



*Perfect is underrated.*

# THE UNPERFECTS

RACHEL  
VAN DYKEN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR



# THE UNPERFECTS

The Unperfects  
A Perfects Novel  
by Rachel Van Dyken

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Edited by Jill Sava, [Love Affair With Fiction](#)

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# A NOTE ON CONTENT

I know that some of you like to know if there is anything in a book that may be difficult for you to read.

Some real-life issues are discussed/portrayed within these pages.

If you would like to see what they are, please click [HERE](#)

Or scan the QR Code



As always, thank you for reading!

Hugs, RVD

# DEDICATION

So I've decided I'm going to start doing this, rather than dedicating to my team who all know how amazing they are and I hope they know that on a daily basis, I'm going to dedicate to readers.

This one goes to Crystal Perkins, who has always been such an advocate for me, such a cheerleader, and just an incredible woman in the book industry. Know you are loved and appreciated perfectly imperfect in all the best ways. Thank you for truly being a woman who supports other women and romance.

Hugs, RVD.



# PROLOGUE

*Quinn*

“What do you mean?” Sophie stares me up and down like she’s trying to find something on me that would give any clue about why I am doing what I am doing. Why I’m walking.

Why I’m leaving.

And why *she* is the problem. Or maybe it’s me. Maybe it’s always been me and I just never knew it was me. Shit.

I grab Chloe’s hand, her twin sister, and slowly back away. I’ll release it soon, I’ll let it go like I’ll let her go... but for now, I don’t even know how to respond.

I’ve been gaslit.

I’ve been lied to.

I’ve also been the liar and cheater in this messed up situation, but one thing rings true.

There was only one guilty party.

One.

And I know it is her, part of my brain says, “But do you really know? Between two twin sisters who made your life a living hell while also giving you the best few weeks of your life?”

I clutch Choe’s hand harder. She looks away, her blue eyes focusing on the ground, wearing nothing but black sweats and Adidas flip-flops, her hair in a bun, she looks nothing, and I do mean nothing like Sophie at this point who stood in front of us in nothing but designer clothing, head to toe Gucci,

Louis Vuitton.

I mean, in the end, can you blame me for wondering who the true villain is? And where it all went wrong?

I just wanted to get over a girl I loved that ended up with my best friend.

I just wanted space.

What I got?

Twins.

Twins who thought it would be fun, apparently, to mess with my already messed up emotions and a vacation, aka gap year, that ended up turning into a nightmare.

I got hell, and yet I'm still holding one's hand.

I can't be that big of an asshole, right?

Because what if one needs saving?

Suddenly, I drop her hand, realizing it's not hers that's shaking but mine.

Mine.

What if. In this scenario. I'm not the knight.

No, maybe.

I'm the one that needs the white horse.

I'm the one who needs a rescue. I'm...

I slowly start to back away from them both, body trembling, lips not even moving anymore, even though I have so many words to say. I take one step, then another, then I turn and run.

So much for a one-night stand.

So much for two.

So much for relaxation.

Now all I can do at the airport is pull a Kevin from Home Alone—and run.

I don't even know where I'm going, all I know is that it hurts, I feel stupid, ashamed... I feel completely blindsided, and yet I still feel in love, the only question?

Which girl is it?

Fuck if I know.

Hi, my name is Quinn and I'm currently sitting in a plane headed back home writing out my thoughts and feelings about a situation I had zero control over.

I'm writing so my heart stops breaking.

I'm writing in hope that one day that will be true.

And I'm writing because PS... I love you.

# CHAPTER ONE

*Quinn*

*Two Weeks Earlier*

“I hate heights, I hate heights, I hate heights.” I don’t know how many times I actually repeat this to myself while standing on the top of the platform looking down into certain death but, I mean even if I say it a million times I know it wouldn’t make the actual distance any lesser.

Lesser? Oh wait... yes, that’s a word, right?

Panic ensues, while my best friend Ambrose urges me toward the ledge. “Just jump, bro! You’re safe!”

The devil is a liar. I am strapped in with some sort of random ropes, a harness that is sucking my balls for dear life—and not in a happy way—and sure, yeah, I am totally safe. I feel safe. I mean, at least at this point my balls will stay attached to my body, so if I ever want to reproduce, we’d at least get to save those when aliens take over the world and need spawns.

“There could be alligators!” I yell. “Piranhas! You don’t even know what shit could be down there. Just last year they found a flesh-eating coyote!”

He frowns, his dark brows furrowing, his light brown hair blowing carelessly in the wind like for real mocking my pain underneath his black beanie while his perfect girlfriend stands beside him with another perfect smile on her face.

God, she even has a dimple on the right-hand side just touching her perfect little cheek and jawbone, and what the hell? Did I say jawbone? In my head? There is nothing romantic about that word and yet, I think I nearly

sighed like a simp.

Why me?

Why did I have to fall for the one girl that chose him and why did she have to give me one small taste of her before letting me know that no, my name in fact was not the one that was going to fall from her lips in complete abandon.

It will always be Ambrose.

I will always be second to him in her eyes, and the real shit part is that I can't even be pissed about it because at the end of the day I love them both too much to say anything and way too much to make it weird. I mean, long story short, it already got weird that one time we all kissed and had a near threesome. I'd like to say, oh yeah, we were wasted.

Totally sober.

And now I'm on another "ledge" inevitably waiting to jump off bungee style, not how I thought my gap year was going to start, or you know, like, possibly end by way of death. "Okay, I'm going."

"That's what she said." Ambrose jokes.

"How old are you, boomer?" I call back. "Genuinely curious because if you still say that, it means you're at least looking at renewing the lease on your car and might buy a new dishwasher if things pan out."

He bursts out laughing. "Why a dishwasher?"

"It's what old people do!" Everything is double in my vision, the trees, I mean, it is a forest so that could have been a me problem, but the point is, everything looked entirely too far down.

I look back at Diego, the dude that strapped me into the contraption, and

force a smile. “Nobody’s died, right?”

The way the color left his face will be forever imprinted on my soul.  
“Nah, man, totally, safe.”

“Second time I’ve heard that.” I did another double take. “Cool shirt.”

It literally says: That’s the way things go.

Toward death? Downward.

I take another deep breath, then look back at Diego again. “How old are you again?”

His full white-toothed smile does not give me any sort of comfort, he is too good-looking to know how to put on a harness let alone shove an eighteen-year-old off a ledge. You can never truly trust the pretty ones. Not to mention his shirt, his ripped jeans as if Abercrombie made a comeback, or the fact that I know his shoes are entirely too expensive for this job, which also means that he was doing it for fun.

Not safety. Or actual monetary need.

I stare him down one last time; I stare down every perfect Clark Kent curl on his blond head. “Trust fund?”

He shrugs. “One day.”

I look around him to Ambrose. “For the record, if I die, burn the box under my bed.” I point at Diego. “No!” okay, so I shouted. “You don’t get to laugh or ask!”

He holds up his hands.

“Okay, so for the millionth time I can just... go.”

“Someone should,” Diego mumbles under his breath.

“Diego, I swear I will shove you over this ledge so hard and fast you’ll get



pregnant!”

Ambrose bursts out laughing and wraps his arm around *her*.

What was once, possibly, potentially, mine. “Never seen him so freaked out that he’d threaten children on the first dude he saw, but hey, they’d be cute.”

“They’d be fucking gorgeous, and you know it, Ambrose!” I yell back while Diego grabs the rope and harness one last time.

“Remember...” Diego tightens my balls so hard.

Maybe that’s a no on the pregnancy?

“Focus.” He orders. “Just fall, all you have to do is fall, if you’re freaked, you can cross your arms, but honestly, I would just let that shit fly.”

“No shit shall be flying this day, good sir. No shit, damn it!” I turn. “Okay, I’m finally ready.”

Diego mutters something under his breath.

I’m sure it isn’t wholesome.

“One!” Ambrose yells. “Two!”

Diego grins at me. “Three.”

So I fall, or it is more of a trip in an attempt to step backward, but I’m sure I look like a mother fucking eagle soaring through the sky.

I don’t scream; the air is completely taken from my lungs by the eight-hundred-foot death drop.

I wasn’t expecting so much bouncing.

The first one is the largest, probably saw Heaven, but I am too traumatized to even do anything except gasp for air and try to look cool in front of

everyone. The second time isn't as bad, and I was having some fun, not really freaking out.

But the third?

The third is when I bounce dangerously close to a canoe.

It's also when my rope snaps, and I land right with my face between someone's thighs with several new bodily injuries and delirious as everyone screams above me.

The best part?

She just stares down at me and smiles. "Hey, you're alive!"

When I finally get past the absolute panic of near death, I look up. And I'll never forget the way she smiles down at me, with her reddish-brown hair, blue eyes, wearing nothing but the smallest black triangle bikini top ever, and a small tattoo on her wrist that looks like a whale. "You sure?"

She laughs harder. "Yeah, scared stranger, I'm sure, by the time you hit the third bounce, you were only a few feet above my canoe, kind of saved your life from the alligators."

"I KNEW IT!" I shout, then move my face. "Uh sorry about you know, trying to have an early lunch."

She leans down. "Interesting, it kind of felt like a simple appetizer."

"Are we in love now?" I ask.

She helps me to my feet and sits me down, bracing me with her hands. "I mean if you want to be, I have time on my schedule, was gonna check out a matinee later, heard Jason Statham made a comeback, then again here you are so, if you're trying to give him a run for his money I'm down."

Even injured, I lean forward out of adrenaline and cup her chin with my

shaky hands. “I think I was the one that was down.”

Her cheeks flush. “I’m Chloe.”

“I’m Quinn.”

## CHAPTER TWO

*Chloe*

He is cute, like really really cute, the kind of hot cute you have to take in for a minute before actually understanding how good looking they actually are. He's already forming a bruise over his full lower lip, his jaw is cut like glass and he has a black eye, which I'm going to assume is from the seat between my thighs during his epic descent.

I like him immediately.

There is just something hot about a guy during a near death experience who asks you out on a date minutes after a catastrophic disaster of epic proportions.

My sister would love him.

Which means I have to keep her away from him at all costs, she eats men truly like they are a small snack before devouring them whole and ruining their entire lives. She always denies it but I see the revolving door of guys that just leave with their heads hanging as if she uses them, and listen, I love my sister but consent is a thing too with guys and I have to wonder how often they just put out because she convinces them she'll stay forever when really—it will only ever a moment.

I blame our parents.

Our mom is completely absent, my dad is the one that taught us how to put on makeup and when we both got our periods, he was the one that took us to the store to get everything. He was the one that, awkwardly, gave us the sex talk and he was the one that when I had my first break up, offered to go to prison on my behalf.

I love my dad.

He even went on vacation with us, which, to an outsider, was a weird thing to do, but even my friends were like let's do this! We had plans to do a rafting trip, canoeing, eating all the food, and just basking in the sun and he was the only adult that was completely willing to rent out a house and let us do it for two straight weeks.

Again, I adore him, worship him, so it always makes me wonder why Sophie is so weird about her boy problems, there were no daddy issues with my twin, maybe it is because my dad constantly gave us everything, not just love, but truly everything we could have ever wanted in order to shield us from a mom who at times still couldn't tell one of us from the other.

I check my phone. I have an hour before actually meeting Quinn after our whole near disaster and we really are going to a random matinee. I told him he has to buy popcorn and if he didn't add butter, I'd choke him and he was weirdly okay with it.

Test number one.

Then I told him I tend to cry during suspense movies because I have this weird syndrome where I cry during pain, fear, and funerals.

Test number two.

He gave me a high five.

And in the end, after grabbing his number, I told him that I'll probably abandon him for one of the hot nerds at the local theater because I have a thing for SpongeBob, and I receive an actual bow while he said, "F is for friends who stuff together!"

Almost got married in under a minute after that last one.

I check my phone again, Sophie is supposed to show up and at least pretend to make sure he wasn't a serial killer, but her last text said, be there in a few and it had definitely been an hour.

I text back.

Me

My death might be on your hands, I know how you love Dateline, let it be known that it was because of Jason Statham. Amen.

Again, no three little dots.

I sigh and wait in front of the theater.

Seaside, Oregon tends to be extremely quiet during the afternoons, especially on really nice days. Everyone wanders to the gorgeous white beach, which means I am currently the loser, heading inside a dark cave with a random stranger who fell on me all to get my hands full of butter while paying seven dollars for a Coke Zero.

My phone buzzes.

Quinn the Eagle

So, I'm here and I'm watching you stare at your phone and I realize how creepy that sounds, but I did bring Twizzlers, also, I'm not a serial killer, thought I'd just throw that out there, not that you should be concerned because serial



killers tend to bring masking tape and garbage bags on dates, but our first interaction was random on both ends, top, bottom, soaring like a MF through the air, so if you want to bail, I can take the Twizzlers home and cry into some ice cream, maybe go for a long walk on the beach while listening to The Rose. I'll keep my distance until you decide.

I start to laugh, then realize...

Me

Um, the fact that you know what serial killers bring on dates is extremely concerning but I'll let you approach, I brought pepper spray and even though you attempted to fly like a MF through the air this morning, I think it was more of a... it's a bird, it's a plane, it's... splat. But I do think that you saved that ending in the most vacation way, so points on the landing, however inappropriate it was.

I look to my left and there he stands, even more gorgeous, huge smile and

wearing none other than a vintage-looking SpongeBob shirt.

He points at it, salutes me, and winks.

I never thought in my life I would think a wink was so sexy, but there he stands. He walks over and smiles. “May I continue to approach?”

Quinn is wearing black-rimmed glasses, his man bun is on point just making him look like the hot guy that tried to stay below the radar but actually knew his own prowess.

I look away and try not to smile, but really, what can a girl do? When I finally look back up, he is right in front of me.

“Um, hi, I’m Quinn, the random guy that fell between your thighs. I was captain of the mathletes two years running, taught my own grandpa how to play squash at the ripe old age of eighty. I hate the wind, the cold, basically anything that makes me want to chokehold someone. I like to run. I think you’re really pretty, and I think a matinee should only be held before the early bird special where I will then order all the food at four pm then crash on my couch—naturally covered in plastic to protect it at all costs—“

“I would expect nothing less.” I grab his hand and shake it, then hold it there between us like this solid moment.

“And...” He leans in, pulling my arm with him until my elbow makes contact with his clearly banging warm body. “...I’m still dealing with a bit of a broken heart, so tread lightly, maybe buy me some Milk Duds when you pretend to go to the bathroom to check your impeccable makeup. Oh, and two plus two does in fact equal four.” He winks again. “See? Genius.”

“God doesn’t make men like you.”

“I’m like Lady Gaga, I was born this way.”

I drop his hand. “Wow, and you were doing so good!”

He scrunches up his nose, making his glasses move. “Yeah well, I think it’s smart to show weakness so you don’t just front on a first date... at three in the afternoon, after you know...” He makes a motion with his hands as if he is flailing. “That.”

“Ah that, what we shall never speak of again.”

He turns to the side, choking on his laugh. “Yeah, that.”

“That.”

“Did I just turn into a Harry Potter character or just create my own Dungeons and Dragons one? I can’t tell?”

We walk toward the theater side by side and honestly I want to grab his hand but know it is early and also he could be a serial killer, he takes one look at me again and accidentally bumps into a tall guy with no shirt on, tons of tattoos who looks vaguely familiar.

I pause.

Quinn pauses, tilts his head. “Hey aren’t you Zane Andrews?”

The guy in question smirks what could only be described as the most perfect smile in the universe of smiles, you know, attached to his mouth, things were malfunctioning in my head, he has dark ruffled hair and again, no shirt just nothing but abs and ripped jeans, flip-flops and what looked like brand new ink on his chest. “Shhhh, I only came here to grab my wife popcorn.”

Quinn nods and holds out his hand for a high five. “Up top.”

“It’s like I knew we were already vibing.” The guy doesn’t take off his Ray-Bans but looks around like he is nervous. “Don’t tell anyone I was here

though, baby on the way, she wanted popcorn, it was a whole thing and I really, really loathe the crazy paparazzi in Seaside.”

We both look around.

I swear a tumble weed just randomly chose death and went across the road into oncoming traffic.

Quinn coughs. “Yeah man, it gets lit out here.”

“So lit.” He keeps walking toward a waiting black Escalade and all I do is stare while they drive off.

“Gonna make it, or do you need a paper bag to breathe into? Almonds to inhale all the peppermint so your airway opens? Will you need the ER because it’s only a mile that way and I hear Costco has some great street tacos?” Quinn pulls me to his side. “Or just the movie.”

“That”—I have a moment of panic, quickly recover—“was Zane Andrews like one of the most popular pop stars in the world.”

“He lives here.” Quinn nods. “Has been for a while. A dad now. And no, I do not subscribe to notifications from TMZ, I’m just crashing at my rich friend’s place that just so happens to be in the same neighborhood. You know they always say rockstars hit different with the partying, gotta admit all I see are kids running around, lots of super glue—the random kickass water slide and sometimes, sometimes if things get super crazy—a bonfire.”

“Speaking of being on fire.” I shove him. “Your banter, gotta love it, do you always have this much energy or only after near-death experiences?”

“Always.” Quinn opens the door for me and walks up toward the lobby, then grabs my hand in the process. “Always, I mean, in the presence of my savior.”

“Did we just go to church?”

“Did I just get saved?” I counter.

And that’s all it took for me to fall in love with him a little bit, as he buys me popcorn while I buy him Milk Duds on our way to see Jason Statham kick ass.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Quinn*

Play it cool, play it cool, do not be that dick that just like slides his hand across the armrest in an effort to grab popcorn and then oops accidentally grabs her hand.

Or worse.

The idiot that “stretches” and puts his arm around the girl and is like oh my bad, did I actually just wrap my arm around you whilst yawning watching a suspense film?

It was dark?

I was confused?

I had a muscle cramp?

No, dumbass, you’re just an idiot. But see, also, me, hi, I’m the idiot who wants to take both options just to get closer, instead I focus on the movie like the nerd I am and just keep nodding and needing to nearly sit on my hand so I don’t fist pump the air and say, “Damn right, Jason, you get that assassin!”

I sit demurely, like the fucking gentleman I am, and continue to watch while my fingers itch.

My phone buzzes.

Don’t look, don’t look.

It buzzes again.

Finally, I glance down and do actually pretend to stretch to my left and answer the text.

*Ambrose*



Dumbass. Seriously, you're so stiff you're hard, but the bad kind that nobody wants to touch.

What the hell?

I don't look around.

Ambrose

Behind you, chaperoning, but at least one of us is actually holding a hand that isn't our own.

Ambrose

Seriously, at this point, I'm concerned, you okay, bro? You good? I mean, I know you had a near death experience, but that girl is super into you and you're just like... the statue of liberty.

What does that even mean?

Ambrose

Copper, at least I think copper like concrete, either way, do better, I'm disappointed as hell over here, I think you've let yourself and the universe down. At least like lean, breathe, exist.

I don't text him back, just shove my phone back into the cup holder next

to the seat and sigh, leaning back.

“Everything okay?” Chloe whispers so dangerously close to my cheek, I nearly die on the spot. When did her lips get that plump and just... edible? Yes, okay, yes, I would bite those lips, not hard at first, softly, then hard once I slammed her against the wall and pulled her hair.

I’ve gone crazy.

It’s the only explanation.

“Errr...” Is all that actually comes out of my mouth. At this point she’s going to think that I’ve slipped vodka into my coke and might pass out between her thighs—hah yay full circle.

She leans closer, putting her hand on the one that’s resting and currently coddling with my other. Her skin’s warm, soft. “Errr?”

I blink. “I was, um... clearing my throat.”

“Ohhhhh.” She nods like she knows. “That makes more sense.” I think I’m out of the woods until she moves her face until those perfect lips are touching my ear. Then she’s whispering, “Do I make you nervous?”

I go so still I am, in fact, turning into the statue. “Never. Girls don’t make me nervous, I’m kind of a big deal,” I turn to her, nearly meeting her lips with mine, then graze the side of her soft cheek. “But if you want me to pretend, I can role play all day.”

Her fingers slide between mine.

I’m so done, I can barely hold on.

I need an emergency stop button like the ones they have in the elevator, can you blame a horny teenager who’s had his heartbroken and nearly died?

I think not.

I sit up a bit, her hand rests on mine still and I'm trying like hell to focus on the fact that Statham just nosedived off a cliff in a fiery blur only to somehow manage to roll out of it and keep walking.

She releases my hands and I breathe a sigh of relief that I didn't just die by way of attacking her with my mouth, knocking a tooth out in all my anticipation and choking to death on it.

I'm safe, right?

Totally safe.

Statham makes a badass move on TV, something that really shouldn't be possible in real life, you know like jumping through a car window only to drive the car and crash it only to be able to walk away with a scrap of dust on his chin.

I try to relax even though I'm staring at her hand, the same hand that's returned back to the arm rest.

I may as well be wearing a sign that says, can I hold it again?

I shake my head at myself and finally just go for it. I reach for her hand and this time I keep it in my lap. She jolts a bit, then smiles to herself and keeps watching the movie.

I smile back and reach for the candy, everything is going as smooth as possible until a really explicit sex scene pops up on the screen, oh shit he's taking off her clothes.

Bra. I see a red bra.

I clear my throat and try like hell not to squeeze her hand tighter. Damn, Statham has some moves.

Chloe crosses her legs and leans back.

I'm sweating all over again but mainly because it's a seriously sexy scene and I'm next to this gorgeous girl and I sure as hell remember being accidentally between her thighs.

I clear my throat again.

She suddenly snatches the Milk Duds and her purse, then elbows me. "Want to get out of here?"

Oh shit, she's offended by the sex scene. I picked a good girl. That's fair. I nod. "Sure, let's go get ice cream or something."

What the shit? Did I just offer to treat her to ice cream? Something is seriously wrong with me. We pass Ambrose and of course they're making out, so they don't even notice us walk by.

I'm at least still holding her hand, just bummed that our night's going to be over real soon. We walk out into the lobby; I start making my way toward the door with her next to me when she puts the Milk Duds into her purse, then tugs me down a separate hall in the opposite direction of the actual exit.

I mean, maybe they have two exits? It is Seaside.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

She knocks twice on one of the doors that looks like it's seen better days, in fact, the entire hallway looks semi-abandoned. It's still part of the movie theater but I think an older part. I've never seen it before, for the most part I always thought this section was closed off, unless I'm imagining things.

She turns the knob of the door.

Hah perfect and she thought I was the serial killer, goodbye Ambrose, burn the box! Always burn the box.

The door opens, it's musty, but it's a smaller theater with an old black and

white film playing on the screen, literally nobody is in there... okay, sorta creepy but nice and private and oh shit.

She shoves me down onto a cushy red chair in the back row, then straddles me. "I hope this is okay."

I have no words.

She drops her purse into the chair next to us and leans in. "Sorry, I just felt like we should skip a few steps since I know you were literally ready to bone the Milk Duds back there the minute you saw a bra."

"Am I that transparent?"

She smirks. "You're a guy."

"Literally in my head thought to myself, it's okay to be horny and whoa, whoa..." I hold up my hands and accidentally graze the front of her shirt. Nipple, that was definitely nipple action. "You didn't even buy me dinner."

"Right." She licks her full lips. "But I figured dessert should be eaten first, plus we're high school graduates, right? Why not have a little fun in an abandoned theater before we spend an insane amount of money on college only to get a job that will work us to death and never pay us enough to pay off student loans?"

I nod. "Well, when you so romantically put it that way." I pull her closer, damn I'm so hard already, the zipper on my jeans actually hurts me. "What did you have in mind? Because I'm already taking a gap year so I'm up for anything."

This will, in my memory, always go down as the one time I should have known something was off, I should have compared and read into things more. She seemed so eager and excited, like life was ending for her, like she only had today. I should have listened. She shouldn't have lied.

I should, however, do not prevent heartbreak, do they?

What if?

I should?

I could have.

Yeah, all a complete waste of time, because when you're in the moment, you're truly there and I was there, feeling her all around me.

Chloe lifts her shirt over her head and tosses it to the ground, she's wearing a neon green bra that makes her tits look huge and I'm not sure if it's on purpose like one of those distractions before certain death, but I touch anyway.

I grab her tits through her bra and sigh, then slide my hands up her neck and jerk her down toward me. "I think there's been some sort of miscommunication."

Her eyes are hazy. "What?"

I smiled. "Just because I like SpongeBob and think Star Wars should always exist... does not, for one second mean—I can't do this."

I slam my mouth against hers with perfect precision and flick off her bra with my other hand.

She shudders beneath my touch and breaks away from me. "It's always the nerds."

"I'm not a nerd, I just have an actual brain."

"So hot."

"Brains are hot." I agree and capture her mouth again, her hands move to my jeans, she unbuttons them and slides a few fingers down.

"Whoa."



I tug on her hair with one hand. “Don’t be afraid of large things...”

“But do you know how to use the large thing?” She challenges.

I look around the auditorium. “Are we going to get arrested if I try?”

“It’s a local hook up spot,” she explains, still palming me. “And something tells me we aren’t going to need a lot of time.”

“Is this the part where you confess that you never do this?”

Her face falls a bit. “I actually don’t ever do this but thought...” Something changes in her gaze. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“First time.” I repeat, suddenly losing a bit of the heat between us. “No, no, no, no, not in a dirty movie theater that probably has ghosts and—“

“—Not for that.” She starts moving her hand up and down. “My first time hooking up with a complete stranger.”

“It was the scream when I fell that did it, wasn’t it?” I groan and mutter out a curse. “Are you wanting sex or are you just planning on jerking me off while I try to have a completely normal conversation about—death—wait, no, that was oh shit... wrong, so wrong.” I start pumping my hips. “Seriously, you can’t just—no, you can, you definitely can. I agree to all of this, consent and all that, God promise me you really are eighteen, what am I even saying, I need to stop talking and, oh shit, you don’t even know my favorite color!”

She bursts out laughing and leans her head against my neck, pressing her lips to my pulse. “You talk a lot when you’re turned on, you talk a lot in general.”

“One of my finer qualities.” My head falls back against the chair a bit. It feels so good, her small hand wrapped around me, gripping me so hard that it

almost hurts.

“I like you,” she whispers. “And sometimes, all we have is right now.”

Cryptic, a bit deep for this moment, but I go with it because I don't even know what words are right now.

When she pulls back, I kiss her again, our tongues are a tangled eager mess, my hands keep going from her hair to her breasts while our mouths fuse like we're afraid to breathe on our own.

I'm close... so close... she suddenly moves to the ground and tugs my jeans down further and lowers to her knees, her swollen lips latch onto my dick and I'm gone I grip the armrests and groan then explode into her mouth at about the same time Singing in The Rain starts to play.

