

**ONE
LAST
BREATH**

GINNY MYERS SAIN





An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Razorbill,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2024

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
Insert CIP [TK]

ISBN 9780593625453

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America

[Printer Vendor Code TK]

Design by Rebecca Aidlin
Text set in Apollo MT Pro

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For my mother, Anna Myers,
who believes the two most powerful forces in the world
are love and story, in that order. Thank you for gifting
all three of your children with plenty of both.



“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, /
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

—*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare

ONE

USUALLY, IT'S THE soft sound of the knife that wakes me. The noise it makes when it slices through the canvas. Like a whisper. I roll over to ask Celeste what it was that she said, but she can't answer because she's already dead. Staring and bloody.

So I run.

Other times when I imagine myself as Bailey, it's the crunch of leaves or the snap of a twig that makes me sit up straight in my sleeping bag.

I stare into the dark, not realizing that the rest of my life can be measured in minutes.

Even in my dreams, though, that night always ends the same way. With me dead. Floating on the surface of the spring. I fade into the blackness, my hair spreading out around me in a sea of blood, without ever knowing that Celeste and I have become the most famous citizens of Mount Orange, Florida.

But then I wake up. Take a deep breath. Hear the hum of the air conditioner. I count the old glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling and feel the softness of clean sheets against my skin. I inhale the mountain breeze dryer sheets my mother uses, even though neither of us have ever even seen a mountain in real life. Every time, I'm hit with this rush of relief. Because I'm not Bailey.

I'm not Celeste, either.

I'm Trulee.

And instead of bleeding out in the water, right now I'm standing on the courthouse lawn while the high school choir sings a memorial song for two long-buried girls who have always felt more alive to me than any of the people standing here dripping in the late-May heat.

I squint and glance up toward the sky. All that smooth, endless blue reminds me of the surface of the freshwater springs that lie right outside the city limits. It's the perfect day to be free diving out at Hidden Glen, but I felt like I had to be here. So did everyone else, I guess.

Downtown Mount Orange is a three-block strip of insurance offices, real estate offices, and four or five junk stores that like to be called "antique shops." Other than the memorials to Bailey and Celeste scattered around town, and the old crime scene out at Hidden Glen Springs where they died, the only real things of interest are an old-fashioned ice cream parlor called The Cone Zone and a beauty salon called Kurl Up and Dye. Every business sports a dark green awning out front, and big planters of ferns and pink hibiscus line the sidewalks. It would be picturesque, probably, if you didn't live here.

But I do.

I wipe at my sweaty forehead and glance up at the Florida flag flying over the courthouse.

My home state is known for four things.

Alligators.

Beaches.

Theme parks.

And serial killers.

There's Ted Bundy. Danny Rolling. Aileen Wuornos. The legendary Glades Reaper. He's maybe the worst of the worst. The things he did were so unspeakable that the mention of that name is enough to stop a conversation in its tracks. The original Florida boogeyman.

But I'm not thinking about him as I stand in the baking afternoon sun, struggling to fill my lungs with thick, wet air that feels more like warm oatmeal than anything else.

On a little stage at the front of the crowd, our illustrious mayor, Knox, is rambling on about the new memorial fountain in the town square. I'm not thinking about him, either, though.

I'm thinking about Bailey and Celeste again, our own local horror story.

The anniversary of the murders out at Hidden Glen is coming up in just a few weeks. It happened almost twenty years ago, but it's clear that nobody has forgotten about what went down out there that night, because everyone has gathered here in the hellish heat to see yet another memorial dedicated to our dead girls.

When we were little, my friends and I used to pretend to be them. We didn't understand that they were dead. Murdered. We only knew they were famous, their pictures framed in our school hallways and their names written on plaques all over town.

Once we understood the gruesome truth, we found other games to play. But I never lost my fascination with Bailey and Celeste.

Especially Bailey.

When I reenact the murders in my mind, I always play her role. It's her eyes I see it all unfold through. Her panic that swells in my chest. Her last moments that play over and over in my head.

I look around the crowd. There are a lot of true-crime people here today. A couple hundred, at least. Podcasters and writers. Plus their fans, creepy murder enthusiasts who travel the country visiting beautiful places where ugly things happened. These are the kind of weirdos who get off on playing detective as they pore over clues on internet forums, and there are so many more of them than any normal person would think. That's why we need another memorial. Because the lines get too long at the first five. The murder ghouls might have to wait a few seconds to snap their selfies, which might piss them off. And we can't have our guests leaving town dissatisfied. What if they didn't stay for pie at the diner and antique shopping on Dickson Street? That would be a real tragedy for this town.

I glare at a woman who steps right in front of me, blocking my view. She doesn't even offer up an "excuse me" or a "sorry." She's too busy fanning herself with her hat as sweat soaks through the back of her fancy silk blouse. She's an out-of-towner. I can tell because they're always dressed too formally. The uniform of choice in Mount Orange is shorts and a swimsuit paired with flip-flops. Put on anything else, and you're gonna stand out.

It isn't only the tourists who turned out today. There are

plenty of locals, too. I wave at some girls I know from school. And the lady who cuts my hair. But my eyes keep searching the crowd until they land on Celeste's mom. She skipped the last few memorial dedications, but today she's standing off to one side, staring up at the courthouse windows. When the mayor points her out, the crowd offers up a polite round of applause for the murder victim's mother. Her shoulders tighten, but her face never changes, and she never looks anywhere but up at those empty second-floor windows.

Knox is bellowing from the podium now, giving his best impersonation of a Southern Baptist preacher getting really worked up on this Sunday afternoon. "This mystery will be solved," he promises us, one hand raised skyward like he's waving a Bible. "The guilty will be punished! Someone knows who did this. And nothing stays a secret forever. The killer is someone's son. Someone's father. Someone's brother." He pauses for effect. "Maybe even yours."

Knox narrows his eyes at his captive audience, and a low murmur swells from the crowd, because, in this town, speculating about the Hidden Glen murders is every bit as much a local pastime as watching the high school football team lose championship after championship. We still eye each other with suspicion after all these years, and whispers are always hanging like water droplets in the humid air. When we're waiting behind our neighbors in line at the grocery store or the bank, there's always a part of us that wonders, *Was it you?* It does something to a person, always thinking that the person holding

the door open for them could be a murderer, but none of us can give up on the guessing game. After all, there are only three unsolved murders on record in Mount Orange.

