



B **S** **S**
Ackwards

RISE LIKE A ROCKET
LAURA ROCCA

Ackwards **B*SS**

LAURA ROCCA



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Dedication

We all have our ups and downs, no one can be happy all the time, but it's always important to remember to smile. Life goes by pretty fast and we all have our moments, but when you feel lost; look up at the sky, at the myriad of stars, and remember that, every day clouds pass over them, obscuring them...but it's never permanent. Clouds pass, they fade. Stars last forever.

Choose a star, make a wish and spend every day making the most of your life, making it shine like that star. You deserve it. We all do.

Laura

“When you look up at the sky at night, since I’ll be living on one of them, since I’ll be laughing on one of them, for you it’ll be as if all the stars are laughing. You’ll have stars that can laugh!”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

“People have stars, but they aren’t the same. For travelers, the stars are guides. For other people, they’re nothing but tiny lights. And for still others, for scholars, they’re problems. For my businessman, they were gold. But all those stars are silent stars. You, though, you’ll have stars like nobody else.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Synopsis

“How many stars do you think are up there?”

“A million?”

“I don’t know. What do you say we sit a while and count them together?”

Piper Hooper has never had it easy. Growing up is hard when your family is problematic. The only thing that ever made her feel alive was swimming. It was her refuge, her reference point, her only certainty in a sea of instability. Swimming - and Kirk Jenkin, her best friend, her secret love, the one person who made the stars shine.

For Piper, however, swimming is now just a faded dream. As for Kirk - despite his promises, he left Nantucket and never came back.

Piper knows the only way she’s ever going to see him again is on the cover of a magazine. She’s so sure of this that when she comes face to face with him, she thinks her mind is playing tricks on her.

Kirk Jenkin is bass player in a rock band. He’s successful and famous but when he returns to Nantucket Town, where he spent time as a teenager, it’s like he’s sixteen all over again. Every place, every memory, leads him to one person, the one person he can’t bear thinking about: Piper Hooper.

Every thought brings back bittersweet memories of her, the person he loved the most, the person who disappointed him the most.

Some feelings, however, lay buried inside us for years, until they come back to life with breath-taking potency.

Kirk realizes he’s not ready to let Piper go and, as the memories come flooding back, he knows with a certainty he’s never felt before that he wants Piper back and, this time, he won’t give up on her.

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Chapter 1



The last boat leaves the island, laden with tourists. That's it for this season. Come September, the visitors depart and Nantucket finally takes off its glamorous evening dress and slips back into its comfortable sweats, knowing the only people who are going to see her now are the locals.

The season starts in June. Tourists crowd the boat at Hyannis Port and, by the time, they pull into Nantucket, they've forgotten all about hotdogs and mustard, greasy burgers and fizzy sodas, and are desperate for their first bite of a lobster roll. We call it The Nantucket Effect – it's as if everyone, from the tourist to the islander, from the boats in the harbor to the seafood restaurants, from the narrow alleyways to the road signs by the houses, knows that here things are a little more sedate.

It's almost as if the town has its own mood board, or they used one of those arty filters you get on Instagram - the colors may be bright, but nothing about them conveys vibrancy.

For me, Nantucket is almost more English than American - a simple, sober, seaside town. No one would dare paint their house just any old color - there are twelve official colors on the town committee's approved color palette - and here, no one forgets the past. House and shop signs are made of wood from boats that once sailed the seven seas, brought back to life, carefully painted, and mounted on the walls of the town.

This morning, however, I got a call from my boss at the Wauwinet Luxury Resort, where I work housekeeping, informing me that, just when everyone is leaving, we're expecting guests - a huge booking for five of our most luxurious bungalows, the most isolated ones, which have their own gardens and overlook their own private beach.

I climb onto my bike and pedal back to Wauwinet village, where I live. My house is the last one, at the end of the lane and, despite my financial difficulties, it's beautiful. In keeping with the island, it's gray, with white fixtures.

My father bought it when things were going well, when we were still a family, before he walked out, leaving me with my mother, whose decline was only just beginning. My older brother, Wade, soon followed her, rapidly going off the rails. Dad never asked for a penny for the house and he always kept up to date with the child support, but I haven't seen him since the day he packed his bags and left.

And now it's just me.

Before heading home, I stopped off at Sayle's Seafood for some fried calamari and while they're still hot I sit on the stoop and eat them straight from the bag, staring out at the horizon, wondering just who these off-season tourists could be.

And just like that, she comes rolling in: The Grey Lady. When she arrives, draping Nantucket in soft white cotton candy, cloaking everything in a thick, soupy mist, the whole island takes on a dramatic air and you almost feel yourself catapulted into Herman Melville's famous novel, imagining the steaming breath of Moby Dick.

I finish my solitary dinner and head inside.

Every year, when fall arrives, I'm engulfed in deep melancholy. I try not to think about it, but the end of that long ago summer always comes back to

haunt me, bringing with it a boatload of painful memories because that was the moment my life took a nosedive and since then it's only gotten worse and I can't help wondering if it will always be like this.

Sometimes I'm sure I left my will to live buried in the remains of that long gone summer.

Chapter 2



“Tell me again why you thought this place was a good idea?” Eric asks as he stands beside me, leaning over the railing. He points to the outline of Nantucket in the distance. “Have you seen that black sky! It’s fall and we’re about to land on an island that the day after Labor Day is dead. There’ll be no one around...”

“Because none of you guys came up with any decent alternatives,” I reply sarcastically. “Good job we’re here to work and not party. You’ll see, this place will work out just fine and, besides, fewer people around means fewer people notice us. Jax couldn’t have wished for anything better,” I reply, pretending not to understand what the real problem is.

“Yeah, sure. Jax is okay, Denys too. Even Sherman brought someone with him,” he mutters.

“I get it. You’re pissed because being here means no hook ups for a month,” I shrug. “You’re obsessed, anyone ever tell you that?”

“I won’t look this good forever,” he says smugly. “You’re single too, you should have my back!”

“All I care about is putting this album to bed. And, FYI, after that party the other night, I’m trying to put distance between me and Laetitia’s friend, Judy. Believe me, I’m more than happy to be here,” I say, wiggling my eyebrows.

“Right, there’s a lobster roll with my name on it, at least that won’t disappoint,” he says, with a shake of his head, and walking off.

We left New York over six hours ago then caught the Nantucket Ferry out of Hyannis. The journey to the island takes just over two hours, but now I see it approaching in the distance, I wonder just what the hell I was thinking. Why I didn’t I keep my big mouth shut?

The last time I saw Nantucket like this was ten years ago. I was eighteen and instead of sailing towards it, I was leaving. I haven’t been back since and it never would have even crossed my mind to return...

Lying thirty miles south of Cape Cod, Nantucket is a world unto itself. Just over one hundred square miles, with an off-season population that rarely tops ten thousand, the island has a split personality: on the one hand it’s wild, on the other, well-groomed. It offers a relaxed, yet at the same time, pretentious approach to life, and behind its gray tiled buildings it’s a playground to some of the country’s most affluent adults.

And yet, as the ferry gets closer to the place where I spent my adolescence, the main street with its vintage lampposts and the salt-worn cedar shingles on the houses, the seagulls and the Widow’s Walks, the rooftop platforms, where legend has it that the wives of 19th-century whalers stared forlornly out to sea in the hope of seeing their husbands returning with cargoes of precious whale oil, are the farthest things from my mind.

What am I? Some kind of masochist?

Back in the summer, when the Denys shit hit, Jaxon told us to come up with a place where we could hide out and work on our new album.

Eager to help, I did some research and came across a sponsored article about renovations at the hotel we’re now heading to.

Not that I needed to read it to know it was about Nantucket.

I wasn’t thinking, I was acting on impulse. Full of bravado, I remember thinking, *I’m a grown man now. All that was ten years ago! Time to do yourself a solid and prove for once and for all that the past is dead and*

buried.

So, when we were up at Denys's place in the Adirondacks, I couldn't help it. I blurted out my stupid idea and Jaxon somehow agreed. Jaxon. The others weren't so impressed.

It was only later that it occurred to me to lie, tell him the hotel shuts down in fall and that we should look for someplace else, but I didn't have the balls.

Then the Denys situation escalated further, the media were hounding us. It was awful and coming here on retreat seemed the only positive thing on the horizon.

I know for sure that here we'll be left in peace, though the closer we got to leaving New York, the more I shuddered at the thought of coming back here, but still I didn't say anything because I knew Nantucket was our best option. I care too much about the band to put my own problems first.

Fuck the past! Fuck this fucking island and fuck her! I think, my fingers clutching the metal railing.

Besides, after a glittering career in swimming Piper, ever the gold-digger, will have found a rich husband to bleed dry.

With any luck she'll never find out I'm here. She probably doesn't even live here anymore.

"Penny for them...?" Sherman's girlfriend, Laetitia, says, looking up at me curiously.

"I'm just bored, that's all. The boat ride out here always seemed shorter."

"Yeah, stinks of fish too," she sniffs.

"I hadn't noticed."

The last thing I want to do is swap inanities with Laetitia and, honestly, I've no idea how Sherman puts up with her. Okay, when they first got together, Eric and I were jealous AF, but after hanging out with her, all I can say is, we dodged a bullet, big time.

She's super needy and whines worse than a five-year old. It's like she suffers from some sort of complex that drives her to seek attention. Constantly.

"You missing Judy yet?" she asks slyly.

Nope! I want to say, but I bite my tongue. "We're not a couple, we've only seen each other a few times," I say instead.

"She asked me about you, though. Just before we left Hyannis, she texted me," Laetitia continues.

"Sorry, if she got the wrong idea. It's just a casual thing. Not like you and

Sherman, obviously, your relationship is different.”

Unfortunately for him!

“Maybe...maybe when you’re back in New York you can give her another chance. She really cares about you, and you look so good together.” She has no intention of giving up.

She’s on my last nerve. I’m about to say something I know I’ll regret but the boat docks and, luckily for me, Sherman rocks up to take her away.

I step off the ferry, take a look around, and it all comes back to me, overwhelming me. Ten years have passed but it’s like I’m eighteen again and the island’s almost British charm seems frozen in time.

It’s shocking how things seem so unchanged, how every smell, color and sound brings the memories flooding back. I’m literally bombarded by sensations which, and this is serious, make my chest tighten.

Something tells me this is going to be the longest month of my life.

I was such an idiot to think the past would stay where I left it, buried in a corner of my mind.

Images, like illustrations in a well-thumbed picture book, swirl past my eyes, mocking me.

You can be a famous rock star, live thousands of miles away, have more money than you ever dreamed of and a million and one things to distract you, but you can’t erase the past.

My ordeal has only just begun, I think, as we wind our way down the main street of Nantucket Town towards our destination: the Wauwinet Luxury Resort.

Chapter 3



Dawn. The empty streets are eerily silent as I make my way over to the Wauwinet Luxury Resort, the salty air stinging my face.

My boss has spent the past week reminding me how important this booking is, so much that I'm nervous – I've been doing this job for years and have never once received complaints about my work, but now he makes me feel like some inadequate newbie. It's housekeeping, not rocket science!

I get to the main building and head for the deserted locker room where I quickly change into my jade green striped uniform - at least the color suits me. I scrape my hair into a bun and load my trolley with the necessary cleaning products and a supply of fresh flowers. I could have fixed them last night, but I want them to be perfect, the same goes for the fresh fruit in the

refrigerator and welcome baskets.

Fortunately, as soon as I enter the bungalows, I can still smell the room freshener I used yesterday but, just to be on the safe side, I spray a little more.

I lift all the rugs to make sure I haven't missed even the slightest speck of dust then, still not satisfied, I go over them with the state of the art vacuum cleaner again. Then I check under the beds and have to hold myself back from stripping them clean and checking there are no microscopic stains on the mattress. I spend longer than usual smoothing the sheets then move on to arranging the flowers in the crystal vases and setting out fruit in matching bowls.

Everything must match the color-scheme, nothing can look out of place. What fruit doesn't fit in the bowls, is carefully arranged inside the refrigerator.

I run through my checklist for our Welcome Basket, then check the crockery and utensils are in order and in perfect, pristine condition.

I then go over every surface again until I'm sure they're clear of dust, check all mirrors for stubborn specks and, just as I'm running like crazy from one bungalow to another, making sure there's everything the guests will need for their new born, I catch sight of the sun rising over the rooftops and hope I'll get everything finished before they show.

I check the faucets - God forbid there are water spots on the fittings - then examine the plug holes for any nasty hairs, and feel myself becoming increasingly agitated.

It's only when I get to the bathroom of the last bungalow, that I start breathing again. I'm almost there.

In Bungalow 5, like Bungalow 4, only one guest is expected, while in the other three we're expecting three couples plus a new born.

Who the hell brings a tiny baby to Nantucket in fall? I wonder, shaking my head and thinking about rich people and their 'quirks'.

The resort has a reputation for luxury and, therefore, we attract a very wealthy clientele. I don't get it, though - if these people have so money, why are they coming here off season?

No time to think about that, however - I need to double-check the shower.

Everything looks fine, until I step inside the cubicle and immediately see the problem: there's a tiny water spot on the shower head. It's too high to reach on my own and, unfortunately, I left the stepladder in the storeroom.

My wristwatch says 9:am, which means the guests could arrive at any

moment.

Oh, well, desperate measures, I think, staring at the hateful speck.

I grab my cloth and start jumping, my arms stretched high as I try to reach it.

Needless to say, after ten attempts, I'm a sweaty mess and the water stain is still there. Despite my efforts, I didn't even get close.

I refuse to give in and, in a desperate attempt to reach the shower head, jump up and down like crazy.

I'm so determined to eliminate that damned spot, so focused, that I don't even realize the bungalow's new occupant has arrived until I hear the bathroom door slam shut.

"Phwew! Just in time!" a deep, masculine voice gasps in relief.

There's something about it that startles me, and long-buried memories I refuse to think about come flooding back. I can't think anyway, not while I'm lurking here in the shower and Mr. Moneybags is about to pee.

I hear the sound of a zip.

Oh, no. He's peeing! Kill me now!

"Excuse me..." I begin, turning my face away, pressing it against the tiles so he doesn't think I'm spying on him.

"Shit! I didn't realize there was someone in here, I'm so sorry," he says, and I hear him fumbling with his zip.

This should never have happened. Not with a guest! Not with such an important client! I scold myself, trying to find the courage to step out of the shower.

I feel myself turning bright red. No, purple.

I step out of the cubicle and catch sight of myself in the mirror. Yup, I'm definitely purple - and the fact that I'm one of those blondes who are so pale they seem almost transparent doesn't help.

I touch my chest - my heart is pounding.

Partly because of that voice, partly because of the incredibly shitty situation.

Come on, Piper. Get it over with. Apologize and get out of here as fast as you can.

I place a sweaty hand on the shower door and, head down, slide it closed. All I can think about is getting out. I don't even have the nerve to raise my head - so it's not hard to spot the tips of the shoes just a few feet away from me.

Black New Balance, topped by a pair of faded, raw denim jeans. The shoes, the jeans, the voice, make me think, whoever he is, he's pretty young. I just hope he's not pissed!

"Sorry. I'm mortified. I was just cleaning the shower and..." I stammer, my eyes rigidly fixed to the floor.

"Piper? Piper Hooper?" the voice asks and my heart leaps in my chest. I glance up in surprise.

When you really love someone, even after many years, you realize time doesn't heal and nothing can change the way you feel. Your head may rage against it, but the heart...shit, your heart...still beats incessantly for that one person, I think as my eyes finally meet his.

There's something about his eyes that always captivated me.

They're so perfectly unique. I can't even begin to describe their color. Green? Gold? Hazel? A mix of all three? I've never seen anything like them. And it's been ten years since I last looked into them.

I can't move. All I can do is stare.

It's a hallucination... I tell myself. Then he speaks again.

"Piper Hooper? That really you?" he asks with a sarcastic smirk.

"Kirk?" I find the strength to ask.

I'm suffocating. I can't breathe. I have to get out of here.

I can't risk a panic attack. Not here, in front of Kirk *fricking* Jenkin.

"All done now," I blurt. "Enjoy your stay."

"Leaving so fast? Not going to stay and tell me how you ended up cleaning bathrooms?" he asks callously.

I turn abruptly. "No need to ask why you became a rockstar. It's the perfect career for a sleaze like you. All those groupies - you don't even have to fake interest to get them into bed," I spit, unable to bite my tongue.

"It seems fate had in store for us exactly what we deserved, right? A luxury hotel like this, crawling all over with rich clients for you to suck dry," he snaps, and his voice is full of scorn.

"I'm not my mother!" I exclaim, tears stinging at the corners of my eyes.

"If you say so," he shrugs. "This your M.O now, hiding out in the bathroom and taking advantage of surprised guests?"

I feel myself blushing again.

After everything he did, the way he treated me, he has the courage to call me a slut? I think, waves of pain washing over me.

"You make me sick. You just confirmed everything I think about you!" I

hiss angrily.

“Don’t worry. I tip big, perhaps that will change your mind,” he replies, slipping his hand into the back pocket of his jeans. He pulls out his wallet and hands me fifty dollars. “That enough to put me at the top of your list?” he adds with a wink.

“Fuck you!” I flash him my middle finger and run out of the bungalow.

Kirk Jenkin. My last happy summer and, at the same time, my most painful memory.

I knew he was famous, of course. With all the hype around The Blind Spot it’s been impossible not to see his face plastered on the cover of magazines and billboards, defined as the next great, legendary bass player.

Obviously, after the first time, I made sure I never listened to their music again and I deliberately went out of my way to avoid stumbling across pictures of him.

I refused to obsess over him.

I have to add, however, that Kirk cut me out of his life way before he became famous.

He was a total asshole. He tore my heart out and ripped it to shreds, but not the kind of asshole who drops his friends when he becomes famous. At least that.

Or perhaps he is, who knows...

Well, I won’t have the pleasure of finding out either way. It’s been years since we were friends.

The way he treated me...like it was all my fault...

He still has the same dark hair, so dark it’s almost black, shaved in back and long at the front, tousled into beautiful curls, and that olive skin that makes him look tan all year round. And those eyes...the most incredible eyes I ever saw.

Stop it!

Whatever Kirk and I had, as much as I thought he was the most special person in my life, the only one who ever really cared about me, it died ten years ago, the night before he and his family left Nantucket, never to step foot on the island again.

Right now, however, Kirk is not some rockstar out there in the universe – he’s here, just a few minutes from my house.

And he’s going to be staying right here where I work. For a whole month and, surprise surprise...he’s in one of the bungalows I have to clean every

goddamn day.

If it wasn't for the mortgage and my brother Wade's continuous screw-ups, I'd seriously think about quitting, even if it meant being unemployed.

This is going to be the longest month, ever!

I don't think I have anything to worry about, however.

Good looking guys like Kirk, especially when they're famous, are used to hooking up with a different model every night and could care less about girls who work housekeeping and were friends when they were kids.

By tomorrow, he'll have forgotten all about me, just like he did ten long years ago.

Chapter 4



Fall 2008

I hate it when summer ends. It means staying home more and, even worse, the week after Labor Day means the start of school and, for over a year now, there's nothing I hate more than the thought of stepping foot inside that school and walking down its corridors.

Not that I've ever been Miss Popularity, then or now. I care too much about getting an education and winning events on the high school swim team to waste time on the stupid games my classmates love so much, but back then I was simply invisible, which was okay - now I'm an outcast. A leper!

Last February, my dad left...

For Vicky Sandoval, Mean Girl in Chief at middle school and Nantucket High, and her suck-up friends, Sharla, Olyvia and May, I'm the Town Tramp's daughter.

Vicky's a spoiled brat from a super-rich family - her father owns one of Nantucket's most famous restaurants, and her mother is the bank manager - and everyone does exactly what she wants.

So, as soon as she started calling me names, everyone joined in, keeping their distance, treating me as if I had the plague, aware that Vicky and her Clique would do the same to them if they even dared speak to me, God forbid!

Not everyone makes fun of me like they do, they're not all bad, but let's just say, if I dropped my book bag, no one would rush to help me. If anything, they'd trample all over my books. The one exception is Tracee Copson. My best friend since forever. Esthetically, we're total opposites - Tracee has thick brown hair, olive skin and dark, dark eyes, while I'm blonde and fair-skinned with green eyes, but for everything else we're identical.

However, while I tend to ignore Vicky's provocations, Tracee faces them head on. The first time she dared reply to Vicky's whispered comments as we walked past, Vicky warned her, "You've no idea who you're messing with..."

Tracee turned, flashed her a sarcastic grin and said, "I don't care if you don't speak to me, in fact, I'm disgusted I ever spoke to you at all so, please, Sticky Vicky, do me a favor and keep it up." Leaving Vicky furious!

Sticky Vicky. The nickname coined by her ex, Louis Templeton, captain of the lacrosse team, who said he'd dumped her because she was harder to get rid of than gum on the sole of his shoe!

Anyway, it's no use thinking about it. It's not like I can change school - it's the only high school on the island, with around 500 students. 501 actually, since the new kid arrived a few weeks ago.

Kirk Jenkin.

It seems like the whole world was waiting for him and stopped just for him.

Needless to say, as I pass through the common area where the most heart-breaking trophy ever - the skeleton of a whale - hangs suspended from the ceiling, I see him, surrounded by a group of people, as if he were a superstar or something.

Of course, I'm excluded from this too. I couldn't care less about the new

kid and detest seeing the whale skeleton, which everyone else thinks is the perfect tribute to the famed whaling industry of Nantucket. The island is synonymous all over the world with whaling. Even our school's team mascots are called Whalers, for obvious reasons.

I shake my head, watching the crowd around Kirk, which has doubled in the past five minutes. It seems all the guys want to be his buddies, and all the girls just want him.

"Shit! I ran straight over here as soon as the bell rang, but he's already surrounded!" Tracee groans, joining me.

"For God's sake, not you too?" I blurt, rolling my eyes. "What's wrong with you? Okay, he's new here, which automatically makes him exotic but, come on, he's a guy like any other."

"A guy like any other? Piper, seriously...all that chlorine has gone to your brain. Did you bang your head on the side of the pool or something?" She waves a hand in front of my face and holds up three fingers. "How many fingers do you see?"

"How many do you see?" I ask, holding up my middle finger.

"Miss Hooper!" she exclaims, mimicking the principal's voice. "Oh, shit!" she sighs dramatically, "I want to be a jelly bean. That jelly bean!"

"A what?" I ask, confused.

"A jelly bean, you know? Candy? He always carries a bag of Jelly Belly with him...oh, my God. He's eating one. Look at it, sliding between those luscious lips!" She's actually serious.

"Come on," I say, taking her by the arm. "Let's get out of here before they think we're drooling."

"But I am drooling! Come on, Pipes, five more minutes?" she pulls away in Kirk's direction.

"Tracee, seriously. What's so special about him?"

"Okay..." she raises her palms, positions herself behind me, puts her hands on my shoulders and turns me one-eighty until I'm pointed straight at Kirk. "See those black curls tumbling over his face? The hair shaved in back? And the eyes. Pipes, look at his eyes, oh, and, by the way, don't forget the killer body," she whispers dreamily.

"How do you know? As if you've seen him undressed," I object.

"You have eyes don't you? Look how his shirt fits him. The way it hugs his shoulders. I swear, it should be illegal to be that tall at sixteen."

"But he's so full of himself. All the sports teams are literally begging him

to join them, and he's so up his own ass he keeps holding out."

"Seems like whatever he does, you're going to criticize him. Maybe he's just not interested in sport." Tracee folds her arms across her chest. "Why so pissed anyway?"

"Because, right now, I'm the only one here who's sane! All right, he's hot, I'll give you that, but he's no different from that meathead, Louis Templeton - and another thing, in less than a month Vicky Sandoval will be stuck to his side and he'll be yelling insults at me every time I walk past, just to keep her happy. Look at him, his head will be even bigger once he's on some team. He's just holding out, waiting for them to make their best offer."

I had to say he was good-looking just to shut her up, but I guess it didn't work.

"If he wants an offer, I could come up with something," she sighs. "One of the sophomore girls said she'd seen him do one hundred push-ups in the rec area and he didn't even break a sweat. One hundred fucking push ups...I can't stop fantasizing about what kind of body he's hiding under those clothes. It's clear he works out. Imagine the stamina...imagine what he's like in bed - with you underneath...makes my mouth water."

Tracee's favorite subject is sex. She doesn't know much about it, all she knows she gets from magazines like Teen Vogue and Glitter, but sometimes she goes into such detail she makes me blush with embarrassment.

"Me too. But with hunger! Have you seen the time? Let's eat before we spend our entire break staring at Kirk Jenkin. I know you don't care, but lunch in the cafeteria is the only decent meal I'm going to get - that's how desperate I am," I say, taking hold of her arm again.

Suddenly, Jenkin turns and sees us. He smirks, raises a hand and give us a casual wave.

Tracee, of course, starts to hyperventilate, while I feel my anger rising.

Great, now he thinks we're both here to swoon over him...Excellent way to get us added to his shit list, I think bitterly.

"Let's go, we look pathetic," I urge, tugging at Tracee's arm, although she seems to be in a trance.

She turns, gives me a mournful stare, then follows me.

After queuing for a rubbery chicken leg and a still half-frozen side of spinach, we take our places at our usual, solitary table.

"Your mom never cooks?" Tracee asks and I see sadness in her eyes.

"If she remembers, sure, but she's usually so out of it all she makes is a

mess. Wade tries sometimes, but it's just a variant on the same old shit, so I have to take over. I'm no chef either, so it's usually a frozen meal or whatever I can find in the refrigerator," I say. When I'm with Tracee I don't have to pretend that my family is normal.

"Still nothing from your dad?"

"I figured he'd at least call me on my birthday but, I didn't even get that," I shrug.

"My mom taught me how to make Nantucket Bay scallops like you get at Sayles, so if you want, I can take you through the recipe and maybe you can surprise Wade and your mom with a nice dinner. When we're done with our homework, we can make a start," she smiles.

"I thought we were studying at your place," I say, surprised.

Tracee flashes me a guilty look then, her hands together, pleads, "Pipes, please. You're my best friend, don't deny me the chance of seeing my crush from your window. Without the entire student body of Nantucket High buzzing around, I might just stand a chance..." and she gives me the kind of stare you usually see on a lost puppy.

"Tracee," I point out, rolling my eyes, "me and Jenkin are neighbors, nothing more, and that's only by some unfortunate twist of fate. We're not friends, I doubt he even knows my name or that I live next door."

"I know, and I'm still green with envy. If he were my neighbor, I'd show up on his doorstep with a different cake every day, flowers for his mom, cigars for his dad. I'd do anything to get him to notice me. Pipes, you have this enormous privilege and you ignore it, so, please, let me get the benefit, huh?"

"Okay, okay, but don't do anything stupid and don't even think about going over there," I accept finally. Tracee's the only person who ever shows me any kind of affection and I can't turn her down. "Like I said, two more weeks and he'll be Vicky Sandoval's latest arm candy. You know she has her sights on him, right?"

"Pipes, I promise," she declares, hand on heart, "I'll just stand at the window, drooling, hoping to catch a glimpse of him."

"Okay, but you know the risks of coming over to mine," I glance down, embarrassed.

Tracee is the only person I've ever had the courage to invite home - my mother is so unstable you never know what the hell is going to happen - yet she's never told a soul about what she sees and, most of all, she's not afraid

of her.

An icy shiver runs down my back. *How could I be so stupid?*

Kirk is my new neighbor.

Practically every day my mother makes a show of herself in some way.

How long will it take him to tell his acolytes about the adventures of the crazy woman next door and for my classmates to make my life even more of a living hell?

Chapter 5



“How many stars do you think are up there?”

“A million?”

“I don’t know. What do you say we sit a while and count them together?”

It’s been ten years since I last thought of those words, but now they’re so clear in my mind it’s like it were only yesterday. I never dreamed I’d find the girl from housekeeping hiding in the shower of the bungalow just as I was about to take a pee, and I certainly never imagined that girl could be Piper Hooper.

I close my eyes and picture the night sky here, far from the bright lights of New York, where I moved full-time after graduating from Yale.

Back then I thought a lot about Piper, wondering what had become of her, but I didn’t expect to find the answers to my questions so soon after setting

foot on the island.

Now I not only know that she still lives here, I also know where she works.

What about the swimming? It was her greatest passion. What happened to make her abandon her sports career?

When we were dating, Piper was a brilliant swimmer, it was the only thing in her life that she felt proud of. I would have bet my balls she'd end up on the Olympic team or something but she must have quit.

Perhaps not, I think, curious to find out more. Look at Skylar, maybe Piper's just waiting for her big moment.

Does she still remember the stars, those nights out at the lighthouse, our trips to the beach, the bonfires, the shared confidences, that warmed out teenage years.

Then I realize I'm an idiot to even wonder. I'm a grown man now, and facts don't lie!

Our relationships was just an illusion. I was a kid, I believed in her, but I was stupid, blind to Piper's real goal.

As for the swimming - taking a sport seriously, at competition level, means self-sacrifice, a quality Piper lacks completely.

I guess she was doing it for the scholarship, to get her ass off of Nantucket, preferably as far away from the gossip about her mother as possible, and into some Ivy League college, where she could get her hooks into the next sucker.

Obviously, that didn't work out and she gave up on it.

And she called me a sleaze? Well, well, well. Hey, pot, do you know kettle?

A sudden knock on the door rouses me from my thoughts: it's Jaxon.

"Hey, J. Everything okay with the bungalow?" I ask, anxious to know if they have everything they need for the baby.

He can be a pain in the ass at times, especially with Denys - he can be a real mama bear with him. It wasn't so obvious before, but since he's been with Skylar, it's gotten worse and, since Sarah arrived, he's been off the scale.

I'm not complaining, it's good to feel taken care of, and we all love that Snugglebug, even when she's screaming at the top of her lungs. One thing's for sure, she's destined to become the most spoiled little girl in the universe, but in a good way!

"Perfect!" he nods, stepping inside. "I just came to thank you, this place is perfect. Eric is whining, of course, but don't pay him any mind, it's all part of

the act.”

“I know. He knows we’re here to work, he just gets off on complaining,” I shake my head in amusement.

“So, as payback, I’ve decided we’re going to use his bungalow as our rehearsal room, so every time he walks through the door, he remembers just why we’re here,” Jax adds with a grin.

“Sounds good to me,” I agree.

“See you over at his, in...” he checks his cell phone, “...one hour. I’m doing the rounds, letting everyone know, that way they have time to unpack and wash up.”

“Getting down to work immediately is the best thing I’ve heard all day. I mean, that’s what we’re here for.”

What I want to do, however, is headbutt the wall.

Not only was it my idea to come here, I even managed to choose the hotel where Piper works. *How dumb can you get?*

When I thought, why not? and decided to face my past, I genuinely thought it wasn’t going to affect me - instead, it’s been like a kick in the teeth.

It’s going to be hell and it’s all my fault.

Jaxon leaves and I unpack, arranging my clothes in the closet. As we’re here for a month, I empty my case then hit the shower. There’s something inside the shower stall, however, a cleaning cloth. Piper must have left it behind.

I think about leaving it by the sink, but I know how strict these places are with their staff and decide to put it in a drawer so I can return it to her in person.

Then I catch myself. *WTF are you doing? I wonder in disgust. Who gives a shit if she winds up in trouble? Your old habits didn’t take time to resurface, did they?*

But then I remind myself that it could be the perfect opportunity to tease her a little, to remind her of her lowly position. Given the absolute torture staying here is going to be, it’s the least I can do!

I dress, grab my bass, and head toward Eric’s bungalow.

The guys are already there, moving furniture around, setting things up.

First we have to do something about the acoustics. We’re not recording, obviously, but the last thing we want is a dirty sound. In a space like this, an improvised rehearsal room, it’s going to be hard enough to pick up on the finer points of our playing, our instruments would seem lost, and the drums

would be too loud, while the vocals would seem dull and flat. So we cover the bare walls and ceiling with sound-absorbing panels, which trap unwanted frequencies and prevent them from bouncing back. Luckily, there is already thick carpeting on the floors and the windows are hung with soundproof blackout curtains, which was the first thing Jaxon asked for when we booked here. Finally, we place bass traps in every corner of the room to trap the low frequencies.

“Kirk, come in! Don’t worry. We all know bass players are just guitarists with no talent.” Eric wastes no time in throwing one of the many cliches about bass players in my face.

“Let’s get started,” I say, ignoring him, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a reply. “What do we want to try first?”

“How about Denys’s song,” Jaxon suggests. “He’s been working on it on his own for a while. We’ve been over the other songs together at least once, more or less.”

“Fine by me,” I agree, slipping my bass over my shoulder and adjusting the strap.

Though I pretended to ignore Eric’s joke, I’m still pissed. The fact that the bass often takes a backseat to the guitar makes people think it’s useless. Nothing could be more wrong. You might not always notice it, but you’d notice if it was missing.

You could say that the bassist is almost more important than the guitarist (I don’t like to remind them too often, though, they tend to be regular prima donnas). They’re the reference point for the other musicians in the band, the guitarists and the singer – and especially the drummer, like Eric, who can be such a jerk about it.

The four-stringed instrument in my hands, which gives me an apparently minor role compared to the others, provides the groove, the rhythm, the depth, and the beat. I’m the one who keeps the tempo and plays the riffs, who sets the tone for the two guitarists.

I know I sound like a typical bass-player, pissed because he’s not getting enough attention, but try listening to any rock song without the bassline and tell me if it sounds so good, if it gives you the same gut-trembling vibes.

We work on Denys’s song for the rest of the day, each of us making suggestions on how to improve it and, though it will take a while until it’s perfect, the sound is much richer and Denys seems pretty satisfied.

When it’s time to quit, the guys suggest hitting Nantucket Town for dinner

somewhere, but I'm not feeling it. I order a snack from room service and, once its delivered, turn off the porch light and take it outside. Inevitably, I look up at the night sky over Nantucket and the long-buried memories come flooding back.

Chapter 6



Fall 2008

We've only been on Nantucket a few weeks. My father is a marine biologist but his office in New York often sends him away on research projects. He usually goes on his own, even for long periods, but this time my parents decided we'd all make the move.

I totally get why. Their decision is especially appropriate when you think of what we've been through and the effect it has had on each of us.

We just wanted to be able to walk around without coming face to face with painful memories wherever we turned and Dad's new transfer was the perfect opportunity.

I've received offers from several of the teams at my new school, but I'm

still trying to figure out which is the best, and which is the best for me, because I want to make my parents proud.

I'm here and I'm determined to succeed, in everything. I want to make them happy again and use my skills, both academic and athletic, to create new memories. Happy ones.

There was a time, a few months back, when I had the feeling that, despite living under the same roof, we were all leading separate lives.

I decided to take matters into my own hands and began to work harder than ever, involving my parents as much as possible and, little by little, we started to enjoy life again.

I know I'm on the right path. I have a certain responsibility to my parents and I'm doing the best I can.

I do feel guilty at times – it's inevitable - when I wonder how things would be now if only I'd reacted differently that night.

Suddenly, my thoughts are interrupted by ear-splitting screams.

This big house, with its gray wooden shingles and white-painted window frames, had been empty for years - so long that the landlord almost jumped for joy when my father signed a two-year contract ...now I know why. There's an identical house on the other side of the fence, and I know who lives there too: Piper Hooper.

I hear the sound of windows hurriedly being slammed shut. The screaming continues, but it's muffled now. I can't catch the words, but it's pretty clear that it's two women fighting.

A short time later a car pulls up outside and, peeping from behind the drapes, I see Piper's mother come running out of the house and into a car.

Whoever is in the driving seat, pulls away immediately.

Piper and I are at the same school, Nantucket High, but she doesn't seem quite so enthusiastic about me as the others. No one in her family showed up at our door with the usual house warming gift and I've never once caught her stalking me, at school or at home.

Which leaves me kind of curious. She's very much the outsider, she walks down the corridors at school and everyone ignores her, though, I have to say, she doesn't look like the typical loner, quite the contrary.

It's absurd - the school leper lives right next door and won't give me a second glance. At school, I can't even get through one period without some random girl giving me the come on. Piper, on the other hand, lives just a few feet away and pretends I don't exist.

Who knows? Perhaps she's as crazy as they say, that's the only explanation I can come up with.

I've already heard the rumors and, I have to say, her family is pretty strange.

Her mom has must have quite the screw loose. Some days I hear terrifying screams coming from the house, other times it's hysterical sobbing, and once I was woken by a car screeching to a halt right out front at three am.

I'm about to return to my desk when I notice Piper come flying out the front door, across the yard and over to the far end of the property, where she flops down onto the grass.

If I want to find out more about her, what better moment than now? I think, my curiosity getting the better of me,

I want to see if, even when she's alone with me, she's still as indifferent as she makes out.

I can't believe she doesn't know that I live next door - or that she's never bothered to look at me!

"Where are you going?" my mom asks, sticking her head out of her office. "Homework all done?"

She's a journalist, but freelance, so she can work wherever she wants.

"Almost. I just wanted to stretch my legs, get some fresh air before dark," I reply, keeping my real intentions vague.

If the local gossips have been shooting their mouths off about the family next door I don't want to get into a fight with my parents about wanting to meet Piper.

After what we've been through, Mom's become super-protective.

"Okay," she says with a wave of her hand. "But don't be late for dinner."

I hurry out the front door, my eyes on the place where I saw Piper from the window. She's almost invisible, except for her hair blowing softly in the breeze.

How did someone like her come to be such an outcast? She's very pretty, with long blonde hair, green eyes and the palest, smoothest skin and, thanks to all that swimming, she has an awesome body.

I move closer, as silently as possible.

She's perched on the grass, almost folded in on herself, her arms wrapped tight around her knees, staring straight ahead, into the distance.

Perhaps because I was just thinking about it, perhaps because that "what if I'd reacted differently?" will continue to haunt me forever, I can't help

wondering if there's anything I can do help.

I don't even know her and I have enough problems of my own, yet...the way she's sitting, her position, the tension emanating from her body, the sensation of pain hovering in the air, stir up feelings that are quite different than my initial reason for coming out here.

I wanted to tease her a little, hoping to catch her gawking at me like all the other girls, but now I feel something tugging at my stomach.

"Hey," I say.

Piper jumps as if a firecracker has gone off next to her ear, then she turns to look at me.

I clear my throat. "Kirk Jenkin. I live next door," I announce, holding out my hand.

"I know," she snaps. She ignores my hand and goes back to staring at the horizon.

"Since you already know me, it's okay if I sit down?" I'm not giving up that easily.

Piper turns to look at me as I sit down, staring at me like I'm some three-headed alien.

She flicks her hair first to one side, then the other, then raises her hand to cover the rip in the side of her t-shirt. Trying to act casually, she folds her legs underneath her and I know it's because she doesn't want me to see her worn out shoes.

Shit! What an asshole! I mentally kick myself, remembering my original intentions.

"What do you want, Kirk Jenkin?" she asks icily. "Didn't your fan club warn you to stay away from me."

"Why would anyone do that?" I ask, feigning ignorance.

"Don't make fun of me. I know you all laugh at me behind my back," she replies, blushing furiously, although I don't know if it's from anger or embarrassment.

"And why shouldn't I talk to you?" I ask, still playing dumb, hoping she'll tell me something about herself.

Piper shakes her head, then runs a hand over her face. "You and me, we have nothing in common, and I get teased enough in school without you coming over to do it in your spare time." Our eyes meet and I notice her lip is trembling.

"I assure you, that wasn't my intention at all..." I start to explain.

“Really? I get you’re used to girls fainting at your feet as you walk past but, sorry, I’m not one of them, and your fake kindness has no effect on me. Even if your new buddies haven’t warned you to stay clear of me - which I find ridiculously hard to believe - you live right next door and I know you’ve heard my mom screaming and yelling. It’s humiliating enough as it is, without you coming over with your fake friend act. I know guys like you,” she sneers, tugging at her hair with one hand, the other firmly over the hole in her shirt.

“Guys like me?” I ask, my head tilted to one side.

Piper gives me some serious side eye. “Always showing off, the ‘all eyes on me’ types. You like being the cool one, the new guy everyone wants to be friends with, it makes you feel good,” she says bluntly.

“Wow! Judgmental much? You accuse me of coming over just to make fun of you, but you don’t seem any better,” I snap back.

It’s the truth though, she just described me perfectly!

She blushes again and blinks. For a moment she looks sorry. Maybe she’s realized she was just a little too blunt, then she seems to reconsider. “I’ll give you a couple more weeks, then I know how it will be. Everyone in school will know about the fights between me and my mom.”

There’s so much pain in her voice, it’s like she can feel the sneers and comments on her skin. Then I notice the small bruise on her forearm.

“Does she hurt you?” I ask, concerned, ignoring her previous comment.

“I don’t know what they’ve told you at school, but my mom isn’t crazy and she doesn’t hurt me, okay? If they sent you over here on a fact finding mission to gather more ammunition for their jokes, out with it. Did they think sending the new guy over would loosen my tongue and I’d tell you everything?” she asks angrily.

“I’m not like that. I’m not their puppet, no one pulls my strings and, most of all, I don’t get off on making fun of other people’s problems. I was just trying to be friendly.”

“But you are like that and I don’t want anything to do with you,” she says coolly, getting to her feet. She turns her back on me and makes her way over to the edge of her property and leans on the fence.

From the way she’s gripping it, I can tell she’s pretty worked up. If I try and get near her now she’ll probably give me a black eye. Wondering just what kind of life she leads to feel let down by everyone and, more importantly, what kind of hell they put her through at school, I decide to give

up and go home.

Most of all, I'm worried about her mother and if it's true that she doesn't hurt her.

Her brother Wade is a big guy and I doubt she'd try and hit him, but Piper is only fourteen.

I go back to my homework, but when my mother calls me for dinner, I can't help glancing out the window again.

Piper is still in the yard, sitting in the grass by the fence. Come to think of it, I don't think I heard her mother or brother come home.

Over dinner I'm restless, wondering if she's eaten, if she has anyone to take care of her.

"Kirk, honey, what's wrong?" My mother asks and I know she's seen the look in my eyes.

I want to lie, but I don't know what to say. "I'm worried about the girl next door, we go to the same school," I say, opting for sincerity.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Seems she has a pretty dysfunctional family," I explain. "At school the kids avoid her and make fun of her, laughing behind her back."

"I don't know anything," my father replies. "I'm too busy to keep up with the local gossip."

My mother makes her way over to the window and gently moves the drape. Something in her face changes. I know she's seen her, she's picked up on how she's feeling.

"Oh, Kirk," she says, placing a hand over mine. "You know you can't save everyone, right?" But she sounds worried.

"She's not everyone, Mom, she's the girl next door. She's out there, sitting in the damp grass, and we're here, at the table, eating, while she has nobody to make her dinner. She may not even eat it, but she's fourteen!" I blurt.

I don't like it when they worry about me. I'm good. Too good even,

I'm good-looking, no use denying it, I come from an affluent family, I have everything I need. That girl, on the other hand, has nothing.

"How about you eat up," my mother suggests, "then I'll put some leftovers in a Tupperware for her and you can take it over. Okay?"

"Really? You'd do that for her?" I ask with a grin.

"Sure. As soon as we finish up here, I'll put something together for her," she confirms. "You're right. That little girl is only fourteen and I doubt she goes around town killing people, taking a hot meal over for her won't put you

in any danger, besides, it's a nice gesture."

She doesn't say anything else, but I know exactly what she's thinking. I don't say anything either, it's not the moment.

My father moves over to the window and he and my mom exchange a knowing look.

As soon as we're finished eating, I check Piper is still out there.

She hasn't moved, though it's dark now and dinnertime is long gone.

My mother hands me a plastic container and a clean fork. "Take this to her," she says, pointing to the door.

As I tiptoe over the grass toward Piper, I wonder if her immediate reaction will be to throw the Tupperware at my head. When I get up close, however, I realize she's sobbing.

I sit down next to her. "Are you crying?" I ask, not knowing exactly how to start the conversation.

"Duh. I'm doing my world famous fountain impression, what do you think I'm doing?" she replies sarcastically. "Don't miss much do you? And why the hell are you back again?"

"Thought you might be hungry." I hand her the plastic container.

Thanks to the moon, which is particularly bright tonight, I can make out her face in the darkness. She blinks and several times she opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

"My mom's no chef, but it's good," I add, still holding out the box of leftovers, hoping she'll accept it.

"I have money for food," she replies, tugging at her hair.

"That's not the point, Piper. You're out here all alone and I know you haven't eaten. Go on, take it. I promise, you won't be disappointed..." I lift the lid and let the scent of my mom's meatloaf waft toward her.

She stares at me, uncertain, but then her stomach rumbles fiercely and she finally takes the box in her hands.

In the moonlight I see her raise the fork to her mouth though I can tell she still doesn't trust me - she probably thinks it's all some stupid joke and I'm trying to poison her.

"Do you have to stare like that? It's embarrassing," she glares. "You've seen a human being eat before, right?"

"Yeah, sure. Sorry." I turn my head away, and she resumes her chewing.

I want to say something but bite my tongue in case I piss her off again, so I sit staring at the sky in silence until I hear the sound of a fork scraping at the

bottom of the container.

Wow! She must have been really hungry!

Should I ask if she wants seconds? Or will she think I'm insinuating she eats like a pig? Quick, find something intelligent to say!

"See? I wasn't kidding. My mom's meatloaf is the bomb!" I say, peering over at her to see if I've managed to gain even the bare minimum of trust.

"For the record, my mother doesn't hit me. She's just a little...eccentric... and when she takes her meds her moods are all over the place."

"Okay," I nod. "I was just worr..."

"That bruise you were staring at so hard," she interrupts me abruptly, pointing to her arm. "I got that in the pool. When your future girlfriend pushed me. It was her, not my mother."

"My future girlfriend? What? You're psychic now?" I shake my head in amusement.

"I don't need a crystal ball to know you'll end up with Vicky Sandoval," she shrugs.

"Wow!" I let out a low whistle. "And you say I'm judgy!"

"No judgment, fact." She spreads her arms, as proof that it's all so obvious.

"What if I said I don't even find her attractive?" I ask, curious to hear what she has to say.

Piper gives me a strange look then gets to her feet. "Aaah. I'm saying nothing, so don't even go there. Whatever I say you'll go running to tell her and I'll end up with a broken arm, at least." She raises the Tupperware container. "I'll wash this then bring it back."

"It's okay, I'll take it back now," I reach out for it.

"What? And have your friends saying I don't have soap to wash my dishes? You're joking?" she crosses her arms tight across her chest.

"I thought I'd made it clear, coming over here, that I'm not that kind of person."

"I'm not too convinced. I told you how I hurt my arm just so you wouldn't go around spreading stupid rumors about the screams you heard earlier. So, I satisfied your curiosity and now you know how things stand." She turns away and heads back toward her house.

I stand up to follow her. I need to tell her she's got me all wrong, but before I can move she suddenly turns round.

"And don't you dare go telling people my mom hits me, not even in fun, the last thing we want are do-gooders from child protection on our case," she

blurts, her hand on her hip.

“Piper, honestly. I wouldn’t dream of doing that...how can you even...”

“We’ll see, Kirk,” she smirks. “We’ll see.” And she turns and runs home.

I know I should be furious that she’s got the wrong idea about me, but I’ve only been here a few weeks and I’ve no idea of the hell she’s been through.

If she’s having trust issues, it’s clear something’s wrong - and, more important, that someone has hurt her more than once.

On my way back home, I find myself thinking, *I want to be her friend. I want to help.*

Around 11pm I decide it’s time to turn in. Piper is still all alone and I wonder why Wade, who’s the same age as me, doesn’t do more to take care of her. I know I would if we were in the same situation.

As I fall asleep I wonder if last night’s nightmares will be back, but in the morning I wake feeling refreshed. For the first time in months, I’ve slept well.

Perhaps my parents were right after all - the move to Nantucket was the medicine we all needed.

Chapter 7



When Kirk left, when I realized he was never coming back, the pain tore me apart. Then I got used to it.

It was like ripping off a Band Aid. It hurt at first. It stung so hard, then the pain faded, until it was just a throbbing sensation at the back of my mind. But then, as soon as someone mentioned Kirk, either deliberately because they wanted to hurt me, or simply because they were interested, the pain came back even stronger.

Now he's here, in the place where I work, and I'm doing all I can to avoid running into him.

Apparently, he and the band are very busy, which I can confirm – there's music coming from one of the bungalows, day and night.

In the gardens I've only ever seen Skylar, Jaxon Mitchell's wife, with their baby, and a girl called Chloe, who I hear is seeing Denys, the guitarist.

There's a third girl, but she seems to spend all her time getting pampered at the spa - I don't think she gets on too well with the other girls, but maybe that's just my impression. Not that it's any of my business.

However, once I get out of work and I'm hurrying home, I can't stop thinking about the boy with the most amazing, wonderful eyes I ever saw, and the fact that I suddenly found him standing in front of me, just a few feet away.

If I'd known he was one of the guests involved in the mega-booking, I would have run away. There's no way I would have stayed around and risked bumping into him.

For him, you're just one of many, for you, he's the only one... comes back to me. I used to repeat those words, over and over.

All these years later, my family's problems are still the same - if anything they're worse, far worse than Kirk could ever remember.

My mom was so far gone on uppers and downers that she lost all sense of reality. She continued to get worse, day after day until, a few years ago, I found her unconscious on the kitchen floor. Not surprisingly, it was an overdose.

As for Wade, well thanks to my mom's 'friends' and the fact that he was often the one who had to go drag her home, he got in with the wrong people and ended up addicted to meth and high on the go-go juice.

After...after what happened to me, he was overcome by guilt, his addiction took a nose dive and he's been in and out of rehab for years.

What I'd really love to do is try out for a position as swim coach in a school somewhere. God knows, the idea of having to put aside all my hopes and ambitions kills me, but I can't, and not just because of the way I look - let's just say, things are different now. I need money for the mortgage on the house and for Wade's continuous trips to rehab.

Now Kirk is back and there's the risk of running into him and his smug grin. My first instinct is to hand in my notice and run, and the thought of reliving his betrayal and the way it made me suffer, is torture but, as always, given the situation, I have no choice in the matter.

I just can't afford it. If anything, I should consider the Blind Spot's arrival a blessing. Once the season is over, we're back to basic wage, tips are almost inexistent, so having the band here is an unexpected bonus.

I'd already calculated that, for the next few months I'd have to tighten my belt, even tighter than usual, but now I can breathe a little more easily, though the price my soul is paying is high.

I think of the fifty dollar bill Kirk handed me in the bathroom and my blood boils at the memory of his words.

He thinks I'm selling myself, just like my mom did!

I have to stop brooding over a problem I can't solve. However, when I get back home, I realize I have to vent about the tsunami of bad luck that just hit me.

"So, what's the sheikh like?" Tracee jokes as soon as she picks up, referring to our conversation the other day, when we'd been discussing who the mysterious guest could be. "Is he recruiting for his harem?"

"No, and these people are definitely American. And get this. The first guest I met was in the bathroom, when he came running in and unzipped his pants!"

"Nooo. Oh, my God. Did you see his Johnson?"

"No, my back was turned!"

"Ew! You got lucky. Rich old guys are known more for their bank accounts than their peckers!"

"Well, I wish it had been some rich old guy or a sheik," I say, still not sure whether I should tell her.

"So, who is it? Don't tell me - it's a Christian Gray type, with a hot S&M chick and a playroom in each bungalow," she jokes.

"It's Kirk Jenkin." That's it, I've said it. The line falls silent. "Tracee...?" I say, trying to figure out if she's still there.

"Kirk 'awesome eyes' Jenkin? Kirk Jenkin who had all the girls in Nantucket High creaming their pants? That Kirk Jenkin? The one who...I didn't hate you because you're my bestie, but...drop dead gorge, Kirk Jenkin?" she's screeching so loud my eardrums hurt.

"Tracee, you're a married woman," I remind her. "You're a mother!"

"I know, but I'm not blind. Or numb from the waist down. Tell me, is he as beautiful in real life as he is in the photos? I mean, he was gorge at sixteen but, Christ on a bike, I'd take that man out for a ride!"

"Tracee, for God's sake, that's gross!"

"Piper, I'd just like to remind you that I have a six-month old baby and any social interaction I have is limited to goo-goo-gaa-gaa. I have a husband who works his ass off and is never around, I'm stuck home all day and my boobs

have gone from being a weapon of mass seduction to looking like they would be more at home on a dairy cow! The dark circles around my eyes would make a raccoon jealous and I barely remember how it feels to get out of sweats, so go figure a hot date. Let me dream a little!”

“Next time someone asks me why I don’t want kids, I’ll tell them it was you and your stories about varicose veins, sore nipples and hemorrhoids that put me off!”

“Nice try, but don’t change the subject. You were in the same room as Kirk Jenkin. With his pants down. Don’t leave me hanging, I need the deets,” and her voice goes up another octave.

“I told you already. I had my back turned. I didn’t even know it was him until I crept out of the shower and tried to apologize. Also because the only alternative was climbing out of the window!”

“And Kirk? Does he know it was you? Did he recognize you?” Who knew she could sound even more excited.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“What do you mean unfortunately? This is...what do they call it...serendipity?”

“And do I have to remind *you* how much he hurt *me* ten years ago? How he basically disappeared from my life? He’s here for a month, then he’ll go back to his old life and, believe me, I have no intention of repeating the Kirk Jenkin Experience...” and I begin to count off on my fingers all the things he did to me, just in case she’s still suffering from baby-brain.

“From your reaction, I’d say you still have feelings for him.”

“Tracee, I just want to get through this period as quickly as possible. I wish I could run away and never see that sneaky, sleazy creep again,” I say, picking at the skin around my thumbnail.

“See? That’s what happens when you don’t listen to your best friend’s advice,” she replies smugly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, if you’d started looking for work as a swim coach like I told you, you wouldn’t be schlepping round picking up other people’s shit, and you wouldn’t have to deal with Kirk Jenkin. Simple, no?”

“We’ve already been over this...” I groan.

“That’s because, for some reason, you insist on staying here, Piper. If you left Nantucket, you wouldn’t risk having to teach our ex-classmates’ kids. Believe me, if you go, I’ll miss you with all my heart, but you have to go,

there's nothing for you here anymore and, Pipes, swimming is your first love, you can't give up on it." Tracee gives me one of her usual motivational speeches!

"I gave up on it years ago, Tracee," I point out.

"The gig at the hotel was supposed to pay for college and the mortgage on the house, but you're still here, working housekeeping."

She really doesn't get it. I can't leave. I can't dump everything for a job that isn't guaranteed and, besides, working in a swimsuit - it's not for me anymore.

"I was fooling myself, Tracee. It was a stupid dream I allowed myself to believe in, because it gave me the strength to carry on. Now I know it's just not possible, not with the way things are..." I reply, shaking my head despondently.

"Any obstacles are all in your mind, Pipes. Try and overcome them..." she whispers softly.

"I tried. But you know what happened that time I finally put on a suit and went to the beach?" I reply nervously, tugging at my hair.

"Piper, please don't pay any attention to that stupid bitch...she..."

I'm saved by the bell - or rather, by baby Jacob's screams - and she's forced to hang up before she can say anything else.

I know she means well, but she has no idea how it feels.

I see them staring at me. The pity in their eyes when I walk past. Some people only nod when they see me, too afraid to interact, others show so much indifference it hurts more than the stares and the rude comments.

I try not to get offended or angry. It's not easy, knowing how to act in the face of other people's misfortune, but it still hurts. Their eyes go right through me, through my clothes, my skin and bone, straight to my heart. I'm used to it now, knowing the only one I can count on is myself - and Tracee. She's the only one who stuck by me.

All alone, I gaze out of the window at the house where Kirk once lived with his family. Even after all these years, it's still empty.

A shiver runs down my spine at the thought of how much he meant to me, at the memory of all those nights when, after he left, I would stand here, all on my own, abandoned by everyone, staring over at his bedroom window hoping, praying that, as if by magic, the light would come on and I'd see him smiling at me from behind the glass.

Sorry Tracee, but you're wrong. Nothing good can come from seeing Kirk

Jenkin again.

Chapter 8



Fall 2008

“What’s wrong?” Tracee whispers in my ear. “You’re miles away...”

The content of the history lesson may be interesting, but the teacher’s voice is so monotonous that, to avoid falling asleep, I let my mind wander, replaying what happened last night...

Once I was back inside the house, I began to wonder what Kirk’s parents really thought of me. They obviously think I’m deprived – I’m surprised they even let him come over.

Then again, they live next door, they’ve probably heard my mother

screaming and shouting and they don't seem to hold it against me, so maybe Kirk isn't so bad after all - well, not quite the bad guy I thought he was.

On the other hand, it doesn't matter what his intentions are: as soon as he realizes that talking to me will turn his new buddies against him, he'll stop. It's better to ignore him before I end up confiding in him because, one day soon, when he's Vicky Sandoval's new boyfriend, he'll tell her everything and they'll use my secrets as ammunition to make fun of me behind my back or, even worse, to my face.

Suddenly, Tracee jabs me in the ribs. "Answer me!" she hisses.

"Mrs. Folger's staring at us," I hiss under my breath.

"Since when has that been a problem?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you at lunch," I mumble, lowering my head under Mrs. Folger's glare and pretending to take notes.

I already know I'm going to regret it. Tracee's going to lose it when I tell her about last night. I just hope she isn't too upset; I know she has a mad crush on Kirk, but I didn't go looking for him, he came to me - and that was only because he felt sorry for me.

I'm terrified someone will overhear so, instead of eating in the cafeteria, I force Tracee to opt for a sandwich and we take our food outside, away from prying ears.

"The curiosity's killing me. What's going on? Why so cagey? What's so important that you have to make me eat this..." she takes a break from firing questions at me and peels open the two slices of bread, eyeing the contents suspiciously, "...plastic turkey?" as soon as we sit.

"Because the other plastic shit they serve is so good?" I arch an eyebrow.

"No, but at least it doesn't taste like Saran wrap." She points a finger at my chest. "Anyway, out with it!"

I stare at her intently "Okay, but first you have to promise me you won't let anything I'm about to tell you upset you...I haven't done anything..."

Tracee's my only friend. Okay, she has a different crush every month, but she seems really into Kirk and I don't want her to think I've been faking indifference so I can hit on him when she's not around.

"Unless you're having a secret fling with some Hollywood hunk, I'm good." She holds up her hand. "Promise. Pinkie swear."

"Not Hollywood...somewhere closer...very close, considering how much you're crushing on this person." I take a bite of my sandwich. "Ew, you're right!" I shudder, wrapping it up again. "It sucks!"

“Pipes, spit it out - not the sandwich – it’s bad enough I have to starve until I get home,” she blurts impatiently.

“So, last night I was in the yard and Kirk Jenkin came over. I told him to take a hike but then he came back. And he brought dinner,” I reveal bluntly.

“You’re kidding me!”

“I’d make something up like that? Don’t read anything into it. He probably felt sorry for me or, more likely, he was gathering intel about me for his new friends,” I shrug.

“Don’t stop now. Tell me everything!” she urges.

And I do...

“The problem is,” she says when I’m done. “I know you and I know you don’t mince your words. If you told him to go to hell, you really told him to go to hell. You’re out of your mind.”

“Tracee, please...I told you, one month and he’ll be the new king of the clique that never misses a chance to humiliate me. Whatever I tell him, or he finds out from living next door, will be used against me.”

Tracee looks me in the eye, her expression serious. “What if it’s because he’s a nice guy? What makes you think he’s as mean as Vicky and her gang?”

“I thought about that. Even if he is a nice guy, eventually they’ll contaminate him. No one wants to be the class outcast, eventually he’ll go with the flow.”

“Whatever happens, I’m here for you,” she nods.

“Girl, you’re the exception, not the rule.” I shake her hand. “You’re not angry that I spoke to him?” I ask, worried.

“Piper, Kirk Jenkin is hot as hell, a blind man can see that, but our friendship is another level. You know how I feel. He’s not my boyfriend, he can hang with whomever he chooses, and it seems he chooses you. Honestly, I’d be really pissed if I saw him hanging off Vicky Sandoval’s arm, that’s for sure, because it would confirm that he’s a total idiot.”

“First of all, he didn’t choose anything. Like I said, he came over because he felt sorry for me. Second, we know he’s going to end up with Sticky Vicky, it’s just a question of when!”

“Betcha!” She holds out her hand. “I win and you owe me a lifetime supply of chocolate frosted coconut donuts from the Downyflake.”

“Okay!” We shake hands just as the bell rings.

As we’re walking back to class, who do I see?

Kirk Jenkin, obviously.

And what is he doing?

Showing off, obviously!

He's in the middle of the yard, surrounded by a group of students, totally indifferent to the fact that recess is over, executing a perfect handstand. Just like that, he lifts one hand off the ground, which has all the guys clapping and all the girls sighing ecstatically. Then, as if he's choreographed it, his shirt flops down over his face, revealing his rock hard abs.

The girls shriek hysterically and he, obviously, does nothing to cover himself up. I'd bet my last cent that he deliberately pulled his shirt loose so this would happen.

He's a total attention whore. He never misses a chance to be at the center of attention and show just how cool he is.

