

THE BACHELORETTE PARTY

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Blogger Exclusive Early Material

Not for quotation

There are a lot of places I like, but I like New Orleans better.

- Bob Dylan

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Prologue

The detective walks through a tunnel of weepy oak trees, following the picturesque path to the glowing French doors. She tries to imagine herself in the killer's shoes.

Did he sneak up on them? Or was he already inside when the party started?

She stares up at the strange, eclectic home. It inspires awe and horror in tandem.

The pediments and classic columns give the place an undeniable Greek feel. But like so many other domiciles in New Orleans, it's a haunting patchwork of influence—the Spanish and Caribbean flashes of color and design; the Creole parapets and cast-iron balconies; the Victorian motifs twisted like lace. And the siding looks Italian...

A true work of architectural genius...too bad its reputation will be tainted after today, the detective thinks.

Someone has decorated the front of the house, either for the event or leftover from Mardi Gras, gaudy swoops of pearls and flowers...and massive bride and groom statues, which look to be made of paper mâché, keep watch at the carriageway.

The detective stares at their faces; stoic, they reveal nothing about what transpired here. *What secrets are you hiding?* she wonders.

Through the carriageway, she stops at the French doors. Her assistant helps her into boot covers and gloves. He is young and male, barely twenty. His eyes are frightened. His skin has turned a muted gray. But the detective pretends not to notice.

“Take me to her, please,” she says.

Down a marbled hallway lined with a dark mix of Parisian and contemporary paintings, the assistant stops at the entry of a grand dining room and points. It's large enough to fit a ball room inside it.

On a long wooden table are remnants of half-eaten food. The pungent smell of rotting oysters fills the air. There are open wine bottles scattered from the head of the table, on down.

The banquet assumes a substantial portion of the room, but the centerpiece of the space... is the woman.

The detective moves in, tiptoeing like a ballet dancer around the ghastly main attraction.

The noose is tight around the victim's neck. She dangles from the rafter, still as a statue carved by Marcus Aurelius himself, as though she's part of the mishmash design that comes with the house.

The victim's eyes are open, staring.

The detective turns, follows her gaze toward the putrid food spread, trying to see through her victim's eyes. *What was the last thing you saw before you died? Or should I say: who did you see?*

There are others in the room—technicians, combing for clues, but the detective might as well be alone with the dead woman. *What happened to you?* The detective wonders, eyes combing the woman's body for clues. She looks weightless...

Why did someone do this to you? And most importantly—who hated you enough to kill?

The detective walks a full circle around the victim, eyes never leaving her body. She nearly steps in a small puddle of blood before the assistant stops her.

Kneeling, she examines the coin-shaped blot on the marble floor, glancing back up at the victim.

She's wearing a long white dress, nearly see-through. No shoes. Her toenails are painted candy-apple red.

The detective cannot say for certain until the medical examiner arrives, but she doesn't think she died by hanging.

"What are you thinking?" the assistant asks, mustering some stoicism despite his sickly pallor.

"Well, I can't say for sure. But I don't see much injury around the ligature. No scratch marks...and she doesn't appear to have clawed at the noose. If someone strung you up like that, you'd fight like hell, wouldn't you?"

The assistant's face turns ashier.

"Maybe she put herself up there," he squeaks.

The detective shakes her head, slowly considering.

"Not a chance," she says, finally.

"Well, how do you know?"

She lifts an arm, points a latex finger at the back of the victim's head. "Can't see it too clearly from here, but someone whacked her good on the back of the head. The blood on the floor probably came from her, but this isn't where she was hit. A wound like that...it would have caused a whole lot of mess...and I don't think the victim hit herself in the back of the head

before hanging, do you? And how did she get herself up there? There's no stool or chair..." The detective is talking, but she's mostly talking it through with herself.

She motions for one of the technicians and points at the blood on the floor.

Later, as the body is cut down and removed, the detective roams the halls of the mansion, room by room, taking it all in. She has had no luck finding a weapon.

A blow like that would have come from something heavy...and from someone strong, she thinks, wearily.

She imagines the perpetrator, lifting something heavy over the victim's head. She sees the weight of the blow... the whale-like squeal someone might make after sustaining a sudden brain injury of that nature.

The detective's lieutenant has passed along some details already, but she wants to walk it through herself a few more times. She needs to get a feel of this place...needs to know what happened, and how a joyous night could turn out so wrong...

Six women were present at the party and now one of them is dead.

The remaining five are in custody, being questioned at the station. *Hopefully being managed with care until we have more information,* the detective thinks to herself.

