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books

LIANA CINCOTTI

*PICKING
DAISIES
ON
SUNDAYS*



ORION

Prologue

Four Years Prior

I loved Levi Coldwell. I was *in love* with Levi Coldwell. My best friend of four years and counting.

It wasn't love at first sight when we met freshman year. Especially when we both had braces and hormonal acne that changed location on our faces every day. The first day of high school, we found ourselves in two of the same classes, one we were each struggling with.

One audible sigh from Levi as he tried threading a needle in sewing, and a C minus in my first English assignment, was all it took to start helping one another.

I taught him how to sew and he helped me edit my essays. It was exclusively a business transaction two days a week, until we started talking about things that weren't sewing or writing.

We had a list of adorations in common: our love for films, dedication to academics, loyalty to family, and the grief we went through – we were *going* through. We both had experiences with losing a father, and I think that's what bonded us first.

When I met Levi in freshman year, my dad had passed three months prior, while Mr Coldwell had already been gone for two years.

Levi still carried grief with him like an empty wine bottle.

Fast forward four years and we were the best of friends, about to graduate high school together.

Years of texting every day, spending Saturday nights watching movies, and eating school lunches together had become habitual. They were my equivalent of having a morning routine or praying at night.

Months of seeing him in the stands as he cheered me on at my softball games while I hit foul balls, and nights full of tripping on that one cracked sidewalk on the way to each other's houses.

I'd witnessed him bake cupcakes for his sisters' school functions, pulled their hair into ponytails, and sat still as they painted our nails. Those moments revealed every aspect of a person. And God, have I enjoyed every single one of his aspects.

We had become the type of best friends who came over for dinner every week and whose Moms knew each other's most recent drama, gossiping over cups of coffee on the porch.

He lived down the street from me, so I'd walk over and have dinner with his family on Sunday nights, laughing as Trish recalled old stories and his sisters threw chips at each other across the table.

But it changed when junior year rolled around.

Levi had finally returned from being away with his family in Vermont during Christmas break. I had been bored all December waiting for him. So the day he returned, I rushed through the hall to the second locker on the left from our English class to see him.

Only to find him kissing someone.

My stomach clenched as I spotted him kissing Jennifer O'Brien. I was blindsided seeing him pressed up against that locker with Jennifer's hands crawling across his body like she was etching a sonnet into his skin. I couldn't remember

how long I stared; I couldn't stop. It was like catching your celebrity crush in person. My throat dried up, my eyes filled with tears, and my feet refused to move until someone bumped into me, forcing me out of the way.

I had seen Vi – Levi – leave for dates and go to prom with other girls and I was always completely fine! There were always twinges of jealousy, but I brushed it off as protectiveness for my best friend. But I had never seen him *kiss* anyone before. That . . . that felt wrong – intrusive actually.

And when I saw Jennifer taking his lips in hers, I regretted it instantly, because every emotion I didn't know existed rose to the surface.

It'd been almost a year since it happened, and I still couldn't erase the memory. But it was senior prom tonight and graduation tomorrow, and I couldn't put this off any longer.

Scrapbooking didn't work, watching endless romance films didn't work, embroidering and quilting didn't work, and writing a list of all of his cons definitely didn't work because he had none.

The only con I could come up with was that he didn't try to kiss me after the homecoming football game in September. We had been sitting in his car outside my house, and I had glanced at his lips *at least* twice.

Anyways, none of it worked. I still loved him. And I couldn't pretend anymore like my heart didn't hit my rib cage when he winked at me in class or brushed my hand – and *especially not* when he twirled strands of my hair when we sat across from each other. I couldn't pretend that my throat didn't resemble the tightness of a twisted towel when girls flirted with him at parties. I couldn't pretend like it meant nothing anymore.

I had to tell him, tonight, before we graduated tomorrow and left for college at the end of the summer. I couldn't

suffer another summer and then wonder *what if* when he went to college and possibly met the love of his life.

