

pretty
guilty
women

A NOVEL

GINA LAMANNA

prologue

Hush, little baby, don't say a word..." Quiet footsteps filled the nursery. A woman padded over the thick, plush carpet, carefully selected to greet the newborn. Moonlit lines lay etched on the floor, carved into bars by the halfway closed blinds. Thin strips of light gave the impression of an ethereal jail cell, a prison holding the baby—*her* baby—captive.

"Mama's gonna buy you a mocking bird..." Happily grinning cartoon giraffes had been lovingly pressed against the wall, their necks arched toward the ceiling in a quiet watchfulness. "And if that mocking bird won't sing..."

The singing ground to a halt as she listened for the groan of the garage door—the sound of it inching up, a gaping, ugly black mouth ready to swallow him into the belly of the beast. To bring him here.

While she waited, her pulse racing, she listened for the creak of the front door, the depression of his heavy sole striking the hardwood staircase. If it was him, she would recognize the fifth step squeak as he ascended, and then the seventh step sigh.

But she suspected he knew about the squeak. He'd skip over the fifth step, but not the seventh.

That *sigh* would save her life.

When neither the fifth nor the seventh steps wailed their trusty alarms, she eased to the side of the crib and smiled down at

the sleeping baby. In a few more minutes, they'd be free. Alone and safe.

"Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring..."

She lifted the baby to her chest, cradling the newborn bottom against her arm, savoring the feel of the tender little head against her chest. Sweet-scented bubble bath clung to the baby's skin like an exquisite perfume.

"And if that diamond ring turns brass..."

"Papa's gonna buy you a looking glass." The low, throaty voice came from the doorway, where a man, flanked in shadows and charmingly handsome, rested against the wooden trim. He watched her through glittering black eyes.

He gave a slow, dangerous smile as she spun toward him. Her pulse skittered as she realized with horror that he'd discovered the seventh step sigh.

"And if that looking glass gets broke..." She hoarsely continued singing as if nothing strange had occurred. She belonged here with the baby, after all. Nothing—no one—could take that away from her.

"That's where you're wrong, sweetheart." He gave an ugly smile, fingered the gun at his waist, and shook his head. "You're already broke."

one

Detective Ramone: Please state your name for the records.

Lulu Franc: My name is Lulu Franc, and I am sixty-eight years old. My last name is spelled F-R-A-N-C. Please make sure that gets spelled correctly, as it's a nightmare to correct on legal documents.

Detective Ramone: Ms. Franc, we're recording this interview. Your name will be transcribed accurately. Please state the date you arrived at Serenity Spa & Resort and your purpose for being here.

Lulu Franc: I arrived August 16 with my husband, Pierce Banks. We have a suite booked for a week as we're attending the DeBleu/Banks wedding. I'm the groom's aunt by marriage. Not that my nephew would notice if I wasn't in attendance, but he'd most certainly notice if we didn't leave him a check as a wedding gift.

Detective Ramone: I assume you know the reason you're here. We discovered a body tonight, Ms. Franc.

Lulu Franc: Yes, a dead one.

Detective Ramone: That's implied.

Lulu Franc: Good. Because that's the way I saw him last.

Detective Ramone: Are you confessing to murder, Ms. Franc? Let me remind you this conversation is being recorded and whatever you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.

Lulu Franc: Must I repeat myself? For the last time, let me state for the record: I, Lulu Franc, am guilty of killing this man. When you write that down, remember, Franc is spelled *F-R-A-N-C*. If you add a *K* at the end, I will be very upset.

Lulu Franc was desperately annoyed.

She was supposed to be at the salon, relaxing while Delilah curled her hair and touched up her manicure, but *no*. Instead, she was stuck at home, rattling across her gorgeous wooden floorboards as she poked her head into the freezer and ducked under tables. Lulu's joints creaked as she bent low, and despite her attempts to ignore all signs of aging, she couldn't help but notice the glaring evidence to the contrary. However, her darling husband's elusive (and very fat) wallet was not nearly as obvious. It simply insisted on remaining lost.

She straightened, flicking dust off her new cashmere cardigan as she heaved a sigh of frustration. Her sweater was lined with real

raccoon fur and had cost her husband a fortune. No matter, as Pierce Banks was both loaded and happy to indulge his wife's taste in fashion. Not that Lulu didn't work for it. Being married to Pierce Banks was a full-time job on the South Carolina social circuit.

"Relax, sweetheart. It'll turn up," Pierce called as Lulu blazed passed him. "Don't be late for your appointment."

