

SOME WOMEN GET EVERYTHING.
SOME WOMEN GET EVERYTHING THEY DESERVE.

THE
LAST
MRS.
PARRISH

A NOVEL

LIV CONSTANTINE

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[A NOVEL]

Liv Constantine



HARPER

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Dedication

Lynne's Dedication:

For Lynn, the other bookend, for reasons too numerous to mention

Valerie's Dedication:

For Colin, you make it all possible

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Part I
Amber

One

Amber Patterson was tired of being invisible. She'd been coming to this gym every day for three months—three long months of watching these women of leisure working at the only thing they cared about. They were so self-absorbed; she would have bet her last dollar that not one of them would recognize her on the street even though she was five feet away from them every single day. She was a fixture to them—unimportant, not worthy of being noticed. But she didn't care—not about any of them. There was one reason and one reason alone that she dragged herself here every day, to this machine, at the precise stroke of eight.

She was sick to death of the routine—day after day, working her ass off, waiting for the moment to make her move. From the corner of her eye, she saw the signature gold Nikes step onto the machine next to her. Amber straightened her shoulders and pretended to be immersed in the magazine strategically placed on the rack of her own machine. She turned and gave the exquisite blond woman a shy smile, which garnered a polite nod in her direction. Amber reached for her water bottle, deliberately moving her foot to the edge of the machine, and slipped, knocking the magazine to the floor, where it landed beneath the pedal of her neighbor's equipment.

“Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry,” she said, reddening.

Before she could step off, the woman stopped her pedaling and retrieved it for her. Amber watched the woman's brow knit together.

“You're reading *is* magazine?” the woman said, handing it back to her.

“Yes, it's the Cystic Fibrosis Trust's magazine. Comes out twice a year. Do you know it?”

“I do, yes. Are you in the medical field?” the woman asked.

Amber cast her eyes to the floor, then back at the woman. “No, I'm not. My younger sister had CF.” She let the words sit in the space between them.

“I’m sorry. That was rude of me. It’s none of my business,” the woman said, and stepped back onto the elliptical.

Amber shook her head. “No, it’s okay. Do you know someone with cystic fibrosis?”

There was pain in the woman’s eyes as she stared back at Amber. “My sister. I lost her twenty years ago.”

“I’m so sorry. How old was she?”

“Only sixteen. We were two years apart.”

“Charlene was just fourteen.” Slowing her pace, Amber wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. It took a lot of acting skills to cry about a sister who never existed. The three sisters she did have were alive and well, although she hadn’t spoken to them for two years.

The woman’s machine ground to a halt. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Amber sniffed and shrugged. “It’s still so hard, even after all these years.”

The woman gave her a long look, as if trying to make a decision, then extended her hand.

“I’m Daphne Parrish. What do you say we get out of here and have a nice chat over a cup of coffee?”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to interrupt your workout.”

Daphne nodded. “Yes, I’d really like to talk with you.”

Amber gave her what she hoped looked like a grateful smile and stepped down. “That sounds great.” Taking her hand, she said, “I’m Amber Patterson. Pleasure to meet you.”

* * *

Later that evening Amber lay in a bubble bath, sipping a glass of merlot and staring at the photo in *Entrepreneur* magazine. Smiling, she put it down, closed her eyes, and rested her head on the edge of the tub. She was feeling very satisfied about how well things had gone that day. She’d been prepared for it to drag out even longer, but Daphne made it easy for her. After they dispensed with the small talk over coffee, they’d gotten down to the real reason she’d elicited Daphne’s interest.

“It’s impossible for someone who hasn’t experienced CF to understand,” Daphne said, her blue eyes alive with passion. “Julie was never a burden to me, but in high school my friends were always pushing me to leave her behind, not let her tag along. They didn’t understand that I never knew when she’d be hospitalized or if she’d even make it out again. Every moment was precious.”

Amber leaned forward and did her best to look interested while she calculated