The problem was, tonight was here now and I was terrified. I had spent hours fixing and retailoring my dress so it fit perfectly, but now it was too tight as I downed my second glass of spiked soda – courtesy of the hockey team that brought vodka – under the twinkly lights hanging around the overpriced prom venue.

Please don't let that affect your opinion of me though because this wasn't me. Drinking was not something I found pleasing by any means, and I definitely wasn't someone who was known by the hockey team. Unfortunately, this crowd wasn't sophisticated enough for Shirley Temples, so vodka soda it was.

I saw Molly Ringwald do this in a film once for confidence so I thought it couldn't hurt. But as I watched Levi from a distance talking to a few friends, my stomach still clenched and pinched with anxiety. His dark grey suit clung to his long legs and made his dark hair and eyes look edgier than usual. He always had this cool look about him with his brown, curling hair, tall posture, and captivating hazel eyes.

My gaze must've been heavy because he glanced at me, catching me in the act. My heart stopped in a panic, but he simply mouthed, *hey punk*, and winked at me, continuing on with his conversation.

Pushing my hand out to the concerningly mature-looking hockey player for another drink, I swallowed it all before my mind could register the taste. I did come here with a (platonic) date by the name of Jeremiah. He was helping me figure out what to say to Levi tonight, resulting in an incredulously long note on my phone. Speaking of, where was he? The last time I had seen my phone, it was in his hand.

Crap, crap, *crap*. I couldn't do this without him or the phone.

Why was my face wet? Running my hand across my cheek, I realized that I was crying. Of course I wasn't a relieved, happy drunk, but a sad, *anxious* drunk.

Clutching my dress to avoid tripping, I rushed into one of the side hallways to pull myself together. Once I found privacy, my body relaxed and my tears flowed. *Where was Jeremiah with my phone?*

Tap, tap, tap. The tears in my eyes blurred my vision enough that I couldn't see the person approaching me, just the sound of their shoes. Squeezing my eyes shut, I prayed they just kept walking. Maybe if I closed my eyes, it'd be as if no one saw the embarrassing mess sitting on the floor.

'Hey, hey, hey, what's wrong, Daisy?'

Only three people in my life referred to me by my middle name, and only one of them was here.

My eyes opened on command at the sound of Levi's voice, watching him crouch down on the floor in front of me with urgency. His hands immediately cupped my face. Tilting it up, forcing me to meet his eyes, I found that his own face looked distressed. My heart pounded harder in my chest, warming my cheeks at the feeling of his palms on my face.

This was too close; he was too close. Could he see my love for him painted across my face? Could he tell from the way I shuddered when he touched me, that every fiber of my being was made to be touched by him?

How did we go from friends to this?

Tears refused to reel themselves in. But when I registered the absolute devastation on his face, my heart refilled with the hope that he might feel the same way.

Ten minutes later, he broke my heart. And I didn't see him for four years.

I

How did I ever let time pass this long without seeing you?

'Jia, I'm not sitting at the table with them, I have no idea what they're saying,' I whispered in a hushed tone from the coverage of the booth I was hiding in.

'Then what was the point of going?' Jia responded over the phone.

'To make sure Gabe doesn't get murdered, of course,' I responded seriously, watching Gabe from across the restaurant on his date.

'You're in the West Village, Dani, no one's getting murdered. The only crime around here is the preposterous real estate prices,' Jia said matter-of-factly.

'We're twenty-two, this is the prime murdering age.' I turned back to Gabe as he began furrowing his eyebrows. 'Gabe's giving me the look.'

'*The look?* – Wait, why are you dressed like you're going on a date?' Jia said entirely off topic, commenting on my (apparently uncommon) blouse and jeans.

I turned around abruptly in my seat where I found Jia entering the restaurant. If you could call it entering; it was more like a hunched walk behind a menu to hide from Gabe's date. I raised a discreet waving hand above my own menu to catch Jia's attention.