Celeste and Bailey.

Plus my sister Dani.

Although most people think Dani's death was just a tragic accident. Not worth obsessing over. Which is kind of a relief in one way, because it means there's no opportunity for this town to make a buck off her memory. An accident victim's photo won't pull in tourists with cash to spend on pie and postcards. That also means there are no memorial ceremonies or golden fountains for her, so sometimes I feel like I'm the only one who notices that Dani's gone.

A breeze tickles the back of my neck, and I'm grateful for that little bit of relief from the heat. Everyone in the crowd tips their bright red faces toward the sky to find the cooler air. I shiver as it moves across my slick skin, and for the briefest second, I sense someone standing right behind me. Someone I recognize by the sound of their breathing.

"East," I say with a sigh. "I know it's you." I spin around, expecting to find my boyfriend, grinning and ready to wrap me up in a hug, even though it's a hundred and twenty degrees and my shirt is soaked through with sweat.

But no one is there. At least not anyone familiar.

The mayor pushes his cowboy hat back on his head to reveal a few wet curls that hang like limp macaroni above pinprick eyes. He fans at his red face with a yellow legal pad, then ends his speech the way these things always end, with a plea for

information. "If anyone knows anything, or if you have any clues, no matter how small, please reach out," he thunders at us, and my hand immediately moves to cover the zipper pocket of my backpack, almost like Knox's beady little eyes have X-ray vision. "One of you out there could hold the key to solving these murders and finally bringing peace to our community."

His words strike the proper somber tone, if you don't pay attention to how fake they sound and how he's mostly focused on making sure our local newspaper editor, Jon Boy Westley, gets plenty of good photos of him for the front-page story we'll run next week.

Jon Boy is my neighbor, plus I work for him part-time at the Mount Orange Star in the summers. I'm grateful to have the afternoon off, otherwise it might be me up there gritting my teeth when Knox waves me in for a closer shot.

When it's all over, I take my turn filing by the new fountain. The lady in the sweaty silk blouse leans over me to snap a selfie, and I can't help laughing when she slips and drops her phone in the water. Before I move on, I pause for a second and run my fingers over the lettering on the gold plaque.

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
BAILEY ALDERSON AND CELESTE WOODWARD,
THE LOST GIRLS OF MOUNT ORANGE,
ON THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THEIR DEATHS.

Even though most of them wouldn't even recognize Dani's name, I fight the urge to remind the people around me that

Mount Orange has more than two lost girls. Instead, I watch as melting tourists drift toward The Cone Zone for ice cream.

I'm desperate for some air-conditioning, so I make my way through the crowd to my truck. As I reach for the handle, I feel it again, a whisper of breath on my neck. Someone I can almost name standing close behind me. It slides across my skin like the touch of familiar fingertips, and I break out in goose bumps. I scan the crowd for East again, or maybe my mom or Jon Boy. But they aren't there. This time, all I see is a flash of short, coal-dark hair disappearing around the corner of the drugstore.

Nobody I know has hair like that, so I turn back toward my truck. That's when I notice Celeste's mother leave her spot and head toward the fountain. She's waited for the crowd to disperse, I guess. And now she's standing there alone. I stop with the truck door open and watch her pause for a few seconds to run her hands over the engraved plaque. Exactly like I did.

She looks up and catches me staring at her. Her eyes are fixed on mine, and it makes me uncomfortable. I've been watching her since I was a little girl, always checking for a glimpse of her in the garden when we'd drive by her house on the way to school or, when I got older, looking for a bit of her faded blond hair when someone hurried past the newspaper office windows.

I don't like the idea of her watching me, though.

All I can think is that she has no idea how often I wake up worried about her daughter, because I'm always Bailey in my dreams, but it's always Celeste I'm calling out for.

I climb into the truck and get the AC going, then lean close to the vent and let the cold air kiss my sunburned cheeks. I take a

few seconds to shoot East a text while I wait for the traffic jam to clear up.

Hey, baby. You downtown
at the dedication?

His reply is immediate.

Nope. Waiting at your place.
Thought you might want to go
cool off together. Or maybe
get a little hotter . . .

That last line is followed up with four kissy-face emojis, a neon-green penguin, and a bright blue ocean wave even though we're an hour from the closest beach. On my way, I tell him, and I relax a little as I slide the truck into reverse and back onto Main Street. East always has that effect on me. He's a source of instant calm and comfort, like slipping on an old T-shirt that's gone all soft from wearing it so much. Or hearing your favorite song on the radio. The two of us have been best friends since we were four, and everyone always said that we'd get together as a couple eventually. So we did, I guess.

On the way out of town, I pass the cemetery. A group of people is gathered around a little grave that lies off to one side. Right up against the rock wall. At first, I think maybe a funeral is going on, and then I realize who that particular grave belongs to.

It's Celeste's.

Bailey is buried up near Tallahassee, where her mother's people were from. But Celeste's final resting place is here in Mount Orange.

I grip the steering wheel as anger builds low in my stomach and quickly moves up into my chest where it sits like a hot coal. The true-crime ghouls have invaded the cemetery. I slow down to watch them jostle and push for their chance to take a picture. After all, why be content posing for selfies with a fountain when you can flash your best smile over the grave of a real murder victim.

I'm not sure why it bothers me so much, I just know I have this sudden urge to roll down the windows and yell something awful. But I can't think of what to yell. So I grit my teeth and keep driving.

When I make it home, East is sitting on my front porch. He waves as I climb out of the truck and leave the cool of the cab behind. The afternoon heat breathes me in and swallows me up again. Like some kind of lazy monster. By the time I make it to the steps, I've surrendered to the constant sweat running down my neck in tiny rivers. I'm not even trying to wipe it away at this point.

I sit down beside East, and he reaches up to push my damp hair back off my forehead—strands of stringy red—as I lean in for a kiss. His lips are soft, and his blond waves glint in the sunlight. I inhale a lungful of him. Mango shampoo and coconut sunscreen. He smells like a potluck fruit salad. The little blue sailboats on his swim trunks make me smile, and I trace the outline of one with my finger.

East grins. "Watch it there, missy," he teases.

"I looked for you at the fountain dedication," I tell him, and East lets out a long sigh.