"Have you forgotten that you need identification to fly?" Lulu asked. "Please call Marsha and have her come by. Maybe she saw your wallet when she was cleaning yesterday."

"I'm not calling Marsha on her day off," Pierce said. "It will turn up; it always does."

Lulu gave up her search in the kitchen, where Pierce Banks lounged against the counter in a luxurious, black robe, watching her with a gleam in his eye as he waited for the coffee maker to warm. Lulu returned the flirtatious look with one of her own, forgetting her annoyance almost at once as she surveyed her husband, a man who by any measure appeared quite perfect.

"What is that look?" Lulu asked with a coquettish tilt of her head. "I'm annoyed, Pierce Banks. Don't think you can distract me with those beautiful baby blues."

"I don't think I can make the one and only Lulu Franc do anything she doesn't want to do." Pierce grinned back at her. "Otherwise, your name would be Lulu Banks."

"You knew my rules when you married me." Lulu added a lighthearted snip to her tone. "It's a lucky thing you're charming enough to make me forget why I was frustrated with you in the first place this morning."

Pierce crossed the room, pulled Lulu in for a quick kiss on the cheek. "I am the luckiest man alive."

Lulu inhaled the fresh scent of Pierce after his shower, his expensive gels and shampoos both familiar and comforting. She didn't think there'd ever come a day when she wouldn't be madly, brutally in love with her husband.

“Pierce,” she protested against his chest. “I’m going to be late!”

Pierce let her back away to arm’s length, but he held her there, his eyes fixed on hers with a lingering gaze that at once melted Lulu’s heart, and then set her at unease. There was a hint of love in his eyes and, more curiously, a longing. Something Lulu hadn’t seen from Pierce in quite some time.

“Is everything all right?” Lulu asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Pierce looked startled. “Nothing at all. Just taking in the moment.”

“Yes, well, next time you take in the moment, do you mind taking in your wallet as well? We really do need to find it.” Lulu gave a smile that was meant as an olive branch. In the background, the coffeepot gurgled to life and the delightful scent of freshly ground beans reached Lulu’s nose. She inhaled deeply. “I’ve got to finish getting ready. Will you pour me a cup for the road?”

As Lulu pecked her husband on the cheek, she allowed herself one additional moment to wonder about Pierce’s strange look. He was kind and loving, almost too generous for his own good, but he wasn’t overly affectionate. At least not anymore. That look in his eyes set Lulu on edge, and it wasn’t the first time he’d acted somewhat strangely as of late.

She waited in the hallway until she heard Pierce puttering around, pouring a cup of coffee for himself and then another for her, before easing into his favorite kitchen chair where he flicked a newspaper to attention during his typical morning routine.

Lulu took his silence as an opportunity, easing farther down the hall before she paused outside Pierce’s study. It was the one place she hadn’t gone to look for his wallet. The one place she normally avoided, with the drawer she normally ignored. But she couldn’t shake that look in his eye. Something wasn’t quite right.

And despite her husband seeming quite perfect, Lulu knew she was missing something. Nobody was perfect—Lulu included. Her four (failed) marriages proved that. Ironically, Lulu had thought this

would be her last marriage. She'd toyed with the idea of changing her last name when she married Pierce, especially after he'd emotionally pleaded his case and explained how much it would have meant to him to share a surname, but it hadn't been enough.

In the end, Lulu had made the decision with her head, not her heart. She'd kept her maiden name—Lulu Franc (without the *K*)—because that was the way she'd held onto her independence, her identity, after nearly seven decades of life. Four men, five marriages, and through it all, she'd maintained a certain sense of freedom. Clung to it with greedy little fingers, even though it had disappointed Pierce to hear her decision. He'd said he understood, but Lulu wasn't sure if he ever truly could.

After all, Pierce hadn't been married before. He claimed to have no secrets. No ex-wives or tangled relationships following him around. At least, none that Lulu had heard about. But somehow, she suspected that all might change if only she could open the damn drawer.

Lulu slipped into her husband's study. She knew with confidence that she had at least ten minutes until Pierce would finish his coffee, crinkle up his paper, and pour himself a second cup before heading to his study to check his emails.

She didn't ever mean to pry, but Lulu was nothing if not curious. Her fingers curled around the handle on the drawer and gave a light tug, but it didn't so much as budge. She knew it wouldn't, just like she knew Pierce wouldn't be fooled if he found her in here, yanking against a handle and claiming to be looking for his wallet. The truth was, the drawer had been locked for more than a year now.