Fuck.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Chloe*

I cannot believe I'm doing this.

My sister always told me to play it cool when it came to dates and after the news I got today I just lost it, completely, and he was so happy and fun, and after graduation everything has just been shit.

I wanted to pick something—someone for myself—live life outside the bubble I've been put in. And the shadow she constantly held me under.

I didn't exactly plan on said bubble exploding so hard and fast, then again, I really didn't plan on meeting Quinn.

He's so cute I want to cry and he isn't shoving himself in my face—the guy literally offered to buy me an ice cream cone because, I'm assuming, he thought I wasn't having a good time or was uncomfortable when really I wanted to jump him. Adrenaline spiked and now I know what a good random one night with a guy tastes like.

Quinn.

I wipe my lips.

He stares down at me with hooded eyes, like he's in some sort of hypnotic state. "Well, that was not what I had planned when you wanted to watch *Statham*."

I laugh. "Maybe I wanted to watch you?"

"That was not a passive activity, Chloe." He winks. "And I'm a little in shock and suddenly so very sleepy right now." He yawns and stretches his arms above his head. He literally has lean muscle everywhere. "Stop staring,

that's what stalkers do.”

I make a face.

“Where did you come from?” I ask.

He leans forward and points up. “The sky, I’m like superman but I can’t fly, oh shit, that rhymed,” I turn away as he rearranges himself.

I gulp. “Yeah well, you’re clearly a poet.”

His hands find my face and turn me back around. “I’m not a one-night stand sort of guy and you didn’t even share all the Milk Duds, so at the risk of sounding extremely cheesy, do you wanna go walk on the beach?”

“How’s that cheesy?”

“Because clearly I’m saying it so the night doesn’t end, and while I appreciate all the sexual tension throbbing—“

I wince.

“—Yup, poor choice of words.” He clears his throat in the most adorable way. “Ahem, while I appreciate the connection.” He grins down at me.

“Better.”

“Thank you, so where was I, oh yes, while I appreciate the strong connection we have, I really want to get to know you, so can we attempt to not step on a jellyfish wherein I would have to sadly pee on you, and walk for a bit so I can ask you a shit ton of dumb questions that have to do with all your favorites so I don’t fail you miserably when I obviously ask you out on a second date.”

“THIS WAS A DATE?” I yell.

His body goes still, his eyes narrow, he points at me, I love that he keeps jabbing his finger in the air like he can’t actually believe I said that. “Nobody

prepared me for someone like you.”

Excitement bursts in my chest, it feels like a billion butterflies are fighting for dominance to escape my stomach just so they can touch him in real life. “Meh, I’m special.”

He reaches for my hand and kisses the back of it then squeezes my fingertips, his expression is unreadable but the way he looks at me, it’s as if he’s known me in a past life which is crazy, his gaze is serious, intense. He stands, still holding my hand, then pulls me back against him, leaning into my right ear and whispering, “But I still get Milk Duds right?”

“What is with you and candy?”

His expression sobers, sending chills down my spine. His hand comes up, but at the last minute he pulls back and lightly drags one finger down my jaw. “I like sweet things that know how to be naughty. Nothing has to be perfect in this life, I think we just combine the perfect moments, and later when things turn unperfected, we remember the gifts we were given, otherwise, how do you even survive?”

I spin in his arms and pull him close in a hug. “Whoever broke your heart never deserved you.”

“Nah, I never deserved her, and my best friend loved her first.”

That’s what he leaves me with as we walk hand in hand toward the door and it kills me that I don’t have the guts to ask what happened in that moment, because it’s gone.

And because I don’t want to tarnish our present with his past. We keep walking and eventually are on the beach, past all of the small-town cafes, restaurants, all the people just roaming around trying to vacation.

Music hits us the minute we hit the boardwalk, someone’s playing guitar

while their dog sits next to them, the dreads on their head look badass and quite honestly, he looks so free in his worn white tank top and blue jeans that I almost want to spin in front of him.

Quinn notices me pause then pulls me toward the guy and his guitar case, he drops a five-dollar bill in the case.

“What do you want to hear?” The guy stops playing immediately and asks.

His smile is free and cool. His eyes, a clear blue, his posture not like a person who’s living off the streets.

I frown and tilt my head.

Quinn points. “You’re, you’re, you’re—“

“—Shhhh.” He grins. “I like a good hobby.”

“Demetri.” Quinn gets the word out. “Bro, I haven’t seen you in like seven years!”

“Demetri?” I repeat. “The homeless guy is Demetri?”

Alleged Demetri winks at me, he’s extremely good-looking his hair is pulled back into a ponytail with the light blonde dreads and he’s looking like he belongs on a red carpet more than a street in Oregon, though his shirt is dirty I now realize that it’s on purpose.

“YO.”

“Did he just say yo?” I ask.

Quinn laughs. “Bro, it’s good to see you, how are the kids?”

“Good. Busy.” He nods. “So very, very, busy.” He winks his blue eyes at me. “But thanks for the fiver, I guess I can buy a burger now.”

Quinn rolls his eyes. “Maybe sell a Grammy instead?”

Demetri grins. “This is so much more pure and fun, hey, take this...” He grabs the five and hands it back to Quinn. “Go get ice cream or some shit, avoid the birds at all costs, they’re aggressive this year, and go for a walk.” He eyes me up and down. “You picked a good one.”

I’m stunned. “How do you two even—“

“—Cousins.” Quinn shrugs. “Like twice removed or whatever we figured out last time we got wasted on Mountain Dew.” He fist bumps Demetri, a dude from one of the biggest bands in the world that has a house in Seaside right next to Zane, what is even happening?

They bro hug as bros do and then we’re walking toward the beach and I’m taking off my shoes and staring up at Quinn like he’s this... subject I need to study. “How do you know famous people?”

He smirks, then frowns down at me. “Um, well, you heard, I’m actually related to one, and the thing about Seaside Oregon? They’re all best friends, all the famous actors, all the famous singers, they came here for a freaking break and if you know one you know them all, it’s how I recognized Zane earlier. Plus, also, they’re actually the coolest ever. I only ever went to two dinners, but it was enough to set me up for life as far as entertainment. They don’t get wasted, too many kids, too much drama, they even have ties into the mafia, but don’t tell anyone I said that.”

I stumble. “The mafia?”

He shrugs. “Snitches get stitches.”

“What is this day?”

Quinn pulls out his phone. “It is the Saturday of my near death, one because of falling from the sky, and the other from getting a taste of you.” He kicks the sand. “Ice cream my ass, you already licked me dry.”

I stumble again, this time he catches me. How does he smell so good? I've always hated cologne, it felt like this toxic cloud of chemicals, but with Quinn it smells masculine and soft at the same time. Like a vanilla cinnamon latte.

His hands wrap around my waist. "What has you so stunned? Oh God, please tell me you didn't step on a jelly."

"A jelly?" I finally find my voice. "Are you nicknaming the jellyfish now?"

"It took less time to say, and I wanted to use my mouth for other nefarious purposes."

I smile up at him and wrap my arms around his neck. "So, you want to use your mouth for..."

"On. If we're being specific." His smile could not be more sexy. My hair whips around my face from the wind on the beach, it's not exactly warm the closer we get to the ocean, but he is, so I press closer to him.

When I lean up on my tiptoes he leans down, I think he's going to kiss me, instead he dodges my mouth and rests his chin on my shoulder and hugs me tight.

I have no clue why it feels more romantic than a kiss or why I can't seem to let go of him, even though I barely know him and am probably jumping into this without thinking.

"Favorite color?" he asks.

"Blue." I cling to his shirt.

"Favorite movie?"

"Gladiator."



“I approve.”

“I was looking for validation today.” My hands tug at his shirt while my face presses against his warm chest.

“Favorite moment?” he whispers against the wind, his face still on my shoulder.

I want to say this one, but I’m not sure I’m brave enough, but it’s almost like my silence is answer enough as I stand there and hold him tight.

“This.” I finally get one word out.

He squeezes me tighter, then kisses the top of my head. “Good, you pass—for now.”

I shove him playfully as he pulls away laughing, reaching for my hand and holding it tight.

It could have been seconds or hours, I have no concept of time with him, all I know is by the time we make it back to the boardwalk it’s really dark out and I need to go home.

I’ve never been the type to jump into relationships nor have I been the type to invite myself to people’s houses—I’ve never had a one-night stand drunken or sober, I’ve never done what I did today or even taken a chance for fear I’d be used or labeled a slut.

But things change quickly when you’re faced with giants in your life.

I never thought I’d meet mine at eighteen.

I don’t realize I’ve stopped walking until Quinn pulls me toward a park bench and onto his lap. “Why so sad?”

“What?” His warm arms wrap around me.

“I said, why so sad? You just froze back there, I mean it could be the

wind, my overall impressiveness, exhaustion, but you just stared straight ahead, so I'm assuming something's wrong and also assuming that you might possibly be sad because the night is over."

I relax against him. "It doesn't have to be."

This time he freezes. "What?"

"My parents aren't home and my sister won't say anything." I feel all the blood rushing to my face in embarrassment. "I mean never mind, it's fine it's \_\_\_"

He lightly pushes me off his lap and holds out his hand. "Lead the way."

I don't think anyone could have prepared me for the journey we'd take after this. I often wonder what would have happened if I didn't take that outstretched hand and I daily question myself.

Why the hell would I introduce him to my sister?

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Quinn*

I send Ambrose a quick text to let him know I won't be coming back while we walk down the boardwalk. She says her home's right on the water and I can't imagine it being anything but spectacular since most of the houses, even if they're old, are huge and beautiful.

We walk past the aquarium and the main road and keep walking in silence, but still holding hands until she stops in front of a beautiful two-story beach house. It's white and has blue shutters plus a large balcony with chairs and a fire pit on top.

It's both pretty and cute, kind of like her.

We walk through a small white picket fence past a stone water fountain that had seen better days, past a large oak tree and up to the front door. Two sconces framed the door, both of them lit up with real fire.

"Setting the mood, I see." I pointed at them. "Do I need to take off my shoes?"

Chloe batted her eyelashes up at me, her expression both innocent and seductive. "You can take off whatever you want."

Oh shit, things just got intense in front of that fire. I nod. "Maybe let me make sure you didn't lure me here to kill me first and then I'll take off whatever you want."

"Deal." Her laugh is light as she releases my hand and opens the front door. I walk in after her.

It smells sweet, like someone is baking, or there's a candle that has some cheesy label on it, like American Pie or Blueberry. I walk past the small

entryway, there's a staircase to the right, the hardwood floors like original with how dark and scratched they are, but it adds to the ambiance, I guess. The next thing I notice is how clean it is. While it may look older on the outside, the inside is completely open and exposed; we walk further into the kitchen, everything is stark white, the living room has furniture that looks expensive but in multiple random colors, a lime green chair, a black leather couch, and a huge white and brown cow hide rug is in the middle of the room with a wood table over it.

Whoever decorated has unique but modern taste.

I do a quick turn. "I like it."

"Mom." She shrugs. "Loves HGTV a little too much."

"Don't we all?"

She laughs and walks further into the kitchen and pulls something from the fridge, I think it's champagne, but I can't tell for sure until she turns around and places it on the counter. "Drink?"

"Does mom also let you drink?" I tease.

"Well, she's not here a lot, neither is my dad, they don't really do family."

"How does one do family?"

"I mean..." She starts to pull the foil from the champagne bottle. "...they don't really—"

"—They don't give a shit." Another voice chimes in. "Ah, Dad's gonna be pissed you opened up the expensive one this time." A girl who looks identical to Chloe pulls out a chair next to me. She's wearing no makeup, has black fingernail polish on, and is in matching black sweats. Her eyes are the same color blue, and her hair is cut in the exact same way that Chloe's is.

“There are two of you.” I nod. “Good to know, might have prepared me before I had a near heart attack at nineteen and thought I was seeing things.”

The girl holds out her hand. “I’m Sophie, that bitch’s twin.”

Chloe’s smile doesn’t reach her eyes. What am I not picking up on?

I squeeze Sophie’s hand. “Good to meet you. I’m Quinn, and apparently, I’m hanging out here tonight because according to your twin over there, you’re a steal trap and won’t say a word to the parents, then again, I now wonder if they would even care.”

Sophie rolls her eyes and drops my hand. “If they found you both naked, the only thing they’d ask was if you used protection since my mom refuses to become a grandma at the ripe age of fifty.”

“Oh good, so she likes kids.” I smirk at Sophie, she lets down her defenses a bit, her smile different than when she sourly walked in the kitchen.

She leans forward, her hair brushing her shoulders. She’s really pretty, just like Chloe, honestly I don’t know how their own parents tell them apart, maybe they each have a favorite style of makeup or clothing, that would be the only indicator.

I jump at the sound of the pop from the champagne and glance over at Chloe, she looks sad.

I get up and walk around the kitchen island and pull her into my arms while she holds the champagne bottle, then kiss the top of her head. “Need help?”

Sophie glances at Chloe, then at me, her eyes narrowing. “How long have you guys known each other? A day?”

“Yeah.” I immediately don’t like her. “And I already earned a kiss in

several special places, jealous much?”

Chloe relaxes against me.

Yeah okay, noted, they’re competitive, and Sophie is clearly jealous that Chloe has someone. I can read the room.

Sophie laughs, it’s actually a nice laugh, not too high pitched, just amusing. “No, I don’t have time for guys, I’m married to myself.”

“Good for you, I hope you bought yourself flowers for the ceremony.” I joke.

She smirks at me. “You’re a handful, aren’t you?”

“In more ways than one, right Chloe?”

Sophie’s eyebrows shoot up. “Wow, so it’s like that, hmm?”

“Yup,” Chloe chimes in. “I’ve decided to start taking initiative and chances, even though he could have been a serial killer. Then again, his scream while falling to his death via bungee jumping kind of made me realize that he probably couldn’t even hold a knife without shaking.”

“Hey!” I spin her in my arms, the champagne bottle rests between our bodies. “I thought you were sworn to secrecy.”

She winks. “Whoops?”

“So, what movie did you guys see?” Sophie interrupts. “And let me guess, you did the whole what’s your favorite color, memory, oh please do not tell me you guys took a walk on the beach.”

We’re both silent.

She shakes her head. “Yes, little risk taker, do you.” Sophie hops off the barstool and waves at us. “I’m headed to bed, this story isn’t going to get any more exciting.”

“Sweet dreams,” I call out after her, more like ever-loving nightmare. I shudder and grab the bottle from Chloe. “So, she’s nice.”

Chloe sighs and leans against the counter. “She’s just... been hurt in the past and doesn’t do well with new people, add that to her competitive nature and being a twin, well it’s not the best mix of things.”

“Not even a little bit.” I take a swig from the bottle and grin. “Pretty sure I charmed the shit out of her though.”

“Oh buddy.” Chloe pats me on the shoulder. “You did your best, that’s the most I’ve seen her smile in two years.”

“Success.” I lean down and press a kiss to Chloe’s mouth, her tongue slides past my lips, I almost drop the bottle, instead I set it on the counter, then set her on the counter and grab her by the ass.

“Mmmm.” She moans into my mouth, arching against me, hooking her feet behind my ass and pulling me closer. We taste like champagne and need. My entire body is hot for her, I’ve never been this guy.

Apparently today is backward day because she’s never been this girl—according to her.

She reaches for my shirt and tugs it off my body, throwing it to the ground while I reach for her jean shorts and start to unbutton them.

She suddenly freezes.

We’re both panting, our mouths inches apart.

Her hands drop and she shakes her head a bit. “I’m sorry, I just suddenly got super dizzy.”

“Are you okay?” I cup her face. “I can leave.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Let’s maybe just sit on the couch, watch a movie, then

make out. Sound good?”

“I do love a good make out session.” She really doesn’t look good, all the color’s left her face. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Her smile seems forced she nods and pats me on the shoulder. “Of course I am, just give me a minute to catch my breath.”

I don’t believe her, but I also don’t want to leave, not if she’s not feeling well and I can tell she doesn’t want me to go either. “Okay.”

I help her hop off the counter and we go to the couch; she grabs a blanket and turns on Netflix, she’s suddenly yawning and leaning on my shoulder. We settle on watching Free Guy, which I’ve seen a million times—never gets old though, so we hold hands and eventually, like a half hour into the movie, I’m yawning too.

My eyes get heavy.

Before I know it, I’m dead to the world.

I jolt awake when my phone goes off in my pocket. It’s Ambrose.

And it’s also like four AM.

Shit.

Ambrose

Did she kill you or are you alive or just dead via sex, text back, bro.

I quickly answer.

Me

Sorry, dickhead, I fell asleep.

Ambrose



I'm so disappointed.

Me

That I'm alive?

Ambrose

No, that you fell asleep mid sex.

Me

There was no mid sex, only champagne and a movie.

Ambrose

No action at all.

It feels wrong actually telling him something did happen, so I just answer that I'm tired and am going back to sleep.

Speaking of sleep, Chloe is nowhere to be found.

Frowning, I look down at the floor, did she lay down? Leave? Huh, I feel like I would have noticed, then again, I was sleeping so hard I was probably snoring like an idiot.

I should probably leave.

I start to get up when Chloe walks into the living room. She's wearing a pair of short white shorts and a sheer black tank top that leaves literally nothing to the imagination. "Damn."

It's really all I can say.

Her hair is in a loose braid. "You fell asleep."

"I did, Ryan Reynolds does that to a person said nobody ever." I laugh, my voice is raspy from the sleep. "Are you feeling better?"

She tilts her head. “Of course, I mean, other than the snoring coming from you.”

“It’s like a mating call.” I nod seriously. “Kind of like when peacocks stretch their feathers to, you know, peacock.”

“Stop saying peacock.” She laughs, it sounds kind of different, then again, I’m delirious, it is four am.

I lean back as she suddenly crawls up onto my lap, straddling me. She reaches for her shirt and pulls it off and tosses it to the ground.

No bra.

I try like hell not to stare at her chest but it’s right in front of me, I’m looking at her face with all the willpower I have. “I take it you got hot?”

She leans down, her lips are so full, nearly swollen like she’s been biting them, and suddenly I’m jealous of her teeth—weird. I grab her by the back of the neck and jerk her forward. Our mouths collide in a bruising kiss that has me completely awake and ready to go, she reaches between us and palms the front of my jeans.

“Ah, déjà vu.” I joke.

She laughs. “Let’s repeat some things, make some mistakes, let’s start now.”

I grip her by the hair and twist it around my fingers. It feels so soft. “Deal.”

Everything passes in a blur then.

I’m flipping her onto her back on the couch.

She’s reaching for the button of my jeans, then asks about a condom. We’re moving fast, like fast fast, but I also can’t say no. I can’t, I don’t want

to. I've had a shit year and this beautiful girl is seducing the shit out of me and I don't want to say no.

I want to forget it all.

The heartbreak.

The times I stupidly cried over my best friend's girlfriend like an idiot.

The moments we tried to hang out only to have to be tortured, watching them fall deeper in love while I fell behind.

Being a third wheel sucks.

I want to be the lead.

I want to be the main character of my own story, so I kiss her deeper, and I hold her tighter and tell myself it's going to heal the scars that have yet to scab over. I tell myself that sex will change everything, even when I know I'm lying to myself.

I give into it.

I give into her.

And when I sink into her, I feel at peace for a fraction of a second and realize it can become my new addiction, getting lost between her thighs and telling myself everything is going to be okay—because I'm for one instant, loved by someone.

Giving them pleasure, taking mine.

I tell myself this as I pump into her, as I consume each and every breathy sigh from her mouth, as I bite her neck and suck.

As she clings to me, gasping my name like a chant.

It's all going to be okay.

It's going to be perfect.

## CHAPTER SIX

*Chloe*

Last night sucked, it sucked all the balls of the balls that were available, I feel so bad for Quinn. First, I invited him over to hang out, then fell asleep, then ended up having another episode. I started getting really tired, like so tired he probably thought I was drunk... then the headache set in along with the rash that was starting to present itself on my stomach.

It sucks.

All of it sucks.

I wonder if he ended up leaving earlier this morning. At least we had a few moments together and at least we had yesterday. I decide to throw on a pair of sweats and put my hair in a ponytail, then go see if he's still on the couch.

When I go out there, the blanket's folded and he's in the kitchen making coffee. He smirks at me, looking over his shoulder like he knows a secret I'm truly not aware of. "So last night was fun."

"Look, I'm so sorry—"

"—sorry?" He frowns. "Why would you be sorry for the best sex ever, I woke up dreaming I was a unicorn, and I don't know exactly why that's where my head went but, yeah, you were, that was, I honestly have to say the statement of I don't do this ever, but, thank you."

My hands start shaking so badly, so I put them behind my back. The hell? We never had sex last night.

I immediately feel sick to my stomach, but I also don't want to say anything because he'll hate me and never come back.

She promised.

She freaking promised me.

I look around the room and find her at the breakfast table like she didn't just have sex with my crush, with my person.

When she looks up, her smile is cruel, so cruel that I want to cry.

“You guys should have been louder.” She licks her lips. “I don't think they heard you in space, it was close though.”

Quinn winces. “Yeah, sorry about that, I think things just got really out of hand in the heat of the moment.”

Sophie sits up. “Must have been nice to get your brains screwed like that, I wonder what it was like.”

She's never gone this far.

She's never.

I start panicking, my breathing is off, the room feels dizzy or is that me? I collapse onto the ground, cracking my knees before laying down.

“Chloe!” Quinn's at my side immediately. “Chloe, are you okay? Talk to me.”

Sophie's voice sounds. “She's fine, she sometimes gets lightheaded, it runs in the family, it's kind of an attention thing though sometimes, right Chloe?”

I blink up at her, barely getting out the word. “Right.”

“Anyway, I'll see you losers later, have fun with all your sex.” She steps over me and walks out of the room, she's in a short denim skirt—my denim skirt to be exact and wearing one of my white crop tops.

She grabs her purse, then my Ray-Ban's and blows us a kiss, leaving the

house.

“She’s a piece of work.” Quinn mutters under his breath. “It’s weird you’re even sisters, let alone twins.”

“Yeah.” I can’t cry. I think I’ve lost all my tears because of her in the past few years, it was one time, one time, and it’s not like I knew that he was her boyfriend.

She purposefully did this.

To hurt me.

To get revenge.

She took it too far.

And now I have to decide if I come clean that it wasn’t me last night, or do I lie and keep him by my side?

I’m too sick to think about it.

My sickness isn’t going to get better, but what will make it better is having someone like Quinn.

His eyes search mine. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” I lie. “It’s perfect.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Quinn*

I put on a straight face the entire time I eat breakfast with her and make plans for later, I'm trying not to lose my mind. I could have sworn there was something off with her this morning, and her sister, naturally, was just as hateful as ever.

Good riddance.

I pull Chloe in for a hug but she goes immediately stiff like she doesn't want the attention. "You good?"

Her eyes fill with tears. "I'm totally fine."

"Was I too rough with you last night?"

She presses her lips together then smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes, it's like she's holding herself back, shit I knew a one-night stand wouldn't end up well. I probably hurt her or her feelings, both of us were exhausted.

I shake my head. "Listen, we can just be friends this doesn't have to go past—"

"—NO!" she shouts and then grips my shoulders. "That's not it, it's just, I'm really tired after—last night and no, you weren't too rough." Her eyes fill with more tears, what the actual hell is going on? "I just think I'm a bit too invested in you and it's only been a day, kind of terrifying."

"Extremely terrifying." I agree, "But I'm not going anywhere, I mean I am going home because I have to shower and I know I don't technically live here so that might be an issue later, but taking a gap year is sounding better and better the more time I spend with you, add that to the fact I can take online classes and by your expression I am one hundred percent freaking you out



aren't I?"

She shakes her head, why does her hair look a bit longer? Weird. "No, not freaking me out, I like you."

"I like you too."

She stands on her tiptoes and presses a warm kiss to my cheek. "Go shower, go make sure your rich roommate knows that you're okay and call me later, okay?"

"I don't call, I text, calling stresses me out." I wink. "Kidding, I'd even break the no calling rule just to hear your voice. Then again, I heard it a lot last night when you kept saying my name over and over again."

She flinches. "Sorry."

"Don't be." I lean in. "I liked it."

# CHAPTER EIGHT

*Chloe*

I text Sophie, she doesn't text back.

I'm so upset that even crying all day and burning down my own house wouldn't make it better.

She slept with him.

On purpose.

And pretended to be me, there's no way I sleepwalked into the living room from my bedroom and had the best night of my life.

Me

Sophie, pick up. Now.

Sophie

I'm shopping.

Me

Then stop, take a time out, and call me back, this is serious. He's a good guy and doesn't deserve this

She doesn't type back right away, instead I wait for the bubbles to pop up and when she does respond, I don't even know what to say.

Sophie

Just like I didn't deserve to get ignored my entire freaking life because you're "sick" with Lupus.

Half the time I still think you're faking it for attention, attention I never got, so yeah, I slept with him, but if you say something just know I'll tell him you're not well and I'll make you look like the biggest liar on the planet, so pick your battles, sis. I had a good time, and so did he, what's the harm?

Unbelievable!

Me

The HARM is that he thinks he was with me, and it's you instead!

Sophie

Go with it, what's the worst that could happen? He gets more sex? He gets more attention? You're lame and you're lucky I showed up, now he's still interested, meanwhile you were passed out sick, you should be saying thank you.

I don't even know how to respond to her and I don't have time or the patience to when mom suddenly calls.

"Hi!" I sound way too cheerful to be talking to her, my voice is high pitched, I'm still sweating and could pass out at any minute. "Everything

okay?”

Mom sighs heavily on the phone. “Sophie said you had a hard night last night?”

I’m so angry I could cry, it’s just instinctual to want to cry when I’m mad at her or the world or my stupid sickness. “Not really.” I answer honestly. “I just decided to go to bed because I had a slight fever and then kind of passed out, but I’m fine, I swear.”

“It’s nice your sister’s paying attention and is worried about you.”

See, this is where I get pissed because my sister only does that in order to deflect from herself, but because she knows it drives me crazy, I don’t want to be the center of attention and she only makes it worse by constantly doing this to my parents when she wants to get me grounded to the stupid house.

Mom is quiet for a few seconds. “You know, maybe you should rest.”

I also know they start paying attention to the ring cameras the minute they’re worried about me, which also means that I can’t have Quinn over because they’ll see it immediately.

What is with this sabotage? It’s not like she even has his number! She just doesn’t want me to be happy.

