

# PROLOGUE

## FRIDAY NIGHT

The bass thumps from somewhere behind me, echoing the beat of the blood pulsing in my ears. I look back at the group I've left behind. Bodies painted in flashy greens and sickeningly sweet pinks rub against each other. Cheap beer froths out of gold and green bottles while friends sip collectively from fishbowls filled with noxious blue liquids. Farther down, a dancer swirls a hoop of fire for the acclaim of an impressed—and extremely intoxicated—crowd.

Everything suddenly seems hazy, like I'm watching it all unfold from outside my body. A neon cacophony of color set to music that's become nothing more than one long blurred note, deep enough and loud enough to shake my chest bones. My muscles are heavy, and I need to remind myself to breathe, like my body has forgotten to engage in its normal functions. Maybe they put something in my drink to make this easier. Or maybe I'm just intoxicated with the knowledge. The awareness that time is running out.

I call back toward the group, pleading for anyone to help me. But it's no use. The raucousness blasting from the party's speakers sweeps down the beach like an avalanche, picking up my voice and carrying it away into the silence.

I thought I could do this myself. That I was smarter than them, that I could figure out the darkness that lives on this island and stop it from hurting anyone else.

But I was wrong.

I made a mistake. I trusted the wrong person. I should have known better after everything that happened.

I feel a palm on my lower back. It's light, and I know what it would look like to any onlooker, even one who decided to walk this far down the beach away from the party. Two partygoers escaping the dance floor for the romantic seclusion of the moonlight. It's so far from true it almost brings a smile to my lips, a bubbling euphoria that nearly escapes.

But it doesn't.

Because I know what that palm signifies. And I feel what the others down the beach don't. The thin prick of a knife digging into my lower vertebrae.

I hear a voice close to my ear, the tone hard and cold, the music doing little to muffle it.

"Move. Forward."

I look before me, the ocean stretched out to the horizon, black waves glittering in the light from the moon—as round and full as a pregnant belly. I've looked at this view in awe several times since I arrived here, a beauty like nothing I've ever seen.

I do as I'm told and walk. What choice do I have?

The pulsing bass emanating from the bars' speakers recedes

with each step until I'm far enough away that the music becomes nothing more than a memory. This distance from the party, the beach is bathed in darkness, the shops lining this stretch long since closed. The only light comes from the smattering of stars over my head.

As I feel the water lap against my toes, I take one more look over my shoulder. The people are only small blurs at this distance, but I can still make out their bodies grinding together, so many aching to make contact any way they can. Despite the sloppiness—the drugs and drink making them flop on to each other in lurid movements—there's a beauty to it.

For so long, I've felt nothing but coldness, even with the heavy humidity of the island cloying at my skin these past few days. People always talk about rage burning, but it sat inside my stomach, as hard as ice, freezing my veins. I couldn't think of anything besides revenge. A need to impose pain that I've never felt before.

But now, as the ocean water grazes my kneecaps and I watch the people down the beach from me dance in the glittering moonlight, so far removed from the rest of the world, it's as if that ice finally melts, the brief giddiness from earlier returning.

I wonder if she felt this way before it happened to her. An appreciation for life that comes only at its end.

Before I can think about it any more, my feet stop moving, and the single palm on my back turns into two, pushing me hard, face-first into the water. I gasp for breath as I fall, my forehead striking one of the rocks that litters the ocean floor. But it's not enough. The hands grip my neck tightly, holding my head under, legs now wrapped around my hips, pinning me down. Even though I fight back, the person barely moves. I lift my arms up, reaching for

anything to grab hold of, but it feels as if I'm draped in a weighted blanket. My fingers finally grasp around wrists, and I drag my nails across flesh as hard as I can. But the water turns everything soft, and I barely make a dent.

My eyelids force open against the sting of the salt water. Small fish flick by me, deftly avoiding the bubbles erupting from my lips, seemingly unconcerned with the life seeping from my lungs.

My hands release, floating back downward as if my muscles have realized the futility of the fight before my brain. And I picture her again, as I have so many times since she left. She's the reason why I'm here. Why I've sacrificed everything.

It's her I'm thinking of when the beauty of the water fades to black.



