

CHAPTER 1

WINTER 2016

As I sit here 39,000 feet in the air nursing a mimosa on the plane to Cozumel, I can't help but laugh at the turn my life has taken. Or else I would cry—and I am not a crier by any means. I'm also not a bitter person by nature, but when you're attending your brother's wedding in a tropical paradise as the only single guest, it's inevitable that some of your joy for the happy couple will be a teensy bit tainted. I did anticipate that this situation would sting a bit, but when we started planning this blessed event only weeks ago, I thought that maybe, just *maybe* I would miraculously have a date. Or even a booty call. Or at least someone to drunk-dial on the night of! But, lo and behold, I am indeed attending alone, knowing he will be there. Lucas, my childhood crush, my ex (if you can even call him that), the love of my life.

The flight attendant sees my grimace and asks if there's anything she can do for me.

I give her a pained smile. "What do you have to get me through a three-day wedding in Mexico where the man who obliterated my heart is one of two groomsmen?"

Without a word, she hands me another mimosa.

I nod in gratitude, finish the first one in a single gulp, and pass her back the empty glass. I sink back in my seat and sigh loudly—which, judging by the expression on the older gentleman next to me, is something I've been doing repeatedly for the past hour.

I try to clear my head, but sure enough, thoughts of Lucas creep back in. Our romance had an unconventional start: he's one of my older brother's best friends, and I'm the off-limits younger sister. But somehow, to my delight, it did happen—albeit briefly—before it spectacularly blew up in my face. Twice. And it will probably be the epic love story of my lifetime. *And also my downfall*, I think as I start in on my second drink.

I catch the flight attendant's eye and tell her to keep the mimosas coming.



I step off the plane and am immediately slapped with a wall of humidity that makes it impossible to suck in a breath. I pull my sunglasses down over my eyes and raise my hand to my face to shield myself from the blazing Mexican sun threatening to burn my retinas. Jesus, it's hot.

There's no bridge leading the disembarking passengers from the plane into the airport; everyone descends a set of metal stairs on wheels to reach the tarmac. I close my eyes and say a quick prayer that I don't tumble to my death before I follow suit, making my way down the flimsy steps. Sweat has already begun to bead at my brow and between my shoulder blades. Thank God I dressed in layers, I think as I pull off my hoodie.

Men hand out Coronas in front of the airport doors. I grab one, wishing it was a margarita, but grateful for the cold bottle as I touch it to my forehead before taking a giant gulp. I'm hoping to awaken the mimosa buzz I started on the first half of the flight.

I follow the rest of the passengers into the terminal, where a

huge line zigzags the length of the room, waiting to pass through customs. *Great.* I sigh, fanning myself with my passport. It must be a hundred degrees in here. The line moves at a snail's pace, and now I feel the sweat trickling between my boobs. Damn, I wish I'd grabbed two beers from that guy. I drain the last sip and toss the bottle into a nearby trash can. My brother Jake and his bride-to-be, Ashley, who also happens to be my best friend since kindergarten, have assured me that my room at the hotel will have a fully stocked minibar, and they'd better be right if I'm going to get through the next few days. The two of them, along with both sets of our parents, came down yesterday on a sold-out flight, hence my solo trip today. Which was fine with me; it gave me an extra day to prepare myself and gather my nerves to see "he who must not be named." Another day to practice my happy face as the supportive maid of honor for my best friend and brother.

This whirlwind wedding came together in record time. I was secretly hoping they wouldn't be able to pull it off so fast; the sting of rejection was still fresh in my mind. After all, it was only a few months ago that Lucas left me in Montauk on Fourth of July weekend without a word and has barely spoken to me since. I'm not saying I was innocent in the whole fiasco, but I really thought we were getting a second chance, only to be punched in the gut by disappointment. I'm not going to lie: I've been dreading the whole thing since the night Jake and Ashley told me their great idea to elope to Mexico. Which was the day after they got engaged, which was only four months after they started dating. When they first told me the news, I immediately asked Ash if she was pregnant. Wouldn't that be everyone's first reaction? After all, it had only been four months! Who gets engaged after only four months?

