

CHAPTER ONE

Tess

All good things start with a bang.

This is Gram's motto, and obviously, one of the most cringeworthy things the woman who raised you can possibly say. But, as much as I hate the saying, it still manages to pop into my head at the worst moments. Like on my way to spend two nonstop weeks with my ex.

"I can't believe the plane isn't full," I say, making a show of spreading myself out between my seat and the empty middle between us as soon as we board our flight to New York. The flight where my recently high school-graduated teen daughter and I will meet up with her dad before our next flight to Italy tomorrow. I stretch luxuriously, earning a pronounced frown from the man across the aisle from us. He, apparently, isn't as easily impressed by extra legroom.

My daughter, Harper, of course, ignores me. Once she's situated, she pulls her tablet from her bag and shoves it under my nose. "Here. You need to get caught up, Mom."

She and her dad have a whole itinerary planned out, all of these places and things to see that they decided on before I was a part of this and had a say in things. Not that this should matter. I'm here to take one last memorable trip with my daughter before everything changes, and that's it.

And, okay, maybe I'm here for some closure. It's completely normal, though, to still wonder what it would be like if things didn't go so terribly wrong all those years ago. But a trip with Spencer has to be the key—I've tried everything else.

"This is Italy," Harper says, flashing the color-coded schedule in front of my face. She switches to another screen. "And then Germany. London. And last but not least Edinburgh. We'll

do one big museum a day and then pick from one of the other activities on the list.” She’s been filling me in since last week, showing me the spreadsheet Spencer made of cities and hotels and sights. I’ve resisted the urge to add my input and even now I keep my face carefully neutral. “It’s an impressive plan,” I say.

Harper doesn’t buy it, though, because she snatches her tablet away and fixes me with a mild glare. “I know you don’t think that, but this is how Dad and I always do our vacations. We fit in so much when we went to Hawaii two summers ago. This is the best way to make sure we see everything.”

Harper’s dad is a huge nerd. He was, and still is, I guess, the organization to my procrastination, and Harper is exactly like him. They both thrive on this kind of thing, whereas my ideal trip would have me wandering around getting lost in some new place I never meant to end up in. But I’m not going to complain out loud when Spencer has been great about fitting me into their travel plans.

After he extended a pity invitation and Harper took it upon herself to emotionally blackmail me into coming along, obviously.

When I texted him a mere six days ago, I offered to pay for my own hotels, but he insisted I stay with them. So, Harper is right, it doesn’t matter what I think about their way—I’m just happy to go along with it. And if that means accidentally turning off their alarms so that we all get the chance to sleep in one or two times, so be it.

“I’m sure it’s going to be perfect,” I say. “Really.” A yawn sneaks out before I can stop it. It’s early enough in the morning that the window shades are drawn and the cabin light’s still off. Most other passengers are settling in for a quiet three-and-a-half-hour nap to our first stop, New York.

Harper sets the tablet in my lap and pats my arm with a huge amount of silent sarcasm. “It will be. Once you study the schedule. We don’t want you dragging us down.”

I guess there’s no nap in my future. I click my tongue and snatch the tablet up, scrolling through the meticulous plans. We’ll be lucky if there’s enough time left in the day to breathe after all of it. While I do my assigned homework, Harper reads a book on her phone for the rest of the flight, laughing to herself about whatever mischief her characters are up to. I try not to scowl at the side of her head as I read through the plan for the next several days. Art museums, dinner reservations, a walking guided tour. It’s dizzying, but still, I have to admit, exciting.

Back in high school, Spencer, my best friend Meg, and I used to daydream about traveling the world and getting to do cool things like this exact trip. Irony doesn’t seem like a strong enough word to describe this current situation, where I find myself about to tour Europe with Spencer almost twenty years after the fact.

“Welcome to New York city,” the pilot announces as we touch down hours later. The sun is firmly set above us, gleaming over the skyline. JFK is predictably full, a center for travel for people all across the world and always busy and bustling like the city itself.

When we deplane and make it to the other side of the airport where baggage claim is located, Spencer stands at the bottom of the escalator holding a printed sign with Harper’s name on it. Even though I saw him last week at Harper’s graduation, there’s something about him today that stops me. He’s in the same basic uniform of haphazard dark hair, black-rimmed glasses, and gray T-shirt with shorts. He looks more relaxed here, though, I think. Harper rolls her eyes and grins before taking her phone out to snap a picture of him.

When we get to him, Harper throws her arms around his neck, almost knocking me into a tall blonde woman standing nearby. “This is going to be amazing,” Harper says, “I literally can’t wait for tomorrow.”

“I know,” he says softly into her hair. I only hear because I’m standing close, but it makes me want to step away. They have their own thing going, these two, and I haven’t had a chance to witness it very often, but it never fails to make me feel self-conscious. My relationship with Harper is solid, but there’s something about the way she gets along with Spencer, making it look so easy.

“Hey,” he says to me when Harper releases him. Spencer’s eyes meet mine and soften warily.