# 1

## CASS

### FOURTEEN HOURS EARLIER

*The hotel room already smells like death. I know realistically it's too soon for that, that the body isn't anywhere near decomposing. But still the stench filters into my nostrils, cloying and visceral. A thick, wet substance smears through the cracks in my toes, and time seems to stand still as I see the blood seeping into the carpet fibers. Each droplet holds little pieces of me that will stay long after I'm physically gone.*

*Suddenly, his body looms large in front of me. And then I feel the weight in my hand, the sturdiness of the knife. My eyes flick to it, the lamplight illuminating a rust-colored substance that lines its sharp edge. Blood. My blood.*

*I try to pause, to take stock of what's happening, to piece it all together. But before I can, my arm plunges forward as if of its own volition, angry and desperate. And then it comes. The connection of the blade to the flesh. That satisfying feeling of contact.*

*I hear the scream erupt from my lungs as if it comes from someone else.*

“Shh, shh.”

I clamp my hand over my mouth, and my eyelids snap open. And then I’m staring into Logan’s eyes, at the ocean waves he carries in his irises.

“Cass, I’m here. You’re home. You’re okay,” he soothes.

Slowly, I register Logan’s palms on each side of my face, the sight of his concerned gaze, the sound of his deep Scottish brogue. I inhale a deep breath through my nose, the familiar scent of salt-tipped air flooding my nostrils. *In for two, out for two.*

“A nightmare?”

I can feel a headache forming at the back of my skull, and it takes me a moment to understand what Logan’s asking.

“Yeah, I guess,” I answer noncommittally. He doesn’t know about the terrors that haunted my dreams every single night for the first year after that day in the hotel room. My unconscious mind replaying the memory on an endless loop, every viewing becoming darker, more frightening. They’d stopped for a while, when I first moved to Koh Sang, but recently, as the third-year anniversary approaches, I feel my mind constantly returning to that hotel room, and the nightmares have returned, darker and more real than ever.

“What was it about?” he asks.

My heart is still beating erratically, and I swipe away a bead of sweat from my forehead. I force myself to breathe slowly, using the trick I teach my students. *In, two, out, two.* “I can’t remember,” I lie.

I realize with a start that my fingertips are tracing the line above my heart where my jagged skin has turned soft and stretched. Logan thinks it’s from an accident. A car crash when I was in college. A piece of glass from the windshield piercing my chest. The accident

I managed to survive but that left me an orphan, my two remaining family members torn away in one fast movement of destruction. He thinks that because I've made him think that.

I pull my hand away from my chest, not wanting to draw more attention to the scar than necessary.

Logan's face slowly morphs from concern into his signature lopsided smile: his lips opened slightly, one side pulled up just a touch more than the other, a glitter reaching his dark blue eyes. A stray strand of curls has broken loose from his messy ponytail to graze his chin, and the sight of it sends a flutter to my abdomen.

He leans his face closer to mine. "Well, whatever that dream was, it wasn't real. But you know what is?" he asks teasingly.

He lifts my left hand up to his mouth, his lips grazing my knuckles, giving me a clear view of the gold band that, as of last night, has taken up permanent residence on my ring finger.

The thought still sends a ripple up my spine. *He's mine. I'm his. We're all we need. No one else matters.*

My eyes travel downward from his face to the identical ring hanging from the chain around his neck, perched on his tattooed chest.

I think back to last night, letting the good memories replace the residual panic from the nightmare. Logan had gently pulled out that ring from where it lay tucked under his T-shirt moments after he'd held out a matching ring in a small red box in my direction. Time seemed to freeze, my brain temporarily glitching, nothing making sense until I watched him lower himself onto the vinyl flooring of our patio, taking position on one knee. He timed it perfectly as the sun descended into the sea, a fiery ball drowning in the water that left the sky smoldering in pinks and shimmering blues.

I held the ring in my hand a moment before slipping it on my finger.

“Look on the inside,” Logan had instructed, and I did. There, engraved in delicate cursive, lay our words. The phrase we say to each other before bed every night or whenever we separate. Our version of *I love you*.

“Forever us two,” I managed through the emotion growing thick in my throat.