I spend the afternoon trying to get the image of Kirk in my yard out of my head and concentrate on my lessons. It's a gorgeous day out and I don't want to ruin it.

Though I don't enjoy school - why should I? I'm the butt of everyone's jokes and every time I walk past they whisper cruel comments about my mom and someone's dad - today is swim club, which is more than enough to put a smile on my face.

The only problem is, Vicky Sandoval is on the same team.

"Piper," she sneers, sashaying up to me. "Did you put weight on?" Her friends hover in the background. "Or did your ass eat your swimsuit," she adds, causing even more laughter.

I ignore her, pretending I didn't hear.

My body is changing, becoming more womanly. Unfortunately, I bought this swimsuit at the beginning of last year and I can't afford to buy a new one.

"Ah, I get it. You're too broke to buy a new one. Get your mother to ask those deadbeats she hangs out with every night at the bar for a downpayment." More loud laughter from her minions. "Could you at least try and look presentable? I know you're out of touch with things, but Kirk Jenkin is the new captain of the water polo team and, since he's actually here, try not to make us look too bad, or that fat ass of yours will scare him off."

He's chosen. He just got here and they already made him captain. I knew he was holding out for their best offer, I'm never wrong, not when it comes to guys like him.

Still ignoring Vicky, I pull on my swim cap, slip my feet into my sliders

and head for the pool.

At least the coach seems happy to see me. “I want to see your butterfly, today, Piper,” she announces with a smile. She turns to the rest of the team, who are gradually arriving. “When we’re done, I want to see each of you in your starting positions,” she announces. “It’s a simulation, but you will be on the clock.”

Once we’re in the water, the teasing stops. Vicky wouldn’t dare, not in front of the coach. When teachers are around she’s so sugary sweet it hurts my teeth. Little do they know that ninety percent of the time she’s a poisonous snake.

As soon as I hit the water, the tension miraculously drains from my body.

I’m no longer Piper Hooper, the outcast with the junkie mother and the runaway father. It’s just me, a body, immersed in liquid, as I focus on my breathing, making sure I have enough air in my lungs to move fast and smoothly, my muscles burning from the effort of pushing through the water, propelling faster and faster, and the sense of freedom that envelopes me.

I finish my twenty-five laps and even the coach compliments me.

As announced, fifteen minutes before the lesson ends, she makes us line up, take the starting position, and dive in, one by one.

I’m actually excited: there are not many things I’m good at, but when it comes to swimming, I know I’m good.

When it’s my turn, I get into position, the coach raises the whistle to her mouth and I prepare to push myself off, but then someone clears their throat.

“Can I have a moment?” I know immediately that it’s Vicky.

“What’s going on?” Coach asks.

“Ms. Cooper, while we have Piper here, I’d like to say something,” Vicky simpers, flashing the sweetest smile ever.

An icy blast hits me between the shoulder blades and works its way down my spine: whenever Vicky does that, I know she’s in attack mode.

“Okay...” Ms. Cooper nods, hands on hips.

“We all know Piper’s family is going through a challenging time - her father left and it can’t be easy for her mother, raising two teenagers on her own. As you’ll have noticed, Piper’s suit is a little too small, and it’s not fair because she can’t afford to buy a new one. So, I’d like to suggest we, as a team, have a collection, and help her out,” she says, looking saintly.

The humiliation is killing me. From the corner of my eye, I see my teammates swap knowing glances, then May gives a cry of joy.

“Oh, Vicky. You’re awesome. You always put others first, you’re an example for us all.”

Just when I think things can’t get any worse, I catch sight of Kirk Jenkin sitting in the stands.

And it’s obvious that he heard everything - and that Vicky’s show of generosity was for him!

“Vicky, that’s a wonderful idea,” says Ms. Cooper. “I’m sure Piper is very grateful, aren’t you, Piper?”

“Thanks,” I mumble, my face catching fire.

“Right, let’s finish up, then you can go,” she continues, and I get back into position.

When the whistle goes, however, I’m too tense, too humiliated and miserable to give my best, and instead of entering the pool gracefully, I end up flopping into the water with a pitiful splash.

When the whistle goes for the end of practice, I hang back, letting my teammates go first, but it’s useless, they’ve forgotten all about me and making fun of me, and all go rushing over to Kirk.

“You came to see me!” Vicky exclaims.

Kiss goodbye to your Downyflake donuts, Tracee, I think, convinced I’ve already won our bet.

“Well, as the captain of the water polo team, I figured I check out my *neighbors...*” he says with a crooked grin.

Is it my imagination, or did he give me a strange look when he said ‘neighbors’?

“Well, feel free to visit whenever you like,” Vicky purrs seductively.

“Oh, I’ll be here quite often,” he winks.

“We’re having a collection for poor Piper. You want to contribute?” Vicky asks, looking saintly again. “I think it’s our duty to help those less fortunate...”

“Nice,” he says, standing up and slipping his hands into his pockets. “Always glad to help.”

Kill me now, please!

I’ve never felt so humiliated in my life. Ever.

Vicky just asked my neighbor for a hand out on my behalf. I know he noticed the hole in my shirt last night, and the scruffy shoes I tried my best to hide, now this...

I wish I had the courage to tell him I don’t need his charity, his or anyone

else's, but before I find the strength to open my mouth, he's gone and all I'm left with are my teammates and their condescending stares.

Ignoring them, I hurry to the locker room. I throw my things into my gym bag and, without taking a shower, pull my clothes on over my wet swimsuit and flee with my hair still wet.

I'm so quick that I'm out of there before they come in. I know they've been talking about me and I have no intention of hanging around to find out what else they have planned.

As fast as I can, I head for the school bus stop, but a hand reaches out and grabs my elbow.

"Where are you going?" asks a male voice which, despite everything, I recognize immediately.

"Home," I grunt, nodding at the bus stop.

"I'll take you. I have my dad's car," he offers.

"I don't need a ride, from you or anyone," I reply, my arms tight across my body.

"Why are you doing this, Piper? You know you can trust me."

"Sorry if I don't believe you!"

"I saw what happened back there, I'm not stupid. That wasn't Vicky being kind, she was deliberately humiliating you."

I'm speechless. I blink repeatedly, trying to reply. "You saw through her?" I ask eventually.

"Come on, hop in before they come out," he says, steering me toward the car.

I'm so stunned I don't even resist and before I know it, we've pulled out of the lot.

"Want one?" Keeping one hand on the wheel, he hands me a small bag of candies.

I recognize them immediately: they're the jelly beans Tracee mentioned.

"Go on, take one!" he says, taking one himself and slipping it between his lips.

Please, please, don't let me stare at him like Tracee the other day...I think, fishing a Jelly Belly from the bag.

"What flavor did you get?"

"Strawberry, I think...but aren't they all the same?"

"Nah, it's the mega-mix. Fifty flavors, everyone a surprise. It's cool, not knowing what flavor is going to explode on your tongue, that's why I never

look at them.” He glances at me for a second. “What? You never had them before?”

“No...” I mumble.

At home there's hardly enough money for breakfast cereals, never mind candies. What the hell am I doing here?

“Really?” he asks, curious.

“With the swimming, you know? Being an athlete, I have to limit my sugar intake, so I try and avoid candies,” I lie, then try and change the subject. “So, you’re the new guy and they already made you captain. You certainly know how to get what you want, don’t you?”

“What does that mean?”

“You kept them all hanging,” I roll my eyes. “You held out until they each made you an offer and you took the most important.”

“FYI, I tried out for the team. I didn’t take the position from anyone, they offered it to me. No blackmail, no bribery. The other captain moved on, they needed a replacement and I tried out for it,” he replies, sounding resentful.

I know I’m being way too aggressive, but everything about Kirk confuses me.

What does he want from me anyway? He flirts with Vicky, then hangs around to give me a ride and tells me he didn’t believe a word of vile Vicky’s performance back there.

“I don’t get your behavior though. Care to explain yourself?” I snap, unable to bite my tongue.

“Easy. I can’t let my family down. I have to be a grade A student in everything. Everything - which means that, as much as I’d like to, I can’t kick Vicky Sandoval’s ass and, by the way, I’m not that kind of guy anyway,” he gives me a sideways look.

“What the hell does that mean? That your parents are okay with you hanging out with bullies, as long as you’re popular?” I ask dumbfounded.

“That’s not what I meant. It’s just that popular kids can’t go around making enemies. It’s complicated.” His eyes are on the road ahead, but I can see he’s embarrassed. “There are things you don’t know, okay?”

“Whatever. I’m not after your secrets anyway, I could care less. In any case, I don’t want Vicky’s charity, or anyone else’s.

The car pulls up at the end of the driveway and I leap out. Then I remember my manners and turn around.

“Thanks, anyway. Whatever your intentions, it was kind of you. Anyway,

forget it, there's no way we can be friends. You're one of the popular kids, that's clear, and I'm...anyway, it ends here..." I say before turning back and running home.

I slam the door behind me and lean against it, my hand on my chest.

My heartbeat is anything but normal.

I can't give into his charm, I'd get hurt way more than the other girls in school and, besides, I have enough problems already.

I run upstairs and throw myself in the shower, rinsing off the chlorine. Once I'm dressed I head down to the kitchen and check the contents of the refrigerator: four carrots.

I rummage around until I find a can of corned beef and some slightly bruised and sprouted potatoes in a cupboard.

It's not much, but it's enough to make a quick hash.

Then I notice the plastic container from last night. I don't want to see Kirk again, ever, but I have to do the decent thing and return it.

The best thing is to put it in a bag, stick a thank you note on it, and leave it by his door without even ringing the bell - then running away like a thief.

My heart is still pounding, but I try to distract myself, preparing my sad little dinner.

When it's ready, there's still no sign of my mom or Wade. As usual.

My brother came home very late last night, just before my mom - I was still awake, locked in my room but, now I think of it, I didn't see him at school today.

He usually rides his bike to school, he hates the school bus, but now I'm wondering if he even bothered to show up.

I give them thirty minutes, then resign myself to dining alone. When I'm done, I put the leftovers in the fridge, in case they come home hungry, and finally head upstairs to study.

At 11pm I'm still alone. Time to call it a night.

Two hours later, I'm woken by my mother's shouts as she stumbles, drunk or high or both, through the door, swearing at the top of her voice.

"Piper!" she yells, though it's the middle of the night.

I consider pretending not to hear and letting her scream, but then I remember Kirk's family next door and jump out of bed and hurry downstairs.

"Mom! Mom! What's wrong?" I ask gently, hoping to calm her down somehow.

"When you have shit delivered, at least have the decency not to leave it

lying in front of the door!” She throws a package at me.

“But...I didn’t order anything...”

“Has your name on it, doesn’t it? Now, leave me alone...” she moans, heading for the stairs. “I’m tired and my head hurts...”

I want to grab her, tell her how I feel, tell her that she’s my mother, that I’m still a kid and she should be taking care of me, instead of making me walk around in a swimsuit two sizes too small, but I don’t. I’m just grateful that she’s quit yelling.

It’s not worth it anyway. The mother I thought I knew hasn’t been around for over a year. It’s like she disappeared the day my father left.

I turn the package over, looking for a label: it’s a rectangular box wrapped in plain brown paper.

My first thought is: it’s my classmates playing some bad taste trick on me, but while I’m still wondering what’s inside, I decide to bite the bullet and open it.

There’s a white card taped to the box. I don’t recognize the writing.

You’re welcome.

Just two words. My heart skips a beat. Now I know who sent it. Kirk. This afternoon, while I was making dinner, I left the bag with the container in front of his door, with a note saying ‘Thanks’.

With trembling fingers, I lift the lid.

There’s another note inside the box, a sheet of paper, folded into four, and something that leaves me speechless.

My legs are shaking so much I have to sit down.

It’s a swimsuit in my exact size and a bag of Jelly Belly.

It’s a competition racerback, just like I need.

I can’t accept it. I have to give it back!

I’m much too curious not to read the note, however.

I know your gut instinct will be to give it back. Don’t.

Money isn’t a problem for me and, honestly, I want to see their faces when you show up to practice in your new suit.

This isn’t an act of charity. I hate mean girls like Vicky Sandoval and if it means wiping that smug smile off her face, I’ll buy you ten swimsuits. Think of it as helping a spoiled rich kid get one over on a spoiled rich bitch, that’s all.

Don’t feel obligated. It’s money well spent. If I were in New York I’d only have wasted it hanging with friends or on something useless I don’t want or

need.

But you need this suit. You're good and you deserve it.

Life can be bitter sometimes – that's why they invented candy and, in certain situations, who cares about the calories. Jelly Belly - little beans of happiness!

Kirk

My hands are shaking worse than ever and I don't know how to react. I don't know what his game is, but I'm keeping the suit. When I get back to my room, I glance distractedly out the window in the direction of Kirk's house, naturally assuming that he's asleep.

And, just like that, his bedroom light comes on.

He's standing at the window.

He winks, pops a jelly bean in his mouth and smiles.

I'm literally burning up with embarrassment. He's caught me staring at his room in the middle of the night. My first instinct is to close the drapes and run and hide, but I can't.

I smile back and mouth "Thank you", then wave and turn off the light.

I don't know how long it's been since I felt this way, but I'm feeling strangely, absurdly happy.

Don't get too used to it, Piper, I warn myself, getting back into bed.

Chapter 9



Day Three on Nantucket and so far, despite my concerns, I haven't seen Piper again. Which is pretty weird. I figured she'd be up here 24/7, trying to strike up a conversation, pretending nothing happened - but I guess my reaction on that first day convinced her I'm not the idiot she took me for when we were kids.

Plus, the day I left, she made it pretty clear what our relationship meant to her.

I was in shock. I could hardly believe it.

Accepting it was even harder. I told myself it was impossible, that I was being stupid, that Piper would never do that, that I knew her better than anyone else. That what we had was special.

Then the days passed - weeks, months - and she never once got in touch,

not even on Christmas.

And that was when I knew I had to face reality and admit that I'd been taken for a fool and just let it go...

Since then I never once tried to contact her - and who can blame me?

Eric and Sherman want me to give them a guided tour tonight, take them to a bar somewhere, so we're heading into Nantucket Town while Jax and Denys stay home and have a quiet night in with their ladies.

I've no idea what Laetitia has planned, not that it's any of my business - but according to Sherman, she won't be gracing us with her presence.

I head back to my bungalow to change and my cell phone rings as soon as I walk through the door. It's a New York area code, but I don't recognize the number. Assuming it's a work call I swipe to answer.

"Hi..." a woman purrs.

What do I do now? I don't know who it is and I don't want to look stupid.

"Cat got your tongue, Kirk? Aren't you happy to hear from me?"

I give up. In the end I have to admit that I don't know who she is... "Sorry, I don't have your number saved in my contacts," I reply hesitantly.

"Aw...that hurts, Kirk...it's me, Judy," she reveals with a giggle.

Shit! She already sent me four messages and I didn't reply so she figured she'd trick me and call on a different number! I curse inwardly, kicking myself for ever giving her my contact details.

"Oh, hi...I already have your number, I didn't expect you to call me on another." It's a not-so-subtle dig, to let her know that I've seen through her.

"My phone died and I needed to ask you something, so I borrowed my agent's. Lucky for you, I know your number by heart," she simpers.

So lucky!

"Ah...okay, fire away..." I cut short. I need to take a shower before I meet the guys.

"I was checking my schedule for next week and I have some downtime, I'm almost completely free, and I was thinking that, if you like, no pressure, I could come up there too. What do you say? It would be good to spend time together."

Good for whom? Seems my words to Laetitia went in one ear and straight out the other.

"Judy...you'd only be bored. This isn't a vacation. We're playing all day and in the evenings I'm so tired I'm in a coma by ten. It's off-season, the tourists have all gone, there's no one around..." I'm trying to let her down

gently when what I want to say is a blunt NO WAY!

“Laetitia’s there though. I can hang with her while you’re busy, then we can be together at night...” she insists.

It’s no use ducking the issue, or I’ll never get rid of her. I love girls and I love spending time with them but I’m not looking for anything serious and I don’t want to lead her on. I don’t believe in true love and pretending I do would only make a fool of us both.

“Judy, I don’t want to sound rude, but we’re not a thing, we’ve only been out a couple of times...” I begin.

“...and had so much fun...” she interrupts.

“I know, I know but, please try and understand,” I take a breath, “I’m not interested. I’m not looking for anything, I thought I made myself clear. Laetitia’s here because she and Sherman are a thing. We aren’t.” This time there’s no mincing words.

“I’m not asking you to put a ring on it, Kirk. I just want to spend time with you, relax a little,” she continues, unperturbed.

“I don’t own this place, but I guess there are still some bungalows available. If you want to book one and come up here, spend time with your friend, feel free. Just don’t count on me being around.”

“I see. Well, I’m certainly not wasting my money to stay in the middle of nowhere. Laetitia says she’s boring her ass off. I was coming up there to see you...” she whines.

“Then stay in New York, Judy, there’s nothing here to interest you. Now, if you don’t mind, I have to go,” and I hang up before she can say anything else.

If she doesn’t take the hint and keeps on calling, I’ll be forced to change my number.

When I’m ready I join the guys in reception. I take one look at Eric, however, and roll my eyes.

“Something wrong?” he asks.

“What have you done to your hair?” I ask, shocked.

“I was bored...I wanted to change things up...” he shrugs.

Ever since I’ve known him he’s had long hair - and I mean long, halfway down his back, long - but now he has a dramatic undercut, the rest of his hair, which is now cut level with his ears, flopping over the shaved sides.

“You certainly succeeded. I’m shocked!” I exclaim, shaking my head in amusement.

“The hairdresser called it shabby-chic-neo-punk-Viking,” he says with a wink. “Guaranteed to drive the girls wild!”

“I guarantee everyone at the pub will be...impressed,” I tease.

“All I care about is, they have good beer, that’s my first priority.”

“You have nothing to worry about there,” I reassure him.

Sherman, on the other hand, is strangely silent and on the ride over to Cisco Brewers on the Bartlett Farm Road, he never says a word.

If it’s good beer Eric wants, this place is ideal: since the early eighties it’s been famous for the variety and quality of its craft beers.

Inside, it feels like a small village festival - the atmosphere is rustic but decidedly hipster.

“Awesome! You weren’t kidding!” Eric grins, taking in the wooden counter and the long line of taps.

What he doesn’t know is - before placing your order, you get to sample the beers for free! He’ll be hammered before he orders his first pint!

The range is enormous and they switch the options according to the season so, as we’re heading into autumn, I order the special: Purple Drumkin Pumpkin Ale.

“You don’t want to try anything?” I ask Sherman, who still hasn’t uttered a single word and, unlike Eric, seems pretty miserable.

“I think I’ll go straight to the home made spirits,” he says with a shrug.

“Whoa, it’s early, why not save the hard stuff for after dinner? If you don’t want to try the beer, there’s always wine,” I suggest.

Sherman nods and places his order while I stare at him in confusion.

Something tells me he’s not going to be the life and soul of the party tonight.

Eric finally chooses a beer and we find a table and sit down.

We can’t decide what to order, so we get the tasting menu of sliders, grilled corn on the cob and, of course, the lobster rolls.

“Sherm, dude, we’re here to have fun. The Depress Heads Anonymous meeting is down the road,” Eric announces, turning to Sherman.

I laugh so hard, my beer almost comes down my nose! Talk about being direct. I should have tried that with Judy!

“Doesn’t the fact that he’s here alone with us tonight tell you anything,” I intervene on Sherman’s behalf.

Sherman takes a sip of wine and glances from me to Eric. “It’s Laetitia...I’m not one to complain and all that, but...” he begins.

There are times when he sounds more British than ever. This is one of them.

“Please! Don’t tell me you’re about to badmouth that angel on earth?” Eric huffs.

“I have nothing to say about her heavenly appearance, quite the contrary, but it’s one thing seeing her in New York - up here, however, living together, it’s completely different.”

“We’ve only been here three days,” Eric reminds him.

“Says the guy who changes chicks more than he changes his socks! That’s rich coming from you!” I try and direct the conversation away from Sherman, who’s looking very tense.

“Yeah, I know...but we’re talking Laetitia, and she’s a ten. For a certified ten like her, even I’d give monogamy a whirl,” Eric snaps back.

“For three days, then you’d be back to grinding on randos!”

“We’re not talking about me,” he replies, indicating Sherman with a wave of his hand.

“I’m perfectly aware we’ve only been here a few days...but we just seem to fight all the time. Apparently this place is too quiet, there’s no life, she’s bored,” Sherman sniffs.

“We’re not here on vacation, we’re here to work, she know that?” I point out.

“Just to make myself clear, I’m not the one complaining. This place is just what we needed so we could get our heads down and work, no distractions. I warned her what to expect, but Nantucket is famous for its *celebs*...” he explains, biting into a lobster roll. “I think she was expecting boatloads of billionaires and *la dolce vita*, not an isolated fishing village!”

“In summer, the population easily hits fifty thousand, then it’s back to the usual ten thousand for the rest of the year. Off-season it’s pretty dead,” I clarify.

“She can’t hang with the other girls?” Eric asks. “I don’t hear Skylar and Chloe whining.”

“They hit it off straight away, but they’re hardly the kind of company Laetitia prefers...” Sherman frowns.

“Skylar’s a world-class figure skater, about to resume training for the Olympics after taking time off to have a baby and she’s not good enough for her?” I ask, unable to hold back my sarcasm.

“No, mate...it’s just that...for Laetitia, Skylar is too...normal...she’s used to

a different kind of company,” Sherman tries to explain.

“Like Judgy Judy!” I ask. I tell them about the phone call.

“You should have invited her up! Anything to get Laetitia off my back. I’m sick of seeing that bloody long face of hers.”

“I didn’t tell her not to come, I just told her she wouldn’t be bunking with me,” I shrug.

“Are you totally crazy. A super-hot chick wants to come all the way up here and warm your bed and all you can say is, Nah, I’m good?” This time it’s Eric who rolls his eyes.

“She’s a total ball buster. Hot AF, but a complete pain in the ass. I don’t want her hanging around and I don’t want to hook up with her,” I inform Eric before turning to Sherman. “I’m going to tell you what I think, sorry if I’m a little direct, but getting together with her was a huge mistake! She’s with you because you’re famous. She likes hanging on your arm at parties and being seen all over town. Sherm...if she wants to go back to New York, let her. We’re here to work. We need to concentrate, you don’t need her whining all the time because she’s missing out on lavish parties with the A-listers of the month.” *Could I be clearer?*

“Are you really suggesting he dumps Laetitia?” Eric looks at me like I’m crazy.

I hold up both hands. “I didn’t say that.”

“I understood very well what you meant, and the truth is, I’ve been thinking about it since before we even left New York,” Sherman agrees. “We’re together, but sometimes I find myself wondering if we know each other at all. There are times when she makes me see red but I let it slide because, physically, she’s this knockout goddess, but we’re not a good fit, especially in a delicate moment like this, when the band needs me to focus.”

Eric starts in again, asking him if he’s lost it now, but a few moments later, a hysterical scream pierces my eardrum, drowning out his voice.

“Kirk Jenkin! I can’t believe it!”

I turn and find myself face to face with Sharla and May, two of the girls from my Nantucket High days.

All this is happening because I’m the jerk who suggested we come here to work on the album!

I make the necessary introductions and pull up two chairs so they can join us at our table.

Not that we were ever particularly close. I’d happily ignore the hell out of

them but Eric's eyes lit up when he caught sight of May, squeezed into a tiny, shocking pink sheath dress that leaves very little to the imagination and, if nothing else, the conversation round the table serves as a distraction for Sherman.

Fifteen minutes later, we have to add another table because six more girls, whose names I forget the moment they introduce themselves, have joined us. It's pretty clear they're here to meet Sharla and May for a girls' night out and they're not at all sorry that we interrupted their plans. Finally, Olyvia joins us too.

They're all chatting, trying to impress us, hoping we'll invite them back to our bungalows.

I just hope word doesn't get round and people don't start bugging us or I'll never hear the end of it from Jaxon.

Despite the excited chatter around the table, my attention is suddenly drawn to the sound of laughter. A laugh I haven't heard in years, though I recognize instantly.

Perhaps because when we were kids she didn't have much to laugh about or perhaps it's the sound and the emotions still attached to it but, even before I turn round, I know exactly who it belongs to.

In fact, I turn in my seat and there she is - Piper.

She's at a table just a few feet away, her back to me, and sitting across from her is Tracee Copson, her best friend from school.

I hate feeling like this. I hate these stupid memories, flooding back like this. I hate that I even recognized her laugh in a crowded pub.

Sherman refuses to be the life and soul of the party so looks like it's down to me. I down my beer and grab the brunette sitting next to me and pull her onto my knee.

She seems to appreciate the gesture and places her hand on my shoulder and grins. I have no intention of taking her back with me. It would only piss off Jaxon - then there's the risk of her showing up every day looking for me, however, it serves its purpose.

The buzz around our table increases and, inevitably, we become the center of attention.

Other girls show up, asking for autographs and selfies. All eyes are on us and when I finally dare to glance over my shoulder, my eyes meet Piper's green ones.

She's staring at me with an expression of contempt mixed with disgust.

She shakes her head and sneers, then turns away again.

She still thinks she's better than everyone, but this time I'm not falling for it.

We stay much longer than we intended. Hours longer.

"That girl on the table behind us, isn't she that maid chick?" Eric asks casually in the car on the way back.

"That's where I've seen her before..." Sherm nods.

"Cute, though. Blonde, green eyes...I was wondering what she was hiding under that uniform," Eric says, and for some reason, I feel the blood rushing to my brain.

What the fuck?? He can bang her brains out for all I care!

"You, my friend, have a one track mind!" Sherman retorts. "That girl is a Godsend, she deserves every cent of those tips. When it comes to Laetitia she's been a lifesaver – thanks to her, she has hardly anything to complain about and she even makes sure there are warm towels for when she wakes up!"

"Same here. I let slip that I'm a mango fan. Since then there's been fresh mango in the refrigerator every day. Ready sliced. When they work like that, they're worth every cent," Eric nods. The cold beers have warmed his heart.

"Really? She's worth that much!" I blurt. My voice sounds so harsh I barely recognize it.

"Whoa! That pumpkin beer must have been sour!" Eric teases.

"Forget it! I'm tired, it's late, I have a headache," I say, trying to sound less aggressive. The last thing I want now is a round of questions.

"You two have history?" Eric asks, narrowing his eyes.

I've already said too much. Luckily, the car pulls up in front of the resort.

"Better get to bed," I say, abruptly ending the conversation. "It's after three, if Jaxon hears us or we wake Sarah, there'll be hell to pay!"



Next morning, half way through a new piece, one of the strings snaps.

“You mean you were playing for real?” Eric exclaims. “I always figured it was just an act!”

“Jerk!” I hiss, searching through my case for another string to replace the broken one. “Idiot!” I slap my forehead and let the lid close with a bang. “They’re in with my spare bass.”

“No problem. Go get them and we’ll take a breather,” Jax announces. He turns to the others. “Five minute break?”

I run back to my bungalow, push the door open, and rush inside, only to find I’m not alone.

Piper’s in there, cleaning.

She flinches and stares at me like I’m a terrorist. Not that I’m happy to see her either.

Suddenly I remember the stupid cloth she left behind in the shower. I retrieve it from the drawer and slam it down on her trolley with a flourish.

The thought that I kept it for her irritates me more than walking in and finding her here!

“Try not to leave your crap lying around or you can kiss goodbye to your tips,” I grin sarcastically.

“I don’t need your money,” she snaps back angrily.

“Oh, really? Funny, the guys were just saying how helpful you are, practically bending over backwards for the tips. Carefully sliced mango? Oh, please!” I shake my head. “This must be a new low even for you. Is it really the pennies you’re after or something else?” This time I lean into her personal space, deliberately making her feel uncomfortable.

“And you? All that fame and you’re still playing the fool for the mean girls from school? Pathetic! Almost thirty years old and still the class clown. Anything to be one of the cool kids, huh? I thought famous people wanted privacy, yet you’re so desperate to be in the spotlight - you sure it’s not pathological? Narcissistic personality disorder would be my guess!” Her hands are on her hips and her face is mottled bright red.

I laugh in her face. Her words mean nothing to me.

“I read that people with NPD have an unusually high opinion of themselves and are absolutely convinced that they’re special. They constantly seek admiration, have an enhanced sense of entitlement and firmly believe that their needs come before all others. As a definition, it fits you perfectly,” she snaps and this time she’s the one leaning into my personal space.

“Careful, Piper, or I’ll have to come up with a definition for you, and you won’t like it!”

“Oh, really? Come on,” she waves her hand in my face, “I’m curious.”

“I have better things to do than waste time with you and your pathetic attempts to analyze me. I have to get back to the band,” and I push past her into my bedroom.

I grab my spare strings and come out again. Piper is in the bathroom, with the door closed.

Great! It’s my bungalow yet she thinks she can do whatever she wants.

I knock on the door. “By the way,” I raise my voice so she can hear me. “Don’t bother chasing after Eric. I already warned him about you. That bank is well and truly closed!” She doesn’t reply, which pisses me off even more. “Since you’re so fucking clever, analyze that,” I add. I turn and walk out, slamming the door so hard I’m surprised the bungalow is still standing.

I stop and run my hands over my face, trying to calm down.

Of course, I never said a word to Eric. After my initial outburst, I made sure I didn’t let anything else slip and, despite the way Piper behaved, I’d never say anything like that to my friends.

Why not? Shouldn’t they know just what they’re dealing with? I wonder a moment later.

I think of the bathroom. The closed door, Piper hiding behind it and, just for a second, wonder if I’ve gone too far.

I have to fight the urge to go back to the bungalow and check on her.

What is it they say? Old habits die hard? I feel like slapping myself, hard – it’s been ten years and I hate her, but she still has the same effect on me.

Chapter 10



Fall 2008

I didn't think Piper would accept the suit so easily. When I realized she was gazing over at my window, I could have pretended to be asleep, but decided to let her see me - I was curious to see her reaction and, I have to say, it went better than expected.

Money isn't a problem for me but Vicky Sandoval's so-called generosity made me sick. I know why she did it too...She'd seen me walk in and was showing off. I know what girls like her are like, I saw it all the time in my old school, and I've never fallen for it.

I get on the bus after school and immediately spot Piper.

She's at the back, on her own, isolated from everyone.

When she sees me she gives me a knowing look. We have a secret now. I smile back then turn away.

I'm tempted to join her and ignore the kids trying to attract my attention as I walk past, but I have my Mr. Popularity reputation to maintain and I can't.

So, I ignore her and join the guys on the water polo team, who are fooling around, showboating, as usual.

When the bus drops us off at our stop, however, it's just me and her and I can be myself.

"You try the suit?" I ask, curious to find out.

Piper clears her throat, visibly embarrassed. "I shouldn't have accepted it, but the thought of seeing Vicky Sandoval's face was too much" she whispers, biting her bottom lip.

I know she's hurt because of my behavior on the bus, and now I feel guilty because she could have ignored me like I ignored her and she didn't.

Don't ignore her in public like that, it's not fair, I scold myself.

"And...?" I ask. "How was it?"

"Let's say she was speechless."

"Show me?" I nudge her elbow, hoping to break the ice.

"Are you serious?"

"Deadly...come on...do an impression of her, please...I think I deserve it."

She covers her face with her hands. "Here goes..." she says, blushing.

She has that fine, pale skin, typical of natural blondes, that easily turns red. She purses her lips in an expression of disgust, which is so Vicky, then, her eyes wide, she blinks, opening and closing her mouth like a flapping fish.

I can't help it. I burst out laughing.

"Are you laughing at me?" she asks, looking hurt.

I automatically put a hand on her shoulder. "No, I'm laughing with you!"

Finally, she smiles. Unfortunately, her good mood is short-lived.

The front door of her house opens wide and her mother lets out a strangled yell. Piper turns instantly and I can tell that the idea of me seeing her mother in this state terrifies her.

The woman promptly pukes and slumps to the floor.

Piper drops her book bag and runs up the driveway.

Without thinking, I chase after her.

Her mother is lying unconscious, her face in a pool of vomit.

Piper puts her into the recovery position and when I see her face, I'm

struck by their resemblance - she looks like an older, more beat up version of her daughter.

"I'll call 911," I say, pulling out my cell phone.

"Nah, I'm used to it," Piper objects. "I'll get her cleaned up and into bed."

"But..."

"I know her, Kirk. We've been here before, she'll be fine." She shakes her head and I see tears in her eyes.

"What about your brother? Should I call him?"

"He's at school, on another detention. We don't need him anyway, I'll handle this," she refuses, attempting to lift the unconscious woman.

I drop my bookbag and crouch down to help her.

However, Piper slaps my hands away. "Go home, Kirk. I've got this, really."

"Don't even think about it," I refuse. "Go ahead, you lead the way. I'm not leaving you alone like this. If you don't want me to call 911, I won't, but let me help you."

She stares at me for a long minute, debating whether or not to accept my offer, then she gives in and opens the door.

"Sorry," she apologizes as soon as we walk in. "I try to keep the house clean, but it's not easy. She's on her own all day and makes more mess than a first grader on a sugar high!"

"Don't worry...where to? Upstairs?" I ask, jerking my head in the direction of the stairs.

"No, no...I'll take her!" she exclaims, refusing my help again.

"Piper! If you want to stop me from helping, you're going to have to kick me out yourself." I'm not giving up.

She sighs, closes her eyes for a second, glances over at the stairs, then looks at me and nods.

Upstairs, we come to the bathroom and she motions for me to stop.

"Wait here," she says, running into another room. She comes back with a nightgown and clean underwear. "Put her in the shower. I'll take over now, you go home," she says, opening the bathroom door.

Okay, but I'm going nowhere. I'm not leaving her like this.

If only she knew how many times I've been in similar situations.

I wait for her in the corridor.

I hear her trying to talk to her mother, asking what happened, but it doesn't seem like she gets anything out of her, except for the odd groan.

My heart aches for her. I know all too well how awful her life is.

She's only fourteen. She's going through this alone and, as if that weren't enough, she's continually humiliated and bullied at school, because the woman who should be taking care of her chose pills and alcohol over the welfare of her daughter.

The door opens and Piper appears in the doorway, propping up her freshly cleaned mother. She sees me and jumps.

"I'll just get her into bed. A few hours and she'll be as good as new...and, thanks..." she says, looking down at the floor.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of..." I reply, taking hold of her mother and carrying her to the bedroom and laying her on the bed.

Piper tucks her in.

"I need to change. I got a little wet in there," she says, touching her shirt.

"I'll wait downstairs," I nod.

"You've done enough, Kirk," she says, ringing her hands, staring at the floor. "Go home."

"I said I'll wait downstairs."

"And I said go home!" She's getting agitated. "You should never have seen this." She shakes her head angrily. "That's why nobody wants anything to do with me. I'm the crazy lady's kid. I bet they're just waiting to see me face down in a puddle of puke on the school steps, like mother, like daughter," she continues.

"Well, you're not her, so it won't happen," I say softly, trying to reassure her. "I'll be downstairs," and this time I leave her no time to object.

While I'm waiting, I find the garden hose and rinse down the porch, washing away her mother's mess with high pressure jets of water.

I'm not even sure what I'm going to say - for a minute, I think about telling her the real reason why we moved out to Nantucket.

Just for a minute...but...I want her to trust me. I really do want to be her friend and share who I am with her.

I'm not sure why or what's got into me, but I want Piper to know she can count on me and that, even if she has no one to take care of her, I'll always be there for her.

Seriously? You're not sure why? my conscience asks.

That long blonde hair, I see it fluttering in the wind, all tousled, or gathered in a twist at the nape of her neck, held in place with a pencil, and it brings back so many memories...

That's enough! Stop it, now!

When Piper arrives, she sees immediately that I cleaned up and purses her lips. She's about to say something, but the look on my face makes her change her mind.

"Want to sit?" I point to the spot on the grass where we sat last time.

"Okay," she nods, walking over.

I wait for her to sit down then take my place next to her. She looks so sad that I wish I could get closer. I want to wrap my arm around her shoulder, hug her, tell her I'll protect her - but I don't.

"I'm grateful, Kirk, really, but don't go ruining your reputation for a freak like me. You've only just got here and you're already Mr. Popularity. Every guy wants to be your friend and every girl wants to be with you - I'm not just saying that..." she says, pulling up tufts of grass.

I know I am. That's why I ignore her in public, though the shame is killing me. I can't afford to be sidelined like her. I have to keep my grades as high as possible, I can't let my parents down.

Everything was falling apart at home, then I woke up, pulled myself together and put my head down. My hard work began to pay off and I can't fuck up now.

"You mean, they'd come after me just because I'm your friend? Who?"

Piper taps her finger against her lips thoughtfully. The wind ruffles her hair and the scent of her shampoo tickles my nose.

It's not one of those expensive, sophisticated ones like so many girls use. It's fresh and clean. It reminds me of the sea - natural and wild like her, like the island she lives on.

"Louis Templeton would be the first to come for you, he already hates you. Before you turned up, he was the King of the school and I'm guessing he'd like his title back," she replies, studying my expression.

"Really? A guy I don't even know is pissed at me?" I'm astonished.

"Are you dumb or just playing dumb? Anyway, yes. You know how it is, we take everything pretty seriously at our age, well, most of us do," she shrugs.

"But I've done nothing! Why so pissed?" I asked, spreading my arms in amazement.

"Stealing his crown was more than enough, believe me," she laughs.

"Good job he's not on the water polo team or I'd be sleeping with the fishes," I wink.

Piper blushes. “Do you even like water polo? Did you even play it before you got here?” she asks curiously.

“Yeah, all the time back in New York,” I smile. “I love being in the pool.”

We start talking about swimming, swapping anecdotes, and gradually I see her relax. It seems my passion for jelly beans has got to her too, because as she speaks, she dips continuously into the bag of beans I’ve placed between us.

The sky gradually changes color, the days are growing shorter and, after a sunset that sets her blonde hair on fire, it gets dark and the first luminous dots begin to appear in the blue velvet sky.

In New York there’s too much artificial light to see the stars. In the city you don’t get wafts of salty air mixed with the smell of fresh grass, or the scent of something wild in the wind, or the stillness that envelopes everything.

Piper shivers and rubs her arms and, once again, I fight the urge to hold her. I still feel the need to make the moment special, however.

“How many stars do you think are up there?” I ask, turning towards her and pointing up at the sky.

“A million?” she shrugs, halfway between a reply and a question.

“I don’t know. What do you say we sit a while and count them together?”

She blinks, like when she was pretending to be Vicky, like she doesn’t understand what I’m doing here or why I’d want to talk to her.

She opens her mouth to reply, but then a voice startles us.

“Piper, you out there?” her mother calls from the doorway.

We’re too far away and it’s too dark for her to see us.

“Shh. Don’t move. Stay here until I’m inside, I don’t want her to make another scene,” she says, getting to her feet and running back to the house.

“Mom, I’m here. I was just checking to see if Wade was coming.”

“Goofing off again, huh? Dinner won’t cook itself,” the woman barks.

“I’m on it, Mom,” Piper says, then the door closes behind her.

I’m left sitting in the dark, wondering how to deal with the feelings I have for her, but determined to see them through.



It's been several weeks since our chat on the grass and, every afternoon, when the bus drops us off, we hang back, talking. When school finishes, she's always there, a solitary figure at the back of the bus.

Idiot! Go join her!

I'm about to, then four guys from the water polo team who usually travel by car get on.

"Damn clunker won't start, if I have to call someone and have it towed, I'll be pissed," Jason starts.

"Blessing in disguise because now we get to travel with Jenkin!" Andrew jokes when he sees me.

I high-five him. "The one and only!"

"Whoa, Kirk, you seen the way the crazy chick's kid's looking at you? Someone's crushing!" Jason grins, pointing at Piper.

She blushes bright purple, lowers her eyes and pulls her jacket tight around her.

"Hey, trashcan!" he calls. "Eyes off! You don't have permission to look at Kirk Jenkin!"

I should make him stop. I know I should...

Piper clenches her fist. Her bottom lip trembles as she curls up in her seat, trying to make herself invisible.

"Jenkin, really? She's proly as batshit as her mom! Tell your folks to move house before she stalks you, big time!"

"Lucky she can't afford binoculars, or she'd be staring into your room, 24/7," Taylor continues.

Piper's head hangs so low her hair forms a curtain over her face, but I still catch the movement of her hand as she wipes away a tear.

And I feel like a total shit.

"Come on guys," I hiss, hoping she doesn't hear me, trying to get them to leave her alone. "I have to live next door to her."

Somehow it's enough to shut them up.

More students board the bus and finally it pulls out of the lot. All the way

home, I fight the urge to turn and check on Piper, see how she's doing.

Even when the other guys get off, I hold back.

When we get to our stop, the driver opens the door and Piper is off like a shot.

I immediately race after her.

Unfortunately for her, I'm pretty fast myself, besides, my legs are longer than hers. In two strides I catch up with her and reach out to take her arm.

"Get off!" she wrenches away from me.

"I'm sorry, Piper," I apologize, reaching for her again.

"For what? Having to live next door?" she asks, tears of anger streaming down her face.

Shit! She heard.

"I didn't mean that..." I try and explain. "I just wanted to make them stop."

"Ah, so you're not scared the crazy chick's daughter has a crush on you? Or that she'll stalk you, big time?" she asks, pulling her arm away again.

"You know that's not what I think," I raise my hand to touch her face, but she backs away.

"Piece of shit! What do you want from me, Kirk. Really?" She glares angrily.

"I want to be your friend," I reply. As soon as the words are out, I realize how fake I sound.

"You're not my friend. You just want to ease your conscience because you've seen what a disaster my family is, but you don't care about me. Tracee's my friend. Guys like that, she tells them to fuck off. If you were my friend you wouldn't have said anything about having to live next door to me, you would have defended me – that's what friends do." Her eyes drill into mine.

She aims a kick at my knee. I let go of her arm in shock and watch as she runs home and slams the door behind her.

I want to go over and knock, but it would be useless. She's furious and, worse, she's right.

I enter my own house and I'm so distracted I almost walk smack bang into my mother.

"Kirk?" she asks, taking my face in her hands. "Something wrong?"

"Nah, just tired, heavy day at school."

"I wasn't referring to school, hon. I saw you from the window, with that

girl from next door. I know you're a good kid, what on earth did you do to make her so angry?"

With no time to make up a story, I blurt out, word for word, what happened on the bus.

"Why didn't you defend her?" my mother asks.

"My reputation, I guess...she's the butt of everyone's jokes and I worry that if I take her side, they'll do the same with me," I mumble.

"Since when is being popular more important than being decent, Kirk? Your father and I didn't bring you up to be superficial!" She shakes her head, disappointment written all over her face.

I wanted to help, but have I made things worse? I wonder, afraid I've made a huge mistake, worried that I've compromised the delicate balance that took my family so long to find, and terrified of seeing it fall apart again.

"So, if the kids at school rejected me, excluded me, you wouldn't mind? You wouldn't be upset if they suddenly replaced me as captain of the water polo team, if I was no longer popular?"

It's like walking on shards of broken glass.

My mother steers me over to the couch. We sit down and she takes my hands in hers. "Kirk, you're strong and you're so much better than this. Are you seriously worried that some provincial kids are going to laugh at you? Does the judgment of stupid idiots who deliberately target a girl whose only fault is having a mother with mental health issues bother you so much?" she asks, staring at me intently.

"I can handle them, Mom," I sigh.

"I know. What that poor girl needs is a friend, not some vacuous kid who hides when the going gets tough. I love being proud of you, but what makes me prouder is seeing you make the right choice." She strokes my face. "And your heart knows what that is." I nod. "I don't want to butt into your social life or tell you how to manage your friendships, but you're making a mistake and, as your mother, I have a duty to make sure you do the right thing. Being silent in the face of injustice doesn't make you a man, Kirk," she explains.

"I know. I'm just sorry I forgot..." I reply regretfully. I didn't mean to, but I know I've disappointed her.

"Growing up can be hard sometimes but, believe me, you're on the right track." She ruffles my hair. "Right, better get back to work."

I go up to my room and from my window I see Piper, bent over her desk, studying.

I'm tempted to go over and apologize again, promise her it won't happen again, that I'll show up for her.

But words are just words, it's actions that count.

From tomorrow, things will be different.

Chapter 11



By the time I get home I'm a wreck. I'm such a mess, it's a miracle I got there without falling off my bike. Getting through the rest of the day after my encounter with Kirk was hell – I still had work to do, though my mood was constantly alternating between agony and anger.

His words cut deep. Even worse, the fact that whatever comes out of his mouth still has so much power over me, drives me insane. At first all I felt was the pain – then the anger set in. Now I'm furious with myself for not coming up with a stinging reply when I needed it most.

I'm pretty sure I'll spend the night tossing and turning, like some character from a TV show, making up replies to the various scenarios. If I ever bump into him again, at least I'll be ready.

I'm so ashamed. I could kick myself for being so weak, for locking myself in the bathroom, but I couldn't do it, I couldn't handle coming face to face with him.

Everything he said humiliated me. And I let him.

It's clear he feels no remorse for the way he treated me all those years ago - far from it.

And the way he gets off on comparing me to my mother? He knows what she was like, what I went through as a kid. If nothing else, Kirk Jenkin just showed his true colors.

What I saw at Cisco Brewers last night was typical Kirk - as if I needed any further proof. All he cares about is being the center of attention and hooking up with any girl who breathes, just like when we were kids, when he tried everything to prove he was different, and ended up cheating on me, showing me that the Kirk I thought I knew was just a fantasy who never existed.

My cell phone rings, interrupting my bitter thoughts.

I check the display: Wade's latest rehab.

Then I see the time and anxiety grips my stomach. *Just when I thought things couldn't get worse...*

Berating myself for being pessimistic, I swipe to answer.

"Ms. Hooper?" a woman asks.

"Speaking," I confirm with a gulp.

"Sorry to bother you, Dr. Brant here... Unfortunately, I have some unpleasant news..." she says somberly.

I'm immediately alarmed. "What's wrong? Is Wade sick? What's happened?"

"I don't know how to tell you this, but he's missing. His things are still here, but it seems he's disappeared," she reveals.

My legs almost give way and I drag myself over to the nearest chair. "Disappeared? How is that even possible?" I ask, beside myself with worry.

"Ms. Hooper, this isn't a prison. Our residents are here voluntarily, we pride ourselves on providing a service for people who want to be here and who want to heal. Technically, if Wade had signed for his release and walked out, no one would have stopped him. Unfortunately, he disappeared of his own volition, without notifying anyone," she explains.

She's right. We chose the clinic because Wade said he was determined to get clean .

Now I feel like he tricked me.

Was it all deliberate? Did he choose that particular clinic because he knew that whenever things got tough, he could just walk?

I daren't even imagine where he could be. If he'll turn up here or hole up for a while, keeping a low profile?

It's nothing personal. He's sick. He's still your brother. He loves you, in his own way, I reproach myself for feeling angry.

"When did this happen?" I ask, running a hand over my face.

"He was last seen during lunch. No one has seen him since then. We checked with the other residents, but no one knows anything, which is the normal response. No matter what they say, they're not happy to be here, and anyone who decides to quit the program is seen as a hero. We decided to give him until the evening, to not alarm you unnecessarily, for all we know he could just have gone for a ride, but dinner time is over and there's still no sign of him. If he shows up anytime tonight, I'll let you know."

"Of course. I see. Thanks for calling. If he turns up here, I'll let you know," I say, totally demoralized.

"Ms. Hooper – Piper – don't blame yourself. You've done everything you could, including paying for his stay here. These people are addicts, it's not easy to understand the mental processes behind certain choices," she tries to reassure me. "Sometimes they find the motivation to get their lives back on track but, in some cases, all the love in the world is never enough. We'll keep his things here for now. If he doesn't come back, we'll send them on to you."

I thank her again and end the call. I can hardly breathe, I'm suffocating. I need to get out of the house.

Wondering just what was going through Wade's head when he decided to run, I feel my panic levels rising. I dread finding out where he's gone and what he's got himself into.

If he'd wanted to come back here, he would be here already. Who knows, maybe later tonight or tomorrow morning, he'll show.

In any case, filing a report with the police is useless.

I've been there before, I know exactly what they'll say...Wade is old enough to look after himself and free to do as he pleases. Plus, the local chief police knows him well by now and my brother is not high up on his Favorite Citizens list!

This is my life today!

Ten years ago I was running around, cleaning up after my mother, now I'm

doing the same for my brother and the last thing I need is to add Kirk to my worries.

One month, just four weeks, of him being in the vicinity, then it will be all over, again.

I feel the panic rising.

I've been fighting it for ten years now, since...*what happened*.

It's not been easy. Your heart pounds in your chest, you struggle to breathe, electric shocks run through your whole body, and all your mind wants to do is find some safe place while you desperately search for answers, anything to calm the terror that, suddenly and with no apparent reason, takes control of your whole being.

Sometimes fighting my instincts, controlling my reactions, is almost impossible. I wish I had someone to protect me, help me escape the sense of impending danger, even if it exists only in my head. Then it all shuts down, as if my entire being has short-circuited, and I'm left feeling weak, scared, and ashamed of my lack of self-control (especially when it happens around others) yet terrified of it happening while I'm alone.

I've been trying to cope with these attacks for years, lately it's gotten a little easier but, after today, I'm scared they'll come back, worse than ever.

After everything, my greatest fear is fear...

Nantucket is no big city. It's too small to avoid the places you wish you could erase from your memory, whether they're the good memories or the bad ones, the worst ones.

Until the most painful memory of all comes back to haunt me. Standing right in front of me, day after day, humiliating me, insulting me, almost impossible to ignore.

Sometimes I think of that DiCaprio movie, 'Inception', where people have the ability to shape their dreams just the way they want.

If only I could do that. I'd spend my life dreaming, changing buildings, streets, colors. I'd build a whole new world just for me, a place where the house over the way was never empty and my life took a whole different turn. An existence in which Kirk Jenkin is the person he made me believe he was.

That's not possible, however.

So, sitting out on the porch, I look out at the patch of grass where I once sat with Kirk, collecting unforgettable memories and where, years later, I discovered that everything I thought we'd been for each other was just a lie.

I'm still breathing, I'm still alive, but the Piper that existed back then is

long gone and nothing will ever be the same again.



Next day at work, I'm pretty busy.

One of the bungalows looks like a cyclone hit it. It's literally like someone turned it upside down and, from what I'm told back in the office, one of the two occupants has checked out.

Whatever happened, it's none of my business. My job is to clean up, not to ask questions.

There's a much more pleasant surprise in Skylar and Jaxon's bungalow, however - a cage containing the cutest African hedgehog, which adds a much needed touch of cheer to my day.

My day gets even better, however, when I finish my shift and breathe a huge sigh of relief at being spared any surprise collisions with Kirk.

I head to the storerooms for my bicycle, ready to set off home, but when I get up close, I stop suddenly, appalled - someone has slashed both tires, broken the chain and left the lock lying in the dirt.

Then it starts. My heart leaps into my throat and I shudder, those dreadful demons crawling over me again. My hands are sweating and an icy shiver runs down my spine. I'm paralyzed with fear and it takes all my strength to look around, terrified that there might be someone who, suddenly...

Don't think about it, don't think about it, I repeat on a loop, trying to calm down, to pull myself together and dominate my feelings, refusing to allow what happened years ago to rise to the surface and ruin my life, all over again.

Does this have anything to do with Wade?

Why can't they leave him alone?

Oh, God. This is just the beginning, the worst is yet to come.

I can feel it. My lungs empty, I'm choking, engulfed by darkness...I recognize the signs, a powerful attack is on its way and all my efforts to remain calm will be for nothing.

I don't want to be the victim anymore.

I clench my fists and glance around, trying to find something to fix on, to

clear my head. Red car, green trashcan, blue streetlight, black asphalt.

I need to direct my thoughts elsewhere, to think of something else. I can't afford to let my brain associate where I work with some place that causes fear or it will drive me crazy.

It doesn't work, however.

I count backwards from a hundred - by the time I get to ninety-five I can hardly breathe.

Which is not a good sign.

Suddenly the words of a song I haven't heard in years come into my head and, somehow, despite everything, I find myself singing along. Feeling calmer, I let them take over, and the tune comes alive in my head.

I hate that song, but it helps, bringing me back to reality, banishing my fears, as I focus on the words.

When my breathing returns to normal, I take a look around.

It's just me, nobody else.

I need to go home, but I'm too damn scared.

There's someone whose face I've been trying to forget for a long time, and the thought of seeing him again fills me with terror. In my mind I see him materialize in front of me, intent on finishing what he started all those years ago, back when he had *business* with Wade.

Someone touches my shoulder and I jump several feet in the air.

"What are you doing standing here like that? Something wrong?" asks the last person I want to see.

"Nothing wrong. I was having the perfect day, until a moment ago," I say, making light of the situation.

Go away, Kirk. Stop asking questions, just go...

Unfortunately, he's much taller than me. One glance over my shoulder and he sees my bicycle.

"That yours?" he asks, pointing at it.

"Yes...no...it was...now it's trash..." I shrug.

Kirk stares at my bike. He looks so shocked it's like he's seen a ghost.

Okay, rockstar, calm down. It's a bicycle, no need to call CSI.

"Piper, that the same one you had when we were kids?"

"Well, until today it served its purpose, so why change it? In any case, what's it got to do with you?"

There's no way I'm telling him that I don't have the money for a new one.

"I never thought things were this bad..." he says, looking from my bike to

me and back again.

Is he stupid? I've never lied to him - not like he lied to me. He's always known about my finances - or my lack of them.

“What the hell do you care? It's a damned bike...or are you looking for another excuse to make fun of me? Insult me?” I blurt, noticing how hysterical I sound.

Kirk runs a hand through his hair, looking almost shocked. What's going through his head?

“I mean, I don't get it. You're still using that rusty old thing? Why?”

That's it. He's gone too far. I can't help it. I open my mouth and all the rude answers I've been working on all night come spewing out.

“The fame gone to your head, Kirk? Really? You were an idiot when you were a kid, but somehow I figured you'd grow out of it. In case you forgot, I work in a hotel. I clean other people's shit, hardly a six-figure salary and, just like all those years ago, I'm lucky if I make it to the end of the week, never mind the end of the month. If you think I have the money for state of the art bicycles and other crap, then you're seriously stupid. For those of us who live in the real world, they're luxuries, for people like you with not a care in the world, who look down their noses at people like me,” I blurt, all in one breath.

Kirk blinks several times, sparing me his idiotic reply.

He walks over to my bike. “I can give you a hand, if you want. I can fix this.”

What is he? Bipolar?

“I'm good,” I snap.

He turns, his hands on his hips. “Piper, come on, I'm offering to help.”

Is there something wrong with his brain? Is this what they mean by selective memory? Does he have any idea of how long the spoken word can remain impressed on the brain? Apparently not, he's already forgotten.

And all the while, I'm literally rabid with rage, clenching my fists, trying to control myself.

I'm shuffling mentally through my list of suitable insults, hoping to get rid of him for once and for all, when Tracee arrives.

“Piper!” she exclaims. “Kirk! Sorry I didn't get to say hi last night at Cisco's but you were surrounded - looking good, though...”

“Weren't we meeting at my house?” I ask. *What the hell is she doing here?*

“When you didn't show, I figured I'd drive over, see what was happening.

But since your here with Kirk, I guess I can forgive you. I'd be late too, in your shoes," she winks.

"I'm not late because I stopped to chat with Kirk...anything but..." I reply, pointing to my ruined bike.

"Shit! What the...?" she groans, suddenly forgetting that we're not alone. "That's creepy AF...like when..."

"...When Vicky Sandoval trashed my bike?" I improvise, hoping to shut her up. "Somehow, I don't think that's her style anymore, not in her late twenties."

Kirk doesn't know what happened that summer and he doesn't need to find out, it's none of his business.

He already looks down on me, I certainly don't need his pity, it would be the perfect combination.

"Piper, it's a little scary though..."

"You know what it's like end of season - the kids get bored. They were having fun, that's all. It's happened before, it was all over the local news last year, remember?" I place a hand on her shoulder and give it a little squeeze, hoping to make it clear she has to keep her mouth shut, at least until we're alone.

"Piper, honestly, I can fix it." Kirk again.

"That's nice," Tracee butts in again. "See, Pipes?"

I'm so tired, so shaken, that I'm almost tempted to accept, but then I change my mind. "I don't need your help," I refuse, again.

"Piper, you want to stay over at mine tonight?" Tracee offers.

"Why would I do that?" I ask, immediately realizing I've made a mistake.

"Well, I'd be scared, home alone, after..." she begins.

She doesn't get it!

"I hardly think the local kids are going to throw stones at my windows, I bet they don't even know who the bike belongs to. They were just playing, nothing personal."

"Whoa...home alone...don't tell me Wade actually found someone dumb enough to marry him!" It's Kirk's turn now.

"That's my brother you're talking about," I hiss angrily.

He's been mean enough to me, I won't let him trash talk Wade too.

"Oh, I know, and I know him too, remember? In fact I've lost count of the times I saved his ass, thanks to his little drugs problem!" he snaps back.

I gasp. His words are like a sucker punch. I feel the color drain from my

face.

“Everything okay?” Tracee asks.

I swallow. “What do you know about Wade’s drug problems?” I ask, turning to Kirk.

“What do I know?” he raises his eyebrows. “I know, for example, that you thought it was Vicky who trashed your bike, when it was one of Wade’s ‘buddies’. I was the one who went to get him back when the same guy took him and refused to let him go until he settled his debts...How do I know? Because I was the one who paid up...how do you *not* know?” This time there’s no hint of sarcasm in his voice and I can tell by his face that it’s the truth.

“You did what? You mean it wasn’t Vicky Sandoval?” I ask in shock.

“Piper,” Tracee strokes my back. “You okay? Sure you don’t want to sit down?”

“I’m fine. Please, let’s just go home...” I have to get out of here, rethink my ideas, analyze Kirk’s words.

“And your mother?” Kirk again.

“I really don’t think that’s any of your business. You’ve been away ten years, in a few weeks you’ll be leaving again so, please, leave the past where it is,” I blurt.

“You want me to fix that or no?” he points to my bicycle.

“I don’t need your help. You said it yourself, no? It’s old. I’ll get a new one when I get the chance,” I announce, picking it up and putting it next to the nearest dumpster. I hold my arm out to Tracee. “Ready?”

She stares at me in silence, then takes my hand. After a few steps, however, she stops. “Bye, Kirk,” she waves.

“See you around, Tracee.”

As soon as we’re at a safe distance she stops again. “Why are you acting so crazy?” she asks. “All that crap about kids? What was all that about. Nothing like that has ever happened here so there were no newspaper articles.”

“Tracee...what part of ‘I don’t want Kirk back in my life’ didn’t you understand? Is it so hard? You want me to spell it out for you?” She’s my best friend but she’s on my last nerve. “All we need is for him to think Wade’s past has something to do with this and he’ll put two and two together and find out what happened that summer, after graduation.”

“But...” she begins.

“No buts. My life is a big enough mess as it is. I told you this morning,

Wade ran away from rehab and I have no idea where he is. He hasn't been in touch, no calls, nothing."

"And speaking of Wade...you know what kind of people he hung out with. This bike thing, I'm worried," she squeezes my arm. "You can't just blame it on the local kids, when you know already it could be something much more serious."

"Well, whoever they are, Wade's new buddies don't know me, they have no reason to come looking for me. Wade would never put me in danger like this," I reply, downplaying it to make myself feel better.

"You can't let it slide, Pipes. Report it. Don't let it go...tell someone. Kirk could help..."

"Did I stutter?" I stop abruptly. It feels like she's lecturing me. "I said no. N.O! You have no idea how I'm doing, Tracee. Did you hear what he said? Don't you realize what that meant to me? I hate him. I know it's not his fault, but...if he hadn't left...if...he hadn't made a fool of me...It's...stupid...useless, I shouldn't be angry with him because... his family moved away, but..." I ramble, realizing I'm not making sense.

"Calm down. Deep breaths, and start again..." she says, as we come to my house.

"I didn't know, Tracee. I had no idea Wade was mixed up in drugs back in school," I explain. "Then, of course, they tore the lid off Pandora's box big time, but back then I knew nothing and today, more than ten years later, what do I discover? That it's Kirk I have to thank for keeping Wade's drug problems away from my front porch for so long."

"That much I figured, yes."

"Just think. What would my life be like today if Kirk hadn't left? Why, if he was taking care of Wade, did he do what he did the night before he left? He got on that boat, everything took a turn for the worse...until... look at me...I'm a fucking freak show." I clench my fists.

"You're not a freak, Piper," she sighs, stroking my shoulder.

"Yes, I am. Just that, like this, it doesn't show," I specify angrily.

"It's not true." She's still trying to console me.

"You don't know what it's like, Tracee, and you never will. You have no idea how it feels to be me."

She sighs again and looks me in the eye. "No, you're right," she whispers. "Sorry."

"Thanks," I mouth, relieved that she understands.

“As for what happened in the past. Piper, we were kids, there was a lot of stupid stuff going down. Plus it was his 18th birthday party...we’d all been drinking...but, we’re adults now,” Tracee continues.

