

# Prologue

Last night I dreamt I went to Malibu again.

I stood barefoot on the sand, the cool water nipping at my ankles. And there, high above me, perched on the edge of that magnificent cliff, his stunning house sat as it once had, alive, whole. It had ten bedrooms and was on three private cliffside acres, with a lap pool, a tennis court, and a garden blooming flush with pink and white bougainvillea. But from the beach down below all I could see was its long wall of privacy-tinted glass windows, slanting out toward the sea.

He could see me here, out on the beach. I was certain he could, even in my dream.

He was still behind those windows, watching my every step. Though I couldn't see him. The glass was one-way. But I imagined him there behind the glass so vividly, it had to be real.

Until it wasn't. Until the heat from the flames would shatter all the windows, break them apart, send smoke spewing from the piano room, down the cliff, evaporating in wisps into the lonely Pacific.

But in my dream, the flames hadn't existed yet. Or, maybe they never would. He and his house were there, watching me. Wanting me. Haunting me.

"Come back!" His voice was a desperate echo, my undoing. The smoke was so thick, even out on the beach I couldn't see, and I couldn't breathe.

So that's why I did it, in my dream. I turned away from the house, and I walked into the bone-chilling water. It was so cold, it numbed me, but I walked into the sea, up to my shoulders, my neck, my chin. Until I could no longer smell the smoke or hear his voice.

And then my entire head was underwater, and the tide was strong. It sucked me in, held me there.

But I wasn't trying to drown. I really wasn't. I was merely trying to escape the fire.

# One

*One year earlier*

To say I was shocked to see my agent's name, Charley Bingham, pop up on my phone that morning in early March would be an understatement. But truly another word to describe how I was feeling escaped me. Aghast? Stunned? Astounded? None of them. All of them? I was a writer; words were supposed to come easily to me. But lately not much had. Why should this be the exception?

"Hey, Charley," I answered, forcing a brightness to my tone I certainly wasn't feeling. The last time Charley and I had spoken on the phone, six months earlier, was when she'd called to tell me that the last of the editors she'd submitted my third novel to had passed. *What are you thinking for your next book, Olivia?* she'd asked me then.

*My next book.* As if my ideas and words sprouted fully formed from our rooftop garden each summer, the same as my tomatoes. As if I didn't need to actually sell a novel to eat and pay my rent. And what about my poor third novel, a *slightly* semi-

autobiographical coming-of-age story, which was now destined for no more than a dusty drawer? It had drained every bit of creative life out of me to write it; I'd poured my whole self into it for nine months, ignoring everything, and worse, everyone, in my life, until it was too late. And then having it out on submission for months had been its own special kind of hell. Charley had forwarded me lovely note after lovely note from passing editors who *just weren't the right fit*. They used words like *beautiful writing* or *gorgeous prose*, followed by *can't break her out, too quiet*, or perhaps the most honest one, who'd said that *following the lackluster sales of Becky, is there really a place for this new book in the market?* Harsh, but maybe that was fair. My second novel, *Becky*, had sold about a thousand copies to date.

"Olivia," Charley said now. "How's the new book coming?"

"Great," I lied. "Almost finished the first draft." If you considered fifty (well, forty-six to be exact) rambling pages close to a first draft, then that wasn't a complete lie. But creativity was an emotional well, and mine had run dry, even as the generous advance I'd received for my first and second novels had, too, almost run dry from my checking account.

"Great," Charley echoed. "Can't wait to read it."

She paused for a moment, and the line was silent. Was that really why she was calling, to check on my progress? Charley had too many other clients, important ones, to have the time to hold my hand.

"Anyway." She cleared her throat. "I have an interesting offer in for you."

"An offer?" I repeated, not quite understanding. Book three was no longer out on submission. The disaster that was *Becky* certainly wasn't causing any subsidiary rights folks to knock on my door. And though my first novel had gotten a little bit of nice press and was even an *Indie Next* pick, no one was still thinking about it (except for me) five years later.

"A write-for-hire gig," she said. "A very well-paying one."

