

Brandy Woods Snow

Chapter One

A summer away at Memaw's can't rectify everything that fell apart in a single minute, but that won't stop my dad from forcing it on me.

My fingers wrench tighter around the handle grip of Dad's Ford Explorer as he hugs the center line, tires thumping over golden reflectors in waves and shooting vibrations through my seat. I glance over my shoulder to make sure the door lock is crammed to its neck into the tan vinyl interior. Not that it'd make a difference if he were to flip this thing head-over-end into the muddy goop of tidal flats along either side of the road. If a body's going to exit a car in a hurry, it sure as hell won't wait for an unlocked door.

These kinds of thoughts never shoved their way into my brain before the accident. Now they circulate like a washing machine stuck on the spin cycle.

I sigh and yank my phone off the dashboard. 4:15 p.m. Only ten more minutes to get my summer of hell underway.

A notification blinks on the home screen. One new email from Trent Casey and all I can see of it is, "CJ, things have changed so much this last year that I think..." Inbox preview cruelty at its finest. A little sneak peek of my on-again, off-again boyfriend kicking me to the curb because I've been too screwed up to screw him the past year. Not that I'd screwed him before, or anyone else for that matter.

I toss the phone in the cup holder and stare over at my dad in the driver's seat, his eyes fixed and hooded as if in a trance. He hasn't spoken in over a hundred miles, but I've strategically coughed from time to time to make sure there's at least a reaction to the noise, and he's not comatose or something. Plus, it's easier than actually talking, and it warrants no response from him. Win-win.

Dad flips on the blinker, its *dink-doonk, dink-doonk, dink-doonk* signaling a right turn. Into where I have no idea, and unless Memaw has taken up living in a dilapidated open-air shack, he's seriously misguided. He pulls into one of the ten open parking slots, demarcated by rows of conch shells instead of actual painted-on lines. How beachy of them.

Dad lets the engine idle, sliding his phone from the pocket of his polo and pecking out a text message without so much as a word or glance in my direction. I unlatch my seatbelt and open the door, easing out onto the hot, gritty sand, which creeps into my sandals and scratches at the skin.

"Where are we?" When he doesn't respond, I step beside the open door, banging my hand on the window. "Dad, where are we?"

"Edisto Island, of course," he mumbles, never looking up from his phone, his fingers still moving furiously over the screen.

I point to the rectangular banner draped atop the entrance with what looks like a hand-stenciled *Welcome to Edisto Beach, SC!* in blue paint. "No shit. I mean, what is this place?"

"Watch your mouth, CJ. I'm still your father." He finally looks up long enough to glare across his steering wheel at the banner, squinting as if it's written in some foreign language before looking back at me. He waves his hand around. "We're obviously at the market."

The entrance isn't a single open-close door, but one of those garage-style deals that pulls down from the ceiling. Oyster shell wind chimes tinkle in the breeze. I take a deep breath, the briny air expanding in my lungs and coating my skin, and somehow start imagining myself as one of those slugs we used

[Type here]

to find on the back porch at home and pour salt over. Almost immediately, their slimy little bodies would foam up and implode, turning into a dried-up crispie we'd flick off into the grass the next day. Maybe that'll happen to me, and I can simply shrivel up and disappear.

Dad gets out and lifts the back hatch, and I walk to meet him, giving an extra foot shake on each step to loosen the stowaway sand from my sandals.

"But why are we here?"

"This is where Memaw's picking you up." He hauls out my two large suitcases and sets them under the overhang. "She's running late, but she'll be here within the next twenty minutes."

"And you're just gonna leave me here?" I thumb over my shoulder.

He stares at me as if I've just asked for an explanation on the meaning of life, standing like a statue except for the front flip of his thinning auburn hair that tousles with the breeze. That hair, along with his chocolate brown eyes and freckles, are the only things we even share anymore. Everything else is gone. Evaporated.

"Don't be dramatic, CJ. I have a long drive home." He slams the hatch, walks to his still-open driver door and slides in behind the wheel. The passenger window rolls down part-way. "I'll see you at the end of summer. Bye." The words scarcely exit his lips before the window's rolled up and he's peeling out of the parking lot on two wheels as if he's off to a five-alarm fire.

Wow. Truly heartfelt. I think he might miss me. I lock my jaw, forcing my quivering stomach back in its rightful place. Part of me loathes him for just dumping me here. The other part understands, though. He hates me for what happened and wants me gone too.

I can't blame him for that.

"Bye Dad," I whisper in the wind, staring down at my bags before glancing out across the surrounding marsh.