“What the fuck does that mean? That I should just forget all about how he hurt me, broke all his promises to me? Come on...if he’d wanted to apologize or make it up to me, he could have, no problem. And, you know what? I was so stupid, I probably would even have forgiven him. But it’s been ten years, Tracee!” I can’t believe she’s making excuses for him.

“I’m just saying, when you’re a kid you do stupid things. Perhaps he realized what he did and regretted it but was too ashamed to call you. Maybe he was scared of your reaction. I mean, you never tried to contact him either,” she continues.

“Tracee, please. Why the hell would I? Come on! You saw him at Cisco’s. That’s Kirk all over, growing up hasn’t changed him one bit...” I wave my hand, dismissing any further argument.

“But he paid off Wade’s debt, that doesn’t quite go with your idea that he was leading you on the whole time,” she objects.

“Like I told him, Tracee...leave the past in the past. I have my life and he has his, and all these questions are getting us nowhere. You saw him, he’s unstable. All the shitty things he said to me, then he turns round and offers to fix my bike? That sound normal to you?”

“Who knows, maybe one of the guys in the band said something and he was just reacting out of jealousy...” Tracee suggests.

“Now who’s crazy? Jealous? Of me?” I literally laugh in her face.

“Piper, Kirk’s not crazy, and he’s not evil. You know that, you know him. You guys have unfinished business, and you need to get together and talk it out,” she puts a hand on my shoulder. “Perhaps fate decided to give you a second chance.”

“Tracee, you need to stop watching daytime TV and reading all those affirmations about love and the laws of attraction. Seriously, you’re so positive, it’s absurd. The only concrete fact in all this is that Kirk, once they’re done, will go back where he came from and I’ll go on with my boring little life and all the crap that comes with it,” I announce before she gets any more ideas.

“But, Piper...you know how obvious it is that you still love him, like ten years ago?”

My blood freezes in my veins. “What...? No way, that’s not true!” I shake

my head.

“If it wasn’t, you wouldn’t be acting like this, you wouldn’t care. Your feelings haven’t changed one bit, just admit it,” she continues, her face deadly serious.

“Wade’s disappearance is my priority right now, not Kirk,” I reply, crossing my arms.

Tracee leaves soon after that – after all, she has a baby son and husband to take care of.

When she’s gone, I’m all alone in an empty house. I fish my phone from my bag and check to see if there are any messages from Wade, but nothing.

As I pull it out, however, my fingers brush against the keyring that was clipped to bicycle chain. It’s the fluffy unicorn Kirk gave me all those years ago. Despite everything, I never got rid of it. I couldn’t.

Time to get rid, I think, my foot on the pedal of the trash can in the kitchen, I don’t need it anymore, my bike’s in the dumpster now.

The lid opens, but my hand hovers mid-air. I can’t do it. In the end, I toss it back into my bag, feeling stupid.

Then my past hits me - memories of when Kirk was my sunshine. Whenever my world fell apart, he was always the one to fix it.

The revelation that it wasn’t Vicky who trashed my bike, but someone connected to Wade and his drug habit, stunned me.

And yet...I still don’t give it the importance I should because all my thoughts are focused on that far off morning.

I was sure I’d have to throw my bike away, that nothing could save it, but then I found it, propped up against the picket fence. Kirk had worked his magic.

Not only had he repaired it, he’d also painted it and bought a new basket - and right there inside was the pink unicorn key ring with the pompom. A gift. Such a small thing, but it meant the world to me.

Kirk meant the world to me.

Distant thunder rumbles in the distance. I wrap a comforter around me and make my way out onto the porch.

In the distance, the first flashes of lightning rip through the black sky. The wind picks up and the first drops of rain start to fall and, yes, I’m still thinking of when Kirk lit up my life, when if he’d said he’d stop the rain for me, I would have believed him.

Tracee’s comment about me still caring for him cut deep. No one knows

me like Tracee.

I remember a long gone afternoon - Kirk and I sitting in a car, while all around us a storm raged.

Don't even go there... I warn myself.

The feelings stirring in my chest are so intense they take my breath away and there's nothing I can do about them.

One after the other, it's a whirlwind of memories, like leafing through an album of old photos found in a dusty attic, and the wind from the past intensifies, unleashing a tempest inside me.

Chapter 12



Fall 2008

My jacket is too lightweight for the season and the icy wind blows right through it, slicing me in two, making me shiver. There's the scent of rain in the air and I just hope it doesn't start raining before I reach my destination. You could have taken the school bus, I scold myself, rubbing my hands together. Oh, no I couldn't! I think, aiming a kick at a pebble.

I couldn't bear the thought of running into Kirk Jenkin and having to talk to him, not after yesterday afternoon.

He whined to his friends about having to live next door to me and, while

they laughed and humiliated me, he never said a word. I bet he was laughing on the inside.

Maybe he thinks I have a pathetic crush on him because he's the hottest guy in the school and only talks to me because he feels sorry for me.

I swipe away the tears streaming down my face and walk faster.

Just when I thought things couldn't get worse, I now have to walk to school. I got up way before sunrise and now I'm making this crazy trek all because I don't want to bump into my neighbor.

By the time I get to school, I'm freezing and when I enter the classroom, I let out a shiver.

During the first period, my fingers are so numb I can barely write, but little by little they warm up and the rest of the morning soon passes.

When it's time for lunch, I find myself alone in the cafeteria. There's no Tracee today, she has a doctor's visit. I really don't want to sit on my own, but it's too cold to even think about taking my food outside. I'm also very hungry.

I didn't eat last night - the refrigerator was empty - and I need to get something warm inside me. Today, of all days, pre-packed plastic sandwiches just won't cut it.

I choose the most calorific things from the menu, grab my tray, and am just heading toward a table, when a figure blocks my way.

"Piper, can we talk?" Kirk asks.

"We have nothing to say to each other, besides I'd hate for your new friends to laugh at you," I hiss, pushing past him.

Next thing I know, I'm on the floor, food splattered everywhere, even in my hair.

I raise my head enough to see the tip of a pink ballet flat. Only one person wears shoes like that: Vicky Sandoval!

The bitch tripped me!

"Piper, you're pathetic," she sneers. "Literally throwing yourself at Kirk's feet like that? What? You thought he'd catch you?"

Her clique bursts out laughing, while the other kids whisper among themselves.

Don't cry! Don't cry! Don't cry!

Get up and get out, now!

"That's enough!" a familiar voice yells.

I raise my head, stunned.

“Just a little pest control,” Vicky sniggers.

“You tripped her. I saw you!” Kirk accuses angrily. “What’s wrong with you? Why do you have to be so mean all the time?”

He helps me to my feet. *What is this? Am I dreaming?*

“All of you, cut it out!” he shouts, glaring around him.

Everyone present immediately falls silent and turns back to their lunches.

“Don’t fall for it, Kirk,” Vicky starts breathlessly. “She’s bad news, period.”

“Quit wasting your breath, Vicky. I don’t care,” he cuts her short. He places a hand at the base of my spine. “Ready?” he asks, looking me straight in the eye.

What beautiful eyes...what color are they anyway?

Oh, my God. I’ve turned into Tracee!

I nod dumbly. I just want to get out of there and I’m still too stunned by the way he defended me to say anything.

We leave the premises and, as we walk through the door, the icy wind hits me, making me shiver violently.

“Don’t worry, I have the car today,” he smiles, pulling a set of keys from his jeans pocket.

“Car? But school isn’t out yet...” I object.

“Piper, after that, I think we’re done for the day,” he says, his head cocked to one side as he looks at me.

I should really go back and finish the day, but...

I don’t want to. I don’t want to spend the rest of the afternoon in a filthy sweatshirt that stinks of Shepherd’s pie!

“Okay,” I nod, staring at my shoes.

He walks me to his car and opens the door.

Two seconds later, I hear him pop the trunk.

“Here,” he says, handing me a sweatshirt. “I always keep a spare, just in case.” He closes the door and leans against it, his back against the window.

I think I can trust him not to peep, but I change as fast as I can.

I pull the sweatshirt over my head and a delicious smell envelopes me. My breath catches in my throat and my heart skips a beat. I’ve never experienced this before and I have to fight the urge to hold the shirt to my nose and breathe in deeply.

I knock on the glass to let Kirk know I’m ready and he gets into the car.

“Okay, I’m the Nantucket Newbie. I want to see someplace new...any

suggestions?”

I'm about to reply, when my stomach grumbles violently.

“Shit! I forgot, you didn't get lunch. Right, let's get something inside you,” and he starts the engine.

“It's no problem, really. Besides, my wallet's in my bookbag, my bookbag's in my locker....” I don't add that my wallet is also completely empty.

“You're kidding? If you're going to be my guide, the least I can do is offer you lunch. So, where's the best place, this time of day,” he asks, surprisingly enthusiastic.

He seems determined to thank me for showing him around Nantucket and the way he puts me at ease, kindly overlooking the fact that I don't have any money, without saying anything, makes something give way inside me and I feel my defenses coming down.

“How about The Downyflake. They make the best donuts in the Lower 48, or so they say,” I reply with a smile. “One bite and you're hooked. You drive, I'll tell you where to go.”

I was not expecting Kirk to come back to the car with a haul of donuts so big it could feed the whole island, but I'm immensely grateful to him all the same. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse. I watch as Kirk bites into his first donut, then do the same, sinking my teeth into the delicious softness.

We drive off, heading for the western side of the island, to the tiny community of Madaket, known for its gorse-bordered beach and incredible sunsets.

We stroll along the beach but after less than thirty minutes, a clap of thunder tears through the sky, sending us running back to the car.

“You mind if we stay here a while?” he asks. “I can't go home so early or my parents will know I skipped school.”

The first drops of rain crash against the windshield.

“Sure,” I nod. “I like watching the rain.”

“Piper...” Kirk places a hand on my shoulder. “I'm sorry about yesterday, I feel so ashamed.

I'd give anything to avoid this speech. “I get it, it's not easy to take sides with someone like me. I'm an embarrassment. I told you myself to avoid me, if you didn't want the others treating you like an outcast too,” I try to downplay the situation, too embarrassed by the way things stand.

“I know, but it wasn't fair and I'm sorry. I was wrong, I thought more

about protecting my reputation than doing the right thing,” he replies, and our eyes meet.

“And what’s that, exactly?” I ask, curious to find out.

“I should have told those idiots to shut the fuck up. That only cowards resort to bullying and those who get off on it are just brainless jerks.”

One look at his face and I know he’s not lying.

I glance away, it’s hard to maintain eye contact.

Now that I’m no longer blinded by anger, it’s difficult not to notice how gorgeous he is, or try and ignore the pounding of my heart because I, Piper Hooper, the town crazy’s daughter, am sitting in a car with a boy for the first time ever - and not just any boy.

It’s Kirk Jenkin, the most beautiful thing I ever laid eyes on.

I swallow, trying to think of something to say. “I don’t know if we can be friends, honestly. Maybe yesterday afternoon I was expecting too much...”

“No, you weren’t, and I was wrong. Those guys are total jerks,” he interrupts.

“I don’t mean just that. Okay, so the thing with my mom is complicated, you saw what she’s like, but hanging with me will do neither of us any good.” *Call me Piper Obvious!*

“Piper...it’s nothing new for me, believe me, I’ve seen it all before, and you don’t know how many times,” he sighs.

There’s a sadness in his eyes. He’s not saying it to make fun of me.

“But...your parents, they seem...normal,” I point out.

“I don’t mean my parents,” he replies bluntly.

There’s pain in his voice. It’s not hard to recognize. I’ve heard it all too often in my own voice. It happens when I’m speaking with Tracee, the only person I ever confide in.

“Melody,” he says, his voice cracking. “Someone I cared about a lot, she OD’d. Heroin. I know your mother doesn’t shoot up, but all addicts have pretty much the same M.O.”

I want to ask him about this Melody. Who she was, what she meant to him. Was she his girlfriend? But I daren’t. I know how he feels and I understand the enormous effort it takes to talk about it.

“Sorry for your loss,” I reply, putting a hand on his arm.

“I’m just telling you that to let you know you’re not alone. You have nothing to be ashamed of, not with me. I know what it’s like when someone you love hits rock bottom, you’re helpless...” he replies, placing a hand over

mine.

A shiver runs up my spine. I feel myself blush and want to pull my hand away but then I'd ruin the moment, so I leave it where it is.

"Piper, what happened with your mom? How did she end up like this?" he asks gently.

I usually clam up when people ask, but not this time, not after what he just told me. I know now he's not trying to make fun of me.

"Some time last summer, my dad left. He met someone else, you know how it is..." I begin.

Kirk sits silently, waiting for me to go on.

I take a deep breath and let it all out. "My mom had no idea, until he told her. One moment he was her husband, the next he was a total stranger, packing up and moving to Boston. Apparently, he'd met this woman at some conference..." I snort, bitterly.

"I'm sorry..." he whispers, like everyone else, not knowing quite what to say.

"My mom fell into a deep depression, which she just can't climb out of. She started on antidepressants, there were days when she couldn't get out of bed, she'd sob and cry, until she cried herself to sleep. I didn't think things could get any worse, but I was wrong. When her doctor realized she was abusing the pills, he stopped prescribing them and gave her a mild herbal preparation instead. Told her they'd be good for her nerves. I figured she'd soon bounce back, but those pills were a crutch. She quit seeing him, and found another way to get hold of them...it's just that, when she's on the downers, she's like a zombie, she doesn't leave her room for days. But it's worse when she's on the other shit. I don't know what she takes, but they make her hyper. She's like this stupid little girl who only thinks of going out and having fun." I say, nervously picking at the cuff of the sweatshirt with my free hand.

"That's why those assholes at school treat you so bad? What the hell is wrong with them? Your mother's sick and they bully you?" he asks angrily.

"Not exactly. She got in with the wrong crowd. Guys. Lots of them. Some were visitors, some she met through her dealer and junkie friends – and some were dads of the kids from school... That's why they hate me. Despite the depression and the pills, my mom is still beautiful and picking up men has never been a problem. She hits the bars in Nantucket then Wade has to drag her home at all hours of the night, and day. Then we fight because I tell her

not to go into town, to quit dating losers, who think that because some hot woman lets them screw her for a few pills, they've won the jackpot. Then the yelling starts. She says me and Wade are jealous, that we're draining her, sucking what's left of her youth out of her, that she deserves to have fun after throwing her life away on our bastard father and taking care of us. And that, is my life..." I shrug.

"I'm so sorry."

Then he does something totally unexpected. He hugs me.

Kirk Jenkin is hugging me! My face is pressed tight against his chest, and I'm enveloped by the same heady scent I smelled when I pulled on his sweatshirt.

His hand is on my back, softly stroking it and, though I hardly know him and I keep telling myself not to trust him, the feeling of warmth and safety he transmits is like nothing I've ever felt before.

We sit in silence for a long time, soothed by the sound of the rain splashing against the windshield, two wounded souls with a shared pain that only those who have been there can understand.

When Kirk lets go, I'm so embarrassed I don't know where to look. He knows exactly what to say, however. "Look at me, huh? Now you can go back to school and tell everyone what a cry-baby I am!" he jokes, starting the car.

"I'd never do that," I shake my head earnestly.

"I know," he whispers.

It's dark now. The rain shows no sign of stopping and we drive home, wrapped in a complicit silence, as if we both need to metabolize what just happened.

He pulls up outside my house. "Friends?" he asks, holding out his hand.

I squeeze it. "Friends," I nod.

From the way he looks at me, I'm sure he just showed me the real Kirk.

"Thanks for today. For everything..."

"My pleasure," he grins.

I open the door, climb out of the car, give him a quick wave and head toward my house.

"Hey, Piper," he calls. I turn. "Look," he points to the sky. "The rain stopped."

I glance up. The wind has blown away the clouds.

"How many stars do you think are up there?" he asks, leaning out the

driver's side window.

Last time he said it, it felt silly, but now I realize it's cute. "A million?" I reply with a shrug.

"I don't know. What do you say we sit a while and count them together?" he says, flashing a broad smile.

"Maybe someday we'll find the answer."

"Together with a whole load of others...Night, Piper."

He drives off, leaving me with a strange feeling of excitement mixed with happiness.

Chapter 13



I pick up Piper's bike and security chain from beside the dumpster with a million questions buzzing in my head. First of all: Who could have done this to her? It reminds me too much of that time when we were kids.

Her brother had gotten himself mixed up with a drugs ring: he'd pissed off one of the local dealers, who'd decided to take his revenge on what he thought was Wade's bicycle.

When Piper saw it, she immediately assumed it was Vicky and I decided it was better to let her believe that. I wanted to protect her, she had enough problems already with her mother, she didn't need to worry about that loser brother of hers too.

And it's just happened again. I'm angry with Piper and the way things turned out between us, but I can't help worrying about her.

Old habits are hard to break, I guess, I think on my way back to the bungalow.

That's not all, however. The conversation we just had bothers me. It seems some of my convictions about her are crumbling a little.

The shocked reaction to my words was too powerful not to be real. Piper wasn't faking it. And Tracee looked just as shocked as she did, and that doesn't quite fit with what I've been told.

I was convinced she'd been leading me on, using me for my money, but her reaction just now tells me she knew nothing about me paying off Wade's drug debts to keep his associates away from his family.

Doubt is starting to undermine my certainties and I have the niggling suspicion that we need to clear up certain issues.

I'm so confused right now, a little manual labor might help clear my mind. I fixed her bike once, I can fix it again.

It's not long however, before the guys gather round, firing questions.

"Where'd you get that piece of junk?" Eric asks first.

"It's a friend's. Someone did her dirty," I say, investigating the damage.

"Since when have you been into repairing bikes?" This time it's Denys.

"Since someone fucked up Piper's," I huff. "Don't you guys have anything else to do?"

"Who's Piper?" Jaxon asks.

"Whoa!" Eric exclaims. "I know! It's the chick from housekeeping. She was in the pub the other night. But didn't you say you wouldn't even tip her a cent?"

"I thought you were too busy working on your next fuck to remember conversations word for word! Now you have total recall?"

"Ooh, touchy!" Jaxon laughs.

"Listen, Piper's pretty complicated but back when I lived here, we were best friends and I want to help her out, okay? You know I like fixing things."

"If you need to buy spare parts or anything, mate, I'll come with," Sherman, who so far has remained in silence, offers.

"Thank you, Sherman. That's very kind of you!"

A few minutes later, we're in the car heading for Nantucket Town. If my memory serves me well, I know exactly where to go.

"You okay?" I ask Sherman. He's not been his usual self for days.

"Mmm...not really," he admits, shaking his head.

"What's wrong?" I ask, though I've already guessed the answer.

“I think you were the only one who ever talked sense about my relationship with Laetitia,” he sighs.

“You know Eric...he thinks with his dick,” I shrug.

“I don’t know what to do. On a good day, it’s fun. With Laetitia, I mean, but then she turns into a harpy, screeching like a bloody banshee, like that time we had the Denys Debacle... She couldn’t understand why I refused to take sides against him. I swear, I was this far from sending her arse packing. She drove me berserk and, you know what, mate? I feel much better since she left. It’s just that now I’m feeling a little guilty,” he continues. “Sometimes I think I’m incapable of feeling anything for anyone.”

“Cut her loose, dude,” I suggest. “It’s not you, it’s her...”

“I know, but she’s back in New York and we’ve been together a while and I can’t dump her long-distance, it’s not right,” he explains. “When we get back, when the album’s ready, I’ll break it to her, tell her we’re just not meant to be. Besides, the fallout could be brutal...”

“Fallout? What do you mean?” I’m confused.

“Laetitia has a lot of followers. A lot. If I dump her now, she’ll head straight to the Gram and TikTok and slag me off. Then I’d have to defend myself and we’d end up in a social media ping pong loop. Gordon would blow a gasket...my mental health would go out of the window, so for now, it’s better to focus on music.”

“Yeah, I hadn’t considered that but, hey, you can’t say you don’t think of Gordo’s health!”

“Altruist, that’s me. And you? What’s with this Piper?” he asks curiously. “I mean, it’s usually the girls chasing the rock stars, not the other way round.”

“What a sad little cliché that is, Sherm,” I turn to look at him. “Sure, we’re famous, but we’re still people like everyone else, and Piper meant a lot to me.”

“Mate, I’m pulling your leg. It’s obvious there was something between you, but I’ve known you for years and, all this time, you never mentioned her.”

“I hadn’t heard from her since I left here,” I explain, without going into detail.

“And, if I may, if she was so important, how come you never heard anything from her?”

What is this? The third degree? “Long story...and we’re here,” I cut short.

Bikes are pretty popular on the island so the shop is still there. I get everything I need and head back to the car.

As soon as I get in, however, Sherman pounces.

“So, this long story...?”

“Ever heard the word *private*, Sherm?” I snap, making it clear that the subject is closed.

“I get it.” He sighs, finally deciding to let it drop. “I just hope she appreciates what you’re doing.”

After dinner, I take advantage of the bungalow’s outdoor lighting to work on Piper’s bike. I like working with my hands and I love fixing things. I started a long time ago, soon after Melody died.

Melody, a perfect musical name for someone who loved music so much.

One day, not long after her death, I came across her guitar and noticed all the strings were broken.

I couldn’t leave it like that, it hurt to see it in that condition, so I decided to fix it.

Until then I’d never cared much about music, I was too busy playing water polo or hanging with my friends, but I did a little research on how to restring guitars, bought what I needed, did what I had to do - and the magic happened.

When things got really bad, when her loss was too much to bear and I locked myself away refusing to go out, my love of music was born.

I taught myself to play her guitar and, not only that, along the way I discovered that I have a natural talent for inventing tunes and writing them down.

When it’s time to stop for the day, I still haven’t finished, so I carry her bike inside my bungalow and prop it against the wall.

Staring down at it, however, the guilt hits me.

The way I’ve treated Piper since I got here sickens me. I still want to take care of her, almost as much as I did all those years ago, to do something that brings us closer, that helps me work out the confusion in my head, because it feels like I don’t understand anything anymore and I’m struggling to erase the image I’ve had of her since I left here.

But then something else occurs to me...

I want to surprise her, give the bike back to her, all nice and shiny and (almost) new, but tomorrow she’ll be back to fix my room and she’ll see it. So, thinking somehow it will solve my problem, I decide to hang the Do Not

Disturb sign on the door when I leave, that way she'll skip my bungalow and move on to the next one.

Rehearsals are going well. We've finished Denys's song and he seems pleased with the results, so now we're working on the other pieces.

The only one who seems a little dissatisfied is Sherman, who wants to replace the electronic keyboard on one of the songs with a classical piano, but Jaxon says we don't have any suitable pieces and, ask me, he's right.

I get the idea Sherman would like to try something a little darker, but it's not our style and I hope Jaxon's suggestions don't leave him too frustrated, musically speaking.

Jaxon, who's always incredibly open to any proposals we make, suggested he work on something of his own, a solo project, once we're done promoting the new album and things calm down a little. Once again, I have to agree with Jaxon. It sounds like an excellent idea.

I get back to my bungalow, relieved to see no one moved the sign from the door and that my room is just as I left it this morning, and quickly start work on Piper's bike.

When I'm done, I drop the lock in the basket so I don't forget it, and decide to take it over to hers.

When I get there, however, the house is in darkness.

I knock, but there's no answer.

Where's Wade? What about her mother?

I think about taking it back to the resort and letting her find it tomorrow but then I remember something...

When we were kids, there was one place where Piper loved to hang out in the evening. It was her safe place. I don't know what makes me think I'll find her there, but I decide to give it a try.

On the way over, since the sea air has made me hungry again, I stop off for takeout - nothing fancy, just fish and chips, but it's something to fill the gap and, if I'm wrong and Piper's not there, it means I get to eat hers too!

Nantucket Light is a lighthouse located on the northernmost tip of the island. Built on a thin strip of land where the currents of the Atlantic Ocean and Nantucket Sound meet, it's a wonderfully enchanting place to spend a summer evening, but when the season changes and the winds start to blow, it's not exactly the best place to be.

Plus, we had a storm yesterday and the temperatures dropped considerably.

Nevertheless, I keep on pedalling, increasingly convinced that I'll find Piper there and, the more I pedal, the more the memories, which until a few weeks ago had faded over time, come flooding back - and they're as vivid as if no time at all has passed...

Chapter 14



Spring 2009

Piper opens the door, grinning enthusiastically.

I know I'm going to disappoint her, but there's nothing I can do.

"I can't wait to see the surfers at Madaket Beach," she gushes excitedly. "You think I can learn too?"

"I'm sorry, Piper," I hold up my hands. "I can't make it, not today anyway."

Her face darkens. "Who is it? Who's the lucky girl?" she asks, hands on hips. "Violet? Kimberley?"

"Piper..." I'm buying time because I still haven't come up with a decent

excuse.

“I heard Violet put up posters in the hallway about the size of your...what are we calling it? *Manhood?* Classy!” she curls her lips in disgust.

“Any publicity is good publicity,” I joke, sounding like a jerk.

“Really, Kirk. Have you heard yourself? Don’t tell me it’s Jasmine...she failed her history test last week, again. When the teacher told her it was the second time this semester, all she could say was, *Well, I’m going to be famous anyway!* What? Famous for being dumb as a box of hair? See how stupid she is?”

“Well, we don’t actually talk much history when we’re together...”

“And Kimberly always wears low-cut shirts whenever that creep Smith teaches class. Every time he asks her a question, she leans forward and flashes the goods...” she continues, listing the various ‘talents’ of my conquests.

“Good to know. That way I won’t feel guilty when I dump her. Being cheated on with Mr Smith the history teacher, not good for the ego,” I’m still cracking jokes, though the truth is, I don’t give a damn about those girls - Piper doesn’t know that, however.

“Whatever,” she huffs, crossing her arms tight across her chest.

“Some other afternoon, I promise,” I wink.

“Sure...that’s if you don’t come down with the clap or something first,” she sneers. “Bye, Kirk,” (which sounds more like a Fuck you, Kirk!) and she closes the door.

I take a deep breath. I know she’s hurt, but I had to do it. I had to lie.

I’d rather she think I stood her up so I can screw one of the girls from school than have her find out the awful the truth.

I get on my bike and head for Nantucket Town, in the direction of the port and the most disreputable bar* on the whole island.

There isn’t much crime on the island but, thanks to certain elements who come here on vacation, there is a drugs problem, and the port area is always buzzing with people looking to score. I know Wade’s often here, trying to persuade his mother to go home with him, and it’s because of her that he started hanging with some of the more unsavory characters.

The other day, while I was waiting for Piper after swim practice, I witnessed something I didn’t like at all. Behind the pool building, far from prying eyes and convinced no one could see them, Wade was deep in conversation with some creep who had ‘pusher’ written all over.

First there was The Bike Incident, then what I saw behind the pool, now this - Wade called me, practically begging me to come meet him. He sounded like he was freaking out and God only knows what I'm going to find.

I get to the bar and immediately recognize the creep from behind the pool, strutting like a rooster, surrounded by the biggest freak show on Nantucket.

I can't see Wade, but I decide to say something anyway.

As I approach, the group of human trash turns and stares at me belligerently.

"I'm here for Wade Hooper," I say coolly.

"About time. We were beginning to think no one cared about the little freak," Rooster says, leading me round the back of the bar.

Crouched on the ground, his clothes torn and battered, is Wade. Looming over him, like some biker security guard, is another member of the gang.

My first thought is, *He needs a shower, or ten!*

"Okay, Pocket Rocket, you can go," Rooster nods, waving his hand. "I got this."

Pocket Rocket? What the hell kind of nickname is that?

"His pills send you into orbit," Rooster explains when he sees my expression.

"Fascinating..." I nod sarcastically.

"Watch the mouth, kid. Your friend here owes me five Cs," he sneers, flexing his muscles and looking even more threatening.

"Five C...? Five hundred dollars?" The words almost choke me.

"Yup, plus he promised to off load a nice amount of Molly at that school of yours," the pusher continues. "And we're still waiting..."

"And if we don't pay?" I try.

"Let's say, I know where Wade lives, and that *thing* with the bike was just for starters," he replies, easing the muscles in his neck.

That confirms my suspicions: Vicky has nothing to do with any of this.

Thank God I have my own money. My parents opened a bank account for me - basically, it's my college fund, but I can access it when I want, without exaggerating, obviously.

I inform Rooster that I'll be back with his money ASAP.

"We're done now," I inform him, handing the money over. "You've got what he owed you. Wade's done dealing for you," I continue, making myself clear.

"You're not the boss of me, bitch!" Rooster growls, moving in closer,

puffing out his chest.

“Take the money while it’s on the table. One thing though, I never want to see you near him, ever again, and if I catch you sniffing around his house or his sister, I swear, it’ll be the last thing you do,” I threaten.

He bursts out laughing. “Some bratty rich kid still in high school thinks he can give orders - to me?” He immediately pulls back his arm, ready to land a punch.

Unfortunately for him, I’m expecting it. It’s not the first time I’ve found myself in situations like this. I grab his wrist and twist it behind his back.

Snorting like a bull, he strains, trying to break free, but my grip is too tight. “His old lady’s always down here, trying to score. I told Wade if he offloaded some stuff for me, I’d give her a couple freebies,” he says.

I lean in close to his ear. “Forget it...” I hiss.

“Come on, man. He and that sister of his are still in school, they can help out with...product distribution...she’s on the swim team, right? Always someone looking to enhance their performance. Look at them, they don’t have two cents to rub together...I’d give them a cut...”

When I understand his intentions toward Piper, I lose it.

Still twisting his arm behind his back, I push him against the wall, slamming his face hard.

“Fuck! You broke my nose,” he groans.

“Take Piper’s name out of your fucking mouth! Say her name one more time and I’ll break your legs too, that should keep you out of circulation for a while. Now...you leave Wade and, above all, Piper, alone. Things are bad enough as it is with their mom without them getting into trouble because of you. Stay away, got it?” I ask, whacking him against the wall again.

“Got it,” he mumbles, surrendering.

“Good.”

When I let him go, he turns, glaring furiously, his hands over his bleeding face.

“I have a lot of friends. I could make you pay for this,” he says, mustering a little of his previous swagger.

I grab him by the lapels of his filthy jacket and lift him until he’s on his tippy-toes and his eyes are level with mine. “Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear...” I look into his eyes and see fear. I go in for the kill. “I were you, I’d get my sorry ass home, stat. Or do you want me to tell that freak show out front that you’re only capable of playing the hard man with kids and that a

teenager just handed you your ass?”

His eyes widen in panic. He knows that if I did, he'd be a laughing stock and no one would ever take him seriously again.

“You forget all about the Hoopers, and I'll forget about you. End of. We good?”

When he nods, I let him back down then take Wade by the arm and drag him away.

“Thanks, dude,” he says once we're alone.

“What the fuck were you thinking, Wade?” I ask, my finger jabbing his chest. “You really want to drag Piper into your mess?”

“It was Bazooka's idea,” he whines. Another stupid pusher with a stupid nickname.

Typical junkie behavior, unable to admit responsibility, it's always someone else's fault.

If he's already at that stage, then the situation is worse than I thought.

“You think I care whose idea it was, Wade. She's your sister, she's a kid. You should take care of her.

“I'm lucky if I can take care of myself, dude,” he winces.

“Look, if you want to be up to your neck in shit, that's your business, okay, just don't drag Piper into it. She has a future in swimming, she has a chance to be someone and leave this squalor behind. I won't let you ruin her life and, as you just saw, you don't want to get on the wrong side of me,” I explain, hoping I get through to him.

“S-s...ure, Kirk,” he stammers. “I...I'll do my best.”

I already know they're just hollow words.

I climb on my bike, but he stops me.

“What? You're gonna leaving me here?” He sounds like a four-year-old.

“Wade, I lied to your sister to come save your ass. She can't know anything about this, I want her out of it. If she sees me arrive with you, she's going to ask questions. Just keep your mouth shut,” I threaten before setting off on my bike.

I get home and go straight to my room to study but, towards evening, unfortunately, I hear voices coming from Piper's house.

Sounds like her mom's having a bad day.

I'm sorry, but her mother is a total crack brain. I get she feels bad because her husband left her, but what about her kids? She just ignores them.

She's so pumped full of pills she's lost touch with reality...and she's

dangerous!

I watch as a sports car pulls up in front of the house.

Piper's mom comes out. She's dressed like a high class hooker and already unsteady on her feet.

Piper runs out after her. She tries to stop her, begging her not to go, but her mother lashes out, shoving her to the ground, and my first instinct is to go over there and say something.

Before I can move, the woman gets into the car. Piper stays on the ground a couple of seconds more, then gets to her feet and runs at breakneck speed in the direction of the lighthouse.

It's dark out now, and pretty cold.

I grab a blanket and, as I go rushing towards the front door, I catch my mother watching me. She says nothing, the look in her eyes is enough.

I tuck the blanket under my arm and hit the ground running.

I find Piper curled in a fetal position at the foot of the lighthouse, her knees drawn up to her chest, sobbing.

I crouch down and wrap the blanket around her shoulders.

She turns her head, staring up at me, her green eyes filled with tears.

"How many stars do you think are up there?" I ask, pointing at the sky.

"A million?" she replies, just as I expected.

"I don't know. What do you say we sit a while and count them together?"

She smiles sadly and nestles in my arms. I can literally feel the misery emanating from her body. "Do you think she'll ever quit?" she asks, her face pressed against my chest, her voice muffled. "The drugs, the sleeping around."

"I don't know, Star Girl. I wish I did. I wish I could tell you everything will be fine and one day all this will be over, but I can't," I reply sincerely.

"Thanks," she sighs.

"For what?"

"For being here. For being honest. Sometimes it would be nice to hear that the old mom, who loved me, took care of me, will be back but it's just an illusion," Piper whispers, her fingers clutching at my sweatshirt.

I tighten my arms around her, as if it's going to help, make her feel better in some way, holding her as she sobs for the mother she lost and wishes would come back.

I don't know why. I promised I'd never let anyone else hear it, but with her it feels so natural. Without thinking, I put my mouth close to her ear and start

humming the song I wrote on Melody's guitar.

Piper continues to cry, then suddenly seems to calm down. She lifts her face to mine, her eyes puffy and swollen, and the look in her eyes, together with the scent of her hair blowing in the salty breeze, makes my stomach clench like never before.

I ignore the strange feeling and continue singing, determined to make it to the end.

When I stop she blinks in amazement.

"That's beautiful, Kirk. I've never heard it before."

"That's because I wrote it, just before we moved here," I admit.

"What?" she asks, her eyes wide.

And I tell her how I fixed Melody's guitar and how, when I started to feel bad, music became my safe place.

"So, you're not only a great singer, you also write music and play an instrument?" she asks, admiration in her eyes.

"It's nothing special, really."

"Rubbish! You're really good. You have an amazing voice. Why don't you sign up for music classes, that way you can be a rockstar!" She's more animated now.

"Me? A rockstar? No, it takes more than talent for that, Star Girl. It's just a hobby, no one else is ever going to hear me sing," I brush it off, shaking my head.

"That's a shame, because I loved it," she glances down again.

"I can sing it again, if you want..." I ask, turning her face to look at me. She nods. "Oki doki, Piper Hooper. You're the only person who'll ever hear me sing. You know that? I'll do it just for you, no one else, and whenever you want," I promise.

"Really?"

"Really!" And I start over.

* Unlike the other places mentioned, the bar does not exist. It was invented for purely narrative purposes, as were Wade's drug trafficking activities, to further the storyline.

Chapter 15



The doctor from rehab called again. Wade hasn't turned up, obviously, so they're packing up his things and sending them on. I've no idea where he could be. I tried talking to the Chief of Police. He said he'd ask around, but I already know how it's going to end. After all, this is my brother we're talking about.

It feels like the walls of this house are closing in on me and I wonder what the hell I'm doing here, if this is all my life will ever be.

I went from running after my mom, trying to keep her off those damn pills, to running after Wade, taking care of him and trying to keep him clean.

I'm twenty-six and I feel like an old woman - and there's a good chance that I'll spend the rest of my life cleaning other people's shit and spending

the evenings alone in this house.

And that's if I can pay the mortgage. The enormity of such a huge debt hanging over me is overwhelming, but what choice did I have? Someone had to help Wade and rehabs don't come cheap. On top of that, I have my student loan to pay off, for a degree I've never used.

It was a stupid idea anyway.

Stupid and expensive.

Tracee still has the nerve to suggest I put myself out there. I know she means well, that's why I don't let it get to me. She's my best friend, but her life is...normal.

Her parents put money aside for her college fund, they paid for her wedding, helped her and her husband buy their first house.

Until you've crossed the hellscape that is my life, until you've gotten to the end of the week wondering if you have enough money left for even the most basic grocery shopping, until you spend nights worrying if you'll have money to pay the bills or you'll be spending the winter shivering in an unheated home, you have no idea what I go through.

I'm on a real downer today!

And this has nothing to do with what you saw when you went to clean Kirk's bungalow, does it? my conscience teases.

Okay - so when I went got to Kirk's bungalow, there was a 'Do Not Disturb' sign hanging on the door.

Which means there was someone inside and, as I'd already seen him through the window of another bungalow, rehearsing with the others, I knew it wasn't Kirk.

Who cares? He can sleep with whomever he chooses.

As if lying to myself is really going to help!

It's probably some girl he met last night, while I was staring out at the rain, fretting, or perhaps some beautiful supermodel over from the mainland.

For all I know, he has a serious girlfriend.

Just a few of the questions I've spent the day trying, and failing, to avoid.

When I got home from work, all I wanted to do was eat and fall into bed, but then the doctor called and I lost my appetite.

I can't stay in this house a moment longer, not tonight.

I open the door and, as usual, glance over at the place where I leave my bike, but it's not there, obviously. Someone had the great idea of trashing it.

It's cold tonight. After yesterday's storm, the temperatures dropped and I

know I should go back inside, but...

Just the thought suffocates me so, instinctively I begin to run, in the direction of my safe place, the place where I used to hide as a kid, when I was sad, unhappy, or lonely - the lighthouse.

I've always loved the Coskata-Coatue Wildlife Refuge, with its windswept dunes, heather and beach grass, its forests of red cedar and sea oak, but there's one place I love more. Great Point Light, officially known as Nantucket Light.

I sit, staring out to sea, hugging my knees to my chest against the frigid wind, breathing in the salty air.

The moon is obscured by cloud cover but I already feel better, almost at peace.

Suddenly I feel something warm around my shoulders, followed by the words, "How many stars do you think are up there?"

"A million?" The words come to me so quickly, so automatically, you'd never know it's been ten years since I last said them.

"I don't know, what do you say we sit a while and count them together?"

Is it possible to recognize the scent of someone's skin, even after ten years?

The scent that enveloped me when Kirk placed his jacket over my shoulders took me right back and, for a couple of seconds, it's hard to remember we're in the present.

I look up at him in silence.

How did he know where to find me after all these years?

"It's too cloudy, no stars around," I reply, changing the script.

For a fleeting moment Kirk looks sad, then says, "They're there, it's just harder to see them but, believe me, they're there."

My stupid heart starts pounding, like when I was sixteen. However, my mind quickly steps in to remind me that my body is no longer that of a teenager and that there'll never be anyone else in my life.

Despite that, I still feel like I did when I was a kid.

That's love for you, Piper. An evil villain disguised as Cupid. He's the one who keeps you hanging on to memories you should have let go of years ago, I tell myself, shivering - and not from the cold.

That's why, after ten long years, I've never been able to break free. The person who caused me the greatest unhappiness is also the one who made me the happiest.

“What aren’t you telling me, Piper?” he has the nerve to ask, as if he cares. I swear, I could slap him into next week.

“You used to understand even my silences. Now, evidently, you don’t, so I guess you don’t deserve an answer.”

“Okay, but I’m hungry, I figured you might be too...” and he places a takeout bag at my feet.

He opens his and the smell of delicious fried food tickles my nostrils: fish & chips.

I’m about to turn him down, tell him I already ate, but my growling stomach gets the better of me.

I can’t bite my tongue and ignore him, however. “I thought you’d have better things to do than waste your time with me.”

“There’s something better than eating the best fish and chips on the island with you?” he asks, playing coy.

“I don’t know - how about hanging with the girl you were with last night. It’s not very cool, flirting with another girl the very next day,” I point out, just in case he thinks I’m stupid.

“The girl I was with last night...” he echoes, clearly confused.

“You think I’m dumb? In case it slipped your mind, I’m housekeeping, I clean your rooms in the morning. I saw the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the door, so quit making fun of me.”

Incredibly, he bursts out laughing.

“What the fuck’s so funny?” I snap.

“Are you jealous?” he has the nerve to ask.

“Jealous? I just don’t like guys who bed one girl one night, then go after another the next day. Then again, I don’t think that has anything to do with you being famous, you’ve always been a player, it’s just that, now I’m older, I can see it better,” I hiss, making to stand up.

He takes hold of my wrist. “Don’t go. Sit, please.” He fixes me with that intense gaze. “Just for a second.”

Then he gets to his feet and disappears behind the lighthouse.

I’m just wondering what he’s up to when he reappears.

“Here’s the hot chick I was keeping in my room. I was fixing it but I didn’t want you to see it until it was ready,” he explains, wheeling my completely refurbished bike towards me. “So I put it in my room and hung the sign on the door.”

Luckily, it’s dark and he can’t see my face burning up.

I've made a complete fool of myself. I don't know what to say or even where to begin to apologize. "You shouldn't have," is all I can say.

"Why? You know I like fixing things," he shrugs, sitting down next to me again.

Yeah, just like you fixed my life before you smashed it into a million pieces. Kirk Jenkin, fixer and destroyer, rolled into one.

"Thanks," I say, despite everything, warning myself not to give in to his charms.

"You're welcome. Besides, me and her, we're old friends, I couldn't miss out on the chance to fix her again," he nods, reminding me of another event from our shared past.

As he looks into my eyes I have the feeling the same memories are coming back to him too and a shiver runs up my spine when I remember the confession he made that time.

"Eat up, before it gets cold and all that awesome crispiness turns soggy," he says, pointing to the bag.

As chewing is an activity that prevents you from talking, I'm more than happy to oblige.

However, there's such a deep, familiar feeling to eating together that I feel almost uncomfortable.

Kirk and I, staring out at the horizon in silence, eating takeout. How many times have we done that together?

And just as I'm trying to clear my mind of these thoughts, as I try to swallow and push them away, Kirk starts humming. Not just any song, but the one he wrote all those years ago and that I haven't heard since.

The one with the words about stars that, whenever I was sad, he'd whisper in my ear to make me feel better and, just like then, my mood improves. Just the other day, in the parking lot when I saw my bike, I was humming it to keep the fear away, and I listen in silence as the salty smell of the air mingles with Kirk's scent.

When he finishes, I sit in silence, forcing myself not to speak, when I'm dying to ask if he ever sang it for anyone else.

There's no point clinging to certain memories, I'm only hurting myself.

"Still works, I see," he says, breaking the silence.

"Hmm?" I ask, confused.

"The song...as I was singing it, you were smiling."

"No I wasn't!" I deny, my arms hugging my chest protectively.

“Yes, you were,” he insists.

“It’s getting late, I better get to bed. I’m up at six.” I get to my feet.

So does Kirk.

I slip his jacket from around my shoulders and hand it back.

“Keep it, it’s chilly. Give it back tomorrow,” he shakes his head, making no attempt to accept it.

I’m about to insist, but I can’t wait to get out of there, and dropping it off at his bungalow tomorrow morning seems easier than standing around discussing it.

Or is it because you like being enveloped by his scent?

Like I always do, I pull my keyring from my bag, but I’m so nervous it slips from my hands and falls on the ground.

“You still have it!” Kirk exclaims as he gathers the unicorn keyring he gave me a lifetime ago.

“It’s a keyring for the chain, not some precious treasure I’ve spent years wondering if I’d ever be able to replace,” I reply rudely.

Liar! My conscience, even ruder.

I’ve tried to throw it away over the years, but I can’t.

“And the stars?” I know instantly he means my earrings.

“I’ve no idea...I probably lost them,” I lie shamelessly.

They’re actually in a little box in my bedroom. I took them off the day he left and never wore them since, I just couldn’t bear to get rid of them.

Star Girl...that was his nickname for me...

I can’t think about that now, it brings back too many memories, too many feelings.

“Piper,” he touches my arm. “Does this bike thing have anything to do with Wade?”

“How would I know? I didn’t know it had anything to do with Wade the first time it happened, plus, I told you already, the kids round here get bored, they look for fun, anywhere they can find it,” I lie, worried that he might decide to investigate - and find out what happened to me.

I feel like telling him to leave me the hell alone, for the way he’s been acting since he got here and also the way he behaved in the past, but knowing he helped Wade, even though it was so long ago, makes me feel stupidly grateful. Besides, he just fixed my bike.

“I heard Tracee the other day though, she suspected it was something more serious.”

“Sometimes she talks crazy,” I snap.

“She’s your best friend and there was no way she was talking crazy.”

Will he ever drop it?

“Tracee watches Criminal Minds on a loop, that should give you an idea. Kirk, stop worrying about my life. Like I said, you don’t live on Nantucket anymore, it has nothing to do with you, you’re not the one who has to put the pieces together. I’ve been doing it on my own, for a long time.”

I climb onto my bike and pedal away.

I can’t tell him what happened, because that would mean him finding out what condition I’m in and, quite honestly, I’d rather live with the memory of what we had than have him look at me with pity or, even worse, disgust.

Chapter 16



Spring 2009

Kirk and I have been friends for some time now. Some things in my life have changed. I have someone to count on now, even if...

I'm aware that when I see him my heart beats that bit faster, that when he holds me under the stars I feel like I'm on fire, that when he shows up at my door, every time, I have to fight the urge to throw my arms around his neck and...more and more, I find myself thinking thoughts I never thought before. I was never one to fantasize about guys but, late at night, when I'm in bed, it's hard to fall asleep because my mind is too busy wondering what it would be

like to kiss him, and how it would feel if he liked me and...

No! I scold myself, closing my locker. He's the first good thing to happen to me in a long time, I can't throw that away by falling in love with him. His friendship is enough.

I quickly head for the cafeteria - once I start daydreaming, I lose track of time and I'm running late.

I spot Kirk immediately – he's at his usual table and, as usual, he's surrounded by the BBC, the Brainless Bimbo Club, whose membership seems to grow week after week.

I hate them and, when I see him like this, I hate him too.

How can he even stand being around them? The conversation at that table is a total lip-glossed yawn fest.

I get my lunch and am about to join Tracee at our usual table, when suddenly someone slips my tray from my hands.

Vicky Sandoval.

I gawp at her, confused.

"Let me take that. You're our guest today," she simpers, leading me briskly toward the table she always shares with Sharla, Olyvia and May. "Take a seat." With a flourish she pulls out a chair while the other girls flash friendly smiles.

I have absolutely no idea what the hell is going on.

They usually avoid me like the plague and this sudden kindness leaves me shocked. I can't even find the words to refuse, it's like my brain short-circuited and, in spite of myself, I find myself sitting down.

Then I notice Tracee staring at me in amazement. All I can do is shrug.

"Look at us, ladies who lunch," Vicky exclaims cheerfully.

"And you know what that means..." Sharla announces. "H.G.G."

"Hot Guy Gossip," Olyvia explains.

"Okay," I nod, picking up my fork.

But then I notice that they aren't eating and put it back down again. I feel embarrassed, whatever I do, and figure it's better not to do anything.

For a while, I try to follow their conversation, nodding distractedly every now and then because I actually have zero interest.

I'm only interested in Kirk and I have no intention of talking about him.

I mean, it's nice they're not trying to humiliate me, but I'm not stupid. I'd never talk about anything as precious as Kirk with them. I don't know them, they're not Tracee.

What if they made fun of us, started spreading 'gossip'? What if, because of me, they started teasing Kirk, making jokes about how I feel about him?

"Hey!" May snaps her fingers in my face.

"Sorry. I was distracted," I admit.

"I bet you were," Olyvia arches an eyebrow. "Thinking about Beef-Kirk again? You two are always together. Hearing us gush about other guys must be so boring."

What the...?

"Vicky was asking when you're going to fix her up with that brother of yours," Sharla nudges me.

Vicky Sandoval likes Wade? Who knew? I mean, not that he's ugly or anything, but he doesn't have two dimes to rub together and everyone knows Vicky likes her guys loaded.

"Really? You like Wade?" I ask, blinking.

The four girls roar with laughter.

What the hell's so funny?

"Duh...we're talking about Kirk Jenkin," May informs me.

"Kirk's not my brother," I object.

"He kind of is, though," Vicky replies, with a wave of her hand. "He's taken you under his wing, like a good big brother - since he got here, basically."

"We're friends..."

"Exactly. You hang out a lot together, right?"

I nod.

"And he's never hit on you, right?" Sharla asks.

"No." I shake my head.

"He's like a brother, then," May points out. "There's no such thing as male friends, Piper. Guys like Kirk only act like that when they see you as a baby sister, someone to protect, otherwise he would have already made a move."

"Oh, sorry...perhaps that was a bit rude. I mean, would you like him to try something," Vicky asks, blinking innocently.

"No!" I blurt. "Like you said, he's like a brother." I nod hard for emphasis.

"At least you're intelligent enough not to fool yourself," May continues. "So, set him up with Vicky."

"Like you said, when Kirk sees a girl he likes, he makes a move," I glance over at his table. "Who he dates has nothing to do with me, I shouldn't butt in."

The last thing I want to see is Vicky Sandoval, curled around Kirk like an anaconda, with her tongue down his neck. Just the thought gives me the ick. He hasn't actually had any girlfriends yet. I know he sees girls every now and then but, so far, nothing serious...

"Are you trying to say he doesn't like me?" Vicky hisses. Her tone has changed. Bitchy Vicky is back.

"No, I didn't mean that, but Kirk's a guy, plus he's older than us, and he's certainly not shy about making his feelings known. I don't think I should get involved, is all, it's embarrassing," I say, wringing my hands.

"He wastes enough time baby-sitting you, why wouldn't he want to spent time with me? Come on...tell all," Vicky insists.

I can't help it. "He's not my babysitter, he's my friend."

I know I could agree and just walk away, but then if Kirk didn't actually go out with her, if I didn't mention it to him, I'd never hear the end of it from Vicky. I can't promise her something I don't want to do and I can't back out.

"How don't you get it? He comes from a certain background, he's seen the way you live and, for him, you're just a charity case. I don't even know why he bothers, I mean, he could just give you the cash, no?" she hisses furiously.

"She's right." It's May's turn now. "Have you seen yourself? Thrift store hand-me-downs, a butt so big it almost falls out of your swimsuit and, by the way, you're fat. You don't wear makeup, and that hair makes you look like a stupid little kid. All you're missing are the pigtails. You really think someone like Kirk Jenkin is your friend, that he's interested in you? Girl, he feels sorry for you."

"I told you we were wasting our time," Olyvia shakes her head. "I knew she'd never help you out with Kirk, she's knows he'd never look at her again if he got with you."

"She's right," Vicky grabs my chair, almost pulling it out from under me. "I thought you could put in a good word for me but you're useless...byeee."

Like, after all the insults they just fired at me, I was going to stay anyway?

I stand up so quickly my chair tips over, but I don't give a damn. Like I don't give a damn that everyone is watching.

As I run for the door, my eyes meet Kirk's - just for a split second, he's too busy *entertaining* his girls.

I run to my safe place, the bench under the huge oak, my refuge when it all gets too much for me and I need to hide.

I sit there, trying to hold back the tears, remembering all the ridiculous

thoughts I've been having about Kirk. I'm so embarrassed.

It's wrong to think certain thoughts about him.

I was such a fool to think he actually wanted to be my friend. Those stupid girls are right. I am just a charity case, a stray to take in.

My face is buried between my knees and I'm crying like a baby when a hand lightly touches my shoulder.

"Piper, what's wrong?" I recognize Kirk's voice but find it hard to believe he'd leave his fan club to come check on me.

I ignore him.

I don't need his pity.

I hope he'll get bored and leave, but he doesn't.

The old wooden bench creaks as he sits down, then his fingers touch my chin, lifting my face toward him.

"You can't make me talk to you," I sob, trying to turn away, but he won't let me.

"Star Girl, you won't get rid of me that easily."

"Why do you call me that, Kirk?" I ask, caught off guard.

"I figured it suits you, as our favorite hobby is counting the stars together," he winks. "Tell me who pissed you off, and I'll whoop his ass!" he exclaims theatrically.

For a moment I almost smile, then I remember what the girls said and it passes. "Why do you want to be my friend?" I ask bluntly.

"Didn't we go over this already?"

"Just tell me. Is it because you feel bad for me?" I ask, clenching my fists and lowering my eyes.

"Wait? What? Does that have anything to do with why you ran out here? Why you're ignoring me?" he asks, turning my face toward him again.

"Just tell me," I insist, shaking my head.

"I'm guessing it does. I saw who you were sitting with at lunch."

"It has nothing to do with them," I lie, scared that he'll connect everything to Vicky, that he'll say something to her – and make things worse for me.

"I know Vicky well enough to know that she enjoys hurting people," he continues.

"Forget it, pretend I didn't say anything." I push his hands away from my face, but he refuses to let go.

"I want you to tell me why you're so upset and why you're asking such stupid questions."

“Look, I don’t want any trouble with Vicky and if you were to go out with her at any time, then this conversation could be a problem,” I mumble, turning away.

“What? I’ve no intention of ever dating Vicky. Or Olyvia, or May or Sharla, for that matter.”

“Why not? They’re cute AF,” I reply, turning to look at him.

“I know, but they’re also ugly AF on the inside. Now, Star Girl, I want the truth. We’re friends and I trust you, you should trust me, there’s no way I’m going to go running straight to them and rat on you, whatever you tell me. And if you think I would then, that’s a good reason for no longer wanting to be your friend,” Kirk replies, crouching down in front of me.

“I was an idiot. I was so surprised when they invited me to eat with them that I just went along with it...” I mumble.

“You still haven’t answered me.”

I feel myself blush to the roots of my hair. I’m terrified of telling him the truth, because then he’ll know how much I like him. “Vicky...Vicky wanted me to set her up on a date with you. I said I didn’t want to, that it’s not my job to fix you up with anyone and it’s none of my business. It was embarrassing, I told her that if a guy’s interested he’ll make a move, that there’s no need to resort to tricks...” I try to explain how they made me feel, without letting him know how much I care about him.

“Well, it’s true. Guys don’t need tricks like that, if they’re interested, they make a move. So...?” he waits for me to continue.

“When they realized I wasn’t going to help them, they started saying you’re only my friend because you pity me and that they don’t get why you would even want to be seen with me.” *I have to admit, that last part hurt the most.*

“Like I said, ugly on the inside. They’re the perfect fit for each other. They’re incapable of understanding others,” Kirk says looking into my eyes.

“What do you mean?” I ask, hoping he’ll say something to confirm that he doesn’t pity me.

“They can’t see how special you are because they are anything but special. Piper, that first time I came looking for you in the garden was because I was worried about you, but the truth is, I like hanging with you. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be your friend, would I? I mean, I won’t deny it, if you were like Vicky, for example, I would have been worried too, but I wouldn’t have kept on seeing you. There’s not much else to say. I’m your friend because I like

spending time with you, talking with you, otherwise I never would have told you about Melody. Do you really think that if I just felt sorry for you, I would have confided in you like that?" he asks, his eyes drilling into mine.

All I see there is the truth. I believe him.

He has his father's car, so when school finishes, we take a drive around the island and stop off at the beach, then he drives me home.

"Tomorrow is Friday, how about we go to the movies and see 'Confessions of a Shopaholic'. I remember you told me you got the book from the library and it made you laugh," he suggests.

"It was hilarious. Who knew a book could be so funny? There are other books in the series, but the library doesn't stock them. It's a shame, I'd like to see how her story pans out," I shrug.

"That's a yes, then. I'll book two seats online?"

I nod excitedly but don't have time to thank him because the front door of my house flies open.

"Piper, where the fuck have you been? Look at the time!" My mother yells, her hands on her hips. "This house is a mess, you've done nothing all day. Get in here, make yourself useful for once!"

I see Kirk's fingers tighten around the wheel and know exactly what he's thinking. I should, I've stopped him from intervening enough.

All I need is for my mom to shout at him, for his parents to find out and forbid him to see me or, even worse, for Mom to take her anger out on him.

"Please, just forget it," I whisper.

I get out of the car and run home.

"Look at this mess!" My mom grabs me by the arm, dragging me around the house as she points out the piles of dirty dishes and empty beer bottles. "Instead of helping out around here, you're off flirting with dumb boys. Now, move your ass!" she orders.

My mother is always in a terrible mood, for one reason or another, but when she gets like this it means only one thing: one of her 'friends' has stood her up.

"Kids are supposed to help their parents but what the hell use are you? You don't get a dog and bark yourself...you're always wasting time with that kid from next door. If I'd never had you two, if I'd never wasted my youth running after you, maybe your father would still be here. And this is how you repay me? Running about like a tramp all day. Did you go to school at least?" she asks, relentlessly pacing up and down, firing questions at me.

“Of course, I did, Mom,” I reply, dropping empty beer bottles into a trash bag.

“I hope so. When you’re done here, get upstairs and change the sheets. I’m going to watch TV, I’m sick of the sight of you already...” She flops down on the couch I just cleared.

I could tell her that, maybe, as she was home all day, she could have cleaned house already, but I’d be wasting my breath.

I’ve starting locking my door when I’m at school. I’m terrified that when I’m not around she’ll bring someone home and they’ll go through my things.

When I’m done changing the sheets, my mom is asleep in front of the TV, the fridge is empty and there’s still no sign of Wade.

Guess dinner’s off the menu tonight. I’ll try and buy groceries after school tomorrow, I think, writing a note to my mom, asking if she can leave me some money tomorrow morning, and leaving it on the kitchen table.

I’d ask Tracee if I can eat at hers tonight, but if my mom wakes up and finds me gone then, after what happened earlier, she’ll freak out again, big time, and I don’t feel like telling Kirk I haven’t eaten. I know he’d bring something over but...I know we’ve been over this, but I really don’t want him to feel sorry for me.

I go up to my room and make a start on my homework. I have so much to do that I don’t even check Kirk’s bedroom window, which is good because then I’d be tempted to run over and tell him everything. I can’t show up for school without my homework, though. It’s strange but, despite my dysfunctional family, my grades are good and if I want to get out of this shitty situation and make my dream of becoming a swim champion come true, I have to maintain my average, that way I can get on the financial aid program at Harvard, in Boston, where Kirk already has a place. If anything, at least I’ll get away from *her*.



I’m in luck. Next morning there are twenty dollars on the table. It’s not much, but at least I can get the bare essentials.

When we get out of school, Kirk offers to drive me to the supermarket so

we're not late for the movie.

I can't wait to spend the evening with him, he's usually out with some girl on the weekend.

When I get home, however, my plans go right out of the window. My mother is on the couch with a high fever and there's still no sign of Wade.

I don't know what's happened, but I can't leave her alone like this.

I apologize to Kirk, who helps me get her into bed upstairs, and resign myself to spending the night watching over her.

I know she's my mother and I should love her, but there are times when I hate her and this is just one of them.

I should be at the movies with Kirk but, thanks to her, I had to back out. Now he'll be there with one of his randoms, his arms around shoulders that aren't mine...what was he supposed to do anyway? He'd already booked the tickets.

I fight back tears, not knowing if I'm more hurt or more angry.

A sudden knock at the door makes me jump. I'm not expecting anyone, so it's probably Wade, without his keys, as usual.

I open the door to find Kirk standing there. "What are you doing here?" I ask, blinking in surprise.

He hands me a heavy package. I stare at him, then at the package, then at him again.

"Well? You're not going to open it?" he asks.

"Oh, yeah..."

He follows me as I walk over to the table. I untie the bow and carefully remove the paper to reveal a brown cardboard box. I grab the scissors and snip the tape.

I pry open the lid and see five books from the Shopaholic series plus another two by the same author: 'The Undomestic Goddess', and 'Can you Keep a Secret?'

I stare open-mouthed at Kirk.

"You said you wanted to read the other books," he shrugs.

"You shouldn't have," I gasp, staring at my feet in embarrassment.

"Yes, I should. If someone deserves a smile on their face, it's you, and you said those books make you laugh." He puts his fingers under my chin and tilts my face toward him.

My legs go weak. His eyes are so beautiful and expressive and his face is so close...

Sometimes I'm terrified that I'll make some dumb move, like trying to kiss him.

"But...the movie? You had tickets." I ask, easing the tension.

"The movie versions of books are always overrated, anyway. I don't know the story and, as you have to stay home tonight, I figured you could read it to me." He points to the first book. "And I bought food." He waves a bag containing popcorn and bottles of Coke in my face.

"Okay," I nod happily.

We make ourselves comfortable on the couch and I make a start on Becky Bloomwood's financial woes. When I get to the part where she runs out of an interview because she lied about being 'fluent in Finnish' on her resume, we both have tears in our eyes.

I'm laughing so much, I accidentally knock Kirk's Coke over and reach out to catch it before it can land on the rug.

I manage to grab it just before disaster strikes. I breathe a sigh of relief, then realize I've practically spread myself all over Kirk.