“How well-paying?” I asked, quickly.

“Fifty thousand up front, and then twenty percent once it sells to a publisher,” she said. “Twenty percent of all of it—advance, subrights, royalties,” she clarified.

But all I really heard was *fifty thousand up front*. “Okay, I’ll do it,” I said, not asking any of the questions I should’ve asked, any of the questions all writers *know* to ask: *who, what, why, where, when?* These past six months, a fuzzy sort of desperation had come over me, where everything I used to know about writing felt ephemeral. Fifty thousand dollars? Great. Sign me up.

Charley laughed a little. “How about I send over the NDA, and after you sign it, we can discuss the details.”

I agreed. But how hard could it be? And fifty thousand dollars would go a long way toward rent and groceries and giving me time to figure out what the hell I was going to do next.

## Two

I refreshed my inbox, eager for the NDA to land, still in disbelief that Charley had called with something that might actually be *good* news.

The last time I'd spoken to Charley before today was the same day Jack had moved out of our apartment. Charley had called that morning to tell me my third book was dead. Charley was too tactful to actually use the word *dead*, though. Instead she'd said, *how about we put a pin in this project for now?* The pin felt more like a knife, as I'd tried to digest what Charley was saying while simultaneously staring at the boxes Jack had haphazardly stacked up by our front door. They were shoddily labeled—the top one was simply Sharpied with the word **STUFF**. (At that point, why had he even bothered to label?) And it occurred to me in that exact moment when Charley was talking about *a pin*, that Jack was so desperate to get out of here, to get away from me, that he hadn't even taken the time to properly pack his *STUFF*.

What felt worse? The death of our relationship or the death

of my book? *The book*. Definitely the book. It was my entire life, my career. The words had felt like my blood for a year, running through me, keeping my heart beating. But, later that night, lying in our bed all alone, knowing that all the boxes were gone from the front door, I'd suddenly wished I'd never written the book at all. If I hadn't, I might've noticed what Jack had already seen for months, if not years, that *we were growing apart*. I might've held us together, before we were too far gone to fix things. Jack was the one who left, but as he'd said, quietly, just a few nights earlier as I'd downed half a bottle of pinot grigio in our tiny kitchen, I was the one who'd stopped trying. It wasn't true, though. I'd simply gotten caught up in my story, in my fictional world, in my desperation to overcome those depressing *Becky* sales numbers and resurrect my fledgling career. Writing was my blood, but it was also my addiction. I hadn't necessarily stopped trying with Jack. I'd just *forgotten* to try, for a while. For too long. And by the time Jack actually left me, I couldn't even necessarily remember if I truly loved him, or if I more just loved the idea of him.

My inbox suddenly dinged with an email—Charley!—and I pushed Jack out of my mind, again. It felt impossible that an offer could come out of nowhere, just like this, and for the first time in months, an excitement pulsed through my veins. Writing was still my lifeline.

Charley's email called the NDA *industry standard*, and *okay to sign*, so I skimmed it, signed it, and emailed it right back to her. My phone rang almost as soon as I hit Send.

"Okay, are you sitting down?" Charley asked.

"Yep," I lied. I was, in fact, standing up, watching my fish, Oscar, flutter through his massive tank. After Jack moved out, I'd needed something to fill the space where his sixty-inch TV once sat, and I'd landed on an aquarium after the internet told me watching fish swim could improve my mental health. I'd started with six fish, but five of them had already perished.

“Henry Asherwood,” Charley said.

“What about him?” I watched Oscar flip through a tiny pink coral like an acrobat.

“That’s who wants to hire you.”

I laughed because Charley definitely was joking. Henry Asherwood, reclusive mega-billionaire, twice-named *People’s* Sexiest Man Alive, and heir to the Asherwood store chain—wanted to hire me?

“Olivia, I’m serious,” Charley said, and I remembered that Charley was always serious, always working, not at all prone to kidding around. But how could this possibly be right?

“I don’t...understand,” I stammered and then sat down for real, bracing myself against the arm of the couch.