But no, they swore there was no baby and they just didn't want to spend a year planning a big wedding. They would much rather have an intimate ceremony somewhere beautiful, and as soon as possible. What was the point of waiting if they were so sure about each other? They kept the guest list small, including a handful of

close friends, our parents, myself as maid of honor, and obviously Jake's two best friends from childhood, Alex and Lucas, as groomsmen. Despite my reluctance to attend, I obviously wouldn't miss it, so all I can do is power through with a smile on my face and pretend like everything is fine.

Luckily the customs line has picked up, as do my hopes, just to be dashed again when I see the actual system at play here. When it's their turn, people press a button which prompts either a red or green light from what appears to be a large stoplight hanging overhead. Green, you pass through. Red, the Mexican Federales, or whoever the hell are running this show, stop and search your luggage. There doesn't seem to be any deciding factor except pure, dumb luck.

I look around at my fellow travelers to see if they think this is as ridiculous as I do. I see some surprised faces, but mostly people look weary, hot and sweaty. I can't believe this is the process to get into this country. I mentally run down the list of crap in my luggage in case I get a red light and my belongings are strewn all over the place in front of all these people like the poor guy it's happening to right now. His face is beet red and I feel so bad for him that I have to avert my eyes. I once watched an episode of a reality show where a woman was stopped at customs, and after rummaging through her luggage the customs officer found three large dildos. I almost turned the show off; the third-party embarrassment was more than I could handle. I say a silent prayer of gratitude that I didn't pack any dildos on this trip. However, my best lace lingerie is in there, just in case I happen to meet a hot, single man in the next few days. I snort to myself. Ash probably has every minute of the next three days accounted for, never mind any time for me to seduce a man. Also, I know everyone attending this wedding, and none are available or eligible. Even Alex has recently started dating some chick he met at the gym. So unless there's a random single guy at this super-romantic, adults-only resort in Cozumel, the chances of any male seeing my sexiest lingerie are slim to none.

I'm snapped back from my dream of seducing a hot Mexican bachelor when one of the officers signals that it's my turn to press the button. My heart starts pounding in my ears; with my luck, this thing will flash red and a siren will start blaring. My fear must be emanating from my body in waves since the middle-aged woman standing behind me in line gives me a sympathetic smile and nod of encouragement. I offer a small smile back, gather my nerve and reach out to press the button.

Green! Yes!

The relief in the air is palpable. I literally wipe the sweat from my brow and forge through. Next up is a little booth where the officer takes my passport and asks my reason for traveling.

I must be temporarily possessed, because my mouth opens and words start flying out. "Hi, I'm Lila Turner. I'm here for my brother's wedding. Older brother. He's older, just so you know. By two years. Even though he's marrying my best friend. Who's my age. *And* I'm like, the only single one going. Because *his* best friend dumped me four months ago. If you can call leaving me at the beach without so much as a goodbye and totally ghosting me afterward actually dumping me." *Oh my God Lila, stop talking. Stop talking now!* I slap my hand over my mouth just in case it wants to keep disobeying my brain.

The officer gives me a blank stare, hands me back my stamped passport, and yells, "Next!" as if he didn't hear a word I said.

I wonder how many crazy answers he gets to that question. I can't be the first to lay my life story on him, I think as I drag my roller behind me and out the front door.

The Mexican sun blinds me again, and in the second I blink, I'm hit with a bear hug and a shriek, completely catching me off guard and almost knocking me off my feet. I smile to myself; I'd know that shriek anywhere.

"Ash, whoa," I say, trying to calm the excited blonde jumping up and down in front of me.

"Ahhhhh, I'm getting *married*! Thank God you're here. What

took you so long? I need my maid of honor, the mothers are seriously stressing me out,” she says, grabbing my hand. She leads me to where my brother is double-parked in a rental Jeep Wrangler with no doors.