The detective stops in the doorway of a massive library. Floor to ceiling shelves are crammed with heavy volumes and tomes. She has an eye for order and prides herself for it. *Whoever the caretaker of this place might be, they certainly have an eye for order too,* she realizes.

The books are organized by size and girth—the thickest and tallest volumes on the left, cascading from left to right, growing thinner and shorter, all the way to the smallest and narrowest volumes. It flows seamlessly...*perfectly*.

The detective's eyes roam the spines, left to right then down a row, right to left...it takes her less than a minute to find it—the chaos commingling with the order.

The offender is a thick red tome inched between two narrow tomes of the same height.

As she removes it, slowly and with care, she realizes the book isn't red at all. Rather, it is meant to be brown, but something has stained the heavy paperboard binding.

The detective turns it over and stares at the thick clump of hair and scalp attached to the sharpest edge.

"I need help from someone in here," she whisper-shouts, hands shaky from the weight of the book, and the horror of what has happened here.

The detective's voice booms around the cavernous space, echoing back in her face. *This place feels less like a historical monument and more like an ill-starred tomb*, she thinks, hairs rising on the back of her neck for the first time all night.

Earlier, she saw pictures of the women—a fun-filled weekend; a celebration of what should have been one of the best moments in life...an event catalogued in real time with the help of social media and social influence...

But all the filters in the world can't hide this sort of darkness.

They could cover up their flaws and grievances with Gingham or Valencia, but no amount of lighting or special effects could change what one of them had done...

A monster in a pretty dress is still a monster.

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Chapter One

ROSALEE

The Bride-to-be

The backyard of our new home spread before me, stretching over a gentle slope then unfolding into a pasture. Beyond that, the land melted into a quiet hush of sugar maple trees and smudgy, rolling hills in the distance.

Two mares stood in the pasture, silent and hulking, unbothered by the eerie hush of falling snow. I stood at the edge of our veranda, letting the weightless flakes brush my cheeks and hands. I wondered if the horses were sleeping...*do horses stand when they sleep or lie down?*

The smell of manure was strong, despite the cold, but the odor didn't bother me. The realtor had warned us when we walked the place, but the pasture smelled just fine to me—like farmland and fresh air. Like a fresh new start for my tiny two-person family...

Asher and I had lived here for nearly a month now, but still, I hadn't adjusted. Half our belongings still stowed away in boxes, pushed aside in the deep dark corners of our three-bedroom farmhouse.

It's perfect, Asher told the real estate agent, before turning to me. *Isn't it perfect, Rosalee?*

What else could I say but 'yes', in that moment? I loved it; this was true. And the way Asher's eyes lit up when he was excited about something, whether it was a big case he was working on at the law firm, or a story he read online...his eyes, warm and brown like pecans, would grow smiley and wide, like a kid bubbled over with Christmas morning delight.

Later, as the real estate agent typed up the deal, he repeated those words: *It's perfect.*

Adding this: *For now.*

Us and a couple of kids. The perfect place to raise a family. Until we want to have even more kids, and we eventually outgrow the place, he had said.

I shivered at the memory. Yes, the house was perfect, and I loved my fiancée, but the thought of having so many kids we would soon outgrow it? *Not in the plans for me.*

I loved the solitude of Moon County. You could drive from one side of town to the other in 30 minutes, counting the crows and telephone wires...pointing out the silos and family farms that had obviously been around for generations. One generation gives way to the next...a bunch of knock-offs walking around, replacing the youth that came before them. We're all different here, yet all the same.

I love it here, but also—I don't feel settled. Not yet.

“You're freezing.” Asher wrapped his thick arms around me from behind, squeezing me close to his chest. He smelled like aftershave and his favorite coffee, an over-priced bourbon barrel aged brew. He was wearing his thick, black, terrycloth robe. But still, I could feel his erection as he held me close. I shivered and pressed into him.

“It seems wrong to go,” I whispered, icy words forming foggy little puffs around me. “We're just getting settled...and this is our first snow since moving...” Asher squeezed tighter, too tight...and I tried to relax, giving into the curve of his body, a shudder of pleasure running through me.

I didn't want to leave Asher—we hadn't spent a night apart from one another in ages.

I'd loved him since middle school...and even now, at twenty-eight, it felt surreal to think we were together. *We are getting married soon.*

Perhaps that could account for the unsettled lump in my chest...*We're not married yet. He could still back out...*

Asher laughed, a thick rumble in his chest that vibrated my backside and made me warm all over. *He has the best laugh. He might not be perfect, but that laugh...it's one of his best features. Always has been.*

"Who are you kidding, Rosalee? You hate the snow."

