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Missing
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ALL THE MISSING PIECES

CATHERINE COWLES

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For all those who have lost someone they loved beyond measure.

Don't let the pain harden you.

*Let it become your reminder that you experienced
the most beautiful thing this world has to offer.*

And for my dad.

*Who would've gotten such a thrill out
of seeing my words in bookstores.*

You taught me all the best lessons.

I carry them, and you, with me always.

PROLOGUE

RIDLEY

“YOU LOOK like I’m dragging you to the gallows,” I said, glancing over at my sister as I headed down the dirt path toward the crowd below.

She was my mirror image in every way yet somehow managed to be my complete opposite. While my blond hair was a wild tangle of waves, hers was tamed into sleek curls. I’d opted for a favorite sundress and flip-flops, and Avery was in khaki shorts and a white cap-sleeved blouse.

My twin sent me a droll look. “I think I’d take the gallows over the Greeks’ bonfire.”

I rolled my eyes. “You need to go to one party before you graduate.”

Avery let out a huff of air, smoothing hair that was already perfectly in place. “I’ve been to plenty of parties. I’m just not into frat boys chanting, ‘*Chug!*’”

“They do look like overgrown Neanderthals half the time, but it’s part of the quintessential college experience. Wouldn’t want you to miss out on mocking their keg-stand form.”

A laugh bubbled out of Avery’s mouth. More like a giggle than anything. A sound that reminded me of childhood. Of countless nights spent in our room at home, whispering about anything and everything as we stared up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. The ones over my bed were a chaotic spray with no rhyme or reason, but Avery’s were arranged to perfectly replicate the Orion constellation.

She knocked her shoulder lightly into mine, grinning. “I do love to critique a boy-man.”

I couldn’t help but snort. “We should’ve stolen those numbered cards from the gym that they use for gymnastics meets.”

Avery shook her head. "I want to believe you're joking but I know you're not."

I shrugged. "Gotta use those team captain keys for something fun."

She stared at me as if I'd sprouted another head. Avery took responsibility seriously, from her classes to her role as captain of the women's lacrosse team. Her dedication had led to great things: graduating with honors, a scholarship to an incredible physical therapy graduate program that would start in the fall, and a state championship for her team.

But me? I was still waffling. Unsure of what I wanted to do, I'd ended up majoring in journalism with a minor in environmental studies. Neither were especially calling to me. But it wouldn't matter soon. I'd have to take whatever job I managed to land.

Avery shifted, her whole body turning toward mine as she instantly read the change in my mood. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head, forcing a smile. "Nothing. Just thinking about how tomorrow's the end of an era." We'd walk across that stage and nothing would ever be the same.

My sister's face softened as she looped her arm through mine and musical strains from the party below wafted up to us. "Come to Chicago with me. We can share the apartment, and you can get a job in the city."

There was a part of me that wanted that. To keep things just as they were. Avery and I had been together since the womb, and this was the first time we'd ever be separated. Just thinking about it made an ache take root in my chest. But I knew Chicago wasn't for me. "I'd feel like a rat in a maze," I admitted. I craved wide-open spaces, fresh air, and nature. Not smog and honking horns.

"There are a bunch of lake communities not far away from the city. Maybe one of those," Avery suggested.

"Maybe," I echoed. But she knew the word lacked any real commitment. Because I simply wasn't sure what my purpose was.

I tugged on her arm, quickening our pace. "Come on. No future-talk for one night. You know Mom and Dad will be on me the moment graduation ends."

Avery sighed. "Lead me down the plank, Captain Hook."

I laughed and picked up my pace. Nestled in the Arizona mountains with plenty of outdoor activities and on the outskirts of a picturesque town that had lots of restaurants and bars for us to frequent, the small private

college a couple of hours outside Phoenix had been an idyllic setting to get an education.

I'd miss it. The comfortability of it. The beauty. But I itched to see new places too. Different landscapes and terrains.

Music and voices got louder as we rounded a curve in the path and the party came into view. There were a handful of houses a few frats rented and a large bonfire in the center. Beyond it all was only trees—that and the faint outline of a mountain in the moonlight. That called to me more than the party, but I knew before long the buzz of the people and the music would catch hold.

Just as we approached the crowd, a handful of guys began chanting, “Chug! Chug! Chug!” as they lifted someone I recognized from the men's lacrosse team in the air and someone else held the tap to his mouth.