“Forever us two,” Logan echoed. “It’s official now.”

It was the moment I had been waiting for since the night I first met Logan, two years ago. Since the first time I saw him, I knew. He would be the one to save me.

Tears filled my eyes as Logan continued. “You are everything to me, Cass Morris. When I was a young lad growing up, I dreamed I would find someone as loving and understanding as you, someone I could always turn to and trust. I can’t believe I found you. I must be the luckiest guy in the world.”

All I could do was nod as I listened, the tears breaching the levees of my eyelids. I swallowed hard and tried to enjoy that moment completely, tried to pretend I was really the sweet, shy, loyal woman he fell in love with and not the girl from the hotel room three years ago who would turn on anyone she could to survive.

I lean forward to him now in our bed, craving the feeling of his lips on mine. But just as they touch, a sound crashes into our bedroom.

*Thud, thud, thud.*

I feel my body go rigid, my muscles clench.

“It’s only the door,” he says, frowning, his statement carrying a question.

“Of course,” I say in a rush, hoping he doesn’t notice my embarrassment. “That dream just felt so real.”



Logan rolls over, shifting his legs off the side of the bed as if making to get up.

“No, you stay,” I command. “You don’t work until the afternoon, and my alarm is about to go off anyway. It’s probably just Greta with an engagement present. You know how she is.”

I can already picture her at the door, ready to wrap me in a huge hug and shout about how difficult it was for her to keep this a secret for so long. I feel a brief tinge of pity, thinking of Greta’s recent breakup. The way Alice just up and left her and the entire life they built on this island without notice or apparent explanation. But I push it away. This morning is for celebrating. I deserve to be happy for once.

“Look at you. Already the best fiancée I could ever ask for,” Logan says.

His comment sends a warm flush to my stomach, and I gently kiss his smiling lips before grabbing clothes that lie crumpled at the side of the bed—casualties from last night. As I slip Logan’s T-shirt over my head, I pause briefly to look through the floor-to-ceiling windows that line our bedroom, giving us unbridled views of the sparkling, mountain-studded ocean.

Just like it always does, the beauty takes my breath away. We moved into this house a year ago, each of us fed up with our respective living situations—Logan crashing in an apartment in Kumvit with Neil and Doug, and me in one of the hotel rooms that Frederic rents out to resort staff at decent rates. As soon as we saw the house come on the market, we agreed we didn’t have a choice but to put in an offer. It’s one of the only buildings this far up the hill, situated right next to the Khrum Yai trailhead. But the view sealed the deal, the beauty of the island on display, as if it’s ours for the taking. And in a way, it is. Koh Sang is our home, nestled in the Gulf of Thailand,

far enough away from all the other backpacking islands that it hasn't yet been tarnished by an overflow of tourists, like neighboring Koh Phangan or Koh Samui.

Today, the sea looks placid. Good news, given that we're still very much in the rainy season. Every day is a gamble with the weather. But the sun is already well above the water, steadily ascending in the cloudless sky.

I walk through our living room and past the adjoining kitchen. With each step, I expect the knocking at the door to come again, but Greta seems to have given up for the time being. Either that or she's heard me moving around.

I pause when I reach the front door, smoothing my hair down, hoping it doesn't look like I've just rolled out of bed—which I have. No need to rub the engaged bliss in Greta's face more than necessary. As I open the door, I'm smiling, ready to feign mock surprise at Greta's presence.

But there's no one there.

I step out, the humidity instantly sticking to my skin. Could Greta have gone already, thinking that Logan and I were out? I look down the sharp hill that leads back to the rest of the island. If she'd left, I would at least spot her motorbike speeding down the hill, but the road is empty.

My forehead scrunches in confusion. I think about texting Greta as I step back into the doorway, but my foot brushes against something. It's small enough that I managed to step over it without noticing. A plain white envelope with my name—CASS—written across it in small capital letters in a handwriting I don't instantly recognize as Greta's. But it must be hers.

That explains it. She must have dropped it here as she knocked

on the door, eager to make a quick getaway so as not to bother us. I find myself smiling again.