“Mom.” I try to speak as clearly as possible. “Please don’t make me stay home, I’m fine, plus I’m on a break, right? I even went on the canoe the other day, went to a movie, I probably overdid it a bit but I’m truly good, I’m taking my meds, I’m hydrated, I’m good.”

I feel like it’s the perfect argument, instead she curses under her breath. “I just worry and I’m not there.”

Worry, my ass, but it’s still nice to hear. “I’m good.”

“Why don’t you just stay home for the day, take a nice lukewarm bath and then I can put in a call to Dr. H—“

“—Mom.” I interrupt, nothing sounds worse than a lukewarm bath right now, especially after last night. “I promise if I start feeling worse, I’ll go to the doctor, but right now I just want to relax and go for a walk.”

I leave out that I want to walk into the actual ocean.

Instead, my mom just answers, “Oh honey, I’m headed into another meeting, just, go for your walk but call me if you need anything, I’ll text Sophie later—hi! So great to meet you!”

She forgot I was still on the phone, so I hang up first and start walking. I need to get out; I need the fresh sea breeze—what I really need is to hang out with Quinn. It feels freeing, but now I don’t know if I can face him, I’m not sure I can keep myself from confessing everything, not just what I’m sick with but what happened with my twin.

It’s so messed up.

I would so love the ice cream he offered me last night. How did things get so messed up so fast?

I grab my purse and a pair of sunglasses and leave the house, power walking down the boardwalk like my life depends on it.

Ice cream. I’ll eat ice cream. I repeat that mantra in my head a dozen times as I round the corner and come to a complete and total stop.

It’s Sophie, and she’s with Quinn.

Wait, what?

Maybe it was a random meeting?

I had my phone with me all night and while she knows my passcode she

would never, right? Never.

He starts laughing and leans in, then pulls her against his chest and kisses her head.

He thinks he's kissing mine.

He thinks it's me.

This is freaking diabolical.

I start walking toward them, then stop when she turns in my direction. Her eyes say it all. She pats his face and then walks toward me. I round the corner and try not to hyperventilate.

Sophie meets me in front of the store, the wind whips at my face as I stare out at the beach, I can't even meet her eyes.

“So, this is how this is going to go.” She leans against the wall. “You're not going to say shit about last night, not that he'd believe you, I'm very good at impersonating your sad innocent face, have been for years, and I won't tell him that you have Lupus and are constantly fainting and laying in bed like the loser you are. And you let me go on a date with him.”

“What?” I jerk my head toward her. “He's not an object! And I barely know him!”

“And yet...” She grins. “...you took him to the movie theater, and you went into the old section, trust me, that was one of the best moments of his life, he's not going anywhere. Plus, he's decided to take a gap year, so he's here for a while, not just vacation, I mean, what's the worst that can happen? He gets a ton of action for like months on end? Would any guy say no to that?”

“Stop!” I yell. “Just stop! He's a person and a really good person from

what I know, you can't just—he's fragile right now and I won't do this—“

“—Again?” She grins. “You mean you won't do this again.” She taps her mouth with her fingertip. “Because isn't this kind of sort of what you did Senior year when I was dating Brax?”

“He was in on it and I had no idea!” I hiss under my breath. “He hurt me, he hurt us!”

“He”—she seethes—“was the love of my life and you stole him from me because at the end of the day, he chose you, not me. So right now, I'm going to choose Quinn and you're going to deal with it, but don't worry, I'll leave you some scraps, even dogs deserve a bone.”

She walks off.

My heart cracks in my chest.

I never meant to hurt her and had no idea Brax had this weird fascination with twins or that he was purposefully doing it because he was a sick bastard and no matter how many times I tell her she doesn't believe me.

Her hatred has always run deep.

Years ago, she dressed differently.

Years ago, she did her makeup differently.

The minute things happened with Brax—she started copying everything I did, almost like she lost her own personality or individuality but I know the truth, she did it to hurt me and then told my parents that it was because she felt bad for me when I was diagnosed.

She walks away and skips into Quinn's arms, and he spins her around.

He spins who he thinks is me.

I take a step toward them and then feel dumb about how split I am about

telling him because he's the only happiness I've had for the last year. What if he runs away because of my illness? It wouldn't be the first time.

I stare down at my clothes.

He'll notice immediately that it's not me or that I'm not her.

I should just march right up to him and give up.

Maybe I'll go jump in the ocean and take a deep breath.

How did the last twenty-four hours turn out this way?

I watch as Sophie grabs his hand, smiles, and walks off with them.

To go get ice cream.



## CHAPTER NINE

*Quinn*

I didn't expect her to be downtown or chase after me, but she did, which on one hand is kind of cool, on the other, totally unexpected, it seems completely against her character, but I'm not mad about it.

Again, gap year, taking in the sights, not worrying about everything and staying with my rich best friend despite the fact I have the money, just not the townhouse or the will to suddenly purchase one. What could really go wrong in this entire scenario?

Find a hot girl? Check.

Have a one-night stand? Check.

Get the best ice cream in the world? Um, double check.

Apparently near-death experiences make me super lucky, I turn and look at Chloe. "I'm really glad I met you. Plus, now I finally get the ice cream I promised last night but never delivered on."

Her grin doesn't reach her eyes. "Oh, you delivered on a lot of things."

"Damn right I did." I lick the cone and wink while she grabs her own cone and laughs, again I don't know what it is, but I'm a laugh guy and her laugh sounds just mildly off, maybe she's not as happy to be hanging out with me as I am her. Ambrose would say I'm bad at sex, and while I'm fully ready to admit when I'm bad at things, sex is not one of those things that I struggle with—kissing, foreplay, A+, now ask me to become an engineer and do calculus for four straight years and I might just flunk out of school, I may be smart but math is where I refuse to even embark on the struggle.

I took stats one year just because they offered it up as part of your math

credit and all I remember was the absolute sadness when I messed up one tiny part of my project and after two hours had to go back and find out where I went wrong.

Chloe checks her phone and frowns down at it. “Yeah, um, I’m so sorry to cut you short, but I have to get running.” She stands up on her tiptoes and presses a vanilla ice cream fueled kiss to my mouth.

I start to respond to her cold lips when she bounces back, waves, and skips out of the ice cream store.

Frowning, I finish my ice cream then start the trek back to my waiting black Benz AMG Sedan, I’d parked it there in order to eventually get in the car with Chloe and impress her but yeah, nah. Now I’m kind of leaning toward the direction of her, just believing I’m a freeloader at my friend’s ginormous beach house.

People tend to freak out when you have money, and it’s like I did anything to deserve it. I just inherited it.

All of it.

All of my parents’ money.

And a huge, almost always empty house since they’re constantly gone and ever since my whole high school scandal with a teacher who’s now in prison—one my dad paid off—they’ve become even more distant.

Thus, why I jumped at the chance to be the third wheel on this little vacation. I know Ambrose and Mary-Belle are leaving at the end of the week anyway. And it would be a waste of my money to buy my own house or VRBO when I could just crash at his place.

I hop into my car and start driving toward the beach house, fully intending on not getting distracted by thoughts of Chloe and the even more complicated

thoughts about my best friend and his girlfriend.

Damn, my life is messed up, isn't it?

I round the corner and go down A street, then make my way up the hill toward the cliff where Ambrose's beach house is.

It's stupid massive, six bedrooms with a smart TV in each one, snacks, wine, fluffy beds that you're afraid to actually sleep in because they're so white and what if you have a piece of sand between your middle toe, and five bathrooms that all seem to look like they came out of the Archeologists Digest.

Honestly, the rooms are untouched and unloved and now that Ambrose is completely on his own, all he has are empty houses.

His mom gave him her kidney and basically died a room over from him last year in the hospital after saving his life and his dad committed suicide after our high school mess up where he, the DA was caught for embezzlement and bribery charges.

Sometimes the parents are worse than the kids, just look at my dad and you'll see all the red flags, not that I've seen him in the last six months. The divorce was finalized and then the house just emptied, ever since then I've been with them but why does it always feel like I'm intruding?

It's not like they're getting married soon. They're going to travel the world and do all that shit.

I pull up to the three-story beach house with its white paint and large black door and get out, grabbing my keys and killing the engine.

Ambrose is there since his black Jeep is parked out front which means I really am intruding on their time because immediately I know MB is gonna feel sorry for me like she always does, offer to watch a movie or do

something together making Ambrose give me the narrowed eyes as if to say, bro I was just going to get laid and now she wants to watch The Great British Bake Off!

I feel that though, I'd be pissed too.

I open the door, shut it quietly, and walk into the open kitchen. It's all just... too white, no decorations, no rugs, it's beautiful and modern but nothing about it screams family or beach day.

I feel like I just walked into LA.

I set my keys and sunglasses on the counter, go over to the fridge, grab a water and then start walking toward my room.

I don't even remember falling asleep, I was so exhausted, when I woke up it was like this weird fever dream of Chloe and all the things I wanted to do to her, and then my mouth was so dry I stumbled half naked into the kitchen to grab water. It was peaceful for a few seconds.

But when I round the corner to go to my room, I spit out my water all over the floor. "WHY!"

Ambrose does a little half shrug. "Because I was getting laid in the shower?"

"Bro." I shake my head. "It's almost noon!"

Ambrose grins. "Right, but I was really dirty."

"And now my ears." I grumble, putting the lid back on my bottled water. "Mary-Belle, I'm home, put on clothes!"

"You didn't have to yell," Ambrose grumbles.

"And you don't have to just stand in the hallway naked like it's your birthday and you get a prize for having a dick."

“It’s a nice dick.”

I shake my head. “Mines bigger.”

“Are we really doing this right now?” He crosses his arms.

With a sigh, I cross mine, crinkling my water bottle. “Do we need to go over this again? Bring out some measuring tape?”

Mary-Belle, aka MB for short, comes out of the bathroom with wet pieces of her blonde hair sticking to her shoulders, wrapped in a towel. “You guys are both pretty happy now? And no, you’re not going to be the weirdos who actually have a dick measuring contest, has anyone ever complained?”

We’re both silent.

He makes a face at me.

I flip him off.

“All right, see contest over.” She stands up on tiptoes and kisses Ambrose’s cheek, “Now I’m going to get dressed and since Quinn is here, we can all totally hang out and watch a movie!” She does a little dance and bolts into their shared room.

Slowly, Ambrose shakes his head at me. “Biggest cockblock ever.”

“See? You said it yourself first, biggest cock.” I walk past him.

“I said biggest cockblock!”

“Same thing.” I turn and nearly run into my own doorway.

“Saw that.”

“Hate you.”

“Yeah, okay best friend who cried watching Brother Bear,” he whispers it under his breath like he thinks I can’t hear.

“Do we need to re-address The Notebook?” I counter. “Because I’ll go there, I’ll go straight there right now and pull the last thirty minutes rule!”

He gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

“Only the last, most torturous thirty minutes.” I do a little dance in the doorway and earn a pillow to the face, nearly sailing backward on my ass.

“NO!” MB yells, then pokes her head from the bedroom. “No last thirty minutes of sad movies, now go shower so you can come join us.” Her eyes narrow. “Actually, you look like you”—they go from narrow to wide—“did you sleep with her?”

I wince. “Define sleep?”

Ambrose, still naked, nods his head like he’s saying respect over and over again on the inside but doesn’t want to get hit on the outside. Smart move.

MB is still in her towel and walks up to me, oh great, now I’m going to get the pillow again. She glares up at me, her brown eyes searching mine. “What I want to know is how you even got that close while you looked ready to shit your pants at the movie theater, you had zero game.”

I lift a shoulder. “I have my ways.”

She pokes me in the chest hard with her finger. “Don’t hurt her.”

“What about me?” I question. “What if she hurts me?”

“Okay, big dick energy.” MB pats me on the stomach. “Your last four relationships ended up with our house getting egged—twice—and you having to buy a new car because the waitress you hooked up with wrote whore across the hood, and don’t even get me started on the others. Girls fall hard and fast, they get obsessed, and then the damage is insane, we almost had to move!”

“Exaggerate much?” I tease, but really I’m not, because every single one of those girls was a way for me to get over the one standing in front of me, ready to strangle me to death.

Life isn’t fair.

I’m over her, I really am. And I’m happy for them, I just don’t know how to find what I had with her, a friend but someone who’s more than that as well, who I can tell my secrets to, my dreams.

And now I sound weak.

“Just...” She does a little turn and walks back to the room, calling out, “Don’t hurt her!”

How does a person hurt someone they barely know? And how do I hurt her when I’m still hurting and bleeding? The other girls made it known to me right away they didn’t want a relationship. Was I so horrible in saying yes to that? Or maybe they just thought it was a cover-up or something?

Ambrose snickers and follows her into the room while I go to my bedroom, grab some fresh clothes and step into my bathroom.

I have three missed texts.

Chloe

You around?

Oh no, is the obsession starting? I almost want to send a screen shot to MB but barely hold myself back.

Chloe

Ignore me. This is a horrible idea.

Me

I'm just getting into the shower and changing my clothes. Then most likely will scarf an insane amount of food. Why what's up?

Chloe

This is going to sound weird.

Me

Try me.

Chloe

Um, can we have a picnic? I'll bring the food, I just always wanted to have one on the beach, my parents got stuck on a work trip and Sophie disappeared again and I just really don't want to be alone... on my birthday. Sophie's with her friends getting wasted.

Did that mean she didn't have any friends, or did that mean she just wanted to hang out with me? I had no idea, no clue, but I was intrigued.

Me

Why don't you just come over?

I see nothing, but dots pop up only to go away. Waiting is torture.

Finally.

Chloe



Give me your address?

Well, now she'd know, actually, no, Ambrose owed me. I went back to my phone and shot him a text.

Me

Dickface, you owe me, I'm telling her I'm poor, okay byeeee.

Ambrose

Who, who are you telling? What am I missing? Is this because I was naked and you got embarrassed? What the Hell is going on?

Me

She's coming over, the girl, the one-night stand, the one I really like, don't mess this up for me. You know people freak out over money

Ambrose

So basically you're my bitch. Yeah, sure, I like it, checks out.

Well, when he puts it that way.

I groan and then text him.

Me

Just don't be a dick.

Ambrose

No promises, this should be fun.

Maybe this was a horrible idea, maybe the best idea I've ever had.

# CHAPTER TEN

*Chloe*

I'm nervous as hell, like literally ready to vomit, why did I even invite myself over? He's going to think I'm crazy, but after this morning, after seeing them together, I can't do it, I really can't.

Sophie and I got into another huge fight when she came home with her ice cream cone, she said he kissed her. I have no clue if she's being serious, but Quinn, from what I know, has always been super handsy, at least after that first date we had at the movies.

I decide to wear something comfortable and go for sweats my sister would normally wear, in fact I stole them from her months ago when she thought they went missing I just never said anything because she'd ruined one of my favorite dresses that mom had gotten me and told me to deal with it.

So I don't exactly feel that guilty.

When she got back and we stopped fighting, I told her happy birthday and she said not to wait up.

Never said it back.

Never even smiled at me.

And this is after she literally stole a guy right from underneath me by impersonating me.

I grab my purse, the keys to the Jeep and the rest of the food that I'd prepared along with the birthday cake I'd made myself. It was plain chocolate, and I had plans to just blow out my own candles and sit there on the couch miserable for hours on end until I buried my face in every last Suits episode I could find.

Once I set everything in the Jeep, I looked down at my screen, he'd texted me the directions to the Beach House, it wasn't that far away but totally on the richer side of Seaside, right above the bluffs.

They had the best views on the coast and since he lived next to celebrities, I was assuming that his best friend was stupid rich, houses up there cost anywhere from five million to fifty.

After starting the Jeep, I made sure to set my phone down with the directions and followed the boardwalk all the way up the hill.

Turn left.

Right.

Straight.

As I kept driving, the houses kept getting bigger until they matched my eyes, just how much money did this guy have?

I pulled up to a three-story beach house with a car that probably cost more than a college education parked in front of it and internally hoped the friend wouldn't be there so I wouldn't have to be nervous in front of him.

Money made me nervous, and I was already having a shit day, I just wanted to see Quinn, wanted to make sure he wasn't suspicious of anything, and wanted to blow out my candles with people around me.

I hadn't seen Quinn in a day and already I was sad, and on top of that Sophie was being horrible on our birthday.

Mom hadn't even called yet.

Dad sent a text of a candle.

Yeah, overjoyed.

I killed the engine, hopped out, grabbed my things, tried not to

hyperventilate as I walked up the steps to the huge white house.

I didn't even have to ring the doorbell though.

The door swung open and a girl with dirty blonde hair and brown eyes answered. "You must be Chloe?"

Why did she look so happy to see me, and why was she so pretty? She looked older than me and yet at the same time not, maybe there was just more wisdom there, but she seemed nice, even though I was always super wary of girls, probably why I didn't have a ton of friends or maybe it's just because my twin liked to spread a shit ton of lies to all my old friends making me isolated and untrusting of anyone and everyone.

"Yeah." I didn't have a hand to hold out to shake hers, but she didn't seem to mind.

She quickly grabbed the cake from my right hand and jerked her head toward the open concept kitchen and living room. Everything was so white and new, it didn't look lived in at all. She almost skipped into the main kitchen area and set down the cake, then turned around. I was suddenly thankful I wore sweats since she was in a pair of black joggers and white Converse. Even her tank top just looked normal, matching her joggers. She had zero to no makeup on and her hair loosely pulled back into a braid.

"So..." I could not sound louder in that empty kitchen or more awkward, or maybe I just looked it. "Is Quinn here or—"

"—Just put the rest of the groceries on the counter." She winks. "And I'll take you out back, the boys had some drama earlier, so I made them go play corn hole."

"You made them?" I almost laugh. I can't see anyone making Quinn do anything.

“Well...” She shrugs. “They weren’t on their best behavior, I may have tried to strangle Quinn after shoving a pillow or I guess he claims I threw it but it barely hurt him!”

I smirk. “What a child.”

“Thank you!” She laughs. “Finally, some good female energy up in here, oh and by the way, I put the fear of God into him that if he breaks your heart, I’ll break his face. I think there were other details in there about dismemberment, but meh, he’ll survive.”

“You are extremely violent.” I nodded. “But I can’t seem to be upset about it, plus if he does break my heart, I’ll probably throw more than a pillow.”

“That’s my girl.” She moves to the sliding glass doors, they open up to a really cool balcony that has a fire pit tons of large blue comfortable looking chairs, a bar to the right, and an outdoor kitchen. The wood doesn’t even look worn from the salt water, maybe it’s teak? Or maybe it was just redone?

I hear yelling.

Then cursing.

She winces. “They’re very competitive.”

“Well, that means only one thing.” I grin and start to walk down the stairs in the direction of the cursing. “We need to beat their asses.”

“Wait, you play cornhole?”

“Won second place in the local championship we had last year, smoked my sister’s ass, ah, that was a good memory, I thought she was going to set my car on fire.”

“...you’re such a dumbass!” I hear Quinn’s voice. “That’s not a point and

you know it! It slid off at the last minute! Do you even know how to do math?”

“No, idiot, because you always did my homework for me!” Another male voice chimes in. “And I’m still pissed about getting a B!”

“You would have failed without me!” Quinn yells.

I turn the corner, and the sight is hilarious.

Quinn is wearing nothing but low-slung ripped jeans, flip-flops and no shirt, and the other guy has on matching black joggers with his girlfriend, his messy golden brown hair blew in the wind and he only had a black tank top on. He was a bit more built than Quinn, as in bulkier but not better looking, in fact, it was hard to tell which would win in that department, but I assumed because of that guy’s money, he won every time.

I know how that feels.

Felt.

How that existence is.

You’re the star of the show until someone else comes in and literally steals your crown, then makes you feel like the guilty party as if you purposefully dropped it or gave it to them.

That was my sister to a T.

“Hey!” Quinn drops the bean bags and jogs over, it’s kind of adorable. “Happy Birthday!”

He seems so happy to be saying it that I almost burst into tears, it’s like when people ask you if you’re okay but you’re not and then you just cry through it or can’t talk out loud.

That was him saying Happy Birthday to me.

He doesn't give me a chance to reply because he's suddenly pulling me into his arms and holding me tight. He's warm, a bit sweaty, and I love it.

"Awww." The girl sighs next to us. "Ambrose, how come you never—"

"—Do not," Ambrose jabs a bean bag at her. "Finish that sentence if you don't want me to beat your ass at cornhole."

"You've won once!" she yells.

"MB!" Ambrose marches over to an actual honest to God white board that has all the wins and losses written in red.

Ambrose 1.5 wins.

MB Seventeen.

Quinn Seven.

Huh.

When Quinn releases me, I just have to ask, "How do you win halfway? Like did you get a point, and she felt sorry for you so threw half the game? Or did you just make up new rules, furthermore, I'm genuinely curious why you would write down your shame for the world to see."

Ambrose slowly turns. "Where did you find her again?"

"Near death experience for both of us." I nod. "Remember?"

He smirks. "I'm going to start calling you thigh girl."

I don't laugh. I just march over and write it on the actual board, then hand the dry erase marker back, slapping it into his hand. "Already done, now should I change your name to pussy or loser? I can't really decide, what do you think, MB?"

She starts to slow clap. "I knew I liked you."



“Do you like cake?”

“If you don’t like cake, you aren’t even living. Who doesn’t like cake?” I almost blurt out my twin sister, but keep it on the inside like everything else.

Instead, I just shrug. “Who knows, I was just doing some recon.”

She nods her head. “Nice. We’ll keep you then.”

“Aw, was this a test? Did I pass?”

“Listen,” MB marches up to me and changes Ambrose’s name to PL, aw she made a little name for him then drew a giant heart next to it. “Anyone who can give these guys shit is a friend of mine, because they dish it out like complete lunatics. Wanna be on my team?”

“Hey, wait!” Quinn starts to protest. “Don’t make me be on his team! Don’t do it, you know what happened last time, MB, I swear, I carried that team and you still beat us, he couldn’t even make it in the hole!”

MB grins. “Huh, he doesn’t seem to have trouble with that in other areas of his life, should I be concerned?”

“Like all holes?” I ask innocently.

“Why does nobody want to be on my team?” Ambrose yells. “Fine, no girls against guys shit, I’ll be on Chloe’s team and yes sorry I already knew your name, it was a test and yes you passed.” He sticks his tongue out at MB.

“Stick it one more time and I’ll pull it.” Her eyebrows arch.

Ambrose holds up his hands. “Only if you promise to pull something else.”

“Why.” Quinn asks nobody in general. “And no, you can’t be her partner, she’s my partner.”

“Rock, paper, scissors for her.” Ambrose goads him on.

Quinn's eyes narrow, he looks ready to punch Ambrose in the chin.  
"Fine."

Ambrose chooses Rock.

Quinn chooses scissors. "Son of a bitch!"

He kicks the ground with his foot sending one of the bean bags flying, it's cute, he's cute and sexy all at once, I like seeing a different side of him and you can tell how awesome someone is by the people they hang out with. I suddenly want to protect them at all costs, we don't need Sophie meeting any of them, she'd just talk trash, she'd ruin everything.

I try to change the mood. "Well, it looks like Ambrose is my bitch now." I laugh and hold up my hand for a high five.

Ambrose hits it, then flips off Quinn with the other.

"Yes, Ambrose, celebrate the one and only time you've won." They both go awkwardly silent, even MB averts her eyes, not able to meet mine and staring down at the grass.

Quinn clears his throat loudly, so loud that I'm afraid to ask what could make them suddenly so uncomfortable.

"Well," MB's face has suddenly lost some color. "I'm going to take the other bitch over here and grab my beanbags, stop moping Quinn, you'll be fine! You're on the winning team!"

"We'll see!" I yell and grab my beanbags and then toss Ambrose his. He catches one, drops the other. "Wow, did you never play sports?"

"Oh shit," MB says under her breath.

"Captain of the lacrosse team, if you must know!"

"You?" I point.

MB laughs harder.

The good mood is back.

Ambrose points over at Quinn. “He was captain of the chess club!”

“Are you saying that because while he was using his brain you were playing with a stick or am I missing something, butterfingers?” I wink.

Quinn dies laughing while MB joins in again.

Ambrose has murder in his blue eyes. “You,” He points the beanbag at me. “Are lucky we’re teammates, otherwise I would wreck you. You hear me, get wrecked!”

“Please don’t start rizzing.” I shake my head. “That would just further my disappointment, now try to follow through with your throw and don’t let them get in your heads!”

He’s already staring in their direction.

“No!” I clap in front of his face. “Listen soldier, they want to get in your head, they want you to lose, they want to humiliate you, but don’t worry, I won’t let that happen, because I’m a team player.”

“Are you guys done hyping each other up now?” Quinn calls. “It just makes us sad.”

“Hate being sad,” MB agrees.

They both nod like they’re watching the beginning of a tragedy.

“Let’s end them,” Ambrose says through clenched teeth.

Now, I’m a little fuzzy on all the details but at one point violence did in fact take over, the boys started yelling again while MB and I carried their asses. We were tied and there was no end in sight and then suddenly MB kind of staggers then collapses to the ground.

I run while they're still yelling and get to her side even faster than Quinn. He panics and reaches for her at the same time Ambrose does.

"Sweetheart." Ambrose taps her cheek.

Quinn jerkily pulls his hands away, concern etched across his face, and it quite honestly all clicks.

Her.

He said his heart was recently broken, I thought he was being sarcastic or living in the moment, I didn't really take his words at face value until this moment.

I lean down and reach for his hand. "She'll be okay."

How weird, to comfort someone who's still in love with someone else. Or maybe not in love, I don't know... I have too many conflicting emotions and right now we just need to make sure she's all right.

Slowly, she blinks open her eyes and frowns at Ambrose. "Why am I on the ground?"

"Because you fainted." He's gritting his teeth. "And you know that when you're pregnant—"

He stops talking.

My mouth gapes open.

Quinn pales next to me, squeezing my hand so tight I'm afraid he's going to actually pull it off. "You're pregnant?"

MB hits him. "I just get dizzy and I just found out this morning, so thank you, dumbass of the house, for spilling everything, plus it's early on... only a few weeks."

"With a baby." Quinn's voice cracks.

Ambrose clenches his teeth. “No, a chicken. Yes, a baby!”

“A baby,” he repeats again, smile sad. “I’m really happy for you guys.”

I start to stand as Quinn pulls me up. “Hey, maybe we should all go inside, it is a weirdly hot day, and she probably needs to hydrate.”

MB rolls her eyes. “I’m fine, plus it’s your birthday.”

“We have all the rest of the day.” I point out. “You go nap.”

Ambrose is already pulling her to his side and helping her get up and walk back toward the stairs.

