

## CHAPTER ONE

The walkie-talkie on the front desk hissed, crackled, and finally resolved into Lu's lilting voice: "At what point," she said, "do we worry the guy in two-oh-six is dead?"

The couple across the counter from me glanced at one another. Bargain hunters. We only saw two kinds of people at the Mid-Night Inn—Bargains and Desperates—and these were classic Bargains, here. The two kids, covered in mustard stains from eating home-packed sandwiches, whined that the place didn't have a pool. The mother had already scanned the lobby for any reference to a free continental breakfast. We didn't offer continental breakfast, not even the not-free kind.

I slid their key cards to them, smiling, and flicked the volume knob down on the radio before Lu convinced them they'd prefer to get back in their car and try their luck farther down the road.

"Which room are we in, again?" said the woman.

"Two-oh-four," I said.

"And you said we could go to Taco *Bell*," cried the little girl, five or so. A glittering pink barrette that must have started the day neatly holding back her corn-silk hair now clung by a few strands. She threw herself at her mother's feet and wailed into the carpet. "But they don't even have a Taco *Bell*."

The boy, a few years older, had pressed himself against the glass door to the bar. "Mommy," he hissed. "All these people are drinking *alcohol*."

It was after nine—way past someone's bedtime. The parents and I negotiated by a series of glances between the key cards and each other. They wouldn't get tacos, a free breakfast, or a swim, but the odds seemed better on a dead body in the room next door. "Why don't I get you a room with a little more—privacy?" I took back the cards and pretended to click around on the computer for better options.

Under the kids' keening and questions, Lu's low, complaining voice murmured on the radio, and then the door chimed, signaling another visitor.

The Mid-Night Inn had only twelve operational rooms, seven even-numbered upstairs and five odd-numbered down, plus the lobby and bar. In the right light, it had old-school charm. The balcony's wrought-iron railing swirled in a fancy design that snagged our uniform skirts' hems. "Filigree," Billy called it, when he accused us of never sweeping the cobwebs from it. It was a nice touch. We had a single-star rating from some hospitality association, left over, surely, from better days.

Now the Mid-Night was a step above a roadside dive. Technically, it *was* a roadside dive, nestled between the roaring interstate and an overpassing state road out of town that led into the dusty countryside. The motel was a big two-story *U* of rooms, all with exterior doors on a wraparound walkway, all overlooking a slim patch of grass and a couple of struggling crabapple trees. Billy called that the "courtyard," and the eight closed rooms on the other side of the bar that had been left to ruin, "the south wing." At the open end of the courtyard, only a rusty chain-link fence tangled with scrub and brush separated the Mid-Night from the rushing cars below.

In the summer, the Mid-Night's old, blinking neon sign regularly pulled guests off the highway. We got minivan parents who'd misjudged how long they could listen to their kids howl and lone drivers who found they couldn't keep themselves awake until they reached Indianapolis. We often got people who used their expensive, high-tech phones to search for the cheapest overnight stay they could get.

But now in the off season, people could do better and usually did. I could say the Mid-Night was at least a clean place to lay your head. But I was the one who cleaned it, and I knew that wasn't true.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the new arrival, a woman in a long coat, hesitate at the door. Her, the Bargains, the dead guy in two-oh-six—this was officially a crowd for a Monday night in the spring, especially since it was just me and Luisa holding down the fort while Billy had his night off. Lu was out pretending to clean up the courtyard while I kept the front desk, and tomorrow morning, we'd flip back to mornings for the rest of the week. I'd get to clean up vending-machine taco-chip crumbs after these cheapskates got back on the road, while she fended off anyone who came looking for a free Danish. Or comment cards. We didn't offer comment cards, either.

I handed over the updated key cards to the Bargains. “You have a nice night,” I said. The mother had already decided I was some kind of simpleton. She and her husband each pulled a child along behind them toward the door. I’d put them as far away from the dead guy’s room as I could—which located them right over the Mid-Night bar, open ’til two in the morning.

The woman at the door still hadn’t decided if she was coming in. She held the door for the family, letting the parade of misery pass back out into the night and watching after them for far too long.

I’d already known there existed a breed of women who made the rest of us notice how far off the mark we were, but they didn’t often stumble into the Mid-Night. This woman was their queen. Her clothes draped as if they’d been trained. Her golden hair hung loose and perfectly careless. She was tall and angular, with a chiseled masterpiece of a jaw.

