relatable,

sharing everything about your life, and that's what they come for: the full Monty."

Molly wondered if Brookelle had any idea what *the full Monty* meant. Her assistant must have been a toddler when that movie came out. "I'm not going to talk about Scott or Ella, you know that."

"Then you're going to have to figure out another way to connect with your followers. To let them in."

"I'm still letting them in!" But she knew that wasn't quite true. She was keeping a huge chunk of her life off-limits, which felt disorienting but also . . . good.

"Think about ways to let them in *more*," Brookelle said, the avatar's black-lined eyes narrowing. "Post a picture of yourself in your bra and underwear, like those Dove Real Women ads, or whatever. Show off your stretch marks, say you've earned those tiger stripes, blah blah blah. People eat that shit up."

"I'm not posting pictures of my stretch marks!" Molly was all about being real, but come on. Even the gynecology visit video had stayed PG-rated.

"Well, figure something out. People are getting bored seeing videos of your house and backyard."

Molly said goodbye, wishing she could slam the phone into the receiver. She settled for punching the "End Chat" button *really* hard with her thumb and leaned back, staring up at the ceiling.

The problem was, she didn't have anyone to connect with IRL, and Molly needed people like she needed air. Scott's full-weekend river-rafting trips, all that time with the two girls but no adult to talk to, were leaving her batty.

Grabbing her phone, she sent a text message to a local mom she'd met at the pool:

Hi! Would you like to get the girls together today to play?

Within a few minutes, her phone buzzed.

Sorry, I have plans.

What about tomorrow?

Molly pressed send before she could think about how needy that sounded.

That doesn't work, either.

Disappointment curdled in her stomach. So pathetic—Molly Sullivan, Everybody's Best Friend, with not a single person to talk to. Female friendships were even more laden with pitfalls than dating, it seemed. Especially in a small town where everybody already knew everybody else.

Then she thought about Liv—she was new here, too. With a smile, Molly sent her a text:

Hey!! Want to hang out later??

But even after waiting for a full five minutes, there was no response.

That stung; Molly had invited Liv to a *party*! Introduced her to dozens of people! But Liv had probably found friends her own age to hang out with, not a boring thirtysomething mom. Molly leaned forward, fingers at her temples, and tried to think. Not about how lonely she was, but about her career. About where to go from here.

She still found a deep well of satisfaction from connecting with her followers and hopefully making their lives better. In the back of her mind, though, she could never forget that her livelihood depended on those likes and comments. Revealing more, just to gain followers or keep her sponsors happy, seemed cheap. If she could share something about Scott—his heartbreaking story about Ella’s mother, her death, and the adoption—that could be huge. She’d spin it as a redemption story, a young father doing the right thing for his daughter.

Her mind started churning out ideas for punchy one-liners: *Real family shows up, even when it’s difficult. Even when it’s messy. Showing up is showing love.* She could create videos about their home life, a whole series about blending a family, keeping a marriage strong while raising children, and getting through adversity together. People would eat it up.

But she couldn’t. Scott would never want that, and now that she knew the story of Ella’s mother’s death, she understood.

Her mind flipped to the two birth certificates, and on a whim, she opened Twitter—not her favorite social media platform, but one Scott never checked—and posted:

Looking for information on adoption. What happens to the original birth certificate when someone is adopted later? Does the adopted person get two birth certificates? TIA.

It only took a moment for her phone to start pinging with responses:

Rebekah Blair @BekahBlair

Replying to @InvincibleMollySullivan

I’m a social worker for an adoption agency. The original birth cert is sealed by the court. The adoptee is

given a new birth certificate.

Jamal Joseph Kendrick @jjkendrick

Replying to @BekahBlair

Agree. I was adopted at age 2 and I only have the birth certificate featuring my adoptive parents.

Kandace Nguyen @kandynguyen

Replying to @jjkendrick

They're not your ADOPTIVE parents, they're just your PARENTS. That's disrespectful to the people who raised you.

Jamal Joseph Kendrick @jjkendrick

Replying to @kandynguyen

STFU. You don't know anything about my relationship with my parents. I'm just answering the question for @InvincibleMollySullivan

Molly stood, not wanting to watch a Twitterstorm erupt on her feed. She walked into her bedroom, went to the top drawer of Scott's dresser, where his undershirts and boxers lay in neat stacks, and opened the lid of the cigar box. There it was, the key ring with the two keys. If the silver key fit Scott's safe, what was the gold key for?

Not that she was going to stop and think about that now. Back in the office, she fit the silver key in the safe's lock and opened it, holding her breath. As she looked inside, sifting through the contents with her hands, she realized the safe wasn't as full as it had been before. No leather book, no notebooks full of Scott's cramped, slanted writing. No delicate golden cross necklace.

Molly sat back on her heels, confused. The birth certificate for Ella Jane Wander was there, right on top.

But the birth certificate for Gabriela Jane Casillas was gone.

McSnark's STOP RUINING MY INTERNET

The official discussion forum for Molly Sullivan of An Invincible Summer

Meow17 posted:

Did anyone see that tweet about adoption WTF was that about??

IhateMollySullivan4Eva replied:

Well, I have a theory. She has a stepdaughter, right? I'm guessing Molly wants to adopt her.

Meow17 replied:

Yah seems like something she'd do. Shes so controlling she wants to take over everything but doesn't the stepdaughter already have a mom???

ColoradoGrrl replied:

The stepdaughter's mother died years ago.

IhateMollySullivan4Eva replied:

Oh @ColoradoGrrl I keep forgetting you live in their neighborhood! Spill some tea, girl. What do you know?

ColoradoGrrl replied:

Not a lot. The stepdaughter is really quiet and standoffish. Like, no social skills. Very strange. She literally lived with her dad in a van before he moved here a few years ago.

Meow17 replied:

That is seriously bizarre

FannyPackLuvr replied:

Tell me you guys saw the picture Molly posted of the stepdaughter on her stories yesterday! I mean, it had to be the stepdaughter, right? It was Clover and a brown-haired girl and the caption said “Love my two girls!”
Gag.

DM from user012367 to FannyPackLuvr:

Did u get a screenshot of the pic of Molly’s stepdaghter if so can u send it 2 me

FannyPackLuvr replied:

I totally did! I’ll send it one sec

User012367 replied:

Thx

twenty-one

When life takes an unexpected turn, reevaluate.
You might find a path you never considered
before. It might even be a better path—but you'll
only know if you take it.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv's phone woke her from sleep. She grabbed it from her nightstand and stared at it, blinking her gritty eyes. A Pittsburgh area code.

“Olivia Barrett?” The voice—a man's, deep and a little gruff, seemed familiar, but Liv couldn't place it. “This is Kent Rasband. I was the detective on your sister's case nine years ago.”

After weeks of waiting, she finally had him on the phone. Clearing her throat, she sat up and tried to sound alert. “Detective, thank you for calling.”

“Sorry it took a while to track me down. A couple years back I moved to Philadelphia and joined the force there.” He still sounded like Pittsburgh, though, and his accent brought back memories. She could see him in her mind's eye—Mr. Clean in a dark suit.

“Did you see the picture I sent that other detective?” Liv asked, jumping right in. “I don’t remember his name.”

“Jim Granzinelli, and yes, I did see it. He filled me in on the whole thing—that you think you found Sam Howard. He’s married to some kind of Instagram lady?”

She nodded, encouraged. “Did he tell you that I found that picture in Sam Howard’s house? And that I took the original photograph?”

“Yes—”

“So I’ve found him.” Liv couldn’t keep from blurting it out. “What do we do now?”

He paused for a long moment. “Ms. Barrett. I’m not sure you have all the information about your sister’s case.”

The grave tone in his voice stopped her. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry Detective Granzinelli didn’t look in the file for you, because that coulda saved you a whole lot of trouble. But the bottom line is this: Sam Howard didn’t kill your sister.”

His words felt like bricks, landing on her. “I don’t understand.”

Detective Rasband sighed. “I’m sorry to be the one to explain all of this to you. I assumed your grandmother told you, but I remember she sent you to stay with your aunt and uncle. She never talked about it when you came back?”

“No,” Liv said, anger simmering. Gran had left Liv and Ollie to deal with the tragedy on their own. Maybe because she was grieving, or to protect them, but Liv had felt abandoned.

“Well, I’m sure she thought that was for the best. You’d been pretty traumatized already. When I took your statement—that was rough on you. You remember?”

She did. And just like that, she was back on the night of her sister’s death, watching Sam Howard storm away across the lawn. How could it have been anyone but him?

“Tell me what happened to my sister,” she managed to say. “Please.”

“Of course.” His voice was gentle. “Kristina was found in her apartment by a neighbor, deceased. That neighbor reported hearing a commotion from the apartment throughout the night, including a gunshot, but unfortunately that neighbor had her own issues with the law, so she didn’t call right away. Eventually, her conscience got the better of her and she went to Kristina’s apartment. The door was ajar, and that’s when she found your sister and called 911.”

While that had been happening, Liv had been sleeping in her top bunk at Gran’s house, blissfully unaware.

The detective continued. “Kristina had been badly beaten. Lots of trauma. The medical examiner determined the cause of death was her head striking the edge of the coffee table at high velocity. Most likely, she was pushed.”

Liv closed her eyes, fighting a rush of nausea. She remembered that coffee table—it had a marble top. Gran used to have it in her front room. Kristina had loved that table, had asked Gran for it.

“But—” She cleared her throat. “But how do you know it wasn’t Sam?”

“He was our prime suspect at first. He and Kristina had been arguing over custody of Gabriela, and your grandmother

said Sam knocked on her door around midnight, wanting Kristina's new address."

"Right, I know," Liv said.

"But then we learned that around one o'clock that night, Sam arrived at his girlfriend's place with Gabriela."

Liv was stunned into silence. "His *girlfriend's* place?"

"Yeah, that's right. Sam told her that when he got to Kristina's apartment, she was passed out on the couch, so he took Gabriela. He stayed at the girlfriend's place overnight and left in the morning. She didn't hear from him after that—she assumed he was busy with the baby—but then she saw his picture on the news a couple days later. That's when she called us."

Liv shook her head. "Even if that's true, Sam could've snuck out in the middle of the night and gone back to Kristina's apartment. He still could have killed her."

"Kristina's death happened between two and four a.m., per the medical examiner," Rasband said, his voice patient. "Sam was at the girlfriend's place from one o'clock until around seven. They were up most of the night with Gabriela; she was fussy."

"You're telling me a *girlfriend* is a reliable alibi?" Liv didn't even try to keep the disbelief out of her voice.

"I hear you, but a neighbor of the girlfriend corroborated the story. He worked nights from home doing customer service for an airline. Said he saw Sam's truck parked outside all night."

Liv sat back, her mind spinning. If Sam didn't kill Kristina—which she still had trouble believing—why did he take off with Gabriela? With Kristina dead, he would have been given

custody. There was no need for him to move across the country and take on a new identity.

“So who did it?” she demanded, refocusing. “If it wasn’t Sam, then who?”

“Kristina’s neighbors reported seeing sketchy characters going in and out of her apartment in the weeks before her murder. Multiple prescription drugs were found in Kristina’s apartment, and in her system, too. Oxycontin, Ativan.”

Liv’s eyes filled with angry tears. She hated that this was how the cops had seen Kristina: an addict, a neglectful mother. Yes, Kristina had struggled in the months prior to her murder—exhausted, overwhelmed, and grieving her father. But she loved her daughter.

“But Kristina didn’t overdose.” Liv could hear how she sounded: desperate. “You just said she was beaten. She was shoved to the ground and hit her head and died.”

Rasband paused. “Listen, I knew Kristina since she was a kid. Such a bright, happy little thing. But after Joe was killed, she had a hard time. You remember that, right? I think she was looking for something to take the pain away and fell in with the wrong crowd. In that situation, even a good person can make poor decisions.”

He was trying to be kind, Liv could tell, but in that moment she wanted answers. Kindness might make her fall apart. Blinking back tears, she tried to hold onto the anger that had been her companion for so many years. “That still doesn’t explain who killed my sister.”

“I know,” he said, sighing. “I can’t answer that for you. Look, Olivia, I’m sorry, but she was involved with several known drug dealers. One in particular that we’d been tracking

for a while, a guy named McKinley. There was likely an altercation, which led to her death. I know that's not very satisfying. The one bright spot in all of this is that Gabriela wasn't in the apartment when it happened."

Liv's eyes filled with tears, and she focused on the blank wall in her bedroom. There was a hairline crack in the paint, so thin she'd never noticed it before. But now it was all she could see.

"And no one cared that Sam had taken Gabriela?" she said, her throat raw. "You just let him get away with it?"

"Whoa there," Rasband said. "Of course we cared. That was Joe's granddaughter. But we didn't know for a while that Sam had disappeared. We were focused on the murder investigation. A couple days passed before it was clear he had taken the baby, and the FBI managed that case. Parental abductions are difficult, you know. There are a lot of them. Resources are stretched thin."

Rasband exhaled, and Liv imagined him rubbing a hand over his bald head. "Although I do wish we could have recovered the money from the charity."

"Charity?" This meant nothing to Liv.

"Raised money for kids with leukemia. The same night Kristina was killed, someone stole nearly two hundred thousand dollars in cash from their office in Pittsburgh. They'd just had a swanky fundraiser, a casino night with a cash bar, auction, the works, but it was a Saturday night, so they put the money in the safe at their office. By Monday morning, it was gone."

"You think Kristina's killer stole it?" Liv asked, confused.

“No, sorry, I’m not making sense. Sam Howard worked for the nonprofit. He had access to the safe, knew the code to the security system. Seems out of character—kid who graduated summa cum laude from Ohio State, got into law school at NYU—but we’re pretty sure he took the money. Probably why he ran off.”

Liv hadn’t known that about Sam, but even if he was the thief, what would she do about it? Her entire perspective on him—on everything, her life for the past nine years—had shifted so radically in just a few minutes that she felt off balance.

“You can request a copy of the case file, if you’d like,” Rasband continued. “I let Granzinelli know you might want to see it for yourself.”

Liv nodded. Oliver would probably like to see it, as well. “Thank you,” she said.

They ended the call, and she hugged her knees to her chest, so stunned she could barely breathe. Her body felt weak, as if her anger toward Sam Howard had been the only thing keeping her intact. Without it, she wasn’t sure how she would stay upright.

And not just anger toward Sam, she realized. Years of blaming herself for not warning her sister that Sam was on his way. So many nights she’d lain awake and replayed her decision to go back to sleep. So many nights spent drowning in guilt.

If it hadn’t been Sam’s fault, that meant it hadn’t been *her* fault, either. Her vision blurred with tears. She ought to talk to Ollie about all this, but she would do that later. Right now, she knew only one way to process her feelings.

She needed to run.

It took five miles of near sprinting before Liv was able to settle into an easier stride. She'd let her tears flow freely until they seemed to dry up. The morning sun slanted between the homes in the quiet neighborhood as she turned, heading toward the hills.

Everything had changed. Beyond the obvious—that Sam Howard, now Scott Wander, wasn't a murderer—he had quite possibly saved Gabriela's life. If he hadn't been there that night, if he hadn't taken his daughter away, who knows what could have happened to her.

And what about Gran? Her refusal to communicate had left Liv and Oliver—two scared, grieving teenagers—to concoct their own story. But Liv's anger toward her grandmother had begun to slip away, too. Gran had done her best. Her daughter had been in prison, her granddaughter brutally murdered, her great-granddaughter missing. Yet she'd still managed to put one foot in front of the other, taking care of Liv and Oliver's physical needs, if not their emotional ones.

Now that Liv knew the truth, what should she do? She'd spent the past nine years hating Sam Howard, desperate to find Gabriela. Without that . . . she wasn't sure who she *was* anymore.

Rounding a corner, she headed onto a trail, slowing her speed to navigate loose rocks. The one thing she still felt certain of was this: she wanted Gabriela in her life.

If she walked up to Sam Howard—to Scott Wander—and introduced herself, what would he do? He'd been on the run for nine years. He might take off again, or order Liv to stay

away from them. Liv supposed that she could put up some kind of legal fight for Gabriela; as far as she knew, Sam was not on Gabriela's birth certificate. Kristina had refused, even when Sam came to the hospital. At the time, Liv had thought her sister was being brave and independent; now, a small part of her wondered if Kristina had been too stubborn.

Still, Sam had run off with Gabriela and stolen a large sum of money from a charity. She could turn him in for that. She could hire an attorney, make a case for custody. But how would that help Gabriela, to be torn away from her only surviving parent? Liv knew the pain of growing up without a stable home and family. The last thing she wanted was for her niece to experience that.

And yet, the thought of leaving Gabriela, of never seeing her again, made Liv ache with longing. At the very least, she needed to make sure that Gabriela was happy and cared for.

Slowing her pace, Liv took her phone out of her armband and pulled up the text messages from Molly Sullivan. Liv hadn't responded to any of them so far. The latest text had come in last night, and Liv had ignored it, too. Now she stared at the words, realizing what they meant. The possibility they held.

Going to the farmer's market tomorrow with the girls. Want to join us?

Liv didn't allow herself to think, to consider the consequences, as she typed a reply and pressed send.

Sure. What time?

Awesome!!! Eleven o'clock?

After a few back-and-forth messages to figure out a meeting spot, it was arranged. Liv tucked her phone in her armband, noticing that her hands were shaking. Oliver would probably think it was reckless to meet up with Molly again. But once she told him everything she'd learned from Rasband, he would understand. Now that Liv had met Ella, the last remaining piece of Kristina, she couldn't walk away. She needed to see her.

Just one more time, she promised herself. *That's all.*

With that newfound resolution, she set out again on her run. But as she came up the sidewalk toward her door, she stopped. Someone was sitting on her front step. Someone with messy brown hair, wearing running clothes and running shoes, turning to look at her with smiling eyes.

“What are you doing here?” she said, hands on hips. The warm morning breeze blew through her clothes, making her skin prickle into goosebumps.

“Waiting for you.” Jeremiah just smiled, as if he hadn't stood on her doorstep last night, uncomfortable and distant after an epic make-out session on a mountaintop.

She dropped her hands. “I'm really confused.”

The understatement of the century.

“Why?” he said.

“I got the impression you didn't want to spend any more time with me after last night.”

“Well, that's . . .” He hesitated, the laughter fading from his eyes, leaving a different expression behind—open and earnest. “That's because I think I could really like you.”

“You make that sound like a bad thing.”

“It is. Because of why you’re here.”

She stiffened, thinking about Scott and Ella, the questions buzzing through her head. Then realized he wasn’t referring to any of that.

“Because I’m just here temporarily,” she said.

He nodded, then stood. “I don’t want to like someone who’s leaving in six weeks.”

Most guys would be fine with it—most guys she had dated in the past few years *had* been fine with it. Not just fine, but relieved. No ties, no commitment. She was usually fine with it, too.

“Okay, I get it.” She shrugged, trying for nonchalant. “But what I don’t get is why you’re here, now.”

“I wanted to see you again. Does it have to be any more complicated?” He tilted his head. “Although it looks like you’ve already finished your morning jog. Not feeling up for a real run, I suppose?”

The laugh lines around his eyes warmed her like a fireside on a cold night. But behind the smile was a challenge. He was daring her to see what could happen between them, if only for six weeks.

She stepped toward him, her body tingling at his nearness, and tipped her chin up to look him in the eyes. “I could go another ten miles. See if you can keep up.”

twenty-two

I've been following your wife for three days and she hasn't noticed.

Now that I'm here, I can understand why you picked Durango. It's off the beaten path, but not so small that everyone is in each other's business. Plus, all the tourists make it easy to blend in.

I've learned something by watching her these past few days: you're not with your wife very much, are you? You leave her alone a lot.

That's interesting, Sam. Maybe not so smart. But interesting.

By the way, you should tell your wife to stop posting about every single place she goes. Or to post about it after the fact, not in real time. Made it easy to find her here at the farmer's market.

I'm guessing she's used to being watched, because she doesn't seem to have noticed me. It's crowded, sure, but I've been trailing her for the past thirty minutes. Maybe she's just oblivious. She has the girls with her—your daughter and your stepdaughter—and they're having such a lovely time, Sam, smiling and chatting with all the different vendors. Your wife is snapping pictures, the girls are tasting samples, they're

picking out food to take home. So far your wife has purchased heirloom tomatoes, local honey, and a dozen tamales.

Now it looks like she's meeting up with a friend, a younger woman with short, dark hair.

Wait a second. That woman . . .

It couldn't be, could it?

Well, damn. Isn't that convenient for me.

twenty-three

It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are

—E.E. Cummings Quote shared on
@InvincibleMollySullivan

Molly lay awake, staring at the green digital numbers on Scott's alarm clock: 11:48 p.m.

The air conditioner had stopped working earlier that day, and the repair technician couldn't come out until Monday. She had the windows open, the ceiling fan at full-speed, and still she was sweating. Bitsy curled against her thighs, relishing this opportunity to be in her rightful place while Scott was away. Hoopi lay on his bed on the floor, sending reproachful looks up at Bitsy for breaking the rules.

Molly had put in a few hours of work after the girls went to bed—editing a video about the farmer's market, capturing the small-town summer aesthetic, adding the perfect music, artfully cropping the images so Ella's face was never fully shown. She didn't include any video of Liv, but it had been wonderful to have her there. Both the girls got along with her, but especially Ella—probably because they had similar personalities, quiet and self-contained. Molly had felt a few small twinges of jealousy, watching how easily Ella warmed to

Liv, but mostly she'd been happy to have another adult around to talk to. They'd chatted about Liv's work as a physical therapist, their shared love of Taylor Swift, and made plans to get together again.

But now that the video was edited and her computer set aside, Molly couldn't relax. Her heart beat too quickly for sleep, her limbs itchy with restlessness. She'd felt that way all day, this gnawing unease.

She didn't want to doubt her husband. Even after her Twitter question-and-answer session about birth certificates and adoption, she might have believed his story. Except the birth certificate was now gone. If he had nothing to hide, why would he have taken it out of the safe?

With a huff, she sat up in bed again. Hoopi raised his massive black-and-tan head, ears pricked upward, eyes focused on her. Bitsy rolled on her side and went back to sleep. Molly pulled her laptop from her nightstand and onto her lap.

How to verify a birth certificate.

She typed the words into the search bar, then scrolled through the websites, most of them for various agencies that could help with obtaining a copy of a birth certificate.

She narrowed her search. *How to verify a birth certificate in Ohio.*

This led her to the Ohio Department of Health. She scoured the website for information on adoption records, which confirmed what her Twitter friends had told her. An amended birth certificate was issued when a child was adopted, with the adoptive parents' names replacing those of the birth parents. The original birth certificate was then sealed

by the court, and not available to either the adoptive parents or the adoptee.

If Scott had adopted Ella, he shouldn't have the original birth certificate. That wasn't the only mistake, though—there were different birth dates on each certificate. Molly continued reading. The only way to verify adoption records, she saw, was to appear in person at the office of Vital Records. She couldn't do that. But she could request a certified copy of the new, post-adoption birth certificate.

Next to her, Hoopi snapped to attention. His ears pointed up, his eyes focused toward the open bedroom window.

“What's wrong, Hoop?” Molly murmured, lifting her hands from the keyboard and listening. She heard nothing but the rhythmic song of the crickets and the occasional traffic noise drifting in with the breeze. “It's okay,” she said.

But Hoopi remained rigid, watchful.

Molly had been intimidated by Hoopi at first, when she and Scott started dating. Now, with Scott out of town so much, the big German Shepherd was nice to have around. She relaxed her shoulders and turned back to the computer. She could order a copy of Ella's birth certificate—the new one—and verify it. Without thinking, she entered the information:

Full name.

Date of birth.

City and state of birth.

She wished she'd thought to snap a picture of the birth certificates with her phone, because she wasn't quite sure about the city. Hopefully the office could still locate Ella's record.

After entering her payment information, she received a confirmation email saying the requested birth certificate would arrive in two weeks. But it would be even more helpful, she thought, if she could verify the original birth certificate, the one for Gabriela Jane Casillas.

She navigated back to the form, entering in the information for Gabriela, recalling her mother's name, Kristina Casillas, and the birthday, three days earlier. This one should be sealed, so instead of a copy of the birth certificate, she'd be mailed a letter stating as much. Either way, she'd be able to verify Scott's story. Then she could really stop worrying.

Hoopi leapt to his feet, barking as he raced to the open window. Molly froze, her heart lodging in her throat. The dog went silent, his massive paws on the windowsill as he stared into the dark backyard. From deep within his throat, a warning growl echoed. Then he was barking again, so loud and fierce Molly was terrified to go near him.

“Hoopi!” she said in a harsh whisper. “Stop it!”

But he didn't stop, and she forced herself out of bed and over to the window. She had only heard Hoopi bark once before, when she was on a walk with Scott in the woods. A jogger had come up behind them, and Hoopi had let out a warning growl and two quick barks. Nothing like the all-out ferocity she saw now.

When she reached the dog, he settled, and she grabbed his collar and tugged him away from the window. She peered outside, heart thumping against her chest, but couldn't see a thing. Probably a squirrel. Still, she closed the window, listening for the click that meant it was locked.

She climbed back in bed, trembling. Bitsy raised her sleepy head, just now noticing what was going on. “Well,”

Molly said in a shaky voice, “thanks for paying attention, you silly dog.”

She lay down, and Bitsy curled up against her. Molly wrapped her arms around her, remembering all those lonely nights in Denver before she met Scott. This big, dopey mutt had gotten her through them.

Hoopi stayed on the floor, head resting on his paws, his eyes wide in the darkness.

twenty-four

The best thing about social media is connecting with other people and forging genuine friendships. Invincibles, we must always remember that IRL relationships take precedence over online ones.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv told Oliver everything about her call with Detective Rasband. He'd gone through the same emotions she had: shock, confusion, anger at Gran for not telling them the truth, and finally, acceptance. She'd asked the Pittsburgh PD to email her a copy of the case file, and they'd gone through it together on FaceTime. Reading the details of their sister's death, the medical examiner's report, seeing the scanned images of her body, had been emotional for both of them. But it was also cathartic, the closure they'd never gotten.

As the detective mentioned, Kristina had been involved with a local drug ring. The leader was a man named Dale McKinley, and either he or someone who worked for him had likely been the one to hurt Kristina that night. The police had tried to find McKinley, but he covered his tracks well. Their sister's killer was walking around free and would never be held accountable, but it seemed clear that the police had done everything they could.

After that, Oliver understood why Liv had shifted her focus, and why she no longer wanted Sam Howard to rot in prison.

But he didn't understand what she was doing now. And he definitely didn't approve.

Over the past week, she'd gotten together with Molly and the girls twice—first at the farmer's market, and then a picnic near the river. Each time, Liv felt herself growing more attached to being around her niece. Gabriela. *Ella*, Liv had to keep reminding herself.

Liv couldn't get enough.

Which was why she was, once again, with Molly and the girls, this time in Silverton, an old mining town turned tourist destination north of Durango. They'd ridden the famous coal-powered train together, soaking in the view as they chug-chug-chugged from the red-tinged hills of Durango to the alpine peaks of Silverton. Once they arrived, Molly snapped a few pictures that Liv expected she'd see on the 'gram in the next couple days.

After that, Molly pocketed her phone. They strolled down Silverton's Main Street with the girls, passing pastel false-front buildings and Old West-style shops and restaurants. Thanks to the 9,000-foot altitude, the air felt cooler, almost crisp—a welcome respite from the heat of Durango.

Getting to know Molly had been a surprise for Liv. She'd expected Molly to be constantly on her phone, taking pictures or checking her social media alerts, but she was present and down-to-earth. And so damn *nice*. So genuine and friendly, like she truly wanted to get to know Liv. Weren't influencers supposed to be superficial and fake?

The only fakeness in their relationship was on Liv's end, which made her feel . . . well, not quite guilty, but certainly aware of her own duplicity. The fact that she followed Molly online had created an odd intimacy between them, like Liv knew Molly better than she knew most people in real life. This made it easy to guide their conversation to topics she knew Molly would be interested in: Taylor Swift, obviously, but also home renovations, the girls' activities, and the upcoming school year. To keep the focus off herself and on Molly.

The best part of spending time with Molly's family was, of course, seeing Ella. Liv wished she could have one-on-one time with her niece, but Chloe was always there, chattering away.

"I have a squirrel friend at home," Chloe was saying to Liv as they walked down the street together. Her small, perpetually sticky hand was clamped tightly around Liv's. "He lives in our backyard, and he likes me."

Ella, on the other side of Liv, chimed in. "He's eating all the birdseed from our next-door neighbor's bird feeder, and Mr. Robison is very upset."

Such a simple moment, a simple conversation, but a balloon seemed to be expanding inside Liv's chest. Letting go of years of anger and guilt had given her space to fill herself up with other emotions. Contentment, for now. Maybe, someday, happiness. Still, there would always be a shadow, not just because she missed her sister, but because she'd missed the past nine years of her niece's life. She didn't think she'd be able to forgive Scott Wander for that.

After a while the girls ran off down Main Street and Liv and Molly walked together.

“Is Ella’s mother in her life at all?” Liv asked, hoping she didn’t sound too forward. But she wanted to know what, if anything, Scott had told his wife about his past.

“No,” Molly said, sounding surprised. “She passed away when Ella was a baby. It was really hard on Scott.”

Probably less due to real grief and more because he had lied about pretty much everything, Liv thought.

“Why did he end up here? Does he have family in town?” Liv asked. She assumed he didn’t, but she wanted to know what Molly knew.

Molly shook her head.

“And Ella’s mother’s family? Where are they?”

Molly pushed her pink sunglasses up on her head and gave Liv a quizzical look. Liv realized she had gone too far. “I’m just so sorry about Ella’s mother,” she said, smiling and hoping she looked nonthreatening. “Ella seems like such a sweet girl.”

Scott may not have been a murderer, but he’d still stolen Gabriela from the family that loved her. Liv should have spent countless summer afternoons like this, watching her grow up.

Molly nodded, her face turning thoughtful. “Yeah, she is. She has trouble making friends, though. Trouble trusting people—me in particular.” She laughed self-deprecatingly. “I want her to like me. Pathetic, right?”

“It’s not pathetic,” Liv said. She understood the impulse. She wanted Ella to like her, too. But Molly’s comment about Ella’s difficulty with people worried her. How much of that was Ella’s nature, and how much a result of her unstable childhood?

“Excuse me?” The voice came from behind Liv, and she turned.

Two women, one redhead and one brunette, stood holding their phones and grinning at Molly like they were meeting a movie star on Hollywood Boulevard. They were decked out in head-to-toe athleisure—leggings and strappy tank tops—and pushed expensive strollers.

“You’re Molly Sullivan, right?” the redhead said.