'Where did you go?' I asked. Switching my phone off, I moved over to make room for her in the booth. She had a maxi skirt on, leather boots, and a small top that just covered her chest. Her hair was naturally black, but it'd been dyed every color of the rainbow, changing every season. It didn't matter what she colored her hair, though, because everything complemented her thin face and tall frame. This spring it was blonde. Her parents hated that she colored her hair, but her response was, 'I work in fashion, it matches my job description.' A very Jia response – to me, of course. No way in hell would she talk back to her parents.

'I had to pick up fabric for the devil and drop it off to her,' Jia said, exhaling, as she rested her chin on her fist.

'Why don't you just quit? You have enough experience at this point,' I insisted, worrying about the last of her energy.

'If there's any chance she can get me into The Met Gala next year, then all of the work I've done would be worth it,' she said with a matched urgency and concern.

Before I could reply, Josh, our waiter, arrived at our table with a look of scorn. Rightfully so. I had been sitting at this table for thirty minutes without ordering anything other than water. But there were about ten other open tables and no one waiting at the door to be seated, so I didn't feel *that* bad.

It was fine though; I left him a really nice tip every time and I'd bring him flowers in a few days.

This was our love-hate relationship. Jia, Gabe, and I used the table at the restaurant once in a while for scoping out dates in case we needed a reason to get out of an awkward situation (and to avoid being kidnapped), annoying Josh a little, then I brought him flowers that he swooned over.

He mentioned wanting peonies before seating me.

'Ladies, you need to order something if you're going to use the table—'

‘Two waters,’ we responded in unison.

‘And a basket of fries, please, Josh,’ Jia added in. Josh rolled his eyes, walking away with the order.

‘What’s happened so far?’ she asked with curiosity, bringing the menu just below her eyes.

‘Gabe has laughed twice, checked his phone once—’

‘Good, good.’

‘—and finished four glasses of wine,’ I finished, pressing my lips into a solemn line.

She smacked her palm against her forehead in disappointment, ‘And he did a look?’

‘*The look*, yes.’

‘Yeah, it’s over, let’s wrap this up,’ Jia said, putting the menu down and getting up from her seat. As quickly as she got up, she was turning back around, pointing a finger at me with a threatening glare. ‘Don’t forget the fries.’

Here we go, the funniest part of the night.

Jia made her way to Gabe’s table with her hands in fists at her sides, mustering up her performance.

‘*How dare you?*’ Jia shouted with seething anger as she slammed her hands onto the table in between Gabe and his date. ‘I tell you I’m pregnant and you decide to go on a *date*?’

Gabe clutched his chest, choking on his shrimp at her abrupt appearance. The blonde guy across from Gabe was washed with horror, his cheeks turning pink and his eyelashes practically reaching his eyebrows.

Gabe pressed a hand against his throat, now clear of shrimp, with feigned earnestness, ‘Darling—’

‘I thought you were gay!’ Gabe’s date interjected with horror.

I have to say, *that* would not have been my first concern when hearing the word pregnant . . .

Gabe’s head tilted at the audacity of his date’s concern, obviously mirroring my exact thought.

Jia grabbed Gabe’s collar. ‘This is the last time I let you out of my sight,’ Jia raged, trying to get Gabe out of this – apparently – horrible date, pulling him out of his seat.

As if on cue, Josh placed the basket of fries on my table while Jia and Gabe rushed out of the restaurant. I swiftly picked up the basket, left cash on the table behind me, with an apology wave to Josh.

Scrambling out of the restaurant, I found Jia and Gabe outside waiting for me, laughing. ‘*Pregnant?*’ Gabe asked, practically wheezing with laughter. ‘We agreed on you being my *girlfriend*, not my baby mama!’

My own laughter spilled out at Gabe’s comment. ‘If you ask me, that was an award-winning performance, Jia.’

She bowed at the waist and said, ‘I would like to thank my mom and Daniella for their support, and Gabe for his horrible taste in men.’