“His manager called me this morning. Henry Asherwood wants *you* for this project.” If I wasn’t so surprised myself, I might’ve been offended by how surprised Charley sounded.

“Why me?” I finally asked a question, though I inwardly chided myself for its self-deprecation as soon as it popped out of my mouth. *Why not you?* my friend Noah used to say back in college, when I’d doubt myself or worry that my writing would never be good enough to be publishable. “I mean, how does Henry Asherwood even know who I am, much less want to hire me?”

“His manager didn’t say,” Charley answered. “But maybe he read *All the Little Lights*?” My first novel had sold nearly one hundred thousand copies, so I supposed it was possible. But it also came out five years ago. “He thinks your writing is perfect for this project,” Charley added.

“And what is the project?”

Charley was silent for a few seconds, and then she said, “Well, that’s the catch. He didn’t exactly tell me what the project was. He wants to meet you in person first. Asked if you’d fly out to LA. He’ll pay five thousand now for your time and transportation. And if it works out, after you meet, we’ll set

up a contract for terms. He'll pay the fifty thousand and you can do the project."

So the fifty thousand was far from a sure thing. I sighed.

"Are you up for this, Olivia?" Charley's voice softened a little, and it occurred to me maybe she knew I'd been lying about my first draft being almost done earlier.

I stared at poor lonely Oscar, and then glanced around my half-empty apartment. Fifty thousand dollars or not, maybe *this* was what I needed. To get away, out of this apartment, out of Boston, which, even in March, was still in the depressing throes of a dark winter. LA sounded far away, warm and sunny. Someone was handing me a free trip. And meeting Henry Asherwood! How could I possibly say no?

# Three

Much later I would think, *I should've just said no*. There were red flags, even from that earliest conversation with Charley, that, had I not been in such a desperate, awful state, I would've recognized.

But stepping on the plane at Logan a few days later, that was the farthest thought from my mind. I was thinking about (1) the Pacific Ocean. I'd used the money Charley had deposited in my account to book my plane ticket as well as an ocean-view room at the Malibu Heights Inn. (2) The fact that *the* Henry Asherwood III now had *my* email and we had actually written back and forth last night. Granted, he'd only asked where I was staying and what time he should send a car tonight to pick me up. I'd responded with that simple information. But still! And (3) Noah.

Noah Weissman had been both my best friend at Brown and my critique partner in our writing seminars. We'd both planned to get our MFAs after college, but then I'd ended up moving to Boston with Jack after we graduated instead, and

Noah went to get his MFA at UCLA. He stayed out in LA after, and now taught as an adjunct while (still) trying to get his first novel published. While I'd written *All the Little Lights* in the two years after college, had signed with Charley, and then got a publisher for it, almost right away. My two-book deal hadn't exactly caused tension between me and Noah, but in the years since college, we'd gone from hourly texts, to daily, to weekly, to checking in twice a year on birthdays. Now I couldn't even remember the last time we'd texted, much less talked. I hadn't told him about Jack leaving or my third novel not selling, and as I settled into my seat on the plane, my finger hovered over his contact in my phone. I wondered if I should even bother to text him and let him know I was coming to LA.

But no, that was silly. This was Noah. If he were coming to Boston and didn't text me, I'd be hurt. I shot off a quick text: Hey, will be in LA for the next week. Would love to see you if you're free? I stared at my phone for a few minutes, expecting him to immediately text me back, but he didn't, and then I had to put it in airplane mode.

I settled into my seat and pulled out the thick copy of the biography I'd purchased last night: *From the Ashes: The Rags to Riches Story of America's Wealthiest Family*. I knew a little about the Asherwood family, as much as anyone who was a devout reader of *People* magazine did. I knew that Henry Asherwood III's grandfather had been a decorated navy hero during World War I, and that he had started the Asherwood store chain with one store outside of LA in the early 1930s. (Today, the Asherwood chain had more stores than Costco and Target combined.) I knew that his son, Henry II nearly bankrupted the company before his untimely drug-fueled death in the '90s, and that in recent years, Henry III had brought it back to life. But tragedy seemed to follow the family generationally, from Henry III's grandmother, who'd died young in an accident, to his father's drug overdose, to most recently, one year ago, the

death of his wife, leaving him a widower at the age of forty. He'd allegedly holed up at his Malibu estate ever since, and even the tabloids had barely gotten a photo of him.