Avery sent me a sidelong look. “Three at best. His arms are already shaking.”

I barked out a laugh. “Hey, he's one of yours. A jock. A lacrosse player at that.”

She shook her head. “Gonna have to talk to Coach Carter about upping their conditioning. This is just pathetic.”

“You show no mercy.”

Avery grinned back at me. “Damn straight.”

An arm slid along my shoulders as lips grazed my temple. “Hey, baby.”

I tilted my head back to take in the familiar face. Amber eyes framed with dark lashes. Light-brown hair kissed with lighter strands thanks to all his time in the sun playing tennis. I smiled up at Jared, leaning in to meet his mouth.

The kiss was all warmth and comfort. Easy and no pressure. I let it deepen, hoping for the spark of *more*. Hoping for fire to catch. It didn't come.

Jared pulled back, kissing the tip of my nose before glancing at my sister. “Hey, Avs. This is a surprise.”

“Granting my sister her one final college wish.”

Jared laughed. “Definite heaven points for that.”

Avery's lips twitched. “I see Carly. I'm going to go say hi.”

“Remember,” I called as she walked away. “No drinks from random men, just say no to drugs, and no candy from strangers in vans.”

She flipped me off and went right on walking toward her teammate.

Jared chuckled, the sound skating over me in a familiar vibration. But there was no pleasant shiver, no hint of *more*. “You really do work miracles getting her to one of these things,” he said.

“I feel like we should probably follow her. Who knows what sort of trouble she could get into?”

He pulled me against his chest, arms wrapping around me. “Or you could stay here with me.”

I tipped my head back to take in his beautiful face. “I could.”

I let the buzz of people and music pull me in, the heat of the fire and the excitement of tomorrow. Jared led me toward a group of people—a few guys he roomed with from the tennis team and their girlfriends—I’d become friends with over the past year and a half.

We chatted about graduation plans and trips some of them had planned for after the ceremony. Easy, light, but with the undercurrent of possibility.

Jared’s lips ghosted against my ear. “Have you thought about New York?”

My stomach bottomed out. Jared’s life had been planned out for him since the moment his dad found out he was a boy, which meant majoring in finance and going to work for his father’s hedge fund in the city. Even tennis was on a list of appropriate choices for hobbies, the others being golf and racquetball.

At school, Jared was a bit more free. Hiking with me or taking trips to the lake. But every time he was in his father’s presence, that changed. He colored within the lines.

“New York isn’t for me.” I said the words softly, trying to ease into them, as if that would keep them from stinging.

Jared’s jaw hardened, that narrow muscle along it fluttering. “You don’t know unless you try.”

“I know.” The two words lost a bit of the softness. They weren’t harsh, but they were firm.

His eyes flashed with a flicker of heat, temper. “Then you’re sure about me too, aren’t you?”

“Jer, don’t do this tonight.”

His back teeth ground together. “And when exactly am I supposed to have this conversation? As you’re bailing out of town right after graduation? I’ve been trying to talk to you about this for months.”

A tightness settled in my chest, squeezing my lungs. “I just wanted us to enjoy these past few weeks. Not get into anything too heavy.”

Jared stared at me for a long moment, jaw working back and forth. “And *heavy* means you’re done. Which you’ve probably known for months. But instead of growing the fuck up and telling me that, you just avoided it. Thanks for that.”

“Jer—” I reached for him, but he ducked out of my grasp.

“At least you don’t have to have the conversation now. We’re done.” He took off, moving away from the party and toward the path that would lead to the road where everyone parked. All I could do was stare after him.

An itch spread over me, my skin feeling too tight for my body. Because Jared was right. I had avoided it. Hadn’t wanted to hurt him or see the betrayal in his eyes. And my avoidance of that had only caused more pain.

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I jumped, whirling.

Lana, the girlfriend of one of Jared’s roommates, looked back at me with kind eyes. “You okay?”

Her gaze tracked down my cheeks, and it was only then I realized I was crying. I quickly wiped at my face. “I’m an asshole.”

Lana’s dark eyes hardened. “Don’t talk about my friend like that.”

I wanted to smile but couldn’t quite get my mouth to obey. Instead the truth tumbled out. “I hurt him.”

“Oh, babe.” She pulled me into a hug. “He just couldn’t see there was no way this was going to work.”