Receiving a slap on the shoulder from him, she only erupted in more laughter. ‘You owe me a drink for that performance,’ Jia stated, pointing at Gabe.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he responded. ‘It’s on its way.’ He rolled his eyes and scrunched his button nose. It made him look like a kid. His height alone gave him a child-like appearance, standing two inches shorter than me, meaning several inches shorter than Jia. You could never tell though because he wore platform sneakers, a gift from the company he interned at as a marketing assistant.

Turning another corner, we made our way to the bar down the street, entering into the usual crowd.

‘Two beers and a Dirty Shirley,’ Gabe asked the bartender, squeezing in between those also asking for drinks as Jia and I shouted our thanks.

Turning to me, Jia took another fry out of the basket. ‘You never explained the cute outfit.’ Her gaze swept over

my clothes, from the well-fitting jeans to the low-cut, long sleeve top that accentuated my chest in a way I knew she commended, but I opposed. It was a stark contrast from my usual attire which often consisted of overalls, flowing linen pants, midi dresses, et cetera – anything that didn't stick to my body.

I pulled at the top, trying to cover more of my chest, but then it exposed my belly button.

I sighed. 'I needed a silhouette example for the dress I'm sketching. I wasn't sure if I liked the combo of this cut with a bodycon style frame towards the bottom.'

Was she listening? Because she looked more focused on how I couldn't stop touching my shirt. Then suddenly, she was pulling at the top too, trying to fix the mess that was me in fitted clothing.

'What did you end up deciding?' Jia asked, apparently listening.

'To keep the dress fitted in the waist and hips, but have it flare from there. If the neckline was higher, I would've decided otherwise, but I feel like it's too much all together, right?' I asked.

Talking about design thoughts wasn't good for my mental health after class hours – it made me stress-sweat – but it had to be done because it was all I could think about. If I didn't figure it out now, then it'd knock on my glass window like a desperate Romeo visiting Juliet tonight. And I liked my sleep uninterrupted.

I rummaged for my flower hair clip in my purse and then twisted my short brown hair up.

Jia continued, 'Nope, I totally—'

'Oh crap,' I exhaled, my hair clip falling to the ground. Squatting down, I searched for the bright clip. As soon as I reached the floor, I was standing back up with the clip in

hand – *shit*. Was that the bottom of someone's beer that just hit the top of my head?

'*Shit*,' I said in unison with the person holding the beer. Standing up, I ran a hand through my hair (no beer, thank god) as I went to apologize to—

How hard did I just hit my head? Because there's no way this is actually happening right now.

'*Daisy?*' Levi asked. Levi Coldwell. Levi Coldwell was standing in front of me.

I never understood why anyone spoke poorly of the color brown, it was a dream on you

Short, curling hair – shorter than I remembered – in the most perfect shade of brown, along with his hazel eyes and melting smile.

How did he get more handsome?

The Levi Coldwell that I loved in high school. The boy I spent nearly every day with and watched every girl swoon over in the process while my heart was shattered into pieces. Roaring started in my ears and the room began to sway as past memories flooded my vision. The last time I had seen him was when he walked across the graduation stage our senior year of high school four years ago. I had been silently wiping tears as I avoided his gaze in the crowd, thinking of everything he said to me the previous night.

'Levi?' I was trying to hide any state of panic, but I couldn't relax my shoulders or lower my blood pressure as I took in the man in front of me. I rushed to fix whatever the beer glass just did to my hair as I absorbed that he was real.

'Levi?!' Gabe and Jia whispered from behind me, reminding me that we were in public, not in a dream.

'You cut your hair,' Levi said in astonishment as if we had been speaking for the past four years. His hand reached toward my face to touch it, but then he moved it down

to his side quickly. My breath hitched in my throat like a hormonal teenage girl.

Don't blush, don't blush, be cool, be cool. He mentioned your *hair*, not the shape of your lips in a romantic way.

I suppressed my numerous questions about why he was here. Like where he'd been the past four years, if he'd thought of me at all, if he was doing okay. Instead, I said, 'I did. Kind of gets in the way while sewing.'