“I sure am!” Molly said, her one-sided dimple winking as she grinned.

“I am *such* a big fan,” the redhead gushed. “I’ve been following you since before Clover could even walk.”

The brunette nodded eagerly. “Me too!”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Molly said. She gave them each a hug. “I’m so glad to meet you both. Tell me your names and a little about yourselves.”

Molly seemed in her element, and Liv turned away, watching Ella and Chloe up ahead. They’d stopped at a candy shop and were staring inside, faces pressed against the glass.

Then, slowly, Liv realized the conversation behind her had shifted.

“I mean, I’m a huge fan,” one woman was saying to Molly, “but I have to say that the content seems . . .”

“Different,” the other woman supplied. The brunette, Liv saw as she turned. “Not necessarily bad . . .”

“But kind of not as good,” the redhead finished, her voice taking on an edge that made Liv’s stomach tighten.

Molly's smile seemed frozen on her face. "I appreciate the feedback, but—"

"I don't want to be rude," the brunette cut in, "but you used to be funnier. Nicole, you know what I mean, right?"

The redhead nodded. "It was better when you were single, you know? Less complicated and stuff."

Liv's muscles tightened with irritation. If these women were getting on her nerves, she could only imagine how Molly was feeling. Although it was obvious Molly felt like she needed to be *nice* to them.

"I know change can be difficult," Molly said. Her dimple had disappeared. "But I do hope that—"

"It feels like a bait-and-switch," said the redhead, one hand on her hip. "Like, this isn't what we expect from the invincible Molly Sullivan, right?"

"Right," the brunette said, pushing her stroller back and forth to calm her baby. "So maybe you could—"

"Excuse me," Liv blurted without thinking. "How much do you pay to access Molly's social media?"

The brunette's mouth hung open for a second before she recovered. "I mean, I don't *pay* anything. It's on the internet. But—"

"Oh, so it's free," Liv said, struggling to keep her voice calm. Her blood raced furiously. She hated confrontation, but she hated this ambush even more. "Molly creates content that you get to read and view *for free*, and you think you should be able to tell her what to do?"

Nicole huffed. "We're sharing our opinion. We're fans; we're trying to help."

Liv could feel Molly's eyes on her, but she didn't dare turn her head. Maybe she should have kept quiet, but she had always been like this—shy and reserved on the outside; fiercely indignant when she saw someone being mistreated. The hidden claws came out, as Oliver said.

“I don't know about you,” Liv continued, “but I think the only person who can tell someone how to do their job is someone who pays them to do it. So if you're not paying—then you don't get a vote.”

The two women glanced at each other, shifting their weight in their pristine Nikes. Liv would bet neither of them had worked up a sweat on a real run in their lives.

“Well,” said the redhead, rolling her eyes. “So sorry for caring.”

The brunette sniffed. “Seriously.”

They turned, pushing their strollers down the walkway, ponytails swinging as they bent their heads toward each other, their furious whispers echoing through the summer air.

Liv turned to face Molly, inwardly cringing. “I'm sorry—”

“That. Was. Badass!” Molly's face broke into a smile—a real one, this time. “I wish I'd captured *that* on camera.”

Liv's shoulders dropped in relief. “Does that happen a lot?”

Molly shrugged. “Sometimes. Most fans are supportive, but some have strong opinions about what I do. I want to make them happy, of course, but . . .”

“You have to be true to yourself,” Liv said, echoing Molly's unofficial mantra. It wasn't something she'd usually

say, so it made her feel uneasy, like she was absorbing Molly's personality.

"Exactly. I would never dare say what you just said, but that's what I'm always thinking. Just because I share a big chunk of my life online doesn't mean my followers own me." Her face turned thoughtful. "They're right, though. People are losing interest, and I'm not sure what to do about it."

"What do you mean, losing interest?"

"My life's different now. Scott doesn't want to be online, and my followers can tell I'm holding back."

Liv stiffened at the reference to Scott, but she forced herself to focus on the conversation. "Still, you're not obligated to produce content for their enjoyment."

"It's how I make my living," Molly said with another quick smile. "It's a balancing act, figuring out how to keep everybody engaged, but also expressing my own voice."

It sounded excruciating to Liv. The thought of putting her life online made her shudder, but even worse was the thought of strangers judging and commenting on all her choices.

The train blew its whistle, which meant it was time to load up and head down the mountain to Durango. Molly called to the girls, and they boarded.

Once they were back in town, Chloe threw her arms around Liv in an exuberant hug. That wasn't unusual—Chloe was always physically affectionate. But when she detached herself, Liv was shocked when Ella leaned in for a careful hug, too.

Liv's breath caught. She closed her eyes, soaking up the feeling of her niece's slim arms around her. She ran her hands along Ella's dark hair, breathed in her warm sugar scent. When

Ella stepped away, Liv stuffed her hands in her pocket and blinked away tears, grateful that her sunglasses hid her eyes.

As she drove away, Liv tried not to think about the fact that her time in Durango was running out. Her temporary position would end when the person she was covering returned from maternity leave at the end of the summer. She had to figure out how to keep Ella in her life, but the situation was complicated—partly because Liv had started to *like* Molly, almost against her will.

Not to mention: Liv knew secrets about Molly's husband that Molly maybe deserved to know. But how would that affect Ella? She seemed to have a good life—a mom and dad, a little sister, a home, and a neighborhood. Perhaps the best thing was to remain silent. Not rock the boat. Liv could continue to be friends with Molly; she wasn't hurting anyone.

Liv told herself this. She repeated it several times, in fact.

She almost believed it.

twenty-five

Women need other women. To laugh with, to cry with, to tell us when our skirt is see-through, to binge-watch *Outlander* and drink wine and eat too many peanut M&Ms. We need women who show up in our lives, who are present through the best and the worst.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

For the next few days, Molly successfully put the birth certificates out of her mind. She focused on her family, on Chloe and Ella, and on Scott when he was home. Work somehow fit in around that, though it wasn't going well. Another sponsor pulled out, citing the waning engagement on Molly's account. She wanted to blame the ever-changing algorithm on the decreased reach of her posts, but her comments were down, too, indicating that her followers were losing interest.

Summer wasn't even halfway over, and she was already feeling the doldrums. While her Instagram story showed trips to the pool and park and zoo, it didn't show all the dead time in between. The long, hot afternoons. The bickering between the girls. The forty-seventh time she'd restaked the damn slip-n-slide. Sometimes she wondered how she was going to

survive until the girls started school and their beautiful teachers took them away.

Thank heavens for Liv. Molly was ever so grateful to have another adult to hang out with when Scott was gone. Because they were both new in town, it was the perfect opportunity to explore the area together. Liv was quiet and introspective, qualities Molly admired because she'd always been the exact opposite. Plus, she got along great with the girls, especially Ella, who was slowly coming out of her shell.

Today they were lounging at the neighborhood pool together, drinking Diet Coke while watching the girls swim. Liv looked tiny and surprisingly curvy in a black bikini and sunglasses, making Molly feel matronly in her floral one-piece. But she'd recently written a call-to-action Instagram post entitled *Dare to Show Up (In a Swimsuit)* so she felt obligated to follow her own advice, despite cellulite and spider veins.

"How's your job?" she asked Liv. She needed someone else to talk to her, about anything. She was tired of listening to her own thoughts. "Is Mr. DeLuigi still trying to look down your shirt whenever you work with him?"

She expected Liv to laugh; she just shook her head. Liv was always reserved, but something in her expression seemed off, like she was miles away.

"Is everything okay?" Molly asked.

"I'm fine."

She didn't seem fine, though. "You sure?"

Liv hesitated, then shrugged. "Um, I'm having a little . . . guy trouble."

Molly set her Diet Coke down and leaned in, intrigued. “You didn’t tell me there was a guy! What’s going on?”

Liv’s porcelain-white cheeks turned pink. “He asked me out a few weeks ago and I thought we had a good time, but the date didn’t end well. I figured he didn’t like me. Then he showed up at my apartment the next morning, wanting to go on a run with me.”

“You run? You didn’t tell me that, either.” Molly realized how little Liv shared about herself, while Molly felt like she’d blabbed about everything under the sun to Liv.

“That’s how we met. Well, I met him at a coffee shop first, but a few days later we saw each other out on a run.”

“Very cute.” Cute for Liv, that is. Not for Molly, who would only run if a bear were chasing her. “What’s the problem?”

“He hasn’t asked me out again, but almost every morning he meets me for a run.” She paused, sneaking one of her half-glances at Molly before her eyes darted away. *Skittish*, Molly’s dad would have called her. “But nothing else. Which is fine—it’s fine. I’m probably making a big deal out of nothing.”

“It’s not nothing if it matters to you,” Molly said, filing away that catchphrase for a later live video.

Liv lifted her eyes to meet Molly’s, and Molly could see through the dark glasses to her eyes, so big and round and full of sad, sad hope that it made Molly’s own heart feel swollen.

“It’s not nothing to me,” Liv said in a quiet voice.

And then she glanced away, returning to her carefully constructed expression, which seemed to tell the entire world to back off.

“Well, Liv, here’s the thing.” Molly wondered how to say it delicately. How do you tell a brand-new friend that her face, her demeanor, tells people to stay away? “You’re pretty, and you’re kind, and you’re smart.”

Liv’s eyebrows shot up. “But . . . ?”

“You may—occasionally—give people the impression that you don’t want them to get close to you.”

Liv snorted. “I know. Ollie tells me that all the time.”

“Ollie?”

“My brother.”

Molly was about to ask Liv about him when she got the strange feeling that she was being watched. Sitting up, she glanced behind her at the crowd of moms and kids on the lawn. None of them seemed to be paying attention to her. Relax, she told herself. Her confrontation with those “fans” in Silverton had left her distrustful.

“Listen, friend,” she said, refocusing on Liv. “If this guy shows up at your place to see you almost every morning, he likes you. He’s probably just waiting for some encouragement.”

“Some encouragement,” Liv repeated.

“Yeah.” Molly waved at Chloe, who was flopping like a mermaid in the shallow water a few yards away. “What’s he like, anyway?”

Liv’s cheeks tinged pink again. “He teases me constantly. When he laughs, he gets these little crinkly lines around his eyes. They’re dark brown—his eyes—so dark it’s hard to see his pupils. And he has a beard, a kind of barely-there reddish beard, but it works.”

“Nice,” Molly murmured. “What else do you know about him?”

“He hikes and bikes and rock climbs and skis.”

“You’ve just described half the male population in Durango.”

“And he’s an accountant.”

Molly was about to respond when the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. That feeling of being watched. Slowly, she glanced around the pool area. No one seemed out of place, and again she told herself to relax.

“I don’t know any cute, bearded accountants,” she said to Liv, forcing a smile. “But give him a little encouragement. See what happens. You might as well have someone to pass the time with, right? A cute guy will make these next few weeks a lot more fun.”

Although she didn’t like the thought of Liv moving away, just when she’d started opening up.

“Have you ever thought about settling down in Durango?” she asked.

Liv looked startled. “What? No. I don’t know. Maybe.”

Molly didn’t press the issue, and they both continued watching the girls play in the water. But the hairs on the back of her neck kept raising. Her stomach was buzzing with nerves. Quickly, she glanced behind her.

“What’s wrong?” Liv asked.

Molly shook her head, thought about Hoopi, barking at the open window. “Nothing. You want to come over for dinner? Scott will be home later—I’ve told him all about you.”

Liv's guarded expression was back. "Sorry, I have stuff to do."

Molly tried not to frown; she was disappointed, yes, but she also couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that she was afraid to be alone.

When she pulled into the driveway at home, Scott's 4Runner was already there, parked next to the faded green Westfalia near the back of the house. The girls tumbled out of Molly's car to run inside and greet him. Molly headed to the mailbox, rifling through the bills and advertisements for something from the Ohio Vital Records office.

Her heart thumped when she saw them: two identical envelopes, both addressed to her.

The front door opened, and she jumped.

"Hi, wife," Scott called.

She turned around, holding the mail against her chest. "Hi, husband."

"I'm not sure why you're not giving me a kiss right now." He leaned against the doorframe, watching her, an easy smile on his face. Looking at him, her heart slowed down. She relaxed, the way she always did when he was around.

"Just grabbing the mail." She stuffed the two envelopes into her purse, then lifted the rest for him to see. There was no reason Scott needed to know about her worries—her paranoid, idiotic worries, she told herself. And looking at his face, she realized how silly she was being.

"I have a surprise for you," he said.

"You do?"

He nodded, his eyes lingering on his favorite parts of her body, sending heat racing along her limbs. “Sarah’s agreed to watch the girls for a couple days. And we,” he took a few steps closer, “are going to Telluride for two nights.”

“But you have a run this weekend!”

He put his hands on her waist and pulled her closer. “I switched with another guide. It was one thing to work so much when I was single, but now . . .” He kissed her mouth. “Now I have a gorgeous woman waiting in my bed, and it’s been difficult to focus.”

“Has it?” she asked, smiling.

“So difficult.” He kissed her again. “You know what tomorrow is?”

She shook her head.

“Tomorrow is the one-year anniversary of the day I showed up on your front porch, terrified out of my mind you were going to open your door and have a boyfriend. Or, worse, you wouldn’t even remember me.”

She put her arms around his neck, leaning back to smile up at him. “I remembered you pretty quickly, as you probably recall.”

He moved his big hands up her back. “Molly girl, I know this summer hasn’t been easy. But it’s just a couple months until things slow down for me. Then I’ll take over on the home front so you can focus on your work for a while.”

She exhaled, enjoying the feeling of his hands on her body. “It’s been lonely without you, I’ll admit. A couple nights to ourselves sounds perfect.”

“I can’t imagine going back to my life without you. I love you, Molly Sullivan.” His voice dropped lower. “And I’m going to make that clear tonight.”

She followed him into the house and packed a bag. Before she left, she took the two envelopes from her purse and stuffed them in the top drawer of her dresser, under the oldest, ugliest stack of underwear she had. Scott would never look there.

And then she went to join her husband.

twenty-six

Here's what I think about sex: if you're not being emotionally vulnerable, you're not doing it right.

—From the IGTV 'Let's talk about Sex, Baby!'
@InvincibleMollySullivan

"You're losing your grip on reality, Livi. Seriously."

Liv glanced at her brother's face on the screen. They were on FaceTime, chatting as she got ready for her morning run. No surprise, he didn't approve of this whole making-friends-with-Molly business.

"It's the only way I can spend time with Gabriela," Liv said. "I'm not going to apologize for that."

He gave a long, exasperated sigh. "What are you going to do at the end of the summer, huh? When your time is up in Durango?"

Liv paused, tightening her shoelaces. "I'll deal with that when I get there."

"It's a matter of time before Molly posts a picture of you online and Scott recognizes you, or he sees you around town, or something. This isn't sustainable, long-term. You know that."

Liv's jaw tightened. Okay, maybe she did. But still. "Don't judge me. You're thousands of miles away, avoiding the mess like you always do."

"Come on. I know you're lonely, but it's creepy that you're pretending to be friends with Molly. Creepy and a little sad."

Wincing, Liv turned away from the laptop so he wouldn't see her face. She hadn't had a friend since Kristina's death. She'd had acquaintances, classmates, coworkers—but not a real friend, and she didn't have to dig too deep into her psyche to understand why. Safer to avoid relationships than risk the pain from losing them. But the more Liv opened up to Molly, the more she realized how much she missed that closeness.

Oliver continued, his voice gentle. "Is it because she reminds you of Kristina? You see her as an older sister?"

"Of course not," Liv said.

But that was a lie. Yesterday at the pool, Liv kept wondering if Kristina could have ended up like Molly someday, with a house, a husband, and a couple of kids. If they would have spent afternoons together at the pool, chatting, and watching the kids play.

And when Molly had given Liv advice about Jeremiah, it felt *sisterly*. Molly was so earnest, so down-to-earth, and in that moment, Liv had been caught between gratitude for Molly's friendship and guilt for manipulating her.

She knew it wasn't healthy. And yet she felt powerless to do anything to change course. She was a speeding train hurtling down the wrong track, brakes malfunctioning, ready to crash and burn.

"Okay, okay." Oliver's voice softened. "I'm just worried this isn't going to end well. For you."

She bit her lip, wondering if she should tell him what she'd done yesterday. On a whim, she'd searched for physical therapy jobs in Durango. A local clinic was looking for a new PT with experience in running biomechanics. A perfect job, but it'd force her to put down roots, build a reputation and a clientele. Something she'd always avoided.

It would also allow her to stay in Durango indefinitely, so she'd sent in her resume.

No, she decided. She wasn't ready to tell Oliver about that yet.

"I have to go," she said, standing. "Time for my run."

On screen, Oliver looked at her, eyes narrowing. "What are you wearing?"

"I needed some new running clothes." Liv shrugged, trying for nonchalant. They weren't fancy, but they fit her curves and didn't yet have the sour funk of all her other workout clothes. But of course Oliver had noticed. He was more observant than Liv gave him credit for.

She wasn't ready to tell Oliver why she'd bought them, either.

"By the way," she said, changing the subject. "Remember how you said you'd borrow a car so you could open Kristina's safe deposit box? How's *that* going, huh? Oh, wait—let me guess: you haven't done it."

Oliver huffed. "I'm working on it. But—"

"We're running out of time," Liv said, cutting him off. "We have maybe five or six weeks before the state opens it and confiscates everything. Let me know when you have a car. Love you!"

She shut the laptop resolutely and headed to the kitchen to make herself a preworkout snack.

As Liv had told Molly, Jeremiah had continued running with her nearly every morning, sparks crackling between them—at least, Liv thought so. She had no idea how things felt on his side. He seemed to like being around her. Laughing at her, teasing her, pushing her harder and faster than anyone she'd ever run with. But she wondered, as Molly had suggested, if he needed a little encouragement.

So yesterday morning, Saturday morning, she'd invited him inside after their run, trying not to be self-conscious about being sweaty and smelling terrible. He was also sweaty, but he smelled fantastic: masculine, warm, woodsy.

She made each of them a smoothie, then sat next to him at her kitchen island. Their forearms were only about a half inch apart, so when he teased her about something, she knocked her forearm into his. Trying for casual, although it wasn't casual to her. It felt calculated, serious.

And then he reached over with his index finger and hooked it around hers, and pretty soon they were full-on holding hands, both of them grinning into their smoothies. She had expected something else to happen then—a kiss, or more—but he finished his smoothie, gave her hand a squeeze, and said, “Run tomorrow morning?” just like he had every morning all week, and she said, “Yep.”

Today, Sunday morning, she didn't know what to expect. But she'd worn the new running clothes, just in case.

She was standing barefoot in her kitchen when she heard a knock on her door. Jeremiah had never knocked before, just waited on the doorstep or caught up with her along the way.

“Come on in,” she called, and soon after he walked into her kitchen, looking tan and lean in his shorts and shirt. Her stomach flipped over.

“Got anything to eat?” Jeremiah said.

“Good morning to you, too.” She smiled and motioned to the cupboards behind her. “Make yourself at home.”

He opened a cupboard and peered inside, frowning. “A loaf of bread, three bananas, and a jar of peanut butter. That’s it? Sad.”

She shrugged and came up next to him, reaching for the bread and peanut butter, allowing her body to graze against his. When she popped a slice of bread in her toaster, he added another slice for himself, his arm brushing hers.

Then they stood in silence, eyes focused on the toaster as if it held the secret to everlasting life, tension building between them until Liv thought she would collapse from it.

“Got any honey?” he asked when the toast popped up, and she pointed to the cupboard above her head, not wanting to meet his eyes. Her heart was beating too fast, her chest tight from the nearness of him as he reached over her to grab the honey. She could smell him, the clean scent of his shirt, and her skin prickled. She remembered the day before, his palm pressed against hers as they held hands, and she turned to meet his eyes.

His gaze dropped to her lips, and she took a step away. He took a step toward her, close enough that she backed up into the cabinet behind her. He placed one hand on either side of her, trapping her. A flirty, smirking expression played on his face.

“What’s up?” she said, trying to pretend like she felt nothing. That her body wasn’t responding, heating up, her heart rate quickening.

He didn’t take his eyes off her lips. “I’m feeling sort of torn.”

“Torn?”

He nodded. “Between what I want to do, and what I should do.”

“What should you do?” she asked, breathless.

He exhaled, long and slow. “Go for a run.”

“What you *want* to do, then?”

“Kiss you.”

His eyes, still locked on her mouth, turned intense. An intensity she hadn’t seen before in him. She had seen him joking and teasing, she had seen him challenging, she had seen him looking vulnerable and regretful when he talked about his brother on their picnic—but she hadn’t seen him like this. This was a new expression. Intense. Focused.

“Do it,” she whispered.

Without hesitation, his lips met hers. The kiss started out gentle, careful, and at first that was enough. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of his mouth on hers, the soft rasp of his almost-beard against her chin and lips. But soon it wasn’t enough, that gentle pressure, and she leaned in further. His hands, which had been on either side of the counter, moved to her waist, to the small of her back.

And then the kiss turned rougher, deeper, as he pressed her against the counter. His hands ran up her ribs, down to her butt, and through her hair. She slid her palms along his back,

tracing the cords of muscle along his spine, feeling them flex and roll under her fingers. This was the kind of kissing they had done on the mountaintop, hot breaths and tangled limbs and aching need. The kind of kissing that had made her expect so much more to happen that night and had left her frustrated and off-balance when it didn't.

She pulled away enough to say, "I'm still kind of confused."

He blinked, dazed. "I thought that kiss would clear things up."

"You've been giving me mixed signals, Jeremiah."

His face was inches away, his body pressed against hers. His eyes started dancing, crinkling at the edges. "Okay. Let me see . . . how can I make this clear?"

He brushed his lips below her jaw, lingering until goosebumps traveled across her chest and down her arms.

"Liv, I like you." He kissed her shoulder, lifted her wrist to kiss the soft skin at the curve of her elbow, the palm of her hand, her fingertips. "I want you."

Then he dipped his head and gently, so gently, placed a kiss in the hollow between her clavicles. She sucked in a breath as she realized what was happening.

He was asking her permission.

Since the day they'd met, he had teased and irritated her. He had ruptured her bubble of solitude without appearing to even notice it existed. But he had noticed. He understood that she lived as a country of one, as an island with no neighbors, simply vast, unending sea.

And now he was asking to cross the border.

When he lifted his eyes to hers, they held the look of challenge she had seen so many times before. *I dare you*, that look said.

She reached for the bottom of her top, took a deep breath, and pulled it over her head. Now she stood in front of him in just her sports bra and running shorts. In a flash of embarrassment, she realized this wasn't a terribly sexy look; as seductions go, she wasn't acing this one. But his eyes were glazed over, hazy with wanting. He wanted her, and that made her bold.

She lifted her chin and tried to channel the *I dare you* look back to him. It must have worked, because he cocked an eyebrow, then pulled his own shirt over his head.

Before his shirt even hit the floor, his lips were on hers, pushing her back against the counter. She met his kisses with her own, surprised at her own intensity, wanting the taste of him, wanting to replace all other thoughts and feelings with Jeremiah's lips, Jeremiah's arms and shoulders, Jeremiah's hand now running up the back of her thigh, pulling her leg against him.

She ran her own hands down his chest, lean muscle with a sprinkle of golden-brown hair. At his waist, she tucked her thumbs inside the waistband of his shorts, walking him away from the small kitchen and into the living room.

"So," he said, his mouth at her ear. "Are we doing this?"

She leaned back far enough to see his expression, the laughter in his eyes taunting her again. "Can you keep up?"

"Oh, don't you worry about me."

And then his lips were on hers again, this time with so much force she bent backward at the waist. He was pushing

her down, toward the floor, his hands spread wide on her back.

“Not on the floor,” she managed to say. “It’s a temp apartment, remember? Who knows what’s been on that carpet.”

He grinned against her lips, then started kissing her neck, moving her toward the couch.

“Not there either,” she said. “The couch came with the apartment. Bedroom.”

“Didn’t the bed come with the apartment, too?”

“Mattress topper,” she said, breathless with urgency. “Clean sheets. It’s fine. Let’s go.”

“That’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

He walked her backward down the hall, still kissing her, running his hands up her back and into her short hair. He was rushing, bumping her against the wall, and the doorknob to the hall closet nailed her in the back.

“Oof,” she said.

His warm laugh vibrated against her. “Sorry.”

“Last door on the right,” she directed him. “Hurry it up.”

With another laugh, he picked her up and headed down the hall, kicking open the bedroom door and landing with her on the bed, a heap of tangled limbs and laughter.

At that moment, Liv paused. Morning light filtered through the half-closed blinds, illuminating the bedroom, the unmade bed, and the rumpled sheets. It felt oddly intimate. Maybe because morning sex was usually for couples, or at least for two people who had already done this at the usual time, at night, where flaws and insecurities could be hidden in

the dark. This forced her to see him, to see herself, to acknowledge this moment.

The laughter faded from his eyes, sending a trace of panic through her gut. Maybe he had felt it too, the odd intimacy, and now he wanted out.

“Shit,” he said. “I don’t have a condom.”

For a split second, Liv faltered. Not because of what he’d said, but because it brought back a memory. It had been Kristina who gave Liv the safe-sex talk, years ago. And thinking about Kristina made her remember why she was here, in Durango. It wasn’t to end up in bed with a good-looking, bearded runner. But she didn’t want to think about Kristina, or Gabriela, or Scott, or Sam, and whatever had happened between all of them. She smirked up at Jeremiah, shoving all other thoughts out of her mind.

“You didn’t come prepared? I assumed you came over here planning to seduce me.”

“Not planning.” His voice held a hint of regret, and he traced her jaw with the tip of one finger. “Hoping, maybe. But I can take a rain check.”

“Never fear, I got you covered.” She reached into the top drawer of the nightstand, his hands remaining on her waist as if he didn’t want to let her get too far away.

“Please don’t tell me those came with the apartment, too,” he said.

Her laughter rang out into the morning light of her bedroom, and she rolled back toward him, putting anything but Jeremiah’s face, Jeremiah’s lips, and Jeremiah’s hands out of her mind.

twenty-seven

Where is that key, Sam? I've been in Durango for over a week now, and I'm no closer to finding it. I'm guessing you must keep it with you, because it wasn't in your house.

Thanks for going away for a couple of nights, by the way. Gave me the perfect opportunity to look around your house. Your wife must have decorated it—it's cute, all colorful, and welcoming. But you should probably get an alarm system. Without your German Shepherd there to alert the neighbors, it was easy to break in. I went through every drawer and cupboard, looked under the sofa cushions, through the attic.

I took a little rest on your daughter's bed. Her pillow smelled nice.

Did you even notice I'd been in there, when you returned? I'm guessing not, since you didn't call the police.

I was thorough, too. Exceptionally so. And still no sign of that fucking key—not in your house, not in your camper. I'm getting irritated, Sam.

That's why I've been keeping an eye on Kristina's sister, too. My back-up plan. I know where she's staying, where she works, and the route she takes on her runs. Her apartment building would be a challenge to break into. But I'll figure something out. Time is ticking away—only five weeks left.

My goal was to get in and get out without anyone even knowing I was here. I'd prefer not to involve Kristina's sister if I don't have to. Unlike you, she's innocent in all of this.

Unfortunately, you're not leaving me with many options.

twenty-eight

People always say, “If you love someone, set them free.” No offense, but that’s bullshit. If you love someone, hold them as tightly as possible. And if you are lucky enough to find someone who loves you back, never let them go.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

It was one of those glorious stay-in-bed mornings, the kind they had enjoyed before they were married, when Scott would visit Molly in Denver or she’d come to Durango. The kind of morning when they’d each prop themselves up with pillows in bed, Scott with a book (reading peacefully), and Molly with her phone (scrolling, liking, commenting). Since their romantic getaway to Telluride, she and Scott had both committed to spending as many mornings in bed together as possible.

Which reminded her: time to set down the phone and focus on her husband. She reached for her charging cable, which she always kept tucked under the base of her lamp. It wasn’t there. Sitting up halfway, she glanced around; the cable had fallen between the bed and the nightstand.

Goosebumps crawled up her arms; she’d had this sensation a few times since returning home from Telluride. A feeling

that something was off inside her house, but she couldn't pinpoint why.

Shaking herself, she plugged her phone in and rolled over toward Scott. "This is perfection," she said.

"Perfection," Scott agreed. He lifted an arm and pulled her close, so her cheek pressed against his chest. She relaxed, soaking in the moment: the rise and fall of Scott's chest, the morning sunlight warming the room, and the dogs snoozing on the floor.

"What are you reading?" she asked, and he tilted the book in her direction. It was a travel guide. The front cover showed a gorgeous town nestled against snow-capped mountains.

"About Banff," he said. "It's a resort town in Alberta, Canada. I know a guy who runs a white-water rafting company there, and he's been bugging me to come work with him. I told him I'd never leave Durango, but I thought we might take a trip there this fall with the girls. I hear it's beautiful in the autumn."

"Sure, that would be fun." A family vacation sounded lovely. She ran her hand down his chest, across his stomach. "The girls aren't awake yet. We might have a few minutes, if you don't mind putting down the book. I mean, I hear Banff is beautiful in the autumn and all, but . . ."

His quiet laugh rumbled through her. "I don't mind one bit."

He reached over to the nightstand for a folded piece of paper he'd been using as a bookmark, but it fluttered down onto Molly's face.

She grabbed it and sat up. "I don't know why you can't just dog-ear a page to mark your spot."

“That’s sociopathic,” Scott said, one corner of his mouth quirking up.

“It’s better than using trash as bookmarks! Let’s see . . . this time it’s a bill.” She glanced at him, trying to look severe. “Scott! You’ve got to keep the bills where I can see them and make sure they get paid.”

“It’s not a bill, it’s a receipt from a donation.”

Thank you for your donation to Kendra’s Hope, it said in dark letters at the top, followed by a tax-deductible form for a shockingly large amount of money donated over the prior year. “I didn’t know you were such a philanthropist,” she said.

He smiled and took the paper from her. “It’s a nonprofit raising money for childhood leukemia. The couple who runs it are family friends and I worked for them for a little while after college. They lost their daughter to leukemia—she was my year in school. It’s something I’ve been doing for a few years.”

“You donate this much money every year?”

“I try to.”

Molly knew Scott’s business was doing well, and she donated to causes she believed in, too, but the amount surprised her. “Well, I’m impressed.”

He rolled her onto her back, pinning her under him, and grinned down at her. “How impressed?”

Unfortunately, Chloe chose that exact moment to burst through the door and launch herself onto the bed, landing between Molly and Scott in a heap of purple nightgown.

“Good morning, awesome family!” she yelled, wrapping an arm around each of them.

“Good morning, lucky Clover,” Scott said, catching Molly’s eye and mouthing, *sorry*.