Do all couples have secret drawers? Lulu wondered, casting a guilty glance over her shoulder. She paused to listen again, her heart pounding against her chest with such intensity that she checked her left arm for signs of a heart attack. Unfortunately, her arm was fine, and her erratic pulse was due solely to the fact that her perfect husband was keeping a secret, and Lulu was positively dying to find out why.

two

Detective Ramone: Please state your name for the record.

Ginger Adler: Ginger Holly Adler.

Detective Ramone: What is the nature of your trip to Serenity Spa & Resort?

Ginger Adler: We're attending a college friend's wedding. It's pretty obvious, I thought. Aren't you supposed to be the detective? I mean, there are signs for the ceremony everywhere. Did you see the letter board out front?

Detective Ramone: I haven't.

Ginger Adler: It's got a week's worth of activities on it. In my day, weddings were a one-day event. And the money they're putting into this! There's a flower arrangement the size of the Taj Mahal outside the resort, spelling their initials in a heart. They even gave me a bottle of custom wine as part of a welcome basket in our room. Not the cheap kind either, with a label just stuck on the outside. It's an actual bottle

of some special blend made exclusively for them. Don't you think it's all a bit much?

Detective Ramone: Let's stick with me asking the questions. Mrs. Adler, when did you arrive at the resort?

Ginger Adler: We were supposed to arrive on August 16 at 3:00 p.m. We didn't arrive until 8:00 p.m.

Detective Ramone: 8:00 p.m. on August 16? What was the reason for your delay?

Ginger Adler: A missed flight. I almost killed my husband because of it.

Detective Ramone: I assume you were able to get on a different flight.

Ginger Adler: Yes, luckily. My husband lives to see another day.

Detective Ramone: Mrs. Adler, I assume you understand why I've called you in here this evening.

Ginger Adler: Of course. Let's cut to the chase and save us some time—I am responsible for a man's death tonight. Is that what you needed to hear?

Elsie, get your shoes!” Ginger tugged a hand through her strawberry-blond hair, now showing a smattering of gray. (She’d meant to get that highlighted before the wedding, but there was no time now.) “Poppy, did you pack a bathing suit? You should bring two, honey. Tom. *Tom!* Put down your dinosaur and go potty. We have a long flight ahead of us, and we are not stopping on the drive to the airport.”

“Mom,” he moaned. “I’m seven. I use the bathroom.”

“Potty, potty,” Poppy singsonged in her sweet little voice. “Tom has to go to the potty.”

“Shut up,” Tom said. “I do not.”

“Mommy!” Poppy’s sweet voice turned into a wicked scream. “Tom told me the s-word.”

“Kids, now,” Ginger roared. “Anyone not in the car in ten minutes is going to be left home alone. Move it, troops.”

Ginger’s children grumbled and groaned and moaned in camaraderie. It seemed the only time they called a truce and worked together was when they were ganging up on their mother. All three kids seemed to agree on how horribly awful she was to have picked up double shifts for the past six months at the hotel where she worked as a receptionist, just so they could afford the trip. Anything less, and the Adlers wouldn’t have been able to foot the bill for the ungodly sum of money it was costing her to fly a family of five across the country.

Who did Whitney DeBleu think she was, anyway? It was ridiculous that she needed to get married in some exclusive resort on the coast of California. And even more ridiculous that the wedding festivities lasted an entire week! What happened to nice, heartwarming Midwestern weddings in a barn with sloppy buffet food and a raucous dance party? That’d done the trick for Ginger and Frank, and they were still married sixteen years later with three gorgeous (albeit not very cooperative) children.

In reality, Ginger would rather not have received an invitation to

Whitney's wedding at all. She and Frank really couldn't afford to be going, but the wedding would only happen once, and Ginger and Whitney really had been good friends in college. Of course, Emily and Ginger had been best friends, but that relationship had fizzled once Emily had gone and turned into a complete and utter bitch.

"If I don't see your butt on the toilet in two seconds, Tom, I am going to put you there myself," Ginger called. "Frank, where are you? Can you find Poppy's other shoe? The pink one. She needs it for the ceremony. Elsie: You've packed a library in this backpack. Do you need ninety-four books for a week? And they're all so torn up and mutilated. Can't you choose a regular-looking book to read by the pool so people think we're a normal family?"

Ginger limply picked up a battered, dog-eared, somewhat stained paperback that her daughter had likely acquired from the neighbor's Little Free Library. Elsie had a thing for random books and preferred to choose an odd freebie from next door rather than buy her own, which fit very well with Ginger's budget, but not so much with the image of a neat little family vacationing at a luxury resort.