That wasn't a complete lie, but it also wasn't the full truth. I cut it short the day after senior graduation because that's what all the heartbroken main characters I watched did when they needed a change. It seemed like a good next move after finding out the person I was in love with didn't feel the same way.

His face lit up. 'How's that going by the way – designing?' he asked, sincerity in his eyes and smile.

'It's good,' I said. 'I love it.' Trying to keep myself from rambling, I stopped there, unsure of how much longer I could hold this discussion without asking him a million questions and sounding insane. Not my best quality while I tried to discreetly adjust my top in the process.

Did my boobs look okay?

'I'm sorry, by the way,' he winced, referring to his beer hitting my head, as he reached for my forearm to enforce his sincerity. The small touch sent goosebumps up my arm, something I hadn't experienced in what felt like years. It felt more intimate than any of the sex I had in the past four years. 'Can I buy you a drink? Shirley Temple, right?'

My lips parted in surprise as I said, 'Dirty Shirley, actually,' despite the drink in Gabe's hand that was waiting for me.

Levi nodded, embarrassed, as if us being together in the same room meant we shrunk back to our younger years, barred from ordering alcoholic drinks.

I followed him up to the bar as he made room for us, trying my best not to stare at his long stature as he walked. Or at his lips as he ordered our drinks. Or at his hands as he touched his hair. It was like I was back in high school; my mind reeled as I stood in his presence.

'Are you still going to NYU?' I asked as he leaned against the bar.

'You remember?' There was a flicker of surprise in his face.

'Of course. You don't give me enough credit, we were best friends,' I said softly. But I was fully aware that he heard me from the look on his face as I said *best friends*, despite the rowdiness of the people drinking around us.

'We were,' he said, nodding his head at the memory. 'Are you still living with your mom and aunt in the West Village?'

'How do you know I live in the West Village?' I asked with confusion. The last thing I expected was for him to remember anything about me, let alone where I was currently living.

He laughed as if he was trying to prepare himself for what he was about to admit. 'I called your mom the day after graduation to find out if you were still moving into the city. She gave me the address in case I ever wanted to stop by.'

My chest tightened. He had never stopped by.

I wasn't sure how to respond to that information, and honestly, I wished I hadn't known it at all. I'd already struggled the past four years wondering what he was doing, so knowing that he'd had this information all these years and did nothing with it . . . It left a pit of anxiety growing at the bottom of my stomach. With the old feelings rising to the surface, I refrained from responding and waited for him to continue.

'How are they – your mom and aunt, I mean?' he asked, tripping over his words. Was he nervous?

'They're good,' I said, smiling. 'Aunt Mandy is running the flower shop and my mom is designing, as usual. How are your sisters?'

His face lit up with joy. 'They're great. Claire and Rhea just entered the third grade, and Sarah's getting married, actually.'

I gasped, '*To who?* Don't tell me it's Jeff,' covering my mouth with anticipation.

'You're not helping the situation,' he said dolefully as he ran his hand over his jaw with a groan.

'Oh my gosh, it is Jeff,' I said urgently, trying not to laugh at this *horrifying* news. 'Why would she ever agree to that?'

I was always invested in his sisters' lives. I still remember going over to his house in high school and being sucked into their rooms to catch up on all the gossip happening in kindergarten for an hour before I even saw Levi. Sarah was only a year below us, so we usually talked about the cutest guys in class. I never admitted to her that I thought it was her brother.

'Because she's tired of the dating world – those were her exact words,' he said, shaking his head, obviously stressed over the engagement.

'Are you dating anyone?' The words were out before I could process what I was saying.

His eyebrows rose. He hesitated before answering. 'No. Are you?'

'Not at the moment,' I said. *Not at the moment? What was that supposed to mean?*

He obviously didn't think much of it because he responded casually, 'That's good.'

God, this conversation was going into a territory I wasn't dressed properly for. I think this was the type of conversation I needed to be prepped on before I was allowed to speak freely.