She couldn’t possibly be upset, though, because there was nothing better in the entire universe than watching the man she loved being sweet to her daughter. Within a few minutes, Ella joined them, sitting cross-legged on the edge of the bed as they discussed their plans for the day. It was the kind of moment she’d dreamed about since first discussing blending their families together—casual, comfortable, and full of love. Even Ella was smiling and joining in the conversation.

Molly’s heart warmed with satisfaction. And for the first time in a while, she didn’t have the itch to pick up her phone, snap a picture and post it to Instagram (#familytime #sundaymorning #invinciblefamily). She just smiled and soaked in the moment.

That afternoon, Scott took the girls to the park so Molly could talk with Brookelle, who had been sending her panicky messages for the past few days. She was out in the backyard chatting via actual telephone, Molly using her earbuds while weeding the flower beds.

They’d lost out on two sponsorship opportunities, Brookelle reported—a meal delivery service and a makeup subscription box—and a third was trying to negotiate a post for only half of Molly’s standard fee. Their social media manager told Brookelle a rumor was going around that Molly was going to quit.

“You have to do something soon,” Brookelle was saying, her voice urgent. “Something big. You’re losing touch with people, Molly.”

Molly bit her tongue to keep from pointing out this was not a life-or-death situation. There was no emergency here. Yes, a year ago she had been obsessed with all of this too, but things had changed. She had a different focus now. Currently, removing a weed that was trying to choke her snapdragons.

“It’s just for the next six weeks or so,” she told Brookelle. “When Scott’s work slows down, mine will pick up.”

“Six weeks in internet-time is like six years, Mama Molly.” Brookelle gasped as if something had occurred to her. “I know! You should have a baby!”

Molly knew why she said it—the same reason so many mom bloggers kept having babies, then homeschooled them. There’s not much to share when your kids are gone all day. Molly felt a twinge of worry: Chloe would start kindergarten this fall. What, exactly, would Molly chatter about if Chloe was gone and Scott wouldn’t let her post anything about him or Ella?

“We’re not having a baby to get more social media attention.” Besides, Scott probably wouldn’t want that baby online, either.

“Well, I have something else for you. A new live video system we agreed to beta-test.”

Molly put both hands on a stubborn weed and yanked. A bead of sweat trickled down her forehead. “*We* agreed to test it?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I told them you’d do it. They’re paying your usual rate for product placement and you’re not in a position to turn this down.”

Molly sighed and wiped the sweat away with the back of her arm. “Fine, what is it?”

Brookelle nearly squealed. “You’re going to love it. It’s a system of tiny cameras, the size of dice, placed all over your home. They’re equipped with facial recognition software, and once you turn them on—it’s an app on your phone—they follow you, trading off between the cameras that give the best shot of your face. You can literally walk around your house, talking to your followers, and the cameras will track you and automatically upload the video via Wi-Fi to your Instagram and TikTok live!”

Brookelle paused, waiting for Molly to be amazed. Instead, she was horrified. “What if I accidentally turn it on while walking around my house naked?”

“That would be fantastic!”

Molly stood and moved down a few paces, then knelt. She noticed something in the dark soil of the flower bed—the print of a boot. Much larger than her own foot. Definitely a man’s shoe.

She glanced up. The master bedroom window was above her head, and she thought about the night Hoopi had lunged at it, barking ferociously. Goosebumps rose on her arms for the second time that day.

“Are you listening?” Brookelle said.

Molly blinked, coming to attention. “Yes, sorry. Go on.”

“I said they’re coming to install the cameras tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

Brookelle cleared her throat, and Molly knew what was coming: the same thing her assistant had been bothering her about for weeks. “Think about what else you could do to get some attention, Molly. Your online presence is languishing like a coma patient. Either put it out of its misery or revive it,

but don't leave it to slowly starve to death. Wasn't it Oprah who said writing is easy, you just pick up your pen and bleed?"

Molly bit her tongue to keep from saying no, it was not Oprah who said that. But in a way, Brookelle was right. Nobody wanted to follow a person who lived the same boring life as everyone else. There was always some inherent voyeurism in social media, peeking through an open window into a stranger's world.

After ending the call, Molly stood and looked at the boot print in the dirt, at the window above. If she told Scott about this, he would get nervous. The print was probably his, anyway. But just to be safe, she'd keep her windows closed at night whenever he was gone.

As she walked back inside, Molly focused on the next task on her to-do list: writing that post Brookelle wanted. Or maybe she could do a video—those seemed to get more engagement lately. But what to talk about? Her snapdragons? She longed for the early days, when life as a single, floundering new mom had given her unending fodder for Instagram.

Marriage didn't provide as much juicy material—especially marriage to Scott, the most reclusive man in America. A spark of resentment flared inside her, and she tried to squelch it. She would never in a million years trade her life with him for her life before.

And yet, that tiny spark of resentment remained. Toward Scott, for preventing her from sharing herself fully online. But also—maybe even more so—toward her followers, for demanding that she do so.

McSnark's STOP RUINING MY INTERNET

The official discussion forum for Molly Sullivan of An Invincible Summer

IhateMollySullivan4eva posted:

Soooooo besties who wants to join me in some Molly speculation.

Meow17 replied:

You know Im always here for that

MamaLlama99 replied:

Same same!

IhateMollySullivan4Eva replied:

I think we're seeing the beginning of the end for her. This is how it always goes with these influencers, right? They start out super relatable and likable (I mean, not to me, but to some people obviously). But little by little, as their fame grows, it shifts. They lose relatability as they get more popular. That's when they start doing product placement for stupid shit like organic fruit snacks and down comforters. Soon everything seems like an ad. Even the supposedly candid moments feel scripted. Curated imperfection, ya know? BORING. They become desperate to maintain their influence. This is followed by some sort of public breakdown, after which they either get divorced and/or go to rehab.

Who wants to take bets on when'll it happen for Molly??

FannyPackLuvr replied:

Oh I am SO in. If I never have to see Molly's stupid ponytail and stupid pink sunglasses again, I'll die happy. I give her two months before she falls apart.

MamaLlama99 replied:

Two MONTHS? Try two WEEKS. See if I'm wrong.

IhateMollySullivan4Eva replied:

Get your popcorn ready, girls. This is gonna be good.

twenty-nine

While I am of the opinion that most people in the world are inherently good, some people are toxic. Even rarer are the truly evil people, but they do exist.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv had just finished up a busy day at the nursing facility and was heading across the parking lot to her car when she jolted to a stop.

Her passenger side window had been broken. Crumbled glass littered the asphalt, crunching underfoot as Liv peered carefully in the window. *Damn it.* She'd left her purse in the car—and now her wallet had been stolen.

She curled her hands into fists, frustrated. Not just because of the break-in, but because she hadn't sent that letter to the bank in Pittsburgh yet. With her driver's license missing, she didn't know what to do—it would take a few weeks to get it replaced.

Pulling out her phone, she called the bank and asked to be transferred to the safe deposit box division. "Hi," she said, when a woman answered. "I called a couple weeks ago about getting access to my sister's safe deposit box. Can you remind me of the date when the lease expires?"

“Of course,” the woman on the phone said. “Just give me the number.”

Liv did, and waited, listening to the clack of the keyboard on the other end of the line.

“Ah, yes,” the woman said. “You have until the twelfth.”

About four weeks.

“My driver’s license was just stolen,” Liv explained. “So I’m going to need to get a new one, and I’m not sure how long that’ll take.”

“No problem. Like I told your brother, a copy of any government-issued ID will do just fine. Do you have a passport?”

Liv stopped. “Wait, what? My brother called?”

“That’s right,” the woman said, patiently. “He called an hour ago and said he’d be sending the required documentation shortly.”

Confused, Liv put her phone on speaker and texted Oliver.

Did you just call the bank about K’s safe deposit box?

No, why would I do that?

Her heart thumped. It couldn’t be a coincidence. She wished she had thought to ask Rasband about the safe deposit box when they’d spoken. But he must not know about it; there had been no mention of it in Kristina’s case file. Otherwise, the police would have opened it to look for evidence.

“You’re sure that someone called about this exact safe deposit box?” Liv said into the phone.

The woman sighed. “Yes, I wrote a note in the computer. I have it right here in front of me.”

“Did he give a name?”

“No, I’m sorry,” the woman said.

A thousand questions flooded her mind: Who would want to get into that box? And why? She flashed back to Kristina’s case file, and the drug dealer who might have killed Kristina. Had he been following her?

“That wasn’t my brother,” Liv said, panicking. “I don’t know who he was or why he wants to get into my sister’s safe deposit box, but I only give permission to Oliver James Barrett. No one else. How can I have that documented in the file?”

“I’ll document it right now,” the woman said, sounding exasperated. “But the sooner you get me that certified letter, the better, okay?”

Liv took a breath. “I will.”

Liv rushed home and was relieved to find her apartment undisturbed. Her passport was in the top drawer of her nightstand, like usual, and she also grabbed the cash she kept there. She looked up the address for the nearest notary public and headed over.

As she drove through the streets of Durango, she berated herself. She’d gotten complacent, allowed herself to relax. Even if Scott—Sam—whatever his name was—hadn’t killed Kristina, someone had. And maybe it had something to do with whatever Kristina had kept in her safe deposit box.

An hour later the certified letter had been notarized and faxed to the bank, and she'd mailed the original copy. Liv called the same woman to make sure she'd received it, who verified that no other requests for access had come through.

Then Liv called her brother.

"Ollie," she said when he answered. Her heart was pounding, even now. "I think Kristina's killer might have found me."

thirty

We must not allow ourselves to forget that even though our online life is part of our life, it is not our full, real, true life. That cannot be contained on a screen.

—Molly Sullivan in a speech at Youth Rise, a conference for social media influencers

It was Monday, Scott's day off, and he'd encouraged Molly to do something nice for herself. She needed it after a full weekend with the girls. Plus, engagement on all her social platforms had continued to drop. Soon, Molly might not be able to justify keeping Brookelle on. She hated the thought of firing her assistant, plus she didn't want to start doing it on her own again. It all felt heavy. Relentless. She probably should have spent the day creating new, innovative, engaging content. But her well of ideas had gone dry. She needed a break. She needed real, genuine connection.

Thank goodness for Liv, who had responded to Molly's text right away, agreeing to meet up for lunch. She and Liv met up at Michel's Corner Crepes on Main Ave. The patio was pleasantly crowded with a comforting hum of activity, and Molly relaxed and let herself enjoy being with an IRL friend.

But a few minutes after their crepes were delivered, she got the sensation of being watched again. The hairs on the back of her neck rose. She glanced around, looking for someone staring at her. But she didn't see anything other than the usual crowd for a weekday lunchtime, businesspeople and tourists, and a few mom groups. Molly had purposefully worn her hair down today—not up in her usual high ponytail—and hadn't even brought her favorite pink sunglasses, hoping that might make her less recognizable.

“Molly?” Liv asked. “You okay?”

“I keep having this weird feeling. Like someone's watching me.” Molly forced a laugh, trying to keep it light. “Which is stupid, I know. There's been a lot of negative comments online recently and maybe it's getting to me.”

Liv didn't laugh, though. She looked concerned. “You think someone's watching you? Have you seen anyone?”

“No.” Molly shifted uncomfortably in her seat. It sounded ridiculous, saying it out loud. “It's just a feeling. One night Scott's dog started barking at the open window. Scott was gone, and it freaked me out. Probably nothing, though. Dogs bark at random noises.”

Although Hoopi never did.

Liv leaned forward, concern creasing her forehead. “Have you told Scott?”

“No. I don't want him to be worried.” She took a bite of her crepe—delicious—and tried to look as if she wasn't worried, either.

“It sounds like something you *should* be worried about.” Liv's voice was firm. “What if someone tried to break in?”

“Probably some teenagers hanging around, looking for crimes of opportunity.” Neighbors had told Molly there’d been break-ins on the street, wallets taken out of cars, and stolen bikes. That sort of thing apparently happened every summer.

“Still.” Liv didn’t look convinced.

“How are things with you?” Molly asked, ready to turn the conversation away from herself. “How’s your Cute Beard Guy?”

Liv’s expression changed from a concerned frown to a careful smile. “Good.”

“Good? Like, how good?”

Liv smile widened, and two spots of pink stained her cheeks. “Like, really good.”

“Yay!” Molly clapped her hands. Liv looked smitten. “We’re going to have a barbecue this weekend. You should come. Bring your guy. I’d love to meet him.”

Liv froze, her fork halfway to her mouth. “Oh. That’s nice of you. I’m not sure, though. He might have already made plans for us.”

“Please come!” Molly urged. “I want you to meet Scott. I’ve told him all about you.”

Liv set her fork down, still not meeting Molly’s eyes. “I’ll let you know, okay?”

thirty-one

You yourself as much as anybody in the entire universe deserve your love and affection

—Buddhist quote on Molly Sullivan's refrigerator

Ever since her wallet had been stolen, Liv had felt uneasy. She'd filed a report, and the police had reviewed CCTV footage from the security cameras outside the rehab facility. Clear video showed two teenagers in hoodies breaking the window with a crowbar. The police said they'd keep an eye out, but couldn't promise they'd catch them.

Liv had considered calling Rasband. But what could he do? He was all the way in Philadelphia, and there was no actual evidence that the break-in was related to Kristina's murder.

But on the other hand, Molly thought that she was being watched. What if it was the same person, targeting them both?

Liv had pulled up the case file the detective had emailed to her a few weeks ago and reviewed the information again. They'd investigated a drug ring led by a man named Dale McKinley. What if there was something in the safe deposit box that he wanted? This question continued to niggle at her, so she brought it up with Oliver.

He agreed they should do some investigation. They'd spent the afternoon FaceTiming while they searched the internet on their laptops for information about Dale McKinley. It almost felt like they were in the same room, working together, and Liv felt closer to her brother than she had in a while.

"I found a picture of him," Oliver said.

"Oh, send it!"

When the picture appeared Liv leaned forward, studying it. A white man, probably around forty, with close-set eyes, and a long nose. He had short, cropped brown hair that was shaved on the sides, revealing a scalp tattoo of a hummingbird.

"Oh god," Liv said, her stomach dropping out from under her. This could be the man who had killed her sister.

"Who knew a hummingbird tattoo could be creepy, right?" Oliver said, his shaky voice betraying that he, too, was unsettled.

It was more than creepy, this colorful, delicate bird against the pale flesh. Longer than Liv's hand, blue wings with a flush of red at the base curling behind the ear, the long, thin beak reaching to his temple. The tattoo might have been pretty on a woman's ankle or back, but looked sinister on McKinley, beauty co-opted by evil.

They kept searching, trading links to news articles. McKinley was wanted in the murders of six people, including the family of his former right-hand man who had, apparently, crossed him. That made Liv nervous—this man's need for revenge, at all costs.

"Wait, hang on," Oliver said. "This article says that he went to Colombia and joined a drug cartel there. Hasn't been

seen in the United States in about five years. I'll send you the link."

He did, and Liv skimmed it. She felt moderately reassured, and yet she couldn't shake the worry.

"Maybe I should warn Molly," she said.

Oliver sputtered, surprised. "What?"

"She invited me to a barbecue at her house tonight. I think I need to come clean about everything."

Liv had started letting herself imagine a life that included Ella on a permanent basis, and that would only work if she was upfront about everything. It would be a relief to stop carrying her secret, to stop deceiving Molly.

"Won't Scott be at this barbecue?" Oliver asked. "You don't think he'll recognize you?"

That's why she hadn't accepted Molly's invitation at first. But now . . .

"So what if he does? I don't want to keep this a secret forever. And what if this McKinley guy is looking for Scott?"

She told him what Molly had said about feeling watched, about the dog barking at night.

Oliver didn't seem convinced, though. "I don't know, Livi. Why would he be looking for Scott?"

"Maybe Scott saw something that night?"

"But why *now*, all these years later, when McKinley's in Colombia? It doesn't make sense." Oliver hesitated before speaking again, his voice careful. "I'm not trying to be insensitive, but you tend to always think of the worst-case scenario."

Liv pressed her lips together. He wasn't wrong.

"I mean, you have to admit that the most likely explanation," Oliver continued, "is that none of this has anything to do with Kristina's murder. Molly feels like she's being watched? She's a goddamn internet celebrity. Your car was broken into by two random kids—it's on video. Do we really think the same person is behind all of it? Why would a member of a drug cartel who lives thousands of miles away still care about something that happened nine years ago?"

He had a point. Except for one thing: "Someone called about the safe deposit box—"

"How many safe deposit boxes are at that bank? Hundreds, thousands, I don't know. The lady could've gotten Kristina's confused with someone else's. How would anyone find you, anyway? You're not an easy person to locate. You keep a low profile."

Liv nodded, feeling reassured. "Okay, yeah. That makes sense."

"Good—so you don't need to go to that barbecue at Molly's tonight."

"Ah," she said, as she realized what he was doing. "You just don't want me going over there and meeting Scott."

"You're right, I don't," Oliver said. "I've told you from the beginning that I think it's weird you're friends with Molly at all. Thank god you're leaving soon."

"I'm actually thinking . . ." Liv took a deep breath, then said casually, "maybe I'll stay longer. I applied for a position as a running specialist."

She held her breath, bracing herself for Oliver's reaction. Her brother's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Does this have to

do with that guy? Jebediah or Zachariah or whatever his name is? I bet you love his long, white beard and his prophetic robes.”

“Shut up,” she said, rolling her eyes. “You know his name, idiot.”

She had told Oliver about Jeremiah, but not how she felt about him. It was early, but it already felt different than with anyone else she’d been with. Since that first time, they had spent more nights in bed together than apart. Just that morning she’d woken up to find him smiling at her, his fingers tracing lazy circles on her stomach. She didn’t know what to think. She only knew she didn’t want it to end.

“Be careful, Livi.” Oliver sounded protective, concerned. “Don’t make any long-term plans based on him. Guys are—”

She bristled. “You’re going to tell me what guys are like? Please, you’re always trying to figure them out, too.”

“I know. But I can tell you this for sure: there’s a big difference, in a guy’s mind, between someone who’s leaving town in two weeks and someone who’s permanent.”

The thought made her stomach twist. She had worried about the exact same thing.

“I gotta go, bro,” she said. Someone was knocking on her front door. “Love you tons.”

“You too.”

She unlocked the front door to see Jeremiah standing there. He looked like he’d just come from work, the sleeves of his blue button-down rolled up to expose tanned, lean forearms.

“Come in!” She was genuinely excited to see him, which struck her—she didn’t usually like people showing up unannounced. “Did we have plans? I thought I told you I was going to my friend’s barbecue tonight.”

He stepped across the threshold, shut the door with his foot, and swept her into his arms. Spinning her backward, he pressed her against the door as he kissed her neck with soft lips and enough sharp teeth to make her skin prickle.

“Don’t go to the barbecue,” he murmured.

She smiled, enjoying the feel of him pressed against her. “You can come with me, if you’re that pathetic. But I thought you had plans tonight, too.”

He laughed, soft and husky. “I canceled them. I want to take you somewhere.”

“Where?”

Jeremiah had already taken her mountain biking on his favorite trail, fishing along the Animas, and picnicking up near Silverton. A month or two’s worth of dates packed into one week, sharing all his favorite places with her. That had to mean something, right?

“A place I used to go when I was a teenager,” he said. “I’d camp there with my brother. It’s totally secluded—the kind of place you can’t find unless you already know it’s there.”

“Sounds like a good spot to murder someone and bury the body.”

He bit the lobe of her ear, making her shiver. “That’s not exactly what I had in mind.”

She pulled away to look at him, feigning suspicion. “Oh, I get it. This is the place you take girls when you want to

impress them. Do I really want to go somewhere you take all your women?”

In answer, he kissed her mouth, long and slow, then said, “I’ve never taken a woman there.”

“I hate to cancel on my friend . . .”

“Liv!” he groaned. “Why is this such a difficult decision?”

A memory from last night flashed through her mind: waking up in the darkness to see him watching her, his eyes bright and focused, as if he were memorizing her. As if he didn’t want to miss a moment.

“I’ll call her.”

“You’re seriously canceling on me to hang out with your Cute Beard Guy?”

Liv could hear the teasing in Molly’s voice. She had gone into her bedroom to call Molly, and was now throwing underwear and pajamas into an overnight bag while Jeremiah waited in her living room.

“I’m sorry,” Liv said. And she was, because it was delaying the inevitable. She made a promise to herself that she’d go see Molly the next day, as soon as she returned to town.

Molly sighed into the phone, then said in a louder voice—to Scott presumably, “Sweetie, Liv can’t come tonight. She has a hot date.”

Scott said something in return that Liv couldn’t catch, then Molly said to him, “What? Why isn’t Maya coming?”

She sounded disappointed. Liv caught Scott's dismissive voice in the background, saying: "Who knows why Maya does anything."

Molly returned to the phone. "Let's reschedule for some time during the week, so you can meet Scott. He doesn't believe you exist."

Liv laughed, but something occurred to her. She'd been wanting to ask Molly about Scott's friend Maya since she'd heard about her at Chloe's birthday party. Maya and Sarah, the two sisters who ran the business with Scott. She didn't know how to ask the question delicately, so she said it straight out. "Does it bother you that Scott works closely with a woman? I mean—I think it's great you trust him."

"Oh," Molly said, and Liv could imagine her waving Liv's concerns away. "Sarah's happily married—and you should see her husband. She has no reason to come after Scott."

Liv took a breath. "I didn't mean Sarah. I meant Maya."

Molly paused. "Maya's not a woman. Maya's—" she broke off, then laughed. "Sorry, that must be confusing. Maya's a nickname for Jeremiah. Sarah's brother—they run the business with Scott."

Liv blinked as the letters slowly reorganized themselves in her mind. Not Maya. Miah. Jeremiah.

"Oh, god," she whispered.

"What's wrong?"

There couldn't be many Jeremiahs in their early thirties here in Durango. "What does he look like?"

"Miah? Well, he's not as tall as Scott, maybe six feet? Slim. He's got brown hair that he refuses to brush, and kind of

a scruffy beard thing going on right now—” Molly cut herself off, her voice softening with concern. “Oh, Liv. Is he your cute beard guy?”

She gripped the phone tighter and lowered her voice. “I think he might be.”

“Hang on,” Molly said, then called out, “Scott, is Miah dating anyone?”

“Not that he’s told me.”

Liv heard his answer loud and clear and wished she hadn’t. His words sank like a rock in her gut.

“Why did he cancel on us tonight?” Molly asked Scott. Liv didn’t catch his answer this time, but then Molly said into the phone, “Miah told him he’s going camping.”

“That’s definitely him.” And he was clearly not as serious about her as she was about him, given that he hadn’t even told his friend about her.

Swiftly she analyzed her interactions with Jeremiah, from the first date to the past week, when things had turned more serious. Everything they had done together had been private, just the two of them. She’d thought he understood she didn’t like being around crowds, that he enjoyed being alone with her. Maybe he just didn’t care enough to introduce her to anyone else.

“Liv?” Molly said, pulling her back to reality. “I’m sure he’s just being a guy. They don’t talk about stuff like that.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right.”

But that wasn’t all Liv worried about—she had dug herself into an even deeper hole than she’d realized. Not only had she befriended Molly, but she was also dating Scott’s business

partner. How good of friends were they? And how much did Jeremiah know about Scott's past?

"Tell me," Molly said, and Liv could hear the smile in her voice. "What are you and Miah up to tonight?"

Liv held the phone tighter against her ear and talked quietly so Jeremiah wouldn't hear. "He's taking me camping with him."

"Wow." Molly sounded impressed. "I've never heard of him doing something like that with a girl. I think he likes you a lot."

"Well, I'm worried he doesn't, or that it's going to be too weird when he finds out we know each other. You know how guys are—they don't want things to be complicated. And you and I are friends, and he and Scott are friends . . ."

It could ruin everything. Her newly hatched plan to stay in Durango was crashing to the floor. If things didn't work out with Jeremiah, it could get awkward. It could get awkward even now, actually.

Then she thought of one of Molly's videos from a couple months back, about how we self-sabotage when things are going well, always anticipating that they're going to fall apart. Liv remembered rolling her eyes when her coworker showed the video to her at lunch, but now she realized the truth in Molly's words. Like Oliver pointed out, Liv had a bad habit of expecting the worst-case scenario.

"We spend a lot of time preparing for things to *not* work out," Molly had said, aiming her wide brown eyes right at the camera. "But what if it does? Are you prepared for *that* beautiful possibility?"

For an instant Liv allowed herself the hope, the beautiful possibility: staying in Durango, keeping Ella, keeping Molly, keeping Jeremiah, too. Maybe. Maybe it would work out.

thirty-two

Is it indecent? The amount of time I spend talking about myself? Sometimes I wonder if any of this matters. If any of this is worth anything, or if I'm just deluding myself.

—@InvincibleMollySullivan

live video, deleted the next morning

The barbecue had gone well, even though Liv and Miah hadn't come. Molly was delighted they were seeing each other. She didn't know Jeremiah well—he and Scott weren't close friends, their only connection was the business they shared, and per Scott, he was kind of a loner. But that probably made him a good match for Liv. Plenty of other people had come, the backyard filled with neighbors and friends eating hamburgers and brats and drinking beers, kids running and laughing. Scott had played the agreeable host, chatting by the grill. By the end of the evening he had seemed tired, strain settling around his eyes and mouth, but he stayed at her side, smiling, until the last guest left. Then they worked together to get everything cleaned up and the girls to bed.

After, she pulled him into their bedroom and showed him—slowly, fiercely, then tenderly—how much she appreciated him.

“Thank you for tonight,” she said as they lay in bed afterward.

“You’re an amazing hostess,” Scott said, turning on his side and facing her. “It was a great party. And you’re right—it’s good for us to get to know the neighbors.”

“I appreciate it. I know it’s not your thing.” She could tell this evening had taken something out of him. An emotionally demanding night for an introvert.

“Anything for you,” he murmured, his eyes drifting closed.

He was bare-chested, and Molly ran her fingers along his chest. The lighter skin usually covered by his life vest made a stark contrast to the dark tan of his massive arms and shoulders. She still found it difficult to believe a man this beautiful could be real, that she had the right to touch his skin, explore his body.

She ran a finger down a long, thin scar just below his right collarbone from a broken bone in college. She traced his shoulder, up to his jaw, brushing his sandy hair out of his face. Then she ran her fingers down his arm to where his hand lay, palm-up, on the bed between them.

Scott had a small tattoo on his inside forearm, just above the wrist. It was a cross, no more than an inch long. She’d seen it before, of course, but had never paid much attention to it. Now she leaned closer, studying his skin. There was a tiny rose at the center of the cross.

A tingle of awareness shot up her spine. She had seen the same thing in Scott’s safe—the gold necklace with the broken clasp. This was why it had seemed familiar: it was the same design as Scott’s tattoo. And it had been missing the second

time she'd looked, along with the extra birth certificate for Gabriela Jane Casillas.

In a rush, she remembered the envelopes in her drawer, the letters from the Ohio Office of Vital Records. She'd forgotten about them—or maybe she'd forgotten on purpose. Maybe she hadn't wanted to think about them or what they might reveal about her husband.

She sat up in bed, but hesitated. Part of her wanted to close her eyes and curl up against Scott again. She could go back to sleep and stay blissfully ignorant—there was no reason to go digging into his past. It was over and done with.

And yet, she couldn't shake the nagging sense that something was wrong. Something she shouldn't ignore anymore.

Her heart thumped when she found the envelopes in her drawer. Quiet as a whisper, she slipped out of the bedroom and down the hall to her office, where she turned on the desk lamp. She slid her finger under the flap of one of the envelopes, then pulled out the single sheet of paper inside.

It was a birth certificate, just as she had expected. But it didn't have the name Ella Jane Wander on it, it had the name Gabriela Jane Casillas, identical to the birth certificate Scott had removed from the safe. She blinked in confusion. This one should have been sealed.

She ripped open the other envelope and yanked out the sheet of paper inside.

*Unable to locate birth certificate for individual requested:
Ella Jane Wander.*

That didn't make sense. She double-checked the information she had provided, which was copied below. There

was no mistake, she realized, her heart hammering in her chest.

Ella Jane Wander didn't exist.

An hour later, she was still at the computer. She started by searching for the name of Ella's (Gabriela's?) birth mother: *Kristina Casillas*. That gave her too many search results to be useful. *Kristina Casillas Ohio* narrowed it down slightly, but she found nothing connected to the woman in the photograph on Ella's nightstand. *Kristina Casillas Obituary* returned nothing helpful, either, just page after page of obituaries for various people with the last name Casillas.

Then a thought occurred to her: what if Kristina Casillas was still alive?

Scott had painted an unflattering picture of Kristina, the drug addict who wouldn't let him see his daughter, always asking for money, dead of an overdose. Molly knew Scott, and she knew how deeply he felt his responsibility to his daughter. Was that responsibility strong enough to take his daughter from her mother and disappear?

It all clicked: the years Scott had spent living out of the Westfalia, traveling around the country, working odd jobs. His hermit-life after settling in Durango. His reluctance to be on social media. Had she married a man who had kidnapped his own daughter?

Ella's birth certificate must be a forgery. And if Ella's was a forgery, was Scott's? Was his name even Scott at all?

Molly exhaled, sick at the thought of her husband lying to her. Not trusting her enough to tell the truth. *Do I want to continue exploring this?* she asked herself. She could still go

back to bed, try to forget about it, and move on. If Scott had taken Ella from a neglectful mother, he had done the right thing. She couldn't fault him as a father.

But the lying made her ill. Lies were poison; she knew that all too well from her marriage to Jake. Pressing her mouth into a thin, hard line, she tried one more search.

Kristina Casillas daughter kidnapped.

Less than a second later, the results appeared, and this time she had found something. Right at the top of the screen was a headline from a local news channel in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Murdered Clairton woman identified as 22-year-old Kristina Casillas, her 11-month-old daughter still missing

The dread in Molly's stomach turned into something slimy, something slippery with panic. She clicked on the link and started to read, the words on the screen swimming as her eyes filled with tears, making it difficult to take in the information.

But one thing was clear: Scott's lies went much deeper. Ella's mother hadn't died of an overdose. She was murdered.

thirty-three

Your wife is up late tonight, Sam. Her office window is the only light on in your house—well, except for the dim glow from the youngest girl's window. Nightlight, I'm guessing.

Your bedroom light flicked off long ago. Your older girl's window is dark, too, but it's cracked open enough so that even from the street, I can hear an audiobook playing. Harry Potter, I think. For someone with a checkered past like yours, I'd expect better home security.

By the way, Sam, you should really shut your window if your wife is going to give you a blow job. I can't be the only person in the neighborhood who heard that.

Now I'm sitting in my car across the street, watching. It's comforting, knowing exactly where you are and what you're doing. Makes it easier to remind myself to be patient.