"Yeah," he says. "I wanted to be there, but I had to work." He gives me a slightly embarrassed grin, like he just got caught sneaking a cookie before dinner. "And then Paz and I went for a dive out at the Well." He pushes his hair out of his eyes, and I try to fight back my jealousy. I've been thinking about free diving all afternoon. I crave the cold, clear water of Hidden Glen Springs the same way our old hound dog craved bacon. It's a constant hunger that hums just under my skin every moment I'm awake. Even in my dreams, I find myself below the surface more often than above it.

Right now, I need it more than usual. I'm anxious to slide into that deep blue and wash the heat of the day from my body.

To see how deep I have to dive before I forget about the smiling tourists at the cemetery.

"Besides," East adds, "I wasn't in the mood to deal with Knox. Especially after last weekend."

Our red-faced, cowboy-hat-wearing mayor is East's uncle, but they don't share much of a bond.

"What happened last weekend?" I ask. Knox gets up to so much shady shit that East hardly bothers to tell me anymore, unless it's something really big.

"Nothin' new." East shrugs. "He got drunk off his ass at Nana's house. Broke a damn window in the front room."

"Jesus," I mutter. So much for the dignity of our high-and-mighty mayor. "What had him so pissed?"

"Who knows?" East shakes his head. "You know how he gets when he's been hittin' the bottle. He's meaner than a hornet with a headache. Maybe Nana didn't make his favorite kind of pie for Sunday dinner." He stops for a second, and his jaw tightens. "Anyway, I'm the one she had to call to clean up the mess. Her standin' there cryin', wringin' her hands, and him passed smooth out in the side yard."

"I'm sorry, baby," I tell him, and I run my fingers through those beautiful blond waves. He just shrugs again. East is no stranger to his uncle's shenanigans.

"Nah. Don't be sorry," he murmurs as he leans in for another kiss. "I'm the one who's sorry for diving without you." He grins. "How about I make it up to you?" I let myself enjoy the feeling of his lips pressed against mine. His fingers in my hair. Our relationship is so easy, worn smooth like the wooden porch steps underneath me. No bumps or rough places. "I thought maybe you and me could squeeze in a dive out at Hidden Glen before dinner."

"I wish," I say, "but I'm supposed to have dinner with Dad." I can't help but roll my eyes.

East frowns. "What's he doin' in town?" He's known my piece-of-shit father his whole life too, and his opinion of him isn't any better than mine.

"He's coming through on his way back down to Miami."

"Well damn. Tomorrow evening, maybe." East is busy nuzzling me with his nose and pressing his lips to my neck. "I missed you," he whispers against my collarbone. "Sorry I couldn't make

it to the memorial." His voice is low and gravelly. Soft and slow like wild Florida honey in my ear.

I'm so hot. Sticky. I fight the urge to move away, to let some air circulate between us. All I can think about is how much I want to be in the water right now. Out at Hidden Glen Springs. And that has my mind drifting back to Bailey and Celeste.

How they died out there in the woods.

"What if the killer was there today?" I ask. It's something I've been thinking about since I stood in that jam-packed town square earlier. East pulls back to look at me. "Down at the courthouse. In the crowd. Watching the spectacle."

East just shrugs.

"What?" I ask him. "You don't ever wonder about stuff like that anymore?" I nudge him in the ribs with my elbow. "I thought maybe we could do a little poking around out at the campsite tomorrow after we get off work."

East and I used to go clue hunting out at the murder site all the time when we were kids. We'd spend the morning trampling through the scrub looking for anything that might point to the killer's real identity. Then we'd spend the afternoon in the water, splashing each other and goofing off and practicing our dive breathing with Dill.

"I don't know." East rubs at the stubble on his chin, and it makes me want to plant little kisses along his jawline. "It's comin' up on twenty years, Tru. All that shit went down before we were even born. And we've been all over back there. It's time to let it go."

It's my turn to shrug, but I don't meet East's eyes. "You sound like your mom," I say. East's family doesn't like to think about what happened that night. Knox was one of the original suspects. But he was cleared.

Now he's the mayor.

"Every time we go poking around back there, all we ever get is ate up and scratched up." East reaches out and touches my cheek. "You're never gonna find anything."

"Never say never," I tease him, and I reach for my backpack so I can unzip the side pocket to reach in and run my fingers over the secret treasure I keep hidden there.

A sudden honk makes us both jump, and I'm careful to rezip the backpack pocket, because what's tucked inside is so tiny. So easily lost.

"Hey! Lovebirds! Y'all wanna come for supper at our place?" East's best friend, Paz, has pulled up in the driveway, and he's sticking his head out the driver's side window, grinning in our direction. "Ma's making ropa vieja!" My mouth immediately starts to water. Paz's mom is Cuban, and she makes the most amazing food. I mean, my mom is an okay cook, but she thinks pepperoni pizza is super spicy. And we've been eating microwave dinners more and more often the last couple of years.

East jumps on the offer immediately, but I say that I can't because I'm supposed to have dinner with Dad. It makes me irritated with my father all over again, because I know eating with Paz's family would be way more fun. Besides, Dad's probably gonna blow me off. He usually does.

Before he leaves, East pulls me in for a goodbye kiss. "I love

you, truly. Truly, dear.” He half hums, half sings that old song into my ear like a secret, and my whole body is covered in goose bumps. We heard it years ago, on a Bing Crosby record his grandma had, and it’s been his song to me ever since.

I hear an impatient cough and look over to Paz, still hanging out the car window, making kissy faces at us like an overgrown second grader.

“I better get going,” East tells me, and he promises to text me later. “Paz’s mama may be a better cook,” he teases, “but you’re for sure a better kisser.”

I snort as East climbs into his truck and raises one hand to me in a lazy wave. Then he takes off after Paz and I watch until they disappear in a cloud of dust.

When I step inside our tiny living room, I head straight for the stairs. I try not to make eye contact with the two girls in the giant portrait that hangs on the wall just above the TV.

Me and my big sister, Dani.

When I reach the safety of my own bedroom, I unzip my backpack and carefully take out what’s hidden in the side zipper pocket: a tarnished best-friends locket on a broken chain. I hold it in my hand, feeling the weight of all the questions it surely knows the answer to, and I wish for like the millionth time that I could absorb its secrets directly into my skin.

I know for a fact the necklace belonged to Bailey, because she’s wearing it in the picture they used in all the newspaper articles that ran after the murders.