However, Elsie was almost sixteen and almost impossible to be around. Arguing with her only made things worse. She'd developed some sort of new attitude that revolved around obnoxious technology, an inability to string a full sentence together, and a general moodiness that affected the entire house. Even vacationing in California had barely tipped the edges of her lips into a smile.

"Frank!" Ginger looked toward her feet where there were four full-size suitcases, three halfway-zipped duffels, and Poppy's little backpack—along with an entire zoo of stuffed animals. "A little help here?"

"Sorry, honey, I didn't hear you." Frank Adler careened in through the front door of the suburban three-bedroom house—just a touch too small for the five of them—with a goofy grin on his face. "I was watering the tomatoes."

“You were...” Ginger felt her lips parting in shock. “You were watering the tomatoes?”

“Yeah, well, Leslie won’t be here to care for the plants until Wednesday, and we’re really in for a heat wave. Would hate to see those babies die. I figure a good soak will keep them healthy for a few days.” Frank paused, running a hand through his already ruffled hair. “Hey, I forgot all about my potted lemon tree. And the raised garden bed. Honey, I’ll be right back—”

“No you won’t.” Ginger felt her voice turn ugly. “Frank, what about your *real* children? Tomatoes are not living things.”

“Well, actually—”

“Forget the damn tomatoes,” she said as her phone burst into a jingle. “I’ve got to answer this. Can you help get the children ready for the trip that *you* wanted to take?”

Ginger’s shoulders stiffened with resistance at the horribleness in her voice. This wasn’t like her. Ginger was fun and patient and exuberant. She wasn’t a nag, and more importantly, she loved Frank. She loved his silly hobbies and stupid projects. His very zest for life was one of the reasons she’d fallen head over heels for him in the first place.

But then life had happened, and kids, and finances, and insurance, and lost pink shoes. And somewhere in the mess of suburbia and second jobs and the monotony of daily life, love just seemed so hard sometimes.

“Sorry,” Frank mumbled. “I—Er, what did you need me to do?”

“Forget it,” she said, pulling her phone out from beneath the mounds of other things she had in her arms. “Water your garden. Be in the car in ten minutes, and I’ll take care of the kids and the house and the suitcases and the snacks and the paperwork and the money.”

“Really?” Frank’s face turned into a childish expression of jubilee. “You’re a doll, honey. Kids, listen to your mother. We’re going on vacation!”

“Hello?” Ginger was already on the phone. She’d barely glanced at the number as she pushed the phone against her ear and juggled the socks and the suitcases and one of Elsie’s books that had plopped on the floor, looking sad and dead. “Sorry, I can’t hear you. Who is this?”

“It’s me, Whitney” came a tinkling, manicured voice. “Is everything okay? It sounds like you’re in a war-torn country, sweetie.”

“Well, that’s the Adler household for you,” Ginger said. “How’s everything going with the wedding? Is something wrong? I swear, Whitney, if Arthur is having cold feet, I’ll stick those frigid toes up his—”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that,” she said quickly. “Arthur is wonderful. I’ve just stepped out to the spa to get my nails done, and I thought I’d give you a call while I had a second to myself. I’m positively booked every minute from now until the ceremony.”

Of course Arthur is perfect. Whitney deserved all sorts of wonderful, so why was the image of Whitney—wildly in love, chatting easily while a masseuse rubbed her shoulders and a nail technician pampered her feet and yet another professional waxed her lady business—so dang frustrating? As if Whitney’s blissful naivete was some sort of sin.

Just you wait... Ginger thought. *Wait for the third kid, the tightening budget, the sleepless nights.* Then Ginger would call Whitney back and daintily inquire about her delightful marriage and beautiful children, picturing her baggy-eyed with roots showing and a child on her breast, while Arthur watered his fucking tomatoes.

“I’m thrilled we’ll be seeing you so soon,” Ginger said instead. “We’re trotting out of the house now.”

“Excellent,” Whitney said. “But that’s sort of what I was calling about.”

“Go on,” Ginger said, gritting her teeth as a shoe came flying over the upstairs bannister and nearly took her eye out. “What’s bothering you, sweetie?”

“Emily called,” Whitney said in a rush. “She wanted to know if it would be super rude to last minute change her RSVP and attend.”

“It’s a little late, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but, well...” Whitney had always been uncomfortable with confrontation. Everything from her angelic blond hair to her precious pale skin shrunk at the first sign of an argument. “I was thinking of telling her she could come. It’s...she thought she’d be traveling, and now she’s not, and—anyway. I thought you should know she’s going to be there.”