I pick up the envelope and take it inside, stopping at the kitchen table to open it. It's light enough to be a card, but knowing Greta, it's likely something more. Maybe tickets to some new destination? She can be a bit over the top when it comes to gifts.

I rip the envelope greedily, not bothering to wait for Logan. I'm excited to surprise him with whatever this might be.

Once opened, I realize it's nothing more than a folded sheet of computer paper. I unfold it, curious.

Immediately, I drop it on the table, my fingers buzzing as if it's burned me. I instinctively step back, away from the unfolded paper, my heart rate accelerating, my thoughts racing. I stumble a few steps and grab at a chair.

The whole time, I keep my eyes trained on the paper, at the black-and-white photo of a girl staring up at me, wide-eyed and crazed, guilt splayed across her face. Reporters and cameramen rush at her from all sides, buffeting her in a media circus.

The photo sits in a sea of dense, black text, the sole image on the printed news page.

At the top sits a note, scrawled in red marker.

*I know who you are.*

Then, beneath the article and the photograph lies more handwriting.

*And soon everyone else will too.*

I feel bile rise in my throat as the meaning of those words settles heavily around me. Everything I've accomplished in these last two years—this new identity, this new fiancé, this new life—comes crashing down.

“Was it Greta?” I hear Logan call from the bedroom.

It takes me several tries to answer. Each time I open my mouth, the sound sits trapped in my airway. My vision goes black, and I’m back in that hotel room. The knife in my hand, my blood on the blade.

“No—no one there,” I finally manage, praying that Logan can’t hear the strain in my voice. “Greta must have given up waiting.”

“Good,” he says. “Then come back to bed. We’re not done celebrating.”

I walk as if in a trance, stopping in the kitchen to fold up the paper and shove it in our junk drawer beneath a pile of takeout menus, somewhere I know Logan won’t find it. I should destroy it, but part of me needs to see it again, with a clearer head. To make sense of how this could happen.

Even when it’s out of sight, those words remain emblazoned on my mind. *I know who you are.* And the photo of that girl is everywhere I turn.

A girl I haven’t seen in years, who I made sure no longer exists. The version of myself I left behind a long time ago.

# 2

## BROOKE

I drag the cursor of my laptop inward slightly, minimizing the size of my thigh to Barbie perfection. My smiling face stares back at me from the screen, my body contorted into the pose I've practiced to precision: arm popped out to appear as thin as possible, torso slightly turned away from the camera, stomach tight.

Bored with the futility of the task at hand, I lean back in my chair with a sigh. There are a few guests milling about the Tiki Palms, but given that it's between the breakfast and lunch rush, the official open-air restaurant and beach bar of the Koh Sang Dive Resort is relatively empty. I take another sip from the iced coffee I've been nursing for the last hour. Despite how cheap things are here, I don't have the spare baht to spend on a second cup.

Unlike most of the clientele, I chose a seat in the corner of the restaurant, with my back toward the ocean. After two weeks on the island, I've become accustomed to the stunning aquamarine waters lapping gently against white sand, the colors oversaturated, like everything is draped in an Instagram filter. So I face toward

the resort, monitoring the guests coming and going. A much more interesting view.

The resort itself is carved into the side of a hill, as are most places that line the perimeter of the jagged island. From my vantage point, I can see the path from the beach sharply ascend to the main road. Perfectly trimmed palm trees and clusters of magenta flowers decorate guest rooms grouped in motel-style buildings. Two pools—one for lazing and one for training—dot the hill at the one place where an extended flat area makes their existence possible. Past the pools, one of the island's main roads bisects the resort, but the resort grounds continue even further on. Another bigger infinity pool—the resort's designated party pool—along with the spa, fitness center and yoga studio, and even more guest rooms graze the northern half of the resort. All in all, the mile of landscaped grounds covers nearly a quarter of the island.

I watch as a group of divers descends the sharp incline, fins in hand and masks hanging from their wrists, evidently heading toward the dive shop, the resort's main draw. "Koh Sang: a scuba diving island with a party problem" reads the back of the T-shirts they sell in the resort lobby. But my eyes skirt over them to a small figure who follows about twenty feet behind. Unlike the divers, she's not carrying anything. She's petite with delicate features and fine, light brown hair.