I sniffed as she released me. “But you saw.”

Lana gave me a gentle smile, the dark skin around her eyes crinkling with the action. “Two different worlds. And it wasn’t like he was offering to meet you in the middle. I love Jared, but it’s his way or the highway. He’s never once thought about going against his dad’s wishes.”

Something about Lana’s words eased the worst of the guilt. Because she was right. There was no asking what *I* wanted. There was only asking me to join him in what *he* wanted. “It was never going to work.”

Lana gave my arm a squeeze. “I don’t think either of you really wanted it to.”

“It wasn’t that light-your-soul-on-fire love. It was comfortable love,” I admitted.

“You deserve that burn-everything-to-the-ground love.” She sent me a sympathetic look. “But that doesn’t mean saying goodbye to this love is any

easier. So what's it going to be? Get shit-faced and dance to forget everything? Go home and stuff our faces with ice cream while cursing his name?"

My lips twitched at that. "I think the latter. But I need to find Avery."

Lana looked over her shoulder. "I saw her with the lax girls earlier. Let me just tell Connor I'm going with you two."

"You don't have to—"

Lana sent me a look that had me snapping my mouth closed. "Don't say stupid things. Of course I'm coming with you."

A fresh wave of tears hit my eyes but for an entirely different reason. "I'm so damned lucky to have you."

She grinned. "Damn straight. Now come on."

Lana hooked her arm through mine, leading us through the crowd. We paused for her to tell Connor she was heading out. He sent me a concerned look that had him heading for the path himself, but in search of his friend. That was good. Jared would have someone to talk it out with. And he deserved that.

I scanned the crowd, looking for that familiar head of blond hair, but I didn't see Avery anywhere. She wouldn't have bailed without telling me, even if she'd wanted to.

"I don't see her. Do you?" Lana asked.

I shook my head. "There's Carly."

We hurried over to Avery's teammate.

"Hey," I called over the music. "Have you seen Avs?"

"She's here. Went to get a drink a little while ago, maybe fifteen minutes?"

I frowned as I looked toward the makeshift bar. It was covered with liquor, soda, and bottles of water, but there was no Avery in sight.

"Maybe she went to get a jacket from the car? It's getting cold," Lana suggested.

"Maybe," I echoed. We shared the slightly beat-up sedan, and she had her own key.

"Come on," Lana said. "Let's go check."

I nodded absently, searching the crowd as she led me through it. The music grated on my ears now, making my head pound. Lana clicked on her phone's flashlight, illuminating our path. The same tree-lined trail that had seemed so innocent on my way in now cast ominous shadows.

We walked quickly up the hill and toward the road, but just as we were about to get out of the forest, something caught my eye. “Wait.” I grabbed Lana’s arm, my throat constricting as blood pounded in my ears.

It was the tiny silver lacrosse sticks formed in an X that had caught the light. My heart thudded, painfully slow and trippingly fast all at the same time.

I bent, grabbing the custom key ring I’d gotten Avs for Christmas two years ago. A sick feeling settled over me as I saw the *A* in the center of one of the lacrosse sticks.

When I turned it over, something else caught the light. A dark-red substance. Sticky almost.

“Oh God,” Lana whispered. “Is that blood?”

And my whole world crumbled.

RIDLEY

FIVE YEARS LATER

I LEANED into the curve of the road, my restored VW Kombi van hugging the bend perfectly. Bessie and I had been together for over three years, and I knew just the speed at which she could take turns like this one. I'd spent every cent of my savings to bring her back to life and customize her insides. From the kitchen and seating area to my office in the back to the pop-up bedroom in the roof. And who could forget the cat tower for Tater.

As if she could sense my thoughts drifting to her, she stretched in her bed on the dash, leaning over to lightly nip my fingers on the wheel.

"We're almost there. No need for tooth hugs," I chastised.

She meowed in answer. But it sounded more like a demand. And once she got started, there was no stopping her.

But Tater's *talking* only made me smile as the road curved again. The two-lane highway was blanketed by a wall of massive trees on either side, but they didn't make me feel claustrophobic. They made me feel free.

My work brought me to cities occasionally, but I did my best to pick locations off the beaten path. Ones where I had access to my drugs of choice: mountains, forests, deserts, or bodies of water of any kind. They

were the only places I found comfort now. The only places I could find peace for a fleeting moment. In nature and in my work.