He hops out, grabs my roller suitcase and leans in for a hug. “This is all you packed? Wow, impressive. You should see Ash’s three huge suitcases. She left me half of one for my own stuff.” His eyes twinkle as he teases her.

She slaps his shoulder affectionately.

I reach into my carry-on and pull out the dress-up tiara I saved from the bachelorette party and put it on her head.

She beams at me. “I can’t believe you brought this. You’re amazing.” She turns to the taxi line on the sidewalk and shouts, “*It’s my wedding!*” Startling the line of passengers waiting for their transportation.

Jake and I both laugh as we climb into the Jeep.

“So our moms are being our moms?” I ask, raising my brows as my eyes connect with Jake’s in the rearview mirror.

“You know them. Always trying to be in control of everything,” he answers with a shrug.

Both of them took over the wedding planning with fervor immediately after they were told of the Mexico idea. They tried to organize everything, even the tiniest little details.

“Mom offered to write my speech for me,” I say with a snort.

Jake and Ash turn to look at each other, lips pressed together, holding in their laughter. “Sounds about right,” my brother says, nodding at me in the mirror.

“I think they’re both forgetting it’s our wedding and not a second chance to redo their own,” Ash says, looking back at me and rolling her eyes.

“How’s the speech coming, anyway?” Jake asks. “Do you know what you’re going to say yet?”

Ash’s ears perk up and she turns around to look at me from the front seat, eyes wide with anticipation.

I shake my head. “No, no. No sneak-peeks! You’ll just have to wait and see on the big night.” I try to smooth out my face, but anxiety whirls in my chest. I’m secretly terrified of giving this speech. Any type of public speaking is so not my jam, and in front of Lucas no less. Thankfully, I already have most of it memorized. I just pray my mind doesn’t go blank when I’m up there in front of the whole party.

I subtly segue to more important topics at hand. “So when is Alex coming?” I ask, even though I already know the answer. Alex is Jake’s other best friend, and like a second brother to me. And even though I could really use his calming presence right now, I’m trying to stealthily fish for info on when the other groomsman is actually arriving. The one I’m both dreading and longing to see.

“He gets in later tonight. He couldn’t take the day off work,” my brother says, not offering any additional info.

Realizing I’m not going to get the answers I’m looking for, I let it go and we talk about wedding details the rest of the way to the hotel. My mind wanders as they break down the itinerary for the next few days, which apparently includes a super-romantic luau right on the beach with tiki torches and a mariachi band.



I’m not sure when this crush on Lucas developed, really. All I know is that for as long as I can remember, I’ve had it. Like a birthmark or a mole that you carry with you through life, never really knowing if you were born with it or if one day it just appeared. The three of them have been inseparable since the first day of kindergarten—my brother Jake, Alex and Lucas. Alex Cooper was the chubby kid with freckles and an easy smile that could light up a room. Lucas Hayes, the strong, silent type—not brooding exactly, but not bubbly, either. The typical tall, dark and handsome hero in every movie. And Jake, my brother, the balance between the two—tall and lanky with dark-brown hair and matching eyes, like my own.

Somehow their personalities meshed well from the get-go, and they formed an easy friendship solidified by their commitment to youth hockey.

Growing up across the street, Alex was a fixture in our house as far back as I can remember. He has three sisters and I guess felt overwhelmed in his own full house, so always came over to ours. Even though he has real sisters of his own, he always made me feel like his favorite—making it a point to include me and inviting me to play whatever silly game they cooked up. If I was ever having a bad day, or something happened at school to upset me, he'd be there as a shoulder to lean on. Always asking how I was and interested in my life.