What am I supposed to do for twenty minutes? Lotus pose? Stare out over the grasses and become one with my new home-away-from-home? Not likely.

I force out an audible breath and bend down to grab my wallet from the suitcase, folding out the side flap to check myself in the tiny mirror. The jagged tip-top edge of my scar peeks out from the neckline, so I inch my white T-shirt straight on my shoulders, making sure it's hidden. Not like I need another reason for the people in this market to look at me like a freakshow. I secure the magnetic clasp on my wallet with a click and walk inside.

The floor is packed dirt and sand, the shelves nothing more than overturned crates and stacked-up pallets brimming with rainbow-hued mounds of fresh fruits and vegetables. I trudge to the refrigerator cases, their motors humming in a monotonous chorus, swing open the door, and grab a bottled ginger ale from the rack. Glass bottles, huh? This place is *all* about modern ambiance.

At the cash register—the only thing in the whole place that doesn't look like it got dropped off of Noah's Ark or dug out of some grungy guy's truck—a girl about my age stands behind the counter, power grin spread wide, lips stretched around both rows of teeth. The top ones have braces with little purple bands.

"Hey there! Will this be all for you today?" She takes the bottle, punches in the barcode numbers by hand, then slides it back across the counter, tilting her head just enough that the honey-blond ponytail poked through the back of her baseball cap waggles from side to side.

"Yeah, thanks." I pull out my debit card and hand it to her. She slides it and then pushes the handheld electronic device in front of me. While I type in my pin, she flicks my card in her fingers, staring at the front of it.

"Wait...Ainsworth? Are you Bessie's granddaughter, CJ?" She leans across the counter on her elbows, blue eyes wide like polished sapphires.

"Uh, yeah. That's me." I pluck my card from her fingers and shove it back inside my wallet. "How do you know Memaw?"

“Everyone knows your Memaw! She’s like a grandma to all of us.” She looks over her shoulder and yells, “Bo, get in here!” before turning back and sticking her hand out to shake. “I’m Ginny Lee, by the way. You can call me Gin.” I reach out and take her hand. A stocky, chocolate-haired guy with the same eyes as Gin jogs to the counter and waves. He’s cute in a boy band-meets-rugged-farmhand kind of way.

“I’m Beauregard Johnson, Gin’s brother.”

“That’s some name there, Beauregard.”

“My mama loves historical family names. My great-great-great-great grandfather was also a Beauregard.”

That’s a lot of greats. I give him a thumbs-up. “Ah, then her name choice stands completely validated.” I smirk and pick up my bottle, wrestling with the stubborn-ass metal cap.

“You can call me Bo. Everybody else does.” He offers a dazzling white, if somewhat crooked, smile. His curly hair, longer on top with shaved-close sides, flops lazily over his brow. “Did I hear you say you’re Ms. Bessie’s granddaughter?”

“In the flesh. By the way,” I turn back to Gin, “when you said Memaw’s a grandma to ‘all of us,’ who exactly is us?”

“Pretty much the whole town. She’s a legend around here. Volunteers like crazy.” She narrows her eyes. The question marks practically float in speech bubbles above her head. “You didn’t know that?”

I bite at a piece of dry skin on my lip. “I don’t know much about her. I haven’t seen her since I was eight.”

The two of them glance sideways at each other. “Oh. Well, we live right next door to her.” Gin hesitates, then reaches out over the counter to touch my arm, her fingers barely brushing my skin. “She told us about what happened...”

My heart catapults to my toes as a familiar frenzied vibration courses through my veins. Not here. That was never supposed to follow me here. “No.” I point the longneck of the bottle between the two of them. They both step back, hands up. “I don’t want to talk about that. Everyone over the last eight months has steered clear of me because...” I open my mouth wide, willing the oxygen to saturate me. “I can’t believe Memaw would tell.” I slam the bottle on the counter and wrench my hands over my face.

“CJ?” I glance at Gin from between my fingers. “Only Bo and I know, and we won’t tell.” She stares at Bo, who nods in agreement.

“Ms. Bessie wanted you to have some friends here who understood if...it took you a while to open up. We won’t mention it again.” Bo shifts from leg to leg, rubbing his hands together.

Somewhere down deep, my backbone relinquishes its grip on my stomach, and I swallow hard. “Thanks, y’all.”

He ducks around the corner of the counter and walks over to me, holding out his clenched fist. “Bump ‘em.” I stare at his knuckles, then follow the ridges over the top of his hand and up his arm. He widens his eyes and shakes his fist a bit, still waiting.