The other half shines from around Celeste’s neck in her photos.

I found it a couple of years ago. Half a heart mostly buried in the sandy soil at the edge of the Well, out at Hidden Glen Springs. I should have turned it in to the sheriff. I know that. But as soon as I touched it, I knew it was meant to be mine. Even before I turned it over, I somehow knew about the engraved *B* on the back, although I'd never seen that mentioned anywhere.

I take the necklace and lie down on my bed to let the air-conditioning wash over me like cool, clear spring water. I'm exhausted from standing in the heat for so long, and I have an hour before Dad is supposed to pick me up.

I don't intend to let my eyes drift closed, but it's almost two hours before the ping of a text message wakes me.

Sorry, baby. Car trouble. Next time, okay?

He could at least have come up with an interesting excuse.

I have a few missed messages from East, so I return those.

There's one from Mom, too. Out late.

It's already dark, so I decide to call it a night. I change into a clean T-shirt and crawl under the covers, then I close my eyes and try to slip away again in the darkness of my bedroom. I imagine myself diving. Calm and focused. Free. Floating in an endless deep.

But I keep hearing a sound. A swish that's barely audible under the loud hum of the A/C and the barking of our neighbor's dog. A noise that sounds like a whisper.

Or a knife cutting through nylon.

Before I can figure out what it might be, I fall asleep with a dead girl's treasure clutched tightly in my fist.

TWO

AS SOON AS I open my eyes, the need to dive is humming through my veins the way the constant droning of the window air conditioner hums in my ears. My whole body is pulsing with it.

I only have an hour before I have to be at work at the newspaper office, and I'd be cutting it really close. So I lie there for a minute and try to shake that desperation off. But it's like lying in bed knowing you have to pee. I can't think about anything but diving, no matter how hard I try to distract myself. until I get in the water, I won't be able to focus on the rest of my day.

East won't be able to dive with me this morning. He's probably already at work. But I know somebody else that will be up and ready to go, so I change into my swimsuit and hide Bailey's necklace away in my backpack for safekeeping. I grab a muffin and my dive bag before I head out the door. Less than five minutes after I wake up, I'm already in my truck and following the highway out of town toward Hidden Glen.

Dill says I was born to breathe water, that my soul should've dropped to earth as a carp, or maybe a striped bass. But my wires got crossed somehow, and that's why I ended up with lungs instead of gills. Every time he says it, I think he's probably right. If I had the chance to pick, I'd choose being a fish

over being a human any day of the week, because I pretty much live to dive.

It scares my mom. She won't watch. All she can think about is what if I never come up? And I understand why; she's already lost one daughter. But I've never been afraid of the deep. That's always been the one place that feels safe.

I've never been afraid of the gators, either. If you grow up in Mount Orange, Florida, you learn early on that they aren't any more inclined to mess with us than we are with them, so the big snaggletoothed fellow sunning himself near the turnoff to Hidden Glen Springs barely gets a glance from me as I pull into the parking lot. Let him hiss and bellow. I don't give a shit.

Today is Monday, and we're kicking off the first full week of summer break. The days are already unbearable—ninety-four degrees and 300 percent humidity—which means, even at just past nine o'clock in the morning, the picnickers and partiers at Hidden Glen outnumber the horseflies and no-see-ums.

I park the truck in the last open spot and pick my way toward the swimming area, stepping over blankets and around stacks of inflatable tubes. There are already people everywhere. Setting up their grills and umbrellas for the day. Listening to music in the sun. Snorkeling with their kids. Waiting for the Dive Bar to open so they can buy overpriced Frito pies and ice pops.

Some of them are out-of-town day-trippers drawn by the promise of our cold, clear water. Others are true-crime fans, like the ones at the memorial yesterday, who've come to check out the decades-old murder site hidden back in the scrub. But most

of them this morning are locals, people I've known my whole life. They wave and smile. Shout questions at me.

"You still headin' to FSU in the fall?" Mrs. Bernson wants to know. She was my fourth-grade teacher.

I nod and shout back, "Leaving in August." Her broad smile makes my stomach tighten at the lie I just told.

A group of preteens turns their music up, and I think maybe I'll get away with just one question today, but then somebody else stops me.

"How's your mama doin'?"

And somebody else.

"Missed you in church last Sunday . . . ?"

I grit my teeth at that, because me and Mom haven't seen the inside of a church since Dad left. That was his thing, not hers. Especially after what happened with Dani. But people still ask all the time, like maybe I forgot to show up for Sunday school the last five thousand weekends in a row.

As for how my mama's doing, Mount Orange is a tiny place. Everybody knows everybody else's business, so they all know good and well that she stays out at the Wild Clover a little too late. Dances with too many guys. Drinks a little too much. Nobody ever mentions it because they all know why. Besides, it doesn't stop her from being the top-selling real estate agent in town. Not that we're rich or anything; commission on run-down mobile homes isn't much money.

I've already had enough questions to last me until fall, and summer is just getting started, so I bypass the crowded main spring and follow the wooden boardwalk up the run a couple

hundred yards to a second, smaller spring called Elijah's Well. It's a dark blue circular hole, only fifteen feet wide, but almost a hundred and forty feet deep. A liquid elevator shaft running straight down through the limestone, all the way to the Floridan aquifer. If you stand up top and look down into it, it's like staring into a bright blue eye.

I raise the little lever to push open the gate in the chain-link safety fence, and it swings closed behind me. I hear the click of the latch.

Just inside the gate, there's a plaque dedicated to Celeste and Bailey. The Rotary Club put it there years ago. Today, two middle-aged women in murder podcast T-shirts are posing for selfies in front of it, and I fight the urge to push them into the water. Just to see if they can swim.

Instead, I set my bag on the rocks, slip off my shirt and shorts, and wait. I don't figure it'll be long, and sure enough, it's only a few minutes before I hear a familiar voice call my name.

"Mornin', Tru! You're out early today!"

I look over my shoulder to see Dill scampering across the rocks toward me. Derry is following along behind him, picking her way and holding up her long skirt.

Dill moves like one of the little lizards you see everywhere down here. He's nimble. Fast. Sure footed and fearless. But Derry's cautious. Thoughtful. You can see her considering each step before she takes it.