I’m quiet.

Quinn’s deathly quiet.

Happy Birthday to me?

I clear my throat. “It’s good that you guys can all still be friends, even better that you’re happy for him, right?”

Please say right.

Please don’t be so hung up that you can’t see anyone else.

Please see me.

Quinn drops my hand, it may as well be my heart. Didn’t she make him promise not to break it?

He puts that hand on his chest, then grabs mine again. “It doesn’t hurt like it used to, I’m just in shock because one time, just one time, I saw a way in. Had I been more honest, a better friend, made different choices, but I wouldn’t change any of that.”

“Because hurting is a normal human process?”

“Well that, but also because I got to meet you and as cheesy as that

sounds, I really like you, even when you're so competitive my best friend looks ready to run you over with his car."

"Yeah, his eyes get so big."

"Scary big." He smirks, then wraps an arm around me. "Let's go grab a snack or some drinks. God, I need a drink that actually sounds way better—and go watch a movie in my room."

"Is that code for birthday sex?"

He smiles straight ahead. "I mean, if you want it to be... but I kind of just wanted to hold you."

Plus, how horrible of a human would I be if I slept with him like my sister did and didn't tell him?

How horrible is it of me that my next biggest concern is, what if he can tell because I'm not good at it?

Selfish.

But it is my birthday so I accept it. "Sounds good."

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Quinn*

I want her again.

So bad. It's ridiculous. She's so pretty, and it's not just that, it's just this feeling I have. She's walking down the hall, I watch her steps and think to myself, I'm an idiot because I'm obsessed with the cadence, like how does a human get obsessed with how someone walks?

But I am.

Fully invested, by the way, in how she walks. Her hips sway, there are tiny things about her that are so amazing but it's almost like she saves them for me when I'm watching. She looks over her shoulder and smiles. Meanwhile, I nearly walk into a wall, then the fridge, then take a minute.

A near death experience and I met someone for a reason, I hope.

I just want to be close to her and I feel a weird need to do exactly that.

I would hold her if that's what she wanted.

I would kiss her on the cheek, ask permission to hold her hand, she's just so interesting and fun. I feel like she gets me and I get her.

It's different than it was with MB, I was in full protective mode along with having a whole secret life that I shouldn't have kept secret. I was in a war with my best friend, and oh yeah, trying to survive my dad's heavy hand on everything I did since apparently being in the chess club was so not the direction he wanted me going.

But Chloe? She was free.

And she was mine.

The only thing that has been mine in a very long time, like a secret I keep between just us and don't have to feel guilty about.

“Hey.” I grab her hand, then slap her ass. “Go into my room, first door on the right in the hallway, and I'll grab us some snacks.”

She smiles, but it feels like a different sort of smile, maybe she's nervous, I don't know, but it just feels off.

I ignore it as she walks by because I know it's her birthday and maybe she's just sad and I want to make her feel special. It's important she knows that it wasn't a one-night stand, that it was us, her, together. I've been through a lot with my past and I'm just so done and while I don't know her entire history, I feel like she's the same way.

I smile as I walk to the fridge and grab two cokes.

This is it, right?

When you find someone and you're at peace.

When you feel for someone else but know they will only ever be a friend and when you find someone you know will be more than that or could be?

I don't want to stress Ambrose out because hello apparently MB is pregnant which is a whole different thing I refuse to even think about, but also, I can't be angry, they're in this for the long run and if that means they have a baby before they planned, I'm good with that, it was just a huge shock, but I'm good, I have other things to look forward to and I'm finally moving past everything and it's all because she makes me feel like I never had my heart broken, which is just... huge for me.

I smile as I grab some Twizzlers, a few cans of Trulys, and make my way back to the room I'm staying in. She's already on the bed, her hair is spread across a pillow. “Why is this so comfy?”



“Because it’s my room.” I answer. “Any other questions, or do you want to watch something epic?”

“Yes, because watching suspense always works for us. Oh no, is this our porn?”

I laugh so hard I nearly fall off the bed I just climbed onto. “No, that would be weird, imagine Jason Statham, never mind, it just got weird, eat a Twizzler.”

She laughs and grabs the pack from me, opening it and tugging one out, her smile is wide and free. I want to think I did that to her, I want to think I can do more to her, again and again.

I really like her.

I finally feel like I’m on a different journey.

One that wasn’t pushed for me, but one I chose.

Finally.

Her teeth tug into the Twizzler, she moans, I moan internally and watch as she tucks her hair behind her one ear with her left hand like she needs more space to chew or maybe to experience.

I say nothing.

It’s so good.

I feel it.

She keeps chewing and finally finishes the Twizzler with her eyes closed, then opens them and looks at me. “What?”

“Nah, just sexy watching you eat.”

She blushes, then looks away. “Sorry, was way too hungry.”

“Same.” But not for Twizzlers. “What do you want to watch?”

Her blue eyes turn to me... they focus then unfocus like she's thinking about something serious before responding, like she's uncertain before she clears her throat reaches for another Twizzler and points to the TV and says, “A documentary, like something very tragic, that's perfect.”

“Yeah, okay, so setting the mood, I feel you.”

Chloe shoves my face with her hand. “Hey, I like those kinds of shows.”

“Yes, they are extremely uplifting and sexy on your birthday, oh look death, destruction, drugs, cheating, tell me more!”

Her laugh is impossible to miss as she climbs onto me and straddles my lap. “I like learning.”

I sigh when I put my hands on her shoulders and run them down her arms. “Yes, I also like exploring.”

“Wow.” She breathes, and again her eyes seem unfocused, uncertain maybe is a better word, like she's either dreaming or experiencing a nightmare, I can't tell which so I start to pull back but then she grabs my wrists.

I stay midair with her gripping them tight.

Her chest rises and falls.

“You okay?” I ask. I mean, I want to add, it was only a movie, but she's looking like this is life or death. “What's going on?”

“You like me?” she asks, licking her bottom lip and taking a deep breath. “Right?”

I almost snort. “Yeah, obviously. I mean, my time is extremely valuable. Why would I waste time with someone I don't like, but also, you're funny

and amazing, except for when we had ice cream, and you just bounced.”

She flinches.

“You good?” I ask.

She nods her head slowly. “So it’s me, only me?”

“It’s only ever been you for two straight weird days of insta-love and sex, why do you ask? Then again, we are young, damn, are we like the Top Gun of Seaside just jumping into things and going a million miles a minute? I’m here for it, I swear I am just—“

She painfully jerks my neck toward her and bruises my lips with her kiss. I’m gone. I’m lost, devoured by her, owned.

She pulls back suddenly. “So, what happened with her?”

“Who?” I play dumb.

Chloe crawls off my lap and lays down next to me. My head hits the pillow and I instantly grab her hand and squeeze it, staring up at the ceiling, wishing there were those cheesy plastic stars I could wish on.

All I see is white.

I wish I was the type of person who could look up and go wow an empty canvas, instead I look up and see nothing.

Just nothing.

If anyone asked me, I’d lie and say I saw an incredible future, visions, dreams, instead I just see nothingness and I wonder if my trauma led me to this place. I wonder what it’s like to just be able to draw on that canvas, to create your own path, your own future.

I won’t ever know.

So I keep my lies to myself.

I keep my secrets inside.

I keep things between my lips that are bursting to be told.

And I wait for her answer.

“Her,” she says like I should know, then turns to me, her hair tangling with the pillow. She grabs the blue blanket on my bed and holds it tight, almost twisting it between her fingers. “MB, the girl with Ambrose. Was she the one who broke your heart?”

I hesitate, then say, “I think I need something stronger than Twizzlers for this.”

“Probably.” She releases the blanket and grabs my hand, pulling me on top of her easily. “Are you over her?”

I’m worried that if I hesitate she’ll leave, just like I’m worried if I answer too soon, she’ll think I’m lying when really I’m where I’m supposed to be. “I’m over her.” I speak out. “In the romantic way you’re thinking, but she’s still close to here.” I hold Chloe’s hand to my chest and press it hard. “And she’ll always be a close friend, so if that means you’re uncomfortable, then... I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry, but I don’t abandon friends, and even though she’s with my best friend, I refuse to let either of them go.”

“Loyalty.” Chloe nods, pressing her hand even harder against my chest. “Who knew guys still had that?”

“Well, it could be because I’m an idiot, but, I will always be by their side even if I was the one who lost the girl, even if I was the knight that came too late, even if I was the lesser person, or even if I just wasn’t the right one. Hell, it could have even been my fault, but life is life and right now I’m trying hard to find what I want and right now in this moment I really want to kiss you and ignore the fact that my past has semi tried to jump up into my

present, so can I? Can I just kiss you?”

Her eyes well with tears. She nods her head, her skin is smooth as I cup her cheeks, running my thumbs down to her lips like I’m already kissing her. Her skin is perfect, her lips plump and pink, I want to bite them. I’m feeling both aggressive and soft, what the hell is wrong with me?

I lean down the minute her chin knocks mine. So soft and sweet, her lips part and suddenly my tongue massages hers as our mouths meet, she moves her hips, I settle down on her body and forget my own name, she feels so good, too good.

Her hands reach for my hair, her nails dig into my head and draw down until she’s at my neck, keeping me pinned against her even though I’m the one on top.

All I keep thinking is, what a beautiful smile.

She’s all wonder and fire, she’s refreshing and new, she’s dare I say happy? And I want to think it’s for me.

“Listen,” She licks her pink swollen bottom lip. “Can we do this again? I’m asking for a redo from the other day.”

I frown. “We can, but why?”

“Because” —her eyes flicker from mine—“I just want to be awake for this one, I want to be yours, just yours.” Her eyes suddenly swell, filling with tears, one slowly slides down her cheek. “I know it’s weird, but please?”

I answer honestly. “I’ve known you two days and still, I think I’d give you the world, damn this whole insta love situation people always give people shit about, if you want a do over, that’s what I’ll do even if you hate me later, even if you leave me, aren’t we all allowed our moments?”

Another tear slides down her cheek, I catch it with my finger and bring my tongue to it, tasting it. “Bitter.”

“Always,” she says instantly. “Especially now.”

What does that even mean?

“But.” She continues. “You’re mine, for now, right?”

“Well, might need to do a character interview later to make sure we’re compatible, do a few tests and—“

She pulls me down for another kiss and I’m done. I reach for the bottom of her shirt, then jerk it off her head. I waste no time in undoing her bra or reaching for her jean shorts and tugging them down with her underwear. I am not a lazy lover, that’s for sure.

She moans into my mouth. Yup, this is happening.

I have no condom, though.

I try to pull away to tell her that, when she shoves my pants down and grips me, shit, oh shit.

I nearly pass out. She’s aggressive, more aggressive than before, maybe because we’re familiar with each other?

I give into it.

Into her grip, into her guidance, into the way she rubs my tip with her thumb, the way she tries to shove me inside her. I have no clue what’s going on other than we’re having sex and it’s unprotected and I want to say something. Later, I know I’ll regret this.

I know.

I just know.

But it feels so good.

I don't say stop.

I don't pause anything.

I give in, because I like her, because I think she might be my person.

So when I'm sinking between her thighs and slowing my movements and kissing her, all I think about is how wonderful it's going to be—to hopefully keep this angel forever, not realizing—I might be sleeping with the devil—no that's not even right. Not the devil... my sadness, my utter destruction. All because I fell in more ways than one .

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Chloe*

He feels amazing.

I feel amazing.

I try not to overthink it because he was mine first, not hers, she stole him, she stole a moment and now he's mine again, he never has to know, right?

His hips move perfectly, the way he holds mine with both hands then kisses me slowly is like a drug, one I want to be on for an eternity. I feel both safe and screwed which is a weird thing to even think about as he slowly thrusts deeper and deeper, my legs shake a bit while I cling to his neck and back with my hands, his sweat presses through my fingertips as he continues to kiss my neck. I wipe away everything he did with my sister and know he's mine, mine. No way did he act this way with her, this precious.

His mouth opens against my collarbone, biting down before he makes his way back up to my lips, capturing them with heat and tongue. Yes. This was what I wanted, what I was waiting for. His muscles flex beneath my fingertips, I grip harder and pull him closer. God, he's so deep it almost hurts.

He pulls back, his expression unreadable as he looks down at me, brows furrowing. "This is different."

"What?" I almost moan it. I wonder why I can't keep any emotion in when I'm with him, why I feel weak but brave at the same time.

"Better." He leans down, his mouth latches onto mine again before answering. "So good. I just, damn..." He makes a noise in the back of his throat. "I'm too close, Chloe, I'm so sorry."

"Go." It's all I have to say when my entire body spasms and he collapses



on top of me.

Out of breath, he just lays there, suffocating me until he leans up on his elbows and looks down at me and grins. “Where did you come from again?”

“A canoe.” I laugh. “And where did you come from again?”

He presses a kiss to my lips. “The sky.”

“You were falling.”

“Maybe,” he kisses me again and again, three times across the mouth. “I was destined to fall.”

I say nothing.

But the guilt of the knowledge builds until I want to puke.

Instead, I hold him close like that’s going to make things better.

And I hope that it actually will.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Quinn*

It was different.

It was more emotional, more perfect if I can even say that word anymore because she literally here in my arms feels so right, from her soft skin to the way that she fits right next to my body. I want to tell her not to go home, to stay in my room and watch movies forever.

Creepy, yes, but I'm borderline obsessed with this girl. Maybe that's what happens when you find your person and someone who makes you smile rather than cry. I'm so damn tired of being disappointed and upset over a relationship, hell I was ready to quit even dating before I fell into her lap, but now I have hope that the universe isn't completely against me.

I fall back against the bed, she's quiet next to me, I don't have the energy to move and I honestly don't want to. My grip on her is stronger than it should be, tighter.

All I keep thinking is, finally, finally something for me, someone for me, is that so wrong? To be excited that I have a person in my arms I don't have to fight someone else for? Someone I genuinely like... could potentially love.

Life is weird.

She turns in my arms and looks up at me. "Was that, like, I mean... okay for you?"

I almost laugh then realize she's dead serious and quickly sober and frown over at her in shock, because how could it not be amazing again? "What do you mean, was it okay? It was incredible, just like last time."

Her face falls as if it wasn't a compliment. "Oh, good."

I cup her cheeks with my hands. “That’s your response, oh good?”

She grins up at me, suddenly changing her posture. “Sorry, apparently you exhausted me with your sexual prowess.”

“As one does.”

“As one does.” She agrees with a wider smile, giving me a toothy grin that has me wanting to kiss her all over again, shit she’s cute. I capture her lips and pull her on top of me. “I meant actually watch a movie, you know, not this... I’d be happy just to lie next to you.”

She rests her arms on my chest, folded against it, our skin is sticky from sweat, the smell of sex fills the air but I can’t find myself to move from this moment. Her eyes search mine. “Do you really mean that?”

“I’m easy to please.” I put my hands behind my head. “I mean, sex is great, but if you wanted to binge watch Lord of the Rings, I’d be okay with that too.”

“Maybe that’s why I like you.”

“YOU SHALL NOT PASS!” I yell like a total nerd.

She smacks me on the chest. “Yeah, okay Gandalf.”

I grab her hand. “See? And that’s another reason I like you, you didn’t look at me like an idiot and actually know who Gandalf is.”

“People don’t know Lord of the Rings? That’s just sad.”

“Pathetic.” I nod. “A tragedy really.”

“Does that make you Sam Wise? And me Frodo?”

“Wait, why do you get to be Frodo?”

She grins and rests her chin on my chest. “Because I want to have the power of the ring, but also because Sam never leaves his side, I kind of like

the idea of that kind of loyalty.”

I sigh. “I’ve never cheated, never will. Loyal to a fault.”

Her eyes flicker away from mine, like I somehow made her nervous. “Good.”

What did I say wrong?

She starts to move away from me, but I pull her back down then frown. Her face is super flushed across the bridge of her nose and her cheeks. “Hey, you feeling okay?”

She nods.

“Okay, it’s just you have a small rash or swelling—“ I start to point when she scrambles away from me and basically dives off the bed in search of her clothes.

“I actually...” She quickly puts on her clothes. “Forgot about something I have to do really quick.” She stumbles toward the door and pauses like she needs to catch her breath. “Thank you though, thank you!”

“For the sex?”

She looks over her shoulder. “For being you.”

She’s gone in seconds.

And I’m left wondering if I’m bad at sex or just offered her.

I send her a quick text.

Me

Please tell me you really didn’t hate it.

She doesn’t respond back for two hours.

And when she does, it's with a heart emoji plus a "I'll tell you later."

Later comes sooner than I thought because when I open the front door, she's standing there in completely different clothes with a smile on her face. "Aren't you going to wish me Happy Birthday?"

"Thought I already did?"

Her attitude seemed more upbeat, different. "Well, let's repeat that then."

"Huh?"

She grabs me by the neck and pulls me in for a kiss that does not feel like the kisses we've been sharing today. I jerk away. "Are you feeling okay?"

"It's my birthday," she says again. "Of course, plus I have you."

"Okay, Frodo." I laugh.

She doesn't.

What the Hell is going on?

Her smile doesn't reach her eyes.

I drop her hand and take a step back. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Her posture relaxes a bit. "Yeah, I just had something to do with my sister, but now I'm back."

"Okay."

"Okay." She steps into the house. "Want to watch a movie?"

It sounds lame but I just want to take that frown from her face and the fact that she's still here tells me all I need to know.

She wants a friend.

I'm attracted.

I want her.

I feel weirdly needy and possessive.

But at the end of the day, I can be a friend, I can be what she needs, at least that's what I tell myself as I sit next to her. She's a stranger but not, and while I always judged insta-love I kind of look at her and go, okay, I get it. I get it now.

"Let's gooooo." I wrap an arm around her.

It feels good.

It feels like I'm finally healing from my past.

Starting a new beginning feels like being set free, maybe all I needed was Seaside, maybe all I needed was her.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Chloe*

We watched a movie.

Everything was fine.

Had you asked what the movie was about I might have just had to make it up. First off, he's too hot, like literally, second, he kept rubbing my shoulder, hand, kissing my neck, but not in an aggressive way, basically he's perfect and I don't deserve him.

I wanted to tell him, actually I almost told him a million times last night, but how do you even begin that conversation? My own sister despises me because of my illness, my family treats me like I'm going to die any minute when everything is under control—don't even get me started on when I'm struggling.

I'm glass.

Officially glass.

I just want to be steel.

Is that so hard to ask for?

The universe probably laughs every time I say that because there is no chance in hell I will ever be that, even though it's what I wish for on a daily basis. My stomach kind of hurts, my anxiety is at an all-time high because of the secrets I'm keeping and I feel—funny, not like myself, which means I might be having an episode which again terrifies me. I don't know him well enough to actually expose him to all of this.

And it's a lot, I know it's a lot, I get it, trust me, I deal with it constantly,

but the real shit part is that even my own parents really don't get it, they work, they check in, they travel constantly, and then when they come home and see if I've had an episode you'd think that I had leprosy.

One time I walked in to hear Sophie talking to my parents, it's something I'll never forget.

“What if I catch it? We don't know, it could be something else. I don't want to die! What if the diagnosis is wrong, and she's contagious? Not even that, but you guys spend so much time just worrying about her and working, I'm left here, maybe it would be easier, right? Easier to get sick.”

She yelled the last part.

I kept waiting by the kitchen, mouth dry, a clump of hair in my hand that I was crying over, pain everywhere, fear that I'd need a transplant, fear that I was somehow alienating everyone in my world because when they asked how I was doing all I wanted to say was, welp, not great, see exhibit A! But when you're sick you're not allowed it, I mean maybe once or twice, but after a while even your own family gets tired of talking about it, so you suppress, you try to get better and you tell them everything is fine when you're dizzy, nauseated, when you puke up dinner, when your muscles ache, you force a smile because how dare you be sick and fucking show me.

It's the fear.

I believe my last boyfriend said I was baggage and damaged and that I was making everything up even when my hair was falling out in my own hands, then he told his dad who then sat me down and told me that sometimes we manifest things.

I got a little pat on my knee, and that was it. We broke up the next day and I almost ran to the store to build a voodoo doll to curse his entire family—



especially after doctors did, in fact, diagnose me correctly.

Ugh, people suck, and the worst part is that no matter how much they “love” or “care” they don’t get chronic illness, at least not in the way that makes sense. I could literally give my entire diagnosis, write a report, win a Nobel and I swear people would still look at me, blink, and go, well why don’t you just eat healthy and rest more, take your medicine, then manifest good thoughts?

The amount of times I’ve been told to just do better or get better is insulting—especially from my own twin, who’s convinced I’m “sick” to get more attention.

It steals every piece of joy and it steals the rest that I get in between those moments where I’m able to actually breath. I always heard or grew up hearing that twins could sense each other and that the bond they had was tighter than anything, but all she’s ever done well is sabotage.

“Hey, you good?” Quinn frowns. “You look kind of pale?”

“Is that a question?”

“Well, if Cinderella’s carriage is currently turning back into a pumpkin, isn’t it the prince’s job to help save her from the mice?” His grin is infectious, but I can tell he’s worried, I’m not ready though, not ready to tell.

“Why are the mice bad again?” I laugh.

He smiles and pulls me into his arms across the couch. “They eat their young.”

“Right.” I nod in agreement. “So you just don’t want me to get... bit?”

His teeth cause goosebumps as they scrape down my neck before he presses a kiss to my collarbone. Is it horrible to beg him to bite me? “Maybe

it's jealousy.”

“It's something.”

“Seriously though, are you okay? I can take you back home, I just—I don't know, it's your birthday and I want to be with you. I wish I could do more.”

He has no idea he's doing everything that nobody has ever done by just existing and actually offering to do something.

I take a deep breath and rest against his chest. I can feel his heart through my palm, his skin is even warm through his shirt. I love it. I love that I could easily tap my fingers to his heartbeat.

I love that he's funny and serious at the same time.

I love so much.

And then I wonder, if I'm laying with a stranger or a guy I've known for two days, sleeping with him, and just existing with him on my birthday, is the love I've known or thought I known my entire life, an actual lie?

Shit. Immediately, it hits me. I really am going to start an episode, I can feel it not physically as much as emotionally. I'm getting anxious and depression is creeping in.

I feel the darkness coming.

Tears burn the back of my eyes, why is it always like this? That when my body starts to completely betray me, my mind does too? I feel out of control, I feel like the world isn't the same, that the sun just set and abandoned me along with everyone else. And then I feel guilty for feeling that way, like my anxiety is somehow a selfish emotion.

I take a few deep breaths.

“Hey.” Quinn pulls me up onto his lap. God, he’s a gorgeous distraction with his straight white toothed smile, small dimples, messy man bun. I can’t, the list will just go on and on if I keep checking him out. His warmth though, it’s not just the way he looks, it’s, wow, it’s the way he looks at me.

I don’t know if I’ve ever had anyone look at me the way he does.

Is this what feeling special is like?

Feeling unique?

Like the most important person in the others world that they can’t for one second look away?

“You’re still beautiful.” He cups my chin with his hand, I suddenly realize how large it is, his thumb brushes across my lower lip. “I just want to take care of you on this day, mainly every day, even though you’re probably still wondering if I’m a serial killer.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m not.”

“See? Though, we do need to have our first fight in order to solidify all assumptions, until then—“ He leans in at the same time a knock sounds at the door.

“Cockblocking Ambrose, I’m gonna murder him...” The door opens and Zane Andrews, you know famous, gorgeous guy we saw earlier strolls right on in like he owns the place.

He drops his phone and sunglasses on the kitchen counter and stretches his arms over his head.

He’s literally wearing no shirt, only low-slung ripped jeans that show his black Calvin Klein underwear and he has a weird smile on his face.

“Bro, you high?” Quinn asks. “Also, why? Just why?”

Zane frowns. “No, I just made a neighborhood decision.”

“What’s that?” I whisper under my breath.

“Hey there.” He winks a blue eye in my direction. “Anyway, neighborhood decision...” He walks around the couch, then plops down next to me. “Basically, the kid shit his pants again, the wife is gone, the nanny is present because my beautiful wife had to go out of town and when I saw an escape from shit, I took it, and then I told everyone else—also yes, parenting isn’t for the weak and I haven’t had time off in years from not only my work but from wiping asses, so don’t judge me with your judgmental eyes.”

I hold up my hands. “No judgement over the shit.”

He peers around me. “I think she’s a keeper.”

Quinn sighs. “Okay, so what’s this about?”

“We’re having a barbeque, might play some pong.” He sighs. “Or maybe even nap, actually, damn, can you imagine how nice it would be to just... lay down?”

“Do you not... er, sleep?” I ask.

His left eye twitches.

Quinn leans in and whispers, “I think that was a no.”

“Anyway!” Zane jumps up. “The life of a rockstar and full-time dad is exhausting and I’m starting work on the new album next week so I think I deserve some time out, oh shit, you guys watching *Pretty Woman*?” He proceeds to jump between us on the couch—still shirtless mind you while another knock sounds at the door. “It’s open!”

“It’s not your house,” Quinn grumbles under his breath.

Zane scoffs. “Actually, it’s not your house either, besides, did you not hear the explanation? No shitty diapers. I get to sit here.”

“Shirtless.” I add, staring at his chest.

He points at me. “Very perceptive of you and while I did used to go around with no shirt on, the only reason I pulled mine off today was because it had chocolate on it—was touch and go there for a minute there when I thought it was poop.”

Quinn and I frown at each other.

I speak up first. “How did you know it was chocolate?”

Zane shrugs. “Oh, I tasted it.” The door opens. “Hey man!”

A guy pops his head in, then pulls out a giant case of beer. He’s vaguely familiar and I’m just about to place him when Quinn curses under his breath. “You brought Jamie?”

“Heard that,” Jamie says, his voice has a slight British accent.

I’m still frowning when it dawns on me. I’m not used to seeing him in real life, only on TV.

I raise my hand.

“Awww.” Jamie grins. “She’s adorable, we’re keeping her, right?”

“She’s not a pet!’ Quinn yells.

“How many famous cousins do you have again?” I say in a weak voice. “So I can mentally and emotionally prepare for more shock?”

I’m already sick.

Pale.

Not feeling great.

And now my heart is hammering against my chest because the Jamie Jaymeson is standing in Ambrose's living room or I guess, Quinns now. If he has such famous friends or family, why is he crashing at Ambrose's place?

"Oh, he's loaded." Zane gets up and grabs a chip from the counter, then looks over his shoulder. "You said it out loud." He bites down and chews—loudly. "The whole weird why is Quinn crashing at Ambrose—"

"—Thanks man." Quinn interrupts.

"Anytime, bro," Zane turns to Jamie, "The rest of them coming?"