Normally I wouldn't give her the time of day, except her eyes lock on mine. I hold her gaze for a second, convinced that she'll stop staring, but she doesn't. She's familiar in a way, reminding me of someone. I scroll through a mental list of past acquaintances, Instagram connections, and even family members, but I come up empty.

I know what this must be: a follower who recognizes their favorite Instagram influencer in the wild. I've only been approached by my social media followers a few times in person, but it always makes me uncomfortable. I know what they expect from me: the bubbly, upbeat, slightly ditzzy personality I post all over my @BrookeaTrip social media pages.

But Real World Me isn't the walking Barbie they expect. Unfortunately, Instagram still hasn't made a life filter that can permanently smooth away my rough edges.

I'm not in the mood this morning to plaster on my @BrookeaTrip smile. Hoping the approaching girl will take the hint, I divert my eyes, pretending to focus back on my laptop screen.

After a moment, I can't help but look up again. Unlike the divers walking in front of her, who veered right off the path to head to the dive shop, she continues toward the restaurant, her eyes still fixed on mine. Something in me tenses, and my fingers curl into my palms.

"I figured I'd bring options."

The voice close to my ear makes me jump.

"Jesus!" My pulse spikes until I turn around, realizing who it is. "God, you nearly gave me a heart attack," I scold, but I can't keep the smile from my voice.

"Sorry!" Neil smiles at me goofily. "I didn't know what kind of drink you'd want, so I figured I'd bring options." He gestures toward the table in front of us where he's deposited three beverages: a green bottle of Chang beer, a pink cocktail topped with an umbrella, and a smoothie.

He's big, with a body more akin to a teddy bear's than the chiseled muscles most of the guys here spend hours in the gym refining

each day. Freckles dominate the majority of his face, with a few stray dots sneaking onto his pink lips. His fire-red hair is wet and plastered to one side. I watch as a drop of water emerges from the end of one sodden strand, dangling before dropping onto my arm.

“Sorry,” Neil says with a chuckle as the water hits my skin. “Just got out of a dive.”

That explains it. He must have dropped his stuff off at the dive shop and entered the restaurant from the beach side. I was so transfixed by the girl that I never even heard him order.

*The girl.*

I immediately turn back to the resort, but she’s gone. That’s strange. I could have sworn she was coming to talk to me. I look up and down the hill, even scanning the beach, but I don’t see her anywhere. It’s like she disappeared.

“I saw you up here and thought you could use some company.” The boldness of Neil’s flirtation brings me back to the present, and despite myself, I can’t help but blush.

I met Neil last week when Cass dragged me to Frangipani Bar, an expat-dominated dive bar located a mile or so up from the beach that Cass’s boyfriend—and apparently now fiancé, according to the text I received from her late last night—owns. Cass pointed Neil out as her coworker, one of only three dive instructors at the resort. I tried to ignore the flutter in my stomach as he shook my hand in greeting and introduced himself in his British accent, but my disloyal face flushed every time I felt his eyes on me that night. It wasn’t just his looks that set him apart; it was how he was so unabashedly himself, unconcerned with whatever anyone else thought. His originality radiated charm.

Every time I stole a glance at him that night, he would look



back, a glint in his eyes. I tried to hide the flush in my cheeks, drowning it out with irritation at my own naivete. I knew what Neil likely saw when he looked at me: the same thing every other guy did. A fit body, a perfectly made-up face, and absolutely nothing underneath. A person who morphs from beautiful to shrill whenever a guy realizes she actually has something to say. Believe me, I've read the comments on my Instagram page.

Since that first night, I've run into him on a few other occasions, whenever Cass brought me along to a group event: karaoke at the Tiki Palms, an afternoon picnic and beach volleyball game in the gloriously empty Lamphan beach over on the opposite side of the island, where tourists don't bother to venture.

I would secretly dread those get-togethers, but I never had a good enough excuse to decline the invite. I had seen how that group of friends—the Permanents, they called themselves—interacted with one another. They were so close that it didn't seem like there was room for anyone else. Cass did the best she could to keep me involved, but eventually she would end up next to Logan, the two of them losing themselves in some romantic revelry. And I would always end up drifting off to the outskirts of the group. Alone.