Dill and Derry are permanent fixtures at Hidden Glen. They're modern-day hippies with an off-the-grid camp back in the woods, on the opposite side of the springs from the murder

site. Summers, Dill works the crowd out here the way a politician works the room at a campaign rally. He spends the long, hot days chatting people up, telling jokes, showing off with backflips and jackknife dives into the blue of the main spring. Right now, it's clear he only has one thing on his mind.

"We gonna go below?" Dill asks me. He's crouching on a rock, practically levitating with excitement. Dill's little and wiry. Permanently tanned. He's all taut muscles and energy, with dirt under his fingernails that not even the springs can wash away. He's wearing raggedy cut-off shorts. No shirt. No shoes. His everyday uniform.

"You bet," I tell him. "That's what I came for."

The light is flashing in Dill's eyes, and he runs his fingers through his dark tangled curls. I know that urge, the need that gnaws on you with sharp little teeth. He's already digging his gear out of a beat-up backpack while he whistles a little tune—some sea shanty he loves about a dead sailor and the women who mourned him. He pauses to wink at me before he starts spit cleaning his mask.

Derry's found herself a shady rock to perch on, and she's lost in the pages of a tattered paperback romance. I watch her absentmindedly shoo away a horsefly, then look up to give me a friendly wave.

It feels good to be a part of their little family this morning, especially since Dad no-showed on me last night, exactly like I figured he would.

"You goin' first?" I ask, and Dill nods.

"Age before beauty." He gives me another wink, then pulls

on his gear. Dill lives to shoot the shit most of the time, but when it's time to dive, chatting always takes a back seat. "You ready to get deep?"

"Always," I tell him.

I know my job. Stand up top. Keep watch. Be prepared. Ready to go in. Just in case.

Dill is already poised at the edge of the Well in his mask and fins. He's breathing slow. Eyes closed. Stretching. It's a weird kind of yoga he made up for himself. His face changes completely as he relaxes. He's an artist preparing to pick up the brush. Or a writer just before the first stroke of the pen.

Dill is always so intense, like a struck piano string. Or a live electrical wire. I love to watch the change that comes over him when he's getting ready to go below. All that wild, pent-up energy flows out his fingertips. He becomes this other version of himself. Still. Focused. He's completely calm. It's the opposite of watching someone transform into a werewolf.

Then he's gone. Vanished. He disappears from the rock in the blink of an eye. No splash. No ripples. He slips below the surface of the Well as silently and gracefully as the sunlight.

I watch him move through the water, and I think back to that summer Dill first started teaching East and me to dive. We were ten years old. Dani had died a few months earlier. Mom and Dad were after each other all the time, and I could tell Dad was on the brink of bailing. East's mom was pregnant with Seth. Her latest boyfriend had already ditched her, and she was always busy working two or three jobs. So East and I were just kind

of drifting along by ourselves. We'd ride our bikes down to the springs every day, and Dill and Derry were always here.

I don't know how I would have made it through all that without them.

Dill pops up out of the water and swims toward the side of the spring. He gives me a thumbs-up, then pulls himself onto a rock and collapses. I watch his chest heaving up and down. Big breaths to fill his starving lungs. A huge grin on his face. That's the free diver's high. Soul-shattering euphoria. The danger of diving without an air tank is worth that feeling of indescribable joy.

When it's my turn, I slide into the water and let the spring swallow me whole. I know from the beginning it's going to be a good dive. I'm in complete control of my mind and my body. The space inside me feels so big. It's like I have enough air to last forever. I go down and down and down and down.

One by one, I'm letting go of all the thoughts that've been eating at me—

How Mom doesn't know I never sent my application in to FSU—

All the things I wish I had the guts to say to Dad—

How it's my fault Dani died—

How I love East with all my heart, but sometimes I wonder if maybe there might be some other life out there for me—

I do like Dill taught me. I imagine each of those thoughts floating up and away toward the surface, like air bubbles. I watch them drift out of sight until the world goes still and I'm

finally left alone with just myself. And even though I'm holding my breath, I feel like I can finally breathe.

Below me, on the bottom, I see the vent—a curtain of bubbles streaming out of a crack in the rocks. The perfect clarity of the water plays tricks on my eyes and my brain. It looks like no more than a few feet down to the bottom, but I know it's over one hundred.

An almost unbearable urge pulls me toward those bubbles. It's a constant tug, that desire to push myself harder and farther. To dive deeper. Go longer. I feel it even when I'm lying in bed at night, or when I'm working in the overly air-conditioned newspaper office.

No matter how much time I spend in the water, it's never enough, because when I dive, there is no good or bad or right or wrong or should or shouldn't or happy or sad. Or even up or down. I'm not thinking about Mom. Or Dad. Or what happened to Dani. Or East or college or how messed up everything feels sometimes. There's just weightlessness.

Peace.

Before I know it, I'm farther below the surface of Elijah's Well than I've ever been before. The depth markers scratched into the soft limestone tell me I'm at about seventy feet. Halfway to the bottom.

I want to get deeper. It's the worst kind of craving. I turn my face up to find Dill so I can signal to him that I'm okay, and when I look down toward the vent again, someone is swimming toward me. My muscles tighten and my mind locks up.

This is impossible.

No one else went into the water.

There shouldn't be anyone down here.

But there is.

A girl is coming up fast from below me. Long brown hair floats around her face, hiding her features. She's wearing a short white dress. Definitely not dressed for swimming.

She grabs me by the wrist and panic strikes right through me like summer lightning. My heart rate skyrockets. My pulse pounds in my ears and my lungs immediately start to ache.

Then she's pulling me down. Not like sinking and dragging me with her. This girl is swimming hard toward the bottom of the spring, jerking me along like she's the kite and I'm the trailing ribbon.

I kick hard. Claw at the limestone wall with my free hand, hoping for something to grab on to. All I can think about is my mom. And East. How they'll feel if Dill has to tell them I'm dead.

I blink hard. Force those thoughts out of my mind.

I have to think clearly.

I have to—

I have to breathe.

It's the only thought my body knows now.

I have to BREATHE.

HAVE to breathe.

I HAVE TO BREATHE.

My lungs are desperate.

I'm going to die. We're both going to die. In the deep. The cold.

Together.

Just before everything goes blurry, she peers up at me through the curtain of bubbles streaming from her mouth.

I know her. The thought slams into me like a runaway truck.