And now I was on my way across the country to *meet* with him. To potentially write something for him. It felt so improbable that had it not been for the deposit in my bank account from Charley and the email in my inbox from Henry himself, I might've thought that I'd dreamt the entire thing.

Six hours and one Lyft later, I was in my room at the Malibu Heights Inn, sitting out on the balcony, reveling in the warmth of the sunshine on my face. Waves crashed against the rocks in front of me, and I was close enough to the water to feel a fine mist of sea spray dance across my bare arms. I inhaled deeply, and it smelled like summer. So amazingly different from the stuffy air and hissing radiator inside my apartment back in Boston. I closed my eyes, and I sighed. This trip, this write-for-hire job, were exactly what I needed to get myself back on track. Soon, the words would flow easily from my fingertips again, and after I finished this project, maybe I'd even write something of my own good enough for Charley to sell at auction.

I opened my eyes just in time to see a dolphin jump out in the surf, and then suddenly I remembered: Oscar! He couldn't go a whole week without eating, and I'd been rushing this morning to get to the airport. Had I even fed him before I left? Keeping him alive felt like the one good thing I'd done these past few months, and killing him now, because I'd gone on this trip, felt like it would be a bad omen for the Asherwood project and the easier future I'd just imagined.

Jack still had a key to the apartment. We hadn't talked since he'd moved out, but if I texted him now and asked him to feed Oscar, I wouldn't mind also having to tell him I was in LA for the week. Subtext: *I've moved on. I have an amazing life!* The truth, of course, was another story.

Can you do me a huge favor? I quickly texted Jack before I could change my mind. Can you stop by the apartment a few times this week and feed Oscar? I had to go to LA for the week.

His reply came back immediately. And I was relieved that he wasn't avoiding my texts, as much for my pride as for poor Oscar's well-being. Who's Oscar? Did you get a cat?

I'd been born and raised a cat lover, and grew up in a house with four cats, but Jack was allergic. So why hadn't I gotten a cat after he moved out? Maybe deep down I'd clung to the notion that someday, Jack might move back in. Or maybe I just didn't have it in me right now to care for a real pet.

No, allergen free pet! Oscar's a fish, I typed.

You got a fish, seriously?

What? He's good company!

You replaced me with a fish? Was he trying to be funny, or was he trying to be an ass? It was hard to tell which one over text.

I ignored the question. Please, please can you feed him? I've already managed to kill his five friends. Food is next to the aquarium. Just sprinkle a few flakes a few times this week. I'll be back next Saturday.

What are you doing in LA? Visiting Noah?

Jack and Noah had a long history of disliking each other, all the way back to senior year at Brown, when Noah told me Jack wasn't right for me and Jack told me Noah was secretly in love with me. I'd rolled my eyes at both of them, positive they were both completely wrong. But still, it would give me a sadistic sort of pleasure to lie and tell Jack now that yes, I was here for Noah. In truth, Noah had yet to text me back,

but the NDA I'd signed also prevented me from telling Jack exactly what I was actually doing in LA. My fingers hovered over my phone for a minute before I replied. Novel research, I finally typed. I swallowed hard; it was only half a lie.

Jack didn't comment on that or question me. Why would he? Instead, he finally texted back: Okay, I'll feed Oscar for you. Three dots popped up for a second, then disappeared. Then reappeared. **How have you been?**

I stared at his words for a moment, thinking of all the truthful ways I could respond. Pretty miserable. I missed him. Oscar really was honestly a shitty replacement for a guy who used to regularly wash and fold my laundry.

But it was easier to lie than to get into any of that over text. So instead I quickly typed: **I'm great!!! Busy. Gotta run. Thanks for saving Oscar!**