"Yup." He checks his cell. "Though getting the OGs to leave their plethora of kids got semi difficult."

"OG's?" I repeat.

"The guys from Adrenaline, the boy band that just got back together and oh shit is she gonna be okay?" Jamie waves a hand in front of my face and I swear I still see that hand two hours later when the entire back yard is full of guys and their wives, beer, wine, hot dogs, hamburgers, and competitive corn hole—no like they legit brought more sets to have a competition.

So far some tall guy with a bald head who looks like he could be part of the Russian Mob has threatened to break up two fights, though the fights were more funny than anything.

Two guys with earpieces are at the gate drinking beer, when I asked if they were security, the only answer I was given was Chicago sent us for the week.

My answer was. "I didn't know a city could send people." I laughed awkwardly, they didn't and looked like they would eat their own young, wearing black suits, covered in hand tattoos, one had this giant bird around his neck, it looked like a raven.

They smiled, but it was calculated, so I got the hell out of that section of the yard and went in search of Quinn.

I was starting to feel even more sick as the night progressed, so the minute I saw him sitting at one of the tables, I pulled out a chair and sat down. The ocean breeze was at least helping a little bit.

“So.” I drummed my pink fingernails against the glass table while my hair whipped across my mouth. “You’re kind of a big deal then?”

Quinn grinned and lifted a bottle of water to his lips, set it down and reached for a small glass of whiskey next to his thigh, he downed it in one big swipe and set it down on the table, then held out his hand. “Let’s not talk about me, it’s not my birthday, now is it?”

In that moment, Zane started shouting, everyone was laughing, and then he jumped on a chair and pointed at me. “Happy Birthday, strange girl I don’t know!”

Cheers erupted around us.

I had to laugh, it had been years since I’d been at a party let alone get acknowledged at one, even though it wasn’t my party.

Zane jumps down from the chair and starts belting out happy birthday while slowly walking toward me and I truly do feel dizzy, but I can’t tell if it’s because he’s so pretty to look at or because his voice is so good.

He stops right in front of me and does a little bow.

Quinn curses next to me. “Seduce your wife, not my girlfriend.”

Girlfriend?

I smile to myself.

Zane rolls his eyes. “I’m obsessed with my wife and you know this.”

“Right.” Quinn sighs. “You just can take the musician out of LA, but you can never truly take away their seductive ability on stage.”

Jamie snorted out next to me. “According to Zane, he can’t help but ooze. What was that sexuality? Wait, weren’t you a virgin until like twenty—“

“—okay singing time is over.” Zane grabs Jamie by the back of the neck and shoves him toward the cornhole chaos.

Quinn kisses the top of my head. “They’re all happily married and harmless, but seriously, they just can’t help themselves sometimes.”

“Meh, I assume that’s Hollywood.”

“No, that’s just them being too good looking and talented and being told it on a daily basis while everyone around them kisses their asses.”

“Heard that!” Jamie yelled.

Quinn wraps his arm around me. “Hey, you still look kind of pale, why don’t we call it a night?”

“Sending me home on my birthday?” I tease.

He squeezes my shoulder and leads me toward the outdoor deck. “Hell no, you’re spending the night, but you do seem tired, we can just... cuddle.”

I smack him in the chest. “Just cuddle? With a perfectly healthy good-looking guy on my birthday?”

He smiles down at me and grabs my hand, helping me up the stairs. “It doesn’t always have to be about sex, Chloe, sometimes, a guy just wants to hold the girl he likes.

I fall asleep that night in his arms. Safe. Protected. Wanted.

Happy.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Quinn*

Okay listen, I'm not exactly proud of my man-whorish background but at least I can be proud that the gorgeous girl laying across my chest, burning it up, ended up truly just sleeping in my arms.

See? I can show some damn restraint!

Chloe's phone starts to buzz where I left it on the nightstand, I don't want to wake her up since she wasn't feeling so good last night, plus she looks so peaceful. I slowly pry her away and grab the phone in a hushed voice, answering, "Hey, Sophie."

She doesn't say anything at first, then blurts out, "What? Did you kidnap my sister on her birthday or something?"

I turn and look at her. "Yeah, something like that, happy birthday, by the way."

"Thanks." She doesn't sound thankful, instead she sounds downright hostile, then again I haven't had coffee yet and I'm not a huge fan of getting interrupted when I have a gorgeous girl in my arms, though she does seem to feel really hot to the touch and the fact that she hasn't even stirred is weird.

"Anyway..." Sophie's voice is a bit lighter. "My parents were trying to get ahold of her and wanted to know how she was doing, but she wasn't answering her phone."

I don't check the missed calls but frown down at her sleeping form. I love her in my white t-shirt more than I should admit. "Well, she did say she was tired yesterday, and she does feel a bit warm—"

"—Shit, I knew it! See, this is why you don't—" She cuts herself off.

“Whatever, give me your address and I’ll be there in a few minutes to grab her.”

“What if I don’t want you to grab her?”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re an idiot?”

“Often, yes, anyone ever tell you that you’re rude?”

She cackles out a laugh that kind of makes me want to both love and hate her at the same time. Something is off with her, but I go with it because it’s Chloe’s twin. “All the time, yes.”

I take a hesitant deep breath. “Maybe we should work on our faults, I’ll go first, yes apparently I am being an idiot, but only because you’re too rude to tell me why you’re frustrated.”

“That makes me second I guess,” She sighs long and hard into the phone, I can feel her pain and I suddenly feel sorry for her the way I’ve felt sorry for myself over the shit year I’ve had. And it has been a complete bomb of shit, like the kind of shit that makes you second guess all life choices. “It’s not for me to tell, but if she’s warm or hot to the touch, she has a fever and she’s gotten them a lot since she was like thirteen, so I need to come get her.”

I reach out with my palm and touch her forehead again... she seems to be getting hotter. I touch my own forehead and go back and forth like a psycho for at least ten seconds. She’s not okay. And she needs more rest and hydration, obviously. “She’ll be okay though, right?”

Sophie says something, but I can’t decipher what it is, then her voice is clear as day. “Get a damp compress, make sure she drinks some water, and I’ll be there in a few minutes oh and let me write down your address, ugh I’m so tired of this shit all the time.”

“Phone calls with would be suitors?” I joke, trying to lighten the moment.

Clearly it fails because her immediate response isn't laughter. But a curse.

"Hell no, having to take care of someone who's so damn sick that it's the only thing anyone ever sees."

She doesn't say it, but I swear I can hear it. "See me."

My heart drops, my stomach sinks, and all because I feel sorry for her, because I know that feeling, and when you experience something like that, you one hundred percent recognize it in others.

"Hey." I swallow and get up, pressing the phone to my ear. "Are you okay?"

I hear her gasp. It's a few seconds before she goes. "Nobody ever asks me that."

"Well, that's sad."

She laughs. "Life is sad, I prefer to live in the sadness and shadows."

"Then how do you ever see the light?"

"Says someone I'm assuming lives the same way."

I almost drop the phone. Instead, I leave the room. I leave Chloe and I talk to Sophie. I take a step into the living room. What the hell am I even doing? "Get a pen."

She says nothing until finally. "I'm ready."

"She's still sleeping."

I don't know why I say it, and after I give her my address.

After all of it.

After it all.

My concern for Chloe, my underlying understanding of Sophie—things

feel weird. I stand outside and grip the balcony, watching the waves crash against the rocks.

Something shifts in the wind.

Something strong.

Something disposable maybe, something new or old? Something that might change things.

But just like the waves—it's never the same.

I don't know what I'm doing with my life, with Chloe, with the strong feelings I have, but I know something's coming.

I count the waves as nervousness takes over.

“Hey,” a voice sounds.

It's not Chloe.

“I let myself in after knocking a billion times.”

I bark out a laugh. “Damn, you sound like a bitch all the time, or is this just a me problem?”

Sophie walks up to me and grips the balcony, her hair is pulled back into a tight ponytail, she has no makeup on and is wearing sweats. “Maybe it's me.”

“Mmmm, no self-control with resting bitch face? Is that an actual condition?”

She turns to me, crossing her arms over her white sweat outfit, biting down on her bottom lip. “Should it be? I gotta admit, I've never seen it in the DSMV.”

“The fact you even know what that is, wow, either impressive or concerning, I'm not sure which? I mean, do you watch Dateline, I heard that was a red flag for sociopaths.”

Her smile is finally easy, free as she looks out at the waves. “I hate crime.”

I gasp. “And yet you act like a villain! How dare you!”

She leans down on the banister and sighs, resting her chin against her arms. “Do you ever wonder?”

“Wonder what?”

“Wonder what it would be like to feel like that,” She lifts a finger and points at the ocean. “To crash against a rock and slide through it, and do it over and over again, but never get bruised?”

I have nothing to say but, “That’s not life. We hit something hard, and it hurts, but the hurt is what makes us feel, and when we feel we learn, at least some of us, but the point is, the ending doesn’t always have to be the same.”

“I hate her,” she says immediately, standing and turning to me, her white sweats are almost too clean, her skin too perfect. “I hate her, do you want to know why?”

“Curiosity can be dangerous.” I laugh to ease the tension between us as she takes a step toward me. I don’t back up. I know I should, but I don’t, because I really am curious.

I want to know why she wants to be the water.

Why she hates Chloe.

Why she covets the cliffs.

Why her eyes aren’t the same as Chloe despite being twins, why her behavior is aggressive and angry—and why I like it.

Maybe I see myself in her a bit too much.

I laugh, I keep people happy, but there is so much darkness, so much

anger, so much, why not me inside my soul that it scares me sometimes.

It's why I like Chloe.

It's why she calls to me, maybe because I'm that masochist that thinks if I just find the one, she'll fix what's been so broken, so tarnished, ruined.

Sophie reaches for my face, then pulls a shaky hand back. "It always ends the same, you know."

"What does?" I ask.

"Everything." She hangs her head. "I take them, I collect them you know, her boyfriends, every first kiss, I collect them and I keep them so I have something for me, and they all eventually leave her when they realize it's too hard—you will too you know. After all, they fall for her first." Her eyes lock onto mine. "Yet want to stay with me forever."

"What kind of witchcraft do you use?" I joke.

"You want a sample?" She teases with a seductive smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "Most just wait until they can't take it anymore."

Her hand goes to my chest, I'm still shirtless, but have grey sweatpants on, her eyes follow her hand as she draws a finger down the middle of my chest until she reaches my sweatpants and gives a tug. I stumble toward her.

I tell myself to stop.

I like Chloe.

Chloe!

And she's sick in bed right now, her sister is... crazy right? But I can't look away, I want to know.

I do what no guy should ever do. I give into the curiosity of the moment, of the tension swirling, of the familiarity of her mouth, which is even weirder

when I think about it.

She stands up on her tiptoes and whispers in my ear, “Eventually, you’ll want me the way I want you, eventually you’ll forget her name and scream mine, who knows, you might have already done that... we did used to, swap.”

I freeze and take a step back. “I’m sorry, what?”

“How else could I steal something so precious?” She lifts her shoulder with a shrug. “I always give a sample first, and when they find out, they always want the full meal.”

Panic ensues.

Like completely takes over.

My mouth goes dry.

My stomach drops.

“Sophie—“

“—Do you want to know? Are you curious, Quinn?”

I am, but I don’t want to know. She would never, right? And if Chloe knew she would say something, on top of that, it just makes me feel like a prostitute between sisters.

“Hey.” Chloe walks up to the outside door, she looks pale and unsure as she tucks her hair behind her ear. “You’re here. I heard talking.”

“Yeah,” I cough into my hand and force a smile. “Sophie came to take you home so you could rest, or maybe to quick care? Are you feeling better?”

Dark circles are clearly evident under Chloe’s eyes. She nods once. “I’m good, just tired, I’ll let Sophie take me home.”

“Yeah, do that.”

“Let me just get my things.” Chloe smile. “Thanks, Quinn, it was a good birthday.”

She walks off, but Sophie stays, I mean, she pretends to walk out, then slowly backs her ass up right against me, pinning me against the balcony and her ass. “Yes, Quinn, what a happy,” She moves her hips and shoves them back against me, “Happy.”

What the hell!

“Happy,” She moves her hips and reaches behind her and palms the front of my sweatpants. “Birthday.”

My body responds, my heart’s horrified, and my soul feels a bit crushed, like I’m being completely used and have no say in the matter. No consent. Nothing.

I want to scream, but I’m frozen in place.

Any guy’s body would respond.

I’m a bastard, a horrible person.

I can’t feel worse in this moment, more dirty, more used—I think I kind of want to toss this girl off the cliff but part of me feels gaslit, I feel bad because I know she’s damaged, tortured, so I do nothing.

I take it.

I take it as she palms my dick as she reaches with her other hand and takes mine and presses it against one breast. “You know, it’s okay to want me.”

The. Actual. Fuck.

I jerk away. “I’m not something you play with, Sophie.”

“You will be.” She stops moving, turns around and looks down. “See? You can’t help yourself, none of them can. I look forward to my trophy when



you finally know who you really want.”

With that, she walks off.

And I’m left with a boner for Satan and confused as hell.

Chloe doesn’t say goodbye, but she does text an hour later to tell me that she was throwing up and felt bad and didn’t want me to see it, so just left with her sister.

An hour after that, Sophie texts me one thing.

Satan Sophie

At hospital with Chloe. Don’t call.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Chloe*

It sucks.

All of it sucks.

It's always like this, I swear, and I want to feel sorry for myself, but when has that ever helped anyone?

I've been in the hospital a day, have heard nothing from Quinn, so I'm totally panicking that he's freaked out and that Sophie pulled her normal trick where she tells the guy that I'm sick or worse just hits on him.

He can never know.

He can never find out.

I hate it.

Tears burn the back of my eyes. I really like him, he's so sweet, so good looking, fun, he gets my sense of humor, he likes Garfield and Star Wars, he's just... the best and I barely know him.

Will she take him from me too, out of anger at me being sick? Will she take every good thing I've ever had? And why the hell do I always sit back and let her?

Is it guilt that I get attention she doesn't over my sickness? Is it my way of giving back to her in some sick manner?

Shit, we need therapy.

Love should not be this hard.

Family should not be this cruel, and yet here we are.

I lay back against the pillow and check my phone again. Sophie went back

to the house, so I'm pretty sure everything is fine and I know Quinn's probably just busy, but I text him anyway.

Me

Are you okay?

Quinn

Holy shit, you're alive!

I laugh.

Me

Yeah, I just needed to do some blood work and then I can bounce out of here and come see you.

I say this as a nurse walks in, followed by another. Yay more testing. More questions. More, it's always more. It's been like this since I can remember. In the beginning I had my parents holding my hands, even Sophie panicking and then slowly one by one they just... left.

So now I have a white wall I stare at and I imagine a family member, it always changes, it's always different, but they're in the room smiling, telling me to be strong.

It helps.

Or I lie to myself and tell me it helps, maybe that's just what lonely, sad people do, just like how I try to mask it with humor and sarcasm.

But right now as I clutch my phone in my hand, with a text message I want to send that says please just, please, replace my phone with your fingers, with your touch, please just stand in front of that wall and stare while I get poked and prodded, while my family is missing, while my sister still

hates me so much that she literally dropped me off at the front of the hospital with a fever of one hundred and four.

I collapsed into a wheelchair in the lobby and I just waited for someone to notice, maybe that will be my entire life, waiting for someone amazing to notice until she takes that too.

And then, I just allow it, because she's also been through a lot emotionally, it's like I'm handing out all the good that happens to me, to her without fighting her on it, because I'm punishing myself for not being perfect, punishing my body for not working the way it should.

"Hey," My nurse, Sarah, grabs my phone, her smile is fake, we all know it, but I believe it because otherwise I think I might actually give up. "We have to run some panels, you feeling up to it?"

"Do I have a choice?" I let her put my phone away, along with the unanswered text.

She scrunches up her nose. "No, actually, not really." Her laugh is infectious. "You know we hate seeing you, right?"

"I hate you too."

"Glad we still have that boundary." She nods. "Let's just get this shit done so I can send you home and you can go have awesome sex, but don't tell the attending I said that."

I actually laugh. "Well, the sex was..."

I forget that I'm speaking out loud.

She pauses. Stares me down for at least three seconds with her short black bobbed cut hair and perfectly tanned golden skin. "I want every detail."

"No!!!" I laugh. "No, I mean, well he did fall between my thighs."

“Sure that’s normal.”

“After a near death experience.”

“Not so normal.”

I laugh again; it feels good. “It’s a long story, but the beginning was epic, the middle feels good, not so strong, but good, the ending however,” I shrug. “He doesn’t know how sick I am, so maybe I’ll just imagine seeing his back now as he walks out of these doors, I can be tough like that, it makes it easier when you daydream about them walking away from you rather than toward you. That’s what strength is you know? It’s taking those moments and accepting them, then dreaming about them leaving, so when they actually do, the knife doesn’t dig as deep when you pull it out.”

Sarah nods slowly, then sets down her iPad and sits on the bed, her blue scrubs even look good on her, she’s the girl you want to hate but can’t because she’s so kind. “Listen, you make your own journey even with the difficulties you suffer around you. Right now, you’re going to be depressed and anxious because your body is physically working against you, but this too shall pass and when it does, you’ll have that nice love waiting for you. I know it. Trust it. I know it’s hard to trust your own body, your mind—but isn’t it time to trust another human other than yourself?”

“And watch them let me down... again?” I ask. “I just wish—“

A knock sounds on the door and then Zane walks in. “Heard we had a celebrity in here getting tested.”

Sarah looks ready to swallow her own tongue when she stands, nearly drops her iPad, and bows.

Oh God, she literally just bowed.

I hold my laugh in.

Zane winks at me like he knows it.

Sarah seems to realize it then does this awkward laugh before bowing again, maybe it's a habit now. "Yeah, I'm just gonna go get all the supplies to draw, um, blood, the red stuff. Haha."

"Weird, I thought it was purple," Zane says with a straight face.

"Oh, no." Sarah gets serious. "It is actually red even though when you look down at your skin it can be in a variety of—" Her nostrils flair. "You're messing with me, aren't you?"

Zane's grin is priceless. "I was seeing how long your medical and informational speech would be until you realized it."

"Now." She points at him. "Now I know why the nurses say to watch out for you, it's not because of your good looks but your ability to get into our heads by looks alone!"

"Why are you yelling?" he asks.

"I'm yelling?" She looks at me.

"No." I answer for him. "He's literally just messing with you again, don't let him gaslight, he's too good at it, just grab all the shit that's going to shit all over my arms and be quick about it, now that my fevers done I just want to go home."

She nods. "See, you can be bossy!"

When she leaves, Zane comes and sits gently on the bed, here we go, I'm going to get a speech, I can feel it in my bones. He's wearing ripped jeans and a white tank top that shows off his tattoos and his black beanie that has a skull on it isn't really helping my mood.

"So." He takes a deep breath. "I have a suggestion."

“You and everyone else in this world.”

“I heard your parents aren’t back yet, and that you have an evil twin that might set you on fire any day now.”

My laugh escapes before I can help it. “She means well, I think, I mean, she just feels unseen and I can’t blame her for that, because I feel—“

“No need to justify other people’s feelings, especially people who aren’t kind, who only do the basics in order not to go to prison.” He sighs and runs a hand through his dark hair. “I’m going to be bossy right now, all right?”

“You weren’t before?”

“Very funny, just allow me to go into dad mode, okay?”

“Do you have jokes though? Because if not, then what’s the point of taking that journey?”

“There she is!” He holds up his hand. “High fives all day long, YO!”

“Never again, shall you ever repeat that sentence, oh wait, you passed, you are a dad, okay continue.”

“My hand’s still up here.”

“And there it shall stay until you tell me what your idea is.”

To his credit, he doesn’t lower it, instead he keeps his right hand held high, he has two gold rings on his pinky and one on his thumb, rockstars and their jewelry. “So, I think you should stay with Quinn, let him take care of you until you feel better. Being alone at your house, according to the doctors isn’t good, and your sister according to Quinn and you isn’t exactly Mother Teresa, I don’t have time or I would, plus the kid would just jump on your face and ask you to smell his butt for poop which I’m thinking isn’t exactly the healing journey you want to take, I mean just until your parents get back

at the end of the week and yes I'm prying but, you can't deal with..." He swallows and finally, slowly, lowers his hand. "Chloe, you can't deal with lupus on your own when you're like this, you need help."

A tear slides down my cheek. "He doesn't know."

"Yes." A new voice sounds. "He does."

Quinn walks into the room with a bouquet of daisies and sets them on my bed, and then he stands in front of the white wall and smiles.

I burst into tears.

Crazy, ridiculous tears.

Because for the first time in five years.

Someone real is standing in front of the white wall.

And he's here for me.



# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Quinn*

I hear everything.

I wasn't supposed to, but when Chloe didn't respond and when Zane said that she was actually in the hospital, I couldn't get to the car fast enough.

Just when I was ready to go in, he went in first.

I looked at her chart.

I know I shouldn't have.

I asked questions I shouldn't have asked of Zane that were probably illegal and when he went in and talked with her, when the nurse came out and gave me this, sad look that lacked all hope and happiness which didn't match the conversation she'd earlier had with Chloe, I think a part of my heart broke.

I found my person.

And my person isn't okay.

There are only two options here.

Help. Or run.

I'm assuming she's used to the runners, but the jokes on her, I hate running, I'm more of a rowing sort of guy, which means I just row through my problems rather than run and try to forget them.

So I tell myself to do what I always do.

I row slowly through them, I deal with them, and I'm going to pick her up and put her in my boat. Even if she says it's okay, that she can swim, I'll put her in my boat.

Most of us, when drowning, always say we can make it, we refuse help, whether it's weakness or pride, we try to keep swimming until we start to sink and even then as we see the border of water across the horizon, we decide it's better to just breathe in the water, then scream out help.

I don't want her to get to that place.

I've been to that place, it isn't fun, and it isn't an option. So I listen, and then I walk in.

I stand in front of the white wall after placing flowers on her bed and I give her a stare that I hope puts the fear of God into her, then sa,. "Let's finish up here, then you're coming home."

She opens her mouth.

I shake my head.

"My home. You're moving in. Hope your DoorDash game is strong either that or cooking because I think I have one cracker left, a half bottle of wine that tastes like shit, and an old pancake mix that might kill you before Lupus. Oh also, if you need a kidney, I've always wanted to see what it's like to go under the knife. Bad joke? Probably, but I'm here for you. So let's get this done and Zane, I swear if you keep smiling at me right now, I'm going to kill you. Leave. Out. And thanks for the heads up." Tears stream down Chloe's cheeks. "All right, what sort of cheese do I need to go buy so you stop crying?"

She cries harder as Zane leaves.

I know what I need to do.

So I do it.

I walk over to her side and I stand.

I don't sit.

I just grab her hand and hold it.

Because sometimes we don't want someone to sit and look at us with pity,  
nah, sometimes what we need is someone to stand by us.

With strength.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Chloe*

“So now I’m living with a guy that nearly died by bungee?” I joke while laying on the nice black leather couch with a soft blue blanket covering my feet and more food and hydration than I could possibly ask next to me on a tray.

He has fruit.

He has vegetables.

He has Gatorade.

He weirdly decided a turkey leg would be the best way to go. Boys.

Oatmeal.

Doritos, because who doesn’t need those to heal?

And I’m pretty sure he has enough ice cream bars in the freezer to kill me with sugar and dairy alone.

Sarah went over the diet with him and he just ran with it but wanted me to have some treats too, I mean it should just be vegetables, healthy grains, fruits, yes some lean proteins but the guy literally asked me if he should go fishing for a salmon.

I reminded him that we didn’t actually have fresh water salmon in the ocean and got a death glare.

“Funny, very funny.” Quinn brings over a bowl of pasta. “I just made this so if it sucks, know that I accidentally at one point dropped half the salt in it but scooped it out so we should be good to go.” He makes a face. “If not, I’ll start over, the pasta is whole grain, and I made homemade sauce, I may have

stolen a few tomatoes from Zanes garden down the street, but he won't even notice, the guy has a black thumb."

I laugh. "He gardens?"

"Correction," Quinn puts the bowl of pasta on the tray in front of me. "He pretends to garden but pays a gardener, his wife turns a blind eye because she gets awesome food and the little dude loves it."

"How old is he?"

"Zane?"

"Little dude."

Quinn laughs. "Oh, he's an adult if you ask him, but he's two, thinks he should be in college, uses big words like elephant and poop, pretty awesome if you ask me."

"Ah poop is a big word, good for him."

"Took me years to learn that one." Quinn winks. "I'd just point at my ass and smile."

"And yet, why do I feel like you still do that?" I tease.

His smile lights up the room as he sets himself on the couch and grabs the blanket like we've done this a million times. He puts my feet in his lap, hands me a fork, and says, "May the odds ever be in your favor."

I take the fork. "You know, even if it's salty, I won't say a word."

"I can smell lies."

"Says the poop master."

"Hey! I shared in confidence!" He throws his head back and laughs, damn he's beautiful, it shouldn't be right. He's like my own personal Clark Kent on the couch, and my Superman at the hospital.

I want to say I don't deserve him, but that's what sick people do, we say we don't deserve good things because we're told by others that we shouldn't be sick in the first place and are already like this heaviness to society, instead, I tell myself in that moment.

Mine.

I'm hiding one more secret. One more to keep to myself, does he really need to know? I'm too immersed in the fact that he hasn't run away screaming or told me I'm too much.

So I silence my lips and decide to put them to good use instead.

I, in that moment, really do become my twin, because I know I'm manipulating with my mouth even though I say no words.

I lean in and kiss him.

His lips are soft, but not eager, he quickly pulls back. "As much as I want to kiss you right now, you're pale and even pale you're pretty, but I need you to eat, to take care of yourself and if that means I need to be a jackass, then so be it." His hand reaches out and cups my cheek gently, his fingers are warm, strong. I like the way they feel against my skin. Quinn has the power to both be gentle and a total ass, and I love it. Sometimes you need both, I think I'm one of those people.

Quinn grabs the fork, digs it into the pasta bowl, blows across it and leans in. "Open."

I've never been so turned on in my life. "I want to open for something else."

He licks his bottom lip, then bites it. "Maybe later, when you're healthy enough to know just exactly what you're licking, I mean, what if it's a wall? A lollipop? The freezer? Do you really want to take the huge risk of missing

out on my mouth and what it's going to do to you?"

Chills run down my spine. "I can think of nothing worse."

"Great answer, I'll get you an ice cream bar later."

I open my mouth. He shoves pasta in. I chew.