His hands are on my waist, holding me, and the look in his eyes makes my breath catch in my throat.

What do I do now? I'm terrified he'll hear my heart pounding out of control.

He raises a hand to stroke my face and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

My breasts are pressed tight against his chest and a strange warmth radiates from my stomach. The butterflies I felt before have gone straight to my head and when Kirk runs his thumb lightly over my lip, I sigh, practically in ecstasy.

His face gets closer and closer until it's hovering over mine.

Is this a dream? I wonder, wishing I had the nerve to pinch myself.

Kirk's other hand squeezes my hip and I stroke the hair at the back of his neck.

I can smell his breath.

Suddenly the door bursts open and I scoot over to the other end of the couch.

"What's going on here?" Wade slurs drunkenly. "You two making out on my couch?"

"We...we were just reading," I stammer awkwardly.

"'course you were," Wade grins sarcastically.

“Wade, come on!” I snort. “It’s Kirk, he’s like another big brother!”

I’m terrified that Kirk will put two and two together and realize how I feel.

Wade rolls his eyes hard and heads for the stairs.

I’m so embarrassed I don’t know where to look.

“Look at the time, it’s gone three,” Kirk announces awkwardly, pointing to his wristwatch. “I should be going...”

“Oh, wow, so late...” I walk him to the door. “Thanks again for the books,” I call when he reaches the driveway.

“You’re welcome. Good night, Piper,” he waves.

I really thought he was going to kiss me? I mentally kick myself as I close the front door.

I feel so embarrassed. I know I’ve been acting strange. I just hope Kirk hasn’t noticed and doesn’t suspect that I have feelings for him. What the hell is wrong with me?

I get into bed, but sleep eludes me. I relive the scene on the couch, over and over, fantasizing about it so much I can even feel Kirk’s mouth on mine and, when I finally fall asleep, he’s the one I dream about.

Chapter 17



The most FAQ? - “Where do you get your ideas?”

I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve heard it but, I’ll let you in on a secret: we have a standard answer that Gordon, our manager, had our publicist write up for us.

It’s sad, I know, but that’s how it is.

It’s always the same story. Gordon says it for our own good. He made us add our own personal twist to it, to pimp it up a bit, but in the end, it’s always the same.

According to him, our fans have to think we spend our days giving birth to ideas and tunes, popping out one hit after another.

He says people have to know that we work just as hard as they do, or they’ll think we’re just pissing our days away and start to hate us.

I don't really see it that way. Even when we're not rehearsing, playing, or in the studio, we still have social events to attend, we still have to do interviews or photo shoots. Sometimes even leaving the house for a stroll in Central Park feels like work – there's always some pap, lurking behind the bushes, waiting to take a shot of you dressed like a total bum, which you know is going to end up in the gossip mags, accompanied by some made-up story.

What I'm trying to say is, you can't create music at the drop of a hat. Especially when there are five heads involved.

Each and every one of us has their moments when we're more creative - whenever we come up with something, it doesn't matter who it is, we usually share it, listen to it as a group, evaluate it and, if everyone is agreed, and only then, we work on building a song around it.

The most creative, obviously, is Jaxon. It's like he has words and music for breakfast every morning. I'm not joking. He's impressive. I'd say after Jaxon, there's Sherman and he's probably more prolific than Jaxon, it's just that he keeps his ideas close to his chest, mostly because his sound is a little moodier than what we're used to. Denys has started expressing himself more, musically speaking - then there's me who, apparently, only taps into his creative vein when he's feeling particularly depressed or overwhelmed then, last but not least, Eric, who tends to add his flair to pieces that have already been written, completing them or enriching them with his solos.

In any case, everything we do is a collaboration between the five of us, and that's exactly why we came up here on retreat.

We go over the edits we already made and decide whether or not to keep them, then sometimes keep the arrangement as is, or work on a new one. What Jaxon cares about most, what we all care about, is that each piece represents us both as artists and as individuals.

Tunes, like lyrics, come from inspiration. They can't be controlled or conjured up at will, they choose when to arrive. Our duty, as artists, is to welcome them, take them on board and transform the emotions they transmit into sounds and words.

Doing this all together, making changes to something we created as a group, letting the inspiration to make adjustments to this or that take us, is like one huge, shared experience. It's almost spiritual.

Years of study don't count...what counts is how good you are at transmitting certain emotions to the public, adding that extra spark that comes

from deep inside, straight from your soul, and which transforms a simple song into something personal, for everyone.

It's not something that can be learned. It can only be achieved with words and tunes that come from within, and only if you strip yourself of all pretense and put your real self into what you do.

Today however, something is off - and it's my fault. I'm distracted. Too distracted.

Jaxon has already mentioned it twice and he's right - the problem is I can't get the questions I have about Piper out of my head.

Putting aside my doubts about the past, and only Piper can help me with those, I need to find out why Tracee looked so scared when she asked Piper if she wanted to sleep over at hers.

'Criminal Minds', my ass! I think, feeling my suspicions grow.

The sight of Piper's bike banged up like that transported me to the dingy backroom of a bar near the docks and Wade's drug dramas. Tracee's anxiety makes me think there's something more serious going on and, knowing Wade's M.O. as well as I do, I dread to think what he's like today. I remember the time I had to go pick him up from some paranoid prepper who lived in the woods near Boston and shudder. He was in hiding, he'd fucked off some big shot drug dealer and, even then, I ended up paying off his debts so Piper wouldn't get hurt.

We make it through to 5pm, then Jaxon suggests we call it a day.

He comes over to me, looking concerned, "Dude, this isn't like you. Everything okay?"

"All good, Jax. I'm just worried about that girl I used to date when I lived here. There's something going on, something I can't figure out, and it's bugging me," I answer sincerely.

"The best thing is to find out what it is and try and solve the problem. I feel for her, honest, I do, but we can't afford another day like today. We came here to work on the album and we need your riffs to be top tier."

I know he's not lecturing me. He's genuinely concerned - that's Jaxon, a rockstar mother hen, but I still feel guilty. I should have tried harder.

So, as I'm now free, I decide to take things up a notch and head straight to the only person who can give me the answers I'm looking for. It's time to pay Tracee Copson a visit.

I did a quick search on AnyWho and got lucky: the phone bill is in her name and I know where she lives: Sesachacha Road, up near Sesachacha

Pond.

As I'd expected, it takes me a little time to find the house. As soon as I see the lights on, upstairs and downstairs, I know I'm not there on a wild goose chase.

I knock and a few seconds later the door is opened by a middle-aged woman who I guess is Tracee's mother, although it's been a long time since I saw her.

"Yes?" she asks, looking suspicious.

"Sorry, to disturb, ma'am, but I'm looking for Tracee Copson," I explain, trying to peek over her shoulder.

"She's feeding the baby," she woman says, crossing her arms.

"My name's Kirk Jenkin, Tracee and I were at school together a few years ago, then I moved..."

"Of course!" She interrupts, slapping her forehead. "The rockstar! My daughter tells me you're here with your group. Bravo!" She steps aside to let me in. "Take a seat, I'll let her know you're here." She points to an armchair, then disappears.

I hear footsteps on the stairs and muffled voices then, a few minutes later, Tracee appears.

"Kirk, what a lovely surprise. What are you doing here?" she asks sitting down, then she hesitates. "Oh, shit. Baby brain. Can I get you anything?"

"I'm fine thanks and, I'm guessing you already know why I'm here."

"Piper..." she sighs.

"Exactly."

"What do you want to know?" she asks warily.

"First of all, I need you to clear up some doubts I have about the past, but I'm guessing the Girl Code means you won't tell me much."

"You guessed right. And, I should be furious with you, but we were kids and kids do stupid things." Tracee shrugs then leans forward a little. "Is there anything else I can do?"

I'm confused.

What did I do exactly?

"Tracee, sorry, but why would you or Piper be mad at me? If anything, it's the opposite," I can't help it, the words come flying out.

I'm about to ask her about their conversation just before I left all those years ago, the one someone told me about, that opened my eyes to Piper, but hold back – it's obvious she won't tell me anything.

She blinks a couple of times and stares at me intently. "I don't think I should get into any of this, it wouldn't be right. Like I said, we were kids. I think you need to talk to Piper directly," she says, choosing to hide behind silence.

Which only heightens my suspicions but it's useless to insist. Tracee won't tell me anything more and if I piss her off, she'll be even less cooperative.

"Okay. Question number two. I repaired her bike and took it back to her last night. I'm not sure if you know this, but what happened really bothered me."

I decide to tell her everything, hoping she'll take pity on me and answer at least one of my questions. "It reminded me of that time with Wade, and your reaction the other night makes me think this was more than bored kids doing it for the kicks. I tried to ask Piper about it, but she just made a joke and cut me off. At her house there seems to be no one but her - so what happened to her mother? And Wade?"

Tracee rubs the back of her neck awkwardly. She looks conflicted. "You want to know so much. I'm sorry, but I can't answer all of your questions," she says, looking away.

"Tracee, Piper's mad at me. I don't know why, but I do know you probably think she has good reason, but you have to believe me when I say I care about her. I always have. You know how important she was to me. There's no way I'd use anything you say against her, to hurt her."

"That's not why, Kirk. It's the opposite...I was the first to tell her she was being stupid and that you should talk it out together. I'd tell you everything, honestly, but it's up to her to tell you certain details of her life. It's a delicate subject and it's not for me to tell you. Piper will tell you, when and if she wants." Tracee shakes her head and it's clear she's telling the truth. She wants to tell me, she just can't.

Her words do nothing to ease my anxiety. Something serious is going on here.

"Please, tell me what you think you can," I urge and she nods.

"Piper's all alone now..." she finally reveals. "Wade is hardly ever around. In fact, right now she doesn't even know where he is. That's another reason why she's so tense. As for her mom, Rowena died of an overdose. Piper found her."

"That must have so hard on her. I'm so sorry she had to go through that..." and the trauma of finding Melody's body suddenly comes back to me.

“Rowena’s drug taking was out of control. She was so out of it, she almost OD’d several times before. Plus, she was mixing with the wrong crowd. It got so bad, Piper hardly ever left the house, she was practically her mom’s babysitter. Eventually she fell behind in her studies. Then what happened, happened and Wade was no great help. When he’s not screwing up, he’s in and out of rehab...which is why Piper works her ass off at that resort you’re at. There’s not much work now the season’s over, but in summer she was up there fifteen hours a day, every single day. With the money she earns, plus tips from residents who take a liking to her because she bends over backwards to satisfy their crazy requests, like making sure the flowers match the drapes, etc, she has to pay the mortgage on the house, which she had to take out to pay her student loan and swim coach qualification,” she continues, giving me a clearer picture of the situation.

I stare at her, baffled. Student debt? Mortgage? I thought Piper was doing just fine, I was sure of it... “But Harvard? She’d qualify for financial aid... why didn’t she go there?” I ask.

“Listen, I’m no gossip, and perhaps I shouldn’t even tell you this, but Piper told me about some inappropriate comments you made. I don’t know why – if one of the guys in your band made some story up about her, or something. I mean, she’s very beautiful. But Piper’s a good girl. She doesn’t use clients to boost her income. She cleans their rooms. Period.” She gives me a fiery glare. “I know guys like to brag about their conquests. You want me to believe you? Well, believe me when I say Piper doesn’t sleep around. With anyone.” She stops abruptly.

I know what I said and that Tracee would say anything to defend her friend, but she spits the last words out so forcefully that I feel alarmed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I said too much,” she says, biting her lip.

Before I can say anything, her cell phone rings.

“What the...? Pipes, what’s wrong?” she asks in alarm.

I can’t hear Piper’s answer but the look on Tracee’s face makes the hairs on my neck stand up.

“Are you okay?” she asks, panic in her voice. Piper says something but I can’t make it out. “Don’t cry, I’ll be right over. Wait there,” she reassures her before ending the call.

She glances over and only then seems to remember I’m there.

“I won’t take no for an answer,” I say before she can speak. “My car’s

right outside, I'm coming too."

Tracee, as pale as a ghost, nods. "I'll just ask my mom to stay with the baby," she says, running for the stairs.

I hear the beginning of a conversation, but then someone closes the door. A few moments later, however, Tracee comes running downstairs, pulling on a jacket.

"Let's go," she orders, heading for the front door.

"What the hell's happened, Tracee?" I ask, starting the car.

"Listen, Kirk, I hate to betray a friend's trust," she says looking me straight in the eye. "But Piper's been attacked and I know Wade's involved somehow. She can't stay at her place anymore. If you weren't here, I would have gone alone, but Piper needs help and, right now, I think you're her best option."

"What the fuck do you mean - attacked?" I'm almost yelling. "Is she okay?"

"Physically, yes. I couldn't make out much, she was crying. We're almost there, then we'll find out," she says, ringing her hands anxiously.

There's nothing left to do. I put my foot down as hard as I can and just hope we don't run into anyone from Nantucket PD.

Chapter 18



Fall 2009

It's been months since my fight with Vicky and the night I thought Kirk was going to kiss me. Halloween came and went and soon it will be Thanksgiving, then Christmas.

Nothing has happened between us since then and I'm beginning to wonder, again, if I'm not the problem - if he doesn't see me as 'romance' material because of the way I look. The insults and sneers Vicky and her friends threw at me live rent-free in my head and I spend hours staring at myself in the mirror.

My shirt has been washed so many times it's transparent, my jeans are old-fashioned and so faded, they're almost white. My hair desperately needs cutting, but I don't have the money to go to the hairdresser, though I can't help wondering what I'd look like with a nice, trendy cut and a different color, instead of this boring, old blonde!

I never told anyone what Vicky and her girls said, however. Not even Tracee.

Partly because it's embarrassing, but also because Tracee has a rep for being brutally honest and I'd die if she agreed with them - hearing that my clothes suck or that my hair is stupid and that my ass is enormous would feel even worse coming from my best friend.

I try not to think about it but I can't help it, I'm obsessed. Without realizing it, I spend hours moaning to Kirk about my clothes, probably boring him to death, explaining how I can't afford anything nice because I'm permanently broke.

I don't realize just how much I've bombarded him until he suggests we take a trip off the island and catch the first boat the next day, the first Saturday in November.

I jump at the chance, obviously, delighted that he wants to spend Saturday with me and not his Bimbo of the Week, but I'm surprised when we get to Hyannis and he heads straight for the mall.

"I never figured you for a mall rat," I laugh as we walk through the huge sliding glass doors.

"We're not here for me, but for you, Star Girl," he replies.

"Me?"

"You complain non-stop you have nothing to wear," he shrugs. "So let's do something about it."

"Just one problem. I'm broke," I say, pointing out the obvious.

"Yeah, but I'm not," he replies.

"No! No way! You give me too many gifts as it is, but this is too much," I object, vigorously shaking my head.

"Let's say it's my gift for winning your next swim meet."

"I can't let you spend your money like this. If it were my birthday, okay, but not now," I shake my head again.

"Come on, Piper. Choose something," he continues.

I know that look on his face, it's pointless to object further, we'd just spend the day arguing in circles.

I look around, undecided.

A new shirt or a new pair of pants isn't going to change my situation any. I can't wear the same t-shirt every day, I'll look ridiculous, plus at some point I'm going to have to wash it, and what am I going to wear then?

Then it occurs to me. My hair

I could get something done to my hair. That would be a radical change that would last for some time.

"Is there a hairdresser around here?" I ask, glancing around.

"I thought you needed new clothes?"

I explain that a new shirt won't solve my problems long term, but that a haircut would be something more permanent.

Kirk stares at me in silence for a full minute. "What is it you want to do, exactly?" he asks finally, tilting his head to one side. "With your hair, I mean?"

"I don't know. Cut it short maybe, something that makes me look older, or dye it red," I explain, pointing at my hair.

"What?!" he shrieks, halfway between a question and an exclamation.

"You think I'd look bad?" I'm worried now.

"It's not that, I just don't get why. Your hair is beautiful as it is," he says, twisting a lock around his finger.

I feel myself blush down to my toenails. "You don't think it's too... babyish?"

"You're joking, right? You have the most amazing natural blonde hair. Fifty percent of the female population is desperate to get the same color and you were born with it!" he scoffs. "Don't do anything stupid just to please someone."

"I'm not," I retort, crossing my arms defensively.

"So you always wanted to dye your hair red?"

"No..." I don't know what to say. He has me on the spot - because, honestly, I've never even considered it before.

"Then forget it. I'm not paying for you to ruin your beautiful hair. Choose something else, a manicure, an outfit," he says, his arms wide open, indicating the other stores in the mall. "I'm happy to pay for that, Star Girl."

"You're right. I'm just being stupid. I don't need anything. Let's go get a shake," I suggest.

"Okay. We're agreed that dyeing your hair is silly, but really, there's nothing you want?"

“I can’t think of anything, no,” I reply, staring at my feet in embarrassment.

“Not even those combat boots with the embroidered stars you’ve only told me about like a zillion times?” he asks, arching an eyebrow.

I don’t say anything, I’m too busy trying to control the heat rushing to my face.

“Come on...” Kirk gently places a hand on my back.

He leads me to the huge shoe store and buys me the very boots I know I’d never be able to afford myself.

When I think of how much they cost I feel faint, but Kirk’s mind was made up. I’d talked about those boots so often he even knew the make and model. *Note to self – Careful! You don't want him thinking you're using him.*

We leave the shop with my worn out sneakers in a bag and head straight for Milkshake Lovers, where we grab a couple of shakes and sit down at a table.

We’re chatting about this and that when Kirk asks a question that turns my blood to ice.

“So, who is he?” he asks, fixing me with those deadly green eyes.

My face immediately catches fire. “No one,” I blurt, lying.

“I don’t believe you. You’re crushing on someone, that’s why you want to change so much, why you’re so obsessed with your clothes, your looks. You were never like this before...”

“No, really...” I stammer, unable to contain my embarrassment.

“Yes, really.” He points to my face. “You’re practically purple.”

He never, ever mentions it when I blush, but this time he won’t let it drop.

I shake my head again. I’m so agitated that if he carries on like this I’m going to hurl my shake literally everywhere.

“I know you’re lying, Piper. You know what I think? It’s not worth it. You’re perfect just the way you are. You’re special. Don’t change yourself to please some idiot. If he can’t see how unique you are then, well...screw him!” he exclaims, looking pretty angry.

You’re the idiot! I want to scream, but I don’t.

“I mean it, Piper,” he continues. “Hey, are you even listening?” which only makes me feel more embarrassed.

His words have a strange, dual effect on me...on the one hand, knowing he thinks I’m perfect makes my heart beat fast...but the fact that he says this boy should accept me for the way I am, when it’s obvious that he doesn’t, at least

not the way I want, kills me.

Oh, Kirk. You have no idea. You have no idea that I keep a notebook, where I write down all the movie quotes that remind me of you, all the songs that, every time I hear them, make me think of you. Every microscopic detail of you. You don't know that, in the evening, I stay up way past my bedtime, checking if you're online, in some chat, wondering if you're talking to some girl. Do you know that when you write me goodnight, even if your window is right in front of mine, when the time comes to say goodnight, I always wonder if I shouldn't have said it first? You have no idea how much I talk to Tracee about you and never get bored. You'll never know how adorable I find you, every detail of your face, every expression, especially that fine line that runs down the middle of your forehead when you're concentrating, or the way you frown when you're confused, or the way you hum under your breath and don't even realize you're doing it. You've no idea how my heart skips a beat every time you smile at something I say. You don't understand how much I have to hide my feelings for you, that I gave up on letting you know how I feel because I didn't want to lose your friendship...

"Whoa...Earth to Piper," he interrupts my stupid thoughts.

He's still staring at me, trying to find out who my crush is, so I decide to tell him the truth, or at least part of it, so he'll back off - and before he figures out that it's him.

"I didn't tell you everything..." I begin.

"Now tell me something I don't know," he says sarcastically.

"That time I had lunch with Vicky and the girls...they were the ones who told me my clothes were skanky, that my hair was ugly. Oh, and that my butt was the size of a small country," I glance down.

It's true, their words hurt me - but what hurts more is the thought that he sees me like that too.

"That it? So you don't have some massive crush on some mystery guy?" he asks, immediately looking less worried.

"Nope," I shake my head. "Why? You look relieved."

"I am," he shrugs.

"Why?"

In my dreams, this is the moment when he confesses that he loves me, that he couldn't bear the thought of me being in love with someone else.

It doesn't happen, obviously.

"I just wondered who the asshole was who made you feel so bad. Whose

ass I was going to have to whoop.” He spreads his arms, as if it were obvious.

“Well, no need now,” I roll my eyes.

“And no need for you to buy new clothes or color your hair just because some mean girl can’t control her mouth...by the way, in case you didn’t notice, Vicky Sandoval’s shade is Pure Bottle. She’s jealous of your hair, Piper.” He seems pretty sure.

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter anyway. You’re right, it’s stupid.”

I’m not entirely convinced, but there’s one thing I’m sure of now...Kirk wouldn’t look at me the way I want him to, even if I was wearing full makeup, designer clothes and high heels.

The truth is: Vicky and her bitches are right.

For Kirk I’m a kid sister he feels he has to look out for.

When we get home it’s late afternoon. I’m naively hoping Kirk will spend the evening with me as his parents have taken the boat over to Cape Cod for the weekend, but Suzanne Swain is standing in front of his house, waiting for him. And she looks pretty pissed. What better confirmation do I need?

It’s obvious. He knew he’d have the house to himself so he’s invited one of his bimbos over.

I’m so stupid. I have to stop with my stupid fantasies before they wreck our friendship.

Chapter 19



My mind's all over the place: Kirk fixing my bike. Kirk singing to me. Kirk asking about Wade.

And, I could literally kill Tracee after what she said the other day.

Thinking back to those terrible days in the hospital, after what happened and how it changed me forever hurts - but not as much as the thought of telling Kirk or even just showing him.

I still remember the strict rules. Because they were terrified of infection, I was limited to one visitor at a time, for a maximum of three hours a day. Not a problem for me, of course. I had no one to visit me, except Tracee, who traveled all the way to Boston whenever she could.

The hours flowed like molasses, the days punctuated by visits from the

doctors, then the nurses...each time they changed my dressings, it was like swimming through an ocean of pain and the nights...The nights were endless. Restless, filled with agonizing visions and a constant, throbbing pain.

Then there were the journalists, clamoring for information, begging the nurses to let them speak to me, take photos, offering deals, money. The sheer terror that someone, tempted by the generous amounts of money on offer, would take sneaky pics of me and the terrible condition I was in, has never left me.

My waking hours filled with thoughts, questions about what would happen next, what my life would be like in *The After*. I knew that the Piper I had been before was never leaving that hospital.

I prefer to be a distant memory for Kirk, instead of a horror show.

I'm terrified I'll bump into him while I'm working, fearful that he'll ask more questions, try and find out more.

If there's one thing I know about Kirk, one thing I'll never forget, it's his stubbornness - once he gets his teeth into something, he never lets go...and that's why I know I'm going to have to put even more distance between us.

When I was a kid, Vicky's snide remarks taunted me, haunting me, making me wonder if Kirk was only my friend because he knew my situation and felt sorry for me.

Even now, the thought upsets me. I can't think about it. I can't.

It was hard enough starting over after what happened, resigning myself to never being the same person, to avoiding mirrors, knowing that my swim career had been flushed down the can before it even started - but feeling the force of Kirk's pity now would be the last straw.

So, all the time I'm at work, I'm in a state of alert, buzzing with anxiety that I could bump into him at any moment.

While I'm cleaning his bungalow, I even lock the door so he can't just walk in like last time.

I look like a crazy woman, jumping out of my skin at the slightest sound of footsteps.

By the end of the day, I'm so tense my neck and back hurt so much it's like someone replaced my spine with a red hot poker.

Even on the way home, I can't tear my mind away from the thoughts that have haunted me all day.

The truth is, despite telling myself not to let Kirk in again, to keep him at a distance, to ignore him because as soon as he's gone, I'll be even worse,

when he behaves like he did last night, it's hard to stop the emotions from overwhelming me. I feel like when we were together, a single entity, as if time had stood still, and he was still the same boy who made my life a million times better.

I'd be lying to myself if I said I didn't want to feel his arms around me.

Though it's cold out and I'm without gloves, the thought of his body against mine makes my palms sweat and by the time I get to my house, my mind is racing again.

I run up the steps but don't notice something is wrong until I feel the crunch of broken glass beneath my feet and by then it's too late - a gloved hand grabs me by the collar of my jacket and drags through the open door.

I've never seen him before, I think, as he slams me against the wall, pinning me there with his bulky body.

He's tall, well built, with a shaved head and a thick, dark beard. He has huge piercings in his ears and an ugly tattoo crawls up his neck. "Where's that asshole brother of yours, doll face?" he asks. Up close his breath smells worse than a latrine.

"I don't know, I swear. He was in rehab..." I'm tumbling into a walking nightmare.

Once again I'm being held with my back against the wall and, though this is a different person, the situation is just the same.

Not again. Please, not again. I can't take it, the voice in my head pleads.

The guy shakes me. "I'm talking to you!" he growls. "Where the fuck is he?"

"I don't know. I don't know," I find the strength to answer. "Please...he was in rehab..." Terror surges through my body.

"A little birdie told me he left, and as you're the one he always comes running to, where the fuck is he?"

"I've no idea....please...I don't know...really...I even went to the police..."

"Liar! You're covering for him!" He slams me up against the wall, knocking the air out of me, then slaps my face.

All I can think in my rising terror is *He's going to kill me! He's going to kill me!* while a tiny part of my mind wonders just what Wade has gotten himself mixed up in now.

In my panic I can hardly breathe, my heart is pounding.

No, please, no! I murmur to myself.

I can't have a panic attack now. It would kill me - if this guy doesn't kill

me first.

I have to speak. I have to find the courage to say something. The danger is real.

My heart is beating faster and faster, pounding out of control, but I have to ignore it. "Does he owe you money?" I ask, fighting back the tears.

"Dumb fucking question. Scumbag owes me big time, plus I gave him some merch for a deal. He was supposed to keep it for a while, but then he did a number on us. By the time I found out where he'd it stashed, he was in hiding," he says, crushing me with his body.

"I swear, I know nothing about any of this. I sent him to rehab so he could get clean," I say through hot tears.

"Save the tears. Tell me where Wade is and I let you go, otherwise I start rearranging your face. From what I hear, somebody already made a start on your body. Who knows, I might be tempted to finish the job," he threatens. "By the way, in case you haven't figured it out yet, I was the one who worked your bike over. A friendly warning," he grins.

I'm paralyzed with fear. "I don't know where he is. I can't do this, just... just kill me," I blurt in the end.

"You really don't know?" he looks puzzled.

I don't know what miracle just happened. If it was the look on my face, or he felt my terror, but he seems to believe me.

"I'm looking for him too..." I say.

"The bike I gave him, take me to it..." he pulls on my arm. "Don't scream, don't try anything. I already did my good deed for the day. I'm not usually this generous."

The temptation to scream at the top of my lungs is strong. As soon as we're out the door my instincts tell me to run - but where? Who would help me?

My only neighbor was Kirk - and that house has been empty for ten years. As always, I'm totally alone.

I always wondered where Wade got the money for that motorbike. He told me he'd spent the summer tending bar and had used money from his tips. I was too busy with my own job to check out his story, but I've always had my doubts.

Calling on my last reserves of strength, I lead Blackbeard to the garage and unlock the door. Before the door is fully open, he shoves me inside, turns on the light and pulls the door down behind us.

He circles the bike, scratching at his filthy beard, then pulls a knife from his boot.

Instinctively, I huddle against the wall, my hands over my face.

I don't dare look until I hear the sound of something being torn apart by a knife and I'm sure it's not my body.

Blackbeard is gutting the seat of Wade's bike - and with good reason. Transparent packets of what looks like fine, white powder begin to spill out and I shiver at the realization that there were literally pounds of coke stashed in my garage and I had no idea.

I dread to think of its street value, or what would have happened to me if someone had stolen that bike. My heart is beating so fast that I'm terrified it could stop at any moment.

Blackbeard stuffs the packets of coke into a backpack then plants himself in front of me. "Listen up. Wade still owes me. You can't begin to imagine how much, but this will do for now. I got my gear back, this batch anyway. But I'll be back - and when I do, I want to hear that you've found him or he's told you where the money is. I'm not risking my ass for you or your brother. If I don't get the money back, I have to prove I've done my bit. Wade can't go unpunished, we have a rep to defend. There are no second chances in this business, so if I find out you went running to the cops to tell them about our little business meeting..." he squeezes my shoulder.

I'm so scared I can't find the words to reply.

"Nod, if you understand me," he growls. I nod. "Now, don't even breathe for the next ten minutes. Don't move, don't call for help, don't try to look where I'm going."

I nod again.

He lets go and, just like that, he's gone.

My legs give way and I slide to the floor.

"I almost died," I repeat, my whole body trembling.

I don't know how long I stay there, but at some point I begin to pull myself together. I need help. I can't spend the night here. The door is destroyed and there's no way I can stay here, alone. Not tonight.

I find my purse, which I dropped when Blackbeard dragged me into the house, and call Tracee.

She's the only one I can rely on, the only one capable of picking up the pieces of what's left of me and putting them back together.

After assuring me she'll be right over, she ends the call and, unable to stay

indoors any longer, I drag myself to the porch, where I huddle on the steps, gulping down fresh air.

Fifteen minutes later, a car comes racing down the road and screeches to a halt.

I don't recognize it, but when Tracee steps out I breathe a sigh of relief, then...

"Oh, shit!" I want to run away.

She's brought Kirk.

"Piper, oh, my God...are you okay?" Tracee shrieks running over to me. "Don't ask," she whispers, nodding at Kirk, who's standing behind her. "Long story..."

"What the hell's going on?" he asks, moving closer.

"Nothing," I lie. "Someone smashed the glass in the door and I got scared," I add, pointing to the shards of glass.

"Bullshit!" Kirk exclaims. He's in front of me now.

"Piper, this is getting out of hand. You can't do this on your own. Tell him, please," Tracee urges.

"Is this because of Wade?" Kirk asks, sitting down next to me.

I wish I had the strength to tell him to go away, to leave me alone, like he's done for the past ten years, but what just happened has left me weak and defenseless and, when Kirk gently wraps his arm around my shoulders, I break down and tell him everything that happened, from Wade's disappearance from rehab to Blackbeard's threats - the only part I leave out is my secret.

"Fuck!" he curses, furiously. "Idiot! Doesn't Wade realize the danger he puts you in?"

"It's okay, I'm okay. I'll go over to Tracee's, put some distance between me and this place," I reply, still trying to downplay the situation.

"No way. You're staying with me," he insists.

"Forget it! I'm going over to Tracee's," I refuse bluntly, shaking my head.

"Piper. You're upset, you're not thinking clearly, you can't stay with her..." I'm about to ask what makes him think he can stop me, but he doesn't leave me the time. "She has a baby at home, don't drag her into this. What if that bastard from before shows up at her house?"

His reply stops me in my tracks. He's right. *How can I be so irresponsible?*

"I'm sorry," I turn to Tracee. "I should never have involved you. I

shouldn't have called you. I'm sorry, I just didn't know what to do."

"Don't even, Piper. If Kirk weren't here, I'd be dragging you back to mine right now - but he's right. You should go with him. Not because I don't want you, but because it's safer," Tracee replies.

"No way they're stupid enough to try it on with a world famous rock band," he smiles, squeezing my shoulder. "You're safe with me."

My mind races, trying to find another excuse, but the idea of a second encounter with Blackbeard is just too scary. "I'll go upstairs, grab some clothes," I sigh. I try to stand up, but my legs give way again.

"Stay here, I'll go..." Before I can even open my mouth, Kirk is heading for the stairs.

Tracee and I are all alone.

"You shouldn't have brought him," I whisper.

"What choice did I have? He was at mine. I told him nothing about...but I couldn't lie about this. It's not a game, Piper, this is dangerous. You need Kirk. Let him help you and, maybe while you're at it, you can talk, clear things up a little..."

"I can't believe you're making me do this, not after the way he treated me," I shake my head despondently.

"We all do things we regret when we're eighteen. Tell him how he made you feel. Throw it in his face. Be clear. You're not a kid, Piper, not anymore."

If only it were that easy. And that's without taking into consideration what I've just been through.

I want to tell him what happened. I wish I could tell him just how much the threat of having my face disfigured had terrified me, but I can't. Tracee seems determined to push me back into Kirk's arms - if I told him now it would be the end and I simply cannot let him find out what my body looks like now.

So, I tell her about the drugs Blackbeard found, trying to calculate their street value.

"Wade really screwed up this time," she sighs. "And you really need Kirk, I just thank God he's here."

I'm about to remind her how I've managed on my own all these years, when Kirk comes back, a bag slung over his shoulder.

"Let's go. We'll get that glass fixed tomorrow. There's nothing we can do now, so let's get out of here." And before I realize it, he's picking me up.

“What the hell?” I protest, trying to wriggle free.

“Five minutes ago, you could hardly stand,” he grunts, ignoring my attempts to free myself, depositing me in the passenger seat of his car.

Tracee climbs into the back.

We drive her home, with me apologizing the whole time. When it’s just me and Kirk, however, a deadly silence falls. I don’t say a word until he pulls up in front of the resort.

“Don’t you dare carry me in front of everyone or, I swear, I’ll kick you,” I threaten.

“It’s chilly out, I doubt the guys are in the garden, but okay,” he shrugs.

In fact, none of his friends are around.

“Go take a shower,” he says once we reach his bungalow, pointing to the bathroom, as if I don’t know where it was, and placing my bag on the floor.

I nod - because he’s right and because I need to spend some time away from him.

I stand under the jet of hot water longer than necessary, hoping it will calm me. When it doesn’t, I give up.

I unzip my bag and realize with horror that Kirk only packed short-sleeved shirts and shorts. I can’t show so much skin in front of him.

Thankfully, at the bottom there are also leggings and a long-sleeved tee, so I opt for those.

When I come out of the bathroom, Kirk is on the couch in a tank and board shorts and I almost have a heart attack.

Not that he looked bad when he was eighteen, when he left, but now he’s so hot it’s killing me. His shoulders are broad, every muscle in evidence, and I see them flex with every movement he makes. I could lose my mind over those arms. Who knew two arms could have that effect, with their fine, dark hair...and those hands... Big hands, long slender fingers, I picture them on the strings of his bass...I can almost feel them on me. I swallow hard and try and focus on something else, before he notices me staring like an idiot.

On the table in front of the couch there’s food he must have ordered from room service.

“No need to dress for dinner,” he comments glancing up. “PJs are just fine.”

“I know - and I’m fine like this,” I reply, my arms around me protectively.

He points at the table laden with food. “Help yourself.”

Now that the shock is finally subsiding, I’m beginning to feel the first

pangs of hunger. I take a seat on the opposite couch.

Kirk sits a moment in silence, then jumps up and sits next to me.

I barely have time to register what he's doing, when he takes my face in his hands.

"The bastard hit you!" he exclaims furiously. "I didn't notice at first, until the light hit your face and I saw the bruise..."

"It's nothing," I shrug. "It'll soon fade."

"How many times has shit like this happened, because of Wade, since I left here?" he asks, looking even angrier.

"Nothing ever this bad," I lie, in an attempt to deflect his suspicions. "Okay, sometimes they ask for money because of his debts, but small amounts. It's not Wade's fault. He's sick, you should understand that...and if I don't take care of him, who will?"

"Oh, God, Piper...you don't know how sorry I am, how much I wish I could have been there." He sounds so disheartened there's no way he's faking it.

Why did you leave then? I want to ask, but I can't get the words out.

"Can I just ask...please? How come you don't swim anymore?"

Whoa, Kirk. Don't ask, because I won't tell, I think bitterly.

"My mom was getting worse, Wade was doing drugs too and was never around, so something had to go," I lie, partially.

"But it was your dream," he whispers apologetically.

"There are some people whose life is nothing but harsh reality. The dreams dropped out of my life ten years ago," I reply, realizing I've said too much. Kirk blinks. He's about to say something but I beat him to it. "At least we know who trashed my bike now, and that it was a warning for Wade," I blurt, quickly changing the subject.

"He'll still want that money, Piper, you have to report it."

I know he's right, but I don't want to put Wade in any danger.

"I could, but then what if they send someone else? If they get really pissed and kill Wade when they find him?"

"That's exactly why you need to go to the cops. You said it yourself, you tried to report Wade missing and they didn't take you seriously, they'll have to now. He's in danger too, and it's better the cops find him than those guys. You've never done anything wrong, so they're going to have to take the threats against you seriously," Kirk continues.

He's right, I can't keep quiet about this.

Plus, given my history, the police will get moving immediately.

“You’re right.”

“I know...that’s me, the voice of reason.” He winks and my heart leaps in my chest. I’m tempted to throw my arms around him, like I used to all those years ago.

“I’ll grab some clean sheets and make up a bed on the couch right here,” I say, changing the subject, anything to avoid staring at him like an idiot.

“Ah, no! No way! You take my bed, I take the couch,” he shakes his head. “And I’ll make it up myself.”

“Er...it’s my job...and it’s not fair. I know how much these bungalows cost,” I say, with a wave of my hand.

“Exactly. I’m paying, so I call the shots and, by the way, you’re not my personal maid. I’ll do it myself, end of.” This time he’s categorical.

No point in arguing further. I go to his room, but as soon as I lie down I know I have no chance of ever falling asleep. The sheets, the pillows, everything smells of Kirk, that incredible scent I haven’t smelled in years but have never forgotten.

I try to fall asleep. I do, honestly, but even when I force myself to breathe through my mouth, it still doesn’t help. I can’t stop myself. I want to, but the voices in my head are too loud.

Talking of memories, of days spent together, of shared laughter and dreams, of a feeling that grew stronger every day, an unrequited love that burned my soul every time I found out that Kirk was seeing another girl, every little flirt, and I obsessively wondered when he was going to fall in love and end the time we spent together...then the greatest illusion of them all...

I stare at the blank wall, trying to control my breathing, trying to calm down. I close my eyes, praying for sleep, only to open them in exasperation. I close them again, squeezing them shut, but it’s useless.

No matter what I do, I still see his face, those eyes, which change from green, to gold, to grey, those beautifully shaped lips, the tuft of dark hair tumbling over his forehead.

Great! Now I’ll never fall asleep.

Night time is the right time for memories - all those memories you wish you could erase. No prizes for guessing why so many people suffer from insomnia.

Tracee says we should talk things out, clear the situation, but it’s never going to happen. I needed Kirk and he ran out on me. He took all I had to

give and left the next morning without even a second glance.

Even now, all these years later, I don't understand what made him do it. What we had was real. I never dreamed he could do something like that. For months I hoped, prayed, he'd get in touch.

I'm reminded of that line from 'Memories of a Geisha.'

"The heart dies a slow death, shedding each hope like leaves until one day there are none. No hopes. Nothing remains."

That's exactly how it is.

In the end, my heart was empty. I had no interests, no feelings. I breathed, I drank, I ate. That was all.

Suddenly my mother's words come back to me...

I still remember that evening. It was one of her very rare moments of lucidity.

I was in my room, huddled against the cold glass of the window, staring out at the empty house where Kirk once lived.

"Hey, baby girl, how are things?" she asked, breezing in.

I turned, surprised by her apparently cheerful tone. "Good," I lied.

"Liar!" she'd scoffed, perching on my bed. "Piper, listen...I know I'm a terrible mother but, despite everything, I've been watching you since that boy left." She pointed over to the window.

"I miss him," I admit, letting my mother see my fragility on one of the rare occasions in which she was really herself.

"I'm going to say something now, probably one of the few sensible things to come out of my mouth in years." Her gaze was clear, her eyes steady, unhampered by pills. She patted the bed and I scooted over to sit next to her. "If Kirk really loved you, he wouldn't put you through this.

"I've been there, baby girl," and she slipped an arm around my shoulders. "I lied to myself, pretended I was shocked when your father left me for...for her...but the truth is, I knew already. I knew there was something wrong, I'd known for a year, I just chose to ignore the signs. If I'd faced reality, I wouldn't have suffered so much. So, believe me when I say that if Kirk deserved your love, he wouldn't make you feel like you do now. You're not wrong, he just doesn't feel anything for you." She squeezes me tight.

I fell onto her lap and cried myself to sleep.

The next morning when I awoke, I was alone. My mom was lying on her own bed, in a drunken stupor. I had no doubts. Things were back to *normal*, but those few words of comfort helped me to stop hoping and move on with

my life.

My tears begin to flow silently.

Tears of fear for what happened today and which, as usual, I found myself facing alone. Tears of pain for the feelings I still have for Kirk, which I've never been able to successfully suffocate. Tears for myself, for the woman I no longer am and will no longer be in his eyes. Tears of regret for that last night we spent together all those years ago, because things could have gone differently, because for once one of my dreams could have come true.

I wasn't asking for much. I just wanted the boy I loved to love me back.

Obviously, I didn't deserve it.

I can hardly breathe so I pull myself up until I'm sitting on the side of the bed, the tears coming, hard and fast.

Suddenly the bedroom door opens.

"Piper, you okay?" Kirk bursts in. "Sorry, I should have knocked...but I heard you crying..." he runs a hand through his hair, looking embarrassed.

I try to tell him that I'm fine but all that comes out of my mouth is a stream of unintelligible babble.

He sits down next to me and takes me in his arms, holding me tight...and that's it...I wrap my arms around him and sob against his warm chest, accepting any form of comfort he offers, grateful for the fact that, for a short time, he's back in my life.

"This calls for a little bean of happiness," he says, leaning over to open the nightstand drawer.

A bag of Jelly Belly appears in his hand.

"Take one," he says, holding out the bag. "But no looking..."

Instinct tells me to hold back, to refuse to take part in something I've done so many times before, but I'm drained and any resistance is long gone.

I take a random jelly bean and pop it in my mouth.

"What flavor is it?" Kirk asks, with an expression that almost makes it sound like the world's most important question, ever.

"Strawberry."

"Like when..." he whispers, staring into my eyes.

I glance away in silence, but his stare is so intense my breath catches in my throat.

"What happened today should never have happened," he says, stroking my hair. "I think I'll end up killing Wade, way before those guys get hold of him."

He thinks I'm upset about today - it's better that way.

"Come on, you need to rest..." He leans back against the headboard, pulling me along with him.

"But, Kirk..." I say awkwardly.

"How many times have we slept in each other's arms, Piper? A million? One more won't change anything. You're too upset to be alone. Come on, it's just us," he breathes, without letting me go.

Yeah...it's just US...an US that I thought would become less painful over time, an US that will never be the way I want it, especially now.

Chapter 20



Winter 2010

I'm super cranky.

Saturday night, for the umpteenth time, Kirk dumped me for one of his bimbos. I don't even know who, because he picked her up in his car, but we were supposed to go to the movies - until he canceled last minute.

I spent the whole night wide awake, peering out of the window, like a total idiot, waiting to see what time he came home.

I even dared hope that, in the end, he'd dump her and come back early enough to still catch the movie with me.

How stupid can you get?

I was so upset at the thought of him spending time with someone else that I couldn't face seeing him on Sunday in case I lost it and made a scene, so I begged Wade to go over and tell him I was running a fever.

However, it's getting harder and harder to hide my true feelings, especially when it comes to hiding my jealousy.

This morning I didn't wait for him. I left home earlier than usual, deliberately avoiding him, pedaling like crazy so he'd never catch up with me.

I got to school super early, but at least I avoided bumping into him.

I know that, eventually, I'm going to have to face him and pretend nothing happened - after all, we're just friends, no? But this time he really hurt me, more than usual. It's hard, knowing you mean nothing to the person who means the whole world to you.

I'm so focused on avoiding Kirk that, when lunchtime comes round, I forget all about Tracee and head outside, bypassing the cafeteria.

I take a seat on my lonely bench and pull on my headphones.

Is it totally psycho stalker if I admit that I secretly recorded Kirk playing his song for me and listen to it every chance I get?

I pretended I was playing with my phone, but really I was recording him - so now I have an audio of Kirk playing his guitar, while in the background the waves lap the shore.

This is how I spend my time now, listening to him, thinking about him, imagining those words are meant for me - I even fantasized about how it would feel to hear him say them just for me.

Needless to say, just the thought makes me shiver.

A hand touches my shoulder, startling me, making me jump.

"Tracee!" I exclaim, my heart pounding. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"You disappeared without saying a word and this is all the thanks I get? What the hell are you doing out here all alone? I thought you were eating with Kirk, but I saw him sitting with his teammates and knew something was wrong."

"It's the usual shit..." I shrug.

"Er...I need more deets, girl."

I sigh and tell her what happened on Saturday and how disappointed I was. "To think that, when he got here, I didn't want anything to do with him...now look at me. The problem is, Kirk just wants me as a friend but, Trace, I'm in

love with him and he's only ever going to see me as a kid sister," I complain, staring at my shoes.

"Who the hell told you that? Whose brilliant idea was it?" Tracee squares up to me, her hands on her hips.

"No one, it's nothing...something I said once," I reply, my arms crossed defensively.

"Yeah, but I still don't get it though."

"The night Wade caught us hugging on the couch? I said it then, it just came out...I was terrified Kirk would see how I really felt."

"What if your stupid comment made him re-think though? Who knows...maybe if Wade hadn't walked in he would have kissed you..." Tracee points out, building up my hopes again.

"That was months ago. If he wanted to, he would have tried again, no? When he left that evening, I don't know...It felt like things had changed. It's hard to explain. It's like he was embarrassed. I'd rather have him as a friend than lose him when he finds out how I really feel."

"Mmm...ask me you're a little bit psycho! How about you re-thinking your strategy?" Tracee suggests, winking suggestively.

"For example?"

"Make him jealous, Pipes. Give him a taste of his own medicine!" She seems totally convinced.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Duh...start seeing other guys. He needs to know that you're not his personal doormat. That way he realizes how he feels about you."

"Kirk feels zero about me," I roll my eyes. "Not that way anyway." Tracee raises her eyebrows. "Guys like him aren't shy. They're not afraid of rejection. If you haven't noticed, Kirk has no trouble getting girls."

"If you say so," she mumbles.

"Tracee...who'd ask me out? Since Kirk got here and turned me into his best friend, I don't get teased like before, but there's a huge difference between ignoring me and actually dating me! No one is ever going to ask me out...and if I asked someone, word would soon get round that I've tried it on with, I don't know, Tyler or Jacob, and we'd be back to square one. Thanks, but no thanks."

"Shit, Pipes...I don't mean for real. How about, one afternoon when you two are supposed to meet, you cancel a few minutes before and tell him you're meeting someone? Then, you get on your bike, zoom over to the other

end of the island and disappear for a while. It's not like he can read your mind and he'll know you've been feeding him a lie," she suggests.

"It's dumb. First, we all live on Nantucket, we all go to the same school. He'll find out I was lying eventually, he'll start asking questions, and I'll look like a pathetic loser when he finds out I've been making up secret admirers. Dumb is an understatement."

She opens her mouth to say something but we're saved by the bell.

Tracee makes it all sound so easy, but it's not - and not only for the reasons I've just listed.

The truth is, and I don't tell her this, I could never cancel on Kirk to spend my time pedaling in circles. The time I get to spend with him is too precious to ever throw away.

My mood gradually improves, because it's swim club after school. As soon as she sees me the coach tells me that college scouts will be at the end-of-year meet and that, perhaps, it could lead to Harvard.

It's my dream - Kirk will be there next fall and I want to join him there when I graduate.

Coach Cooper warns me I'm going to have to keep my grades high. I immediately reassure her that, despite my dysfunctional family, my GPA is higher than average. I've always worked hard, my future depends on it. As an Ivy League institution, Harvard does not offer athletic or academic scholarships. However, it does provide need-based financial aid to students in financial difficulty and that's what I need to aim for if I'm ever going to get off this island and make something of my life.

Kirk and I spend hours going over photos of the campus in the prospectus. He's already shown me where his dorm will be, but he's promised that when I get there, he's going to convince his parents to rent a small apartment so we can share.

I don't have words to describe how happy the idea makes me.

If I do well at Harvard, it means some famous coach could see me, perhaps offer me a contract or a sponsorship what will change my life.

I do a flip turn, come up for air and notice Vicky arguing with the coach, but I don't find out why until we're all back in the locker room.

"How did you do it this time?" Vicky asks, shoving me with her shoulder.

"What the hell do you mean?" I ask, with no idea where all this is heading.

"Don't start!" she hisses, pushing me harder. "Your pathetic tricks won't work on me."

“I told you already, I’ve no idea what you’re talking about!” I exclaim, trying not to lose my balance.

“There’s only one person who takes lane one, Piper – me!” she yells, sticking her face up close to mine. “Now Coach Cooper tells me she’s moved me down to lane two. You’re in lane one for the final. So don’t play dumb, I saw you talking to her before we started. What lame story did you feed her this time?”

“Nothing, I swear. She must have decided already. I never asked her anything.”

“Sure. Do you have any idea how much money my father donates to this school? Lane one is mine, it’s the best, I’m the best!” she yells, clenching her fists.

“Perhaps this time Coach Cooper decided to assign lanes based on talent and not on the size of daddy’s wallet.” I can’t help it, the words come flying out.

There’s so much hatred flashing in her eyes, I think she’s going to hit me. I’m preparing myself for the sting of her hand on my face, but then she steps back and crosses her arms.

“I refuse to dirty my hands on someone like you!” she sneers in disgust.

Ignoring her, I turn, grab my shower bag and head for the showers without adding anything else.

I stay in the shower longer than usual, hoping that by the time I get out, she’ll be gone. When the locker room falls silent, I turn off the water, head back to my locker and start drying myself - but when I reach for the bag with my clothes and clean underwear, it’s empty.

In a panic, praying they haven’t been stolen, I start searching for them. The jeans I was wearing today are the least worn out - not that they’re new, but at least they’re not four years old and full of holes. I’m about to give up when, in one of the showers, I see a pop of color that I hadn’t noticed before: it’s the sleeve of a red sweater. My red sweater.

Someone - it’s not hard to guess who - dumped my clothes in the shower and left the water running!

I’m naked, apart from this stupid towel and all my clothes are soaking wet, I think in alarm. What now?

In desperation I scoop my soaking clothes up and run the hairdryer over them. When that doesn’t work, I shove them under the hand-dryer, but nothing improves the situation.

I don't know what to do. I'd cry, but it wouldn't help. I can't leave, not dressed like this, I'll catch pneumonia.

My cell phone was in the pocket of my jeans - now it's soaked and I can't even call Tracee and ask her to come to my rescue.

I flop down on the wooden bench and release the tears I was trying so hard to hold back.

I'm so caught up in my crying that I don't realize I'm no longer alone until the bench creaks under someone else's weight and a hand brushes my shoulder.

"When you didn't come out, I got worried...and quite rightly too..." A shiver runs down my spine when I recognize Kirk's voice. "Little bean of happiness?" He holds up a bag of Jelly Belly.

I dry my tears and lean towards the bag of candy, taking one out.

When I glance up, our eyes meet.

Why is he looking at me like that?

Duh - because you're practically naked, stupid! I scold myself, realizing that my threadbare towel leaves little to the imagination.

Even worse...when I leaned forward, my towel slipped, revealing even more cleavage. Cringing with embarrassment, I pull it up again, clutching it to my chest.

"What happened?" he asks gently, thankfully not mentioning my partial nip slip.

Lying is useless. I tell him exactly what happened. Kirk already knows the worst about me, he's seen my mother in full flow, this is nothing.

"Bitch!" he hisses.

"What do I do now?" I hug my arms around me, shivering.

"Wait here, I have an idea...be right back," he says, planting a kiss on my wet hair before running out of the locker room.

As soon as he leaves, I burst into tears again.

Because of my ridiculous jealousy, I've been avoiding him all day - I even left the house at the crack of dawn so I wouldn't have to see him - and still, he was outside, waiting for me.

I don't think there's anyone in the world who loves me like Kirk and, even if it's not the love I want, I can't lose him.

That's why Tracee's suggestions are silly and useless.

If I lied, made up absurd situations, I'd push him away, which would damage our friendship and, in the end, I'd lose him.

“Oki doki,” Kirk announces, arriving with a tracksuit and a pair of socks. “I always keep a change of clothes in my locker...they’ll bury you, but at least you won’t freeze to death. If you give me the key to the lock, I’ll load your bike in the trunk of my car, that way you won’t catch cold on the way home without a jacket.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.” Somehow I manage to smile as I hand him my keys.

“No need. I’ll be outside,” he nods, heading for the door.

I quickly get dressed, drying my hair as much as I can with my damp towel, then run for the door.

When I get into the car, the heater is on full blast.

Kirk starts the engine and pulls out, but not in the direction I was expecting.

“Where are we going?” I ask curiously.

“Smith’s Point. Sunday, when we didn’t meet up because you were sick, I had some free time so I worked on my song and I want you to hear it.” He points to the guitar case, peeking out from the back seat.

“Awesome!” I grin enthusiastically.

Jutting out into the channel between Madaket Harbor and Tuckernuck Island, Smith’s Point is the westernmost tip of Nantucket. The sandy beach is stunning, with golden dunes where gray seals congregate during winter.

Kirk parks up near the beach. The sea is rough today and even with the windows closed, you can still hear the sound of waves crashing on the beach.

He smiles, then reaches for his guitar. “If you don’t like the changes I made, tell me, be ruthless,” he winks.

Then he works his magic and I begin to forget the horrible day I just had – I’m just sorry my phone doesn’t work, or I would have secretly filmed him again.

“That’s amazing,” I sigh when he finishes.

“Glad my number one fan likes it. At least I put smile on your face,” he replies, stroking my cheek.

My face immediately catches fire but I have the presence of mind to divert the attention from me. “You’re so talented, and I’m not saying that because you’re my friend...the whole song...it says so much, it makes me tingle. It’s a crime that you only play it for me. I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again, you should be a musician.”

“I told you already, I’m good like this. I’m just happy I learned to play,

that I can express my emotions through music - and that hearing me play makes you happy. That's all I need, really," he replies with a shake of his head, his dark curls bouncing on his forehead.

Oh, my God...I want to reach out and touch them.

"Thanks for coming to get me..." I start again. "If it wasn't for you..."

"I'm here for you because I want to be, Piper. Remember that, always. No need to thank me." He puts his guitar back in its case then turns to me. "Piper, why were you avoiding me?"

Wow! That's direct.

I stare down at the floor mat. I don't know what to say.

"Tell me." He tilts my chin upward until our eyes meet.

"I wasn't, I just didn't feel too good," I lie, biting my lip.

"What am I supposed to do if the only girl I care about insists on lying to me?" he asks, cupping my face with his other hand.

"Please, we both know I'm not the only girl you care about," I blurt, unable to hold back my jealousy.

There's a strange light in his eyes. He seems almost disappointed.

Oh, no...he knows that I like him...that's what it is...he's worked it out... I've said too much and immediately regret it.

"No, Piper...we both know that the only one I care about is you," he says, running his thumbs over my cheekbones. "The only one I want..."

"You're not just saying that because you feel sorry for me?" I don't know what else to say.

"When have I ever done that? I don't feel sorry for you - if anything, right now I feel sorry for myself."

Now I'm even more confused.

"Never. And now's not the time to start," I reply.

He shrugs. "Didn't you notice the way I was looking at you earlier? No way."

"Kirk, it's me, Piper," I wave a hand in front of his face. "Your best friend. A sister from another mister..."

Suddenly he grabs my hand and pulls me in close, holding me against his chest, taking my breath away. "I never said that, you did. These past two years, since you let me in, I've dedicated practically every waking moment to you. Piper, if I was an iPhone, you'd be the Apple logo on the back," he says, staring straight into my eyes.

I've never heard anything so absurd and yet, at the same time, so beautiful.

“What...what are you trying to tell me, Kirk? I...” I stammer nervously.

“You sure you need me to be clearer?” His gaze intensifies.

“All I know is, I’ve no idea what you’re talking about...really...” I stutter.

“Okay...here goes...I can’t pretend anymore. I almost screwed up before, but who cares...” he says. He closes his eyes then opens them again, his gaze firm. “I’m in love with you. You’re my Star Girl,” he whispers, holding me tighter.

He’s messing with me.

No way.

It’s impossible.

While my thoughts run wild, I stare at him, willing my lips to move.

“See, I asked you...”

“No, Kirk, really...you can’t mess with me like this,” I finally manage to say.

“I love you, Piper. The only girl I ever wanted to be with is you, ever since you gave me that first smile. For years I tried to hide it, using other girls as a distraction. And it burned. It was useless. My pride was killing me. I could have any girl, except the one I’ve always wanted.” He looks very serious.

I’m fully focused. I don’t look away. I look straight into his eyes and I know he’s not lying.

“Kirk, you have no idea...I...how fast my heart beats when I see you. I can’t describe the way you make me feel...full disclosure, I’m not good at this...You...just the sound of your voice sends shivers through my whole body,” I confess breathlessly.

Kirk blinks. He looks shocked and for the first time I realize he never guessed the intensity, or the source, of my feelings. “You want the truth, Star Girl? All this time I’ve been terrified that if I told you how I felt, I’d lose you, that you’d be embarrassed and things would never be the same again,” he breathes, his face very close to mine.

“It was the same for me, Kirk...” I smile. “I figured it was better this way, that you were just looking out for me because Wade didn’t care, let’s face it, he doesn’t give a shit, rather than risk losing you.”

“You know something else, Star Girl? Maybe I shouldn’t have seen you in that skimpy little towel because I’ve never wanted to kiss you more than I do now. I don’t think I can resist...” he whispers, his lips almost on mine, his forehead pressed against mine.

I sigh and bite down on my lip. “Well, if you don’t kiss me, I’m going to

have to kiss you,” I find the courage to reply.

“You want this, Star Girl? You really want me?” He’s staring into my eyes again.

“I want you more than I want to be a champion swimmer. Is that enough for you?” I reply, without looking away.

Kirk’s green eyes seem to catch fire and his grip around me tightens as he pulls me in close against his body and I feel his excitement. Now I know he’s not lying.

A split second later, his mouth is on mine.

It’s our first kiss.

Just like in my dreams.

All those nights spent fantasizing about this moment, studying his mouth under the microscope of my dreams, staring at photos of us together, zooming in and out, wondering how I’d feel if he ever kissed me - but nothing in my fantasies could ever match the reality of this.

I clasp my hands behind his neck and squeeze him tight. When his tongue touches mine, I gasp against his lips while my body, in the throes of unknown emotions, rubs against his.

I’m dreaming, I repeat to myself, my heart in my throat.

Kirk’s hand works its way under my sweatshirt. His sweatshirt. I’m wearing nothing underneath and at his touch a feeling of intense heat stirs in my belly and the more he moves his hand along my body, the more I feel myself melting.

He squeezes my breast, rubbing his thumb over my nipple and I tremble at the unexpected sensations running through my body.

Suddenly he jerks his hand away. “Shit, sorry,” he mumbles in embarrassment, peeling his lips away from mine.

“It’s okay, it’s just that...” I stammer uneasily.

“...no one’s ever touched you like that before...sorry...I’ve been waiting for this for so long, I lost control,” he replies, planting tiny kisses over my face.

I kiss him back and stroke his face, amazed at my bravery, touching him like this. “You’re not regretting it?” I ask, noticing that his hands are still firmly around my waist.

“What? Of course not, I was just getting ahead of myself,” and he squeezes my hips.

“But I know...that you...” I continue, embarrassed.

“That doesn’t matter anymore, Star Girl, it’s in the past. What he have is worth so much more and there’s no way I’m jumping on you in the parking lot at Smith’s Point.” He strokes my hair.

“You don’t want me?” I ask, my heart pounding, unsure of what he means.

“I don’t want you? I want you so much I have to stop here, Piper. I don’t want it to happen like this.” He kisses me, once, twice...again and again, taking my breath away. “Do you still have doubts?” he asks, pretending to bite my nose.

“We...now...I mean...er...” My face is burning up. Kirk laughs. “Stop that!” I slap his arm.

“I guess that means we’re a couple now,” he grins.

“What? Just me and you?”

“Well, I wasn’t counting on inviting anyone else!”

“Idiot! You know what I mean.” I slap his arm again but he’s still laughing.

“Piper, what part of ‘I love you’ didn’t you understand? You’re the only one I want to be with. The other girls don’t count, they don’t exist anymore,” and he kisses me again.

What started out as a terrible day with me feeling gloomier than ever just turned into one of those days I’ll hold in my heart forever and it’s all thanks to Kirk, his sweetness, his beautiful voice, and the emotions he transmits.

Everything is exactly like I always dreamed it would be.

Chapter 21



I awake with a start, feeling groggy but not sure why - then I see Piper standing at the foot of the bed and it comes back to me.

She must have crept out of my arms while I was sleeping because she's dressed and ready to leave.

"So, you seduce and abandon me then think you can just run away?" I tease.

"For real?" she huffs, her hands on her hips. "Are you high?"

"I don't need drugs to get high, I am the high." I scoot down to the end of the bed and launch myself to my feet.

"Do you always wake up so full of energy?" she asks, gruffly. It's like she's forgotten all about last night and how she sobbed like a baby.

"Nope...only when someone I care about goes through something

traumatic and, though I offer to help, she runs out on me without saying goodbye or telling me where she's going," I say, my hands on her shoulders.