In the middle of the floor lay the sparkling barrette from the little girl’s hair. I slipped around the desk and plucked it up, watching the woman all the while. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as we both watched the family tramp toward the stairs with their mismatched luggage. The open door let in the smell of green cornfields and wet grass.

I pressed the barrette against my palm and slid it into my pocket. “Can you pull the door?” I said. “You’re letting in bugs.”

It was cheap, but all I had. Compared to her, I was shorter, chubbier, mousier. Poorer—that went without saying. I looked down at what I was wearing. Ouch. Her raincoat, as supple as butter and with the belt tied in a casual knot at the back, probably cost more than I made in a month. It wasn’t even raining anymore.

She closed the door, a gracious smile cranking up to blind me as she swept across the lobby.

But then she stopped. The smile cut short. “Juliet? Juliet Townsend, is that you?”

A thousand thoughts shoved into my mind at the same time, jamming the works. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t speak. On the desk, the walkie-talkie hissed and crackled. “Juliet?” Lu’s voice, turned to nearly zero, sounded like a bomb going off in the empty lobby. “Jules, I’m serious, pick *up*.”

The woman looked at the radio unit on the counter, then me. The smile came back, a few megawatts shy of its original glow. That superstar grin I’d almost received was reserved for customer service. For getting the best room

available, and maybe an extra set of towels. This smile—well, this was the surprised-slash-horrified gesture reserved for ex-best friends discovered working below their potential in roadside crap-heaps.

My brain finally jarred loose, throwing out the shard of a memory: a blond ponytail bouncing against thin shoulders, three paces ahead. Nothing holding me back but my aching lungs and burning thighs, and nothing ahead of me but that chiseled jaw, resolutely set toward the finish line.

“Madeleine Bell,” I said. The name had always meant the same thing to me. Another loss. Another very near miss.

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On the walkie-talkie, Lu’s voice transitioned from irate English into furious Spanish. I held up a finger to Maddy Bell and grabbed the handset.

“Please tell me,” I said, my teeth clenched, “that Señor Two-oh-Six has requested fresh towels.”

Lu said, “There is a *smell* coming out of there—”

“That’s far above my pay grade, and yours,” I said. “Let Billy handle it tomorrow.”

“Fine by me,” Lu said. “*You*’ll be behind the cart, and *you*’ll have to clean up the body.”

“I have a guest,” I glanced back at Maddy. She’d turned her head, pretending to admire the lobby décor. She probably didn’t get a lot of gold-leaf wallpaper and garage-sale geegaws in the places she normally stayed. “And then I’m probably going to need to take my break,” I said. I needed a few minutes to die of embarrassment. Just ten minutes to hang myself from shame.

“Roger,” Lu said.

Billy insisted we use proper military com lingo when we used the radios, all those over-and-outs, rogers instead of yeses. He’d never been in the military, of course. He only knew what he’d learned from Stallone movies. But when he was out of earshot—which wasn’t often, since he lived in room one-oh-one—we took liberties. It was a crummy job. Liberties were what we had, instead of health insurance or bonuses or even a schedule that allowed us to take a second job. Instead of dignity.

I put down the radio and found Maddy watching me. “So you, uh, need directions or something?” Which didn’t make any sense. She’d been gone ten years, but surely she remembered the way to her old house. Surely she remembered there were better places to stay forty minutes in either direction.

“A room,” she said. “If you have one.”

I tapped around the computer’s reservation system for time. “How many nights?”

“It’s weird, isn’t it? Seeing you here?” she said.

“Weird for you,” I said. “I’m here a great deal. Just one night, then?” “One night. Passing through. I didn’t think I’d run into anyone.” I looked up. “Hoping you wouldn’t, you mean?”

“Maybe I was hoping I *would*. Juliet, really,” she said. “How would I have known?”

“I heard you were a big shot in Chicago,” I said.

She nodded, slowly, letting my statement hang in the air between us.

“How many guests?” I said. The words almost got stuck in my throat. I’d just spotted the largest diamond I’d ever seen in real life or on television on her left ring finger. Were there any finish lines Maddy Bell wouldn’t reach before everyone else? The diamond was cartoonishly big. The palms of both my hands started to itch. I wiped them on my jeans. “How many in the room, I mean?”

“Just me.” For a moment the sound of my typing filled the lobby, and then she gasped. “Oh, Jules, I totally forgot. Your dad. I’m so— God, that must have been awful.”