Two weeks. Time is running out for me, which means time is running out for you, too, Sam.

Kristina's sister shut down my chances of accessing the safe deposit box the easy way. Can't say I wasn't upset about it, especially after all that trouble I went to, hiring those kids to steal her wallet. She's lucky she hasn't been out running alone since then. Who knows what I might have done. That's how angry I was.

But I've calmed myself now. I'm rethinking my options. Still keeping an eye on the sister, yes, but I think you're my best bet.

The problem is this: if I confront you, will you give me the key? Even if I flat-out *threaten* you, there's no guarantee. You have this hero complex, I remember that about you. You probably still consider yourself the good guy, the defender of the weak.

It's laughable, after what you did to Kristina.

But knowing that about you makes me pretty certain: the best way to get what I want is to threaten the people you love.

thirty-four

There is something terrifying about love, right? It's like we're afraid to admit we're in love, even to ourselves.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv didn't want to fall asleep, didn't want to end this moment. Snuggled up in a tent with Jeremiah curled behind her, his face buried in her hair, his breath warm on the back of her neck. Nowhere else she would rather be.

Jeremiah had pulled out all the stops this evening—starting with the location, a lonely area they had reached by driving across an unmarked desert landscape for two hours. Just when she'd started getting nauseous from the constant jouncing and bouncing in his Jeep, he had turned one last corner and said, "We're here."

It was a small valley about two hundred yards across, surrounded by red rock and a few scraggly trees. So quiet all she could hear was the wind whistling and the sound of her own breath. It felt like they'd ended up on some Martian landscape, except for the occasional bird soaring overhead. But as the sun drifted to the western edge of the valley, the sky above transformed into a dome of stars.

Jeremiah didn't let her do a thing to help set up camp. He put up the tent and cooked dinner over the fire, red wine-marinated steaks and fat portobello mushrooms grilled on a grate laid over the coals. That was followed up by what he called "grown-up s'mores," a gooey stack of delicate wafer-thin cookies and dark chocolate topped with a gourmet marshmallow from a candy shop in town. They drank craft beers from his favorite brewery, and Liv ate until she was stuffed, her belly full, and her heart happy.

After they finished the last s'more, he took her roasting stick and set it on the ground, then kissed her mouth, her neck, and her jaw until she was dizzy. Finally he stood and pulled her into the tent with him. Instead of the zipped-together sleeping bags and thin sleeping pad she had expected, he had somehow created an inviting bed, complete with the softest cotton sheets and down comforter. He'd left the rain fly off the tent. Nothing but a thin screen separated them from the outside air, the sky above, as he moved along her body with a focused attention she had never experienced before.

Afterward, he pulled her close and said, with more than a little satisfaction, "Do you still wish you'd gone to that barbecue?"

"Sort of," she said, straight-faced. "I was going to bring those really good salt-and-vinegar kettle chips."

"What?"

"Don't get me wrong, this has been *nice*," she emphasized the word.

He huffed, offended, and pulled back. "Nice? That's not what you were saying a few minutes ago. I seem to remember you saying things like, Please, Jeremiah; don't stop, Jeremiah; more, Jeremiah."

“Don’t get cocky.” She held in a laugh. “You haven’t heard what I sound like when I’m eating salt-and-vinegar chips.”

“Now I want to.” He leaned in and bit her earlobe. “I bring you to my favorite place in the world, make you a gourmet dinner, take you to bed and use all my best moves on you, and you’re telling me all I needed to do was get you a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips?”

“Next time, do all those things *and* get the chips.”

“Next time, huh?” He looked down at her with those laughing eyes, his gorgeous mouth curved in a delicious smile. This was the first time they had talked about any sort of future together. His words, combined with that smile, made her body heat up again.

“There’s something I need to talk to you about,” she said.

He propped himself up on an elbow. “What?”

She didn’t want to spoil the moment, but she felt like she had to tell him. “You know how I had plans to go to a barbecue tonight, and I had to cancel with someone?”

He nodded, his expression unchanged.

“The friend I canceled on is Molly Sullivan. She’s apparently married to your friend Scott.”

“Oh.” He didn’t seem upset or flustered by what she had said to him, and the tension in her shoulders eased.

“You said you were an accountant,” she blurted out. If he had said he owned a river rafting company, she would have made the connection much earlier.

He nodded, looking unconcerned. “I said I’m a CPA, which is true. I run the finance part of the company. Is that all you needed to tell me?”

“Yeah. I thought maybe it would be weird for you, since we have . . . mutual friends.”

Jeremiah shrugged. “We’re not really friends. Scott’s hard-working and smart, and I respect the hell out of him, but he keeps to himself. I don’t think he has many friends.” Then he glanced at her, eyes creasing with a hint of laughter. “You know, Molly invited me to the barbecue, too—I guess we could have gone together, gotten you some potato chips.”

She smiled, relief rushing through her like a warm breeze, and raised her arm to the sky, where the Milky Way glistened bright and liquid above them. “And miss this? This is absolutely perfect.”

The laughter faded from his eyes as he studied her face. She didn’t think anyone had ever looked at her like Jeremiah did. No one else had ever seen all the way into her. She hadn’t let them.

“I never expected this,” he said quietly.

“This?”

“You.” He paused. “It’s . . .”

“Scary?” she supplied.

“Scary is an understatement. You absolutely terrify me.”

She wondered if his fun-loving, joking act was just that: an act. Designed to protect the real Jeremiah, not much different than her own bubble of solitude. She thought she might be glimpsing the real Jeremiah tonight, and got the feeling maybe even his own friends and family didn’t see this.

Monday, she told herself. She would call Molly and tell her everything. It would be such a relief to let it all out. She imagined Molly being surprised, maybe angry at first, but

eventually understanding. Soon, hopefully, Liv would get invited to interview for the running specialist job.

She let her mind drift further into the possibilities: Oliver would go open Kristina's safe deposit box and find nothing special in there, no reason for someone like Dale McKinley to want it. That was most likely, wasn't it? Liv had spent the last nine years telling and retelling herself a story about what had happened to Kristina and Gabriela, and believing it had made her suspicious, afraid of getting too close to anyone, always anticipating the worst. But that story had changed, which meant everything had changed, so maybe *she* could change, too.

What if she stayed here, in Durango, and made a life for herself? She'd come here looking for her niece, but she'd found so much more.

Jeremiah pulled her toward him, and she closed her eyes and let herself imagine the future. Barbecues and get-togethers with Molly and Scott and their girls, getting to know Jeremiah better, and their relationship deepening. Watching Ella grow up. Being part of a family.

She had never wanted anything permanent. Or rather, she'd never believed anything permanent could exist. But for the first time in her life, she didn't want to run away.

thirty-five

@trickster297—What’s the hardest part about sharing your life online?

@InvincibleMollySullivan—It’s the constant balance between my innate desire to share and the need to maintain boundaries. I always ask myself if I’m sharing something out of desire to connect or because I’m trying to get attention. Sometimes there’s a fine line between the two.

From an Instagram live Q&A

Molly couldn’t step away from the computer. It was three in the morning and her eyes were dry and her hands were shaking, but she couldn’t look away.

Pittsburgh, PA - Police are investigating the death of a woman whose body was found yesterday in a Mitchell Street apartment. She has been identified as 22-year-old Kristina Casillas.

Detective Kent Rasband said the woman’s body was discovered by a neighbor who heard shouting and then noticed the front door of the apartment left open. Casillas was found dead in

her apartment and her 11-month-old daughter is missing.

“We are awaiting results of the autopsy for official cause of death,” Rasband said, “but we anticipate investigating this as a homicide in addition to the kidnapping of her daughter.” He noted that the incident was likely drug-related and that narcotics were found in the apartment on the 800 block of North Mitchell Street.

Given the circumstances of the mother’s death, Rasband continued, police are concerned about the safety of her daughter. The child has brown hair, brown eyes, weighs 21 pounds, and is not yet walking.

Anyone with information related to the case or the location of the child is encouraged to contact police.

Homicide. A missing eleven-month-old girl. Molly was breathing too quickly, her face going numb and tingly. The obvious conclusion—the conclusion she didn’t want to admit—was that Scott had done it all. Had killed Kristina, had taken his daughter—if she really was his daughter. He wasn’t on Gabriela’s birth certificate, and she’d never seen the positive paternity test. He could be lying about this, too.

But if Gabriela wasn’t Scott’s daughter, why would he have taken her? Despite Scott’s lies, she couldn’t imagine that he’d kidnap a child. Or maybe she was being delusional, not wanting to face the truth.

She found another article.

Pittsburgh, PA - Police shared preliminary autopsy results today regarding the death of a murdered woman, Kristina Casillas. She was found dead on the floor of her living room from blunt force trauma to the head. Casillas also had significant trauma to her face and neck, including broken bones in her face and signs of attempted strangulation.

Molly couldn't read anymore, her stomach churning with nausea. *Blunt force trauma to the head. Attempted strangulation.* She couldn't imagine Scott doing that—but then again, she'd seen a glimpse of his anger when she'd shared that picture of him online. Scott was tall and strong. If he'd lost control . . . She shuddered, thinking about it. How well could you ever really know someone, even if you had slept next to him, even if you shared a bed, a home? If Scott had been capable of hiding all of that from her, what else was he capable of?

She continued clicking on articles, scanning through them. *Person of interest found in Murder/Kidnapping.* She clicked the link.

Samuel Howard, 23, is wanted in connection with the death of 22-year-old Kristina Casillas, Pittsburgh police said today in a press conference.

Molly relaxed as she read the words. Scott had insinuated that Kristina had been involved in a rough group before her death. Drug dealers, that sort of thing. If this person, this Samuel Howard, had killed Kristina, that made sense. Scott's

story—about the overdose and the adoption—wasn't complete, but it wasn't totally wrong, either.

Molly's heart rate started to slow as she put the pieces together. Scott had lied to her, yes, but it was a lie of omission, because Scott was a good person. She needed him to be a good person, the kind of man who did the right thing.

She ran her hands over her face, her cheeks wet with tears as the tension and relief bubbled up out of her. But as she continued to scan the article, the relief froze into dread.

Howard is the former boyfriend of the deceased and father of her daughter, Gabriela, who was discovered missing the night of the murder.

Howard is 23 years old, 6-foot-5, 210 pounds, with brown eyes and sandy blond hair, according to police. His last known vehicle is a white Toyota Tacoma. He is suspected of kidnapping Gabriela and is wanted for questioning regarding the murder of the deceased.

At the bottom of the article was a picture of a young man with his arms around two other young men, the picture cropped so their faces weren't visible. They wore navy-blue fraternity sweaters, and the one in the middle wore a cocky smile, too. *Sam Howard*, the caption read. *Recent graduate of the Ohio State University, former president of the Lambda Pi fraternity.*

He was younger, and she'd never seen an expression like that on his face, a smugness that made her want to throw up. But it was Scott. It was definitely Scott.

Fighting down her rising panic, Molly continued clicking links and reading, finding more pictures. Sam Howard had last been seen at a fundraiser banquet for the nonprofit he worked for, the same night Kristina was found dead. A coworker described him as “a little inebriated” and reported that their boss had asked him to leave around 11:00 p.m.

“He was ranting about his ex-girlfriend,” the coworker added. “It was disturbing the guests.”

Molly clicked to a snapshot from what appeared to be a college party, Scott in a crowd of other students, holding a red solo cup in each hand, chin lifted as he stared at the camera with blatant arrogance.

Each time she found his face attached to a different name—a different life—it felt like a punch in the gut. Not only had he lied to her about the events of his life, but he’d also reinvented himself, from a cocky frat boy to a reclusive single dad. That seemed even more deceptive than lying about events—he’d lied about who he was, at his core.

A photograph of Scott’s parents captured them as they left the police station. Scott’s father was tall, broad-shouldered, with salt-speckled dark hair and a hard jaw, his mother slim and blond with tired eyes. *Douglas and Meredith Howard of Shaker Heights, Ohio*, the article said, *have declined to comment on the whereabouts of their son, his ex-girlfriend, or their missing granddaughter.*

Molly started to cry—deep, wrenching sobs she stifled by covering her mouth with her hands. Then she got angry, and that lasted longer, the desire to scream and rage, to march into her bedroom and wake Scott, to demand he explain everything.

But behind the anger was fear. She knew what he was capable of now, and she was terrified. She had the sudden urge to scoop Chloe out of bed and take her somewhere far away, somewhere safe. But if she did that, Scott would probably wake up. Besides, she was exhausted, her eyes burning, her brain foggy and confused. She ached to sleep, to crawl into bed and drift into a welcome oblivion. But she couldn't imagine getting back in bed with Scott.

Instead she took a couple short steps across her office to the queen-size bed she'd brought from her house in Denver, the bed she'd slept in all those years. Lonely years, yes, but simple ones, too, just her and Chloe and Bitsy. She wanted back into that world.

She didn't get out of bed the next morning to see him off. If he wondered why she had ended up in the spare bedroom, he didn't give any indication of it. He came into the room and bent over her, kissed her forehead. Her skin crawled, but she pretended to be asleep until she heard Scott's car back down the driveway and pull away.

She made it through the rest of the day in a fog, going through their typical summer-day routine as if by muscle memory: breakfast, outside time, a visit to the pool, dinner, night games with the neighbors, then bed. Through all this she ached to tell someone, to pick up her phone and start a live video and blurt out her fears and worries. Thousands of her followers would immediately start commenting, sharing this moment, making her feel less alone.

She dismissed the idea as soon as it occurred to her—she would never do that, of course she wouldn't. But the itch was

there, and she wondered if this was how an addict felt, wanting their next hit.

As the hours ticked past midnight, she couldn't stop staring bleary-eyed at the tiny cameras dotting her living room. The size of dice, like Brookelle had said, and if someone didn't know where to look, they'd never notice them. The company had installed six in strategic locations in her living room and four in the kitchen. All she had to do was hit the app on her phone—tap it once with her finger—and they would start recording, tracking her face as she moved. So easy.

Maybe if she explained her feelings, without telling any of the details, she could unravel her thoughts enough to sleep.

Hoopi wandered in from the bedroom and sat near her feet, ears pricked high, on alert. She ran her hand along the top of his head. "It's okay, Hoop," she said.

And then she opened her phone and hit the app.

"Hi, Invincibles," she said, looking at one of the tiny cameras tucked behind a vase on the mantel. There wasn't even a light to show it was recording, but she assumed it was. "How are you all doing tonight? It's been a hard day for me."

Her voice caught, and she cleared her throat, trying for a smile. It was strange, not being able to see her own face in the phone, but it was nice, too. Less like talking to a screen, and more like thinking out loud.

"I wanted to ask for some advice. I recently discovered that someone close to me, someone I love and trust, hasn't been honest with me. I'm feeling hurt and confused and frustrated—with this person, and with myself. I can't talk to this person about it for a few days, so I'm trying to stay calm and not jump to any conclusions, which is pretty difficult

when I'm all by myself. Tell me, Invincibles, what should I do? Do I come right out and confront this person with what I know? Or do I try to beat around the bush and get this person to tell me the truth?"

She'd rather that Scott was honest of his own volition, not because he was caught in a lie. But as soon as he saw her, he'd know something was wrong. Her face wasn't just an open book, it was an unbound sheaf of pages spilling all over the floor.

She continued talking as she walked into the kitchen and sat on one of the stools at the counter. Hoopi followed her and once again sat at her feet, watchful. This time she didn't even try to look for the cameras, just let her thoughts tumble into the empty space.

"I guess the biggest thing is the lack of respect," she continued. "This person lied to me because he doesn't respect me enough to be honest, to consider how this affects my life. And not just the lack of respect, but the lack of authenticity. That's a relationship killer, I know from my own past."

Her throat swelled with emotion, and she ran a hand over her face. "My question to you, Invincibles, is this—"

Hoopi growled, and she held her breath. The dog sat erect, his glittering brown eyes focused on the window over the kitchen sink. The low rumble vibrated again from his throat, making her entire body break out in goosebumps. She squinted, trying to see what he was seeing, but the light from the kitchen made it impossible to see through the window.

"What's wrong, Hoopi?" she whispered. She was nervous to touch the dog, and now she wanted to end the video, so she finished by saying, "My question is this, now that this has

happened, is there a way to get past it? A way to move forward? And if so, how do I do it?"

She ended the video. Phone in hand, she walked to the window and looked out, heart racing. Nothing but her normal backyard, serene in the moonlight. When she turned back to Hoopi, he had relaxed, laying down with his head on his paws.

"Okay," she whispered. "We're okay."

Back in her bedroom, she curled up in bed next to Bitsy, who snuggled against her. Hoopi, always obedient, walked over to his bed on the floor.

"Hoopi, come up here," Molly said, patting the foot of the bed. He tilted his big head, obviously wondering why she was asking him to break the rules. She patted the bed again. "Come on, big boy."

In one swift movement, he leaped to the bed and settled at her feet. She felt more at ease with him there. Easing back against her pillow, phone in hand, she watched the comments on her video start to roll in. Each one lit up her screen like a little beacon. Her people were always there, even at three-thirty in the morning.

Some comments were supportive:

Hang in there, Molly! We have your back!

Some were full of advice:

I could never forgive someone for lying to me.
Like you said, it's the lack of respect. If I can't
trust someone, I can't be around them.

And some were creepy:

I like those blue pajamas. Why don't you take
them off next time?

She brushed those comments aside and tried to focus on the supportive ones. Each flash, each buzz of her phone meant someone was listening, someone had heard. But she still felt hollow, because it was one thing to get a supportive comment on your phone, from someone you've never met in person. It was another to have a conversation with a real, flesh-and-blood friend. Even with Hoopi at her feet and Bitsy curled up at her back, she was still alone.

thirty-six

Real friends are there for you even when it's inconvenient for them.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv opened her eyes in the darkness, awakened by a noise she couldn't place. It took a few seconds to register the unfamiliar ceiling above her, the unfamiliar bed beneath her. Jeremiah's ceiling and bed. They had come back from the camping trip last night, and she'd stayed over at his house with plans to spend Sunday—today—together. He lived in a cozy two-bedroom surrounded by ponderosa pines and quaking aspen, across town from Molly's house.

"Whassat sound?" Jeremiah murmured next to her, his eyes shut.

Liv sat up, aware of a buzzing coming from somewhere nearby. Her phone, vibrating beneath her pillow. She pulled it toward her and winced as its bright surface nearly blinded her sleepy eyes.

MOLLY SULLIVAN HAS STARTED A LIVE VIDEO.

She peered at the screen; she'd set notifications for all of Molly's content when she first came to Durango and never

turned them off. Lately, she'd mostly ignored them. But why would Molly start a video at this time of night?

Jeremiah, not fully awake, rolled away and put his pillow over his head. She slid out of bed and walked out of the room, closing his bedroom door quietly.

She turned the video on, surprised to see a view of Molly's living room. The camera was somewhere near the fireplace, and it gave the room a fishbowl appearance, the picture grainy in the dim light. Molly looked frazzled, curled up in a yellow armchair with her feet tucked under her.

Within a few seconds of listening to Molly ramble, Liv knew something was wrong.

I recently discovered that someone close to me, someone I love and trust, hasn't been honest with me.

Her first thought was that Molly had figured it out—figured Liv out—and she felt sick at the betrayal in her voice. But soon it became apparent that Molly was talking about much more than Liv.

This person lied to me because he doesn't respect me enough to be honest.

Scott. She must have learned something about Scott. That would account for the tears slipping down her face, the half-contained sobs in her voice.

Should she call Molly? Liv hesitated; it was the middle of the night. But then she heard something on the video that sounded like a growl. Molly had wandered into the kitchen, and somehow the video had kept up with her, bouncing between different views. The blurriness made Liv a little seasick, but eventually it stabilized, showed Molly sitting at

her kitchen table. Liv could see Scott's giant dog at her feet, his fur sticking up around his neck.

Molly's face went white. She whispered something to the dog, then glanced behind her.

Liv flashed back to their recent conversation over lunch. Scott's dog had barked at an open window once before, Molly had said. A feeling of being watched.

Molly ended the video and Liv held her phone in her hands, thinking about what to do next. If Molly had learned something about Scott's past, it was safer for Liv to not get involved. Better to let Molly ask him directly. Liv had no desire to step in the middle of that.

But if someone truly was watching Molly? If she was in danger, right now?

Stop thinking of the worst-case scenario, Liv told herself as she walked down the hall and into Jeremiah's living room. He kept his bikes right next to his sofa, apparently because they were so precious to him, which had made her laugh the first time she'd come over. Two mountain bikes and a road bike. In the tepid, pre-dawn light they looked like skeletons, like bones.

Liv sat on Jeremiah's sofa, unsure of what to do. The image of a hummingbird tattoo on a close-shaved scalp rose in her mind, and she shivered. Better to be safe than sorry, she decided, and picked up the phone.

"Molly?" Liv whispered when she answered. "What's wrong?"

"Liv?" Molly sounded sleepy but not nervous, and Liv felt silly for calling. "Are you okay?"

"I saw your video—it looked like you were upset."

“Oh. Yeah. I’m so stupid,” Molly said, and her voice caught. “I believed everything he told me about the birth certificates and the safe—”

“Hang on,” Liv said, trying to sound soothing. “Molly. Tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s Scott!” she shrieked, and Liv pulled the phone away from her ear. “He’s been lying to me this entire time. Our entire relationship, ever since I met him.”

Liv’s heart rate quickened. How much did Molly know? How did she find out? She took a deep breath and steadied her voice. “Is Scott there?”

“No, he’s on an overnighter.”

“You’re all alone?” Something had caused the dog to growl. Maybe it was nothing, but Liv couldn’t take that chance.

“The girls are here,” Molly said, her voice wobbling, “but they’re sleeping.”

Liv chewed on her fingernail, trying to figure out what to do. “Why don’t I come over to your house and we can talk.”

“You don’t have to . . .” Molly said, but she sounded hopeful.

“I’ll be there soon. I’m not sure what to tell Jeremiah—”

“You can’t tell him anything about this,” Molly interjected.

“I won’t,” Liv said, keeping her voice firm. “I’ll tell him you need help with the girls. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Before Liv made it halfway up the walkway to Molly’s house, the sun-yellow door opened, and Molly stepped onto the front

porch. Her hair was a mess, her eyes huge and red, her freckles vivid against pale skin.

“Thank you for coming,” she said when Liv reached her. “I’m sorry for pulling you away from Miah, but . . .” She put her hands over her face, and her shoulders started shaking. She was sobbing, Liv realized with horror, the sound echoing down the silent street.

Liv, uncomfortable with emotion anyway, knew she had to get Molly inside before neighbors started opening their doors to see what was going on. She led Molly back into the house, shutting the front door behind her. Then she stood there, awkwardly patting Molly’s back, until her deep, heaving breaths calmed.

Molly rubbed her palms over her eyes. She looked exhausted.

Liv at least knew how to handle that. She started steering Molly toward the kitchen. “I think you need some caffeine.” She almost suggested a stiff swallow of bourbon—what Gran would have done—but she figured that wouldn’t help Molly at this point.

“Coffee,” Molly said, slumping into her kitchen chair.

A half an hour later, Molly was on her third cup of coffee, speeding through her story about birth certificates and new articles so quickly Liv couldn’t keep up.

Liv tried to hide her interest—why did Scott have the original birth certificate for Gabriela? But she couldn’t waste time thinking about that right now, not with Molly barely pausing to take a breath.

“Scott’s story about the adoption seemed fishy,” she was saying, “especially when I looked back in the safe and he’d removed the original birth certificate, the one for Gabriela.”

It sounded fishy to Liv, too, but she couldn’t tell Molly that, even though the words were on the tip of her tongue.

Molly continued, explaining how she’d tried to verify the birth certificates by ordering copies from the state of Ohio. “Gabriela’s was real, but Ella’s wasn’t found.” Molly rubbed a hand through her messy hair. “Then I wondered if Scott hadn’t been honest with me.”

“Did you ask him about it?”

“No,” Molly said. “I don’t know why, but I didn’t want to pry. Or maybe I didn’t want to know what was going on. Denial, I guess.”

Liv could understand that. “But you said you found something online.”

“Yeah, last night I kept thinking about Ella, and Scott’s story about the adoption. Maybe Scott lied and told me Kristina had died so he didn’t have to deal with questions. So he could raise Ella on his own.”

“You think Scott took her from her mother?” Liv said the words carefully, trying to feel out what Molly knew.

“Yes! But that’s not the worst part.” Molly stifled a sob. “Ella’s mother was murdered.”

Liv knew she should come clean, right then. The words rose in her throat, nearly choking her. But she couldn’t explain what had happened with Scott and Kristina without explaining how she knew, and she couldn’t explain that without revealing why she had come to Durango.

She suddenly saw herself as Molly would—a pathetic girl weaseling her way into Molly’s life under false pretenses—and she was ashamed of herself. *Dishonesty is a relationship killer*, Molly had said on the video.

“Liv!” Molly said, staring at her. “I said Ella’s mother was murdered!”

Liv realized she ought to be showing more emotion—Molly didn’t know she already knew. She forced herself to look shocked. “Oh my god,” she said. “Are you sure?”

Molly brushed an errant tear out of her eye and took a shuddering breath. She continued to ramble through the details, most of which Liv already knew. Liv tried to act like she was listening, when what she was really doing was thinking. If she was too much of a coward to tell Molly the truth, she still needed to do something. She couldn’t let Molly continue to think her husband was a murderer.

“Liv?” Molly said. “Are you listening to me? Scott murdered his ex-girlfriend.”

Liv snapped back to attention. “Not necessarily.”

Molly threw her hands in the air. “What do you mean? His name is all over the internet in connection with this crime. It makes me sick—”

“Just because he was a suspect doesn’t mean he did it,” Liv said carefully.

“But he ran off and changed his name! And why did he lie and say Kristina died of an overdose?”

“Maybe he didn’t want to tell you she was murdered. Maybe he knew it would look bad for him. Or maybe he doesn’t want Ella to know.”

Molly bit her lip, as if considering Liv's statement. "Maybe."

Liv hesitated, not ignorant of the fact that she was trying to talk Molly out of the exact thing she herself had believed for years. "I understand why you're upset. Forgery and lying are a big deal, but," she paused, "they're not the same as murder."

She wanted to tell Molly about talking to Detective Rasband and what she'd read in Kristina's case file, but the words were jammed in her throat, and she hated herself for it. What kind of friend was she, if she couldn't tell Molly the truth when it mattered?

Molly seemed to relax, the stress on her face dissipating. "You don't think Scott did it? You don't think he murdered Kristina Casillas and kidnapped Ella?"

Liv swallowed against the shame burning her throat. "Didn't you say that Ella's mother was an addict? Maybe she got mixed up with the wrong crowd. Maybe that's who killed her. Scott probably took Ella to keep her safe. Maybe that's why he changed their identities, too."

That was all she could think to say, but it seemed to be enough. Molly was nodding now, her face less pale, her tense shoulders dropping in relief.

"Yeah," she said. "That's probably what happened, right? I mean, I'm still furious at him for lying to me—"

"I can understand that."

"But he's not a murderer." Her face relaxed, her eyes still bright with tears. "Thanks for talking me off the ledge. Now I need to figure out how to approach Scott about this when he gets home this evening."

“Let me watch the girls,” Liv said, wanting to do something—anything—to make this easier on Molly. To make up for her own cowardice. “I’ll keep them at my place as long as you need.”

“That would be wonderful. I’ll bring them over this afternoon before Scott gets home.”

Molly’s entire face brightened with gratitude, and Liv felt a rush of happiness, then told herself to stop being ridiculous. One small good deed couldn’t cancel out the lies she was telling.

Molly walked Liv to the front door, and as Liv turned to say goodbye Molly reached out and yanked her into a hug so sudden Liv almost lost her breath.

“I’m glad I have a friend here,” Molly whispered. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Guilt settled on Liv’s shoulders like a shroud.

McSnark's STOP RUINING MY INTERNET

The official discussion forum for Molly Sullivan of An Invincible Summer

MissLovelyPeach posted:

What was up with that random live Molly did in the middle of the night? Poor thing looked just awful.

IhateMollySullivan4Eva replied: P

lease. No sympathy for Miss Molly the Invincible. Sounds like she's having trouble in paradise with the Mister. I'm sure it's some stupid little thing like he forgot to take out the trash and she's turning it into Major Internet Drama (TM). Her lack of self-awareness is staggering.

MamaLlama99 replied:

I don't know, I'm with @MissLovelyPeach. It was weird. Molly wasn't herself—she looked really upset.

MissLovelyPeach replied:

Has she posted anything else yet today to explain it?

MamaLlama99 replied:

Nothing. Literally nothing on any platform all day. It's weird.

thirty-seven

Everyone has a story. Are you willing to read
between the lines, to glimpse the truth?

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Molly dropped the girls off at Liv's that evening and headed back home, trying to think about what she would say to Scott when he returned. Her sense of betrayal was so huge it was difficult to put it into words. The summer heat had worsened, today a record high. The world felt like a giant oven, baking her meandering thoughts into hard facts.

First of all, he had lied to her, multiple times. Second, he'd changed his identity, his entire personality. She didn't even know him. They weren't legally married. After being deserted by her first husband with zero warning, the fear of a repeat event still lingered.

But something else bothered her, as well. It had to do with the things she'd found in Scott's safe. She remembered them vaguely: notebooks, old letters, the cross necklace. At the time she'd been fixated on the birth certificates, but now she wondered about the other things. Especially the cross, and the matching tattoo on his forearm.

And most of all, where they were now.

He might have thrown them away, but she didn't think so. Not when he'd preserved them so carefully in the safe. Had he put them in the attic somewhere, stuffed them inside one of his unpacked boxes? No. He would put them somewhere she never went. Some place that was his alone.

With a burst of energy, half inspiration, and half dread, she walked out through the back door, across the stone patio to the driveway where the VW Westfalia crouched like an old green troll against the garage. She'd only been inside it when Scott had taken her for an overnight camping trip when they were dating, and she paused before opening the door. It had always struck her as sad, this temporary home of Scott and Ella's. A nomadic life, driven by grief.

But what if it wasn't driven by grief, but by guilt?

She heaved open the heavy sliding side door and peered inside. The interior of the Westfalia was clean and neat, the way Scott always kept things. On the far side stood a compact kitchen of faux-wood laminate, to her left a seat that folded into a bed, and to her right a small bank of cabinets. The air was stale and hot, speckled with floating motes of dust that she imagined as tiny secrets. Visible, but if you tried to catch them, they floated away.

She pulled herself into the camper and sat on the green vinyl bench. She started with the cabinets, but a quick perusal revealed nothing useful: assorted camping supplies, playing cards, and an old lighter. The kitchen cupboards revealed more of the same: pots and pans, utensils, tiny salt-and-pepper shakers. Artifacts from Scott's earlier life, but nothing that helped her now.