“Hey back.” Clearly I’m too awkward to think of something smart to say to break the silence. My stomach clenches with the tension, and it’s a good thing this trip will give us plenty of forced practice.

Spencer lifts his arms like he might attempt to pull me into a hug too, then drops them. He points to my suitcase instead. “Let me get that for you.”

I keep a firm grasp on the handle. “That’s fine. I’ve got it.”

“Are you sure? Because the last time I saw you in an airport you almost took out a whole family with your suitcase.”

“Okay, that was just bad timing. I’m perfectly capable of keeping track of my own bag ninety-nine percent of the time.” I hold back a chuckle at the memory because I don’t want to give Spencer the satisfaction of knowing I appreciate his wit.

He rolls his shoulders. “Let me get it, Tess.” Spencer reaches for the suitcase again, his hand covering mine where it rests on the handle.

“No, it’s really okay,” I say, desperately ignoring the tingle across my fingers at his touch. It doesn’t make sense to let him affect me like this, over a suitcase of all things.

Harper swings her duffel bag at his chest, grinning. “You can carry mine, Dad.”

I snort at the same time he does, and we look at each other, both of us smiling and shaking our heads at our daughter. My stomach flipflops for no reason, kicking up a storm of emotions that are supposed to be long, long dead, my mouth suddenly dry.

“Hi there.” The platinum blonde next to Spencer turns and holds out her hand. “You must be Harper’s mom.” She speaks to me in that self-assured way that only someone who has that elusive combination of supermodel beauty and confidence to spare can master.

Startled, I look to Spencer and then to Harper. This stranger knowing who I am fazes neither of them. Spencer reaches for the stranger and wraps an arm around her shoulders. “Tess, this is my girlfriend, Ivy. Ivy, this is Tess.”

I blink and my stomach falls. I’m such an idiot. “Ohmygosh, hi. This is so embarrassing, I’m sorry. It’s great to meet you. I’m just a little jetlagged, so excuse me for”—I gesture wildly—“Everything.”

Spencer ran all his relationships by me when Harper was younger so I knew who she might be around while she was in New York, but I guess it’s not exactly necessary anymore. None of the relationships seem to last long, at least according to Harper. But I also don’t ask too many questions when it comes to Spencer’s love life. Some things are better left to mystery, and trying to picture him with someone always leaves me feeling strange. Like running into an old friend and finding out that they’re still in touch with someone you thought you both considered an enemy. A betrayal of some sort, which is ridiculous, I know.

Ivy smiles. “No need to apologize. Spencer has been so excited for this trip. We’re glad you both made it.” She leans into him, marking her territory. Not that there’s a need for that, but maybe she doesn’t know that yet.

I bite my lip. “Thank you. Glad to be here.” If I didn’t feel like a third wheel before with just Spencer and Harper, I do now. There’s no good way to bow out of lunch with them all so we all walk out of the airport together to wait at the curb, me dragging my suitcase behind me.

Spencer gets a taxi and we pile in to find somewhere to eat. When we get out at a street corner to walk the rest of the way, Harper points out places we pass, turning back to give me context. “This is the store I was telling you about, with the really cute shoes,” she says. Spencer says something and he and Ivy laugh, and then Harper points to another storefront. “This is that resale shop that replaced the Indian restaurant.” She looks so at ease here, and it hits me that she’s spent enough time in the city with her dad for it to feel like a kind of home. I don’t know why that never occurred to me before, that this is her home, too. Maybe because I try to stay so busy when she’s gone, trying to focus on anything but missing her.

Compartmentalizing is a skill of mine, clearly.

At the small but glam bistro Spencer leads us to, Harper cracks open the menu and points out the only item on there that comes with fries. It may or may not technically be part of the kid’s options. “Mom. This is what you should get.”

I should probably feel embarrassed to have the diet of a toddler, but I smile at her gratefully. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

When the waiter stops at our table, Harper doesn’t even look at the menu. “I’ll have the folpetti, please.”

Spencer raises his eyebrows, clearly impressed by whatever it is she ordered. “We’ll have the polenta to share.” He passes over our menus. “Thank you.”

After we order Ivy leans forward, her eyes narrowed. “Did you know that we had such an adventurous girl on our hands, Tess? Octopus for lunch is pretty brave, but I guess she got it from her dad.”

I side eye Harper. “Is that what you got? Octopus?”

“It’s good. Dad let me try some last time we came here.” She shrugs, looking pointedly away from Ivy.

“Well,” I say, “To answer your question, yes, she definitely got it from Spencer.”

Ivy nods, as if that settles it. She gives my plate a lingering glance when my alfredo with a side of crispy parmesan fries is set in front of me.

“Mom, try mine. I actually think you’re going to like it.” Harper inches her fork close to my face, a miniscule bite of octopus on the end of it.

I shake my head. “I’m good. I’m happy you like it, though.”

But she pushes it against my lips and I open my mouth with a groan as I take the fork for myself and chew. The flavor is lemony and full of a garlic bite. The octopus itself is chewy and tender, and almost tastes like a cross between steak and lobster.