True. Although he doesn't exactly know why. Talk of my parents' fatal accident was something I avoided whenever possible, even with my future husband.

For me, the beauty of snow will always be intertwined with those ugly, dark days of death. That haunting silence snow brings...as though the entire world is vacuum-sealed and there's no one around to save you...

"And," Asher continued, "there's not that much left to unpack." *Lie.* The thought of all those boxes and all the sorting that needed done...it overwhelmed all of my senses, the pressure thick in my chest to just *get it done, get it done...*

"What will you do without me though? You'll be lonely," I teased. I turned around, wrapping my arms around his waist, then lifting up on my toes to kiss him. Even first thing in the morning, the milky-sweetness of his skin and lips were enticing.

He rocked back on his heels playfully, then took my face in his hands.

“Ah. Don’t you worry about me. I have work to do on the Werner file and in my free time, I’ll probably get drunk on cheap beer and start hanging some of your art on the walls,” he grinned.

I groaned but smiled, unable to contain my pleasure. I wanted a place to hang my art pieces, but if Asher had it his way, they’d be displayed front and center—in the living room or foyer, for all of our guests to see. I liked that he was proud of my work, but it also embarrassed me.

“Don’t you dare. Wait until I come back at least,” I said, taking my last longing glance toward the pasture. The horses were gone now, as though they’d never been there to begin with. My eyes drifted over to the gazebo next to the farmhouse; bright blue with tiny white pockets of flowers on its beams, it was one of my favorite features on the property.

I had suggested, casually, that perhaps we should hold the wedding here, in the gazebo. A simple ceremony on our lovely new patch of land...

Of course, Asher’s mother nearly choked on her biscuit when I said that. “She’s teasing mom. Relax,” Asher had said, rubbing smooth circles over his mother Elizabeth’s back until her throat cleared.

“Well, I sure hope so. I’ve paid a fortune for Merribelle Gardens and already paid countless deposits on the flowers and caterers,” she had huffed, refusing to meet my eye as she dabbled her lips with a fancy white linen napkin. That day, we had met for lunch at her favorite restaurant—a snobby, upscale place that charged 100 dollars for a dab of meat with a smear of potatoes and a lettuce leaf on it.

I’d been horrified by it, even if she were the one paying the tab.

Ah yes—the grand Merrible Gardens, the destination for our wedding in June.

Merribelle Gardens and all the money my future mother-in-law had so generously put forth for our wedding. The whole grand plan had been her idea—a *tradition*, since she and Asher’s late father had been married there in 1972.

I’d seen the glamorous pictures of their wedding day, countless times. Elizabeth in her big ballgown with its floaty A-line and mother-of-pearl buttons...she had looked like a movie star. And Asher’s father—tall and demure in his fancy black waistcoat with its classic pocket square.

There was no way Asher and I could live up to his mother’s ideal wedding tradition.

It wasn’t that I was opposed to getting married there. It’s just...I couldn’t shake off the feeling that it was being held over my head; a constant reminder that I should feel grateful, *indebted*, to the Beake family, for simply letting me be a part of it.

My own parents weren’t around to help pay for the wedding, and even if they had been, they were never as well off as Asher’s family.

Whenever Elizabeth discussed the upcoming wedding, I often felt guilty, as though no matter how much I thanked her for planning and paying for it, and no matter how much enthusiasm I tried to muster, none of it was good enough. I couldn’t shake off the feeling that she didn’t like me. And all of my suggestions and ideas for the wedding were pushed aside...*how dare the peasant bride have an opinion!*

I wasn’t joking that day at the restaurant when I suggested the gazebo. I did love our new farmhouse...and the thought of having a small ceremony in my own mother’s plain white dress with feet bare...was appealing

But I didn't want to disappoint Asher, and I certainly didn't want to disappoint his mother.

"Hey. Don't worry. Go! Have fun. You deserve this weekend. It's yours to celebrate," Asher said, shaking me out of my worried thoughts.

"Okay. If you insist," I winked. Although, he and I both knew, there was no way of getting out of New Orleans either. My best friend Mara had planned it; like Elizabeth, Mara wasn't opposed to using guilt and pressure to get her way.

Truthfully, I was excited to see Mara. And the others...mostly. I'd never been to New Orleans and the thought of celebrating for a few days with friends in an authentic Greek Revival in the Garden District was too exotic to resist. It would be nice to get away for a few days...from the mess and stress of packing. From the wedding jitters and constant questions and answers from the party planner.