Frustrated, she slumped back against the bench, and the force of her slump caused a small squeaking sound from

underneath. As if the bench weren't completely attached at the bottom.

Molly hopped off the seat, kneeling on the linoleum floor. The late-afternoon sun beat into the van's interior, and the backs of her knees and armpits dampened with sweat. She put her hands under the bottom of the bench and pushed up. It didn't lift, but it did jiggle. She walked her hands down both sides, feeling as she went, and her left hand hit something smooth, metallic. A latch.

When she released it, the seat bottom lifted. Inside were jumper cables, a battery charger, and greasy bottles of motor oil. She rocked back on her heels, disappointed once more, then decided to dig around.

Under the coiled jumper cables she found a black garbage sack, tucked and folded to make a small, dark package. She lifted the contents out and placed them on the floor of the Westfalia.

A leather notebook.

Five spiral-bound notebooks.

A Ziplock bag containing a delicate gold cross necklace.

Molly settled cross-legged on the floor, her heart beating a furious rhythm, and opened the leather notebook. Each page contained three columns of numbers written in Scott's careful handwriting. The far left-hand column were dates starting a few months after Kristina Casillas's murder. The middle column was a series of dollar amounts, with an entry for nearly every month for the past nine years in varying amounts: sometimes only \$10, sometimes \$1,000, and most recently \$5,000. The far right-hand column looked like a running total

of the middle column. At the top of each page he'd written, in large blocky letters: *Total owed - \$193,450.*

She couldn't make sense of this, so she turned to the spiral-bound notebooks. They were the cheap kind you might pick up at a drugstore, the edges frayed and worn with use. She recognized Scott's handwriting again, this time in paragraph form, covering the pages from top to bottom in his neat script.

She paused in the middle of a page and read:

I have gazed too long into the abyss. It not only gazes back at me, it threatens to swallow me.

A chill ran down her spine. She flipped to the next page, and read at random:

If I am to become a monster, at least let it be in the process of fighting a monster. Or is it preferable to disappear? To un-create myself, to return to the dust, to escape the confines of guilt and ease into nothingness.

It continued like that, stream-of-consciousness, often making little sense, his handwriting slanting down the pages as if he couldn't write fast enough to keep up with the feverish churning of his brain. It was difficult to believe Scott had written this, these words so different from the way he spoke, but it was his handwriting.

She picked up a new notebook and opened the front cover, read aloud in a shaky voice:

“If I could go back—undo it all—would one crime be wiped out by thousands of good deeds? The capability of killing will live within me forever now.”

His handwriting became unreadable then, and she flipped to the next page with shaking hands.

“To take a life,” she read, her voice just above a whisper. “To snuff it like a candle. To render another human being extinct. No forgiveness, no— How is it possible to continue?”

Maybe he meant taking a life as in taking Ella away from her prior life. She wanted to believe that. She didn’t want to believe what she was actually reading, these barely coherent ramblings of a guilty conscience. Her eyes burned with tears. Her chest burned with anger.

She slammed down the notebook and picked up the plastic bag holding the necklace. She imagined Kristina Casillas wearing it, remembered the news articles about her death, the signs of attempted strangulation. The clasp of the necklace was broken, and Molly hated the images rushing into her mind: Scott with his hands around a delicate, pale neck, Scott yanking the necklace off, breaking the clasp, Scott’s fists battering and bruising, throwing a slim, young body against a wall.

She didn’t know she was crying until tears fell on the floor, dust pooling around each individual droplet. With a start, she realized it was getting late. Scott would be home soon.

Her mind raced. She’d drive to Liv’s house, pick up the girls, and head somewhere he couldn’t find them. Just for a night or two, to give herself time to think. Rubbing her face with her hands, smearing tears and sweat, she prepared to leave.

“Molly?” Scott stood in the doorway of the Westfalia, bending at the waist to see inside. “What are you doing?”

thirty-eight

A friend is someone who gives you total freedom to be yourself That's what real love amounts to—letting a person be what he really is.

—Jim Morrison quote pinned to Molly's
Pinterest board "Words to Live By"

After two hours with Chloe and Ella, Liv was out of ideas. She had a newfound respect for Molly, entertaining them all day, every day. Chloe was delightful, but truly the cutest walking disaster Liv had ever met. She'd already gotten into Liv's makeup and dumped out an entire bag of cereal. After that, they'd walked to the pond near the apartment complex, skipped rocks, and fed the ducks. Finally Liv, in a stroke of desperation, asked the girls if they wanted to make chocolate chip cookies, because that's what Kristina used to do with Liv and Oliver when she'd babysat them. Both girls had cheered.

Now Chloe was sitting on Liv's counter, her pink sundress covered in flour and her face sticky with dough, while Ella and Liv spooned the dough into balls.

"This is fun," Ella said, smiling, as she plopped a misshapen ball of cookie dough onto the cookie sheet.

“I’m glad you came over,” Liv said. “I don’t have any little sisters, so it’s nice to hang out with you.”

Ella nodded gravely. “Do you have any brothers?”

“Yes, I have one.” Liv handed the beaters to Chloe to lick. “He’s named Oliver. I called him Ollie when we were growing up.”

“Ollie-wollie-pollie-mollie,” Chloe said in a sing-song voice. “Hey! Ollie sounds like Molly! That’s my mommy’s awesome name.”

On a whim, Liv told the girls to smile and snapped a picture of them. She sent it to Oliver, wanting him to understand, at least a little bit, what it was like to be with Ella.

Oliver’s reply came immediately:

How did you get this?

Ella and Chloe are here at my apartment for the evening.

Liv braced herself for a tirade about getting too enmeshed in Ella’s life. Thank god she hadn’t mentioned anything to him about Molly’s discovery.

But Oliver replied:

FaceTime me? I want to see her.

She dialed Oliver. He immediately picked up, his face coming through on her phone’s screen, eyes wide, and hair disheveled.

“Ollie?” she said, trying to keep her voice casual. The girls didn’t need to know this was anything other than a simple brother-sister chat. “We’re making cookies, want to see?”

“Sure,” he said, and she recognized the forced casualness in his voice, too.

She held the phone up so he could see the room. “Chloe, this is my brother Ollie.”

“Hi Ollie-wollie-pollie-mollie,” Chloe sang, waving her sticky hands at the phone.

Oliver raised one hand. “Hello there.”

“And this is Ella.” Liv turned the phone to Ella, but kept her eyes on the screen, waiting for the moment when Oliver saw their niece.

“Hi,” Ella said, looking at the phone under her bangs.

Oliver’s eyebrows raised, just a fraction. He cleared his throat before speaking. “What are you making, Ella?”

“Chocolate chip cookies.”

Oliver’s expression remained serious. “Livi used to make those for me when we were little.”

“Livi?” Ella glanced over at Liv, grinning. “Is that your nickname?”

“Yep,” Liv said. “Ollie and Livi, that was us.”

She glanced at her brother on the phone screen, then felt the smile fade from her face as she saw his expression. Her brother’s eyes glistened with tears. “What other things do you like to do, G—Ella?” His voice caught on the last word.

Ella didn’t seem to notice. “Oh, read. Play with my dog. Draw. Stuff like that.” She brushed her hair out of her face with her forearm, then set another ball of dough on the cookie sheet. “Is this good?” she asked Liv.

Liv nodded, unable to respond. Her brother, her niece, talking; it was all so ordinary, so normal, that it made her chest ache. “Really good. Let me finish with Ollie, and I’ll be right back to help you get it in the oven.”

She walked to the opposite side of the room, near the beige sofa, and kept her voice low as she spoke to her brother again. “What do you think?”

“She’s like Kristina.” Oliver’s voice sounded thick, and he cleared his throat. “Not so much how she looks, but how she talks. Her mannerisms, her expressions.”

“Do you get it now? Why I can’t leave her?”

“Yes.” His voice carried far more weight than the simple word. “Yes, I do. And it’s why I think we need to turn Sam Howard in.”

“What?” she said. It felt like a punch to the gut. “We can’t, Oliver. You know that. It would ruin everything for Ella.”

“Gabriela,” Oliver corrected. “Her name is *Gabriela*. And she is our niece. You’ve been distracted, playing house with your new man and hanging with your new bestie, but none of this is going to last, Liv. You know that. We need a long-term solution to keep Gabriela in our lives.”

“What are you talking about? What long-term solution?” She looked past his face, saw the background, an unfamiliar space. “Where are you? That’s not your apartment.”

Oliver shrugged. “You asked me to go open Kristina’s safe deposit box. That’s what I’m doing.”

Liv studied him, the faint blush spreading up his neck to his ears. “Ollie . . . are you at Elton’s?”

He pressed his lips together, his eyes shifting to the side. That was answer enough for Liv, and she broke into a grin.

“Stop,” he said, glaring at her. “Don’t make a big deal out of this. We’re leaving the day after tomorrow. I’ll keep you posted.”

Liv nearly squealed. “He’s going with you?”

“Goodbye,” Oliver said, rolling his eyes. And then he ended the call.

thirty-nine

I hate leaving loose ends. I'm known for being careful, meticulous, untraceable. But that safe deposit box is chock full of loose ends, Sam. I'm going to need to tie them up.

Soon.

But not tonight. Tonight I'm sitting in my motel room with the TV humming in the background. Mostly, I'm thinking about why I'm here, the errors I made that led me to this point. When I look back to that time in my life, before I moved on to bigger and better things, I'm not proud of all my actions. But I wasn't at the top of my game then. Nowadays I'd never let someone get away like you did.

But you know, Kristina could have just given me the key herself, that night. She could've given me what I came for and I would've left, no problem. I'm not such a terrible person. We probably have more in common than you think. Like you, I have people who depend on me. Like you, I have hopes and dreams, plans for the future. And like you, I'd do anything to get what I want.

But here's the difference between us: when I left Kristina's apartment, she was still alive.

By the time you left, she was dead.

forty

Introverts have always intimidated me. All those hidden depths. Those secret corners.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Molly and Scott sat together in the living room, each in a yellow armchair. They'd ended up here after Scott found her in the Westfalia. He sat leaning forward, elbows on knees, his face half-shadowed. The colorful room around them felt gaudy and overdone, the house darkened, the air slippery with secrets.

"I know you've been lying to me from the beginning," Molly said. "And I need you to tell me the truth."

He glanced up then, his eyes sharp. "If you already know everything—"

"I need to hear you say it."

He exhaled, dropping his head so she couldn't see his face. That made it easier. Easier to hold onto the righteous indignation she felt. Because looking at that face, the face of the man she adored, made everything more difficult.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know," he said. "Ask me anything."

She had never heard him sound like this, bleak and hopeless, and it threatened to rip her wide open. Instead she stood and folded her arms tight across her chest. She started firing questions, pausing only long enough to allow his one-word answers.

“Is Ella your daughter? Your actual, biological daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Was Kristina Casillas your girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Is your real name Sam Howard?”

“Yes.”

“Did you kidnap Ella?”

A pause. “Yes.”

“Did you kill Kristina?”

A longer pause. “Yes.”

Her heart contracted in her chest, nearly choking her. “Were you ever planning to tell me the truth?”

“No.”

That was the answer that did her in—on top of all the rest, the fact that he’d systematically lied since the day they’d met. She sank back into the chair.

“Tell me everything,” she said, her voice sounding as if it came from far away. “Leave nothing out.”

He closed his eyes. The muscles of his shoulders and back stiffened under his T-shirt. Molly resisted the urge to reach out and touch him, like she usually did when he was upset. She

couldn't imagine touching him anymore. That was the worst part of all of this.

She waited, pressing her lips together.

When he opened his eyes and started talking, his voice was so quiet it gave her chills.

“Kristina and I met in college, we dated for a few months. I didn't know she was pregnant until she called me right before Ella was born. Later, I moved to be near her because she was having trouble taking care of Ella.”

He stopped, as if unwilling to go on, and she said, “What happened on the night she died?”

“I was supposed to have Ella that weekend,” he said, “but Kris wasn't returning my calls. I went to her apartment, but she had moved out. Luckily, her grandmother lived not too far away, and she was willing to give me her new address.”

Molly nodded. That was probably a good sign, wasn't it? That Kristina's grandmother trusted him? “Okay,” she said.

“When I got to Kristina's apartment, the door swung open when I knocked, so I walked in.” Scott stopped and looked up, meeting Molly's eyes, his own dark and shadowed. “Are you sure you want to know? Because once you do, you can never un-know it.”

His voice sent a shiver of dread down her limbs. “Go on,” she whispered.

He swallowed, staring at his hands in his lap. Molly wondered, briefly, if he was telling her the truth. This could be a lie, too. But she could tell his emotions were real—the horror shadowing his expression, the guilt nearly drowning him.

“Kristina was on the couch,” he said, “all bruised and bloody, unresponsive. I had no idea what had happened to her and I panicked, worrying about Ella. I found her in the bedroom closet, wearing nothing but a stained T-shirt and a filthy diaper. Who knows how long she’d been there? I hadn’t seen her in a few weeks, and I was shocked at how thin she was. When I picked her up, she just curled against me and whimpered.” He closed his eyes, his face knotted as if he were back in that moment, his little girl pressed against his chest. “I considered calling 911 to report that Kristina was in the apartment, that she’d been beaten and maybe overdosed on something, but I didn’t want to get involved. And I’ll admit it, I was furious at her for putting our daughter in danger.”

“You just left her there?” Molly’s heart lifted with a brief, fleeting hope. She was ashamed of herself for thinking this, but it was better than the alternative. Let this be true! Let him have walked away. Let *this* be the guilt he had carried all these years, that he had left the mother of his child alone to die.

But he shook his head, and her hope plummeted. “As I was leaning over to check on her, she opened her eyes. She saw me holding Ella and she started screaming at me to put her down. And I—I was upset with her, too. We argued. Kris lunged toward me, trying to grab Ella out of my arms, and I—”

Molly stared at him. “What? What happened?”

“I pushed her.” His eyes went dark. Expressionless. “I pushed Kris away from me. She fell and hit her head on the edge of the coffee table. She didn’t get up.”

Silence hung between them.

“And then?” Molly whispered.

“You know the rest.” His jaw tightened. “I took Ella and ran.”

Molly’s mind was spinning, trying to make sense of what he’d told her. “It was an accident,” she said, the words coming slowly. “You should have called the police and told them.”

She wanted that to be true—she wanted his story to be true—but she wasn’t sure if she should believe it. How could she trust anything he said now?

He exhaled a short, unhappy burst of laughter. “Yeah, how would that have gone? The ex-boyfriend who shoved the mother of his child to the ground, accidentally killing her. There’s no way I would have gotten off the hook. I would’ve been arrested, probably would’ve ended up in prison. Ella would’ve been taken away from me. I couldn’t allow that.”

Molly let his words sink in. She wished she had never let him tell her this story. Scott had been right: *You can never un-know this.*

“Molly,” he said, his voice now gentle. “I never wanted any of this to happen.”

“You never wanted me to find out, you mean,” she said, her eyes locking onto his. She hated that he’d kept this from her. “Why did you bring me into this? You should have stayed away from me.”

His gaze dropped away. “I know. I didn’t let myself get involved with anyone for years—no friendships, no relationships, nothing more than casual acquaintances. But after a few years here in Durango, I . . . I guess I hoped it had been long enough. Eight years, when I met you.”

She wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake him. He must have been delusional if he’d thought this could stay

buried forever. He must have assumed *she* was so stupid and trusting she'd never find out. The thought sent a shock of indignation through her chest.

“It was going to come out someday, Scott. Maybe not now, but when Ella applies for a job or needs a background check, or when she goes off to college. You can't hide her forever.”

“Her identity is secure. I was promised that.”

The anger flared inside her again. “By who? A criminal who forges documents and steals identities? I can't even believe you're involved with someone like that, Scott! Or should I say Sam?”

He flinched at the sound of his real name, like hearing it physically hurt. Molly hated saying it, but she couldn't handle his new name, either. Both seemed false.

“Does anyone know else about this?” she asked.

“No.”

She believed that, knowing Scott. He would be the type to take a secret, lock it deep inside his chest, and never tell a soul. “What about your parents? They didn't die when you were in college.”

He shook his head. “I haven't had any contact with them since the night I ran with Ella.”

The magnitude of everything he had given up overwhelmed her—his future, his friends, his family of origin. An immense sacrifice, and she could tell by the look on his face, the set of his jaw, that he didn't regret it. He was still racked with guilt for killing Kristina, she could see, but he didn't regret his actions afterward.

In a way she respected his absolute conviction that he had done the right thing in the face of a horrifying situation. But it was one thing for him to make this decision for himself—and even for Ella. It was quite another to drag Molly and Chloe into it.

“You were willing to lie to me for the rest of our lives together,” she said. “Did you think I would never find out?”

“I hoped you wouldn’t.” He shrugged, looking far too comfortable with those words. “I should have been more careful.”

“No, you should have been more honest!” She shouted it, surprising even herself. “When I asked you about the birth certificates, you could have come clean, but instead you lied again. This story could be a lie, too. You could have beaten Kristina and bashed her head against the coffee table until she died. You could have committed a dozen other crimes and I would never know!”

“I don’t blame you for being angry.” His voice was flat.

“That’s great. I’m really glad you don’t blame *me*.” She rarely used sarcasm, and it felt foreign on her tongue.

Scott didn’t respond and silence descended, thick as a blanket pressed to her face. Anger and sorrow rattled inside her chest, almost escaping in gut-wrenching sobs, but she only allowed a few tears to escape onto her cheeks.

She could hear laughter from children playing outside, the honk of a bicycle horn, and a distant siren. The noises of a normal neighborhood on a summer night, echoes of the life she had tried to build here. Slipping through her fingers like dust.

Scott looked up, his voice quiet but urgent. “What are you going to do now?”

She knew what he was asking: *Are you going to turn me in?*

“I don’t know,” she said.

She was trying to wrap her head around this, what it meant for her and Chloe. She hadn’t yet considered turning him in, but did she have a responsibility to do so? That wouldn’t be good for Ella, and despite how angry Molly was at Scott, she had no desire to hurt his daughter.

“All I’m asking is that you don’t do anything right now,” Scott said, and she could see the fear in his eyes. “Let’s sleep on it. Can you do that?”

She was too overwhelmed to make any decisions right now, anyway, so she nodded. “But I’m not sleeping in the same bed as you.”

The thought of climbing into bed next to him felt wrong, like sharing a bed with a stranger, but that’s not why she’d said it. She’d said it to hurt him—to shake him, to make him realize he could lose her, to make him understand how badly she was hurting.

But he didn’t seem to care, just nodded, and that hurt even more. He should be crying and pleading for forgiveness.

“Molly,” he said, “this should go without saying, but please keep this between us. Don’t share any of it online.”

She stiffened. More than anything else he’d said during this conversation, this rankled. The assumption that she had no ability to discern between appropriate and inappropriate things to post online. Proof of his years of secrets—and her own

idiocy—was not at the top of her list of things to share with the world.

And the weary resignation in his voice, as if she were an irritating teenager with a bad habit of gossiping. As if her tendency to overshare online was equal to his years of deception.

“I wouldn’t do that, Scott,” she said, snapping the last consonant between her teeth and tongue. Guilt blossomed inside her as she remembered spilling everything to Liv. But if he’d been honest with her from the beginning, she never would have needed to tell a friend.

She didn’t want any more dishonesty, so she decided to come clean about that conversation now. “I told Liv what I found about you online.”

“What?” His eyes flashed. “Why would you do that?”

“I needed someone to talk to!”

“You realize that’s putting me and Ella at risk?”

“And that’s my fault?” She was shouting again, pounding her fist against the arm of the armchair. “None of this is my fault! I trusted you, I uprooted my daughter and my life to be with you. I reached out to the only friend I have in town when I was alone and terrified after discovering a horrible truth about the man I loved.”

Loved. That word—the past tense—hung heavy between them.

He collapsed against the back of his chair, defeated. “I know. I know that, Mol.”

She appreciated the acknowledgment, but what he didn’t say was *sorry*. He looked exhausted, worried, and defeated,

but he didn't look sorry.

She wanted him to apologize. She wanted him to get out of his chair, to kneel in front of her, to take her hands in his and beg her not to leave him. She wanted him to wallow. Then she could be the magnanimous one, the understanding one, working through her anger and betrayal before finally forgiving him.

Even when Jake had left her, she'd wanted to forgive him. She'd cycled through anger and grief over the next few weeks, but she was so lonely that she would have taken him back in a heartbeat if he'd asked.

This was another fundamental weakness in her, she realized, staring at Scott's profile, the taut muscles of his jaw and shoulders. Her willingness to forgive something unforgivable just so she wouldn't be alone again.

Scott looked up as if something had occurred to him. "Where are the girls?"

"They're with Liv." Molly's body felt heavy, exhausted from the emotions of the past several hours. "She offered to watch them so we could talk. I can get them whenever we're ready."

"Are you?" he asked, glancing over at her. "Ready, I mean?"

"No," she said. "But I don't think I'll ever be."

forty-one

Family doesn't have to mean the people you're related to by blood. For me, "family" means the people who have your back. One hundred percent, forever and always, no matter what.

—*An Invincible Summer: A Memoir*

Liv returned to the kitchen, still smiling about her brother's last words. She found Chloe holding a ball of dough in her hand, smashing it against her fingers until both hands were sticky.

"You are such a mess, sweet girl!" She lifted Chloe up into the air, spinning her around while the little girl squealed. Then she set her down by the kitchen sink and washed her hands for the third time. After that, she placed Chloe on a stool at the kitchen counter with paper and crayons to color, while Liv started cleaning up. Ella followed her over to the kitchen sink to help.

"What do you know about your mother?" Liv asked, hardly believing her own audacity. An adult would have found that question strange, but Ella answered easily.

"Not much."

"Does your dad talk about her?"

Ella gave a small shrug, looking far older than her years. “Not really. Until Molly found a picture of me and my mom and dad from the hospital when I was born. Then he told me some stuff.”

“What did he say?”

Ella seemed focused on drying the dish, but her voice grew smaller. “That she was pretty. And smart and funny and nice. And she loved me very, very much.”

Liv’s eyes filled with tears. “I’m sure she did.”

She wanted to ask Ella how her mother had died—or at least, what she knew. And that made her wonder what was happening with Molly and Scott, how the conversation was going. She hoped that everything would work out. That Scott could calm Molly’s worries.

Because if Molly could forgive Scott, if she could get past his deception—loving him in spite of it—maybe she could get past Liv’s deception, too.

Liv handed Ella a cookie sheet. “Do you know how your parents met?”

“At a party,” Ella said, drying the cookie sheet with a dish towel. “My dad noticed her as soon as she walked in the room. Long black hair down to her waist, sparkly brown eyes, and the best laugh he’d ever heard in his life.” Ella smiled up at Liv—a full smile this time. “He said I look like her a little bit.”

Liv almost said *You look like her a lot*, but caught herself. “I bet you do. You have sparkly brown eyes, too.” She jumped as her phone vibrated in her back pocket. She wiped her hands on the dishtowel and pulled the phone out to see a text from Molly.

I'm on my way to pick up the girls.

Are things OK?

I told Scott I wouldn't talk about it with anyone else. Sorry. But yes, things are okay for the moment.

Heat flooded Liv's cheeks—a hot shame that Scott had told Molly not to talk about it with her. As if Liv had done something wrong, overstepped her bounds as a friend. Which she had, of course.

She set her phone back on the kitchen counter and ruffled a hand through Chloe's hair. "Your mom's on her way here to get you."

"Oh," Ella said behind her, sounding disappointed.

"I want to stay longer!" Chloe said.

"You can come back another time," Liv told them. "How about we make a plate of cookies to take home?"

Chloe clapped her hands and jumped up to run into the kitchen.

Just after they had piled a plate high with warm cookies, there was a knock at the door.

"Ella, you finish putting the last few on the plate, okay? I'll go talk to Molly." Liv dusted her hands on her shorts, then walked to the door. Hopefully the girls would stay occupied long enough to get at least a moment alone with Molly.

Liv opened the door and blinked, confused. She saw Molly, her eyes red and puffy, a tentative smile on her face.

And next to her, a tall, broad-shouldered man with sandy blond hair.

Scott. Sam. Her breath caught and she felt a spark of panic. Then she told herself he wouldn't recognize her. It had been ten years. She looked completely different. She smiled, as if she knew nothing about him, nothing about what had happened between him and Kristina years ago, nothing about what had happened between him and Molly tonight.

His eyes widened, and his mouth fell open. "Olivia?"

forty-two

You never see someone's true colors until the road gets rocky. It's easy to put on a good front when life is smooth; but when it gets rough, that's when true character is revealed.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Scott had the strangest expression on his face, Molly thought. As if he had stumbled across some long-forgotten artifact, buried for a thousand years.

"This is my friend Liv," Molly told him. Maybe he was still dazed from their conversation.

But Liv seemed dazed, too. An old flame, perhaps? No, the energy crackling between them didn't seem like the energy of attraction. It was white-hot. Angry.

"Olivia," Scott said again, his voice flat and hard, his eyes locked onto Liv's face. She looked frozen, her eyes two dark spots, her lips a vivid red. "You're Olivia, right? Kristina's . . ."

Liv didn't respond. She seemed stuck in some kind of cement, turned to stone.

Molly's heart started pounding. "How do you know her?"

But Scott didn't answer. His voice sharpened as he demanded of Liv, "Why are you here? What's going on?"

"I already told you, she's watching the girls," Molly said.

Then she remembered Ella and Chloe, who were watching from the middle of Liv's living room, eyes wide. "Go get in the car, girls," she said to them, trying to force a smile. It felt foreign on her face.

Neither girl moved. Chloe was smiling, oblivious to the tension, her clothes covered in something beige and sticky. Ella's gaze snapped between her father and Liv, the plate of cookies in her hands tipping toward the floor.

"Ella!" Molly said, her voice coming out sharper than intended. Ella startled, but she righted the plate. "Go wait in the car, please, and share a cookie with Chloe. We'll be right out."

Ella walked out the door, shepherding Chloe with one arm, her eyes still on Scott and Liv.

Once the girls were safely away, Molly turned back to her husband and friend.

"Will someone please tell me what's going on?" she said, her voice rising with a note of hysteria.

"Olivia," Scott said, still staring at Liv. "Why don't you explain things? Starting with why you're here, in Durango, and ending with why you're baking cookies with my daughter."

Liv's eyes, dark and wild, met Molly's. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen. But then I met you," she nodded at Molly, "and Ella and I just . . ." She squeezed her eyes shut, a tear escaping between her dark lashes. "I'm sorry."

Molly's chest constricted. Some crucial piece of information was missing, that was obvious, and she kept looking back and forth, as if she could put it together by studying their faces.

"I don't understand," she managed to say.

"Did you come here looking for me?" Scott said to Liv, still not acknowledging Molly.

Liv put a hand to her mouth, then nodded.

"What?" Molly said.

"How did you find me?" Scott demanded.

Liv's hands started to shake, and Molly watched as the trembling in her fingers spread up her arms until even her lips were trembling. "It was the picture Molly posted of you. When you got engaged. I saw it and I recognized you and I . . ."

Molly's mind jumped back to the morning after she'd posted that picture, waking up to see Scott standing over her, anger clouding his features.

"And then you sought out my *wife*?" Scott shouted, making Liv flinch. "And our *daughters*? And became friends with them so you could—what? Turn me in? Send me to prison?"

Molly had the vague sense that everything was shifting, her world dissolving like chalk sidewalk drawings in the rain. "No," she said, confused. "Chloe ran into Liv at the park. You weren't looking for us." She looked at Liv. "Right?"

Liv sent her a pleading glance. "I'm sorry, Molly."

"You came here looking for Scott?" she whispered.

"I saw the picture . . ." Liv trailed off.

That picture. And Scott's reaction. What Molly had interpreted as annoyance—a private man's reluctance to engage with social media—had been fear. Fear of this exact occurrence, of being discovered by someone who knew his past. And she, Molly Sullivan, had made it a reality.

She should have felt triumphant—if he had been honest with her, she never would have posted that picture. But instead her chest felt hollow. What was Liv planning on doing?

“She's Kristina's sister, Molly,” Scott said in a hard voice. “How could you be so gullible?”

Molly flinched at his tone but spoke to Liv. “You knew all along? This entire time?”

It crystallized then: running into Liv at the park; outside the bakery. She'd posted on Instagram about those outings—it would have been easy for anyone to find her. And then, Molly realized with a wave of horror, she'd invited Liv into her *home*, into her life. She'd trusted her.

But it didn't make sense. When Molly had been panicking, certain her husband was a murderer, Liv had talked her down, tried to make her see that none of what she'd read online was conclusive. If Liv had befriended her to find Scott and turn him in, why had she done all of that?

“What are you going to do, Olivia?” Scott said, his voice sharp as a broken bottle. “Call the FBI? What about Ella, what about Molly and Chloe? It would ruin their lives.” His voice dropped. “Is that what you want?”

“No,” Liv whispered, those bright spots on her cheeks burning like she'd been slapped.

“Then why?” Molly asked, desperate for answers.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen like this,” Liv started, glancing between Scott and Molly like a caged animal. “I came here to find him, yes, and—and then I met you, and I met Ella. I wanted to know her, and . . .”

Molly wanted to break in and explain to Scott what Liv had done—that without Liv, Molly would have taken the girls and left him, wouldn’t have even given him a chance to explain.

But then she glanced behind her out the open door to see the car parked on the side of the road. Chloe and Ella were inside, windows rolled down. Ella stared out the window, listening to the adults’ conversation. Molly hoped she wasn’t catching any of it.

Scott glanced behind him, too. “We’re done here.”

“But wait, I still don’t understand . . .”

“What’s to understand?” he said, his voice rising. “Your *friend* has been lying to you since the day you met her. And yes,” he glared at Liv, “I know what I did. Believe me, I know. But I won’t allow you to ruin my daughter’s life.”

He grabbed Molly by the upper arm, his grip painful, and steered her out the door.

“Wait,” she said, trying to twist away. “I want to talk about this.”

But Scott marched her down the walk to the car, where Ella stared wide-eyed from the back seat.

“You’re hurting me,” Molly whispered to Scott, tears forming in her eyes. She couldn’t comprehend how had they gotten to this moment. Just an hour earlier they’d decided to go slowly, to move carefully. How had her husband changed

from that quiet, thoughtful person to this angry man with an iron grip on her arm?

At least she hadn't told Liv about the things she'd found in the Westfalia, the ones that linked Scott directly to the murder. At least she didn't know that.

Although, Molly realized, she had no idea what Liv knew.

"Hang on," she said to Scott. "I want to talk with her."

Scott's grip didn't relax a millimeter. "Get in the car."

forty-three

Something's going on in your house tonight.