“C’mon CJ. I know we’re all gonna be great friends.” Gin’s syrupy drawl makes me almost believe it’s possible. I force a smile and reach forward to bump my fist into Bo’s, but we’re interrupted by the squealing of tires and the gritty pitter-patter of displaced sand raining down in the parking lot.

A bright orange Dodge Challenger with parallel black racing stripes pulls in front of the entrance and revs its engine, the thunderous growl rattling the walls. Bo looks at his watch, and a grin creeps across his lips. “Aw hell, here comes trouble.”

He walks halfway to the front and stands with his hands on his hips while Gin begins fidgeting with her hair, sticking loose wisps under the cap’s brim, and running her tongue over her lips time and again until they glisten with wetness. Damn, these two must have a major yen for trouble. I smirk and shake my head, but find myself leaning forward on tiptoes to see just who’s creating all the commotion.

He gets out and slams the door, twirling the keys on his finger. Taller and thinner than Bo, his arms and legs look a bit too long for his body, but it doesn't affect his stride. He glides in, heavy on the heels of his sneakers, almost as if he's somehow reclining on an invisible cushion while walking. Bo high-fives him as he saunters to the counter across from me and hops onto it in one seamless motion. Gin's at his side almost immediately, arms folded underneath her boobs, creating a vertical line of cleavage above the scoop neck of her tank.

"Hey kid." He flicks the brim of her cap, and she giggles, swatting his hand. But he's not looking at her. His jade eyes pierce me like daggers as he nods in my direction. "Who's the chick?"

Oh God. One of those.

I roll my eyes and grab the ginger ale from the counter, renewing my fight against the stubborn bottle cap. "Someone who doesn't appreciate being called chick," I say through the grunts as I twist raw ridges into my palm.

Bo steps in between us. "CJ, this is my best friend Jarrett Ramsey. Jett for short. And Jett, this is CJ Ainsworth, Ms. Bessie's granddaughter. She's here for the summer."

He runs his eyes up and down me in a way that makes my bones shiver and my blood boil. My body wars within itself. "I didn't know Ms. Bessie had a granddaughter. We've never seen you here before."

I purse my lips and shrug my shoulders. "Can't say that now."

"You don't look like a CJ." Jett stops and runs his tongue across the front of his teeth, and as it swipes from right to left, a metallic flash catches my eye. A gold-capped tooth. Odd.

"What does that stand for, anyway?" he asks.

"Camelia Jayne."

Jett smiles, but Bo slaps his hand over his mouth, laughing. "And you made fun of Beauregard! I'm sorry my name seems too old-fashioned for you, *Camelia*."

"Quit being an ass, Bo." Gin sashays around the counter and inserts herself between us. Jett jumps down and walks beside me, tugging my French braid between his fingers. I flick my eyes toward Gin who frowns and looks at her flip-flops.

"I think I'm gonna call you Cami." He drops my hair and folds his arms across his chest. "Yeah, Cami. That's better."

"You can call me what you want. Doesn't mean I'll answer." I snort then pick up the edge of my T-shirt, protecting my hand as I try again to open my drink.

The edges of his lips crinkle into a grin. He yanks the bottle from my hand, leans back, and pops the top off in the metal bottle opener hidden on the side of the counter. The top drops with a *clink* into a white bucket with about a million others. He holds the bottle up to his eyes, scanning the label, then tucks his bottom lip between his teeth, nodding. "Blenheim Hot. A bold choice."

"You even have commentary for ginger ale?" I yank the bottle from his hand, the jostle creating a thin, foamy line in the bottle neck. That's when I notice they're all staring at me like I'm some three-headed goat, and I dart my eyes down to make sure my scar's not showing. It isn't. Whatever. If watching me drink this is so damn interesting, I can't wait to see what the next three and half months bring. I wrap my lips around the smooth bottle edge and take a substantial gulp. Their smiles widen, eyes huge.

Suddenly I know why. The liquid sloshes down my throat like a river of fire, the flames sucking back into my nostrils, robbing my breath. My nose runs and eyes water. "What in the hell?" The words squeak out as I fan my open mouth. "I think I just swallowed a firecracker!"

"Told ya it was a bold choice," Jett says as they all circle around me, laughing. "That's the real deal. The famous southern tradition."

"It's a southern tradition to burn holes in your esophagus?"

"A little bit of fire is good for the soul. Where's your fire? What's your passion, Cami? Gotta let it out. Put the pedal to the metal." He leans back, sticking out his leg like it's on a gas pedal, his right hand shifting imaginary gears.

I shudder. “No thanks. I’m good.”

He thumps his fingernail against my bottle. “We’ll see.”