“That’s great,” Ginger said in a high-pitched falsetto. “Thanks for calling, but I’ll be fine. We’re all adults. Now, you just focus on getting married and looking marvelous. We’re running late for our plane, so I’m going to let you go get pampered. See you soon!”

Ginger sighed and collapsed on the couch, the phone cradled in her limp hand as she stared at the muddy shoe on her white floor. She should have never RSVP’d to this wedding. She’d have to face Emily while towing tomato-loving Frank on one arm and three children headed straight to the juvenile detention center behind her.

three

Detective Ramone: Please state the time and date you arrived at Serenity Spa & Resort, as well as your name, for the record.

Emily Brown: Emily Brown. I arrived the sixteenth of August at 4:00 p.m.

Detective Ramone: Did you go straight to your room?

Emily Brown: No, but I suspect you already know that.

Detective Ramone: I have an eye witness who claims you joined a man in his room.

Emily Brown: Yes, Henry. I met him on the plane.

Detective Ramone: The flight you took on August 16?

Emily Brown: Yes.

Detective Ramone: Please describe the nature of your relationship with Henry, for the record.

Emily Brown: What does that have to do with anything?

Detective Ramone: I'm sure you're aware this is an investigation into how a man died, Ms. Brown.

Emily Brown: I could get a lawyer.

Detective Ramone: You could.

Emily Brown: But there's no need. I fired that gun, Detective. I killed a man tonight.

Why don't you hand me both of those, please and thank you." Emily Brown gestured at the flight attendant carrying two glasses of champagne and forced a smile at him. "I really hate flying."

"Of course," he said, setting both glasses on Emily's tray table before respectfully bowing his head and returning to the front to retrieve more drinks for the first-class passengers.

That's a laugh, Emily thought. She wasn't a first-class passenger by a long shot, nor was she scared of flying. However, when the airline bumped her up at the last second, what was she supposed to do—decline free drinks?

Emily settled deeper into her seat, closing her eyes in an attempt to relax. She came up short when a passenger clunked her head with a hefty backpack in passing. Emily's eyes flashed open as a stressed-looking woman with two small children in tow leaned over and apologized. An apology that was lost when one of her sons elbowed Emily in the thigh during a heated argument with his brother.

“Gosh, I’m so sorry,” the woman said again. “We’re terrorizing you. Boys, what did I say about behaving? You get none of the cookies we packed if you don’t say sorry this instant.”

“Sorry,” they chirped in unison.

“It’s really okay,” Emily said. “I understand. I used to be a teacher.”

The woman gave her a grateful smile as the line moved along, and she barked at her children to keep up.

Emily had been a preschool teacher for long enough to understand exactly how difficult it was to get small children to do much of anything in an orderly way, let alone behave on a cross-country flight. But her patience for that sort of work had expired long ago.

Her career as an educator had been short-lived after college, and over the past ten years, she’d transitioned instead to corporate America. She had eventually settled into a comfortable position as a project manager at a marketing company. It was much safer there.

Wincing at the memories, Emily took her first sip of champagne and glanced at the empty seat next to her. With a small laugh, she shook her head and then closed her eyes again. The only reason they’d bumped her to first class was probably because she was still single, no children. At thirty-eight, her biological clock was winding down.

Emily finished her second glass of champagne and stacked the two cups on top of each other when a shadow appeared over her shoulder. She glanced up at the hulking presence, noting that her new seatmate was one fine specimen of man.

But when Emily truly laid eyes on him, her first impression was that he was tired. The same sort of bone-tired she herself often felt. She continued her assessment of him, ticking off observations on some arbitrary mental checklist: handsome, worn, rugged. A hint of reckless. This man had lived a lot of life—but Emily didn’t care. She only wanted to be left alone with her champagne.

This man had ruined everything. She’d almost had the row to

herself until he showed up. A surge of illogical frustration bubbled in her chest as she sat pointedly back in her seat and ignored him. It wasn't as if the man had actually said something; he just waited, expectantly, as if she were supposed to read his mind.

He cleared his throat and edged closer.

Emily still gave him nothing. She had no idea why she was being so rude except she was tired too. A lifetime ago, she would've apologized and made a huge effort to move out of his way, offering polite niceties and appropriate small talk. That was before the incident. Now, Emily was a bitter shell of herself, and the more she noticed it, the more she sank into the role like a comfortable, old sweatshirt.

"Ma'am, I think that's my seat." The man's voice was deep and rocky, like a desert gravel road crunching against tires.

"Ah." Emily moved her legs ever so slightly closer toward the seat. "Can you get by?"