According to your normal work schedule, you should be off on a three-day river run. But instead, you're home. Sitting in the backyard by yourself.

That's strange. You've changed your schedule in the past—that time you took your wife away for the weekend—but you aren't with her now. She's upstairs in her office, but she's not working.

She's watching you. Silhouetted against the yellow glow of her window. I can't see her expression, but she seems tense.

Something has happened between you. Your fault, I'm guessing, based on how much you've had to drink tonight. In all the time I've been watching you, I haven't taken you for much of a drinker. What did you do to your poor, sweet wife, Sam?

Not that your marriage problems matter to me. Even if you're drunk, tonight isn't the right time for me to make my move. I've worked out a plan, but I need the conditions to be just right.

First: I need your wife alone, or with the younger girl.

Second: I need you, Sam, out of the house—but not on a river rafting trip. I need you fairly close by.

And third: I need your German Shepherd gone. That damn dog won't let me get within fifty feet of your wife without waking up the entire neighborhood.

forty-four

When your world has changed, your only option is to change with it.

—*An Invincible Summer: A Memoir*

Liv opened her eyes to the sound of a knock on her front door.

Shit. She rolled over to glance at her phone—7:04 a.m. She'd overslept, unable to fall asleep after the confrontation with Scott and Molly. She kept seeing the look on Scott's face—worse, on Molly's—and worst of all, on Ella's. The shocked confusion morphed into shocked betrayal.

Another knock at her front door made her bolt upright. Jeremiah. They were supposed to go on a run together.

“Liv?” His muffled voice carried from her front door.

She couldn't face him, not today, so she picked up her phone and sent him a text, then sank back into bed:

Not feeling well.

That sucks. Can I come in?

I don't want to get you sick.

Okay

Call me later?

Sure.

Although she wouldn't. She'd been deluding herself, thinking she could keep these people she'd grown to love—not just Ella, but Molly and messy little Chloe. And funny, challenging, sweet, contradictory Jeremiah.

A sob threatened to escape, and she stuck a pillow over her head. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Staying in Durango wasn't an option. All she could hope was that she hadn't damaged Molly and Scott's lives beyond repair. Maybe once she was gone, Scott would realize she wasn't a risk. But she wouldn't have been a risk in the first place if he hadn't kidnapped Ella. He was at fault here, too.

She didn't expect forgiveness from Molly, but maybe someday she could write a letter to Ella. Let her know something about her mother, about the family who loved her.

Last night, Liv had tried to call Oliver, but he hadn't answered. He wasn't responding to her texts, either, and Liv felt abandoned. She needed her brother to help her think through this.

On the other hand, maybe it wouldn't help to talk to him. He would give her an *I told you so* lecture and go on about *long-term solutions* again. She was too heartsick for that. She'd ruined any chance of having a relationship with Ella, she'd ruined her only friendship in years, and she might have destroyed Molly's marriage.

Another sob started to squeeze her throat, and she forced herself to take deep breaths. She had two weeks left at her job,

but she could get out of it. Make up some kind of family emergency. It wouldn't even be a lie.

Her only option, at this point, was to leave. She would text Molly and let her know she was leaving town. Reassure Molly that she wouldn't tell anyone a thing about Scott's past, that all she wanted was for Ella to be safe and happy.

forty-five

“I am, and always will be, the optimist. The hoper of far-flung hopes, and the dreamer of improbable dreams.”

—Eleventh Doctor

Pinned to Molly’s Pinterest board

“Words to Live By”

The next morning, Molly was ready to talk.

After leaving Liv’s the night before, Scott had driven them home silently. The girls must have known something was wrong, because they went to bed without a fuss. Scott didn’t say another word, just headed out to the backyard with a six-pack of beer and a bottle of scotch.

Molly had gone to her office to get some space from him. Partly because she had no idea how he would act if he got drunk—and she didn’t want to find out—but mostly because she needed to sort through what she’d learned about Liv. Setting aside her feelings of betrayal, she’d tried to put herself in Liv’s shoes, to imagine losing her sister and niece in one horrible night. Of course Liv would want to see Ella. But did that mean she planned to turn Scott in? Try to get custody of Ella for herself?

She wasn't ready to talk to Liv about this yet—the deception felt too fresh—and Molly was grateful she hadn't told her about the other things she'd found, or about Scott's confession. Not only had he taken his daughter away and changed his identity, he had killed someone—accidentally, and sort of in self-defense, but would a judge and jury agree? They wouldn't have seen Kristina agitated, lunging toward Scott. His daughter, malnourished and neglected.

The weight of that sank into Molly's chest. Ella could have died if Scott hadn't shown up. From neglect, from some sort of accident, at the hands of a drug dealer coming into Kristina's apartment. Scott had saved Ella from that.

Molly believed in responsibility and accountability, in theory. But if Scott had stuck around, he might have gone to prison. Which meant his little girl would have gone—where? Not to Liv, who'd been a teenager at the time. Maybe there was other family, but Molly didn't know. Ella might have ended up in foster care.

She then put herself in Scott's shoes, twenty-three years old, alone and afraid, trying to protect his baby girl. Could Molly blame him? If Chloe were in a similar situation—the thought made her sick—she would have done anything to keep her safe.

Bottom line: Molly *knew* Scott. In every other circumstance, he had never been anything but honorable, trustworthy, and selfless. She may not have known the details of his past, but she knew his character. Didn't she?

Maybe she was deluded, blinded by her feelings for him, or so committed to the fantasy of a perfect marriage that she couldn't allow herself to see the relationship clearly. That had

happened with her first husband; she'd ignored the warning signs.

But still. Something about the situation with Scott didn't make sense.

When Molly went to the kitchen for breakfast, Scott was already sitting at the table, looking hungover as he sipped his coffee. Despite how awful he must be feeling, he'd fixed a mug for her, and she hoped that meant something. If not an apology, at least an olive branch. She sat across the table from him and took a sip. Except for his bloodshot eyes and weary expression, except for the dread sitting like a weight in her stomach, it was the same thing they'd done all summer.

"We need to talk," she said, trying to keep her voice calm, measured. "Please look at me."

She said the words gently as she touched his hand, and his eyes met hers. This time she saw the apology in them, the regret she hadn't seen the day before, a raw sorrow and bleak hopelessness that took her breath away.

"Scott," she said, and tried to pour all the love she felt for him into his name. "I hate that you've been living with guilt over everything that happened. I know you'll never forgive yourself. But when I think about it, I can't help thinking that what you did . . ." She took a breath. "Maybe it was better for Ella."

"Don't say that—"

"It was a tragedy, what happened. A horrible tragedy, but Ella has come out okay. She's grown up in a safe home with a wonderful father. She never would have had any of that if—"

"No," he said, suddenly fierce. "Don't pretend like what I did was some heroic act. My daughter's mother is dead, Molly.

No amount of positive parenting can erase that. I hope to God Ella never finds out what happened, but she'll always live with the consequences. She'll never know her mother."

Molly gripped his arm, trying to make him understand. "But is that such a horrible thing, Scott? Her mother was—"

"You didn't know Kristina." He rubbed his face, looking so exhausted she wondered if he'd slept at all. "She went through hell the year Ella was born. Her dad died within a few months of Ella's birth, her mom was in prison. Ella wasn't an easy baby, never slept more than a couple hours at a time, always crying. Colic, the doctor said. Yeah, Kris struggled. But I have no doubt that if I hadn't made a stupid, rash decision that night, she would've gotten back on track. She would've been a wonderful mother to Ella."

"But you don't know that. Scott, look at me. You don't know if she would have gotten better. She could have gotten worse. Ella was already in danger—"

He shook his head. "Don't give me a pass on this, Molly. It was *my* fault. *My* responsibility. I . . ." He stopped himself, shaking his head.

"What?" she asked. "What are you not telling me?"

"Nothing." But he wouldn't meet her gaze.

Molly's eyes pricked with tears at the guilt lacing his voice. "I'm sorry about Liv," she said. "I didn't know . . ."

His mouth twisted. "She manipulated you, weaseled her way into our lives."

"I think she just wanted to find her niece—"

"She can't ever see Ella again." Scott's jaw tightened. "You understand that, right?"

“But they’re family, Ella and Liv. You should see how well they get along. I’m not saying we need to tell Ella the whole truth, but can we figure out how to explain it? I think Liv needs Ella, and Ella definitely needs Liv.”

He dismissed that with a quick shake of his head. “It puts us at risk, don’t you see?”

“But if you met her, if you had a chance to talk to her . . .”

He barked a laugh. “That’s a wonderful idea. Hang out with the one person in the world who could ruin my life, and my daughter’s life.”

“I don’t think she wants to ruin anyone’s life, Scott.”

“It’s too risky.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Molly exhaled in frustration. “Because if you’re trying to cast Liv as some kind of villain, you’re missing the point. This is an opportunity to come together, to connect, to be vulnerable together—”

“To connect? To be vulnerable?” He shook his head. “You can’t use your social media skills to get through this. This is real life.”

She sat back, stung by his dismissive tone. “Do you have a better idea?”

He didn’t meet her eyes. “I’ve been stashing cash for years, new passports—in case something like this happened.” The edge in his voice startled her. “Option one: pay Olivia off. Not sure if that will work—she could come back wanting more. Option two: we run, Ella and I. Start over somewhere else, new identities, new job, everything.”

She noted that when he said, “we run,” he didn’t include her and Chloe. She didn’t know how to feel about that—she

had no intention of starting her life over, but it hurt that he didn't want her. That he could leave her without a second thought.

“Or,” she said, trying to sound reasonable, “we talk to Liv and try to understand what she wants. Not just pay her off—come to some sort of agreement. Try to see her side.”

He didn't answer, his eyes still fixed on his coffee mug. Probably thinking through his options. Maybe planning his escape. The thought terrified her.

She took his hand in both of hers, holding it until he met her eyes. “Yesterday you asked me to move slowly, to not make any sudden decisions. But now I'm worried you're going to make a rash decision. Promise me you won't, Scott. Let's think about it. Let's talk to Liv—”

“If she hasn't already called the FBI.”

“I don't think she'd do that. I think she wants what's best for Ella.”

He shook his head, but said, “Fine. Let's talk to her later tonight. Today I need some time with Ella. Some father-daughter time.”

Molly didn't love the idea—she would have preferred to do something together as a family, but she understood. Scott needed to center himself, and part of that was reconnecting with his daughter. “Okay, Chloe and I could use the time to go school shopping.”

“Thank you,” he said.

Then he stood and came around to her side of the table, going down on one knee in front of her, taking her hands in his own. She blinked in confusion—the last time he had knelt at her feet coming to her in a rush of breathtaking clarity.

They had gone for a walk in the woods around his house one morning while the girls were still asleep. It was early spring, the ground still wet from melted snow. They had walked only a short distance when he stopped and faced her. She remembered how nervous he had seemed, how for an instant she'd thought he was going to break up with her. But then he'd dropped to one knee. And all her fears had fallen away.

He had spoken softly, humbly, as if he were asking a favor of her. *Will you marry me, Molly girl?* As if he expected her to say no, but couldn't stop himself from trying, anyway. She had fallen even deeper in love, watching this big man struggling to keep the tears from his eyes as he told her that he loved her, needed her, that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

In their kitchen in Durango, he didn't ask her to marry him, but he did speak in the same quiet, sincere voice. And just like the first time, her heart swelled with love for him.

"Molly girl," he said. "You are the best thing that has happened to me in nine years. I swear I never wanted to hurt you, and I can't express how sorry I am. I will do whatever it takes to make sure you are never hurt again. I know you can't trust me anymore, but I hope you can trust this." His voice caught, and he squeezed her hands. "I have loved you from the day I met you. I have loved you every day since then. I will love you until my dying day."

This was everything she had wanted—the apology, the regret, the declaration of love. But something else in his voice—desperation?—sent a flare of worry through her mind. There was something he wasn't telling her. Something he was holding back.

“We can work through this,” Molly said, as much to herself as to him. “I’m not going anywhere. Do you understand? I’m staying right here, Scott.”

He pulled her against his chest, crushing her with an embrace that knocked the breath from her lungs. She wrapped her arms around him and closed her eyes.

forty-six

The hardest thing about betrayal is that it never comes from your enemies.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv parked in front of Jeremiah's house, pausing to collect her thoughts. She'd contacted her temp agency and told them about the family emergency. Then she'd packed her things, leaving the beige apartment just as she had found it. For the first time in her life, packing had been difficult. Painful, even. The apartment was too full of memories, even after just a few weeks. No matter how hard she'd shoved them away, they kept elbowing their way back.

Memories of mornings she'd walked out that front door, excited to meet Jeremiah for a run. Memories of the nights in bed with him. The evening—was it just yesterday?—she'd spent with Chloe and Ella, baking cookies. A delusional dream world, yes, but a beautiful one.

She'd considered leaving town without telling Jeremiah. But she knew that if the situation were reversed, she would at least want him to say goodbye. She owed that to him.

Still, she had to force herself to get out of the car and walk up to his front door. The sky had clouded over, heavy and slate-gray, but still no break from the high temperatures. If

anything, the heat seemed more oppressive today. A thunderstorm was coming this evening, the radio announcer had said, but by then Liv would be long gone.

Jeremiah opened his door with a surprised look on his face. “You feeling better?” he said, leaning in for a kiss. When she took a step back, his eyebrows wrinkled together. “What’s going on?”

“I need to talk to you.”

He led her into his living room where she sat on the edge of his faded leather sofa, his three bikes to her right. He sat opposite her and leaned forward. “Talk, Liv. You’re scaring me.”

She exhaled. “I’m leaving. Something came up and I can’t stay here anymore.”

“You’re . . .” His expression went blank. “Why?”

She couldn’t tell him—not because she didn’t want him to know about her past, but because she would never spill Scott’s secrets to someone else. For Molly’s sake, at least.

“I can’t explain all of it,” she said, “but I will say I’m sorry.”

Jeremiah’s confused expression deepened into hurt. “I thought you had a few more weeks at your job.”

“I’m leaving early.”

“What happened?”

She shook her head, throat tightening. “Nothing. I just can’t stay here anymore.”

At that, he stood abruptly and walked to the window, gazing out at the gray sky. “I guess I’m not surprised you’re

freaking out.”

That stung, but she knew how this must seem to him. He had opened up to her, that night in the valley under the stars. He’d admitted this scared him, and now he thought she was pushing him away.

“This isn’t how I wanted this to end,” she said, wishing she could say so much more.

He still didn’t look at her. “So you expected it to end.”

“No, I—I hoped it wouldn’t,” she said, stumbling over her words. “I was looking at another job here, actually, thinking I would stay and see where things went between us, but . . .” She trailed off, not able to explain for fear of giving away too much.

“Instead you’re running away.”

“No, I—”

He turned and faced her, eyes blazing with frustration. “That’s what you do, Liv. Right? You never stay long in one place so you don’t have to get involved with anyone. You’d rather go live in some bland apartment than deal with an actual, real relationship.”

“I need to go home,” she said. Oliver would be on his way to Pittsburgh soon, and she figured she’d head that direction.

Jeremiah seemed even more frustrated by her response. “You’d rather be in fucking Pennsylvania than with me?”

Liv blinked. “I never told you I was from Pennsylvania.”

Jeremiah paused, a fraction too long. “Yes, you did. The first time I met you.”

She never would have said that. A whisper of fear crept up her spine. “I said I was from California. You said I didn’t look like a California girl.”

“You must have mentioned it another time. I don’t know—that’s not the point, Liv. The point is—”

“How do you know where I’m from?” The fear grew, and she stared at him, willing him to answer her, to explain, but his eyes slid away. “Jeremiah,” she said. “Tell me.”

He put his hands in his pockets and tilted his head, the heat of his frustration cooling. “Fine. If you want to do this, let’s do this. I know quite a few things about you. Olivia Barrett. Younger half-sister to Kristina Casillas.”

“How . . .” Her heart dropped into her gut.

“How do I know? I recognized you the first time I saw you.”

“At the coffee shop?”

“No,” he said, a slight scoff in his voice. “I never would have noticed you there.”

Of course not—someone like Jeremiah would never notice someone like her, would never voluntarily seek her out and make conversation with her.

Then she realized where he must have seen her, and it all fell into place. “You were at the Wander Far office when I stopped by looking for Scott.”

He dipped his chin. “Someone comes in asking questions about my best friend—where he’s from, his work schedule—I take notice. It made me nervous.”

His best friend. Her heart dropped further. “You said you weren’t friends with Scott.”

“I lied.”

The magnitude of that sank in, like a slow-moving bullet toward her spine, piercing new layers of bone and tissue. He had been faking it all these weeks, every kiss, every touch. Laughing at her, pretending to care about her. Her stomach twisted.

“When did you know I was Kristina’s sister?” she managed, just above a whisper. “I’ve never seen you before.”

“That’s true—but I’ve seen you.” His face settled into hard lines. “Your little face in your bedroom window, watching Scott. Listening to everything he said to your grandmother.”

“What? Where were you?”

“In Scott’s car. I was with him the entire night.”

His words were a hard kick to the gut—not just the pain of impact, the surprising shock of it, but the nausea that followed. The sense that all her organs had been displaced, suddenly and violently.

“After that, meeting on the run—was it just a coincidence?”

“I followed you from the coffee shop to your apartment afterward. I started keeping an eye on your routines. Your pattern was easy to figure out. Early morning runs, always along the east side. I decided to catch up with you and find out more about you.”

Liv cringed, thinking about racing Jeremiah up the hill, teasing him at the top, and running with him afterward. “That’s why you asked me out.”

“Yes,” he said, as if she was stupid for thinking otherwise. “I don’t know why you’re upset. You were doing the same

thing with me.”

“No, I wasn’t.” She faced him, anger simmering below the pain. “I didn’t know you were Scott’s friend until last week. And at that point I was already—” She cut herself off before she said too much—before she admitted she had started fantasizing about staying with him. “Surely there were easier ways to keep tabs on me than to seduce me.”

He shrugged, and her heart felt bruised. “You know what they say. Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.”

Something snapped inside Liv. He looked like a stranger now, and she couldn’t believe she had been worried about *his* feelings if she left without saying goodbye. She wanted to rage at him, to punish him for making her feel something for him—to feel again, period. After so many years spent keeping the world at bay, she had opened up to him. Now everything seemed too intense, her feelings terrifying and vivid, and it was his fault. He had done this to her.

But before she could say anything, her phone pinged. A text from Molly.

Scott’s gone.

Her face must have paled, because Jeremiah took a step forward. “What’s wrong?”

Without thinking, she turned the phone and showed him.

forty-seven

Honesty means more when it's inconvenient.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Molly had been out all afternoon with Chloe, and when they returned, lugging bags from their shopping trip, the house was dark and silent. The air felt stale, undisturbed. She swallowed, worry bubbling inside her.

Bitsy woke from where she lay on her bed by the back door and trotted over to Chloe and Ella for a belly scratch.

“Where’s Hoopi, Bits?” Molly murmured, running her hands through her dog’s fur.

Maybe Scott had taken his dog with him. Molly headed down the hall toward Chloe’s bedroom with the shopping bags, glancing into Ella’s bedroom as she passed. She did a double take.

Ella’s bedroom was nearly empty.

The furniture was there, the bedding, the lamp on her nightstand. But everything personal was gone. The photograph of Scott and Kristina—gone. The book Ella had been reading—gone. The clutter of shells and rocks and dried flowers on the dresser—gone.

With a sinking feeling, Molly stepped into the room. A quick look into Ella's dresser drawers and closet revealed that most of her clothes were missing. Her heart pounded as she raced into her own bedroom and threw open Scott's drawers—empty. His side of the closet, too.

Option two: we run.

She sprinted to the backyard where Scott's Westfalia had rested, unmoving, all summer. It wasn't there. That's when she texted Liv, because what else was she supposed to do? She had nowhere else to turn.

When the doorbell rang a few minutes later, Molly settled Chloe in her room with her dollhouse. She didn't know how to explain any of this to her.

She opened the front door to see Liv and Jeremiah. A flash of anger surprised her—she had specifically told Liv not to tell Jeremiah about Scott's past.

But one look at the two of them and Molly knew something else was going on. Tense and quiet, they stood as far apart as possible. They'd come in separate cars—she could see Liv's little sedan and Jeremiah's Jeep parked in front of her house.

“Why is he here?” Molly asked Liv.

Liv blinked, surprised. “You don't know that he knows?”

“Knows what?” Molly said, turning to Jeremiah. “Scott said he hadn't told anyone else.”

“Well,” Jeremiah said, shifting his weight and looking at his feet. “He didn't *tell* me.”

“Then what are you talking about?” Molly asked, frustration simmering beneath her worry. She was tired of

feeling one step behind, of not knowing the real story.

Liv and Jeremiah exchanged a glance—hurt and anger in Liv’s expression; shame and guilt in Jeremiah’s—and Molly knew she must be missing some crucial piece of information.

“He was there,” Liv said, her voice quiet. “The night Kristina died.”

Molly stared at Jeremiah. She never would have guessed Jeremiah knew about Scott’s past—they had never seemed close. Scott hardly spoke to Jeremiah, except for terse conversations about the business.

Just one more lie, but it felt like a slap on already-sore skin. She had known, deep down, that Scott hadn’t told her the entire story.

“Scott didn’t say anything about you being with him that night,” she said to Jeremiah.

He nodded, and the guilty look on his face intensified. “He’s always tried to protect me.”

“Protect you from what?” Liv asked. She was pale, but her eyes sparked with fury.

If Jeremiah had been there, had he also known Liv was Kristina’s sister? He certainly hadn’t told Scott—Scott’s shock at seeing Liv had been genuine.

“Miah,” Molly said, “I want to know what happened.”

Jeremiah shook his head, exasperated. “It’ll have to wait—we need to find him before he does anything stupid.”

But Molly folded her arms. She wasn’t letting him get away with that. “No, I need to know what really happened. Then I can decide if he’s worth finding at all.”

A few minutes later, they were settled in the living room. The cloudy sky made the room seem muted, bleached of color. Jeremiah sat in one of the yellow armchairs. Liv stood awkwardly, as far from him as possible. Molly sat in the other chair and waited for Jeremiah to start talking.

“You should know,” he said, “neither of us have breathed a word about this for nearly nine years. We’ve hardly talked about it to each other.”

“Just tell me,” Molly said, impatient. “And please make it the truth.”

Although she wondered how she would recognize the truth, even if Jeremiah told it.

Jeremiah sighed, leaning forward with his hands on his knees. “It’s not a pretty story.”

He was looking at Liv, and her face went even paler. Once again Molly was reminded that this was Liv’s *sister* they were talking about. Her sister had been murdered. Her niece had been kidnapped. Liv swayed on her feet, and Molly went to her.

“You should sit down,” she said.

Liv blinked, as if coming out of a daze, and allowed Molly to direct her to the sofa. Molly sat again and turned to Jeremiah. “Start with how you met Scott.”

Jeremiah exhaled, then said, “My parents divorced when I was ten years old. My mom remarried a couple years later and moved to Ohio. My new stepdad had a son of his own. Sam is three years older than me.”

Shock ricocheted through her. “He’s your stepbrother?”

Jeremiah nodded. “I spent my summers in Durango with my dad, but other than that, I lived in Ohio with my mom. I was always tagging after Sam—”

“Don’t call him that,” Molly said, surprised at the edge in her voice. “It makes him seem like a different person.”

And she needed to remember, as she heard this story, that it was about Scott, the man she knew as her husband. Calling him by a different name, even if it was his real name, made the whole thing seem like it had happened to someone else. She needed to remember this was happening to her, right now.

Jeremiah nodded and continued. “I was always tagging after Scott, growing up. He felt like the big brother I always wanted, but also my best friend. He even came to Durango once, during a summer break in college. He loved it here.” He paused, his eyes focusing. “The summer after my sophomore year in college, I was living in Pennsylvania with him. He was planning on starting law school in the fall at NYU, but he was worried about being so far away from Ella. Kristina wasn’t doing well.”

He glanced over at Liv, who sat perfectly erect on the couch, her dark eyes blazing.

“What happened that night?” Molly prompted.

“I’ll get there,” Jeremiah said. “I need to tell you about Scott and Kristina first. They met while he was a senior at Ohio State, and he fell hard and fast for her. When Kristina broke up with him, it was rough. He came home for a break—spring break, I think—and he was a disaster. Not showering, hardly sleeping. Anyway, when Kristina showed back up saying she was pregnant, he was actually pretty thrilled. He asked her to marry him.”

Molly glanced over at Liv, who looked as surprised as Molly felt. “This isn’t at all how Scott described their relationship,” Molly said.

Jeremiah nodded. “That doesn’t surprise me—she broke his heart. And he loved his baby girl. Little Ella. His world revolved around her.”

That part didn’t surprise Molly. “Go on,” she prompted.

Jeremiah shifted his weight. “The night everything happened, Scott was at a fundraiser for this nonprofit he worked for. He had too much to drink and started talking about Ella, how he was worried about her, and how Kristina didn’t want him around. I’m guessing he was annoying the guests because his boss told him to go home. Scott called me to pick him up.”

Scott seemed mildly drunk but mostly upset, Jeremiah told them. He could see that his stepbrother wasn’t going to feel better until he could see his daughter, so Jeremiah suggested they drive to Kristina’s place and check on Ella.

Kristina’s apartment was vacant, however, and Scott got even more nervous. He had good reason—Kristina had disappeared once before, when he called social services on her. Since then, he’d always worried she would take Ella somewhere and not tell him.

After that, Jeremiah drove Scott across town to Kristina’s grandmother’s house.

“That’s when I saw Liv,” Jeremiah said, looking at the floor. “She was watching Scott from the window.”

Molly glanced at Liv. Her eyes had a faraway look in them, like she was back there again, a teenager on the night her sister was killed.

When they arrived at Kristina's new place, Jeremiah continued, Scott ran into the apartment. Jeremiah waited in the truck with the window rolled down—it was a hot night. Then he heard shouting, jumped out, and ran inside.

The apartment was in chaos: Kristina on the couch, bloody and unresponsive. Scott stood in the middle of the room, grappling with a man holding a gun. As Jeremiah entered, the man was distracted for a split second. Before Jeremiah could even realize what was happening, a gunshot echoed through the apartment, blood splattering the wall behind the man, who fell to his knees. A red blossom of blood appeared near his right shoulder.

Scott had pulled the trigger.

Jeremiah froze, terrified, but Scott took a step forward. “Get up,” he said, pointing the gun at the man. “Go.”

The man grinned and spat a mouthful of blood on the carpet as he stood. “If you were smart, you'd finish me off.”

Scott's jaw clenched. “Just leave.”

With another grimace, the man was off, limping out the door, leaving a trail of ruby-red blood drops behind him.

After he left, Scott searched the apartment for Ella. Jeremiah stayed in the living room with Kristina. Her face was bloody, her nose broken, but she was breathing. Barely. Not opening her eyes, her lips and fingertips tinged blue.

“I didn't know what to do,” Jeremiah said, glancing at Liv apologetically. “I was shaking so badly I could hardly stand, so I sat on the floor next to her. Tried to wake her up.”

Molly imagined a young version of Jeremiah, thrust into a scene that must have felt like something out of a horror movie. Blood on the carpet, blood on the walls, a broken and battered

woman close to death. A surge of compassion ran through her, and she looked over at Liv, who was crying silently, her eyes still focused on Jeremiah.

“Go on when you’re ready,” Molly said to Jeremiah, who was twisting his hands together, one knee bouncing.

“It took a while, but Scott found Ella,” he said in a shaky voice. “She was so skinny and scared. Scott came over to Kristina to check on her, but then she opened her eyes and saw him holding Ella . . .”

“I know,” Molly said, wanting to hurry the story along. “He and Kristina argued, she was angry, she tried to grab Ella, he pushed her away and she hit her head on the coffee table.”

Liv flinched, her dark eyes jumping to meet Molly’s. “Scott really did it?”

“That’s not what happened,” Jeremiah said quietly. “Scott never would’ve hurt Kristina.”

He fell silent, his lips pressing together until they were nearly white.

“Go on, Miah,” Molly prompted. She had a feeling about what was coming, but she needed to hear him say it. And maybe *Jeremiah* needed to hear himself say it, too. He had kept this truth sequestered inside him for so long; it had started to eat him on the inside.

He took a breath. “Kristina tried to take Ella from Scott, she grabbed her legs and yanked. Ella screamed and Scott stumbled and I . . .”

Jeremiah stopped, squeezing his eyes shut. He stayed silent for so long Molly started to get worried. She looked over at Liv, who was crying openly now, tears running down her cheeks and into her mouth. Molly felt like an outsider,

intruding on a private moment between two people she cared about, each on their own island of grief and regret.

“You pushed her,” Liv whispered. Her voice was soft, not accusing, but Jeremiah cringed. He looked miserable, full of all the regret Molly hadn’t seen in Scott’s face—and now she understood why. Because Scott wasn’t dealing with guilt from killing the mother of his child. He was dealing with anger at the person who’d done it, the young man who was like a brother to him. A young man he then felt the need to protect, because it was his fault Jeremiah had been there in the first place. This was why Scott could barely look at Miah, barely speak to him. Why he hadn’t told Molly the truth, even when she pressed him. He was protecting his brother.

“I didn’t mean to push her so hard,” Jeremiah said, his voice like an open wound. “I was worried about Ella. I don’t know why Kris had a marble-topped coffee table—but she landed wrong. I swear to god, it was an accident.”

Molly knew his words were for Liv, only for Liv. But she wasn’t sure if Liv could hear them, or if she was nine years in the past, in a blood-spattered apartment, watching her sister dying in front of her.

After a moment, Jeremiah went on. “Scott didn’t want to leave Kristina. He was holding her face and crying. I’ve never seen or heard anything like that in my entire life. Ella was crying, too, and I didn’t know how to calm her.”

Molly closed her eyes and listened as the story washed over her. At some point Scott turned around and saw his daughter, Jeremiah said, and it was like a switch flipped in his brain. No more tears, no more emotion. He went silent, rigid. And then he took charge.

He told Jeremiah to get in the car, but Jeremiah could hardly walk. Scott—in pain from his fight, covered in Kristina’s blood—grabbed him and hauled him out of there, Jeremiah in one arm, Ella in the other.

They got in the car, Scott driving this time, stone-cold sober now. They drove to the office where Scott worked. He went in, returned with a bag of cash and a grim expression on his face. All the money from the fundraiser that night—Scott had stolen it.

Then they stopped at the apartment of a woman Scott had been dating. Jeremiah didn’t know her, but Scott went in with a wad of cash, talked to her for a while, and left.

“She lied for him,” Liv whispered. “She told the police Scott was with her all night. He paid her to lie for him. And maybe the neighbor, too.”