Trembling, Piper glances down. "I wasn't running away. I always get up early. Plus, today's my day off, there's no reason for me to be here," she says, still staring down at the floor.

"Piper, that guy's still out there, I need to know where you're heading." I tilt her chin so she's looking at me, but then I see the bruise on her pale skin and almost explode with rage.

I hope for his sake I don't run into him because I could do some serious damage before the cops arrived.

Piper stares at me with those huge green eyes, almost challenging me to look away first, but I don't.

It's pretty clear she wanted to creep out without saying anything, but if she thinks she can exclude me from things now, she can think again.

The situation is much bigger than her and she can't handle it on her own. Besides, we have certain things to clear up.

"I'm going to go to the police, file a report, like you said last night. They can't ignore me this time, I'm the victim. Then I have to get that door fixed."

"I'll get dressed and drive you over," I offer immediately.

"You don't need to do that," she refuses, shaking her head.

"Yes, I do."

"No, really. You're busy with the album, you can't run around after me all day," she says.

Shit! She's right! I mentally slap my forehead.

I can't just go MIA for the whole day.

"Okay," I sigh. "But don't go disappearing on me, Piper. Keep me updated," I say, staring deep into her eyes. I grab a sheet of paper and scribble my number on it and hand it to her. "Text me after you speak to the cops, let me know what they say."

"Sure," she nods, slipping it into her pocket.

My mind races, trying to find an excuse to keep her here, but I don't know where to start. If she goes to the police, they'll take her home again, to check out the situation, gather evidence, etc.

"Piper, I'm not kidding. Text me," I remind her when she's at the door.

She nods again and she's gone.

However, when I look around the room and notice her bag is still here I feel a rush of relief.

I get dressed and head outside to find Sherman. He's sitting at a table in the garden, sipping coffee - and he looks pissed.

"You're looking cheerful this morning," I say, sitting down next to him.

"I spent most of the night on the phone with Laetitia, arguing," he replies, setting down his coffee cup. "She wants me to go back to New York on Saturday for some bloody party. She knows I can't, but she went off on one, screaming at me. Sometimes it's like she thinks her schedule is more important than mine and even worse, all she cares about is appearances."

"Appearances?"

"She says that if she rocks up to the party alone, then she'll look bad and that it's all my fault, that I should be at her side, that people will talk, say I don't care about her and all that crap. In the end I told her that people could say the same about her, since she skipped off back to New York, instead of staying here with me," he says, rolling his eyes.

"I guess I'd have done the same, when it's too much..." I leave the sentence hanging.

"By the way, I saw housekeeping coming out of your place. When she saw me, her face turned fifty shades of purple, then she ran away. I'm guessing she wasn't there just to turn down your bed," he winks, nudging me.

"You guess wrong. It's not what you think, and if you see her again, try not to be a total jerk."

"What am I supposed to think when I see the staff creeping out of your bungalow at the crack of dawn?"

"I told you already, it's complicated. I've known Piper for years, literally since we were kids, and right now she's having a tough time. She slept over at mine last night, but I didn't sleep with her, okay?" I explain, keeping it vague.

He flashes me a strange look, but I made it more than clear that I'm not in the mood for jokes. He opens his mouth to say something but then the guys arrive and he changes his mind.

Despite everything, it's business as usual and we start rehearsals again.

At first everything goes smoothly. I'm feeling fine, but the more time passes, the more I wonder why Piper hasn't been in touch and if something has happened.

When I screw up yet another riff, Jaxon raises his hand for everyone to stop, then turns to me.

"Kirk...what the...? What's wrong with you? I've never seen you make so

many mistakes all at once. Where's your head at? We can't work like this," he snaps, his hands on his hips. He's trying not to lose it but it's clear his patience is running out.

I slip my bass over my head, place it on the floor and look at my bandmates, the people I share my life with, and decide to come clean. They deserve it.

"First of all, I owe you guys an apology. There's a reason why I'm so distracted. I'm seriously worried about Piper, the girl from housekeeping. I've known her for years and she's in a terrible situation right now..." and I quickly run through what happened yesterday.

"Whoa, that's scary!" Jaxon exclaims when I'm done. "No wonder you're so frazzled. You should have told me before we got started, you know I would have told you to go with her. If some freak looking for money and drugs attacked Skylar, I don't know what I'd do."

"I'm sorry, but my head's all over the place," I admit, brushing my hair back from my face.

"Kirk, there's nothing to discuss here. Go to her, stay close to her," Jaxon says, pointing to the door. "And tell her not to go too far, she could still be in danger."

"You don't mind? It's not a problem?" I ask, not wanting to cause trouble.

"You're too stressed out to stay, and this is serious. Really, that girl could be in danger. Go, Kirk. Go find her," Jaxon looks around at the other guys, who nod in assent.

He doesn't have to say it twice. In a shot I'm out of the door and in the car, heading for the Nantucket Town Police Station, hoping to catch Piper there.

When I get there, however, I'm informed that the chief of police has left with someone and that they're not authorized to tell me anything else. Assuming he's with Piper and that they've gone over to her place, I head straight over there.

When I arrive there's no Chief, no Piper, just two cops loading Wade's bike onto a trailer to take away as evidence.

Piper, where are you?

Following my instincts, I head back to town, hoping I've anticipated her next move.

It's early afternoon on a beautiful sunny autumn day and, if I weren't so worried, I'd almost feel happy. It feels like spring, one of those glorious days that makes you want to stop what you're doing and lie down and soak up the

sun.

When I'm near town, I pull over and, with the help of my cell phone, do a quick search for local glaziers.

I'm in luck.

I've not gone far before I catch sight of Piper's blonde hair through a store window and make my way over.

"Do you have anything a little cheaper, maybe?" I hear her ask as I walk through the door.

"Glass for doors like yours doesn't come cheap, Piper," a guy sighs. "I'm giving you cost price, but I have to charge for labor."

"Whatever it costs, this will cover it," I intervene, placing my credit card on the counter.

Piper blushes bright red when she realizes it's me. It's obvious she doesn't like me overhearing the conversation, but I don't care.

"That won't be necessary, Tom," she snaps, as the guy looks from me to Piper to the card and back again.

"Something has to be done about that door, and as money isn't a problem for me..." I reply, pushing the card toward Tom.

"Kirk, no!" Piper objects.

Ignoring her protests, I turn back to Tom. "Do what you have to."

He nods and takes my card.

It feels just like ten years ago. Once more, I'm paying for Piper and, seriously, given my doubts about her past intentions, it feels pretty weird.

I came looking for her, I walked in here, I put my card on the table, she never asked me for anything, I tell myself, feeling the demons from the past beginning to resurface. Then something occurs to me. *Ten years ago she never asked either. At least not directly.*

I know she's still in shock after what happened, but we need to talk.

If what I thought about her isn't true, then how come she never got in touch?

And Tracee's comments about the way I treated her? What was she getting at?

Tom hands my card back, bringing me back to the present. "One of my guys will be out there in a few, he'll take care of everything."

We leave the shop in silence, but as soon as we're out the door, Piper doesn't waste a moment.

"As soon as I get to the ATM, I'll get your money."

“We’re good, Piper.”

“I have the money,” she says, hands on hips.

“I don’t doubt it, but I overheard the conversation back there, so don’t pretend it’s not a problem for you. Honestly, it’s okay,” I say, placing my hands on her shoulders to reassure her.

“Kirk, you can’t do this...” she mumbles.

“Can’t do what, exactly?”

“I’m used to...”

She’s interrupted by high-pitched shriek. “Kirk Jenkin! We must stop meeting like this!”

A rather flashily dressed woman runs over to join us.

I don’t recognize her at first, but then I get a closer look – it’s Olyvia, one of Vicky Sandoval’s clique from high school, who just happened to be at the pub the other night.

I don’t know if it’s the heavy make-up or the clothes or if she’s just ageing badly, but now I see her in daylight, I realize she looks more like a forty-year old soccer mom.

“Hi, Olyvia,” I greet her politely.

“How funny, bumping into you again...and Piper’s here too,” she announces with a flirty grin. “How about a kiss, for old times’ sake?” And she almost throws herself at me.

Since when were we such good friends? I wonder. Was I a little too friendly with her the other night?

I lean in and give her a peck on the cheek. I kiss so many fans like this, one more won’t make any difference.

Though nobody actually asks, Olyvia launches into a fast paced monologue about everything she’s done over the past ten years, how she models for a mail order catalogue, etc. She points to her suit and tells me it was a gift from the people at the catalogue.

“Good for you,” I reply, though I’m paying her very little attention.

“So, have you seen Vicky yet?” she asks slyly. “You were so close.”

For a brief instant, a shadow passes over Piper's face. It’s a split second, but it feels like we’re still in school.

“Were we?” I reply, mimicking her tone.

“I get it, I mean, she’s a married lady now, but if you feel like looking her up, you’ll find her on Martha’s Vineyard, at the Captain Morse House hotel. It’s her husband’s place, I’m sure he won’t mind...an old friend visiting an

old friend,” she smirks knowingly.

“I’ll bear that in mind.” I’m trying to keep my eyes from rolling hard.

I could not care less. I just want to get rid of her as soon as possible.

“Oh, it’s so hot today,” she fans herself with her hand when she realizes the Vicky question is dead in the water. “It feels like spring.”

“Yup...” Why doesn’t she just go away?

Instead, she turns toward Piper with a smug grin. “Must be awful, wearing that sweatshirt in this heat, but what can you do? You have to cover up somehow.”

Piper flinches and I see a flash of pain in her eyes. I’m still feeling like we’ve been catapulted back to high school and I’m about to tell Olyvia to back off, when Piper speaks up.

“Well, I’d love to stay and chat about clothes, the weather and setting up my friend with her old flame behind her husband’s back, but I’ve an urgent date with the glazier, so I’ll say goodbye,” she says, climbing onto her bike and riding away.

What the fuck? She’s run out on me again.

“So, Kirk. Coffee?” Olyvia asks, slipping her arm through mine.

“Sorry. I’m busy.” I slip my arm from hers and head to the car.

I catch up with Piper but she refuses to let me drive her home and by the time I pull up outside her house, the glazier has already made a start on fixing the door.

Piper supervises his work until late afternoon, when he finishes.

I don’t know if she thought I was going to give up and leave at any time, but I can be pretty stubborn - and if anyone knows that, it’s her.

I take a moment to think over what Olyvia said, as her words have been buzzing around my head ever since. At first I thought she was up to her old tricks and teasing Piper about her money problems, but now I realize she was alluding to her being covered up all the time and I don’t get it.

“Thanks for that. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can,” Piper says when the glazier leaves. “The door’s fixed, I’ll sleep here tonight.”

“No way!” I exclaim.

“This is my house and I won’t be forced out of it by some goon with a grudge against Wade. Besides, he knew I was telling the truth,” she shrugs, turning and making her way back into the house.

I grab her by the arm before she can walk off. “This is crazy! You can’t stay here, especially now you filed a report. And that guy made himself pretty

clear when he threatened you.”

“You were the one who told me to report it!” she snaps.

“Sure - and I’m not saying you shouldn’t have, but you have to be safe and staying here isn’t at all safe,” I try to make her understand.

“Kirk. I don’t need a babysitter,” she exclaims. “I can take care of myself. I’m used to it. I’ve been alone for years! Years of trying to keep Wade clean, of looking after my mother, until she died. I don’t need help from you or anyone else.” Her lips purse into a hard line.

“You were alone because I wasn’t here and I didn’t know what was happening. I’m here now and I know everything. I refuse to leave you alone so, you don’t come with me, I stay here.”

“God, you’re exhausting,” she sniffs.

“I always have been, remember?” I reply with a wink. “So, you coming back with me, or no?”

“Okay,” she sighs, like she’s doing me a huge favor.

I want to ask her about Olyvia, but the atmosphere in the car is tense enough as it is and I don’t want to give her another excuse to run away.

She doesn’t seem very willing to share facts about her life with me and it feels increasingly like back in the day, when I had to work hard every day to earn her trust.

When we get to the bungalow, I see we’re not alone.

Taking advantage of my absence and the beautiful sunny day, the guys are on their way back from the beach.

Piper takes one look at them and stiffens, but I keep my hand firmly on her shoulder and make the necessary introductions, even though they’ve all seen her before.

I feel the tension in her body, until Skylar comes over.

“I have to change Miss Poopy-Pants here, you want to come back to mine with me and Chloe?” she says with her beautiful, open smile.

For a moment Piper seems undecided: stay or go? But the look on Skylar’s face convinces her to accept.

“All good?” Jaxon asks when we’re alone.

“No news for now. She filed a report, the cops impounded her brother’s bike and we got the door fixed. That’s about it,” I say, summing up the day.

“You think that guy could come back?” he asks.

“He’s not the only problem. There’s her brother, Wade, and Piper seems hell bent on refusing my help. I know I haven’t seen her in ten years, but

she's being unreasonable and I still don't have a clear idea of what's going on," I say sincerely.

"Anything I can do, let me know." He puts a hand on my shoulder. "Seems like the girls are making her feel at home," he adds, pointing to the corner of the garden near his bungalow, where the three girls are chatting animatedly.

"I hope so, and that she doesn't try and run out on me again."

Chapter 22



Summer 2010

Summer's here, everyone's having fun. Everyone except Piper.

I love her and I don't care if we spend every weekend stuck in the house with Rowena, who's too stoned to take care of herself, but it's only right that Piper has fun too.

Wade, as usual, is too busy thinking of Wade to even consider his little sister.

Perhaps I'm being overprotective, but I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say Wade is the worst brother, ever.

He's stopped asking for money every time he sees me - that doesn't mean

he's stopped getting into all kinds of trouble. I'm still pissed about Boston - and everything I had to do to keep it from Piper.

A while back I had to pick him up from this house deep in the woods belonging to some paranoid prepper called AK Andy, which was pretty scary. But that wasn't all...

He also owed a thousand dollars to some guy who'd given him drugs to sell. Somehow, Wade had managed to mislay them, which didn't go down too well. I settled the debt, obviously, but that was when I realized we weren't dealing with two-bit pushers anymore but pros, people who'd wipe out your family without batting an eye over one stupid mistake.

Anyway, I need to speak to him. I've a surprise planned for Piper this weekend. I don't think she even remembers what a vacation is, and if I don't do anything, it will be like that for a long time.

Not that I've planned anything lavish, but I'm sure my surprise will put a smile on her face, one of those smiles that make her eyes light up. I can't explain how I feel when I see her eyes shine like that.

So, as soon as I see Piper leave the house to go to the store, I take my chance.

Wade opens the door. "She's not here."

"I know, that's why I came," I say, crossing my arms. "To talk to you."

"Why? I've not asked for money for some time," he mutters, stepping onto the porch.

"That's not why I'm here. I just wanted to let you know you're on babysitting duty this weekend."

"What? Nah, no way, dude. No way I'm staying home on a Saturday night, I have plans."

"Not this weekend, *dude*," I shrug.

"You're giving the orders now?" he asks, puffing out his chest. "I should stay home because you tell me?"

"Because your sister's sixteen, she has every right to enjoy herself. It's summer for her too, and this weekend we're going camping," I say, holding his gaze.

"Yeah, sixteen. She can have all the fun she wants when she's older," he snorts.

I point a finger at his chest and get right up in his face. "I don't really care what you think, Wade. Don't come the caring older brother now, when you have no idea what Piper does and care even less. This weekend your sister

and I are going away and you, as the responsible adult you are, are going to stay home and take care of your mother.”

“And if I don’t? You think you’re so superior, just because you have money. Do you have any idea how many guys I know down at the port who’d do me a solid, any time, no questions asked.”

He actually has the nerve to threaten me, after everything I’ve done for him?

I was hoping he’d back down and do the right thing. That he’d realize he was in the wrong but, no. All he thinks of is himself. In the end, I play the only card that works with him.

“Put it this way. You don’t do as I ask and, come Monday, you don’t get the five hundred bucks I was planning on giving you in exchange for the favor,” I announce.

“Five hundred?” his eyes open wide. “To stay home all weekend? You’re joking, right?”

“Nope, deadly serious but, since you can’t be trusted, you only get the money on Monday - and you have to promise me Piper never finds out I had to pay you for something you should be doing for free.” I state my conditions.

“Okay.” He holds out his hand. “It’s a deal.” We shake hands and I turn to leave, but Wade isn’t quite done. “She must be good if you’re willing to pay big bucks for just one weekend. There are girls down at the club who’d do it for much less,” he calls smugly.

I know I should ignore him and walk away, but I can’t. I spin round and face up to him, our faces less than an inch apart. “The only reason I’m letting you get away with that is because I don’t want to upset Piper. Talk about her like that again and, I swear, all your little friends won’t be enough to put you back together again once I’m done with you.”

Wade raises his hands defensively. “Whoa, whoa! I was kidding, man.”

“Wade, just tell me you’re not going to screw up anymore,” I look him straight in the eye.

“I try man but, you know, I need cash and...” he shrugs.

“Shit, Wade! It’s summer, get a job in one of the bars you’re so fond of. You want money? Work for it, stay away from all that bullshit. You’re putting your sister in danger. What if that guy from Boston had turned up here? Piper’s all alone with your mother, while you’re off getting drunk or stoned. What if she got hurt or something? Christ, Wade, you’re so fucking

dumb.” It’s hard to resist the urge to shake him, hard.

“But it didn’t happen, did it? We cleared that mess up, you helped me,” he says, as if we’re not talking about a considerable sum of money.

“I’ve always helped you, Wade, and not because I care about you, that’s for sure, but could you try and avoid screwing up again?” I jab my finger in his chest.

“I’ll pay you back, as soon as I get the money together,” he promises.

“I don’t give two fucks about the money. I don’t want it, burn it for all I care...I care about your sister, you know I do, otherwise I wouldn’t have bailed you out all those times,” I snap. “If it weren’t for Piper, I would have left you in the shit where you belong a long time ago. You’re a parasite, and things around here have to change.” I grab his shoulders and shake him. “I’m serious, Wade.”

“Did you come over here to insult me?” he tilts his chin arrogantly.

“Wade!” I stick my finger in his face, and he takes a step back. “Enough, already. Shut the fuck up and listen.” His mouth snaps shut and he stares at me. “Your mom’s a big enough problem as it is, Piper can’t take care of your screw ups too. I’m telling you straight. I leave for Harvard soon and I won’t be here to save your ass every day but, nothing has to happen to Piper. Understand? I want her to graduate high school with no problems then join me at Harvard. If she keeps up her grades and the swim team, she’ll get a full ride. But, if someone, one of your gang buddies, anyone, so much as touches a hair on her head, I will personally find you and kill you. Have I made myself clear?”

“Perfectly,” he nods.

“Good. Don’t make me repeat myself,” I threaten one last time, before turning and heading for home before Piper comes back and my surprise is ruined.

I know I’m lucky. My parents set up a bank account for my college fund. I’m allowed to access it and, before we moved here, I was pretty responsible with my spending, also because, the deal is whatever I take out, I have to put back.

Now, I’m gradually working my way through it, so I can help some kid on his way to becoming a hopeless junkie, all because of his sister. I wish I could stop, but Wade is a loose cannon, he doesn’t care about the danger he puts her in and, honestly, I’d give him anything as long as it keeps her safe.



Next morning, eight o'clock on the dot, I ring Piper's doorbell.

"Kirk!" she exclaims when she sees me. "Why so early?"

"I'm taking you away for the weekend," I explain, pointing to my car.

"I'd love to, really, but I can't leave Mom," she replies despondently.

"I squared it with Wade. He's going to stay with her instead," I grin, giving her a boop on the nose.

"For real? You're not tricking me?" she asks excitedly.

"For real!"

"Oh, my God...I can't believe it!" she yelps, throwing her arms around my neck and planting a kiss on my lips. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," I arch an eyebrow and pull her in close.

"What do I bring? You can tell me that, at least."

"Mmmm...let me see..." I scratch my chin, pretending to think about it.

"Kirk!" she pleads, nudging my elbow.

"Okay, then. How about a bikini and comfortable clothes?" I say, with a huge grin.

"Just one thing..." she sighs sadly, glancing down at her shoes. "I don't have any money."

"No problem. I brought a tent and I've packed more than enough food, all you have to do is get changed and we're good to go!"

"You've already gifted me with clothes and the new swimsuit, with the excuse that now we're a couple you're springing surprises on me, but I don't want to be a burden." She rests her head on my chest.

"Making the person I love happy is what counts. One day when I'm a penniless musician and you're an Olympic swimmer, it will be your turn to support me."

She flashes me one of her wonderful smiles and kisses me. "I'll be right back," she yells, running inside and heading upstairs.

A few minutes later she's back, carrying a small tote, and though I want to keep her in suspense as long as possible, as soon as we get to the ferry it

becomes pretty clear where we're headed.

"Martha's Vineyard?" she asks enthusiastically.

"There's this place I've been dying to visit but I wanted to go with you," I explain, with a grin. "I've seen the photos and it looks amazing."

"Mmm...is it the same place I'm thinking?"

"We'll soon find out." *Is it? I'm feeling anxious now.*

The ferry docks and we park up, then walk to the place I've been longing to visit, our arms wrapped around each other.

"I can't believe it...you love the Gingerbread Houses too?"

"See...we're soul mates!" I stroke her face with one hand and lean in to kiss her.

Piper kisses me back, her arms tight around my shoulders, and I remind myself to take it slow with her. I don't want it to be like with the others. I want her first time to be perfect and, most of all, I want her to feel ready.

I love her so much. I never thought it possible to feel this way about anyone, not until I met her. Now her smile is enough to make me happy too.

We begin our stroll through Oak Bluffs, taking in the splendid Victorian cottages, or The Gingerbread Houses, as they're known - more than three hundred pastel-colored summer cottages; yellow, lilac, sky blue, Pepto pink, dripping with intricate wooden trim and decorated with heart, angel, starfish and shell motifs. To complete the look, there are rocking chairs on each porch, balconies and turrets, lace curtains blowing in the salty breeze. Circuit Avenue winds round it, bordered with shops, and Piper and I stop and browse each window we come to.

When we finish the tour, we make our way back to the car and I explain where I intend spending the night. The elated look on Piper's face tells me I hit the mark again.

Joseph Sylvia State Beach is known for its soft white sand and shallow waters and is one of the most famous public beaches on Martha's Vineyard. Five miles long, it sits between Oak Bluff and Edgartown, on a narrow stretch of land facing east, accessible by a bridge, known as Jaws Bridge, because it was used as a location for the famous movie.

I pitch the tent, then take out the cooler with the sandwiches I brought from home and we eat under the blue night sky, the large candles strategically placed around the tent illuminating the scene, the sound of waves breaking on the beach providing the soundtrack to our meal.

The sand, still warm from the sun, caresses our skin, in contrast to the cool

ocean breeze. As usual, we try and count the stars but lose count after just three seconds and end up starting over.

“You think we’ll ever be able to count them all?” Piper asks with a soft smile.

“I think it’s destined to remain one of life’s great unsolved mysteries. We don’t need to know, all we need to know is that counting them makes us happy.” I turn to look at her and our eyes meet. Her eyes are so deep and green I could drown in them.

Suddenly, Piper shifts her attention to the tent behind us. “Did I see your guitar?” she asks, hugging her knees tight.

I love it when she blushes. We’ve been together for a while now but expressing her desires still makes her embarrassed.

“Sure, I know how much you love it, plus the surprises aren’t over yet...” I reply cryptically, getting to my feet.

I changed some of the lyrics to my song and tweaked the tune again. I can finally tell her that the song was inspired by my feelings for her. I wanted to tell her right from the start, but decided to wait until I was satisfied, until it was perfect.

I begin to play and can’t get over the way she looks at me.

“I still think you should think about a career in music. I love that you play exclusively for me, I love the privilege of listening to you, but you’re such a natural talent, you can’t give it up and head in a different direction,” she says.

“You know what? I’m starting to think that too,” I nod.

“You’ll find a way, Kirk. You’re smart, you know what you want. You’re the kind of guy who, once they set their mind on something, they go all out to get it and, if music is what you want, go for it.” Her gaze is so intense that, for a moment, what she says feels like an absolute certainty.

“You too...you’re going to have an amazing swim career,” I try to give her the same encouragement she gave me. “You’re passionate and, more important, you’re talented.”

“Coach Cooper says I have real promise. If I keep my grades up, I should qualify for financial aid at Harvard...I still can’t believe it. I actually have a chance to go to Harvard, with you!” She throws her arms around my neck and kisses me.

I nod excitedly. “As soon as you join me, we’ll get a place together.”

“I’ll miss you though. Not being able to look out my window and see you every day will hurt.”

I tilt her face to mine and kiss her. “I’ll miss you too, but I’ll be back every weekend. We already spoke about his, Harvard is only a few hours away...or I’ll send you money for the bus so you can come see me. Nothing’s going to change, it’s just going to be better.” I pull her in tight, stroking her hips.

“I have to pinch myself, my wishes are finally coming true, it doesn’t seem real,” she grins.

A shooting star arcs through the sky above us.

“Quick, make a wish.”

“I don’t need to,” Piper says softly.

“Really?”

“Nope, I have everything I want right here.”

She kisses me. It feels like we’re now a single entity, that without Piper I couldn’t even breathe and, suddenly, I decide to tell her everything, not just about the song.

“Piper, there’s something you should know,” I stroke her face. “I should have told you before, but it’s hard for me...”

“You can tell me anything, you know that.” She places her hand over mine.

“I told you about Melody, but I never told you who she was...”

“No,” she sighs, “but it’s clear you loved her very much.” And her expression darkens.

“Not the way I love you, Piper. She was my sister.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. “Your sister? Oh, my God...I’m so sorry...is that why you get my family so much? Why your parents have always been so accepting of our friendship?”

“Your hair, Piper...it’s just like hers. I used to catch my mother watching you from the window, you know? Since we met, my feelings for you have gone much deeper. The truth is, before, when I played guitar, it was to ease my pain, but also to punish myself. After her death, I felt so frustrated, so guilty...” I’m building up to the worse part.

“What do you mean, you were punishing yourself?”

“Melody was a junkie. Heroin. My parents tried everything to get her clean, they even cut off her allowance. That afternoon she came to me, begging for money. We had a fight and I refused. It wasn’t about the money, I just couldn’t stand the idea of her using it for drugs.

“That night I heard her arguing on the phone, then I heard her moving around the house, like she was looking for something. I thought about getting

up, checking on her but, in the end, I pretended I was asleep, anything to avoid another argument. Sometime later, I heard her open the front door. I was afraid she was going to run, but then she closed it again and I heard her come upstairs. Eventually I fell asleep. Next day she was dead. Overdose. Someone brought smack to the house, she paid for it with my dad's figurine collection. If only I'd gone downstairs, if only I'd checked on her, perhaps she'd still be alive..." my stomach tightens at the thought.

"Oh, Kirk...it wasn't your fault." She takes my face in her hands. "You did well not to give her that money. I ignore my mother sometimes, pretend I can't hear her. It's only human. As much as we love them, addicts wear you down." And I know she understands me perfectly.

"The guilt tore me apart. I tried to keep the family together, give my parents something to live for. I was the only child they had left, but I was doing it for two. I feel so ashamed, Piper. In the beginning, when I didn't have the courage to be your friend in front of everyone else, it was because I always have to be number one. Whatever I do, I have to be the best, and I wanted my parents to be proud of me. I was terrified of being the outsider, of letting them down, and I'm so sorry for all those times on the bus...all those things..."

"Don't say that. No one's ever taken care of me like you. You had your reasons..." She hugs me so tight it's almost like she's putting me together again.

"There is one good thing though..." I grin. She stares at me, waiting.

"You transformed my concept of music, turned it into something beautiful. When we started hanging out, I started composing for you. You turned a painful memory into something I love and that song, the one you always ask me to sing, I wrote it for you. It's always been *your* song," I confess, before kissing her again.

Her body is pressed close to mine and, as she's wearing only a swimsuit, it takes all my willpower to control myself.

It's time to give her my gift. I peel my lips away from hers. "This is for you, Star Girl. A good luck gift for the next year." I hand her the tiny package.

Her eyes shining in the dark, Piper quickly unwraps the tiny box. "They're beautiful," she gasps. "I'll never take them out, I swear..." She holds up the gold, star-shaped earrings.

"As soon as I saw them, I thought of you." I grin, watching her put them

in.

“How do I look?” she asks, giving me her profile.

“Like a star. Two stars for my Star Girl,” I say and she hugs me.

When the wind gets up and the temperatures drop we take refuge inside the tent. As we lay on our bedrolls, I feel Piper shiver, and pull her in against my chest, holding her tight.

She lets out a soft moan and I think I’m going crazy, then she raises her hands and links them round my neck, and our kiss intensifies.

I place my hands flat on her breasts, squeezing and kneading, and she moans again, arching her back.

She raises her arm and I’m not sure what she’s doing until the strap of her bikini top tumbles down.

She pulls away and stares deep into my eyes. “This time don’t stop. I want to know how it feels to be touched by you,” she whispers, a blush spreading across her cheeks.

“Are you sure?” I ask, worried.

“I need to feel it.”

I cover her mouth with mine and tug at the top half of her bikini. I’m so aroused it almost feels like the first time for me too. I touch her breasts again, but this time it’s flesh on flesh. Piper moans and I feel her excitement growing, as I tease her nipples, which harden immediately.

“Do you like that?”

“Yes...do you?” She seems so innocent.

“I could touch you forever,” I reply, kissing her again, then working my way down her body with my lips.

Her flushed face and eyes misted with desire are the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

I run my hands down her body, then brush my fingertips along the edge of her bikini bottom and she raises her pelvis, thrusting it against me.

For the first time ever I’m going to cum in my pants, I think, almost amused at the thought of such an embarrassing thing happening during what is the most beautiful and sensual moment of my life.

I run my fingertips down her leg, along her inner thigh and up toward her groin. Piper’s hips move faster and faster, rubbing against my erection. Slipping a finger under the elastic of her bikini, I look into her eyes. “You want me to stop?”

“No... no...” she replies hoarsely.

I don't have to be told twice.

I kiss her and slowly slide a finger inside her. She's hot and wet. This is the first time I've ever explored her and I don't want to miss a thing, so I pull my lips away from hers so I can see her face. She's breathing fast now, her head back against my shoulders, her face flushed, and when my index finger glides over her clitoris, she opens her eyes wide, unprepared for the sensations overwhelming her.

"So intense..." she gasps, halfway between a sigh and a moan.

"Sssh...just let yourself go," I reassure her, moving my finger in circles.

"And you...?" she breathes, her blush deepening.

"Keep rubbing against me like this, I'll probably come before you."

I kiss her, sucking her bottom lip, tugging at it, while with one hand I tease her nipple, the fingers of my other hand moving faster and faster over her clitoris.

Piper starts to moan, her head moving from side to side. She spreads her legs to give me better access while her hips push wildly against my own, arousing me even further. I see the pleasure in her eyes and wonder how much longer I can hold out.

"Kirk..." she groans.

She says my name again, ten, a hundred times, until her eyes fly open and she yells it. Her body starts to shake, her head falls back, and her face takes on an expression so incredible, so intense, that for a moment I think I'm going to lose my mind. Then I come too, trembling with her, for her, kissing her.

I take it slowly. I want her to feel how much I love her and when I finally pull away, the look in her eyes tells me she already knows.



I awake in the pale light of dawn. Piper and I in the same sleeping bag, our arms and legs wrapped around each other.

I can't describe how good it feels to hold her in my arms. I spend at least thirty minutes just looking at her, then I head to the showers along the beach to freshen up - after last night, I need it.

I dry myself off then go back to the tent to check on Piper. She's still asleep, so I leave a note saying I'll be right back with a surprise, then head off to hunt down breakfast.

When I get back, bearing warm muffins and caramel lattes, Piper is sitting outside the tent. She hears me approach, turns her head and greets me with that incredible smile.

We spend the rest of the day wandering around Martha's Vineyard before, reluctantly, taking the ferry home.

"I can't thank you enough, Kirk. These past couple of days have been the best days, ever, of any summer, ever," Piper smiles when I drop her off.

"Ditto," I grin. "Especially waking up with you in my arms," I add, bending to kiss her.

"Not fair...I woke up and you were gone!" she pouts.

"I was getting breakfast." I kiss her nose. She frowns, pretending to be angry. "Summer's not over yet...who knows...perhaps my parents will take off for a vacation and you can sleep over while they're away," I suggest, kissing her again.

It's hard to tear myself away, but I have to get home.

Maybe it's because I'm so happy, perhaps it's because it takes me so completely by surprise, but when I walk through the door the reception I receive floors me.

"Kirk," my father announces as soon as she sees me, "We need to talk..."

He and my mother are perched on the couch. My mother nods at the chair opposite.

I drop my bag and sit down.

"My time here's almost up, Kirk." My father gets straight to the point. "The office just let me know that they're pulling the plug on the research project."

"And...?" I ask, a lump forming in my throat.

"Well, once summer ends, we're going to terminate the lease and head back to New York. We'll have the party for your 18th, as planned, then ship everything home. We need to get back to our old lives and back to normal. Melody's death was a terrible trauma, we'll always feel her absence, but it's time to get back on track," my father explains.

"But...you've always worked in different places while Mom and I stayed in New York...what difference does it make if we stay here?" I'm desperate to find a valid excuse.

“I don’t see the problem, Kirk. You’re leaving for college soon, you won’t even be here.”

“Kirk, staying home in New York while your father traveled was different,” it’s my mom’s turn now. “My paper has its office there, and living here, working remotely, well, I’m missing out on a lot of chances. The time we spent here helped us all get over the trauma, but your dad’s right, it’s time to go back, otherwise I would have suggested staying longer too.”

I want to say something, put up a fight, but how can I stand in the way of my mom’s career?

“I know I’ll be leaving for Harvard soon, but here we’re close. Well, the same state anyway. I planned on coming back here on the weekend. Couldn’t we at least keep the house, even for a while...?” I suggest, hoping they’ll agree. It would be cool to have some place to stay, until Piper joins me, then it won’t matter anyway. “I’ll get a job, help pay for it,” I add, hoping my gesture of goodwill convinces them.

My parents exchange knowing looks.

“There’s something else we need to talk about...” my dad continues, weighing his words very carefully. I stare at him, waiting for him to continue. “You’ve always been a good kid, until now you never gave us any particular worries but...just lately we’ve noticed some increasingly substantial amounts being withdrawn from your college fund. Is everything okay?”

Shit! Shit! Shit! I should have known he’d notice eventually.

“Honey, if it’s the same thing as...as Melody...we deserve to know,” my mother says sadly.

“Do I look like I do drugs?” I ask, raising my voice.

“No, Kirk, you don’t, but admit it, all this money...it’s a little suspicious. Is there some other reason?” my father asks, his hands joined in prayer.

“I don’t have a problem and I don’t do drugs,” I blurt. “I’ve been helping someone...”

“That girl? Kirk, it’s fine you want to help her, just be careful she doesn’t take advantage,” my mother declares. “I could be wrong, but money holds a strong attraction for some people.”

“You’re wrong. I didn’t spend it on Piper. Okay, I’m helping her, but indirectly. She doesn’t know anything about it.”

“We’ve all been young, Kirk. At your age love can be so intoxicating...it blinds you...” my mother sighs. “I encouraged you to help her, too...that blonde hair, it reminded me so much of your sister...but Piper isn’t Melody.”

“I know and it’s obvious that my feelings for my sister are different. I haven’t confused the two and I’m not so stupid as to let Piper make a fool of me. What we have is special. I love her. I love Piper.” *Could I be any clearer?*

“I didn’t mean to offend you or her,” my mom nods. “But we’re talking substantial sums of money...if you didn’t give it to her, what did you do with it?”

I don’t know what else to say. My only option at this point is honesty.

“Wade...her brother. I paid off his drug debts. He was in trouble and I was scared they’d hurt Piper...Mom, she knows nothing about it.” I confess, without adding too many details.

“Oh, Kirk...once you let people like that get their hooks into you, you’ll never see the end of it.”

“He said he’d quit.” Hearing myself say it, I realize how gullible I sound.

“We all know that’s never going to happen. I agree with your mother,” my dad interrupts.

“Who knows...I’m not going to help him forever anyway, just until Piper can get away from here and join me at Harvard. They could blow the house up around him then and I wouldn’t care.”

“Kirk, it’s not the money that’s the problem. That money came from your college fund and need I remind you we made a deal? What comes out goes back in, from your own pocket. Now, you can go,” my father nods, dismissing me.

“Wait...what about the house? Keeping it on for a while, so I can come here on weekends?” I turn the conversation back to what interests me the most.

My parents exchange another loaded look.

“Okay, leave it with us, will you?” my father replies, my mother nodding at his side. “I need time, I don’t want to rush into anything.”

Whatever it takes, I have to convince them.

How am I going to tell Piper? When we said goodbye just a few minutes ago she was so happy. Now I’m going to have to break it to her that, probably, when I go to Harvard, we won’t see each other as often as we thought.

I won’t say anything for now. I don’t want to worry her unnecessarily. Who knows, maybe my parents will decide to keep the house on and everything will be just as we planned.

“We’re done for now,” my father nods and I get to my feet.

I don’t know which way to turn. The thought of being so far away from Piper is literally killing me. Eventually, I drag myself to the hall, where I gather my things, then take refuge in my room.

Chapter 23



Skylar and Chloe are great. They immediately make me feel welcome. I don't know if it's because I don't know them and they know nothing about me, so I don't feel they're watching my every movement, or if it's because we genuinely made a connection, but chatting with them really takes me out of myself.

The African hedgehog is called Jax...short for Jaxon...and Skylar's story about the night Jaxon came face to face with his namesake is hilarious. It turns out she and Jaxon met again after many years apart too...just that Skylar wasn't hiding a secret like mine, a secret that, once revealed, transforms you into a different person forever.

Sometimes it feels like I died and I'm suspended in a kind of limbo,

hovering between Life Before and Life After. Since that day I've been a different person. I'm alive, but my dreams, my ambitions, my goals of becoming a swimming champion, are dead.

Chloe, on the other hand, tells me all about the animals she and Denys have up in the Adirondacks. There's a local guy called Richard who takes care of them while they're away, also because bringing them up here and keeping them in a small, yet luxury, bungalow, would have been unthinkable...plus they apparently have a singing goat and there's no way they could have brought that along. Then she tells me about her special project, a rescue center for abandoned and sick animals in New York. She even invites me down to take a look around and it would be nice to think that one day, perhaps, that's going to happen, but sometimes I think I'll never leave Nantucket again.

And, just like that, I get that familiar feeling that my life ended that day.

The girls' chatter, however, brightens my dark mood and the baby, Sarah, is so sweet. I'm feeling so good that by the time we all sit down to dinner, I don't feel out of place or uncomfortable.

Halfway through our meal, however, my phone rings. I check the display: Dr. Brant. I slide to answer. "One moment please..." and move away from the table looking for some privacy. My heart is pounding in my chest. I just hope she has good news for me, that Wade is back in rehab. "Sorry about that," I apologize when I come to a peaceful corner of the garden.

"Miss Hooper, I'm sorry to disturb you like this, but I have some bad news." Before I can say anything, she continues. "We'll be taking legal action against Wade. It has nothing to do with you and you have nothing to worry about, but I thought it only fair to warn you..."

"Legal action?" I stammer in shock. "What the hell did he do?"

"There's a lockbox at the clinic, in the manager's office, where we keep any spare cash. At the last count there was twenty thousand dollars in there...we just checked and it's empty."

"Impossible. It can't have been Wade! You told me yourself he went missing days ago," I object incredulously.

"We don't check it every day, Ms. Hooper, only when necessary. As soon as we discovered it was empty, we called our security company. It took them some time, but their technicians went through the surveillance footage on the server, going back days, and it was Wade, the night before he ran away," she explains.

“So you’re going to report him for theft?” I ask, my hand on my chest.

“I’m sorry, but he’s left us no choice. Look at the positive aspect however, it means the police will be on board now, they’ll intensify their search and hopefully, find him.”

“I’m so sorry, I’m so ashamed...”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, it’s not your fault. I just wanted to let you know that Wade gave your house as his home address, so it’s likely the police will be paying you a visit in the near future. I didn’t want them taking you completely by surprise. You’re a good woman, Piper, but you can’t take responsibility for everything your brother does,” the doctor reassures me before ending the call.

Stunned, I lean back against the side of the bungalow before my legs give way.

“Piper...what’s he done now?” Kirk’s voice asks from behind me.

“Ever heard of privacy?” I snap, still shaken.

“Let’s go inside,” he says, taking me by the elbow and steering me towards his bungalow.

I want to shout, tell him to leave me alone, but I don’t have the energy, plus the last thing I want is to make a scene.

“So, what has he done?” Kirk asks when we’re alone.

“You heard everything?” I rub my hands over my face.

“When I saw you walk away, I followed you. I get you want to keep me out of this, but you’re making a mistake. You can’t go through this alone. Please, tell me.”

I clench my fists so hard my nails dig into my palms.

This whole situation is driving me crazy.

There’s a part of me that wants to fall into his arms, tell him everything, beg for help, finally let someone take care of me, someone who won’t leave me on my own.

But then I remember that it’s all an illusion, that I can’t depend on him. He won’t be here forever, he’ll be leaving again soon. I already had to get used to losing him once and I don’t want to go through it again.

How much longer does he have left here? Two weeks?

“What do you want me to say, Kirk?” I snap, standing rigid, my hands on my hips.

“What do you mean?” he stares at me in confusion.

“I mean, do you want me to say, everything’s just fine, I’m not mad at you,

quite the opposite, I'm delighted you're here?" I sneer sarcastically. "Or perhaps, Hey, Kirk, don't feel bad about running out on me like that ten years ago, not after two years together. I moved on, I'm fine, I don't need to hear your guilt."

"Who's talking about guilt? What the hell do you mean?" he asks, pretending not to understand, looking almost incredulous.

"Ah...I get it...you want to hear me say, I've been in a really dark place, Kirk. Since you left, my life has gotten worse and worse but now you're finally back perhaps you can save me and put it back together again," this time I assume a deliberately theatrical tone. "Is that what you want to hear? Now you're a big star, you're used to being worshipped, having people kiss your ass? Which line do you prefer? Tell me, that way I can make you happy and you can go back where you came from with a smile on your face." I'm shouting now, unable to hold back.

"Perhaps if you actually said something that sounded reasonable..." He steps forward.

"You want reasonable? Here you go - I don't have to tell you anything, Kirk. You don't deserve an answer. You're not in my life anymore, you disappeared...poof! You didn't even have the balls to say goodbye...now you turn up here and expect to know everything about me, to help me, to be part of my life. What's your problem? Do you not realize how much you hurt me?" I yell, clenching my fists even tighter.

"Piper, please...why are you so mad at me? You'll have to tell me, because I just don't get it. Okay, we haven't spoken in years, but you never once thought to text me and ask how I was or, I don't know, say you missed me... so I guess that makes us even."

He has a nerve. That makes us even? Even? I loved him. I gave him my heart and he ran away. I thought he loved me but all the time I was just a bit of fun, a side piece.

I try to bite my tongue, to stay silent, to find the strength to turn and run away and end this ridiculous conversation, which has already gone much too far for my liking, but my anger is bubbling under my skin like lava.

I'm angry at myself for believing him, at him for dumping me like just another of his stupid conquests.

I'm angry at the turn my life took after he left.

I'm angry because I realize I still love him.

I'm angry about the day I just had - at Kirk for paying for the glass in my

door, at Dr. Brant's phone call and, most of all, at Olyvia, for what she said when we saw her this afternoon.

"Must be awful, wearing that sweatshirt in this heat, but what can you do? You have to cover up somehow."

Nantucket is small, everyone knows what happened. Even if they don't recognize me, they hear my name and instantly remember me from the local papers.

But when someone like Olyvia throws it in my face, with all the bitchiness she's capable of, I relive every moment like it was yesterday. I go back to the bad old days when I couldn't face being seen in public because I couldn't stand the way people looked at me, the pity and disgust in their eyes.

And Tracee has the nerve to ask me why I gave up swimming and refuse to try out as swim coach?

"Piper..." Kirk's voice brings me back to the present.

I feel cornered. I stare at him and explode. Boom!

Before I can stop myself, the words come bursting out. "We're even? Really? Is that what you think? You used me just like all the other girls, Kirk. I thought I meant something to you, you were the only person who ever showed me even one ounce of affection. You remember that last night, right here in Nantucket? Your eighteenth birthday party? I gave you something...a *gift*...How could I have been so stupid? That night I thought you loved me, that we had a future together, that we really were going to live together at Harvard. You were the only one who ever made me happy, the only one I loved, and I finally found the courage to tell you - before you lied, made me think you felt the same, then you tossed me like a dirty tissue, like you did with all the others, and disappeared...but only after cheating on me the worst way possible. And you have the nerve to wonder why I never wrote? Ah, sorry, perhaps you wanted me to throw myself at your feet, beg you to come back. Sorry, not sorry...I'd never do that...especially once I realized how little you cared for me..."

Kirk stares at me, his eyes wide. He opens his mouth to speak but nothing comes out. He looks like he's been sucker punched.

That's how I feel too. I could kick myself for what I just said.

I can't breathe. I have to get out. I can't stay here, not after that.

I don't think about the danger anymore, the men looking for Wade, the threats. I don't think of anything.

I turn and make a run for it, dashing through the dark shadows, heading for

the only place that has always given me some form of comfort. My safe place.

Chapter 24



Summer 2010

The Big Day is finally here. It's the day of my eighteenth birthday party – however, celebrating is the last thing on my mind.

It's two pm, the guys from the water polo team will be here soon for the pre-party - the actual party is scheduled for seven.

I wish I could cancel the whole thing and just have Piper over, but it's too late for that, besides, it wouldn't be fair to the guys who want to say goodbye and have bought gifts.

My parents just left. They're spending our last night in a hotel, leaving me free rein of the house for the party. I should be grateful to them for being so generous, but I'm furious.

I spent the last couple of weeks thinking the house issue was resolved.

My parents never said another word about my college fund, and they said nothing about me seeing Piper, either. Shit! They even had her over for dinner several times, so I automatically figured they believed in her.

I was just being stupid.

Today, after lunch, just before they left for the hotel, they announced they'd decided to cancel the lease after all.

When I asked why, my father replied that Harvard isn't too far away, I'd still get to see Piper.

I pointed out, again, that with nowhere to come home to, it wouldn't be quite so easy, that I'd have to spend money on a hotel room.

That was when they looked at each - those goddamn loaded looks again - and finally told me the truth. They think Piper is playing me and that a little distance can only do us good.

I tried to argue, but it was useless. According to my mom, if we really do love each other, it won't be a problem. If anything, the distance and the difficulties will only bring us closer.

They just don't get it. I'm not worried that Piper will get bored with me if she doesn't see me: I'm seriously worried about her safety. What if something happens to her and I'm not there for her? What if Wade gets into trouble again and puts her in danger? I was counting on my parents leaving me the house so I could give her the keys in case of emergency, so she'd be safe, but now my parents have pissed all over that and they decided to wait until the day before we left to let me know, so I couldn't get organized.

As planned, my teammates arrive and, as their idea of a party involves rivers of alcohol, they've brought several kegs, six-packs and various bottles of spirits.

For a while I avoid the alcohol but in the end I can't resist it. I need to relax, empty my head, and enjoy this last evening with Piper, and try and be happy for the next few hours before reality comes back and slaps me in the face.

After four beers I'm definitely in a better place, by the fifth I can barely remember why I was so worried.

At seven, as announced, the first guests begin to arrive. At 8pm, however, there's still no sign of Piper, and I don't know why. I keep trying to go over to hers and see what's happened, but every time I head for the door, someone grabs me, shoves a drink in my hand and proposes a toast, and eventually I

lose track of time.

I'm heading once more for the door when I find Sticky Vicky glued to my arm.

"For you," she purrs, handing me a pack of beers and a gift.

"Thanks, but I think I drank too much already," I shake my head.

"Come on, the least you can do is join us in a farewell toast," she simpers, pointing at Sharla, Olyvia and May, lined up on the couch like Barbie dolls.

Why not? If it gets rid of them...

I perch on the arm of the couch and place the unopened gift on the table. I raise my beer and make a half-hearted toast to the four girls. I'm just getting up to leave when Vicky places a hand on my leg and gives me a meaningful look.

"What's wrong? Nervous much? No judgment, but you're waiting for someone who, all this time, has done nothing but use you," and she glances over at the door.

"That's BS, Vicky!" I exclaim, making to leave.

"I'm serious, Kirk," Vicky continues. "Once you're gone, you'll never hear from her again. She already knows that once you stop bankrolling Wade, you'll be useless to her - so why should she waste her time?"

I can't move. I feel nailed to the spot. No one from school knows I gave Wade money. "What the fuck have you heard?"

"Don't say I didn't warn you. I tried but you refused to listen. Piper's like her mother, a vulgar little tramp. She was just after your money, Kirk. She always knew it was you paying off her brother's debts," she blurts, point blank.

I'm starting to feel lightheaded. I'm not thinking clearly. I want to ask questions but I can't put the words together.

There's no way Vicky could know certain things - unless someone told her.

"Did Wade tell you?" I ask, desperate to make sense of what's happening.

"Since when do I talk to that human dumpster? No, I overheard Piper telling Tracee Copson. Now it's looking like Harvard will pretty much waive her fees she can't resist bragging about all the cash you shelled out on her. When she gets to Harvard, it won't be long before someone with bigger pockets replaces you."

"Lies!" I refuse to believe her.

"Really, Kirk. Lies? So how do you explain how she's been so peaceful

and happy lately?” Vicky asks. “If it was me, I’d be heartbroken at the thought of you leaving.”

I’m about to answer her, when a voice calls out, making me turn abruptly.

“Happy Birthday, Kirk,” yells Tracee Copson.

Then I notice the person standing next to her - Piper.

She’s just a few feet away and looks pissed as hell - probably because she’s seen Vicky practically draped all over me.

I’m feeling pissed too, though perhaps I’m more confused than pissed.

I want to ask for an explanation, but then I look at her again. She’s wearing one of the dresses I bought her, the black one she always refused to wear because she thought it was too elegant.

The dress you paid for, a little voice in my head says.

One glance from her, however, and I’m lost in her eyes.

That’s how it’s always been. I just have to look at her and I’ll do anything. Even forget what Vicky just told me.

The only thing I know for sure is that I love her. I love her and I’m praying nothing of what Vicky said is true.

She’s so beautiful she takes my breath away. Everyone is staring at her like they just saw her for the first time, the guys eating her up.

*As of tomorrow you won’t be around anymore...*my jealousy is mounting.

I’m unsteady on my feet and know I should switch to water, but I can’t help it.

I get to my feet, full of the insane need to mark my territory, to prove to everyone that she’s mine and that no one can look at her except me.



Summer 2010

I stare at the clock, my panic rising. Tracee's here, she's been helping me get ready. I'm wearing Kirk's favorite dress, the one he chose when he took me shopping – it's short, black, silky, with a halter neck and narrow shoestring straps that cross over and tie in back.

All that's missing is Wade!

It's almost eight and he still isn't back. We agreed he'd stay home with Mom tonight but, so far, there's no sign of him.

I can't believe it. Kirk's leaving tomorrow and I'm stuck here.

"Did you try calling him?" Tracee asks.

"Of course, I did. He's not picking up." I'm so nervous now. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap."

It's not Tracee's fault.

The more time passes, however, the more stressed I feel.

“You go on over, I’ll stay here with your mom. Kirk could care less if I didn’t go, but you can’t miss it,” Tracee offers.

“Are you sure. You really want to stay here with her, all alone?” I gesture towards my mother’s room.

“Pipes, she’s unconscious, she’s not going to get up and start yelling at me. Go, go...”

I’m trying to decide what to do when the front door finally opens.

“Where the hell have you been?” I ask my brother furiously.

“I had to see someone. Chill, will you? It’s only just gone eight,” he shrugs as if it’s nothing.

“You knew the party started at seven, I told you.”

“Get moving then, instead of hanging around whining,” he scowls.

He’s right, for once. There’ll be time enough to argue about this tomorrow.

Tracee slips her arm through mine and steers me toward the door.

I can hardly believe that, after tomorrow, when I look out my window, there’ll no longer be Kirk’s smiling face looking back at me.

Drama Queen! He said he’d come see you every weekend. He promised, I scold myself, plastering a huge smile on my face so I don’t ruin my boyfriend’s birthday party. I’m just being selfish - as soon as I finish school, I’ll be at Harvard too and we’ll be together every day.

I just have to be patient.

I trust Kirk. I know he loves me and I know that our relationship will remain solid, even if he’s no longer here physically, that we have a future together.

We promised each other we would.

I just hope he likes my present, that it’s enough for him.

Unfortunately, I’m flat broke, as usual, and it took me a while to get the money together to buy it. It’s a silver chain, with a pendant shaped like a pair of headphones. I wanted to get him one in the shape of a guitar, but it cost twice as much and, despite my sacrifices, I didn’t quite have the money.

Headphones are still music related, though.

“You sure I look good in this dress? Kirk chose it, but.. look at my hips...and up here...” I mumble, pointing to the neckline of the dress.

Tracee rolls her eyes. “You mean your boobs? Yes, girl, you have boobs. A little cleavage never harmed anybody...besides, it’ll give Kirk something to remember you by when he goes off to college.”

“Don’t you think I look...” I leave the sentence hanging.

“Hot? Sexy?” Tracee arches an eyebrow.

“I was going to say, cheap, inappropriate.”

“It’s inappropriate that you think it’s inappropriate. Piper you’re gorgeous. Gor-geous!”

The thing is, I don’t look like me anymore. I don’t look like the usual Piper - I look like one of those girls the guys stare at.

“Well, we going in?” Tracee nudges me.

“Have you seen how many people are in there already?” I ask, tugging at the hem of my dress. “They’ll all stare at me.”

“Let them. It’s better that way - the more they stare, the more Kirk will realize how stunning you are and what he’ll lose if he doesn’t behave himself,” Tracee says, passing in front of me and opening the door wide, dragging me after her.

Kirk’s house is almost unrecognizable. Every corner is crammed with kids. Everyone from school must have showed up - there are even people dancing on the kitchen counter.

“There you go, beautiful lady!” A guy I’ve never seen before thrusts a small bottle of beer into my hand.

I pull a face and turn to Tracee. “I don’t think I should, I’m not used to it.”

Tracee takes a generous swig of her own beer. “Drink it. It’ll help you relax. Have you seen Kirk yet?”

“He’ll be somewhere, surrounded,” I reply, pointing at the crowds of guests. “I just hope he’s not mad at me.”

“Pipes, stop it! He’ll be as happy as a clam at high water to see you, and you know it!” Tracee says, pushing her way through the crowd, dragging me along in her wake.

We reach the family room, and the first thing I see is Birthday Boy – he’s sitting on the couch and, like a scene from my worst nightmare, Vicky Sandoval is glued to him. And either side of them are her minions.

I can’t help it. It’s a horror film, unfolding right before my eyes. All I can do is stand in the doorway and watch as Vicky’s hand languidly strokes his thigh.

“Happy birthday, Kirk!” Tracee yells, attracting his attention.

He raises those incredible green eyes in Tracee’s direction, flashes her a smile and waves his hand - then he sees me. He literally does a double take before getting to his feet and coming over.

“Piper...” he gasps, a strange light in his eyes.

Is the dress a little too much after all?

“Kirk, you’ve already seen me a million times,” I joke, feeling the heat rush to my cheeks.

“You’re so beautiful that every time is like the first time,” he grins.

“Have you been drinking?” I ask, my hands on my hips.

“Nope!” he giggles. I glare at him. “You got me, Star Girl...just a couple beers, or four...I was stuck on the couch between Sticky Vicky and Co, listening to their blah, blah, blah. Without alcohol, I’d be dead now!” he winks and puts a hand on my hip. “Hey, I thought you were never coming.”

No doubt about it, in black jeans and a white dress shirt, Kirk is breathtaking.

He’s always sexy, but I’m not used to seeing him dressed like a grown-up and everything about him gets my blood flowing more than usual.

“You wore the dress. Finally. Give me a twirl, let me get a look at you,” he orders, staring at me so hard my breath catches in my throat.

“Are you sure I look good? Everyone’s staring. I told Tracee it was inappropriate,” I hiss, pointing over to my friend, who made herself scarce as soon as Kirk came over and I started drooling.

“They’re staring, because you’re beautiful. But you’re mine!” He raises his voice a little and, though his words send a thrill down my spine, there’s something about them that feels strange.

Kirk’s not the possessive kind, and he knows he has no reason to be.

“You hear that, assholes?” he yells at everyone present. “She’s mine. All mine.”

I’m about to tell him that perhaps he’s already had enough to drink, but Vicky Sandoval and her Clique suddenly materialize in front of us.

“Let’s go have some fun,” she purrs, waving another bottle of beer in his face.

“No, thanks,” I intervene. “He’s had enough for now.” I take the beer and place it on a nearby table.

Vicky jabs her index finger in my chest. “Oh, Cinderella. Even if you’re not wearing your usual rags, you’re still skanky Piper Hooper. What? You park your pumpkin outside?”

Kirk seems to be a little more lucid. “Don’t talk to her like that!” he snaps.

“Kirk,” Vicky simpers, reaching out to touch his shoulder, but he pushes her away.

“I may be a skank, but at least I don’t have to get a guy drunk before he’ll

even look at me. Kirk loves me and you're pathetic, Vicky. Why don't you give us all a break?"

Vicky and her Clique stare at me in shock.

Kirk laughs. "Let's go," he says, taking my hand. "Let's get out of here before their mouths start flapping again."

I know Kirk's house well by now, and when he leads me towards the stairs I know exactly where we're going. I've been there enough times - but this time it hits differently and there's a strange churning sensation in my stomach.

"Kirk, you can't go AWOL at your own birthday party. They'll wonder where you've got you," I say when we reach his bedroom. "They'll trash the place."

"One, they're too busy getting drunk, they won't even notice I'm not there. Two, eighty percent of the guys down there crashed the party anyway, three, there's a cleaning crew booked for first thing in the morning and, last but not least," he says, staring deep into my eyes, "you're the only one I want to celebrate my birthday with, Star Girl."

I know I should be used to it by now, but whenever Kirk says something like that, he leaves me stunned.

"Happy eighteenth birthday!" I announce, holding up his gift.

He grins and quickly unwraps it. He takes the chain from the box and holds it up, letting the headphone pendant dangle in front of his face. "It's the best gift, ever, Star Girl!" he exclaims. "Can you fasten it? I want you to put it on me," and he hands me the chain.

With trembling fingers, I move behind him and carefully fasten the tiny silver clasp.

"Perfect," he announces, checking his reflection in the mirror. "Absolutely perfect...just like you..." and he gives me the kind of look that makes my legs shake.

I feel myself blushing and don't know what to do - most of all, I don't know where to look.

It's Kirk and I've heard those words a thousand times over but...today something is different...there's something...

"They'll soon be up here looking for you," I say, tugging nervously at my hair.

Kirk nods, walks over to the door, turns the key in the lock, then turns to look at me. "Problem solved. Now, do I get a hug?"

“Why so weird?” I ask nervously.

“I’m not weird, I just need to feel you close. I can’t get it into my head that, after tonight, I won’t see you every day, that’s all. You love me, don’t you? You won’t disappear on me once I’m in college?”

Kirk’s never been the insecure type and I don’t know what’s gotten into him...it’s almost...I don’t know...as if he thinks I’m going to forget him or something.

“Of course, I love you,” I smile, wrapping my arms around him.

“You always refused to wear that dress, said it was too much, so why tonight?” he asks and, I swear, he seems almost suspicious.

“It’s your eighteenth birthday. I’m wearing it for you, you said it was your favorite,” I say, and it’s the truth.

“For real? Or is it because you want the other guys to look at you?”

He seems paranoid. I’m not used to him being like this.

“I hope you’re joking and that you realize how offensive you sound.” I feel more and more agitated.

He pulls me in tight and lays his head on my shoulder, burrowing into my hair, until I feel his breath on my neck. “I can’t do it, Star Girl, I can’t bear the thought of being so far apart from you,” he sighs, his lips pressed close to my ear.

My legs are shaking. I bite my bottom lip, holding back tears, then pull back my head until our eyes meet. “All you have to do, wherever you are, is look up at the stars and I’ll be there, beside you,” I muster up a smile. “And next weekend you’ll be back here anyway,” I add, hoping to cheer him up.

For a moment he seems to have forgotten that even if his parents are in New York, he can come back here whenever he wants and, this time, we’ll be alone.

He stares at me in silence, his eyes never leaving mine. “You think I’ll still see the stars at Harvard or will there be too much light...beside...” he whispers, “there’s only one star I want to look at.” There’s something in his expression, something strange. “Swear that what we have is real, that you’re mine.”

I’m beginning to think he’s had more than the four beers he admitted to.

“You know it is...you know I am,” I try to reassure him.

“You don’t seem too sad,” he says, studying my face.

“Kirk, are you okay?”

“Why? Everything’s hunky dory, no? I’m only leaving tomorrow.”