Debilitating, actually. And I knew what had reminded her. Here I was, working a dank motel’s lobby desk in the same town where she’d left me. No one could have chosen this life. There must be some sad story of ambition thwarted, opportunity denied. And there was. My dad’s sudden death—a heart attack, far too young—during my second semester of college had drained my ambition and our family finances. If I’d gone to any other high school in the state, maybe I’d have been the star distance runner and would have been at college on full scholarship. But I’d gone to Midway High in Midway, Indiana, where Maddy Bell’s best times still clung to the halls, where Maddy Bell’s trophies still gleamed in the cases, ten years on. I knew the records were still up at Midway because all my almost one year of college had prepared me for was a spot as a third-string substitute teacher there. They called once a year or so

when all they needed was a warm body, and I went in, gladly. That is, on days when I could tear myself away from the cleaner's cart at the Mid-Night Inn.

"And your mom?" she said.

"She's fine."

"Glad to hear it."

She'd always liked my family better than her own. Maddy had arrived in Midway with ready-made parental tragedy. Her mother rumored to be a suicide, and her dad remarried to a woman Maddy was determined not to like. Her dad had died more recently, quietly and without much fanfare in the local paper. There hadn't been a funeral. "Your dad—"

She waved away the sentiment. She'd never been as close with her dad as I'd been with mine.

"Well, Gretchen comes in for a drink sometimes," I said. I nodded through the glass doors that led to the inn's bar. A look of horror crossed Maddy's face. Her stepmother was apparently not the person she'd hoped to run into. "But not tonight. Not yet, anyway."

I slid a guest-info card across the counter for her and held out a pen. Up close, she nearly glowed. I couldn't look, for fear I would stare. Her perfume wafted over the desk, equal parts spicy and sweet—and warm, somehow, like exotic cookies fresh from the oven. Under the harsh fluorescents, the diamond in her ring caught the light and twinkled.

The door chimes rang again, this time for Lu and the rattling cart. Maddy glanced over her shoulder at the noise, and beamed her supernova smile in Lu's direction. Maddy turned back to hand me her card and pen, and behind her, Lu pulled her long, dark hair into a smoother ponytail and mugged a *la-di-da* hip wiggle. She gave Maddy's clothes a long, lurid look, then glanced down at herself, just as I had. I slipped the pen into my pocket.

"So there are drinks? In there?" Maddy jerked her head in the direction of the dark doors of the bar. "I could sure use one."

"Right through there," I said. "Tell the bartender you're a—tell her I sent you."

"Why don't you join me?"

Lu raised her eyebrows in my direction. We'd be talking about this, whatever my answer.

"I—" I'd meant to take my thirty-minute break to get out of Maddy's rarified, spice-cookie air, to brace myself for the knowledge that I'd be the one to clean her fair locks out of the shower drain in room two-oh-two the next morning.

"Please?" Maddy said. She leaned across the counter, and instead of taking the key card I'd left within her reach, she put her hand on mine. She had the skin of an infant. "We could catch up."

I blinked down at the diamond. Catching up with Maddy was the one thing I'd never been able to do.

## CHAPTER TWO

The bar didn't have a real name, but everyone called it "the Mid-Night," too. No one who frequented the place seemed to have a problem keeping them straight. The bar was named for the motel; and the motel was named for the town; and the town, Midway, was named for the fact that it wasn't one place or another. We were halfway to anywhere that mattered, stuck.

The bar was badly lit, badly arranged, badly cleaned. The cleanliness issue Lu and I could take credit for, but the rest of the management decisions were Billy's. He knew what the regulars liked: cheap beer, keep it coming. They didn't care about new linoleum to replace the warped floors or painting over the ancient graffiti in the bathroom stalls. They didn't want the old mirror over the back of the bar re-silvered. They didn't want to see themselves. They lined up at the bar, watched the TV without sound, and drank. A subculture had developed over time from the group of nodding acquaintances, mostly men, who parked on stools side by side and hardly said a word to one another.

That was the scene as I led Maddy through the lobby doors into the dark, hoping to go unnoticed. An undercover mission. We got away with it for a second. A couple of the regulars turned around—there were a few Midway High faces, some hardened regulars my mom's age or older, a couple of people I knew but ignored—but then Maddy's presence was noticed. *Felt*. By the time we'd sat ourselves at a table in the corner and waved over a couple of drinks, three of the guys had dismounted from their barstools to head home. The others stayed to stare and pretend not to.

"I don't even know where to start," Maddy said. "Has it really been since graduation?"

It had been longer. Maybe she didn't remember, or want to remember, that the last time we'd spoken had been weeks before the ceremony meant to send us on our separate ways. Precisely, it had been since the day Maddy had beaten me for the last time. And we hadn't even been running.