I needed a break from it all. The engagement, the home-buying process, the move...it was all too much for my historically fragile mental health...

Asher led me back in through the back door, nudging me towards our bedroom to pack for the trip. "I'll make coffee and eggs. Maybe some pork sausage..." Even though the man worked ungodly hours at the law firm, he was phenom in the kitchen when he offered to cook.

"Sounds wonderful." I kissed his cheek and drifted off to our room. My suitcase was under the bed, still thick with dust from my apartment. It had been years since I'd travelled anywhere.

Humming softly, I filled the soft fabric lining of the case with pockets of panties and bras, and my best t-shirts and jeans that had been unpacked. Despite the chilly weather here in Indiana, the weather forecast in Louisiana looked perfect—a balmy 79 degrees. I tossed in pajamas and a

couple of old bathing suits in case there was a pool. I was tempted to try them on to see if they still fit, but then I'd get depressed about my weight gain...*I'll just deal with it when I get there*, I decided.

After my clothes were all packed, I went in search of my tickets. They were in a folder, tucked away with all the airline details printed out by Mara and my cousin, Tinsley.

Where's that folder now, then? I wondered.

As I wandered down the hall to Asher's office, I could hear the sizzle of sausages and smell the warm scent of toast and coffee. My stomach grumbled.

Asher's office was still a work in progress, like the rest of the house. Housed in one of the spare bedrooms, he had a single desk and chair. The desktop was littered with files and folders. I spotted the neon yellow folder with my flight itinerary in it, balanced on a crooked stack of papers on the corner of the desk. He had obviously moved the folder into his office, thinking it was one of his.

I scooped up the folder and opened it, double checking my flight time and that everything I needed was there. Glancing at the other stack of papers on his desk, I was reminded of all the paperwork and drama that had been involved in buying our new, and first, home together.

Copies of our bank statements, w2s, and every single asset we had ever owned...the only thing the mortgage lender didn't ask for was a picture of the inside of my underwear drawer...

I need to go through these papers when I get back, file away the important ones and shred the duplicates...

I picked up the stack in my hands and straightened it, then set it back down neatly on the desk. I was about to turn away with my folder in hand, when my eyes drifted to a line item I hadn't noticed before on the top sheet of one of our bank statements.

Truthfully, I'd barely paid any of it any mind, just printing and printing and printing whatever the mortgage lender asked for.

Now, I picked the statement up, studying one of the charges listed at the very top. A recurring charge. For a place I knew all too well. A place Asher had no business going to...

In the kitchen, I held the folder to my chest like a shield, watching the man I loved making breakfast. He glanced up at me and smiled, wagging the spatula playfully.

I thought I could trust him with my life, but perhaps that's not the case...

Chapter Two

ELIZABETH

The mother-in-law

“Are you sure about this? It’s not too late to switch flights.”

“Mom, stop it.” My daughter, Bri, jabbed an elbow in my rib cage, but she was smiling when she did it. I knew she wanted to be here about as much as I did.

“Seriously. I have miles on my Amex. We could go anywhere you want. The Galapagos. Or, hey, what about Paris?” I teased.

“There she is,” Bri spoke from the corner of her mouth, dipping her head toward my future daughter-in-law, Rosalee.

Rosalee stumbled through the terminal, catching herself just in time. She had a dented old suitcase swaying at her side.

“Good lord. Is that all she brought with her, that tiny suitcase?”

Bri’s lips tightened; her thick brows furrowed together. “Looks like it, mom.”

Bri’s baby brother was getting married when, in reality, it should have been her.

My daughter was beautiful, but different. Bri had her father’s stature and face, his squarish jaw and thick, broad shoulders. And when she was angry, she looked like a linebacker perched for attack on the field. As much as I had wanted it for her—marriage, babies, a traditional life...it wasn’t her thing. She was focused on her career, building computers and creating her own custom models. I didn’t understand a bit of it, but I was proud.

I am proud of my daughter, even if she doesn't choose to live her life the way I expected her to.

Speaking of pride...I zeroed in on my clumsy daughter-in-law to-be as she stopped in front of us. She dropped her suitcase at her feet and tugged on her stubby black ponytail, a line of sweat beading at her brow. *How can someone so young look so sweaty and out-of-breath all the time?* I wondered, and not for the first time.

“I went to the wrong terminal. And then I got hassled in X-ray over the buckles on my shoes,” Rosalee breathed.