As if the thought summoned him, my phone rang out with the *Jaws* theme song. It was a good thing my boss didn't know this was his ringtone, because he wouldn't have been pleased.

I tapped *accept* on the screen, choosing speakerphone. "Hey, Baker."

"Where are you?" he clipped.

Never any pleasantries with my producer. Always in a rush. In his book, time was money and he wasn't going to waste a dime. "About five minutes out from Shady Cove."

I heard a chair squeak over the line as Baker sighed, and I could picture my boss in his office on Sunset Boulevard, looking out over Los Angeles and wondering how he ended up with such an obstinate podcaster under his umbrella. "You could keep going another few hours north and take that case of the missing mom of three."

My stomach twisted. That mother deserved her justice too. But I needed this case in Shady Cove. This woman. This set of circumstances. "I can look into that one next."

I'd have to give Baker a win after back-to-back passion projects. But I'd gotten used to that cadence. Two for me, one for him.

He sighed again, as if disappointed in me. "I don't get what's so interesting to you about this one. Bungled abduction. The girl got away."

That itch skated over my skin again, the need to move, to roll down my window and breathe the fresh mountain air. "Which means I'll have a victim to interview. How often do we get that?"

Baker made a humming noise in the back of his throat as he mulled that over. I knew what called to him. Any angle that would push the numbers. Subscribers, downloads, listens. The hope of going viral on TikTok. Anything that would up what he could charge advertisers.

"You could have a point."

I went in for the kill. "They never found the perp. Maybe we get lucky and nab him."

I'd been doing this for over four years now. I'd covered over a dozen cases. I'd made headway in almost all of them, but I'd broken three wide-open. One had left a man doing twenty to life for murdering his wife, the other had a man on trial for the abduction and assault of eight women in Wyoming, and the final one had meant a life ended in a shootout when a

man opened fire on the FBI instead of being brought in for questioning in the disappearance of a college student—they'd found her body in his basement.

"I want you to start posting tonight," Baker ordered.

I shook off the chilling memories and did a mock salute even though he couldn't see me. "You got it."

He hung up without a goodbye, just another waste of time for him. But I didn't mind. Anything to get off the call quicker. And I didn't mind the social posts either because that forward progress on a case came from getting the community on your side. Activating them to become a force of amateur sleuths.

That public involvement had its downsides for sure. False leads and people getting in my way. The occasional safety concern. But I took precautions. People didn't know who I was, not really. I used my middle name, Sawyer, as my last on the podcast. And I never spoke about what had spurred me into the world of true crime to begin with—knowing what it was like not to have the answers you needed and feeling like no one gave a damn.

I was careful about more than the links to my past. I was cautious about the here and now too. I never posted around where I was staying. Never took photos or videos of my vehicle. Bessie was unique after all. Her teal-and-white paint job, the paddleboard fastened to her side, the cat almost always perched in the window.

Since taking care with those safety measures, I hadn't ever had someone find where I was staying. Probably because anyone interested enough to look checked hotels or short-term rentals. But I was always staying in Bessie.

It was necessary. Because with that first breakthrough case, there'd come attention. Just over a million followers on Instagram. One and a half on TikTok. And we averaged over two million monthly downloads of the show between all platforms. It was a community. There were some kooks for sure. There were some folks who thought they were the next Sherlock Holmes. But mostly there were people who wanted justice for those who had been forgotten.

They were my people.

It might have been because they too had lost someone. Or maybe they had been victims themselves, unable to speak up in the moment or even

now. Or they could simply be empathetic humans who wanted the world to be better than it was.

No matter the reason, I was grateful for them.

As the road straightened out then dipped down a bit, I caught sight of a sign in the distance. I could see the white letters spelling out *Welcome to Shady Cove*. The paint was chipped in places, worn by weather and time.

I quickly tapped the camera app on my phone from where it was in the charging dock and hit record. People loved the rolling-into-town footage that meant I was on a new case. As I got closer to the sign, I could see more of its details. The waves that marked the large lake the Northern Californian community sat on, the trees carved into the wood and painted a dark green for the surrounding forests. All of it aged, raw, real. And followed by *Population 2,033*.

Small. Almost minuscule.

But I knew that the most horrific things could happen in the places you least expected.