He threw a small backpack in the bin above and then climbed roughly over her. Apparently both of them were in a mood, but it was nothing Emily couldn't handle. If he knew half of what Emily had gone through, he might think twice about getting on her bad side.

As he adjusted and buckled his belt, Emily couldn't help but glance over. He brought no 'personal items' with him to stash under his seat, a choice that always mystified Emily. What was he planning to do all flight? Stare out the window? Pick at his fingernails? Sleep? Heaven forbid his plan was to talk to her.

"Sir, can I get you a beverage?" The flight attendant appeared again, politely ignoring Emily's two empty glasses. "We have sparkling water, champagne, sodas, liquor, wine..."

The man's eyes flicked toward Emily's empty cups, then to her hands clenching around the seat arms, then back to the flight attendant. "Whiskey for me, two champagnes for the lady."

The flight attendant stared blankly at him. He clearly didn't believe in serving Emily four glasses of champagne before the

wheels lifted for takeoff, but there was a certain weight to the way this guy carried himself, as if it would be unwise to mess with him, so the attendant nodded. “Very well, sir.”

The more Emily studied the man next to her, the more intrigued she became, albeit reluctantly. Her champagne savior looked something like a cowboy with worn jeans and a simple, buttery-soft black sweater. The alcohol already twirled lazily through Emily’s brain, and she wondered what it would be like to rest her cheek on his shoulder and close her eyes. To have his hand come up and dance lightly over her skin as she drifted into the safety of a nap.

Emily gratefully reached for a glass when it arrived and held it up, clinking the cheap plastic lightly with his. “Cheers. What’s your name?”

“Henry,” he said. “And yours?”

“Emily.”

“Emily no last name?”

“Henry no last name?”

Henry raised the glass of whiskey to his lips and downed it in one gulp.

Emily watched him with interest. “So, are you from Chicago, Henry Anonymous?”

He glanced out the rain-streaked windows and watched men and women dressed in neon-orange vests shuffle around below, carting bags and directing traffic beneath the gray clouds hovering over O’Hare. “No. I’m only passing through.”

“I moved here a few years ago from Minnesota after college,” Emily offered. “That’s the reason I’m headed to California—I’ve got nothing better to do, and an old roommate of mine is getting married. I fucking hate weddings.”

Henry sucked his teeth. “Is that why you’re still single?”

Emily saw Henry glance at her bare ring finger. She raised her hand, wiggling her fingers to make it easier for him.

He arched an eyebrow and looked out the window again, and

Emily found herself peeking for a glimpse of a ring on Henry's hand, but it was equally as naked as hers.

"One more question," she said as she reached down to her own bag stashed beneath the seat and pulled out headphones, a marker, and a small photo album. "What are you planning to do for a whole flight?"

Henry's eyes flicked toward Emily's supplies. "Not an art project."

"I never understand why people don't bring a book or a tablet with them on the plane," she said. "Won't you be bored staring out the window?"

"I inevitably sit next to women who want to talk the entire flight."

"If you'd brought headphones," Emily pointed out, "you could've plugged them in and pretended you couldn't hear those annoying women."

Henry gave a half smile for the first time all flight, reached into his pocket, and withdrew two earbuds. Without another word, he popped them into his ears and rested his head against the seat, staring out the window. The other end of the cord dangled uselessly between his knees.

"Nice." Emily shook her head and looked away. "Subtle."

He gave a soft laugh, and it changed something in Emily. It warmed her blackening heart, softened the bitter taste in her mouth, like tea that'd steeped too long, and added a hint of honey to make it palpable. She—Emily Brown—had made this surly, fine-looking gentleman laugh. A stranger.

As Emily polished off her champagne, she studied the man next to her more overtly, counting the grooves on his face like battle scars, noting the laugh lines that seemed to have softened over the years, as if Henry hadn't had a reason to smile in quite some time. She could relate. And if the weekend went as awfully as she expected, she wouldn't be smiling again anytime soon.

So why had she called Whitney and RSVP'd at the last moment? Emily still didn't have an answer. Part of it had been curiosity. In college, some fifteen years ago, Emily, Whitney, Kate, and Ginger had been the best of friends. Then Emily had made one choice that had sent the four spiraling down wildly different paths through life.

The thought sent a chill along Emily's spine. She hoped Henry didn't noticed her reluctant shiver. Turning toward the album on her lap, she thumbed through pages of happier times. She racked her brain for captions to add beneath the photos while the flight attendants prepared everyone for takeoff. However, her time was mostly spent chewing on her pen and daydreaming instead of jotting down lovely, heartfelt phrases—even after the pilot had gotten the four-hour trip well underway.