Suddenly the pressure on my arm is just gone. I don't waste any time wondering what happened. I don't give a shit, to be honest. All I can think about is air. Every instinct I have is telling me to open my mouth and breathe in. But I know that's a death sentence.

I'm kicking hard for the surface, but my movements feel jerky. Chaotic. I try to count fin-kicks so I can keep my rhythm steady, but my heart is hammering inside my chest. I can't focus. I'm using up too much energy. Too much precious oxygen.

I'm not going to make it.

Oh God. Please don't let me—

Everything goes dim, and the next thing I know Dill has me. He's holding my head up out of the water, yelling at me to breathe.

I'm coughing and choking. Vomiting. Clutching and clawing at his chest like he's some kind of human life raft.

Dill isn't much taller than me. Maybe an inch or two at the most. I bet he doesn't weigh any more than I do, either. Yet he hauls me over to the side and up onto the rocks like I'm made of paper. Before I can even get my eyes to focus, Derry has me wrapped up in a towel. She's stroking my hair, telling me to look at her, while Dill pounds me on the back.

I'm still spitting up water.

Shaking.

"Where'd she go?" My throat burns something awful, and I barely manage to get the words out between coughing fits. The

confused look in Derry's eyes and a quick glance toward the spring bottom tells me what I already know.

The girl didn't go anywhere. She was never there.

"You're okay," Derry reassures me. "We've got you."

I nod and lean forward to rest my head on my knees.

"Too deep." Dill isn't pounding me on the back anymore, but his words hit hard. "Too fuckin' deep, Tru."

He's right. Prolonged oxygen deprivation is dangerous. It can mess with your mind, cause hallucinations.

"Yeah" is all I can get out.

"This ain't the Olympics," Dill tells me. "There ain't no gold medals out here." Dill's voice is trembling, and that frightens me more than anything else. Dill never gets scared.

I look down at my left hand and see my broken, bloodied fingernails.

I shiver and lean deeper into Derry. She takes my hand and laces her fingers through mine.

Sometimes I wish she was my mom.

Or my big sister.

All of a sudden, I'm hit with that same feeling I had at the memorial yesterday. Someone I know is standing close by. Watching me. I can almost hear the sound of their breathing.

When I look around, I can't see anyone, so I relax against Derry again. I'm letting my imagination get the best of me.

I stay like that for a long time. Struggling to catch my breath. Trying to convince myself I'm wrong about what I think I saw under the water.

Who I think I saw.

Finally I glance at my watch. "Shit," I say. "I gotta get going. I'm supposed to be at the newspaper office by ten."

Derry helps me to my feet. She holds on to my elbow as I step back into my shorts. I slide my feet into my flip-flops and pull on my T-shirt.

"You sure you're okay to drive?" she asks, and I nod.

"Yeah. My head feels a lot clearer. Really."

"It's gonna hurt like a bitch later," Dill warns me, and I know he's right.

I let Dill and Derry steer me across the slippery rocks toward the safety gate. But I'm already thinking of my hallucination again.

It's her face I can't get out of my mind.

Because I'm pretty sure I just stared into the eyes of a dead girl.

THREE

BEFORE I EVEN make it into town, Dill's prediction has come true. My head does indeed hurt like a bitch.

It's a million degrees outside, but when I push open the door to the newspaper offices, it feels like it might snow any second. Jon Boy keeps the thermostat set on negative fifty. He says the cold keeps the Florida humidity down, and humidity is bad for old newspapers. I tell him that freezing to death is bad for humans, but he just shrugs and tells me to wear more clothes.

Jon Boy has been my next-door neighbor since I was born. He's a smart guy. Talented. I used to think he'd leave town eventually. Most of the smart people do. But the *Star* runs too deep in his blood for him to be happy anywhere else. Or at least that's what he always says.

His dad ran the paper when Jon Boy and his older brother, Reese, were growing up. When their father died, Reese took over as editor. Then, when Reese died in a boating accident not long after we lost Dani, it was Jon Boy's turn to carry on the family tradition.

When I walk in this morning, he's leaning on the counter staring at his laptop and nursing a (probably ice cold by now) cup of coffee. He doesn't say a word about me being fifteen minutes late.

He never does.

And I almost always am.

“Good news, Trulee Bear.” He grins and offers me a strawberry donut. “I stopped at Wendell’s Bakery on the way in this morning.”

“Thanks,” I say as I snag Jon Boy’s offering, along with an old cardigan of Reese’s that still hangs on a coatrack in the corner. His name tag is still pinned to the front. R WESTLEY, EDITOR, mount orange star. “You workin’ on the article about the new fountain?”

“Yeah.” Jon Boy is looking back down at his laptop screen. “Trying to edit the photos from yesterday so our great and glorious mayor looks a little less like a side of raw beef.”

I laugh and start downstairs. “Good luck with that. I’m gonna finish reorganizing the nineties. Unless there’s something else you need me to do.”

I’m halfway to the basement before Jon Boy even thinks to answer me. “Nope. Not a thing. You just keep at it down there.”

I hold the donut between my teeth and slip on the ratty gray sweater. It’s damp and scratchy, and it makes my skin crawl in the same way walking through a spiderweb does. But it’s better than freezing to death. I feel around on the wall for the switch, and when I find it, the basement fills with a flickering, buzzing yellow light.

The archives are a disaster. I started pretending to reorganize the 1990–1999 issues at the end of last summer, but I never got past 1992. I should try to get some actual work done today, but I have another project in mind first. I keep thinking about that

girl—the hallucination—in the Well this morning. Every time I blink, I see her on the insides of my eyelids.

And I'm on a mission to prove myself wrong.

I drag a rickety chair over to one of the huge metal shelves against the back wall. There are two dusty boxes on the top shelf marked DO NOT THROW AWAY in big, bold letters. Jon Boy calls them the cold case files. The first one holds a bunch of articles and research about the Glades Reaper, Florida's most infamous serial killer. The second one is full of stuff about the Hidden Glen murders. And that's the box I'm after.

I pull it down, then slip off my flip-flops and settle on the floor to dig through the contents. Articles from other newspapers around the country. Photos Jon Boy took out at the campsite after the crime scene tape came down. Scribbled maps and scrawled interviews he did with friends of Celeste's and Bailey's.