“I don’t know...it’s just that...you’re looking at me strangely...”

“Sure you’re not hiding something, Piper?” His eyes examine mine.

That’s it. I break free of his arms. “I’m just trying to make the best of a terrible situation. I didn’t want to make a scene about you leaving, it would be selfish and I’d only make you feel worse. It’s not like you’re leaving on vacation – you’re going away to college and that’s a good thing.” This time I’m really offended. “I didn’t want you to see how sad I feel. Tonight we’re supposed to be celebrating. How can you even say that?”

“I’m just scared I’ll lose you,” he whispers.

Mom’s mood seesaws when she’s been drinking too, I think, trying to find a plausible excuse for his strange behavior.

“Kirk, come on. Let’s go back downstairs. I think you’ve had too much to drink, I’ll get you some water, or coffee,” I mumble, shaking my head.

He reaches for me. “Baby girl, I weigh 175 pounds and I’m 6,2. It takes more than four beers to get me hammered.”

“Something else then? Whatever it is, you’re scaring me. How do you think I felt when I walked in to find you cozied up with Vicky?”

“You know I don’t give two fucks about Vicky. I love you and I want you more than anything else in the world,” he says, his eyes burning into mine.

I want him too, just as much. After that night in the tent, we never had the chance to be alone again...but I’ve been thinking about sex with him. A lot...and I’m wondering now...if he wants...

“What are you trying to tell me, Kirk?” I ask, embarrassed.

“You really need me to spell it out?” His gaze intensifies.

“Why not?” I nod, caressing his face.

“Okay...here goes...this is our last evening...” He shuts his eyes then opens them again, his eyes glued to mine. “I want to make love to you, Star Girl,” he says, tightening his grip around my waist.

Tell him you want it too!

Embarrassment and inexperience block me, however, and all that comes out of my mouth is a long sigh.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” he whispers.

“No, Kirk, really...me too...I want...” I finally manage to blurt.

“Really? Are you sure you’re ready? That you love me enough?” he asks and again I catch a glimmer of fear and suspicion in his eyes.

Now you’re being insensitive!

The fact that he’s a guy and good looking counts for nothing.

I'm reminded of all the times the idea of Kirk going away to college filled me with paranoia - the thought of all those girls, some way older than me, chasing after him. It's taken all my willpower to keep my insecurities to myself, to say nothing, to decide to trust him so much that I never even considered the thought of him cheating on me.

Perhaps he's just as scared as I am and thinks that I...

"I'm more than sure," I say, leaning in to kiss him.

I link my arms behind his neck and he grabs my butt and presses himself against me.

Feeling his excitement makes my heart race and I dig my nails into his shoulder blades.

He backs me toward the bed.

I'm painfully aware that, this time tomorrow, Kirk will be in his room at Harvard, just as I know that if I let him push me down on the bed, it won't be long before we're both naked. I'm also pretty sure, however, that if I asked him to stop now, he would.

Is that what you want? You really want him to stop kissing you and take you downstairs?

Of course not!

I want Kirk. I want everything about him. I want to make love with him tonight, even if I know he'll be gone tomorrow.

I've never done it before, I have no experience, but this is Kirk - the only person who ever made me feel loved, and I know I'm ready.

When my knees touch the edge of the mattress, I lean back and we fall onto the bed.

Kirk is on top of me, his hands cupping my face while his mouth devours me with a growing intensity that leaves me shocked, yet yearning to touch his body all over.

I untuck his shirt and stroke his naked back and Kirk, raising himself up on his elbows, reaches up and tugs it over his head before tossing it to the floor, then he lowers himself down and resumes kissing me.

One touch of his lips on mine and I'm spellbound. It's like being cold and hot at the same time. Shivers run through my body, yet I can't stop sweating, my blood is so hot.

I'm so inexperienced, I'm not sure what to do, but the way Kirk makes me feel means it all happens naturally, spontaneously, as I move my hips and rub myself against him.

Every kiss, every touch, eliminates any attempt at rational thought. All that counts is the here and now and the scent of Kirk's skin.

"I've wanted you for so long, now we're here I'm not even sure I'm ready. Stop me if I go too far, Star Girl, just say the word," he gasps, his forehead against mine.

"I want it, Kirk. I want it all. I want to feel every sensation, every emotion. I want you," I reply, untying the strap of my dress.

Kirk's eyes follow my hand and his pupils seem to dilate further and, before I can say anything else, his lips are on mine again, devouring them, while his fingers tug my dress away.

Without taking his mouth from mine, he raises himself up again and, supporting my back with one hand, he slips my dress along my body, while I raise my hips to help him.

He's on top of me again, this time my bare breasts are touching his warm naked skin and the sensation of his body against mine makes me moan.

He slips a hand between our bodies and caresses my breasts. Unprepared for the ensuing sensations, I gasp in surprise.

Kirk peels his lips from mine and looks into my eyes. "I've dreamed about this for so long, but if it's too much for you, we can get dressed." He stops. "I need to know that you're ready."

"Kirk, I'm ready. Take me where I've never been. I've been dreaming of going there with you for two years now," I whisper in reply.

"The same place I want to go?" he smiles sweetly, then lowers his head again.

This time, he doesn't kiss me on the lips. He makes his way down my neck, planting butterfly kisses on my breasts. He sucks first one nipple, then the other, and a sudden quivering sensation makes me arch my back as my fingers clutch at the sheets.

He doesn't stop there, however. He moves further down my body, the tip of his tongue snaking around my belly button, until it reaches the elastic of my underwear.

My embarrassment is building and I close my eyes, terrified at the thought of being completely naked in front of him.

At the same time, however, I'm telling myself that this is Kirk, that I've always wanted this and, when he tugs at my underwear, I lift my ass to make it easier for him.

Breathe, I repeat like a mantra, my eyes shut tight as my nails dig into the

cotton sheet.

I feel Kirk gently pulling my knees apart, then the touch of his hot lips along my inner thigh.

I hold my breath and, from nowhere, I'm hit by a wave of extreme pleasure as his mouth finds the spot between my legs.

I'm too curious, however. I open my eyes and lift my head, forgetting all about my embarrassment. Our eyes meet for a fleeting moment before he resumes kissing me.

I hear moans and sighs, but I'm too absorbed by the new feelings racing through my body to realize they're coming from me. When he sucks my clitoris, my embarrassment disappears and I let out a cry when he begins to rapidly flick his tongue over it.

Everything is suddenly so intense.

I writhe on the bed as Kirk's tongue moves faster and faster. My hands sink into his dark curls and, at one point, I think I'm going to lose control, until I feel my pleasure mounting and let out a scream of pleasure.

This time, however, my orgasm is much more intense than the previous one. I feel exhausted yet, at the same time, my body has never felt so alive.

I don't know what's happening to my body, but Kirk seems to understand immediately. He sits back on his heels, takes something from the pocket of his pants, places it on the bed, then unzips his pants. I can't take my eyes off him. I watch as he undresses, anticipating the first glimpse of the naked body I've spent so long fantasizing about.

He has a strange, irregular shaped mole just below the line where his shorts were and I smile, realizing it looks almost like a star.

Then he leans over me again and I feel everything. The taste of me when he kisses me, his warm skin gliding over mine, and his erection against my body.

"Please, don't stop. I want it all. All of you."

"I'll give you all of me, all that I am. I only ever wanted to do it with you, Star Girl," he breathes, before kissing me and putting on the condom.

That's what was in his pocket, I realize suddenly.

Supporting himself on his elbows, he slowly pushes himself inside me. "If it hurts, stop me," he whispers.

Don't even think about it, I think. *I'm not missing out on this just for a little discomfort.*

I'm not prepared for the sharp, stabbing pain that follows, however, and

gasp in surprise.

Kirk stops. He kisses me slowly, running the tip of his tongue over my lips. My heartbeat slows and I begin to relax. He pushes himself inside me a little more. It still hurts, but this time the pain is more bearable.

I'd put up with any pain, if it meant being with him.

When Kirk finally takes my virginity, the pain is so acute, I gasp again and claw at his back. He pauses, looks down at me, waiting for my nod.

I kiss him and, finally, he starts thrusting again.

He's moving slowly and I can tell he's experienced, unlike me. I drive the thought from my mind. I can't ruin all this by wondering about all the girls he's been with. This is my moment, the one where Kirk finally becomes mine.

The moment I manage to erase my fears, the pain turns to pleasure, increasing with every thrust, every time his tongue touches mine.

My body comes alive and I start moving too, following his rhythm, my hips rising to meet his determined thrusts. My arms tight around his shoulders, I cling to him, as if afraid he could disappear at any moment.

Everything intensifies - our sighs, the touch of his hands on my body, his mouth, his passionate kisses, the strength and depth of his thrusts.

In the throes of sensations I've never experienced before, I feel weightless, like a leaf floating in the breeze, when suddenly an intense feeling of pleasure courses through me, making my toes curl.

I moan against Kirk's lips as another orgasm hits me full force.

Kirk tightens his grip and begins to move even faster. He lifts his head, an expression of pure ecstasy on his face, and I know that the same sensations that invaded my body are surging through his.

He pauses, then a shudder shakes his whole body and he flops down on top of me. "I've always loved you," he whispers. "Now I know I'll never feel like this with anyone else."

We hold each other tight, waiting for our breathing to return to normal and our heartbeats to slow down. Kirk takes a minute to remove the condom and toss it in the trash, then I feel his arms around me again.

"Happy?" he asks, running a finger over my lips.

"Happy isn't a big enough word for it," I say, my heart beating fast again.

"You've no idea how much I understand that," he grins, leaning in to kiss me.

We kiss each other slowly, leisurely, until we lose track of time, of

everything around us, of anything that isn't us, until we fall asleep.

Chapter 25



Summer 2010

I blink at the annoying bright light and realize it's the early morning sun. And just like that I remember where I am.

Naked. In Kirk's room. In Kirk's bed.

Where is he? I wonder, rolling over in bed.

Maybe he went to the bathroom, I think, expecting him to walk through the door at any moment.

The party? Where did everyone go? I'm beginning to feel worried.

The house is silent. The guests must have gone home.

I feel a little guilty about staying over without telling anyone, but then I

remember that neither Wade nor my mother ever notice my absence, it's a miracle they even notice I'm alive.

Who cares anyway? For once in my life I want to savor every moment.

I sink my face into the pillow, inhaling Kirk's scent. My boyfriend's scent.

At the memory of what we did last night, my heart literally explodes with joy.

Kirk. My Kirk. I can finally say it.

The minutes pass, however, and there's still no sign of him.

He drank a lot last night. Is he okay?

I climb out of bed, pull on last night's clothes, then slip on my shoes. "Kirk?" I call, knocking softly on the bathroom door.

When I get no answer, I slowly turn the handle. The bathroom is empty.

I head downstairs but there's still no sign of him then, over the back of the sofa, I see something that makes my blood freeze.

Vicky Sandoval's cheap blonde hair.

My heart leaps into my throat and I'm hit by a wave of panic mixed with disgust. I don't want to go any nearer, but I know I have to.

I march over to the couch, where I come face to face with my worst nightmare - Kirk, wearing only his shorts, is fast asleep, his head in Vicky's lap.

Vicky is wide awake, grinning triumphantly. She stares at me as I stand there, paralyzed with shock, then gently moves Kirk's head onto the cushion, gets to her feet and, grabbing me by the arm, drags me into the kitchen. "Ssh," she sneers, looking me up and down. "You don't want to wake him with a pathetic scene, do you?"

"You make me sick, Vicky? What did you do to him?" I ask, hands on hips.

Despite what I just saw, I still trust Kirk, 100%.

"Fucked his brains out, what do you think?"

"You're dumber than I thought if you think I'm going to believe that!" I move to walk past her and go back to Kirk.

She reaches out and grabs my wrist, her fingers like claws. "And you're even dumber than I thought, if you really believed, with all the girls he's had, that you'd ever be enough for him," she hisses.

"You disgust me!" I jerk my arm free.

"That may be, but I'm the one who spent most of the night licking that cute little star-shaped mole on his belly. What about you, Piper, what did you do?"

Did you give him a nice little BJ for his birthday?” she crows.

My heart breaks into a million pieces and Vicky knows, I can see it in her face.

“Really? Really, Piper? You really thought he loved you? How dumb can you get? When he came downstairs, he couldn’t stop complaining about you – FYI, you’re officially his worst screw ever, in case you were wondering. He knew you were a virgin but, what a let-down...” She takes what’s left of my heart and stamps on it.

I still have a glimmer of hope and I’m determined to cling to it. “Liar! Kirk would never say anything like that!”

“Oh, and talking of liars...bet he didn’t tell you that, as of tomorrow, this house will be vacant, did he? That his parents ended the lease a month ago and that, once he’s gone, he’s never coming back?” she mocks, adopting an innocent tone.

My head is spinning. “You’re lying!”

“The only one lying here, sweetie, is Kirk,” and she pats my cheek. “If you don’t believe me, see for yourself. This is a copy of the wire transfer the owner gave to his parents, in lieu of some furniture they’re leaving behind...” she waves a flimsy piece of paper in my face.

I snatch at it, struggling to read what it says.

Then everything comes into focus.

It’s all true, all there in black and white.

I’m confused, I can’t breathe.

“I think you should leave before Kirk wakes up, spare yourself the humiliation,” and she ushers me to the door. “Ah, and save yourself the trouble of coming to say goodbye at the harbor, because I’ll be there,” she adds, pushing me onto the porch.

I don’t struggle.

I don’t have the strength.

I’m numb.

I look over at my house. My reality. The life that awaits me.

As I get closer, I hear my mother’s voice. 9:am and she’s screaming already.

I start to run. I run until I get to Nantucket Town then, still in shock, wander around aimlessly.

I miss the lighthouse, curling up at its base, but Wade knows I go there and could come looking for me.

Today, at least, I want to be selfish. For once I want to think about me, to be alone.

You're really going to let him leave without asking for an explanation? I wonder when I see the time.

Kirk's ferry leaves in one hour, at four.

I take a deep breath and decide.

I head for the harbor. When I get there, I hide behind a large shed, waiting for him and his family to arrive.

I need to know if Vicky was right.

At 3:30, they arrive. Kirk gets out of the car and his parents drive up the ramp.

He stands at the base of the foot passenger stairs, his gaze on the entrance to the harbor.

Is he waiting for me?

I'm about to leave my hiding place and run to him when I catch sight of a girl, her platinum blonde hair blowing in the breeze.

Vicky.

She throws her arms around him and leans in close to kiss him.

I can't look.

I turn and run. It's all too much.

Kirk was just leading me on.

It hurts so much I think I'm going to die.

I hear a terrible tearing sound.

It's my heart being ripped to pieces all over again, my confidence being shattered.

All that's left of my hopes now, just tattered shreds.

And the true love, the only love I ever felt, is now nothing but hundreds of shards, driven deep into every part of me.

I run all the way back to my house and creep inside.

There's a deathly silence.

No one is waiting for me. I'm not surprised. As of now, I have no one who cares about me, not even Kirk.

I go up to my room.

The first thing I do is take out those damn star-shaped earrings Kirk gave me. I toss them in the trash with all the rage I have burning inside me, the first tears stinging my eyes.

I stare down at the two golden earrings, my fists clenched at my sides.

Piper, get rid!

I'll never wear them again, I know that, but I can't bring myself to throw them away. I fish them from the trash and put them back in their box, determined to forget all about them. Two tiny earrings, but it feels like they ripped my soul from my body.

Finally I throw myself down on my bed and begin to cry, the bitterest tears I ever cried streaming down my face.



Summer 2010

I peel my eyes open.

My head feels like it could explode any moment and there's a disgusting taste in my mouth.

I'm all alone, the house is silent.

Somehow I'm on the couch – problem is, I've no idea how I got here.

I'm struck by a sudden flashback. I know I threw up at some point last night, but that's all I remember.

I stand up, struggling to get my balance.

How much did I drink?

I glance around. In the harsh light of day, the house is a total mess and I pray the cleaning crew finishes before my parents get home.

Piper! The last thing I remember is being in bed with her in my room.

I stagger upstairs, push open the bedroom door, but the bed is empty. She's not there.

Where is she? I wonder, starting to feel worried.

I pull on the first clothes I find and cut through the yard to her house.

I hammer on the door until Wade opens up.

"I need to talk with Piper."

"She's not here. How about you tell me where she is," he replies, blocking my way.

"Don't come the worried big brother with me, it's not a good look!" My head is pounding, but I push past him and make my way up the stairs to Piper's room.

Empty.

I check the bathroom, but that's empty too. Wade follows me down the corridor as I open every door, but there's no sign of her.

I run out of the house and make my way to the lighthouse. I'm not feeling so good and it takes forever, but I force myself to continue, in the absurd hope that she'll be there and she'll have a logical explanation for her disappearance, but there's no one around.

I should call her but I can't find my cell phone and begin to suspect that, in my drunken stupor, I left it somewhere.

It's almost eleven. My parents are due any minute and if I don't want any trouble, I'd better make sure I'm there when they get back.

Obviously, they see me, then the state of the house, and lose it. I spend the rest of the morning trying to calm them down. I even roll up my sleeves and give the cleaners a hand - well, I try, I'm too preoccupied to do much good.

When we stop for lunch, I resume my search for Piper, but there's still no sign of her and she hasn't been home.

I'm tempted to ask Wade if he let slip about me paying off his drug debts, but I know he'll never give me an honest answer.

If it's true that Piper was taking advantage of me too, she doesn't know that I know and I don't want Wade to tell her.

The hours pass, my bags for Harvard are ready, my other bags have already been collected by the moving company and are on their way to New York. There's still no sign of Piper and when it's time to head to the harbor, my tension is palpable.

"Everything okay, Kirk?" my mother asks once we're in the car.

"Sure," I mumble, fastening my seatbelt. "It's just that I can't find my

phone.” It’s a half-truth.

“As soon as the ferry docks, we’ll get you another one,” she smiles encouragingly.

Great! Hours of isolation.

“Did you inform your network provider?” my dad asks.

“Not yet, I only just noticed. I’ll do it later,” I reply and he starts the car.

All the way to the harbor my dad breaks my balls about reporting my phone to the phone company, but I don’t care, I have worse things on my mind.

Piper? Where the fuck are you?

I don’t understand it. Where is she? The things Vicky told me are machine gunning around my brain and I still have no idea just what the hell happened.

How did I get from my bed to the couch and not remember how? I wonder, trying to figure out just how much I drank.

We pull up to the pier and I look around. I climb out of the car and my dad drives on board the ferry. I’m not leaving until I absolutely have to.

I picture her arriving, breathless and windswept on her bike, late because she was running errands for her family and Wade forgot to tell me.

The minutes tick by and there’s still no sign of her.

From out of nowhere Vicky comes running toward me.

She comes to a stop and throws her arms around my neck and plants a kiss on my mouth.

“What the hell, Vicky?” I exclaim, pushing her away.

“I thought you’d changed your mind. I got home really late and my parents were furious. They grounded me, but I managed to get away. I had to come, I couldn’t let you go without saying goodbye, not after last night,” she gushes breathlessly.

“W-what the hell are you talking about?” I ask, confused.

She places a hand on my shoulder. “You mean you don’t remember?”

“If I did, would I be asking?”

She sighs. “Well, it was late...everyone was leaving...” she begins. “I was about to leave, then the shouting started. You and Piper were having a terrible fight. I saw her run downstairs and out the door, then you came flying down the stairs after her. You were in an awful state. Now do you remember?”

“Why would we fight?” I ask immediately.

“You’d been drinking, I guess that’s why you don’t remember. Anyway, you told her your parents had given up the house, that you wouldn’t be

coming back so often, and she freaked out. Said she was counting on you for your help. Long story short, she finally showed her true colors. Like I said, you were in a state, we spent the rest of the night talking,” she explains, stroking my arm.

I can't breathe.

It's not possible.

But how else would Vicky know about my parents and the lease? She can't be lying.

I have to face the truth. I have no recollection of fighting with Piper, but what other plausible explanation is there?

When Piper and I made love, I told myself that she loved me, that what Vicky told me couldn't be true, that she'd found out about Wade some other way, but this is too much.

“She only slept with you so you'd think she cared. All she cares about is you bankrolling Wade and his debts. She practically threw it in your face.” It's the final blow to my already battered ego.

“I - I have to go, the ferry leaves soon...” is all I can say.

“Stay in touch, Kirk. Harvard isn't too far away, I can come visit if you want,” she suggests.

I nod, but I don't care. Screw this place!

I don't want to see this fucking island or anyone who reminds me of it, ever again.

My parents are leaning over the railing, preparing to say goodbye to Nantucket, the place that healed them after Melody's death. It should be the same for me, I should be grateful but instead I hate it.

I wish I could go down below, spare myself the final views of the island, but I don't want to arouse my parents' suspicions, so I stand staring stupidly at the pier until it's nothing but a blur, in the idiotic hope that I'll see Piper running after the ferry and that everything I just found out is a lie.

But it doesn't happen, unfortunately.

“So, ready to meet your new classmates?” my father asks, when we get back into the car with my new phone.”

I want to message Piper, ask for an explanation - then I pull myself together.

I'm pathetic. Why should I waste my time on her? She isn't worth the effort, I think, slipping my phone into my pocket.

“Well?” my father says and I catch his questioning look in the rear-view.

Do I really want to go to Harvard? Do I really want to risk running into Piper next year when she graduates high school?

No.

I don't want to see her face or hear her name, ever again. I don't want to be reminded of one single detail of our life together.

I take a deep breath. “Are you still friends with the president of Yale?” I ask, meeting my father's gaze in the mirror.

“Sure.”

I lean forward between the front seats. “And you remember I got accepted there too?”

“I also remember how you turned it down for Harvard,” he frowns.

“You think there's any way you could put in a good word for me?”

“Kirk, why the sudden change?” my mother exclaims. “What happened?”

“I just realized that Yale's only ninety minutes from New York, and since you guys gave up the lease on the house in Nantucket, I figured this way I could come home on the weekend,” I lie with a shrug.

“Kirk, before I do anything, I want the truth. I'm not calling in a favor just because you're worried you'll get homesick,” my father says.

Another deep breath. “You were right. Piper was only after my money. As soon as she graduates high school, she's going to Harvard but I never want to see her again,” I spit angrily.

“Oh, sweetheart,” my mother groans. “You don't know how much I wish I was wrong.”

“I know, Mom and, no, I don't want to talk about it.”

And the journey continues in silence until we get home.

I haven't set foot in my bedroom in over two years.

The house is sparkling, my parents had the cleaners in before we got back.

Hoping no one notices, I open the door to Melody's room, but there's nothing left - they turned it into a laundry room. Further proof of my parents' determination to start over.

Her guitar case is still there though. I pick it up but can't bring myself to throw it out. I fetch a stepladder, climb up and place it on top of the closet, pushing it all the way back so no one can see it, then go back to my room.

When I catch sight of my reflection, I realize I'm still wearing Piper's gift.

With one violent tug, I tear it off, breaking the chain, scratching my neck

in the process.

It hurts, but the pain is nothing to what I've been feeling all day. I wish I'd seen it before, that way I could have thrown it overboard, left it to rot in the waters off Nantucket. I stare at the pendant, concentrating all of my hatred, wishing it would disintegrate.

I turn and head to the kitchen, ready to toss it in the garbage disposal, but then stop.

No, I'll keep it.

As a reminder that love doesn't exist, that it doesn't matter how much of yourself you give, there'll always be someone who wants more until they squeeze you dry. I'll never let anyone make a fool of me like Piper Hooper did.

Chapter 26



Piper's words leave me stunned and for a few seconds it's hard to breathe.

It's been ten years since that morning, but my memories of waking up, the way I felt, Piper's disappearance, Vicky's words, are still vivid.

Not this time, Piper, I think, running after her. I'm not letting you run and hide this time.

I catch up with her before she can leave the grounds and reach out for her arm.

"Let me go!" she grunts, trying to break free.

"Sorry, Piper, but we're grown-ups now, it's time we acted like it. Whatever you have to say, say it to my face. Quit running away and just tell me." I walk back to my bungalow, practically dragging her behind me.

She stops, digging in her heels. "I'm not going back in there, I won't."

“Oh, yes, you are and, news flash, we’re going to talk.”

“No!” she exclaims, still trying to free herself.

“It’s up to you, Piper. Or you come back inside with me and we have it out like two adults, or we do it here, in front of everyone.” I’m not exactly leaving her much choice.

Her lips tighten into a thin line, then she nods and lets me guide her back into the bungalow, where she sits on the couch, wringing her hands and staring at the floor.

I’m so nervous I can’t stand still. I pace backwards and forwards, trying to find the right words.

In the end, I snap. “I’ve never forgotten the way I woke up that morning, Piper.” No use beating about the bush.

“That makes two of us, because I haven’t forgotten either,” she mumbles.

“Look at me!” I yell, standing in front of her. Finally, she raises her head. “I woke up and you’d gone. Poof! Vanished. I went to your house and you weren’t there, either. You didn’t even bother to come to the harbor and say goodbye.”

“And you wonder why? I trusted you, Kirk. I thought you loved me. We’d just made love. I thought you cared about me, but instead you were just using me, I was just another notch on your bedpost because then you spent the night with Vicky. You even lied about the house. Why didn’t you tell me? That you had no intention of ever coming back? Did you think I’d refuse to go along with it if you told me?”

“What the...? Vicky? I never so much as laid a finger on her. I woke up alone, on the couch. And if we’re pointing the finger, just before I left, I heard you’d been bragging to Tracee about all the money and gifts you’d managed to get out of me...” I run my hands through my hair.

“Are you for real?” she glares. “I had no idea you’d paid off Wade’s debt. And every time you tried to give me anything, money, gifts, I refused. I was ashamed of always being so broke. You were my world, there was nothing I wanted more than being able to pay you back and do the same for you. For months I hoped you’d reach out and call me. I was so stupid, that if you’d come looking for me and apologized, I would have outright forgiven you,” she shakes her head.

“Wade never told you I came by the house that day?” I ask, puzzled. “That’s impossible...”

“No, he didn’t.” She stares at me doubtfully. “And why should I believe

you anyway?”

“Look me in the eye, Piper, and ask yourself this...Whatever you think of me, that I’m a liar and a cheat, do you really think you can trust Wade more than me?”

Her confidence seems to waver and she sighs. She seems on the point of backing down, giving me the benefit of the doubt.

“No, Kirk. I was there. After you lied about the house. After I found you almost naked in Vicky’s arms, I was there. Like an idiot, I thought she was lying, that she’d made it all up, but then she arrived and threw herself into your arms.”

“Wait, what? You were at the ferry?” I ask, shocked.

“Yes. And I saw everything, Kirk, so don’t try and deny it.”

“Not quite everything, Piper. You should have stayed a little longer, then you would have seen me push her away.”

I don’t know how much time we spend, yelling at each other, shouting our different, conflicting, painful truths.

The whole things sounds crazy. I can’t believe Vicky could be so evil - then I remember just how much she hated Piper.

She was sixteen at the time, spoiled and entitled, used to getting her own way and it figures she’d get a kick out of causing trouble. For her it was just a game, revenge, because she wanted something she couldn’t have.

I sit down next to Piper, take her hands in mine and look into her eyes. “We’ll probably never know what happened that night, or how Vicky got hold of my parents’ bank statements, but I know you’re not lying and if you know me at all, you know I’m not lying either. It wouldn’t make sense, if I was, I wouldn’t be here talking to you. Do you really think I would have spent money to get you into bed? I get that you were only sixteen and it’s easy to think like that but, really, can you tell me today, as a grown woman, that you still believe that?”

In her eyes there’s no sign of the mistrust and contempt I saw before.

“I think I know how,” she says softly, almost out of breath. “Vicky’s mother was the bank manager back then.”

I’d forgotten that little detail.

Suddenly, the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

“That’s how she got her hands on a copy of my parents’ bank statement and the lease termination agreement. That’s how she knew about all those withdrawals from my account, but it still doesn’t explain how she knew I’d

been paying off Wade's drug debts."

"Withdrawals? Plural?" Piper looks baffled. "I thought it was just that time they trashed my bike. When you said you thought I was taking advantage of you, I thought you meant the gifts...the swimsuit, the books..."

"No, Piper, that was loose change in comparison. For almost two years I was the one who paid for every one of Wade's fuck ups. Remember when we went camping? Just before then he managed to piss off some big shot from Boston - that time I really did save his life..." I carefully omit the fact that I had to pay him to stay with her mother so we could go away. "Even my parents thought you were using me for my money, that's why they canceled the lease on the house. They wanted to get me away from you. That's also why they waited until the last minute to tell me. Add Vicky's story to their suspicions and they had me convinced too." I explain further.

"Why didn't I know this? Why didn't you tell me?" she asks softly.

"I was trying to protect you. The situation with your mother was bad enough. I only wanted the best for you, so you could focus on your studies and the swimming, so you could graduate and get the hell out of here. Wade's addiction on top of everything else would have been the last straw," I say, stroking her arm.

Piper starts to shake. She's not shivering, she's literally shaking, and seems to be having trouble breathing.

She glares at me, glassy-eyed. "I need some air. Let me go. Please."

Not sure what's going on, I let go of her hands.

She jumps up then takes a step back. She stands there, her hands on her chest, so rigid it's like she could snap in two at any moment, and I'm genuinely scared for her.

Chapter 27



It's happening.

Right now, in front of Kirk.

The threat of another attack has been haunting me for days.

His words resonate inside me.

What would my life be like today, if only that morning I'd seen through Vicky's plan to break us up?

There's a worse question, however, and it's killing me.

Can you hurt someone with too much love?

Calm down. Breathe. Be rational. Live in the present.

Kirk's interventions, the idea that I needed protecting at all costs, left me blind and vulnerable, exposed to a danger I never saw coming.

If only I'd known how serious Wade's drug problem was, how dangerous his habit had become, how in deep he was, I would have been prepared.

Instead...

I was blissfully unaware and, just when I thought I could finally leave Nantucket and my dysfunctional family behind, that a better future was waiting for me, everything came crashing down on top of me and I paid the consequences. I paid off Wade's drug debts too, with interest.

Would I be normal?

Would I be a champion swimmer?

Would I be happy, maybe?

Is it really all Kirk's fault?

The lump in my throat seems to expand, my body tingles from head to foot, the trembling turns to jerking, the suffocating feeling intensifies, and my heartbeat is a dull pounding sensation in my neck.

Anyone who's ever experienced a panic attack at least once knows how terrifying they can be.

So sudden, so unexpected...at least the first time...then...

Then they get worse because you know what they're like and live in fear of having another one...a fear so dominant, so overwhelming, that it takes over your life.

I know it all too well. I remember everything.

After the attack, after the hospital, the police report, it was time to leave the house for the first time, and my fear soon degenerated into what is literally the *fear of fear*. I was trapped in a vicious circle, my soul imprisoned in a dark tunnel. The sheer terror of leaving the house, not only because of what they'd done to me, but also of having another attack in public, with everyone watching, giving the world yet another reason to pity me. Another reason to think I'm as crazy as my mother.

From then on, things went downhill. I avoided any situation that could cause anxiety. Even simple grocery shopping had me in a state of agitation.

Unlike those who opt for therapy and professional treatment, my only option, as always in my sad little life, was to try and cope on my own, fighting tooth and nail, focusing hard on my responsibilities.

Watching as my mother's mental health plummeted while Wade's drug habit escalated.

I never fully got over my attacks, they just lay dormant, waiting to start over.

Now I'm having the worst attack ever and I feel like I'm going crazy.

Everything goes black and, with no time to think rationally, I'm convinced I've gone blind. Any moment, I'll be feeling my way along the pitch black walls.

I can't breathe! I'm clenching my fists so hard my nails are digging into my palms.

"Piper, it's me, Kirk. I'm right here with you." I blink as the sound of his voice breaks through my anxiety.

I glance around, trying to focus. Then I see them. The most beautiful eyes ever, those lips, that square jaw, the dark hair.

Kirk.

"You're hurting yourself, Star Girl. I'm going to touch you now, help you open your fingers."

Star Girl...his old nickname for me...how long...?

Unable to do anything else, I nod.

I feel someone prising my fingers open. I try to struggle, then remember that it's Kirk.

"Was it something I said? Something from your past?" he asks, his voice calm.

"B-both," I stammer, then I add, "The past...it always comes back..." anything to avoid him finding out.

"What do you want to do? Do you want to go outside? Sit down, maybe?" he asks, gently taking my hands.

He seems to know exactly what to do. His touch is reassuring and I realize that he's holding me not to restrain me, but to let me know he's there.

"No, not outside," I manage to say, trying to control my breathing, staring into his eyes.

"Sit down then?" he suggests softly.

I nod and we take our seats on the couch again.

"I know the fear is real, Piper, you have nothing to be ashamed of. I'm here, I'm going nowhere." He massages my fingers. "Now, breathe with me. Pretend we're blowing up balloons...breathe...in through the nose, out through the mouth." He smiles. "Watch me, like this."

I stare at him for several seconds, then follow his lead, synching our breathing.

After a while, my heartbeat returns to normal and I no longer feel like I'm dying. The attack has passed. Now I'm feeling better, I don't know how to

face him.

“Piper, whatever I said to make you feel bad, I’m sorry. But, we need to talk about it,” he says, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I wish I could run away, anything to stop him from finding out, to prevent him from remembering what he just saw. Instead of running, however, I throw myself into his arms.

I cling to his body like it’s a rock in the middle of the ocean, breathing in his scent as he holds me close to his chest.

I bury my face against his neck, which calms me even more. Gradually I begin to feel better, and though my spirit of self-preservation tells me to run away, I know it would be useless.

I know I can’t blame him for loving me so much, for trying to protect me. I can’t ignore it anymore - Kirk wasn’t leading me on, he really loved me.

“How come you always know how to fix me?” I ask suddenly. “Just like when we were kids...how...”

He pulls away, just far enough to look me in the eye. “A friend of mine has the same problem. The first time it happened, I had no idea what to do, I was going to call an ambulance...then he told me what it was. I was shocked, but I did a little research. The attacks don’t happen so often, but when they do, I know how to help him. I knew what was happening to you, because I’ve seen full blown panic attacks before.

I nod.

“Piper, I’m sorry, honestly. I feel so guilty for saying what I said, for bringing on the attack. You’ve told me almost nothing about yourself, and what little you did tell me, I had to dig out of you. Please, tell me. Tell me what’s wrong. No judgment, you know that.” He kisses me then looks at me, waiting.

I bite my lip.

I want to tell him the truth, I really do, but I can’t so, as usual, I make something up.

“It’s not your fault, I just wondered what my life would be like now if I hadn’t run away that morning...if I’d understood...if I’d believed you loved me. If you’d been in my life all these years...” I drop my head and let the tears flow freely.

“How long has this been a problem? What brings them on?” he asks, stroking my face.

“I hadn’t had one for some time,” I sob. “Before, shortly after graduation,

they were more frequent. Mom was getting worse, Wade had started to spiral, and I was all alone. That's all," I lie, leaving out the real reason.

"I'm such an asshole." His jaw clenches.

"No, it's not your fault. The truth is, I never saw a doctor, I never got therapy...like I'd have the money for a therapist? I don't even take anything. How could I, with my family history?" I reassure him, hoping he feels less guilty.

"Then you're even stronger than I thought. You should be proud of yourself. Few people could overcome all that drama without help from somewhere," he says, pulling me in close.

"I just did what I had to, Kirk," I shrug. "Who was going to take care of my mother? Wade was too busy chasing his next high and someone had to put food on the table."

"What about Harvard though? I heard you never went, that you went to some college here and that you had to take out a mortgage on the house. What happened, Piper? They practically confirmed you'd get financial aid at Harvard."

I'll never tell him the real reason why I didn't go to the Ivy League college of my dreams.

"Sometimes Tracee has a big mouth!" I snort. I stop a moment, then give him a more rational answer. "The situation here was drastic, and it was all on my shoulders. In the end, I turned down my place at Harvard and stayed here to take care of Mom and Wade. No one else stepped up and I couldn't just abandon them," I lie the best I can.

The truth is quite different, but he doesn't need to know that.

"There was something Olyvia said the other day. Some comment about the heat and your t-shirt?"

I immediately want to run away but I can't, it would only make it more obvious that I'm hiding something. "Are you looking for some hidden meaning? You know she and her friends have always got off on humiliating me for being poor, for wearing the same clothes over again," I shrug.

"You sure it wasn't something else?" he asks with a frown.

No one knows me like Kirk!

"No, really. It's just that I thought I'd put it all behind me, but thinking about it again, how lonely I was, how I felt abandoned by the whole world - I was devastated, Kirk - and your words made me feel stupid, they brought it all back to me and it suddenly occurred to me that if I hadn't believed Vicky,

if you'd been there, my life might be very different now..." I confess, because whatever I tell him, it's better than telling him the truth.

"But I'm here now and I'm going nowhere. You can kick my ass from here to next Friday and you'll still not get rid of me, is that clear?" he asks, hugging me. "Even when we leave here, you'll always have me, I'm not leaving you again," he adds. "Do you believe me now?"

"I believe you," I nod, though I can't stop crying. "I believe that you really did love me. It wouldn't make sense, helping me out so much, just to lead me on. I know now that what we had was real..." I feel myself blushing, bright red, just like when I was a teenager.

"Why the past tense though, Piper? Is it because you stopped loving me a long time ago?"

I never stopped loving you, I think, but I don't say it.

We sit in silence, his eyes staring deep into mine, into my soul, searching for the truth that I'm desperately trying to keep hidden.

"I never loved anyone like I loved you, Piper, with that stupid, all-encompassing love you feel when you're young. Yeah, there were a lot of girls at college and after we became famous there were even more, but I never, ever, loved any of them, and when I got here, I had to face facts. As much as I tried to hate you for what I thought you'd done, I knew that what I felt for you had never gone away. You're my Star Girl," he reveals, without breaking eye contact.

The instinct to lie again is almost stronger than me. I want to tell him that ten years have passed, that everything has changed...but those green eyes have me hypnotized and I can't. "There's never been anyone but you, Kirk," I reply honestly. "You always had my heart."

He takes my face in his hands. "I'm asking you now, like I did ten years ago, do you really want this, Star Girl? Do you want me?" he asks, so close to my face that his breath makes my skin tingle.

The reply comes to me, together with the memory of two teenagers holding each other, in a car parked up by the sea. "More than I want to be a champion swimmer, even now. Is that enough for you?"

He stares at me for what feels like an eternity, then leans in, closing the distance between our mouths, and kisses me.

I'd like to say that now I'm a woman and no longer an innocent teenager, that his kiss has no effect on me, that it's just a kiss - but I'd be lying.

It's as if all the stars in the sky are dancing before my eyes. It's like being

enveloped by light, wrapped in a healing warmth that magically takes away my pain.

Then fear rears its ugly head again and I'm about to put my hands on his chest and push him away, but when I do, when I touch him, instead of pushing him away, I find myself clinging to his firm body.

Kirk nibbles my bottom lip, making me sigh, then takes advantage of my open mouth to kiss me even harder.

It feels amazing. Intense, intimate and overwhelming

The feeling isn't new, I've felt it before. It explodes inside me, bringing memories of that night ten years ago and, at the same time, it feels new and exciting because I'm experiencing it with a different intensity, a new maturity. Nothing else feels like this. No one else feels like Kirk.

He runs his hands through my hair, tilting my head back, changing the angle of our kiss, making it even more intimate and sensual.

I'm like clay at his touch, soft and malleable, as he runs his hands over my body. He rests a hand on my breast and squeezes it through the fabric of my shirt, and my body responds immediately, arching toward him.

I moan against his lips and his breathing becomes more rapid and intense. Suddenly he pulls me on top of him so I'm straddling him and, though ten years have passed, it feels just like it did then and I gasp when I realize just how aroused he is.

He grips my butt tightly, increasing the pressure between our bodies, and I devour his lips, holding his face in my hands like it's a precious treasure I can't let go of. I think I'm going crazy.

His skin smells just like I remembered and I can't help wondering how his body has changed over the years.

It looked incredible when he was a teenager, I daren't imagine how good it looks now.

Kirk's hand begins to move, stroking my body through my clothes, then I feel it working its way under my shirt, brushing against my skin, and suddenly the bubble bursts.

I'm overwhelmed by a thousand mixed emotions, which bombard me, tormenting me.

There's the excitement, the anticipation, followed immediately by a wave of terror washing over me as I remember my devastated body.

The thought of him seeing it, of seeing the pain in his eyes, disgusts me.

Breathing heavily, I pull away from his mouth and scoot along the couch.

“Hey, everything okay?” Kirk asks, amazed at my sudden change of mind.

“Sure, I’m fine,” I nod, terrified at the thought of what he was about to do; touch me under my shirt.

You could ask him to turn out the light, my lust-filled thoughts remind me.

One second later, I know that would be a huge mistake.

He’s not stupid, he’d soon know something was wrong.

I can’t have sex with Kirk. I can’t let him see me naked. Ever.

I’d rather he lived with the memory of how I was ten years ago, than with the horror of how I am now.

“I don’t know if I’m feeling it right now...” I stammer in embarrassment.

“I’ve seen you naked before. Very naked.” He runs his tongue down my neck, reminding me of just where his tongue has been, the way he explored me, every sensation making me tingle with desire, mixed with the pain at having to push him away.

My body isn’t quite how you remember it, though I reflect bitterly.

“Piper, come on, what’s wrong?”

I look into his eyes.

Tell him! my conscience yells.

Better get this over with. That way he’ll realize that he’s never going to be attracted to me ever again.

I can’t. I can’t do it.

I freeze.

Kirk refuses to give up, however. I have to come up with something.

“I’m sorry. I’m too tired tonight, but let me do something I’ve been dreaming of for ten years,” I say, as seductively as possible.

Kirk blinks, clearly confused, but when I slide off the couch and kneel at his feet he soon understands what I have in mind.

When Kirk left, perhaps due to the fact that I’d been his girlfriend and he was so popular, I suddenly wasn’t so untouchable anymore and the boys began to hit on me. I didn’t feel anything, I wasn’t even interested, but I was trying to fill the void caused by his absence and I learned some things, though nothing too exciting. They’re very distant memories and, since the attack, there’s been no one else, but I’m not the inexperienced virgin I was ten years ago.

I leave him no time to protest or tell me he wants to take care of me. I quickly undo his belt and unbutton his jeans, then tug them down, together with his shorts.

I'd seen him before of course, but not like now, up close and clear headed, and it's the first time I've ever touched him.

Overcoming my embarrassment, I run my hand down his erection. He parts his lips and his breathing accelerates. When he looks at me there's fire in his eyes. I meet his gaze then lean over and kiss the star-shaped mole I remember so well, before taking him into my mouth.

He clenches his fists and inhales hard as I take his erection between my lips and move my mouth over his shaft.

I feel his fingers in my hair and sense his hips moving toward me and he begins to moan, whispering my name over and over. I go faster. The heavier his breathing, the more my movements intensify, until he tightens his grip on my hair and comes, a low sensual groan escaping his lips.

"If that's when you're tired, what can I expect when you're wide awake?" he jokes, unaware of the emotions ravaging my mind.

"Talking of tired...will you hold me while I fall asleep?"

"Of course," he agrees, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

We move into the bedroom and get into bed. As promised, Kirk holds me tight, but he falls asleep long before I do.

My thoughts keep me wide awake.

Finding Kirk again, knowing he wasn't just leading me on, makes me happier than I ever thought possible yet, at the same time, it tears me apart.

On the one hand there's the terror of what I went through, and the devastating thought of what could have been.

On the other there's the love I feel for Kirk. A love that never died, that survived ten years of his absence, smouldering under the surface, like a slow burning fire covered in ashes.

And then there's the worst part: how am I going to handle all this?

This time I managed to distract him, but how on earth can I be with a man and not let him see me naked.

The truth is, I can't. I have to end this. The problem is, I have no idea how I'll find the strength to do it.

Chapter 28



Rehearsals go much better this morning.

Needless to say, a lot of it is down to what happened last night.

I know it sounds absurd, but even after ten years, Piper still makes me feel like when I was a kid.

However, there's still something bothering me.

I have a nagging feeling about our conversation last night.

It's not as intense as before, when I literally feared for Piper's safety, but still, I can't stop thinking about what Olyvia said.

On its own it seems banal, just another bitchy comment from a girl known for her bitchy comments, but something about Piper's behavior last night set my alarm bells ringing.

I don't believe she was anywhere near as tired as she made out. Her

reaction was more to do with my hand under shirt than physical exhaustion.

When we break for lunch, Skylar and Chloe inform me that the police chief stopped by and that he and Piper are over at her place.

I know I shouldn't spy on her, that I should wait for her to tell me whatever it is she has to say, but I'm scared that, instead of telling me something she doesn't want me to know, she'll run away again.

That's something else we have to talk about but, after last night's panic attack, I don't want to insist too much. However, if I'm going to handle this the best I can, I need to know just what I'm dealing with. I'm not losing her again, not now.

The thing is, I don't know where to start.

I'm racking my brain, trying to figure it out, when a server approaches our table.

Looking straight at me she announces, "Sorry, Mr. Jenkin, but you have a visitor."

"Who is it?"

I'm a little pissed. When we're expecting visitors, we let the staff know, we can't just drop everything every time a random fan shows up at reception.

And right now, I'm expecting no one.

The girl blushes violently.

"What's wrong?" I ask, getting to my feet.

"If you could just follow me...?" she asks nervously.

That's when I start to think the worst. Something's happened to Piper and it's the Police Chief come to break the news.

I follow the girl to a half-open door.

"Here," she says, stepping aside.

I open the door. The first thing I see is a woman, sitting in an armchair, her back to me.

She's wearing a large hat and I have no idea who she is.

"Close the door, Kirk," she says, standing up and taking off her hat.

Vicky Sandoval.

She's a grown woman now, but she hasn't changed much – she's still slim, her clothes are more elegant and her hair is a more natural shade compared to the platinum blond she wore in high school.

She's the last person I'm expecting to see, however, and I'm literally speechless.

"We need to talk," she says, pointing to another armchair.

“What makes you think I want to talk to you?” I ask, hands on hips.

“I know you’re angry, but what I have to say is important.”

“Angry? Angry is an understatement, Vicky. What the hell makes you think you can just show up here like this, as if nothing happened.” I shake my head.

She calmly points to the door. “Close it, then, please, just hear me out.”

Curiosity gets the better of me and I do as she asks.

“I should have known when I saw the server that someone like you was behind this. Still used to getting your own way, aren’t you?” I accuse.

“I know you hate me, Kirk. You have every reason to, but this time I’m not here for me,” she replies, pointing once more to the chair.

I sit down and she does the same.

“I’m curious to hear just how you ruined our lives, Vicky. First of all, I should sue your mother for divulging personal information about account holders,” I threaten.

“My mother had nothing to do with it, it was all me,” she explains.

“And why, all of a sudden, do you feel the need to get it off your chest?” I ask suspiciously.

“I’m not the spoiled brat I was, Kirk. I’ve lived with the guilt of what I did, and the damage it caused, all these years. I should have told Piper everything years ago, but I couldn’t, I was too ashamed. Time passed. I tried to get on with my life, to stop thinking about it. Then I heard you were here and knew I owed you the truth. It took me a minute to find the courage...” she spreads her arms. “...but I’m here now.”

“Great. Now give me a good reason not to set my lawyers on your mother.”

“That day I’d stopped by her office for some cash. I wanted to go shopping. Anyway, Mom was out to lunch, but everyone knew me, obviously, so they let me sit in her office and I made myself comfortable in her private meeting room. I swear, I was just doodling in my diary, waiting for her. How was I to know she’d come back with a client...?”

“I don’t have all day, Vicky. Spit it out.”

“It was your mother, Kirk. They thought they were alone. She was asking my mother about your bank account, the withdrawals, how often....she was desperate. After a while she brought up Piper and Wade and mother told her everything. She hated the Hooper family. That’s when your mother decided to cancel the lease on the house. That conversation I said I’d overheard

between Tracee and Piper? It never happened, I made it up..." she confesses and I finally realize how she knew what I needed the money for.

"And your mother did nothing? How the hell did you get your hands on a copy of the wire transfer?" I'm still incredulous.

"They had no idea I was in that room. Your mother was upset, worried about you. By the time they finished she was on the verge of tears. My mom offered to get her something to drink and once they left the room, I managed to creep out without anyone noticing. That evening when she asked me where I'd been, I lied. Told her I got tired of waiting. I waited a few days to make sure the transfer had arrived, then went back to the office when I knew my mom would be out, accessed her computer and printed it out. It wasn't hard. She used the same password for everything, the date of birth of her pride and joy, me!"

It's all starting to make sense, even if...

"I'm positive you've never seen me naked, Vicky. I also know that I've never had sex with you, not consciously, anyway...but there's also the fact that there are huge chunks of that night that I can't remember, so...did we...?" This is the part that worries me most.

I told Piper that, as far as I know, I never cheated on her, but I can't be 100% sure.

Vicky shakes her head. "No, I just batted my lashes at your teammates, asked them if you had any flaws. I told them it was impossible, there's no way you could be so perfect...in the end, one of them told me about your mole. That's all."

She sounds perfectly plausible but there's still something missing. "Piper said she found me in your arms. How did I get there?"

Vicky looks down. "I did something bad," she confesses, her hands clasped in her lap.

"Tell me!" I shout.

"That afternoon, I arranged to meet with Wade, that's why Piper was late to the party. I knew he needed money, like I knew his mother was on all those meds. He sold me some Ambien, the strong ones, then I went straight to the party. I was in my car, he was on his bike...Kirk, I drugged you."

"But, I was with Piper. If you'd drugged me, it would have knocked me out before," I object.

"It was later. I came upstairs, said I wanted to give you my gift before I left, and you agreed, I'm guessing because Piper was asleep and you wanted

to get rid of me. Anyway, we made a toast. I knew you'd try and get me out of the house, asap. I slipped you the Ambien and, with all the alcohol already in your system, it soon kicked in. You fell fast asleep, and I took care of all the rest, arranging everything so it looked believable. After Piper and I fought, you woke up and barfed everywhere, and you didn't even notice. That's when I stole your phone so you couldn't reach her and left, leaving you all alone. No one ever knew, not even my friends. I told them we'd slept together that night and they believed me."

"You could have fucking killed me!"

"I know and I'm sorry. I was stupid, immature and, most of all, mean," she admits, lowering her gaze.

"I don't get it though, why did your mother hate the Hoopers so much? Just because they were poor? You made that girl's life hell!" I'm disgusted.

"You're right. I was horrible, a monster, but I had my reasons, or at least I thought I did," she mumbles, her face flushed.

"Yeah? Let's hear them."

"There's something else. No one outside my family knows this. You saw Rowena. Despite the drugs, she was beautiful. Piper too." Vicky looks at me. "I hated her, Kirk, but I wasn't blind."

"I always wondered why such a beautiful girl was sidelined like that. Are you trying to tell me it was all because she was prettier than you?" I'm shocked at how ridiculous it sounds.

"No," she wrings her hands. "It was because of my father."

"Your father?" Now I'm even more shocked. I don't understand a thing.

"After Rowena's husband left her, she and my dad had an affair. He fell in love. One evening he told my mother he was leaving her for Rowena. However, he hadn't done the math. My mom's family is the one with all the money, my dad's restaurant relied on the mortgage from the bank, my mom's bank, and she told him straight: leave me and I'll ruin you. He chose money and ended it with Rowena so, for the second time in just a few months, Piper's mother found herself alone, which pushed her even closer to the edge. By the time you got here, she was in self-destruct mode. My father, however, not content with almost ruining my family, insisted on telling me how pretty Piper was, how clever she was, what a good swimmer she was. That with all the chances life had given me, I was worthless compared to her. I set out to destroy her any way I could, and I succeeded. Then you came along - Mr. Perfect. And what happened? You chose her over me. I couldn't stand it," she

confesses, giving me a glimpse of a reality I never could have imagined.

“Why come all this way and tell me everything now? What are you up to?” I ask, suspecting she has something even worse up her sleeve.

“I only realized after - after what happened. As much as I hated her, I knew she didn’t deserve what they did, it was too much. I’ve spent years living with the guilt, trying to figure out how to unring the bell. When Olyvia told me she’d run into you at Cisco’s, I knew you still believed my version and I couldn’t stay quiet any longer. I owed it to her. I was just waiting until my husband was away on business so I didn’t have to face any awkward questions about coming back to Nantucket. I don’t come back here much, not since I went no contact with my dad. I told myself this could be the chance for Piper to be happy, to make up for the damage I caused, because if you’d been with her, perhaps they wouldn’t have done what they did...”

“Whoa...wait...what the hell are you talking about?”

Vicky blinks. “Olyvia told me she’d seen you two together in town. I assumed you knew.”

“Knew what?”

She tells me and my whole world comes crashing down.

Again.

I need to talk to Piper. I need her to trust me, to tell me everything.

Heading back to the bungalows, I see her hard at work and decide that before I can go back to the guys and start rehearsing, I have to speak to her.

When I’m one step away, however, I realize that it’s just not the right moment. I’m still too shocked, I need to metabolize everything before we can even begin to talk.

“Hi,” I whisper in her ear, hugging her from behind.

“Kirk, I’m working.” She tries to pull away but I won’t let her.

“I’m going back to the guys, just wanted to let you know that we’re having dinner in my bungalow tonight, just us.”

Piper spins around. “No, don’t go to any trouble, we can have dinner with the others,” she refuses, shaking her head.

“No trouble, I want to. Plus, you deserve an evening of me all to yourself, so let me take care of you, at least for now,” I insist, my arms still wrapped around her.

Piper stares at me in silence. I know she’s trying to find an excuse. I stare back at her, deep into her eyes, and it’s like we’re staring into each other’s souls, like all those years ago.

“Okay,” she nods.

I kiss her softly then hurry to join the others.

Fortunately, everything goes smoothly after lunch and we work on two songs. They’re songs Jaxon wrote, and they were already practically perfect, all we had to do was work on the arrangements and make some minor changes here and there.

When we’re done, I head back to my bungalow, ready to argue the dinner-question again with Piper, but I’m surprised to see her curled up on the couch.

She doesn’t look particularly relaxed, however, and as soon she sees me, her eyes dart anxiously to my face.

I smile and walk over to her. “You look nice,” I say, leaning down to kiss her. “Too bad you pulled your hair up, I love it when it’s down.” I sniff myself. “Ew! I’ll take a quick shower, then we can order dinner.”

When I get back, smelling a little sweeter, she seems stiffer than ever. I try to ignore it and hand her the room service menu.

“Everything okay?” I ask, once our food arrives.

“Yes,” she replies, her head down.

“Piper...”

“Okay...it just feels strange, being waited by people I work with. I’m embarrassed and now they’re going to talk about me,” she admits finally.

“I know, but we haven’t just met, we’ve known each other forever, and besides, it’s none of their business,” I point out.

“It’s not that easy,” is all she says.

I want to reply, but decide to drop the subject - we have more important things to talk about. “Vicky came to see me today,” I blurt in the end.

The blood drains from her face. “What did she have to say?” she asks a moment later.

I can tell by her eyes that she’s terrified, that I know the one thing she had no intention of ever telling me.

“You won’t believe it, but she came to tell me the truth,” I reply, remaining vague.

“The truth?” she looks at me incredulously.

I nod and take her through my conversation with Vicky - I even tell her about the affair between her mother and Vicky’s father.

“You’re joking!” She looks genuinely shocked.

“No. For a moment she thought her parents were going to split, that her

father would leave them for your mother, that she'd have to live with the shame and, worse, that you would take everything away from her. That's why she froze you out and caused trouble for you every time she got the chance."

Piper looks deathly pale and I realize that I was maybe too blunt, but there's no dodging the issue.

We can't tiptoe around the problem any longer and if I'm going to get the truth out of her, I have to be brutal.

Chapter 29



Kirk's revelations leave me shocked.

Vicky's father...my mother?

There's something that worries me more, however - that Kirk finds out the truth.

I want to enjoy what time he has left here without having to tell him anything – I just don't know if I'm strong enough to end things and lose him all over again.

I know I'm not strong enough. Having him near, feeling him close, like ten years ago, makes the thought of giving him up impossible, especially now I know that other people were involved in us splitting up, but...

He's never going to find the new me attractive. Let's face it, I look in the

mirror and I scare myself, what's it going to do to him.

When he told me he'd seen Vicky, I was terrified that somehow he'd found out...

As soon as we finish eating, he comes and sits down next to me on the couch.

He delicately kisses my neck, working his way up my cheek until he comes to my ear. "I've been dreaming about having you to myself all day," he whispers.

A shiver runs down my spine and the temptation to turn and kiss him, to just live in the moment, is so strong that for a second I almost give in - then I come to my senses and pull away from him.

"And what a day. I've been slammed all day, making up for the time I spent with the police," I announce, backing further away.

"What did they want, exactly?" he asks and I seize the chance to answer, anything to distract him.

"They wanted to check the garage again, that's all. They didn't find any drugs, or money, thank God," I explain, launching into a detailed description of everything the cops said and did that is so dull I'm even boring myself.

The only thing I leave out are the police chief's concerns about what happened to me in the past.

Kirk doesn't say a word, he just sits there, waiting for me to finish. I think he's going to let me talk forever until, at a certain point, I run out of things to say and fall silent.

"Piper, now we've talked things out and you know you can trust me...I'm going to ask you again. Why didn't you go to Harvard?" he asks, studying my face.

"I told you already," I exclaim, my heart racing. "I couldn't leave my mother and Wade, someone had to take care of them."

"I see. And what Olyvia said the other day? It has nothing to do with why you don't want me to touch you?" he asks a moment later.

I literally freeze. I can't say a word.

He knows. He knows. He knows.

The two words play in my head, in a terrifying loop that sounds like an alarm.

"I...I don't know what you're talking about," I lie when I can finally find the words. "Since when did I stop you from touching me?"

"Okay, then," he crosses his arms and stares at me. "Take off your shirt."

“What the...?” I feign indignation. “What kind of question is that? I’m not some groupie, tossing her bra on stage! You can’t order me to take my clothes just because you feel like it.”

Smiling bitterly, Kirk shakes his head.

He takes my face in his hands. “I won’t let you distract me with another argument, then run out on me as soon as I fall asleep. I want the truth.”

I’ve no way out. I look at my hands, but he’s still too close.

“Please...” he sighs. “Piper, talk to me.”

“Vicky told you, didn’t she? Her good deed for the day, and she still manages to fuck things up,” I say, shaking my head, my eyes filling with tears.

“Hey, Star Girl,” he tilts my chin so our eyes meet. “She means nothing to me, and I don’t care if you have scars or anything. I just want to know what happened to you, so I can understand,” he tries to reassure me.

I know he’s sincere, but it hurts too much.

He knows the truth and I feel humiliated.

They never touched my face. Anyone who doesn’t know me, seeing me fully clothed, would have no idea of the hell I went through. The rest of my body, however...

That day began like any other day, and ended in a nightmare I’ve been living ever since.

That’s why I’m haunted by panic attacks. Because, in addition to the abuse, to the inhuman act I was subjected to, the pain, the sheer terror of dying, the torture, there’s the alienation - the fact that when I look at myself in the mirror, I don’t recognize myself.

I’ve gotten used to looking at myself selectively. From the neck down is off-limits until I’m fully dressed and, whenever I take shower, I avoid the mirror at all costs. I don’t want to look. I can’t look.

When I was a kid, I thought it was just bad luck – people stared at me because my mom was crazy – now they stare at me because everyone on Nantucket knows I’m a freak.

There are certain things, certain emotions, that are impossible to understand until you experience them first hand.

“Piper,” Kirk puts his hands on my shoulders and looks deep into my eyes, bringing me back to reality. “It doesn’t matter how I found out. What matters is that you weren’t going to tell me. Why?”

“I’m not the same girl anymore, Kirk,” I try to explain. “The Piper you

spent the night with doesn't exist anymore... and I don't want you to see..."

"But she does. You're the same Piper I never stopped loving, though it's been ten years."

"I don't want your pity, Kirk. I couldn't take that."

"And what, exactly, were you going to do? Keep running out on me whenever I tried to get close to you, then ghost me as soon as I left here? Do you really want to throw away what we could have together, all over again?" he asks, studying my face.

"It's not about what I want...it's...You won't want me anymore, Kirk. Sometimes a beautiful memory is better than a painful reality."

"Bullshit! That's your problem, not mine, don't put it on me, like you did ten years ago when you thought you weren't good enough. If you want to take things slowly, that's fine by me. Take all the time you need before you feel comfortable enough, I can wait. I'm in no hurry, I just can't stand the thought of you running out on me again..." He looks so intense, I can almost feel the panic attack building inside me.

I take a deep breath, close my eyes, then open them again, trying to get my crazy heart to calm down...then I tell him.

"I didn't know Wade was in so deep with that gang. I'd graduated high school, I still missed you terribly, but my one consolation was knowing I'd soon be leaving Nantucket. Then, one evening, on my way home, someone grabbed me and threw me into the back of a van. I had no idea what was happening, until they took me to an abandoned storage unit and started firing questions at me, about Wade, asking where he'd hidden the money. They thought I knew. He'd been missing for a week. I didn't know where he was, and I certainly didn't know he owed them thousands of dollars.