Glancing down at her feet, I was horrified to see a pair of cheap payless shoes that looked like a carryover from the nineties.

“They’re comfortable,” Rosalee said, following my gaze. “My mom always said to dress comfortably while traveling.” She shrugged, then chewed her bottom lip—one awful habit out of many.

But I felt a small lurch in my chest at the mention of her mother. *It could not have been easy, losing her mother and father at such an early age. But surely...her mother could have taught her a thing or two or about fashion, about walking with her head up and finding a sense of direction...about not wearing such ridiculous shoes...*

“Oh, I almost forgot! Here’s your shirt.” Bri beamed, as she thrust a folded pink t-shirt into Rosalee’s hands. The words ‘The Future Mrs. Beake’ were embroidered in hideous sparkly gold letters on the front of it.

I couldn't help smiling as I watched Rosalee unfold the shirt and hold it up to her face. There was a flicker of something—a tiny clench in her jaw. But then she smiled brightly at Bri. “I love it! Thank you so much for making the shirts, Bri.”

That flicker of annoyance, quickly masked with gratitude, came as no surprise to me. Rosalee's best friend and maid of honor, Mara, and her cousin, Tinsley, were in charge of throwing the bachelorette party. Yet Bri had insisted on overseeing the shirts from Day One. Bri had a close friend from high school who designed her own t-shirts—a cheesy endeavor, if you ask me—and she had promised to get them well-made, and at a reasonable price. But the others should have known...price isn't really something we worry about.

Mara had suggested something cute and classy—‘Here comes the bride’, ‘Crown me’—and even a few funny inscriptions—‘Bride-zilla’, ‘Soon to be under new management’. But I was the one who pushed for ‘The Future Mrs. Beake’, and Bri had gone along with it too. *She always listens to her mother.*

It's not my fault Rosalee wants to keep her own last name. Disgraceful, that's what it is. She should be grateful to call herself a Beake now, especially considering that she has next to no family to call her own.

I'd expected a better reaction from her when she saw the shirt, but I should have known better—Rosalee was polite, if anything. Always biting her lip, being a try-hard when it came to impressing Asher and his family. But I could see through her phony routine.

I watched in mock horror as Rosalee removed her thin jacket and started tugging the new t-shirt over the ratty one she was already wearing.

“Oh, you don't have to do that now...” Bri said, looking around at passersby, embarrassed.

“No, I want to! Thanks again for this. I just adore it. Your friend who makes these is very talented,” Rosalee beamed, struggling to pull the t-shirt over her breasts and flabby stomach. She wasn’t a heavy girl; but she certainly wasn’t in shape. Last year I bought her a pair of maternity pants for Christmas, hoping she would take the hint. Instead, she had thanked me and promised to wear them soon. *Knowing her and her fashion sense, she probably does wear them...*

“Where are the others?” I sniffed, looking at my favorite watch with its diamond band. It was a present from Edmund on our twenty-fifth anniversary. I blinked back memories of that day, his cheesy grin, slipping the velvet box across the table before I’d even taken a bite of my dinner. He’d always been so impatient when it came to gift-giving. He loved the thrill of seeing me open things; watching my eyes sparkle with the presents he bestowed upon me. Despite all his showiness and spoils, he was never a man who cared about buying things for himself. His favorite thing to wear was holey pajama pants and he didn’t even own any jewelry. *Edmund probably would have loved Rosalee*, I thought, a flicker of annoyance running down my spine as I continued to watch her struggle with the too-tight shirt.

“Georgia’s almost here. Not sure about the other two...” Bri said, face bent down over her phone, trying not to look at Rosalee’s scuffle with the shirt.

“You talked to Georgia?” Rosalee asked, breathily. Now she was attempting to stretch out the tight cotton away from her bulging waistline. There had been a time or two when I wondered...could she be pregnant? In my mind, I’d imagined the way she and Asher would break the news—a fancy cake or a gift that when opened would reveal the grainy ultrasound portrait of my first grandson...

“Yeah. She texted me about an hour ago. She should be here by now,” Bri said casually, eyes still glued to her phone.

My eyes wandered over Rosalee’s face, the pained expression at the mention of Georgia’s name. It was no secret that I thought it would be Georgia standing here—tauter and better dressed of course but serving as the bride-to-be for Asher. They had been thick as thieves since grade school, those two. Georgia’s mother and I had been lifelong friends; as children, Asher and Georgia were always running around, keeping themselves entertained with pirate and war games, while Mary and I sipped gin and tonics and talked shit about the men in our lives.