I glance up. Jett stares at me, gaze like stone, with a slight upturn to the corner of his lips. He wrenches his arm toward his face, clicking the side button on his watch, then turns to Bo. “You ready to go, man? We gotta be there in ten.”

“Yep, I’m done here today.” Bo nods and waves at me. “Nice meeting you, CJ. I’ll catch you later at home.”

“Bye kid.” Jett side-hugs Gin who clamps her eyes closed and nestles into his side like a faithful puppy. He walks toward his car but pauses at the pallet of cantaloupes, looking back at me over his shoulder. “See you around...Cami.”

I break eye contact, whipping my head sideways to the stacked containers of pimento cheese and crab dip on my left. He laughs, and seconds later, two doors slam and the engine roars to life in a deep rumble. I look back as Jett accelerates out the drive onto the blacktop, tires squealing and smoke rising in the air behind him.

Gin sighs and rubs her fingertips down the length of her neck. “He’s trouble, all right. The good kind.”

I shake my head. “There is no good kind. Trouble’s trouble, and I don’t need any more of that in my life.”

## Chapter Two

Gin ducks behind the counter and re-emerges with a crate of bottled sodas. “Keep me company while I restock?”

I glance at the empty parking lot. “Captive audience,” I say and draw in a much smaller sip of my ginger ale. “So, I’m guessing you have a thing for what’s-his-name?”

“Jett?” She giggles, double-fisting Cheerwines to load into the freezer. “He and Bo have been friends forever. We were all raised together. He’s gorgeous—I mean, you saw him—but it’ll never be like that between us.” She pulls the door open with her foot, steps in front and lets it bump on her hip, continuing to talk as she refills the shelves. “Jett thinks of me as a kid sister. Always has.” She steps toward me, and the door slams, the bottles clinking together inside. “But he seemed to like you.”

I roll my eyes with a throaty snort. “Hardly.”

“Trust me. Jett’s hyper-focused on his racing.” She picks up the empty crate and props it on her hip under one arm before walking back to the counter. “If it ain’t got wheels and a motor, he usually ain’t interested.”

I narrow my eyes, every muscle rigid. “His racing? Like illegal street racing?” That explains the hot dogging in the parking lot. Just some punk trying to prove his manhood with a flashy car and a disrespect for anyone in his way.

“Heck no!” Gin tosses the crate on the ground behind the register then turns to me, eyes wide, head shaking back and forth at light speed. “He’s the real deal. Gonna be on the NASCAR circuit one day. His daddy was years ago, but then he retired young and stayed here to run shrimpin’ boats.” She presses her lips together and releases them with a pop. “They say Jett’s better than he ever was.”

“Well there goes your theory.” I shoot her a thumbs-down. “No way would a hotshot racer ever be interested in a professed car hater who doesn’t drive.”

Her nose crinkles as she frowns. “I saw your license in your wallet.”

“I said I *don’t* drive, not that I *can’t*.”

A knowing glint lights her eyes. “Oh...because of...” I jerk my head in her direction, wilting her under my glare. “Right.” She drops her head, walks behind the counter, and leans forward on her hands, her fingers rat-a-tat-tatting the wood. “What are your plans for the summer?”

Quick change of topic. Good. She’s getting the point.

“Lay low. Forget everything. Maybe get a job. Anything to make this summer go by faster.” I chuck the empty bottle into the glass recycling bin by the front door, then weave back through the pallets to the counter. “Hey, do you know anyone hiring?”

Her smile returns as she triggers her finger at me. “Beachin’ Books at the marina is looking for a part-time cashier.” She thumbs over her shoulder as if the bookstore is visible from the back window. I shuffle sideways and peer out the screen-covered hole. Nope. Nothing but swamp grass and mud. Gin stops talking and follows me with her eyes. “It’s that way,” she points her finger in the opposite direction. “On the other end of the island. But only a mile from Ms. Bessie’s house.”

I nod. A mile is perfectly walkable. “Cool. So, books, huh? Sounds easy.”

“Yeah. New and used books, souvenirs, drinks, and live bait.”

I stop-sign my hand. “Live bait?”

She laughs, explaining that I won't have to touch it. Apparently, it's scooped out downstairs on the dock. My only responsibility would be taking the cash.

"Plus, the place has awesome windows overlooking the water. Best views in town."

"Of the beach?"

She winks. "Among other things."

"Wait. If the job's so good, why don't you want it?"

"I don't get a choice. This market is my dad's. Family business means everybody in the family works here."

"Gotcha." Making spending money in an obscure little shop while watching the ocean all day? I think I can swing it. "In that case, it sounds perfect."