Jon Boy would have been about my age at the time. The exact same age as Celeste and Bailey. Not editor of the *Star* yet. He was freshly graduated from high school, a small-town reporter working for his dad and trapped in his superstar older brother's shadow. But what happened out at the springs was big news—national news—and some nights, when he has a few beers in him, Jon Boy still talks about how cracking the case would've earned him a ticket straight to the big time. Some New York City newspaper. Or the *Chicago Tribune*. Or at least the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

But he never cracked it. Nobody did.

I look through the yellowing articles. Run my eyes over the words.

MURDER AT THE SPRINGS.

Local teens dead.

Multiple stab wounds.

Surprise attack.

Throat slit.

I already know all the information by heart. It's the photos of the girls that keep pulling me back. Bailey and Celeste captured in smudgy newspaper black and white. Those side-by-side senior pictures.

Bailey with her neat brown ponytail.

Celeste with her blond curls.

Those half hearts winking around their necks. Each a perfect mirror image of the other.

Best friends forever.

The girls in those photos had no idea how little time they had left.

I'm staring at Bailey when this overwhelming sense of loss washes over me, and I have the clearest feeling that something really beautiful was just about to happen. Like I was just at the edge of discovering the most incredible secret, but now it's been swept out to sea, and I'll never know it.

I shake that sorrow off and keep digging through the pile, but I don't know exactly what I'm looking for until I come across the big brown envelope at the bottom of the box.

I hold it in my hands. Feel the weight of it. The words CRIME SCENE PHOTOS are scrawled across the front in red ink. Jon Boy told me once that it's a collection of eight-by-ten black-and-white

photos, copies of the ones taken by the crime lab investigators immediately after the murders were discovered. Before the bodies were removed by the coroner. I've never known how Jon Boy got hold of them. *A reporter never reveals his sources*, is all he said when I asked. They were never published, of course, and there was never an opportunity for them to be used in any trial, so most folks have never seen them.

I've never seen them.

I've been tempted a few times, but I remember the warning Jon Boy gave me back when I first asked about that envelope. *Don't ever open it, Trulee Bear*, he told me. *Not ever. You can't unsee that stuff, and it changes you.*

But I'm not a little kid anymore, even if Jon Boy does still insist on calling me by the nickname he gave me when I was five. Besides, it won't be the first time I've seen a dead person. I saw Dani. Up close and personal. I glance back over my shoulder before I run my fingernail under the flap to break the seal. Then I let the photos slide into my lap.

The first one is of Celeste. She's half tangled in her sleeping bag. Blond curls splayed behind her in a matted mess. One muddy foot sticking out.

Empty eyes. Arms and legs bent at weird angles.

The tent is slashed to ribbons. So is the sleeping bag.

It takes me a few seconds to realize that the black stuff smeared everywhere in the photo is actually blood.

For just a second, I stop breathing. I run my fingers over Celeste's face. Even like this, she's still so beautiful.

She wouldn't want me to remember her like this. The thought materializes in my mind like a ghost. It comes from nowhere. *She was always so vain about her hair.*

The donut in my stomach sours, and I think I'm going to be sick. I shudder before I move on to the next photo.

Bailey.

My hands are shaking.

Here she is, in black and white. One last photo captured not long after her soul left her body.

She's floating on her back on the surface of Elijah's Well. This was before the safety fence went up. The water around her is black with blood so dark it looks like an oil slick, and her eyes are wide and staring.

I'm used to seeing her with a neat ponytail in the newspaper pictures, but in this photo, her long brown hair is loose. It drifts and floats around her head while her white nightgown swirls around her body like the petals of a water lily.

It wasn't a white dress.

It was a white nightgown.

Suddenly my head is spinning. I sit there, trying to breathe. It's her. The girl from the Well. The one who tried to pull me down to the bottom.

Suddenly I'm gasping for air. The scent of pine trees fills my nose. I manage to get to my feet, but instead of the cold tile floor under me, I feel the grit of sand. The crunch of leaves.

Pine needles.

A terrible crushing fear consumes me. I'm paralyzed by it. There's only one thought in my brain.

Run.

Run.

Run.

But I'm too confused and afraid to move.

My fingers search for a half-heart necklace that isn't hanging around my neck.

My lucky charm.

"Dammit, Tru." I jump when I hear Jon Boy's voice behind me. Photos and papers go everywhere. "I told you never to look at those."

"Yeah," I say. "I know, but—"

"But you don't listen. I know. Believe me." Jon Boy's voice is sharp and scolding. But there's something a little bit proud there, too. "You'd make a good reporter." He squats down to help me gather up the photos. "I should have fed all this stuff to the shredder years ago." He sighs and shakes his head. "But I couldn't." Jon Boy glances at the photos before he slides them back in the envelope. Then he takes a long look at me, and when he speaks again, his voice is gentle. "I don't blame you for being curious, Tru." He shrugs. "We all want to know what really happened out there."

I put the last of the papers in the box and Jon Boy sticks the manila envelope with the crime scene photos back inside. Then he tucks the collection into its spot on the top shelf before he leaves me standing there in that dusty basement and heads up the stairs. He's almost to the top when he turns back to look at me. "You okay?" he asks, and I nod. He doesn't look convinced, though. I see the way his eyebrows are all drawn together

behind his glasses. "That's awful hard to see, Tru. Those photos. If you need to take—"

"I'm good," I tell him. "Promise."

Inside, I'm reeling.

I must have seen the crime scene photo of Bailey before. Otherwise, how could I have a hallucination that exactly matched it?

I spend the rest of the morning and the whole afternoon trying to sort out the mess that is 1993, but I don't make any real progress. I'm too distracted to keep the dates straight. I keep getting June and July mixed up.

My mind is constantly flickering back to Bailey. I keep feeling her cold grasp on my wrist.

That pit of fear in my stomach reminds me of the morning I found Dani. I remember seeing her lying in the ditch—strangely still—knowing she was dead but begging God to let me be wrong.

My eyes drift toward another stack of newspapers, and it would be so easy to go over there and find the one I'm thinking of. I have the exact date memorized. I could pull out the one with the headline just above the fold on the front page. LOCAL GIRL DEAD IN HIT-AND-RUN ACCIDENT. But I don't give in to that urge. I see Dani's face every time I close my eyes. I don't need to see it in black and white today. Or ever again.

I never look at the articles about Dani.

Ever.

Instead I turn to a happy memory. It's my secret trick to make myself feel better. Something I think about a lot when I'm sad. Or scared. Or anxious.