And it's good, so good, but I'm not sure if it's because of the pasta or because of him. I don't know why the universe sent him careening into my lap, but all I can think is thank you.

Not just because I'm sick.

But because I've been so lonely.

I've needed a friend.

I've needed a person.

He's my person.

Which just brings me back to not telling him. What he doesn't know won't hurt him, right? I convince myself of this, and I eat each bite like Eve from the garden leading Adam into Hell.

I've become that person.

Because selfishly, I just want to be normal, I just want to imagine this is a normal relationship, that we're eating pasta on a couch, that we're going to complain about work in the morning, make coffee, and yawn while pouring old cereal.

It sounds like a dream.

He's a dream.

I open my mouth again.

Quinn puts the bowl down. "Okay listen, I know you're sick, but I also

know you have full access to your own hands, so while you feed yourself like a big girl, I'm going to go back to the kitchen, pour myself a glass of wine, a reward if you will for making good pasta, and come back. Your only job is to finish that bowl, hydrate, rest, and tell me how awesome I am."

I make a face. "I don't know if I can do that."

His eyebrows arch. "You mean you can't tell me how awesome I am?"

"Not that one, that's easy, you're my hero, I meant resting, I don't want to rest when you're here, I want to jump you. I want to take advantage, right now I want to lick your abs, grab you by your long hair, tug a bit, and beg you to screw me, but sure, yeah I'll just... rest."

His eyes dart toward the kitchen, then back to me, then back to the kitchen. He runs his hands down his face.

He turns around like he can't make eye contact and runs his hand down the front of his jeans.

"You okay?" I laugh.

"Perfect," he says so devastatingly that I laugh out loud.

"Not funny, stop laughing, I'm seconds away from tossing you around and you don't feel good and that's wrong, it's wrong Quinn, what the hell are you thinking? What's wrong with you?"

"Are you, like, third personing yourself right now?" I laugh so hard it hurts my stomach.

He doesn't turn around, but points his thumb behind him right at me. "Not cool, so not cool, I'll be right back, got a date with a cold shower and my hand."

"Does it work when it's cold?"



“Shut up, Chloe, before I shove”—he stops walking—“this is hard.”

“So are you.”

“I hate you.” He keeps walking.

“I won’t be mad if you yell my name!”

He flips me off and slams the bathroom door.

The last thing I remember after eating one last bite of pasta, is smiling and closing my eyes.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Quinn*

I go to the shower and barely feel the cold water. I don't touch myself, I don't touch anything, for whatever reason, I just shower, dry off, and attempt not to think about Chloe.

Which is basically impossible when the towel runs roughly over my dick, it truly is so much harder than I realized.

A knock sounds on the door. "Go away Chloe, you're supposed to be resting."

"I need help though," she says in such a weak voice that I immediately panic and open the door completely naked, towel dropped to the floor.

She's in nothing but a long t-shirt, she's still pale, her hairs in a braid down her back and I've never seen anyone so pretty.

"I'm sick," she states, taking a step into the bathroom and shutting the door behind her. She leans her back against it. "Who knows how many times I'll be able to attempt to seduce a guy who laughs in the face of death?"

I smirk. "Really? That's what we're going with?"

"Yup, you're like your own Puss in Boots." She seems so pleased with herself I can only shake my head and look away, so I don't nod my head and walk toward her, my lips leading the way.

"It goes like this." I press her up against the door. "I kiss you. I screw you. You say nothing. You don't exert yourself. You do nothing extra..." I drop to my knees in front of her. "You let me serve."

"Serve," she repeats, licking her lips.

“You.” I nod. “You let me serve you, touch my dick or any other part of my body, get aggressive or out of breath and I’m putting you to bed and chaining you there in a very non sexy way so you don’t overexert yourself.” I slide my hands up her calves, past her knees, I cling to her thighs, digging my fingers in and slowly spreading her legs wider as my fingers inch closer to her hips. “Deal?”

Chloe’s face breaks out into a wide smile. “So I get served, and what do you get out of it?”

“Hook your right leg around my head and find out.”

Her eyes widen.

I grab her right leg and do exactly that, exposing her core to me. She’s wearing nothing underneath my shirt. I want her so bad. I want her taste. I want her mouth. I want her body.

“Pardon me for a minute.” I smirk up at her. “I’ve got some business to attend to, I mean you only live once.” And with that, I clap my mouth between her legs and suck. I twist my tongue against every inch of her, feeling her heartbeat in the best way possible. Her hands grip my hair. She tugs at me the way I shove my tongue inside her.

Her left knee goes weak as she collapses against my head. I pin her to the door with my left hand, keeping her there. “You’re close.”

“You’re too good at this.”

“I’m good at everything.”

“Did you forget the bungee—oh shit—“ She exhales and starts moving her hips.

I pull back. “What was that again? Care to change your answer?”

“Go!” she yells, forgetting her promise. “Please.”

“Come, I think is what you meant, but okay. I’m down.” I laugh at my own joke. “Get it? Now calm the Hell down so I can pleasure you then put you to bed.”

She smacks me on the side of the head with her left hand.

I laugh and get back to work, but really, is it work? No. It’s my pleasure. My priority. My girl. “Relax and let me taste you.”

“Relax.” She repeats, her body actually tensing around me, her legs getting closer and closer to holding my head in a vice I wouldn’t mind dying in. “I can’t relax when your mouth is on me, when you make me feel…” Her head hits the back of the door. “Feel—“

My tongue slides in and out, I add my fingers and all is lost when she bucks against them and then collapses against me, her body limp. I’m almost worried until she slowly pulls away and sinks to the floor, looking up at me like I just gave her the world.

Her hand shakes as she reaches for my face and cups it. “You won’t leave, right?”

“Where else would I go? And why do you think I’m that crazy? To let some other guy slide in when I’m already fully committed, I’m competitive like that.”

“Promise?” Tears fill her eyes.

“Promise.” It’s not even hard to. I like her, I like her a lot.

Slowly her hand lowers to my raging cock, and it’s angry, I know it is, I can feel my own blood pulsing, demanding that we do something about the whole situation but the point is, she needs rest even if my cock wants a

chance to pleasure and play.

I almost forgot I was naked.

She can see it all.

The pleasure she gave me while I gave her pleasure.

The way my body responded instantly.

And the way my body still looks and feels ready to explode.

She reaches for my cock, I almost wince when her small hand wraps around it. I hiss out a breath. I don't want to move. I don't want her doing any work, quite honestly. With her just gripping me, I'm ready to explode.

She's almost brutal in her touch.

It's painful.

I want to react, to jump her, to slam her against the wall and pull her hair, instead I just kneel there while she kneels in front of me, slowly her mouth descends.

I won't last.

I'm already there.

Her lips touch my tip, and I'm already feeling it in my stomach, the way my balls draw up, I'm so far gone it's embarrassing.

"Harder." I hiss. "Harder, so much harder, hurt me."

She tugs, then reaches with her other hand and cups my balls, giving them a small tug that's a mix of pain and pleasure.

I slam my hand against the tiled floor. "Shit."

"Let go." She pulls her mouth away and looks up at me. "I just want you." Her tongue descends to my tip, before her mouth engulfs me, and I'm gone,

pumping into her mouth like my life depends on it.

It's over before I know it. I tried to keep my eyes open, but it took me, the way her wet mouth felt, the way her tongue swirled around me, her hands. Fuck, I start coming again, fuck.

What the hell is happening?

When I'm done, I'm almost embarrassed by one, how fast it happened, two, that I somehow had like this weird double orgasm against her mouth.

She wipes it on the towel, face pale. "That was better than taking a sleeping pill."

"Wait, pause." I start laughing. "Foreplay made you... sleepier than Benadryl? Are you serious right now? Like I literally put you to sleep both times?"

She starts laughing so hard that she collapses against me. "Hey that took a lot of energy."

I'm still naked when I lift her into my arms and open the bathroom door, walking her down the aisle and across the living room into my room.

The only problem, I notice, is that the front door suddenly opens.

I turn away, giving the intruder my ass.

"Oh wow. You've been doing squats." Comes Ambrose's voice.

I turn with her in my arms. "This isn't what it looks like."

"Yeah it is." Chloe grins. "It's exactly what it looks like."

I swear I'm still at half mast, naked, looking like an idiot, I will never live this down. I will never be able to walk away from this.

Ambrose goes to the kitchen and grabs a key. "Forgot the storage unit key, so I flew back real quick so MB could move in the rest of her stuff but you

guys,” He gives us a thumbs up. “Doing great, clearly, um...” He cracks a smile. “Do continue your bedroom olympics, I’ll be rooting for gold.”

“Out!” I yell.

“Or in?” He teases.

I flip him off, still holding onto Chloe.

Ambrose just laughs and slams the door behind him.

“So.” I nod. “He just saw my naked ass, half erection, and all for a stupid key, should we charge him next time?”

She looks down. “It is a full show, so at least two dollars, don’t you think?”

“Ohhhh fast food money, good thinking.”

“I mean, if you show your dick, you should at least get some fries with it, you know?”

“Plus ketchup is included.” I laugh. “I think you’re on to something, but for now... we head to bed.”

“I like that plan.” She snuggles up against me. “Now take me to bed.”

“To sleep.” I clarify. “Only to sleep and get better.”

She blinks up at me, eyes all innocent. “Whatever else would I do other than sleep by my suitor?”

“OH wow, and you even said it in a southern accent. I can’t decide if I’m turned on or horrified that you did it so well.”

She laughs and clings to me harder. “Just be proud.”

“I’m always proud.” I nod. “Of you.”

Her eyes well with tears. “Because I’m sick and can still laugh?”

“No. Because you’re brave and you still cry.”

I don’t let her answer as I walk into my bedroom and tuck her into bed. A tear slides down her cheek onto the pillow I will now officially never wash—ever. “I really like you, Quinn.”

“You’re in luck! I really like you too.” I walk toward the light switch and hit it, then turn around. “Also, you should be sleeping, not talking.”

She rolls her eyes, I can even see it in the dark. “I’ll try.”

“Try harder and stop being a distraction before I jump into bed with you.”

“Wouldn’t mind a cuddle.”

“Wouldn’t mind another fuck, which is why I say no to gateway drugs like cuddling and will walk out of this room while you rest, doctors’ orders, shit I just had a very, very vivid day dream about you in a nurse outfit, me as the doctor, ordering you around, you drop a pen, pick it up, our fingers touch, you try to stab me with it, I pull you into an empty room and—“

Her grin is huge. “—And?”

“And I give you CPR because you had a stroke from me touching you?” I laugh. “Yeah, okay, soap opera story time is done now, I’ll just see myself out.” I literally almost run into the door before opening it and leaving the room.

When I finally do, I go to the couch and sit.

I just sit.

My naked self sits.

And I stare at the wall, wishing that I was staring at her.

Life is so extremely strange, but for the first time in a long time, I feel light, I feel like maybe this is it for me. That she’s it for me, that I can be



happy. I quickly change into a pair of sweats, grab her some water and set it on the nightstand for her, she's already sleeping, then go turn on the tv and stare some more.

You'd think I'd be into the show.

Instead, it's just pictures, movements, nothingness, all I see, even while watching TV—is her.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

*Chloe*

I wake up in a weird bed, then remember why it feels weird. My phone is plugged in next to me and I have about a billion missed texts from Sophie, what? Now she's concerned?

I'm super confused when I see what they say.

Sophie

I'm sorry. Is Quinn taking care of you the way good boyfriends do? Mom and Dad are MIA again.

Sophie

I miss you, can I come over and visit?

Sophie

I'm lonely.

Sophie

Please? I promise I won't do anything, I just hate being alone.

My heart sinks. I know exactly what it's like to be alone, but at the same time, I know her point of view, of having to take care of me, deal with me, so I quickly text back.

Me

Sure. But only for a little bit, since need rest.

---

Why does it feel like this is the worst answer I could possibly give her? I ignore the feeling in my gut, just like I ignore the fact that I'm lying to Quinn and get ready for the day.

By the time she stops by, I've eaten some fruit for breakfast and Quinn decided to go get groceries, domesticated that one, he refused to let me come which is probably for the best since Sophie's on her way.

I jump when a knock sounds at the door.

"It's open!" I call.

Sophie rolls right on in with her designer black Celine glasses, a pair of short jean shorts, a black sweater that hangs off her shoulder, and enough makeup to kill a person on her face.

What's her angle?

I look down.

I'm in a pair of matching red Nike sweats and barefoot, my hair's pulled back, I have zero makeup on and I know I look as sick as I feel.

She drops her black bag on the counter and takes off her sunglasses, placing them there. "You look like shit."

"Thank you?"

She smirks and walks past me to the sliding glass door. "So, heard he's rich."

"Ambrose?" I ask innocently.

She looks over her shoulder. "No, I did a little recon, Quinn has a shit ton of family money, like literally so much money it's ridiculous, lots of drama with his family though so maybe stay far, far, away, hey maybe we can switch it up again? I'll take your spot, he can have a nice healthy girl and you

can go just... sleep.”

I shake my head slowly. “Both hurtful and seriously disturbing, plus he’s my boyfriend, not yours.”

I suddenly feel sick to my stomach. Has she seen him while I was in the hospital? Has she tried anything else? And now that he knows I’m sick, is she going to say something? It’s the only thing she has on me. Panic rises in my throat like I want to both scream and cry, but I’m motionless.

Is she even my sister anymore?

Or a stranger now?

All because I have Quinn.

She had him.

But I have him.

My skin starts to feel clammy, but I can’t tell if it’s me or if it’s the realization that if he finds out—it’s over, everything will be over.

Sophie looks around the apartment. “Hmm, must be nice, yeah? I’m all by myself and you’re here with a hot nurse and what appears to be millions of dollars in his hands. I always wonder why is it that I’m the cursed twin and you’re the lucky one.”

“Lucky?” I repeat. “How in the hell am I lucky? I could die!”

“Good.” Sophie crosses her arms. “Maybe it would just be better if there were only one of us, I could easily take over your life, you know, it’s easy to act like you. Sarcastic but slow, pretty, but not pretty enough because you don’t know how to put on makeup.” She reaches into her purse and pulls out a flask and starts chugging from it.

I ignore her insults. “Since when did you pre-game on a Monday?”

She downs more, then screws the top back on the silver flask and tucks it into her bag. “Since I realized that my life was meaningless, even if I’m the one that’s probably going to live longer. Ironic, right? A dead person means more to our parents, more to Quinn, more to friends who constantly ask about you.”

The front door opens, but Sophie keeps talking.

“You know the worst part?” She walks up to the couch and leans down. “Sometimes, I wish you were dead. And I feel like shit over it, because it would solve all of my problems, it would be so easy,” She reaches out and touches my cheek.

A tear slides down followed by another, they’re hot on my skin and my throat starts to feel like it’s closing. “How did we get to this place?”

“You.” She jerks back. “That’s the easy answer. Everything is your fault and you know it. All of it. Even my last boyfriend asked how you were doing, it will never be about me. It should be though, everyone should have their moment, and you’ve had enough of mine.”

“So you came over to tell me that?”

“I came over to tell you...” Her eyes locked on mine. “...that I’m done with you. I’m going to tell mom and dad I’m moving. Send me an invite when you die—oh wait...” She taps her chin with her black manicured nail. “I guess Quinn will have to be the one to send it, promise I’ll fuck him good for you and let him scream your name while he mourns.”

Quinn suddenly grabs her by the wrist, I didn’t even see him walk in, I mean I heard the door but I was so immersed in what she was saying that hurt that came tumbling out of her mouth that I wasn’t sure what to even say or do.

She jerks away from him and laughs, wiping tears from her eyes. Just how drunk is she? I hate her right now, but she shouldn't be driving. "Ah, the hero arrives."

"Leave." Quinn's jaw flexes. "I'll only say this once. Sophie, you need to leave. Now."

"Ah, the great protector!" Sophie spins around. "If only you knew our little secret!"

"Sophie!" I yell. "Stop!"

"Should I?" She walks over and grabs her purse from the counter, puts on her sunglasses, then approaches Quinn. "Truth or Dare?"

"Neither?"

"Truth it is." She gets so close it's almost like she's going to kiss him, instead she leans in. "I know the way you taste, I know the feel of you inside me, and you know it too... it wasn't Chloe that first night and she knew it all along, enjoy your first fight, you know where to find me." I burst into tears. "Bye sis."

The door slams.

Quinn's staring at me like I'm a stranger.

I want to yell, I can explain, but I have nothing.

I lied.

I betrayed.

Me.

Not him.

I open my mouth and close it.

Quinn's so still I'm afraid something's wrong with him.

He has two bags of groceries in his hand, and I think to myself, I will never forget the moment everything changed.

When the groceries drop from his hands onto the floor, eggs included. An orange rolls down past his feet and hits the couch, he stares straight ahead.

He doesn't make eye contact.

I can hear my breaths getting more panicky, feel my heart slam against my chest. My body's a live wire while I wait for him to say something—even if it's goodbye.

Finally, he swallows, takes a deep breath. “Did she mean what I think she meant? Did I fuck your sister thinking it was you? And did you keep it from me on purpose?”

“I—“ My body can't stop shaking. “I didn't want to lose you and she knew that. I got super sick that night and she came out pretending to be me, then threatened to tell you I was sick. She's always stolen any sort of friend or guy that was interested in me, it's what she does, I didn't think she'd do it to you but when she said she'd tell you I was sick, that I was extra baggage, I kept it to myself.”

“How. Fucking. Selfish.” Quinn snaps. His eyes are wild. “Are you kidding me right now? I slept with a stranger thinking it was you and you let me believe it! You know how messed up that is? I basically got raped by your twin!”

“That's not rape.”

“It sure as fuck isn't consent, Chloe!”

I jerk at his words.

He's yelling.

He has every right to yell.

“Shit!” He's shaking, he leans down on his haunches and covers his face with his hands. “Was it just once?”

I hate the words as I say them. “That I know of. I don't know, sometimes I pass out, sometimes I'm tired. I know that she got ice cream with you instead of me, I saw it but didn't want to—“

“—Ruin what we had but clearly didn't if I was dating both of you at the same time! Fucking both of you. Kissing both of you!”

He shudders. “Go to bed. I'll bring in your water, other than keeping you alive, I don't want to see you. There is a lot I can tolerate, but you don't know my past, you don't know, you don't.” It looks like he's ready to cry. “The universe is a cruel, cruel place, you know that? And history, it always finds a damning way to repeat itself.”

“Quinn—“

“—Please.” A tear slides down his cheek. “Just go sleep. Please, just leave me alone. I need to be alone.” He shakes his head. “The worst part is, had you just told me, I would have thought it was messed up, but I would have worked through it with you. It's the lie. It's the betrayal. Breaking of trust. It's so many things that make me feel used and dirty, but end of day, why should I ever win?”

He walks away.

And I walk to the room.

When I wake up the next morning, a random stranger, a nurse, is there, she's like in her seventies at least, in her pink nursing uniform and smiling at



me with a breakfast tray. “Are you hungry?”

“Who are you?”

“Sam.” She grins, her teeth are white just like her hair, she’s tiny, and she seems sweet. “Mr. Quinn said to feed you some fruit.”

“And um,” I run my hands through my tousled hair. “Where is Quinn?”

Her face freezes a bit. “He didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

Her smile falls a bit. “He went home.”

“Home?” I repeat.

“Back to Seattle or LA... I’m not sure, he’d previously applied for both.” She nods slowly. “He’s enrolling at UW for the Spring Semester and wants to get his apartment settled and meet up with his friends. “

“He’s gone?”

She nods slowly. “He hired me until your parents get back, he also left a card for you to use, I think he said to cut it up when you’re done, it’s a black AMEX, it will pay for everything.”

“Can I see it?”

Maybe he left a note.

“Oh! Sure.”

She sets down the tray and walks out of the room, only to return a few seconds later. “Here.”

There’s a sticky note folded up on it.

I open it and gasp.

“How does it feel to be a prostitute? Get better. Cut up the card. Stay as

long as you need to. I can't look at you without seeing her and without knowing what you did. I'm sorry. I truly hope you do get better. See you in the waves one day.—P.S. I loved you, Quinn.”

I start bawling when I see a bracelet taped to the same stupid AMEX card, it has whales and turtles on it, it's the ocean, my obsession, my freedom, and I'm assuming he bought it just for me. I don't have the heart to even put it on, so I lay it gently on the nightstand.

The tears won't stop flowing down my face and I know I'm freaking out, Sam, but I can't stop.

He was my forever, I knew it in my soul and I messed it all up just because I was afraid.

I can't even blame Sophie, though she was a huge part of the problem. I never stood up for myself and I lost him because of my silence.

I crawl back into bed and pull the covers over my head.

“I'm”—my voice shakes—“not feeling well. I'll eat in a bit, can you turn the lights off?”

The lights go off.

I stay in bed for two days.

I cry for three.

And on day four, I wonder if it's even worth it.

This life.

If you have nobody who cares, and nobody to share it with.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*Quinn*

I'm embarrassed.

So fucking embarrassed.

So hurt.

And the worst part is that I feel like the guilty party, like I did something wrong for being seduced by her twin, when I had no idea, it was dark, she was acting just like her.

And every stupid time I opened up my mouth to talk about that experience... she knew it was her sister, she knew!

I feel sick to my stomach but can't catch a plane until the next day, one thing I do know, the last thing I want to do is spend one more minute in that house so I grab my shit and I walk down the lane and stop at Zane's house, I knock twice, he jerks open the door. "Oh, you."

I have sunglasses on, aviators to be exact, that and a white t-shirt, ripped black jeans and my duffel bag. I even left some shit, but I'll go back and get it later. "Yeah, trust me, I don't like this any more than you do."

He grabs my duffel tosses it inside the house then closes the door behind him, "I'm recording with Drew, you're coming with, the last thing I need is to be guilty of your death, the balcony's a bit high and there are rocks underneath, you wouldn't just go splat and see cherubs, you'd go splat and bleed to death."

"Kind of dark."

"Darkness recognizes darkness, I guess." He shrugs. "Now get in the car,

bitch.”

“Drew.” I repeat the name. “Haven’t seen him in years, he still out partying or—“ I pause. “—why are you laughing?”

Zane unlocks his black Escalade. “Do you even watch the news? I’m concerned you know nothing of pop culture.”

I make a face. “Sorry was busy trying to graduate and going through absolute hell my senior year, my TikTok game wasn’t as strong as it should have been.”

“I remember being eighteen once.”

“Was that before or after you lost your virginity and lied about being a player to the world?” That earns me a punch to the arm.

I rub it.

The guy can hit.

Music blasts, unfamiliar music, as he drives us into town. It’s early, so it’s still quiet as he pulls next to one of my favorite coffee shops. I follow him in and it’s weird, nobody seems phased that he’s a Grammy award-winning artist or that he’s literally so famous that even famous people get nervous around him.

He’s up there with Harry Styles when it comes to his sold-out concerts solo, but when he’s on tour with AD2 and Adrenaline, security is wild and the internet doesn’t know how to internet.

The coffee shop is relatively empty, Bronte who’s married to Drew, the guy we’re about to see, waves from the counter. “The usual?”

Zane nods. “Yeah, and get this guy some caffeine too, but put it in a kid cup and be sure to add some whipped cream,” He glances over his shoulder at

me. “Did you want the tootsie roll too, or are you going to pass?”

I flip him off.

He turns back to Bronte. “They grow up so fast, don’t they?”

She smiles at me, then tilts her head. “You okay?”

“Swell.” I choke it out and suddenly feel like crying like a little bitch, maybe I will take that tootsie roll, maybe it will occupy my throat enough to keep the thick need to cry at bay.

I walk around the counter and stare at the wall of books, half of them romance, what a joke. I don’t know how long I stand there but it’s long enough for Zane to tap me on the shoulder, hand me my coffee—it is in fact in a plastic kid’s cup with whipped cream—and then shove me toward the back door.

I frown. “Aren’t you recording?”

“Top secret studio, my friend.” We pass Bronte and go into the storage room, then through another door, it has a wooden winding staircase that looks like it’s new construction.

I follow Zane up the stairs and into a small studio with one booth on the left. The soundboard is right in front of me and to the right, several small fridges with energy drinks and snacks lined across the wall.

The wall is painted purple, and there are a myriad of different guitars hanging from it. Past the soundboard is a sliding glass door leading out to a balcony. And that’s when I see him.

Drew Amhurst, member of Adrenaline, award-winning producer, and apparently tame now? He has tattoos up and down his arms, a lip piercing, and messy dark hair that’s pulled back into a low ponytail. He’s holding a

coffee and watching the ocean when Zane taps on the glass.

He turns and flashes a smile, then joins us in the studio, closing the door behind him. He's in low slung blue jeans, a loose black tank top and has enough necklaces to make a person dizzy, don't even get me started on the sheer amount of bracelets on his wrists or the black nail polish, I forget how old he is but I think he's in his late thirties.

"Hey." Drew laughs. "Eyes up here High School."

"Oh, he graduated already." Zane adds in helpfully. "How is the chess club, by the way?"

I shoot him a glare. "This is not the day to give me shit." I almost throw my coffee at the wall, then hold out my hand to Drew. "Nice to see you, it's been a while."

He grips my hand, stares me down, doesn't let it go. "Shame."

"What?"

"That you aren't an artist, I could do a lot with the pain you just brought into this studio. Should we light some sage?" He's still gripping my hand but asking Zane.

Zane just sighs. "I know, I could literally feel his anxiety the entire drive here."

"Artists." Drew releases my hand. "We're extremely sensitive to other people's feelings, damn, who hurt you?" He turns to Zane again. "He's not even standing up straight and his skin is pale."

"I'm standing straight!" I argue.

"I know," Zane says, completely ignoring me. "Quinn, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but there will be another chess club and there're tons of fish

in the sea, so what if she dumped you and—“

“—I left her.”

Both guys look surprised.

“What?” I scoff and set down my coffee on the table. “Is it so surprising that a guy who likes math would dump the hot girl?”

“Yes,” they say in unison.

Zane smirks. “I mean, you’re an attractive dude, fit, super funny, and why does it sound like I’m hitting on you right now?”

“What he means,” Drew jumps in smoothly. “Is that, it’s just a shock you know, to hear those words, from your mouth—specifically.”

I groan into my hands and just blurt it out. “I slept with the wrong twin!”

Zane’s mouth drops open while Drew’s eyes widen.

“At the risk of sounding like a dick, I’m not sure whether I should feel bad for you or respect the shit out of you for not having a nervous breakdown already, that shits messed up dude. Did you know?”

“Yeah Drew, I met the girl of my dreams, then her twin, and thought you know what would be super epic? Ruin my entire relationship by screwing her sister!”