In middle school and high school, Georgia and Asher had developed into miniature adults...Georgia blossomed and grew prettier, and Asher shot up like a weed, towering over her and all his classmates. He was destined to play sports and, all through school, he made friends wherever he went. Any girl would have been lucky to have Asher Beake, but he never left Georgia’s side. They rode to school together every morning and afternoon. They spent time together on the weekends. For a long time, I just assumed they were dating...it was only natural...

But then Asher left for law school and Georgia studied to be a nurse; they drifted apart, and Asher met other women, sometimes bringing them home for breaks or holidays. None of them measured up to Georgia. Not even close.

When Rosalee moved back to town and they started dating, it became obvious that it was more than a short-lived fling. Finally, I had asked him—what was the deal with Georgia? By then, she was done with nursing school; like Asher, she had come back home to her family and

roots. Why were they not pursuing something romantic? Why did he choose the clumsy, frumpy Rosalee over the girl he'd known all his life, Georgia?

Ah mom. You know we've always just been friends. I don't think of Georgia in that way, and she doesn't either, Asher had said.

But he was wrong—I could see it in Georgia's eyes when he told her the news about Rosalee. Georgia was jealous about his upcoming marriage, she had to be. *I only wish she would try to stop him, stop this whole thing before it's too late...*

“There she is! Hello, darling!” I squealed, mustering all the excitement I could. It wasn't hard when it came to Georgia.

Georgia came running, her oversized Coach carrion swinging in the crook of her arm. She dropped it and opened her arms, embracing me in a too-long hug. She smelled like honeydew and toothpaste; and, as usual, she looked like a girl who, although humbly and smartly dressed, could have been a runway model. Thick blond hair, beachy waves. Eyelashes for days. When she smiled, she showed all her teeth. And, as I glanced down at her feet, I noted her espadrilles—better taste in shoes, that's for sure.

Georgia turned to Rosalee. “Hello, you! Congratulations! I'm so excited for this trip. Thank you for letting me come, and for asking me to be a bridesmaid,” Georgia beamed. She reached for Rosalee, who looked startled as she settled into the embrace. That was one thing that Georgia and Rosalee had in common—they were both too nice. *I wish she'd run Rosalee off and stake her claim on my son. Lord knows they look more suited for one another, and they're both enthusiastic about their careers. Unlike Rosalee, with her strange and eerie paintings, the dusty spots of chalk on her clothes and face.*

“Aw it’s my pleasure. Thank you for agreeing to be a bridesmaid. Your Asher’s best friend, so it only made sense...” Rosalee said. She closed her mouth then opened it...then closed it again, as though she had something else to say but couldn’t.

As Bri handed over Georgia’s shirt—nicer and well-fitted, for certain—I watched Rosalee study my son’s best friend. It was no surprise Georgia intimidated her. *Good. She should be. She should be afraid of us all*, I thought, silyly.

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Chapter Three

MARA

The best friend

My eyes wandered from one woman to the next as I approached with my shiny black carry-on bag. *I have many flaws, but if there's one thing I'm good at it's reading a room.* Rosalee's awful soon-to-be in-laws, the beak-nosed Mrs. Beake and her thunderous daughter Bri looked downright miserable, waiting in their neatly-pressed khakis, silky button-downs, and ballet flats. *Did they plan out their outfits together in advance? Ew,* I thought, leerily.

And *Georgia. The fucking Georgia.* Don't get me started on her...

Georgia is the bane of my best friend Rosalee's existence. Rosalee didn't tell me that, but then again, she didn't need to. Best friends know these things.

When your fiancée's 'best friend' is a woman who looks like an Instagram model, there's nothing left to do but hate. And me, being me, can't help hating anyone who upsets my oldest and closest friend.

Call me old-fashioned, but women and men aren't friends. If they are, it's only because one of them wants more and the other doesn't. *Georgia makes no sense to me...*

For the life of me, I couldn't understand it—Rosalee had asked me to be her maid-of-honor (obviously), and I could understand having Tinsley as a bridesmaid too. Tinsley was Rosalee's only cousin and Tinsley's family had taken her in after the tragic loss of her parents. *Me and Tinsley—we make sense. But why did she have to ask Bri and Georgia to be bridesmaids, too?*

I'd had no choice but to invite the other two bridesmaids to the bachelorette party...and then Rosalee had also insisted we ask Elizabeth, the matriarch of the Beakes, with her poufy white hair and long nose, perfect to look down on you with...