“Wow. You were right. It’s good,” I tell her, but my gaze falls to Spencer, who’s watching with intense interest I can’t quite explain. His eyes are smiling even when his mouth is still.

Harper breaks out into a grin. “I told you!”

Ivy sits back. “I guess she gets that adventure bug from both sides.”

“Tess may be picky about food, but she’s not afraid of much.”

I blink at Spencer. I don't need him to defend me or explain my life to someone I barely know. "Oh, I'm afraid of a lot of things." I spear another bite of Harper's octopus and chew, working my jaw needlessly.

Spencer slides his elbows over the tabletop and lowers his lashes at me in challenge. "Like what?"

The air between us thickens and a half dozen quippy responses spring to mind. But before I can say anything, the waiter comes to check on our table and refill our drinks and the topic changes, leaving Spencer to break first and look away.

When it's time to leave, Ivy reaches in for a hug. I offer her my side, but she squeezes in tight anyway. "I have to run home, but it was nice to meet you. Have fun with these two." She kisses Spencer and gives Harper a hug. Harper makes a face at me over her shoulder just out of view of Spencer.

Spencer's apartment is small and tidy. I've been here once before, when I came to drop off Harper for Thanksgiving last year and Spencer insisted I stay overnight after my flight was delayed due to a winter storm. It was a little bit like peeking into an alternative universe, especially after touring Harper's room. It has a lot of the same tenants as her room at home—a closet shrine to Harry Styles, her favorite shade of green splattered onto everything, a stack of bleak-looking fantasy novels by her bed. But it's somehow classier and more New York than I've ever seen her back in Austin.

Spencer's been to our house too, and I wonder what he thinks of the haphazard piles of laundry on the chair in the living room, or the front door painted bright yellow, or the years of Harper's artwork still proudly stuck to the front of the fridge.

Spencer puts our bags in Harper's room and sits on the minimalistic gray sofa in the living space. Harper perches on the rug at his feet and I sit as far over as I can without looking ridiculous.

"Our flight leaves at five PM tomorrow, so we should head to the airport after lunch just to make sure. International flights are a little different," Spencer tells us. He's frowning off in the distance as if mentally ticking through boxes, probably weighing the pros and cons of adding a few more things to his itinerary.

Harper nudges my foot with hers. "We need to plan enough time to get gum. Mom's ears always pop without it."

"I have enough from our flight today," I tell her.

"Cool," she says. She rolls over to look at her phone and then jumps up. "Oh. Okay, Kaylee wants to talk about her first day. I'm going to call her."

Harper takes her phone to the balcony, leaving me in the front room with Spencer. He nods at Harper's disappearing figure. "She's always on her phone lately."

I shrug. "It's hard right now. Her friends are all going their separate ways."

"Yeah. I remember that after high school."

It's probably a harmless thing to say, but my gut twists. It may have been my decision to stay in Austin after high school, but it still stung watching everyone move on without me. Even Spencer.

Especially Spencer.

I was the one watching my friends leave and faking excitement for them because it felt too early to tell the truth. I knew I was pregnant right at four weeks. My period was always

exactly on time, and I'd felt off for a few days. I'd read enough romance novels that end in surprise pregnancy to know the signs.

Telling Spencer came later, once I'd accepted it myself and made decisions, and once he was safely gone to college. I'm not sure he's forgiven me for keeping the secret.

When I don't say anything, Spencer frowns. He moves closer to, I don't know, maybe reach for me. "I didn't mean anything by that, Tess. I"—

I sit up straight, not even letting my back touch the couch. "It's okay," I say to stop whatever he might be readying himself to admit. "I know what you meant."

I change the subject with a polite smile. "Ivy seems great."

He clears his throat, still studying me through cautious eyes. "She is. The relationship is still new, but it's been good. She's great with Harper."

What I don't say out loud is that Ivy didn't seem one-hundred-percent comfortable with me being here.

"Good. And she's okay with the trip? With me coming along and everything? Because I could explain to Harper and fly home. I don't"—

Spencer touches his glasses. "Hey, no. You can't do that to Harper. She's so excited you're coming. She called me as soon as you told her."

I open my mouth again but he keeps talking, "And don't worry about Ivy. She completely understands why you're coming on the trip. She's fine with it. But think about Harper—she'd be devastated."

I flinch at the automatic mom guilt his words stir up. I already know that Harper wants me here and she's the reason I said yes in the first place. "Okay," I say, nodding heavily. "I'll stay. I'm sure it will be fine."

“We won’t torture you too much.” The corners of his mouth turn up into a lopsided grin. His glasses tilt along with it, and it’s charming in that geeky sort of way. That hasn’t changed since high school.

“We’ll see about that,” I say, standing and going down the hall. It’s been a long day, and tomorrow promises to be tiring all over again. Over my shoulder I say, “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night,” he says back. “And Tess?”

I stop and turn back to look at him. Spencer is still wearing a faint smile as his eyes meet mine. “Don’t worry about the trip. We’re going to have fun, the three of us. I promise.”