Zane pats me on the back. “Should you sit down?”

“You sit down!” I toss a finger in his direction.

He holds his hands up in front of him. “Do you need like a shot of tequila? Seven?”

“I need ten bottles and even then, it won’t fix the fact that the girl I really like could potentially see myself truly loving knew this entire time, but didn’t say anything because her sister was holding it over her head, long story short.

I acted like an ass, kissed both of them, had no clue the evil one was playing me, but the apparent nice one did.”

Zane walks over to the fridge, pulls out a chilled bottle of tequila, and hands it to me. “Shh, take it.”

I take it. “Since when do you promote underage drinking?”

Drew bursts out laughing. “Bro, do you even realize how many drugs and alcohol and okay I’m going to stop talking, know that I’m a family man now that’s behind me, it has been for a while but, I believe it started at fourteen, age doesn’t really exist in the music industry, trust me.”

“How wholesome.” I grumble and screw off the cap and bring it to my lips and toss back three gulps.

“Slow down,” Zane swipes it out of my hand. “Geez, you drank like four shots!”

“Okay,” Drew sits down next to me. “Let’s think this through, what happened after you found out? I mean, other than going through extreme embarrassment and despair?”

Zane kicks him in the foot. “Seriously?”

“That hurt!”

“It was supposed to!” Zane yelled back. “Shit man, he just got his heart broken and you suck at pep talks!”

“Honesty is always the best policy, that’s what Bronte always says at least, and that’s what we tell our little dude, and the youngest one Nexus, though we lock her in her room since many a suitor from first grade think they’re worthy of her.” He sighs. “Point is, you’ve got to figure this out and you can’t just bounce because you’re sad or disappointed, did you even hear



her out?”

I shrug and jerk the bottle from Zane’s hands. “I mean, what is there to hear out? She lied to me, and I screwed, let me repeat, screwed her sister and then told her how great it was to her face only to have her agree as if it was her.”

Zane winces next to me. “Yeah, that’s bad.”

“You think?”

“Fear makes us do weird things.” Drew pipes up. “Well, I guess if you’re just going to sit there and feel sorry for yourself, we’ll get started on recording Zane’s song, stay as long as you want, I’ll be sure to grab you a tiny violin later and a bucket for your tears.”

My jaw drops open. “That’s your advice? That’s your pep talk?”

“Told ya.” Zane smiles and pats me on the leg. “It’s still fresh, just chill with us a while, do not finish that bottle because I’m not holding your weird man bun back, and take a minute, snacks are everywhere, oh and that jar right there over in the far right is not filled with fruit snacks if you get my meaning, that’s why it’s way up high and has a skull taped to it and um, why they’re all individually wrapped. Mmmm kay?”

“Noted.” I grumble and hold the bottle to my chest and watch them move around. Zane and Drew are speaking words, but I don’t really hear anything. My heart hurts. I would call Ambrose but I know it’s just going to stress him out and MB, and I would just be a burden—again.

Plus, they aren’t coming back for months.

I guess they’ll figure it out when I show up back home with swollen eyes and a hangover.

Zane heads into the booth and puts on the headphones while Drew adjusts stuff on the board, so many buttons, it's interesting to me how technology works, and by the time he's working on the chorus I'm too curious not to plop down next to Drew still clutching the tequila like a baby.

Drew doesn't look up, just grunts out. "This board costs more than your life, I will murder you and smile while doing it if you spill anything near it, got me?"

"I'm not an idiot."

He slowly glances over at me as if to say, really? Could have fooled me.

I listen to the lyrics, barely, Zane has a super raspy cool voice, he's singing about finding love because of course he is. The beat is slow, then picks up toward the end of the chorus. By the time he's recorded over an hour, I have the chorus memorized and I'm starting to feel a bit better.

Then again, it could be the tequila in my system. Time passes by slowly, my phone starts to blow up to the point that it's getting annoying. I ignore it, knowing exactly who it is and what they want. But I'm over it, I'm so done, what could she possibly say except sorry? And how could I possibly go back to her and trust her?

Am I being overdramatic?

Slightly, maybe, but I just wanted something for me, I wanted her, I thought wow, this is it, a girl I don't have to share, because my shady ass past included being in love with MB, with Ambrose's girl, and before her, we did share, with our teacher only to later get date raped by her so excuse me for having a bit of trauma when it comes to situations like these.

Will I never have a normal girl experience?

Zane waves a hand in front of my face. "Yo, I think he's sleeping with his

eyes open.”

I bat his hand away. “Jushh thinking.”

I spin in my chair, the sound of glass rolling has them both staring at the ground as the tequila bottle makes its way to the couch, it’s half empty because half is inside my body, prickling my soul.

I laugh at that. I’m funny.

I fall off the stool and look up at them. “So tall!”

“Let’s get you back to my place.” Zane helps me to my feet while I stumble against him.

Drew slaps me on the back. “It’s going to be fine, and you may not remember this conversation later, but give her a chance to explain, life is full of shit and misunderstandings, it’s too long dark and lonely not to at least give people a second chance when they mess up, believe me, I know from experience.”

I don’t remember really getting back in the Escalade, just lots of cursing, and when we get to Zane’s, I’m already drooling and falling asleep, my head lolling to the side.

Zane sighs and helps me into the house, two little kids come careening toward me, ahh I know them, Zane’s kids. Oh look, his wife is home!

Fallon tilts her head at me, her hair’s pulled back into a tight braid and she’s wearing a crop top and leggings, what colors are they?

Or is it every color?

What is color?

“Is he okay?” Fallon’s brown eyes narrow in on me. “He smells like tequilas without the tacos.”

“No tacos!” I announce.

Zane sighs. “He’s gonna take the guest room, I’ll fill you in later.”

“How was recording?” She asked with a smile, leaning in and pressing a kiss to his mouth.

“Good.” His face lights up when he sings, but when he sees her, it’s like he forgets he’s even trying to keep me standing. “Let me get this one taken care of first.”

“Yup.” She kisses him again. “Do that, I’ll make some tea for him and get dinner on.”

The last thing I remember is getting laid onto a bed, but before my eyes close, I reach across the bed and imagine Chloe there.

I see her smile.

I hope she wears the bracelet and thinks of me and only remembers good things. I hope one day I can get over her.

I just wish, in that bed, I was holding her hand.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Chloe*

He won't answer any of my texts.

I'm miserable, I still don't feel good, nurse Sam keeps giving me side eye like I'm going to do something stupid and hovers as if I need full-time care.

Sophie hasn't answered my texts either.

All I want to tell him is that I was afraid, terrified actually, that he'd leave and I somehow still manifested that and made it happen by not being honest, he has to see it from my perspective though!

Everyone always leaves.

And I knew if he found out about my sickness—or I thought I knew — that he would take off, and then if he found out that I kept this from him, he'd be even more pissed.

Ugh, it's so messed up.

The front door opens and Sophie walks in. "Oh, you're awake."

It's been a day, and it hurts. Today she's wearing a tight black dress that barely covers her ass, red heels, and a beanie.

"You look like a prostitute." I grumble. I mean a high paying one like one a politician would use, but whatever, I'm not in the mood to give her a compliment. "How could you?"

"Here we go." Sophie laughs and slams her purse down next to the Amex and the bracelet. She reads the note, then the name on the card. "Wow, and I'm the prostitute?"

"Go away. I really don't want to talk to you right now."

She snatches the card. “Maybe I’ll go on a shopping spree, it’s the least he can do for leaving you like this, right? I mean, don’t they all when they find out you’re sick?”

Bile rises in my stomach. “He left because you slept with him and I lied to him about it, not because I’m sick.”

She rolls her eyes and sits on the bar top, crossing her legs. “If that’s what you have to tell yourself so you get out of bed in the morning, then so be it, but at the end of the day he still walked out the door, if it wasn’t for me, he would have eventually gotten tired of your constant neediness, so really I did you a favor, you can thank me later.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I scream.

Sam walks in the room. “Everything okay in here?”

“She was just leaving.” I point to my sister.

My sister hops down from the counter onto her tall heels and sighs. “Mom and dad won’t be back for another few days, let me know when you get lonely and I’ll come watch a movie with you and stop sulking, you’ll get wrinkles, plus the sex wasn’t even that good.”

I want to throw something at her devious smirk.

She says I take everything from her, but I think it’s the other way around. Is it too much to ask for a sister that actually cares? We were close before I got sick and that just went completely out the window.

I don’t even recognize her anymore.

She sashays toward the door and looks over her shoulder. “I’m headed to a party, I’ll see you when I see you I guess,” She holds out his credit card. “And please tell Quinn thank you.”

“Sophie! No!”

She laughs. “Oh, I’m not going to go crazy, but remember he owes you, he owes us, plus he’s rich, you can’t even apply for this card unless you have loads of cash.”

She slams the door and I don’t have the energy to chase after her. I quickly call Quinn again, he doesn’t answer.

So I text.

Me

Sophie stopped by, she stole your card, I’m so sorry I didn’t have the energy or strength to chase her, cancel it right away before she ruins your life like she did mine and buys a new car with it.

It’s delivered, but he hasn’t read it yet.

Me

Quinn? Please, I don’t want her taking advantage of you more, and I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I really care for you, as much as you don’t believe me. Please come back so we can talk. Please. Please.

I’m desperate and I know it.

I watch the sunset later that day, my phone finally goes off, I nearly drop it when I see that it’s Quinn.

Quinn

Noted. Already at the airport.

Me

Come back.

Quinn

Too raw right now. Go sleep.

Well, that's better than nothing, right?

Me

Please?

Quinn

Going into airplane mode.

And just like that, my present, what I thought was supposed to be my future, instantly becomes my past.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*Quinn*

I woke up this morning with a hangover from Hell which was not helped by two children running around playing the floor is lava.

Hours later, I ended up joining them to distract myself from the calls I was getting from Chloe.

To make it worse, Sophie tried calling me too.

The hell? How did she even get my number?

I was too angry to do anything and my stomach felt like it would implode, so by the time the car service came to grab me and drive me into Portland, I was more than ready to bounce.

Zane and Fallon tried to get me to stay and fix things, but I wasn't even sure what that would look like and realized I just needed time, funny since the only reason I came to Seaside was for that.

Time. Fun. Relaxation. An adventure away from the drama of my life back home. I sighed and texted Chloe back.

Maybe I was being an ass, I mean I could call her and hear her out it just, maybe I'm being stubborn, maybe I'm an idiot, but you can't just get a blow like that and then suddenly have one conversation and establish trust again, plus I'm still really freaked out I slept with Sophie. I've never been that guy, I mean, I slept around in high school, but I at least knew the person I was sleeping with... I wasn't tricked.

Shit, I'm like Bathsheba, Sophie's David.

Weird.

Gross.

Why am I bringing the Bible into this suddenly? And how do I even know that?

A voice sounds over the speaker. "Delta Flight 1254 en route to LA is now boarding the first-class cabin."

I grab my duffel bag and slide my phone into my pocket and board the plane. I feel numb as I walk down to the plane, I'm even more numb as I find row number two and sit down, kicking my bag under the seat in front of me and staring out at the rainy Portland sky, of course it would be raining.

I grab my phone and see more missed texts and calls, okay so I lied and said I was in airplane mode, but once we're done boarding, it won't be a lie.

And my lie wasn't near as big as hers.

I start typing out my thoughts like an inner journal, and the minute I start typing, it's like I can't stop.

I just wanted to get over a girl I loved that ended up with my best friend.

I just wanted space.

What I got?

Twins.

Twins who thought it would be fun to mess with my already messed up emotions and a vacation aka gap year that ended up turning into a nightmare.

I got hell, and yet I'm still holding one's hand. I mean metachromatically. I want to be there for her and ugh, I can't go there mentally or emotionally and now I'm literally talking to myself.

I can't be that big of an asshole, right?

Because what if one needs saving?

Suddenly, I drop her hand in my head, realizing it's not hers that's shaking but mine.

Mine.

What if. In this scenario. I'm not the knight.

No, maybe.

I'm the one that needs the white horse.

I'm the one who needs a rescue. I'm...

I slowly start to back away from them both in my head, body trembling, lips not even moving anymore, even though I have so many words to say. I take one step, then another, then I turn and I run.

So much for a one-night stand.

So much for two.

So much for relaxation.

Now all I can do at the airport is pull a Kevin from Home Alone—and run.

I don't even know where I'm going, all I know is that it hurts, I feel stupid, ashamed, I feel completely blind sighted, and yet I still feel in love, the only question?

Which girl is it?

Fuck if I know.

Hi, my name is Quinn and I'm currently sitting on a plane back home writing out my thoughts and feelings about a situation I had zero control over. I'm writing so my heart stops breaking.

I'm writing in hopes one day that will be true.

And I'm writing because PS... I love you.

Shit, it's like I have this whole indie film in my head, the way it should have been. But the way it's ending, is with me sitting at a gate and staring up at the sad flight attendants who also just want to go home.

"Maybe," I whisper. "In another life."

Tears fill my eyes, I'm tempted to share the note with Chloe, but instead, I just keep writing.

This is definitely not a John Hughes film sort of ending, everyone's sad and broken, and nobody is rushing toward the plane to tell me to get off, and I'm not rushing back to give in when it's still raw, but I do want to, Chloe. I've been burned so much in the past, so damn much, you don't even know how much and I'm petrified if I give you the rest of me.

I'll be broken forever.

And now I'm a loser that's ready to burst into tears on a stupid plane, maybe it would be cleansing, to cry over you, to feel something other than this numbness. My emotions are barely held up by a dam right now, one crack and I'm done.

Maybe it is too late for me, maybe this is my curse, to fall for people who keep secrets and lies—maybe that's my punishment for coveting my best friend's girl or for lying to him years ago. I don't know what happened to carefree Quinn, but I really want him back.

Why did the universe save me from certain death only to put me in a situation where it feels the same?

Dark. Isolated.

You were like sunlight Chloe. Your smile is so pretty it's hard to look

away, maybe that's why it hurts so much.

You see, a long time ago I hurt my best friend, I know what it's like to feel like you have no choice, maybe I'll write a book about my past, maybe you'll be in it as the love of my life.

Maybe the bungee actually does snap and I miss your lap.

Maybe it ends there.

If the world would just stop spinning around me... It's going to take me a while, Chloe.

PS... I still love you.

I hit send without thinking as they close the cabin doors and I close my eyes, leaning back against the comfy seat.

Twenty minutes pass by and I can't figure out why the plane isn't actually moving, we're clearly delayed. I'm annoyed when the pilot comes out on the speaker. "Sorry folks, we just need an all clear from the mechanic and then we'll be on our way."

Groans are heard all over.

Great, I don't die by bungee, but I'll have a broken heart and then fall from a higher place in the sky—sounds about right.

I hate flying too.

Shit.

I immediately grab my headphones so I can focus on something happier and put on some music from my phone.

And why is it that the first song that comes on is Heartbroken by Diplo, perfect, great. I listen to it anyway, maybe I really do need to deep dive into sadness so I can feel better, though writing that note actually did feel like a

deep exhale, even though she hasn't read it yet.

Which is weird because she's been all over the texting and calling recently, then again she could be resting. Guilt attacks, she's sick, the least I could do was listen to her for five minutes.

But no, no, I refuse to justify anything.

I'm where I need to be.

I frown down at my phone like an idiot, then remember I put my phone in airplane mode after sending that last text. I quickly take it off and wait for my phone to buzz and buzz it does.

With seventeen missed calls from Zane.

Thirty text messages, the hell?

Zane

Bro, you need to get here now.

Zane

I'll send a car.

Zane

Quinn, turn your damn phone on, the plane won't crash if you turn it on for one second and if you're in the air, you can use the texting.

Zane

You should be past ten thousand feet and be able to text, what the Hell? Quinn, talk to me.

Zane

Don't make me do this.

Zane

Don't ignore me.

Zane

Shit, this is serious, Quinn.  
Everyone in my house is okay.

What about other houses? What the hell is going on?

The pilot comes back on the speaker. “Folks, I’ve got some bad news, it looks like we’re going to need to deplane and get you on another flight, the mechanic doesn’t feel comfortable giving us the all clear. We’ll get you all taken care of, just be patient with our staff. On behalf of Delta Air Lines, we apologize for the inconvenience.”

I groan and quickly read through the texts, only for a picture to pop up on the last desperate attempt.

It’s a hospital bed.

It’s Chloe hooked up to several machines—and she’s wearing my bracelet. The one I left with the card.

“FUCK!” I scream and jump to my feet, hitting my head on the ceiling. Pain hits but I don’t really care, I’ll be numb soon. Because Chloe.

“Sir!” The flight attendant comes over to me. “You need to calm down, we’ll all get off the plane and get you booked on a different flight, okay?” My heart’s racing, I feel like I’m going to puke. “Sir? I need you to take your seat before I can open the cabin back up, all right? Sir? Sir?”

I sway and collapse into my seat while she goes over to the door and gets

the clear to open it, and the minute she does, I grab my shit, shove past everyone and run.

I'm running while fumbling with my bag and my phone, I finally stop once I'm outside baggage claim and out of breath and call Zane.

He answers on the first ring. "Quinn!"

"The plane, bad plane, mechanics, what's going on?"

"So you're off the plane?"

"Yes, I'm off the plane. Now what the hell is going on? Why is she in the hospital?"

"She um, was without air for quite a while, they had to resuscitate her, I won't give you any more details until you get your ass back here."

"But she's alive?"

He's quiet for a few seconds than curses. "She's in a coma, man. And her sister is not okay, she's freaking out, I know you've had a falling out with them, but you're close with her."

"You think I'm close with her?" No, I'm angry so fucking angry at her. It should have been Sophie, not Chloe.

"You did sleep with her."

"Yeah, look how that turned out." I nearly throw my phone.

"Quinn, I'm serious, you need to come. I sent a car and told them to park until you came back, even if it meant waiting for your next flight, this is serious."

Tears run down my cheeks.

I'm finally crying.



I can't see the world in front of me.

I thought her betrayal and lies would shatter me forever—and now I know—it's the loss of her and my own pride that finally did it.

"Um..." I'm choking on my own tears. "Where's the car at, and where... where..." I start to hyperventilate.

"Quinn." Zane snaps. "Get it together, I know this is a shock, but you have around a thirty-minute drive to the hospital."

"What?"

"They um, they had to life flight her, that's all I know, I asked for updates from, well from you know, and this was the last picture she sent. I need you to keep your shit together and be strong, okay? None of this betrayal bullshit, this is bigger than that."

"You think I don't know that?" I wipe my hand down my face. "Where's the fucking car?"

He sighs. "Just run out of baggage claim, he should be waiting for you with a sign, he texted while we were on the phone that he was already there, so good timing."

Sure, yeah, good timing.

"I'll um—" I can't breathe. "I'll call you once I'm there."

"Quinn," Zane breathes out a curse. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry."

"Yeah." I swallow the lump that will forever take residence in my throat. "Me too."

When I manage to get outside of baggage claim, I see a man holding an iPad with Quinn scribbled across it.

I don't even care that I look like I've been crying. I walk toward him and

bark out. "I'm ready."

But I'm not.

I'm not ready for this, for any of this.

The car ride feels like it takes forever. I barely remember getting into it, and when I do, I stare down at my phone in my hand, at the unread note I sent her where I said I loved her still.

When I was writing that—she was already in a coma.

She never got to see or hear my soul.

And now she might never hear the words.

I open the note and re-read it, then whisper the ending into the universe,  
"PS. I still love you."

Even though you're gone...

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*Quinn*

The car pulls up to the hospital. I don't even say thank you, I just shoot Zane a text and ask for the room number.

He texts back immediately.

Zane

Room 3038, they're expecting you so you can go right up, ask for directions to ICU.

ICU.

Tears burn the back of my eyes. People wake up from coma's all the time, right? I almost asked what actually happened but I'm assuming it's part of her Lupus, I was too afraid to look it up on my phone and have it be right or hear bad news.

My only focus is to make sure I can hold her hand, even if she can't hold it back. I walk slowly into the gift shop and grab flowers. She can't smell or see, but I grab them anyway along with a small white bear that says get better.

What a joke.

But it's something.

It's all I can do.

I'm helpless, powerless. My chest feels like it's cracking over and over again as I make my purchase and walk over to the elevators. ICU is on the third floor. I grab my lame gifts and slowly walk into the elevator and hit

number five.

My head is starting to pound from the crying.

My hands shake as the smell of hospital fills the air. Like medicine and bleach, like sickness and death.

The doors slowly open, I walk past the nurses' station and look at the numbers on the doors. I'm not ready for this. I'm not.

I stop in front of her door and slowly let myself in.

The door pushes open. A nurse is checking her vitals. "Oh, you just missed her sister, she should be back soon, visiting hours are almost over."

"Yeah." My voice cracks. "Is there a waiting room I can go to once they're over?"

"When you're done visiting, I'll show you, all right?"

I nod. "Is she making any progress?"

The nurse's face falls. "She's stable."

That's like saying she's in a vegetative state. A way for them to make you feel better because hey she could be dead—she may as well be.

The nurse walks by me and clicks the door shut, so many machines are plugged in around her. Nobody told me about the bruising on her arms and face, was that normal too?

I set the bear and flowers down on the table and pull up a chair next to the bed, and reach for her hand. I squeeze it and look for the bracelet but it's not there, they probably took it off of her. I look over at the nightstand and sure enough, it's right there with a picture of her and Sophie.

Damn it!

"I'm so sorry," I rasp. "So fucking sorry."

Maybe if I would have stayed I could have prevented this, if I would have listened, was it my fault her condition declined?

Tears stream down my cheeks. “I love you, Chloe. I was just upset, I felt betrayed, I never told you my story but maybe I’ll tell you now, I heard people can still hear in comas, but I have no clue if it’s true. When Ambrose and I were in high school, we had this girl we were both obsessed with, we later found out she was basically pinning us against each other and then admitted it one day. We were competitive, and each of us were just horny idiots. One night at a party, she said she wanted—us both. And we were so damn young and stupid we agreed and furthermore took drinks from her, we later found out she’d drugged us, her whole fantasy was for me and Ambrose to hook up with each other and with her, she made us do some really messed up things, but our inhibitions were gone and on top of that, she took pictures while we were unconscious, touched us—“ I shudder. “—then she used them as a way to threaten us if we ever said anything. In order to protect my best friend, I pulled her away from him, purposefully making it seem like I wanted her when really I was trying to take the fall for him. Our fathers at the time ended up finding out, we sued her, she left, only later we found out she was pregnant and lost the baby, we still don’t know who’s it was since both of us had been with her. I don’t know why I’m telling you all of this, except, I know what it’s like to be on both ends of betrayal—it took a while for me and Ambrose to make up only for me to fall for the girl he’s now engaged to. In both scenarios I thought I was in love, in the last one, I knew she was his, not mine, so when I came to Seaside I was like man, finally. Finally, someone who gets me. I don’t give a fuck if you’re sick, I want to hold your hair when you puke, I want to hold your hand when you’re scared, and I want to carry you when you can’t carry yourself. You think I cared that you were

sick? That's complete bullshit. When you love someone, you love every broken part of them, you don't get to choose and the idiots that do just give us all a bad name. Love is when you accept no matter what, even if it doesn't benefit you—you love people where they're at and you hold their hands if they stand still, stumble backward, or move forward. Love isn't defined by how healthy you are or what you can give me. Love is defined by all those beautiful, tiny, wonderful moments were given. I guess I just wanted you to know that." I get up and lower her hand back down. "I brought you a bear and flowers, stupid, I know, but I wanted to do something other than just wish you would open your eyes."

I turn around and see Sophie.

Wait.

I look closer. "Sophie?"

"Do you mean that?" she asks, taking a step forward, she looks really pale, then again her twin's in a coma. "What you just said? Do you mean it?"

I can't speak.

Why does she sound so much like Chloe? I'm hallucinating and it's not fair, the universe is a cruel, horrible place.

Tears slide down my cheeks.

And then she's in my arms. "Did you?"

I want to shove her away but I need the comfort and I know she does too, slowly I lower my chin to her head and sniff.

What? Now I'm even smelling her perfume.

She starts sobbing against my chest. "I'm sorry Sophie."

She tenses in my arms and pulls back. "Sophie?"

My eyes search hers, then widen. “Chloe?”

She nods her head. “Sophie’s the one that got in the accident.”

I collapse against her sobbing.

She holds me tight in her arms. “Did you think? Wait, you thought I was the one in the coma?”

“Fuck that hurt.” I cling to her so hard that it’s borderline embarrassing. “I thought I lost you. I thought I’d never—“

“—Shhh, Quinn, I’m so sorry I thought Zane explained everything. I left my phone back at the house after he took me to the hospital. I’m so sorry!”

“Shit.” I pull back and press a kiss to her mouth and then her forehead, her cheeks. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too.” Her smile’s sad.

“We should talk.” I finally get out.

She nods. “But not here.”

A knock sounds at the door, the nurse pokes her head in. “Visiting hours are over.”

Chloe nods and grabs my hand. “I have a hotel across the street, you can stay with me.”

I walk out of that hospital room both relieved and sad, because there’s still someone in a coma and no matter how badly she treated me—that’s still tragic and it’s still Chloe’s twin.

I squeeze her hand and whisper words I’m not sure I believe, “It’s going to be okay.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

*Chloe*

I can't believe Quinn actually thought I was the one that was dead, I mean that could easily be my future, should I even get involved with him being as sick as I am? I quickly shove the thoughts away because after that speech, how dare I even think that.

His emotions, his truth bled all over that room, it was beautifully tragic. We walk in silence across the street and into Hotel 47, a small boutique hotel, they only had one room left, and it was a suite. Zane paid for it and told me to stop talking.

He wasn't even my family, but Quinn's.

I barely knew him, but my parents still weren't here yet, their flight got delayed with some plane mechanical issue thing at Portland airport so they couldn't make their connection.

I was completely and utterly alone.

But now, I had Quinn.

I think Zane knew I was barely holding it together. We walked to the elevator and went up to the room. It was spacious and modern, with two bathrooms, a large king room, and a second room with a queen bed. Both rooms were themed, one was all modern art and bright colors, down to the purple down comforter, the other smaller room was more elegant with golds, whites, and blacks, and the main living room and kitchen area were like a joint mash up of both, but it worked.

Quinn walked straight into the king bedroom I'd been sleeping in and laid facedown on the bed with a grunt.



I came over and sat next to him.

His voice was muffled against the comforter. “Start at the beginning, what happened with Sophie, the truth, then tell me what happened when I left and how we went from Seaside to being airlifted to a hospital.”