"That's when they started to cut me. They burned me too, with red hot blades and cigarette butts, trying to make me talk. Their boss told them not to touch my face. Not out of kindness. They figured if they didn't get their money back, they could pimp me out. It was three days before they found me. No one had reported me missing, it was just luck. Some lady out walking her dog noticed a strange vehicle parked outside the unit and called the cops. If not for her, who knows what they would have done with me..."

"Why did you want to keep it from me?" Kirk asks, holding my hands tight.

"Because I never had the money to finish my treatment. They took me to the ER and that was the beginning of the end...I had the mortgage to pay, no

insurance...where was I going to find the money for plastic surgery? When the hospital bill arrived, I didn't know what to do. All I knew was that someone would have to pay it. The guys who hurt me never even got as far as court. They were very conveniently killed in jail while awaiting trial. Their boss wasn't there when the police raided and we never found out who it was. I shelved my plans of going to Harvard and, as my body was messed up, it meant I'd never wear a swimsuit again. Look, I don't want to disgust you or, even worse, make you feel sorry for me."

"How can you even think that? You're Piper. You're not your scars. That's how I'll always see you, even in forty years' time, when you're old and grey, you'll always be my Piper. It's you, your spirit, your eyes, your smile, the sound of your voice, the way you look at me. I never stopped loving you, and I never stopped missing you," he says and he sounds so intense that I lose myself in his voice so much that I seriously begin to consider a reality in which he loves me, despite the way I look.

So, when he bends his head to kiss me, when his lips touch mine, I don't flinch or try and break free. I cling to him, clutching his shoulders, returning his kiss, moulding my lips to his. I open my mouth to let him in, breathing in his soul, letting him breathe in mine.

Kirk devours my mouth, then his tongue meets mine while his hands stroke my neck so delicately, they send tiny little shivers all down my body, and I let out a soft groan.

"I love it when you do that," he whispers against my mouth, before picking up where he left off.

He runs his hand slowly down my body until it comes to my breasts and I feel his touch through my clothes.

It feels good, and my body, so far, seems to like it because I find myself arching my back toward him.

I let out another groan, then another, a sign of the desire mounting inside me, and tighten my grip on his shoulders, almost as if I'm scared of falling.

Still kissing me, Kirk slides his hands under my body and lifts me up, then carries me through to the bedroom. Without turning on the light, he lays me on the bed, then tugs the bedding back, gets on the bed beside me and pulls the covers over us.

For a moment he sits up, looks me in the eye, tugs his shirt over his head, then takes my hand and places it on his naked chest before kissing me all over again.

I wish I could stop but I can't. I take in his body. It was a knockout when he was a teenager, now he's a man, the muscles well-defined, a tight six-pack beneath the olive skin I always adored. I make out the outline of a tattoo but there isn't enough light to see it clearly.

I caress his skin, exploring his body, feeling more and more aroused, as his kisses increase in intensity and his hands move over me. Despite my layers of clothing, he manages to find my bra and unhook it. As it opens, Kirk's hands find my hard nipples through the barrier of my shirt and he teases them, making me quiver and gasp.

He slips his leg between mine and I open them, spreading them wide, as his thigh presses between them. A rush of excitement floods my body, bringing back memories of that distant night ten years ago.

All my defenses disappear, coming tumbling down. It's like my brain stopped working. My hips begin to shake and I rub myself against his thigh, quivering with pent-up desire.

It's all perfect, until I feel one of his hands work its way between my jeans and my shirt.

Instinctively I grab his wrist to stop him.

Panic engulfs me. *He can't touch me under my clothes. I can't let him.*

Kirk stares at me and in his green eyes I see so much love that it hurts. I know he doesn't lie, I know he feels the same way I do, just as I know he's the same guy who turned my life around the day I decided to let him in, but...

It's all too much. I can't stand it.

"Piper, I want to touch you. Please, let me," he whispers, kissing me,

"Please, no," I hear myself plead.

"I won't take your clothes off, I promise. I'll just touch you, let yourself go, we're under the sheets, I won't see anything," he says, kissing me again.

His free hand teases my nipple through my shirt, while the fingers of the wrist I'm holding slowly undo the buttons of my jeans.

His fingers work their way inside my jeans, moving down until they come to my underwear. Through the fine cotton, they stroke me softly, making me pant. My whole body is concentrated on the sudden source of pleasure, a sensation I haven't felt in far too long. I run my nails down Kirk's back and he gasps as he nibbles my bottom lip.

"Piper, let go my wrist, let me touch you. I want to feel you come," he whispers in the dark.

I freeze again.

I don't know what to do.

Part of me wants to stop him, tell him it's useless, but another part of me needs it. It needs to experience the sensations that I thought were denied me forever, especially with him.

I let go of his wrist.

He kisses me again and I feel myself melt.

His hand, now free to do as he pleases, pushes the elastic of my underwear to one side and slides over my naked skin.

My vision blurs as his fingers move faster and faster, circling over me. I let go and open my legs for him, holding him tight and kissing him, moving my hips towards the source of pleasure that is burning me up.

"I still remember the way you taste, Star Girl," he breathes, breaking his kiss. "When can I taste you again, like that first time?"

I think I'm going to explode. My mind is in the here and now, but my body returns to that night many years ago when Kirk buried his face between my legs and explored me.

When it comes, my orgasm is like a jolt of electricity. I stiffen, screaming out his name, trembling in his arms as he continues to touch me, gradually slowing down until, exhausted, I fall back against the pillows.

When my breathing returns to normal, Kirk turns on the bedside lamp, which casts a pale glow over the room, then leans over me, stroking my face, making me look him in the eye.

"That wasn't too bad, was it?" he asks, staring intensely.

"You know it wasn't," I reply, my face flushed with embarrassment. "But you..." I add, realizing he's probably more aroused than ever.

"Sssh, Star Girl. For now, let's focus on you. Tell me what you're thinking, what's on your mind, tell me how you're feeling," he says seriously.

"I'm good, Kirk," I sigh. "Too good."

"Too good?" he looks confused.

"I don't think I can go any further than that," I gulp. "Let you touch me under my clothes, let you see my body..."

"You don't have to do anything now, Piper. You just need time to see that it doesn't matter. Promise me you'll give this, us, a chance, instead of running away. I don't care if for a month, three months, six even, I only get to touch you through your clothes. I care about what you want, that you want to do it, that you're committed to overcoming your fear," he says softly.

I can hardly believe it. "You can't be serious?" I reply.

"Oh, I'm deadly serious, Star Girl. You've always been the only one for me. I'll wait for you as long as it takes, if that's what you want, if I'm the one you want too," he says.

I look into his eyes and there's no trace of a lie.

"Of course you're the only one I want. I never stopped wanting you," and I lean in and kiss him.

We spend the rest of the evening holding each other tight, kissing, until I fall asleep.

Chapter 30



Waking up to Piper sleeping peacefully with her head on my chest could be considered a win, but it's still nothing compared to what I really want..

Until she genuinely believes that her scars mean nothing to me, the problem remains unsolved.

What we need to overcome isn't the scars on her body but her lack of confidence, in what she is and what she means to me.

She blinks and our eyes meet. After a moment of initial confusion I feel her body relax.

“It’s Sunday, you ready for a day out?” I say, looking into her eyes.

“What? Sorry, Sunday may be a rest day for you, I have to work,” she declines, shaking her head.

“Not today,” I smile.

“Really?” she blinks, looking confused.

“Being a famous rockstar has its perks...” I shrug.

“For example?”

“For example, when you inform the resort manager that you want to spend the day with your girlfriend,” I explain with a wink.

“Oh, no, you didn’t?” she exclaims, immediately tensing.

“Oh, yes I did!” I confirm with a kiss.

“Kirk, I have to work here. Of course he said yes, but I’ll pay for it later.”

“Come on, Piper. Is housekeeping your ultimate goal in life?” I ask, stroking her face. “Whatever happened to ambition?”

“Tracee and her constant lectures aren’t enough, you have to start too?” she snorts in exasperation.

“It’s because we care, Piper. You’re important to us. We know what you’re worth. Now, go get ready, we’re leaving soon.” And I end the discussion.

After days spent rehearsing, we all needed a break, so Jaxon suggested I organize something.

I immediately remembered the weekend I spent with Piper all those years ago which, for a girl with no money and no chance to travel was almost luxurious, and suggested Martha’s Vineyard.

On the ferry over from Nantucket, I watch Piper carefully.

At first she’s impassive, but the closer we get to our destination, the more her face lights up and, when she turns and her eyes meet mine, I know immediately what she’s thinking.

“I haven’t been back here since that time I came with you,” she says, as we walk hand in hand through the island’s narrow streets. “I didn’t want to ruin the memory of it with my sad new existence,” she admits, staring up at me.

We make our way down to Oak Bluff, where Skylar and Chloe rave about the brightly colored Victorian-era cottages. It’s not just the band here today, there’s also Skylar’s coach, Bart, who is up here to discuss her training schedule and her return to competitive skating.

“They call them The Gingerbread Houses,” Piper explains to Chloe and Skylar. “You should see this place in summer. It’s full of quirky little coffee shops, craft stores, bistros. The season is crammed with special events, the most spectacular is Grand Illumination night in August, when all these little houses are strung with lights.”

We stay on the island for dinner and by the time we get back to the resort,

it's dark.

As soon as Piper and I are alone again, the tension is palpable. She seems afraid and I know we still need to talk, hopefully for the last time.

Since we're dragging up ghosts she seems unable to leave in the past, I decide to start with mine.

I never kept anything hidden from Piper all the time we were friends. She's one of the few people I ever felt comfortable opening up to, I felt an immediate affinity with her so, once more, I open up the closet and release a few of my skeletons.

"There's one thing you've not asked me yet," I announce, taking a seat and indicating for her to join me.

"What's that?" she asks, eyebrows raised.

"Well, I figured sooner or later you'd ask me how I ended up playing bass," I shrug.

"I was kind of wondering. You were so good on guitar and to be honest, I always wondered why you never sang. You always had such a great voice," she replies, resting her chin on her hands.

"I've never sung for anyone but you, Piper. That song was for you. Even playing the guitar reminded me of you, and it was too painful. For a while I forgot all about music and concentrated on my studies. I thought that was it, but I missed it too much and started taking bass lessons, you know, kind of a fresh start."

"Then you started looking for a band to join?" she asks.

"Not exactly. I was just happy to be playing again, but I'd shelved any dreams of actually doing anything with it. There was something holding me back, stopping me from believing in myself. I kept telling myself that it was Melody's dream, not mine, and I should give up. In the end I realized that playing was so important to me, I was justifying my fear of failure."

"How did you overcome it? This fear of failure? What happened between you changing your mind and joining The Blind Spot?" she asks, leaning forward curiously.

"I was at Yale, about to graduate, like my parents always wanted, but I felt numb. I had no incentives, no motivation, and no real idea of what I wanted to do. Looking back, it's pretty clear that the only thing that made me happy was music, but I continued to rule it out because of my anxieties. Now, here comes the weird part, you ready?"

She nods.

“I’m telling you this, because I know you won’t think I’m crazy. Anyway, I had a dream. About Melody. One thing about my sister, she always got straight to the point. Even in my dream, there was no pussyfooting around. She told me I was a coward. That giving up was ridiculous and there was no way she was going to let me use her as an excuse for my failure. She said it was absurd, that I was alive and that I was going to have to find it in me not only to survive but to live life to the full. To stop hiding behind her death, as there was nothing I could do about it. I could do something else though...

“I woke up pretty shaken, it all seemed so real. Then, on my way to college, my bookbag over my shoulder, the wind literally blew a flyer into my face. It was Jaxon and Denys’ ad, looking for a bassist and keyboard player for their band. I turned around, took my bag home, and headed for New York. Two hours later I was auditioning. I never found out how that flyer found its way to Yale. Ask me, it was destiny. After five minutes of hearing me play, the guys welcomed me to the band and, as they say, the rest is history.”

“There’s no such thing as coincidence. Nothing happens by chance. Call it what you want, Kirk, it was meant to be.”

“I think so too. But that brings us to you, Piper. You had such talent for swimming, what made you give it up? You were incredible, so passionate, with such stamina and style...you were a real natural.”

It’s something that has been bugging me for a while and I’d rather she open up about this before we move on with the rest.

“Well, the easy answer is that my body is too fucked up,” she sighs, shaking her head. “But that’s not all.”

“Star Girl, we have all the time in the world. I’m here for you,” I encourage her to continue talking, “take your time, tell me everything.”

Piper takes a cushion and squeezes it tight. Just when I think she’s going to shut down on me again, she takes a deep breath. “First of all, I stopped for a long time,” she says softly, looking into my eyes. “As for college, I didn’t even enrol. I was up to my eyeballs in debts. The house, Wade, my mother. I had to give up on my dreams, Kirk, it was useless. You know me, you know what I’m like. You remember all those evenings we spent at mine because I wanted to take care of my mother?”

“My sense of responsibility didn’t fade with time. I found myself paying off Wade’s debts too. I was afraid they’d come looking for me again if I didn’t,” she concludes, spreading her arms wide as if to highlight the

obviousness of what she's saying.

I watch her, waiting for her to continue, afraid to speak.

"I tried to live the best I could, which basically meant getting by and hiding away from everyone and everything. How could I even think of competing with this body? I can barely bring myself to look in the mirror." She lowers her head.

"But you graduated, no? You got your degree. How come you never used it?"

"I went to college, I graduated with a degree in phys. ed, thinking I could be a swim coach, but then...I can't, Kirk. How can I teach swimming when I look like this? All those kids staring at me? It's impossible. What was I supposed to do? Resign from the hotel, try out as swim coach, fail miserably, and end up broke? There's still the mortgage to pay off and don't even ask me where Wade is. I'm not in a position to take risks, Kirk. I have too many responsibilities." Finally, she's being honest with me.

"I think you've done enough, Piper. Wade's a big boy now. He can take care of himself, and if he can't, tough. You can't let him continue to ruin your life like this. Tracee's right," I begin. "You need to get off this island, distance yourself from everything. I get that you're anxious, I know the idea of doing anything here, where everyone already knows you, is terrifying, though, if you ask me, you have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of."

Piper's sense of responsibility gets the better of her again. "I'm all Wade has," she says, shaking her head. "What difference would it make, anyway? It would be the same, wherever I went. Sure, in another town they wouldn't know what happened, why I ended up like this, but I'd still be a freak." She grips the cushion even tighter.

"Piper," I say softly. "You can't let what happened rob you of your future. You had a passion for swimming and you'd make an excellent teacher. You'd be more than just a swim coach for your students, you'd be an example. You should be proud of every single one of those scars. Tell your students about them, what it took for you to get where you are today, without psychological help, just with strength and willpower. You'd be an example of courage for every one of those girls and a coach like you would be an inspiration. They wouldn't see you as a freak, they'd admire you." I'm trying to make her see reason, make her understand that the problem is hers alone and that she's the only one who can overcome it.

She's right, obviously. Unfortunately, the world is full of idiots who would

stare, but we can't let other people ruin our lives because they're mean and, besides, not all people suck.

"Nice fairy tale, Kirk, but in the real world things don't work quite like that..."

"But you didn't even try!" I exclaim, interrupting her.

"Really? You think in all these years I haven't tried? Sometimes, in summer, I go to the beach. You know how people stare at me? Gawping, their mouths wide open? Every single one of them? No, because you have no idea..."

She's getting angry now, but I can't drop the subject and I refuse to let her wallow in self-pity. She's been on her own for too long, but she doesn't need me to console her - right now she needs me to help her see sense.

"Don't let them get to you, Piper. If they're so disgusted by what they see, they're the ones who should turn away, not you. What? Only people with perfect bodies can go to the beach now? What about curvy girls? They can't wear swimsuits in case they offend anyone? What about stretch marks? Are they allowed, or guys with beer guts, and what about skinny people?"

"Kirk! It's not because I'm too fat or too thin or for a couple of stupid stretch marks..."

"We all have our complexes, it all depends on how we live them. Who knows, perhaps a curvy girl feels just as uncomfortable as you at the beach," I refuse to give up.

"That's easy to say, you haven't seen me naked!" she yells angrily, before she realizes what she just said.

"No, I haven't. I want to though," I say softly, prising her hands away from the cushion and holding them in mine.

She tries to pull away, but I won't let her. "You'd only be disgusted," she says bitterly. "You'd run away."

"Never, Piper. I guarantee it. I love you and, to me, it makes no difference how you look. I want to see you naked because I want you, I want to make love to you. I can't stop thinking about that night ten years ago. It was the best night of my life, the only night when I felt something real for anyone, and I can't wait for it to happen again."

Chapter 31



I'm torn between giving in to a panic attack and the mad desire to get it all off my chest.

Kirk's green eyes stare at me so intently, stripping me of my last defenses. More than anything, however, I feel his love. It's so strong, so real, I can literally feel it on my skin.

I hear it in his voice, feel it in the way he touches me. I see in his eyes that he's sincere, that when he says he'd love me, no matter what, he's telling the truth.

"We're the ones who give power to our circumstances," he says, his eyes drilling into mine. "You really want those scars to take over your life?"

Tears stream down my face. "I don't know if I can stop them, Kirk. It's not

like I chose them. Someone did this to me, when they chose to change my life.”

“Maybe not on your own, Star Girl. You’ve already done so much without help from anyone else. But do it with me, for me, most of all, for you. Let me help you, let me be there for you, just like before. I was good at taking care of you, right?” He playfully taps the tip of my nose.

Despite the tears, I find myself smiling.

I nod. It’s true. He was good. “I never stopped thinking about you, either. I probably haven’t had as much experience as you...since the accident, I haven’t...” I stop, embarrassed. “You know what I mean, I’m no rock star, am I? Anyway, I do know that what happened between us was different, that it was love...that all-encompassing, all-consuming, eternal love of adolescence.”

“It still is, Star Girl, but this time it could be even better,” I say, taking her face in my hands. “Just give me the chance to prove it.”

The look on his face, so sweet, suddenly morphs into a sneer of disgust as a thousand anonymous faces stare at me in horror, whispering animatedly...

“Look at me, Piper...” his voice snaps me out of my trance. “I’m here, it’s all good. Tell me what it is that makes you feel like this.”

I take a deep breath and swallow.

You’re not suffocating, you’re not in danger, nothing is going to hurt you...

This time, the words work.

My heart slows its mad rush and my breathing returns to normal.

I feel safe, really safe, and it’s all because Kirk is here, because I’m with him.

“I don’t want to see the new me reflected in your eyes, Kirk. I prefer to hold onto the memory of how you used to look at me. I’ve never been able to forget that look in your eyes,” I say, admitting what scares me the most.

“The new you is someone I love even more than I did ten years ago, Piper. I admire you and I don’t think I’d be where I am today if not for you. You’re much stronger than you think, Star Girl. You’re a fighter. When life knocked you down, tried to destroy you, you got up again, every time. I couldn’t wish for a better woman at my side. What kind of physical beauty can compete with that? None,” he whispers, moving in closer.

Leaving me no time to object, he cups my face and presses his lips to mine.

It’s much more than a kiss, however. It’s a whispered promise, a

concentrate of hope and love, an injection of confidence. Confidence in me, in who I am, in what he truly believes I can achieve, including finally, candidly, opening my heart to him.

And I feel like I'm suspended between pure joy and the depths of fear.

Then my emotions take over. His kiss becomes more intense. He slips his tongue between my lips, his breath meets mine, his tongue savors mine, while his arms pull me close.

The rush of excitement that bursts inside me is further amplified by the thought of what happened last night, the way he made me feel, like I'm still unscarred, the teenage girl from ten years ago in Kirk's bedroom while everyone else was downstairs getting drunk, and we were in a bubble, just us, and what we were experiencing.

"Piper, don't think, just feel..." he whispers, before kissing me again.

The reality of who I am now starts to blur. The disgust for myself, for my tattered body, is replaced by the sensation of being truly loved, by the warmth that radiates in my soul at Kirk's touch.

And I finally allow myself to feel something I've worked so hard to reject since the first day I saw Kirk again: happiness.

His hands run over my thighs, caressing me slowly, and it doesn't take much effort to imagine them on my skin, through the thin fabric of my leggings.

Then they move up to my waist, increasing the pressure, until they come the elastic of my waistband.

One of his hands stops, moves away, and reaches behind my back. I'm confused, until I hear a soft click, and the room falls into semi-darkness.

Both hands are on my body again, slowly caressing my waist as his mouth slips from my cheekbone to my neck - and his fingers slide under my waistband.

I stiffen. "What...what are you doing?" I ask, fear in my voice.

"I want you like I did that night so long ago, Piper," he whispers in my ear.

"You can't..." I gasp while his fingers tug at the elastic of my pants. I grab his wrist, trying to move his hand away.

"Come on, Piper. Let me, please. It's dark, I won't see anything. It's just your legs, the legs I love..." I try to escape, backing away, and my heart feels like it could explode any second. "Piper, trust me." In the dark room, his words caress me as his warm breath brushes against my neck.

He's practically pleading and something, somehow, begins to stir inside

me. My limbs relax, my breathing slows down, and I let go of his wrist.

For a moment he doesn't move then, in silence, he kisses me again, while his hand takes hold of the waistband of my leggings and pulls them down, together with my underwear.

For the first time in a very long time, I'm practically naked with a man.

The thought takes my breath away, making my head spin, but then it's gone.

It disappears when Kirk's hands reach my knees, touching my skin, making me quiver, a feeling that seems completely new yet, at the same time, brings back all the emotions I felt ten years ago.

When he slowly pushes my knees apart, I'm trembling. But not with fear.

Then he works his way up my legs until, mid-thigh, he comes to the only scar I have on my lower body, a spot on my right thigh, where the skin is a series of tiny, raised lumps.

He can't see them, but I know he can feel them. I try to avoid them as much as possible when I get dressed, as if I could ever forget their presence.

He doesn't stop, however. He doesn't pull his hand away in disgust. He spreads his hand over it, palm down, and runs his thumb over the rough edges of my skin, before moving on until he reaches my inner thigh.

He pauses again, then slips a hand between my legs, brushing over my naked skin, making me gasp.

He slides a finger inside me and my whole body arches toward his hand in response.

His lips part and he rests his forehead on mine. "You starting to trust me now, Star Girl?"

In the dark, I still feel the intensity of his gaze, burning through the last remnants of my defenses.

Unable to speak, I nod my head.

Kirk stands up. One moment his face is level with mine, the next he's on his knees at the end of the couch. Taking my legs, he pulls me down so my hips are slightly over the edge then, with no hesitation, lowers his mouth directly onto my most sensitive area.

The memory of that night, of the first time we made love, explodes in my head, but it's nothing compared to how I'm feeling now.

Kirk knows exactly what he's doing. He takes me to the edge of heaven, then stops and kisses me slowly.

I feel it building inside me. Unable to contain my groans of pleasure, I

want to come but I also want the moment to last forever.

With one hand, I grip the couch, the other one sinking into his thick black hair as my lips rise to meet his mouth, which continues to explore me.

He begged me to trust him, and I do. He's doing everything in his power to help me forget my scars, even the ones on my soul.

My mind empties, my thoughts disappear, until only instinct remains. Pure instinct, as if deep inside me there's a forgotten fire burning, and my body begins to react on its own, begging for more, moaning uncontrollably.

I'm gripping his hair so tight I'm almost afraid I'll hurt him, yet Kirk doesn't stop, he doesn't move, he just carries on devouring me.

I suddenly wonder if it's all a dream, one of the many sexual fantasies I indulged in over the years, when the loneliness got too much and my mind went back to Kirk and that incredible night.

I open my eyes and glance down at Kirk to make sure it's all real.

My eyes have grown accustomed to the dark and I can clearly see the dark curls trapped between my white fingers and his head, buried between my thighs.

It's really happening... I think briefly, before emotions overwhelm me again.

Something I haven't felt for a long time surges through my body, filling me with desire. More than anything, however, I feel need. I need Kirk.

I let go of his hair and grab him by the shoulders, almost dragging him on top of me. "I want you..." I say, over and over, as I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

I run my fingers down his body until I come to his jeans, then I unbutton them and slip my fingers inside, under the fabric of his shorts. In no time I come to his erection and close my hand around it.

The hoarse, throaty moan that leaves his lips sets me on fire, exciting me so much I think I'm going to catch fire.

Still kissing me, Kirk pulls me into his arms and carries me into the bedroom.

He lays me on the bed, stands up and, never once breaking eye contact, begins to take off his clothes.

Light filtering through the window from outside gives me a glimpse of his incredible body while, one after another his clothes fall to the floor, leaving him completely naked.

I reach out and entwine my fingers through his, pulling him toward me.

Kirk does as I ask and kissing me once more, lies down on top of me.

I feel his erection between my legs and part them slightly so he can slip inside me but instead, he pulls away.

He lifts his head, looks me in the eye, then I feel his fingers tugging at the ribbed waist of my hoodie.

Fear takes over, however, and I grab his wrist, blocking him.

“I want you, Star Girl. I want you more than you know, more than ten years ago when I was a dumb, stupid kid, but I can’t make love to you if you insist on wearing this two-foot thick sweatshirt. We do it, or we don’t. I don’t care either way, but if we do it, we do it properly,” he says, stroking my cheek. “If you’re not ready, it’s all good, I can wait.”

Wait?

Again?

Let the world continue to make me feel disgusted with myself, repulsive, the way I’ve felt for as long as I can remember?

No! No more waiting! a voice explodes in my head.

And, suddenly, it’s as if someone turned a light on inside me.

I’m lost in his green eyes.

It’s not desire I’m feeling, not the passion of the moment, it’s everything, every single thing I’ve shared with Kirk over the years. It’s the humiliation my mother’s behavior caused me, the pain and hurt of my adolescence, every good thing that he brought into my life. It’s the absolute certainty that Kirk knows who I am - that he’s always known - that he’s always seen everything I am. I don’t mean the horror I wear on my body, but my soul, who I am inside, and everything I need.

I don’t say a word. They’re not necessary, but I do something crazy, totally crazy for me. Something I thought I’d never do again, especially in front of a man.

I sit up and, slipping my hands inside my sweatshirt, unhook my bra.

Breathe...

Taking the waistband of my sweatshirt in both hands, in one single gesture, I tug it over my head, pulling my bra off with it.

I toss them to the floor and stare at Kirk and I know, I feel it in every atom of my soul.

Like ten years ago, like some stupid kid who still believes that Prince Charming will ride in and save her, I know I love Kirk Jenkin. I love him with every fiber of my body, with every particle of my being.

And it terrifies me, perhaps even more than the idea of finally letting him see me naked. One second later, however, our eyes meet, and I feel safe.

Kirk's eyes never leave mine all the time his hand moves over my body, getting to know it again.

He moves from my collar bones, where a lit cigarette left a trail of tiny, round dots in its wake, like heavy raindrops.

Then onto my breasts, the unscarred one first, then the one with the burn marks, and up to the nipple which, thanks mainly to the padded bra I was wearing that day, is relatively unscathed, apart from the razor thin scar which runs across it, his fingers delicately brushing the underside.

Then he moves down to perhaps the most disfigured part of my body, my stomach. Here my attackers really went to town, gouging out chunks of flesh and peeling away strips of skin.

I shudder and a tear rolls down my cheek, but Kirk doesn't stop.

He caresses every inch of my damaged body, working up to my arms, which are criss-crossed with slash marks, and over my back, where they branded me with hot blades.

When he reaches my face, he leans down and kisses me lovingly on the lips. A moment later, I feel his hot mouth on my cheekbone, descending along my neck.

His lips are doing something that, until several seconds ago, I was convinced anyone would be repulsed by - kissing my ravaged body.

One by one, he takes my nipples into his mouth, sucking hard while teasing the other.

And every time he touches me, a new sensation runs through me, igniting something I never thought I'd feel again, something smothered by fear and self-loathing: desire.

And while his lips move from one breast to the other, he runs a hand down my body and between my legs, caressing me. He slips his fingers inside me and I moan.

"I want you," I plead.

He stops, leans over the side of the bed and finds his jeans. He fishes a condom from one of the pockets, tears open the wrapping and puts it on.

Finally, he positions himself between my legs, his erection pressing against me, and I cling to him, my arms wrapped around his shoulders.

He stops for the briefest of moments, then pushes himself inside me. In the exact same moment our bodies become one, his lips meet mine.

When he begins to move inside me I suddenly feel whole again. I'm back where I belong, where I was always meant to be.

I begin to follow his movements, moving my hips in time with his thrusts. My breathing grows faster and skin to skin, I feel his heart beating against mine, as if it were my own.

I'm no longer the terrified, disfigured girl. I'm Piper again, almost as if I've traveled back in time to the real me. I wrap my legs around him, pulling him in close, and he feels like mine. Really mine.

My new position means he can thrust even deeper inside me. His lips continue to devour mine and his breathing becomes labored as his thrusts become more determined.

I claw wildly at his shoulders, begging him to give himself completely and he doesn't disappoint. His mouth moves to my neck, his breath so close to my skin, and while still inside me, he stops. He slowly rotates his hips, intensifying the sensations burning inside me. Overwhelmed by a sense of joy and fulfilment I never thought I'd feel again, I scream his name and, while my vision blurs and I feel myself begin to float, Kirk climaxes. He thrusts deep inside me once, twice, then stops. His body tenses for a moment then begins to tremble.

I thought I would feel scared, shocked, even, but I don't. A growing sense of contentment spreads through me and I feel so relaxed, so peaceful, that I don't realize that, for the first time in ten years, I'm falling asleep, completely naked, next to another human being.

I wish I could say that daylight finds me in the same state of bliss, but that's not quite what happens.

I open my eyes to the warm sensation of Kirk's hand resting on my bare stomach but, unlike last night, the harsh light of day is pouring through the windows and I stiffen in terror.

Kirk is already awake and when he senses that I'm no longer asleep, he rolls onto his side and looks into my eyes.

For some reason I was expecting to see horror in those beautiful green eyes, but I'm wrong.

He leans down and kisses me softly and the sheet over his body slides down to his waist.

For the first time in ten years I get to see what his body really looks like now.

On his stomach, just above his belly button, in the exact center of his six-pack, is a spider tattoo.

I hate spiders. They disgust me, and I raise my eyes to meet his.

I'm about to ask why, when he beats me to it.

"See, you found something horrible on my body before I could find anything on yours," he says, a glint in his eye.

"I don't..." I'm embarrassed, I don't know what to say, but the look on my face is eloquent enough.

"Spiders are ugly and scary, right? They lay in wait, lurking in the dark, ready to strike. To trap us in their webs, hold us prisoner with no chance of escape. Know what else does that? Fear. That's why I got it tattooed right there. I forget it's there then it jumps out at me, like one of those terrors that suddenly seizes you and won't let you go, tormenting the pit of your stomach. It's here to remind me of the anxiety that will always be here, right here," he says, touching the spot on his stomach where the creature lies, "but also as a reminder that fear can be defeated."

I trace the outline of his tattoo and Kirk kisses me, pulling me in close and, this time, I don't resist. Now I know that, with Kirk, I have nothing to be afraid of.

"I lied," I confess. "It's not true that I don't know where those star earrings are. After that night, after we'd slept together, when I thought you didn't love me, I took them out. Wearing them was too painful, but I couldn't bring myself to throw them away, so I put them in a little box and they've been there ever since."

"Think it's time to dig them out again?" Kirk smiles, stroking my right ear lobe.

"What about you?" I ask hesitantly. "What happened to the chain I gave you for your eighteenth birthday?"

"Same thing, Star Girl. I couldn't throw it away, it's in the box, the same box it came in, back at my place. As soon as I get to New York, I'll put it on," he replies, kissing me again, taking me into another world.



Just a few days later, and being with Kirk is my new normal. It's almost absurd to admit how easy it is to get used to certain things, how natural it feels to have him around, to share a bed with him and, more important, to share my life with him.

I have three hours free this afternoon and while Kirk and the band are busy rehearsing, I decide to stop by and see Tracee. I have to tell her about a decision Kirk helped me reach which, until a week ago, would have seemed like pure madness.

The baby is asleep in his crib, which means we can talk without the risk of being interrupted, and I can fill her in on everything that's happened recently.

The only detail I leave out is the one about Vicky's father. I don't think Tracee would tell anyone, but...I know first-hand how hurtful gossip about your family can be and, as much as I resent Vicky for what she did, I refuse to sink to her level. As far as my story with Kirk is concerned, Randall Sandoval falling in love with my mother, has nothing to do with it.

"And here's me thinking you were crazy, while he was more fucked up than you," my best friend shakes her head. "How could he not see just how much you loved him? Even worse, how could he believe Vicky's BS?"

"You could say the same about me. I knew Kirk for two years, he turned my life around, literally, I had no reason to believe what Vicky said about him..." I shrug. "But I did..."

"What matters is that you've finally talked things out and," she adds mischievously, "from the look in your eye, you've been doing more than talking!"

"Tracee!" I blush.

"When you know, you know, Pipes...plus, as if by magic, you're wearing those earrings again...two and two makes...mad passionate love..." she winks.

After she forces me to give her the juicy details, some of them anyway, I tell her about my decision and the enormous step I took last night on Kirk's laptop while he sat next to me.

"Don't be upset, but all this has made me reach a decision..." I announce, not sure where to begin exactly.

"A decision? What decision?" she asks, leaning in close.

"I know you always told me to do it, and that it won't be easy, but now things are moving again with Kirk, I felt confident enough to apply to a school in New York, for the position of swim coach. The previous one is moving on."

“Upset?” She takes my hands. “Pipes, that’s awesome. Sure, I’ll miss not having you around, but there’s nothing to keep you here. You have to start living, girl. You’re twenty-six and it seems like you’ve spent most of them running round after Wade and your mom. It’s time to think of yourself and, most of all, it’s time to get out there and have fun.”

“I know I’m always going to be paranoid about the way I look, it’s going to take a minute to deal with that....but, you’re right. I have to start living my life. Having Kirk around again, encouraging me, standing by me, finally opened my eyes. It’s thanks to him that I realize that from the day I was taken to today, I’ve given Wade all the power, let him run my life, and I deserve so much more,” I reply excitedly.

“That’s exactly how it is. I don’t care that it took you so long to figure it out, what counts is that you got there. This is your big chance, Pipes, don’t let Wade pull you back in. You know all Wade cares about is Wade, he doesn’t deserve your love. But...one thing...this decision to apply specifically to a school in New York...does it have anything to do with the fact that Kirk also lives there?”

“Well...” I stammer, feeling myself blush. “I figured since I decided to make this massive move, I should give being near him a chance too.”

“Piper, there’s nothing to be ashamed of. I get that he wants you around just as much as you want to be around him. You already wasted ten years, there’s no point in wasting more time, is there?” she asks, spreading her hands.

“Thanks, Tracee,” I sigh. “I’m feeling a little less crazy now.”

“Crazy? What’s crazy about it? You know Kirk, probably better than anyone in the whole world. It would be crazy if you’d only just met, but it’s not like that,” she says, stroking my arm reassuringly.

Sometime later, I’m on my bike, a huge smile plastered across my face, heading back to the resort. Kirk and the guys will be finishing soon, then we’re all having dinner together.

My head is still firmly stuck in the clouds, as if my problems have all miraculously disappeared, as I chain my bike in the parking lot.

When my phone rings, I pull it from my pocket and cheerfully swipe to answer.

“Piper. Thank God!” It’s Wade. I’d recognize his voice anywhere.

“Wade, oh, my God!” I exclaim. “Are you OK? Where are you?”

“Plymouth,” he replies, “I had to get out of Boston.”

“Did you steal that money from the clinic? Was it you? What did you do with it? Is that why you ran away? Some guy came here, there was money and drugs stashed in the garage.”

“What is this? ‘Twenty Questions’? They tracked me down to the clinic, wouldn’t leave me alone. They made me take that money, I was supposed to use it as a down payment for another consignment, but thanks to you, things escalated. I’m here now, but I need you to do me a solid. I have to leave the country ASAP or I’m a dead man. Help me, Piper, one last time. I won’t ask for anything else, I promise,” my big brother begs.

“Wade, go to the police! Tell them everything, they’ll help you. And what do you mean, I escalated the situation?” *Why blame me all of a sudden?*

“Are you crazy? They’ll kill me. I’m stuck in Plymouth because you went to the cops. I had it all worked out, then you opened your big mouth and now they want to kill me,” he says, immediately making me feel guilty.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do. He wanted money or the drugs. I had no idea they were in the garage, I was terrified he’d come back and, well, you know, do bad things...”

“You know I always put things right, Piper. I was going to give them the 20K I got from the clinic, do a couple jobs, and we would have been even, then you stuck your nose in, now they think I’m some snitch who wants to fuck them over and set a trap for them.”

I know I should have kept quiet, that taking Kirk’s advice and reporting the assault would get Wade into trouble. I made a huge mistake, I was thinking only of myself, and now his life is in danger.

Okay, he’s no saint, but he’s all I have left. I can’t just turn my back on him. He’s my brother and I won’t abandon him like my father did with us when he walked out on my mother.

“Okay, okay...give me the address. Give me time to get everything together and I’ll be with you tomorrow,” I say. I’ve already gone back on my promise and agreed to take care of him again. “Promise me one thing, though. I’ll help you but swear this is the last time, that you’ll leave and start over somewhere, far from here, far from the damage that our freaky family has caused...” my voice cracks with emotion and sadness.

I often wonder what life would have been like if only the situation at home had been normal. It’s easy for someone who didn’t grow up like us to judge my brother.

“I promise. You’re the world’s best sister. I swear, one more time and I’m

out for good.”

The others don't get Wade. They don't realize that he's sick, that he loves me, in his own way, that I'm important to him.

The call ends, leaving me a wreck all over again. I need to talk to Kirk. I need to get my thoughts together before I do that but, just as I'm making my way to his bungalow, he steps through the door of the one they're using for rehearsals and sees me.

Even from a distance he can see something is wrong and rushes over to join me.

“Piper, shit! You're as white as a ghost. What's wrong?”

I want to lie, tell him everything is fine, but I'm too upset. “Wade just called,” I sigh. “He needs my help.”

Kirk's eyes darken. “Did he tell you where he is?” I nod. “Excellent. Call the cops, tell them everything,” he says, pointing to the cell phone in my hand.

“Last time I called the cops, it almost got him killed, so not a good idea.”

“Hey, something wrong?” Jaxon and the band join us. You can cut the tension between me and Kirk with a wooden spoon.

“I'll tell you later,” Kirk nods curtly, taking my elbow and leading me inside. “Wade is such a dumbass. You really think going to the cops was a mistake?” he asks once we're alone. “You're going to drop everything and run to him?”

“He's still my brother, Kirk,” I sigh sadly.

“He's a useless junkie who's always put his needs before anyone and anything, he's even worse than your mother,” he snaps angrily. “He doesn't deserve your loyalty, like he doesn't deserve everything you've done for him over the years.”

“I know he's no saint, I'm not stupid, but I have to help him. I can't stand by and let them kill him, he's all the family I have left.” I'm barely holding it together. “I promised I'd meet him in Plymouth tomorrow.”

I tell Kirk everything - for two reasons.

1) - because lies have caused enough damage already.

2) - because I'm too scared to go alone.

“That's crazy. Why the hell would you do that?” he asks nervously.

“Because I promised him. If he doesn't leave the country they'll find him and kill him. I have to do this, one last time. I have about three thousand dollars saved, it was my emergency fund in case I lost my job at the resort.

I'll give it to him then, once he's out of the country, he can use it to start a new life. I have to do this, I have to."

"No, Piper, you don't. The best thing to do would be to call the cops, tell them where to find him and let them do their job. Helping Wade escape could piss those people off and open you up to all kinds of trouble. Do you want a replay of what happened before?" Kirk refuses to understand.

"No way I'm doing that. I wanted to be honest with you, no more secrets, but tomorrow I'm going to get that money and go to my brother. That man who came to my house knew I was telling the truth, that I knew nothing. This time it will be different," I reply firmly.

Kirk grips my shoulders. "And you think I'm going to let you do this on your own?"

"I'd understand if you did. This is my mess, Kirk, I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to get involved," I say, trying not to show just how much I need him.

"I'm coming with you. Just give me time to talk to the guys. And don't touch your money, I have some here in the safe, we can use that, okay?" he nods decisively.

"I can't let you pay for Wade's fuck ups, not again."

"Pay me back when you can, it's just to save time. If we don't have to wait for the bank to open, we can leave earlier."

"Okay, but I will pay you back."

"It's a deal," he nods, and I hope he means it.

Instead of dinner with the others, we call room service, but I'm so anxious I barely touch my meal. Eventually, Kirk gives up on trying to get me to eat and leaves me in front of the TV while he goes to inform Jaxon that we'll be leaving for Plymouth in the morning.

I wish I could say that the idea makes me feel calmer but, sitting on the couch wrapped in the comforter Kirk draped round my shoulders, I'm frozen to the bone.

I just hope that, after all this, Wade is able to get a way and make a fresh start somewhere else.

I've never stopped dreaming that one day he'll get clean, and quit getting into trouble. That one day he'll find the happiness he's been searching for, for so long.

I'm hopeful that getting him away from everything, giving him the chance to start a new life, will make me feel better about my future too.

Chapter 32



I hate leaving Piper alone like this, but I need to talk to Jaxon.

We're leaving for Plymouth first thing tomorrow and God only knows how long it will take to settle things. I still want Piper to call the cops - and if she won't, then I will, even if I have to do it behind her back.

I trust Wade as far as I can throw him and, most of all, I don't want Piper to be accused of being an accessory.

It's not just drug dealers we're dealing with now - Wade is wanted for theft and Piper refuses to understand that if the police find out she helped him get away, there will be consequences. All we need is trouble with the law thanks to Wade.

I head towards Jaxon's bungalow. He's sitting outside, his guitar in his lap, chatting with Skylar, who's holding baby Sarah, and Sherman.

“Not interrupting anything, am I?” I ask, walking over to join them.

“Nah, we’re just chatting.” Sherman points to a chair. “Park your bum.”

“This young lady is a little night owl,” Skylar shakes her head.

“So, I’m playing for her,” Jaxon adds, playing a couple of notes from one of our new songs.

“And I’m boring her arse off with my love life!” Sherman adds drily.

Sarah is wide awake, cooing happily, almost as if she wants to sing along. I know nothing about babies, but it’s amazing how something so tiny can feel the emotion of music.

“Something bothering you, K?” Jaxon asks, halting his strumming.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to interrupt.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take her inside, try and get her down,” Skylar says, getting to her feet. “I think listening to daddy playing actually excites her.”

“I’ll be in in five,” Jaxon says quickly.

“Relax, she’s fine, she just doesn’t want to go to bed, do you?” Skylar rolls her eyes and looks lovingly down at the baby.

I have to smile too. Jaxon, rockstar-momma bear, strikes again.

I’d rather talk to Jaxon one-on-one, but I trust Sherman, 100%.

If anyone can keep a secret, especially his own, it’s Sherm. He has a sensitivity that he rarely lets anyone see, and I don’t have a problem discussing Piper’s story in front of him.

“So, what’s wrong?” Jaxon asks, looking concerned.

“It’s all such a mess,” I shake my head, “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Just start...” Jaxon puts a reassuring hand on my arm. “If we can help in any way...” he leaves the sentence hanging.

I tell them everything: Wade’s teenage drug problems, how he took advantage of Piper, guilt-tripping, her blind loyalty - then I tell them everything she’s been through and how Wade continues to fuck up, again and again, and how she bears the weight of it every time.

Sherman’s face darkens. Knowing what he’s been through himself, I have no trouble imagining what he’s thinking.

“Tomorrow we’re heading over to Plymouth. Sorry to leave you guys in the shit like this, but I can’t let her go alone.”

“You’re joking? Do what you have to do...one thing though...you sure it’s a good thing, giving into this Wade guy like this?”

Jaxon doesn’t even know him and he doesn’t trust him.

“Of course not, but you try changing Piper’s mind! I’m going to call the

cops, make sure they tail us, that way it looks like she's willing to cooperate. I lied about the money too. Said I'd give it to her, so we wouldn't have to go the bank, but I don't want her to leave a trail that can be traced back to her and get her into trouble."

"Mate, you're sure that going behind her back is a good idea?" asks Sherman.

"Of course not. I'll try and get her to change her mind again. If she refuses, then I'll do whatever it takes. I can't let that idiot ruin her life again," I explain. "It's for her own good."

Sherman nods.

"Sorry to run out on you guys like this...I know we're here to work,' I apologize once more.

"Don't worry. We can work around it. You can catch up with us when you've put this story to bed." Jaxon gives me an encouraging pat on the back. "And talking of which..." he gets to his feet and heads inside.

I say my goodbyes and go back to Piper.

"I spoke with my manager, told him I'm taking a couple of days. He's not a happy bunny," she says when I walk through the door.

"Who cares? Hopefully that school will hire you and you can kiss goodbye to this place. Not that there's anything wrong with working hospitality, but you can't let a talent like yours go to waste," I say, leaning in to kiss her.

"Hopefully..." she says, glancing down.

"Piper, listen to me...I know I talked you into applying...I could come up and down to Nantucket anytime, come see you whenever you want, no problem, money's no problem, you know that...but I want what's best for you. Ask me, leaving Nantucket and putting the past behind you is the best thing you can do."

Piper looks me straight in the eye. "I can't think of anything better than starting from scratch with you, Kirk, and I know your suggestion was in my best interests. Tracee has been bugging me about leaving for years. My best memories of this place are all linked to the time I spent with you, now I want to make new ones, somewhere new. I'm just worried about Wade. When all this is behind us, I'll finally be able to look to the future," she explains, looking determined.

"Piper, forgive me if I can't let this drop, but I really think we should call the police, tell them where Wade is, and put an end to this whole thing."

"I thought you were going to help me," she sighs, shaking her head.

“I am...but they could accuse you of being in on it, right from the start.”

“No one else knows Wade called me. Let me help him, one last time. I made a huge mistake last time and it almost got him killed,” she pleads, taking my hands in hers.

Oh, God, Piper, I hate doing this to you, but I have no choice, I think even while I'm nodding in agreement.

I did the same with Melody. I invented excuses for her behaviour a thousand times over, I fought with everyone, just to defend her – it's a vicious circle that's so hard to get out of.

“Okay, we'll do it your way,” I say, humoring her. “Just give me the address, so I can Google it. I'd feel a lot more comfortable knowing exactly where he is and the roads in and out of there.”

“Okay,” she nods, finally deciding to open up.

I wait for her to fall asleep, then grab my phone and walk outside.

Forgive me, Piper, but I'm doing this for you...

Then I dial Boston PD and ask to be put through to whoever is investigating the theft at the clinic, explaining that I'm calling on Piper's behalf as she is too upset to speak.

The police want to wait until tomorrow, but they reassure me, saying they'll be in place to protect us when we get there, and that they hope to arrest the leaders of the drug trafficking organization Wade works for too.



All the way there, I'm nervous as hell.

Part of me hopes the cops are wrong, that Wade is working on his own and that he really just wants to get out and start over.

A few blocks from the address he gave Piper, I park up.

I've never seen her so tense. She's gripping the handle of her purse so hard, her knuckles are white.

“There's still time, Piper. We can call the cops and ask them to intervene,” I suggest, in the absurd hope she'll agree. “That way they arrest Wade and you don't have to deal with this mess any longer.”

I can always tell the cops that she's scared, that after what she's been

through, she doesn't feel like acting as bait...

"You know what I think," she refuses again.

"Then let's go." I take her hand, anxious to end this whole damn thing.

Wade's hideout is a rundown old shack that looks like it's been empty for years, and when we knock on the door I wonder if he's there at all.

A few minutes later, however, the door opens and I find myself face to face with him.

"Kirk, my man!" he exclaims, grinning like we're best friends and it's some sort of happy reunion.

"Wade, how are you?" Piper rushes forward, worried.

Hearing the anxiety in her voice makes my blood boil because, truth is, the selfish asshole doesn't give a fuck about his sister.

He leads us through to a filthy sitting room. The place is a pigsty!

"What the fuck were you thinking?" I can't hold back my anger.

"I needed a place to lay low and the Four Seasons was fully booked. What are you doing here, anyway?" he asks curiously.

"What am I doing here? You're a lucky man, Wade..." I sniff, glancing around.

"I must be if you're here to put things right," he grins.

"Wade, why did you run away like that? You didn't think to let me know you were okay?" Piper cuts in anxiously.

"I had to wait, make sure they weren't following me," he shrugs.

I automatically want to reach out and grab him, but I hold back for Piper's sake. "You never change, Wade!" I jab my finger at his chest instead. "Do you have any idea what kind of mess you've dragged us all into - and how dangerous your 'associates' are? And, as usual, you don't give a damn about Piper's safety, do you?"

"I knew they'd come after the stash, I just figured they'd leave Piper out of it. They know she's not involved," he replies nonchalantly.

This time I can't help it, and I grab him by the shoulders. "Really? Admit it, Wade! The only person you care about is yourself. You have no idea what they could have done to Piper, how much danger she could have been in...and you have no idea the lengths they'll go to, to get that money back," I snap.

"Wade...the money, the drugs...do you know where they are?" Piper asks.

"I told you already. The money I stole from the clinic was payment on my debt - well, some of it. Unfortunately, I only managed to give it to them the day after they stopped by, if I'd got there sooner, they wouldn't have

bothered you. They were beginning to trust me again then, like an idiot, you went to the cops and put a fucking target on my back,” he snarls, trying to make her feel guilty.

I’m immediately pissed again. “I’m warning you! You have no right to blame her!”

“Okay, okay,” he holds his hand up, palms out. “Enough already, let’s get down to business. I need enough money to get through the next few months. I’ve managed to get hold of some fake papers, I’ll get a flight and start over in Europe,” he says, making it all sound so easy.

“I have three thousand in savings,” Piper announces.

Evidently she thinks that’s going to be enough to get him off her back.

“3K? What am I supposed to do with that? It will barely cover the cost of my plane ticket. Wait ...you’re back with Kirk?” He spreads his arms magnanimously. “In that case, I’d say twenty thousand sounds better, don’t you?”

“Twenty thousand?” Piper blurts.

“You really think your brother would let a chance to milk the situation slip through his fingers?” I cross my arms aggressively.

“Ah, Kirk. You’re not so perfect yourself. We know who you really are. Do I have to remind you of all those empty promises you made?” he nods over at Piper. “Where were you when she needed you?”

“Hey, scumbag. Don’t offload your responsibilities on me!” I yell.

“Did you come to help me or insult me?” he asks.

“I want them to leave Piper alone. She doesn’t deserve anymore of your crap. She’s your sister – do you know what you’ve done to her? The danger you’ve put her in?” I run my fingers through my hair in exasperation. “No, of course, you don’t...nothing exists but you in Wade’s World!”

“You want to tell me again why you’re here?” the asshole asks, his arms crossed.

“To take you to the cops. You’re going to turn yourself in. You’re going to tell them all about the drugs and the money you stole from the clinic. You’re going to name names and, for once, you’re going to do the world a favor - you’re not going to think of yourself, but of Piper, who’s life you so carelessly tossed in the can. That’s why I’m here.”

“Kirk...” Piper touches my shoulder.

“Don’t you get it? If you let him get away, those people won’t give up, they’ll come looking for you again?”

“You can’t make me turn myself in!” Wade exclaims. Then he turns to Piper. “You’re my baby sister, you’re all I have left. Dad could care less about us, Mom’s dead...you really want things to end like this? You want to see me in jail?” he asks, squeezing her hands desperately.

I can’t help it. “Don’t even think about it, Wade,” I yell, pushing him away from her. “You can’t manipulate her anymore. I’m here now, and I have her back. You’re going to turn yourself in, it’s the only way this thing is going to end.”

“Is this what you want, Piper? You want to see me dead? Because like this, that’s what is going to happen,” he whispers, leaning in close to her.

I make one last attempt to reason with him. “Why don’t you do the right thing for once?”

I’ve barely finished when the door flies open and three guys armed with guns barge in. The first is very tall and powerfully built, the second is thickset, with a shaved head, and the third is very thin, his hair scraped back in a ratty ponytail.

“Sit,” Ponytail orders, all three aiming their weapons at us. He turns to Wade. “Big Rush is pissed. You said this would be a cinch,” he points at me, “that pretty boy here always pays up. And what’s all this crap about turning yourself into the cops?” he asks Wade.

“Pretty boy’s also a rich boy....rock star rich, dinero no problemo,” Wade blusters. “Tell him, Kirk!” his eyes flicker to me, but I ignore him.

“See? I was right, getting you to plant those listening devices,” Bald Guy says. “When our guy in Nantucket tipped us off that the sister was dating some rock star, we should have got rid of Wade, and gone straight for the big money. I don’t know why Big Rush even wasted his time listening to the BS this clown spouts.”

It’s Skinny Guy’s turn to talk. “Who knows if he would have paid. That’s why we figured he’d be more likely to stump up if he thought it would have gotten rid of Wade.”

“Nah...I told you, we should have gone straight for the girl. He’s more likely to pay to save her ass than this jerk’s,” Bald Guy replies, nodding at Wade.

So that’s how it is.

Just like I thought, Wade deliberately lured Piper into a trap. From their brief exchange, it’s clear Wade knew I was in town and was sure I’d pay up, just like I always paid up in the past. When we showed up, he was just

pretending to be surprised to see me.

“Hey, asshole. I didn’t stick my gun in your mouth just because you swore that getting them here was the best way to get the money, else I would have just blown your brains out and gone straight to the source...” and he presses the barrel of his gun to Wade’s temple.

“Kirk, please,” Piper whimpers, squeezing my wrist. “Tell them you’ll pay.”

A soft chuckle in the doorway suddenly attracts my attention.

“Well, well, well, kid...who knew that, once again, you’d be giving me money for this dead beat?” says a voice. “I can still call you kid, right? I’m a traditionalist,” he asks, stepping out from the shadows.

I recognize him instantly – it’s the guy I paid off in Boston all those years ago, but that’s not what shocks me to the core – it’s the look of sheer terror on Piper’s face.

Her eyelids flutter convulsively and she starts to shake.

What was it she said: *The boss wasn’t there when they raided the building...*

I’m not thinking anymore. I could care less about the other three guys and their guns. I launch myself from the couch and slam him against the wall, taking him completely by surprise. “I’ll fucking kill you,” I yell.

I somehow sense the others are watching us, waiting for Big Rush to react, but he raises his hand. “Stop...he’s the one with the money, plus he’s not so stupid as to try anything, he knows you’d kill him, which would leave this pretty little thing in our clutches again.” He grins, winking suggestively at Piper. “Hi, sugar tits, it’s been a minute!”

I’m about to tighten my grip around his neck but a sudden bang takes us all by surprise and I realize the cops have finally decided to join the party.

I let go of Big Rush and reach for Piper, dragging her to the floor.

There’s no way out for them now.

Piper is so shocked, she’s almost catatonic.

I help her to her feet and onto the filthy couch and it’s then that Wade, handcuffed and being escorted to the door by two cops, turns to look at her.

“Bitch!” he spits.

They take him away.

A few seconds later, the agent in charge of the operation arrives. “Thanks for everything. We’ve been after Big Rush for years, and never managed to get our hands on him before.” He holds out a hand and I shake it

automatically. “We’re going to need a statement from you, then you can go,” he adds.

“Tomorrow, okay? You can see how upset she is...”

“No,” Piper interrupts. “Let’s do it now. I’m not staying here a moment longer.”

“We’ll follow you to the station,” I suggest to the cop.

I walk Piper to the car. She never says a word, just keeps her arms wrapped tight around her body.

When we’re seated, I take her hands, hoping to persuade her to put off the ordeal until tomorrow, but she doesn’t give me the time to speak.

“You lied,” she says, her voice ice-cold.

“I had no choice, Piper. I couldn’t stand by and let Wade drag you down with him. He wanted that money to pay them off, not to get away. Which would have made you an accessory and got you in trouble with the cops. Warning them like that puts things in a different light,” I try to explain.

“Just drive, before you lose sight of your cop buddies,” she says sarcastically.

I start the car then try again. “It was a trap, can’t you see? Wade was using you, again. He doesn’t care what happens to you.”

“And you, Kirk? You weren’t using me? Treating me like some stupid kid,” she glares at me furiously, her hands clasped in her lap.

“I was just trying to protect you, that’s all.”

“Yeah, like ten years ago? You recognized that man, you’d already dealt with him, so why didn’t you call the cops then? Perhaps it would have protected me, who knows – because you disappeared and I ended up like this,” she yells, tears of rage streaming down her cheeks.

“I know you’re angry, but you can’t really think that. I was a kid, I acted like a kid. What was I supposed to do?” I’m trying to keep calm.

“You put a huge sign over my head, Kirk. You left me out there, an innocent victim, and now you manipulate me into betraying my brother,” she exclaims, bursting into tears.

“Piper, you’ve done nothing to be ashamed of. Think of all those times he threw you under the bus and you never even realized it. I did, though, and you should be grateful, otherwise God knows what those thugs would be doing to us now.”

I know she wants to say something, but we’re already at the precinct.

They separate us while we make our statements. I waste no time in letting

them know that Big Rush kidnapped Piper in the past, hoping she'll do the same.

When they let me go, I hang back, waiting for her, preying the stress hasn't brought on another panic attack.

I'm so tense that when an officer appears in the doorway I almost leap out of my seat.

"We're finished here. You can go," he says kindly.

"I know, I was just waiting for Piper."

"We got through with her thirty minutes ago. Perhaps she needed some fresh air and went outside," he says, pointing to the exit.

"Thanks!" I nod, running for the door.

But there's no sign of Piper, not even near the car.

I pull my phone from my pocket and am just about to call her when I see the text message.

I need some time on my own, Kirk. I'm not in danger anymore, I'm spending the night at my place. Please, leave me alone.

Needless to say I don't. I call her over and over, but her phone is turned off, and when I get to Nantucket, there's still no sign of her. I walk from her place to the lighthouse, but she's not there either, and suddenly I'm transported back to that morning ten years ago, when I had no idea where she could be.

Chapter 33



I couldn't sit there, waiting for Kirk to finish and drive me home.

This whole thing has exhausted me, there's no way I could have sat next to him in the car without fighting all the time.

I feel betrayed and manipulated - as if all this time, Kirk has been pulling the strings of my life, leaving me no chance to decide for myself.

Coming back here has done me no good at all, but I couldn't resist the morbid urge to revisit the place where they kept me prisoner all those years ago.

Seeing that man again, finally putting a name – Big Rush - to his ugly face, made me relive the time when I wondered how much more pain I would have to endure before they put me out of my misery.

And where was Kirk?

Ah, yes...at Yale, enjoying the college life, having a ball after leaving me blissfully unaware of the dangers lying in wait for me.

Even this time he decided for me. He tricked me into giving him the address where Wade was hiding and, deliberately ignoring my wishes, called the police.

All I can think of is how, once more, he's kept me in the dark and now I'm terrified something far worse is going to happen.

You know it's incredibly childish to blame Kirk for what happened, don't you? says the little voice in my head. My conscience.

I know it's right, at least the rational part of me does, but there's still a tiny piece of me that refuses to accept the way things turned out.

By the time I drag myself home, it's late at night.

I've nothing more to fear, now that Wade's associates have been apprehended, and without evening bothering to undress, I lie down on my bed, trying to put my thoughts in order, but I'm too distracted.

I turn my cell phone on. That's when I see Kirk's missed calls.

Part of me is still madly in love with him and wants to forgive him, move on, and leave all this behind, but there's another part of me that is furious at being taken for a ride, again.

It's hard to accept that the man I love knew the person who kidnapped and tortured me, and even gave him money to pay off Wade's debts.

I can't help wondering what would have happened if he'd gone to the police instead.

Would I still be so terribly scarred?

Would Wade have gotten clean?

What would my life be like now, if he'd told me about it? What decisions would I have made?

Would I be ashamed or grateful?

What would I have done in his place? Would I have called the cops to protect Wade or would I have paid up?

If I'd known, would it have prepared me for the problems that came crashing down on me?

I'll never know. Because Kirk decided for me, and that's what angers me the most.

He did it for you, so you could graduate high school without any setbacks and get out of here, that little voice says again.

If I'd known just how bad things were with Wade, I never would have tried to get into Harvard. I would have known already that there was no way I could leave Nantucket, that abandoning my responsibilities was totally out of the question.

What about their responsibilities, Piper? Where was your mother when you needed her? What did your brother do to protect you?

The thoughts are coming thick and fast.

Wade was sick, so was my mom. Addiction is an illness, but I don't doubt they loved me – I'm trying hard not to blame them.

I don't know how long I torment myself, but eventually I fall into a deep sleep, where I'm haunted by nightmares of Wade, his eyes burning with hatred, accusing me of betrayal.

My eyes fly open and it takes me a minute to realize that the strange buzzing sound is my cell phone.

I glance at the display, pretty sure it's Kirk again, but it's an unknown number. I take a deep breath and answer.

"Ms. Hooper?" a male voice asks.

"This is she," I reply, hoping it's not another of Wade's fuck ups.