But Neil would always be the one to save me. He'd drag up a seat next to me in the sand or at a Tiki Palms picnic table and pull me into conversation with one of his stupid dad jokes. Making me feel like I belonged, as if he actually wanted to get to know me. The real me, not @BrookeaTrip. It was a feeling I couldn't seem to shake for hours after we'd separate, a sugary hangover that filled me with a warmth that seemed lacking here, despite Koh Sang's blistering temperatures.

Something about this moment though—us, here in the Tiki

Palms—feels different from those other times. Without Doug somewhere behind us cracking dirty jokes to Greta, or Cass shooting me knowing smiles, silently taking the credit for us hitting it off, it's just the two of us. Neil and I have never been just one-on-one without the other Permanents. There's something oddly intimate about it.

"You do know it's barely ten a.m., right? Hardly happy hour," I say, gesturing to the drinks Neil's delivered and stifling a laugh.

He feigns a look of mock surprise. "It's always happy hour on Koh Sang. Has no one ever told you?"

I pull the smoothie close to me, deciding on the most innocent of the three options. I try to ignore the quick thrumming in my chest as I feel Neil's sun-warmed skin next to mine. Those kinds of thoughts are a distraction I can't risk now.

Undeterred, he slides into the seat across the table, gathering the cocktail and beer bottle in front of him. "More for me," he says with a wink.

He takes a large gulp from the pink cocktail, the paper umbrella rubbing against his freshly shaved cheek. I can't help but smile at how small the girly drink looks in his massive, freckled hand.

"Hey," he says, noticing. "Nothing shows that you're secure in your manliness quite like a pink drink."

I laugh, meeting his kind eyes, the freckled skin around them crinkled in a smile. I force my gaze back downward.

"Mm." Neil smacks his lips together. "Solid cocktail as always, Sengphet," he shouts back toward the bartender.

Sengphet, who always seems to be manning the bar while simultaneously serving as the primary host, waiter, and washer-upper of the Tiki Palms, nods back, his hands pressed in front of him in gratitude. I've only had a few short conversations with

Sengphet since arriving here, during quiet moments between the breakfast and lunch rushes. He tells me in broken English about how he came to Koh Sang so that he could send money to his family back in Laos in efforts to give them a better life. We talk about his son, barely three, and how Sengphet is reminded of him every time he makes a drink with bananas and coconuts—his son’s favorite foods. Or about how much he misses playing *sepak takraw*—apparently some kind of mix between volleyball and soccer—with his friends and cousins back home. He fumbles through the new language he’s been struggling to learn since he arrived on the island a few months ago with a toothy smile and a hopelessly endearing chuckle.

An up-tempo Mumford & Sons song plays from the bar speaker now, a prelude to the raucous club beats that will take over as soon as the sun sets. I take a long sip from the smoothie. It tastes like a mix of papaya and dragon fruit and is absolutely delicious.

“So what were you doing here before I so rudely interrupted?” Neil asks.

My mind returns to the girl, and I scan the restaurant once more, but I don’t spot her anywhere.

“Oh, nothing. Just editing some photos I took from the hike Cass and I did on the Khrum Yai trail the other day so that I can turn them into a TikTok.”

“Ah,” he says. “Cass is a good tour guide if she’s taking you up there.”

I nod, not telling him the real reason I asked her to show me the trail, my true intention in seeing the summit.

“It’s nice that you’ve become so close,” he continues. “You and Cass.”

I smile, silently remembering the day I met her two weeks ago, my first morning on the island. She was sitting next to me a few tables down from where Neil and I sit now, her back straight in that typical East Coast, upper-middle-class way I always envied growing up. I watched Sengphet smile at her as he took her order, the gentle way she touched his arm as she thanked him.

“You’re American, right?” I asked after Sengphet walked away. Her eyes grew wide as if I was accusing her of something. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I heard you order. I’ve been in Thailand for a few days now, and strangely enough, I haven’t run into another American yet.” I was surprised at how eager I was for her response. Even after traveling for years throughout Eastern Europe on my own without issue, there was something utterly foreign about Southeast Asia. Something I’d found oddly isolating.