Sometime later, Emily found her head bobbing forward. Her hand slid over the book, and she closed it, sensing Henry's curious glance at her lap. She resolutely turned her head the other way, let her eyes collapse shut, and before she knew it, she found they were halfway to California.

Shaking herself awake, Emily dropped the tray table before her and placed the photo album on top, still disoriented from her unexpected doze. She wiped at her eyes and blinked a few times until the alertness settled back in her brain, hampered only by the slight lingering effects of her champagne.

Hunching over the weathered album, Emily resumed her scan of the images. The book featured those smallish square photos from disposable cameras, the stills taken long before phones or digital versions had made perfection so much easier.

Emily smiled at one particular image where the four girls had smooshed together, crammed with limbs entangled underneath one teensy tiny Christmas tree they'd decorated with whatever junk they could scrounge up in their college apartment.

Emily recalled Ginger's playful cackle as she'd made paper snowflakes out of old exams she'd bombed from a certain history

professor she'd sworn had a vendetta against her. They'd sipped spiked eggnog and belted Christmas carols at the top of their lungs until their resident advisor had pounded on their door with a noise violation in hand. Ginger had made a paper snowflake out of the violation too.

Emily's thoughts were interrupted as Henry glanced over her shoulder and spoke. "How old were you there?"

She considered. "Oh, I don't know. Twenty? This must have been junior year of college."

Emily knew for a fact it had been junior year because she recognized the present under the tree she'd wrapped to give to Ginger. It was a silly thing, a set of matching Christmas pajamas for her and Ginger to split. After all, they'd shared everything. An apartment, a friendship, a life...until Emily shared one thing too many and ruined everything.

"Do you keep in touch with all of them?" Henry asked. "Seems like a lot of work."

"No, actually," she said. "I mean, the occasional Christmas card, maybe. But Kate—this one, here—she lives in New York. Whitney's in California. Ginger's in Minnesota, and I'm in Chicago, and we don't make a habit of meeting up."

"Why are you going, then? You hate weddings, you don't talk to these people—seems like it makes sense to skip the damn thing."

"Maybe I should have." Emily shrugged. "But I have a week of vacation to burn, and it's supposed to be a very nice spa and resort. I will probably barely see them at all."

Or maybe that was a lie. Maybe Emily longed to be a voyeur more than anything else. To peek into the life of her ex-best friend and marvel over Ginger's flourishing, secure marriage. To watch her chirpily dote upon three flawless, cherub-faced children. To examine in person the gifts Ginger had been given, and to make certain—absolutely certain—that Ginger appreciated what she had in front of her. (Emily had Facebook, and even though she and

Ginger weren't friends, Emily could see her profile picture of a bubbling, joyful family.)

God only knew how Emily had suffered. And God only knew how much Emily admired, envied, desired what Ginger had. If it weren't for one terrible decision in college, maybe things would have been different. Maybe Emily would be sitting in economy class with three children climbing on her lap, shooting knowing, lovely little glances at an adorable, loving husband. Instead, she was groveling over photos from years past, longing for simpler times.

"Well, that doesn't make any sense to me, but maybe it's different for a man and a woman." Henry sat back in his seat, closed his eyes. "You're an adult. You clearly don't like these women anymore, so why torture yourself?"

Emily's fingers shook, and she capped the marker she'd been holding so no stray flecks of ink marred the irreplaceable photos. There were no backup copies. "What makes you think I don't like them?"

Henry opened his eyes to glance at his watch. "It doesn't seem like the captions are coming easily to you. If they were still your friends, it wouldn't be so hard to write your little love notes."

"It's a wedding gift," Emily clarified. "I'm trying to make it nice for the bride."

However, as Emily peered down at the book again, she was surprised to find Henry Anonymous was right. She'd only written a handful of captions on a thirty-page photo album in the span of a few hours.

"I'll finish at the resort," she said. "I'm not in a rush."

However, the truth was that Emily had been so lost and twisted in her thoughts of yesterday that the sound of Henry's voice was disorienting as it dragged her back to reality. She pinched at her forehead as she felt the beginnings of a champagne headache take hold and wondered about the logistics of getting another glass to keep her buzz going strong.

She leaned over the arm of her chair, glancing up the aisle in search of the attendant. When she caught Henry watching her, she gave a wry smile. “Who do I have to sleep with around here to get a glass of champagne?”

“He’s not going to serve you again,” Henry said, returning the smile. “I think the flight attendant is a bit frightened of you.”

“That’s ironic,” she said. “Seeing as I’m not frightening at all. I only wish he’d top up my glass, or this headache is going to get worse.”