Molly hadn’t heard this part of the story, and Jeremiah just shrugged. “All I know is that after that, Scott drove west. I curled up in the backseat with Ella. She fell asleep; I tried not to vomit.”

The next morning, they stopped at a shady-looking used car dealership. Scott bought them each a new car with cash and left his truck in a ditch miles off the highway, license plates removed. After that, he handed Jeremiah a wad of bills and told him to keep driving.

“He said no one knew I had been with him that night, and we should keep it that way,” Jeremiah finished. “I shouldn’t have gone along with it, but I didn’t know what else to do. I kept driving, all the way back to Durango. I didn’t tell anyone what had happened, and I didn’t see Scott again for four years.”

The ledger Scott had kept with lists of sums, Molly thought, the money he donated to the charity—he was paying back what he had taken. The gold cross necklace, the matching tattoo—they hadn't been some sort of souvenir of a crime, but a memento from the girl he had loved and lost.

“Does anyone else know?” she asked. On the couch, Liv seemed to have retreated into herself again, her face like a door slammed shut.

“No one,” Jeremiah said.

“What about Sarah? Doesn't she wonder why Sam changed his name to Scott?”

Jeremiah shook his head. “Sarah's ten years older than me—she was already married and living on base with her husband when my mom remarried. She was so pissed off at her for leaving our dad that she refused to meet our stepdad or his kid. I told her Scott is a friend from college. I'm pretty sure she suspects something, but we've never talked about it.”

“And now he's run off again,” Molly said, leaning back against the chair. “Do you know where he'd go?”

Jeremiah seemed relieved to focus on a task he could accomplish, and he sat forward. “I have some ideas. About a year after he and Ella moved here, something happened that got him nervous. He took off, but I tracked him down, convinced him to come back. He was at an RV park a couple hours west of here. The lady that owns it likes to keep things off the grid—back when marijuana was illegal, she used to sell it. She doesn't keep records of the people staying there, only takes cash.”

Molly wanted to jump in her car and drive there right now, but she couldn't uproot Chloe and she wasn't sure she felt

comfortable leaving her daughter with Liv. “I don’t know what to do,” she whispered.

Jeremiah focused on her, muscles tensed to move, to act. “Molly. Listen to me: Scott will do whatever it takes to keep his daughter with him. And if he’s worried someone is a threat —”

Molly looked up to see Liv watching Jeremiah’s face, her eyes brimming with tears.

“I’ll go,” Liv said, her voice hoarse. “I’ll tell him I’ll keep quiet. Whatever it takes to keep your family together.”

Molly wasn’t sure if their family would stay together, but she didn’t want Scott leaving like this.

“You stay here,” Jeremiah said to her. “In case he comes back. Did you try calling his phone?”

Molly nodded. “It’s going straight to voicemail.”

“He might have ditched it somewhere. Okay, Liv, let’s go,” Jeremiah said, all business.

Liv looked startled. “We’re going together?”

“I’m the only one who knows where he is,” Jeremiah said, “and you’re the only one who can convince him he’s safe to return.”

“Just bring Scott back,” Molly said. “Please.”

forty-eight

The only thing scarier than being vulnerable with someone you hate is being vulnerable with someone you love.

—*An Invincible Summer: A Memoir*

The RV park was a ninety-minute drive from Durango. Which meant an hour and a half of tense, weighted silence in Jeremiah's Jeep. The sky darkened with clouds, a few bolts of heat lightning crackling in the distance. Liv's eyes felt scratchy and dry, her body tight with tension. She didn't know what to say to Jeremiah or how to put her thoughts and feelings into words.

She wanted to be angry, to let the fury surge around him like lava. To make him suffer. But how would that help? Guilt buried him already, and piling more on would do nothing but suffocate him. It might suffocate her, too.

She wanted to question him, to force him to explain his motivation. It didn't make sense that he'd spent so much time with her, when he could have just told Scott at the beginning that she was in town. But she couldn't find the words, or maybe she was too emotionally spent to even try. She kept her eyes straight ahead, watching the highway stretch out like a fat black snake, the clouds a gray ceiling overhead. Jeremiah

drove with his jaw tight and his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel.

Eventually she drifted off to sleep, the past few days catching up to her. When Jeremiah pulled off the highway she jolted upright, blinking.

They were on a dirt road marked with a wooden sign saying NANCY'S in faded, hand-painted letters. Drops of rain dotted the windshield. Jeremiah followed the road through a darkened tunnel of pine trees; in a hundred yards, it opened to a small clearing, where a turquoise vintage camper was tucked against the trees. CHECK IN HERE, another hand-painted sign instructed.

Jeremiah parked and got out without glancing at Liv. She watched from the front seat of the Jeep, her window rolled down so she could hear. The air smelled of damp earth and growing things. Jeremiah rapped on the door of the camper and waited, raindrops speckling his T-shirt.

A petite woman with gray hair down to her waist peered out. "We're full," she said. Her voice sounded like the effects of ten thousand cigarettes.

"I don't need a spot," Jeremiah said. "I'm looking for a friend. A man and his nine-year-old daughter. Have you seen them?"

The woman's expression didn't change. "Now, you know I'm not going to start giving away information on my paying customers."

Jeremiah nodded. "I know, ma'am. Just needed to give a message to my friend, that's all. He's my brother, in fact. And that lady right there," he turned and motioned to Liv without meeting her eyes, "is the little girl's aunt."

Liv leaned forward, watching as the woman's eyes flickered. "If he was your brother," the woman said, "you'd think he would've let you know where he was staying."

Jeremiah stuck his hands in his pockets, and Liv could see the tension in his shoulders. "Fair enough. But how about this: if he's not here, you tell me so I don't have to waste time finding two people who mean a lot to me and preventing them from doing something that could end up being a disaster."

Liv flinched, but Jeremiah was right: this could be a disaster. And although Liv hadn't set it all in motion nine years ago, she was the one who had stirred it up again by coming here. By trying to find Scott, befriending Molly, and getting to know Ella. Jeremiah had brought her along for one purpose only: to convince Scott he could return safely to Durango. Once that happened, they would all be glad to see her go.

The woman—Nancy, Liv assumed—brushed long gray hair off her shoulder and put a hand on her hip. "All right. But only because I like your face. There's no one here like that—no grown man with a young girl. Sorry, honey."

Jeremiah's shoulders slumped, and he fished in his back pocket for his wallet, then handed Nancy a bill. "Thanks for your help, ma'am. Appreciate it."

He headed back, rain running down his face in little rivulets. Once in the Jeep, he reversed in a rush, reached the pull-out onto the empty two-lane highway, and paused, face impassive, eyes straight ahead. Rain beat against the windshield, drummed against the hard top, and he turned on his wipers. Watching him, Liv realized how badly they had both hoped for a quick resolution.

"Where do we go now?" she asked.

“No idea. He could be across the border to Mexico by now. There are a dozen directions he could’ve gone. I don’t know how we’ll find him.”

He slammed his hand into the steering wheel so hard the entire Jeep rocked. Liv flinched.

“I knew this would happen,” Jeremiah muttered. “As soon as he realized you were here, I knew it would end like this, with him taking off.”

“Is that why you didn’t—”

“Tell him about you? Yeah. I knew he would panic and run. I was trying to keep him from meeting you, but you ...”—he exhaled and shook his head in frustration—“you kept getting more and more involved in their lives. I don’t understand why you couldn’t leave them alone.”

“You’re right,” Liv said. “You don’t understand.”

He turned to meet her eyes. The first time he had actually looked at her for hours. She saw a complex mixture of emotion in his expression: anger at her, anger at himself, bone-deep guilt.

“Then why?” he asked—not accusing, but curious.

Liv shrugged. A lump rose in her throat as she said, “Ella’s my family.”

Jeremiah held her gaze for a long moment, his lips parting and then closing again, like he was wrestling with something.

“Liv,” he said quietly, “I—”

From behind them came the humming sound of a vehicle moving their way, and Jeremiah glanced in the rearview mirror, his eyebrows knitting together. Liv twisted, trying to see who it was, but the headlights blinded her. She couldn’t

make out the face of the person walking toward them, but her heart surged with hope. Maybe it was Scott—maybe he had seen them.

Then the figure came around to Jeremiah's window, and the light caught his ancient, sun-weathered face. Liv's heart sank. It was a graying man in a flannel shirt, a cowboy hat, and wranglers.

Jeremiah rolled down his window. "Sorry for blocking the road—we're just trying to figure out where we're going next."

"Maybe I can help you out," the man said. His voice sounded like a wheel needing to be greased.

"I don't think so," Jeremiah went to roll up the window, but the man tapped on it with one knobby-knuckled hand.

"I overheard you talkin' with Nancy up there. She ain't the type to give out information, but I heard what you said and you seem like a good guy."

Jeremiah didn't respond, and Liv leaned over the gear shift toward Jeremiah's window. "Yes," she said, eager for any help. "We're looking for his brother and my niece. We have an important message for them."

The man nodded, his craggy lips turning up in a slight smile. "And would this man happen to be a tall guy with shoulders like a linebacker and a little dark-headed girl, driving the prettiest old Westfalia I ever did see?"

"That's them!" Liv nearly shouted.

"Do you know where they are?" Jeremiah asked.

"Well, I maybe do," the man said. "But he sure seemed like a fella who didn't want to be found."

Jeremiah huffed in annoyance. “Great. Thanks for that.” He went to put the Jeep in gear, but the man spoke again.

“He was here, though. Four or five hours ago, but Nancy was all full up.”

Liv leaned forward. “And?”

“Well,” the man said, his eyes shifting to the right. “I did happen to notice Nancy ended up with a ten spot after giving you some valuable information.”

He paused, licking his lips wetly. Jeremiah rolled his eyes, but Liv dug in her purse and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. “Here,” she said, handing it to the man.

“Sweet of you, honey.” He stuffed the bill in his pocket, then fixed his eyes on Liv. “I watched him walk away with that little girl, holding hands. He said something to her like, ‘We don’t want to stay here anyway, too many people. How about I take you to my secret place. The best place to see the stars in the entire state of Colorado.’” The man grinned. “I remember what he said exactly ’cause I asked him where he was going. But he wouldn’t tell me—that’s why I figure he don’t want to be found.”

Liv turned to Jeremiah, her breath catching.

“Go,” she told him. “Let’s go.”

The car was silent, the darkened highway lit only by the glow of the Jeep’s headlights and the occasional car passing in the opposite lane. A flash of lightning illuminated the sky behind them, followed by a rolling rumble. Liv jumped.

They were heading to the red rock valley where Jeremiah had brought her just a few days ago, back when Liv had

stupidly thought everything was going to work out. The best place to see the stars in all of Colorado. She pressed her forehead against the cool of the window and watched the raindrops move along the glass. She didn't want to remember the last time they had driven on this highway.

"I'm sorry," Jeremiah said.

She sat up, confused. He kept his eyes fixed on the darkened road in front of them. "I know sorry doesn't mean anything, but I am."

"I don't blame you for what happened to Kristina. I know it was an accident." Her throat felt swollen, the words difficult even though they were true. She was still angry her sister was gone, angry for all the tragic choices and circumstances leading to her death, but she wasn't angry at Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I'm also sorry for . . . how things went between us."

That was harder to forgive, because it hadn't been an accident—the lies, the manipulation.

She rested her head against the window, and he started talking again, as if he could speak more easily when he couldn't see her face.

"I want you to know that even though I initiated contact with you because I recognized you, I did enjoy . . . spending time with you." He paused. "It wasn't all a lie, is what I'm trying to say."

"Thank you, Jeremiah," she said, keeping her voice toneless. "I'm glad to know that while you were kissing me, sleeping with me, and taking me on weekend trips, at least you were enjoying yourself."

Silence for a few moments. "I guess I deserve that."

As much as it hurt, though, Liv knew she had done the same thing to Molly, pursuing a relationship with an ulterior motive. But it had become a real friendship—or at least, Liv liked to think so. Maybe she was deluding herself. Maybe it had never been real.

Jeremiah spoke again, quietly, like he was thinking out loud.

“He’s never forgiven me,” he said. “Scott. Even after everything Kristina put him through, I think he still hoped they’d end up together someday. I know it’s my fault he and Ella have to live like this, always on edge, always ready to run.”

Another flash of lightning behind them, another roll of thunder. Liv still didn’t look at him, and her silence seemed to give Jeremiah the space to keep talking.

“When I saw you here, I thought, this is my chance to redeem myself. If I could keep you away from him, if I could make sure he and Ella stayed safe—well, I knew it wouldn’t make up for anything. I knew that. But I thought I was keeping things from getting worse.” He cleared his throat. Light from a passing car illuminated his face, casting shadows across the hollows of his eyes, his cheekbones, and his throat. “But I did. Make things worse, I mean. And when I think about what I did to you, I feel sick.”

“Do you want me to feel sorry for you?” The words came out more harshly than she’d intended, and she immediately regretted them. As much as Jeremiah had hurt her, she didn’t want to punish him. She got the feeling he was punishing himself enough.

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

After an hour of bouncing along a dirt road, Liv knew they were getting close.

“What are we going to do if he’s here?” she asked.

Jeremiah shrugged. She could once again see the tension in his body, the cords of his neck strained and tight. He seemed more on edge the closer they got. “I’m going to tell him he’s being a fucking idiot, running out on his wife without warning, and he needs to grow a pair and get back to Durango and deal with this.”

Liv blinked. “Well, that’s an option.”

“You have any better ideas?”

“He ran because he’s scared, right?”

“Yeah, of getting caught.”

“Of losing Ella,” Liv corrected. “I don’t know Scott well, but think about it. On the night Kristina . . . on the night it all happened, he never considered leaving Ella behind. He could’ve left her there and called 911, he could’ve dropped her off at my grandma’s house and run with you, but he didn’t. He didn’t even hesitate to take Ella, did he?”

Jeremiah shook his head, eyeing her.

“I have to convince him there’s no threat to Ella. Specifically, that I,” she said, emphasizing the word, “am not a threat.”

“Are you?”

She got the feeling he was asking about more than just Ella and Scott—he wanted to know if she was a threat to him, to Jeremiah. And she realized something else, too. She had

power over not only Scott and Ella's life now, but Jeremiah's as well. She could ruin him, if she wanted to. And yet, he'd still told the truth to her and Molly, not sparing any details.

"Of course not." She swallowed. "I have no reason to turn anyone in. I won't go to the police or the FBI or anyone else. I'll leave and never speak a word about it to anyone."

"You'll just . . . leave?" Jeremiah said, and for a second he looked—what, lost, maybe? She didn't know. Then, just as quickly, the frustrated, tense expression was back.

She didn't want to leave Ella. But she would, if she had to. To make sure Ella's family stayed together. To make sure Ella had the safe, stable childhood Liv never did.

She nodded. "As soon as we get back to Durango."

Jeremiah steered the Jeep past a cluster of trees, then slowed as they reached the top of a small hill. "Good," he said. "Because we're here."

She squinted into the rainy darkness, across the bowl of the valley. The dark sky, thick with clouds, made it impossible to see the hoodoos or any other defining features. But near the far rim of the valley, she saw something distinct against the rocks and trees.

"Look," she whispered, pointing. "Think that's them?"

Jeremiah followed her finger, then turned in that direction. The Jeep bounced along the valley floor, the windshield wipers squeaking against the glass as the rain died down. They drew closer, until Liv could see Scott's camper. Her heart quickened and she told herself to breathe. This was her last chance to make things right.

Jeremiah put the Jeep in park, and they got out. A few drops of rain fell on Liv's face, and she peered through the

darkness as they came around the front of the Westfalia. Sitting on a camp chair next to the door was Scott, looking like a man carved from stone. In his right hand, he held a handgun, resting it against his knee.

“Welcome,” Scott said. He motioned with the gun to a couple of camp chairs across from him. “Why don’t you two have a seat.”

forty-nine

Your wife is home alone.

I'm watching her as she moves through the house, turning off lights and closing curtains.

I gotta say, Sam, I thought you were smarter than this, leaving your wife and her little girl without even your German Shepherd to protect them. All these years, you've been so careful. Did you forget about me? Or did you think I'd forgotten about you?

Not a chance. If not for you, I'd be living my life, completely worry-free. In my line of work you always have to watch your back, but I've worked hard to get where I am. I'm not about to let that change just because of you.

The only reason you got away with it is because you surprised me when you showed up that night. You and the other kid—a friend maybe, I don't know. I was bleeding out at that point so you'll forgive me for not remembering much about him.

The point is: I didn't expect you. Just like you aren't expecting me now.

Your wife is putting the girl to bed now, rocking her to sleep. The window is shut but the curtains are sheer enough,

the nightlight bright enough, that I can see everything. Your wife is singing, the girl's eyes are drifting closed. Both of them unaware that I'm just a few feet away.

And that I broke the lock on that window a couple weeks ago.

fifty

You never know what kind of person you are until you've been tested.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

After Liv and Jeremiah left, Molly wanted to collapse, but she had to pull it together for Chloe. She'd done her best to smile through her tears as she tucked her daughter in, singing their special song about the bear that went over the mountain. Always another mountain.

Then she headed out into the backyard with a glass of wine. The long-awaited rainstorm was on its way, lightning flashing in the distance. She tried to breathe in the night air, cool for the first time in weeks, but her chest felt constricted. Even if Jeremiah and Liv convinced Scott to return, what would she do? Maybe he'd had a "good" reason to lie to her, but he'd still lied, every day since the day they'd met. Was that level of deception ever justified? It didn't seem possible to continue loving a person after that.

No, that wasn't true—it was possible to continue loving him. That's why it hurt. But if she couldn't trust him, that was deadlier than the loss of love.

Lightning cracked overhead, followed by a crash of thunder. She jumped, splashing wine onto her hand. As the

sound faded, she listened for Chloe, hoping she hadn't woken up. But she heard nothing but another rumble of thunder in the distance.

Molly sat outside, finishing her wine, until the rain started. Back in the kitchen, she deposited the glass in the sink before heading toward the bedroom. But as she walked past the living room, she heard the unmistakable sound of a man clearing his throat.

Her breath caught. Peering through the hazy darkness, she saw someone sitting in the armchair furthest from the front window.

A chill ran up her spine. It was a man, as tall as Scott but leaner, angular, his long legs crossed at the knee. His face was shadowed; she couldn't make out his features. Bitsy, that stupid, silly dog, lay asleep at his feet. She lifted her head, saw Molly, and padded over next to her.

"Hello, Molly Sullivan," the man said. His voice was pleasant, easy, like a neighbor stopping by for a chat.

Her knees trembled and nearly gave out. He held something on his lap, something small and fragile . . . Chloe, Molly realized with a rush of fear, her little blond head resting against his chest, her eyes closed. For a heart-stopping moment, Molly thought the worst, and she nearly collapsed from the horror of it. Then she saw Chloe's lips move, her chest rise and fall.

Asleep. Her daughter was asleep in the arms of a stranger. While Molly had been outside in the backyard, this man had somehow gotten into her home, picking up her daughter. Touching her. A scream rose in her throat, and she swallowed it down.

The man stroked Chloe's hair with one long-fingered hand.

"She's a sound sleeper," he said. "Didn't mind at all when I picked her up out of bed. Let's not wake her, shall we?"

fifty-one

No matter how you live, someone will disapprove.

Live YOUR truth.

Your own approval matters most of all.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv and Jeremiah sat in two camp chairs opposite Scott. The rain had cleared, but the ground was still wet, the air humid and charged with electricity from the approaching storm. Scott's massive German Shepherd perched next to him, ears pricked, eyes tracking between Liv and Jeremiah. It could have been any group of friends on a camping trip, sitting down for a chat—except for the gun in Scott's hand.

“Why are you here?” Scott said.

“To get you to stop being a damn idiot,” Jeremiah said.
“Go home to your wife and stepdaughter.”

Liv shot him a look. Pretty sure that was not going to work. “Scott,” she said, sitting on the edge of her seat. “I understand why you left.”

He didn't respond. His jaw was rock-hard. His right knee, the one the gun was resting on, twitched.

“Liv,” Jeremiah said. “Why don’t you tell him what you told me in the car?”

Liv took a breath, ready to say all the words she’d rehearsed on the drive—about leaving Durango, promising to never contact him or Molly or Ella again, to never breathe a word about this to anyone. Instead, out came something that surprised her.

“I want to know Ella.”

Scott blinked. The jittering in his right knee stopped. “Come again?”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you,” she said. “I just want Ella in my life. That’s all.”

Jeremiah stared at her, his mouth open, shaking his head. It didn’t matter. She needed to speak her truth—and this was it.

“I grew up without much of a family, and it always felt like a giant blank space inside me. I think Ella has an empty space, too. I want a relationship with her.”

“How exactly does that look to you, in this fantasy world of yours?” Despite his scornful words, Scott sounded interested.

Liv swallowed, glancing at the gun, then back up to Scott’s face. “I’m not sure. For a while I thought I could keep pretending, maybe settle down in Durango. Watch Ella grow up.” She didn’t glance at Jeremiah, because she was certain he would see in her face what she wasn’t saying—everything she had hoped would work out with him, too. “I know that was stupid, and not just because it would never work. But because I don’t want a relationship based on a lie.”

Again, she avoided looking at Jeremiah.

“You want Ella to know the truth?” Scott’s hand tightened on the gun.

“Put the gun down, Scott.” Jeremiah’s voice held a warning. “We’re just having a conversation.”

Scott glared at him, then nodded. He set the gun on the chair next to him—a small, purple chair Liv could imagine Ella sitting in, roasting marshmallows and chatting with her dad.

“Where’s Ella now?” she asked.

Scott jerked his chin toward the Westfalia. “Asleep.”

“What did you tell her about why you were taking off?” Ella was a perceptive child. She must know something was wrong.

Scott sat forward, running his hands through his sand-colored hair. “I told her we needed some time alone. I haven’t told her the official plan. I’m still trying to work that out myself.”

If Scott hadn’t fully decided what to do, there was a chance he might go back home. Liv ran her palms along her thighs, steadying herself. “You asked if I want Ella to know the truth. I don’t think that’s my place—you’re her father. You need to decide how much to tell her, and when. But I do think you could start with *some* truth. For starters: that I’m her aunt.”

“And how do we explain you reentering her life?” Again, Scott sounded interested, if wary.

“We could keep it simple,” she said. “Say we lost touch with each other when you moved away, that I’d like to get to know her now.”

Scott appeared to be considering that. “That’s a possibility. I’m not saying it’s for sure. But I’m open to it.”

Liv felt a tentative smile stretching her lips, the first since this entire mess had come out. “That’s fine—we don’t have to decide anything tonight.”

“We do, actually,” Jeremiah said.

She and Scott both looked at him as if they had forgotten he was there. He sat with his arms folded across his chest, glaring at Scott. “You need to face up to what you did to Molly. I told you from the beginning not to get involved with her—with anyone. But you did, and now you can’t just disappear on her. Do you understand?”

Scott closed his eyes. “I know.”

Jeremiah leaned forward, and Liv averted her eyes. She felt like she was observing something she had no business watching.

“Scott,” Jeremiah said, then shook his head. “*Sam*. Look at me.”

Scott’s eyes flicked open, dark and haunted in the dim light.

“Haven’t you punished yourself enough?” Jeremiah’s voice was quiet, serious. “I don’t expect you to forgive me, but can you forgive yourself?”

“I don’t know,” Scott said.

“Think about Ella. She’s not a toddler you can rip away from everything she knows, not this time. If you leave, you’ll be doing much more damage to her.”

Scott’s mouth tightened. “It’s not just Ella—I don’t think Molly will want me back.”

“I wouldn’t blame her,” Jeremiah said.

As he said the words, he met Liv’s eyes. She didn’t know what to make of that glance, but her eyes filled with tears, and she blinked to clear them.

“Molly panicked when she realized you were gone,” she said, hoping Scott was listening and understanding. “Jeremiah told us everything. She wants you back, Scott.”

fifty-two

When you put yourself on social media, you must accept the risks.

—Written on a sticky note
stuck to Molly Sullivan's computer

All the stories about crazy internet stalkers zipped through Molly's mind. This man must have become obsessed with her. Now he was in her house, holding her daughter. As if he belonged here, as if he had a right to all of it.

A flash of lightning lit the room, giving Molly a brief glimpse of the man's sharp eyes, his lean bone structure. He was wearing a black beanie.

He shifted his weight, and Chloe stirred in his arms. Molly tensed, watching her daughter. Her head rolled back, exposing her pale throat. Something about the way she was sleeping, her deep and even breaths, seemed unnatural.

"What did you do to her?" she asked in a whisper.

He smiled. "Just a small injection of a sedative. She'll be fine—but I needed her quiet."

Molly's knees shook so hard she thought her teeth would start chattering, and she clenched her jaw until it ached. "What do you want from me?"

“From you? Nothing, really, except access to your husband. We have a history together, Sam and I.”

She startled at the name. *Sam*. “A history?”

The man smiled again, an easy smile, like it cost him nothing to give. But his eyes told a different story: hard as slate, glittering with rage. “He shot me. I almost bled to death.”

She flashed back to Jeremiah’s story: Scott grappling with a man with a gun, the gun going off, the man running away. Was this some kind of revenge plot?

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“Someone who’s been looking for your husband for nine years.” He smirked at her. “Awfully kind of you to share your engagement picture on Instagram.”

Molly’s throat clamped shut. She had caused this; she had brought this man to her home. Once you post something online, it never really disappears. It belongs to the world, to the public.

“You’ve been looking for me since then?”

He gave a small smile and a nod.

“But why?”

“An excellent question.” The intruder uncrossed and recrossed his legs. He wasn’t completely at ease, Molly thought, if he was shifting his weight like that. “Sam took something he shouldn’t have. I’d rather not go into the details, if you don’t mind, although I guess it doesn’t matter if you know.”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked in a near-whisper.

“An even better question.” He nodded approvingly. “When will he be home?”

“I don’t know.” That was the honest truth.

“I think he should be here for this discussion. It’s important. Can you call him and let him know he needs to come home?”

He still sounded casual, but he gently wrapped his hand around the back of Chloe’s neck. Molly stopped breathing.

“He’s camping,” she said in a rush, thinking of the Westfalia. The intruder might have noticed it was gone, and it made sense. “I’m not sure if I can get ahold of him.”

“Too bad. I’d hate for this little sleeping beauty to be frightened when she wakes up.” His hand tightened, long fingers reaching nearly all the way around Chloe’s neck. Her mouth fell open, a tiny ribbon of drool escaping from her lips.

Molly sat forward, pulse pounding. “Please . . .”

His hand relaxed, but Molly didn’t. She’d tried calling Scott multiple times in the past few hours. He wasn’t picking up. Her only hope was that Jeremiah and Liv had found him by now and one of them would answer her call.

“I’ll try,” Molly said, trying to remain calm. “My phone’s in my back pocket.”

He flicked a finger in her direction. “Stand up and reach for it. Nice and slow.”

Molly stood, her breath rapid and shallow. She kept her eyes focused on Chloe’s face as she reached for her back pocket and pulled out her phone.

“Your job,” he said, “is to get him to come home without saying anything about me.”

“His phone wasn’t working earlier.”

The intruder’s eyes flashed, a hint of anger beneath his calm exterior. “You need to figure something out.”

“Okay,” Molly said quickly. “I’ll call someone who should be with him.”

“Speakerphone,” he directed.

She pressed Liv’s number, then turned on the speaker. It rang three times, and she prayed silently that Liv would answer.

“Molly?” Liv sounded tired, but otherwise normal. Molly sent up a small prayer that Liv wouldn’t say anything to make the intruder suspicious. If he knew Scott was on the run, he might decide to cut his losses and get out of there—and she was certain he wouldn’t leave her and Chloe alive.

“Hi,” Molly said. Her pulse pounded, whooshing in her ears. “Are you with Sam? I need to talk to him.”

fifty-three

All we really know of other people is what they choose to show us.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

“It’s Molly,” Liv said, holding out the phone, confused.

Molly had sounded strange. Too cheerful, even for Molly, the perpetual optimist.

Jeremiah and Scott stared at her. “Why?” Scott said.

Liv handed the phone to him. “She wants to talk to you.”

Scott’s eyes narrowed as he listened, but otherwise his face gave nothing away during his short conversation with Molly. Liv strained to hear her voice. Maybe Molly could convince Scott to come home.

Jeremiah, she noticed, was trying to hear the conversation, too. He looked as hopeful as she felt. But there was nothing to hear, just Scott’s occasional *Okay* as he nodded. Finally, he said, in a patient voice, “I’m two hours away, Mol. Can’t you call someone else?” More nodding, more *okays*, and then, in a resigned voice, “All right, I’ll come.”

He hung up the phone and handed it back to Liv.

“What’s going on?” she asked him.

He shook his head, his forehead wrinkling in confusion. “She said a pipe’s burst and the basement is flooding. She needs me to come home.”

“What?” Jeremiah said. “A burst pipe?”

Scott seemed dazed, shaking his head. “I know. It’s strange. I don’t get it.”

A thought formed in Liv’s mind. A theory. “She called you Sam,” she said. “When she asked for you. Not Scott—Sam.”

Jeremiah sent her a strange look. “So?”

The more Liv thought about it, the more certain she became. Molly had deliberately used his real name. “Molly would never call you Sam. Something’s wrong.” She looked at Scott, willing him to understand. “Molly said she’s felt like someone’s been watching her recently. Your dog was barking out the window one night when you were gone. She said it was nothing, but I could tell she was worried. What if someone’s there?”

“Like a stalker?” Scott’s forehead remained frozen, wrinkled.

“Maybe, but what if . . .” Liv’s head spun as she thought about her car being broken into, the man who called the bank and pretended to be her brother. Dale McKinley, with the hummingbird tattoo on his scalp. “Someone was trying to get into Kristina’s safe deposit box—”

“What?” Scott said, stiffening. “How do you—”

“It’s a long story,” she said, cutting him off. No time to explain. “But what if that same person has been following Molly, and now he’s broken into your house? Why else would she have called asking for *Sam*? Why would she have had a

random conversation about a burst pipe without mentioning anything else that's happened between you?"

"Jesus Christ," Scott whispered. Even in the darkness, Liv could see he had gone white.

In the distance, thunder rumbled. A few drops of rain fell, wetting Liv's hair.

"Who is he?" Jeremiah asked. "What does he want from you?"

"I'm not sure," Scott said. "But I—I think I accidentally took something he needs."

"What?" Liv asked, but Jeremiah cut in, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"We need to call the police," he said.

"No!" Liv and Scott said at the same time, and Jeremiah froze.

Scott stood. "I need to go. Just me. Alone."

fifty-four

There are two basic motivating forces: fear and love.