Gin claps her hands together, the huge power grin returning. "I'll text the owner right now with your information." She slides her phone from her pocket and begins pecking at the screen, looking up every so often to smile at me. Her friendliness is tough to swallow after dealing with the shitstorm of people walking on eggshells around me for the last eight months. We've known each other all of twenty minutes, and here she is putting her own neck on the line to recommend me for a job. Such hopeful naiveté reminds me of Emmalyn, my best friend back home. The only person who didn't treat me like a fragile flower. The only one who kept trying when I balled up and pushed everyone away.

I should call her, but I probably won't.

The gravel crunches out front. An older model blue Cabriolet convertible pulls in the space in front of my suitcases, inching so close, one topples over on its side. The driver lumbers out and slams the door with a foot-shove. She drops the keys in the sand, then reaches for them with a few cuss words to boot.

"Sounds like Ms. Bessie's here." Gin chuckles under her breath.

My eyelids sink backwards in my head. No way is this Memaw. Standing about five-foot-nothing, her stature doesn't match her boobage, which hangs long and low in her black tank top. I'd swear she isn't wearing a bra, but the cheetah-print straps peeking out the side prove me wrong. *Cheetah-print? Really?* She slides her hands over her ripped denim capris, perhaps knocking off the ever-present grittiness I've determined is inevitable here, then strolls inside.

Pausing by the zucchini, she steeples her hands against her mouth. "This cannot be my little CJ! You've grown a foot since I've seen you!" Before I can respond, her arms circle me, yanking my head into her chest. A puddle of her sweat dribbles onto my nose and cheek, and I jerk back, swiping the remnants away with the hem of my sleeve.

"That kind of thing happens in nine years."

Her shoulders snap backwards as if I've scorched her with a branding iron, lips curled in a grotesque scowl. "That wasn't my doin'. I've always loved you and wanted to see you. And I did. Your mother," she stops and makes the sign of the cross, "emailed me pictures and videos of you girls quite often."

My mouth drops open the same way it did last week when Dad called me into the living room, ran his hand through his hair, then spontaneously announced I'd spend my summer in Edisto. This doesn't make any sense. I was always under the impression we didn't visit Memaw because there'd been some huge falling out between her and Dad after Grandpa's death. I remember the night I snuck out in the hallway after bedtime and heard him telling Mama that Memaw should be committed and was an embarrassment to the family.

After that, no one ever really spoke of her again, though my sister and I used to wonder about her late at night when we had sleepovers in my room. She'd ask me all sorts of questions, and

sometimes I knew the answers, and sometimes I didn't. But if I didn't, I made it up because it made her happy. She was four years younger than me, so she had no memories of Memaw and Grandpa, and I figured my made-up stories were better than nothing.

"But I thought...so Mama sent you...I didn't..." I stammer, rubbing my hand across the back of my neck.

She shakes her head. "You didn't know. No one did."

"And Dad?"

"We talked for the first time about a month ago. My son...your father..." She sighs, replacing her frown with a toothy grin. "Never mind. That's nothing to worry about right now. Point is you're here, and we're gonna have a terrific summer!"

I stare at her, unsure of what to say. How can it be I've only just met her again and I'm more confused than ever? She seems genuinely concerned, not at all the aloof and uncaring woman Dad insinuated. Eccentric, quirky? Yes. Self-absorbed? No. Why did they start talking again a month ago? And why did Mama feel the need to go behind Daddy's back to keep Memaw in the loop?

Gin taps me on the shoulder and thrusts a piece of paper into my face. I pinch the note between my fingers and survey the words written on it.

*Mrs. Baxter. Beachin' Books on the Marina. 2PM.*

"You have an interview this week. If she likes you—which she will—the job is yours." She clasps her hands together against her chest, her full cheeks smooshed up like some overly-eager cherub. Something about it makes me want to slap her and hug her all at once.

Memaw plucks the note from my fingers. "Edith Baxter's a dear friend! I'll call her and..."

"No. I don't want any special favors. If I get it, I get it. If I don't, I don't."

She tucks the paper into the pocket of my cut-off shorts, then pretends to twist a key into her puckered lips.

"Thank you," I say to Memaw, then turn to Gin, her blue eyes shining. "And thank you."

She nods and touches my arm. I shrink backwards; it's involuntary now.

"Once you're settled, we'll hang out. It'll be nice to have another girl around," Gin says.

I smile and nod as Memaw reaches out and cups Gin's chin in her hand. "Such a sweet girl. I know you and CJ are gonna be quick friends. Now, come on." She turns toward me, hoists her purse higher on her shoulder, and fans herself with one hand. "Let's get your bags and get to the house. I'm hotter than a hooker in Sunday church."