Suddenly I remembered Maddy hunched over the edge of a hotel bed, her knuckles white against a shiny, patterned bedspread. The old disgust rose in my throat.



I swallowed around it. “Did you get your invitation to the reunion?” The reunion was why I knew where Maddy lived. Our classmate Shelly Anderson, who was planning the event, worked at the bank, where all deposits of the informational kind had to be made at her window. You always left richer than you came in.

Our beers arrived. The bartender, Yvonne, winked at me.

“Let me get this round, since I’m holding you hostage.” Maddy reached inside an inner pocket of the coat and pulled out a bill. “Keep the change,” she said to Yvonne.

This round? I took a gulp of my beer, avoiding Yvonne’s look. I was sure the bill had been a fifty.

Yvonne stalked away with a sharp glance over her shoulder.

“The reunion,” Maddy said with an odd smile. She pivoted her beer bottle on the table but didn’t drink. “Right.”

“It’s a Midway High reunion in here every night of the week,” I said, scanning the bar. A few sets of eyes dropped away. “Ten years.”

“It seems longer,” Maddy said.

To me, it seemed shorter. But maybe that was because I hadn’t gone anywhere or done anything. Maybe we all experienced life not by the hour, but by the texture and taste. I hated to think it. If that was how time measured itself, I was still a knobby-kneed kid in an oversized track team uniform. I hadn’t moved on. But neither had most of our high-school class. We saw each other at the grocery store, at Mike’s Hardware, at the movie theater. A lot of them went to church together. Some of them had kids in the same class at the elementary school.

We didn’t need a reunion. A Saturday in some party room, going-out clothes, and Maddy down from Chicago—

“The reunion wasn’t last night, was it? Is that why you’re here?”

I’d hoped not to be working the night of the party, so that if anyone stopped by the bar on their way home, I wouldn’t have to hear about it. But now I was strangely panicked that I’d missed it.

“Soon. This coming weekend, I think.” She frowned at the table. “I doubt I’ll stick around for it. I don’t have much to report.”

I let my beer bottle hit the table a little too hard. Yvonne and the guys at the bar turned in our direction. “Are you kidding me?” I said. “What?”

“You’re probably the only one of us who has anything to show for the last ten years,” I said. “Except the ones who are already married or divorced or have four kids or credit-card bills up to their eyeballs. Look at yourself. Look at this place.” I knew what I meant to say, even if I hadn’t said it well. She didn’t belong here, had probably never belonged here.

I’d always thought I didn’t belong in Midway, either, that someday I’d get out and make something new of myself. But the truth was that I belonged to my hometown in a way I hadn’t been able to shake, and now it felt too late to try.

“You always did think more of me than I did myself,” she said.

“It was hard not to look up to you, standing on the lower-medal podium every week.” I plucked at the wrapper on my beer. I hadn’t meant to say that.

“Maybe I should have thrown a few races.” She pushed her bottle away.

“That’s hardly what I wanted, Maddy.” That was not the truth. Back then, I would have accepted any top placing, however it came to me. “Well, then,” she said. “You should have run faster.”

That stung. What did she think I’d been doing all those times I came in second? “I ran as fast as I could for as long as I could,” I said.

She looked over my shoulder for a long moment, toward the door. “That’s what I was doing, too. I was probably only faster because I was being chased.”

By me, she meant. I saw again the blond hair beating against thin shoulders. The back of Maddy’s head had been my view of high school, and not just on the track. I was the friend who didn’t have a life of her own, the parasite, the loser. The journalism staff had even made some joke about it in our senior yearbook.

In some ways, the ten years felt like ten minutes. I leaned back in my chair. My break was almost over. I thought ahead to the long night at the front desk, and then the early morning behind the cleaning cart. Maddy had one night back in Midway. I had the rest of my life. And yet, I didn’t want to spare even these few minutes on her. “What are you in town for, then?”

“Business,” she said.

“What do you do?”

She shrugged. “It’s not that interesting.”

I felt color rising on my neck. “Do you travel a lot?”

“For work?”

“For any reason,” I said.

She smiled a little and leaned forward, waiting for the punch line.

“A little.”

“You’ve been to New York? Paris? Tokyo, where?”

She understood me now. The smile slid away. “All those places.” “You’ve got—I don’t even know how many thousands of dollars of diamond on your hand. Is he handsome?”

She blinked at the ring, then nodded.

“After you leave tomorrow, I’ll be changing the sheets on your bed. Your job—your life—has to be more interesting than mine.”