She nodded politely but didn’t respond.

“I’m Brooke.” I tried again.

“Cass,” she answered. Her voice was quiet, and there was a shyness to her that was refreshing given that most of my interactions lately came in the form of excited messages over social media with other extroverted influencers and eager followers.

“Where in the States are you from?” I asked.

“New York,” she said. And after a moment, “You?”

“The West Coast.”

If Cass was curious about my unintentionally vague answer, she didn’t say. And it’s not like she would have had any reason to suspect I was lying. I’d spent years molding my harsh Kentucky accent, sharpening my consonants and shortening my vowels, so that I could leave my drawl behind with the rest of my upbringing.

I spotted the black polo she was wearing, her chest emblazoned

with the label for the Koh Sang Dive Resort, the only hotel on the island. “You work here?”

“Yeah, I’m a dive instructor,” she said, the hint of a proud smile on her lips.

“Wow,” I said, impressed. “That’s incredible. I can’t imagine doing all that, spending all that time under the water. What’s that like? Doesn’t it make you nervous that things could go wrong down there?”

And with that, it was like a switch had flipped. She began to tell me all about what it was like to lose herself below the water’s surface, how it felt like an escape. Her quiet shyness melted as she opened up, her passion for diving evident. Eventually, I moved over to her table, and we talked for well over an hour, barely touching the meals in front of us. She told me about how she’d lived on Koh Sang for two years and how she was in a long-term relationship with Logan, another expat who owned one of the island’s bars.

She asked me questions as well, wanting to know all about the campaigns I’d established with hotels throughout Eastern Europe, how I’d created @BrookeaTrip, listening to it all attentively, without a shred of judgment. She leaned forward, eyes wide as I told her about the destruction I’d seen in Sarajevo, still unrepaired from war decades ago, and she nearly choked on her smoothie as I regaled her with the story of how I had reluctantly agreed to go on a first date with a guy in Croatia, expecting a casual meal, only to realize he had brought me as his plus-one to his sister’s wedding—an event I was severely underdressed and horribly unprepared for.

It felt good, this conversation, her interest. It was a type of female connection I hadn’t felt in a long time, absent of the inherent competition that came with the shallow Instagram-based

friendships I'd formed with other influencers. And I found myself disappointed when Cass eventually had to leave after an hour or so to get back to the dive shop. But we promised to meet up again, and we kept it, spending nearly every day together in the last few weeks. She was quick to introduce me to her friends, to welcome me into the life she had made here.

"Yeah," I say to Neil now. "I'm lucky to have met her."

Neil nods knowingly, and we sit in silence for a few moments. I expect it to feel awkward, but other than the nervous trill in my stomach, it's surprisingly comfortable. We watch a group of backpackers toss around a blow-up volleyball as they walk down the slope toward the beach.

"So how are you liking Koh Sang so far?" Neil asks finally.

"It's great," I say. "I mean it's beautiful, obviously, and everyone is so nice." Both statements are objectively true.

"Are we nice enough to get you to stay?" Neil's dark eyes are trained on mine, his eyebrows rising.

It catches me off guard, even though it shouldn't. I can tell the answer Neil wants, the one he's expecting. That I'll join him and the other Permanents who have made Koh Sang their home.

"Maybe," I say finally, settling on as uncontroversial an answer as I can think of. "Just taking it week by week at this point."

I don't mention that I don't have much choice. That I've spent nearly all my savings on a one-way flight to Phuket, followed by a ferry ticket to Koh Sang. I have barely enough left to cover my expenses for the next two weeks, let alone to book a flight out of here.

Neil nods. He looks as if he's considering saying something more, but I head it off before he has the chance. "So what brought

you here? How did you know that this was the place for you to settle down?”

Neil takes another drink, apparently thinking over the question. He casually reaches down and starts playing with the bracelets that cover several inches on both of my wrists. Some beaded, some nothing more than a loop of string. Some purchased, some given to me, usually by kids, in the various places I've traveled. Neil shifts each bracelet one at a time, his skin brushing against mine. His touch is unexpected, but somehow it feels right. Even so, I pull my arm away, feigning an itch on my back that desperately needs to be scratched.