"Ms. Hooper, this is Boris Chapman, from the Central Park High School. We've been evaluating candidates and, after reading your resume, we'd like to invite you in for a chat, sometime tomorrow. I'm sorry it's such short notice, but we need to find a new coach as soon as possible," he explains.

For a moment, just one, I wonder if I should go through with it, but then I realize that, Kirk or no Kirk, I owe it to myself to try. New York could be my chance to start over. I don't need Kirk to leave this place behind.

I don't need a man to decide for me. I can do this on my own. I can move there and live my life without him.

"That's great. I'll be there, could you send me an email confirming the time, with all the relevant information?" I accept, sounding very professional.

"Perfect, I'll get onto that immediately. See you tomorrow," and Chapman ends the call.

All I have to do now is inform my boss and pack a bag.

He doesn't take the news too well, but I don't care. I can't miss this opportunity and, perhaps due to my excitement or the Kirk Situation, this time I don't hold back.

"I've worked here for years and, apart from recently, I've never even taken a day - if anything, I was the one working double shifts and covering for

other people,” I snap.

“You never complained about the extra money before,” he replies. “And you show your gratitude by taking time off when you know we have VIP clients here?” He’s pissed. I’m about to reply but he doesn’t give me time. “You think screwing one of them will get you special treatment from me too?” he adds, this time sounding seriously slimy.

“My private life is my business. And, by the way, I quit. Find someone else to clean your crappy bathrooms.” And I end the call before he can say anything else.

One more stupid thing Kirk made me do.

I told him that ordering from room service and being served by my own colleagues would only lead to gossip. Of course, it didn’t help when he went to the manager and got him to give me the day so we could go to Martha’s Vineyard with the band.

And where did it get me? After years of working my ass off, I’ve lost my boss’s respect and he thinks I screw around.

I’m so angry I can hardly breathe. I walk outside into the yard and flop down cross-legged on the grass.

My first thought is, of course, *Shit, I just quit!* I’m going have to make a good impression in New York or I’m fucked.

But then optimism kicks in. Even if I don’t get the coaching job, I could always look for work in housekeeping - I mean, we’re talking the Big Apple, the city is full of hotels and I have years of experience.

*And some excellent references...*my conscience teases, reminding me that if the school were to call the resort and ask for information about me, my former manager wouldn’t hesitate to demolish my reputation.

Enough! You can do this! I think, trying to boost my confidence. I can’t let anxiety and fear get the better of me, not now.

This is my big chance, to get back into swimming and, even if I won’t be competing, I’ll be training other girls who love the sport, nurturing their abilities.

I’m actually pretty lucky. The previous coach had to resign shortly after the start of the school year when her husband was transferred abroad. I’ll never get another chance like this and, who knows if I’ll ever find the courage to apply anywhere else. I have to do this, it’s all or nothing.

I grab my phone and check the ferry timetable, then search for car hire places on Hyannis and hire a car for my trip to New York.

I just hope this is worth it, I think when I press to pay. I'm now unemployed, with extremely limited finances.

There is one positive in all this – I don't have to pay Wade's rehab anymore. I may just survive a little longer.

I rush upstairs to pack an overnight bag and find something smart to wear at my interview.

I lock the front door behind me, wondering if this is one of the last times I'll be doing it, if the next time I come back here it will be to pack my things.

When I board the ferry and watch Nantucket retreat into the distance for the second time in only a few days, it seems almost absurd.

I just hired a car that I'm about to drive all the way to New York.

Where I have an interview as a school swim coach.

I'm about to move almost 300 miles away from the place where I've spent my whole life and I'm doing it on my own!

I'm strong. I can do this, I repeat, breathing in the ocean air while the ferry moves closer and closer to the mainland.

Once we dock, I hurry to the store to pick up supplies for the trip. I'm facing a six hour drive and I have no intention of stopping until I get to New York, although I know it will be very late when I get there.

I've never been there before, I have no idea what I'm letting myself in for, but the last thing I want is to turn up for my interview looking like a nervous wreck. It isn't until 11am, however, so I have plenty of time to get some sleep and make myself presentable.

I climb into the tiny compact, which is all I could afford, and take the US-6 W towards Boston/Providence, then call the number of the hotel I found. It's not exactly close to the school, but it's cheap.

I want to get there as soon as possible and, as the black top disappears beneath my wheels, I wonder if this is the journey that will change everything, if it's the start of a new life. If it's my chance to put things behind me and finally look ahead to the life I always dreamed of.

For a brief moment I remember that this is all down to Kirk. It's thanks to him that I sent in my resume and that, despite our fight, I should perhaps call him and let him know about the interview.

The temptation is strong.

I glance down at my cell phone.

Don't do it. You're still rattled by what happened, you're not thinking straight.

The past weeks I've spent almost every day with him after more than a decade apart and his presence, the way he takes care of me, after all these years of solitude, swept me off my feet - now the desire to not be alone anymore is overwhelming.

I need time to think, get my ideas straight, try and figure out if, despite his behavior, I'm ready to forgive him, trust him again, and believe that he'll no longer do things behind my back.

Gradually, day turns to night and in the silence, my mind begins to wander, exploring the recesses of my mind, wondering about our past and the days we spent together over the last few weeks, looking for a definitive answer. The truth is, there's no easy solution. Trust is there or it isn't, and before I see him again, before we even try and talk things out, I have to search deep inside myself and understand if the trust is still there and, if it is, if I'm ready to let him back into my life.

Chapter 34



My first instinct is to run straight over to Piper's place, but I've already abused the guys' patience enough.

I skip the group breakfast, and try calling her several times, always with no answer, then head over to Eric's bungalow, ready to get down to work.

"Hey, how did it go?" Jaxon asks as soon as he sees me.

"I heard you guys come back last night, but it was late, I figured you'd be knackered, otherwise I would have come straight over," Sherman says.

I want to tell them everything is fine - but it's impossible. "It was just me," I sigh, before explaining how things went down.

Sherman flashes me a loaded look.

"I know, I know," I raise my hands in surrender. "I knew the risks when I went behind her back."

“Guys! Now isn’t the time for ‘I-told-you-sos’,” Jaxon intervenes. “You need to go to her?”

“You think I should?” I look around me, desperate for advice.

“Er, no. If she told you she needs space, perhaps you should hang back a while,” Denys suggests. “I’m not saying you should give up on her, just give her time to process things. Deep down she knows that, whatever you did, it was for her good.”

“He’s right, you don’t want her thinking you’re trying to force her into making a decision,” Sherman nods.

“You realize we’re almost done here, right? In a few days we’ll be shipping out. There’s no way I’m leaving Nantucket without talking things out with her. I’m not going to make the same mistake I made ten years ago,” I say resolutely.

“Give her until tonight. If you still haven’t heard from her, drive over, see how she’s doing,” Jaxon suggests.

“Whoa, don’t you think you’re exaggerating a little?” Eric asks.

“Exaggerating?” I ask, puzzled.

“Dude, you’ve bent over backwards for that chick for a month now. Shit, it wasn’t for you her brother would be ten toes up now, you even drove her to Plymouth to save his ass, and she runs out on you, again?” He spreads his arms wide. “Is she really worth the hassle?”

“As subtle as a sledgehammer, as usual,” Sherman rolls his eyes.

“Eric, come on. It’s not that simple,” I try and explain. “For Piper, seeing that guy again was traumatic. I understand her reaction, we just need to sit down and talk this out together.”

“Sorry, guys, but I just don’t see it. Perhaps it’s me, but no way I could commit to a flake like that. All I can think is, come January, we’ll be away on tour. You have any idea how many girls are going to turn up to see us every night?”

“Sherm’s right. As subtle as a fucking sledgehammer!”

Talking about affairs of the heart with Eric is like trying to get Denys to strut around in a mink coat!

Sometimes I wonder if he’s really as cynical as he makes out or if it’s just a front - or if he’s going to end up some ageing rock star, with a rep for chasing young models.

Only time will tell.

“K, what do you want to do?” Jaxon interrupts my train of thought.

“Get down to work,” I announce, slipping my bass over my shoulder. “I’ll try and talk with her later. She knows where I am, if she changes her mind, there’s nothing to stop her coming over and looking for me.”

Music can be immensely powerful. Who hasn’t found themselves walking down the street, or driving in the car, absent-mindedly switching radio stations, and suddenly heard a song that takes them back to a precise moment? A combination of notes, a guitar solo, a key change, is all it takes to take us back in time and make us relive a memory, buried deep in our subconscious.

Music has the power to stop time and to make us feel less alone. It helps us share our feelings with thousands of strangers, regardless of gender, age or ethnicity. It’s universal.

For the rest of the day, I let my work and that part of me that has always saved me during my darkest moments and has always been present during my most special ones, that fragment of my soul that is inextricably linked to music, take over and carry me away.

As soon as we’re done, however, my mind goes back to my fight with Piper and, without even saying goodbye to the guys, I put my bass away and race over to her house.

I don’t like how she ran out on me after Plymouth, the way she refused to give me a chance to explain and just went home on her own. However, I’m realizing now that my actions may have hurt her, so I swallow my pride and decide to go speak to her.

I park up and for a moment I glance over at the house where I used to live.

It has stood vacant for ten long years. No one has lived in those rooms since we left, the last people to call it home were my parents and me.

I turn away and head over to Piper’s house which, for some reason, seems to be empty.

I stand on the porch, knocking repeatedly, my ear to the wooden door, trying to pick up any sign of noise, but nothing. She’s not there.

I try calling several times, still nothing.

Is she deliberately ignoring me?

Swallowing my pride once more, I head over to Tracee’s house, imagining Piper taking refuge there in her moment of crisis.

I feel a little guilty. It’s dinnertime, I can’t just show up at Tracee’s door like this, but I put it behind me, park up in the first vacant space and make my way to her door.

I ring the bell and wait. I hear movement inside, the sound of chairs scraping, and a man opens up.

“Can I help you?” he asks suspiciously.

“Sorry to disturb you, but I’m looking for Piper.”

“She’s not here.”

“Something wrong?” I hear Tracee approaching. As soon as she sees me, she stops.

“Kirk! What are you doing here?” she exclaims.

“You know this guy?” her husband asks.

“It’s Kirk Jenkin, he used to live here, he was at school with me and Piper, and now he’s back...on business...” She gives her husband a knowing look. “Let’s just say, he and Piper have reconnected.”

“I see,” he nods.

“Tracee, sorry to just turn up like this, but I need to speak to Piper,” I blurt.

“She’s not here, Kirk. What’s wrong?” She frowns. “Did you guys fight?”

“I know you’re eating and all, but I was over at Piper’s place before and she’s not there.”

“Come in...” she ushers me into the house and points at the couch. “Sit down, tell me everything.”

“I will, I promise, but can you call her, please. At least when she sees your number she’ll pick up and I’ll feel a little better. We may have gotten Wade and his buddies off our backs but the anxiety is eating me up.”

“Really? It’s all over?”

“Tracee...” I plead, pointing to her cell phone.

“Okay, okay...” Just as I imagined, Piper picks up at the second ring. “Hi, Pipes,” Tracee greets her. “How are things?”

I can’t make out Piper’s reply - but I can’t help noticing the way Tracee blinks.

“Awesome! You go, girl!” she says a moment later. “And Kirk? He must be so happy for you,” she says, glancing over at me. “What do you mean, he doesn’t know?”

Piper replies. Once again I don’t hear what she says, but Tracee nods, her eyes still on me.

“Okay, I have to go anyway, safe journey. Let me know when you get there, just a text if you’re too tired to talk, but keep me updated, huh? You’re lucky I’m not pissed that you left me out of the loop too,” she jokes.

She waits a moment while Piper says something else. All the time, I’m

perched like an idiot on the edge of the couch.

“Sure, don’t worry, I have the keys, anything happens, I’ll take care of it. I’m jumping for joy here, finally something that doesn’t include diapers and apple sauce,” she laughs.

She ends the call.

“Well?” I ask. The curiosity is killing me.

“She’s on her way to New York. For a job interview at a high school in the city tomorrow morning.”

What should be good news hits like a bucket of ice cold water.

We filled out her application form together. We were making plans, I encouraged her to believe in herself - now she can’t even bring herself to tell me?

“What the hell happened?” Tracee asks, putting her cell phone down. “She wouldn’t tell me.”

“Nothing - nothing important, anyway. I’m just glad she’s okay,” I mutter, standing up.

Tracee beats me to it, jumping to her feet. “Kirk Jenkin, sit your ass back down and get ready to tell me the truth. I lied to my best friend in front of you, because I thought she was freaking out, overreacting about something, but now I need to know what you’ve done? What did you do that was so bad she left town for something important without even telling me? I know you encouraged her to apply for that post and now I want the truth.”

I don’t see the sense in hanging around, re-hashing what happened, but Tracee did me a favor, and I owe her an explanation at least.

I start at the beginning, giving her a detailed account of what went down in Plymouth. Piper hadn’t told her about that either. Tracee didn’t even know Wade had been arrested.

“You’re saying Piper found herself face to face with the bastard who did...who did that to her?” she asks, a hand on her chest.

“How was I supposed to know? You tell me, you’re her friend. I was seventeen. How the hell was I to know that the same guy was going to kidnap her and torture her like that? I loved her, I was trying to protect her, keep her out of Wade’s bullshit, and yeah, this time I lied too, to her, to keep her out of trouble, and I’m glad I did! It was a trap. Wade lured her there, but all Piper can think of is that I lied to her, made her betray him...the scumbag asshole...now she blames me for what they did to her and I don’t know how to make her see sense anymore.”

“Piper’s always been unreasonably protective of Wade, he’s fucked up so many times even Einstein would lose count. Think about it, Kirk. Now that you know everything, it shouldn’t be so hard to see the truth,” Tracee shrugs.

“What truth?” I’ve no idea what she’s talking about.

“Piper should despise Wade for what happened. She knows it was because of him - but what did she do? She continued to sacrifice herself for him and that mother of theirs. Since it happened, I’ve tried to persuade her to dump him, to cut all ties, but she wouldn’t...and you know why? Because despite everything he’s done to her, she just wants to be loved. She wants her brother to love her, just like she wanted her mother to love her and take care of her. You get it now? She’ll never give up on Wade, she’ll always find a way to forgive him. It’s self-defense. It’s damn hard to face the fact that your family doesn’t give a shit about you.”

“How am I supposed to fight that?” I ask, running my hands through my hair.

“Give her time. Or you could leave now, drive to New York. Her interview’s at 11:00. You could wait outside the school, surprise her,” Tracee suggests.

“Nah, I can’t,” I shake my head.

“Why?”

“Because we’re almost done here, and we still have to work to do on several pieces. Even if I’d known Piper had this interview, I couldn’t have gone with her anyway, but I could at least have paid her airfare...and, the truth is, I can’t chase her forever. I need her to figure out what she really wants or we’ll be stuck in this loop forever. Wade’s in jail, he’s not dead. How long do you think it will take him to track her down, feed her another one of his bullshit stories? He’ll get what? Ten years? Then, as soon as he’s out, he’ll be sucking her dry again, if not before.”

“Are you saying you don’t love her anymore?” Tracee looks shocked.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I get she’s hurt after what happened, but she can’t run away from me every damn time. Shit, Tracee, I did all I could to help her. I was there, those guys were going to hurt me too. I took a risk, I know, and I did it for *her*. I’ve tried so hard this past month to stay close to her, to help her, to show her I really love her. But, no. She can’t even tell me about something we planned together. She runs out on me, as usual, but I can’t keep chasing after her. It’s time she started thinking about her own behavior and made a choice, and stuck with it. All I can hope is that it’s the

right one for her.”

“I see,” Tracee sighs.

There’s nothing else to say. This time when I stand up, she walks me to the door.

On my way back to the resort, I don’t think I’ve ever felt so disheartened.

I meant what I said - I love Piper, but I can’t go chasing after someone who lets her idiot brother take advantage of her.

I would have given my soul for my sister but I learned at my own expense that there comes a time with addicts when you have to draw the line. The way Piper protects Wade, always giving in to him, means she too has some responsibility in all this.

She accused me of being over-protective and perhaps she’s right, but she did the same with her brother and my only hope is that, sooner rather than later, she figures that out for herself, or we’ll never get out of this situation.

I can’t go through this every time Wade bursts into our lives. It’s hell.

Perhaps I’m too bitter to think straight right now, but I’m beginning to wonder if we have a future together, if Piper will ever realize that the family she’s been searching for she can find with me, without being victim of her brother’s ego for the rest of her life.



Over the next few days, I focus all my energy on music, trying to give the best I can, putting my all into everything I play. It’s the least I can do after everything the guys have done for me but, most of all, I’m doing it for me, I want this album to be the best yet, a bomb!

I’m lucky to do something I love, that makes me proud and happy, and I can’t let external events have a negative influence on it.

I’ve heard nothing from Piper. No calls, no messages, nothing. I have no idea how the job interview went - all I know is she still hasn’t come back to Nantucket. I know that, because every evening I stop by her house.

Tracee has my number, but she hasn’t reached out either. I’m guessing Piper asked her not to and it wouldn’t be right to show up at her door again.

When, on the last evening, I carefully put my bass back in its case, I’m

painfully aware that tomorrow morning it will be loaded into the back of the van, along with everything else we brought with us, and that this brief interlude on Nantucket is over. I also know that the next few weeks are filled with pre-release PR engagements organized by Gordon to promote the new album.

The guys are all buzzing and can't wait to celebrate. Me too but, at the same time, the thought of leaving Nantucket again leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Being here, back on the island, took me back to my teenage years, when I was heartbroken over Melody's death, yet filled with joy over my new friendship with Piper.

We healed each other - she helped me, without me realizing it - while I looked out for her and always had her back. During difficult moments in our lives, we saved each other.

On this island, music became a synonym for love, when previously it was only to numb my pain.

I wrote the song I'm most proud of here. For her. The one which no one except Piper has ever heard.

I was happy here, carefree but, most important, this is where I experienced true love for the first time.

Suddenly I feel the need to do something I didn't do last time: say goodbye to the island.

"Hey, Denys, did you bring your acoustic guitar too?" I ask when I get him alone.

"Sure, it's back in my bungalow. Why?"

"Can I borrow it? I need to do something." My reply is pretty evasive.

He gives me a curious look but asks no further questions.

That's why I chose him. Jaxon would have expected an answer - he'd probably even ask me to play in front of him and there's no way I'm doing that.

Denys is a little more self-contained, despite the hard rocker image he had for so long, and knows when it's time to back off.

We go over to his bungalow. "I won't ask what you need it for, all I ask is that you bring her back in pristine condition, she's my favourite, okay?" he says.

I take the guitar from him, smiling gratefully. "Don't worry!"

Guitar case in hand, I run away before anyone else can see me or ask

questions.

I don't stop until I come to the lighthouse. The wind is getting up, the ocean is pretty rough, the spray creating a thick mist that seems to hang in the air, filling my nostrils with its saltiness.

I take a deep breath and raise my head.

How many stars do you think are up there? I turn my silent question to the heavens.

I sit down at the foot of the lighthouse, just like when I was a kid. I open the case, take out Denys's guitar and strum a couple of chords, then close my eyes and let my memories carry me away. I still remember everything, even after all these years, and as I play, the words come back automatically.

"Bravo," a voice calls out behind me when I play the last note.

I instantly know who it is but, turning, all I can see is the bright orange tip of his cigarette.

Sherman steps out of the darkness and I finally get a good look at him: he's wearing a black peacoat, a huge black scarf wrapped tight around his neck, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled over his head. No wonder he was almost invisible in the dark.

Seeing him now, he looks like a Gothic lord from other times. It's not hard to imagine him in England with his upper-class family but, at the same time, the way he dresses fits his image perfectly.

More than any of us, Sherm is the one who, despite his angelic appearance, has the darkest character. Sometimes he really is a Dark Lord. He loves nurturing the image by posting photos of himself posing with black candles on social media, wearing clothes that would make more than half the male population look and feel ridiculous. He's our very own fallen angel and the girls love him.

I realize almost immediately that I don't mind that it was Sherman who overheard me.

We have a close bond, not as strong as the friendship between Jaxon and Denys, Sherman has too many shadows inside him to be classed one hundred percent as a friend, but we're still close.

"What are you doing here?" I ask bluntly.

"I followed you," he shrugs, dropping down next to me. "Plus I had to get away from Eric, he's so excited about getting away from here, he's positively giddy!"

I snort with laughter. Because of me, Eric just endured a month of forced

abstinence.

Sherman takes a pull on his cigarette that is so long and so hard that his cheeks hollow. He sighs then turns to me.

“He’ll make up for it in January when we’re on tour, I don’t feel guilty for choosing this place,” I continue.

“Have you any idea how he’s going to bust our balls? He’s the only one who’s single, we’re going to have to hear every single detail of every single conquest.”

“No comment. I may be single myself right now,” I shrug.

“I don’t think your greatest ambition in life is to go rando-hunting with Eric! I know you feel like shit, but I’m sure you’ll work it out.”

“Yeah, sure,” I nod. What else can I say?

“I’m just sorry I can’t help,” he says, stubbing out his cigarette.

I stare out at the dark ocean trying to figure out what to say and decide to tell him what Tracee said about Piper’s behavior.

He looks so lost in thought that when I finish I wonder if he’s been listening at all. “I know a thing or two about seeking attention from someone who doesn’t care or approve...” he sighs, turning to look at me.

Which is why I told him.

“I don’t know how to help her anymore, Sherm.”

“Right now, there’s nothing you can do,” he squeezes my shoulder. “It’s up to her, Kirk. Believe me, I’ve been there. I changed country, continent and my bloody name...”

“You want to talk about it?”

“You know I’m not a fan,” he replies with a shrug.

“Of talking about yourself?”

“Of talking, period. I’m not really a heart-to-heart kind of guy,” he smiles bitterly.

I nod. “I don’t want to lose her again.”

“If they hire her at that school, you’ll be in the same city. You’ll know where she works, where to find her. Reach out to her, let her know you care. She’ll come around eventually. As for that wanker of a brother of hers, she has to work that out for herself.”

I know he’s right, I can’t force her to see something she’s not ready to see. All I can do is take a chance and see how it works out.

“Sherm, what you just saw, what you heard just now? Keep it on the DL. I don’t want the others to know.”

“Why not, mate? You have talent and there’s something about your voice...Denys is singing on the new album, who knows, maybe on the next one you could introduce something new to the mix too.”

“That song? I wrote it a long time ago, for Piper. I don’t think I could stand hearing it on the radio if we never got back together,” I explain.

“Yeah, I get that. Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.”

Then, lighting yet another cigarette, he turns and stares out to sea.

In the absolute silence that follows, my cell phone buzzes.

Chapter 35



It's been several days since my interview and, despite my initial nerves and awkwardness, it went well. So well, in fact, I had to call the hotel and tell them I'd be staying on a little longer.

At the end of the interview, Boris Chapman asked if I'd stay for a trial period and get to know the girls on the swim team.

I always knew facing a class of teenagers would be traumatic, I didn't understand just how traumatic until I found myself for the first time in front of eighteen pairs of eyes, all staring me up and down, waiting for me to introduce myself.

Something told me to shelve the nice little speech I'd prepared beforehand and just look them in the eye, be myself, and tell them everything.

Lying or pretending there's nothing wrong with me would be useless. Sooner or later they would see me in my swimsuit, and that's when the

questions about my scars would start.

At first they whispered among themselves, exchanging puzzled looks, but little by little I managed to hold their attention and they understood that my intention is to help them be the best they can be in their chosen sport.

Those first days were incredible. The group is closed knit, working very well together, with no tension or animosity.

I know it's still early days and that, over time, problems are destined to emerge, but so far, so good!

I was surprised that they accepted me so willingly as their new coach and didn't flinch or back off when I told them what happened to me - in fact, they even complimented my bravery.

It gives me hope for the future and I'm determined never to hide my 'problem' again - kids who are taught to accept and appreciate diversity, without making fun, pitying, or bullying, become better adults.

That's what I hope anyway, as I've still not heard either way from Chapman's office, so as soon as I shower and change, I'm heading over there.

While I'm getting ready, however, something occurs to me: *It doesn't matter.*

Whatever Chapman decides, I won't let it get to me. It won't change what those girls have shown me over the past few days, and it certainly won't affect my determination to succeed.

If they hire me, great, if not, I'll look for a temporary job here and as soon as a similar position opens in another school, I'll apply for that.

Forcing myself to face reality, it's clear now that life is like a mirror - it reflects exactly what it sees.

If your outlook is full of bitterness and resignation, then that's what it throws back at you. Until I realized that, I never stood a chance.

"Ms. Hooper," Chapman greets me when I step into his office. "Take a seat. How did it go?"

"It's been amazing, really. You have a great team there, they work so well together. I love the school too, it would be incredible to work here," I reply enthusiastically, sitting down.

"Well, I did a few background checks I didn't tell you about. We never inform our teaching candidates of certain procedures but, as you can imagine, the well-being and welfare of our students is paramount. As you're aware, this is a very prestigious private school." I nod. "We can't afford complaints

from parents or guardians and Coach Larkin was very popular with students and families alike. She helped the girls achieve various goals and she was an excellent and inspirational figure. Replacing her will not be easy,” he explains, opening his desk draw and taking out a handful of papers.

“Of course, of course ,” I nod, with no idea where this is leading.

“Yesterday, we had the girls on the swim team fill out an approval form. I’ve been watching you, teaching, interacting with them, and referred my observations to the school board, but ultimately, it’s the girls’ opinions that matter.” He hands me the papers.

The group was asked to rate me from one to ten on various aspects of my work. My heart skips a beat when I realize that they all scored me pretty high - but my amazement is nothing compared to the bottom of the form, where there is space for a hand-written answer:

I think Coach Hooper has a lot to offer, both as an athlete and as a woman.

Coach Hooper is a great example for all of us. Life isn’t always kind, but she’s proof that you can overcome anything.

Coach Hooper is so brave. Not everyone can go through what she did and come out the other side and talk about it with such honesty.

I didn’t get to work with Coach Hooper long enough to know about her technical abilities, but I do know she has a lot to teach us from a human point of view.

I have to stop reading, my eyes are so full of tears I can’t see.

“As you can see, Piper, you made an excellent impression on our young ladies. So, if you’ll sign here,” he slides a contract across the desk, “I’d like to welcome you on board.”

“I’m...I’m so...I can’t wait to start,” I cry-laugh, wiping away tears.

Despite my excitement, I force myself to read the contract all the way through, scrutinizing every word, every clause. Only when I reach the end and I’m sure I’ve understood everything, do I sign.

“I imagine you’ll need a few days to get organized before you can start,” Chapman says when I hand back my signed contract.

“Well, I didn’t bring much with me, so I’ll have to go back to Nantucket and pack. I need to start looking for an apartment too, but that can wait. The important thing is that I go back home and settle a couple of issues, but that shouldn’t take long,” I explain, hoping the delay won’t cause too many problems.

“Of course. Speak to Margaret Hotch. Here’s her number.” He hands me a slip of paper. “She’s our drama teacher, her roommate just left, and I know she’s looking for someone. It could be a temporary, or permanent, solution to your problem.”

“Thank you, I’m so grateful for this,” I gush, slipping the number into my purse.

I shake his hand once more and leave his office.

I’m so excited, I feel like jumping for joy and skipping down the corridors, but I restrain myself: I don’t want to ruin the good impression I made so quickly!

I’m just leaving the school premises when I feel my cell phone vibrating in my purse.

Tracee.

“Well....you never called me back. I get you wanted to be left alone, but I demand to know how the interview went. Now!” she blurts as soon as I answer.

“I got the job!” I yelp. “I just left the school, I was going to call you, also because I’ll be back in Nantucket tomorrow to get my things, I hardly brought anything with me.”

“Pipes! That’s amazing! I’ll give you a hand to pack up, if you want,” she offers. “And if you forget anything, or if there’s anything you need, just let me know and I’ll send it on to you.”

“That would be so cool, Trace. Thanks!”

“What about Kirk? Did you give him the good news yet?” she asks a moment later.

“No,” I snap drily.

“Pipes, hun, could you be a little clearer?” she asks.

I tell her everything. About Wade. How Kirk knew my kidnapper, and how I felt when I discovered he’d betrayed my trust, and my brother.

“Piper! Open your eyes for God’s sake!” she practically roars in my ear. “I’m going to be harsh now. Your brother doesn’t give a damn about you and he never will. All he cares about is his next fix. He threw you under the bus, Piper. Again. When will you get it into your head that Kirk’s only fault was that he was seventeen and in love. He was trying to protect you. And why would he tell you about Wade, anyway? So you could martyr yourself at fifteen, give up all your dreams of Harvard - and for what? You spent your life being milked by two selfish people who just happened to be related to

you. I know it's easier to close your eyes than accept they never loved you, but by clinging to this sentiment, this inexistent affection, you're throwing away your future - together with the only person who really loves you and wants to give you one."

Tears sting my eyes. Tracee's words are like a knife to the heart. "You don't really think that?" I ask, holding back my tears.

"Oh, yes I do! And, I think you're the biggest fool this side of Canada, Piper Hooper. How on earth can you feel guilty about Wade's arrest? Even worse...How can you be angry at Kirk? Why are you not seeing it? Your brother put you in the same room as the man who kidnapped you. Disfigured you. Again. It wasn't Kirk, Piper. It was Wade. Twice. Like it or not, the only one responsible for the bad things that have happened to you is your goddamn brother," she snaps harshly. "If I were you, I'd call Kirk, throw myself at his feet and thank him for saving me, for keeping me out of trouble," she adds.

"I hoped you'd be more objective," I sigh.

"I am, Piper. You're making a huge mistake. I just hope you realize that before it's too late."

"Don't bother coming over, I can pack up myself," I say, ending the call.

I get back to my hotel and start packing, ready to leave at dawn. As I fold the few clothes I brought with me, Tracee's voice is still ringing in my ears, refusing to go away. Any other time I'd think, *What does she know anyway? Playing happy families all day* - but not this time.

Wade knew Big Rush was on his way. He knew what he did to me and he didn't give a damn - he carried on doing deals with him like it was nothing.

My heart is pounding in my chest.

I try to focus on the here and now, fixing on objects in the room, making note of their colors, but it's useless.

None of my coping strategies work, until the words to Kirk's song pop into my head and I start humming them.

When I calm down I find myself staring at my overnight bag.

I can't wait any longer. I have to leave now. There's something I must do, before I lose my nerve.

I know it's probably not a good idea to drive so soon after an attack, but I'm determined to see it through. I arrive at the prison where Wade is being held and ask to visit him.

After an endless series of checks, I'm shown into the visiting area.

A guard escorts Wade through the door and as soon as my brother sees me he sneers.

On the other side of the thick plastic screen, he picks up the receiver, "I'm only here because it gets me out of that goddamn cell."

"Wade, I never wanted it to end like this..."

"Can it!" he interrupts brutally. "If you cared anything about me, we wouldn't be in this mess. You would have made sure your rock star boyfriend paid up instead of handing me over to the cops. Big Rush was expecting that money, it was my big chance..."

"Big chance for what? To make Kirk pay off your debts for the rest of your life?" I feel a surge of adrenaline. "Why were you still doing deals with that guy? After he..." It's too much, I can't bring myself to say it.

"Big Rush had plans for me," he shrugs. "After what happened, when those guys were arrested, he personally thanked me for keeping his name out of it, said he owed me, big time."

I stare at him in amazement.

Wade knew all along and he didn't care. When faced with a choice, he chose the guy who scarred me. The cops could have gotten to him, but my darling brother chose not to talk...there would have been a trial, I would have received compensation, I realize in horror.

"What's with the shocked face, Piper? It's not a good look, after what you did to me."

I don't think I've ever been so angry. "What's wrong with you?" I ask sarcastically. "You're pissed because you missed your chance to get money out of Kirk, now that he's even richer than before?"

"Ah! I get it...you turned me in because you want to get your hands on his money? Right? You were only thinking about yourself. Shit, who knew you had it in you? I told Big Rush I gave you that address because you were too dumb to say anything. I trusted you. And you made me look stupid."

Now I see what an asshole he is and, most of all, how much he used me, manipulated me.

I don't tell him it was Kirk who notified the police, I don't care anymore.

I stare at my brother through the glass. "I'm just sorry it took me so long to see through you, Wade. You're going to rot in here now and when they finally release your ass, you'll never find me, so don't even bother looking for me," I spit, hanging up the receiver.

"Wait, Piper!" he mouths, one hand on the screen. I take the receiver down

again. "I'm sorry. You're my baby sister. We can work things out. I'll change, I promise." His repentant side is back, the one that fooled me all these years.

But not anymore.

"Bye, Wade, look after yourself." I put down the receiver, turn my back and walk away to the sound of his fists pounding on the screen, his muffled shouts.

I don't turn round. Not once.

When I step out through the prison gates, the cool evening breeze hits me. It's dark.

I rummage in my purse for my cell phone. I need to call Kirk.

Kirk, who helped me overcome the mental and physical barriers I'd built around me.

Kirk, who always had my back.

Kirk, the only person who ever genuinely loved me.

I got it so, so wrong.

The thought hits me with the force of a bullet and I instinctively touch my earlobe, caressing one of the star-shaped earrings he gave me. This time at least, I was in too much of a rush to take them out again.

I didn't think I was worthy of his love, that he could feel anything for me, never mind that he could love me because, thanks to my family, I was convinced I didn't deserve it.

I stare down at my cell phone. I need to call him, apologize, try and make up with him.

I know this is the band's last night on Nantucket and that tomorrow they'll be heading back to New York.

I know that by the time I get there, he'll be gone and I'll never get the chance to say goodbye, but I'm terrified that if I call he won't pick up, that he's still too angry.

I've just plucked up the courage to press call when my cell vibrates.

Tracee.

"Hey, Pipes..." she begins. "I know I was hard on you before, I'm sorry, but I had no choice."

"You were right," I admit. "I was stupid."

I tell her everything, including my fears about getting in touch with Kirk.

"Don't put it off, admit your responsibilities, apologize to him. Just accept that, perhaps, he may not want to pick up," she suggests. "But if you don't do

it, you'll never know."

We arrange to meet the next day when I'm back on the island. Suddenly I feel exhausted and decide to check into the nearest motel and get some sleep before driving home.

It's darker than ever now and I still haven't found the nerve to call Kirk, but Tracee's words echo in my head, and I know she's right.

I know that if I call Kirk and he refuses to answer, I'll be too upset to ever try again, so I opt for a text message instead.

I'm much better at putting things into the written word and, at least, even if he doesn't reply, he'll still get to read what I have to say.

I stretch out, face down, on the bed and start typing.

Chapter 36



6:am. I open my eyes and realize I was so exhausted I fell asleep clutching my phone. I swipe the screen, praying that Kirk has finally read my message and that he's written back.

The screen comes to life. My words are still there.

I know I let you down, that I was wrong. I want to apologize and explain why I did what I did. I know I made a huge mistake and I'm trying to find the best way.

I was scared. Again. Scared I didn't deserve you, that I wasn't enough for you, that I wasn't worthy of your love.

I've spent most of my life trying to make my mom and my brother love me:

I took care of them, but all I got in return was indifference. I know you're not like them, Kirk. I should have known, but it's hard.

It took me some time to realize it, but you have no fault in any of this, you were trying to protect me. The problem was me, and my blind loyalty to someone who didn't deserve it.

I don't know how I can repair the damage I've caused to our relationship, but I know that I don't want to wait another ten years, hoping I'll bump into you again.

Understanding my mistake made me understand something else: I want to be with you.

I don't want to lose you. I can't. Not again.

Unfortunately, not only has Kirk not answered, he hasn't even seen my message. He ignored it.

It's this bitter knowledge that accompanies me all the way back to Nantucket.

I drive along, maintaining the same constant speed. I left early, hoping to arrive back on the island by lunch, so I can spend the rest of the day packing, and be on my way back to New York first thing tomorrow.

Mr. Chapman has been more than accommodating, but I don't want to abuse his kindness.

However, I can't help wondering where Kirk is.

Perhaps he didn't see my message? Oh, he did, he's deliberately ignoring you.

I'm not giving up - the problem is, I have no idea where Kirk lives in New York. The only way I can get in touch is by phone, texting or even calling, in the hope that he'll take pity on me and pick up.

I return the car to the rental service then board the ferry to Nantucket. It's just gone 1pm when we dock.

Tracee is waiting on the wharf and as soon as she sees me, she wraps her arms around me. "Did you speak to Kirk?" she asks as we climb into her car.

"I messaged him, but he didn't even read it," I sigh, flopping back in my seat.

"Perhaps he didn't see it," she tries to console me.

"I doubt that."

"I think you should try again. Call him until he picks up," she suggests, taking the road to my house.

“For now I just want to focus on packing up and getting out of here. I want to start my new life first. As soon as I’m settled in New York, I’ll contact him,” I explain.

When we get to my place, I realize Tracee has already made a start and has cleared out the fridge.

“Help yourself,” I announce, opening up the cupboards where I keep the canned stuff, flour, snacks, etc. “It will save you buying groceries for a while.”

“No, take it with you. You have to eat in New York too,” Tracee suggests.

“I know, but I’ll be staying in a hotel for now and I have the number of a colleague who’s looking for a roommate.”

“Wow! Piper Hooper - moving in with a total stranger?” She looks at me in fake suspicion. “Where’s my friend? What have you done with her?”

“Let’s just say that my eyes have been opened – on many things. There’s another reason, though. Life in the Big Apple doesn’t come cheap, and I’d rather split the cost with someone else, even if I don’t know them, than face it alone.”

“Who knows - perhaps you could move in with Kirk,” she winks.

“I don’t think that’s an option anymore, Trace. Not after the way I behaved,” I sigh, feeling incredibly sad.

I’m happy about this new beginning, knowing that there’s a world of opportunities waiting for me out there in the big city - certainly compared to Nantucket, where no one knows me or my dysfunctional family, where no one gossips about me, but...

I just wish I could share it with Kirk.

“Don’t lose heart, Pipes. You’ll work it out, I know you will.” Tracee pats me on the back. “Now, as you want to leave tomorrow, let’s get your bags ready. I’ll take care of the house when you’re gone.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon, sorting through my clothes and stuffing them into bags. By the time we’re done, every bag, case, and trolley I own is bulging. I want to take as much as I can with me, unfortunately winter coats, sweaters and scarves take up a lot of space, but I can’t leave them here - once I get to New York I’m going to really have to watch the pennies and I’m going to need as many clothes as I can carry.

Tracee has an idea. “Why don’t you just take your winter clothes for now? You’ll be good for several months, I’ll send the rest on when you need it, but if we continue like this we’ll be packing your summer shirts in the cooler

bag!”

“You’re right,” I nod, “it doesn’t make sense taking everything!”

I glance at the clock: 6:30. Tracee follows my gaze.

My cell phone is in my pocket. All the time we’ve been here, it’s never vibrated, not once, unlike Tracee’s, which buzzes constantly with new notifications.

“You want to come for dinner?” Tracee offers. “Celebrate your new job, new life, in style?”

I want to accept, I do, but I prefer to be alone - plus there’s one last thing I need to do.

“Don’t be offended, Tracee, but I’d rather say goodbye now. I’ll have a quick snack, then head over to the lighthouse. I know it sounds crazy, but I want to say goodbye to Nantucket my way. At night, under the stars.”

How many stars do you think are up there? Kirk’s words come back to me.

“It’s only right that you say goodbye your own way. Don’t worry, no offence taken, our friendship goes way beyond a dinner invitation. Do what you feel is right, Piper,” Tracee hugs me. “And keep in touch, or else!”

A couple of minutes later, I see her checking her phone again.

It’s definitely not like Tracee.

“Why do you keep checking your phone? What? You’re an influencer now?”

“I wish. My mom couldn’t babysit today, so I left hubs in charge. Honestly, you’ve no idea how useless he is. I explained everything, left him notes all over the house, and he still can’t find anything,” she rolls her eyes. “I’m amazed I don’t have to put a sticky note on his dick!”

And with that, we say our goodbyes and she drives back to her family.

I’m not hungry so I skip dinner and head straight for the lighthouse.

It feels strange, however, walking down the road, knowing that it’s the last time I’ll take refuge here.

Great Point Light has always been my favorite place, my safe place, my hiding place, the place where I used to come to cry in solitude - and where Kirk and I spent many magical hours.

I sit down at the base of the lighthouse, my eyes firmly closed.

I can’t help thinking back over my life here, the past twenty-six years, and the tastes, noises, sensations and feelings that I’m leaving behind.

Nantucket for me means pain, but it has its good points too...

The roar of the ocean crashing on the rocks, the cries of the seagulls, the

barks of the seals, the horns of the ferries as they come and go.

I wish I could capture those sounds in a shell so, in the rare moments when I'm feeling nostalgic, I can hold it to my ear and experience once more the lapping of the waves.

If I concentrate hard I can almost relive the summers of my adolescence, the rare happy moments, the sun-warmed sand underfoot, the cold water on my hot skin, the feel of salt drying on my body. The sensation of the warm sun on my back, the relief of the fresh breeze lightly blowing over it, the taste of the salt water, the smell of the ocean and the fresh fish off loaded by the fishermen at dawn.

Then there are the colors; the sun reflecting on the sea at dawn, the amber glow of sunset, the ever changing shades of gray of a storm, the calming blue of the smooth ocean afterwards.

I won't miss the people of Nantucket, but I'll miss its colors.

A solitary tear rolls down my cheek as I open my eyes and gaze up at the night sky. I want to say goodbye to the stars because, in the bright lights of New York, they'll no longer be visible.

"How many stars do you think are up there?"

A voice I'd recognize anywhere startles me, and I shiver from head to toe.

It can't be real. It's an auditory illusion, like the sound of the sea in a conch shell. Still, I turn around.

Unless I'm also hallucinating, Kirk is standing in front of me, in flesh and blood, staring at me intently, waiting for my answer.

There's no anger in his eyes, no recrimination, just love.

The truth is, and everyone should know this, when someone genuinely loves you, no matter how difficult the situation, they'll never let you go.

I get to my feet and throw myself into his arms.

Chapter 37



“A million?” Piper asks, blinking incredulously.

“I don’t know. What do you say we sit a while and count them together?” I grin.

Finally, she stands up and runs into my arms.

Several important things have happened between yesterday and today: I knew I couldn’t walk away like I did ten years ago, and I’d already decided to reach out to Piper. I just didn’t know how. Then, late last night, Tracee came to my rescue.

She knows Piper inside out and was sure Piper would never have the courage to call me - so she called to let me know Piper was on her way back from New York. The first thing I did was tell Jaxon I’d be staying on for a few, which isn’t a problem as our schedule in New York doesn’t start until

next week.

Then I went to Denys, got down on my knees and asked him to lend me his guitar again.

When I read Piper's message I was so happy, but I'd turned off the Send Read Receipts on my iPhone so she couldn't see that I'd read it.

I didn't do it lightly. Not replying was a torture, the guilt was killing me, but I wanted to surprise her and was determined to see it through.

We had it all organized: Tracee was going to take her back to hers to celebrate, then I'd show up, but when she messaged me about the change in plans - Piper wanted to say farewell to Nantucket and make her last visit to the lighthouse - I told her not to worry, I knew exactly what to do.

I'm not surprised that she too has chosen the lighthouse to say her goodbyes - our souls have always been connected by an invisible thread, so it's no surprise that we both had the same idea.

So, here I am, a guy and his guitar, ready to pick up where we left off just a few days ago.

"I'm sorry, Piper," I say. "I was wrong to go behind your back like that, but your loyalty to Wade had you blinkered."

She lifts her head and our eyes meet. "It's okay, Kirk. I know," she interrupts. "I finally did it. I faced reality. I went to see Wade, I confronted him. He's out of my life now," she says and in her eyes there's something new, a determination I've never seen before. "It wasn't easy, especially after what he told me in prison, the way he behaved all those years....it was hard to accept his total indifference toward me, hearing him talk like that..."

"Don't blame yourself, Piper. It's typical addict behavior. They never admit their responsibilities, lying becomes second nature. You couldn't know just how bad things had gotten, he covered his tracks pretty well," I reassure her.

"You're right," she nods. "He even tried to lie about where that bike came from. Sure, I had my suspicions, but I wanted to believe him..." she breaks off.

"It's only natural to want to trust those who we love, we want to trust them more than anything. It must have been so easy for him to take advantage of you, knowing how kind you are. Addicts like Wade will blame anyone but themselves. Trust me, prison is the best place for him, it will keep him away from the drugs too. What happens after is on him, but when he gets out, you won't be in his life anymore and if he does find a way to contact you, we'll

deal with it. I'll never let him hurt you again," I say, gently kissing her hair. "I was hurt when I heard you went for that job interview without telling me. We worked on your application together, and I felt so bad when you decided to cut me out. I'm over it now, obviously, but Piper, you have to promise me one thing," I say, squeezing her waist.

"What?" Without taking her eyes off mine, she nods for me to go on.

"You have to quit running out on me. You have to trust me. We can't go on repeating the same mistake, over and over. I could never hurt you, Piper. You know that, don't you?"

"I know, but it's hard. You spend your whole life starved of affection, then someone comes along who wants to actually give it to you and it feels weird. I do promise, however, that I'll work real hard on myself, that I'll try and grow with you, and that I'll leave Wade behind forever," she says, reaching up to stroke my face.

I've had enough of talking. I can't help it, I lean down and kiss her, with all the love I'm feeling.

"Whoa...how did you know where to find me?" she asks when we finally come up for air.

"Guess?" I arch an eyebrow.

She stares at me blankly for a moment, then rolls her eyes. "Tracee! When she said she was messaging her husband...it was you?" She shakes her head.

"The one and only!" I confess. "I read your message the moment it arrived. I so wanted to answer, but I wanted to surprise you even more. I didn't want to make up over the phone or over some stupid text, and those few hours felt like a lifetime."

"Grrr...I should whoop your ass!" she holds up a fist. "I felt sick all night, I thought you didn't want anything to do with me."

I laugh. "However, I did come up with a way to make it up to you," I say, stepping away from her for a second and reappearing with the guitar I'd carefully hidden behind a rock.

"I thought you only played bass now," she says in surprise.

"I do...this belong to Denys. I still like to strum occasionally, especially when I'm all alone," I say, slipping the strap over my shoulder.

I take her hand and lead her to what was once our favorite spot.

The look on her face is the exact same expression as ten years ago and, when I finish playing, she throws her arms around my neck.

"It was always beautiful but, after all these years, it sounds incredible," she

whispers. “You should record it, everyone should know how beautiful it is.”

“We’ve almost finished arranging the pieces for the album, plus, this is your song,” I shrug.

“That’s a shame,” she says dreamily. “Just promise you’ll play it for me every time I ask,” she adds immediately, flashing me one of her brightest smiles.

“You know something, Star Girl. I love making you happy, seeing you smile like that. Knowing that I’m the reason, fills me with joy,” I whisper, my face close to hers.

We kiss again and there’s nothing left to say.



Next day we head back to New York together and I take Piper to my apartment for the first time. I know it might sound crazy, the idea of us living together so soon, but I loved her for two whole years when we were kids and, all this time, I never stopped.

I know she’s the woman I want by my side and it would be dumb to make her look for a place to stay and pay rent when she can live with me in Central Park, which happens to be just a short distance from the school.

She barely has time to settle in, however, before life gets pretty hectic for both of us.

Once she starts work, she’s coaching the swim team full time and every day I see her confidence grow. I’m in the studio all day with the guys. This album is going to be special, I can feel it; we’re putting our hearts and souls into making sure every song, every note, is as perfect as possible, all thanks to the hard work we put in on Nantucket.

Eric can barely contain his excitement at the schedule of events and parties we have lined up – he’s still single and desperate to mingle!

Me, Denys and Jax are, for obvious reasons, less enthusiastic about being away from home. As for Sherman, who knows what goes on in his head; he’s an enigma but, ask me, getting away from Laetitia for a while will do him good.

Jaxon is in crisis mode - Skylar is back in training, which means his mother takes care of Sarah during the day. Jaxon's mom is an incredible grandmother, but he feels guilty about leaving the baby for long periods and he's freaking out. Despite everything, he'd never dream for one minute of asking Skylar to give up her career as an ice-skater. Add the fact that smack bang in the middle of our schedule, Skylar will be competing in the Olympics to the mix, his anxiety is understandable. Apparently, Jaxon's mother is leaving for the training center with Sarah and Skylar, then Jaxon will join them for the actual competition.

When it comes to the new album, however, the most anxious is Denys, who for the first time will take lead vocals on the song he wrote for his girlfriend, Chloe.

She won't be joining us on the promo tour either: she has her own business in New York and doesn't feel she can be away for long periods. She and Denys live mostly in the Adirondacks, where they have a house full of animals, and where Chloe works part-time at the local animal hospital.

In the studio, Denys's song is the last track we record and there's something bugging me - maybe it's because Piper suggested I record it, maybe it's because I love it so much that I want to share it with the world after all, but I decide to do the one thing I swore I'd never do.

While we're packing up in the studio I turn to Jaxon. "Hey, can we talk - in private?" I ask, hoping he agrees. "I'd like you to hear something."

"Sure."

Once we're alone, I point to his guitar. "Can I borrow that...?"

"Okay..." he agrees, looking a little puzzled.

I never let on I also play acoustic guitar - and Jaxon has no idea I can sing.

All the time I'm playing, he stares at me, dumbfounded.

"Shit! Why didn't you tell me?" he asks when I finish.

"You know how it is, I'm no frontman, I'd never try and upstage you, but I really need to get this song out there. It's important to me and Piper. I wrote it for her when we were just kids, it's us, our story."

"K, if you'd told me earlier, there'd be time to put it on the album, along with the one Denys wrote. We could have worked on it together up at the resort," he says with a shrug.

"I know we've wrapped up here, and the album is scheduled for release, that's fine, but hear me out. I want this to be my Christmas gift to Piper. How about we release it as a Christmas single, special December 25th download?"

What do you think? Could it be ready by then?" I ask.

"A new track just in time for Christmas? A gift to our fans? I love it!" he enthuses. "We already have a list of dates lined up for January, we can fit studio time around our current schedule...I don't see why not!"

I can't wait to see Piper's face when she finds out! I think, grinning to myself.

Epilogue



December 24

It sounds strange, I know, but I feel right at home in New York. Who knew?

So much has changed – and I've learned so much too.

Now I know that life is to be lived, it's too short to just exist. I know that anger, especially when directed inward and at the past, is useless. I'm aware now that fear is an enormous obstacle and that, if you want to live your life and make it worthwhile, you have to face your fears head on, even if it is painful. Then there are the memories connected to each and every time you bring down one of those obstacles. Conserving them, savoring them,

revisiting them whenever you're feeling down, when you need inspiration, can be so sweet.

I know now that if you want to be accepted, you have to give people the chance to accept you.

In my case, I wasn't a victim of prejudice - I was, but it was my own prejudice. My mindset prevented me from opening up to others. I automatically assumed they would mock me, pity me. I wasn't ready to give them the chance to get to know me, the walls went up, regardless.

What I went through left its mark, the scars were more than just physical, visible. It left me with a constant sense of guilt. I wondered if I'd missed something, if I could have reacted differently. Most of all, it made me wonder what my life would be like if it hadn't happened.

I was locked in a prison cell of my own making. For too long I put my life on hold, considering myself dirty, unworthy, undeserving of love.

My own mother couldn't bring herself to love me, my brother didn't care whether I lived or died, and even Kirk, apparently, turned his back on me and returned to New York.

This lack of love, of affection, made worse by my mother's irrational behavior, made me feel so many things, none of them good; unworthy, undeserving, and I carried it around, like a stigma, or a heavy suit of armor, and perhaps that's why it took me so long to see through Wade's lies.

I know that my ghosts will still come back to haunt me, like I know that the first time a new student looks at me sideways, I'll start to panic. I also know that when some pretty little fan comes onto Kirk, I'm always going to wonder if he wouldn't be happier with her.

I've learned to recognize my ghosts, however. I know where I went wrong, and I've realized that often, too often, I'm the one who thinks I'm not good enough, not the others.

I'm determined to fight them, every day, and every time I defeat them, I'll feel proud of myself because it means I've beaten my insecurities, the demons of my dysfunctional adolescence, and the terrors of what I suffered in that old storage unit because today, thanks to Kirk, I know I deserve love.

I've made friends with several of my new colleagues and I love hanging with Chloe and Skylar, though Skylar's training schedule is so intense now I rarely see her.

Chloe showed me round her animal center and it was love at first sight. Now I volunteer whenever I can, coaching duties permitting.

We're planning on spending New Year's together up at Denys's place in the Adirondacks and I can't wait to meet Ludwig Van Goathoven, the famous singing goat, and spend a few days on the fresh snow. So far, no one knows if Eric is bringing anyone. Only time will tell.

Once the holidays are over, Kirk and the guys will be away, promoting their new album. It's not like he's leaving on a world tour or anything, he'll be home as often as possible, but they have various live events scheduled across the country.

The Piper of just a few months ago would be terrified at the thought. The Piper I am now, knows that Kirk would never betray her trust. There aren't many men like Kirk around, and I know I can breathe easy.

I'll have Chloe to keep me company, and Skylar is due in town a couple of nights, so we won't be too lonely while the guys are away. We're going to get together, watch the guys on TV, and eat junk food. It's going to be fun. Of course, Skylar will have Sarah with her, which will be cool. Since I got to New York, we've been over to Jaxon and Skylar's place several times and the way that little girl reacts to her daddy's music is unreal, I can't wait to see her reaction when she sees him live on TV.

I stand back and admire the Christmas tree, hung with brightly colored ornaments, that Kirk and I decorated in the large, red-wood great room,

Over the fireplace, we've hung stockings filled with Jelly Belly, which Kirk regularly empties.

The house is enormous and from the windows you can see the whole of Central Park, spread out below us like a green carpet.

When I first moved in, I felt in awe of the whole place. From my run down home on Nantucket - to this? But, day after day, Kirk's love helped me realize, again, just like when we were kids, that when two people love each other, the differences don't count.

I've already set the table for two, for our special dinner, with red candles and matching Christmas decorations.

We're spending Christmas with Kirk's parents but tonight we want to be alone, just us.

When they found out we were back together, they were so happy. His mother even apologized for confiding in Vicky's mother, though she had no idea Vicky was lurking, ready to use the information against us.

I don't blame her though, she was doing what any parent would do, protecting their child. In her place I probably would have done the same.

One thing that wasn't easy, however, was choosing a gift for Kirk.

What do you buy someone who has everything and the money to buy anything?

Then, one day I noticed his battered old acoustic guitar and decided to get him a new one. I just hope he'll like it.

I reread my note and smile.

I'm imperfect in so many ways, but when I'm near you I feel perfect.

There may be times when I bore you, or talk nonsense, when my uncertainties get the better of me so, please, forgive me in advance, ignore my mistakes, and know that there is no one in this world who loves you more than I do.

I hear the key in the lock and tingle with excitement. Kirk's home. It's time to start our evening together, and I can't wait.



December 24

In just a few weeks we'll be away again, on another round of promo events.

A couple of months ago, the idea of leaving Piper on her own filled me with anxiety but now I know she's learned to trust, I feel so much better.

Trust is fundamental in love, but you have to be careful - it's like fine sand slipping through your fingers, gone before you realize it.

For our first Christmas together, I want to surprise her.

I have gifts, obviously, but they're more for me than for her, as I literally bought out the expensive lingerie store on Madison Ave - but the real surprise, which she knows nothing about, is the recording of my song, our special Christmas track.

I walk through the door and she jumps into my arms - it's become our thing, and I love it.

I leave the pale pink gift bag on the table in the hall and we spend a wonderful evening, chatting over good food, listening to old Christmas songs, and waiting for midnight.

As the clock strikes twelve, we make a toast and it's time to start with the surprises.

We stand next to the tree, gazing out of the window at the whole city lit up below.

"How many stars do you think are up there?" I whisper in her ear.

"Who knows, if only we could see them!"

"Perhaps we can," I wink. "Alexa, turn off the lights!"

The house is plunged into darkness. I count to five and turn on the special LED Galaxy projector I bought and suddenly the ceilings and walls are transformed into the night sky.

"You are completely crazy!" Piper exclaims, joining me under our very own starry sky.

"How about a starlit fashion show?" I ask, handing her the pink gift bag.

There is enough light from the stars and the tree for her to see as she unwraps the lingerie I bought her.

"Oh, my God...They're gorgeous, but no way I'll have time to model everything in one night!" she giggles.

"I know, you could try on a different outfit every time I make you scream my name," I tease, preparing to give her my most important gift.

Piper beats me to it, however, and pulls a gift from behind the tree.

From the shape and size I know immediately what it is and feel a rush of happiness as I read the note attached to it.

"I feel exactly the same," I whisper, blowing her a kiss.

"Are you not going to play it," she asks expectantly when I've unwrapped the guitar.

I know what she wants me to hear and, after tuning the strings a little, I begin to play.

It's perfect, just perfect, I think, strumming the first chord.

Piper listens, captivated and, as usual when I finish playing her song, she says, fingering the headphone shaped pendant on the chain around my neck. "You really should record it, Kirk. It's too good to keep all to ourselves."

"The thing is, this song is us. To the world, it's just a nice song, to me it's the world..." I break off and hand her another gift bag.

"What's this?" she asks, staring up at me uncertainly.

"I don't know...open it."

She tears off the gift wrap to reveal a CD.

The cover artwork we chose is simple, yet effective - the night sky, in

muted tones of blue, with the title printed in italics: *You're all the Stars in the Sky*.

"You recorded it!" Piper exclaims excitedly.

"You were right. This song needs to be heard, to be sung at concerts," I say, pulling her in close. "It's about the love I've felt for you since we were teenagers, and I want to hear people singing along to it. It will still be our song, though."

She runs her fingers through my hair and kisses me passionately. "I think we can start that fashion show, after all," she whispers.

"Great, let's start now," I laugh, taking her in my arms and carrying her through to the bedroom. "I love you, Star Girl," I murmur against her lips.

I lay her down on the bed and I lean over her, kissing her.

As soon as our lips meet, Piper comes alive. She wraps her arms around my neck and entwines her legs around my hips, clinging to me. We kiss, devouring each other, tearing off each other's clothes and tossing them to the floor.

My lips work their way down her body, kissing every inch of her skin.

My feelings are so intense that it's like there's fire flowing through my veins instead of blood. When I slip my fingers inside her, she moans with pleasure against my lips and begins to move, rotating and lifting her hips, following my own movements.

I know she wants me desperately, but I want to take my time.

It doesn't take her long to figure this out and when I move up to her mouth, kissing her, she arches her body against mine and pulls back. I can't help smiling at her obvious frustration.

"I want you...now..." she gasps in exasperation.

"Mmm....careful what you ask for," I tease.

"I'm old enough to know what I want," she says, nibbling my bottom lip.

"Okay," I breathe, preparing to take her by surprise again.

I pull away from her and take her by the waist, flipping her so she's face down, then I raise her ass and enter her from behind with one single, resolute thrust.

I hear her gasp and almost do the same myself at the intensity of emotions that wash over me. I wait several seconds then begin to move inside her, leaning over her, kissing her back.

The bedroom fills with sounds - sighs, moans, the whisper of two bodies becoming one. I'm about to come when I realize she's almost there too. I

want to give her my everything and increase the speed and intensity of my thrusts, all the time touching her, stroking her, caressing her, and when she comes screaming, unable to control herself, I come with her.

I collapse on top of her and we lie, locked together, panting. When our breathing returns to normal, I slide away from her, ready to reveal my last surprise, which I hid earlier in the pillowcase on my side of the bed.

I pull her to me and kiss her again. “So, how many stars do you think are in the sky?” I whisper.

“A million?” she says, her eyes sparkling, full of love.

“I don’t know. What do you say we lie here a while and count them?” and with that, I slip the ring on her finger.

Piper stares at me, her eyes wide with astonishment. “I’d spend the rest of my life counting them, if it means being with you.”

Are you already missing The Blind Spot?

Pre-order link soon for the story of Eric!

Acknowledgments

I received two very special gifts while I was drafting this book.

The first was a bracelet which is perfect and so me, from one of my readers.

The second was from my friend, Chiara, a book of quotes, from the works of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry; those of you who've read my book, '*Respirami*', know how much I adore 'The Little Prince', and the quotes about stars gave me the idea for the question that Kirk asks Piper that first night in her yard: How many stars do you think are up there?

I also chose quotes about stars for my inscription at the beginning of the book.

I really want to thank Chiara for her gift, which arrived during a particularly sad period in my life. Reading those lines inspired me to add that extra touch of stardust to the story.

Like the previous books in this series, I wanted the title to reflect the instrument played by the main character, but I also wanted it to mean something. There's the word *Bass*, the instrument Kirk is known for, then *Ackwards*. Let's say it's a play on words on the phrase, *Ass Backwards - Confused*, In a hopelessly misguided manner - which perfectly represents the various, disastrous, misunderstandings between Piper and Kirk.

So, with no further ado...

A huge thanks to all my readers, for their support, for buying my books, for being so present. Your love and affection help me overcome even the largest obstacles.

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to receive updates about my books, articles about me, and to all the members on my Facebook group, Laura Rocca Books.

Don't hesitate to contact me, I can't wait to meet you,

Laura