“But you could . . . sorry, no. I’m not going to give you any advice.” She checked her watch and seemed surprised by how late it was. An expensive watch, I was sure. “You really shouldn’t take any direction from me. Things aren’t always as they seem, you know. They weren’t then, and they aren’t now. Envy blinds you.”

I stood up, my chair raking against the floor. I wasn’t the one handing out insultingly high tips on cheap beer tabs and pretending things between us were even. “My break is over,” I said.

“I didn’t mean—that’s not—I meant that I’m the one who’s envious.” She looked up at me with tears in her eyes. Very dramatic. If only she’d had time for the school play back in high school, she might be clutching an Academy Award now, too. “This isn’t how I wanted it to be.”

“So—”

“I didn’t hope to run into you,” she said. “I knew I would. I knew you were working here, Jules, and I wanted to see you.”

She waited to see how I would take this. “Well, you’re seeing me,” I said.

“I just—I wanted to make sure I hadn’t imagined it all. That I hadn’t wasted all my time. So much of it was wasted. Or lost completely.” She stood and glanced uneasily at the bar. They’d be watching openly now. A low song on the jukebox kept things civilized. She lowered her voice under the music. “We were friends, weren’t we? Really friends, not just competitors? Right? Before all that?”

*All that* encompassed so much, I couldn’t tell if she remembered. *All that* could have meant nothing or anything. Or everything. I felt the pen in my pocket digging into my hip and was thankful for its distraction. “No,” I said. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. I don’t think we were.”

She went still. “Don’t say that.”

“We were rivals, Maddy. Practices, tournaments—state.” She flinched. She remembered. “We just spent a lot of time together, and we were kids. It’s not the same thing as being friends.”

“It could have been.”

“It wasn’t. How else do you explain it? As soon as track season was over, we never spoke again. Ten years, Maddy. I’ve been in the same place. I’ve been easy to find.”

“You don’t have to stay here,” she said.

“That’s not what I’m saying, and you know it. Besides, you—you don’t know anything about me.”

“I used to,” she said. Her jaw was set with the same determination she’d always engaged to stay a half meter ahead of me for an entire two-mile race. “The Juliet Townsend I used to know wanted to run from this place as fast as she could.”

“I’m not sure what happened to the Madeleine Bell I used to know,” I said. I felt raw, and mean. “You know where they’re having it, right? The reunion?”

She started to say something, then thought better of it. She pulled her coat tighter around her. “Let’s just say there’s a lot about me you don’t know, too,” she said.

Fair enough. I turned to leave.

“Juliet, wait.”

She caught up with me at the door to the lobby and laid a soft hand on my arm. I could see Lu at the desk, leaning her chin on her fist and watching the dark parking lot. For a moment, my life split in two and I was the me I could have been and also the me I'd become.

"It could still be," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"It could still be the same as being friends. We could—it could be real this time. We could get things right. Chicago's not that far away, and there's the reunion. Maybe I will come back for it, even if they're holding it at the same place—" Her face darkened. "God, what are the odds? But there are some things—I'd like to have a chance to talk to you sometime, really talk. Just think about it, OK?"

Clearly she had no idea how little happened around Midway in a given week. I wouldn't be able to think about anything else. I slipped out from under her hand and opened the door.

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I led Maddy through the lobby, Lu watching, and pointed in the direction of her room. Outside, a lean silver car had parked nose to nose with the vending and ice machines. It could only be hers. As soon as Maddy had swept through the lobby, Lu turned on me.

"What the—"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said.

"All this time I thought I was your fanciest friend."

Lu lived in a ranch house overstuffed with her husband, three kids, and mother-in-law. She might have the same terrible job I did, but she'd figured out a few things I hadn't. "You're pretty fancy," I said.

Lu's smile was close-mouthed to hide her crooked teeth. "So why is she here?"

"Business, she said."

"No, I mean here. At the Mid-Night. Did you see her? She could stay anywhere. She could have stayed at—hotels I don't even know downtown, the Luxe even."

I glanced uneasily at Lu. Maddy knew all about the Luxe. But she'd gotten a room here to talk to me. Hadn't she admitted it? But she could have stopped by with her olive branch and still stayed somewhere else. And what had she actually said, in the end?

A pair of headlights grazed over the lobby. The silver car was leaving. Maybe staying somewhere else was the plan she'd had in mind all along.

Why had she come? The car, the diamond, the soft raincoat. The forty-two-dollar tip on an eight-buck bar tab. The room paid for but not used. Maddy Bell certainly wasn't a Bargain.

Which could only mean she was desperate.