“She’s um...” I get up and walk over to the mini fridge in the king room, grab a water, then grab him a few mini bottles of tequila and hand them to him.

He looks up. “Why is everyone trying to get me drunk with tequila these days?”

“Huh?” I open my water.

He shakes his head. “Long story of rockstars with good intentions and me puking my guts out only to wake up to a little boy and girl putting stickers on my face.”

“What?”

“Zane’s kids, again long story, I stayed at his place, and he got me drunk or I got me drunk and his kids have loads of energy.”

“Gotcha.” I nod. “And did the drunkenness help?”

“Ask the toilet, I dropped all my secrets there.” He groaned and flipped onto his back, opened up one shot, downed it, stared up and the ceiling. “So?”

“When I found out what she did, which yes was that next morning, I was going to tell you. I was embarrassed, and I didn’t want to scare you away, and on top of that, after you left, she threatened to tell you about my illness if I told you it was her, not me. Ever since I was diagnosed, she’s been on this rampage, slowly getting more and more mean. She’s basically stolen all my

friends, the only boyfriends I've had left when it was too "hard" to deal with my being sick all the time. The amount of times I was told to just get better is outrageous."

Quinn snorts out a disgusted laugh. "Wow, just get better? Like it's that easy? You aren't Harry Potter, you can't just magic spell yourself into health."

He was always a good one. I was just too afraid to believe it. "I know that, and it helps that you do too."

He turns on his side. "What do you take me for? Seriously. I'm not a monster, you heard what—"

"—What you said in the hospital was one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard spoken out loud, the best sort of confession."

Quinn's blue eyes soften, his hair's coming out of the bun he always has it in, his sharp jaw clenches. I want to kiss him so badly. I want him to hold me even more. "I meant every word."

A tear slides down my cheek, he catches it with his finger and wraps his hand around my neck and pulls my mouth down to his. I don't think I realize how much I need his touch until I'm finally in his arms, more tears stream down my face colliding with our fused mouths. He pulls me onto him, then tears his mouth away and holds me tight. I rest my head against his chest. "I know we have more to talk about, more to work through, thank you for telling me."

I snifle. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

"I'm sorry I hurt you back."

I sigh. "You should know what happened, also why were you so convinced it was me?"

“Zane sent me a picture of her wearing the bracelet I left.”

Understanding dawns. “Oh, well that makes sense, when I last saw her she grabbed your Amex, the note, and the bracelet, said she was doing me a favor.”

“Listen, nobody deserves to be in a coma, least of all family but, that’s a real bitch move, Chloe, you have to know that.”

“I do.” I hold back the tears. “She was gone for a few hours, I think the idea was a pool party, she’d been drinking and decided it would be a good idea to use the paddle board, she was showing off apparently, and fell at pretty much the perfect angle to hit her head, she was kind of out of it so decided to go home but everyone was still partying, so she decided to sober up then drive back. Her alcohol level wasn’t over when she drove, so that’s good, but the person who hit her car...” My voice shakes. “Was another guy at the party, he was drunk, tried to miss her, while she tried to miss him, he nicked the car just enough for her to go spinning into a brick wall. Thankfully, she wasn’t going very fast, and neither was he, but she’d already had internal bleeding the doctors think from the paddle board and she just happened to hit her head in the same spot, her brain was swelling rapidly and they needed to life flight her, she’s bruised up but really the only thing that is damaged other than a few cuts and bruises, is her brain.”

“Will she wake up?”

I shudder. “I don’t know. The doctors said to give it time, the trauma’s pretty big, but she’s young, right, so...” I swallow and look away. “I just... I don’t know anything anymore.”

He holds me tight. “What do you know right now?”

“What?”

“What do you know?”

“About Sophie?”

“About life? Because every day you learn something new, most days the future is daunting and we can go crazy thinking about the what ifs, so rather than feed into something you can’t control—which believe me, I struggle with this—why don’t you just change the narrative? Today, I know Sophie’s in the hospital. I know she’s strong. Today I know that I’m going to kiss Quinn and he’s going to hold me. I know that I’m strong. I know that I can only do so much. Those are the things I know. And tomorrow will bring worries of its own, but I’ll always know that I know I need to live today with my eyes wide open, accepting of the things existing around me, and using my energy to focus on those things, rather than using my energy to toss fear into the future.”

Hot tears stream down my face. “Pretty smart for a nineteen-year-old.”

“I’m an old soul, what can I say?”

He pulls me up into his arms. “Have you eaten?”

I shake my head.

“Have you showered?”

I laugh through my tears and shake my head again. “All right, first things first, let’s order some food, then we’ll get you in that shower.”

He helps me stand, then goes over to the phone and orders room service, burgers, fries, chicken nuggets, and a salad. I almost laugh at him because I know one hundred percent that he’s going to make me eat that salad first, not because he thinks I’m fat but because of the flare-up. He’ll let me have chicken though. I smile when he hangs up and walks over to me.

Saunters is more like it.

Damn, he's so good looking.

He pulls his shirt over his head and tosses it onto the bed, then shrugs out of his jeans and briefs. He's naked, walking toward me, and then pulling my shirt over my head, my shorts to the ground, peeling my socks from my feet, and then unstrapping my bra before walking past me and turning on the shower.

He tests the water and turns around, holding out his hand. "Come on."

I smile and follow him into the water. It's cleansing as it washes down my face and body. We're both quiet as we shower together. I think we've both spoken enough words for the next hour.

He leans down and starts cleaning my feet, then silently stands and starts washing his hair while I wash mine—it's like it's normal for us to shower together and it does feel that way except for the fact that I want to cling to him.

"It's easier," he says after he rinses the soap out.

I frown. "What is?"

"Crying in the shower, nobody can see your tears."

"But I'll know."

"I won't tell anyone." Quinn grabs me by the arm and pulls me against him. I burst into tears immediately. "I'm not leaving your side, all right? But I do have one question..."

I cling to him, my arms almost hurting from holding him so tight.

"You're sure you're just a twin, not a triplet, right? Like no more surprises?"

My tears soon turn to laughter. “I needed that.”

“Dude, I’m serious, I’ve already aged like ten years in two days.” He pulls back and tilts my chin toward him. “Just you and Sophie?”

“Just us.” I press a kiss to his mouth. “Just me and you, no surprises.”

“Good.” He deepens the kiss, then slowly presses me back against the shower wall, I hook a leg around him, while he lifts me onto his hips sliding into me so easy it’s almost embarrassing.

With slow thrusts and the steam from the shower billowing around us, I cling to him. I smile.

And I know that Quinn is mine, just like I’m his.

I know this feels good.

I know he’ll stay by my side.

His mouth finds my neck and grabs hold as he peppers kisses all up and down my skin. I’m there before I can say anything, but I don’t need to as I feel his release as if it’s my own.

He keeps me pinned there and stares into my eyes. “PS, I love you.”

“You love me?”

“I love you,” he says it again. “And it’s okay if you don’t love me yet, but all it took was thinking you were gone to realize that I would do anything to have you by my side.”

My eyes fill with more tears. “I love you too.” I hug him tight as he gently pulls out of me. “But why the PS?”

He smiles like he has a secret. “You’ll see.”

Later that night, after eating, we fall asleep watching TV, his head’s in my lap, and he refuses to let go of my hand.

I start to move to grab him a blanket when he wakes up and sits up, then stands. “Let’s go to bed.”

I follow him into the room and change into a pair of sweats.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asks.

“Oh!” Suddenly embarrassed, I point at the door. “I’ll just go in the other bed, sorry I’m confused—”

He bursts out laughing. “Um, no, you’re not going anywhere, I’m just curious why you’re putting on clothes when I’m just going to be taking them off? That’s a whole lot of work for someone to do at midnight. Take it easy on me, I’m fragile.”

I roll my eyes. “My ass.”

“Yes.” He points. “That ass is mine, so take off those sweats and hop into bed so I can make you forget about being sad, I know at least in this moment I can do that.”

My heart feels lighter. “With your dick?”

“See! You can already make jokes.” He sobers. “It’s okay to have moments of sadness with happiness in between, remember, we just go with what we know and what I know right now is I really want to hold you even if I can’t have sex with you, and I really, love you.”

I start taking off my clothes, and crawl into the massive bed and immediately straddle him, then lean down, grip his hands pressing them against the pillow, our tongues meet in a mash up of tenderness and desire, he tastes like the red wine we were drinking.

His body’s warm and hard beneath me. I rock my hips after settling on him, and it’s all over so fast, maybe because we’re both exhausted, but when

I collapse next to him, he pulls me into his arms and just keeps me there.

I smile and rest against him, then whisper, “PS, I love you too.”



# EPILOGUE

*Quinn*

*One Month Later*

“This was a horrible idea.” I look around the busy living room and wince when two more small children whose names are lost on me try to convince yet another adult, Drew this time, to play the floor is lava.

Pillows are everywhere.

It’s chaos.

Ambrose took one look at all the famous singers and actors with all their kids, wives, and food, oh and well the absolute mess after one hour, grabbed a bottle of whiskey and just drank it straight.

I’d snickered and said, “Look, your future!”

MB chose that moment to slap the back of my head, followed by a punch in the arm from Chloe.

Now I’m walking around ready to put up a freaking shield wall with pillows so the girls don’t attack me.

Zane walks up to me and gives me an elbow, why is everyone so violent tonight? We’re just celebrating MB’s pregnancy with a little joint party, well it was supposed to be little, then Zane told Drew, and Drew told Jaymeson and Demetri, then it just piled up from there so basically every actor or singer that was currently in Seaside recording or filming—was at the house.

Oh, and two football players, that Ambrose nearly shit his pants over, Wes Michels and Sanchez, apparently they’re on the same team now that Quinton

Miller decided to retire to be with his triplets.

Kids. Everywhere.

The doorbell rings.

What the hell? Is the entire town coming?

I rush over to open it and now it's my turn to shit my pants in the most terrifying way possible. "Nixon." Am I supposed to like salute him? What are the rules? My family never told me the rules, fucking Zane! "H-hello."

The guy just grows muscles and tattoos like a garden, has a lip piercing, scary blue eyes, dark hair, and he's probably packing.

And I do not mean a dick.

Though he has one of those too.

Not that I've seen it.

Shit, he makes me nervous. "Come in."

What follows is something that can only be played in slow motion in my head as several other Italians follow him in, all five of them bosses, one's a senator and the final one to step over the threshold, stops, and turns to me. "We brought the good vodka."

"Oh right, because I was concerned—about the vodka," I say sarcastically, the guy has blonde hair and looks like ten years older than me, maybe?

He slaps me hard on the shoulder. "I like you."

"Play nice Andrei...." Chase, the state senator and underboss laughs. "... there are kids present, which reminds me, kids!"

What follows that is another dozen or so kids of all ages, some in high school, some littles, and a few more scary ones that look ready to rip my tongue from my throat, cool, let's party.

Zane rushes toward them and gives Nixon a hug. “When I heard you were close by, I knew you needed to check out the coast.”

“Thanks for the invite.” Nixon actually smiles, wonders never cease, huh?

Chloe comes up beside me. “So, um, remember when we said no more secrets.”

How many weapons do they have hidden, I wonder?

And why am I sweating?

“I have... no words, ... actually.” I confess when Zane walks over with Nixon again.

Zane rocks back on his heels. “So I may have called in a favor, they have connections.” Shocker. They have connections. With death. “And had Dr. Nikolai Blazik flown into Portland, he’s seeing Sophie now, he’s been studying her case and thinks there are a few things that could work, it’s worth a shot.”

Chloe bursts into tears and hugs Zane. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, thank the cousin over here.”

Just watch out for pointy things. I make eye contact with Nixon and mouth thank you.

While Sophie’s made huge strides, she still hasn’t woken up and nobody knows why, the doctors and specialists can’t explain it, one even said it’s almost like she doesn’t want to.

The entire case is weird, but if they have someone who’s a world renown doctor like Nikolai, then I have hope.

I know I have even more hope than I did before.

When Chloe comes back into my arms, Nixon looks between us. “So, how

did you two meet?”

“A canoe,” I say quickly. Do not look dumb in front of the mafia boss.

Ambrose just happens to be walking by with a bag of chips. “You sit on a throne of lies, it’s like this big scary mafia dude that probably has a knife on him.” Nixon actually bursts out laughing so do the surrounding men that are listening in and suddenly very interested in whatever bullshit Ambrose is about to say. “We went bungee jumping, this dumb-dumb is afraid of heights, we may have tricked him into thinking he wasn’t attached to the bungee, guy almost shit himself, then had a great time, until the band snapped.”

“Snapped!” I feel the need to remind the room, I don’t know why I yell it, the trauma is real.

Ambrose nods and crunches down on a chip. “Right, but the universe had perfect timing because that one right there was rowing her boat and he just happened to fall like two feet into her boat, right between her thighs.”

“Nice.” Nixon nods his head. “Respect.”

“Some might say I fell from Heaven.” I add on.

“Boooooooo.” Chloe does a thumbs down. “You screamed like a girl.”

“Did not.”

“Did.”

“Lies!”

Nixon looks between us. “Well, however it happened, you two look happy.”

“Does that mean you won’t kill us?” I joke.

Nobody laughs.

Nixon rolls his eyes. “I don’t know what you’ve been told, but we’re just

a bunch of businessmen.”

One of the guys behind him, the one with the blond hair, laughs. “Yes, very rich businessmen.”

Zane shakes his head at me as if to say stop talking, stop talking.

“Hah, well if I ever need to chat about my financial assets.” I gulp.

Chloe shakes her head and points me toward the kitchen. “Go get a drink, you’re making it worse.”

“Where’s the vodka!” I yell.

“That’s the spirit.”

Blonde scary dude pours me a shot and clicks it against his, can’t say I saw that coming a few months ago.

The twins.

The sex.

The coma.

MB’s pregnancy.

And taking shots with the mafia while famous people just rummage around the house changing diapers and playing Monopoly in a very violent and aggressive manner.

I came to Seaside to relax.

I fled my own house of isolation and loneliness, and was dropped into chaos, but sometimes the universe knows exactly what you need.

The Mafia. Football. Rockstars. Vodka. The floor is Lava.

And Chloe.

“PS...” She comes up behind me, her arms wrap around my body. “...I

love you.”

“PS, I love you too.”

THE END

## A NOTE ON CHRONIC ILLNESS

Hey everyone. I'm writing this late at night, but just wanted to say, I wanted to really bring recognition to Lupus and I try so hard to make sure that we use our words and our platforms to give others voices. I had sensitivity readers to help make sure her experience made sense but know that even authors who research mess up. One thing with Lupus that I've discovered is that it manifests in so many different ways, so again, give me some grace and also if you're suffering with this, our thoughts and prayers are with you. Thank you so much for your support!

# CAUGHT YOU!

**Did you catch the name drops?**

Zane & Fallon

Curious about their story?

Meet them in their book [Keep](#), a Seaside Pictures Novel.

Chase Abandonato.

Curious about his story?

Meet Chase in his books [Entice](#) & [Eulogy](#)!

Drew & Bronte

Curious about their story?

Meet them in their book [Surrender](#), a Seaside Pictures Novel.

Nixon Abandonato

Curious about his story?

Meet Nixon in his books [Elite](#) & [Elect](#)!

Andrei Sinacore

Curious about his story?

Meet Andrei in his book [Debase](#)!



Demitri

Curious about his story?

Meet Demitri in his books [Tear](#), [Pull](#) & [Eternal](#)!

Wes Michels

Curious about his story?

Meet Wes in his books [Ruin](#) & [Fearless](#)!

Sanchez

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Meet Sanchez in his book [Fratenize](#)!

Quinton Miller

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Meet Quinton in his books [Fraternize](#) & [Infraction](#)!

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*The Setup (Finn & Jillian's story)*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I hate these. I hate them because I know that my team knows how much I love them and at the same time even after talking to them on a daily basis I want to acknowledge them. I want them to have their names on billboards, I want them to win the lottery. I want so much for my team. Until that happens because let's just manifest it now ;)

God is everything in my life along with my family and I'm so thankful to be doing what I do, and with that being said, if that offends you that's cool, you do you and I'll do me and we can have wine later ;) I'll buy.

Second, Nate, ugh you are amazing I don't deserve you, and I don't deserve my two boys. Thank you for giving me time to finish this book and do a signing all within five days. HAH, send help.

Jill, Nicole, Denise, Dani, KP, Mel, Margarita, FOR REAL, I feel like this last year has been a whirlwind and you guys have been pivotal in helping me come back (sidenote, I took like two years off ish with the toddler).

I so respect and appreciate you all, thank you for being so incredible.

And I'm coming back to Jill, because I must, I would not be writing without you (still writing) I think I'd be in a corner rocking back and forth. Thank you for all that you do.

And thank you to my loyal readers and new ones, I am so thankful when I see your responses, good or bad, it just really brings joy even if you hate things I know that I'm capable of bringing you something you'll love at one point.

End of day, I love you all, and you're all amazing in your own way, do you, be awesome, thanks for your support and look forward to more books!

HUGS, RVD

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Van Dyken is the #1 *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author of over 100 books, ranging from new adult romance to mafia romance to paranormal & fantasy romance. With over four million copies sold, she's been featured in *Forbes*, *US Weekly*, and *USA Today*. Her books have been translated in more than 15 countries. She was one of the first romance authors to have a Kindle in Motion book through Amazon publishing and continues to strive to be on the cutting edge of the reader experience. She keeps her home in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, adorable sons, naked cat, and two dogs. For more information about her books and upcoming events, visit [www.RachelVanDykenAuthor.com](http://www.RachelVanDykenAuthor.com).

# ALSO BY RACHEL VAN DYKEN

## STANDALONE ROMANCES

***New Adult, Angsty Romances — Standalone Novels***

[\*The Perfects \(Ambrose & Mary-Belle's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Imperfects \(Quinn's story\)\*](#)

***New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Standalone Novels***

[\*EXposing the Groom\*](#)

## EAGLE ELITE

***New Adult, Mafia Romance — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*Elite \(Nixon & Trace's story\)\*](#)

[\*Elect \(Nixon & Trace's story\)\*](#)

[\*Entice \(Chase & Mil's story\)\*](#)

[\*Elicit \(Tex & Mo's story\)\*](#)

[\*Bang Bang \(Axel & Amy's story\)\*](#)

[\*Enforce \(Elite + from the boys' POV\)\*](#)

[\*Ember \(Phoenix & Bee's story\)\*](#)

[\*Elude \(Sergio & Andi's story\)\*](#)

[\*RIP: A Bratva Brotherhood Novel \(Nikolai & Maya's story\)\*](#)

[\*Empire \(Sergio & Val's story\)\*](#)



*Enrage (Dante & El's story)*

*Eulogy (Chase & Luciana's story)*

*Exposed (Dom & Tanit's story)*

*Envy (Vic & Renee's story)*

*Debase: A Bratva Brotherhood Novel (Andrei & Alice's story)*

*Dissolution (Santino & Katya's story)*

## **MAFIA ROYALS ROMANCES**

***New Adult, Mafia Romance — Interconnected Standalones***

*Royal Bully (Asher & Claire's story)*

*Ruthless Princess (Serena & Junior's story)*

*Scandalous Prince (Breaker & Violet's story)*

*Destructive King (Asher & Annie's story)*

*Mafia King (Tank & Kartini's story)*

*Fallen Royal (Maksim & Izzy's Story)*

*Broken Crown (King & Del's story)*

## **CRUEL SUMMER TRILOGY**

***New Adult, Angsty Romance — Trilogy***

*Summer Heat (Marlon & Ray's story)*

*Summer Seduction (Marlon & Ray's story)*

*Summer Nights (Marlon & Ray's story)*

## COVET

***New Adult, Angsty Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*Stealing Her \(Bridge & Isobel's story\)\*](#)

[\*Finding Him \(Julian & Keaton's story\)\*](#)

## WINGMEN INC.

***New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*The Matchmaker's Playbook \(Ian & Blake's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Matchmaker's Replacement \(Lex & Gabi's story\)\*](#)

## BRO CODE

***New Adult Romance — Standalone Novels***

[\*Co-Ed \(Knox & Shawn's story\)\*](#)

[\*Seducing Mrs. Robinson \(Leo & Kora's story\)\*](#)

[\*Avoiding Temptation \(Slater & Tatum's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Setup \(Finn & Jillian's story\)\*](#)

## THE DARK ONES SAGA

***Supernatural Romance — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*Dark Origins \(Sariel & Nephtal's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Dark Ones \(Ethan & Genesis's story\)\*](#)

[\*Untouchable Darkness \(Cassius & Stephanie's story\)\*](#)

[\*Dark Surrender \(Alex & Hope's story\)\*](#)

*Darkest Temptation (Mason & Serenity's story)*

*Darkest Sinner (Timber & Kyra's story)*

*Darkest Power (Horus & Kit's story)*

*Darkest Descent (Bannik's story)*

*Darkest Need (Tarek's story)*

## **RUIN SERIES**

***Upper Young Adult/New Adult, Angsty Romances — Interconnected  
Standalones***

*Ruin (Wes Michels & Kiersten's story)*

*Toxic (Gabe Hyde & Saylor's story)*

*Fearless (Wes Michels & Kiersten's story)*

*Shame (Tristan & Lisa's story)*

## **SEASIDE SERIES**

***Young Adult, Angsty, Rockstar Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

*Tear (Alec, Demetri & Natalee's story)*

*Pull (Demetri & Alyssa's story)*

*Shatter (Alec & Natalee's story)*

*Forever (Alec & Natalee's story)*

*Fall (Jamie Jaymeson & Pricilla's story)*

*Strung (Tear + from the boys' POV)*

*Eternal (Demetri & Alyssa's story)*

## **SEASIDE PICTURES**

***New Adult, Dramedy (RomCom with Dramatic Moments), Rockstar/Movie  
Star Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*Capture \(Lincoln & Dani's story\)\*](#)

[\*Keep \(Zane & Fallon's story\)\*](#)

[\*Steal \(Will & Angelica's story\)\*](#)

[\*All Stars Fall \(Trevor & Penelope's story\)\*](#)

[\*Abandon \(Ty & Abigail's story\)\*](#)

[\*Provoke \(Braden & Piper's story\)\*](#)

[\*Surrender \(Drew & Bronte's story\)\*](#)

## **STANDALONE K-POP ROMANCES**

***New Adult, Angsty, Rockstar Romances — Standalone Novels***

[\*My Summer In Seoul \(Grace's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Anti-Fan & The Idol\*](#)

## **THE CONSEQUENCE SERIES**

***New Adult, Laugh Out Loud Romantic Comedies — Interconnected  
Standalones***

[\*The Consequence of Loving Colton \(Colton & Milo's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Consequence of Revenge \(Max & Becca's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Consequence of Seduction \(Reid & Jordan's story\)\*](#)

[The Consequence of Rejection \(Jason & Maddy's story\)](#)

## **THE EMORY GAMES**

***New Adult, Laugh Out Loud Romantic Comedies — Standalone Novels***

[Office Hate \(Mark & Olivia's story\)](#)

[Office Date \(Jack & Ivy's story\)](#)

## **STANDALONE DRAMEDY**

***RomCom with Dramatic Moments — Standalone Novel***

[The Godparent Trap \(Rip & Colby's story\)](#)

## **CURIOUS LIAISONS**

***New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Interconnected Standalones***

[Cheater \(Lucas & Avery's story\)](#)

[Cheater's Regret \(Thatch & Austin's story\)](#)

## **PLAYERS GAME**

***New Adult, Sports Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

[Fraternize \(Miller, Grant and Emerson's story\)](#)

[Infraction \(Miller & Kinsey's story\)](#)

[M.V.P. \(Jax & Harley's story\)](#)

## **RED CARD**

***New Adult, Sports Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*Risky Play \(Slade & Mackenzie's story\)\*](#)

[\*Kickin' It \(Matt & Parker's story\)\*](#)

**LIARS, INC**

***New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*Dirty Exes \(Colin, Jessie & Blaire's story\)\*](#)

[\*Dangerous Exes \(Jessie & Isla's story\)\*](#)

**THE BET SERIES**

***New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*The Bet \(Travis & Kacey's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Wager \(Jake & Char Lynn's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Dare \(Jace & Beth Lynn's story\)\*](#)

**THE BACHELORS OF ARIZONA**

***New Adult Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*The Bachelor Auction \(Brock & Jane's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Playboy Bachelor \(Bentley & Margot's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Bachelor Contract \(Brant & Nikki's story\)\*](#)

**WALTZING WITH THE WALLFLOWER — WRITTEN WITH  
LEAH SANDERS**

***Regency Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*Waltzing with the Wallflower \(Ambrose & Cordelia\)\*](#)

[\*Beguiling Bridget \(Anthony & Bridget's story\)\*](#)

[\*Taming Wilde \(Colin & Gemma's story\)\*](#)

**LONDON FAIRY TALES**

***Fairy Tale Inspired Regency Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*Upon a Midnight Dream \(Stefan & Rosalind's story\)\*](#)

[\*Whispered Music \(Dominique & Isabelle's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Wolf's Pursuit \(Hunter & Gwendolyn's story\)\*](#)

[\*When Ash Falls \(Ashton & Sofia's story\)\*](#)

**RENWICK HOUSE**

***Regency Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*The Ugly Duckling Debutante \(Nicholas & Sara's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Seduction of Sebastian St. James \(Sebastian & Emma's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Redemption of Lord Rawlings \(Phillip & Abigail's story\)\*](#)

[\*An Unlikely Alliance \(Royce & Evelyn's story\)\*](#)

[\*The Devil Duke Takes a Bride \(Benedict & Katherine's story\)\*](#)

**RACHEL VAN DYKEN & M. ROBINSON**

***New Adult, Romantic Suspence — Interconnected Standalones***

[\*Mafia Casanova \(Romeo & Eden's story\)\*](#)

*Falling for the Villain (Juliet Sinacore's story)*

**KATHY IRELAND & RACHEL VAN DYKEN**

***Women's Fiction Standalone***

*Fashion Jungle*

**STANDALONE ROMANCES**

***Romantic Comedy, Holiday Romance — Standalone Novel***

*A Crown for Christmas (Fitz & Phillipa's story)*

***New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Standalone Novels***

*Every Girl Does It (Preston & Amanda's story)*

*Compromising Kessen (Christian & Kessen's story)*

***New Adult, Fantasy Romance — Standalone Novel***

*Divine Uprising (Athena & Adonis's story)*

***Inspirational, Historical Romance — Standalone Novel***

*The Parting Gift — written with Leah Sanders (Blaine and Mara's story)*





[www.rachelvandykenauthor.com](http://www.rachelvandykenauthor.com)