“Ah, you know, the usual story,” he says, pretending not to notice the sting of my rejection. “Bit of a rough childhood, drunk dad, the whole lot. Took off traveling as soon as I finished school and didn't even consider stopping until I reached here. Discovered scuba and kind of fell in love.” I feel a heat rise in my cheeks when he says that last word. “Something about this place just felt right. I can't really put my finger on why. So I worked it out with Frederic that I would serve as waitstaff here at the Tiki Palms to pay for my training. Once I finally finished my divemaster course, he took me on as an instructor. That was about three years ago now.”

He's right. It is the usual story. So generic it's almost laughable. But still, I can't help but feel a surge of compassion for Neil. My eyes keep drifting to his fingers, which have now retreated from my skin and are clasped around his glass, and I regret pulling away. I find myself craving human touch. His touch specifically. The feeling of his fingers on me.

*Not now*, I tell myself. This isn't the time, and it's certainly not the place.

He laughs lightly to himself. “But I know the diving isn’t what drew you here, Brooke. I think you’re the only person I’ve ever met who’s come to Thailand’s most-renowned diving island with no intention of even trying scuba.” He shakes his head slightly, as if he can’t quite believe it.

I’d confessed my aversion to water sports to Neil the first night we met. I’ve never been athletic. When I was growing up, I always preferred to hole up in my bedroom with a book or sneak into the living room to turn on CNN rather than join the other kids in our trailer park playing whatever kind of miserable game they’d made up that week. And it wasn’t like we had the option of water sports in central Kentucky. Back then, I didn’t even realize scuba *was* a sport.

I’ve also never understood the desire to be that far below the surface. The claustrophobia, the water’s pressure bearing down on you, relying on nothing but a tank and a small tube to keep you breathing. That’s way more trust than I can put into anything, let alone *anyone*.

“I still think I can convince you. I’ll make a diver out of you one of these days. That’s a promise,” Neil says, raising his glass.

“Sounds more like a threat to me,” I say, cringing at how flirtatious my words sound.

“So what was it then?” Neil presses. “If not the diving, then what brought you to this part of the world?”

“Well, I’ve been traveling for a while now,” I say, following my prepared script, “and what kind of backpacker would I be if I never made it to Thailand?”

He nods, and something in his expression directs me to continue.

“I finished college early,” I explain, the best phrase I’ve come



up with to avoid mentioning that I dropped out after only a few months, “and I didn’t really know what to do with my life. I had always wanted to travel. I started with backpacking through Eastern Europe. Thought I could pick up some freelance journalism jobs as I went, but that didn’t really pan out. So I made this Instagram profile, and then a TikTok, and then a website, and the whole thing kind of blew up...”

I trail off, glancing downward as I feel the usual shame that comes with explaining my career. I prepare myself for Neil’s response. An eye roll or a snort of derision, perhaps. The typical response I get when I admit I’m an influencer, a profession that’s come to be both envied and disdained.

But Neil simply sits there, completely quiet for a few seconds.

“Hmm,” he says finally, his lips turning into a smile, and for the first time, I notice a dimple piercing his left cheek.

“Hmm what?” I ask, a smile pulling at the sides of my mouth.

“I’m not sure I believe you, Brooke.”

Instantly, my smile freezes. My stomach tightens, and I force down a swelling panic. *He knows. He’s figured it out. It’s all over.*

But a glitter in his eye stops me.

“I feel like you’re holding out on me,” he continues. “A smart girl like you must have had tons of options after university. People like us—travelers, I mean—use travel either to find something or to hide from something. So spill. What’s your reason?”

I let my muscles unclench as I convince myself my fear was unfounded. Neil doesn’t know—he can’t know—why I’m really here.

“Oh, you know, just the usual twentysomething discovery phase. Traveling to find myself and all that. I heard a few other travelers raving about Koh Sang, so I knew I had to try it out.” Eager

to change the subject, I hold my glass up, indicate for him to do the same, and clink them softly.

Neil smiles back at me, and we sip from our drinks in unison. I savor the taste of the smoothie, letting the sticky sweetness drown out the bitterness of my lie.