Frankly, my best friend was being way too nice. The party was supposed to be about her, *for her*...not a way to kiss up to her future in-laws and her husband's female 'bestie'. If I'd have had it my way, we would have invited our closest acquaintances and had a wild shindig, stress-free.

But Rosalee wanted this, and as the party thrower, it was my job to meet her demands.

I was determined to make this bachelorette party not only a weekend to remember, but the best fucking weekend of Rosalee's life.

My best friend is getting married, and she deserves this. She deserves to feel celebrated. I just wish she would have chosen some kinder participants...

Rosalee looked so awkward and unsure of herself standing in that group of women; I just wanted to squeeze her up and dropkick those bitches around her. Especially Georgia.

"Darlings!" I launched my bag toward their inner circle and slid my owlish sunglasses down my nose. "Who's ready for the best fucking weekend of their life?"

Elizabeth's mouth fell open and Bri narrowed her eyes at me. And I didn't even bother looking at Georgia. Lord knows I'd studied her enough on Instagram already.

"Elizabeth and Bri! So lovely to finally meet you in person!" I squealed.

Elizabeth offered me a matronly hand; her wedding ring sparkled like a firecracker, gaudy and wonderful. I hated her for it. Ignoring the hand, I reached for my best friend's future mother-in-law, and squeezed her bony carcass so hard she let out a small 'umph'.

Bri, the sister, was big and brutish, too hard to get my arms around. I gave her a light hug with a hand slap on the back. Despite the plastered smile, her face was disdainful. These Beake women were exuding hate vibes...I could see why they intimidated Rosalee.

Lucky for me, I don't get shaken so easily.

Next, I turned to Georgia. "Ummm...I'm so sorry. It's early and I haven't had my coffee. Joanna, right?"

"Georgia," Elizabeth snapped before Georgia could answer.

"Georgia, Georgia...!" I belted out the words to that timeless Ray Charles song, startling a few huffy travelers passing by. "I bet you hear that all the time, right?" I teased.

When Georgia smiled, it was like her whole face smiled with her. Her eyes were pale green, her face shiny and smooth as a skincare commercial, her lips soft and small like a perfect rose bud. Even though I hated to admit it, this one exuded *sweetness*.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe how often people start singing my name! When I was younger, I found it annoying, but now it's kind of endearing. It is a good song, after all. They could always sing something worse I guess..."

"Right. Like, 'Jolene, Jolene, Jolene..." I belted.

If Georgia caught my drift, she didn't react. Instead, she said, "Well, it's awfully nice to meet Rosalee's best friend. Finally! Asher's told me so much about you."

Asher, huh?

“Hopefully only good things,” I said, turning toward my best friend. *Why is Georgia talking to Asher about me? Sure, I’ve spent some time with Rosalee’s fiancé, but it’s not like he knows me all that well either...*

“Come here, you.” I took my best friend in my arms, squeezing and tugging until I’d lifted her off her feet. “Wait. What the hell is this? Did they order a kid’s size by accident?” I let her go and tugged on that disastrous bridal party shirt. Bri had insisted on being in charge of the shirts. But I knew this would happen. Luckily, I’d come prepared.

“Oh, it’s not so bad. It’s cute, just a little tight...” Rosalee tugged at the waist, trying to stretch the material out around her stomach.

“Oh, now you’re just being nice! It’s definitely too small. I guess it could be worse. At least they didn’t accidentally pick up a maternity size or anything!” I let out a loud, angry chuckle, turning to lock eyes with Elizabeth. *Yes, of course my best friend told me about the maternity debacle at Christmas. And yes, I predicted they wouldn’t do a respectable job with the shirts today, either.*

“Don’t worry, sweetie, I picked up some gorgeous black and purple pre-mades at Barney’s last weekend. I have one for you right here in my bag. Let’s go to the bathroom and take that one off...”

Rosalee’s cheeks turned apple-red.

“Come on,” I insisted. Locking arms, I steered her in the direction of the airport bathrooms.

Over my shoulder, I flipped a look at Bri, beaming her with my best “fuck you, bitch” smile.

They can try all they want to ruin my best friend's party and her impending marriage, but I won't let them. Nobody is hurting Rosalee this weekend, unless it's over my dead body...

“Thank you,” Rosalee muttered, once we were safely tucked in the stall. She lifted the too-tight shirt over her head as I unfolded the new one and handed it to her. She seemed tense and distracted, her shoulders and jaw tight. Her eyes far away and sleepy. Was it just the drama and anxiety of dealing with her in-laws or was it something more? There was a stiffness to her that I hadn't seen in a long time, like she was going through the motions but not really present...