—John Lennon

From Molly's Pinterest board

“Words to Live by”

The next two hours seemed to stretch and pull, time becoming elastic. Each of Chloe's quiet breaths were an eternity. Molly prayed her daughter wouldn't wake up, and that whatever the intruder had given her wouldn't harm her. She forced herself to think, to come up with some way out of this, but she kept drawing a blank.

What could she do that wouldn't put Chloe at risk? If she screamed, if she ran, if she tried to alert anyone, she had no doubt he would end Chloe's life. And hers.

Rain slanted across the windows, wind howling around the house. But the man never stopped watching her, his eyes glinting in the darkness, his foot tapping on the hardwood floor.

“When's he going to get here?” he snapped.

“You heard him—he was two hours away.” She was shocked by the defiant tone in her voice. Inside she was liquid

with fear, just a short step from dissolving into hysterical tears. But she had to keep it together for Chloe.

She hoped Scott had understood her message and knew what he was getting into. That he had left Ella with Jeremiah and Liv. She had to consider the possibility, though, that he wasn't coming for her.

Think, she told herself. Think.

And then something occurred to her. "I'll call him again," she said. "See how far away he is."

She reached for her phone, on the coffee table where she'd left it after the phone call. Her fingers wrapped around it, her thumb fumbled on the screen—

A high-pitched pulse split the silence, and the sofa next to Molly rocked back, the cushion split open, plaster from the wall behind it ricocheting across the floor. Bitsy, sleeping at Molly's feet, startled and raised her head.

A scream rose in Molly's throat, and she put her hands to her mouth to hold it in. The man, still sitting in the armchair, had his right arm extended, a gun in his hand. She knew nothing about guns, but she recognized something on the barrel—something she'd never seen in real life, only in movies and television shows. A silencer.

"Next time it'll be your daughter," he said, his voice a snarl. He tucked his right arm against him, the barrel of the gun against Chloe's back.

At her feet, Bitsy gave a low growl—a sound Molly had never heard from her gentle, dopey dog—and Molly reached down to pat her head, desperate to keep her dog from upsetting the intruder. "It's okay," she whispered, and the dog relaxed.

Silence descended again, and this time Molly struggled to stay quiet. Tears slid down her face and she counted the seconds in her mind, needing something to distract her from the panic rising in her stomach.

The man stayed watchful, and Chloe stayed asleep. And finally, just when Molly thought she couldn't take the waiting for one more second, the back door in the kitchen opened and heavy footsteps crossed the floor. They came down the hall and into the living room, then paused behind her.

The intruder looked up. "Sam Howard," he said in that same easygoing voice, as if he were greeting a long-lost friend. "Welcome home."

fifty-five

Love reveals itself in action, in choices.

@InvincibleMollySullivan

Liv sat in the front passenger seat of the Westfalia, gripping the armrests until her hands cramped. Scott had taken Jeremiah's Jeep and left Ella with her and Jeremiah. The little girl was curled up on the green vinyl of the backseat, asleep with one arm around Hoopi. Rain pelted the roof, the windshield wipers going at full speed.

Liv squinted through the downpour at the dark road in front of them, trying to calm herself. Molly must have been tired and overwhelmed, and that's why she'd asked for Sam instead of Scott. A pipe had truly burst, and she wanted her husband home to help. But Liv knew this didn't make sense. She knew, down to the marrow in her bones, that Molly and Chloe were in danger.

Scott had asked them to stay at the campsite with Ella until he contacted them. But not long after he left, Liv had looked at Jeremiah, and he had nodded. The message passed unspoken between them: *We're going.*

A bolt of lightning illuminated the sky. Liv and Jeremiah both jumped at the crash of thunder.

“Do you remember the man you saw in Kristina’s apartment that night?” Liv asked Jeremiah.

He gave her a quick, frightened glance. “Why? Do you think he’s the one in Molly’s house?”

“Maybe,” Liv said. “What did he look like?”

Jeremiah shook his head, his eyes focused on the road. “Um . . . white guy, tall, maybe early forties?”

“Did he have a tattoo on his scalp?”

“I don’t think so. No—wait. He had a hat on. Like a stocking cap. I remember because it was summer and that seemed odd.”

Goosebumps lifted on Liv’s skin. “Hurry.”

Jeremiah nodded and pressed on the gas, propelling them forward even faster. She could almost see the thoughts swirling in his brain, carrying him far away from her. She wondered if he was back in Kristina’s apartment, reliving the night he could never forget. Or if he was imagining what was happening in Molly’s house, terrified of what could happen tonight.

Liv’s phone buzzed.

She pulled it from the center console where it sat, lighting up and vibrating.

MOLLY SULLIVAN HAS STARTED A LIVE VIDEO

Her heart accelerated.

“What is it?” Jeremiah asked, glancing over.

“Molly’s posting a video.”

He did a double take, swerving into the opposite lane, then corrected. “How is that possible?”

Liv didn’t answer, too focused on the screen as she swiped it with her thumb. There it was: the fishbowl view of Molly’s living room she had seen the other night. But Molly wasn’t alone this time.

Liv squinted. The video feed jumped between angles, zooming in and trying to focus on the different faces. She wanted to scream in frustration. Jeremiah peered over her shoulder, craning his neck to get a view.

“What’s happening?” he demanded.

“I don’t know!” she said in a harsh whisper, trying not to wake Ella. “Keep driving—you’re going to run us off the road!”

After a few disorienting jumps, the video settled to a new view, opposite the fireplace. The entire room was visible now, and even though it was dark, Liv could see clearly.

Molly, sitting in one of the armchairs, rigid with terror.

Scott, standing a few feet behind her.

And seated in the other armchair, a man in the shadows. On his lap . . .

“He has Chloe,” she said, horrified.

“Can you hear anything?” Jeremiah’s voice crackled with panic.

She turned up the volume, enough so she and Jeremiah could hear but it wouldn’t wake Ella in the backseat.

“Sam Howard,” the man was saying. “Welcome home.”

At his voice, the camera switched angles to focus on his face. Liv sucked in a breath. He wore a black beanie, but Liv would recognize him anywhere:

“I know him,” she breathed. “That’s . . . it’s Kent Rasband. The detective.”

fifty-six

“I hate the term ‘followers’. They are my friends.
My community.”

—Molly Sullivan on *We Like*,
a podcast for social media influencers

“Detective Rasband,” Scott said, his voice flat.

Molly startled at the name, but the man didn’t seem surprised. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Sam?”

Scott stood behind Molly, and she wanted to turn her head to look at him, but she couldn’t take her eyes off the intruder. His expression had changed when Scott entered the room, the malice he had hidden before no longer concealed.

“Why are you here?” Scott asked.

The man gave a sour smile. “Well, Sam, I can’t let a few past mistakes ruin an otherwise unblemished career.” His smile faded. “Where is it?”

Scott took a step forward, coming around to the side of Molly’s chair. Close enough that she could reach out and take his hand. But she stayed completely still.

“I don’t have it,” Scott said. His voice was steady, and she felt a rush of gratitude in the midst of her terror. He had shown

up. He had come back for her.

“Bullshit.” Rasband’s eyes sparked with anger. “Should I shoot the dog? Or the little girl?”

“No!” Molly cried, leaning forward.

Scott’s hand landed on her shoulder, pushing her back against the chair. “I don’t have it *with* me,” he said. “It’s in my camper.”

“I searched that camper two weeks ago.” Rasband sounded irritated.

“Not well enough,” Scott said.

Molly’s phone, sitting on the coffee table between her and Rasband, buzzed.

Rasband’s jaw twitched. “So where’s the camper now?”

“Not far,” Scott said. “But you’re an idiot if you think I’m giving you the key before I know my wife and daughter are safe.”

The key to what? A memory flashed through Molly’s mind: two keys on a small ring in the cigar box. One silver, one gold. One that fit the safe, and one that had not.

Scott continued talking, his hand gripping her shoulder.

“This doesn’t need to involve anyone but you and me. I’ll tell my friend where to park the camper, and you and I will go together. My wife and daughter stay here.”

Molly’s mind raced. Scott and Rasband heading to some secluded location? She couldn’t think of any angle where Scott wouldn’t end up dead.

Rasband shook his head. “No. Tell your friend to bring the camper here. I stay inside with the ladies while you get the

key. Once I have it in my hand, I leave.”

Molly’s phone buzzed again, and Chloe stirred in Rasband’s arms. She seemed more restless with all the talking.

Her phone buzzed again, vibrating and rattling against the coffee table.

“What key are you talking about?” she asked, hoping her voice sounded as steady as Scott’s. “I’ve been going through his things.” She tilted her head toward Scott. “Maybe I’ve seen it.”

Scott’s hand clamped on her shoulder even tighter. “Don’t,” he whispered.

But Rasband leaned forward, eagerness in his eyes. “It’s a safe deposit box key. Where is it?”

She pretended to think, because in truth she had no idea. Scott had cleared out his dresser when he took off. It was probably in the Westfalia, like he’d said.

“What does it look like?” she asked, stalling. “Is it silver? Gold?”

Her phone buzzed again, then again, and a second later, again.

“What is going on with that phone?” Rasband snapped. He leaned over and picked it up, and Molly got a glimpse of the screen before he held it to his face.

It was covered with comments from her followers.

Be strong, Molly, we’ve alerted the police.

The police are on their way.

I just called the police. Hang in there, Molly.

Prayers for you Molly. EMS and police on their way.

Rasband's eyes narrowed as he looked at the phone. "What did you do?"

Molly lifted her chin, a gesture that didn't match the white-hot fear she felt. "I'm currently sharing a live video from this room with all my followers. I'm guessing at least twenty thousand people are watching us right now."

Rasband sat up straight. His movement shifted Chloe and she started crying, twisting away from Rasband in half-conscious terror. Molly lunged forward and grabbed her daughter, pulling her into her lap, as Scott stepped in front of her, putting his body between them and Rasband.

Molly squeezed her eyes shut, arms tight around Chloe, waiting for the high-pitched sound of the silencer muffling gunshot. But it didn't come.

She opened her eyes to see Rasband standing, his gun trained on Scott.

And Scott was pointing a gun at Rasband.

Molly froze, terror streaking through her as she buried Chloe's face against her shoulder. Bitsy cowered between Molly's legs, trembling with fear.

The air between the two men vibrated with tension.

"I should have killed you that night," Rasband said.

Molly couldn't see Scott's face, but she saw him shake his head. "I should have killed *you*."

"You were this close to me, and you barely hit me," Rasband sneered. "I remember you shaking in terror—thought

you were going to piss yourself. Your girlfriend did, when I was choking her. That bitch.”

Molly watched Rasband’s hand tighten on his gun. Chloe stirred in her arms, becoming more aware.

“Go ahead,” Scott said softly. “Let’s get it on camera.”

Rasband’s eyes darted around the room. “There are no cameras here.”

“There are six of them,” Molly said, hoping he would believe her. “One on the mantle, right next to that blue vase.”

When he saw the camera, he stiffened. His eyes went black with fury.

“You should run,” Scott said.

“The longer you stay, the closer the police get,” Molly said. “And the better look the world gets of your face.”

Realization swept over him, fury building like a bomb about to explode. He took a step closer to Molly, swinging his gun toward her face.

Bitsy jumped to her feet, barking, and Rasband flinched.

A gunshot split the air like a cannon blast, echoing in Molly’s ears.

Chloe screamed. Molly tightened her arms around her daughter, eyes closed as fear flooded her senses.

“Turn the cameras off,” Scott whispered, and Molly opened her eyes.

He stood with his arm outstretched, a shocked expression on his face. Rasband was on the floor, a red stain spreading behind his head, which looked oddly caved in. His legs twitched, then went motionless. Molly forced herself to look

away and fumbled for her phone with one hand, discontinuing the live feed. Chloe wailed, now fully awake, matching the ringing in Molly's ears, and the dog once again covered behind Molly's legs.

"You're okay," Molly whispered to her daughter, holding her tightly. "We're safe now."

Scott let out a shuddering breath and turned, dropping the gun. His hands went to Molly's face, to Chloe's, pulling them both against his chest. "Molly, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He said the words over and over, a litany, a plea, his shoulders shaking.

"We need to get Chloe out of here. I don't want her to see . . ." She trailed off, not wanting to see, either.

Scott nodded and scooped Chloe up with one arm. Molly followed him into the kitchen on shaking legs, nearly collapsing before his free arm pulled her to him, crushing her against his chest. She was overwhelmed by the need to feel him, to hold him until they melded into one body. She ran her hands up his back, across his shoulders, tears running down her cheeks. They were together, they had somehow made it through, and she stood on tiptoe to press her face against his neck, to breathe in the smell of his skin.

He turned his head and caught her mouth with his, kissing her hard enough to hurt. Chloe clung to him, crying, her face buried in his shoulder.

"Molly," he said in a fierce whisper, then kissed her again, on her cheeks, on her forehead and jaw, and neck before returning to her mouth. She kissed him back, needing to taste him, needing to know he was real and solid and warm.

But she forced herself to pull away. "You should go."

He looked down at her, his eyebrows pulling together. “I’m not leaving you again.”

“The police are coming,” she said. “If you’re here, you’ll get sucked into the investigation. Everything with Kristina and Ella, your forged identity—it’ll all come out.”

“I don’t care,” he said. “I’m sick of running.”

“Even if that means prison?” Her voice rose. “Even if it means putting Ella through a trial? It’ll be a media circus after this video.” She took a step away, remembering Rasband’s words. “How did you end up with that key?”

Scott exhaled. “It was in Kristina’s diaper bag, which was in the closet with Ella, and I grabbed it when we ran. Her birth certificate was in there, too. I didn’t find the key for days.”

“Do you know what’s in the safe deposit box?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. But it must link Rasband to something bad. Rasband was in charge of Kristina’s case, so I’m guessing that’s why the investigation was all fucked up.”

“Where’s the key now?” she asked.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out his key ring, holding it by one small gold key.

“You had it with you?” Part of her wanted to know why he hadn’t given it to Rasband right away, but then she thought about what Scott had been willing to do to keep her and Chloe safe.

“Give it to me,” she said, holding out her hand. “And go.”

The sound of an engine pulling down the driveway distracted both of them, and Molly looked out the window to see the Westfalia coming toward the garage. Jeremiah and Liv jumped out, rushing toward the kitchen. Chloe noticed them,

too, and wiggled out of Scott's arms and raced out the back door. It banged shut as she launched herself into Jeremiah's arms. Liv, outside on the driveway, caught Molly's eye, and Molly motioned to her to wait.

She turned back to Scott, forcing herself to focus.

"Ella's in the camper, right?" she said, and Scott nodded. "Then go. Right now."

He shook his head, resolute. "I'm not going anywhere without you again. Come with me. You and Chloe."

Molly paused as she considered what that would mean. Living like Scott, off the grid, disconnected from the world. She'd have to give up everything that made her who she was.

"I can't," she said.

"Then I'll stay." He took a step closer, bringing his hand to her cheek, his eyes full of regret, his touch tentative. "Unless you can't forgive me. If that's the case, I'll go."

She looked at him, this man she loved with her whole being, and she could see everything that had happened between them. Their first kiss during the river rafting trip. Opening her front door in Denver to find him standing there. Watching him kneel in front of her, asking her to marry him.

But then: his all-too-convincing lies after she found the birth certificates. His voice, angry and distrusting, when he found her in the Westfalia. His iron grip on her arm as he pulled her away from Liv's apartment. The layers of deception he had built around himself.

Molly wanted to believe that if he told the truth to the police and the FBI, they would understand. But he had stolen nearly \$200,000 from a charity; he'd taken his daughter and changed his name and evaded law enforcement for years.

There was no way he would be exonerated, even if Jeremiah came forward. And doing so would destroy Jeremiah's life, too.

But if Molly ran with Scott, she'd have to leave everything behind, never see her friends or family again, and spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder.

None of those options were acceptable, and she stiffened, paralyzed with indecision.

"Molly girl," Scott said, his eyes pleading. "I can't—" His voice broke. "I can't leave you again."

He was wavering, and with that realization, her decision was made. Scott could not stay here one minute longer.

"I'm sorry," she said, and the words tore her apart. "But I can't forgive you."

His eyes closed briefly, but he didn't say another word, just turned and walked out the kitchen door to the driveway. Jeremiah and Liv were waiting next to the Westfalia, their faces pale in the darkness. They watched, open-mouthed, as Scott headed to the driver's side of the camper.

"Wait," Liv said. "You'll get caught in no time if you're driving that."

"I'll ditch it somewhere, get a new car," Scott said. They kept their voices low, and Molly hoped none of this would wake the neighbors.

"That'll slow you down," Jeremiah said. "Take my Jeep. Take it with Ella and go."

Swiftly, Scott and Jeremiah loaded Scott and Ella's bags and supplies into the back of the Jeep. Molly watched silently, arms folded, holding herself together. Scott placed a sleepy

Ella in the backseat, covering her with a blanket, where Hoopi waited obediently.

As he stood, he caught Molly's eye. "I love you," he said. "I love you, Molly."

"Just go," she whispered. She stayed there, frozen, her eyes brimming with tears, as he drove away.

Jeremiah and Liv got in the Westfalia and drove off in the opposite direction.

Molly watched them leave, one hand holding Chloe's and the other resting on Bitsy's head. In the distance, she heard sirens.

McSnark's STOP RUINING MY INTERNET

The official discussion forum for Molly Sullivan of An Invincible Summer

MamaLlama99 posted:

It's been a week since that video and I'm still having nightmares.

ColoradoGrrl replied:

Tell me about it. You should have seen the cop cars flooding the neighborhood. My entire family was terrified. And since then, the media attention has been crazy. We can't go anywhere without being mobbed by reporters, cameras in our faces.

Meow17 replied:

Yah I watched that live video like a hundred and ninety seven times. Like the way her husband just shot that guy and he died right there like WTF guys. And then Molly goes totally silent and stops doing her live videos. Like what are we supposed to do now????

FannyPackLuvr replied:

Seriously, what ARE we supposed to do now? I need my daily Molly fix then I need to come here and snark my ass off about it.

ColoradoGrrl replied:

I guarantee she'll find some way to capitalize on all this attention. She's a narcissist. Without the world fawning at her feet, she'll wilt like a basket of daisies.

IhateMollySullivan4Eva replied:

You realize Molly Sullivan just went through the most traumatic experience any of us can probably imagine. Is it any wonder she wants to take a step back? Her house was broken into, her daughter threatened, her husband shot a man in front of her, then disappeared. And then all this crap from his past—her husband's ex-girlfriend, the daughter he kidnapped, all of that. It's insane. I think we can give her a little respectful space, right?

SierraAngel replied:

Hey @IhateMollySullivan4Eva - you might have to change your username now. :)

A statement from @InvincibleMollySullivan

It's been two weeks since that awful night. I still don't know how to say goodbye after five wonderful years, but I know it's time. Thank you for the love and support. Thank you, most of all, for helping keep me and Clover safe. We wouldn't be here without you.

There has been a great deal of speculation regarding my husband's past, as well as his recent actions and his present location. I want to assure everyone I had no knowledge of his past prior to the night you saw on the video. I have had no contact with him since then, and I will continue cooperating with law enforcement as the investigation unfolds.

I ask for your respect as Clover and I process these difficult events and try to heal. For the first time in five years, I'm asking for privacy. All my past content will remain online, but I will no longer be posting.

Invincibles, my dear friends: thank you for being the brightest spot on the internet for the past five years.

With love,

Molly

fifty-seven

My dear,

In the midst of hate, I found there was, within me, an invincible love.

In the midst of tears, I found there was, within me, an invincible smile.

In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm . . .

In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.

And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger—something better, pushing right back.

Truly yours,

Albert Camus

Liv sat on a hot metal bench on the edge of a shaded neighborhood playground, waiting. Two weeks had passed since Molly's live video. The story had been splashed across the national news and had even received some international

attention. Everyone wanted to weigh in on Molly Sullivan, the Invincible One, who had used a live video to save her family.

Within twenty-four hours, the FBI had met Oliver at the bank and opened Kristina's safe deposit box. Inside they found cash, drugs, and incriminating information that linked Rasband to a Pittsburgh-area drug ring. The rest of the story emerged swiftly. The FBI believed that Kristina had somehow learned about Rasband's involvement; he was her father's former partner, and she would have recognized him easily. Going to the police would have been complicated, given Rasband's position and Kristina's own history of drug use, but Kristina must have been collecting evidence with that goal in mind.

At some point, Rasband must have found out what Kristina had been stashing away. When he came that night for the key, Kristina had hidden Gabriela in the closet, along with the diaper bag containing the key to the safe deposit box. Liv drew some comfort from the fact that Kristina's last act had been to protect her daughter.

And as the lead detective on the case, Rasband had been able to direct the investigation away from anything that could incriminate himself.

Liv had tried her best to walk the line between helping the investigation and getting *too* involved. She and Molly had hardly spoken, not wanting anyone to suspect that they had corroborated on their stories. No one knew Jeremiah was even involved, and Liv hoped to keep it that way.

Most of all, she didn't want law enforcement to know what they had done that night to help Scott disappear. After he drove off with Ella in Jeremiah's Jeep, she and Jeremiah had driven the Westfalia halfway to the Mexican border and ditched it, then hitchhiked to the nearest town and bought bus

tickets back to Durango. They rode several rows apart, and when they arrived the next day, they'd gone their separate ways without a word. They'd had no contact since.

Liv didn't know how to feel about it; her emotions regarding Jeremiah were still too raw, and she pushed any thought of him out of her mind.

Across the playground, Liv saw Molly and Chloe walking toward her, hand in hand. She'd texted Molly that morning, asking Molly to meet her. At least Molly had shown up. But Liv had no idea how the conversation would go. She assumed Molly was still furious, and Liv couldn't blame her. She took a deep breath and ran her sweaty palms along her thighs.

Molly wore a faded Denver Broncos baseball cap. Her hair was in a messy braid, her eyes obscured by huge sunglasses. Not her trademark pink ones, though. Liv guessed she was exhausted by the constant attention and trying to slip through the park unnoticed.

Chloe ran toward the playground and Molly sat on the bench next to Liv, facing forward, her spine rigid.

"Thanks for meeting me," Liv said.

"Thanks for reaching out. It's been lonely dealing with this on my own." Molly kept her voice low, her body stiff. Anyone watching them would never assume they had been friends. "Are you okay?"

"Me?" Liv said, surprised. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

"I'm okay. But I need to know something." Molly turned to face Liv. She had removed her sunglasses, so Liv stared directly into those wide, girl-next-door eyes. No makeup. Red-rimmed and puffy. Liv steeled herself for Molly's questions:

How could you do this to me? How could you lie to me? How could you destroy my family like this?

“How did he look?” Molly’s voice caught. “When he got in the Jeep and drove away—you were closer to him than I was.”

Liv sank back against the bench, remembering Scott’s anguish when Molly said those final words: *I can’t forgive you*. And then: *Just go*. The pain in his eyes as he drove off. “He looked heartbroken.”

Molly replaced her sunglasses. “I hope he understands. I hope he knows I love him.”

“Listen,” Liv said, trying to get all the words out in a rush, “I want you to know that I’m so sorry—”

“No more apologies. Everything is forgiven.” Molly reached over and took her hand. Relief swelled in Liv’s chest. “You’re leaving later today, right?”

Liv had let Molly know in her text message about her next temp job—she’d chosen the farthest possible location. “That’s right.”

“Why Hawaii? I thought maybe you’d go visit your brother.”

“I will,” Liv said. “It’s just a month-long position, and then I’ll go back to Pennsylvania, meet Oliver there.”

She and Oliver had plans to visit the cemetery where Gran and Kristina were buried, to face the memories and perhaps gain some closure.

Across the playground, Chloe had made friends with a curly-haired boy. They were chasing each other up and down

the slide. The boy's mom sat on a blanket under a tree, holding her phone in Molly's direction.

Molly tugged the brim of her cap lower, angling her face away. "Any word from Miah?"

Liv shook her head, her throat tight. She knew any connection between them might raise suspicions, especially if the police discovered that Jeremiah's Jeep was missing. But it still hurt that he hadn't reached out. "It would never work between us, anyway."

"It wouldn't?" Molly sounded gently skeptical. "Believe me, I understand how painful it is when someone you love keeps something of this magnitude from you. But that doesn't mean what you shared wasn't real and wonderful and *worth it*. Do you regret your time with him?"

Memories flooded Liv's mind, sweet and painful: Jeremiah racing her up a hill, Jeremiah shaking lake water from his hair, Jeremiah's sleep-soft face on the pillow next to hers.

"No," Liv said. "I don't."

Molly gave a small nod. "We should never regret loving someone with our whole heart, no matter what happens. Otherwise we're only living life halfway."

Classic Molly Sullivan, even now. A smile tugged Liv's lips. "You know, that would make a great video."

"Right?" Molly lifted her hand in front of her, imitating a phone. "Love With Your Whole Heart," she said dramatically. "No Regrets. Live Invincibly." Then she dropped her hands in her lap. "Such a load of crap."

Liv turned, shocked. "It wasn't crap. It helped me see myself differently. It mattered to me, a lot. *You* matter to me."

Molly fell silent. “Thanks for saying that. You matter to me, too.”

On the playground, Chloe squealed as she went down the slide, her tangled curls blowing behind her. Liv wondered how Chloe was dealing with all these changes, the loss of her stepsister and stepfather, the police, and media attention. Somehow, Liv knew without a doubt, Molly was handling it perfectly.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do next?” she asked.

“Well, I got offered seven figures to write another book about everything that happened with Scott,” Molly said.

Liv glanced at her, surprised. “You’re going to do that?”

“Of course not,” she said with a sad smile. “But I have savings, and I have other ideas. There’s a huge market for social media consulting.”

It was difficult to imagine Molly without her public persona, but Liv understood.

Chloe ran over, saying she was hungry and needed to go potty.

“I’d better go, too,” Liv said, standing. “Got to catch my flight.”

As Molly stood, she pulled Liv into a hug. Liv closed her eyes and soaked in the feeling. No one had touched her for the past two weeks, and although that had been her life for several years, she didn’t want to go back to it. She had become accustomed to this—to being wanted and welcomed.

“Thank you,” Molly whispered.

“For what?”

“For being my friend.” Molly smiled, and it felt like the sun warming the sky after a cold night. “Promise you’ll keep in touch, okay? You’re the only person I can talk to about all this.”

“I’d love that.” Liv blinked away tears, grateful. “Where do you think you’ll go next?”

Molly had already listed the house for sale—Liv had driven by several times, staring at that sunny yellow door and wondering what was happening inside. She assumed Molly would go back to Denver, or to Wisconsin where her parents lived.

“I might visit a friend up in Alberta.”

“Canada?”

Molly smiled, her single dimple winking. “Near Banff. I hear it’s beautiful there in the autumn.”

Liv navigated her way through the throngs of people in the airport terminal. Flight 3456 to Honolulu. She scanned the crowded area at the gate and sank into a hard vinyl chair with a heavy exhale, plopping her carry-on into the seat next to her. She needed separation from all the happy vacation-goers. Families with toddlers in strollers, couples holding hands and smiling at each other . . . Liv pulled her attention away from them and took out her phone to read the text messages that had come in while she was getting through security.

From Oliver:

How you holding up?

Fine, I’ll call you after I land.

Just below that, a text from Molly.

Can we FaceTime later? After you get settled.
Chloe wants to see Hawaii.

I'd love to

The thought of chatting with Molly and Chloe made her smile, although she wondered, with a pang of sadness, if she would ever see Ella again. The loss of her niece felt like a missing body part. She wasn't sure she would ever recover.

No messages from Jeremiah. Not that she'd expected any.

The flight attendant announced that boarding would begin in ten minutes. The terminal had filled up. Nearly all the chairs in Liv's area were occupied except for the one next to her, her carry-on keeping everyone else at bay.

Someone paused in front of her. Probably trying to get her to move her bag so they could sit. She kept her eyes focused on her phone.

"Where're you headed?"

She knew that voice. Liv's head snapped up.

Jeremiah. Here, in the airport terminal. Jeremiah with messy brown hair and a golden-red scruffy beard. But no smile. No laughter creases around his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Liv asked, stunned.

"I thought I might go to Hawaii for a while."

She choked on a laugh. "You have got to be kidding me."

He shook his head, his face serious, an apology in his eyes.

Her own eyes started to sting. "Why?"

He picked up her carry-on and swung it onto the floor, then sat next to her.

“Have you ever met someone, and things just felt right? From the very beginning, this person felt *right*. But then you mess everything up. You make all the wrong decisions, you say all the wrong things. You’re pretty sure it’s over.” He hesitated. “But just because the relationship started out wrong doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with the relationship *itself*.”

She stared at him, unable to comprehend. “Do you have anywhere to stay in Honolulu?”

“Well,” he said, one corner of his mouth curving up. “I hope so.”

He took her hand, threading their fingers together. Liv stared at him, absorbing the feeling of his palm against hers.

“I’m really confused right now,” she whispered.

Jeremiah exhaled. “I’ve been confused since the day I met you.”

Something fluttered in her chest. Hope, perhaps. But also fear. Part of her wanted to walk away, because this terrified her. There would have to be conversations. Long conversations requiring vulnerability and discomfort and openness, and she didn’t know if she was ready.

But maybe it would be worth it.

The flight attendant’s voice echoed over the speaker, announcing general boarding. Liv realized everyone else had lined up. She and Jeremiah were the only ones still sitting, heads bent toward each other, hands clasped.

She stood, expecting him to release her hand, but he didn't. That simple act meant more than anything he had said. He was not letting go of her.

“You're coming to Hawaii,” she said, unable to grasp it even as her heart lifted and soared.

“That's right.”

“And then what?”

He squeezed her hand. “That's up to you.”

Liv carefully, carefully squeezed back. And then she led the way to join the growing crowd of travelers, off on their next adventure.

Instagram Direct Message

To @LivBarrett17

From @HedgehogGirl

Hi!!! My dad said I could message you if I was super careful. He told me about you that you are my mom's half sister. I miss you but I'm super loving it where we live now. It's way pretty and we live in a house tucked in the trees so my room feels like it's a treehouse. Cool right?

I am super happy because we are going to have visitors soon. You know them but my dad says I can't say their names on here because no one else needs to know. But I'm super excited that my dad won't be sad anymore.

Anyway I hope when you are back from Hawaii you will come visit us too. My dad gave me my mom's necklace, the one with the cross and the rose. He got it fixed for me. But if you come visit me, I want to give it to you. We have lots of room and you can bring Ollie. And Miah too because my dad says he is nuts about you.

Love,

Gabby (this will be my code name because you know what my REAL name is. The one my mom gave me.)

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about the author

Bradeigh Godfrey is a physician and author of the psychological thriller *Imposter*. When she's not reading or writing, she enjoys spending time with her husband, children, and dog exploring the mountains near her home in northern Utah.

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