Don't get me wrong, I worshipped my brother when we were kids—but Alex and I have a different bond. Not like Jake was ever bothered by it; I think he was actually relieved that someone else was taking over his brotherly responsibilities. Growing up, Jake and I were close in that "I only have one sibling" kind of way, where you had to be because it's convenient when there's nobody else around to play with. Being only two years apart, I was the annoying little sister, but could also pass for a satisfactory playmate in the direst of circumstances.

Lucas was a different story. He was the only child of parents who got divorced when he was just a baby, and his mom, a working single parent, was hardly ever around. Left to his own devices from a young age, he was forced to grow up faster than the rest of us. The lack of a big support system resulted in a limited trust in those around him, and Lucas put up a guard that was written all over his face. He never let this guard down easily, and certainly not for just anyone. You had to really build trust with him before he warmed to you. Lucas was also extremely easy on the eyes, which he never seemed comfortable with. It was like the older he got, the hotter he got, and the more his distrust in people grew. In high school, this gave him a bad-boy air that lured in the girls like you can't even

imagine. Let me tell you, there is nothing sexier than a standoffish, hot, teenage athlete.



I'm ripped back from my trip down memory lane as Jake makes a sharp turn onto a narrow street. I steady myself in my seat and watch as the road eventually opens up into a wider drive and the hotel grounds come into view. We pass a large fountain with two stone frogs in the center spitting water at each other, and drive up to a beautiful glass building with a circular driveway. Whoa, it's absolutely stunning. This is not your usual large vacation resort, but rather a small boutique hotel, and one of the only available on such short notice. However, it doesn't skimp on the grandeur. The grounds are exquisitely manicured with tropical trees and bright, colorful flowers everywhere, and the staff are lined up outside, awaiting guest arrivals, decked out in impeccably tailored uniforms. The whole front entrance is floor-to-ceiling glass, so you can see straight through to the pool and beach on the other side. I'm speechless as I take in my surroundings.

The valet comes around and helps me out of the back.

"Beautiful, right?" Ash asks me when she sees my face.

I can only nod, my eyes huge as I follow them through the glass sliding doors and into the marble lobby.

My brother hands me my roller and directs me to the front desk to check in and get my room key. "Meet us at the bar when you're all checked in. We'll be outside—you can't miss it." He points over my shoulder to another set of sliding glass doors leading to the back of the hotel that open onto an enormous patio with a bar on one side and a lounge area with tables, chairs and couches for guests to relax on the other.

In the middle is a stone path leading past an infinity pool—which looks like it goes straight into the ocean—and on down to the beach. This place is truly drop-dead gorgeous, and giving off

serious honeymoon vibes. There are couples everywhere I look—in front of me, making googly eyes at each other; in the lobby, waiting to check in; another enjoying cocktails on a couch in the outside lounge; and one more folded over each other on a sunbed out by the pool. I sigh to myself and try to bite back the familiar sting of the reality of my current single status, which seems especially aggressive in a place so beautiful and made to celebrate romance. Oh well, I hope I get at least an hour to relax on one of those sunbeds myself; maybe I can pretend I'm on my own honeymoon and my husband is inside taking a nap. I snort at my own ridiculousness as I wait in line to check in.

When it's my turn, the attendant rushes around the counter to grab my suitcase and assures me a porter will bring it up to my room. He gives me my room key and directions to the elevator bank down the hall, and sends me on my way with a wink.

I take the elevator up to my floor, marveling at the lavishness of it all. Jesus Christ, this must have cost a fortune. Thank God they decided to elope with a limited number of people, I think as I fumble with my room key.

I open the door to a small but beautifully decorated room with a king bed and a tiny balcony overlooking the ocean. I go straight to the balcony, throw open the doors and step outside to the landing, sipping in the salty ocean air. The water is an exquisite turquoise blue and I close my eyes, take a deep breath and listen to the waves. I leave the door open and walk back into the room, sit on the bed and kick off my shoes. I breathe in and out, slowly counting my breaths just like my therapist taught me, trying to calm my nerves and think back on the events of my life and how exactly I wound up here.