“Are you okay? I'm sorry about the shirt. I should have insisted on doing that myself too...”

“I'm fine.” Rosalee slid the purple shirt over her head and adjusted her stubby black ponytail.

I shoved the other shirt in the tampon can, watching my best friend's reflection in the bathroom mirror. She lifted her lips, trying to force a smile. Watching her made me feel a sudden rush of sadness.

“Lucky in love”, the shirt read, the ‘o’ fashioned into a glittery engagement ring.

“You sure you're okay? Was everything fine with Asher when you left?” I reached up and adjusted her ponytail for her in the mirror.

“Yeah. Everything's fine. But where is Tinsley? I figured y'all would show up together since you planned the party together...” Rosalee said, shifting out of my grasp.

I took a deep breath through my mouth and blew it out like a bull through my nose. “Yeah, about that...Tinsley isn't coming. I'm sorry.”

Chapter Four

TINSLEY

The cousin

It's not that I'm afraid of flying. I just don't like the crowds or the claustrophobia, stuck with all those tightly compacted bodies 40,000 feet in the air.

If anyone could understand my fears, it was my cousin Rosalee. We had practically grown up together as sisters, her coming to live with me and my mother at the age of fourteen after her parents died.

The drive from Indiana to New Orleans was grueling, but I'd relished the time alone in my Prius, listening to audiobooks and blasting my favorite old songs from the nineties. Not only did I make it on time, but by the time I backed into my long-term parking slot, I was hours early.

A shiny black Uber was there waiting for me.

"What's going on? You must be Tinsley," the driver said with a smile, rolling his window all the way down. It wasn't my first time visiting The Big Easy, but I'd forgotten the beauty of accents—this man's vowels round and smooth like cobbles in a stream.

"That's me. Let me grab my bag." I double and triple checked my door locks, then switched my luggage over to his.

"Let me get that for you. On in." He opened the back door for me, and I slid in, grateful for the air conditioning and the soft, cool seats. *It might have taken me half a night and day's drive to get here, but at least I avoided the plane and all those people. I just hope Rosalee wasn't too disappointed.*

The drive had been strange, chilly temperatures in Indiana fading away when I reached Birmingham, and the moisture thickening as I drew further south. The air in New Orleans felt sticky and airless, settling over my skin like a layer of soup.

“What brings you to New Orleans?” he asked, although when he said it, it sounded like ‘Nyoo Ahhlyins’. I smiled politely at his big bright smile in the rearview.

“Bachelorette party for my cousin. Though she’s more like a sister really...”

“Ah! You missed the Carnival. Too bad,” he said, pulling away from my Prius. As he swooped into traffic onto a busy, colorful street, I watched my car disappear through the rearview mirror.

“Yeah, too bad. My sister...cousin, Rosalee...she wanted to avoid the crowds,” I said. Mardi Gras was over, but you couldn’t tell it—beads still clung to porch rails and remnants of bright awnings, balloons, and streamers were still displayed on the houses and shops.

Awe-struck, I watched the multi-colored buildings swish by—there was no separation between them, as though the entire city were connected, one long heaping heart, each artery pumping blood to the next chamber.

Perhaps it was age that helped me see it clearer now; I’d been barely twenty when I came here last, and the whole place looked different now. The Gothic-inspired moldings and lacy wrought iron; the shotguns next to the Creole cottages...this amazing patchwork of French, Spanish, and Caribbean influences meshed into this unbelievable tapestry.

“Leblanc and Landry, right?” the driver asked, breaking the spell that had overcome me.

“That’s the one.” The Leblanc-Landry Mansion was in the Garden district, close enough to Bourbon Street and the festivities of downtown, but also with an air of seclusion on its acre of land, surrounded by tremendous old oak trees.

Mara and I had pored over the pictures dozens of times, planning and planning. Well, it was mostly her—I just nodded and went along. I’d quickly learned that there was no ‘team’ in teamwork with Mara; she ran the show and you either assisted or got the hell out of her way.

Leblanc-Landry was secluded and romantic, with its hidden courtyard, freakish old trees, and cotton candy architecture—it was perfect, all but the price. When I’d agree to help plan Rosalee’s bachelorette party, I hadn’t agreed to foot the bill.

Mara had promised to pay me back before the trip—I’d put most of it on my credit card. But here I was, in New Orleans...and she still hadn’t paid me. *What the hell is up with that?* I wondered.