“Why don’t I buy you a drink when we land?”

“I really should get to the resort and get checked in.”

“What are the chances you’re staying at Serenity Spa & Resort?”

Emily choked back a noise of surprise. “Did you see the reservation on my phone?”

“You wrote the date and location of the wedding on the front of your album.” Henry’s gaze flicked downward. “It wasn’t hard to guess you’ve been suckered into attending the DeBleu/Banks wedding too. That’s where I’m headed, and I figure there are only so many weeklong extravaganzas in California at one time.”

“That would be correct,” Emily said, somewhat mystified and quite unsure how she felt about sharing a hotel with this gorgeous and mysterious stranger. “I’m obviously friends with the bride as you saw from the photos. You?”

“Cousin of the groom.” Henry gave a polite shrug. “We’re not close, but it’s family.”

“I suppose you could buy me a drink at the resort, then,” she blurted, feeling a bit shy. “If the offer still stands.”

“I’d hate to be interrupted by a bunch of family I haven’t seen in years,” he said, giving her a somewhat lopsided smile. “They say my room has a great view and a complimentary bottle of champagne waiting for my arrival. You’re welcome to join me.”

“Oh.”

“Like you, I don’t have a desire for small talk and mingling. I’ve

got a work project due next week, so I'll be holed up in my room most of the weekend fighting a deadline—which is fine by me.”

“Ah,” Emily said, feeling a thrill cascade through her body at the thought of his implication. “I see. What do you do?”

“I've got a big case,” he said. “But if you'd like to join me for a drink this evening, I could use a break.”

“We'll see,” Emily said, knowing full well that was exactly what she wanted to do. “I should probably check in with the bride first. See what's on her agenda.”

“Is this Whitney? I haven't met her yet.”

Henry leaned over, his breath hot against Emily's neck as his finger extended in a point toward the photo open in her book. It was one of Emily and Ginger, their faces squished together with smiles of glee painted across their lips. They were sitting in a bundle of blankets in the back of Frank's beat-up truck at the drive-in movie theater on a hot summer's evening. If she closed her eyes, Emily could feel the warm Midwestern breeze, smell the buttery flavor of popcorn, feel the stickiness on her fingers.

When she opened her eyes, she realized Henry was watching her curiously.

“Sorry,” she said quickly. “No. It's not. It's a different friend... or was.”

Henry passed over his glass of whiskey. Emily hadn't remembered him ordering another, but she took a grateful sip regardless.

“It's been a long time since I've seen these friends,” she admitted. “I'm a little on edge.”

“Will this help?” Henry leaned forward, his fingers tilting Emily's chin upward. He waited there, paused, his eyes telling her she needed to meet him halfway.

Emily tipped forward, lost in the pull of him. The comfort of a man's arms, the allure of a stranger who knew nothing about her but could make her forget it all for one tiny minute. Their lips met in a soft test of wills.

Henry pulled back first, and, if Emily wasn't mistaken, he looked quite pleased with their kiss. She blatantly studied him, noticing the thick, sturdy head of hair. She wondered how a man as handsome as Henry wasn't married. She wondered if he had children. She wondered if she asked, would he lie? The dark hair cascading over his eye gave him a mysterious, standoffish sort of charm. Emily itched to brush it away, as if that were the key to opening his secrets.

What happened next was a blur. It was a mix of the alcohol simmering in her blood, the thought of showing up alone—fat, ugly, old—for the sole purpose of lording her misery over Ginger. As if Emily had been some self-sacrificing guardian angel in college.

Maybe that was why Emily reached over and brushed the lock of hair from Henry's forehead. Their gazes cemented a concrete bond between them. A knowing, reckless dare. The pulling of two broken souls toward each other in a poisonous, futile swirl of lust.

Henry leaned forward, grabbed her chin roughly with his hand, and pressed his mouth to hers. They tangled together, hot, heavy, until he nodded toward the back of the airplane. Emily felt her heart race, her stomach twist. She returned his nod.

They screwed in the airplane bathroom, Emily's foot wedged on the sink as Henry pounded into her, his eyes—jungle green, flecked with gray—studied her with surprising intention as she moaned his name against his neck. His grip was hard, their pace fast as they fucked like teenagers, tasting whiskey and champagne, smelling a fresh, spicy cologne mixed with cheap airplane bathroom sanitizer. She grasped his delicious, buttery sweater between her fingers as they finished.

The two shared a cab to the resort. They checked in at the same time at different desks.

They met at the elevator.

"I'm in 509," he said.

"411," she said.

"Your room or mine?"