When that crushing guilt comes creeping in.

I'm leaning over Dani's shoulder. I can never see her, but I know it's her, because everything about her is familiar. Safe. She's sitting at a table and I'm watching her pencil move across the paper.

She's sketching a horse. Strong legs and a long, flowing mane braided with wildflowers. And he looks so real that I almost expect him to take off running and escape the page. The memory is hypnotic—the way her pencil moves across the paper—methodical and perfect and with just the lightest touch. Little pieces of that horse appearing as she works. It's magic and it calms me. Every time.

When I get off work at three o'clock, I head out to the springs. Normally, I'd be meeting East and Paz for a dive, but they're seeing a movie in Gainesville this afternoon. So I have some time to kill.

I didn't come out here to dive, anyway. I have something else in mind.

I make my way through the thick crowd and avoid the swarm of little kids flocking around the Dive Bar, jostling each other for Skittles and ice cream sandwiches.

I follow the boardwalk up the run to Elijah's Well, but I don't head into the fenced-off diving area. Instead, I hop off the wooden walkway and skirt around the outside perimeter. I stop at the edge of the trees and scan the shadows. I don't see anything moving. Not one single murder ghoul or rabid podcast fan. Not even an armadillo or one of the fat-ass raccoons that are always hanging around.

I unzip my backpack and pull out Bailey's half heart. I clutch it in my fist and feel the weight of it in my hand. The metal is warm against my skin. Almost electric. I take a deep breath and step into the dense scrub.

Immediately, the sounds of people down the main spring are muffled. The light filters through the trees and everything is bathed in a soft yellow glow. The air has shifted; it's thicker. And the whole world slows.

It's claustrophobic, the way the trees and vines and shrubs all press in on me. Tangled and overgrown. Like they're squeezing the breath out of my lungs.

That feeling doesn't freak me out. I'm used to working without oxygen.

I head deeper in, and I'm immediately battling the plants. Scrub holly snags at my shoelaces and Adam's needle rips at my T-shirt sleeves. It's like being grabbed by a hundred sharp little fingers.

The attack on Celeste and Bailey started at their campsite. Fifty yards back into the scrub. That's where Celeste died. Someone slashed through their tent and tore into her with a hunting knife. Stabbed her so many times and with such force that the knife tip broke off inside her body. She never had a chance to escape.

Bailey ran.

That's what the reports all say. She ran toward the water.

The killer caught her there, at the edge of the spring, though. He slit her throat before he tossed her body into the Well.

The best-friends locket burns in my palm, and I feel sick all of a sudden when I picture Bailey seventy feet below the surface of the spring. Grabbing at me. Trying to pull me down to the vent at the bottom.

My mind playing tricks on me, I remind myself.

A hallucination that happened to look exactly like a dead girl in a crime scene photo that I would have sworn I had never seen before.

I give my head a shake and keep walking, focusing on the act of putting one foot in front of the other, counting steps the way I count fin-kicks when I dive.

One—

Two—

Three—

Four.

My breath catches in my throat when I reach the sandy little clearing where the tent stood. My heart pounds and my stomach flutters. I shiver in the sticky heat. Because I feel it.

I always do in this place.

All the explosive energy from that night is trapped here somehow. It's like the terror and the desperation and the sheer will to live tangled in the brambles. Like the scrub canopy held that panic down and wouldn't let it dissipate. Even twenty years after the murders, there's still enough of that lingering here, soaked into the dirt like blood, to set my pulse racing.

I move around behind the clearing. Just to the east of where the tent would have been set up. I wonder if I'm standing where

the killer stood. If he leaned against this same scrawny pine and watched Celeste and Bailey that night. Biding his time until they turned off the lantern. Waiting for the whispering and giggling coming from the tent to stop. He wouldn't have been far away, but it had stormed earlier, and there were thick clouds blocking out the moon on the night of the murders. They never would have seen him in the pitch dark.

If they'd listened carefully, though, they could have heard him breathing.

He was that close.

I always wonder if it was the rustle of footsteps on dead leaves that woke them up.

Or if they slept right up until the moment the knife sliced the tent wide open like the belly of a gutted fish.

I hear the lonesome call of a whippoorwill. It's getting late. In the last few minutes, all the yellows have turned to blues. I should be heading home.

My skin prickles. Someone is behind me.

"Hey, Tru."

I whirl around, almost expecting to see Bailey standing there. White nightgown dripping. Blood pouring from the wound at her neck.

But it isn't her. It's a girl I don't recognize.

"Did I scare you?" she asks.

Her voice has a soft Southern lilt to it, the kind we don't really have in Florida.

Georgia maybe.

Or Tennessee.

“Not really,” I manage to say. Even though that’s a pretty obvious lie.

We’re eyeing each other warily, almost like two different species meeting for the first time.

And, I mean, we might as well be two different species, honestly. A gopher tortoise and a sandhill crane. I’m powerful, but short. Muscled from years of diving. Blue-black eyes and stringy red hair that falls at my shoulders. A ratty pair of shorts and an even rattier old soccer T-shirt of East’s. Grimy from digging around in the woods. Sweat running down my face.

This girl is perfect skin and long legs. Eyes like emeralds and coal-colored hair cropped in a trendy pixie style. Cut-off shorts and a sunflower-yellow bikini top.

She takes a few steps toward me, and it hits me how graceful she is. I always feel so clunky on land. In the water, it’s different. I’m like a dolphin. But, on land, I don’t have that kind of willowy grace. And I know it.

“I’m Rio,” she says, and it strikes me as funny when she holds out her hand like we’re two businessmen meeting for lunch down at the Kiwanis club. A nervous chuckle bubbles up in my throat, but when I feel her fingers in mine, I instantly relax. The warmth of her skin soothes my uneasiness. I glance down at our hands and we fit together perfectly.

“Like the city in Brazil?” I ask over the handshake. Her grip is strong. Confident.

She laughs. It’s an easy sound. “Like the song. You know?” She sings a few bars for me. ““Her name is Rio and she dances on the sand . . .””

“What are you doing wandering around back here?” I ask her, and she tilts her head to one side and wrinkles her nose in my direction.

“I could ask you the same question,” she teases. When I don’t respond to that, she narrows those bright green eyes at me. Then she grins. “The truth is, I was waiting for you.”